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OTHELLO

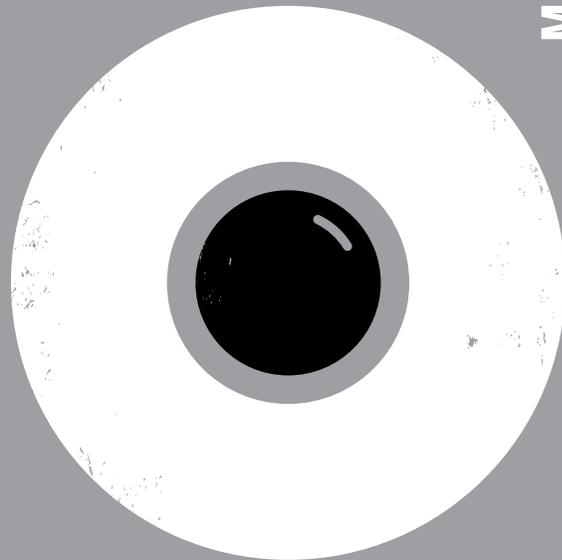
OTHELLO

BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

THE SPACE THEATRE

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YOU CAN'T
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Synopsis

*“When my love swears that she is made of truth
I do believe her, though I know she lies....”*
— William Shakespeare, Sonnet 138.

Othello, a Moorish army general, has passed over Iago for promotion in the Venetian army in favor of Cassio, a younger man. Iago is determined to avenge himself on his commander and his manipulations know no limits in his plot to destroy the generous and unsuspecting general. Meanwhile, Othello has secretly married Desdemona, a union that angers her father, Brabantio. But Desdemona is madly in love and she defies her father’s disapproval. Iago, in his jealousy, uses Roderigo, a nobleman who was formerly a suitor of Desdemona and the promoted Cassio as his pawns. Sensing a weakness in Othello, Iago employs cunning and insinuation to prick the jealousy of his commander while involving the names of Roderigo and Cassio to besmirch Desdemona’s reputation. Othello falls into the trap Iago sets for him, becoming obsessively jealous and readily believing anything he is told about his wife.

Set in Venice and Cyprus this domestic tragedy explores difficult issues that raise artistic, moral and social questions that resonate in this century.

William Shakespeare: An Encapsulated Biography

For all his fame and celebration, William Shakespeare remains a mysterious figure with regards to personal history. There are just two primary sources for information on the Bard: his works and various legal and church documents that have survived from Elizabethan times. Naturally, there are many gaps in this body of information, which tells us little about Shakespeare the man.

William Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, allegedly on April 23, 1564. Church records from Holy Trinity Church indicate that he was baptized there on April 26, 1564. Young William was born of John Shakespeare, a glove maker and leather merchant, and Mary Arden, a landed heiress. William, according to the church register, was the third of eight children in the Shakespeare household—three of whom died in childhood. John Shakespeare had a remarkable run of success as a merchant and later as an alderman and high bailiff of Stratford. His fortunes declined, however, in the 1570s.

There is great conjecture about Shakespeare's childhood years, especially regarding his education. Scholars surmise that Shakespeare attended the free grammar school in Stratford, which at the time had a reputation to rival Eton. While there are no records extant to prove this claim, Shakespeare's knowledge of Latin and Classical Greek would tend to support this theory. In addition, Shakespeare's first biographer, Nicholas Rowe, wrote that John Shakespeare had placed William "for some time in a free school."¹ John Shakespeare, as a Stratford official, would have been granted a waiver of tuition for his son. As the records do not exist, we do not know how long William attended the school, but certainly the literary quality of his works suggest a solid education. What is certain is that William Shakespeare never went on to university schooling, which has stirred some of the debate concerning the authorship of his works.

The next documented event in Shakespeare's life is his marriage to Anne Hathaway on November 28, 1582. William was 18 at the time and Anne was 26—and pregnant. Their first daughter, Susanna, was born on May 26, 1583. The couple later had twins, Hamnet and Judith, born February 2, 1585 and christened at Holy Trinity. Hamnet died in childhood at the age of 11, on August 11, 1596.

For seven years, William Shakespeare effectively disappears from all records, turning up in London circa 1592. This fact has sparked as much controversy about Shakespeare's life as any period. Rowe notes that young Shakespeare was quite fond of poaching and may have had to flee Stratford after an incident with Sir Thomas Lucy, whose lands he allegedly hunted. There is also rumor of Shakespeare working as an assistant schoolmaster in Lancashire for a time, though this is circumstantial at best. It is estimated that Shakespeare arrived in London around 1588 and began to establish himself as an actor and playwright. Evidently, Shakespeare was envied early on for his talent, as related by the critical attack of Robert Greene, a London playwright, in 1592: "—an upstart crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his Tiger's heart wrapped in a player's hide, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best

of you: and being an absolute Johannes factotum, is in his own conceit the only Shakescene in country.”²

Greene’s bombast notwithstanding, Shakespeare must have shown considerable promise. By 1594, he was not only acting and writing for the Lord Chamberlain’s Men (called the King’s Men after the ascension of James I in 1603), but was a managing partner in the operation as well. With Will Kempe, a master comedian, and Richard Burbage, a leading tragic actor of the day, the Lord Chamberlain’s Men became a favorite London troupe, patronized by royalty and made popular by the theatre-going public. When the plague forced theatre closings in the mid-1590’s, Shakespeare and his company made plans for the Globe Theatre in the Bankside district, which was across the river from London proper.

Shakespeare’s success is apparent when studied against other playwrights of this age. His company was the most successful in London in his day. He had plays published and sold in octavo editions, or “penny-copies” to the more literate of his audiences. Never before had a playwright enjoyed sufficient acclaim to see his works published and sold as popular literature in the midst of his career. While Shakespeare could not be accounted as wealthy, by London standards, his success allowed him to purchase New House and retire in comfort to Stratford in 1611.

William Shakespeare wrote his will in 1611, bequeathing his properties to his daughter Susanna (married in 1607 to Dr. John Hall). To his surviving daughter Judith, he left 300 pounds, and to his wife Anne he left “my second best bed”. William Shakespeare allegedly died on his birthday, April 23, 1616. This is probably more of a romantic myth than reality, but Shakespeare was interred at Holy Trinity in Stratford on April 25. In 1623 two working companions of Shakespeare from the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, John Heminges and Henry Condell, printed the First Folio edition of the Collected Works, of which half the plays contained therein were previously unpublished. The First Folio also contained Shakespeare’s sonnets.

William Shakespeare’s legacy is a body of work that will never again be equaled in Western civilization. His words have endured for 400 years and still reach across the centuries as powerfully as ever.

1. [www. bardweb](http://www.bardweb.net)
2. Ibid.

<http://www.bardweb.net/man.html>

Shakespeare's Plays

First Performed	Plays	First Performed	Plays
1590-91	Henry VI, Part II	1599-1600	As You Like It
1590-91	Henry VI, Part III	1599-1600	Twelfth Night
1591-92	Henry VI, Part I	1600-01	Hamlet
1592-93	Richard III	1600-01	The Merry Wives of Windsor
1592-93	Comedy of Errors		
1593-94	Titus Andronicus	1601-02	Troilus and Cressida
1593-94	Taming of the Shrew	1602-03	All's Well That Ends Well
1594-95	Two Gentlemen of Verona	1604-05	Measure for Measure
1594-95	Love's Labours Lost	1604-05	Othello
1594-95	Romeo and Juliet	1605-06	King Lear
1595-96	Richard II	1605-06	Macbeth
1595-96	A Midsummer Night's Dream	1606-07	Antony and Cleopatra
		1607-08	Coriolanus
1596-97	King John	1607-08	Timon of Athens
1596-97	The Merchant of Venice	1608-09	Pericles
1597-98	Henry IV, Part I	1609-10	Cymbeline
1597-98	Henry IV, Part II	1610-11	The Winter's Tale
1598-99	Much Ado About Nothing	1611-12	The Tempest
1598-99	Henry V	1612-13	Henry VIII
1599-1600	Julius Caesar		

The Source of the Story for *Othello*

IAGO: "Take note, take note, O world!"
—*Othello*, III, iii, 1.378.

The seventh novella of the *Hecatommithi* by Giovanni Battista Giraldi Cinthio provided the plot for Shakespeare's play, but he altered the original story so brilliantly that it became his own forever. In Cinthio's tale, the Moor (he has no other name) is highly respected as a military leader and is appointed by the lords of Venice to lead an expedition to Cyprus. The Moor has married a Venetian lady named Desdemona who has admired his manliness and valor. Cinthio's Moor does not tell Desdemona of his adventures nor does her family oppose the marriage. The Ensign (who becomes Iago) has fallen in love with the Moor's lady and is jealous of the captain (Shakespeare's Cassio). The cause of his jealousy is not Cassio's promotion, but the fact that Desdemona disdains him in her preference for the captain.

The Ensign's love turns to hatred and he plots revenge against Desdemona to death. Meanwhile, the captain is dishonored for assaulting a soldier and creating a disturbance while on guard duty. Desdemona takes up his cause with the Moor.

The Ensign fuels the Moor's mind with doubts about his lady's virtue; he claims the captain has boasted of an affair with her and even plants her handkerchief (stolen by his own child) in the captain's quarters. The Moor agrees that his wife must be killed; in addition, he consents to have the Ensign beat her with a sandfilled stocking.

In the Moor's presence the Ensign beats Desdemona. But as soon as the execution is completed, the Moor goes mad with grief. He and the Ensign quarrel and the Moor strips him of his office. The Ensign then plots to have the Moor recalled to Venice where he accuses him of the murder of his wife. Tortured by authorities, the Moor refuses to confess and is exiled for life; subsequently, he is killed by Desdemona's kinsmen. The Ensign goes free, but later dies under torture for his connection to another crime. After the Ensign's death, his wife reveals his treachery involving the Moor and Desdemona. At no point in Cinthio's story does the Moor ever learn of his wife's innocence.

Grace, William J. *Shakespeare's Othello*. New York: Monarch Press, 1964.

Hall, Joan Lord. *Othello: a Guide to the Play*. London: Greenwood Press, 1999.

Time and Setting of the Play

The commonwealth of Venice in their armory have this inscription:

'Happy is that city which in time of peace thinks of war.'

—Robert Burton. *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. (1621-1651)

In Shakespeare's play Venice is an organized and just society, at least on a public level. In 1420, when Venice acquired territories in the eastern Mediterranean "she took on burdens as well, and the greatest of these was the task of opposing the Ottoman Turks."¹ But in 1571 at the battle of Lepanto (600 miles northwest of Cyprus) the Venetians along with the Austrians defeated the Turks, a fact that electrified Europe.

In the 15th century Venetian merchants had traveled to the east on Portuguese ships, but the powerful East India Co. controlled most of the trade. In the 19th century, the gradual dismantlement of the East India Co. transformed trading relations between Asia and Europe and the result was that trade exchanges between India and Italy grew in the last decades of the 19th century.

The other setting is Cyprus, a large island near the eastern end of the Mediterranean. In 1489 it came under the control of Venice, but Venetian expansion involved her in wars with the Turks. Throughout the period of Venetian rule, Ottoman Turks raided and attacked the people of Cyprus at will. The Greek population of Cyprus was given weapons by the Venetians to fight the attacking Ottomans. Numerous battles were fought between the Venetians and Turks, until 1573, when the Peace of Constantinople ended the wars between these two. The Venetians left, leaving Cyprus under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. Thus, Cyprus was a place of isolation, farther away from Christian Europe and one step

closer to the Islamic culture of the Turks.

The occupation brought Cyprus directly under Ottoman despotism. Heavy taxes were levied and many Greek Cypriots converted to Islam but remained “secret” Christians.

1. Asimov, p. 611.
2. Nostbaken. P. 35.

Asimov, Isaac. *Asimov’s Guide to Shakespeare*. New York4: Wings Books, 1970.
antonellaviola@ iue.it. “Mapping Entrepreneurial Commercial Presence in the 19th Century India.”

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyprus_under_the_Ottonian_Empire

Historical & Cultural Context of *Othello*

IAGO: “*An old black ram/Is tugging your white ewe.*”
—*Othello*, I, i, line 88.

Many critics have written about the racism displayed in the play, and there is evidence that Shakespeare’s England bore a prejudiced streak.

In 1554 a sea merchant brought five black men from Guinea to England. He instructed them in English so they could become interpreters on further trade missions to Africa. During the 50 years from this significant beginning to the first performances of *Othello*, the black population of England had increased to a point that Queen Elizabeth issued a proclamation. In 1596 she alerted the Lord Mayor of London about the spread of “diverse blackamoors brought into this realm.”¹ But in 1601 she issued an edict demanding that “Negroes and blackamoors be removed from England.”²

At the same time trade and economic ties between England and North Africa grew. In 1600 an entire embassy from Morocco journeyed to London for a six-month stay designed to strengthen diplomatic and economic relations with England; these North Africans were described as “very strangely attired and behaved.”³ The cultural differences and their cost to the city of London (230 pounds) led to an attitude of distrust and muted hostility among the British. When it came time for them to leave, several English mariners refused to transport them.

British people had limited exposure to Africans and their ignorance fed their distrust. One key political concern affecting English perceptions of Moors was the relationship between Moors and Spain. Spain bore intense hostility to England because it was already trading in Africa and disliked the British competition. More importantly, under Elizabeth’s reign from 1558 to 1603, Spain supported an attempt to replace the Protestant queen with a Catholic monarch.

In the theatre black-masked figures had always denoted suspicion. But in

1589 George Peele wrote a play, *The Battle of Alcazar*, in which the Moor is a complete villain. This stage stereotype reinforced an audience's expectation of blackness as villainy. By dignifying the black character and creating a white man as the central villain, Shakespeare is in stark contrast to this theatrical tradition.

1. Hall, p. 13.
2. Nostbaken, p. 71.
3. Hall, p. 13.

Hall, Joan Lord. *Othello: a Guide to the Play*. London: Greenwood Press, 1999.

Nostbaken, Faith. *Understanding Othello*. London: Greenwood Press, 2000.

Themes of the Play

Jealousy is a main theme in *Othello*, but on a deeper level, the play explores other important concerns. One of these is isolation or “the outsider.” “Respected and utilized for his military prowess... Othello nevertheless remains a stranger within the private world of Venice.”¹ The policy of the Venetian free state was to hire foreign mercenaries to protect its free trade and fight its wars. Therefore, Othello may be leading the army, but he knows little of this city-state and its citizens. Part of Othello's susceptibility to Iago's words is the fact that the ensign is a Venetian insider and Othello is not.

Another reason for Othello's isolation is his race. As director Kent Thompson said in an interview with Phillip Kolin: “Portraying Othello as a warrior-hero but also a supremely lonely outsider opens up the complexity of the play. All of the spoken and unspoken racism of this world comes back to haunt Othello.”² Iago immediately dislikes him for he has been passed over for promotion. Brabantio distrusts him because he believes the Moor has charmed his daughter Desdemona with magic. Othello, too, thinks of himself as an outsider; his race has set him apart and he has had to work hard and look carefully after his reputation so that he is regarded as an equal to a white man.

Appearance versus reality is another important theme of the play. Although Iago is called honest by almost everyone in the play, he is in truth treacherous, deceitful and manipulative. Othello portrays himself as being simple and plain-spoken, but underneath this calm exterior he is bursting with emotion. His lack of self-knowledge makes him easy prey for Iago's insinuations about Desdemona.

Pride is especially important to Othello. He is defensively proud of himself and his achievements and especially proud of his honorable appearance. He wants to appear powerful, accomplished and moral at all times, and when he is challenged by allegations about Desdemona, his pride is wounded. As a military man Othello has a view of justice that ordinary society does not. The play's setting and plot emphasize “the rank and status of a male hierarchy and a war-oriented code of conduct.”³ Discipline and order are necessary,

but more importantly, justice for Othello becomes an excuse for revenge on an innocent victim.

Jealousy brings chaos into the situation; “when jealousy is personified as a monster in the play, it is to suggest some human beings can be taken over by a passion that is huge.”⁴ As Othello’s jealousy mounts, he becomes monstrous. He abandons reason; his language becomes coarse, and he is determined to punish his wife. Iago, too, is a demonic figure who creates images of an adulterous liaison where none exists. As Janet Adelman points out: “*Othello* is obsessively about what is hidden away within the person, the inner, private and unknowable self that might harbor inaccessible desires.”⁵

1. Hall, p. 104.
2. Kolin, p. 442-43.
3. Nostbaken, p. 108.
4. Hall, p. 113.
5. Hall, p. 115.

Grace, William J. *Shakespeare’s Othello*. New York: Monarch Press, 1964.

Hall, Joan Lord. *Othello: a Guide to the Play*. London: Greenwood Press, 1999.

Kolin, Phillip C., ed. *Othello: New Critical Essays*. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Kolin, Phillip. “An Interview with Kent Thompson.”

Nostbaken, Faith. *Understanding Othello*. London: Greenwood Press, 2000.

The Women in *Othello*

OTHELLO: "*O curse of marriage!*
That we can call these delicate creatures ours,
And not their appetites."
—*Othello*, Act III, iii, 268.

Desdemona is often seen as the delicate, innocent, infinitely sweet victim, but Jane Adamson paints a different picture. In her book, *Othello as Tragedy: Some Problems of Judgment and Feeling*, she says that in the first half of the play Desdemona is self-assured and energetic. She rejects the suitors her father has selected, has eloped with Othello, defended her actions before the Venetian Senate, accompanied Othello to a field of war at Cyprus and challenged his judgment on Cassio.

Yet, as madly as she proclaims to love Othello, "neither of them really knows the other...given the circumstances of their courtship."¹ Their ignorance persists as neither one of them notices or adjusts to the personality of the partner. Desdemona holds to her ideal conception of Othello while his ideal sense of her is diminishing with the words of Iago. Desdemona's admiration is not a sound basis for this marriage.

Desdemona's big mistake is her innocent persistence in arguing Cassio's case in defiance of Othello's decision. She believes her love for him and his love for her "will naturally prevail over any other consideration."² She does not understand the rules of soldiership and the demands it makes on her husband; "military matters must necessarily take precedence over private wishes."³ By the last two acts her confidence has waned; the recognition that she is suspected of adultery leaves her miserable and withdrawn. She becomes passive and lacks the will to challenge or resist anything.

Emilia, Iago's wife, is an Army wife, used to the hard facts of military life. She is barely tolerated by her husband who is only interested in malevolent mischief. She steals Desdemona's handkerchief to gain her husband's approval, but it is short-lived. Her loveless marriage has left her with a cynical and hostile attitude toward men as shown by these words: "They are all but stomachs, and we all but food/They eat us hungerly, and when they are full/They belch us." (III, iv, l. 98-100) Her fierceness and rage against injustice are qualities Desdemona might emulate.

Bianca is called a "strumpet" by Iago, but his attitude toward women is misogynistic. In Act V, scene I, Bianca declares: "I am no strumpet, but of life as honest/As you that thus abuse me." She truly loves Cassio, but she is abandoned and rejected by him, just as Emilia is by Iago. Therefore, Bianca must try to adjust to or put up with circumstances that she cannot really change. As Adamson writes: "That sums up explicitly what we have seen to be the chief emotional problem everyone in the play experiences."⁴

1. Adamson, p. 217.
2. Ibid, p. 222.
3. Ibid, p. 222.
4. Ibid, p. 244.

Adamson, Jane. *Othello as Tragedy: Some Problems of Judgment and Feeling*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1980.

Grace, William J. *Shakespeare's Othello*. New York: Monarch Press, 1964.

The Men in *Othello*

IAGO: “*Men should be what they seem.*”
—*Othello*, III, iii, l. 128.

“I am not what I am,” says Iago in Act I, scene 1 and it could be argued that his words apply to all the main male characters in the play. As Marvin Rosenberg writes in *The Masks of Othello*: “It is no longer surprising that Shakespeare sensed complexities of human motivation that psychologists are still trying to explain.”¹

Othello as a general in the Venetian army seems self-assured, dignified and a natural leader. His position is a symbol of his masculinity and self-sufficiency. His military background explains his swiftness of decision and brutality, as when he fires Cassio for his drunken behavior. But underneath this noble appearance lies “self-deception, [limits] of feeling and egotism.”²

Rosenberg lists other characteristics hidden beneath Othello’s façade. He is “insecure, overproud, oversensitive, hungry for admiration and compulsively concerned with his appearance.”³ Most of all, Othello is an outsider because of his race and his nature. He is “a splendidly talented professional employed by a sophisticated society to which he can never belong.”⁴ He is an isolated man in the midst of many.

Iago has been called the Vice figure from the morality plays and the Machiavellian schemer of the Renaissance era. When he says “I am not what I am,” he means his outward appearance bears no relation to the inner reality. He is called “honest” many times but this refers to his blunt speech as a soldier. He also refers to himself as Janus, the two faced Roman god who speaks with a double tongue. What we see in Iago is racial animosity toward Othello; he is bitter at being passed over for promotion and is envious of anyone more successful than he, especially Cassio.

In Rosenberg’s defense of Iago, he proposes that he is a thwarted human being, a clever and ambitious person who has been overlooked. He holds himself in control by exerting will and intelligence over emotion. He feels nothing but contempt for others, “but we learn at last that behind it is a searing contempt for his own self.”⁵ This self-loathing is disguised with fantasies of his powers in that he believes he is cleverer than anyone else. But what is the motive that drives this

venal man? Rosenberg and others believe it is his need “for vindictive triumph—he cannot tolerate anybody who knows or achieves more than he does.”⁶ On the other hand, Bryan Reynolds and Joseph Fitzpatrick write that Iago’s revenge is “against an unjust and hierarchical institute of the state.”⁷ Venice appointed Othello in the first place who then promoted Cassio. Under his lone wolf persona, Iago seethes with emotions of resentment and hostility; to the very end he tries to deceive the outer world about his inner life.

The question of why Othello succumbs to Iago’s lies is often asked. Reynolds and Fitzpatrick contend that “Othello’s character—self-important, self-deceiving and sentimental—is inherently prone to the jealousy that Iago suggests.”⁸ Harold Bloom, author of *Shakespeare: Invention of the Human* writes: “Othello is a great soul helplessly outclassed in intellect and drive by Iago.”⁹ Bloom believes Iago’s passion for destruction is the only creative passion in the play.

Two other male characters in the play become pawns of Iago. Roderigo, who opens the play, has been duped by Iago into giving him money and jewels so he can court Desdemona. Supposedly the symbol of courtly love, he holds decadent thoughts about her and is roundly despised by Brabantio, her father. Roderigo believes the only way to find success in life is to follow people of higher rank than himself.

Cassio is the handsome young man promoted to lieutenant by Othello, although he is a scholar and an untried soldier. He is from Florence, a city much admired by Elizabethans as a center of courtship and culture. But Cassio has his flaws; in a drunken confrontation with Montano and Roderigo, he is demoted by Othello for his behavior. In that skirmish he is more concerned with his reputation than danger to the city. Consequently, Cassio relies on Desdemona to win back Othello’s favor for him. Living in the present, he never considers the consequences or the future. Surviving the tragedy of Othello, not because of strategy or thought, he becomes the new commander of the Venetian army.

1. Rosenberg, p. 176.
2. Hall, p. 86.
3. Rosenberg, p. 185.
4. Ibid, p. 197.
5. Ibid, p. 174.
6. Ibid, p. 175.
7. Reynolds and Fitzpatrick, p. 212.
8. Ibid, p. 211.
9. Bloom, p. 434.

Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1998.

Hall, Joan Lord. *Othello: a Guide to the Play*. London: Greenwood Press, 1999.

Kolin, Philip C., ed. *Othello: New Critical Essays*. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Reynolds, Bryan and Fitzpatrick, Joseph. “Venetian Ideology or Transversal Power? Iago’s Motives and the Means by which Othello Falls.”

Rosenberg, Marvin. *The Masks of Othello*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1961.

<http://www.123HelpMe.com/view.asp?id=6292>
“Character of Cassio in Shakespeare’s *Othello*.”

Great Othellos

Throughout history productions of *Othello* have changed to reflect not only actors’ and directors’ insights into the play, but also the prevailing social thought of the time.

Othello, when originally performed at the Globe Theatre, followed the great introspective tragedy of *Hamlet*. Richard Burbage, Shakespeare’s leading tragedian, played the title role. Continuing the trend he had begun with his interpretation of Hamlet, Burbage made his Othello more personal, his acting filled with deep emotion. The play obviously appealed to audiences and actors alike since it continued to be performed after Burbage’s death until the Puritans closed the playhouses in 1642.

By the end of the 18th and early 19th centuries, *Othello* became a battle flag for the Romantic Movement, the period after the French Revolution when emotion and freedom reigned. The role of Othello allowed the actors to suffer the intensity of a full range of emotions before their audiences. Edmund Kean, who played the role in the early 1800s, is considered to have given the greatest English interpretation of his century. Like Burbage before him, Kean showed an inwardness, a preoccupation in Othello. He broke with earlier tradition by using brown, not black, make-up to become the Moor. He displayed incredible concentration and intensity on stage, making it all the more dramatic when his emotions burst out in rage.

Ira Aldridge (1821-1867), the American grandson of a Senegalese chieftain, was prevented from acting in the United States. That did not stop him from traveling to Europe and playing Othello, among many other roles in the greatest theatres on the Continent. By the time he toured Europe, audiences once again embraced his full range of emotions in the play. For all his acclaim across Europe and Russia, Aldridge was never permitted to perform the role in the United States and died while on tour in Poland.

Across the Atlantic a very different Othello was being performed. In America, a rougher, more violent portrayal was given by Edwin Booth (the actor brother of John Wilkes Booth). Traditionally, Desdemona’s death scene had been played in the center of the stage with Othello’s back to the audience, masking much of the brutality of the scene. In Booth’s production, the bed was moved downstage to the front and side. The audience could focus on Othello’s face and see Desdemona’s struggle.

The African American actor, Paul Robeson, brought another dimension to the title role of Othello in the early 20th century. Though a respected actor and singer, Robeson was forbidden as a black man to appear on stage in the United States. So like Aldridge a century before, Robeson went to England in 1930 London; he played Othello opposite Peggy Ashcroft as Desdemona to great critical acclaim.

Not until 1942, after an extensive public relations campaign and a hard search for an actress who would agree to play opposite him, was Robeson able to perform the title role in this country. Even then the production only toured theatres above the Mason-Dixon line since Robeson refused to play in segregated houses. He brought a quiet, subdued Othello to the stage. As of spring 2010, his 1943-45 run in *Othello* on Broadway, with Uta Hagen as Desdemona and José Ferrer as Iago, still holds the record for the longest running Shakespeare play on The Great White Way.

The 20th century has seen some of its greatest actors in the role of Othello. Sir Laurence Olivier portrayed him as a man who was the instrument of his own downfall. Orson Welles nearly bankrupted himself producing a film version of the play. The play last appeared on Broadway in 1982 with James Earl Jones commanding the stage with his characteristic dignity and nobility to Christopher Plummer's Iago and Diane Wiest's Desdemona.

In 1997 the Shakespeare Theatre in Washington, D.C. produced what its Othello, Patrick Stewart, called a "photo negative" production in which the Moor was white and his Venice black. The production's director, Jude Kelly, said about this non-traditional choice: "I don't think we're trying to make any more major a point than Shakespeare himself was trying to make; we're just making it differently. What's fascinating for me is that you have 22 African American actors onstage who know what racism is about, and one white British actor who may know the effects of racism but has never experienced it the way they have. So the images of racial hostility flip back and forth."¹

1. Chicago Shakespeare Theatre.

[http://www.chicagoshakes.com/main.taf?p=2, 17, 9, 1, 5](http://www.chicagoshakes.com/main.taf?p=2,17,9,1,5)

Contemporary Applications of *Othello*

Time shall unfold what plaited cunning lies.

—William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, I, i.

In June 1994, the arrest of O.J. Simpson for the murders of his former wife, Nicole Brown Simpson and her friend Ronald Goldman, invited comparisons with the tragedy of *Othello*. Both Othello and Simpson claimed fame, one as an army general and the other as a football hero and entertainment figure. Both defied social conventions by choosing to marry white women. O.J.'s farewell (suicide) letter proclaimed if he and his wife Nicole had a problem, it was "because I loved her too much" which prompted comparisons with Othello's final speech about "loving not wisely but too well."¹

Another Othello moment occurred in 2003 when Secretary of State Colin Powell went to the Security Council of the United Nations to explain the United States' action against Iraq. At the time it was the highest rank ever held by an African American in the United States government. Powell had misgivings about the administration's plans to invade Iraq, but his speech presented evidence purporting to prove Iraq had concealed weapons of mass destruction. His testimony was instrumental in persuading many members of the United States Congress to vote for the war. Some of the evidence was later discredited, and like Othello, Powell had been influenced by insinuations and propaganda from questionable sources. He was subjected to harsh criticism and resigned as Secretary of State in 2004, shortly after President Bush's re-election.

In her book *Shakespeare and Modern Culture*, Marjorie Garber writes, "we are now in an Iago moment."² She cites the Monica Lewinsky-Bill Clinton scandal of 1998 that featured Linda Tripp. Tripp became Lewinsky's confidante, and when she learned of her relationship with Clinton, she consulted a literary agent and began secretly taping their phone conversations. These tapes she gave to the independent prosecutor, Ken Starr, who was investigating the affair. Almost immediately in the press Linda Tripp was castigated for her role; Maureen Dowd of the *New York Times* called her "the Iago of Pentagon City."³

Garber also explains the IAGO project, an acronym for Integrated Asymmetric Goal Organization. This project is a model created as part of a war-gaming scenario at the United States Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California.⁴ The premise of the operation is to try to get inside the thought processes of people who are very different from us, such as terrorists. Iago's destructiveness wasn't driven by religion or ideology; it went much deeper than that. John Hiles, lead designer of the IAGO project picked out the name because "the research focuses on a terrible question that won't easily be answered."⁵

More Iago moments are illustrated in an editorial in *The New York Times* of October 10, 2009. Lee Siegel titles her work "How Iago Explains the World." Siegel writes: "(He) is the ideal forerunner of so many contemporary dissemblers—the deceitful politician, clergyman, athlete or entertainer; the

conniving money manager, the prevaricating realtor, the online sexual predator... Through his machinations, Iago demonstrates that directness and honesty are, indeed, not safe—and in fact never are—because the overtly transparent victim sometimes invites the predator’s manipulations and so becomes complicit with him.”⁶

1. Garber, p. 158.
2. Garber, p. 158.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid, p. 160.
5. Ibid.
6. Siegel, p. 7.

Garber, Marjorie. *Shakespeare and Modern Culture*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2008.

Nostbaken, Faith. *Understanding Othello*. London: Greenwood Press, 2000.

Siegel, Lee. “How Iago Explains the World.” *The New York Times*. Oct. 10, 2009.

Questions

Pre-Show Questions

- 1) Do stereotypes change over time? Are the stereotypes in Shakespeare’s time different than the ones today? How would the story be different if Othello was not labeled as a “Moor?”
- 2) What does it mean to be jealous of someone? What does jealousy cause us to do?
- 3) Explain if you believe if it is possible to be evil without cause? Do we need to have a reason to be evil?
- 4) How do we show our loyalty to different people in our lives? What do we expect from the people to whom we are loyal? Are there different degrees of loyalty such as to family or to a friend?

Post Show Questions

- 1) How is Othello described by other characters in the beginning of the play? Why does Brabantio’s, Desdemona’s father’s, attitude toward Othello change? What is the tipping point in their relationship?
- 2) What do you think is the main reason for Iago’s treachery? What does Iago hope to gain by disgracing Cassio and Othello?
- 3) Why does Iago agree to help Roderigo? What does Roderigo hope to accomplish by allowing Iago to help him?

- 4) Why does the handkerchief become a focal point in the story? How does each character react to the handkerchief?
- 5) How would you describe the marriage between Desdemona and Othello? Does your perception change through the course of the play?
- 6) Why does Desdemona dismiss Othello's accusations of infidelity?
- 7) How would you describe the relationship between Desdemona and Cassio? What from their history shapes their relationship and how is the relationship perceived by other people?
- 8) Why is Othello a tragic figure? What happens that leads to his demise?
- 9) How are women portrayed in this play? Do the other characters treat them with respect or scorn?
- 10) Do you believe Emilia is a weak or strong character? What role does she play in Desdemona's death?
- 11) If the play was named *Iago*, what in the play would be different?

Activities

Cassio's Story

Michael Cassio is Othello's Lieutenant. He is also one of the characters that survives. If Othello asked him to tell his story what would it be? Write the story that Cassio would tell the people back in Venice. Remember he does not know the whole story, he would have to try and understand what happened with the information that his character knows. Concentrate on the scenes in which he is involved. How does the actual story change as Cassio relates it? Extension: For an added twist, write the story in iambic pentameter.

Colorado Model Content Standards

Reading and Writing 4 Students apply thinking skills to their reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing.

Reading and Writing 6 Students read and recognize literature as a record of human experience.

Closing Arguments

Iago debates his actions for the entire length of the play. In class, put Iago on the witness stand. One group is to act as the prosecuting attorney that claims Iago is insane and the other group is to act as the defense attorney that claims Iago is sane.

Colorado Model Content Standards

Reading and Writing 4 Students apply thinking skills to their reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing.

Identity Map

This activity looks at the internal and external characteristics of a certain character. Start with a circle in the middle of a piece of paper. As there will be writing inside and outside the circle, be careful to leave space. At the top of the page, either place a generic title such as “Hero,” “Villain,” etc. or the name of a character from the play. If this activity is played before seeing the production, start with generic titles.

Inside the circle, write descriptive words, phrases, or draw pictures that describe the characters’ perceptions of themselves. These descriptions are traits that we know and are the essential characteristics and also those that cannot be changed. For example, Othello is male, strong and a soldier.

Outside the circle, write descriptive words to describe how the characters are perceived by the other characters. These would be immediate qualities that are obvious or those traits that characterize the character.

After seeing the production or reading the text, create another circle for a specific character. For example, if the character is Iago, in the circle, write quotes that Iago uses to describe himself. On the outside of the circle, write quotes that the other characters use to describe him.

Colorado Model Content Standards

Reading and Writing 1: Students read and understand a variety of materials.

Reading and Writing 4: Students apply thinking skills to their reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing.

The Outsider

Draw a set of concentric circles on a piece of paper. The circles represent the society in which *Othello* is set. Place the main characters from the play in position within the concentric circles to show the relationship of each to the mainstream society in the center.

Compare your diagram with others in your class. Do you see any differences? Discuss your reasoning and try to reach a consensus on where each character should be plotted. Who is an “insider”? Who is an “outsider”? What are the relationships between the characters in the center and at the edges? Try making a similar chart placing characters based on how sympathetic they are and compare. What do you see?

Where did you position *Othello*? Why do you think Shakespeare placed these characters from the outer circle of society at the center of action in his plays? What is the role of the “outsider” in *Othello*?

Now think beyond Shakespeare: what can an “outsider” character see that other characters cannot? What can he or she show or teach us?

Look back on your own experience and recall a time when you were the “outsider.” Draw a concentric circle diagram, plotting where you and others stood during the time you recall. Write a short personal essay telling about that time.

Colorado Model Content Standards

Reading and Writing 4 Students apply thinking skills to their reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing.

Reading and Writing 6 Students read and recognize literature as a record of human experience.

Source: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/othello/>

Biographies

Invent a biography for Desdemona.

What do you think her life was like before she married Othello?

Do you think her father, Brabantio, was unhappy with her marriage because he was looking for a more advantageous match for her that might add to the prestige of the family or do you think he thought that Othello was too old, too war-hardened or from a country and culture that was too different?

Do you think Brabantio was interested in Desdemona's happiness?

Do you think that Desdemona really loved Othello?

Or was she a starry-eyed teen? Why do you think she married Othello? Do you think she felt loved or threatened?

Do you think that she just wanted an adventure? Do you think that she was truly attracted to Othello? Does Desdemona have any power?

Invent a biography for Othello. Where is he from?

How old do you think he is and how old is Desdemona.

Why does he seem so confident in Venice and not in Cyprus?

Is it because in Venice there is peace and in Cyprus they anticipate war? Why do you think that he trusted Iago so much? Why did he treat Desdemona so badly in Cyprus?

Was he blinded by jealousy?

Invent a biography for Iago. How long has he been with Othello?

How old is he? Did he like and respect Othello before Michael Cassio was promoted?

Do you think that he should have been promoted in Cassio's place? Do you think that he was always as evil as he shows himself to be in the play? How does he treat his own wife? Is he smart or just sly? Do you think he had cause to go to such lengths to bring Othello down? Was it worth it? Why is he silent at the end? Do you think that he feels any remorse for anything that he did? Do you think that he should?

Colorado Model Content Standards

Reading and Writing 4 Students apply thinking skills to their reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing.

Reading and Writing 5 Students read to locate, select, and make use of relevant information.

Character Shield

After the play, pick a character and create a character shield or coat of arms. Each shield should be divided into four sections and a picture drawn for each of the following:

- a. The character's desire
- b. The character's worst fear
- c. The character's essential nature in symbolic form, preferably as an animal
- d. A quote from the play that represents the character

Colorado Model Content Standards

Visual Art 4 Students relate the visual arts to various historical and cultural traditions.

Visual Art 5 Students analyze and evaluate the characteristics, merits, and meaning of works of art.