

William Shakespeare:
***The Tragedy of
Othello, the Moor of
Venice (c. 1603)***

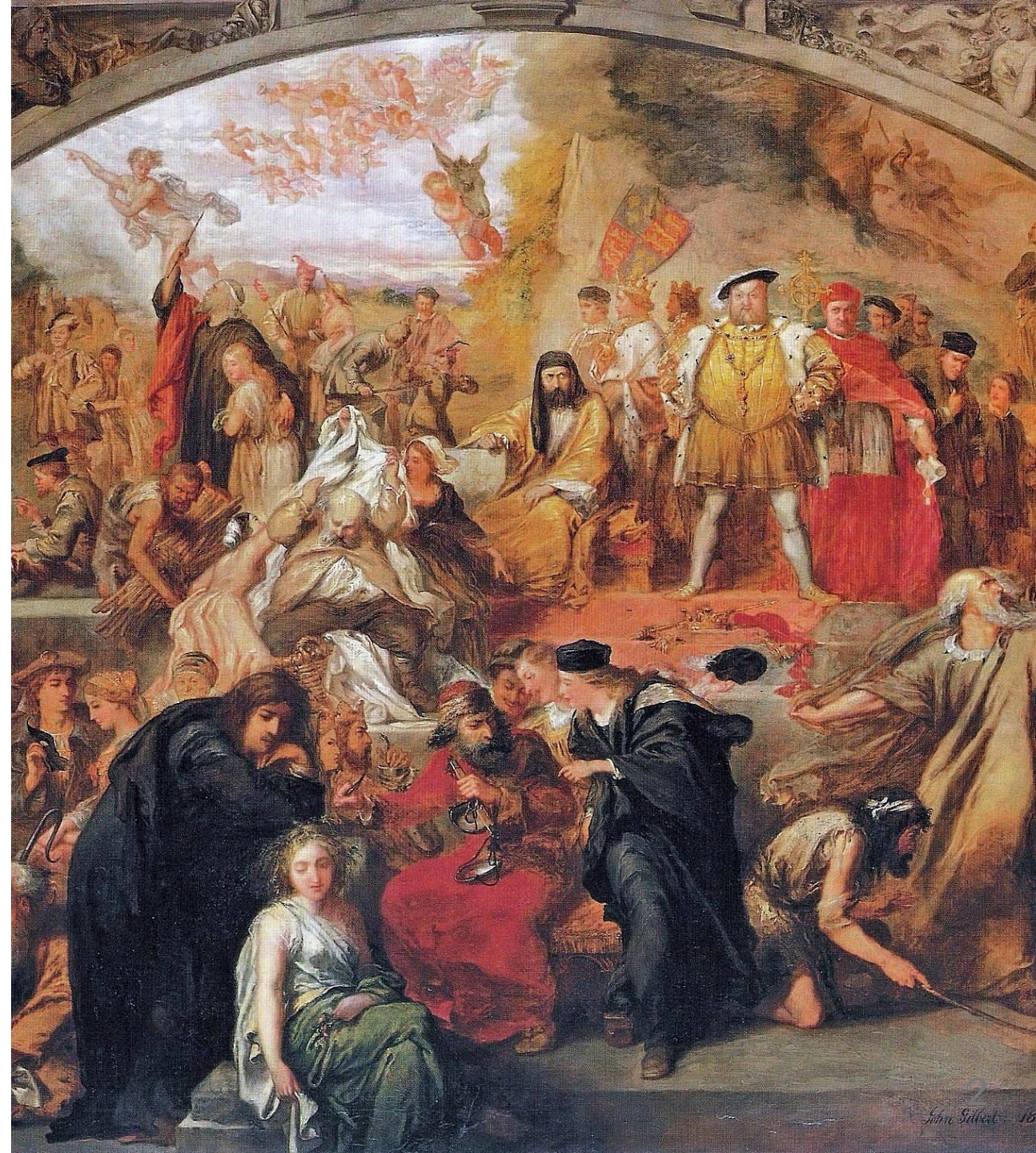
English Literature I

Prof. Pedro Groppo - UFPB



Introduction to Renaissance Drama

- Evolved from religious miracle plays (Bible stories) to secular plays about history and morality
- The Privy Council banned religious plays as "too Catholic," forcing this change
- Actors needed noble sponsorship to avoid arrest for vagrancy (hence names like "Lord Strange's Men")



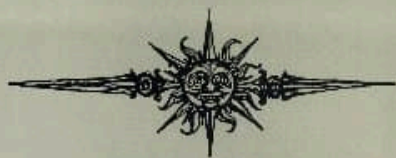
Key Playwrights

- Christopher Marlowe (1564): Son of shoemaker, Cambridge-educated, wrote *Tamburlaine*, *Doctor Faustus*
- William Shakespeare (1564): Wrote 25+ plays including *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *Henry V*
- Ben Jonson: Former bricklayer/soldier, wrote *Every Man in His Humour*



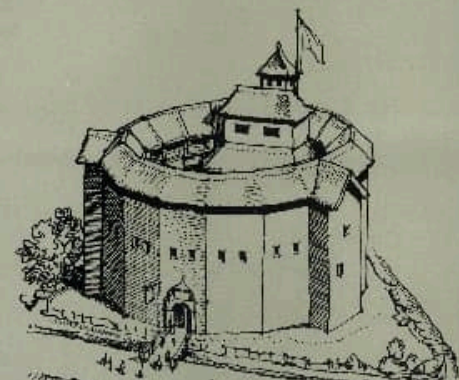
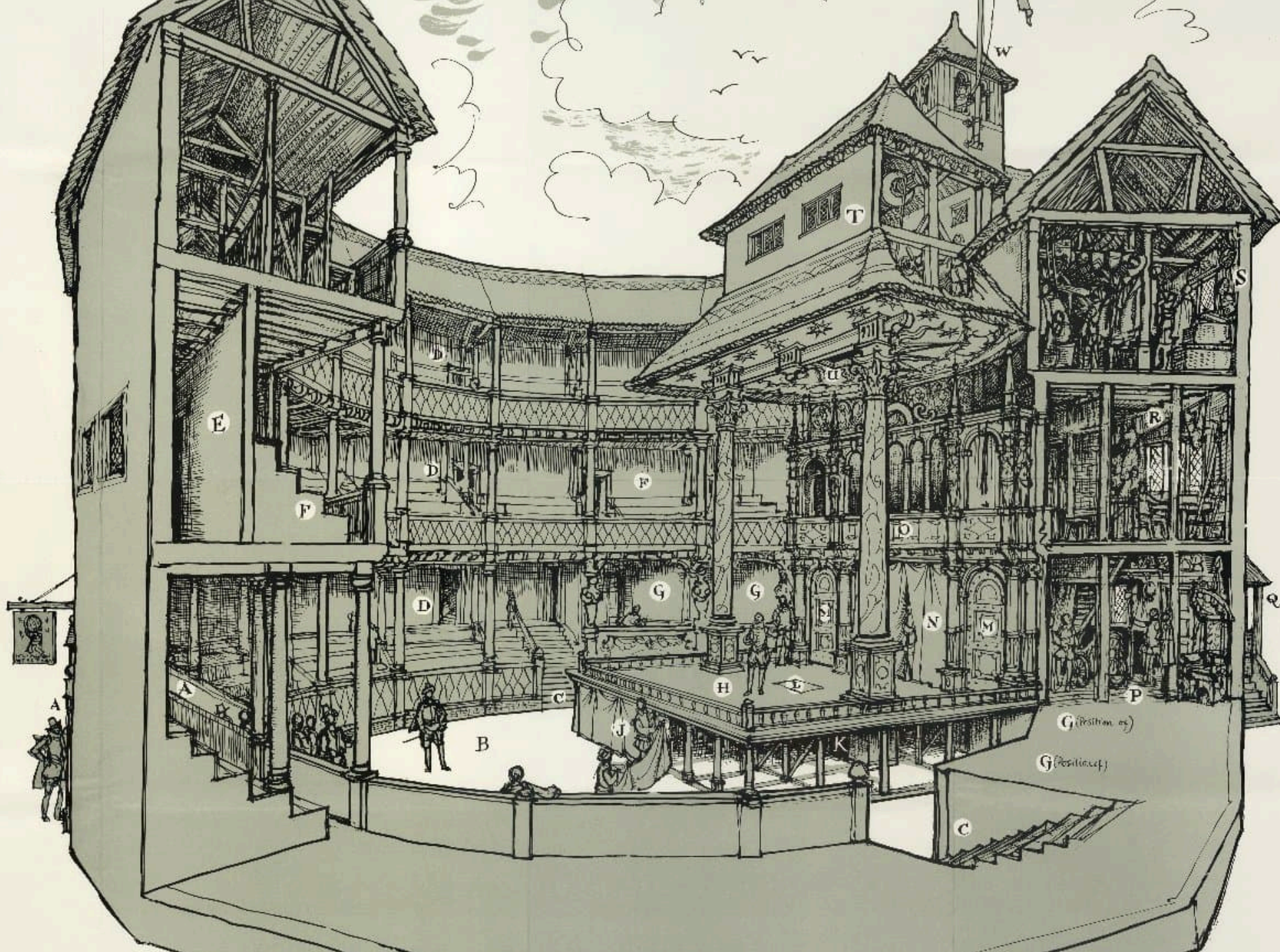
1599-1613

A Conjectural Reconstruction by
C. Walter Hodges



KEY

- AA Main entrance
- B The Yard, where the 'groundlings' stood (for one penny admission)
- CC Entrances to lower gallery (on payment of another penny)
- D Entrances to staircase and upper galleries
- E Corridor serving the different sections of the middle gallery
- F Middle gallery. (The 'Two-penny Rooms')
- G 'Gentlemen's Rooms' or 'Lords' Rooms'
- H The stage
- J The hangings being put up round the stage. (S.D.B. In some theatres this was located in)
- K The 'Well' under the stage
- L The stage trap, leading down to the Hell
- MM Stage doors, leading into the tiring-house
- N Curtain wall 'place' behind the stage, sometimes opened for special scenes
- O Gallery above the stage, used as required sometimes by musicians; sometimes by spectators, and often as part of the play (e.g. Romeo and Juliet)
- P Backstage area (the tiring-house)
- Q Tiring-house door
- R Dressing rooms
- S Wardrobe and storage
- T The hut housing the machine for lowering costumed gods, etc., to the stage
- U The 'Heavens'
- W Hoisting the playhouse flag



The Theater Experience

- Cost: 1 penny to stand in yard, extra pennies for gallery seats, 6 pence for private box
- Working people, merchants, nobles, housewives
- Polygonal buildings, open-air with covered galleries
- Minimal props, elaborate costumes, actors performed directly to audience



The Theater Experience

- Women forbidden on stage; boys played female roles
- Both Puritans and moralists opposed theater as immoral
- Queen Elizabeth supported drama, created her own company (Queen's Men)
- By 1590s, best actors stayed in London rather than touring



The Text

- Written to be acted on the stage, not read
- What we have is a script made after the fact, not one of the working scripts - published after Shakespeare's death
- No single, authoritative text of Shakespeare's plays - they varied even in early editions
- Unlike today's published plays, Shakespeare often integrates actions into the dialogue rather than relying on explicit stage directions
 - Desdemona: "Here I kneel"
- No elaborate scenery or lighting - imagery and descriptive language were crucial for creating the play's world
 - e.g. In Act 1, Iago's crude descriptions of Othello ("old black ram," "Barbary horse")

THE TRAGEDIE OF Othello, the Moore of Venice.

Actus Primus. Scena Prima.

Enter Rodrigo, and Iago.

Rodrigo.
Roderigo, I take it much unkindly
That thou (*Iago*) who hast had my purse,
As if thy strings were chime, should'st know of this.
Iago. But you'd not heare me: If euer I did dream
Of such a matter, abhorre me.

Rodo. Thou told'st me,
Thou did'st hold him in thy hate.

Iago. Despise me

If I do not. Three Great-ones of the Cittie,

(To personall suite to make me his Lieutenant)

Off-capt to him: and by the faith of man

I know my price, I am worth no worse a place.

But he (as loosing his owne pride, and purposes)

Evades them, with a bombast Circumstance,

Horribly flust with Epithites of warre,

Non-suites my Mediators. For certes, saies he,

I haue already chose my Officer. And what was he?

Forsooth, a great Arithmetician,

One *Michael Cassio*, a *Florentine*,

(A Fellow almost damnd in a faire Wife)

That neuer set a Squadron in the Field,

Nor the deuision of a Battaille knowes

More than a Spinster. Vniuers the Bookish Theoricks:

Wherem the Tongued Consuls can propose

As Masterly as he. Meere prattle (without practise)

Is all his Souldiership. But he (*Sir*) had th' elections

And I (of whom his eies had seene the proofe

At Rhodes, at Cyprus, and on others grounds

Chos'n'd, and Heathen) must be be-lee'd, and calm'd

By Debitor, and Creditor. This Counter-caster,

He (in good time) must his Lieutenant be,

And I (bless'd the market) his Mooredships Auncient.

Rodo. By heauen, I rather would haue bin his hangman.

Iago. Why, there's no remedie.

'Tis the custome of Seruice;

Preferment goes by Letter, and affection,

And not by old gradation, where each second

Stood Heire to th' first. Now *Sir*, be iudge your selfe,

Whether in any iust terme am Affin'd

To loue the *Moore*?

Rodo. I would not follow him then.

Iago. O *Sir* content you.

I follow him, to serue my turne vpon him,

We cannot all be Masters, nor all Masters

Cannot be truly follow'd. You shall marke

Many a dutious and knee-crooking knaue;

That (doting on his owne obsequious bondage)

Weares out his time, much like his Master's Ass,

For naught but Provender, & when he's old Calber'd.

Whip me such honest knaues. Others there are

Who try'n'd in Formes, and villages of Dutie,

Keepe yet their hearts attending on themselves,

And throwing but shewes of Seruice on their Lords

Doe well threue by them.

And when they haue lin'd their Coates

Doe themselves Homage.

These Fellows haue some soule,

And such a one do I professe my selfe. For (*Sir*)

It is as sure as you are *Rodrigo*,

Were I the *Moore*, I would not be *Iago*;

In following him, I follow but my feile.

Heauen is my Iudge, not I for loue and dutie,

But seeming so, for my peculiar end;

For when my outward Actiō doth demonstrate

The native act, and figure of my heart

In Complement exterie, 'tis not long after

But I will weare my heart vpon my sleene

For Dawes to pecke at; I am not what I am.

Rodo. What a fall Fortune do's the Thicke-lip owe

If he can carry't thus?

Iago. Call vp her Father;

Rowle him, make after him, poyson his delight,

Proclaime him in the Streets. Incense her kinsmen,

And though he in a fertile Climate dwell,

Plague him with Flies: though that his Ioy be Ioy,

Yet throw such chances of vexation on't,

As it may loose some colour.

Rodo. Heere is her Fathers house, He call aloud.

Iago. Doe, with like timorous accent, and dire yell,

As when (by Night and Negligence) the Fire

Is spild in populous Citties.

Rodo. What hoa: *Brabantio*, Signior *Brabantio*, hoa.

Iago. Awake: what hoa, *Brabantio*: Theeues, Theeues,

Looke to your house, your daughter, and your Bags,

Theeues, Theeues.

Bra. Abuse. What is the reason of this terrible

Summons? What is the matter there?

Rodo. Signior is all your Familie within?

Iago. Are your Doores lock'd?

Bra. Why? Wherefore ask you this?

Iago. *Sir*, y^e are rob'd, for thame put on your Gowne,

Your

Awake the shorning Citizens with the Bell,
Or else the deuil will make a Grand-fire of you.
Arise I say.

Bra. What haue you lost your wits?

Rodo. Most reuerend Signior, do you know my voice?

Bra. Not I: what are you?

Rodo. My name is *Rodrigo*.

Bra. The worse welcome:

I haue charg'd thee not to haunt about my doores:

In honest plainnesse thou hast heard me say,

My Daughter is not for thee: And now in madnesse

(Being full of Supper, and displeasing draughtes)

Vpon malicious knaueserie, dost thou come

To start my quiet.

Rodo. *Sir*, *Sir*, *Sir*.

Bra. But thou must needs be sure,

My spirits and my place haue in their power

To make this bitter to thee.

Rodo. Patience good *Sir*.

Bra. What tell'st thou me of Robbing?

This is Venice: my house is not a Gaunge.

Rodo. Most graue *Brabantio*,

In simple and pure soule, I come to you.

Ia. *Sir* you are one of those that will not serue God,

if the deuil bid you. Because we come to do you seruice,

and you thinke we are Russians, you'll haue your Daugh-

ter cover'd with a Barbary horie, you'll haue your Ne-

phewes neigh to you, you'll haue Courters for Cozens:

and Geeneres for Germanes.

Bra. What prophane wretch art thou?

Ia. I am one *Sir*, that comes to tell you, your Daugh-

ter and the *Moore*, are making the Beast with two backs.

Bra. Thou art a Villaine.

Iago. You are a Senator.

Bra. This thou shalt answer. I know thee *Rodrigo*.

Rodo. *Sir*, I will answer any thing. But I beseech you

Ifs be your pleasure, and most wise consent,

(As partly I find it is) that your faire Daughter,

At this odde Euen and dull watch o'th' night

Transported with no worse nor better guard,

But with a knaue of common hire, a Gaudelier,

To the grosse claspes of a lasciuious *Moore*:

If this be knowne to you, and your Allowance,

We then haue done you bold, and sinfull wrongs.

But if you know not this, my Manners tell me,

We haue your wrong rebuke. Do not belceue

That from the fence of all Ciuilitie,

I thus would play and trifle with your Reuerence.

Your Daughter (if you haue not giuen her leaue)

I say againe, hath made a grosse revolt,

Tying her Dutie, Beautie, Wit, and Fortunes

In an extravagant, and wheeling Stranger,

Of here, and euery where: straight iustifie your selfe.

If she be in her Chamber, or your house,

Let loose on me the Iustice of the State

For thus deluding you.

Bra. Strike on the Tinder, hoa:

Giue me a Taper: call vp all my people,

This Accident is not unlike my dreame,

Beleeue of it oppresses me already.

Light, I say, light.

Iago. Farewell: for I must leaue you.

It seemes not meete, nor wholesome to my place

(How euer it may gaine him with some checke)
Cannot with safetie cast him. For he's embark'd
With such loud reason to the Cyprus Warres,
(Which euen now stands in Ad) that for their soules
Another of his Fadome, they haue none,
To lead their Businesse. In which regard,
Though I do haue him as I do bell apines,
Yet, for necessity of present life,
I must show out a Flag, and signe of Loue,
(Which is indeed but signe) that you shall surely find him
Lead to the Sagitary the raised Search:
And there will I be with him. So farewell. Exit.

Enter *Brabantio*, with Seruants and Torches.

Bra. It is too true an euill. Gone she is,

And what's to come of my despoiled time,

Is naught but bitterness. Now *Rodrigo*,

Where didst thou see her? (Oh you happy Gitle)

With the *Moore* fast thou? (Who would be a Father?)

How didst thou know 'twas she? (Oh she deceaues me

Past thought:) what said she to you? Get more Tapers:

Raise all my Kindred. Are they married thinke you?

Rodo. Truly I thinke they are.

Bra. Oh Heauen: how got she out?

Oh treason of the blood.

Fathers, from hence trust not your Daughters minds

By what you see them act. Is there not Charmes,

By which the propertie of Youth, and Maidhood

May be abus'd? Haue you not read *Rodrigo*,

Of some such thing?

Rodo. Yes *Sir*: I haue indeed.

Bra. Call vp my Brother: oh would you had had her.

Some one way, some another. Doe you know

Where we may apprehend her, and the *Moore*?

Rodo. I thinke I can discouer him, if you please

To get good Guard, and go along with me.

Bra. Pray you lead on. At euery house He call,

(I may command at most) get Weapons (hoa)

And raise some speciall Officers of might:

On good *Rodrigo*, I will deferue your paines. Exit.

Scena Secunda.

Enter *Othello*, *Iago*, Attendants, with Torchet.

Ia. Though in the trade of Warre I haue slaine men,

Yet do I hold it very sinfull o'th' conscience

To do no contri'd Murder: I lacke Iniquitie

Sometime to do me seruice. Nine, or ten times

I had thought I haue yerke'd him here vnder the Ribbes.

Othello. 'Tis better as it is.

Iago. Nay but he prated,

And spoke such scurray, and prouoking termes

Against your Honor, that with the little godlinesse I haue

I did full hard forbear him. But I pray you *Sir*,

Are you silt married? Be assur'd of this,

That the Magnifico is much belou'd,

And hath in his effect a voice potentiall

As double as the Dukes: He will diuorce you,

Or put vpon you, what restraint or greuaunce,

The



Medieval Morality Plays

- Morality play - medieval allegorical theatrical form in which moral lessons were taught through characters who personify moral qualities, like charity or vice.
- Example: *Mankind* (c. 1465) - Newguise, Nowadays and Nought), try to tempt Mankind, a farmer, away from Mercy and who actively endeavour to lure him to commit vices such as avarice, lust and gluttony.



The Vice Character

- A temptation figure who embodies worldly pleasures; often has the most important role
- The Vice interacts directly with the audience, often breaking the fourth wall
- Performs his worldliness by dressing as an Egyptian or a Turk with the aid of blackface and red-face makeup

Shakespeare

- Incorporates elements of morality plays, such as the Vice figure and the struggle between good and evil, into his plays like *Richard III*, *Titus Andronicus*, and *Henry IV*
- Vice = Iago, not Othello: manipulates events and leads Othello down a path of destruction.

Comedy vs Tragedy

- Shakespeare uses familiar aspects of the morality play to mislead the audience's expectations as well as comedy
- Comedic elements: the disobedient daughter (cf. *Midsummer Night's Dream*) and the cuckolded husband
- Chaucer influence: older husbands cuckolded by younger wives (The Merchant's Tale, The Miller's Tale)



Sources

- Giovanni Battista Giraldi (aka Cinthio), in *Gli Hecatommithi* (1565)

I fear greatly that I shall be a warning to young girls not to marry against their parents' wishes; and Italian ladies will learn by my example not to tie themselves to a man whom Nature, Heaven, and manner of life separate from us.

(Disdemona)



What was a Moor?

Elastic term that could refer to:

- Religious identity: Muslims in North Africa, Iberia, or the Ottoman Empire.
- Geographical origin: People from Africa
- Racial designation: People with darker skin, especially Black Africans.
- Cultural outsiders: sometimes “strangers” or non-Christians in general.



native or inhabitant of ancient Mauretania [Morocco and Algeria]. Later ... a member of a Muslim people of mixed Berber and Arab descent inhabiting north-western Africa, who in the 8th C. conquered Spain. In the Middle Ages up to 17th C., Moors were mostly black or very dark-skinned, although the existence of 'white Moors' was recognized. Thus the term was often used, even into the 20th C., with the sense 'black person.' (OED)



Is Othello Black?

- Text suggests he was portrayed as black on the early modern stage
- Racialized rhetoric comes from Roderigo, Iago and Brabantio before the audience ever sees Othello
- Is this metadramatic = how Othello should be performed?
- Only in the 19th century Othello's blackness was questioned by scholars and actors



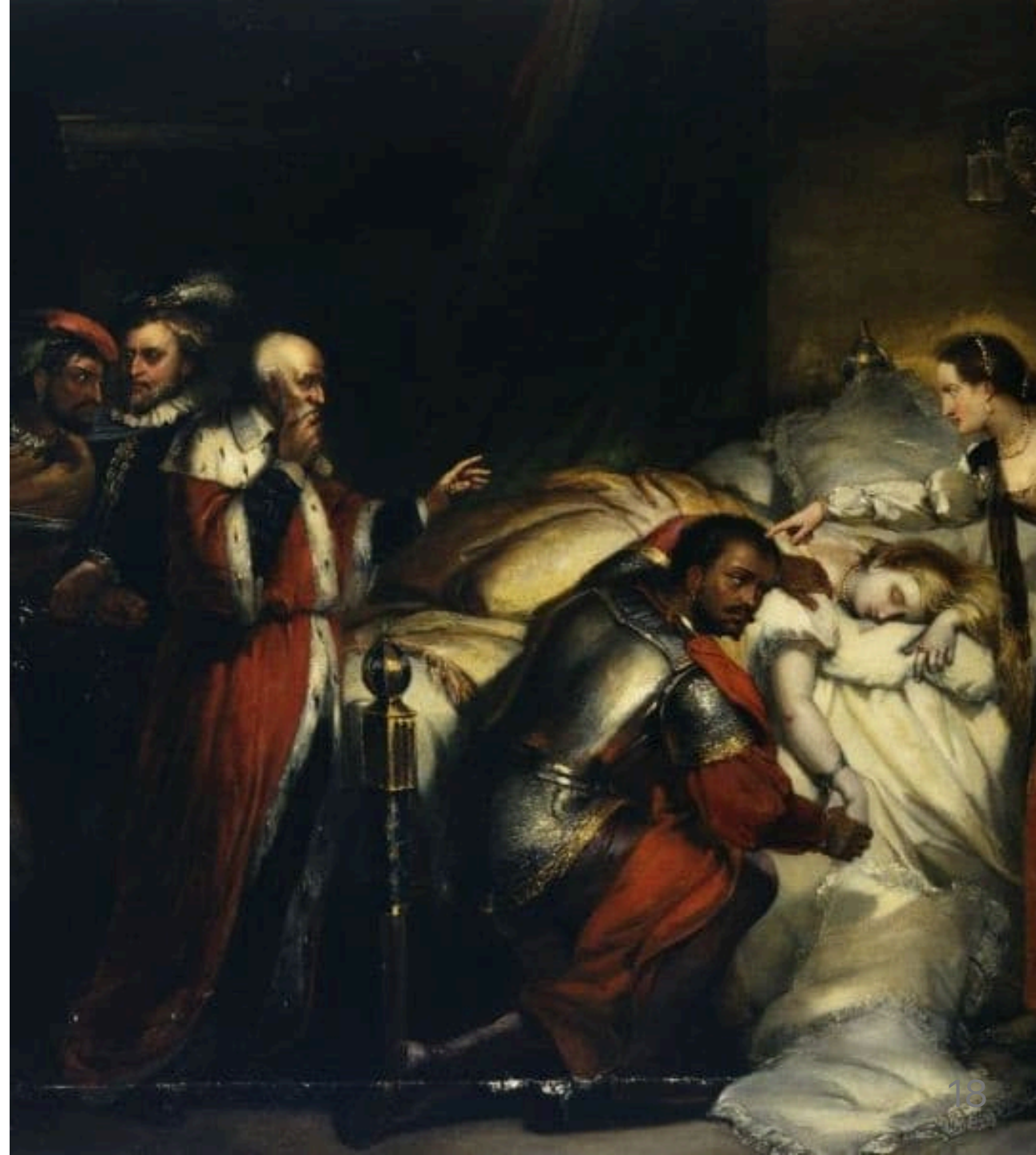
Moor vs Turk

- Early modern English texts portrayed Turks as barbarous, cruel, despotic, tyrannical, and sexually voracious.
- The Turks were perceived as a threat to Western civilization militarily, economically, and sexually.
- The term "Turk" was used to refer to the Turkish people, Muslims in general, and the Ottoman Empire.



Othello and the audience

- Unlike other Shakespearean tragedies where the audience is on equal footing with the hero, Othello's audience knows more, prompting a different emotional response.
- The audience's knowledge often leads to discomfort and a desire to intervene, as seen in historical anecdotes.
- The play's uneven structure forces the audience to choose a side.



Criticism

- A.C. Bradley: *Othello* is Shakespeare's best tragedy, surpassing *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, due to its intense drama, modern themes, and relatable characters.
- Othello's focus on **private matters**, particularly sexual jealousy, makes it more emotionally impactful than plays centered around state affairs.
- Challenged Coleridge's interpretation of Othello's race: Shakespeare **intended Othello to be black**.
- Shakespeare's plays, particularly *Othello*, are better experienced through **reading** than performance: discomfort of seeing Othello's race onstage.
- Shakespeare's plays were primarily experienced as performances during his time, by the early 19th century, they were increasingly studied and read as literary works.

Iago: a perfect combination of the two facts concerning evil (A.C. Bradley)

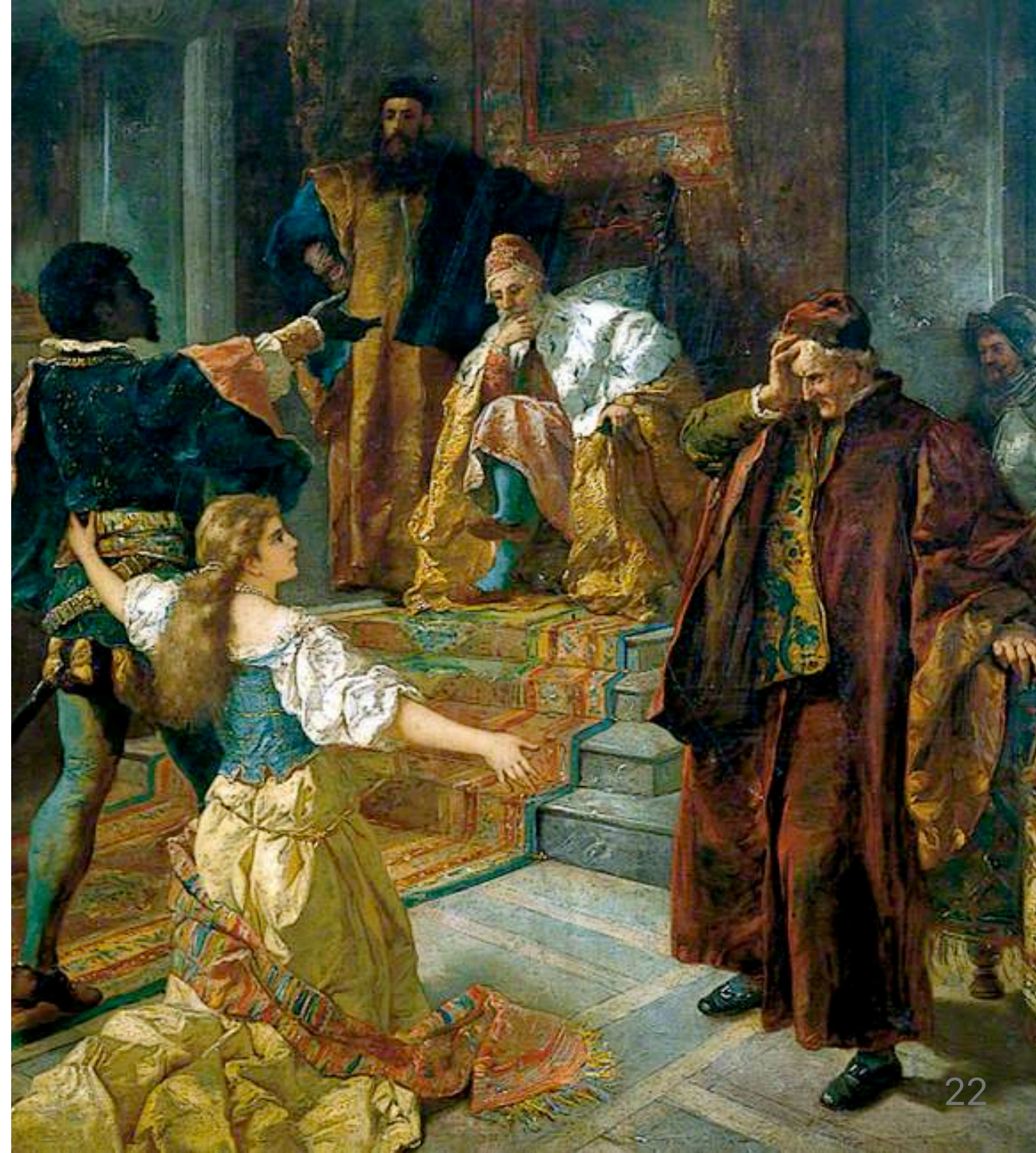
- "perfectly sane people exist in whom fellow-feeling of any kind is so weak that an almost absolute egoism becomes possible to them" + "exceptional powers of will and intellect"
- absurd "to compare Iago with the Satan of *Paradise Lost*" ... "so immensely does [he] exceed Milton's Fiend in evil".



Othello - Review

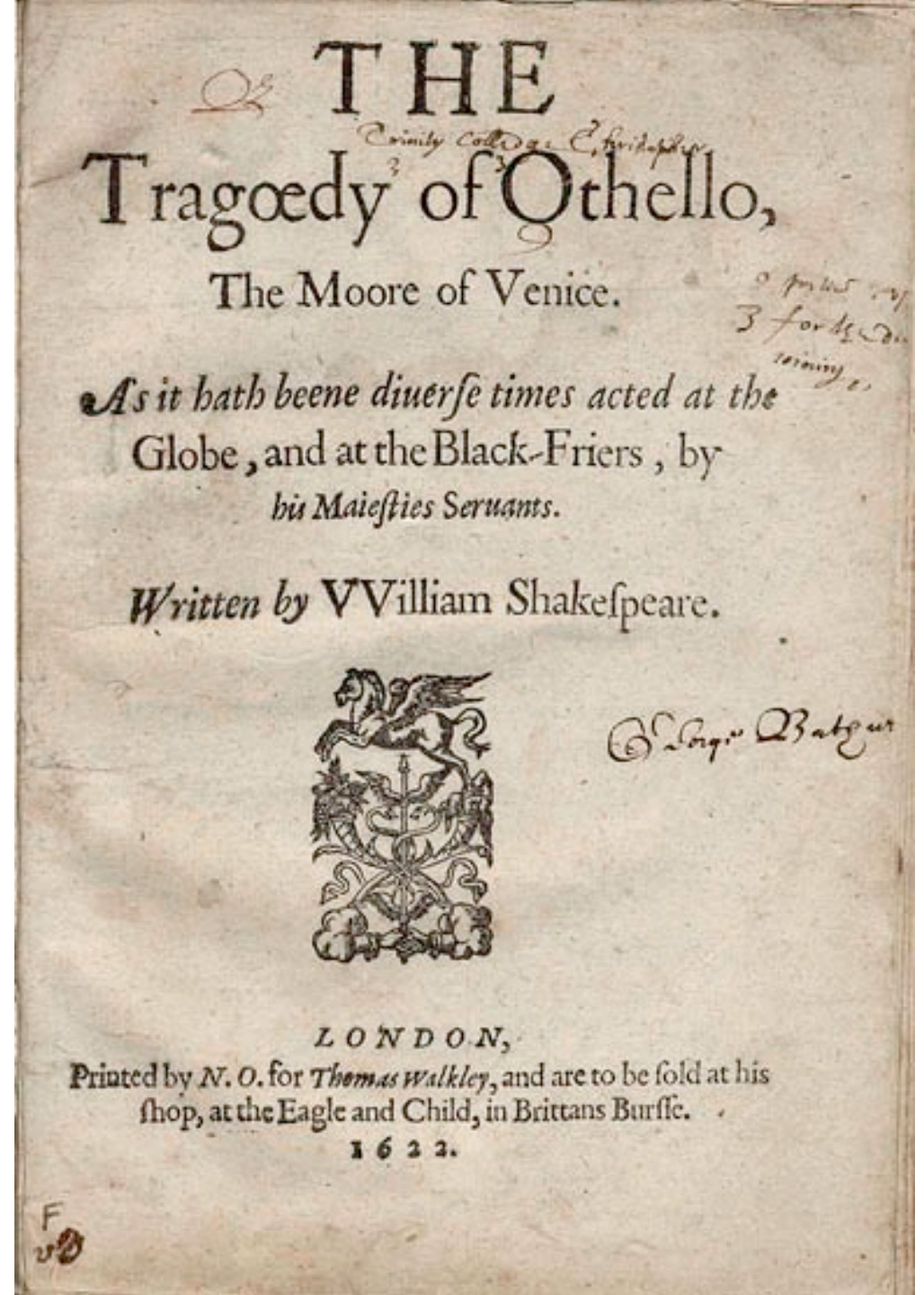
Overview: The Power of Othello

- Shakespeare transforms a crude prose story into a play with intensity and immediacy.
- Audiences actively engaged in the unfolding tragedy, not passive.
- Bold choice to have a black man as a tragic hero.
- Domestic tragedy: tight focus, small cast, deep exploration of sexual jealousy.



Textual Issues

- No authoritative text exists
- 1622: First printed in Quarto;
1623: First Folio (collected plays)
- Folio has ~160 more lines,
includes Desdemona's willow
song; Emilia's role is more
developed; over 1,000 differences
- Text instability explains variations
in performance and interpretation.
- Evidences the nature of a
collaborative, performative
medium.



Sources

- Giraldi Cinthio, *Hecatommithi* (1565) – only the heroine named; story unfolds over months.
- Shakespeare's version condenses the timeline, introduces Roderigo, adds the storm, removes an ending where Othello is executed by Desdemona's relatives;
- Iago is clearly motivated only by career jealousy
- Cinthio emphasizes divine justice

DE GLI
HECATOMMITHI
DI M. GIOVANBATTISTA
GIRALDI CINTHIO
NOBILE FERRARESE.

Parte prima.



IN VINEGIA M. D. LXVI.
APPRESSO GIROLAMO SCOTTO.

Tragedy: Theoretical Framework (Aristotle)

- Fall of a great person (a king, general, or noble) from high esteem to ruin or death.
- Caused partly by fate, but crucially by a character flaw (*hamartia*) such as pride or jealousy.
- To evoke *pity* and *fear*, leading to *catharsis* (an emotional purging and renewal for the audience)



Comedy

Classical (Aristotle, Plautus, Terence)

- Common, ordinary, and everyday rather than kings and generals.
- Provoke laughter and delight by showing human folly, mistaken identity, or social inversion.
- Comedy ends in resolution and harmony (often marriage or reunion).

Shakespearean Comedy

- Misunderstanding, disguise, or mistaken identity (e.g., *Twelfth Night*).
- Witty dialogue, fools, or dupes (e.g., Roderigo in *Othello* has “the characteristics of the dupe of romantic comedy)

Settings

Venice

- Thriving commercial center; culturally sophisticated yet morally dangerous.
- Machiavellian associations; poisonings, political intrigue.

Cyprus

- Frontier between Venetian civility and Ottoman power.
- Metaphor for Othello's liminal social position and vulnerability to manipulation.
- Cyprus mirrors Othello's colonized-but-not-assimilated status. (cf. Virginia Mason Vaughan)

Virginia Mason Vaughan

Othello's loss ... does have frightening consequences for Venice, a city precariously balanced on the frontiers of Christian civilisation.

In contrast to Othello, Venice seems sure of its identity as the play begins - urbane and civilised ... Centuries of legal and governmental tradition have defined Venice as the locus of rational judgment. ... Caught in a liminal zone between Venice's Christian civility and the Ottomite's pagan barbarism is Cyprus, a Venetian colony under siege. Cyprus is the frontier, the uttermost edge of western civilisation, simultaneously vulnerable to attack from without and subversion from within ... Cyprus's geographical and political position mirror Othello's psychic situation.

Virginia Mason Vaughan

Like Cyprus, Othello can be colonised by Venice – he can be put to use. But he can never become wholly Venetian. This liminal positioning makes him vulnerable to Iago's wiles and, like Cyprus, if he is not fortified, he will 'turn Turk'.

- The opposition of Venetian and Turk continues through the play, culminating in Othello's final speech in which he ultimately conquers the threat presented by 'a turbaned Turk'

the precariousness of a nation's identity – not just an individual's – lurks behind the tragedy of Othello and his wife.

Race and Color

- Blackness associated with sin, death, defilement; travel narratives emphasized savagery and depravity.
- Black people present in England; servants or slaves
- Aaron (*Titus Andronicus*): complex villain, both vicious and tender
- Prince of Morocco (*Merchant of Venice*): heroic, eloquent, accepts failure with dignity



Critical Debate

Anthony Barthelemy:

However successful Shakespeare's manipulation of the stereotype may be, Othello remains identifiable as a version of that type ... Shakespeare's black Moor never possesses the power or desire to subvert civic and natural order.

Karen Newman:

Shakespeare was certainly subject to the racist, sexist, and colonist discourses of his time, but by making the black Othello a hero, and by making Desdemona's love for Othello, and her transgression of her society's norms for women in choosing him, sympathetic, Shakespeare's play stands in a contestatory relationship to the hegemonic ideologies of race and gender in early modern England.

Marriage Expectations

- Pamphlets and Sermons: promoted women as silent, obedient, and malleable
- Book of Common Prayer (1552): Marriage vows -- "Wylte thou obey him, and serue him, love, honor, and kepe him"
- The prevailing model emphasized a husband's authority and a wife's submission, often reinforced by law, church, and custom.

Sonnet 116

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments; love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.
O no, it is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wand'ring bark.
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

In *Othello*

- Shakespeare gives us forceful, articulate female characters who challenge restrictive expectations of women.
- He emphasizes mutual respect and partnership in marriage, rather than simple obedience.
- He affirms a daughter's right to choose her husband
- Love is framed as an enduring, equal bond (Sonnet 116: the “marriage of true minds” — love as constant and reciprocal, not submissive).

Brabantio (Act 1 Scene 3, lines 176-8)

Come hither, gentle mistress;
Do you perceive in all this noble company
Where most you owe obedience?

Desdemona (Act 1 Scene 3, lines 178-87)

My noble father,
I do perceive here a divided duty:
To you I am bound for life and education;
My life and education both do learn me
How to respect you. You are lord of all my duty;
I am hitherto your daughter. But here's my husband;
And so much duty as my mother showed
To you, preferring you before her father.
So much I challenge that I may profess
Due to the Moor my lord.

Emilia (Act 4 Scene 3, lines 89-97)

Let husbands know
Their wives have sense like them: they see, and smell.
And have their palates both for sweet and sour
As husbands have. What is it that they do
When they change us for others? Is it sport?
I think it is. And doth affection breed it?
I think it doth. Is't frailty that thus errs?
It is so too. And have not we affections.
Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have?

Language

Verse

- Written both in verse and prose, with the proportions varying from play to play.
- The shift between verse and prose sharpens perceptions and encourages members of an audience to feel and think
- At one moment they may identify with the individual confronting a dilemma, and then they will be prompted to reflect upon the epic dimension of a situation.
- Shakespeare preferred to use lines which do not rhyme (**blank verse**) and have the pattern of five units (or feet) in which an unstressed syllable is followed by a stressed syllable, i.e. unrhymed, **iambic pentameter**.

Verse features

- **Rhythm** indicates tensions between thought and expression and for implying underlying motivations.
- '**end-stopped lines**' permit regular opportunities to take breath
- **mid-line break, or caesura**
- the sense of an utterance can **run over several lines**, perhaps indicating pressure of feeling, fluency or confidence
- **enjambement** can also be used to reveal a character who is determinedly using the run-on lines as a means of preventing interruption.

End-stopped lines

Iago (Act 1 Scene 1, lines 20-2)

One Michael Cassio, a Florentine,
A fellow almost damned in a fair wife.
That never set a squadron in the field

Mid-line breaks

(Act 1 Scene 1, line 11)

I know my price, I am worth no worse a place.

(Act 1 Scene 1, lines 58-9)

Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago;
In following him, I follow but myself.

Several lines

Othello:

Like to the Pontic Sea,
Whose icy current and compulsive course
Ne'er feels retiring ebb but keeps due on
To the Propontic and the Hellespont,
Even so my bloody thoughts with violent pace
Shall ne'er look back, ne'er ebb to humble love,
Till that a capable and wide revenge
Swallow them up.

(Act 3 Scene 3, lines 454-61)

Pauses, silence

- In a regular passage of verse, a line that is metrically deficient gives the character a pause.

And what was he? (Act 1 Scene 1, line 18)

- The short line has only **two feet**. The **absent three feet** give three beats of silence to allow a dramatic pause before Iago gives the information.
- Short lines can also provide the space necessary for action. Othello announces:

Look here, Iago,
All my fond love thus do I blow to heaven;
'Tis gone.

(Act 3 Scene 3, lines 445-7)

Completing half-lines

- The verse line also indicates how characters relate to each other through their dialogue.
- The effect of one character finishing half-way through a line of verse and another character completing it can be to demonstrate a harmony between characters who intuitively respond to each other's rhythms.

Stichomythia

Rhyme

- Most of the play uses **blank verse**
- Rhyme is used by Iago to conclude his soliloquies
- Effect: shaped and completed utterance which, perhaps misleadingly in this case, suggests a clarity of purpose.

'Tis he. O brave Iago, honest and just,
That hast such noble sense of thy friend's wrong!
Thou teachest me. Minion, your dear lies dead,
And your unblest fate hies; strumpet, I come.
Forth of my heart those charms, thine eyes, are blotted,
Thy bed, lust- stained, shall with lust's blood be spotted.

(Act 5, Scene 1, 31-36)

More rhyme

- Rhyme can give statements a symbolic quality or a proverbial force.
- Desdemona's couplet at the end of Act 4 has the form almost of prayer

Good night, good night. God me such uses send,
Not to pick bad from bad, but by bad mend!

(Act 4 Scene 3, lines 100-1)

Prose

- Does not have the rhythmic pattern of verse but affords more flexibility about the delivery
- The shift from one form to another is a way in which **the tone and mood** of a scene can be changed.
- **Distinction between verse and prose mirrors a class or hierarchical distinction** has some validity in a play such as *King Henry IV Part 1*
- Iago uses prose to re-establish Roderigo's trust at the end of Act 1 (Put money in thy purse) - impression of informality and dispels any sense of his manipulation of his friend.
- Othello's only sustained prose speech signals his breakdown: it precedes his epileptic fit and fragmented speech effectively illustrates his loss of control, even before his physical collapse.

Soliloquy

- A character alone on stage has a privileged opportunity to **forge a relationship with the audience**. A soliloquy can be introspective as a character **speaks aloud inner thoughts and feelings**.
- Characters can speak **directly to the audience**, in a way which is challenging, confrontational, sinister, amusing or conspiratorial.
- Othello (character) does not rely on soliloquies, only two lines:

Why did I marry? This honest creature doubtless
Sees and knows more, much more, than he unfolds.

(Act 3, Scene 3, lines 244-5)

Iago's many soliloquies

- So is Iago the central character?
- Which kind of soliloquy Iago offers?
- His direct presentation of commentary and strategy, which would seem to be telling the audience what he is doing
- Paradoxical situation -- soliloquy provides **less insight into character than is gained by observation of the behaviour of the hero in a social context**

Imagery

(Prologue to *Henry V*, lines 18, 23, 25-7)

On your imaginary forces work.

Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts.

And make imaginary puissance.

Think when we talk of horses that you see them

Printing their proud hoofs i'th'receiving earth





Think, when we talk of horses,
that you see them



printing their proud hoofs
in the receiving earth.

Marriage of Black and White

- Conventional assumptions about the goodness of that which is white, virginal and pure are opposed to the stereotyped connections between blackness, corruption and evil

Othello (Act 3 Scene 3, lines 387-9)

Her name, that was as fresh
As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black
As mine own face.

Opposition between the spiritual vs earthly love

- Desdemona uses religious imagery (Act 1, Scene 3) and announces 'to his honours and his valiant parts / Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate'; Othello uses the words 'heaven' and 'good souls'
- When they are reunited in Cyprus, Othello greets her as 'my soul's joy' and Desdemona appeals to the 'heavens' that their 'loves and comforts' might increase.
- Her response to the change in Othello is to pray 'O, heaven forgive us!' She reaffirms her love 'by this light of heaven' and offers supplication, 'Here I kneel'

Iago's influence on Othello's language

- Iago: love 'merely a lust of the blood and a permission of the will'
- Refers to them 'making the beast with two backs' to inflame Brabantio
- Even if she and Cassio were 'as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys', Othello could not expect to 'see her topped'. When Othello leaves (in Act 4 Scene 1): 'Goats and monkeys!'
- He becomes brutal ('I will chop her into messes') and he redefines his relationship with his wife as one in which a man visits a brothel.
- His 'soul's joy' becomes a 'cunning whore' or 'impudent strumpet'.
- Final scene: imagery is reasserted as Desdemona becomes the 'pearl ... / Richer than all his tribe' which he foolishly 'threw' away. His 'subdued eyes' shed tears 'as fast as the Arabian trees / Their medicinable gum.'

Traditional Criticism

1693 - Thomas Rymer

So much ado, so much stress, so much passion and repetition about an Handkerchief!
Why was not this call'd the Tragedy of the Handkerchief? Had it been Desdemona's
Garter the sagacious Moor might have smelt a Rat but the Handkerchief is so remote
a trifle ...

William Hazlitt (early 19th century)

Tragedy creates a balance of the affections. It makes us thoughtful spectators in the lists of life. It is the refiner of the species; a discipline of humanity ... Othello furnishes an illustration of these remarks. It excites our sympathy in an extraordinary degree. The moral it conveys has a closer application to the concerns of human life than almost any other of Shakespear's plays.

[Shakespeare] knew that the love of power, which is another name for the love of mischief, is natural to man. He would know this ... merely from seeing children paddle in the dirt or kill flies for sport. Iago ... belongs to a class of character ... whose heads are as acute and active as their hearts are hard and callous.

A.C. Bradley (1904)

any man situated as Othello was would have been disturbed by Iago's communications, and ... many men would have been made wildly jealous.

Agrees with Coleridge:

... that Othello does not kill Desdemona in jealousy but in a conviction forced upon him by the almost superhuman art of Iago, such a conviction as any man would and must have entertained who had believed Iago's honesty as Othello did.

T.S. Eliot (1924)

Challenges the notion of a 'noble Moor'. Othello, in his last speech is:

... cheering himself up. He is endeavouring to escape reality, he has ceased to think about Desdemona and is thinking about himself ... Othello succeeds in turning himself into a pathetic figure, by adopting an aesthetic rather than a moral attitude, dramatising himself against his environment.

F.R. Leavis

Against Bradley:

completely wrong-headed - grossly and palpably false to the evidence it offers to weigh.

Othello is the chief personage - the chief personage in such a sense that the tragedy may fairly be said to be Othello's character in action.

Iago is subordinate and merely ancillary ... He is not much more than a necessary piece of dramatic mechanism.

Othello yields with extraordinary promptness to suggestion, with such promptness as to make it plain that the mind that undoes him is not Iago's but his own.

G. Wilson Knight

[Iago is] 'the spirit of negation set against the spirit of creation' and 'a colourless and ugly thing in a world of colour and harmony'.

William Empson

- Words 'honest' and 'honesty' are used 52 times -- there is no other play in which Shakespeare 'worries a word like that'.

Caroline Spurgeon

- Image-clusters are a dominant feature through which the particular atmosphere or mood of a play is created
- *Othello*: imagery of animals, of the sea and of poisoning

Barbara Heliodora

"Otelo, uma Tragédia Construída sobre uma Estrutura Cômica"

- *zanni* in the *Commedia dell'arte*: the mischievous engine of the complex plotting that characterises the improvised plays performed by the travelling Italian players

... [Iago], spinning his web of lies, not only gets caught in it himself but sets in motion passions which he could neither feel emotionally nor understand intellectually. For once, in his long and varied career, *Zanni* blunders into a world of tragedy, but it took Shakespeare to see the full theatrical possibilities of such a blunder.

Jane Adamson (1980)

- Rejects Leavis and Bradley: urges for an acknowledgment of the complex way in which the play examines how relationships are fraught with uncertainty and damaged by doubt
- Rejects the impulse to judge the characters in moral terms
- The experience of the play makes its audience 'acutely aware of our own needs for emotional and moral certainty, simplicity and finality' as a way of lessening the 'full brunt of the tragedy'.

Feminist Criticism

- Male criticism often neglects, represses or misrepresents female experience, and stereotypes or distorts the women's point of view
- The handkerchief 'spotted with strawberries' carries weighty sexual symbolism -- the stained wedding sheets
 - Evidence of Othello and Desdemona's marital bond
 - How the purity of their love is marred

The Handkerchief among Women

- Othello takes it to be 'ocular proof' of Desdemona's infidelity
- The women fail to recognise that what they have in common is greater than what divides them
- The female characters in Othello represent three kinds of women separated by a clearly defined social and moral hierarchy
- Virginia Mason Vaughan: gradations are a 'spectrum of female sexual mores ... with Bianca the prostitute, Emilia the earthy matron, and Desdemona the chaste bride'.
- The real tragedy for Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca is the way their marital and emotional bonding pre-empts or takes precedence over their common cause