

An Introduction to Shakespeare's *Othello*



Othello | background

- Unlike Shakespeare's other tragedies, ***Othello* employs no "subplots"**
(e.g. *Hamlet*: Polonius + kids; Denmark vs. Norway (Fortinbras), Hamlet + all his issues)
- *Othello*: a tightly-written play in which the villain *directly* brings about the downfall of the tragic hero



Othello | historical context

- **VENICE:** a thriving capitalism
 - The wealthier merchant classes controlled the state, buying powerful military forces to protect their colonial exploits.
 - What England wanted to become!
 - Employed mercenary soldiers: a black military leader general was required to be a foreigner [they confer *power* on Othello, but **NOT** *status*]



OTHELLO / Social Conventions

- Marriages were arranged, usually for wealth and political alliances... begin to see shift towards companionate marriage
- Women had **lower** social status than men
- **Masculine** friendship held in high regard



Othello | **The Moor of Venice**

- Historically, Elizabethans viewed black Africans with a mixture of fascination and fear.
 - Because of their dark skin and non-Christian heritage, blacks were thought to be associated with the devil
 - [subjected to unjust **stereotyping** and characterized as **wicked, beastly, and prone to jealousy**]



Othello | The Moor of Venice

Othello, a black Moor, is frequently maligned and judged...but you as a reader must decide Shakespeare's motivation.

- Does Shakespeare choose to structure his entire tragedy around a black man to teach his audience **compassion** for those whom society uses but never fully embraces as countrymen?

Othello | The Moor of Venice

- Or does Shakespeare place a black man at the forefront of his tragedy to tear him down and mock the foibles of a lesser “man”?
- Ultimately, you will have to consider whether or not William Shakespeare is a RACIST...as he has been so often been accused of being.

**“It is Othello’s tragedy,
but Iago’s play”**

- **Iago: “The Master Psychologist”**

- A dramatist who takes over his fellow characters and slots them into the play that he desires to stage; a theatrical improviser
- He has been regarded as a genius for his ability to react to situation in amazingly quick fashion and his duplicity is endlessly resourceful.

Essentials

- [1] How does Shakespeare effectively convey '**character**' and **character relationships** to his audience? (Focal characters: Iago, Othello, Cassio, Desdemona, Emilia)
- [2] Identify and discuss the following **subjects** in the play:
 - Jealousy and its destructive effect; the alienation of the outsider; appearance versus reality; loyalty and friendship; truth versus falsehood; parental love versus parental control; culture and gender confusion
- [3] Explore the complexities and paradoxes inherent in the **human condition** that are developed through *Othello*.