



The Publishing and Performance History of *Othello*

The play was written between 1601 and 1604. The first printed Quarto (Q) was published in 1622 by Nicholas Okes for Thomas Walkley. It was entered in the Stationers' Register the previous year, 1621. The First Folio (F) was published in 1623. The second Quarto (Q2) was published in 1630. Q and F contain many differences: for example, the Willow Song appears only in F, but profanities were deleted from F.^[1] Modern editions choose readings from both Q and F.^[2]

The first recorded performance of *Othello* was in 1604, by the 'Kings Maiesties plaiers' in King James' Banqueting Hall at Whitehall, according to the account book of the then Master of the Revels. There was a performance by the Kings Men in Oxford in 1610, at which Desdemona's dying face 'implored the pity of the spectators';^[3] in contrast, at a performance in 1660, the diarist Samuel Pepys records that a woman in the audience 'called out, to see Desdemona smothered'.^[4] In the Restoration period, the female roles were taken by actresses for the first time: Desdemona was played by an actress in 1660 (possibly Margaret Hughes, who appears on a cast list in 1669). A prologue and epilogue were written by Thomas Jordan for the 1660 production, addressing the issue of whether actresses could perform without being thought to be loose women. Jordan's epilogue assured the audience that the actress was 'As far from being what you call a whore./As Desdemona Injured by the Moor'. Jordan invited women especially to approve the actress playing Desdemona: 'But ladies, what think you? for if you tax/ Her freedom with dishonour to your sex./She means to act no more, and this shall be/ No other play, but her own tragedy'.^[5]

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the play remained popular, often performed in cut and censored versions.^[6] with famous actors of the day taking on the part of Othello, with varying success. Actors tended to emphasise either Othello's thoughtfulness and introspection, or his explosive passions.^[7] The play was turned into the librettos of two nineteenth-century operas, by Rossini and Verdi. Modern performances of *Othello* have seen the lead acted by Laurence Olivier in 1964^[8] and Anthony Hopkins (for the BBC) in 1981.^[9] with famous lags including Olivier in 1938 and Richard Burton in 1956. However, as early as the 1960s, some critics found it odd to have a white actor