Consistent with the Shakespeare Theatre Company’s central mission to be the leading force in producing and preserving the highest quality classic theatre, the Education Department challenges learners of all ages to explore the ideas, emotions and principles contained in classic texts and to discover the connection between classic theatre and our modern perceptions. We hope that this First Folio: Teacher and Student Resource Guide will prove useful to you while preparing to attend Othello.

First Folio provides information and activities to help students form a personal connection to the play before attending the production. First Folio contains material about the playwrights, their world and their works. Also included are approaches to explore the plays and productions in the classroom before and after the performance.

First Folio is designed as a resource both for teachers and students. All Folio activities meet the “Vocabulary Acquisition and Use” and “Knowledge of Language” requirements for the grades 8-12 Common Core English Language Arts Standards. We encourage you to photocopy these articles and activities and use them as supplemental material to the text.

Enjoy the show!

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On a Venice street at night, Iago tells Roderigo that Othello, the Moorish general of the Venetian army, has eloped with Roderigo’s beloved Desdemona, daughter of Brabantio. Iago reassures Roderigo that he hates Othello because he made Michael Cassio his lieutenant while Iago remains the general’s ensign. Iago and Roderigo shout to wake Brabantio and tell him of Desdemona’s flight. Brabantio storms off with officers to apprehend Othello. Brabantio arrives at his lodging at the same time as the Duke’s messengers. Othello’s presence has been requested before the Duke on state matters. The enraged Brabantio demands justice against Othello, and they depart to have audience with the Duke.

The Duke and members of the Senate are discussing news that the Turks have launched a fleet to attack Venetian-controlled Cyprus. Brabantio accuses Othello of using witchcraft to ensnare his daughter. Othello describes their courtship; Desdemona is sent for and confirms that she freely gave her heart to Othello. Brabantio, saddened, accepts her decision. Desdemona asks to accompany Othello on his campaign. Othello entrusts her care to Iago and his wife, Emilia. As Roderigo despairs over the loss of Desdemona, Iago advises him to follow her to Cyprus, promising that her union with Othello will not last. Iago plots to poison Othello’s marriage with jealousy because of his mere suspicion that Emilia has been unfaithful with Othello.

A storm off the coast of Cyprus destroys the Turkish fleet, ending the attack. The Venetians’ ships are delayed by the storm but arrive safely. Iago pulls Roderigo aside and tells him that Desdemona is in love with Cassio. He convinces Roderigo to start a fight with Cassio that evening to discredit his rival.

During the celebration of the defeat of the Turks, Iago gets Cassio drunk and Roderigo attacks him. Montano, an official in Cyprus, is wounded by Cassio when he intervenes. Othello enters and demands to know who began the fray. Feigning reluctance, Iago blames Cassio for the violence. Othello dismisses Cassio as his lieutenant. Iago advises Cassio to plead his case to Desdemona who will be able to convince Othello to reinstate him, though Iago plans to make Othello think Desdemona pleads out of lust.

Emilia and Desdemona listen to Cassio’s suit. Cassio departs abruptly at the sight of Othello and Iago, which Iago hints is cause for suspicion. Desdemona entreats Othello to reconcile with Cassio. After she leaves, Iago continues to plant seeds of doubt in Othello’s mind about Desdemona and his former lieutenant. Othello demands proof of his wife’s infidelity. Emilia finds Desdemona’s handkerchief and gives it to Iago, who plans to leave the token in Cassio’s lodging. Iago then tells Othello that he heard Cassio declaring his love for Desdemona in his sleep. Convinced of her guilt, Othello flies into a rage and asks Iago to kill Cassio. Iago agrees and Othello makes him his lieutenant.

Desdemona is unable to produce the handkerchief when the angry Othello demands to see it. Later, Cassio meets Bianca, his courtesan lover, and asks her to copy the embroidery of a handkerchief he found in his room. Iago tells Othello that Cassio has confessed to infidelity with Desdemona. Othello, overcome with passion, falls into a trance. Iago agrees to question Cassio about Desdemona while Othello observes from a distance. Iago asks Cassio about Bianca, and Othello hears only Cassio’s smug laughter. Bianca arrives and returns the handkerchief to Cassio; Othello recognizes the token then reaffirms his desire to see both Desdemona and Cassio dead.

Lodovico arrives with letters calling Othello back to Venice and promoting Cassio to Othello’s position. Desdemona speaks well of Cassio and Othello strikes her. Othello questions Emilia about Desdemona’s fidelity; Emilia insists that Desdemona is chaste. Othello refuses to believe her and calls Desdemona a whore. Roderigo seeks out Iago in desperation and Cassio convinces him that he will win Desdemona if he kills Cassio tonight. Othello orders Desdemona to prepare for bed and dismiss Emilia; Desdemona obeys. Roderigo ambushes Cassio, and Cassio injures him. Iago stabs Cassio in the leg and flees. While Lodovico and Gratiano tend to Cassio, Iago returns and kills Roderigo. Iago sends Emilia to alert Othello.

Othello enters the sleeping Desdemona’s chamber. She wakes to his accusations of infidelity. She denies the charge and pleads for her life. Othello smothers her and Emilia enters to discover her murdered mistress. Hearing Emilia’s cries for help, Montano, Gratiano, and Iago enter the chamber. Othello cites the handkerchief as evidence of Desdemona’s wrongs and Emilia reveals Iago’s lies. Iago kills his wife and flees, but is captured and returned to the room with the injured Cassio. Othello wounds Iago, then asks for Cassio’s forgiveness. Iago is turned over to the state for torture. Asking the statesmen to report his tragic story justly, Othello stabs himself and dies upon the bed of his wife.
Shakespeare’s Language

William Shakespeare was writing scripts for specific actors in his own acting company when he created his plays. He purposely wrote lines in two different ways to communicate information about the characters to his actors. Additionally, he wanted characters to sound different from one another and to adapt their language to new situations, the way people do in real life. The two ways he writes are called **prose** and **verse**.

**STUDENT REFLECTION**

Ask your students to think about how they change their language in different situations:
- Do you speak differently and choose different words when you talk to your friends versus when talking to your parents or teachers? Would you speak differently at a job interview versus a family gathering?
- How does our language change in these situations? Why does our language change in these situations?

*Just like we change our language depending on our situation, so do the characters in Shakespeare’s plays.*

**PROSE**

The ordinary form of written or spoken language, without metrical structure. Prose can be very descriptive, but it follows the rules of grammar. Essays, news articles and novels are examples of written prose.

If a character’s lines are written in **prose** we assume the following information:
- The character is most likely from the lower class and not very wealthy
- The character is most likely uneducated

The servants in *Othello* speak in prose. However, there are times when Shakespeare breaks these assumptions. For example, the character Roderigo, is a young nobleman and jealous suitor of Desdemona. Even though he is rich, he may speak in prose in a **private setting**, when he doesn’t want anyone else to hear the conversation.

**How can I tell if it’s prose?** You can tell when lines are written in prose because they look like a regular paragraph.

Here’s an example:

**RODERIGO** (Act 4, Scene 2)
I tell you ‘tis not very well! I will make myself known to Desdemona. If she will return me my jewels, I will give over my suit and repent my unlawful solicitation. If not, assure yourself I will seek satisfaction of you.

**VERSE**

Another word for poetry. It’s writing that has a rhythmic structure. We refer to the rhythm as meter.

**Meter**: a recognizable rhythm in a line of verse consisting of a pattern of regularly recurring unstressed and stressed syllables.

**Iambic Pentameter**: the name of the rhythm Shakespeare uses.

If a character’s lines are written in **verse** we assume the following information:
- The character is most likely from the upper class and/or nobility and very wealthy
- The character is most likely formally educated
- The character may be experiencing a strong emotion like love or jealousy and needs to use poetry

**How can I tell if it’s verse?** You can tell when lines are written in verse because every line begins with a capital letter and the lines are all different lengths on the page. This is because each line is written with a metrical structure.

Here’s an example:

**OTHELLO** (Act 3, Scene 3)
If thou dost slander her and torture me, Never pray more. Abandon all remorse; On horror’s head horrors accumulate; Do deeds to make heaven weep, all earth amazed; For nothing canst thou to damnation add Greater than that.
When and Why do Shakespeare’s characters switch from verse to prose?

**Public = Verse**  
Noble characters in public situations must present their most formal self and speak in verse as a means to do so. Prince Hal in *Henry IV, Part 1* speaks prose when he’s hanging out with his fellow soldiers at the pub, but uses verse at court and when speaking to his father, the King.

**Private = Prose**  
Upper-class characters use verse in public settings, but may use prose in private settings when they are talking to family or close friends.

**Love = Verse**  
Shakespeare always uses verse when characters fall in love, regardless of their status. For example, in *As You Like It*, Silvius and Phoebe are both shepherds who live in the forest of Arden. However, even though they are lower class, both of these characters are in love and they express it through verse.

**Respect = Verse**  
Upper-class characters use verse as a form of respect. To use prose with a King or Duke or parent would be disrespectful. For example, Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark, has very eloquent verse for his soliloquies. But because he is angry at his mother Gertrude and his uncle Claudius, the new king, Hamlet often speaks to them in prose.

**Disguise = Prose**  
Upper-class characters use prose as part of their disguises, when pretending to be someone else. They are usually disguised as a lower-class character. King Henry V disguises himself as a common foot soldier the night before the battle of Agincourt to find out the true thoughts and feelings of his men. In disguise he speaks in prose, the language of the common men.

**Madness = Prose**  
If a character descends into madness, then they have literally “lost their wits” and no longer have the capacity to speak in verse. Both Lady Macbeth and Ophelia speak in verse until they go mad. Once madness sets in, all their lines are in prose.

**ACTIVITY**  
Follow the character of Iago in the play. Make note of when he switches from verse to prose and discuss why he shifts.

**Key scenes:** Act 1, Scene 1 & Act 2, Scene 3

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**SUMMARY VS. PARAPHRASE**

Paraphrasing is an important tool that actors use to understand what their lines mean and how their character feels. Using Helena’s passage, explore the difference between summarizing and paraphrasing:

**Summarizing**—Concisely stating what a passage says. A summary is usually stated in third person.

**Paraphrasing**—Restating each line in your own words. Paraphrasing should be done in first person.

**Summary**  
*Emilia is wondering why men cheat on their wives. She says it’s a game to them and women have the same desires as men. So if women do wrong, it is to get back at their husbands who did it first.*

**Paraphrase**  
*What is it they do when they cheat on us? Is it for fun? I think it is. And doth affection breed it? I think it doth. Isn’t frailty that thus errs? It is so too. And have not we affections, Desires for sport, and frailty as men have? Then let them use us well. Else let them know, The ills we do, their ills instruct us so.*
Iambic pentameter is the main rhythmic structure of Shakespeare’s verse, meaning the majority of Shakespeare’s verse is written in this rhythm. One line of iambic pentameter has 10 syllables, which we divide up into five units of meter called feet. Each foot of the verse contains two syllables. Illustrate this on the board:

A foot = 2 syllables

Pentameter = a line with 10 syllables which we divide into 5 feet

But soft! / What light / through yon / der win / dow breaks?

Iambic refers to the rhythm of the line. When the first syllable is unstressed and the second syllable is stressed, as in the word Hello, it is called an iamb. *iambic* means push, persistency or determination. The prefix *penta* means five, as in pentagon, a five sided shape. Therefore, *iambic pentameter* is one line of poetry consisting of five forward-moving feet.

**lambic = unstressed stressed rhythm**

Identifying the rhythm of a line is called *scansion*. Actors scan their lines so we know how Shakespeare wanted us to say them. We mark unstressed syllables with this symbol ͝ and stressed syllables with a slash /

```
͝ / ͝ / ͝ / ͝ / ͝ / ͝ / ͝ /

But soft! What light through yonder window breaks?
```

When learning iambic pentameter, many students make the mistake of unstressing & stressing every other word instead of every other syllable. To address this, you need to get the students saying all of the lines out loud, with energy and feeling the rhythm. You can explore having them say their names out loud and figure out what syllable is stressed. You can also explore saying the lines giving every syllable the same stress so they discover how slow & robotic it feels or have them say it with the opposite rhythm to see how unnatural it feels. Have students say this rhythm out loud several times. They should clap lightly on da and clap harder on DUM.

**Clap the rhythm of iambic pentameter.** Without specific words, the rhythm of iambic pentameter is:

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da DUM da DUM da DUM da DUM da DUM
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The rhythm of iambic pentameter is similar to the human heartbeat, a horse gallop, or the beat underneath a piece of music. Iambic pentameter drives and supports Shakespeare’s verse, moving the language along in a forward flow that imitates natural speech patterns.

**SCANSION**

Actors scan the verse for a few different reasons. First, we want to see if it’s a regular line of iambic pentameter. (Sometimes, Shakespeare writes in different rhythms.) Second, we want to make sure we are pronouncing the words correctly. Third, we want to determine which words Shakespeare wants emphasize. To scan a piece of text mark the unstressed syllables with a ͝ symbol and the stressed syllables with a / symbol.

Here are examples of regular iambic pentameter from *Othello* that you can do together as a class.

Thou told'st me thou didst hold him in thy hate.
–Roderigo 1.1

She loved me for the dangers I had pass'd,
And I loved her that she did pity them.
–Othello 1.3

It is the cause. Yet I'll not shed her blood,
–Othello 5.2

I'll pour this pestilence into his ear.
–Iago 2.3

Wouldst thou do such a deed for all the world?
–Desdemona 4.3
**Operative Words**

Operative words are the words the audience needs to hear to understand the story. They are the words that communicate images and emotions. Usually they are the classic who-what-where-when-why-how words—nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs. Actors give extra emphasis to operative words when they perform.

**Text Analysis Activity**

Step 1: Select one of the speeches below and read it out loud for meaning.
Step 2: Look up unknown words.
Step 3: Paraphrase each line of text. (put it into your own words)
Step 4: Underline the operative words in each line. (nouns, verbs & adjectives/adverbs)

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**Othello (Act 4, Scene 2)**

Was this fair paper, this most goodly book,  
Made to write 'whore' upon? What committed!  
Committed! O thou public commoner!  
I should make very forges of my cheeks,  
That would to cinders burn up modesty,  
Did I but speak thy deeds. What committed!  
Heaven stops the nose at it and the moon winks,  
The bawdy wind that kisses all it meets  
Is hush'd within the hollow mine of earth,  
And will not hear it. What committed!  
Impudent strumpet!

**Desdemona (Act 4, Scene 2)**

I know not how I lost him. Here I kneel:  
If e'er my will did trespass 'gainst his love,  
Either in discourse of thought or actual deed,  
Or that mine eyes, mine ears, or any sense,  
Delighted them in any other form;  
Or that I do not yet, and ever did.  
And ever will—though he do shake me off  
To beggarly divorcement—love him dearly,  
Comfort forswear me! Unkindness may do much;  
And his unkindness may defeat my life,  
But never taint my love. I cannot say 'whore:'  
It does abhor me now I speak the word;  
To do the act that might the addition earn  
Not the world's mass of vanity could make me.

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**Iago (Act 2, Scene 3)**

And what's he then that says I play the villain?  
When this advice is free I give and honest,  
Probable to thinking and indeed the course  
To win the Moor again? For 'tis most easy  
The inclining Desdemona to subdue  
In any honest suit: she's framed as fruitful  
As the free elements. And then for her  
To win the Moor—were't to renounce his baptism,  
All seals and symbols of redeemed sin,  
His soul is so enfetter'd to her love,  
That she may make, unmake, do what she list,  
Even as her appetite shall play the god  
With his weak function. How am I then a villain  
To counsel Cassio to this parallel course,  
Directly to his good? Divinity of hell!

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Colleen Delany as Desdemona and Avery Brooks as Othello in the Shakespeare Theatre Company's production of Othello, directed by Michael Kahn. Photo by Carol Rosegg.
During Shakespeare’s time marriage was not always a solemn contract between two lovers but was more often an economic transaction between families. Marriage was perceived as a way for the two families to advance themselves. Love was not a necessary ingredient for a betrothal. It was expected that love would grow between a couple after marriage, provided both husband and wife fulfilled their expected roles. By law, all young women were the property of men. Growing up, she was the property of her father and, after marriage, the property of her husband. It was her duty to remain obedient to her husband in all things; it was the husband’s duty to be a fair and understanding master. Not everyone adhered to these roles or rules. But it is through this expectation of duty and honor that the audience in Shakespeare’s would have viewed Desdemona’s actions.

Such a transaction would have been precisely what Brabantio planned for his daughter. He was a powerful man in Venice and Desdemona, his only child. He would have very carefully considered a marriage that would be most advantageous for the family name. During this period of Italian history, the economy experienced a huge shift in wealth from the nobility to the merchant class. Powerful men such as Brabantio would have concerns about guaranteeing the financial stability of his descendants. He had only one chance to advance himself through his offspring. Desdemona’s eloping not only robbed her father of his trust, but also of potential power. Othello, as an outsider and a member of the military, had no family or great wealth. In Brabantio’s eyes and perhaps those in Shakespeare’s audience, Desdemona had wasted his most valuable property on a nobody.

When Othello describes his courtship with Desdemona, he paints her as the pursuer. Each time he came to visit her father, she would beg him to tell her about his adventures which she devoured with a “greedy ear.” Such forwardness on a woman’s part would have been considered scandalous to the upper classes in both Italy and England during this time. Brabantio believes Othello has performed witchcraft to seduce her. When Desdemona is brought before the Duke she speaks of her “divided” duty. “And so much duty as my mother showed/ To you, preferring you before her father,/ So much I challenge I may profess/ Due to the Moor my lord.” (I,iii,215-218) Desdemona does not speak of desire or love, the less important aspects of a marriage. She reminds Brabantio that there was a time when another woman, her mother, owed him loyalty over her own father. Now that Desdemona is married she must show Othello the duty owed him as her husband. This picture of the ideal wife wins over the court and Desdemona is permitted to stay with Othello.

As clever as Desdemona proves in the first act, straight-laced Brabantio would have raised her to be a typical young woman. This would have included Christian teachings that reminded women again and again that they were not only inferior to men, but they were also the work of the devil. The church believed at that time that women were the only imperfection in God’s creation. Many people believed that women were therefore by nature more apt to stray and lead sinful lives. It was up to them to strive for virtue at all times since they could fall to vice so easily. Desdemona had already shown that she was capable of giving in to her desire. Iago uses this to convince Othello that Desdemona is capable of yet another deception. Desdemona’s prior actions—deceiving her father—gives Iago the proof that she could again deceive one to whom she owes her duty. For Shakespeare’s audience, this reasoning might have shifted some of the blame to Desdemona herself.

Desdemona and Othello exist outside of convention, and perhaps this is the transgression Shakespeare cautions against. While Desdemona might have deceived her father in marrying Othello, we see throughout the play nothing but absolute devotion to her husband. Right before she dies, Desdemona speaks with Emilia on the subject of desire. She cannot conceive that it is possible for a married woman to love a man other than her husband. A modern audience might also find it difficult to conceive of Desdemona as anything other than a victim of a tragic misunderstanding and the heinous manipulation of the truth.
How would Elizabethans have viewed Othello? The world-view of people in Shakespeare’s time was much smaller than our world-view today. At the beginning of the 17th century, England was beginning to open trade routes with Africa. Ships were better constructed, which allowed for more travel across the globe. Travelers and merchants would write home with fantastic stories of people from exotic locales. Elizabethans viewed people with customs different from their own with fear and apprehension, depicting them as savage and uncivilized. Many writers of the time characterized Africans as beast-like, lacking in reason, sexually permissive, jealous and gullible. John Leo Africanus was a black man who traveled throughout Africa until he was captured by pirates, brought to Rome and converted to Christianity. He published a log of his travels in 1600, which many believe to be one of Shakespeare’s sources for Othello. In it, he writes about the African people: “For by reason of jealousy you may see them daily one to be the death and destruction of another, and that in such savage and brutish manner, that in this case they will show no compassion at all…Their wits are but mean, and they are so credulous, that they will believe matters impossible, which are told them…The Negros likewise lead a beastly kind of life, being utterly destitute of the use of reason, of dexterity of wit, and of all arts. Yea they so behave themselves, as if they continually lived in a forest among wild beasts.”

In addition to stories from travelers, Elizabethans may have had some daily interactions with Moors. Because of the developing trade between England and Africa, Africans began to immigrate to London. In 1601, Queen Elizabeth drafted a proclamation deporting all “Negroes and blackamoors” from England, stating that not only were these foreigners using up resources that English citizens needed in times of hardship, but they were also “infidels having no understanding of Christ and his Gospel.”

In Renaissance drama, Moors were almost exclusively villainous characters. In 1589, George Peele’s The Battle of Alcazar was the first English play focusing on a black man, who was an evil villain. Even Shakespeare, in his earlier play Titus Andronicus, includes a villainous character called Aaron the Moor. When Elizabethans saw Othello for the first time, they may have recognized the character of the Moor and expected him to be an evil, reprehensible person. Shakespeare forces his audience to address this fear by reversing this preconception. He casts Othello, the Moor, as a noble general, and a white man, Iago, as the central villain.

As the play progresses and Iago’s lies gain a stronger hold on Othello, we see the noble Moor descend into fits of rage and jealousy, eventually brutally murdering the wife who loved him. Would Elizabethans have viewed Othello’s descent as the typical progression of a Moorish character? Would they have expected a Moor onstage to behave this way and therefore their expectations are confirmed as Othello becomes violent? Or would they have viewed his descent as the tragedy that we see today? Perhaps the tragedy of Othello is his inability to escape the stereotype of Moors during that time.
In the full title of his tragedy, *Othello, The Moor of Venice*, Shakespeare announces his title character’s race and place. Why are these two things so important? The action of the play occurs in two distinct geographic areas, the city of Venice and the island of Cyprus. In addition, the play refers to two types of outsiders: a “Moor” and a “Turk.” Shakespeare uses the common knowledge, opinions and prejudices of his Jacobean audience to set the stage for this play.

“What tell’st thou me of robbing? This is Venice”

Venice stretches across numerous small islands in a marshy lagoon along the Adriatic Sea in northeast Italy. The saltwater lagoon stretches along the shoreline between the mouths of the Po River in the south and the Piave River in the north. The Republic of Venice (850-1797 CE), was a major sea power and a staging area for the Crusades, as well as a very important center of art and commerce, especially the spice trade, in the

Renaissance. Venice, a part of the Byzantine Empire (631 –1204 CE), had established its independence as early as the 9th century CE. Venice was labeled the “Virgin City” since it was so successful at preventing invasion or outside control. In the High Middle Ages, Venice became extremely wealthy through its control of trade in southwest Asia, and began to expand into the Adriatic Sea and beyond. Venice became an imperial power following the 4th Crusade, which seized Constantinople in 1204. As a result of the partition of the Byzantine Empire which followed, Venice gained a great deal of territory in the Aegean Sea.

Later, in 1489, the island of Cyprus, previously a crusader state, was annexed to Venice. In the early 15th century, the Venetians also began to expand in Italy. By 1410, Venice had taken over most of Venetia, including such important cities as Verona and Padua. The Venetians also came into conflict with the Popes over control of the Romagna. This led in 1508 to the League of Cambria against Venice, in which the Pope, the King of France, the Holy Roman Emperor and the King of Aragon came together to despoil the republic. However, the coalition soon fell out among themselves, and Venice found itself without serious territorial loss. At the same time, the expansion of the Ottoman Turks in the Eastern Mediterranean proved threatening to the Venetians. The Turks ultimately conquered Cyprus by 1571.

To the English, who traveled there to study and trade, Venice was a place of wealth and violence, culture and treachery. To Shakespeare’s audience, Venice had a dual reputation for justice and good government as well as leisure, sinful pleasure and sexual liberty. Brabantio’s scene with the council would have completely confirmed the audience’s understanding of Venice’s stable and balanced government. They would have also been aware that a powerful merchant ruling class controlled Venice. The English generally considered the merchants of Venice as greedy and corrupt. To these
The Geography of *Othello*

merchants, war was regarded as a continuation of commerce. However, they would never send their own sons to serve in the military. Thereby, the audience accepted Othello’s high status, since Venice was known to contract large numbers of mercenaries and civic leadership was tied to military service. Successful foreign commanders, like Othello, were promoted and highly regarded. Though the people of Venice generally remained orthodox Roman Catholics, the state of Venice was noted for its freedom and was not easily controlled by religion. Therefore, to the rest of Europe, Venice was decadent. Shakespeare’s audience knew Venice was called the Virgin City, but the label was a bit of a joke since prostitution was rampant and it was renown for its loose wives and violently jealous husbands.

*“When we consider the importance of Cyprus...”*

The Greek goddess of love and beauty, Aphrodite, claimed Cyprus for herself and it is believed that travelers throughout antiquity made pilgrimages to Cyprus for her blessings. Geographically, Cyprus is in Western Asia near Turkey. But politically and culturally, it is considered part of Europe. Historically, Cyprus has been a bridgehead between Europe and Asia. After the division of the Roman Empire into eastern and western halves, Cyprus came under the rule of Byzantium. The island was conquered during the 3rd Crusade. King Richard I of England then sold it to the Knights Templar, who in turn sold it to King Guy of Jerusalem in 1192 after the failure of Richard's crusade. Caterina Cornaro was Queen of Cyprus from 1474 - 1489. Daughter of an old Venetian family, she married James II of Cyprus in 1473. James died soon after the wedding, and she became Queen when their infant son James died in 1474. Around 1470, Venice began to attack the island, forcing the Queen of Cyprus to will the Island to Venice. It became a colony of Venice until 1570, when the Turks first occupied the island. Lala Mustafa Pasha became the first Turkish Governor of Cyprus, challenging the claims of Venice.

Rhodes is the largest of the Dodecanese islands, and easternmost of the major islands of Greece in the Aegean Sea. It lies approximately 11 miles west of Turkey, situated between the Greek mainland and the island of Cyprus. Historically, it was known for its Colossus of Rhodes, one of the Seven Wonders of the World. Shakespeare moves his characters and plot to Cyprus to put them on the edge of civilization and Christendom. The island was tied to Venice in terms of trade, but it was also isolated and far away from the rule and order of the city. Cypress is also much closer to Turkey than it is to Italy and to a Jacobean audience less civilized. Iago’s plot and chaos would not plausibly succeed in Venice. Placing the characters on Aphrodite’s island made them more susceptible to eroticism. Shakespeare’s relocation automatically makes the play more sensual, lusty and dangerous.

*“Are we turned Turks...?”*

Turks are any of various peoples whose members speak languages in the Turkic family of languages. These people, currently 150 million in population, are probably the diverse descendants of large groups of tribespeople who originated in Central Asia. The Ottoman Empire was a vast state founded in the late 13th century by Turkish tribes in Asia Minor. Modern Turkey formed only part of the empire, but the terms “Turkey” and “Ottoman Empire” were often used interchangeably. The Ottoman state began as one of many small Turkish states that emerged in Asia Minor during the breakdown of the empire of the Seljuk Turks. The Ottoman Turks absorbed the other states, and during the reign of Muhammad II (1451–81) they ended all other local Turkish dynasties. The early phase of Ottoman expansion took place under Osman I, Orkhan, Murad I and Beyazid I at the expense of the Byzantine
Empire, Bulgaria and Serbia. Within a century the Ottomans had changed from a nomadic horde to the heirs of the most ancient surviving empire of Europe. Their success was due partly to the weakness and disunity of their adversaries, and partly to their excellent and far superior military organization. The Jacobeans would have found the Turks as threatening as the Venetians did in Othello. It was recent history for Shakespeare’s audience. The Ottoman Empire reached its peak between 1520-1566 and in 1529 they attacked Vienna. If the Turks would attack Vienna and succeed, they could attack other Christian and European cities—like London. The Turks caused great anxiety and fear in Western Europe. They were aggressive in expanding their empire and intolerant and cruel in towards the people they conquered. In Othello, Venice employs the title character, a fierce and converted mercenary, to fight the fearsome foe in Cyprus.

“I hate the Moor,”

Moors describe the medieval Muslim inhabitants of the Iberian Peninsula and North Africa, whose culture is often called "Moorish." In CE 711, Moors invaded Christian tribes in Spain and eventually brought most of Spain and Portugal under Islamic rule in an eight-year campaign. The Moors attempted to move northeast across the Pyrenees Mountains but were defeated at the Battle of Tours in 732. The Moors ruled in Spain and Portugal, except for small areas in the northwest, and in North Africa for several decades. Christian states based in the north and west slowly extended their power over Spain. Galicia, León, Navarre, Aragon, Catalonia, Portugal and eventually Castile became Christian in the next several centuries. This period is known for the tolerant acceptance of Christians, Muslims and Jews living in the same territories.

In 1212, a coalition of Christian kings drove the Muslims from Central Spain. However the Moorish Kingdom of Granada thrived for three more centuries. This kingdom is known in modern times for such architectural gems as the Alhambra. On January 2, 1492, the leader of the last Muslim stronghold in Granada surrendered to armies of a recently united Christian Spain. The remaining Muslims were forced to leave Spain or convert to Christianity. These descendants of the Muslims were named moriscos. The English would have considered any dark skinned person or Muslim (even if they converted to Christianity) a Moor.

The title character is a noble Moor who commands a Venetian army in Cyprus. English literature of Shakespeare’s time commonly depicted Moors and other dark-skinned peoples as villains. A Jacobean audience would have considered Othello a fierce and frightening character. They would have no trouble understanding why Venice sends him to fight the Turks. Some of Shakespeare’s audience would have even shared Brabantio’s disappointment and Iago’s prejudices about Othello. But Othello is ultimately presented sympathetically and it is a testament to the playwright’s humanism and craft.

Shakespeare writes his play with the knowledge and prejudices of his audience in mind. The story reflects what Elizabethan audiences might expect of Venice, Cyprus, and Turkish enemies. But in the Moor, Othello, the audience would have seen an unexpected and unprecedented tragic hero.
Questions for Discussion

Language
- Why does Iago’s language switch back and forth between verse and prose?
- How does Iago manipulate others through language?
- How is this play a tragedy? What are some key examples in the text?

Reputation and Social Status
- In Othello, characters depend upon their social status and reputation for their happiness. Iago covets Cassio’s advancement, and uses his reputation as an honest man to deceive Othello. Cassio’s reputation is tarnished and his social status is lost by Iago’s insinuations. Othello’s fear of being seen as weak fuels his rage against Desdemona. Why is reputation so important for these characters?
- Do you think the story would have been different if Othello had a lower social status?
- How does reputation affect your life? Is our happiness dependent upon our social status and reputation?

Race
- What role does Othello’s racial identity play in the text? Why is it important? How does it affect his relationship with Iago? Brabantio? Desdemona? The nobles of Venice?
- How does race play into STC’s production? Was it different than you expected?
- Do you see any parallels between this story and race relations in today’s society?

Characters
- Who is the hero in Othello? In early Greek plays such as Oedipus, tragedies were about the tragic hero who caused his own downfall. The tragic hero had the potential for greatness but was doomed by fate to fail. Despite his failure, the tragic hero wins a moral victory in the end. Is any of this true for Othello? Was he doomed or unlucky?
- How are Iago and Othello similar?
- How do the expectations and perceptions of the women foreshadow their futures (like Desdemona & Emilia)?
- How are the friendships between Othello & Iago and Desdemona & Emilia different? How are they similar?
- Who should you trust more: your best friend or your significant other? Why or why not?

Questions for Discussion

ACT I
1. Who is “the Moor”? What does the word mean?
2. Why does Iago want to harm Othello?
3. How does the language change between Iago and Othello (rhythmically, structurally etc.)? What are the differences?
4. How is the relationship between Brabantio and Desdemona as father and daughter? How does Brabantio react to Desdemona’s marriage to Othello?
5. How is race discussed in the text (in relation to Othello)?
6. Why does Desdemona love Othello? Why does Othello feel worthy of Desdemona’s love?
7. Where does the play take place and what is happening in state affairs between Venice, Cyprus and Turkey?
8. How does Iago manipulate Roderigo?

ACT II
1. What are Iago’s plans for Cassio?
2. What role will Cassio play in his plot against Othello?
3. What happens to Cassio after Othello’s intervention?
4. What advice does Iago give to Cassio?
5. Why do you think Roderigo continues to trust Iago?

ACT III
1. How does Iago plant doubt and jealousy in Othello about Desdemona? Include literary examples like symbolism, metaphors, etc.
2. Why is the handkerchief important? What does it look like? What happens to the handkerchief in ACT III? Who has possession of it?
3. How does the handkerchief drive the conflict between Othello and Desdemona?

ACT IV
1. How does Iago lead the conversation with Cassio and Bianca? How does Othello’s isolation from the conversation contribute to his jealousy? Cite specific examples in the text.
2. Compare and contrast Desdemona & Emilia’s thoughts about women and fidelity.
3. What is the Willow song, who sings the song, and how does it foreshadow the death of the women?

ACT V
1. Why does Roderigo want to murder Cassio?
2. How does Othello approach the killing of Desdemona and justify her murder?
3. What images/symbols are reflected as Othello murders Desdemona?
4. Why do you think Desdemona implies she took her own life? Why does she continue to protect Othello? How do you feel about Desdemona’s actions?
5. How does Emilia expose the truth? How do you feel about Emilia?
6. Othello says he is “one that loved not wisely but too well.” What does this line mean?
7. What happens to Othello and Iago at the very end of the play?
Classroom Activities for *Othello*

**Time is on My Side**

*Othello* takes place in a very short amount of time. Iago’s manipulations work so well on Othello that he is able to descend from a loving, trusting relationship with his wife into jealously and madness in a matter of hours.

Make a timeline of events in the play. How much time do you think passes between scenes? How long have Othello and Desdemona actually been married? Be sure to include the details of the lost & found handkerchief on your timeline.

- What discoveries do you make about the events in the play by mapping it out?
- What do you learn about Othello? About his relationship with Desdemona?
- What do you learn about Iago?

**Love Advice**

As Othello is manipulated by Iago’s lies, he becomes more and more jealous of Desdemona. Even though he begins to treat her cruelly, she remains loyal.

Imagine you are Emilia, Desdemona’s close friend, in Act IV Scene 3. What advice would you give her about her relationship? What if you were Othello’s close friend, what advice would you give him when you observed his behavior?

Write a scene in which one of the major characters of *Othello* approaches you about their relationship problems and you give them advice. How would the outcome of the story change if they followed your advice?

**The Psychology of Evil**

At the end of the play, when asked why he has committed his heinous crimes, Iago simply answers, “What you know, you know” and is led offstage to be tortured into confession. The audience never learns the outcome. Ask students to imagine that they are Iago’s psychologist. What might his diagnosis be?

Ask students to find support in the text for specific symptoms. Consult a website like nmha.org for basic mental health information.
### Classroom Activities for *Othello*

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<tr>
<th>Racism: Then and Now</th>
<th>Iago’s Side</th>
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<tr>
<td>A director cannot approach a production of <em>Othello</em> without encountering issues of race and racism. Lead students in a discussion about what racial issues were brought up in the production.</td>
<td>Even in the face of torture, Iago refuses to delve into his reasons for the great deceptions that he orchestrated.</td>
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<td>Discuss as a class or in small groups: What decisions did the director make that challenged or reinforced your expectations of the play?</td>
<td>Imagine what Iago’s motives may have been. Rewrite the ending as if Iago told his side of the story to the group. How would the others react to his narrative? Is their anything Iago could say that would make him a more sympathetic character?</td>
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<td>Next, students should interview each other about their own encounters with racism or a time when they were asked to confront racial issues in their own lives. Students can write monologues about their own or each others’ experiences and, if desired, present them to the group.</td>
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### Black & White

In *Othello* Shakespeare examines themes of Black and White, both metaphorically and in terms of racial relationships.

Go on a scavenger hunt through their text of *Othello* for any images or references to either Black or White. Find at least ten of each color. Then create two lists on the board, one of each color, of every reference students found.

- How many of these are racial images?
- How many are images of nature, emotions or time?
- What does Shakespeare seem to be saying about Black and White in *Othello* and how does our modern perspective affect our view of the play and how Othello is treated?
- Do you see any correlations between Shakespeare’s world and our own? Why?
- What is the traditional role of White or Black in literature? Why?
- How might the themes of Black and White be highlighted in STC’s production?
Resource List

Shakespeare Dictionaries

Books on Shakespeare

Books on Teaching Shakespeare

Websites
- Shakespeare Theatre Company—http://www.shakespearetheatre.org/education
  ON SHAKEPEARE: Articles and information about Shakespeare’s life and world
- In Search of Shakespeare: Shakespeare in the Classroom—http://www.pbs.org/shakespeare/educators/
  The companion website to Michael Wood’s four-part PBS series In Search of Shakespeare, this site includes extensive research about Shakespeare’s life and works, as well as interactive features.
- Folger Shakespeare Library—http://www.folger.edu
  Includes excellent resources for further reading about Shakespeare, as well as fun games and information designed specifically for students and teachers.
- Shmoop Teacher Resources—http://www.shmoop.com
  Learning Guides, Homework Help, Study tools and Test Prep

Standards of Learning

The activities and question sequences found in the Folio supports grade 8-12 Common Core standards in English Language Arts. Primary content areas addressed include but are not limited to:

- Understanding of Classical Literature
- Vocabulary and Content Development
- Stagecraft
- Argument and Persuasive Writing
- Inference
- Performance
- Questioning and Listening
- Research
- Analysis and Evaluation
The phrase “theatre etiquette” refers to the special rules of behavior that are called for when attending a theatre performance.

Above all, it is important to remember that the actors on stage can see and hear you at the same time you can see and hear them. Be respectful of the actors and your fellow audience members by being attentive and observing the general guidelines below:

**Before you go:**

- *Othello* plays take place before cell phones and other fun technology existed. Please help us create the environment by turning off your cell phone and other electronic devices (iPods, games, etc.). Not only will it be historically inaccurate, but it can be very distracting, not to mention embarrassing, when a cell phone goes off during a performance. The lights from cell phones and other electronic devices are also a big distraction, so please no text messaging.

- We’re sure that you would never stick your gum underneath your chair or spill food and drinks, but because this theatre is so new and beautiful, we ask that you spit out your gum before entering the theatre and leave all food and drinks in the lobby or the coat check.

- We don’t want you to miss out on any of the action of the play, so please visit the restroom before the performance begins.

**During the performance:**

- Please feel free to have honest reactions to what is happening on stage. You can laugh, applaud and enjoy the performance. However, please don’t talk during the performance; it is extremely distracting to other audience members and the actors. Save discussions for intermission and after the performance.

**Thoughts about the importance of being an audience member from Shakespeare Theatre Company Artistic Director Michael Kahn**

“When you go to the theatre, you are engaging with other living, breathing human beings, having an immediate human response. In the theatre you sense that all of this may never happen again in this particular way.

As a member of the audience, you are actually part of how that’s developing—you have a hand in it … You are part of a community where you are asked to be compassionate, perhaps to laugh with or grieve as well as to understand people, lives and cultures different from your own.”