[Review of:] Othello, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 2005) / Julie Hankey (ed.)
[and of:] The First Quarto of Othello (Cambridge, 2005) / Scott McMillin (ed.)

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Does that mean that too many Shakespeare editions get published? I'm not sure it does. An exciting offshoot of the proliferation of recent Hamlets, King Lear's, and Othellos are specialized editions, devoted to a specific part of the play's production or reproduction, editions which are now increasingly available in fairly inexpensive paperbacks. Cases in point are Julie Hankey's Othello.

Two further editions of Shakespeare's tragedy have recently appeared in paperback. Do we really need them? Lukas Erne thinks so.
Hankey draws on almost 100 theatrical and filmic productions, from the 17th to the early 21st century, meticulously listed in her edition. The copious introduction, a small monograph in its own right, organizes the material into a coherent narrative that progresses along roughly chronological lines. Hankey's stage history does not confine itself to productions in Britain and America but also devotes attention to the play on the Continent, notably France and Italy, including the operatic adaptation by Verdi. She is finely attuned to the play's complex racial politics and devotes several sections to this issue: 'Othello's colour and what it meant'; 'Race and sex; slavery and satire'; 'Othello in South Africa'. The annotation is unusually thorough, and certain key moments of the play - Othello's second speech to the Senate, the conversation between Iago and Othello in Act 3 Scene 3, Othello's suicide - are discussed in what are almost short essays. The combination of introduction and annotation allows Hankey to draw both the large and many small pictures, telling us just about everything we may want to know about the production history of Othello.

While Hankey takes the text of Othello as a given to explore how the play has been performed, McMillin's edition suggests that another important undertaking is to try to determine what exactly the text or texts of Othello are. Modern editions such as Hankey's usually conflate the two earliest versions, the first quarto of 1622 and the one in the Folio published the year after. The two texts dramatize the same events in the same order, but they differ in hundreds of readings, and each version includes lines not present in the other. The total number of lines in the Folio is superior to that in the quarto, but the quarto has fuller and more informative stage directions. Neither version is in any obvious way better than the other. Shakespeareans are increasingly realizing what rich sources of insights the variant versions of Othello and other plays offer, and it seems less and less satisfactory to leave it up to editors to decide what readings are or are not adopted into modern editions, thereby obscuring the peculiarity of each of the early printed versions. McMillin's fine edition - the first fully-edited and modernized version of the 1622 quarto - thus fills a yawning gap in the scholarship on the play, providing a solid basis for the sustained study of the earliest text of Othello.

Far from doing all over again what many other editors of Othello have done before them, Hankey and McMillin's editions - both ground-breaking in the specific area they cover - suggest there is still ample room for important work in the editorial reproduction of Shakespeare. The different, in some ways indeed opposed, concerns of their editions have the further merit of raising key questions which, obvious though they at first seem, deserve sustained thought: What exactly is Othello (or Hamlet, or King Lear)? Do we think of Othello first and foremost as a play invented by Shakespeare and printed in early modern England or as a play that keeps being reinvented on screen and stage around the world? And how do we best arrive at its meaning? Does the play's meaning chiefly inhere in its original production in Shakespeare's own time or in its reproduction through the centuries? Whose Othello do we study when we engage with modern productions without worrying about what constitutes the play's text(s)? At their best, modern editions like Hankey and McMillin's not only advance our knowledge of Shakespeare but also invite us to reflect on what it is we do when we next sit down to watch or read one of his plays.


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