

OTHELLO | FOOD FOR THOUGHT

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



Othello is a successful general in Venice's army, but he's an outsider in Italy because he's a Moor—a Muslim from what is now Spain and Portugal. In the middle of his career, he falls in love with Desdemona, the daughter of a powerful Venetian family. They get married, and everything seems to be going great. Bet you've guessed that it doesn't stay that way...

Iago has served with Othello in the military for a long time, and they've built a bond of trust by going to war together. Now Othello is famous and successful, but Iago hasn't been promoted, despite being Othello's advisor the whole time. (In the play, he says he's Othello's "ancient," which isn't even a real job.) Instead, Othello promotes this guy named Michael Cassio, who is a friendly dude with a drinking problem who's known Iago, Othello, and Desdemona for a long time. Iago hatches a plan to get Cassio fired by getting him drunk and setting up a fight with an important local politician. The plot works; Othello fires Cassio (you may remember the speech: "Reputation! Reputation! Reputation!"). Mission accomplished.

But then Iago keeps going. He tells the audience that he "hates the Moor," not only for promoting Cassio, but because there are some rumors about Othello and Iago's wife, Emilia. If you think that hearing some random rumors isn't a good reason to start plotting against someone, you'd be right; even Iago admits that he has no evidence. But he wants revenge anyway. He decides to torment Othello by suggesting that Desdemona has been unfaithful to him with Cassio. In this scene, he plants the first seeds of that suggestion...

The Shakespeare

Exit DESDEMONA.

OTHELLO

Excellent wretch!* perdition* catch my soul,
But I do love thee! and when I love thee not,
Chaos is come again.

AGO

My noble lord—

OTHELLO

What dost thou say, Iago?

AGO

Did Michael Cassio, when you wooed my lady,
Know of your love?

OTHELLO

He did, from first to last*.

Why dost thou ask?

AGO

But for a satisfaction of my thought:
No further harm.*

OTHELLO

Why of thy thought, Iago?

AGO

I did not think he had been acquainted with her.

OTHELLO

O yes; and went between us very oft.*

AGO

Indeed?

OTHELLO

Indeed? Ay, indeed. Discern'st thou aught in that?
Is he not honest?

AGO

Honest, my lord?

OTHELLO

Honest? Ay, honest.

AGO

My lord, for aught I know.*

OTHELLO

What dost thou think?

AGO

Think, my lord?

OTHELLO

"Think, my lord?" By heaven, thou echo'st me,
As if there were some monster in thy thought
Too hideous to be shown. Thou dost mean something.
I heard thee say even now, thou liked'st not that
When Cassio left my wife. What did'st not like?
And when I told thee he was of my counsel
In my whole course of wooing, thou cried'st "Indeed?"
And did'st contract and purse thy brow together,
As if thou then had'st shut up in thy brain
Some horrible conceit! If thou dost love me,
Show me thy thought.

AGO

My lord, you know I love you.

OTHELLO

I think thou dost.
And, for I know thou'rt full of love and honesty,
And weigh'st thy words before thou givest them breath.
Therefore these stops* of thine fright me the more:
For such things in a false disloyal knave
Are tricks of custom, but in a man that's just
They're close dilations,* working from the heart,
That passion cannot rule."

AGO

For Michael Cassio,
I dare be sworn, I think, that he is honest.

OTHELLO

I think so too.

AGO

Men should be what they seem.
Or those that be not, would they might seem none.*

OTHELLO

Certain,* men should be what they seem.

AGO

Why, then, I think Cassio's an honest man.

OTHELLO

Nay, yet there's more in this:
I prithee, speak to me, as to thy thinkings.
As thou dost ruminate,* and give thy worst of thoughts
The worst of words.

AGO

Good my lord, pardon me:
Though I am bound to every act of duty,*
I am not bound to that all slaves are free to*—
Utter my thoughts? Why, say they are vile and false?
As where's that palace whereinto foul things
Sometimes intrude not? Who has a breast so pure,*
But some uncleanly apprehensions.
Keep leets and law-days and in session sit
With meditations lawful?*

OTHELLO

Thou dost conspire against thy friend,* Iago.
If thou but think'st him wrong'd and mak'st his ear
A stranger to thy thoughts.*

AGO

I do beseech you,
Though I perchance am vicious in my guess*
—As I confess it is my nature's plague
To spy into abuses,* and oft my jealousy
Shapes faults that are not*—that your wisdom
From one that so imperfectly conceits
Would take no notice, nor build yourself a trouble
Out of his scattering and unsure observance.*
It were not for your quiet nor your good,
Nor for my manhood, honesty, or wisdom,
To let you know my thoughts.*

OTHELLO

Zounds! What dost thou mean?

AGO

Good name in man and woman, dear my lord,
Is the immediate jewel* of their souls:
Who* steals my purse* steals trash—'tis something, nothing:
Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands—
But he that filches* from me my good name
Robs me of that which not enriches him
And makes me poor indeed.*

OTHELLO

By heaven, I'll know thy thoughts!

AGO

You cannot, if my heart were in your hand,
Nor shall not whilst 'tis in my custody.

OTHELLO

Ha!

AGO

O, beware, my lord, of jealousy!
It is the green-eyed monster, which doth mock
The meat it feeds on.* That cuckold lives in bliss
Who, certain of his fate, loves not his wronger.*
But, O, what damnd' minutes tell he o'er
Who dotes yet doubts, suspects yet strongly loves!

OTHELLO

O misery!

AGO

Poor and content is rich, and rich enough,
But riches fineless is as poor as winter
To him that ever fears he shall be poor.*
Good God, the souls of all my tribe defend
From jealousy!

OTHELLO

Why—why is this?

Think'st thou I'd make a life of jealousy,
To follow still the changes of the moon*
With fresh suspicions? No; to be once in doubt
Is once to be resolved*. Exchange me for a goat
When I shall turn the business of my soul
To such exsufficate and blown surmises,
Matching thy inference.* 'Tis not to make me jealous
To say my wife is fair, feeds well, loves company,
Is free of speech, sings, plays and dances well;
Where virtue is, these are more virtuous.
Nor from mine own weak merits will I draw
The smallest fear or doubt of her revolt.*

For she had eyes and chose me, No, Iago.
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

I am glad of this, for now I shall have reason
To show the love and duty that I bear you
With franker spirit: therefore, as I am bound,
Receive it from me. I speak not yet of proof:
Look to your wife, observe her well with Cassio.
Wear your eyes thus, not jealous nor secure:
I would not have your free and noble nature
Out of self-bounty be abused: look to it.
I know our country disposition well—
In Venice they do let God see the pranks
They dare not show their husbands: their best conscience
Is not to leave't undone, but keep't unknown.

WORDS, WORDS, WORDS

- **wretch** - in this case, just an affectionate term for his wife, like "babe"
- **Perdition** - spiritual ruin; loss of one's soul
- **from first to last** - from beginning to end
- **But for a satisfaction...no further harm** - just because I was wondering about something, no other reason
- **went between us very oft** - carried messages between us very often
- **discern'st thou aught in that?** - does that mean something to you?
- **for aught I know** - as far as I know
- **conceit** - thought
- **these stops** - this reluctance
- **close dilations** - accidentally revealing secret thoughts and feelings
- **rule** - control
- **Or those that be not, would that they might seem none** - I wish that people who aren't what they seem weren't so fake
- **Certain** - certainly
- **ruminate** - turning over something in your mind
- **I am bound to every act of duty** - I am required to do everything that my duty asks of me
- **I am not bound to that all slaves are free to** - I'm not required to do the thing that even slaves are free do to.
- **where's that palace whereinto...intrude not** - show me a place where bad things don't go
- **a breast so pure** - a heart so pure
- **some uncleanly apprehensions...with mediations lawful?** - a legal metaphor! Here goes: bad thoughts ("uncleanly apprehensions") show up in court ("keep leets and law-days") and have a debate ("in session sit") with good ones ("mediations lawful")
- **thy friend** - Othello
- **makest his ear a stranger to thy thoughts** - don't say what's actually on your mind
- **Though I perchance am vicious in my guess** - although I may be wrong about this
- **it is my nature's plague / To spy into abuses** - one of my faults is that I'm nosy and I overthink things
- **shapes faults that are not** - sees problems where there aren't actually any there
- **that your wisdom...unsure observance** - woah! This is a tough one, even for Othello (look at his reply!). Iago is talking about himself in the third person ("one" and "his" refer to Iago himself). Essentially, Iago is telling Othello not to listen to him because he's often wrong ("imperfectly conceives"). He wouldn't want Othello to pay attention to the "scattering and unsure" observations of a person like him. Or so he says...
- **It were not for your quiet...know my thoughts** - It isn't good for me to tell you what I'm thinking. Not for you or your mental health ("quiet"), or for me or my "manhood, honesty, or wisdom"
- **immediate jewel** - the most precious thing
- **who** - a person who
- **purse** - money; not necessarily an actual purse
- **filches** - steals
- **that which not enriches...poor indeed** - something that makes him no richer but makes me very poor
- **the green-eyed monster...meat it feeds on** - a famous description of jealousy. Green has been associated with envy and jealousy for a long time. "Mock" means "torment" here. So the monster of jealousy torments the "meat" of the heart it is eating
- **loves not his wronger** - is already sure that his wife is cheating on him, and so has stopped loving her (as opposed to someone who "doubts, suspects, yet strongly loves")
- **Poor and content...he shall be poor** - if someone is poor and happy that way, that's as good as being rich, but even unlimited ("fineless") money isn't enough to make someone happy if they're always afraid of being poor
- **follow still the changes of the moon** - going back and forth between things forever, like the phases of the moon
- **to be once in doubt / is once to be resolved** - once I've made up my mind, that's it
- **exchange me for a goat...matching thy inference** - call me a goat (goats were thought to be stupid and driven by lust) if I pay attention to the inflated and blown-up thoughts that you're hinting at
- **nor from my own weak merits...her revolt** - I have my faults, but those don't make me worry that she's betraying me

SHAKESPEARE IN PRISON

DETROIT PUBLIC THEATRE'S
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READ IT
ALOUD!

READ IT
ALOUD!

NO,
SERIOUSLY... IT'S
MORE FOR YOU READ IT ALOUD



SHAKESPEARE IN PRISON

DETROIT PUBLIC THEATRE'S
SIGNATURE COMMUNITY PROGRAM

OTHELLO | FOOD FOR THOUGHT

You can respond to these in any way you choose:

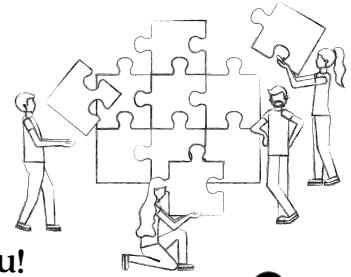
write

ACT IT OUT

Talk about it

THINK ABOUT IT

... up to you!



It's a puzzle for Iago - Iago knows Othello well, but he needs to figure out which manipulations will work best.
In this scene, Iago teaches himself how to manipulate Othello—he discovers what works and what doesn't.

What does Iago learn in this scene?
What works? What doesn't work?

Do you see Iago putting the pieces together?
How do you know?

What are Othello's weaknesses?

THINK This scene (and the play) is all about what people **think** and what they **know**.

- What's the difference between **thinking** something and **knowing** it?
- What do you need before you actually **know** something?



GIVE ME THE OCULAR PROOF!

BE SEEM This scene is also about how people **seem** and how they **are**.

- Do you often **seem** different than how you **are**? How? Why?
- Can you ever truly know how someone **really is**? Or are you actually just seeing more layers of how they **seem**?



Go through the scene and mark the places where you see these four words:

THINK KNOW SEEM BE

or any variation of them ("be" shows up as "is" and "are," usually). Now read through the scene again. Assume that you're always putting emphasis on those words. Do you notice anything new about the scene or the characters?



OTHELLO IS A PUZZLE!

It's a puzzle for the audience, for the actors, and for the characters.



It's a puzzle for the audience - We see everything that happens, but we need to piece together Iago's motivations.

It's a puzzle for actors - Shakespeare's language is always full of hints and clues, but nowhere more than in *Othello*. The entire plot turns on clever suggestions and double-meanings.

Actors need to pay attention to every word—and every place where they *don't* speak, too.

Othello is a play that SIP ensemble members have often said is "just real life." So... think of it as if it were happening in reality. (This is a good place to start if you want to think about staging it, too.)

Sometimes people sit or stand still while having a conversation, and, of course, sometimes they don't.

What do you think these two are doing during this conversation? Are they still for the whole thing? Are they in constant motion? If they only move at certain times, how, when, and where do they move? Oh, and this is theatre, so also: why?

TIP – Watch that verse!

You've seen in many of these packs how Shakespeare puts a lot of information into lines of verse, choosing when to follow the rules of poetry and when to break them. That's even more true in *Othello*.

Let's recap: A "standard" line of Shakespeare is in "blank verse," specifically, unrhymed iambic pentameter. It's got ten "beats," and they alternate between stressed and unstressed:

da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM

Here's the twist: You won't actually find a lot of lines like that in Shakespeare. He liked to mess with the rhythm, shortening lines, making them longer, remixing the rhythm, dropping in a bunch of stressed (DUM) syllables, and generally breaking every "rule." Just look at Othello's first line in this scene:

Excellent wretch, perdition catch my soul

That's ten beats, but the rhythm is totally funky... And what about all of those short lines in the first third of the scene? Each of those lines should have ten beats, too, but many of them don't. In one line, Iago says, "Indeed?" — that's it! "Indeed" and eight beats of silence!

Count the beats in each line and mark the places where the rhythm breaks down or there's a long pause.

Then speak the lines aloud (this scene really needs to be spoken), and notice what happens to the dialogue when the verse gets broken up like that. And notice where the verse is more regular. What's happening there?



Iago and Othello know each other through serving in the military together. How do you think that affects their relationship—especially in terms of how much Othello trusts Iago...and how well Iago knows Othello, to be able to manipulate him so effectively? Are friendships made by experiencing danger together stronger than friendships made in more peaceful circumstances?