AQA English Literature A-level

Othello: Character Profiles

Cassio

CASSIO

CHIVALRY AIN'T DEAD

INTRODUCTION

Cassio is a **well-educated** man from Florence who has recently been appointed Othello's second in command, his **lieutenant**. With his charm, charisma, upbringing, and handsome looks, he is your typical **ladies' man**, and it's clear he views himself as such. With the title of lieutenant under his belt, he is **confident** and **complacent**, but still a loyal and **devoted follower** of Othello.

Iago **resents** him for his promotion, believing he should have been chosen over the inexperienced Cassio, and for his **suave**, **respectable persona**. This makes Cassio one of the many targets of Iago's vendetta. He gets Cassio fired by getting him into a **drunken brawl** and uses his **chivalrous behaviour** against him by implying he has slept with Othello's wife, Desdemona. Cassio is distraught but doesn't speak up for himself, instead asking Desdemona to plead his case. This only bolsters Iago's case against him. While this is happening, we also learn that Cassio is seeing one of Cyprus' courtesans, Bianca; she loves him, but he doesn't love her, and mocks her behind her back. Despite Cassio's many failings, he emerges from the chaos of the play in a **better position** than when he started: when Iago and Othello's actions are revealed, Cassio is put **in charge** of Cyprus.

While Cassio's main purpose might be to become one of **Iago's pawns**, Shakespeare uses the character to complement the many themes he explores in the text. Cassio is a **foil** for both Othello and Iago: he is **white**, **upper class**, and **well-spoken**, all things that either or both men envy. As such, he symbolises the **authority of rich**, white men in society and the **anxieties** felt by outsiders. His existence is a **catalyst** for Iago's behaviour and an **aggravator** for Othello's **jealous insecurity**. Simultaneously, Shakespeare exposes the facades Cassio uses to protect himself, depicting him as someone who isn't as honourable and brave as he wants others to believe. He may be a **victim** of Iago's lies and manipulations but his decision to **rely** on Desdemona for help, taking advantage of her **generosity**, possibly makes the consequences even worse.

EXAM TIP: Minor Characters

Every character in a play is included for a reason. A playwright only has so long to get their point across to the audience, so every character and line is vital. Because of this, writers typically distill a key theme or message into one minor character. While the main characters will encompass many concepts, minor characters are an easier way to identify the themes the writer cares most about. This can be a quick way to get your head around a question in an exam. Don't ignore minor characters just because you think they won't come up in an exam - they have and they will!

KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- **The Reputable Scholar:** Shakespeare depicts Cassio as an **intelligent, well-educated man**. When we first hear of Cassio, we are told he is **"a great arithmetician, / [...] a Florentine, / [...] That never set a squadron in the field," (Act 1 Scene 1)**. This establishes him as a man of **logic and strategy** rather than one of action, with Iago implying that he isn't suited to warfare because he is inexperienced **"in the field"**. In Shakespeare's time, Florence was associated with **intellect, progress,** and the **Renaissance**, so introducing Cassio as a **"Florentine"** goes a long way to telling his audience what to think of him. Cassio uses his education as a crutch, giving himself a sense of **superiority**: for instance, he says of Iago, **"You may relish him more in the soldier than in the scholar," (Act 2 Scene 1)**.

- **The Push-Over:** For all Cassio's alleged intelligence, he ends up being **easily manipulated** by Iago. Despite saying he won't drink any more because he has **"very poor and unhappy brains for drinking,"** mere minutes later he returns on stage and says, **"They have given me a rouse [drink] already," (Act 2 Scene 3)**. He gives into **temptation** and gets drunk; similarly, he is easily provoked into a fight with Roderigo, quickly losing his **temper**: **"Let me go, sir; or I'll knock you o'er the mazzard," (Act 2 Scene 3)**. Shakespeare shows that Cassio is not as logical and controlled as he thinks he is.

- **The Honourable Gentleman:** Shakespeare portrays Cassio as someone who is **motivated** by a **deep-rooted sense of honour**. He attributes his **"manners"** and **"courtesy"** to his **"breeding" (Act 2 Scene 1)**, suggesting he views himself as a respectable man of the upper classes. He is **chivalrous** to women, greeting Desdemona with **"Hail to thee, lady!" (Act 2 Scene 1)** and saying she has **"an inviting eye, and yet methinks right modest," (Act 2 Scene 3)**. He refuses to disrespect a woman of high standing with such 'locker room talk' as Iago tries to engage him in. His **devotion to righteousness** extends to Othello: he declares, **"I will rather sue to be despised than to deceive so good a commander with so light, so drunken, and so indiscreet an officer," (Act 2 Scene 3)**, and, **"I may again / Exist and be a member of his love, / Whom I, with all the office of my heart, / Entirely honour," (Act 3 Scene 4)**. He cannot bear the thought of betraying his general and takes his **commitment** to Othello very seriously.

- **The Dishonest Knave:** Shakespeare shows that Cassio is not so generous with his honour towards all women, however. He leads on Bianca, a **local courtesan**, calling her **"sweet love" (Act 3 Scene 4)** to her face though Iago notes, **"He, when he hears of her, cannot refrain / From the excess of laughter," (Act 4 Scene 1)**. While Cassio refused to sexualise or demean Desdemona, he is happy to call Bianca a **"customer"** who **"haunts [him] in every place," (Act 4 Scene 1)**. This reveals his **duplicitous nature** and his misogynistic views. He gladly **takes advantage** of Bianca for his own **pleasure** and clearly doesn't value her as a fellow human being.

- **The Coward:** For all his **arrogance and extravagance**, Cassio is revealed to be a **coward**. When Othello questions him about his drunken brawl, Cassio replies, **"I pray you pardon me, I cannot speak," (Act 2 Scene 3)**. Likewise, when Desdemona invites him to join her in talking with Othello, he declines, explaining, **"I am very ill at ease," (Act 3 Scene 3)**. Without the title of lieutenant, Cassio is **afraid and incapable**. You might even suspect he is **afraid** of Othello. As a result, he asks Desdemona to speak for him, but still has the audacity to pressure her into acting quickly: **"That policy may either last so long [...] / That I being absent and my place supplied, / My general will forget my love and service," (Act 3 Scene 3)**. He is **demanding and impatient**, and he **punishes** others for this.

- **The Con:** By the end of the play, Shakespeare has made it clear that Cassio is not who he wants people to believe he is. The moment his role as lieutenant is taken away, he is **a nobody**: **"I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial," (Act 2 Scene 3)**. His **cowardice and reluctance** to take action for himself suggest he is not the brave soldier deserving of his lieutenancy. The **chivalrous facade** he puts on hides his **proclivity** for mocking and **exploiting women**. He takes advantage of Desdemona's generosity when he asks her to be his **"solicitor" (Act 3 Scene 3)**, with fatal consequences.

EXAM TIP: Typicality

Considering the typicality of a text is a good way to ensure you are considering both context and the author's intentions. If a text is typical of its era, what are the cultural and contextual influences that make these attributes so emblematic of the period? For example, presenting a female character as weak might be typical of literature because of the legal rights of women at the time, and the resulting cultural perspective. If an author has written something atypical, why have they done this? What message are they trying to convey by challenging these trends?
In an exam, making sure you consider typicality with every point you make is a quick way to include a lot of the AOs.

RELATIONSHIPS

Othello | Othello is the person Cassio **respects the most** throughout the play. When everything is descending into chaos at Iago's hand, Cassio returns like clockwork to inquire about Desdemona's success and his **reinstatement**. He is devastated that he has fallen out of favour with Othello, and is **humiliated** because he acted so **dishonorably** in such a public setting. Cassio has a strong **moral code of honour**, and a large part of this revolves around serving his higher-ups and doing his duty to the state. As such, he is fixated on **regaining his title** and winning Othello's love. This commitment conveys the importance of **homosocial relations** in patriarchal societies, particularly in a patriarchal institution such as the military. If one were to be **cynical** about Cassio's devotion to Othello, one may argue that Cassio serves Othello only because he is his ticket to career success. Indeed, when Othello's crimes are exposed, Cassio takes his place.

When Cassio is trying to **persuade** Othello to welcome him back - using Desdemona as a messenger pigeon - he emphasises his **past service** in the army. He relies on his previous contributions and successes to convince Othello of his worth rather than trying to atone for his mistakes. He doesn't try and do something to make it up to Othello, opting instead for inaction. It becomes apparent that Cassio is **intimidated** by Othello and fears his judgement. This serves as a reminder that their bond is not simple friendship: it is dictated by **social codes** and **power plays**.

Iago | When the play opens, Cassio has managed to offend Iago simply by existing. He represents everything **Iago hates**, namely elitism, favouritism, and success with women. Consequently, Iago decides to use all these things against him: for example, he takes **advantage** of Cassio's **charismatic, suave persona** when convincing Othello that Desdemona has been unfaithful to him.

Cassio, like everyone else in the play, has fallen for Iago's disguise and wholly believes he is an honest man. He is **clueless** about Iago's feud. He **confides** in him, asks him for advice, and engages in **drunken revelry** with him. On the other hand, Cassio looks down on Iago for having a **lower social status**: he brags about being his lieutenant and makes comments about Iago's **lack of intelligence**. Most likely, this motivates Iago to get revenge and prove him wrong.

Desdemona | Cassio admires Desdemona, thinks she is beautiful, and - most importantly - **respects her** as a reputable member of the upper classes. We can't know for certain if he loves her, though Iago seems to think he does. Shakespeare plays on this ambiguity, welcoming **speculation and gossip** about their relationship. The audience can't help but wonder if Iago is right; in a way, this makes us **complicit** in Iago's plans and in Othello's gullible vengeance.

AO5: Society & Savagery

"As the Venetians gradually discover to their cost, **the Wild Man lurks** not in his traditional haunts of the desert, the forest, or the wilderness but, more disconcertingly, **at home, right at the heart of civilisation** itself. [...] The savage exists in a state of nature that, in itself, is neither good nor bad." - Catherine Bates, 'Shakespeare's Tragedies of Love'

"In times of **sociocultural stress**, when **the need for positive self-definition asserts itself** but no compelling criterion of self-identification appears, it is always possible to say something like: "**I may not know the precise content of my own felt humanity, but I am most certainly not like that**"." - Hayden White

"Men call that barbarisme which is not common to them [...] I am not sorie we note the barbarous horror of such an action, but grieved, that **prying** so narrowly **into their faults we are so blinded in ours**." - Montaigne, On Cannibals (1603)

When interacting with Desdemona, Cassio is typically **chivalrous and honourable**. All of his **courtly manners** come out in full force. At the same time, though, he is willing to ask a large favour of her when he comes to her for help. By asking Desdemona to speak to Othello in his defence, he is taking advantage of Desdemona's generosity and trust. He comes to her because she is Othello's wife, reducing her to her **relation to men**; also, this act breaks the divide between **military and civil matters**, disrupting the couple's personal life. It was his mistake that put him in this predicament and he passes the responsibility onto her.

Bianca | Cassio's relationship with Bianca is built on **dishonesty and disrespect**. According to Cassio and Iago, Bianca is **obsessed** with Cassio and fawns on him, though this is likely **misogynistic hyperbole**. Regardless, there is a power imbalance in their relationship, due partly to class, partly to gender, and partly to **unreciprocated feelings**. Bianca cares for Cassio,

but Cassio is using her. We see him feign affection and intimacy, **manipulating** her to stay, while he **mocks** and demeans her behind her back. Cassio's relationship to Bianca gives Shakespeare the opportunity to display Cassio's more **unlikeable** characteristics, such as his **dismissive cruelty** and duplicitous nature.

KEY THEMES

Cassio is your **typical hero**: charming, charismatic, successful, respected. Iago **envies** him because of this and his high breeding, fueling his hatred. Plus, Iago's vendetta is first presented to the audience as a response to Cassio's **promotion** to lieutenant. Hence, Cassio's character is used by Shakespeare as a **vessel** for social tensions, particularly surrounding gender and class. The ways other characters - particularly Iago - perceive him, and the meanings they project onto him, are as significant as the character's own actions. For instance, to Iago, Cassio becomes a symbol for everything he resents about **hierarchical Venetian culture**. Shakespeare writes Cassio as a catalyst, someone whose existence alone provokes other characters into action because of who he is (a successful, admired Florentine) and what he represents. This enables the playwright to explore different themes by 'bouncing' them off Cassio's character and by using Cassio to confront other characters with these themes.

Out of the main characters in the text, Cassio is the only one who **'fits in'.** Iago, as ensign, is too low down the pecking order for his liking, and he is treated by others accordingly. Cassio is **white, upper class, likeable**, and successful. Shakespeare uses his character as a symbol for traditional white male dominance, as well as the **epitome of masculinity.** However, his status is quickly **undermined**: he is demoted by Othello and subsequently revealed as a coward. The 'perfect man' we perceive him as is revealed to be a **fraud**. In this way, Shakespeare questions the legitimacy of **white male hegemony** and the upper classes as a whole, exposing them as frauds and cons.

AO5: Cassio as Othello's Foil

"Both men serve as loyal soldiers of the Venetian crown, but **Cassio** seems to represent the **impishness of youth**, the suave, debonair, and eye-catching gallantry that attracts lady folk to military men, whilst **Othello** represents **the wisdom, experience, and backbone** - both the brains and brawn - of any army's foundation. Cassio has **physical beauty and grace**; Othello has **calculating finesse and wisdom**." - Veronika Walker

Misogyny

Cassio, like all of the other male characters in the text, is used by Shakespeare to reinforce the **patriarchal culture** within which the play is set. If the misogynistic view of women we see portrayed were only voiced by one character in isolation, the effect wouldn't be as great as having this perspective come from all sides. However, by having background or minor characters such as Cassio bring up these same ideals in **casual conversation**, Shakespeare is able to create a sense of being surrounded by misogyny. There is no escape from the **superiority of masculinity**, and as such the women on stage - and in the audience - are struck with a feeling of **claustrophobia**.

Cassio, a Florentine, sees himself as a bit of a 'ladies' man', **flirting** with women and generally charming them, behaviour he puts down to his **"breeding" (Act 2 Scene 1)**. Yet, at the same time, he hides his relationship with Bianca because he doesn't want his **"general"**, Othello, to **"see [him] womaned" (Act 3 Scene 4)**. This **hypocrisy** shows the double standard

surrounding **romance** and women, with women being seen both as a piece of **entertainment** and as an embarrassment. Shakespeare shows that Cassio is **ashamed** of knowing Bianca, a courtesan, even as he makes plans to see her. The dynamic these two characters share demonstrates how women, particularly lower class women or **prostitutes**, were **hidden** from the public sphere: men used them for their **own pleasure** and exploited them, but refused them entry to the rest of their lives. Women were regarded as objects that belonged behind locked doors, waiting patiently for their men to return, with **no autonomy** or freedom to roam. By referring to being in a relationship as being **"womaned"**, it is implied that it is something men are **subjected** to, in keeping with the **stereotype** that women are needy and nag their husbands; to be **"womaned"** is to be burdened. Alternatively, Cassio's **secrecy** surrounding his relationship may reflect wider societal attitudes towards romance and women: as a high ranking officer, Cassio may not want to be associated with something **emasculating** like love or need, not least with a prostitute. If people knew he was succumbing to sexual urges, they may think less of him and **doubt** his ability to **command**.

Cassio's **alleged relationship** with Desdemona is a crucial part of the plot, drawing the audience's attention to their interactions. We can't help but indulge in **gossip and rumour**, and so we wonder if Iago is right when he says, **"That Cassio loves her, I do well believe't," (Act 2 Scene 1)**. In this way, Shakespeare welcomes comparisons between Cassio's relationships with Desdemona and Bianca. One woman is **upper class and respectable**, the other is a courtesan; one is the wife of his boss, unattainable, and the other dotes on him. These roles are reflected in how Cassio views the two women: he calls Desdemona **"a maid that paragons description and wild fame [...] the divine Desdemona," (Act 2 Scene 1)**, whereas of Bianca he says, **"Poor caitiff! [...] Poor rogue! [...] I marry her? What! A customer! [...] She is persuaded I will marry her out of her own love and flattery, not out of my promise," (Act 4 Scene 1)**. He views Desdemona with **awe** and reverence while treating Bianca as a joke, mocking and **patronising** her; this contrast implies men judge women by their **social standing**. His outright **dismissal** of the idea of marrying Bianca emphasises the **exploitation** of women, particularly sex workers, as they were regarded as sexual objects. Moreover, Bianca is the woman Cassio is seeing, yet he treats Desdemona with more **dignity**, suggesting men hold more respect for women who they aren't with: the allure of the unattainable.

However, a different type of **commodification** and **objectification** is reserved for Desdemona. Cassio says, **"Our great captain's captain, left in the conduct of the bold Iago," (Act 2 Scene 1)**: by calling her the **"captain's captain"**, he depicts her as a **powerful authority**, yet in the same breath portrays her as something that must be **"left in the conduct"** of a male guardian, like a child or a piece of cargo. The implication is that Desdemona is too delicate or **too unreliable** to be left alone. In addition, Cassio describes her as **"the riches of the ship" (Act 2 Scene 1)**, objectifying her outright with hyperbole that resembles Renaissance love poetry. Desdemona is another **material good** in this capitalist society. Shakespeare argues that misogyny doesn't dissipate as you move up the class ladder - it merely **changes form**.

AO5: Fallen Women

"The ultimate irony in the play's representation of male-female relations is the fact that **two women accused by their husbands of "falling" morally**, actually fall not morally but physically, before our eyes, **felled by those morally "fallen" husbands' hands** and, symbolically, by the male-dominated society which endorses the murder of supposedly fallen women." - Ruth Vanita, "Proper' Men and 'Fallen' Women: The Unprotectedness of Wives in Othello'

Equally, you could argue that Cassio uses Desdemona in a way akin to his use of Bianca. Instead of sexual favours, he uses her for **political** ones: to represent his **"suit" (Act 3 Scene 3)** with Othello, so that he can regain Othello's favour and be reinstated as lieutenant. This favour turns out to be a nail in Desdemona's coffin, suggesting men ask women to **sacrifice themselves** for matters that, at the same time, are **denied** to women: Cassio wants Desdemona to help him regain his role in the military, yet the military was not 'for women'. Plus, when Desdemona welcomes him to **"stay and hear [her] speak"**, Cassio declines, and Iago describes him as **"steal[ing] away so guilty-like," (Act 3 Scene 3)**. This secrecy resembles Cassio's **reticence and reluctance** about being seen with Bianca. Thus, Shakespeare implies that Cassio is taking advantage of Desdemona, shamefully and in private, the same way he takes advantage of Bianca.

Reputation

Reputation is a big part of Venetian life within the play. It decides who gets power and who gets to keep it, who to know and who to avoid, who is **respectable** and who is **immoral**. It is more important than the quality of your character or your achievements: how people perceive you and where they think you belong in the **social rankings** determines the life you lead, like a **self-fulfilling prophecy**. As someone is climbing the social ladder, someone else is falling down it. As such, *Othello*'s Venetians form a **microcosm** for Jacobean society, with its nobles and aristocrats and high society. Even when they are removed from the streets of Venice and transplanted in Cyprus, this system of reputation persists. Cassio's character sits at the heart of this: throughout the play, he is fixated on his reputation and what other people think of him. When he loses his lieutenancy, he is devastated because of the sense of **public shame** he feels. Shakespeare even introduces Cassio's character to us through the lens of reputation, as Iago insinuates Cassio was promoted through **corrupt favouritism**, not merit. This first impression is supported through his actions, which are calculated (when he's sober) with an audience in mind. It is fitting, then, that all eyes are literally on him.

The turning point for Cassio's character is at the end of **Act 2**, when Othello **demotes him publicly**. Until then, Cassio was depicted as quite an arrogant, self-assured man who sees himself as invincible. Now, faced with **ignominy** and an emasculating loss of power, he flounders in a **crisis of identity**. When Iago asks him if he is hurt, Cassio replies, **"Ay, past all surgery," (Act 2 Scene 3)**, suggesting the greatest wound inflicted is an incorporeal one that can't be treated with medicine. Cassio is more concerned with his notoriety and good name than with his physical health. He says, **"Reputation, reputation, reputation! O, I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial. My**

reputation, Iago, my reputation!" (Act 2 Scene 3). Shakespeare's use of repetition, the rule of three, and **exclamation** emphasises how devastating this turn of events is for Cassio. His **"reputation"** is the most **valuable** thing he owns and now he has **"lost"** it: he fears a life outside the upper **echelons of society**. This loss of respectability is mirrored in Shakespeare's choice of prose rather than the traditional meter; typically, when a character speaks in **prose** within a Shakespearean play, it is a mark of lower class or madness. In Cassio's case, it could be both: he has lost his **social standing** and, faced with this new life, has lost his grip on reality.

AO5: Male Solidarity

"A clear contrast is provided by the reaction of all onlookers to the striking of Montano by Cassio. This is treated as a public act, a crime that must, like any act of cognizable violence even today, be pursued and punished by the state. [...] Violence on a male produces an immediate counterreaction."
- Ruth Vanita, "Proper' Men and 'Fallen' Women: The Unprotectedness of Wives in Othello'

Cassio's **distressed** cries depict him as bereaved, in mourning. Paired with the presentation of reputation as a **physical** thing that can be **"lost"**, Shakespeare conveys the importance of **honour and prestige** in society. Furthermore, the metaphor **"lost the immortal part of myself"** implies Cassio *is* mourning his own death. Reputation lives on once you die, through your **legacy** and family name in society, making it **"immortal"**; therefore, having a good reputation is man's key to living forever. In contrast, Cassio says **"what remains is bestial"**; contrary to the belief that **rational thought** is what separates man from beast, Shakespeare portrays Cassio's belief that respectability is the barrier to **animalistic barbarity**. Shakespeare examines how qualities of character, such as **morality** or wisdom, are bestowed upon a person by their peers, rather than being something a person can develop for themselves. Alternatively, Shakespeare portrays the **damned fate** of someone ostracised from high society; without his reputation, Cassio sees himself as a beast, a symbol of **poverty and depravity**.

From this point in the text onwards, the **personal motivation** of Cassio's character is to regain his good standing. In the following acts, he appears on stage solely with the intention of discussing his reinstatement with others; Shakespeare portrays reputation itself as the character's only purpose. Cassio is **fixated** on becoming lieutenant again but isn't taking any steps to make amends with Othello or prove his commitment; instead, he charges others with the **responsibility**, asking Desdemona, **"I do beseech you / That, by your virtuous means, I may again / Exist and be a member of his love," (Act 3 Scene 4)**. He claims to **"love"** Othello, but the audience knows his obsession with reputation; plus, as he doesn't speak to Othello himself, there is **little doubt** that his intentions go beyond his relationship with him. As Cassio tries to regain his reputation through speech alone - without proving his **own merit** - Shakespeare depicts reputation as a **hollow, meaningless** thing. Furthermore, as Cassio uses others to advocate for him, Shakespeare examines how authority and respect are matters of who you know, not what you do.

Even as Cassio is aiming to **rebuild** his reputation, Iago is taking steps to destroy it. Cassio's reputation and quality of character is a big discussion point, even when the character isn't on stage. Iago successfully convinces Othello that Cassio is **crooked and deceitful**, thus ruining his reputation without Cassio's true actions factoring in. This contrast, as the two men Iago and Cassio battle for control of Cassio's reputation, shows how **public opinion** isn't a reflection of reality, despite it holding a lot of **power**.

Male Ego

Similarly to reputation, Shakespeare depicts the **male ego** as a key point of contention within characters' interactions. The men in the play are always **protecting** their **pride** and honour, to the point that a lot of their actions and decisions are made with this one goal in mind. Cassio is no exception. He feels humiliated by his **fall from grace** and now can think of nothing but setting things right. He doesn't want to appear weak to Othello, which is why he asks other people to speak for him. However, this does make him seem **cowardly** to those he asks and to the audience. This **juxtaposition** may be used by Shakespeare to represent **male ego** as an **irrational**, arbitrary thing: Cassio has decided that asking Othello for help is embarrassing but asking his wife isn't, though the two actions aren't inherently different. This choice may also reflect how the male ego is **intimidated** by other men while not valuing female opinion highly at all. The result of this is that men struggle to form **meaningful connections** with each other and women are exploited as tools or **consolation** for male ego.

AO5: Jealousy & Sexism

"Thus sexual jealousy is shown to be **the rule in Venice** rather than an exceptional emotional disorder to which Othello is especially prone to succumb. Roderigo's infatuation with Desdemona makes him intensely jealous of both Othello and Cassio. The **same emotion flares up in Bianca**, when Cassio gives her Desdemona's handkerchief: 'You are jealous now', says Cassio, 'That this is from some mistress, some remembrance' (3.4.185-186). Above all, Iago himself betrays the same **toxic disposition**, when he fastens automatically on **sexual jealousy as a pretext for provoking it in Othello** and **revenging himself on Cassio** [... A]ll these characters fall prey like him to 'the green-eyed monster' that stalks any society in which the sexual desire of one human being is regarded as the property of another." - Kiernan Ryan

Even before his demotion, Cassio is overly protective of his **self-image**. He tells Iago, **"The lieutenant is to be saved before the ancient," (Act 2 Scene 3)**, betraying his arrogance as he brags about his status. This is also an example of **dramatic irony** because the audience knows Iago is plotting Cassio's downfall and intends to take his place. Therefore, Shakespeare portrays Cassio as a **tragic figure**, full of hubris before his imminent decline. **Male ego**, he argues, is based in the illusion of **power and invincibility**. Cassio's fixation on his role as lieutenant implies he draws comfort from the title, suggesting men need **physical validation** of their importance. **Male ego** is then a matter of convincing *yourself* that you are important and successful, not others. We see this, also, when Cassio tells the crowd, **"Do not think, gentleman, I am drunk; this is my ancient, this is my right hand, and this is my left hand. I am not drunk now, I can stand well enough, and I speak well enough," (Act 2 Scene 3)**. Shakespeare shows how Cassio doesn't want others to judge him for being drunk, but from his actions and words (for instance, the word play in **"this is my right hand, and this is my left hand"**) it is obvious he is **intoxicated**, so we are given the impression Cassio is denying his drunkenness for his own sake. By convincing himself he's sober, he can continue to see himself

in charge, not as the weak light weight he is (**"I have very poor and unhappy brains for drinking" (Act 2 Scene 3)**. Again, he leans on his **superiority** over Iago as his **"ancient"** to reassure his pride. Shakespeare argues male ego promotes **delusion and denial** of reality.

Shakespeare shows how the **male ego** is intimidated by the authority and judgement of other men. Cassio is ashamed of being seen as a drunkard, saying, **"I will rather sue to be despised than to deceive so good a commander with so light, so drunken, and so indiscreet an officer. [...] O thou invisible spirit of wine, if thou hast no name to be known by, let us call thee devil!" (Act 2 Scene 3)**. As his **"commander"**, Othello holds great influence in Cassio's **military and social careers** - the last thing he wants to do is **"deceive"** him. The portrayal of alcohol as an **"invisible spirit"** and a **"devil"** alludes to the Bible and the typical Christian view of **drink**, emphasising how alcohol leads men away from **greatness**. You could argue that Shakespeare shows Cassio passing the blame to something other than himself to save face. Continuing, Cassio says, **"I will ask him for my place again; he shall tell me I am a drunkard. Had I as many mouths as Hydra, such an answer would stop them all," (Act 2 Scene 3)**. This shows how Cassio fears Othello's **disapproval and rejection**. The simile **"as many mouths as Hydra"** implies that nothing Cassio does will allow him to recover from this shame. His pride is irrevocably **ruined**: **"such an answer would stop them all"** suggests he can't confront his own nature. Alternatively, the allusion to **mythology** could serve to present pride as a **destructive monster**: like the Hydra, when one's pride is ruined, Shakespeare suggests one grows more proud and arrogant.

The consequences of Cassio's ego are fatal. Firstly, it makes him **vulnerable** to Iago's manipulative suggestions: **"What's he then that says I play the villain, / When this advice is [...] indeed the course / To win the Moor again?" (Act 2 Scene 3)**. In turn, it sets Desdemona up for death by placing her in the firing line. By playing the role of Cassio's **"solicitor" (Act 3 Scene 3)**, she unintentionally enrages Othello and adds credit to Iago's lies. If Cassio were willing to overcome his **delicate pride** and speak to Othello himself, the play's ending may not have been so catastrophic. In this way, Shakespeare argues that, while male ego is a **personal delusion**, everyone else - especially women - is brought into this delusion and suffers for it.

Symbolism

Shakespeare uses the construct of Cassio to explore the different **archetypes** surrounding **masculinity and manhood**, including the ways in which society judges masculine power. In Shakespeare's plays, gender is presented as a performance through which people express their traits or, more commonly, have **traits** given to them that they must then uphold. In the case of Cassio, masculinity is a symbol for authority, confidence, and **respectability**; all of these things are later revealed to be **hollow facades**. Shakespeare argues that **social indicators** such as gender and class are used to create an **illusion of power.** For example, the misogynistic narrative says that men are better because men are more logical, stronger, and so on; when these **myths** are believed enough, *male* becomes synonymous with *better*, as in the play. As a result, Shakespeare posits, **masculinity** becomes an **empty symbol** for these 'better' traits, with men rewarded for being men without them actually displaying any of these qualities. Cassio profits from his reputation as a masculine hero, but he is exposed for not possessing any heroic

traits. Once he has lost his reputation, there is nothing left. In this way, Shakespeare is **questioning** the very practice of **symbolism** even as he employs it in his writing.

The one who falls furthest for the myth of masculinity is Cassio himself. He invests his **self-worth** in how others view him, putting forward a **persona** that pleases him. Bolstered by his recent promotion, he is conceited, prideful, and - critically - complacent. When he loses his role, he has **no assets** with which to regain status except **networking** and favouritism. Therefore, Shakespeare writes Cassio as a symbol for the smug, lazy ruling classes. He propels the action forward through his ***lack* of action**, opting to ask others to act for him, and through him Shakespeare reveals a hierarchy governed by **nepotism, bias, and corruption**.

Symbolism allows the playwright to take the play out of the **realm of reality** and into another playing field, as it appeals to our emotions and memories more than plain dialogue can. Shakespeare's exploration of the **human condition** is strengthened by it.

Chivalry & Civility

Cassio is a young, well-educated, handsome Florentine. As a result, there are certain **expectations** that his Venetian peers and Shakespeare's contemporary audience would have about how he should behave and present himself. In Shakespeare's time, Florence was known for being an **intellectual, high-cultured city**, the birthplace of the Renaissance; as such, Florentines were expected to be respectable and intelligent. We see this in Iago's description of Cassio as **"a great arithmetician"** that **"never set a squadron in the field" (Act 1 Scene 1)**: Iago actually thinks less of Cassio for being a man of **knowledge**, not of violence. As the play continues, Iago uses Cassio's Florentine origins to mark him as the **suspicious outsider**, showing how ideas about **civility** and respectability differed even within Italy. Venetian culture is so **xenophobic** and **insular** that even the charismatic Cassio is vulnerable to its distrust.

AO5: A Marxist Reading

"The **pecking order** in Othello is clear. The Duke and aristocratic members of the Venetian Senate give orders to Othello, who in turn commands his lieutenant Cassio. Ensign Iago is subordinate to both. All three **ostensibly serve out of loyalty to the state** and for the status their military position brings, but they can be **dismissed at the pleasure of their superiors**. [...] The different **gradations of status** embedded in the text are often **represented in military terms**, with Iago presented as a rough-speaking non-commissioned officer, resentful of Cassio's rank and courtly manners." - Virginia Mason Vaughan, *Critical Approaches to Othello*

In keeping with Jacobean England's view of a **blossoming**, highly-evolved, **romantic** city of Florence, there was an expectation amongst the higher echelons of society that **courtship** upheld the **ideal** of courtly love. Courtly love revolved around the character of the attractive ladies' man who was **chivalrous** and proper towards all women. Shakespeare portrays Cassio as man who engages in this ideal of courtly love; the references in his language to chivalry symbolise his **deep sense of honour**. For example, when Iago attempts to provoke Cassio with lewd euphemisms like **"sport for Jove"** and **"full of game"**, Cassio refuses to rise to the bait, describing her as **"a most exquisite lady"** with **"an inviting eye, and yet methinks right**

modest," (Act 2 Scene 3). Iago's language is typical of **male camaraderie**, particularly among soldiers, where **sexist remarks** and jokes are exchanged happily. Cassio sets himself apart from this by depicting Desdemona as a respectable, honourable woman. His chivalrous demeanor is a symbol for his **outsider status** and for the **unrealistic expectations** of female purity that **enslave** women.

You could argue Cassio sees himself as the better man for his chivalrous view of women. For example, he greets Emilia by **"kiss[ing]"** her, telling Iago, **"Let it not gall your patience, good Iago, / That I extend my manners. 'Tis my breeding / That gives me this bold show of courtesy," (Act 2 Scene 1)**. The nouns **"manners"** and **"courtesy"** present his actions as the proper, respectful thing to do, implying **self-righteousness**. The reference to his **"breeding"** suggests a person's qualities can be attributed to their **upbringing, class, and nationality.** Cassio's acts of courtly love thus become symbols for **elitism** and the extravagant shows of power perpetrated by the rich.

While Cassio claims to be respectful towards women, his actions undermine his chivalry. He exploits Desdemona's **compassion** and generosity by asking her to take up his **"suit" (Act 3 Scene 3)**, **pressuring** her when he says, **"I would not be delayed," (Act 3 Scene 4)**. This suggests that, despite his show of **modesty**, he doesn't respect Desdemona. Furthermore, Shakespeare demonstrates that this ideal of courtly love isn't extended to all women: Cassio repeatedly **mocks** Bianca and calls her a **"customer"** and a **"perfumed one" (Act 4 Scene 1)**, demeaning her for being a prostitute. He compliments her to her face - **"Not that I love you not," (Act 3 Scene 4)**, **"My sweet Bianca!" (Act 4 Scene 1)** - and rejects her when talking behind her back. This **duplicity** shows Cassio is not as honourable as he claims. Furthermore, the **hypocrisy** of his chivalry exposes the double standards of the upper classes. His courtly love becomes a symbol for **farce** and **misogyny**.

Animals, Beasts, & Monsters

AO5: LOVE & CIVILISATION

In the essay 'Shakespeare's Tragedies of Love', critic Catherine Bates calls love "a **fundamentally creative force** and as such it is **opposed to the forces of destruction**. [...] It is therefore the **great civilising force**, the energy that counters anarchy and chaos with order and degree. [...] Love **sponsors the forces of life**, creating human families and social groups in the teeth of man's instinct for destruction - both self-destruction and the destruction of the other."

In the **Chain of Being**, animals are below humans: they are further from God and closer to **sin**. Conventionally, **animalistic imagery** is used to ridicule and cast judgement on someone's most base qualities, such as **laziness** or selfishness. Comparing someone to an animal robs them of their humanity, and because of this it sets up a **power dynamic**: people who behave like animals are **inferior** to 'real' people. Animalistic imagery is also associated with **primitive societies**, depravity, and poverty, so can be used to reveal a character's perspective on class and race. Shakespeare features this **semantic field** within characters' vocabulary to illustrate how certain members of society are demeaned or **degraded** by others.

This is particularly true in *Othello*, where animals symbolise the **morally** and the socially **corrupted** interchangeably. When Cassio is publicly demoted by Othello, he cries, **"I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial," (Act 2 Scene 3)**, suggesting that without the benefits his reputation brought, he is no better than an animal. This view of reputation implies that to be considered human, one must be **recognised** by society - and so only the upper classes are human. Shakespeare demonstrates that the lower classes were **dehumanised** and **denied self-worth**. Furthermore, the contrast put between the **"immortal"** and **"bestial"** parts of a person suggests that reputation brings people closer to **eternal life**, so that they resemble **gods**, and this is what sets humans apart from **beasts**. This is contrary to traditional beliefs in the Jacobean era that stated morality and rational thought were what separated man and beast. By linking being **"bestial"** to his reputation, Cassio conflates a loss of respectability with a **loss of morality**. This implies that, in society, the two are treated as the same thing, where your quality of character is defined by how **others** view you.

"That we should with joy, pleasance, revel and applause transform ourselves into beasts!" (Act 2 Scene 3) says Cassio, returning to the more **conventional** view that **self-control** puts humans above animals in the divine order. Shakespeare suggests people seek the thrill of immorality for a source of **entertainment**, purposefully reducing themselves to **"beasts"**. **"Revel and applause"** connotes decadence, implying it is the rich who pursue an escape from **moral duty**; moreover, **"applause"** implies they are rewarded for their ill deeds. Alternatively, Shakespeare posits that society encourages **aggression** and violence in men.

Cassio's engagement with this semantic field of beasts comes in contrast to his chivalrous, respectable persona, embodying the hypocrisy and **duplicity** of the upper classes. Shakespeare portrays **civility** as a false moral standard, something people pretend to value highly but instead use to **cover up** their sins. Alternatively, the contrast reflects how Cassio is confronted with the **emptiness** of his own status. With his reputation - and all the comfort it brought - stripped away, he discovers he has nothing else to offer. He has no good qualities, no **independence**. In his complacency, he didn't nurture his own strength of character, allowing himself to regress into a **"beast"**.

The Military Mindset

Military jargon and a militaristic ethos dominate the men's discourse and actions in the text. Qualities praised by Shakespeare's male characters, such as loyalty, **impulsive** decision making, and strategy, are all typically admired and required in a military setting. The problem comes when this **military culture** is applied to civilian and **domestic** matters. These conflicts cannot be resolved with the aggressive tactics of the military; instead, the application of the military mindset to the domestic sphere ends in **tragedy**.

One defining attribute of Venetian military culture is an augmented **sense of honour**. We see this clearly in Cassio's character, as Shakespeare merges the ideals of courtly love and high

society with the fierce loyalty shared by men in arms. The result is a man who cannot maintain the honourable persona he claims to possess.

Cassio's **militaristic ethos** comes to the fore in his discussions of Othello. To Iago, he says he has **"deceive[d] so good a commander with so light, so drunken, and so indiscreet an officer," (Act 2 Scene 3)**, presenting his drunk acts as the ultimate **military betrayal**. The adjectives he lists - **"light"**, **"drunken"**, and **"indiscreet"** - are all antitheses of what the perfect soldier should be. Shakespeare illustrates that breaking this type of **'Knights' Code'** is an **egregious sin** in military culture, beaten only by betraying your **"commander"**. Establishing the premium put on loyalty in the military allows the audience to understand how **shocking** and unexpected Iago's **betrayal** is.

AO5: Bringing the Military to the Domestic

"[Iago] is a villain, of course, but not merely because he is guilty of evil deeds; more fundamentally he is a villain because he transfers from one sphere of action the deeds proper therein to another sphere in which they are decidedly improper. It is the ethical blindness of Iago which prevents him from seeing that the methods of war, legitimate as they may be on the field of battle, are not equally applicable to the affairs of peace." - John C. McCloskey, 'The Motivation of Iago'

Cassio's suit to Desdemona reveals how important it was for a man's military **accomplishments** to be recognised. He is concerned, **"That I being absent and my place supplied, / My general will forget my love and service," (Act 3 Scene 3)**. Shakespeare implies a man defined his worth through his contribution to his commander and to the state. Cassio's sense of honour is anchored in the presentation of his **"love and service"**, outlining the hierarchy and **master/servant dynamic** that Venetian society was built upon. Cassio says, **"I may again / Exist and be a member of his love, / Whom I, with all the office of my heart, / Entirely honour," (Act 3 Scene 4)**. The verb **"exist"** suggests that without Othello's favour, Cassio is a nobody. The nouns **"member"** and **"office"** all hold connotations of the military, connecting Cassio's loving **dedication** to his role as lieutenant. **Male solidarity** and respect are built into the military culture and become tools for men to pursue higher ranks. Cassio continues, **"If my offence be of such mortal kind / That nor my service past nor my present sorrows [...] / Can ransom me into his love again," (Act 3 Scene 4)**, showing again how **moral judgement** was passed based on **"service"** alone, erasing a multitude of sins. The **economic connotation** of **"ransom"**, alongside the implied dynamic of captor and captured, suggests all male bonds are forms of exchange and **social contract**. No relationship is formed without both parties benefitting, and friendships are governed by **ulterior motive** and personal gain.

References to the military are used by Shakespeare as a symbol for the **toxic masculinity** that controls his characters. Above, we see how precedence is put on a man's loyalty to the **state** rather than on the **strength** of his character. The military encourages **violence** and aggression. Furthermore, the ubiquitous presence of the military in Cassio's speech symbolises the military occupation of Cyprus by Venice, and the **social conditioning** that leads men to worship warfare. By the play's end, Cassio has taken Othello's role - **"Cassio rules in Cyprus" (Act 5**

Scene 2) - symbolising the **volatile** power structure in the military and the occupation of **blackness** by white forces.

The Handkerchief

Cassio is but one of the many people who have Desdemona's handkerchief in their **possession** during the course of the play. Cassio **"know[s] not" (Act 3 Scene 4)** whose it is or where it came from, so doesn't understand the **significance** of it. Unknowingly, he controls Desdemona's reputation and her honour: Othello sees the **handkerchief** in Cassio's possession as a symbol for Cassio possessing Desdemona's love and **virginity**, saying, **"As doth the raven o'er the infected house, / Boding to all! - he had my handkerchief," (Act 4 Scene 1)**. Cassio's possession of the handkerchief is an omen for Desdemona's **fate**, symbolising Desdemona's **dependence** on Cassio for protection and safety. Shakespeare shows how men define a woman's social identity, even when they are unaware of the power they wield. Desdemona, an **isolated**, powerless woman, relies on the men around her to **protect** her from Othello's **wrath**, and Cassio lets her down.

AO5: The Handkerchief & *Othello*'s Couples
"As the handkerchief, the **'ocular proof'** (3.3.360) **of infidelity**, passes from Othello to Desdemona to Emilia to Iago to Cassio to the courtesan Bianca, it **links the three couples** together to highlight what they have in common. It draws an **implicit parallel** between the **despised kept woman Bianca and the respectable wives** Desdemona and Emilia, revealing the true nature of the married woman's role by erasing the distinction between them." - Kiernan Ryan

Likewise, Cassio's attitude towards the handkerchief reveals how society treats a woman's identity and **individuality**. When the handkerchief is passed around between characters, Shakespeare shows how a **woman's reputation** could be sullied and **manipulated** by others; furthermore, it shows how a woman's identity wasn't her own to control. The handkerchief's travels symbolise her **loss of autonomy**. This significance is compounded in Cassio's wish, **"I'd have it copied," (Act 3 Scene 4)**. Desdemona's identity is **replicated** and passed around, a symbolic form of **promiscuity** that shows how a woman's honour is truly ruined by social **disrespect**, not by her sexuality. Her private property can be **"copied"**, showing how women are **replaceable** and conditioned to conform to one mould. Cassio participates in this culture in an almost **voyeuristic way**, displaying something **intimate** to another person and rendering it for **public consumption**. Furthermore, he asks a courtesan to copy it, linking the respectable Desdemona and the prostitute Bianca together in the **universal commodification** of the **female body**.

AO5: The Worth of the Handkerchief
"For most of the characters, the handkerchief is reproducible, exchangeable, and has a certain cash value. Furthermore, although it circulates widely, everyone recognises it as private property." - Paul Yachnin

CHARACTER IN CONTEXT

The central conflict in the play of 'Othello' combines two defining issues of the Jacobean era: the **treatment of women** and the treatment of outsiders. In this case, 'outsiders' refers to people of **colour**, though the same themes can be applied to another big controversy of the time - the conflict between **Catholics** and **Protestants**. Simultaneously, Shakespeare brings the spotlight to a new system of **hierarchy** and **class**, embodied by the city of Venice. This foreshadows the direction England's economy was starting to take at the time of writing.

As such, 'Othello' is more of a **social commentary** than a morality play. This genre places Shakespeare with his contemporaries, as the Jacobean era saw a prominent use of **satire** and **politics** in its literature. That said, the play is not lacking in morals and messages for Shakespeare's audience; though 'Othello' is set some decades before, its themes and depictions convey Shakespeare's perspective on the time he was writing in, the early 1600s. Shakespeare uses the setting of **wartime Cyprus** as a lens through which to view his own 'modern' time (meaning we can do the same thing!).

Moors

The term **'Moor'** has historically been used by **Christian Europeans** to refer to people from Somalia, Ethiopia, the Middle East, the Berber coast, North Africa in general, and even India - in short, its use to specify a person's **ethnicity** is **ambiguous**. It was often used as a derogatory term so **accuracy** wasn't important to its user.

Originally, the Moors were a group of **Muslims** from what is now North Africa who captured the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal) in 711 A.D. The peninsula became a **cultural** and **economic capital**, but Moorish rule was opposed by European Christians. Eventually, in 1492, the Catholic monarchs Ferdinand II and Isabella I triumphed in a war against the Moors of the Iberian Peninsula. This led to the Moors being **expelled** from Spain, though small communities still resided throughout Western Europe - including in Italy, where the play is set.

While Cassio does refer to Othello as **"the Moor" (Act 2 Scene 1)**, he is overwhelmingly respectful and **reverent** towards him, referring to him as **"our great captain" (Act 2 Scene 1)**, **"so good a commander" (Act 2 Scene 3)**, and **"my general" (Act 3 Scene 3)**. By embracing Othello as his commanding officer and admiring him as a great soldier, Cassio **defies** the racist attitudes of his peers and the **racism** surrounding Moors that defined the Venetian and Jacobean societies. It is possible that Cassio accepts Othello because, as a Florentine, he is also an **outsider**. Alternatively, it may be that the duties and **loyalties** of the military **usurp** any racist hostility.

Venice

The Venice of the Jacobean era was close to a **cultural utopia** in many ways. It was a symbol of beauty, culture, and civilisation. With its numerous trade links with the Eastern World and North Africa and its **thriving economy**, it was the poster child of early Modern Capitalism. At this time, England was only just beginning to trade abroad. Furthermore, Venice was a **Republic**: the wealthier **merchant** classes controlled the state and bought powerful military forces to protect **colonial exploits**.

A consequence of this was the emergence of a **new ruling class** that hadn't been seen before. The city had laws that dictated people dress according to their social standing, but these were rarely enforced and the emerging mercantile class dressed according to financial, not social, status. In addition, Venice was viewed as a **'pleasure capital'**, known for a higher **sexual tolerance** than other places.

Another consequence of being a centre of **international trade** was that Venice was a **cosmopolitan** capital. Trade brought an influx of immigrants from across the country and the globe, leading to a constant **exchange** of material goods and culture. Venice was already renowned for its cosmopolitan spirit, and its **multi-cultural** atmosphere only grew through the 16th century. This extended to Venetian outposts and dominions, including Cyprus, where accounts told of Venetians, Cypriots, Greeks, Jews and Turks living together.

In Venice, foreigners were tolerated because of their economic and military contributions to the city. It was very common for the Venetian state to hire **mercenaries** to protect their assets, and these mercenaries often came abroad. Othello and Cassio are such mercenaries, bringing the two men together as outsiders hired to kill for a state that doesn't claim them as its own. However, as **tolerant** as Venice was, Venetian society was very **insular** when it came to **marriage** and **lineage**. Outsiders could come to the city but weren't allowed to 'contaminate' the pure Venetian line. Iago draws on this **aversion** to strangers when turning Othello against Cassio, calling him **"guilty-like" (Act 3 Scene 3)** and saying, **"As knaves be such abroad, / Who having by their own importunate suit / Or voluntary dotage of some mistress [...] / Cannot choose / But they must blab," (Act 4 Scene 1)**, portraying Cassio as a boastful, **promiscuous** foreigner.

Its status as a symbol for progress makes Venice the perfect opening for this play. Shakespeare explores what it means to be **civilised** rather than **primitive**, ultimately exposing societies such as Venice for being hypocritical and **insidious**.
Though a Florentine, Cassio fits in with **Venice's reputation** for progress, riches, and **pleasure**. Iago notes, **"He hath a person and a smooth dispose / To be suspected, framed to make women false," (Act 1 Scene 3)**, and plans to use Cassio's courtly manners against him: **"Ay, smile upon her, do. I will gyve thee in thine own courtship," (Act 2 Scene 1)**. Iago manipulates Cassio's actions to paint him as another **"super-subtle Venetian" (Act 1 Scene 3)**.

In the end, however, Cassio is the only **true 'winner'** of all the characters in the play. He survives Iago's figurative **mass-murder** and gains control of Cyprus. Hence, an outsider, a Florentine, is the only one able to make Venetian society work for him.

AO5: Venice vs. Cyprus

In his edition of Shakespeare's plays, Samuel Johnson wrote, **"Had the scene opened in Cyprus, and the preceding incidents been occasionally related, there had been little wanting to a drama of the most exact and scrupulous regularity".** His argument is that Shakespeare's choice to set the opening act in Venice adds significant meaning to the play.

In 'Shakespeare's Tragedies of Love', Catherine Bates argues, **"Cyprus distorts to the point of grotesqueness the norms of civil breeding such that it is Desdemona's very accomplishments and cultivated habits which finally indict her."** Of the contrast between the two settings, she concludes, **"[It] drives home the dialectical nature of cultural self-definition. Notions of wildness, madness, otherness and heresy are not moral absolutes but concepts that serve to confirm the value of their dialectical antitheses: civilisation, rationality, identity, and orthodoxy."**

Cyprus

Crusades against Islam brought Europeans to Cyprus, and the island became a Christian military base for operations in the **Levant** (the countries of West Asia that border the Meditarranean, such as modern-day Israel and Lebanon). The **conflict** between the Christian Republic of Venice and the Islamic **Ottoman Empire** had been an on-off affair since the mid-fifteenth century; by the time the play premiered, four wars between the two nations had already taken place. The most recent of these was known as the **War of Cyprus**, which took place between 1570 and 1573. This round of violence was precipitated by a **Turkish invasion** of the isle between 1570 and 1571 that consolidated Ottoman control.

Choosing to set his play during a **crisis of living** memory amplifies the tensions within the play, as well as the play's significance as a piece of **political commentary**. This choice is also a noteworthy **divergence** from Shakespeare's source material, Giraldi Cinthio's 'Hecatommithi', which lacked any clear **historical anchor**.

Its position within the Ottoman empire made Cyprus singularly vulnerable to **Turkish threat**, and the island was dangerously **isolated** from the rest of the Christian world. The country's identity was torn between the two warring religions. The play is likely set during the **Battle of Lepanto**, a year after the Turks conquered Cyprus. The battle marked a **decisive triumph** for the Christian Venice and its allies 'the Holy League'. This tense atmosphere pervades the play, amplifying the **claustrophobia** and confusion experienced by Iago's **unwilling** subjects. When Cassio is **"maimed"** by Iago and cries, **"What, ho! No watch? No passage? Murder, murder!"**, Lodovico and Gratiano are reluctant to help him at first. They are worried it is a con, saying, **"These may be counterfeit: let's think't unsafe / To come in to the cry without more help," (Act 5 Scene 1)**. This emphasises the feeling of doubt that underlies Cyprus and

its inhabitants. Cassio's cries of **"No watch? No passage?"** show how alone and **frightened** he feels.

This choice of setting and time period evokes another example of typically Shakespearean **dramatic irony**. It was believed that **victory** over the Turks came 'too late' to help Cyprus; the Venetians left Cyprus in 1573, and the island fell to the Turks once more. Shakespeare's audience would have known this, making the apparent **peace** celebrated in **Act 2** feel uncertain and **falsely comforting**. The characters are lulled into a **false sense of security** as Iago prepares to strike. The Venetian government has only temporarily avoided the threat, and Othello has only temporarily avoided the **wrath** of his close friend.

The significance of Cyprus as a **setting** doesn't end here. Its reputation for **savagery** and **barbarity**, alongside its identity as a military bastion, makes it the **antithesis** of Venetian calm and order. Having Venetians in Cyprus brings the conflict between the civil and the **primitive** to the fore, just as we witness Cassio's character **fall** from grace. He succumbs to the chaos symbolic of Cyprus, first through his drinking and the **"invisible spirit of wine"**, followed by **violence** as he fights with Roderigo. He tells Iago, **"I remember a mass of things, but nothing distinctly: a quarrel, but nothing wherefore," (Act 2 Scene 3)**. Cassio can't remember why he started fighting, **foreshadowing** the meaningless violence that overtakes the island. Moreover, when he says, **"To be now a sensible man, by and by a fool, and presently a beast!" (Act 2 Scene 3)**, Shakespeare shows that people contain 'civil' and 'primitive' parts, symbolised through Cyprus' destructive influence on the once **respectable Venetians**.

Cyprus was denied its own **autonomy** and **sovereign identity** because it was continually occupied by one empire or other. This makes it a symbol for submission, just as Cassio becomes an **unknowing** servant to Iago's desires. Cassio loses his position because of Iago, but eventually takes over Othello's role: power is **unstable** and **unguaranteed,** and this view of power is epitomised in Cyprus' identity. According to myth, Cyprus is the birthplace of **Aphrodite**, goddess of love; in contrast, we are presented with an island engulfed by war and violence. The island has become a figurehead for **male power** and conflict: the symbol of love is dominated by **warfare**.

The relocation to Cyprus marks the point where everything turns on its head. Iago's plans start to take hold, and nothing is as it seems. The island's **chaotic identity** and renowned 'primitive' behaviour take hold. What's more, the characters never return to Venice. The transition to Cyprus and everything it represents is **irreversible** and final. Cassio is the only one who emerges 'victorious' and **"rules"** Cyprus **(Act 5 Scene 2)**: you could interpret this as Cassio embracing the island's **chaos** and **suspicion**, or as him managing to subdue and **suppress** it.

Religion

Religion was a huge part of Jacobean life, and as such plays an important role in all of Shakespeare's plays. The Church was influential in the subject of **morality** as well as the subject of **politics**: the Church had the ear of the **monarch**, who was the symbolic head of the Church and the government, meaning there was none of the **separation** between Church and State that we have today. Because of this, **Christian ideology** was the foundation of many aspects of life, and people used it as a touchstone or guide in more ways than one. It's important to remember the **ubiquity** of the Church in everyday life, because Shakespeare explores its significance as a political force in addition to its **moral consequence**.

Religion: Protestantism vs. Catholicism

> **AO5: A Postcolonial Reading**
> "Shakespeare **draws upon the Christian-Turkish binary** but **also undercuts it** by making the play's most villainous character a Venetian and its hero an outsider." - Virginia Mason Vaughan, Critical Approaches to Othello

Under the rule of **King James I**, England was a Protestant state, but this hadn't always been the case. Since Henry VIII's separation from the Catholic Church the century before (part of the movement known as the Reformation), England had oscillated between the **two denominations** depending on who was on the throne. Both **Catholics** and **Protestants** had suffered violence and **oppression** at the hands of the other. Because of this, the conflict and **controversy** religion brought with it was very close to home for Shakespeare's contemporary audience. This likely made the **religious conflict** in the play - between the Islamic Turks and the Christian Venetians - easier to empathise with, and so amplified the messages behind it.

Protestantism of the time encouraged a preoccupation with the **self**. **Introspection** was important when practising and maintaining your **faith**, as there was a movement towards **self-improvement**. Similarly, the idea of repentance and confession are fundamental principles in the Christian faith. Cassio's personal mission to **atone** for his actions and win Othello's love once more may resemble the narrative of a typical Christian protagonist. Certainly, depicting himself as a **"beast"** and wine as the **"devil" (Act 2 Scene 3)** is consistent with Biblical teachings on **vice** and **temptation**.

Religion: Logic & Self-Restraint

Jealousy and **rational thought** are integral to the play's main message, so it's helpful to know how Jacobean culture viewed them. You can see evidence of how these **cultural beliefs** shaped Shakespeare's portrayal of **human nature**; at the same time, you may find instances where Shakespeare challenges these perspectives.

In accordance with the **Chain of Being**, it was believed that the ability to think rationally was what separated humans from animals. A failure of reason was the cause of the **fall of man**: allowing **passion** to overtake reason meant you had lost what made you human, reducing you

to the **animalistic state of being**. This state was defined by **appetite** and instinct. It makes sense, then, that to act irrationally and impulsively made you a **monster** in the eyes of others, because you had fallen below the level of man and become **bestial**.

This **ideology** comes to the fore when Cassio is demoted by Othello. He mourns his respectability by saying, **"I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial," (Act 2 Scene 3)**. Knowing that being animalistic was associated with **logic** and **morality**, the use of **monstrous imagery** in his speech implies that reputation and morality are related. Also, Shakespeare likens the Chain of Being to the hierarchy of Venetian/Jacobean society.

Archetypes of Femininity

AO5: Cuckoldry & the Ultimate Marital Crime
"From a feminist perspective, **early modern England's preoccupation with cuckoldry** demonstrates a basic male insecurity about women's sexuality." - Virginia Mason Vaughan, *Critical Approaches to Othello*

Plentiful tropes and myths surrounded what it meant to be a **woman** in Jacobean times. Generally, there were four **archetypes of femininity**, within which all women were categorised: the maiden, the wife, the widow, and the whore. These classifications, as you may have already identified, revolve around the 'stage' of a **woman's sexuality**; the maiden is a virgin, whereas the widow has lost her sexual identity and is **unanchored** in society. Men wanted to marry virgins - the maiden - but used whores for their own pleasure. The fifth category of **'witch'** was reserved for those women deemed too **masculine**, ugly, or barren to be **'real' women**. Additionally, there was the archetype of the fallen woman, someone who had lost her innocence in the eyes of others; fallen women couldn't regain their reputations, were the prey of gossips, and were **ostracised** from society.

Masculinity drew from these categories of **womanhood**. They served as goals or benchmarks. For example, virgins, newly-weds, and demure widows were 'sexual targets': men wanted to sleep with them because the **conquest** of the apparently unattainable was an irresistible challenge to their masculinity. Brides and betrothed women were seen as being in a state of **transition** between the categories, making them vulnerable to assault or slander. Young, beautiful wives were both **desired** and **feared**, because they could **captivate** their husbands and other men with their 'feminine wiles'.

These **contrasting standards** of femininity are captured in the character of Cassio. He is hypocritical and **reductive** in his treatment of women, respecting women like Desdemona while demeaning women like Bianca. He describes Desdemona as **"divine"** and a **"maid" (Act 2 Scene 1)**, idolising her as the perfect maidenly archetype of femininity. At the same time, he **dehumanises** and objectifies her, calling her the **"riches of the ship" (Act 2 Scene 1)** and **"a most fresh and delicate creature" (Act 2 Scene 3)**. He doesn't partake in Iago's **perverted** imaginings (**"she is sport for Jove" (Act 2 Scene 3)**) but he doesn't stop him, either, thus enabling this **misogynistic depiction** of women. He even replies **"indeed"**, meaning he agrees

with Iago even if he doesn't use the same outrightly lewd words. This admiration of Desdemona, particularly in the context of her marriage (**"he hath not yet made wanton the night with her" (Act 2 Scene 3)**) is consistent with men desiring the women they can't have. Desdemona is a **newlywed** and so falls into the category of **'sexual target'**.

Contrary to Desdemona, Bianca is a **prostitute,** and so Cassio sees no need to **respect** her. He lies to her, such as, **"Not that I love you not," (Act 3 Scene 4)**, and behind her back he calls her a **"customer"** and a **"perfumed one" (Act 4 Scene 1)**. His treatment of Bianca is typical of how men treated women they perceived as falling into the **'whore' archetype** of femininity. He **exploits** her, **insults** her **intelligence** and self-worth, and excludes her from his life outside their relationship. Furthermore, Cassio's simultaneous interest in both Desdemona and Bianca **typifies** men pursuing maidens as unattainable **sexual conquests** and as emblems of respectability while using prostitutes in private to **satiate** their needs.

AO5: A Woman's Work

"Because the handkerchief **serves as proof of married chastity**, it cannot be copied by Emilia and Bianca. It is an **emblem of Desdemona's body** that does not circulate because her body is not supposed to circulate: the regulated passage of the handkerchief is along family lines, not elsewhere. [...] When Desdemona loses the handkerchief, she **loses the means of presenting herself as amiable**, the proof that she is doing her private, domestic, bed-work. She **loses her own text**, as the Renaissance constructed it for her." - Valerie Wayne

Courtly Love

The ideal of courtly love emerged in Medieval English literature, where knights and noblemen set out on **dangerous adventures** to win the love of a fair maiden. The best-known example is Arthurian legend, which brought together the **ideals** of the soldier and the lover. It was a conception of love that prioritised **nobility** and chivalry above all else, combining **religious discourse** and imagery with **human sexuality**. Courtly love took something as **scandalous** and improper as **erotic love** and made it 'respectable' and reputable. To what extent courtly love was sexual was a point of controversy, as was the question of whether courtly love was a purely **literary invention** or was practised in real life.

Though courtly love was conceived in the **Medieval Era**, its ideas persist to the modern day, and were **popular** in early modern Europe. Shakespeare engages with the theme in many of his plays, often ridiculing or satirising it.

Courtly love revolved around an attractive ladies' man. He would use **poetic language** and chivalry to **charm** women. There would be the fair lady, a high standing member of the court for example, who would be **worshipped** as divinity; she would have many rival suitors for her hand in marriage. Cassio is the typical ladies' man, and through his eyes, Desdemona is the **"divine"** fair lady worthy of worship **(Act 2 Scene 1)**. Cassio's mention of his **"breeding"** when kissing

AO5: Cassio's Facade

"Cassio's performance is upper-class flattery and an inflated artifice." - McEvoy

Emilia in greeting **(Act 2 Scene 1)** and his description of Desdemona as **"modest"** contrasting with Iago's **innuendoes** can be interpreted in the context of this courtly love **ideal.** On the surface, Cassio is the ideal romantic hero; however, Shakespeare undermines this narrative by **exposing** Cassio's cowardice and hypocrisy. He is in a relationship with a courtesan; this is enough to break the rules of **courtly love**, but he goes beyond this by insulting **Bianca's honour**. Furthermore, many would say that there is no honour in asking a woman such as Desdemona to plead your case for you. Shakespeare suggests that the **chivalrous knight** of courtly love doesn't exist.