THE UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK

SHAKESPEARE AND HIS WORLD

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Shakespeare birthplace trust

Venetian Women

In the opening scene of ***Othello***, we learn that Othello, the Moor, a general in the Venetian army, has been wooing and indeed has now gone away with Desdemona who is the daughter of Brabantio, one of the senators. The scene takes place at night. Brabantio is woken and told the shocking news that the black mercenary has run off with his daughter.

What sort of image did Venetian women have for Shakespeare and his audience? Well, the answer to that is a very interesting one. Venetian women were rather notorious in Shakespeare's time. We can see a really good example of this in a rather wonderful travel book by a man called Thomas Coryat. It's called ***Coryat's Crudities***.

Coryat came from a little village in Somerset in the west country of England and he set off on a walking tour. He eventually walked the way to India. His shoes still survive. You can see them in the village church where he was born. They are, as you can imagine, somewhat threadbare.

But along the way he passed through Venice and at the centre of the book of his travels – ***Coryat's Crudities***, is a fascinating account of his time in Venice and it has a particular interest in the women. Indeed, there's a rather fine illustration in it. An illustration of himself illustrated as Il Signior Tomaso Odcombiano, Odcombe was the name of his home village.

He's seen in the picture with Margarita Emiliana, a Cortesana di Venetia. Venice was famous for its courtesans. This is what Coryat writes, 'But since I have taken occasion to mention some notable particulars of their women, I will insist farther upon that matter and make relation of their courtesans also as being a thing incident and very proper to this discourse, especially because the name of a courtesan of Venice is famous all over Christendome'.

The courtesan in the image, rather startlingly, has bare breasts and indeed Venetian women were famous for their outlandish clothes, their high platform shoes and their very low cut dresses. Cleavage was the very least of what they displayed and one of the things that Coryat and other English travellers said about Venice was that it was actually very difficult to distinguish between the well born fashionable ladies showing off their wares and the courtesans showing off theirs.

On the one hand, the well born ladies wanted to demonstrate ostentatiously the wealth of their husbands. The courtesans were after something very different. Now this confusion about the virtues, as against the sexual wiles off Venetian women is something that Iago plays upon very powerfully. 'I know our country disposition well. In Venice, they do let heaven see the pranks they dare not show their husbands.'

In Venice women are sexual beings and husbands can become distinctly uncomfortable about that. This is the fear that Iago conjures up in ***Othello***. Othello is an outsider. He says he's growing old, he says 'I'm declining into the veil of years' and he's very conscious that he is black. So he can't quite believe his luck when the beautiful daughter of one of the senators falls in love with him and agrees to marry him.

What Iago does is play upon Othello's insecurities as an older man, a black man, an outsider. Someone who is in the pay of the state rather than holding the power of the state in the way that Desdemona's father Brabantio does. 'Watch out Moor' Othello is told. 'She has deceived her father. She may deceive thee.'

Michael Cassio, the charming smooth Florentine who goes to Desdemona in order to try to persuade her to persuade Othello to forgive Cassio for his error of judgement in the drunken brawl. Cassio – he's the sort of man you would've expected Desdemona to marry – and Iago therefore finds it quite easy to persuade Othello, quite

falsely of course, that Desdemona and Cassio are having an affair. He plays on the idea of the sexual appetite of Venetian women.

He allows his deceitful fantasies to take over Othello's own imagination. He conjures up visions of jealousy in Othello with the result that Othello becomes convinced that his wife is not a virtuous, high-born Venetian, but a kind of courtesan. In the most savage, most cruel scene in the fourth act of the play – where he comes to her chamber, convinced she's been unfaithful – he asks her who she is and she says, 'Of course, I am your loving wife'. He says, 'I took you for that cunning whore of Venice' and he throws money at her as if she is a whore. A whore even worse than a courtesan. The point about a courtesan is that they offer a very sort of high class escort service. They will perhaps be set up in a home of their own by the gentleman who's looking after them.

But to call Desdemona a whore, a common street walker is absolutely shocking. So it's very easy to see how Shakespeare uses the Venetian setting with this idea that the women are, on the one hand, highly sophisticated, very beautiful and very fashionable.

On the other hand, sexually questionable. It's easy to see why the setting of Venice is so appropriate to the action of this play. Reading travels from the time, such as Coryat's helps us bring alive the world in which the play was written and set.