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Reading and Interpreting William Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Othello, The Moor of Venice* in the 21st Century

PART ONE: AN INTRODUCTORY SELF-STUDY GUIDE FOR A CLOSE READING OF ACT I, THEORY AND PRACTICE

Othello is the story of a General in the Venetian army who is targeted by Iago, a trusted soldier who enacts his revenge on him over the course of the play with tragic results. The reasons behind Iago's actions and jealousy are subject to lots of debate; is it because he believes Othello is having an affair with his wife? Is it because Othello is a Moor and racially different? (Education Resources RSC 2020).

There are lots of themes you can choose to explore in *Othello*, including:

Jealousy
Revenge
Race and racism
War
Marriage

Before embarking in a close reading of key scenes, it is essential that you read first the theoretical chapter in your photocopied dossier "Reading Drama" in order to be aware of the basic conventions of drama and theatrical performance.

Character and Language

Since drama presents us directly with scenes that are based on people's actions and interactions, characters play a dominant role in this genre and therefore deserve close attention. The characters in plays can generally be divided into **major characters** and **minor characters**, depending on how important they are for the plot. A good indicator as to whether a character is major or minor is the amount of time and speech as well as presence on stage he or she is allocated.

The **opening scene**, as always with Shakespeare carefully excogitated and never simple narrative exposition, is worth close attention. The scene begins with **two characters** in the midst of conversation, Roderigo and Iago.

- Who are they?
- Where are they?
- Who seems to have the leading voice and what is he telling to the other?



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You might want to look first at how both characters are described in the list of **dramatis personae**.

Shakespeare's theatre might constitute the major modern instance of the powers of "**rhetorical scenery**" (States 54). Reference to places, location, and past and present events are all referred to and constructed with words. Words reveal character and they also create action. That is why we can have a lot of information as readers and spectators paying attention to **language**.

As Frank Kermode notes in *Shakespeare's Language* (2000), the first word of the play is Roderigo's "Tush", and Iago's reply begins with an oath "'Sblood", His first word to Brabantio is "Zounds", repeated at line 107. These are all **expletives** indicating the harshness of a **military context** (they all appear in the **Quarto editions** of the text: none of these expletives are to be found in the **Folio Text**, probably because the latter, dependent on a manuscript written by the scribe Ralph Crane, was produced after 1606, when the Act to Restrain the Abuses of the Players forbade the use on stage of oaths or the name of God).

- Do a search on the internet or use your critical edition of the play and find out about the Quarto and Folio editions of Shakespeare's plays. What do these names refer to? When was the Folio published?
- PAY ATTENTION TO IAGO'S OPENING TIRADE. He is referring to someone that is unnamed. To whom? And why is Iago jealous of him?
- It is very significant that Shakespeare holds back from introducing Othello directly. How is he referred to by Iago in the first scene? Does Iago use his name? Please find in the text of the first scene the words used by Iago to refer to Othello. What do these words reveal?

Iago and Roderigo then wake up Brabantio and tell him that his daughter has married Othello in secret. Brabantio is furious, and they insult him and make him even angrier. Iago manages to stay hidden but Brabantio recognises Roderigo.

- Please note Iago's language to refer to Othello and Desdemona lovemaking, how he refers to it as a monstrous bestiality. Please find textual evidence for this between lines 83-88 and 105-110. What does this language reveal about Iago and about the perception of Othello?

Now you can further explore this scene and watch a short clip of the 2015 production of the **Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC)**, directed by Iqbal Khan, which opened on 4th June at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon, following this link:



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<https://www.rsc.org.uk/shakespeare-learning-zone/othello/language/the-opening-scene>

Please note that before rehearsals had begun, Iqbal made the choice to cast non-white actors in the roles of both Iago and Emilia. This decision stimulated discussion around cultural identity. In rehearsals, the company were joined by Abdul-Rehman Malik, a London-based journalist, educator and organiser, who talked with them about the possibilities of representing Emilia as a practising Muslim: for example, whether or not she should wear a head scarf. **As Iago is often portrayed as a racist character whose hatred of Othello is motivated by racial difference, this casting choice immediately changes his motivation: the central belief that motivates his actions.**

Here's a summary of **Scene Two** from the RSC's website:

Iago tells Othello that Brabantio knows about his marriage and 'spoke such scurvy and provoking terms against your honour' but Othello dismisses this and says 'let him do his spite'. Cassio then arrives with a message from the Duke asking Othello to come to the Senate to talk about the war in Cyprus. Just as they are about to leave, Brabantio and Roderigo arrive with soldiers to arrest Othello for bewitching Desdemona. When he hears that the Duke has called for Othello, Brabantio allows him to go saying 'the Duke himself, / Or any of my brothers of the state, / Cannot but feel this wrong as 'twere their own'.

In this scene we learn that:

1. Othello believes Iago's version of events when he tells him about Brabantio.
2. There is a war going on with the Turks and the Senate are meeting very late at night to discuss news.
3. Brabantio thinks the Duke and the rest of the Senate will side with him against Othello.

More important than Scene Two is **Scene Three** of ACT ONE. The opening section of the scene demonstrates the urgency of the political situation as a series of messages offers conflicting and disturbing news. Montano confirms the imminence of the Turkish invasion of Cyprus. In this scene, both public and private affairs are discussed before the Senate.

- Please pay attention to Othello's speech and the story of how he and Desdemona fell in love. **How did he win her heart?**
- Desdemona is called for and she tells the Senate that she married Othello for love and her duty is now to him rather than her father. **As a character she seems**



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- unconventionally independent and courageous. How would you define her attitude?** (Note that, as the affairs of the State are more urgent than the private ones and it is decided that Othello should immediately depart to defend Cyprus, Desdemona challenges the conventional assumption that war separates husband and wife by asking directly, “Let me go with him” (line 257)).
- **Act 1 is important because it sets up the characters – letting us know Othello is an outsider, that Desdemona betrayed her Father and lied to marry Othello. What do you think is the most important detail Shakespeare gives you about each character in this Act of the play?**

Story and Plot

As with the study of narrative texts, one can distinguish between **story** and **plot** in drama. Story addresses an assumed chronological sequence of events, **while plot refers to the way events are causally and logically connected**. Furthermore, plots can have various plot-lines, i.e., different elaborations of parts of the story which are combined to form the entire plot. **Scene 1.3** ends —once Senators, the Duke, Brabantio, Othello and Desdemona leave the stage— in the same way the play started: with Iago and Roderigo alone.

You must re-read the scene carefully and pay attention to several details that will be very important for plot development and how the action will unfold in the following acts:

- When **Desdemona** asks to go with Othello to Cyprus, Brabantio warns Othello ‘she has deceived her Father, and may thee’.
- Othello asks Iago to bring his wife **Emilia** to Cyprus to ‘attend on’ Desdemona (and Emilia will play a major role in the following acts).
- **Iago** is already using Roderigo (who is in love with Desdemona, although his love is unrequited) to help him in his plans and he has already hatched a plot to make Othello believe that his first officer, Michael Cassio, is having an affair with Desdemona. At the very end of the scene, Roderigo leaves and he is alone on the stage.
- Watch Iago’s **soliloquy** here (in the 2015 RSC production): <https://www.rsc.org.uk/shakespeare-learning-zone/othello/story/scene-by-scene>

Dramatic Irony

Iago’s soliloquy is the first instance of a very important dramatic device in the whole play of Othello: **dramatic irony**. Dramatic irony unfolds when the playwright creates a



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situation in which the audience is able to perceive aspects of the plot that are hidden to other characters, who are then unable to act with full knowledge or understanding.

As a dramatic device, irony **is based on the discrepancy between what characters know and what spectators know**. Thus, much dramatic irony “depends on the fact that characters who may think themselves to have free choice, are, in fact, subject to the control of the playwright, and the spectators are always in a more powerful situation than those characters” (Pickering 26).

Spectators are the only people who can hear **ironies in the text**. They may be aware that something said echoes something said by another character earlier in the play. Dramatic irony is a very powerful device to engage with the audience and it can even cause spectators to cry out to characters on the stage: “Don’t do it!” or “Don’t you see what is happening?” Indeed, “the painful and harrowing experience of watching Shakespeare’s *Othello* is based on this kind of dramatic irony, which builds almost unbearable tension in actors and audience alike” (Pickering 26). In the case of *Othello* it is often referred to also as **tragic irony**, because the audience will witness how the tragic hero, Othello, completely deluded about his situation, will swiftly move toward his tragic end. The audience is aware of Iago’s manipulation of the other characters from the outset of the play.

PART TWO: PERSONAL AND CRITICAL RESPONSES TO THE PLAY

Read attentively the article “Racism, misogyny and ‘motiveless malignity’ in *Othello*” (2016) by Kiernan Ryan and write a short paragraph of about 300 words in response to his interpretation of the play. There are no right or wrong answers here: consider your own reactions to the play, as reader and spectator, and think whether you agree or disagree with Prof. Kiernan’s arguments.

You may think about the following issues:

- Othello and Desdemona’s courage in getting secretly married transgressing accepted social conventions.
- The fact that, as Prof. Ryan argues, Othello’s “alien racial identity makes him and his bride far more vulnerable to the machinations of Iago than if he were an equally accomplished and indispensable white man.” In other words, that within the context of a racist society, he should more easily fall prey to the perils of the “green-eyed monster” of jealousy.
- Prof. Ryan argues that Iago’s malignity, however evil his actions may be, “is not a monstrous deviation from the Venetian norm but its mirror image”. Do you find his argument about the deep-seated racism and misogynistic Venetian society convincing?



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Response to the Violence against Women in the Play

Perhaps one of the most fascinating and disturbing things about Shakespeare's Othello is its topicality in the 21st century, when racism and domestic violence against women are still pervasive. Did you connect with the play? (Why? Why Not?) Did you find it a meaningful text to explore blind beliefs, social pressure, misunderstandings in communication, racism?

Think about the women in the play and their tragic fate: Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca. Emilia, for instance, is a very intriguing character because she seems to be, to a certain extent, complicit in Desdemona's death (a death that perhaps she could have prevented): but she is also terrorised by her husband, who kills her at the end of the play. She has a very powerful speech at the end of Act 4. Hers are words of frustration that the surrounding men are not willing to listen to and understand.

- Did the tragic fate of female characters in this play make you more sensitive to gender issues? Is there any scene that was particularly shocking or revealing in this regard?

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