

HOW SHAKESPEARE REVISED *OTHELLO*

The textual situation of *Othello*, especially the relationship between the two substantive texts, is particularly difficult to explain. The Folio text differs from that in the First Quarto in mainly four points: the stage-directions are not as full, but more precise; there are no oaths at all; there is a great number of variants which can hardly be explained by the corruption of one of the texts; and the Folio is longer by about 160 lines.

In the following paragraphs only the last point will be discussed in detail. I hope to present new evidence in support of Nevill Coghill's assumption that the longer 'Folio only' passages are additions to a first version of the play. But I shall also suggest that Shakespeare revised the text earlier than Coghill postulates, and under different circumstances.

The longer 'Folio only' passages have always vexed those scholars who tried to explain the differences between the Quarto and the Folio by the process of transmission only,¹ especially because their Shakespearean origin cannot seriously be doubted. Alice Walker differentiates two groups of longer 'Folio only' passages: those which are due to negligence in the printing of the Quarto — we exclude these from our discussion — and those which she considers to be 'cuts for performance, motivated by practical rather than artistic considerations'.²

M. R. Ridley, in his edition in the New Arden series, leaves the question open whether the longer 'Folio only' passages are cuts or additions, but he tends to consider them as cuts.³ As to those variants which can hardly be considered as derived from the same source he takes the following

¹ See, for example, W. W. Greg, *The Shakespeare First Folio* (Oxford, 1955), p. 370.

² Alice Walker (ed.), *Othello*, The New Shakespeare (Cambridge, 1957), p. 123.

³ He assumes the Quarto text to be based on a transcript of the foul papers, which was to serve as a prompt-book, and the Folio text a later copy of the prompt-book, which was made because the first book showed signs of wear. The transcript may then contain elements of stage adaptation or contamination, and the Folio may record a good deal of Shakespeare's second thoughts. *Othello*, The New Arden edition (London, 1958), p. xliii.

position:

It is, of course, not an impossible, though I think an improbable, supposition that Shakespeare revised the whole of his original. But it is quite possible that some of these variants are the result not of actors' errors but of actors' requests or of alterations made by Shakespeare in the course of rehearsal.⁴

Whereas Ridley hesitantly admits the possibility that at least some differences between the Quarto and the Folio texts may have originated with Shakespeare • himself, Nevill Coghill explains the textual situation of the play by making this his fundamental assumption.⁵<516>>

Discussing Alice Walker's theory, Coghill points out that only eight minutes in two hours and three quarters would be saved in performance by cutting the 'Folio only' lines.⁶ He shows that the 'Folio only' passages often improve structural elements, e.g., the exposition. It is improbable, therefore, that they are cuts for performance. As many of the passages are linked thematically they cannot have been dropped accidentally either. They can only be additions made in some process of revision, of revision by Shakespeare himself.⁷

Kenneth Muir finds it difficult to accept Coghill's theory.⁸ He shares his opinion that the longer passages not in the Quarto cannot be deliberate cuts by the actors — but he makes one important exception: the Willow Song in IV.iii. Coghill argues that if the song had been cut in the Quarto the cutter would probably have removed the whole of Desdemona's preceding speech and, with it, any reference to the song whatsoever.⁹ He rejects Greg's theory that the song was cut for a performance in which no singing boy was available, on the grounds that the song 'is not intended to be sung as a formal solo, but as a sort of *fredonnement* or singing-to-oneself'.¹⁰ But Muir cannot believe that Shakespeare should have written the beginning of Desdemona's speech, which refers to the song, and should have added the song only later. On the other hand, if the song was cut the speech could not be cut with it, because

⁴ Ibid., p. xxviii.

⁵ Nevill Coghill, *Shakespeare's Professional Skills* (Cambridge, 1964), pp. 164-202.

⁶ Coghill, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

⁷ Ibid., p. 200.

⁸ Kenneth Muir, 'The Text of Othello', *Shakespeare Studies* Cincinnati, (1965), 227-8.

⁹ Coghill, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 193-4.

this would have left too little time for Emilia to help Desdemona undress. Muir is driven to the conclusion, that 'most of the cuts were due either to sheer carelessness on the part of copyist or compositor or to the difficulty of deciphering Shakespeare's foul papers or the hurried copy made by the two scribes posited by Honigmann.¹¹"

It may be argued, though, that there need not be any dialogue during the undressing of Desdemona — moments of heavy silence would be very fitting at this point of the play. Desdemona's request unpin me need not even refer to her dress; she may equally well be asking Emilia to help her unpin her hair.¹² Moreover, the Quarto text, too, presents a convincing picture of Desdemona's anxious state of mind. While talking of Barbary's song she suddenly seems to hear a knocking, and abruptly sends Emilia away. These changes of subject may look erratic; but the Folio text actually strengthens exactly this trait of Desdemona's behaviour by introducing a sudden and isolated reference to Lodovico. The passage, though short, makes perfect theatrical sense, and its brevity does not give us reason enough to reject Coghill's theory.

<517>>My argument in support of the assumption that the play was revised is based on two kinds of evidence: the relationship of the 'Folio only' passages to the source of the play, and their distribution in the text.

None of the longer 'Folio only' passages contains material from Cinthio's novella.¹³ On the contrary, most of them contain elements which increase the distance between the source and the play and, besides, strengthen the theatrical features of the text. A short discussion of the pertinent instances, which from now on I shall venture to call 'additions', will show this. For easier reference I have gathered them into numbered groups:

1. The first act of the play does not follow Cinthio's novella

¹¹ Muir, *op. cit.*, 229. E. A. J. Honigmann, *The Stability of Shakespeare's Text* (London, 1965), p. 112-13, assumes that the copy for the Quarto was written by two scribes, who worked at rapid alteration.

¹² The evidence of the *OED* for the sense 'to undress' is not conclusive. This passage, in fact, is given as its first occurrence.

¹³ The uncommon participle *weaponed* (V.ii.267) which, according to H. C. Hart (note to the Arden edition of the play, at I.i.183), is taken from Lewkenor's English version of Contareno's *The Government and Commonwealth of Venice*, occurs in a 'only' passage (V.ii.267-73). But the absence of these lines in the Quarto is probably due to a mistake, possibly by a compositor (see Walker, *op. cit.*, p. 122, and note in the New Arden edition, at V.ii.267-73).

at all closely. The additions help to strengthen the exposition ¹⁴ (Roderigo's account of Desdemona's elopement, I.i.121-37), or are thematic (Brabantio's references to magic, I.ii.65, 72-7, I.iii.63). The elopement contradicts the source, and the introduction of magic is foreign to Cinthio's novella. The parts of Roderigo, Brabantio, and the First Senator (I.iii.24-30, 36) are expanded, and their characters get firmer outlines. None of the three figures occurs in the source.

2. In the third act Shakespeare follows Cinthio most closely. The novella is very near to dialogue at this point. The need to alter the epic material radically was, therefore, less urgent than in other parts of the play (e.g., in acts I and V). The addition at III.iii.389-97 thus grows out of Cinthio's dialogue material. Beside its important thematic and structural functions, pointed out by Coghill,¹⁵ the passage has two tasks: it casts more light on Othello's inner state at this point of his downward course; in this it is related to several other additions of a similar kind (III.iii.460-7, IV.i.37-43, V.ii.83). Secondly, it gives additional material to the actor who plays Othello by developing what Iago mirrors in his next speech: *I see, sir, you are eaten with passion* (line 397).

3. The additions to the Pontic Sea speech (III.iii.460-7) give, as Coghill observes, a 'greater build-up for the climax of the scene',¹⁶ Othello's kneeling — a gestic element which, together with its echo in IV.ii.153-66, does not occur in Cinthio. At the same time, this addition stresses the finality of Othello's decision and evokes, once more, his background in ancient myth (cf. I.iii.128-45) — an element not in the source.

4. The passage preceding Othello's trance (IV.i.37-43) is in many respects similar to the one discussed under 3: it prepares an impressive gesture which does not occur in Cinthio, it gives additional opportunities to the actor, and it helps to express Othello's state of mind.<518>>

5. The fourth act was revised most heavily. The addition to Desdemona's speech at IV.ii.153-66 stresses the contrast between Othello's attitude, as expressed in III.iii.460-7, and her own constancy. It introduces a gestic element, her kneeling, into a scene that does not occur in Cinthio: the meeting of Iago and Desdemona. At the same time the

¹⁴ Coghill, *op. cit.*, pp. 179-85. — Line references in the following discussion are to the New Arden edition.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

passage helps to smooth the change in the delineation of Desdemona as a rather headstrong young woman in the first three acts and her patient submissiveness in the fifth.

6. The same applies to the additions at IV.iii.31-52, 54-6, 86-103. Again they occur in a scene which was not suggested by the source. The characters of Desdemona and Emilia, by being contrasted, are defined more clearly (In Cinthio the wife of the ensign has no firm outlines whatsoever). Desdemona's song, expressing her anxiety, has a strong effect on stage, as does its echo by Emilia in V.ii.247-9.

7. The 'Folio only' passage at V.ii.86-94 helps to mirror the effect of shocked disbelief produced by the revelation of Iago's villainy and the murder of Desdemona. At the same time, this addition stresses Emilia's fearlessness — a trait not suggested by the source — and it heightens the effect of a denouement alien to Cinthio's novella.

Our discussion has shown that the additions move the play farther away from its source. We may reasonably expect this in a revision, as it does not normally involve a new consultation of the sources. Moreover, two small pieces of additional evidence support the view that the Quarto is nearer to the sources than the Folio: those unusual words which are often considered to be transliterations from Lewkenor's English version of Contareno's *Commonwealth and Government of Venice* and from Cinthio, *officers of night* (I.i.183) and *acerb* (I.iii.350) occur in the Quarto text only.

The relationship between Cinthio's novella and the Quarto and Folio texts of Othello is brought out more clearly still if we look at how the additions are distributed among the characters in the play. They rarely give speeches to more than one figure. The only substantial passages which affect more than one part are those listed under 6 and 7 above. As we have pointed out, both occur at important points of the plot, and even here one figure dominates.

Among the main figures, Othello, Desdemona, and Emilia, are given most of the additional lines. Iago's part, on the other hand, does not contain any long additions.¹⁷ Again, a comparison of the play with its source may help to explain this.

¹⁷ Another figure without substantial additions is Cassio, unless we count I.ii.67-73 as such. In the Quarto there is no speech-heading 'Cassio' and the lines still belong to the Second Gentleman. The omission may well be accidental.

In Cinthio, the Moor and his ensign are both villains, to different degrees.¹⁸ In Shakespeare's play the nobility of the Moor is stressed, and evil is concentrated in Iago. At the same time Iago is shown as a mere instigator of crime, who leaves the execution of the deed to others. Unlike the ensign in the source he does not steal the handkerchief himself (III.iii.294); he cannot clearly be charged with injuring Cassio at V.i.25,¹⁹ and he is not involved in the actual murdering of Desdemona. Moreover, Iago leaves much less to chance than Cinthio's ensign: he himself prepares the disgrace of Cassio and takes care that Cassio is suspected of having an affair with Desdemona. These traits, as much as the absence of motives, connect him with the traditional stage villain.

These changes in the figure of the villain are paralleled by a transformation of Othello. His reaction to the plotting of Iago becomes more important, and it is indeed this which is stressed in the passages mentioned under 2, 3, and 4. The additions to Desdemona's and Emilia's parts (5, 6, and 7), insofar as they concern character, have a very similar function. But Othello's traits are not conditioned by theatrical tradition to the same extent as Iago's — they even contradict it in at least one very important point: the coincidence of nobility and black skin.

The distribution of the longer additions among the characters indicates that the revision did not take place because of a change of purpose on Shakespeare's part. It shows the same tendency as the transformation of the source material on the way to the text in the Quarto. The Folio just moves still further from the source, and, as we have seen, nearer to a dramatically developed score for performance.

Coghill assumes that Shakespeare revised his first version of *Othello* more than one year after its first performance :

During rehearsal, or at [the 1604] performance, or possibly in retrospect, Shakespeare noted certain confusions and weaknesses in the play and began to think of ways in which they could be eliminated [...]. But he did nothing about it, having no compelling

¹⁸ The following points are taken from the introduction to my edition of the play in the *Englisch-deutsche Studienausgabe der Dramen Shakespeares* (München, 1976).

¹⁹ The substance of the stage direction at this point (New Arden: *Iago from behind wounds Cassio in the leg, and exit*) is based on Rowe, who obviously derived it from Cinthio.

occasion to undertake a revision.²⁰

This occasion arose when the play had to be adapted to the requirements of the Act against profanity on stage in 1606. Shakespeare revised his play as he had to expurgate it anyway.

This account has the advantage of dispensing with the hypothesis that there was a further reviser, who only removed the offensive words and filled the resulting gaps. But this advantage does not seem to me to outweigh the difficulties in Coghill's assumption. He is certainly right in not overestimating the importance of the changes. I should even think that they may have been too slight to be kept in mind for more than a year. But, above all, I do not see any reason why Shakespeare should have put up with those minor weaknesses during the preparation of the first performance. As a member of the company he may well have been present at the rehearsals, and he may have produced additional speeches whenever they were needed.

<520>>The fact that most additions only amplify the speech of a single character may point to the possibility that actors' requests may indeed have been involved, as Ridley suggests. It is interesting to note in this context that two of the three longer passages added to the first act help to enlarge parts which do not occur later in the play (Brabantio, I.ii.65, 72-7, I.iii.63, and the First, but not the Second, Senator, I.iii.24-30, 36).

According to this account Shakespeare did not just write a complete version of the play at his desk and give it to his company for production.²¹ There are signs that the text had

²⁰ Coghill, op. cit., p. 200.

²¹ Ned B. Allen, 'The Two Parts of *Othello*', *ShS*, 21 (1968), pp. 13-29, claims that *Othello* was written in two stages: first acts III to V, later acts I and II. He assembles considerable evidence to support his theory: double time in *Othello* actually consists of short time in the first two acts, and long time in the rest of the play. There are some contradictions in detail between the two 'parts' as well. But Allen makes the most of the relationship between the source and the play, which he considers to be closer in acts III to V than in acts I and II, and of the notable lack of references in the second part of the first. His attempt to turn up every shred of evidence which supports his case is impressive, but there are strong arguments against it. I do not think that the changing relationship between the source and the play necessarily reflects the process of writing. The deviations from the source in acts I and II can just as well be explained by the necessity of changing a novella into a play: a striking exposition takes the place of leisurely story-telling, the figure of the Ancient is fused with elements of the traditional stage-villain, etc. In act III the parallels between the source and the play can be explained by the fact that Cinthio's respective passages are very near to dialogue

not quite reached its final shape when rehearsing began. Shakespeare seems to have added to the text still during the preparations for the first night. In part at least these additions seem to be the result of testing the text on stage and of listening to the criticism and the suggestions of the actors.²²

We are familiar with this kind of collaboration from the modern theatre. It is highly probable that it also existed in a company like Shakespeare's, especially if we consider that the roles of author, actor, and director were not separated in the way they are in most productions today.

The theory that Shakespeare revised *Othello* during rehearsal does not force on us radically new conclusions about the textual situation. It agrees with W. W. Greg's view that the Quarto is derived from the foul papers and that the Folio text incorporates material from the prompt-book. By assuming additions in the Folio instead of cuts in the Quarto it even resolves a difficulty in Greg's account:

It is, of course, contrary to our experience elsewhere that the cut text should derive from foul papers and the full text from the prompt-book; however, it is likely enough that the cuts would be marked in the foul papers, and if they were it is still conceivable that the passages should have been transcribed in preparing the prompt-copy.²³

already. As for acts IV and V, the contention that they are closer to the source than act II does not seem justified to me: the scenes IV.2 and IV.3, e.g., are not based on Cinthio at all. The argument that many points in the first part are not mentioned again in the second may just as well point to a conclusion opposite to that of Allen: as those elements had been introduced already they did not have to be mentioned again in detail. — But let us assume that Allen is right. If Coghill's theory is correct, we can expect the additions to the first complete version to remove or cover up some of the inconsistencies mentioned by Allen. None of the additions, however, clearly supports his thesis. Usually they do not link the two parts at all (except those on magic in the first act, which may or may not be connected with III.iv.53-73). On the contrary, the lines I.iii.24-30 and 36 once more stress the Turkish danger, which does not occur in the second part; several additions to the second part presuppose long time (IV.ii.153-66, IV.iii.86-103) and do not attempt to reconcile contradictions. Besides, Allen's theory leads us to expect the most severe discrepancies — and, therefore, the heaviest revision — at the ending of act II and the beginning of act III. But it is act IV which contains most of the additions.

²² Many of the smaller additions, which are particularly frequent in II.i.239-59, seem to me to point in the same direction. The introduction of adjectives and expletives looks less like a careful revision of the text than an actor's development of his own part.

²³ Greg., *op. cit.*, p. 370.

There are new complications, however: if we accept the possibility of revision in the case of the longer 'Folio only' passages we cannot exclude it for all the shorter ones and all the variants. We have given examples of variants which may belong to this type (*acerbe*— *bitter*; *officers of night* — *officers of might*). It will prove very difficult to distinguish variants due to the process of transmission and variants due to a revision of the kind described above.²⁴

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²⁴ If we accept Honigmann's theory, there is a further type of auctorial variant. He argues that Shakespeare did not only write his foul papers, but that he also made, like other dramatists of his time, a fair copy, which he gave to the theatre. When writing this fair copy he would change the wording sometimes, write out passages which he had left open in his first draft, and make copying mistakes himself. Honigmann, p. 110-11.