

Silly Shakespeare for Students



# O THELLO

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*with help from*

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

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# The Story Behind Shakespeare's Othello

Imagine a world where power, honour, and social status are everything. That's the world of *Othello*, set in the 16th century. The play starts in Venice, a bustling city known for its political power and rich history. However, most of the action actually takes place on the island of Cyprus, which is just as intriguing and full of drama.

## **Origins of the Play**

Believed to have been written in 1603, *Othello* is said to be inspired by a short story titled "Un Capitano Moro" (A Moorish Captain) by the Italian writer Giovanni Battista Giraldi, published in 1565. Shakespeare likely encountered this tale in one of the many collections of stories available at the time. The play reflects the cultural tensions of the Elizabethan era, particularly regarding race and identity, as Othello is a Black man navigating a predominantly white Venetian society. Shakespeare's adaptation deepens the themes of jealousy, manipulation, and the complexities of love, elevating the narrative beyond its origins to create a profound tragedy that resonates with audiences across generations.

## **The Plot**

The story begins in Venice, where Iago is bitter because Othello has promoted Cassio over him. Iago feels slighted and harbours a deep grudge against Othello, believing he's been wronged in favour of Cassio. To make matters worse, Iago suspects that Othello might be having an affair with

his wife, Emilia. Fueled by these feelings, Iago concocts a plan to ruin Othello's life.

Iago's plan kicks off with him convincing Roderigo, who is desperately in love with Othello's wife, Desdemona, to help him take revenge on Othello. Iago tells Roderigo that Desdemona will soon tire of Othello and return to him, so Roderigo agrees to help Iago in his schemes.

The play moves to Cyprus, where Othello and his entourage are sent to defend the island from a Turkish invasion. While they are there, Iago begins his psychological warfare against Othello. He manipulates events to make it appear as if Desdemona is being unfaithful to Othello with Cassio.

Iago's plan involves planting seeds of doubt in Othello's mind. He uses Desdemona's handkerchief, a special gift from Othello, to create false evidence of her infidelity. Iago tells Othello that he saw Cassio with the handkerchief, further convincing Othello of Desdemona's betrayal.

Othello, overwhelmed by jealousy and anger, becomes increasingly erratic and suspicious. His love for Desdemona turns to bitter resentment as he believes she has been unfaithful. Iago's manipulations are so effective that Othello loses trust in those around him, including his beloved wife.

Desdemona, unaware of the storm brewing, remains loyal and loving, trying to understand why Othello is so distant and hostile. Emilia, who is trying to help Desdemona, is also unwittingly drawn into Iago's deceptions.

As Othello's jealousy consumes him, he decides that the only way to resolve his anguish is to kill Desdemona. Iago continues to fuel Othello's rage, making the plan seem like the only solution to the perceived betrayal. Despite Desdemona's pleas and innocence, Othello strangles her in their bed.

The truth begins to unravel when Emilia discovers the tragic murder and reveals Iago's manipulations. Othello realizes too late that he has been deceived and that

Desdemona was faithful all along. Overcome with guilt and grief, Othello takes his own life.

## Themes and Characters

1. **Othello:** The protagonist and a highly respected military leader. He's a Moor, meaning he's of North African descent, which makes him stand out in Venetian society.
2. **Desdemona:** Othello's loving and loyal wife. She's the daughter of a Venetian nobleman, Brabantio.
3. **Iago:** Othello's ensign (a lower-ranking officer), and the main antagonist of the play. Iago is cunning and manipulative, driven by jealousy and a desire for revenge.
4. **Cassio:** Othello's loyal lieutenant, who is well-liked but becomes a target of Iago's schemes.
5. **Emilia:** Iago's wife and Desdemona's maid. She is more important than she first appears, especially in relation to Iago's plans.
6. **Brabantio:** Desdemona's father, who is initially enraged by her secret marriage to Othello.
7. **Roderigo:** A wealthy Venetian who is in love with Desdemona and is manipulated by Iago.

*Othello* is a story about the destructive power of jealousy and the devastating effects of deceit. Iago's manipulation and Othello's unchecked jealousy lead to tragic consequences, underscoring the importance of trust and communication in relationships. The play highlights how easily trust can be shattered by lies and how destructive unchecked emotions can be.

## **The Play's Impact and Legacy**

*Othello* has had a profound impact on literature and theatre since its creation, influencing countless adaptations across various media, including film, opera, and modern novels. The play's exploration of themes such as jealousy, race, and manipulation resonate with contemporary audiences, prompting discussions about identity and societal prejudices. Characters like Othello and Iago have become archetypes in literature, representing the complexities of human nature and the darker sides of ambition and deceit. The play also raises critical questions about trust and betrayal, making it relevant in today's context of personal and societal relationships. Academic discussions around *Othello* continue to examine issues of race and gender, enhancing its legacy as a work that challenges audiences to reflect on moral and ethical dilemmas. Overall, Shakespeare's *Othello* remains a vital part of the canon, celebrated for its emotional depth and intricate characterizations.

# Playing Style

**T**his version of *Othello*, although reduced to around a one-hour and fifteen minutes playing time, remains true to the original's plot, characters (with some small exceptions), and structure. When performed, this production should maintain a lively pace and exaggerated style.

Technically, the production, as with the original, has a very low level of technical requirements. The sets can be very minimal and the costumes simple. A musical score may be used between scenes to cover changes where necessary.

Of course, one of the major differences between this version and the original is the simplification of the text. On some occasions, in performance, you will find the rhyming scheme helpful to the playing, in which case the actors should just 'stand back', enjoy the words and help the audience do the same. On other occasions, the rhyming scheme will seem stifling and restrictive, in which case do not be afraid to improvise a little, add your own occasional lines or do not emphasise the rhymes so much.

Overall, this version while maintaining the tragedy and pathos of the original should also be fun to play and watch. It can be produced with a small budget and should be done 'over the top' which can give you a chance to play with your own ideas of theatricality.

# Cast of Characters

OTHELLO  
BRABANTIO  
MONTANO  
LODOVICO  
CASSIO  
IAGO  
RODERIGO  
DUKE of Venice  
BIANCA  
GRATIANO  
DESEMONA  
EMILIA  
Herald  
Messengers  
Senators  
Gentlemen



# Prologue

*[Each character is posed on the stage. They come to life when they speak, except for IAGO, who is our narrator.]*

**IAGO**

Welcome to Venice, a watery place,  
Where starts the tale of my disgrace.  
Iago's my name, but this play's called Othello,  
*[Points to OTHELLO]* Named after this man, an insecure  
fellow.

**OTHELLO**

But a very good general . . .

**IAGO**

and stood next to him  
*[Points to CASSIO]* is Cassio, his Lieutenant.

**CASSIO**

I'm handsome . . .

**IAGO**

but dim.

And Othello's girl here! [*Points to DESDEMONA*] Well, he doesn't yet 'own' her!

**DESDEMONA**

I'm honest, I'm pure, and my name's Desdemona.

**IAGO**

[*Points to EMILIA*] This is Emilia, her bestie for life,

**EMILIA**

Who also happens to be Iago's wife!

**IAGO**

[*Points to BIANCA*] Bianca is 'a girl of the night',

Who loves young Cassio,

**BIANCA**

which won't help his plight!

**IAGO**

[*Points to BRABANTIO*] And Dessie's dad, Brabantio,

**BRABANTIO**

Who tries, but fails, to run the show.

**IAGO**

[*Points to RODERIGO*] And Roderigo, a Lord

**RODERIGO**

who fancies his [*points at BRABANTIO*] daughter,

**IAGO**

And who I lead around like a lamb to the slaughter.

[*Points to MONTANO*] Montano of Cyprus . . .

**MONTANO**

Who's the gov. of the isle

**IAGO**

*[Points to the DUKE]* And a Venetian Duke . . .

**DUKE**

You will meet in a while.

**IAGO**

Brabantio's brothers are the last in the herd.

*[Points to GRATIANO and LODOVICO]*

Gratiano and Lodovico, who will get the last word.

**IAGO**

This is the cast and you'll witness their deeds.

You'll see a few others, but these are leads.

Our story begins with me in hot water

As Rod's heard some news about Brabantio's daughter.

*[All exeunt but RODERIGO AND IAGO]*

# Act I

## SCENE I.

*Night. In the street where Desdemona lives with her father, Brabantio.*

*[RODERIGO and IAGO are walking up the street.]*

**RODERIGO**

You double-crossing little cur!

You said you'd set me up with her.

I gave you some cash like a good, trusting fellow.

Now I hear she's gone and hooked up with Othello!

**IAGO**

It didn't quite all go to plan.

Othello's my boss! But I too hate the man.

He overlooked me for promotion!

**RODERIGO**

A hasty and an unwise notion.

**IAGO**

He charmed poor Desdemona well,  
But Othello's life we'll now make hell.

**RODERIGO**

He's very strong. Is it wise to attack?

**IAGO**

We'll do it all behind his back.  
Just stick with me; do what I say.  
My sneakiness will win the day!

*[They stop walking and look at Brabantio's house.]*

**RODERIGO**

Isn't this Brabantio's place?

**IAGO**

Indeed it is. Now open your face!

*[They start shouting, telling Brabantio to wake up because  
he has been robbed.]*

**IAGO AND RODERIGO**

Robbery, thievery, your house is undone!

*[Enter BRABANTIO]*

**BRABANTIO**

What's all this noise? It's twenty past one!

**IAGO**

I know it's late but the news is bad.

**RODERIGO**

Your daughter's escaped and married a cad.

**BRABANTIO**

*[Rubbing his tired eyes]* Roderigo, is that you? Are you on your own?

I told you to leave Desdemona alone!

**IAGO**

*[Whispering to RODERIGO]* I'll leave it to you to explain what's amiss.

I can't be seen plotting against Othello like this.

*[Exit IAGO]*

**RODERIGO**

Desdemona's been seen in Othello's bed.

They tell me the pair are planning to wed!

**BRABANTIO**

She can't be with him. He was not born in Venice.

He may fight like a lion but in love he's a menace.

*[Aside]* Fathers will never get to grips with their daughters.

**RODERIGO**

Just follow me, sire. We'll head to his quarters.

## SCENE II.

*[IAGO is meeting with OTHELLO.]*

**IAGO**

I should have killed Brabantio dead  
For all the terrible things that he said.

**OTHELLO**

Sticks and stones may break my bones . . .  
He wants a marriage he condones.  
I won her heart, I need his, not.

**IAGO**

Did you get married?

**OTHELLO**

We tied the knot!  
Our love is real, our love is pure.  
And our legal status is secure.

**IAGO**

Brabantio will not like that.  
You'd better grab your baseball bat!

**OTHELLO**

I appreciate the friendly warning.

Is that him there? God! What a morning!

*[CASSIO appears.]*

**CASSIO**

It's Cassio, sire. The Duke's in fear.  
He's had bad news from Nicosia.  
To Cyprus, he needs you now to go  
To stop the Turks from running the show.

**OTHELLO**

Sounds like I'm the man for that.  
I'll go and grab my fighting hat.

*[OTHELLO exits.]*

**CASSIO**

Now tell me, what are you're doing here?  
Poisoning Othello's ear?

**IAGO**

How dare you, sir. We raised a glass.  
The moor's just married Brabantio's lass.

*[BRABANTIO and RODERIGO enter.]*

Talk of the devil . . .

**CASSIO**

and the devil appears

**IAGO**

*[Drawing his sword]* And there's Brabantio. I'll cut off his  
ears!



*[Enter OTHELLO]*

**OTHELLO**

*[To IAGO]* Hide your sword! *[To BRABANTIO]* Brabantio!  
What's the meaning of this show?

**BRABANTIO**

I hear you've used your magic charms  
To get my daughter in your arms.  
You know I don't like refugees!  
Roderigo, go and break his knees!

**OTHELLO**

If I had time, I'd fight you all.  
But the Duke awaits me in his hall.  
Cassio came to take me there.

**BRABANTIO**

Is that the truth?

**IAGO**

It is. I swear!

**BRABANTIO**

We'll follow you the way you're heading  
And beg the duke to annul your wedding!

**OTHELLO**

Saddle up, Brabantio,  
Let's see which way the duke will go!

## SCENE III.

*The hall of the duke's palace*

**First Senator**

By the look on this here Messenger's face,  
I'd say the news isn't good, your Grace.

**DUKE**

He looks like he has seen a ghost!

**Second Senator**

Come over here and tell our host.

**Messenger**

To Cyprus now do sail the Turks  
To rob the isle of all its perks.

**Third Senator**

That's just what we did not too long . . .

**First Senator**

*[Interrupting]* Ancient history, long and gone!

**DUKE**

How many boats? How many men?

**Second Senator**

They've got a lot.

**Third Senator**

You can say that again!

Ships alone there's one hundred and four.

**Second Messenger**

And they've stopped at Rhodes to pick up more!

**First Senator**

We need to send our bravest man.

**Third Senator**

If anyone can beat them, Othello can!

**DUKE**

Did you call the mighty Moor?

**First Messenger**

We did your grace; he's at the door.

**DUKE**

We don't just stand there. Let him in!

*[OTHELLO, IAGO, BRABANTIO, and CASSIO enter.]*

Now there's a man who's born to win!

I guess you heard about our plight?

You must set sail this very night.

Brabantio, what are you doing here?

**Third Senator**

Have you come to volunteer?

**BRABANTIO**

Good lord, your Grace, that's quite absurd.

I've come to have an urgent word  
About my daughter . . .

**DUKE**

Is she dead?

**BRABANTIO**

No, no, my Lord she's gone and fled  
Into a soldier's hairy arms.  
Who must have used some magic charms  
Cos the man she's with, to make it clear,  
Is none other than Othello here!

**OTHELLO**

It is no magic trick, your Grace.  
She fell in love with my handsome face.  
I may not be the smoothest talker  
But I'm good enough for this man's daughter!

**BRABANTIO**

You brought him here for another reason,  
But stealing women here is treason!

**OTHELLO**

I stole her heart, that much is true.  
But I didn't win her over you.  
Your relationship will not go south.

**DUKE**

Let's hear it from the horse's mouth.

*[DESDEMONA enters.]*

**DESDEMONA**

I know that in Venice the law demands

A girl to follow her father's commands.

*[Pointing at OTHELLO]* But I've loved this man from the  
very start

And have married him with my head and heart.

*[to BRABANTIO]* My mum she left her dad for you,

And now you must let me go too!

**BRABANTIO**

It looks as though I've failed you, child,

By being far too meek and mild

*[Aside]* A lesson here to take from me:

Keep your daughters under lock and key!

**DUKE**

Cheer up, old man, the bird has flown.

But with tears of grief you'll stay alone.

Just be a little more like me

And take your losses philosophically.

**BRABANTIO**

Like you have done with Cyprus?

**DUKE**

Oh don't be so ridiculous!

That's a loss of a different hue.

And the reason I sent for you *[points to OTHELLO]*

I know this is a passion killer

But you need to get hold of your tiller.

Hold off your matrimonial perks

And sail to beat those pesky Turks.

**OTHELLO**

As always, your Grace, I will do your bidding.

**DESDEMONA**

Sail off to war? You've got to be kidding!

**DUKE**

You can take her too, but please leave soon.

**DESDEMONA**

You promised me a honeymoon!

**OTHELLO**

You'll get one in Cyprus; that should be enough.

Good Iago will help you pack your stuff.

**Second Senator**

*[To BRABANTIO]* No kinder heart, no squarer jaw,  
He'll make the perfect son-in-law.

**DUKE**

We'll leave you now, I'll rest my head.

I have a busy day ahead.

Good night, brave Moor, and Dessie too.

**BRABANTIO**

*[to OTHELLO]* She lied to me and she'll lie to you!

*[Exeunt BRABANTIO, DUKE, CASSIO, and the Senators.]*

**OTHELLO**

You are the apple of my eye.

We have an hour before we fly.

So go with Iago and pack your kit.<sup>9</sup>  
And join me in a little bit!

**DESDEMONA**

Well it's better than being left on the shelf . . .

*[Exeunt OTHELLO and DESDEMONA]*

**RODERIGO**

I'm going, too, to kill myself.  
The girl I love is now his wife.

**IAGO**

But that's no reason to take your life.  
That fighting man will give her the blues  
So you must be prepared to jump in his shoes.  
Believe me, my friend, we'll ruin that man.

**RODERIGO**

I'm a fool to trust you but I don't have a plan.

**IAGO**

Sell everything and take the cash.  
To get that girl; we'll need a stash  
And when she's yours, we'll all be elated  
To see Othello humiliated.

**RODERIGO**

You alone shall guide my hand.  
I'll leave right now to sell my land  
And put together all the cash that I can.

---

9 British idiom for clothes.

**IAGO**

And tomorrow at my place, we'll continue the plan.

*[Exit RODERIGO]*

A fool and his money so easily parted.

That is the reason our 'friendship' got started.

That and to use him to ruin Othello.

Some say the Moor's a real charming fellow,

But he slept with my wife. Well, that is one notion.

But he certainly overlooked me for promotion.

I hate the bloke . . . but he likes me,

And when plotting revenge, that's the key!

I'll say his favourite, Cassio, looks

Like he's trying to get into Dessie's 'good books'.

Othello will believe me alright.

He has faith in me, which is such a delight.

With Cassio gone, I'll inherit his post,

And Othello's marriage will be as good as toast.

You are all my witnesses,

And now all my accomplices!