

SHAKESPEARE AND HIS WORLD

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Othello's Pre-history and Christian Slaves

Brabantio, the Venetian senator, cannot believe or understand why his daughter, Desdemona, has fallen in love with Othello, the Venetian general, the Moor, the outsider, the black man. He says that Othello must have used some kind of witchcraft. One of the things we learn from travellers' tales of Venice is that Venice was famous for its mountebanks. These were quack medicine men, who sold potions that they claimed had all sorts of medicinal powers.

'She is abused', Brabantio says, 'stolen from me and corrupted by spells and medicines bought of mountebanks'. Without witchcraft, he said, Othello could not possibly have persuaded her to marry him. He cannot believe why a maiden, a Venetian maiden, a white girl, a rich white girl, who he sees as being very modest, very restrained, very sheltered from the world, why she should fall in love, as he puts it, with what she feared to look on.

It's a very traditional racist idea that someone who's black, one is afraid to look upon them if one is a white girl. Of course, Desdemona has fallen in love with Othello, and it's precisely because he is so different from her because she is sheltered whereas he has lived this extraordinary life — it's precisely for that reason that she is so attracted by him.

Othello comes absolutely clean in front of the Senate. He says, the only witchcraft I've used is my storytelling. The only witchcraft is the language in which I told her the story of my life. At the end of the great speech describing his past adventures, he says that she loved him for the dangers he had passed and he loved her because she did pity them. So it is the prehistory of Othello that is so attractive to Desdemona.

Of course, from the point of view of the construction of the play, it's very important that here in the first act we learn a bit about Othello's past. There are various uncertainties and ambiguities about the past of Othello. For instance, we get two slightly different accounts of the origin of the handkerchief, that crucial love token that will play such an important role in the plot. What there is no doubt about is that he has spent many years fighting in the Venetian Army.

Who was Venice fighting against? Well, as we saw with our reading of Knolles' *General History of the Turks* that Shakespeare read in preparing for the plays, it was against the Ottomans, against the Turkish Empire. There's one particularly interesting moment in Othello's account of his many adventures, and it goes like this. He, having spoken about the battle, the sieges that he went through, the moving accidents by flood and field, the hairbreadth escapes in the course of battle. He then tells, 'of being taken by the insolent foe and sold to slavery, of my redemption thence, and importance in my traveller's history'.

Then he speaks of his exotic travels, how he's met all sorts of strange people — cannibals and the anthropophagi, men whose heads grow beneath their shoulders. It's that moment where he speaks about being taken by the insolent foe — which is, unquestionably, a reference to the Ottomans, the Turks — and sold to slavery and his redemption thence. It's a little glimpse, a little reminder of the fact that, for Shakespeare and his audience, the possibility of being sold into slavery in North Africa was a very real one. Many merchants who travelled to North Africa found themselves captured, sometimes by pirates, and they would be sold into slavery. We think of slavery in terms of later developments, the African—Caribbean—American slave trade, but actually, there was a very well-developed slave trade within the Ottoman Empire and the Christians were, at this time, the victims of it.

The engraving you are looking at is a fantastically detailed representation of Christian slaves being sold in the marketplace in Algiers. Algiers — which Shakespeare refers to in ***The Tempest*** (another of his plays set in the Mediterranean) — Algiers was a place famous for pirates and also for Christians being captured and sold into slavery. If one looks closely, it's clear that the slave traders, the people with power, are the turbaned Turks whereas the Christians are half naked, fearful, praying and chained. If you look at the figure in the centre, there's a Christian. His hands are held together, he's obviously in prayer, but he's dragged in chains by his Ottoman captor.

So there's a very real sense of fear, a fear of the power of the Ottoman Empire, but there's also a real pride in the fact that Othello has come over to the side of the Venetians. It's one of the great qualities of Shakespeare's characterisation, that he's able, through his language, to create a sense that characters have a past, have many different dimensions. They're not just living in the moment. That's one of the main ways in which he creates this extraordinary illusion that the actors you see on stage are real-life characters, real flesh and blood characters with their own history. At the climax of the play, we will find Othello, again, reverting to his past history in order to describe what is happening in the present.