

EVIDENCE OF REVISION IN OTHELLO

by

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[This article was published in *Notes and Queries*, vol. 45, no. 3 (September 1998) and is reproduced here, with minor changes, by permission of Oxford University Press. Numbers in square brackets refer to end notes.]

Othello exists in two authoritative versions: the first quarto (Q) published in 1622 and the Folio (F) of 1623. Current scholarly opinion on the relationship between Q and F is summarised thus in the *Oxford Textual Companion* [1]:

"[Q] represents a scribal copy of foul papers.
F represents a scribal copy of Shakespeare's own revised manuscript of the play.
F therefore brings us closer to Shakespeare's final text than [Q].
[Q's] scribe obliterated fewer authorial characteristics than F's."

This hypothesis places Othello in the same category as Hamlet and King Lear; for both of these, scholars generally agree that F prints Shakespeare's revised texts [2].

There are two substantial difficulties with this. First, the F versions of Hamlet and Lear omit several long passages (in Lear, an entire scene) which do not significantly advance the plot but whose omission produces tighter, faster-paced dramas. In Othello, if we accept the current hypothesis, precisely the opposite occurs. The prime example is Emilia's defence of wives at the end of the 'willow song' scene:

But I do think it is their husbands' faults
If wives do fall. Say that they slack their duties,
And pour our treasures into foreign laps
.....
Then let them use us well, else let them know
The ills we do, their ills instruct us so.
(4.3.85-102) [3]

This, and similar passages in F, are best described by the Oxford editors:

"Q is shorter than F, and most of the material present only in F consists of static poetic elaboration which slows up the dramatic pace. We find it easier to believe that Shakespeare on reflection intelligently cut such elaborations than that he so unintelligently padded out a play already taxingly long." [4]

These comments were made about Richard III. Excepting that Othello is not taxingly long, they apply to it with equal force.

The other difficulty is that F contains many fewer stage directions than Q. For example, at the climax of the play, F does not tell us that Othello kisses the sleeping Desdemona; that after murdering her, he falls on the bed where she lies; that he runs at Iago when told the truth about the handkerchief; that Iago stabs Emilia; or, finally, that Othello stabs himself. For all of these directions, and many others, Q is our only source. No one has satisfactorily explained how it came about that the revised text of the play contains so many fewer stage directions, when the plot was essentially unaffected by the revision. It seems unlikely that the Q-only directions were added by the scribe who copied the play because, as Greg noted [5], all of them give the impression of being authorial. In particular, Q's 'Enter Montanio, Gouvernor of Cypres, with two other Gentlemen' (II.i.0) could only have been written by Shakespeare, because the text nowhere describes Montano as governor. To explain the absence of such directions from F, we have to believe that either Shakespeare or the scribe who copied his manuscript deliberately deleted around twenty stage directions (accidental omission of so many is hardly possible). This is not a credible hypothesis.

In this note I provide textual evidence to support an alternative hypothesis: that it is Q which represents Shakespeare's revised text of Othello, F being the original.

FALSE STARTS IN F

During the heat of composition, Shakespeare, like all authors, could be expected to strike out certain words or lines he had written and replace them with others he considered better. That these 'false starts' were sometimes not clearly marked in his manuscripts and could find their way into printed texts is proved by, among others, the well-known example from Romeo and Juliet (Q2): 'I will beleeeue, / Shall I beleeeue that vnsubstantiall death is amorous' (5.3.102-3) where the compositor failed to realise that 'I will beleeeue' was a false start for 'Shall I beleeeue'. There are several textual variants between F and Q which are best explained as false starts inadvertently printed in F.

Just before Othello's re-entry in the second half of the great temptation scene, Iago in F says:

..... This may do something.
The Moore already changes with my poyson:
Dangerous conceites, are in their Natures poysons,
Which at the first are scarce found to distaste:
But with a little acte vpon the blood,
Burne like the Mines of Sulphure.
(3.3.328-33)

Line 329 occurs in F only. The near-repetition of 'poyson' and 'poysons' in successive lines is clumsy. I suggest that 'The Moore already changes.....' was a false start,

which Shakespeare intended to replace by 'Dangerous conceites.....', giving:

..... this may doe something,
Dangerous conceits are in their natures poisons,
Which at the first are scarce found to distast.
[etc.]

This is the reading in Q.

After Roderigo has attacked Cassio at the start of the final act, Iago says in F: 'He's almost slaine, and Roderigo quite dead.' (5.1.116) where 'He' refers to Cassio. The description of Roderigo as 'quite dead' has rightly been seen as unintentionally comical and most editions based on F simply omit 'quite'. Wells and Taylor, in 'Textual Companion' [6], quote Lawrence J. Ross's edition of 1974 whose reading 'He's almost slain and Roderigo quite. Dead.' they label 'ingenious'. I suggest that 'quite' was another false start. Shakespeare first wrote 'He's almost slain and Roderigo quite.' where 'quite' has the meaning 'requited'. Use of the word 'quit' for 'requite' is paralleled by Hamlet, speaking of revenge on Claudius, who says 'is't not perfect conscience / To quit him with this arm?' (5.2.68-9). Having written 'quite', Shakespeare immediately altered it to the more straightforward 'dead', giving: 'Hee's almost slaine, and Roderigo dead.' which is the reading in Q.

Two other examples can be given, not as strong as the ones above. When Othello arrives to break up the drunken brawl which Iago has engineered in Act 2, Montano immediately tells him, in F: 'I bleed still, I am hurt to th' death. He dies.' (2.3.157). The phrase 'He dies' is not in Q. Editors have noted that it is perhaps a stage direction which was inadvertently printed as part of the dialogue. The identical stage direction is given for the death of Oswald in the first quarto (1608) of King Lear (4.5.242), believed to have been printed from Shakespeare's foul papers. Moreover, the second quarto (1630) of Othello, a careful conflation of Q and F, prints the stage direction 'He faints' at this point, suggesting that its editor also took 'He dies' to be a misplaced stage direction and emended it in view of the fact that Montano does not die.

If 'He dies' was first written as a stage direction, it was clearly a false start. Shakespeare perhaps intended to have Montano die of his wounds (he plays a negligible part in the play after this scene). Immediately on writing it, Shakespeare realised that, with Montano dead, Cassio could hardly escape with mere dismissal from his post. In a town 'brimful of fear' (2.3.207), Othello would be forced, at the very least, to imprison him, making it much harder for Iago's plot to proceed. So 'He dies' was marked as cancelled, explaining its absence from Q.

In Desdemona and Emilia's 'willow song' scene, in a prose passage which occurs only in F, Emilia says 'but for all the whole world' (4.3.73-4) and goes on to say that she would make her husband a cuckold for the whole world. It

is possible that Shakespeare was in two minds whether to write 'but for all the world' or 'but for the whole world' and in haste wrote a conflation of the two.

The presence of these false starts in F suggests strongly that it represents Shakespeare's original text. There are no false starts discernible in Q.

REVISION IN Q

There are several variants between Q and F which suggest that it is Q which prints the revised text.

In the scene of confrontation between Othello and Desdemona, after he has accused her directly of infidelity, Emilia enters the stage. The motive and timing of her entry differ significantly between F and Q. In F, her entry appears to be a response to Othello's call for her:

I tooke you for that cunning Whore of Venice,
That married with Othello. You Mistris,
[Enter Aemilia.]
That haue the office opposite to Saint Peter,
And keeps the gate of hell.
(4.2.93-6)

This presents a problem because later in the scene Emilia reveals that she knows that Othello has called Desdemona 'whore': 'He called her whore. A beggar in his drink / Could not have laid such terms upon his callet.' (4.2.119-120). To explain how she knows this we have to suppose either that her entry in the scene was wrongly placed at line 94 by the F compositor or, extra-textually, that she was listening outside the door before she entered. It is more likely that the passage in F is as it was first written by Shakespeare who, sensing the difficulty, revised it. In Q, the revised version, Emilia enters 5 lines earlier, allowing her to be on stage to hear Othello say 'cunning whore of Venice'.

One of the many variants between Q and F occurs when Othello is assuring the Senate that he will not scant their 'serious and great business' if Desdemona accompanies him to Cyprus. He concludes by saying that, should he do so,

Let housewives make a skillet of my helm,
And all indign and base aduersities
Make head against my estimation.
(1.3.272-4)

This is the F reading. Q prints 'reputation' instead of 'estimation'. Taken in isolation this change could be taken as evidence of authorial revision either from F to Q or vice versa. But 'reputation' is the key word in the play, repeated again and again. Othello asks Montano:

What's the matter,
That you unlace your reputation thus,

And spend your rich opinion for the name
Of a night-brawler?
(2.3.186-9)

Cassio laments:

"Reputation, reputation, reputation - O, I ha'e lost my
reputation, I ha'e lost the immortal part of myself, and
what remains is bestial! My reputation, Iago, my
reputation." (2.3.256-9)

Iago reassures him:

"As I am an honest man, I thought you had received some
bodily wound. There is more sense in that than in
reputation. Reputation is an idle and most false
imposition, oft got without merit and lost without
deserving. You have lost no reputation at all unless you
repute yourself such a loser." (2.3.260-5)

This cumulative evidence suggests strongly that
Shakespeare changed F's reading 'estimation' to Q's
'reputation' at 1.3.274 to strengthen the use of the
keyword, not that he weakened it by the reverse change.

After recounting to the Senate how he told 'the story of
my life' at Brabantio's house, Othello says of Desdemona:
'My Storie being done, / She gaue me for my paines a world
of kisses:' (1.3.157-8). This, the F reading, is hard to
explain in view of the lines which immediately follow:

..... She thank'd me,
And bad me, if I had a Friend that lou'd her,
I should but teach him how to tell my Story,
And that would woee her. Vpon this hint I spake,
(1.3.162-5. Q misprints 'heate' for 'hint')

That Desdemona should bestow a world of kisses on Othello
first and then proceed to drop hints is implausible. It
can be explained only by the extra-textual
characterisation of her as being 'impulsively
affectionate' [7]. I suggest that the F reading 'kisses'
was Shakespeare's first thought; in revising he realised
the implausibility of what he had written and changed it
to give the Q reading: 'She gaue me for my paines a world
of sighes'.

In the 'willow song' scene Desdemona remembers her maid
Barbary and says: 'She had a song of willow. / An old
thing 'twas, but it expressed her fortune, / And she died
singing it. That song tonight / Will not go from my mind.'
(4.3.27-30, both Q and F). In F only, there follows a
discussion of Lodovico's graces, and Desdemona sings the
song. F, but not Q, has Emilia recall the song in the
closing scene of the play: 'What did thy song bode, lady?
/ Hark, canst thou hear me? I will play the swan, / And
die in music. (sings) Willow, willow, willow' (5.2.253-5).

Clearly, the song and Emilia's later reference to it were
either cut together from the F text or added together to

the Q text. In arguing that it is Q which represents the revised text I admit that the revision, in this instance, appears inept. If his intention was to omit the song, it is surprising that Shakespeare did not also omit the lines beginning 'She had a song of willow'. But scholars who believe that the song was a later addition to the play face a greater difficulty. They must suppose that Shakespeare wrote the lines 'That song tonight / Will not go from my mind' and then made no further mention of the song. Later, he revised the play to add it. But why have Desdemona speak of a song, raising the audience's expectation that she is to sing it, and then fail to provide either the song or any further reference to it? It is more plausible that Shakespeare wrote the song in the original text (F) and then cut it carelessly to produce the Q text.

A few lines later, we find further evidence that material was cut from the F version of this scene. In Q, Desdemona's question 'Wouldst thou do such a deed for all the world?' (4.3.62) is misleading because the only deed to which it might refer is the forsaking of Barbary by her love. But the subsequent dialogue reveals that the deed in question is the infidelity of wives. In F, Desdemona's question is preceded by 'Dost thou in conscience think - tell me Emilia - / That there be women do abuse their husbands / In such gross kind?' (4.3.59-61). These lines make it clear to the audience that Desdemona's mind is on the deed which Othello had accused her of committing, in the previous scene. It seems more likely that Shakespeare created the confused passage in Q by careless cutting than that he wrote it as it stands.

MISCELLANEOUS TEXTUAL NOTES

When Iago first gives his reasons for hating Othello, he says, in Q:

But he, as louing his owne pride and purposes,
Euades them, with a bumbast circumstance,
Horribly stuft with Epithites of warre:
And in conclusion,
Non-suits my mediators:

(1.1.12-16)

In F the passage is the same (with variations in spelling and punctuation), except that the half-line 'And in conclusion' is missing. This is consistent with the F scribe's evident dislike of half-lines [8]. Even in Q, the half-line looks like something added afterwards, as if the scribe could not decipher or understand the line which stood in Shakespeare's manuscript and made up a linking phrase in order to make tolerable sense of the passage. A very similar form of editing can be observed in the British Museum manuscript of Sir Thomas More (Addition II) where Shakespeare wrote:

..... and your unreuerent knees,
Make them your feet. To kneel to be forgiven
Is safer wars than ever you can make,

Whose discipline is riot.
In, in to your obedience! Why, even your hurly
Cannot proceed but by obedience.
What rebel captain,
As mut'nies are incident, by his name
Can still the rout?
(lines 122-30)

With the careful punctuation above, the passage makes sense. Reading without the benefit of punctuation, which Shakespeare did not provide, the scribe who incorporated his addition into the play could not understand it. He crossed out most of it and added 'Tell me but this', to produce:

..... and your unreverent knees,
Make them your feet to kneel to be forgiven.
Tell me but this, what rebel captain,
As mut'nies are incident, by his name
Can still the rout?

'And in conclusion' in Q Othello serves a similar purpose as 'Tell me but this': it replaces an unintelligible passage in the manuscript with an easy bridging phrase.

When delivering news of the likely Turkish invasion of Cyprus, the Messenger tells the Duke that Montano 'With his free duty recommends you thus, / And prays you to believe him.' (1.3.42-3, both Q and F). The feeble 'believe' was first emended to 'relieve' by Capell but most modern editions retain the original reading. Support for the emendation comes from a passage in Antony and Cleopatra. Sent by Caesar to offer 'comforts' to the defeated Cleopatra, Proculeius tells her:

..... you shall find
A conqueror that will pray in aid for kindness,
Where he for grace is kneeled to.
(5.2.26-8)

Just a few lines later, after Roman soldiers have taken Cleopatra by surprise and she moves to stab herself, Proculeius says:

Hold, worthy lady, hold!
Do not yourself such wrong, who are in this
Relieved but not betrayed.
(5.2.38-40)

This example is too slender to warrant the conclusion that there was an association in Shakespeare's mind between 'pray' and 'relieve' but it does tend to support Capell's emendation.

Another variant between Q and F occurs in Act 2 when, viewing the storm from the cape, the Second Gentleman tells Montano:

The winde-shak'd-Surge, with high & monstrous Maine
Seemes to cast water on the burning Beare,

And quench the Guards of th'euer-fixed Pole:
(2.1.13-15)

This is the F reading. In Q, the Pole is not 'euer-fixed' but 'euer fired'. Even Ridley's edition, which is based on Q, prints the F reading, apparently regarding 'euer fired' as an error. That is the most likely explanation: 'fixed'/'fired' are easy to mistake and the Pole is elsewhere in Shakespeare referred to as fixed; for example, Caesar's description of himself in Julius Caesar:

But I am as constant as the Northern Star,
Of whose true fixed and resting quality
There is no fellow in the firmament.
(3.1.60-2)

But it is possible that Q's 'euer fired' may be the true reading. This is suggested by Lady Macbeth's 'What hath quenched them hath given me fire.' (2.2.2) where it is Duncan's guards who have been quenched, as the guards of the Pole are in Othello. [E. A. J. Honigmann's new Arden edition of Othello (1996), which I saw after writing this article, prints 'ever-fired'.]

During the temptation scene, Iago asks Othello in F: 'Would you the super-vision grossely gape on? / Behold her top'd?' (3.3.400-1). Modern editors are united in regarding 'super-vision' as corrupt; they print the Q reading 'superuisor' which makes easy sense. However, a misreading of 'superuisor' as 'super-vision' is hard to explain (a rare reading is not likely to be an error for a common one). Moreover, the second quarto also prints 'superuision', evidently not regarding it as corrupt. Honigmann's explanation [9], that its editor chose 'superuision' because he 'deferred' to Shakespeare's 'obscure' language, is contradicted by the instances where that editor did reject both Q and F readings for ones of his own.

I believe that the F reading is not corrupt. We are accustomed to hear the managers of an enterprise described as 'the management', so why should there be a difficulty in hearing a supervisor described as 'the supervision'? Had the F reading been printed more often in post-seventeenth century editions, the phrase 'the supervision' might have entered the language as easily as 'the management' has done.

Interestingly, there are two other examples of similar variants in Othello. When informed that 'The town is empty. On the brow o'th'sea / Stand ranks of people, and they cry "A sail!"' (2.1.54-5), Cassio, in expectation that Othello's ship has been sighted, replies: 'My hopes do shape him for the Gouvernor.' (2.1.56). This is the F reading. In Q, it is 'the guernement' whom Cassio hopes for and, once again, the second quarto chooses to print the rarer reading 'the gouernement'. As with 'supervisor'/'supervision', there is no difficulty with Q's reading 'guernement'. In fact, F's 'Gouvernor' may be wrong anyway: the word occurs just a few lines earlier

when Montano says: 'I am glad on't; 'tis a worthy governor.' (2.1.31). The F reading may simply be a mistaken echo by the scribe or compositor, a mistake corrected by the second quarto.

The third variant of this type occurs when Iago is persuading Roderigo to undertake the murder of Cassio who, Iago says in F, 'supps to night with a Harlotry' (4.2.238). F's 'Harlotry' is replaced by the easier 'harlot' in Q.

One of the substantive Q/F variants affects stage business in the scene in which Cassio is ambushed by Iago and Roderigo. When Iago is questioning Bianca in the presence of Lodovico and Gratiano, some attendants remove the injured Cassio. At this point, F has Iago say: 'Stay you good Gentlemen. Looke you pale, Mistris?' (5.1.107). No stage direction is given in Q or F but the clear indication is that Lodovico and Gratiano start to leave with Cassio and are urged to stay by Iago. In Q the line appears as: 'Stay you good Gentlewoman, looke you pale mistrisse?'. Here, it is Bianca who tries to leave but is restrained by Iago. Both Q and F readings are plausible; but that F's 'Gentlemen' is an error for 'Gentlewoman' is suggested by the occurrence of an almost identical error in *Much Ado About Nothing* where the quarto (1600) gives the stage direction: 'Enter Hero and two Gentlewomen, Margaret, and Vrsley' (3.1.0) which is reprinted in the Folio with 'Gentlewomen' wrongly replaced by 'Gentlemen'.

SUMMARY

The differences between the F and Q texts are of two kinds: variants between single words or phrases, whether substantive or not; and those passages which occur only in F. There is a small number of lines present only in Q, but all of these are best explained as accidental omissions from F.

Considering the single word or phrase variants, many are almost certainly due to printing error; for example, the 'Doues'/'Dawes' variant at 1.1.65. For the rest, it is possible to construct, on literary grounds, a theory of revision either from Q to F or vice versa. I have already argued above that 'estimation' in F at 1.3.274 was revised to 'reputation' in Q; but one could no doubt find arguments to support the contrary hypothesis.

Nevill Coghill regarded the F-only passages as later additions, evidence of Shakespeare's professional skill as a dramatist. Honigmann discusses this view [10] and shows that regarding the passages as cuts from the original text need not affect our judgement of Shakespeare's skill. In fact, most F-only passages are much better explained as cuts than as additions. Emilia's speech in defence of wives, quoted at the start of this note, is correctly described by Ridley as 'an undramatic disquisition' [11]; it is hard to imagine that Shakespeare *added* this speech to the play.

I believe that the readiness of scholars to see Q as the

original text stems from the many undisputed examples it gives of being close to Shakespeare's own manuscript. Since Q could not have been derived from a prompt-book (as the 'Textual Companion' notes [12], it contains an incorrect entry for Desdemona at 1.3.46) it is natural to believe that it must derive from foul papers. This in turn necessitates the belief that F must be the revised text.

My hypothesis is that it is F which represents a transcript of foul papers. F lacks the inconsistencies in the names of characters and stage directions which we should expect of foul papers because these were 'obliterated' [13] by the scribe. Q represents a transcript of Shakespeare's fair copy [14], with cuts, revision of many words and phrases and the elimination of false starts.

NOTES

1. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor with John Jowett and William Montgomery, 'William Shakespeare: A Textual Companion' (Oxford, 1987; Norton, 1997), 477-8.
2. Professor Donald Foster, in a posting to the Shaksper discussion group on the internet in July 1995, indicated that his lexical analysis of the Shakespeare canon suggests that Q is a revised text. Publication of his data is expected in 1999.
3. Most quotations of Shakespeare's works are taken from the edited modern-spelling text in 'William Shakespeare: The Complete Works', general editors Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford, 1986). Where quotations from the original texts are required, I quote Q and F from the transcriptions available from the electronic Oxford Text Archive (<http://firth.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/ota/public/index.shtml>), in both cases citing the corresponding line numbers from the modern-spelling edition. The OTA transcriptions are not without errors and I have corrected them in a couple of instances, from other sources.
4. Textual Companion, 228.
5. W. W. Greg, 'The Shakespeare First Folio: Its Bibliographical and Textual History' (Oxford, 1955), 360.
6. p.481.
7. Textual Companion, 479.
8. Othello, ed. M. R. Ridley (London, 1958), xxii. Ridley noted that five of the nine Q-only passages are half-lines.
9. E. A. J. Honigmann, 'The Texts of 'Othello' and Shakespearian Revision' (London, 1996), 101-2.
10. The Texts of 'Othello', chapter 2.

11. Othello, 201.

12. p.476.

13. Textual Companion, 478, quoted at the start of this note.

14. Q contains 'permissive' stage directions; for example, 'Enter Desdemona, Iago, and the rest' (1.3.168). It is not necessary to believe that such directions can exist only in a first draft. Nahum Tate's adaptation of King Lear (1681), printed from a carefully prepared manuscript, contains the direction 'Enter Two or Three Gentlemen' (p.49 of the University of Pennsylvania facsimile available on the internet at <http://www.library.upenn.edu/etext/furness/leartate>).

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