

Richmond Shakespeare ON

Play Guide

OTHELLO

By William Shakespeare

Prepared by
Encore! Educational Outreach



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Pre-performance

Sources and history for *The Tragedy of Othello*

Both *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice* suffer from the same stigma of political correctness. Because these plays portray characters of a minority race or religion, and show how bias is used to vilify them, it is often assumed that rather than looking at the human interactions that create bias and how we can learn from them, it is better to avoid them. In Shakespeare's best tradition, however, these plays, "hold the mirror up to nature" (*Hamlet, Act III Sc. ii*), meaning ourselves, and have much to teach us, even though written over 400 years ago.

Though they were a minority, non-Caucasians were present in the Shakespeare's London. He might have interacted with them on a daily basis- the laundress, the prostitute and other working class people. It is difficult to know exactly their national identity, because Elizabethans did not often distinguish among Arabs, African, Indians and other non- Europeans. Even Europeans of darker skin color, i.e. Spaniards or other Mediterranean Europeans, might be referred to as "black."

Written in the period of Shakespeare's "mature" tragedies, *Othello* was written after *Hamlet* (1598-99) and before *King Lear* (1605) or *Macbeth* (1606 -7), *Othello* shares with these a fascination with evil at its most virulent. These plays also generally lack the larger outside or political forces that influence the previous tragedies. There are no scenes of kings or other government figures dealing with forces outside the lives of the major characters.

Othello has the narrowest frame of reference. It has no supernatural visitations, no appeals to cosmic influence. Its focus is purely domestic and human. The action takes place generally in one location (after the first act) and covers 2-3 nights and days. There are no subplots. The concentration upon the three major characters seems to increase the dramatic intensity of the plot.

Othello was presumably written about the time of its performance at the court of James I on November 1, 1604. Its source is a story written by Giovanni Cinthio in his *Hecatommithi* of 1565. The story was apparently based on an actual account in Venice in 1508. Shakespeare changes the story somewhat by creating the first scene with Desdemona's father, inventing Roderigo as the dupe used by Iago and muddying the motivations of the ensign, now named Iago. Instead of a simple story of a murder provoked by the ensign's lust for Othello's wife, the story is now darker and more twisted.

Though ostensibly the play is about jealousy and racial bigotry, beneath it all it is a story about the deceptive use of words and images. Oddly enough, Shakespeare wrote another play at about

the same time on about the same theme, as he did with parental authority versus young love in *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. *Twelfth Night*, a comedy, was written about two years previously. In *Twelfth Night*, Viola, disguised as the boy, Cesario, and Feste the Clown engage in a witty game of one-upsmanship, taking words that sound alike but having different meanings and interchanging them. In the midst of it all, Feste says that "A sentence in but a chev'ril glove to a good wit. How quickly the wrong side may be turned out."

In *Othello*, Shakespeare creates smaller but similar scenes. Again a clown (he has no name) appears to comment on the untrustworthiness of words.

Cassio: Dost thou hear, mine honest friend?

Clown: No, I hear not your honest friend. I hear you.

The phrase "honest friend" proves the most untrustworthy of all. Throughout the play Iago is referred to as "honest friend" and "honest Iago." Both Viola and Iago say the same thing with different wording: they are not what they seem.

Though the title character is Othello, all action revolves around the character of Iago. He is the ultimate ringmaster, shapeshifting as the occasion demands. He targets the weaknesses of everyone around him, and brings them down with their own faults. In this, Iago heads a special group of villains in Shakespeare that take pleasure in doing evil for its own sake: Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*, Richard III, Don John in *Much Ado About Nothing* and Edmund in *King Lear*. Elizabethan audiences would have recognized them as the personification of Vice from the old morality plays. These villains share the traits of being superb actors, enjoying their "sport" and stunning us with their virtuosity. We cannot help but applaud their skill and technique even while we condemn their actions. But Iago is so much more fully drawn as a man than just a vice character. This is what makes him even more terrifying. We expect such villainy from a character named Vice; to see such evil in a human being, chills us.

What puts Iago in his own class, is that he remains essentially motiveless. In the play, he states so many, changing reasons for what he does, that they must be suspect. Cinthio's villain had an obvious motive. By removing this, Shakespeare creates a more disturbing scenario: a human, to all appearances normal, who is unremittingly evil for its own sake.

Black and White

Is *Othello* a racist play? As with Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* this is a complex question. Terrible things are said about both and both are treated badly by some people. But is this universal to all characters in the play, and with whom does Shakespeare intend for us to have sympathy?

Shakespeare has Iago uses images of bestiality and monstrosity to describe Othello and even preys upon Othello's own fears that a marriage between a black man and a white woman may be unnatural. But these are Iago's biased words and are only used on people who would sympathize with bigotry. It is not the norm. Iago freely uses any victim's weaknesses; racism is only one trick in his bag. With Cassio, Iago plays upon the weakness for drink, with Othello himself, Iago twists his trusting nature.

Shakespeare portrays Othello as noble, honest, upright and loving. He is known to be a valiant

general and the Senate relies on him. Shakespeare has no scenes where observers are remarking on Othello's blackness or making racial slurs, which should be the case if Shakespeare wanted to portray universal racism. Instead it seems that Shakespeare embarks on a mission to explore the deeper, more subconscious, definitions of the words "black" and "white." Nothing is as it seems in this play. Black Othello is morally white, Bianca, whose name means white, is a prostitute. Morally, the "blackest" person on stage is Iago. No one, except Iago, knows the truth from fiction, and even he is operating on his own assumptions. He finds in the end that he underestimates the one person closest to him, his own wife, Emilia.

In our own lives, we find that, like each of Iago's victims, we too can be tragically blind in distinguishing good from evil: the lover who treats us badly, the parent that treats us like property, the preacher that fills his own pocket.

We can't determine black from white from outward shows alone.

Stage Practices

Because there were no black actors in *The King's Men*, a white man, Richard Burbage, was the first to play the role of The Moor, presumably with dark makeup. This was the tradition for many years. The lack of skilled black actors played a part, probably fueled by racial prejudice in Europe and America. Though Elizabethans distinguished little between a brown North African and an African of Negroid descent, by the late 18th and early 19th century, the practice was to steer toward the light color. Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote, "it would be impossible for a girl to fall in love with a veritable Negro."

A long line of well known tragedians played the role: David Garrick, Edmund Kean, Henry Irving, Orson Welles in 1952, Laurence Olivier in 1965 and even as late as 1981, Anthony Hopkins.

Black actors played the role, but for a long time, only to black audiences. The famous African Grove Theatre in New York City, produced *Othello* in 1812, with James Hewlett being the first African American to play the role. However, the theater company frequently had to be on the move as police were looking for them. An alumnus of the African Grove Theater, Ira Aldridge, moved to England where he was received with more acclaim. He broke the color barrier at Covent Garden by playing the role in 1833. He went on to play more of Shakespeare's characters, but in white face makeup.

It was about a century later that Paul Robeson played the Moor in London. He then went on to be the first black actor in this century to play the Moor in America in 1943, and the first the Shakespeare Memorial Theater in Stratford-on-Avon in 1959. Since then, the role has been played by such illustrious actors as James Earl Jones, Laurence Fishburne and Avery Brooks, to name a few.

There is still, however, some debate on the issue. Some feel that for a black man to play the part, condones the usage of the stereotype of blacks that Iago plays upon. Others feel that only an actual black man can understand what Othello feels. This debate reflects the deep divide our world still faces on the issue, and it is well that the play brings it up for us to see.

The Elizabethan Playhouse

The theater most associated with Shakespeare, The Globe, was not the only theater in London, but it is the most famous. Others include the Rose, the Curtain (both mentioned in *Shakespeare in Love*) and the Swan. The Blackfriars was an indoor theater used by Shakespeare's company, (known as the Lord Chamberlain's Men, then later as the King's Men.) The others were all open to the sky (the reason being the need for light - no electricity!).

All of the open theatres had arena-type stages (seating on at least three sides), with the poorer audience members (the Groundlings) standing on the ground right up next to the stage, while the more wealthy sat in galleries in a circular fashion all around the "yard" (the open area where the Groundlings stood). The atmosphere was fairly raucous (more like Nascar or professional wrestling), with people constantly moving around, throwing hazelnut shells on the ground and talking - UNLESS they were intrigued by what was going on onstage. We think that with Shakespeare's plays the audience was pretty attentive. There were no intermissions, however, so patrons had to move sometimes. With Shakespeare's plays, they would probably hurry back!

Because the plays took place in the early afternoon and the players (actors) could see the audience and vice versa, it is thought by many scholars that Shakespeare intended for the audience to be involved in the play itself. An actor might refer to an audience member to poke fun at a character not on stage; pretty funny then AND now.

Finally - how long WERE these plays? They seem pretty long on the page. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Prologue mentions "the two hours traffic of our stage...". If the actors really meant that, there would be a very fast pace: no long pauses or slow exits and entrances. This makes sense if you consider that the normal groundling had the attention span of today's 5 year-old and liked to throw things.

Synopsis

Act I

In Venice, Iago and Roderigo awakened Desdemona's father, Brabantio, and tell him she's made off with Othello. They all go to complain to the Duke. They run into Othello and Cassio, Othello's lieutenant, and are accusing him, when officers come in and say Othello and Brabantio are needed at the Senate. They go. Iago admits to hating Othello.

The Turks look like they are threatening Cyprus, the property of Venice. The Senators want to send Othello to take care of it. Brabantio wants to talk about his daughter first. Othello says to ask Desdemona whether she married him willingly. She comes in and says she did.

Arrangements are made for Othello to go to Cyprus; Desdemona is to come too, escorted by Iago and his wife, Emilia. Iago persuades Roderigo to go too and he will get Desdemona for him.

Act II

In Cyprus, the governor is waiting for Othello to come; a big storm is blowing. It destroys the Turks, but they are worried about Othello. Everyone arrives safely and they are happy to be there. Iago plans to get rid of Cassio using Roderigo.

The town is invited to celebrate Othello's marriage. Iago tempts Cassio to drink; Cassio does even though he has no tolerance. Roderigo starts an argument, Cassio starts fighting, wounding

Montano, the former governor of Cyprus as well. Othello comes out and fires Cassio. After everyone leaves he is despondent and begs Iago to help him. Iago suggests he go through Desdemona.

Act III

Cassio goes to Emilia and Desdemona to ask if they will help him make it up to Othello.

Desdemona promises to help. Cassio sees Othello coming and leaves. Desdemona asks Othello about Cassio but he doesn't want to talk about it now. Iago has made him suspicious.

Desdemona and Emilia leave; Iago drums up more suspicions. Desdemona and Emilia come back. Othello isn't feeling well; Desdemona tries to comfort him with the special handkerchief he gave her. He brushes it off and Desdemona drops it. They leave. Emilia picks it up and decides to give it to Iago who has been bugging her for it. Iago plant it in Cassio's rooms.

Othello is upset and says that Iago better be right. Iago says he saw Cassio with the special handkerchief.

Desdemona wonders where the handkerchief is; Othello comes in and wonders where it is. She stalls and tries to talk about Cassio. Othello leaves. Emilia says he is jealous.

Bianca comes to Cassio and wants to know why he hasn't come to see her lately. He gives her the handkerchief and asks her to copy it. HE says he'll see her soon.

Act IV

Iago and Othello are talking about Desdemona and Cassio. Othello falls down in a fit. Cassio comes by, and Iago sends him away. When Othello comes to, Iago says Othello should hide himself and watch while Iago and Cassio talk about Desdemona and he will see how Cassio sneers. Othello hides. Cassio comes back and Iago talks about Bianca. They both laugh and Bianca comes in with the handkerchief. They all leave.

Othello comes out of hiding even more overwrought. He plans to kill Desdemona tonight.

In come Lodovico and Desdemona. Lodovico brings orders from Venice to return. Lodovico and Desdemona discuss the trouble between Othello and Cassio. Othello strikes Desdemona and everyone is amazed. Desdemona leaves. Othello says he'll return and also leaves.

Othello accuses Desdemona; she protests her innocence.

Roderigo accuses Iago of just using him. Iago says he's not being patient and all will be well.

They plan to murder Cassio tonight

Desdemona says that Othello has commanded her to wait for him in the bedroom and to put on the wedding sheets. Emilia gets her ready and Desdemona sings a sad song about unfaithfulness.

Emilia says if women are unfaithful it's the husbands' fault.

Act V

Iago and Roderigo hide and wait for Cassio. He comes and Roderigo strikes at him but misses. Cassio wounds Roderigo. Iago comes up from behind in the dark and cuts Cassio's leg. Lodovico and Gratiano hear people and trouble Iago comes by with a light. They find Cassio and help him, while Iago goes over to Roderigo and kills him..

Othello comes into the bedroom and looks at the sleeping Desdemona. She wakes up and Othello says she should prepare herself. She protests her innocence. He suffocates her with a pillow.

Emilia comes in and tells him about Cassio and Roderigo. She hears Desdemona's dying voice and accuses Othello. He says her husband gave him the proof-Desdemona's handkerchief. She yells and alerts the castle.

Montano and Gratiano come in with Iago. Emilia confronts Iago. He tries to shut her up but she reveals she stole the handkerchief for Iago. Othello tries to get at Iago but Iago stabs Emilia and runs. Everyone leaves to capture Iago. Emilia dies .

Lodovico comes in with Montano, Cassio, officers and Iago. Othello tries to kill Iago but only wounds him. Cassio says he was innocent. Othello kills himself. Iago refuses to explain himself. Lodovico says Iago will be punished.

Post-performance

People/Happenings in the play

Multiple choice

1. What does Iago use for “ocular proof” of Desdemona’s unfaithfulness.

- a. She and Cassio kissing
- b. Finding her and Cassio in bed together.
- c. A handkerchief
- d. Cassio’s clothing

2. What is Brabantio’s position in Venice?

- a. Senator
- b. Duke
- c. Constable
- d. Stable-hand

3. What is a Moor?

- a. an African
- b. a black man
- c. a Spanish Muslim
- d. A Venetian

4. What does Iago say are his reason(s) for hating Othello?

- a. He promoted Cassio to lieutenant instead of him.
- b.. He thinks he slept with his Emilia, his wife.
- c.. He loves Desdemona.
- d.. All of the above.

5. What first attracted Desdemona to Othello?

- a. His strong hands
- b. His beautifully crafted armor
- c. His handkerchief
- d. The stories he told about his past

6. According to Emilia, whose fault is it if wives are unfaithful?
 - a. Their parents
 - b. Society
 - c. Their husbands
 - d. Their own

7. Which of the following epithets is most commonly applied to Iago throughout the play?
 - a. "Honest"
 - b. "Fat"
 - c. "Stubborn"
 - d. "Ugly"

8. Which of Cassio's weaknesses does Iago use?
 - a. His inability to ride a horse
 - b. A low tolerance for alcohol
 - c. A bad knee
 - d. A short attention span

9. How does Othello kill Desdemona?
 - a. He stabs her
 - b. He smothers her
 - c. He strangles her
 - d. He beats her to death

10. What, according to Iago, is the "green-eyed monster"?
 - a. Envy
 - b. Greed
 - c. Lust
 - d. Jealousy

11. Who kills Roderigo in the last act?
 - a. Cassio
 - b. Iago
 - c. Montano
 - d. Othello

12. On the night of her death, what does Desdemona ask Emilia to do?
 - a. Put ribbons in Desdemona's hair
 - b. Sing Desdemona's wedding song
 - c. Put Desdemona's wedding sheets on the bed
 - d. Embroider Desdemona a new handkerchief

13. How does Iago use Roderigo ?
 - a. To provide him with money
 - b. to try to kill Cassio

- c. to get Cassio fired
- d. all of the above

14. What does Roderigo think Iago is doing?

- a. getting gifts for Othello
- b. trying to advance Cassio
- c. getting Desdemona for him
- d. trying to become governor of Cyprus

15. What does Brabantio do when he finds out about Desdemona's marriage?

- a. Celebrates her good fortune to marry a general in the Venetian army
- b. Accuses Othello of witchcraft and disowns Desdemona
- c. Has a hard time accepting it, but eventually gives his blessing
- d. Wishes she would have married Iago instead

16. Which of the following occurs in front of the Venetian council?

- a. Othello asks that Desdemona speak on his behalf
- b. Brabantio is told to worry about his other daughters and be happy for Desdemona
- c. Othello is reprimanded for not asking Brabantio for Desdemona's hand
- d. Brabantio slaps his daughter and accuses her of dishonoring their family

17. Which of the following descriptions best matches Iago's relationship with his wife Emilia?

- a. Pretty good – they get along well and enjoy being together
- b. Great – their love is very strong and they have a solid partnership
- c. Could be better – they appear to love each other but get on each other's nerves
- d. Not good- – they don't seem to have much in common, nor do they seem devoted to each other

18. Which major character remains alive at the end of the play?

- a. Othello
- b. Desdemona
- c. Roderigo
- d. Cassio

19. The handkerchief is important to Othello because

- a. It was expensive
- b. It was a gift from Brabantio
- c. It supposedly has magical powers
- d. It was his first gift to Desdemona.

20. How does Desdemona react on her deathbed?

- a. She curses Othello for his behavior
- b. She remains dignified and maintains her faith and love in Othello
- c. She attempts to kill Othello in self-defense

d. She says nothing at all

21. How does Othello die?

- a. By being poisoned
- b. By being stabbed by Montano
- c. Of a broken heart
- d. By stabbing himself

22. Who was it that "loved not wisely, but too well."

- a. Iago
- b. Othello
- c. Cassio
- d. Desdemona

Language

Match the original lines with the modern meaning.

1) ".My spirit and my place have in them power
To make this bitter to thee."

2) "Though I do hate him as I do hell-pains
Yet for necessity of present life

I must show out a flag and sign of love
Which is indeed but sign."

3) "My services which I have done the Signiory
Shall out tongue his complaints"

4) "Were it my cue to fight, I should have known it"

5) To mourn a mischief that is dead and gone
Is the next way to draw a new mischief on."

a) I would have known if
were necessary to fight.

b) Concentrating on one bad
thing will just bring you
more.

C) I can make things
bad for you.

d) Even though I hate
him, I need to pretend
I am on his side.

E) The good I have done will
count more than the bad
things he complains of.

Match the example with the English usage they illustrate.

alliteration simile metaphor irony

1) "Our bodies are gardens, to which
Our wills are gardeners."

2) "If thou wilt needs damn thyself, do it a more delicate way than drowning."

3) "...doth like a poisonous mineral gnaw my innards"

4) "Honest Iago"

5) "Which as a grise or step, may help these lovers"

6) "coursers for cousins and gennets for germans"

Matching (match the character with the line spoken by him/her/it)

- | | |
|--|--------------|
| 1. "My daughter is not for thee" | a) Desdemona |
| 2. "an old black ram is tupping your white ewe" | b) Roderigo |
| 3. "She loved me for the dangers I had pass'd" | c) Othello |
| 4. "Thus do I ever make my fool my purse " | d) Brabantio |
| 5. "I have very poor and unhappy brains for drinking" | e) Iago |
| 6. "Oh I have lost my reputation!" | f) Cassio |
| 7. "Be thou assured, good Cassio, I will do
All my abilities in thy behalf" | g) Emilia |
| 8. "Put out the light, then put out the light" | |
| 9. "Let husbands know their wives have sense like them" | |
| 10. "The jewels you have had from me to deliver to Desdemona
would half have corrupted a votarist." | |

Questions for thought.

1. Iago is stunningly good at reading and using people. Give the characteristic of each of the major characters that Iago uses, and how he uses that characteristic?. Who is the person that Iago underestimates and finally brings him down?

2) It has been said by some people that no black man should ever play Othello because it would encourage audiences to give in to stereotype. Do you think this is true? Do you think this is what Shakespeare meant to say about black characters in general? Give examples .

3) Here are some things said about Othello by various people in the play:
"old black ram," "thief," the valiant Moor," "lascivious Moor," "brave Othello," "'tis a worthy governor," "thick lips," "a Barbary horse," "is of a constant and loving nature," the man commands like a full soldier."

Why are there so many contradictory things said? Which is more likely to be true, given the characters that say them?

4) Othello states that "her father loved me" when telling his story about how Desdemona fell in love with him. Yet Brabantio disinherits her for marrying Othello. Explain what might have been going on.