BACKGROUND TO THE PLAY

Most scholars believe that Othello, one of Shakespeare’s most popular and powerful tragedies was written between 1602 and 1604. According to the Master of the Revels’ records it was first performed on Hallowmas day (1 November) 1604 for King James I in the banqueting hall at Whitehall Palace.

Unlike the majority of Shakespeare’s plays there is much evidence of Othello’s early performance history. Records show performances at the Globe, Blackfriars, Hampton Court and, most notably, at the wedding of King James’s daughter Elizabeth. Apart from the theatres closing between 1635 and 1660 due to Puritan rule, scholars have records of the play being performed every decade for 400 years.

The famous early modern actor Richard Burbage played Othello in the original production, and the first recorded performance of Iago was Joseph Taylor, a member of the King’s Men in 1616. After the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, Othello was one of the first plays performed when the theatres were reopened. It was a new era. King Charles II proclaimed that women could legally perform and a December production of Othello that year at the Vere Street Theatre, starring Margaret Hughes as Desdemona, marks the first recorded performance of a woman treading the boards of the English stage.

The play was first published by bookseller Thomas Walkley in quarto format in 1622, before it was included in the publication of the First Folio the following year by Shakespeare’s fellow actors John Heminges and Henry Condell. The differences between the two publications have caused much scholarly contention. The Folio version contains around 160 lines that are not in the Quarto, and it lacks about a dozen lines found in the original publication. The Quarto is likely to be a dictated version due to its peculiar punctuation and profanities, whereas the Folio is most likely from a licensed copy of the script that had been reviewed by the Master of the Revels, as it adheres to the 1606 ‘Act to Restrain Abuses of Players’; the profanities have been removed.

Othello was hugely popular throughout the 17th and 18th century and is one of the few Shakespearean plays never altered during the Restoration period. However, over the 19th and 20th centuries various interpretations of the play emerged in response to changing notions of race and sexuality. In 1826, Ira Aldridge was the first African-American to play the role of Othello in London. He played the role many times on European stages. In 1938, Royal Shakespeare Company director Tyrone Guthrie consulted the Freudian psychologist Ernest Jones about the relationship between Iago and Othello. As a result Laurence Olivier’s Iago was portrayed as repressing his sexual attraction to the Moor. In 1985 Ben Kingsley and David Suchet’s depiction of Othello and Iago also stressed the latter’s unrequited homosexual longing. This was the last RSC production to cast a white actor in the role of Othello. In 1997 Jude Kelly and the Folger Library produced a version of Othello in which British actor Patrick Stewart played the title role as a white actor in a cast of 22 African-American performers. This production is referred to as the ‘photo negative’ production and certainly shone a fresh light on the notions of race and minority.
SHAKESPEARE’S SOURCES FOR OTHELLO

Shakespeare’s Othello is an adaptation of the Italian Un Capitano Moro, “A Moorish Captain” by Giovanni Giraldi, a writer more commonly known as Cinthio. It is from his 1565 collection of One Hundred Tales in the style of Boccaccio’s Decameron. It is believed that Cinthio’s sources were either ‘The Three Apples’ tale from Arabian Nights or actual tragic events that took place in Venice in 1508. Amazingly, no known English translation of the story existed during Shakespeare’s lifetime, and although it is believed that Shakespeare most likely read from the French translation, Shakespeare’s lines most closely echo the Italian original.

There are numerous differences between the two texts and many of Shakespeare’s alterations depart from Cinthio’s moral instruction and provide a much deeper study of the human condition. In the original text the only named character is Desdemona, and several of the minor characters and sub-plots (such as Roderigo and his plight) were added by Shakespeare. Shakespeare’s addition of the very tender scene where Emilia prepares Desdemona for bed adds a stronger female voice to the play and heightens audience empathy for the doomed female lead. Although Shakespeare mostly adheres to Cinthio’s plot, his most important departure is undoubtedly in Desdemona’s death. Cinthio’s ‘Ensign’ (Iago), is given the task of bludgeoning Desdemona to death. He and Othello then move her body to the bed and escape, disguising the crime scene as an accident. There is little sign of true affection or remorse. In Shakespeare’s adaptation, Othello performs the tragic act himself, in a less melodramatic fashion, and regrets it instantly. Shakespeare’s version makes great use of dramatic timing and irony and focuses less on the macabre act and more on the relationships and social framework it affects. The original is considered a racist warning to European women about the dangers of interracial marriages, whereas Shakespeare’s text places the central couple as victims of both mindless villainy and inherent human flaws.

Other sources include Pliny’s Natural History. It is thought by many scholars that Othello’s speech in Act 1, in which he argues that he didn’t obtain Desdemona’s love by sorcery, is Shakespeare’s reading of Pliny’s work. As Natural History was translated into English in 1601, scholars have been better able to date Shakespeare’s composition of Othello.

Shakespeare biographer Peter Ackroyd hails Othello as a very modern drama for its day and notes that the play, like many of Shakespeare’s works, draws on Jacobean cultural and political concerns. It is known that James I had a sympathy for and interest in the kingdom of Spain. Shakespeare’s company, The King’s Men, were acting courtiers for the Ambassador Extraordinary of Spain during the time Othello was created and are believed to have performed the production in his honour, at great expense to James. This perhaps explains why Shakespeare incorporated so many Spanish elements into Othello. Although the Moor’s race is ambiguous, many scholars believe him to be of Spanish origin, and Iago and Roderigo are recognisably Spanish names. It was also well known that the previous king of Spain, Philip II, was rumoured to have been a jealous husband who strangled his wife in bed, and that his suspicions were aroused by his wife dropping a handkerchief. This correlation must be more than coincidence. It is also important to note that during Shakespeare’s lifetime the Spanish had made a concerted effort to expel a very large population of Moors from their country. Ackroyd believes the ‘...Moors, like the Jews, were the victims of European racial prejudice.’ Shakespeare would also have known of and seen the community of Moors who had taken residence in London as refugees from Spanish oppression.

That Cyprus becomes the scene of the tragic action of Othello can also be seen as Shakespeare recognising his sovereign’s interest in Spain. At the time of the first production the previously Venetian controlled island of Cyprus had been occupied by the Turks for thirty years and thus posed a threat to Spanish interests in the Mediterranean. King James I had even composed a poem on this subject. During the reign of the current king, Philip III, Spain was in conflict with Venice and some commentators have even claimed that the characters of Desdemona and Othello represent the conflict between the two powers.
FAMOUS ANECDOTES FROM STAGE

• In 1833 in London a famous production of *Othello* cast father and son to play the two lead male roles: Edmund Kean as the trusting Othello and his son Charles as the villainous Iago. Tragically, during one of the performances Edmund collapsed on stage into the arms of his son, and died only a few weeks later.

• In the 1880’s Henry Irving and Edwin Booth attracted audiences by alternating the roles of Iago and Othello. This has been a common approach to producing the play. Richard Burton and John Neville also swapped the roles in 1955.

• The famous actor and theatre practitioner Constantin Stanislavsky played the role of Othello in 1896.

• Laurence Olivier played the role of Othello in 1964 for the Royal Shakespeare Company. He had been reluctant to take the role for fear of being upstaged by the actor playing Iago, Frank Finlay. However, he apparently suffered such immense stage fright when alone on stage that he requested Finlay stand just off stage, in Olivier’s view, to comfort him.

• African-American actor Paul Robeson was the first black actor since Ira Aldridge (1860) to perform the role of Othello in a major production, marking a turning point for the casting of this character. Robeson first played the role in England in 1930 and was the first black actor to play Othello in America (Broadway) in an ‘all-white cast’ in 1943 (there had previously been all-black productions). Robeson had refused to tour the role in America in the 1930’s as he believed that racial prejudice was rampant. Rightly so – in 1930 the New York Times ran an article reporting on Robeson’s English production, entitled “Negro who kisses white girl on London stage would expect protest in America”.

• Although Robeson’s 1943 Broadway production was successful and ran for 296 performances, American audiences were in no way wholly converted. In 1979 African American actor Paul Winfield received hate mail during a run of the production for kissing ‘a white Desdemona’.

• White actors played Othello in blackface well into the twentieth century. The last major production cast like this was in 1990 with Michael Gambon’s performance of the title role at the Stephan Joseph Theatre, Scarborough.

• In 1999 Ray Fearon was the first black British actor to play the role of Othello for the Royal Shakespeare Company.

• Ewan McGregor played Iago in a 2007 London production at the Donmar. Despite negative reviews tickets sold for as much as £2,000.
AUDIENCE RESPONSES TO OTHELLO

American writer and activist Susan Sontag famously said ‘Real art has the capacity to make us nervous’. Othello has a history of doing just that, and here are some of the more famous examples.

- In 1610, Jacobean letter writer Henry Jackson described audience responses to an Othello production at Oxford, stating that the ‘truly celebrated Desdemona... moved the audience to tears’.
- In 1660, Diarist Samuel Pepys noted that during a production ‘A very pretty lady sat by me and called out to see Desdemona smothered.’
- Dr Samuel Johnson, the author of the famous 1755 English dictionary, was a great lover and critic of Shakespeare, and confessed that he found Othello so tragic that he could not bear to read or see the last act performed.
- In 1776, German director Schroeder’s adaptation of Othello made its audience very ‘uneasy’, according to records. There were ‘swoons followed upon swoons’ and people left the theatre, or were ‘carried out’ during the closing scene.
- On recalling the Edmund Kean performance of Othello in the early 1800s, renowned poet John Keats said it was ‘direful and slaughterous to the deepest degree’.
- In an 1882 production of Othello in Baltimore, a guard on duty at the theatre during a performance shouted “It will never be said that in my presence a confounded Negro has killed a white woman”, then he ‘fired his gun and broke the arm of the actor who was playing Othello’.
- In a Russian production in the early 20th century, when Alexander Ostuzhev performed Othello’s final speech, an audience member stood up and shouted “It wasn’t his fault; his kind of love could burn up a city.”