Insights
A Study Guide to the Utah Shakespeare Festival

Othello
The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival’s stages.

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Cover illustration by Philip W. Hermansen
# Othello

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Shakespeare: Words, Words, Words
By S. S. Moorty

“No household in the English-speaking world is properly furnished unless it contains copies of the Holy Bible and of The Works of William Shakespeare. It is not always thought that these books should be read in maturer years, but they must be present as symbols of Religion and Culture” (G.B. Harrison, *Introducing Shakespeare*. Rev. & Exp. [New York: Penguin Books, 1991], 11).

We, the Shakespearean-theater goers and lovers, devotedly and ritualistically watch and read the Bard’s plays not for exciting stories and complex plots. Rather, Shakespeare’s language is a vital source of our supreme pleasure in his plays. Contrary to ill-conceived notions, Shakespeare’s language is not an obstacle to appreciation, though it may prove to be difficult to understand. Instead, it is the communicative and evocative power of Shakespeare’s language that is astonishingly rich in vocabulary—about 29,000 words—strikingly presented through unforgettable characters such as Hamlet, Macbeth, Lear, Othello, Rosalind, Viola, Iago, Shylock, etc.

In the high school classroom, students perceive Shakespeare’s language as “Old English.” Actually Shakespeare’s linguistic environment, experience, and exposure was, believe it or not, closer to our own times than to Chaucer’s, two hundred years earlier. Indeed, the history and development of the English language unfolds as follows: Old English, 449-1100; Middle English 1100-1500; and Modern English 1500-present. Shakespeare was firmly in the Modern English period.

At the time Shakespeare wrote, most of the grammatical changes from Old and Middle English had taken place; yet rigid notions about “correctness” had not yet been standardized in grammars. The past five centuries have advanced the cause of standardized positions for words; yet the flexible idiom of Elizabethan English offered abundant opportunities for Shakespeare’s linguistic inventiveness. Ideally it is rewarding to study several facets of Shakespeare’s English: pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, wordplay, and imagery. The present overview will, however, be restricted to “vocabulary.”

To Polonius’s inquisitive question “What do you read, my lord?” (*Hamlet*, 2.2.191) Hamlet nonchalantly and intriguingly aptly replies: “Words, words, words” (2.2.192). This many-splendored creation of Shakespeare’s epitomizes the playwright’s own fascination with the dynamic aspect of English language, however troubling it may be to modern audiences and readers. Shakespeare added several thousand words to the language, apart from imparting new meanings to known words. At times Shakespeare could teasingly employ the same word for different shades of thought. Barowne’s single line, “Light, seeking light, doth light of light beguile” (*Love’s Labour’s Lost*, 1.1.77), as Harry Levin in his General Introduction to *The Riverside Shakespeare* (9) explains, “uses ‘light’ in four significations: intellect, seeking wisdom, cheats eyesight out of daylight.”

Another instance: Othello as he enters his bedroom with a light before he smothers his dear, innocent Desdemona soliloquizes: “Put out the light, and then put out the light” (Othello, 5.2.7) Here ‘light’ compares the light of Othello’s lamp or torch to Desdemona’s ‘light’ of life.

In both instances, the repeated simple ordinary word carries extraordinary shades of meaning. “Usually such a tendency in a Shakespeare play indicates a more or less conscious thematic intent.” (Paul A. Jorgensen, *Redeeming Shakespeare’s Words* [Berkeley and Los Angeles; University of California Press, 1962], 100).
Living in an age of the “grandiose humanistic confidence in the power of the word” (Levin 9), Shakespeare evidently felt exuberant that he had the license to experiment with the language, further blessed by the fact that “there were no English grammars to lay down rules or dictionaries to restrict word-formation. This was an immeasurable boon for writers” (Levin 10). Surely Shakespeare took full advantage of the unparalleled linguistic freedom to invent, to experiment with, and to indulge in lavishly.

However intriguing, captivating, mind-teasing, beguiling, and euphonious, Shakespeare’s vocabulary can be a stumbling block, especially for readers. “In the theater the speaking actor frequently relies on tone, semantic drive, narrative context, and body language to communicate the sense of utterly unfamiliar terms and phrases, but on the page such words become more noticeable and confusing” (Russ McDonald, *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare: An Introduction with Documents* [Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin’s Press, 1996], 184).

Unlocking the meaning of Shakespeare’s vocabulary can prove to be an interesting challenge. Such words include those which “have dropped from common use like ‘bisson’ (blind) or those that the playwright seems to have created from Latin roots . . . but that did not catch on, such as conspectuities’ (eyesight or vision) or ‘unplausible’ (doubtful or disapproving). Especially confusing are those words that have shifted meaning over the intervening centuries, such as ‘proper’ (handsome), ‘nice’ (squeamish or delicate), ‘silly’ (innocent), or ‘cousin’ (kinsman, that is, not necessarily the child of an aunt or uncle” (McDonald 184). Because of semantic change, when Shakespeare uses ‘conceit,’ he does not mean ‘vanity,’ as we might understand it to be. Strictly following etymology, Shakespeare means a ‘conception’ or ‘notion,’ or possibly the ‘imagination’ itself.

Perhaps several Shakespearean words “would have been strange to Shakespeare’s audience because they were the products of his invention or unique usage. Some words that probably originated with him include: ‘auspicious,’ ‘assassination,’ ‘disgraceful,’ ‘dwindle,’ ‘savagery.’” Certainly a brave soul, he was “a most audacious inventor of words.” To appreciate and understand Shakespeare’s English in contrast to ours, we ought to suspend our judgment and disbelief and allow respect for the “process of semantic change, which has been continually eroding or encrusting his original meaning” (Levin 8).

Shakespeare’s vocabulary has received greater attention than any other aspect of his language. Perhaps this is because it is the most accessible with no burdensome complications. Whatever the cause, Shakespeare’s language will forever be challenging and captivating.
Not of an Age, but for All Mankind

By Douglas A. Burger

After an enormous expenditure of money and effort, Shakespeare’s Globe Theater has risen again, four centuries later, on London’s south bank of the Thames. Designed as a faithful reconstruction of the original, it uses the building methods of the time and traditional materials (oak timbers, plaster walls, wooden pegs, water-reeds for thatching the roof). From above, the shape seems circular (actually, it is twenty-six sided) with three covered tiers of seats surrounding a central area which is open to the sky. There the “groundlings” may stand to see the action taking place on the stage, which occupies almost half of the inner space. There are no artificial lights, no conventional sets, no fancy rigging.

Seeing a Shakespeare play in the afternoon sunlight at the new Globe must come very close to the experience of those early-day Londoners, except, of course, that we in the twentieth-century behave better. We don't yell insults at the actors, spit, or toss orange peels on the ground. We also smell better: the seventeenth-century playwright, Thomas Dekker, calls the original audience “Stinkards . . . gleeved together in crowds with the Steames of strong breath” (Shakespeare’s Globe: The Guide Book [London: International Globe Center, 1996], 42). And we are safer. The first Globe burned to the ground. The new theater has more exits, fire-retardant insulation concealed in the walls, and water-sprinklers that poke through the thatch of the roof.

That hard-headed capitalists and officials would be willing, even eager, to invest in the project shows that Shakespeare is good business. The new Globe is just one example. Cedar City’s own Utah Shakespearean Festival makes a significant contribution to the economy of southern Utah. A sizable percentage of all the tourist dollars spent in England goes to Shakespeare’s birthplace, Stratford-on-Avon, which would be a sleepy little agricultural town without its favorite son. The situation seems incredible. In our whole history, what other playwright could be called a major economic force? Who else—what single individual—could be listed along with agriculture, mining, and the like as an industry of a region? Why Shakespeare?

The explanation, of course, goes further than an attempt to preserve our cultural traditions. In an almost uncanny way, Shakespeare’s perceptions remain valuable for our own understandings of life, and probably no other writer remains so insightful, despite the constantly changing preoccupations of audiences over time.

The people of past centuries, for example, looked to the plays for nuggets of wisdom and quotable quotes, and many of Shakespeare’s lines have passed into common parlance. There is an old anecdote about the woman, who on first seeing Hamlet, was asked how she liked the play. She replied, “Oh, very nice, my dear, but so full of quotations.” She has it backwards of course. Only the King James Bible has lent more “quotations” to English than Shakespeare.

Citizens of the late nineteenth century sought in the plays for an understanding of human nature, valuing Shakespeare’s character for traits that they recognized in themselves and in others. The fascination continues to the present day as some of our best-known movie stars attempt to find new dimensions in the great characters: Mel Gibson and Kenneth Branagh in Hamlet, Lawrence Fishburn in Othello, Leonardo de Caprio in Romeo + Juliet, to name just a few.

Matters of gender, class, and race have preoccupied more recent audiences. Beatrice sounds a rather feminist note in Much Ado about Nothing in her advice to her cousin about
choosing a husband: Curtsy to your father, but say “Father, as it please me.” Coriolanus presents a recurring dilemma about class relations in its explorations of the rights and wrongs involved in a great man’s attempt to control the masses. Racial attitudes are illuminated in Othello, where the European characters always mark the hero by his race, always identify him first as the “Moor,” are always aware of his difference. London’s new/old Globe is thus a potent symbol of the plays’ continuing worth to us. The very building demonstrates the utter accuracy of the lines written so long ago that Shakespeare is not “of an age” but “for all time.”
Elizabeth’s England

In his entire career, William Shakespeare never once set a play in Elizabethan England. His characters lived in medieval England (Richard II), France (As You Like It), Vienna (Measure for Measure), fifteenth-century Italy (Romeo and Juliet), the England ruled by Elizabeth’s father (Henry VIII) and elsewhere—anywhere and everywhere, in fact, except Shakespeare’s own time and place. But all Shakespeare’s plays—even when they were set in ancient Rome—reflected the life of Elizabeth’s England (and, after her death in 1603, that of her successor, James I). Thus, certain things about these extraordinary plays will be easier to understand if we know a little more about Elizabethan England.

Elizabeth’s reign was an age of exploration—exploration of the world, exploration of man’s nature, and exploration of the far reaches of the English language. This renaissance of the arts and sudden flowering of the spoken and written word gave us two great monuments—the King James Bible and the plays of Shakespeare—and many other treasures as well.

Shakespeare made full use of the adventurous Elizabethan attitude toward language. He employed more words than any other writer in history—more than 21,000 different words appear in the plays—and he never hesitated to try a new word, revive an old one, or make one up. Among the words which first appeared in print in his works are such everyday terms as “critic,” “assassinate,” “bump,” “gloomy,” “suspicious,” and “hurry;” and he invented literally dozens of phrases which we use today: such un-Shakespearean expressions as “catching a cold,” “the mind’s eye,” “elbow room,” and even “pomp and circumstance.”

Elizabethan England was a time for heroes. The ideal man was a courtier, an adventurer, a fencer with the skill of Tybalt, a poet no doubt better than Orlando, a conversationalist with the wit of Rosalind and the eloquence of Richard II, and a gentleman. In addition to all this, he was expected to take the time, like Brutus, to examine his own nature and the cause of his actions and (perhaps unlike Brutus) to make the right choices. The real heroes of the age did all these things and more.

Despite the greatness of some Elizabethan ideals, others seem small and undignified, to us; marriage, for example, was often arranged to bring wealth or prestige to the family, with little regard for the feelings of the bride. In fact, women were still relatively powerless under the law.

The idea that women were “lower” than men was one small part of a vast concern with order which was extremely important to many Elizabethans. Most people believed that everything, from the lowest grain of sand to the highest angel, had its proper position in the scheme of things. This concept was called “the great chain of being.” When things were in their proper place, harmony was the result; when order was violated, the entire structure was shaken.

This idea turns up again and again in Shakespeare. The rebellion against Richard II brings bloodshed to England for generations; Romeo and Juliet’s rebellion against their parents contributes to their tragedy; and the assassination in Julius Caesar throws Rome into civil war.

Many Elizabethans also perceived duplications in the chain of order. They believed, for example, that what the sun is to the heavens, the king is to the state. When something went wrong in the heavens, rulers worried: before Julius Caesar and Richard II were overthrown, comets and meteors appeared, the moon turned the color of blood, and other bizarre astronomical phenomena were reported. Richard himself compares his fall to a premature setting of the sun; when he descends from the top of Flint Castle to meet the conquering
Bolingbroke, he likens himself to the driver of the sun's chariot in Greek mythology: “Down, down I come, like glist'ring Phaeton” (3.3.178).

All these ideas find expression in Shakespeare’s plays, along with hundreds of others—most of them not as strange to our way of thinking. As dramatized by the greatest playwright in the history of the world, the plays offer us a fascinating glimpse of the thoughts and passions of a brilliant age. Elizabethan England was a brief skyrocket of art, adventure, and ideas which quickly burned out; but Shakespeare’s plays keep the best parts of that time alight forever.

(Adapted from “The Shakespeare Plays,” educational materials made possible by Exxon, Metropolitan Life, Morgan Guaranty, and CPB.)
History Is Written by the Victors

From Insights, 1994

William Shakespeare wrote ten history plays chronicling English kings from the time of the Magna Carta (King John) to the beginning of England's first great civil war, the Wars of the Roses (Richard II) to the conclusion of the war and the reuniting of the two factions (Richard III), to the reign of Queen Elizabeth's father (Henry VIII). Between these plays, even though they were not written in chronological order, is much of the intervening history of England, in the six Henry IV, Henry V, and Henry VI plays.

In writing these plays, Shakespeare had nothing to help him except the standard history books of his day. The art of the historian was not very advanced in this period, and no serious attempt was made to get at the exact truth about a king and his reign. Instead, the general idea was that any nation that opposed England was wrong, and that any Englishman who opposed the winning side in a civil war was wrong also.

Since Shakespeare had no other sources, the slant that appears in the history books of his time also appears in his plays. Joan of Arc opposed the English and was not admired in Shakespeare's day, so she is portrayed as a comic character who wins her victories through witchcraft. Richard III fought against the first Tudor monarchs and was therefore labeled in the Tudor histories as a vicious usurper, and he duly appears in Shakespeare's plays as a murdering monster.

Shakespeare wrote nine of his history plays under Queen Elizabeth. She did not encourage historical truthfulness, but rather a patriotism, an exultant, intense conviction that England was the best of all possible countries and the home of the most favored of mortals. And this patriotism breathes through all the history plays and binds them together. England's enemy is not so much any individual king as the threat of civil war, and the history plays come to a triumphant conclusion when the threat of civil war is finally averted, and the great queen, Elizabeth, is born.

Shakespeare was a playwright, not a historian, and, even when his sources were correct, he would sometimes juggle his information for the sake of effective stagecraft. He was not interested in historical accuracy; he was interested in swiftly moving action and in people. Shakespeare's bloody and superb king seems more convincing than the real Richard III, merely because Shakespeare wrote so effectively about him. Shakespeare moved in a different world from that of the historical, a world of creation rather than of recorded fact, and it is in this world that he is so supreme a master.
Could the plays known as Shakespeare’s have been written by a rural, semi-literate, uneducated, wife-deserting, two-bit actor who spelled him name differently each of the six times he wrote it down? Could such a man know enough about Roman history, Italian geography, French grammar, and English court habits to create Antony and Cleopatra, The Comedy of Errors, and Henry V? Could he know enough about nobility and its tenuous relationship to royalty to create King Lear and Macbeth?

Are these questions even worth asking? Some very intelligent people think so. On the other hand, some very intelligent people think not. Never mind quibbles about how a line should be interpreted, or how many plays Shakespeare wrote and which ones, or which of the great tragedies reflected personal tragedies. The question of authorship is “The Shakespeare Controversy.”

Since Mr. Cowell, quoting the deceased Dr. Wilmot, cast the first doubt about William of Stratford in an 1805 speech before the Ipswich Philological Society, nominees for the “real author” have included philosopher Sir Francis Bacon, playwright Christopher Marlowe, Queen Elizabeth I, Sir Walter Raleigh, and the earls of Derby, Rutland, Essex, and Oxford—among others.

The arguments evoke two premises: first, that the proven facts about the William Shakespeare who was christened at Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-upon-Avon on April 26, 1564 do not configure a man of sufficient nobility of thought and language to have written the plays; and, second, that the man from Stratford is nowhere concretely identified as the author of the plays. The name “Shakespeare”—in one of its spellings—appears on early quartos, but the man represented by the name may not be the one from Stratford.

One group of objections to the Stratford man follows from the absence of any record that he ever attended school—in Stratford or anywhere else. If he were uneducated, the arguments go, how could his vocabulary be twice as large as the learned Milton’s? How could he know so much history, law, or philosophy? If he were a country bumpkin, how could he know so much of hawking, hounding, courtly manners, and daily habits of the nobility? How could he have traveled so much, learning about other nations of Europe in enough detail to make them the settings for his plays?

The assumptions of these arguments are that such rich and noble works as those attributed to a playwright using the name “Shakespeare” could have been written only by someone with certain characteristics, and that those characteristics could be distilled from the “facts” of his life. He would have to be noble; he would have to be well-educated; and so forth. On these grounds the strongest candidate to date is Edward de Vere, seventeenth earl of Oxford.

A debate that has endured its peaks and valleys, the controversy catapulted to center stage in 1984 with the publication of Charlton Ogburn’s The Mysterious William Shakespeare. Ogburn, a former army intelligence officer, builds a strong case for Oxford—if one can hurdle the notions that the author wasn’t Will Shakespeare, that literary works should be read autobiographically, and that literary creation is nothing more than reporting the facts of one’s own life. “The Controversy” was laid to rest—temporarily, at least—by justices Blackmun, Brennan, and Stevens of the United States Supreme Court who, after hearing evidence from both sides in a mock trial conducted September 25, 1987 at American University in Washington, D.C., found in favor of the Bard of Avon.

Hooray for our side!
A Nest of Singing Birds
From Insights, 1992

Musical development was part of the intellectual and social movement that influenced all England during the Tudor Age. The same forces that produced writers like Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, John Donne, and Francis Bacon also produced musicians of corresponding caliber. So numerous and prolific were these talented and imaginative men—men whose reputations were even in their own day firmly established and well founded—that they have been frequently and aptly referred to as a nest of singing birds.

One such figure was Thomas Tallis, whose music has officially accompanied the Anglican service since the days of Elizabeth I; another was his student, William Boyd, whose variety of religious and secular compositions won him international reputation.

Queen Elizabeth I, of course, provided an inspiration for the best efforts of Englishmen, whatever their aims and activities. For music, she was the ideal patroness. She was an accomplished performer on the virginal (forerunner to the piano), and she aided her favorite art immensely in every way possible, bestowing her favors on the singers in chapel and court and on the musicians in public and private theatrical performances. To the great composers of her time, she was particularly gracious and helpful.

Singing has been an integral part of English life for as long as we have any knowledge. Long before the music was written down, the timeless folk songs were a part of our Anglo-Saxon heritage. The madrigals and airs that are enjoyed each summer at the Utah Shakespearean Festival evolved from these traditions.

It was noted by Bishop Jewel in 1560 that sometimes at Paul’s Cross there would be 6,000 people singing together, and before the sermon, the whole congregation always sang a psalm, together with the choir and organ. When that thundering unity of congregational chorus came in, “I was so transported there was no room left in my whole body, mind, or spirit for anything below divine and heavenly raptures.”

Religious expression was likely the dominant musical motif of the Elizabethan period; however, the period also saw development of English stage music, with Morley, John Wilson, and Robert Johnson setting much of their music to the plays of Shakespeare. The masque, a semi-musical entertainment, reached a high degree of perfection at the court of James I, where the courtiers themselves were sometimes participants. An educated person of the time was expected to perform music more than just fairly well, and an inability in this area might elicit whispered comments regarding lack of genteel upbringing, not only in the ability to take one’s part in a madrigal, but also in knowing the niceties of musical theory. Henry Peacham wrote in The Compleat Gentleman in 1662 that one of the fundamental qualities of a gentleman was to be able to “sing your part sure, and...to play the same upon your viol.”

Outside the walls of court could be heard street songs, lighthearted catches, and ballads, all of which indicates that music was not confined to the cathedrals or court. We still have extant literally hundreds of ballads, street songs, and vendors’ cries that were sung or hummed on the street and played with all their complicated variations on all levels of Elizabethan society.

Instruments of the period were as varied as the music and peoples, and the instrument and songbooks which remain in existence today are indicative of the high level of excellence enjoyed by the Elizabethans. Songbooks, mainly of part-songs for three, four, five, and six
voices exist today, as do books of dance music: corrantos, pavans, and galliards. Records from one wealthy family indicate the family owned forty musical instruments, including twelve viols, seven recorders, four lutes, five virginals, various brasses and woodwinds, and two “great organs.” To have use for such a great number of instruments implies a fairly large group of players resident with the family or staying with them as invited guests, and the players of the most popular instruments (lutes, virginals, and viols) would be playing from long tradition, at least back to King Henry VIII. In short, music was as necessary to the public and private existence of a Renaissance Englishman as any of the basic elements of life.

The Utah Shakespearean Festival musicians perform each summer on authentic replicas of many of these Renaissance instruments. The music they perform is authentic from the Elizabethan period, and the instruments are made available for audience inspection and learning.
Actors in Shakespeare’s Day
By Stephanie Chidester From Insights, 1994

The status of the actor in society has never been entirely stable but has fluctuated from the beginnings of the theatre to the present day. The ancient Greeks often considered actors as servants of Dionysus, and their performances were a sort of religious rite. Roman actors, often slaves, were seen as the scraps of society, only one step above gladiators. In medieval Europe, both the theatre and the actor, suppressed by the Catholic Church, were almost non-existent but gradually re-emerged in the form of the liturgy and, later, the Mystery plays. The actors of Shakespeare’s age also saw fluctuations in reputation; actors were alternately classified as “vagabonds and sturdy beggars,” as an act of Parliament in 1572 defined them, and as servants of noblemen.

As early as 1482, noblemen such as Richard, duke of Gloucester (later Richard III), the earl of Essex, and Lord Arundel kept acting companies among their retainers. But other than these select groups protected by nobles, actors lived lives of danger and instability because when they abandoned their respectable trades, they also left behind the comfort and protection of the trade guilds.

However, life soon became much more difficult for both of these classes of actors. In 1572, Parliament passed two acts which damaged thespians’ social status. In the first one, the Queen forbade “the unlawful retaining of multitudes of unordinary servants by liveries, badges, and other signs and tokens (contrary to the good and ancient statutes and laws of this realm)” in order to “curb the power of local grandees” (Dennis Kay, Shakespeare: His Life, Work, and Era [New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1992], 88). One result of this was that some of the actors, now considered superfluous, were turned away.

To make matters even worse, these actors faced yet another impediment: the “Acte for the punishment of Vagabondes” (Kay, 88), in which actors were declared “vagabonds and masterless men and hence were subject to arrest and imprisonment” (Thomas Marc Parrott and Robert Hamilton Ball, A Short View of Elizabethan Drama [New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1943], 46).

However, there were still nobles, such as the earl of Leicester and the earl of Sussex, who endorsed players; the protector would usually seek royal permission for these actors to perform in London or, less frequently, some other less prestigious town. Thus the actors were able to venture forth without fear of arrest. It is through these circumstances that Shakespeare ends up an actor in London.

There are many theories—guesses really—of how Shakespeare got into the theatre. He may have joined a group of strolling players, performed around the countryside, and eventually made it to London, the theatrical hub of Britain. Another theory suggests that he began as a schoolmaster, wrote a play (possibly The Comedy of Errors) and then decided to take it to London; or, alternately, he could have simply gone directly to that great city, with or without a play in hand, to try his luck.

An interesting speculation is that while he was young, Shakespeare might have participated in one of the cycles of Mystery plays in Stratford: “On one occasion the Stratford corporation laid out money for an entertainment at Pentecost. In 1583 they paid 13s 4d ‘to Davi Jones and his company for his pastime at Whitsuntide.’ Davi Jones had been married to Elizabeth, the daughter of Adrian Quiney, and after her death in 1579 he took as his wife a Hathaway, Frances. Was Shakespeare one of the youths who trimmed themselves for the Whitsun pastime?” (S. Schoenbaum, William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life [New York: New American Library, 1977], 111).
But however he got into the theatre and to London, he had made a very definite impression on his competitors by 1592, when playwright Robert Greene attacked Shakespeare as both actor and author: “‘There is an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his Tiger’s heart wrapt in a Player’s hide, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you: and . . . is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a country’” (G. B. Harrison, *Introducing Shakespeare* [New York: Penguin Books, Inc., 1947], 1).

We don’t often think of Shakespeare as primarily an actor, perhaps because most of what we know of him comes from the plays he wrote rather than the parts he played. Nevertheless, he made much of his money as an actor and sharer in his company: “At least to start with, his status, his security derived more from his acting skill and his eye for business than from his pen” (Kay, 95). Had he been only a playwright, he would likely have died a poor man, as did Robert Greene: “In the autumn of 1592, Robert Greene, the most popular author of his generation, lay penniless and dying. . . . The players had grown rich on the products of his brain, and now he was deserted and alone” (Harrison, 1).

While Shakespeare made a career of acting, there are critics who might dispute his acting talent. For instance, almost a century after Shakespeare’s death, “an anonymous enthusiast of the stage . . . remarked . . . that ‘Shakespear . . . was a much better poet, than player’” (Schoenbaum, 201). However, Shakespeare could have been quite a good actor, and this statement would still be true. One sign of his skill as an actor is that he is mentioned in the same breath with Burbage and Kemp: “The accounts of the royal household for Mar 15 [1595] record payments to ‘William Kempe William Shakespeare & Richarde Burbage seruantes to the Lord Chamberlain’” (Kay, 174).

Another significant indication of his talent is the very fact that he played in London rather than touring other less lucrative towns. If players were to be legally retained by noblemen, they had to prove they could act, and one means of demonstrating their legitimacy was playing at court for Queen Elizabeth. The more skilled companies obtained the queen’s favor and were granted permission to remain in London.

Not all companies, however, were so fortunate: “Sussex’s men may not have been quite up to the transition from rural inn-yards to the more demanding circumstances of court performance. Just before the Christmas season of 1574, for example, they were inspected (‘perused’) by officials of the Revels Office, with a view to being permitted to perform before the queen; but they did not perform” (Kay, 90). Shakespeare and his company, on the other hand, performed successfully in London from the early 1590s until 1611. It would be a mistake to classify William Shakespeare as only a playwright, even the greatest playwright of the English-speaking world; he was also “an actor, a sharer, a member of a company” (Kay, 95), obligations that were extremely relevant to his plays. As a man of the theatre writing for a company, he knew what would work on stage and what would not and was able to make his plays practical as well as brilliant. And perhaps more importantly, his theatrical experience must have taught him much about the human experience, about everyday lives and roles, just as his plays show us that “All the world’s a stage, / And all the men and women merely players” (*As You Like It*, 2.7.149-50).
Shakespeare’s Audience:
A Very Motley Crowd
From Insights, 1992

When Shakespeare peeped through the curtain at the audience gathered to hear his first play, he looked upon a very motley crowd. The pit was filled with men and boys. The galleries contained a fair proportion of women, some not too respectable. In the boxes were a few gentlemen from the royal courts, and in the lords’ box or perhaps sitting on the stage was a group of extravagantly dressed gentlemen of fashion. Vendors of nuts and fruits moved about through the crowd. The gallants were smoking; the apprentices in the pit were exchanging rude witticisms with the painted ladies.

When Shakespeare addressed his audience directly, he did so in terms of gentle courtesy or pleasant raillery. In Hamlet, however, he does let fall the opinion that the groundlings (those on the ground, the cheapest seats) were “for the most part capable of nothing but dumb shows and noise.” His recollections of the pit of the Globe may have added vigor to his ridicule of the Roman mob in Julius Caesar.

On the other hand, the theatre was a popular institution, and the audience was representative of all classes of London life. Admission to standing room in the pit was a penny, and an additional penny or two secured a seat in the galleries. For seats in the boxes or for stools on the stage, still more was charged, up to sixpence or half a crown.

Attendance at the theatres was astonishingly large. There were often five or six theatres giving daily performances, which would mean that out of a city of one hundred thousand inhabitants, thirty thousand or more spectators each week attended the theatre. When we remember that a large class of the population disapproved of the theatre, and that women of respectability were not frequent patrons of the public playhouses, this attendance is remarkable.

Arrangements for the comfort of the spectators were meager, and spectators were often disorderly. Playbills seem to have been posted all about town and in the theatre, and the title of the piece was announced on the stage. These bills contained no lists of actors, and there were no programs, ushers, or tickets. There was usually one door for the audience, where the admission fee was deposited in a box carefully watched by the money taker, and additional sums were required at entrance to the galleries or boxes. When the three o’clock trumpets announced the beginning of a performance, the assembled audience had been amusing itself by eating, drinking, smoking, and playing cards, and they sometimes continued these occupations during a performance. Pickpockets were frequent, and, if caught, were tied to a post on the stage. Disturbances were not infrequent, sometimes resulting in general rioting.

The Elizabethan audience was fond of unusual spectacle and brutal physical suffering. They liked battles and murders, processions and fireworks, ghosts and insanity. They expected comedy to abound in beatings, and tragedy in deaths. While the audience at the Globe expected some of these sensations and physical horrors, they did not come primarily for these. (Real blood and torture were available nearby at the bear baitings, and public executions were not uncommon.) Actually, there were very few public entertainments offering as little brutality as did the theatre.

Elizabethans attended the public playhouses for learning. They attended for romance, imagination, idealism, and art; the audience was not without refinement, and those looking for food for the imagination had nowhere to go but to the playhouse. There were no newspapers, no
magazines, almost no novels, and only a few cheap books; theatre filled the desire for story
discussion among people lacking other educational and cultural opportunities.

The most remarkable case of Shakespeare’s theatre filling an educational need is probably that
of English history. The growth of national patriotism culminating in the English victory over the
Spanish Armada gave dramatists a chance to use the historical material, and for the fifteen years
from the Armada to the death of Elizabeth, the stage was deluged with plays based on the events
of English chronicles, and familiarity with English history became a cultural asset of the London
crowd.

Law was a second area where the Elizabethan public seems to have been fairly well informed,
and successful dramatists realized the influence that the great development of civil law in the
sixteenth century exercised upon the daily life of the London citizen. In this area, as in others,
the dramatists did not hesitate to cultivate the cultural background of their audience whenever
opportunity offered, and the ignorance of the multitude did not prevent it from taking an interest
in new information and from offering a receptive hearing to the accumulated lore of lawyers,
historians, humanists, and playwrights.
The audience was used to the spoken word, and soon became trained in blank verse, delighting
in monologues, debates, puns, metaphors, stump speakers, and sonorous declamation. The public
was accustomed to the acting of the old religious dramas, and the new acting in which the
spoken words were listened to caught on rapidly. The new poetry and the great actors who recited
it found a sensitive audience. There were many moments during a play when spectacle, brutality,
and action were all forgotten, and the audience fed only on the words. Shakespeare and his
contemporaries may be deemed fortunate in having an audience essentially attentive, eager for
the newly unlocked storehouse of secular story, and possessing the sophistication and interest to
be fed richly by the excitements and levities on the stage.
Shakespearean Snapshots

From Insights, 2002

By Ace G. Pilkington

It is hard to get from the facts of Shakespeare’s life to any sense of what it must have been like to have lived it. He was born in 1564 in Stratford-on-Avon and died there in 1616. The day of his birth is not certain, but it may have been the same as the day of his death—April 23—if he was baptized, as was usual at the time, three days after he was born. He married Anne Hathaway in the winter of 1582-83, when he was eighteen and she was twenty-six. He became the father of three children. The first was Susannah, who was born around May 23, close enough to the date of the wedding to suggest that the marriage was not entirely voluntary. Shakespeare’s twins, Hamnet and Judith, were baptized on February 2, 1585. Hamnet died of unknown causes (at least unknown by us at this distance in time) in 1596. Shakespeare’s career as actor, theatre owner, manager, and, of course, playwright began in the vicinity of 1590 and continued for the rest of his life, though there are clear indications that he spent more and more time in Stratford and less and less in London from 1611 on. His work in the theatre made him wealthy, and his extraordinary plays brought him a measure of fame, though nothing like what he deserved or would posthumously receive.

It’s hard to get even the briefest sense of what Shakespeare’s life was like from such information. It is probably impossible ever to know what Shakespeare thought or felt, but maybe we can get closer to what he saw and heard and even smelled. Perhaps some snapshots—little close-ups—might help to bring us nearer to the world in which Shakespeare lived if not quite to the life he lived in that world. In Shakespeare’s youth, chimneys were a new thing. Before that, smoke was left to find its way out through a hole in the roof, often a thatched roof, and there were even some who maintained that this smoky atmosphere was better than the newfangled fresh air that chimneys made possible—along with a greater division of rooms and more privacy.

In the year of Shakespeare’s birth, Stratford had more trees than houses—“upwards of 400 houses as well as 1,000 elms and forty ashes” (Peter Thomson, Shakespeare’s Professional Career [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992], 1). Peter Levi says, “The town was so full of elm trees that it must have looked and sounded like a woodland settlement. For example, Mr. Gibbs’s house on Rothermarket had twelve elms in the garden and six in front of the door. Thomas Attford on Ely Street had another twelve. The town boundaries were marked by elms or groups of elms (The Life and Times of William Shakespeare [New York: Wings Books, 1988], 7). Shakespeare’s “Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang” becomes a far more majestic image with the picture of Stratford’s elms in mind. And the birds themselves had a sound which modern ears no longer have a chance to enjoy. “We must realize that it was ordinary for . . . Shakespeare to hear a dawn chorus of many hundreds of birds at once. . . . as a young man thirty years ago I have heard a deafening dawn chorus in the wooded Chilterns, on Shakespeare’s road to London” (Levi 10).

Exactly what Shakespeare’s road to London may have been or at least how he first made his way there and became an actor is much debated. He might have been a schoolmaster or fifty other things, but he may well have started out as he ended up—as a player. We can then, in John Southworth’s words, “Picture a sixteen-year-old lad on a cart, growing year by year into manhood, journeying out of the Arden of his childhood into ever more unfamiliar, distant regions, travelling ill-made roads in all weathers, sleeping in inns, hearing and memorising strange new dialects and forms of speech, meeting with every possible type and character of person; learning, most of all perhaps, from the audiences to which he played in guildhalls and inns” (Shakespeare the Player: A Life in the Theatre [Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing Limited, 2000], 30). At some time in his life—in fact, many times—Shakespeare must have known theatrical tours very like that.
In London itself, the new Globe, the best theatre in (or rather just outside of) the city, was in an area with a large number of prisons and an unpleasant smell. “Garbage had preceded actors on the marshy land where the new playhouse was erected: ‘flanked with a ditch and forced out of a marsh’, according to Ben Jonson. Its cost . . . included the provision of heavy piles for the foundation, and a whole network of ditches in which the water rose and fell with the tidal Thames” (Garry O’Connor, William Shakespeare: A Popular Life [New York: Applause Books, 2000], 161). The playgoers came by water, and the Globe, the Rose, and the Swan “drew 3,000 or 4,000 people in boats across the Thames every day” (161). Peter Levi says of Shakespeare’s London, “The noise, the crowds, the animals and their droppings, the glimpses of grandeur and the amazing squalor of the poor, were beyond modern imagination” (49).

England was a place of fear and glory. Public executions were public entertainments. Severed heads decayed on city walls. Francis Bacon, whom Will Durant calls “the most powerful and influential intellect of his time” (Heroes of History: A Brief History of Civilization from Ancient Times to the Dawn of the Modern Age [New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001], 327), had been “one of the persons commissioned to question prisoners under torture” in the 1580s (Levi 4). The opportune moment when Shakespeare became the most successful of playwrights was the destruction of Thomas Kyd, “who broke under torture and was never the same again,” and the death of Christopher Marlowe in a tavern brawl which was the result of plot and counterplot—a struggle, very probably, between Lord Burghley and Walter Ralegh (Levi 48).

Shakespeare, who must have known the rumors and may have known the truth, cannot have helped shuddering at such monstrous good fortune. Still, all of the sights, smells, and terrors, from the birdsongs to the screams of torture, from the muddy tides to the ties of blood, became not only the textures and tonalities of Shakespeare’s life, but also the information and inspiration behind his plays.
Ghosts, Witches, and Shakespeare

By Howard Waters

From Insights, 2006

Some time in the mid 1580s, young Will Shakespeare, for reasons not entirely clear to us, left his home, his wife, and his family in Stratford and set off for London. It was a time when Elizabeth, “la plus fine femme du monde,” as Henry III of France called her, had occupied the throne of England for over twenty-five years. The tragedy of Mary Stuart was past; the ordeal of Essex was in the future. Sir Francis Drake’s neutralization of the Spanish Armada was pending and rumors of war or invasion blew in from all the great ports.

What could have been more exciting for a young man from the country, one who was already more than half in love with words, than to be headed for London!

It was an exciting and frightening time, when the seven gates of London led to a maze of streets, narrow and dirty, crowded with tradesmen, carts, coaches, and all manner of humanity. Young Will would have seen the moated Tower of London, looking almost like an island apart. There was London Bridge crowded with tenements and at the southern end a cluster of traitors’ heads impaled on poles. At Tyburn thieves and murderers dangled, at Limehouse pirates were trussed up at low tide and left to wait for the water to rise over them. At Tower Hill the headsman’s axe flashed regularly, while for the vagabonds there were the whipping posts, and for the beggars there were the stocks. Such was the London of the workaday world, and young Will was undoubtedly mentally filing away details of what he saw, heard, and smelled.

Elizabethan people in general were an emotional lot and the ferocity of their entertainment reflected that fact. Bear-baiting, for example, was a highly popular spectator sport, and the structure where they were generally held was not unlike the theatres of the day. A bear was chained to a stake in the center of the pit, and a pack of large dogs was turned loose to bait, or fight, him. The bear eventually tired (fortunately for the remaining dogs!), and, well, you can figure the rest out for yourself. Then there were the public hangings, whippings, or drawing and quarterings for an afternoon’s entertainment. So, the violence in some of Shakespeare’s plays was clearly directed at an audience that reveled in it. Imagine the effect of having an actor pretend to bite off his own tongue and spit a chunk of raw liver that he had carefully packed in his jaw into the faces of the groundlings!

Despite the progressing enlightenment of the Renaissance, superstition was still rampant among Elizabethan Londoners, and a belief in such things as astrology was common (Ralph P. Boas and Barbara M. Hahna, “The Age of Shakespeare,” Social Backgrounds of English Literature, [Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1931] 93). Through the position of stars many Elizabethans believed that coming events could be foretold even to the extent of mapping out a person’s entire life.

Where witches and ghosts were concerned, it was commonly accepted that they existed and the person who scoffed at them was considered foolish, or even likely to be cursed. Consider the fact that Shakespeare’s Macbeth was supposedly cursed due to the playwright’s having given away a few more of the secrets of witchcraft than the weird sisters may have approved of. For a time, productions experienced an uncanny assortment of mishaps and injuries. Even today, it is often considered bad luck for members of the cast and crew to mention the name of the production, simply referred to as the Scottish Play. In preaching a sermon, Bishop Jewel warned the Queen: “It may please your Grace to understand that witches and sorcerers within these last few years are marvelously increased. Your Grace’s
subjects pine away, even unto death; their color fadeth; their flesh rotteth; their speech is
benumbed; their senses bereft” (Walter Bromberg, “Witchcraft and Psychotherapy”, *The

Ghosts were recognized by the Elizabethans in three basic varieties: the vision or purely
subjective ghost, the authentic ghost who has died without opportunity of repentance, and
the false ghost which is capable of many types of manifestations (Boas and Hahn). When
a ghost was confronted, either in reality or in a Shakespearean play, some obvious
discrimination was called for (and still is). Critics still do not always agree on which of these
three types haunts the pages of *Julius Caesar, Macbeth, Richard III,* or *Hamlet,* or, in some
cases, why they are necessary to the plot at all. After all, Shakespeare’s ghosts are a capricious
lot, making themselves visible or invisible as they please. In *Richard III* there are no fewer
than eleven ghosts on the stage who are visible only to Richard and Richmond. In *Macbeth*
the ghost of Banquo repeatedly appears to Macbeth in crowded rooms but is visible
only to him. In *Hamlet,* the ghost appears to several people on the castle battlements but
only to Hamlet in his mother’s bedchamber. In the words of E.H. Seymour: “If we judge by
sheer reason, no doubt we must banish ghosts from the stage altogether, but if we regulate
our fancy by the laws of superstition, we shall find that spectres are privileged to be visible
to whom they will (E.H. Seymour “Remarks, Critical, Conjectural, and Explanatory
on Shakespeare” in *Macbeth A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare* [New York: Dover

Shakespeare’s audiences, and his plays, were the products of their culture. Since the validity
of any literary work can best be judged by its public acceptance, not to mention its lasting
power, it seems that Shakespeare’s ghosts and witches were, and are, enormously popular.
If modern audiences and critics find themselves a bit skeptical, then they might consider
bringing along a supply of Coleridge’s “willing suspension of disbelief.” Elizabethans simply
had no need of it.
Shakespeare’s Day: What They Wore

The clothing which actors wear to perform a play is called a costume, to distinguish it from everyday clothing. In Shakespeare's time, acting companies spent almost as much on costumes as television series do today.

The costumes for shows in England were so expensive that visitors from France were a little envious. Kings and queens on the stage were almost as well dressed as kings and queens in real life.

Where did the acting companies get their clothes? Literally, “off the rack” and from used clothing sellers. Wealthy middle class people would often give their servants old clothes that they didn't want to wear any more, or would leave their clothes to the servants when they died. Since clothing was very expensive, people wore it as long as possible and passed it on from one person to another without being ashamed of wearing hand-me-downs. However, since servants were of a lower class than their employers, they weren't allowed to wear rich fabrics, and would sell these clothes to acting companies, who were allowed to wear what they wanted in performance.

A rich nobleman like Count Paris or a wealthy young man like Romeo would wear a doublet, possibly of velvet, and it might have gold embroidery. Juliet and Lady Capulet would have worn taffeta, silk, gold, or satin gowns, and everybody would have had hats, gloves, ruffs (an elaborate collar), gloves, stockings, and shoes equally elaborate.

For a play like Romeo and Juliet, which was set in a European country at about the same time Shakespeare wrote it, Elizabethan everyday clothes would have been fine—the audience would have been happy, and they would have been authentic for the play. However, since there were no costume shops who could make clothing suitable for, say, medieval Denmark for Hamlet, or ancient Rome for Julius Caesar, or Oberon and Titania's forest for A Midsummer Night's Dream, these productions often looked slightly strange—can you imagine fairies in full Elizabethan collars and skirts? How would they move?

Today's audiences want costumes to be authentic, so that they can believe in the world of the play. However, Romeo and Juliet was recently set on Verona Beach, with very up-to-date clothes indeed; and about thirty years ago, West Side Story, an updated musical version of the Romeo and Juliet tale, was set in the Puerto Rican section of New York City.

Activity: Discuss what the affect of wearing “special” clothes is—to church, or to a party. Do you feel different? Do you act different? How many kinds of wardrobes do you have? School, play, best? Juliet and Romeo would have had only one type of clothing each, no matter how nice it was.

Activity: Perform a scene from the play in your everyday clothes, and then in more formal clothes. Ask the participants and the spectators to describe the differences between the two performances.
About the Play

Like every great writer, Shakespeare didn’t only rely on his own ideas to weave a good story. Around 1603 when Shakespeare was searching for new material it seems he turned to the Italian author Giraldi Cinthio’s *Hecatommithi*. This book of 100 moral stories was first published in 1565. The tale of an unnamed Moor must have captured his interest, but in writing his own play, *Othello*, Shakespeare made several important changes. The original paints the tragedy around the poor victim “Desdemona,” who, in following her heart, instead of her father’s wish, is eventually given cause to believe, “I fear that I shall prove a warning to young girls not to marry against the wishes of their parents, and that the Italian ladies may learn from me not to wed a man who nature and habitue of life estrange from us” (a 1855 translation by J. E. Taylor found at http://www.virgil.org/dswo/courses/shakespeare-survey/cynthio.pdf).

This not so subtle statement served as a moral admonition for headstrong Italian daughters everywhere. Shakespeare artfully manages to supplant the focus of the play from the dangers of Desdemona and Othello’s unsanctioned love by creating of one of the most shameless, clever and duplicit villains ever imagined.

Iago’s manners and motives throughout the play are disconcertingly simplistic and brutal. He is the person we fear the most: likeable, subservient, and unfailingly honest to the beholder, while vicious, cunning, and remorseless within. In the original story this nameless “artful fraud” plots the death of the captain, who Shakespeare named Cassio, without any assistance, and later participates in Desdemona’s violent murder. Shakespeare’s Iago manages all of his dirty work by ruthlessly twisting the minds of others, thus maintaining his unsullied reputation. Little wonder that the Bard’s masterful and timeless telling has been popular in performance ever since its first production in the Palace of Whitehall for the new King James I.

Since their creation, the roles of both Iago and Othello have been among the most coveted and performed by nearly every great actor. In many productions the roles have been shared on alternate performances between the two leading men. Such was the case in 1955 at the Old Vic theatre in London when Richard Burton and John Neville took on the play.

Shakespeare’s *Tragedy of the Moor of Venice* has been adapted for film and television famously by Orson Wells (1952), Laurence Olivier (1965), Trevor Nunn (1990), and more recently Kenneth Branagh (1995). In 2006 *Othello* was adapted by popular Bollywood director Vishal Bharadwaj. His film *Omkara* received enormous critical acclaim. In early 2008 a London production starring Chiwetel Ejiofor and Ewan McGregor at the Donmar Warehouse set unofficial records with tickets on the internet going for a reported £2000.
Synopsis: Othello

Iago, a Venetian soldier and ensign, is passed over for promotion by Othello, a Moorish nobleman who has reached the pinnacle of his career: he is general of the Venetian army and has secretly married Desdemona, daughter of an important statesman in Venice. Partly to be avenged for this slight and partly because of his dark nature, Iago has determined to destroy Othello's happiness.

His first attempt in this villainy is in awakening Brabantio, Desdemona's father, and telling him of his daughter's marriage to the black Moor. Enraged, Brabantio appeals to the duke of Venice to punish Othello but gives up in his efforts when he realizes that Desdemona truly loves her new husband. Iago, however, is not so easily defeated; and he soon enlists the help of Roderigo, a rejected suitor of Desdemona, in his future attempts to ruin Othello.

When Othello is sent from Venice to defend Cyprus from the Turks, Desdemona sails to join him, in the safekeeping of Iago and his wife, Emilia. A storm disperses the Turkish fleet, ending the threat to Cyprus, and Othello is quickly reunited with Desdemona on the island. Now, Iago begins to scheme in earnest. He gets Cassio, whom Othello promoted ahead of Iago, drunk while on duty, thereby prompting Othello to dismiss the dishonored Cassio from his service and make Iago his lieutenant. Then Iago goads Othello into believing that Desdemona is Cassio's lover.

Othello soon becomes obsessively jealous and willing to believe anything he is told about his innocent wife. Iago's final “proof” of Desdemona's infidelity revolves around the loss of a special handkerchief Othello had given her during their courtship. Iago tricks his wife, Emilia into stealing the handkerchief, then convinces Othello that Desdemona has given it to Cassio as a love token. When Desdemona cannot produce the handkerchief, Othello is certain she has been unfaithful and swears an oath of vengeance on his wife and Cassio. That evening, Othello orders Desdemona to await him alone in bed. As she prepares for sleep and fearing Othello's dark mood, she sings “A Willow Song,” a wistful song taught to her about a maid who was forsaken by her lover.

In Desdemona's bedchamber, Othello gazes down at the innocent beauty of his sleeping wife. She awakens, and despite her pleas for life, Othello smothers her with a pillow. A horrified Emilia enters, and Othello justifies himself, citing the handkerchief as proof. Recognizing the handkerchief as the one she stole for her husband, she is stunned and reveals Iago's guilt. Iago enters the scene, kills Emilia, is arrested, and is almost killed by Othello, who now is horrified as he understands the truth. Despite demands for an explanation of his treachery, Iago remains silent and is condemned to a tortuous death.

Before Othello can be led away to face his justice, he begs his listeners to speak of him “as one that lov'd not wisely but too well.” He then draws a concealed weapon, stabs himself, and kisses Desdemona as he dies.
Characters: Othello

**Duke of Venice:** Ruler and commander in defense against the Turks, he sends Othello to Cyprus to defend the island.

**Brabantio:** A senator, Brabantio is the father of Desdemona.

**Gratiano:** A noble Venetian, Gratiano is a brother of Brabantio.

**Lodovico:** Another noble Venetian, Lodovico is a kinsman to Brabantio.

**Othello:** A Christian Moor who is fighting as a hired general for the city of Venice, Othello is noble, proud, and ultimately jealous.

**Cassio:** Othello's lieutenant, Cassio is promoted to that position even though Iago had coveted it for some time.

**Iago:** Othello's villainous ensign, Iago is ambitious and evil and a master at manipulation.

**Roderigo:** Desdemona's rejected suitor, Roderigo becomes one of Iago's dupes as he works his treachery.

**Montano:** The governor of Cyprus, Montano is a trusted and valiant servant of the duke of Venice.

**Clown:** A servant of Othello

**Desdemona:** The “gentle” daughter of Brabantio and the “true and loving” wife of Othello, Desdemona represents the ideal of womanhood.

**Emilia:** The wife of Iago and the personal maid of Desdemona, Emilia is also unwittingly manipulated by Iago.

**Bianca:** Cassio's mistress
The Moral Geography of Othello
By Michael Flachmann

The concept of geography plays a major role in Shakespeare's Othello, as it does in many of his plays. Caught between the two markedly different locales of Venice and Cyprus, the events of the script give proof to the old adage that “people change places, and places change people.” Such characters as Othello, Desdemona, and Iago are forever transformed by their journey through these disparate worlds, just as these dramatic places are permanently altered by the characters’ presence.

One of these locations, Venice, was the crown jewel of sixteenth-century Italy. A major Mediterranean seaport and center of commerce, it was also home to the incredible richness of literature, painting, architecture, music, and all the other art forms that flourished during the Italian Renaissance. At the same time, it symbolized the depths of political intrigue, decadence, and moral depravity that were unfortunately typical of Italy during the same time period. Characterized, on one hand, by Baldassare Castiglione’s The Courtier (1528), a testament to the importance of civilized, courtly demeanor, it also produced Niccolo Machiavelli’s The Prince (1514), a cynical, pragmatic, amoral treatise on the uses and abuses of political power. Polluted by prostitution and other social ills, Venice was an over-civilized, licentious, ingrown society that carried with it the potential for its own destruction.

The other, Cyprus, a fortified outpost on the edge of Christian territory, is a very different world than Venice. Infinitely more barbarous, it is a bastion of male power where Desdemona, alone and isolated from her Venetian support system, is vulnerable to the machinations of a highly skilled manipulator like Iago. This is a savage, warlike milieu in which such admirable military virtues as quick decision making and an inflated sense of honor work strongly against Othello and his bride. Ironically, Cyprus was also revered as the birthplace of Venus Aphrodite, the goddess of love, who was reputedly born in ocean foam and washed ashore near Nicosia. Inspired by this amorous deity, Cyprus provides the perfect location for Iago to convince Othello of his wife’s sexual infidelity.

Because of this geographical dichotomy between Venice and Cyprus, Othello and Desdemona move from an urbane, civilized, and somewhat depraved Italian city-state to a barren military encampment whose claustrophobic confines intensify Iago’s unrelenting psychological assault. Also conspiring against the lovers is Othello’s naivete concerning the subtle charms of Venetian ladies. Like the city itself, Desdemona carries with her the seeds of her own demise. Transplanted into the new terrain of Cyprus, her innocent sophistication confirms her as a “cunning whore of Venice” (4.2.87). In the same fashion, after the Turkish fleet is destroyed by storm, Othello becomes that perfect oxymoron, a miles amores or “soldier of love,” whose warlike nature is dangerously out of place on an island devoted to Venus.

The physical geography of Othello is underscored by a deeper, more symbolic moral geography in which the characters Iago and Desdemona fight over the soul of the hero. Torn between these two extremes—the evil of Iago and the goodness of Desdemona—Othello undergoes a “psychomachia” or “soul struggle,” during which his mind slowly degenerates into murderous passion. As Bernard Spivack argues in Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil, Iago descends from the medieval Vice character, whose role in such well-known morality plays as Mankind and The Castle of Perseverance was to beguile the hero into acts of depravity that would eventually endanger his immortal soul. In these early plays, as in Othello itself, evil starts with a tiny seedling of doubt or jealousy, then proliferates into a forest of trees until the moral landscape of the play is choked with sin.
The physical and moral geography of Othello is supported by a vast number of important themes and images that help bring currency and realism to the play’s symbolic landscape. Chief among these are the relatively small cast of characters, the compressed storyline, the lack of a sub-plot, and the vivid contemporary setting: The Turks attacked Cyprus in 1570, approximately thirty-three years before Shakespeare’s play was written and first produced. An additional topical influence was the fact that the newly crowned King James I of England was fascinated with Turkish history, while his wife, Queen Anne, once asked Ben Jonson to write a play about Moors (The Masque of Blackness) in which she played a role in “dusky” makeup.

Enlivened by such other significant topics as contemporary racism, the uses of verbal and psychological poison, the changing roles of women, the lust for revenge, images of foreignness, the tempest on sea and in Othello’s mind, the isolation of an island universe, the reversion to brutish behavior, and the ironic importance of the handkerchief, Shakespeare’s play takes us on a geographic and psychological journey into the wilderness of the human heart. If we truly give ourselves over to the mystical experience of theatre, we can become one with Othello—navigating through the landscape of the play, alternately seduced by good and evil—and thereby change the world we live in as it inexorably changes us.
Total Allegiance to Justice
By Jerry L. Crawford
From Midsummer Magazine, 1995

While it is evident that involvement need not imply direct participation, it remains clear that few people cannot be affected by the spectacle of Othello’s tragic execution of Desdemona. The strength of our involvement arises from the disparity between what we see and what Othello sees, and that disparity is not a product of a single accidental misunderstanding. It is a mistake to dismiss the stature of this play by thinking that the infamous handkerchief was the cause behind Othello’s actions. Iago sees in Othello the potential for the suspicion Othello later comes to have, and does everything he can to foster it—the handkerchief is only one of a great number of circumstantial evidences that ultimately bring Othello to his decision. But the point is that the germ of the tragedy lies in the nature of Othello’s character, in the fact that he is at heart insecure in his marriage; and the tragedy occurs because of that in Iago’s character which could make use of Othello’s flaw. Character is the motivator of the tragedy, not circumstances—the play is the tragedy of and by Othello; it springs from no dirty linen. Part of the impact of the tragedy is due to the stature of the man who falls. He appears from the very first as a man of supreme nobility: his reply to the senators, in its full and easy dignity, makes him appear large in the sense that Gulliver, threatened by the Lilliputians, is large. Othello is incapable of fear, shown from early in the play; his retort to the officers who threaten his life is gentle even in scorn: “Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them” (1.2.58; all references to line numbers are from The Complete Works of Shakespeare, ed. Hardin Craig [Palo Alto, California: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1961]). So it is not only jealousy and certainly not fear that brings Othello to act as he does. Instead, it is Othello’s total allegiance to justice.

For example, Othello dismisses Cassio from his high office with no thought of vengeance, but because it is the just thing to do. And he brings himself to kill his wife in spite of his personal feelings—he does not want to kill her, but his sense of justice demands that he do so. (The temptation to make comparisons with modern headlines is nearly irresistible.[1995]) Similarly, when he finally discovers what he has done, he kills himself—not from shame or remorse, but as an act of justice.

Indeed, Othello bears the seeds of his own destruction—but it is the circumstances surrounding him that bring the tragedy to fruition. His love for Desdemona is not passion, but a love whose quality is reflected in Othello’s tone when he speaks of it to the senators—calmly, with dignity, serenity, simplicity and stature. Desdemona is rich and noble—she has gone out of her social sphere to marry Othello, and he is aware of this. When he speaks of his marriage, there is a hint of uncertainty over what has happened, a feeling that he thinks it is almost too good to be true. But this insecurity, if it exists, is buried, latent, and nonfatal. It would not rise of itself to produce tragedy, but needs one who sees its existence and uses it. Without Iago, Othello’s marriage would not have ended in catastrophe. Despite what some critics would have us believe, destruction was not inherent in the relationship, but was brought about by the operation of an outside force.

It may similarly be said that Macbeth would not have come to tragedy without the witches, and that Brutus would not have ended as he did without Cassius. The important point is that these outside forces would not have had the effects they did were it not for the character of the protagonists involved. They were the sort of men they were, and it was possible to prod them. It is not character alone that makes for tragedy, but character acted upon by circumstance, the inextricable interweaving and interdependence of character and event. Othello provides the character, and Iago the circumstance, and both are indispensable to the tragedy.
Shakespeare’s vision of Iago is full, clear, and complete; Iago is one of his great dramatic character creations. The most fascinating thing about Iago’s character is its apparent lack of motive. (Hence, the old Coleridge label of Iago as a motiveless malignity.) It might seem, on the surface, that Iago has many reasons to do what he does. For example, he was passed up for the lieutenancy, and he is consequently jealous of Cassio’s position; he suspects both Cassio and Othello have cheated him with Emilia; he shows native patriotism and chauvinistic resentment of the foreigners Othello and Cassio. While any of these might well be Iago’s true motive, none of them, in the light of what Iago does and the manner in which he does it, provides sufficient motive for a completely sane individual. In the original work, Cinthio, from which Shakespeare took the framework for his tragedy, Iago covets Desdemona, and this feeling might be sufficient motive for his subsequent acts. Shakespeare, finding it necessary to have Desdemona coveted, will not allow Iago to perform that function in his play, and invents Roderigo, a sort of Sir Andrew Aguecheek gone bad, to do the courting. Iago’s objective—the destruction of Othello—remains pure and unsullied.

Iago, in mentioning the reasons for his actions so frequently and in such great detail, shows that he himself is searching for motive for the actions he seems compelled to perform! Actually, he begins his practice on Othello as part of his long-standing practice on Roderigo: he persuades Roderigo that it would be an easy and pleasurable thing to cuckold Othello and asks him point-blank and repeatedly for money. He gets his money, and he comments after Roderigo has gone, “Thus do I ever make my fool my purse” (1.3.390). At the outset, he has no definite plan in mind; he builds his plan as the action progresses. Othello, on his part, is passive to the manipulations of Iago; he is the only protagonist who does not seem to take an active part in constructing the means of his own destruction.

It is not too difficult to see how Othello might be taken in by Iago, considering both his essential greatness and his lack of suspicion, and considering also his alien sense of insecurity. While Othello cannot and does not see what is going on in Iago’s mind until the very end of the play, everyone else also interprets Iago’s motives and manipulations incorrectly. Roderigo is the first to see the depths of Iago’s depravity, but his vision occurs at the moment of his death; Desdemona turns to Iago to help her win back her husband; Cassio, after he has been tricked twice, still calls him “honest Iago.” Iago fools everyone, so that Othello cannot alone be called blind. Iago’s method is superlative; he appears virtuous by the strength of his avowals to avenge those who have been hurt by vice—he rushes to the aid of the “wronged Othello,” who does not yet know that he has been wronged.

Many presentations of Othello have represented Iago as some sort of devil incarnate; however, to do so is a mistake. Iago is passionless and motiveless. He is referred to as “honest Iago” in the play over fifty times! Iago is a devil insofar as he is devoted to evil in the same way that Othello is devoted to justice. But there is something clean-cut and direct about pure Satanism which Iago lacks. He possesses an abnormal concentration of foulness and depravity that would seem to indicate that his mind is unhealthy rather than that his soul is sold. He is abnormally concentrated on the achievement of his purpose, and yet he remains comprehensibly human, and his concentration therefore appears maniacal. His speech when his practices are finally discovered (“From this time forth I never will speak word” [5.2.305]) has nothing in common with deviltry, but rather brings to mind the picture of a silent, glaring, supremely malevolent madman. In the face of that horrifying image, Othello’s final action of justice, his suicide, offers lasting redemption.
Universal and Persistent Emotions

Shakespeare’s *Othello* has remained a living drama for nearly 400 years because it treats emotions that are universal and persistent in human nature. Every word carries its own weight, and all parts contribute to the irresistible culmination of plot and theme. We are not asked to witness the conflict of kings and conspirators beyond the experience of everyday people; we are not involved in the consequences of disasters on a cosmic scale; what we witness is a struggle between good and evil and demonstrations of love, tenderness, jealousy, and hate in terms that are humanly plausible.

*Othello* has been called a domestic tragedy; the protagonist is neither a king nor a noble hero of high birth; he is an army general whose official duties seem to cease as the domestic story begins. Hamlet kills a king, Lear and Macbeth drag their kingdoms into civil war. By contrast, *Othello*’s fall portends nothing extraordinary for Venice. Cassio will take *Othello*’s place as general, and life will go on pretty much undisturbed.

Yet this story is one of Shakespeare’s “great” tragedies. It is a tale of pitiless intensity in which the characters play out their roles within a narrow scope, moving swiftly and inexorably toward destruction. And this tragedy has Iago at its heart. Iago is the serpent pouring poison in *Othello*’s ear and turning his happiness into tragedy.

Why Iago should want to destroy *Othello* at all is one of the most debated questions of the play. Some people are satisfied by his claim to be acting out of jealousy over Cassio’s promotion. To others Iago seems to be rationalizing an inexplicable all-encompassing rage—perhaps latent homosexuality, perhaps nationalistic hatred—or perhaps Iago is the devil. The emotions in question are not ambition for a throne, not revenge for a crime, but insane jealousy and vicious malice.

The plot movement of the play is straightforward and uncluttered. From the marriage of *Othello* and Desdemona until their deaths, there is a straight line of action, which takes place in three days and fifteen scenes. When the play is studied, one realizes that it is impossible for all the events to take place in so short a time; the action is condensed and compressed into this three day space, this dramatic time, to give the play unity and coherence.

Two early editions of *Othello* are in existence. The play appears in 1622 in quarto form (published individually), and it is included in the First Folio of 1623. Both are good texts without much visible corruption or error.

The source for Shakespeare’s *Othello* probably includes an account current in Elizabethan times of a Moor who married a virtuous Venetian lady and was led astray by a jealous ensign. This story by Giraldi Cinthio appeared in a collection of lurid tales circulating during Shakespeare’s lifetime.

Stage tradition has it that in this play, more than in any other, audiences have been compelled to call out in response to the action—to warn *Othello* about Iago or to boo Iago when he comes on the stage. What this tells us is that the tragedy of *Othello* seems somehow more avoidable than does that of *Hamlet* or *Lear*, and thus somehow sadder and more painful when it ends as it does.
Wrestling with Form

By Ace G. Pilkington

According to the Accounts of the Master of the Revels, the first performance of Othello (by a playwright identified in the magnificently casual spelling of the time as Shaxberd) was on 1 November 1604; it was probably written around 1603. This is the period when Shakespeare stopped writing comedies and histories, and concentrated on tragedies (until, that is, he switched to romances). In Peter Levi’s words, Shakespeare was “constantly wrestling with the forms he used and . . . wore out form after form to the bone” (The Life and Times of William Shakespeare [New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1988], 246 7). Certainly Othello, which is as compounded of contradictions as its title character, is one of those wrestlings with form, making a tragedy hold and do more than was expected.

Even Shakespeare’s sources show these contradictions. The plot comes from Giraldi Cinthio’s Hecatommiti, but, in addition, Shakespeare took material (among many other places) from Philemon Holland’s translation of the Naturalis Historia by Pliny and General History of the Turks by Richard Knolles. The choice of subject was also designed to appeal to the newly-crowned King James, who had written a poem called Lepanto about the 1571 battle where a Turkish fleet was destroyed by a Christian force. So far, this sounds natural and consistent, but Shakespeare’s names for the characters (only Desdemona is christened by Cinthio) are another matter.

Othello’s name has been plausibly traced to the 1601 version of Ben Jonson’s Every Man in His Humour (in which Shakespeare probably acted). The jealous husband in that play is named Thorello. (There are also a Prospero and Stephano, but that is another story.) Othello’s situation, as well as his name, has a comic subtext. He finds himself first with the difficulties of the traditional comic hero—a willing young woman and furious father. Next, he changes roles, but he is still acting a tragedy in a building with a comic foundation. Now, he has become (like Ford in The Merry Wives of Windsor) a husband who mistakenly believes he is a cuckold. As Dennis Kay points out, “There is a clear debt to the commedia dell’arte, which visited London on several occasions, and from which the relationship between a bombastic soldier and his cunning, self-conscious, audience-wooing servant could have been derived” (Shakespeare: His Life, Work, and Era, [New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1992], 295).

Iago’s name, on the other hand, is the Spanish form of James, and not any James but St. James the Moor slayer (as Barbara Everett argues in Young Hamlet: Essays on Shakespeare’s Tragedies, [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1919], 190 1). It was, perhaps, a dangerous compliment to pay to a king, even one who enjoyed showing off his scholarship as much as King James did. However, not only did Shakespeare survive the danger, he also repeated the offense in Cymbeline, where the villain is Iachimo or little Iago.

Nor is Othello merely made from tragic and comic elements. It also employs a number of the conventions of the romances, including the plot pattern that Northrop Frye identified in Anatomy of Criticism as the green world: “The action of the comedy begins in a world represented as a normal world, moves into the green world, goes into a metamorphosis there in which the comic resolution is achieved, and returns to the normal world” ([Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973], 182).

The pattern is clearly present in Shakespeare’s romances and romantic comedies; it is, after all, one form of the debate between court and country, a part of the pastoral mode. But it also turns up in less likely places: not only can one find Hermia and Rosalind journeying here but King Lear as well. Othello is another variation on the pattern, which begins this time in Venice, the ultimate example of a city cut off from the country and the country’s means of subsistence.
Othello himself is a character out of a romance who speaks of “the Anthropophagi, and men whose heads / Do grow beneath their shoulders” (1.3.143–44) as things that he has seen. Othello’s wooing of Desdemona, like the prince of Morocco’s quest for Portia is an expected episode in the life of a romantic hero.

A. D. Nuttall in his excellent discussion of the play as domestic tragedy says, “Othello is the story of a hero who went into a house” (A New Mimesis: Shakespeare and the Representation of Reality, [London: Methuen, 1983], 134). But it is also the story of a hero who went from the super-subtle court of Venice through a tempest to the green world of an island. The pattern is not completed; Othello does not return; instead, he finds his paradise and perdition awaiting him there.

In this world of conflicts, Othello’s blackness is not accidental or simple. It identifies him as what Muriel Braddock calls a “bogeyman,” descended from the medieval stage devil and linked with the Machiavel (the conscienceless politician whom many English readers found in Machiavelli’s The Prince), both of them dangerous beasts—lion and fox—force and fraud, “The Blackamoor thundered with voice and tread, his costume was gorgeous, his feathers tossed high, he brandished a scimitar” (“Bogeymen, Machiavels, and Stoics,” in Aspects of Dramatic Form in the English and Irish Renaissance, [Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1963], 93). His alliance with the Machiavel is an expected danger with a predictable outcome (a subconscious fear exorcised): “Such threatening alliances between Italian and Jew, Turk or Blackamoor, generally end in a masked fight; evil at last eats up itself” (Braddock 98). And here, of course, there is another layer of contradiction. When Shakespeare wrote his play about a noble Moor, England was at war with Spain. The Moors were Spain’s enemies and therefore the allies of England—Christian warred with Christian while Moslems and Christians cooperated.

Othello is linked not only with romance but also with the emblem tradition (adage, epigram, and pictorial comment). Othello as hero and as Desdemona’s husband is part of the traditional juxtaposition of solider and lady, but in his case it is a seeming paradox, the union of black and white, civilized girl and barbarian man.

In many ways Othello is the largest contradiction in this contradictory play, as Shakespeare uses and transmutes the multiple genres he employs. The Moor, who is the expected villain, has become the hero; the barbarian is a general who commands the armies of super-civilized Venice; the man whose sympathies would seem to be with the Turks is their scourge and not their supporter. The energy for the play’s forward motion comes as Othello shifts from one emblem—his contradictory conjunction with Desdemona—to another, the unnatural naturalness of his partnership with Iago. The old league of Moor and Machiavel is once again established. And whatever else Othello is doing in his final scene—reaffirming his place in a romance by telling one last tale or making a final noble gesture expressing his true nature—he has become a human emblem for the turbulent forces (psychological and dramatic) that have destroyed him. He is, at the last, defender of Venice and her Turkish enemy, true lover and love’s murderer, monster and monster killer, a Stoic and despairing suicide. He is, in fact, so filled with contradictions that it is hard to believe he is merely a created character and not a real human being.
Vocabulary/Glossary of Terms

Affined: Bound, obligated.
“\textit{I in any just term am affined / To love the Moor.}”
— Iago (1.1.40)

Agnize: Recognize, acknowledge.
“\textit{I do agnize / A natural and prompt alacrity.}”
— Othello (1.3.231)

Anthropophagi: Cannibals.
“\textit{The Anthropophagi.}”
— Othello (1.3.144)

Antres: A cavern.
“\textit{Wherein of antres vast.}”
— Othello (1.3.140)

Aleppo: An ancient city of Syria.
“\textit{That in Allepo once.}”
— Othello (5.2.352)

Arithmetician: An expert in arithmetic.
“\textit{A great arithmetician.}”
— Iago (1.1.19)

Arrivance: Arrival.
“\textit{Every minute is expectancy / Of more arrivance.}”
— Gentleman (2.1.42)

Aspics: Asps, snakes.
“\textit{For 'tis of aspics' tougues!}”
— Othello (3.3.450)

Assay: Analysis or trial.
“\textit{By no assay of reason.}”
— Senator (1.3.18)

Avaunt: Hence, away
“\textit{Avaunt! Be gone!}”
— Othello (3.3.335)

Barbary: The coastal region of north Africa, known as a pirate stronghold.
“\textit{A Barbary horse.}”
— Iago (1.1.111)

Billeted: Lodging for a soldier.
“\textit{Go where thou art billeted.}”
— Iago (2.3.380)

Bombast: Inflated language or speech.
“\textit{With a bombast circumstance.}”
— Iago (1.1.13)

Callet: A whore or beggar woman.
“\textit{[He] laid such terms upon his callet.}”
— Emilia (4.2.121)

Cashier'd: Dismissed, returned.
“\textit{When he's old, cashier'd.}”
— Iago (1.1.48)
Caitiff: Cowardly, despicable person.
   “Alas poor caitiff.”
   — Cassio (4.1.108)

Crusadoes: Portuguese silver or gold coins.
   “I had rather lost my purse full of crusadoes.”
   — Desdemona (3.4.26)

Daws: A jackdaw, bird.
   “For daws to peck at.”
   — Iago (1.1.66)

Dilatory: Causing to delay or procrastinate.
   “Wit depends on dilatory time.”
   — Iago (2.3.373)

Devesting: To take away, or remove the clothing.
   “Devesting them for bed.”
   — Iago (2.3.181)

Exsufflicate: Empty, frivolous.
   “To such exsufflicate and blown surmises.”
   — Othello (3.3.182)

Grange: A farm and its surroundings.
   “My house is not a grange.”
   — Barbantio (1.1.106)

Halter: A noose or gallows.
   “A halter pardon him!”
   — Emilia (4.2.136)

Horologe: A sundial or an early form of clock.
   “He’ll watch the horologe.”
   — Iago (2.3.130)

Indign: Unworthy or disgraceful.
   “All indign and base adversities.”
   — Othello (1.3.273)

Jesses: A leash like strap used in falconry.
   “Her jesses were my dear heartstrings.”
   — Othello (3.3.261)

Mandragora: The root of the mandrake plant had soporific and narcotic properties.
   “Not poppy, nor mandragora.”
   — Iago (3.3.330)

Mazzard: Head.
   “I’ll knock you o’er the mazzard.”
   — Cassio (2.3.155)

Mutualities: Exchanges, reciprocities.
   “When these mutualities so marshal.”
   — Iago (2.1.260)

Pate: Top of the head.
   “My invention / Comes from my pate.”
   — Iago (2.1.126)
**Pith:** Strength or force.
“Since these arms of mine had seven years’ *pith*.”
— Othello (1.3.83)

**Pliant:** Flexible (here used to mean free time).
“ Took once a *pliant* hour.”
— Othello (1.3.151)

**Potting:** Liquor, drinking.
“They are most potent in *potting*.”
— Iago (2.3.77)

**Procreants:** Procreators, lovers.
“Leave *procreants* alone.”
— Othello (4.2.28)

**Quillets:** Subtlety, nicety, quibble.
“Keep up thy *quillets*.”
— Cassio (3.1.23)

**Sagittary:** The arsenal of Venice, called so because of the figure of Sagittarius over the door.
“Lead to the *Sagittary*.”
— Iago (1.1.158)

**’Sblood:** Exclamation, God’s Blood
“ *’Sblood*, but you will not hear me.”
— Iago (1.1.4)
Evolving English

The English language is in constant change. Just as today we use words such as “cool” and “hot” in ways that were never considered just fifty years ago, so too are the meanings of words from Shakespeare’s time unfamiliar to us. Here are some examples of how we might phrase some of Shakespeare’s words today:

“I never knew / A Florentine more kind and honest.” — Cassio (3.1.28)
“I never met anyone so nice, even if he is a New Yorker.”

“I am about it; but indeed my invention / Comes from my pate as birdlime does from frize.” — Iago (2.1.125–27)
“I’m trying to think, but my ideas come slowly, like bird crap on a statue.”

“You have known him long, and be you well assured / He shall in strangeness stand no farther off / Than in a polite distance.” — Desdemona (3.3.11–13)
“You two are such old friends that I’m sure he will only keep his distance as long as he has to.”

Scion: An offshoot.
“Call love to be a sect or scion.”
— Iago (1.3.332)

Se’nnight’s: Seven nights, one week.
“Anticipates our thoughts A se’nnight’s speed.”
— Cassio (2.1.77)

Sibyl: A prophetess or witch.
“A sibyl . . . sewed the work.”
— Othello (3.4.70)

Toged: Toga wearing.
“The toged consuls can propose.”
— Iago (1.1.25)

Yerk’d: Strike, whip, or kick.
“I had thought to have yerk’d him.”
— Iago (1.2.5)

Zounds: Exclamation, God’s wounds!
“Zounds, sir, you’re robb’d.”
— Iago (1.1.86)
Figurative language:

Shakespeare uses many types of figurative language tools such as metaphor, simile, and personification to paint pictures with his words. Recognizing when his characters are speaking figuratively helps to understand what they are saying. For example, Othello’s soliloquy before he murders Desdemona (5.2.1–22) is overflowing with figurative language:

- It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul,—
- Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars!— (personification)
- It is the cause. Yet I’ll not shed her blood;
- Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow, (imagery)
- And smooth as monumental alabaster. (simile)
- Yet she must die, else she’ll betray more men.
- Put out the light, and then put out the light: (juxtaposition)
- If I quench thee, thou flaming minister, (personification)
- I can again thy former light restore,
- Should I repent me; but once put out thy light,
- Thou cunning’st pattern of excelling nature,
- I know not where is that Promethean heat (allusion)
- That can thy light relume. When I have pluck’d the rose, (imagery/metaphor)
- I cannot give it vital growth again.
- It must needs wither: I’ll smell it on the tree.

[Then he kills her.]

Ah balmy breath, that dost almost persuade (alliteration)
Justice to break her sword! One more, one more. (personification)

[Then he kills her.]

Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee,
And love thee after. One more, and this the last: (repetition)

[Then he kills her.]

So sweet was ne’er so fatal. I must weep,
But they are cruel tears: this sorrow’s heavenly; (contrast)
It strikes where it doth love. She wakes.

Of course, the text of the play provides many other examples of figurative language, such as the following:

**Metaphor**

Dangerous conceits are, in their natures, poisons,
Which at the first are scarce found to distaste,
But, with a little act upon the blood,
Burn like the mines of sulphur.
— Iago (3.3.326–29)

They [men] are all but stomachs, and we all but food:
They eat us hungerly, and when they are full,
They belch us.
— Emilia (3.4.104–06)

**Imagery**

I see sir, you are eaten up with passion.
— Iago (3.3.391)

I think the sun where he was born
Drew all such humours from him.
— Desdemona (3.4.30–31)
Personification:
Yield up, O love, thy crown and hearted throne to tyrannous hate!
—Othello 3.3.448–49

Simile:
Like to the Pontic sea,
Whose icy current and compulsive course
Ne’er feels retiring ebb, but keeps due on
To the Propontic and the Hellespont;
Even so my bloody thoughts, with violent pace,
Shall ne’er look back, ne’er ebb to humble love,
Till that a capable and wide revenge
Swallow them up.--Now, by yond marble heaven,
In the due reverence of a sacred vow
I here in engage my words.
—Othello 3.3.453–62

Othello: She was false as water.
Emilia: Thou are rash as fire,
To say that she was false: O she was heavenly true.
—Othello 5.2.133–35
Shakespeare’s Language: Prose vs. Verse

Many students—and adults, for that matter—find Shakespeare difficult to read and hard to understand. They accuse him of not speaking English and refuse to believe that ordinary people spoke the way his characters do. However, if you understand more about his language, it is easier to understand. One idea that may help is to remember that his plays are written in two forms: prose and verse. In Othello prose is less common than verse.

Prose

Prose is the form of speech used by common, and often comic, people in Shakespearean drama. There is no rhythm or meter in the line. It is everyday language. Shakespeare’s audiences would recognize the speech as their language. Normally, when a character in a play speaks in prose, you know that he is a lower class member of society. These are characters such as criminals, servants, and pages. However, sometimes important characters can speak in prose. For example, the majority of The Merry Wives of Windsor is written in prose because it deals with the middle-class. In Othello Iago makes remarkable use of prose and verse as he manipulates those around him. Whether wishing to be seen as a respectable advisor, humble servant, or a common soldier Iago is a master chameleon of speech. His snakelike sliding in and out of speech patterns mirrors his ability to camouflage his nature to best suit his purpose.

At the close of Act 1 Iago uses prose to convince Rodrigo not to kill himself. Instead he tells Rodrigo to use all his money to win Desdemona from Othello and Cassio. By speaking in prose he sounds frank and open and his plan simple. Later he tells the audience of his true plans. With his seamless transition into elegant verse, ending with subtle rhymes, we can feel and hear his clever and devious nature through his words.

Iago: Thou art sure of me: — go, make money: — I have told thee often, and I re-tell thee again and again, I hate the Moor: my cause is hearted; thine hath no less reason. Let us be conjunctive in our revenge against him: if thou canst cuckold him, thou dost thyself a pleasure, me a sport. There are many events in the womb of time which will be delivered. Traverse! go, provide thy money. We will have more of this to-morrow. Adieu. Go to; farewell. Do you hear, Roderigo?

Roderigo: What say you?
Iago: No more of drowning, do you hear?
Roderigo: I am chang’d.

[Exit.]

Iago: Thus do I ever make my fool my purse:
For I mine own gain’d knowledge should profane,
If I would time expend with such a snipe.
But for my sport and profit. I hate the Moor:
The better shall my purpose work on him.
Cassio’s a proper man: let me see now:
To get his place and to plume up my will
In double knavery — How, how? Let’s see: —
The Moor is of a free and open nature,
That thinks men honest that but seem to be so,
And will as tenderly be led by the nose
As asses are.
I have't. It is engender'd. Hell and night
Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light.
— 1.2.364–404

Later after having sorted out his whole plan to destroy Othello, Desdemona, and Cassio's lives Iago once again revels in his wickedness to the audience in verse:

When devils will the blackest sins put on,
They do suggest at first with heavenly shows,
As I do now: for whiles this honest fool
Plies Desdemona to repair his fortunes
And she for him pleads strongly to the Moor,
I'll pour this pestilence into his 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.
— 2.3.351–62

Here Iago speaks in blank verse. Blank verse contains no rhyme, but each line has an internal rhythm with a regular rhythmic pattern. The pattern most favored by Shakespeare is iambic pentameter. Iambic pentameter is defined as a ten-syllable line with the accent on the every other syllable, beginning with the second one. The rhythm of this pattern of speech is often compared to a beating heart. Examine one of the lines from the above speech and count the syllables it contains. For example:

So will I turn her virtue into pitch.
First replace the words with syllabic count:
1-2  3-4  5-6  7-8  9-10
Next, replace the word with a 'da' sound to hear the heart beat:
Finally, put the emphasis on the words themselves:
so-WILL  i-TURN her-VIR tue-IN  to-PITCH
Famous Lines

How poor are they that have not patience.
— Iago 2.3.370

But he that filches from me my good name
Robs me of that which not enriches him
And makes me poor indeed
— Iago 3.3.159–61

Reputation, reputation, reputation! Oh, I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial.
— Cassio 2.4.262–64

Reputation is an idle and most false imposition, oft got without merit and lost without deserving.
— Iago 2.4.268–70

O thou invisible spirit of wine, if thou hast no name to be known by, let us call thee devil!
— Cassio 2.4.281–83

But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve
For daws to peck at: I am not what I am.
— Iago 1.1.64–65

O, beware, my lord, of jealousy;
It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock
The meat it feeds on.
— Iago 3.3165–67

I’ll see before I doubt; when I doubt, prove;
And on the proof, there is no more but this,—
Away at once with love or jealousy!
— Othello 3.3190–92

He that is robb’d, not wanting what is stol’n,
Let him not know’t, and he is not robb’d at all.
— Othello 3.3.342–43

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 5.2.342–44
Elementary Discussion Questions:

Compare and Contrast
1. Think of characters from other stories who use disguises, like Iago, to cover up their true nature. Who is the worst?
2. What do Othello and Iago have in common?
3. Think about the three women in the play, Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca. How are they the same? How are they different?

Relational
4. Iago is jealous of Cassio’s promotion and decides to get revenge. Have you ever become jealous of something someone else had? What did you do about it?
5. Iago asks Emilia to try and get Desdemona’s handkerchief. She suspects he might have bad intentions. What would you do if someone asked you to do something mean to someone you cared about?
6. Which character in the play do you think is most similar to your personality? Why?

Textual
7. After getting in trouble for fighting Cassio says, “Reputation, reputation, reputation! I have lost my reputation” (2.3.262). What is a reputation? Is it important?
8. What does “The robb’d that smiles steals something from the thief” (1.3.108) mean?
9. About falling in love Iago says, “Virtue! a fig! ’tis in ourselves that we are thus or thus. Our bodies are our gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners” (1.3.319–21). Do you agree or disagree?

Shakespeare’s World
10. Do you think Shakespeare was for or against a person marrying someone who is different from him or herself in race or upbringing?
11. Discuss what it would be like to see this play at Shakespeare’s theatre the Globe, in the hot afternoon, standing up, with all men on stage.
12. How do you think Shakespeare would react if he knew that you were learning about his play more than 400 years after he wrote it?
High School Discussion Questions

Compare and Contrast
1. Compare and contrast the relationship between Othello and Desdemona with that of Cassio and Bianca. How are they healthy and unhealthy?
2. Compare Iago with other Shakespearean villains. How does he rate on the wicked scale?
3. Examine the similarities and differences in class, freedoms, and wisdom of the three women, Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca, in the play.

Relational
4. What struggles do those who marry interracially or inter-culturally face today?
5. Why, even after being strangled, will Desdemona not name Othello as her murderer and instead say, “Nobody; I myself. Farewell: Commend me to my kind lord.” What does this have to do with abusive relationships?
6. Othello is referred to as “the Moor” nearly sixty times in the play, but is called by his name only about twenty times. What might the effects of this labeling be on a person?

Textual
7. Iago tells Cassio, “Reputation is an idle and most false imposition: oft got without merit, and lost without deserving. You have lost no reputation at all, unless you repute yourself such a loser” (2.3.268–71). Do you agree or disagree?
8. Speaking about the involuntary nature of love, Iago says, “Virtue! a fig! ’tis in ourselves that we are thus or thus. Our bodies are our gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners” (1.3.319–21). Look at the love stories within the play. Do you find this statement to be true?
9. After being caught in his lies, Iago refuses to explain his actions, saying, “Demand me nothing: what you know, you know” (5.2.303). Review what he says earlier about his motivations. Do they substantiate his actions?

Shakespeare’s World
10. Look at the textual references to Othello’s race to better determine the impact of racial relations within the tragedy. What is Shakespeare saying about race?
11. Re-read the conversation between Emilia and Desdemona at the end of Act 4, Scene 3. Who do you think Shakespeare agreed with? What might he have been trying to tell the audience?
12. Considering both the good and bad, especially the pathetic end most of the characters meet, in the play do you think Shakespeare was or wasn’t ahead of his time in consideration of racial and gender ideals?
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. Trying 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.
Lesson Plan

Title:
Miscommunication/Possibilities

Age Level:
Middle or High School

Objective:
Students will become familiar with the characters of Othello and its themes by creating their own version of the play using the same characters. Students will also see similarities and differences in how themes and character types from Shakespeare’s era are used in modern media.

Materials:
A clip from popular television show, television/projector, Othello character descriptions, writing materials optional

Anticipatory Set/Hook:
Show a short clip from a popular television show that illustrates the problems of one of the themes dealt with in Othello, such as jealousy, infidelity, disobedience, miscommunication, misinterpretation etc.

Process:
1. Have students discuss what they saw. What conflict presented by the clip? If possible have someone explain how it resolves.
2. Give students a list of characters with personality descriptions from Othello. Have students share any connections they see between these characters and those they saw in the television show. This can lead into an explanation about how Othello contains some of Shakespeare’s most well rounded characters.
3. Without giving students any information on the actual events in the play, in groups have them create (write it down for optional written assessment) a story containing all of the characters on the list involving jealousy and miscommunication.
4. Have students give a three to five minute performance of the action of their plays.
5. You may wish to hold on to these story ideas for discussion after students have read the play.

Tools for Assessment:
Assessment occurs throughout this lesson as students:
• Actively watch and discuss the popular media clip.
• Actively participate in the discussion of characters from the clip and Othello.
• Work in a group to create an original story involving characters from Othello.
• Behave appropriately as an audience member during other performances.
• Actively participate in their group’s performance of their story. Performances may be assessed with the following criteria: Did they incorporate all the characters? Did they incorporate the required theme? Did they stay focused during the performance? How creative/original was their story?