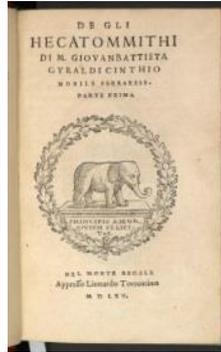


Othello (c. 1603–04)

Contextual information

Quotes from *Othello*

Shakespeare took the plot of *Othello* from Cinthio's *Gli Hecatommithi* (1565) – a story about Disdemona and her Moorish husband, who is duped by his villainous Ensign. Shakespeare removed the idea that the Ensign was motivated by lust for Disdemona, and he added the characters of Roderigo and Brabantio.



Explore [Cinthio's *Gli Hecatommithi*](#)

The word 'Moor' had a number of different connotations in Shakespeare's era. In Cesare Vecellio's 16th-century costume guide, the term is used to describe both the people of North Africa and sub-Saharan Africans. As such, it has provoked heated debate about the identity of Shakespeare's 'Othello, the Moor of Venice'.



Explore a [16th-century costume guide](#)

A number of contemporary visitors were struck by the multinational character of 16th-century Venice, particularly in the trading centre, the Rialto. [Gasparo Contarini](#) notes the 'wonderful concourse of strange and forraine people ... of the farthest and remotest nations'. This multiculturalism is also reflected in Carpaccio's painting of *The Miracle of the Relic of the True Cross on the Rialto Bridge* (1494).



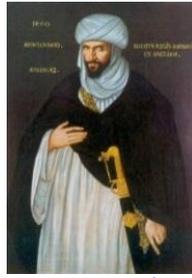
View [Carpaccio's *The Miracle of the Relic of the True Cross on the Rialto Bridge*](#)

In Shakespeare's day, Venice was notorious for its high-class prostitutes or courtesans, as shown by the rich illustrations in [Coryate's *Crudities*](#), [Vecellio's costume guide](#) and the friendship album of [Moyses Walens](#).



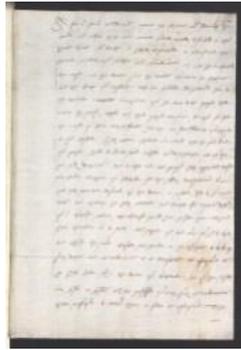
View courtesans in the friendship album of [Moyses Walens](#).

The Moroccan Ambassador visited London in late 1600, to negotiate with Queen Elizabeth I about a military alliance against Spain. Shakespeare may have seen the impressive North African party before he wrote *Othello*.



Discover the [portrait of the Moorish Ambassador to Queen Elizabeth I](#)

A draft proclamation of 1601 asked for the deportation of black people, described as 'Negroes and blackmoors', from the realm of England. This was justified on the grounds that they were draining national resources at a time of 'dearth' or hardship.



Explore a [draft proclamation on the expulsion of 'Negroes and Blackamoors', 1601](#)

The Travels of John Mandeville was one of the most [popular travel books](#) of the Middle Ages. The narrative describes wondrous races and creatures that inhabit the edges of the known world, including men with eyes in their shoulders.



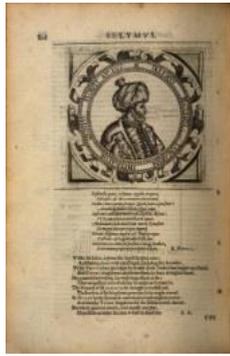
Explore a [manuscript of Mandeville's Travels showing headless men, 1430](#)

In early modern England, people were keenly aware of the dangers and benefits of plants as remedies and poisons. In his finely illustrated *Herball* (1597), John Gerard describes plants like the potato which were used as aphrodisiacs or lust-inducing drugs.



Discover [poisons, sleep-inducing plants and love potions in Gerard's Herball](#)

In the huge sea- battle of Lepanto (1571) Christian forces regained control of Cyprus from the Ottoman Turks. Shakespeare set parts of *Othello* in war-torn Cyprus, giving the play a strong political resonance for its first audiences.



Explore the [description of the Battle of Lepanto in Knolles's History of the Turks](#)

Leo Africanus used reductive racial stereotypes to describe the 'vertues' and 'vices' of Africans in 1550. He says 'no nation in the world is so subject to jealousy' and claims that Africans are 'so credulous that they beleeve matters impossible which are told to them'.



View [Leo Africanus's Geographical History of Africa](#)

Cuckolds are men depicted with animal horns as a shameful sign that their wives had been unfaithful. They became a running joke in many early modern ballads, pamphlets and plays.



View a [broadside ballad on cuckolds](#)

The white actor, Richard Burbage, was probably the first man to play Othello. He played the part wearing black make-up and a wig made of black lamb's wool.



View the [portrait of Richard Burbage](#)

In *A Short View of Tragedy* (1693), the critic Thomas Rymer cuttingly asks why *Othello* was not 'call'd the Tragedy of the Handkerchief?' He wonders how 'it entered into our Poets head to make a Tragedy of this Trifle.'



View an [Italian handkerchief](#)

In his notes on *Othello* (c. 1818), the poet and critic, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, commented on Iago's 'motiveless malignity'.



Explore [Coleridge's annotated copy of Shakespeare](#)

At the age of 17, the American Ira Aldridge was the first black actor to play *Othello* – or any Shakespearean role – in Britain in 1825.



View a [Painting of Ira Aldridge as Othello](#)