



GLOBE
EDUCATION

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S OTHELLO AND ITS SOURCES

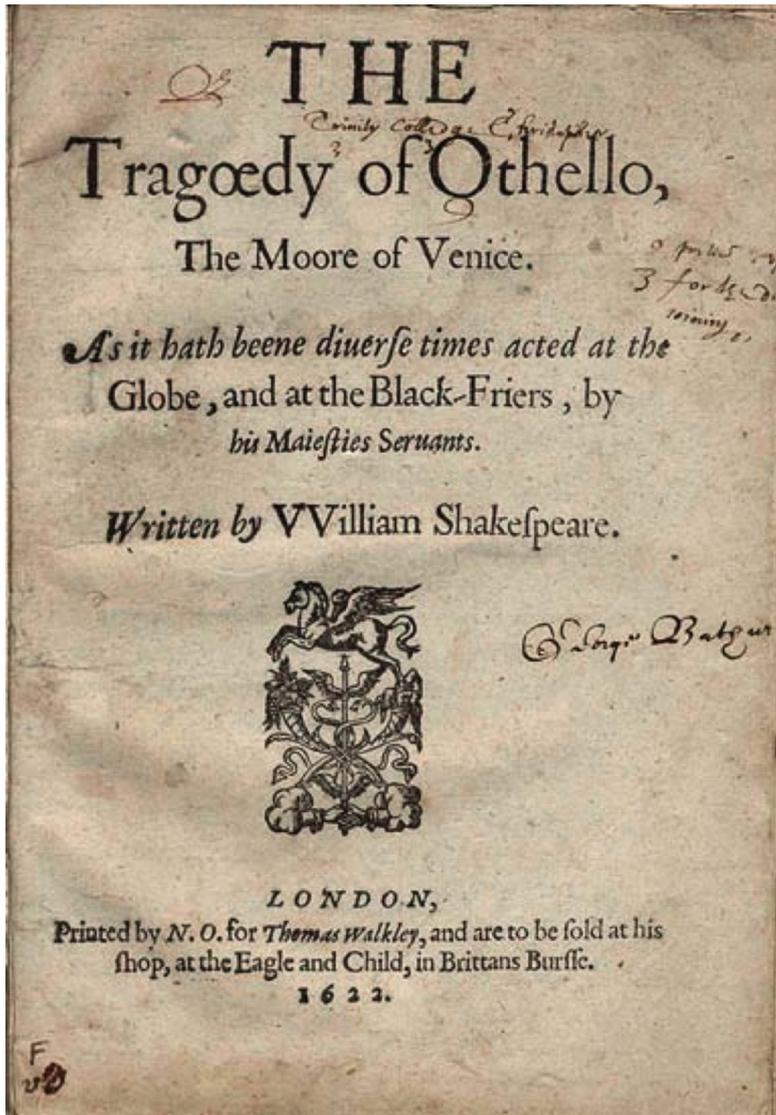


Figure 1. The title page of the first quarto of *Othello*, 1622.

The composition of William Shakespeare's *Othello* has traditionally been dated around 1603/4 by scholars, though it can also be argued that it was written slightly earlier in late 1601/early 1602. The date of composition is uncertain in part because the play exists in two forms: a Quarto (Q) and Folio (F) text. Furthermore, the sources of *Othello* are varied and have generated debate about whether the Q text and the later F text are derivative of different sources. It has been argued that 'Q and F can be explained as Shakespeare's first and second thoughts'.¹ However, this remains conjecture, as both texts 'suffer from widespread misreading' and both texts are quite different, perhaps due to textual corruption.²

The 'principal' source from Cinthio's *Hecatommithi*

A short story – 'the seventh *novella* in the third decade' – of Giraldi Cinthio's *Hecatommithi* of 1565/6 is believed to be Shakespeare's principal source for *Othello*.³ Giraldi Cinthio was an Italian novelist and poet (1504–1573). The editor of the Arden edition of *Othello*, E.A.J. Honigmann makes a direct comparison between Cinthio's work and Shakespeare's play, placing prints of both texts side by side to demonstrate the parallels between the two. Honigmann argues that this source is 'principal' to Shakespeare's tragedy, echoing Cinthio to a much greater extent than previous editors have acknowledged.⁴ In the New Cambridge Shakespeare *Othello* Norman Sanders explains how Cinthio was a source for a number of early modern plays, including Robert Greene's *James the Fourth*.⁵

Honigmann and Sanders support their assertion about Shakespeare's source text with evidence of specific details which point to Shakespeare's familiarity with *Hecatommithi*. For example, *Othello* includes unusual words and phrases which are used in Cinthio's text and not in the French translation by G. Chappuys. Examples of these include: 'acerb' (1.3.350),⁶ 'molestation' (2.1.16), and 'ocular proof' (3.3.363).⁷ There is similarly evidence to suggest that Shakespeare was also familiar with the Chappuys' French edition of the text, with echoing his use of specific phrases: 'heart pierced' (1.3.220), 'take out the work' (3.3.300), and 'touch' (4.1.195).⁸ It is possible that there was a, now lost, English translation which used both the Italian and French as sources. This is particularly likely given Lodowick Bryskett, a well-known translator, had translated a number of Cinthio's works before and after *Othello*'s composition.⁹ Honigmann therefore argues that 'a translation of Cinthio's story of the Moor of Venice could have reached Shakespeare in manuscript'.¹⁰

As Honigmann notes, scholars are still 'piec[ing] together the full jigsaw of borrowings – words, phrases, episodes, ideas' in order to see the relationship between source-text and play-text.¹¹ Sanders states that there was a particular interest in Cinthio's work during the period, in part because Cinthio claimed that his tales were taken from real life, and although this is demonstrably not true of some of his stories, the stark realism of his narrative of the Moor and his Venetian wife has sent scholars to Italian history in the search for parallel tragedies of human jealousy.¹²

Honigmann concludes that, although Shakespeare would have 'felt free to change whatever did not suit him, Cinthio's narrative supplied so much detail that in effect Shakespeare allowed it to guide his view of crucial events'.¹³

Differences between Cinthio and Shakespeare

It is worth noting that, while the third decade, story seven, is specifically about a 'Moor of Venice' there are in fact similarities with *Othello* throughout the ten stories of *Hecatommithi*, specifically the introduction which explores how 'husbands and wives should be chosen'.¹⁴ For example, Honigmann notes the parallel between the argument that 'appetite should be ruled by reason' which is echoed in *Othello* 'not/To please the palate of my appetite' (1.3.262–3) and also suggests that Cinthio's assertion that the 'quality, manners, life and habits' which ought to be matched in potential partners is reminiscent of 'Not to affect many proposed matches/Of her own clime, complexion and degree' (3.3.233) in *Othello*.¹⁵

Cinthio's introduction also censures women who claim to be virtuous, but actually hide their devious, vice-like characters in 'singing, playing, dancing ... and speaking sweetly' which closely links to Othello's statement: 'Tis not to make me jealous / To say my wife is fair, feeds well, loves company, / Is free of speech, sings, plays and dances well' (3.3.186–8).¹⁶ Norman Sanders observes that relatively small points in Cinthio are developed by Shakespeare, for example:

A sentence in Cinthio to the effect that Desdemona's family wished her to marry another man is the seed that produced Desdemona's noble birth, her elopement, and her distraught and racially prejudiced father.¹⁷

Certain parts of Cinthio's story are clearly adapted and changed by Shakespeare in his penning of *Othello*. We see this in the depiction of Bianca, who appears to be a blend of the needlewoman and the prostitute visited by Cinthio's Captain, which then sets up the scenes involving the handkerchief.¹⁸ Shakespeare's tragic ending also differs significantly from 'Cinthio's sequence of plotted murders, trials, imprisonments and torturings'.¹⁹

The plot against Desdemona

In addition to story number seven – the main source of Shakespeare’s play about the Moor of Venice – the sixth story in *Hecatommithi* shows a husband discovering his adulterous wife, revenging himself by planning her death and framing it as an accident.²⁰ This is developed by Shakespeare, who introduces the idea that Iago, out of jealousy of the Moor’s position as the general and Cassio’s promotion to Othello’s lieutenant, plots Othello’s downfall by fabricating a relationship between Desdemona and Cassio:

IAGO And did you see the handkerchief?
OTHELLO Was that mine?
IAGO Yours, by this hand: and to see how he [Cassio] prizes the foolish woman your wife!
She gave it him, and he hath given it his whore.
OTHELLO I would have him nine years a-killing. A fine woman, a fair woman, a sweet woman!
IAGO Nay, you must forget that.
OTHELLO Ay, let her rot and perish and be damned tonight, for she shall not live. [...] (4.1.170–9).

Desdemona, ultimately, becomes the innocent victim of Iago’s scheming and Othello’s jealousy, resulting in her murder.

It is the Ensign of Cinthio’s story who is the ‘villain with great skill in concealing his true nature beneath a manner that strikes everyone as being soldierly and noble’.²¹ This is similar to Iago, as he becomes closer to Othello the more villainous he becomes, pushing Cassio out, but the ‘Ensign is already ‘high in the Moor’s favour’ and it is purely because he ‘passionately desires Desdemona, but is unable to woo her openly because of his fear of the Moor’ that the Ensign plots against her.²²

The Ensign then delivers a plot against Desdemona because she does not accept his advances and the Ensign assumes that this is because she is in love with the Captain. The Captain is similar to Cassio, being a ‘great friend of the Moor and a frequent visitor to his house’.²³ Therefore, the Ensign, similar to Shakespeare’s Iago, ‘decides to accuse her of adultery with the Captain’:

IAGO Cassio’s a proper man: let me see now,
To get his place, and to plume up my will
In double knavery. How? How? let’s see:
After some time to abuse Othello’s ear
That he is too familiar with his wife. (1.3.391–5).

The main difference still is that Cinthio’s Ensign, unlike Iago, plots against Desdemona because he is trying to ‘satisfy the hatred he begins to feel for Desdemona in his disappointment’ and not because he is envious of the Captain’s (Cassio’s) favour with the Moor.²⁴

The murder of Desdemona

The Moor in Cinthio’s tale plans with the Ensign the murder of Desdemona, which is very different to Othello’s intention of asking Desdemona to confess of her supposed infidelity and then suffocating her out of his all-consuming jealous thoughts:

OTHELLO Have you prayed tonight, Desdemona?
DESDEMONA Ay, my lord.
OTHELLO If you bethink yourself of
any crime
Unreconciled as yet to heaven and
grace,
Solicit for it straight.
DESDEMONA Alack, my lord, what may you mean
by that?



Figure 2. ‘A Bedchamber, Desdemona in Bed asleep’, from *Othello* (Act V, scene 2), part of ‘A Collection of Prints, from Pictures Painted for the Purpose of Illustrating the Dramatic Works of Shakespeare, by the Artists of Great-Britain, published by John and Josiah Boydell (1803). S528o1 no.93. Used by permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

OTHELLO Well, do it, and be brief; I will walk by.
 I would not kill they unprepared spirit,
 No, heaven fend, I would not kill
 thy soul. (5.2.25–32).

Othello foregrounds his belief in his wife's guilt, making his motivation for murdering her blatantly clear, whereas, in Cinthio's tale the Moor is first portrayed as considering 'killing his wife by stabbing or poison' but then enlists the Ensign – the part of Iago – to plan a murder but 'escape detection':

'One night while in bed with his wife he orders her to investigate a noise he has heard in the adjoining room. When she does so, the Ensign, who is hiding in a closet, beats her to death with a stocking filled with sand. In order to make the murder appear to be an accident the two men effect the collapse of part of the ceiling on her body.'²⁵

Therefore, it is in fact the Ensign (Iago) who kills the Moor's wife in Shakespeare's source-text. With the scheming of the Moor and the Ensign to escape accusation of murder, they plot further by covering up any evidence of them as murderers, making the story more of a conspiracy between the two men, rather than focusing on the relationship between husband and wife.

Othello's downfall

Cinthio's Moor has an interestingly different downfall to Othello in Shakespeare's play. He similarly becomes distraught at the loss of his wife after her death and 'funeral' but does not commit suicide out of guilt for the wrongs he has committed, as Othello does in Shakespeare's version of the story:

OTHELLO Then must you speak
 Of one that loved not wisely, but too well;
 Of one not easily jealous, but, being wrought,
 Perplexed in the extreme; of one whose hand,
 Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away
 Richer than all his tribe [...]

 [...] He stabs himself.

 [...] I kissed thee ere I killed thee: no way but this,
 Killing myself, to die upon a kiss.

 [Kisses Desdemona, and] dies.

 (5.2.341–6; 354; 356–7)

Instead, Cinthio's Moor is seen to repent for his crime, and so dismisses the Ensign for his role in Desdemona's death. However, this leads the Ensign to seek revenge upon the Moor himself, telling the Captain (Cassio) 'that it was the Moor who attacked him' – when really it was himself on behalf of the Moor, who had planned to destroy what he thought was his wife's and the Captain's adulterous relationship.²⁶ Playing out more like a revenge tragedy, Cinthio's story ends in every man wanting to avenge themselves: after the Moor finishes the Ensign's career, the Ensign plans another attack upon the Moor through tricking the Captain that it was just the Moor who tried to kill him. This then triggers the Captain to charge the Moor before the Signory (the governing body of a medieval Italian republic), sentencing the Moor 'to be tortured'.²⁷

Cinthio's tale completes the Moor's downfall with his banishment from Venice, Desdemona's family arrange to have him murdered in exile.²⁸ This shows a family avenging the murder of their child, very different to Othello's downfall and own suicide which comes out of the truth being revealed by Emilia, Iago's, wife.

The changes made by Shakespeare to his source text, demonstrate his ability to create three-dimensional characters, developing Cinthio's stereotypes of men and women, who function merely as plot devices, into fully-rounded characters with whom we are encouraged to empathise.²⁹

-
- ¹ E. A. J. Honigmann, 'Introduction' in William Shakespeare, *Othello*, (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 1997), p.2
- ² Honigmann, p.2
- ³ Honigmann, p.368
- ⁴ Honigmann, p.2
- ⁵ Norman Sanders, 'Introduction' in William Shakespeare, *Othello*, (Cambridge: The New Cambridge Shakespeare, Cambridge University Press, 1984), p.2
- ⁶ William Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. E. A. J. Honigmann, (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 1997), pp.115–332, 5.2.121–3. All further references to this play are to this edition and given in parentheses.
- ⁷ Honigmann, p.368; See also notes on Cinthio within the appendix of Honigmann's Arden edition.
- ⁸ Honigmann, p.368; See also Honigmann, 'Othello, Chappuys and Cinthio', *N&Q* 13 (1966), 136–7
- ⁹ Honigmann, p.368
- ¹⁰ Honigmann, p.368
- ¹¹ Honigmann, p.369
- ¹² Sanders, p.3
- ¹³ Honigmann, p.369
- ¹⁴ Honigmann, p.369
- ¹⁵ Honigmann, p.369
- ¹⁶ Honigmann, p.369
- ¹⁷ Sanders, p.8
- ¹⁸ Sanders, p.9
- ¹⁹ Sanders, p.9
- ²⁰ Honigmann, p.370
- ²¹ Sanders, p.4
- ²² Sanders, p.4
- ²³ Sanders, p.4
- ²⁴ Sanders, p.4
- ²⁵ Sanders, pp.6–7
- ²⁶ Sanders, p.7
- ²⁷ Sanders, p.7
- ²⁸ Sanders, p.7
- ²⁹ Sanders, p.9; Honigmann, p.386