



PERFORMANCE AND PRINTING HISTORY OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S OTHELLO

Date of first performances

Othello was almost certainly first performed at the Globe, and then at Blackfriars, in the early 1600s. Evidence shows there were 'revivals in 1610 (at the Globe), and in 1629 and in 1635 (at Blackfriars); but in a period of scanty records, there are likely to have been many performances for which no documentation survives.'¹ Dating the play, like with many early modern plays, is problematic. We know that the 'earliest record of its performance consists of an entry in the Accounts Book of Sir Edmund Tilney, Master of the Revels from 1579 to 1610.'² Details shows that 'on Hallowmas Day (1 November), 1604, 'the King's Majesty's players...[acted] a play in the Banqueting House at Whitehall called *The Moor of Venice* [by] Shaxberd' (i.e. Shakespeare).'³ The court performance in 1604 provides an end date by which the play must have been completed, and it has been suggested that the earliest it could have been written was 1601. The geographical details of the play have been attributed to a translation of Pliny's (the Roman author's) *Historie of the World*, also known as *Naturalis Historia*. If this was published in 1601, then *Othello* was surely published after. It is during this time span, between 1601 to 1604, that critics have generally accepted that the play was composed, but further cases have been made for specific dates within this three-year period.

Some scholars have assigned the play to 1603/4 on the basis that was written at the start of James I's reign due to his 'interest in the conflict between Turkey and Christendom', so 'written with an eye to the tastes of the company's new royal patron and his queen.'⁴ Furthermore, the play is referenced in contemporary work in 'Dekker and Middleton's *The Honest Whore* (Part 1), first performed in 1604', which suggests that 'the play had already made its public debut, and that the players (as they typically did) were simply presenting the Court with an established popular success – albeit one well tailored to current royal fads.'⁵ The fact that both *Othello* and *Measure for Measure* share the same source material has been used to suggest that the former could have been one of Shakespeare's first Jacobean plays, as the latter is dated at 1604/5 too. Other texts and ideas can contribute to the debate surrounding the composition date of *Othello*, such as a work by the author Robert Knolles who dedicated his history of the Turks to the King in 1603, and could have provided details for the conflict in the East Mediterranean that the play concerns.

The printing history of other plays can also provide evidence as to when *Othello* was actually created. Some scholars have argued that it may have been written as early as 1601 as they propose that the language of *Othello* mirrors that found in the 1603 Quarto edition of *Hamlet*; 'turns of phrase whose appearance is most easily explained as the result of memorial error by someone familiar with both plays.'⁶ The similarity between the cast list for both *Othello* and *Twelfth Night* also supports the theory for an earlier publication date of around 1601/2 as the company would have used the same boy actor for 'the parts of Viola and Desdemona' for both parts required 'a good singing voice.'⁷ Various evidence and theories make it difficult to confidently say when the play was composed, and 'a date of 1602–3 is as close as we are likely to get.'

Printing History

Othello's own printing history is based on an entry 'in the Stationers' Register on 6 October 1621 by Thomas Walkley, the bookseller for whom Q was printed early the following year.⁹ This was the first of two early publications of *Othello* which 'were published after Shakespeare's death in 1616.'¹⁰ This Quarto in 1622 was followed by the Folio version in 1623. There are differences between the two: the Folio is longer, words are printed in the Quarto that have been either removed or replaced in the Folio, and the Quarto version has much more detailed stage directions.¹¹ Modern editions now merge the two together, yet there are still questions surrounding these two versions. Do they both stem from the same text, or are they from two? If they are from two different versions it could be 'seen as Shakespeare's first and second thoughts.'¹² A third text was published in 1630, known as the Second Quarto, which 'offers a carefully corrected version of Q, produced by an editor who made extensive use of F.'¹³

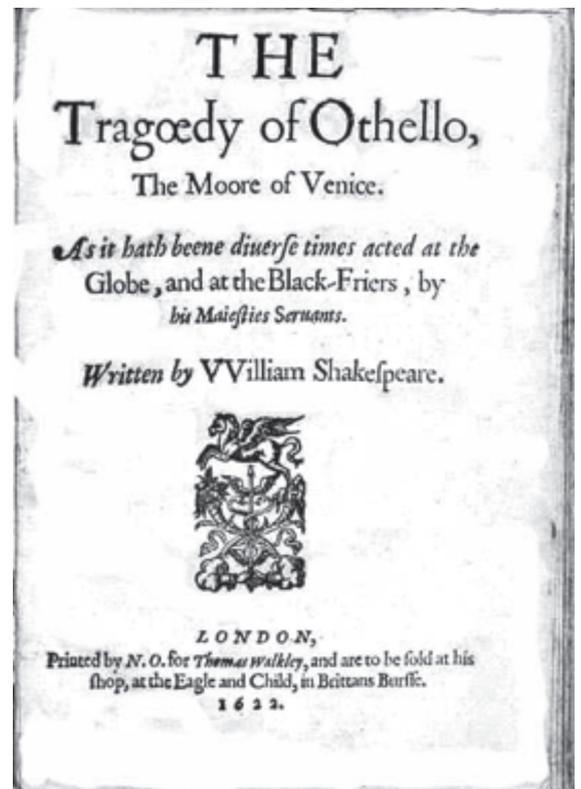


Figure 1. The title page of the 1622 Quarto of *Othello*

¹ Michael Neill, 'Introduction' in *Othello, the Moor of Venice* by William Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp.1–179, (p.3)

² Michael Neill, 'Appendix A The Date of the Play' in *Othello, the Moor of Venice* by William Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 399–404, (p.399)

³ Neill, p.399

⁴ Neill, p.399

⁵ Neill, p.400

⁶ Neill, p.401

⁷ Neill, p.402

⁸ Neill, p.404

⁹ Michael Neill, 'Appendix B The Texts of the Play' in *Othello, the Moor of Venice* by William Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp.40–433, (p.406)

¹⁰ E. A. J. Honigmann, 'Appendix 2 The Textual Problem' in *Othello* by William Shakespeare (London: Arden Shakespeare, 1997), pp.351–367, (p.351)

¹¹ Honigmann, pp.351–2

¹² Honigmann, p.353

¹³ Neill, p.405