



Historical Introduction to *Othello*

Date of Composition:

There has been much discussion and controversy over the date of the writing and first performance of Shakespeare's *Othello*. Most scholars currently accept the year 1604 as being the composition year, but others claim anywhere from 1602-1602. The Royal Shakespeare Company states that there is a record in the Revels accounts of *Othello* being performed in 1604 before King James VI/I ("Dating the Play").

Shakespeare's Sources:

The primary source for *Othello* is most commonly identified as the seventh story in the third decade of the *Hecatomithi* of Giraldi Cinthio, published in Venice in 1566. There is, however, questioning over whether or not Shakespeare would have been able to read the story in its original Italian language or even in the later French version, published in 1584. If there was an English translation of the story at the time there is no copy remaining today. Most critics agree that Shakespeare owes a great debt to Cinthio for the general plot structure and some details. (Ridley xv).

The Problem of the Text:

There are three distinctive texts of *Othello* which are available today:

1. The First Quarto (Q1) was printed in 1622, nearly 20 years after the probable date of the initial writing and performances of the play.
 2. The First Folio (F) was printed in 1623 either independently or from an amended copy of Q1.
 3. The Second Quarto (Q2) was printed in 1630 but is typically regarded as a conflation of Q1 and F.
- Because of these three texts, a decision must be made as to which of the two main texts (Q1 and F) should be adopted or used.

So which is the best? Hart, the original editor of the Arden edition of *Othello* says, "The superiority of the Folio is easily proved. In the first place it contains about 160 lines, undoubtedly genuine, omitted in the First Quarto. Again, there are many errors or misprints in the First Quarto which are correctly rendered by the Folio. There are indeed, a certain number of important exceptions, where the readings of the 1622 Quarto are better than the Folio" (Ridley xviii).

Sources-

"Dating the Play." Royal Shakespeare Company. 1 Apr 2009 <<http://www.rsc.org.uk/othello/about/dating.html>>.

Ridley, M. R. The Arden Shakespeare: Othello. 7th. London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1959.

"Shakespeare in Quarto". British Library. <http://www.bl.uk/treasures/shakespeare/othello.html>.