

# THEATRE & TALK

AN ETF BAR FRINGE PRODUCTION

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## **“Black is Fair” *Othello* and the Stranger in Shakespeare**



Teacher`s Support Pack  
The English Theatre Frankfurt  
2013

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Das Team von T.I.E.S (Theatre in Education Service) wünscht Ihnen viel Erfolg bei der Arbeit mit dem Teacher`s Support Pack. Wir freuen uns auf einen Aufführungsbesuch mit Ihrer Lerngruppe.

**Lea Dunbar, Dr. Karl Guttzeit, Michael Gonszar, Rebecca Reaney**

## Othello, the Moor of Venice (1604)

by William Shakespeare  
(1564-1616)

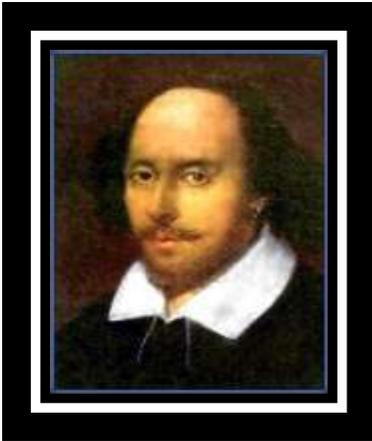


### 1. Introduction

Chronologically following *Hamlet* and preceding *King Lear* and *Macbeth*, *Othello, the Moor of Venice* ranks among Shakespeare's four major tragedies. It has been widely popular for centuries. Verdi turned it into a memorable opera, movies were based on it, and always it has engaged both emotionally and intellectually audiences everywhere. Countless great actors (Edmund Kean, Paul Robeson, Laurence Olivier, Orson Welles) played Othello and the role marked the peak of their brilliant careers on stage or screen.

In our own time, the play continues to reverberate with a multiplicity of echoes: from the relevant imperative of grasping the complexity of cultural diversity, to the exploration of the meaning of racial interrelations and, above all, to seeking an understanding of the essence of love, its strength and vulnerability and how it defines and unites us all as human.

The source of inspiration for the play is a sweeping tale of passion and murderous jealousy told in a 1566 Venetian novella by Giovanbatista Giraldi Cinthio. Shakespeare's reworking of the plot reveals with stunning psychological depth, devastating tragic inevitability and compelling poetic depth the mysterious power and fragility of love, as well as the destructive demons of doubt and suspicion that can be so effectively triggered by a manipulative villain. *Othello* was performed at court in 1604 and scholars believe Shakespeare wrote it that year or the year before. It was published as a quarto in 1622, and a somewhat fuller text was included in the 1623 First Folio. Giraldi Cinthio's *Hecatommithi* was the chief source.



“The story, set in sixteenth century Venice, overtly falls in with the exotic history plays which started with Marlowe`s Tamburlaine. Its background is the clash of Christian and Muslim. For the Elizabethan audience its immediate historic context was the greatest political theatre of the day: the Mediterranean in the time of Philip II. But that`s only the backdrop to a story of racism and jealousy of a white man towards a black man, and of how love is destroyed by jealousy.”

**(from: Michael Wood, In Search of Shakespeare, BBC,**

**London 2003 p.250)**

“If a black actor plays Othello does he not risk making racial stereotypes seem legitimate and even true? When a black actor plays a role written for a white actor in black make-up for a predominantly white audience, does he not encourage the white way, or rather the wrong way, of looking at black men, namely that black men are over-emotional, excitable and unstable?”

**(from: Hugh Quarshie, Second thoughts about Association Occasional Papers Nr. 7 1999 p.5)**

**“Trifles light as air / Are to the jealous confirmations strong / As proofs of holy writ.”**

**(Shakespeare, Othello III, 3, 325 ff.)**

“Bodies in Othello are not only tormented, they also attract each other.” **(from: Jan Kott: Shakespeare, Our Contemporary. Methuen 1966 p.93)**

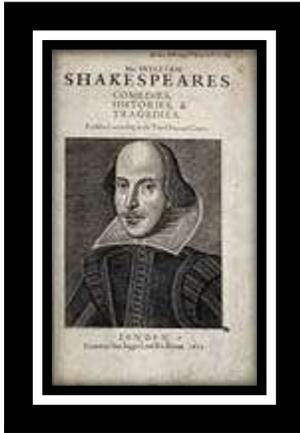
**“If there be any cunning cruelty / That can torment him much and hold him long /It shall be this.**

**(Shakespeare, Othello V, 2, 342 – 44)**

“Though torturing Iago cannot revive Desdemona or restore Othello`s ruined life, *Othello* encourages the audience to accept the legitimacy of this proposed course of the action: it is a gesture toward repairing the damaged moral order. State torture is part of the world as Shakespeare and his audience

experienced and thus imagined it.” **(from: Stephen Greenblatt, Will in the World. N.Y. / London 2005 p. 179/80)**

## 2. Characters



### Duke of Venice

**Brabantio**, a Senator, father to Desdemona

**Ludovico**, Kinsman to Brabantio

**Othello**, a Moor, General in the service of Venice

**Cassio**, his Lieutenant

**Iago**, his Ancient

**Roderigo**, a Venetian Gentleman.

**Montano**, Othello's predecessor in the government of Cyprus

**Desdemona**, Daughter to Brabantio, and Wife to Othello

**Emilia**, Wife to Iago

**Bianca**, a Courtesan, mistress to Cassio

## 3. Synopsis

### 3.1 Brief Version

The play opens in Venice in the middle of a turbulent night, as senator Brabantio, Desdemona's father, learns that his daughter has secretly married Othello, the valiant Moor who commands the army of the republic. At an emergency meeting of the senate, Othello and Desdemona make an emphatic case for their mutual love, and overcome many prejudices and objections raised against a marital union between a black man and a white woman. Together they leave to defend Venice against the attacks of the Turkish fleet. In Cyprus the celebrations of the nuptials of Othello and Desdemona which coincide with the Venetian military triumph don't last too long because Iago begins setting in motion his dark, evil plans. Careful to show Othello a mask of perfect loyalty, he finds devious means to ensnare the Moor in a web of innuendoes, seemingly innocuous half-true comments and oblique accusations that ultimately will lead to blind jealousy, desperate rage and tragic doom.

As the plot unfolds Iago ingeniously drags others in his scheme too: his wife Emilia, Cassio, Othello's lieutenant, and Roderigo, a rejected suitor of Desdemona's. In the end, Desdemona, in spite of her absolute innocence, is smothered to death by Othello who then takes his own life. Iago's punishment concludes the tragedy, too late though to save the love and the lives of the protagonist.

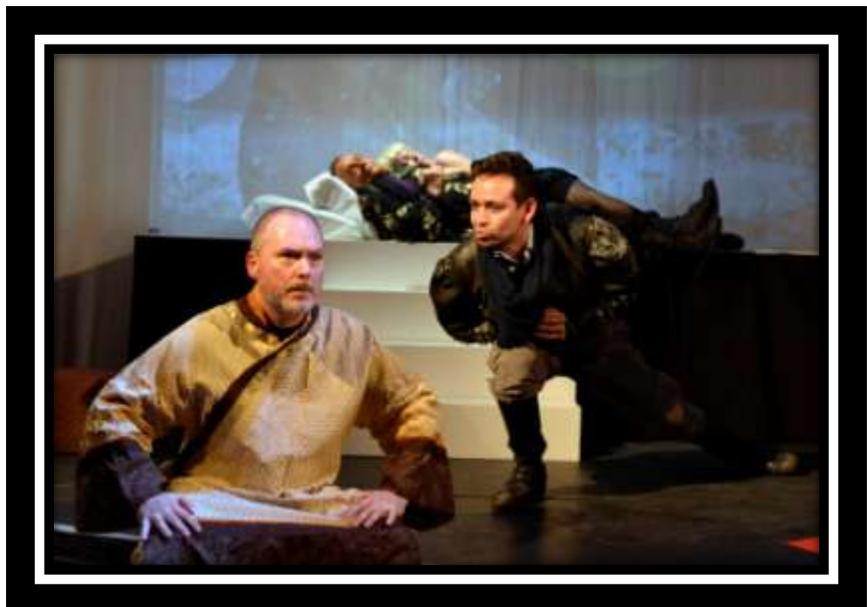
### 3.2 Comprehensive Version

**The First Act is set in Venice; the rest of the play at a seaport in Cyprus.**

*I. Othello* begins on a street in Venice, in the midst of an argument between Roderigo, a rich man, and Iago. Roderigo has been paying Iago to help him in his suit to Desdemona. But Roderigo has just learned that Desdemona has married Othello, a general whom Iago serves as ensign. Iago says he hates Othello, who recently passed him over for the position of lieutenant in favor of the inexperienced soldier Michael Cassio.

Iago and Roderigo cry out to Brabantio that his daughter Desdemona has been stolen by and married to Othello, the Moor.

Brabantio finds that his daughter is indeed missing. At Othello's lodgings, Cassio arrives with an urgent message from the duke: Othello's help is needed in the matter of the imminent Turkish invasion of Cyprus. Brabantio accuses Othello of stealing his daughter by witchcraft.



Jürgen Stockhausen / Mario Mateluna - The English Theatre Frankfurt 2013 - Foto: Anna Meuer

Brabantio's plan backfires. The duke and senate are very sympathetic toward Othello. Given a chance to speak for himself, Othello explains that he wooed and won Desdemona not by witchcraft but with the stories of his adventures in travel and war. The duke finds Othello's explanation convincing, and Desdemona herself

enters at this point to defend her choice in marriage and to announce to her father that her allegiance is now to her husband. Brabantio is frustrated, but consents begrudgingly to the marriage. Othello must go to Cyprus to aid in the defense against the Turks, who are headed for the island. Desdemona insists that she accompany her husband on his trip, and preparations are made for them to depart that night.

II. Turkish fleet has been wrecked in a storm at sea. In Cyprus at the harbour we meet Cassio, Iago, Desdemona, and Emilia, Iago's wife, whose ship did not suffer the same fate. As they wait for Othello, Cassio greets Desdemona by clasping her hand. Watching them, Iago tells the audience that he will use "as little a web as this" hand-holding to ensnare Cassio (II.i.169). Othello arrives, greets his wife, and announces that there will be reveling that evening to celebrate Cyprus's safety from the Turks.

Roderigo complains to Iago that he has no chance of breaking up Othello's marriage. Iago assures Roderigo that as soon as Desdemona's "blood is made dull with the act of sport," she will lose interest in Othello and seek sexual satisfaction elsewhere (II.i.222). However, Iago warns that "elsewhere" will likely be with Cassio. Iago counsels Roderigo that he should cast Cassio into disgrace by starting a fight with Cassio at the evening's revels. In a soliloquy, Iago explains to the audience that eliminating Cassio is the first crucial step in his plan to ruin Othello. That night, Iago gets Cassio drunk and then sends Roderigo to start a fight with him. Apparently provoked by Roderigo, Cassio chases Roderigo across the stage. Governor Montano attempts to hold Cassio down, and Cassio stabs him. Iago sends Roderigo to raise alarm in the town.

The alarm is rung, and Othello, who had left earlier to consummate his marriage, soon arrives to still the commotion. When Othello demands to know who began the fight, Iago feigns reluctance to implicate his "friend" Cassio, but he ultimately tells the whole story. Othello then strips Cassio of his rank of lieutenant. Cassio is extremely upset, and he laments to Iago, once everyone else has gone, that his reputation has been ruined forever. Iago assures Cassio that he can get back into Othello's good graces by using Desdemona as an intermediary. In a soliloquy, Iago tells us that he will frame Cassio and Desdemona as lovers to make Othello jealous.



Maya Pinzolas / James Morgan - The English Theatre Frankfurt 2013 - Foto: Anna Meuer

**III.** Desdemona is quite sympathetic to Cassio's request and promises that she will do everything she can to make Othello forgive his former lieutenant. As Cassio is about to leave, Othello and Iago return. Feeling uneasy, Cassio leaves without talking to Othello. Othello inquires whether it was Cassio who just parted from his wife, and Iago, beginning to kindle Othello's fire of jealousy, replies, "No, sure, I cannot think it, / That he would steal away so guilty-like, / Seeing your coming" (III.iii.37–39). Othello becomes upset and moody, and Iago furthers his goal of removing both Cassio and Othello by suggesting that Cassio and Desdemona are involved in an affair. Desdemona's entreaties to Othello to reinstate Cassio as lieutenant add to Othello's almost immediate conviction that his wife is unfaithful. After Othello's conversation with Iago, Desdemona comes to call Othello to supper and finds him feeling unwell. She offers him her handkerchief to wrap around his head, but he finds it to be "[t]oo little" and lets it drop to the floor (III.iii.291). Desdemona and Othello go to dinner, and Emilia picks up the handkerchief, mentioning to the audience that Iago has always wanted her to steal it for him.

Iago is ecstatic when Emilia gives him the handkerchief, which he plants in Cassio's room as "evidence" of his affair with Desdemona. When Othello demands "ocular proof" (III.iii.365) that his wife is unfaithful, Iago says that he has seen Cassio "wipe his beard" (III.iii.444) with Desdemona's handkerchief—the first gift Othello ever gave her. Othello vows to take vengeance on his wife and on Cassio, and Iago vows that he will help him.

## **INTERMISSION**

**IV.** When Othello sees Desdemona later that evening, he demands the handkerchief of her, but she tells him that she does not have it with her and attempts to change the subject by continuing her suit on Cassio's behalf. This drives Othello into a further rage, and he storms out. Later, Cassio comes onstage, wondering about the handkerchief he has just found in his chamber. He is greeted by Bianca, a prostitute, whom he asks to take the handkerchief and copy its embroidery for him.

Through Iago's machinations, Othello becomes so consumed by jealousy that he falls into a trance and has a fit of epilepsy. Once Othello recovers, Iago tells him of the meeting he has planned with Cassio. He instructs Othello to hide nearby and watch as Iago extracts from Cassio the story of his affair with Desdemona. While Othello stands out of earshot, Iago pumps Cassio for information about Bianca, causing Cassio to laugh and confirm Othello's suspicions. Bianca herself then enters with Desdemona's handkerchief, reprimanding Cassio for making her copy out the embroidery of a love token given to him by another woman. When Lodovico, a noble messenger from Venice, arrives and subsequently gives Othello a letter from Venice calling him home and instating Cassio as his replacement, Othello goes over the edge, striking Desdemona and then storming out.

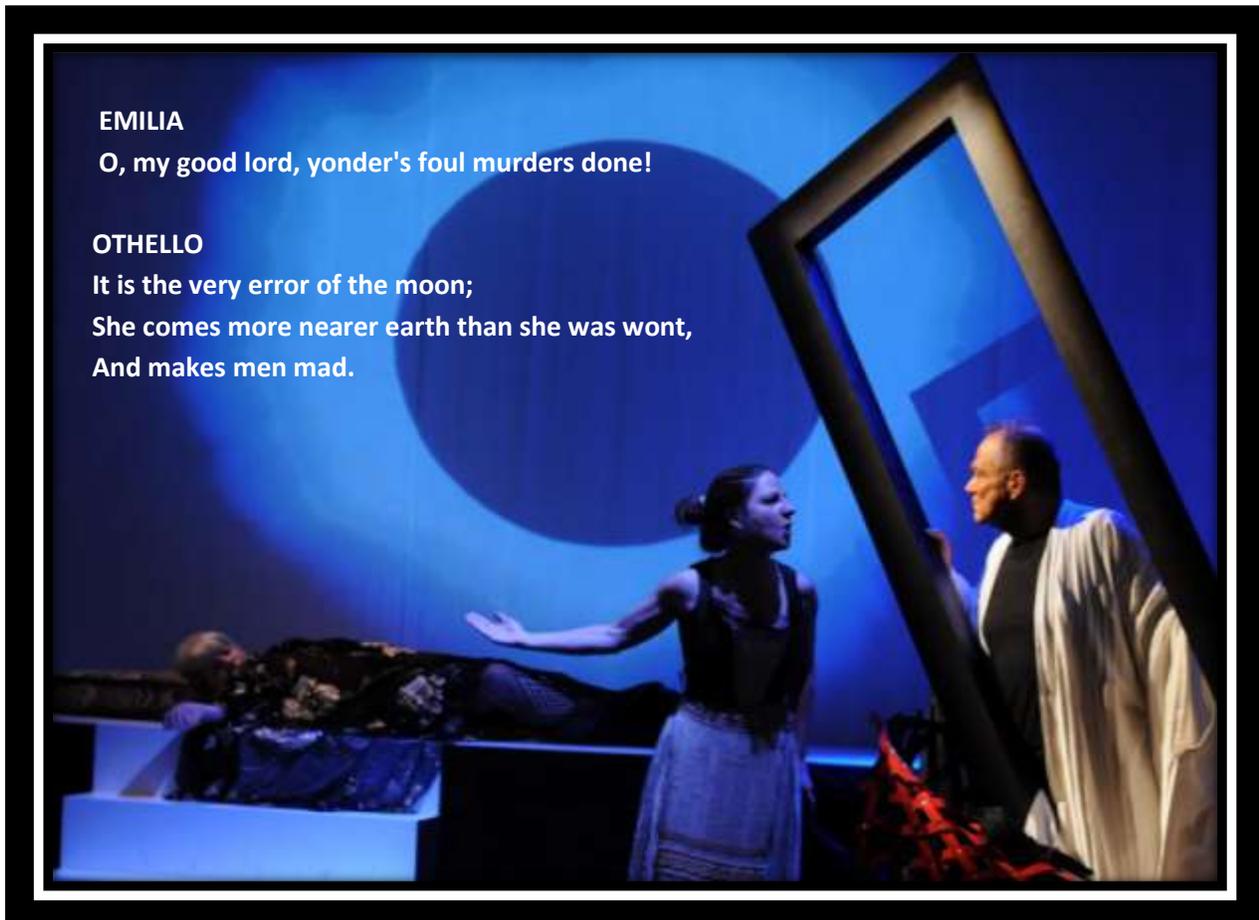
**V.** That night, Othello accuses Desdemona of being a whore. He ignores her protestations, seconded by Emilia, that she is innocent. Iago assures Desdemona that Othello is simply upset about matters of state. Meanwhile, Iago assures the furiously complaining Roderigo that everything is going as planned: in order to prevent Desdemona and Othello from leaving, Roderigo must kill Cassio. Then he will have a clear avenue to his love.

Iago instructs Roderigo to ambush Cassio, but Roderigo misses his mark and Cassio wounds him instead. Iago wounds Cassio and runs away.

Meanwhile, Othello stands over his sleeping wife in their bedchamber, preparing to kill her. Desdemona wakes and attempts to plead with Othello. She asserts her

innocence, but Othello smothers her. Emilia enters with the news that Roderigo is dead. Othello asks if Cassio is dead too and is mortified when Emilia says he is not. Emilia asks Othello what happened, and Othello tells her that he has killed Desdemona for her infidelity, which Iago brought to his attention.

Ludovico, Cassio and Iago come into the room. Iago attempts to silence Emilia, who realizes what Iago has done. At first, Othello insists that Iago has told the truth, citing the handkerchief as evidence. Once Emilia tells him how she found the handkerchief and gave it to Iago, Othello is crushed, he Iago and is disarmed. Othello makes a speech about how he would like to be remembered, then kills himself with a sword he had hidden on his person.



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## 4. The Main Characters as Seen by Themselves and Others

### 4.1 Othello

If we strip *Othello* of romantic varnish, of everything that is opera and melodrama, the tragedy of jealousy and the tragedy of betrayed confidence become a dispute between Othello and Iago: the dispute on the nature of the world. ... What is the ultimate purpose of the few brief moments that pass between birth and death? Like Richard III, Iago sets in motion the mechanism of vileness, envy, and stupidity, and, like Richard, he will be destroyed. ... He has destroyed all around him, and himself. ... In the last scene Iago is silent. Why should he talk? ...

Othello kills Desdemona in order to save the moral order, to restore love and faith. He kills Desdemona to be able to forgive her; so that the accounts be settled and the world returned to its equilibrium. Othello... desperately wants to save the meaning of life, of his life, perhaps even the meaning of the world.

From: Jan Kott, Shakespeare Our Contemporary, 1964.

#### 4.1.1 Quotations

- *fetch my life and being / From men of royal siege. (Othello, I, ii)*
- *She loved me for the dangers I have passed / And I loved her that she did pity them. (Othello, I, iii)*
- *I saw Othello's visage in his mind, / And to his honours and his valiant parts / Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate... (Desdemona, I, iii)*
- *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 th' nose / As asses are. (Iago, I, iii)*
- *For I have served him, and the man commands / Like a full soldier. (Montano, II, i)*
- *Think'st thou I'd make a life of jealousy / To follow still the changes of the moon / With fresh suspicions? (Othello, III, iii)*

- *... my noble Moor / is true of mind and made of no such baseness / as jealous creatures are...*(Desdemona, III, iv)
- /
- *Is not this man jealous?* (Emilia, III,iv)
- *Is this the noble Moor whom our full senate / Call all in all sufficient? This the noble nature / Whom passion could not shake?...* (Lodovico, IV, i)
- *... speak of me as I am ... / ... one that loved not wisely, but too well; / ... one not easily jealous but being wrought, / Perplexed to the extreme ...* (Othello, V, ii)

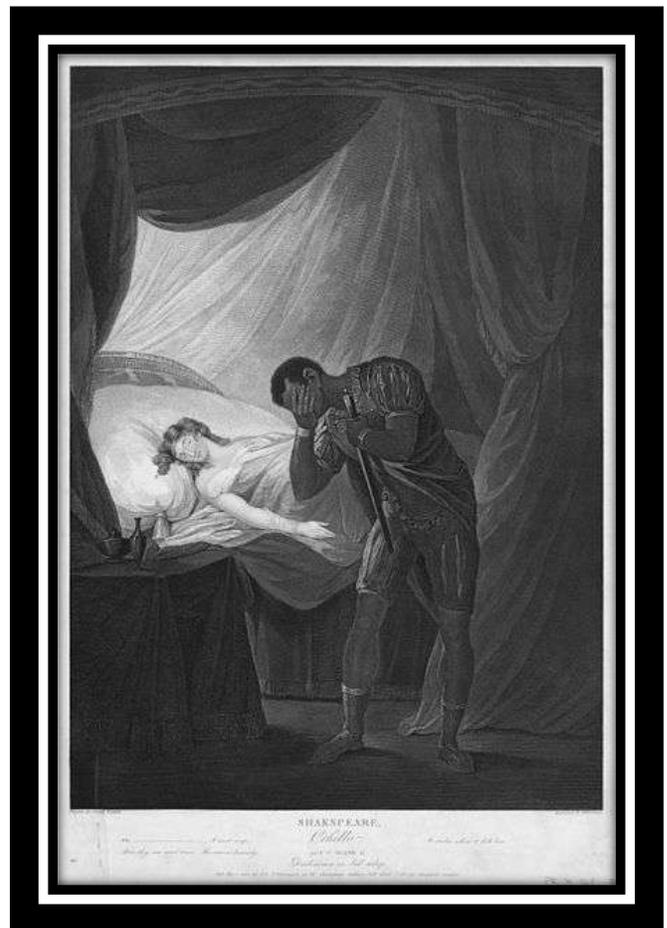
#### 4.1.2 Statements on Othello by actors, directors, authors, critics and scholars

##### Actors

- Shakespeare presents a noble man of singleness of purpose and simplicity with a mind as direct as a straight line. He is important to the State but the fact that he is a Moor incites the envy of little-minded people. Desdemona loves him, he marries her, then the seed of suspicion is sown. The fact that he is an alien among white people makes his mind work more quickly. He feels dishonor more deeply. His color heightens the tragedy.

##### Paul Robeson, 1930

- He's concocted this perfect cocoon exterior: he is the statue of a perfect man. But the statue is flawed: Shakespeare gives him one



fissure. The fissure cracks and the statue breaks. He is too jealous: the fault is self-deception. He's the greatest exponent of self-deception there's ever been.

### Laurence Olivier, 1986

- Every modern, white actor, taking on Othello, feels obliged to explain why he's not playing him black, which was surely Shakespeare's intention, when the unspoken reason is that to "black up" is as disgusting these days as a "nigger" minstrel show.

### Ian McKellen, 1986

- He was revered in his own world where there was no racism. He has no sense of inferiority as the Western black man sometimes has.

### James Earl Jones, 1993

- Once you get to Act III, scene iii, it's like being caught up in a huge surf. You are pounded by experiences and overwhelming feelings that oscillate violently. Sometimes within one sentence I go from passion and adoration to the most extreme expressions of loathing and self-hatred I've ever had to try to get close to.

#### YOUR POINT OF VIEW

What are the causes of Othello's decision to kill Desdemona? How is this murder vindicated at the end of the play?

Consider the situations that make Othello's misgivings redeemable.

At what point in the play does the "valiant Moor" become a victim?

### Patrick Stewart, 1997

- In some respects Othello is an Everyman. He just got married. He succumbs to sexual jealousy as many of us do – white, black, whatever. And things happen. That's what's so contemporary about it.... Yeah, he does go from A to, like, Z. But if you really look at it, and you take the political correctness out of it, this is a man who's trying to deal with something that he just doesn't have the facilities for. He's trying to get a grasp on it, and in the process it explodes.

### John Douglas Thompson, 2003

### Directors

- The difference in race between Othello and every other character in the play is, indeed, the heart of the matter. This is the cause of Othello's terrible vulnerability on which Iago fastens so pitilessly; because of this, the conduct of which Desdemona is accused seems to Othello only too horribly possible...

### Margaret Webster, 1943

- The important thing is not to accept him at his own valuation. Try to look at him objectively. He isn't just a righteous man who's been wronged. He's a man too proud to think he could ever be capable of anything as base as jealousy. When he learns that he *can* be jealous, his character changes. The knowledge destroys him and he goes berserk.

### John Dexter, 1964

- What I did go for very strongly is that [Othello] has to be emotionally very vulnerable. ... I wanted to make his fear of her loss the greatest motivating factor. ... I think there's a great vulnerability, humanity and warmth, despite the fact that he's saying he must loathe her. [in Act III, iii] He can't see another option; in the first flush of extreme emotion it's very difficult to see your way clear.

### Sam Mendes, 1997

#### Poets, Authors, Critics

- Othello must not be conceived as a negro, but a high and chivalrous Moorish chief. ... Jealousy does not strike me as the point in his passion; I take it to be rather an agony that the creature, whom he had believed angelic, with whom he had garnered up his heart, and whom he could not help still loving, should be proved impure and worthless. ... There is no ferocity in Othello; his mind is majestic and composed. He deliberately determines to die.

### Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 1822

- He is great, he is dignified, he is majestic, he soars above all heads, he has as an escort bravery, battle, the braying of trumpets, the banner of war, renown, glory; he is radiant with twenty victories, he is studded with stars, this Othello: but he is black. And thus how soon, when jealous, the hero becomes a monster, the black becomes the negro!

**Victor Hugo, 1864**

- Iago's report of Cassio's dream ... leaves Othello to answer his own questions. ... [At the end he] learns nothing, remains in defiance, and is damned. He cannot think why he did what he did, or realize what was wrong.

**W. H. Auden, 1947**

- The more violently Desdemona becomes engrossed by love, the more of a slut she seems to Othello; a past, present, or future slut. The more she desires, the better she loves, the more readily Othello believes that she can, or has betrayed him.

**Jan Kott, 1964**

- Othello's Moorishness, far from being a special and separable issue, matters only in so far as it is part of a much larger and deeper one:... the distinction, which the action constantly leads us to consider and reconsider, between the given, indissoluble facts, and the more open and changeable areas of people's lives. ... 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, and it is in terms of these larger issues that Othello's color (and his temperament and his past) are best considered.

**Jane Adamson, 1980**

- Othello's conflict regarding women is ... profound, and the other men's solutions are not open to him. Because of his marriage and his integrity, he cannot, like Roderigo, assert Desdemona's chastity and corruptibility simultaneously. ... Othello's shifts from the idealization of women to their degradation are "extravagant and wheeling" (I,i). Iago is the catalyst, but Othello's idealistic love ... needs some realistic grounding in the facts of sex.

**Carol Thomas Neely, 1985**

- ...however far [Othello] believes Iago's tidings, he cannot just believe them; somewhere he *knows* them to be false. This is registered in the rapidity with which he is brought to the truth with no further real evidence ... Shall we say that he recognizes the truth too late? The fact is that he recognizes it when he is ready to, as one alone can; in this case, when its burden is dead.

**Stanley Cavell, 1987**

## 4.2 IAGO

### Iago - the most heinous villain in Shakespeare

IAGO

Preferment goes by letter and affection,  
And not by old gradation, where each second  
Stood heir to the first.  
Now, sir, be judge yourself,  
Whether I in any just term am affined  
To love the Moor.

RODERIGO

I would not follow him then.

IAGO

O, sir, content you;  
I follow him to serve my turn upon  
him:  
We cannot all be masters, nor all  
masters  
Cannot be truly follow'd.



Iago is fascinating for his most terrible characteristic: his utter lack of convincing motivation for his actions. In the first scene, he claims to be angry at Othello for having passed him over for the position of lieutenant (I.i. 7–32). At the end of Act I, scene iii, Iago says he thinks Othello may have slept with his wife, Emilia: “It is thought abroad that ’twixt my sheets / He has done my office” (I.iii.369–370). Iago mentions this suspicion again at the end of Act II, scene i, explaining that he lusts after Desdemona because he wants to get even with Othello “wife for wife” (II.i.286). None of these claims seems to adequately explain Iago’s deep hatred of Othello, and Iago’s lack of motivation—or his inability or unwillingness to express his true motivation—makes his actions all the more terrifying. He is willing to take revenge on anyone—Othello, Desdemona, Cassio, Roderigo, even Emilia—at the slightest provocation and enjoys the pain and damage he causes.



Mario Mateluna as IAGO - The English Theatre Frankfurt 2013 - Foto: Anna Meuer

Iago is often funny, especially in his scenes with the foolish Roderigo, which serve as a showcase of Iago's manipulative abilities. He seems almost to wink at the audience as he revels in his own skill. As entertained spectators, we find ourselves on Iago's side when he is with Roderigo, but the interactions between the two also reveal a streak of cowardice in Iago—a cowardice that becomes manifest in Iago's murder of Emilia could also stem from the general hatred of women that he displays. Some readers have suggested that Iago's true, underlying motive for persecuting Othello is his homosexual love for the general. He certainly seems to take great pleasure in preventing Othello from enjoying marital happiness, and he expresses his love for Othello frequently and effusively.

It is Iago's talent for understanding and manipulating the desires of those around him that makes him both a powerful and a compelling figure. Iago is able to take the handkerchief from Emilia and know that he can deflect her questions; he is able to tell Othello of the handkerchief and know that Othello will not doubt him; he is able to tell the audience, "And what's he then that says I play the villain," and

know that it will laugh as though he were a clown (II.iii.310). Though the most inveterate liar, Iago inspires all of the play's characters the trait that is most lethal to Othello: trust.

With respect to Iago's hatred of Othello, the Romantic poet and critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge once commented on the "motive-hunting on motiveless malignity." Iago might simply be the personification of the devil.

It is Iago's talent for understanding and manipulating the desires of those around him that makes him both a powerful and a compelling figure. Iago is able to take the handkerchief from Emilia and know that he can deflect her questions; he is able to tell Othello of the handkerchief and know that Othello will not doubt him; he is able to tell the audience, "And what's he then that says I play the villain," and know that it will laugh as though he were a clown (II.iii.310). Though the most inveterate liar, Iago inspires all of the play's characters the trait that is most lethal to Othello: trust.

#### YOUR POINT OF VIEW

Consider whether or not you feel that **Othello** is inherently a jealous person.

What traits distinguish a jealous person?

From what sources does Othello's jealousy spring?

With respect to Iago's hatred of Othello, the Romantic poet and critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge once commented on the "motive-hunting on motiveless malignity." Iago might simply be the personification of the devil.

#### 4.2.1 Quotations

***I am not what I am. (Iago, I, i)***

***Though in the trade of war I have slain men / Yet do I hold it very stuff o'th' conscience / To do no contrived murder. (Iago, I, ii)***

***A man he is of honesty and trust. (Othello, I, iii)***

***...I am nothing if not critical. (Iago, II, i)***

***And what's he then that says I play the villain? / When this advice is free I give and honest... (Iago, II,iii)***

***When devils will the blackest sins put on / They do suggest at first with heavenly shows/ As I do now.(Iago, II, iii)***

*...I warrant it grieves my husband / As if the cause were his. (Emilia, III, iii)*

*Cassio hath a daily beauty in his life / That makes me ugly... (Iago, V. i)*

#### 4.2.2 Statements on Iago by actors, directors, authors, critics and scholars

##### Actors

- ... underlying sickness of the mind, the immemorial hatred of life, the secret isolation of impotence under the soldier's muscles, the flabby solitude gnawing at the groins, the eye's untiring calculation.

##### Micheál MacLiammoir, 1976

- There he is, the bugger, sitting on Othello's shoulder and quietly winking at the audience.

##### Laurence Olivier, 1986

- He's not evil incarnate, but part of the soldierly world ... and it's from there that his strengths and weaknesses come.

##### Ian McKellen, 1989

##### Directors

- There are two persons in Iago: the one whom people perceive and the other, his real self. The first is pleasant enough, simple and good-natured; the second evil and repulsive. The mask he wears is so deceiving that everyone, to a certain extent even his own wife, is taken in and believes Iago to be the most loyal ... of men.

##### Konstantin Stanislavski, 1930

- ... Iago is not *evil* but wickedly unsatisfiable and cannot tolerate the presence of anything beautiful, happy, or balanced. He can experience satisfaction only when everything around him that is possibly beautiful is made ugly, when something that is satisfied is made restless.

##### Jonathan Miller, 1986

#### YOUR POINT OF VIEW

What events in Iago's past lead him to act as he does?

How does Iago's behavior reflect his views on lawfulness, order, morality, and advancement in life?

Consider whether or not you feel it is possible for a person to be maliciously evil without cause or motive.

- He creates disorder, disrupts harmony, essentially deconstructs creation and reverses its progress of evolution and enlightenment, back to hell and Chaos again.

**Laird Williamson, 1993**

- I think Iago has a fascination with Othello which is not homosexual, but the fascination of a different race, a different physical type, a different mind, a different sexual drive. I don't think he's in love with Othello, but I think that weirdly, as he destroys him, as he becomes closer to him both physically and emotionally, and begins to understand how he ticks, it sort of turns him on. It's a power trip, and that can be very sexual. The evil, if you like, is compounded of specifics. Character flaws, vulnerability, loss, desperation, ambition, lack of promotion, the flaws in him, which he's probably intelligent enough to realize. It's three dimensional and complex beyond my understanding.

**Sam Mendes, 1997****Poets, Authors, Critics, Scholars**

- Iago near Othello is the precipice near the landslip. 'This way!' he says in a low voice. The snare advises blindness.

**Victor Hugo, 1864**

- ... Shakespeare's greatest villains, Iago among them, have always a touch of conscience. You see the conscience working – therein lies one of Shakespeare's pre-eminencies. ...

**Lord Alfred Tennyson, 1883**

- Believe me, Shakespeare met Iago in his own life, saw portions and aspects of him on every hand throughout his manhood, encountered him piecemeal, as it were, on his daily path, till one fine day, when he thoroughly felt and understood what malignant cleverness and baseness can effect, he melted down all these fragments, and out of them cast this figure. ... He is not the principle of evil, not an old fashioned, stupid devil; Iago has no other aim than his own advantage.

**George Brandes, 1898**

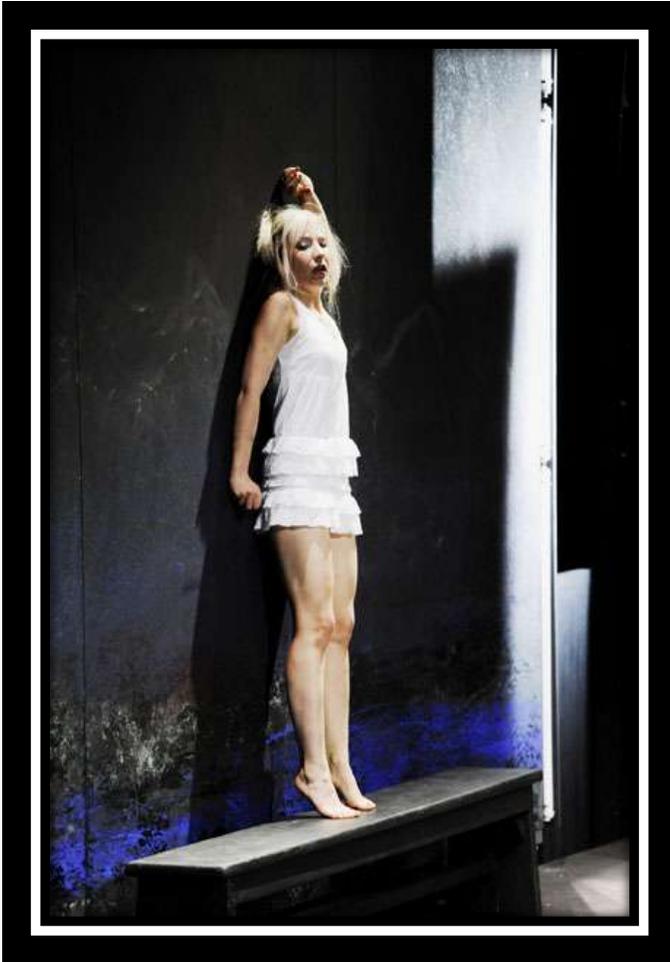


Foto: Staatstheater Darmstadt 2012

### 4.3 DESDEMONA

Though Shakespeare does not give Desdemona center stage with Othello, ... he does not keep her in the wings for most of the play. She is often present so that we must witness her joy, fear, bewilderment, and pain. What happens to her matters because we see how it affects her as well as Othello. The meaning of the tragedy depends, then, on a clear vision of her character and experience as well as those of Othello and Iago. ...

Desdemona shows courage and a capacity for risk in choosing Othello, for it puts her in an extreme position, cutting her off from her father and countrymen. ... Her willingness to risk the censure of her father and society

is some measure of her capacity for love ... [as she] marries somebody from a vastly different culture. ...

Given their characters and experience, both personal and cultural, Desdemona and Othello ... never understand the way the world fosters their misperceptions. We must watch as Othello is reduced from a heroic general, with dignity, assurance, and power to a raging, jealous husband and murderer, out of control and duped by Iago.

We see Desdemona lose her energy, vitality, and courage for living to become fearful and passive. Both suffer the pains of deception, real or supposed loss of love, final powerlessness, and death. Tragedy never allows its protagonists to escape suffering and death, but it often graces them with the knowledge of life, without which they cannot have lived in the fullest sense.

**From: Shirley Nelson Garner, "Shakespeare's Desdemona". *Shakespeare Studies* 9, 1976**



Maya Pinzolas / James Morgan - The English Theatre Frankfurt 2013 - Foto: Anna Meuer

### **What the Men Say About Her**

Before Desdemona speaks about herself, the men speak about her. Her first words actually do not come until she has been summoned by the Venetian Senate to answer questions on whether she has willingly consented to marriage with Othello (1.3.180).

Before this time, however, she is portrayed both as a sexually loose woman and as an innocent and chaste maiden. The strength of her personality, however, is that when she begins to speak she will quickly show the inadequacy of those characterizations.

In order to enrage her father, Iago says that the "black ram" (Othello), is "tupping" his "white ewe (1.1.89)." Notice that the first reference to Desdemona is as if she is a kind of animal, a lower creature. Brabantio will characterize her as treacherous later in the scene as he urges fathers not to trust their daughters (1.1.169-170). In the next scene, again in order to create an incident, Iago tells Cassio, the new lieutenant, that Othello is staying at the Sagittary because he "to-night hath boarded a land carract"--a large and wealthy trading ship (1.2.50). Now she is an inanimate object, to be appreciated only because of the value of the "cargo" she is carrying.

#### **4.3.1 Quotations**

***That I did love the Moor to live with him / My downright violence and scorn of fortunes / May trumpet to the world. (Desdemona, I, iii)***

***The divine Desdemona. ... She that I spake of, our great captain's captain... (Cassio, II, i)***

***I am not merry, but do beguile / The thing I am by seeming otherwise. (Desdemona, II, i)***

***... She's full of most blest condition. (Roderigo, II, i)***

***She's a most exquisite lady. ... Indeed she's a most fresh and delicate creature. ... She is indeed perfection. (Cassio, II, iii)***

***She ... holds it a vice in her goodness not to do more than she is requested. (Iago, II, iii)***

***She did deceive her father, marrying you, / And when she seemed to shake, and fear your looks, / She loved them most. (Iago, III, iii)***

***... to see how he prizes the foolish woman your wife! (Iago, IV, i)***

***I am a child to chiding. (Desdemona, IV, ii)***

***Has she forsook so many noble matches, / Her father, and her country, and her friends, / To be called whore? (Emilia, IV, ii)***

*O, thou weed / Who art so lovely fair and smell`st so sweet / That the senses ache at thee ... (Othello, IV, ii)*

*The sweetest innocent that e`er did lift up eye. (Emilia, V, ii)*

#### 4.3.2 Statements on Desdemona by actors, directors, authors, critics and scholars

##### Actors

- To me she was in all things worthy to be a hero`s bride and deserving the highest love, reverence, and gratitude from the noble Moor. `Gentle` she was, no doubt (the strong are naturally gentle).

##### **Helen Faucit, 1886**

- ... Desdemona`s unconventionality is ignored. She is not at all prim and demure; on the contrary, she is genially expressive, the kind of woman who being devoid of coquetry behaves as she feels.

##### **Ellen Terry, circa 1900**

##### Directors

- One must not forget that Desdemona is not in the least like the girl [sometimes] portrayed on stage. More often than not she is shown as a diffident and timid Ophelia. Desdemona is not Ophelia. She is resolute, courageous, and resists the orthodox type of marriage prescribed by tradition.

##### **Konstantin Stanislavski, 1930**

- Desdemona made a very specific decision to marry this man. It seems to me extraordinary for someone, even now, to creep out of the house at ten o`clock at night and go down the road and marry a large black general without her father knowing.

##### **Sam Mendes, 1997**

... that`s the great challenge of the role for the actor playing Desdemona. I chose *not* to cast somebody who was 22 or 23. ... I wasn`t looking for someone who was a young girl simply carried away by romance and passion.

##### **Kent Thompson, 2000**

### Poets, Authors, Critics, Scholars

- ... her helplessness only makes the sight of her suffering more exquisitely painful. She is helpless because her nature is infinitely sweet and her love absolute.

#### A. C. Bradley, 1904

- Desdemona is a young schoolgirl who wants above all to be a grownup. ... She's never done anything, she wants to do something, and she overdoes it.

#### W. H. Auden, 1947

In Desdemona alone do the heart and the hand go together: she is what she seems to be. Ironically, she alone is accused of pretending to be what she is not. Her very openness and honesty make her suspect in a world where few men are what they appear, and her chastity is inevitably brought into question in a world where every other major character is in some degree touched with sexual corruption....

#### Alvin Kernan, 1963

Of all Shakespeare female characters she is the most sensuous. More silent than Juliet or Ophelia she seems absorbed in herself. ... From the very first night Desdemona felt herself a lover and wife. Eroticism was her vocation and joy: eroticism and love, eroticism and Othello are one in the same.

*Jan Kott, 1964.*

## 5. Perceptions of Blackness & The Moor

### 5.1 A Selection of Quotes from the Play

He, in good time, must his lieutenant be,  
 And I, God bless the mark, his Moorship's ancient. ...  
 ...Now sir, be judge yourself Whether I in any just term am affined  
 To love the Moor. ....Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago;...  
 ... I am one, sir, that comes to tell you your daughter and the Moor  
 are now making the beast with two backs.

**Iago, (I, i)**

...But I beseech you  
If't be your pleasure and most wise consent  
(As partly I find it is) that your daughter,  
At this odd-even and dull watch o'the night,  
Transported with no worse or better guard,  
But with a knave of common hire, a gondolier,  
To the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor. ...

**Roderigo (I, i)**

Damned as thou art, thou hast enchanted her,  
For I'll refer me to all things of sense,  
If she in chains of magic were not bound, ...  
...Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom>  
Of such a thing as thou — to fear, not to delight. ...  
...For if such actions may have passage free,  
Bondslaves and pagans shall our statesmen be.

**Brabantio (I, ii)**

Here comes Brabantio and the valiant Moor  
Senator (I, iii)

Come hither Moor:

I here do give thee that with all my heart  
Which, but thou hast already, with all my heart  
I will keep from thee. ...

**Brabantio (I, iii)**

These Moors are changeable in their wills. ... The food that to him now  
Is as luscious as locusts shall be to him shortly as acerb as the coloquintida. ...  
...I retell thee again and again, I hate the Moor. ...  
...The Moor is of a free and open nature  
That thinks men honest that but seem to be so.

**Iago (I, iii)**

Mark me with what violence she first loved the Moor but for bragging and telling  
her fantastical lies. ...When the blood is made dull with the act of sport, there  
should be, again to inflame it and to give satiety a fresh appetite, loveliness in  
favour, sympathy in years, manners and beauties: all of which the Moor is  
defective in. ...

... If she had been blest she would never have loved the Moor.

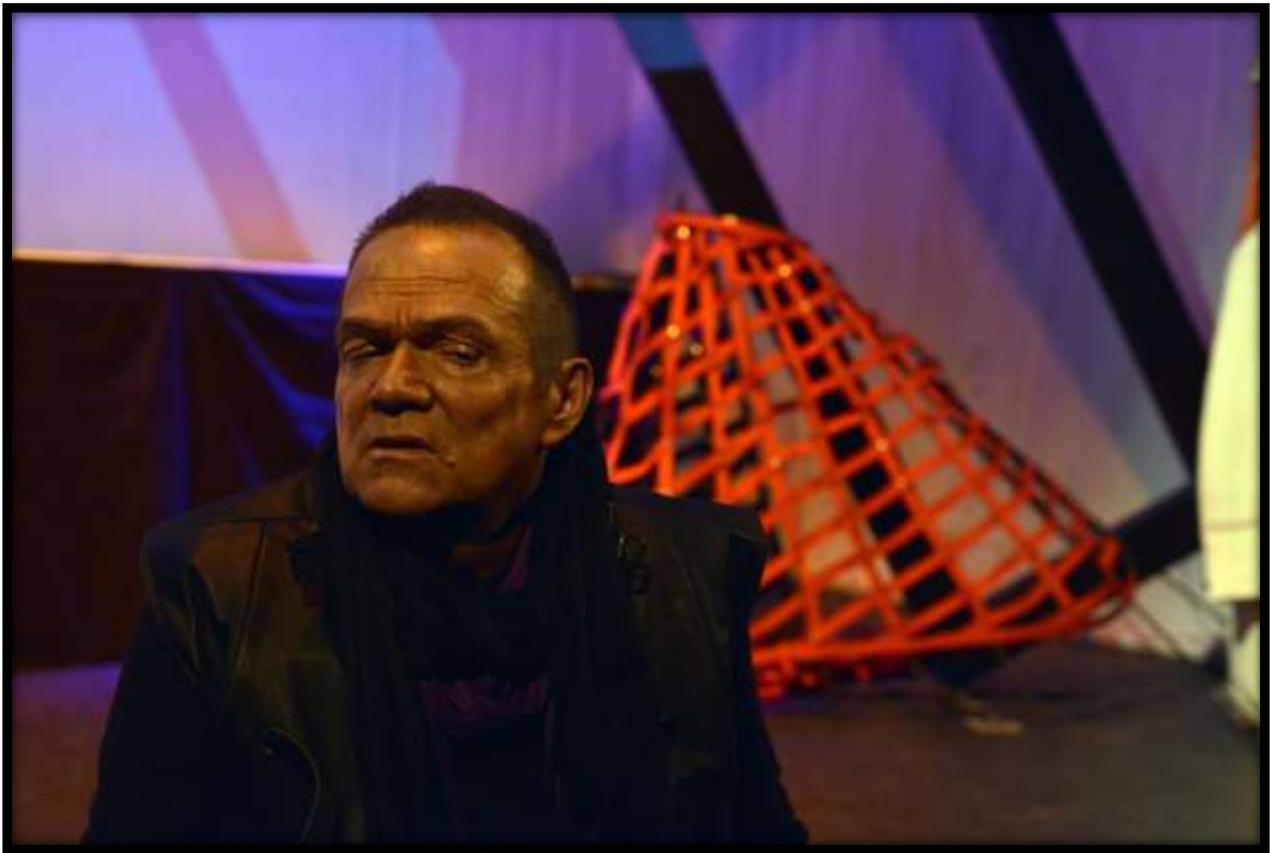
**Iago (II, i)**

... I do suspect the lusty Moor  
Hath leaped into my seat, the thought thereof  
Doth like a poisonous mineral gnaw my inwards;...

**Iago (II, i)**

To win the Moor, were it to renounce his baptism,  
All seals and symbols of redeemed sin,  
His soul is so enfeathered to her love,  
That she may make, unmake, do what she list,  
Even as her appetite shall play the god  
With his weak function ... **Iago (II, iii)**

*James Morgan - The English Theatre Frankfurt 2013 - Foto: Anna Meuer*



## 5.2 Definition

**The word "Moor"** has its origin in 46 B.C. when the Romans invaded West Africa. They called the black Africans they met there *Maures* from the Greek word *mauros*, meaning dark or black. The word indicated more than one ethnic group. To Shakespeare "Moor" simply meant "black African" It is important to point out that the medieval Moors who conquered Europe should not be confused with the modern Moors....

In *Ancient History*, a native of *Mauretania* a region of Northern Africa corresponding to parts of Morocco and Algeria. In later times, one belonging to the people of mixed Berber and Arab race, Mahommedan in religion, who constitute the bulk of the population of North-western Africa, and who in the 8th century conquered Spain. In the Middle Ages, and as late as the 17th century, the Moors were commonly supposed to be mostly black or very swarthy (though the existence of 'white Moors' was recognized), and hence the word was often used for 'negro'; cf. Blackamoor.

The Oxford English Dictionary, 1971

## 5.3 Essay

### Shakespeare's *Othello*: The Black Other in Elizabethan Drama

By SM Coyne from: <http://voices.yahoo.com/shakespeares-othello-black-other-elizabethan-36635.html>

William Shakespeare's *Othello, The Moor of Venice* opens with a graphically violent image of sexual and racial distinctions, as Iago tells Brabantio "Even now, now, very now, an old black ram/ Is tugging your white ewe!" (1.1.89-90). Analysis of this powerful imagery focusing on the multiple meanings of the word 'black' can not only give insight into the prejudices and stereotypes of the past, but also provide answers to the question of why these racial conflicts have persisted for so many centuries as they continue to pervade the present culture.

*Othello* contains one of the most powerful, controversial representations of the black Other in Elizabethan drama. The use of the word 'black' to signify both the Moor and an inherent evil informs readers of racial perceptions of not only the audience which consists of the characters around Othello, but also the greater audience of Elizabethan England. The portrayal of the Moor in *Othello*, often times

contradictory, reveals the dominant racial attitudes of the time period, and has continued to provide insight into shifting social conflicts throughout the centuries during which it has been performed. The question of Othello's true race has never been decided- evidence exists to suggest that the Venetian general was both an African and an Arab- but it is ultimately his status as a foreigner or outsider which truly instigates the racial repercussions of the play.

This absolute otherness is implicit in the subtitle of the play itself (*The Moor of Venice*), which defines the character not in terms of his social role but solely in terms of race. Interestingly, despite his background Othello is initially considered honorable; it is only when race is connected with interracial sexual and marital unions that it becomes a heated emotional issue for the Venetians, and for audience members from the seventeenth century to the present day.

For Elizabethans, the identity of the 'Moor' was somewhat confused; the term meant Muslim or Arab, but was often interchangeable for African or Ethiopian. Shakespeare uses the word 'black' fifty-six times within the text of *Othello*, but even this descriptor held a variety of meanings and connotations in seventeenth century England. The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'black' as "Having an extremely dark skin; strictly applied to negroes and negritos, and other dark-skinned races; often, loosely, to non-European races, little darker than many Europeans" (sense I.1.c) According to this definition, then, the specific race of the Other is unimportant, as anyone with dark skin is excluded from the European identity. The numerous indications of color and race might imply an African identity to modern readers, but for the Londoners of Shakespeare's time they could have applied just as much to an Arab. Norman Sanders writes in his introduction to the text that "Iago's derogatory comparison of Othello to a 'Barbary horse' (1.1.111-112) would not be taken by any member of the Blackfriar's audience to be other than to an Arabian steed; and his scornful use of the term 'barbarian' (1.3.343) is exactly that used by Elizabeth's courtiers to refer to Abd el-Ouahed [the Moorish ambassador to Queen Elizabeth in 1600-1601] and his entourage" (14).



Mario Mateluna /James Morgan The English Theatre Frankfurt 2013 (Foto: Anna Meuer)

This evidence certainly supports an Arab Othello, but fundamentally it is the status of the character as a dark-skinned foreigner who desires a white woman which provides the basis for his discrimination. While in modernity Shakespeare's protagonist would be called an immigrant, at the time Othello was merely an alien to Aryan Europe whose identity was defined by his extremely different physical characteristics.

Shakespeare's characters, including Iago, Brabantio, Emilia, Desdemona and even Othello himself evoke the word 'black' and its subtle stereotypes and meanings repeatedly. Iago's initial comparison of Othello to "an old black ram" (I.1.89) emphasizes the common perception of the bestial black. Blacks were seen not as men but as animals, and therefore lacking human reason and possessing base animalistic desires and urges. Furthermore, the use of 'ram' invokes horns, reaffirming the Elizabethan idea of the black devil. In Act I the Duke reassures Brabantio that his "son-in-law is far more fair than black" (1.3.286). The Duke plies the apparent irony of a black man who does not have a black soul; it is as if these two are inextricably linked, that outward blackness must signify inward

depravity. It is noticeable that the Oxford English dictionary defines 'black man' as both "A man having black or very dark skin" (sense 1) and "An evil spirit; also, the evil one, the devil; also, a spirit or bogey invoked in order to terrify children" (sense 2). Perhaps it is this dual meaning that prevents Brabantio from being able to comprehend why Desdemona would "run from her guardage to the sooty bosom/ Of such a thing as thou- to fear, not to delight" (1.2.70-71). Brabantio is set in his prejudices of black people, and will not trust even his beloved daughter's judgment once it contradicts his own racist beliefs. His use of the word 'fear' reflects the notion of black people as savage and barbaric, but perhaps more derogatory is Brabantio's substitution of 'thing' for 'man' or 'person'. In calling Othello a 'thing', Brabantio strips the captain of his humanity, taking his agency and defining him as subhuman. Even Desdemona, the willing bride, feels that she must justify her choice of husband by telling the Senate that she "saw Othello's visage in his mind" (1.3.248). By claiming to see and hence love his brain and not his body, Desdemona reinforces the idea that loving a Moor needs validation and rationalization. Iago is able to convince Othello that Desdemona's choice makes

her unnatural in that she refused "many proposed matches/ Of her own clime, complexion, and degree" (3.3.231-2) and instead married a man before whose looks "she seemed to shake and fear" (3.3.209). Iago repeatedly uses Othello's physical blackness to symbolize some internal evil; Othello is constantly watched for signs of savageness, noted for his ability to inspire fear, and always inferior. When Iago convinces his lord of Desdemona's infidelity, Othello believes his wife's honor to be tainted, "begrimed and black/ As mine own face" (3.3.388-9). Othello, operating within the constraints of racist Venice, implicates his own perceived corruption through this simile. Othello's self-hatred occurs perhaps only because he must articulate himself in a culture which defines blackness as degenerate and depraved. 'Black' was also defined as "Having dark or deadly purposes, malignant; pertaining to or involving death, deadly; baneful, disastrous, sinister." (OED sense II.8.a). At the beginning of the play, Othello contradicts this definition; Iago, in his inability to come to grips with this opposition, manipulates Othello and causes him to actualize this interpretation.



Foto: Staatstheater Darmstadt 2012

## 6 The ETF 2013 Production: Tragedy of man under an empty heaven.



### 6.1 Time

Only for *Othello* does the night of jealousy last from midnight to dawn. Iago, Roderigo and Desdemona need weeks for the actions to be accomplished. Weeks are required for Desdemona to have the physical possibility of infidelity, or for a ship to reach Venice from Cyprus with news of victory and arrive back in Cyprus with the appointment of the new Governor.

### 6.2 Setting

In what setting does *Othello's* tragedy unfold itself? The question sounds absurd. The first act takes place in Venice, the remaining four in Cyprus.

*Othello* has been identified with 19<sup>th</sup> stage design to such an extent that of all Shakespeare's plays it is the most difficult to visualize on a bar stage. However, Venice and Cyprus in *Othello* are no more real than cities and countries in all the other tragedies and comedies of Shakespeare. The action of *Othello*, like of all the other great tragedies of Shakespeare, really takes place only on the Elizabethan stage which is also the **Teatrum Mundi**. On that stage, as in *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, the world is unhinged, chaos returns and the very order of nature is threatened.



*“If she be false, O, then heaven mocks itself,  
I`ll not believe it.” (III,3)*

Even the firmament is shaken, the balance of the heavenly spheres disturbed, as if madness descended on people from the stars:

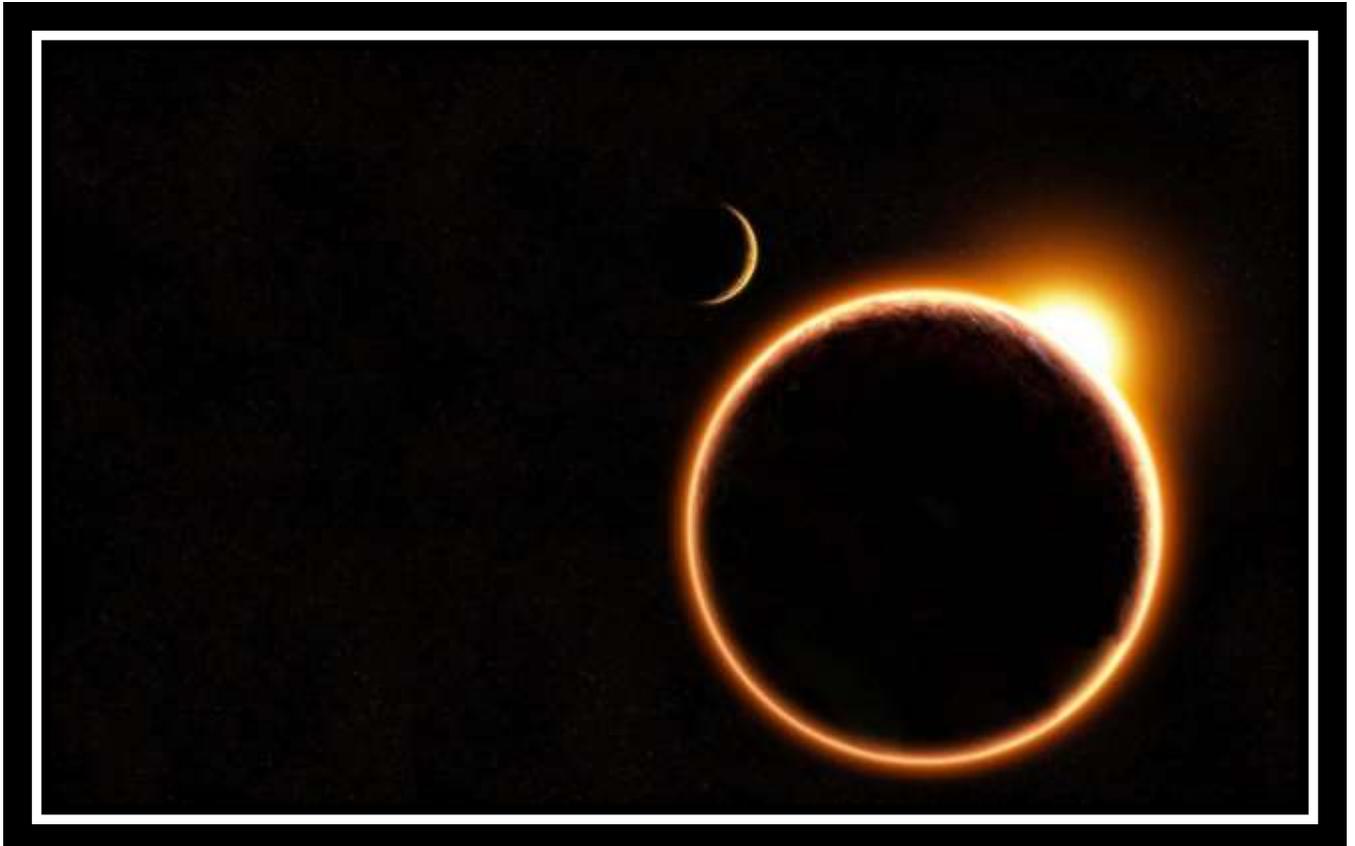
*“It is the very error of the moon,  
She comes more near the earth than she was wont,  
And makes men mad.” (V,2)*

And then, Desdemona having been murdered, apocalyptic night falls on Othello`s world:

*“Methinks it should be now a huge eclipse  
Of sun and moon, and that the affrighted globe  
Should yawn at alteration.” (V,2)*

A simultaneous eclipse of the sun and the moon as a vision of the end of the world found in Baroque painting. (...) *Othello*, like *King Lear* and *Macbeth* is the tragedy of man under an empty heaven.

(from: Jan Kott Shakespeare. *Our Contemporary*. London, Methuen 1965 p.84 ff.)



At the time of Queen Elizabeth the universe or macrocosm was considered to be a unity in perfect order. God had given everything its right place in the **CHAIN OF BEING**. Human society was ordered in a hierarchical way, with the king at the top. Coupled with the ideas of universal orderliness was the idea of universal interdependence. This means that people believed that disorder in one segment was reflected in all other segments.



*Disorder was viewed as caused by men.*

*The heavens themselves, the planets, and this centre*

*Observe degree, priority and place (...)*

*Office and custom, in all line of order; and therefore is the glorious planet Sol*

*In noble eminence enthroned and sphered*

*Amidst the other, whose med`cinable eye*

*Corrects the ill aspects of planets evil*

*And posts like the commandment of a king,*

*Without check, to good and bad, But when the planets*

*In evil mixture to disorder wander (...)*

*The enterprise is sick (...)*

*But take degree away, untune that string,*

*And hark, what discord follows.*

*(Shakespeare, Troilus and Cressida, I,3 75 -137)*

### 6.3 ON JEALOUSY

*O, beware, my lord, of jealousy!*

*It is the green-eyed monster*

Act 3, scene 3, lines 195–196

*Then must you speak*

*Of one that loved not wisely, but too well*

Act 5, scene 2, line 404

Jealousy contains more of self-love than of love.

**Francois de La Rochefoucauld**

Jealousy is the fear of comparison.

**Max Frisch**

He that is jealous is not in love.

**Saint Augustine**

**S.T. Coleridge on Shakespeare`s Othello:** 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 honesty as Othello did. We, the audience, know that Iago is a villain from the beginning; but in considering the essence of the Shakespearian Othello, we must perseveringly place ourselves in his situation, and under his circumstances.

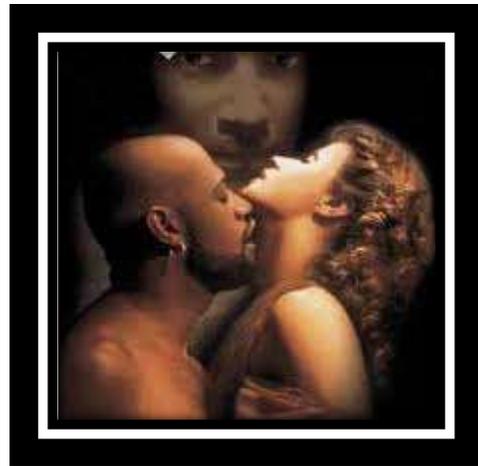
Othello had no life but in Desdemona:—the belief that she, his angel, had fallen from the heaven of her native innocence, wrought a civil war in his heart. She is his counterpart; and, like him, is almost sanctified in our eyes by her absolute unsuspectingness, and holy entireness of love.

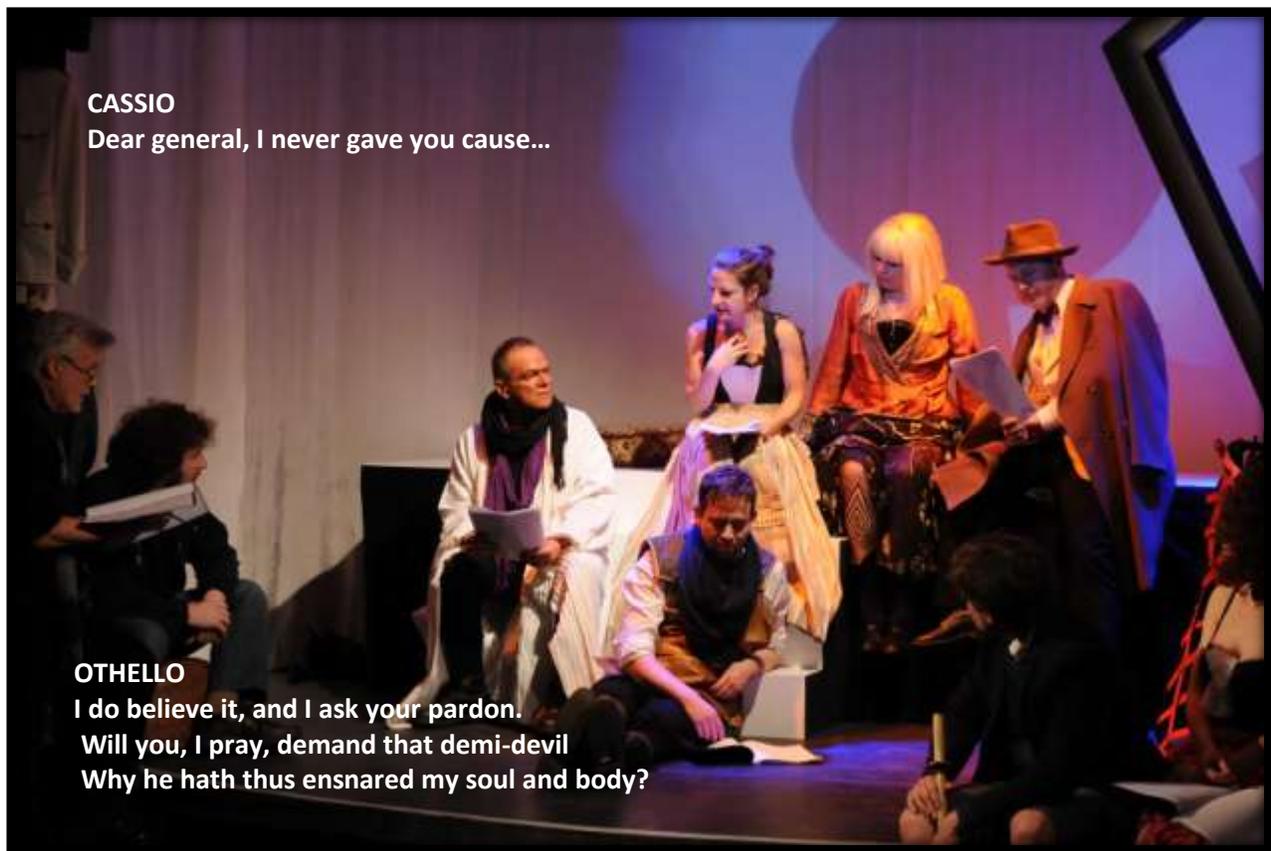
#### YOUR POINT OF VIEW

In light of your own life experience, do you think that it is possible to avoid, control and/or overcome jealousy?

Explain your answer.

As the curtain drops who do we pity most?





**CASSIO**

Dear general, I never gave you cause...

**OTHELLO**

I do believe it, and I ask your pardon.  
Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil  
Why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body?

**IAGO**

Demand me nothing: what you  
know, you know:  
From this time forth I never will  
speak word.

**MONTANO**

Torments will ope your lips.

**OTHELLO**

Soft you; a word or two before  
you go.  
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.

#### 6.4 Lingerin Questions Today By Bill Long

Though "long seeming dead" (5.2.328) because it was written exactly 400 years ago, *Othello* is alive with issues and questions for today. The story may have originated in a tale told by Cinthio and adapted by Shakespeare, but Shakespeare's spin on the yarn keeps us reeling today.

1. Why do people/we throw it all away when they/we have so many things going for them/us? Even when he is trying to exonerate himself or mitigate the harshness of his action, Othello confesses freely that he had thrown away a "pearl" that was "richer than all his tribe (5.2.347-348)."

Why did he, and why do we sacrifice what is most precious to us when we need not do so? Why do people leave their families for other intimate relationships, for the allure of drink or gambling, for a broader field of "excitement," when what they have is not just good but very, very good?

We give up relationships, jobs, good things for no apparent good reason, and by so doing cause others to suffer immeasurably? Why?

2. Why do we rely on hearsay evidence to our destruction when eyewitness testimony is readily available and will put our minds at ease? Othello told Iago that he would require "ocular proof (3.3.360)" of Desdemona's infidelity before he would judge her, but this wasn't true. Iago then plied him with innuendo and the purported report of his experience sleeping next to Cassio where Cassio admitted his desire for Desdemona.

The "evidence" rested on a tissue of lies, hints, and lurid suggestions calculated to enflame the emotions and throw Othello into a frenzy. And it also made Othello dispense with his requirement for "ocular" proof of faithlessness. Othello's conduct is in stark contrast to the behavior of the Venetian Senate when learning about the Turkish threat (1.3.1-45). When they heard one account, they debated it and waited for another report. Then they compared reports and decided on which was more probable. Political bodies deliberate, apparently, but people abandon judicious consideration even when it would be easy to act cautiously.

3. Why couldn't Othello bring himself to ask Desdemona directly about infidelity? He asked Emilia about it, but ignored her answer (4.2.1ff). He became enthralled by Iago, ensorcelled by the vividness of his language and urgency of his pleas.

*Othello's* conduct makes us ask whether and why we rely on filmy language, gossamer explanations, diaphanous hints rather than "ocular" proof.

Is truth so difficult to come by, so elusive, so painful in the discovery that we simply must abandon our straight-ahead quest for objective data in favour of multiple hearsay?

Stress in our lives causes our view of time to change. It becomes almost impossible to take the "long view" of something; issues have to be resolved right away.

I think there are some things where we can live with doubt and uncertainty in life, and other things that we just have to resolve "right away." Some people have a higher tolerance for a messy house or office than others. Likewise, there are different levels of tolerance for intellectual "messes" or inconsistencies that we experience. Some scholars can go throughout their entire lives mulling over a problem without feeling any need to "solve" it, while others feel that unless they are slaying intellectual dragons every day that chaos impends. But all of us, seemingly, have our vulnerabilities, where we will rush to ill-advised and ill-informed judgment when either the data is available that would help us or we would be better served by giving the matter more time. *Othello*, too, rushes to judgment with inadequate information. Are we likewise vulnerable to this?

4. How do we react to being hurt? Emilia's line when *Othello* confronts her with a drawn sword near the end of the play rings in our ears, "Thou hast not half that pow'r to do me harm/ As I have to be hurt (5.2.162-163)." *Othello* is a play about the capacity to be hurt and the various ways that people respond to the loss occasioned by hurt. Though I spoke in the [first mini-essay](#) about the losses suffered by four characters (Iago, Brabantio, Cassio and *Othello*), the women also suffer great loss and react to it. Desdemona will respond to *Othello's* "green-ey'd monster" of jealousy by submitting to his advances and demands, even to the point of death. I have tried to point out that on occasion there is strength in her submission, but others see it only as a sign of weakness. Then, there is Emilia. She reacts to the loss of Desdemona with forthright speaking, with a quest for the truth that comes out of her desire to speak "as liberal as the north."

*Othello* therefore provides us at least six "models" for how we react to being hurt. We can, like Iago, react furiously but contain the rage and plot the destruction of those who hurt us. We can, like Cassio, bemoan the loss but then seek

reinstatement. We might, like Brabantio, be so overwhelmed with the loss of a relationship (his daughter) that he objects before the Senate but then, when he gets no satisfaction, go home and die of grief. We might, like Othello, become obsessed with the other person, the supposed instrument of our pain, and kill him/her. We might, like Desdemona, patiently bear the obloquy and abuse of others until we are killed by them. We might, like Emilia, discover something about ourselves in being hurt and take on a new persona by relentlessly pursuing the truth of the matter, even though it leads to more deaths.

What will it be for us? How do we respond to the losses and hurts of our life? *Othello* helps us focus on the issue of how loss affects us and what strategies we employ to get beyond it.

Mario Mateluna as Iago – The English Theatre Frankfurt 2013 - Foto: Anna Meuer

