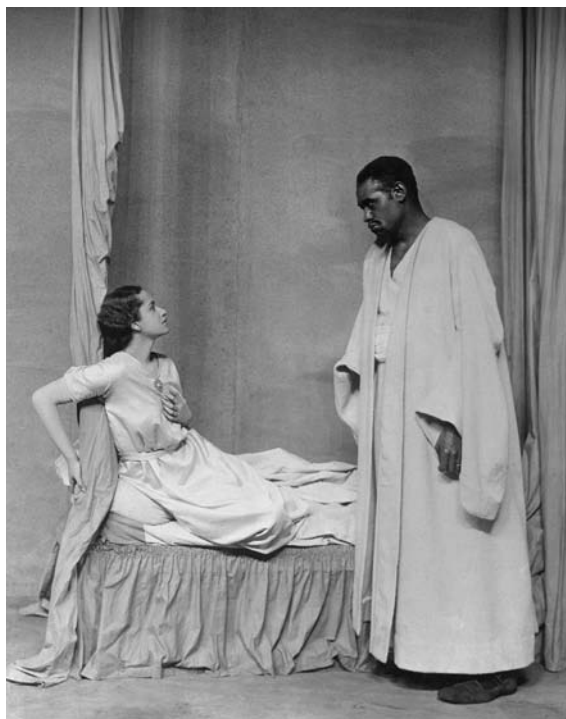


OTHELLO

THE MOOR OF VENICE

William Shakespeare

WITH RELATED READINGS



THE EMC MASTERPIECE SERIES

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William Shakespeare



*Engraving of William Shakespeare from the First Folio.
Image courtesy of the Library of Congress.*

William Shakespeare (1564–1616) may well be the greatest dramatist the world has ever known. Certainly he is the most famous writer in all of English literature. Today, nearly four hundred years after his death, Shakespeare’s plays are still being performed for audiences all over the world. As fellow poet Ben Jonson famously put it, Shakespeare’s art is “not of an age, but for all time.”

Little is known about Shakespeare’s early life. His mother, Mary Arden Shakespeare, was from a well-to-do, well-connected family. His father, John Shakespeare, was a prosperous glove maker and local politician. William’s exact birthdate is unknown, but he was baptized in his hometown of Stratford-upon-Avon on April 26, 1564, and tradition has assigned him a birthdate of April 23, which was also the day of his death and the feast day of Saint George, England’s patron saint.



*Shakespeare’s birthplace in Stratford-upon-Avon.
Photo by Melissa Baker.*

Shakespeare attended the Stratford grammar school, where he likely studied classical literature in Latin and Greek, as was typical for students of that era. However, he did not go on to a university. At the age of eighteen, he married Anne Hathaway, eight years his senior. At the time of their marriage, Anne was pregnant with their first child, a daughter whom they named Susanna. Several years later, in 1585, the couple had twins, Hamnet and Judith. There is no record of what Shakespeare did in the years after the twins were born. He may have worked for a while as a schoolteacher, as there are many references to teaching in his plays. However, it is clear that by 1592 he had moved to London, leaving his family behind while he pursued a life in the theater. Shakespeare continued to provide for his family and to expand his holdings in Stratford while living in London.

Shakespeare's Professional Career

Once in London, Shakespeare soon made himself known as a successful actor and playwright. His history plays *Henry the Sixth*, Parts 1, 2, and 3 and *The Tragedy of Richard the Third* established him as a significant force in London theater. In 1593, however, all London theaters were forced to close due to an outbreak of the plague. During this time, Shakespeare turned to narrative poetry, producing *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, both dedicated to a wealthy patron, the Earl of Southampton.

When the theaters reopened the following year, Shakespeare became a partner in a theater company known as the Lord Chamberlain's Men. The group soon became the most popular acting troupe in London and performed regularly at the court of Queen Elizabeth I. In 1599, they were wealthy enough to build their own playhouse, which they called "The Globe." When Queen Elizabeth died in 1603, Shakespeare's company found a new patron in her successor King James I, and their name was changed to the King's Men.

While Shakespeare acted in the troupe, writing the material soon became his primary vocation. In the span of twenty years he penned at least thirty-seven plays, including comedies such as *The Taming of the Shrew*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Twelfth Night*, and *All's Well That Ends Well*; tragedies such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*; romances such as *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*; and histories such as *The Tragedy of King Richard the Second*.

The last play Shakespeare wrote on his own was *The Famous History of the Life of Henry the Eighth*, which was performed in London in 1613. Later that same year, he collaborated with John Fletcher on the romance *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. At that time Shakespeare was probably living again in Stratford, in a large house called New Place that he had bought in 1597. When he died at age 52, survived by his wife and his two daughters, Shakespeare was a wealthy man. He was buried April 25, 1616 in the Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-upon-Avon. The stone over his grave reads:

Good frend for Jesus sake forbear,
To digg the dust enclosed heere:
Blest be the man that spares thes stones
And curst be he that moves my bones.

The Publication of Shakespeare's Plays

Shakespeare himself never sought to have his plays published; however, many individual plays were published during his lifetime in unauthorized editions known as **quartos**. These quartos are quite unreliable. Although some may have been based on final manuscript versions produced by the author, others were probably put together from actors' memories of the scripts, or reprinted from so-called prompter's copies used in production of the plays.

In 1623, seven years after Shakespeare's death, his friends and fellow actors John Heminge and Henry Condell published a collected edition of thirty-five of Shakespeare's plays. This collection is known to literary historians as the **First Folio**. In the centuries since 1623, and especially during the last century and a half, editors have worked diligently to compare the various early printed versions of Shakespeare's works to determine which version or versions of each play best represent what Shakespeare intended. Editors have also updated Shakespeare's spelling so that the plays can be more easily understood by a modern audience. If you are interested, you can view the texts of Shakespeare's plays in their original spelling on the Internet.

The Authorship of Shakespeare's Plays

The fact that Shakespeare was a commoner and led, according to the few facts we have, a rather ordinary life, has led many people to doubt that he could have written such great works of literature. Over the years it has been suggested that the true author could have been someone else—such as the Earl of Oxford, Christopher Marlowe, or Ben Jonson. While there is no way to conclusively prove or disprove such theories, there are good reasons to believe that Shakespeare was, indeed, the true author of the plays attributed to him. For one thing, the plays show an understanding of the lives of people in all stations of life, from the lowliest peasants to men and women of the court. We know that Shakespeare came from a common background and later moved in court circles; this fact is consistent with his understanding of people from all walks of life. At the very least, a careful reader must conclude that the plays attributed to Shakespeare are the work of a single author, for they have a distinct voice not to be found in the work of any other dramatist of his day—a voice that has enriched our language as none other has ever done.

Shakespeare's Language

Shakespeare used one of the largest vocabularies ever employed by an author. In fact, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Shakespeare actually introduced an estimated 3,000 new words into the English language, many of which are in common use today, including *bedazzle*, *silliness*, *critical*, *obscene*, *hurry*, and *lonely*. Numerous well-known phrases came from his plays, such as “wear my heart upon my sleeve” (*Othello*) and “the world is my oyster” (*The Merry Wives of Windsor*).

Shakespeare's language tends to be dense, metaphorical, full of puns and wordplay, and yet natural, so that—to steal a line from *Hamlet*—it comes “trippingly off the tongue” of an actor. A scene of Shakespeare tears across the stage, riveting and dramatic, and yet it bears close rereading, revealing in that rereading astonishing depth and complexity.

Shakespeare's Poetic Technique

Shakespeare used in his plays a combination of prose, rhymed poetry, and blank verse. **Blank verse** is unrhymed, or “blank,” poetry with a distinct rhythm known as **iambic pentameter**. Each line of iambic pentameter consists of five **iamb**s, rhythmic units made up of a weakly stressed syllable followed by a strongly stressed one as in the word *fōrgēt*. A simpler way of describing this type of verse is to say that it contains ten syllables per line, and every other syllable is stressed. The following are some typical lines:

Her fá ther lov'd me, oft in ví ted me

Still ques tion'd me the sto ry of my life

(*Othello*, act I, scene iii, lines 28–29)

In order to maintain the verse, the lines of two or more characters are often combined to create one ten-syllable line. This accounts for the unusual line numbering and formatting in Shakespeare's plays. In the following example, the words spoken by Cassio and Iago are all counted as one line:

CASSIO. I do not understand.

IAGO. He's married.

CASSIO. To who?

(*Othello*, act I, scene ii, line 52)

If you scan the dialogue in *Othello*, you will find most of it is written in blank verse, although with some variations in stress and syllable count. Shakespeare and other playwrights of his time favored the use of blank verse in drama because they believed it captured the natural rhythms of English speech, yet had a noble, heroic quality that would not be possible with ordinary prose. (You will notice that when Shakespeare does use prose, it is because the characters are speaking informally or are from the lower class.) Blank iambic pentameter can also be used in poetry, although it is more often rhymed, as in Shakespeare's sonnets.

Reading Shakespeare

Shakespeare wrote his plays about four hundred years ago. Because the English language has changed considerably since then, you will find that reading Shakespeare presents some special challenges. Although the spelling has been modernized in this version of *Othello*, as in virtually all contemporary editions of Shakespeare's plays, there are still differences in style and vocabulary that could not be edited out without changing the flavor of the work. The editors of this text have provided footnotes to help you understand words and phrases that have changed in meaning or spelling since Shakespeare's day. However, try not to get bogged down in the footnotes. Remember that a play is a dramatic action and should move quickly. Try first reading through each scene without looking at the footnotes, so that you can get a general sense of what is happening. Then reread the scene, referring to the footnotes to discern the details. If possible, you may want to listen to an audio version of the play, or better yet, view a production of the play on film or on stage. All drama comes alive when it is performed by actors and is best experienced in that way.

Time Line of Shakespeare's Life

- April 23, 1564 William Shakespeare is born in Stratford-upon-Avon, to parents Mary Arden Shakespeare and John Shakespeare.
- April 26, 1564 William Shakespeare is baptized.
- 1582 William Shakespeare marries Anne Hathaway.
- 1583 Shakespeare's first daughter, Susanna, is born and christened.
- 1585 Anne Hathaway Shakespeare gives birth to twins: a boy, Hamnet, and a girl, Judith.
- 1589–1591 Shakespeare's first histories, *Henry the Sixth*, Parts 1 and 2, are produced.
- 1592–1593 *The Tragedy of Richard the Third* is produced. Not long afterward, the plague afflicts London and the theaters close. Shakespeare writes *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*.
- 1592–1594 Shakespeare's first comedy, *The Comedy of Errors*, is produced.
- c. 1593 Shakespeare begins writing a series, or cycle, of sonnets.
- 1593–1594 *The Taming of the Shrew* is produced.
- 1594–1595 *Love's Labor's Lost* is produced.
- 1595 *The Tragedy of King Richard the Second* is produced.
- 1595–1596 *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are produced.
- 1596–1597 *The Merchant of Venice* and *Henry the Fourth*, Part 1, are produced.
- 1596 Shakespeare's son, Hamnet, dies at age eleven.
- 1597 Shakespeare acquires a fine home called New Place in Stratford-upon-Avon. He produces *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, possibly at the request of Queen Elizabeth I.
- 1598 Shakespeare produces *Henry the Fourth*, Part 2.
- 1598–1599 *Much Ado about Nothing* is produced.
- 1599 Shakespeare's Globe Theater opens. *The Life of Henry the Fifth*, *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*, and *As You Like It* are produced.
- 1600–1601 *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* is produced.

<i>Twelfth Night, or What You Will</i> and <i>The History of Troilus and Cressida</i> are produced.	1601–1602
<i>All's Well That Ends Well</i> is produced.	1602–1603
Queen Elizabeth I dies. Shakespeare's troupe, The Lord Chamberlain's Men, is renamed The King's Men in honor of their new king and sponsor, James I.	1603
<i>Measure for Measure</i> and <i>The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice</i> are produced.	1604
<i>The Tragedy of King Lear</i> is produced.	1605
<i>The Tragedy of Macbeth</i> is produced.	1606
<i>The Tragedy of Antony and Cleopatra</i> is produced.	1607
<i>The Tragedy of Coriolanus</i> and <i>Pericles, Prince of Tyre</i> are produced.	1607–1608
<i>Cymbeline</i> is produced.	1609–1610
<i>The Winter's Tale</i> is produced.	1610–1611
<i>The Tempest</i> is produced.	1611
<i>The Famous History of the Life of Henry the Eighth</i> is produced.	1612–1613
Shakespeare collaborates with John Fletcher to write <i>The Two Noble Kinsmen</i> . On June 19, the Globe Theater is burned to the ground in a fire caused by a cannon shot during a performance of <i>Henry the Eighth</i> . Shakespeare retires to his home in New Place.	1613
The Globe Theater rebuilt.	1614
Shakespeare dies and is buried in Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-upon-Avon.	April 23, 1616

Shakespeare's Plays

The Renaissance in England

The word *renaissance* means “rebirth.” Historians use the term to refer to the period between the fifteenth and early seventeenth centuries (1400s–1600s), when Europe was influenced by a rebirth of interest in Greek and Latin learning and experienced a flowering of literature and the arts.

In England, the Renaissance did not truly begin until 1558, when Queen Elizabeth I ascended to the throne. Elizabeth was a great patron of the arts, and during her reign from 1558 to 1603—a period known as the **Elizabethan Age**—English literature reached what many people consider to be its zenith. Shakespeare wrote and produced his plays at the height of the Elizabethan period and throughout much of the **Jacobean period**, the period from 1603 to 1625 when James I ruled England.

Shakespeare’s writing is a good example of the spirit of the Renaissance—his plays often focus on memorable and complex characters, his plots often derive from classical sources, and his themes often involve challenges to authority. Although Shakespeare’s scholarly contemporary and fellow playwright Ben Jonson wrote of Shakespeare, “thou hadst small Latin, and less Greek,” Shakespeare knew far more of these languages than most people do today, and he probably read many of the classical works of Rome in their original Latin. He was inspired by classical works and by the history of Rome to write such plays as *The Tragedy of Julius Cæsar* and *The Tragedy of Antony and Cleopatra*, and all of his works contain allusions to classical subjects.

Renaissance Drama

The two most common types of drama during the English Renaissance were **comedies** and **tragedies**. The key difference between comedies and tragedies is that the former have happy endings and the latter have unhappy ones. (It is only a slight exaggeration to say that comedies end with wedding bells and tragedies with funeral bells.)

A comedy is typically lighthearted, though it may touch on serious themes. Action in a comedy usually progresses from initial order to humorous misunderstanding or con-



Portrait of Queen Elizabeth I.
Courtesy the National Portrait Gallery of London.

fusion and back to order again. Stock elements of comedy include mistaken identities, puns and word play, and coarse or exaggerated characters. Shakespeare's comedies frequently end with one or more marriages.

A tragedy tells the story of the downfall of a person of high status. Often it celebrates the courage and dignity of its hero in the face of inevitable doom. The hero is typically neither completely good nor completely evil but lives and acts between these extremes. The hero's fall may be brought about by some flaw in his or her character, known as a **tragic flaw**. In *Macbeth* that flaw was ambition; in *Hamlet*, indecisiveness. As you read this play, try to decide what tragic flaw, if any, you can find in the character of Othello.

Other kinds of plays produced during the period included **histories**—plays about events from the past—and **romances**—plays that contained highly fantastic elements, such as fairies and magic spells. Also popular were short plays called **interludes**, as well as elaborate entertainments, called **masques**, that featured acting, music, and dance.

Theater in Renaissance London

In the late sixteenth century, London was a bustling city of perhaps 150,000 people—the mercantile, political, and artistic center of England. The city proper was ruled by a mayor and alderman who frowned upon theater because it brought together large crowds of people, creating the potential for lawlessness and the spread of controversial ideas and disease. Many times, London city officials or Parliament ordered the theaters closed, once because they objected to the political content of a play called *Isle of Dogs*, and regularly because of outbreaks of plague. Parliament, which was dominated by Puritans, passed laws that made it possible for traveling actors and performers to be arrested as vagabonds and cruelly punished. For protection, actors sought the patronage of members of the nobility. Actors would become, technically, servants of a famous lord, and troupes went by such names as The Lord Worcester's Men.

Fortunately for actors and playwrights, Queen Elizabeth and other members of the nobility loved the theater and protected it. Elizabeth herself maintained two troupes of boy actors, connected to her royal chapels. In addition to such troupes, London boasted several professional troupes made up of men. In those days, women did not act, and women's roles were played by men, a fact that further increased Puritan disapproval of the theaters. When the

Puritans took control of England in 1642, theater was banned altogether.

The Renaissance Playhouse

The first professional theater in England was built in 1576 by James Burbage. Burbage located his playhouse, which he called simply *The Theater*, just outside the northern boundaries of the City of London, where he could avoid control by city authorities. Another professional theater, the *Curtain*, was built nearby shortly thereafter. In 1598, Burbage's son Richard and other members of the Lord Chamberlain's Men tore down the *Theater* and used its materials to build a new playhouse, called the *Globe*. One of the shareholders in this new venture was William Shakespeare.

The *Globe Theater* is described in one of Shakespeare's plays as a "wooden O." The theater was nearly circular. It had eight sides and was open in the middle. The stage jutted into the center of this open area. Poorer theatergoers called "groundlings," who paid a penny apiece for admission, stood around three sides of the stage. Wealthier playgoers could pay an additional penny or two to sit in one of the three galleries set in the walls of the theater.

The stage itself was partially covered by a canopy supported by two pillars. Trapdoors in the stage floor made it possible for actors to appear or disappear. Backstage center was an area known as the "tiring house" in which actors could change costumes. This area could be opened for interior scenes. A second-story playing area above the tiring

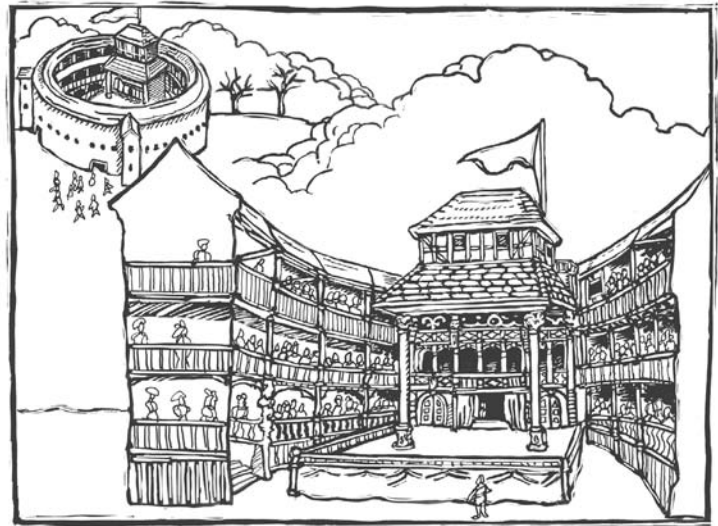


Illustration by Carol O'Malia.

The Globe Theater.

house could be used to represent a hilltop, a castle turret, or a balcony (perhaps used in the famous balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet*). On the third level, above this balcony, was an area for musicians and sound-effects technicians. A cannon shot from this area during a performance of Shakespeare's *Henry the Eighth* in 1613 caused a fire that burned the Globe to the ground.

Because the playhouse was open to the air, plays were presented in the daytime, and there was little or no artificial lighting. Scenery in the modern sense was nonexistent, and very few props, or properties, were used. Audiences had to use their imaginations to create the scenes, and playwrights helped them do this by writing descriptions into their characters' speeches.

The Renaissance Audience

Audiences at the Globe and similar theaters were quite heterogeneous, or mixed. They included people from all stations of society: laboring people from the lower classes, middle-class merchants, members of Parliament, and lords and ladies. Pickpockets mingled among the noisy, raucous groundlings crowded around the stage. Noble men and women sat on cushioned seats in the first-tier balcony. The fanfare of trumpets that signaled the beginning of a play was heard by some twenty-five hundred people, a cross-section of the Elizabethan world. As noted in the preface to the First Folio, Shakespeare's plays were written for everyone, from "the most able, to him that can but spell." That may explain why even today, they have such a universal appeal.

Othello, the Moor of Venice

Shakespeare probably wrote *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice*, in 1603 or 1604, since we know that it was first performed at court on November 1, 1604. A classic story of love, jealousy, and betrayal, *Othello* is considered one of Shakespeare's greatest tragedies. It tells the story of Othello, a Moorish (North African) general who marries a Venetian lady and then is cruelly tricked into believing that his wife is unfaithful.

The plot itself was taken from a novella by Italian writer Giraldi Cinthio, which was published in 1565. (See page 218 for a translation of this tale.) This should not be considered plagiarism; in Shakespeare's day, it was common for playwrights to borrow subjects and storylines from other works and then adapt them for the stage. Furthermore, although Shakespeare's plot was not original, his gift for dialogue, characterization, and poetic imagery and phrasing transformed the story into something altogether his own.

Venice, Cyprus, and the Ottoman Empire

The setting of *Othello* must have seemed very exotic to Shakespeare's audience in London. The first act of the play is set in Venice, a city-state in northern Italy, and the following four acts in Cyprus, an island in the Mediterranean Sea. (See the map on the facing page.)

Today, Venice is a part of the modern nation of Italy, but in the 1500s, it was a powerful seafaring empire ruled by a Duke, or *doge*, and a council of noblemen. Seated in a lagoon on the Adriatic Sea, Venice was a major trade port with control over strategic points in the Mediterranean such as the islands of Crete and Cyprus.

The Venetians' main rivals were the Turks, or Ottomans, who controlled a vast empire stretching from the Persian Gulf in the East to Hungary in the West, including the territories of Greece and Egypt. The Ottoman Empire and Venice were constantly at war. The objective was power and land, of course, but religion entered into the equation as well. The Venetians were Christian, and the Turks were Muslim. To Venice and indeed to Shakespeare's England, the Turks were the hated enemy whom Christians had fought during the Crusades. This conflict between

Christian and Muslim, European and foreign, “civilized” and “barbarian,” is a major theme that runs throughout *Othello*.

In the play, Othello is sent to Cyprus to fend off a Turkish invasion of the island. This incident is probably inspired by an actual battle that took place in 1571. However, in real life the Turks were successful in capturing Cyprus, whereas in the play, they are held off by a storm. Although it has a small part in the plot, the battle at sea serves an important role, as it provides a backdrop and a mirror for the smaller conflict brewing between Iago and Othello. The play asks us to examine which man, the Christian European Iago, or the Muslim-born, “barbarian” foreigner Othello, is the true enemy of civilization.

There is no record of Shakespeare having traveled to Venice, so it is likely that he relied on books to help him create an accurate picture of Venetian life. One source he



Map showing territories held by Venice and the Ottoman Empire in the 16th century.

almost certainly used was *The Commonwealth and Government of Venice* (*De magistratibus et republica Venetorum*) by Italian author Gasparo Contarini, written in 1543 and translated into English by Lewis Lewkenor in 1599.

The Moors and Race in *Othello*

The Moors were a Muslim people who lived on the northern coast of Africa, an area the Europeans called Barbary. These people had a mixed heritage: they were descended from the Berbers (a Caucasian people native to north Africa) and the Arabs, who came from the east. In the eighth century, the Moors invaded Spain and brought it under Islamic rule, in the process bringing to Western Europe their vast knowledge of art, architecture, medicine,



Illustration of a Moor from *Degli abiti antichi et moderni* (1590) by Cesare Vecellio.

By permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library.

and science, much of which they inherited from the Arabs and ancient Greeks. The Moors ruled over various parts of Spain for several centuries. Today, Moorish architecture and art can be seen all over Spain, especially in the cities of Toledo, Cordoba, and Seville.

When Shakespeare wrote about “the Moor of Venice,” therefore, he was envisioning a north African man, well-educated, and raised in the Muslim faith (although baptized Christian as an adult). It is unclear, however, whether Shakespeare meant us to see Othello as a black man, or one more Arab in appearance. The Moors of Barbary were a dark-skinned people compared to Europeans, but they were not black. However, in Shakespeare’s day, the term *Moor* was often used broadly, to refer to any person with dark or black skin, including black Africans. Several references in the play seem to describe Othello as a black African. But no matter what the exact color of his skin, the important point is that Othello was an outsider in Venice, an exotic figure who, while being admired and valued for his military prowess, more often provoked curiosity, fear, and even hatred.

These same feelings toward Africans were probably shared by the members of Shakespeare’s audience. To the English of Shakespeare’s time, Africans were strange and foreign enemies of Christianity, given to heathen practices such as witchcraft and voodoo. In the literature of the time, they were invariably portrayed as villains. The Africans who came to England were viewed with suspicion and hostility. In 1596, Queen Elizabeth I issued an edict against these unlucky foreigners, reading as follows: “Her Majesty understanding that several blackamoors have lately been brought into this realm, of which kind of people there are already too many here . . . her Majesty’s pleasure therefore is that those kind of people should be expelled from the land.” Considering this climate, it is rather surprising that Shakespeare should have written a play in which the hero was an African, and a very noble character at that.

To create the character of Othello, a man whose background was so different from his own, Shakespeare again relied upon books. He may have consulted *The History and Description of Africa*, a book written in 1526 by Moorish author Leo Africanus. See page 231 for an excerpt from this work. You may also refer to the critical readings by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (page 245) and A. C. Bradley (page 250) for more discussion on the subject of Othello’s race.

The Time Scheme of *Othello*

As many critics have noted, the time scheme in *Othello* is somewhat confusing. The events appear to take place in only a few days, but throughout the play, there are references that suggest much more time has passed. Shakespeare may have been torn between two objectives: on the one hand, increasing the dramatic tension by making the events take place in a short time frame, but on the other, allowing enough time to pass so that the plot would be believable. In using a short time frame, Shakespeare was probably following the model of the Greek dramatist Aristotle who advised playwrights to keep the action of a tragedy “within one revolution of the sun.” Shakespeare likely realized that his story could not take place in such a short time, but tried to limit the span of time as much as possible.

If the events actually did take place in only two or three days, there would not have been enough time for Desdemona to have been unfaithful, and the outcome of the play would have been unbelievable. Therefore, Shakespeare creates the *illusion* of more time having passed, even as, when we examine the scenes, the group has only been in Cyprus for two days.

As you read, decide whether Shakespeare’s “double time scheme” is effective, or whether it can be considered a flaw in the play.

Characters in *Othello*

The names in Shakespeare’s plays are often symbolic, and the names *Othello* and *Desdemona* may be seen as symbolic of the doom that befalls the characters in this tragedy. The name *Desdemona* (or *Disdemona*, as it was spelled by Giraldi Cinthio in the original story) is Greek for “unlucky.” Also, it may or may not be coincidental that *Othello*’s name contains the word *hell* and *Desdemona*’s name contains the word *demon*. As you read, look for other ways in which Shakespeare expands on the motif of hell and demons.

Shakespeare probably molded Iago, the villain in *Othello*, after the character of Vice in the medieval morality plays. Vice was a villainous stock character who made his intent known through asides and soliloquies to the audience. In the morality plays, Vice’s role was to tempt the protagonist into doing something that would cause his own damnation. He did this purely for his own gratification and for no other purpose. As you read, decide whether Iago, like Vice, does evil for his own gratification or whether he has a real motive for wanting revenge.

Echoes:
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

Illustrations: Performances of *Othello*

Since it was first enacted at the court of Queen Elizabeth in 1604, Shakespeare's *Othello, the Moor of Venice* has been performed countless times on stages and in cinemas all over the world. Here are a few glimpses.

Image courtesy of the Library of Congress.



Poster for an 1884 production of *Othello* starring American actor Thomas Keene. Keene was a white actor and played the title role in blackface, as was customary in the theater until the late 1900s.

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American actor Paul Robeson and British actress Peggy Ashcroft in a production of *Othello* in London, 1930. The casting of a black actor in the role of Othello generated a great deal of controversy, especially at home in the United States.

Actor/director Orson Welles stars in the 1952 film adaptation of Othello. Welles liked to take risks as a director, and his is an edgy film with dramatic closeups and atmospheric imagery.



Photo © John Springer Collection/Corbis.

The 1995 film Othello, directed by Oliver Parker, featured excellent performances by Laurence Fishburne (as Othello) and Kenneth Branagh (as Iago).



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Patrick Stewart as Othello and Patrice Johnson as Desdemona in The Shakespeare Theatre's 1997–1998 production of Othello, directed by Jude Kelly. Rather than play the character in blackface as actors had done in the past, Stewart conceived the idea of a "photo-negative Othello"—a white man in a black country.



Photo by Carol Pratt, courtesy of The Shakespeare Theater, Washington, D.C.