

Othello

INTRODUCTION

Othello was given before James I in the Banqueting House at Whitehall on 1 November 1604. Information about the Turkish invasion of Cyprus appears to derive from Richard Knolles's *History of the Turks*, published no earlier than 30 September 1603, so Shakespeare probably completed his play some time between that date and the summer of 1604. It first appeared in print in a quarto of 1622; the version printed in the 1623 Folio is about 160 lines longer, and has over a thousand differences in wording. It seems that Shakespeare partially revised his play, adding, for example, Desdemona's willow song (4.3) and building up Emilia's role in the closing scenes. We base our text on the Folio as that seems to represent Shakespeare's second thoughts.

Shakespeare's decision to make a black man a tragic hero was bold and original: by an ancient tradition, blackness was associated with sin and death; and blackamoors in plays before Shakespeare are generally villainous (like Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*). The story of a Moorish commander deluded by his ensign (standard-bearer) into believing that his young wife has been unfaithful to him with another soldier derives from a prose tale by the Italian Giambattista Cinzio Giraldi first published in 1565 in a collection of linked tales, *Gli Ecatommiti* (*The Hundred Tales*). Shakespeare must have read it either in Italian or in a French translation of 1584; he may have looked at both. Giraldi tells the tale in a few pages of compressed, matter-of-fact narrative interspersed with brief conversations. His main characters are a Moor of Venice (Othello), his Venetian wife (Desdemona), his ensign (Iago), his ensign's wife (Emilia), and a corporal (Cassio) 'who was very dear to the Moor'. Only Desdemona is named. Shakespeare's invented characters include Roderigo, a young, disappointed suitor of Desdemona, and Brabantio, Desdemona's father, who opposes her marriage to Othello. Bianca, Cassio's mistress, is developed from a few hints in the source. Shakespeare also introduces the military action between Turkey and Venice±±infidels and Christians±±which

gives especial importance to Othello's posting to Cyprus, a Venetian protectorate which the Turks attacked in 1570 and conquered in the following year. In the source, Othello and Desdemona are already happily settled into married life when they go to Cyprus; Shakespeare compresses the time-scheme and makes many changes to the narrative.

Othello, a great success in Shakespeare's time, was one of the first plays to be acted after the reopening of the theatres in 1660, and since that time has remained one of the most popular plays on the English stage.