THE INDEPENDENT

SHAKESPEARE'S GLOBE

Understanding Othello

The New Essential Guide

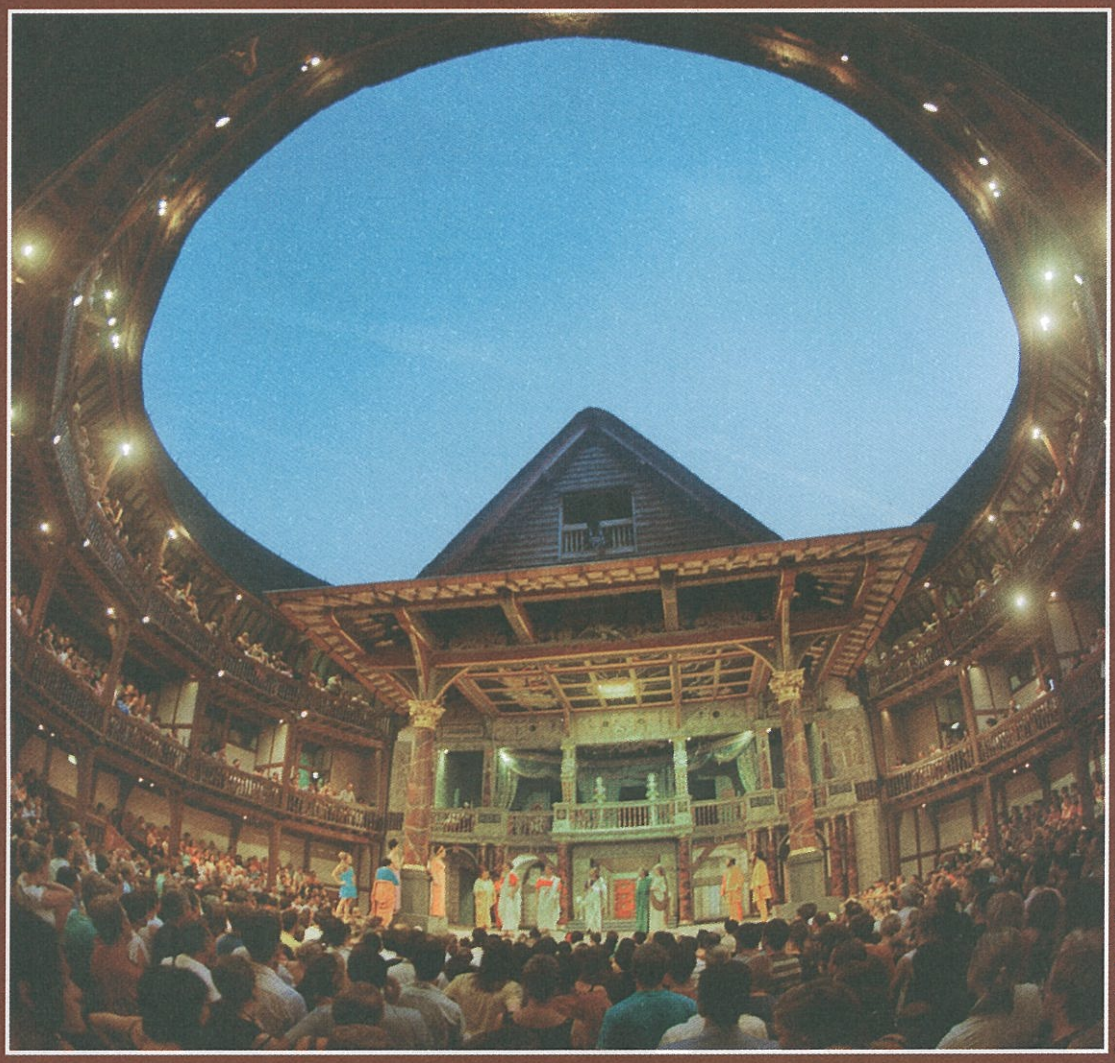


Photo by John Tramper

Now in its tenth year, Shakespeare's Globe has gained a worldwide reputation for its pioneering work in theatre and education, which has been achieved without any core government funding. We depend on our valued family of supporters. Please join us and help us build on our success.

To find out more about how you can support the Globe call 020 7902 5970, email friends@shakespearesglobe.com or visit our website www.shakespearesglobe.org

THE INDEPENDENT

Othello

Welcome to the second of our New Essential Guides to Shakespeare. Produced in conjunction with Shakespeare's Globe theatre, the guides are designed to give you insight into three of Shakespeare's most popular plays. Each one contains a list of characters (dramatis personae), some facts about the main protagonists and an outline of the story. They also contain comments about the plays from the actors who are performing the roles this summer at Shakespeare's Globe theatre. Actors and directors also enter into discussion on important themes in each play and make observations on Shakespeare's use of language. Whether you are a regular theatre-goer, or discovering Shakespeare for the first time as a student at Key Stage Three, GCSE or A level, we hope you will enjoy reading these new guides.

Contents

Produced by Globe Education with acknowledgment to Maya Gabrielle Talbot, Gwilym Jones, Sophie Leighton- Kelly, Claire Daniel, Dr Farah Karim-Cooper, Fiona Banks. All play quotations taken from the Arden Shakespeare Othello, 1997.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

OTHELLO, *the Moor and a General in the service of Venice.*

BRABANTIO, *a Venetian senator and Desdemona's father.*

CASSIO, *Othello's lieutenant.*

IAGO, *Othello's ancient or ensign.*

RODORIGO, *a gentleman of Venice.*

DUKE, *of Venice.*

SENATORS, *of Venice.*

MONTANO, *Governor of Cyprus.*

GENTLEMEN, *of Cyprus.*

LODOVICO, *Desdemona's kinsman or cousin.*

GRATIANO, *Desdemona's uncle.*

SAILOR.

CLOWN.

HERALD.

DESDEMONA, *Othello's wife and Brabantio's daughter.*

AEMILIA, *Iago's wife.*

BIANCA, *a courtesan.*

Messenger, Officers, Gentlemen, Musicians and Attendants.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

OTHELLO

'Othello' has been translated as 'prosperous' in Greek and 'bold' in Spanish. It was an Italian Christian name in circulation in Shakespeare's time, but there is the suggestion that Shakespeare's choice of the name was taken from the intensely jealous character of Thorello in Ben Jonson's *Every Man in his Humour* (1600), who believes that his wife is cheating on him.

If translated from Hebrew, 'Ot - Ha El – O' or 'his sign of God' alludes to the fact that he has been circumcised according to Muslim tradition. It has also been suggested that the name could be literally interpreted as 'Ot-HELL -O', a sinister prediction for the future of Othello's soul due to his tragic deed.

IAGO

'Iago' (the Welsh and Spanish equivalent of James or Jacob) is translated as 'supplanter': one who takes the place of another, through force, scheming, or strategy.
The fact that Shakespeare gives Iago the Spanish form of James rather than the Italian form (Giacomo) indicates a significant reason for this choice. Iago the Spaniard would have aroused hostile feelings in an English audience at war with Spain. St James of Compostela or Sanct' Iago, was not only the patron saint of Spain but known as *'Matamoros'*, Killer of Moors.

DESDEMONA

Desdemona is the only character given a name ('Disdemona') from Giraldi Cinthio *Gli Hecatommithi* (1566), Shakespeare's main source for his play. The name is Greek and means 'unfortunate' or 'ill-fated star'.

The name 'Des-DEMON-a', like 'Ot-HELL-o', has evil connotations. Othello calls her 'fair devil', perhaps to highlight his incorrect view that her beauty (or fairness) hide an evil heart.

RODORIGO

'Rodorigo', like Iago, is a Spanish name meaning 'ruler of the world'.
The fact that both Iago and Rodorigo have Spanish names suggests that Shakespeare might be playing upon the pathological fear of Catholic Spain in Elizabethan England.

SYNOPSIS

In Belmont is a lady richly left,
And she is fair, and (fairer than that word),
Of wondrous virtues Bassanio: (1.1.161-3)

The Loan

Bassanio, needing money to become the suitor to Portia, a wealthy heiress of Belmont, asks his friend Antonio, a merchant of Venice, for a loan. Antonio's money is tied up in shipments away from Venice, so he approaches Shylock, a money-lender. Shylock agrees to lend the money on condition that if Antonio does not pay it back by an appointed time, Shylock may cut a pound of flesh from him. Antonio agrees. Bassanio prepares to leave, allowing his friend Gratiano to accompany him.

Elopement

Launcelot Gobbo, Shylock's servant, decides to leave him, telling his father about his plan. Lorenzo, with the help of Solanio, Salerio and Gratiano, plots to help Jessica, Shylock's daughter, to escape. While Shylock is out meeting with Antonio, Jessica and Lorenzo elope, taking some of Shylock's money and jewels.

The Caskets

Meanwhile, in Belmont, Portia is unhappy with her suitors. Her father has decreed that she must marry the man who chooses, from three caskets, the one containing her picture. Fortunately for Portia, the Prince of Morocco and the Prince of Arragon both fail, being seduced by the external glamour of the two incorrect caskets. When Bassanio arrives he chooses the right casket. Gratiano falls in love with Nerissa, Portia's waiting-woman.

Antonio's Loss

In Venice, Solanio and Salerio hear that some of Antonio's ships are lost, and Shylock promises to redeem his bond. Another Jew, Tubal, brings him news of Antonio's loss and Jessica's new spending habits.

How like a fawning publican he looks!
I hate him for he is a Christian:
But more, for that in low simplicity
He lends out money gratis, and brings down
The rate of usance here with us in Venice. Shylock: (1.3.36-40)

SYNOPSIS

Othello's accusation

Iago arranges for Othello to overhear a conversation between himself and Cassio, joking about Cassio's mistress Bianca, but making the conversation appear to be about Desdemona. Bianca appears with the handkerchief and returns it to Cassio. This enrages Othello and he hits Desdemona, much to the dismay of her kinsman Lodovico who has arrived from Venice with letters ordering Othello to return. Othello asks Aemilia about Desdemona's unfaithfulness but she denies any knowledge of it. He then accuses Desdemona to her face, leaving her distraught.

Death and revelation

Iago convinces Rodorigo that Cassio must die to keep Desdemona in Cyprus. Rodorigo attacks Cassio but is wounded by him. Iago wounds Cassio. Hearing Cassio's cries, Othello thinks Iago has killed him and leaves to deal with Desdemona. Iago then kills Rodorigo. Othello kills Desdemona, strangling her in her bed. Aemilia discovers her body and tells Othello that she was innocent and that Iago had lied to him; she is stabbed and killed by Iago. Letters are revealed telling of Iago and Rodorigo's plot to kill Cassio. Othello, realizing Desdemona was innocent, laments her death, then stabs Iago but only wounds him. Lodovico gives Cassio power to rule in Cyprus, and is about to arrest Othello, when Othello commits suicide.

(*Synopsis adapted from* Shakespeare's Words *by David Crystal and Ben Crystal, Penguin, 2002.*)

O beware, my lord, of jealousy!
It is the green-eyed monster, which doth mock
The meat it feeds on. (Iago: 3.3.167-9)

Eamonn Walker as Othello and Tim McInnerny as Iago

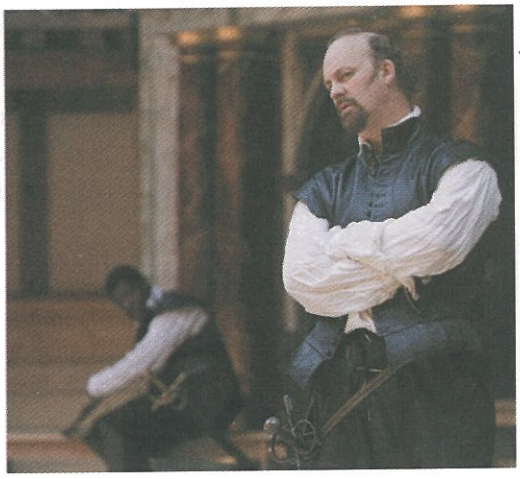


Photo by Johan Persson

ACTORS ON CHARACTERS

The actors from the Globe's production of *Othello* give their opinions about their characters' journeys through the play.

Tim McInnerny on Iago

Iago is a soldier waiting for conflict. Iago doesn't plan anything; he improvises all of the time, from the very first scene. I think, partly, his behaviour comes about through boredom. Also, having been very close to Othello, as only soldiers in battle can be, saving each other's lives, he's now come up against a glass ceiling. Othello has promoted Cassio to lieutenant, not Iago. He also believes that Othello and Aemilia have had an affair, but Iago's a sociopath – he's psychotic. The reasons that he gives for hating Othello don't necessarily hold weight. However, his belief in those reasons is all that matters.

As well as being jealous of Cassio, he's also disparaging about people's moral innocence. He thinks love is ludicrous and doesn't exist – it's a word used to cover up lust. To Iago, Othello's love of Desdemona, and consequent weakening, means that he's watching a man being destroyed. Iago talks about racism and he uses it to manipulate people, but you don't feel that he cares. He hates Othello because he hates him, not because he's black; he hates him indiscriminately. Iago's relationship with death is also very strange; it's something that he's lived with every day; it's part of his job, so it doesn't have the same resonance for him as it does for most.

Iago's only real mistake is a banal one: after wounding Cassio, he sends Ameilia to Othello's lodging. If he'd sent her home, he'd be safe, but Aemilia is the only person who's not scared of him. She has been his accomplice in the past, but suddenly, in the final scene, she adopts this high moral tone and it takes him completely by surprise. She betrays him in front of everyone.

Iago doesn't have a journey in the play in terms of psychological revelations; his character is set at the beginning. It just amplifies as it goes on. He doesn't learn anything and in fact considers learning things as being weak. He believes his view of the world has been proven right by the end and says: "From this time forth, I never will speak word." It's an extraordinary thing to have a character say at the end of a play.

Iago's the engine of the play and needs to push it forward with tremendous energy. This part is the most exhausting thing I've ever done. Carrying Iago around all day is not a pleasant thing to do; it's hard to have that darkness inside of your head.

ACTORS ON CHARACTERS

Eamonn Walker on Othello

Othello is a man who straddles two cultures. In his heart he knows who he is. His life has been a difficult journey, but now he's found himself in Venice doing rather well. He's risen up through the military ranks and now he is a General. He's a successful warrior and his best friend is his Ancient, Iago. Then this woman, Desdemona, comes along and says: 'You are more than that.' He falls in love and is rediscovering himself, as we do when we are in love, through other people's eyes. In Othello's eyes, Desdemona is the light in his dark life. Othello is completely naive in his experience of love. He has never felt it before. That makes him vulnerable. When you are in love you are wide open and anyone can say something to you and you believe it. That is why he is susceptible to Iago's manipulation. Othello loses his sense of self in his jealousy and madness and at the end of the play he kills Desdemona.

She loved me for the dangers I had passed
And I loved her that she did pity them. (Othello: 1.3.168-9)

Zoe Tapper on Desdemona.

We first see Desdemona when she is summoned to the Senate. She has secretly married Othello, and although she hates to defy her father, she is prepared to risk everything for the right to live and be with the man she loves. When the couple arrive in Cyprus, all is harmonious; they are playful and loving towards one another. Desdemona, ignorant of Iago's plot, takes up Cassio's cause with her characteristic passion and zeal. She flirts with Othello a little, chides him a little and then laughs at him or cajoles him, always changing her intention, to try and get him to do what she wants: to persuade him to recall Cassio. It is lovely romantic banter and comes just before Iago plants the seeds of doubt about Desdemona in Othello's mind.

Othello starts behaving irrationally towards her, but Desdemona remains loyal, always trying to work out what is causing his behaviour. She wonders if she is to blame but she never once points the finger at him. This reaches a climax when he strikes her and calls her a whore. She is left reeling from this but is always constant to him. Aemilia gives her guidance as she tries to find solace in an old 'willow song' that she heard in her youth. Finally, though, she is alone with Othello. Othello's eerie calm frightens her, yet she's still searching for an answer, hoping that their love will win out. Her hopes are futile and he smothers her to death. Even as she dies, her final words are ones of complete forgiveness: "Commend me to my kind Lord."

Photo by John Persson

Zoe Tapper as Desdemona and Eamonn Walker as Othello

ACTORS ON CHARACTERS

Lorraine Burroughs on Aemilia

Aemilia is unhappily married to Iago. She has to follow him to different barracks and he beats her. Aemilia is assigned to look after Desdemona in Cyprus. She finds Desdemona's handkerchief, which Iago has been trying to get her to steal. She gives the handkerchief to her husband, without knowing what he will do with it. When Desdemona is upset because Othello is angry with her, Aemilia tells her about the ways of men, but Desdemona doesn't listen. Even though Aemilia understands men, she doesn't see the true depth of Iago's jealousy. In the last scene, Aemilia realises what Iago's been doing, and speaks out against him and all men. She is killed by her husband for her outspokenness, but not before the truth about Iago is known.

Nick Barber on Cassio

Cassio thrives on reputation and appearance. Just before the play starts, Cassio has been made Othello's lieutenant – his second in command. His Achilles heel is that he can't control his drink. In Cyprus, Iago persuades Cassio to drink and then Rodorigo picks a fight with him. Cassio ends up wounding several soldiers, which leads to him being stripped of his lieutenancy. This is the worst thing that Cassio can imagine happening. Iago pretends to help Cassio regain his place, telling him that the best way to persuade Othello is through Desdemona. Desdemona agrees to help and Cassio is very grateful. However, Desdemona's appeals to Othello fail. At the end of the play, Iago has persuaded Rodorigo to kill Cassio. He attempts to, but Cassio severely wounds him. Iago, in the dark, stabs Cassio and flees. Cassio is very badly injured. After the tragic events of the climax, Cassio finds out that he has been appointed to Othello's position. He has gained the high office which he had always longed for, but he is crippled.

Sam Crane on Rodorigo

Rodorigo is in love with Desdemona, and has enlisted the help of Iago, to woo her. Throughout the play, Rodorigo repeatedly loses hope, only for Iago to convince him to be optimistic. At the very beginning of the play, they wake Desdemona's father, Brabantio, hoping that he will not allow Desdemona's marriage to Othello. Brabantio tries to stop the marriage, but Othello persuades the Senate that he won Desdemona by fair means. Iago persuades Rodorigo to disguise himself and follow her to Cyprus. Once Rodorigo has arrived in Cyprus, Iago tells him that Desdemona is also in love with Cassio. Iago convinces Rodorigo to fight with Cassio, to ruin the lieutenant. Rodorigo does but gets beaten up. He is absolutely distraught by this stage, complaining to Iago, who still urges him to pursue Desdemona. When nothing happens, Rodorigo becomes angry. Iago jumps on this anger and tells Rodorigo to kill Cassio. Rodorigo is not a military man, and the thought of killing another man terrifies him. He attempts the act but is wounded. Iago, having finished with Rodorigo, kills him. Only in the final moment of his life does Rodorigo realise Iago's true nature.

IN DISCUSSION

Discussing the themes of **RACE, CULTURE** *and* **IDENTITY** *in* Othello *are: Eamonn Walker (Othello in the 2007 Globe production), Patrick Spottiswoode (Director of Globe Education) and Dr. Jerry Brotton, (Senior Lecturer in Renaissance Studies at Queen Mary, University of London.)*

Race

Eamonn: Although this play is set and written in the past, it is very definitely about the present. Three young black kids of about fifteen or sixteen came up to me after one show and said: "That is my life up there on the stage, right there! I have got a white girlfriend and her dad's giving me a hard time and I don't know what to do and I am getting really angry." I was able to turn around and tell them to use *Othello* as an example, and not to respond with anger. At the beginning of the play Othello displays his intellect and his compassion for knowing and understanding a father's love for his daughter when confronted with the situation these kids are experiencing. That scene opens the play, which is what makes it about the here and now. As long as there is racism this play will be relevant.

Jerry: Although of course there was a time when the notion of 'race' as we understand it didn't really exist as a concept. For Shakespeare's audience, 'race' referred to bloodstock or breeding. So although the play exhibits what we might call 'racism', we need to remember that race has a history, and we need to understand that history to understand what's going on in *Othello*. Perhaps the anxieties that surround Othello, particularly at the beginning of the play, are about his status as an 'outsider', or 'alien'.

Eamonn: When we were sitting round and we were reading and talking about the play Wilson [Milam, the director] would open up the gate for people to come and speak their minds about what was relevant. I like stuff to be real and believable, so when he opened up the gate for people to talk, Othello the 'outsider' was one of the areas that I went straight to. Othello is a man who straddles two different cultures, and he took on board Venetian culture whole-heartedly. In America they ask you to pledge allegiance to the flag, and then sometimes you have to go and fight their wars for them. Othello became very good at fighting wars for his adopted culture.

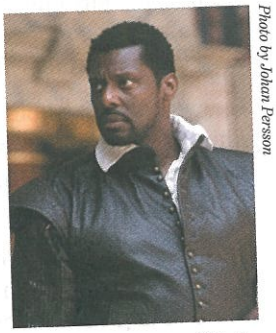


Photo by Johan Persson

Eamonn Walker as Othello

Rude am I in my speech
And little blest with the soft phrase of peace (Othello: 1.3.82-83)

IN DISCUSSION

Jerry: Well, the Senate have little time for Brabantio's slurs against Othello. They want him to lead the Venetian military facing the threat of Islamic Ottoman naval power. At this stage, Othello's identity as a Moor, as a presumed convert from Islam, is irrelevant to the Venetian elite. But gradually, once the threat of the Turks recedes and the play moves to Cyprus – a very dangerous outpost of Christianity in the Renaissance, always threatened with 'turning Turk' and being invaded – Othello loses his status as an 'insider' and Iago can portray him much more as an outsider, someone who can also easily be 'turned Turk'.

Eamonn: And when Othello gets desperately lost in his jealousy and madness, he desperately attempts to find himself again by jumping back to what he knows, which is Islam, the Muslim side of him.

Jerry: We should also remember that the Anglo-Islamic relations looked very different when Shakespeare wrote *Othello*. Queen Elizabeth I established amicable relations with the Muslim world - particularly Morocco and the Turkish Ottoman empire. The enemy for the Elizabethans was Catholic Spain, not the power and might of the Islamic world. I don't think there's an inevitable racist or anti-Islamic logic within Shakespeare's play, and we should always read for different, more ambiguous possibilities, rather than reaching for the stereotypes and prejudices that we see most clearly today – but might not have been there for Shakespeare and his audience. Perhaps the problem the play shows lies within Venice and its assumed superiority, rather than Othello.

Culture

Eamonn: The superiority complex of the Venetians is such that they don't feel that they have to learn about other cultures. We, the outsiders, have to learn about them. And they are not the only ones who feel like that. If there is any fear involved with Othello going back to Islam, it is connected to that superiority complex. The response is: "I don't understand that, therefore I fear it."

Jerry: But is it about Islam specifically, or the fear of Ottoman, Turkish military power? The Turks were respected as possessing the finest, most fearless military machine in Europe at the time, and the audience would have seen that; and anyway, it's doubtful that Shakespeare had such an intimate knowledge of Muslim theology to see Othello in this way.

Eamonn: I imagine Shakespeare watching Abd al-Wahid bin Masoud bin Muhammad al-Annuri, the Moroccan ambassador, who visited London in 1599, in the Elizabethan court and starting to wonder what it must be like for that man. He went down the road of the exotic with Othello and took a woman, Desdemona, the social equivalent to Princess Diana, and put her right in the middle of it.

Jerry: It's also noticeable that the way Othello is initially attacked on the grounds of his perceived difference – be it skin colour, religion, appearance – gradually drops away and is transferred onto Desdemona. It's she who is seen as 'blackened' or stained in the later sections of the play as her reputation comes into question, and she finally identifies with her mother's Barbary maid – presumably a slave from Morocco, where Othello also comes from – who blames herself for her lover's indiscretions. So the play is also drawing attention to the way in which women can easily internalise a sense of themselves as victims.

IN DISCUSSION

Identity

Photo by Johan Persson

Zoe Tapper as Desdemona

Eamonn: Othello is a scary man. When you first meet this man he is a General. What is it that he does for a living? He kills people, and he does it well. The Venetians, for their own reasons, are going: 'While we are using you it is all good.' That in itself says something, because that is what we do now.

Jerry: He is a mercenary. He's hired to save the Venetians and kill people; that's what people saw in the figure of the 'Moor' – fearlessness. But what Shakespeare does is to take that stereotype and unravel it.

Patrick: In Act 1, scene 3, Othello defends the idea of taking Desdemona with him to Cyprus by assuring the Senate that she will not distract him from his soldiership: "...No, when light-winged toys / Of feathered Cupid seel with wanton dullness / My speculative and officed instrument, / That my disports corrupt and taint my business, / Let housewives make a skillet of my helm ..." (1.3.269-273) He is referring to an actual custom in which women looted battlefields and took helmets from fallen soldiers to use as domestic saucepans. But when Othello finally arrives at Cyprus, he goes straight to Desdemona with "O my fair warrior" ignoring the Governor of Cyprus and any mention of the defeated Turk. Desdemona has become the "captain's captain". (2.1.74) Has love not distracted the martial hero already?

Eamonn: You are absolutely right. He is completely distracted even though he says in the Senate: "And heaven defend your good souls that you think, / I will your serious and great business scant / When she is with me." (1.3.267-269)

Jerry: Othello is a more complex character than we've ever imagined. To start with, he's a 'Moor' – basically, a Moroccan, probably born a Muslim but converted at some point to Christianity. He refers to being enslaved – presumably by Muslims – and his 'redemption' – again, presumably a reference to his conversion to Christianity. But throughout the play his identity is uncertain. He becomes continually compared to the 'Turk', and by the end of the play, in his great final speech, he compares himself to a Turk, but one he imagines killing in the service of Venice. So his character remains split throughout the play: as a Moor, a convert, a Christian, a Venetian, a revert to Islam – his identity is just too overdetermined, and in the end these contradictions conspire to destroy him.

O curse of marriage
That we can call these delicate creatures ours
And not their appetites! I had rather be a toad
And live upon the vapour of a dungeon
Than keep a corner in the thing I love
For others' uses. (Othello: 3.3.272-7)

IN DISCUSSION

Eamonn: Othello paid Michael Cassio to help him woo Desdemona. He did not use Iago, because Iago is brash and not classy enough. That suggests as a man, in his heart, he knows who he is. He knows the difficult journey he has been on. Someone who kills people for a living has a darkness that he must walk with. He has found himself here, in Venice, doing rather well. He's risen up through the ranks and he's got this best friend, called Iago. Then this woman comes along and says: "You are more than that." He begins rediscovering himself, as we do when we are in love, through other people's eyes, and particularly in Desdemona's. Through her innocence, her light, her energy, this man is growing.

My story being done
She gave me for my pains a world of sighs (Othello: 1.3.159-60)

Patrick: Does Desdemona's love provide Othello with a sense of acceptance into a society whereinto he feels that he otherwise cannot intrude?

Eamonn: Othello is aware of the 'exotic', because he can see it in other people's eyes. You know it is hard to miss that. He may have made a mistake with Brabantio, in thinking that Brabantio loved him, and that's a big mistake, but Othello is definitely admired because he is big and powerful and exotic. He's already socially accepted. He's the General. It was a prerequisite for Venetian society, at the time, to have a foreigner as the General. Divide and rule, but Othello understood that.

Patrick: Is there not a difference between being accepted and feeling included as a part of the family?

Eamonn: I don't know if Othello is looking to be 'part of the family'. I think Othello is looking for something he has never had. He has never been in love. Othello is completely naive in his experience of love. When you first feel the euphoria of love, you fall head over heels and people can call you stupid, because you are vulnerable. You are wide open. Iago recognises this.

Patrick: Coleridge refers to Iago's 'motiveless malignity'. What do you think motivates Iago?

Eamonn: The relationship between Iago and Othello changed. Iago was Othello's ensign. The ensign was the man who's got your back. Othello goes into battle: hundreds of people with weapons; he wades his way through them. Iago is the person who has got his back. If anyone is going to come and try and stab Othello in the back, Iago kills them and he has done it for years. They drank together, bedded women together, did all the man stuff together. And then this woman appears and Othello doesn't know him. It is not that Othello doesn't love Iago, but he doesn't have space for him. His world is full of Desdemona. Iago's love turns into something else; he calls it hate.

But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve
For daws to peck at: I am not what I am. (Iago: 1.1.63-4)

IN PERFORMANCE

Dominic Dromgoole on Othello

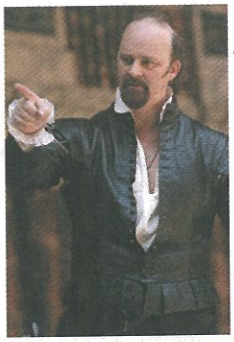


Photo by Johan Persson

Tim McInnerny as Iago

One late summer afternoon, when I was fifteen, my sister and I got hold of a passage from Othello and started playing around with it. It's the scene where Iago starts messing around with Othello's brain [3.3.34]. He does it deftly and with a wickedly quick discretion. The exchanges fly by... Soon after, Othello falls to pieces, babbling spurts of nonsense before he lapses into a trance.

We liked the look of this dialogue and raced at it with our usual quick-fire repartee. As we did, funny things started happening. There was delight at the deft annotation of synapse-fast mental speed. It was all comprehensible and made perfect sense, which was a big plus. There was pleasure to be taken in Iago's rapier irony, and the finger-light touch with which he steers the great boat of Othello's heart. There was also a surprising sense that we were being controlled, that there was only one way to play this, and that it dictated its own rhythm. We could tinker about with it, but only within its own truth. If we didn't live within its music, it fell to pieces on us.

To be direct and honest is not safe. (Iago: 3.3.381)

It was a summer evening, we were circling around among the apple trees, the light was failing, and as we ping-ponged this dialogue to and fro, meanings started percolating up. Power games, ugly master and commander Pinteresque guff, floated around the language. And as Othello crumbled, his soldiers bombast shrivelling down to a boy's fear, the fragility of his identity was exposed. His character was a frail mask. By the end of the scene, sanity itself was under strain, and the strength of language to retain a grip on sanity. All this floated up as we did nothing but toss the words into the air and let them conjure their own sour truth. There was no discussion, no 'goodness, isn't this interesting', just this demented high-speed repetition.

He that is robbed, not wanting what is stolen,
Let him not know't, and he's not robbed at all. (Othello: 3.3.345-6)

I learned more in those two hours than in a year's teaching. About how to play Shakespeare, keeping it light, and fast, and not signposting intentions, just speaking. About the nature of the subtext, the sewage system that runs underneath all great writing and gives it its own electric tension. About the clumsiness of great dialogue, its scrappy messiness, and how a smooth speech articulating its own meaning is often a terrible one.

(*Dominic Dromgoole is the Artistic Director of Shakespeare's Globe. This is an edited extract from his book,* Will and Me – How Shakespeare Took Over My Life, *Penguin, 2006.*)

IN PERFORMANCE

Wilson Milam on Othello

The first thing you notice when you read *Othello, The Moor of Venice* is that only the first act actually takes place in Venice. The rest of the play takes place in Cyprus, the island of Aphrodite, the goddess of love. Shakespeare puts the action in an exotic locale, a garrison town for the Venetian navy protecting the republic of Venice from the constant threat of an infidel invasion. In beginning to delve into the play, I looked for the historical context. We set the play in 1570, the year before the Turks finally reclaimed Cyprus from the Venetians. We researched the Venetian military, a half conscripted, half mercenary navy, which protected both Venice's merchant fleets and the republic itself from pirate attacks. Wherever he learned it from, Shakespeare was exact in his use of Venetian military rank: General, Lieutenant, Ancient. We also examined the Venetian social structure: Who is the elite? Who are members of the Senate? Whom does one properly marry to please one's parents? Understand their social rank and you find the reality of these people and their lives.

Venetian society is alien to Othello. His life has been on the battlefield since, as he says: "since these arms of mine had seven years' pith / Till now some nine moons wasted, they have used / Their dearest action in the tented field, / And little of this great world can I speak / More than pertains to feats of broil and battle." (1.3.85-88) To court Desdemona he chooses Cassio as his guide, someone who is part of and thus familiar with this social milieu, rather than Iago, who is rough hewn, "more in the soldier than in the scholar." (2.1.166)

Shakespeare's knowledge of Venice was almost certainly second-hand. This made it important to also explore the particular robustness of Elizabethan life and culture. For instance, just as the soldiers in *Othello* carry swords, so it was customary for Elizabethan gentleman to walk the street armed.

When casting the actor for Othello, I was looking for qualities of leadership and nobleness. There's a strong spiritual element to Othello's soldier-ship that reflects the ancient manual *The Art of War.* The art of the warrior, says Sun Tzu, is to remain unemotional, calm and detached. It is the warrior who does not let himself be affected by the world who wins. Othello begins to lose his way when emotions – the words 'anger' and 'passion' are used with increasing frequency to describe his behaviour - dictate his actions.

Iago, on the other hand, never lets emotions overtake his reason. When casting Iago, another excellent soldier, I wanted an actor with an earthiness and rapier intelligence. Iago is a renowned Shakespearean villain, but to say he is 'evil' would imply he has a world view or philosophy. Iago doesn't begin with a grand plan. He's like a jazz musician: somebody changes the key, the tempo, the rhythm, and he goes with it. He does feel slighted about being passed over for promotion and he does suspect Aemila with Othello and Cassio, but Iago also loves the game, the brinkmanship. He's in it for the riff and he's a brilliant improviser.

(Wilson Milam is the Director of the Globe's 2007 production of Othello.*)*

Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them.
(Othello: 1.2.59)

Giles Block on the language of Othello

I believe a line of verse corresponds to the amount which we say in one breath. And the rhythm underneath it, the iambic cadence, is our heartbeat. So a line of verse is made up of the two things which keep us going: our breath and our pulse. Each play's use of verse and prose is singular and gives the play a textual individuality. What *Othello* does, perhaps more than any other play, is to capture colloquial exchanges in a domestic situation, in streets and bedrooms. Iago's lines are packed with extra syllables, personal pronouns, and dependent verbs being swallowed together. Some of the lines have fourteen or fifteen syllables rather than the usual ten or eleven. It's filled with a great variety of rhythms that reflects people talking 'on the hoof' in a conversational, street-like way.

With *Othello*, the extraordinary thing is that it's just a certain word dropped at the right time which does all of the damage. And they are such simple words. That's the most remarkable part of the play in terms of text. There are lots of these little things. "I did not think he had been acquainted with her," (3.3.99) is almost casual and very colloquial. It is still approximately iambic, although it has twelve syllables. You could still find the five stresses if you squash syllables together, but the relaxed quality suggests that Iago is capturing everyday speech rhythms.

Iago's vocabulary in his verse is quite simple. However, he's quite a show off in his prose, especially when he's beguiling Rodorigo. Prose is often about being witty. Iago uses a personal way of speaking to Rodorigo. There's a pattern in the prose scenes, where he calls him intimately, 'thee' and 'thou'. But towards the end of the scenes, when he starts giving him orders, he uses 'you'. That's also interesting in the relationship of Othello and Desdemona. He calls her 'you' to begin with, because they're in a very formal place, and only for a moment or two does he use the intimate form: "When I love *thee* not / Chaos is come again." (3.3.91-2) As soon as Iago gets to work on him, Othello goes back to 'you' – although not exclusively. These little changes are very instructive to actors. It helps them to gauge the emotional temperature change in a scene.

If you count the lines of the play, you will see that something very important happens almost exactly at the middle: the handkerchief drops. This little square of silk drops, silently, with ghastly consequences.

(Giles Block advises on text in performance at Shakespeare's Globe.)

Photo by Johan Persson

Zawe Ashton as Bianca and Nick Barber as Cassio

That handkerchief
Did an Egyptian to my mother give (Othello: 3.4.57-8)

IN PERFORMANCE

Gwilym Jones on the Storm in Othello

Storm scenes in Shakespeare's theatre would have been startling and spectacular. The sound of thunder, mimicked by drums and rolling cannon balls in wooden troughs, would fill the playhouse, as squibs and rockets in silver casing were set alight to imitate lightning. We do not know if these effects would be used to stage the storm in *Othello*. No stage directions indicate the noises, but this does not necessarily mean that the tempest, created with language, was not first flaunted with fire.

Shakespeare used storms and shipwrecks to separate characters. The idea is that the characters do not know what has happened to each other; they usually think that they are the only survivors. Of course, this means grief, anguish, loneliness: feelings which councillors often try to assuage with kind words. Iago plays such a role in *Othello*. The storm has divided the Venetian fleet, and all have arrived in Cyprus with the exception of Othello's ship. Iago distracts a fearful Desdemona with his witty wordplay until her husband is safe ashore. It is a chance for the ensign to show off his skills and, for once, he is willingly the centre of attention. Although insulting Aemilia, the passage shows Iago at his kindest in soothing Desdemona; paradoxically, when his language is at its most elaborate he is at his most transparent.

Another recurring feature of the sea-storm sees reunited survivors recalling the shipwreck. In the comedies, this is in the final scene; the tragedy of the wreck has become humour, the ultimate resolution remembers the initial separation. The same happens in *Othello*: "If after every tempest come such calms,/ May the winds blow till they have wakened death,/ And let the labouring bark climb hills of seas,/ Olympus-high." (2.1.183-186) The problem is that the reunion comes too early in the play; a space for tragedy remains. This is consistent with the play's domesticity. Just as Othello and Desdemona survive the laws of Venice, so they survive the raging seas. It takes an internal force to separate them, a force which Iago, the antithesis of the storm, has the simple vocabulary to generate.

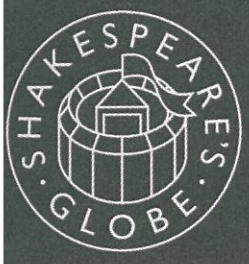
(Gwilym Jones is at the University of Sussex, completing a D.Phil. on Shakespeare's Storms and works in the research department of Globe Education.)

Yolanda Vazquez talks about the Elizabethan practice of using cue scripts.

Shakespeare's actors would have used cue scripts. These are scripts in which only the lines of the character are printed, preceded by their cue. The cues would probably be only the final two feet of the iambic line. The unique thing about cue scripts is that they keep actors listening and engaged in a scene, but they can be very tricky. For example, when Othello is hiding, and Iago and Cassio are talking about Bianca – but Othello thinks that they are talking about Desdemona – in the cue script Othello has to respond several times to Iago's laughter. It's easy to confuse which speech follows which laugh.

Cue scripts shows us the 'moment', something we tend to lose if we've learnt exactly where our lines are in the script. Just as in real life: you listen, you might want to have your say, but you don't get to speak, so you lift up your energy and you have to bring it down again. You are truly listening rather than acting it. A character that does not have many lines in a scene can switch off onstage, but with a cue script, they will be listening intensely throughout the scene for their cue.

(*Yolanda Vazquez is a Globe Education Practitioner and actress, who has appeared in many Globe productions including: Adriana in* The Comedy of Errors, *Hypollita in* The Two Noble Kinsmen, *Queen Elizabeth in* Richard III, *Hortensio in* The Taming of the Shrew, *Beatrice in* Much Ado About Nothing *and Hermione* in The Winter's Tale.)



Courses at Shakespeare's Globe

Globe Education offers courses including an MA in '*Shakespearean Studies: Text and Playhouse*' in conjunction with King's College London, modules forming part of MA courses at Exeter University and the Drama Centre London, and a one-year BFA programme offered to students from Rutgers University.

Globe Education is also at the forefront of creative approaches to teaching Shakespeare and offers Continuing Professional Development courses for teachers, and a part-time MA course '*Creative Arts in the Classroom*' taught in association with King's College London.

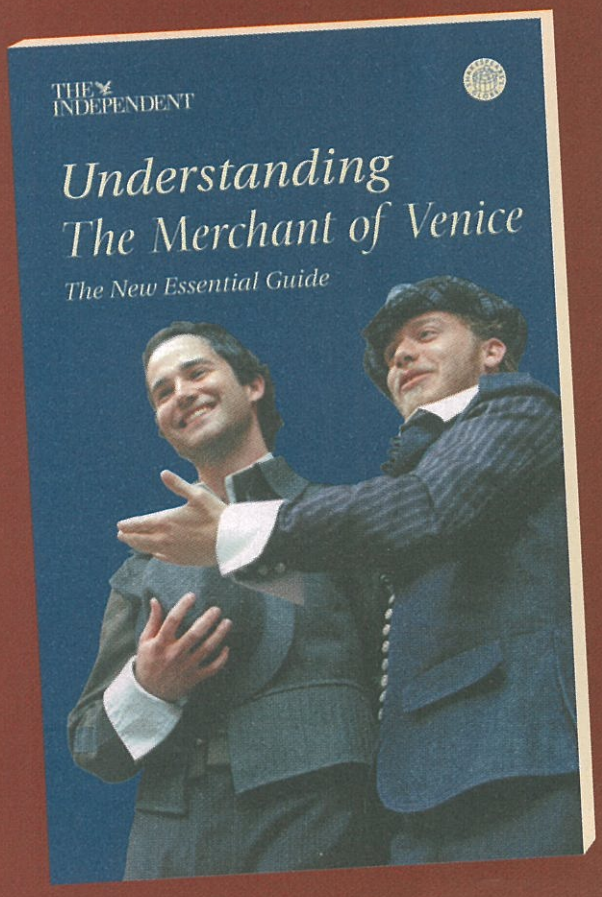
For more information about all accredited courses offered by Shakespeare's Globe please call **020 7902 1464** or e-mail **courses@shakespearesglobe.com**

GlobeLink

Globe Education's online resource centre

A resource for students, teachers and scholars. Actors, directors and theatre practitioners share the process of creating theatre at the Globe.

www.globelink.org



Free Tomorrow

The Merchant of Venice

THE INDEPENDENT
www.independent.co.uk

If you have missed part of our 'New Essential Guide to Shakespeare' series, visit www.independent.co.uk/shakespeare