

Othello

Imagine a wealthy neighborhood in the middle of the night. It is dark and quiet. Two men suddenly shout noisily up to a house. A sleepy older man, a powerful senator, comes to the window. "You've been robbed!" they yell. "What?" the man demands. They tell him a troubling story: your fair daughter has been stolen by a rapacious black man. The angry senator rushes to court to get a magistrate to stop the marriage, while a riotous crowd calls the "Moor" to come forward to testify. They accuse him of kidnapping and of witchcraft. Not so, the newly married man replies in a dignified manner, a man who happens to be the state's most important military hero—with the country about to launch a war. The soldier proceeds to tell a moving and eloquent story, what he calls a "round unvarnished tale." When invited to the senator's house, he had been asked to narrate his exotic adventures and travels. The man's daughter listened eagerly, later telling the soldier in confidence that such stories could certainly woo *any* woman. Presto: they fell in love. This is the story that the soldier tells at court so effectively that it persuades the magistrate to bless this atypical, cross-raced marriage. "I think this tale would win my daughter too," the Duke confesses. Such is the beginning of William Shakespeare's now classic play, *Othello*, a play that has gripped readers' and audience's imaginations for over four centuries.

As its opening intimates, *Othello* is a story about the power of stories and the seduction of the imagination. It constantly asks the reader and audience to think about ways that reality is shaped by words and images. We enter the story from the perspective of Iago's prejudicial view of Othello and Desdemona's relationship. When the scene moves to Cyprus, an outpost of the Western Christian world far from the civilizing structures controlled by the Duke, Iago's skill in weaving an alternative reality through rhetoric takes center stage. Here he is able to make Othello conjure up tortuous visions of his wife as adulterous. Iago, one of the most deliciously evil villains ever to take the stage, is a consummate actor, director, rhetorician, and improviser—someone able to frame scenes so vividly that life experiences serve merely as ingredients for his devious scripting. He twists words to stimulate Othello's imagination, forces everyone to leap to judgment, plays brilliantly off of people's virtues and faults, and even transforms a mundane stage prop—a handkerchief—into "ocular proof" of infidelity.

As you read the play, notice how Iago is able to unravel a passionate marriage by trading on Othello's idea of himself as a racial outsider in the Venetian white world. In the famous rhetorical seduction scene (3.3.), Othello says of Desdemona "When I love thee not, chaos is come again" (and chaos, for a Renaissance audience, was the ultimate nothingness). One clue to understanding why Othello's love for Desdemona is paramount in his life might

be found in the historical context in which the play was presented. Othello was the first black tragic hero on the English stage, performed just at a time when England started to invest in the African slave trade. As a newcomer to Venice, he finds himself on the margins of culture, holding an unclear status that his marriage might solidify by allowing him to assimilate. At stake in his relationship is his very sense of self and his place in his society. "My name, that was as fresh / As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black / As mine own face," Othello declares after hearing Iago's accusations. Apparently Iago has successfully made Othello see black skin as moral and sexual filth. Othello's sense of himself as divided into hero and enemy—Venetian and other—emerges forcefully in his final speech.

As you read, notice the play's compelling analysis of the psychology of jealousy, shown when Iago uses innuendo to make Othello dream up pornographic images. Jealousy, the "green eyed monster," becomes an all-powerful lens through which Othello then experiences the world. Notice as well the play's striking presentation of Emilia's and Desdemona's different perspectives on the place women can occupy in a male-dominated society. Their discussion prepares the way for the surprising female heroics displayed at the play's conclusion. Notice finally the play's focus on the dangers of the imagination, an unexpected theme to be espoused in a play that was part of London's new burgeoning entertainment industry. In Shakespeare's day, city fathers and preachers accused the theater of being dangerously immoral in its capacity to create false realities; *Othello*, Shakespeare's most anti-theatrical play, seems to confirm these charges. Regardless of how we interpret the play, we see that stories and fiction hold a vast amount of power.

Othello has appeared in many incarnations for over four hundred years—as an opera, silent film, printed text, and differently adapted performances staged all over the world. It has served as the ground for novelistic and poetic revisions as well as philosophical speculation. This fall quarter, Northwestern's English Department will be celebrating *Othello* by hosting a series of events revolving around this classic text, including film screenings, performances, panel debates and dance workshops. The eminent cultural critic Marjorie Garber (whose classes on Shakespeare at Harvard attract huge enrollments) will be here for a "must-see" presentation. Director David Bell will show how a scene from the play can be performed two different ways. And there will be discussions of opera, art installations, Kabuki *Othello*, dance adaptations, the teen flick *O*, and much more. We hope to tease out the complex and enduring issues that arise from this play, as well as showing how it continues to come alive in each century in new ways.

Wendy Wall
Chair of the English Department
Northwestern University