

## COMPOSITION DATE, SOURCES, CONTEXT

*See the introduction to the Arden edition.*

“*Othello* was probably written at some point in the period from mid-1601 to mid-1602.” **Arden** “The play was probably written *circa* 1602–4. (...) [Elements] may point to an early-Jacobean date.” **Cam**.

*Does it matter? March 1603: from a celibate, English Queen to a married, foreign (Scottish) King...*

## THEMES AND ISSUES

Envy & jealousy — Honesty, lies & truth — Appearances & reality — Good & evil, moral & epistemological dilemmas — Language & persuasion — Social hierarchy — Otherness

## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

### Language

- “[Othello] knows [his rhetorical skill] is the vehicle for his majestic authority as well as the source of his power to win Desdemona.” **Cam**
- “[About Iago’s use of Euphuism:] Such a style (...) is syntactically the style of Janus, the two-faced god by whom he swears.” **Cam** « Iago est un sophiste, un manipulateur des signes et des apparences. Sa fonction militaire d’enseigne fait d’emblée de lui une figure du signe. » **FL** “[Iago’s] speech habitually degrades human activities to the level of the doings of despicable animals.” **Cam**
- “The clown’s habit of verbal emphasis, applying his own irrepressible criticisms to the matter in hand, contrasts with Othello’s overpowering imagination, which incapacitates his reasoning faculties.” **Arden**
- “[Iago’s] speech-rhythms become uncharacteristically slower and smoother only when he is dissimulating. Othello’s speech is, above all, flowing. Its ordered harmonies are expressive of the ordered universe in which he lives (...) until Iago throws him into a state of confusion (‘chaos’) and moral horror by convincing him that (...) good and evil are horribly intertwined. The ordered harmonies of his normal speech, the ‘Othello music’, are broken or speeded up when he is thus influenced by Iago’s poison.” **JML**
- “In the temptation of Othello [3.3], the secret of Iago’s success is that he makes it seem that Othello’s honest (faithful, reliable) ancient is at first too honest (faithful to his friend, Cassio) to be honest (tell the truth) about what is in his mind. (...) Desdemona’s one small lapse in honesty (truth-telling) leads Othello to doubt much further her honesty (chastity).” **JML**

### The racial question

- “There is no way of saying with absolute certainty how Shakespeare conceived Othello racially. A black / white opposition is clearly built into the play at every level (...). This is ultimately the only important theatrical fact.” **Cam** “The majority of actors has chosen to emphasize Othello’s race and colour as either Negro-black or north African tawny. We may wonder, finally, whether such a clear-cut distinction is really necessary in the theatre, as long as Othello’s costume remains neutral.” **Arden**

- “Salvini and Olivier, who emphasized Othello’s animal noises and panther-pacing, based their ‘racist’ interpretation on the firm evidence of the text.” **Arden**
- “Be he a black or a north African Moor (...), Othello’s otherness remains. He is more than a stranger, he comes from a mysteriously ‘other’ world, a world that lies beyond our reach, hinted at rather than defined. Despite his self-identification with Venice and Christianity the Moor cannot shake off this mystery.” **Arden** “Othello’s colour is far from being the decisive factor, but it is a vital element in Shakespeare’s whole conception of the tragic pattern.” **JML**
- “It is only when race is connected with miscegenation that it becomes a highly-charged emotional issue for the internationally-minded Venetians; and it was probably more so for the insular theatre-goers of Jacobean England. (...) In 1601 Africans were to be seen in sufficient numbers in London for Queen Elizabeth to be ‘discontented at the great numbers of Negars and blackamoors which are crept into the realm’.” **Cam**
- “A more modern interpretation would say that Othello’s tragic flaw was that he had internalized, that is taken into himself, the prejudices of those who surrounded him. (...) Iago hinted at these ideas, and Othello rushed to accept them, because they echoed his deepest fears and insecurities.” **Cliffs**

### Otherness & isolation

- “[Othello] is so proudly a Christian (...) Othello’s urge to be assimilated as a Venetian (...) Only Othello’s hands and face would have to indicate his ethnic background.” **Arden** « Othello, aventurier de l’espace, déclare dès l’abord son appartenance à un monde autre, à un ailleurs. (...) De par ses origines lointaines, il est lui-même (...) un exemple d’association composite — âme chrétienne dans un corps mauresque — où Brabantio verra une façon de monstre. » **RG**
- “We see [Othello] repeatedly switching from one to the other [self] in 4.1.168ff. (...) I cannot help feeling that such contrary impressions are meant to intimate Othello’s ‘otherness’, the volatile temperament that voyagers described as characteristics of non-European races (...) In Othello, as in non-European Caliban, [Shakespeare] linked emotional volatility with other ‘racial’ characteristics (...). Gullibility, superstition, murderousness, a (primitive?) need to worship or abase oneself.” **Arden**
- “Shakespeare saw Venice as part of his own world, but not so Cyprus.” **Arden** “Venice represents civilization, while Cyprus symbolizes the wilderness. The idea is that what happened in Cyprus never would happen in the civilized city of Venice.” **Cliffs**
- « [Pour Desdemona,] l’accompagnement de son époux à Chypre (...) au cœur d’espaces de plus en plus éloignés de la cité et de plus en plus tempétueux symbolise l’abandon d’une réalité ressentie comme incapable de satisfaire sa nature. En suivant Othello, Desdemona croit quitter un monde aux limites trop étroites. » **RG**
- « La translation sur l’île de Chypre (...) rappelle en filigrane son appartenance à Vénus (...) venue y résider après son adultère avec Mars. L’union de la belle Vénitienne avec un Noir affreux (...) et beaucoup plus âgé qu’elle, n’est pas non plus sans rappeler le mariage de Vénus et de Vulcain. » **FL**
- “Othello moves from the judiciary center of the state to an island outpost; and from reliance upon an adequate court to a position of authority upon which others rely for justice.” **RBH**
- “The whole movement of the action is that of a narrowing gyre. (...) The last three acts make us concentrate on a purely personal world created by Iago and Othello until we are locked physically and symbolically into the claustrophobic bedroom-tomb of the doomed pair. The hero’s mental path contributes to this sense of contraction.” **Cam**
- “Every line Othello utters in his normal manner illustrates how all he has experienced has been related to himself with (...) breathtaking egocentricity.” **Cam**
- “The commonest kind of ‘hurt’ the action turns on is that of being emotionally or physically rejected. (...) Throughout the play we see the various ways people try to avert this calamity, and the way they

respond to it when it happens (or when they think it has happened).” **JA**

### Disease, poison & monsters

- “My reason, the physician to my love, / Angry that his prescriptions are not kept, / Hath left me (...) Past cure I am, now reason is past care (...) My thoughts and my discourse as madmen’s are, / At random from the truth vainly expressed” **Sonnet 147**
- “The metaphor of illness is thoroughly embedded in the play.” **RBH**
- “One of the means which Shakespeare employs to indicate the gradual hold Iago develops over Othello’s mind is the growing infection of his speech by Iago’s vocabulary.” **Cam** “As Iago’s poison enters his mind [Othello] seems to change more completely than other tragic heroes: we must not confuse his earlier and later self.” **Arden**
- “Elizabethans would have thought [Othello and Iago] curiously alike. According to the psychology of humours, jealousy and envy were closely related, jealousy being ‘a species of envy, which is in turn a species of hatred’. So Othello and Iago suffer from the same disease. (...) Both are outsiders, Othello as a Moor, Iago as a malcontent with a grudge against privilege. (...) Both want to be accepted.” **Arden**
- « Chacun des trois protagonistes principaux (surtout Desdemona) est à la fois beau ou séduisant pour certains regards, et monstrueux pour d’autres. Mais il évolue dans un contexte imaginaire et métaphorique totalement tissé et sous-tendu par le thème tératologique dont d’autres avatars, *difformités* tout à fait typiques de cette époque, sont présentés, et même décrits aux auditeurs. (...) Tout cela nous renvoie à une idée-force bien connue de l’ontologie élisabéthaine fondée sur le concept général d’ordre menacé par les forces du chaos représenté par le monstre. (...) Selon l’héritage platonicien, ce qui est beau doit être bien et vice-versa, l’inverse étant vrai pour la laideur. De plus, une chose ne peut pas être son contraire. (...) L’*oxymoron*, expression stylistique de l’action menée par les agents du chaos, et donc du mal, est ici un des avatars du thème tératologique. » **JP**

### Perception, deception & self-deception

- “For Othello, seeing is believing, and proof of the truth is visual.” **Cliffs** “Shakespeare seems to suggest that Othello sees less clearly than Iago, that he depends on Iago’s eyes.” **Arden** “If the night itself is symbolic, there is a comparable symbolic value in the lights that must be used at night. Lights are introduced very deliberately—much too frequently and conspicuously for us not to become conscious of them—whether they lead the way to understanding or ironically emphasize a failure of understanding.” **RBH**
- “The large number of inconsistencies between what is said or implied in some parts of the play and information given on the same subjects at others (...) [is] an integral part of any understanding of the theme of marital jealousy and the psychological credibility of the characters and their actions.” **Cam**
- “Othello’s sense of smell receives unusual emphasis. Desdemona’s physical beauty and musical voice also have an overpowering effect on him.” **Arden**
- “Growing out of the hero’s idea of his self is the play’s stress on ‘reputation’, which is the reflection of this self in others’ eyes.” **Cam** “In the first two acts we may notice how often particular characters recognize in others, or project onto others, qualities which in fact they themselves possess, though often without their being conscious that this is so. (...) Clearly, all these judgments of other people reveal as much (or more) about the judge as about the judged.” **JA**
- “Shakespeare seems to be making a point about deception and intent, distinguishing between different kinds of culpability.” **Arden** « Dans *Othello*, a-t-on dit, aucun personnage ne se connaît, ni ne connaît les autres. C’est une tragédie de l’incompréhension. Mais ne mettons pas effets et cause sur le même plan. C’est l’ignorance de soi, la farouche détermination mise à l’œuvre pour ne pas se connaître qui entraîne

l'inévitable : chez le Maure, chez sa femme, chez son enseigne — et dans le monde un peu partout. »

**IO** “Othello and Desdemona are among the most touching of literature’s lovers because we have the impression that neither knows the other very well.” **JML** “Other characters, not only Othello, deceive themselves, but he has a special aptitude for self-deception, even when Iago is not directly responsible.”

#### **Arden**

• “Othello (...) has no reason for distrusting Iago, nor has anyone else within the play—with the interesting exception of Roderigo, who is a Shakespearean innovation, created as a contrast to Othello. For Roderigo is a thorough-going dupe, the only person who knows enough of Iago’s true nature to suspect him, yet continues to allow himself to be gulled.” **JML**

• “Within Othello’s very simplicity, admirable as it is, are qualities which make him vulnerable. Not far below the unruffled surface are passions of which he is himself, doubtless, unaware. (...) This is linked with his inability to pause and reflect or to remain in doubt.” **JML**

#### **An unorthodox tragedy?**

• “Insofar as they were believing Christians, Elizabethans would consider revenge wrong; insofar as they were Renaissance pagans, they would *feel* it to be right. From this conflict springs much of the tension which is felt in revenge tragedy.” **JML** “*Othello* is sometimes described as a ‘domestic tragedy’. (...) *Othello* could also be called a tragedy of intrigue.” **Arden**

• “Shakespeare presented his audiences with two figures [Othello and Iago] which were virtual stereotypes and proceeded to reverse completely the normal expectations of the way they should act.” **JML** “A change of emphasis, and might the play not be called *The Tragedy of Iago*? Indirectly these denunciations of Iago also help to rehabilitate Othello, whose smothering of Desdemona comes close to turning the hero into a villain.” **Arden**

• “It is the ending of this play that separates it most strikingly from the other tragedies. (...) There is no emphatic re-establishment of public order. (...) The real emphasis is on the punishment of the villain; there is no effort to understand the nature of the catastrophe, no attempt to ritualise the hero’s end.”

**Cam** “All Shakespearean tragedy ends with control returning to the representative forces of social order. But in the other tragedies, those forces conclude the play by paying tribute to, not trying to enclose and condemn, the tableau of tragic violence. (...) Yet *Othello* ends, with marked aversion and avoidance—with Lodovico’s determination to cover up the picture that Othello and Desdemona present and then go, avoiding as quickly as possible that ‘object [that] poisons sight’.” **LB**

• “In *Othello* the debt to comedy is pervasive, since Shakespeare so frequently falls back on comic routines.” **Arden** « Les ingrédients de la comédie sont pratiquement tous présents dans cette pièce. (...) La perversion du comique en tragique est tout entière contenue dans le fait que Iago, “fool” en puissance, est en réalité “foul”. » **FL**

• “As Desdemona protests her innocence [she] grieves for [Cassio]. It is this which enrages Othello and, renewedly convinced of her guilt, he kills her in the end not as a cold act of justice but in a moment of angry passion.” **JML**

• “From the start Shakespeare establishes that we should not believe Iago when he talks to others; later we learn to distrust him even when he soliloquizes.” **Arden**

• “In what does the tragedy of Othello consist? How far is the tragedy seen to come about by the plotting of Iago and how far by faults in Othello’s nature? What are these faults? Do racial, social, or any other factors contribute?” **JML**

• “The ‘monstrous birth’ to which [Iago] looks forward gloatingly (1.3.402) is the birth of Othello’s jealousy; this is where nature does indeed preposterously err from itself—for Othello’s is not at all a jealous nature. (...) The tragedy of *Othello* is that *a man like this*, can be ‘wrought’ to such savage behaviour; if he is not a man like this, the tragedy, if it does not disappear altogether, becomes much less

moving.” **JML**

### The play's structure

- “Visually and metaphorically the opposition of black and white is at the heart of the work. And this is explored in all its variants: evil and good, deceit and truth, illusion and reality, ignorance and knowledge, dishonesty and honesty, hate and love, death and life. These polarities, however, are not offered us as the series of clearly defined alternatives that this listing suggests; rather, all the terms are dramatically and poetically redefined.” **Cam**
- “The plot of *Othello*, with all its inconsistencies, its lack of perfect orderliness, its blurring of chronological time, and its frightening picture of mind defining existence in terms of its twisted ideals, is the perfect vehicle for conveying the experience of obsessive jealousy.” **Cam**
- “The double time scheme allowed Shakespeare to transform Cinthio’s Ensign into a much more daring gambler, one who revels in risk-taking.” **Arden**
- “We get a very limited view of the play if we take its main substance to be Othello’s jealousy. (...) Iago’s jealousy is pervasive: (...) his jealousy works itself off, or is purged, by the creation of a soothing counterjealousy. (...) It has been called, correctly I think, envy.” **RBH**
- “Precisely what is to *happen* in the tragedy is prefigured in the imagery associated with the storm. (...) The poetry in which [Shakespeare] evokes the menacing, treacherous, destructive power of *this* storm [in Othello’s soul] is impressive and cannot be regarded as merely decorative.” **JML** “If we make the storm function as a symbol of later disaster, as some critics do, we lose a major dramatic point—that the storm is exactly the kind of trouble that Othello can and does survive. (...) The contrast furnishes a vivid image of human experience: the conquering of violent external threats and dangers, the defeat by internal disorders that may not even look like attacks.” **RBH**
- “As we watch the play we are perhaps more conscious of Iago’s brilliance in making the most of his opportunities, yet not all of Desdemona’s misfortunes are engineered directly by Iago. (...) It may be that Shakespeare invented the storm at sea and unexpected annihilation of the Turkish fleet because he foresaw how heavily the plot would depend on chance.” **Arden**
- “All [Othello’s] outstanding professional virtues become parodies of themselves when he draws on them to solve problems of a personal relationship. Decisiveness becomes rash actions; emotional engagement turns into ruthless obsession; automatic active response to crisis is transformed into a capacity for murder. Similarly with Desdemona: independence of mind emerges as stubborn persistence; [etc.]” **Cam**

### The moral reading (What should I do?)

- “We must not shirk the most difficult question, whether or not the play has a moral. When Othello and Desdemona decided to marry was that a terrible mistake, one condemned by the play? (...) Was it a tragic ‘error of judgement’ [*hamartia*] that a black man marries a white wife? (...) To apply [Cinthio’s] ‘moral’ to the play seems to me entirely wrong-headed.” **Arden** “There is no answer in the text to (...) why Iago acts as he does. (...) Iago’s tortuous explanations for his plotting seem too shifting and trivial to account for the wilful torture in which he indulges with such pleasure. (...) Shakespeare [has] brought together in Iago the vicious, the diabolical, and the Machiavellian.” **JML**
- “Contrasts between heaven and hell run right through the pattern of *Othello*. (...) Taking his own life, Othello believes that he is thus consigning both soul and body to the literal torments of hell.” **JML**
- “Othello divides all human activity into higher and lower, and thinks of himself as invariably committed to the higher, just as Iago always chooses the lower.” **Arden**
- “In [the final] scene, what we are seeing is an Othello who has come to know that his moral world *is*, after all, as he had believed it to be: good and evil are once again at opposite poles, now that he knows

Iago is hellishly evil, Desdemona of heavenly goodness. There is no more confusion on Othello's mind."  
**JML**

### The existential reading (What may I hope?)

- “Although the dramatic conflict centres on Othello and Iago, the principals of what we may call the metaphysical conflict are Iago and Desdemona. They compete for Othello's soul almost like Mephistopheles and the Good Angel for Faustus's. (...) Shakespeare set himself new targets: to explore, from the inside, human nature on the very verge of its confine, man as devil, woman as angel. In the centre, between them, he placed human nature mysteriously right and not right, familiar and yet unknown — a non-European.” **Arden** — See also figure 1?

- “[There are] two main views of [Othello:] the first (...) is the heroically noble soldier-lover calling for an admiration and sympathy that survive the hideous descent into cruelty and violence (...) The second [is] this picture of an easily-duped, egregiously egocentric Moor. His majestic idiom itself is viewed as incontrovertible evidence of his proclivity for self-dramatisation, his romantic capacity for self-delusion, his inability to cope with life, his flair for the picturesque and the histrionic. (...) All views of Iago will be influenced by the opinions their holders have of Othello. (...) The ‘Noble Moor’ implies a villain of almost supernatural powers; whereas an easily credulous ass makes for merely a pathological liar putting in train an action that moves out of his control during the last two acts.” **Cam**

- “The marriage of Othello and Desdemona overturns all preconceived notions of normal behaviour. Shakespeare's determination to question the ‘normal’ emerges from the large number of stereotypes that he sets up only to knock them down.” **Arden**

- “Iago's looking for causes, his citing of wrongs, his disappointment—by these Shakespeare brings him partly within the circle of recognizable humanity and forbids us to write him off as unique. In his efforts to be or look ‘normal’ we can see our own impulses at work. (...) In Iago, Shakespeare made his fullest and most daring exploration of the potential evil of Everyman.” **RBH**



Figure 1: Snowy in *Tintin au Tibet*

### The epistemological reading (What can I know?)

- “The whole play is founded on the different ways a single object may be viewed because of divergent human perspectives, interpretations and natural predilections.” **Cam**

- “Othello's passion rises [in the brawl scene, II.3] only because of his uncertainty. He is responsible for administering justice and enforcing discipline: he must and will know who is responsible. He must and will act. This crucial characteristic is one on which we later see Iago work deliberately. (...) Once he is certain, Othello acts quietly and firmly. (...) When he finds out the truth, his final act of justice is to take his own life. In all three situations he is convinced he is administering justice, and does so despite personal feelings: first on Cassio (...); then on Desdemona (...); finally on himself!” **JML**

- “Othello's race, costume, age and impaired vision are all matters of opinion, not susceptible of proof. We have to admit that it is equally difficult to feel sure about his personality and motives. Is he confident, or secretly insecure? (...) The play was so devised that its characters and the theatre audience cannot explain all that happens, and consequently the ‘need to know’ survives to the end.” **Arden**

- “Wit and witchcraft: in this antithesis is the symbolic structure of *Othello*. (...) *Witchcraft* is a metaphor for love. (...) Love is a magic bringer of harmony and may be the magic transformer of personality. (...)

Such events lie outside the realm of ‘wit’—of the reason, cunning and wisdom on which Iago rests—and this wit must be hostile to them.” **RBH**

• “The play dramatizes and explores the ways and means by which different people ‘make sense’ of what happens in their lives, including what they merely imagine to be happening. (...) From one end of [the play] to the other, Shakespeare explores the ways and means by which people’s thoughts and feelings—whether about others or about themselves—can become fatally tangled, mutually distorting. The very plot is little else than the causes and consequences of a wide range of feelings, judgments and misjudgments.” **JA**

#### REFERENCE KEY

**Arden**– Introduction to the Arden edition.

**Cam**– Introduction to the Cambridge edition, ed. N. Sanders, 1984.

**RBH** – *Magic in the Web: Action and Language in Othello*, R. B. Heilman, 1956.

**JA** – *Othello as Tragedy*, J. Adamson, 1980.

**JML** – *Shakespeare: Othello*, J. McLauchlan, 1971.

**Cliffs** – *Cliffs Notes on Othello*

**IO** – *Othello : chef-d’œuvre en sursis*, Ion Omesco, 1990.

**RG** – « L’Univers onirique d’Othello », R. Gardette, in *Autour d’Othello*, 1987.

**JP** – « *Othello*, ou les métamorphoses du monstre », J. Perrin, *ibid.*

**FL** – « Figures de la perversion dans *Othello* », Fr. Laroque, *ibid.*

**LB** – « “Let it be hid” : Renaissance pornography, Iago, and audience response », L. Boose, *ibid.*

#### COMPLEMENTARY REFERENCES, REMARKS AND QUESTIONS

• “Readers may stumble here and there, as Shakespeare’s actors no doubt did, yet at the same time they will learn an important lesson — that there is no single correct way of speaking Shakespeare’s verse.”

**Arden**

• The Elizabethan stage: *see figure 2.*

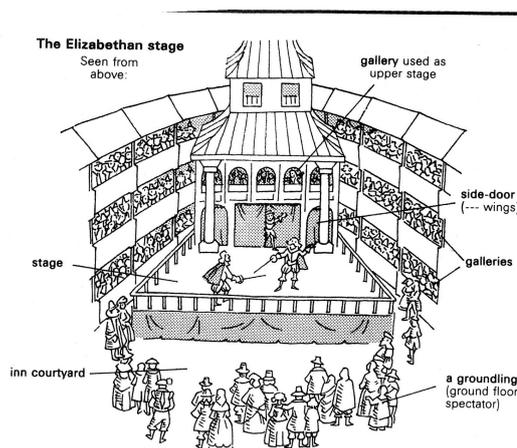


Figure 2: From F. Grellet, *An Introduction to English Literature*