

**THE GYPSY “TEST OF THE HANDKERCHIEF”
IN *OTHELLO***

Prof. Giosuè Ghisalberti M.A., PH.D
Liberal Arts and Sciences department, Humber College, Toronto, Canada

ABSTRACT

Since Thomas Rymer’s comments on the handkerchief in *Othello*, unable to recognize its meaning and therefore dismissing its “passion,” the piece of cloth has remained both a fascinating and incomprehensible object – its cultural meaning (perhaps known by Shakespeare’s Elizabethan audience) as neglected and mistaken as the true ethnic identity of Othello himself. Shakespeare, however, has given the audience/reader several indications of the meaning of the handkerchief, its description (i.e. Egyptian, embroidered with spotted strawberries) related both to Othello’s ethnicity and to a particular pre-marital ritual practiced by a people sometimes, if deceptively, called Moors; important remains Othello’s origins and his experience prior to arriving in Venice. Once the handkerchief (*fazzoletto* in Italian) becomes understood as necessary as a crucial pre-marital ritual – one first intended to check Desdemona’s virginity, as in the Gypsy “test of the handkerchief” – then Othello’s murderous rage and his concealed ethnicity becomes interrelated and provides insights into the meaning of the tragedy. Finally, since Shakespeare surely knew of John Florio’s 1598 *A World of Wordes* (an Italian-English dictionary) he was able to read two consecutive entries in the dictionary, *fazzo* and *fazzoletto*, that allowed Iago to manipulate Desdemona’s association with the cultural meaning of the piece of cloth and its relationship to bed sheets.