

Seminar

The Conceptualization and Treatment of the Foreigner in Shakespeare's Work: The Impact of Cultural, Socio-Economic and Gender Factors

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Suspicion, mockery, fear: these are only some of the reactions that foreigners elicit in Shakespeare's plays. Geographical borders turn into mental borders in the moment in which the person who comes "from outside" is identified through a series of stereotypes and prejudices that annihilate his/her individuality in the eyes of the other characters, fostering both physical and psychological marginalization. However, exactly as it happens now, not all foreigners are perceived and treated in the same way. The "Europeans" can be political and military allies or enemies, fighting for a redefinition of physical maps and borders, but they are usually perceived as essentially akin to the English, and treated accordingly. The case is different with people coming from outside Europe, belonging to different races, religions and cultural backgrounds. Even in this case, however, the perception and treatment of the foreigner is deeply influenced by a series of elements such as wealth, social status, cultural level and gender. For instance, the prince of Morocco may be laughed at by Portia because of his blackness, and yet he is received at her court and has the right to aspire to her hand; Othello is a liminal and divisive figure, raising issues of identity and belonging; Shylock is despised for his religion and profession, but he is made use of by a community that tacitly acknowledge its need for such figures as his, while his (beautiful and rich) daughter Jessica undergoes a different process of inclusion.

This seminar aims to explore and promote a discussion on the ways in which various factors, such as race, religion, socioeconomic status, cultural level and gender, impact on the process of conceptualization and acceptance/exclusion of the "other", offering many opportunities of reflection on the differences and analogies between the early modern and the current geopolitical situation.

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