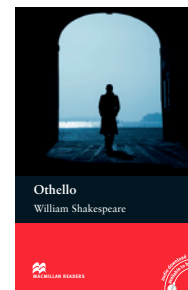




Othello by William Shakespeare

ABOUT THE PLAY

Along with *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth*, *Othello* is one of William Shakespeare's four greatest 'tragedy' plays. The protagonist, Othello, is a Moor (from northern Africa) who has risen from very poor and humble beginnings to become a general in the Venetian army. At the beginning of the play, Othello secretly marries Desdemona, the rich and beautiful daughter of a Venetian senator. The play deals with the themes of jealousy, insecurity, loyalty, and anger and, as with all Shakespearean tragedies, has a fatal outcome. In the scene below, Desdemona's father, Brabantio, learns of their marriage and gives his reaction.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, England in 1564. Shakespeare wrote 37 plays during his lifetime, of which at least ten were tragedies. Many of the main characters in his tragedies were based on real life historical figures. As well as writing, he also acted in some of his plays in the late 16th and early 17th century. One of the reasons why Shakespeare's plays are still popular is due to the fact that his characters and plots are universal: they do not belong in one place or time, but are equally relevant today as they were in Elizabethan England. Shakespeare died at the age of 52 in 1616.

Act 1, Scene 3

Othello: Sirs, it is true that I have taken away this old man's daughter. It is true that I have married her. That is all I have done wrong. I am not a great speaker, I am a brave soldier. I will tell you the truth.

...

Duke: Bring Desdemona here. Tell us what happened, Othello.

Othello: Her father loved me, often invited me to their house and asked me to tell him the story of my life, all the battles and wars I had fought. I told them all, from my boyish days up to now, my great adventures, like getting caught and being made a prisoner, the dangerous escapes. I told of my travels across empty deserts and through high mountains. I talked of the people I had seen: the cannibals that eat each other and the strange men whose heads grow below their shoulders. Desdemona loved my stories and used to spend hours listening to them. My stories made her feel different emotions: sometimes they made her cry; she thought some of them were wonderful, others very sad. She said she wished she could be a man so that she could see such things, too. She said that if I had a friend who loved her, I should teach him to tell my stories because that would make her fall in love with him. When she said that, I told her I loved her. She loved me because of the dangers I had experienced and the stories I told. And I loved her because my stories made her feel so many emotions. This was the only witchcraft I used. Here she comes now: let her tell you herself.

[Enter Desdemona and Iago.]

Duke: I think this tale would win my daughter, too. Good Brabantio, I advise you to make the best of this matter.

Brabantio: Let her speak. [To Desdemona] My dear daughter, which man here in this room is most important to you?

Desdemona: Father, I think there are two men here who are very important to me, and it is difficult for me to answer you. You deserve my respect because you gave me life and brought me up. I am your daughter. But this man is my husband, and just as you became more important to my mother than her father had been to her, so the Moor Othello has become more important to me than you are now.

Brabantio: Oh! Let us carry on with the matter of the war, my lord. [To Othello] You have tricked her. You have taken my daughter away from me, so you have broken my heart, too. [To Desdemona] I am glad I don't have another daughter, because after this I would keep her locked up and never let her out of my sight.

Duke: Let them go, Brabantio. Because there is nothing you can do to change it, it does no good to be unhappy about something that has already happened. If someone steals something from you, don't be sad about it for long.

VOCABULARY FOCUS

battles (line 10): fights between two armies in a war

tales (line 35): a story about imaginary events or people

matter (line 37): a situation that someone is involved in

brought me up (line 44): looked after by parents until adulthood

carry on (line 50): to continue doing something



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Before reading

- 1 Shakespeare's plays can be categorised into three genres: **Comedy**, **History** and **Tragedy**. In pairs, sort the plays into the correct categories in the table below.

Richard III • Hamlet • Twelfth Night
Henry V • Othello • Romeo and Juliet • Henry VIII
A Midsummer Night's Dream
Much Ado About Nothing

| Comedy | History | Tragedy |
|--------|---------|---------|
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |

- 2 Read the definition of a Shakespearean tragedy. In pairs, answer the questions below.

A Shakespearean tragedy features a protagonist, usually of high social standing, who has a major character flaw. He is usually placed in a stressful situation which he cannot overcome due to this flaw and, as a result, the play reaches a fatal conclusion.

- What does 'of high social standing' mean? What kind of person might this be?
 - Can you think of some examples of a major character flaw?
 - What do you think happens in 'a fatal conclusion'?
- 3 Read the **About the play** section. In pairs, discuss what Othello's major character flaw might be. Use the questions below to help you.
- What is Othello's background? How do you think he feels about this?
 - What is Desdemona's background?
 - How do you think Othello feels about the fact that Desdemona wants to marry him, given their respective backgrounds?

While reading

- 1 Read the text. Are these sentences True (T) or False (F)? Correct the false sentences.

- | | |
|---|-------|
| 1 Up to this point, Brabantio has always hated Othello. | T / F |
| 2 Othello has had lots of adventures in his life. | T / F |
| 3 All Othello's stories made Desdemona cry. | T / F |
| 4 Desdemona and Othello fell in love whilst he told her his stories about his life. | T / F |
| 5 Brabantio asks Desdemona to choose between him and Othello. | T / F |
| 6 Desdemona has a sister. | T / F |

- 2 Read the text again and answer the questions.

- Why did Desdemona fall in love with Othello?
- Why didn't she tell her father that she was getting married?
- Is Brabantio for or against the marriage? Find sentences to support your answer.

- 3 Look at the quotes about Othello, Brabantio and Desdemona. Write some adjectives that you could use to describe their characters, based on these quotes.

Othello: I am not a great speaker, I am a brave soldier. I will tell you the truth.

Brabantio: Oh! Let us carry on with the matter of the war, my lord. [To Othello] You have tricked her. You have taken my daughter away from me, so you have broken my heart, too.

Desdemona: You deserve my respect because you gave me life ... But this man is my husband ... so the Moor Othello has become more important to me than you are now.

- 4 Having read the scene, what do you now think is Othello's major character flaw? Is it what you discussed in Before reading, exercise 3?

After reading

- 1 Work in groups. Think about the relationship between Brabantio, Othello and Desdemona. Discuss how each character is feeling after the scene and make notes. Use the prompts below to help you.

Brabantio

How does he feel about Desdemona before he learns about the marriage? What is his reaction to the news of the marriage? What is his behaviour like? What are his feelings for Othello and Desdemona like now?

Desdemona

Think about her feelings towards her husband and her father. Does she feel differently about her father after what he said?

Othello

Think about his feelings for Desdemona and why he married in secret. Does he regret telling Brabantio? Why/Why not?

- 2 Choose one of the characters. You are going to write a letter from that character to a friend, describing the discussion and explaining how you felt. Use your ideas from exercise 1 and try to keep within 'character'.