

## Venice and Race

The fact that the character of Othello is black is an important thematic element in *Othello*. Our relationship to race and racism, however, is very different than it was when *Othello* was written. An understanding of the historical perspective on race is important in order to develop an educated opinion on the theme as it relates to us today.

Throughout the Middle Ages and the early modern period, Venice was one of the most important ports in Europe, a gateway between the West and the Middle East and Africa. It was also an empire in its own right, controlling both land and sea lanes. Because of these factors, the city of Venice was both immensely wealthy and very diverse. People from all over the world came to Venice to trade and live. Venetians of all classes would have been much more used to seeing foreigners of all kinds than almost anyone else in Europe and they were, in general, more tolerant of foreigners than other cities.

This does not mean that modern Americans would find Venice to be a multicultural or inclusive place. For example, while Venice had a large Jewish population, they were required to wear clothing that signified their religion, and to live in a specific quarter which was locked at night (our modern word “ghetto” comes from the term used in Venice to signify the Jewish quarter). When Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice*, he described with some accuracy the causal racism most Venetians would have had towards those who were Jewish. However, Jews were allowed to live and work mainly under the radar, as compared to Spain, where the Inquisition gave Jews the choice of forced conversion or death, and England, where no openly practicing Jews had lived since the thirteenth century.

Africans or “Moors” (the word covers people we would today consider both African and Middle Eastern) were a slightly different story. While the dislike of Jews was based completely in religion, reactions to Africans were more complex. Many Africans were not Christians, but some were, and then, as now in some parts of the world, lighter skinned Africans were often considered more intelligent, civilized and even more human than those with very dark skin. In addition, Moors and Africans alike were viewed as exotic and exciting—the period had a fascination with “wonders”—that could sometimes make them sought out and popular, at least to a point. We see

this attitude early on when Othello describes how Brabantio “loved” him and invited him over all the time to tell the fantastic tale of his travels. Up to a point, Brabantio saw Othello as a highly sought after connection. That point, of course, stopped well short of Othello’s marriage to his daughter.

Of course, Shakespeare never visited Venice and his casual rewriting of recent historical events shows clearly that he was creating drama, not recording history or sociology. The English viewed Venice as both an actual city-state and as an idea. Venice was seen as supremely powerful, more so than other Italian city states like Florence, sophisticated, tolerant of diversity and more than a little amoral—much the way some people today often feel about New York City. Shakespeare drew on this mythology, choosing Venice as a place where an African could plausibly rise to become the general of the navy and marry a senator’s daughter.

