

## The Historical Blackamoor

This handout is intended to give you some idea of the idea of African identity that Shakespeare was working with as well as a look at what Othello was portrayed as during the 19th century, the period relevant to *Blood Meridan*.

A depiction of *A Moor* from Cesare Vecellio's *Degli habiti* (1590). This is a typical depiction of a North African person from Elizabethan times.



In the 1603 edition of his *Epitome of the Theater of the World*, a series of maps with commentaries, Abraham Ortelius describes "Barbarie" [North Africa] and some of the characteristics of its inhabitants:

The people are generalye all tawney, moores, veye sturdye and stronge of bodye ... They are very jealous of theyr wyves ... and very hardlye can they forget any iniurye offered them ... The countrye swaynes are better, more lovinge, and patiente, but so simple that they will beleeve any incredible fiction.

We would do well, too, to remember that Cyprus was, for the characters of this play, the forefront of the battle between Christendom and the Ottoman empire. The Ottoman empire was, of course, populated by Turks, which was in Shakespeare's day a term often used to denote any practitioner of Islam. Cyprus is, then, a boundary place of change and war. It is here that Othello's faculties of nobility, honesty, and reason first succumb to Iago's venom. When these positive traits lose hold Othello's passions to take the upperhand, leading in the end to both his and Desdemona's tragic deaths. (More tragic still, Cyprus is to this day divided down the middle; those on the west, Greeks, adhere to the Greek Orthodox Church and those on the east, Turks, adhere to Islam.)

The parallels between Shakespeare's Othello and Ortelius's description are obvious, or will be as you continue to read the play.

This is Edmund Kean playing Othello in 1814, a performance described by William Hazlitt as "the finest piece of acting in the world" and "a masterpiece of natural passion." The racial "difference" of this Othello is strongly represented through costume and jewelry.



It's worth noting that the words *Barbary* and *barbarian* have common origins. As a matter of fact, an ambassador from Barbary (now Morocco) to Elizabeth's court in 1600 is labelled in a painting from the time as "legatus Regis barbarii in Angliam." This translates to "emissary from the Barbary/barbarian king to England." And *Morocco* more or less is "moor - occo."