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We forge community by dismantling barriers to participation.

We nurture a culture of learning where we are both teacher and student.

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For more information or to register for any of our programs, please call Indiia Wilmott, Artistic Learning Programs Manager 510.548.3422 x137, or email learn@calshakes.org.
OTHELLO: Making the Choice

painting: Ira Aldridge as Othello, James Northcote, 1826
Fear is a powerful motivator. It steals our will, but it also bestows permission to do things, to think things, we would never otherwise consider. It feeds on our flaws, it teases them into the open, it lays them naked before us. My Othello will be a consideration of this, of the daily compromises we make to co-exist in a place with others who are not like us, of the manner in which those compromises might eat at our insides, revealing themselves as fear, as rage, as hope, as desire, as paranoia, as faith. This tragedy does not reside in just one man, one marriage, but rather in all of us, even the most honest of us.

— Eric Ting, Artistic Director of Cal Shakes, and Director of Othello 2016

How do I decide how to treat people day to day?
What influences me?
Do I even think about it?
How would I make a choice so important as to attack another person, emotionally or physically?
Do I even think about it?

Actors are always considering “choices”—how what they do onstage can more clearly illustrate a character’s emotional state that will make sense of the actions they take in the play. They need to make specific decisions about how a character speaks, moves, and uses language for the audience to be able to understand that character’s motivations. And “why” is a key question for the actor. Why does the character do what they do? Why does Iago go so far, so insidiously, to get revenge? Why does Othello have to “punish” Desdemona? Why doesn’t Desdemona (or Emilia) pick up on what’s going on earlier than Act 5? What is working in these characters to choose to change high regard to disgust, love to punishment, self-esteem to self-hatred?

American society is again questioning why we make the choices we do around the issues of race, religion, and gender. We know that how we perceive people in terms of how they are different from how we perceive ourselves dictates our behavior towards them. Our job, as artists, and arguably as a society, is to recognize our perceptions, why they happen, and how to change the negative behavior, which is very often damagingly violent.

Shakespeare takes this opportunity to show how perception can change with lightning speed—only two days pass, in which Othello and Desdemona go from their loving marriage to his murder/suicide.

Your students must look at the conscious and unconscious motivations at work here within the context of the Elizabethan/Venetian culture of the time. As we present Othello as clearly Muslim, and starting our play in a contemporary context, we ask that parallels be clearly drawn between what Shakespeare asks us to consider in terms of race, religion, and gender and how significant misperceptions continue today. If we can understand what drives a character to extreme actions, we have a good shot at understanding how these forces work in ourselves.

The theater, through its great gift of empathy, lets us deepen our ideas of who we are as individuals, and allows the imagination to see what we could be. Most powerfully, it allows us to understand—not to condone, but to understand—someone else’s point of view.

Enjoy!

Cal Shakes Artistic Learning Department
**OTHELLO**

1. Desdemona and Othello have secretly married, and Othello has appointed Cassio, instead of Iago, as lieutenant in the army.

2. Othello is put on trial by Desdemona's father, Brabantio, in the Venetian court. Othello and Desdemona make a calm and eloquent case for their love and the Duke of Venice confirms the marriage as legal. Brabantio grudgingly accepts.

3. The Duke commands Othello to lead the Venetian forces to defend Cyprus against the Turkish fleet. All go to Cyprus, including Desdemona and Iago's wife, Emilia.

4. Iago conspires with Roderigo, who is foolishly in love with Desdemona, to get Cassio drunk and fight him. Iago convinces Roderigo to do this by lying to him that Desdemona and Cassio are in love.

5. Othello catches the men fighting and strips Cassio of his lieutenancy. Iago persuades Cassio to beg Desdemona to influence Othello to get his position back.

6. Othello sees Cassio and Desdemona together and Iago persuades him that their meeting is because they are having an affair. Othello demands proof.

7. Iago engages Cassio in a conversation about Cassio's mistress, Bianca. Iago gets Othello to eavesdrop, making sure Othello thinks they are talking about Desdemona, rather than Bianca.

8. Othello is confused and angry, and asks Iago for even more concrete proof. If he receives it, Othello vows to kill Desdemona for her disloyalty and adultery.

9. To provide this proof, Iago plants a special handkerchief of Desdemona's in Cassio's quarters. Bianca finds the handkerchief and returns it to Cassio in anger, in full view of Othello.

10. Othello loses his temper and hits Desdemona. Then he debates with Iago how to kill Desdemona. Iago suggests strangling her in their marriage bed, since it is where she has betrayed him. Othello agrees.

11. Iago tells Othello he will kill Cassio for him, but kills Roderigo instead to keep him from talking. Othello believes Cassio is dead, and proceeds to suffocate Desdemona in their bed with a pillow.

12. Emilia finds Desdemona dead and denounces Iago as a liar; Iago kills her and is arrested.

13. Othello realizes his terrible mistake in trusting Iago and disbelieving his innocent wife. He kills himself. Iago is wounded but does not die and refuses to speak from then on.
The Actors and Stage Managers employed in this production are members of Actors’ Equity Association, the Union of Professional Actors and Stage Managers in the United States.
The CHARACTERS

OTHELLO: an accomplished general in the army of Venice, Italy; referred to as “the Moor” because of his Middle Eastern background

DESDEMONA: Othello’s wife, daughter to Brabantio

BRABANTIO: father to Desdemona and a Venetian senator

IAGO: Othello’s “ancient” in the army; the equivalent to a flag or standard bearer.

EMILIA: Iago’s wife and Desdemona’s companion

CASSIO: newly-promoted lieutenant to Othello in the Venetian army

RODERIGO: a gentleman of Venice, in love with Desdemona

BIANCA: Cassio’s mistress

MONTANO: governor of Cyprus

LODOVICO: noble Venetian, cousin to Brabantio, ambassador to Cyprus

DUKE OF VENICE: head of the Venetian senate

MESSENGERS, GENTLEMEN

print: Scene Othello Princess Theatre Town Harbour Cyprus the Illustrated London News, 1861
CHARACTER MAP

In Venice

Othello
Desdemona
Brabantio
Duke of Venice
Lodovico Nobleman
Cassio
Iago
Lodovico Nobleman
Roderigo
Emilia
Bianca

In Cyprus

Montano
First Gentleman
Second Gentleman

daughter
spouse
conspirators
mistress
spouse
attendant
attendant

CAL.SHAKES

- 10 -
Seeing the Play: 
BEFORE & AFTER

By heaven, he echoes me,  
As if there were some monster in his thought  
Too hideous to be shown.  
— Othello, Act 3, Sc. 3

Consider the following questions before and after the show.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BEFORE Viewing the Play</th>
<th>AFTER Viewing the Play</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>WHAT TO WATCH FOR:</strong></td>
<td><strong>WHAT DO YOU THINK OF OTHELLO?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Look for how Othello is perceived by all the characters, even the ones who look like they might be of the same ethnic background.</td>
<td>• If this happened in real life, do you believe that a man such as Othello would really be driven to murder? Why or why not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Look for instances where Othello's Muslim religion makes him vulnerable to attack.</td>
<td>• What do you think Iago's real motivation is for his revenge?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How does Iago use race or religion to convince others to turn against Othello?</td>
<td>• Did any of the insults in the play surprise you? Iago refers to just about everyone in a disparaging way, and the women are treated by everyone almost as servants. Do we still talk about people like Iago does today? Why or why not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How does he use the same arguments to get Othello to turn against Desdemona?</td>
<td>• Do the characters act like people do today? Why or why not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What are other ways Iago manipulates people to get what he wants?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• See if you can understand why Iago acts the way he does.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Watch carefully how Othello changes his mind.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

See the “Write Your Own Critique” page in the Activity Section for more ideas about what to watch for and how to write about your reactions after the show.
Shakespeare’s Language: Choosing the Right Words

When asked the number one challenge with Shakespeare’s works, modern day audiences will almost always respond “the language.” It’s true that the language does sound a bit different to our ears. And he uses phrases that we no longer use in our everyday speech. But think of this: there are phrases that we use today that would baffle Shakespeare, should he mysteriously time travel to this day and age. That’s because language is constantly transforming.

Here are some original quotes from *Othello*. Can you match them to their modern-day translations?

…‘tis in ourselves that we thus or thus.
—Iago, Act 1, Sc. 3

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. —Iago, Act 1, Sc. 3

O beware, my lord, of jealousy; It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock The meat it feeds on. —Iago, Act 3, Sc. 3

If she be false, O, then, heaven mocks itself! I’ll not believe it. —Othello, Act 3 Sc. 3

*O brave Iago, honest and just,* 
That hast such noble sense of thy friend’s wrong! —Othello, Act. 5, Sc. 1

Yet she must die, else she’ll betray more men. —Othello, Act 5, Sc. 2

That death’s unnatural that kills for loving. —Desdemona, Act 5, Sc. 2

Let heaven and men and devils, let them all, All, all, cry shame against me, yet I’ll speak. —Emilia, Act. 5, Sc. 2

For nought I did in hate, but all in honor. —Othello, Act. 5, Sc. 2

Then must you speak
Of one that loved not wisely but too well. —Othello, Act 5, Sc. 2

If she is allowed to live, she’ll just cheat on other guys.

Watch out for jealousy, sir; it’s like a green-eyed alien that hates the only thing it has to eat.

If she’s cheating on me and lying about it, it’s like goodness making fun of itself. I can’t believe it.

Describe me as someone who loved foolishly, but with all his true heart.

That man has a trusting nature and thinks people are speaking truly even when they lie. He’ll easily believe anyone, just like a donkey being pulled by the reins.

We decide for ourselves what we will be—one thing or another.

I did nothing in hatred; everything I did was in faith.

If you kill me because you love me so much, that’s completely abnormal.

Go ahead and let God and all the people and even demons scream that I am a disgraceful embarrassment; I’ll say what I want.

Oh excellent Iago, true and fair, You really understand what a terrible thing has happened to me.

For Students: TRY THIS!

Consider: do the “translations” here do the Shakespeare quote justice? Can you make a better translation to modern English and still capture the mood, tone, and meaning of all of Shakespeare’s words? Try it out!
OTHELLO: Making the Choice
ELIZABETHAN WORLDVIEW:
What is a “Moor”?

Her name, that was as fresh
As Dian’s visage, is now begrimed and black
As mine own face.
— Othello Act 3, Sc. 3

Othello’s intended ethnicity is in some dispute. ‘Moor’ is a name applied to the Arab and Berber peoples of North Africa who inhabited medieval Spain. Thus, Othello may be connected with the Moors...in Spain...or with the people of ‘Barbary’ in North Africa. Iago calls Othello a ‘Barbary horse’ (Act 1, Sc.1), referring to the famous horses of the Arab world, but also playing on the associations of ‘barbarian’ with paganism and savagery.

—Karen Kay from Shakespeare Online, Study Tools

All of the characters in Othello are white Europeans, except Othello himself, who is clearly described as having a darker skin tone than the other inhabitants of Venice, frequently referred to as “black.” This is a term that, in Elizabethan England, could encompass a variety of skin colors (see the above passage), but not one of a Caucasian descent.

Another interesting, more archaic, meaning of the words “white” and “black” was to denote good and evil—white meaning the light or good, black connoting the dark or bad. Othello’s quote above makes use of both meanings—his face is literally dark-skinned, and he also sees Desdemona as morally “black” as he believes she has been unfaithful. Shakespeare plays with these meanings throughout the text.

For Students: TRY THIS!

• Have you ever heard someone in your family or at school make a negative comment about another person based on their background or ethnic origin?
• Have you ever made a comment or thought something negative about another person based on their background or ethnic origin? Be honest with yourself.
• Write a paragraph explaining where you think negative perceptions of certain groups come from. If you have trouble, ask your family and friends. The answer is not necessarily buried in history; it might be right in front of you at school or in your community.

Reflection: How do you think negative perceptions of people get perpetuated? Do you think you have certain negative perceptions you weren’t aware of before doing this exercise?
ELIZABETHAN WORLDVIEW: What is a “Moor”? (continued)

In our play we have cast actors of color in roles other than that of Othello. How does this affect our understanding of Othello’s primary difference—the color of his skin—when he is no longer the sole person of his race in the play?

We have chosen, in our production, to highlight Othello’s religion as a Muslim. There is a reference to Othello’s baptism in the play (Iago, Act 2, Sc. 3), which makes sense, as it seems unlikely Othello would have been born Christian, as Moors were Muslim. Othello as Muslim is also supported by the text when Othello refers to himself disparagingly as a “circumcised dog,” circumcision being a practice only used by Jews and Muslims.

The roles of Othello and Desdemona are arguably two of the most sympathetic representations of a minority ethnic man and a woman in Renaissance England, where to be one or the other was to be “less than” a white male with few rights and little regard. Ironically, these roles were not played by a man of color or a woman until many years after Shakespeare’s death.

MARGARET HUGHES played Desdemona on the English stage in 1660, the first time a woman had done so (legally, at least). Younger men or boys in Shakespeare’s time played all the female roles—including Desdemona—since it was actually against the law for women to be seen on stage.

It wasn’t until 1825 that a black actor, IRA ALDRIDGE, played Othello in London, and another century after that before American actor PAUL ROBESON became the second black actor to play Othello onstage. Many Othellos have been white men who “blacked up” by putting charcoal or other darkening substances such as ash or chalk on their faces and hands.
William Shakespeare is considered one of the world's most significant playwrights. Writing in England during the late 1500s during the reigns of Queen Elizabeth I and King James I, he established himself as a major poet, actor, and playwright. He mastered the comic and tragic dramatic forms and introduced over 2,000 new vocabulary words into the English language. Shakespeare is read by nearly every American student and is perhaps best known for Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, and A Midsummer Night’s Dream.

So sure, he’s one of the most highly regarded writers of all time. But the really interesting thing is that we don’t actually know if the man known as William Shakespeare—of Stratford-on-Avon, son of a glove-maker—was really the author of all the plays written under his name. A common argument from “anti-Stratfordians” is that a lower middle-class man such as Shakespeare could not have had sufficient education or knowledge of court matters to write so insightfully and profoundly of the human condition and of kings, much less use language so skillfully. Who else could have written the plays? Frequently suggested are:

- Queen Elizabeth I
- Edward de Vere, the Earl of Oxford
- Sir Francis Bacon
- A bunch of other playwrights writing under one name
Even his real birthday is unsure. (Birth records of the time are rare and unreliable.) Shakespeare was born on April 23, or maybe the 20th, or the 21st, or maybe even May 3. It’s pretty certain that it was in 1564, and that he was baptized on April 26. To add to the confusion, back in Shakespeare’s day there wasn’t actually such a thing as standard spelling—people spelled words as they sounded. Common spellings of “Shakespeare” include “Shakespere,” “Shackspeare,” and “Shakspeare.” Furthermore, only a few samples of handwriting are thought actually to be his—plays were copied out by actors and others in the theater company to carry for rehearsals.

There are a few things about Shakespeare, however, that we do know for sure. A man known as William Shakespeare definitely was involved in the theater: His name is listed among the acting company known as the Lord Chamberlain’s Men in London, which was very popular with the people and with Queen Elizabeth. The company also built the famous Globe Theatre in London, which premiered most of Shakespeare’s plays.

Shakespeare had a son named Hamnet who died young, and is thought to have inspired the name of Hamlet. Shakespeare had two other children: Hamnet’s twin, Judith; and another daughter, Susannah.

Unfortunately, the Shakespeare line ended when his granddaughter Elizabeth died in 1670, having no children of her own. Therefore, there are no descendants who kept records of the time, and none alive today.

Shakespeare is buried in the Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-upon-Avon, his birthplace. On this grave there is an inscription cursing anyone who dares to move his body from that final resting place. To this day his bones remain undisturbed.

What do you think?

For Students: TRY THIS!

Look up the clues that people have collected about who Shakespeare was. Do you think there really was one man from Stratford-upon-Avon who wrote all of the plays, or was the name used to cover up the real author(s)? Why would someone want to cover it up? Does any of this matter in the end?
OTHELLO: Making the Choice
Director’s Interview with Eric Ting: MAKING THE ARTISTIC CHOICE

Ay, let her rot, and perish, and be damned tonight, for she shall not live. No, my heart is turned to stone; I strike it, and it hurts my hand.
— Othello, Act. 4, Sc.1

I chose Othello for my Cal Shakes debut, in part because of the climate of racial injustice across our country—what better play to explore the ravages of white envy in a politically correct era, capturing the subtle and not so subtle extremism that surfaced with and has lingered after Obama’s election? Iago, career soldier, working class, a good and decent man who has opportunity “stolen” from him by a Black man; but who re-commits himself to this general, this friend, only to once more be passed up for a younger man, perhaps even another Black man.

—Eric Ting, Cal Shakes blog post

Artistic Learning:
How will you stage this play to be relevant to the current cultural dialogues about racial injustice and identity? Will you use a modern setting?

Eric Ting:
We’re imagining our audience sharing the space with a company of modern day actors who investigate/interrogate the classical story of Shakespeare’s Othello through a contemporary lens, trying to understand how this problem play lives as a reflection of some of the challenges we face in American society today.

AL: Directors must frequently choose a specific focus from such a large and complex play. Are you coming at it as a domestic tragedy, a political firestorm, an examination of psychological manipulation—what’s the core idea you want to illustrate to the fullest in this production?

ET: All of the above. Religion is certainly surfaced in our choice to reflect Othello as a Muslim—though even that identity is sublimated in this story (because when we encounter Othello he has “converted to Christianity” we think to better assimilate into Venetian society). Politics exist not so much as a manifestation of the war with the Ottomites (like much of the wars the US fights today, that war is backgrounded to the more domestic concerns of the drama); but rather we will be exploring the presence of a political figure like Donald Trump and asking how that injection of volatile political rhetoric might pave the way for more manifest examples of xenophobia, releasing years of pent up race-hatred (i.e.: Iago). Lastly, Othello is a play about two marriages, a domestic tragedy writ large about the daily battles wrought “in the name of love”—love of God, love of Country, love of each other.
ET: My impulse is always to play against the poetry of Shakespeare’s language. The words themselves elevate his plays to soaring heights, but when actors indulge in that poetry it often sends the plays into a more melodramatic space. He wrote in blank verse, and as such, his writing is all the more remarkable for its construction—vivid, honest language held to a rigorous form. It’s that pursuit of surfacing the familiar, the banal, the human in Shakespeare’s plays that also—I believe—demand that we not try to censor the very real prejudices that have existed across time, from Shakespeare’s Venice to our communities today.

AL: Is there any comic relief in this play? Should there be?

ET: Yes. And absolutely. Comedy accentuates tragedy, like salt with chocolate. Certainly there’s a lovely scene that we begin with: two men, ugly drunk, commiserating late one night about the unfairness of the world. But also: Shakespeare writes into the play a “CLOWN” character that, to my eyes, is not particularly funny (HA!). So we’ve made a production choice to replace those clown scenes with a series of jokes—the sort of jokes that accentuate our society’s treatment of outsiders, the sort of humor that “others” us.

AL: Okay, the ultimate question—are you more drawn to Othello, or Iago? Why?

ET: Mmmmm. Good Question. I think the one doesn’t exist without the other, no? It’s almost biblical, the conflict between these two—like Cain and Abel.
How Do You Choose How You Act?

“How does we, their ills instruct us so.”
— Emilia, Act 4, Sc. 3

Many individuals and groups of people in the world experience unequal opportunities, and unfair advantages or disadvantages. How people perceive and make judgments on other people who seem different from them in some way has created these unfair divisions and difficulties. The Black Lives Matter movement is an excellent example of people who want to talk frankly about inequity for people of African-American descent.

People are perceived a certain way (either positively or negatively) because of race, ethnic origin, their way of speaking, gender, if they are rich or poor. The women in Othello are caught in a society that demands they be completely obedient to their fathers, and then their husbands. People of color, like Othello, in the play are routinely insulted even as they achieve positions of power and supposed respect. Even others in the majority ethnicity and considered “honest,” like Iago and Roderigo, feel they have been slighted and unrecognized.

For Students: TRY THIS!

Think privately of a person you see at school, but don’t know very well, who is different from you in some way. It may be in how they dress, what they look like, how they act, how they look at you. Picture them in your mind and recall how they talk, walk, stand or sit. What’s your first thought or feeling whenever you see them?

Now make a list:
• Imagine what that person’s inner thoughts are, in a realistic way. Everyone has favorite things, things they wish for, things they are scared of.
• Imagine what they like the most.
• Imagine what they want. This could be an actual thing, like a bicycle, or something like love, or respect.
• Imagine what they are afraid of.
• Imagine who is the most important person in their life.

REFLECTION: Has your initial feeling about this person changed by thinking about them in this way?

Do you think your perception of their inner life comes from observation of that person specifically, or representations in movies and books? Try to see where your thoughts come from, without judging them, to understand what influences you.
CLASSROOM RESOURCES
**OTHELLO: In Film**

*Othello* is a compelling story and raises questions particularly relevant to our modern world. According to Eddie Salmon in *Shakespeare: A Hundred Years on Film*, *Othello* is the third most popular Shakespeare play to be made into a movie, with 43 made up to the year 2000 (it's a bit behind *Romeo and Juliet*—77 and *Hamlet*—75). These include all kinds of versions, whether following the text verbatim, adapted and cut down, modernized, or just loosely based on the plot and ideas of the play. Many employ vastly different interpretations, or are simply inspired by the *Othello* story. Here's a sampling of a few of the most popular and available:

**Othello (2015)**
*Rated R.*
**Director:** Mikael Kreuzriegler  
**Writers:** Colin Martin, Allison Marie Volk  
**Stars:** Colin Martin as Othello, Allison Marie Volk as Iago

**O (2001)**
*Rated R.*
**Director:** Tim Blake Nelson  
**Writers:** William Shakespeare (play), Brad Kaaya (screenplay)  
**Stars:** Mekhi Phifer, Julia Stiles, Josh Hartnett, Martin Sheen

Set in a modern upscale prep high school; Odin (Othello) is a star basketball player.

**Othello (2001)**
*Rated R.*
**Director:** Geoffrey Sax  
**Writers:** William Shakespeare (play), Andrew Davies  
**Stars:** Eamonn Walker, Christopher Exxleston, Keeley Hawes

Retelling in modern London set amongst the officers in racially charged police force.

**Othello (1995)**
**Director:** Oliver Parker  
**Writers:** William Shakespeare (play), Oliver Parker (adaptation)  
**Stars:** Laurence Fishburne, Kenneth Branagh, Irene Jacob

**Othello (1995)**
**Director:** Geoffrey Sax  
**Writers:** William Shakespeare (play), Andrew Davies  
**Stars:** Eamonn Walker, Christopher Exxleston, Keeley Hawes

Retelling in modern London set amongst the officers in racially charged police force.

**Othello (1981)**
**Director:** Jonathan Miller  
**Writer:** William Shakespeare (play)  
**Stars:** Anthony Pedley, Bob Hoskins, Geoffrey Chater

Faithful adaption of Shakespeare's play.

**Othello (1965)**
**Director:** Stuart Burge  
**Writer:** William Shakespeare (play)  
**Stars:** Laurence Olivier, Maggie Smith, Frank Finlay, Robert Lang

Straight rendering of the London's National Theatre 1965 production. Shot on a soundstage with spare backdrops.

Ask students to look at the opening scenes of the Parker version with Kenneth Branagh set in Italy (*Othello, 1995*) and the Nelson version (*O, 2001.*) What are the differences? Similarities? Do they tell the same story? Which one do you think is more effective and why?

Ask students to come up with suggestions for modern re-tellings of the story. What style would they use (puppets, animation, action film, Western)? What would make it interesting and understandable to a student audience?

Would this story work if it was translated to other cultures? Would it be the same if Othello was a white man in a world of majority Black people? Or a powerful woman in a land of majority men?
OTHELLO: On the Web

Teaching Resources for Othello

Royal Shakespeare Company
RSC.ORG.UK/EDUCATION/TEACHER-RESOURCES/

Young Shakespeare Nation
A new initiative by the RSC to provide educational tools as the theater stages the 36 plays that make up the First Folio of Shakespeare’s work over the next six years. Find out how to participate!
RSC.ORG.UK/EDUCATION

Folger Shakespeare Library
WWW.FOLGER.EDU

Globe Theater in England
WWW.SHAKESPREESGLOBE.COM

The Stratford Festival
STRATFORDFESTIVAL.CA/EDUCATION/TEACHERS.ASPX?ID=1096

Life in Elizabethan England
ELIZABETHAN.ORG/COMPENDIUM

Elizabethan England
WWW.BARDWEB.NET/ENGLAND.HTML

Specialized Activities:

Activities on Shakespeare’s Various Plot and Character Relationships
COLLABORATIVELEARNING.ORG/MUCHADOPLOTRELATIONSHIPS.PDF
(for Much Ado About Nothing, but can be adapted to any Shakespeare play)

The Kennedy Center’s “The Poetics of Hip Hop”
ARTSEEDGE.KENNEDY-CENTER.ORG/EDUCATORS/LESSONS/GRADE-9-12/POETICS_OF_HIP_HOP.ASPX

Shakespearean Insult Worksheet
WEB/MIT.EDU/DRYFOO/FUNNY-PAGES/SHAKESPEARE-INSULT-KIT.HTML
Recommended BOOKS for Othello


Recommended play texts for Othello

For student editions of the play, we recommend the Folger editions of the plays.

For in-depth footnotes and background for teachers and advanced students, we recommend the Arden Shakespeare series.
Note to Teachers: This guide was created as a supplement for teachers preparing students to see California Shakespeare Theater’s production of *Othello*. Worksheets are designed to be used individually or in conjunction with others throughout the guide. While we realize that no aspect of this guide fully outlines a course for meeting a subject area's standards, discussion questions and topics are devised to align with Common Core standards in English, Performing Arts, and History. The activities here can be minimally reproduced for educational, nonprofit use only. All lessons must be appropriately credited.

There are many excellent lesson plans for *Othello* on the internet. Please see our “Resources” page for links. This guide concentrates primarily on ideas that help students understand language, plot, and character through activities that get students on their feet and speaking.

If you are interested in a California Shakespeare Theater Professional Development Workshop, which provides easy-to-learn tools for teachers to incorporate theater and arts education activities into California standards-based core curriculum, please contact the Artistic Learning Department at 510.548.3422 x136 or learn@calshakes.org.
SOCIAL NETWORK
Character Study

Have your students create a Facebook profile following for a character from the play.

OVERVIEW:
Being able to empathize with fictional characters sheds light on our own personal situations, and recasts the plot of the play in relevant terms.

GRADE: 6-12

GOAL: To bring the characters of Othello into a real-world context.

STATE STANDARDS: English Literary Response and Analysis 3.0-3.4

OUTCOMES: Students will be able to use basic facts from the text to imaginatively enter into the thoughts, feelings, and motivations of fictional characters by creating a mock Facebook page.

ACTIVITY:

Familiarize students with the profile layout of a social networking site page, such as Facebook. (See following examples.)

1. Ask the students to fill in the profile with
   a. vital statistics
   b. likes and dislikes
   c. friends

NOTE: Students should use information drawn from their knowledge of the play (for example, Iago is a villain), filled out by their imaginations (for example, Iago feels unfairly passed over for promotion.)

2. Profile photos may be drawn or cut out from magazines, or an actual photo of the student could be used and attached to the page. Remember, many actual Facebook profile pages do not have an actual photo of the person who made them—Facebook members sometimes choose a picture of something they feel represents them, e.g., a tree or a poster they like.

3. Share the pages you have created in student pairs or in a group discussion.
**SOCIAL NETWORK** Character Study (continued)

**REFLECTION:**
- Name one thing you had to imagine about your character that you think is really interesting.
- Was it easy to imagine beyond the play—for instance, what Iago does in his spare time? Or do you feel the play did not provide enough information? How so?
- How easy was it to decide who your character’s friends are? Would your character ignore a friend request from other characters in the play? Why or why not?

**EXTENSION EXERCISE IN WRITING DIALOGUE:**
Note: Require the students to fill out the worksheet manually, rather than actually filling out a public profile online. If you can post their mock profile pages onto your school website or blog for students to fill out within the framework of this project, that would work as well, but false profiles in a public space should be actively discouraged. Student examples should show a deep understanding of the plot and qualities of the character. Some examples follow.
Iago

Venice, Italy

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Interests: Puppetry, reading Machiavelli, political consulting

Activities: Swiss banking, damage control consultant for public figures, marketing new products.

Religious Views: If there is a God, he's not good to me.

Favorite Music: “Under My Thumb” by the Rolling Stones

Favorite Movies: anything about espionage or murder

FAVORITE QUOTES

“The basic tool for the manipulation of reality is the manipulation of words. If you can control the meaning of words, you can control the people who must use the words.” — Philip K. Dick

Write something...
# BEYOND THE PLAY: Character Backstory

**OVERVIEW:**
Write the backstory for one of the major characters in *Othello*: Othello, Iago, or Desdemona. A “backstory” is the personal history of a character that is not described in the actual play or story. In other words, it is what happens to the character before the play starts.

**Grade:** 4-12

**GOAL:** To use contextual clues to create an imaginative experience of a character.

**OUTCOMES:** Students will research the play for clues to the characters, and fully describe an imagined life previous to the play’s beginning that justifies the way the character acts in the play.

## ACTIVITY:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Write the names of a few of the characters from <em>Othello</em> onto post-it notes and then stick the notes on the foreheads of the students, so that the students cannot see the post-it note on their own heads but can see the names of everyone else in the class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The students then talk among themselves and ask each other questions about their character.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• A student may only ask questions that can be answered with a “yes” or “no”. After a few minutes, all the questioning should stop and the students should state who they think their character is and see if they are correct.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Explain to the students that the interior life of the character is something an actor must be able to imagine as they start to understand how to play that character.

Exploring the life of a minor character has been a popular literary and theatrical venture. It can illuminate the main story even more brightly. For instance, *Wicked* is a very popular book-turned-Broadway musical that explores the backstory and unseen lives of the witches of Oz before they met Dorothy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• CREATE WORD BANK: Create a word bank as a class on the board about a particular character from the book. Use descriptive concrete sensory details (sight, smell, touch, taste, and hearing). Guide students through describing how the character looks, how s/he acts (personality), and what we already know about him/her from the text.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• WRITE SUMMARY— Prep for writing Backstory: Students choose a character from the reading, and using descriptive words, write a one-paragraph description using words like those in the word bank.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
WRITE BACKSTORY: Students write a one-page description of the character in their life before the play takes place. In this description, include the following:

1. Describe the setting (when and where the backstory takes place).
2. Describe the character in vivid detail as s/he was early in life—personality, looks, situation, who s/he is friends with, what his or her interests are, how s/he looks or talks, etc.
3. Use action words, descriptive words, dialogue, and images.
4. Be based on clues from the main story when possible.
5. Describe a problem that the character faces and why it is a problem (“I don’t understand why Othello is suddenly so cold to me; he used to love me.”).
6. Describe specifically why s/he chooses to take action around the problem (for example, personal satisfaction, revenge, habit, being forced to do them by someone else, etc.).
7. Describe how the character feels about doing what s/he does in the play.

1. ORAL SHARING: Divide students into groups of 4 or 5. Students in each group read their descriptions to each other. Pick one to share with the class and add others if there is time.

2. THEATRICAL PRESENTATION: each group should pick one of those stories to present to classmates in an artistic way. They can choose how to present it. Possibilities include: a rap, comic strip drawings, tableau, puppet show, etc.

COACHING: Tell the students that this requires them to use their imagination! Think of what the character does in the play and imagine reasons why the character ends up doing what he/she does. Remember, there is no “right” answer to an open-ended exercise, as long as they can justify their choices using the text. This exercise is specifically designed to explore the life of minor characters in the play—characters that are often overlooked, but can yield fascinating discoveries. Actors, even when playing a smaller role, must do this same kind of research to be able to make that character believable on stage.

REFLECTION:
• What did you learn about your character that you didn’t know before?
• What did you especially like about one of the descriptions you heard today?
• Did you see a picture of the character in your head?
• How did you describe it in your writing so that other people could imagine the same thing you did?
• (To classmates): Did you see that character the same way the writer did? What was different if anything?
• Who imagined their character’s day while writing the description? What was it like?
• Why did you decide on the specifics that you did for your character? For example, why did you choose a particular setting for that character’s childhood?
• Does the play provide enough clues to spark your imagination? Why or why not?
• What did you find (in your backstory or someone’s from your group) that was particularly interesting?
• How hard was it to imagine beyond the story?
OVERVIEW:
These activities look at verbal interaction and physical movement using the clues in the language to reveal how characters might be interacting.

Grade: 9-12

GOAL: To let the language move the body, allowing for new understanding of how the characters feel and react in a personal context.

OUTCOMES: Students will be able to use text to create their interpretation of the physical and verbal relationship between characters.

ACTIVITY:

• Organize students into pairs and ask them to assign themselves the roles of Desdemona and Othello. (Allow students to have pairs of the same gender as well as male-female.)

• Provide each pair with a copy of the Act 5 Scene 2 text on the following page and ask them to read this together in their pairs.

• Reflect with students on what kind of relationship they think exists between these two characters.
  o What kind of relationship do they have at this point in the play?

• Alert students to the fact that this is the last conversation between this married pair. Each is trying to convince the other of something—Othello to convince Desdemona that he knows of her supposed infidelity, and Desdemona to convince Othello of her innocence. What does this tell us about how this conversation might be performed?

• Encourage each pair to look closely at their lines and to re-read them to each other, picking out one specific word in each line which they think might be particularly convincing to the other person. When they reach those words encourage them to take a step forward towards the other person and to use their voice to make sure that chosen word has real impact.

• Explain that a key part of rehearsals was about considering key words in this way and which words needed to be emphasized. Invite students to share some of the words they picked out and explain their reasons why.
• Share with students that staging and movement across the space also affects the way a moment like this is rehearsed.

• Ask students to stand diagonally opposite their pair and to re-read the scene making sure that they are always on a diagonal. They can move as close to each other or as far away as they want, but they must make sure they are always at the right angle if the other person moves.

• Reflect with students on how this simple rule changed their movement in the scene? Were they always close together or further apart? If the diagonal changed, which character changed it most or was it equal?

• Remind students that this scene is played in the couple’s bedroom. Ask students to consider how the scene might be different if it was played:
  o In front of a Venetian court
  o Among Othello’s soldiers
Text for Othello & Desdemona

ACT 5, SCENE 2

OTHELLO
*He hath confessed.*

DESDEMONA
*What, my lord?*

OTHELLO
*That he hath used thee.*

DESDEMONA
*How? Unlawfully?*

OTHELLO
*Ay.*

DESDEMONA
*He will not say so.*

OTHELLO
*No. His mouth is stopped.*

... 

DESDEMONA
*Alas, he is betrayed, and I undone.*

OTHELLO
*Down, strumpet!*

DESDEMONA
*Kill me tomorrow, let me live tonight.*

OTHELLO
*Nay, if you strive –*

DESDEMONA
*But half an hour! But while I say one prayer!*

OTHELLO
*It is too late.*
Brush Up On Your Shakespeare REFERENCE SHEET

Below are some commonly used, but unfamiliar, words that Shakespeare used.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>addition</th>
<th>bum</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>affined</td>
<td>bound by duty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>alarum</td>
<td>call to arms with trumpets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anatomize</td>
<td>to analyze in detail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ancient</td>
<td>ensign</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anon</td>
<td>until later</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>arrant</td>
<td>absolute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aroint</td>
<td>begone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>assail</td>
<td>to make amorous siege</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>attend</td>
<td>to await</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aye</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>baffle</td>
<td>to hang up (a person) by the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>heels as a mark of disgrace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>baggage</td>
<td>strumpet, prostitute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>balk</td>
<td>to disregard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>barm</td>
<td>the froth on ale</td>
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<tr>
<td>belike</td>
<td>maybe</td>
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<tr>
<td>belov'd</td>
<td>beloved</td>
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<tr>
<td>blank</td>
<td>a target</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bolted</td>
<td>refined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brach</td>
<td>bitch hound</td>
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<tr>
<td>brake</td>
<td>bushes</td>
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<tr>
<td>brave</td>
<td>fine, handsome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>enow</td>
<td>enough</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fare-thee-well</td>
<td>goodbye</td>
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<tr>
<td>got</td>
<td>begot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grammarcy</td>
<td>thank you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>housewife</td>
<td>hussy, prostitute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>heavy</td>
<td>sorrowful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>word</td>
<td>synonym</td>
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<td>------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>impeach</td>
<td>dishonor</td>
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<tr>
<td>list</td>
<td>listen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mayhap</td>
<td>maybe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mess</td>
<td>meal, food</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mew</td>
<td>confine</td>
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<tr>
<td>minister</td>
<td>servant</td>
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<tr>
<td>moiety</td>
<td>portion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>morrow</td>
<td>day</td>
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<tr>
<td>nay</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ne’er</td>
<td>never</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>office</td>
<td>service or favor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>oft</td>
<td>often</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>passing</td>
<td>surprisingly, exceedingly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>perchance</td>
<td>maybe</td>
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<tr>
<td>perforce</td>
<td>must</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>politician</td>
<td>schemer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>post</td>
<td>messenger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>power</td>
<td>army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>prithee</td>
<td>please</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>quest</td>
<td>a jury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>recreant</td>
<td>coward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>resolve</td>
<td>to answer; reply to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>but soft</td>
<td>be quiet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>soundly</td>
<td>plainly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stale</td>
<td>harlot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>subscription</td>
<td>loyalty, allegiance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tax</td>
<td>to criticize; to accuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>troth</td>
<td>belief</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teem</td>
<td>to give birth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thee</td>
<td>you (informal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thou</td>
<td>you (informal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thy</td>
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<td>teem</td>
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<td>you (informal)</td>
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<td>thou</td>
<td>you (informal)</td>
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<tr>
<td>thy</td>
<td>your (informal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tucket</td>
<td>trumpet flourish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>verge</td>
<td>edge, circumference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>verily</td>
<td>truly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>villain</td>
<td>common person, not noble</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>want</td>
<td>lack of, don’t have</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>well-a-day</td>
<td>alas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wherefore</td>
<td>why</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yea</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zounds</td>
<td>by his (Christ’s) wounds</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
YOU’RE THE CRITIC:
Cal Shakes Plays Critique
(Middle and High School)

Give this production a rating of one to five stars. (One star is the lowest rating and five stars is the highest.)
On a separate sheet of paper, write a paragraph review of the play. In other words, describe why you gave it
that rating. Give specific examples to support your reasons. On the same sheet of paper, reflect on the follow-
ing questions:

Star rating: ___ stars

1. How would you describe the character of Othello as he is portrayed in this production?

2. Does Shakespeare give any reasons as to why Othello allows himself to be driven to murder? What could
   motivate Othello besides Iago’s manipulation?

3. Why are we still staging this play 400 years after Shakespeare’s death? Why do you think the director chose
   this play?

4. Which character did you sympathize with most? Why?

5. Think about and describe:
   i. The vocal and physical actions of the actors (characterization)
   ii. The set
   iii. The costumes

6. What do you think are some of the themes of the play?

7. Did the elements of characterizations, set, and/or costumes reinforce any of these themes?

8. Shakespeare writes about things that we all experience: love, jealousy, death, anger, grief, fear, passion,
   confusion, etc. Write a paragraph about one big emotion in the play that you’ve also experienced in your
   life.

9. Now, imagine you are the director of Othello, and use a new sheet of paper to create your own production.
   • Cast the characters of Othello, Iago, and Desdemona with famous actors. Why would you choose these
     people?
   • Many directors set Shakespeare plays in time periods other than the Renaissance. What other setting
     could you place the play in that would make sense? Why?
   • How about costumes? Imagine how the characters in your new production would be dressed that would
     illustrate the kinds of characters they are and what setting you have put the play in.