

An early quarto edition of Shakespeare's *Othello*

William Shakespeare, *Othello*. London: Richard Hawkins, 1630. 7 1/8 inches x 5 1/4 inches (181 mm x 133 mm); [2], 78, 77–81, 83–92, [1] pages; A–M4.

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.* | [White's device] | *London,* | Printed by *A. M. for Richard Hawkins,* and are to be sold at | his shoppe in Chancery-Lane, neere Sergeants-Inne. | 1630.

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 second quarto of *Othello* was bound by the British Museum Bindery in nineteenth-century gold-tooled red half sheep, with comb-marbled paper boards. "SHAKESPEARE. THE TRAGEDY OF OTHELLO. LOND. 1630." is lettered in gold up the spine, below the emblem of King George III.

Now in the British Library, this quarto was formerly owned by George III (1738–1820), who reigned as king of Great Britain and Ireland from 1760 until his death. At the start of George III's reign, there was no royal library to speak of; his grandfather, George II, had presented his library to the British Museum in 1757. In 1763, George III began his collection in earnest with the acquisition of the library of Joseph Smith, the former British consul in Venice whose collection contained many early printed books and classics.

The king's agents attended many English and Continental auctions, and they purchased both single volumes and complete libraries on his behalf, steadily enlarging the royal collection. In 1774 Frederick Augusta Barnard was appointed Royal Librarian, a post he held for the remainder of George III's reign. Barnard, with the advice of such men of letters as Samuel Johnson, enlarged the king's library in a methodical fashion, assembling a fine collection of religious texts, English and European history, classics, English and Italian literature, and such incunables as a Gutenberg Bible and a first edition of Caxton's *Canterbury Tales*. By 1820, the library included 65,000 printed books and nearly 20,000 pamphlets; George IV, who succeeded his father on the throne, donated the library to the British Museum in 1823.

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