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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2009 Volume III: Shakespeare and Human Character

African Americans and Shakespeare: Partners in Search of Humanity

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Unbeknownst to the vast majority of average Americans — and certainly to average high school students — is the fact that a long and distinguished roster of African American actors, professional and amateur, embraced the language and characters of William Shakespeare, audaciously challenging a society that denied both their humanity and intellectual abilities. The wealth of material, both printed and electronic, that is available for research in these lives, dating back to the early 19th century career of the black actor Ira Aldridge, can stimulate student interest both in American social and literary history and in the Bard of Avon himself. High school students will study the narratives of *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice* — plays presciently modern in depicting individuals cast as 'other' — analyze speeches that bring these characters to life and evaluate how these roles evolved through the ages. Student performance of key scenes and soliloquies, the display of timelines exhibiting the interplay between actors' lives and African American history, and published poster or mini-book biographies of the actors will serve as assessment.

(Developed for English II, grade 10, English IV and AP English Literature, grade 12; recommended for English, grades 10-12)

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