The Guide

A theatergoer’s resource edited by the Education & Community Programs department at Portland Center Stage

Othello
By William Shakespeare

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Table of Contents
Synopsis ................................................................. 2
William Shakespeare ........................................... 3
Cast of Characters ................................................. 5
A Cultural Context for Othello .......................... 7
Commentary .............................................................. 8
Famous lines from Othello .................................. 9
Discussion Questions .......................................... 9
Classroom Curriculum ........................................ 10
Synopsis

From "A Teacher's Guide to the Signet Classic Edition of William Shakespeare's Othello" by Debra (Dee) James, University of North Carolina at Asheville

The play is set primarily in Cyprus. However, the opening act takes place in Venice, providing us with an understanding of the authoritarian government controlled by the Venetian senators. Also, we begin to understand Othello's tenuous standing in Venice, as well as Desdemona's privileged background. The first scenes introduce the primary plot, beginning outside Brabantio's house with Iago already intent upon manipulation and trouble-making. He encourages Roderigo to rouse Brabantio, Desdemona's father, and tell him of her elopement with Othello. Iago makes the announcement as alarming and disruptive as possible. Both Iago and Roderigo reveal their motivation: Roderigo's passion for Desdemona and Iago's appetite for revenge on Othello for choosing Michael Cassio over him as his second in command. Although Brabantio and Othello had been friends, or at least amiable acquaintances, Brabantio's first thought is that his daughter would never have done this of her own free will—Othello must have used witchcraft and potions. The secondary plot, introduced in the following scene, is that the Turks have taken a fleet to Cyprus, and the senators want to send Othello as the best and most experienced general to defend it. The Turks' threat to Venetian civilization echoes Brabantio's concerns about what he interprets as Othello's barbarian threat to his civilized daughter; he wants the powerful senators to condemn Othello for wooing her. However, Desdemona declares that her love for the Moor is free of any external influence.

After Desdemona's declaration all attention is returned to the attack on Cyprus. Othello is ordered to leave Venice immediately. Ironically, he commends Desdemona into Iago's keeping and requests that she be allowed to come to him in Cyprus. Brabantio warns Othello that if Desdemona deceived her father she could also be false to her husband. At the end of the act, Iago persuades Roderigo to abandon his plans to kill himself over Desdemona and come to Cyprus disguised and ready to seek revenge on Cassio and Othello.

The next act opens with a conversation that tells of the Turks' drowning in a storm, thus ending their threat to Cyprus. Cassio arrives, and we learn that Othello's ship is still at sea. Desdemona and her entourage, including Iago, appear shortly thereafter; all await news of Othello. Othello appears and a tender moment of reunion with Desdemona. Cassio is overwrought Othello has a seizure that Cassio witnesses. Iago uses this as an opportunity to call Othello's reason into question with visitors from Venice, one of whom is Desdemona's relative. Othello can no longer contain his passionate anger towards Desdemona and publicly chides her and strikes her. Unable to get an admission of guilt from his wife, he turns to her attendant. When Othello questions Emilia about her mistress's habits, she staunchly defends Desdemona's virtue, but Othello will not accept her testimony. Desdemona's assistance in returning to Othello's favor, begins slowly poisoning Othello's mind by making him think that Desdemona is illicitly involved with Cassio.

In Act III Iago's plot progresses. Cassio asks Desdemona to plead his case to Othello. She freely and happily accepts his suit and pledges herself to urge his case relentlessly. In the meantime Iago continues to poison Othello's mind. Othello demands visual proof:

"Villain, be sure thou prove my love a whore
Be sure of it, give me ocular proof;
Or, by the worth of mine eternal soul,
Thou hadst been better have been born a dog
Than answer my naked wrath."

(III, iii, 356-360)

Iago quickly seizes the opportunity. Othello has given Desdemona a special handkerchief, a family heirloom passed down from his mother to his bride. Iago gets the handkerchief from Emilia, his wife and Desdemona's attendant. Emilia is unaware of her husband's intent. Iago plants the handkerchief in Cassio's rooms. At Iago's urging Othello asks Desdemona for it. Worried because it seems to mean so much to her husband, Desdemona lies and says she doesn't have it at the moment. This arouses Othello's doubt and distrust.

The next act opens with Iago plotting with Roderigo to kill Cassio. Iago continues to manipulate both Othello and Roderigo, pushing each of them to murder—even persuading Othello to strangle rather than poison Desdemona. An overwrought Othello has a seizure that Cassio witnesses. Iago uses this as an opportunity to call Othello's reason into question with visitors from Venice, one of whom is Desdemona's relative. Othello can no longer contain his passionate anger towards Desdemona and publicly chides her and strikes her. Unable to get an admission of guilt from his wife, he turns to her attendant. When Othello questions Emilia about her mistress's habits, she staunchly defends Desdemona's virtue, but Othello will not accept her testimony. The story ends with the witnesses contemplating the tragic tale they must tell the Venetian court.

The final act climaxes in the revelation of Iago's multi-faceted scheme. Emilia, Roderigo, and Desdemona are its early casualties. Cassio, though intended to die, survives. Othello finally confronts the truth about Iago's manipulation and Desdemona's innocence and kills himself. The story ends with the witnesses contemplating the tragic tale they must tell the Venetian court.
William Shakespeare

Known throughout the world, the works of William Shakespeare have been performed in countless hamlets, villages, cities and metropolises for more than 400 years. And yet, the personal history of William Shakespeare is somewhat a mystery. There are two primary sources that provide historians with a basic outline of his life. One source is his work—the plays, poems and sonnets—and the other is official documentation such as church and court records. However, these only provide brief sketches of specific events in his life and provide little on the person who experienced those events.

Though no birth records exist, church records indicate that a William Shakespeare was baptized at Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-upon-Avon on April 26, 1564. From this, it is believed he was born on or near April 23, 1564, and this is the date scholars acknowledge as William Shakespeare’s birthday.

Located 103 miles west of London, during Shakespeare’s time Stratford-upon-Avon was a market town bisected with a country road and the River Avon. William was the third child of John Shakespeare, a leather merchant, and Mary Arden, a local landed heiress. William had two older sisters, Joan and Judith, and three younger brothers, Gilbert, Richard and Edmund. Before William’s birth, his father became a successful merchant and held official positions as alderman and bailiff, an office resembling a mayor. However, records indicate John’s fortunes declined sometime in the late 1570s.

Scant records exist of William’s childhood, and virtually none regarding his education. Scholars have surmised that he most likely attended the King’s New School, in Stratford, which taught reading, writing and the classics. Being a public official’s child, William would have undoubtedly qualified for free tuition. But this uncertainty regarding his education has led some to raise questions about the authorship of his work and even about whether or not William Shakespeare ever existed.

William Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway on November 28, 1582, in Worcester, in Canterbury Province. Hathaway was from Shottery, a small village a mile west of Stratford. William was 18 and Anne was 26, and, as it turns out, pregnant. Their first child, a daughter they named Susanna, was born on May 26, 1583. Two years later, on February 2, 1585, twins Hamnet and Judith were born. Hamnet later died of unknown causes at age 11.

After the birth of the twins, there are seven years of William Shakespeare’s life where no records exist. Scholars call this period the “lost years,” and there is wide speculation on what he was doing during this period. One theory is that he might have gone into hiding for poaching game from the local landlord, Sir Thomas Lucy. Another possibility is that he might have been working as an assistant schoolmaster in Lancashire. It is generally believed he arrived in London in the mid- to late 1580s and may have found work as a horse attendant at some of London’s finer theaters, a scenario updated centuries later by the countless aspiring actors and playwrights in Hollywood and Broadway.
By 1592, there is evidence William Shakespeare earned a living as an actor and a playwright in London and possibly had several plays produced. The September 20, 1592 edition of the *Stationers’ Register* (a guild publication) includes an article by London playwright Robert Greene that takes a few jabs at William Shakespeare: “...There is an upstart Crow, beautifi  ed with our feathers, that with his Tiger’s heart wrapped in a Player’s hide, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you: and being an absolute Johannes factotum, is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a country,” Greene wrote of Shakespeare.

Scholars differ on the interpretation of this criticism, but most agree that it was Greene’s way of saying Shakespeare was reaching above his rank, trying to match better known and educated playwrights like Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Nashe or Greene himself.

By the early 1590s, documents show William Shakespeare was a managing partner in the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, an acting company in London. After the crowning of King James I, in 1603, the company changed its name to the King’s Men. From all accounts, the King’s Men company was very popular, and records show that Shakespeare had works published and sold as popular literature. The theater culture in 16th century England was not highly admired by people of high rank. However, many of the nobility were good patrons of the performing arts and friends of the actors. Early in his career, Shakespeare was able to attract the attention of Henry Wriothesley, the Earl of Southampton, to whom he dedicated his first- and second-published poems: “Venus and Adonis” (1593) and “The Rape of Lucrece” (1594).

By 1597, 15 of the 37 plays written by William Shakespeare were published. Civil records show that at this time he purchased the second largest house in Stratford, called New House, for his family. It was a four-day ride by horse from Stratford to London, so it is believed that Shakespeare spent most of his time in the city writing and acting and came home once a year during the 40-day Lenten period, when the theaters were closed.

By 1599, William Shakespeare and his business partners built their own theater on the south bank of the Thames River, which they called the Globe. In 1605, Shakespeare purchased leases of real estate near Stratford for 440 pounds, which doubled in value and earned him 60 pounds a year. This made him an entrepreneur as well as an artist, and scholars believe these investments gave him the time to write his plays uninterrupted.

With the exception of *Romeo and Juliet*, William Shakespeare’s first plays were mostly histories written in the early 1590s. *Richard II, Henry VI* (parts 1, 2 and 3) and *Henry V* dramatize the destructive results of weak or corrupt rulers, and have been interpreted by drama historians as Shakespeare’s way of justifying the origins of the Tudor Dynasty.

Shakespeare also wrote several comedies during his early period: the witty romance *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the romantic *Merchant of Venice*, the wit and wordplay of *Much Ado About Nothing*, the charming *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*. Other plays, possibly written before 1600, include *Titus Andronicus, The Comedy of Errors, The Taming of the Shrew* and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*.

It was in William Shakespeare’s later period, after 1600, that he wrote the tragedies *Hamlet, King Lear, Othello* and *Macbeth*. In these, Shakespeare’s characters present vivid impressions of human temperament that are timeless and universal. Possibly the best known of these plays is *Hamlet*, which explores betrayal, retribution, incest and moral failure. These moral failures often drive the twists and turns of Shakespeare’s plots, destroying the hero and those he loves. In William Shakespeare’s final period, he wrote several tragicomedies. Among these are *Cymbeline, The Winter’s Tale* and *The Tempest*. Though graver in tone than the comedies, they are not the dark tragedies of *King Lear or Macbeth* because they end with reconciliation and forgiveness.

Tradition has it that William Shakespeare died on his birthday, April 23, 1616, though many scholars believe this is a myth. Church records show he was interred at Trinity Church on April 5, 1616. In his will, he left the bulk of his possessions to his eldest daughter, Susanna. Though entitled to a third of his estate, little seems to have gone to his wife, Anne, whom he bequeathed his “second-best bed.” This has drawn speculation that she had fallen out of favor, or that the couple was not close. However, there is very little evidence the two had a difficult marriage. Other scholars note that the term “second-best bed” often refers to the bed belonging to the household’s master and mistress—the marital bed—and the “first-best bed” was reserved for guests.

from www.biography.com
Cast of Characters and the Actors Playing them:

**OTHELLO**
A Moor, and an officer in the Venetian military. He falls in love with, and marries, the delicate Desdemona, though he is middle-aged, and she is still young. Othello is bold, a good warrior, and a decent person overall; however, he is undone by jealousy and pride, his two main failings. Although Othello is very eloquent, he believes his manners and words are both rough.

**DESDEMONA**
Othello’s wife, a young Venetian woman of high birth and good breeding. Desdemona is almost overly virtuous, which causes her to feel that she must defend Cassio, and speak in a public sphere when necessary. She is stronger than Othello believes her to be, and is not the private, withdrawn, meek woman he would ideally like her to be.

**CASSIO**
Othello’s lieutenant, though he has little field experience. Cassio is a smooth-talking, very courteous Venetian courtier, the opposite of Othello in many respects, which is why Othello admires him, oddly enough. Othello is led to believe that Cassio has had an affair with Desdemona, though Cassio has only honorable intentions toward Desdemona.

**IAGO**
Othello’s ensign, and passed over for the lieutenant position in favor of Cassio. Iago is young and treacherous; he is a villain from the start, and though he cites his hurt pride over the lost promotion and Othello’s alleged infidelity with Iago’s wife Emilia as being reasons for his actions, he is without reasons. He is immoral, but very perceptive, keen, and able to manipulate people into falling for the traps he sets without them being aware.
EMILIA
Iago’s wife, and Desdemona’s handmaiden. She is entrusted with bringing people into Desdemona’s presence, staying with her at all times, etc. Emilia has no idea what her husband Iago is up to, nor of his darker qualities. She remains loyal to Desdemona above all others, although she unwittingly plays a key part in Iago’s treachery.

BRABANTIO
Desdemona’s father, a senator and renowned citizen of Venice. He is not at all pleased by Desdemona’s union, and warns Othello that as Desdemona betrayed her father, she may betray her husband too.

RODERIGO
Lusts after Desdemona, which Iago is of course aware of. Iago uses him to ruin Cassio’s reputation, and in his other schemes. Iago promises Roderigo that he shall have Desdemona’s love in return for his help; Roderigo actually receives nothing but a disgraced death.

DUKE OF VENICE
Ruler of the city, and Othello’s superior. He allows Othello and Desdemona to stay together despite her father’s protests, and also sends Othello off to Cyprus to battle the Moors.

SENATORS
Other authority figures of Venice, and men of reason and order; they also support Othello and Desdemona’s union, and Othello answers to them and the Duke in matters of war.

BIANCA
A courtesan who Cassio visits frequently; Cassio asks her to make a copy of Desdemona’s handkerchief, and the fact that the handkerchief is found in her place further incriminates Cassio. She is the only female in the play whom Cassio shows less than full respect to, probably because she is a prostitute.

MONTANO, GOVERNOR OF CYPRUS
Pronounces judgment on Iago at the end of the play, comments on the situation, and helps to wrap the play up. He is the main law and order figure of Cyprus, and serves as damage control after Othello dies, and Iago is proven unfit.

LODOVICO AND GRATIANO
Two Venetian nobles, both of some relation to Desdemona; both play their biggest part after Desdemona has died, and must take the news of the tragedy back to Venice as officials of that city.
A Cultural Context for Othello
By Kristin Johnsen-Neshati

Scholars disagree as to when Shakespeare finished writing Othello, but we can date the play from its first performance by the King’s Men on November 1, 1604, at the court of James I. Multiple productions followed at the Globe and Blackfriars theaters, and the play was mounted at court again in 1612–1613 in honor of Princess Elizabeth’s wedding. Shakespeare’s principal source for the plot was a short story by the Italian writer Cinthio Giambattista Giraldi (1504-1574), who included it in a collection of 100 domestic stories titled Hecatommithi, published in Venice in 1566. No English translation is believed to have existed before 1753, so Shakespeare may have read it in either the original Italian or in a French translation published in 1584. A handful of lines from Shakespeare’s text recall phrases from the Italian and French versions, suggesting that he may have read it in both languages.

The plot of Cinthio’s story centers on four characters, all of whom Shakespeare borrowed for his tragedy: the Moor, the Ensign, the Captain and the Moor’s wife, Desdemona. The events and key players are similar, but important differences emerge with respect to the characters’ actions and each author’s intent. Cinthio’s Moor reflects certain racial stereotypes of the day, such as a proclivity toward jealousy and passion, whereas Shakespeare takes pains to establish Othello’s heroic qualities alongside his blind spots. Desdemona offers a moral later in the original story, urging Italian women to obey their parents when they forbid them to marry foreigners. In Shakespeare’s telling, however, Desdemona takes no such stand, opting not to implicate Othello, even when Emilia asks her dying mistress, “O, who has done this deed?” Cinthio’s Ensign and Moor conspire to kill Desdemona, while Shakespeare assigns the murderous act to Othello alone. Cinthio’s Moor refuses to confess his guilt, but in Shakespeare’s version, Othello earns his place as a tragic hero by recognizing his tragic mistake and atoning for it magnificently.

Early 17th-century English attitudes toward non-Europeans were largely shaped by the government’s diplomatic policies and, to a lesser extent, by exotic stories brought back by travelers overseas. The term “moor” was derived from the name of the country Mauritania but was used to refer to North Africans, West Africans or, even more loosely, for non-whites or Muslims of any origin. North and West Africans living in Elizabethan England were frequently singled out for their unusual dress, behavior and customs and were commonly referred to as “devils” or “villains.” Moors were commonly stereotyped as sexually overactive, prone to jealousy and generally wicked. The public associated “blackness” with moral corruption, citing examples from Christian theology to support the view that whiteness was the sign of purity, just as blackness indicated sin.

Although Queen Elizabeth granted the Moors “full diplomatic recognition” out of gratitude for their help in conquering Spain, in 1601 she deported them, citing concerns about their irregular behavior and a fear that allowing them to stay in England would lead to overpopulation. Blacks were not typically associated with slavery at that time, since the slave trade would not be fully established until the late 17th century. Instead, the Elizabethan portrait of the dark-skinned “other” clearly established him as a bestial force, dangerous because of his sexuality, temper and magical powers.

In his adaptation, Shakespeare incorporates these racial stereotypes into the dialogue, assigning them to characters like Iago, Roderigo and Brabantio at the top of the play. Their slurs and accusations provide the backdrop against which viewers must formulate impressions of a man they do not know. Once Othello enters, however, the audience must judge him—his calculated actions and eloquent speech—not in the abstract, but in person. Through the theatrical medium, Shakespeare helps the public see his protagonist in three dimensions: the Moor from Cinthio’s story transformed from an exotic and passionate stereotype into a tragic figure in flesh and blood. The play’s action reveals the depth of affection shared by Othello and Desdemona, the enchanting power of the general’s poetry and, finally, Iago’s easy manipulations of collegial and marital trust. Through the treachery of a surprising white devil, Shakespeare challenges his audiences to spot the true color of villainy.

Some scholars have speculated that Shakespeare wrote Othello to please James I, who had a keen interest in the history of the Turks and their defeat by the Christians in the Battle of Lepanto in 1571. In assigning Othello, the Christian general, the role of defending Cyprus against the Turks, Shakespeare gives a nod to recent military history but also signals to the Elizabethans that his hero is a “civilized” (non-Muslim) African and, therefore, worthy of their empathy.

As the setting for the original story (and substitute for Shakespeare’s London), Venice provides a natural environment for the figure of the Moor to be both revered and despised. According to Venetian law, the Venetian Republic’s army general was required to be a foreigner. Since Shakespeare’s Venetians reflect the mores of English society, it follows that Venetian society would admire Othello for his valor and leadership but still recoil at the notion of his marrying into its families.

Shakespeare chose the same city for another of his most famous portraits of otherness, The Merchant of Venice (1596–1597), challenging his audiences to consider “Hath not a Jew eyes?…” In both plays, Shakespeare calls on his audiences to consider the person before them, complex as he may be, rather than judging him by inherited assumptions used to dismiss a maligned people in the abstract. Shakespeare makes the stage a venue for closer examination, a place where audiences may begin to relate to “others,” not all at once, but one extraordinary example at a time. In adapting Cinthio, Shakespeare sets up familiar stereotypes to explode them and to teach his audiences compassion for those whom society uses but never fully embraces as countrymen.

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Commentary

From “A Teacher's Guide to the Signet Classic Edition of William Shakespeare's Othello” by Debra (Dee) James, University of North Carolina at Asheville

Othello, like all of Shakespeare's plays, particularly the tragedies, is complex and subtly nuanced. Through its complexities and subtleties, Shakespeare makes us care about the characters who people this story. We understand their weaknesses and their strengths, their passions and their nobility. In our engagement in their lives and our pondering over what has gone wrong and why, we are given the opportunity to analyze human life both in the abstract and in the particular of our own lives. Shakespeare's ability to involve us in the lives and fortunes of his characters is one of the best reasons for reading, rereading, watching and teaching Othello.

Because Othello is considered by many to be one of Shakespeare's major tragedies, criticism of it is as complex as the play itself. Some call it a modernized Morality play in which the characters are primarily symbolic. This criticism centers on the characters' fall from innocence—the snake fouling the Garden—caused by Iago's manipulation of Othello. Other critics examine the play in terms of the clash of cultures: military vs. civilian, Moorish vs. Venetian, barbaric vs. civil. Likewise, the themes of prejudice and of unbridled jealousy are the focus of commentary about the play. Others view the play as a story of human frailty — the story of the fall of a man of noble bearing and sincere passion and the destruction of an innocent and real love.

Othello is equally, however, a story of malevolence and manipulation. One of the most intriguing characters in Shakespeare's roll call of villains is Iago. From the beginning of the play until the final scenes, Iago plots and maneuvers to bring the people around him, especially Othello, to doom and destruction. Iago's tactics are revealed in the opening scene as he draws first Roderigo and then Brabantio into his service. By presenting the relationship between Othello and Desdemona in the crudest sexual terms, he rouses Brabantio and Roderigo to become willing workers in his scheme to revenge himself on the Moor. Just as clearly he enjoys each man's alarm and anguish. His subsequent conversations with Roderigo, in which he draws him ever deeper into his plot, prepare us for the cunning with which he begins his cruel work on Othello.

By contrast, Othello is clearly not a dissembler. He is forthright with the senators when asked about his relationship with Desdemona. Instead of claiming that she was attracted by his noble bearing and grace, he tells them that she was first caught by his stories of the true adventures of his life and then drawn on to love through her pity for the trials he had endured. He is not a man who plays games. He accurately sums up his own character:

...Then must you speak
Of one that loved not wisely, but too well;
Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought,
Perplexed in the extreme; of one whose hand,
Like the base Judean, threw a pearl away
Richer than all his tribe.
(Vii, 339-344)

Othello and Iago, then, are the two characters at the crux of the play. The major action of the play is the tightening of Iago's net around the noble Moor and the decay of the Moor's nobility. It is this clash and the vulnerabilities of the humans involved that many critics agree provide the basis for the continuing interest and compelling attraction of Othello.
Famous Lines from *Othello*

For when my outward action doth demonstrate
The native act and figure of my heart
In compliment extern, 'tis not long after
But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve
For daws to peck at: I am not what I am.
—Iago, act I, scene i

I saw Othello’s visage in his mind,
And to his honour and his valiant parts
Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate.
—Desdemona, act I, scene iii

—N—oble signior,
If virtue no delighted beauty lack,
Your son-in-law is far more fair than black.
—The Duke of Venice, act I, scene iii

Look to her, Moor; have a quick eye to see.
She has deceiv’d her father; may do thee!
—Brabantio, act I, scene iii

Reputation, reputation, reputation! O, I have
lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal
part of myself, and what remains is bestial.
My reputation, Iago, my reputation!
—Cassio, act II, scene iii

Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul,
But I do love thee! and when I love thee not,
Chaos is come again.
—Othello, act III, scene iii

O, beware, my lord, of jealousy!
It is the green-ey’d monster which doth mock
The meat it feeds on.
—Iago, act III, scene iii

But yet the pity of it, Iago! O Iago, the pity of it, Iago!
—Othello, act IV, scene i

Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,
Nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak
Of one that loved not wisely but too well;
Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought,
Perplexed in the extreme . . .
—Othello, act V, scene ii

Discussion Questions

PCS thanks Milwaukee Repertory Theater and the Utah Shakespeare Festival for the use of materials in their Play Guides.

**LOVE**

At its core, Othello is a love story. It begins with the secret marriage of Othello and Desdemona.

Desdemona’s love of her husband makes her trusting and faithful until the very end, and Othello’s love of his wife makes him lose his mind when he believes her to be unfaithful.

Questions:

• In what ways is love a force of good in Othello? How does it cause negative actions?

• Desdemona goes against her father to marry the man she loves. Is she right in doing this?

• Othello is not just a story of romantic love. What other forms of love exist in the play?

**JEALOUSY**

Othello explores how jealousy can be fueled by rumors. Othello is convinced that his wife is unfaithful based on circumstantial evidence and Iago’s manipulation. Jealousy over Cassio’s promotion to lieutenant is the source of Iago’s hatred. Both romantically and professionally, jealousy destroys the characters of this story.

Questions:

• What language does Shakespeare use to describe jealousy? What are the common metaphors?

• Does this play portray jealousy as unreasonable? Is jealousy sometimes reasonable?

• Why is jealousy such a strong emotion?

**POWER**

Positions of power are central to Othello. Iago feels entitled to the position of lieutenant and when Cassio is promoted over Iago, Iago seeks revenge. Iago, powerless in respect to rank, becomes the most powerful person in the play, gaining people’s trust and confidence and using them for his own gain. Women in Othello have very little official power but are also able to use their influence and information to gain power.

Questions:

• How are positions of power used in Othello?

• What are the ways people of lower status gain power?

• What is the place of women in Othello? How would the story be different if women had a greater role in decision-making?
Classroom Curriculum

The following pages contain activities to help students explore themes found in Portland Center Stage’s production of Othello by William Shakespeare. We encourage you to choose the most appropriate activities for your group and adapt as needed.

Portland Center Stage’s Stage Door Program

seeks to provide all young people with opportunities to experience and directly participate in the art of high-quality, professional theater in a context that supports their education. The following pages contain activities to help students explore themes found in our production of Shakespeare’s Othello. We encourage you to choose the most appropriate activities for your group and adapt as needed.

GOALS:

• To encourage personal connections between the students and the major themes of the play.

• To excite students about the story and introduce the theatrical elements of the production.

• To engage students using the actors’ tools (body, voice, imagination).

KEY CONCEPTS:

• Appearance v. Reality

• Shakespearean Tragedy

• Major Plot Points in Othello
Warm-up Activity #1: Triangle

The goal of this physical warm-up activity is to explore relationships and introduce concepts of awareness and the consequences of other people’s choices.

HOW IT WORKS:
This is a silent game with lots of moving around. An open space to play, awareness, and honesty are needed for this exercise to work best. Start by standing in a circle. Each person will secretly and silently choose two other people in the circle (don’t point). These two people are the two other points in an individual’s triangle; the individual chooser is the third point. When the game begins, each individual needs to move to position themselves so they are the same distance away from their other two “points,” thus shaping an isosceles triangle. Since each person is trying to make their own triangle, the game is about constant adjustment, and being honest - “If they move, you move!” Rarely does the group ever come to a complete stop, if it does, prompt with “be honest!” The game ends when after a few minutes, frustration starts to take over the fun.

ATTACKER/DEFENDER VARIATION:
Once the group is comfortable with the Triangle exercise, add in the next layer of ‘Attacker/Defender.’ In this game, each person chooses one other person to be an ‘attacker’ and another person to be a ‘defender.’ The objective is to always have the defender located between the individual and their attacker. If you lose your defender, death is imminent.

QUESTIONS:
What strategies did you employ when you weren’t getting what you wanted? Did you play fair or were you tempted to win by making someone else lose?

CONNECTIONS:
• Watch for how characters in the play change their tactics when plans start to go South. When does Iago start to panic? What does Desdemona do to protect herself?

Warm-up Activity #2: Murder

The goal of this activity is to loosen up the group utilizing the actors’ tools, demonstrate how villains come in all forms, and explore the theme of suspicion.

HOW IT WORKS:
The workshop leader has students stand in a circle and close their eyes. Walking around the circle, he or she taps one student on the shoulder to select the MURDERER. Next, Students walk freely throughout the room, filling the space. As students run into each other, they shake hands and greet one another (either modern greetings like Hello, how are you? or more classical salutations such as Good morrow? or How Now?). The Murderer kills off his/her victims with a double-squeeze handshake. Those who are ‘offed’ should wait 10-15 seconds before revealing that they’ve been hit. Theatrical/acting skills can be introduced by asking participants to think about and portray their methods of death when dying, e.g. strangulation, falling off a cliff, poisoning, etc. Once enough time has passed, the workshop leader polls the group on who they think is the culprit.

TIPS FOR LEADERS:
Praise ‘good’ deaths, watch carefully for cheats, consider choosing two murderers on occasions to shake things up.

QUESTIONS:
Did you know who the murderer was right away? What tipped you off? Were you surprised by the outcome? How did it feel to be one of the last people standing?

CONNECTIONS:
• One of Othello’s downfalls is he puts his trust in the wrong person in Iago.

• Iago builds trust with Othello through calculated manipulation.

• In every Shakespearean tragedy there is someone who is left to tell the story (e.g. Horatio in Hamlet). Who will it be in Othello?
ACTIVITY #1: Truth & Lies

The goal of this activity is to get students thinking about how reality can be skewed depending on how someone delivers a message. The activity will also introduce some characters in Othello.

PART A: TWO TRUTHS AND ONE LIE

HOW IT WORKS:

This is just like that classic game that you’ve probably played before, but this is just a warm-up. In groups of whatever size, each participant will have their turn to try and convince the group that each of three pieces of information is true. After which, the audience will guess which of the three statements is false and the speaker will reveal the facts. Ironically, honesty counts. Note: the purpose of this game is to make the false statement sound true, not simply to “trick” the audience into guessing the wrong one. Consider this:

A BELIEVABLE LIE HAS THREE ASPECTS:

• It should be personal (to increase the speaker’s authority on the topic)

• It should be partly true (to camouflage the lie to the listener’s ear)

• It should be somewhat emotional to say (to discourage follow-up questions)

PART B: TRUTH, LIES AND SHAKESPEARE

The goal of this activity is to convey the Shakespearean line convincingly and understandably, and to make comparisons between truths, lies, and acting.

HOW IT WORKS:

Each small group will receive one line of Shakespearean text to decipher and translate into contemporary speech. Within the small group, the participants will decide who will say what; each group will tell exactly one lie, one translated Shakespearean line, and the rest will tell truths. Groups should pick their most convincing liars...er...actors, to tell the lie and the Shakespearean line. The audience will have a chance to guess which lines were truths, lies and Shakespeare.

Below are lines that can be used in this exercise.

“Rude am I in my speech, And little bless’d with the soft phrase of peace.” – Othello, Act I sc iii

“I am not merry; but I do beguile The thing I am, by seeming otherwise.” – Desdemona, Act II sc i

“I have very poor and unhappy brains for drinking: I could well wish courtesy would invent some other custom of entertainment.” – Cassio, Act II sc iii

“I had rather be a toad, And live upon the vapour of a dungeon, Than keep a corner in the thing I love For others’ uses.” – Othello, Act III sc iii

“Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate, Nor set down aught in malice: then must you speak Of one that loved not wisely but too well.” – Othello, Act V sc ii

TIPS FOR LEADERS:

Circle the room to help students come up with appropriate modern-day translations. Once lines from Shakespeare are identified, read the original Shakespearean text and ask students where they think the line falls in the play.
ACTIVITY #2: The World of the Play Discussion/Brainstorm

Find out what students already know about Shakespeare through a discussion. Discuss contemporary examples of Shakespearean-inspired stories like West Side Story, Baz Luhrman’s R&J, Kevin Spacey as a modern-day Iago in House of Cards.

WHAT WAS IT LIKE TO BE AN AUDIENCE MEMBER IN SHAKESPEARE’S TIME?

Shakespeare’s plays are complex, but were written to be entertaining to every class, color and creed. If you feel like you aren’t catching the meaning of every single word, you are not alone! Better that you focus on characters and relationships that you like than to try and understand how each character relates to every other character. One of the reasons why Shakespeare continues to draw audiences after hundreds of years is because you may see the same play ten times in your life, but associate with different characters each time.

THEATER IN THE TIME OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

• The theater building was open air.
• Performances started at 2:00 to make the most of daylight.
• The stage was usually bare.
• Elizabethan theaters held 1500 -3000 people.
• There was a balcony, called the “inner above” to be used if needed, but most of the action took place downstage.

• After the death of Queen Elizabeth I in 1603, Shakespeare had to write plays that would please the new King James I who had come from Scotland (one of these is Macbeth).
• Characters usually tell us where they are and what time of day it is in their lines.
• Women were not allowed to perform on stage, so boys would perform all female parts, including Desdemona and Emilia in Othello.
• Actors often played multiple roles, as they will in PCS’s production.
• Actors usually wore their own clothes unless they were portraying someone evil, royal, or female.

OTHELLO FACTS

• Act I takes place in Venice, Italy and the rest on the island of Cyprus which is off the coast of Turkey.
• Along with Hamlet, King Lear, and Macbeth, Othello is one of Shakespeare’s four great tragedies, written during a period that most critics take to be the apex of Shakespeare’s dramatic art (early 1600s).
• Hamlet, King Lear, and Macbeth, which are set against a backdrop of affairs of state and which reverberate with suggestions of universal human concerns, Othello is set in a private world and focuses on the passions and personal lives of its major figures. It has often been described as a “tragedy of character.”
• Written sometime around 1603 (right around Queen Elizabeth’s death).
• Iago has the most lines of anyone in the play. In fact, the only Shakespearean characters who speak more than Iago are Hamlet and Richard III.
ACTIVITY #3:  
Plot Points Tableaus

The goal of this activity is to familiarize students with the major plot points in Othello. The below excerpts are provided in large print so they can be cut out and distributed at the workshop.

HOW IT WORKS:

The students split into groups of 4 or 5 and each group is given lines of text from the play as well as a short description of the scene in which it appears. The group must represent the action in a silent tableau that conveys the basic action and relationships between the characters.

TIPS

• Help provide context for each excerpt and answer any questions students have about the characters/story.

• Hand out the Othello character map (included in our resource guide) to help students sort out the players.

CONNECTIONS AND CLASSROOM QUESTIONS:

What will happen next in the story? Who do you think deserves to die? Who deserves to live, and why? And who will be left when the dust clears at the end of Act V?

SCENE A

Act I, scenes i & ii, where Iago & Roderigo come to Brabantio’s house to tell him that Desdemona has stolen away to marry Othello. Meanwhile, Cassio tells Othello he is called to Cyprus to fight, and Brabantio comes upon them to accuse Othello of winning Desdemona’s love through witchcraft.

Essential Characters: Roderigo, Iago, Brabantio, Cassio, Othello, Desdemona

RODERIGO

Your daughter, if you have not given her leave,  
I say again, hath made a gross revolt;  
Tying her duty, beauty, wit and fortunes  
In an extravagant and wheeling stranger  
Of here and every where. Straight satisfy yourself:  
If she be in her chamber or your house,  
Let loose on me the justice of the state  
For thus deluding you.

SCENE B

Act I, scene iii, the scene in front of the senators & Brabantio in which Othello tells how he wooed Desdemona and she declares she loves him freely.

Essential Characters: Roderigo, Iago, Brabantio, Othello, Desdemona, the Duke.

Othello. Most potent, grave, and reverend signiors,  
My very noble and approved good masters,  
That I have ta’en away this old man’s daughter,  
It is most true; true, I have married her:  
The very head and front of my offending  
Hath this extent, no more.

SCENE C

Act II, scene iii, the scene in which Cassio is drawn by Iago first into drinking then brawling. Othello relieves Cassio of his duties after hearing Iago’s “reluctant” testimony. Iago then reveals that he will set up Cassio by encouraging him to make good with the Moor by befriending Desdemona.

Essential Characters: Iago, Cassio, Othello, Desdemona.

IAGO

... for whiles this honest fool [Cassio]  
Plies Desdemona to repair his fortunes  
And she for him pleads strongly to the Moor,  
I’ll pour this pestilence into his [Othello’s] ear,  
That she repeals him for her body’s lust;  
And by how much she strives to do him good,  
She shall undo her credit with the Moor.  
So will I turn her virtue into pitch,  
And out of her own goodness make the net  
That shall enmesh them all.
SCENE D

Act III, scene iii, where Othello drops Desdemona’s handkerchief, and her handmaiden Emilia picks it up, vowing to give it to Iago.

Essential Characters: Iago, Emilia, Desdemona, Othello, Cassio

EMILIA

I am glad I have found this napkin:
This was her first remembrance from the Moor:
My wayward husband hath a hundred times
Woo’d me to steal it; but she so loves the token,
For he conjured her she should ever keep it,
That she reserves it evermore about her
To kiss and talk to. I’ll have the work ta’en out,
And give’t Iago: what he will do with it
Heaven knows, not I;
I nothing but to please his fantasy.

SCENE E

Act IV, scene i, the scene in which Othello is hidden listening to Cassio talk to Iago about Bianca, but Othello thinks she is talking about Desdemona.

Essential Characters: Iago, Othello, Cassio, Bianca

IAGO

Now will I question Cassio of Bianca,
A housewife that by selling her desires
Buys herself bread and clothes: it is a creature
That dotes on Cassio; as ‘tis the strumpet’s plague
To beguile many and be beguiled by one:
He, when he hears of her, cannot refrain
From the excess of laughter. Here he comes:
As he shall smile, Othello shall go mad;
And his unbookish jealousy must construe
Poor Cassio’s smiles, gestures and light behavior,
Quite in the wrong.
Additional Activities

THE GREEN-EYED MONSTER
Draw Jealousy—the green-eyed monster. Art may include text and symbols. Write a paragraph explaining your picture.

CHARACTER GARDEN
Iago says, “Our bodies are our gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners” (1.3.319–21). Draw a picture of the character gardens of Othello, Iago, Emilia, and Desdemona. Items in the garden should represent the character’s ideals. What do you want to plant in yourself? Draw your own garden with items representing characteristics you would like to grow in your own life.

YOU’RE THE WRITER
Rewrite Othello’s “Put Out the Light” speech in 5.2.1–22 or Amelia’s “Let Husbands Know” speech in 4.3.84–103 in modern language. Try to include several idioms, allusions, and other examples of figurative language.

YOU’RE THE ACTOR
Option One: Monologue
Pick a speech of at least ten lines. Repeat the speech using several different techniques. Try it dramatically, angrily, humorously, sarcastically. Try emphasizing different words to change the meaning.

Option Two: Dialogue
Pick a bit of dialogue of at least ten lines. Play the scene using several different techniques. Try it dramatically, angrily, humorously, and sarcastically. Try emphasizing different words and swapping roles to change the meaning of the words.

YOU’RE THE DESIGNER
Create costume designs that illustrate the story line behind one of the main characters. Pay attention to the feelings that can be created by color and line. Consider what era you want to set the play in and what impact that will have on the play.

FATHER TO DAUGHTER
Write or improvise a scene between Desdemona and her father the night before her elopement. Imagine he has discovered her feelings for Othello and has come to give her his opinion. What happens between them? Consider questions not specified in the play such as what happened to Desdemona’s mother? What was her first impression of Othello?

FIRST MEETING
Write or improvise the scene in which Desdemona and Othello meet for the first time. What are their impressions of each other? What is the setting? Who else was there and how do they react?

NEW ENDING
Choose one detail of action from the play and change it. Imagine Rodrigo gives up on Desdemona and leaves Cyprus without telling Iago, or that Desdemona never dropped her handkerchief, etc. How does this affect the ending of the play? This doesn’t mean that everyone is happily ever after.

HIDDEN MOTIVES
Write a speech or journal entry by Iago giving a full explanation of why he hates “the Moor” so much.

LIFE STORY
Othello woes Desdemona by telling her “the story of [his] life. From year to year.” Write out and tell one of Othello’s stories. In it include a reference to at least one of the things mentioned in his explanation speech in 1.3.128–70.
JUST FOR FUN
Shakespeare Insult Kit

Combine one word from each of the three columns below, prefaced with “Thou”:

**Column 1**
- artless
- bawdy
- beslubbing
- bootless
- churlish
- cockered
- clouted
- craven
- currish
- dankish
- dissembling
- droning
- fawning
- fobbing
- froward
- gleeking
- gorbelled
- impertinent
- infectious
- jarring
- loggerheaded
- lumpish
- mammering
- mewing
- pribbling
- puking
- puny
- qualling
- rank
- reeky
- roguish
- ruttish
- saucy
- spleeny
- spongy
- surly
- tunmuzzled
- vain
- venomed
- villainous

**Column 2**
- base-court
- bat-fowling
- beef-witted
- beetle-headed
- boil-brained
- clapper-clawed
- clay-brained
- common-kissing
- crook-pated
- dismal-dreaming
- dizzy-eyed
- doghearted
- earth-vexing
- elf-skinned
- fat-kidneyed
- flap-mouthed
- folly-fallen
- fool-born
- full-gorged
- guts-griping
- half-faced
- hasty-witted
- hedge-born
- idle-headed
- ill-nurtured
- knotty-pated
- milk-livered
- motley-minded
- onion-eyed
- plume-plucked
- pottle-deep
- pox-marked
- reeling-ripe
- rough-hewn
- rude-growing
- rump-fed
- sheep-biting
- spur-galled
- swag-bellied
- tardy-gaited

**Column 3**
- apple-john
- baggage
- barnacle
- bladder
- boar-pig
- bugbear
- bum-bailey
- canker-blossom
- clack-dish
- clotpole
- coxcomb
- codpiece
- dewberry
- flap-dragon
- flax-wench
- foot-licker
- giglet
- gudgeon
- haggard
- harpy
- hedge-pig
- horn-beast
- hugger-mugger
- lewdster
- maggot-pie
- malt-worm
- mammet
- measle
- minnow
- miscreant
- moldwarp
- mumble-news
- nut-hook
- pigeon-egg
- pignut
- puttock
- ratsbane
- scut
- skainsmate
- strumpet
THEATER ETIQUETTE:

Please share the following points with your group of students. Encourage the students to practice these points throughout the workshop. Going to see a play is very different from going to the movies. During live theatre, the audience is as important a part of the experience as the actors.

- **Live response is good!** If you’re telling a story to a friend, and they really respond or listen, it makes you want to tell the story better—to keep telling the story. So, the better an audience listens, laughs and responds, the more the actors want to tell the story. In this way, the audience (as well as the actors) can make a performance great.

- **The actors can hear you talking.** If an audience member is not paying attention, the actors know it. Have you ever had a conversation with someone and felt that they’d rather be someplace else? This is the EXACT feeling actors get when people in the audience are talking.

- **The actors can see you.** Even though actors are pretending to be other characters, it is their job to “check in” with the audience in order to tell the story better. This is another way in which theatre greatly differs from the movies. Film actors can do a take over and over to try to get it right. Theatre actors have one chance with an audience and want to make sure they are communicating clearly. Imagine trying to tell a group of fellow students something only to see them slouching, pretending to be bored, or sitting with their eyes closed in attempt to seem disinterested and “too cool” for what you had to say. Think about it...

- **Cell phones, beepers, candy wrappers, loud gum smacking.** Please turn off all cell phones and do not eat or chew gum inside the theater. These things disturb the people around you as well as the actors. As much as you might be tempted to text a friend how cool the play you’re watching is, please wait until after it is over to send any texts.