SHAUL BASSI
ALBERTO TOSO FEI

SHAKESPEARE IN VENICE
EXPLORING THE CITY WITH SHYLOCK AND OTHELLO

photographs by
GABRIELE GOMIERO
DESDEMONA - That I did love the Moor to live with him
My downright violence and storm of fortunes
May trumpet to the world.
[OTHELLO, Act I, Scene III]

OTHELLO - ... alas, to make me
The fixed figure for the time of scorn
To point his slow unmoving finger at!
[OTHELLO, Act IV, Scene II]

RODERIGO - What a full fortune does the thicklips owe
If he can carry's thus!
[OTHELLO, Act I, Scene I]

[9] ST. MARK'S: A GALLERY OF "MORI"

thello, says the title of the tragedy, is "the Moor of Venice". In the principal source of the work, the novella by Giambattista Giraldi Cinzio, Gli Hecatommiti, Shakespeare had read:
"There once lived in Venice a Moor, who was very valiant and of a handsome person, and having given proofs in war of great skill and prudence, he was highly esteemed by the Signoria of the Republic, who in rewarding deeds of valor advanced the interests of the state." But what exactly is meant by "a Moor"?
The only certainty is that for centuries the critics have engaged in heated debate about an identity which in many ways is mysterious and blurred and on which the text never throws clear light, for Renaissance knowledge fused reality and imagination into what has been defined as "poetic geography" when it came to countries outside Europe, and in Africa in particular. Let's suppose that Shakespeare has just read Cinzio's novella in the Biblioteca Marciana and decides now to ask a passerby where he can find the Moors.
The Hub of Power

Shakespeare in Venice

(i mori) of Venice. Curiously, he doesn’t have to leave St. Mark’s Square to find at least four kinds, each very different from the other. The most famous and easiest to see are the great bronze statues that strike the hours at the top of the Clock Tower, built by Mauro Codussi between 1496 and 1499. These powerful male figures, cast in 1497 by Ambrogio da le Anchore, are clad in animal skins that leave them half naked. A contemporary document, a note detailing the expenses entailed in the construction of the building, refers to the two figures as Ziganti (giants) but there is no certainty as to who they were intended to depict, though they were probably biblical or mythological references to an earlier age. But before long, probably as a result of the dark brown colour of the bronze or the patina that formed on the surface, the Venetians took to calling them “Moors” and the clock tower is still known as the “Torre dei Mori”.

Looking up at the tower from the Square, the traveller of four centuries ago would have seen what nowadays we can admire only twice a year, during the week following Ascension Day (in Venetian dialect Sensa) and on the Feast of Epiphany: from one of the two doors at the sides of the dial, where normally we see the hours and minutes, the Three Magi emerge in procession and, preceded by the Angel, bow before the Virgin as they pass. One of the Magi, the dark-skinned king Balthasar, may be the “fixed figure for the time of scorn / To point his slow unmoving finger at” that Othello fears he will become.

If you move now towards the corner between the Basilica and the Doge’s Palace, you will see the unsettling and enigmatic group of the Tetrarchs, four figures of warriors embracing each other, sculpted in Egypt in the IV century from a single block of porphyry. They depict the Emperor Diocletian and the other members of the tetrarchy; the hole visible in the headdress of each was once set with the symbol of their royalty. Venetians prefer to believe that the sculptures are none other than four Saracens (or Moors) who were turned to stone as they tried to steal the Treasure of St. Mark’s.

Support for this attractive theory might be deduced from the crude, late XIII century sculpted frieze below; this depicts two putti emerging from the
mouths of two dragons bearing a cartouche inscribed with one of the earliest examples of vernacular language in Venice: "L'om po fur e die in pensar – E vega quello che gli po inchontrar" (which loosely translates as: "Men will do and say whatever they feel like – and then they'll learn the consequences"). It would seem like a classic case of projection for it was well known that the theft was perpetrated by Venetians just as it was Venetians who stole the body of St. Mark from Alexandria by concealing it under a layer of pork, which was repugnant to the Moslem guards.

And lastly, on the XIV century capital of the Peoples of the Earth, the third from the left on the water side façade, we can see the proud turbaned head of a Moor, complete with the thick lips Rodrigo insultingly refers to when speaking of Othello.
This gallery of Moors actually within the Square shows how the term could be used in many different and inventive ways and became almost a generic word for "otherness", applicable both to recognizable ethnic physiognomies and to creatures shrouded in legend. When we move towards Campo dei Mori in the Sestiere of Cannaregio, things will get more complicated.
LORENZO — How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank! Here will we sit, and let the sounds of music creep in our ears. Soft stillness and the night become the bounties of sweet harmony.
Sit, Jessica; look how the floor of heaven is thick inlaid with paterns of bright gold. There is not the smallest orb which thou behold'st but in his motion like an angel sings. Still choiring to the young-eyed cherubins. Such harmony is in immortal souls, but whilst this muddy vesture of decay doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it. [THE MERCHANT OF VENICE, Act V, Scene 1]

SHAKESPEARE AND THE KABBALA

According to one of the most fanciful and tempting theories regarding Shakespeare’s intellectual nourishment, he was interested in Kabbala, the ancient mystical and speculative current in Jewish thought. Kabbala, a word that in Hebrew means simply “tradition”, reached Venice at the same time as the newly established Jewish community and in particular thanks to the Jews expelled from Spain, with its rich history of mystical meditation. Kabbala possesses keys capable of reconciling the different modes in which science and religion interpret creation and life. Kabbala teaches science humility and respect for mystery; it teaches the importance of developing all aspects of human beings, not only of logical reasoning and the satisfaction of physical needs. During the Renaissance interest in Kabbala spread to Christians (the most famous was Pico della Mirandola), and many believed it could perfectly well be incorporated into their religion. In Venice, for example, the friar Francesco Giorgi (or Zorzi della Mirandola) believed in Kabbala, and Shakespeare was also influenced by it. In his important work The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age the celebrated scholar Frances Yates suggests that Giorgi also influenced Shakespeare. Commenting on the somewhat reckless theories of Daniel Baines, who saw the characters of The Merchant of Venice as embodiments of the Sephiroths, the ten emanations of the divine — with Shylock in the part of the Ghever; or “judgement-severity”, Antonio as “Hesed” or “loving kindness” and Portia in Venetian), like all Christian adepts in Kabbala, was convinced that it fore-shadowed the Second Coming of Christ. Fusing Jewish, Christian and neo-Platonic elements in a perfect example of Renaissance intellectual synthesis, Fra Giorgio wrote De harmonia mundi, whose theories of harmonizing the macrocosm and the microcosm found artistic application in the construction of the Church of San Francesco della Vigna, which the Kabbalist friar planned according to “harmonic” calculations. Giorgi was also consulted by two emissaries sent by Henry VIII, who was collecting opinions as to the divorce he was contemplating (see also the chapter devoted to Leon Modena), and his teachings exerted a considerable influence in the Elizabethan period on thinkers such as John Dee and Robert Fludd. In his important work The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age the celebrated scholar Frances Yates suggests that Giorgi also influenced Shakespeare. Commenting on the somewhat reckless theories of Daniel Baines, who saw the characters of The Merchant of Venice as embodiments of the Sephiroths, the ten emanations of the divine — with Shylock in the part of the “Ghever; or “judgement-severity”, Antonio as “Hesed” or “loving kindness” and Portia...
as "Tifereth" or "beauty or mercy", who reconciles the first two (Banes uses this interpretation to show that the play was not an enactment of the conflicting positions of Jewish law and Christian charity but rather an exploration of Kabbalistic synthesis) – Yates takes a more cautious approach and writes of the famous dialogue between Lorenzo and Jessica: "we may therefore suppose that the immediate inspiration for this outburst was the universal harmony of the Friar of Venice". He goes on to suggest that Shakespeare's play is not anti-Semitic in spirit but an invitation to tolerance. And in this connection we should also remember (as mentioned in the chapter devoted to Venus and her birth) that in Othello too, music and harmony are important elements.

Other scholars have been very sceptical of the idea of an esoteric Shakespeare. Responding to Frances Yates, who had described the expression on Shakespeare's face in his funeral bust in Stratford as "trance-like", William Empson commented that the expression more probably indicated the effects of a "city banquets, with a series of grand courses and a round of wines" which the poet found it difficult to keep down.
The observations of Salerio at the beginning of *The Merchant of Venice*, which show us how he and his fellow merchants Antonio and Solanio are so obsessed by the outcome of their trading enterprises that they see ships literally everywhere, may provide an eloquent psychological touch but they are nonetheless historically inaccurate. Venetian merchants and nobles (often the same person) did indeed love to see vessels constantly around them, as we know from the inventories of their houses that often included ornaments, vases, carafes, jewels, spice-boxes and other objects in the form of ships; and their tables often bore *spongade*, a sort of fruit cake sometimes shaped like a boat; but these were evidence of pride and prosperity not of anxiety. It obviously served the story to have Antonio unable to repay his debt to Shylock because his argosies were reported to have foundered, but cargoes were normally covered against loss and Venice was one of the leading centres of maritime insurance.

Dockyard workers in Venice, the *Arsenale*, were held in such high regard by the city's hierarchy that they were the only people, other than members of the nobility, who were not obliged to kneel in the presence of the Doge, and they were considered as his personal bodyguard. Something of this dual link between St. Mark's and the *Arsenale* must have survived to modern times: the Fire Brigade, normally stationed in the Arsenale, have the honour of presiding over the hoisting and lowering of the three great flags in St. Mark's Square. And it was in these two places that the celebrated revolt against the Austrian occupation began under the leadership of Daniele Manin and Niccolo Tommaseo in 1848.
RODERIGO — Here is her father’s house, I’ll call aloud. [...] 
IAGO — Awake, what ho, Brabantio! thieves, thieves, thieves! 
Look to your house, your daughter, and your bags. 
Thieves, thieves! [...] 
BRABANTIO — What tell’s thou me of robbing? This is Venice. 
My house is not a grange. 
[OTHELLO, Act I, Scene I]

[86] THE HOUSE OF DESDEMONA  

As mentioned in the chapter dealing with secret accusations, Othello opens with Iago and Roderigo engaged in noisy wrangling beneath the window of the Senator Brabantio. One tradition accredited in many guidebooks, identifies the place as Palazzo Contarini-Fasan, a small jewel of florid Gothic architecture on the Grand Canal, of which John Ruskin executed a fine watercolour. It was certainly common practice for Venetian families to attach their name to the building where they lived and even the most imposing palazzi are still known, with a not entirely convincing show of modesty, as Ca’ (the abbreviation of casa or house/home). So it is difficult to fathom why, probably in the XIX century, a building that belonged to a branch of the illustrious Contarini family that was renowned for its pheasant shooting should suddenly have become “Ca’ Brabanzio”.

The main access into Venetian palazzi was the water entrance from the canal and the labyrinthine approach to Ca’ Contarini-Fasan on the land side makes it difficult to imagine the spot from which Iago and Roderigo could have yelled their insinuating insults to the elderly nobleman in an example of charivari, the ancient ritual whereby a community publicly stigmatized unconventional marriages, deviant conduct and offences against ethical and moral standards with shouting and loud discordant music. Perhaps the most logical answer is that the palazzo is near St. Mark’s and stands on a route used by gondoliers, who are notoriously prone to inventing stories to satisfy the appetites of Shakespeare-loving English and American tourists; indeed, as John Pembie makes clear in his Venice Rediscovered, gondoliers made an enormous contribution, after the fall of the Republic and throughout the XIX century, to the creation of a second – this time romantic and crepuscular – myth of Venice. But there is one small detail that gives rise to another alluring line of thought. The elegant fretted balconies praised by Ruskin feature a wheel pattern, careful examination of which reveals that one of these wheels is “turning” in the opposite direction to all the others. Think now of the ancient image of the wheel of fortune, the symbol of uncertainty and of the folly of pride, which Shakespeare describes as a blindfolded goddess “depicted with a wheel to signify – this is the point – that she is turning and inconstant, and all about change and variation” [Henry V, Act III, Scene VI]. So perhaps we can imagine that the balcony wheels offer an allusion to the tragic fate of Desdemona, the imaginary inhabitant of the palazzo, whom fortune first destines for overwhelming, passionate love and then nullifies it through her cruel and tragic death.
SHYLOCK — Now, what news on the Rialto?
[THE MERCHANT OF VENICE, Act I, Scene III]

SHYLOCK — Signor Antonio, many a time and oft
In the Rialto you have rated me
About my moneys and my usances
Still have I borne it with a patient shrug,
For sufferance is the badge of all our tribe.
You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog,
And spit upon my Jewish gaberdine,
And all for use of that which is mine own.
Well then, it now appears you need my help.
[THE MERCHANT OF VENICE, Act I, Scene III]

SHYLOCK — There I have another bad match: a bankrupt,
a prodigal, who dare scarce show his head on the Rialto;
a beggar, that was used to come so smug upon the mart.
[THE MERCHANT OF VENICE, Act III, Scene I]

PETRUCHIO — Give me thy hand, Kate. I will unto Venice,
To buy apparel 'gainst the wedding-day.
[THE TAMING OF THE SHREW, Atto II, Scena I]

BUSINESS IS BUSINESS
rialto is the only place in Venice that Shakespeare mentions—and repeatedly—in his work. Rialto was the name of one of the earliest settlements on the islands that comprise the city (its name, from the Latin Rīvus Altus, which later became Rivoalti, indicates an island whose high shores made it possible to build without being hindered
by the tide) and it subsequently developed into the pulsating heart of Venetian trade and finance. According to legend it was here, on 25th March, 421, with the founding of the small Church of San Giacometto, that Venice was born; and here too, in 809, that Doge Angelo Partecipazio moved the seat of administrative and commercial power from Meta mauco, which had become dangerously vulnerable to attack by Charlemagne's son Pipin. And it is here that Antonio insults and spits on Shylock before he needs his loan, and here that he feels ashamed to return to when he can no longer repay the debt.

At the time of Shakespeare the market area had already been completely rebuilt after the terrible fire of 1514, which had razed most of the district to the ground. The arcades of the Fabbriche Vecchie and the Fabbriche Nuove, built by Sansovino and Scarpagnino between the Grand Canal and the Church of San Giacomo, were where business was discussed and deals made. Thomas Coryat offers a careful description of what went on there: "The Rialto which is at the farther side of the bridge as you come from St. Marks, is a most stately building. The building being the Exchange of Venice, where the Venetians, the Gentlemen and the Merchants doe meete twice a day, betwixt eleven and twelve of the clocke in the morning, and betwixt five and sith of the clocke in the afternoone. This Rialto is of a goodly height, built all with briche as the Palaces are, adorned with many faire walkes or open galleries, and hath a pretiy quadrangular court adjoyning to it."

The question "What news on the Rialto?", which is actually asked twice in The Merchant of Venice (and which, significantly, has been adopted as the name of a modern-day international network of Venetian scholars), reminds us how extremely important the city was as a centre of information during the Renaissance.

The area of Rialto was also famous for its shops, which were specially decked out when important visitors were in town (for the Ottoman envoys, for example) and where goods of all sorts were produced, like the celebrated helmet chased for Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent. Famous too were the cloths and fabrics. In the earliest description of the city in Italian, Iacopo d'Albizzotto Guidi wrote...
tremendous crash and a section of the arch toppled into the Grand Canal. The young man felt his blood run cold as there came a mocking laugh just behind him. It was the Devil. «All your work will be to no avail,» he said. «No-one will manage to build this bridge in stone. However, if you wish, I can help you. Of course, there will be a price to pay.» «What do you want of me? My soul?» asked Sebastiano. «Not yours,» said the Devil with a cruel laugh. «I want the soul of the first to cross the bridge once the work has finished.» The young man accepted the terms and the next day he set to work again with his masons and stonemasons. The Devil kept his word: there were no more collapses and eventually the bridge was finished. In the meantime, Sebastiano had an idea. The Devil hadn't stipulated that the first over the bridge had to be a man. So he arranged for a cockerel to be released at dawn. He placed guards at the sides of the bridge and gave orders that they should let no-one pass. But the Devil had other ideas. Dressed as a workman he knocked at the door of the foreman's house and told Chiara that her husband needed her immediately. She hurried to the site, where the guards recognized her and let her pass. When Sebastiano saw his wife on the bridge, he shuddered with horror and thought that all was lost.

The next day, shortly after the official inauguration ceremony, a servant girl brought him the news that his child was stillborn and that Chiara was close to death. He ran home but too late. Chiara was already dead. From that day, the soul of the baby began to haunt the bridge. As he crossed it one night, an old gondolier heard a tiny sneeze at the top. Though he could see no-one, he called out, as one does, «Bless you!» «Thank you!» came back a child's voice: it was the soul of the baby, saved by the words of the gondolier.

It is said that the who lived at the time of Shakespeare, near the Tower and in Bishopsgate, referred nostalgically to their districts with the names of familiar places and made appointments to meet each other at "San Marco" and "Rialto".
IAGO — Now will I question Cassio of Bianca,
A busy that by selling her desires
Buys herself bread and cloth. It is a creature
That dotes on Cassio — as 'tis the strumpet's plague
To beguile many and be beguiled by one.
[OTHELLO, Act IV, Scene I]

OTHELLO — I took you for that cunning whore of Venice
That married with Othello.
[OTHELLO, Act IV, Scene II]

MODERN CALYPPOS: COURTESANS AND PROSTITUTES
he courtesans of Venice were famous throughout Europe and
the English traveller Thomas Coryat was surprised that the var-
ious official descriptions of the city quite ignored the matter.
He even went so far as to state that at the time of his visit there were as many
as twenty thousand of what he euphemistically referred to as "modern
Calyppos", celebrated to the point that their reputation “bath drawn many
to Venice from some of the remotest parts of Christendome to contemplate their
beauties and enjoy their pleasing dalliances.”

Coryat’s attitude evinces a not uncommon ambivalence: he castigates the
Venerians, who “should be daily afraid lest their winkings at such uncleanness
should be an occasion to draw down upon them God's curst and vengeance from
Heaven, and to consume their city with fire and brimstone, as in time past he did
Sodome and Gomorrah”. But at the same time he wastes no time in visiting
one of these courtesans, both because he wishes to convert her and because
he thinks “that a virtuous man will be the more confirmed and settled in virtue
by the observation of some vices then if he did not at all know what they were”.
Shakespeare doesn’t fail to bring this well-known side of Venice to the stage,
but the description of Bianca suggests a common sex worker rather than one of the legendary courtesans, who were famous for their cultural sophistication, artistic talent and high-class clientele. Indeed, prostitution in Venice operated according to a very complex hierarchy.

During the 1500s in fact, a quite separate category of prostitute became established in the city; as well as physical attractions, refined amatory skills and supreme elegance they could offer their highly placed clients an extensive knowledge of art, music and literature, gleaned also from their acquaintance with painters, architects, men of power and influence, writers. A sort of elite: a group of women leading independent, intellectually stimulating (though not always happy or easy) lives of considerable luxury; many were famous and what we might now call fashion icons. According to the chronicler Marin Sanudo, at the beginning of the XVI century there were 11,654 official courtesans in Venice.

A few decades later, the practice of sex for payment had become such a firmly rooted feature of the social fabric of the city that a guide to Venetian prostitutes was published. This was the "Catalogue of all the principal and most famous courtesans in Venice; their names and the names of their bawds, the apartments and districts where they live and the amount of money a gentleman has to pay to enjoy their favours ...". Some of the courtesans in the catalogue were married and 37 of them used the services of their mother to procure them clients; others had no procuress and are described in the book as: "Madam Just-knock-on-my-door". Some charged as much as 25 or 30 scudi, such as "Livia Azzalina at San Marsiale; procuress, Maria Vienzina et Meneghina; address, corte de Cal Badner al ponte dei Sassini, rate 25 scudi. Paolina Fila Canevo at Santa Lucia; procuress, one of her servants; rate 30 scudi. The married courtesans included "Andriana Schiavonetta at Santa Fosca, a married woman; procuress, her mother; rate 4 scudi. Caterina da Todi, a married woman at San Vio; procuress, her servant; rate 1 scudo."

The least popular courtesans charged just half a scudo. The booklet concludes with the statistic: "...there are 215 of these ladies altogether and anyone who wishes to be entertained by all of them will have to pay 1,200 gold scudi ...". At least one of these women, an archetypal courtesan whose fame has lasted down the centuries, really deserves a chapter to herself. Veronica Franco was born in Venice in about 1546. She married young, to a doctor, but soon began her career as a courtesan. Uninhibited, charming and adventurous as well as a writer, musician and poetess, she kept open house for painters, musicians and literary figures and granted them her favours in exchange for writings and philosophical discussions. Veronica was well known far beyond the confines of the Venetian state: the King of France, Henri III, paid her a call as he was passing through Venice in 1574 and so entranced was he by her beauty that he took a portrait of her away with him.

In short, Veronica skilfully combined the sale of her body with cultural refinement. Some of her poetic and literary compositions (including the Terze rime and Friendly letters) were much admired by her contemporaries and are still worth their place in any anthology of the literature of the time.

Another turning point came when she reached forty: in 1580, with the help of a number of noblemen, she founded a refuge for repentant courtesans, the "Casa del Soccorso" near the Church of the Carmini. Sympathetic assistance was provided by other former courtesans, who understood the feelings and problems they were experiencing; many married, took vows or employment in a household. But the history of prostitution in Venice goes back much further. In 1360, a state-run brothel called the Castelletto was established in a group of houses in the area of Sant'Aponal. This "little fortress" was so called because it was

Business was not always so brisk for Venetian courtesans. On the contrary, in the mid-XV century, a number of them started a fashion of wearing their hair brushed to the centre of the forehead to form a sort of quiff. The result was that they looked more like young men, and the Council of Ten, ever wary of encouraging "unnatural vice", decreed the fashion illegal on 14th March 1470. And some years later, on 27th March 1511, they appealed directly to no less a figure than the Patriarch Antonio Contarini: they could no longer make a living, they said, because "nunquam in libellus" — no one would go with them any more.
watched over by six guards and run with military efficiency. A sort of red­
light district where the authorities, in order to distract men from the vice of
sodomy, required prostitutes to stand at the doors or windows, lasciviously
découvertes and illuminated by oil-lamps after dark. In practice a precursor of
the modern peep-show, and indeed, not far away, there is still a bridge and
a canal-side path whose name, de Ie Tette, recalls this “up-front” practice.
So it should come as no surprise if the “foreigner” Othello, his imagination
infected by Iago, who says of Venetian women that “they do let God see the
pranks / They dare not show their husbands; their best conscience / Is not to leave'
undone, but keep's unknown”, is tormented by the suspicion that his innocent
wife is really a woman of easy virtue, “Was this fair paper, this most goodly book
/ Made to write 'whore' upon?”. But the last word must go these celebrated
women themselves, so often believed to be the sole mistresses of their own des­
tiny. In her Friendly letters, published in 1580, Veronica Franco wrote as follows
to a mother who had ambitions for her daughter to become a courtesan:
“There is no more unhappy, or indeed senseless, thing than to subject one's body and
one's efforts to servitude of a kind that frightens me just to think of it. To offer one­
self as a prey to all and sundry, to risk being cheated, robbed, even killed and from
one day to the next lose everything one has worked long and hard to get, with so
many other dangers of injury and horrifying disease; to eat with someone else's
mouth, to sleep with someone else's eyes, to move as someone else commands, know­
ing that the inevitable outcome will be the ruin of one's faculties and one's life"."
SALERIO — But there the Duke was given to understand
That in a gondola were seen together
Lorenzo and his amorous Jessica.
[THE MERCHANT OF VENICE, Act II, Scene VIII]

RODERIGO — ... your fair daughter;
At this odd-even and dull watch o' th' night,
Transported with no worse nor better guard,
But with a knave of common hire, a gondolier,
To the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor.
[OTHELLO, Act I, Scene I]

ROSALIND — Farewell, Monsieur Traveller. Look you lisp,
and wear strange suits; disable all the benefits of your
own country; be out of love with your nativity, and
almost chide God for making you that countenance
you are, or I will scarce think you have swam in a gondola.
[AS YOU LIKE IT, Act IV, Scene I]

It is only to be expected, when his plays speak of Venice, that
Shakespeare should mention the boat that has typified
Venetian transport for over a thousand years - the gondola.
Though the oldest known document to include the word Gondolam is a
decree issued by Doge Vitale Falier in 1094, legend has it that as early as 809
Estrella, the beautiful daughter of another doge, Angelo Partecipazio, used one
to go and meet King Pipin, the son of the great Charlemagne, in an effort to
persuade him to refrain from pursuing the Venetians, who had retreated to
the islands of Rialto after the Franks had conquered Malamocco.
Estrella failed in her attempt for Pipin was indifferent to the grace and charm of “the Rose of Venice” and pressed on in an enterprise that proved his undoing: a high tide submerged the causeway he had built to carry his troops to the assault on the enemy and the Venetians easily weathered the storm.

But the legend nevertheless had a tragic end: as Estrella was arriving at Rialto to the cheers of the victors, a stone, shot by mistake from a catapult, pierced a hole in her gondola and she disappeared below the waves. The Rialto Bridge now stands at the spot where she was lost.

Thomas Coryat reports that there were thirteen ferry stations where gondolas were used for a passenger transport service, and he seems to confirm the questionable reputation that Shakespeare attributes to the gondoliers who carried Desdemona to Othello’s arms: “the boatmen that attend at this ferry are the most vicious and licentious varlets about all the City. For if a stranger entereth into one of their Gondolas, and doth not presently tell them whither he will goe, they will incontinent carry him of their owne accord to a religious house forsooth, where his plumes shall be well pulled before he commeth forth againe. […] if the passenger commandeth them to carry him to any place where his serious and urgent business lies, which he cannot but follow without some prejudice unto him, these impious miscreants will either strive to carry him away, maugre his hart, to some irreigious place whether he would not goe, or at the least tempt him with their diabolical persuasions.”

As the detail of Carpaccio’s celebrated painting *The Miracle of the True Cross* show, many of the gondoliers were African. And the famous diarist Marin Sanudo, writing in 1493, tells us that the gondolas were “rowed by black Saracens or other servants who know how to row … and those servants who are not slaves are paid a wage”.

The gondola is about 11 metres long; it is painted black, with seven coats of paint made up to a secret recipe. The colour was established by decree on 8th October 1562, regularly renewed over the decades until 1633; before then, gondolas were richly decorated and coloured and the Serenissima standardized the colour in order to stop noble families vying with each other to flaunt the finest, most luxurious gondola. At this time there were at least ten thousand gondolas in Venice, all of them with the removable cabin (now no longer used) called a *felze*. The gondola has a flat bottom and a slightly asymmetrical shape to offset the weight of the gondolier, who rows with a single oar, standing on one side of the stern. Every gondola comprises about 280 wooden parts. The ornamental metal beak or *ferro* has six teeth, which represent the six districts into which the city is divided; the seventh, on the other side, signifies the island of Giudecca. Between the six teeth there are often three openwork elements to recall the islands of Murano, Burano and Torcello. The rounded part above the six teeth echoes the shape of the Doge's horned cap, the *corno* or *zoia*, a symbol of his power and protection of the city.

The rest of the *ferro*, which tapers to finish under the gondola, stands for the Grand Canal. Gondolas can be seen all over Venice, but the only *squero* – a boatyard where gondolas are built and maintained – that still pursues its activity in a traditional Venetian boatyard building is the one at San Trovaso, near the Zattere.

Just behind the squero is the elegant Campo San Trovaso. In 1994 the square was the scene of a historic production of *The Merchant of Venice*, directed by the famous Mike Nichols and with a cast featuring the foremost Italian actors of the day. With the magnificent scenery and the evocative power of the setting (a real boat entered the scene along the canal), the production was a tremendous success.
BRABANZIO — Ay, to me. She is abused, stol’n from me and corrupted
By spells and medicines bought of mountebanks.
For nature so preposterously to err,
Being not deficient, blind, or lame of sense,
Sans witchcraft could not.
[OTHELLO, Act I, Scene III]

OTHELLO — That handkerchief
Did an Egyptian to my mother give,
She was a charmer and could almost read
The thoughts of people. She told her, while she kept it
’Twould make her amiable and subdue my father
Entirely to her love; but if she lost it
Or made gift of it, my father’s eye
Should hold her loathed and his spirits should hunt
After new fancies.
[...] ‘Tis true, there’s magic in the web of it.
A sibyl that had numbered in the world
The sun to course two hundred compasses,
In her prophetic fury sewed the work;
The worms were hallowed that did breed the silk,
And it was dyed in mummy, which the skilful
Conserved of maidens’ hearts.
[OTHELLO, Act III, Scene IV]
he was therefore "an abuser of the world, a practiser of arts inhibited and out of warrant". Venice was famous as a centre of magic and the occult, both essential components of Renaissance knowledge, whether the high philosophical research of cabbalists and alchemists or the petty tricks of sorcerers and mountebanks. Traces of this tradition are to be found in Corte del Strologo, in the parish of San Marcuola. The name of the courtyard may derive from the surname of a family who once lived there. But impressed in the stones of Venice and the names of its public thoroughfares are the strangest of stories and the most beguiling of legends, so it is just as probable that Corte del Strologo was in fact the home of a "strologo", in other words of a magician or a fortune-teller. Merchants trading with the East imported not only costly spices and magnificent cloths into the city: Venetian ships also brought esoteric knowledge and beliefs concerning astrology and magic, particularly in the 1500s; they were popular both with the common people, who were always ready to believe what any charlatan might swear was irrefutable truth, and amongst the nobles.

Sixteenth century chronicles reported widely the claims of Francesco Barozzi, a patrician who boasted of being able conjure up any spirit from the afterworld within a ring traced with the blood of a murdered man. He also declared that he had discovered a plant at Candia – he called it the "happy" herb – that could give wisdom to the greatest dullard in the world; and that he was privy to the secret of how to make coins he had just spent return to his purse. Another of his claims was that he could make himself invisible, but he evidently lost the knack the instant he was denounced and arrested for he ended up with a sentence of life imprisonment on 16th October 1587.

But superstition and the practice of magic were not so easy to eradicate: the city was full of silverware and jewels to which were attached beliefs, often going back to Roman times, in their magical properties. They "provided protection from poison and fire, guaranteed victory and love, made men wise and invisible, calmed tempests and infernos and cured illnesses". High-ranking Venetian women moved in a shimmer of pearls, diamonds, rubies, sapphires, agates, emeralds, beryls and topazes. A chronicler of the time, the Milanese nobleman Pietro Casola, notes that as he was passing through Venice on his long journey to the Holy Land in 1494 he saw twenty-five damsels "each one more beautiful than the next" who were wearing "so many jewels in their hair, around their necks and on their hands that those present were of the opinion that the accumulated gold, precious stones and pearls were worth a hundred thousand ducats".

The handkerchief that Othello gives Desdemona also had magical properties. But despite her father's accusations, Desdemona swears before the Doge that Othello had won her heart not by magic potions or spells but by his fascinating and moving stories; not by witchcraft but by the power of words, which in the Renaissance were considered to possess a nonetheless potent form of natural magic.