

Othello on Trial

A note to sceptical teachers

I have devised two dramatised courtroom hearings, to be used as *Othello* teaching aids (along with two schematic summaries of characters, settings and other details). I know some teachers swear at the very thought of drama in their classroom, while others swear by it. I certainly advocate the use of role-play and playing out a scene, even – if need be – with students seated at their desks in the conventional arrangement.

These two hearings are better served by a ‘courtroom’ arrangement of desks, either in the ‘British’ or ‘American’ style, simulating a judge, legal representatives, the accused, and a witness-stand. The non-participants make up the public gallery at the back of the classroom. It should be easy enough to arrange this set-up with a very brief disruption spilling over to adjacent classrooms.

Of course there are teachers who persist in claiming that any use of drama is simply a waste of teaching time. Wrong. I offer one instance: a Form 4 (Grade 11) History class in an international school in then-Swaziland (eSwatini) enacted the workings of UNSCOPI = the United Nations Special Commission on Palestine and Israel. The students decided their affiliation: the UN officials, the Palestinian delegation, the Israeli delegation, reporters on a daily newspaper. We took over the Senior Common Room for two double-periods for three weeks. The students had access to all the maps of the area from 1948 to the present. It was their job to find a solution (geographical and political) to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

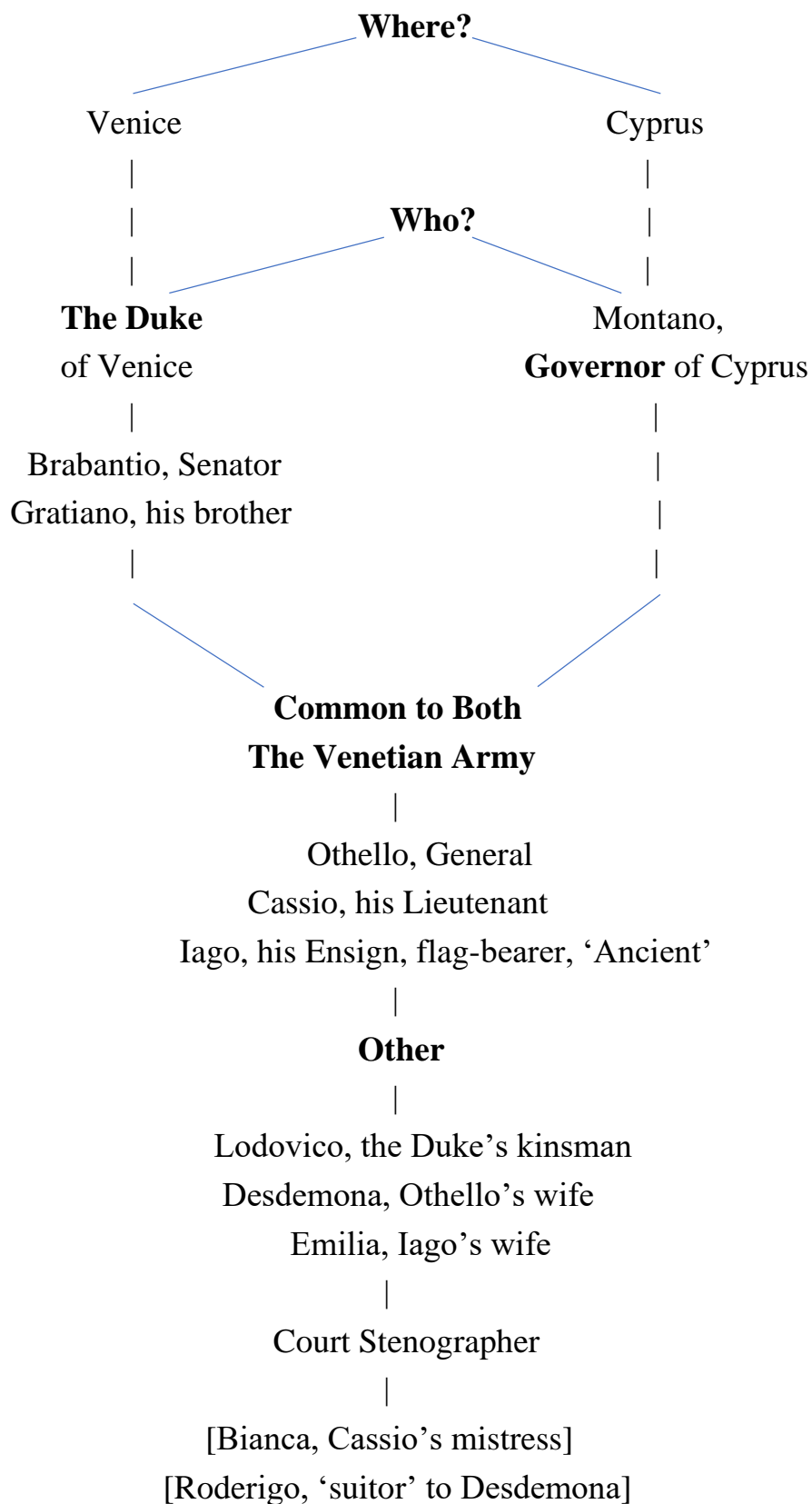
The students entered into the drama with gusto and great earnestness. At one point, to everyone’s surprise, the Palestinians staged a walk-out. The UN officials did not know what to do. They came and asked me; I said I couldn’t tell them, but I could inform them of the practice of lobbying or corridor politics. The next day’s newspaper carried breaking news of urgent lobbying that went on in the boys’ hostel even after Lights-Out! The Palestinians were persuaded to return. Students from other forms popped in to listen during their free periods. It even seeped into the Staffroom, with some heated side-taking. A promising single-state solution was decided on. Hard on the heels of UNSCOPI came the mid-year exams. All the History students chose the Arab-Israeli conflict, and produced pretty good essays. It was clear that they had listened to one another and so had become informed on areas they weren’t directly involved in. I have no doubt that students learned more than they would have if the topic had been handled in a conventional situation of textbook/notes/dictation. Boring.

What I offer here is at least worth a try. If you as the teacher get excited about it, the students will, too.

Robin Malan
Pinelands, January 2024

For reference, before the study of the play:

Places and People

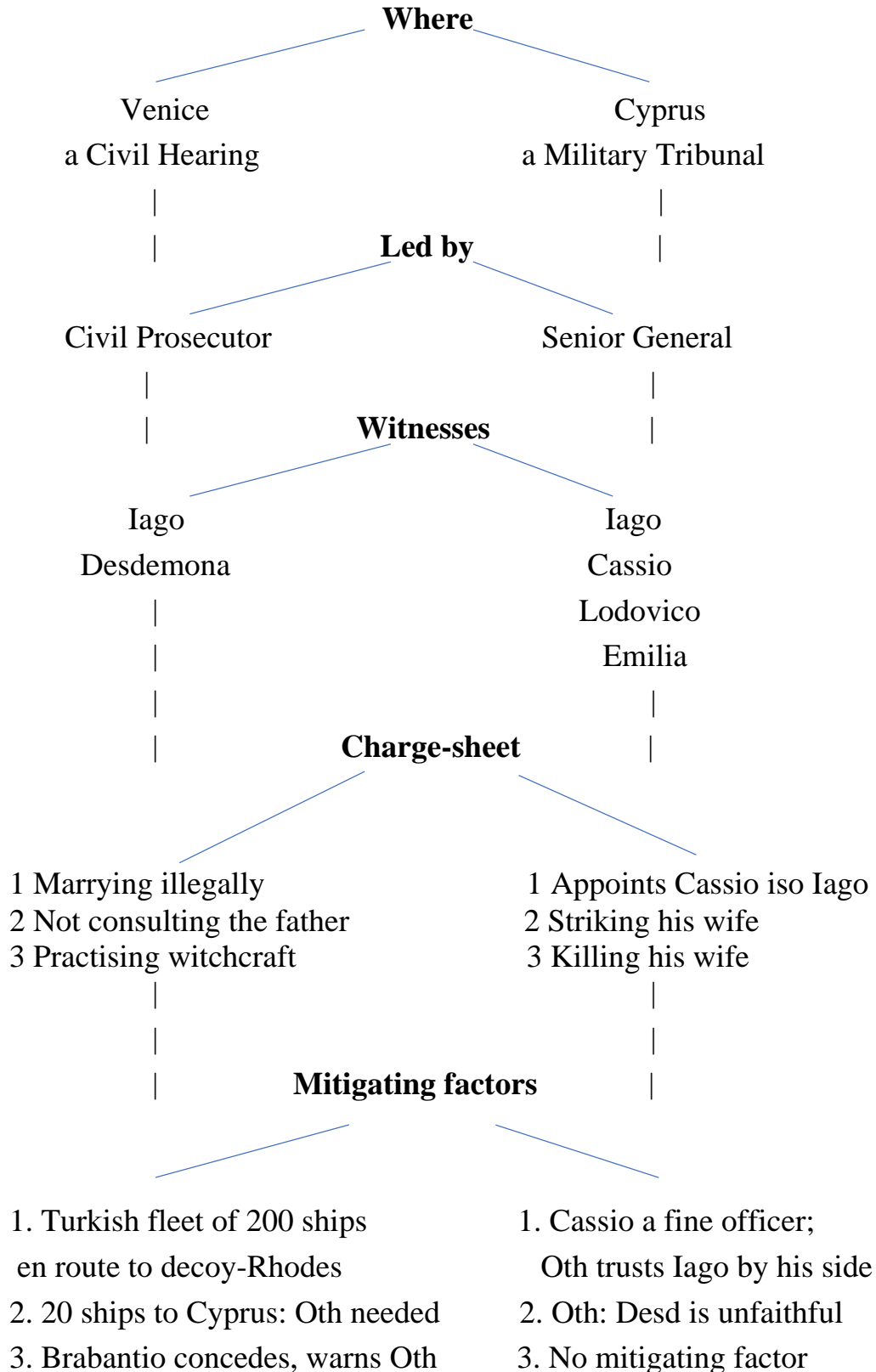


For reference, after the play has been studied and before the two enactments:

The Hearing and the Tribunal

in the matter of General Othello

into his recent conduct



The Civil Hearing

Civil Prosecutor

In the matter of Othello, General in the Venetian Army. Let it be noted that this is a Civilian Hearing (a Military Tribunal will follow). This hearing is now in session, presided over by the Duke of Venice; in attendance: the complainant, Signor Brabantio, a member of the Venetian Senate; also, other members of the Senate.

Duke

Master the Prosecutor, please proceed.

Pros

We call General Othello to the stand. (*Pause. Enter **Othello.***) General Othello, it is not necessary, sir, to reiterate all the service that you have done the State. So this hearing is restricted to your recent conduct in Venice.

Othello

With what am I charged?

Pros

Be assured, we will work our way through the charge-sheet.

Othello

I am satisfied.

Pros

Are you married? And, if so, to whom?

Othello

That I have ta'en this old man Brabantio's daughter,
It is most true; true I have married her.

Pros

Before marrying her, did you seek the permission of her father?

Othello

[*Student playing Othello to answer in their own words.*]

Pros

Further to the illegality of marrying without consent, did you bewitch Desdemona?

Othello

I will a round unvarnished tale deliver
Of my whole course of love: what drugs, what charms,
What conjuration and what mighty magic –
For such proceedings I am charged withal –
I won his daughter.

Duke

We recognise Signor, the First Senator.

1st Senator

A question, General Othello:
Did you by indirect and forcèd courses
Subdue and poison this young maid's affections?

Othello

Send for the lady,
And let her speak of me before her father.

Duke

Fetch Desdemona hither. (*Pause. Enter **Desdemona**.*)

Brabantio

Come hither, gentle mistress.
Do you perceive in all this company
Where most you owe obedience?

Desdemona

My noble father,
I do perceive here a divided duty:
To you I am bound for life and education.
I am hitherto your daughter. But here's my husband.
And such duty I profess
Due to the Moor, my lord.

Brabantio (*A broken man, to the **Duke**.*)

I have done, my lord.
(*To **Othello**.*) Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see.
She has deceived her father, and may thee.

Othello

[Student playing Othello to give a brief answer to Brabantio, either in their own words or in Shakespeare's.]

Pros

Call witness Iago, ensign to Othello. *(Pause. Enter Iago.)*
Iago, you were heard in riotous voice at this Lord's house in the still and dead of night ...

Iago

Not I, Master the Prosecutor. I was not by. I hear that one Roderigo was, and in full cry spake 'gainst my noble general, Othello.

Othello

So please your grace, my Ancient, a man he is of honesty and trust. From out of this affray at Lord Brabantio's house, I heard of some slanders 'gainst my person ...

Duke

How so?

Othello

Oh, I am called 'the thick lips', 'an old black ram', 'a Barbary horse', 'the lascivious Moor', my heart becomes 'my sooty bosom'!

Duke

Is't possible?

Othello

Such things as these, I brush aside, when my duty to the State and to your Lordship calls.

Duke

'Tis so: we have need of you, to Cyprus 'gainst the Turk. Th'affair cries haste. You must hence tonight.

Othello

With all my heart.

Duke

My Lord Brabantio, and you, the Senators, at nine
i'th'morning, here we'll meet again, on such things else of
quality and respect as, General, doth import you.

Othello

So please your Grace.

Duke

For this time, then, Master the Prosecutor, this Hearing is
concluded.

Pros

As it pleases your Grace. The Hearing is adjourned.

[The Hearing ends.]

The Military Tribunal

Senior General

In the matter of Othello, General in the Venetian Army. Let it be known that this is a Military Tribunal. This Tribunal is now in session, presided over by Montano, the Governor of Cyprus.

Montano

General, please proceed.

Sen Gen

We call General Othello to observe and note the evidence relating to his recent conduct. (*Pause. Enter **Othello**.*) Please be seated, General, on the observer-bench, and bend an auditory ear to the testimony of the witnesses. I call the first witness, Ensign Iago. (*Pause. Enter **Iago**.*)

[*Note to students: pay close attention to Iago's speeches, both the text (what he is saying) and the sub-text (what he is thinking). Remember, right at the beginning of the play he says, 'I am not what I am'.]*

Sen Gen

Iago, you have served in the army for a good number of years.

Iago

That I have, sir.

Sen Gen

And yet ... what is your rank, soldier?

Iago

Ensign to the valiant General Othello, sir.

Sen Gen

(*With somewhat of a sneer.*) That's right, Ensign, flag-bearer, 'Ancient'.

Iago

Ay, I am – God bless the mark! – his Moorship's Ancient.

Sen Gen

Do we detect a hint of resentment in your saying so?

Iago

Why, there's no remedy. 'Tis the curse of service.
Preferment now goes by letter and by ... affection, and not
by the old step-by-step gradation. But, sir, content you: I
follow him to ... serve him.

Sen Gen

That speaks of loyalty, sir.

Iago

My General, the Moor, is of a constant, loving, noble nature.

Sen Gen

Yet, it is reported that you observed a different nature in
Othello when here, in Cyprus.

Iago

General – and monsignor the Governor Montano – I'll not
mince the matter. There occurred a soldiers' brawl after
Lieutenant Cassio had drunk more than he could ...

Sen Gen

Hold, Ensign Iago!

Iago

Ay, sir, more than he could hold.

(Laughter in court.)

Sen Gen

You are merry, sir. You know well 'twas not the meaning I
intended. 'Hold!' I say, as in 'Wait! Stop!' 'Tis meet that
Lieutenant Cassio should hear and answer this. Call
Lieutenant Cassio. *(Pause. Enter **Cassio**.)* Lieutenant Cassio!

Cassio *(Interrupting, despairing, almost in tears.)*

No, sir, no more. Hear what said my General to me.

Othello

(Rising from the bench.) Cassio, I love thee, but nevermore
be officer of mine.

Cassio

Reputation ... !

Sen Gen

Hold, sir!

Cassio

Reputation ... !

Sen Gen

I say, hold, sir!

Cassio

O, I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself!

Sen Gen (*To Montano.*)

My Lord Governor, the witness is in a state of some distress.

Montano

Michael Cassio, would you like a short recess ... ?

Cassio

I ... I find I cannot ...

Sen Gen

My lord Montano, I leave off examining Michael Cassio, to pursue another matter with General Othello.

Montano

Very well, sir. Be seated, Michael Cassio. Proceed, General.

Sen Gen

I thank your Lordship. Your last words, General Othello ...
(*To Stenographer.*) Please read to the Tribunal General Othello's last words to Michael Cassio.

Stenographer

'Cassio, I love thee, but nevermore be officer of mine.'

Sen Gen

You demoted him ... ?

Othello

Why, I did so ...

Sen Gen

You stripped him of his office ...?

Othello

I did so.

Sen Gen

Without a court martial ... ? Without an examination by independent senior officers into your reasons. Sirrah, you note I put no question mark at the end of that statement, so there is no need for you to reply. Michael Cassio, you are now excused, with the Tribunal's thanks. (*Exit Cassio. To Othello.*) This matter of Cassio's dismissal past, what then said you to Iago?

Iago

If I may speak on behalf of my General ...

Sen Gen

No, sir, you may not. Well, General ... ?

Othello

I said unto Iago: 'Now art thou my Lieutenant.'

Sen Gen

Again, without any recourse to any senior military personnel?

Othello

Ay, I did so.

Sen Gen

You promoted him from Ensign to Lieutenant?

Othello

Ay, sir, I did so.

Iago

If I may ... speak for my General ... ?

Sen Gen

No. You. May. Not. You speak only when you are invited to. (To **Othello**.) Thank you, sir, please be seated. My lord Montano, we now move on to the next charge against Othello.

Montano

(*Mildly correcting him.*) General Othello.

Sen Gen

(*Acknowledging the reprimand.*) My lord. General Othello, our attention is drawn to the unfortunate occurrence resulting in your striking your wife. Pray, take us through the events that led up to this unsavoury situation.

Iago

My lord, if I may answer for ...

Sen Gen

No, *Ensign* Iago, you may not, until called upon. Be seated, sir. Call the next witness, Signor Lodovico, kinsman to the Duke of Venice. (*Pause. Enter **Lodovico**.*) Signor, how came you to be in Cyprus?

Lodovico

I delivered a letter to General Othello, from the Duke and Senate of the State of Venice.

Sen Gen

I see. And what did you perceive in the General's demeanour?

Lodovico

He was a much-changed man from the General as we knew him in Venice. He started, he shook; he appeared like a man possessed by some demon.

Iago

(*Leaping up from the bench.*) I said to him: 'O, beware, my lord, of jealousy! The green-eyed monster!'

Sen Gen

Silence, sir!

Lodovico

So, it was jealousy ... !

Othello

Why is this? Thinkst thou I'd make a life of jealousy?

Montano

(Using the gavel.) Order! Order! The Tribunal shall come to order!

(Order is restored.)

Sen Gen

Signor Lodovico, what say you of his state of mind?

Lodovico

It may be that the letter moved him, for, as I think, they did command him home, deputing Cassio in his place of government.

Sen Gen

And his response on reading the letter?

Lodovico

When Desdemona said she 'was glad' of Cassio's reinstatement (which the letter presupposed), he called her 'mad', cried out that she was a 'Devil!', and ... he struck her. Stunned, I said, 'This would not be believed in Venice.'

[That is what Lodovico thinks. But students may debate this and decide who in Venice would readily believe it – and could even be said to have 'predicted' it, or something like it.]

Sen Gen *(To Montano.)*

If it please your lordship, this is where the second charge against Othello ... General Othello ends. His presence at this Tribunal is no longer required; indeed, is not possible, as the third charge of the Tribunal is made against him posthumously. He died by his own hand before this third section of the Tribunal could commence.

Montano

Very well, then. General Othello – for so I address you, but you must know that that rank is in jeopardy as this Tribunal will conclude – we thank you for your attendance at the Tribunal and your patient forbearance of what must be a difficult in-detail examination of yourself. Please vacate the chamber. (*Exit Othello.*) Pray, continue, General.

Sen Gen

This will be brief, sir, as the pertinent facts are known. In a word, we know that General Othello killed his wife by smothering her with a pillow as she lay abed.

Montano

What we need to know – as we shall need to impart it to the Duke of Venice and the lady’s father Brabantio – is how this came about.

Sen Gen

Indeed, sir, we are ready to do just that. I need to let you know that I have resisted all the pleas and even threats made by Ensign Iago to speak in this part of the Tribunal. As you can guess, this did not sit well with Iago, who finally refused to have anything to do with the Tribunal, his last words being recorded thus ... (*To the Stenographer*) Pray, read from the record.

Stenographer

‘From this time forth I never will speak word.’

Montano

Well, then, let us proceed without the benefit of Ensign Iago. You gave notice of this section of the charge-sheet to be ‘the tragic outcome of a trivial occurrence’ – that being the loss or misplacement of a ... a handkerchief. Pray, expound, so that I and the Tribunal may be enlightened.

Sen Gen

I call only one witness. I call Emilia to the stand. (*Pause. Enter Emilia.*) Emilia, a handkerchief embroidered with strawberries – just such an one as this. (*Produces a handkerchief and shows it to both Emilia and Montano.*) Please take your time and tell this court all the journey of

this pretty little item: how it moved from hand to hand, each reason for its passage, and the final result of its journey.

Emilia

[The student playing Emilia will have prepared with their peers by tracing the course of the handkerchief in the text – and can now take their time to satisfy the Tribunal’s request. Don’t hurry this, as it is important for the Court to understand how this aggravated Othello’s distress, and played into the hand of Iago.]

Sen Gen (After *Emilia’s* testimony.)

We hereby conclude the business of this Tribunal. It is now left, Signor Montano, to you and your small band of advisers to frame the military and personal outcomes.

Montano

We withdraw and will do as you say. You will be informed to reconvene to hear us at due date. The Tribunal is adjourned.

[The Tribunal ends.]

Two final points:

1 It is up to teacher and students whether Montano’s closing injunction occurs, i.e. whether or not Montano and his advisers reconvene the Tribunal, and what they will say at such a ‘press conference’.

2 All of the above should serve more as a blueprint rather than a finished product. There are many other issues that can be brought up for examination and probing. But that will depend on the involvement, enthusiasm and staying power of both teacher and students. We must beware of stretching things beyond their comfortable limits!

RM