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Othello

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Othello

by Helen McCulloch, M.A., Dip Ed

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- Preview an Introduction to the Play
- Study a graphical Character Map
- Explore themes and literary devices in the Critical Commentaries
- Examine in-depth Character Analyses
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LIFE AND BACKGROUND OF THE AUTHOR

The following abbreviated biography of William Shakespeare is provided so that you might become more familiar with his life and the historical times that possibly influenced his writing. Read this Life and Background of the Author section and recall it when reading Shakespeare's *Othello*, thinking of any thematic relationship between Shakespeare's work and his life.

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Many books have assembled facts, reasonable suppositions, traditions, and speculations concerning the life and career of William Shakespeare. Taken as a whole, these materials give a rather comprehensive picture of England's foremost dramatic poet. Tradition and sober supposition are not necessarily false because they lack proven bases for their existence. It is important, however, that persons interested in Shakespeare should distinguish between facts and beliefs about his life.

From one point of view, modern scholars are fortunate to know as much as they do about a man of middle-class origin who left a small country town and embarked on a professional career in sixteenth-century London. From another point of view, they know surprisingly little about the writer who has continued to influence the English language and its drama and poetry for more than three hundred years. Sparse and scattered as these facts of his life are, they are sufficient to prove that a man from Stratford by the name of William Shakespeare wrote the major portion of the thirty-seven plays that scholars ascribe to him. The concise review that follows will concern itself with some of these records.

Personal History

No one knows the exact date of William Shakespeare's birth. His baptism occurred on Wednesday, April 26, 1564. His father was John Shakespeare, tanner, glover, dealer in grain, and town official of Stratford; his mother, Mary, was the daughter of Robert Arden, a prosperous gentleman-farmer. The Shakespeares lived on Henley Street.

Under a bond dated November 28, 1582, William Shakespeare and Anne Hathaway entered into a marriage contract. The baptism of their eldest child, Susanna, took place in Stratford in May, 1583. One year and nine months later their twins, Hamnet and Judith, were christened in the same church. The parents named them for the poet's friends, Hamnet and Judith Sadler.

Early in 1596, William Shakespeare, in his father's name, applied to the College of Heralds for a coat of arms. Although positive proof is lacking, there is reason to believe that the Heralds granted this request, for in 1599 Shakespeare again made application for the right to quarter his coat of arms with that of his mother. Entitled to her father's coat of arms, Mary had lost this privilege when she married John Shakespeare before he held the official status of gentleman.

In May of 1597, Shakespeare purchased New Place, the outstanding residential property in Stratford at that time. Since John Shakespeare had suffered financial reverses prior to this date, William must have achieved success for himself.

Court records show that in 1601–1602, William Shakespeare began rooming in the household of Christopher Mountjoy in London. Subsequent disputes over the wedding settlement and agreement between Mountjoy and his son-in-law, Stephen Belott, led to a series of legal actions, and in 1612 the court scribe recorded Shakespeare's deposition of testimony relating to the case. In July, 1605, William Shakespeare paid four hundred and forty pounds for the lease of a large portion of the tithes on certain real estate in and near Stratford. This was an arrangement whereby Shakespeare purchased half the annual tithes, or taxes, on certain agricultural products from parcels of land in and near Stratford. In addition to receiving approximately 10 percent income on his investment, he almost doubled his capital. This was possibly the most important and successful investment of his lifetime, and it paid a steady income for many years.

Shakespeare is next mentioned when John Combe, a resident of Stratford, died on July 12, 1614. To his friend, Combe bequeathed the sum of five pounds. These records and similar ones are important, not because of their economic significance but because they prove the existence of William Shakespeare in Stratford and in London during this period.

On March 25, 1616, William Shakespeare revised his last will and testament. He died on April 23 of the same year. His body lies within the chancel and before the altar of the Stratford church. A rather wry inscription is carved upon his tombstone:

Good Friend, for Jesus' sake, forbear
To dig the dust enclosed here;
Blest be the man that spares these bones
And curst be he who moves my bones.

The last direct descendant of William Shakespeare was his granddaughter, Elizabeth Hall, who died in 1670.

These are the most outstanding facts about Shakespeare the man, as apart from those about the dramatist and poet. Such pieces of information, scattered from 1564 through 1616, declare the existence of such a person, not as a writer or actor, but as a private citizen. It is illogical to think that anyone would or could have fabricated these details for the purpose of deceiving later generations.

His Work

In similar fashion, the evidence establishing William Shakespeare as the foremost playwright of his day is positive and persuasive. Robert Greene's *Groatsworth of Wit*, in which he attacked Shakespeare, a mere actor, for presuming to write plays in competition with Greene and his fellow playwrights, was entered in the Stationers' Register on September 20, 1592. In 1594, Shakespeare acted before Queen Elizabeth, and in 1594–1595, his name appeared as one of the shareholders of the Lord Chamberlain's Company. Francis Meres in his *Palladis Tamia* (1598) called Shakespeare "mellifluous and hony-tongued" and compared his comedies and tragedies with those of Plautus and Seneca in excellence.

Shakespeare's continued association with Burbage's company is equally definite. His name appears as one of the owners of the Globe (a theater) in 1599. On May 19, 1603, he and his fellow actors received a patent from James I designating them as the King's Men and making them Grooms of the Chamber. Late in 1608 or early in 1609, Shakespeare and his colleagues purchased the Blackfriars Theatre and began using it as their winter location when weather made production at the Globe inconvenient.

Other specific allusions to Shakespeare and to his acting and his writing occur in numerous places. Put together, they form irrefutable testimony that William Shakespeare of Stratford and London was the leader among Elizabethan playwrights.

One of the most impressive of all proofs of Shakespeare's authorship of his plays is the First Folio of 1623, with the dedicatory verse that appeared in it. John Heminge and Henry Condell, members of Shakespeare's own company, stated that they collected and issued the plays as a memorial to their fellow actor. Many contemporary poets contributed eulogies to Shakespeare; one of the best known of these poems is by Ben Jonson, a fellow actor and, later, a friendly rival. Jonson also criticized Shakespeare's dramatic work in *Timber: or, Discoveries* (1641).

Certainly there are many things about Shakespeare's genius and career that the most diligent scholars do not know and cannot explain, but the facts that do exist are sufficient to establish Shakespeare's identity as a man and his authorship of the thirty-seven plays that reputable critics acknowledge to be his.

INTRODUCTION TO THE PLAY

The following Introduction section is provided solely as an educational tool and is not meant to replace the experience of your reading the work. Read the Introduction and A Brief Synopsis to enhance your understanding of the work and to prepare yourself for the critical thinking that should take place whenever you read any work of fiction or nonfiction. Keep the List of Characters and Character Map at hand so that as you read the original literary work, if you encounter a character about whom you're uncertain, you can refer to the List of Characters and Character Map to refresh your memory.

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Introduction

Shakespeare used existing stories as the basis for many of the plots of his plays. He took some from history (*Macbeth*, for example is based on Holinshed's *Chronicles*) and some from stories that were circulating in books at the time. Shakespeare's tragedy *Othello*, written and performed in 1604 and first printed in 1622, is based on a tale in Cinthio's *Hecatommiti* (1565), "Un Capitano Moro." What's interesting to modern readers is how Shakespeare adapted these stories, turning bare narratives into gripping drama.

The Original Story

The original tale, "Un Capitano Moro," concerns an unnamed Moor who marries a beautiful lady, Desdemona, despite her parents' opposition. The Moor and Desdemona live happily in Venice, and the Moor is appointed commander of troops sent to the garrison at Cyprus. He takes his wife with him.

The Moor's wicked ensign falls in love with his commander's wife, Desdemona. The ensign is afraid he will be killed if the Moor discovers his secret, and all his efforts to impress Desdemona go unnoticed because she only thinks of her husband. The ensign imagines that she loves someone else, a handsome young captain who is also in Venice, and his love turns to bitter hatred. He plots to kill the captain and revenge himself on Desdemona.

The ensign bides his time. He sees his opportunity when the Moor degrades the captain for wounding a soldier and Desdemona tries to make peace between her husband and the captain. The ensign hints that Desdemona has her own reason to want the captain reinstated. When his wife claims that the demotion was an overreaction, the Moor becomes very angry and suspects that his ensign had spoken truthfully. When the ensign tells the Moor that the captain told him of the affair, the Moor demands to see proof of it.

The ensign and his wife have a daughter aged about three, and one day when Desdemona visits their house, he puts the child on her lap. As Desdemona and the child play, the ensign steals one of her handkerchiefs. The ensign then leaves the handkerchief on the bed of the young captain, who recognizes it and goes to return it to Desdemona. When the Moor answers his knock at the door, the captain runs away, but not before the Moor recognizes him.

Later, the ensign laughs and jokes with the captain where the Moor can see them; he then tells the Moor him that he and the captain were talking about the captain's love affair with Desdemona and a handkerchief that she had given him. The Moor, believing that the handkerchief constitutes proof of his wife's infidelity, demands it of his wife, who, of course, cannot produce it. The Moor decides that he must kill his wife and plots with the ensign to kill both his wife and the captain.

The ensign, after a large payment, waylays the captain, attacks him with his sword, and manages to wound him on the leg. Desdemona is tearful to see the captain in pain, and the Moor and the ensign beat her to death with a sand filled stocking. Then they pulled down the rotten timber ceiling on her, making it appear that the falling roof had killed her. The Moor, distracted with grief for his dead wife, turns against the ensign and cashiers him.

The ensign now plots to ruin the Moor. He goes back to Venice with the captain, now one-legged, and they accuse the Moor of injuring him and murdering Desdemona. The Moor is arrested, refuses to speak under torture, and is banished and later killed by Desdemona's family. The ensign pursues his career of villainy with other victims, but in the end is arrested and dies under torture.

For a complete retelling of this story, see *The Arden Shakespeare: Othello*, edited by M. R. Ridley. London: Methuen, 1965.

Shakespeare's Version

In creating his tragedy *Othello*, Shakespeare tightened and dramatized the original story in several ways. The plot is concentrated in time and space, other characters are introduced to give, in several places, a double motive for an action. Iago now plots to destroy Othello, for a variety of motives, rather than Desdemona. Roderigo provides Iago with a useful dupe; his existence allows Iago to outline his wicked plans in conversation rather than soliloquy and to demonstrate his capacity for ruthless manipulation. Emilia provides a running commentary on Iago and his character, which she ascribes to all men. She innocently picks up the handkerchief, allowing the elimination of the daughter from the plot, and is a quick source of the information that finally condemns Iago.

Shakespeare also significantly altered the story's ending, concentrating revenge, love, and despair in the final dramatic scene of the play: murder in the marriage bed, followed immediately by revelation and

grief. Shakespeare's Othello murders his wife alone, face to face, by strangulation, struggling with his love for her to the end.

By concentrating the action and developing the characters into fully realized human beings, with their own names, personalities, and ways of looking at the world, Shakespeare created a tragedy whose beauty and pathos is universal.

A Brief Synopsis

The play opens in the powerful city state of Venice, famous as a center of trade and banking and for its military might. It is in the early hours of the morning, and two men—Roderigo, a young gentleman and former suitor of Senator Brabantio's daughter Desdemona, and Iago, an ensign who claims to have been passed over for promotion by Othello—are outside Senator Brabantio's house to tell him the news of his daughter's elopement with Othello, the Moor.

After sharing the news of the secret marriage in words calculated to alarm him, the treacherous and vindictive Iago quickly departs, leaving Roderigo to confirm the story. Feigning friendship and concern, Iago then meets with Othello and tells him of Brabantio's reaction. Brabantio, Othello, and Desdemona appear before the Duke of Venice. Although Brabantio accuses Othello of seducing his daughter by witchcraft, Othello explains that he won Desdemona by telling her his adventures, and Desdemona, called to testify, convinces the senators that she has freely gone with Othello and married him for love.

The Duke appoints Othello as general of the defense forces against the Turks, and he must leave for Cyprus immediately. Desdemona requests permission to accompany Othello to Cyprus. With the Duke's permission, Othello arranges for Desdemona to follow him later in another ship with Iago, whom he mistakenly believes is a trusted friend, and Iago's wife, Emilia. Iago convinces Roderigo that Desdemona will soon tire of Othello and that he should follow her to Cyprus. To himself, Iago decides to make use of Cassio, the man he deeply resents and who received the promotion he himself wanted, as the instrument to destroy Othello.

In Cyprus, Iago plots against Othello, planting the seed of doubt about Desdemona's fidelity and implicating Cassio as her lover. Using Roderigo, Iago arranges a fight that ultimately results in Cassio's demotion. Believing that his chances of reinstatement are better if he

has Desdemona plead his case to her husband, Cassio, with Iago's help, arranges for a private meeting with Desdemona, who promises to speak on his behalf to Othello until his reconciliation with Othello is achieved.

As Cassio leaves, Iago and Othello appear. Othello notices Cassio's speedy departure, and Iago quickly seizes the opportunity to point out that Cassio seems to be trying to avoid the Moor. Desdemona immediately and enthusiastically begins to beg Othello to pardon Cassio, as she promised, and will not stop her pleading until Othello, preoccupied with other thoughts, agrees. The moment Desdemona and Emilia leave, however, Iago begins to plant seeds of doubt and suspicion in Othello's mind.

Othello, beset by uncertainty and anxiety, later demands of Iago some proof that Desdemona is unfaithful. Using a handkerchief that Desdemona later innocently drops, Iago convinces Othello that she has been unfaithful, and he stages a conversation with the innocent Cassio that further hardens the Moor's heart against his wife and her supposed lover. Convinced of his wife's betrayal and enraged and grieving, Othello rushes into action, making an agreement with Iago that he, Othello, will kill Desdemona, and Iago will dispose of Cassio.

Desdemona, true to her word to Cassio, continues to plead on his behalf, unknowingly confirming to Othello her unfaithfulness. He accuses her of falseness, and Desdemona, not knowing what she has done to offend, can only assure him that she loves him.

Meanwhile, the gullible Roderigo has abandoned all hope of Desdemona, but Iago urges him to kill Cassio and rekindle his hopes. Late that night, they attack Cassio in the street, but it is Cassio who wounds Roderigo. Iago rushes out and stabs Cassio in the leg. Othello, hearing Cassio's cries for help, believes that half of the revenge is completed and hastens to fulfil his undertaking.

Desdemona is in bed when Othello enters. He tells her to pray a last prayer as he has no wish to kill her soul. Realizing that he plans to murder her, Desdemona protests her innocence of any wrongdoing. Knowing that he doesn't believe her, she begs him to let her live just a little longer, but he smothers her with a pillow.

Emilia, Desdemona's servant and Iago's wife, upon discovering the ruse, raises the alarm and declares Iago a liar before Montano and Gratiano. She explains how Desdemona's handkerchief came into Cassio's possession, and when she refuses to be quiet, Iago stabs her. Cassio, wounded, confirms Emilia's story. A soldier to the last, Othello stands