

# OTHELLO | FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Shakespeare's language can seem scary, but give it a try! *Go at your own pace, and have fun!*



SHAKESPEARE IN PRISON

DETROIT PUBLIC THEATRE'S  
SIGNATURE COMMUNITY PROGRAM

A long time ago, in a Venice far, far away... Iago is a military officer serving under Othello, who is a Moor (from North Africa). Roderigo (Iago's protégée) is the son of a rich nobleman. They both hate Othello—Roderigo because he likes Desdemona (who has just married Othello) and Iago mainly because he's been passed over for a promotion that he *definitely* deserved. As the play opens, Roderigo is questioning whether Iago really hates Othello, since he acts so loyal in public. Iago's reply is...

## The Shakespeare

### IAGO

I follow him to serve my turn upon him.  
We cannot all be masters, nor all masters  
Cannot truly be followed. You shall mark  
Many a duteous and knee-crooking knave  
That, doting on his own obsequious bondage,  
Wears out his time much like his master's ass  
For nought but provender, and, when he's old, cashiered.  
Whip me such honest knaves! Others there are  
Who, trimmed in forms and visages of duty,  
Keep yet their hearts attending on themselves  
And, throwing but shows of service on their lords,  
Do well thrive by them, and, when they have lined their coats,  
Do themselves homage: these fellows have some soul  
And such a one do I profess myself.  
For, sir, It is as sure as you are Roderigo  
Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago.  
In following him I follow but myself:  
Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty  
But seeming so, for my peculiar end,  
For when my outward action doth demonstrate  
The native act and figure of my heart  
In complement extern, 'tis not long after  
But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve  
For daws to peck at: I am not what I am.

## The Translation

### IAGO

I'm serving under him to take advantage of him. We can't all be masters, and not all masters should be followed. Look at all the devoted servants who work for their masters their whole lives for nothing but their food, and then when they get old they're terminated. They ought to be whipped for being so stupid. But then there's another kind of servant who looks dutiful and devoted, but who's really looking out for himself. By pretending to serve their lords, these men get rich, and when they've saved up enough they can be their own masters. Guys like that have soul, and that's the kind of guy I am. Let me tell you, as sure as your name's Roderigo, if I were the Moor I wouldn't want to be Iago. I may seem to love and obey him, but in fact, I'm just serving him to get what I want. If my outward appearance started reflecting what I really felt, soon enough I'd be wearing my heart on my sleeve for birds to peck at. No, it's better to hide it. I'm not who I appear to be.

Write the speech in your own words. Don't worry about using Iago's exact images or examples, but make the gist of it the same.

Iago needs money, and Roderigo is rich. Iago's objective is simple: to get Roderigo "on his side" so he can manipulate him and use his money in a revenge plot against Othello.

Keeping that in mind, read the monologue aloud *slowly*. As you go, circle or underline the words that seem to be the most important. Emphasize those and see how it feels.

Now read it *slowly* aloud again. This time, see what happens if you switch it up and emphasize *other* words that seem important.

Do this as many times as you like! There's no one way to do it. Changing the way you use the language often changes the way you understand and empathize with your character.

Spoiler alert: this does not end well for Roderigo. Or anyone else in the play. Well, maybe that's debatable...

Spoiler alert-within-a-spoiler alert: It's definitely debatable. But this is neither the activity nor the pack. As you were.





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You can respond to these in any way you choose:

Write

**ACT IT OUT**

Talk about it

Draw

**THINK ABOUT IT**  
... up to you!

## Iago is saying, essentially...



Trust me, man—I'm  
totally untrustworthy!

And Roderigo buys it  
—hook, line, and  
sinker.

If you were Roderigo, what part of Iago's speech would be *most* convincing? Do you find any part of his speech convincing?

What about if you were Iago? How would you convince Roderigo?



Nothing Iago says is a lie, as far as the audience can tell. Iago is being two-faced to Othello. It's just that he's *also* being two-faced to Roderigo. How does a person tell a lie while also telling the truth?

Iago says that there are two kinds of people:

1. Those who are loyal and honest and do their work—and get used and thrown away.
2. Those who pretend to be loyal and honest, but actually just look after themselves.

Do you think Iago actually believes that? Or is he just saying it to manipulate Roderigo?

Whether or not you think he believes it, is Iago basically right? Do you have to choose between being loyal to others (and vulnerable) and being loyal to yourself (and protected)?

Iago describes this choice as binary—there are only two options. But are there other ways of being?

Iago worries that if he let his “outward action” reflect the “native act and figure of my heart,” he would be vulnerable—as if his heart was outside of his body, where birds could attack and eat it.

- Are you always vulnerable when your actions reflect what's in your heart?
- Are there other ways to protect yourself?
- What are the benefits of being vulnerable? What are the benefits of being protected?

This monologue is chock-full of very specific images. How would you represent those visually—as drawings, paintings, sculptures, collages... or something else entirely?

