

INTRODUCTION:

I am frankly missionary about Shakespeare. I like to picture him thoroughly at home in both the low tavern culture and the high court culture of a world capital poised on the edge of a new world. The teeming Thames with its ships coming and going from the distant realms and climes. Sunsets, smells, diverse populations of traders and their funders: Moors, Jews, American Indians, Italians, Spaniards, Netherlander cloth merchants. White birds against black waters. The promise of clear air downstream, a difference from the filthy narrow alleys of London where shit is underfoot, Protestant street-corner preachers are sure of their rightness, courtesans and law-boys watch bear-baiting, executions and plays with equal enthusiasm, and the Queen's officials and the plague shut down theaters – the excitement of the imagination, and of the future, set against the **fear** lurking in present realities. The sheer energy of London with its sex, violence, race, power, politics, money, jealousy, murder, philosophy.

Othello is a play **full** of sex, violence, race, politics, power, money, jealousy, murder, and philosophy – but, for me, it is not **about** any of those things. They are all foils and metaphors for the real subject. For me, the play is **about** two things: the formation and transformation of human identity, and love - love of self and love of another. *Othello* is horribly sad because the marvelous identity the hero formed for himself by the beginning of the play is transformed into its base opposite by the end. And it is sad because both kinds of love are present in the beginning of the play, in apparent perfection, and both are destroyed by the end. Identity is destroyed by its opposite – a shape-shifting shadow-dweller. Love is destroyed by its opposite - hatred. *Othello* is a tragedy in the Aristotelian sense because, in the end, both identity and love are reclaimed, or at least understood to have been lost, too late. Indeed, I take “too late” to be the defining words of tragedy – the phrase involves both a permanent loss, and a terrible awareness of the value of that which is lost.

From Iago's “I am not what I am” in Act One to Othello's “Speak of me as I am” in the final soliloquy, Shakespeare probes the nature of human identity: the constructs we make as individuals, as individuals in love with a single other individual, and as individuals in a historic-socio-political context of many individuals. You all arrive at UNCA with identities fashioned by the worlds you come from, are trying to find true stories to tell about yourselves, are in search of love, and want to do some service for the world. Othello, more than any other of Shakespeare's tragedies, speaks directly to these personal issues. Further, because the play is a tragedy, it asks, “What went wrong?” and by extension, “What can go wrong in our own worlds of interacting selves?”

The play has two contexts. Its outer context is the time-specific historic world in which the real Elizabethan audience with its culture, assumptions and expectations experienced the drama. Its inner context is the timeless created world in which the fictional characters play out the drama?

I'd like to zoom in on the play by starting with a wide lens. Let's take a look at what was going on in the world beyond England – a world of events and ideas Shakespeare and his audience would have been well aware of, living as they did in one of the world's most important bustling port trade cities.

I. THE LARGER WORLD

The external context of *Othello* is complex, and included the Italian Renaissance and its spread north, the Protestant Reformation and Catholic Counter Reformation, the witch craze, the expanding Ottoman Empire, the undeclared war with Spain (1585-1604), the burgeoning Conceptual Revolution in science and philosophy, the exploration and exploitation of new worlds and markets, the unique English Renaissance and Reformation, and both perceptions **about** and the presence **of** Africans in European culture.

The Italian **Renaissance** of art, architecture, philosophy and poetry had moved north by the early 16th century, carried across the Alps to the Netherlands by men like Erasmus, who packed his donkeys' saddlebags with books and wine. They said you could hear Erasmus coming because he clinked. The Renaissance was imported to Paris by King Francis I, who wanted to co-opt that movement's attendant glory for France, and did co-opt Leonardo da Vinci. Francis was Leonardo's last patron and Francis claimed that Leonardo died in his arms. Leonardo, being dead, never disagreed. The intellectual excitement at the heart of the Renaissance had reached England by King Henry Tudor VIII's time, imported by men like Sir Thomas More (close personal and philosophical friends with Erasmus), and was made particularly manifest in the prolific sonneteering of the Tudor court culture.

The Mainland Protestant **Reformation** in religion had, by Shakespeare's day, happened, splintered, and been reacted to (with polemic and sword) by both Church and State, both spiritual and secular authority – for when one authority is challenged, all authorities are challenged. Henry VIII's Catholic daughter Mary slaughtered English Protestants in droves during her mid sixteenth century. And on St. Bartholomew's Day 1572, during Elizabeth's Protestant reign in England, the weak Catholic king of France was convinced by his powerful Medici mother, Catherine, to slaughter all the Protestant Huguenots in Paris. In the area of religion, the prevailing mood was - Fear!

On the dark, or darker side, **witchcraft** apparently flourished, for persecutions were forced to pick up at an exhausting rate. 1590 was an especially smoky decade – although witches were never burned in England, they were hanged. The pope sent two priests up to the Northern German Mountains to investigate mysterious pre-Christian rites, and the result was the publication in of the *Maleus Maleficarum* – a complete handbook on how to recognize, torture a confession out of, and kill witches. Brabantio wasn't alone. Europe saw witchcraft and black magic everywhere. Fear!

At the end of my Crusades lecture I mentioned that when Acre, the last Christian outpost in the Levant, fell to the Muslims in @1300, Osman I was already warlord of a small tribe in Anatolia that would shortly grow to become one of the largest and wealthiest empires in the world – **the Ottoman Empire**. I'd like to glance at the progress, heroes and ramifications of that growth, with a boring old-fashioned time-line. (ppt images of Ottomans and Constantinople)

1204 – Constantinople is conquered and completely sacked by Christians in 4th Crusade.
 1261 – Byzantium retakes Constantinople from Christians, but never really recovers its medieval glory
 1290-1320 – Rise of Ottoman Turks in Northwestern Turkey, end of Christian Crusades in East
 1326 – Bursa is founded as first Ottoman capital (Orhan’s rule from 1326-1362)
 1389 – Sultan Beyazit the Thunderbolt defeats Serbs at Kosovo – Ottoman conquest of Balkans (1389-96)
 1402 – Tamerlane captures Beyazit at Battle of Ankara (check out Christopher Marlowe’s play)
 1430-1460 – Migration of Byzantine scholars and artists (with their books) to Western Europe, particularly Italy and Ficino’s Platonic Academy
 1451-1482 – reign of Mehment II, the Conqueror
1453 – Siege and capture of Christian Constantinople, almost turn their attention to Venice itself.
1466-1479- war with Christian Venice over Greek possessions – Venice loses
 1453-1595 – Hagia Sophia converted to mosque, and construction of the Topkapi Palace
 1520-1566 – Reign of Suleiman I, The Magnificent.
1522 – Take the Christian island of Rhodes
 1529 – First Siege of Vienna – torrential rains prevent artillery from getting through
 1533 – Suleiman conquers Baghdad
 1550 – Architect Sinan begins redesigning the skyline of the middle-east (domed mosque surrounded by minarets) – builds The Suleimaniye Mosque
October 7, 1571 – Battle of Lepanto (see *Othello*). The entire Turkish naval force (which not lost a sea battle in over a century) is defeated by a small and unstable coalition of Christian states, and a storm. Lost 200+ warships and 35,000+ men. Cervantes rises from his sick bed to fight and is permanently wounded in his left hand “for the glory of the right one.” “The most noble and memorable event that past centuries have seen or future generations can ever hope to witness.” - Cervantes
 1609 – Construction of The Blue Mosque (completed in year of Shakespeare’s death)

What went wrong for the great Ottoman Empire? Same things that always go wrong with all great empires – some their own fault, some not: 1) Victims of own success (Janissaries become conservative administrative class, complacency); 2) Not interested in technological development (Europe developed cannons for use on ships); 3) New World silver and gold flood Europe after 1492.

All Europe lived in terror of the Ottoman advance. In Machiavelli’s play, *The Mandrake*, one character asks, “Do you think the Turks will invade this year?” “Yes, if you do not pray,” replies a friar.

The menace was real, ever-present, and seemed inevitable. It was only a matter of time before Europe would fall under Muslim rule. Fear!

Now for the **Conceptual Revolution** I mentioned. Ideas, ideas ideas. Increasingly, old world views (faith-based, text-based, hierarchical, teleological and communal) are coming into conflict with nascent modern world views (based on empirical observation, reason, and the authority of the individual). Shakespeare seems to me to be less interested in the rightness or wrongness of these views than he is in the creative tension inherent in them – the dramatic possibilities. How often does he express the old, possibly superstitious views in the words of venerable, good, if slightly foolish elderly men, and the new reasonable views in the words of eminently intelligent, young, if slightly evil, characters? His audience, while very much aware of contemporary intellectual trends, would still be firmly rooted in the world view expressed by Ulysses in *Troilus and Cressida* (on line). Such conflict results in insecurity and concerns about the nature of Truth itself – Fear!

- Science – Ptolemy (church supported) = geocentric, Copernicus (born 1473) = heliocentric, published 1543. Francis Bacon (born 1561) = separation of religion and science, no reliance on old authorities (like Aristotle), observation + experimentation (like Iago).
- Technology – guns (handheld and on ships), printing, compass – warfare, communication, global expansion and trade.
- Exploration – new worlds in Africa, India, China, Americas – we aren’t alone.
- Philosophy – conceptual revolution in how people thought about themselves and their world in three important areas: what is the nature of existence, why do things happen, and how do I know what is true – what to base my actions on? Who am I? Why am I? How do I act? Is human nature essentially noble and worthy (Pico) or base and unworthy (Machiavelli/Hobbes, born 1588)? How do we define and perceive ourselves – then how does that perception affect how we behave?

Now let me focus the glass of history closer to Shakespeare, on England herself.

First, there was a prominent image in the 16th century of a prince as the pure high fountain from which flows downward, to the members of the realm - sustaining water, values and national character. So what was trickling down onto the good people of England? The princes of England who most influenced Shakespeare were the Tudors, who created something history has called The Myth of the Tudor Monarchy – that it was divinely ordained, that history must be rewritten to justify its glory, and that it must be maintained at all costs. In 16th century England, Fear was not only of a threat from without. Fear was a national characteristic and had been since Henry VII, the first Tudor, had emerged triumphant in 14?? from the devastating, brutal and bloody civil Wars of the Roses. From that moment, Fear of deposition, Fear of not having an heir, Fear of more civil war, Fear of any threat, however small, to authority – dominated the decision-making of the Tudors, the P.R. campaigns of the Tudors, and the whole tenor of their rule. There was Henry VIII, who desperately wanted an heir and overthrew the English Catholic Church in order to get one. There was Bloody Mary, Elizabeth’s Catholic older sister, who blessedly only reigned for 5 years, and who slaughtered Protestants and had hysterical pregnancies. And there was Elizabeth herself who beheaded her Catholic rival Mary Queen of Scots and initiated a Lord of the Revels to monitor political censorship of the stage. Fear!

A word about the **English Reformation** - which was not about ideals. On every level, The English Reformation was a practical matter for the King. However one casts Luther, he was an idealist. King Henry VIII was not, but he was **afraid**. He was afraid of how history would perceive him. He needed money to fight wars against France so he could live up to his warrior father's legacy. Confiscation of monasteries provided that money. He was afraid of appearing weak and needed constant reinforcement of his power. Declaring himself Supreme Head of the Church of England increased his power over not only his subjects' bodies and purses, but over all their legal matters (secular and spiritual) and over their immortal souls as well. He was afraid of not having an heir. Divorcing Catherine of Aragon freed him up to marry more fruitful women. There is also some evidence that he actually did fear for his immortal soul, for having wed his brother's widow in the first place. An annulment would get him out of that peril as well. Against Pope Clement's citation of Deuteronomy 25.5 - you are required to marry your brother's widow - Henry cited Leviticus 20.21 - you'd better not marry your brother's widow. He dissolved the Church **in** England, Created the Church **of** England with himself as Supreme Head, granted himself a divorce, and executed his Lord High Chancellor, Sir Thomas More, whose loyalty to the Catholic Church trumped his loyalty to his king, and whose ideals, which had permitted him to persecute and burn protestants, would not permit him to sign a loyalty oath to the newly self-proclaimed head of the church. Henry reacted out of fear.

There is a saying that everything happens fifty years later in England. The **English Renaissance** of the 16th century is a case in point. The English Renaissance was a linguistic, highly literary one. From Court Sonnets to a proliferation of psalm translations, to invention of the prose novel, to attempts at romantic epic poetry, to consolidation of native dramatic and classical dramatic traditions in a rich new dramatic form, to translations - or Englishings - of all the classical literature recovered in the Italian Renaissance, to resoundingly eloquent sermons, to the King James Bible. Language was important. By Shakespeare's time, three linguistic strands had become woven together to create a rich matrix of sound, structure and meaning: the hard Bs, Ds and Gs and the dense syllable structure of native Anglo Saxon; the soft sibilant lyrical sounds brought by the French in 1066; and Latin's grammatical constructs and syntax from Christendom. Almost all of Shakespeare's plays are, on some level, about the power of language.

Let me introduce you to just one courtly genre, because it shows up in the mouth of the most perfect courtier in the play. When Cassio lands on cypress he is asked about Othello's new wife and he delivers an epithalamium that contains a blazon - or a wedding song that includes a description of all the lady's parts - in which he encapsulates all the ideas about a perfect lady and marriage that have been poured into the English consciousness for the previous 50 years. In his poem he compares Desdemona to Venus, the goddess of love, and to Mary Queen of Heaven.

Everyone wrote epithalamia, and blazon was a popular theme in the sonnets. Spencer's Epithalamium is the most famous, published in 1597, but I think the most relevant is Sir Philip Sidney's - circulated in the 80s and published after his death in *Arcadia* in 1593. Sir Philip Sidney feels like a model for Cassio - the loyal servant, soldier, diplomat, poet, and dashing lady's man - the consummate English courtier - stabbed in the line of duty, defending his Queen and realm. He was referred to by his contemporaries as the very "type of English chivalry," "made in the image of god," "the miracle of our age."

A few characteristics of this proliferation of the written word are worth noting, in the context of Iago's speeches. The courtly sonnets often contained, thinly disguised, a language of chase, hunt, predation, wildness. There was an appetite for what we think of as soft-core porn. There was an emphasis on what I call sprezzatura of language - the courtly imperative of art was to hide the art part, the art-ifice - to make it seem art-less. And the use of what literature majors call "the humility topos" to manipulate an artist's way to power was rampant. Watch Iago use that.

Speaking of trickle-down values and the Machiavellian emphasis on Seeming as a disguise for Being, Shakespeare's Queen was the great Elizabeth I. She had a thorough Humanistic education. She spoke, wrote and read many languages, translated many classics from Latin, wrote sonnets and songs, and wrote her own letters, epistles and speeches. Her sense of Ciceronian oratory was highly evolved and effective. She literally kept her head through her manipulation of language. She carefully crafted her image: in painted and printed pictures, in coinage, in statuary, in porcelain, on banners, on specially minted medals, on cameos, in etchings, on frontispieces, and especially in words. She completely controlled what was said about her by the literary artisans of the English Renaissance, as much as she controlled what she herself said.

Now I'd like to turn my attention to the **presence** of Africans in Europe in general and in England in particular, and to the **image**, both negative and positive, of the black, in folk lore, literature, hagiography, and art.

Here are a few important moments in African/European contact:

Historical mileposts:

- Conquering of Andalusia from Christian Vandals and development of remarkably tolerant Moorish culture with libraries and schools, preserving and building on Islamic and Hellenistic learning (711 Umayyads, 1086 Black African Almoravids),
- Crusades (1100-1300),
- Beginnings of trans-Atlantic Slave Trade (1441, Portuguese) 367,000 souls shipped out between 1450-1600.
- Fall of Constantinople (1453),
- Fall of Granada to Catholic rulers with thousands and thousands of priceless books (created often by black men) burned on bonfires and three-million Moors expelled or converted, Columbus's voyages, Torquemada's Inquisition and the beginning of the public debate about the definition of "human" (1492).

- Elizabeth's proclamation, 1596: "of late divers blackmoores brought into this realm, of which kind of people there are already here too many. . . . Those kind of people should be sent forth of the land." 1601: "discontentment by the numbers of blackamores which are crept into this realm. . . ."

From Pre-classical antiquity, two images of the black man have co-existed side by side: the virtuous, heroic, smart, larger-than-life, warrior prince, and the over-sexed, hot-blooded, ignorant, violent ape-like beast. I would like to suggest that Shakespeare deliberately created the former, in Othello, so that the character could be transformed into the latter. He deliberately violated cultural expectations of his time in order to hold the mirror up to them. As the character changes, he moves **towards** base popular stereotypes.

It seems to me that there are many heroic black figures standing in back of the Othello of Act I and II: The four matters of English Literature are The Greek and Roman Classics, The Charlemagne Romances like Roland, The Arthurian legends, and Christianity. Images of heroic black men were prevalent in all these areas. In the Aeneid II/103ff (Englished in 1567) we hear of a black Greek warrior named Palamedes who invented eleven letters of the Greek alphabet by looking at migrating geese, and was smart enough to outwit Odysseus, which resulted in Odysseus' hatred and jealousy. So Odysseus plotted his downfall – which involved a forged letter and ended with the stoning to death of Palamedes on the shores of Troy. Sir Palamedes is the black Saracen knight at King Arthur's Round Table. He was a rival of Tristan for Iseult's love. The knights admired his bravery and prowess, but were jealous of him. After he caught and killed the Questing Beast, Gawain killed him. On the prejudicial side, we saw negative images of black knights in Song of Roland.

Imagery of Blacks in Western Christian Art and literature followed these two opposite lines. Blacks as sons of Cain and Ham who tortured Christ and are semi-human or all devil, ugly, deformed, oversexed, damned, savage and only savable through slavery. Or, Blacks as heroes of Militant Christianity, a regal and highly civilized Magi worshipping infant Christ, possessing a natural capacity for redemption, noble, beautiful, possessed of Christian and Western society's values, and increasingly in the centuries leading up to Othello (see Montaigne) - representational of primitive innocence, often depicted as victimized by inhuman, uncivilized Spanish colonizers- note Iago's name is Spanish and his imagery is nautical.

Moors were all over the literature leading up to Shakespeare. Roger Bacon, Albertius Magnus, even Dante wrote about the Moors' "magnanimity. . . [and] chivalric virtues of fearlessness, charity and generosity. *L'amour e il cuorgentil sono una coas* – 'love and a generous heart are one and the same thing'" – Dante

1545 Cosimo I de' Medici and his pregnant wife watched theatrical presentation of a mock battle between Christians and Turks. The actor portraying a Turk accidentally exposed his larger than usual privates, which caused everyone in the audience to laugh with great gusto.

African Moors were also featured in the heraldry of many prominent European families, cities, territories and countries.

Alessandro Medici, the Duke of Florence had a black African mother.

Let me cite a few specific examples of the impressions England was receiving of black men at the time of Othello.

A converted, baptized, black African traveler named Leo Africanus (Al-Hassa Ibn-Mohammed Al-Wezaz Al-Fasi) wrote a book called *The History and Description of Africa and of the Notable Things Therein Contained* which was "done into English" in the year 1600 by John Pory, and immediately became a best seller. In it he called Africa his "nurse." The expulsion from Spain he called "The Last Sigh of the Moor." Moors are "most honest people . . . and destitute of all fraud and guile . . . , embracing all simplicity and truth They keepe their covenant most faithfully; in so much that they would rather die than breake promise. No nation I the world is so subject unto jealousie; for they will rather lese their lives, then put up any disgrace in the behalfe of their women." He gave descriptions of the "customs of the Arabians and Africans. He escaped "manie thousands of imminent dangers desolate cold mountains, and huge drie and barren deserts. . . . in hazard to have beene captured or have his throat cut by the prouling Arabians. How hardly many times escaped he the Lyons greedie mouth, and the devouring jaws of the Crocodile. . . . [in] antres vast and desarts ilde (I.3.140). His text is full of fountain imagery: the cisterns in Fez are "always kept sweet and clean, neither are they covered but only in summer time, when men women and children bathe themselves therin."

Pliny's *Natural History* was "Englished" in 1601 by Philemon Holland, and immediately became a best seller. In it English readers learned of Troglodites' "hollow caves," Blemmyi with "no heads but with mouth and eyes in both their breasts," cannibals, "Scythians called Anthropophagi," . . . and a tale about a bondsman accused of using magic who responded with practical evidence and said "My Maistres, Behold, these are the sorceries, charmes, and all the inchauntments that I use."

Even closer to home, for Shakespeare. At the Gray's Inn Revels 1594, *Comedy of Errors* was performed, and Lucy Negro, a black African, presided as Queen of the Revels. Luce means light. She is probably the same Luce who was Shakespeare's black courtesan, now risen to Madame status. There is scholarly speculation that she is the dark lady of the final sonnets. Interestingly, the courtesan in Othello is named Bianca, which means white.

Shakespeare also knew members of the powerful & influential merchant class who traveled to Morocco, Tunisia and other parts of Africa, like the Earl of Leicester (his patron), Master Roberts (Elizabeth's Ambassador to Morocco) and Merzouk Rais (Moroccan Ambassador to London).

The Image of the Black in Shakespeare: Titus Andronicus (Aaron), Merchant of Venice (Prince of Morocco – noble, civilized, courtly, a prince, wealthy, powerful), Tempest (Caliban – half-wit, deformed, symbol of colonized man, permanent slave), Othello.

With regard to Desdemona and Othello, it's worth a glance at Ursula and Maurice in European iconography – part of the sub-conscious "matter" of any English artist in 1600.

The Golden Legend of the Lives of the Saints was "Englished" by William Caxton in 1483 and immediately became a best-seller. The Protestant Reformation in England did not succeed in wiping out people's fondness for their Saints' stories. Ursula – **Native English** Saint from pre-Norman **Britain**, patron saint of **virgins**, often portrayed with St. George's white banner with red cross. Maurice – **Black African** Saint, also connected with English **St. George**.

"The sacrificial lover" is a stock character in Catholic iconography and hagiography, but the figure unique and special to England is golden-haired, pale, virginal Ursula, daughter of an early Christian King of Britain named Notus or Maurus (both names indicate Blackness). Ursula "shone full of marvelous honesty, wisdom and beauty." Of the 11,000 virgins who joined her in martyrdom was one Queen of Sicily (held by Moors?) "which had made of her husband. . . a meek lamb, and was sister of Maurice the bishop." Again, Maurice indicates blackness. "Maurice, bishop of Levicana" was among the company of the martyred. For those of you who are fans of King Lear, one of the martyred English women was named Cordula! 238 or 452 A.D. with the men = 26,000 martyred

St. Maurice's connection to Shakespeare's noble Moor appears to me to be more direct. He was the great, black commander of the Theban League. Here are quotes from *The Golden Legend*: "first of his name. . . it is said of mauron, which, after Isidore, in Greek is said black. [he is] black by despising himself." That's a good thing in medieval Christianity – put your earthly self lower than God – but not such a good thing in 1600 English language or identity construction. Maurice comes from a land "full of riches, plenteous of fruit, delectable of trees. The indwellers of that region be of great bodies and noble in arms, strong in battle, subtle in engine, and right abundant in wisdom." "And the **noble** man, Maurice, was duke of this **holy legion**." Maurice says, "I have kept the commandment of God which said to Peter: Put thy sword into the sheath." (Put up thy swords or the dew will rust them) And in his last speech before dying he says, "Send this answer unto Caesar: We be thy knights, sir emperor, and have taken arms to the defense of the common weal; in us is no treason ne dread." "I have done this kingdom some service."

Relics of Ursula, Maurice and George lie together in Windsor Cathedral.

Another contextual note: Othello is not, technically, an Elizabethan play. The Queen died the year before it was first produced. King James, the son of beheaded Catholic Mary Queen of Scots, was on the English throne. Othello is a Jacobean play. Things are not nice in the Jacobean world. Not tidy. Not happy. Not reconcilable with anything previously "known" The favorite genre of the Jacobean is the Revenge Tragedy. Here is an excerpt from a typical Jacobean play – *The Revenger's Tragedy* by Thomas Middleton (Derek Jakobi, Eddie Izzard, Christopher Eccleston). "He who seeks revenge should dig two graves."

And what of the play's inner context? There's a geographical context: the two worlds of Venice and Cyprus, the great civilized realm of civic law, where reason and good council yield justice, and the Edenic garden paradise where Othello and Desdemona, like Milton's Adam and Eve, make and lose their love bower. There's a political-social context: the two melded worlds of Othello and Desdemona - Military and Domestic, Public and Private, State and Family, General and Particular (1.2.51-57). But I want to focus on two areas: the Conceptual Revolution I spoke of earlier, and what I see as the psychological context of the play, a strange realm indeed: Iago's mind.

Shakespeare wrote on the cusp of a great revolution in ideas – in ways people thought about themselves and the world. I like to think of Shakespeare as a sponge, who absorbed everything he came into contact with. The new ways of thinking were simply a new stage for him, to throw characters onto and see how they respond. Shakespeare is the Iago in the wings of this play.

Shakespeare's character Iago achieves nothing less than a complete conceptual revolution in Shakespeare's character Othello. We all think about the world in which we find ourselves in a certain way, and we change our behavior based on our way of thinking. – our perceptions about ourselves, our sense of good and bad, our relationships to each other, our sense of what is possible to do and what is not. I find it useful to look, with students, at the way Othello perceives himself and his love in Acts I and II, and the way that perception changes – and therefore how it becomes possible for him to act. Indeed, this play is Ovidian. It is about change. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* was Englished by Arthur Golding in 1567. This play bursts with tensions between medieval and modern ways of thinking. How Othello sees himself affects what it is possible for him to do. He is, after 3.3 no longer the level-headed general, "Othello's occupation is gone." How he sees Desdemona affects what it is possible for him to do to her. She is no longer sacred and chaste. She is a profane whore.

Next, let's look at the psychological context of the play. Wherever we are in the play, we are in Iago's world because, like Milton's Satan, he carries hell within him and can make a hell of heaven. Look how he makes ambiguous the urban heaven of Venice. Brabantio, in disbelief that anything terrible could happen in the city, exclaims simply, "This is Venice!" And we, with Othello, have seen with our own eyes the reasonableness of civilized governance. But Iago collapses our and Othello's faith in our own experience when he insinuates, "In Venice they do . . ." And he transforms the heaven of the bridal bed to the hell of the murder couch.

So what do we initially learn about this territory we and the characters will inhabit? Iago's first and almost last words are profane curses. "Sblood" and "Zounds." His first advice about himself, and incidentally a reflection of his opinion of himself, is "Abhor me. / Despise me." The first, and only emotion to escape him is "hate." We learn that his weapons are words – language. He "tells" people things. "You told

me.” His first prediction is his final act, and has to do with words. “You’ll not hear me.” “From this time forth I never will speak word.” But his first and primary syntactical construction, the conditional, casts into ambiguity everything he says, “If “If.” Thus, in the first eight lines of the play, in utter darkness but for a torch, we hear the world the characters will inhabit from the mouth of its creator. When Brabantio hears his voice out of the darkness he recognizes Iago’s true nature. “What profane wretch art thou?” By the end of the first act we have seen that he is a completely ego-centric shape-shifter, “seeming” for his own “peculiar end.” He swears by Janus, the two-faced god of beginnings. He goads others into action, “Call up her father.” “I’ll call aloud.” He uses, ruthlessly, the people around Othello to “poison his delight.” He understands neither self-love (1.3.116) nor love (1.3.334). He considers himself self-created. “Our bodies are gardens. . .” He aligns himself with the prince of Hell and boasts to have access to “all the tribe of hell.” He perpetrates evil for “sport.” He is an improviser who has no plan but never let’s slip an occasion (“Tis here, but yet confused” 2.1.312). Like the dramatist himself, he is a keen observer of human nature who absorbs words and events as if the whole human drama is nothing but potential weaponry in his arsenal. He is a big fan of “reason.” He speaks in metaphors, questions and innuendos, rather than straight forward description (Barbary Horse). And above all, he is as invisible as if he spent the whole play in the darkness of the first scene – as invisible as hypocrisy always is, a subject Milton will also deal with, in a similar way. In *Aereopagitica*, Milton will claim that in any open encounter with truth, falsehood will lose. So a smart falsehood will be circumspect. As Iago says of himself, “Knavery’s plain face is never seen til used.” (2.1.313) His epithet, which he wears like Harry Potter’s invisibility cloak, is “honest.” Iago’s mind, and his imposition of it on the world he will ruin, reminds me of Flannery O’Connor’s comment about her fiction, “I have discovered that my subject is the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil.”

I want now to look at the character of Othello. Who is he and how did he get there? Iago may claim to be self-created but, again like Milton’s Satan, his whole problem in the beginning of the play is that he is at the mercy of his commander in chief and can’t tell the difference between servitude and service. The most self-fashioned character in Othello is Othello. I will argue that three strands weave together to form an identity: nature (in modern terms, genetics), merit (choice and deed), and magic (what we imagine and invent).

What do we learn about Othello at the beginning? I skip the clearly vitriolic first scene, except to note its impact, by contrast, on our first glimpse of Othello. And except to note that when Iago speaks in soliloquy, he calls Othello a man “of a free and open nature.” Othello, we learn, is a black African, a man of mature years, and an important general in service to the Venetian state. He is “royal,” self-raised by “merit” to a “proud fortune,” “free,” and loves “the gentle Desdemona.” If we look at deeds to infer character, compare Iago’s mean, sneaky, invisible deeds of scene one with Othello’s in scene two. He accepts the consequences of his choices (“I must be found”), honors the years and standing of his Father in Law, does not act rashly (Put up your swords), remains calm and dignified in the face of disgusting prejudice and false slander (he is not, in fact, a “bond-slave,” a “pagan” or a wielder of potions). Othello submits to the rule of law and is associated with justice from the beginning. He does understand the meaning of service to a higher authority than himself, and acts at all times as if he is indeed his own gardener. He speaks in direct declarative sentences that make us believe him, and that make his epithets (brave, valiant) ring true. He does understand both self-love and selfless love for Desdemona. The only two potential cracks in his character armor (cracks invisible Iago listens to from the corner of the room) are his reference to the “vices of his blood” and the fact that he sees himself reflected in Desdemona’s adoring and admiring eyes (I did love her that she did pity them, 1.3.287). At least part of his love for her has to do with the way her love for him reinforces the value of the story he tells about himself. How many of us have loved “unwisely” because we were loved?

How did Othello fashion this admirable identity? A 20-year old student once told me that when he sees a movie with a character in it that he really likes, he becomes that character for a couple of days. He tries on selves to see how they fit. We’ll never know how Othello became Othello. All we have is his story about himself – the pretty fantastic myth he has selectively written as his autobiography. A linguistic myth he explicitly connects with “witchcraft.” We see the Duke respond to Othello’s linguistic magic in much the same way Desdemona did. Anyone who has ever created a poem, a story, a drama, a piece of music, a ballet, a painting – knows, has experienced, magic. Without the oft-invoked muses, there is nothing. The sense of being a magician is palpable in the act of creation, self or otherwise. Of course Shakespeare is the real linguistic and imaginative magician here, and he treads a fine line. There are many sober people in his world who think the theater is blasphemous for this precise reason. Creation treads in God’s territory. Self-creation and pre-destination are not compatible notions.

I think one thing can safely be said about how Othello became a virtuous individual, since I speak here in an educational context. Experience was a good teacher for him. I am reminded of Montaigne’s essay *On Education*, when he speaks of Alexander’s acquisition of virtues. “Aristotle did not amuse his great pupil so much with the tricks of constructing syllogisms . . . as by instructing him in the good precepts concerning valor, prowess, magnanimity, and temperance, and the security of fearing nothing, and with this ammunition he sent him, still a child, to subjugate the empire of the whole world.” Alas, Othello is about to run into a bad teacher whose method is, precisely, tricks of constructing syllogisms.

We have looked at the fashioning of a “good” self. How do we fashion a “good” union of two selves – a condition humans seem universally driven to. Again, I argue that, in this play, the three strands woven together to form a good love are nature (individual character and sexual attraction), merit (choices made relative to each other), and magic (the mysterious “faith” or “trust” the characters speak of). Iago must pervert each of these in order to uncreate love.

Othello and Desdemona, in spite of the “gross” picture painted by Iago and Rodrigo, are “soul to soul”(1.3.116), “mind” to “mind” (1.3.255 & 268), “most fortunate in each other,” (2.1.63) only have eyes for each other (2.1.180ff), and are in perfect harmony with each other and with the spheres (2.1.200). They are partners in the enterprise of their relationship. She is “half the wooer.”(1.3.178) Her descriptor is “divine”(2.1.75), she swears by “r Lady” (3.3.80), MERCY?? and Cassio sings an Ave Maria to her and praises her in a Petrarchan ode (2.1.63-87). Thus their love is connected with the celestial and sacred. But it is also rooted in the human. She is both unfallen, sensual Eve and chaste intercessor, Mary. Their natural sexual union in the garden of Cypress will make all right with the world, says Cassio (2.1.82-84). They try to steal “but an hour of love” before shipping out to war. Othello says, “my life upon her faith,” (1.3.297) and language – in a play

partly about the potential and limits of language – fails him when he tries to describe his joy (2.1.196). Above all, their union puts the universe in a new order, for each of them, and they can never go back to their previous individual orderings. Their disunion would not cause kingdoms to fall, but, as Othello says “when I love thee not, / Chaos is come again.” If there is a crack in their love armor it is, as Othello realizes too late, that he loves her too much (a theme Milton will expand upon with Adam and Eve). Their love is personal to them, and is the new most important thing in their mutual hierarchy. How many of us have experienced such a reshuffling in a love relationship, one that leaves us stranded with no frame of reference when that new order is shattered? That personal urgency, selflessness, tenderness and absoluteness is what makes Othello and Desdemona’s love, and its sad dissolution, a good one to look at with students.

What goes wrong? Well, Iago clearly goes wrong. But more importantly, how does he succeed? We teachers are in the business of helping young people reveal and create individual adult selves. We hold mirrors up to them through literature, art, science, history, philosophy. Part of our project is to try to teach our students to read well, by which we mean critically, to reason for themselves, and to formulate responses based on those acts of reading and reasoning. The relationship between reading, reasoning, and choice (or action) is at the heart of what goes wrong in Othello.

If this is a play on some level about the power of language to create and uncreate, it must then be about the act of reading, as well. There is a lot of misreading in this play, from the beginning. Brabantio misreads his daughter. Othello and Desdemona selectively read each other. The significance of an over”seen” conversation, a handkerchief, and a suit on behalf of a friend are misread. And everyone misreads Iago. In fact, the only person who reads everything almost correctly throughout the whole play is Iago, who writes the script. I say almost. We will see why in a moment.

In the beginning, Iago sets reason and passion at opposite ends of a balance beam. He leaves something out of that equation: faith, or in the secular world, trust. The balance beam must rest on some fulcrum. What name can we give that point? Faith, magic, mystery, trust are not concepts Iago is comfortable with, except as possibly useful weapons. They are squishy. A Fig – he would say. He works “by wit and not by witchcraft.”(2.3.366) But these concepts turn up again and again in this play.

True, we see in the first court scene, when the messenger comes from Rhodes, that reason can be used to read received information wisely. And we see in the second trial scene, of Cassio on Cypress, what happens when “blood begins my safer guides to rule.”(2.3.197) So we do see reason and passion operating in the traditional polar way. But Othello and Desdemona’s passion for each other is presented, early, as a good thing, approved by the reasonable state, a passion that will heal a war-torn world. And Shakespeare, inheriting Montaigne’s distrust of reason, seems to be at least ambiguous about the value of reason, not because of any inherent fault in reason, but because of human nature. Reason is, in fact, Iago’s secret weapon. His “if/then” construction does two things. “If” asks a question where none was. “Then” poses an answer to the non-existent question as if it’s the only possible alternative. Iago teaches people how to interpret a text before he sets that text in front of them. Then lets them think they are reasoning their way through it. This is a play in which “all that is spoke is marred,” first by misreading, then by mis-reasoning.

In fact, Shakespeare suggests, there is a great deal of the mysterious in self-fashioning and in fashioning a love. Look how, in 1.3, Othello and Desdemona tell the same story about their love, separately, not having heard what the other has said, or will say. It is when Othello and Desdemona falter in their mysterious love bond that hinges on trust of each other (she lies about the handkerchief, he, well, look at 3.3) that both reason and passion go haywire. And it is that very mysterious element that will, in the play’s last moment, pull right reason and loving passion back up out of Iago’s muck. Iago has been holding a mirror up to everyone and showing them his own filthy interior landscape so that they think it is theirs. Othello finally holds his own mirror up to himself, looks squarely, reads truly, and acts honorably. It seems to me that Iago’s project collapses, in the end, because of his great initial misreading of the mysterious human potential for both self-love, and selfless love.

How do we know what we know? What can we do to sniff out and foil the evil of invisible ego-centric hatred? I don’t know. Perhaps we can’t. Perhaps Milton is right and not even angels can spot hypocrisy. The word hypocrisy derives from the Greek for “play-acting, “feigning,” or “dissembling.” Perhaps Othello could have asked questions back. A child’s first question would be a good place to start: Why? In fact, he finally does ask Why? (5.....) but it is too late. Like Iago, I will close with a question. How, in fashioning good and secure identities and loves, in territory held largely by the devil, can we achieve vigilance without cynicism, can we balance the beam of reason and passion on the fulcrum of trust, can we strive for justice, but be merciful when we fail, as we will. How can we feel fully, read the world critically, think carefully, and trust ourselves?

I think one answer Shakespeare offers is that we can choose our mirrors carefully.

One aspect of our identity must respond to the values of the world in which we must succeed and be happy, and the way that world sees us. What is the name of the mirror in which we gaze? Venice? The Military? Justice? Mercy? Hate? Love? Reason? Passion? Faith? When the “I” that is not what it seems has slunk from the field in silence, will our students be able to say, with Othello, “I am.”

So, *Othello* was not written to be read, but to be experienced live. Therefore, I have edited together four renderings of the key Temptation Scene (Act III, scene iii), which we will watch in a moment, in order to show you the many possible choices actors, directors, scene designers etc. can make, for the particular emphasis each thinks significant. The only actual evidence we have of what Shakespeare intended is in the words. There are few stage directions, and where they exist they are spare and charged with meaning. For example in 2.1 (during Othello and Desdemona’s reunion on Cypress) Shakespeare includes them both in the tender and passionate note “they kiss,” while in 4.1 he separates them in the violent and passionate note “he strikes her.” These notes accentuate the shocking change in the lovers’ physical relationship.

Othello is first of all a beautiful and deeply sad love story and personal tragedy - a story of a perfect marriage destroyed, and of high merit toppled - both the "earned" merit of Othello's public worth and the "natural" merit of Desdemona's private virtue. The play is a story about real people, and I hope you recognize your own best and worst characteristics in it as you read. These people and their relationship are utterly ruined by what Samuel Taylor Coleridge called "a motiveless malignity in search of a motive." They are vulnerable because he is insecure, she is innocent, and neither one, in their over-confidence about their love, is vigilant about the presence of evil in their utopian world. Neither one has the "imagination" of evil that evil has.

Othello expresses insecurity about his age (a respected positive characteristic in the public world, but a concern in comparison with Desdemona's youth), about his blackness, about his foreignness, and about his lack of the softer skills of learning and speech that come from education in the peacetime courts of a great city like Venice. He is a warrior whose highest praise of Desdemona is "My fair warrior." A military man who has achieved success in war with the necessary military skills of: 1) the ability quickly to sum up a situation (based both on empirical evidence and on the counsel of trusted advisors), and 2) the courage to take decisive, thorough and ruthless action. He is out of his element in the domestic realm. His skills do not transfer - or rather, they transfer disastrously. He rashly says, "To be once in doubt is once to be resolved," and, "I'll see before I doubt. When I doubt prove, and upon proof away at once with love or jealousy."

I want to say a word about the way Iago works. He is first of all an improviser. Perhaps this is why no-one can see him coming. In his first soliloquy we hear that he has no plan, he doesn't even have a very well-formulated motive or goal, beyond hatred and the intent to poison Othello's delight. He works by simply never letting slip an occasion. He is protean, a shape-shifter, and appears to each character almost as a reflection of themselves. Perhaps this is why no-one can recognize his hypocrisy. Through suggestion, he puts ideas into characters' heads then stands back and lets them think that those ideas are their own, and watches gleefully as idea leaps lightly over the guardian wall of reason and moves straight into the realm of will. For example, he says, after Othello has commissioned him to kill Cassio, "But let her live." His tool is rhetoric - carefully reasoned language designed to move the will of the listener to action. And when his mission is completed, he falls silent. Above all, Iago is an unnatural character who uses "nature" over and over again as his authority, and uses reason to undermine reason through the medium of the false syllogism. In Venice women are unnatural adulterers / She is Venetian / Therefore she is by nature an adulterer. It is unnatural for people of mixed race to marry / She married you / Therefore she will naturally seek a white lover. It is unnatural for a child to deceive her father / She deceived her father / Therefore she will deceive you. It is unnatural for the old to marry the young / She married you / Therefore she will naturally seek a younger lover. It is unnatural for people to marry outside their societal "clime" / She married a foreigner / Therefore she will naturally seek someone in her proper circle. Iago, with his humble posture and subtle and devious reasoning, so destroys Othello's proud, straightforward confident ability to reason that Othello accepts Iago's final syllogism: Anyone who loves an unloveable, black, old alien is perverse / She loves you / Therefore she is a perversion of nature. Othello gets a pain in his head - the seat of reason - and tumbles down the Great Chain of being from hawk to animal to toad, to the lifeless ocean. He even realizes that he will have to say farewell to the world he loves so much and in which he created himself - the military. Iago has uncreated him. In fact, Iago blatantly aligns himself with the greatest uncreator, the first hypocrite, the ruler of Hell, Satan. In his chilling Act II soliloquy he boasts to the audience about the poison he is about to pour into Othello's ear. "Divinity of hell! / When devils will their blackest sins put on, they do suggest at first with heavenly shows, / As I do now."

I'd also like to give one example about the way Shakespeare works. Act III, scene iii, the turning point of the play, begins with Desdemona and Othello declaring their love for each other and their commitment to the proper relationship of husband and wife in a perfect marriage. In the exact middle of the scene, to indicate the fatal turn in Othello's mind, the playwright puts this devious syntax in the mouth of up-to-now a most direct thinker and speaker: "I do not think but Desdemona's honest." Then he says, "And yet, how nature erring from itself - " And then he makes a statement of action, "Set on thy wife to observe." - not an act of faith. At the end of the scene, Othello and Iago kneel side by side in a mockery of the wedding posture, and Othello makes a "sacred vow" for revenge, claims Iago as his new "love," and promotes Iago to Lieutenant. To which Iago, in a triumph of reverse irony, responds, "I am your own forever."

Lastly, because we are reading this play at the end of Humanities 214, I'd like to point out a few of the ways in which I find it representative of the progress of the renaissance as it moved from 14th century Italy north to 17th century England - from an idealistic, energetic optimism about human potential for excellence and goodness to cynicism and even pessimism about human potential for folly and evil.

Consider these questions: What has become of Pico's glorious view of human nature as able to climb the Great Chain of being towards the angels? Or of his confidence in the ability of reason to elevate man above the animals? What has become of Leonardo's confidence in the human eye as a supreme way of "seeing" the world? What has become of Castiglione's high view of the important role of the courtier as a good-counsel giver to his leader? What has become of Alberti's notion that humans can rise in the world through education, hard work and above all merit? What has become of Petrarch's confidence in the ability of language to promote right action? What has become of the Medici concept of money as a valuable commodity particularly when used to benefit the community? To what use has Machiavelli's idea that a prince must be both a lion and a fox been put in this play? Or his discussion on the relationship of seeming and being? Or his statements about the relationship of ethics to worthy goals. Watch sprezzatura become fawning and glöz'ning. Watch virtue grovel in the dust. Watch human order disrupted become chaos, and human harmony become untuned. To what use does a "free and noble nature" put the gift of free will, freely accepted by a converted Christian? Watch Das Casas' warnings about the dangers of racism be acted out. Watch Marinella's description of the dangers of sexism be acted out. What happens to the ideal vision of married love as the union of the erotic and the spiritual, the sensual and the chaste - physical lover and intellectual friend in union?

Perhaps most importantly, this play asks a question posed often by renaissance thinkers (in imitation and deeper exploration of the ideas of classical pagan and Christian thinkers): How do we know what we know? The play turns on the relationship of faith-based knowledge and empirical knowledge. In a great error, trust is abandoned in favor of a misreading of the meaning of a piece of material evidence - a

handkerchief. Othello rightly says in Act one, "My life upon her faith." And in his last speech, after his reliance on his sense of sight has led to disaster, he describes his "subdued eyes" that now "Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees / Their medicinable gum."

Even the "motiveless malignity" seems stupidly amazed at the degree of damage he has wrought.

(SHOW FILM) 1st clip = African - ness, otherness, sensual love / 2nd clip = Military - ness, high rank, confidence and authority (before) / 3rd clip = insecurities (age, etc.) / 4th clip = reason unseated from its throne, where it is supposed to "govern" passions. Loses his mind.

Conclusion. What does the renaissance ideal of individualism carried to its most horrible logical conclusion, look like. Iago is an "individual" - self-raised, self-sufficient, self-controlled, self-nurtured (our bodies are gardens and our will is the gardener). In this pessimistic world, an individual totally out of context of relationship (society, marriage, whatever) = a monster.