We learn Iago’s name in the second line of the play and Roderigo’s soon afterward, but Othello is not once mentioned by name. Rather, he is ambiguously referred to as “he” and “him”. He is also called “the Moor”, “thick-lips” and “a Barbary horse” – all names signifying that he is dark skinned.

Iago feels Othello has cheated him out of a promotion that was his due. However, should the audience trust Iago? Iago stresses that he only follows Othello to ‘serve my turn upon him’.

Iago is good at manipulating/avoiding trouble, he leaves the stage just as Brabantio discovers Desdemona has gone, knowing that it is ‘not meet nor wholesome to my place,/To be produced’. Neither his words nor his actions in this scene have been ‘wholesome’ – dramatic irony.

Roderigo fails to see that a man who admits he is a selfish fraud might be using him and Brabantio is unaware of the truth of his words to Iago, ‘Thou art a villain!’ By the end of this scene, Shakespeare has established Iago as a powerful, manipulative figure, who instigates and stage-manages chaos efficiently.

The fact that Iago immediately paints himself as the villain also prepares us to be sympathetic with Othello. Iago explicitly delights in his villainy, always tipping the audience off about his plotting. Because of the dramatic irony Iago embellishes, the audience is forced into a position of feeling intimately connected with Iago’s villainy.

Knowing nothing of Othello, one would expect the audience, too, would be seduced by Iago’s portrait of the general, but several factors keep us from believing him. In the first place, Roderigo is clearly a pathetic and jealous character. Shakespeare juxtaposes Roderigo’s failure to marry Desdemona with Iago’s failure to gain promotion, making it clear that private, domestic issues and the public, professional world will collide in Othello. The scene ends with the indication that this is not a purely domestic affair, given he is making his daughter’s elopement a public, political affair.

Should the audience dismiss everything we’ve heard about Othello as gossip given the pathetic nature of Roderigo and the Machiavellian, two-faced nature of Iago?

The men’s language reveal the patriarchal context. Iago sneers Cassio is ‘a fellow almost damned in a fair wife’. The casual sexism helps to establish Iago’s misogyny, which he will use to infect Othello’s mind. Male characters view women as possessions. Iago shouts to Brabantio, ‘look at your house, your daughter, and your bags!/ Thieves, thieves!’ The order of this triplet highlights the order of priority. House (a sufficient asset), daughter, possessions. A daughter is simply a slightly elevated possession. Listed order (in language) is prevalent throughout the play.

Brabantio believes Desdemona has subverted the natural order by eloping. Her decision to choose her own husband is ‘treason of the blood’. The image of Desdemona in ‘the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor’ makes it plain that her ‘revolt’ is outrageous not just because Desdemona has deceived her father, but also because she has chosen a Moor. Perhaps because it is too alarming to believe that Desdemona is a writing bride, Brabantio suggests his daughter is a passive victim. Her ‘youth and maidhood’ have been ‘abused’ by Othello and his love potions. This idea reflects the Renaissance stereotype of the black man as a cunning sexual predator.

It is night-time at the start of Act 1, Scene 1, and the two levels of the stage used (Brabantio at window, Iago/Roderigo concealed in the darkness of the street below) signifies disruption and confusion and demonstrates the environment in which Iago thrives.
Brabantio assumes the role of angry patriarch. When he says to Roderigo, ‘my daughter is not for thee’, we know that Brabantio looks upon Desdemona as an object. This follows from the earlier idea of ‘robbed’. Brabantio’s social position is undermined in this scene, not just by the ‘wheeling stranger’ who has eloped with his daughter, but also by Iago’s impudent words and Roderigo’s description of Desdemona’s ‘gross revolt’. Another reason we know that Brabantio’s authority is subverted is because his utterances contain questions as well as threats, and his words increasingly show he is alarmed. Instead of directing his social inferiors, Brabantio finds himself acting in response to them. Here, there is an emerging theme of collapse of the typical social order. This is only really made possible because of the setting of Italy. However, those who subvert the norm (not including Iago who has an allegiance with an Elizabethan audience), Othello, Emilia and Desdemona all die together on the bed at the end. Shakespeare somewhat represents minorities but cannot allow them to survive – he completely destroyed the character of Shylock in The Merchant of Venice because he’d given the Jews a voice at an anti-Semitic time. Does his mean he is submitting to societal prejudices himself?

Iago speaks a different language from the other two male characters. He is crude and mocking. Such as when depicting Othello and Desdemona or even the ways he refers to Othello. The reduction of the Desdemona-Othello match to bestial sexuality is typical of Iago, who is associated with unpleasant animal imagery throughout the play. However, we might already feel that the imagery here tells us more about Iago’s character than it does Othello’s.

Iago: persuasive, self-confident; forces his own interpretation of events; has an ability to improvise (perhaps also adding to theatricality); he sets the pace and controls the drama.

In many ways, Iago is the driving force behind the plot, a playwright of sorts whose machinations inspire the action of the play. His self-conscious falseness is highly theatrical, calculated to shock the audience. Iago is a classic two-faced villain, a “Machiavel” – a villain who, adhering all too literally, to the teachings of the political philosopher Machiavelli, lets nothing stand in his way in his quest for power. He is also reminiscent of the stock character of Vice from medieval morality plays, who also announces to the audience his diabolical schemes.

Scene 2

After having been prepared for a passionate and possibly violent personage in Othello, the quiet calm of Othello’s character – his dismissal of Roderigo’s alleged insult and his skilful avoidance of conflict – is surprising. In fact, far from presenting Othello as a savage barbarian, Shakespeare implicitly compares him to Christ. The moment when Brabantio and his men arrive with swords and torches, tipped off to Othello’s whereabouts by Othello’s disloyal friend, vividly echoes John 18:1-11. In that Gospel, Christ and his followers are met by officers carrying swords and torches. The officers were informed of Christ’s whereabouts by Judas, who pretends to side with Christ in the ensuing confrontation. When Othello averts the violence that seems imminent with a single sentence. “Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust ‘em”, he echoes Christ’s comment to Peter, “Put up thy sword into the sheath.” However, whereas Christ’s calm restraint is due to his resigned acceptance of his fate, Othello’s is due to his sense of his own authority.

Brabantio twice accuses Othello of using magic to seduce his daughter, and he repeats the same charge a third time in front of the Duke in Act 1, Scene III. Even though Shakespeare’s audience would have considered elopement with a nobleman’s daughter to be a serious, possibly imprisonable offence, Brabantio insists that he wants to arrest and prosecute Othello specifically for the crime of witchcraft, not for eloping with his daughter, without his consent. Brabantio’s racism is clear – he claims that he simply cannot believe that
Desdemona would be attracted to the Moor unless her reason and senses were blinded. Yet, it is possible that Brabantio’s is not being sincere. He may feel that he needs to accuse Othello of a crime more serious than elopement because he knows the Duke will overlook Othello’s infraction otherwise.

- This scene provides our first glimpse at Othello’s conflict between war and love.
- Othello speaks with a measured calm in blank verse (used for heroes, conveys intensity of feelings – unrhymed iambic pentameter)
- Othello and Iago are polar opposites: one seeks to resolve conflict while the other revels in it.
- Othello’s quiet confidence and sincerity about his love for Desdemona are attractive. In spite of his secret marriage, he says he prefers to be open about his actions. We may accuse him of pride when he speaks of his services to the state and insists that his “parts…title, and…perfect soul” will “manifest me rightly”, but we understand that his reputation has been attacked.
- By making Othello so different from Iago’s version, Shakespeare could be challenging his audience to accept the Moor as a noble, worthy man?
- Iago makes a crude joke when he tells Cassio that Othello has ‘boarded a land carrack.’ By using a metaphor of piracy, Iago degrades Othello’s stature.
- As we compare real Othello with Iago’s version, we also now compare Cassio. In his first speeches Cassio comes across as trustworthy and reliable. He delivers his urgent summons from the Duke that makes it clear the Cyprus mission is important. However, Othello has not taken Cassio into his confidence about his marriage (as he did with Iago? Perhaps Othello values Iago more as a friend than military adviser, but Iago would rather the promotion): he acted alone when he eloped. Does this mean there is a distance between Othello and Cassio? The most significant feature of Cassio’s presentation in this scene is his failure to understand Iago’s sexual joke about Othello’s marriage at line 50. His puzzlement suggests Cassio doesn’t share Iago’s crude sense of humour, thus distancing him from the villain at this stage. This appears ironic, however, as Iago will cast Cassio in the role of seducer.
- Iago: “I hold it very stuff o’ th’ conscience To do no continued murder.” – foreshadowing manipulation of others to do murder, especially Othello.

**Scene 3**

- The war between the Turks and Venetians will not prove to be a major part of the play. However, the Turks “feint” – in which they pretend to sail toward Rhodes and mislead the Venetians into thinking they will not attack Cyprus – has a symbolic significance. Throughout the play, deception is one of Iago’s major weapons, and his attacks on other characters are particularly devastating because his enemies don’t know that he is attacking them.
- The same opens, once again, with subterfuge and deceit. The misinformation about the amount of Turkish ships reflects the chaos in domestic and military affairs. The Duke, not named, in the first few lines, is also quite difficult to identify.
- Othello is both an outsider and an insider in Venetian society. His race, physical appearance, and remarkable life history set him apart from the other Venetians, and inspire Brabantio’s fears that Othello is some kind of witch doctor. At the same time, the Duke and other characters treat him as an essential part of the Venetian state. When Othello and the others enter, the Duke gets straight to business, ‘Valiant Othello, we must straight employ you.’ The adjective ‘valiant’ stresses (surprisingly) Othello’s heroism and dignity. However, he is still not treated as an equal, as the Duke only wishes to ‘employ’ Othello, echoing, albeit a more glorified, slave trade. Only after addressing Othello, does the Duke notice Brabantio and even then only acknowledges him in a rather demeaning fashion: “I did not see you. Welcome, gentle signor.” The Duke even reprimands Brabantio for not helping them tackle
the Ottoman threat, whilst Brabantio was raising hell after Othello. Perhaps this is our first indication of the battle between war and (Brabantio’s twisted) love.

- As both a physical and a political presence, Othello overshadows Brabantio.
- Brabantio dismisses the Duke’s need for Othello to tend to military matters in order to address his own business. As an outsider, Othello only senses the state, but Brabantio is at liberty to disrupt proceedings for personal gain in a way Othello would not be able to. Brabantio believes that Othello can be twisted with militia but not his daughter. Othello only has rights in this society because of his economic contribution – based on the assumption that Shakespeare places al marginalised groups (inc. Moors and Women) on the same level.
- The first monologue Othello is allowed to give in this scene was at the discretion of the Duke, implying Othello had to receive permission to speak at will.
  
  “Rude am I in my speech” – irony given this is the most eloquent we’ve seen thus far. Perhaps self-righteous arrogance? Perhaps genuine self-consciousness? More likely that he is imitating Cassio, a fellow outsider but who is better accepted in Venice.

  “I won his daughter” – perhaps misogynistic objectification, perhaps acknowledgement that his relationship was borne of mutual appreciation. However, Othello winning over the state could be undermined (ironically0 by his high military status. The Senate need him to protect them, and hence humour him?

- Shakespeare fleshed out the fantastic details of Othello’s past life by drawing on a number of ancient and Renaissance travel writers.
- Othello clearly attaches great importance to the image of himself as a unique and heroic figure, and it is also important to him that he have a remarkable life story worthy of repeated telling (source of his pride? Nothing else of himself to give?). Not only does he claim that Desdemona fell in love with him because of his story, he says he fell in love with her because of her reaction to it.
  
  o Desdemona confirms/validates something about Othello’s self-image, which may suggest why her faithfulness is of such all-consuming importance to him.
  
  o However, this also implies they are in love with the ‘idea’ of each other. A story is a fictional construct, and more likely to be a hyperbolised one at that.

- Brabantio still cannot comprehend how his daughter would overlook Othello’s appearance. The pinnacle of exploit racism. But he also assumes Desdemona to be a ‘maiden never bold, quaint, quiet and docile. This is another preconception Shakespeare destroys.

- Before Brabantio and the Duke, Othello is effectively put on trial. Brabantio and Othello give their opening speeches, Othello alls the witness Desdemona (also empowering her), more arguing, Duke verdict.

- Othello allowing Desdemona to speak on his behalf (in the same way the Duke allowed Othello to speak) is powerful. He trusts her judgement with his life, which would’ve been a stark contrast to the idea that women are incapable a rational thought. He gives women a voice in a very male-dominated scene. He also explicitly undermines her father: Othello gives her the voice that Brabantio didn’t know she had.

- Desdemona herself appears remarkably forward and aggressive in Othello’ account, particularly in relation to Renaissance expectations of female behaviour. She “devoured up” his discourse with a “greedy ear”, and is the first of the two to hint at the possibility of their loving one another. Exactly how forward we should imagine Desdemona to be is somewhat uncertain.

Modern texts of the play are based upon one of two early edition s of Shakespeare’s plays, the Quarto edition and the Folio edition (Quarto and Folio refer to two different sizes of books). In the Quarto, Othello says, “My story being done,’ she gave me for my pains a world of sighs,” whereas in the Folio, he says “she gave me for my pains a world of kisses.” In both editions Othello is ambiguous about whether
her or Desdemona played the more active role in courtship, which could mean that he is somewhat uncomfortable – either embarrassed or upset – with Desdemona’s aggressive pursuit of him. In Act I, Scene II, lines 149-154, for instance, he says that he observed that Desdemona wanted him to retell his tale, so he found a way to get her to ask him to tell it, and then he consented. This seems an unnecessarily complicated way of describing what happened, and suggests either that Othello was uncertain which of them played the leading role or that he wants to insist that his own role was more active than it actually was.

- “Her father loved me, oft invited me;” – Brabantio respected Othello in a military capacity but not as a suitor. Could evidence that Brabantio’s real anger lies at their elopement and not consulting him, undermining the social order, rather than at Othello himself.
- Brabantio’s description of docile Desdemona was probably a version of her that existed at some point, but he refuses to accept her emancipation.
- When Desdemona finally enters and speaks for herself, she does indeed seem outspoken and assertive, as well as generous and devoted. In her speech about her “divided duty” as a wife and a daughter, Desdemona shows herself to be poised and intelligent, as capable of loving as of being loved, and able to weigh her competing loyalties respectfully and judiciously. Yet, by swapping allegiance from Brabantio to Othello’s, she accepts male authority at the same time she subverts it – a transferral of duty. In arguing for her right to accompany Othello to Cyprus, she insists upon the “violence” and unconventionality of her attachment to Othello. In declaring “I did love the Moor to live with him,” he frankly insists on the sexual nature of her love. She is saying that she isn’t content to marvel at Othello’s stories; she wants to share his bed. As the plot progresses, Desdemona’s sexual aggressiveness will upset Othello more and more. The ambiguity of Othello’s discomfort at Desdemona suggests ideas of her promiscuity may have already crosses his mind prior to Iago’s intervention (implying Iago is merely a catalyst to events).
- In explaining her love for Othello she states that she “saw Othello’s visage in his mind”, which could mean either she saw a different face inside him than the one the rest of the world sees, or “I saw him as he seems himself” supporting the idea that she upholds Othello’s sense of self.
- Brabantio: “look to her, Moor if thou hast eyes to see:/She has deceived her father, and may thee.” Was this when the seed of doubt was planted in Othello’s mind? Or had he already concluded this, as previously mentioned.. Perhaps this moment when the idea was planted in lago’s mind, to exploit this very fact? The added theatricality that this was Brabantio’s last words leaves them metaphorically and dramatically lingering.
- Immediately after, Othello: “My life upon her faith’. Honest Iago,’ My Desdemona must I leave to thee’. – ‘My’ he has already claimed victory and possession of Desdemona. Could these lines be a juxtaposition of good vs. Poor judgement / love vs. War or a highlight of Othello’s naivety towards both matters?
- The end of the scene is concluded by Roderigo and Iago. Once again, Iago proves himself a masterful manipulator, talking Roderigo out of suicide. Here, Roderigo may also be played as the comic character, as he is so obviously being laundered for money (Roderigo’s comical ignorance is hyperbolised by Iago’s: ‘put money in thy purse.’) Iago’s malice is revealed once again, perhaps a step up from act 1, hinting a progressive worsening: ‘thus do I ever make my fool my purse.’ There are also more unjustified reasonings produced: “I hate the Moor and it is thought abroad that ‘twixt my sheets’. Iago’s “How? How?” – rhetorical/asking audience, leaves us his co-conspirators. “Hell and night/Must bring this monstrous birth to the world’s light.” Othello is accused of witchcraft, but Iago is almost satanical in his plot to end him.