November 4, 1604, is the first recorded date of a performance of William Shakespeare’s *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice*, although most scholars believe that it was first performed in 1600 or 1601. All records indicate that the play was an immediate success, and interest in the story continued unabated for four hundred years. The story of Othello the Moor, his lovely wife Desdemona, and the dastardly villain Iago was enacted countless times on stage, reworked as an opera, choreographed as a ballet, filmed multiple times, and transformed into television shows, novels, and movies. The title role of Othello became the quintessential Shakespearean role for black actors, although many white actors acted the part as well, and the villainy of Iago remained one of the most complicated and contested issues of contemporary Shakespeare scholarship. For Americans, historic issues of slavery and race made *Othello* an especially troubling and problematic play. Likewise, issues of gender, postcolonialism, diversity, and global perspective continued to generate a lively critical debate on the play. The play is easily available to readers in many editions; one of the most useful for students is the Norton Critical Edition (2004), edited by Edward Pechter. As of the early 2000s, interest in *Othello* was unlikely to abate; it remained a towering story of passion and rage.
William Shakespeare’s life was a source of mystery and controversy among scholars of English literature. What little was known of his life was gleaned from documentary evidence and writings of his contemporaries. Shakespeare himself left no writings concerning his personal life and thus remained a frustrating enigma for biographers and critics alike.

Shakespeare was born to parents Mary and John Shakespeare in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. Church records show that he was baptized on April 26, 1564; from this, scholars extrapolate that he was born several days earlier, and so April 23, 1564, is the traditional dating of his birth.

Shakespeare’s father was a glover and was active in town government. That John Shakespeare’s fortunes began to decline in about 1576 suggested to some scholars that the family may have been Catholic or had Catholic sympathies at a time when membership in the Church of England was required for any kind of social or financial standing.

It was assumed that Shakespeare attended the Stratford grammar school, where he would have learned Latin and studied the classics in depth, although little was known of his young life. In November 1582, Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway. Hathaway was eight years his senior and was pregnant with their first child at the time of their marriage. The couple had three children: Susanna, born in 1583, and the twins, Judith and Hamnet, born in 1585.

At this point, Shakespeare disappeared from records known as of 2004. Then he reappeared in 1592 in theatrical circles in London. Both Robert Greene and Thomas Nashe referred to Shakespeare in print. In 1593, poems by Shakespeare appeared in print. In all, Shakespeare composed some 154 sonnets during these early years.

In 1594, Shakespeare, along with Richard Burbage (perhaps the greatest actor of the day) and six other actors, formed the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, an acting troupe. Over the next five years, Shakespeare both acted with the company and wrote plays for them. He was remarkably prolific, writing primarily comedies and histories during this period, with the exception of the tragedy, Romeo and Juliet in 1595.

In 1599, Shakespeare and his troupe began building the Globe Theater. In addition, around this time, Shakespeare began writing his great tragedies, including Othello. Some critics have suggested that this tragic turn was precipitated by the death of his son Hamnet and his father in a short space of time. Although these deaths were recorded in documents, there was no hard evidence, as of the early 2000s, linking Shakespeare’s change in writing to the events.

The first probable performance of Othello was in 1601 and 1602 and continued to be performed regularly in the following years. Shakespeare’s last recorded stage appearance was in a play by Ben Jonson in 1603. After this date, he seemed to have devoted himself solely to writing. By 1611, twentieth-century biographers surmised he was living again in Stratford. In March 1616, Shakespeare changed his will, perhaps in anticipation of his own death. On his fifty-second birthday, April 23, 1616, Shakespeare died in Stratford.

### PLOT SUMMARY

#### Act 1

The play opens in Venice, Italy, at night. Iago, General Othello’s ensign, and Roderigo, who is in
love with Desdemona, are on the street outside of the home of Brabantio, Desdemona’s father. Iago tells Roderigo of his hatred for Othello, primarily because Othello has promoted Michael Cassio ahead of Iago. They call out to Brabantio, telling him in crude language that his daughter is having a sexual encounter with Othello. Brabantio, enraged, goes with his servants to find the couple. Meanwhile, Iago goes to Othello to warn him of Brabantio’s anger.

In the next scene, the duke and the senators discuss the Turkish threat on Cyprus. Brabantio, Othello, Cassio, and Roderigo, all enter and Brabantio levels his charges against Othello. Othello replies that he has not stolen Desdemona but has rather legally married her, although without her father’s consent. Desdemona is sent for, and when she arrives, she concurs with Othello’s summary of their relationship. The duke recognizes their marriage and tells Othello that he must go to Cyprus to defend against the Turks. Othello asks that his wife accompany him, and Desdemona says that she wants to go with him as well.

The act closes with an exchange between Iago and Roderigo. Iago says that Othello will soon change his mind and that Iago will help Roderigo win Desdemona. After Roderigo’s exit, Iago reveals to the audience how much he hates Othello and Cassio and that he plans to ruin both of them.

**Act 2**

Act 2 opens in Cyprus in a storm. The Turks have lost their entire fleet in the tempest. Ultimately, all the characters arrive in Cyprus, and Othello and Desdemona are lovingly reunited. Iago hatches his plot with Roderigo and instructs Roderigo to make Cassio angry this evening after Iago makes Cassio drunk.

In the next scene, Othello leaves to celebrate his nuptials with Desdemona. After Othello’s departure, Iago manages to get Cassio to drink more than he should. As a consequence, when angered by Roderigo, Cassio gets into a fight with him and ends up seriously injuring the Cypriot governor Montano. Othello is called from his chambers to resolve the crisis. Othello is very angry and dismisses Cassio as an officer.

Cassio is distraught and bares his soul to Iago, whom he thinks is his friend. Iago sets his second scheme in motion by instructing Cassio to try to get back into Othello’s favor through Desdemona.

**Act 3**

As this act opens, Emilia speaks to Cassio and tells him she will work on his behalf with Desdemona. Then, Cassio speaks to Desdemona herself. Cassio leaves quickly when he sees Othello and Iago approaching. Iago makes an oblique comment about how he does not like seeing Cassio speaking with Desdemona. This begins to work on Othello and marks the beginning of his deterioration through jealousy. Desdemona and Othello make up, and Othello repeats his great love for her. However, Desdemona, through her unwitting support of Cassio to Othello, contributes to his growing jealousy. After Desdemona and Emilia exit, Iago goes to work on Othello again, suggesting that Cassio and Desdemona have betrayed Othello. He reminds Othello that Desdemona deceived her father when she married him, suggesting that Desdemona is not what she seems to be.

When Iago exits, Othello in a soliloquy contemplates what he will do if he finds that Desdemona has betrayed him, yet when Desdemona and Emilia come on stage, he says that he will not believe she is untrue. They exit together, but Desdemona drops her handkerchief accidentally.

Emilia picks up the handkerchief, saying that her husband has asked her to take it for him. She gives it to Iago then leaves the stage. Iago then says that he will leave the handkerchief in Cassio’s lodgings to be used as evidence against him. Othello returns, and Iago works on him further, finally convincing him that Desdemona has been unfaithful. He tells Othello that he has seen her handkerchief in Cassio’s possession. Othello vows to have Desdemona put to death.

When Desdemona enters, Othello asks her for the handkerchief. Desdemona is unable to produce it, and Othello takes this as evidence of her betrayal. Othello exits, angry.

**Act 4**

In Act 4, Iago continues to torment Othello with innuendo and suggestions of Desdemona’s dishonesty. Othello has a fit of epilepsy. When he recovers he sees Cassio and Iago speaking about Bianca, who arrives with the handkerchief that Cassio has given her. Othello recognizes it as Desdemona’s handkerchief and thus resolves to kill both Cassio and Desdemona.
Emissaries from Venice arrive and observe Othello’s cruelty to Desdemona. They question Iago about Othello’s sanity, and Iago implies that Othello is if not mad, certainly dangerous.

In the next scene, Othello interrogates Emilia concerning Desdemona’s fidelity. He is clearly growing more distraught by the moment. Desdemona describes the drastic change in her husband to Iago and Emilia. After the women exit, Roderigo enters and accuses Iago of playing false with him. Iago makes up a story that convinces Roderigo that he should kill Cassio.

Act 4 closes with Desdemona in her bedchamber, having been sent there with Emilia by Othello. There is a grim sense of foreboding over the scene.

**Act 5**

As the act opens, Roderigo seriously wounds Cassio. Iago appears to save Cassio and implicates Roderigo to Ludovico, and Roderigo is killed. In the next scene, Othello is in the bedroom with Desdemona as he prepares to kill her. Desdemona protests her innocence, but Othello does not believe her. He kills her by smothering her with a pillow. Emilia comes to the room; Desdemona revives for just a moment to tell Emilia that she has killed herself and then she dies. Othello tells Emilia that he has killed her and says that Desdemona was false. Emilia contradicts him and offers proof that it was Iago who plotted against the pair. Iago threatens Emilia with his sword as she testifies against him, but he is stopped by Desdemona’s uncle, Gratiano, and placed under arrest. Othello finally understands that he has killed the innocent Desdemona and asks why Iago has treated him thus. Iago refuses to respond. Othello begs for Cassio’s forgiveness. Ludovico produces a letter from Roderigo that reveals the whole plan. There being no recourse, Othello kills himself with his own knife.

**CHARACTERS**

**Bianca**

Bianca is a courtesan. While some have interpreted this to mean a prostitute, it is not clear at all from the text that this is the case, since only Iago describes her in this way. Bianca is a woman with whom Cassio is having an affair. Her importance to the play concerns the handkerchief plot, and while her role is small, much turns on the scene where Othello observes Cassio and Bianca discussing the handkerchief.

**Brabantio**

Brabantio is Desdemona’s father and a Venetian senator. A very powerful man in Venice, Brabantio has invited Othello to his home many times to talk about military matters. He is very angry, however, when he learns that Othello has eloped with his daughter. Brabantio only appears in the opening scenes of the play, yet in these scenes, he reveals much about not only himself but about the general attitude toward daughters and marriage in his time. He reveals his belief that a daughter is a possession of her father until the father arranges her marriage for her. This process often includes receiving money and property from the prospective groom in return for the daughter’s hand. Brabantio is clearly distraught over this aspect, as well as the fact that his daughter has married a foreigner and a black man. Ultimately, however, he blames Desdemona: he warns Othello that he should look to his wife, stating that her deception of her father might portend a similar deception of her husband. In the final scenes of the play, the audience learns that Brabantio has died in Venice, the result of the grief he suffered over Desdemona’s marriage.

**Michael Cassio**

Cassio is a lieutenant to Othello. A handsome and honorable man, Cassio receives a promotion from Othello that enrages Iago, beginning the action of the play. Cassio is tricked by Iago into becoming drunk and striking the governor of Cyprus. This action leads to his dismissal from Othello’s troop and the loss of Othello’s affection for him. Under Iago’s guidance, Cassio attempts to regain Othello’s favor through Desdemona. However, this action makes Othello very jealous of Cassio. In addition, Cassio’s interaction with the courtesan Bianca further enrages Othello. While Cassio is meant to be seen as the innocent wronged victim of Iago’s machinations, it is true that he is unable to hold his liquor, that he engages in a brawl, nearly killing an
MEDIA ADAPTATIONS

- Italian composer Giuseppe Verdi adapted *Othello* into the opera *Otello* in 1887. Nearly one hundred years later, in 1986, film director Franco Zeffirelli directed a film version of the opera starring Placido Domingo, Katia Riciarelli, and Justino Diaz. The film was released in 2003 on DVD and VHS from MGM Home Video.

- In another adaptation, choreographer Lar Lubovitch interpreted *Othello* as a ballet. Performed by the San Francisco Ballet and released on DVD in 2003, the ballet featured Desmond Richardson, Yuan Yuan Tan, and Parrish Maynard. It is available through Kultur Video.

- A 2001 British television production set *Othello* in the contemporary London Metropolitan Police Department. While keeping the structure of the plot and story, the drama did not use Shakespeare’s language. Originally produced by London Weekend Television, the drama is available on DVD from Acorn Media.

- Another film that used the basic plot of *Othello* but transforms the play into a modern setting with modern language is *O*. Directed by Tim Blake Nelson and starring Mekhi Phifer, Josh Hartnett, and Julia Stiles, the film is set in a southern boys’ private school, and the action revolves around a basketball team. The original release of the movie was in 2000, and it was released on DVD in 2003, available from Vidmark/Trimark.

- A more traditional filming of *Othello* was undertaken by the BBC as part of its *Complete Dramatic Works of William Shakespeare* series. In 1981, the BBC produced *Othello*, directed by Jonathan Miller and starring Anthony Hopkins and Bob Hoskins, available through the BBC.

- *Othello* was adapted for film in 1995 by Castle Rock Entertainment. It was directed by Oliver Parker and starred Laurence Fishburne as Othello and Kenneth Branagh as Iago. It is available from Turner Home Entertainment.

- Famed director and actor Orson Wells directed himself in another adaptation of *Othello* in 1952. The film was released on DVD in 1999 and is available from Image Entertainment.

- Stuart Burge and John Dexter II directed Laurence Olivier in *Othello* in 1965. The film was released on VHS in 1996 and is available through Warner.

Desdemona

Desdemona is a wealthy, beautiful, young Venetian woman who falls in love and then elopes with Othello. She is naive to the ways of the world; however, she is well spoken and confident, as revealed to her statements in Othello’s defense to the Venetian Senate. Desdemona leaves her home and family behind when she follows Othello to his posting in Cyprus. Unbeknownst to Desdemona, Iago uses her to plot against both Cassio and Othello. In Cyprus, Desdemona takes the part of the disgraced Cassio in pleading to her husband for clemency. This action, in turn, feeds Othello’s jealousy. Desdemona’s naïveté prevents her from seeing that her pleading for Cassio enrages Othello. In addition, her innocent carelessness with the handkerchief that Othello has given her provides Iago with the vehicle he needs to “prove” Desdemona’s infidelity to Othello. Desdemona proves herself to be brave, loving, and self-sacrificial in her final scene. Although she pleads for her life as she is being murdered, she continues to treat Othello with love. Indeed, when she rouses briefly after being smothered, she tells...
Emilia that she has killed herself and that she alone is responsible for her death. In doing so, she tries to save Othello from the guilt of her death. However, she dies as she tells this lie, a particularly awful moment. From a Catholic perspective, because she dies in a state of mortal sin, she sacrifices her eternal soul in a futile attempt to save Othello.

**Emilia**

Emilia is Iago’s wife and Desdemona’s lady in waiting. The two are good friends; yet Iago persuades Emilia to steal Desdemona’s handkerchief from her and give it to him. Emilia does so, but it seems clear that she has no idea of the terrible ramifications of this act. In the final scenes, when she realizes what she has done, she condemns Iago to Othello and reveals her role in the handkerchief plot. In this moment, Iago runs her through with his sword, killing her. While Emilia is surely culpable for her part in the plot, her utter surprise at what Iago has done in some ways exonerates her. Her love for Desdemona is genuine, and if she had fully understood the depths of her husband’s villainy, it is unlikely that she would have cooperated with him. Nonetheless, she pays for her part in the deception with her death, although she dies in an honest confession of her own part, rendering her death less problematic than that of Desdemona.

**Iago**

Iago is Othello’s ensign, or in some texts, ancient. Iago is arguably the most evil of all Shakespeare’s villains and, ironically, perhaps the most interesting character in the canon of Shakespeare’s work. He is complicated and difficult to understand because his hatred seems so motiveless. Like Hamlet, Iago is a wordsmith. Shakespeare gives Iago more lines than anyone else in the play, and many of these lines reveal a highly intelligent, yet highly malignant character. Through the course of the play, Iago offers five different reasons why he hates Othello and wants to bring him to ruin; he is angry that Cassio has been promoted above him; he believes that Othello has slept with Emilia; he believes that Cassio has slept with Emilia; he mentions that he loves Desdemona himself; and he feels ugly when he is with Cassio.

One of the most striking features of Iago is that he is so believable. He manages in the course of the play to deceive every character with whom he interacts. The deception is so complete that none of the characters doubts Iago enough to even double check the information. This point suggests that Iago is exceedingly persuasive, and his facility with language may be the reason for this. While Iago may appear fair, however, he is evil to the core. Perhaps the most evil action on Iago’s part in the play is not his betrayal of all the other characters but his refusal to reveal to Othello his motivation for doing so. In the end, Iago performs verbal suicide, refusing to speak another word.

**Othello**

Othello is the Moorish general for whom the play is named. He is a middle-aged African, who has come to the aid of Venice in their war against the Turks. While in Venice, he meets and falls in love with the beautiful Desdemona. Against Venetian custom, he chooses to elope with Desdemona and must answer for his action to the Senate. At the same time, a new threat from the Turks means that the Venetians must send him to Cyprus. When the Senate approves of his marriage, Othello asks that his wife accompany him to Cyprus because he does not want to be without her. This request reveals his deep love for his wife, although it ultimately leads to her death.

From all accounts, Othello is a brave and strong military man, capable of saving the Venetians through his cool command. Other characters often refer to him as the “noble” Moor, and there is reference to his princely caste in Africa. As a black man, Othello is both imposing and exotic, to the Venetian characters in the play. He is meant to be impressive as well to the audience. Yet the issue of Othello’s race was probably both enticing and troubling to Elizabethan audiences, as it certainly continued to be in the centuries of audiences to come.

Like Iago, Othello is one of the most complicated of Shakespeare’s characters. He is, on the one hand, a larger than life hero. On the other hand, he seems to be preternaturally gullible in his impetuous acceptance of Iago’s ordering of reality. On the one hand, he is a crafty and intelligent military leader. On the other hand, he has been called stupid by critics of the play. On the one hand, he is a romantic and passionate lover. On the other, he is a cold-blooded murderer. These inconsistencies or contradictions in his character are further complicated by the issue of race. It is difficult to know just what Shakespeare intended for his audience to make of Othello. Is Shakespeare attributing Othello’s gulli-
Othello

bility to his race? Or is he suggesting that it is because of his race that others choose to degrade him to such an extent? Is Othello heroic because he is black or in spite of it?

Roderigo

Roderigo is a companion of Iago. A wealthy gentleman, Roderigo is in love with Desdemona. Iago uses Roderigo’s love for Desdemona as the device through which he gains both Roderigo’s financing and complicity in his plots. Roderigo is villainous in the play; he works against particularly Cassio in what he thinks is a plot that will finally unite him in marriage with Desdemona. Of all the characters in the play, Roderigo is clearly the least intelligent. He plays the part of the heavy in Iago’s machinations. After tricking Cassio early in the play, he falls victim to Cassio’s sword at the end.

THEMES

Jealousy

Traditionally, Othello was read as a cautionary tale about the destructive nature of the green-eyed monster, jealousy. Certainly, the play is filled with examples of jealousy, each contributing to the claustrophobic atmosphere of plot and counterplot, all orchestrated by Iago. Iago himself attributes his hatred of Othello to numerous sorts of jealousy: he is jealous of Michael Cassio because he believes that Cassio has been promoted unjustly over him and because he believes that Cassio might have had an affair with his wife. Iago is jealous of Othello because he believes that Othello might have had sex with his wife and because he says that he loves Desdemona himself. It is almost as if Iago examines the various kinds of jealousy he finds in himself in order to exploit those jealousies in others. For example, he first manipulates Roderigo. Roderigo, in love with Desdemona, is very jealous of Othello and by extension of Cassio. His jealousy makes him an easy dupe for Iago’s plotting. Likewise, Bianca is jealous of any woman in whom Cassio might be interested, and thus she also can be manipulated by Iago. Of course, the most destructive jealous rage that Iago incites is that within Othello. Iago uses his own fear of cuckoldry as the basis for his plot against Othello. By projecting his own feelings (and a common cultural fear) onto Othello, he is able to convince Othello that what he fears most, Desdemona’s betrayal, is a reality. It is jealousy that weakens Othello’s mind and reason, thus rendering him increasingly vulnerable to Iago’s plots.

In the twentieth century and into the early 2000s, some productions and some critics suggested yet another way that jealousy might work as a motivating force in the play. As Steven Orgel notes in his article “‘Othello and the End of Comedy,’” “Tyrone Guthrie in 1938 had [Laurence] Olivier as a homosexual Iago furtively longing for Ralph Richardson’s Othello.” Such an interpretation suggests that Iago is in love with Othello himself or, alternatively, in love with Cassio. He concocts his dastardly plan as the result of jealousy, playing the role of spurned lover. While the interpretation may seem strange to some readers, it does reinforce the thematic concern over jealous rage. Furthermore, it provides motivation for Iago’s actions, something that troubled viewers and critics alike since practically the first performance of the play.

Sexuality

Many of Shakespeare’s plays refer to sex through joke and innuendo. Some, such as Much Ado About Nothing, even use a sexual pun in their titles. However, Othello stands out among Shakespeare’s works as the most troublingly sexual of all plays. Indeed, it is the issue of sex that causes the downfall of both Othello and Desdemona.

In the opening scene, Iago and Roderigo awaken Brabantio to inform him of Desdemona’s elopement. Their language is obscene and racist: “‘A[n old black ram] / [I]s tupping your white ewe,’” Iago shouts, “‘[Y]our daughter / and the Moor are making the beast with two backs.’”

Further, Shakespeare calls attention to the nuptial night between Othello and Desdemona by having it interrupted several times, first in Venice when Othello is called to the Senate and later in Cyprus when Cassio stabs Montano. This serves to produce extreme sexual tension; in the scenes shared by Othello and Desdemona, their language is highly charged with interrupted desire.

For Othello, thoughts of sexual infidelity are also at the heart of his total disintegration. After murdering Desdemona, the thoughts of her supposed promiscuity continue to eat at Othello. “Iago
TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY

• Read Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* as well as descriptions of Venice written during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. What does the setting of *Othello* provide for the play thematically? What issues is Shakespeare able to explore in the play because of his choice of a Venetian setting?

• Research the status of women in England around 1600 both through primary sources such as William Gouge’s *Of Domestical Duties: Eight Treatises* (1634) and through secondary sources such as Lawrence Stone’s *Family, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1500 1800* (1977). How does an understanding of this status inform a reading of *Othello*?

• Read accounts of the Moorish ambassador’s visit to England in 1600 as well as selections from popular travel writing of the day. How does this contemporary information affect portrayal of Othello in the play?

• Watch at least four different versions of *Othello* or adaptations of the story of Othello on video or DVD. How do directorial decisions concerning casting, editing, and scripting affect an interpretation of the play?

knows / That she with Cassio hath the act of shame / A thousand times committed,’’ Othello says in his own defense.

The fear of cuckoldry runs deep in many of Shakespeare’s plays; yet in most plays it is a matter of joke and play. In *Othello*, however, Shakespeare demonstrates how such fear, when attached with deeper issues of sexuality, can turn tragic.

STYLE

Irony

Harmon and Holman in *A Handbook to Literature* define irony as “a broad term referring to the recognition of a reality different from appearance.” *Othello* is an essentially ironic play in that Shakespeare creates such a wide divide between what appears to be real to the characters in the play and what appears to be real to the audience in the theater. He does this through several devices. In the first place, Shakespeare offers Iago some of the best language in the playwright’s whole body of work. Consequently, Iago appears to the other characters as well spoken, appealing, and attractive. His language makes him someone they trust. This is evident from the number of times a character (particularly Othello) refers to Iago as “honest.” Iago does not look like the villain he is. In this, Shakespeare deviates from the traditions of the Middle Ages in which evil characters always exhibit some degree of the evil on the surface. Indeed, in medieval romance, characters are as they appear: an ugly character is inevitably evil. Shakespeare plays with both audience and character horizon of expectation here.

The first gap, then, is between what the characters and audience expect from such an attractive and well-spoken character and what he really is.

Shakespeare also structures his scenes so that the play becomes increasingly ironic. Invariably, Iago speaks to other characters on stage, lying to them and manipulating them. Then, when the characters leave the stage, Iago reveals his inner thoughts to the audience. For example, in Act 1, Scene 3, Roderigo is about to lose heart in his attempts to win Desdemona. Iago engages in a long eloquent speech telling Roderigo to “put money in / thy purse.” The speech is intended to manipulate Roderigo to continue to finance Iago’s plans. As soon as he exits, Iago speaks aloud, although he is alone, in a soliloquy, revealing to the audience his feelings about
Roderigo: “For I mine own gained knowledge should profane / If I would time expend with such a snipe / But for my sport and profit.” Consequently, as the play continues, the audience knows increasingly more about Iago than do the other characters, intensifying the sense of irony in the play.

In addition, the stature of Shakespeare and of this play contribute to the ironic atmosphere. Virtually anyone watching or reading the play knows the basics of the story: man meets woman, man marries woman, villain lies, man gets jealous, man murders woman. Consequently, a naïve viewing of the play is exceedingly rare. Thus, lines such as Brabantio’s in Act 1, Scene 3, anticipate what is to come: “Look to her, Moor, if though hast eyes to see: / She has deceived her father, and may thee.” In this fore-shadowing, the irony is doubled. Not only does the audience already know that Othello will believe that this prophecy has come to pass, the audience already knows that Othello will be wrong in that belief. Through devices such as this one, the play becomes thicker and thicker with irony.

**Chronology**

One of the strangest features in the construction of this play is Shakespeare’s ordering of time or chronology. There are two chronologies functioning simultaneously in the play. As Orgel notes, “Credit for discovering the double time scheme in Othello is always accorded to two ingenious Victorian critics, Nicholas Halpin and John Wilson, writing in Blackwood’s in 1849; but they were merely the first critics to treat it systematically and consider it a good idea.” Orgel goes on to summarize the problem. A careful reader notes that the opening act includes Othello and Desdemona’s elopement and their discussion with the Venetian Senate. The audience is informed that Cassio and Othello will leave immediately the next day while Iago, Emilia, and Desdemona will make whatever plans they need to make and then make their way to Cyprus. Orgel points out that there is a chronological gap here between Act 1 and Act 2. Othello and Desdemona are reunited on Cyprus, but their trips have taken varying lengths of time. At the point they are reunited, the action resumes continuously, and only takes about thirty-three clock hours to go from Desdemona’s arrival on Cyprus until her death.

At issue is, then, that the characters accused of infidelity with each other are never together at the same time and place for the infidelity to take place. Although Iago is able to convince Othello that Desdemona and Cassio have had an intimate affair, careful readers and viewers know that there has been no opportunity for such indiscretions. Likewise, when has Cassio had the opportunity to start his affair with Bianca? The “past” that the audience believes to have been constructed disappears on closer examination. One could argue that this is Shakespeare not paying attention to the details; however, it is just as likely, as Orgel argues, that Shakespeare plays with the time in order to illustrate how easy it is to “dupe” someone like Othello—or an audience, for that matter.

**HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

**The Moorish Ambassador and the Banishment of Africans**

One of the large questions facing Shakespeare scholars was that of Elizabethan attitudes toward Moors and others of different races. It is difficult to determine how many English people had actually ever seen someone with a different color skin than their own. It is known that in 1596, Queen Elizabeth I ordered the banishment of ten “blackamoors” from her country. Shortly after this, English prisoners being held in Spain and Portugal were traded for “blackamoors.” Thus, while there were evidently people of color in England at the time, it seems likely they were exceedingly rare.

In 1600, in an odd turn of events, Abd el-Ouahed ben Messaoud Anoun, the Moorish ambassador of Elizabeth I, came to England with his entourage. In a series of letters between Elizabeth and the king of the Barbary Coast, the two colluded for ways the North Africans and the English could work together against the Spanish. After a year or so of this fruitless negotiation as well as the frustration of the Englishman whose house had been commandeered as an embassy, the ambassador and his entourage left England. In the same year of 1601, Elizabeth ordered further expulsion of “blackamoors.” It seems likely that the two events were related; it also seems likely that Shakespeare would have been aware of the Moorish ambassador’s presence in London. How much of his play was influenced by these events is debatable, however.

**Trade and Exploration**

The Elizabethan and Jacobean ages were times of great exploration and trade. Like the Venetians of Othello, Elizabethans were merchants and traders,
COMPARE
&
CONTRAST

- **1600s**: By this date, it is estimated that some 900,000 Africans have been transported by English and other European slavers to the Americas.

- **2000s**: Slavery has been abolished throughout the world, although many countries and people still feel the effects of the African Diaspora.

- **1600s**: Women generally have little or no career options other than marriage and motherhood and are subordinate to men in every way.

- **2000s**: Women have equal rights with men and are able to pursue careers outside the home.

- **1600s**: Women are legally prohibited from acting on the stage so all female characters in Shakespeare’s plays are acted by young boys.

- **2000s**: Women actors play all female characters in Shakespeare; at times, women actors even play men’s roles.

- **1600s**: England is an absolutist state, although Elizabeth I demonstrates great ability to reach compromises with her various constituencies. James I, her successor, however, is a proponent of the absolute monarchy and attempts to control all functions of state.

- **2000s**: The British monarchy is largely a figure-head, and Queen Elizabeth II, while important to her country as a symbol, has little or no political power.

eager to open new avenues for raw goods and materials. Sometimes these goods also included traffic in human beings; from 1562 through 1568, Sir John Hawkes and others began slave trading from Africa to the West Indies. This disturbing practice continued unabated throughout the sixteenth century, and by 1600, an estimated 900,000 Africans had been transported to the Americas as slaves.

In the 1580s, English gentlemen such as Sir Humphrey Gilbert and Sir Walter Raleigh financed colonies in Newfoundland and Roanoke Island in an attempt to make a permanent presence on the North American mainland. In 1607, the Jamestown colony was founded in Virginia.

In 1600, Elizabeth also chartered the British East India Company for trade in the Eastern Hemisphere in an attempt to expand the British spice trade. Ultimately, the English conquered the whole of the Indian subcontinent through their ongoing mercantile expansion.

Shakespeare’s interest in these explorations shows up clearly in the character of Othello as well as in plays such as The Tempest. The fascination with new frontiers and with new landscapes is also evident in the popularity of travel literature. For example, The History and Description of Africa, by Leo Africanus, was published in 1600. Thus, the seeds of empire and colonialism were sown during the sixteenth century; their harvest would be the globe-spanning British Empire of the nineteenth century.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

Othello received considerable critical attention from the seventeenth century to the early 2000s. The earliest published critique of the play is that of Thomas Rymer in 1693. Rymer famously notes that the play serves as “a warning to all good Wives that they look well to their Linnen.” Rymer seems particularly concerned that Othello does not function properly within the traditions of either comedy or tragedy. He writes, “There is in this Play some burlesk, some humour, and ramble of Comical Wit; some shew, and some Mimickry to divert the spectators: but the tragical part is, plainly, none other than a Bloody Farce, without salt or savour.”
Samuel Johnson, the influential eighteenth-century literary critic and essayist also weighed in on *Othello*. He worried slightly that the strength of Iago’s character could evoke admiration from the viewer: “There is always danger lest wickedness conjoined with abilities should steal upon esteem, though it misses of approbation; but the character of Iago is so conducted, that he is from the first scene to the last hated and despised.”

The pace of Shakespearean criticism picked up in the nineteenth century with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Charles Lamb, and William Hazlitt, among others writing on *Othello*. Like Johnson, Hazlitt was also concerned with the character of Iago. He writes, “The general groundwork of the character of Iago as it appears to us is not absolute malignity but a want of moral principle, or an indifference to the real consequences of the actions which the meddling perversity of his disposition and love of immediate excitement lead him to commit.”

In the early twentieth century, scholar A. C. Bradley wrote what many consider to be the most influential volume of Shakespearean criticism of the century, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on ‘Hamlet,’ ‘Othello,’ ‘King Lear,’ ‘Macbeth’* (1904). He focused on the feelings of the reader or audience of *Othello*, calling *Othello* “the most painfully exciting and the most terrible” of all Shakespeare’s plays. He continues, “From the moment when the temptation of the hero begins, the reader’s heart and mind are held in a vice, experiencing the extremes of pity and fear, sympathy and repulsion, sickening hope and dreadful expectation.”

Subsequent criticism of *Othello* focused on issues such as gender, race, and history. John Russell Brown in his book *Shakespeare: The Tragedies* (2001) notes that *Othello* “may be judged the most innovative of Shakespeare’s tragedies with regard to sexuality, gender, racial inheritance, and social relationships.” Patricia Parker, writing in *Shakespeare from the Margins: Language, Culture, Context*, focuses on the history of the word “dilation,” a word Shakespeare sprinkles liberally through his text. Parker succeeds in linking the word to issues of hiding, discovery, opening, closing, and female anatomy in her exploration of *Othello*.

Race, likewise, is at the center of much contemporary criticism. Many take as their starting point G. K. Hunter’s seminal essay, “*Othello* and Colour...”
Prejudice,’’ first published in 1967 and reprinted in 1978. The essay was an early attempt to try to recover Elizabethan attitudes toward race.

Karen Newman directly confronted both issues of race and sexuality in a 1987 chapter in the book Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology. She writes, ‘‘[F]or the white male characters of the play, the black man’s power resides in his sexual difference from a white male norm.’’

Jyotsna G. Singh in 1998, on the other hand, considered how one teaches texts of ‘‘racial dissonance,’’ particularly in the American classroom. Singh focused on Thomas Jefferson’s use of literature for moral lessons and asks, ‘‘Given his naturalized fear of miscegenation, what moral lesson, one wonders, would Thomas Jefferson derive from Othello?’’ In an article that also appeared in 1998, Ferial J. Ghazoul enlarges the issue of race by exploring the role of the play in the Arab world. In doing so, he argues, ‘‘Othello offers a special case of relations among literatures. It is a product of an acculturation involving a double circulation of the Other and a complex intertwining that combines the effect of an African Arab (i.e., Othello and his background) on European imagination and, in a reversed way, its impact on Arabs/Africans.’’

CRITICISM

Diane Andrews Henningfeld

Andrews Henningfeld is a professor of English at Adrian College who writes widely on literature for educational publishers. In this essay, Andrews Henningfeld argues that the main characters belong to differing linguistic and discursive communities and are thus tragically unable to understand each other.

In Othello, Shakespeare offers several distinctive linguistic and discursive communities, including the patriarchal hegemony of the Venetian merchant class and the military hegemony of the soldiers on the field and in Cyprus. A linguistic community is one that shares a common language, while a discursive community is one that shares common forms of discourse such as ideas about law, business, or women. Further, ‘‘hegemony,’’ according to Ross Murfin and Supriya M. Ray in The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms, is a term often used by literary and cultural critics to refer to ‘‘the pervasive system of assumptions, meaning, and values . . . that shapes the way things look, what they mean, and therefore what reality is for the majority of people within a given culture.’’ Thus, characters who find themselves cast as outsiders for reasons of race, ethnicity, social class, or gender, do not know or understand the values and assumptions that shape the reality of a hegemony. They may act or speak in ways that reveal their inability to ‘‘read’’ the structures of the culture in which they find themselves, sometimes with tragic results. Such is the case in Othello, a play about a black man attempting to function within a white mercantile culture, a white woman who marries a black military man, and a white Venetian soldier who destroys them both.

To begin to understand the relationship between the Venetians and Othello, a reader needs to remember that Venice is a mercantile society, one whose values are based on the buying and selling of goods. Turks represent such a threat to the Venetians because they restrict trade, the life-blood of Venetian society, by restricting ship traffic on the Mediterranean Sea. Othello is clearly an outsider in Venetian society. He is of a different race and different nationality, having come from North Africa to fight for Venice against the Turks. Moreover, Othello comes from a different discursive and linguistic community; he is not a native speaker of the culture or the language of Venice. He tells the Senate, ‘‘Rude am I in speech . . . / And little of this great world can I speak / More than pertains to feats of broils and battle.’’ Othello is correct in this assessment. He does not speak the language of buying and selling, the guarded language of negotiation and barter, but rather speaks the language of a soldier, rough and rude, straightforward and without guile.

His contribution to Venetian safety is well-documented; he is called repeatedly the ‘‘noble Moor’’ or the ‘‘valiant Moor’’ or the ‘‘brave Moor.’’ Because of this record and reputation, he has been welcomed into the hearts and homes of Venetian citizens. Othello tells the Senate that Desdemona’s ‘‘father loved me, oft invited me, / Still questioned me the story of my life / From year to year, the battles, sieges, fortunes / That I have past.’’ Clearly, Othello has been an honored guest in Brabantio’s home. Yet Othello, as an outsider, fails to understand the hegemony of which Brabantio is a part. In believing himself welcome in Brabantio’s home, he has also believed himself worthy of Brabantio’s daughter. What Othello reveals, however, in his
elopement with Desdemona is his failure to ‘‘read’’ the culture in which he finds himself. In Venetian culture, daughters obey their fathers, and fathers arrange marriages for their daughters. What Othello does not and cannot understand (as a linguistic and discursive outsider) is that an elopement is a kind of theft, depriving Brabantio of the money he could command from a prospective husband in the marriage market. While a military man takes what he wants, a merchant negotiates a sale. Thus, Othello and Brabantio are not only linguistically speakers of two different languages, they are also members of two radically different discursive communities.

At an even more fundamental level, Othello does not understand that he, like Desdemona, is a commodity; he has sold his military prowess to the Venetians for money. As such, he is ‘‘owned’’ by the Venetians, in much the same way that Desdemona is ‘‘owned’’ by her father. As such, according to Venetian hegemony, Othello does not have agency; rather, he is to be acted upon, rather than acting, to go where he is sent and do what he is told to do. Why then does the duke try to quell Brabantio’s objection to the marriage and seem to approve of the elopement?

In the first place, Venice is both a merchant society and a patriarchal society. As noted above, fathers control their daughters. Indeed, in all ways, men control the goods, products, and means of production in this society. Daughters are commodities, something that can be bought and sold on the marriage market. As such, Desdemona does not have intrinsic worth to the entire society; rather, her value is to her father in how much money he can accrue through the negotiations leading to her marriage. Her worth, then, is of limited value to the hegemony, although her rebellion is a cause of grave concern to the patriarchal power structure. Yet an even graver danger looms on the horizon: the immediate Turkish threat to Cyprus.

Thus, the second reason that the duke recognizes Othello’s marriage to Desdemona becomes clear. Venice needs Othello to go to Cyprus to quell the imminent danger from the Turks. Giving Othello a Venetian woman becomes a form of payment for Othello’s service. Moreover, because Othello wants Desdemona with him, the duke is able to remove the rebellious element from Venetian society. He is able, in this move, to accomplish several goals: he can pay off the Moor in female flesh, a bargain for all the Venetians save Brabantio; he can protect his city-state from the Turks by sending the best soldier to lead the battle; and he can isolate Desdemona from other women of Venice who might be encouraged to form their own alliances with prospective husbands, thus depriving their fathers of their rightful marriage profits.

Once removed to Cyprus, it is Desdemona who becomes the outsider. Not only is she far away from the protective patriarchal structures of Venetian society, a hegemony that she flaunts in her choice to marry Othello, she is now in an entirely different discursive community, that of the military. She is surrounded by men who are pledged to fight for and with her husband to the death. Her misunderstanding of this is evident in her willingness to speak for Michael Cassio to her husband. Were she a member of the military hegemony, she would know that a commander’s word cannot be undone. Once dismissed, Cassio is always dismissed. For Othello to do otherwise would be to undermine his command. Further, military language is masculine, and Desdemona also does not ‘‘speak’’ the language of men. If she were to speak it, she would also realize that her husband would find her support of Cassio suspect. Her ignorance of the discursive communities and of their languages costs her dearly.

Shakespeare also puts one more ingredient in the mix: Iago. If Othello and Desdemona are outsiders, then Iago is the quintessential insider, a rare linguistic wizard, a polyglot who can speak the language of trade, of business, and of soldiering equally well. This facility with words and structures is what shifts the play from potential comedy to certain tragedy. As a native Venetian, Iago fully understands the sly wheeling and dealing of businessmen. ‘‘Put money in thy purse!’’ he admonishes.
Roderigo. He barters promises of Desdemona’s favor in exchange for Roderigo’s capital. He offers his comrades at arms advice. He entices his wife to betray her lady. In each of these dealings, using the deep structures of culture and language, he successfully moves himself toward his goal: the utter destruction of Othello.

Finally, there is one more language Iago speaks, and he does so just as subtly and cannily as he does the others, so subtly and cannily that the audience is never fully aware of how they, too, have been duped. Iago speaks the language of theater. In many scenes, Iago cajoles and flatters and has his way with the other characters. Once these characters leave the stage, however, Iago turns to the audience and reveals his “real” motivation. Theatergoers, too, belong to a hegemony of sorts and have unspoken, but firmly held, assumptions and values about what constitutes the “real” in a play. For example, an audience knows that when a character dies on the stage, the actor is not really dead. There is another assumption: soliloquies reveal the inner thoughts of a character. What the audience does not do, however, is to doubt the truth of what they hear in a soliloquy.

Iago is a troubling case, however. He demonstrates repeatedly that he does not speak the truth. “I am not what I am,” he says. Yet the audience believes whatever he tells them. He hates Othello because he is jealous of Cassio. He believes Othello has sexual intercourse with Emilia. He also think Cassio had intimate relations with Emilia. He loves Desdemona. All the while the audience wonders how it is that Othello can believe Iago’s obvious lies, the audience itself believes what Iago reveals when alone with them.

As the play closes, each of the characters demonstrates his or her final confrontation with the linguistic and discursive communities of the play. In the final act, Desdemona plays out the role demanded of her by the patriarchal hegemony in which she has been encultured, a hegemony that demands devotion and obedience to a husband. She sacrifices her immortal soul in order to protect Othello. When Emilia begs her to tell her who has killed her, Desdemona replies, “‘Nobody. I myself.’”

In the final act, Othello loses language altogether. As John Russell Brown suggests, “Increasingly during the last scene, Othello speaks of what is happening very simply, as if his ability to say more is entirely spent.” He can no longer even attempt to speak the language of Venice, and he dies in his own nearly wordless grief. He cries, “O Desdemon! dead Desdemon; dead. O, O!”

And in the final act, Iago, the polyglot, chooses to remain silent. Language does not desert him, as it does Othello; rather, he voluntarily leaves the discursive communities of Venice, the military, and of theater in his final act of treachery, choosing to abandon his role as playmaker. “‘You know what you know,?’” he says to Othello and to the audience. It is left to the other characters to piece together the story, like foreigners speaking a second language, badly.


Stephen Orgel

In the following essay excerpt, Orgel focuses on themes of patriarchy and patronage in Othello in examining the play’s evolution from comedy into tragedy.
determined, if we think of the popularity of Oroonoko in both Aphra Behn's novel and Thomas Southerne's
In the following essay, Bates examines how Shakespeare’s narrative choices, particularly those of word play and borrowing from Ovid’s Metamorphoses, drive the central themes in Othello.

Sources


Further Reading


Bell delivers an in-depth character analysis of Othello.


Kenneth Branagh is a leading Shakespearean actor of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This interview captures both his enthusiasm and his thoughts on playing Iago in the Oliver Parker film.


Erickson offers a cogent discussion of the three ways race can be handled in a discussion of Othello.


Hadfield has compiled a very useful and usable collection of primary sources and critical interpretations as well as providing chapters on the work in performance.


This book has useful introductory sections and a wealth of excerpts from primary documents, arranged thematically.


O’Dair offers a new historical approach to the play, examining particularly the implications of Othello in American classrooms.