



**UNDERSTANDING  
SHAKESPEARE:  
OTHELLO**

**Robert A. Albano**

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**MERCURYE PRESS**

**Los Angeles**

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NOTE: All act and scene divisions and lines numbers referred to in this text are consistent with those found in *The Norton Shakespeare* (Stephen Greenblatt, editor).



## INTRODUCTION

Just as *Macbeth* may be viewed as a play primarily about **ambition**, the play of *Othello* may be viewed as a tragedy primarily concerning **jealousy**. Shakespeare usually presents his audience not only an impelling dramatic experience, but also a study of a strong and intense emotion, desire, feeling, or passion that overwhelms the protagonist and conquers his rational abilities. Thus, once again, Shakespeare is presenting a play where the principal **conflict** could be termed as one of **Reason vs. Emotion**. During Shakespeare's time the Christian viewpoint was that God has presented man with a special gift – Reason. And with that gift man is capable of controlling his whims, passions, and desires. A man who did not control his emotions was, therefore, viewed as weak and lazy. Shakespeare, however, did not agree with this Christian perspective. Time and again, play after play, Shakespeare presents a strong, noble, virtuous aristocrat who becomes trapped by a powerful emotion and who is defeated by it. This situation happens to Macbeth, it happens to Othello, and it happens to Lear. Shakespeare understood, more so than most of his contemporaries, just how powerful and overwhelming the emotions could be. Shakespeare realized that emotions could become so powerful that they could ruin or destroy a man.

## Understanding Shakespeare: *Othello*

To describe a Shakespeare play with just one word, though, is a huge oversimplification. And, indeed, the play of *Othello* is about more than just jealousy. But this particular drama, perhaps more so than any other of Shakespeare's tragedies, has eluded some critics. These critics have overlooked the richness of the play because it does not contain the complex structure of the other tragedies. *Othello* does not contain any **subplots** or lengthy **comic interludes**. All of the scenes relate directly to the main action of the story. And, thus, certain critics have dismissed the play as being somehow less rich and satisfying than Shakespeare's other major tragedies.

Yet, Shakespeare never is quite that simple. And in this play, Shakespeare adds another dimension and point of interest for the audience with the character of **Iago**. The character of Iago is the **antagonist** to Othello. Iago is, quite certainly, the **villain** of the play. But Shakespeare develops this character far more carefully and subtly than villains of other Renaissance plays. One of the ways Shakespeare develops this character is by the use of the **soliloquy** (a speech or monologue that reveals the inner thoughts of the character). Typically, the protagonist delivers the lengthy or principal soliloquy in the early acts of a tragedy. But in *Othello* Iago delivers not just one, but three of these speeches.

Shakespeare liked to stretch the boundaries and limitations of playwriting. Shakespeare liked to

experiment and move in new directions. And he was doing so in *Othello* with his character of Iago. By having this character present three speeches in the early part of this play, Shakespeare has taken the attention off of Othello and placed it on his villain. Iago becomes the central point of attention in the play. In a sense, viewing the play from a different perspective, one could examine the character of Iago as a **protagonist**. Indeed, he is a vicious and cruel protagonist. And in the literature of later centuries such negative protagonists are referred to as anti-heroes. Although Shakespeare is not the first writer to present an **anti-hero** in literature, this play does establish an innovation in literature because the boundaries have become blurred: the audience cannot simply point to Iago as the villain of the piece or as the protagonist of the piece. But like Othello, Iago is a figure who experiences a **tragic fall**. And like Othello, that fall is due to an overwhelming passion or desire.

One aspect of Iago's character that has caused many critics to pass over him is his evil nature. The major question for some critics and audience members is this: **Is Iago just too evil to be believable?** Indeed, the extent of Iago's evil is quite great; and many people cannot believe that anyone could be so downright wicked. But other critics and audience members believe that there are many Iagos in this world, as accounts in history and newspapers often seem to indicate.

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The character of Iago is actually quite a complex figure. And a successful production of this play requires an extremely gifted actor who can make the character both fascinating and repulsive to the audience at the same time. The audience is intrigued by this character and wants to learn more about him. Yet, at the same time, the audience hates this figure and hopes for his capture and punishment.

As with most Shakespeare plays, the **role of fate** must be taken into consideration in a study of this play. There are no witches or other supernatural agents in *Othello*. But there is a supernatural force, unseen and unheard, that propels events into a certain tragic path. At first events occur to the favor of Iago, who proclaims himself superior to the forces of fate. But in time the forces of fate catch up with the wicked figure who believes that he can manipulate the lives of others like so many puppets on his strings.

Finally, a word should be said about postmodern productions of *Othello* in America. Perhaps sometime around the 1960s theater producers envisioned an Othello who represented or symbolized the black man who struggled up from **slavery** to achieve greatness. Indeed, the problem of slavery during the 19<sup>th</sup> century forms a sad chapter of American history; and civil rights movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century certainly did need to point to that tragic past in order to pave the way toward a better future. But Shakespeare's play, written centuries earlier, has nothing to do with that. Othello is an aristocrat. He

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is a nobleman from northern Africa. And, as such, he bears far more in common with Shakespeare's other tragic heroes, such as Macbeth or Lear, than he does with the black slaves of America. In short, the connection of *Othello* to slavery is misleading and inappropriate. It is a misinterpretation of the play.

However, the issue of **prejudice** does play a role in this play. Just as today, prejudice existed in Shakespeare's time. And Shakespeare was certainly aware of this and included some of the attitudes towards black Africans that appeared in his time. But prejudice is not the major focus or issue of this play. The play of *Othello* succeeds because the members of the audience can relate to and sympathize with Othello. The members of the audience feel the passion and experience the anguish of this man. The members of the audience even come to identify themselves with Othello. In this manner, Shakespeare actually overcomes the prejudices of his own audience, who see Othello not as a black man or as an aristocrat, but just as a man, someone who is human just like themselves.





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