

# *Othello* (1604)



<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/tri203.html>

# William Shakespeare: **3 Stylistic Groups**



His plays tend to be placed into three main stylistic groups:

early comedies and histories (range from broad comedy to historical **nostalgia**)

*Much Ado about Nothing*

*The Twelfth Night*

*A Midsummer Night's Dream*

# William Shakespeare : **3 Stylistic Groups**



**middle period** (which includes his most famous tragedies that are grander in terms of theme, addressing such issues as **betrayal, murder, lust, power, and ambition** ):

*Othello*

*Macbeth*

*Hamlet*

*King Lear*

# William Shakespeare : **3 Stylistic Groups**



as well as "problem plays"

*Troilus and*

*Cressida*

*Measure for*

*Measure*)

later romances featuring  
**redemptive plotlines** with  
ambiguous endings and the  
use of magic and other  
**fantastical elements**

*The Winter's Tale*

*The Tempest*

# Transition by Genres

- Delightful Comedies: falling in love
- Ambitious Tragedies: marital conflict, murderous envy, philosophical doubt, aging, fear of death
- Comedies: sorrow and world-weariness

# *Othello, King Lear, The Tempest,* Sonnets

- *Othello*: full of intensities
- *King Lear*: probing deeply into human nature
- *The Tempest*: Shakespeare's last play on his own. Political, religious, and theatrical interest.
- Sonnets

## Source (*Othello*)

- “There once lived in Venice a Moor, who was very valiant and of a handsome person [...]”  
(Giraldi Cinthio *Hecatommithi*)

# *Othello* and its Time

- Then, the black actors played villains or people of lower status.
- Then, desiring women were considered demonic.
- Venice was London's trading rival. It was famous for its sexual freedom.
- Ambassadors from the King of Barbary came to London in 1600.



# Major Roles

- Othello
- Desdemona
- Iago (Coleridge → “motiveless malignity”)
- Cassio
- Emilia
- Roderigo
- Brabantio

# *Othello* Act I



Scene: Streets/ a  
Council Chamber of  
Venice

<http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/1298/productions/othello.html>

# What Happened in Act I?

- Plot Summary

## Brabantio, lines 157-65

- It is too true an evil, gone she is,
- And what's to come of my despised time
- Is nought but bitterness. Now Rogerigo,

- ' ' ' ' ' '
- 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?

# Questions (1.1)

- Roderigo and Iago talk of Othello, but they do not mention his name. Why?
- What is Roderigo complaining about in the opening scene?
- Why does Iago say he hates Othello so much, and what does he mean when he says: "In following him, I follow but myself."

- What do Iago and Roderigo hope to accomplish by shouting insulting remarks about Othello and Desdemona under Brabantio's window?
- Iago and Roderigo talk of Othello. What do we thereby learn about Othello?
- Have you noted the imageries used in Iago's language? What do we learn about him from these imageries?



- Shakespeare constantly concerns himself with the issue of seeming. Have we found this concern up to now?
- You might be unhappy with Iago's language when he talks of women. Can you give some examples?
- Is Roderigo corrupted by Iago? Can you give examples?

- Brabantio: Thou art a villain!
- Iago: You are a senator!
- (I have never been able to figure out the significance of Iago's retort. Can you help me?)

- Double plot is common in the Elizabethan drama. What might be the function of Roderigo in *Othello*?
- Cakderwood argues that Iago “ocularizes [...] language.” Do you agree? Can you give examples?

# Questions (1.2)

- 1.2
- What are Othello and Iago talking about at the opening of this scene?
- When Iago warns Othello that Brabantio is "much-loved" and may try to separate him and Desdemona, what is Othello's answer and what does it suggest about what Othello values?

- What does Othello mean when he says: "My parts, my title, and my perfect soul/ Shall manifest me rightly."
- According to Brabantio, how has Othello seduced his daughter?
- Othello believes that there should be correspondence between appearance and reality. Can you give an example about this belief? Has this belief anything to do with his being an "outsider"?

# Questions (1.3)

In response to Brabantio's accusation that Othello has bewitched his daughter, Othello explains how she originally fell in love with him. How did it happen and why has Othello's description been called "the Othello music"?

- What is the point of Iago's "Virtue, a fig" speech and what is the "new" Elizabethan philosophy behind it?

- How would you characterize the difference between the way Othello and Iago talk, both in their subject matter and their style?
- At the end of this scene, Iago gives a second reason for hating Othello; what is this reason?
- What did the city of Venice symbolize to members of the Elizabethan audience? What was the reputation of Venetian women?

- Can you explain the double-time scheme in *Othello*? What is the short-time scheme? What is the long-time scheme?
- Compare Othello's and Iago's languages.
- Othello and Desdemona think differently about social authorities. Can you compare their different attitudes?
- In his narration of his “seduction” of Desdemona, Othello emphasizes her pity on him. Why does he emphasize that point?
- Has Othello tried to seduce Desdemona?