

Othello



Background Notes

Othello Background

THE PLAY



Basic Info

- *Othello* unlike other Shakespearean tragedies
- No secondary plot like his other tragedies
- Villain (Iago) is responsible for the downfall of the tragic hero (Othello)
- Ideas for this play taken from a collection of tales called *Hecatommithi* by Giraldi Cinthio, published in Venice in 1566

Writing of the Play

- ◆ *Othello*: This play was probably written in 1603 or 1604, a little past the middle of Shakespeare's career (he was 40).
- ◆ Performed at the royal court
- ◆ Christmas season of 1604
 - ◆ when command performances of entertainments for the king and courtiers were customary.
 - ◆ That means it had probably already been a success.

Performance



- ◆ First recorded performance took place in 1604 for King James I; Richard Burbage, Shakespeare's partner and fellow actor, played Othello

Main Characters

◆ Othello:

- ◆ Soldier from North Africa;
- ◆ Employed as a general by the city-state of Venice;
- ◆ Highly respected, but still an “outsider” because of his skin color;
- ◆ Marries Desdemona



Main Characters, cont.



◆ Desdemona

- ◆ Beautiful and accomplished young Venetian woman;
- ◆ Protected by her father;
- ◆ She stands for love, trust, and purity—all that makes life meaningful and worth living

Main Characters, cont.

◆ Iago

- ◆ Soldier who works with Othello;
- ◆ Wants to be Othello's second in command but is passed over for Cassio;
- ◆ Seeks vicious revenge;
- ◆ Plots to destroy all that Othello values

◆ Emilia

- ◆ Maidservant to Desdemona;
- ◆ married to Iago;
- ◆ loyal to Desdemona, but will tell lies if it will help her husband



Main Characters, cont.

◆ Cassio

- ◆ Gentleman soldier,
 - ◆ Not much real experience
- ◆ Man of ability, loyalty and grace;
- ◆ Respects Desdemona and Othello;
- ◆ Is NOT a love interest for Desdemona;
- ◆ Suffers from a drinking problem

◆ Brabantio

- ◆ Father of Desdemona;
- ◆ Venetian nobleman and senator

◆ Roderigo

- ◆ In love with Desdemona;
- ◆ Listens to Iago's plan to get Desdemona away from Othello;
- ◆ A fool!

Static & Dynamic Characters

◆ Dynamic Character—

- ◆ Character changes from beginning to end

◆ Static Character —

- ◆ Character does not change

Static & Dynamic Characters

◆ Othello is a strong example of a
DYNAMIC CHARACTER

- ◆ Courageous Venetian soldier
- ◆ Well respected
- ◆ Has reputation as man of honor
- ◆ Has vicious temper
- ◆ Becomes enraged with jealousy

Static & Dynamic Characters

◆ Iago is a **STATIC CHARACTER**

- ◆ Corrupt character
- ◆ Hypocritical
- ◆ Evil
- ◆ Selfish
- ◆ Focused throughout the play to destroy Othello

Foil



◆ FOIL—character who highlights or emphasizes certain traits of the main character by contrasting them

◆ EX: Emilia is the foil to Desdemona

◆ EX: Cassio is the foil to Iago

Conflicts, Internal

- ◆ Othello vs. Himself
 - ✦ Doesn't want to distrust Desdemona
 - ✦ Insecure about his qualities to enable Desdemona to love him



Conflicts, External

◆ Iago vs. Othello

- ✦ Iago hates Othello and plots to bring about his downfall

◆ Iago vs. Cassio

- ✦ Iago is jealous of Cassio, and works to ruin his reputation, as well as separate him from Othello's friendship



Irony – 3 Types

◆ Dramatic Irony:

- ◆ a contradiction between what a character thinks and what the reader or audience knows to be true

◆ Situational Irony:

- ◆ an event occurs that directly contradicts the expectations of the characters, readers, or audience

◆ Verbal Irony:

- ◆ words are used to suggest the opposite of what is meant (i.e. sarcasm, double-entendre, etc.)

Themes

◆ Destructive nature of Jealousy

- ◆ Iago jealous of Cassio's position
- ◆ Othello suspecting Desdemona's unfaithfulness

◆ Importance of Honor and Reputation

- ◆ Cassio
- ◆ Desdemona

◆ Being an outsider

- ◆ Prejudice against Othello
 - ◆ Skin color
 - Black & White Imagery
 - ◆ From Africa, not Venice
- ◆ Warrior rather than courtier and politician
 - ◆ Unfamiliar with societal conventions
 - ◆ Dealt mainly with men and battle, not women and love

Themes

◆ Appearance Versus Reality

- ◆ “Honest Iago”
- ◆ Desdemona & Cassio

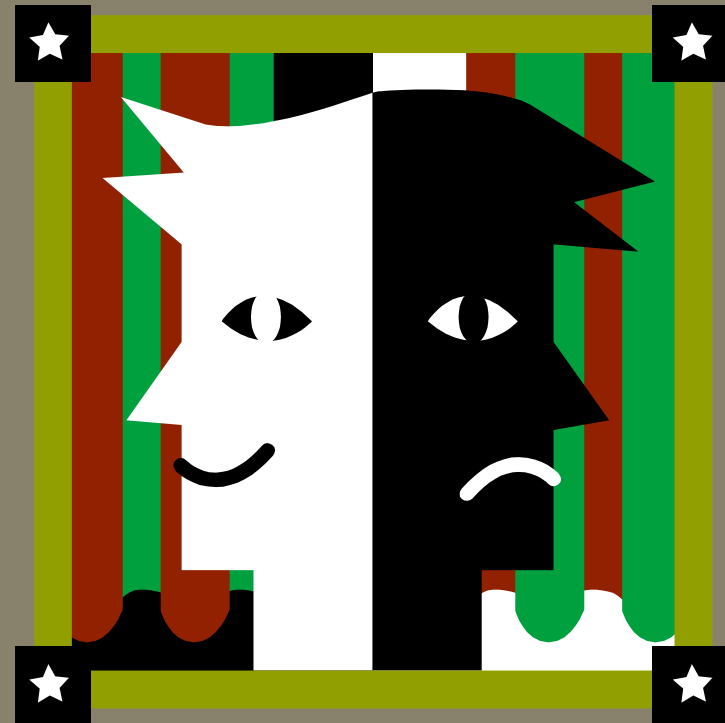
◆ Loyalty Versus Treachery

- ◆ The ones Othello believes are treacherous are actually loyal

- ◆ Cassio
- ◆ Desdemona

◆ Role of Emilia

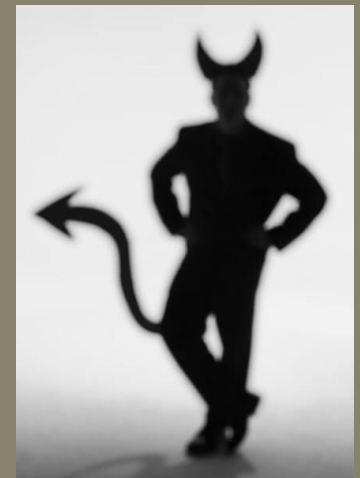
- ◆ With her husband
- ◆ With Desdemona



Motifs

◆ MOTIFS—Major topics related to theme

- ◆ Animals
- ◆ Jealousy
- ◆ Sight and darkness
- ◆ The handkerchief
- ◆ Magic
- ◆ Evil and the devil



Setting

- ◆ Act I
 - ✦ Venice
- ◆ Act II – V
 - ✦ Cyprus
- ◆ 16th Century
 - ✦ Entire play covers only a couple of days



Locations - Venice

- ◆ A city-state of enormous mercantile wealth, (wealth from trade)
- ◆ Venice in Shakespeare's time was a byword for luxury and culture and was also famous for its Judicial system
- ◆ Its trade was partially choked off by the growing power of the Turkish empire in the 16th century, which extended into Europe as well as Asia and Arabia. Hence the importance of Cyprus.

Locations - Cyprus

- ◆ Island, near Turkey and Syria,
- ◆ was annexed by Venice in 1489 and conquered by the Turks in 1571.



Terms & Concepts

◆ MOOR.

- ◆ In Shakespeare's time, equivalent to "African," with the expectation that ,such a person would be black.
- ◆ This was not a negative or derogatory word.
- ◆ Originally, it meant "native of Mauretania," a country in north Africa (present day Morocco), but its meaning had become generalized by the 17th century.

◆ OTTOMAN, OTTOMITES.

- ◆ These terms (I.3.49, 11.3.170) refer to the Turks.

Brief History of the Moors

- ◆ In 711 Moors, who are Muslim, conquered Spain and ruled until 1492—Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand took over and brought Christianity to Spain
- ◆ Moors forced to leave Spain or become Christian; many left the country and became Gypsies in Europe and pirates in the seas near Europe, Asia & Africa



Elizabethan Attitudes

- ◆ Play first performed in 1604, when Christian European tolerance of Muslims was greatly strained
- ◆ Shakespeare created the character of Othello as a tragic hero, not a villain



Othello's Position & Status



- ◆ Professional soldier who, after much battlefield experience, is currently employed by Venice as general of its forces.
- ◆ He is called "General" or, sometimes, "Captain."
- ◆ He holds a high position and is greatly respected.

Military Terms

◆ ANCIENT

✦ Pronounced “en-sin”

- ✦ A military rank, properly of a standard-bearer (same word as "ensign").
- ✦ This is Iago's rank, which he resents. He is third in command to Othello, behind Cassio.



Military Terms



◆ LIEUTENANT.

- ◆ The rank which Cassio has just been given, literally meaning "place-holder."
- ◆ Second in command to Othello, he holds Othello's place in his absence.
 - ◆ Ironically, Othello comes to believe that Cassio holds Othello's place in Desdemona's affections.
 - ◆ Even more ironically, the play ends with Cassio literally put into Othello's place as governor of Cyprus.



Othello Background

SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDY

Tragedy

- ◆ Drama in which the main character suffers a disaster after a serious struggle
- ◆ Faces downfall in a heroic way



Tragic Hero

- ◆ 1. Noble/influential person who
- ◆ 2. Meets with destruction because:
 - ◆ personal flaw (fatal flaw)
 - ◆ Opposition of others
 - ◆ Othello fits this description
- ◆ 3. Harsh punishment (arouses pity in audience)
- ◆ 4. Character gains self-knowledge
- ◆ 5. Catharsis resulting in compassion
 - ◆ Catharsis = cleansing or release of tense emotions

Fatal Flaw

- ◆ Error, weakness, mistaken judgment or misstep that causes the downfall of the hero
- ◆ Also called *hamartia* from Greek
- ◆ Hero is not perfect & may make errors from
 - ◆ Ambition
 - ◆ Ignorance
 - ◆ Pride
 - ◆ Jealousy
 - ◆ Gullibility (believes others too easily)

Diagram: Tragic Hero

◆ Power, Wealth

◆ Self Knowledge

◆ Beginning of story

◆ End of story

◆ Self Knowledge

◆ Disaster/Death/
Loss of Power

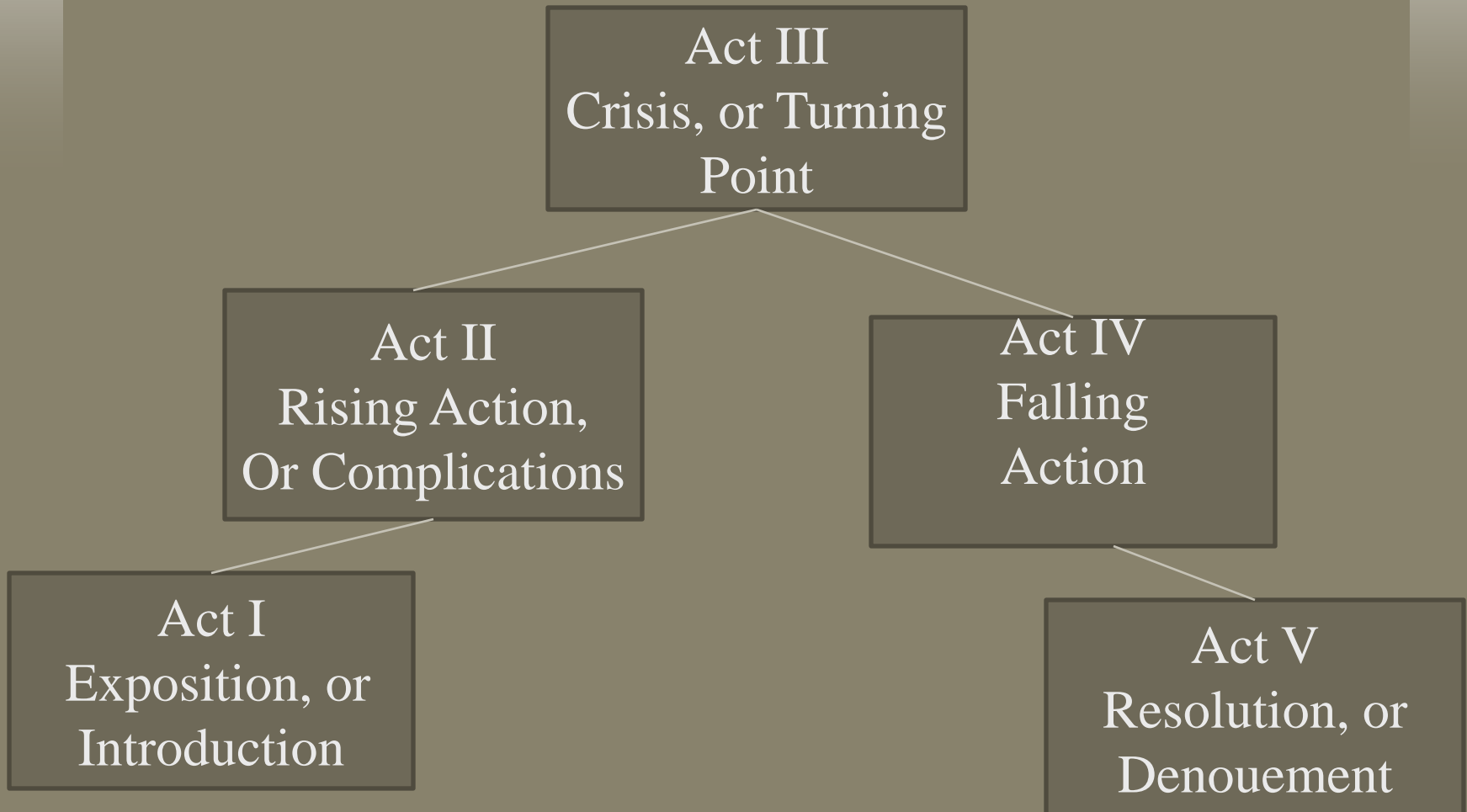


Elizabethan Tragic Heroes



- ◆ The Elizabethan tragic hero is much more often responsible for his own downfall rather than being a victim of fate
- ◆ Emphasizes the “waste of human potential”
- ◆ Othello is the tragic hero

The Five-Part Dramatic Structure



Soliloquy

- ◆ Character's inner thoughts (truthful) spoken aloud
- ◆ No other characters present

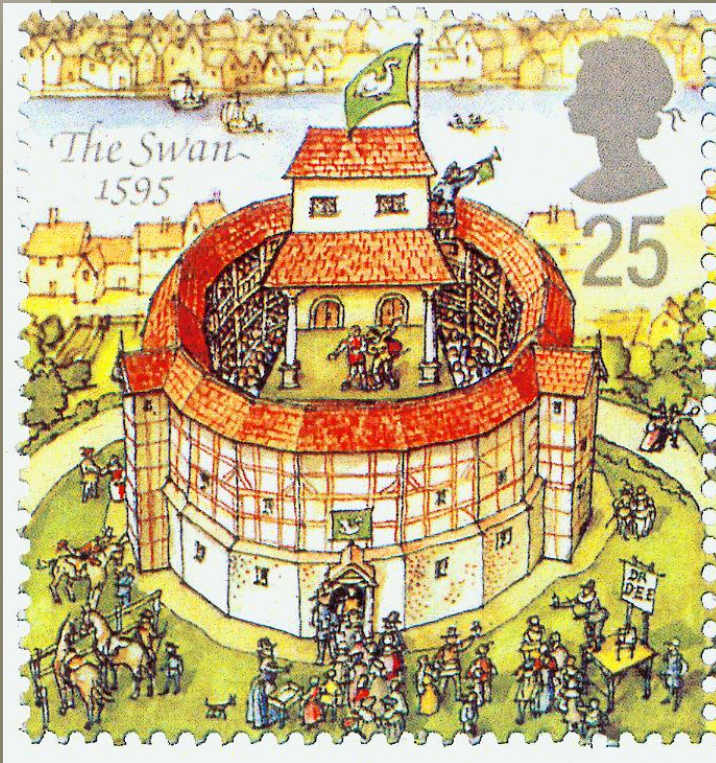


Aside



- ◆ Character's inner thoughts spoken aloud
- ◆ Other characters are present
- ◆ Other characters cannot hear the spoken thoughts (even though the *actors* can)

Elizabethan Theater



- ◆ Little to no props used
- ◆ Minimal scenery
- ◆ Rarely performed at night
 - ◆ Lighting
- ◆ Female Parts played by teenaged boys
 - ◆ Against the law for women to act
- ◆ Actors not respected
 - ◆ One step above beggars

Globe Theater



◆ Galleries

- ◆ Audience area covered by a roof (3 levels)

◆ Yard

- ◆ Audience area w/o covering or seating
- ◆ “Groundlings”
 - ◆ hazelnuts

Globe Theater, cont.

- ◆ Pricing based on comfort
 - ◆ 1 penny (week's wages for apprentice)
 - ◆ 5 pence – cushioned gallery seat
- ◆ Nobility generally had private performances at their homes



Stage Views

- ◆ Platform Stage
 - ◆ Raised stage that projects into the audience



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Stage



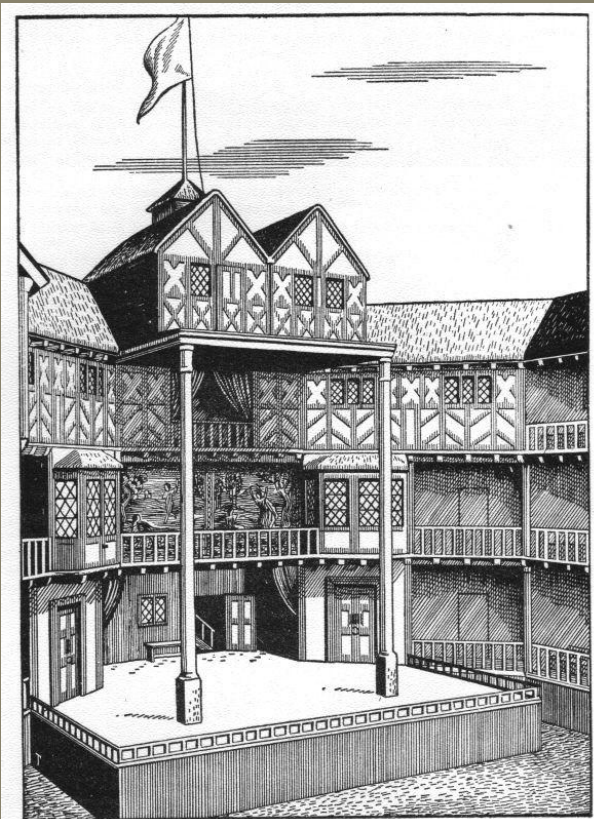
◆ Heavens

- ◆ Pictures of moon, stars, & zodiac painted on the underside of the canopy covering the stage

◆ Hell

- ◆ Under the stage
- ◆ Used for prop storage
- ◆ Trap door entrance to main stage

Tiring House



The Stage of the Globe (drawn from the model made by Dr. J. C. Adams)

- ◆ Three-level inner stage area (background)
- ◆ Inner stage: (study)
 - ◆ 1st floor
- ◆ Balcony stage
 - ◆ 2nd floor
- ◆ Music Gallery
 - ◆ 3rd floor
 - ◆ Also used as a stage

Tiring House, Cont.



◆ Chamber

- ◆ Curtained area behind balcony

◆ Bay window stages

- ◆ Stages on the sides of the balcony stages

Shakespeare's Language



◆ Iambic Pentameter

- ◆ Most common rhythm in English poetry
- ◆ Iamb: 2-syllable foot
 - ◆ Foot: unit of rhythm in poetry and drama
 - ◆ Unstressed, stressed
 - ◆ I.e. today = to DAY
- ◆ Pentameter: five foot line
- ◆ Blank verse: unrhymed Iambic Pentameter

Ways to Understand More Easily

- ◆ Word Order
- ◆ Read in sentences
 - ◆ Don't break at ends of lines
- ◆ Archaic Language
 - ◆ Written in 1599
- ◆ Footnotes
- ◆ Overall sense
 - ◆ Don't worry about every single word
- ◆ Contractions