


Othello the Moor of Venice
by William Shakespeare
Fully annotated from an Oxfordian Perspective
by Ren Draya and Richard F. Whalen
The Oxfordian Shakespeare Series
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Reviewed by Felicia Londré

he appearance of this second volume in the Oxfordian Shakespeare Series significantly advances one of the most important projects envisioned by proponents of Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, as the author of the Shakespeare plays and sonnets. The stated aim of the series is to draw upon the wealth of both Oxfordian and Stratfordian scholarship to correlate evidence of Oxford's authorship with the texts of the plays "for better understanding of the author's intention and design" and of the plays themselves (1). The choice of *Othello* to follow the series' inaugural volume, *Macbeth*, is interesting not only because *Othello* is among Shakespeare's "top ten" most read and staged plays, but also because it is less obvious as a source of Oxfordian allusions than such works as *Hamlet* or *Twelfth Night*.

Each of the first two Oxfordian volumes includes a preface, a ten-page overview of the dramatist's life and the context for his work, a list of basic Oxfordian works for further reading, acknowledgments, a note on the texts, an introduction to the specific play, and the play itself with commentary. The *Macbeth* volume concludes with a reprinted essay, but the *Othello* volume offers an additional fifty pages of excellent material on dating the work, on the military and musical knowledge evident in it as well as demonstrable firsthand knowledge of the layout of the port and battlements of Famagusta on Cyprus. Most importantly, it includes an annotated bibliography of works pertaining to *Othello*.

The heart of the matter, the play with commentary, is accessibly presented with the text and line-referenced commentary on facing pages. This presentation is much easier to read with minimal interruption of the flow of the play than are those editions with bottom-of-the-page notes. Only in Act 2 does a glitch propel the notes for the last four lines of the text onto the subsequent page of notes. How good is the commentary? It definitely succeeds in enhancing the reader's understanding of "the author's intention and design" for more insightful appreciation of the play. The notes occasionally acknowledge scholarly disagreement about the meaning of a term or phrase; they explain archaic references; they recognize skillfully deployed literary or theatrical devices; they offer anecdotal context on topics ranging from historical events to Renaissance courtly manners. By my rough count, approximately 65 notes

refer to Oxford in some capacity; few of these are so compelling that they drive home the authorship point, but they add up to a well-laid foundation.

The major thematic thread from the introductory essay on influences and sources and throughout the commentary is a claim for the play's affinity with the Italian *commedia dell'arte*, the improvised comedy of stock characters that flourished in Italy circa 1550-1750. Iago functions as the equivalent of various *zanni* figures, comic servants who move the action along, helping or hindering the aristocratic *innamorati* like Othello and Desdemona. Iago notably is an improviser, whose evil goal is achieved opportunistically. Editors Draya and Whalen also designate Othello as a swaggering *Capitano*, Desdemona's father Brabantio as the talkative old Venetian merchant Pantalone, and Cassio as Pedrolino. The latter identification seems forced in that the whiteface clown Pedrolino was usually a mute character, whereas the commentary signals Cassio's florid or formal speech patterns. The importance of the play's ties to *commedia dell'arte* (referenced in approximately 25 notes) is to show comedic devices innovatively applied to tragedy, as well as to underscore Oxford's exposure to and awareness of all things Italian long before such cultural referents had become known in England. The standard approach is to see Iago as a descendant of the Vice figure in medieval morality plays, but that identification is not here taken into account. It should be noted also that the essay on influences and sources ends abruptly, as if a concluding paragraph had been inadvertently omitted.

If suggestions are in order for future volumes, mine would be to amplify the documentation. For example, note 319 in Act 1 defines "scion" and goes on to tie Iago's phrase "sect or scion" to the late 1570s Family of Love, adding details that appear in Ruth Loyd Miller's essay on that sect in Eva Turner Clark's *Hidden Allusions in Shakespeare's Plays*. A scholar would want to trace that information to Miller's essay or other source. Yes, Miller's essay is listed in one of the bibliographies, but there is no way for an interested reader to make the connection. Related problems are the scattered bibliographies (pages 15, 291, 299, 304-8) and bibliographical omissions. The text of the essay on military matters, for example, refers to works by Virginia Mason Vaughn, Jorgensen, and C. F. Burgess that do not correspond to any complete citation.

The three short essays, listed as appendices, on the military, musical, and geographical knowledge that permeates *Othello* do most of the work in conveying the arguments for Oxford's authorship of the play. While still serving the goal of illuminating "the author's intention and design," this material would probably be more convincing to an authorship agnostic than some of the same points made more cursorily in the commentaries. It cannot be expected that any one volume in this series would win converts to the Oxfordian view, but this one does make its solid contribution to the larger mass of evidence.