

List of characters

OTHELLO A black army general in the service of the Duke of Venice

DESDEMONA Othello's wife, daughter of Brabantio

IAGO Othello's ensign (standard-bearer)

EMILIA Iago's wife, companion to Desdemona

CASSIO Othello's lieutenant

BIANCA in love with Cassio

DUKE OF VENICE

BRABANTIO A Venetian senator, father of Desdemona

RODERIGO A Venetian gentleman, in love with Desdemona

GRATIANO Brabantio's brother

LODOVICO Brabantio's relative

MONTANO Governor of Cyprus

Senators of Venice

Gentlemen of Cyprus

CLOWN Servant to Othello

Herald

Messenger

Musicians, soldiers, attendants, servants

Sailor

The action of the play takes place in Venice and Cyprus



Two men are in the middle of an argument. Roderigo accuses Iago of cheating him. Iago is angry about failing to gain the promotion that has gone instead to Michael Cassio.

Stagecraft

A dramatic opening (in pairs)

In the theatres of Shakespeare's time, there was no electric lighting and no stage curtain. The playwright had to signal the start of the play by means of a dramatic opening scene. Here, the noisy audience would be silenced by two men in the middle of a heated argument, accompanied by much swearing.

- a** Read this opening conversation (lines 1–34) aloud. Try reading it in several different ways and decide which sounds best. Can you bring out differences between the two characters? Discuss which words in the script give you clues as to how they should be spoken. For example, look carefully at the use of pronouns: in Shakespeare's day, 'thou' indicated familiarity, or suggested that the speaker was addressing someone socially inferior; 'you' was a more polite or respectful form of address.
- b** Movie and theatre directors have chosen various ways to begin the play. Think about how you might want to set the scene – for example, how could you suggest to an audience that this opening scene takes place in Venice? Consider the ways the actors might enter the stage or screen, and what sound and lighting effects might imply a street at night.
- c** The play opens halfway through an argument. Make up what you think Iago and Roderigo have been saying before the play begins. Improvise the full argument, making sure that your dialogue ends on the first line of the play.
- d** Imagine you are preparing to direct a performance of *Othello*. Start a Director's Journal and record your ideas (advice for actors, costume sketches, set designs) as you read through the play.

1 Michael Cassio – why does Iago dislike him?

Iago explains why he believes he has not been promoted to the rank of lieutenant (lines 8–27).

- Look carefully at the way Iago describes Cassio (lines 19–26) and pick out four key phrases that suggest why Iago is jealous of him. Compare your phrases with those of other students. How many do you have in common?

'Sblood by God's blood
(a swear word)

Abhor me you may hate me

In personal suit
personally requested

Off-capped to him paid him their respects (by taking off their hats)

bombast circumstance
fancy excuse

epithets of war military jargon

Non-suits my mediators
rejects proposals made by my supporters

Certes certainly

arithmetician theorist (i.e. has studied the theory of war)

Florentine person from Florence

squadron small group of soldiers

devison strategic placing of soldiers

togèd consuls senators wearing the robes of peace

had the election was chosen

Othello, the Moor of Venice

Act 1 Scene 1

Venice A street at night

Enter RODERIGO and IAGO.

- RODERIGO Tush, never tell me, I take it much unkindly
 That thou, Iago, who hast had my purse
 As if the strings were thine shouldst know of this.
- IAGO 'Sblood, but you will not hear me.
 If ever I did dream of such a matter, 5
 Abhor me.
- RODERIGO Thou told'st me thou didst hold him in thy hate.
- IAGO Despise me if I do not: three great ones of the city,
 In personal suit to make me his lieutenant,
 Off-capped to him; and by the faith of man, 10
 I know my price, I am worth no worse a place.
 But he, as loving his own pride and purposes,
 Evades them with a bombast circumstance,
 Horribly stuffed with epithets of war,
 And in conclusion, 15
 Non-suits my mediators. For 'Certes', says he,
 'I have already chosen my officer.'
 And what was he?
 Forsooth, a great arithmetician,
 One Michael Cassio, a Florentine, 20
 A fellow almost damned in a fair wife,
 That never set a squadron in the field,
 Nor the devising of a battle knows
 More than a spinster, unless the bookish theoretic,
 Wherein the togèd consuls can propose 25
 As masterly as he. Mere prattle without practice
 Is all his soldiership. But he, sir, had the election,

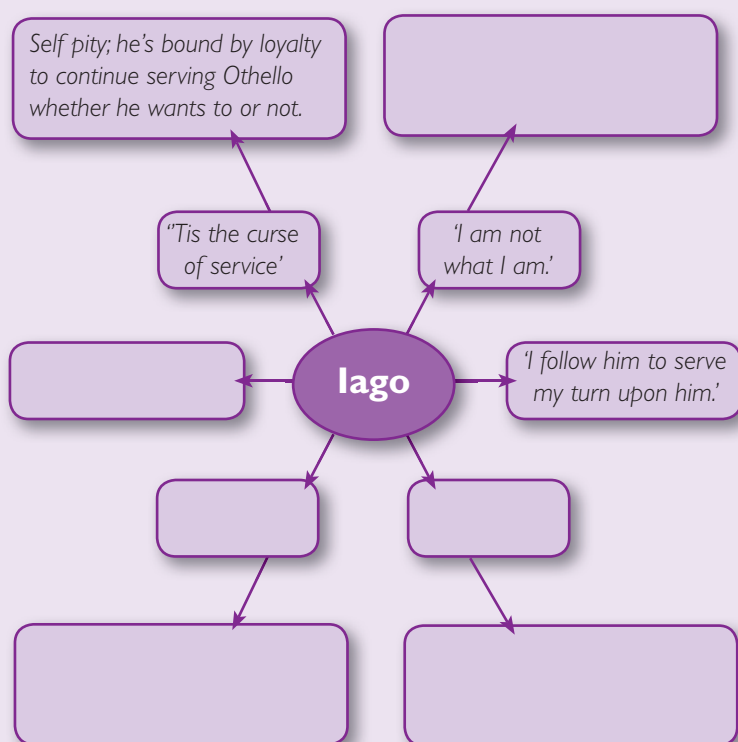


Iago continues to complain about 'the Moor' and the system of promotion. He says he pretends to be a faithful officer, but follows Othello only to serve his own purposes.

Characters

First impressions of Iago (in small groups)

- Read the script opposite aloud several times, sharing out the lines between all members of the group (hand over to the next person at each full stop, question mark or exclamation mark).
- On a large, plain piece of paper, write 'Iago' in the centre (see the diagram below). In the script, look for the key statements that Iago makes about himself. What words reveal something about his character or motivation? Write these quotations on the second layer of the diagram. On the outer layer, explain in your own words what you believe each quotation tells us about him.
- When you have finished, join together with other groups and compare your sheets. Explain how and why you chose your particular quotations.
- Pool your ideas to produce one final diagram for display on your classroom wall.



lee'd pacified (sailing terminology)
counter-caster accountant

Moorship 'Moor' indicates someone from North Africa
ancient ensign, standard-bearer

Preferment promotion
letter academic qualifications
affection favouritism

old gradation
 conventional promotion through the ranks
affined bound

obsequious bondage
 crawling service

provender food and drink
cashiered dismissed from service
trimmed ... duty pretending to be loyal

complement extern
 outward show

daws jackdaws

	And I, of whom his eyes had seen the proof At Rhodes, at Cyprus, and on other grounds Christian and heathen, must be lee'd and calmed	30
RODERIGO	By debtor and creditor; this counter-caster, He, in good time, must his lieutenant be, And I, God bless the mark, his Moorship's ancient.	
IAGO	By heaven, I rather would have been his hangman. Why, there's no remedy. 'Tis the curse of service; Preferment goes by letter and affection, Not by the old gradation, where each second Stood heir to the first. Now sir, be judge yourself Whether I in any just term am affined To love the Moor.	35
RODERIGO	I would not follow him then.	40
IAGO	O sir, content you. I follow him to serve my turn upon him. We cannot all be masters, nor all masters Cannot be truly followed. You shall mark Many a duteous and knee-crooking knave, That doting on his own obsequious bondage, Wears out his time much like his master's ass For nought but provender, and when he's old, cashiered. Whip me such honest knaves. Others there are Who, trimmed in forms and visages of duty, Keep yet their hearts attending on themselves, And throwing but shows of service on their lords, Do well thrive by them; and when they have lined their coats, Do themselves homage. These fellows have some soul, And such a one do I profess myself.	45
	For, sir, It is as sure as you are Roderigo, Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago; In following him, I follow but myself. Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty, But seeming so for my peculiar end. For when my outward action doth demonstrate The native act and figure of my heart In complement extern, 'tis not long after But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve For daws to peck at. I am not what I am.	50
		55
		60
		65

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Iago suggests a way of taking revenge against Othello. They shout in the street outside Brabantio's house, and tell him the news that he has been 'robbed'.

Stagecraft

'BRABANTIO [*appears*] *above at a window*' (in pairs)

Below is a photograph of Shakespeare's Globe in London, which was built towards the end of the twentieth century as a replica of the theatre in which Shakespeare's company worked in Elizabethan and Jacobean times. Notice that the theatre has a deep 'thrust' stage, with two exits at the back and a balcony above.

- Talk together about how you would stage lines 68–93, first on the stage of Shakespeare's Globe and then in a modern acting space (for example, in a drama studio). Think about the use of lighting and consider any props that seem appropriate.
- As an extension to this activity, talk together about what you think might be the main challenges of directing a play on the stage at Shakespeare's Globe.



owe own

timorous frightening or fearful

Zounds 'by Christ's wounds'
 (a swear word)

tupping mating or copulating with

snorting snoring

devil (in old church paintings, devils were commonly portrayed as black)

grandsire grandfather

- RODERIGO What a full fortune does the thick-lips owe,
 If he can carry it thus!
- IAGO Call up her father:
 Rouse him, make after him, poison his delight,
 Proclaim him in the street, incense her kinsmen, 70
 And though he in a fertile climate dwell,
 Plague him with flies: though that his joy be joy,
 Yet throw such chances of vexation on't
 As it may lose some colour.
- RODERIGO Here is her father's house; I'll call aloud. 75
- IAGO Do, with like timorous accent and dire yell,
 As when, by night and negligence, the fire
 Is spied in populous cities.
- RODERIGO What ho, Brabantio! Signior Brabantio, ho!
- IAGO Awake! What ho, Brabantio! Thieves, thieves! 80
 Look to your house, your daughter, and your bags!
 Thieves, thieves!
- BRABANTIO [*appears*] *above at a window.*
- BRABANTIO What is the reason of this terrible summons?
 What is the matter there?
- RODERIGO Signior, is all your family within? 85
- IAGO Are your doors locked?
- BRABANTIO Why, wherefore ask you this?
- IAGO Zounds, sir, you're robbed; for shame, put on your gown;
 Your heart is burst; you have lost half your soul;
 Even now, now, very now, an old black ram
 Is tugging your white ewe. Arise, arise; 90
 Awake the snorting citizens with the bell,
 Or else the devil will make a grandsire of you.
 Arise, I say!



Brabantio suspects that the two men are drunk. He learns Roderigo's name, but not Iago's. Iago tells Brabantio that Desdemona and Othello are having sexual intercourse and that his descendants will be mere animals.

Language in the play

Verse and prose (in pairs)

Brabantio and Roderigo speak in **blank verse** (a poetic style of writing that does not rhyme). Each line usually has five main beats or stresses. But when Iago interjects at line 109, the script switches to prose. Read the information about verse and prose in 'The language of *Othello*' on page 230, then suggest why Shakespeare has Iago speak in prose here. Consider:

- the different social status of the three characters
- what each of the men is saying
- the context of the scene as a whole.

1 Freeze the action (in threes)

There are three men on stage when Brabantio asks the question 'What profane wretch art thou?'

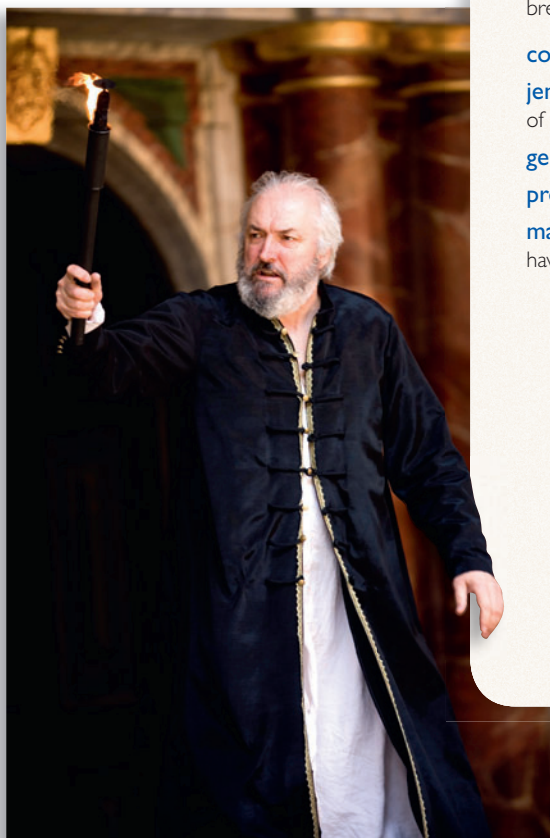
- Decide where each man is positioned at this point. Who is visible to whom? Then create a tableau (a freeze-frame) of this moment. Think carefully about facial expressions and ways of standing/crouching. Other groups should try to guess who is who in your frozen picture.

2 Who is Roderigo?

When Roderigo introduces himself (line 96), Brabantio is not pleased to see him ('The worser welcome'). He reminds Roderigo that on a previous occasion he ordered him to stay away from his house and his daughter (lines 97–9).

- What might have happened in the past to cause this reaction from Brabantio? Carefully read lines 96–105 and prepare a short improvised drama in modern English, depicting the incident that led to Roderigo being banned from the house.

► **What gestures might Brabantio use to express his displeasure?**



charged ordered

distemperring draughts alcohol

malicious bravery
drunken behaviour

start disturb

place position

grange country residence

Barbary horse North African
breed of horse

courasers racehorses

jennets small Spanish breed
of horse

germans relatives

profane foul-mouthed

making ... two backs
having sexual intercourse

BRABANTIO	What, have you lost your wits?	
RODERIGO	Most reverend signior, do you know my voice?	
BRABANTIO	Not I; what are you?	95
RODERIGO	My name is Roderigo.	
BRABANTIO	The worser welcome; I have charged thee not to haunt about my doors; In honest plainness thou hast heard me say My daughter is not for thee. And now in madness, Being full of supper and distempering draughts, Upon malicious bravery dost thou come To start my quiet.	100
RODERIGO	Sir, sir, sir –	
BRABANTIO	But thou must needs be sure My spirit and my place have in them power To make this bitter to thee.	
RODERIGO	Patience, good sir.	105
BRABANTIO	What tell'st thou me of robbing? This is Venice; My house is not a grange.	
RODERIGO	Most grave Brabantio, In simple and pure soul I come to you.	
IAGO	Zounds, sir; you are one of those that will not serve God if the devil bid you. Because we come to do you service and you think we are ruffians, you'll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse, you'll have your nephews neigh to you, you'll have coursers for cousins, and jennets for germans.	110
BRABANTIO	What profane wretch art thou?	
IAGO	I am one, sir, that comes to tell you your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs.	115
BRABANTIO	Thou art a villain.	
IAGO	You are a senator.	



Roderigo tells Brabantio that Desdemona has run away to live with Othello. Brabantio leaves to check if the story is true, saying he has already dreamt of such a thing happening.

1 'a gross revolt' (in small groups)

Roderigo tells Brabantio that Desdemona has run away from home to get married without her father's permission. Several of Shakespeare's plays include young people rebelling against their parents' wishes (most famously *Romeo and Juliet*). Generally speaking, in the comedies they are eventually forgiven, while in the tragedies the situation ends in disaster.

- Talk together about stories you have read, and movies or television shows you have seen, that include a similar plot element. How is the family split resolved in those storylines?

2 The chain of being (by yourself)

In medieval England, people believed that God assigned all humans a specific place in society. This meant that people had to accept whatever social status they were born into; it also meant that young people were expected to obey their parents without question. By Shakespeare's time, however, this belief was being challenged.

- Carry out some research of your own into this 'chain of being'. Write some notes about the way in which an Elizabethan audience might view Desdemona's decision to run away and marry without her father's knowledge. How might those views differ from modern perspectives on the issue?

Language in the play

Roderigo's references (in pairs)

In lines 119–39, Roderigo refers to Desdemona in positive terms ('fair'), whereas he uses derogatory language to speak about Othello ('gross clasps', line 125).

- List all the words or phrases Roderigo uses in the script opposite to refer to Desdemona and Othello. Write down what these words and phrases mean.
- We have not yet met Desdemona or Othello. Talk together about the way the audience's expectations are being shaped at this point. Record your ideas and then review them when you reach the end of Act 1.

answer be called to account for

odd-even just after midnight

dull watch late hour

lascivious lustful

saucy insolent

stranger foreigner

Strike on the tinder make a light

taper candle

gall hurt

cast dismiss

loud reason strong support from the Senate