

Synopsis of *Othello*

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, a position of lower rank. Iago and Roderigo wake Brabantio and tell him of Desdemona's flight. Brabantio storms off with officers to apprehend Othello. Brabantio arrives at Othello's lodging at the same time as messengers who request the general's presence 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 discuss 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. The Duke sends Othello to defend Cyprus, and 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 love for Othello will not last long. 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. Pretending 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 love for Cassio.

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 Iago his lieutenant.



Orson Welles as Othello and Suzanne Cloutier as Desdemona in a film version of *Othello* (1952).

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 Iago 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. **S**

The Geography of *Othello*

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 Cypress. 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.



The highlighted sections of this map, circa 1819, show the former possessions of the Venetian Republic. The island of Cyprus is on the far right.

“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 dependency 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 Cambrai 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 merchants, war was regarded as a continuation of commerce, however, they would never send their own sons to serve in the military. 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 renowned for its loose wives and violently jealous husbands.

“When we consider the importancy 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. Cyprus is also much closer to Turkey than it is to Italy and to a Jacobean



Modern-day detail map of Cyprus.

audience less civilized. Iago's plot and chaos would not plausibly succeed in Venice. Placing the characters on Aphrodite's island makes 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 Jacobean audience would have found the Turks as threatening as the Venetians did in *Othello*. This 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 could attack Vienna and succeed, they could attack other Christian and European cities—like London. The Turks fostered great anxiety and fear in Western Europe. They were aggressive in expanding their empire and intolerant and cruel towards the people they conquered. In Shakespeare's play, the Venetians have Othello, 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 and/or Muslim person (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. Most 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. Throughout the play, Shakespeare has thoroughly considered his audience's perceptions and for the most part, Shakespeare delivers what is expected of Turks, of Venice, and of Cyprus. But in the Moor, Othello, the audience gets an unexpected and unprecedented tragic hero.



Engraving by Thomas Ryder of the painting "The Meeting of Othello and Desdemona" by Thomas Stothard, c.1799.

Iago and the Problem of

Iago is a character that has perplexed and divided scholars and artists for centuries. He is a villain able to ruin the lives of those around him with a single suggestion—words with no proof to back them up—and the result, four deaths, hardly seems to fit his stated motive of revenge after being overlooked for a promotion. Where did Shakespeare’s inspiration for such a dastardly villain come from? Why does Iago enact such terrible crimes on his friends?

“Did you perceive how he laughed at his vice?”

We can see the villainous ancestors of Iago in medieval morality plays. These plays, developed in 15th-century England, use allegorical characters and simple plots to teach the audience a specific moral lesson. Characters such as Knowledge, Strength and Good Deeds would share the stage with the devil, Death and Vice; often the two groups would battle for possession of a man’s soul. The symbolic characters were not meant to be people; rather they were physical representations of different virtues and sins. The characters and plot were constructed very simply so that the lesson of the play would be clear to the audience. Evil characters would have comic scenes to entertain the audience as well.

Shakespeare would certainly have seen morality plays in some form as he was growing up, and they influenced his later work. The character of Vice in particular is evoked in some of Shakespeare’s villains, especially those like Iago who some scholars suggest are “evil for the sake of being evil.” Iago seems at times as inhuman as the allegorical figure of Vice, a personification of wickedness descending on humanity to tempt mankind and ultimately defeat virtue—but Iago is human, a member of society and not a one-dimensional representation of an intangible quality. While Iago has many Vice-like qualities, his character is far more complicated than his morality-play ancestors.

“How am I then a villain?”

Iago is one of the most studied and written-about villains Shakespeare created. He is often compared to Richard III, another Vice-like figure who appears much earlier in Shakespeare’s career. Richard tells the audience from the very beginning of the play, “I am determined to prove a villain.” (I.i.30) Richard’s clear motivation for his malice, and his use of violence through henchmen to enact his revenge, separate him from the more subtle motivation and strategy of Iago.



Orson Welles as Othello and Michael MacLiammoir as Iago in *Othello* (1952).

Similarly, even though characters like Macbeth, Claudius (*Hamlet*) or even Aaron the Moor (*Titus Andronicus*) achieve deadly results that rival Iago’s quartet of deaths, we have a difficult time finding a similarly-constructed counterpart in Shakespeare’s other plays. Usually the villain has sufficient and clearly stated motivation for his actions—Richard is deformed, Aaron and Shylock are ostracized, Edmund is illegitimate—or he demonstrates some sort of hesitation or remorse, as do both Macbeth and Claudius. At the very least, Shakespeare’s villains are caught, exposed and disposed of in a manner that is satisfying to an audience, whether they are buried alive or their disembodied head is brought onstage. Not so with Iago.

“What you know, you know”

The most disputed aspect of Iago’s character is motive. We learn early in the play that he has been passed over for a promotion in favor of Cassio. Iago also mentions briefly that he suspects Othello is having an affair with his wife Emilia. References to these two motives, however, are few and occur only in the first few scenes of the play; many scholars argue that a motive strong enough to result in four deaths should have more prominence in the villains’ speech. Many of this school of thought argue that, like the Vice before him, Iago is driven by “motiveless malignity,” or being evil for evil’s sake. These scholars claim that Iago does not need a reason to act; he is either simply one-dimensionally evil, or so intoxicated by his powers of manipulation that he loses all sense of conscience. Other readers feel that Iago’s stated motives are adequate to explain his villainy, that the combination of being passed over for promotion and being cuckolded are enough to drive him to malevolence.

At the end of *Othello*, when Iago’s villainy is revealed, Othello demands to know why he has done it. Iago answers:

Demand me nothing. What you know, you know.
From this time forth I never will speak word.
(V.ii.355-356)

And he doesn’t. Iago is taken offstage to be tortured, but it’s hardly conceivable that his torturers will get anything out of him. This only adds to our frustration regarding Iago’s character—not only does he fail to clearly articulate a motive at the beginning of the play, he refuses to respond when asked directly about it at the end. The audience is not given the satisfaction of a reason or seeing his punishment onstage.



“O beware, my lord, of jealousy”:
Engraving of Act 3 Scene 3 of *Othello* by
Malcolm C. Salaman, 1916.



Paul Mullins as Iago and Raphael Nash
Thompson as Othello in The Shakespeare
Theatre of New Jersey’s 2003 production
of *Othello*.

“I follow him to serve my turn upon him”

Almost as interesting as why Iago does what he does is how. This is not a villain with a cadre of henchmen; Iago’s one helper, Roderigo, is ultimately another of Iago’s victims, manipulated and deceived to fulfill Iago’s plan. Nor does Iago use violence to reach his desired ends—everything that happens is a result of deception, as Iago misleads his friends and then stands back to watch the carnage that follows. Not only is Iago capable of persuading Othello of Desdemona’s infidelity merely by suggesting it, he is also supremely clever and able to think on his feet. We see his plans change and shift as the play progresses. When his original plan to thwart Othello’s marriage to Desdemona is foiled by her impassioned defense of her husband before the Senate, Iago quickly shifts gears and targets Cassio as another way to get to Othello. He has been likened to a playwright, shaping and dictating the plot of his own play to his own ends using only words.

In Iago we see a soldier’s capacity for attack combined with intelligence and charm. In much the same way that we might admire a painter who has produced a masterpiece, audiences are forced to recognize that, despite his motivations, Iago is a masterful villain. Furthermore, it is only to the audience that Iago speaks honestly. He reveals his plans, takes the spectators into his confidence, and, in a strange way the audience is honored to be a part of the master’s planning. The audience is put in an awkward position by the middle of the play ultimately becoming accomplices to Iago’s plot, watching the gruesome results.

Whether the character of Iago is played as a modern-day Vice character—a symbol of pure evil for the sake of being evil who is removed from the world of the play—or a bitter cuckold bent on vengeance for the wrongs he has suffered, one thing is certain: Iago is one of the most cruel and brilliant bad guys that Shakespeare ever created.



"The net that shall enmesh them all" ~ Act 2, Scene 3

Symbolism in *Othello*



"Othello Narrating his Adventures." Engraving by Goupil & Co., after the painting by Carl Becker.

Elizabethans believed in reading special meanings into signs, symbols or events. They thought one's fate could be read in the stars and that the natural world often controlled their actions. Knowing that his audience valued symbols, Shakespeare invested symbolic meanings into objects or events on stage to heighten their dramatic significance and help tell a clear and compelling story. While some of Shakespeare's symbols are still easily accessible to a contemporary audience, many of them require us to investigate what Elizabethans believed about themselves and the world around them to be clearly understood. Throughout *Othello* Shakespeare uses symbols as omens or signs of what characters are thinking and feeling; for example, Shakespeare uses symbols as varied as a storm, the military, a spider's web and a lady's handkerchief to heighten the dramatic effect of his story. At first glance these events and objects may seem ordinary but further investigation reveals multiple meanings that enrich the play.

Early in the play, the storm that defeats the Turks at the island of Cyprus, wiping out Othello's military

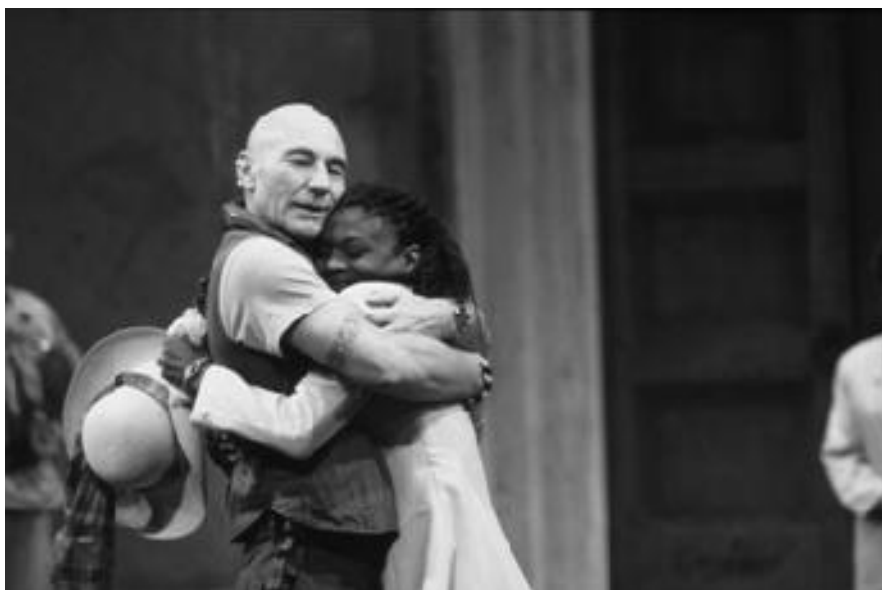
opposition, quickly reestablishes nature's dominance over humanity. This would have reminded Shakespeare's audience of their recent victory: after the English Navy defeated the Spanish Armada in 1588, the remainder of the Spanish fleet was destroyed by a storm. Familiar with this story as well as tales of shipwrecks and tropical storms from travelers exploring the New World, Elizabethans would have associated the storm with the natural world's power over their actions. The storm in *Othello* eliminates the need for military action and focuses the audience's attention on the domestic and personal drama unfolding between Iago, Othello, Cassio and Desdemona.

Many characters in *Othello* define themselves through the rank, order and symbolism of the military. During Elizabeth's reign the military became much more clearly delineated with the 1586 publication of *Army Orders, Lawes and Ordinances set down by Robert Earle of Leycester, the Queenes Maiesties Lieutenant and Captaine General of her armie and forces in the lowe countries*. While emphasizing the male dominance of this society,

the military to which Othello, Cassio and Iago belong provides Shakespeare with clearly outlined levels of masculinity and a strong symbol that defines each man. Iago reveals early in the play that he was passed over for a promotion to Lieutenant by Othello. Unlike the original story on which Shakespeare based his play, in which Iago's motivation for revenge comes from his love and obsession with Desdemona, in *Othello* Iago's ultimate motive seems to be this lost promotion. Having lost this honor to Cassio, Iago feels he has been stripped of his status as a man. This slight has silently humiliated Iago and inspires him to seek revenge on Othello and Cassio attacking their military and masculine status. Beyond this professional loss, Iago also fears Othello has "done his office" with his wife, alluding to rumors that Iago's wife Emilia has betrayed him with Othello. Meanwhile Othello's fear that Desdemona has betrayed him with Cassio is inadvertently supported by Cassio's military position as Othello's "lieutenant" because this position in Shakespeare's time served as the captain's deputy and potential substitute in all matters. In this case Othello fears that Cassio has substituted for him as a husband with Desdemona. In his publication Leicester defined the military ranks as well as regulations, including the regulation against drinking broken by Michael Cassio. When Cassio is stripped of his rank for his behavior, he loses his reason for living when he loses his manhood or "reputation." Unfortunately, because the Lieutenant also served as Othello's adviser in matters of discipline, Cassio also loses the one position from which he could campaign to regain his status. This leaves Cassio with no choice but to ask Desdemona for help, providing Iago with the perfect opportunity to spark Othello's jealousy. Iago visualizes this complicated relationship between Othello, Desdemona and Cassio as a spider's

web, in which he will "enmesh" them all. Shakespeare creates the image of a web to symbolize the trap being laid by Iago, as well as Iago's role as predator while Othello, Desdemona and Cassio are his prey.

Perhaps the strongest symbol in *Othello* is Desdemona's handkerchief, which serves as a weapon for Iago's scheme as well as a promise of love and fidelity between the married couples and the infidelity and betrayal with Cassio and Bianca. Beautifully embroidered with strawberries, the handkerchief contains "magic in the web," as Othello describes it having been sewn by a sibyl, or magical being, before his father gave it to his mother. Elizabethans viewed strawberries as a "virgin fruit," so the strawberries on the handkerchief could also symbolize Desdemona's virginity. When Othello sees Cassio with the handkerchief and believes Desdemona has given it to him, he feels he has lost Desdemona's love to Cassio through the loss of the handkerchief. After Othello murders Desdemona, Emilia reveals to Othello that she found the handkerchief on the ground and gave it to her husband. Emilia's telling Othello the truth about the handkerchief symbolically restores Desdemona's fidelity and Othello's jealousy vanishes. With this spoken truth the symbolism of the handkerchief loses its magic and Othello realizes Iago's scheme. Finally knowing, without any more signs to read, that he "lov'd not wisely but too well" in killing Desdemona, Othello kills himself. If only Othello had continued to demand "ocular proof" for every accusation made by Iago, Desdemona might have survived and the tragedy been averted. In an age when people believed signs and symbols foretold their fates and the future, Shakespeare warns his audience not to trust symbols more than their own eyes.



Patrick Stewart as Othello and Patrice Johnson as Desdemona in The Shakespeare Theatre's 1997 production of *Othello*.

Who's to Blame for Desdemona's

Murder?



Engraving by Seymour Eaton, 1900.

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. Parents would arrange marriages for their children that were financially or socially advantageous, then provide a dowry to be given to the couple. The dowry, generally in the form of money, goods or property, would give the couple financial support to begin their wedded life.

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, they would be the property of the head of their family, most often the father or eldest brother. When they married, women became the property of their husbands. It was the wife's 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 was 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 their descendants. Brabantio 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,



Laurence Olivier as Othello and Maggie Smith as Desdemona in an RSC film version of *Othello*, 1955.

had no family or great wealth. In Brabantio's eyes, and perhaps in those of Shakespeare's audience, Desdemona had wasted her father's 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—give Iago the proof that she could again deceive one to whom she owes her duty. For Shakespeare's audience, this reasoning might have assigned some of the responsibility to the victim; accusing Desdemona of her own demise.

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, as 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.



Engraving of Desdemona by Charles Heath, from *The Heroines of Shakespeare*, 1848.

Classroom Connections

Before the performance...



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 jealousy and madness in a matter of hours. Ask students to 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 discover about Othello? About Iago?



The Psychology of Iago

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.



Black & White

In *Othello* Shakespeare examines themes of Black and White, both metaphorically and in terms of racial relationships. Have students go on a scavenger hunt through their text of *Othello* for any images or references to either Black or White. Challenge them to 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 students see any correlations between Shakespeare's world and our own and why? What is the traditional role of White or Black in literature and why? How might the themes of Black and White be highlighted in the production they are about to see?



Lie, Lie, Lie

Reality becomes twisted for Othello because he listens to what Iago tells him and believes what appears to be true instead of investigating the truth for himself. Have students divide into groups of three. Each group should choose a storyteller who should share a brief true story about something they experienced. The other two members of the group must learn their story and prepare to tell it to the class. After about five minutes of rehearsal, the class should come back together. Each three-person group stands in front of the class. One at a time, each person in a group tells the same story. Each group member's objective is to convince the class that they are the true storyteller. After each trio performs, the class must vote on who they believe is telling the truth. Why did the class think the person they chose was being truthful? After revealing the actual storyteller, discuss why or why not the class may have guessed correctly. What kind of physical or vocal communication reveals the true storyteller and the false ones? Discuss how Iago might appear to be telling the truth when lying, and the differences between reality and what appears to be reality to Othello.



Symbolism in *Othello*

What are some of the major symbols in *Othello*? Common objects come to hold great meaning as the story unfolds. Lead students in a discussion of symbols in the play, including the handkerchief, Desdemona's bed sheets and the "green-ey'd monster." Ask students to design a poster for a production of *Othello*, choosing one symbol to focus on that they feel represents the story. Ask students to present their work, explaining why they chose the symbol they did, and how they feel it communicates the meaning of the play to a prospective audience member. Please send examples of your students' work to The Shakespeare Theatre!

Classroom Connections

...After the performance

The Pen vs. the Sword

Iago explains to Roderigo that he is angry at being passed over for a promotion primarily because Cassio is an “arithmetician,” that is, he has studied the art of battle in books but does not have experience on the field. Brainstorm two lists of occupations with the class: one that benefits from more scholarly book knowledge, the other from real-world experience. What differences can you find between the two lists? Where does the occupation of “Lieutenant” belong?

Racism

A director cannot approach a production of *Othello* without encountering issues of race and racism. Lead students in a discussion about what racial issues were brought up in the production. What decisions did the director make that may have challenged or reinforced students’ expectations of the play? Ask students to break out into small groups and discuss. Then ask students to 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.

Deception & Truth—Rewriting the Ending

Even in the face of torture, Iago refuses to delve into his reasons for the great deceptions that he orchestrated. Ask students to imagine what Iago’s motives may have been. Have them rewrite the ending as if Iago told his side of the story to the group. How would the others react to his narrative? Is there anything Iago could say that would make him a more sympathetic character?

Othello on Film

In 1995, Laurence Fishburne became the first African American to play Othello onscreen. Previous movie Othellos included great actors such as Orson Welles, Laurence Olivier, and Anthony Hopkins; all in make-up. Why did it take so long for Othello to be portrayed by a black actor on film? How does our history affect the art we create?

Tragic Hero

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?

Reputation & Social Status

In *Othello*, characters depend upon their social status and reputation for their happiness. Indeed, the happiness of Iago, Cassio and Othello depends upon how they are perceived by others. 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, and Othello’s fear of being seen as weak fuels his rage against Desdemona. Why is reputation such a big factor 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?

Loyalty & Jealousy in Relationships

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?

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- www.sgc.umd.edu—*Shakespeare's Globe Center USA*.
- hrsbstaff.ednet.ns.ca/engramja/Svtour.html—*Shakespeare: A Virtual Field Trip*.
- renaissance.dm.net/compendium/home.html—*Life in Elizabethan England*.
- www.shakespeare.org.uk—*Shakespeare Birthplace Trust*