

# Othello

chicago  
shakespeare theater  
on navy pier



Teacher Handbook

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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**Barbara Gaines**  
Artistic Director

**Criss Henderson**  
Executive Director

Chicago Shakespeare Theater is Chicago’s professional theater dedicated to the works of William Shakespeare. Founded as Shakespeare Repertory in 1986, the company moved to its seven-story home on Navy Pier in 1999. In its Elizabethan-style courtyard theater, 500 seats on three levels wrap around a deep thrust stage—with only nine rows separating the farthest seat from the stage. Chicago Shakespeare also features a flexible 180-seat black box studio theater, a Teacher Resource Center, and a Shakespeare specialty bookstall.

Now in its twenty-ninth season, the Theater has produced nearly the entire Shakespeare canon: *All’s Well That Ends Well*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *As You Like It*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *Cymbeline*, *Hamlet*, *Henry IV Parts 1 and 2*, *Henry V*, *Henry VI Parts 1, 2 and 3*, *Henry VIII*, *Julius Caesar*, *King John*, *King Lear*, *Love’s Labor’s Lost*, *Macbeth*, *Measure for Measure*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Othello*, *Pericles*, *Richard II*, *Richard III*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Tempest*, *Timon of Athens*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *Twelfth Night*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, and *The Winter’s Tale*. Chicago Shakespeare Theater was the 2008 recipient of the Regional Theatre Tony Award. Chicago’s Jeff Awards year after year have honored the Theater, including repeated awards for Best Production and Best Director, the two highest honors in Chicago theater.

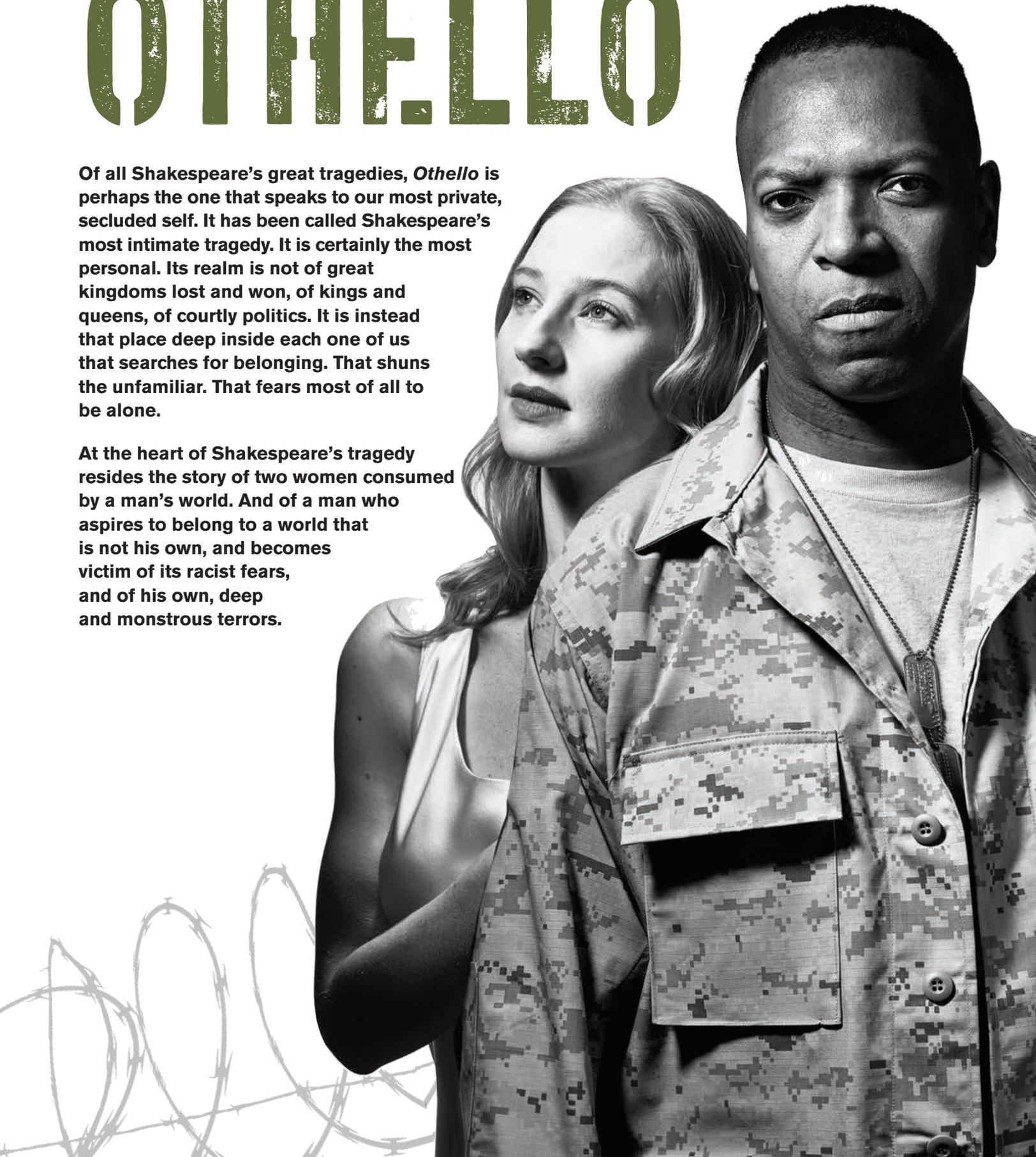
Since Chicago Shakespeare’s founding, its programming for young audiences has been an essential element in the realization of its mission. Team Shakespeare supports education in our schools, where Shakespeare is part of every required curriculum. As a theater within a multicultural city, we are committed to bringing Shakespeare to a young and diverse audience, approximately 40,000 students each year. Team Shakespeare’s programming includes free teacher workshops, student matinees of main stage shows, post-performance discussions, comprehensive teacher handbooks, and an abridged, original production each year of one of the “curriculum plays.” Team Shakespeare offers a region-wide forum for new vision and enthusiasm for teaching Shakespeare in our schools. In 2014, CST’s education department received the nation’s highest honor for after-school arts programming when it was honored in a White House ceremony by First Lady Michelle Obama with the National Arts and Humanities Youth Programs Award. In 2012, the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, DC, honored the program with the prestigious Shakespeare Steward Award. The 2015-16 Season offers a student matinee series for two of Chicago Shakespeare Theater’s full-length productions: in the fall semester, Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, and in the spring, Shakespeare’s *Othello*. Also this spring, a 75-minute abridged version of *Twelfth Night* will be performed at the Theater on Navy Pier and will tour to schools and theaters across the region. We hope that you and your students will enjoy our work—and Shakespeare’s creative genius brought to life on stage.

**Marilyn J. Halperin** Director of Education  
**Molly Truglia** Learning Programs Manager  
**Jason Harrington** Education Outreach Manager  
**Roxanna Conner** Education Associate

# OTHELLO

Of all Shakespeare's great tragedies, *Othello* is perhaps the one that speaks to our most private, secluded self. It has been called Shakespeare's most intimate tragedy. It is certainly the most personal. Its realm is not of great kingdoms lost and won, of kings and queens, of courtly politics. It is instead that place deep inside each one of us that searches for belonging. That shuns the unfamiliar. That fears most of all to be alone.

At the heart of Shakespeare's tragedy resides the story of two women consumed by a man's world. And of a man who aspires to belong to a world that is not his own, and becomes victim of its racist fears, and of his own, deep and monstrous terrors.



# INTRODUCTION



## Art That Lives

**D**rama is a living art. It is written to be performed live before a group of people who form an audience and experience it together, just as you will here at the

Chicago Shakespeare Theater. This tradition of performance and observance, of drama as *communication*, is an historically rich and complex one that reaches far back in time. Textual evidence from Egypt and Mesopotamia—including cave paintings depicting men disguised as animals—reveals that since ancient times, impersonation and imitation have been used not only ritualistically but also as a means of expression and communication, a way to impart the knowledge of the community.

The beginnings of Western drama further developed in the religious ritual and festivals of the ancient Greeks, while their theater also took on new emphasis as a sophisticated mode of storytelling, especially as a way of communicating the history of a culture and imagining new heroic tales. The drama of Europe's Middle Ages was closely tied to forms of religious observance, but the medievals also used theater to teach biblical stories, present the lives of saints, and creatively communicate the moral ideals of the community. It is this long and varied tradition of community engagement and communication through drama that Shakespeare and the Renaissance playwrights inherited—and from which they would both borrow and imagine new possibilities.

Drama not only depicts human communication, it *is* human communication. But in the theater, unlike television or film, a two-way communication occurs between the actors and their audience. When you experience theatrical storytelling, you are not simply on the receiving end of this communicative process: the audience, as a community, is also a participant. We are quite used to thinking about the actors' roles in a play, but may find it strange to imagine ourselves, the audience, playing an important role in this living art. Because theater is art that lives, each performance is guaranteed to be different, depending in part upon an audience's response.

A live performance depends upon its audience. In the theater, the audience hears and sees the actors, just as the actors hear and see the audience. When the actors experience a responsive, interested audience, their work is at its best—full of animation and energy. When the actors sense disinterest, they too are distracted, and the play they create is less interesting. One actor described the experience of live performance as a

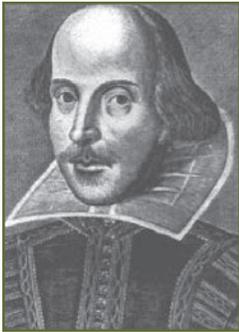
How can you help us give you the best performance we can?

- ◆ **Please, no talking during the performance.** It distracts the actors as well as the people sitting nearby.
- ◆ **Respond naturally to our play.** Emotions are part of drama. We hope that you'll laugh, cry and even gasp—but as a natural response to the story, and not in order to distract attention from the stage.
- ◆ **Please leave all “noisemakers”—**food, gum, cell phones, iPods, etc.—**back at school or on the bus.** In a quiet theater, wrappers, munching—and even a phone's vibration—are heard by all, the actors included.
- ◆ **No photographs of any kind, please.** Flashbulbs can make the actors lose their focus and can be dangerous. Digital cameras, along with all other kinds of recording devices, are prohibited, as is text-messaging.

story told by the actors and audience together. In this sense, you are also a storyteller when you experience live theater. We hope you'll enjoy your role—and will help us to give you a dramatic experience that you'll always remember. ◆

***[Theatrical performance] is essentially a sociable, communal affair. This is important. To resist this is, I think, to ruin one of the very important parts of the theatrical experience. Let the play and let the fact that temporarily you are not your private self, but a member of a closely fused group, make it easy for the performance to 'take you out of yourself'! This, I suggest, is the object of going to a play...to be taken out of yourself, out of your ordinary life, away from the ordinary world of everyday.***

—TYRONE GUTHRIE, 1962



## Bard's Bio

The exact date of William Shakespeare's birth is not known, but his baptism (traditionally held three days after a child's birth) was recorded on April 26, 1564. His father, John Shakespeare, was a tanner, glover, grain dealer, and prominent town official of the thriving market town of Stratford-upon-Avon. His mother, Mary Arden, was the daughter of a prosperous, educated farmer. Though the records are lost, Shakespeare undoubtedly attended Stratford's grammar school, where he would have studied Latin and the classical writers, rhetoric and analysis of texts, a smattering of arithmetic, as well as in the articles of the Christian faith. There is no record that Shakespeare acquired a university education of any kind.

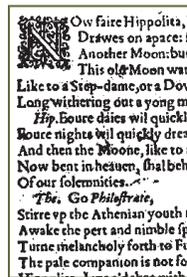
At the age of eighteen, Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, eight years his senior. They had one daughter, Susanna, followed by twins, Hamnet and Judith. Hamnet, Shakespeare's only son, died at age eleven. From 1585, the year in which the twins were baptized, until 1592, when he is first referred to as a dramatist in London, we know nothing of Shakespeare's life. Consequently, these seven so-called "lost years" are filled with legend and conjecture. We may never know what brought Shakespeare to London or how he entered its world of the theater. The first reference to Shakespeare as an actor and playwright appears in 1592 and was made by Robert Greene, a rival playwright and pamphleteer, who attacked Shakespeare as an "upstart crow" for presuming to write plays (when he was only a mere actor) and for copying the material of established dramatists.

By the early 1590s Shakespeare had emerged as a rising playwright in London, where he continued to enjoy fame and financial success as an actor, playwright, and part-owner of one of London's leading theater companies for nearly twenty years. Subsequent references to Shakespeare indicate that as early as 1594 he was not only an actor and a playwright, but also a partner in a new theatrical company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, which soon became one of London's two principal companies. The company's name changed to the King's Men in 1603 with the accession of James I, and it endured until the Commonwealth closed the theaters in 1642.

During his career, Shakespeare wrote or collaborated on what most scholars now agree upon as thirty-eight plays. His earliest plays—including *Love's Labor's Lost*, *The Comedy of*

*Errors*, *Richard III*, *King John*, and *The Taming of the Shrew*—were written between 1589 and 1594. Between 1594 and 1599, Shakespeare wrote both *Romeo and Juliet* and *Julius Caesar* as well as other plays, including *Richard II*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Twelfth Night*. His great tragedies—*Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*—were composed between 1599 and 1607, and were preceded by his last play traditionally categorized as comedy, *Measure for Measure*. The earlier histories, comedies, and tragedies made way for Shakespeare's final dramatic form—the plays commonly termed "romances" or "tragicomedies" for their blending of the comic and tragic forms. Written between 1606 and 1611, the romances include *Cymbeline*, *Pericles*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*. These were the plays of a playwright no longer bound by the constraints of his earlier forms.

Although some quarto versions of the plays were printed in Shakespeare's lifetime, there is no definitive extant evidence to suggest that he directly oversaw their publication. It was not until 1623, seven years after his death, that his complete plays were published in the First Folio. However, we do know that Shakespeare did oversee the publication of three narrative poems and a collection of 154 sonnets during his lifetime. Shakespeare retired in 1611 to live as a country gentleman in Stratford, his birthplace, until his death on April 23, 1616—400 years ago this year.



## The First Folio

Throughout much of the Renaissance, plays did not occupy the same high cultural status that we attribute to them today. In fact, theatrical texts were not viewed as "literature" at all. When a play was published (if it was published at all) it was printed inexpensively in a small book, called a "quarto," the sixteenth-century equivalent of our paperbacks. It was not until 1616, the year of Shakespeare's death, when a contemporary English poet and dramatist, Ben Jonson, published his own plays in a large-format book called a "folio"—the format traditionally reserved for the authoritative texts of religious and classical works—with the intention of challenging this pervasive understanding of theatrical texts as holding low literary value, that plays began to be understood as literature worthy of publication. Jonson was still chided as bold and arrogant for his venture for many years.

continued ⇨

# INTRODUCTION

During Shakespeare's lifetime, only half of his plays were ever published, and those were printed as quartos. He did, however, oversee the publication of three narrative poems and a collection of 154 sonnets. It was not until seven years after the playwright's death that two of his close colleagues decided to gather his plays for publication in a move of three-fold significance: as a gesture of homage to a long-time friend and colleague; as a promotion of the King's Men as a theater company of the highest cultural prestige; and as a financial venture with lucrative potential.

In 1623, what is now known as the First Folio, a book containing thirty-six of Shakespeare's estimated thirty-eight plays, was published. Modern textual scholars maintain that the First Folio was likely compiled from a combination of stage prompt books and other theatrical documents, the playwright's handwritten manuscripts (no longer extant), and various versions of some of the plays already published. Shakespeare's First Folio took five compositors two and one-half years to print. The compositors manually set each individual letter of type, memorizing the text line by line to increase efficiency, as they moved down the page. There was no editor overseeing the printing, and the compositors frequently altered punctuation and spelling. Errors caught in printing would be corrected, but due to the high cost of paper, earlier copies remained intact. Of the 1,200 copies of the First Folio that were printed, approximately 230 survive today, and each is slightly different. Chicago's Newberry Library contains an original First Folio in its rich collections.

Chicago Shakespeare Theater traditionally utilizes the First Folio as the basis for its play scripts. The First Folio still serves as a manual for many Shakespearean actors nearly 400 years after its publication because the plays as printed in the First Folio took theatrical documents as their basis for printing. Its punctuation, capitalizations, variant spellings, line breaks, and rhetorical structures all give clues to actors and directors about what words to emphasize and about what ideas are important—helping them to break open and examine the language. In Shakespeare's own theater company, with only a few days to rehearse each new play, these built-in clues were essential and provided information for members of the entire company. Today, these textual clues still help modern actors make the language easier to break apart—even though they're speaking language that's 400 years "younger" than ours. ♦

***This is the book that gave us Shakespeare (or most of Shakespeare) [...] But the way it presented Shakespeare was carefully calculated to make a collection of theatre works look plausible as what we would now call works of literature. The book not only gives us the texts; it gives us Shakespeare as a cultural icon.***

—JOHN JOWETT, 2007



## Shakespeare's England

**E**lizabeth I—daughter of Henry VIII and his second wife Anne Boleyn—ruled England for forty-five years from 1558 to 1603 in a time of relative prosperity and peace. “Few

monarchs,” says Shakespearean scholar David Bevington, “have ever influenced an age so pervasively and left their stamp on it so permanently.” He maintains that “[h]er combination of imperious will and femininity and her brilliant handling of her many contending male admirers have become legendary,” and resulted in a monarchy that remained secure in the face of religious and political threats from many sides. In choosing not to marry, Elizabeth avoided allying herself and her throne with a foreign country or an English faction which may have threatened her broad base of power and influence.

Throughout early modern Europe—the period that spans the timeframe from after the late portion of the Middle Ages (c. 1500) through the beginning of the Age of Revolutions (c. 1800)—governments were centralized, assuming the power that once belonged to city-states and feudal lords, but the rule of monarchs like Queen Elizabeth I was still absolute, just as it had been understood in earlier historical periods. The monarch was seen as God's deputy on earth, and the divine right of kings—the theory that the monarch derives from God (as opposed to the people or some other source) his/her power to rule and authority—was a cherished doctrine. It was this doctrine that condemned rebellion as an act of disobedience against both the state and God.

The politics of religion constantly threatened Elizabeth's reign, even though it was one of the most secure that England had known for hundreds of years. As the daughter of Henry VIII's marriage following his divorce from Catherine of Aragon, Elizabeth was regarded by many Catholics as an illegitimate child—and thus an illegitimate monarch. Upon her ascension to the throne, Elizabeth I inherited the rule of a country that, in the wake of the Protestant Reformation, was engaged in the process of attempting to make sense of its own history. Religious power changed hands during the early modern period with astonishing rapidity.

Stephen Greenblatt reminds us that within the possibility of living memory, England had been transformed: from a highly conservative Roman Catholicism (in the 1520s Henry VIII had fiercely attacked Luther and had been rewarded by the pope with the title “Defender of the Faith”): first, to Catholicism under the supreme head of the king; then to a wary, tentative

Protestantism; to a more radical Protestantism; to a renewed and militant Roman Catholicism; and then, with Elizabeth and James, to Protestantism once again.<sup>1</sup> The English were living in a world where few people had clear memories of a time without religious confusion. Since, under Elizabeth, England had returned to Protestantism, the Church of England's government was held under the direct authority of the crown (and England's conforming Protestant clergy) during this period.

In addition, Elizabethan England was a smaller, more isolated country than it had been previously or would be subsequently. It had withdrawn from its extensive empire on the Continent, and its explorations of the New World had barely begun. There was a period of internal economic development as Elizabeth ignored the counsel of her advisors and kept out of war until the attempted invasion by Spain and the Great Armada in 1588. England's economy was still based in agriculture, and its farmers were poor and embittered by strife with rich landowners who "enclosed" what was once the farmers' cropland for pastures. Uprisings and food riots were commonplace in the rural area surrounding Stratford-upon-Avon, where Shakespeare grew up. London, then the largest city of Europe, was a city of contrasts: the richest and the poorest of England lived there, side by side. While many bettered themselves in a developing urban economy, unemployment was a serious problem. As England eventually began what would be a long transition from an economy based mostly in agriculture to one of increased reliance upon trade and the manufacture of goods, both cities and social structures would rapidly evolve—it was a time of change and social mobility. For the first time in English history, a rising middle class aspired to the wealth and status of the aristocracy.

As Elizabeth had no heir, the politics of succession posed a real threat to the nation's peace throughout her reign, and Elizabeth I finally died childless in 1603. The crown passed to her cousin James VI, King of Scotland, who became England's King James I. Ruling from 1603 to 1625 (Shakespeare died in 1616), James I was famously responsible for overseeing a new translation of the English bible—the 1611 King James Version—which, with its powerful syntax, remains a legacy of this fertile time, just as Shakespeare's canon has. Yet the reign of James I was troubled with political and religious controversy, and James's son, Charles I, who was beheaded in the English civil wars of the 1640s for tyrannically abusing what he believed was his divinely ordained power. ♦

<sup>1</sup>Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*, (New York: Norton, 2004): 93-94.



## The English Renaissance Theater

A time of historical transition, of incredible social upheaval and change, the English Renaissance

provided fertile ground for creative innovation. The early modern period stands as the bridge between England's very recent medieval past and its near future in the centuries commonly referred to as the Age of Exploration, or the Enlightenment. When the English Renaissance is considered within its wider historical context, it is perhaps not surprising that the early modern period produced so many important dramatists and literary luminaries, with William Shakespeare as a significant example.

Because of its unique placement at a crossroad in history, the English Renaissance served as the setting for a number of momentous historical events: the radical re-conception of the English state, the beginnings of a new economy of industry, an explosion of exploration and colonialism, and the break with traditional religion as the Church of England separated from the Catholic Church. It is perhaps this last example of cultural upheaval—the changes brought from Continental Europe by the Protestant Reformation—that provides us with a useful lens to examine the culture of theater in England during this period, in particular.

While we can see that Shakespeare lived through a transitional time, and we can understand that rapid change often fosters innovation, we may still be led to ask what could have influenced Shakespeare's dramatic sensibilities. What kind of theater did he encounter as a child or young man that may have made an impression upon him? It is commonly acknowledged by scholars today that Shakespeare may have developed his love for the theater by watching acting troupes that were still traveling from town to town during the middle decades of the sixteenth century—the early modern successors to a long heritage of English theater carried over from the Middle Ages. These traveling performers often enacted important stories from the Bible, staged tales of mystery and miracles, or presented their audiences with the stories of the lives of saints and heroes of the faith.

These traveling companies would move around the countryside in flatbed, horse-drawn carts, which did triple duty as transportation, stage, and storage for props and costumes. They would pull into a town square, into an inn yard or the courtyard of

# INTRODUCTION

a country estate or college, and transform that space into a theater. People gathered around to watch, some standing on the ground in front of the players' stage, some leaning over the rails from balconies above to view the action on the impromptu stage below.

But during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries as the Protestant Reformation gained a surer footing in England, the English theater was caught between conflicting ideas about the value and purpose of drama. Many officials of the Protestant Reformation desired to squash these traveling performances for their strong Catholic sensibilities; and even as late as 1606 James I passed legislation to remove all treatment of religious matters from the English playhouses.

But as the stories enacted in the newly constructed public theaters became more secular, public officials scorned the theater as immoral and frivolous. The theaters just outside London's walls came to be feared as places where moral and social corruption spread. The authorities frequently shut them down during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries when the city was menaced by the plague and, frequently too, by political rioting. When the theaters were open, the Master of the Revels had to read and approve every word of a new play before it could be staged. But the practical enforcement of such measures was often sketchy at best, and playing companies themselves found plenty of ways around the strictures of the theatrical censors.

A man who would later become an associate of Shakespeare's, James Burbage, built the first commercial theater in England in 1576, in the decade prior to Shakespeare's own arrival on the London theater scene. Burbage skirted rigid restrictions governing entertainment in London by placing his theater just outside the city walls, in a community with the unglamorous name of "Shoreditch." Burbage was not the only one to dodge the severe rules of the Common Council of London by setting up shop in Shoreditch. His neighbors were other businesses of marginal repute, including London's brothels and bear-baiting arenas. Actors in Shakespeare's day were legally given the status of "vagabonds." They were considered little better than common criminals unless they could secure the patronage of a nobleman or, better still, the monarch.

Shakespeare and his fellow actors managed to secure both. They provided popular entertainment at Queen Elizabeth I's court as the Lord Chamberlain's Men, and they continued to enjoy court patronage after King James I came to the throne in 1603, when they became the King's Men. Their success at court gave Shakespeare and his fellow shareholders in the Lord Chamberlain's company the funds to build the new Globe playhouse in 1599. The Globe then joined a handful of other

theaters located just out of the city's jurisdiction as one of the first public theaters in England.

All kinds of people came to plays at the Globe, and they came in great numbers—a full house in the Globe could seat as many as 3,000 people. The audience typically arrived well before the play began to meet friends, drink ale, and snack on the refreshments sold at the plays. An outing to the theater was a highly social and communal event and might take half the day. It was more like tailgating at a football game, or going with friends to a rock concert, than our experience of attending theater today.

Affluent patrons paid two to three pence or more for gallery seats (like the two levels of balcony seating at Chicago Shakespeare Theater), while the "common folk"—shopkeepers, artisans, and apprentices—stood for a penny, about a day's wages for a skilled worker. The audience of the English Renaissance playhouse was a diverse and demanding group, and so it is often noted that Shakespeare depicted characters and situations that appealed to every cross-section of early modern English society. Audience appeal was a driving force for the theater as a business venture, and so during this period most new plays had short runs and were seldom revived. The acting companies were always in rehearsal for new shows and, because of the number of ongoing and upcoming productions, most plays were rehearsed for just a few days.

There was, of course, no electricity for lighting, so all plays were performed in daylight. Sets and props were bare and basic. A throne, table or bed had to be brought on stage during the action since English Renaissance plays were written to be performed without scene breaks or intermissions. For example, when stage directions in *Macbeth* indicate that "a banquet is prepared," the stage keepers likely prepared the banquet in full view of the audience. From what scholars can best reconstruct about performance conventions, Shakespeare's plays were performed primarily in "contemporary dress"—that is, the clothes of Shakespeare's time—regardless of the play's historical setting. Company members with tailoring skills sewed many of the company's stock costumes, and hand-me-downs from the English aristocracy often provided the elegant costumes for the play's nobility. Because women were not permitted to act on the English stage until 1660, female roles were performed by boys or young men, their male physique disguised with elaborate dresses and wigs. The young actors were readily accepted as "women" by the audience.

After an extremely productive creative period spanning about 100 years—often called the "Golden Age" of the English theater—the Puritans, now in power of the government, succeeded in 1642 in closing the theaters altogether. The public theaters did not reopen until the English monarchy was restored and

Charles II came to the throne in 1660. A number of theaters, including the Globe, were not open very long before the Great Fire of London destroyed them in 1666. The fire, combined with the eighteen years of Commonwealth rule—the so-called Interregnum (“between kings”)—led to the loss of many of the primary sources that would have provided us with further evidence of the staging traditions of Shakespeare’s theater. The new theater of the Restoration approached plays, including Shakespeare’s, very differently, often rewriting and adapting original scripts to suit the audience’s contemporary tastes. So it is left to scholars of early modern English drama to reconstruct the practices of Renaissance theater from clues left behind. ♦



## Courtyard-style Theater

Chicago Shakespeare Theater’s unique performance space reflects elements of both the first public playhouses in London and the courtyards of inns temporarily transformed into theaters, in which the young Shakespeare might first have acquired his love of the stage.

The interior of the Globe playhouse, opened in 1599, was simple, and similar to that of Chicago Shakespeare Theater—a raised platform for the stage surrounded by an open, circular area, with seating on three levels, one above the other. Both theaters use a thrust stage with an open performance area upstage; basically, the entire performance space is in the shape of a capital “T.” With the audience seated on three sides of the thrust stage, the play is staged in the middle of them. An architect for Chicago Shakespeare Theater describes the experience of theater staged in this way: “You’re the scenery. You’re the special effects. And the people you see performing this play are performing it in front, and out of, you.”

If you think about a more traditional theater’s proscenium arch “framing” what is (not literally) a two-dimensional stage picture behind it, the thrust stage by contrast creates a three-dimensional picture for an audience that surrounds it on three sides. The people sitting in the side seats have the closest interaction with the performers, and the performers with them. The play unfolds between the audience members seated along the sides, and the actors draw upon the responses of the audience (laughter, gasps, nervous shifting in chairs when tension mounts) as they perform. As an audience member, your facial expressions and

body language serve both as the focal point of the actors’ energy and the backdrop for the other audience members seated across from you. Architect David Taylor and his company, Theatre Projects Consultants, worked closely with Chicago Shakespeare Theater’s leadership to design this courtyard theater. “It’s important that we don’t lose the performer among the faces, but it’s essential to understand that every single face is a live piece of scenery reflecting and framing what’s going on,” Taylor explains. “That’s the reason why the courtyard theater shape is such a wonderful historical springboard for modern theater design.”

“The backdrop and the scenery for Shakespeare is the human race,” Taylor notes, “so we’re putting Shakespeare into its proper context by making human faces the backdrop for those sitting in any seat in the theater.” According to Taylor: “This close, close relationship with the performers on stage is the very essence of the courtyard experience. The courtyard experience was about leaning out of windows. It was about throwing open the windows in the courtyard when the stage was brought through on a cart and leaning out and interacting.” Audience members seated in the galleries at Chicago Shakespeare Theater are encouraged to use the “leaning rails” to watch the players below—like those watching from an inn’s balconies centuries ago when a traveling troupe set up its temporary stage.

The actors and the audience share the experience of seeing and interacting with one another. Taylor thinks that actors benefit tremendously from the courtyard design: “They’re not looking at people sitting in straight rows, disconnected from everybody around them in big seats. There’s a sense of community in the space, a sense of embracing the performer on stage.” Actors are always fed by the energy generated from their audience. The design of Chicago Shakespeare Theater offers a feast of feedback to the actors on its stage.

Other theaters have been modeled upon the Elizabethan experience of courtyard theater, perhaps most notably the Royal Shakespeare Company’s Swan Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon. The Swan served as a model for Chicago Shakespeare Theater. Besides their deep thrust stages that were designed to create an intimate relationship between actors and audience, prominent architectural elements in both theaters are the brick walls that surround the audience and natural wood that creates a feeling of warmth. Brick is an aesthetic choice but, due to its particular design, it also serves as an acoustic choice. The angle of the bricks in the side walls helps diffuse sound, sending it in different directions throughout the theater. The sound, lighting, and rigging systems are all state-of-the-art. Chicago Shakespeare Theater’s design accommodates a wide array of possibilities for structuring and using the performance space. ♦

# TIMELINE

## 1300

- 1326** Founding of universities at Oxford and Cambridge
- 1348** Boccaccio's *Decameron*
- 1349** Bubonic Plague kills one-third of England's population
- 1387** Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*

## 1400

- ca.1440** Johannes Gutenberg invents printing press
- 1472** Dante's *Divine Comedy* first printed
- 1492** Christopher Columbus lands at Cuba
- 1497** Vasco da Gama sails around Cape of Good Hope

## 1500

- 1501-4** Michelangelo's *David* sculpture
- 1503** Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*
- 1512** Copernicus' *Commentariolus* published, theorizing that Earth and other planets revolve around sun
- 1518** License to import 4,000 African slaves to Spanish American colonies granted to Lorens de Gominzot
- 1519** Ferdinand Magellan's trip around the world
- 1519** Conquest of Mexico by Cortez
- 1522** Luther's translation of the New Testament

## 1525

- 1531** Henry VIII recognized as Supreme Head of the Church of England
- 1533** Henry VIII secretly marries Anne Boleyn, and is excommunicated by Pope
- 1539** Hernando de Soto explores Florida
- 1540** G.L. de Cardenas "discovers" Grand Canyon
- 1541** Hernando de Soto "discovers" the Mississippi

## 1550

- 1558** Coronation of Queen Elizabeth I
- 1562** John Hawkins begins slave trade between Guinea and West Indies
- 1564** Birth of William Shakespeare and Galileo
- 1565** Pencils first manufactured in England
- 1570** Pope Pius V excommunicates Queen Elizabeth
- 1573** Francis Drake sees the Pacific Ocean

## 1575

- 1576** Mayor of London forbids theatrical performances in the City  
Burbage erects first public theater in England (the "Theater" in Shoreditch)
- 1577** Drake's trip around the world
- 1580** *Essays* of Montaigne published
- 1582** Marriage license issued for William Shakespeare and Anne Hathaway  
Daughter Susanna Shakespeare christened

## SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS

ca. 1592-1595

### Comedies

Love's Labor's Lost  
The Comedy of Errors  
The Two Gentlemen of Verona  
A Midsummer Night's Dream  
The Taming of the Shrew

### Histories

1,2,3 Henry VI  
Richard III  
King John

### Tragedies

Titus Andronicus  
Romeo and Juliet

### Sonnets

Probably written  
in this period

- 1585** Christening of son Hamnet and twin Judith
- 1587** Mary Queen of Scots executed
- 1588** Destruction of the Spanish Armada
- 1592** Shakespeare listed with the Lord Chamberlain's Men
- 1593-4** Plague closes London playhouses for 20 months
- 1595** Coat of arms granted to Shakespeare's father, John
- 1596** Death of son Hamnet, age 11  
Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*
- 1597** Shakespeare, one of London's most successful playwrights, buys New Place, one of the grandest houses in Stratford-upon-Avon
- 1599** Globe Theatre opens, as home to the Lord Chamberlain's Men, with Shakespeare as part-owner

## 1600

- 1602** Oxford University's Bodleian Library opens
- 1603** Death of Queen Elizabeth, coronation of James I  
Lord Chamberlain's Men become the King's Men upon endorsement of James I
- 1603-11** Plague closes London playhouses for at least 68 months (nearly 6 years)
- 1605** Cervantes' *Don Quixote Part 1* published
- 1607** Marriage of Susanna Shakespeare to Dr. John Hall  
Founding of Jamestown, Virginia, first English settlement on American mainland
- 1608** *A true relation of such Occurances and Accidents of Note as hath passed in Virginia* by John Smith  
Galileo constructs astronomical telescope
- 1609** Blackfriars Theatre, London's first commercial indoor theater, becomes winter home of the King's Men
- 1611** "King James Version" of the Bible published
- 1613** Globe Theatre destroyed by fire
- 1614** Globe Theatre rebuilt
- 1615** Galileo faces the Inquisition for the first time
- 1616** Judith Shakespeare marries Thomas Quinney  
Death of William Shakespeare, age 52
- 1618** Copernican system condemned by Roman Catholic Church
- 1619** First African slaves arrive in Virginia
- 1623** The First Folio, the first compiled text of Shakespeare's complete works published

## 1625

- 1625** James I dies, succeeded by Charles I
- 1633** Galileo recants before the Inquisition
- 1636** Harvard College founded in Cambridge, Massachusetts
- 1642** Civil War in England begins
- 1642** Puritans close theaters throughout England until following the Restoration of the Monarchy, 18 years later, with Charles II
- 1649** Charles I beheaded
- 1649** Commonwealth declared

## ca. 1596-1600

### Comedies

- The Merchant of Venice
- Much Ado About Nothing
- The Merry Wives of Windsor
- As You Like It
- Twelfth Night

### Histories

- Richard II
- 1, 2 Henry IV
- Henry V

### Tragedies

- Julius Caesar

## ca. 1601-1609

### Comedies

- Troilus and Cressida
- All's Well That Ends Well

### Tragedies

- Hamlet
- ◆ Othello
- King Lear
- Macbeth
- Antony and Cleopatra
- Timon of Athens
- Coriolanus
- Measure for Measure

## ca. 1609-1613

### Romances

- Pericles
- Cymbeline
- The Winter's Tale
- The Tempest
- The Two Noble Kinsmen

### Histories

- Henry VIII

# OTHELLO

## WHO'S WHO

### BIANCA

a prostitute and Michael Cassio's mistress, has a love for the newly appointed lieutenant that he does not return.

### BRABANTIO

a respected Venetian senator and father to Desdemona, who in the past often invited Othello to his home. He is convinced the Moor has used witchcraft to woo his young daughter into marriage.

### CASSIO

a young privileged Florentine working in the service of the Venetians with fine manners and courtly gestures, but little experience in actual battle. As the play begins, he is Othello's newly appointed lieutenant. This promotion especially galls Iago, who regards Cassio as unqualified.

### DESDEMONA

daughter to Brabantio, is the Venetian senator's only child. She is young, sheltered, and very much in love with Othello whom she has just married in secret and against the wishes of her father.

### THE DUKE OF VENICE

holds Othello in high esteem for his past military service, and appoints him leader of the forces that must defeat the Turks at Cyprus to protect Venetian interests there. Brabantio appeals to the Duke, following his daughter's secret marriage.

### EMILIA

Iago's wife and Desdemona's attendant. Her husband suspects her of infidelity.

### GRATIANO

a noble Venetian and Desdemona's uncle.

### IAGO

Othello's ensign, the lowest ranking officer in his service. As the play begins, Iago is already plotting revenge: against Cassio, who has been promoted instead and against Othello, his commander who has passed him over for promotion.

### LODOVICO

a kinsman to Desdemona, and a noble Venetian.



Paul Niebanck as Iago and Derrick Lee Weeden as Othello in Chicago Shakespeare Theater's 2008 production of Othello, directed by Marti Maraden. Photo by Steve Leonard.

### MONTANO

the governor of Cyprus. He once served under Othello and eagerly awaits his arrival in Cyprus to help defend the island against the Turkish fleet.

### OTHELLO

a Venetian general originally from Barbary, which is part of North Africa between Egypt and the Atlantic Ocean. By his own account, Othello has been a warrior since the age of seven, was sold into slavery, escaped, wandered the desert, encountered cannibals, converted to Christianity, and finally came to fight in service of the Venetians. He has secretly married Desdemona and chosen Cassio as his lieutenant when the play begins.

### RODERIGO

a Venetian nobleman and rejected suitor to Desdemona, Roderigo is easy prey to Iago, who uses the unsuspecting man as a pawn in his plotting.

## Dramatis Personae

### **OTHELLO**

*the Moor, a general in the service of Venice*

### **DESEMONA**

*Othello's wife and daughter to Brabantio, a Venetian*

### **IAGO**

*Othello's ensign (standard-bearer)*

### **EMILIA**

*Iago's wife and attendant to Desdemona*

### **CASSIO**

*Othello's lieutenant*

### **BIANCA**

*a prostitute in love with Cassio*

### **DUKE OF VENICE**

### **BRABANTIO**

*father to Desdemona and a senator*

### **RODERIGO**

*a Venetian gentleman and suitor to Desdemona*

### **LODOVICO**

*kinsman to Brabantio and a Venetian nobleman*

### **GRATIANO**

*Brabantio's brother and a Venetian nobleman*

### **MONTANO**

*governor of the isle of Cyprus*



Othello



Desdemona



Emilia



Iago



Duke of Venice



Bianca



Cassio



All Soldiers

Sketches by Costume Designer Linda Cho



## The Story

**I**n the city street shadows, two men discuss the night's intel: Othello, a hired general in the Venetian army—and a Moor—has eloped with a young aristocrat of Venice, named Desdemona. Iago, the soldier, reassures Roderigo that

all hope of winning the young woman's heart is not yet lost; and that he, too, harbors reasons for hating the Moor, who has promoted over him Cassio, a young and privileged officer. Iago and Roderigo yell from the street below the news of Desdemona's elopement to awaken her father Brabantio, who immediately seeks the full justice of Venetian law. But this night the Duke and senators are intent upon more pressing affairs of state: the Turks threaten Venetian interests in Cyprus, and the Moor's service is required. Othello prepares to deploy to Cyprus and, with the Duke's permission, Desdemona will join him there, attended by Iago's wife Emilia.

Now Iago conceives his plan: he will make the general believe that his new lieutenant is Desdemona's lover. And so begins his work. First ensnaring Cassio in a drunken brawl, Iago looks on as Othello predictably dismisses the officer from his service. Iago urges Cassio to seek Desdemona's aid in recovering the general's favor—while suggesting to Othello that her interest in a man's misfortunes might signal a wife's infidelity. Demanding proof, Othello is convinced when his first gift to Desdemona—an embroidered handkerchief belonging once to his mother—is misplaced and now passes, with guidance, to Cassio, then into the possession of a Cypriot prostitute named Bianca.

For his great service to the general, Iago is appointed Othello's new lieutenant. Desdemona, stunned by her husband's accusations, pleads with him—first for compassion, then for her life. And as Emilia comes to understand her own husband, two women become caught inextricably in the crossfire.



## Act-by-Act Synopsis

### ACT ONE

**I**t is night in Venice. On a street near Senator Brabantio's house, Iago and Roderigo discuss the scandalous news: Brabantio's daughter, Desdemona, has eloped with Othello, a general hired by the Venetians—and a Moor. Iago, Othello's ensign, complains bitterly to his companion Roderigo, who is one of Desdemona's rejected suitors. Othello has passed over Iago for promotion, choosing the less-experienced Michael Cassio as his lieutenant instead. The two men rouse Brabantio to yell the news from the street below. Brabantio wakes his household in alarm, and Iago goes to find Othello and bring him to the council chambers to face Brabantio there.

Outside the council chamber, Iago and Othello await Brabantio when Cassio appears to summon Othello to the Duke: the Turkish army threatens Venetian interests in Cyprus and Othello's services as a general are required. Inside the chambers, the duke and his senators discuss the Turkish fleet's threat to Venetian interests in Cyprus. When Othello, Iago and Brabantio join them, talk turns to Othello's marriage. Brabantio claims that Othello must have bewitched his daughter. Othello responds that Desdemona truly loves him as he, too, loves her, a statement corroborated by Desdemona when she arrives. Othello and Desdemona ask that she be able to accompany her husband into the field, and the duke grants their request. Brabantio denounces his child. Once alone, Roderigo, who had hired Iago to help court Desdemona, despairs. Iago comforts him, claiming that the couple will soon tire of one other, and he sends Roderigo to gather more money to give to him, ostensibly for a second round of wooing. Left alone, Iago reveals to the audience that it is rumored that Othello has bedded his own wife. For this and for being overlooked for promotion, he will make Othello believe that Desdemona has been unfaithful to him with Cassio.

### ACT TWO

**A**t a port in Cyprus, several gentlemen gather around Count Montano. Much to their relief, a terrible storm has stopped the Turkish fleet, but they anxiously await news of the Venetian ships. Cassio's vessel docks first and he praises Desdemona to Montano as he waits.

He is soon followed by Iago, Desdemona and Emilia, who is Iago's wife and Desdemona's companion. Finally, Othello disembarks triumphant with the news that the Turkish fleet is drowned and the battle won. Alone with Roderigo, Iago claims that Desdemona loves Cassio and counsels Roderigo to provoke the lieutenant that night.

A herald announces Othello's proclamation of this night's celebration of the Turkish defeat and his own nuptials. Before retiring with Desdemona, Othello leaves Cassio in charge of the castle guard. Knowing Cassio's difficulty holding his drink, Iago persuades Cassio and his men to toast to Othello's marriage. Completely inebriated, Cassio proves an easy target as Roderigo provokes him into a quarrel. Montano attempts to stop the drunken brawl, but is himself wounded as Roderigo slips away. After hearing Iago's account of the fight, Othello dismisses Cassio for dereliction of duty and leaves to tend Montano's wounds. Iago urges the disgraced Cassio to regain Othello's favor by pleading his case to Desdemona, all the while plotting to use their meeting to convince Othello of his wife's infidelity. When an impatient Roderigo appears, Iago reassures him that all is going according to plan.

### ACT THREE

Outside Othello and Desdemona's residence, Cassio pays a clown to fetch Emilia, who he hopes will help him to speak to Desdemona. Emilia invites him in and Desdemona agrees to petition Othello on his behalf. As he returns home, Othello observes Cassio's hasty departure and is met with Desdemona's pleas on the lieutenant's behalf. Iago takes this opportunity to insinuate that Desdemona's interest in Cassio may be proof of her infidelity. Although Othello tries, he cannot entirely ignore these suspicions.

When Desdemona returns to bring Othello in to dinner, she drops her handkerchief—a family heirloom from her husband, who charged her to keep it with her always. Finding the handkerchief, Emilia gives it to Iago, who has often pestered her to steal it. Alone, Iago admits that he intends to plant the handkerchief in Cassio's lodgings as proof of Desdemona's unfaithfulness. When Othello returns to demand proof of his wife's unfaithfulness, Iago claims to have heard Cassio talking in his sleep: thinking the sleeping Iago to be Desdemona, Cassio had kissed him. Iago claims, too, that he has seen Desdemona's handkerchief in Cassio's hands. Othello promotes Iago to lieutenant and swears revenge while Iago pledges his help.

Desdemona searches for Cassio to share news of her success with Othello and bemoans her lost handkerchief to Emilia. When Desdemona cannot produce the handkerchief

at her husband's insistent command, Othello's suspicions grow. He is more certain of her guilt when she continues to press Cassio's suit, and Othello storms off in a rage. Desdemona then reassures Cassio that she will keep arguing his case. Cassio, who has found the stolen handkerchief in his bedchamber, cajoles his mistress Bianca to copy the fine embroidery for him and promises to visit her that night.

### ACT FOUR

Iago's continued lewd insinuations cause Othello to fall into a seizure. While he is unconscious, Iago sets the stage for a conversation with Cassio that will "prove" Desdemona's guilt. When Othello awakes, he hides as instructed by Iago to observe this conversation. Cassio and Iago bawdily discuss Bianca; Othello assumes they talk about Desdemona. When he sees Bianca return Desdemona's handkerchief to Cassio he presumes the worst. Othello vows to kill Desdemona that night and Iago convinces him to smother her.

Lodovico, Desdemona's kinsman, arrives from Venice bearing news that, with the Turkish threat diminished, Othello is to return to Venice and leave Cassio in command of Cyprus. In front of everyone, Othello suddenly strikes Desdemona and demands she leave his sight. She obeys as Lodovico and Iago wonder at Othello's violent change.

Othello questions Emilia about her mistress's relationship with Cassio, and Emilia swears Desdemona is faithful. Nonetheless, Othello harshly accuses a bewildered Desdemona of betrayal. When he leaves, Iago comforts Desdemona. He then convinces Roderigo that Othello is departing for North Africa rather than Venice. They plot to kill Cassio so that Othello—and Desdemona—must stay in Cyprus.

Ordered to her chambers by Othello, Desdemona sings a sad "song of willow" that she long ago learned from her mother's maid. She asks Emilia to place her wedding sheets on their bed that night. As Emilia prepares her for bed, the two women debate whether any wife would ever have cause to be unfaithful to her husband. Emilia argues that she might, and that a strayed wife is her husband's fault.

### ACT FIVE

Night falls, and on the streets of Cyprus Roderigo and Iago ambush Cassio. But Cassio wounds Roderigo instead, and then Iago jumps out from the shadows to stab Cassio. After Othello, Gratiano and Lodovico respond to the alarm, Iago secretly kills Roderigo and then implicates Bianca in Cassio's injury.

# OTHELLO

As Desdemona sleeps, Othello comes to their bed. She awakes. Stunned by her husband's accusations, Desdemona pleads first for understanding and then for her life before Othello smothers her. When Emilia discovers her mistress, Desdemona dies refusing to incriminate Othello. After Montano, Gratiano and Iago respond to Emilia's cries, she reveals her husband's complicity. Iago stabs and kills his wife, then flees, pursued by Gratiano and Montano.

Othello finds a weapon and, when Iago is captured, stabs his Ensign, who refuses to die. Convinced of Desdemona's innocence, Othello asks Cassio's pardon. Stabbing himself, Othello dies upon Desdemona's body. Lodovico gives Gratiano Othello's house and fortunes and charges Montano with Iago's punishment.

## Something Borrowed, Something New: Shakespeare's Sources

Shakespeare often crafted his plays from a fabric of shared stories, contemporary Elizabethan interests and original additions. To create *Othello*, Shakespeare combines a tale from 1566 with the early seventeenth century's growing interest in foreign places and cultures.

The primary source for the story of *Othello* appears to be Italian author Giraldi Cinthio's 1566 collection of tales *The Hecatommithi*. (Shakespeare used a *Hecatommithi* tale for *Measure for Measure*, too.) Cinthio's story tells of an unnamed Moor who was a valued, distinguished soldier in Venice. The young Venetian and only named character "Disdemona" falls in love with the Moor. Despite her family's strong objections, they marry and live happily in Venice for some time. When the Moor is assigned to take command in Cyprus, Desdemona asks to accompany him.

Meanwhile, the Moor's ensign (a soldier who carries the army's flag) desires Disdemona. When Disdemona fails to recognize his secretive advances, he assumes she must already be in love with someone outside of her marriage. He assumes she desires the Moor's handsome corporal and decides to kill both the Corporal and Disdemona. Fortunately, the Corporal wounds another soldier while on guard, and is immediately dismissed from service by the Moor. Disdemona pleads for his reinstatement and the rebuffed Ensign suggests to the Moor that his wife, disgusted by his looks, is attracted to the dashing

Venetian Corporal. The Moor demands proof of his wife's infidelity, and so the ensign steals Disdemona's handkerchief, a wedding present from her husband, and drops it in the Corporal's bedroom.

The ensign arranges to talk with the Corporal in sight of the Moor. He claims the Corporal admitted his adultery and the gift of the handkerchief. When the Moor questions Disdemona, she seems guilty. Disdemona confides her fears to her best friend, the Ensign's wife, but she, fearing her husband, cannot divulge his plan. The Ensign brings the Moor to the corporal's window to see a woman copying the embroidery of the lost handkerchief. At the Moor's request, the Ensign attacks the Corporal but fails to kill him. The Moor resolves to kill Disdemona. The Ensign and the Moor bludgeon Disdemona to death and stage the murder to appear an accident. Finally realizing the ensign's lies, the Moor demotes him. In retaliation, the Ensign charges the Moor with the attack upon the Corporal. The Moor is banished from Venice and murdered by Disdemona's family in exile. Later imprisoned for another crime, the ensign dies from torture.

The similarities to Cinthio's story are striking, but so are the alterations Shakespeare made to tell his story of *Othello*. Cinthio's tale is a forbidding sermon against inappropriate marriage, complete with a moral from Disdemona:

*I fear greatly that I shall be a warning to young girls not to marry against their parents' wishes; and Italian ladies will learn by my example not to tie themselves to a man whom Nature, Heaven, and manner of life separate from us.*

*Othello*, however, names and develops each of Cinthio's characters to create a compassionate, multifaceted story through many changes and additions:

- Shakespeare adds Brabantio, Roderigo and the Turkish attack on Cyprus entirely. In Cinthio, the ensign at first loves Disdemona; in Shakespeare Roderigo takes over this role.
- Iago's passed-over promotion is unique to *Othello*. In Cinthio the ensign is demoted at the end of the story as punishment.
- Shakespeare adds Othello's Act 1 account of how he and Desdemona had fallen in love.
- Iago improvises his way to revenge, unlike the ensign, who carefully plans Desdemona and Cassio's murders from the beginning.
- Othello alone murders Desdemona—and by smothering rather than bludgeoning her to death.
- Instead of being killed in exile as Cinthio's Moor is, Shakespeare's Othello commits suicide.
- Othello's story moves much faster than its source material: a marriage that experienced years of happiness in Cinthio's tale lasts no more than weeks in Shakespeare's retelling.

While Cinthio's story (which Shakespeare likely read in a 1584 French translation) is clearly *Othello's* main literary source, scholars also view contemporary public figures and travel narratives as influential to the playwright. At the time of *Othello's* writing, the English were fascinated by faraway lands that offered new resources and power. Elizabethan England had longstanding relationships with Venice, the Ottoman Empire and African nations, all of which appear in *Othello*. By 1604, Britain had established peace with Venice after wars over perceived British piracy in the Mediterranean and was aware (and partially in awe) of the Ottoman's Empire expansion. (Shakespeare altered history by giving Venice control of Cyprus; the island had long been part of the Ottoman Empire.) England also had a long history of commerce with African nations from which it imported both goods and slaves.

Scholars frequently point to three sources that inspired Shakespeare's depictions of Venice, the Ottoman Empire and Africa: Sir Lewis Lewkenor's translation of Contarini's *The Commonwealth of Venice*; Knolles's *The General History of the Turks* and John Pory's translation of John Leo Africanus's *The Geographical History of Africa*. All these works appeared in print shortly before the first known performance of *Othello* in 1604, fueling curiosity about the nations that Shakespeare presents in his tragedy.

*The Geographical History of Africa* is especially interesting because its writer bears a personal history similar to that of Othello's before meeting Desdemona. John Leo Africanus was born Hasan ibn Muhammad al-Wazzan, the Muslim son of wealthy, upper-class parents in Granada in 1485. (Othello

was born noble and Muslim.) Al-Wazzan grew up in Morocco and traveled extensively on diplomatic work. In his early twenties, he was captured by Christian pirates, given to Pope Leo X, imprisoned and, as a sign of the Pope's success at (forcibly) converting Muslims to Christianity, baptized and named John Leo, mirroring Othello's own story of capture and conversion. Like Othello, he thrived in Italy writing the widely read *Geographical History of Africa*.

While John Leo Africanus offers a historical parallel for Othello's early narrative, a story involving the Spanish King Phillip II mirrors Othello's subsequent rage. As Peter Ackroyd describes in *Shakespeare: The Biography*:

*[there was] a well-attested story publicized throughout Europe that the previous king of Spain, Philip II, was an insanely jealous husband who had strangled his wife in her bed. What is more, he had become suspicious of her when she had inadvertently dropped her handkerchief. These parallels are too close to be coincidental.*

It's interesting to explore what elements of a story Shakespeare adopted and what he created anew. What does the character of Roderigo, for example, add? How does knowing the history of their love story change our perception of Othello and Desdemona? Does knowing that Shakespeare may have based part of Othello's character upon narratives surrounding contemporary figures change our perception of the general? Exploring these questions will lead to a deeper understanding of both Shakespeare's sources and of his *Othello*. ♦



Postell Pringle as Othello, JQ as Roderigo, GQ as Iago and Jackson Doran as Cassio in Chicago Shakespeare Theater's 2013 production of *Othello: The Remix*, directed by GQ and JQ. Photo by Michael Brosilow.

## 1604 and All That

**1** 604—the year of the first recorded performance of *Othello*—was one that was pivotal in English history. In 1601, the queen’s one-time favorite, the Earl of Essex, staged an unsuccessful rebellion against the crown and was executed. Some scholars hold this event to have affected the nation more deeply than even the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1598. The mood of the country was uncertain. A “brutal examination of man’s deepest commitments—personal, marital, sexual” (Rosenberg, 1961) became the subject of dramatic and social discourse. In 1603, Queen Elizabeth’s forty-five-year rule came to an end. Elizabethan England became Jacobean England with the accession of the new king, James I, and Shakespeare renamed his acting company “The King’s Men” to honor his new patron. The most successful playwright was at the height of his creative genius. *Hamlet* was written; *King Lear* and *Macbeth* were soon to follow.

The traditional picture of a highly ordered, stable society—for centuries an idealized view looking back upon early modern England—is one that modern scholarship has essentially overturned. Instead, the turn of the seventeenth century is now understood as a time when past certainties and assumptions were undermined by a new world outlook that perceived values as no longer absolute, but relative and in flux. Fundamentally incompatible social thoughts stood uneasily side by side. A culture that honored and idealized its military, England was full of out-of-work, disillusioned professional soldiers. England was becoming less isolated and therefore more multicultural, but was still preoccupied with distinctions of nation, race and religion. Romantic love was idealized in works of fiction but, in real life, was viewed as an unessential ingredient for a successful marriage. These current strands of conflicts can be found in *Othello*, which Shakespeare uncharacteristically chose to set in his own time period.

*Othello*’s story takes place inside the army, which in Shakespeare’s England had drastically changed. Even as recently as the late 1500s, England had an unpaid standing army that awarded its members based on “wealth, kindred and favor” and not for winning wars. The heroes of this army were noble knights who led anonymous, unwilling villagers into battle, writes scholar Kim F. Hall. But by 1604 its military was largely made up of professional soldiers. Hall describes this change:

*[Before the early modern period] battle stories mostly told of individual courage and of the opportunity war offered to win personal glory and reputation. However, by Shakespeare’s time, men on foot—in-fantry from the lower classes—had come to dominate, and the professional soldier acting in concert with others became the new image of war.*

Hall recognizes in *Othello* an image of the “old horseman-knight...for whom war was a noble calling and a religious duty rather than a profession.” Although *Othello* is a paid mercenary, his love of exploration and his chivalrous language align him with this history of the noble fighter. Iago, Hall argues, represents the newer face of England’s military. He is a professional, hoping to eventually rise in the ranks and disgruntled because his lack of promotion means a lack of money. *Othello* speaks the language of chivalry; Iago speaks the language of commerce that is about to conquer the developing world.

In 1604 England was comparatively at peace—bad news for its new army, who found themselves out of work and unpaid. The plight of the poor soldier was so widespread that it appeared as an item in the Poor Man’s Petition of 1603. In addition to other concerns, this petition asked King James to

“let poor soldiers be paid their wages while they be employed and well provided for when they are maimed.” The fact that

soldiers felt the need to petition their king for wages and disability care suggests that they were not receiving what they were owed. The following year, playwright Thomas Middleton published a story about a double-amputee soldier forced to beg for a living after his return to London. Both of these narratives describe the common soldier’s disillusionment with a military career. Iago’s dissatisfaction with the army would have resonated strongly with Shakespeare’s original audience.

Following the dissolution of the great monastic estates that began around 1535, approximately one-sixth of English land changed owners during the 1500s. Land shifted out of the hands of the old nobility and clergy, into the hands of those who now possessed the money to buy it—the industrialists and merchants of an emerging capitalist society. Land was no longer a symbol of birth, but a symbol of wealth. “A medieval nobleman in good standing” writes James Calderwood, “would no more have thought of selling his land than the governor of Connecticut would think of selling a few counties to the governor of Rhode Island.” But all that was changing. For the first time, the nobility faced a class fluidity that could breach its ranks and diminish its power.

**Othello speaks the language of chivalry; Iago speaks the language of commerce that is about to conquer the developing world.**

*Othello* reveals early modern anxieties about race and otherness. Still at the beginning of centuries of imperialist relations with Africa, it is likely that Jacobian England did not know racism as we in America know it today. But because there was less association between nations than now, those who fell outside the borders of the known, white world were viewed as “barbarians.” “*Othello* is a play full of racial feeling,” writes scholar Michael Neill:

*perhaps the first work in English to explore the roots of such feeling; and it can hardly be accidental that it belongs to the very period of English history in which something we can now identify as a racist ideology was beginning to evolve under the pressures of nascent imperialism.*

Although he never uses the word himself, Othello is referred to throughout the play as a “Moor,” a vague term then used to signify a Middle Eastern or black Muslim (or, occasionally, Christian or pagan) likely from Africa, Arabia, or, perhaps, Spain. The white, early modern conception of a Moor was an exotification of a population viewed as foreign, though present in England at the time of Othello’s writing. In 1596 Queen Elizabeth licensed Captain Casper van Senden to deport both free and enslaved “blackamoors” from England, arguing that they drained relief meant for white Elizabethans in times of economic hardship. This edict was aimed at both enslaved and free Africans. In 1601 Queen Elizabeth published another, more strongly worded edict—likely because the first had not been successful. But while marriage between races was emphatically taboo, England continued to depend upon African workers for cheap and free labor.

Jerry Brotton explains that the ambivalent attitude of early modern England towards Africans “can be partly explained by the extensive and amicable relations that were established between Elizabethan England and the kingdom of Morocco.” *Othello* was written soon after the visit of the Moroccan Ambassador, al-Annuri, to Elizabeth’s court. Writes Brotton:

*Al-Annuri’s highly visible presence in London appears to have influenced Shakespeare in his portrayal of Othello—a charismatic, sophisticated but also troubling presence. . . . What this all suggests is that we can no longer see Othello as the simple, barbaric, jealous figure of 19th and 20th-century stage productions; the Elizabethans had a far more ambiguous and complicated understanding of the Moor than we have today, hampered as we are by contemporary ideas of racism and Islamophobia.*

At the same time that England was becoming more internally diverse, it was also becoming a more global nation, engaging with foreign countries through commerce and war. *Othello*’s original audiences had their own ideas of what Venice, Cyprus and African nations looked like and represented.

Venice then embodied the height of Western civilization. It was the Italian city viewed as London’s counterpart, the seat of art and commerce in a Western world growing ever more commercial. It was also celebrated as a place of cultural exchange. In *The Commonwealth and Government of Venice* Gaspar Contarini wrote that:

*“[Some] exceedingly admired the wonderful course of strange and foreign people, yea, from the farthest and remotest nations, as though the City of Venice were a common and general market to the whole world.”*

And, as A.J. Honnigmann notes in his introduction to the Arden Shakespeare *Othello*, “Venice was the pleasure capital of Europe, especially in its sexual tolerance.” So in Venice, a city celebrated for its sexual permissiveness and multicultural flair, a story of a “civilized” society excluding an Other from outside its borders could be depicted and explored at a safe distance from the England of Shakespeare’s audience.

Unlike many of his other works, Shakespeare does not distance his story of *Othello* to an earlier historical period. The successful Turkish attack on Cyprus, repelled in the play, took place in 1570—and in the memory of most of Shakespeare’s theatergoers. By the time Shakespeare wrote *Othello*, the English had been exposed to Africa and Africans by continuous contact that stretched over more than half a century. By 1555, books appearing in English described the Moors of Africa. Sixteenth-century writers referred to any dark North African as a Moor or “blackamoor.” And though Shakespeare’s contemporaries might not have differentiated a North African Moor who was “white” or “tawny” from an African who was “black” (as did many scholars and productions of *Othello* in the centuries to follow), the Moors as a whole represented “the Other,” the non-Christian, heathen world that lay outside the boundaries of Western and Christian civilization.

Early modern England had a long history of commerce with Africa, which might have led to an understanding of the continent’s varied countries and nations. By 1604 books describing the continent, like Leo Africanus’s *The Geographical History of Africa*, were in circulation. By 1562, England financed ships to West Africa to buy both goods and slaves. British explorers travelled through African countries on their way east towards lands considered more profitable to explore. And yet,

despite this potential wealth of information, the continent remained a mystical, foreign and unknowable place within Jacobians' collective imagination. Words used to reference Africa and Africans were vague. Ethiopian, for example, meant either someone from Ethiopia, or any black African, regardless of nationality. Scholar Emily C. Bartles argues, "it seems to have been a deliberate choice to make Africa mysterious and dark because it was not actually THAT mysterious to Europeans." Othello's unspecific African background would have been in keeping with Jacobian's carefully selected understanding of Africans. Clearly, *Othello* was a modern story: a modern story, specifically, centered on the marriage between a black man and a white woman.

In sixteenth-century England, women were legally the property of their father or husband. Marriage marked a transfer of property as the bride moved from her father's to her husband's care. Wives were understood to require the kind control of men and were in turn expected to be chaste, silent and obedient to their husbands. Adultery threatened not only an individual marriage, but also the patriarchal state. In 1650 (forty-six years after *Othello's* writing) female adultery was made a corporal crime.

Although spouses were not treated equally within a marriage, they were expected to be well matched by external measures. Balance was thought to be the required foundation for a solid union. Spouses were supposed to be equal in age, class, social status, religion and, of course, race. Love, on the other hand, was considered undesirable and viewed as a passion, an explosive and illogical force more likely to destroy couples than to make them happy. Desdemona and Othello's elopement between two people in love of different ages, races, social standings and religious backgrounds went against all conventional Jacobian beliefs of what made a stable marriage.

Shakespeare wrote *Othello* as a modern story in a time of sudden cultural change and concern. Jacobian fears about the military, race, a globalizing world and marriage informed what has been called Shakespeare's most intimate tragedy. Written over 400 years ago, Shakespeare's *Othello* survives both as a masterful play in its own right and as a testimony to the changing beliefs of the early modern world. ♦

## Shakespeare, Tragedy and Us

**W**e all know something about tragedy: we lose someone we love; we must leave a place we have called home; we make a decision that leads to consequences we never wanted. Tragedy is a part of our lives, despite all of our attempts to keep it at arm's length.

But what's the point of picking up a book we know to be full of doom and, by choice, entering so dark a world? Clearly, it's more "fun" to spend time with an episode of *Parks and Recreation* than with Act 1 of *Othello*. So why do it?

We read tragedy for many of the same reasons we read other literary genres—because we respond to stories that show us people who are somehow like us, versions of ourselves under other circumstances. When we feel that characters bear some resemblance to us—are relatable to us in some way, although they may be very different—they interest us and we can sympathize with them. But when a story communicates a particular kind of emotional truth to us, it goes beyond touching our sympathy. As we come to understand the people in it, we also reach a deeper understanding about our world, about ourselves and the people we know, and about the tragedies we have to face in our own lives.

Shakespeare's tragedies, like our own lives, are stories that interweave opposites—joy and sorrow, farce and harsh reality. How often in a day do we experience these extremes? *Othello*, a play dealing with life and death, contains moments of lightness. Shakespeare is a master of juxtaposition; of holding his "mirror up to nature" and showing us that there is very little black and white and many more shades of gray in our lives than we like to admit. Cassio can be an honorable man, esteemed by Othello, and also keep Bianca as his whore. Iago can maintain the outward appearance of an honorable man, while secretly plotting at every available moment. We know from our own lives that two extremes can often live simultaneously within one person; Shakespeare personifies this truth with a mastery attained by few writers.

As we follow characters on their journey, we may be tempted to hunt for the hero's "tragic flaw"—the character trait, or error in judgment, that leads to the hero's downfall. Critic Russ McDonald, however, warns against labeling the hero as inherently weak and not up to the challenge, as someone who gets what he deserves. The heroes of tragedy typically display great strengths, says McDonald. Their tragedy resides not so much in a weakness of character, but in a "kind of tragic



Paul Niebanck as Iago and Allison Batty as Desdemona in Chicago Shakespeare Theater's 2008 production of *Othello*, directed by Marti Maraden. Photo by Steve Leonard.

incompatibility between the hero's particular form of greatness and the earthly circumstances that he or she is forced to confront." McDonald points out how differently the heroes of Shakespeare's tragedies speak, not only from us, but also from all the other characters around them. Their poetic language, he says, expresses their "vast imaginations." They see the world more completely than the rest of us do.

The tragic hero imagines something out of the ordinary, seeking to transcend the compromises of the familiar. We both admire this imaginative leap and acknowledge its impossibility. The contest between "world" and "will" that exists for those characters brings misery, sometimes insanity, and often death; however, it also produces meaning and magnificence. Through their journeys, tragic heroes and heroines learn something about themselves and about their lives, but it is an understanding which comes from great loss and pain. It has been noted by some scholars that in Shakespeare's earlier tragedies—such as *Romeo and Juliet*—the hero and heroine do not gain insight from their fated tragedies. Instead, it is the suffering of those left behind who gain wisdom by facing the consequences of their own actions. In his later tragedies, lessons are internalized into the consciousness of Shakespeare's heroes and heroines through their tragic journeys.

Desdemona, with her dying breath, still tries to assume the best of her husband, in the same moment that she becomes the proof of his capacity for destruction, even of something he loves so deeply. It takes Desdemona's death for Emilia to recognize the depth of her husband's deception; Emilia, too,

must die before Othello can face realization of his terrible error of judgment and trust.

Most of us will never face the same choices Othello does. But we *are* likely to face choices in our lives that seem too big for us. That we will be required to go through some "fearful passage" of our own, where old ways of thinking and behaving don't work. That we will face head-on the consequences of choices we've made—and wish desperately that what's done could somehow be undone.

What makes theatrical art different from life is its transient nature: what was witnessed on stage dissipates when we leave the theater. The damage that is permanent and irreversible to tragedy's heroes is temporary for us. We leave the theater. We close the book. But if we enter that world for a time, we may come to understand ourselves more deeply. We learn. And when our own "fearful passage" comes along, something we have learned along the way about ourselves and the nature of others may help us make our choice. ♦

<sup>1</sup>Russ McDonald, "The Flaw in the Flaw," *Shakespeare Set Free: Teaching Romeo and Juliet, Macbeth, A Midsummer Night's Dream*, ed. Peggy O'Brien (New York: Washington Square Press, 1993): 9.



Postell Pringle as Othello and Jackson Doran as Emilia in Chicago Shakespeare Theater's 2013 production of *Othello: The Remix*, directed by GQ and JQ. Photo by Michael Brosilow.



GQ as Iago in Chicago Shakespeare Theater's 2013 production of *Othello: The Remix*, directed by GQ and JQ. Photo by Michael Brosilow.



Postell Pringle as Othello and GQ as Iago in Chicago Shakespeare Theater's 2013 production of *Othello: The Remix*, directed by GQ and JQ. Photo by Michael Brosilow.



Jackson Doran and GQ with Postell Pringle as Othello in Chicago Shakespeare Theater's 2013 production of *Othello: The Remix*, directed by GQ and JQ. Photo by Michael Brosilow.

## From a Scholar's Perspective Unhoused



**WENDY WALL**, is a Professor of English at Northwestern University, specializes in Early Modern English Literature and Culture, 1500–1660 and is the author of *Staging Domesticity: Household Work and English Identity in Early Modern Drama*, and the newly published *Recipes for Thought: Knowledge and Taste in the Early Modern English Kitchen*.

*But that I love the gentle Desdemona, / I would not my unhoused free condition / Put into circumscription and confine / For the sea's worth.*

What does it mean to feel “at home”? To have a place in society? And what does race have to do with place? Shakespeare’s most domestic tragedy takes up these issues by showing what is at stake in the marriage between a white Venetian woman and a black immigrant military hero converted from Islam. The first scene in *Othello* makes “home” central to its exploration of “the green-eyed monster” jealousy, as Othello oddly describes his loss of bachelorhood as the state of being “housed.” He announces himself as someone whose place in society is outside of it, unhoused, in temporary tents used in military crusades. Beneath the veneer of the old ball-and-chain complaint about marriage, we discover the depth of Othello’s anxiety about how to locate himself. Described as a “wheeling stranger of here and everywhere,” he finds marriage a sure way to assimilate, to provide a durable place in the world.

And yet the tragedy of the play turns on the inequality of the dream of belonging. *Othello* opens with Iago clamoring to Desdemona’s father in the night: “Awake, Brabantio! Look to your house, your daughter, and your bags! . . . your daughter and the Moor are making the beast with two backs.” In his prejudicial view, daughters are material goods, and Othello and Desdemona’s marriage, a pornographic bestial melding. Guarding the house means protecting a particular idea of family. As Mercutio’s curse upon the Capulets and Montagues suggests in *Romeo and Juliet*, the “house” is more than a physical structure; for it signifies lineage, community, and family.

The striking irony posed by the opening marriage is that Brabantio disowns his daughter just as Othello is joining a supposedly stable family. Shakespeare hits this point home by including a lengthy discussion about where the exiled Desdemona will live once Othello goes to war. As Othello *houses* himself in the solid affiliation she offers, Desdemona becomes a wandering stranger of here and everywhere. Such is the art of the first act of *Othello* where the stakes of marriage, identity and belonging are conveyed by reference to the social meaning of home.

The eerie fascination of the play rests in part on Iago’s success in getting Othello to see himself as an outsider. Othello was the first black tragic hero on the English stage, appearing at a time when England started to invest in the African slave trade. As a black man, he exists on the margins of culture. So when Othello says of Desdemona, “When I love thee not, chaos is come again” (with chaos, for a Renaissance audience, being the ultimate nothingness), we understand the stakes of fidelity for him.

Incited into jealousy by Iago, Othello begins to see his own *skin* as a sign of his degradation: “Her name, that was as fresh / As Dian’s visage, is now begrimed and black / As mine own face,” he declares. Othello begins to view his own marriage as unnatural and out of place. The logical extreme of this view culminates in Othello’s final poignant suicide speech, where he splits into two identities: the insider Christian hero and outsider enemy. In his final moments, Othello imaginatively converts the violence of the bedroom into a remote battlefield in the Middle East. Attempting to prove himself a war hero (rather than a wife-killer), Othello ends up alienating himself as the stranger-infidel he has so courageously fought.

*Othello* is perhaps Shakespeare’s most anti-theatrical play, the text that most graphically portrays the devastating effect of believing in a reality shaped by words, performances and images—by what one character calls “false gazing.” In making Othello conjure tortuous mental images of his wife as adulterous (and crediting these illusions as true), Iago becomes the consummate playwright, actor, and director—someone able to weave an alternate reality for those around him. He transforms a mundane and domestic stage prop—a handkerchief—into “ocular proof” of infidelity. He uses illusions to estrange the familiar.

Yet with some poetic justice, the handkerchief is the one smoking gun that unravels Iago’s web of fictions and reveals the truth at the conclusion. Disclosing Iago’s manipulation of the handkerchief, Emilia—Desdemona’s maid and Iago’s wife—emerges as the play’s unexpected hero. Standing defiantly by the dead Desdemona, she calls for justice even at the threat of death. How does Shakespeare present her heroism? As a new and improved vision of domesticity. When Iago commands, “I charge you get you home,” Emilia boldly declares, “Perchance Iago I will ne’er go home.”

In a play whose first act meditates on the role of home for establishing kinship and social place, the final scene shows a wife refusing home as a place vulnerable to poisonous fantasies. Not only has the household ceased to function ethically and socially, but its dream of inclusion is shown to be especially dangerous for women and racial outsiders. Belonging, being housed, having a place: Othello brilliantly uncovers the fragility of these desires in a world where home is as illusory as theater. ♦

## From a Scholar's Perspective Poisonous Commonplaces



**CAROL THOMAS NEELY**, is Professor of English Emerita at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. These scholar notes were first published in Playbill, written for CST's 1995 production of *Othello*.

**T**he *Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice* was first performed in 1604, around the time of *Troilus and Cressida* and *Measure for Measure*.

Like them, it is the stuff that current headlines are made of. In it, status hunger mixes with racial and sexual fears and prejudices to corrupt love and justice. *Othello* begins with Iago's racist, sexist taunt to Brabantio: "An old black ram is tupping your white ewe." It concludes on a bed covered with wedding sheets where a murderous consummation enacts Iago's fantasies. With no extraneous character, no subplot, no comic diversion, the play is relentless. Like the characters, the audience wants justice and relief; we want to blame someone else and absolve ourselves.

As the play begins, Othello and Desdemona display extraordinary courage, self-assurance, and love. He eloquently asserts his authority: "My parts, my title, and my perfect soul shall manifest me rightly." She boldly defends her elopement before the Venetian Senate:

*That I did love the Moor to live with him, / My downright violence and storm of fortunes, / May trumpet to the world.*

But the different expectations they bring to this cross-cultural match create potential for divisions within and between them. Desdemona is a dutiful, white Venetian daughter who chooses to disobey her father and move outside her house, her milieu, her city, seeking adventure. Othello, long an adventurer, is a freed slave, a black African in white Europe, a converted Christian and Venetian general who fights Turks, aliens like himself. An outsider who has moved inside, he seeks security and contentment through love for Desdemona:

*And when I love thee not, / Chaos is come again.*

Iago corrupts Desdemona's and Othello's virtues by catalyzing their vulnerabilities—as he does to all those he exploits. By promulgating sleazy racial, sexual and cultural stereotypes, Iago triggers insecurities. Then he offers satisfactions: to the impotent Roderigo, Desdemona; to the proud Cassio, his reinstatement; to the agonized Othello, proof of infidelity and opportunity for revenge. Iago finds or plants in his victims his own deepest compulsion: to elevate himself by putting down others, to "plume up my will in double knavery." He exults in his plot to deface beauty by spreading filth:

*So will I turn her virtue into pitch, / And out of her own goodness make the net / That shall enmesh them all.*

The audience, made confidante to his scheme, may be seduced into unwitting participation.

At the center of Iago's web is the handkerchief, which, as it passes from Desdemona to Emilia to Iago to Cassio to Bianca, is transformed from a symbol of one woman's passionate

**With no extraneous character, no subplot, no comic diversion, the play is relentless.**

fidelity to a mark of all women's inevitable promiscuity. Replacing his vision of Desdemona with Iago's, Othello takes her

for a commonplace "whore of Venice," who must be sacrificed to the cause of justice. But Desdemona, although baffled by Othello's raging jealousy, refuses to reduce him to "the Moor." She seeks instead a strategy which will reverse Iago's and bring good out of bad. Desdemona dies affirming her love, but it is Emilia who uses the handkerchief, once proof of guilt, to reveal innocence. As Emilia dies for her mistress, the audience has found its hero.

Othello's own death speech seems more self-serving than self-cleansing. He claims that he loved "not wisely but too well;" he blames Iago who perplexed him; he imagines that his Venetian general self can be redeemed by killing his alien slave self now denigrated as a "circumcised dog." The conclusion, like the play, is harrowing for the audience who wants clarity and catharsis. We may wish to remember the Othello who was "great of heart" and forget the man who murdered his innocent wife. We may wish to demonize Iago, judging him guilty and finding satisfaction in his promised torture. Or we may agree with Lodovico that the marital death bed "poisons sight" and must be hidden. But if, as audience, we are too easily satisfied with redemption, revenge, or concealment, do we not deny our own vulnerability to, our own complicity with, the poisonous commonplaces about others which circulate now as then? ♦

# WHAT THE CRITICS SAY

## 1600s and 1700s

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*Nothing is more odious in Nature than an improbable lye; And, certainly, never was any Play fraught, like this of Othello, with improbabilities . . . The Character of that State is to employ strangers in their Wars; But shall a Poet thence fancy that they will set a Negro to be their General; or trust a Moor to defend them against the Turk? With us a Black-amoor might rise to be a Trumpeter; but Shakespear (sic) would not have him less than a Lieutenant-General.*

—THOMAS RYMER, 1692

*'Tis granted, a Negro here does seldom rise above a Trumpeter, nor often perhaps higher at Venice. But then that proceeds from the Vice of Mankind, which is the Poets (sic) Duty as he informs us, to correct, and to represent things as they should be, not as they are. After all this, Othello being of Royal Blood, and a Christian, where is the disparity of the Match? If either side is advanc'd, 'tis Desdemona. And why must this Prince though a Christian, and of known and experienc'd Virtue, Courage, and Conduct, be made such a Monster, that the Venetian Lady can't love him without perverting Nature?*

—CHARLES GILDON, 1694

*The Groundwork of [Othello] is built on a Novel of Cinthio Giraldi . . . , who seems to have design'd his Tale as a Document to young Ladies against disproportion'd Marriages . . . That they should not link themselves to such, against whom Nature, Providence, and a different way of Living have interpos'd a Bar. Our Poet inculcates no such Moral: but rather, that a Woman may fall in Love with the Virtues and shining Qualities of a Man; and therein overlook the Difference of Complexion and Colour.*

—LEWIS THEOBALD, 1733

*The fable of Othello is founded upon one action only, which is conducted with great skill; and if from the distress of the catastrophe it is not the most pleasing of Shakespeare's tragedies, it is undoubtedly the most perfect.*

—JOHN SHEBBEARE 1771-72

*Upon the whole, in this intercourse betwixt Iago and Othello, Shakespeare has shown the most complete knowledge of the human heart. Here he has put forth all the strength of his genius; the faults which he is so prone to fall into are entirely out of sight. We find none of his quibbling, his punning, or bombast; all is seriousness, all is passion.*

—W.N. 1791



Postell Pringle as Othello and the ensemble of JQ, GQ and Jackson Doran in Chicago Shakespeare Theater's 2013 production of *Othello: The Remix*, directed by GQ and JQ. Photo by Michael Brosilow.

# WHAT THE CRITICS SAY

## 1800s

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*The last speech [Iago's soliloquy], the motive-hunting of motiveless malignity—how awful! In itself fiendish; while yet he was allowed to bear the divine image, too fiendish for his own steady view. A being next to devil, only not quite devil—and this Shakespeare has attempted—executed—without disgust, without scandal!*

—SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE 1808-1818

*While the Moor bears the nightly color of suspicion and deceit only on his visage, Iago is black within. He haunts Othello like his evil genius and with his light (and therefore the more dangerous) insinuations, he leaves him no rest.*

—AUGUST WILLIAM SCHLEGEL 1811

*Othello does not kill Desdemona in Jealousy, but in a conviction forced upon him by the almost superhuman art of Iago, such a conviction as any man would and must have entertained who had believed Iago's honest as Othello did.*

—SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE 1813

*We feel that the utterer is thinking of the past and the future while speaking of the instant. When he says in Othello 'Put up your bright swords or the dew will rust them,' we feel that his throat had commanded where swords were as thick as reeds. From eternal risk he speaks as though his body were unassailable.*

—EDMUND KEAN (WHO PLAYED OTHELLO) 1817

*The great moral lesson of the tragedy of Othello is that black and white blood cannot be intermingled in marriage without a gross outrage, upon the law of Nature; and that, in such violations, nature will vindicate her laws.*

—JOHN QUINCY ADAMS 1835

*Iago is the whitewashed, hypocritical power of evil—his is a selfish, half-animal nature, which is unable to control its desires and passions simply because it has never made the attempt . . . With Iago, honour, even in its worldly acceptance is a mere pretence.*

—HERMANN ULRICI 1839

*I quail at the idea of his laying hold of me in those terrible passionate scenes.*

—FANNY KEMBLE

(SARAH SIDDONS' NIECE WHO PLAYED DESDEMONA) 1848

*In Othello, with wonderful psychological perception, [Shakespeare] created a magnificent tragic field for the passion of jealousy.*

—G.G. GERVINUS 1849-50

*By the side of Othello, who is night, there is Iago, who is evil—evil, the other form of darkness. Night is but the night of the world; evil is the night of the soul.*

—VICTOR HUGO 1864

*There is no mistaking Shakespeare's intention in the delineation of [Iago's] character. He meant him for a most attractive, popular, good-natured, charming, selfish, cold-blooded and utterly unscrupulous scoundrel.*

—RICHARD GRANT WHITE 1885

*To me [Desdemona] was in all things worthy to be a hero's bride, and deserving the highest love, reverence, and gratitude from the noble Moor.*

—HELENA FAUCIT 1888

*To portray Iago properly you must seem to be what all the characters think, and say, you are, not what the spectators know you to be; try to win even them by your sincerity. Don't act the villain, don't look it or speak it (by scowling and growling, I mean), but think it all the time. Be genial, sometimes jovial, always gentlemanly. Quick in motion as in thought; lithe and sinuous as a snake.*

—EDWIN BOOTH

(JOHN WILKES BOOTH'S BROTHER WHO PLAYED IAGO) 1886

*The love of Desdemona is made to leap over quite all of the social limitations known to man; she bids defiance not only to the behests of family, but also to the feelings of nationality and to the instincts of race.*

—DENTON J. SNIDER 1887

*[Othello] is pure melodrama. There is not a touch of character in it that goes below the skin and the fitful attempts to make Iago something better than a melodramatic villain only make a hopeless mess of him and his motives. To anyone capable of reading this play with an open mind as to its merits, it is obvious that Shakespeare plunged through it so impetuously that he had it finished before he had made up his mind as to the character and motives of a single person in it.*

—GEORGE BERNARD SHAW 1897

## 1900s

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*[Othello's] tragedy lies in this—that his whole nature was indisposed to jealousy, and yet was such that he was unusually open to deception, and, if wrought to passion, likely to act with little reflection, with no delay, and in the most decisive manner conceivable.*

—A.C. BRADLEY 1904

*The player who represents Iago should, when he speaks to the Moor, be so sincere in his doubts as to put the audience also in doubt, make it admire his character, and only by degrees discover his perfidious cunning. If the actor should make the betrayer a shade too Satanic, Othello would look foolish. His insinuations should be delivered with little care, and show a great respect for his captain.*

—TOMMASO SALVINI (WHO PLAYED OTHELLO IN ITALY) 1907

*Othello is a play written in the style of Italian Opera.*

—GEORGE BERNARD SHAW 1910

*It is a tragedy of racial conflict; a tragedy of honor rather than of jealousy . . . It is because he is an alien among white people that his mind works so quickly, for he feels dishonour more deeply.*

—PAUL ROBESON (WHO PLAYED OTHELLO) 1930

*I know no character in Shakespeare which has suffered from so much misconception. The general idea seems to be that Desdemona is a ninny, a pathetic figure chiefly because she is half-baked. It is certainly the idea of those who think an actress of the dolly type, a pretty young thing with a vapid innocent expression, is well suited to the part. I shall perhaps surprise you by telling you that a great tragic actress, with a strong personality and a strong method, is far better suited to it, for Desdemona is strong, not weak.*

—ELLEN TERRY (WHO PLAYED DESDEMONA) 1932

*Othello is the symbol of faith in human values of love and war, romantically conceived. Desdemona, as she appears in relation to Othello, is not so much individual woman as the divinity of love. Iago is cynicism incarnate. He stands for a 'devil-world,' unlimited, formless, negative.*

—MAUD BODKIN 1934

*Iago's 'almost superhuman art' may properly be termed sub-human.*

—G.R. ELLIOTT 1937

*[Othello] is a marvelously sure and adroit piece of workmanship; though closely related to that judgement is the further one that, with all its brilliance and poignancy, it comes below Shakespeare's supreme—his very greatest works.*

—F.R. LEAVIS 1937

*[Othello] pictures through the hero not only the destruction of an established way of life, but the birth of a new order. Othello in his final soliloquy is a man of more capacious mind than the Othello who first meets us.*

—E.M.W. TILLYARD 1938

*Nothing that is in Iago is absent from Othello, though there is much in Othello of which Iago never dreamed.*

—MARK VAN DOREN 1939

*Othello is all of the past trying to forget itself in a moment, he is Africa trying to breathe in Venice. That is his struggle, that is what threatens his peace; and that, over and above the wiles of Iago, is the source of our feeling that explosion will follow calm.*

—MARK VAN DOREN 1939

*In [Othello] we see exemplified in the highest degree alike the spiritual greatness and the tragic weakness of men, in both of which the age of Shakespeare had a profound belief.*

—KENNETH O. MYRICK 1941

*Othello's . . . is a story of blindness and folly, of a man run mad. As the play is planned, evil works all but unquestioned in him until it is too late. Of battle between good and evil, his soul the battleground, even of a clarifying consciousness of the evil at work in him, there is nothing.*

—HARLEY GRANVILLE-BARKER 1945

*Shakespeare usually works as a romantic, raising his audience to the cosmic significance of his theme by setting it in remote ages and in the courts of kings. In Othello he goes differently to work, showing that the old war of Good and Evil has its centre everywhere, not least in the private household.*

—S.L. BETHELL 1952

*Othello is thus a true, and sublime, love tragedy—not a true-love romance with a tragic ending brought about chiefly by a heavy villain. It is Romeo and Juliet matured and recomposed. In writing the earlier play Shakespeare was aware, though not*

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*deeply aware, that the tragedy of love, when supreme is also the tragedy of hate. In Othello those two passions comparatively superficial in all of his previous stories are intensified to the uttermost and deeply interwoven . . . Othello is Shakespeare's, and surely the world's, supreme secular tragic poem of 'human love divine.'*

—G.R. ELLIOTT 1953

*Although the characters never achieve understanding and although our response to them—as theirs to each other—shifts with the successive and conflicting pulls of emotion and analysis, so that we see Othello through his own eyes and Iago's as well as our own, yet if we wait for the fullness of what the play has to offer we do reach a state of tragic comprehension; we are left with a greater insight into the passions and the will and how they operate to cut us off from each other and from ourselves.*

—JOHN BAYLEY 1960

*Iago hates Othello because he is a Moor. This irrational but powerful motive, underlying the obsessive intensity of his feelings, and the improvised reasons with which he justifies it, continually presses up towards the surface of his language . . . Iago's mind broods constantly over Othello's color.*

—G.M. MATTHEWS 1964

*Though I played Iago many years ago, I didn't understand the part till I'd been in service during the war. I think when someone gets a half-stripe more than you, your soul can get bitten.*

—SIR LAURENCE OLIVIER 1964

*Just as no one can become truly a member of a family into which he was not born, no one can set his roots deeply in a city that is not his own. In a sense, the brotherhood of man does not extend beyond the walls of the city. Or there are two brotherhoods of man—one as men are universally and other as men are in their practical lives—the two being incommensurable. A man can be fully at home only in his own city. Men know themselves from their place in the city . . . A being who was completely indifferent to such a world, who had no need of any particular place, would either be a beast living on unconscious passion or a superman, a sort of deity, who could receive his laws and his aspirations from the silent vastness of the universe.*

—ALLAN BLOOM 1964

*Our natural partisanship with love and lovers causes us to see only Iago's wickedness in destroying the love of Othello and Desdemona; we like to believe that, without his intervention, all would have been well . . . Iago is only a mirror or an agent that causes the unseen to become visible. Lived over and over again, the love of Desdemona and Othello would end the same way . . . Iago's speeches, read dispassionately, shows that he is the clearest thinker in the play. 'Honest Iago' is not merely a tragically misplaced epithet. Iago does tell more of the truth than any other character.*

—ALLAN BLOOM 1964

*The massiveness of his self-assurance in the face of the tenuousness of his real position shows that his life is based on a critical lack of self-knowledge. Othello, though radically dependent, represents himself as completely independent; and the myth of his independence seems to be less for his own benefit than for the sake of those who made him. They could not trust him if they knew him to be their own creation.*

—ALLAN BLOOM 1964

*Othello is about the wanton destruction of happiness—something so precious and fragile that its loss is felt as quite irredeemable. This, I think, is the fundamental source of the peculiar sense of pain and anguish that this tragedy, more than any of the others, leaves in the consciousness of a spectator or a reader.*

—G.R. HIBBARD 1968

*Othello presents, in extreme form, the situation of the alien (including the class-alien) in a hierarchical, predatory and therefore not yet fully human society. Othello's color is thus representative of a much wider human protest than concerns race alone.*

—G.M. MATTHEWS 1974

*Iago knows something essential that Othello does not know; the audience shares the knowledge and so are implicated with Iago whether they like it or not. Iago's knowledge is not objective knowledge of real human relations . . . but the power it confers is real enough, and this is why the audience find themselves tied to Iago by a bond of complicity. The effect is intentional; Othello is not a play for making consciences comfortable.*

—G.M. MATTHEWS 1974

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*In Othello, [Shakespeare] imagines a world in which internal grace may not exist and the mind of man is free to make the choices that will result in the shaping of its own ends. The implications of man's freedom turn out to be at least as tragic as the implication of man's bondage.*

—ROBERT G. HUNTER 1976

*Instead of being, like the other tragedies, a play of expansion, Othello is a play of contraction. The action does not widen out, it narrows down as public business is increasingly excluded from it until it finds its catastrophe, not on the battlefield, nor in the presence of a court, but in a bedroom at night where two people, united by the closest of ties, speak at cross purposes and misunderstand each other disastrously . . . The pattern of this tragedy is that of a whirlpool, with its centre in the poisoned mind of the hero which reshapes, distorts, and degrades objective reality.*

—STEPHEN GREENBLATT 1980

*Much of the power of Othello as a tragedy, I believe, is to make us acutely aware of our own needs for emotional and moral certainty, simplicity and finality—our own impulse . . . to categorize people as fair or foul in accordance to our own hot feelings about them. In revealing the web of self-strung delusions in which its characters trap themselves, the play forbids us (unless we delude ourselves) to judge its characters absolutely in terms of moral 'debit and credit,' as angels or devils, virtuous victims or hellish villains.*

—JANE ADAMSON 1980

*Throughout the play Shakespeare is exploring the capacity of the human heart to break or be broken . . . The last scene presents many deaths, each of which symbolically reinforces the play's stress on the necessary link between loving and vulnerability: Brabantio, Emilia, Desdemona, Othello—they are all killed, emotionally and physically, solely because they were willing to love.*

—JANE ADAMSON 1980

*Shakespeare's presentation of Iago challenges us to dare not to shield ourselves from what the drama shows: that Iago's inhumanity is itself the clearest sign of his humanity. It cannot be safely fenced off into a category labelled 'devilish,' 'unhuman.' Despite its best (or its worst) efforts, Iago's will cannot enclose itself totally and permanently in protective armor-plating.*

—JANE ADAMSON 1980

*At the heart of the play, and centered in its full realization of both Desdemona's and Othello's anguish, is Shakespeare's insight into the dire necessity for, and the often impossible difficulty of sustaining, a life open to doubt and uncertainty and therefore always at risk.*

—JANE ADAMSON 1980

*It would be impossible for Iago to seduce Othello if Othello did not already share Iago's value structure. Othello is not dense or blind, he is not a noble savage. He is a male who lives and thrives in a masculine occupation in a 'masculine' culture, the assumptions of which he shares.*

—MARILYN FRENCH 1981

*One of the means which Shakespeare employs to indicate the gradual hold Iago develops on Othello's mind is the growing infection of his speech by Iago's vocabulary. . . Whereas the former delights in the dualities of saint and devil, beauty and dishonesty, alabaster skin and the possibility, the latter finds such insecurity unbearable.*

—NORMAN SANDERS 1984

*When Othello, late in life, finds in Desdemona the erotic equivalent of his military profession, he transfers on to her all the imaginative appreciation which had formerly been lavished on his career. She becomes his 'fair warrior,' his 'captain's captain' and his camp companion. But more significant, and fatal, than this verbal militarizing of his wife is his insistence on making her the sole object of his full powers of romantic projection. She is not only his love but Love itself which banished chaos from the universe at the beginning of the world.*

—NORMAN SANDERS 1984

*Othello is fascinating as a historical document because of the way it inscribes a transitional moment in Western culture. In it we can almost see the supernatural realm receding. The feudal world of honor, fidelity, and service is becoming the bourgeois world of property and contractual relations. Heroic tragedy is turning into domestic tragedy. It was Shakespeare's fortune to partake of two worlds without belonging completely to either.*

—MARK ROSE 1985

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*The sexes, so sharply differentiated in the play, badly misunderstand each other. The men . . . persistently misconceive the women; the women fatally overestimate the men. Each sex, trapped in its own values and attitudes, misjudges the other.*

—CAROL THOMAS NEELY 1985

*What happens in this play is that in fact the military calling is hideously domesticated; the fury and terror of the field, having no outlet in action, settle into the bedroom, and 'honour' is grotesquely fought over, ambiguously won and lost.*

—ANTHONY HECHT 1986

*Although Othello intensely wishes not to be a typical stage Moor, he finds himself in exactly that position. He is the black man who provokes a crisis by his sexual relationship with a white woman.*

—ANTHONY GERARD BARTHELEMY 1987

*I wanted to see if Shakespeare without changing a single word could be a protest play. And it turned out to be exactly that.*

—JANET SUZMAN 1987

*[Othello's] precarious entry into the white world is ruptured by his relation with Desdemona, which was intended to secure it in the first place.*

—ANIA LOOMBA 1989

*The play thinks abomination into being and then taunts the audience with the knowledge that it can never be unthought: 'What you know, you know.' It is a technique that works close to the unstable ground of consciousness itself; for it would be almost as difficult to say whether its racial anxieties are ones that the play discovers or implants in an audience as to say whether jealousy is something Iago discovers or implants in Othello.*

—MICHAEL NEILL 1989

*It doesn't 'oppose racism,' but (much more disturbingly) illuminates the process by which such visceral superstitions were implanted in the very body of the culture that formed us. The object that 'poisons sight' is nothing less than a mirror for the obscene desires and fears that Othello arouses in its audiences—monsters that the play at once invents and naturalizes, declaring them improper, even as it implies that they were always 'naturally' there.*

—MICHAEL NEILL 1989

*The point is that the Senate hired Othello. He is there merely on business—killing business, which happens to be his occupation. You would not expect the 'wealthy curled darlings of our nation' . . . to bloody their doublets and muddy their hose fighting Turks, not when there are, as we Americans say, 'freedom fighters' available. Freedom fighters and barbaric mercenaries do for us what we are too civilized to do for ourselves. If we contract with them to kill our enemies, it does not mean that we are alike.*

—JAMES L. CALDERWOOD 1989

*To be a black in Venice is to be a stranger, wherever you come from, even if you are a Venetian. Othello's case may seem unique, but the mirror he looks in reflects a universally human face. We are all trapped by accident inside bodies that misrepresent us, making us strangers in Venice to everyone but the Desdemonas who love us.*

—JAMES L. CALDERWOOD 1989

*I don't mean that Iago is an allegorical sign of Othello's unconscious. He is that in some degree, but he is also the unconscious of the play itself; or, in dramaturgical terms, he is all that Shakespeare the playwright felt obliged to exclude when he fashioned characters like Othello, Desdemona, and Cassio. That means that Iago is somewhat within them by virtue of being kept outside of them; or at least he is indispensable to them, since they are nobly what they are by virtue of not being ignoble like him. He is a kind of theatrical residue of Shakespeare's creation of nobility. A romantic playwright might have discarded this residue entirely, but Shakespeare not merely retains it but makes it into a character with enormous theatrical vitality, the conscious unconscious of the play.*

—JAMES L. CALDERWOOD 1989

*Iago is not interested in who he is; he can live without the myth of the I. The rest of us are not so hardy. Like Othello, we need to have faith in the roles we play, especially when we are playing ourselves. Otherwise we could never act or speak.*

—JAMES L. CALDERWOOD 1989

*Being human means accepting promises from other people and trusting that other people will be good to you. When that is too much to bear, it is always possible to retreat into the thought, 'I'll live for my own comfort, for my own revenge, for*

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*my own anger, and I just won't be a member of society any more.' That really means, 'I won't be a human being any more.'*

—MARTHA NUSSBAUM 1989

*Derrida writes, 'There's no racism without a language.' I take this to mean that racism—and all the violence historically associated with it—is generated by language. Racial difference is not genetically 'real' nor is it grounded in real experience but is a product of verbal conditioning. Racism cannot long survive without the verbal and symbolic apparatus that generates and sustains it: the names, the jokes, the plays, the speeches, the casual exchanges, the novels. In short, racism is a cultural virus that is verbally transmitted and its antidote must therefore be verbally transmitted as well. Othello—along with the many African American texts it has inspired—provides a running record of Western civilization's attempt to confront what Paul Robeson called 'the problem of my own people.' Othello, he said, 'is a tragedy of racial conflict, a tragedy of honor, rather than jealousy.'*

—JAMES ANDREAS 1992

*Shakespeare's tragic characters are visionaries, purists, idealists. Believing in a strict correspondence between the way things are and the way things appear to them, they commit themselves imaginatively to the fulfillment of an ideal, whether personal or political or both. This is what Alfred Harbage notices when he remarks on 'their unworldliness, their incapacity for compromise,' and speaks of them as 'imperfect ones torn by their dreams of perfection, mortals with immortal longings in them.'*

—RUSS McDONALD 1993

*Othello provokes us with something new, something that many view as more dangerous than an unruly daughter wooing and wooed by an exotic storyteller. Othello taunted Englishmen of the 17th century and later readers to abandon their fears of the other, to accept an African's humanity, to correct centuries of theatrical and literary history that equated black men with the devil.*

—ANTHONY GERARD BARTHELEMY 1994

*We may not be black or from Africa, but we have come from somewhere. And we have known profound loneliness. Othello's unconscious is my own. Shakespeare has given us*

*a black man, but he speaks of the entire human condition. Shakespeare uses the metaphor of a black man, but Othello is the stranger—the stranger that lives in each of us.*

—BARBARA GAINES 1995

*Othello talks of love, not of sex . . . We must not suppose that there is only one kind of love, or even that Othello's exactly matches Desdemona's. Lovers tend to assume this equivalence, as indeed do bystanders who commend the intercourse that 'soul to soul affordeth.' Othello and Desdemona use the same language of love, as if intending theirs to be a mating of souls; yet, as Virginia Woolf once remarked, when one wants to concentrate on the soul 'life breaks in.' Desdemona's soul burns steadily; when life breaks in, in the form of a husband who strikes and kills her, this cannot extinguish her love. Othello's burns with a more flaring flame, at times so intensely that he gasps for breath; it switches easily to its opposite, an equally unbearable hatred.*

—E.A.G. HONIGMANN 1997

*As a Moor, he is clearly presented as Other, but not necessarily an offensive Other; the qualifier noble Moor does not extricate him from the realm of the exotic, yet it undermines the perception of him as evil. The association of him with blackness and its numerous signifiers, however, clearly locates him in the world of the undesirable.*

—ELLIOTT BUTLER-EVANS 1997

*Like many tragic heroes, Othello is greater than those around him. He is, in Aristotle's term, *spoudaios*: excellent in character, intense in thought, elevated in feeling. But the forces assayed against him are immense—not superhuman forces . . . but all of human society. Everywhere he turns, Othello confronts racism. Its different faces or masks—not only enmity, disdain, abuse, but friendship, admiration, love—serve to make it more insistent, compelling, inexorable. In the end, he succumbs to the racist vision of those around him.*

—PATRICK HOGAN 1998

*Of all the parts in the cannon, perhaps Othello is the one which should most definitely not be played by a black actor.*

—HUGH QUARSHIE 1998

# WHAT THE CRITICS SAY

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*What did Iago achieve by these killings? Before Othello's suicide the answer would have been Othello himself, freed from marriage—as he was before the play started. I realized that Iago has got rid of everyone close to him and Othello—Emilia, Roderigo, Desdemona and an attempted murder of Cassio. Iago's failure to kill Cassio undid him. Othello killing himself destroys him. There's nothing left.*

—DAVID SUCHET 1998

*Dramatic irony is the primary device here. We are required as an audience to understand the distance between reality and appearance in Othello's distress. We are asked to reflect on the disparity between a false human engagement with reality, and the actual truth. We are driven to see the terrible absurdity of Othello's misunderstandings, as well as their plausibility, and consequences . . . Othello believes Iago, and the dramatic irony of the play establishes this as a terrible and false belief. But we as an audience see how persuasive this subjective and false 'truth' is. We are therefore encouraged by the narrative to view our own truths as less certain than they might have been. For what is truth, but a subjective construct rendered persuasive in the moment of its construction? There are, perhaps, no absolute truths . . . The baroque experience addresses, in a more general way, the disenchantment and anguish arising from the emergence of new religious views of the world, putting into question the old religion of catholic Europe. The play is a study of human relations through a 'secularized' religious perspective.*

—ANTHONY GILBERT 2001

*[Desdemona] is shown as so pure that she cannot conceive of the impurity Othello accuses her of, and so obedient that she goes to bed to be murdered . . . With her last breath she tries to save her loved Othello from punishment. It was not he who stifled her, she says—she did it herself. Shakespeare lavishes such plangent poetry, such spiritual delicacy, on this portrait, that it is very difficult to notice how such an unqualified display of virtue might be seen as provocative, from the analytical point of view—because it leaves the other partner in the relationship to carry everything else, the messy, unspiritual, gross, and violent elements of sexuality, as Othello in fact does.*

—FELICITY ROSSLYN 2001

*Here on the quayside, though, the whole history of women is, as Iago thinks, already known. A male-authored narrative circulated*

*among men, it takes its place among the other male narratives that constitute Othello.*

—CAROL CHILLINGTON RUTTER 2001

*Critics recently have focused attention on the interplay of race and gender in Shakespeare's Othello, examining how the play interrogates social norms and disagreeing over whether those norms ultimately are subverted or upheld. However, in analyzing the Caucasian, patriarchal world of the play, critics have largely overlooked the textual issue of age, failing to note that Othello and Desdemona may be separated by as much as a generation. . . . Such a difference in age would alarm the typical early modern audience, as they would likely perceive this match as unnatural to the point of being doomed . . . In fact, the age difference in this union would foreshadow tragedy for the audience even without the compounding of other differences. . . .*

—VALERIE BARNES LIPSCOMB 2001

*Othello's collapse into murderous violence would seem to be an illustration of the way, according to the racist view, the coating of civilization must slide readily off the 'savage' personality. But Shakespeare's readiness to admit the instability of personality—as though he is ready to entertain Iago's denial of intrinsic and permanent character—is apparent in all his tragedies. The Macbeth who is held by his wife to be too full of the milk of human kindness before his murder of Duncan is not the same as that 'dead butcher' whose head is triumphantly carried onto the stage on the uplifted lance of Macduff at the end.*

—MILLICENT BELL 2002

*At the last, Othello surrenders himself to the prison of race he thought he had escaped. He is not able, in the end, to cast away the role and character which societal convention prescribed to him at the beginning of his career in the white colonial world.*

—MILLICENT BELL 2002

*Emilia, rather than any of the male characters, has the final say on female sexual honesty, as she exonerates Desdemona with her last words: 'Moor, she was chaste' (5.2.249). Finally, it is Emilia who in her last statements and actions redefines 'honesty' for women in the play, making it signify not only a case of chastity, but one of being 'truthful,' 'loyal,' 'loving toward friends which brings honor,' and 'one who takes up the cause of another as if it were her own.'*

—STEVE CASSAL 2003

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John Hoogenakker as Roderigo and Paul Niebanck as Iago in Chicago Shakespeare Theater's 2008 production of *Othello*, directed by Marti Maraden. Photo by Steve Leonard.

*To ensure that we do not miss the intimate connection between the sexual act on the first day and the murderous act on the second, Shakespeare makes both happen in the same place: in bed.*

—LUKAS ERNE 2003

*The benevolent properties of the handkerchief are conditional upon its retention within Othello's family. Desdemona's consequent loss of the article (and its repossession by Iago) initiates the malevolence of which the charmer warns Othello's mother: 'If she lost it / Or made a gift of it, my father's eye / Should hold her loathed, and his spirits should hunt / After new fancies' (3.4.60-63). Thus Othello, in fulfillment of the curse, begins to loath his wife and pursue the fancy of murdering her.*

—DIANA ADESOLA MAFE 2004

*Othello is the story of a woman killed—smothered in her bed—for having sex. Which particular man she is killed for having sex with matters less to me than the sexual nature of the transgression she dies for . . . That relatively few objections to Shakespeare's politics in this play have focused on its treatment of domestic violence—as opposed to its treatment of race—seems to me worthy of comment. Indeed, even those critics who categorize the play as 'domestic tragedy' overwhelmingly resist applying the language of domestic violence . . . Wife-murder is a crime—in Shakespeare's culture as in our own—even when the wife is 'guilty' of adultery.*

—CELIA R. DAILEADER 2005

*Othello is a tragedy that continually surprises us. Not only did Shakespeare make the blackest man on stage a white man (Iago), I would suggest that he made the bravest warrior onstage a woman (Desdemona) . . . Because none of the acknowledged literary sources for Othello describe the heroine as a warrior . . . Shakespeare catches us off guard when Desdemona is identified as a warrior twice in the play, once by Othello who greets her on the seemingly peaceful battle front of Cypress as his 'fair warrior' (2.1.180) and once by herself when she calls herself in the subsequent act and 'Unhandsome warrior' (3.4.152) for uncharitably arraigning Othello.*

—JOAN OZARK HOLMER 2005

*Shakespeare calls on his audiences to consider the person before them, complex as he may be, rather than judging him by inherited assumptions used to dismiss a maligned people in*

# WHAT THE CRITICS SAY

## 2000s

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*the abstract. Shakespeare makes the stage a venue for closer examination, a place where audiences may begin to relate to 'others,' not all at once, but one extraordinary example at a time. In adapting Cinthio, Shakespeare sets up familiar stereotypes to explode them and to teach his audiences compassion for those whom society uses but never fully embraces as countrymen.*

—KRISTIN JOHNSEN-NESHATI 2005

*As trade opened up with northern Africa in the late 16th century, growing prejudices against Moors and Muslims in England added to the acceptance of this stereotype. In 1601, Queen Elizabeth issued an edict expelling all Moors from the British Isles. Debate continues today about whether Othello subverts Elizabethan expectations of a Moorish character or simply delays the reinforcement of the stereotype until later in the play, as Othello descends into madness and jealousy.*

—VIRGINIA MASON VAUGHAN 2005

*This multi-ethnic society and the blurring of social boundaries that accompanied it did not come without a sense of anxiety, whether in the Venice or the England of that time. Othello's relationships with himself and to those around him reflect renaissance imaginings of the exotic—of the cultural 'other'—that were at once glamorous and dangerous. In Shakespeare's England the abhorrence of 'otherness' was profound, and this anxiety ripples upon the surface of Othello.*

—FARAH KARIM-COOPER 2007

*Shakespeare leaves Othello's religious conversion deliberately ambiguous, poised between Moor, Christian and the other complex ethnic group described in the play, 'the general enemy Ottoman.' This ambiguity surrounding the origins and approaches towards the figure of the Moor can be partly explained by the extensive and amicable relations that were established between Elizabethan England and the kingdom of Morocco. It is important to remember that by the late 1580s, Protestant England regarded Spanish Catholicism, rather than Ottoman or North African Islam, as its biggest religious and political threat.*

—JERRY BROTTON 2007

*In describing the effect on Desdemona, Othello restages the effect—on us. We are wooed; we are drawn in; we are persuaded. It is an effect the play will restage again (and again), showing not just Desdemona's seduction by narrative as seduction.*

—LAURIE MAGUIRE 2014

*So too the plot...is insistently coded as theatrical. The gulling of Roderigo is a rehearsal for the gulling of Othello. Othello's voyeurism parallels our own as spectators. Both Desdemona and Roderigo speak after they've technically been pronounced dead: Desdemona revives (impossibly) after being strangled...These are both physiological miracles and amateur dramatic errors.*

—LAURIE MAGUIRE 2014

*Eighteenth-century reviews and memoirs were written by educated white men whose prosperous standard of living often rested on traffic in human flesh; what they did not discuss may be as important as what they did. We need to ponder their silences and, as best we can, burrow in alternative discourses to understand fully Shakespeare's role within the cultural tradition.*

—JANET ADELMAN 2014

*Othello unfolds along the axis of imperial crisis and envy. The urgency and heat of the first act are driven as much by the Ottoman threat to Venetian imperial interests in the eastern Mediterranean as they are by Othello and Desdemona's clandestine marriage. The conjunction of the two events, the Ottoman attempt at seizing a Venetian colony and Othello's successful 'theft' of an elite Venetian woman, not only aligns Othello with the Ottoman Empire but also signals the latent danger of imperial expansion.*

—AMBEREEN DADABHOY 2014

*...Othello played out before an audience of Othellos and Iagos, strivers in the status wars of early modern England. The character who least connected with Shakespeare's contemporaries was probably Cassio, the fortunate stranger...*

—LENA COWEN ORLIN 2014

*Othello is perhaps Shakespeare's most anti-theatrical play, the text that most graphically portrays the devastating effect of believing in a reality shaped by words, performances and images—by what one character calls "false gazing."*

—WENDY WALL 2016

*Iago becomes the consummate playwright, actor, and director—someone able to weave an alternate reality for those around him. He transforms a mundane and domestic stage prop—a handkerchief—into "ocular proof" of infidelity. He uses illusions to estrange the familiar.*

—WENDY WALL 2016

## A Look Back at Othello in Performance

Looking back at *Othello* from a vantage point centuries after it was first performed, it can certainly be viewed among Shakespeare's most innovative plays. The plot is tight, the emotions are heart-stopping in their intensity, and the motivation behind all the characters' actions are rooted in a tangled web of causation. Throughout history, productions of *Othello* have reflected not only actors' and directors' insights into the play, but also the pervading social thought of the time. Few other plays have caused as much furor over casting choices, as much emotional discomfort, or as strong an audience response. And few other plays—by Shakespeare or any other playwright—have commanded the stage and the imagination of its audiences so persistently over 400 years.

The first recorded performance of *Othello* was at the Globe in 1604. Richard Burbage, one of Shakespeare's leading tragic actors and fresh from starring in *Hamlet*, played the title role. As with his *Hamlet*, Burbage made his *Othello* personal, his acting filled with deep emotion. He was likely joined by comedian John Lowin as Iago, suggesting that Iago was originally considered a comedic role. With Burbage playing *Othello*, the general was clearly the focus of the play. After Burbage's death, productions began to focus both on *Othello* and Iago. Desdemona was considered a secondary character.

Some scholars have convincingly argued that Shakespeare may have written *Othello* as early as 1601 or 1602. *Othello* was not printed until after Shakespeare's death: first in 1622 as a quarto (a small volume about the size of a modern paperback), and one year later in the first Folio (a large, atlas-sized collection). The first Quarto does not include Desdemona's Willow Song or Emilia's monologue blaming men for their wives' fates—omissions that create very different female characters. Both texts were produced during Shakespeare's lifetime. *Othello* must have appealed to audiences and actors alike since it continued to be performed until the Commonwealth closed the playhouses in 1642.

In 1660, with the monarchy restored in England, King Charles II reopened London's theaters. Attempting to maintain some control, he limited the number of new theater companies by licensing only two: the King's

Men (the vestiges of Shakespeare's own company) and the Duke's Men, owned by William Davenant, Shakespeare's godson. After dividing the rights to Shakespeare's plays, the King's Men received *Othello*, *Julius Caesar* and the three Falstaff plays. Productions of *Othello* during the Restoration are thought to have resembled those of Shakespeare's time, since many of the actors had once performed as boys with Shakespeare's company prior to the closing of the theaters in 1642.

After a special edict from King Charles II allowed women to appear on the English stage for the first time, Desdemona became the first role to be played by a professional actress in England. In *Othello: Texts and Contexts* Kim F. Hall writes:

*Ironically, the appearance of actresses on the English stage coincides with the diminution of women's roles in Othello: Desdemona becomes a more passive victim...and the desire and independence of the three female characters—Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca—fade under the intensity of the Iago-Othello dynamic.*

Throughout the Restoration until the late 1700s, *Othello* was played heroically, usually dressed in an English general's uniform complete with white-powdered wig that marked him as British, not Venetian or African. The eavesdropping scene and seizure, which were considered unworthy of a military hero, were often cut. Iago began to be portrayed as villainous rather than comedic. Many of Desdemona's domestic comments and more intimate lines, such as the Willow Song were cut, creating a more classical and less accessible character.

Many theaters on the European continent rejected *Othello*, and in fact it was banished entirely from the French stage throughout the 1700s. The inclusion of comic elements in this obviously tragic tale did not adhere to current theories of drama. In Ducis's 1792 "translation," Cassio's drunken brawl was omitted entirely because drunkenness, viewed as the sole property of comedy, had no place in high tragedy. This *Othello* focused on Desdemona and Brabantio's relationship (at the expense of Desdemona and *Othello*'s) and drastically cut Iago's role and prominence. The audience still protested the unconventional theatrical elements, such as depicting Desdemona's murder on stage, and the play's depiction of an

**After a special edict from King Charles II allowed women to appear on the English stage for the first time, Desdemona became the first role to be played by a professional actress in England.**

interracial marriage. France's black population had won citizen rights only five years prior to this production and marrying across race lines was newly legal—but socially taboo. At a performance in Paris in 1822, Desdemona's murder caused such uproar among theatergoers that the curtain was brought down. Ducis was forced to supply a “happy” ending; in his version, Brabantio rushes on stage and stops Othello before he can kill Desdemona.

By the early nineteenth century, *Othello* became a battle flag for the British Romantic movement—not ‘romantic’ as we know it today, however, as the play fell victim to severe cuts that eliminated all its “indecentencies.” 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 and preoccupation in *Othello*. He displayed incredible concentration and intensity on stage, making it all the more dramatic when he burst out in rage. The Victorian middle class did not want to see a cruel and sensual Othello, so all allusions to sex were cut from the text. Othello's love for Desdemona was devoid of any sensual feeling, due in part to the sexually repressive culture and in part to the Victorians' aversion to seeing a black man with a white woman. Othello's foreignness was downplayed as he became a man tempered by the Venetian society, a general with excellent parlor manners. The nineteenth century screened the murder from its audiences by closing the curtains around Desdemona's bed. Towards the end of the century, Desdemona and Emilia started to be realized as complex roles with identities beyond that of their husbands' obedient wives. Writing in 1885, actor Helena Faucit on Desdemona's behalf described a hitherto unspoken anger against Othello. Cutting the play to end with Othello's suicide speech, the Victorians wanted to restore tragic propriety to the play's disturbing conclusion.

Italians saw a very different *Othello* in 1887—Verdi's grand opera. Verdi cut the early Venice scenes, simplified Shakespeare's tragedy to recreate much of the grandeur present in early productions, and imagined Iago as pure, threatening evil. The opera met with immediate success. Across the ocean, 1821 saw the creation of New York City's African Company, an all black theater formed by ex-sailor William Henry Brown to perform melodramas and Shakespeare. The company's lead actor James Hewlett played Othello in the early 1820s, the first record of a black actor to play the role anywhere. The company disbanded in 1824, after harassment from the white theater community. Before its closing, one

of the theater's young audience members was Ira Aldridge (1821-67), an actor who, like the members of the African Company, was barred due to his race from an acting career in the United States. Instead, Aldridge traveled to Europe and played Othello, among many other roles, in the greatest theaters on the Continent.

By the time Aldridge was touring Europe, audiences there once again embraced the full range of emotions in the play. Aldridge was a proponent of naturalistic acting, and was able to bring his audiences to the same emotional peaks he experienced on stage. While generally positive, critical response often had exoticizing racial undertones. As one critic wrote, “After this Othello, it would be an anticlimax to have seen an ordinary Othello again. What abandonment, passion, beauty, greatness, sense... A Negro from Africa's western coast has come to show me the real Othello” (quoted in Hankey, 2005). Aldridge's performance as Othello held special cultural and social significance, both as a sign of liberation in Russia, where Alexander II had just freed the serfs, and in America, as Aldridge used his fame in exile to argue for the end of American slavery. For all his acclaim across Europe and Russia, Aldridge was never permitted to perform the role in the United States.

In 1800s America, a very different *Othello* was being performed. A rougher, more violent portrayal was given by Edwin Booth (the famous actor-brother of John Wilkes Booth). Traditionally, Desdemona's death 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 struggles. Through much of the nineteenth century, the play was set in contemporary middle-class interiors, with Othello and Desdemona costumed to look like their audience. It was only in the late 1800s that the tradition of historical costuming became prevalent.

In the early twentieth century, another American, Paul Robeson, added dimension to the role of Othello. Though a respected actor and singer, Robeson was forbidden as a black man to play Othello in the United States. And so, like Aldridge a century before, Robeson went to England. In 1930 London, he played Othello opposite Peggy Ashcroft to much critical acclaim. Not until 1942, after an extensive public relations campaign and an exhaustive search for a white actress who would agree to play Desdemona opposite his Othello (Uta Hagen), was Robeson

able to perform the title role in the United States. Even then the production toured only to theaters above the Mason-Dixon Line, since Robeson refused to play to segregated venues. As with Ducis's French "translation" and Ira Aldridge's performance in Russia, *Othello* gained new resonance when starring an African-American actor-activist in 1942 America. "In the USA," scholar Julie Hankey writes, "Robeson's was the voice of black America—and of his own struggle with the House Committee on Un-American Activities. Paul Robeson brought a quiet, subdued *Othello* to the stage, a man who "carried the chains of his race with him as weight" (Hankey, 1987).

Paul Robeson's success permitted different conversations about casting *Othello*. It was now clear that while a black actor as *Othello* might challenge a traditional, predominantly white theater-going audience, there was no longer a reason to avoid casting a black actor in the title role. In 1965 Sir Laurence Olivier portrayed *Othello* in painstaking blackface. While the production was critically acclaimed, critics also began to discuss the colonial implications of a white man, who does not share *Othello*'s lived experience with racism, "blacking up" to portray one of the few black characters in Western canonical drama. After Olivier's performance, it became socially taboo to cast a white actor as *Othello*, as audiences began to realize the racist weight of black face. Soon, however, productions began to make more deliberate casting choices about race for all of *Othello*'s characters.

Liz White's 1960 film *Othello* cast the General as African and the Venetians as African American. Charles Marowitz's 1972 adaptation, *An Othello*, turned both Iago and *Othello* into contemporary African American archetypes. Iago's characterization, inspired by the Black Panther movement, reflected the influence of contemporaries Malcolm X and Eldridge Cleaver. Marowitz depicted *Othello* as an African-American man who had aligned himself with the white government. In 1997, The Shakespeare Theatre in Washington, D.C. produced what its *Othello*, Patrick Stewart, called a "photo negative" production in which *Othello* was white and his Venice black. The production's director, Jude Kelly, said about this non-traditional choice:

**Robeson was forbidden as a black man to play *Othello* in the United States. And so, like Aldridge a century before, Robeson went to England.**

*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.*

In 1998 British-Ghanian actor-director Hugh Quarshie wrote: "Of all the parts in the canon, perhaps *Othello* is the one which should most definitely not be played by a black actor," arguing that his character is not a depiction of a black man, but a depiction of a white man's idea of a black man and therefore suited to be played by a white man in black face.

1997 saw another *Othello* in which Shakespeare's text resonated closely with the experiences of its audiences.

Janet Suzman directed the tragedy in Apartheid South Africa just twelve years after marriage between races had been legalized. The production's *Othello*, John Kani, had directly experienced systematic prejudice—his brother had been killed by the Apartheid police. Suzman's production was received as Protest Theater, with Iago as "the sick face of Afrikanerdom, of state-sponsored prejudice" (Hankey, 2005). Desdemona and *Othello* were portrayed as a passionate, dynamic couple with a real chance for happiness ruined by a racist state. The production was incredibly popular and has been filmed, as well.

The past three decades have brought a new focus upon the women's roles, especially Desdemona and Emilia. Trevor Nunn's 1989 production presented Imogen Stubbs as a frivolous and flirtatious Desdemona contrasted by Zoë Wanamaker's abused and downtrodden Emilia. Both roles captured the audience's interest; the portrayals of *Othello* and Iago were referenced frequently in reviews in terms of their interactions with their wives. British Director Michael Attenborough's 1999 *Othello* paired Zoë Waites's strong and even violent Desdemona with Rachel Joyce's tough and resentful Emilia. Desdemona and Emilia have continued to be realized as complex characters in contemporary productions. Chris Abrahams' 2013 *Othello* for Canada's Stratford Festival cast Deborah Hay as a notably feminist Emilia, disturbed at her husband's sexist remarks and horrified at

his plotting. This production utilized Julie Fox's blood-red set, Thomas Ryder Paine's contemporary soundscape, and careful realizations of all supporting characters to create an *Othello* focused less singularly upon Iago's machinations. Joanna Vanderham's Desdemona for the 2015 Royal Shakespeare Theater's Stratford-upon-Avon's production presented a "capable military wife and daughter rather than an impressionable girl" (Andrew Cowie, 2015). These varied depictions are indicative of Desdemona's evolving role in contemporary productions.

*Othello* clearly has a complicated stage history of incredibly varied productions that have resonated strongly with diverse cultures. But it also has a history of audience involvement unlike any other of Shakespeare's plays. An audience member in 1660 reported hearing a woman scream during Desdemona's smothering; an 1825 audience member interrupted the play to challenge Iago, whom he called a "damn'd lying scoundrel," to enter into a fight. In 1822 a Baltimore soldier shot and wounded the actor playing Othello for murdering a white woman "in [his] presence"; an audience member in 1943 whispered "Oh God, don't let him kill her...don't let him kill her."

Contemporary dialogue with *Othello* has been more nuanced as Shakespeare's tragedy has sparked a wide range of literary response. Murray Carlin's 1969 *Not Now, Sweet Desdemona* is a dialogue between Jamaican and white South African lovers as they rehearse Othello and Desdemona. Charles Marowitz's 1972 *An Othello* (discussed above) contextualizes *Othello* within the American Civil Rights Movement. Paula Vogel's 1984 *Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief* develops Desdemona and Emilia's relationship. The character of Othello has provoked other artistic responses: Fred Wilson's "Speak of Me as I Am" at the U.S. pavilion for the Venice Biennale showed Othello as a "European image of a black man" by overlaying film clips of different *Othellos*; Tayeb Salih's 1969 novel *Season of Migration to the North* tells of a Sudanese man tried for killing his British wife and Derek Walcott's poem *Goats and Monkeys* references *Othello* to portray modern reactions to black and white marriages (Kim Hall, 2007).

In 2013 Chicago Shakespeare Theater presented Chicago rappers the Q Brothers' *Othello: The Remix*. Known for their rapid fusion of Shakespeare and hip-hop, the Q Brothers created a 75-minute musical *Othello* performed by a cast of four men. Setting the play in contemporary American hip hop culture, the Q Brothers' adaptation closely follows Shakespeare's plot,

frequently interweaving *Othello*'s original lines into its hip hop verse. Othello is a superstar MC, Cassio a pretty boy lightweight rapper, Roderigo a gamer nerd, Bianca a band groupie, and Emilia a neglected and sexually frustrated housewife. Desdemona, who falls in love with Othello as she listens to his mix tape in her bedroom, is represented on stage only by her ethereal voice. While the production certainly portrayed the comic moments of Shakespeare's play, it also highlighted its tragedy in the harsh treatment of the women (played in drag or invisible) at the hands of all of the men, and created a chilling final scene. After Othello's suicide, all four actors took the stage to sing about Othello's isolation as a black man in modern America.

Jonathan Munby's 2016 upcoming production of *Othello* on Chicago Shakespeare Theater's stage marks the company's third time staging an unadapted version of *Othello*. In 1995, Paul Butler played the title character under Barbara Gaines' direction in a production that focused on "the pervasive and incessant clash of two cultures; the story of a man who aspires to belong to a world that is not his own, and who becomes victim to its racism, and to his own deep and monstrous terrors." (*Stagebill*, 1995) An original haunting, percussive score, composed by Lloyd King and performed live on stage by three musicians in traditional African dress, reminded the audience of Othello's state of isolation as a man alone in a foreign land. In 2008 a production directed by Marti Maraden featured Shakespearean Derrick Lee Weeden in the title role. Weeden's Othello, noted for his "fearful dignity" and sonorous bass voice, was joined by Allison Batty's adult, refined Desdemona. Leslie Bevan was especially praised for her creation of a righteous Emilia determined to finally tell the truth. As the full-length production comes to a close in the Courtyard Theater this spring, the Q Brothers' internationally acclaimed hip-hop "adaptation" will return to the theater Upstairs at Chicago Shakespeare, giving audiences for the first time an opportunity to see both in close succession here at Chicago Shakespeare Theater.



Ian Barford as Cassio and Deborah Staples as Desdemona in Chicago Shakespeare Theater's 1995 production of *Othello*, directed by Barbara Gaines. Photo by Chuck Osgood.



Lisa Dodson as Emilia and Steve Pickering as Iago in Chicago Shakespeare Theater's 1995 production of *Othello*, directed by Barbara Gaines. Photo by Chuck Osgood.



Deborah Staples as Desdemona and Lisa Dodson as Emilia in Chicago Shakespeare Theater's 1995 production of *Othello*, directed by Barbara Gaines. Photo by Chuck Osgood.



Glenda Fairella Baker and Niki Mitchell, dancers in Chicago Shakespeare Theater's 1995 production of *Othello*, directed by Barbara Gaines. Photo by Chuck Osgood.

# A PLAY COMES TO LIFE



## Conversation with the Director

Guest director Jonathan Munlay talks with CST's Education team about his approach to his production of *Othello*.

**Q** Jonathan, can we start by talking about your decision to place your production of *Othello* in the present?

**A:** For me, it's always important that we make the dialogue between actor and audience as immediate as it can be, that the major themes of the play resonate with us in the present tense. We talked about going back to the original period in 1604—a fascinating and turbulent time in English politics, with a change in the monarchy and fear of the unknown resonating through the society. But doublets and hose distance a contemporary audience, and this play touches on too many issues that we are still wrestling with in society. I want to make this experience as immediate as possible so that we can't shy away from it, that we can't say 'this is about a then and there,' when actually what I want to say is that this play is about the here and now.

I think *Othello* is a masterpiece, a study of human psychology: the power of manipulation and a study of sexual jealousy and what that can make us do. This play feels to me like one of the greatest psychological thrillers that has ever been written. I want our production to put a noose around the audience's neck and tighten it. That is what I think this play should be.

**Q: Where will you be setting the play?**

**A:** Whenever I change a play from its original period, I always do so with some caution. I don't want the setting to be too literal because the more literal you become, the more you pigeonhole the story, and the less the play has room to breathe. We'll be inventing a world. We'll be inventing a Venice and the play's other location in Cyprus. It will feel and look like recognizable, a contemporary America and Mediterranean Europe, but it will be its own world.

**Q: Can you describe what Cyprus will look like?**

**A:** Othello and his soldiers are sent to Cyprus to deal with the imminent threat of the Turks. There's something that resonated in me about this image of a military base in the Mediterranean or Middle East, something we see in the news on a daily basis. It will be set in an encampment, which should feel temporary: modular barracks surrounded by barbed wire. I was very much drawn to one particular photograph—an image of a small, delicate piece of fabric entangled in a fence, caught up inextricably in the barbed wire. For me, that is the play: Desdemona, this pure, good person, gets caught up in the barbed wire. This was really the starting point for the whole production. There's something so elemental for me about this image, so symbolic. This delicate piece of material caught up in barbed wire. What happens when you put someone like Desdemona into this military environment, into this male-dominated barracks? Well, what happens to her is the play. This setting fuels the intensity, the sense of entrapment and isolation, within its small, confined, dark spaces. I'm interested in the dangers for the female characters in this very male, heat-crazed barracks.

**Q: You had mentioned to the staff that the word 'now' is one frequently repeated throughout this entire play.**

**A:** Yes, it's interesting. I always do a search for which words appear most frequently in a play when I'm preparing for a production because it gives you a sense of what the play is about, what Shakespeare is

most interested in. In fact 'now' is one of the most frequently occurring words in *Othello*. Shakespeare writes the same play in every scene; thematically he looks at the same ideas regardless of where that scene takes place or who's in it. The 'nowness' of this story is really interesting because there's something about the sheer momentum of this story. Once Iago starts the ball rolling, there's a sort of inevitability about this narrative and the extraordinary pace at which it unfolds. That's something I really want an audience to experience: once you get on this train, there's no getting off.

**Q: Going back to your choice to place the production in the present, does the contemporary setting encourage you to make other interesting choices?**

**A:** Yes, I think it does. The ruler of Venice, the Duke, for example, is being played by Melissa Carlson. We used the audition process as an experiment to hear what it sounded like for a woman to speak these words and to be the one to negotiate this relationship between an angry father and his daughter. The moment Melissa started to utter this text, I

**I was very much drawn to one particular photograph—an image of a small, delicate piece of fabric entangled in a fence, caught up inextricably in the barbed wire. For me, that is the play.**

# A PLAY COMES TO LIFE

realized how wonderfully contemporary it sounded, how much it resonated as an interpretation—a senior woman defending the rights of this young woman.

**Q: Let's talk, then, about the women in this story.**

**A:** The gender politics of the play are fascinating. The piece takes an unsettling look at what we are prepared to do—and to lose—for love. In the context of this production, Emilia might well be part of the military's personnel, and her marriage to Iago, a military marriage. It makes sense for her to be on duty in the camp, and when the general's wife lands on the base she becomes Desdemona's aide. I imagine these two women set against the intensity and tensions of a barrack mentality, where fights can break out from nowhere. Everything becomes even more heightened because of the environment they are in. For both Desdemona and Emilia, service, duty and identity are all so closely intertwined. And then there's Bianca—this local escort, a sex worker who Cassio has a relationship with, and you get a sense that their relationship has gone beyond the boundaries and definition of work for her.

**Q: What do you hope to portray in your Othello?**

**A:** Othello is a very difficult role. The whole play is a kind of deception. That deception is only interesting if Othello is smart and as intelligent and strategic as his promotion and rank would suggest. Iago has to, therefore, work very hard. He plants the seed of something in Othello's head and nurtures it, like a gardener planting a seed, watering and fertilizing it, growing this monstrous plant inside Othello that rips through the man's skin and consumes his life. If you look at the concordance of this play and its word count, the word spoken most frequently, apart from 'now' and the characters' names, is 'jealousy.' In fact, jealousy is mentioned more in this play than in any other in the canon—I think there's maybe a hundred references to the idea of jealousy. It's truly a study of jealousy.

**Q: What about Iago?**

**A:** Iago is an absolutely fascinating character. I see him almost as a sort of 'lovechild' of Angelo, Edmund and Richard III. He's a professional soldier, yes, but there's a sophistication to him, as well, and an intelligence that feels almost like Hamlet at times. The interior of this man is extraordinary—knotty, difficult, extraordinarily complex, and a real challenge for any director or actor that takes Iago on. Who is he and what drives him? What motivates him? What makes him do the extraordinary things that he does in this play?

I think he is acutely aware of a glass ceiling present in his life as he watches people all around him being promoted above him. I think Iago is a hard-working, probably brilliant, soldier,

**Shakespeare keeps him alive in the end, which I think is really an interesting choice. He stays alive to live with what he has done.**

who has reached the top of his career ladder simply because he, unlike Cassio, is not from a privileged background. Cassio was born with a silver spoon in his hand. And so I think it's that glass ceiling as well as racism that are the two main drivers for Iago. He wants to see the downfall of both of them—Othello and Cassio.

**Q: What is our relationship going to be with Iago? How are we meant to feel about him?**

**A:** You know, audiences love Iago, that's one of the ironies of this play. He causes such extraordinary destruction and yet we love that. I suppose we love the antihero, don't we? We love the villain. Calling him a psychopath lets us off the hook, though you can describe some of what he does as psychopathic. But to say that he's a psychopath, I think, is diminishing. I think he *has* to deal with the human fallout of what he does. What is it for Iago in that final moment to be standing over this room of dead bodies, this room of carnage? What's going through that man's head in that moment? Shakespeare keeps him alive in the end, which I think is really an interesting choice. He stays alive to live with what he has done.

**Q: Do you imagine him remorseful in the end?**

**A:** I don't know what the end of this play is yet. We'll find out when we get there. A lot has been written about Ian McKellen's performance in Trevor Nunn's production at the RSC in 1989. He was described by reviewers as this sort of archetypal psychopath. Standing at the end of the bed with these bodies in front of him, he looked cold and dead in the eyes, like he couldn't connect emotionally with what he had just done. The same production was then filmed, and in the film we go into a close-up on Ian McKellen, into those eyes, and you see that he's not dead. He's not dead at all. You see a discovery of this horror that he's created. It's interesting. We'll have to find out in rehearsal when we get there.

**Q: Going back to what you were saying before about what motivates Iago. In your mind, how much in this play revolves around race?**

**A:** There's an endemic racism here, I think, an institutional racism in the world of this play. It's a play where we meet racist characters head on. The story begins in Venice, and we meet a white man, Brabantio, and his white daughter, and the father is very angry. He's angry at his daughter's deception, yes, but he

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is also angry that she's made this particular choice. Brabantio wines and dines this remarkable man one minute, and then in the next can't imagine him touching his daughter. He can't stand the thought. That type of hypocrisy is very much alive in our culture today.

So, yes, it's a play that looks at racism, but I think even more than racism, this play is about class and privilege. Iago is a professional soldier, who has worked very hard to get where he's got to, but he's acutely aware of a glass ceiling. He can't seem to be promoted any higher. And just before the play begins, a young, attractive, successful, privileged young man is promoted ahead of him. This seems to me a major catalyst for what Iago does. Yes, he's driven by hate, by racial hatred. Yes, he's driven by jealousy. But he's also driven by the realization, I think, that he can't achieve what he wants to achieve in life.

**Q: We haven't yet talked about the production's soundscape.**

**A:** There will be one central theme, Desdemona's theme, that runs through the play, an abstraction of the Willow Song

that she sings and which haunts her—and should haunt the entire production, as though the song somehow is carried on the wind. It is beautiful, and in absolute contrast to the other element of the soundscape, which is strong, contemporary and hard-edged. It's about that contrast, exactly what that image of that cloth caught in barbed wire evokes.

**Q: Jonathan, as a frequent director of Shakespeare, do you hear *Othello* in dialogue with any other Shakespeare plays?**

**A:** I've just directed *The Merchant of Venice* in London, and to work on these two plays in succession is such a privilege. It's amazing how thematically both plays are about outsiders and very much resonate with one another—the threat of the alien 'Other' and how unresolved that presence is in our culture, still. We made the choice to portray Shylock without a dialect and as someone well assimilated into that culture, which seemed to reveal more strongly the hypocrisy of his treatment among his fellow Venetians. I think the same with *Othello*. It's a choice to portray him without a distinct dialect. He is 'other' enough. And he is acutely aware of his otherness and the society around him chooses to accept him or not when it suits. ♦



Derrick Lee Weeden as Othello and Paul Niebanck as Iago in Chicago Shakespeare Theater's 2008 production of *Othello*, directed by Marti Maraden. Photo by Steve Leonard.

**CPS Shakespeare!** is a transformational program that invites CPS high school students and their teachers from across the city into CST's rehearsal room to create a completely original Shakespeare production. Through a five-week intensive rehearsal process under the guidance of a full team of professional CST artists, this intergenerational ensemble works together to prepare a fully designed production, culminating in two performances on Chicago Shakespeare's mainstage in the Courtyard Theater.



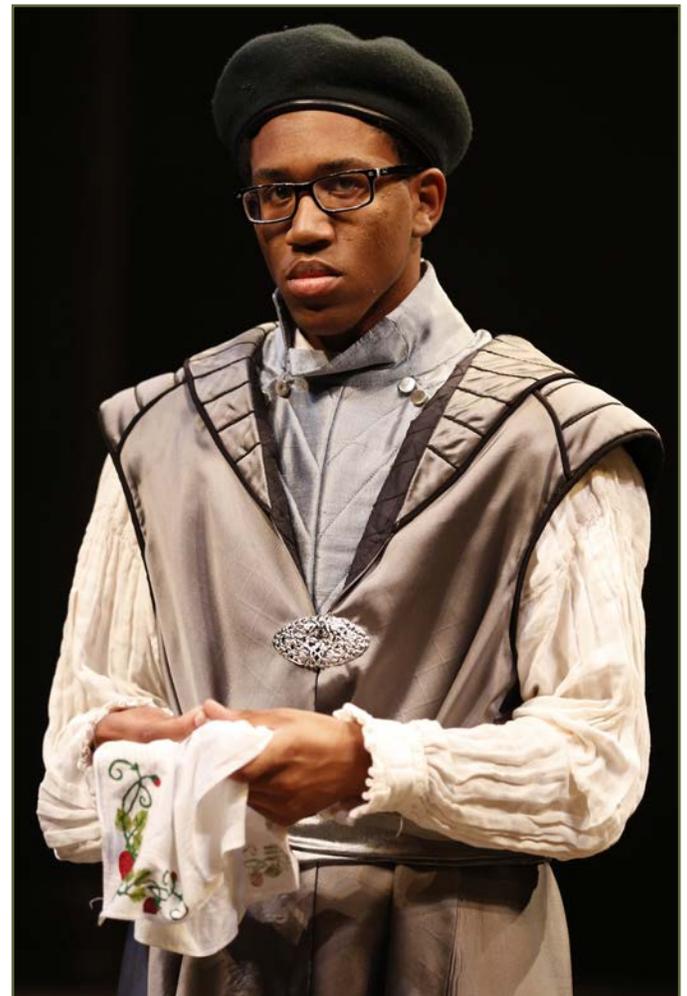
Deainera as Othello in Chicago Shakespeare Theater's 2013 production of *CPS Shakespeare! Othello*, directed by Kirsten Kelly. Photo by Liz Lauren.



Jenny as Emilia and Michelle as Desdemona in Chicago Shakespeare Theater's 2013 production of *CPS Shakespeare! Othello*, directed by Kirsten Kelly. Photo by Daniel Ribar.



Friday as Othello and Kimberly as Desdemona in Chicago Shakespeare Theater's 2013 production of *CPS Shakespeare! Othello*, directed by Kirsten Kelly. Photo by Liz Lauren.



Michael as Iago in Chicago Shakespeare Theater's 2013 production of *CPS Shakespeare! Othello*, directed by Kirsten Kelly. Photo by Liz Lauren.

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES & RESOURCES

## Before You Read the Play

### AS A CLASS

#### 1. LINE “DANCING”

*[To the teacher: when reviewing the text before class reading, pull significant short lines from throughout the script, and arrange them chronologically—or consider our suggestions below! **See Appendix A for printable lines ready to cut and distribute.**]*

With a classmate with the same line of text as you, decide who will read the first half of the line, and who will read the second. Together, read the line quietly three times. As a class, share any unfamiliar words, and discuss what they might mean.

Back with your partner, choose one word from each half of the line that stands out most to you and then think of a big physical gesture that helps illuminate the word’s meaning. Now, arrange yourselves in numerical order in a circle with the rest of the class. Starting with line #1, read your half of the line—sharing a big gesture on your chosen word—followed by your partner doing the same with his/her half of the line. Then, read your line a second time, with the rest of your classmates mirroring your gesture.

Continue to read the lines in chronological order, with the full group mirroring each pair’s gesture on the second reading. Once you’ve heard three pairs, go back to the first pair and string several lines together, building a kind of dance comprised of each pair’s gestures.

#### CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS L3, SL1

#1 O Thou foul Thief! | Where hast thou stowed my daughter?

#2 She is abused, stol’n from me, | and corrupted by spells and medicines bought of mountebanks.

#3 She loved me for the dangers I had passed, and I loved her that she did pity them. | This only is the witchcraft I have used.

#4 And so much duty as my mother showed to you, preferring you before her father, | so much I challenge that I may profess due to the Moor my lord.

#5 Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see. | She has deceived her father, and may thee.

#6 Oh, let the heavens give him defense against the elements, | for I have lost him on a dangerous sea.

#7 Till I am evened with him, wife for wife. | Or, failing so, yet that I put the Moor at least into a jealousy so strong that judgment cannot cure.

#8 You rogue! You rascal! | I’ll beat the knave into a twiggen bottle.

#9 I had rather have this tongue cut from my mouth than it should do offence to Michael Cassio. | Yet I persuade myself to speak the truth.

#10 Cassio I love thee | but never more be an officer of mine.

#11 I’ll pour this pestilence into his ear: | that she repeals him for her body’s lust.

#12 Cassio, my lord? | No, sure, I cannot think it that he would steal away so guilty-like seeing you coming.

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES & RESOURCES

#13 I am abused, | and my relief must be to loathe her.

#14 I am glad I have found this napkin. | My wayward husband hath a hundred times wooed me to steal it.

#15 Trifles light as air are to the jealous | confirmation strong as proofs of holy writ.

#16 Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore, Be sure of it. | Give me the ocular proof.

## 2. EXEUNT!

*[To the teacher: for students who might struggle reading a line of Shakespeare “cold,” consider using the Line “Dancing” exercise above as a scaffold. You may also want to consider breaking up the script below into smaller chunks, perhaps using parts of the Exeunt script as a teaser before reading starting a new act. We’ve found, too, that creating placards with the characters’ names on them is useful. A student volunteer who may find it easier to participate initially without enacting parts of the story can help distribute the name placards as you tap students to become characters. We’ve narrated the first three acts below to help students get familiar with the characters and plot, but not give away the ending. See Appendix B for a printable version of the script in a much larger font size.]*

Standing in a large circle, listen closely as the first half of the story of *Othello* is narrated. When you are tapped by the narrator to become a character—or perhaps an object like a ship—listen to the narration and, stepping into the center of the circle, act out your role, which may include reading a quote aloud. When the center of the circle needs clearing to move on, an exuberant “Exeunt!” will sweep everyone back to their spots in the circle.

### CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS SL2, R3

## ACT 1

On a Venice street at night, a soldier named **Iago** and a gentleman named **Roderigo** discuss the news: Senator Brabantio’s daughter, Desdemona, has eloped—and with the Moor, Othello, a general in the Venetian army. Roderigo is upset because he’s paid Iago to help him pursue Desdemona, which has clearly failed. Iago, Othello’s ensign, complains that the general has promoted the far less experienced Michael Cassio as his lieutenant. Iago confesses that he only pretends to serve Othello to serve his own interest. From the street, the two men yell to wake Desdemona’s father, **Brabantio** to deliver the news of Desdemona’s elopement. Brabantio is horrified and begins to search for the Moor to bring him to justice before the Duke of Venice.

But the **Duke** and his **senators** are concerned with more important issues. The Turks are headed to invade the Venetian territory of Cyprus. The Duke sends **Cassio** and **officers** to summon **Othello**. Pretending to be helpful, Iago warns Othello that Brabantio is searching for the newlyweds. Cassio and the court officers arrive first.

**[CASSIO]** “The duke does greet you, general, and he requires your haste-post-haste appearance even on the instant.” Just then, Brabantio arrives. **[BRABANTIO]** “O Thou foul Thief! Where hast thou stowed my daughter?” Everyone heads off to meet with the duke.

The Duke’s military planning is interrupted by the entrance of Brabantio, Othello, Cassio, Iago and Roderigo. Brabantio insists that the issue of his daughter’s elopement be addressed immediately. **[BRABANTIO]** “She is abused, stol’n from me, and corrupted by spells and medicines bought of mountebanks.” Othello confesses that he has married Desdemona, but that they are very much in love. **[OTHELLO]** “She loved me for the dangers I had passed, and I loved her that she did pity them. This only is the witchcraft I have used.” **Desdemona** confirms Othello’s story and pledges her loyalty to her husband. **[DESDEMONA]** “But here’s my husband. And so much duty as my mother showed to you, preferring you before her father, so much I challenge that I may profess due to the Moor my lord.”

The summit continues as the Duke informs Othello that his expertise is required to defend Cyprus against the Turks. Desdemona pleads, **[DESDEMONA]** “Let me go with him.” The Duke concedes, and orders Othello to leave immediately. As all depart, Brabantio warns Othello. **[BRABANTIO]** “Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see. She has deceived her father, and may thee.”

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES & RESOURCES

## EXEUNT!

**Othello** dismisses Brabantio's warning. He instructs **Iago** to bring Desdemona and his wife, Emilia, to Cyprus. Othello departs, leaving **Roderigo** and Iago behind to stew in their bad feelings. Roderigo ponders drowning himself, which Iago mocks. The two agree to work together to gain revenge. After Roderigo leaves, Iago reveals that he has more than one reason to hate the Moor: it is rumored, he claims, that Othello has slept with his own wife, Emilia. For this and the insult of being overlooked for promotion, he plots revenge—to make Othello believe that his lieutenant Cassio and Desdemona are lovers.

## ACT 2

At a port in Cyprus, several **men** gather on shore. Much to the relief of **Signior Montano** and the others, a terrible storm has stopped the advance of the Turkish fleet, but they anxiously await news of the fate of the Venetian ships. Michael Cassio's **vessel** is the first to arrive ashore. **Cassio** and his **soldiers** have inflicted heavy damage to what was left of the Turkish fleet. He expresses concern for Othello. **[CASSIO]** *"Oh, let the heavens give him defense against the elements, for I have lost him on a dangerous sea."* Iago's ship docks next, bringing **Desdemona** and her lady-in-waiting, **Emilia** and **Roderigo**. While waiting for Othello, **Iago** discusses with Desdemona the shortcomings of women in general. As he talks, Cassio takes Desdemona's hand as a courtesy.

Finally, **Othello** arrives, with news that the battle is won. The newlyweds greet each happily. **[DESDEMONA]** *"My dear Othello!"* **[OTHELLO]** *"Oh, my soul's joy!"* While the others head to the victory celebration, Iago plots his revenge with Roderigo's help. He insists that since Othello is old and unattractive, Desdemona will soon tire of him and set her sights on the young, handsome Cassio. Iago instructs Roderigo to pick a fight with Cassio, which will lead to his falling out of favor with the general. Believing that his wife has been intimate with Othello, Iago vows to get revenge. **[IAGO]** *"Till I am evened with him, wife for wife. Or, failing so, yet that I put the Moor at least into a jealousy so strong that judgment cannot cure."*

## EXEUNT!

A **herald** announces Othello's proclamation of this night's celebration of the Turkish defeat and his own nuptials. Othello leaves **Cassio** in charge of the guard for the night. **Iago** persuades Cassio and his **men** to toast Othello along with **Montano** and a few **Cypriots**. Cassio is soon intoxicated. Iago expresses concern to Montano that Cassio's drinking may cause a problem for his new responsibilities. As planned, **Roderigo** enters and follows Cassio. Cassio begins chasing him. **[CASSIO]** *"You rogue! You rascal! I'll beat the knave into a twigggen bottle."* Montano attempts to stop the drunken brawl, but is stabbed by Cassio as he tries to intervene.

**Othello** arrives, demanding to know what has happened. Iago reluctantly agrees to tell the story. **[IAGO]** *"I had rather have this tongue cut from my mouth than it should do offence to Michael Cassio. Yet I persuade myself to speak the truth."* Othello dismisses Cassio from office. **[OTHELLO]** *"Cassio I love thee but never more be an officer of mine."* Iago and Cassio remain after all the others exit.

Cassio is heartbroken. **[CASSIO]** *"Oh, I have lost my reputation!"* Iago urges him to regain Othello's good favor by pleading his case to Desdemona, all the while plotting to convince Othello of his wife's infidelity with the lieutenant. **[IAGO]** *"I'll pour this pestilence into his ear: that she repeals him for her body's lust."*

## EXEUNT!

## ACT 3

With **Iago's** help, **Cassio** visits **Desdemona** to ask her assistance in repairing the relationship between him and Othello. Desdemona assures Cassio that she can help him. **[DESDEMONA]** *"But I will have my lord and you again as friendly as you were."* As **Othello** returns home from business with the senate, he observes Cassio's hasty departure and mentions it to Iago. **[OTHELLO]** *"Was not that Cassio parted from my wife?"* Iago uses the moment to create suspicion. **[IAGO]** *"Cassio, my lord? No, sure, I cannot think it that he would steal away so guilty-like*

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES & RESOURCES

seeing you coming.” Desdemona implores Othello to reinstate Cassio. Though Othello says he will meet with Cassio, Desdemona continues to question her husband when he refuses to set a specific time for the meeting. Iago takes the opportunity to insinuate that her interest in Cassio may suggest her infidelity. Iago succeeds in planting suspicions in Othello’s mind. **[OTHELLO]** *“I am abused, and my relief must be to loathe her.”*

When Desdemona returns to escort Othello in to dinner with his guests, he complains of an aching forehead. Desdemona offers her handkerchief embroidered with strawberries—the first keepsake from her husband, but Othello pushes it away saying it is too small. She accidentally drops it. **Emilia** finds the handkerchief. **[EMILIA]** *“I am glad I have found this napkin. My wayward husband hath a hundred times wooed me to steal it.”* Iago reports to the audience that he intends to plant it in Cassio’s room. **[IAGO]** *“Trifles light as air are to the jealous confirmation strong as proofs of holy writ.”*

Othello demands that Iago provide him proof of Desdemona’s infidelity. **[OTHELLO]** *“Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore, Be sure of it. Give me the ocular proof.”* Iago suggests he’s uncomfortable, but must confess that he has heard Cassio while dreaming say. **[IAGO]** *“Sweet Desdemona, let us be wary, let us hide our loves.”* He adds that he witnessed Cassio wipe his beard with the handkerchief Othello had given to Desdemona. Enraged, Othello charges Iago with killing Cassio within three days and appoints Iago as his lieutenant.

## EXEUNT!

**Desdemona** asks **Emilia** about her missing handkerchief, but she replies, **[EMILIA]** *“I know not, madam.”* Desdemona suggests that the loss will not pose a problem as her husband is not a jealous man. **Othello** enters and, greeting his wife, requests the use of her handkerchief. When she does produce it, he becomes unsettled, and recounts the story of the charmed handkerchief that had been given to him by his mother. When Othello demands that his wife produce the handkerchief and she cannot, his suspicions grow. **[OTHELLO]** *“Is’t lost? Is’t gone? Speak, Is’t out o’ th’ way?”* As he presses to see the handkerchief she attempts to change the subject to Cassio. Othello leaves in anger, convinced of Desdemona’s guilt.

Meanwhile, Cassio finds the stolen handkerchief in his bedchamber. He persuades his mistress Bianca to copy the fine embroidery for him and promises to visit her later in the night...

## (THE FINAL TWO ACTS REMAIN TO BE NARRATED BY TEACHERS AND STUDENTS...)

### 3. LINE WALKABOUT: A FIRST LOOK AT CHARACTERIZATION IN *OTHELLO*

*[To the teacher: Excerpt from the play one line for each student, choosing lines that are rich in Shakespeare’s language or are descriptive of character—or consider our suggestions below! See Appendix C for printable lines ready to cut and distribute. Distribute a line to each student on a slip of paper, not revealing the character who spoke it.]*

Look at your line(s), and as you begin to walk around the room, say it aloud again and again without addressing anyone. Let the nature of the line and the way you say it affect the rhythm and pace at which you walk around the room. Say your line for at least five other people, and listen closely as they share their line with you. Continue walking around the room, silently, making eye contact with each person you pass. Now begin investigating different ways of moving with these prompts:

- Pick up and slow down pace. If “1” is slow motion and “5” is running, start at a “3.” Each time you take on a new pace, say your line to at least one other student. Slow down to a “2.” Speed up to a “4.” Back to “3.” Down to “1,” etc.
- Alter your posture. Walk upright with your chest out. Hunch your shoulders. Strut with swagger. Shuffle your feet. Fold your arms. Swing your arms freely by your side. Each time you explore a new posture, say your line to at least one other student.
- Change your status. If “1” is the lowest status in a society and “10” is royalty, begin walking at a “5.” Now change to a “10.” What does a “1” feel like? Continue repeating your line to a fellow student each time you switch your status.

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES & RESOURCES

Now regroup in a circle, each student in turn delivering his or her line to a classmate opposite them in the circle, at the pace, posture, and status level that feels best to you. Sit down as a group and discuss the lines. What do you imagine about the character who speaks your line? Are there lines that might possibly have been spoken by the same character? What about the lines suggests that to you? What pace felt best with your line? What size? What status? Did any sounds of the words you spoke aloud in your line tell you anything about the emotions of the character?

## CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R4, SL1

1. I know my price, I am worth no worse a place.
2. And what's he then that says I play the villain, when this advice is free I give?
3. I am not what I am.
4. The Moor is of a free and open nature that thinks men honest that but seem to be so.
5. With as little a web as this will I ensnare as great a fly as Cassio.
6. O treason of the blood!
7. Fathers, from hence trust not your daughters' minds by what you see them act.
8. He robs himself that spends a bootless grief.
9. Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them.
10. Rude am I in my speech and little blessed with the soft phrase of peace.
11. Let him do his spite; for know, Iago, but that I love the gentle Desdemona.
12. If you do find me foul in her report let your sentence even fall upon my life.
13. Chaos is come again.
14. I think that thou art just, and think thou art not.
15. The bloody book of law you shall yourself read in the bitter letter after your own sense.
16. My lord is not my lord; nor should I know him, were he in favor as in humor altered.
17. All's one. Good faith, how foolish are our minds!
18. Heaven keep that monster from *Othello's* mind!
19. If I do die before thee, prithee shroud me in one of those same sheets.
20. Do not think, gentlemen, I am drunk.
21. Whatever shall become of Michael Cassio, he's never anything but your true servant.
22. Reputation, reputation, reputation! O, I have lost my reputation.
23. O, my dear Cassio, my sweet Cassio! O, Cassio, Cassio, Cassio!
24. But I do think it is their husbands' faults if wives do fail.
25. They are all but stomachs, and we all but food.
26. They eat us hungerly, and when they are full, they belch us.
27. They are not ever jealous for the cause, but jealous for they are jealous.
28. Thou hast not half that power to do me harm as I have to be hurt.
29. I do not find that thou deal'st justly with me.
30. I have wasted myself out of my means.

## 4. ACTIVATING SCHEMA: TEXT TO WORLD CONNECTIONS

Scholar David Bevington writes that "Shakespeare is fascinated by this phenomenon of declining reputations." As a class, discuss recent examples of this type of decline you've seen in the news. Why do you think that such stories interest us so much?

## CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS SL2

### IN SMALL GROUPS

## 5. PUNCTUATION EXPLORATION

In pairs, read aloud the verse passage below that has been stripped of all punctuation and internal capitalization. Read it again several times aloud, listening for the rhythm and to find the sense of the verse. When you feel you've grasped

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES & RESOURCES

the meaning, punctuate the speech. Hint: In Shakespeare's later plays, he frequently experiments with "midstops"—that is, sentences ending in the middle of a verse line. There are six such lines in this passage. What do you think that tells us about Iago's emotional stage in this famous soliloquy found in Act 1, scene 3, lines 381–403?

Punctuation and the fundamentals of grammar are some of the tools of the trade for poets and writers. After you've punctuated your text, compare your choices with the edited text you are using in class. When comparing the two texts side by side, did you make any editorial choices that arguably alter the text's meaning? What power does punctuation have to affect meaning?

## CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS L2

*Thus do I ever make my fool my purse  
For I mine own gain'd knowledge should profane  
If I would time expend with such a snipe  
But for my sport and profit I hate the Moor  
And it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets  
He has done my office I know not if't be true  
But I for mere suspicion in that kind  
Will do as if for surety he holds me well  
The better shall my purpose work on him  
Cassio's a proper man let me see now  
To get his place and to plume up my will  
In double knavery how how let's see  
After some time to abuse Othello's ear  
That he is too familiar with his wife  
He hath a person and a smooth dispose  
To be suspected framed to make women false  
The Moor is of a free and open nature  
That thinks men honest that but seem to be so  
And will as tenderly be led by the nose  
As asses are I have't it is engender'd hell and night  
Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light*

## 6. PICTURES INTO WORDS

*[To the teacher: find three images of different moments from various productions/movies of Othello and duplicating them in sets, give each group a set of pictures. A good go-to site for production images is ADHS Performing Arts, <http://www.ahds.rhul.ac.uk/ahdscollections/docroot/shakespeare/performance/list.do?playId=11023>.]*

In small groups, examine each image in your packet. Keeping in mind that this is exploratory and based on inference (and that there's not one "right" set of answers), what do you imagine might be going on and what is the relationship between the people in the picture? Where does the scene take place? What is happening? If this picture were in a newspaper or magazine, what headline or caption would describe it? Silently, look at the photos and write your responses down by each picture. You can also respond in writing to comments your other group members have already made.

As a class, share what you discovered during this process. Did any of your classmates write something that helped you to make your own connection to a photo? Based on these few images, what inferences could you make about the story of *Othello*?

## CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R1, R7

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES & RESOURCES

## ON YOUR OWN

### 7. FOCUSED FREEWRITE: TEXT-TO-SELF CONNECTIONS

Before beginning your exploration of *Othello*, it's useful to think about your personal connections to the themes, situations and emotions surrounding Shakespeare's characters. Explore one of the following that has particular resonance for you.

- Think about a time when you were hurt by somebody and, in trying to protect yourself from that hurt, ended up causing more pain to yourself or others. What kind of hurt were you trying to avoid? Is it a natural human response to try to protect ourselves from hurt? Are there times when our protective behavior actually gets in our way? How? In looking back at the situation, can you think of another way in which you might have responded that might have changed the outcome?
- All of us at one time or another piece together bits of information we have about a situation and come up with our own story, our own picture of possible outcomes. Think about a time recently, no matter how insignificant the incident was, that you incorrectly predicted what would happen in a situation. Given certain facts, perhaps you came to a conclusion that didn't, in fact, pan out. What were the facts? Which pieces did you add to the story? Why do you think we tend to jump to conclusions, to determine the outcome of situations that haven't yet run their natural course? Did your false conclusion in any way affect your own behavior, or even the real outcome of the situation?
- Think about a time when somebody falsely accused you of something. What were the circumstances? How did they present their accusation? How did you respond? What feelings did the situation stir up about yourself and your accuser? Looking back, do you wish you had responded in another way to the accusation? If so, why?
- Think about a time when you wanted something very badly, and even though you felt like you deserved it most, someone else got it in place of you. How did you react in the moment when you found out? What factors or external forces contributed to this outcome? What actions did you take—towards yourself or others—after the fact?

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS W10

## As You Read the Play

### 8. BARD BLOG

*[To the teacher: a blog can offer a way for your students to keep track of their thoughts, from pre-reading through post-viewing. It provides a place where students can make text to text, text to self and text to world connections. They will be asked to find modern-day texts that relate back to Shakespeare's work, aspects of their own personality that relate to the characters, and real-world situations that relate back to the play. Don't yet have a class blog? Check out <http://www.kidblog.org>, a free and simple website for teachers to create class blogs. You may also want to explore <http://wordpress.com/classrooms>, another resource for building a classroom website.]*

As you begin to enter Shakespeare's text, here's one idea to get your Bard Blog started, or modify other activities in this section to a blogging format:

- Choose a character to follow through the play. Keep a running list of text references for that character—both their lines and other characters' lines about them. What does s/he feel about the other characters? How do they feel about him/her? How much does your character reveal about themselves through their own words and how much did you learn from other characters? Based on the notes you've taken, write a short summary of your character. What qualities do you think are most important to highlight about your character?

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R3, W6, W10

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES & RESOURCES

## 9. CHARACTER DESIRES AND FEARS

At the end of each act, list five of the major characters in *Othello*. Write a single sentence for each that begins, “What I most want is...” Take a risk—there’s not just one right answer! Then write a sentence for each character that begins, “What I’m most afraid of is...” (Is there ever a situation when what one most wants is also what one most fears?)

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R3, W10

## 10. DRAMATIC PROGRESSION THROUGH SCENE TITLES

One of the best ways to get at the “through-line” or dramatic progression in a play is to give each scene a name or title that captures the heart of the action. Directors often use this technique to help actors (and themselves) during the rehearsal process. As you read, give each of the scenes a name or title that you feel gets at the essence of the scene. Be as creative and specific as you can in naming each scene.

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R5

## ACT 1

### AS A CLASS

## 11. THE LANGUAGE OF RACISM

James Andreas wrote, “Racism cannot long survive without the verbal and symbolic apparatus that generates and sustains it: the names, the jokes... In short, racism is a cultural virus that is verbally transmitted and its antidote must therefore be verbally transmitted as well.”

As you read through Act 1, scene 1, circle all of the names Othello is given by other characters. As a class, discuss what you discover, and respond to Shakespeare scholar James Andreas’s assertion above. As you move through the rest of the play, note other instances of racism, explicit or implied. Among the characters who express negative opinions of racial differences, do you notice any rhetorical patterns?

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R4, L5

## 12. “I KNOW MY PRICE”

Take another look at the first few lines of *Othello*; you’ll notice that both characters speak about ownership, money, and the value of a person as a commodity to be bought and sold. The late sixteenth century when Shakespeare was writing his plays was a time of dramatic social change in England. “The feudal world of honor, fidelity, and service is becoming the bourgeois world of property and contractual relations,” writes scholar Mark Rose. In the second half of the 1500s, the monastic lands were put on the market place, and about one-sixth of English land changed hands. Suddenly, a person’s identity was not determined solely on the basis of heredity, but also upon what he came to own. Ownership and power became more and more synonymous.

What can you infer about the rest of the play from these opening lines? What are some of the consequences of thinking of other people as commodities, or possessions that can be “acquired,” “owned” and “discarded”? As you read through *Othello*, think about Rose’s comment, and look for other places where human relations are referenced in terms of price, cost, and possession. Add the references as you find them—and any you might encounter in your everyday life—to a list compiled by the class.

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R2, L5

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES & RESOURCES

## 13. SHAKESPEARE'S POETIC DEVICES

What Shakespeare's schooling comprised that might have later helped him to write the kind of poetry and characters he did is the subject of much argument. But we do know that grammar school education at the time focused on the principles of rhetoric, and the power of the spoken word. At the height of the Renaissance, when Shakespeare was composing his plays, the English were having a kind of love affair with words and the seemingly boundless potential of the power of language in speech and play—very much like hip hop artists today.

Shakespeare's plays are filled with poetic devices that add emotion, punch, flavor, intensity to the story and characters—many of which you may already know about from studying poetry today:

- repetition of words and phrases;
- repetition of consonant sounds (alliteration);
- repetition of vowel sounds (assonance);
- rhyme.

Iago's monologue ("O sir, content you.") in Act 1, scene 1, as he tells Roderigo of his hatred for Othello, is chockfull of these literary devices. In pairs, read ALOUD (it's imperative or you won't hear the repetition of sounds!), and mark the text whenever you hear: repetition, alliteration, assonance or antithesis (words or ideas in opposition to one another). As a class, listen to one or two readings of the speech, encouraging your classmates to over-emphasize the poetic devices they have identified.

Discuss your clue-finding—because these devices were, indeed, clues to help Shakespeare's actors discover their characters. Did the emphasizing of certain clues help to reveal anything new about Iago's character?

**CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R4, SL2**

## 14. IMAGERY IN LANGUAGE AND MOVEMENT

When Othello describes how Desdemona fell in love with him, his story prompts the Duke to say, "I think this tale would win my daughter too." In this image-rich speech, Shakespeare asks his audience to use their imaginations to help realize the story. Close your eyes and listen to an audio recording of James Earl Jones delivering this speech—<http://ed.ted.com/on/OcZqvcQz>—as a class.

- Listen closely for imagery, and raise your hand any time the speech brings a picture to your mind.
- Listen to the audio recording again—this time, have the text in front of you to mark up. Circle all words and phrases that connect to your senses—smells, sounds and colors.
- Listen to the audio recording a final time, still with the text in front of you. This time, underline any lines, words or phrases that stand out to you as you listen.

Discuss the overall mood of the passage. In small groups, agree on a single word, phrase or line that conjures up a vivid image for you, and then bring that line to life through a tableau—a "living sculpture" of bodies. As your group creates this sculpture, you will notice just how many details Shakespeare includes in each image. Take turns directing, or "chiseling," the sculpture. Revise until the sculpture closely represents the imagery and intention. Present your final sculpture to the rest of the class. How does your understanding of the passage change through an examination of these tableaux? What does the language reveal about Othello's tone in this speech? Is there a pattern or a theme among the lines your group and others chose to represent through tableau?

**CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS L5, R4, SL2**

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES & RESOURCES

## 15. SHIFTING GEARS

In writing his plays, Shakespeare moved back and forth between prose and verse. It's easy to see the different forms on the page: prose has margins aligned on both the left and right; verse has shorter lines, (almost always) aligned on the left margin only, and with capitalization at the beginning of each new line. There are no hard-and-fast rules that dictate Shakespeare's choices, but when a character switches from verse to prose or vice versa, it may indicate a shift in the character's state of mind.

There are many examples of these "gear changes" throughout *Othello* where Shakespeare switches from prose to verse. An early example occurs near the end of Act 1, scene 3, when we first hear Iago and Roderigo talking together, and subsequently listen to Iago alone on stage. Why do you think this shift might occur? What does it suggest about Iago's emotional state? As you study *Othello*, note which characters speak in prose and verse, and closely examine the moments when a character switches from one to the other.

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R5

### IN SMALL GROUPS

## 16. MEETING DESDEMONA

Shakespeare takes his time before introducing us to Desdemona in Act 1, scene 3. We've heard much said about her already. In groups of five, decide who will adopt each of the following characters: Iago, Roderigo, Brabantio, Othello and Desdemona.

If you selected one of the male characters, scan the first three scenes of the play (up to Desdemona's entrance in Act 1, scene 3, line 170) for the various—and varying—comments said about Desdemona before her entrance. Share with your group some of the key lines that describe Desdemona from these four men's points of view. If you chose Desdemona, review her lines through the end of Act 1, scene 3. Which of her lines seem to match the male perceptions of her? Which contrast?

Compare your work with other groups' and discuss as a class. How do the differences or similarities among Desdemona's and the men's words compare to contemporary society—do women tend to view themselves differently from the men with whom they interact? Support your argument with examples from other stories, real-world events, or your own personal experiences.

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R3, R6

## 17. A FIRST LOOK INTO IAGO'S PSYCHE

Towards the beginning of Act 1, scene 2, Iago swears "by Janus," the two-faced Roman god who simultaneously faces in opposite directions. Why is it significant that Iago chooses this god to swear by? Standing back to back with a partner, return to the beginning of Act 1, scene 2, lines 1-33. As one partner reads Iago's words aloud, pause at the end of each sentence for the other to give voice to what Iago's "inner monologue"—or what he's really thinking in the scene. (When you get to Othello's lines, both partners whisper the lines together.) How different do you think what Iago is saying from what he's thinking? Why doesn't Iago simply say what he's thinking? Think about a time you were in a situation in which you found yourself saying something other than—perhaps even the opposite of—what you felt. Why was there such a disconnect between your spoken words and what you thought or felt? What was the result?

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R1, SL2

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES & RESOURCES

## 18. DEFYING BRABANTIO

In groups of four, choose roles and perform Act 1, scene 3, beginning with line 173 (Brabantio: “I pray you hear her speak”) through line 255 (Desdemona: “Let me go with him.”). As a group, discuss different ways this father-daughter relationship could be portrayed in a performance. Is Desdemona respectful towards her father? How much of Brabantio’s anger do we see in this public setting? How physically close are they to one another, and what might that reveal about their relationship? How does Desdemona show her love for her father? Find evidence in the text to make interpretive choices about their relationship and then perform your scene again.

On your own, take a moment to consider Desdemona’s actions in Act 1—she openly defies her father and asks to accompany her new husband on a dangerous crusade against the Turkish fleet. Have you ever defied your parents/guardians and done something they thought was dangerous? What was the result? Imagine you are Desdemona’s best friend and write a letter to her either supporting her decision to marry and follow Othello, or trying to dissuade her from going with him.

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R1, W3

## ACT 2

### AS A CLASS

## 19. OTHERNESS IN OUR WORLD TODAY

Consider this assertion by Donna Denizé in her essay, “Unfinished Business: An African-American Teacher Talks Race and *Othello*,” published in *Shakespeare Set Free: Teaching Twelfth Night and Othello*:

The anxiety of the Duke and the senators about invasion by the Turks—the perennial ‘other’—reveals the atmosphere of suspicion and fear. I wondered: Why are these guys always running in with reports of a Turkish advance that never happened? What is Shakespeare doing here? Later, I began to think that in such a state of uncertainty, opportunities are rife for an Iago to launch a campaign of misrepresentation against Othello, a campaign full of misconstrued motives and derided aspirations. Iago uses not only racial differences but also regional ones: Cassio is a ‘Florentine,’ Desdemona, a ‘subtle Venetian,’ all amid the backdrop of the larger fear of the state’s weakened, national allegiance against the Turks. In this nationalistic ‘world’ of Venice, Iago could suggest and perpetrate the advantages of being Venetian over Florentine, of being Venetian rather than the barbarian Turk, and of being White over Black. Surely, an Iago was bound to occur in such an atmosphere. In the play and in life, an Iago is difficult to recognize because we have abandoned the eyes of justice and view the world from our own vested camps.

As a class, discuss parallels between the world of Venice and our world today. Consider the “war on terror” and the most recent developments with ISIS in Iraq and Syria. How has fear of terrorism in America affected the political conversation? What cultural groups suffer the most as a result of this discourse? As in *Othello*, what “vested camps” exist in our world, and what actions do we justify from that vantage point (that, perhaps in a more peaceful time, would be unjustifiable)?

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R1, SL2

## 20. SCENE LAB

[To the teacher: This activity, based on an exercise developed by actor Michael Tolaydo, may take two class sessions to complete, but is well worth it! The exercise is a performed group scene. This is not a “staged” performance, so there should be no heavy focus on acting skills; rather, this should be approached as a learning experience involving exploration of plot, character, language, play structure, and play style. The script should be photocopied and typed in a large font [at least 13 point], with no text notes or glossary, and enough copies for every student in the classroom. In selecting readers for the speaking roles, it is important to remember that the play is not being “cast,” but rather that the students are actively exploring the text. The process of getting the scene off the page and on its feet enables students to come

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES & RESOURCES

*to an understanding of Shakespeare's text on their own, without the use of notes or explanatory materials. A familiarity with the scene and the language is developed, beginning a process of literary analysis of the text and establishing a relationship with the play and with Shakespeare.]*

Some of Shakespeare's most action-packed and exciting scenes are difficult to read on the page because there is not yet a picture to accompany the words—and though good proficient readers can create those pictures in their minds as they read, that is a challenging process with a complex text like *Othello*. This is where a “scene lab” comes in very handy, especially when a scene involves many characters and a lot of physical action, such as Act 2, scene 3.

- **Step One:** While the scene is being read for the first time, the rest of the class listens rather than reads along, so no open books. Don't worry about the correct pronunciation of unfamiliar words or phrases. Say them the way you think they would sound. (Later, you can take a class vote on the pronunciation of any words that cannot be located in the dictionary.)
- **Step Two:** Follow the first reading with a second one, with new readers for each part—not to give a “better” reading of the scene but to provide an opportunity for others to expand their familiarity with the text, and possibly gain new information or clearer understanding of a particular passage. After this second reading, engage in a question-and-answer session. Answers to the questions asked should come only from the scene being read, and not rely on any further knowledge of the play outside the scene at hand. Some examples of the questions to be discussed: Who are these guys? Where are they? Why are they there? What are they doing? What are their relationships to each other? What words don't we understand? What else is confusing in this scene? If there is disagreement, take a class vote. Majority rules! Remember, there is no one right answer, but a myriad of possibilities—as long as the conclusions are supported by the text. After this, you may choose to read the scene a few more times, with new sets of readers, followed by more questions.
- **Step Three:** The “fast read-through” is next. Stand in a circle; each student reads a line up to a punctuation mark and then the next student picks up. The point of this is to get as smooth and as quick of a read as possible, so that the thoughts flow, even though they are being read by more than one person—much like the passing of a baton in a relay race.
- **Step Four:** Before we put the scene “on its feet,” search the text for signals that help you know how to move and speak to create a coherent story. These stage directions can sometimes be found in the character's own lines or may be spoken by another character. (e.g. when Othello says, “Come, my dear love,” it's a good indication to the actor playing Desdemona to move towards him.) In addition to looking for these signals in the script, ask yourself these questions:
  - Where do you imagine the audience to be sitting?
  - How many characters are on stage at the start of the scene?
  - Where and how will you position each character?
  - Which characters make entrances and/or exits in the scene? From where do they enter and where will they exit?
  - How does each character walk?
  - How does each character talk?
  - What furniture or properties (props) might be needed for the scene?
- **Step Five:** The final step is to put the scene “on its feet,” using the signals and choices you've discussed as a class. Select a cast to read the scene, while the rest of the class directs. No one is uninvolved. There are many ways to explore and stage this scene—there is no one “right” way, and everyone's input is important. After the advice from the “directors” has been completed, the cast acts out the scene. After this first “run-through,” make any changes necessary, then do the scene again using the same cast or a completely new one.

**CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R7, SL1, SL2**

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES & RESOURCES

## IN SMALL GROUPS

### 21. CUTTING SHAKESPEARE

Rarely is one of Shakespeare's plays performed in its entirety. Most would last between three and four hours—even without an intermission! The Prologue of *Romeo and Juliet* refers to “two hours of traffic on our stage,” but if performed in its entirety, the play would last at least three hours. Unlike the way we view them now (as published books), plays on the early modern stage in Shakespeare's time were viewed as “mutable” (ever-changing) in performance—and were often cut and amended.

You can learn a lot about Shakespeare's use of language by reducing a longer speech or scene while trying to retain its original meaning, its poetic language and approximate ten-beat meter whenever possible, and its purpose in furthering the plot. In small groups, work together to edit Iago and Roderigo's exchange in Act 2, scene 1, lines 205-290. First, read the excerpt through aloud once. Talk about the story line: what's going on in this scene between these two characters? How is the plot being advanced? What must be preserved for clarity? What is negotiable?

Your goal is to cut approximately half of the 85 lines in your text. If you cut part of a verse line, remember that your goal is to “protect” the meter by tagging it to another partial line. After you've made your choices, read the cut scene, and revise any choices you've made that aren't working for you.

Compare the cut versions of all the groups, and discuss your reasoning for cutting certain lines, while leaving others intact. Many productions of *Othello* choose to cut the first two scenes of Act 2—what effect might it have on a production to cut the scenes entirely? What is lost by this decision? Is there anything to be gained by cutting Shakespeare's text? If so, what do you think that is?

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R5, R6

### 22. BIG “BUT” WORDS

“But” is a very short but very big word...

*You are lord of all my duty; I am hitherto your daughter. BUT here's my husband...* (Act 1, scene 3)

*Cassio, I love thee, BUT never more be officer of mine.* (Act 2, scene 3)

In groups of three, take Desdemona's and Othello's lines above, and think how you might perform them. As one person speaks the line, your two classmates must decide how to personify or characterize the two poles that the speaker is working between. As you read through the rest of *Othello*, listen for the “but's” in people's speech. Does one character have a corner on the market? When are “but's” spoken? What effect do they have on the speaker? On the listener? Be on the lookout for other “small words” in Shakespeare's language—taking note of these can help you track the argument at hand. Other small words include “yet,” “therefore,” “however,” “if,” “or,” “so,” “thus,” etc. Can you find others that seem to matter as much as “but” seems to?

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS L3

## ACT 3

### IN SMALL GROUPS

### 23. DIRECTOR'S CHOICE: INTERMISSION

Somewhere in Act 3 always marks the midpoint of Shakespeare's five-act plays. In your small groups, imagine that you are directors who must decide where to place your intermission. Take a look back at Act 3, follow its course of action and decide where you would choose to take a break. (For some ideas, think about how a reality TV show positions its

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES & RESOURCES

commercial breaks for maximum suspense.) Reconvene as a class and discuss your ideas—then plan to compare your intermission placement to that of the Chicago Shakespeare Theater’s production.

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R5, R6

## 24. WRESTLING WITH ONESELF

Soliloquies were important tools in Shakespeare’s dramatic “toolbox.” The soliloquy allows the audience to learn about the character and his/her motivations privately—we learn what other characters cannot. It allows us to get as close to the essence of a character as he/she can psychologically permit. Often, a character is debating an issue, weighing the pros and cons of taking one action over another. Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” is a prime example of this.

In Othello’s Act 3, scene 3 soliloquy (“This fellow’s of exceeding honesty...”), he is grappling with his growing suspicion of Desdemona’s infidelity. Explore the two sides of his debate in a kinesthetic way through the following activity. Read the speech as a group, changing speakers at each punctuation mark. Repeat once more for comprehension and discuss any words that are unfamiliar.

With a partner, read through the soliloquy again. As you work through the speech, divide it into two voices: BELIEVING that Desdemona has been unfaithful and DISBELIEVING. When you’ve determined which parts of the speech support each side of the argument, choose one person to read the BELIEVING voice and the other to read the DISBELIEVING voice. Read the speech again with your new role; when it’s your turn to read, move towards the other person, touching your finger tips together lightly, while your partner moves backward. Listen to a few different pairs’ readings of the speech and discuss. Are there different ways to divide up the speech? Which lines seem more open to interpretation? By the end of this soliloquy, what has Othello decided to do?

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R1, SL2

## 25. TABLEAUX

A tableau is a wordless, still picture made by bodies assuming certain poses and conveying a particular mood or image. A play often ends with a tableau that the director creates with his/her actors to leave a dramatic impression in the mind of the audience as it leaves the theater. Choose a scene in Act 3 that you think could be represented by using a single tableau. Create your stage pictures and share them with the class. You can also do this exercise with each act, or use a series of three or even five tableaux to show the progression of the entire play.

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R1, SL1

## ACT 4

### AS A CLASS

## 26. PHYSICALIZING OTHELLO’S GROWING SUSPICIONS

Standing in front of a chair, read Othello’s lines in Act 4, scene 1, lines 35-41 (“Lie with her?” through “O devil!”) aloud. When you come to the first punctuation mark, sit down, and then when you come to the next, stand up. Continue sitting down or standing up with each punctuation mark.

Compare his manner of speech in this scene to that found at the beginning of the play—for a comparison, look back at Act 1, scene 2, lines 17-28 (“Let him do his spite” through “But look what lights come yond!”). What do you discover? Has his language changed? Has his speech pattern changed? What can we learn about his journey as a character from examining the way he speaks and the way it changes over the course of the play?

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS L1, R3

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES & RESOURCES

## IN SMALL GROUPS

### 27. CHARACTER MANEUVERS: DESDEMONA AND EMILIA

In Act 4, scene 3, Emilia and Desdemona engage in their only private conversation in the entire play, giving us a unique glimpse into the feelings of these two women. With a partner, choose roles and read an excerpt, starting with line 58 (“Dost thou in conscience think...”) through the end of the scene.

Characters always speak and act to achieve what they want (just as we do in everyday life). The different strategies they use to get what they want are called “tactics.” Explore the tactics that Desdemona and Emilia use in this scene in a physical way by assigning one of the following physical movements to each line they say:

- Hook – Extend the arm and curve the fingers toward your body. Move the hand toward the body.
- Probe – Point the index finger of one hand. Extend the arm forward. Move the finger around and forward as if it is digging into something.
- Deflect – Extend the arm and have the palm facing upwards as if pushing something away.
- Stroke – Move your hand, palm down, through the air, as though you are petting a cat.

Once you’ve assigned tactics to each line, read through your scene again, and then come back together to discuss as a class. What do you discover about these two characters and their similarities and differences to one another? Which gestures did you employ most often for each of them? Do you understand the scene differently as a result of this exploration?

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R4, SL2

## ACT 5

### IN SMALL GROUPS

### 28. BFF’S: THE POWER OF ASIDES

*Cassio do remain, / He hath a daily beauty in his life / That makes me ugly.* (Iago, Act 5, scene 1)

To us, his private audience, Iago is nothing if not “honest.” In Shakespeare, asides and soliloquies create a connection between the character and his or her audience that is privileged, confidential—and collusive. In small groups, what are some analogies that you can think of to the soliloquy or aside in contemporary entertainment—in movies, TV, even novels? What impact do they have upon us as a viewer or reader?

Reconvene as a class and, with three volunteers (who have familiarized themselves with these lines already) practice speaking Iago’s aside in three different ways: the first time around, speak your lines avoiding eye contact with your audience—you can look around the room, at the walls, the ceiling, but keep your delivery general; the second person will deliver the aside again, but this time making eye contact with any number of people in your audience—the more, the better; and the third person will deliver his/her lines directly to someone in the audience, making a very intentional relationship with them—that person becomes your “scene partner” though they say nothing. After the class has experienced the same lines delivered in these three, very different ways, discuss what the effect of each was upon the audience. Do you have a preference, and why? Do the different ways of presenting the aside suggest what Shakespeare is up to when he writes these for a given character? What does it tell us about the character? And about how we as the audience come to feel about that character?

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R3, SL3

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES & RESOURCES

## 29. SHAKESPEARE'S SHARED LINES

Shakespeare's texts contain many clues to help actors better understand their parts. You'll notice that some capitalized verse lines in *Othello* are indented from the left margin, starting well to the right of other lines. This is one half of what is called a "shared line," and it happens when two speakers share the ten beats (or sometimes eleven) in a line. When actors come across a shared line, this prompts that the two lines be delivered as one, with no pause between the end of one character's line and the beginning of the next.

In pairs, decide who will take on the roles of Desdemona and Othello. Read through an excerpt of Act 5, scene 2, lines 21–34 (beginning with Desdemona's line "Who's there? Othello?" and ending with Othello's line "Amen, with all my heart." After your first read-through, recap with your partner what you understand about the relationship between Desdemona and Othello at this point in the story. Then take a moment to identify and underline all of the shared lines you can find in this excerpt.

Read through your scene a second time. This time, when you reach a shared line, practice jumping in as soon as your scene partner has finished their line. For a challenge, you can also use a ball (like a hot potato!) for this activity to throw back and forth as you "toss" the lines to each other. Discuss what the shared lines suggest about these characters' emotions and state of mind in the scene.

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R5, SL1

## 30. CHORAL POEM MONTAGE

*[To the teacher: Divide the class in half and assign each half a character—Desdemona or Iago.]*

Examine the final moments in *Othello* before Desdemona is murdered. Recall the moment that Othello enters Desdemona's room, preparing to kill her for her alleged adultery.

- Write a letter to Othello from the perspective of your character—either as Iago or Desdemona. If Desdemona could freeze the moment and say anything to Othello, what might she want to communicate to him? What might Iago want to say to Othello at this moment before Desdemona's murder? Make decisions about tone of voice and language based on the character. Find the character's voice!
- Pair up with someone who wrote from the other character's perspective. In your pair, read one another's letters. In reading the letter written to your character, select three of the strongest phrases, words or single sentences that you feel really capture the character's voice, mood and tone. Underline your choices and give the letter back to your partner, who then decides which of your choices he or she will use for the group poem.
- Now, in groups of 6 (3 Iagos, 3 Desdemonas) work on your feet (so that the words are being said and heard) to create a poem from your 6 different contributions. Edit as much as you need in order to create the most powerful poem you can. You can repeat words; you can decide to say some in unison, but be sure to incorporate all 6 contributions.
- Each group takes a turn presenting its choral poem to the class.
- The rest of the class then becomes the editors of the living poem, asking the group to make whatever revisions we feel will help strengthen the writing.

Come back together as a class and discuss any new insights about this play's ending that were discovered through your choral poems.

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R3, SL2, W3

## 31. "MY HUSBAND? THY HUSBAND!"

Upon Desdemona's death, Othello explains to an incredulous Emilia that Desdemona was unfaithful with Cassio. "Thy husband knew it all," he says to Emilia, and in the next 13 lines, the word "husband" is uttered another eight times.

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES & RESOURCES

Explore the possible reasoning for this extensive repetition by exploring Emilia's subtext—her inner feelings that influence actions, behavior and tone.

- Read through the scene aloud, and underline "husband" each time you come across it. With your partner, discuss the possible reasons Emilia keeps repeating herself. Is she in shock? Is she trying to buy time? Is she piecing together the part she playing in this grisly scene? Next to each of Emilia's lines, write a possible subtext that Emilia might be thinking or feeling in that moment.
- Read through the scene again, but this time, speak Othello's lines and Emilia's subtext.
- Read through the scene once more, returning to Emilia's actual lines, but as you read, try to communicate the subtext you've identified for Emilia through the words Shakespeare has written.

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R4, SL3

## 32. COMPARING TWO TEXTS

Nas, a hip hop artist who released his first album in 1994, is no stranger to writing poetry, having released thirteen albums. Like Shakespeare, he has his devoted followers and his devoted critics. His fourth album, *I Am*, features a song entitled "Undying Love," with a very similar ending to Shakespeare's *Othello*. In this fictional song, Nas raps about returning home from a trip and discovering that his girlfriend is having an affair. In both this song and in *Othello*, the men's raging jealousy results in murder. And both men take their own lives.

Compare and contrast the end of the last verse in Nas' "Undying Love" and Othello's last monologue before his death. In small groups, try reading each of the passages out loud, paying close attention to the rhythm. You can choose to read them as a rap or a dramatic reading. What similarities do you see in the passages? Are there poetic devices (such as metaphor, alliteration, simile, imagery, rhythm, rhyme, etc.) used by the authors in both passages? Choose two groups to perform each of the passages for the class. Why do you think these two authors would choose to tell the same story?

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS L3, R9

### "UNDYING LOVE" (NAS)

Grabbed her face, say goodbye to your undercover friend  
One between the eye, she's died, by mistake  
Must've held the gat too tight, pointed at her face  
Heard somebody knock, Horse helped me hide the bodies  
Heard sirens, I guess we going out we out like kamikazes  
We surrounded, red lights flashing, who's inside?  
Came out a bullhorn, I'm contemplating suicide  
Horse asked me for the Mac, he gave me dap, one love  
Cocked the strap, then he ran out the back  
Mad shots couldn't tell what was going on  
Sat on the floor near my dead girl, put her in my arms  
Pulled her ring out my pocket I was saving  
Put it on her ring finger cocked the Glock, and started praying  
To Muhammad and Allah, the most beneficial  
Through you, all things are possible, I know you're listening  
I never meant for this to happen, I never dreamed  
This'd be my fate, such a grotesque, murder scene  
On that note, same time, the cops busted in  
Kissed my lady, her blood on my lips, I said "Amen"  
Put the nine to my head, pulled the hammer, held her close  
Squeeze the toast, said to her, "Now unto God, we elope"

We elope.

### OTHELLO, ACT 5, SCENE 2

OTHELLO

Soft you; a word or two before you go.  
I have done the state some service, and they know 't:  
No more of that. I pray you, in your letters,  
When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,  
Speak of me as I am; Nothing extenuate,  
Nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak  
Of one that loved not wisely, but too well;  
Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought,  
Perplexed in the extreme; of one whose hand,  
Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away  
Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes,  
Albeit unused to the melting mood,  
Drops tears as fast as the Arabian trees  
Their medicinal gum. Set you down this;  
And say besides that in Aleppo once  
Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk  
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,  
I took by the throat the circumcised dog,  
And smote him thus.

*Stabs himself.*

I kissed thee ere I killed thee: no way but this,  
Killing myself, to die upon a kiss.

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES & RESOURCES

## 33. STAGING VIOLENCE

Take a look at the final scene of the play and all its brutality. Working together in a small group, decide how you would stage this scene so that it would have the most impact on your audience. Where would you place the bed in relation to the audience? How brutal would the stage violence be—is there a “non-traditional” or more theatrical way for you to show the brutality of these final moments, or do you feel it’s necessary to see the violence in full view? Justify your choices with support from the text.

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R1, R6

## 34. GUILTY?

Like almost moment in a Shakespeare play, the final glimpse we get of Iago is open to interpretation—be it ours as readers, or the actors and director who are bringing the script to life in a live performance. Here’s what CST Guest Director Jonathan Munby said in an interview before the start of the rehearsal process:

*I don’t know what the end of this play is yet. We’ll find out when we get there. A lot has been written about Ian McKellen’s performance in Trevor Nunn’s production at the RSC in 1989. He was described by reviewers as this sort of archetypal psychopath. Standing at the end of the bed with these bodies in front of him, he looked cold and dead in the eyes, like he couldn’t connect emotionally with what he had just done. The same production was then filmed, and in the film we go into a close-up on Ian McKellen, into those eyes, and you see that he’s not dead. He’s not dead at all. You see a discovery of this horror that he’s created. It’s interesting. We’ll have to find out in rehearsal when we get there.*

Which face of Iago do you imagine at the end the play as he vows silence? Do you see an Iago who might actually feel remorse? Are there moments where we’ve witnessed his ability to recognize what another person is experiencing and, if so, to which character or characters? Is there any way that you can imagine feeling sorry for him at the end? As a class, experiment with saying Iago’s final lines, from Lodovico’s “Wrench his sword from him” (Act 5, scene 2, line 284) to Iago’s “...I will never speak a word” (Act 5, scene 2, line 301). Can these lines be delivered suggesting that Iago is indeed feeling remorse for what he has perpetrated?

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R1, R4

## ON YOUR OWN

## 35. CRITICAL INTERPRETATIONS OF OTHELLO

*[Othello] pictures through the hero not only the destruction of an established way of life, but the birth of a new order. Othello in his final soliloquy is a man of more capacious mind than the Othello who first meets us.* —E.M.W. Tillyard (1938)

*Othello’s... is a story of blindness and folly, of a man run mad. As the play is planned, evil works all but unquestioned in him until it is too late. Of battle between good and evil, his soul the battleground, even of a clarifying consciousness of the evil at work in him, there is nothing.* —Harley Granville-Barker (1945)

Tillyard and Granville-Barker claim very different points of view about the Othello we see at the end of the play. Thinking about Othello’s final speech, what is your point of view? Is Othello a hero who has come to a deeper self-understanding, or is he one who, at his story’s end, still understands very little? Use textual evidence to support your view.

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R3, SL3

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES & RESOURCES

## After You Read the Play

### IN SMALL GROUPS

#### 36. DEFINING “BLACK” IN *OTHELLO*

[To the teacher: divide your students up to create ten small groups, and assign each a passage of text containing the word “black”—you can find all instances of the word’s use in *Othello* by visiting [www.opensourceshakespeare.org](http://www.opensourceshakespeare.org) and using the “Text Search” feature in the right column. Choose *Othello* from the “Search in work” drop-down list.]

The word “black” and its derivatives are used ten times throughout *Othello*, but the meaning of the word changes, depending on the context of the lines, the character speaking it, and when it is said. In your small groups, examine your passage and discuss the meaning of the word “black.” Use a Shakespeare lexicon or [www.shakespeareswords.com](http://www.shakespeareswords.com) to collect possible definitions and then come to a consensus. Is your line said by Othello or in his presence? What does the word connote in the context of your line?

Read your passage aloud once more, this time looking for antithesis—an opposite idea—to the phrase or line containing the word “black.” (For instance, “When devils will the blackest sins put on / They do suggest at first with heavenly shows.”) What does the antithesis suggest about the culture of racism in the world of this play? What about in our own contemporary use of language?

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R4, L5

#### 37. THE HANDKERCHIEF

The objects we hold most dear in our lives are layered with a meaning that far outweighs their material value. Like Desdemona’s handkerchief, they might have been passed down through generations, and along their journey bear witness to history in their own remarkable ways. What stories might such an object reveal?

Desdemona’s handkerchief first makes its appearance in Act 3, and in the final three acts of the play, it is mentioned a whopping 27 times. Revisit the first moment that the handkerchief is mentioned in Act 3, scene 3, and then trace the handkerchief’s journey through the play from that moment onward. (To help with this, visit [www.opensourceshakespeare.org](http://www.opensourceshakespeare.org) and use the “Text Search” feature in the right column to search for “handkerchief,” choosing *Othello* from the “Search in work” drop-down list.)

Design a handkerchief on a sheet of paper, adding words and images that reveal its journey throughout the story of *Othello*. In each scene that the handkerchief is mentioned, choose one key word, phrase or line that reveals something about the handkerchief’s past, present or future trajectory, and record these on your handkerchief. As you’re examining these scenes, consider, too, any information about what the handkerchief looks like or if the handkerchief ever incurs any physical damage or markings along the way—add drawings to your handkerchief based on this textual evidence.

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R2

#### 38. SIGNATURE LINE

In groups of eight, decide who will adopt each of the eight major characters: Othello, Desdemona, Iago, Emilia, Cassio, Bianca, Brabantio, Roderigo. Individually, mine the text to find a single line (or two or three verse lines if the sentence is longer...) that encompasses your character’s journey. Take a few moments to write your thoughts about why you think that line best represents your character. Share your line and your reasoning with your group.

If you were going to present these eight lines after the play’s last lines as a final artistic moment in a production of *Othello*, how might you stage such a moment? Together, decide how to present these eight lines in a dramatic read-

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES & RESOURCES

ing. Consider the order of lines, positioning of each person, and how each line will be delivered. Present your work to the class and examine key similarities and differences between the performances.

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R3

## 39. COMPARING TWO LOVE STORIES

*Othello is ...not a true-love romance with a tragic ending brought about chiefly by a heavy villain. It is Romeo and Juliet matured and recomposed. In writing the earlier play Shakespeare was aware, though not deeply aware, that the tragedy of love, when supreme is also the tragedy of hate. In Othello those two passions comparatively superficial in all of his previous stories are intensified to the uttermost and deeply interwoven....* –G.R. Elliott (1953)

Now that you've read (or seen) both *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet*, think about Elliott's quote. In your small group, return to each play, and discuss where love and hate were rooted in each. Now, divide your group in half again. Return to the scripts of both plays, one group exploring *Othello*, the other *Romeo and Juliet*. Your task is to find key lines in your play that express these two strong passions—search for 20-30 lines.

Reconvene with the rest of your small group. Take a look at the lines you've gathered. Saying them aloud several times together, do you begin to see any comparisons? Any contrasts in the two plays' lines and language?

It is now your task in your small group to present—dramatically—what you've discovered. There are many ways you could take this: two separate line readings from each play that summarize their stories; an intermingling of the lines of hate from both; a presentation of one particular aspect of love or hate that you found repeated in each, etc. You don't need to use all the lines. You may repeat as often as you like. You can speak in chorally or individually. After each group has presented its version to the class, discuss as an entire class what you discovered.

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R9

## 40. TWITTER OTHELLO

[To the teacher: Divide this fifteen-scene play into the number of students in your class, assigning each scene to one or two students.]

As an omniscient observer of the action in *Othello*, you must “tweet” an assigned scene from the play, working to whittle the action of the scene down to its bare essentials.

- First, review your scene, and write a short summary that includes the main idea, supporting details and two to three significant quotes.
- Exchange summaries with a classmate. Read his/her summary, and circle the lines/words/phrases that are really getting at the essence of the scene. Cross out the parts that seem unnecessary. Return the summaries to one another.
- With your own summary back, create a tweet-length summary of 140 characters or fewer. In your tweet, you must include one three-or-more consecutive word quote (and yes, quotation marks count as characters!). And, for this assignment, textspeak is completely acceptable!
- In order of the play, read your tweets aloud with your classmates, hearing a concise summary of the entire play's events.

Here are a couple of tweeted examples from other Shakespeare plays:

*Romeo and Juliet's* Act 3, scene 1: Tybalt has beef w/ Romeo. Mercutio fights Tybalt. Mercutio: “A plague on both your houses”; dies. Romeo kills Tybalt; Prince exiles Romeo.

*The Tempest's* opening scene: Sailors during a storm tried to keep it afloat, but passengers in the way, sailor yelled, “You do assist the storm”!

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R2, W3, W4

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES & RESOURCES

## 41. MIRRORING OTHELLO

...if Iago 'represents' something that is in *Othello*, so equally does *Desdemona*. –Jane Adamson (1980)

What do you think about Adamson's comment? In these three apparently different natures, what are the commonalities? In small groups, discuss Adamson's comment. Do you perceive aspects of *Othello* that reflect a commonality with Iago? With *Desdemona*? Return to the script, and see if you can pinpoint a phrase, a word or a line that seem to bridge each pair of characters. Read these lines aloud to one another. Then decide how you might present one of your paired sets of lines to the rest of the class. What feeling do you want to evoke? You may have members of the group who are not speaking the lines either echo, speak chorally, or dramatize the words as they are spoken.

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R3, SL4

### ON YOUR OWN

## 42. PERFORMANCE HISTORY

While Americans and Englishmen in the mid-nineteenth century rejected Shakespeare's *Othello* as it stood, cutting it heavily to suit the tastes of "proper society," Europeans on the Continent embraced the play as an expression of the critical changes in the political climate at the time. Ira Aldridge, an African-American actor, couldn't find work in America, and only minor parts in England. But touring as *Othello* throughout Europe brought him honors and medals.

*It is impossible Mr. Aldridge should fully comprehend the meaning and force or even the words he utters...*  
–Reviewer for London's Athenaeum (1833)

*After this *Othello* it would be an anticlimax to have seen an ordinary *Othello* again. What abandonment, passion, beauty, greatness, sense... A Negro from Africa's western coast has come to show me the real *Othello*.*  
–A critic writing in Germany following Aldridge's tour there

Take a look at Aldridge's life and place in theatrical history by writing a short research paper on him and his experiences touring the world as *Othello*. Consider focusing your research around the question of racial discrimination in the United States and England in the mid-1800's, contrasted with the attitudes in Europe of that same period.

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS W2, W7

## 43. AN IMAGINED EPILOGUE

Write an epilogue (a short passage/essay) to *Othello*. What's happening five years following the conclusion of Shakespeare's play? How was Iago punished for his treachery? How were *Othello* and *Desdemona* memorialized? Did Cassio regain his status in the military? Does Iago ever come to regret his actions? Be creative in your telling of what happened next.

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS W3



## Teacher Resource Center

If you have an activity or lesson plan that was a classroom success with your students, we want to hear about it! Consider donating your lesson plan to the Teacher Resource Center, and become part of our ever-growing, permanent collection! Need inspiration? If you are looking for the perfect activity or "proven" lesson plan, visit the Center to access hundred of teaching resources.

**Call the Education Department, 312.595.5678, to make an appointment.**

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES & RESOURCES

## 44. IN MEMORIAM

You've been hired to write epitaphs (a phrase or phrases memorializing a person's life on his or her tombstone) for Othello and Desdemona. What would you write? Why? How do you think these individuals should be remembered?

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS W3

## The Performance: Preparing and Reflecting

### AS A CLASS

## 45. BARD BLOG: A TOOL FOR DISCUSSION

Before and after you see the performance at CST, continue adding to your Bard Blog. Use these ideas to get you started, or modify other activities in this section to a blogging format:

- Select one of the quotations from the “What the Critics Say” section of this Teacher Handbook. Do you agree or disagree with the writer? Blog an argument about this quotation. Cite specific examples from the play to support your assertions. Does your argument still hold up after seeing the performance?
- Each actor brings his or her own unique quality to a character. They make specific choices based on the director's vision, chemistry with the ensemble of other actors, and their own interpretation of what motivates their character to action. Choose a character to follow closely when you see CST's performance (and if you already began a character diary, stick with your same character). As you watch the actor playing your chosen character, note the acting choices he or she makes through voice, movement and “subtext”—the inner feelings beneath the spoken words. Compose a free-write of your thoughts on the actor's interpretation of the character. How does the actor in CST's production differ from what you had imagined? What choices did the actor make that enhanced your understanding of the character?

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R6, W6, W10

## 46. FATE OR FREE WILL

*The play makes us consider and reconsider not merely what aspects of one's nature and behaviour one can make and change and control, but also the relationships between various ways that things seem 'fated to us...'—parentage, birth, physical attributes, natural talents and dispositions—and those which our own experiences, choices, actions, commitments, and so on, in all the given circumstances of our lives, gradually accumulate and form into our destiny. Throughout the play, the characters themselves keep confusing all these—as when Othello for example alleges that he is congenitally doomed to be betrayed. Yet their very confusions painfully underline and intensify our own difficulty in maintaining any clear-cut distinction between the 'fated' and the 'free' aspects of the self... Are the feelings we cannot help having really 'fated' to us? And in what sense are we free or able to do anything about them? All these perennial questions lie at the heart of the play... —Jane Adamson (1980)*

Before and after you see CST's production, discuss Adamson's assertion. When you read the play, did you imagine Othello as a victim of his own fate? Did CST's production take a different stance? In the production, how much was he shown as a person with free will? Did your view of Othello change as you watched the play? If you are able to view a film version as well, compare different actors' portrayals of this character. In each, think about the question of Othello as free agent vs. Othello as victim. How did the director and the actors suggest a point of view? At what specific moments did you feel this way? Did the portrayal of Iago in the CST production make a difference in the way you viewed Othello? What

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES & RESOURCES

about any other versions you've seen? Again, think of specific moments in the CST production and others you've seen that brought you to your conclusion. Discuss these moments and your observations as a group.

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R3, R6, R9

## 47. IN FULL VIEW

The experience of theater is one of community. We all come together to watch a story that has been enacted many, many times for hundreds of years and in hundreds of places. *Othello* is performed in Chicago Shakespeare's Courtyard Theater with its thrust stage. A "thrust" is a stage that extends into the audience who, sitting on three sides of the stage, are "up close and personal" with the action and the actors. This requires a special relationship with the performers and your neighbors. During the play do you become aware of other audience members? How does this affect your experience and inform your behavior? Discuss what the role an audience actually plays in a theater performance like this one.

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS SL1

### IN SMALL GROUPS

## 48. THE CURTAIN RISES...

Through Chicago Shakespeare's thrust stage lacks the traditional curtain rise, there is an opening moment when the play begins—and the director thinks as carefully about our initial entry into the world he/she has created as the final moment that we take with us. In Shakespeare productions, the director may begin with an "extra-textual" scene—a brief scene, typically without any words, that precedes the opening lines and action of the play. It helps set the mood, or it may give the audience some additional information about the story and the world of the play. If you've studied *Othello* in class, work in small groups to discuss what such a scene in your own production might convey. What mood do you hope to create before the play's first lines? Or what information do you want your audience to see for themselves? If you were to foreshadow a moment in the play (without yet revealing it), what element might you choose to depict? Be creative—there are so many different choices that a director could make.

After you see the play (whether or not you studied *Othello* in class beforehand), discuss the impact of Director Jonathan Munby's choice. Why do you think he chose to portray this particular scene—and the way in which he staged it?

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R6, SL3

## 49. DESIGNING FOR A TIME AND PLACE

Put the act and scene numbers for each scene in the play on slips of paper, and mix them up in a hat. Everyone picks one scene out of the hat. Imagine that you are designing a production of *Othello*. What does your scenic design look like? What kinds of costumes are your characters wearing? What is the lighting like? Some questions to get you started:

- Where does the scene take place?
- What props are helpful in setting the mood?
- What is the weather like? What time of day is it?
- What's the overall tone of the scene?
- Who's in the scene? Where are they from?

It may help to make a designer's board—a large piece of poster board with swatches of fabric, copies of paintings or photographs that have an element of what you envision, and anything else that illustrates the scene for you. Magazines and art books, as well as the Internet, are often good sources of ideas. When you've finished your collage, pick the line or lines from the scene that are essential to your design concepts. As a class, do a "show and tell" in order of scenes (designers often do this for the cast on the first day of rehearsal). When you see the play, be aware of the design. Are there similar elements to some of the designs you saw in class?

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R1, R6, SL5

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES & RESOURCES

## 50. CASTING A PRODUCTION

Chicago Shakespeare Theater's casting director is responsible for finding the right person for every character you see on our stage—no small task! After you've read the play, return to the text and look for clues for each character to answer these questions: how do they look? sound? move? behave? Think of television and film celebrities who fit your image of the character and, in groups, discuss who your "Dream Team" would be for your version of *Othello*. Print or post on your class blog images to create "headshots" for your perfect cast. Then present your cast to your classmates, explaining why you made each decision, and compare your ideas with those of your classmates, using specific textual evidence whenever possible. After you see the play, contrast your vision to that of Director Jonathan Munby and the actors whom she and CST's casting director have assembled.

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R1, R7, SL5

### ON YOUR OWN

## 51. CHARACTER KARAOKE

Directors think carefully about the placement of an intermission (since Shakespeare's script doesn't dictate where one comes). They consider the mood in the room that they want to leave the audience with prior to the break, as well as how they want us to feel re-entering the world of the play once we've been away from it for a few minutes. Prior to seeing Jonathan Munby's production, consider where you might choose to place the intermission and the reasoning behind your choice.

Once you see CST's production, discuss Director Jonathan Munby's choices around the intermission for this production. Why might he have chosen that given moment in the play to break—and return to? What effect did the closing of "Part One" have upon you? Would there have been another point in the story that a break would have made sense?

When we return from intermission, the characters are immersed in singing karaoke. The songs they choose are not accidental—any more than our own karaoke choices ever are... What songs do you remember hearing? Now, create your own karaoke song list for some of the major characters in *Othello*—and don't forget Roderigo, Brabantio, the Duke and Bianca! From your song list, choose one character to write about. Using textual evidence from both the song and from the play, discuss why that song resonates for that particular character.

COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R6, W3, W9

## 52. RECURRING WORDS: "NOW" IN *OTHELLO*

Director Jonathan Munby talked with CST's staff about his process in preparing to stage *Othello*. Here is something he shared:

*I always do a search for which words appear most frequently in a play when I'm preparing for a production because it gives you a sense of what the play is about, what Shakespeare is most interested in. In fact 'now' is one of the most frequently occurring words in Othello. Shakespeare writes the same play in every scene; thematically he looks at the same ideas regardless of where that scene takes place or who's in it. The 'nowness' of this story is really interesting because there's something about the sheer momentum of this story.*

As you watch the production, look for ways in which the production choices seemed to support the director's intention that he articulates above—acting choices, design choices, transitions between scenes might all give you hints.

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R2

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES & RESOURCES

## 53. MAN OR MONSTER?

*[Iago's]...last speech, the motive-hunting of motiveless malignity—how awful! In itself fiendish; while yet he was allowed to bear the divine image, too fiendish for his own steady view. A being next to devil, only not quite devil... –Samuel Taylor Coleridge (c. 1810)*

*Shakespeare's presentation of Iago challenges us to dare not to shield ourselves from what the drama shows: that Iago's inhumaneness is itself the clearest sign of his humanity. It cannot be safely fenced off into a category labeled 'devilish,' 'inhuman.' –Jane Adamson (1980)*

Then, share your point of view through a short graphic narrative. Consider the moment in the play that best represents your view of Iago as “inhuman” or “all too human.” On a single sheet of paper, draw the events leading up to this moment, the moment itself, and the aftermath. Allow your perspective on Iago to shape your portrayal of this event. Drawings need not be realistic! Share your drawings with the class, having classmates guess your stance.

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R3, SL3, W9

## 54. UPDATING FOR A CONTEMPORARY AUDIENCE

Throughout the nearly 400 years of *Othello's* history on stage, directors have often made choices to draw connections between the play's themes and their own “contemporary” world and audience. To learn more about historical interpretations of the play, read “A Look Back at *Othello* in Performance” on page 33. Working in a group, think about how you would update this play for today's audiences. Create an outline for your interpretation, highlighting major interpretive choices for characters or particular scenes. Share your interpretation with the class, and be prepared to defend your decisions.

After seeing CST's production, think about Director Jonathan Munby's interpretations of Emilia (as a soldier) and the Duke (as a woman). Both were made possible by placing the production in a contemporary military setting. If you read the play prior to seeing the production, did your perspective on either character change based on these choices? How do these two specific portrayals of Emilia and the Duke subtly (or not so subtly) shift the roles and relationships of these two characters? Using the production as your “text,” what specific moments were clearly altered—and how—by these choices? What did the contemporary military environment reveal about the play's story, themes or characters that you hadn't noticed before? After you think about your own responses to the production, read what Director Jonathan Munby had to say in his interview:

*The ruler of Venice, the duke...is being played by Melissa Carlson. We used the audition process as an experiment to hear what it sounded like for a woman to speak these words and to be the one to negotiate this relationship between an angry father and his daughter. The moment Melissa started to utter this text, I realized how wonderfully contemporary it sounded, how much it resonated as an interpretation—a senior woman defending the rights of this young woman.*

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS W3, R6

## 55. STAGE DIRECTIONS

Shakespeare is known for his brevity—at least when it comes to writing stage directions! He rarely indicates more than an “Enter” or “Exeunt,” which means that actors and directors get to make a lot of creative decisions as they bring any of his plays to life. (As a contrast, take a look at the lengthy, very detailed stage directions of a playwright like Henrik Ibsen: <http://tinyurl.com/ibsensadollshouse> or George Bernard Shaw: <http://tinyurl.com/shawsarmsandtheman>).

In groups of three, choose one scene from *Othello* and write stage directions to open the scene. To get you started, think of specific details: How old are the characters, and how will age affect their movements? What are some of the sounds we hear? The smells? Will the characters' clothes affect their movements? What are their states of mind during the scene? After you see CST's production, compare your stage directions with what you saw onstage.

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R1, W3

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES & RESOURCES

## 56. THE TOOLS OF THEATER

Consider all the different tools of theater that can help bring a story to life, including:

- Acting (vocal, physical and character choices made by the actors)
- Blocking (the actors' movement and positioning on stage)
- Set design
- Costume design
- Lighting Design
- Music and sound design
- Props
- Special effects

In each of these areas, there are countless choices made by the director, designers and actors, contributing to their unique interpretation of the story. Before you see CST's production, choose one of the above tools of theater to focus on. As you watch the performance, note the specific ways that tool is used throughout and how those choices help to support the storytelling.

After you see CST's production, write an analysis of how your chosen tool was utilized to create a unique interpretation of *Othello*. Outline the choices made using that tool, and how those choices either supported or didn't effectively support the storytelling.

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS R6, W1

## 57. WRITING A THEATER REVIEW

A scaffold for this activity: Before you write your review, read three different theater reviews of current plays at Theatre in Chicago's Critics Review Round-Up: <http://www.theatreinchicago.com/reviewlistings.php>. Analyze the structure of a review, identifying key elements. Based on these key elements, describe the style you found most helpful (or least helpful) in communicating a play's appeal for potential theater-goers.

Now, write your own critical review of CST's *Othello*. Briefly recount the plot. Discuss the parts of the production— including the casting, acting, setting, music, dance, costumes, cuts—you thought worked particularly well, or did not work well and explain why you thought so. Consider publishing your piece in a school newspaper or the Bard Blog. Use some of the questions below to generate ideas for your review:

- What aspect of the play captivated your attention?
- How did the production's interpretation compare with your own interpretation of the play?  
Do you believe it stayed true to Shakespeare's intention?
- Were there particular performances that you believed were powerful? Why?
- Would you recommend this play to others? Who would most enjoy it?
- Based on your answers to the above questions, how many stars (out of a possible five) would you give this production?

CONSIDER COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS W1, W4

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES & RESOURCES

## To Listen or Not to Listen: Using Audiobooks to Read Shakespeare

**MARY T. CHRISTEL** taught AP Literature and Composition as well as media and film studies courses at Adlai E. Stevenson High School from 1979 to 2012. She has published several works on media literacy including *Seeing and Believing: How to Teach Media Literacy in the English Classroom with Ellen Krueger (Heinemann)* as well as contributing articles to *Teaching Shakespeare Today (NCTE)*, *Teaching Shakespeare into the Twenty-First Century (U of Ohio)*, *For All Time: Critical Issues in Shakespeare Studies (Wakefield Press)*. Ms. Christel has been recognized by the Midwest Chapter of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences for promoting media literacy education.

### WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF LISTENING TO A SHAKESPEARE PLAY?

Despite the wealth of audio performances available, these resources easily can be overlooked or forgotten. Asking students to listen to portions of an audio performance—either key scenes or speeches—can help them hear the auditory effect of iambic pentameter and the poetic devices, such as alliteration, assonance, metaphors and figurative language. Using a “listen along strategy” can help students transition to an independent, skilled reader of the text or sharpen their listening skills before seeing Shakespeare in performance.

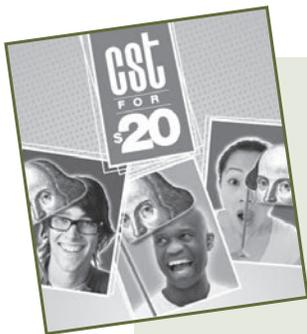
When preparing to introduce a play using audiobooks, keep in mind the following framework that The National Capital Language Resource Center suggests in order to maximize the effectiveness of using audio texts (<http://www.nclrc.org/essentials/listening/goalslisten.htm>)

- Before listening - plan the listening task
- During listening - monitor comprehension
- After listening - evaluate comprehension and strategy use

### WHAT KINDS OF TECHNIQUES “WARM UP” STUDENTS’ LISTENING SKILLS?

Like an actor who warms up their body and voice, an audio-book listener needs to warm up their active listening skills. Rebecca Alber offers useful warm-up activities at <http://www.edutopia.org/blog/five-listening-strategies-rebecca-alber>—tips that inspired the following strategies.

To help students warm up their ears, offer them a prose passage that focuses on the play they will be studying. Excerpt that passage from an introduction or analysis of the play to provide an easily accessible listening experience that also offers information that will inform their listening of the play. A recording of this passage is preferred to a live reading. Increase the length of each “listening passage” as students’ proficiency develops.



### CST for \$20

Chicago Shakespeare is committed to making our productions accessible for everyone, so CST for \$20 was designed to fit the budget of students and young professionals. We have allocated thousands of tickets across the entire season, giving our friends under 35 the opportunity to see world-class theater at an everyday price. Anyone under 35 can buy up to two \$20 tickets per production.

**You can find out more at [www.chicagoshakes.com/cst20](http://www.chicagoshakes.com/cst20)**

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES & RESOURCES

## **Summarizing and Posing Questions**

Students listen to a segment of prose text or a scene/speech from a play, paying attention to details that would help summarize that piece's content. Then, students write down their summary and any questions about what they did not understand. Students then listen to the piece a second time, revise their summary as needed, and reconsider their previously posed questions.

## **Pair and Share**

Students follow the directions for the previous activity. In pairs, they share their summaries, discuss differences in their summaries, and consider the reasons for differences between their summaries.

## **Eyes Open, Eyes Shut**

Students listen to a prose passage or scene/speech from a play and summarize what they have heard. During a second listen, students close their eyes and after, revise their summaries as needed. Discuss if students felt that their concentration improved when they closed their eyes, minimizing visual distractions. Invite students to suggest a variety of strategies for minimizing distractions as they listen to an audio text (e.g. following along with print text, picking a focal point in their listening environment, etc.)

## **WHAT ARE EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR LISTENING TO AN AUDIO PERFORMANCE?**

As with effective reading instruction, a teacher needs to set a purpose for listening and break down the listening experience into segments, allowing students to process and react to what has been heard.

Every opening scene is brimming with exposition, so an initial goal might be to have students listen to Act 1, scene 1, focusing on the “who, what, where, and why” that emerge in play's first lines. Students can be given one focus to follow throughout the scene and report to the class what they discover about their given “w.” So that the act of listening reinforces the act of reading, they can mark in their text or photocopy all details that respond to their listening/reading focus. How much the audio performance relies on a heavily or lightly edited script can pose a challenge, so a teacher should do a “test listen” to see how different the audio version is from the print text. Folger audio/digital books do match their printed companion texts and Arkangel Shakespeare recordings are based on Pelican editions of the plays. Cambridge publishers also offer recordings that match their New Cambridge editions. Taking time for a “test listen” is important in helping students navigate any differences they might encounter in their text—and any encountered discrepancies offer a teachable moment about how plays are edited and what is lost or gained in the process. Information about these audio-books can be located at:

### **Folger**

<http://www.folger.edu/podcasts-and-recordings>

### **Arkangel**

<http://www.audioeditions.com/complete-arkangel-shakespeare.aspx>

### **Cambridge**

[http://education.cambridge.org/us/subject/english/shakespeare/cambridge-school-shakespeare-\(latest-editions\)](http://education.cambridge.org/us/subject/english/shakespeare/cambridge-school-shakespeare-(latest-editions))

Giving students the opportunity to “listen along” can be carried through each act of the play to preview or highlight a key speech or scene and to set the stage for the next segment of the plot.

As students become more comfortable with the details of plot, they can be directed to look for changes in how a character's use of language changes in conjunction with changing motives or actions—as they fall in love (Romeo or Juliet), become more desperate and distracted (Othello or King Lear), or gain confidence in their bid for power (Henry IV or Richard III).

For struggling readers, they may find that the reading/listening strategy is the best way for them to develop the necessary fluency to stay on pace with their peers. A listening station can be set up easily in the classroom for students to self select more support from the audio-book strategy, or a link to an audio-book online site can be established on the class web page so students can listen in study hall, at home—whenever or wherever they might need support.

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES & RESOURCES

## HOW DO I SELECT AN AUDIO PERFORMANCE OF A SHAKESPEARE PLAY?

The following blog entry from offers some advice in selecting audio performances for commonly taught plays:

**Top Ten Shakespeare Audio Productions** [as well as 11-20 suggestions]

<http://www.shakespeareteacher.com/blog/archives/2760>.

In addition to audio performances tied to published editions of the play, various free audio files are available online at these sites:

### **Learn Out Loud**

<http://www.learnoutloud.com/Free-Online-Learning/Free-Video-Audio-Resources/Free-Shakespeare-Plays-on-Audio/315>

### **Free Shakespeare**

<https://www.playshakespeare.com/>

Extensions of listening to excerpts from a play could involve students storyboarding scenes based on how they visualize the action and setting, or trying their hand at recording their own speech or scene.

## Using Film to Teach Shakespeare

MARY T. CHRISTEL

Given that Shakespeare as a playwright in Elizabethan England found himself at the epicenter of popular culture, one can't help but wonder if he wouldn't be writing screenplays if he were alive today. He would likely be pleased that his legacy is not only perpetuated on stages like CST but also on the silver—and now digital—screens. It is up to the savvy teacher to determine how to help students “read” Shakespeare in the three ways Mary Ellen Dakin suggests: as text, as performance and as film.

Mary Ellen Dakin's book entitled *Reading Shakespeare Film First* (NCTE 2012) might seem a bit contradictory to the approach many English/Language Arts teachers take. How can one “read Shakespeare” if one places film first? Film might be considered an enemy when helping students to read and appreciate Shakespeare's work. For most teachers, film generally follows the reading of a play and functions as the “dessert” at the unit's end. The strategies that follow are intended to help teachers reconsider how and when film can be used in order to motivate, clarify and enrich students' engagement with any play.

### FILMS CAN BE USED BEFORE READING...

#### **...to preview the story, characters and themes**

Many of the stories that Shakespeare dramatized were familiar, even well known, to his audience, so providing students with a broad outline of the action of a play prior to reading it would be consistent with the knowledge that Renaissance audiences brought to many of the plays they saw performed on stage. Previewing can be accomplished in the classroom in one of two ways.

First, twelve of the plays were adapted into thirty-minute animated films, which aired in the 1990s on HBO and now are distributed on DVD by Ambrose Video. These “Shakespeare in short” adaptations retain the play's original language and present the essentials of the story in an abbreviated form. This activity acquaints students with the major characters, incidents and themes, providing a “road map” for students who might get mired in sorting out who's who and what's what as they adjust themselves to the language and structure of play.

A second method requires the teacher to select key scenes from a film that takes a relatively conventional approach to the play. For example, Franco Zeffirelli's version of *Romeo and Juliet* (1968) would be preferred over Baz Luhrmann's film (1996), while Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet* (1996) is a rare “full text” version and useful in this context, whereas Zeffirelli's adaptation (1990)

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reduces the text to two hours on screen. The BBC filmed all of Shakespeare's plays for television in the 1970s and '80s; these versions are faithful to the texts, with relatively traditional staging and the full text intact. Like the animated films, the teacher's scene selection should provide students with a broad outline of the play, as well as introduction to key events, main characters and crucial soliloquies. Students can use these scenes as reference points in their discussion of the play as they read it.

## ...to create context

Film can be utilized as an introductory element of a unit to provide a context prior to reading a specific play. A&E's Biography series provides students with Shakespeare's biographical details and a survey of the times in *Shakespeare: A Life of Drama* (1996), a conventional approach to delivering contextual information. Historian Michael Wood takes viewers on a lively tour of various locations throughout contemporary England to explore Shakespeare's life, times, and plays in this acclaimed four-part series, *In Search of Shakespeare* (2004). (An episode guide is available at <http://www.pbs.org/shakespeare/theshow/> to facilitate selection of the most appropriate segments from this comprehensive work.)

Context can be built by viewing a commercially released film that "sets the stage" for the Elizabethan era, enabling students to get a sense of the politics, social customs, and "look" of the times. A film like *Elizabeth* (1998) starring Cate Blanchett has little to do with Shakespeare, but it provides a vivid glimpse into the monarch's struggle to claim and maintain the throne. *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) and *Anonymous* (2011) provide glimpses into the world of early modern theater practice and Shakespeare himself, but the liberties these films take with conventional historical fact may create more confusion than clarity for many students. Excerpts, however, could be used to help students visualize the time and the occasion of attending the theater, but contextual information is required to help students sort out historical accuracy from bias, poetic license or pure invention.

If students and teachers are interested in a serious examination of the authorship question, *Anonymous* is not the most scholarly approach to the matter. A better option is First Folio Pictures documentary *Last Will. And Testament* (2012). A trailer and other preview materials can be located at <http://firstfoliopictures.com/>. Other films that address the controversy surrounding Shakespeare's authorship include:

*The Shakespeare Enigma* (2001) Films Media Group  
<http://ffh.films.com/ItemDetails.aspx?TitleId=5953>

*Who Wrote Shakespeare's Works?* (1993) Films Media Group  
<http://ffh.films.com/ItemDetails.aspx?TitleId=7069>

*The Shakespeare Mystery* from PBS' *Frontline* series (1989)  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shakespeare/>

Incorporating this kind of film can help students examine how a documentary film constructs an argument to support its thesis through the use of standard rhetorical strategies that students use to analyze and create written arguments.

Al Pacino's documentary *Looking for Richard* (1996) provides an ideal way to contextualize the study of *Richard III*, but it should not be overlooked as a viewing experience to help students of any play understand what makes the study and performance of Shakespeare invigorating for actors, directors, scholars, readers and audiences. Pacino's passion for the hunchback king is infectious and the film is effectively broken up into sections: a visit to Shakespeare's birthplace, Shakespeare's Globe rebuilt in contemporary London, brief conversations with modern Shakespearean scholars and directors, and actors in rehearsal tackling the meaning of particularly dense passages of text. The film may not be practical in most cases to screen in full, but it certainly helps to build anticipation and knowledge prior to diving into a full text.

Films that document students interacting with Shakespearean texts can also generate enthusiasm for reading, and perhaps performing, a selected play. *Shakespeare High* (2012) showcases California high school students who annually compete in a Shakespeare scene contest. Students, who are both likely and unlikely competitors, are followed from scene selection, casting, rehearsal, through the final competition. *The Hobart Shakespeareans* (2005) features fifth-graders, whose home language is not English, performing scenes with uncommon poise and command of the language as a result of a dedicated teacher's commitment to offering his students the rigor of studying Shakespeare. *Romeo Is Bleeding* (2015) follows poetry slam performer and teaching

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artist Donté Clark's process of adapting and "remixing" *Romeo and Juliet* into his own play, *Té's Harmony*, to reflect the tension and conflicts that have emerged between gangs in Richmond, California. The film includes Clark's collaboration with amateur actors from RAW Talent, a community arts outreach agency. These films shared, in full or in part, can provide motivation to not only read and understand the text but to take it to the next level of student engagement: performance.

Films Media Group (formerly Films for the Humanities and Sciences) has an extensive catalogue of films useful in providing context; many titles are available as streaming video, allowing teachers to "sample" a film without that "lifelong commitment" to purchasing a DVD that can cost several hundred dollars and sometimes not be the proper fit for students' interest or abilities.

Many of their offerings have been produced in the UK or by the BBC and cover the gamut of plays and approaches to Shakespeare in performance and on the page. (That search can start at <http://ffh.films.com/>.)

## FILMS CAN BE USED DURING READING...

### ...to clarify understanding

For students who are having difficulty visualizing the action or fully comprehending the language, it can be beneficial to watch a faithful adaptation incrementally, act by act. Again, Zeffirelli's version of *Romeo and Juliet* works well. The film is easily broken down act by act with all the critical incidents and speeches intact. Students should be given a focus for their viewing, through the lens of their own questions and quandaries that they retain after reading an act, along with thoughts on how the film might address them. As students become more comfortable with the reading/viewing rhythm as they work through the play, they can adopt a more "critical" attitude toward examining later acts to discuss choices made by the screenwriter/adaptor, director, designers and actors.

When working with students who are really struggling with the language and where listening to a recorded version of a play isn't particularly helpful or engaging, film can also be used in a "read along" fashion for the exposition and key scenes or speeches. Students follow in their own printed text while the film is running, and are coached to follow in their book while taking "peeks" at the screen when they need the support of the image to clarify their understanding of the language. Staged versions of a play with close adherence to the script (BBC, for example) are better choices for this application. More cinematic versions tend to be so visually rich that students have a hard time reading rather than watching. For example, the RSC filmed version of *Macbeth* (1979) featuring Ian McKellan and Judi Dench in the leading roles follows the standard text fairly closely in most of the interactions between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. This strategy is best used for the analysis of short scenes or at moments of crisis in students' understanding. It is essential for teachers to prescreen scenes to make sure that they closely follow the edition of the play being studied as much as possible.

### ...to make comparisons

Just as the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries adapted Shakespeare's scripts to fit the fashion and tastes of the theatergoing audiences (as susceptible to trends as the fashion industry), once Shakespeare's work entered the multi-media performance space of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the text is often transformed to support the spectacle of the cinematic image. Every cinematic adapter of a complex dramatic text must consider the balance of "showing" versus "telling," sometimes choosing to emphasize the visual over the verbal. These adapters struggle with the question: What can the art of cinema reveal visually through a close-up, crosscut, or a montage that effectively augments or replaces the text? In the past thirty years, Shakespeare's comedies, tragedies, histories and romances have been transported to modern settings that maintain the broad outlines of plot and character but replace Shakespeare's blank verse with contemporary language and colloquialisms.

A sample list of adaptations includes:

*Zebrahead* (1992) . . . . . *Romeo and Juliet*  
*Ten Things I Hate About You* (1999) . . . . . *The Taming of the Shrew*  
*O* (2001) . . . . . *Othello*  
*She's the Man* (1996) . . . . . *Twelfth Night*

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*My Own Private Idaho* (1991) ..... *Henry IV*  
*Tempest* (1982)..... *The Tempest*  
*A Thousand Acres* (1997)..... *King Lear*  
*Scotland, PA* (2001) ..... *Macbeth*  
*Men of Respect* (1990) ..... *Macbeth*

Additional adaptations of plot, characters and setting include four plays in the BBC series, entitled *Shakespeare Re-Told* (2005): *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Macbeth*, *The Taming of the Shrew* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. A second type of adaptation shifts the plot and characters to another genre, such as the musical (*West Side Story/Romeo and Juliet* or *Kiss Me Kate/The Taming of the Shrew*), science fiction (*Forbidden Planet/The Tempest*) or the Western (*Broken Lance/King Lear*). *Royal Deceit* (aka *Prince of Jutland*, 1994) tells the story of the “historical” Prince *Hamlet* using Danish source material to differentiate the story from Shakespeare’s approach. Akira Kurosawa produced the best-known adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays placing them in a different cultural context with his films *Throne of Blood* (1957) based on *Macbeth*, and *Ran* (1985) based on *King Lear*. Soviet filmmaker Grigori Kozintsev adapted both *Hamlet* (1964) and *King Lear* (1991), which have been restored and released recently on DVD. For film historians and real curiosity seekers, a collection of adaptations, which run from a few minutes to over an hour, showcase the earliest eras of cinema, entitled *Silent Shakespeare*. Sharing these adaptations, in part or in full, can facilitate the discussion of the relevance of Shakespeare’s themes, conflicts and characters across time, cultures, and cinematic traditions.

## FILMS CAN BE USED AFTER READING...

### ...for culminating projects and summative assessment

Students can successfully engage in their own film production as a collaborative project. A movie trailer can tout an imagined film adaptation of the play they have just studied. The necessary steps involved can be found in *Lesson Plans for Creating Media-Rich Classrooms* (NCTE 2007), which includes Scott Williams’s lesson, “Turning Text into Movie Trailers: The *Romeo and Juliet* iMovie Experience.” Creating a trailer requires that students: first focus on the essential elements of plot, character and theme in order to convey excitement; and second, develop an imagined version in a highly condensed and persuasive form, which comes to life in a minute or two.

## TERMS TO EXAMINE THE PAGE-TO-SCREEN PROCESS

(adapted from *Film Adaptation*, ed. James Naremore)

### Fidelity:

Much discussion in film adaptation criticism focuses on how faithful a film is to the source material. Obviously, film and literature use very different narrative strategies and tools of composition. A fruitful way to have students approach the question of fidelity is to ask them to list the scenes, characters, motifs, and symbols that are essential to telling the story of the source text. Then as they watch a film adaptation, they can keep track of how those elements are handled by the film version.

### Film as Digest:

This concept acknowledges that the written text is far more detailed and comprehensive in its ability to set a scene, develop a character, reveal a narrative point of view, or create a symbol. Film works best in developing plot and showing action.

### Condensation:

Due to the “film as digest” phenomenon, characters and events need to be collapsed or composited in order to fit the limitations and conventions of the film adaptation. Students can explore this term by determining which characters can be combined based on their common functions in the text.

### Immediacy:

Viewing a film is a far more “immediate” experience cognitively than reading a book. We decode visual images much faster and more readily than the printed word.

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES & RESOURCES

## Point of View:

The camera can express a point of view, just as the narrator of a written text can and does. Voice-over narrators are seldom used in film, since it seems artificial and intrusive. Point of view in film is visual and subtle.

Here are three ways to express or describe the point of view in a film:

- Neutral: the camera is merely recording events as they happen in a reportorial fashion. This is the most common shot in filmmaking.
- Subjective: the camera assumes the point of view of one of the character so the viewer sees what the character sees.
- Authorial: the director very deliberately focuses the camera on a feature of a sequence or shot to comment on the action or reveal something.

## Shot and Sequence:

As defined by *Basic Film Terms: A Visual Dictionary*, a “shot” is the “basic unit of film structure or an unbroken strip of film made by an uninterrupted running of the camera.” Think of a shot as a “still” image that is combined with other still images to create a moving picture. A shot captures its subject from a particular distance and angle. The camera can be stationary or moving as it captures its subject. Individual shots then are joined together by the editing process to create a sequence of action.

## KEY QUESTIONS FOR CLASSROOM DISCUSSION

### Prior to viewing:

In order to maintain fidelity to Shakespeare’s play, what are the essential scenes that must be included in an adaptation to cover the basic plot? Considering that film is a digest of the original play, what constitutes the exposition, inciting incident, central conflict, complications, climax and resolution to represent and streamline the central action?

What point of view dominates the play? Who is the central character? Which character has the most soliloquies or asides and might have the strongest relationship with the reader/viewer as a result? How could the viewpoint of the central character or the character that has the most direct connection with the audience be represented through the use of the camera? Or, should the camera maintain a neutral position to reveal the story and the characters?

What details does the play provide to guide the casting of principle actors for the central characters? Looking at the text carefully, which details regarding physical appearance, class or behavior should be embodied by an actor to make an immediate impression on the viewer?

Which supporting characters are essential to the development of the plot and main characters? Which characters serve the same functions in the story? How might several of those characters be composited in order to condense the story in helpful and necessary ways considering a film will normally be shorter than a stage production?

Which central images, motifs, symbols or metaphors are central to the literary source? How could one or two of these literary techniques be translated into visual or sound techniques to make their impact more immediate in order to support or to replace the play’s language? How would they be represented on the screen or through the musical score?

### During viewing:

- How much of the actual dialogue from the play itself is used in a scene?
- To what extent does the camera work seem unobtrusive, natural or obvious, stylized?
- Which character(s) appears mostly in one shots?
- At what point in the scene are two shots used? What is the effect of their use at that point?
- What is the typical distance (close, medium, long) of the camera to the subject of the shots? To what extent does the manipulation of camera distance make the scene an intimate one or not?
- To what extent are most of the shots at eye level, slightly above, or slightly below? How do subtle changes in angle influence how the viewer perceives the character in the shot?
- To what extent does the scene make use of extreme high or low angles? To what effect?

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- To what extent does the camera move? When? What is the effect of the movement?
- To what extent does the sequence use music? If it does, when do you become aware of the music and how does it set a mood or punctuate parts of the dialogue?

## **After viewing:**

- Which choices made to condense the events of the play by the screenwriter are the most successful in translating the original text to the screen? Which choices are less successful or satisfying?
- Which narrative elements (events, characters, key speeches) omitted from the screen adaptation of the play shift the focus of the comedy, tragedy or history in comparison to the original text?
- If any characters were composites of two or more characters, what was gained or lost by reducing the number of characters or altering the function of a particular character?
- Which actors performed their roles in expected and/or unexpected ways? How did the original text dictate how roles should be performed?
- Which visual elements of the film made the strongest impression upon you as a viewer?
- How did the visuals help draw your attention to an element of plot, a character or a symbol that you might have missed or failed to understand when reading the play?
- As a reader of the play, how did viewing the film help you to better understand the overall plot, particular character, or specific symbol/theme?

## **OTHELLO FILM FINDER**

### **TOP FIVE FILMS TO INVITE INTO YOUR CLASSROOM**

#### **1. Shakespeare: The Animated Tales - Othello (1992, 25 min.), Ambrose Video**

*The Pre-viewing, Pre-reading Experience by Hitting the Highlights:* This twenty-five-minute condensation of the play provides the perfect overview of the characters and plot to prepare students for reading the play or seeing a performance. To give students a viewing focus, consider assigning a particular character to track through the film and write a summary about the importance of that character to the plot as a whole. Students can become an “expert” on that element of the play. They can use that focus while reading the play or seeing the actual performance, which helps students who feel overwhelmed by the narrative or Shakespeare’s language to gain control over one aspect of the text.

#### **2. Shakespeare Uncovered: Othello, series two (2015, 55 min.), PBS**

*Providing Context:* Actor Darian Harewood poses the question, “Could you kill the person that you love?” as an entry point to examining the character of Othello and recognizing that his tragic dilemma is as contemporary as ever. Harewood discusses how he prepared for the role of Othello using clips from various film versions, Trevor Nunn’s RSC production, and the Q Brothers’ rap version, *Othello: The Remix*, a CST-commissioned work. In addition to a recap of the plot and an introduction to the central characters, the program traces the history of black actors playing the role and the critical reception to those performances in the UK and US. This is a program that screens easily and effectively in excerpts.

#### **3. Othello (1995, 125 min., R), directed by Oliver Parker**

*The Moor Hits the Cineplex:* This popular theatrical film sets the story in its Renaissance time period and provides lush production values as well as engaging performances from Fishburne and Branagh. Its two-hour running time makes it classroom friendly, though its R-rating for “sexuality” probably makes it suitable for more mature students. It is an excellent tool to examine excerpts of Iago’s manipulations of Roderigo, Cassio, and Othello. View the trailer at <http://tinyurl.com/FishburneOthello>.

#### **4. O (2001, 98 min., R), directed by Tim Blake Nelson**

Starring Mekhi Phifer, Julia Stiles, Josh Harnett

*The Moor Goes to High School:* The tragic tale of Othello, Desdemona and Iago sets Othello in world of high school basketball and dating infidelity. This adaptation received mixed reviews, but it is worth screening in full or in excerpts to examine how the premise and themes of *Othello* travel over new time periods and cultural contexts. The film earns its R-rating for language, violence, drug use and sexuality. View the trailer at <http://tinyurl.com/PhiferOthello>.

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## **5. *Jubal* (2012, 65 min., NR), directed by Delmer Daves**

Starring Glenn Ford, Ernest Borgnine, Rod Steiger

*Jealousy and Betrayal on the American Frontier*: This Western adapts *Othello's* imagined love triangle into an actual tryst by introducing a charismatic stranger, Jubal, who is seduced by his employer's much younger wife, the counterpart to Desdemona. Jubal (Cassio) draws the ire of a jealous cattleman, Pinky (Iago), when Jubal promoted to ranch foreman. Matters are complicated when it is revealed that the employer's wife has been unfaithful prior to Jubal's arrival. Removing the Desdemona character's uncompromised virtue makes this an intriguing companion piece. It is offered on DVD in a Criterion Collection edition that includes helpful support material.

## **OTHER ADAPTATIONS OF OTHELLO**

The popularity of producing *Othello* across the world both onstage, on the silver screen, and for television has produced a bounty of choices currently available on DVD and/or streaming online.

1. *Othello* RSC (1990, 204 min., NR), directed by Trevor Nunn and starring Ian McKellen as Iago, Willard White, Imogen Stubbs. Please see "A Read and View Teaching Strategy" for more on using this film in the classroom.

2. *Othello the Tragedy of the Moor* CBC (2008, 90 min., NR), directed by Zaib Shaik and starring Carlo Rota, Matthew Deslippe, Christine Horne. Please see "A Read and View Teaching Strategy" for more on using this film in the classroom.

3. *Othello* (1952, 91 min., NR), adapted, directed, and starring Orson Welles

4. *Othello* (1965, 186 min., NR), directed by Stuart Burge and starring Lawrence Olivier, Maggie Smith, Frank Finlay.

5. *Othello* BBC (1981, 195 min., NR), directed by Jonathan Miller and starring Anthony Hopkins, Penelope Wilton, Bob Hoskins

6. *Othello* South Africa's Market Theater (2005, 188 min., NR), directed by acclaimed actress Janet Suzman in 1988 and starring John Kani, Richard Haines, Joanna Weinberg

7. *Othello* Shakespeare's Globe (2008, 195 min., NR), directed by William Milam and starring Eammon Walker, Tim McInnerny

8. *Othello* (1922, 80 min) directed by Dimitri Buchowetzki and starring Emil Jannings, first recipient of the Best Actor Academy Award in 1929.

Unlike other adaptations of Shakespeare's plays filmed in the silent era, this film renders the tragedy through a detailed visual narrative, with a running time the length of a feature, which was unusual for silent Shakespeare films. This film is available on DVD from Kino Video.

9. *Otello* (1986, 123 min, PG) directed by Franco Zeffirelli and starring Placido Domingo

Verdi's opera is presented in a highly accessible film version directed by Zeffirelli, known for his popular film versions of *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Romeo and Juliet*.

## **TAKING OTHELLO TO OTHER TIMES, OTHER PLACES**

1. *Omkaara* (2006, 155 min, NR), directed by Vishal Bhardwaj

This Hindi film, set in a crime world, is part of series of films written and directed by Vishal Bhardwaj based on Shakespeare's tragedy. This film was the first to pass the film censors in India and approve its use of profanity.

2. *Othello: A South African Tale* (2005, 98 min, NR), directed by Eubulus Timothy

This version is set in modern South Africa and casts both Othello and Iago as black.

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES & RESOURCES

**3. *Othello* / Masterpiece Theater (2001, 100 min, TV-MA), directed by Geoffrey Sax and starring Eamonn Walker, Christopher Eccleston, Keeley Hawes**

Created by Andrew Davies (*Downton Abbey*), this version of *Othello* sets the drama in modern-day London and reimagines Othello as a commander in the New Scotland Yard who must confront race riots, neo-Nazis, and his growing suspicions of his wife's infidelity fueled by the malicious innuendos of a colleague.

**4. *Kaliyattam aka The Play of God* (1997, 130 min, NR), directed by Jayaj**

This acclaimed Indian adaptation of *Othello* revolves around the jealousies of an artist in love with the daughter of the village leader. He is led to believe she is having an affair with his assistant based on the evidence of a silk robe found in that assistant's possession. An Iago figure plants seeds of doubt in the central character's mind. The plot of Shakespeare's play is followed closely in this adaptation.

**5. *He Knew He Was Right* / Masterpiece Theater (2005, 240 min, NR), directed by Tom Vaughan**

Created again by Andrew Davies, this four-part mini series adapted Anthony Trollope's sprawling 1000-page novel, published in 1869, uses the premise and themes of *Othello* to dramatize the insecurities and jealousies of Louis Trevelyan, who suspects his wife is having an affair with her godfather, a notorious ladies' man. Trollope expands Trevelyan's descent into madness over his suspicions with plot complications befitting Victorian novel traditions.

**6. *A Double Life* (1947, 104 min, NR), directed by George Cukor and starring Ronald Coleman**

An actor who plays Othello onstage finds that the Moor's jealousy spills over into his own life with tragic results in this quintessential, entertaining 1940s melodrama.



Derrick Lee Weeden as Othello and Allison Batty as Desdemona in Chicago Shakespeare Theater's 2008 production of *Othello*, directed by Marti Maraden. Photo by Steve Leonard.

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES & RESOURCES

## A Read and View Teaching Strategy Explained

MARY T. CHRISTEL

### SETTING THE STAGE WITH READING AND VIEWING

Before attending a performance of any of Shakespeare's plays, students should be primed with basic information about setting, characters and conflict. A brief summary of the play certainly would suit that aim, but a summary does not help to tune up students' ears to Shakespeare's language and cadences, so critical to understanding the actions onstage. Reading and studying the entire play would be ideal, but limits of time, demands of the established curriculum—and sheer stamina—may make this unabridged option less than optimal.

Screening a film version instead would save class time and help students both see and hear the play, but the viewing experience might not allow students to linger over the more challenging scenes and speeches or engage in more participatory activities with the text. A happy medium approach marries the study of key scenes and speeches with viewing of the rest of play in a recommended film version in order for students to understand both the dramatic arc of the comedy, tragedy, history or romance as well as tackle the signature scenes and speeches of that play in greater depth and detail. Those select scenes can be explored through “active Shakespeare” strategies.

This reading/viewing approach had its genesis early in my teaching career when I methodically took students through Act 1 of *Romeo and Juliet* while they listened to key speeches on a recording of the play. Even though I thought reading and listening would enhance their understanding, students glazed over as the speeches were declaimed on a scratchy, worn record in particularly plummy British accents in the style of rather melodramatic “radio acting.” Since it was the spring of 1980, I had access to some new A-V technology, a VCR and a VHS copy of Franco Zeffirelli's film of *Romeo and Juliet*—the school's first VHS tape purchase.

I decided to combine reading the play and watching the film incrementally act by act. After students read and discussed Act 1, I screened the equivalent of that act in the film to promote discussion of difficult aspects of character, plot and language that we encountered during the reading process. For example, Mercutio's witty banter was difficult for students to fully grasp until they both read the text and viewed one actor's interpretation of the language and the resulting onscreen characterization. Seeing one visual interpretation of the characters, their actions and the world of the play gave my students the ability to create a movie in their heads as they continued to read the play.

I extended this methodology when I taught plays by Molière and Ibsen, sometimes showing shorter excerpts to help students understand costumes and manners that informed character behavior and the overall “look” of an era that a few photos in a textbook don't effectively convey. Though this approach is billed as a way to preview a theatrical performance of a play, it could be adapted to the study of any challenging play or work of fiction, like nineteenth-century works by Austen, Dickens or the Brontë sisters.

### SELECTING THE SCENES FOR CLOSE READING AND STUDY

Though a range of scenes is suggested below for previewing *Othello*, pulling back the pedagogical curtain on how the scenes and speeches are selected can help in applying this approach to any play. First, consider which scenes and speeches are the “signatures” of the play: “To be or not to be” in *Hamlet*, the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*, the St. Crispin's Day speech in *Henry V*.

Once those scenes are identified, select the ones that might prove most difficult to fully understand when viewing the play in the “real time” of the stage performance and the scenes truly crucial to fully grasping the arc of the conflict or the development of key characters. If there is a particular theme that a production will emphasize, scene and speech selection might focus on how that

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theme is developed throughout the play and in the production. For example in approaching *Othello*, some productions or film adaptations might focus on the origins and consequences of treachery, jealousy, and prejudice as well as appearance versus reality.

An effective tool to understand how a play can be boiled down to its essential scenes is evident in Nick Newlin's series *The 30-Minute Shakespeare*, with eighteen abridgments of Shakespeare's plays currently available. Newlin's adaptations focus on the continuity of plot and provide a narrator to link the selected, edited scenes together. If a teacher's goal is to have students grasp the arc of the conflict (inciting incident, basic conflict complications, climax, essential falling action and resolution) then Newlin's approach will suit that aim. These texts are available for download as PDFs as well as in traditional print forms.

If investing in copies of a text like *The 30-Minute Shakespeare* is not possible for a single use, Shakespeare's plays are available online in the public domain at:

**Folger Library Digital Texts** ([www.folgerdigitaltexts.org/](http://www.folgerdigitaltexts.org/))

**The Complete Works at MIT** (<http://shakespeare.mit.edu/>)

Downloading the complete play for students who have access to computers or to tablets in the classrooms allows students the freedom to use the text beyond the scenes and speeches studied in class. Some students might be motivated to read the play in its entirety or "follow along" in the text with the selected scenes from the film version. The only drawback in allowing students to follow along with any film arises when they discover that directors and screenwriters/adapters make subtle or massive cuts to the original text, which can disrupt students' viewing.

## READING SCENES AND SPEECHES FROM *OTHELLO*

The arc of the play's plot can be introduced effectively by examining a selection of Iago's key speeches and interactions outlined below. Using this approach, students can grasp Iago's personal and political goals. Viewing the twenty-five-minute abridgment of the play offered by *Shakespeare: The Animated Tales* (Ambrose Video) prior to reading helps students contextualize these excerpts.

### Iago's Key Speeches:

1.1	1-82	with Roderigo
1.2	1-49	with Othello
1.3	297-386	with Roderigo
2.1	96-171	with Cassio, Emilia, & Desdemona
	205-293	with Roderigo
2.3	12-100	with Othello
3.4	120-344	Viola/Cesario forced to accept Sir Anthony's challenge to duel;
	302-329	Iago
3.3	90-259	with Othello
	302-330	with Emilia
	331-480	with Othello

This approach allows students to linger over a shorter piece of text and to examine the poetic and rhetorical strategies that Iago uses to drive the plot to its tragic consequences. Students can analyze how Iago employs varying tools of persuasion with each character. How does he build trust? When does he rely on emotional rather than logical appeals?

The selection of scenes does not extend into the last two acts of the play since students should be able to follow the scheme that Iago establishes as it moves to its inevitable conclusion. When this scene study is paired with screening the animated, abridged adaptation, students will witness the outcome. If students are not viewing the abridged version,, you might ask them to predict the fates of the character caught in Iago's web of deception.

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES & RESOURCES

A second approach focuses on Othello's key speeches or interactions that span all five acts. These speeches and scenes can help students understand how Othello defines himself as a soldier, a lover, a betrayed husband, and a misguided murderer.

## Othello's Key Speeches:

1.2	16-28	Expressing love for Desdemona and confidence in himself
1.3	76-94	Presenting circumstances that lead to marrying Desdemona
	127-169	Recounting how he wooed Desdemona
3.3	178-194	Exposing the escalating influences of jealousy
	260-281	Speculating on Iago's claims and Desdemona's virtue
	339-367	Succumbing to Iago's influence and his jealousy
	52-71	Recounting the history of the handkerchief
4.2	46-91	Confronting Desdemona's (imagined) infidelity
5.2	1-22	Resolving to take Desdemona's life
	257-279	Recognizing his tragic error
	334-352	Memorializing himself

The Cambridge School Shakespeare edition of *Othello*, edited by Jan Coles, was used to prepare this list of suggested scenes and speeches.

## SELECTING A FILM VERSION

The "Film Finder" feature of this handbook provides a list of films (both theatrical releases and television broadcasts) commonly available in a variety of formats (VHS tape, DVD, streaming online). Two versions of *Othello* will be recommended there, but they can easily be substituted by other more available or age/classroom appropriate versions. For example, Roman Polanski's film of *Macbeth* is a powerful, visceral adaptation of the play, but its R-rated violence and nudity would not make it a wise choice for many classrooms. Versions that have played on PBS are usually classroom safe but it is incumbent upon any teacher to fully screen a film before bringing into the classroom to ensure that there is no objectionable content in the rendering of Shakespeare's text.

Some plays have a rich range of film versions, while others have a scant few. Some have only been staged and shot for the *BBC Shakespeare* series. If there is a choice of films, what then should be the criteria for selecting one for the read/view pairing? You might choose to select one version with a design concept that situates the play in its expressed time period or in Elizabethan costumes so that students recognize the visual style as Shakespearean. If the design concept is too avant-garde, that approach might prove too distracting and confusing for some students.

Choosing films with actors familiar to students can offer both advantages and disadvantages depending on students' ability to move beyond their preconceived notions of that actor's range or signature roles (or off-screen antics). Finally, the running time of a film might determine how it fits into classroom use. Obviously if a film runs two hours, it has eliminated a fair amount of the text which might lead to greater clarity for a Shakespeare novice. Zeffirelli's *Hamlet* runs a lean two hours but it does not sacrifice characterization or plot in the cuts to the text relying on effective visuals to replace dialogue. Conversely, Ian McKellen's *Richard III* (1995) eliminates the character of Queen Margaret and reassigns many of her lines to Queen Elizabeth or to the Duchess, which could prove confusing if a similar approach to Margaret is not observed in the theatrical production.

## SELECTING A FILM VERSION OF OTHELLO FOR A "READ AND VIEW"

Trevor Nunn's RSC production of *Othello* features Ian McKellen as Iago in a standout performance. The televised version runs 204 minutes and presents the text with only minor cuts, which would allow a "read along" approach of the film act-by-act or key scene by key scene. Visually it is constrained by documenting a stage production with allowances for camera placement. The second suggested film version, a 90-minute telecast of *Othello*, will visually transport students from Venice to Cypress in studio-constructed sets that are more realistic than representational, as they are in the RSC version. In choosing which version to use, think about how much you want students to focus on the nuances of language and character development rather than a broader understanding of plot and incident.

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES & RESOURCES

The Canadian Broadcast Corporation (CBC)'s 90-minute telecast of *Othello* streamlines the original text to focus on action rather than language. It opens on the bed bearing the bodies of Othello and Desdemona, an image accompanied by Othello speaking in voiceover, with the rest of the film as a retrospective investigation of what leads to tragic end. This film is an excellent tool to provide students with a broad understanding of the tragedy's plot. After viewing an act, students could focus on one of the key conversations or speeches to dig deeper into Shakespeare's use of language that defines individual characters and their relationships. The director's approach occasionally favors visuals over Shakespeare's language; for example, it presents Othello imagining the alleged infidelity of Cassio and Desdemona. This television production would probably garner a TV-MA rating for sexuality and violence, so it is important to preview anything before using it in the classroom. Overall, the film is well paced and features engaging performances, though sometimes at the expense of Shakespeare's language and characterization.

	RSC Version	CBC Version
Act I	0 – 39:53	0 – 15:13
Act II	36:54-55:46	15:14 - 31:24
Act III	55:47-99:28 0-25:23*	31:25 - 54:00
Act IV	25:24-59:59	54:00 - 69:23
Act V	60:00-105:00	69:24 - 90:00

\*The RSC version places an intermission before 3.3 line 291 (Emilia's discovery of the handkerchief) that restarts the counter. This DVD includes a menu with act by act or scene by scene selection.

## COMBINING THE READING AND VIEWING EXPERIENCE

To read first or to view first? Is that the question? It really depends on students' comfort level and experience with reading and viewing Shakespeare. I recommend viewing any film adaptation act by act to facilitate previewing the highlights of action and character development in each act. This strategy can focus on the structure of play since Shakespeare's works tend to present the inciting incident in Act 1, complications to escalate the conflict in Act 2, the climax or turning point in Act 3, falling action in Act 4, and the resolution in Act 5.

How students handle "reading" both before and after viewing Act 1 will help inform a teacher's choice in handling reading/viewing sequencing for the rest of the play. Students could be assigned specific characters to follow closely in reading/viewing activity and when they see the production at CST. Teachers could be highly selective just focusing on the early acts of the play allowing students to discover what becomes of the characters and the central conflict when they see the production at CST. The aim of any version of this previewing strategy is to prime students with just enough information and level of challenge to place those students on a firm foundation to not just follow the action but to appreciate the approach taken by the director, designers and actors to make *Othello* fresh and relevant.

## Theater Warm-ups

A brief physical and vocal warm-up can help your students move from a "classroom mode" to a "studio mode." It sets the tone for a student learning Shakespeare in a theatrical sense as well as a literary sense. And you'll find that after the first couple of times, your students nerves—and yours—will be unseated by the energy and focus. A few rehearsals in the privacy of your home can do a lot to bolster your courage!

Every actor develops his/her own set of physical and vocal warm-ups. Warm-ups help the actor prepare for rehearsal or performance not only physically, but also mentally. The actor has the chance to focus on the work at hand, forgetting all the day-to-day distractions of life, and beginning to assume the flexibility required to create a character. The body, the voice and the imagination are the actor's tools.

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES & RESOURCES

## PHYSICAL WARM-UPS

### GETTING STARTED

- creates focus on the immediate moment
- brings students to body awareness
- helps dispel tension

Begin by asking your students to take a comfortable stance with their feet shoulder-width apart, toes pointing straight ahead, knees relaxed. Ask them to inhale deeply through their noses, filling their lungs deep into their abdomen, and exhale through their mouths. Repeat this a few times and ask them to notice how their lungs fill like a six-sided box, creating movement in all six directions.

### WARM-UP FROM THE TOP OF THE BODY DOWN *(approx. seven to ten minutes)*

- gentle movement helps increase circulation, flexibility, and body readiness
- Increases physical and spatial awareness
  - a. Begin by doing head-rolls to the left and to the right, about four times each way, very slowly. Then do a series of shoulder rolls to the back and to the front, again very slowly, and emphasizing a full range of motion.
  - b. Stretch each arm toward the ceiling alternately, and try to pull all the way through the rib cage, repeating this motion six to eight times.
  - c. Next, with particular care to keep knees slightly bent, twist from the waist in each direction, trying to look behind. Again, repeat six to eight times.
  - d. From a standing position, starting with the top of the head, roll down with relaxed neck and arms until the body is hanging from the waist. Ask the students to shake things around, making sure their bodies are relaxed. From this position, bend at the knees, putting both hands on the floor. Stretch back up to hanging. Repeat this action about four times. Then roll back up—starting from the base of the spine, stack each vertebra until the head is the last thing to come up.
  - e. Repeat the deep breathing from the beginning of the warm-up. Ask the students to bring their feet together, bend their knees, and keeping their knees together ask the students to rotate their knees in a circle parallel to the ground six to eight times. Repeat in the other direction. Return to standing.
  - f. Pick up the right foot, rotate it inward six to eight times, and then do the same with the left foot. Repeat with outward rotation of the foot. Take a few moments and shake out the entire body.

## VOCAL WARM-UPS

*[Your vocal warm-up should follow your physical warm-up directly—approx. seven minutes]*

- helps connect physicality to vocality
- begins to open the imagination to performance possibilities
  - a. Ask students to gently massage and pat the muscles of their faces. This will help wake up the facial muscles.
  - b. Ask students to stick their tongues out as far as possible—repeat this with the tongue pointing up, down, and to

**Actors have described the experience of acting Shakespeare as the “Olympics of Acting.”** Shakespeare’s verse demands a very flexible vocal instrument, and an ability to express not only the flow of the text, but also the emotional shifts, which are suggested by the variations in rhythm and sound. In light of the sheer volume of words—some rarely or never used in our contemporary language—the actor must also be prepared to help the audience with his body, as well. An actor preparing to perform Shakespeare must go through each word of his text, determine its meaning, and then express it clearly to his audience. Shakespeare requires a very physically demanding style. The physical and vocal warm-up is the actor’s basis for each performance.

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES & RESOURCES

each side. (This exercise will seem strange, but can be made silly and fun, while accomplishing the necessary vocal warm-up. When students see you going through these exercises with commitment, that's often all they need to draw them in.) Repeat this exercise once or twice.

- c. Ask students to put their lips gently together and blow air through them, creating a “raspberry.”
- d. Next, hum, quietly, loudly, and across the entire vocal range. The vocal instrument loves to hum. Explore all the resonating spaces in the body, by moving the sound around. Humming helps to lubricate.
- e. Create the vowel sounds, overemphasizing each shape with the face—A, E, I, O, and U—with no break.
- f. Choose two or three tongue-twisters—there are some listed below. Again overemphasizing the shape of each sound with the lips, tongue, jaw, and facial muscles, begin slowly with each tongue-twister, and gradually speed up, repeating until the speed is such that the enunciation is lost.

## TONGUE TWISTERS

- red leather, yellow leather ... (focus on the vertical motion of the mouth)
- unique New York ... (focus on the front to back movement of the face)
- rubber, baby, buggie, bumpers ... (focus on the clear repetition of the soft consonant)
- Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers ... (focus on the clear repetition of hard consonant)

## STAGE PICTURES

- shows how varied interpretation is: there is no wrong answer
- encourages the students to interpret concepts with their whole bodies
- begins to show how the body interprets emotion

You will need a list of very strong descriptive, colorful, emotional words from the script for this activity. Ask your students to begin walking around the room. Ask them to fill up the entire space, exploring pacing, what it would feel like to be a different weight, a different height, and ask them to move the center of their body into different places. Encourage them to see if they feel any emotional differences within these changes. Giving them about three minutes to explore these changes, see if you notice any particularly interesting discoveries. Encourage these discoveries without necessarily drawing focus to individual students, as this is a self-reflective activity, but perhaps suggest to the group they might “Try what it feels like if you slow your pace, hunch your shoulders, droop your head, and move your center into your knees.”

After a few minutes of this exploration, ask your students to find a “neutral” walk. Explain that they are going to create a stage picture as an entire group. You will give them a word, and then count down from seven. After those seven beats, you will say freeze, and they must create a photograph of the word you have given them, with their entire body, collectively. Comment on the emotions you feel from their stage picture. After a couple of words, split the group in half—half will be in the space and half will be audience. Repeat the process, encouraging the audience's reactions after each tableau. This might be a good time to discuss balance, stage direction, and the use of levels as effective variation for the audience's visual interpretation. (This activity should take about 10 minutes.)

Shakespeare's characters are often very physically broad. He created elderly characters and hunchbacked characters; clowns, star-crossed lovers and cold-blooded killers. These characters call for the actors to figure out how they move. If the character is greedy, should his center be in a big fat belly? The actor must be prepared to experiment with the character's body.

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES & RESOURCES

## MIRRORING

- helps build trust within the ensemble
- encourages the students to “listen” with all their senses
- helps the students reach a state of “relaxed readiness,” which will encourage their impulses, and discourage their internal censors

Many actors will tell you that learning the lines is the easy part; making it come out of their mouths as if for the first time is the hard part, especially with Shakespeare. Shakespeare can sound like a song, but how do you make it sound like real people talking to each other? Actors listen to each other, and try to respond to what they hear in the moment of the play. Listening is a very important part of acting; it keeps the moment real and the characters believable.

Either ask your students to partner up, or count them off in pairs. Ask them to sit, comfortably facing their partner, in fairly close proximity. Explain to them that they are mirrors of each other. One partner will begin as the leader, and the other partner will move as their reflection. Explain to the students that they must begin by using smaller, slower movements, and work up to the maximum range of movement that their partner can follow.

Encourage the partners to make eye-contact and see each other as a whole picture, rather than following each other’s small motions with their eyes. Switch leaders and repeat. After the second leader has had a turn, ask the students to stand and increase their range of movement. Switch leaders and repeat. After the second leader has had a turn, tell them that they should keep going, but there is no leader. See what happens, and then discuss. (This activity should last about ten minutes.)

## COMMUNITY BUILDERS

Each of these exercises is meant to open and expand our imaginations, increase our sense of “ensemble” or teamwork, and encourage being “in the moment.” These are some of the most fundamental and crucial elements of an actor’s training—and, of course, they are fundamental, too, to the learning process in the classroom.



JQ as Loco Vito with GQ, Jackson Doran and Postell Pringle as ensemble in Chicago Shakespeare Theater’s 2013 production of *Othello: The Remix*, directed by GQ and JQ.  
Photo by Michael Brosilow.

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES & RESOURCES

## ZING! BALL

*[This exercise requires a soft ball about eight to twelve inches in diameter.]*

- helps the ensemble grow together
- helps the students let go of their internal “censor” and begin tapping into their impulses
- brings the physical and the vocal actor tools together

Ask the students to stand in a circle, facing in. Explain that the ball carries energy with it. This energy is like a feedback loop that increases the energy, speed, and focus of the entire group by the amount that each student puts into the ball. The idea is to keep the ball moving in the circle without letting the energy drop. There should be no space between throw and catch. There should be no thought as to whom the actor-student will throw the ball to next.

As the ball is thrown, to keep the intensity of the energy, the student must make eye contact with the person he is throwing the ball to, and at the moment of release, the person throwing should say “Zing!” Note: Encourage the students to experiment with the way they say “Zing!” It could be loud or soft, in a character voice, or in whatever way they wish, as long as it is impulsive and with energy. (This activity lasts about five minutes.)

Shakespeare has love scenes, sword fights, betrayals, and all sorts of relationships in his plays. They must be able to experiment, follow their impulses, and create characters without the fear of failure.

## ZING! BALL WITHOUT A BALL

- asks the students to make their imagination clear to the ensemble
- focuses the students on physical detail

This exercise builds on Zing! Ball. Take the ball out of the circle and set it aside. Take an imaginary Zing! Ball out of your pocket. Grow this ball from a tiny rubber ball into a huge balloon. Using “Zing!,” toss the ball to someone across the circle, and as it floats down, your classmate catches it with the same weight and speed as you threw it. Then ask that person to recreate the ball into a different weight and size, making it clear to the rest of the circle how they’ve changed it. In the same way as Zing! Ball, work around the circle.

The wide range of vocabulary in Shakespeare’s plays can often be intimidating as one reads the scripts. The actor’s job is to make the language clear, and this is often accomplished by very specific physical gesturing (approx. five to seven minutes.)

## FOUR UP

- helps the ensemble/classroom work together
- helps to slowly introduce physical activities in the classroom
- brings focus to the classroom

For this exercise, everyone stays seated at desks. The goal is to have four people standing at all times. There are a few rules: anyone can stand up whenever they want, but only four can be standing at a time and they can only stand up for a maximum of five seconds. Everyone should participate and try to stand with a group of four.

A sense of community and having a strong focus can be the keys to a successful production (and classroom). This exercise can help to establish those norms in a fun way, which also gets the students up on their feet.

# TECHNO SHAKESPEARE

## ZIP ZAP ZOP!

- facilitates mental focus
- encourages eye contact and team work
- builds a sense of rhythm and pace

*[To the teacher: For a demonstration of this community builder, watch this video, <http://www.tinyurl.com/zipzapzop>, for a demonstration and instructions.]*

Stand in a circle, facing in. Bring your hands to your chest in a prayer pose. Make sure everyone can see each person in the circle. Eye contact is going to be very important! Point your hands like a laser, make clear eye contact at another person in the circle, and say “zip,” “zap” or “zop,” picking up your cue from the person before you. While maintaining the word sequence of zip, zap, zop as well as the rhythm, start slowly and eventually build speed.

## WAH!

- facilitates physical awareness and risk-taking
- encourages vocal projection
- helps actors increase their sense of timing and decrease their response time

*[To the teacher: Want to see Wah! in action with a group of students? Watch this brief video, <http://www.tinyurl.com/wahwarmup> ]*

Stand in a circle, facing in. No one in the circle is a student or teacher any longer, but rather a fearsome warrior. Press the palms of your hands flat together to become a sword. To begin the game, one warrior raises his or her sword straight up, then brings it down, pointing at another warrior in the circle. Warriors must make excellent eye contact to avoid confusion. As the warrior brings down his or her sword, he or she utters a fearsome battle cry, by saying, “Wah!” (Be wary, warriors, of shouting, which comes from the throat and leads to laryngitis, a warrior’s worst enemy. Using the good support and deep breathing from your vocal warm-up will help you keep your vocal chords in top fighting condition.) When you become the recipient of “Wah!,” raise your sword up above your head. While your sword is raised, the warriors on either side of you slash towards her stomach, as they cry “Wah!” in unison. Then make eye contact with someone else in the circle, slash your sword towards them with a final defiant “Wah!” Each “battle” should therefore include three cries of “Wah!” As the group becomes familiar with the game, work to increase your speed and volume. This is a silly game; remember that warriors don’t care about “looking cool” because they’re too busy fighting unending battles. When a warrior misses his or her cue, stop the round and start it again until everyone is comfortable being loud and making big physical choices.

## WHAT ARE YOU DOING?

Form two parallel lines, and enough room in between for “action” to take place. The first student in one line, Student A, steps into the empty space between the two lines and begins miming any action (ex. bouncing a basketball). The first student in the opposite line, Student B, steps out and addresses Student A, saying their first name (a good name reinforcer!) and asking, “[Name], what are you doing?” Student A then states any action that is not what they are miming (e.g. “baking a cake”). Student B then begins miming the action that Student A has just stated, and the next student steps out to continue the exercise. *[To the teacher: Once students feel confident with the exercise, ask students to choose actions found in a chosen text. For instance, if you are teaching Othello students might say, “I’m finding a handkerchief” or “I’m pleading to get my job back.”]*

\*indicates specific focus on *Othello*, in addition to other plays

## Chicago Shakespeare Theater

### **Chicago Shakespeare Theater's website**

Access articles and teacher handbooks for twenty one of Shakespeare's plays, as well as information on introducing your students to Shakespeare in performance.

<http://www.chicagoshakes.com/education>

## Comprehensive Link Sites

### **Shakespeare in Europe Sh:in:E**

Access an array of web links categorized into criticism, theater and film, music, adaptation, education, and more. Website created and maintained by Basel University in Switzerland.

<http://shine.unibas.ch/metasite.html>

### **Absolute Shakespeare\***

Access a comprehensive collection of Shakespeare's work, including full texts and summaries, a timeline, and lists of film adaptations.

<http://absoluteshakespeare.com>

### **Touchstone Database**

This website database identifies and maps significant UK Shakespeare collections and includes an 'enquiry service' that allows users to ask questions and for research assistance. Created and maintained by University of Birmingham in the UK.

<http://touchstone.bham.ac.uk>

## Teaching Shakespeare

### **The Folger Shakespeare Library\***

This website features lesson plans, primary sources and study guides for the most frequently taught plays and sonnets.

<http://folger.edu/education>

### **Teaching Shakespeare with Technology—PBS**

Learn more about incorporating digital media into your Shakespeare units.

<http://pbs.org/shakespeare/educators/technology>

### **The History of Costume by Braun and Schneider**

View costume illustrations of different social classes and cultures from various historical times.

<http://siue.edu/COSTUMES/history.html>

### **The Elizabethan Costuming Page**

Read articles on what Elizabethan woman and men wore, with drawings.

<http://www.elizabethancostume.net/>

# TECHNO SHAKESPEARE

## Shakespeare and Elizabethan England

### **The Map of Early Modern London Online**

*This resource includes a detailed, searchable map of Shakespeare's London and an evolving encyclopedia of the places listed.*

<http://mapoflondon.uvic.ca/index.htm>

### **The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust**

*Learn more about Shakespeare's life and birthplace through an extensive online collection.*

<http://shakespeare.org.uk>

### **Shakespeare and the Globe: Then and Now**

*The Encyclopedia Britannica's entry includes a detailed biography, contextual articles on Elizabethan literature, art, theaters and culture, and brief entries on famous Shakespearean actors, directors and scholars.*

<http://search.eb.com/shakespeare/index2.html>

### **The Elizabethan Theatre**

*Read a lecture on Elizabethan Theatre by Professor Hilda D. Spear, University of Dundee, held at Cologne University.*

<http://uni-koeln.de/phil-fak/englisch/shakespeare>

### **Queen Elizabeth I**

*Learn more about Queen Elizabeth and the people, events and concepts key to the study of the Elizabethan Age.*

<http://www.luminarium.org/renlit/eliza.htm>

### **Elizabeth I: Ruler and Legend**

*This web-based exhibit is a companion to The Newberry Library's 2003/2004 Queen Elizabeth exhibit.*

<http://newberry.org/elizabeth/>

### **Proper Elizabethan Accents**

*A guide to speaking like an Elizabethan*

<http://www.renfaire.com/Language/index.html>

## Texts and Early Editions

### **The Internet Shakespeare Editions\***

*This website has transcriptions and high quality facsimiles of Shakespeare's folios and quartos, categorized by play with links to any articles written about the play that can be found on the website.*

<http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Foyer/plays.html>

### **What Is a Folio?**

*This image shows how to read a Folio text; part of Massachusetts Institute of Technology's website "Hamlet on the Ramparts."*

<http://shea.mit.edu/ramparts/newstuff3.htm>

### **Shakespeare's First Folio**

*This page from the British Library provides an easy to understand introduction to the First Folio.*

<http://bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/landprint/shakespeare/>

### **The First Folio of William Shakespeare (University of Virginia)\***

*Access Othello and others of Shakespeare's plays online in their First Folio editions.*

<http://search.lib.virginia.edu/catalog/003081548>

## Words, Words, Words

### **Open Source Shakespeare Concordance**

*Use this concordance to view all the uses of a word or word form in all of Shakespeare's works or in one play.*

<http://www.opensourceshakespeare.com/concordance/findform.php>

### **Shakespeare's Words Glossary and Language Companion**

*Created by David Crystal and Ben Crystal, this site is a free online companion to the best-selling glossary and language companion, Shakespeare's Words.*

<http://shakespeareswords.com>

### **Shakespeare Lexicon and Quotation Dictionary**

*Part of Tufts University's Perseus Digital Library and created by Alexander Schmidt.*

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.03.0079>

### **Shakespeare's Grammar**

*Discover how Shakespeare used grammar differently than we might today.*

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

## Shakespeare in Performance

### **The Internet Broadway Database**

*This online database of Broadway plays is a great place to search for 'Shakespeare' and learn about some productions of the Bard's works. This will only give information about shows performed on Broadway.*

<http://ibdb.com>

### **The Internet Movie Database: William Shakespeare**

*Similar to IBDB, utilize this online movie database to search for 'Shakespeare' and learn about the different cinematic versions of his plays.*

<http://imdb.com>

### **Designing Shakespeare Collections**

This link offers many production photos focusing on design practice at the Royal Shakespeare Company and other British theaters. The photos can be enlarged and used for a myriad of classroom activities and research.

<http://www.ahds.rhul.ac.uk/ahdscollections/docroot/shakespeare/playslist.do>

## Shakespeare in Art

### **Folger Shakespeare Library Digital Image Collection\***

*In August 2014, over 80,000 images from Folger's collection were released for use in the public domain. Images include production photos, books, manuscripts and art.*

<http://luna.folger.edu/luna/servlet/view/all>

### **Shakespeare Illustrated\***

*Harry Rusche, English professor at Emory University, created this website that explores nineteenth-century paintings depicting scenes from Shakespeare's plays. Othello has four linked works of art; the website is searchable by play title and artist name.*

[http://english.emory.edu/classes/Shakespeare\\_Illustrated/Shakespeare.html](http://english.emory.edu/classes/Shakespeare_Illustrated/Shakespeare.html)

# TECHNO SHAKESPEARE

## **Tudor and Elizabethan Portrait Gallery**

England's National Portrait Gallery's Tudor and Elizabethan collection contains portraits from 1485-1603. These portraits are viewable on this website.

<http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/explore/by-period/tudor.php>

## **The Faces of Elizabeth I**

Access a collection of paintings of Queen Elizabeth spanning her lifetime.

<http://www.luminarium.org/renlit/elizface.htm>

# Othello

## **Othello Study Guide\***

Michael Cummings's study guide offers background information, a character list and summary and discusses themes, and figures of speech.

<http://www.shakespearestudyguide.com/Othello.html>

## **Manga Shakespeare Online\***

Fourteen of Shakespeare's plays, including Othello are available for purchase in manga form on this site. The "resources" tab also includes a free online glossary.

<http://mangashakespeare.com/index.html>

## **A Teacher Guide to the Signet Edition\***

This teacher's guide provides summaries of each act in addition to study questions to consider while reading the play and follow up writing prompts.

<http://www.penguin.com/static/pdf/teachersguides/othello.pdf>

## **Shakespeare Online\***

The full text of the play is provided with accompanying activities and information.

<http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/othelloscenes.html>

## **Play Shakespeare**

This site offers synopsis, detailed character descriptions, production reviews and online full texts, including translations, for Othello and forty-one other plays.

<http://www.playshakespeare.com/>

## **Shakespeare's Globe: Playing Shakespeare—Othello\***

This link will take you to a suite of short videos, which accompanied an eight-week unit based on a production at Shakespeare's Globe in London.

<http://2015.playingshakespeare.org/>

## **BBC's 60-second Shakespeare: Othello\***

An engaging introduction to the play, this site is written in the format of exclusive breaking news in a tabloid.

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/drama/shakespeare/60secondshakespeare/themes\\_othello.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/drama/shakespeare/60secondshakespeare/themes_othello.shtml)

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aprendices

APPENDIX A – LINES FOR LINE “DANCING” (Activity #1)

Script Key: The following lines are printed twice for each pair of students sharing the same line. The two colors denote each student's half.

---

#1 O Thou foul Thief! | **Where hast thou stowed my daughter?**

#1 O Thou foul Thief! | **Where hast thou stowed my daughter?**

#2 She is abused, stol'n from me, | **and corrupted by spells and medicines bought of mountebanks.**

#2 She is abused, stol'n from me, | **and corrupted by spells and medicines bought of mountebanks.**

#3 She loved me for the dangers I had passed, and I loved her that she did pity them. | **This only is the witchcraft I have used.**

#3 She loved me for the dangers I had passed, and I loved her that she did pity them. | **This only is the witchcraft I have used.**

#4 And so much duty as my mother showed to you, preferring you before her father; | **so much I challenge that I may profess due to the Moor my lord.**

#4 And so much duty as my mother showed to you, preferring you before her father; | **so much I challenge that I may profess due to the Moor my lord.**

#5 Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see. | **She has deceived her father, and may thee.**

#5 Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see. | **She has deceived her father, and may thee.**

#6 Oh, let the heavens give him defense against the elements, | **for I have lost him on a dangerous sea.**

#6 Oh, let the heavens give him defense against the elements, | **for I have lost him on a dangerous sea.**

#7 Till I am evened with him, wife for wife. | **Or, failing so, yet that I put the Moor at least into a jealousy so strong that judgment cannot cure.**

#7 Till I am evened with him, wife for wife. | **Or, failing so, yet that I put the Moor at least into a jealousy so strong that judgment cannot cure.**

#8 You rogue! You rascal! | **I'll beat the knave into a twiggen bottle.**

— — — — —  
#8 You rogue! You rascal! | **I'll beat the knave into a twiggen bottle.**  
— — — — —

#9 I had rather have this tongue cut from my mouth than it should do offence to Michael Cassio. | **Yet I persuade myself to speak the truth.**  
— — — — —

#9 I had rather have this tongue cut from my mouth than it should do offence to Michael Cassio. | **Yet I persuade myself to speak the truth.**  
— — — — —

#10 Cassio I love thee | **but never more be an officer of mine.**  
— — — — —

#10 Cassio I love thee | **but never more be an officer of mine.**  
— — — — —

#11 I'll pour this pestilence into his ear: | **that she repeals him for her body's lust.**  
— — — — —

#11 I'll pour this pestilence into his ear: | **that she repeals him for her body's lust.**  
— — — — —

#12 Cassio, my lord? | **No, sure, I cannot think it that he would steal away so guilty-like seeing you coming.**  
— — — — —

#12 Cassio, my lord? | **No, sure, I cannot think it that he would steal away so guilty-like seeing you coming.**  
— — — — —

#13 I am abused | **and my relief must be to loathe her.**  
— — — — —

#13 I am abused | **and my relief must be to loathe her.**  
— — — — —

#14 I am glad I have found this napkin. | **My wayward husband hath a hundred times wooed me to steal it.**  
— — — — —

#14 I am glad I have found this napkin. | **My wayward husband hath a hundred times wooed me to steal it.**  
— — — — —

#15 Trifles light as air are to the jealous | **confirmation strong as proofs of holy writ.**  
— — — — —

#15 Trifles light as air are to the jealous | **confirmation strong as proofs of holy writ.**  
— — — — —

#16 Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore, Be sure of it. | **Give me the ocular proof.**  
— — — — —

#16 Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore, Be sure of it. | **Give me the ocular proof.**  
— — — — —

## APPENDIX B – SCRIPT FOR EXEUNT! (Activity #2)

### Script Key:

- Each time you come to a bolded word, select a new student to enter the circle and take on that character. (You may want to create name placards or use a shared costume piece to help students keep track of each character.)
  - When you reach a highlighted line, ask the student portraying that character to read the line off of your script. (These are the same lines from the Line “Dancing” activity, so they may already be familiar to the students.)
  - When you reach an “Exeunt!,” all students return to the outer circle, leaving the playing space empty.
- 

### Act 1

On a Venice street at night, a soldier named **Iago** and a gentleman named **Roderigo** discuss the news: Senator Brabantio's daughter, Desdemona, has eloped--and with the Moor, Othello, a general in the Venetian army. Roderigo is upset because he's paid Iago to help him pursue Desdemona, which has clearly failed. Iago, Othello's ensign, complains that the general has promoted the far less experienced Michael Cassio as his lieutenant. Iago confesses that he only pretends to serve Othello to serve his own interest. From the street, the two men yell to wake Desdemona's father, **Brabantio** to deliver the news of Desdemona's elopement. Brabantio is horrified and begins to search for the Moor to bring him to justice before the Duke of Venice.

But the **Duke** and his **senators** are concerned with more important issues. The Turks are headed to invade the Venetian territory of Cyprus. The Duke sends **Cassio** and **officers** to summon **Othello**. Pretending to be helpful, Iago warns Othello that Brabantio is searching for the newlyweds. Cassio and the court officers arrive first. **[CASSIO]** *“The duke does greet you, general, and he requires your haste-post-haste appearance even on the instant.”* Just then, Brabantio arrives. **[BRABANTIO]** *“O Thou foul Thief! Where hast thou stowed my daughter?”* Everyone heads off to meet with the duke.

The Duke's military planning is interrupted by the entrance of Brabantio, Othello, Cassio, Iago and Roderigo. Brabantio insists that the issue of his daughter's elopement be addressed immediately. **[BRABANTIO]** *“She is abused, stol'n from me, and corrupted by spells and medicines bought of mountebanks.”* Othello confesses that he has married Desdemona, but that they are very much in love. **[OTHELLO]** *“She loved me for the dangers I had passed, and I loved her that she did pity them. This only is the witchcraft I have used.”* **Desdemona** confirms Othello's story and pledges her loyalty to her husband. **[DESDEMONA]** *“But here's my husband. And so much duty as my mother showed to you, preferring you before her father, so much I challenge that I may profess due to the Moor my lord.”*

The summit continues as the Duke informs Othello that his expertise is required to defend Cyprus against the Turks. Desdemona pleads, **[DESDEMONA]** *“Let me go with him.”* The Duke concedes, and orders Othello to leave immediately. As all depart, Brabantio warns Othello. **[BRABANTIO]** *“Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see. She has deceived her father, and may thee.”*

### EXEUNT!

**Othello** dismisses Brabantio's warning. He instructs **Iago** to bring Desdemona and his wife, Emilia, to Cyprus. Othello departs, leaving **Roderigo** and Iago behind to stew in their bad feelings. Roderigo ponders drowning himself, which Iago mocks. The two agree to work together to gain revenge. After Roderigo leaves, Iago reveals that he has more than one reason to hate the Moor: it is rumored, he claims, that Othello has slept with his own wife, Emilia. For this and the insult of being overlooked for promotion, he plots revenge—to make Othello believe that his lieutenant Cassio and Desdemona are lovers.

## Act 2

At a port in Cyprus, several **men** gather on shore. Much to the relief of **Signior Montano** and the others, a terrible storm has stopped the advance of the Turkish fleet, but they anxiously await news of the fate of the Venetian ships. Michael Cassio's **vessel** is the first to arrive ashore. **Cassio** and his **soldiers** have inflicted heavy damage to what was left of the Turkish fleet. He expresses concern for Othello. **[CASSIO]** *"Oh, let the heavens give him defense against the elements, for I have lost him on a dangerous sea."* Iago's ship docks next, bringing **Desdemona** and her lady-in-waiting, **Emilia** and **Roderigo**. While waiting for Othello, **Iago** discusses with Desdemona the shortcomings of women in general. As he talks, Cassio takes Desdemona's hand as a courtesy.

Finally, **Othello** arrives, with news that the battle is won. The newlyweds greet each happily. **[DESDEMONA]** *"My dear Othello!"* **[OTHELLO]** *"Oh, my soul's joy!"* While the others head to the victory celebration, Iago plots his revenge with Roderigo's help. He insists that since Othello is old and unattractive, Desdemona will soon tire of him and set her sights on the young, handsome Cassio. Iago instructs Roderigo to pick a fight with Cassio, which will lead to his falling out of favor with the general. Believing that his wife has been intimate with Othello, Iago vows to get revenge, **[IAGO]** *"Till I am evened with him, wife for wife. Or, failing so, yet that I put the Moor at least into a jealousy so strong that judgment cannot cure."*

## EXEUNT!

A **herald** announces Othello's proclamation of this night's celebration of the Turkish defeat and his own nuptials. Othello leaves **Cassio** in charge of the guard for the night. **Iago** persuades Cassio and his **men** to toast Othello along with **Montano** and a few **Cypriots**. Cassio is soon intoxicated. Iago expresses concern to Montano that Cassio's drinking may cause a problem for his new responsibilities. As planned, **Roderigo** enters and follows Cassio. Cassio begins chasing him. **[CASSIO]** *"You rogue! You rascal! I'll beat the knave into a twigger bottle."* Montano attempts to stop the drunken brawl, but is stabbed by Cassio as he tries to intervene.

**Othello** arrives, demanding to know what has happened. Iago reluctantly agrees to tell the story. **[IAGO]** *"I had rather have this tongue cut from my mouth than it should do offence to Michael Cassio. Yet I persuade myself to speak the truth."* Othello dismisses Cassio from office. **[OTHELLO]** *"Cassio I love thee but never more be an officer of mine."* Iago and Cassio remain after all the others exit.

Cassio is heartbroken. **[CASSIO]** *"Oh, I have lost my reputation!"* Iago urges him to regain Othello's good favor by pleading his case to Desdemona, all the while plotting to convince Othello of his wife's infidelity with the lieutenant. **[IAGO]** *"I'll pour this pestilence into his ear: that she repeals him for her body's lust."*

## EXEUNT!

### Act 3

With **Iago's** help, **Cassio** visits **Desdemona** to ask her assistance in repairing the relationship between him and Othello. Desdemona assures Cassio that she can help him. **[DESDEMONA]** *"But I will have my lord and you again as friendly as you were."* As **Othello** returns home from business with the senate, he observes Cassio's hasty departure and mentions it to Iago. **[OTHELLO]** *"Was not that Cassio parted from my wife?"* Iago uses the moment to create suspicion. **[IAGO]** *"Cassio, my lord? No, sure, I cannot think it that he would steal away so guilty-like seeing you coming."* Desdemona implores Othello to reinstate Cassio. Though Othello says he will meet with Cassio, Desdemona continues to question her husband when he refuses to set a specific time for the meeting. Iago takes the opportunity to insinuate that her interest in Cassio may suggest her infidelity. Iago succeeds in planting suspicions in Othello's mind. **[OTHELLO]** *"I am abused, and my relief must be to loathe her."*

When Desdemona returns to escort Othello in to dinner with his guests, he complains of an aching forehead. Desdemona offers her handkerchief embroidered with strawberries—the first keepsake from her husband, but Othello pushes it away saying it is too small. She accidentally drops it. **Emilia** finds the handkerchief. **[EMILIA]** *"I am glad I have found this napkin. My wayward husband hath a hundred times wooed me to steal it."* Iago reports to the audience that he intends to plant it in Cassio's room. **[IAGO]** *"Trifles light as air are to the jealous confirmation strong as proofs of holy writ."*

Othello demands that Iago provide him proof of Desdemona's infidelity. **[OTHELLO]** *"Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore, Be sure of it. Give me the ocular proof."* Iago suggests he's uncomfortable, but must confess that he has heard Cassio while dreaming say. **[IAGO]** *"Sweet Desdemona, let us be wary, let us hide our loves."* He adds that he witnessed Cassio wipe his beard with the handkerchief Othello had given to Desdemona. Enraged, Othello charges Iago with killing Cassio within three days and appoints Iago as his lieutenant.

### EXEUNT!

**Desdemona** asks **Emilia** about her missing handkerchief, but she replies, **[EMILIA]** *"I know not, madam."* Desdemona suggests that the loss will not pose a problem as her husband is not a jealous man. **Othello** enters and, greeting his wife, requests the use of her handkerchief. When she does produce it, he becomes unsettled, and recounts the story of the charmed handkerchief that had been given to him by his mother. When Othello demands that his wife produce the handkerchief and she cannot, his suspicions grow. **[OTHELLO]** *"Is't lost? Is't gone? Speak, Is't out o' th' way?"* As he presses to see the handkerchief she attempts to change the subject to Cassio. Othello leaves in anger, convinced of Desdemona's guilt.

Meanwhile, Cassio finds the stolen handkerchief in his bedchamber. He persuades his mistress Bianca to copy the fine embroidery for him and promises to visit her later in the night...

TO BE CONTINUED...



16. My lord is not my lord; nor should I know him, were he in favor as in humor altered.

17. All's one. Good faith, how foolish are our minds!

18. Heaven keep that monster from Othello's mind!

19. If I do die before thee, prithee shroud me in one of those same sheets.

20. Do not think, gentlemen, I am drunk.

21. Whatever shall become of Michael Cassio, he's never anything but your true servant.

22. Reputation, reputation, reputation! O, I have lost my reputation.

23. O, my dear Cassio, my sweet Cassio! O, Cassio, Cassio, Cassio!

24. But I do think it is their husbands' faults if wives do fail.

25. They are all but stomachs, and we all but food.

26. They eat us hungerly, and when they are full, they belch us.

27. They are not ever jealous for the cause, but jealous for they are jealous.

28. Thou hast not half that power to do me harm as I have to be hurt.

29. I do not find that thou deal'st justly with me.

30. I have wasted myself out of my means.

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