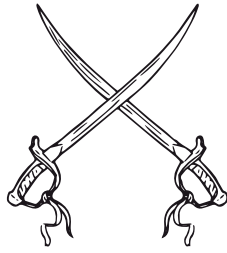


THE TRAGEDY OF OTHELLO,  
THE MOOR OF VENICE

*William Shakespeare*

*With an Introduction by Stephen Rippon*





# CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION . . . . .vii  
DRAMATIS PERSONAE . . . . . XIV

## ACT I

SCENE I . . . . . I  
SCENE II . . . . . 8  
SCENE III . . . . . 12

## ACT I

SCENE I . . . . . 27  
SCENE II . . . . . 38  
SCENE III . . . . . 39

## ACT I

SCENE I . . . . . 53  
SCENE II . . . . . 55  
SCENE III . . . . . 56  
SCENE IV . . . . . 75

## ACT I

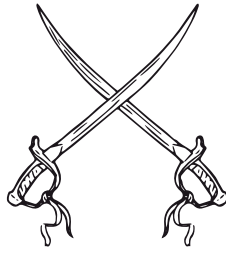
SCENE I . . . . . 84  
SCENE II . . . . . 95  
SCENE III . . . . . 105

## ACT I

SCENE I . . . . . 109  
SCENE II . . . . . 115

ANSWERS TO REVIEW QUESTIONS . . . . . 131





## INTRODUCTION

Have you ever sat through a show, movie, or play that was intensely disturbing to watch? *Othello* is one such work. Harold Bloom, a well-known literary scholar and critic, observes that *Othello* “is surely Shakespeare’s most painful play.” Why should we put ourselves through such an experience? Is there any redeeming value to be had in watching the inevitably tragic events unfold?

### The World Around

As poet and playwright Ben Jonson observes in his tribute to Shakespeare, “He was not of an age, but for all time!”<sup>†</sup> Still, Shakespeare did inhabit a particular age. We will look briefly at the history between Venice and Cyprus, where *Othello* takes place, and then at the major transition that occurred in England just before the play was composed.

In 1571, Islamic Turks of the Ottoman Empire seized Cyprus, which had belonged to Venice for over a century. That led to the

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\* *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 442.

† “To the Memory of My Beloved, the Author Mr William Shakespeare,” in *The New Oxford Book of Seventeenth-Century Verse*, ed. Alastair Fowler (Oxford UP, 1991), 150.

Battle of Lepanto, where Christian forces defeated the Turks.\* In 1591, King James VI of Scotland published a poem, “Lepanto.” In one section of this long poem, God tells the angel Gabriel to

Go quickly hence to Venice town,  
And put into their minds  
To take revenge of wrongs the Turks  
Have done in sundry kinds.†

In 1603, Richard Knolles published *A Generall Historie of the Turkes*, which covered Christendom’s conflicts with the Ottoman Empire.‡ It is likely that as he wrote *Othello*, Shakespeare drew on King James’ “Lepanto” as well as Knolles’ history; as Jonathan Bate points out, the name “Othello” resembles Othoman (also known as Osman), the founder of the Ottoman Empire.§

Another important event took place in England a year before *Othello* appeared on stage: Queen Elizabeth I, who had reigned since 1558, died in March of 1603. She was succeeded by King James, whose poem “Lepanto” was republished that year. *Othello* was first performed in front of King James himself on November 1, 1604 by Shakespeare’s company, which was now called “The King’s Men.”

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\* Virginia Mason Vaughan, “Critical Approaches to *Othello*,” British Library, March 15, 2016, <https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/critical-approaches-to-othello> (Accessed June 25, 2019).

† “The Lepanto of James the Sixt, King of Scotland,” *His Maiesties poetickall exercises at vacant hours* (Edinburgh: Robert Waldegrave, 1591), I updated the spelling of the poem for ease of reading.

‡ “Description of the Battle of Lepanto in Knolles’ *History of the Turkes*,” British Library, <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/description-of-the-battle-of-lepanto-in-knolles-history-of-the-turks> (Accessed June 26, 2019).

§ “*Othello* and the Other,” *The Times Literary Supplement*, October 19, 2001, available at <http://www2.idehist.uu.se/distans/ilmh/Ren/sh-othello-bate.htm> (Accessed June 25, 2019). For the text of Knolles’ *History of the Turkes*, see <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A04911.0001.001?view=toc>.

in Cyprus; however, in the attack Cassio is only injured, while Cassio wounds Roderigo. After Lodovico and Gratiano come in response to the cries, Iago secretly stabs Roderigo, giving him a mortal wound. In the final scene, Othello arrives at Desdemona's bedside as she is asleep. He cannot help but kiss her, conflicted as he is. She awakens and Othello announces his intention to kill her. She protests a little, but to no avail: he smothers her. Emilia arrives with news of the violent attack on Cassio. Desdemona briefly revives and cries out. After Desdemona's dying words, Othello explains to Emilia that he killed Desdemona because she was having an affair with Cassio, as Iago told her. Emilia, recognizing the injustice, cries out for help. Gratiano and Montano appear, along with Iago. When Othello mentions the handkerchief as evidence, Emilia decries Iago as a villain and informs Othello that the handkerchief was planted. Iago stabs Emilia, who dies on the bed alongside Desdemona. Iago is arrested. Othello wounds Iago. Iago refuses to speak, despite the threat of torture. Othello asks permission to make a final speech before being arrested, which he concludes by stabbing himself. Before he dies, he gives Desdemona one last kiss.

### Worldview Analysis

*Othello* is agonizing to read or watch. As Harold Bloom observes, "The decline and fall of the Moor possesses a violence from within that assaults the audience beyond the limit of endurance. Not only is *Othello's* catastrophe incredibly painful, Shakespeare draws it out at excruciating length."<sup>\*</sup> Again, we must ask, why put the reader or viewer through such pain?

In order to appreciate *Othello*, we need to look more closely at *Othello's* genre, tragedy, as it reflects the biblical account of Creation, Fall, and Redemption. Then, by way of applying the redemptive aspect of *Othello* to our own lives, we will look at six key characters

<sup>\*</sup> Harold Bloom, *Iago: The Strategies of Evil* (New York: Scribner, 2018), 99.

in *Othello*: Iago, Desdemona, Othello, Emilia, Roderigo, and Cassio. There is something we can learn from each character, for they each make choices that lead to redemption or damnation.

Aristotle presents a foundational definition of tragedy in his *Poetics*. A tragedy tells the story of a noble person who, because of a great error on his part, falls from happiness into misery, leading the audience to feel fear and pity.<sup>†</sup> Aristotle commends the sort of plot where, as in *Oedipus Rex*, the character is ignorant of what he has done; only later does he recognize it with horror.

Peter Leithart contrasts Shakespeare's tragedies with Greek tragedies: "In Shakespeare's tragedies the main characters are not merely 'fallible' as Oedipus was, but commit sins, acts of moral evil. Nor are they ignorant of what they are doing."<sup>‡</sup> Leithart observes that tragedies are retellings of the "fall story."<sup>§</sup> As a tragedy, *Othello* draws upon the biblical account of Adam's fall.

But if *Othello* is a fall story, what do the characters fall from? What is their initial state? Othello is first presented to us as an admirable man, truly noble and virtuous, as Adam was before the Fall. He is not ashamed to be confronted by Brabantio or even the Duke of Venice about having eloped with Desdemona, saying, "My parts, my title, and my perfect soul / Shall manifest me rightly" (Act I, Scene II, p. 9).<sup>¶</sup> As G. Wilson Knight observes in *The Wheel of Fire*, "Othello is essential man in all his prowess and protective strength; Desdemona essential woman, gentle, loving, brave in trust of her warrior husband."<sup>\*\*</sup> Desdemona, then, is Eve. She appeals to the Duke of Venice

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† Aristotle, *De Poetica (Poetics)*, trans. Ingram Bywater, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941).

‡ *Brightest Heaven of Invention: A Christian Guide to Six Shakespeare Plays* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 1996), 114.

§. *Ibid.*, 114-115.

¶ All citations are to the Canon Classics Edition (2016).

\*\* G. Wilson Knight, "The Othello Music," in *The Wheel of Fire, in Shakespeare: Othello: A Casebook*, ed. John Wain, revised ed. (London: Macmillan, 1994), 86.



for permission to accompany Othello to Cyprus. She does not want to be separated from her husband, even if it puts her in harm's way.

When husband and wife arrive on Cyprus safely, their delight in each other is comparable to Adam and Eve before the Fall. They have an exchange:

OTHELLO: O my fair warrior!

DESDEMONA: My dear Othello!

OTHELLO: It gives me wonder great as my content

To see you here before me. O my soul's joy! (Act II, Scene I, p.

34)

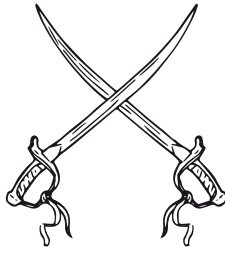
Having survived the storm and the Turkish threat, Othello and Desdemona may now enjoy their honeymoon. But there is a serpent in the garden.\*

Iago is the satanic figure who brings about their fall, and ultimately their death—but in this case, the serpent does not address the woman, but Othello. Desdemona remains innocent throughout the play. In an amazing, subtle scene of temptation at the center of the play—Act III, Scene III—Iago masterfully insinuates an affair between Desdemona and Cassio, Othello's second-in-command officer. We in the audience have known this was Iago's plan since Act I, which only increases the pain of seeing Iago's scheme progress.

In Act II, Iago unfolds to us his plans to deceive Othello, saying, "I'll pour this pestilence into his ear" (Act II, Scene III, p. 51). Iago's words remind us of another tragedy Shakespeare wrote just a few years before *Othello*, *Hamlet*, in which Claudius poisoned Hamlet's father through the ear.† Shakespeare's use of poisoning through the ear shows that Iago is another such serpent as Claudius. Later, when Othello asks Emilia if she has seen signs of Desdemona's

\* Paul N. Siegel, "The Damnation of Othello," *PMLA* *LXVII* (Dec 1953).

† Harold Bloom makes this connection in *Iago*, 36.



## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Duke Of Venice

Brabantio, a Senator

Other Senators

Gratiano, Brother to Brabantio

Lodovico, Kinsman to Brabantio

Othello, a noble Moor, in the service of Venice

Cassio, his Lieutenant

Iago, his Ancient

Montano, Othello's predecessor in the government of Cyprus

Roderigo, a Venetian Gentleman

Clown, Servant to Othello

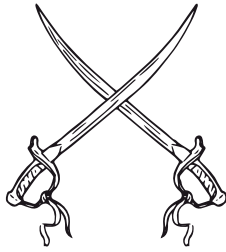
Desdemona, Daughter to Brabantio and Wife to Othello

Emilia, Wife to Iago

Bianca, Mistress to Cassio

Officers, Gentlemen, Messenger, Musicians, Sailor, Herald, Attendants, &c.





## ACT I

### SCENE I

*Venice. A street.*

[*Enter RODERIGO and IAGO.*]

**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, but you will not hear me:—  
If ever I did dream of such a matter,  
Abhor me.

**Roderigo.** Thou told'st me thou didst hold him in thy hate.

**Iago.** Despise me, if I do not. Three great ones of the city,  
In personal suit to make me his lieutenant,  
Off-capp'd 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 bumbast circumstance  
Horribly stuff'd with epithets of war:  
And, in conclusion, nonsuits  
My mediators: for, "Certes," says he,

"I have already chose my officer."

And what was he?

Forsooth, a great arithmetician,

One Michael Cassio, a Florentine,

A fellow almost damn'd in a fair wife;

That never set a squadron in the field,

Nor the division of a battle knows

More than a spinster; unless the bookish theoretic,

Wherein the toged consuls can propose

As masterly as he: mere prattle, without practice,

Is all his soldiership. But he, sir, had the election:

And I,—of whom his eyes had seen the proof

At Rhodes, at Cyprus, and on other grounds,

Christian and heathen,—must be belee'd and calm'd

By debtor and creditor, this counter-caster;

He, in good time, must his lieutenant be,

And I—God bless the mark! his Moorship's ancient.

**Roderigo.** By heaven, I rather would have been his hangman.

**Iago.** Why, there's no remedy; 'tis the curse of service,

Preferment goes by letter and affection,

And not by old gradation, where each second

Stood heir to the first. Now, sir, be judge yourself

Whether I in any just term am affin'd

To love the Moor.

**Roderigo.** I would not follow him, then.

**Iago.** O, sir, content you;

I follow him to serve my turn upon him:

We cannot all be masters, nor all masters

Cannot be truly follow'd. You shall mark

Many a duteous and knee-crooking knave

That, doting on his own obsequious bondage,

Wears out his time, much like his master's ass,  
For nought but provender; and when he's old, cashier'd:  
Whip me such honest knaves. Others there are  
Who, trimm'd in forms and visages of duty,  
Keep yet their hearts attending on themselves;  
And, throwing but shows of service on their lords,  
Do well thrive by them, and when they have lin'd their coats,  
Do themselves homage: these fellows have some soul;  
And such a one do I profess myself. For, sir,  
It is as sure as you are Roderigo,  
Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago:  
In following him, I follow but myself;  
Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty,  
But seeming so for my peculiar end:  
For when my outward action doth demónstrate  
The native act and figure of my heart  
In complement extern, 'tis not long after  
But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve  
For daws to peck at: I am not what I am.

**Roderigo.** What a full fortune does the thick lips owe,  
If he can carry't thus!

**Iago.** Call up her father,  
Rouse him:—make after him, poison his delight,  
Proclaim him in the streets; incense her kinsmen,  
And, though he in a fertile climate dwell,  
Plague him with flies: though that his joy be joy,  
Yet throw such changes of vexation on't  
As it may lose some color.

**Roderigo.** Here is her father's house: I'll call aloud.

**Iago.** Do; with like timorous accent and dire yell  
As when, by night and negligence, the fire

Is spied in populous cities.

**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 above at a window.*]

**Brabantio.** What is the reason of this terrible summons?

What is the matter there?

**Roderigo.** Signior, is all your family within?

**Iago.** Are your doors locked?

**Brabantio.** Why, wherefore ask you this?

**Iago.** Zounds, sir, you're robb'd; 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 tugging your white ewe. Arise, arise;

Awake the snorting citizens with the bell,

Or else the devil will make a grandsire of you:

Arise, I say.

**Brabantio.** What, have you lost your wits?

**Roderigo.** Most reverend signior, do you know my voice?

**Brabantio.** Not I; what are you?

**Roderigo.** My name is Roderigo.

**Brabantio.** The worser welcome:

I have charged thee not to haunt about my doors;

In honest plainness thou hast heard me say

My daughter is not for thee; and now, in madness,

Being full of supper and distempering draughts,

Upon malicious bravery dost thou come

To start my quiet.

**Roderigo.** Sir, sir, sir,—

**Brabantio.** But thou must needs be sure  
My spirit and my place have in them power  
To make this bitter to thee.

**Roderigo.** Patience, good sir.

**Brabantio.** What tell'st thou me of robbing? this is Venice;  
My house is not a grange.

**Roderigo.** Most grave Brabantio,  
In simple and pure soul I come to you.

**Iago.** Zounds, sir, you are one of those that will not serve God if the  
devil bid you. Because we come to do you service, and you think  
we are ruffians, you'll have your daughter covered with a Barbary  
horse; you'll have your nephews neigh to you; you'll have coursers  
for cousins and gennets for germans.

**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.

**Brabantio.** Thou art a villain.

**Iago.** You are—a senator.

**Brabantio.** This thou shalt answer; I know thee, Roderigo.

**Roderigo.** Sir, I will answer anything. But, I beseech you,  
If't be your pleasure and most wise consent,—  
As partly I find it is,—that your fair daughter,  
At this odd-even and dull watch o' the night,  
Transported with no worse nor better guard  
But with a knave of common hire, a gondolier,  
To the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor,—



If this be known to you, and your allowance,  
 We then have done you bold and saucy wrongs;  
 But if you know not this, my manners tell me  
 We have your wrong rebuke. Do not believe  
 That, from the sense of all civility,  
 I thus would play and trifle with your reverence:  
 Your daughter,—if you have not given her leave,—  
 I say again, hath made a gross revolt;  
 Tying her duty, beauty, wit, and fortunes  
 In an extravagant and wheeling stranger  
 Of here and everywhere. Straight satisfy yourself:  
 If she be in her chamber or your house  
 Let loose on me the justice of the state  
 For thus deluding you.

**Brabantio.** Strike on the tinder, ho!

Give me a taper!—Call up all my people!—  
 This accident is not unlike my dream:  
 Belief of it oppresses me already.—  
 Light, I say! light!

*[Exit from above.]*

**Iago.** Farewell; for I must leave you:

It seems not meet nor wholesome to my place  
 To be produc'd,—as if I stay I shall,—  
 Against the Moor: for I do know the state,—  
 However this may gall him with some check,—  
 Cannot with safety cast him; for he's embark'd  
 With such loud reason to the Cyprus wars,—  
 Which even now stand in act,—that, for their souls,  
 Another of his fathom they have none  
 To lead their business: in which regard,  
 Though I do hate him as I do hell pains,

Yet, for necessity of present life,  
 I must show out a flag and sign of love,  
 Which is indeed but sign. That you shall surely find him,  
 Lead to the Sagittary the raised search;  
 And there will I be with him. So, farewell.

[*Exit.*]

[*Enter, below, BRABANTIO, and Servants with torches.*]

**Brabantio.** It is too true an evil: gone she is;  
 And what's to come of my despisèd time  
 Is naught 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?—Get more tapers;  
 Raise all my kindred.—Are they married, think you?

**Roderigo.** Truly, I think they are.

**Brabantio.** O heaven!—How got she out?—O treason of the  
 blood!—  
 Fathers, from hence trust not your daughters' minds  
 By what you see them act.—Are there not charms  
 By which the property of youth and maidhood  
 May be abused? Have you not read, Roderigo,  
 Of some such thing?

**Roderigo.** Yes, sir, I have indeed.

**Brabantio.** Call up my brother.—O, would you had had her!—  
 Some one way, some another.—Do you know  
 Where we may apprehend her and the Moor?

**Roderigo.** I think I can discover him, if you please  
 To get good guard, and go along with me.

**Brabantio.** Pray you, lead on. At every house I'll call;  
 I may command at most.—Get weapons, ho!  
 And raise some special officers of night.—  
 On, good Roderigo:—I'll deserve your pains.

[*Exeunt.*]

## SCENE II

*Venice. Another street.*

[*Enter OTHELLO, IAGO, and ATTENDANTS with torches.*]

**Iago.** Though in the trade of war I have slain men,  
 Yet do I hold it very stuff o' the conscience  
 To do no contrived murder: I lack iniquity  
 Sometimes to do me service: nine or ten times  
 I had thought to have yerkd him here under the ribs.

**Othello.** 'Tis better as it is.

**Iago.** Nay, but he prated,  
 And spoke such scurvy and provoking terms  
 Against your honor,  
 That, with the little godliness I have,  
 I did full hard forbear him. But, I pray you, sir,  
 Are you fast married? Be assured of this,  
 That the magnifico is much beloved;  
 And hath, in his effect, a voice potential  
 As double as the duke's: he will divorce you;  
 Or put upon you what restraint and grievance  
 The law,—with all his might to enforce it on,—  
 Will give him cable.

**Othello.** Let him do his spite: