



Oregon
Shakespeare
Festival.

2018 Study Guide



Moroccan mosaic

Moorish History

- To some, the word Moor refers to people of the Muslim faith who originated from the Middle East, the Iberian Peninsula and northern Africa who conquered and settled in modern day Spain and Portugal. The Moors' territory once extended from what is now Spain, Sicily and some of southern Italy.
- The term also means anyone of Muslim faith. That belief is contested by some who say that there were Christian Moors so the term cannot be only defined by religion.
- Others say the term is synonymous with the term black as a racial identifier. However, the term "white Moors" was used to distinguish Muslims of a lighter complexion.
- Today, as in Shakespeare's time, the term can be used offensively, but it is also used with pride by people who identify as descendants of the Moors of North Africa.



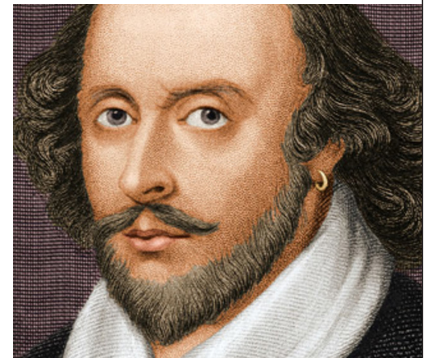
Kyrenia Castle on the island of Cyprus in the Mediterranean Sea

VENICE AND CYPRUS

- In the Middle Ages, Venice flourished as a port and trading center linking Europe to the vast offerings of Asia and the Middle East. This independent state operated on a trade-based economy, but also sought to expand its holdings by acquiring strategically located cities such as Cyprus. Cyprus was sold to Venice in 1489 and immediately became of interest to the Ottoman Empire.
- In the 1500s, Cyprus was the furthest territory held by the Republic of Venice. The War of Cyprus began when Turkey, then a part of the vast Ottoman Empire, invaded Cyprus in 1570. The wealthy and strategically positioned Cyprus was too attractive an island to pass up, even though Venice paid an annual fee to Ottoman controlled Egypt to protect their holding.

Othello

by William Shakespeare



William Shakespeare

SHAKESPEARE'S PLAY

- *Othello* was written soon after *Hamlet* and just before *Macbeth* and *King Lear* around 1604.
- *Othello* was first performed in 1604 and starred Shakespeare's famed actor, Richard Burbage.
- The play was written to please and entertain a new royal patron, King James I of Scotland. *Othello's* themes of jealousy, betrayal, and love were crowd-pleasers.
- The tragedy was inspired by the Italian tale *Hecatommithi*, written in 1565 by Geraldino Cinthio. In this tale, a Moor falls in love with a young Venetian maiden from a family of high status.

Before seeing or reading the play

1. What does the term Moor mean? With what region are they associated? Why did Elizabethans view Moors as outsiders? What prejudices against them existed? What preconceptions? What stereotypes? What part did they play in Elizabethan society? What moral and aesthetic beliefs did the Elizabethans hold about the colors black and white? These and other websites provide information:

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Moor-people>

<https://www.etymonline.com/word/moor>

http://www.britaininprint.net/study_tools/race.html

2. Research the history and relationship of Venice, Cyprus and the Ottoman (Turkish) Empire in the 15th and 16th centuries. To Elizabethan minds and prejudices, what characteristics distinguished each? What would the Elizabethans have admired and/or envied about each? What would they have feared, scorned, rejected and/or felt superior to? These and other websites provide information:

<http://www.phillyshakespeare.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/War-Between-Turks-and-Venice.pdf>

<https://www.onwar.com/aced/chrono/c1500s/yr70/ottomanvenetianwar1570.htm>

<https://sites.google.com/site/apethello/elizabethan-attitudes-toward-venice>

3. Research the behavior called “Machiavellian.” Who was Niccolò Machiavelli? What do Machiavels wish to accomplish? How do they go about accomplishing it? These and other websites provide information:

<http://www.philosophypages.com/ph/macv.htm>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Machiavellianism>

4. What is a cuckold? What is the meaning of horns in relationship to being a cuckold? This and other websites provide information:

<http://www.yourdictionary.com/cuckold>

5. Define and discuss xenophobia and misogyny and how they manifest in behavior and society. These and other websites provide information:

**“O, beware, my lord, of jealousy!
It is the green-eyed monster
which doth mock
The meat it feeds on.”**

<https://www.thefreedictionary.com/misogynist>

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/xenophobia>

6. What were the expectations of men and women in Elizabethan society? What was the function of a wife? How



Margaret Hughes' appearance in the 1660 production of *Othello* marked the first time a woman was allowed to perform on stage in England.

was she expected to behave? What was the function of a husband? How was he expected to behave? These and other websites provide information:

<http://www.william-shakespeare.info/elizabethan-women.htm>

<http://www.elizabethan.org/compendium/10.html>

<http://www.elizabethan-era.org.uk/elizabethan-family-life.htm>

7. What is the importance of honor in Elizabethan society? What does honor mean in regard to a man? A woman? A family? How can one's honor be lost or tainted? How can one's honor be regained? What is reputation? How is a reputation lost? These and other websites provide information:

<http://www.phillyshakespeare.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/elizabethan-women.pdf>

<http://web.uvic.ca/~mbest1/ISShakespeare/Resources/Honour/Honour.html>

<http://blog.elizabethanmafia.com/2010/06/07/honor-and-reputation-in-early-modern-england/>

8. Research the actors who portrayed Othello to great acclaim over the last two centuries. What influence did each have on the way Othello is portrayed? When and where did it become acceptable for actors of color to play the role? What controversies surrounded this casting choice and how were they resolved? These and other websites provide information:

Othello in general:

http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/theater/2015/11/why_is_othello_black_understanding_why_shakespeare_made_his_hero_a_moor.html

Ira Aldridge:

<http://www.historyextra.com/article/culture/ira-al-dridge-shakespeares-black-othello>

<https://shakespeareandbeyond.folger.edu/2017/02/17/ira-alldridge/>

Paul Robeson:

<http://www.bl.uk/learning/timeline/item107672.html>

<http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/robeson/>

Robeson performs Othello's final speech (audio):

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oSBWCKEj3No>

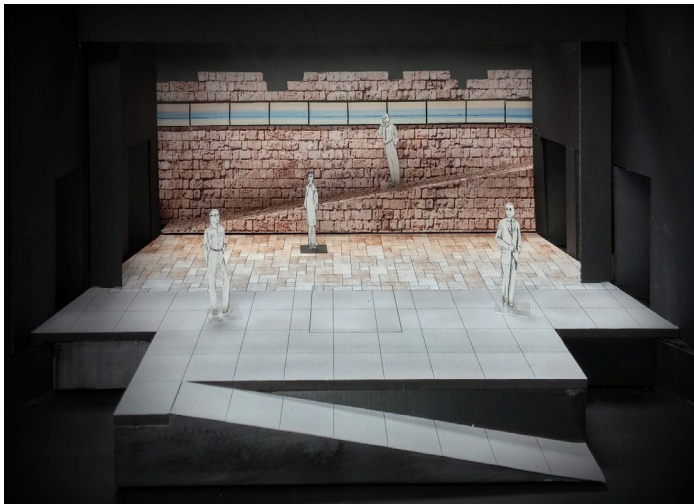
Learn more about Shakespeare's life and times at the following websites:

<http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/SLT/index.html>

<https://www.folger.edu/shakespeares-life>

<http://www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare.html>

<http://www.bardweb.net/man.html>



2018 *Othello* set design by Christopher Acebo

After seeing or reading the play

1. *Othello* is a play of contrasts such as war and peace, light and dark, etc. What other thematic contrasts are highlighted in the play? Which characters are set up as contrast against others and in what ways? How are contrasts used to inform the audience about the locations in the play? How are the contrasts used to differentiate the characters in the play? In what ways do the set, lighting and costume designs for the OSF production explore these contrasts? What are some of the middle grounds between the extremes? Which characters are able to recognize that there is a middle ground and to what effect?

2. Compare Iago's descriptions of Othello in the first scene with how Othello presents himself in words and actions when he appears in the second scene. According to the complaints against Othello that Iago and Roderigo mention in Act One, what offenses do they think Othello is guilty of? In what other instances does Iago misrepresent something or someone? When is Iago's misrepresentation of the facts readily accepted and why?

3. Refer to your research on Moors and discussion of xenophobia. What role does race play in *Othello*? How do the other characters react to and describe Othello? In what ways is Othello different from others in Venetian society? What are the inconsistencies in how Othello is accepted in the play? In what circles is he accepted? Which characters exhibit racial prejudice against Othello and why? How does Othello regard his blackness? How do his feelings change? What causes the changes?

4. In regard to Othello the soldier, what qualities and deeds is he admired for? How does he feel about his life as a soldier? How are his military virtues transformed in peacetime?

5. How does Brabantio describe his daughter, Desdemona? How does her behavior before the Senate show him accurate in his assessment of her? How does her behavior contradict his image of her?

6. What qualities attract Desdemona to Othello? Who courted whom? How well did they know each other before their marriage? What significant aspects of each other do they not know? What are Desdemona's core beliefs about Othello? To what extent is she correct in her assessment of him? Incorrect? What new things do they learn about each other after the wedding? In what ways does Desdemona become an outsider as a result of her marriage to Othello?

7. How do religious beliefs shape each of the characters' sensibilities, behavior and morality? When is religion used to justify a course of action and by whom?

8. Storms in Shakespeare's plays usually reflect the inner turmoil of the principal character(s) and announce the coming of rebirth and/or renewal. What does the storm in *Othello* reflect? What changes does it announce?

9. Refer to your research on Venice, Cyprus and the Ottoman Empire. Which characters do we see in both Venice and Cyprus? How do the characters change in their new location? Of the characters who go to Cyprus, who knew whom in Venice and what were their relationships? What changes in their relationships take place in Cyprus? What actions take place in Cyprus that could not happen in Venice and why? Vice versa?

10. Refer to your research on honor. How is honor defined in the world of the play? What is the importance of honor to each character? Whose honor is called into question? Which characters act honorably? Which characters do not act honorably and why?

11. Some form of the word "honest" appears 42 times in the play. Iago is usually described as "trustworthy" and "honest." How does he manage to convince each of the other principal characters that this is so? To what extent do they convince themselves and why? Who else is described as "honest" and in what circumstances? Who else is dishonest and in what circumstances?



In 1514, Venice produced Niccolò Machiavelli's "The Prince," a treatise on the uses and abuses of political power.

12. Refer to your research on Machiavelli. Which Machiavellian traits does Iago possess? How does he use them to further his plot? What is Iago striving to achieve? According to Iago, what motivates him? What other feelings and character traits might cause his actions? How does his plan change? What prompts the changes? What factors cause Iago's plan to fail?

13. How does Iago regard each of the characters he deceives? What vulnerabilities does he recognize in each of the characters that make them susceptible to his deception? To what extent is his assessment accurate? To what extent does he overestimate or underestimate them?

14. Iago is the only character who addresses the audience directly. What effect do his addresses have on the audience?

15. Describe the history of the strawberry handkerchief, how it was made, and the powers it possesses. How did it come to be in Othello's possession and what does it mean to him? Desdemona? Emilia? Iago? Cassio? Bianca? How is it used to highlight the themes of jealousy and love in the play?

16. Shakespeare's women talk differently when alone together than when men are present. Compare the quality of Desdemona and Emilia's private conversations with their discourse with men. What is Emilia's view on men? What does Emilia choose to share with Desdemona and what does she keep secret? How does Desdemona speak about Othello to Emilia?

17. Refer to your research on roles of men and women in Elizabethan times and discussion of misogyny. Compare the way Brabantio, Othello, Iago and Cassio treat Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca. How do the men fail to protect the women? How does their treatment of the women change? What causes the changes?

18. Compare the three women in the play: Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca. In what ways are they similar? In what ways are they different? What expectations are placed on each woman by the men in their lives? What expectations does each woman have of the men? Under what circumstances do the women submit to male authority? When and how do they defy male authority? What are the results? How is each falsely accused? How is each betrayed by her partner?

19. How is the belief in loyalty presented in positive and negative ways in the play? Why does Othello believe Iago to be fiercely loyal? What evidence does Othello have for believing in Desdemona's fidelity? What evidence does he have for doubting it? In each case, how does he obtain the evidence? What or who influences his belief? Why does Othello believe that Desdemona is not loyal?

20. Traditionally, tragic figures such as Othello are said to have a tragic flaw. What—other than his obvious jealousy—is Othello's tragic flaw? How does it lead to his downfall?

21. How does Iago prey on Othello through his ears? How does he prey on him through his eyes? Why is he able to dupe Othello in these ways?

22. Othello the Moor and Cassio the Florentine are two of the play's two outsiders. Compare the features that make them "other." What other characters may be considered outsiders and why? What might Shakespeare be expressing about his or society's views about outsiders?

23. Refer to your research on honor and reputation. What can we infer about Cassio from what other characters in the play have to say about him? What incites Iago's dislike of him? Describe Cassio's drinking problem. How does he manage it? Why does he allow Iago to manipulate him into drinking? What does Cassio lose by drinking? Who else loses their reputation and how?

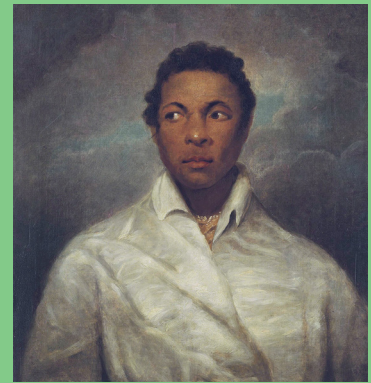
24. In Act III, scene iii, Othello falls into a "trance." What does Iago tell Cassio has happened? How does this affect Cassio's behavior?

25. What does Othello's final speech reveal about his priorities and how he views on his place in the world? How does Othello's language change over the course of the play? What type of language does Shakespeare use in the last speech and to what effect?

26. In the 2018 production of *Othello*, Cyprus is a cosmopolitan place full of people from all over the world. How does xenophobia manifest itself in a world where there are many foreign nationals? How does this influence Othello? Iago? Cassio? Desdemona? Emilia? How does xenophobia contribute to the outcome of the play?

Othello Throughout History

- Black American actor Ira Aldridge took the London stage by storm in 1833 after he took over the role of Othello from beloved actor Edmund Kean.
- Paul Robeson challenged American audiences when he appeared on Broadway in the first staging of the show with a black Othello and an otherwise white cast. His onstage kiss, hug, and romantic relationship with a white woman disturbed many white audience members.
- Acclaimed British actor Lawrence Olivier played Othello at the National Theatre in England, and a film based on that production was produced in 1965. Olivier, a white actor, played the role in blackface. The film played in 51 theatres across the United States in the Civil Rights era. U.S. critics objected to the choice, which seemed out of step with changing times.
- Laurence Fishbourne acted in the 1995 film *Othello* with British actor Kenneth Branagh as his Iago. This production marked the first film by a major studio that cast an African American actor in the role of Othello. Until then, only low-budget, independent films allowed for the casting choice.
- White British actor, Patrick Stewart, took on the title role in a racially flipped “photo negative” version of *Othello* in 1997 at the Shakespeare Theatre in Washington DC. Othello was the only white character and the other characters were people of color.



Ira Aldridge as Othello, the Moor of Venice, now in the Manchester Art Gallery, by Northcote, 1826



Scene from *Othello* with Paul Robeson as Othello, Theatre Guild Production, Broadway, 1943-1944

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