

SHAKESPEARE



ST. LOUIS

FESTIVAL

SHAKESPEARE STUDY MATERIALS/ACTIVITIES



IN THE SCHOOLS
IN THE STREETS
IN THE PARK

OTHELLO

THE MOOR OF VENICE

OTHELLO IN A BREATH

adapted by ELIZABETH BIRKENMEIER
commissioned for
SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL ST. LOUIS'
2012 EDUCATION TOUR

GRADES 1-12 - SYNOPSIS, SCENE WORK, ACTING EXERCISES & MORE!

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Christopher Limber
Education Director
Shakespeare Festival St. Louis



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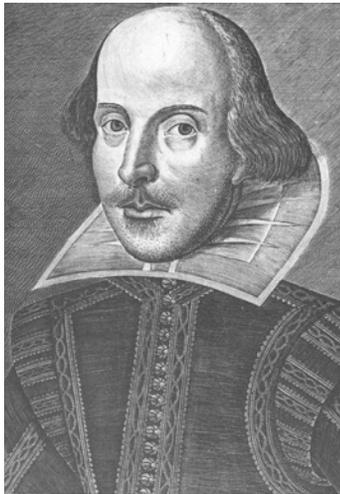


WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: A BIOGRAPHY

There are two primary sources for information on the Bard: his works, and various legal and church documents that have survived from Elizabethan times. Unfortunately, there are many gaps in this information and much room for conjecture. We know a man named William Shakespeare was baptized at Stratford-upon-Avon on April 26, 1564, and was buried at Holy Trinity Church in Stratford on April 25, 1616. Tradition holds that he was born three days earlier, and that he died on his birthday—April 23—but this is perhaps more romantic myth than fact. Young William was born of John Shakespeare, a glover and leather merchant, and Mary Arden, a landed heiress. William was the third of eight children in the Shakespeare household, three of whom died in childhood. We assume that Shakespeare went to grammar school, since his father was first a member of the Stratford Council and later high bailiff (the equivalent of town mayor). A grammar school education would have meant that Shakespeare was exposed to the rudiments of Latin, rhetoric, logic and literature.

In 1575, John Shakespeare suddenly disappears from Stratford's political records. Some believe that his removal from office necessitated his son's quitting school and taking a position as a butcher's apprentice. Banns (announcements) were published for the marriage of a William Shakespeare to an Ann Whatley in 1582 (there are no records indicating that this arrangement was solemnized, however). On November 27 of the same year a marriage license was granted to 18-year-old William and 26-year-old Anne Hathaway. A daughter, Susanna, was born to the couple six months later. Twins, Hamnet and Judith, were born and baptized three years later, and Hamnet died in childhood at the age of 11, on August 11, 1596. We don't know how the young Shakespeare came to travel to London or how he first came to the stage. One theory holds that young Will was arrested as a poacher (one who hunts illegally on someone else's

THE MANY FACES OF WILL



Dreshout Engraving (1623)



Chandos Portrait (~1610)



Cobbe Portrait (~1605)

property) and escaped to London to avoid prosecution in Stratford; another holds that he left home to work in the city as a school teacher.

However, it is clear that between 1582 and 1592, Shakespeare became involved in the London theatre scene as a principal actor and playwright with one of several repertory companies. By 1594, Shakespeare was listed as a shareholder in one of the most popular acting companies in London: the Lord Chamberlain's Men. He was a member of this company for the rest of his career, which lasted until about 1611. When James I came to the throne in 1603, he issued a royal license to Shakespeare and his fellow players, inviting them to call themselves the King's Men. In 1608, the King's Men leased the Blackfriars Theatre in London. This theatre, which had artificial lighting and was probably heated, served as their winter playhouse. The famous Globe Theatre was their summer performance space.

In 1616 Shakespeare's daughter Judith married Thomas Quiney, the son of a neighbor in Stratford. Shakespeare revised his will six weeks later; within a month he died. The revised version of his will bequeathed his house and all the goods therein to his daughter Susanna and her husband Dr. John Hall, leaving Judith and Thomas only a small sum of money; his wife, who survived him, received the couple's second best bed.

In the years since Shakespeare's death, he has risen to the position of "patron saint" of English literature and drama. In the 1800s especially, his plays were so popular that many refused to believe that an actor from Stratford had written them. To this day some believe that Sir Francis Bacon was the real author of the plays; others choose to believe Edward De Vere, the Earl of Oxford, was the author. Still others would prefer to believe Walter Raleigh or Christopher Marlowe penned the lines attributed to Shakespeare. While most people are content to believe that genius can spring up in any social class or rural setting, the gap between the known facts and the myths that surround Shakespeare's life leaves ample room for speculation.

IMPORTANT TO KNOW

- *Othello* is a tragedy differing from Shakespeare's other tragedies because it is relational and domestic rather than a national story with political overtones.
- Key players are Othello, a noble Moor, his innocent wife Desdemona, and Shakespeare's most loathsome villain, Iago. The protagonist is Othello and the antagonist is Iago.
- The plot is relatively simple with no major subplots and no apparent comic relief.
- As *The Merchant of Venice* has elements of anti-Semitism, *Othello* has elements of racism. These elements are present but not the primary focus of the story.
- Iago is thought by many to be Shakespeare's most evil villain. His hatred and cruelty are remarkably complete.
- Othello's tragic flaw is his inherent humanity.
- The most prominent theme in *Othello*: Conflict between appearance and reality.

SOURCES & FIRST PRODUCTIONS

During the turn of the 17th century, Shakespeare wrote his greatest tragedies, including *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth* and *Anthony and Cleopatra*. During a window of nearly a decade, Shakespeare wrote only one pure comedy, *Twelfth Night*, and two problem plays (plays that can't be called pure comedy or tragedy):



All's Well That Ends Well and *Measure for Measure*. *Othello* was written during 1603-1604, in between two of Shakespeare's most famous works: *Hamlet* (1600) and *King Lear* (1605). It was a dark time in his career, but one that produced some of his best plays.

In the case of *Othello*, there is a record of a play entitled *The Moor of Venice* by a "Shaxberd" in 1604. As records of this time were frequently mislabeled and misspelled, most experts agree that the first performance of *Othello* was for King James I, probably on November 1, 1604 at Whitehall Palace. Shakespeare's greatest actor, Richard Burbage (below), originated the title role. It would be two centuries before the role of Othello was actually played by an actor of color. In 1824 Ira Aldridge, an African-American born a slave, who then emigrated to England, performed Othello to tremendous acclaim all over Europe and Russia (see page 11). Interestingly, in 1660, Margaret Hughes (above) became the first woman to appear on the English stage, portraying Desdemona.



Othello was based on "Un Capitano Moro," from a collection of Italian stories called *Ecatommithi* (meaning "One Hundred Stories," also called *Hecatommithi*) by Cinthio. Shakespeare expands upon Cinthio's original by giving the characters, originally titled "Moor," "Ensign," etc., unique names and highly defined personalities. In Cinthio's original, Iago and Othello both attack and kill Desdemona, but Shakespeare gives this task solely to Othello, making Iago a pure manipulator. He also decreases the interaction between Cassio and Othello, and gives Emilia a much larger role in the story.

CHARACTERS IN OTHELLO

OTHELLO: A Black Moor and the greatest general in Venice. He is smart, brave, and honorable. He woos and marries Desdemona, the beautiful daughter of a prominent Venetian Senator, provoking racial slurs against him. Undeterred, he is chosen by the Duke to lead an army against the Turks on Cyprus. His dedication to duty is eclipsed only by his devotion to Desdemona, who follows him to Cyprus. Othello loves Desdemona so completely that he cannot suffer the thought of someone else even looking at her. Hence his tragic flaw: jealousy.

IAGO: Othello's ensign who plots against Othello because the Moor promotes his associate Michael Cassio instead of him. He is completely evil, and takes pleasure in destroying Othello.

DESDEMONA: Daughter of Brabantio, wife of Othello, and an unwilling victim of Iago's scheming and Othello's jealousy. She is the noblest and most unselfish character in the play and perhaps in Shakespeare.

MICHAEL CASSIO: Othello's lieutenant, who is also a target of Iago's evil schemes. His promotion sparks Iago's jealousy. Iago involves him by alleging a nonexistent love affair with Desdemona to arouse Othello's jealousy.

RODERIGO: A Venetian gentleman and former suitor of Desdemona who still pines away for her. He is also part of Iago's manipulative plot.

EMILIA: Iago's wife. She does not see his evil ways until she learns he plotted against Othello and Desdemona.

DUKE OF VENICE: Head of state who protects Othello when Desdemona's father attacks his character.

BRABANTIO: Senator and father of Desdemona. He despises Othello and proves a bigot whose racism is used by Iago to compromise Othello's integrity.

GRATIANO: Brabantio's brother.

LODOVICO: Brabantio's relative, who brings an order from the duke recalling Othello to Venice.

MONTANO: Othello's predecessor in the Cyprus government.

CLOWN: Othello's Servant.

BIANCA: Cassio's mistress.

MINOR CHARACTERS: First & Second Senator, Sailor, messenger, herald, officers, gentlemen, musicians and attendants.

OTHELLO - SYNOPSIS

ACT ONE

In Italy, the city of Venice is at war with its Turkish enemies. Othello, a brave officer and a dark-skinned Moor who has distinguished himself in battle, has two lieutenants, Cassio and Iago. Othello, recognized and promoted for his courage, in turn promotes Cassio, blinding Iago with jealousy.

An influential Venetian, Brabantio, has only one daughter, Desdemona. She and Othello fall in love and secretly elope. Iago informs Roderigo, another of Desdemona's admirers, convincing him to report to Brabantio that she has married without his permission. Brabantio is furious, and rushes off to confirm the truth.

Iago begins his betrayal of Othello by warning him of Brabantio's imminent arrival. Brabantio accuses Othello of stealing his daughter. Othello protests and they take the matter up with the Venetian government.

The Duke of Venice and his attendants meet to discuss the Turks' recent threat of reinforcements. All are surprised when Othello and Brabantio, a top advisor, arrive arguing. Brabantio tells the Duke of his daughter's plight and demands justice. The Duke agrees. However, learning the husband is Othello, he asks for Desdemona's version of the events and sends for her. She arrives, and confirms she married out of love and although sad to defy her father, now considers her husband is her first duty. Brabantio gives in, but he warns Othello that just as Desdemona left her father, she may leave her husband.

Before he leaves to command the army, Othello

OTHELLO

arranges for Desdemona to travel along and mistakenly entrusts her to the care of Iago and his wife, Emilia. Iago, full of malice, tells the audience of his hatred for Othello, his jealousy of Cassio, and his suspicion that his wife Emilia is in love with the Moor. Together these elements will keep him alert for chances to destroy them all.

ACT TWO

The Turkish fleet is destroyed in a great storm – Cassio’s ship is the first to return to land, closely followed by that of Iago, Emilia and Desdemona. Desdemona greets Cassio by clasping his hand, a gesture that Iago keeps in mind for his future use. Finally, Othello’s ship returns safely, and the entire party leaves to celebrate.

Iago sees that it is important to destroy Cassio’s credit in Othello’s eyes. That night, under the cover of a celebration, Iago pressures Cassio into drinking too much, and sends Roderigo to pick a fight with him. When Governor Montano attempts to break it up, he is stabbed.

The news of the quarrel reaches Othello, who hurries in frustrated at being interrupted in the middle of celebrations with his wife. He asks Iago who started the fight, and while Iago pretends to be worried about hurting Cassio, he blames him anyway. Othello then strips Cassio of his rank and honor. Othello leaves.

Cassio tells Iago that he is afraid he is ruined. Iago comforts him by suggesting he appeal to Desdemona to ask her husband for a pardon. Iago tells the audience that he will use the relationship between Cassio and Desdemona to spark Othello’s jealousy.

ACT THREE

Attempting to regain Othello’s favor, Cassio arranges for musicians to play for him. Othello sends his Clown to tell them to stop. Cassio asks the Clown to fetch Desdemona’s maid, Emilia, in hope that she will get her mistress

to talk with him. As he waits, Iago enters and promises to distract Othello so Cassio can speak with Desdemona. Emilia arrives and takes Cassio to Desdemona.

Othello, Iago and his attendants leave to walk the grounds. Desdemona, Cassio and Emilia enter. Desdemona promises to speak with her husband on Cassio’s behalf. Iago and Othello return, and Cassio hurries away rather than meet Othello, which Iago points out to Othello.

Desdemona pleads passionately with Othello to meet with Cassio. Othello begrudgingly agrees, and Desdemona leaves. Iago seizes his opportunity, innocently asking questions about Desdemona and Cassio stirring Othello’s jealousy. Seeing his plan succeed, Iago backs off, pretending that he doesn’t want to hurt anyone. But the damage is done. Othello now begins to obsessively imagine the potential impact of Cassio’s attraction to Desdemona, becoming very upset.

Iago leaves as Desdemona and Emilia reenter. Desdemona attempts to comfort Othello, giving him her handkerchief to wipe his head. Othello throws the handkerchief to the ground, and they both exit.

Left behind, Emilia retrieves her mistress’s handkerchief. Knowing it to be a present from Othello, Iago has often asked her to steal it. Emilia gives the scarf to a delighted Iago. By planting it on Cassio, Iago finally has physical proof to incriminate the duo. Othello enters in a rage. A confident Iago pushes Othello’s frustration into a blind fury by suggesting that Desdemona has already been unfaithful.

Desdemona goes to tell Cassio that she has won Othello to his cause. She laments the loss of her handkerchief to Emilia, as a present from Othello with emotional significance. Othello enters, and requests that Desdemona lend him her handkerchief. Desdemona doesn’t have it. Othello demands to see it while Desdemona

**“So will I turn
her virtue into
pitch, / And out of her
own goodness make the
net / That shall enmesh
them all.” - Iago (2.3)**

OTHELLO

attempts to distract him by reminding him of Cassio. They fight, and Othello storms out.

Cassio and Iago enter on his heels. Iago feigns surprise at Othello's temper, and they calm Desdemona. Still clueless, Desdemona leaves with a final promise to help Cassio. Alone, Cassio meets with a companion named Bianca. He presents her with Desdemona's handkerchief, explaining that he found it, and asks her to embroider a copy.

ACT FOUR

Othello, consumed with jealousy, falls into an epileptic fit. As he lies unconscious, Cassio enters. Iago tells him to go and return shortly. When Othello awakes, Iago tells him Cassio is coming and to hide to overhear the conversation. Cassio returns and Iago talks to him about Bianca – Othello sees Cassio's laughter and lighthearted manner. Thinking he is speaking of Desdemona, Othello assumes Cassio is guilty. Bianca enters with the handkerchief, scolding Cassio for giving her another woman's possession. She leaves in a huff, and Cassio runs after her to keep her from making a scene. His suspicions confirmed, Othello tells Iago he will kill Desdemona for her faithlessness. In support Iago suggests Othello kill her in her bed, as poetic justice for infidelity. Iago vows to help Othello by killing Cassio.

A dark mood prevails as Desdemona and her father's friend Lodovico arrive.

Lodovico has a letter requesting that Othello depart immediately, leaving Cassio in charge. When Desdemona questions him, Othello slaps her, shocking those in attendance. Undeserving of such treatment, yet remaining a faithful wife, Desdemona leaves at Othello's command. When Othello himself storms out, Lodovico questions his sanity and judgment, encouraged by Iago.

Still seeking proof, Othello questions Emilia, insisting that Desdemona has fooled them both.

He orders her to bring Desdemona. She arrives and he berates her, calling her "strumpet" and "whore". Emilia catches the tail end of his abuse, and leaves, on Desdemona's command, to find Iago. Although Emilia and Desdemona are shocked and terrified by Othello's behavior, Iago insists that only government business has put Othello in this temper, and that Desdemona has nothing to fear. When the women leave, Roderigo comes in, berating Iago because he has had no luck in pursuing Desdemona. Iago insists that Cassio stands in his way, and he convinces him to kill Cassio.

After dinner, Othello decides to accompany Lodovico to his lodging. He orders Desdemona to bed, telling her to dismiss her attendants before he returns. Emilia is worried by this command as she helps Desdemona get ready for bed. She exclaims that she would rather Desdemona had never met Othello, but Desdemona refuses to agree. She asks Emilia if some wives are unfaithful to their husbands. Although Emilia says yes, Desdemona maintains that such an act is beyond her comprehension.

ACT FIVE

Roderigo, incensed by Iago, seeks out Cassio and they fight. Roderigo is wounded. Iago slashes Cassio's legs and flees. Othello hears the cries and assumes Iago has killed Cassio. Lodovico and Gratiano enter, closely followed by Iago who then stabs Roderigo for wounding Cassio. Iago sends Emilia to report the fight to Othello.

As she lies asleep, Othello contemplates killing Desdemona. Desdemona awakes and pleads for her life, asking to live just a day or an hour. Othello denies her and smothers her with a pillow.

Emilia returns and calls from the door until Othello answers. She starts to tell him of Roderigo's murder when Desdemona, almost dead, cries from her bed. Emilia rushes to



her. At first, Desdemona claims she has been falsely murdered, but when pressed, she claims she killed herself and her final words are “Commend me to my kind lord, O, farewell!”

Othello claims he killed her for her faithlessness, but Emilia insists that her mistress was not guilty. Othello retorts that Iago, Emilia’s husband, brought the proof himself. Emilia, more astute than this, sees the lie immediately. Iago enters with others – he attempts to quiet Emilia, to quell her accusations, without success. When Othello mentions the handkerchief, Emilia finally grasps the entire picture. She confesses to stealing the item.

Realizing he has been deceived, Othello attempts to stab Iago, without success. Iago stabs Emilia, killing her, and escapes. Othello attempts to explain his actions, and is interrupted when officers return with Iago and the wounded Cassio.

Grief stricken, Othello stabs Iago. He then speaks on how he wants to be remembered, draws his sword, and kills himself. He dies upon the same bed as his wife. Lodovico is left to close the play; he bequeaths Othello’s house to Gratiano, telling him to punish Iago, the play’s true villain. Lodovico will return to Venice to relate the sad events.

IMAGERY, IRONY, AND PLAYWRIGHT INTENTION

In his heartfelt tragedy *Othello*, Shakespeare makes a confident playwriting choice of having a black character play the hero. Othello, called the Moor of Venice, is referenced as black or dark skinned, mostly by Iago, the play’s antagonist. Though they have been obvious ever since the play was first performed, the racial implications in *Othello* speak more strongly to a contemporary audience than in Shakespeare’s time. Othello’s ethnicity is occasionally spoken of derogatorily by Iago, used against him behind his back, and is at times spoken directly to the audience. These racist leanings are strikingly contrasted by Othello’s presence and status within the world of Shakespeare’s play. As a

general, he is publicly rewarded for his honor and bravery, being singled out by the Duke to lead the battle against the Turkish onslaught. In his private life, his charm and daring has won him the devoted love of the young and beautiful Desdemona, whom in turn he loves completely.

While it is often assumed that Othello bears an African heritage, “Moor” may have referred to anyone outside the traditional light-skinned European identity at that time the play was written. Othello could have been Asian, Middle Eastern, African or any other ethnicity with a darker complexion. While race does play a role in the perception of Othello and Desdemona’s relationship, it is not in the exact form of 21st century racism. Like Jews, Moors in Shakespeare’s time were often stereotyped in the theatre as the villain. (In his earlier play *Titus Andronicus*, Aaron the Moor is the villain.) In Elizabethan England, blackness was a color associated with moral evil and death. However, a Moorish ethnicity was also evocative of medieval romanticism as in *The Adoration of the Magi* where one of the kings



is black. In Shakespeare’s England both these associations informed the Elizabethan audience, and brought a carefully chosen set of character traits to bear on the full journey of the Bard’s tragic hero.

Before the audience meets Othello, Iago begins his hateful plotting by igniting a racist fear in Desdemona’s father, Brabantio, informing him of his daughter’s secret marriage to the Moor:

Even now, very now an old black ram
Is tuppung your white ewe. Arise, arise!
(1.1.94-95)

However Othello is soon introduced as an enduring example of honor and bravery. His wartime success and his unshakable love for

Desdemona counteract any negative statements Iago makes. This makes the eventual demise of Othello's inner strength even more painful and heartrending and, ultimately, a disturbing reflection of Iago's relentless evil.

It is certainly possible to produce *Othello* with a strong twenty-first century racial commentary, but that would be a contextual choice by a modern director. It must be remembered that Othello's downfall is not a result of race, but is caused by his own jealousy and misplaced trust. He grows unable to distinguish reality from paranoid delusion. Iago's lies about Desdemona obsess his imagination. Fueled by Iago's calculated gossip, his marriage disintegrates as his insecurity is inflamed. Because the majestic Othello begins as a noble, good-natured character, the gradual waning of his inner strength awakens our empathy, and then disappoints. The hero's painfully human downfall is, in the end, hard to forgive.

Iago uses the symbolism of color, isolating Othello to all listeners both in the play and in the audience. At key moments he inserts the references of 'black' to remind the audience Othello is different, alone and apart from the rest. This derogatory labeling, at odds with Shakespeare's rendering of Othello, is an intentional calculation by the playwright – Shakespeare plays directly against the symbolic and accepted associations of appearance during his time. He surprises (and delights) his audience by writing against convention. In the first half of the play he utilizes the romantic association of exotic royalty to accentuate Othello's heroism and turns the negative and limited stereotypical expectations (and potential prejudice) of his audience upside down. The results are striking and deeply enduring. He imbues Othello with an attractive humanity that not only transcends race but then also creates a pure-evil-opposite in Iago. Othello's struggles are painfully

human. Shakespeare effectively contrasts the protagonist's humanity against Iago's deliberate, merciless actions. Iago becomes Shakespeare's most successful villain. He is a mortal with the relentless power of a potent devil.

Because Othello falls victim to Iago's malicious plan, his jealousy ultimately becomes difficult for the audience to absolve. His emotional frailty may initially speak to us, but his murderous and suicidal actions evoke a profound regret at his failing. Once he succumbs to weakness and suspicion, Othello commits his own ironically disturbing act of prejudice. He condemns his wife as a "cunning whore" (4.2.105) who must pay for her supposed transgression with her own life. This layered approach is one of Shakespeare's trademarks: making each characterization surprising and complex. No one survives without blame save Desdemona. Even so, she pays the ultimate price for her husband's hateful and erroneous assumptions and we mourn for the tragedy of her death even more than the flawed insecurity of her husband.

Othello's major themes are jealousy, obsession, loyalty and reality vs. illusion. We are privy to experiencing how fear and jealousy can influence human perception. The themes are familiar, and the play follows a basic plot arc. Othello and Desdemona are united early in the play, Iago pushes them apart until they are fully separated, at which point Othello kills Desdemona, then repents and kills himself, hoping to be reunited with his wife in death. Unlike Shakespeare's other tragedies, Othello has few subplots and does not meander far from the main story. This leaves the audience free to focus all attention on Othello's internal struggle between the villainous machinations of Iago and his false accusations against the faithful Desdemona. The audience invests in the characters and the outcome, making *Othello* one of Shakespeare's most successful and beloved dramas.

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major themes are
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PRE-SHOW QUESTIONS

- What do you know about Shakespeare? Do you know where he was from? Where he worked? Does anyone remember his nickname?
- Do you know what Shakespeare's theater was called? Do you know what it looked like? Does anyone know what a groundling is? Does anyone know what Shakespeare's theater company was called?
- What do you know about the play *Othello*? Do you know any of the main characters? If you were to describe a person as a "moor," what do you think that would mean?
- Shakespeare wrote his plays in verse. Does anyone know what this is? Have you ever heard of iambic pentameter? Do you know what characterizes this type of meter?
- What is a tragedy? What makes it different from a comedy? Can anyone think of other types of plays?
- Do you know where Venice is? Can you tell us anything interesting about Venice?
- How would you explain a villain to somebody who has never heard that term? How about a hero? Do you know the literary terms for these characters?
- What do you know about play themes? Can anyone give an example? From what you've heard of *Othello*, what do you think the themes might be?
- Has anyone seen another Shakespeare play before? Which one? What do you remember thinking about that show?
- Are you all excited for the show? Nervous? Any questions you want to ask before we all go to see the play?

POST-SHOW QUESTIONS

- What did you think about the play? Was it what you expected? Is there anything you particularly like or disliked about the show?
- Did you relate strongly to any particular character? Who? Why? Were there characters you didn't understand?
- What did you think of the production aspects of this show, such as lights, sound and costumes? Did they help you understand the show? Did they distract from the action?
- Who do you think was responsible for the outcome of this play? Othello? Iago? Emilia? None of the above?
- Why do you think Iago manipulated Othello the way he did?
- How was the language for you? Did you find it difficult to understand? Were there parts you understood better than others? Can you explain what made the difference?
- Othello is called the Moor of Venice. Do you think his race is important to the play? Do you think his skin color impacts the way the other characters treat him? Why did Shakespeare make the choice of writing Othello as a Moor?
- How important was Desdemona's handkerchief to this play? Do you think Othello would have believed Iago otherwise?
- We talked about Shakespeare's New Globe Theatre before the play. How is the New Globe space different from Shakespeare's original? How is it similar? How do you think the different spaces would impact the play?
- Now that you've seen the play, what do you think are the major themes? Why? How do these themes impact the main characters?

STUDY/TEST QUESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

On the Shakespeare Festival St. Louis website under “Education/Study Guides” is a series of test questions and answers about *Othello* labeled **OTHELLO TEST QUESTIONS**, broken down by act and scene. You are free to access and use these in your classroom. Here is an example of what you will find. The examples below are for Act I, Scene i:

Act I, Scene i: Study/Test Questions

Q1: How does Iago feel about “the Moor” (who we find out later is Othello)? Why?

A: He hates Othello for promoting Cassio instead of him.

Q2. Why does Iago still follow Othello?

A: To get his revenge; he is waiting to take advantage of him.

Q3: Is Iago our Protagonist (the hero) or our Antagonist (the person or force keeping the hero from the goal)?

A: Antagonist.

Q4: *Even now, now, very now, an old black ram*

Is tugging your white ewe (I.i)

What literary device is this quote an example of? What does it mean?

A: Metaphor (Othello, a black man, is sleeping with Desdemona, a white woman).

Q5: How does Brabantio feel about Roderigo? Why?

A: He doesn’t like him; he believes Desdemona is too good for him.

Q6: Throughout, Iago and other characters use blatant derogatory words to refer to Othello’s race. Identify some of these. Reflect upon the issue of race as it is depicted throughout the play.

A: “Thick lips,” “Barbary horse” (not quite human), “your nephews will neigh to you” (any offspring wouldn’t be considered human either), “Bond-slaves and pagans shall our statesmen be,” play on “black” = ugly and “white” = handsome (II.i).

Q7: *Your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs (I.i)*

What is Iago trying to say?

A: Othello and Desdemona are having sex right now.

Q8: What is another reason that Iago can’t just denounce Othello?

A: He is a skilled general and they are at war.

Q9: How does Brabantio feel about the idea that Desdemona and Othello are married?

A: He doesn’t like it at all.

IRA ALDRIDGE



Ira Aldridge was born a slave in New York City July 24, 1805. He became an actor. As an African-American, he faced persistent discrimination which black actors endured until only recently in the United States. Aldridge immigrated to England, where he was referred to at first as ‘The African Tragedian.’ Even in Europe, black performers were often type cast as comic relief. However, Aldridge refused to be pigeonholed and chose his own material and venues. His performances were so accomplished that he reversed nineteenth century Europe’s racist expectations, stunning the reviewers and audience. One critic wrote, “In *Othello* (Aldridge) delivers the most difficult passages with a degree of correctness that surprises the beholder.” (Herbert Marshall, *Ira Aldridge: The African Tragedian*). He gradually progressed to larger roles and huge notoriety; by 1825, he had top billing at London’s Coburg Theatre as Oronoko in *A Slave’s Revenge*, soon to be followed by the role of Gambia in *The Slave* and the title role in *Othello*. He also triumphed in the title role in *Richard III*, and as Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*.

In 1831 he was a sensation all over the British Isles, notably Dublin, Bath, Edinburgh, and small towns throughout southern Ireland. The actor Edmund Kean praised his *Othello*; some took him to task for taking liberties with the text, while others attacked his race. Since he was an American black actor from the African Theater, the Times called him the “African Roscius”. Aldridge used this to his benefit and expanded African references in his program biography, which he made sure appeared in playbills.

Aldridge first toured continental Europe in 1852, performing in Budapest, then for the Duchess of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha in Germany and Frederick William IV of Prussia. An 1858 tour took him to Serbia and to Imperial Russia, where he became acquainted with Leo Tolstoy, Mikhail Shchepkin and

the Ukrainian poet and artist Taras Shevchenko who sketched the picture at left.

Older and more seasoned, Aldridge tackled the role of King Lear (in England) for the first time. He purchased some property in England, toured Russia again (1862), and applied for British citizenship (1863). Soon after going to England, in 1824 Aldridge married Margaret Gill, an English woman. They were married for 40 years before her death in 1864.

A year after Margaret’s death, on April 20, 1865, Aldridge married his mistress, the self-styled Swedish countess Amanda von Brandt, with whom he already had a son, Ira Daniel. They had more children: Irene Luranah, Ira Frederick and Amanda Aldridge, all of whom went on to musical careers, the two girls as opera singers. Aldridge spent most of his final years with his family in Russia and continental Europe, interspersed with occasional visits to England. He planned to return to the post-Civil War United States, but he died in August 1867 while visiting Poland.



SOURCES:

Ira Aldridge 1807-1867. The Great Shakespearean Tragedian on the Bicentennial Anniversary of His Birth, Krystyna Kujawinska Courtney and Maria Lukowska (eds). Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2009

Krystyna Kujawinska Courtney, *Ira Aldridge (1807-1867) (Dzieje pierwszego czarnoskorego tragika szekspirowskiego)*, Krakow: Universitas, 2009

Bernth Lindfors, “Aldridge in Europe”, *Shakespeare in American Life*, Folger Shakespeare Library’s public radio documentary

ACTIVITIES FOR GRADES 4-8**ACTIVITY 1 - PRE-SHOW RESEARCH**

R.1.H - Students will compare the text to the real world, examining how the historical period of the work influenced the content.

Materials: Note cards, computer/library access.

Before reading *Othello*, give each student a note card. Then, via library or computer, have them find one unique fact about Shakespeare, *Othello* or Elizabethan England. Have each student read theirs aloud and then collectively, with the help of additional resource material, create a timeline across the room. For example, if a student's fact is that Elizabeth I was the Queen of England, her card goes before someone with Shakespeare's birth date, which goes before a card with the date *Othello* was written. If possible, leave this timeline up as a reference point while you study the rest of the text.

ACTIVITY 2 – SHAKESPEARE BEE

R.1.E - Students will develop vocabulary skills using context and the aid of the dictionary or other reference.

Materials: Two copies of *Othello*, bookmarking tabs, Shakespearean dictionary (if unavailable, you can use a regular dictionary and a copy of the play with the words defined in text).

Divide the class into two groups, giving each half a copy of *Othello*. Let each group come up with a list of words found in the text that they don't think the other team will know. Each team should find as many words as there are players on the other team. Have them mark where these words are found in the text with book-marking tabs.

Playing the Game: team one gives one of their words, which team two then has to attempt to define or explain. The teacher should provide the ultimate ruling on each word: if the guessing team has the right idea, they get one point. Then the teams switch, and team two provides the word while team one guesses. Continue until all words have been used – the team with the most points wins!

ACTIVITY 3 – VERSE VS. PROSE

R.2.B-Students will analyze literature based using poetic sound devices (meter).

LS.1.A-Students will listen for a variety of purposes (distinction).

Materials: Copies of *Othello*

Shakespeare wrote both in verse (a kind of rhymed poetry that utilized the 10-syllable iambic pentameter) and prose (an unrhymed way of speaking which is more similar to everyday speech). An example of iambic pentameter: "I don't know why I like this play so much." Iambic pentameter is interesting because the flow of the words is supposedly similar to our own heartbeat. The familiarity makes a familiar and attractive sound for the audience.

Instructions: Give each student a copy of the play and instruct them to find one passage in verse and another in prose. Remain available, as some students may still have difficulty telling the difference. When everyone has found these two passages, ask for volunteers to read them out loud, so the students can hear the difference. When the differences have been established, let this turn into a discussion of why Shakespeare did or did not use verse. Ask them which of the characters spoke in verse and which did not. Ask what the emotional and psychological differences may have been between the two.

ACTIVITY 4: CHARACTER WORK**Part 1) Journaling**

Materials: Paper, writing utensils, art supplies.

Actors play all the characters in *Othello*. As an actor, it's really important to get to know who the characters are, so they can better pretend to be them. Now it's your time to try and understand one of the characters in *Othello*. Pick your favorite character from the play. Now, write a journal entry as if you were that person. It can be that character before the play, during the play or even afterwards, if you would prefer. Try to make up some details that you don't already know. What is your character's favorite color? Who is their best friend? What is their favorite childhood memory?

Part 2) Improv

Split up into groups of three or four students. Now, pick a time and a place. As the characters you just wrote about, create a scene that shows them interacting outside the play. When you are ready, perform this for the rest of your class!

- **Teacher Note:** If you have younger students, scale down the activity. Instead of writing about their character, let them draw pictures. And instead of creating a scene, let them have some supervised playtime, encouraging them to pretend to be their characters.

ACTIVITY 5: TEXT WORK

R.2.C-Students will examine a work and analyze the presentation of the characters.

Before you begin to discuss the play, write the names of the main characters on the board or on large sheets of paper: Othello, Desdemona, Iago, Emilia and Cassio are suggested characters to focus on. Ask students to list everything they know about these characters based only on their reading before discussing the text. Encourage them to list how they feel about the characters, as well as any factual information. As you discuss the text, add new discoveries about the characters to the board, creating a list. When you're done with the discussion, draw the student's attention back to their character lists. Have them add their final feelings and impressions about each one. Note how they have changed as everyone discovered new information. How does this impact the understanding of the play?

ACTIVITY 6: RETELLING THE STORY

R.1.H-Students will compare text to world, examining how the historical period of the work influenced the content (and how it changes in a different context)

R.2.C-Students will analyze themes in a work

Shakespeare's stories are often retold, using other artistic forms and time periods. Now it's your turn to recreate the story behind *Othello*. The main themes in *Othello* are jealousy, love and trust. Secondary themes are race and loyalty. Keeping these main points in mind, as well as the overall plot arc, retell the story of *Othello* putting it in a modern context. Create it as if *Othello* was happening today. Feel free to use whatever artistic medium you are most comfortable with. You could write a play, like Shakespeare, or if you're a dancer, you could imagine or choreograph a dance. You could write a story or a poem or you can draw a picture of what *Othello* might look like today. If you like, you can even write an essay or a list of things that would be different or similar if they happened today.

- **Teacher note:** The idea behind this activity is to encourage students to think creatively. Provide a supportive environment – hang the artwork of those who draw pictures, encourage those who write plays to stage them for the class, or let other authors read their own writing or explain their thoughts on the matter. If students need inspiration, go online and look up material that uses *Othello* in a non-traditional manner.

ACTIVITIES FOR GRADES 9-12ACTIVITY 1 - WORD POWER: MOST IMPORTANT WORDS

(DESE: PP1.B) (Show me: Goal 2.1)

Provide each student with the below passage from *Othello*. Ask 22 students to each take one of the lines. Standing in a circle, closed against the rest of the class, ask them to read their lines in order. They should do it a second time, faster. Now, ask them to choose one word from their line that they feel is most important. The third read-through should be just the words deemed most important in each line. A fourth time should be the same, only faster.

1. Will you think so?
2. Think so, Iago!
3. What, to kiss in private?
4. An unauthorized kiss.
5. Or to be naked with her friend in bed
6. An hour or more, not meaning any harm?
7. Naked in bed, Iago, and not mean harm!
8. It is hypocrisy against the devil: / They that mean virtuously, and yet do so,
9. The devil their virtue tempts, and they tempt heaven.
10. So they do nothing, 'tis a venial slip:
11. But if I give my wife a handkerchief,--
12. What then?
13. Why, then, 'tis hers, my lord; and, being hers,
14. She may, I think, bestow't on any man.
15. She is protectress of her honor too: / May she give that?
16. Her honor is an essence that's not seen;
17. They have it very oft that have it not:
18. But, for the handkerchief,--
19. By heaven, I would most gladly have forgot it.
20. Thou said'st, it comes o'er my memory,
21. As doth the raven o'er the infected house, / Boding to all
22. He had my handkerchief.

ACTIVITY 2 - PUNS

(DESE-R2.B)

A pun is play on words based on the similarity of sound between two different words with different meanings. Puns are as common a source of jokes today as they were when Shakespeare wrote *Othello*. Have the students keep a running list of the puns they notice as they read *Othello* and who said them. What do the subjects of the puns they use tell us about the characters who say them? In one column, list some (if not all) of the puns used throughout the play. In another column, have the students record the meaning of the pun - why is it funny/important? For example, in Act 3, Scene 4, the Clown uses several words ("lies," "stabbing," etc.) as puns in a brief conversation with Desdemona. (For younger students, you can identify and discuss them together; for older children, have them try to analyze on their own.)

ACTIVITY 3 - WEB OF DECEPTION

(DESE-R2.C) (Show me: Goal 1.8)

Note: This exercise is designed to be used **AFTER** the performance.

Objectives:

- The students will identify the characters that Iago deceives in the play
- The students will use quotes to support their answers
- The students will use a graphic organizer to analyze the play (can also assign roles and create an actual web with a ball of yarn-again, having Iago in the middle; quote random lines that show Iago’s deception of a specific person and have Iago throw the yarn to that person to entangle them in his web)

Iago reminds Othello that Desdemona “did deceive her father marrying you...” but Iago is the master of deception. After seeing Shakespeare Festival St. Louis’ touring production *Othello in a Breath*, create a spider web on the board with Iago in the center. Represent the characters in the play, as suggested by the students in discussion, caught in Iago’s web. Have the students identify the ways that Iago is deceiving them, perhaps supplying quotes to back up the answers, and write those in the web.

ACTIVITY 4 - METAPHOR: THE GREEN-EYED MONSTER

(DESE-R2.B)

Objectives:

- The students will create an piece of art based on a description in Othello
- The students will examine an extended metaphor and practice extending it further

Exercise: Present the students with the following two texts and ask them to draw a picture of the “monster,” perhaps extending the metaphor further by giving the monster more characteristics. Provide as many different colors of pencils, markers, and/or crayons as you can. The students should label the parts of the monster. After the exercise, students should share their drawings. In a class discussion, explore the uses of metaphor and give examples from works you have examined in class.

IAGO

O, beware, my lord, of jealousy;
It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock
The meat it feeds on; that cuckold lives in bliss
Who, certain of his fate, loves not his wronger;
But, O, what damned minutes tells he o’er
Who dotes, yet doubts, suspects, yet strongly loves!

EMILIA

But jealous souls will not be answer’d so;
They are not ever jealous for the cause,
But jealous for they are jealous: ‘tis a monster
Begot upon itself, born on itself.

ACTIVITY 5 - MUSIC VIDEO FOR WILLOW SONG

(DESE-Interdisciplinary Connections 1.A) (Show-Me: Goal 2.5)

Author: Susan M. Kochman, Hempfield Area High School, Greensburg, PA.

Plays/Scenes Covered: *Othello* 4.3.43-62

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 will help 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 lesson 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, resort to movies.) Discuss specific examples and their responses to these songs or music, and note what affects 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. (You may also suggest which modern artist they think this song would be fitting for)
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.

ACTIVITY 6 - THE TRIAL OF IAGO

(DESE-PP1.F) (Show-me: Goal 2.1; Goal 3)

Author: Damian Bariexca, English teacher at Hunterdon Central Regional High School in Flemington, NJ. He teaches Multicultural Studies, Sophomore English, and Major American Writers. Damian is also an actor with Shakespeare ‘70, a repertory theater company in Mercer County, NJ.

Plays/Scenes Covered: *Othello* 5.1 and 5.2

Students will analyze text and utilize outside resources to determine Iago’s fate, which is not addressed by Shakespeare in the play. They will then present their findings in an organized “trial” scenario. Since students will be researching criminal and civil laws, there is the option of making this an interdisciplinary project with a social studies class. (Can just be a speech exercise: Student Congress; Lincoln/Douglass Debate) This lesson will take a minimum of two 45-minute research periods (spread out over a week or so), one 80-minute block of group work, and one 80-minute block to present.

1. Divide your class into four groups: Criminal, Civil, Federal, and Defense. Using library and Internet resources (see “What You Need” below for a list of potential starting points), have each prosecuting group determine a list of charges and possible sentences and then research corresponding laws in their area. While they do this, the defense group will analyze potentially “harmful” text evidence and develop refutations.
2. Each prosecuting group must give the defense group a list of charges. While the defense group researches the laws and defenses, prosecuting groups will search for textual evidence to apply to their arguments. Defense groups may also want to research similar cases to see how defense teams have defended clients who were very nearly clearly guilty.
3. Once the outside research has been completed, students will have an in-class day (or days)

to strategize their approach. Each group must develop opening and closing statements, a list of witnesses, questions, rationales for charges, and corresponding textual evidence. (You may want to have each group meet with you at least once to discuss progress, problems, etc.)

4. On the day of the trial, encourage students to bring props from home. Robes, a gavel, “evidence,” are all fun ways to add to the proceedings.

5. Conduct “The Trial of Iago” in much the same way as a real trial. Have each team deliver opening statements, each prosecuting team deliver its cases, and the defense team deliver its rebuttal.

6. If you can bring students in from a study hall or lunch period to act as a jury, have them take notes, deliberate, and return a verdict and a sentence at the end of the trial.

Lesson Extension: Have students write Act 6 of *Othello*, wherein they script a trial based on the same textual analysis. Or you could have students conduct the same court case with 17th-century English or Italian laws in place of current laws.

ACTIVITY 7 - SCENE PRODUCTION-PRE-READING

(DESE-R1.F/PP1.B/PP1.F/Historical and Cultural Contexts 1.B)

Select an important scene from the play*. Have them rewrite the scene as if a similar incident were to occur today. Contemporary interpretations of scenes should have clear beginnings, middles, and ends. They should be clearly focused on demonstrating one important incident from the play. For example:

- Friend A and Friend B enter a public place where Friend A is to meet his girlfriend. As they enter, she is laughing and talking with Friend C. Friend B begins to call attention to them; he suggests that Friend C is trying to take away Friend A’s girl.
- Friend A and Friend C have been good friends but have quarreled. Friend A, who was in the wrong, tries to get the girlfriend or boyfriend of Friend C to make peace between them.

Students should perform the scene for the class.

***EXAMPLES OF SCENES**

- Iago/Cassio (2.3, starting at Iago: “What, are you hurt, lieutenant?”)
- Othello/Iago (3.3, starting at Othello: “Excellent wretch!”)
- Desdemona/Emilia (4.3)
- Othello/Desdemona (5.2)

ACTIVITY 8 - CHARACTERIZATION

(DESE-R2.C)

Through each character’s speech and actions, we learn about the character’s desires, intentions, motivations, and dreams. Divide the class into groups and assign each group an act. Allow the group to select one major character that appears frequently in that act. Have them analyze the speech and actions of the character and list on chart paper what each speech and/or action tells us about the character’s motivation and desires.

They should divide the chart paper in half and list in the left column the lines in the act or behavior. In the right hand column, they should list what this tells us about the character’s desires. After each group has completed this exercise, have them create an internal monologue based on one or more of the speeches of the character in the act they have selected. In this internal monologue the character speaks directly to the audience about her/his desires and motivations.

The group should present this internal monologue to the class either as a dramatic reading or recitation. Understanding the “minor” characters and the roles they play leads students to a clearer sense of how to analyze characters in general. The following exercise helps students think about

the minor characters and what they add to the understanding of the play.

Instructions:

- Choose one of the secondary characters—not Desdemona, Othello, or Iago.
- Write a diary entry in the voice of the minor character after s/he encounters one of the three main characters.
- Explain what happened in the encounter and how you, the character, feel about it. This should be based on what you know about that character from the play. For example, choose the scene in which Emilia finds the handkerchief and gives it to Iago. As Emilia, write about that encounter in your diary.
- Ask and try to answer in the entry questions such as: Why don't you (Emilia) stand up to Iago? Why don't you just tell Desdemona? Use only information from earlier in the play in your diary entry. Now select a scene from later in the play to contrast or compare with the earlier one. For example, write from Emilia's perspective about her confrontation with Iago at the end of the play. Has your behavior toward him changed? Have you changed or grown? If so, how and why?
- Quote Emilia's lines from the play in the entry, to support her belief.

Have students chart Othello's changes from the beginning to the end of the play. They can place a chart of these changes in the dialogue journals, create a chart to display on a single sheet of chart paper, develop a time line of these changes, or create a sketched or computer generated storyboard of these changes. However students display these changes, they must document the scenes that reveal them.

ACTIVITY 9: CULTURAL CONTEXT

(DESE-R1.F) MISC. (Show-Me: Goal 2.1)

Have students label the various geographic locations that are important to the play:

- England (Shakespeare's Home)
- Cyprus
- Venice
- Turkey

(DESE- R1.I; Product/Performance 1.A)

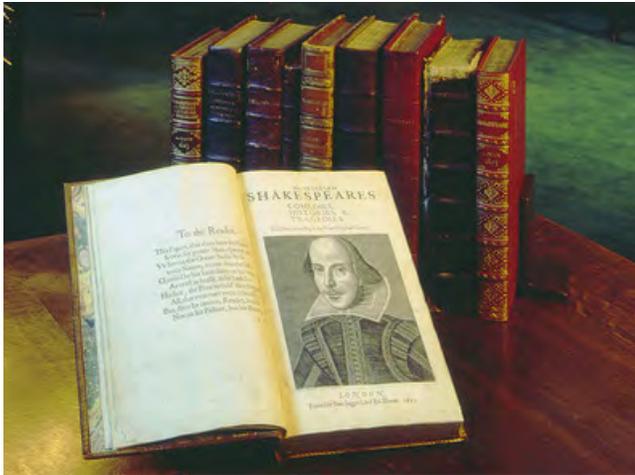
Have students rewrite the play as a contemporary soap opera, perhaps through a week of episodes. After the script has been drafted, they might perform and videotape it. The videotape can be shown to the class or placed in a classroom videotape checkout library.

(DESE-Listening Skills 2.A)

Have students stage an episode of a daytime talk show on which Iago confronts Othello, Desdemona, Cassio, Roderigo, and Emilia. Who appears and in which order? What is the headline for that day's show? What questions does the host ask? What questions do members of the audience ask?

(DESE-PP1.C/Elements and Principles 1.C)

Have students design, either by hand or on the computer, costumes for each of the characters. The costumes should reveal knowledge of the historical period and analysis of the personality of the character. These 'sketches' can be presented to the class or posted.



BOOKS ON SHAKESPEARE AND TEACHING SHAKESPEARE:

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- Kermode, Frank. *Shakespeare's Language*. Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 2000.
- Linklater, Kristin. *Freeing Shakespeare's Voice*. Theatre Communications Group, 1992.
- Pritchard, R. E. *Shakespeare's England*. Sutton Publishing Limited, 1999.
- Papp, Joseph and Elizabeth Kirkland. *Shakespeare Alive*. Bantam Books, 1988.
- Reynolds, P. *Teaching Shakespeare*. Oxford University Press, 1992.

SHAKESPEARE WEBSITES:

- Mr. William Shakespeare and the Internet: www.shakespeare.palomar.edu
- The Shakespeare Resource Center: www.bardweb.net
- Shakespeare's Globe Center USA: www.sgc.umd.edu
- Shakespeare: A Virtual Field Trip: www.hrsbstaff.ednet.ns.ca/engramja/Svtour.html
- Life in Elizabethan England: elizabethan.org/compendium
- Shakespeare Birthplace Trust: www.shakespeare.org.uk

- Shakespeare Lite: library.thinkquest.org/23293
- Shakespeare Magazine: www.shakespearemag.com
- Absolute Shakespeare: absoluteshakespeare.com
- Everything Shakespeare: www.field-of-themes.com/shakespeare/indexmain.html
- Ready to Use Activities for Teaching: www.pearsonschool.com
- Shakespeare Curriculum Resources from The Center for Learning: www.centerforlearning.org/c-41-shakespeare.aspx

ONE MORE ACTIVITY

Write and let me know your thoughts. YOU are the reason we do what we do, and it's your responses that help us to provide theatre experiences that are exciting, meaningful and educational. Write care of:

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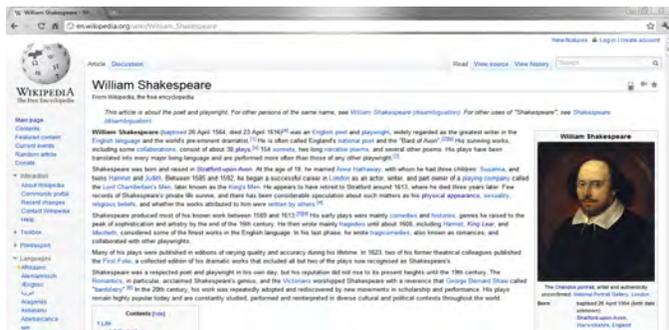


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