

A Brief History of the Moors

Othello is subtitled, "The Moor of Venice."

The word "Moor" comes from *Mauri*, the name of an old tribe in the area of present-day Morocco in northern Africa. Their northern-African kingdom was known as *Mauretania*. The descendants of the *Mauri* became Muslims very early in Islamic history.

In the year 711, these Islamic Moors conquered Spain. They ruled lands in North Africa, Spain, and Portugal for the next seven hundred years (a coalition of Christian kings drove the Moors from Central Spain in 1212, but the Moorish Kingdom of Granada thrived for almost another three hundred years). In 1492, the last Muslim stronghold in Granada surrendered to Christian Spain (united by the marriage of Queen Isabella of Spain and King Ferdinand of Portugal), in an agreement called "The Capitulation of Granada." By 1502, the remaining Muslims had been forced either to leave Spain or convert to Christianity. The converts were known as *moriscos*.

Most of the expelled *moriscos* went to Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. Others became pirates. Many passed themselves off as Gypsies and migrated to other countries in Europe. Between the years 1609 and 1614, all remaining Moors were systematically hunted down and expelled from the few regions in Spain where they remained.

The first recorded performance of *Othello* was in 1604, during the time when Christian European tolerance of Muslims was greatly strained.

When Shakespeare identifies his tragic hero as a Moor, he clearly wants to establish that *Othello* is a descendent of these North-African/Spanish Muslims, whose not-too-distant ancestors were exiled. This could explain why *Othello* finds himself in Venice, Italy. Yet it is significant to remember that *Othello* is the *tragic hero* of the play, *not* the villain.