

A Guide to OTHELLO

by William Shakespeare



Alistair McCallum

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Setting the scene

Othello was probably written in the period 1602-4, when Shakespeare was in his late thirties. He was a leading member of England's foremost acting company, based at the Globe Theatre in London. With the death of Queen Elizabeth in 1603, the company came under the patronage of her successor, King James I, a great theatre enthusiast, and became known as the King's Men.

The first recorded performance of *Othello* was at the new king's court in 1604. The play was an immediate and continuing success. Many of Shakespeare's plays were later adapted in various ways to suit current tastes – for example, songs might be added, or even endings changed – but *Othello* remained enduringly popular in its original form after the playwright's death in 1616.

In 1642, with civil war looming, Parliament ordered all London's theatres to be closed: it was not until 1660, with the restoration of King Charles II, that this ban was lifted. One of the first productions to celebrate the reopening of the theatres was a staging of *Othello* in December of that year. The part of Desdemona was played by Margaret Hughes, in what was almost certainly the first performance by a woman on an English stage; before this, women's parts had been played exclusively by boys.

Set against a background of feverish political and military activity, the tragedy of *Othello* is intimate and compelling. Overflowing with rich, musical, stately language, it is a drama that involves its audience intensely:

“Of all Shakespeare's tragedies, Othello is the most painfully exciting and the most terrible ... the reader's heart and mind are held in a vice, experiencing the extremes of pity and fear, sympathy and repulsion, sickening hope and dreadful expectation ... Nowhere else in Shakespeare do we hold our breath in such anxiety and for so long a time as in the later acts of Othello.”

A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*

Runaway lovers

In the wealthy, opulent republic of Venice, a secret marriage has taken place.

The newlyweds are Desdemona, the young daughter of a Venetian senator, and Othello, a Moorish general who has long served the republic as a military commander. Having eloped in the dead of night, the couple are now at a nearby inn.

News of the marriage has just emerged. Roderigo, a rich, dissolute young Venetian, is dismayed; he had been hoping to marry the beautiful Desdemona himself, and he is appalled at her match with the ageing, dark-skinned foreign soldier.

Curtain up

Iago bears a grudge

I, i

Roderigo is angrily confronting Iago, Othello's aide and trusted adviser, believing that he knew in advance about the Moor's plan to elope with Desdemona. He is furious that Iago, who has often benefited from Roderigo's generosity, did not warn him about the marriage.

For his part, Iago vehemently denies any knowledge of Othello's decision:

Roderigo: Tush, never tell me, I take it much unkindly
That thou, Iago, who hast had my purse
As if the strings were thine, shouldst know of this.

Iago: 'Sblood,¹ but you'll not hear me. If ever I did dream
Of such a matter, abhor me.

¹ *God's blood*

Iago goes on to assure Roderigo that he hates the Moor, just as Roderigo himself does. His animosity, he explains, is due to Othello's recent failure to promote him to the post of lieutenant. Iago knew himself to be the best man for the job, and was supported by influential Venetians, but Othello refused his request for promotion with evasive answers:

Iago: Three great ones of the city,
In personal suit¹ to make me his lieutenant,
Off-capped to him, and by the faith of man
I know my price, I am worth no worse a place.
But he, as loving his own pride and purposes,
Evades them, with a bombast circumstance²
Horribly stuffed with epithets of war,³
And in conclusion
Nonsuits⁴ my mediators.

¹ *appeal, petition*

² *in formal, convoluted language*

³ *padded out with military jargon*

⁴ *refuses, rejects*

The alarm is raised

Iago urges Roderigo to wake Desdemona's father, the senator Brabantio, and warn him of his daughter's clandestine marriage.

The two men approach Brabantio's house. Roderigo's attempts to rouse the senator are drowned out by Iago's urgent, forceful cries:

Roderigo: What ho! Brabantio, Signior Brabantio, ho!

Iago: Awake, what ho, Brabantio! Thieves, thieves, thieves!
Look to your house, your daughter and your bags!
Thieves, thieves!

Brabantio appears at the balcony, ill-tempered at being summoned in the middle of the night. Again Iago takes the lead, brazenly hinting to the senator that his daughter is coupled with a dark, evil spirit:

Iago: ... for shame put on your gown!
Your heart is burst, you have lost half your soul,
Even now, now, very now, an old black ram
Is tupping¹ your white ewe! Arise, arise,
Awake the snorting² citizens with the bell
Or else the devil will make a grandsire³ of you ...

¹ *copulating with*

² *snoring*

³ *grandfather*

When Brabantio learns that one of the men outside his window is Roderigo, he is displeased; he disapproves of the young gentleman, and has previously ordered him to stay away from his daughter. Roderigo tries unsuccessfully to reassure Brabantio that he has the senator's interests at heart.

Iago then interrupts, and his crude warnings immediately attract Brabantio's attention:

Iago: Because we come to do you service, and you think we are ruffians, you'll have your daughter covered¹ with a Barbary² horse; you'll have your nephews³ neigh to you ...

Brabantio: What profane wretch art thou?

Iago: I am one, sir, that comes to tell you your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs.⁴

¹ *mated*

² *from north Africa*

³ *grandchildren, descendants*

⁴ *copulating*

Roderigo now spells out what has happened: under cover of darkness, Brabantio's daughter Desdemona has secretly fled the house to be with Othello. Brabantio is shocked, and calls for his servants to bring him light and to search the house immediately.

As Brabantio goes back indoors, Iago tells Roderigo that he cannot stay; if he were seen to be one of his master's accusers, his position would be at risk. War is imminent, and Othello's services will be essential to Venice regardless of his misdemeanour. Iago, in turn, will be required to serve the general, and he cannot afford to lose his livelihood.

A search party will inevitably be raised when it is discovered that Desdemona is missing. Iago tells Roderigo the name of the inn where Othello will be found, then sets off to join his master.

At this point Brabantio comes out to join Roderigo. The house has been searched, and Desdemona is nowhere to be found. The senator is beside himself with anxiety and grief:

Brabantio: ... gone she is,
And what's to come of my despised time
Is nought but bitterness. Now Roderigo,
Where didst thou see her? – O unhappy girl! –
With the Moor, say'st thou? – Who would be a
father? –
How didst thou know 'twas she? – O, she deceives me
Past thought! – What said she to you?

Brabantio suspects that magical powers of some sort have been used on his daughter, and he now wishes that he had looked more favourably on Roderigo's attempts to court Desdemona. When Roderigo reveals that he can help to find the fugitive couple, Brabantio promises that he will be rewarded generously.

In all their heated arguments, Iago, Roderigo and Brabantio do not once mention Othello by name during the opening scenes:

“The term ‘Moor’ was an elastic one in the early modern period, used variously as a marker of race, geography, nationality, religion, or some combination of these. The term is associated in texts of the period with light-skinned Arabs from north-Africa; with dark-skinned sub-Saharan Africans; with Muslims from the Iberian Peninsula; and with the smaller number of men and women of color who lived in England, some as slaves and others as paid workers ... By replacing Othello’s name with the indeterminate sobriquet ‘Moor’, the general’s opponents deny his individuality and insist instead on his role as a potentially threatening outsider.”

Jessica Slights, Introduction to *Othello*, Internet Shakespeare Editions, 2018

Othello is summoned

I, ii

Iago has joined Othello outside the inn where he has taken up residence with his new wife. He explains to his master that he has just spoken with Brabantio. In Iago's version of events, he was so shocked at the old senator's attitude that he found it difficult to refrain from violently assaulting him:

Iago: I had thought t'have yerked him¹ here, under the ribs.

Othello: 'Tis better as it is.

Iago: Nay, but he prated²
And spoke such scurvy and provoking terms
Against your honour,
That with the little godliness I have
I did full hard forbear him.³

¹ *I was tempted to stab him*

² *chattered foolishly*

³ *I spared him, with great difficulty*

Iago then turns to another subject. Brabantio is a very influential man in Venetian society, he points out, and he may be able to annul Othello's marriage, particularly if it has not yet been consummated.

Othello is unmoved. He knows that his usefulness to Venice as a military leader will far outweigh any qualms people may have over his marriage to the senator's daughter. Besides, he points out, he is of royal descent himself, even though this is not widely known in Venice, and is worthy of a bride such as Desdemona.

A group of men approaches through the darkness. Iago, believing this to be Brabantio and his search party, warns Othello to go inside. The general refuses, determined to stand his ground.

As the men approach, however, it becomes clear that this is not Brabantio and his followers; it is Othello's new lieutenant Cassio, accompanied by servants of the Duke of Venice himself. Their message is urgent: Othello's presence is required immediately at a council of war. The island of Cyprus, a Venetian possession, is under threat:

Othello: The goodness of the night upon you, friends.
What is the news?

Cassio: The Duke does greet you, general,
And he requires your haste-post-haste¹ appearance,
Even on the instant.

Othello: What's the matter, think you?

Cassio: Something from Cyprus, as I may divine;
It is a business of some heat. The galleys
Have sent a dozen sequent² messengers
This very night, at one another's heels,
And many of the consuls,³ raised and met,
Are at the Duke's already. You have been hotly
called for ...

¹ *urgent (an instruction often written on letters)*

² *successive, following one another*

³ *councillors, advisers*

Othello agrees to come at once, pausing only to hurry into the inn to take his leave of Desdemona. While he is gone, Cassio asks what Othello is doing at an inn rather than at home. Iago's reply is crude but enigmatic:

Cassio: Ancient, what makes he here?

Iago: Faith, he tonight hath boarded¹ a land carrack:²
If it prove lawful prize,³ he's made for ever.

Cassio: I do not understand.

Iago: He's married.

¹ *gone on board, entered*

² *ship carrying treasure*

³ *if he is legally entitled to his plunder*

Before Iago has time to give any more details, Othello returns.

Brabantio accuses Othello

Just as Othello is about to set off to join the Duke and his council of war, Brabantio arrives, still furious at the disappearance of his daughter. A gang of armed men, including Roderigo, is with him, and he immediately orders them to seize the Moor.

Weapons are drawn on both sides, but Othello remains calm. He respects the senator's age and wisdom, he says, and is ready to listen:

Othello: Keep up¹ your bright swords, for the dew will rust them.

Good signior, you shall more command with years
Than with your weapons.

¹ *put away*

Keep up your bright swords ...

“Brabantio’s party arrive, but the threatened brawl is at once averted ... Othello’s slight contempt for these excited Venetians, who flash their nice new swords like toys, gives extra weight to his unforced authority.”

John Wain, *The Living World of Shakespeare*, 1964

Brabantio launches into an angry denunciation of Othello. He accuses him of casting a spell on Desdemona, who has never shown any interest in marriage, and who would never otherwise have allowed herself to be abducted in this way:

Brabantio: Damned as thou art, thou hast enchanted her,
For I'll refer me to all things of sense,¹
If she in chains of magic were not bound,
Whether a maid so tender, fair and happy,
So opposite to marriage that she shunned
The wealthy, curled² darlings of our nation,
Would ever have, t'incur a general mock,
Run from her guardage³ to the sooty bosom
Of such a thing as thou?

¹ *I would present my case to anyone with any degree of perception*

² *elegant, stylish*

³ *would ever have abandoned her protectors, making herself an object of ridicule*

The senator orders his men to arrest Othello on suspicion of sorcery, and to keep him in prison until a trial can be arranged. Othello, still calm, points out that the Duke, who has summoned him urgently, might be displeased.

Brabantio is shocked to hear that a council of war has been called in the middle of the night. He will need to join the Duke himself, but he insists that his case against Othello must still be considered:

Brabantio: How? The Duke in council?
In this time of the night? Bring him away:¹
Mine's not an idle cause, the Duke himself,
Or any of my brothers of the state,²
Cannot but feel this wrong as 'twere their own.
For if such actions may have passage free³
Bond-slaves and pagans shall our statesmen be.

¹ *bring Othello with us*

² *fellow-senators*

³ *are allowed to go unchallenged*

Although *Othello* is a fictional story, it is set against the background of the struggle between Venice and the Ottoman Empire (which included modern-day Turkey and Greece, as well as vast stretches of territory in the Middle East and Africa) for control of the Mediterranean Sea. This conflict culminated in the major sea-battle of Lepanto in 1571.

In Shakespeare's day, this battle, won decisively by the Venetians and their allies, was well within living memory. It was known to be a subject that interested the new patron of Shakespeare's acting company, King James I:

“Othello probably owes something to the king's known interest in the Christian struggle against the Muslim Turks; in his youth, James had written a 'celestial poem', Lepanto, to celebrate the great sea-battle of 1571 in which a Christian fleet organised by the Venetian republic and captained by Don John of Austria virtually destroyed Muslim sea-power. Clearly the play evokes that period and the tensions that led up to the battle; the Mediterranean is where conflicting religions meet, a cosmopolitan mixing-pot where an alien like the Moor might plausibly make his mark.”

Richard Dutton, *William Shakespeare: A Literary Life*, 1989

A threat to Venice

I, iii

In a chamber in the Duke's palace, the council of war is under way. Although reports are inconsistent, there seems to be little doubt that a large Turkish fleet is heading for the Venetian island of Cyprus.

A sailor rushes in with more news: the fleet has been seen sailing towards the island of Rhodes. The Duke and his councillors are not convinced: Rhodes is better defended than Cyprus, and is of less importance to the Turks.

It soon becomes clear that the fleet has indeed been to Rhodes, but only to join up with reinforcements. A Turkish armada is now heading directly for Cyprus, and Montano, the Venetian governor of the island, has asked for urgent assistance.

Othello, Brabantio and their followers now arrive. The Duke immediately informs Othello that he will be needed in the imminent battle with the Turks.

Brabantio, on the other hand, is interested only in the ill-treatment of his daughter. Despite the urgency of the situation, the Duke and his councillors listen sympathetically:

Brabantio: ... my particular grief
Is of so flood-gate¹ and o'erbearing nature
That it engluts² and swallows other sorrows
And it is still itself.

Duke: Why? What's the matter?

Brabantio: My daughter, O my daughter!

Senator: Dead?

Brabantio: Ay, to me:
She is abused, stolen from me and corrupted
By spells and medicines bought of mountebanks³ ...

¹ *torrential, overwhelming*

² *consumes, devours*

³ *quack doctors, fraudsters*

Brabantio insists that witchcraft must have been used to seduce Desdemona. This is an extremely serious charge, says the Duke: even if the culprit were his own son, the appropriate punishment would be death. The council is shocked when Brabantio reveals that the man in question is Othello, their trusted general.

A love story

Othello respectfully addresses the Duke and the assembled council. It is true that he has married Desdemona, he announces. He then reminds his listeners that he has been a soldier since he was virtually a child, and apologises for his lack of eloquence:

Othello: ... little of this great world can I speak
More than pertains to feats of broil¹ and battle,
And therefore little shall I grace my cause
In speaking for myself. Yet, by your gracious patience,
I will a round unvarnished tale deliver
Of my whole course of love ...

¹ *turmoil, upheaval*

Brabantio, unable to contain his anger and disbelief, interrupts impatiently. It is inconceivable that his daughter has married the Moor of her own free will:

Brabantio: A maiden never bold,
Of spirit so still and quiet that her motion
Blushed at herself;¹ and she, in spite of nature,
Of years, of country, credit,² everything,
To fall in love with what she feared to look on?

¹ *any stirring of her feelings made her blush*

² *in spite of differences of character, age,
nationality and reputation*

He repeats his accusation that Othello has used witchcraft – probably in the form of magical potions – to influence his daughter. The Duke points out that Brabantio's suspicions do not amount to genuine evidence. One of the senators turns to Othello and asks him directly whether he has used any kind of deception to win Desdemona's affections.

Othello proposes that they ask Desdemona herself, and the Duke sends for her. In the meantime, Othello volunteers to describe how the two of them fell in love. He recounts how he had often visited Desdemona's father Brabantio, who admired Othello and loved to hear of his exploits and his travels:

Othello: ... I spake of most disastrous chances,¹
Of moving accidents by flood and field,²
Of hair-breadth scapes i' th' imminent deadly
breach,³
Of being taken by the insolent foe
And sold to slavery ...
... of the cannibals that each other eat,
The Anthropophagi,⁴ and men whose heads
Do grow beneath their shoulders.

¹ *unlucky, ill-starred events*

² *stirring incidents at sea and on the battlefield*

³ *narrow escapes from death under a break in
the overhanging battlements*

⁴ *man-eaters*

Desdemona would take every opportunity that she could to listen as Othello and her father talked. Eventually, with Othello's encouragement, she asked to spend some time alone with him. She was deeply touched by his stories of the hardships he had endured, and Othello in turn was moved by her concern:

Othello: My story being done
She gave me for my pains a world of sighs,
She swore in faith 'twas strange, 'twas passing¹
strange,
'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful ...
... She loved me for the dangers I had passed
And I loved her that² she did pity them.
This only is the witchcraft I have used.

¹ *exceptionally*

² *for the fact that, because*

Brabantio accepts defeat

The Duke, affected by Othello's account, remarks that it is not surprising that Desdemona has fallen in love. He advises Brabantio to accept the situation rather than fight hopelessly against it.

Desdemona herself now arrives at the council. Brabantio, confident that he will be proved correct, asks her to say publicly where her loyalties lie. He does not receive the answer he had anticipated:

Brabantio: Do you perceive, in all this noble company,
Where most you owe obedience?

Desdemona: My noble father,
I do perceive here a divided duty.
To you I am bound for life and education:¹
My life and education both do learn² me
How to respect you; you are the lord of duty,
I am hitherto your daughter.³ But here's my husband:
And so much duty as my mother showed
To you, preferring you before her father,
So much I challenge that I may profess
Due to the Moor my lord.⁴

¹ *I am indebted to you for my life and upbringing*

² *teach*

³ *until now, my identity has been as your daughter*

⁴ *I claim the same right to place my husband
above my father*

Brabantio accepts his daughter's declaration, but he remains resentful. He wishes he had never fathered a child, he claims; and although he gives his blessing to the marriage, he makes no secret of the fact that he wishes it had never happened.