

Introduction to Shakespeare's *Othello*

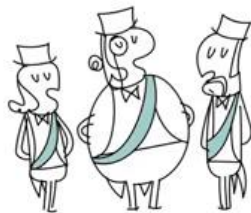
THEN, MUST YOU SPEAK
OF ONE THAT LOVED NOT
WISELY BUT TOO WELL.

- WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE -





BIANCA



SENATORS



MONTANO



LODOVICO GRATIANO



DUKE



PLOT SUMMARY



DESDEMONA



IAGO



BRABANTIO



CASSIO



EMILIA



RODERIGO

It is the story of an outsider (Othello, a moor, from Africa) in Venice, probably in or during the early Italian Renaissance. Othello is a soldier, who, having moved up in the ranks, now commands great respect in Venice. When the story opens we learn that he has married Desdemona, a woman of incomparable beauty and the daughter of a wealthy and powerful Venetian senator, Brabantio. This is their personal story, but it is also the story of a political body and how it preserves and protects itself.

Important Themes (note references to these as we move through the text together):

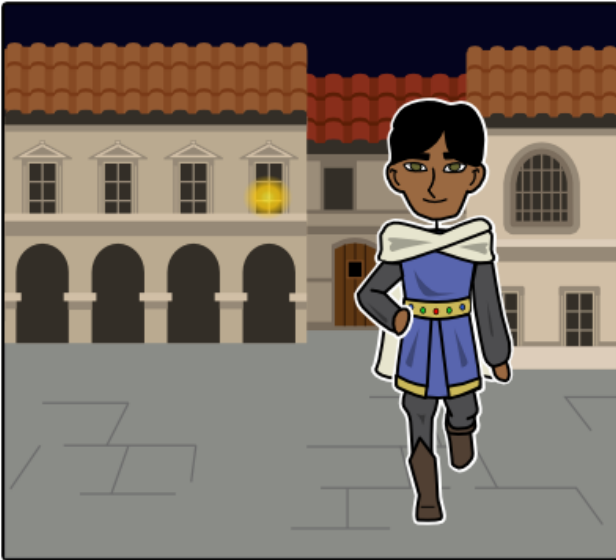
1. Friendship, love, and marriage
2. Race
3. Gender (How are women defined or given limited roles, for ex.? What is expected of men/women?)
4. Class (social status)
5. The individual vs. the state (Othello's or Brabantio's personal interests vs. the interests of Venice, for ex.)
6. The nature of evil (Iago as its representative and what makes him tick)
7. Jealousy
8. Storytelling and language
9. Reputations (men and women, professional and personal)
10. Appearances vs. Reality (and deceit, truth, and performances)

RELEVANCE

- Othello is known as the most prominent black protagonist in early Western literature.
- He faces racism from other characters, especially when he marries a privileged white woman (whose father disapproves).

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- There is racism in the play, xenophobia, racist slurs etc.
 - Some people say that the play shows how Othello 'absorbs' or internalises the racism he faces and eventually 'acts' it out.
 - The play was referred to as 'Othello, The Moor of Venice'

EXPOSITION



The play takes starts in Venice. The Moorish General, Othello, secretly marries a nobleman's daughter, Desdemona.

CONFLICT



Othello and Desdemona are attempting to build a life together. However, their relationship is sabotaged by the envious friend, Iago, who convinces Othello that Desdemona is unfaithful to him.

RIISING ACTION



Othello is sent to defend the Island of Cyprus from Turkish Invaders. Iago tells the audience them his plan to split up Desdemona and Othello. Part of the plan includes getting Cassio, a lieutenant, fired from his position.

CLIMAX



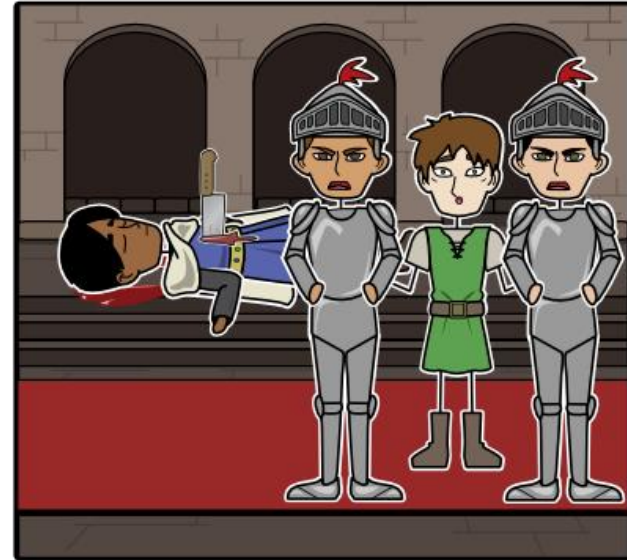
Iago plants a handkerchief of Desdemona's in Cassio's room to make it appear that the two have been together. Othello finally believes Iago, and vows that he will not stop until he has his revenge.

FALLING ACTION



Othello smothers Desdemona with a pillow, and Iago attempts to kill Cassio. However, Emilia, Iago's wife, exposes his plan.

DENOUEMENT



Othello kills himself and Iago is taken away to be tortured. The reader is left with disbelief and despair, but some satisfaction that Iago is found out.

Aside, Monologue, and Soliloquy

Aside: a character's remark, either to the audience or another character, that other characters on stage are **not supposed to hear**

Monologue: an extended speech by a **single character** that is uninterrupted by others

Soliloquy: a speech a character gives when s/he **is alone on stage** (audience hears thoughts/emotions)

Tragedy

A serious play representing the **disastrous downfall** of the hero

Achieves a catharsis by arousing **pity** and **terror** in the audience

Hero is led into fatal calamity by **hamartia** (tragic flaw or error) which often takes the form of **hubris** (excessive pride leading to divine retribution)

Tragic effect depends upon audience's awareness of the **admirable qualities** of the hero which are wasted in the disaster

Classical Tragic Hero

The tragic hero is a **good man**, important to society

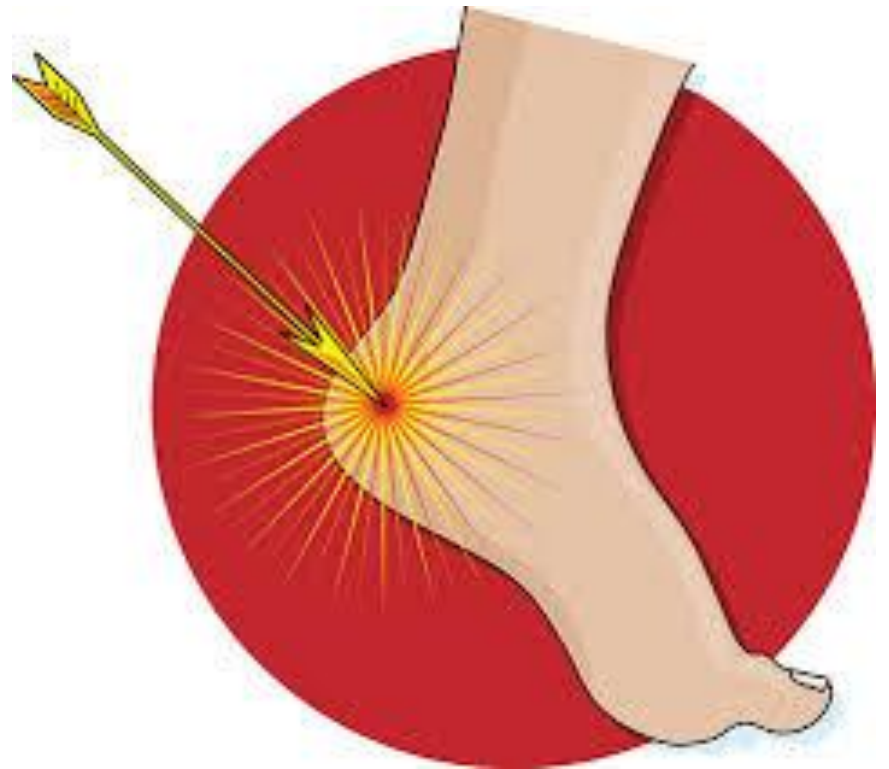
The hero suffers a fall brought about by **something in his nature**

The fall provokes the emotions of pity and fear in the reader

The tragic character comes to some kind of **understanding** or new recognition of what has happened

Tragic Flaw

Defect of character
that leads to the
hero's disastrous
downfall



Othello Terminology: Moor

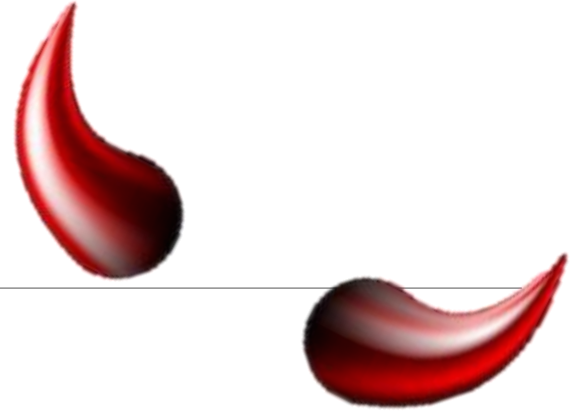
Muslim person of Arab and Berber descent from northwest Africa

Moors invaded Spain and established a civilization in Andalusia lasting from the 8th - 15th centuries

Term Moor comes from the Greek word *mauros* meaning dark or very black



Othello Background



In Renaissance drama, Moors often symbolized something other than **human** - and often, indeed, something **devilish**.

Moors were treated much like the Jews who became new Christians, “regarded with suspicion as a false Christian.”

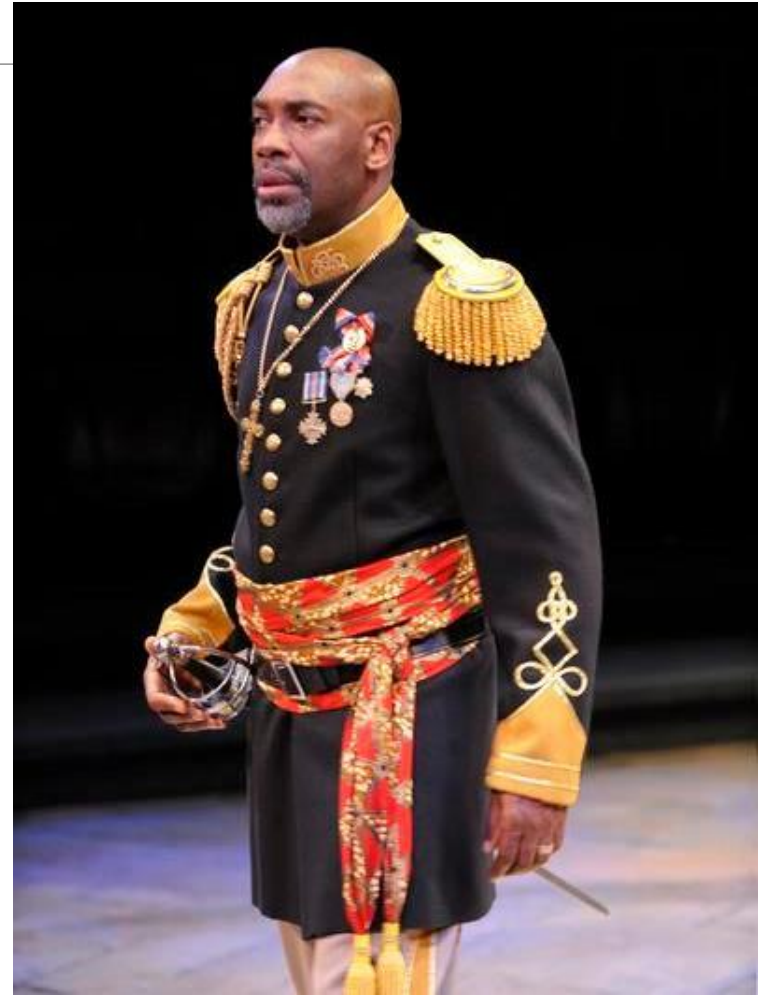
Othello Terminology: Moor

Because of their Arab descent, the Moorish culture is very structured when it comes to women. Women in Arab culture are absolutely, positively not allowed to commit adultery. To do so meant instant death.



Othello Background

Othello is of royal lineage. He was captured, turned into a slave by the Spanish and Italians, then later won his freedom and became a tremendous general.



Othello Background

Othello knows nothing but violence. He has little formal education. Everything he knows involves the battlefield.



Othello Terminology: Cuckold

a man whose wife is **unfaithful** to him

Represented with **horns** growing out of his **forehead**

“That cuckold lives in bliss

Who, certain of his fate, loves not his wronger;

But O, what damned minutes tells he o’er

Who dotes, yet doubts; suspects, yet strongly loves!”

(3.3.197-200)

“I have a pain upon my forehead, here” (326).



Othello: Setting – Act 1 : Venice



Othello: Setting – ACT 2-5 Cyprus

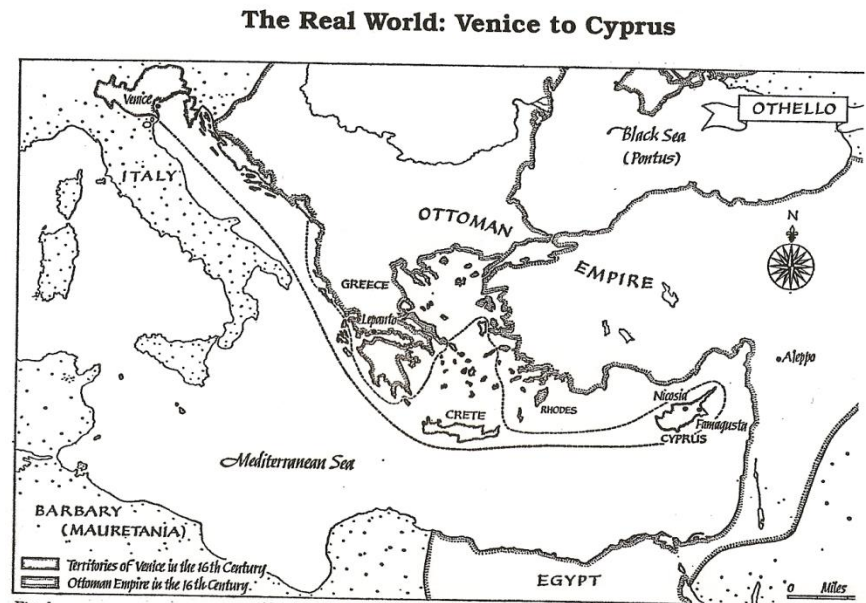


Othello: Setting

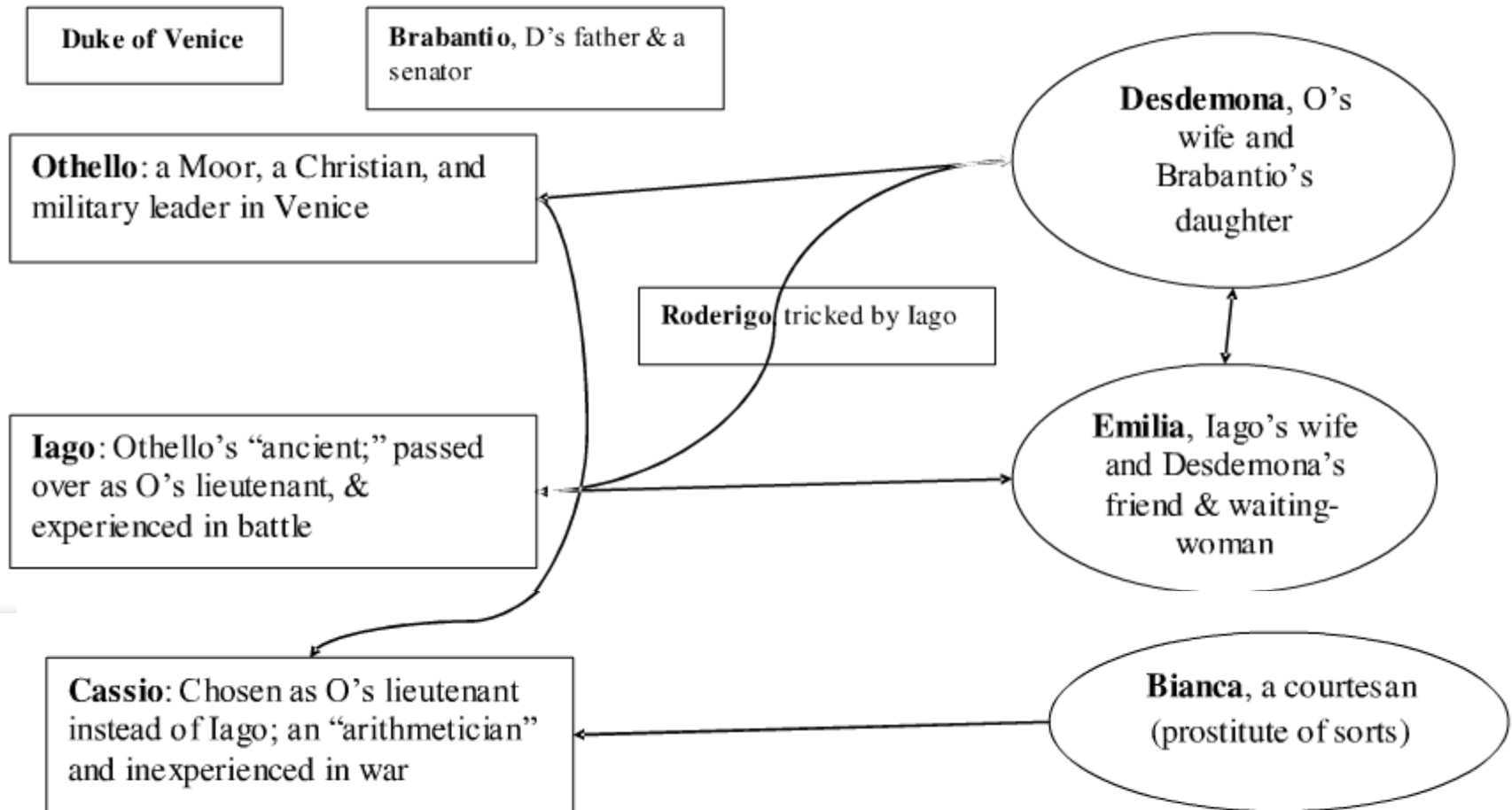
Journey from **Venice**,
Italy to **Cyprus**

Venice = order, rule of
reason

Cyprus = disorder, rule
of passion



Othello—Major Character Chart



Desdemona

Othello's wife and also the daughter of an Italian nobleman. Desdemona is fair, apparently quite **pure**, and apparently quite **innocent**. There is a debate whether she is naïve.



IAGO



Quite possibly one of the most **dangerous, evil** characters in major literature, yet throughout the play no one but the reader knows his intentions. In appearance, he is Othello's confidant; in reality, he is Othello's nightmare.

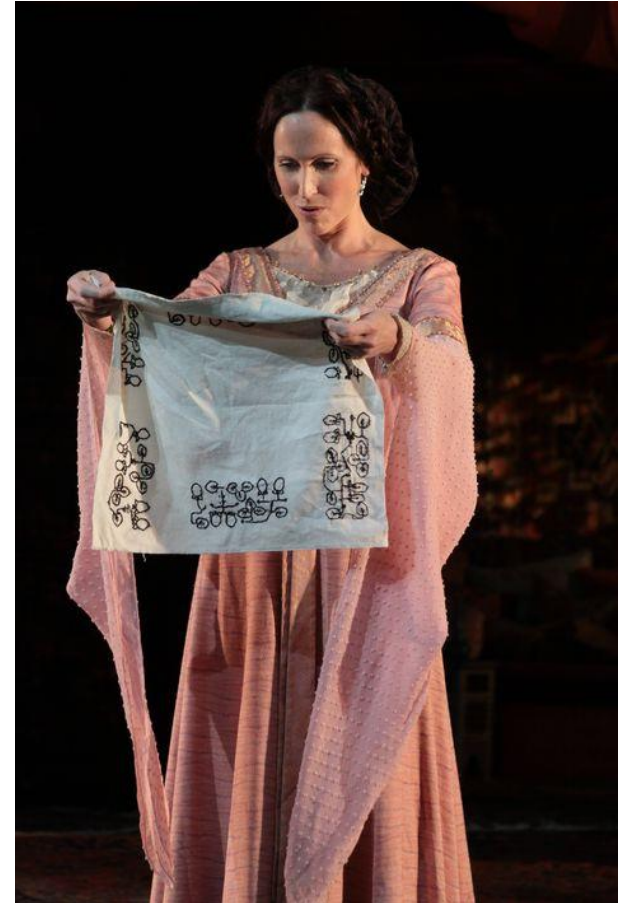
CASSIO

Othello's lieutenant, and the one Iago (apparently) is angry with because Othello picked Cassio over him. He is a **young flirt** who is very preoccupied with advancement.



Emilia

Iago's wife. Emilia is basically an abused spouse, but she may know more about her husband than anyone else. She also has an earthly view of the love. Cynical. **(very important for the handkerchief scene)**



Roderigo

Iago's **lackey**, a man that Iago can **use without any worry** of his intentions being misinterpreted. Roderigo is basically a **weak mind that can be easily manipulated**.

Iago controls Roderigo's purse in the same way that he will control Othello's soul later.



Bianca

A courtesan (prostitute/escort) who is another pawn in Iago's game. She is **Cassio's mistress** and because she is of **low social status**, is an easy target.



Brabantio

Desdemona's father, who actually was friends with Othello until he gets a big surprise. Brabantio is basically **a failed politician** that the military has little use for.



Irony



1. Iago – the biggest liar gives the audience/reader many truths. He also gives Cassio, Roderigo, and Othello good advice, yet he manipulates it to his evil purpose.

Irony

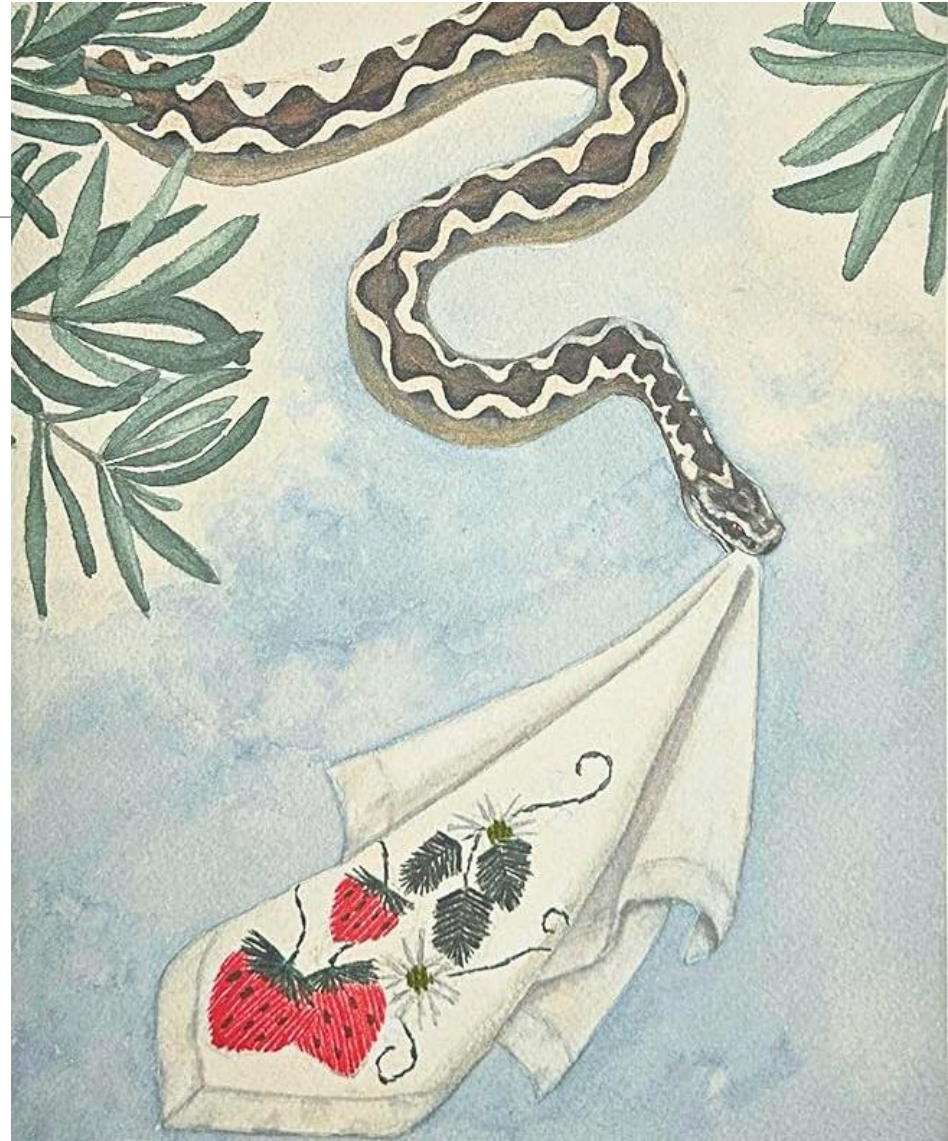
2. Desdemona—The sweetest, purest character is painted as a whore and liar.

WHORE!



Irony

3. Othello thinks Iago is a virtuous friend who is helping him. By the end of Act III, he is has been called “honest” 30 times!



Othello: Thematic Ideas

- Nature of love and marriage
- Nature of jealousy
- Nature and use of language
- Male mistrust of women
- Deception / Honesty
- Importance of reputation