



OTHELLO

CURRICULUM GUIDE

FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

A companion to the Folger Shakespeare Library Edition

FolgerSHAKESPEARE
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Advancing knowledge & the arts

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ON THE COVER:

James Clarke Hook. *Othello's description of Desdemona*. Oil on canvas, ca. 1852. Folger Shakespeare Library.

See more images of *Othello* from the Folger collection at www.folger.edu/digitalcollection.



Image 1) Byron Company. *Othello*. Photograph, 1903. Folger Shakespeare Library. Image 2) Suli Holum (Desdemona) and Craig Wallace (Othello). *Othello*, directed by Aaron Posner, Folger Theatre, 2002. Photo by Carol Pratt. Image 3) *Othello* playbill. *Ira Aldridge, playbill & illustrations, Theatre Royal Covent Garden*. London, 1833. Folger Shakespeare Library. Image 4) *O* (2001). Directed by Tim Blake Nelson. Lions Gate/Photofest. © Lions Gate.

At the Folger, we love to see students take Shakespeare and make it their own. We believe that Shakespeare is for everyone and that students of all ability levels can successfully engage with his works.



SHAKESPEARE IS FOR EVERYONE!



Shakespeare isn't an antiquated art form. His plays are full of explosive family situations, complex relationships, and deep emotions that today's students can—and do—relate to. At the Folger Shakespeare Library, we love to see students take Shakespeare and make it their own. We believe that Shakespeare is for everyone and that students of all ability levels can successfully engage with his works.



The best way to *learn* Shakespeare is to *do* Shakespeare. What does this mean? Put simply, it is getting students up on their feet and physically, intellectually, and vocally engaging with the text. We believe that students learn best using a performance-based methodology and that performance can build a personal connection with the text that traditional teaching methods may not.



Performance—which is not the same thing as “acting”—activates the imagination. Active learning invigorates the mind and stays with the learner. Shakespeare's genius with language, his skill as a dramatist, and his insight into the human condition can instill even the least academically motivated student with a passion not only for Shakespeare but also for language, drama, psychology, and knowledge.

The Lesson Plans and Tips for Teaching Shakespeare included in this Curriculum Guide provide practical, classroom-tested approaches for using performance-based teaching techniques. We have also included a Synopsis, a Fact Sheet, and Famous Lines and Phrases from the play and interesting facts to share with students.

Remember that enthusiasm is more important than expertise. There is always more for everyone to learn, so enjoy the ride with your students!

Photos from Folger student Shakespeare festivals, classroom visits, and teacher workshops by Mignonette Dooley, Mimi Marquet, Deidra Starnes, and Lloyd Wolf.

Robert Young
Director of Education
Folger Shakespeare Library

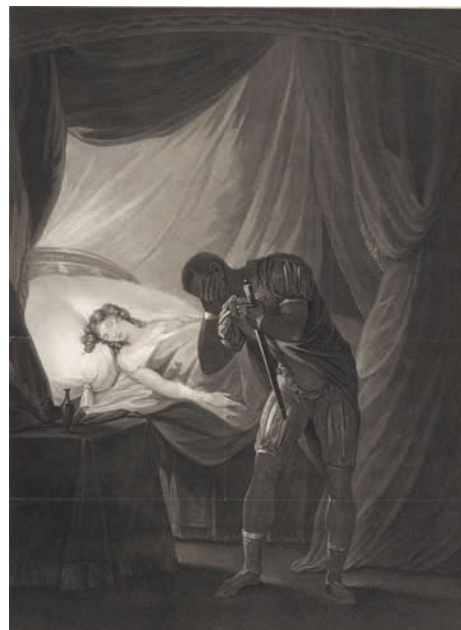


Above: Scott Leonard Fortune (Jimmy) and Susan Lynskey (Wendy). *Playing Juliet/Casting Othello* by Caleen Sinnette Jennings, directed by Lisa Rose Middleton, Folger Theatre, 1998. Photo by Ken Cobb. Below: William Satchwell Leney. *Othello*, act V, scene II, *Desdemona in bed asleep*. Engraving after Josiah Boydell, 1803. Folger Shakespeare Library.

OTHELLO

SYNOPSIS

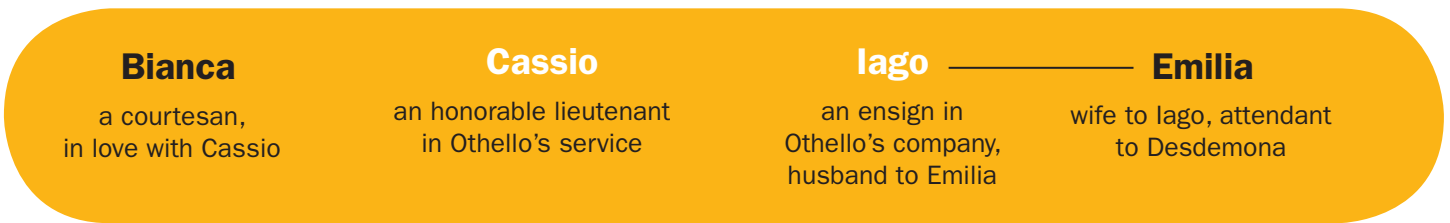
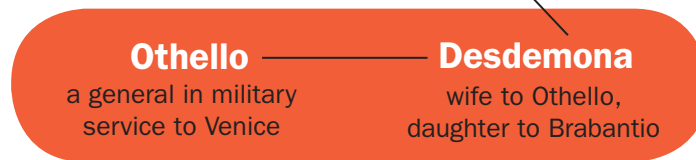
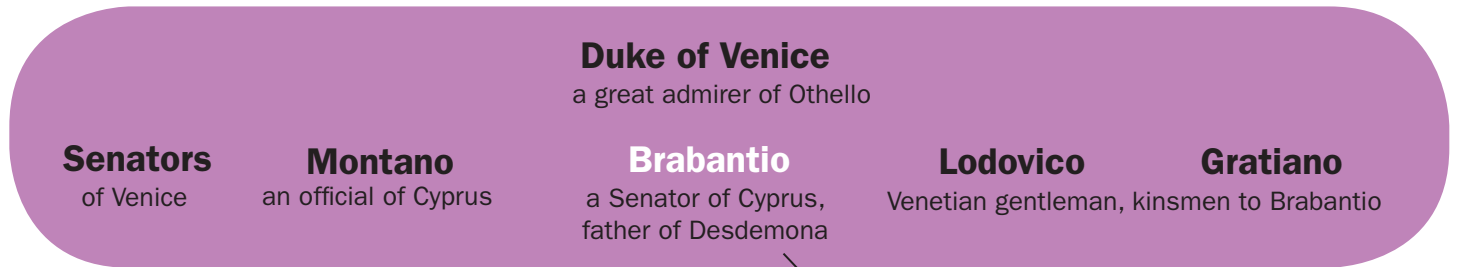
In Venice, the soldier Iago tells Roderigo of his hatred for Othello, a Moorish general and Iago's superior. Othello recently made Cassio his lieutenant, a position that Iago wanted. Othello has also secretly married Desdemona, the daughter of a Venetian senator. Iago and Rodrigo go to Brabantio, Desdemona's father, and tell him of the marriage. Othello and Brabantio meet with the Duke of Venice, who orders Othello to take charge of the Venetian army in Cyprus. Iago plots how he may use Othello's marriage as a means to revenge. Desdemona and Othello travel separately to Cyprus and are joyfully reunited. Iago plans to provoke Cassio into a fight with Roderigo and to convince Othello that Desdemona is in love with Cassio. After the fight, Othello strips Cassio of his lieutenantcy, and Iago advises Cassio to enlist Desdemona's help in getting reinstated. Iago speaks with Othello, implying that Desdemona supports Cassio because he is her lover. Tormented by jealousy, Othello threatens to kill Iago unless he provides proof of Desdemona's disloyalty. Emilia, Iago's wife, takes a handkerchief from Desdemona given to her by Othello and gives it to Iago. Iago then places Othello where he can see (but not hear) a conversation with Cassio about Bianca, Cassio's lover, and Iago tells Othello that the vulgar conversation is about Cassio and Desdemona. He tells Othello that he has seen Cassio with the handkerchief. Othello's fury grows, and, when she is unable to produce the missing handkerchief, he denounces Desdemona to her face, saying she has been unfaithful. Later that evening, he wakes her and once again charges her with infidelity. Over her protests of innocence, he smothers her. After Desdemona's death, Othello learns of her innocence and stabs himself. Iago is taken away to be tortured and killed. Learn more at www.folger.edu/editions.



See more images from *Othello* at the Folger collection at www.folger.edu/digitalimagecollection.

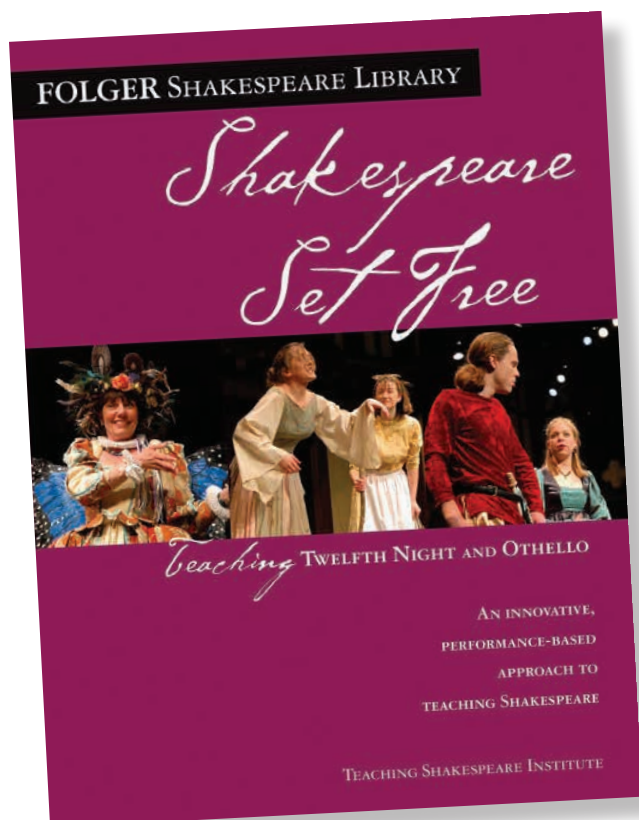
OTHELLO

CHARACTER CONNECTIONS



CHARACTER KEY
Main Characters in **white**
Secondary Characters in **black**

FROM ONE CLASSROOM TEACHER TO ANOTHER



Questions don't squelch students own ideas; on the contrary, they stimulate students to look more closely, respond more imaginatively.

Dear Colleagues,

Make no mistake: *Othello* works as well in the classroom as it does in the theater. It's a dynamite play to teach. Students get hooked early and stay with it to the end.

The play engages their emotions. This painfully modern-seeming story of a noble black general, tricked and tempted into being his worst self by an evil man he mistakenly trusts, has the power to shake certain students to their depths. Although teachers sometimes believe that the emotions the play explores are too adult for many high-school students to understand, most students know more about sexual jealousy as a potentially tragic force than we like to think. Few, however can articulate that understanding well; *Othello* gives them words for what they know but can't express.

It is a real asset that the study of *Othello* offers opportunities to confront issues of race and violence, including domestic violence, which are all too alive today: students can discuss difficult subjects, subjects that need to be encountered and thrashed out, on the neutral-seeming territory of a sixteenth-century play.

Ideally, teacher and students will discover the play together. The teacher's role is not to explain everything, but to allow students to experience for themselves the complexity and ambiguity of this wonderful, terrible, beautiful play.

We are big on questions. We believe that questions are provocative and that they may often uncover deeper meaning in a scene or truths about a character that simply do not occur to students who are discovering a play for the first time. Questions don't squelch students own ideas; on the contrary, they stimulate students to look more closely, respond more imaginatively. The best questions, of course, are those that do not have "an answer."



See performance-based teaching strategies in action at www.folger.edu/teachervideos.

Louisa Foulke Newlin
High School Shakespeare Institute
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Washington, DC



TIPS FOR TEACHING SHAKESPEARE

Performing Shakespeare—even at the most rudimentary level, script in hand, stumbling over the difficult words—can and usually does permanently change a student’s relationship with the plays and their author.



At the Folger, we believe that **Shakespeare is for everyone.** We believe that students of all ability levels, all backgrounds, and at all grade levels can—and do—successfully engage with Shakespeare’s works.

Why? Because Shakespeare, done right, inspires. The plays are full of explosive family situations and complex relationships that adolescents recognize.


Performance is particularly crucial in teaching Shakespeare, whose naked language on the page may be difficult to understand. “Performance” in this sense does not mean presenting memorized, costumed, fully staged shows, although those can be both satisfying and educational. Performance means getting students up on their feet, moving around a classroom as characters, and speaking the lines themselves.

Remember:

1. Enthusiasm is more important than expertise—there is always more for everyone to learn, so enjoy the ride with your students!
2. Trust Shakespeare’s original language, but don’t labor over every word.
3. Pick out key scenes that speak most clearly to your students. You do not have to start with Act 1, Scene 1.
4. Use the text to explain the life and times, not vice versa.

The following two Lesson Plans will give you practical ways to get started using this approach in your classroom.

Want More?

Folger Education’s *Shakespeare Set Free Toolkit* is a comprehensive resource for teaching Shakespeare, with lesson plans, activity guides, podcasts, videos, and other teaching tools. Learn more at www.folger.edu/toolkit. 

TEACHING SHAKESPEARE FAQS

How long does it take to teach a play?

A Shakespeare unit can take anywhere from a few days to a few weeks, depending on your students. You may want to spend a few days to introduce the play's major characters and themes, or you could spend a couple of weeks exploring several scenes, key ideas, and multiple interpretations. Full play units, such as the ones in *Shakespeare Set Free*, can take up to six weeks to teach. You do **NOT** need to start with Act 1, Scene 1 and you do **NOT** need to labor over every word.

Do I need to teach the entire play?

Sometimes it is better to do just part of a play rather than the whole play. Or you might opt for a Shakespeare sampler, using several scenes from different plays.

Which edition of the play is best to use with students?

The Folger Shakespeare Library paperback editions are relatively inexpensive, and easy to use, with the text on one page and footnotes and scene summaries on the facing page. Be aware that Shakespeare plays in literature anthologies often edit out some of the more bawdy content—content which students often love. They are also very heavy to carry around when students are performing scenes.

You can install the **Free Electronic Shakespeare Reader** on your hard drive on any Windows computer at www.shakespeare.ariyam.com. This is a downloadable piece of software that allows you to have all of Shakespeare's 38 plays instantly at your fingertips. Once you have it, there is no Internet connection required. It also provides in-depth full-text searching to all of Shakespeare's plays. You can also download the text online from sites such as www.opensourceshakespeare.org.

Should I start with the movie?

One disadvantage with watching a film version first is that students equate this version with the play and have difficulty realizing that scenes and

lines can be interpreted and enacted in many different ways. One way around this is to start with one scene which your students read and perform. Follow this activity by showing clips from several film versions of the same scene. This strategy enables allow for some meaningful discussion about possible interpretations.

What if I have never read the play before?

Learn along with your students—model for them the enthusiasm and excitement that comes with authentic learning.

Do I need to teach about the Globe Theatre or Shakespeare's Life?

The simple answer is "No." While telling students that Shakespeare had three children and that he and Anne Hathaway had to get married might be interesting, it really doesn't help them understand the plays. It's much better to integrate some facts about Elizabethan life when they come up in the plays. So when Francis Flute protests, "Let me not play a woman. I have a beard coming" in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, that's the perfect opportunity to explain the Elizabethan stage convention of young men playing the female parts.

Are student projects helpful?

Designing Globe Theatres out of sugar cubes and Popsicle sticks, designing costumes, creating Elizabethan newspapers in the computer lab, doing a scavenger hunt on the Internet, or doing a report on Elizabethan sanitary conditions has nothing to do with a student's appreciation of Shakespeare's language. If you want to give students a project, have them select, rehearse, and perform a scene.

What is a "trigger scene?"

A trigger scene is a short scene from a play that introduces the students to key characters and plot elements. Most important, the trigger scene shows students that they can uncover the meaning of Shakespeare's texts as they "put the scene on its feet."

Tried and true trigger scenes for beginning Shakespeare:

Othello, 1.1

(Iago rudely awakens Brabantio)

Julius Caesar, 3.3

(Cinna the poet is attacked by mob)

Hamlet, 1.1

(Ghost appears to soldiers)

Macbeth, 1.3.38 onwards

(Macbeth meets the witches)

A Midsummer Night's Dream, 1.2

(The rustic actors are introduced)

Much Ado About Nothing, 4.1

(Beatrice urges Benedick to kill Claudio)

Romeo and Juliet, 3.5

(Juliet angers her parents)

The Taming of the Shrew, 2.1

(The two sisters quarrel)

Twelfth Night, 2.2

(Malvolio returns ring to "Cesario")

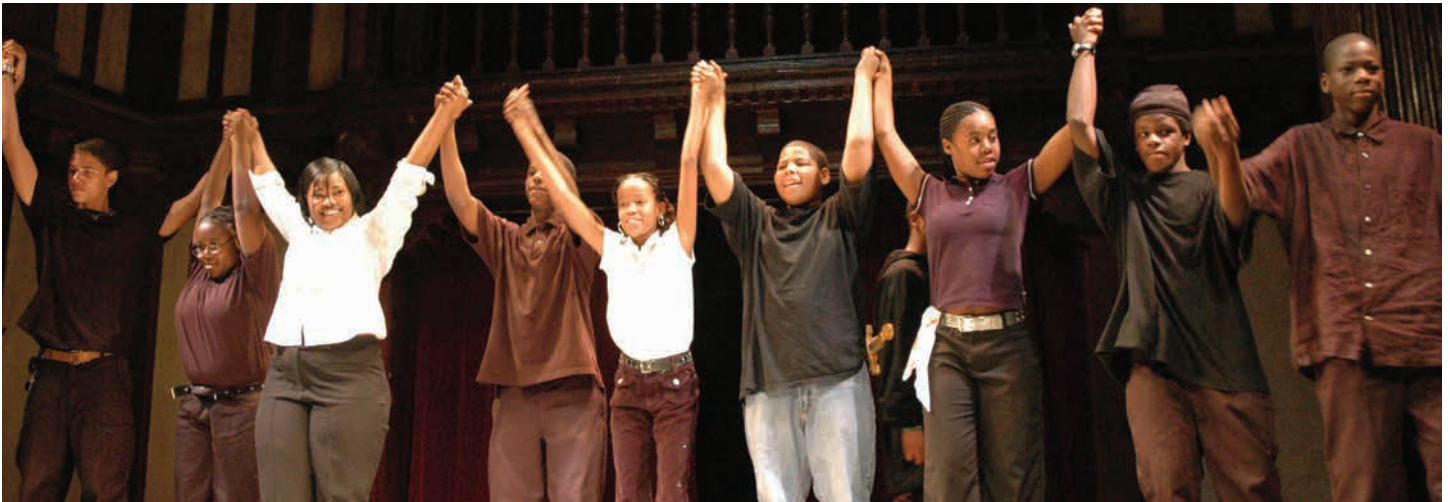
Want More?

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OTHELLO | LESSON PLAN 1

Divinity of hell!: Soliloquies, Cutting and Computers



Janet Field-Pickering served as Head of Education at the Folger Shakespeare Library from 1996–2000.

Play/Scenes Covered

Othello, 2.3.356–382. The lesson may also be adapted for other soliloquies.

Meeting the Standards

This lesson plan covers NCTE Standards 1, 3, 4, 6, 8, and 12.

What's On for Today and Why

Students struggle with soliloquies—the language is poetically rich and dense, and they often complain, “Why can’t Shakespeare just get to the point?” This lesson sets students loose on the language and gives them permission to cut Shakespeare down to size. In the process of reducing a soliloquy to half its former length, students get a clearer understanding of a character’s thoughts and intentions. In debating what is essential to the soliloquy and what is expendable, they discover how the language of the soliloquy works.

This lesson will take one to two class periods.

What To Do

This activity works best with a networked computer lab in which each student works at a computer. If, like many teachers, you don’t have access to a networked lab or one computer per student, change the group size to four and have each group work together at one computer station.

1. Put the text of the *Othello* 2.3 soliloquy on every computer screen. (Use the Soliloquy Handout as a reference for the text.)

2. Assign the students to groups of five and seat them at adjacent computers. Tell them to read the soliloquy on the screen in

front of them. Their ultimate goal is to cut the text in half. Their immediate task is to cut two or three lines and paste them below the asterisks at the bottom of the screen.

3. When the students have selected two or three lines and moved them, play musical computers. Hum a few bars of “Pop Goes the Weasel” as each student in the group moves to the computer to his or her right—except for the fifth person or group who circles around to sit at the first computer. A few rules: a “line” can mean an entire line or phrase. No student may move the same line twice. The cut lines are moved below the asterisks in the order in which they are cut—no deleting. The soliloquy must preserve its sense and meaning—no random cuts for the sake of cutting.

4. Tell the students to read what is in front of them, cut two or three more lines and paste them below the asterisks. Have the students move from screen to screen in this manner until at least ten lines appear below the asterisks on each screen and all the members of a group have circled back to their original computer screens.

5. Save and print the altered texts. Have each group discuss its five different versions and select the best one. Print a copy of the new script for each member of the group.

6. Give each group five to ten minutes to figure out how to stage the final script, with everyone in the group participating (lines can be shared or spoken in unison). Have each group perform its version in front of the class.

7. After all the groups have performed, discuss the choices made.

Discussion Prompts:

Did any patterns emerge—were all the performed versions similar or different in terms of the lines that were cut?

Did some versions seem to preserve the meaning of the text better than others?

Argue the case for discarded lines—should the lines be returned to the script or are they expendable?

8. (Optional) Homework assignment: have each student create a new poem using some or all of the discarded lines.

What You Need

Computer lab

Othello Soliloquy Handout

How Did It Go?

This lesson requires that students engage in a number of activities—text analysis, group work, performance, class discussion, and writing. If the students are actively involved in all stages of the process, if they are able to debate the relative merits of individual and group choices, if they take words and phrases and create a poem that might lead them even further in their understanding of character or language, they will end up with a clearer understanding of how a soliloquy works and why.

Want more?



Find more ideas and resources on teaching *Othello* at www.folger.edu/teachingothello.

OTHELLO SOLILOQUY HANDOUT | LESSON PLAN 1

DIVINITY OF HELL! SOLILOQUIES, CUTTING, AND COMPUTERS

Act 2, scene 3

Excerpted from *Othello*,
Folger Shakespeare Library Edition

And what's he, then, that says I play the villain,
When this advice is free I give and honest,
Probal to thinking, and indeed the course
To win the Moor again? For 'tis most easy
Th' inclining Desdemona to subdue
In any honest suit. She's framed as fruitful
As the free elements. And then for her
To win the Moor—(were't) to renounce his baptism,
All seals and symbols of redeemed sin—
His soul is so enfeathered to her love
That she may make, unmake, do what she list,
Even as her appetite shall play the god
With his weak function. How am I then a villain
To counsel Cassio to this parallel course
Directly to his good? Divinity of hell!
When devils will the blackest sins put on,
They do suggest at first with heavenly shows,
As I do now. For whiles this honest fool
Plies Desdemona to repair his fortune,
And she for him pleads strongly to the Moor,
I'll pour this pestilence into his ear:
That she repeals him for her body's lust;
And by how much she strive to do him good,
She shall undo her credit with the Moor.
So will I turn her virtue into pitch,
And out of her own goodness make the net
That shall enmesh them all.

Sample Cut Soliloquy

And what's he then that says I play the villain,
When this advice is free I give and honest,
the course
To win the Moor again? For 'tis most easy
Th'inclining Desdemona to subdue
In any honest suit
How am I then a villain
To counsel Cassio to this parallel course
Directly to his good. For whiles this honest fool
Plies Desdemona to repair his fortune,
And she for him pleads strongly to the Moor,
I'll pour this pestilence into his ear:
That she repeals him for her body's lust;
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So will I turn her virtue into pitch,
And out of her own goodness make the net
That shall enmesh them all.

Probal to thinking, and indeed
She's framed as fruitful
As the free elements. And then for her
To win the Moor—were't to renounce his baptism,
All seals and symbols of redeemed sin—
Even as her appetite shall play the god
With his weak function.
His soul is so enfeathered to her love
That she may make, unmake, do what she list,
Divinity of hell!
When devils will the blackest sins put on,
They do suggest at first with heavenly shows,
As I do now

OTHELLO | LESSON PLAN 2

MTV OTHELLO



Susan M. Kochman

Hempfield Area High School
Greensburg, PA

Play/Scenes Covered

Othello, 4.3.43–62

Meeting the Standards

This lesson plan covers NCTE Standards 1, 3, and 4.

What's On for Today and Why

Songs are often overlooked in Shakespeare's plays; this lack of attention will be addressed by having students dramatize Desdemona's "Willow Song." Creating a choral reading, singing and performing the song, or staging a music video helps students recognize how music and lyrics contribute to the mood and meaning of a scene. The students' creativity and active participation in whatever form the dramatization takes will make both the song and scene more memorable.

This lesson will take one to two class periods.

What To Do

1. Ask students to recall any plays they have read or seen that have songs or music in them. (If they can't think of any plays, try movies.) Discuss specific

examples and their responses to these songs or music, and note what effects the songs produced on the audience.

2. Tell students that they will create a performance of a song in *Othello*. Read aloud *Othello* 4.3 up to line 62. Discuss the meaning and mood of the lines.

3. Divide students into groups of four or five and have them prepare a dramatization of Desdemona's song. Have each group "script" the song, parceling out lines and phrases to different students, or perhaps saying or singing certain lines all together. Each person in the group must contribute either by reading, singing, acting out a part, or adding sound effects. Encourage the students to be creative in scripting their choral reading. They may also choose to set the words to a modern tune or write their own music for the song.

4. Each group will present its version of the song to the class. When all the groups have performed, discuss what the students discovered throughout the process, noting differences among groups in performance and interpretation, and determining what the song contributes to the scene.

What You Need

Folger edition of *Othello*

Video camera and video editing software (optional)

How Did It Go?

Discussing the exercise afterwards will reveal students' understanding of the effects of songs on drama. Having students write their individual reactions in a journal prior to class discussion is an effective means of preparing students for discussion.


Extend this activity over a few more days to allow the students to bring in costumes and props and film the students' performances for later viewing and analysis.

If you test at the end of the unit, include an essay question that asks students to discuss specifically how Desdemona's song enhances the mood of the scene and their understanding of the play.

Want more?



Find more ideas and resources on teaching *Othello* at www.folger.edu/teachingothello.



Shakespeare used several sources for the plot of *Othello*, including the *Hecatommithi*, a collection of stories by the Italian novelist and poet Giovanni Battista Giraldi.

There are numerous film versions of *Othello*, including a 2000 adaptation set at an exclusive boarding school where “O” is the school’s star basketball player and only black student.

Dominic West, who played Detective Jimmy McNulty in HBO’s series *The Wire*, performed the role of Iago in a 2011 British stage production of *Othello*.

Othello was first performed in 1604 at the royal court of King James I.

The town of Othello, Washington is named for the play—and also has streets called Macbeth and Hamlet.

DID YOU KNOW?

Learn more at www.folger.edu/shakespeare.

Until 1943, only white actors played the role of Othello in the United States. Paul Robeson, an All-American football player and graduate of Columbia Law School, became the first black actor in the 20th century to play the part.

Composer Giuseppe Verdi wrote an opera entitled *Otello* that was based on Shakespeare’s play and premiered in Milan in 1887.

FAMOUS LINES AND PHRASES FROM *OTHELLO*

Did you know you're quoting Shakespeare when you say...

...I will wear my heart upon my sleeve
Iago—1.1.70

She swore... 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange
Othello—1.3.184–85

...I am nothing if not critical.
Iago—2.1.134

When devils will the blackest sins put on,
They do suggest at first with heavenly shows
Iago—2.3.371–72

Be as your fancies teach you
Desdemona—3.3.98

O, beware, my lord, of jealousy!
It is the green-eyed monster...
Iago—3.3.195–96

Trifles light as air
Are to the jealous confirmations strong
As proofs of holy writ.
Iago—3.3.370–72

Heaven truly knows that thou art false as hell.
Othello—4.2.48

That death's unnatural that kills for loving.
Desdemona—5.2.48

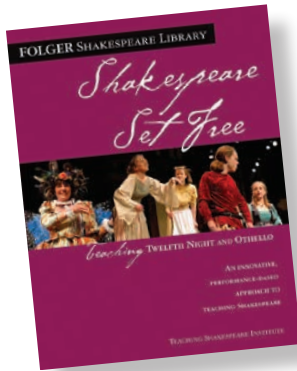
As ignorant as dirt!
Emilia—5.2.200

...one that loved not wisely, but too well
Othello—5.2.404



Carl Van Vechten. Paul Robeson as Othello. Photograph, 1944. Folger Shakespeare Library.

SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

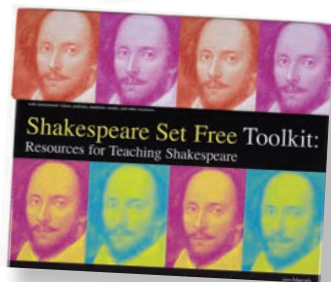


Shakespeare Set Free

The *Shakespeare Set Free* series offers innovative, performance-based approaches to teaching Shakespeare from the Folger Shakespeare Library, the world's leading center for Shakespeare studies. This volume includes unit plans on *Othello* and *Twelfth Night* and day-by-day teaching strategies that successfully immerse students of every grade and skill level in the language and the plays themselves—created, taught, and written by real teachers in real classrooms.



Available at the Folger Gift Shop 202-675-0308, or www.folger.edu/shop.

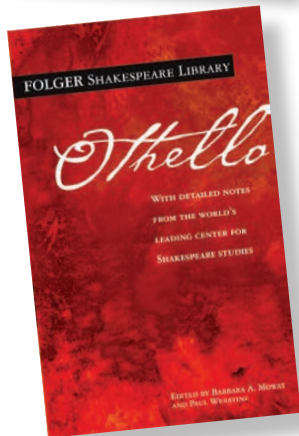


Shakespeare Set Free Toolkit

Think of it as Shakespeare in a box! Everything you need to teach Shakespeare, all in one place: the Doing Shakespeare Right guide to getting started; *Shakespeare Set Free* curriculum guide; two-line scene cards; a flash drive with instructional videos, podcasts, handouts, scripts, and images; *The Play's the Thing* DVD that follows a 5th grade class preparing for a festival; and the *Macbeth* Edition DVD, which includes a film of the smash 2008 Folger Theatre/Two River Theater Company production.



Available at the Folger Gift Shop 202-675-0308, or www.folger.edu/shop.



Play-by-Play: *Othello*

Folger Education's "Play-by-Play" website section contains resources on each of the most commonly taught plays, all in one place. Find *Othello* lesson plans, podcasts, videos, and more.



Learn more at www.folger.edu/teachingothello.



Making a Scene: Shakespeare in the Classroom

Folger Education's blog features new ideas, tips, and resources for teaching Shakespeare. With the teaching community commenting, Folger educators explore what works and what doesn't in today's classroom. Join the conversation!



Learn more at www.folger.edu/edblogger.

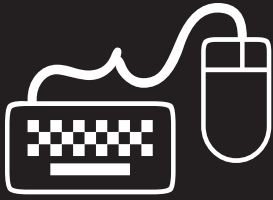
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