



Starting to read Othello – Act 1 Scene 1 (emagplus)

Barbara Bleiman, emagazine co-editor, considers the key questions to ask when reading the first lines of a play. She puts her advice into practice by looking at the opening scene of Othello.

The opening of any play sets things up, most obviously a place and a person or group of people around whom the drama is going to revolve. Less obviously perhaps, the opening scene establishes what kind of drama this is going to be. By the choice of language, or decisions about who is on stage, or through directorial decisions about set or lighting, signals are sent out to the audience about what to expect. Will this be a naturalistic bit of drama, trying to evoke a real world, or will it be more unexpected and self-consciously theatrical, creating a world that is different, exaggerated, unnatural, or deliberately abstract and de-contextualised? Will it be a close, intimate play about personal relationships, or a big broad canvas drama about political or historical events, or the larger society?

Unless it's a very experimental drama, the opening also usually sets up a point of potential conflict, from which everything else will flow, or a set of questions that the drama will try to answer. If it's a good opening scene, the audience wants to find out the answers to these questions. These might include a range of different kinds of things:

- Who are these people?
- Why are they there?
- What's going to happen to them?
- How is this situation or problem that's been raised going to be resolved?
- Why is this person behaving like this or saying these things?
- Why are they speaking in this way, or that?
- What will the person/people they're talking about, who we've not yet met, turn out to be like?
- Where do my sympathies lie?

The first scene of Othello encourages many of the questions listed above, and many others as well. Simply by asking yourself some of these questions as you read, you can get a grip on some of the most significant issues at stake and the distinctive elements in Othello as a piece of theatre. With a Shakespeare play, where the detail of the language itself can be a barrier at first, getting the 'gist' of what's important is very helpful, giving you a feel for the drama as a whole that will support you in understanding the detail.

Just to prove that point, I'm going to try to ask and answer just a few of those questions for myself (and then leave you to continue the process for yourself, asking and answering questions of your own).

1. The scene starts in mid-conversation. Why?

It makes us feel as if we're eavesdropping on something, and immediately we wonder what's been happening, specially since the very first word is a signal of disapproval and the first character to speak, Roderigo is asking the other character not to tell him something. The 'I take it much unkindly' immediately sets up conflict. Roderigo is annoyed with the other character, Iago, and this is reinforced by Iago's reply with a swear word, 'Sblood'. Right from the start, there's a sense of emotional tension.

2. Roderigo mentions someone else who isn't named and says Iago hates him. Why? And why does Iago go on then, to talk about his hatred for almost thirty lines?

Immediately the audience wants to know who this other person is and why he is hated. He isn't named at first. That sets up a sense of anticipation. And then Iago proceeds to explain his anger at length and the audience discovers that in fact there are two people who could be viewed as the objects of his hatred – his superior, Othello, who has decided not to promote him as lieutenant, and Michael Cassio, who has been chosen in his place. Iago talks – perhaps even rants – for a great long stretch of time. Partly that serves the purpose of telling us about these two characters who are going to be important to us, filling us in on the situation – though, interestingly, at no point in the whole of the 182 lines of the first scene is Othello's actual name mentioned, to signal to us that the man being discussed is the very one whose name forms the title of the play we know we've booked to see! Partly, also, this long speech tells us about the character who is speaking it. Iago isn't just a little bit cross. He has a major grudge, and he feels it strongly enough to go on and on about it, at length. Here we have a man who is resentful, who is annoyed enough to be rather obsessed with it, and we become aware that here is a source of conflict that is likely to be at the heart of the play.

Iago's speech also potentially sets up some themes, that a quick-witted audience might pick up on right from the start. The 'great' are contrasted with those, like Iago who 'know [their] price', social advancement is desirable but hard to come by and there's a problem about whether merit gets you advancement, or simply knowing the right people, or being well educated. Class is clearly a significant issue, even within the first pages of the text.

3. Why have Iago say so much at the beginning when Othello is the named hero of the play?

At first maybe that's a question that just has to hang there, waiting to be answered. Maybe it's one that you'll come back to, after reading the whole play and ask it again? A few possibilities may suggest themselves even at this stage though. For instance, might it be that Iago, with all his anger and obsessive resentment, is the main antagonist, set up against the protagonist, Othello. This idea is borne out by the resentments he clearly feels. If so, why should the antagonist appear before the protagonist? Is nastiness more interesting, in some way, than goodness and will we end up being just as interested in the man who is seething with anger as the one with whom he is angry?

4. The conversation between Roderigo and Iago soon gives way to a more public scene. Why?

We've had a glimpse of a man with a grudge, talking privately, almost secretly, to his confidant, giving us insight into his thinking and now, swiftly we see him in action, beginning to act upon these feelings. For all kinds of reasons, this is brilliant stagecraft – an intense scene of intrigue and motivation followed by a very public act of revenge against the person he hates, who still hasn't appeared before the audience. We're suddenly rushed into actions rather than words and these become the spark for the rest of the play. Iago is stirring up mischief against 'the Moor', whose name has still not been explicitly used. Along with the change from words to deeds comes a quite different style of dialogue – more choppy and changeable, with lots of shouts and exclamations, questions and repetitions, swearing and taboo language. All of a sudden we're in the verbal quickfire world of upset, accusation and anger.

Four questions and four attempts to begin to answer them that give a strong sense of what this drama is going to be like, what its themes are, who its main characters are and why it is going to be a powerful bit of theatre. Now go on and read the rest of the scene, asking and answering these kinds of questions for yourself.

Article Written By: Barbara Bleiman is co-editor of emagazine.

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