

The first quarto edition of Shakespeare's *Othello*

William Shakespeare, *Othello*. London: Thomas Walkley, 1622. 6 13/16 inches x 4 5/8 inches (173 mm x 117 mm); [4], 80, 89–99, [1] pages; A2 B–M4 N2.

The | Tragœdy of Othello, | The Moore of Venice. | *As it hath beene diuerse times acted at the | Globe, and at the Black-Friers, by | his Maiesties seruants. | Written by VVilliam Shakespeare. | [Okes' device] | London, | Printed by N. O. for Thomas Walkley, and are to be sold at his | shop, at the Eagle and Child, in Brittans Bursse. | 1622.*

Shakespeare's quartos, so named because of their format (a single sheet folded twice, creating four leaves or eight pages), are the first printed representations of his plays and, as none of the plays survives in manuscript, of great importance to Shakespeare scholarship. Only twenty-one of Shakespeare's plays were published in quarto before the closure of the theaters and outbreak of civil war in 1642. These quartos were printed from either Shakespeare's "foul papers" (a draft with notations and changes that was given in sections to actors for their respective roles); from "fair copies" created from foul papers that presented the entire action of the play; from promptbooks, essentially fair copies annotated and expanded by the author and acting company to clarify stage directions, sound effects, etc.; or from a previously published quarto edition. The quartos were inexpensive to produce and were published for various reasons, including to secure the acting company's rights to the material and to bring in money during the plague years in London when the theaters were closed.

In this play, Othello the Moor returns to Venice from a victorious battle campaign to his faithful, loving wife Desdemona, daughter of a Venetian senator. Iago, Othello's ensign, plots to take power and humiliate Othello. He first entraps Cassio, Othello's trusted captain, into creating a commotion outside Othello's window, waking Othello and ultimately resulting in replacing Cassio with Iago as captain. Iago slowly undermines Othello's confidence by making him believe that his beloved Desdemona is having an affair with Cassio. As Othello becomes more distant from Desdemona, he ignores her pleas to explain his behavior while Iago's whisperings make him increasingly more jealous and vengeful. Othello begins to believe that to retain his honor he must kill Desdemona. He strangles her and as she lays dying, he is told that Iago has been deceiving him; Othello kills himself and Iago flees.

This first quarto of *Othello* from the British Library was bound in 19th-century gold-tooled red morocco binding. The spine is divided into six compartments, with "SHAKESPEARE TRAGEDY OF OTHELLO" lettered in gold up the spine in the second, third, and fourth compartments. "1622" is in gold across the foot of the spine. The turn-ins are gold tooled, and the leaves' edges are gilt. There are no marks of ownership. The book was purchased by the British Museum in 1857.

Octavo code: **shaoth**