

OTHELLO SYNOPSIS

The Play

OTHELLO opens in Venice, a cosmopolitan city. The soldier Iago complains bitterly about his commander, Othello, a black Venetian general born in Africa. Iago declares that he “hate[s] the Moor,” and conspires against him with the gullible Roderigo. Roderigo is angry because Othello has married Desdemona, a white Venetian Senator’s daughter; *he* wanted to marry Desdemona instead. The cause of Iago’s anger is ambiguous, but he does admit that he resents Othello for passing him over for a promotion. Instead, Othello has elevated Cassio – younger and better educated but less seasoned in battle than Iago – to be his lieutenant, or second-in-command.

With Roderigo in tow, Iago wakes Desdemona’s father, Brabantio, in the middle of the night to inform him in the crudest of ways that Desdemona and Othello have eloped. Furious, Brabantio goes on to accuse Othello in front of the Venetian Senate of using witchcraft to seduce his daughter. Desdemona, however, defends Othello and his honor, and the marriage stands. Yet danger still looms: the Turkish Ottoman Empire is threatening to take Cyprus, a contested Venetian territory, and the Othello is dispatched with his troops to defend the island. Desdemona follows her new husband to war, but a military confrontation is unexpectedly avoided when a storm destroys the Turkish fleet.

In Cyprus, Iago continues to plot with Roderigo against Othello and Cassio. He gets Cassio drunk and lures him into a fight with Roderigo, for which Othello strips him of his new rank. At Iago’s suggestion, Cassio begs Desdemona to intervene with her husband. Iago uses this and several other devious tactics – including convincing his wife Emilia to steal Desdemona’s handkerchief so he can plant it on Cassio – to convince Othello that Desdemona is having an affair with the lieutenant. Othello is overcome with jealousy and eventually murders Desdemona in their marriage bed. Devastated, Emilia turns on her own husband and reveals Iago’s treachery. Othello kills himself in grief.

The Major Characters

OTHELLO: a noble Venetian general and yet an outsider in Venice – a Black man born elsewhere, evidently in Africa; newly married to Desdemona

DESDEMONA: a Venetian noblewoman, daughter of a Senator (Brabantio) and newly married to Othello

IAGO: a Venetian soldier and a commoner who reports to Othello; married to Emilia

EMILIA: married to Iago and attendant to Desdemona

CASSIO: a young, high-born, educated soldier, recently promoted to become Othello’s second-in-command; lover of Bianca, a Cypriot woman

RODERIGO: a wealthy suitor to Desdemona and conspirator with Iago

BRABANTIO: a Venetian Senator and Desdemona’s father; patron to Othello prior to his elopement with Desdemona

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