

THE  
CONNELL GUIDE  
TO SHAKESPEARE'S



# OTHELLO

'If you are new to Shakespeare, or simply want to know more, then this is the perfect guide for you'

SIMON RUSSELL BEALE

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE  
PLAY IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

*by Graham Bradshaw*

*The  
Connell Guide  
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Shakespeare's*

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# Othello

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# Introduction

With the exception of *Hamlet*, *Othello* is Shakespeare's most controversial play. It is also his most shocking. Dr Johnson famously described the ending as "not to be endured", and H.H. Furness, after editing the Variorum edition of the play, confessed to wishing that "this tragedy had never been written". No play in performance has prompted more outbursts from onlookers: there are many recorded instances of members of the audience actually trying to intervene to prevent Othello murdering Desdemona.

It is a more domestic tragedy than *Hamlet*, *King Lear* or *Macbeth*, and it is the intimacy of its subject matter which gives it its dramatic power. "*Othello* is a faithful portrait of the life with which we are daily and hourly conversant," wrote one anonymous Romantic critic. "Love and jealousy are passions which all men, with few exceptions, have at some time felt; the imitation of them, therefore, finds an immediate sympathy in every mind."

*Othello* has also prompted more critical disputes than any other play except *Hamlet*. How could the hero possibly believe his wife had been unfaithful within a few days of their marriage? Is the marriage properly consummated (as it is usually assumed to be)? Is Othello a noble hero or is he really just a self-deluded egotist? And in this play about a disastrous inter-racial marriage, how important is the whole issue of race? Is the play itself racist?

This book looks at what *Othello* is really about and why it has such power to move us. It seeks to resolve the disputes which have taxed critics, or at least to resolve them as far as the text will allow. It aims to offer a clear, authoritative and fresh view of *Othello*, while taking account of the many fascinating insights other critics have had into the play in the four centuries since it was written.

## THE CHARACTERS

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**OTHELLO**, *a Moor, General in the Venetian Army*

**DESDEMONA**, *his wife*

**CASSIO**, *his lieutenant*

**IAGO**, *the Moor's ensign*

**EMILIA**, *wife of Iago*

**BIANCA**, *mistress of Cassio*

**RODERIGO**, *in love with Desdemona*

## THE DUKE OF VENICE

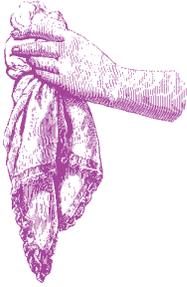
**BRABANTIO**, *A Venetian senator, Desdemona's father*

**GRATIANO**, *his brother*

**LODOVICO**, *his kinsman*

**MONTANO**, *former Governor of Cyprus*

*Senators of Venice, Gentlemen of Cyprus, Musicians, Officers, A Clown in Othello's household, A Herald, A Sailor, A Messenger, Soldiers, Attendants and Servants*



## A summary of the plot

### Act One

Like so much of the play, the first scene takes place at night. Iago, Othello's personal ensign, complains that he has been passed over as Othello's lieutenant in favour of Cassio. He and Roderigo taunt Brabantio, a Venetian senator, telling him his daughter Desdemona has eloped with Othello, the general of the Venetian army and a Moor. Othello and Brabantio appear before the Venetian Senate, and Othello describes how he courted and won Desdemona. When she enters and takes her husband's side against her father, Brabantio is forced to accept the marriage. Othello is posted to Cyprus, to defend the island against a threatened Turkish invasion. Desdemona is allowed to accompany him. Roderigo, in love with Desdemona, despairs. Iago persuades him to follow her to Cyprus, and suggests he will be able to cuckold Othello.

### Act Two

The remainder of the play takes place in Cyprus, over two nights and a day. We learn that the Turks were indeed about to invade, but that a storm wiped out their fleet. (This is the point at which Verdi begins his opera, *Otello*.) Desdemona arrives in Cyprus, escorted by Iago, his wife Emilia, and Roderigo. Othello, delayed by the storm, arrives shortly afterwards and greets Desdemona lovingly. Iago persuades Roderigo that Desdemona loves Cassio, and incites him to challenge Othello's lieutenant. In Act Two, Scene Three, a dramatic *tour de force* which spans an entire night, he plies both Roderigo and Cassio with drink and sets them fighting. Montano, the island's former governor, becomes involved and Cassio wounds him. Othello is called from his chambers to quell the riot, and Iago tells him that the quarrel was begun by Cassio. Othello dismisses Cassio. Iago advises Cassio to ask Desdemona to plead his case with Othello (which will make it easier for Iago to suggest Desdemona is Cassio's lover).

### Act Three

Othello comes upon Cassio asking Desdemona for her help. Iago hints to Othello that Cassio and Desdemona may be lovers. Desdemona appeals to Othello to help Cassio; he agrees: "I will deny thee nothing." Iago then goes to work on Othello in the so-called "Temptation Scene", suggesting that

Desdemona has been unfaithful. Desdemona returns briefly, accidentally dropping her handkerchief – the handkerchief was her first present from her husband. Emilia picks it up and hands it to Iago. Othello, growing ever more jealous, demands that Iago give him proof of Desdemona’s infidelity. Iago tells him that she has given the handkerchief to Cassio. When Desdemona renews her pleas on behalf of Cassio, Othello asks for the handkerchief and she lies, saying she could but won’t produce it. Cassio finds the handkerchief in his room and, not knowing it is hers, gives it to his mistress, Bianca.

#### Act Four

Iago reminds Othello that Cassio has Desdemona’s handkerchief. His psychological torture causes Othello to collapse in an epileptic fit. When he recovers he sees Iago talking to Cassio – they are talking about Cassio’s mistress, Bianca, but Othello thinks they are talking about Desdemona. Bianca arrives holding the handkerchief. Othello recognises it as Desdemona’s and vows to kill both her and Cassio. Lodovico arrives from Venice, with a letter recalling Othello and promoting Cassio to the command of Cyprus. Desdemona renews her pleas on Cassio’s behalf, and Othello strikes her. Othello questions Emilia about Desdemona, but Emilia declares she is honest. When he questions Desdemona, she swears her innocence. Othello

leaves and Desdemona asks Emilia to re-lay the wedding sheets on the marriage bed. Iago persuades Roderigo to ambush and kill Cassio. Othello sends Desdemona to bed, and she prepares sadly for sleep.

#### Act Five

The first scene is fast and furious. Roderigo cripples Cassio without killing him; Othello hears Cassio’s screams and gloats that Desdemona’s “dear lies dead”; Iago appears, pretending he has come to save Cassio, and kills Roderigo to silence him. He then declares that the murderer is Bianca. Othello joins Desdemona in her bedroom. She is asleep, but wakes when he kisses her. He questions her faithfulness, but she again declares her innocence. He smothers her. When Emilia calls from outside, Othello lets her in. Desdemona revives briefly, long enough to tell Emilia that she has killed herself, and dies. For a moment Othello shelters behind this deathbed lie, then confesses that he has murdered her. Emilia convinces him with remarkable ease that it was Iago who plotted against them both. Iago kills Emilia and flees. He is captured and, when he is brought back, Othello wounds him. Cassio tells Othello of Iago’s villainy. Othello stabs himself and dies, kissing Desdemona.

## What is *Othello* about?

For most of its history, *Othello* has been regarded as a play – or *the* play – about sexual jealousy and its devastating power. But it is about much more than that. In the play’s first two acts we see Iago destroying the “grave and reverend” Senator Brabantio and the glamorously attractive Cassio, long before he goes to work on Othello in the play’s second half.

In the figure of Iago, Shakespeare comes close to personifying outright malice – and the play shows how easy it is for someone malicious, ruthless and clever to manipulate others. In doing so, it offers us a disturbing view of human character as something changing and unstable: we are all more vulnerable to manipulation than we like to think, Shakespeare suggests, because our sense of “self” – of some Real or Inner Me – is a construct with scary faultlines. Things that we think of as unthinkable can be activated, and destroy our lives and those of others.

As Charles Nicholl shows in his book, *The Lodger*, Shakespeare was working on *Othello* in 1603, while living in an apartment in London’s Silver Street. At the same time, he was working on another play with a sexual theme, *Measure for Measure*, and based both on Italian stories that he had found in the same book: Cinthio Giraldi’s *Gli Hecatommithi* (1565) – or “A Hundred Tales”. In

both cases, however, he changed or keelhauled the original stories. Stephen Greenblatt once described the study of Shakespeare’s sources as the elephants’ graveyard of Shakespeare studies, and he has a point. Yet the changes Shakespeare made to these two Italian stories tell us a lot about what he wanted his very different plays to be about.

So, in the Italian story he turned into *Othello*, *The Moor of Venice*, the unnamed Moor and “Disdemona” have lived together happily for years, before the Moor is brought to suspect that his wife has been unfaithful. Shakespeare’s lovers, on the other hand, have only just eloped and married when the play begins, and we learn in Act Two, Scene Three that they had not even had time to consummate their marriage before they set sail from Venice to Cyprus. Just why they had to make that journey in separate ships is not explained, but it is consistent with Shakespeare’s drastic and, in the circumstances, cruelly purposeful compression of the Italian story’s loosely indeterminate but extended time scheme: Shakespeare ensures that his couple have had almost no precious time together by themselves – even less than Romeo and Juliet. Although they love each other and are bravely committed to each other, they are denied any opportunity to know each other in those ways that require time and the prolonged intimacies of living together. This makes Othello’s jealousy