

## ***Othello* as a play text**

As you read and study *Othello* it is important to remember that this is a play, written to be performed on a stage. Lack of time means it is not always possible to experiment with performing or staging a scene.

- To help you visualise what a scene might look like on stage and to reflect on how this alters your interpretation, keep the following questions in mind as you read.
  - Who is on stage at the beginning of the scene?
  - Who leaves? Who enters? At what point?
  - Who is central to the action? Who else is on stage and why are they there, if they are only marginal to the action?
  - Who initiates the action/conversation?
  - Who responds?
  - Does the scene (or section of the scene) take place in public or private? What is the significance of this?

## **Reading a speech – some linguistic approaches**

- Use the approaches in the box on page 21 on one or more of the key speeches in the play. Make sure you connect the language features you notice to the meaning. Experiment with one of these approaches to help you prepare:
  - a dramatic reading of the speech, which highlights the most significant language features you've noticed
  - a short presentation about the speech, in which you explain what you've noticed about the way the language contributes to the meaning.

You could do this activity in pairs or threes, with each group taking responsibility for one of *Othello*'s key speeches (listed below), in order to explore what's revealed about *Othello* through his changing uses of language at different stages in the play.

- 1 'Most potent, grave, and reverend signiors ... I won his daughter' 1.3.76-94
- 2 'Her father lov'd me ... let her witness it.' 1.3.128-170
- 3 'Why, why is this? ... Away at once with love or jealousy!' 3.3.180-196
- 4 'This fellow's of exceeding honesty, ... I'll not believe it' 3.3.262-283
- 5 'I had been happy if the general camp ... Farewell, *Othello*'s occupation's gone!' 3.3.351-363
- 6 'Lie with her, lie on her? ... O devil!' 4.1.35-43
- 7 'Ay, you did wish that I would make her turn ... Goats and monkeys!' 4.1.248-259
- 8 'It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul ... It strikes when it does love: she wakes.' 5.2.1-22
- 9 'Soft you, a word or two: ... And smote him thus.' 5.2.339-357

## Reading a speech – some linguistic approaches

- **Punctuation, pace, rhythm, structure.** Try reading every sentence of the speech with one breath per sentence. Then read it again, this time pausing for 1 count for a comma, 2 for a semi-colon or a dash, 3 for a colon and 4 for a full stop, an exclamation mark or a question mark.
  
- **Mood: statement, exclamation, question, command.** Go through the speech and annotate it to show the mood of each sentence, with an 'S', 'E', 'Q' or 'C'. Then read the speech emphasising that mood in your voice and facial expressions.
  
- **Line rhythms.** Clap out the iambic rhythm (*de dum, de dum, de dum, de dum, de dum*). Force the speech into the rhythm. Where does it want to break out? How does this relate to the meaning?
  
- **Monosyllabic and polysyllabic words.** What's the balance? What difference does this make to your reading of the speech?
  
- **Sounds of words.** Try whispering the speech to each other and spot the 'plosives' ('p', 'd', 'k', 't', 'b') – often hard, or ugly, or powerful – or the soft sibilant 's' sounds which can be menacing. Listen for other soft sounds, or humming sounds ('l', 'm'). Listen for any consonant clusters. What is the effect of these sounds on meaning?
  
- **Rhetoric: repetition, antithesis, questions, heightened language.** Start with repetition – any repeated words or patterns. Read the speech and get your partner to echo any repeated words. Move on to the other rhetorical techniques. Find ways of emphasising them in reading the speech out loud.
  
- **Patterns of words or images.** Link up all the words with a similar meaning or with deliberately contrasted meanings. Read the speech with your partner echoing these words for emphasis.
  
- **Use of rhyme.** Is rhyme used anywhere in the speech? If so, when? What is the effect as you read? Try emphasising the rhymed words to see what ideas stand out.
  
- **Blank verse or prose?** What difference does this make to the way you read and to the impact of the words? Try reading the verse as if it were prose and the prose as if it were verse. What is the effect of this?