Shakespeare and *Othello* (1604)

- In Elizabethan England, the term “Moor” could be used to refer to a wide range of non-European persons, including black Africans, North Africans, Arabs, and even Indians.
- *Othello* comes from a short story written in 1565 by Giraldi Cinthio about a Moorish Captain who takes a Venetian wife.
- Queen Elizabeth welcomed the Moorish Ambassador in 1600 and established a trade relationship; however, in 1601 she signed an order expelling Moors from England.

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**English Renaissance (1500-1650)**

- Humans had the potential for development
- Medieval Christianity was questioned (this world is preparation for eternal life) people began to see everyday life as meaningful and a time for noble activity
- The ideal Elizabethan man was a talented courtier, adventurer, fencer, poet, and conversationalist. He was a witty and eloquent gentleman who examined his own nature and the causes of his actions.
- Marriages were arranged, usually for wealth
- Women had a lower social status than men
- People were concerned over the order of things. They felt there was “a great chain of being”
- People felt that their rulers were God’s agents. To kill a King was a heinous crime; the heavens would show ominous signs when such evil was present.
- The Crusades and explorations of Columbus and others exposed the relatively isolated English to races they did not know exactly how to interact with.
Tragedy

- drama that relates the fall of a person of high status as a result of the protagonist’s tragic flaw
- celebrates courage and dignity as the hero faces inevitable doom
- begins in chaos and ends with the restoration of order

The Tragic Hero

- The tragic hero, according to Aristotle, was a man (god, demi-god, hero, high ranking official) who rose to a high position and then fell from that high position - usually to utter desolation and death. Two forces seem equally powerful in classical tragedy, the tragic hero’s tragic flaw (or hamartia), and fate.

The Tragic Hero

- By the Renaissance, people generally felt themselves to be less pawns of fate and more in control of their own destinies.
- The Elizabethan tragic hero, therefore, is much more often responsible for his own downfall. This “waste of human potential,” as it were, seems to be much more tragic to the Elizabethans than the shifts of fate.

Features of Shakespearean Drama

- Formal vs. Informal forms of address
  - Be aware of how the various characters address one another and in what contexts they use what form of address
- In the Renaissance, there were two forms of second-person address—the formal and the informal. You was the formal form of address, and thou was the informal or familiar.

Devices of Shakespearean Drama

- Ghosts (no ghost in Othello)
- Madness, either real or pretended.
- Allusions
  - Shakespeare uses ALLUSIONS as techniques for establishing character, building theme, and setting mood. In Othello, there are allusions to Greek and Roman mythology, Roman history, and the Bible.
The Aside
- gives the audience insight into a character.
- The character is speaking either to himself, another character, or directly to the audience.
- There are other characters onstage who, by convention, do not hear the aside.

The workings of the Aside:
- if a character is aware that others are on stage the aside cannot be overheard by others
- If a character is not aware that other characters are on stage, than the aside can be overheard by others onstage

Dramatic Reverse: the action or particular act in the play that determines or changes the fate of the protagonist

Climax: In Shakespearean plays, the climax always takes place in Act III

Play-within-the-play: a dramatic device where a play is performed on stage by characters in a play, often with other characters forming an "audience"... often having symbolic and psychological significance, as well as having an important function in the plot.

The Chain of Being
- This concept originated with Plato and expressed the idea that there is a proper order within all things, and among all things, based on complexity, from the tiniest grains of sand to heaven and God...

Rank of the Chain of Being
- God
- Angels (Seraph)
- Humans (King)
- Animals (Lion or Elephant)
- Vegetables (Oak Tree)
- Minerals (Diamond, Gold, Marble)

When everything was in its proper position, there was harmony. When the order was broken, everything was upset and everyone suffered. This creates literary, political, and moral implications (see handout)

If Shakespeare compares a woman to a vine and her husband to an oak tree, what does this mean?
- He doesn't do so merely to talk about her beauty or his strength. Instead, he emphasizes her subordination to him in the Chain of Being.

If two characters fight for the throne, one compared to a lion, the other compared to a boar, which one has a legitimate claim?

Imagery from the sun, the moon, or other parts of nature often involve an implied set of connotations concerning that object's place in nature.
Setting

- Act I is set in Venice while Acts II-V are set in Cyprus
- A fact taken for granted by Shakespeare was that Venice was the pleasure capital of Europe, especially in its sexual tolerance
- British Romantic poet Lord Byron wrote about the state of morals in Venice: “a woman is virtuous (according to the code) who limits herself to her husband and one lover; those who have two, three, or more, are a little wild; but...only those who are indiscriminately diffuse...are considered overstepping the modesty of marriage.”
- What are the implications of this to the play? Consider that Desdemona is Venetian.

Essential Questions

- What defines masculinity and femininity in the play? Are masculinity and femininity artificially invented cultural and social constructs?
- How do assumptions about race, femininity and masculinity define social expectations?
- How does language affect characterization?
- How many different ways are we to understand the word honest in the play?
- How do age, social position, and race impact the relationship between Desdemona and Othello?

Online

- Link to online text of Othello
- Supplementary handouts of the following:
  - Othello Character Map
  - Men and Women in Othello
  - A Brief History of the Moors
  - Othello Play Synopsis
  - The Chain of Being
  - Literary Terms
  - Close Reading Questions
  - Some Thoughts about Tragedy