Othello
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WHO’S WHO

When directors cast actors for a Shakespeare play, the only information they have is the text that Shakespeare wrote. Unlike in many modern shows, the dramatis personae of a Shakespearean play does not include the ages of characters, their relationships to each other, or descriptions of what they look like. All of that information must come from within the play itself. What the characters say about themselves and what other characters say about them define what they look like, where they come from, and how they behave. What information can you get from the character quotations below?

Othello- “It is Othello’s pleasure, our noble and valiant general, that, upon certain tidings now arrived, importing the mere perdition of the Turkish fleet, every man put himself into triumph; some to dance, some to make bonfires, each man to what sport and revels his addiction leads him: for, besides these beneficial news, it is the celebration of his nuptial.” (Herald, 2.2)

Desdemona- “I will beseech the Virtuous Desdemona to undertake for me” (Cassio, 2.3)

Iago- “O damn’d Iago! O inhuman dog!” (Roderigo, 5.1)

Emilia- “I will not charm my tongue; I am bound to speak: My mistress here lies murder’d in her bed.” (Emilia, 3.3)

Cassio- “Forsooth, a great arithmetician, one Michael Cassio, a Florentine, a fellow almost damn’d in a fair wife; That never set a squadron in the field, Nor the division of a battle knows More than a spinster.” (Iago, 1.1) *

Bianca- “It is a creature that dotes on Cassio; as 'tis the strumpet's plague to beguile many and be beguiled by one.”(Iago, 4.1)

Roderigo- “My sick fool, Roderigo, whom love hath turn'd almost the wrong side out.” (Iago, 2.3) *

The Duke of Venice- “Noble signior, if virtue no delighted beauty lack, your son-in-law is far more fair than black. (Duke, 1.3)

Brabantio- “Her father loved me; oft invited me; still question'd me the story of my life.”(Othello, 1.3)

Montano- “Worthy Montano, you were wont be civil; I gravity and stillness of your youth the world hath noted, and your name is great in mouths of wisest censure” (Othello, 2.3)

Gratiano- “Signior Gratiano? I cry you gentle pardon; these bloody accidents must excuse my manners, that so neglected you.” (Iago, 5.1) *

Lodovico- “This Lodovico is a proper man.” (Desdemona, 4.3)

Senators – “If we make the thought of this, we must not think the Turk is so unskilfull to leave that latest which concerns him first” (First Senator, 1.3)

Musicians – “The general so likes your music, that he desires you, for love’s sake, to make no more noise with it” (Clown, 3.1)

Clown – “To do this is within the compass of man’s wit: and therefore I will attempt the doing it” (3.4)

FOLLOW-UP

Look at the starred quotes again. Given what you have learned about Iago, can you trust his take on others? Find the quotes in your text – is Iago talking to the audience or to another character in those lines? In which circumstances is Iago more likely to speak honestly about another character?
**DISCOVERY SPACE SCAVENGER HUNT**

**Discovery Space** [di-skuh-uh-ree speys], n. 1. The curtained area at the upstage center portion of an Elizabethan stage where something is revealed to or discovered by characters or audiences.

**Instructions to Teacher:** In your final class meeting before attending the performance of *Othello* at the Blackfriars Playhouse, assign each student one question from the following list. Each student should hear all of the questions as you assign them. Your students will discover the answers to their own questions, and probably to everyone else’s as well, as they watch the production.

1. How does the pre-show relate to the play?
2. What does Iago’s costume tell you about his status?
3. What does Cassio's costume tell you about his status in relationship to Iago's?
4. How are Iago's and Othello's costumes similar or different? What do you gather from this choice?
5. What do the props at use in the first scene tell you about the setting?
6. How many times does Iago talk directly to the audience in his first scene?
7. Describe how Othello's costume relates to his occupation.
8. How does Othello use gesture to communicate his status?
9. How is the loss of Desdemona's handkerchief staged?
10. How is the handkerchief's reappearance staged?
11. …

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**THE BASICS**

**Getting Them on Their Feet**

Many of the activities in this guide depend on student participation. At the ASC, we believe that your students will appreciate Shakespeare's plays better, will find them more interesting and more relevant, and will enjoy the process of learning more if they study them with a consideration of the medium for which Shakespeare wrote them: the stage. More specifically, he wrote for the playhouses that he knew and worked in.

The following activities will help warm your students up to the idea of exploring the play as an action-based experience, not just words on a page.

**Playing the Plot:**
- Walk your students through the story of the play, without lines.
  - Give each student a nametag with the name of a character on it. These nametags can be downloaded for printing and lamination. Some tags may have a star or a heart on them; characters with a star will die during the course of the play, characters with a heart married at the end, and those hearts are labeled with the name of the character’s partner.
  - Have the entire class stand up wearing their nametags.
  - Say, “If you have a star, die. Go ahead, get on the floor, do it as dramatically as you can.”
  - Get everyone back up.
PERSPECTIVES

Race Relations

Especially in America, because of our history of enslaving Africans and the events of the early- to mid-20th century, this can be a tricky issue to handle in class. That does not mean that it should be avoided or skimmed around. In teaching Othello, evasion is likely to be impossible. We encourage you instead to embrace what makes the conversation difficult and to consider how modern sensibilities and four hundred years of race relations in this country affect your students' perceptions of Othello. These activities will help you discuss the issue of race in Othello with your class. Throughout these discussions, encourage your students to think about and to openly state what ideas in the text make them uncomfortable.

Race in Early Modern England

In considering the question of race in Othello, you may find it helpful to distinguish the early modern idea of racial differences from the modern American connotations of prejudice and racism.

The Elizabethans would not have considered themselves prejudiced or racist, at least not in the same way that we use those words today. Europeans tended to be not so much specifically racist as generally xenophobic, finding fault with anyone not of their own people, and the English were no exception. Each European nation considered itself head and shoulders above the rest, including above other Europeans, as demonstrated by the writings of French philosopher Jean Bodin, who categorized the entire world as either "southern," intemperate and animalistic, or "northern," dull and sluggish – with France as the sole point of moderation in the middle. Comments on people of other nations, such as those found in Handout #1, could be harsh, short-sighted, and ignorant, but were not universally condemning of other races.

While Europeans certainly considered themselves superior to the Moors, the reasons for this assertion varied. Debates raged over whether or not people from other continents could be considered descendents of Adam, whether or not they were "God's creatures," and whether or not they were naturally inferior for being descendents of Noah's wayward son Ham (for the Africans) or of a bondmaid (for the Muslims). A more "scientific" point of view suggested that Africans were more like animals because the heat of the sun imbalanced their humours and made them quick to anger. One of those "scientific" sources, however – suggests that the Africans could be civilized much like "the Germans, who as they themselves confess were once not very far from the level of wild beasts." Though the slave trade out of Africa to Europe and the New World had begun, instigated by the Spanish, the Arabs conducting the trade at the time (and who had been doing so for centuries) were as likely to sell "poor Christians" as Moors or Berbers, according to a 1571 report by Nicolas de Nicolay. The issue of racial prejudice, then, while certainly present, was not drawn as starkly or as as we think of it today.

So, just what defined race in Shakespeare's England? And, how it was described? According to the Oxford English dictionary, the term "race" in 1600 could mean "a group of people belonging to the same family and descended from a common ancestor; a house, family, kindred" or "a tribe, nation, or people, regarded as of common stock, as British race, Roman race, etc." The term did not apply more broadly to skin color until the early 18th century. Shakespeare uses the word "race" only 16 times in all of his plays and poems, generally to mean either a race of speed, as a footrace, or as a collective noun for a group of horses. When he uses the sense of the word to relate to people, he uses it to mean a family group, as in Richard III, when the ghosts of the slain princes tell the Earl of Richmond to "Live, and beget a happy race of kings!"

Activity: Race in Early Modern Europe

- Give your students Perspectives: Race Relations Handout #1
  - These passages are drawn not just from the English, but from other European travelers in the 16th and 17th centuries, but all of these accounts were published in England before 1603, and thus would have been available to Shakespeare as he was writing Othello.
  - Discuss the European perspective on other races.
    - Was there a single monolithic opinion on non-Europeans?
    - How did Europeans agree or disagree with each others' accounts?
  - What distinctions did the Europeans draw between North Africans and Sub-Saharan Africans?
Abd el-Ouahed ben Messaoud ben Mohammed Anoun, Moorish ambassador to Queen Elizabeth in 1600, sometimes claimed as inspiration for Othello

Edmund Kean at the Drury Lane Theatre, 1814

Paul Robeson in 1930, left, and 1942, right
STAGING CHALLENGES

Dark Deeds in the Dark

In Act 5, scene 2 of Othello, three characters die, one gets arrested, and the truth, so long hidden, comes out. This scene takes place at night, after Desdemona has gone to bed. Within the first eight lines, Othello says that he will “put out the light,” extinguishing the candle implying that much of the rest of the scene plays out in the dark.

Begin by asking students to mark all of the instances of reference to light, dark, night, day, and the symbols of them. An obsessive attention to these themes at the beginning of the scene disappears by the end – When does the light become a non-issue?

EXPERIMENT: Walk into a completely dark room and time how long it takes your eyes to fully adjust to the light. Knowing that iambic pentameter equals about 20 lines per minute, mark in your text when the characters can begin to see if Desdemona’s room is completely dark.

READING the STAGE: Scansion

After paraphrasing, the ASC actors determine which words they are supposed to emphasize (and which they are not) by scanning the lines. Othello, according to A Dictionary of Shakespeare (Stanley Wells), contains 82% verse, therefore, most of it can be scanned. This scene reveals some interesting emphasis when one considers the meter.
1. Show Iambic Bodies (Activity 4) to your students to demonstrate the importance of knowing the scansion.
2. Give them the symbols to mark the verse on their handouts (/ = strong, ~ = weak)
3. Mark the first speech together, note any interesting “strong” words. Make note of any weak endings or unusual stresses.
4. Give the students time to mark the rest.
5. Read each line aloud, overemphasizing the beat.
6. Discuss, again, the implication of any unusual stresses or meter (irregular verse can be an acting clue)

STAGING the PAGE

Activity: Staging Darkness
• Othello says that he will extinguish the candle before he kills Desdemona. Break the class into groups and have each group stage the scene in one of the following ways, using the text found on Handout #5:
  • Set up your classroom according to the Elizabethan Classroom guidelines, found on page ?? of this study guide. This will allow your students who are not participating as actors to serve as the audience. Remind your non-acting students that the audience members are still a part of the play – at any moment, an actor may pick them out to play with them.
  • Direct the students to play darkness throughout the entire scene. Remind them that our eyes adjust to the dark and that they should make concrete choices regarding when each character can begin to see those around them and mark those points in their texts.
  • Direct the students that Othello’s candle is not the only source of light and that the characters can see each other clearly throughout the scene.
  • Direct the students to play darkness until Montano, Gratiano, and Iago enter (bearing lanterns, perhaps). The room only becomes light, revealing the physicality of Othello’s deed, once other people are made aware of it.

QUICK VERSIONS:
• Have the groups perform only the specific moments when the scene “comes to light” for their characters.
• You may also wish to divide the scene into 20-40 line chunks and cast 2+ students for each section. Then have each small group scan, paraphrase, and perform their chunk.

FOLLOW UP:
• Ask your students to respond to the following:
  o How do the characters’ relationships if they cannot see one another? If they can see the whole time? If they can only see for part of the time?
  o In a play that focuses on one character’s physical appearance, how does a final scene in which no one can see affect our understanding of Othello?
  o What challenges does an actor face when playing 5.2 in darkness? When playing 5.2 in light?
  o What happens if the scene becomes about the characters trying to navigate the darkness of the room instead of the text of the play itself?
Enter Othello, and Desdemona in her bed.

Othello
It is the Cause, it is the Cause (my Soul)
Let me not name it to you, you chaste Stars,
It is the Cause. Yet I'll not shed her blood,
Nor scar that whiter skin of hers, then Snow,
And smooth as Monumental Alabaster:
Yet she must dye, else she'll betray more men:
Put out the Light, and then put out the Light:
If I quench thee, thou flaming Minister,
I can again thy former light restore,
Should I repent me. But once put out thy Light, (10)
Thou cunning'st Pattern of excelling Nature,
I know not where is that Promethean heat
That can thy Light re-lume.
When I have pluck'd thy Rose,
I cannot give it vital growth again, (15)
It needs must wither. I'll smell thee on the Tree.
Oh Balmy breath, that dost almost persuade
Justice to break her Sword. One more, one more:
Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee,
And love thee after. One more, and that's the last. (20)
So sweet, was ne'er so fatal. I must weep,
But they are cruel Teares: This sorrow's heavenly,
It strikes, where it doth love. She wakes.

Desdemona
Who's there? Othello?

Othello
Aye, Desdemona.

Desdemona
Will you come to bed, my Lord? (25)

Othello
Have you prayed to night, Desdemona?

Desdemona
Aye, my Lord.

Othello
If you bethink yourself of any Crime
Unreconciled as yet to Heaven, and Grace,
Solicit for it straight. (30)

Desdemona
Alack, my Lord,
What may you mean by that?
STAGING CHALLENGES

Iago, Asides, and the Audience

Shakespeare often leaves characters onstage by themselves. In Othello, Iago spends plenty of time with just the audience, similar to Richard III in the play with his name, or the Duke, Angelo, and Pompey in Measure for Measure. Sometimes these characters are working through an issue, sometimes they are letting the audience see what they are thinking (but can't talk about in front of other characters), and sometimes they are letting the audience in on a secret. These moments in which characters have “no one else to talk to” (except the audience in an Early modern Theatre) have been interpreted throughout their performance histories in various ways. In modern, proscenium productions, actors and directors bring them to life as an explication of the character’s inner thoughts—sort of “thinking aloud” or “to oneself” moments. In the 18th and 19th centuries, some of the speeches were simply cut or re-arranged. In Shakespeare’s lifetime, however, the speeches would have had a different life. They would have been an opportunity for the characters to engage with the audience. To bring them into the story, to ask questions (and possibly, to receive answers).

In this activity, your students will look at two conventions of Shakespeare’s plays that allow the soliloquies in the dramas to become conversations rather than internal musings.

Activity 1: What is an aside?

Every student of Shakespeare who has read a modern edition of his plays will recognize the word “aside,” but not every student will necessarily recognize its meaning.

- Ask your students to brainstorm: How would you define the word aside?
- Share with them the following definition from the OED:
  - “Words spoken aside or in an undertone, so as to be inaudible to some person present; words spoken by an actor, which the other performers, on the stage are supposed not to hear.”
  - Note that this definition doesn't appear until 1727 – so the word would have meant something different to Shakespeare and to his audience.
  - Also notice that the definition doesn’t say who is supposed to hear. We assume the audience will be the “auditors” but in many playhouses the audience, who is sitting in the dark, in front of the stage, may not be the obvious choice.
- Using Elizabethan Classroom and Shakespeare’s Staging Conditions, discuss how the following will alter the meaning of “aside” for the audience and how it may, in some cases, provide a different motivation for the actor.
  - playhouses in which the audience was on 3 or all 4 sides of the playing space,
  - playhouses in which the audience was wearing clothes of the same period as the actors performing onstage,
  - playhouses in which the lights on the actors were the same as those on the audience—everyone was sharing the same light.
- Discuss how, if the actor is talking to a peer, a friend, or a potential ally, an aside becomes a shared secret that privileges the knowledge of the hearer—giving the audience more information than the people onstage, engaging them in a secret with the character speaking to them.

While there are over 550 instances of the word “aside” used as a stage direction in early modern drama, only six times (and two in Shakespeare—in Pericles and in the Quarto of Merry Wives) does it seem to be directed to the delivery of speech. IE, there are only two times in Shakespeare in which he (or the Prompter) marks that a speech should be said to the audience as opposed to the other characters onstage. Look at your edition of the plays and note how many more than two they include. Then, think about this: there are many opportunities that even editors miss throughout every play for lines to be said to the audience. Some would even argue that one can take every line to the audience.

Activity 2: Exploring Audience Contact

At ASC, in the setting of the Blackfriars, we have found that almost anything a character says can become an opportunity for a character engage the audience in these ways. In this activity, your students will consider how the performance spaces make this possible.
Guide for Teachers: Asides and Audience Contact

- **Proscenium**
- **Thrust Stage**
- **Normal Aside**
- **Sophisticated Aside**