***Othello* Essay. Due in Friday 10th /Monday 13th July: How Does Shakespeare Present the Theme of Loyalty in Othello? Relate your discussion to relevant contextual factors.**

**Remember: my criticism of your essays last time was that some of you forgot to put in any context (I have suggested some elements you could incorporate in my guidance) and that you failed to analyse language closely enough, so make sure you do this in support of your points – look for patterns in the text. There are some good examples in my feedback powerpoint (estream) so remind yourself of this first.**

**Introduction:**

Overview of loyalties presented in the play – loyalty between family, colleagues and lovers. Consider why this theme is important at this time: in Elizabethan and Jacobean times, your loyalty often determined your fate. Both Elizabeth 1st and James 1st were Protestants, so to be loyal to Catholicism at this time was to risk persecution. The court was a place of competing loyalties with favourites going in and out of favour so the question as to who you could trust was a key one. So Shakespeare is asking some key questions of his audience: who can we trust and how can we be sure our trust is well placed? Pivotal to this is the character of ‘Honest Iago’ who proves the least honest of all, yet gains the trust of so many.

**Family:**

Desdemona experiences ‘divided loyalt[ies]’ between her father and her husband, but, once committed to Othello, is completely faithful to him, thus acting as an example of the ideal wife, and a complete contradiction of Iago and Othello’s accusations of her. (Context: Robert Cleaever: *A Godly form of household Government (*1603) stated that ‘no man would look for anything in a woman but her honesty.’ Honesty is a highly prized quality and explains, but does not excuse, Othello’s condemnation of her when he suspects this honesty is lacking). Find and analyse some specific examples of Desdemona’s loyalty.

Ironically, it is Desdemona’s loyalty to Othello that kills her father (top p. 206) which shows how loyalty can affect families.

**Colleagues:**

It is Othello’s preference for Cassio over Iago that causes Iago’s jealousy and unleashes the train of events that cause so much destruction in the play. Yes, ironically, Iago is still respected by his colleagues. This is mainly because he is two-faced (remember, he swears by the god Janus) pretending to be loyal to his comrades, but secretly plotting their ruin. Try to collect and closely analyse some patterns of language that Iago uses that demonstrates to us his lack of loyalty. Try to get some context in here. As James was the new king of England around the time Shakespeare was writing the play, was he warning him about dishonest and disloyal advisors (as Othello should have been warned against Iago)? See if you can research this a little to get in some specific detail. The old queen (Elizabeth’s) mother had been executed for treason by her father. She had learnt the hard way not to trust anyone. Similarly, James’s mother (Mary Queen of Scots) had been executed by Elizabeth. There was a high price paid for disloyalty at this time.

Look at how Iago manipulates Cassio, Roderigo and Othello.

Just as Iago is an example of lack of loyalty, Othello is an example of misplaced loyalty. More used to male camaraderie in the army, and naïve when it comes to women, Othello is more inclined to trust his disloyal ensign than his loyal wife. Find and analyse some specific examples of this. To get in some context, mention that at this time Venice was known for loose morality when cuckolded men were common stereotypes. Othello’s own pride is at stake here – he is terrified of being made a fool of.

**Lovers:**

Emilia is initially loyal to Iago (steals handkerchief, lies to Desdemona about it) but once she discovers her husband’s wickedness she transfers her loyalty to Desdemona and dies for her actions, further elevating her in the eyes of the audience. (Worth pointing out for context that in Shakespeare’s plays, the death or suicide of servants to the hero or heroine are a device to raise the stature of characters – eg both Antony and Cleopatra’s servants kill themselves out of loyalty to their master and mistress). Make sure you support the claim of Emilia’s loyalty with detailed examples – eg the repetition of ‘never’ in Act four scene two (p. 179).

Point out that just as Iago lacks loyaltyd, so he is also suspicious of others’ loyalty, such as his conviction that Emilia has had affairs with Cassio and Othello

Bianca, wrongly, suspects Cassio’s infidelity with another woman - ‘This is some minx’s token’ she says of the handkerchief (top page 174).

**Conclusion**

Loyalty and lack of loyalty (illustrated through the behaviour of many of the characters in the play) contribute to the central conflicts of the play. The theme reflects the contemporary obsession with loyalty as well as challenging a modern audience as to who we can trust.