

A Taste of Shakespeare



Othello

Produced by
Eugenia Educational Foundation

Teacher's Guide
by Ada Craniford

A TASTE OF SHAKESPEARE SERIES

HAMLET

37 minutes

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

51 minutes

ROMEO AND JULIET

43 minutes

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

56 minutes

KING LEAR

57 minutes

MACBETH

52 minutes

Color, Grades 9-12/College/Adult

Designed by: Cameron Porteous

Directed by: Dug Rotstein

Produced by: Eric Weinthal, Ada and Doug
Craniford, Eugenia Educational
Foundation

bullfrog[®]
FILMS

PO Box 149

Oley, PA 19547

Toll Free (800) 543-3764

www.bullfrogfilms.com

Othello

Table of Contents

Program Description	p. 1
Production Notes	p. 2
Characters and Cast	p. 6
Key Production Personnel	p. 8
Classroom Activities	p. 8
Recommended Text	p. 14
Recommended Reading	p. 14
Acknowledgements	p. 15

Program Description

A Taste of Shakespeare: Othello—seventh in the series—presents an abridged version of the play. The great scenes are acted out in the language of the play while a narrator comments on the action in the language of today. This educational program is designed as an introduction to the play for high school and college students. The teacher's guide offers an interpretation of the play as well as student activities that involve the class in a close reading of the text. After viewing the video and taking part in these activities, students become familiar with the story, the famous speeches, and the intricacies of each character. When students eventually see a full-length production of *Othello* on stage or on film,

they have a more fulfilling experience than they would have had without this preparation.

Production Notes

Othello is a tragedy of hurt pride, humiliation, jealousy, and revenge. The play begins with Iago seething with hurt pride at having been passed over for a promotion. He determines to make Othello pay for not choosing him to be his lieutenant; and resolves to make Cassio—the man who was given the coveted position—pay as well. When the opportunity for revenge arrives, Iago takes a steely pleasure in orchestrating each man’s doom, manipulating Othello and Cassio so that they willingly participate in their own—and each other’s destruction. With Othello he succeeds brilliantly; with Cassio, he partially fails.

Iago’s humiliation—which he considers a public as well as a private hurt—is twisted up with jealousy of Othello’s happiness in his marriage to the lovely Desdemona, and of Othello’s high reputation in the State. As for Cassio, Iago hates him because he is handsome and popular and has been given the position Iago considers to be rightfully his own. Since “reputation” is the thing that Iago feels he has lost by being passed over, reputation is what he will destroy in Cassio and Desdemona, and finally Othello himself.

In spite of Iago's duplicity, Cassio remains steadfast in his devotion to Othello even after Othello demotes him. But Othello—who at the beginning of the play seemed so strong and sure in his love for Desdemona—becomes pitifully unbalanced by jealousy under the barrage of Iago's insinuations. Believing that Desdemona has betrayed him with Cassio, Othello strangles her in what he considers an act of honor. When he finds out that she was true and he was deceived, he stabs himself. So famous has Othello's overhasty judgment of his wife's infidelity become that we now have clinical terms such as "conjugal paranoia," "insane jealousy," and "Othello's syndrome" to describe this dangerous condition.

We also have a clinical term for people like Iago who lack fellow feeling, experience neither sympathy nor compassion, and care for nobody's pain except their own. Indeed they often take pleasure in another person's suffering, especially if they themselves have caused it, because it heightens their sense of superiority and control. We call these people psychopaths. They bilk the gullible out of their money; they lie and cheat and scheme to advance themselves. They marry and murder for their own advantage and never feel remorse.

The most frightening part about psychopaths is that on the surface they often seem likeable, charming, and trustworthy. They are also very

smart. And that is what makes Iago so dangerous. He clearly sees the weaknesses and strengths of Othello, Desdemona, and Cassio, but they do not understand him at all. They think he is a good honest friend while Iago takes full advantage of their misplaced trust to ruin them.

Although Othello is the central character and we suffer with him as he twists and turns under Iago's insinuating lies, we don't at first know what kind of man Othello is. Certainly he was once a brave and supremely competent commander, but we do not see him in battle. Also, he appears to have been a magnificent storyteller, winning Desdemona's love through tales of his adventures. But by the time he reaches Cyprus to find that the Turkish fleet has fled, his dazzling escapades are done and he has no more stories to tell. His life is now defined by a passionate attachment to his lovely young wife, on whom all his happiness depends. So when Iago slyly suggests that she is giving herself to Cassio—the handsome young soldier who had acted as Othello's go-between in his wooing of Desdemona, and whom he had just promoted to lieutenant—Othello's world falls apart, and his life is ruined. Since he himself tells us that he is a man of action who cannot live in doubt, who cannot wait to weigh the consequence, but must act quickly to revenge his injured pride and shattered heart, Othello accepts Iago's feigned

friendship and manufactured “proofs,” and resolves that Cassio and Desdemona must die.

The arc of tragedy requires that the tragic hero be seen as noble and fortunate at the beginning; that he fall from his high estate and happiness because of a weakness or fault in his own nature; and that he rise to nobility again at the end when it is too late to save him. There must also be some outside force that joins with the hero’s weakness or one-sidedness to bring him down. Because of his grudge against Othello for having failed to promote him, because of his psychopathic personality, and because he is aware of Othello’s exaggerated pride and inability to remain in doubt, Iago is uniquely situated to pressure Othello until he breaks. Convincing himself that murdering Desdemona is an act of honor, Othello strangles his innocent wife, and then almost immediately finds out that Iago has lied. When all is lost, he accepts his fate and asks Cassio for forgiveness. Before his death, in his final, heart wrenchingly honest, infinitely poetic attempt to explain who he is and what he has done, Othello regains some of the nobility that he had lost.

Characters and Cast

OTHELLO (Maurice Dean Wint) – an honored general, a Moor from Africa, no longer young, just married to a beautiful, Venetian young woman. He is proud of his lineage and achievements, but vulnerable to taunts that his wife might prefer a younger man with a whiter skin.

IAGO (Eric Weinthal) – Othello's ensign (flag bearer). A seemingly honest fellow who is actually a cold-hearted con man, happy to steal, cheat and lie to achieve his personal goals. Furious with Othello for not making him his lieutenant, Iago vows to make him pay.

DESDEMONA (Holly Lewis) – a light-hearted but determined Venetian young woman who is used to having her own way. She marries Othello knowing her father will deeply disapprove. Loving and faithful, she doesn't know how to deal with Othello's aroused jealousy.

RODERIGO (Daniel Kash) – a Venetian Gentleman, Iago's first victim, and our narrator until he succumbs to Iago's treachery. Roderigo is a foolish, gullible man who shows the audience how lightly Iago destroys even those who have done him no harm.

EMILIA (Jane Spidell) – Iago's wife, who sometimes suspects that her husband is up to no good, but does not realize until the end of

the play how truly warped and vicious he can be. Emilia is devoted to Desdemona whom she serves as attendant when Othello is sent to Cyprus.

CASSIO –(Alan Van Sprang) – a handsome, loyal soldier, devoted to Othello and Desdemona, and now Othello's new lieutenant. Iago whips Othello into a jealous rage with the lie that Cassio and Desdemona are long time lovers.

BRABANTIO (Brian Tree) – a Venetian nobleman, senator, and Desdemona's father. He is furious that his daughter has married a Moor, and tries to have the marriage dissolved. He fails because Othello is needed to fight the Turks in Cyprus.

MONTANO (David Ferry) – The Governor of Cyprus, whom Othello has been sent to replace.

THE DUKE OF VENICE (Al Bandle) – He convenes the Senate late at night in response to news that a Turkish fleet is headed for the Island of Cyprus. He orders Othello, his general, to head the Venetian garrison stationed on the island.

SENATORS (Peter Glen; Tim Blake; Stan Channing) – called together by the Duke in the middle of the night to discuss how the war against the Turks should be managed.

Key Production Personnel

Director- Dug Rotstein

Producer - Eric Weinthal

Executive Producers - Ada Craniford
and Doug Craniford

Designer - Cameron Porteous

Director of Photography - David Patrick

Editor - Ralph Brunjes

Music - Rusty McCarthy

Classroom Activities

Abridging a Shakespeare play inevitably requires cutting out parts of even the most important and famous speeches. For this reason, a significant part of classroom time should be devoted to reading and memorizing key speeches in their entirety. Only then can we discover what the characters are saying about themselves and each other. Only then can we fully understand what Shakespeare is telling us in the play as a whole. The following discussion and essay topics will therefore focus on crucial speeches taken from the text but only hinted at in the video. Line numbering comes from the Signet Classic Shakespeare.

1. Soft you, a word or two before you go.
I have done the state some service, and they know't.
(V.ii.334-352)

Speaking to Montano, who plans to issue a report to the Senate in Venice, Othello—in highly poetic language—defends his actions and the motivation behind them. He presents his case as the accused, the defence attorney, the judge, and the executioner. Assuming he has not killed himself but faces trial, set up a court situation to determine the extent of Othello's guilt and how he should be punished. Assign a court reporter to the case and have him or her write up the trial and its aftermath.

2. A maiden never bold,
Of spirit so still and quiet that her motion
Blushed at herself: (I.iii.94-106)

Brabantio describes his daughter Desdemona to the Duke and Senate, trying to account in a negative way for her marriage to a black man who is much older than she is. What is Brabantio saying about Desdemona? What is he saying about Othello? How would you characterize Brabantio's attitude toward black men? In the play, only Brabantio (whose daughter married without his knowledge or permission); Iago (who has a grudge against Othello); and Roderigo (who is a bit of a fool) speak negatively about Othello's skin-color and facial features. What

does this say about the position of blacks in Venetian society? Research Venice in the 1600s to find out. How much of a problem do you see in the age difference between Desdemona and Othello? (We never know exactly what this age difference is.)

3. O, sir, content you.
I follow him to serve my turn upon him.
(I.i.38-63)

Iago reveals his philosophy of service and gives a seemingly rational explanation for it. What is he actually saying? Argue for and against his position. What does “I am not what I am” mean? Whom is Iago misquoting? If Roderigo were a little smarter what warning would he take from this speech?

4. I fetch my life and being
From men of royal siege; (I.ii.20-27)

Othello here responds to Iago’s warning that Desdemona’s father will see to it that the marriage is annulled. What unexpected view of marriage does Othello present? What insight into his ancestry and character does he reveal? Why does he feel he has to say these things?

5. Most potent, grave, and reverend signiors,
My very noble and approved good masters,
(I.iii.76-93)

Othello says that he is “rude in his speech” and then goes on—in this speech and the next—to give an eloquent rebuttal to Brabantio’s accusation that he used witchcraft to win Desdemona’s love. How does he describe himself? How does he defend himself?

6. Her father loved me; oft invited me;
Still questioned me the story of my life
(I.iii.128-170)

In plain English, what is the story that Othello tells? What do you think of this method of wooing? Why would such a story appeal to a girl like Desdemona?

7. It gives me wonder great as my content
To see you here before me. O my soul’s joy!
(II.i.181-191)

This is the highest and happiest moment of Othello and Desdemona’s love. Paraphrase in ordinary English what he is saying. What foreshadowing of future events do you find here? What emotions does the speech arouse in the viewer or reader?

8. That Cassio loves her, I do well believe’t;
That she loves him, ‘tis apt and of great credit.
(II.i.286-312)

In working out his revenge against Othello and Cassio, Iago indicates that he suspects each of

them of having cuckolded him in the past. How likely do you think this is? What does Iago reveal about himself here, and how does it make you feel toward him? Research “psychopath” and “sociopath.” Discuss ways that we might recognize a psychopath and how we might protect ourselves from him.

9. Now, by heaven,
My blood begins my safer guides to rule,
(II.ii.203-206)

Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul
But I do love thee! And when I love thee not,
Chaos is come again. (III.iii.90-92)

Why? Why is this?
Thinks't thou I'd make a life of jealousy,
To follow still the changes of the moon
With fresh suspicions? (III.iii.177-292)

Othello tells Iago precisely what his greatest weaknesses are. How, in ordinary English does he describe them? What distinct dangers are revealed in each of the three speeches quoted above?

10. What's he then that says I play the villain,
When this advice is free I give, and honest,
(II.iii.336-362)

The term “villain” is frequently applied to Iago, both by himself and others. What exactly does “villain” mean? What advice has he given

Cassio? What is wrong with this advice? What character traits does Iago count on in Desdemona to make his plan work? What characteristics in Othello does he mock? What will Iago say to Othello to turn him against Desdemona's entreaties? Explain the last five lines of the speech.

11. Good name in man and woman, dear my lord,
Is the immediate jewel of their souls.
(III.iii.155-161)

This masterful speech of Iago's is often thought to be too profound to come out of a villain's mouth; but it should be remembered that it comes in response to Othello's insistence that Iago reveal his thoughts, which Iago refuses to do. In Iago's two preceding speeches he explains precisely why he refuses to utter his thoughts. (III.iii.134-141) and (145-153) What does he say in each of the three speeches? Why is his so-called refusal to utter his thoughts highly ironic?

12. Read the poem, 'My Last Duchess' by Robert Browning. Then compare Othello and Desdemona with the Duke and Duchess in Browning's poem.

Recommended Text

Signet Classic Othello, edited by Alvin Kernan
(1986)

The Arden Shakespeare Othello, third edition,
edited by E.A.J. Honigmann (1999)

Recommended Reading

“Othello” in A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*
(1966)

Robert J. Smith, *The Psychopath in Society*
(1978)

Alan A. Stone, “Othello” in *Boston Review*,
<http://bostonreview.net>

Dr. David B. Adams, “Psychological Letter,”
<http://www.psychological.com>

David M. Buss, *The Dangerous Passion: Why
Jealousy is as Necessary as Love or Sex* (2000)

Acknowledgments

Produced in Association with
BRAVO!

A division of CHUM Limited

Produced in Association with
CANADIAN LEARNING TELEVISION

Produced with the Participation of
THE CANADIAN INDEPENDENT FILM AND
VIDEO FUND

With the assistance of
THE DEPARTMENT OF CANADIAN HERITAGE

We gratefully acknowledge
the financial support of:

The St. George's Society of Toronto
The Catherine and Maxwell Meighen Foundation
The Norman and Margaret Jewison Foundation
The Henry and Berenice Kaufmann Foundation
Allan Weinbaum
The George Lunan Foundation
J.P. Bickell Foundation
Sir Joseph Flavelle Foundation
Miriam Erlichman and Eli Klein

bullfrog[®]
FILMS

PO Box 149
Oley, PA 19547
Toll Free (800) 543-3764
www.bullfrogfilms.com