THE UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK

SHAKESPEARE AND HIS WORLD

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Shakespeare birthplace trust

An Introduction to Venice

Othello, the Moor of Venice. It's a play that immediately has an ethnic identity and a place in the title. What associations would the name 'Moor' and the place 'Venice' have had for Shakespeare's audience?

When the play begins, we quickly meet the Venetians. We meet a Florentine called Michael Cassio and we meet Othello, the 'Moor', from North Africa. We hear a lot about his origins. We hear, too, that Venice is at war with 'the Turk'.

What were the associations of all these groups for Shakespeare's audience? Why did he set his play in Venice? Why was there a Moor, a black, as a general in the Venetian army? What's the significance of Cyprus, where the action moves in the second act and where it remains for the rest of the play? These are some of the questions that we're going to explore this week.

We're going to think about Shakespeare and geography. We've already talked a lot about Shakespeare and history, but geography was also a subject of great interest at the time. Shakespeare's was an age of exploration, of cross-cultural encounter, of trade and of mapping.

I'm here at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust in Stratford-upon-Avon, Shakespeare's home town, and I've been looking at some of the old books in their library. This one here is by a writer called Ortelius, and it's a basic introduction to the principles of geography. It has little maps of all the continents and countries of the known world. So it's a great place for thinking about what the significance of Italy, in general, and Venice, in particular, was for Shakespeare and his audience.

Ortelius says of Italy, 'the description of this worthy country deserves a whole volume to be implied thereon'. Indeed, Italy was of enormous fascination to Shakespeare. I think there were two particular associations that Italy had, and they were rather contrary. On the one hand, Italy was associated with great sophistication, with great culture, with fine manners. After all, it had been in Italy that the Renaissance had really taken off. Yet Italy was also associated with scheming politicians, with low cunning.

We only have to think of some of the famous names from Italy. We think of the great Renaissance artists, such as Leonardo and Michelangelo. We think of the fabulous churches, the paintings, the palaces, the enormous patronage that, for instance, the Medicis in Florence gave to the arts.

Italy seems the most wonderful place to go and many Elizabethan travellers thought exactly that, but at the same time, among the famous names from 16th century Italy, was that of Niccolo Machiavelli, the author of ***The Prince***, the handbook of political scheming. Machiavelli said that all that matters in politics is power, is control. Those old ideas about the virtue of a ruler, of a prince or a king or a duke, as God's representative on earth were all thrown out by Machiavelli in the name of raw power. Religion itself, Machiavelli said, was simply a device dreamt up by the powerful in order to keep the people under control and tell them what to do.

Machiavelli's infamous work, ***The Prince***, wasn't actually translated into English in Shakespeare's lifetime, but books attacking Machiavelli certainly were, so he was a very well-known figure, an almost demonic figure.

One of the plays that lies behind Shakespeare's ***Moor of Venice*** is Christopher Marlowe's very successful ***The Jew of Malta*** That play actually has a prologue spoken in the character of Machiavelli, and we know that it's a play Shakespeare knew very well.

There is no doubt that the cunning, scheming Venetian Iago is a figure who would have been regarded by Shakespeare's audience as a Machiavellian figure. It is, I think, a little bit of a witty irony on Shakespeare's part that the more virtuous character, the gracious Michael Cassio (with whom Iago falsely accuses Desdemona of having an affair) is a Florentine. In the very first scene of the play, Iago scornfully calls Cassio a Florentine. The irony, I think, is that Machiavelli was a Florentine, and the truly Machiavellian one is Iago, who's very proud of being a Venetian.

We need to remember, and Ortelius' map is helpful in showing us this, that Italy was not a unified country in Shakespeare's lifetime — in fact, it wasn't until the 19th century that Italy was unified as one nation. So Italy was divided into a number of city-states. There was the Florentine Republic. There was the Dukedom of Milan, which Ortelius says was the greatest of all the Italian states. That's going to be important when we look at ***The Tempest*** in a later week. In the south, there was the Kingdom of Naples. To the northeast, there was Venice, and Venice had a very distinctive structure. It had a doge, who was like a duke, but there was also a counsel of senators — Venice was proudly republican. Also, in contrast to so many of the other Italian city-states that were very close to Rome and the pope of Rome, Venice had a long tradition of independence from papal-Catholic influence.

I think this is one of the reasons why the Elizabethans were fascinated by it. It was a small self-contained place, it had its own political system; but it was also, of course, a port, a city on water, a place of trade and cultural exchange and it was anti-papal, anti-Rome.

In all those things, it bore a certain resemblance to Shakespeare's London. So it is, that in both ***The Merchant of Venice*** and ***Othello, the Moor of Venice***, there is a sense in which Venice acts as a double for Shakespeare's London.