



EXERCISE: MISOGYNY

2 classes: approx. 120 minutes

OBJECTIVE: Students will analyse one of the central themes of the play: misogyny and how it impacts the characters, and how racism and gender inequality are interconnected and reinforced through societal intolerance and discrimination.

INSTRUCTIONS: Students will examine the text of Act 2, scene 1 together, starting with what they know and understand to be the key issues. Then, delving deeper, they will explore how misogyny and racism worked together 400 years ago and now.

RESOURCES: Act 2, scene 1 script copies*, pens, pencils, notebooks
Using PerformancePlus
Othello: Act 2, scene 1 film video; *PDF script; Learning Activities video on Misogyny; Artistic Insights videos

INTRODUCTION

1. Before exploring the scene together, have the students consider these questions, either by responding with their own writing or by discussing with a partner or small group.
 - First, gender¹ – what informs what we believe about gender? Why do we believe what we do about gender? What are some unconscious biases² we may have about gender?
 - Shakespeare wrote only three women in the play: Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca. If it were written today, would that still be the case? Would anything else be different? Why or why not?

¹ **GENDER:** the socially constructed roles, behaviours, expressions and identities of girls, women, boys, men and gender-diverse people. Gender identity is not binary or static. It is a spectrum and can change over time.

² **UNCONSCIOUS BIASES:** social stereotypes about certain groups of people that individuals form outside their own conscious awareness.

EXPLORING THE SCENE

2. Now examine Act 2, scene 1 together. You will get some insight into Iago's views on women and on how Desdemona and Emilia are written in the play. (Note: Take some time to watch the scene. Remember, you can read the text on your screen while the scene plays out.)
3. Next, have the students, working either independently or with a partner, make note of the following:
 - How would you define misogyny,³ and what examples of it do we see in this scene?
 - Misogyny runs rampant in the play.
 - Think about how Iago and Cassio speak about and treat Bianca.⁴
 - Witness Iago and Emilia's entire relationship.
 - Consider Othello's treatment of Desdemona as the play unfolds.⁵
 - Do any of these examples resonate with beliefs about or treatment of women today?
 - Does seeing this enacted in the play tell us anything about how to disrupt or resist this injustice in our world today? Why or why not? Explain your position.
 - Who speaks the most in this scene? Why do you think this is the case?
 - Why do you think Emilia doesn't respond more to what her husband says?
 - What does Iago reveal about his character in this scene? Do you think he is unique in his beliefs or is he simply sharing the dominant views of his time?
 - Though this production is set in our time, the play was written over 400 years ago. Does it surprise you that it is still produced today? Why or why not?

PROVIDING A NEW PERSPECTIVE

4. Next, again working either independently or with a partner, the students may choose to do one of the following:

³ **MISOGYNY:** feelings of hating women or the belief that men are much better than women. Examples of misogyny may come in the form of exclusion, discrimination, patriarchy, male privilege, belittling of women, violence harassment, disenfranchisement, sexual objectification, etc.

⁴ Look at Act 4, scene 1.

⁵ Look at Act 4, scene 2.

- Write a scene that immediately follows this one that features just Desdemona and Emilia discussing what happens in Act 2, scene 1.
 - Alternatively, edit this scene by inserting more lines from Emilia and Desdemona, responding to Iago.
 - Whichever approach the students choose, have them consider the following:
 - Where might this scene take place if you were to transpose it into your own life?
 - What might Desdemona and Emilia say privately that they would not say in front of Iago and Cassio? Why is this the case?
 - How might these two women support each other and build each other up after experiencing Iago's denigration?
 - What do you imagine Emilia's subtext to be throughout the scene? What might she wish to say in response? How would her responses change how the scene unfolds?
 - If you were in the scene, what would you say to Emilia or Desdemona to make them feel safe and empowered?
5. After the students have either written a newly imagined scene or edited this one, have them perform their work for their classmates.

DEBRIEF

6. After sharing some of the work the students have created, use the following questions to debrief them, either by having them write independently or by discussing as a class:
- Does this type of gender injustice resonate with today's society and politics? What are the similarities and differences?
 - *Othello* is a play about racism.⁶ How do misogyny and racism work together? How can we stand up to both?
 - *Othello* is also a play steeped in militarism. Does this have an effect on the systemic oppression⁷ we see in the play? Why or why not?

⁶ **RACISM:** prejudice, discrimination or antagonism directed against people on the basis of their membership in a particular racial or ethnic group, typically one that is a minority or marginalized.

⁷ **SYSTEMIC OPPRESSION:** the intentional disadvantaging of groups of people based on their identity while advantaging members of the dominant group (gender, race, class, sexual orientation, language, etc.).