Shakespeare's War Brides

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war bride *n* (1892) 1: a woman who marries a serviceman ordered into active service in time of war. 2: a woman who marries a serviceman esp. of a foreign nation met during a time of war.[1]

Although the term "war bride" came into our language in the late nineteenth century, the concept of a woman marrying a soldier of foreign birth goes back to antiquity. Women who marry foreign soldiers, whether they are mercenary soldiers or victors, occur in myth and dramatic literature from ancient times to the present day. Many of the anxieties, experiences or social attitudes written about actual twentieth-century war brides can be found centuries earlier in literature.

In this paper I will look at characters in Shakespeare who could be viewed as war brides. I will also compare Shakespeare's war brides to other stage presentations of war brides from antiquity to the present. Further, I will be paying particular attention to the plays being produced as part of the 2008 summer season at the Utah Shakespearean Festival.

When googling "Shakespeare + war bride," I obtained only one hit: Hippolyta. Hippolyta in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is sometimes referred to as Theseus's war bride, but as her role is part of the framing device for the story, her personal history is not part of the action of the play. She appears also in *Two Noble Kinsmen*, but once again her story is not central to the action of the play.

On the other hand, in *Henry V*, the French princess, Katherine, is preparing to become a war bride from her first scene onwards. All in all, Katherine fares better than most war brides in literature or legend. She lives, as does her child. This contrasts dramatically with *Othello*, where Desdemona does not fare well; she dies childless, her husband dies, and shortly after her death news arrives that her father has died. It is interesting to observe how preparation for war versus cessation of fighting influence Desdemona's marriage in quite a different time frame than they do for Katherine in

Henry V. The time compression in *Othello* concentrates events much closer together to create an overwhelming environment.

Katherine's marriage in *Henry V* is used to secure a political alliance between countries that have recently been at war. A variation on this practice occurs in *Antony and Cleopatra*: "Octavius calls Antony back to Rome from Alexandria in order to help him fight against Pompey (Sextus Pompeius), Menacretes, and Menas, three notorious pirates. . . . Back in Rome, Octavius convinces Antony to marry his sister, Octavia, in order to cement the bond between the two men."[2] In this case the "war bride" is intended as an attempt to maintain a fraying domestic political alliance; however, Cleopatra has already captivated Antony, and the domestic war bride, Octavia, cannot compete with the foreign mistress. Antony's preference introduces another topic associated with war brides that will play into *Othello*—"the allure of the exotic."[3]

Examples of the first definition of war bride, "a woman who marries a serviceman ordered into active service in time of war," also occur in Shakespeare. *Henry V* has a second war bride. Just prior to going off to the war in France, Ancient Pistol marries Mistress Nell Quickly. After the English victory, he receives word in act 5, scene 1 that she has died of "a malady of France" (that is, venereal disease).[4] While these few lines warrant a "Note on the Text" in *The Riverside Shakespeare* about the emendation of the name "Doll" to "Nell," for this paper it introduces the association of venereal disease with war. Both Barbara G. Friedman, in her book *From the Battlefront to the Bridal Suite: Media Coverage of British War Brides 1942-1946*, and Hilary Kaiser, in her book *French War Brides in America: An Oral History*, write on the military's ongoing concern in almost all wars with promiscuity and venereal disease.[5]

All's Well That Ends Well can be read to have an interesting and ironic variation on the idea of a war bride as "a woman who marries a serviceman ordered into active service in time of war." Although the French King in act 2, scene 1, has kept Bertram from going off to the Florentine wars due to his youth and the expectation that the Florentine women are sexually available to the young French soldiers, Bertram sneaks off to the wars after his forced marriage to Helena as a way of avoiding his bride. Hilary Kaiser writes in her 2008 book on French war brides, "As military historians have often pointed out, combat and sexual activity usually go hand in hand."[6] Similarly, Barbara Friedman in her 2007 book on British war brides writes, "The uncertainty of war inspired a carefree attitude among soldiers and civilians that was sometimes expressed as promiscuous behavior."[7]

Helena willfully capitalizes on this aspect of war to consummate a marriage that her husband has vowed not to. After Bertram's military triumphs—as related by Diana ("They say the French Count has done most honorable service" [3.5.3-4]) and her mother the widow ("It is reported that he has taken their great'st commander, and that with his own hand he slew the Duke's brother" [3.5.5-6])—he makes plans to meet Diana, with assistance from Paroles, and then sets up a liaison with her. Unknown to Bertram, Helena has followed him to Florence and arranged to substitute herself for Bertram's intended conquest. What is of interest for this paper is that the wartime environment has helped facilitate Helena's plan. She would have had a far more difficult time arranging the bed-trick back in Rousillion or at the French court where she would be known as his spurned wife. And Bertram needed the war environment to sow his wild oats, away from the ever-guiding presence of his mother or the King of France.

Troilus and Cressida also touches on many aspects of the war bride experience. Helen of Troy is one of the oldest examples of a war bride in literature; however, Helen does not figure prominently in the action of Shakespeare's play. Although Troilus does not actually marry Cressida, their interactions play out in the manner of a war bride scenario and introduce the jealousy motif into this discussion of Shakespeare's war brides—a motif that will come to the fore in *Othello*.

This paper will center on Desdemona. The genesis for this inquiry into stage representations of war brides came from watching a recent revival of *Otello* at the Los Angeles Opera. As Italian operas based on Shakespeare often have a way of leaving Shakespeare behind and reverting to the original Italian novella, this performance also brought up the notion of looking at Cinthio's short story, Shakespeare's source. The absence of Desdemona's back story in the opera libretto made me wonder about the impact on her character of being a war bride. Since the opera cuts Shakespeare's first act and opens in Cyprus, Desdemona's eloquent speeches from act 1, scene 3 are absent. Her speeches in this Shakespearean scene deeply inform the listener of her strength of character, sophistication, and education. This scene is also pivotal in showing that the Duke of Venice's need to "straight employ [Othello] against the general enemy Ottoman" (1.3.47-48) diminishes family and personal concerns for Desdemona and Othello. Would the Duke of Venice, who is arguably the wealthiest and most powerful man in the world, ignore the personal plight of Brabantio—one of his own—if he didn't absolutely need for Othello

to prepare for battle against the Turks? Like almost any leader in wartime, military concerns supersede other concerns which may be more personally important to the individual, but not to the country. Although his first inclination is to keep Desdemona in Venice, like many Western governments centuries later during World War II, the duke concedes to the war bride to placate the soldier.

To appreciate Shakespeare's point of view, it is useful to look back at his source and observe the changes. Frank Kermode in his essay on *Othello* in the 1974 edition of *The Riverside Shakespeare*, relates that Cinthio's main character is nameless throughout, being known only as "the Moor."[8] A direct translation of Cinthio by J. E. Taylor in 1855 gives this account: "Although the parents of the lady strove all they could to induce her to take another husband, she consented to marry the Moor; and they lived in such harmony and peace in Venice that no word ever passed between them that was not affectionate and kind. Now it happened at this time that the Signoria of Venice made a change in the troops whom they used to maintain in Cyprus, and they appointed the Moor commander of the soldiers whom they dispatched thither."[9]

When the Moor takes command in Cyprus, Kermode continues, "he decides to take the risk of allowing Desdemona to accompany him on a dangerous voyage rather than be parted from her, and they move to Cyprus (in the same ship). . . . It will be noted that Shakespeare allowed this story to change . . . . [H]e allows them no quiet married life in Venice; their marriage now begins among the tensions and alarms of a remote and embattled Cyprus."[10]

In other words, Shakespeare has made Desdemona a war bride.

Kermode continues, "In the play the lovers are reunited, one might say almost married, in Cyprus; in Cinthio they travel safely in the same ship. . . For good reasons Shakespeare wanted an intense concentration of event—the blissful reunion at Cyprus, the consummation of the marriage [this time] interrupted by the Cassio brawl."[11]

Note that Shakespeare has added the pressing threat of battle with the Turkish fleet to the story. Therefore, an important part of the definition of *war bride* present in Shakespeare is missing from Cinthio—that is, the "active service" part, the notion of the union occurring "in time of war." Shakespeare's Desdemona is a war bride; Cinthio's is not. As a war bride, her character is affected: She is placed in an environment that is not only unfamiliar, but also has an element of danger. Further, where Cinthio says the Moor and Desdemona lived in harmony and peace in Venice for a

time, Shakespeare does not give them one night together as a married couple before the move to Cyprus. He interrupts the wedding night and separates them.

Even though Desdemona travels to Cyprus to be with her husband, Othello still manifests the fears of infidelity that typically afflict servicemen. Freidman writes that concerns "that their women might not be faithful was an almost constant source of worry among . . . soldiers."[12] This statement from a recent social history of war provides an insight into why Othello and Desdemona's marriage does not work. Once back on active duty, there is no place for them to develop as husband and wife. Othello knows soldiers; he knows how soldiers talk of women; he knows what soldiers do with women. He knows the link between war and infidelity. So does Iago. Iago also knows that it doesn't take much to exploit a soldier's concern about a wife's fidelity; whether she's back at home or whether she's near the camp, soldiers worry about fidelity. Desdemona does not know that soldiers are constantly worried about fidelity.

I've mentioned that in researching this paper I went to the social sciences to read accounts of the war-bride experience. What surprised me in these accounts was how *Othello* and other stories and myths presage the actual experiences of real war brides. Certain details in works such as *Othello* were played out centuries later in real life. For example, like Desdemona, the World War II war brides were transported on ships separately from their husbands and reunited dockside. Another historical oddity from Friedman's book not to be omitted from this study cites "a notorious [British murder] case in 1945 [that] involved a soldier who strangled his expectant wife after learning her pregnancy was the result of a liaison with another man; the husband was acquitted."[13]

A more universal, and probably more significant, situation for war brides often concerns education. Kaiser writes extensively on the difference in educational backgrounds between French war brides and their American GI husbands. For the most part, the women were much better educated than the soldiers. "According to the French women I interviewed," writes Kaiser, "one of the problems that could lead to incompatibility in the couple was the 'education gap' between them and their GI husbands. . . . In addition, since French schools have always tended to teach 'Culture' (with a capital C) . . . the women were obviously more *cultivée* than their American husbands . . . and some of [the women] complained about the cultural and educational disparity between them and their husbands.[14]

This educational disparity is also present in *Othello.* Desdemona cites her education eloquently in act 1, scene 3, lines 182-83, whereas Othello apologizes for his in lines 81-82 saying, "Rude am I in speech / And little blessed with the soft phrase of peace." Though the Duke usually speaks in verse, he switches to prose when he gives instructions directly to Othello in lines 221-28.

It is notable how, despite the technological advances of recent centuries, there is still a shared common experience of the human condition which is remarkably constant over the centuries. Kaiser notes that "there is . . . a poignant and universal quality about these women's stories that goes beyond the . . . dimension of their encounters and subsequent marriages with [soldiers]."[15]

Could familiarity with the stories from literature actually help prepare a modern war bride to expect certain experiences? I find it interesting that although we often turn to the social science, for answers today, for centuries it was myth and legend that explained or foreshadowed life experience. War brides, like the previously mentioned Helen of Troy, go back to ancient myths. Another, the Phaedra myth, is later dramatized by Racine. In it Theseus marries Phaedra (daughter of the late King Minos), whom he receives from her brother Deucalion, who wished to seal the friendship between Crete and Athens (King Minos had previously waged war against Athens).

Yet another war bride is found in the Philomele myth, which is retold in Timberlake Wartenbaker's recent play, *The Love of the Nightingale.* For mercenary military aid, Philomele's older sister, Procne, is given in marriage by her parents to Tereus and goes north to a less cultured life in Thrace. Procne's laments about never returning to her family in Athens are echoed by war brides interviewed by Hilary Kaiser: "Nevertheless, all of the women I interviewed remain deeply attached to the[ir] . . . distant homeland, the place where they were born. Whenever possible they return on visits or open their homes to . . . [their] family."[16] In Wartenbaker's play, the visit of Procne's sister Philomele leads to destruction of Procne's family life and the death of her only child.

As a part of its 2008 season, the Utah Shakespearean Festival presented one of the great romantic war bride stories—*Cyrano De Bergerac.* Roxane is one of the classic examples of the first definition of a war bride. Note that Roxane, like Desdemona, has her wedding night interrupted by a call to battle. Like Desdemona, she travels to where her husband is stationed. But a more significant similarity between them is one they have in common with many historical war brides—the educational disparity between a young woman and

a soldier. Roxane's telling Christian that she loves his soul more than his looks presages World War II war brides' discoveries that "the handsome soldier in uniform would turn out to be an uneducated farm boy."[17] Cyrano keeps this information from Roxane, but Christian goes off to his death with the realization that his union with her is superficial.

In late twentieth-century drama, the predicament facing Setsuko Shimada, a young Japanese woman of aristocratic birth in Velina Hasu Houston's play *Asa Ga Kimashita*, echoes that of Desdemona. Both plays illustrate what Barbara Friedman writes about "the allure of the exotic,"[18] as both women marry dark-skinned men. Setsuko's father does not approve of the match and, coupled with the loss of the bulk of his estates by decree of the occupying Americans, the play ends with his suicide.

"*Asa Ga Kimashita* (*Morning Has Broken*)," Houston writes in the introduction to her play in *The Politics of Life: Four Plays by Asian American Women*, "is the first play in a trilogy of plays that includes *American Dreams* and *Tea*. *American Dreams* focuses on Creed, the African-Native American soldier we meet in *Asa Ga Kimashita*, bringing [his war bride] Setsuko . . . home to New York."[19] Stressing the autobiographical nature of her work, Houston adds, "*Asa Ga Kimashita* is a story that I formulated during my late teenage years, based on extensive discussions that I had with my mother about our family history in Japan relating to the World War II experience. This peculiarly Japanese play is also part of the African American experience, by virtue of its exploration of a Japanese woman's interracial romance with an African-Native American."[20] By the third play *Tea*, Creed is dead and the play explores the suicide of Setsuko.

Like Desdemona and Othello, Setsuko and Creed illustrate a point that Kaiser writes about: "Under 'normal' circumstances, these two young people would probably not have met at all . . . but this is wartime."[21] Wartime has always been able to force people to come in contact with and interact with others whom they would otherwise never have met.

As with Setsuko and Desdemona, the issue of exogamous marriage appears in another selection in the Utah Shakespearean Festival's 2008 season—*Fiddler on the Roof*. Set against the failed Russian revolution of 1905, Tevye's third daughter, Chava, parts ways with her father when she wants to marry a young man wearing the wrong uniform—that of a Russian Bolshevik. Marriage outside the tribe is no more acceptable to Tevye than it was to Brabantio. In real life, Friedman notes that "the *New York Times* wrote on

November 26, 1944: 'most . . . [war brides] come against the advice of parental or religious authority in their native land.'"[22] Tevye's second daughter, Hodel, could also be viewed as a war bride in that her husband, Perchik, is a dissident in the revolution.

Shakespeare, like writers before and after him, told the stories of war brides. Hilary Kaiser in the forward to her book on war brides writes, "'Why these . . . scenes?' you might ask. Where's the connection? different stories, different continents, different circumstances. And yet, there *are* threads; there *are* links."[23] The examples in this paper show some of those links and promote the idea of looking at characters by common experience.

Finally, I would like to mention something quite serendipitous on this topic. When I submitted the proposal for this paper, I was unaware that this season's production of *The Taming of the Shrew* would play Katherina as a war bride. In director Jane Page's interpretation of the script, Petruchio is an American officer in post-World War II Italy. Although this is an imposed concept and not in the script itself, those who have seen the production can appreciate how it makes for a pleasant romp through the play. By giving Petruchio a military background, the overbearing way he "commands" his bride to say what he says, and to do as he instructs, becomes more understandable and perhaps a little less sexist to a modern audience. The stage business and costume design support this theme as Kate dons a military uniform and does an ironic mock salute as she follows his seemingly outlandish demands. Also, it is almost prescient how act 4, scene 1, the meat-eating scene at Petruchio's, and act 4, scene 3, the tailor scene, adapt to the directorial concept in way that reflects the actual European World War II war-bride cultural experience with American GIs. Kaiser writes, "Another problem the women had not reckoned on was suffering from 'culture shock'. . . . [T]he reality of adapting to a new culture on their own without the support of family and friends was fraught with difficulties. As intercultural researchers tell us, first you adapt on the superficial level: [As]. . . you adopt the dress and habits, you cook the food. Then you discover that there are so many hidden differences—the underside of the 'iceberg,' so to speak—the ways of thinking, the norms and values, the core beliefs."[24] In director Page's concept, the notion of "taming" the shrew takes on the greater context of culturally adapting to a spouse.

It is almost astonishing how many war brides were on stage at the Utah Shakespearean Festival this summer: Kate, via a directorial concept, Desdemona, Roxane, and two of Tveye's daughters, Hodel and Chava, in *Fiddler on the Roof*. That's four out of six plays. Clearly

the subject of war brides in dramatic literature is one that warrants further study.

Notes

1. "War Bride," *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Eleventh Edition* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc, 2003).

2. http://www.playshakespeare.com/antony-and-cleopatra/synopsis (accessed October 12, 2008).

3. Barbara G. Friedman, *From the Battlefront to the Bridal Suite: Media Coverage of British War Brides 1942-1946* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 53.

4. All in-text line references to Shakespeare's plays are from G. Blakemore Evans, ed., *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974). 1199.

5. Friedman, *From the Battlefront*, 41-42, 89; and Hilary Kaiser, *French War Brides in America* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2008), xxxv.

6. Kaiser, *French War Brides,* xx.

7. Friedman, *From the Battlefront,* 5.

8. Frank Kermode, introduction to *Othello* in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974), 1199.

9. Giraldi Cinthio, from *Hecatommithi* (1565), trans. J.E. Taylor, 1855, http://www.clicknotes.com/othello/Osource.html (accessed August 5, 2008).

10. Kermode, introduction to *Othello*, 1199.

11. Ibid.

12. Friedman, *From the Battlefront*, 47.

13. Ibid., 50.

14. Kaiser, *French War Brides*, 151-152.

15. Ibid., lii.

16. Ibid., 156.

17. Ibid, xxix.

18. Friedman, *From the Battlefront*, 53.

19. Velina Hasu Houston, introduction to *Asa Ga Kimashita (Morning Has Broken)* in *The Politics of Life: Four Plays by Asian American Women*, ed. Verina Hasu Houston (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 210.

20. Ibid.

21. Kaiser, *French War Brides*, xv.

22. Friedman, *From the Battlefront*, 94.

23. Kaiser, *French War Brides*, xvi.

24. Ibid., 150.