Othello and *Othello* and *Othello*
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Course Description

Shakespeare's *Othello* has been one of the most controversial and popular Shakespearean plays. In this class, we examine issues of race, religion, gender, class, and sexuality in the past as well as the present. Beginning with the play's earliest performance, we study *Othello* from various critical perspectives through close analysis of the play-text and adaptations on film and stage. For several weeks students read the text of the play slowly and closely, paying particular attention to Shakespeare's use of language, metaphor, genre, and dramatic form. Then they investigate the complex meanings of race, religion, gender, social status and sexuality in premodern England through *Othello* as well as other medieval and early modern materials.

In addition to recent interpretative criticism and the performance history of the play, including the use of blackface on stage and in film, the course also includes global adaptations of the play in various forms, including Giuseppe Verdi's opera *Otello,* Vishal Bhardwaj's film *Omkara*, Toni Morrison's play *Desdemona*, Tayeb Salih's novel *Season of Migration to the North,* and Keith Hamilton Cobb's *American Moor.* By using *Othello* and its afterlives as a case study, the course considers the relevance of *Othello*, and Shakespeare in general, to our understanding of race, religion, gender, sexuality, class, and immigration today.

Modules

1

Texts, contexts, and sources

The Text of the Play: Shakespeare, William. *Othello*. Edited by Michael Neill. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

> I typically assign Neill's edition as I find its introduction and appendix particularly rich for teaching and query. In the final assignment, I ask students to return to Neill's introduction and critique it—identifying what they would omit, add, or reorganize—while drafting their own version. I encourage students to own the text as experts and to consider what themes, critical frameworks, performance histories, or scholarly debates they find most essential to an engaged reading of the play.

Cinthio, Giraldi. *The Moor of Venice*, 1565.

Excerpts from Leo Africanus. *A Geographical Historie of Africa*. Translated by John Pory, 1600.

Selections from Loomba, Ania, and Jonathan Burton, eds. *Race in Early Modern England: A Documentary Companion*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

2

Critical responses: race, religion, gender, sexuality, class

In this module, students write four short close-reading papers—on gender, race, sexuality, and religion, respectively—in which they focus on a single, specific moment, word, phrase, image, or short passage from *Othello*. This method of literary analysis allows us to notice how Shakespeare's language invites multiple interpretations and generates complex messages. Each paper shares the same task—close read a passage with a strong thesis—but requires students to re-read the play through a different critical lens.

When students write about race, my goal is for them to consider how race is constructed through language, skin color, foreignness, nationhood, and/or hierarchy. How does the play racialize characters, and to what effect? Students should focus on terms of description, metaphor, otherness, idealization, or insult, and note when race is made visible *or* invisible.

3

Concluding assignment: Rewriting the introduction to *Othello*

After students have read *Othello* multiple times and critically engaged with the play through close reading, performance analysis, and thematic exploration, the final assignment invites them to step into the role of editor, scholar, or teacher. In this assignment students demonstrate what they have learned this semester by showing how they would now guide others into the play.

Students revise the introduction of the *Oxford World's Classics* edition of *Othello*—the one they have used throughout the class. They rethink how the play should be presented to students and readers today. Rather than rewriting the introduction itself, their task is to critique, reimagine, and design a new one.

Students organize their response into these required sections:

1. What's missing?

Students identify what they think is absent from the current Oxford edition introduction.

- What key themes, perspectives, or contexts are underdeveloped or missing entirely?

- What conversations about *Othello* should be foregrounded in the 21st century that the edition sidelines or omits?

2. What would you omit, and why?

Are there aspects of the existing introduction that feel outdated, overly canonical, or unnecessarily emphasized?

- What would students cut or shorten—and why?

- Students consider how space in a scholarly edition should be used purposefully and inclusively.

3. What would you add?

This final assignment requires students to articulate their vision for the edition:

- What would they include in their new introduction?

- What themes, critical frameworks, performance histories, or scholarly debates did students find most essential to an engaged reading of the play?

- What perspectives—feminist, queer, postcolonial, Black studies, disability studies, performance studies—should be centered?

- Are there recent adaptations or performances that shift how we understand the play?

Students have the option to respond as a teacher (what would I want students to learn from *Othello*?) or as a scholar (what does the public need to rethink or revisit?). They may imagine their new introduction as part of a public-facing edition or as a classroom tool.

4. How Would You Organize It?

Students may submit their work in outline form or as continuous prose (or a combination). Bullet points, headings, and short paragraphs are welcome: they do not need to write a formal essay.

Students must propose a possible structure or table of contents for their new introduction. They may list:

- Section headings and subtitles

- Topics to be included in each section

- Examples of key texts, productions, or scholarly perspectives to reference

- New questions readers should consider

Readings and bibliography

Boyarin, Daniel. "Othello's Penis: Or, Islam in the Closet." In *Shakesqueer: A Queer Companion to the Complete Works of Shakespeare*, edited by Madhavi Menon, 254–62. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011.

Burton, Jonathan, Kate Fisher, and Sarah Toulalan. "Western Encounters with Sex and Bodies in Non-European Cultures, 1500–1750." In *The Routledge History of Sex and the Body*, edited by Sarah Toulalan and Kate Fisher, 495–510. London: Routledge, 2016.

Harris, Jonathan Gil. "Shakespeare and Race." In *The New Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare*, edited by Margreta de Grazia and Stanley Wells, 201–16. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Little Jr., Arthur L. *Shakespeare Jungle Fever: National-Imperial Re-Visions of Race, Rape, and Sacrifice*. Chapter 2. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000.

Loomba, Ania. "Identities and Bodies in Early Modern Studies." In *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Embodiment: Gender, Sexuality, and Race*, edited by Valerie Traub, 228–46. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Masten, Jeffrey, and Valerie Traub. "Glossing and T*pping: Editing Sexuality, Race, and Gender in *Othello*." In *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Embodiment*, edited by Valerie Traub, 569-586. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Neill, Michael. "Unproper Beds: Race, Adultery, and the Hideous in *Othello*." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (1989): 383–412.

Newman, Karen. "'And Wash the Ethiop White': Femininity and the Monstrous in *Othello*." In *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology*, edited by Jean E. Howard and Marion F. O'Connor, 142–62. New York: Methuen, 1987.

Sanchez, Melissa E. "The Erotic Life of Racism in *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*." In *Shakespeare and Queer Theory*, 111-142. London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2019.

Smith, Ian. "We Are Othello." In *Black Shakespeare: Reading and Misreading Race*, 156–181. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022.

Smith, Ian, and Jyotsna G. Singh. "The Queer Moor: Bodies, Borders, and Barbary Inns." In *A Companion to the Global Renaissance*, edited by Jyotsna G. Singh. 190–204. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

Vitkus, Daniel J. "Turning Turk in *Othello:* The Conversion and Damnation of the Moor." In *Turning Turk: English Theater and the Multicultural Mediterranean, 1570–1630*, 77–106. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

Productions: stage and screen

- Orson Welles, dir. *Othello*. 1952.
- Stuart Burge, dir. *Othello.* 1965.
- Jonathan Miller, dir*. Othello.* 1981.
- Trevor Nunn, dir. *Othello*. 1989.
- Oliver Parker, dir. *Othello*. 1995.
- Tim Blake Nelson, dir. *O.* 2001.
- Vishal Bhardwaj, dir. *Omkara.* 2006.
- Iqbal Khan, dir. *Othello.* 2015.
- Mehmet Ali Sanlikol, dir. *Othello in the Seraglio.* 2015.

Whose *Othello*

- Cobb, Keith Hamilton. *American Moor*. Modern Plays. London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2020.

- Hall, Kim F. "I Can't Love This the Way You Want Me To: Archival Blackness." *postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies* 11, no. 2–3 (2020): 171-79.

- Morrison, Toni. *Desdemona*. New York: Vintage International, 2012.

- Salih, Tayeb. *Season of Migration to the North*. Translated by Denys Johnson-Davies. New York: New York Review Books, 2009.