



OTHELLO

By William Shakespeare
Directed by Joe Dowling

**November 1 - December 21, 2003 at the Guthrie Lab
and
2004 National Tour**

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STUDY GUIDE

The Guthrie Theater

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CHRONOLOGY

A Selected Chronology of the Life and Times of William Shakespeare

	Playwright	World History
1564	William Shakespeare is born to John Shakespeare and Mary Arden of Stratford-upon-Avon, their third child and first son. (Traditionally, Shakespeare's Day is celebrated on April 23.)	Galileo Galilei is born. British playwright Christopher Marlowe is born. Voyages of exploration, trade and colonization are undertaken throughout the "New World," primarily by England, Spain, Portugal, France and the Netherlands. Rivalries break out between European trading powers.
1566		The collection of novellas, <i>Hecatommithi</i> by Giovanbattista Giral di Cinthio is published. Shakespeare's <i>Othello</i> borrows some of the plot line and characters from the 7 th novella, <i>The Unfaithfulness of Husbands and Wives</i> .
1573		Venice loses Cyprus to the Turkish forces of Selim II, ending over 80 years of Venetian rule on the island.
1576		James Burbage opens The Theatre, London's first playhouse used by professional actors. The dining hall of Blackfriars monastery is converted into a theater for private performances given by a company of boy actors. It remains open until 1584.
1577		Raphael Holinshed publishes the <i>Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland</i> , a primary source for Shakespeare's history plays. Francis Drake begins a three-year voyage around the world.
1578	Shakespeare's family finds itself in serious debt and mortgages Mary Arden's family house in Wilmcote to raise cash.	Interest in Roman and Greek antiquities leads to the discovery of the catacombs in Rome.

1580	John Shakespeare is involved in lawsuits regarding several mortgaged family properties.	The English folksong “Greensleeves” is popular.
1582	A marriage license is issued to William Shakespeare and Agnes (Anne) Hathaway in November. She is eight years his senior, and pregnant at the time of their marriage. The following May their first daughter, Susanna, is born.	The Gregorian calendar is adopted in Catholic states, Spain, Portugal, France, the Netherlands and Scandinavia. (England does not adopt the Gregorian calendar until 1752.)
1585	Twins, Hamnet and Judith, are born in February to William and Anne Shakespeare.	Spanish writer Miguel de Cervantes writes the pastoral novel <i>Galatea</i> .
1585-91	No documents record Shakespeare’s life during these so-called “lost years.” At some point, he must have made his way to London, without taking his family along.	
1586		Mary, Queen of Scots, is accused of plotting to murder Queen Elizabeth. Mary’s co-conspirators are tried and executed. Mary is executed the following year.
1588		An attempt by the Spanish Armada to invade fails due to the combination of bad weather in the English Channel and the ability of smaller English ships to out-manuever the attackers. The event establishes England as a major naval power. England enters a period of economic, political and cultural expansion.
1592	Shakespeare is listed as an actor with the Lord Chamberlain’s Men in London.	15,000 people die of the plague in London. Theaters close temporarily to prevent the spread of the epidemic.
	Writer and dramatist Robert Greene scathingly lashes out at “an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers” at the time when Shakespeare’s first known play, <i>King Henry VI, Part One</i> , is successfully produced.	
1593-	During the course of the plague, it	Christopher Marlowe is killed in a tavern

- 94 appears that Shakespeare has written several plays (their dates of composition have not been established with certainty in all cases): *King Henry VI, Parts Two and Three, Titus Andronicus, Richard III*, and the comedies *Love's Labour's Lost, The Two Gentlemen of Verona, The Comedy of Errors, The Taming of the Shrew*, as well as the poems "Venus and Adonis" and "The Rape of Lucrece."
- The Comedy of Errors* performed at the Gray's Inn on the night of Innocent's Day, December 28th, as recorded in the *Gesta Graymorum*.
- 1595 Approximate year of composition for *A Midsummer Night's Dream, King John, Romeo and Juliet, Richard II*, and *The Merchant of Venice*.
- 1596 John Shakespeare, the dramatist's father, is granted a coat of arms.
- Shakespeare's only son, Hamnet, dies at the age of eleven.
- 1597-98 Shakespeare's sonnets circulate unpublished.
- The two parts of *King Henry IV, The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and *Much Ado About Nothing* are written.
- He purchases the New Place, one of the largest estates in Stratford.
- He is listed as a player in a production of Ben Jonson's *Every Man in His Humor*.
- 1599 The Globe Playhouse opens. Shakespeare is part owner by virtue of the shares divided between the Burbage family of actors (half) and five others, including the dramatist.
- brawl (1593). His tragedy *Edward II* is published the following year.
- London's theaters reopen in 1594 when the threat of the plague has abated.
- Italian astronomer Giordano Bruno is accused and imprisoned by the Vatican for supporting the Copernican theory of the universe. He is eventually burned to death in Rome for heresy (1600).
- Sir Philip Sidney's *An Apology for Poetry* is published posthumously.
- Another hall of London's Blackfriars monastery opens as James Burbage's playhouse. Later it will serve as the winter theater space for Shakespeare's company.
- A second armada of Spanish ships en route to attack England is dispersed by storms.
- Sir Francis Bacon's *Essays, Civil and Moral* is published.
- An English Act of Parliament prescribes sentences of deportation to British colonies for convicted criminals.
- The Earl of Essex is sent to command English forces in Ireland. He fails to secure peace and returns to England against the orders of Queen Elizabeth.

Approximate year of composition for *King Henry V*, *Julius Caesar*, and *As You Like It*.

- | | | |
|---------|--|---|
| 1600-02 | Shakespeare's poem, "The Phoenix and the Turtle" and his plays, <i>Twelfth Night</i> , <i>All's Well That Ends Well</i> , <i>Hamlet</i> and <i>Troilus and Cressida</i> date approximately from this period. | In 1600 comedian Will Kempe dances a Morris Dance from London to Norwich.

The international trading corporation, the English East India Company, is founded. (The Dutch East India Company is founded in 1602.) |
| 1601 | Shakespeare's father dies. | The Earl of Essex attempts a rebellion against the crown and is executed.

Ben Jonson, offended by a satirical portrayal of himself in a play, returns the insult, sparking a series of plays known as the War of the Theaters in which playwrights ridicule each other from the stage. |
| 1603 | Approximate year of composition for <i>Othello</i> and <i>Measure for Measure</i> .

James I is crowned King of England, and the acting company long known as the Lord Chamberlain's Men, with which Shakespeare is affiliated, becomes The King's Men. The company will perform twelve plays per year for the court of James I. | Elizabeth I dies. She is succeeded by her cousin, James I. (The era of his reign is called the Jacobean period.)

Sir Walter Raleigh, arrested for suspected involvement in a plot to dethrone James I, is put on trial for treason and imprisoned.

Plague breaks out again in London. |
| 1605 | Shakespeare's name is included among England's greatest writers in <i>Remaines of a Greater Worke Concerning Britaine</i> , published by the antiquarian William Camden.

<i>King Lear</i> and <i>Macbeth</i> appear. | Guy Fawkes and others are arrested following the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot, a plan to blow up the House of Lords during an address by James I (November 5). They are executed the following year.

Ben Jonson writes <i>Volpone</i> . |
| 1607 | Shakespeare's daughter, Susanna, marries Dr. John Hill; they make their home in Stratford.

<i>Anthony and Cleopatra</i> , <i>Pericles</i> and <i>Timon of Athens</i> are written. | English colonists in America, led by John Smith, establish the city of Jamestown, Virginia. |

1608	Shakespeare's acting company signs a lease for the use of the Blackfriars Playhouse.	Dutch scientist Johan Lippershey invents the telescope. Galileo copies the design to construct one of his own.
	<i>Coriolanus</i> appears.	
	Shakespeare's mother dies.	
1609-10	Shakespeare's <i>Sonnets</i> are published. His late plays <i>The Winter's Tale</i> , <i>Cymbeline</i> , and <i>The Tempest</i> belong to this period.	The Dutch East India Company begins shipping tea from China to Europe. The Moriscos, Spanish Moors who had converted to Christianity, are expelled from Spain (through 1614).
1611		The King James version of the Bible is published.
1612	Records show that, by this time, Shakespeare "of Stratford-upon-Avon, gentleman" has returned to live in his birthplace.	John Webster's tragedy <i>The White Devil</i> is staged and published.
1613	Two plays, <i>King Henry VIII</i> and <i>The Two Noble Kinsmen</i> , are attributed to both Shakespeare and John Fletcher.	The Globe Playhouse burns down during the first performance of <i>King Henry VIII</i> .
1616	Shakespeare's daughter Judith is married. Shakespeare dies on April 23 and is buried in Stratford's Holy Trinity Church.	The Catholic Church prohibits Galileo from further scientific work.
1620		Led by Miles Standish, English Puritans settle at Plymouth Colony in Massachusetts. Serious economic decline begins in England.
1623	Heminge and Condell of The King's Men compile Shakespeare's complete dramatic works in the <i>First Folio</i> . Anne, William Shakespeare's widow, dies.	John Webster's <i>The Duchess of Malfi</i> is published. Dutch colonists settle in New Amsterdam (seized by the English and renamed New York in 1664).

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Commentary on Shakespeare's Work

My Shakespeare, rise. ...
Thou ... art alive still, while thy Booke doth live,
And we have wits to read, and praise to give. ...

Ben Jonson, *To the Memory of My Beloved the Author Mr. William Shakespeare: and What He Hath Left Us*, commendatory poem printed in The First Folio edition of Shakespeare's works, 1623

Thou in our wonder and astonishment
Hast built thy self a live-long Monument.

John Milton, *On Shakespear*, a compliment included in the Second Folio, 1632

He was the man who of all modern, and perhaps ancient poets, had the largest and most comprehensive soul. All the images of Nature were still present to him, and he drew them, not laboriously, but luckily; when he describes any thing, you more than see it, you feel it too.

John Dryden, *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, 1668

When he wrote sonnets, it seems as if he had considered himself as more a poet than when he wrote plays; he was the manager of a theatre, and he viewed drama as his business; on it he exerted all his intellect and power, but when he had feelings intense and secret to express, he had recourse to a less familiar form of writing. ... For the right understanding of his dramatic works, these lyrics are of the greatest importance.

A. W. Schlegel, *Our Shakespeare*, 1808

Since he exhibits everything in dramatic form, he renders easy the working of our imagination; for with the "stage that signifies the world" we are more familiar than with the world itself, and we can read and hear the most fantastical things, and still imagine that they might pass before our eyes on the stage.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Literary Essays*, 1816

He has a magic power over words: they come winged at his bidding; and seem to know their places. They are struck out at a heat, on the spur of the occasion, and have all the truth and vividness which arise from an actual impression of the objects. ... His language is hieroglyphical. It translates thoughts into visible images. It abounds in sudden transitions and elliptical expressions.

William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Poets. On Shakespeare and Milton*, 1818

[He] is the chief of all Poets hitherto; the greatest intellect who, in our recorded world, has left record of himself in the way of Literature. On the whole I know not such a power of vision, such a faculty of thought, if we take all the characters of it, in any other man. ... It is truly a lordly spectacle how this great soul takes-in all kinds of men and objects, a Falstaff, an Othello, a Juliet, a Coriolanus; sets them all forth to us in their round completeness. ... How could a man travel forward from rustic deer-poaching to such tragedy-writing, and not fall-in with sorrows by the way?

Thomas Carlyle, *The Hero as Poet in On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, 1841

He is like some saint whose history is to be rendered into all languages, into verse and prose, into songs and pictures and cut up into proverbs; so that the occasion which gave the saint's meaning the form of conversation, or of a prayer, or of a code of laws, is immaterial compared with the universality of its application. ... He wrote the airs for all our modern music: he wrote the text of modern life.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Representative Men*, 1841

No other poet has given so many-sided an expression to human nature, or rendered so many passions and moods with such an appropriate variety of style, sentiment and accent. If, therefore, we were asked to select one monument of human civilization that should survive to some future age, or be transported to another planet to bear witness to the inhabitants there of what we have been upon earth, we should probably choose the works of Shakespeare.

George Santayana, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, 1900

We may say confidently that the full meaning of any one of his plays is not in itself alone, but in that play in the order in which it was written, in its relation to all of Shakespeare's other plays, earlier and later: we must know all of Shakespeare's work in order to know any of it.

T. S. Eliot, *Dante*, 1929

Shakespeare himself, indeed Shakespeare especially, does not describe from outside; his characters are intimately bound up with the audience. That is why his plays are the greatest example there is of people's theater; in this theater the public found and still finds its own problems and re-experiences them.

Jean-Paul Sartre, *Sartre on Theater*, 1959.

Shakespeare can illuminate our knowledge of Western attitudes; an analysis of values can also illuminate some dark corners in Shakespeare's work. For Shakespeare, unlike some of his critics, did not unthinkingly adopt the received wisdom of his time. He really probed, dramatically, the subjects of power and legitimacy, his own attitudes towards sex and women; he struggled all his life for a vision of a proper ordering of society.

Marilyn French, *Shakespeare's Division of Experience*, 1981.

Shakespeare doesn't belong to the past. If his material is valid, it is valid now. It's like coal. One knows the whole process of the primeval forest and how it goes down into the ground and one can trace the history of coal; but the meaningfulness of a piece of coal to us starts and finishes with its combustion, giving out the light and heat that we want. And that to me is Shakespeare. ...

If we accept this way of looking at Shakespeare's writing, we see that our present-day consciousness is our own aid. ... [And] far behind we can perceive living values! If we can touch them, the coal begins to burn.

Peter Brook, *The Shifting Point*, 1987.

Shakespeare can set the agenda for the modern era — himself half medieval, half modern, all renaissance, he brought up every issue that the world has had to deal with from family relationships to political power to colonialism, not to mention good and evil. As the modern era ends, we can't go ahead

into whatever is coming next without consulting the Bard and shaking him until he gives up some answers. He is the wise one, or at least the wisest one we've got.

Jane Smiley, "Shakespeare in Action" *The New York Times*, 1996

In Shakespeare, there is always a residuum, an excess that is left over, no matter how superb the performance, how acute the critical analysis, how massive the scholarly accounting, whether old-style or newfangled. Explaining Shakespeare is an infinite exercise; you will become exhausted long before the plays are emptied out. ... His universality will defeat you, his plays know more than you do, and your knowingness consequently will be in danger of dwindling into ignorance.

Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare, The Invention of the Human*, 1998

THE PLAY

Characters and Synopsis

CHARACTERS

Duke of Venice

Brabantio, a Senator, father to Desdemona

Gratiano, Brother to Brabantio

Lodovico, 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

Senators, Officers, Messengers, Heralds, Sailors, Attendants

Desdemona, Daughter to Brabantio, and Wife to Othello

Emilia, Wife to Iago

Bianca, a Courtesan, mistress to Cassio

SCENE

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

SYNOPSIS

The plot of Shakespeare's tragedy revolves around the title character and his passionate love for and marriage with Desdemona, the daughter of a Venetian senator. Othello, a Moor and valiant army general, has proven exceptional military abilities in the service of the maritime power of Venice. But his life faces ruin once he is caught in the conniving tricks of his ensign, Iago who is angered that he was not given the promotion he had anticipated.

Through shrewd and calculated deceit, Iago weaves a web of innuendoes, false accusations and deliberate miscommunications that ultimately undermine Othello's love. Tricked into believing the lie that his wife has been unfaithful to him, Othello begins to lose his confidence in her and haunts her with his blind jealousy. Although Desdemona professes her innocence in good faith, the trumped evidence provided by Iago inescapably pushes Othello down the torturous slope of doubt, unbearable uncertainty and disbelief.

In the end Othello seeks a desperate escape from these mutual sufferings: he asks Desdemona to say her last prayers and smothers her to death. When he realizes that he has murdered her for falsified reasons, ultimately Othello takes his own life. The play concludes with the unmasking of Iago and his punishment by execution for the heinous crimes he perpetrated.

***Othello, the Moor of Venice* (1604) by William Shakespeare (1564-1616)**

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, Ira Aldrige, Paul Robeson, Laurence Olivier, Orson Welles, Laurence Fishburne) 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.

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 protagonists.

In the play, purity of heart is pitted against evil ambitions, genuine candor and trust are assailed and destroyed by treacherous deception. The agony at the center of the tragedy is captured in a nutshell when Othello admits to Desdemona that "when I love thee not/Chaos is come again." This is a tragedy of love misunderstood, trust misplaced, honesty besmeared and lives ruined by blatant lies and denigrating fabrications. Shakespeare's tragic cautionary tale offers a supreme warning against jealousy, "the greeney'd monster which doth mock/The meat it feeds on."

The Guthrie Theater has produced the play once before in 1993, with Paul Winfield (Othello) and Robert Foxworth (Iago) leading the cast. Laird Williamson was the director. The 2003 production will be staged by Artistic Director Joe Dowling at the Guthrie Lab. After its run at home the show will embark on a national tour as part of the "Shakespeare in American Communities" initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts and with support from Arts Midwest.

The Main Characters Seen by Themselves and Others

Editor's Note. Below you'll find a selection of quotes regarding six central characters of *Othello*. Excerpts from Shakespeare's text are followed by various statements by actors, directors, authors, critics and scholars. It is a kaleidoscope of views and comments relevant for the multiplicity of perceptions and interpretations that the play has generated.

OTHELLO

I fetch my life and being / From men of royal siege. (Othello, I, ii)

Were it my cue to fight, I should have known it / Without a prompter. (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)

I will be found most cunning in my patience / But – dost thou hear? – most bloody. (Othello, IV, i)

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)

Actors

A friend describing Edmund Kean in his dressing room, after having performed Othello: ["He was stretched out on a sofa, retching violently and throwing up blood. His face half washed: one side deadly pale and the other a deep copper colour."]

Unknown, 1816

Although a soldier of fortune, Othello was descended from a royal race, of which honor, however, he never boasted. ... Skilled as he was in the art of war, he was simple and ingenious in other relations,

believing everybody honest who appeared so.

Tommaso Salvini, 1875

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

There is nobility in him.

Laurence Fishburne, 1996

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.

Patrick Stewart, 1997

[Othello] behaves as he does because he is a black man responding to racism, not giving pretext to it.

Hugh Quarshie, 1998

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

In Othello's part not a single scene is irrelevant as regards the whole mountain of the hero's growing passion. ... He was intensely happy with Desdemona ... the height of love and passion. ... Can one bid farewell at once to this bliss ... [and] can one live on without it?

Konstantin Stanislavski, 1930

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, Scholars

Shakespear[e] hath artfully introduced his Desdemona soliciting favours for Cassio of her husband, as the means of inflaming, not only [Othello's] jealousy, but his rage, to the highest pitch of madness ... We find the unfortunate Moor less able to command his passion on this occasion, than when he beheld his valued present to his wife in the hands of his supposed rival.

Henry Fielding, 1749

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 monster, the black becomes the negro!

Victor Hugo, 1864

...for all his dignity and massive calm (and he has greater dignity than any other of Shakespeare's men), he is by nature full of the most vehement passion.

A. C. Bradley, 1904

I was ... impressed by the volley & volume & tumble of [Othello's] words...

Virginia Woolf, 1928

Othello, in his magnanimous ways, is egotistic. ... A habit of self-approving self-dramatization is an essential element in Othello's make-up, and remains so to the very end.

F. R. Leavis, 1937

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

[His] identity depends on a constant performance ... of his story, a loss of his own origins, an embrace and perpetual reiteration of the norms of another culture.

Stephen Greenblatt, 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

IAGO

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)

Honest Iago, that look'st dead with grieving, / Speak: who began this? On thy love I charge thee. (Othello, II, iii)

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)

...it is my nature's plague / To spy into abuses, and oft my jealousy / Shapes faults that are not... (Iago, III, iii)

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

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

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 problem is that Iago specifies so many different reasons for doing what he does. I think he does it for all those reasons, but that doesn't amount to the real reason. I don't think we'll ever really know. 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

[In our production Iago] was seen as somebody ... who was on the cusp of being too old to be chosen as Othello's lieutenant. ... This became doubly worse in the military encampment of Cyprus – an enclosed world filled with competitive men who know that you were passed over for a younger man. We made it a constant source of injured pride for Iago.

Kent Thompson, 2000

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; nor a Miltonic devil, who talks cynicism, makes himself indispensable, and is generally in the right. Neither has he the magnificently foolhardy wickedness of a Caesar Borgia, who lives his life in open defiance and reckless atrocity. Iago has no other aim than his own advantage.

George Brandes, 1898

In Iago we have, I think, a very remarkable portrait by Shakespeare of the villain as an inverted saint, a saint *manqué*. On the surface, nothing might seem less probable. Yet Shakespeare was surely right in suggesting this, because the saint and the villain have very similar psychologies. In both, ethics and aesthetics become almost the same thing. There is a similar detachment and similar freedom in both with respect to human relations, an absence of the usual scruples and motivations that govern or trouble most living.

W. H. Auden, 1947

He is not subservient to the interests of the men in power who employ him, he says; he can stand up for himself, as they do.

William Empson, 1951

Says Iago: The world consists of villains and fools; of those who devour and those who are devoured. People are like animals; they copulate and eat each other. The weak do not deserve pity, they are just as abominable, only more stupid than the strong. The world is vile.

Jan Kott, 1964

The ultimate motive for his hatred of Othello, Desdemona, and Cassio is his denial of the values they affirm, his fixed opposition to the virtues they represent. It is the hatred of Satan for the sanctity of Adam and Eve, the hatred of being forced to recognize a virtue he cannot share and constantly desires. ... At the close of the play, when he has corrupted Othello's mind, destroyed both him and Desdemona, when, for them, Paradise has been lost, Iago is dragged away to the tortures that are his element. He does not die, ... he is to linger in pain...

Leah Scragg, 1968

To all but Roderigo, of course, Iago presents himself as incapable of improvisation, except in the limited and seemingly benign form of banter and jig. ... [Yet] like Jonson's Mosca, Iago is fully aware of himself as an improviser and revels in his ability to manipulate his victims, to lead them by the nose like asses, to possess their labor without their ever being capable of grasping the relation in which they are enmeshed.

Stephen Greenblatt, 1980

DESDEMONA

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)

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

The most important causes of Desdemona's powerlessness lie within herself. She idealizes Othello and cannot recognize that he is as susceptible to irrationality and evil as other men. She tells Emilia that her 'noble Moor / Is true of mind, and made of no such baseness / As jealous creatures are.' Evidently surprised, Emilia asks if he is not jealous, and Desdemona replies as though the suggestion were preposterous: 'Who? He? I think the sun where he was born / Drew all such humors from him'.

Shirley Nelson Garner, 1976

CASSIO

A great arithmetician, / One Michael Cassio, a Florentine, ... That never set a squadron in the field / Nor the division of a battle knows / More than a spinster ... (Iago, I, i)

A knave very voluble, no further conscionable than in putting on the mere form of civil and humane seeming, for the better compassing of his salt and most hidden loose affection. (Iago, II, i)

Cassio hath a daily beauty in his life... (Iago, V, i)

Poets, Authors, Critics, Scholars

Cassio is brave, benevolent and honest, ruined only by his want of stubbornness to resist an insidious invitation.

Samuel Johnson, 1868

He's a ladies man, not a seducer, but he's better at holding wool in the drawing room than being in a barroom where he's ill at ease – women shouldn't be there, anyway. He wants to be authoritative and one of the boys, but when in trouble, he runs to the ladies. How right that he should be the one to be quarrelsome when he gets in tight, a characteristic of a person who has hidden resentments.

W. H. Auden, 1947

EMILIA

Do not learn of him Emilia, though he be your husband. (Desdemona, II, ii)

I do think it is their husbands' faults / If wives do fall. (Emilia, IV, iii)

Let them all / All, all cry shame against me, yet I'll speak. (Emilia, V, ii)

Poets, Authors, Critics, Scholars

Emilia in this play is a perfect portrait from common life, a masterpiece in the Flemish style; and though not necessary as a contrast, it cannot be but that the thorough vulgarity, the loose principles of this plebeian woman, united to a high degree of spirit, energetic feeling, strong sense, and low cunning, serve to place in brighter relief the exquisite refinement, the moral grace, the unblemished truth, and the soft submission of Desdemona.

Anna Brownell Jameson, 1832

The virtue of Emilia is such as we often find worn loosely, but not cast off, easy to commit small crimes, but quickened and alarmed by atrocious villainies.

Samuel Johnson, 1868

You'd expect Emilia to know Iago best – yet she gives him the handkerchief. She is stupid. She thinks men are all crazy anyway, that you must put up with them or they'll make a fuss. Anything for a quiet life.

W. H. Auden, 1947

RODERIGO

What should I do? I confess it is my shame to be so fond, but it is not in my virtue to amend it. (Roderigo, I, iii)

... This young quat ... (Iago, V, i)

Poets, Authors, Critics, Scholars

Roderigo's suspicious credulity, and impatient submission to the cheats which he sees practiced upon him, and which by persuasion he suffers to be repeated, exhibit a strong picture of a weak mind betrayed by unlawful desires to a false friend.

Samuel Johnson, 1868

Roderigo is the stupidest of the men whom Iago deals with, but he is the one who destroys Iago. Roderigo is neither handsome nor bright, and he is envious of those who are, but he does have one asset – money. He is the type who buys what he wants with money, including sleeping with lots of girls. He won't love anyone, however, because he is unattractive and afraid he won't be loved back. He may, though, care for Desdemona a little. He wants to be Cassio and Iago.

W. H. Auden, 1947

Commentaries on the Play

The beauties of this play impress themselves so strongly upon the attention of the reader, that they can draw no aid from critical illustration. The fiery openness of Othello, magnanimous, artless, and credulous, boundless in his confidence, ardent in his affection, inflexible in his resolution, and obdurate in his revenge; the cool malignity of Iago, silent in his resentment, subtle in his designs, and studious at once of his interest and his vengeance; the soft simplicity of Desdemona, confident of merit, and conscious of innocence, her artless perseverance in her suit, and her slowness to suspect that she can be suspected, are such proofs of Shakespeare's skill in human nature, as, I suppose, it is vain to seek in any modern writer.

Samuel Johnson, *The Plays of William Shakespeare*, 1765

Iago near Othello is the precipice near the landslip. "This way!" he says in a low voice. The snare advises blindness. ... Falsehood serves as a blind man's dog to jealousy. ...

Desdemona dies, stifled by the pillow upon which the first kiss was given, and which receives the last sigh.

Victor Hugo, *William Shakespeare*, 1864

[Othello] comes before us, dark and grand, with a light upon him from the sun where he was born; but no longer young, and now grave, self-controlled, steeled by the experience of countless perils, hardships and vicissitudes, at once simple and stately in bearing and in speech, a great man naturally modest but fully conscious of his worth, proud of his services to the state, unawed by dignitaries and unelated by honours, secure, it would seem, against all dangers from without and all rebellion from within. ...

Othello's nature is all of one piece. His trust, where he trusts, is absolute. Hesitation is almost impossible to him. He is extremely self-reliant, and decides and acts instantaneously. If stirred to indignation, as "in Aleppo once", he answers with one lightning stroke. Love, if he loves, must be to him the heaven where either he must live or bear no life. If such a passion as jealousy seizes him, it will swell into a well-nigh uncontrollable flood. He will press for immediate conviction or immediate relief. ...

He stirs, I believe, in most readers a passion of mingled love and pity which they feel for no other hero in Shakespeare.

A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 1904

In Shakespeare's most compact and painful tragedy [Iago] is the artisan of an intrigue that first alienates and then destroys a pair of wedded lovers, in an action fraught with the pathos that attends the loss of noble love and noble life. ...

Labels... adhere only to surfaces and mock us with superficiality when we try to apply them to Shakespeare's depths. We detect the type with which he begins but lose it in the unique creation with which he ends. Applied to Iago, the Machiavellian label, while supplying some prefatory enlightenment, is too general to carry us very far into the moral meaning of his role.

Bernard Spivak, *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil*, 1958

The Shakespearean tragic hero, as everybody knows, is an overstater. His individual accent will vary with his personality, but there is always a residue of hyperbole. This, it would seem, is for Shakespeare the authentic tragic music, mark of a world where a man's reach must always exceed his grip and

everything costs not less than everything. ... [Othello speaks:] "*Nay, had she been true,/ If heaven would make me such another world/ Of one entire and perfect chrysolite,/ I'd not have sold her for it.*" ...

Othello's foil of course is Iago, about whose imagery and speech there hangs ... a constructed air, an ingenious, hyperconscious generalizing air. ... Yet Iago's poison does not work more powerfully through his images than through a corrosive habit of abstraction applied in those unique relations of love and faith where abstraction is most irrelevant and most destructive.

Maynard Mack, *Some Observations on the Construction of the Tragedies*, 1961

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.

Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, 1964.

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.

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

It is surely not surprising that Shakespeare, the dramatist whose sympathy for the despised alien upsets the balance of the otherwise "unrealistic" *The Merchant of Venice* should want to create a play about a kind of black man not yet seen on the English stage; a black man whose humanity is eroded by the cunning and racism of whites. ...

In *Othello*, then, Shakespeare presents his Elizabethan audience with a series of propositions which serve to reverse or disturb their settled notions of black people. A Christian African is pitted against a diabolical white, a startling reversal of the norm. An honorable and self-restrained African is also pitted against a sensual, debased white who lusts after his wife, again a reversal. ... Othello, proud of his services to the State, and committed to the State's religion, falsely believes that he is an accepted part of that society, and that marriage into that society would be tolerated. ...

Shakespeare raises ...questions about blackness and whiteness without fully resolving them. ... Whatever his intentions may have been, we have to take seriously the significance of Othello's race in our interpretation of the play.

Ruth Cowhig, *Blacks in English Renaissance Drama and the Role of Shakespeare's Othello*, 1985

The collapse of Othello is augmented in dignity and poignance when we gain our full awareness of Iago's achieved negativity, war everlasting. No critic needs judge Othello to be stupid, for Othello does not incarnate war, being as he is a sane and honorable warrior. He is peculiarly vulnerable to Iago precisely because Iago is his standard-bearer, the protector of his colors and reputation in battle, pledge to die rather than allow the colors to be taken. ... Othello, within his occupation's limits, has the greatness of the tragic hero. Iago breaks down those limits from within, from war's own camp, and so Othello has no chance. Had the attack come from the world outside war's dominion, Othello could have maintained some coherence, and gone down in the name of the purity of arms. Shakespeare, courting a poetics of pain, could not allow his hero this consolation.

Harold Bloom, *Introduction to William Shakespeare's Othello. Modern Critical Interpretations*, 1987

From "*Shakespeare's Desdemona*"

Any effort to describe [Desdemona] must take into account all of what she says and does as well as what other characters say about her and how their views are limited by their own personalities and values. 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.

That Desdemona is neither goddess nor slut Shakespeare makes very clear.... Desdemona's liveliness, assertiveness, and sensuality are corroborated in her marrying Othello. The crucial fact of her marriage is not that she elopes but that she, a white woman, weds a black man. Though many critics focus on the universality of experience in *Othello*, we cannot forget the play's racial context. Othello's blackness is as important as Shylock's Jewishness, and indeed the play dwells relentlessly upon it.... Critics speculate about what Othello's marriage to Desdemona means for him but usually fail to consider what it means for her to marry someone so completely an outsider. What are we to make of Desdemona's choosing Othello rather than one of her countrymen?... Desdemona's marrying a man different from Roderigo, Cassio, and the other "curlèd darlings" of Italy is to her credit. She must recognize in Othello a dignity, energy, excitement, and power that all around her lack. Since these qualities are attributable to his heritage, she may be said to choose him because he is African, black, an outsider. When she says she saw Othello's visage in his mind, she suggests that she saw beneath the surface to those realities that

seemed to offer more promise of life...

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.... Her elopement is more surely a measure of her determination to have a life that seems to offer the promise of excitement and adventure denied her as a sheltered Venetian's senator daughter.

Because Desdemona cuts herself off from her father and friends and marries somebody from a vastly different culture, she is even more alone on Cyprus than she would ordinarily have been in a strange place and as a woman in a military camp besides. These circumstances, as well as her character and experience, account in part for the turn the tragedy takes....

Othello is surely one of Shakespeare's bleakest tragedies. Given their characters and experience, both personal and cultural, Desdemona and Othello must fail. They do not know themselves, and they cannot know each other. Further they 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. Yet for all their terrible suffering, Desdemona and Othello are finally denied even that knowledge.

Shirley Nelson Garner

From "*Shakespeare's Desdemona*". *Shakespeare Studies* 9 (1976)

Love, Trust & Destruction in a Murky World by Archibald I. Leyasmeyer

Of Shakespeare's thirty eight plays only three have extended titles. *Twelfth Night*, in the spirit of revelry offers us an alternate title: *or, What You Will*. Two plays have subtitles: *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, and *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice*. In both cases we are given a triple identification of the tragic protagonist: name, geographical place, and status. Ironically, despite all the information, finally both remain mysteriously enigmatic characters, as do their worlds. It is worth noting that *Othello* was Shakespeare's next tragedy after *Hamlet*, and that both plays share strikingly similar thematic elements, patterns of imagery, and linkages. In both we have (actual or metaphoric) poisoning, an infected world, an abused and eventually dead innocent young woman, and the title character concerned about his future reputation. "O God, Horatio, what a wounded name," says the dying Hamlet, "shall I leave behind me!" "Absent thee from felicity a while," he adds, "And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain / To tell my story." Othello too has a story to worry about. "I pray you," he asks at the end of the play, "When you shall these unlucky deeds relate, / Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate / Nor set down in malice...."

Geography is rarely neutral, and Venice makes for a powerful, exotic, fascinating setting. "This is Venice," Brabantio emphasizes early in the play. Since the times of the Crusades, Venice was a dominant trading center, a place of fabulous wealth and great influence. In 1203 Venice, which provided ships and supplies to the Crusaders, persuaded them to attack the Byzantine Empire first, in 1204 Constantinople was conquered, the Empire divided, and Venice gained dramatically. Eventually it became an independent Republic, a "free state," practicing religious tolerance, distancing itself from the religious controversies, permitting the expression of just about any ideas and views, attracting an

impressive variety of artists, creative talents, dazzling beauties. Shakespeare's contemporaries considered Venice fabulous, powerful, corrupt and devious, atheistic, lustful and immoral, dangerous, and attractive, a fascinating gateway to the exotic lands beyond. An elegant place of seductions, passions, plotting, poisoning, murder.

Through the years, from the fourteenth century on, Venice also became identified as the defender of the Christian faith against the Turks. This, of course, is the intense public concern introduced early in the play. "Valiant Othello," says the Duke at the emotional night Senate meeting, "we must straight employ you / Against the general enemy Ottoman." (I,iii) In the fourteenth century Osman I led the Turkish nation, and his followers and successors became known as the Ottoman Turks. In 1453 the Turks conquered Constantinople, and in the sixteenth century they were the most powerful presence in Europe, very expansionistic. During the reign of Suleiman the Magnificent (1520-1566), the Turks even besieged Vienna. Cyprus, the setting for most of *Othello*, became a dramatic place of conflict between the two great powers of Venice and the Turks. As perceived throughout Europe, it was not so much a conflict between two nations as between the forces of Christendom and the "infidels," the forces of darkness.

In 1570, when Shakespeare was 6 years old, the Turks invaded Cyprus, greatly troubling Christian Europe. Cyprus, a Venetian possession, was seen as a civilized, Christian outpost, indeed, Venus' island of love, now threatened and overcome by the brutal Turks. Venice initiated the formation of a Christian consortium, led by Venice, the Pope, and Philip II of Spain. In 1571 the huge Christian fleet moved toward Cyprus, met the Turkish fleet in an area north of Cyprus, near Lepanto, and the world's last great galley battle took place. Some 500 ships were involved, some 60,000 soldiers, plus the many thousands of poor galley rowers. It was a famous Christian victory, celebrated throughout Europe. But for Shakespeare's audiences the sea battle at Lepanto was much more than a famous story about a distant place. Seventeen years later, in 1588, Philip II took his victorious fleet and launched the Armada against another outpost at the edge of Europe — England. As we know, a great storm wiped out the Spanish forces and gave England a victory that was widely interpreted as an indication of God's special protection and favor.

But in 1573, having rearmed, the Turks again conquered Cyprus and then ruled it till the end of the nineteenth century. Thus at the time *Othello* was written, 1603-4, the victory over the Turks at Lepanto was a treasured memory, the "infidel" threat was seen as both real and immediate, and, as the "Epilogue" to Shakespeare's *Henry V* indicates, great victories are soon threatened by great disasters.

Shakespeare writes two plays set in Venice — *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice* — and both are about dramatically visible outsiders to this powerful city ruled for centuries by a few great families through the Senate, the Signiory. One is Shylock, the Jewish money lender from the ghetto, of a different religion; the other the Moor from across the seas, and of a different skin color, an extravagant and dazzling stranger, who is a hired servant of the Venetian state. Very few in Shakespeare's audiences would ever have met either a Jew or a Moor, but probably would readily view them as stereotypical villains. In plays as in life, being different is often perceived as being dangerous.

While Moor was an imprecise broad term and could include all kinds of Northern Africans, in general usage it meant blacks, and for Elizabethans blacks represented darkness, danger, and the demonic. Blacks were associated with the sons of Cham, the rejected sinful son of Noah. In medieval illustrations devils are shown with black faces. A considerable body of existing literature depicted blacks as passionate, barbaric, savage. They were not Christians but heathens, at a time when this distinction meant far more than it does today. The very language negatively characterized them: white carried all

kinds of positive associations while black had seriously negative ones. In 1601 Queen Elizabeth even ordered that all "negars and blackamoores," of which there could not have been many, be expelled from England. So it should not be surprising that in plays of this period blacks are stage villains, including Aaron the Moor in Shakespeare's own *Titus Andronicus*. (For a good discussion of these matters, see Eldred Jones, *Othello's Countrymen*, Oxford University Press, 1965, and K.W. Evans, "The Racial Factor in *Othello*," *Shakespeare Studies* 5, 1969, 124-40.)

Othello is deliberately a racially charged play, and interpreters who minimize or deny Othello's blackness — at times almost desperately and frantically, and often for very suspect reasons — seem to me to diminish it. For this play Shakespeare wants a black Othello in Venice. Aesthetically, thematically, dramatically, logically, the play requires him to be black. He himself claims his blackness very directly: "I am black..." (III,iii). Iago, Roderigo, and Brabantio establish the early attitudes in the play, and they, of course, readily work with the existing prejudices, from Iago's "old black ram," to Roderigo's "thick lips" and Brabantio's "sooty bosom." And then Shakespeare brings on his black Othello, and instead of a stage villain we see a majestic, assured, wise, virtuous, eloquent, splendid individual, almost out of the world of legends, myth, or exotic dreams. He is a noble hero, a great warrior, a Christian, selected to defend Venice, Cyprus and the Christian faith against the infidel Turks. Even Iago admits "that for their souls / Another of his fathom [ability] they have none / To lead their business." (I,i)

In his last extended speech, the glorious "Soft you, a word or two before you go," Othello requests, "Speak of me as I am." He then even provides some descriptions and assessments of his own. "Speak of me as I am." Indeed. A Moor of noble blood. An adventurer. A great general. A lover. A poet. The outsider. And the murderer. Cassio's last comment is "he was great of heart." But in Act IV Othello strikes Desdemona, and Lodovico exclaims, "My lord, this would not be believed in Venice, / Though I should swear I saw't." In a few moments he questions,

Is this the noble Moor whom our full Senate
Call all in all sufficient? Is this the nature
Whom passion could not shake? whose solid virtue
The shot of accident nor dart of chance
Could neither graze nor pierce?

Iago's cryptic response: "He is much changed." (IV,i)

Indeed, the entire play is a complex tapestry of ambiguities, uncertainties, changes — observed, reported, promised. "It cannot be long that Desdemona should continue her love to the Moor," notes Iago. "She must change for youth." (I,iii) "Are we turned Turks," Othello demands of the drunken soldiers. "O God," moans the disgraced Cassio, "that we should with joy, pleasance, revel, and applause transform ourselves into beasts!" "I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial." (II,iii) "Exchange me for a goat" is Othello's demand, (III,iii) and soon Desdemona states, "My lord is not my lord." (III,iv) Close to the end of the play Lodovico enters, asking, "Where is this rash and most unfortunate man?" and Othello responds, "That's he that was Othello; Here I am." (V,ii) Indeed, the unfolding tragedy has confirmed Iago's assertion, "He is much changed."

What is constant? What is true and what is false? Which reports are to be believed? How is one to know? Which is the enemy? The Turks are drowned, but the honest friend, who tells us early on, "I am not what I am," remains close by, the true alien, whispering lies in the ear. "So will I turn her virtue into pitch," (II,iii) he has promised. In his growing despair Othello cries out, "she had eyes, and chose me," (III,iii) but Iago suggests that that was then, but this is now.

Brabantio's ironic last lines are "Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see; / She has deceived her father, and may thee." (I,iii) A character's final exit lines often resonate with multiple significances. This warning from the deeply hurt father, of course, is never confirmed in reality, but it does echo in Othello's mind. "I'll see before I doubt," he asserts, but then sadly enough the doubts all too quickly overwhelm him. He demands, "give me the ocular proof," (III,iii) but we know already how readily the eyes mislead and lie. The "honest" Iago is dramatically false. And the supposedly suspect stage black is the exotically, seductively, splendidly noble Othello. He speaks, and the Duke remarks, "I think this tale would win my daughter too." (I,iii) Iago though, not surprisingly, smirks "with what violence she first loved the Moor but for bragging and telling her fantastical lies." (II,i) Brabantio in his pain cries, "O thou foul thief... thou hast enchanted her... in chains of magic." Why else would she run "to the sooty bosom / Of such a thing as thou"? It had to be "foul charms" or "drugs or minerals." Dark, lustful things. (I,ii) And then in the Senate scene Desdemona makes a dramatic entrance to declare simply "I love the Moor," and "to his honors and his valiant parts / Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate." (I,iii) There is no other magic than that of love and admiration and affection. As Othello arrives in Cyprus and sees Desdemona he speaks passionately, "It gives me wonder great as my content / To see you here before me. O my soul's joy!" "If it were now to die, / 'Twere now to be most happy..." (II,i) One thinks of Shakespeare's glorious Sonnet #116:

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
 Admit impediments; love is not love
 Which alters when it alteration finds,
 Or bends with the remover to remove.
 O no, it is an ever-fixed mark
 That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
 It is the star to every wand'ring bark,
 Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
 Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
 Within his sickle's compass come,
 Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks
 But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
 If this be error and upon me proved
 I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

During the second night on Cyprus Othello murders Desdemona, claiming "That she with Cassio hath the act of shame / A thousand times committed," (V,ii) which translates roughly into an "act of shame" every two minutes-continuously.

Many of Shakespeare's major villains — Richard III, Edmund, Iago — are strikingly theatrical creatures, daring playwrights, directors, performers. Iago, the street-smart hustler, does the "life ain't fair to a good man" routine. He sets up the "let's torment the old man" business — "poison his delight," "incense her kinsmen," "Plague him with flies." Roderigo says "I'll call aloud," and Iago coaches him to do it with "dire yell / As when, by night and negligence, the fire / Is spied in populous cities," and then demonstrates the "terrible summons" by shouting, "What, ho, Brabantio! Thieves! Thieves! / Look to your house, your daughter, and your bags!" While Brabantio talks of witchcraft, Shakespeare enchants and entraps us. We are intrigued by the typical comic confusion, sucked in by the mystery and intrigue of things. "If ever I did dream / Of such a matter." (II,i) We are a long time finding out what it is. Othello's adventures and travels fascinate not just Desdemona and the Duke but us too. At first we take pleasure in Iago's promises of revenge ("I follow him to serve my turn upon him"), his nasty energy, and most definitely his fascinating playing with highly emotional erotic and taboo elements. "Even now,

now, very now, an old black ram / Is tuppung your white ewe." Once heard, it is impossible not to think of these striking, seductive bestial images, not to feel the lustfulness in them. Our imaginations have been engaged. Just as Othello's will be later in the play.

We sometimes forget that events in plays are written for the audience, not the characters. If Iago is to seduce Othello's mind, Shakespeare first wants him to entrap us. Iago opens the play, he is the chorus, the director, the commentator, the interpreter. It is impossible for us to look at things for long without being aware of the coloring that Iago brings. "I'll be at thy elbow," Iago tells Roderigo, and he stands at ours as well. He always seems to be nearby, while Othello becomes distanced, ever more the outsider. This play operates extensively in the theater of the mind, and while eventually it turns into an erotic nightmare, at the beginning it is seductively fascinating. "When devils will the blackest sins put on, / They do suggest at first with heavenly shows," says Iago, "As I do now." (II,iii)

Shakespeare's tragedies often start with the endings of comedies. The old king is dead, long live the new king, and *Hamlet* gives us the celebration of a royal marriage and promising new beginnings. Unfortunately the ghost of the old king haunts the castle and troubles young Hamlet, and the tragedy is on. Macbeth wins a great victory, is richly rewarded, and a royal celebration for him and his wife takes place. Unfortunately, they kill old king Duncan, and the tragedy is on. In *Othello*, the old man is dismissed, Desdemona and Othello are married, the visible Turkish threat is eliminated. "Our wars are done," says Othello, "the Turks are drowned." (II,i) The Herald announces "the celebration of his nuptial." (II,ii) Unfortunately Othello's trust is in Iago who closes Act I with a dramatic image:

The Moor is of a free and open nature
That thinks men honest that seem to be so;
And will as tenderly be led by th' nose
As asses are...

Through Act II, scene ii of *Othello* we have a Prologue which ends with the comedic conclusion of the celebration of marriage. Then Iago takes over. Acts II through V, Othello is set upon the rack and "practiced upon." In Act II Cassio is brought down. In Act III Othello is destroyed as his mind is invaded. In Act IV, "Othello shall go mad." (IV,i) And in Act V the killing starts.

The Prologue gives us an intensely dramatic situation, at the center of which stands Othello. Iago maligns him, Brabantio accuses him, Cassio and the Senators seek him for an emergency night meeting, officers draw swords to arrest him ("Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them"), and Desdemona leaves her father to marry him. The language sings with an almost antique elegance. First time he is named, the Duke calls him "Valiant Othello." (I,iii) Desdemona enters with magical timing and before the full Senate speaks with eloquence and assurance: "That I love the Moor to live with him... trumpet to the world." (I,iii) The Turkish attack on Cyprus "is a business of some heat," (I,ii) a national emergency, but the meeting of the Signiory comes to a halt as Brabantio presents his case and the Duke hears Othello and Desdemona speak. Their love has visible intensity, magnitude, and significance. And then the Turkish threat is over, and the Herald proclaims "full liberty" to the thousands of soldiers to engage in "feasting."

But this early part of the play also has an unsettling dark undertone. Venice is a world full of threats — fire, thieves, seducers, enchanters, bands of men with swords, dark rumors, reports of the Turks. Symbolically enough, we get Brabantio's cry for illumination: "Light, I say! Light!" (I,i) In Act V, of course, we will have Othello musing, "Put out the light, and then put out the light." (V,ii) The marriage might be a marvelous, daring, love match, but we all too readily dismiss, I think, Brabantio as a familiar comic character. His complaints have a certain validity. Desdemona does violate Elizabethan codes of

behavior, and so does Othello. Brabantio, after all is his friend and host ("Her father loved me, oft invited me"). Their love might be romantically pleasing, but it is also obviously surprising. Brabantio is amazed that "she, in spite of nature, / Of years, of country, credit, everything," might fall "in love with what she feared to look at." (I,iii) "Tis unnatural — "Against all rules of nature." Very soon Iago is to use this same argument to persuade Othello that Desdemona simply could not be true for long.

Brabantio states

my particular grief
Is of so floodgate and o'erbearing nature
That it engulfs and swallows other sorrows,
And it is still itself. (I,iii)

He speaks the same grief that Othello will later in the play. At the beginning we see a father in anguish, betrayed by Desdemona, and we smile; at the end a husband in anguish, believing himself to be betrayed, when in fact Desdemona has been most true. The father disowns his daughter and soon dies; the husband kills his wife and soon himself as well. In both cases it is Iago that "informs" them of their having been betrayed.

At the end of the Signiory scene Othello asks the Duke, "So please your grace, my ensign; / A man he is of honesty and trust, / To his conveyance I assign my wife." (I,iii) By now we know Iago well; Othello obviously does not. "Tis a bad and ominous choice. "My life upon her faith!" declares Othello in response to Brabantio's suggestion that Desdemona could deceive him. Then, "Honest Iago, / My Desdemona must I leave to thee." (I,iii) Iago is ready. He will destroy all three — Desdemona, faithfulness, Othello himself — and we will watch. Entranced.

This process of destruction is obviously far too complex to be adequately discussed in this essay, and so I only provide a few comments suggesting some of the approaches I would take.

The play offers a tension between the love and harmony that transcend barriers of all kinds — the love of the young Desdemona reaching out to the much older, black stranger, a marriage of true minds overcoming censorious fathers, Senate elders, social conventions — and the chaos that confronts us everywhere in the play, from the essentially comic opening scene to the larger chaos of warfare, of sea storms, and which eventually becomes pervasive, as we gaze on the destroyed and dead lovers.

Iago not only hates and despises beauty, honor, goodness, nobility, trust, faith, wherever they may appear, he also needs to deny and destroy them. Othello and Desdemona emerge as beautiful, glorious, romantic figures, almost from an exotic fairy tale setting, and Iago's darkness is repelled. "I have told thee often, and I retell thee again and again, I hate the Moor," emphasizes Iago. (I,iii) The reasons do not matter. He can make up as many as he needs, but no one believes them, least of all himself. The point is that the hate must lead to insult, torment, corruption, destruction: "I follow him to serve my turn upon him." Cassio? "He hath a daily beauty in his life That makes me ugly.... He must die." (V,i) In Iago's world all beautiful things must die. As his disciple Roderigo notes, "'Tis but a man gone." Happens every day.

"What profane wretch art thou?" Brabantio demands of Iago, who shouts in the night vivid and nasty descriptions of Desdemona's and Othello's lovemaking. From the beginning of the play, Iago, this "profane wretch" has the power to define things and therefore to distort and falsify them. What he says might be comic, but it is certainly brutal, intended not so much to inform as to drive Brabantio crazy — "poison his delight." Is what Iago says true? No, but even if it were, the act of love has been translated

into an erotic, animalistic, fascinating and repulsive image. For Iago the realm of love is merely lust in action, and as we know from Sonnet #129, lust in action is "Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame,"

...perjur'd, murd'rous, bloody, full of blame,
Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust,
Enjoy'd no sooner but despised straight,
Past reason hunted, and no sooner had,
Past reason hated as a swallowed bait
On purpose laid to make the taker mad....

"It cannot be long that Desdemona should continue her love to the Moor," Iago tells Roderigo — and us — early in the play. (I,iii) "It was a violent commencement in her... The food that to him now is as luscious as locusts [a sweet fruit] shall be to him shortly as bitter as coloquintida [a bitter laxative]... when she is sated with his body... a frail vow... an erring barbarian... supersubtle Venetian... thou shalt enjoy her." Brabantio fears witchcraft, dark magic; Iago sees only the physicality of ugly lust. To him, Desdemona's "supersubtle Venetian" love is merely a violent physical reaction. Othello the barbarian will eagerly feed on the sweet (and forbidden) fruits and then purge, and her body and lust will be glutted.

The first day on Cyprus Iago "the playwright" creates another vivid scene for Roderigo's theater of the mind, now with a new player. "I must tell thee this: Desdemona is directly in love with him [Cassio]." (II,i) "Why, 'tis not possible," even stupid Roderigo perceives. "When the blood is made dull with the act of sport," argues Iago, "there should be a game to inflame it and to give satiety a fresh appetite.... her delicate tenderness will find itself abused, begin to heave the gorge [vomit]..." Roderigo sees between Cassio and Desdemona only "courtesy." "Lechery!" cries Iago. "They met so near with their lips that their breaths embraced together." All that is needed now is the "main exercise, th' incorporate conclusion...." Most of the words Iago uses are still familiar to us today, but in general usage many of them have lost a particular nasty, vulgar quality. Even so, the very images he provides — gorging, excreting, vomiting, gorging again on new and newly gamey game — stand in stark contrast to the romantic nobility of love we have seen in Othello's and Desdemona's marriage. And it is not merely a matter of ignoring love to focus on sexuality; he makes even sexuality crude, repulsive, grotesque. This is no longer lustfulness or lechery, only a repugnant awareness of physical activities. Cassio banters with Desdemona and kisses his three fingers, an Italian gesture of a courtier. Iago, no courtier himself, mutters to himself, "Yet again your fingers to your lips? Would they were clyster pipes for your sake!" (II,i) Clyster pipes are enema tubes. Iago's excremental vision does not even need an audience to operate.

So how does this creature of the dark shadows succeed in destroying the noble Othello? The account of *Othello* is not a documentary, and we should not expect a certain consistent logic in dark and oppressive nightmares. Still, some things can be noted. The honest Iago has provided trusted service before, and he repeatedly emphasizes his concern as a friend. ("I would not have your free and noble nature... be abused." "My lord, you know I love you." To which Othello replies, "I know thou'rt full of love and honesty.") Iago has incredible luck, as with the handkerchief, the lovers' symbol of faith and trust. Iago is uncommonly shrewd in perceiving needs and vulnerabilities, and he uses brilliantly perverted logic. Brabantio claimed three times that his daughter's falling in love with the black foreigner clearly violated "all rules of nature." Iago, who used racial taunts to bait Brabantio, now, more subtly, uses racial insinuations to awaken Othello's uncertainty.

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

Othello simply agrees, "And so she did." Iago presses on with "She that so young could give out such a seeming," "a will most rank," "thoughts unnatural." He all but calls her a lustful slut daring to enjoy the forbidden fruit. But then, she is a Venetian woman, Iago reminds Othello, a Senator's daughter, and Venice, as we know, is full of all kinds of courtesans. "I know our country disposition well," Iago declares, implying that Othello does not, and

In Venice they do let heaven see the pranks
They dare not show their husbands; their best conscience
Is not to leave't undone, but kept unknown. (III,iii)

It is not long before Othello, the great general, gives the two worst orders of his life: "be sure thou prove my love a whore!" and "Make me to see't!" (III,iii) Iago leaps at both commands with genuine eagerness. It is a destructive pornographer's dream assignment. In the opening scene he made Brabantio see and feel and howl, now he will do the same for Othello.

And so we get vapors of dungeons and the smells of cheap peepshows, grotesque images and tantalizing glimpses. Iago controls the language and through it the imagination. Desdemona "to be naked with her friend in bed / An hour or more, not meaning any harm..." (IV,i) Once planted, this kind of thing tends to stick in the mind. We have insinuations, suggestions, interpretations, until the echoes echo in the mind and images burn in the brain. "I lay with Cassio lately," Iago begins,

There are a kind of men so loose of soul
That in their sleep will mutter their affairs.
One of this kind is Cassio.
In sleep I heard him say, 'Sweet Desdemona,
Let us be wary, let us hide our loves!'
And then, sir, would he gripe and wring my hand,
Cry 'O sweet creature!' Then kiss me hard,
As if he plucked up kisses by the roots
That grew upon my lips; laid his leg o'er my thigh,
And sigh, and kiss.... (III,iii)

Instead of wondering why Iago permitted all of this to happen, Othello can only gasp, "O, monstrous! monstrous!" Iago, of course, nastily adds, "Nay, this was but his dream." Robert Ornstein effectively describes Iago's method as one that "seeks to hypnotize the mind by the sinuous weavings of obscene suggestion and image." Iago's own observation: "I'll pour this pestilence into his ear." (II,iii) As in *Hamlet*, poison in the ear kills, the infection spreads, and the very atmosphere becomes poisoned. Othello is great of heart *and* imagination, and Iago easily makes him see and feel. Soon he rages using Iago's dark, painfully fascinating, repulsive language, full of erotic obsessions and animalistic images. "I had been happy if the general camp," he declares, "Pioners [trench diggers] and all, had tasted her sweet body, / So I had nothing known." (III,iii) The entire army, "tasting" Desdemona's body. We have only dark lust, a piece of meat covered with black clouds of summer flies.

Iago is a brilliant playwright who tantalizes with suggestions, insinuations, glimpses of the forbidden, then pulls back and makes Othello himself complete the scene by questioning and interpreting. "What doest thou say?" "Was not that Cassio parted from my wife?" "Who is 't you mean?" "What dost thou

say, Iago?" "Why of thy thought, Iago?" "Discernest thou aught in that?" "Is he not honest?" "What dost thou think?" "What didst not like?" "What dost thou mean?" "Why, why is this?" This sustained questioning not only undercuts and erodes his natural faith but also makes him a co-creator of these images. They become his own.

Most productions of Shakespeare's plays minimize their eroticism, typically taming powerful material. Because women's parts in Shakespeare's day were played by boy actors, lovers on stage tend to do relatively little physically; they talk. Maybe in our age of explicit sex, we have lost some awareness of the eroticism of language, but I think it essential to recognize the intense, innocent sensuality of Desdemona. *Othello* is powerfully emotional, and not just in Iago's dark terms. Desdemona loves Othello spiritually, but she certainly also loves him physically. In front of the whole Venetian Senate she dramatically declares that she does not intend to wait for Othello's return. She wants the full rites of marriage — now. "Let me go with him." (I,iii) Othello assures the Senate that he would never "your serious and great business scant," but talks of passion. What women follow armies into battle? Especially battles against the notoriously cruel Turks? A few wives, maybe. Camp followers. And a fascinating, enchanting, amorous young woman, a Venetian Senator's daughter, who dares to abandon her father, impulsively marry an exotic adventurer, of another race and background, to follow him anywhere, even across the sea to Cyprus and the Turkish wars.

Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are destroyed because of the evil they commit. Othello and Desdemona are destroyed because the intensity of their love and affection made them so vulnerable. Once Iago starts to invade Othello's mind, love, the greatest of things, becomes the dark destroyer.

Demonic possession of any kind is terrible to observe, almost impossible to analyze. In this play Iago finally becomes the true alien (far more terrifyingly so than the thing in Sigourney Weaver's *Alien* films), invading Othello's very being. One of the most disturbing lines in the play is Othello's simple declaration, "I am bound to thee forever." (III,iii) Later in the scene the awful linkage is consecrated in a dark mockery of the marriage ceremony. Othello kneels, then speaks, "Now, by yond marble heaven, / In the due reverence of a sacred vow / I here engage my words." Iago tells him, "Do not rise yet," then kneels alongside Othello. "Witness, you ever-burning lights above," Iago continues,

You elements that clip [enfold] us round about,
Witness that here Iago doth give up
The execution of his wit, hands, heart
To wronged Othello's service! Let him command,
And to obey shall be in me remorse,
What bloody business ever.

They rise together. "I greet thy love," declares Othello. Then Iago, "I am your own forever." (III,iii) This, I believe, is the most frightening line in the play.

"I will chop her into messes," Othello now muses. The white wedding sheets seem "a cistern for foul toads / To knot and gender in." Looking at Cassio, "O, I see that nose of yours, but not that dog I shall throw it to." (IV,i) "How shall I murder him, Iago?" "I would have him nine years a-killing!" (IV,i) As Lodovico asks a few minutes later, "Is this the noble Moor?"

The Bridegroom has turned into the deadly Iceman, ready to do the priestly sacrifice. Justice requires it, or "else she'll betray more men." "I will kill thee, / And love thee after," frozen in death like a figure on the Grecian Urn, past passion, past temptation. The light will be put out, the rose plucked. Othello kisses the sleeping Desdemona, then, "O balmy breath, that dost almost persuade / Justice to break her sword."

He remains a truer lover to the end than he ever knows.

We are struck by the incomprehensibility of it all at the end. The Turks seem to constitute the great national threat at the beginning of the play, but it is the honest Venetian Christian, with the white skin, not out there somewhere, but here, always nearby, who is the alien monster. Othello, the legendary warrior, in his rage attempts to kill him, twice, but is unable to do so. "I bleed, sir, but not killed," Iago mocks him. (V,ii) We remember the promise: "I am your own forever." "Why?" demands Othello. "Why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body?" "Demand me nothing," Iago replies. "What you know, you know." The rest is silence. The mystery of evil has no easy or ready explanation.

Camus has written, "if the world were clear, art would not exist. Art helps us to pierce the opacity of the world." But bad art simplifies and tames, while important art questions, challenges complexity and mystery, enlarges our vision and perception. Bad art would probably inform us about Iago's sad childhood. Shakespeare's Iago simply tells us, "What you know, you know." The mystery of the unknowable remains. *Hamlet* is full of seeming, appearing, whispers in the night. For Duncan, Macbeth's castle seems so fair, but it is a place of foul murder when the king falls asleep. Lear has three daughters, and he cannot identify the true one. Gloucester has two sons and cannot distinguish between the fair and foul one either. Angelo in *Measure for Measure* (Shakespeare's next play after *Othello*) seemingly is a man of grace and honor; soon we see him ready to rape and murder. In *Othello* the black stranger is noble and great of heart, while the supposedly honest Iago is monstrously foul. Venetian women are supposed to be lustfully unfaithful, but Desdemona is constant till death, full of faith, forgiveness and love. How is one to know? How to establish?

Both Hamlet and Othello are told of terrible wrongs that have been committed. Othello responds with easy belief, and then finds that he is responsible for a horrible wrong. Hamlet doubts and probes and questions, and finds that the killing continues, of the guilty and innocent alike. It's in the nature of tragedy. How to test or trust? Lear stages a public theater to prove love, and tragically fails. Othello sets out to prove faithfulness, demands "ocular proof" and, just as tragically, fails. Of course, love and faithfulness cannot be proved (nor bought); when found, they are freely given and must be accepted on trust. Even, I fear, in a corrupted, fallen, dangerous, murky, pornographic world.

Professor Archibald Leyasmeyer of the English Department of the University of Minnesota originally wrote this essay especially for the Study Guide of the 1993 production of *Othello*.

GLOSSARY

A Selected Glossary

[Shakespeare] had a deep drive to coin words anew, and I am always astonished that he employed more than twenty-one thousand separate words. Of these, he invented roughly one out of twelve: about eighteen hundred coinages, many of them now in common use. - Harold Bloom, 2003

Abroad

broadly, widely, generally.

“...it is thought abroad” (Iago, I,iii)

at large

“...as knaves be such abroad...” (Iago, IV,i)

Abused

mocked

“I would not have your free and noble nature/ Out of self-bounty be abused.” (Iago, III,iii)

Achieved

acquired, obtained

“He hath achieved a maid/ That paragons description and wild fame” (Cassio, II,i)

Acknown

acquainted, acknowledged

“Be not acknown to it” (Iago, III,iii)

Addition

credit, distinction, sign or title of honor

“And think it no addition, nor my wish,/ To have him see me womaned” (Cassio, III,i); “To do the act that might the addition earn...” (Desdemona, IV,ii)

Affined

bound by ties, committed, obliged

“Whether I in any just term am affined/ To love the Moor.” (Iago, I,i); “If partially affined, or leagued in office/ Thou dost deliver more or less than truth...” (Montano. II,iii)

Agnize

acknowledge, admit

“...I do agnize/ A natural and prompt alacrity/ I find in hardness...” (Othello, I,iii)

Alarum

a call (usu. to arms); a compelling signal

“And when she speaks is it not an alarum to love?” (Iago, II,iii)

Aleppo

town in the Asian part of Turkey

“...in Aleppo once,/ Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk/ Beat a Venetian and traduced the state...” (Othello, V,ii)

Almain

German (from the French word *Allemand*)

“He sweats not to overthrow your Almain...” (Iago, II,ii)

Ancient

standard-bearer in battle; personal attendant to a military commander. (See also: **ensign**, same pronunciation and meaning, different spelling)

“And I, God bless the mark, his Moorship ancient.” (Iago, I,i)

Answerable

corresponding. (see **sequestration**)

“It was a violent commencement in her and thou should see an answerable sequestration...” (Iago, I,iii)

Anthropophagi

cannibals (from Greek *anthropo* – human being, *phago* – to eat).

“...the cannibals that each other eat,/ The Antropophagi, ...” (Othello, I,iii)

Antres

caverns; entryways

“...Wherein of antres vast...” (Othello, I,iii)

Approved

esteemed

“Most potent, grave, and reverend, signiors...” (Othello, I,iii)

proved

“ And he that is approved in this offence...” (Othello, II,ii)

Apt

fitting

“That she loves him, ‘tis apt and of great credit...” (Iago, II,i)

Arabian trees

trees reputed for their medicinal sap

“Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees/ Their medicinable gum.” (Othello, V,ii)

Arch-mock

extreme mockery

“the fiend's arch-mock...” (Iago, IV,i)

Arraigning

accusing

“I was, unhandsome warrior as I am,/ Arraigning his unkindness with my soul” (Desdemona, III,iv)

Aspics

venomous snakes

“Swell, bossom, with thy fraught,/ For ‘tis of aspics tongues!” (Othello, III,iii)

Assay

attempt, try

“Come on, assay” (Desdemona, II,i); “And passion having my best judgment collied/ Assays to lead the way” (Othello, II,iii)

Attach

arrest, seize

“I therefore apprehend and do attach thee...” (Brabantio, I,ii)

Attend

await, wait for

“... the generous islanders/By you invited, do attend your presence.” (Desdemona, III,iii)

Aught

anything; something

“Discern'st though aught in that?” (Othello, III,iii).

Also meaning everything

“For aught I know” (Iago, III,iii) [“To the best of my knowledge”]

Avaunt

away (as interjection)

“Avaunt, be gone!” (Othello, III,iii)

Bauble

plaything

“thither comes the bauble...” (Cassio, IV,i)

Begrimed

spoiled, stained

“Her name, that was as fresh/ As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black/ As mine own face.” (Othello, III,iii)

Beguile

deceive

“So let the Turk of Cyprus us beguile...” (Brabantio, I,iii); “...beguiled your daughter of herself” (Duke of Venice, I,iii); “as 'tis the strumpet's plague/ To beguile many and be beguiled by one.” (Iago, IV,i); “...often did beguile her of her tears/ When I did speak...” (Othello, I,iii)

Be-lee'd

nautical term: to place a ship “on the lee,” a bad position in relation to the winds

“And I... must be be-lead” (Iago, I,i)

Beshrew

mild oath (evil befall one)

“Beshrew me much, Emilia...” (Desdemona,III,iv); “Beshrew him for't...” (Iago, IV,ii)

Betimes

early, soon

“I'll be with thee betimes.” (Roderigo, I,iii); “...betimes in the morning...” (Cassio, II,iii)

Billeted

assigned lodging

“Retire thee, go where thou art billeted” (Iago, II,iii)

Birdlime

a sticky substance used to catch birds

“...my invention/ Comes from my pate as birdlime does from frieze” (Iago, II,i)

Blazoning

boasting, praising

“One that excells the quirks of blazoning pens...” (Cassio, II,i)

Blowing

laying eggs

“...as summer flies are in the shambles,/ That quicken even with blowing.” (Othello, IV,ii)

Blown

inflated, puffed out, full of empty air, overstated

“When I shall turn the business of my soul/ To such exsufflicate and blown surmises” (Othello, III,iii)

Bobbed

acquired by cunning means

“...gold and jewels that I bobbed from him/ As gifts for Desdemona...” (Iago, V,i)

Boding

predicting darkly, forecasting doom

“It comes o’er my memory/ As doth the raven o’er the infectious house/ Boding to all...” (Othello, IV,i)

Bolster

sharing the same pillow (lie together)

“damn them then,/ If ever mortal eyes do see them bolster/ More than their own.” (Othello, III,iii)

Bombast circumstance

bombast (and **fustian**, see below): terms for the cotton stuffing that was used to pad out clothes; hence “bombast circumstance” refers metaphorically to inflated talk, over-padded with rhetoric

“Evades them with a bombast circumstance” (Iago, I,i)

Boon

request, favor

“Why, this is not a boon/ 'Tis as I should entreat you wear your gloves...” (Desdemona, III,ii)

Bootless

pointless, useless

“He robs himself that spends a bootless grief” (Othello, I,iii)

Bounteous

virtuous, generous, goodhearted (from the French *bonté* = goodness)

“Bounteous madam...” (Cassio, III,iii)

Brace

couple, few

“...a brace of Cyprus gallants that would fain...” (Iago, II,iii)

Bridal

wedding

“...such observancy/ As fits the bridal” (Desdemona, III,iv)

Cable

scope

“He will divorce you,/ Or put upon you what restraint and grievance/ The law... will give him cable...” (Iago, I,ii)

ropes, ties

“I confess me knit to thy deserving with cables of perdurable toughness.” (Iago, 1,iii)

Caitiff

wretch, slave

“Alas, poor caitiff!” (IV,i)

Callat

(spelled also: callet, callot) derogatory slang term for a woman of disrepute, slut

“A beggar in his drink/ Could not have laid such terms upon his callat.” (Emilia, IV,ii)

Cannakin

a little can

“And let me the cannakin clink...” (Song, II,iii)

Carack

a treasure ship

“Faith, he tonight hath boarded a land carack” (Iago, I,ii)

Cashiered

discarded from office with no pay

“... when he's old, cashiered” (Iago, I,i)

Challenge

calls for, claims, commands

“...his worthiness/ Does challenge much respect.” (Othello, II,i)

Chamberer

gallant or courtier who spends most time in ladies' chambers (as opposed to a soldier)

“...have not those soft parts of conversation/ That chamberers have” (Othello, III,ii)

Charm

control, hold (in this usage)

“Go to, charm your tongue.” (Iago, V, ii)

Check

as noun: rebuke, reprimand, reproof

“However this may gall him with some check...” (Iago, I,i); “...is not, almost, a fault/ T'incur a private check.” (Desdemona, III,iii)

as verb: stop

“I am desperate of my fortunes if they check me here.” (Cassio, II,iii)

Chrysolite

green, semiprecious stone

“...one entire and perfect chrysolite...” (Othello, V,ii)

Circumstanced

forced to obey the conditions

“...I must be circumstanced” (Bianca, III,iv)

Civil monster

monster who lives in a city; repelling city inhabitant

“There's many a beast in a populous city/ And many a civil monster.” (Iago, IV,i)

Clip

embrace, encompass

“You elements that clip us round about...” (Othello, III,iii)

Close delations

(also spelled **dilations**) secret accusations, concealed thoughts

“...in a man that's just,/ They're close delations, working from the heart...” (Othello, III,iii)

Clogs

wooden blocks attached to horses' legs to prevent their escape

“...thy escape would teach me tyranny/ To hang clogs on them.” (Brabantio, I,iii)

Clyster-pipes

syringes for enema or vaginal douche

“Would they were clyster-pipes for your sake!” (Iago, II,i)

Cogging

cheating, deceiving, lying

“Some cogging, cozening slave...” (Emilia, IV,ii)

Collied

darkened, kept in the dark (derived from coal)

“And passion having my best judgment collied/ Assays to lead the way” (Othello, II,iii)

Coloquintida

colocynth, yellowish-green fruit of the plant called bitter apple, once thought to be poisonous

“The food that to him now is as sweet as locusts shall be to him shortly as acerb as coloquintida”
(Iago, I,iii)

Compassing

attaining, obtaining

“...for the better compassing of his salt and most hidden loose affection.” (Iago, II,i)

Composition

consistency

“There is no composition in these news” (Duke of Venice, I,iii)

Compt

the Day of Judgement

“When we shall meet at compt/ This look of thine will hurl my soul from heaven...” (Othello, V,ii)

Conjunctive

united, jointly engaged

“let us be conjunctive in our revenge” (Iago, I,iii)

Converse

interaction, exchange, conversation

“...I'll devise a mean to draw the Moor/ Out of the way, that your converse and business/ May be more free.” (Iago, III,i)

Cope

lie with

“He hath, and is again to cope your wife” (Iago, IV,i)

Counter-caster

accountant; someone using round pieces (“counters”) for adding and subtracting

“This counter-caster/ He, in good time, must his lieutenant be...” (Iago, I,i)

Coursers

strong racehorses

“...you'll have coursers for cousins and jennets for germans!” (Iago, I,i)

Cozening

cheating (see also: **cogging**)

“Some cogging, cozening slave...” (Emilia, IV,ii)

Crusadoes

Portuguese coins minted with a cross sign on their design

“I had rather have lost my purse/ Full of crusadoes” (Desdemona, III,iv)

Cry

rumor, word-of mouth

“The cry goes that you shall marry her.” (Iago, IV,i)

Cudgelled

beaten

“I have been tonight exceedingly well cudgelled” (Roderigo, II,iii)

Delivered

come to life, as in being born; achieved

“There are many events in the womb of time which will be delivered.” (Iago, I,iii)

Designment

plan, intention

“The desperate tempest hath so banged the Turks/ That their designment halts.” (Gentleman in Cyprus, II,i)

Despised time

disgraced years, old age, decrepit, dishonored state

“And what's to come of my despised time/ Is nought but bitterness.” (Brabantio, I,i)

Dian's visage

the face of the Greek goddess of chastity and hunting

“as fresh/ As Dian's visage” (Othello, III,iii)

Dilate

expound, give details

“...that I would all my pilgrimages dilate...” (Othello, I,iii)

Dilations

See **close delations** above

df

Directly

completely, entirely

“Desdemona is directly in love with him.” (Iago, II,i)

Discreet

discerning, insightful, judicious, thorough

“Let not thy discreet heart think it.” (Iago, II,i)

Dispose

bearing, disposition, manner, temper

“He hath a person and a smooth dispose/ To be suspected.” (Iago, I,iii)

Dispraisingly

disparagingly; without praising

“...so many a time/ When I have spoke of you dispraisingly/ Hath tane your part...”
(Desdemona III,iii)

Doff'st

turn away

“Every day thou doff'st me with some device” (Roderigo, IV,ii)

Dolt

block-head

“O dolt, as ignorant as dirt...” (Emilia, V,ii)

Dressed in

dbr

“...altogether lacks th'abilities/ That Rhodes is dressed in” (Senator, I,iii)

Effect

authority, power

“...the magnifico is much beloved/ And has in his effect a voice potential/ As double as the duke's...” (Iago, I,ii)

Egregiously

utterly shameful and embarrassingly
“making him egregiously an ass” (Iago, II,i)

Encave

hide
“Do but encave yourself...” (Iago, IV,i)

Enchafed

angry, enraged
“I never did like molestation view/ On the enchafed flood” (Gentleman in Cyprus, II,i)

Engines

cannons
“O you mortal engines...” (Othello, III,iii)
Contrivances or instruments of torture
“...take me from this world with treachery and devise engines for my life.” (Iago, IV,ii)

Englut

devour, engulf
“... my particular grief/ Is of so flood-gate and o'erbearing nature/That it englut s & swallows other sorrows” (Brabantio, I,iii)

Ensign

standard-bearer in battle; personal attendant to a military commander. (See also: **ancient** same pronunciation,same meaning, different spelling)
“And I, God bless the mark, his Moorship ensign.” (Iago, I,i)

Enwheel

encircle, encompass, surround
“...and the grace of heaven,/ Before, behind thee, and on every hand,/ Enwheel thee round!”
(Cassio, II,i)

Epithets

phrases, terms
“...horribly stuffed with epithets of war” (Iago, I,i)

Excels

exceeds, surpasses
“He hath achiev'd a maid/ That paragons description and wild fame/ One that excels the quirks of blazoning pens...” (Cassio, II,i)

Expostulate

argue, discuss, speak
“I'll not expostulate with her...” (Othello, IV,i)

Exsufflicate

exaggerated, swollen, (see also: **blown**)
“When I shall turn the business of my soul/ To such exsufflicate and blown surmises” (Othello, III,iii)

Extenuate

attenuate, lessen, tone down

“Nothing extenuate,/ Nor set down aught in malice.” (Othello, V,ii)

Fain

gladly, with pleasure

“...a brace of Cyprus gallants that would fain have a measure...” (Iago, II,iii); “...for I would very fain speak with you” (Iago, IV,i)

Fast

firmly committed

“Wilt thou be fast to my hopes, if I depend on the issue?” (Roderigo, I,i)

confirmed

“I pray, sir,/ Are you fast married?” (Iago, I,ii)

Fathom

ability, caliber, complexity

“Another of his fathom they have none...” (Iago, I,i)

Fell

cruel, fierce, pernicious

“More fell than anguish, hunger or the sea!” (Lodovico, V,ii)

Fetch

derive, extract, hold as from a source

“I fetch my life and being/ From men of royal siege...” (Othello, I,ii)

Fineless

endless, unlimited

“...riches fineless is as poor as winter/ To him that ever fears he shall be poor.” (Iago, III,iii)

Fitchew

a polecat, noted for bad odor and considered lecherous; hence, a wanton woman

“Tis such another fitchew! Marry, a perfumed one.” (Cassio, IV,i)

Fixed figure

target

“...to make me/ The fixed figure for the time of scorn” (Othello, IV,ii)

Fleers

looks of contempt (see also: **gibes**)

“...And mark the fleers, the gibes and notable scorns...” (Iago, IV,i)

Flustered

excite, heat up

“The very elements of this warlike isle/ Have I tonight flustered with flowing cups” (Iago, II,ii)

Fobbed

cheated, deceived, deluded

“...I think it is scurvy, and begin to find myself fobbed in it.” (Roderigo, IV,ii)

Fond

foolish

“I confess it is my shame to be so fond,...” (Roderigo, I,iii); “There are old fond paradoxes to make fools laugh...” (Desdemona, II,i)

Footing

arrival, landing

“...the bold Iago,/ Whose footing here anticipates our thoughts...” (Cassio, II,i)

Forfend

forbid

“Heaven forfend, I would not kill thy soul.” (Othello, V,ii)

Frank

open, unchecked

“...bearing with frank appearance...” (Messenger, I,iii)

Free

generous

“I would not have your free and noble nature,/ Out of self-bounty, be abused” (Iago, III,iii)

Frieze

(also spelled frize) coarse woolen cloth, rough fabric

“...my invention/ Comes from my pate as birdlime does from frieze...” (Iago, II,i)

Front

brow, forelock

“...take the safest occasion by the front/ To bring you in again.” (Emilia, III,i)

Fulsome

disgusting, filthy, nauseating

“Lie with her, zounds, that's fulsome!” (Othello, IV,i)

Fustian

nonsense, inflated rhetoric (see also: **bombast**)

“...and discourse fustian with one's own shadow?” (Cassio, II,iii)

Germans

close relatives

“...you'll have coursers for cousins and jennets for germans!” (Iago, I,i)

Gibes

sneers (see also: **fleers**)

“...And mark the fleers, the gibes and notable scorns...” (Iago, IV,i)

God bless the mark

a phrase to ward off bad luck

“And I, God bless the mark, his Moorship ancient.” (Iago, I,i)

Grange

a monastery's store-room; an isolated farm-house
"My house is not a grange" (Brabantio, I,i)

Gripe

grasp, seize
"And then, sir, he would gripe and wring my hand,..." (Iago, III,iii)

Grise

degree, a ladder's rung
"...lay a sentence,/ Which as a grise or step, may help these lovers/ Into your favor." (Duke of Venice, I,iii)

Gyve

chain, fetter, shackle
"I will gyve thee in thy own courtesies" (Iago, II,i)

Haggard

an untamed hawk (unreliable, faithless)
"If I do prove her haggard" (Othello, III,iii)

Hallowed

consecrated
"The worms were hallowed that did breed the silk..." (Othello, III,iv)

Halter

rope, hangman's noose
"A halter pardon him..." (Emilia, IV,ii)

Haply

perhaps
"...he is rash and very sudden in choler, and haply with his truncheon may strike at you..."
(Iago, II,i)

Hearted

placed or kept in one's heart; located where the heart is
"My cause is hearted" (Iago, I,iii)

Heave

raise as in a sigh or as if about to vomit; pant
"...begin to heave the gorge" (Iago, II,i)

Hellespont

today the strait of Bosphorus (Dardanelles) in Turkey, where Europe meets Asia
"...on/ to the Propontic and the Hellespont." (Othello, III,iii)

Hem

signal, give a warning
"cough or cry hem" (Othello, IV,ii)

Hie

haste, hurry

“Prithee hie thee” (Desdemona, IV,iii)

Hinge

that on which a thing turns or depends

“...so prove it/ That the probation bear no hinge nor loop/ To hang a doubt on...” (Othello, III,iii)

Hobby-horse

loose woman, prostitute (term of contempt in Elizabethan slang)

“...there, give it your hobby-horse.” (Bianca, IV,i)

Humours

bodily fluids once thought to determine one’s temper and moods

“...the sun where he was born/ Drew all such humours from him” (Desdemona, III,iv)

mindset, disposition

“My lord is not my lord, nor should I know him/ Were he in humour altered.” (Desdemona, III,iv); “I pray you, be content, ’tis but his humour;...” (Iago, IV,ii)

Importune

ask, request, urge

“Confess yourself freely to her, importune her help...” (Iago, II,iii); “Go, and importune her.” (Iago, III,iv)

Incline

be in favor, lean toward, be disposed

“This to hear/ Would Desdemona seriously incline...” (Othello, I,iii); “For ’tis most easy th’inclining Desdemona to subdue/ In any honest suit.” (Iago, II,iii)

Incontinently

immediately, right away

“I will incontinently drown myself.” (Roderigo, I,iii)

Indues

brings about, effects, extends to

“For let our finger ache and it indues/ Our other healthful members even to that sense/ Of pain.” (Desdemona, III,iv)

Ingraft

deeply rooted

“... the noble Moor/ Should hazard such a place as his own second/ With one of an ingraft infirmity...” (Montano, II,ii)

Inhibited

prohibited

“...an abuser of the world, a practiser/ Of arts inhibited and out of warrant.” (Brabantio, I,ii)

Iniquity

wickedness

“I lack iniquity/ Sometime to do me service.” (Iago, I,ii); “If you are so fond over her iniquity, give her patent...” (Iago, IV,i)

Invest

clothe, dress, wrap up

“Nature would not invest herself in such shadowing passion without some instruction...” (Othello, IV,i)

Issue

outcome

“Wilt thou be fast to my hopes, if I depend on the issue?” (Roderigo I,i)

Iterance

repetition

“What needs/ This iterance, woman?” (Othello V,ii)

Janus

Roman god, depicted with two profiles looking in opposite directions

“By Janus, I think no.” (Iago, I,ii)

Jennets

Spanish small horses

“...you’ll have coursers for cousins and jennets for germans!” (Iago, I,i)

Jesses

straps of leather or silk used to tie hawks by the legs

“Though that her jesses were my dear heart-strings” (Othello, III,iii)

Joint-ring

a ring with joints in it that consists of two halves

“I would not do such a thing for a joint-ring” (Emilia, IV,iii)

Jove

Jupiter, supreme god of the Romans

“Great Jove, Othello guard...” (Cassio, II,i)

Leets

local courts handling judicial matters

“...some uncleanly apprehensions/ Keep leets and law-days and in sessions sit...” (Iago, III,iii)

Liberal

irreverent, licentious

“...is he not a most profane and liberal counsellor?” (Desdemona, II,i)

Like

such

“I never did like molestation view” (Gentleman in Cyprus, II,i)

Lip

to kiss

“...To lip a wanton in a secure couch/ And to suppose her chaste” (Iago, IV,i)

List

as noun: desire, inclination, wish.

“I find it still when I have list to sleep.” (Iago, II,i)

wait

“Confine yourself but in a patient list.” (Iago, IV,i)

as verb: wish, want.

“She can make, unmake, do what she list.” (Iago, II,iii)

Locusts

fruits (dry pods) of the carob plant, sweet and pleasant in taste, in the Bible known as Saint John's bread

“The food that to him now is as sweet as locusts shall be to him shortly acerb as coloquintida” (Iago, I,iii)

Lolls

bents over, dangles, hangs onto

“lolls, and weeps upon me” (Cassio, IV,i)

Loop

loophole, questionable opening

“...so prove it/ That the probation bear no hinge nor loop/ to hang a doubt on... ” (Othello, III,iii)

Magnifico

Brabantio's title of nobility as a Venetian grandee. (“the magnificent” in Italian)

“...the magnifico is much below'd/And hath ... a voice potential/ As double as the Duke's.” (Iago, I,ii)

Make after

pursue

“Rouse him, make after him, poison his delight...” (Iago, I,i)

Malicious bravery

nasty, ill-intended defiance

“Upon malicious bravery doth thou come/ To start my quiet.” (Brabantio, I,i)

Mamm'ring

hesitating, muttering

“...stand so mamm'ring on.” (Desdemona, III,iii)

Mandragora

soporific made from the root of this plant

“Not poppy, nor mandragora,/Nor all the drowsy syrups of the world...” (Iago, III,iii)

Mazzard

slang for the head

“...I'll knock you o'er the mazzard” (Cassio, II,iii)

Medicinal gum

sap or resin with healing powers

“Drops tears as fast as the Arabian trees/ Their medicinal gum” (Othello, V,ii)

Meet

proper, fitting

“It seems not meet, nor wholesome to my place” (Iago, I,i)

Minister

servant

“I quench thee, thou flaming minister” (Othello, V,ii)

Minx

wanton woman (slang term)

“Damn her, lewd minx” (Othello, III,iii)

Molestation

trouble, turmoil

“I never did like molestation view/ On the enchafed flood” (Gentleman in Cyprus, II,i)

Mortise

joint; socket that allows pegs to be fitted in and holding together pieces of timber in a construction frame

“What ribs of oak, when mountains melt on them/ Can hold the mortise?” (Montano, II,i)

Mountebanks

charlatans, dubious dealers, quacks

“...corrupted/ By spells and medicines bought of mountebanks” (Brabantio, I,iii)

Mummy

medicinal preparation with magical power, made from dead and mummified bodies

“...And it was dy'd in mummy...” (Othello III,iii)

Mystery

profession, occupation, function; in this context, a bawd

“Your mystery, your mystery. Nay, dispatch!” (Othello IV,ii)

Napkin

handkerchief

“Your napkin is too little.” (Othello, III,iii)

Nice

insignificant, thin, trifling

“...feed upon such nice and waterish diet” (Cassio, III,iii)

Non-suits

refuses, cancels; legal term for stopping the course of a suit
“And in conclusion/ Non-suits my mediators...” (Iago I,i)

Observancy

loving attention
“...such observancy/As fit the bridal.” (Desdemona, III,iv)

Occasion

matter, topic
“...I would on great occasion speak with you” (Iago, IV,i)

Ocular

visible, visually verifiable
“Give me the ocular proof” (Othello, III,iii)

Odd-even

between night and day; specifically the time between midnight and 1:00 a.m.
“At this odd-even and dull watch o' th' night” (Roderigo, I,i)

Off-capped

hats taken off as a sign of respect
“Off-capped to him” (Iago, I,i)

Offends

bothers
“I have a salt and sullen rheum offends me...” (Othello, III,iv)

Office

duty, obligation
“...twixt my sheets/ He's done my office...” (Iago, I,iii)
commitment
“...I with all the office of my heart...” (Cassio, III,iv)

Out-tongue

out-speak, prove more eloquent
“My services which I have done the signiory,/ Shall out-tongue his complaints.” (Othello, I,ii)

Paddle

fondle, play, toy
“Didst thou not see her paddle with the palm of his hand?” (Iago, II,i)

Paragons

surpasses
“...a maid/ That paragons description” (Cassio, II,i)

Parcels

bits
“...Whereof by parcels she had something heard...” (Othello, II,i)

Parley

summons; conversation or conference seeking participants' agreement

“Methinks it sounds a parley to provocation” (Iago, II,iii)

Passed

experienced

“...the battles, sieges, fortunes, that I have passed...”; “she loved me for the dangers I have passed...” (Othello, I,iii)

Patent

license, permit, right

“If you are so fond of her iniquity, give her patent to offend...” (Iago, IV,i)

Peculiar

private, exclusive

“...That nightly lie on those unproper beds/ Which they dare swear peculiar;” (Iago, IV,i)

Perdition

annihilation, destruction

“Perdition catch my soul/ But I do love thee.” (Othello, III,iii)

Perdurable

resistant, lasting

“I confess me knit to thy deserving with cables of perdurable toughness.” (Iago, I,iii)

Period

conclusion, ending, full stop

“O bloody period!” (Lodovico, V,ii)

Person

actual physical or bodily presence

“He hath a person and a smooth dispose/ To be suspected.” (Iago, I,iii)

Pioneers

lowest rank of soldiers who build roads & fortifications, dig mines

“ I had been happy if the general camp,/ Pioners and all...” (Othello, III,ii)

Pith

force, strength

“these arms of mine had seven years' pith...” (Othello, I,iii)

Pliant

favorable, well suiting

“Which I, observing,/ Took once a pliant hour...” (Othello, I,iii)

Plume up

bring triumph to, turn successful

“...plume up my will/ In double knavery” (Iago, I,iii)

Ply

handle, maneuver, manipulate

“Ply Desdemona well, and you are sure on’t.” (Iago, IV,i)

Politic

prudent, wise

“He shall in strangeness stand no farther off/ Than in a politic distance.” (Desdemona, III,iii)

Pontic sea

the Black Sea, in Latin called Pontus Euxinus

“Like to the Pontic sea,…” (Othello, III,iii)

Portance

bearing, conduct, deportment

“...of my redemption thence,/ And portance in my travailous history...” (Othello, I,iii)

Potations

drinks

“...has tonight carous'd/ Potations pottle-deep.” (Iago, II,iii)

Pottle-deep

to the bottom of a ½ gallon tankard

“...Potations pottle-deep.” (Iago, II,iii)

Practices

intrigues, treacheries

“... practices of cunning hell” (Brabantio, I,iii)

Prate

tattle, talk emptily, bragging

“Doth thou prate, rogue?” (Cassio, II,iii)

Prated

tattled, spoke idly, insolently

“Nay, but he prated/ And spoke such scurvy and provoking terms...” (Iago, I,ii)

Prerogated

privileged, safe from evil

“Yet 'tis the plague of great ones,/ Prerogated are they less than the base.” (Othello, III,iii)

Pregnant

clear, cogent, obvious

“...it is a most pregnant and unforced position.” (Iago, II,i)

Pride

lust, irresistible sexual drive

“...Were they as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys,/ As salt as wolves in pride...” (Iago, III,iii)

Prime

like an animal in heat, lecherous

“...Were they as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys,/ As salt as wolves in pride...” (Iago, III,iii)

Probal

meant to open one's mind, reasonable, stimulating

"...what's he then that he says I play the villain,/ When this advice is free I give, and honest,/ Probal to thinking..." (Iago, II,iii)

Probation

proof

"...so prove it/ That the probation bear no hinge nor loop/ To hang a doubt on..." (Othello, III,iii)

Procreants

persons engaged in sexual intercourse (slang)

"Leave procreants alone and shut the door." (Othello, IV,ii)

Produced

seen, appear in [others'] view

"It seems not meet, nor wholesome to my place,/ To be produced..." (Iago, I,i)

Promethean

related to Prometheus' act – snatching the fire from the gods to give it to mortals

"I know not where is that Promethean heat/ That can thy light relume" (Othello, V,ii)

Promulgate

to make known by public declamation

"'Tis yet to know/ Which, when I know that boasting is an honour,/ I shall promulgate" (Othello, I,ii)

Proper

one's own

"...though our proper son/ Stood in your action" (Duke of Venice, I,iii)

Propontic

the Sea of Marmara

"to the Propontic and the Hellespont." (Othello, II,iii)

Provender

fodder, dry food for animals

"Wears out his time much like his master's ass/ For nought but provender..." (Iago, I,i)

Provocation

challenge, stimulation to prowess (either military or sexual)

"Methinks it sounds a parley to provocation" (Iago, II,iii)

Puddled

muddied, confused

"...some unhatched practice/...Has puddled his clear spirit" (Desdemona, III,iv)

Puffed

blast with a powerful blow

"...like the devil, from his very arm,/ Puffed his own brother..." (Iago, III,iv)

Puny whipster

petty, unimportant young fellow

“...every puny whipster gets my sword.” (Othello, V,ii)

Purchase

acquisition, trophy acquired

“The purchase made, the fruits are to ensue...” (Othello, II,iii)

Qualified

diluted

“I have drunk but one cup tonight, and that was craftily qualified too” (Cassio, II,i)

Quat

small boil, pimple

“I have rubbed this young quat almost to the sense” (Iago, V,i)

Rail

scold, make loud reproaches

“...she’ll rail in the streets else.” (IV,i)

Relume

rekindle, light again

“I know not where is that Promethean heat/ That can thy light relume.” (Othello, V,ii)

Repair

come, return

“...I will be walking on the works;/ Repair there to me.” (Othello, III, ii)

Repeals

reinstates, restores

“she repeals him for her body's lust.” (Iago, II,iii)

Reprobance

perdition, eternal damnation

“Yea, curse his better angel from his side/ And fall to reprobance.” (Gratiano, V,ii)

Rheum

mucus, secretion from the nose or the eyes

“...a salt and sorry rheum offends me” (Othello, III,iv)

Rouse

a full measure of liquor

“...they have given me a rouse already” (Cassio, II,iii)

Sagittary

mythological creature (centaur), here it's the name/sign of an inn or public house

“Lead to the Sagittary the raised search” (Iago, I,i)

Salt

lust, lechery

“...for the better compassing of his salt” (Iago, II,i); “as salt as wolves in pride (Iago, III,iii)

Also vexing, annoying
“...a salt and sorry rheum offends me” (Othello, III,iv)

Saucy

impudent, insolent
“We then have done you bold and saucy wrongs.” (Roderigo, I,i)

‘Sblood

oath, contraction of “God’s blood.”
“‘Sblood, but you’ll not hear me” (Iago, I,i)

Scant

neglect, ignore, put down
“...you think/ I will your serious business scant/ When she is with me...” (Othello, I,iii); “...or say they strike us/ Or scant our former having in despite...” (Emilia, IV,iii)

Scattering

disordered, messy, scattered
“...build yourself a trouble/ Out of his scattering and unsure observance...” (Iago, III,iii)

Scion

small twig
“I take this you call love, to be a sect or a scion.” (Iago, I,iii)

Scurvy

contemptible, vile
“And spoke such scurvy and provoking terms” (Iago, I,ii)

Sect

section, cutting
“I take this, that you call love, to be a sect or a scion.” (Iago, I,iii)

Seel

close
“...when light-winged toys/ Of feathered Cupid seel with wanton dullness/ My speculative and officed instrument...” (Othello, I,iii) cover. “a seeming/ To seel her father's eyes up...” (Iago, III,iii)

Self-bounty

goodness, benevolence, inherent kindness
“I would not have your free and noble nature/ Out of self-bounty be abused...” (Iago, III,iii)

Sequestration

separation; as a legal phrase: “answerable sequestration”(see **answerable**)
“...thou shall see an answerable sequestration” (Iago, I,iii)

Shadowing

rich in odd images and shapes
“Nature would not invest herself in such shadowing passion without some instruction...” (Othello, IV,i)

Shambles

butchery, meat-market, slaughterhouse

“...as summer flies are in the shambles/ That quicken even with blowing.” (Othello, IV,ii)

Shrift

place for confession

“His bed shall seem a school, his board a shrift...” (Dedemona, III,iii)

Sibyl

a sorceress with forecasting powers

“A sibyl that has numbered in the world/ The sun to course two hundred compasses...” (Othello, III,iv)

Siege

origin, rank, status

“...being/ From men of royal siege...” (Othello, I,ii)

Signiory

the Venetian 16th century oligarchy, consisting of some 300 “signiors”, 40 members of the inner council, as described by a traveler in 1581

“My services, which I have done the signiory...” (Othello, I,ii)

Sith

since

“I’ll leave no friend, sith love breeds such offence...” (Iago, III,iii)

Slubber

obscure, soil, sully

“...content to slubber the gloss of your new fortunes...” (Duke of Venice, I,iii)

Snorting

snoring

“Awake the snorting citizens with the bell” (Iago, I,i)

So

as long as

“...So they do nothing, 'tis a venial slip.” (Iago, IV,i)

Sold

exchanged

“I’d not have sold it for it.” (Othello, V,ii)

Speak parrot

utter nonsense; speak with no comprehension or intended meaning

“Drunk? And speak parrot?” (Cassio, II,iii)

Splinter

mend (as if with splints)

“This broken joint between you and her husband, entreat her to splinter...” (Iago, II,ii)

Start

disrupt, disturb

“...doth thou come/ To start my quiet.” (Brabantio, I,i)

Stop

cessation, restrain

“Let’s teach ourselves that honourable stop/ Not to outsport discretion.” (Othello, II,ii)

Strangeness

Aloofness, reserve

“He shall in strangeness stand no farther off/ Than in a politic distance.” (Desdemona, III,iii)

Surmises

suspicious

“...such exsufflicate and blown surmises” (Othello, III,iii)

Task

test, try out

“...dare not task my weakness anymore...” (Cassio, II,ii)

Thrice-driven

three times improved; soft bed made by drifting and separating the lightest feathers from the coarse and heavy ones

“...made the flinty and steel couch of war/ My thrice-driven bed of down” (Othello, I,iii)

To the sense

to the quick, to the point of irritation

“I have rubbed this young quat almost to the sense/ And he grows angry.” (Iago, V,i)

Traded

defamed, libeled

“...in Aleppo once,/ Where a malignant and turban'd Turk/ Beat a Venetian and traduced the state...” (Othello, V,ii)

Travailous

exhausting, toilsome

“...of my redemption thence/ And portance in my travailous history...” (Othello, I,ii)

Truncheon

staff carried as a symbol of authority or military command

“...he is rash and very sudden in choler, and haply with his truncheon may strike at you...” (Iago, II,i)

Tush

interjection of contempt, reprimand

“Tush, never tell me!” (Roderigo, I,i)

Twiggen

cased in twigs or wickerwork

“I’ll beat the knave into a twiggen bottle.” (Cassio, II,iii)

'Ud

abbreviation for God

“ud's pity, who would not make her husband a cuckold to make him a monarch.” (Emilia, IV,iii)

Unbitted

unbridled

“...our unbitted lusts” (Iago, I,iii)

Unhatched practice

conspiracy, hidden plot still brewing

“...some unhatched practice/...Has puddled his clear spirit” (Desdemona, III,iv)

Unprovide

change, weaken

“...lest her body and beauty unprovide my mind again.” (Othello, IV,i)

Venial

trifle, trivial misdeed, pardonable sin

“So they do nothing, 'tis a venial slip.” (Iago, IV,i)

Venture

risk, take a chance with

“I should venture purgatory for't” (Emilia, IV,iii)

Voice

vote, influence

“... a voice potential/ As double as the Duke's.” (Iago, I,ii)

Votarist

a purified soul; a person who took a vow

“The jewels you have had from me... would half have corrupted a votarist.” (Roderigo IV,ii)

Vouch

as verb: bear witness, testify

“Vouch with me, heaven, I therefore beg it not/ To please the palate of my appetite...” (Othello, I,iii)

assert, claim

“I therefore vouch again/ That with some mixtures powerful o'er the blood/ Or with some dram conjured to this effect,/ He wrought upon her.” (Brabantio I,iii)

as noun: attestation, testimony

“One that in the authority of her merit did justly put on the vouch of very malice itself?...” (Desdemona, II,i)

Warranty

authorization, permission

“...never loved Cassio/ But with such general warranty of heaven/ As I might love.” (Desdemona, V,ii)

Wight

creature, human being (both female and male)

“She was a wight, if ever such wights were...” (Iago, II,i)

Wived

marry

“...when my fate would have me wived,/ To give it her.” (Othello, III,iv)

Works

fortifications, ramparts

“That done, I’ll be walking on the works” (Othello, III,iii)

Yerked

to jerk or strike with a sudden and quick strong blow

“I had thought t’have yerked him here, under the ribs.” (Iago, I,ii)

Zounds

Interjection meaning “God’s wounds.”

“Zounds, sir, you are one of those that will not serve God...” (Iago, I,i)

CULTURAL CONTEXT

Francis Bacon (1561-1626) On Cunning, Suspicion, Honor, Reputation

Editor's Note. Francis Bacon was a celebrated Renaissance philosopher, contemporary of Shakespeare. (In the controversy regarding the playwright's identity some have speculated that Bacon might be the "author" of Shakespeare's plays). The excerpts below are selected from three of Bacon's essays. Thematically they echo moral aspects we encounter in *Othello*.

We take cunning for a sinister or crooked wisdom. And certainly there is a great difference between a cunning man and a wise man; not only in point of honesty, but in point of ability. ...

There is a cunning, which we in England can, the turning of the cat in the pan; which is, when that which a man says to another, he lays it as if another had said it to him. And to say truth, it is not easy, when such a matter passed between two, to make it appear from which of them it first moved and began. ...

But these small wares, and petty points, of cunning, are infinite; and it were a good deed to make a list of them; for that nothing doth more hurt in a state, than that cunning men pass for wise. For that nothing doth more hurt in a state than that cunning men pass for wise.

From Essay XXIII, "Of Cunning"

Suspicious amongst thoughts are like bats amongst birds, they ever fly by twilight. Certainly they are to be repressed, or at least well guarded: for they cloud the mind. ... They dispose kings to tyranny, husbands to jealousy, wise men to irresolution and melancholy. They are defects, not in the heart, but in the brain; for they take place in the stoutest natures. ... There is nothing makes a man suspect much, more than to know little; and therefore men should remedy suspicion, by procuring to know more, and not to keep their suspicions in smother.

From Essay XXXII, "Of Suspicion"

The winning of honor, is but the revealing of a man's virtue and worth, without disadvantage. For some in their actions, do woo and effect honor and reputation, which sort of men, are commonly much talked of, but inwardly little admired. And some, contrariwise, darken their virtue in the show of it; so as they be undervalued in opinion. ... A man is an ill husband of his honor, that entereth into any action, the failing wherein may disgrace him, more than the carrying of it through, can honor him. Honor that is gained and broken upon another, hath the quickest reflection, like diamonds cut with facets. ... Envy, which is the canker of honor, is best extinguished by declaring a man's self in his ends, rather to seek merit than fame. ...

From Essay LVII, "Of Honor and Reputation"

Francis Bacon's *Essays* were first published in 1597, then rewritten and republished in 1625.

Ballad of Othello

Various narratives in verse or prose of the tragedy of the Moor of Venice circulated in London in the wake of the play's popularity as performed by the first Othello, Richard Burbage (c. 1567-1619). An example of such a derivative version is this handwritten broadside that was found among the papers of Lord Ellesmere who served as Lord Chancellor to King James I. English literary historian John Payne Collier discovered the ballad in 1835 and dated it to about 1625. The document's spelling and details were retained here.

The Tragedie of Othello the Moore

The foule effects of jealousie,
Othelloe's deadly hate,
Iagoe's cruell treacherie,
And Desdemonae's fate,
In this same ballad you may reade,
If soe you list to bye,
Which tells the blackest, bloodiest deede
Yet ever seen with eye.

In Venice City, long time since,
A Noble Moore did live,
Who to the daughter of a Prince
In secrecie did wive.
She was as faire as he was blacke,
A sunshine and a cloude:
She was as milde as playfull childe,
But he was fierce and proude.

And lovede he her, as well he might,
For deerlie she lovde him:
She doated on his brow of night,
And on each swarthie limbe.
Othello was this noble Moore,
A Souldeir often tride,
Who many victories did procure
To swell Venetian pride.

Faire Desdemona was the name
This lovelie ladie bare:
Her father had great wealth and fame,
And she his onelie heire.
Therefore, when he at length found out
His daughter thus was wed,
To breake their bonds he cast about,
But onelie firmer made.

And much rejoiced he to know,
And to that end did worke,

The State his wife would part him fro
To fight against the Turke.
But she ne would remaine behinde,
For that she did not wed;
She'd live and die with one so kinde,
And soe she plainlie said.

The Turkes the while did threat the Isle
Of Cyprus with a fray,
And thither must Othello speede
And that without delaye.
To Cyprus steere they both, nor feare
Could touch the lady's hart;
The Lord she lovde she knew was neare,
Whom death should not depart.

But when they came to Cyprus Isle
To her great joye they found,
That heaven had fought the fight the while
The Turkes were sunk and drownd.
A storme had late assailed their fleete,
That most of them were lost:
And you will owne it was most meete
The crescent should be crost.

Now, while upon the Isle they stayde,
The luckelesse lotte befell,
By a false Spaniard's wicked ayde,
Which I am now to tell.
He was the Antient to the Moore
For he so closlie wrought,
He held him honest, trusty, sure,
Until he found him nought.

Iago was the monster's name,
Who lovde the lady long;
But she denied his sute and claime,
Though with a gentle tongue.
For this he silent vengeance vowd
Upon the happie Moore,
And took a way without delay
To make his vengeance sure.

There was a Captain of the band,
And Cassio was his name,
In happie moode by nature pland,
Of strong and lustie frame:
He was Lieftenant to the Moore,
A post of trust and weight,

And therefore he must partner bee
Of the foule traitor's hate.

He whisper'd at Othelloe's backe
His wife had chaungde her minde,
And did not like his sootie blacke,
As he full soone would finde;
But much preferrd the ruddie dye
Of her owne countrey men;
And bade him keepe a warie eye
On her deportment then.

Tut, tut, then quoth the hastie Moore,
Deepe as the throat you lye.
I wish I did, quoth he, for sure
Much liefer would I die,
Then see what I my selfe have seene.
What have you seene? he cride —
What onelie would become a queane,
Not my deare general's bride.

Ile heare no more, Othello said:
That I am blacke is true,
And she is faire as morning ayre
But that she always knew.
Well onelie keepe a warie eye
Upon her actions now:
Cassio's the man, I do not lye,
As you will soone allowe.

You thought she lovde you, that she came
With you to this hot Isle:
Cassio was with you, and the dame
On him did closelie smile.
I needes must grieve to see my Lord
So wantonly deceived:
Thus far I prithe take my word,
It is to be believed.

O god, what prooffe has thou of this
What prooffe that she is foule?
Prooffe you would have — tis not amis,
Ile give it on my soule.

Cassio will talke you in his sleepe,
And speakes then of your wife.
He cannot anie secret keepe
An it would save his life
This shoves that he may love my wife,

The doubting Moore replied;
And if tis true she loves him too,
Better they both had died.

Behold, my Lord, Iago said,
Know you this token true?
And then a handkerchief displaid,
Which well Othello knewe.
Twas one he Desdemona gave
When they were wedded first,
Wrought with embroidery so brave:
With rage he well nie burst.

Whence got you that, whence got you that?
Tell me or instant die!
She gave it Cassio, but thereat
Why roll your yellow eye?
It is but one of tokens more
That he, I know, can bost;
And she has his, no doubt, good store,
I recke not which has most.

Now, this same well knowne handkerchiefe
That very morne he stole,
And thus the cruel vengeful theife
Rackde brave Othelloes soule.
His wife was true, and pure as dewe
Upon the lillie white.
No bounds his tameless passion knew
But rushing from the sight,

He sought his lady as she layde
Within her virgin bed,
And there his hands of blackest shade
He dyed to gory red:
But first he chargde her with the crime,
Which ever she denyed,
And askt but for a little time
To prove the traytor lyed.

O, twas a piteous sight to see
A thing so meeke and faire,
Torne with such salvage crueltie
By her long lovelie haire.
Then came the caitiffe to rejoice
His blacke hart with the viewe,
But soone twas provde by many a voice
The Ladie had beene true.

Twas provde the handkerchiefe he stole,
And then the same he layde
Where Cassio for a suertie came,
That he might be betrayed.
Othello stood as one distraught
To heare what thus was showne,
That Desdemona, even in thought,
To sinne had never knowne.

He fomde, he stampt, he ravde, he tore,
To thinke upon his deede
Then struck Iago to the floore,
But onelie made him bleede.
For deadliest tortures he was savde,
And suffring them he dide:
A lesson milde to traytors vilde,
May such them still betide.

Upon his Desdemonae's coarse
Othello cast him than,
In agonie of deepe remorse,
A broken harted man.
With charitie, he said, relate
What you this day have seene,
Think once how well I served the State,
And what I once have beene.

Then with the dagger, that was wet
With his dear Ladies bloud,
He stabde him selfe and thus out let
His soule in gory floud.
This storie true you oft times knew,
By actors played for meede;
But still so well, twas hard to tell
If twas not truth in deede.

Dicke Burbidge, that most famous man,
That actor without peere,
With this same part his course began,
And kept it manie a yeare.
Shakespeare was fortunate, I trow,
That such an actor had.
If we had but his equall now
For one I should be glad.

Finis.

Perceptions of Blackness & The Moors: A Selection of Quotes from the Play and Documentary Sources

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)

It seems not meet nor wholesome to my place
To be produced, as if I stay I shall,
Against the Moor. ...
Iago, (I, i)

Roderigo: Signior, it is the Moor.
Brabantio: Down with him, thief!
(I, ii)

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)

That I did love the Moor to live with him,
My downright violence and storm of fortunes
May trumpet to the world; my heart's subdued
Even to the very quality of my lord.
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)

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)

Desdemona: ...How if she be black and witty?
Iago: 'If she be black and thereto have a wit,
She'll find a white that shall her blackness fit.'
(II, i)

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)

... 'tis great pity that the noble Moor
Should hazard such a place as his own second
With one of an ingraft infirmity;
It were an honest action to say so
To the Moor.

...and then for her
To win the Moor, were it to renounce his baptism,
All seals and symbols of redeemed sin,
His soul is so en fettered 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)

... be you well assured
He shall in strangeness stand no farther off
Than in a politic distance. ...
Desdemona (III, iii)

I'll have some proof. My name, that was as fresh
As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black
As mine own face. ...
Othello (III, iii)

'Cursèd fate that gave thee to the Moor.'
Iago (III, iii)

... but my noble Moor
Is true of mind and made of no such baseness
As jealous creatures are...
Desdemona (III, iv)

... That handkerchief
Did an Egyptian to my mother give:
She was a charmer and could almost read
The thoughts of people. ...
Othello (III, iv)

Is this the noble Moor whom our full senate
Call all-in-all sufficient? Is this the nature
Whom passion could not shake?...
Lodovico (IV, i)

The Moor's abused by some most villainous knave...
Emilia (IV, ii)

Othello: She's like a liar gone to burning hell:
'Twas I that killed her.
Emilia: O the more angel she,
And you the blacker devil!
(V, ii)

Moor, she was chaste; she loved thee, cruel Moor.
Emilia (V, ii)

Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,
Nor set down aught in malice.
Othello (V, ii)

Descriptive Excerpts/Definitions/Comments

That part of inhabited land extending southward, which we call Africa, and the Greeks Libya, is one of the three generall parts of the world knowen unto our ancestors; which in very deed was not throughly by them discovered, both bicause the Inlands coulde not be travailed in regard of huge deserts full of dangerous sands, which being driven with the winde, put travailers in extreme hazard of their lives; and also by reason of the long and perilous navigation upon African coasts, for which cause it was by very few of ancient times compassed by navigation, much lesse searched or intirely known. ... Moreover this part of the worlde is inhabited especially by... the Abassins, the Egyptians, the Arabians, and the Africans or Moores, properly so called; which last are of two kinds, namely white or tawnie Moores, and Negroes or blacke Moores. Of all which nations some are Gentiles which worship Idols; others of the sect of Mahumet; some others Christians; and some Jewish in religion.

John Pory, 1600

Moor — 1. 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

MOORS — Nomadic people of the northern shores of Africa, originally the inhabitants of Mauretania. They were chiefly of Berber and Arab stock. In the 8th century the Moors were converted to Islam and became fanatic Muslims. They spread SW into Africa,... and NW into Spain. Under **Tariq Ibn Ziyad** they crossed to Gibraltar in 711 and easily overran the crumbling Visigothic kingdom of **Roderick**.... In 756, **Abd Ar-Rahman I** established the Umayyad dynasty at Cordoba.... The court there grew in wealth, splendor, and culture. The regent **Al-Mansur**, in the late 10th century waged bitter warfare with the Christians of N Spain.... The **Almoravids** in 1086 took over Moorish Spain,... [and by 1174 were] supplanted by the **Almohads**. These successive waves of invasion had brought into Spain thousands of skilled Moorish artisans and industrious farmers who contributed largely to the intermittent prosperity of the country. They were killed or expelled in large numbers (to the great loss of Spain) in the Christian reconquest, which... [lead to] the downfall of the Muslims... [in] 1492. Many of the Moors remained in Spain;... those who accepted Christianity were called **Moriscos**. They... were kept under close surveillance,... persecuted by Philip II, revolted in 1568, and in the Inquisition were virtually exterminated. In 1609 the remaining Moriscos were expelled. Thus the glory of the Moorish civilization in Spain was gradually extinguished. Its contributions to Western Europe and especially to Spain were almost incalculable — in art and architecture, medicine and science, and learning.

The New Columbia Encyclopedia, 1975

Moor, in English usage, a Moroccan or, formerly, a member of the Muslim population of Spain, of mixed Arab, Spanish, and Berber origins, who created the Arab Andalusian civilization and subsequently settled as refugees in North Africa between the 11th and 17th centuries. By extension (corresponding to the Spanish *moro*) the term occasionally denotes any Muslim in general, as in the case of the Moors of Sri Lanka (Ceylon) or of the Philippines.

The word derives from the Latin *Mauri*, first used by the Romans to denote the inhabitants of the Roman

province of Mauretania, composing the western portion of modern Morocco.

Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1992

While white Vandals were pouring into Africa in the fourth and fifth centuries, Africans continued to arrive in Southern Europe, chiefly as slaves. But in 711 A.D. they came in as conquerors.... These Africans were Moors, sometimes called Arabs, because of their language. To the earlier Greeks, the Moors were "a black or dark people" (Mauros) and to the Romans, Maurus, a black woolly-haired people, known synonymously as Ethiops, Niger (Negro) and Afer (African). Even as late as the fifth century A.D. Procopius, Roman historian, calls the people of Morocco "black." ...

Moors also appear by the thousands in European heraldry and except in very rare instances are shown as coal black and with Negro hair.... To the Christians of the eighth century and much later, the Moors were a jet-black people, so much so that until Shakespeare's time, "Moor" was used to signify an unmixed Negro. So predominant was the black skin of the Moorish invaders of Europe that blackamoor (black as a Moor) came to be used not only for Moroccans but for other blacks as Ethiopians and Sudanese.

J. A. Rogers, *Nature Knows no Color-Line*, 1952

The Alhambra... was the royal abode of the Moorish kings, where... they held dominion over what they vaunted as a terrestrial paradise, and made their last stand for empire in Spain.... In the time of the Moors the fortress was capable of containing within its outward precincts an army of forty thousand men....

I fell into a course of musing upon the singular fortunes of the Arabian or Morisco-Spaniards, whose whole existence is as a tale that is told, and certainly forms one of the most anomalous yet splendid episodes in history. Potent and durable as was their dominion, we scarcely know how to call them. They were a nation without a legitimate country or name....

A grand line of distinction existed among the Moslems of Spain, between those of Oriental origin and those from Western Africa. Among the former the Arabs considered themselves the purest race, as being descended from the countrymen of the Prophet, who first raised the standard of Islam; among the latter, the most warlike and powerful were the Berber tribes from Mount Atlas and the deserts of Sahara, commonly known as Moors, who subdued the tribes of the sea-coast, founded the city of Morocco, and for a long time disputed with the oriental races the control of Moslem Spain.

Washington Irving, *The Alhambra*, 1832

The word "Moor" literally means "Black," so the Moorish people were the Black people. Some anthropologists assign them to an arbitrary Brown race, and others label them as Dark-Whites.... In medieval times the name of Moor was not restricted to the inhabitants of Morocco, but it was customary to refer to all Africans as Moors. The highly ambiguous word "Negro" had not yet been invented. We know from contemporary records which have come down to us from the era of medieval Moorish supremacy that the Moors did not consider themselves as white men.... Even the Arabs, who were always a minority in the so-called Arab culture of the Middle Ages, regarded a dark complexion as a badge of honor.

In the Muslim destruction [during the 16th century] of the Songhay empire, the main centers of learning with all their precious libraries and original manuscripts were destroyed first. Then the age-old practice was adopted of seizing all men of learning and skilled craftsmen for enslavement and service to the

conquerors. Foremost among those captured and carried off to the Magreb was Ahmad Babo. There he was treated as an honored guest and instructed to use his great learning in the service of his conquerors, the Moors.

John G. Jackson, *Introduction to African Civilizations*, 1970

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....

At the heart of the history of the ancient Moors are the Garamantes of the Sahara. The Garamantes were blacks who occupied much of northern Africa. They can be considered the ancestors of the true Moors.... The Sahara came to be occupied by two distinct groups — the original Moors (Garamantes) and the Berbers, who later became the "tawny" or "white" Moors. The rest of North Africa, from Egypt through the Fezzan and the west of Sahara to what is now called Morocco and Algeria, were peopled by black Africans, also called Moors by the Romans and the later Europeans. Eventually these Moors would join with Arabs to become a united and powerful force. ...

The Moors can be credited with many achievements in the arts and sciences. In mathematics, the solving of quadratic equations and the development of new concepts of trigonometry. Advances were also made in astronomy, medicine, architecture and chemistry. Moorish chemistry, in fact, gave birth to gunpowder and the Moors also introduced the first shooting mechanisms. These were rifles, known as fire sticks. The Moors excelled in botany and in horticulture they introduced many new vegetables to the civilized world. The list of their contribution to European science and industry is so long and so startling that it is a wonder that they are almost never mentioned in any discussion of the beginnings of the industrial revolution.

These accomplishments were spread throughout the four great dynasties of the Moorish empire and many of the most significant ones were spearheaded by black Africans.

Ivan Van Sertima, "introduction" to *African Presence in Early Europe*. The Journal of African Civilizations, November 1985

Now, again, just who were the Moors? The answer is easy. The original Moors, like the original Egyptians, were Black Africans. As amalgamation became more and more widespread, only the Berbers, Arabs and Coloureds in the Moroccan territories were called Moors, while the darkest and black-skinned Africans were called "Black-a-Moors." Eventually, "black" was dropped from "Blackamoor." In North Africa, and Morocco in particular, all Muslim Arabs, mixed breeds and Berbers are readily regarded as Moors. The African Blacks, having had this name taken from them, must contend for recognition as Moors.

Chancellor Williams, *The Destruction of Black Civilization*, 1987

Circa 46 B.C., the Roman army entered West Africa where they encountered black Africans which they called "Maures" from the Greek adjective *mauros*, meaning dark or black. The country of the *maures*, Mauretania ... existed in what is now northern Morocco and western Algeria. The Greek themselves, approaching from the east in search of Egypt, called the black Africans they found there Ethiops from the Greek words *aithen* to burn and *ops* meaning face. ... Both the Roman Maure and the Greek Ethiopos indicated more than one ethnic group. Herodotus, for example, held that Ethiopians occupied all of

Africa south and west of Libya. Europeans used the words Moor and Ethiopian almost interchangeably to indicate a black African. ...

At the heart of the history of the ancient Moors of Sahara is a tribe known as the Garamantes. According to E. W. Bovill, "ethnologically the Garamantes are not easy to place, but we may presume them to have been negroid." Their homeland was in the area later known as the Fezzan in the Sahara; their capital city, called Garama or Jerma, lay amidst a tangle of trading routes. ... Contemporary with the Garamantes was another group called the Libyans. ... Their presence has been documented since the first dynasty in Egypt, circa 3100 B. C. Dr. Rosalie David, an Egyptologist, describes them as "people with distinctive red or blond hair and blue eyes who lived on the edge of the western desert" bordering Egypt. ... Surrounded by darker people on all sides but the Mediterranean Sea, the fair-skinned Libyans constituted a small minority within the black African continent. In addition, nomads of the Arabian Plate fled their barren and drought-stricken homeland in search of more fertile lands to occupy. The blending of black Arab and Libyan produced a light-brown or olive-skinned people who came to be known as "tawny Moors" or "white Moors," often known in history as the "Berbers." ... When the Romans encountered the Libyans they referred to them as barbarians and the coastal region they occupied later came to be known as the "Barbary Coast." ...

The rest of North Africa, from Egypt through the Fezzan and the west of the Sahara to "Mauretania" (Morocco and Algeria) were peopled by black Africans, also called Moors by the Romans and later by the Europeans.

Wayne B. Chandler, "The Moor: Light of Europe's Dark Age" in *The Golden Age of the Moor*.
The Journal of African Civilizations, Fall 1991

THE GUTHRIE PRODUCTION

Notes from the Director

Edited from comments made by Joe Dowling to the Guthrie company on September 23rd, 2003

This is an exciting production on so many different levels: one, we have the opportunity to do this great play in a more intimate setting than our large main stage; and two, we will take it around the country on a national tour, the first in many years. This challenging undertaking funded in part by our extraordinary supporters the Target Corporation and Dain Rauscher. And we are also pleased and proud that the National Endowment for the Arts selected the Guthrie Theater to be part of the “Shakespeare in American Communities” initiative. We ourselves know the work we do on both stages, but this production will lead to national visibility and wider recognition of the quality of our work.

Othello is a play that has always meant a lot to me. Twelve years ago I directed it in the outdoor vastness of the Delacorte Theater in Central Park in New York City. The desire to do it again in a smaller space is related to and can gratify an ambition of exploring the tragedy in a different way. Performing it in the Lab clearly will help us finding a different feeling. The play lends itself to an intimate setting due to its great emotional power and subtle psychological insight. I am excited about exploring these aspects rather than the spectacle and epic grandeur some have seen in the play.

I really love this text. *Othello* is one of the most accomplished of Shakespeare’s tragedies because, while it contains some of the truly greatest poetry in all of the canon, it also has the most compelling plot and rich characters to bring to life on stage. I believe that Shakespeare was more interested in Othello the man than in him as a heroic warrior and military man. And we have Iago who remains one of the most complex and engaging villains ever depicted by Shakespeare. His evil machinations permeate the tragedy and his motives have been the subject of much critical speculation since the play first appeared. Then we have Desdemona, the daughter of a Venetian aristocrat, who is a rebel who breaks conventions and marries outside the tribe; she eventually comes to pay a tragic price for defying the norms of her culture and crossing boundaries.

Othello is a man of a different race leading an army, and always having to prove himself who he is as a human being and a soldier. The noble Moor comes “from men of royal siege,” He has attained military excellence, but he was born outside this world and has deep securities regarding his place in the Venetian society. The ease with which Iago dupes him becomes possible in the context of Othello’s awareness that he is an outsider. And like all outsiders who excel, he feels the pressure of proving himself better than any Venetian. He may be admired, he is needed to fight and win the wars for Venice, but woe betide him when he dares to marry a beautiful and young Venetian. We learn early in the play that “her father loved” Othello and eagerly listened to the story of his life. But once Brabantio finds out that Desdemona is in love with the Moor, he can only think that she must have been “stolen” from him, abused, “corrupted by spells and medicines” and bound “in chains of magic” by a “foul thief.”

However, I don’t essentially see this play as being about racism. There are many, many racial elements to it. There are slurs thrown at Othello, there are characters who are distinctly racist. Of course, in Shakespeare’s time, as indeed in our time, racism exists – a pernicious, destructive force. The world that Othello inhabits is full of traps and uncertainties; they affect his insecurities and shape his perceptions. But the actual core of the play: how Iago fools Othello and destroys his happiness and life, is much more

complex than simply saying Iago hates Othello because of his race. The matter cannot be reduced to one single root: racist prejudice.

The main motor of everything that happens in the play is Iago. His “double knavery” drives the story forward. Critics down through the ages have tried to identify why Iago does what he does. The notion of a motiveless malignity is seen by some as a central theme, but I think that gets us off the hook too easily. Iago’s actions cannot simply be motiveless. One crucial point is that at the heart of the play lies Iago’s own jealousy. Just check from the start Iago’s motives. Listen to what he claims (“I hate the Moor”). Watch what he says and does (“abuse Othello’s ear,” lead him “by th’ nose as asses are”). Race isn’t mentioned as a direct and unambiguous factor. So to limit the play to Iago’s overt racism, as some feel appropriate, is to underestimate the range and riches of Shakespeare’s genius.

In the end, the level of destruction is so great, the devastation that’s inflicted upon both the lives of Desdemona and Othello is so profound that one must begin to seek deeper human impulses. A psychological underpinning reveals perennial traits of human behavior and it shapes the events in the play. As we go on preparing the show and rehearsing, this is what this production is about. Not the grandeur of battle scenes – in truth there are none in the play – not a sweep of history, but rather the detailed specifics of human interaction. The most fascinating part of our exploration is bound to be searching beyond the obvious and capturing the complexity of human behavior that motivates the tragic course of *Othello*.

How can we pull apart the society and the people in the play so that we actually discover what gives permanence and lasting power to Shakespeare? How are we to understand and interpret the story from today’s perspective? One thing that I’m very strong about, is not playing Shakespeare in what I call “puffy pants:” not setting the play exclusively in an Elizabethan era. Because it strikes me that when you do that, you change the perception of the play. People end up viewing it as though those characters are distant from ourselves, distant from who we are. Underlying all of Shakespeare’s work is a truthful psychology and an awareness of social and political realities that transcend his own time; no doubt he speaks to us, to our realities. So it’s been often my view that we need to move the setting and course of action from the Elizabethan days to a different era.

When Patrick Clark and I started talking about the production, we realized that the way the action unfolds, it assumes a certain isolation of Cyprus, a factor that contradicts the present day world of instant communications. So we decided to set this *Othello* at the end of the 19th century which was a time when, after many invasions and colonizations, Cyprus came under British rule. We settled for this timeframe for very specific reasons. It seemed right in terms of the military nature of the war-like island in the play. It is a world sufficiently remote from our own to serve the plot, and still allows a better sense of connection than the Renaissance. And we also made the choice because I think that showing the late Victorian repressive conventions breaking down in Cyprus is an idea worth undertaking. It helps contrast the Venetian world and the world encountered in Cyprus. It also provides us with an opportunity to really distinguish between the civilian and the military, between the social classes that are evident throughout the play.

I think *Othello* is an extraordinary achievement, it’s a sublime piece of dramatic writing. The task ahead of us is truly to open the play up, to avoid making judgments before having carefully examined the reasons for a particular behavior. Rather we will pursue every underlying element of the tragedy as expressed in the amazing language of the text.

Keeping it Simple: Keeping it Moving - Notes from the Scenic and Costume Designer

Edited from comments made by set and costume designer Patrick Clark during the preliminary stages of preparation for the Guthrie production of the play.

I have always loved *Othello*. It's a wonderful play. And I've always seen it more as a small scale, intimate, domestic piece. So when Joe Dowling and I started talking about it, I felt we were on the same wavelength.

When we first spoke, I suggested the 1880's as a good period for the men and women, costume-wise. We looked at an earlier date as an option, but the late Victorian period has many advantages. We can make the most of the poetic language without having to deal with things conventionally known as typical of the Elizabethan past. It is a timeframe that crosses into the modern world but still retains something from the past. One of the great things about setting a Shakespeare play in this period is that we have the documentary advantage of photographs, and the audience too has had opportunities to see pictures from those times: early photos, not paintings. I think this helps a contemporary audience relate to the given historical aspect.

However in our production neither costumes nor sets will be strictly tied to that period. I've tried to distill it down into something simple, very neutral perhaps. In a sense, as far as our perceptions are, I think it will appear very "classic." Hence the production is in "period" but not lavishly so. The spoken language should be the true star in the performance. No distractions from this focus!

I have been to Cyprus many times. I've actually been to what is called the "Othello's Tower" in Famagusta. Whether he was ever there or not is evidently irrelevant; it's a fictional figure that in some way acquires a sort of reality, like events and people in myths. But the fortress has become known as Othello's and is listed as such in tourist guides in support of the island's very turbulent history. It's very interesting to see those great castles all over Cyprus, once real sites of military clashes, and now tourist attractions.

Cyprus was part of the Byzantine Empire, before being conquered by Richard the Lionhearted. He wasn't making any money off of it so he kept it for only two years before selling it to the Knights Templar. They weren't making any money off of it either, and so they sold it too. It's amazing to think: selling a whole country! But they did, and the populace had nothing to say about it. The French Lusignan family bought it, and they controlled much of the island for many years. Next the Venetians acquired it as part of the dowry for the wedding of Catherine de Coronado. Eventually the Turks occupied it, and they kept it until 1878. At which point, the British, needing yet another fueling station for their fleet on its way through the Suez to India, decided to lease it. When the First World War came the British decided the lease didn't count any more, yet they kept Cyprus under their mandate till the 1960s.

What is of interest to us is that it was in 1878 that the British officially took control of the island, as one of the empire's many far-flung outposts. So there is ground in the choice made by Joe and I for *Othello*, to place the action in the late 19th century. For centuries the island was an incredible crossroads. And the population mirrors that; when you meet them, they're from all over the world.

As a designer I'm used to a thrust stage, and I've never actually done Shakespeare in a proscenium. For a while I was having a difficult time, but eventually we came up with a straightforward and simple, call it traditional solution. I've tried to create a simple, classic space for the action to flow, that will give a

mood to fit the story. The design will allow light to play a large role. It will also help outline different areas for the action through simple shifts from one scene to the next. We know Shakespeare in his days did it all with minimal scenery, so I like giving a similar impression. On this set you can almost do any classic play. I wanted to keep the space small also as a means to convey the domestic scale of the drama performed on stage.

The opening scenes in Venice are at night. It's very dark. We start right outside the gilded bronze gates of Brabantio's house. Traditionally in Elizabethan plays you have an upper level and a lower level. This space separation was one of the few things that could give the sense of wealth needed to distinguish among the characters in the plays. And things had to be established very quickly: these people are rich, these people are poor. Indicating the social status is important, especially since Desdemona leaves her place to marry Othello and goes with him to Cyprus. We don't have the height on our set for two levels, but our production will use other means to attain a similar result. When we shift to the next street scene, in front of the Sagittary, the gates will track offstage. The action can attain a constant flow that will make the change of scenery noticeable but unobtrusive while the lights will mark every new location.

Once the action moves to Cyprus, there are walls of shutters in the back that close or open. When I traveled to Cyprus I understood why the crusaders died. During the day it is too hot, unbearably hot. Literally, people live at night. During the day they stay inside because of the heat: everything is shuttered. Here much of the set showing places on the war ridden island is uncomfortable and bleak, barrack-like. The walls and columns will also allow for lots of lurking areas. We wanted the sense that, as the play progressed, things were closing in on them. The characters' life is in a sort of isolation, the outside world has ceased to exist. We watch a domestic tragedy that involves a small group of people. These soldiers have gone off to the very fringes of an empire, the edge of the frontier. This is not a place for any woman to live, because it's really where brawls and battles erupt. Also you have this sense of decay, this slight sense of the end of an empire. Thus, the walls and floor may resemble crumbling stone and plaster the way they appear in worn-out places that were once prosperous, have existed for ages, and continue to exist long after the characters are gone. However for the final scene gauze curtains will be present. In relation to Desdemona's scenes there is an attempt to create a sense of femininity.

Now a word about the costume elements. Venice can be miserably cold in the winter and early spring: damp and forbidding. People will have cloaks and gloves. I imagine a very dark world at night in the streets of Venice: colors are navies and blacks. Indoors though, the senators will be in frock-coats. All of the uniforms are inspired from Italian military ones of that period, but they've been simplified. We're not being literal here but rather dealing with archetypes. I don't think that men's military uniforms have changed much from the 1860s up to about 1910; as usual, there are regular uniforms for the more temperate European climates and then there are campaign uniforms for hot climates. The campaign uniforms will be just light canvas jackets and trousers, as Cyprus' heat can be cruel. This is the kind of heat that makes people mad and causes them to abandon any bounds of decorum and reasonable behavior.

In the Victorian period there is a very distinct line between the masculine and the feminine worlds. Men belong to the military or are connected to government. It's significant that Desdemona and Emilia are the only women to appear, plus Bianca, a local courtesan. The two worlds are kept separate and this gives us a contrast, implicitly suggesting that the late Victorian world believed in such a separation between men and women. I've chosen the strongest costume shape and line for the women from that period. It's a definite feminine shape, but not too overwhelming. I prefer a design of clothes that are simple. I don't like giving the impression that these costumes are about costumes per se; rather they are

meant to help define the people wearing them.

So that's where we're starting. And we'll go on: keeping it simple and keeping it moving.

Costumes and Set Design for *Othello*

Following are costume renderings and set designs by designer Patrick Clark and photographs from the Guthrie Lab production of *Othello*.



Othello



Desdemona and Othello
Cheyenne Casebier and Lester Purry.
Photo by T. Charles Erickson



Othello in Cyprus



Iago



Iago and Othello
Bill McCallum and Lester Purry.
Photo by T. Charles Erickson.



Desdemona



Desdemona and Emilia
Cheyenne Casebier and Virginia S. Burke.
Photo by T. Charles Erickson.



Emilia



Brabantio



Bianca



Set Model - Venice Council Chamber



Venice Council Chamber
The cast of *Othello*. Photo by T. Charles Erickson.



Set Model - Bedchamber



Desdemona and Othello
Cheyenne Casebier and Lester Purry.
Photo by T. Charles Erickson.

Vibrations in the Air: Comments on the Language

Edited from a conversation with Andrew Wade, voice and language consultant, on October 26th, 2003.

*Tush! Never tell me; I take much unkindly
That thou, Iago, who hast had my purse
As if the strings were thine, shouldst know of this.*

Can theater still excite an audience to “see with” its ears? How do we do that? The opening lines of *Othello* are all about the word “this.” The word is dropped to the audience at the beginning of play in the same way Iago drops seeds of suspicion to Othello throughout the play. Shakespeare’s language is ultimately a stimulant to curiosity, and the word “this” can make an audience curious. Hopefully curious enough to be alert, ignoring the comfort of the seats for the duration of the story being performed.

Today, the central question we must ask is how do we relate Shakespeare’s verbal expression and dramatic form to a contemporary theater performance. Form is about carrying an audience with you and,

particularly in Shakespeare, it is about verbal persuasion. In every speech there is a focus, an objective to work out and reveal. We then think about how that focus, the topic addressed by the speaker, gets debated, talked out, stretched, resisted to, until the a resolution is found. This creates a form that is palpably exciting for the actor.

Though this form may look like something premeditated, it really is a shaped spontaneity, that the speaker/performer must master. If a speech exists solely for reporting information to the audience, it denies part of its function. Emilia's speech when she finds and picks up the handkerchief is a good example of a character speaking while thinking, and discovering the ideas in the moment. In this speech she is working something out, not reporting, and this creates a tension in her speech. Meter is ultimately a reflection of this tension, and though it can sometimes seem like a literary device (which of course it is, in terms of poetry) it is truthfully something that is organically part of how human beings think, act, make discoveries, express themselves. To feel the meter is to feel the ongoing drive of the speech, of the narrative, and their heightened intensity. How exciting it is for the actor – and in turn for the audience – to discover these ideas as they are being spoken.

Shakespeare is always begging the question: which comes first – the word or the thought? or are they happening together? or maybe the thought actually happens after, as the word is uttered? On stage, I believe, the act of speech acknowledges an act of change; and my job is to help the actors explore the possibilities of the form until s/he arrives at his or her own personal processing of the music of thought. I often prefer to work with actors by exploring the physicality of the language. A central question is: how does meaning change when I speak the words aloud? You can't say the word "filch," as Iago does, without grimacing. It leads you into a very specific physical shape of the thought. Though one could be easily tempted to assess the value of words based on the number of letters or the length of a word, I can get very excited about "I-F", just two letters. When I give myself permission to pay attention and listen to what the word "if" implies as I say it, I realize that it is about possibilities, about questioning.

Live theater is about these vibrations in the air affecting an audience. Take for instance the sound of the word "soul," its frequency in so many lines, a very important word in this play. The final – "l" in the word "soul" almost bears the weight of a syllable, and thus "sou-l" almost becomes a two-syllable word. It takes time to say it. And it reverberates in the listener's own mind and soul. This makes the listener wonder: what does "soul" really mean? how to hear it?

Irrespective how an actor chooses to perform the sound of "o" in the play, it has a dying inflection. This becomes implicit in the repetition of the sound "o," both overtly as "O" and subconsciously in words like "So" and "Soul." Shakespeare's language also reveals the power and the danger of this repetition: how repetition can create, change, or reinforce truth. Iago's repetitively dropping seeds of suspicion creates doubt, enforces uncertainty, and the audience, like Othello, goes on a journey from words like "may" and "if" to, in Act V, "know" the cause. However, "honest Iago," "good Iago," also shape perceptions and lead to a viewpoint through their very repetition. This sets up a dichotomy of how the audience is led to feel about Iago.

In Shakespeare the range of manipulation through language is absolutely fascinating. This is what, draws the audience toward Iago, subconsciously, almost sexually. Anyone that is that articulate in saying things becomes curiously appealing to most human beings. The power of eloquence is also at the center of Desdemona's attraction to Othello. He wins her over by his ability to speak, and tell so grippingly his life story. The tragic irony may be that, subsequently, his downfall is brought about by someone else's ability to speak and persuade him. Othello is book-ended by and centers on the persuasive power of language.

The “Farewell” speech, a speech in which Othello is primarily persuading himself that everything is over for him – love, military glory, trust, the very fabric of his existence – is filled with repetition of the very word “farewell” and also it has the music of this incredible rhetoric. Immediately after, however, comes Iago’s reply: “Is’t possible, my lord?” Aside from the “my lord,” it is alarmingly colloquial. It could be heard in any modern television series. Its impact is made by this elaborate contrast. Shakespeare routinely undercuts his own elaborate language with such contrasts which form the base of antithesis.

The idea of antithesis is fundamentally about how we consider and understand anything as a human beings. How can I understand anything other than setting it in reference to and against something else? That’s how thought works: to focus on one thing and then do define it by its opposite, by a comparison. This is how we make distinctions, quantify, refine and identify points, possibilities, the meaning of an idea through language. The antithesis between heaven and hell, for instance, runs as a central reference and contrast throughout Othello’s journey to “know.”

This need to distill and quantify ideas is what drives the characters to rely on imagery. They need these images to sum-up and express in words the unexplainable. But it is not just because Othello has been at sea, on ships, engaged in naval battles, that he uses sea-imagery. His emotions are as unfathomable as the sea – shifting, unstable, “false as water.” And he communicates the feelings of the tormenting sea inside himself. In the “Pontic sea” speech there is an absolute logic in which Othello must persuade himself to execute upon the “cause,” but there is also a movement akin to the sea and the storm in the language. Storms, like the one that precedes the second act, are never totally external in Shakespeare; rather they are internal to the characters’ turmoil and thus internal to the movement of their language. It is that “other,” non-literal, level of language that affects us as an audience. Helping actors find the way of releasing that “other” to an audience is what drives my work with the language and vocal skills of the cast.

Since you asked: Backstage information about *Othello*

Editor’s Note. The following notes on the Guthrie production of *Othello* were prepared by Community Relations Volunteer Jacque Frazzini for tour guides, volunteers and staff.

NOTE: In his remarks to the staff and visitors at the “Meet and Greet” and in his program notes for *Othello*, Artistic Director Joe Dowling shared some of his thoughts about this play and the artistic choices that have been made. First, he believes the play lends itself to a more intimate setting as it is a play of emotional power and psychological insight rather than one of spectacle and epic grandeur. He thinks *Othello* is one of the most accomplished of Shakespeare’s tragedies because, while it contains some of the truly greatest poetry in the Shakespeare canon, it also has the most wonderfully compelling plot and richly drawn characters. With input from Set and Costume Designer Patrick Clark, the decision was made to set the play in the late 19th century. One of the many reasons for this choice is the distinction between the classes at the time. Othello is a man of a different race leading an army and feels that he has to constantly prove himself to those around him. The ease with which Iago can dupe Othello is proof of his feelings of being an outsider in a very enclosed society; however, Joe Dowling does not see this play as being about racism. While there are racial slurs in the play, and there are characters who are definitely racist, the actual core of the play - how Iago deceives Othello and destroys not only Othello’s happiness, but his life - is much more complex than simply a matter of racial prejudice. At no

point does Iago suggest that his hatred of the Moor is because of his race. In mounting this production, the intent has been to focus on the weaknesses and human frailties that make this story so timeless and profound.

Facts about the tour:

The show will travel with eighteen cast members, a stage manager and assistant, understudies and a company manager. The technical support group will consist of a tour technical director, master carpenter who reviews drawings of all the theaters and fire codes, a rigger who is in charge of the scenery that “flies” and takes care of the battens and weights, a props person, two electricians (one master electrician), a sound person and two wardrobe staff who take care of hair, wigs, makeup and costumes. Run crews are picked up in every town to complete the various back stage needs.

Set

Craig Pettigrew, Assistant Technical Director

Set designer Patrick Clark has been to Cyprus often and is fascinated with its history. The island has been under the control of many empires and countries, so it has some significant French architecture, castles that were partly designed to be in water, and at times, a sense of desolation from being a battlefield on the edge of those empires. Three scenes in the play take place in Venice, set to look dark, cold and wet in contrast with the brighter and hot Cyprus. One scene in Venice has a gilded gate that moves on and off on tracking while another scene has a series of shutters that change the mood of the setting.

The design concept for the set is to create a space that could become more and more “claustrophobic” to reflect the fact that Othello’s world becomes smaller and smaller. There are eight traveler tracks and two folding walls. The travelers that use gates, shutters and panels for the scenes in Venice are used to change the set space and create different environments. The Cyprus setting uses alternative walls and curtains to create its unique effects. The set must be adaptable; therefore, the emphasis is on durability and flexible ways to bolt pieces together. It utilizes as few pieces as possible for efficient load in, and requires that the set pieces be as light as possible. The shutters are made from Sintra which is extruded PVC that comes in sheets. It can be bent and will keep the bend but won’t break. One of the challenges to the crew is that the set is very shallow (28’ deep) creating limited aisles for the crew to move in and out between the travelers. Moving the bed becomes a particularly challenging feat! (Read more about the bed in the section on Props).

Props

Kate Sutton-Johnson, Associate Props Manager

The build for the props in this show had touring in mind. Special “road boxes” have been designed for props storage as the show moves from venue to venue. Duplicates have been created for some props.

Weaponry – The swords that appear in the show are sabres which were ordered from a sword maker in Maine. The tips of the weapons have been “blunted” to avoid injuries to the actors especially in the mess hall scene which is extremely physical. The blood used in this scene and others in the show is “Reel Blood” – a theatrical film product which easily washes out. The blood packs are made from sandwich bags that are then made into small packets for use on stage.

The bracelet with which Othello ends his life is designed to look Moorish to complement the caftan he is wearing. This prop was created by Props Craftsperson Nick Golfis and uses both soft plastic and metal.

Special fittings were needed, as Lester Purry (Othello) is left-handed. Nick designed a sword which fits inside the bracelet and has a symmetrical handle so it could be used both ways. It is crucial that the bracelet stays centered on Othello's arm, so on the inside periphery there is a neoprene Velcro band to keep the bracelet in place.

Lamps – A number of lighting elements in this show are prop lamps both large and small. There are two standing floor lamps which have been made to look like oil lamps and are plugged into the floor so that their light is controlled by the dimmer board operator. Inside each the lamp stand is a solid pipe to give it reinforcement. Special road boxes with specific padding insure the security of these lamps as they are moved throughout the tour. The lamps lend intimacy and help to enhance the dimly lit scenes with smaller lighting elements so the focus remains on the characters. The desk lamps were purchased in pieces from lamp supply catalogs and then assembled by the Props department. Examples would be the chimney sections and bases. All lamp construction was coordinated with the electricians.

Furniture – The Duke's table was designed by Set Designer Patrick Clark and built by Props Craftsperson John Vlatkovich. Though the legs look sturdy, they are actually hollow for ease in lifting. The top of the desk is not wood; it has an inset of a fabric upholstered panel to create the look of a writing desk. The molding along the edge of the desk and detailing along the legs consists of appliques made from a lightweight and inexpensive composite purchased from a decorating supply company. Once an applique is ordered, a mold is made of it so that it can be mass-produced and never requires ordering again. From Ressler Company, two bench frames were ordered so the tops could be upholstered with a silk fabric. The globe that appears in this scene consists of several pieces that were pulled from stock and then painted to look antique. The graphics were added to enhance the "antique look." A special pedestal was built for this prop with an accompanying shipping crate.

Because the mess hall scene involves so much physicality, the table that was pulled from stock was fortified underneath with special framing. For the garden scene, several pieces of furniture were pulled from stock along with terra cotta pots and plants. The cushions were made especially for this scene.

The boudoir scene consists of a dressing screen, a small table and a bench. A radio-controlled lamp is wired into the table with a battery inside the drawer and is included in the dimmer schedule so that it can be adjusted with the overall lighting in this scene. The bed was built by Props Craftsperson Mel Springer and comes from upstage in a folded and locked position to fit between the wing space and then flipped down later. A bolster is then added, and pillows complete the final touch. John Vlatkovich built the valance and steel framing for the drapes which are Velcroed inside the valance box. The bed comes apart into several pieces for traveling and all the furniture pieces have custom packing blankets specially made by Master Soft Props Artisan Rozi Graham.

Costumes

Maribeth Hite, Costume Director

There is a very tight color palate throughout the show. Set and Costume Designer Patrick Clark determined the 1876 period of the piece, selecting earth colors for Cyprus and envisioning Venice as being dark. The Cyprus uniforms were very specific so they had to be built, made of cotton canvas that was purchased locally. Patrick wanted a particular color which necessitated dyeing the fabric. Because of the use of blood in the show and the continual washing that would fade the base color, a fiber-reactive dye was used. This type of dye sets up a chemical reaction between the dye and the cotton so that water does not dilute the color. Artistic Director Joe Dowling added more blood during the tech rehearsal period, so there are many duplicate costumes with varying amounts of blood.

The somewhat constricting uniforms for Venice are navy blue wool, contributing to the dark motif for Venice. The uniforms for Lodovico and Gratiano were pulled from stock, the military riding boots were purchased and the hats were built. Garments for Cyprus are lighter and less restrictive. Desdemona has six specific changes in the show. Four were built: the mantle which she wears over her dress in the Venice scene, the white silk dress (called the Tissot dress), her evening dress and a night gown. A special slip which covers her corset and petticoat was made to wear under her evening dress to give her a more attractive line.

For Amelia one dress was built and one was pulled from stock. Bianca's costume which is an amalgam of several styles was also pulled from stock. Othello has two caftan-type garments worn when he works at home. Both costumes were made for the performance. The metallic fabric was cut and then a silk fabric was stitched underneath.

Ivy Loughborough, Wigmaster

There are three women in the show and all have wigs; Desdemona and Bianca each have two wigs, Amelia has one. Desdemona's hair has to come down on stage so the style had to be simple enough to put up and easily take down. A lot of hairpieces were used in the women's styles at that time. There are two men's wigs in the show and supplemental hair pieces. One actor (Roderigo) takes his wig off before the trip to Cyprus so it looks as if he's cut his hair after joining Othello's army. Due to the nature of touring, it made more sense for the men to grow their own facial hair and goatees.

Ray Steveson, Lighting Design Assistant

Before the show moves into any venue, arrangements have been made in advance regarding lighting requirements so that the crew can be prepared. The Guthrie crew brings its own light board and plugs it into the dimmer racks at the venue, if it isn't feasible to use the house lighting system. A light batten (or pipe) travels with the show and is attached to a second pipe in the performance venue. Trusses (box-like units) with lights inside are moved from venue to venue. The number of instruments that are used will remain the same throughout the tour.

Scott W. Edwards, Sound Designer

Most of the music for the show is by a British composer, Arnold Bax, with a few pieces by Benjamin Britten. There are about twenty-five music cues used for transitions between scenes. There is no underscoring during the scenes. There are about fifteen special effects cues ranging from thunder and rain, to cheering crowds. No microphones are used in the production.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Suggested Topics

Compare the story of the Moor of Venice in the novella by Cinthio (1565) with Shakespeare's *Othello*. What plot elements are similar? What is different and in what way? How have the themes, ideas and poetic power of Shakespeare's *Othello* transformed Cinthio's story into a more strikingly complex, profound, and timeless work?

What place is occupied by *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice* among other plays by Shakespeare with which you are familiar? Consider, for instance, its possible connections with *Hamlet*, *The Winter's Tale*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Richard III*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Twelfth Night*, *King Lear*.

Who were the Moors? What was known about them in early seventeenth-century England? How does that differ from what was thought of Moors in Venice or other parts of the world in history, from Shakespeare's time to our days?

How does the choice of placing the action on stage in the late nineteenth-century, as in the current Guthrie production, inform and affect the audience perception of *Othello*, the Moor?

Why did Shakespeare choose to set the action in Venice and Cyprus? What elements would be different if the story had taken place entirely in Venice? What makes the "war-like island" an appropriate location for the unfolding of the events in the play?

When is *jealousy* mentioned the first time in the play? Who utters the word first? What does Iago mean when he forewarns Othello to beware of this "green-eyed monster"? How does the idea of jealousy evolve and reverberate as the story unfolds?

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? Are there other characters in the play who exhibit jealousy? Who are they? How does their mode of jealousy differ from Othello's? In light of your own life experience, do you think that it is possible to avoid, control and/or overcome jealousy? Explain your answer.

How do you estimate Othello's strength as a story-teller and public speaker. What persuasive rhetorical devices do you notice in his speeches? Discuss Othello's statements about his own accomplishments, ambitions, love, honor, and convictions: how true are his claims and disclaimers regarding the "witchcraft" and "mighty magic" he had used to win Desdemona?

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?

No character in *Othello* is flawless. Discuss some of these flaws and how Iago uses them to his advantage. What are Iago's flaws in relation to the people he dupes as he implements his plans?

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.

To which other figures in Shakespeare's plays or in other literary works can you compare Iago? What similarities and what differences do you notice in such comparisons?

How does Iago's treachery change pitch as his intended "scenario" progresses? At what point can he no longer control the consequences of the actions he had spurred? Discuss what Iago claims he wants to achieve in the beginning of the play in light of the subsequent developments and the ending of the tragedy.

Trace how Shakespeare creates dramatic irony by having Iago share his thoughts directly with the audience. In what ways does he engage the audience as a witness to his plotting? How do you feel about becoming Iago's sounding-board and being a silent participant in the tragedy fostered by him? Explain your response.

Is there anything you might have in common with Iago? Are you able to empathize with him and for what reasons? Consider who in your own life you envy and of what are you jealous. To what lengths would you go to succeed in securing the things you want? What would you do to emulate the people you envy and attempt to become more like them?

Discuss the ways in which Iago elicits trust from different characters. What characters seem to trust Iago and on what grounds? What reasons might any of them have not to trust Iago entirely? What links and contradictions do you see between "trust," "doubt" and "suspicion?"

What does Iago say about women? Discuss the nature of his relationship with Emilia. How do Iago's feelings about women reveal his views of gender relations, and more broadly any human relations?

What strengths do you see in Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca? How do you see their status (i.e. Desdemona as a newlywed, Emilia as a housewife, and Bianca as a courtesan) reflected in what they say about themselves, their male partners, infidelity, and jealousy?

What accounts for Desdemona's choice to marry Othello and leave her father for good? How do you see her courage, purity, innocence, and goodness as factors that eventually lead to her doom? Do you find faults in Desdemona's conduct during the course of the story? Discuss the interplay between her intentions and how other characters interpret what she does and says.

Consider Emilia's part in the play. How does Emilia change in the course of the action? What responsibility does she feel in connection to Desdemona's death? Do you see Emilia as a weak or strong character? Give details in support of your answer.

Discuss the relationship between Cassio and Desdemona. What kind of love does Cassio bear for Desdemona and Desdemona for Cassio? How does Iago manipulate the perceived ambiguity of their mutual affection that both of them candidly acknowledge? How does Shakespeare use their relationship within the dramaturgical structure of the tragedy?

What elements do you think define the characters of Cassio and Roderigo? How does Cassio's conflicted nature make him a target for Iago's scheming? What features of Roderigo's persona make him follow Iago's instructions?

How can we know the thoughts and unspoken feelings of the characters? How do such elements contribute the atmosphere of the play? What comments would you have regarding the dramatic impact, tone and mood of *Othello*?

Consider the titles and the hierarchy that define the social position of the characters in the play. In what way is the form of addressing each other indicative of their relationship? How is power shifted when characters address one another differently than it is proper? Do you see any application of these situations and relations in your daily life?

What is your response to Shakespeare's language in *Othello*? Why do you think verse and prose alternate in the play? In what way does the vocabulary used by the author enrich and illuminate the themes of the tragedy? How remote or close is this language from today's spoken English?

The texts of Shakespeare's plays abound in memorable aphorisms, concise statements that often sound like proverbs. Here are some examples from *Othello*:

- "Fathers, ... trust not your daughter's minds / By what you see them act."
- "To mourn a mischief that is past and gone / Is the next way to draw new mischief on."
- "Knavery's plain face is never seen till used."
- "... honour is an essence that's not seen / They have it very oft that have it not."
- "My heart is turned to stone: I strike it and it hurts my hand"
- "...unkindness may defeat my life / But never taint my love"
- "... it is their husbands faults / If wives do fall"
- "That death's unnatural that kills for loving."

Identify the characters who speak these lines. In what way do you find that such turns of phrase heighten the poetic language of the play and enforce the impact of the dramatic action?

Select some frequently recurring words (i.e. honesty, suspicion, doubt, cunning, patience, honor, villainy, lust, trust, love, etc.) and discuss the range of their meaning in a speech or a scene that you choose and in the context of the story; beyond that, how do they reverberate for us today? What do you learn about the characters when they use certain words to mean different things?

What and/or who in the play can be deemed as being "monstrous," and how does that perception change throughout the course of the action? What in your life do you see as "monstrous?" How do your perceptions of the world around you determine what you feel is "monstrous?"

Consider situations and events in the play that could have turned differently and possibly spare Othello and Desdemona from their ultimate fate. Why do characters such as Emilia, Cassio, Desdemona, and Roderigo fail to take actions that may have deterred or thwarted Iago's plan?

Who do you think is commanding authority regarding the way the action unfolds? Who controls the dramaturgy of *Othello*? Support your answer by discussing the way the story is told, what elements are disclosed at what moment and for whose benefit or damage. Similarly, examine the order of scenes and the characters' actions and transformations in the structure of the play.

Comment on the racial overtones of the play. Consider what is said about the Moorish Othello by various characters. How do these comments work for or against racial prejudices regarding the color of Othello and his African background? Discuss to what extent racism does or does not motivate the conflict and dramatic action of the play.

Recall and consider the religious references in the play. How do religious beliefs shape each of the characters' sensibility, behavior and morality? What religious metaphors does Shakespeare employ in the play and how do they partake in shaping the overall meaning?

How is a sense of dramatic illusion developed throughout the play? Discuss those aspects which do not turn out to be as they "seem" to be. Recall lines from the play that exhibit the characters' concerns with

what things “seem” to be. How do this “illusion” and/or impression of uncertainty apply to the time-frame and duration of the action in *Othello*?

How does the time of day of each scene affect the mood, tone, and rhythm of those scenes? How does the passage of time contribute to the pace and tone of the whole play? What inconsistencies do you find in the play’s temporal structure. In your view, do any of these matter? Or can they be ignored? Explain your answer. How come that Shakespeare allowed such inconsistencies?

How does Shakespeare make use of animal imagery in the play? Which characters are compared to animals and to what effect? How do these references to animals interact in the play’s imagery and enhance the relevance of the characters and their part in the dramatic events?

What symbolic value does the handkerchief have? How does it propel the action, precipitate the dramatic crisis, and help to further highlight the themes of love and jealousy in the play?

How are songs used in the play? Discuss how do you feel that they contribute to the atmosphere and tone of various scenes, how they help to define the characters’ state mind and emotions, and how they underscore the tragic action.

Besides the Renaissance setting of Shakespeare’s *Othello*, what other historical period could be imagined to fit the tragic events of the story and highlight its themes and conflict?

What do you see as the final poetic image of the tragedy? How does it shape the conclusion you derive from the play?

Draw parallels between your understanding of the play when reading it and when seeing it on stage. What would be your description of the time-frame, circumstances, dramatic conflict and characters’ conduct in light of having read the play and/or seen it performed? How immediately present or distant do you feel *Othello* appears on the page, in a movie or in a live performance?

What makes the characters in the Guthrie production engage your own emotions? How would you describe your perception of the characters as they appear on stage in action? Who is most affecting your feelings and on what ground?

What specific elements define the interpretation of *Othello* in the Guthrie production directed by Joe Dowling? Discuss them in light of your response to the way Shakespeare’s language comes alive in the actors’ performances.

How would you discuss this production in relation to other stage or film versions of *Othello* that you may have encountered? What particular features of these versions make their rendering of the story distinct and special?

In what way do the scenery and lighting of the Guthrie production convey the emotional world of the play, and heighten its dramatic setting and the flow of the action?

How do the costumes enhance the sense of place and period of the play’s setting? How do they lend support to and enhance the specifics of the actors’ interpretations of the roles?

Discuss how, in the Guthrie’s staging, the production elements converge into a distinct theatrical interpretation of Shakespeare’s *Othello*. How do you think they all contribute to the impact the tragedy has on you as the audience?

ADDITIONAL SOURCES

For Further Information

BOOKS

Othello in Print

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WEBSITES

<http://www.allshakespeare.com>

All Shakespeare

http://www.folger.edu/Home_02B.html

Folger Shakespeare Library

<http://www.shakespeare-online.com/default.asp>

Shakespeare Online

FILMS

1952 - Orson Welles (director). Cast: Orson Welles, Micheal MacLiammoir, Suzanne Cloutier. (U.S.A., b.&w.).

1965 - Stuart Burge (director). Cast: Laurence Olivier, Frank Finlay, Maggie Smith. (United Kingdom, color).

1980 - Liz White (director). Cast: Yaphet Kotto, Richard Dixon, Audrey Dixon. (U.S.A., color).

1981 - Jonathan Miller (director). Cast: Anthony Hopkins, Bob Hoskins, Penelope Wilton. (United Kingdom, BBC-TV, color).

1987 - Janet Suzman (director). Cast: John Kani in the title role. 1987, (South Africa, TV adaptation of the play produced by the Market Theatre, Johannesburg).

1996 - Oliver Parker (director). Cast: Laurence Fishburne, Kenneth Branagh, Irene Jacob. (U.S.A., color)