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MARVELS OF THE LEVANT: PRINT MEDIA AND THE POLITICS OF WONDER IN EARLY MODERN VENICE

This article explores the political uses of wonder in early modern Venice. In particular, it examines how printed news pamphlets about the marvels of the Levant mediated Venice's encounters with its colonial subjects and imperial rivals, shaping an imperial community of feelings at home. Connecting emotions, media and politics, the article argues that marvellous news stories about the Venetian-Ottoman borderlands constitute a powerful archive of popular fantasies and fears about Venice's material investments in the east Mediterranean. Geographically peripheral but symbolically central, overseas wonders provided metropolitan publics with a mass-printed spectacle for popular consumption, closely intertwined with the semiotics of empire-building and colonial rule. These stories need to be appreciated not only in terms of their ideological work, but also in terms of their affective politics. Entangled with enduring 'epistemic anxieties'¹ about empire, the marvels of the Levant introduced war and colonialism to the Venetian public sphere not as matters of informed, rational debate but as collective sentiments. If we are to engage systematically with power and communication in Venice, the wonders and fantasies of empire must be addressed: not only because fantasy is a crucial aspect of the political culture of empire, but also because empire is partly a work of the imagination.

Over the last three decades, wonder has become an established feature of the historiographical landscape of early modern Europe. A key concept of the age of exploration and discovery, wonder was a 'decisive emotional and intellectual experience'² inextricably bound with the expansion of European trade and imperial networks around the globe. Exotica, rarities and cabinets of curiosities placed wonder at the heart of early modern knowledge and collecting practices, while marvels, monsters and prodigies assumed a major symbolic role in the domains of politics and confessional conflict.³ In the Italian-speaking areas, the pursuit of *meraviglia* dominated Baroque aesthetics, with the language of the marvellous shaping literary and artistic production,

¹ Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*, Princeton, N.J., 2009.

² Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World*, Chicago, 1991, p. 14.

³ The literature on wonders is now extensive. See Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750*, New York, 1998. Also, Jean Céard, *La nature et les prodiges: l'insolite au XVIe siècle*, Geneva, 1996; Jennifer Spinks, *Monstrous Births and Visual Culture in Sixteenth-Century Germany*, London, 2009; Philip M. Soergel, *Miracles and the Protestant Imagination: The Evangelical Wonder Book in Reformation Germany*, Oxford, 2012.

from poetry to the visual arts and landscape design.⁴ Much of this historiography has been rather detached from the history of Venice.⁵ However, the lagoon city makes a special case of early modern wonder – and not only because the rhetoric of the ‘most marvellous city in the world’⁶ was a central component of Venetian mythmaking. Capital of an Italian regional state, Venice was also the metropolis of an overseas empire stretching from the Adriatic to the east Mediterranean. After the Fourth Crusade (1204), Venetian maritime supremacy fueled a process of empire building, which included territorial possessions in Istria, Dalmatia, Albania, the Ionian Islands, the Aegean Archipelago, Euboea, the Peloponnese, Crete, and Cyprus. These territories often appeared in Venetian print culture as epistemological disturbances, prime locations for exceptional phenomena that defied the normal order of nature. As Venice became the print capital of Europe in the 16th century, news pamphlets and pictures about such strange events spread information to large audiences, framing the metropolitan experience of empire through the sensationalist business practices of the publishing industry.

In looking at the emotional impact of empire through the lens of media and communication, the article draws on Stuart Hall’s insight that ‘culture is about feelings, attachments and emotions as well as concepts and ideas’.⁷ I use the strange and the marvellous as heuristic devices to probe the affective dynamics of Venetian culture in relation to the doubts and uncertainties of the imperial experience. Marvellous stories and images are indexes of power relations between colonial rulers and subjects; Venetians and Ottomans; Roman Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and Muslims. Wonder was a key resource defining these relations in the sphere of representation. With its typical tendency to ‘blur the distinction between the moral and the natural’,⁸ it offered a vehicle for affective experiences that reproduced political, ethnic, and cultural hierarchies. Charting the multiple operations of wonder in Venetian culture allows us to appreciate how

⁴ Paolo Cherchi, ‘Marino and the *meraviglia*’, in *Culture and Authority in the Baroque*, ed. Massimo Ciavolella and Patrick Coleman, Toronto, 2005; Luke Morgan, *The Monster in the Garden: The Grotesque and the Gigantic in Renaissance Landscape Design*, Philadelphia, 2016.

⁵ See, however, Andrea Martignoni, ‘Era nato uno monstro, cossa horendissima’. Monstres et t ratologie   Venise dans les Diarii de Marin Sanudo (1496-1533)’, *Revue historique* 629, 2004, pp. 49-80; Surekha Davies, ‘The wondrous East in the Renaissance geographical imagination: Marco Polo, Fra Mauro and Giovanni Battista Ramusio’, *History and Anthropology* 23.2, 2012, pp. 215-34.

⁶ Giuseppe Rosaccio, *Teatro del mondo ...*, Bologna, 1688, p. 107. Also, Peter G. Platt, ‘“The meruailouse site”: Shakespeare, Venice, and paradoxical stages’, *Renaissance Quarterly*, 54:1, 2001, pp. 121-54.

⁷ Stuart Hall, ‘The Work of Representation’, in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Hall, London, 1997, p. 2.

⁸ Lorraine Daston, *Against Nature*, trans. , Cambridge MA, 2019, p. 35.

imperial encounters were shaped not just by economic and geopolitical rivalries, but ‘by the five senses; how we understand others, even more how we feel about them, emotionally’.⁹

The ensuing analysis is organised into three main sections. I first discuss the political, religious and cultural meanings of wonder in printed pamphlets relating extraordinary news from the Levant. These stories articulated imaginative geographies that structured readers’ understandings of the empire while simplifying the complexity of power relations between Venice, its colonies, and the Ottomans. The second section focuses on monstrous births and analyses their coverage in printed news pictures. Such images were an essential form of early modern news storytelling but have received little consideration in Venetian historiography. This is partly due to the general tendency to neglect the intertwined histories of verbal and visual journalism as well as the role played by pictorial reporting in the development of news and mass media.¹⁰ Building on the classical etymological and semantic links between wonder (Gr. *thaumazein*; Lat. *admirari*) and seeing/looking (Gr. *theaomai*; Lat. *mirare*), this section discusses the affective power of images and their role in cultivating hegemonic ‘ways of seeing’¹¹ religious and ethnic others. In doing so, it brings attention to the potential of visual sources for the political history of emotions and the study of emotional politics. Drawing together these two strands, the third section looks to wonder to explore the emotional dimensions of the Venetian public sphere, which remain largely overlooked. While claiming to convey information about the empire and its contested borderlands, Venetian cheap print media intermingled news and fiction to shape affective publics in relation to the wondrous, and often monstrous, alterity of the Levant.

THE AFFECTIVE GEOGRAPHY OF WONDER IN VENETIAN CHEAP PRINT

For early modern Venetians, the eastern Mediterranean was an extremely rich source of marvellous news that set the imagination on fire. Both the Venetian-ruled areas and the Ottoman lands featured prominently in metropolitan print media as wonder-producing

⁹ Andrew J. Rotter, ‘Empires of the Senses: How Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching Shaped Imperial Encounters’, *Diplomatic History* 35:1, 2011, pp. 3-19.

¹⁰ Jason E. Hill and Vanessa R. Schwartz, ‘General Introduction’, *Getting the Picture: The Visual Culture of the News*, ed. Hill and Schwartz, London, 2015, p. 3.

¹¹ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* [1972], London, 2008.

sites, where monstrous births, natural disasters, and unusual meteorological phenomena appeared to be routine aspects of daily life. Typically linked to political and military events, these sensational events were part and parcel of a wider mediascape in which the very notion of overseas news was closely intertwined with the wonders of the period. Texts and images relating to the marvels of the east circulated in various media, from the oral reports of merchants to the popular tales of Marco Polo and John Mandeville. Fantastic sea creatures populated mythological prints and maps of the Greek islands, while antiquarian marine hybrids adorned church and civic artworks symbolizing Venice's dominion over the sea.¹² Multi-headed hydras lurked in private medical studios,¹³ and fake oriental dragons, made out of fish and snake skin, accompanied charlatans in public squares.¹⁴

Cheap print, especially news pamphlets published as eyewitness accounts, increased the dissemination of stories about overseas marvels, further fixing popular images of the empire as a natural setting for novelty and paradox. Many of these wonders were drawn from classical mythology and ancient geo/ethnographical texts, which extensively mediated European perceptions of the Greek lands during this period. Others took the form of news stories about remarkable natural phenomena in the colonies that Venetian administrators deemed extremely topical and worthy to include in their reports to the Senate.¹⁵ These men participated in indigenous networks of scholarly exchange, led by outstanding figures like the Veneto-Cretan noble Andrea Cornaro (1548-1616), who listed contemporary monstrous births in his unpublished *History of Crete*: a lamp with a human head, a child with a pig's head, a two-headed boy with four arms and four legs.¹⁶

Within this mix of past and present, of classical tradition and institutional documentation, of state agents and native informants, the long-lasting association of islands with mystery and fantasy facilitated popular understandings of Venice's maritime dominions as borderline locations at the edge of chaos. A case in point is the *Copia delle*

¹² Chet Van Duzer, *Sea Monsters on Medieval and Renaissance Maps*, London, 2013; Alison Luchs, *The Mermaids of Venice: Fantastic Sea Creatures in Venetian Renaissance Art*, London, 2010.

¹³ Angelo Artegiani, 'Descrizione dello scheletro esistente nell studio del sig. Antonio Rossi, chirurgo veneziano, estesa in una lettera all'ill.mo sig. cavalier Antonio Vallisnieri' [1721], in *Raccolta d'opuscoli scientifici e filologici*, vol. 6, ed. Angelo Calogerà, Venice, 1732.

¹⁴ Paula Findlen, 'Inventing nature: commerce, art, and science in the early modern cabinet of curiosities', in *Marvels and Merchants: Commerce, Science, and Art in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Pamela Smith and Findlen, London, 2002.

¹⁵ Kostas G. Tsiknakis, 'Η παρατήρηση του κομήτη του 1577 στην Κρήτη', *Kritiki Estia* 3, 1989-90, pp. 167-72.

¹⁶ Andrea Cornaro, *Historia candiana. Mía αφήγηση του Δ' βενετοτουρκικού πολέμου (1570-1573)*. Κύπρος – Ναύπακτος, ed. Stefanos Kaklamanis, Nicosia, 2017, p. 560.

littere recevute de Cipro, lequale narra de un meraviglioso miracolo, a newsletter published in Venice around 1550.¹⁷ The ‘marvellous miracle’ presented in the report involved an inhabitant of the district of Limassol, Cyprus, named Marco Sateni, who was purportedly attacked by invisible malicious forces. In vain did Marco try with prayers and holy water to deter the disembodied spirits that hurled stones at him and his wife. The stoning went on even at church, while successive wildfires burnt down his house and storerooms. More spectacularly, a strange nocturnal creature in the form of a bellowing camel appeared at midnight among the ruins of his burnt property, frightening away a pack of black dogs. The report adds that due to his unbounded misfortunes, Marco was forced by his scared fellow villagers to leave his *casal* (Koilani) and move to a different one (Potamiù). Both he and his wife, however, did not manage to set themselves free from the mysterious powers of the maleficent, incorporeal creatures bent on causing them harm, and were eventually stoned to death by them in the church of the Holy Cross in the village Omodos. The author of the report speculates that Marco was the hopeless victim either of magic charms made with herbs (*herbarie*) or of the Greek orthodox liturgical rite of *psalmochatara*, curses by the psalms inflicted upon him as a form of legitimate punishment because he had hidden written documents proving he had committed an injustice against another man. As we know from earlier sources, the Sateni was an affluent merchant family in late fifteenth-century Limassol,¹⁸ so it seems probable that Marco was a prominent member of the community. Irrespectively of its real or fictive elements, this ‘stupendous and horrendous’ story guides us into popular perceptions of the empire as a place of risk and danger. Throughout the report, words describing different shades of fear (*paura, spavento, timor*) and instances of surprise and amazement (*stupore*) work together to create in the reader a sense of insecurity vis-à-vis the Levant, which is further heightened by the author’s repeated assurances about the veracity of the story and the diligent inquest upon which it was based.

The idea that life overseas should be lived with vigilance is a common thread running through the official reports of Venetian imperial administrators. The fusion of Venetian commercial and colonial interests in the Levant required a sustained fiscal

¹⁷ *Copia delle littere recevute de Cipro, lequale narra de un meraviglioso miracolo apparso in Cipro ...*, Venice, 1550.

¹⁸ Angel Nicolaou-Konnari and Chris Schabel, ‘Limassol under Latin rule’, in *Lemesos: A History of Limassol in Cyprus from Antiquity to the Ottoman Conquest*, ed. Nicolaou-Konnari and Schabel, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2015, p. 290.

commitment to defence, with a string of coastal fortresses and military bases providing the Venetian fleet with a costly infrastructure that, alongside claims of sovereignty and possession, reflected the ‘defensive psychology’¹⁹ of Christendom towards Islam. In addition to the danger posed by the Turks, this defensive attitude also stemmed from the chronic insecurity about the fragility of colonial order in Venice’s maritime state. As the governor of Crete Zuanne Mocenigo argued in his 1589 report on the state of the island, deepening economic inequalities and social injustice undermined social cohesion and challenged the legitimacy of Venetian rule. Conscious of the political consequences of people’s affective dispositions, Mocenigo drew attention to the growing enmity and discord between the privileged and disadvantaged groups. As he noted, the Venetian nobles were detested by the Cretan nobles who, in turn, were despised by the city dwellers, while the peasants resented their exploitation by all the other groups, even to the point of transferring their allegiance from Venice to the Ottoman sultan.²⁰

Such official assessments of divided, contentious, and unstable local societies, threatening to disrupt the colonial project, often found their way into print. Given the symbiotic relationship between the government and print media in Venice, this sort of commentaries moved beyond their bureaucratic origins, doing further political and rhetorical work in publications that presented the Republic’s fringe territories as a hostile and potentially unsafe place. Writing about the island of Zante in 1687, the cosmographer of the Republic Vincenzo Maria Coronelli pointed to the perils of living closely alongside untrustworthy religious others, when he asserted that native inhabitants used harmful magic against the Roman Catholics. ‘The Greeks with their ceremonies, superstitions, spells, and charms reveal thefts, escape diseases, foment loves and make similar sortileges, of which there is a great abuse’, he added.²¹ Underlying such uncomfortable descriptions of the colonial world as a danger zone was the widespread presumption about the occult powers of the colonized and the apparent vulnerability of the colonists – a presumption articulating deep-seated tensions within the society of the island. It is telling that the magical practices that seemed to upset Coronelli were also found in Venice, where Greek women immigrants often appeared in the Inquisition trials of the

¹⁹ Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, vol. II, trans. Sian Reynolds, Berkeley, 1995, p. 864.

²⁰ *Μνημεία της Κρητικής Ιστορίας*, ed. Sterghios G. Spanakis, vol. 1, Herakleio, 1940, pp. 26-7, 35-6.

²¹ [Vincenzo Maria Coronelli], *Memorie istoriogeografiche della Morea riacquistata*, Venice, 1687, p. 60r.

Holy Office, accused of love magic and witchcraft. On one occasion in 1615, Maddalena, a Greek popular healer who specialised in treating syphilis, indicated her status as a foreigner to explain why she was denounced for sorcery: “Because I’m Greek, that’s why they call me a witch, also because I medicate the sick”.²²

The affective geography of the marvellous extended beyond Venice’s maritime state to include the territories of the Ottoman empire. An informative example is the anonymous *Avisi da Constantinopoli di cose stupende*, published by the Venetian printer Giovanni Andrea Valvassori in 1538. The newsletter contained a fictional account of a Venetian naval victory over the Turks and a report of marvellous signs allegedly seen in Istanbul and linked by the sultan’s astrologers to the destruction of the Ottoman empire.²³ As Ottavia Niccoli has shown, the description of the prodigies was a near literal copy of the *Littera delle maravigliose battaglie*, a popular propagandistic newsletter about clashing spectral armies in Verdello (Bergamo), which had appeared twenty years earlier to gain financial support for pope Leo X’s anti-Ottoman crusade.²⁴ Media recycling was a standard practice in early modern popular print, yet one important question remains: how did a profit-driven and ostensibly apolitical practice like text reuse affect meaning production? By relocating these apparitions to Istanbul, the *Avisi* reinforced the Islamophobic message of the text to strengthen anti-Turkish sentiment and cultivate the myth of Ottoman fragility. The intertextual similarities between the *Littera* and the *Avisi* effectively show how the duplication of false news served to spin symbolic and moralistic narratives about Istanbul as a place deviating from the normal state of affairs.

The concept of the normal, Ian Hacking suggests, is a powerful ideological tool, which ‘bridge[s] the fact/value distinction, whispering in your ear that what is normal is also right’.²⁵ Second-hand stories cast light on specific instances in which early modern news set up Istanbul in opposition to standards of normality, thus reinforcing its dystopian image as a place of fear, chaos, and death. In 1630 a newsletter announced that ‘grand prodigies and frightening signs’ appeared in the Ottoman capital, including ‘lightening, winds, tempests, thunders and apparitions of comets’. The letter reported that the sultan had ‘horrible visions’ and nightmares – of lions attacking him and of a ‘bloody

²² Laura J. McGough, *Gender, Sexuality, and Syphilis in Early Modern Venice: The Disease that Came to Stay*, New York, 2010 p. 82.

²³ *Avisi da Constantinopoli di cose stupende, et maravigliose ...*, Venice, [1538].

²⁴ Ottavia Niccoli, *Prophecy and People in Renaissance Italy*, trans. Lydia Cochrane, Princeton, 1990, pp. 84-5.

²⁵ Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance*, Cambridge, 1990, p. 160.

battle' between centaurs and griffins – which had been interpreted by his astrologers and fortune tellers as signs of the imminent fall of his empire to the Christian armies (Fig. 1). Although the narrative presents itself as an authoritative eyewitness account, it is what we would call today 'fake news'. It is based on outdated news published in Venice in 1551 on commission of Paris Mantovano, an itinerant publisher, bookseller and street singer.²⁶ Mantovano's *Copia* is also a derivative work, based on an older news-sheet about comets, locusts, earthquakes, and sightings of dragons in Istanbul printed in Venice in 1542 by Zoppino, one of the foremost vernacular publishers and public performers of his time.²⁷ Again, Zoppino's account of the 1542 earthquakes – which, tellingly, never took place – recycled news of the destructive Istanbul earthquake of 1509.²⁸ This earlier event had featured in several texts, including a Venetian ambassadorial report from Istanbul and Lodovico Dolce's world history which added that, as a result of the damage suffered to the Church of Hagia Sophia, the plaster used to cover its Byzantine mosaics fell off, miraculously revealing the Passion of Christ.²⁹ Zoppino had simply re-invented the 1509 earthquake, mixing the marvellous with the political in fake news to capitalize on the popular fascination with portents and rekindle popular expectations about the end of the 'false Mahometan faith'.

In other words, the 1630 *Copia di una lettera* did not describe actual events, but appropriated older tales that street singers had been chanting in public squares for decades. In doing so, the pamphlet reworked preexisting knowledge about Istanbul that continued to inform Venetian popular mythologies at the time of its publication. The repackaging of old stories about natural disasters as fresh news suggests that publishers made any editorial choices based on what readers knew, were interested in, or felt deeply about. Wonder and curiosity about the Ottomans was a profitable affair, used to boost sales by tapping into the infotainment culture that developed around cheap print. Meanwhile, infotainment was a political communication vehicle, motivating people to engage with current affairs. As a 1684 reprint of the same story shows (Fig. 2), the outbreak of a new war between a European Holy League and the Porte made old

²⁶ Domenico Fiorentino, *Copia de una lettera, venuta da Costantinopoli, dove narra gli gran prodigi ...*, Venice, 1551.

²⁷ *Li particolari avisi delle cose occorse novamente nella città di Costantinopoli ...*, Venice, [1542].

²⁸ N.N. Ambraseys, 'The Earthquake of 1509 in the Sea of Marmara, Turkey, Revisited', *Bulletin of the Seismological Society of America* 91:6, 2001, 1400-01.

²⁹ Lodovico Dolce, *Giornale delle historie del mondo*, Venice, 1572, p. 342; Andrea Foscolo's report (1512) in *Relazioni di ambasciatori veneti al Senato*, vol. 14: *Costantinopoli. Relazioni inedite (1512-1789)*, ed. Maria Pia Pedani-Fabris, Padua, 1996.

sensational reports relevant again. Marvel accounts circulated alongside news pamphlets publicizing Christian victories to rally public sentiment around the war, while inciting animosity toward ‘the poisonous dragon of Thrace’.³⁰

These wonder stories, at once disconcerting and fascinating, were not just soft news, but an integral part of the construction of the east Mediterranean as an ambiguous epistemic space. As the Chicago sociologist Robert Park observed in a seminal 1940 essay, news is closely related to knowledge as it provides orientation that helps people make sense of the world beyond personal experience.³¹ More than bizarre tales for the amusement of curious readers, overseas prodigies shuffled the uncertainty of life to the margins to shape popular understandings of the seeming randomness and unpredictability of the Levant. Embedded within a larger system of cultural narratives and storytelling codes, they provided a way of knowing the Mediterranean that imaginatively domesticated the alien through older traditions of the marvellous.

NEWS PICTURES AND MONSTROUS BIRTHS

Printed pictures were another category of popular media through which early modern Venetians came to grips with the news and formed sentiments about the empire. Used by entrepreneurial publishers as a hook to lure customers, engraved title pages of newsletters constructed marvels as objects of visual consumption that bridged the gap between overseas lands and the viewers’ field of vision. Uniting interactive pictorial and textual elements within a single iconotextual construct, they merged different sensory and cognitive modes to sharpen and summarise the pamphlet’s message. While eye-catching titles guided the interpretation of the image, the sensational visualization of news aimed to elicit strong and instantaneous audience reactions. Wonder is ‘a relation to the visible world’,³² so pictures of monstrous births and other marvels can help us capture something of the immediacy and suddenness of wonder itself. Moreover, pictures verified the news through the testimonial power of visual representation. The transparency effect of visual documentation complemented the framing of the story as an eyewitness testimony to jointly craft the authenticity and truthfulness of the marvellous news.

³⁰ Pasquale Biondi, *Il volo dell’aquile ...*, Venice, 1684.

³¹ Robert E. Park, ‘News as a form of knowledge: a chapter in the sociology of knowledge’, *American Journal of Sociology* 45:5, 1940, pp. 668-86.

³² Philip Fisher, *Wonder, the Rainbow, and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences*, Cambridge MA, 1998, p. 17.

Yet news pictures are not evidentiary records. They have less to do with relaying information and more with moving readers and affecting the way news is processed. News images command public engagement by strategically freezing the unfolding of an event at a single, memorable moment that invites viewers to use emotions, imagination, and contingency to fill in what is unseen and create meaning.³³ Visuals, in general, are a powerful means for conveying emotions and prompting visceral responses. Still, although images work through immediacy, such immediacy is the product of mediation: it is mediated by language, representation, and symbolic definition.

Among prodigy tales, reports about monstrous births relied on crudely but vividly illustrated title pages that intrigued and conditioned readers before they experienced the main text. Graphically gripping illustrations spectacularized monstrosity to maximize the emotional potential of the news and influence its credibility. The perceived efficacy of visual communication was based on the long-standing notion that pictures have a special affective power and capacity to move the soul of the beholder.³⁴ In his influential treatise on Counter-reformation art (1582), Cardinal Gabriele Paleotti cited Augustine's view (copied from Cicero) that 'to delight is a matter of sweetness, to instruct a matter of necessity, to sway a matter of victory' to argue that the principal virtue of sacred images was their ability to 'move the minds of viewers' and 'sway the emotions'. For Paleotti, images 'force themselves into us with even greater violence', a process facilitated by 'the universal coarseness of the common folk'. Monsters, in his view, might be depicted in portrayals of Africa or newly discovered lands, insofar as they corresponded to the allegorical monsters recorded in the scriptures and revealed in the visions of prophets 'by divine grace, as supernatural things full of great mystery'.³⁵

Images of monsters appeared in popular devotional texts and biblical works that placed horror at the heart of religious experience.³⁶ In a classic 1917 essay, historian of religions Rudolph Otto considered awe, wonder, and dread as common elements of the monstrous and the holy – what he called the *mysterium tremendum* and *fascinans*.³⁷ In

³³ Barbie Zelizer, *About to Die: How News Images Move the Public*, Oxford, 2010.

³⁴ Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting* [1435] trans. John R. Spencer, New Haven, 1966, p. 89.

³⁵ Gabriele Paleotti, *Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images* [1582], transl. William McCuaig, Los Angeles, 2010, pp. 111, 118-9, 259-60.

³⁶ Gabriel Simeoni, *Figure del vecchio testamento ...*, Venice, 1574, p. 257; Luis de Granada, *Devotissime meditationi per i giorni della settimana*, Venice, 1578, p. 169.

³⁷ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* [1917], trans. John W. Harvey, New York, 1958.

Venice, monstrosity was part of the iconography of warrior saints, from the statue of Saint Theodore standing upon a crocodile in the Piazzetta San Marco to Carpaccio's paintings of Saint George slaying the dragon in the Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni. Monstrous animals featured in the decorative programs of local churches, including San Marco's Genesis mosaic and Santa Margherita's statue of the saint standing on a dragon. At Santa Maria dei Miracoli, a stuffed crocodile hung from the ceiling in 1693,³⁸ further increasing the impact of the miraculous painting of the Virgin and Child and the marine hybrid reliefs of the church. The spiritual value of such marvels was clear to clergymen, who underscored their emotional effects as trigger of devotion. The Jesuit Ercole Mattioli linked prodigies to moral improvement by asserting that God uses monsters to 'warn mortals'. Stressing their emblematic and didactic function, Mattioli argued that fiery dragons, armed comets, and blazing crosses were proofs of the benevolence of God, who speaks not only through the prophets but also, 'as John Damascene wrote, through the elements, which take diverse aspects and figures to form an image of terror'.³⁹

These issues frame a 1624 illustrated pamphlet on Istanbul, which replicated marvellous news printed in Venice two years earlier (Fig. 3-4).⁴⁰ The first part recounted the advent of the Holy Trinity in the guise of three burning torches above Saint Sophia and the sultan's palace, a strange incident interpreted as a sign of the Holy Spirit's attempt 'to illuminate the heart of the aforementioned grand signor' and convert him to Christianity. The second part gave a sensational account of the monster depicted on the title-page. It narrated that the wife of an Ottoman pasha gave birth to a 'most monstrous case of the greatest amazement'. Although the newborn had the size of an ordinary baby, it was 'pitch black' and combined a dog's head, two burning horns, blazing red eyes, a long tail, a bird's legs with the nails of a grifon, human arms ending in a toad's legs, long and hairy ears and the wings of a bat. What made this event so shocking was that, immediately after birth, the baby monster bit its mother and vanished with her, leaving 'a very loud clamour'. The female attendants who witnessed this 'great and very monstrous prodigy' – an internal, textual audience of eyewitnesses, whose nervous agitation served

³⁸ Biblioteca Querini Stampalia, Venice, mss. Cl. IX, 20 (876), 24v.

³⁹ Ercole Mattioli, *Le meteore celesti più maravigliose ...*, Parma, 1706, p. 92.

⁴⁰ Cfr. Alberto Natale, *Gli specchi della paura. Il sensazionale e il prodigioso nella letteratura di consumo (secoli XVII-XVIII)*, Rome, 2008, pp. 204, 208-9.

to steer the readers' affective responses through empathetic participation – 'remained so astonished' that they could not 'find rest or peace anymore and constantly scream and beat themselves without measure'.

Like the devil in ballads and folktales who appears out of the blue and disappears from one moment to another, the trickster baby demon arrives without warning and dissolves suddenly into thin air, epitomising the arbitrariness of the natural order of things in Istanbul. More spectacularly, this mischievous infant strikes back, in the out-of-scale front page image, as a grown-up giant, whose visual features – black complexion, ribbed bat-wings, horns, pointed ears, tail – immediately conjure up images of the devil. By magnifying the monster and juxtaposing it against a proportionally smaller cluster of buildings topped by crescent half moons and squeezed in the lower right corner of the design, the image suggests aggressive dynamics and gives the impression of an impending trouble. The stark contrast between the monster and the city is accentuated by the monster's body language, movement and posture – leaning forward and towering over the cornered buildings, with his sharp-pointed body put on a diagonal and covered with diagonal lines to heighten emotional tension. The ground is angled downwards from left to right to enhance the monster's threatening movement towards the city and his potential to wreak havoc. All these visual elements create enough suspense to make the viewer follow the title's injunction to turn the page ('as you will understand by reading'). In this way, the picture does not just illustrate the text; it works in tandem with words to tell the story. And it does so even after the reader has finished reading the pamphlet, as it moves the narrative forward in time to show how the action will be continued. Curiosity is piqued as the return of the roaming monster generates a sense of drama, inducing the beholder to fear a certain turn of events that the spellbound birth attendants of the story do not yet see but that is about to swallow them up suddenly and unexpectedly.

Yet even shapeshifting devils are part of a divine plan, a message clearly conveyed by the news report which explains that the monster was 'a sign of God's wrath against those infidels'. Used as a polemical device to foster a religious understanding of the event, the report situated the 'monstrous and ugly thing' within an established moral-political discourse that saw anomalous births as markers of spiritual corruption. Linking moral degeneracy and deformity, the monster's body exemplifies 'the ugly': that which

‘belongs to a world of ineluctable individuality, contingency, and resistance to the ideal’.⁴¹ Ugly as sin, the monster showed Muslims the road to ‘the true knowledge of his divine majesty’, and instructed Christians ‘that we must abstain from sin’.

Well-informed readers would have also understood this piece in relation to the ongoing Ottoman-Safavid war (1623-39) and the fall of Baghdad in 1624, as well as the Cossack boat raids and domestic uprisings in the Bosphorus. In response to these events, various news pamphlets interpreted the appearance of monsters in the Balkans as signs of the ineluctable demise of the Ottoman empire, thus joining a long tradition of prophetic literature that forecast the political future of the Turks. A 1624 newsheet concerning the birth of a ‘prodigious monster’ to the family of a hodja in Ostrovizza (Croatia) is a typical example of such political reading. The aberrant infant had three horns, three blazing eyes, a donkey’s ears, and reversed legs and feet, and caught the eye of Christian merchants, who were keen to exhibit him as a profitable curiosity in Italy. Citing the supposed opinions of the diviners of the pasha of Bosnia and those of the sultan, who saw a drawing of the misshapen child, the report interpreted the monster as a portent of the imminent downfall of the Ottoman state, and urged European princes to attack the common enemy, whose defeat was providentially ordained.⁴²

In an era in which notions of apocalypse and of divine providence had massive emotional impact, news about monsters fittingly mobilized visual stereotypes of foreign bodies within a powerful religious and political framework. The black monster of Istanbul may have sparked visual associations with real and imagined black gondoliers and other black African slaves in Venetian everyday life and art,⁴³ but it also invited viewers to associate Islam with the devil by relating their prior knowledge of pictorial conventions to visual clues in the image. Illustrated vernacular bibles provided similar images of the devil, while other religious texts warned that he could take on the appearance of an animal body. ‘[The Satan] will come with great furor in the guise of an enraged dog’,⁴⁴ wrote Giovanni Antonio Pantera, the vicar of the bishop of Parenzo, in his best-selling biblical narrative *Monarchia di Christo*. As the Venetian archbishop of

⁴¹ Mark Cousins, ‘The ugly’, part 1, *AA Files* 28, 1994, pp. 61-4; part 2, *AA Files* 29, 1994, pp. 3-6.

⁴² T.B. [Tomaso Bosnese], *Prodigiosi avvenimenti successi nel paese turchescho ...*, Rome-Bologna-Piacenza, 1624.

⁴³ Paul H.D. Kaplan, ‘Black Turks: Venetian artists and perceptions of Ottoman ethnicity’, *The Turk and Islam in the Western Eye 1450-1750*, ed. James G. Harper, Farnham, 2011; Kate Lowe, ‘Visible lives: Black gondoliers and other black Africans in Renaissance Venice’, *Renaissance Quarterly*, 66:2, 2013, pp. 412-52.

⁴⁴ Giovanni Antonio Pantera, *Monarchia del nostro signor Giesu Christo*, Venice, 1548, p. 311.

Adria Carlo Labia showed in his illustrated preaching manual, the dog was a symbol of the sinner, closely associated with the devil.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, the rhetorical commonplace of the bloodthirsty dogs was deployed to dehumanise the Turks as ‘enraged mastiffs in the Orient’ and ‘dogs of Thrace’.⁴⁶ Poetic compositions also emphasized their dubious humanity, comparing them to ‘the fiercest Cynocephali’.⁴⁷ One of the classical marvels of the East, the *Cynocephali* were men with canine heads, who symbolized the savagery of barbarian foreigners and the dangers of geographical boundary-crossing.⁴⁸ Whereas the Egyptian dog-headed Anubis and his Hellenistic fusion with Hermes were objects of scholarly inquiry,⁴⁹ Muslim *cynocephali* were viewed as monsters associated with the devil. In fact, the dog-headed and dark-skinned monster of Istanbul synthesised Christian reinterpretations of the monstrous races of antiquity with medieval depictions of the Black Saracen as a minion of the devil.⁵⁰

Illustrated news about Muslim hybrids remain quite informative in yet another respect: they shed light on the production of ethnographic knowledge in the Republic of Venice. By developing a specific ethnographic gaze, these images constructed religious and cultural difference in the context of Venetian colonialism and commerce in the Mediterranean. News imagery offers a window into the visual epistemology of monstrous ethnography and the role of print in transforming specific historical relationships into representations of pathological otherness. During wartime, news pictures of monsters that straddled the nature-culture boundary expanded Venetian heterological discourse, attesting to the intimate involvement of visual ethnography with empire-building.

A revealing case in point is the 1690 ‘new and truest’ story ‘of the most terrible monster called Ali Agamet’, a Janus-like, double-faced giant with four legs and four arms discovered on the island of Cyprus, a former Venetian kingdom then under Ottoman rule (Fig. 5). The monster of the story was found in the deep woods by a hunting group of local *ağas*, and was then taken to a high-ranking military officer, who was impressed by his physical strength and recruited him into his rebellion against the sultan. The

⁴⁵ Carlo Labia, *Simboli predicabili estratti da sacri evangeli*, Ferrara, 1692, p. 182.

⁴⁶ Cristoforo Ivanovich, *Minerva al tavolino*, Venice, 1688, pp. 366, 388.

⁴⁷ Gio. Battista Rostagno, *Viaggi ...*, Turin, 1668, p. 411.

⁴⁸ Rudolf Wittkower, ‘Marvels of the East: A Study in the History of Monsters’, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 5, 1942, pp. 159-97; John Block Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought*, Cambridge, MA, 1981; David Gordon White, *Myths of the Dog-Man*, Chicago, 1991.

⁴⁹ Ulisse Aldrovandi, *Monstrorum historia*, Bologna, 1642, pp. 22-3; Lorenzo Legati, *Museo cospiano*, Bologna, 1677, p. 473.

⁵⁰ Sophia Rose Arjana, *Muslims in the Western Imagination*, New York, 2015, pp. 37-41, 49-56, 58-83.

frontispiece of the pamphlet shows Ali Agamet holding a sword, a rifle, and a shield with the Ottoman crescent moon unmistakably identifying him as a Muslim. All these weapons made him look like ‘a new Antaeus’, the fabled giant wrestler of Libya, according to the main text, which gives further details about his ‘horrid appearance’. The monster had ‘long, grubby hair, laden with dust’ and a ‘hispid and disordered’ beard, his cheeks were covered by ‘a stinking black sweat’, his eyes were ‘puffy and shapeless and so red that they look like burning coals’, and his open nostrils and mouth were pouring out ‘thick smoke and gloomy foam’. ‘Inflamed with anger’, he brought ‘fright to the eyes’, exhaled ‘horror’, and ‘thundered’ with his voice and ‘terrible screams’.

The striking image and thorough description of the sight, sound, and smell of Ali Agamet should not lead us to assume that this ‘monstrous figure’ necessarily terrified or disgusted contemporary readers. As Paleotti argued, ‘things that by their nature normally cause repugnance and horror in the viewer, like seeing a monster [...], have the opposite effect when they are well imitated, and delight us miraculously’.⁵¹ Such delight must have been a common response to popular readings, like the illustrated editions of Ariosto’s *Orlando furioso* or Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, featuring hybrid monsters and transformations of humans into animals and plants. As we saw above, the Christian merchants eager to buy the monster of Ostrovizza could perfectly anticipate the lucrative opportunities that the performance of abnormality offered for a freak show in Italy. Although the seventeenth-century Paduan playwright Carlo De’ Dottori argued that man (and not God) ‘aroused fear in the hearts of poor mortals with fake monsters’,⁵² he omitted to say that fear could often be a pleasurable consumption experience. Curious bodies and deformed infants were often put on display in Venetian inns and taverns for amusement and profit, confirming Mattioli’s view that monsters may ‘cause horror’, but they nevertheless ‘delight with their novelty; so much so that people want to see what is monstrous in our species even with payment, competing with each other to buy their own fear in watching them’.⁵³ Historians of emotions have pointed out that scary sources do not automatically produce fear and should always be examined within their specific

⁵¹ Paleotti, *Discourse*, p. 113.

⁵² Geminiano Montanari, *L’astrologia convinta di falso ...*, Venice, 1685, p. 3.

⁵³ Mattioli, *Le meteore*, p. 140. Also, Martignoni, ‘Era nato uno monstro’.

contexts.⁵⁴ Early modern monsters were regarded both as religious portents and natural wonders, and evoked horror, pleasure or repugnance depending on the circumstances that generated them.⁵⁵ The case of the Venetian tract, published in the midst of a war against the Turks (1684-99), belongs to the more conservative popular literature that used monsters as a polemical instrument against Islam. Moreover, textual clues link the wild giant to Mehmet Ağa Boyacıoğlu, a high-profile member of the Cypriot elite of the time, whose rebellion against the sultan enjoyed the support of the janissaries and many Christians but was eventually suppressed in 1690.⁵⁶

Although the pamphlet is a typical example of cheap print, it contains learned allusions that only an educated readership was familiar with. Ali Agamet is a wonder of nature, but also resembles wonder-working automata that merged natural and artificial motion. He is an animated machine, more marvellous in terms of wit, invention, and artifice than ancient virtuoso mechanical works, such as the moving statues of Daedalus, and the bronze Tritons of Andronicus of Cyrrhus. Moreover, he is in the process of being tamed by an appointed instructor, who teaches him the human language and the use of weapons: activities in which he proves himself a curious and fast learner. Far from monological, the text combines classical references with elements of grotesque realism that attenuate the scariness of the monster by presenting his exaggerated incoherence as a source of comic pleasure. Ali Agamet lacked articulate speech, and was ‘making himself understood only through gestures, ridiculous even to the Turks themselves’. His gargantuan drinking made him ‘urinate constantly and in great abundance’ in a way typical of the grotesque body: a transgressive, leaking body subverting hierarchical notions of self-control through the material acts of the ‘lower bodily stratum’.⁵⁷

More importantly, the Cypriot monster is presented as a liminal case of embodied deviance that attests to the moral breakdown of Cypriot society under Ottoman rule. According to the report, Agamet was the son of a renegade and a Christian woman, whom he had abducted and forced to convert to Islam. The mother died giving birth to him, while the father was killed; and because the wife of a Turkish neighbor who

⁵⁴ Barbara Rosenwein, ‘Worrying about emotions in history’, *American Historical Review* 107.3, 2002, p. 833.

⁵⁵ Daston and Park, *Wonders*, pp. 176, 209; Caroline Walker Bynum, ‘Wonder’, *American Historical Review* 102:1, 1997, p. 15.

⁵⁶ Marios Hadjianastasis, ‘Crossing the line in the sand: regional officials, monopolisation of state power and ‘rebellion’. The case of Mehmed Ağa Boyacıoğlu in Cyprus, 1685-1690’, *Turkish Historical Review* 2, 2011, pp. 155-76.

⁵⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky, Bloomington, 1984, p. 26 and ch. 6.

breastfed him also died, the baby grew up in the forest, in the company of wild animals. Ali Agamet's jumbled features are effectively the disastrous outcome of the multiple wrongdoings of his sinful parents: a double apostasy to Islam, interreligious sexual mingling, and the illicit activities of the couple who, jointly with other Muslims, attacked passers-by and the island's rural inhabitants.

Like all monsters, Ali Agamet is the 'harbinger of category crisis',⁵⁸ a threshold creature that 'blur[s] boundaries ... transgressing, violating, polluting, and mixing what ought to be kept apart'.⁵⁹ He is fundamentally a figure of the abject, defined as that which 'disturbs identity, system, order'.⁶⁰ By exemplifying the physical embodiment of a religious boundary-crossing, Ali Agamet's merging of two bodies into one giant visualizes the promiscuous sexual union of the parents and serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of 'turning Turk'. Linking sexuality and religion, the pamphlet discredits intimate relations between converts to Islam, equating the renunciation of Christian faith to the disintegration of human identity. In doing so, it echoes not only centuries-old Church prohibitions about religious mobility, or contemporary European anxieties about the increasing numbers of renegades, but also perceptions of Venice's Greek subjects as lesser Christians. In fact, Ali Agamet's excessive corporality gives spectacular form to the ostensibly moral transgressions of Christian converts to Islam in Cyprus who destabilized confessional and social hierarchies.⁶¹ Since conversion was not only religious but also about the making of political subjects, the pamphlet politicized the monster to chastise unruly subalterns, whose unreliable hearts and minds contested Venetian imperial rule.

There is, however, a further dimension to Venetian political teratology. Both the monster of Cyprus and the monstrous black baby of Istanbul underscore the interface between gender and religious, ethnic, and colonial boundary-making. In both stories the mothers either vanish or die. The same is repeated for Ali Agamet's surrogate mother, whose charitable wet-nursing intervention results in her sudden death. While re-proposing the archetypal motif of matricide, the elimination of the mothers amounts to an

⁵⁸ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 'Monster Culture: Seven Theses', *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Cohen, Minneapolis, 1996, p. 6.

⁵⁹ Laura Lunger Knoppers and Joan B. Landes, 'Introduction', in *Monstrous Bodies/Political Monstrosities in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Knoppers and Landes, Ithaca - London, 2004, p. 6.

⁶⁰ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, New York, 1982, p. 4.

⁶¹ Costas P. Kyrris, 'Symbiotic elements in the history of the two communities of Cyprus', *Kypriakos Logos* 8, 1976, pp. 243-82.

act of symbolic retribution. Discursively correlated with proto-orientalist portrayals of sex and gender in the Ottoman empire, it is a dire warning of God's anger showing what it means to live a life that does not comply with Christian norms and expectations. For contemporary readers, pervasive stereotypes of Ottoman women as 'extraordinarily wanton [...], very dishonest and lascivious'⁶² would have shaped understandings of monstrous maternity. Working in tandem with a widespread belief in the power of the maternal imagination and pregnant women's desires to control the act of procreation,⁶³ such stereotypes would have provided the ultimate explanation of the reported prodigious births. Occasionally monstrous imagination could even offer personal agency to Levantine women, allowing them to transcend the order of nature during times of geopolitical change. In a 1676 newsletter relating to the transition of Crete from Venetian to Ottoman rule, an intensely desired and deliberately provoked birth of conjoined twins becomes an instrument of empowerment, which enables a local Christian woman to renegotiate her social status within a new political order.⁶⁴ All these stories of monstrous motherhood configured imperial dynamics along gender lines to define ethnic and religious hierarchies across empire. By applying dominant conceptions of women's reproductive bodies to the colonial world, they resonated with ideals of political loyalty and wider concerns about the subversive power of indigenous desire.

More generally, illustrated news about the monsters of the Venetian-Ottoman contact zone deployed wonder to structure oppositional identities through feelings of difference. As Sara Ahmed notes, emotions work to shape collective bodies in a relational way, by aligning individuals with communities and by treating 'others' as the 'source' of our feelings.⁶⁵ At the same time, cheap-print images of monsters highlight the discrepancy between Venetian familiarity with the Levant and the pejorative stereotyping of its people. It is hard to conclude that such emotion-laden, image bite news reflects the kind of nuanced cross-cultural understanding that one would expect from a long history

⁶² Thus the Venetian envoy to Istanbul, Ottaviano Bon, *The Sultan's Seraglio: An Intimate Portrait of Life at the Ottoman*, ed. Godfrey Goodwin, London, 1996, p. 144. See, among others, Silke R. Falkner, "'Having It off' with Fish, Camels, and Lads: Sodomitic Pleasures in German-Language *Turcica*", *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 13:4, 2004, 401-27; Heather Madar, 'Before the odalisk: Renaissance representations of elite Ottoman women', *Early Modern Women: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 6, 2011, pp. 1-41.

⁶³ Marie-Hélène Huet, *Monstrous Imagination*, Cambridge MA, 1993; Claudia Pancino, *Voglie materne. Storia di una credenza*, Bologna, 1996; Mary E. Fissell, *Vernacular Bodies: The Politics of Reproduction in Early Modern England*, New York, 2004, pp. 65-6, 207-11.

⁶⁴ Anastasia Stouraiti, 'Η γυναίκα του Χάνδακα: τερατογονία, φύλο και έντυπες ειδήσεις στον απόηχο του Κρητικού Πολέμου', *Cretica Chronica* 39 (2019), 381-407.

⁶⁵ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, New York, 2004, p. 63.

of Venetian-Ottoman diplomatic and commercial interactions. Widely circulated publications of this sort suggest instead that the printing press popularized traditional, bipolar views that defined civilizational centres and peripheries in an era of messy global encounters. In that context, the monstrous did not simply represent the strange and the unknown. Rather, it articulated relationships, behaviours, and practices that were forbidden, albeit recognisable and familiar. Current historiography often dismisses early modern fake news about the people of the east Mediterranean as a mere example of ‘the era’s rhetoric’⁶⁶ that supposedly disguised an ideologically neutral experience of Christian-Muslim exchanges. This assessment shows not only a misunderstanding of the function and uses of rhetoric, but also a problematic perception of reality as a free-standing condition, uncoupled from language and symbolic representation. Disinformation certainly proliferates in wartime when ‘most intelligence is false, and the effect of fear is to multiply lies and inaccuracies’.⁶⁷ Still, false news can shed light on the culture that produces and spreads them. As Marc Bloch has shown,

the error does not propagate, does not grow, does not ultimately live except on one condition: that it finds a favorable cultural broth in the society where it is spreading. Through it, people unconsciously express their prejudices, hatreds, fears, all their strong emotions. Only [...] great collective states of mind have the power to transform a misperception into a legend.⁶⁸

EMOTIONS, MEDIA, AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

The previous discussion raises important questions about the relationship between print media, emotions and politics that have wider implications [for](#) the ways we understand the emergence of the public sphere in early modern Venice. Although recent historiography has engaged with Venetian public spaces and arenas of public debate,⁶⁹ it has not problematized Habermas’s rationalist configuration of the public sphere in relation to the role of affect in public life. Instead it has overlooked the relationship between political participation and emotional engagement, thus failing to incorporate affective modes of

⁶⁶ Eric R. Dursteler, *Venetians in Constantinople: Nation, Identity, and Coexistence in the Early Modern Mediterranean*, Baltimore, 2006, pp. 20-1.

⁶⁷ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* [1832], trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, New York, 2007, p. 64.

⁶⁸ Marc Bloch, *Réflexions d’un historien sur les fausses nouvelles de la guerre* [1921], Paris, 1999, pp. 16-7; id., ‘Reflections of a historian on the false news of the war’, trans. James P. Holoka, *Michigan War Studies Review*, 2013, p. 3.

⁶⁹ *Beyond the Public Sphere: Opinions, Publics, Spaces in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Massimo Rospoche, Bologna, 2012.

communication into a more nuanced account of Venetian political culture. The history of politics and communication cannot be fully understood without grasping their inseparable cognitive and emotional dimensions. Taking account of the role of feeling and imagination in shaping opinions and actions is essential because rationality is only half the story.

In Habermas's influential formulation, the bourgeois public sphere of the eighteenth century consisted of an assemblage of different institutions, printed texts, and communicative settings for the reasoned/critical exchange of ideas. As several scholars have argued, this highly idealised public sphere is based on a 'normative narrative of rational modernity',⁷⁰ which obscures the role of emotional communication in the deliberative process, as well as the centrality of passions in political rhetoric and collective action.⁷¹ Printed news reports about the marvels of the Levant complicate the presumed rationality of discourse within Venice's public sphere by highlighting the symbolic and affective dimensions of social and political life. Co-articulating textual and visual technologies of communication, these reports were expected to evoke both cognitive and emotional responses. This was more so the case in times of war, when ephemeral pamphlets focused the public sphere less on the formation of discursive opinion and more on the 'orchestration of public feelings'.⁷² If the increasingly speedy dissemination of news created a sense of 'contemporaneity',⁷³ it also encouraged a more passionate involvement with current affairs, making public debate more emotional. As Bacon noted in his *Advancement of Learning* (1605), 'affection beholdeth principally the present [...] and therefore the present filling the imagination more'.⁷⁴

To understand how marvellous news functioned as a mode of affective knowledge, it is necessary to situate it in a wider context of intelligibility defined by collective moods, emotionally inflected attitudes and 'structures of feeling'⁷⁵ that gave meaning to Venetian social life. Rather than sophisticated, dispassionate analysis, the

⁷⁰ Jürgen Habermas *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger, Cambridge, MA, 1989.

⁷¹ Harold Mah, 'Phantasies of the public sphere: rethinking the Habermas of historians', *Journal of Modern History* 72:1, 2000, p. 175. Also, Michael E. Gardiner, 'Wild publics and grotesque symposiums: Habermas and Bakhtin on dialogue, everyday life and the public sphere', *Sociological Review* 52, 2004, pp. 28-48; Barry Richards, 'News and the Emotional Public Sphere', in *The Routledge Companion to News and Journalism*, ed. Stuart Allan, Abingdon, 2010; Vicki Hsueh, 'Intoxicated reasons, rational feelings: rethinking the early modern English public sphere', *The Review of Politics* 78, 2016, pp. 27-57.

⁷² Lauren Berlant, 'The Epistemology of State Emotion', in *Dissent in Dangerous Times*, ed. Austin Sarat, Ann Arbor, 2005, p. 47.

⁷³ *The Dissemination of News and the Emergence of Contemporaneity in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Brendan Dooley, Aldershot, 2010.

⁷⁴ Susan James, *Passion and Action: The Emotions in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, New York, 1997, p. 168.

⁷⁵ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford, 1977, p. 132.

processing of news was an imaginative interpretive process, which focused public attention on emotionally salient and culturally resonant issues. It is a common characteristic of all public arenas that they ‘place a premium on drama’, using ‘vivid, emotional rhetoric’ and prioritizing topics that can be related to political myths or broad cultural preoccupations.⁷⁶ In Venice, the marvels of the Levant condensed profound anxieties about the limits of knowledge and the failures of empire. Striking a responsive chord with a broad audience, they resonated with concerns about the outcome of wars of conquest. They also channeled religious sensibilities into Islamophobic feelings through recourse to communicative practices used by authors of sacred oratory. For the latter, wonder was an extremely helpful tool of persuasion that intensified attention, elicited pleasure, and amplified effects.⁷⁷

While popular news pamphlets undermine the putative rational logic of the public sphere, they should not lead us to view wonder or fear as expressions of irrational behavior. Popular culture has often been understood to produce emotional bodily responses lacking in reflective thinking, but even the most embodied responses to culture involve an intellectual process.⁷⁸ During the early modern period, wonder was widely viewed as a cognitive passion and an instrument of insight – famously by Descartes, but also by Italian philosophers like Francesco Patrizi, who placed wonder on the boundary between reason and emotion.⁷⁹ Similarly, for cardinal Sforza Pallavicino, wonder was a ‘source of supreme intellectual pleasure’, because ‘the principal delectation of the intellect consists in marvelling’.⁸⁰ At the same time, however, an interesting question concerns the wider assumptions about popular belief, impassioned publics and ‘picture-thinking’⁸¹ that news about marvels registered.

In a 1686 newsletter, Mattio di Rossi, priest of Santo Stefano in Murano, linked an ominous fire in Venice to new conquests in Greece. However, he patronizingly dismissed the credulity of the ‘fantasizing common people’, who saw monsters and horrible apparitions in the fire, and disdainfully attributed such sightings to the ‘vanity of

⁷⁶ Stephen Hilgartner and Charles L. Bosk, ‘The rise and fall of social problems: a public arenas model’, *American Journal of Sociology* 94:1, 1988, pp. 62, 71.

⁷⁷ Paolo Aresi, *Arte di predicar bene*, Venice, 1611, pp. 154, 159, 161-64.

⁷⁸ Alan McKee, *Beautiful Things in Popular Culture*, Malden, MA, 2007, pp. 206-09.

⁷⁹ Peter G. Platt, ‘“Not before either known or dreamt of”: Francesco Patrizi and the Power of Wonder in Renaissance Poetics’, *Review of English Studies* 43, 1992, pp. 387-94.

⁸⁰ Sforza Pallavicino, *Trattato dello stile e del dialogo* [1644], Modena, 1819, pp. 77-8.

⁸¹ William Mazzarella, ‘The Myth of the Multitude, or, Who’s Afraid of the Crowd?’, *Critical Inquiry* 36:4, 2010, p. 703.

the plebs' and the 'superstitions of women'.⁸² Visual unreason and ignorant credulity are commonly ascribed to women and the lower classes, as extreme emotionality was seen as a marker of gender and status difference. This stratification of emotions shows how hegemonic definitions of self-discipline employed notions of wild imagination and vulgar excess to exclude disenfranchised counter-publics from the sphere of reason.

The intersections of wonder and politics can also be seen in the management of the emotions of operatic audiences. The Venetian newsreading public was a theatre-going public, which would have encountered fantastic beasts in musical dramas set in Ottoman territories. Among the amazing machines on show in Giovanni Legrenzi's *Giustino* (1683), a melodrama staging Venice's ties to Byzantium, there was a 'savage monster', a 'marine dragon', and Atlas carrying the globe on his shoulders.⁸³ A 'huge monster' also featured in Carlo Pallavicino's *Elmiro re di Corinto* (1686), written to celebrate the Venetian victories in the Peloponnese.⁸⁴ As the contemporary journal *Pallade veneta* reported, apart from a dance of Turks and Moors, spectators saw 'a monster of immense size and terrible appearance, representing a flying toad on which Scorn rides, singing an *arietta* full of fury'.⁸⁵ Dramatising current affairs on stage, these visually extravagant performances communicated political arguments about Ottoman despotism as they reproduced stereotypical views about Ottoman emotional behaviour as the epitome of violent passions.⁸⁶ Such was the perspective of Tommaso Cataneo, a Greek professor at the University of Padua, writing about the Turks as a brutal people, who thought 'that men are born to wage war [...] and that the sword is what distinguishes men from animals'.⁸⁷ In these accounts of unrestrained aggression, constructions of emotional difference served to denigrate the Ottomans, setting a criterion for marking the break between civilization and barbarism.

Emotions were not only enmeshed in the Venetian-Ottoman association; they also regulated the relation between individuals and the body politic. According to Edward Muir, an 'affective parochialism' underlay the civic rituals and ideology of Venice, while

⁸² *Vera et distinta relatione dell'horrendo fuoco ...*, Venice, 1686, p. 5.

⁸³ Nicolò Beregan, *Giustino ...*, Venice, 1683.

⁸⁴ [Vincenzo Grimani], *Elmiro re di Corinto ...*, Venice, 1686.

⁸⁵ Eleanor Selfridge-Field, *Pallade Veneta: Writings on Music in Venetian Society 1650-1750*, Venice, 1985, p. 140.

⁸⁶ Larry Wolff, *The Singing Turk: Ottoman Power and Operatic Emotions on the European Stage from Siege of Vienna to the Age of Napoleon*, Stanford, 2016, pp. 9-10.

⁸⁷ Tommaso Cataneo, *Orazione detta nella quarta elezione ...*, Venice, 1693, p. 12.

the governing patriciate used the myth of civic freedom and the cult of Saint Mark as ‘magnets to attract parochial sentiment’ and strengthen civic patriotism.⁸⁸ Collective bonds of attachment and feelings of belonging were key factors of social integration and conduits of political power. As the Jesuit Francesco Ercolani asserted, the Republic was the ‘mistress of the wills’ of others, the heart-binding imperial queen who omnipotently mastered the affects of her subjects (*signoria sù gli affetti*).⁸⁹

These views were in tune with ‘reason of state’ theories that stressed the intimate relation between affect and political legitimation, putting the management of the passions at the heart of state governance and political rationality. Acutely aware of the affective registers of political life, the sixteenth-century theorist Giovanni Botero linked reputation and wonder, stressing that the prince should gain the love of his subjects and build reputation by staging ‘a politics of the sublime’, or a spectacle of power that evoked awe and admiration.⁹⁰ Venetian artists often allegorised Venice as the sea-born goddess of love, Venus, while panegyric texts represented the republic as both the source and object of love.⁹¹ Wonders and marvels could strengthen the love of the subjects for the state by enacting Botero’s recommended politics of sublimity. Wonder was not just personal but relational, woven into the affective politics of the state. The pleasure of marvellous storytelling was crucial in this regard. ‘No one can feel the taste of wonder whole, if one does not then have someone with whom to share it by means of a story’,⁹² argued Cataneo praising doge Francesco Morosini, who paraded alongside his beloved dwarf in St Mark’s square on the day of his departure for a new campaign in Greece in 1693.⁹³ Objects of wonder and curiosity, dwarves reinforced the authority of their masters. Similarly, the marvels and monsters of the Levant were part and parcel of the representational politics of empire in the metropolitan public sphere.

THE POLITICS OF WONDER

In his fascinating diary of life on Corfu, *Prospero’s Cell*, the British writer Lawrence Durrell suggests that the unnamed island in Shakespeare’s *Tempest* was in the Ionian.

⁸⁸ Edward Muir, *Civic Ritual in Renaissance Venice*, Princeton, 1981, pp. 299, 301.

⁸⁹ Francesco Ercolani, *Raccolta d’orazioni*, Venice, 1728, p. 150.

⁹⁰ Victoria Kahn, *Machiavellian Rhetoric: From the Counter-Reformation to Milton*, Princeton, 1994, pp. 77-8; Botero, *The Reason of State*, ed. Robert Bireley, Cambridge, 2017, pp. xxiii-xxiv, 71. Also, Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, pp. 59, 70-71, 98.

⁹¹ David Rosand, *Myths of Venice: The Figuration of a State*, Chapel Hill, 2001, pp. 117-19, 138.

⁹² Cataneo, *Orazione*, p. 7.

⁹³ *Distinta relatione di quanto è occorso ... nella felice partenza per Levante ...*, Padua, 1693.

One of Durrell's characters, the old Venetian Count D., asks: 'Have I never told you that Corcyra [Corfu] is Prospero's island? [...] You would take a little pleasure in the knowledge that Shakespeare was thinking of Corcyra when he wrote *The Tempest*'.⁹⁴ Recent scholarship on the setting of Shakespeare's play corroborates Durrell's hypothesis by locating the island in the Mediterranean.⁹⁵ During Shakespeare's writing, Corfu was under Venetian rule. Like Crete or Cyprus, it was not a remote island, but a key node of the Venetian trading and colonial networks in the Levant.

Networks, however, are not always about smooth connections between different communities and places. They are also about limits, disruptions, and resistance. As anthropologist Anna Tsing notes, motion does not proceed without friction, 'the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference'.⁹⁶ The association of familiar Greek islands and of the Ottoman capital with moments of epistemological rupture suggests that increased connectivity and communication did not undermine the power of the Levant to offer Venetian audiences experiences of wonder and encounters with monstrous beings. Interestingly, wonder – a mixture of fear, curiosity and pleasure – was a complex emotional response to territories that were well-known through classical texts, amply documented through travel, trade, and diplomacy, and systematically domesticated through colonial forms of knowledge, from military reconnaissance to geographic surveys and cartographic projects.

Yet, to paraphrase Edward Said, the east Mediterranean was more than what was empirically known about it. As we have seen, Venetian printed news did not always contain new information but mobilized prior cultural memories to condition how readers felt about strange events allegedly taking place in the Levant. Most importantly, wonders and marvels were inextricably mixed up with the indeterminate contours of political sovereignty in the Venetian-Ottoman borderlands. Fuzzy and elusive objects of knowledge, marvels and monsters escaped true mastery in the same way that imperial control over contested territories was never reducible to some simplistic knowledge-power equation. In effect, stories about monsters and marvels were not really about those things at all. Rather, they were stories in which colonial relations, imperial rivalry, and

⁹⁴ Lawrence Durrell, *Prospero's Cell* [1945], London, 2012, p. 82.

⁹⁵ *The Tempest' and Its Travels*, ed. Peter Hulme and William H. Sherman, London, 2000.

⁹⁶ Anna Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*, Princeton, 2005, p. 4.

religious difference were the real subjects. If the possession of an empire was a major component of the myth of the Republic, the marvels of the Levant bring to light the dark underside of imperial rule. Far from the classical *locus amoenus* of Venetian pastoral idylls and idealized Arcadian landscapes, spirits, hybrids, and monsters defamiliarized colonial space, turning Greek islands into uncanny traps, where imperial order was always precarious, subject to interruption and threatened by indigenous agency.

These points have implications for our understanding of the political role of emotions in the making of the Venetian metropolitan community. If ‘emotional control is the real site of the exercise of power’,⁹⁷ in a highly stratified society like that of Venice wonder was not just a community-building force, capable of forming publics in opposition to imaginary foreign monsters. It was also a powerful device for reproducing dominant political and religious viewpoints within a public sphere pervaded by structural relations of social inequality. In that context, sensational pamphlets and news pictures that captured people’s imaginations were of paramount importance in aligning larger segments of society with the Venetian political community and its hierarchical power structures. Together with the commercial practices that supported them, cheap-print media were a crucial channel of communication that co-opted the marvels of the Levant into the Republic’s emotional regime; ultimately, into its myth of political and social order.

⁹⁷ William M. Reddy, ‘Against constructionism: the historical ethnography of emotions’, *Current Anthropology* 38, 1997, p. 335.