

## Editorial influence in *Othello*

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I was in high school the first time I was given a copy of *Othello*. It was the Folger Shakespeare edition edited by Barbara Mowat and Paul Werstine, but at the time I probably couldn't have told you that. It wouldn't have occurred to me to think of it as anything other than Shakespeare's play. It was just *Othello*. We were reading it for school. This is how many students in are positioned to read the plays: Shakespeare is Shakespeare. The play is the play.

A 400-year-old play, especially one as embedded in our literary, artistic, and performance cultures as *Othello*, can't be read in isolation. It's an influential play that represents an important document in the history of race and racism. It captures a moment when English people, Shakespeare's audiences, living in an increasingly diverse world of global movement and trade, were trying to understand the importance of racial difference and at the same time, trying to understand why and how these kinds of differences impact the opportunities and experiences of real people. And the differences in these opportunities persist to our present. When I teach this text, it is vital to show my students how *Othello* has been handled throughout time, and especially through a lineage of editorial decisions.

I need my students to understand how the book became the book in their hands, and how the editors of that particular edition have a hand in the meaning-making process of the play. This is important, especially for plays like *Othello*, which have several early versions that are contradictory to each other. Each editor of every edition has to contend with the variations amongst the early versions, but also the lineage of editorial decisions that have been passed down in the centuries of making this play available to readers.

My students are invited to consider how, by the time they pick up the book, an editor has already engaged in the interpretive work of the text and has made significant changes that will influence a reader's experience and understanding. I want them to see how editors are human and that everything they do when they are working with a text is subjective. Each edition is created at a single point in time and space, so it's always going to be a product of the social and political realities of its origin. It's also important to note that historically the demographic makeup of the scholars who engage in editing is homogenous—most scholarly editions have been created by white men.

So, what does that mean for a play like *Othello*?

Let's start with an example.

In Act I, Scene 3, Othello has eloped with Desdemona during the night. He has been accused by her father, Brabantio, of coercing her to marry him—implying that this relationship could not be consensual and that his daughter has been violated by Othello. Brabantio hauls Othello in front of the senate to answer for this crime, and Othello, in his first lengthy speech of the play, defends himself. This is a moment of heightened tension, and every word Othello says is crucial.

But there are two early versions of the play that render this speech differently. In fact, these versions, the 1623 Folio and the 1622 Quarto, are full of differences, which is what makes *Othello* such a difficult play to edit. To make one cohesive and coherent

version of this old book for new readers, an editor must constantly compare two equally authoritative versions of the play that sometimes disagree and contradict each other in significant ways.

This is one of those moments. In both versions, Othello defends himself against Brabantio's accusations by saying that Desdemona did consent. He says that she fell in love with him over the course of his many invited visits to their home, at her father's request, and that she made her affection and desire for him clear.

In the quarto, Othello says, "she gave me for my pains a world of sighs." That is, she had a strong empathetic response. She felt for him, and thus she fell for him.

But in the folio, Othello says something different. He says, "she gave me for my pains a world of kisses." This is a little more specific. She had a strong response, and it led to physical intimacy initiated by her.

There's a lot at play here and even more at stake. Othello is a non-European character with dark skin—a Black man. He is one of the first, if not the first, Black men in English literature to be represented as a fully formed, three-dimensional character. And in this moment, he is accused of essentially raping or otherwise assaulting a white woman, the daughter of a senator.

This is a moment in which race, as represented through physical and cultural difference, plays a major role in the happenings of the story. Race is what makes the conflict of the play perilous, and it is sharpened by Shakespeare throughout Act I, in which characters continue to degrade Othello with racist slurs and stereotypes.

The question of whether Desdemona and Othello's relationship was consensual, and whether it was physically intimate, is a crucial one. The reading of this scene, without the understanding of the editorial decisions being made in the text, is highly dependent on the edition. So, when our students pick up a copy of *Othello*, they will be influenced by

the editorial decisions made in the edition that they have—unless they are taught how to read for that influence.

While the several slight variations of one line in a play might seem minor, this ability to read through and around a text like *Othello* is an important critical thinking skill for students to develop. Not only does it destabilize an assumption of authority or universality within these old, canonical texts, but it forces them to read any and all texts as mediated. It gives students agency, authority, and expertise over the supposed or predetermined truths of our world and asks them to be a participant in their own meaning-making.