



# The Moor in Elizabethan England: Exoticism in Othello

*Christine Merklein*

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Seminar paper from the year 2005 in the subject English Language and Literature Studies - Literature, grade: 1-, University of Würzburg (Anglistik- Literaturwissenschaft, Kulturwissenschaft, Didaktik), course: Shakespeare-Seminar, 14 entries in the bibliography, language: English, abstract: In his introduction to *The Moor in English Renaissance Drama*, Jack D'Amico mentions that "as an opposite in race, religion, and disposition, the Moor can be used to confirm the superiority of Western values". This is a clear statement about the position of Moors, but to a rather unclear topic: As will be shown below, the term 'Moor' was not clearly defined in Elizabethan England and is even in today's criticism left to some discussion. Although it was not unusual in 16th-century England to see Moors acting on stage, it was indeed unusual to portray them like Shakespeare did in *Othello*. He draws a very special and unique picture of the Moor, not only in comparison to contemporary stage portrayals of Moors, but also compared to the other characters of the play. *Othello* is exotic because of many reasons. His origin, his complexion and his values are only some of them. All together they determine his exoticism. The blackness of his skin is the visual signifier of his otherness and exoticism, and plays an important role, wherefore it is an important topic of this work. When taking a closer look at this exoticism, racism is an important topic: "no analysis of *Othello* 'can be adequate if it ignores the factor of race.'" The aim of this work is not to answer the question whether *Othello* is a racist play or not, but because "black/white oppositions permeate" the tragedy, racism in the sense of people's reactions and attitudes towards exotic foreigners will inevitably be a topic here.

This essay is divided in two main parts. One of them is discussing the term 'Moor', its meaning in Elizabethan England, and the stereotype which is connected with it. The other is taking a closer look at the exoticism portrayed in *Othello* itself. The conclusion at the end tries to bring these two parts together, although many links between them are made throughout.

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