

## Satire

*Troilus and Cressida*

*Troilus and Cressida* is unique among Shakespeare's plays for not being a comedy, a history, or a tragedy. Like the comedies it has many comical elements, like the histories it tells a historical tale, and like the *de casibus* tragedies it involves the fall of princes. But it lacks the happy ending of the comedies, the relative authenticity of the histories, and the profound personal engagement of the tragedies. If we are to categorize the play at all, given its plot, language, and tone, it must be as a satire, as mentioned in Chapter 10 of Volume 1. Even at that the play is not a typical satire of the period, or indeed of any period, based as it is on an imaginative recreation of the famous heroes of the ancient Trojan War.

Because of its uniqueness as Shakespeare's only satire, the play has suffered from critical attempts to force it into one of the more familiar categories of plays. Some have tried to see it as a tragedy by imagining Troilus a tragic hero. Some have read it as a failed comedy to be included among the so-called "problem plays." Some have seen it as the diatribe of a disillusioned Shakespeare-turned-cynic like Timon of Athens. These attempts falsify the play's real subject and its actual effects. A careful study of the language of the play in the context of the background discussed in Chapter 7 of Volume 1 will reveal the reality: *Troilus and Cressida* is a dramatic evocation of a morally benighted civilization in the process of collapse as seen from the perspective of an audience for whom redemption, by contrast, is available.

The matter of Troy, the great topic of the ancients from Homer on, was very familiar to Shakespeare and his audience. The tradition of often retold tales combined

veneration for the heroes of the Trojan War and horror at the destruction of the famous ancient city of Asia Minor. In other places Shakespeare himself alludes to the greatness of the ancient Greek and Trojan heroes. The tradition was not pristine; in various versions it includes flaws in the heroes. But in general the heroic reputation of the warriors on both sides at Troy prevailed.

In this play, however, Shakespeare detaches himself and us from such veneration in order to serve his satirical purposes. In fact, it is precisely the universal fame of those heroic tales and the more or less permanent invulnerability of the traditional treatment of the matter of Troy that permit Shakespeare to use the Trojan War to achieve the effects he wanted—namely to expose his audience to a biting analysis of the corruption and inevitable collapse of a whole civilization. (To set such a depiction of the collapse of human society in a time and place closer to home would be to distract the audience with topical allusions—and to risk government censorship, or worse.) To accomplish his task, Shakespeare takes the whole matter of Troy and turns it on its head. Though he keeps to the external facts, the famously great ancient heroes are here riddled with major character flaws, their self-promotion but so much empty swagger and their love but a pretense for lust. Thersites becomes the true oracle of this play, in whose view the entire matter of Troy is summed up in the phrase “still [= always] wars and lechery, nothing else holds fashion” (V.ii.194–95).

The structure of *Troilus and Cressida* is built of a masterful complexity of Shakespeare’s familiar use of foils, parallels, and antitheses. The characters Troilus and Cressida are a perfectly matched couple, opposite but equal in their respective errors. The same is true of the Trojans and Greeks generally. The play as a whole dramatizes two

opposite but equally corrupt forms of moral blindness: misplaced idealism and cynicism. Together these two characteristic forms of moral blindness account for the self-caused fall of the civilization depicted in the play.

The play is named for the lovers whose story came to Shakespeare from Homer via a line of descent, including Benoit de Sainte-Maure's *Roman de Troie* and Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*, culminating in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* (c. 1385) and Robert Henryson's *Testament of Cressid* (later 15<sup>th</sup> c.). From the Middle Ages into Shakespeare's time Troilus was an archetype of faithful love betrayed and Cressida of feminine infidelity (which makes it highly ironic that Toyota named a modern automobile for her). Shakespeare keeps to the tradition with Cressida, but instead of taking Troilus as received, Shakespeare makes him into a lover equally, though differently, at fault.

Cressida, appropriately enough, is the daughter of a Trojan priest who has gone over to the Greeks. Her own words show Cressida to be calculating, hypocritical, and unchaste from the start, well before she betrays Troilus with Diomedes. Her banter with Pandarus is risqué, and she is guileful in manipulating him into manipulating Troilus. With "wit" she will defend her "wiles," and with "secrecy"—not virtue—she will defend her "honesty" (I.ii.261–62). While her soliloquy expresses her love for Troilus (I.ii.282–95), it also expresses her cynicism about the love of Troilus for her. Her false character is then embodied in her willingness to go to bed with Troilus without his first marrying her and in her later betrayal of him with Diomedes. Unlike the besotted Troilus, Ulysses in the Greek camp sees through Cressida's external beauty to her falsity: she is a "wanton" "daughter of the game" (IV.v.54–63), a niece befitting her uncle the pander.

Troilus, who unlike Cressida is naïve, is nevertheless also guilty of betraying her before she ever betrays him. First of all we see that he himself is changeable. When the play opens, he is in arms. Then he says he will “unarm again” (I.i.1) because of his love longing. Then he goes to the field of battle after all. In the meantime, Troilus has abased himself in begging for the aid of the go-between Pandarus to get into Cressida’s bed, making Pandarus “Our doubtful hope, our convoy and our bark” (I.i.104). He subjects himself to a salesman who praises Cressida to Troilus and Troilus to her in order to tantalize the already converted, and he cannot imagine that the resistance of both Pandarus and Cressida is merely contrived, as in fact it is. When he does get into Cressida’s bed, he does so without benefit of marriage. His highest goal is not marital but merely sexual union, as we will see in his arguments in the debate among the Trojan leaders. At the end of the play, he says about himself, “Never did young man fancy / With so eternal and so fix’d a soul” (V.ii.165–66), a perfectly ironic expression of Troilus’s foolish devotion to notoriously changeable “fancy” rather than to “love.” In short, Troilus betrays Cressida by treating her as a mere object of his desire and his pleasure in her bed as the ultimate good. For this betrayal he is then repaid by Cressida’s betrayal of him in the arms of Diomedes.

Troilus is foolishly ardent and ingenuous; Cressida is cynically designing and disingenuous. Troilus fights for Troy; Cressida goes over to the Greeks. Like the lovers who give their name to the play, the warriors of the two armies are depicted as suffering from a similarly complementary corruption of values. Their respective betrayals of the heroic ideal are explicitly conveyed in the two great debates—one among the Greek leaders (I.iii), one among the Trojan leaders (II.ii)—and in their conclusions.

Like Cressida, the Greeks are cynically debunking of all ideals. Their debate is about the law of political relations (hierarchy vs. insubordination). Like Troilus the Trojans are foolishly ardent about false ideals. Their debate is about the law of personal relations (marriage vs. lechery). Ulysses' speech to the Greeks voices the truth of the external order, opposite to the chaos of war; Hector's speech to the Trojans voices the truth of the personal order, opposite to the chaos of lechery. These opposite general faults form the two halves of the supposed "age of heroes"—two forms of corruption of the one set of universal truths Shakespeare and his audience believed to be built into the nature of things (see Chapter 7 of Volume 1).

The Greek debate in I.iii begins with Agamemnon and Nestor, who both speak to the fact "That after seven years' siege yet Troy walls stand" (l. 12). What the forces call "shames" (l. 19) Agamemnon calls "But the protractive trials of great Jove" to test the warriors' "constancy" (ll. 20–21). Nestor reiterates the idea by saying, with many examples, that "In the reproof of chance / Lies the true proof of men" (ll. 33–34). That is, their failures are merely tests of their mettle. But then Odysseus gives a very long and justly famous speech to analyze the *cause* of the failures. He locates that cause in the overturning of rule, insubordination to the general, the "untuning" of the string of "degree."

Odysseus' speech on "degree" is a detailed evocation of the principle of hierarchy discussed in Chapter 7 of Volume 1. Only by keeping their places in the hierarchy of the universe are the natural and human worlds—planets, elements, communities, schools, brotherhoods, commerce, "Prerogative of age, crowns, scepters, laurels" (I.iii.107)—sustained. The stability of all things depends upon "degree, priority, and place, / Insisture,

course, proportion, season, form, / Office, and custom, in all line of order” (ll. 86–88).  
 “Take but degree away” (l.109), he says, and nothing but discord follows until

Each thing meets

In mere oppugnancy . . .

Strength should be lord of imbecility,

Force should be right, or rather, right and wrong . . .

Should lose their names, and so should justice too!

Then every thing include itself in power,

Power into will, will into appetite,

And appetite, an universal wolf . . .

Must make perforce an universal prey,

And last eat up himself.

(I.iii.110–24)

This is all quite right. Odysseus’ analysis is accurate and apt. It applies specifically to Achilles, who has refused to participate in battle and has spent his time mocking Agamemnon and the other leaders. And without Achilles the Greeks have no hope of defeating Hector, the prop of Troy. But it also applies to Agamemnon himself, whose previous speech (I.iii.70–74) turns decorum on its head: its crabbed and overwrought rhetoric with inverted word order, double negatives, and chiasmus of images, is inappropriate in the speech of the chief leader of the Greeks, and its compliment to Ulysses is made through a base comparison to the reviled Thersites.

So Odysseus’ denunciation of the insubordination of the Greek forces, and specifically of Achilles, is quite correct. But then what follows it? Odysseus himself, joined by Agamemnon, the general of all the forces, Nestor, the oldest and most

experienced of leaders, and other Greek heroes all abase their own “degrees” by stooping to play a cynical schoolyard trick on Achilles. They decide to use Achilles’ pride to force his return to battle by pretending to promote the equally proud but not so capable Ajax into Achilles’ place as match for Hector. In other words, no sooner has Odysseus identified and articulated the behavior that has caused the Greeks’ ongoing failure than he and those he is advising rush to engage in precisely that behavior. In this way Shakespeare illustrates how throughout a society the habit of cynicism blinds the will to the dictates of reason.

In the debate among the Trojans we see that the will of men may be similarly blinded to right reason by false idealism. Nestor has sent Troy an offer: “Deliver Helen” and the Greek forces will forego every other claim and depart (II.ii.3–7). The only wise man in Troy, the counterpart to Odysseus among the Greeks, is Hector, who argues that Helen “is not worth what she doth cost / The keeping” (II.ii.51–52).

Troilus, the voice of youth and passion, asks “What’s aught but as ’tis valued?” one of the pithiest expressions of relativism in our literature.<sup>1</sup> The value of anything, he implies, lies only in what people are willing to pay or do to have it. To this absurdity, Hector wisely replies,

But value dwells not in particular will,

It holds his estimate and dignity

As well wherein ’tis precious of itself

As in the prizer. ’Tis mad idolatry

To make the service greater than the god.

(II.ii.53–57)



That is, true value lies not only in the opinion of the valuer but in the reality of the thing valued. But Troilus argues for keeping Helen, despite the cost and the injustice of doing so, because they have all agreed to value her for her beauty's sake and to keep her for their honor's sake.

There is great irony in the argument of Troilus and in its hypothetical example. He says,

I take to-day a wife, and my election  
 Is led on in the conduct of my will,  
 My will enkindled by mine eyes and ears,  
 Two traded pilots 'twixt the dangerous shores  
 Of will and judgment. (II.ii.61–65)

The example is ironic because though Troilus will in fact take a lover, he will *not* make her his wife. He then argues that his will (meaning not only free will but also willfulness and sexual desire) are enkindled by his eyes and ears. This is not wrong. It is characteristic of young lovers that their desire follows the lead of the external senses. But then Troilus calls the eyes and ears “traded pilots” (i.e., experienced intermediaries) between will and judgment, which he calls “dangerous shores.” Judgment a “dangerous shore”? Eyes and ears to be trusted as go-betweens? The irony of his argument is that his image is directly opposed to what Shakespeare and his audience believed to be the more accurate picture of man's condition: It is the judgement that ought to mediate between eyes and ears on the one hand and the choices of the will (in all senses) on the other, judgment that ought to govern the will's pursuit of what the eyes and ears value. True danger lies in the will's following the eyes without reference to the judgment.

Troilus then blames Hector for counseling a change of mind: “O theft most base, / That we have stol’n what we do fear to keep!” (II.ii.92–93), failing to realize that a dishonorable theft cannot be made honorable by persisting in it. When Cassandra then enters to prophesy, “Troy burns, or else let Helen go” (l. 112), Troilus rejects her prophecies as brainsickness and, along with the besotted Paris, argues for keeping Helen at all costs. So that Hector is quite right to accuse Troilus of arguing

but superficially, not much

Unlike young men, whom Aristotle thought

Unfit to hear moral philosophy. (II.ii.165–67)

(The anachronism of the reference to Aristotle, who lived long after the Trojan War, takes nothing away from the point.)

In response to the “superficial” chop logic of Troilus, Hector argues rightly as follows:

Nature craves

All dues be rend’red to their owners: now,

What nearer debt in all humanity

Than wife is to the husband? . . .

If Helen then be wife to Sparta’s king,

As it is known she is, these moral laws

Of nature and of nations speak aloud

To have her back return’d. Thus to persist

In doing wrong extenuates not the wrong,

But makes it much more heavy. (II.ii.173–88)

The aptness of Hector's speech sounds much like that of Odysseus in I.iii. However, again, as with Odysseus' speech, what follows completely betrays the uttered wisdom:

Hector's opinion

Is this in way of truth; yet ne'er the less,

My spritely brethren, I propend to you

In resolution to keep Helen still,

For 'tis a cause that hath no mean dependence

Upon our joint and several dignities. (II.ii.188–93)

In other words, he caves in. He jettisons his rational and virtuous loyalty to the laws of nature and of nations in favor of pursuing a superficial idea of honor. Since we have stolen her, our dignity requires that we should keep her. Dignity, not virtue.

Hector's moral collapse here prefigures that which will occasion his own death. Later in the play, ignoring Cassandra's prediction and the dreams and entreaties of his wife, his mother, and his father, King Priam, Hector goes into battle, where he chases after a Greek for his shiny armor. Having killed the man and observing "Thy goodly armor thus hath cost thy life" (V.viii.2), Hector says, "Now is my day's work done" (V.viii.3) and takes his own armor off. He is immediately surrounded and killed by Achilles' Myrmidons. Hector's valuing of armor over life leads to his losing his own life for the sake of a goodly armor. Of course he loses it to the utterly reprehensible and unheroic choice of Achilles to have his men surround an unarmed man and kill him because Achilles himself has been physically weakened by his idleness. But this is the point: one morally corrupt army is warring against another, the anti-heroic wishful

thinkers against the anti-heroic cynics. Both exhibit a benighted disregard of fundamental moral principles.

In both the debates, then, true value is articulated, then betrayed. As in the supposed love relationship between Cressida and Troilus, so in the war relationship between Greeks and Trojans, moral blindness leads to destruction. People betray others because they have betrayed themselves. The play demonstrates what the world is like when the essence of the advice of Polonius in *Hamlet* (written at about the same time) is rejected:

This above all: to thine own self be true,

And it must follow, as the night the day,

Thou canst not then be false to any man.

(*Hamlet* I.iii.78–80)

Immoral in himself, one cannot be true to others.<sup>2</sup>

Beyond the major contrasting foils of Cressida and Troilus, Greek and Trojan, Greek debate and Trojan debate, a partial list of the many parallels and antitheses of the play would include the following: The vicious mascot of the Greeks is the cowardly biting dog Thersites, that of the Trojans the sexual go-between Pandarus. The prophecies of the Greek Calchas are used to gain his own advantage; the true prophecies of Cassandra are met with disbelief. Ulysses the Greek speaks the truth about value and then betrays it; Hector the Trojan speaks the truth about value and then betrays it.

Agamemnon, the leader of the Greeks, is reduced to a cheap trick to entice Achilles to fight; King Priam of Troy is reduced to begging his son Hector not to fight. The great Greek hero Achilles, weakened by inaction, runs away from Hector and then has his men surround and kill the unarmed hero; Hector, the prop of Troy, chases after a shiny armor,

unarms, and is killed in an unfair fight. Achilles, against the will of his people, declines to go to battle so he may keep an oath made to the enemy Trojans for love of the Trojan Polyxena; Hector, against the will of his people, goes into battle in order to keep an oath made to the enemy Greeks to fight them for his honor. Patroclus begs Achilles to fight; Andromache begs Hector not to fight. Cressida is a calculating Trojan held by the Greeks; Helen is a flighty Greek held at Troy. The whole war turns on the broken marriage of the feckless cuckold Menelaus and the beautiful nitwit Helen.

Hector's words about Helen—"she is not worth what she does cost / The keeping (II.ii.51–52)—are validated by what we see of her in Act III, Scene i. In that scene Pandarus comes to get Paris to make excuses to Priam for Troilus's absence from court. (Troilus is absent because he will be spending the night in Cressida's bed.) Helen engages with Pandarus in naughty verbal byplay and persuades him to sing a naughty song called "Love, love, nothing but love" (III.i.113, 115). Shakespeare has made Helen a perfect focal point of the drama of corruption by overturning her mythic reputation for beauty and showing her to be a shallow, frivolous ditz. Paris's love for her is seen to be an equally frivolous sensuality with no hint of the "marriage of true minds" of Sonnet 116. As with Cressida and Troilus, there can be no true love in this Greek/Trojan couple because she is an empty vessel and he is a worshipper of her shell.

To sum up, the Greeks are cynics, debunking every ideal and believing in nothing. The Trojans are fools, rushing in without the rational capacity to govern passion with reason or weigh competing ideals—too young for moral philosophy. Achilles responds to the chivalric challenge from his ideal opposite with "'tis trash" (II.i.126) and kills Hector in cynical cowardice. Hector believes that whatever he does is right because he is the

hero Hector and dies chasing a shiny armor. Ulysses schemes to pit Achilles and Ajax against one another in a pride that supplants all possibility of heroism; Pandarus schemes to unite Troilus and Cressida in a lust that supplants all possibility of love. Troilus foolishly idealizes sexual love while Cressida cynically uses it. Hector foolishly idealizes his own heroism while Achilles cynically squanders his. To paraphrase Yeats, the knowing Greeks lack all conviction while the foolish Trojans are full of passionate intensity.<sup>3</sup>

Because of these corruptions of the true order of values, all fall prey to the universal wolf appetite (I.iii.121). The play begins with the Prologue's minimizing the matter of Troy: "The ravish'd Helen, Menelaus' queen, / With wanton Paris sleeps—and that's the quarrel" (Prol. 9–10—see the figure of speech called Meiosis in Appendix 4 of Volume 1). The play ends with the venereal disease-ridden Pandarus (V.x), a perfect embodiment of appetite, the universal wolf, eating up itself (I.iii.124).

### **Key Lines:**

1. In III.i there is a telling passage that is easily overlooked. Amidst the double meanings in the banter that opens the scene, we find in the Servant a character otherwise nonexistent in this play, namely one who "depend[s] upon the Lord." "You know me, do you not?" asks Pandarus. "Faith, sir, superficially" (III.i.9–10), says the Servant. His "Faith, sir" (i.e., "in faith" or "by my faith") implies (with another anachronism) a faith in God that, held by others in the play if it were available to them, would light a path out of

their moral benightedness. And he uses “superficially” in three senses: he knows Pandarus not very well; he knows him by his outward show, which is different from his inward reality; and he knows him to be superficial. When Pandarus says, “know me better,” the Servant says, “I hope I shall know your honor better” (III.i.13). In calling him “your honor” he is giving him an epithet he does not deserve. But the greater sense is not merely know *you* better but have reason to know that you have gained some *honor* that so far I don’t see in your character. Finally, Pandarus, after implying that his niece Cressida is more attractive than Helen, says, “my business seethes,” meaning is about to boil over, implying that he is in a hurry. To this the Servant responds with “Sodden business! There’s a stew’d phrase indeed!” (III.i.41–42). *Sodden*, the past participle of *to seethe*, also implies what is meant by *stewed*, from *stews*, that is, brothels. (Compare the puns on “stewed prunes” in *Measure for Measure*—II.i.90 ff.). In other words, the Servant recognizes that Pandarus is about the business of a sexual go-between, taking his own advantage from the lust of others.

2. The fecklessness of Menelaus, in keeping with the play’s overall satirical intent, is illustrated in IV.v.28–46 when Cressida comes to the Greek camp and allows every one of the heroes to kiss her. When it is the turn of Menelaus, Patroclus jumps in and kisses her twice, once for himself and once for Menelaus, mocking the way Paris jumped into Menelaus’ place in her bed (IV.v.28–29). This mock is in keeping with Thersites’ mocking of the Greek leaders that Achilles and Patroclus have so enjoyed (II.iii etc.). When Cressida says to Menelaus, “you are odd, and [Paris] is even with you” (IV.v.44), Menelaus answers “You fillip me a’ th’ head” (IV.v.45), meaning (literally) flick your fingernail against my head and (figuratively) allude to my cuckold’s horns.

(Horns are the symbol of the cuckold, visible to everyone but himself.) Ulysses says, “It were no match, your nail against his horn” (IV.v.46). That is, the fingernail of a Cressida is minute compared to the size of Menelaus’ horn, the implication being that Cressida’s entertainment of the heroes’ kisses (i.e., her loose character) is insignificant compared to the cuckolding of Menelaus. A few lines earlier, Ulysses gives voice to why: “O deadly gall, and theme of all our scorns, / For which we lose our heads to gild his horns!” (IV.v.30–31). The “argument” [= point of dispute] of the entire war is, as Thersites has said, “a whore and a cuckold, a good quarrel to draw emulous factions [= the competitive rival armies] and bleed to death upon” (II.iii.72–74), “good” here being bitterly ironic in keeping with Thersites’ savage wit.

3. The two parallel oaths mentioned above reinforce Shakespeare’s theme and structure. Achilles is engaged by oath to the enemy queen for love of her daughter (Troilus’ sister), Polyxena. Achilles says,

My sweet Patroclus, I am thwarted quite  
 From my great purpose in to-morrow’s battle.  
 Here is a letter from Queen Hecuba,  
 A token from her daughter, my fair love,  
 Both taxing me and gaging me to keep  
 An oath that I have sworn. I will not break it.  
 Fall Greeks, fail fame, honor or go or stay,  
 My major vow lies here; this I’ll obey.  
 Come, come, Thersites, help to trim my tent;  
 This night in banqueting must all be spent. (V.i.37–46)



He has taken an oath not to fight against the Trojans, fighting whom ought to be his only mission. His opposite, Hector, is engaged by oath to fight the Greek enemy. He says,

Aeneas is a-field,  
 And I do stand engag'd to many Greeks,  
 Even in the faith of valor, to appear  
 This morning to them . . .  
 I must not break my faith.  
 You know me dutiful, therefore, dear sir,  
 Let me not shame respect, but give me leave  
 To take that course by your consent and voice,  
 Which you do here forbid me, royal Priam. (V.iii.67–75)

However, given the prophecy of his sister Cassandra and the pleading of his wife Andromache and his father King Priam, his duty lies in *not* going out to battle that day.

Both speeches use the word *gage* (as “gaging” and “engag’d”) about their oaths. Neither hero chooses to break his oath, the one not to fight, the other to fight. Both choices, putting oaths to the enemy before loyalty to friends, result in disaster. Because Achilles doesn’t fight, his friend Patroclus dies. Because Hector does fight, he himself dies, and Troy falls. The defeat and fall of Troy are seen, then, not as a great triumph of one heroic army over another, or one hero over another, but as the result of moral collapse on both sides.

**Notes to help you in your reading:**

1. In myth, Cassandra was a priestess of Apollo to whom the god gave the gift of prophecy. When she refused his love, he cursed her with never being believed.

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<sup>1</sup> As Philip Thompson writes, “The true corruption of Troilus’ question is ‘who values nothing is nothing’ or ‘who nothings value, Value nothings’ (verbs).” Philip Thompson, *Notes on Shakespeare in Dusk and Dawn: Poems and Prose of Philip Thompson*, ed. Gideon Rappaport (San Diego: One Mind Good Press, 2004), p. 223.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Thompson puts it thus: “In his speech about ‘degree’ [I.iii.75–137] Ulysses means to rebuke the military paralysis caused by insubordinate ‘factions,’ but what his words really give is a full description of the world in which the play takes place: a world lacking [‘degree, priority, and place,’ etc. (ll. 86–88, 103–107)], in which [‘Each thing meets / In mere oppugnancy,’ etc. (ll. 110–124)]. Like the worlds of Coriolanus and Timon, it is a world in which no good can arise because the moral devastation stemming from radical disorder is its permanent condition. And because the good is powerless to be born, annihilation is the only possible destiny for these worlds.”—Philip Thompson, p. 224. The phrase “powerless to be born” intentionally echoes ll. 85–86 of Matthew Arnold’s “Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse.”

<sup>3</sup> See W.B. Yeats, “The Second Coming,” ll.7–8.