June 1990

Shakespeare's Troilus and Cressida: Of War and Lechery

Kristina Faber

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact mfkelly@colby.edu.
Shakespeare's Troilus and Cressida:
Of War and Lechery

by KRISTINA FABER

Commentators have generally agreed that Shakespeare's Troilus and Cressida is one of his "problem plays." Others include All's Well That Ends Well, Measure for Measure, and sometimes Julius Caesar; less frequently, Hamlet and Timon of Athens are named. For critics, identifying the actual "problem" in a problem play, determining what causes the difficulty, and theorizing about how to solve it have traditionally represented three separate analytic tasks. I would like to treat all three as interrelated aspects of one critical misconception about Troilus and Cressida—that it is a "problem comedy"—and offer an alternative explanation, though no solution, for the underlying "problem" of this play.

The original problem seems to be the peculiar effect Troilus and Cressida and the other problem plays have on their audiences (Boas 345). At the end of these plays viewers may feel ambivalent, confused, dissatisfied, resentful, even repulsed. Playgoers and readers have suspected that Shakespeare himself did not know what he wanted or, worse, that in these dramas the playwright was cynically manipulating the spectators' reactions, but denying them his guiding vision and withholding his own emotional commitment to the dramatic material. Such plays have been called "dark," "satirical," "bitter and cynical pseudocomedies." I would concur that the ending ofTroilus and Cressida will forever remain troubling, offering neither traditional comic release nor tragic catharsis.

A wide range of critics attempts to explain this difficulty. For instance, Troilus and Cressida may be a "problem" in the sense of a "botched" comedy; perhaps due to personal problems Shakespeare just wasn't up to his usual standard (Wilson 114-15). Or because the play's probable sources (Homer, Ovid, Chaucer, Henryson, Caxton, Lydgate, and Greene) were relatively well-known and thus resistant to major changes, Troilus and Cressida posed unusual dramatic challenges which Shakespeare was unable to overcome (Morris 483). Barbara Everett believes that the "absence of simple story-line...is the source of most of the other problems that disturb the play's readers" (119). But other commentators theorize that rather than the absence of story-line, too many storylines cause the problem: Shakespeare could not successfully weld together two major plots in the story, the classical Trojan matter (the war plot) and the

1. Portions of this essay were presented previously in a paper given at the Conference of College Teachers of English (of Texas), March 1987, and published in the CCTE Proceedings, 52 (Sept. 1987), 61-69.
medieval invention of Troilus and Cressida's relationship (the love plot) (Palmer 49). More penetrating, I believe, are the observations of Marilyn French and F. H. Langman that "at every level" (Langman 66) these plots coterminate: in Troilus and Cressida, love is war (French 159; see also Yoder 19). French further argues that all of Shakespeare's problem plays cause difficulties because they "share an unusual donne [sexual disgust] and are all written in mixed gender modes" (136). This mixture, she explains, involves a conflict of ideals, which may or may not be embodied in individual male or female characters. "Masculine" principles encompass such values as unity, stability, order, control, reason, and power over (events, women, nature); "feminine" principles include plurality, mutability, flexibility, responsiveness, emotion, and power to (create, heal, transform). While I find feminist criticism particularly relevant to this troubling play and agree with French's assessment of it, this paper will discuss other approaches as well in an attempt to define more precisely its dramatic genre and its central problem.

One of the many difficulties affecting critical interpretation of Shakespeare's problem plays in general, and Troilus and Cressida in particular, has been the overriding tendency to speak of the group (however composed) as "problem comedies." The common assumption of the terms' synonymity has resulted in the decision by most modern editors to place Troilus and Cressida with the comedies, as do G. B. Evans in The Riverside Shakespeare (1974) and David Bevington in his most recent (1980) edition of the complete works. But in 1951 Hardin Craig grouped the play with other "Tragedies of the Third Period"; Kenneth Palmer proves another exception: in the 1982 Arden edition, we again find Troilus and Cressida with the tragedies. On the other hand, the MLA Bibliography continues to list it as a comedy. Ironically, early publishing history provides precedents for virtually any generic decision: the 1609 Quarto lists the play as a "history"; the second state of the Quarto, however, has an address to the "Eternal reader" which repeatedly refers to the play as a "Commedie"; the First Folio of 1623 calls it a "Tragedy." But as Brian Morris points out, "No real weight can be given to these ascriptions as critical terms, for the inchoate state of criticism in the first years of the seventeenth century did not admit of any precision in such labels, and terms like 'Comedy' and 'Tragedy' cannot bear their modern interpretations" (481). Yet immense critical weight has fallen precisely on the assumption that Troilus and Cressida is a comedy, albeit a problem one. This assumption creates its own problems. The average playgoer may well find it difficult to respond to the play as a comedy, given its cynical and bitter tone, its unrelievedly dismal appraisal of human virtues like love, loyalty, honor, courage, truth, and reason, its often savagely pessimistic language and ugly imagery, and its catastrophic conclusion—to say nothing of the virtual absence of lighthearted merriment.

Oscar Campbell tries to get around the difficulty of generic inconsistency by describing Troilus and Cressida as a "Comical Satyre," thus redefining the play as a special subcategory of comedy. His argument is interesting, and unquestionably the play involves satire. But nagging doubts remain. Even if we concede
that aspects of the play—the opening banter between Pandarus and Cressida, the tenderness between the lovers in their brief scenes together, the lighter pleasantries of Thersites—reflect something of the comic spirit, we must note that such moments are almost entirely confined to the first half of the play. Following the departure of the woeful Cressid to the merry Greeks in Act 4, things go rapidly to smash. Surely, the play is neither wholly comic nor tragic. Indeed, a far greater structural difficulty than the “tenuously” linked love and war plots is the clash between a certain comic tendency in the first part of the play and in the latter part a powerful tragic force which checks, turns, and obliterates the comedy.

In the problem plays Shakespeare seems to push generic experimentation further than usual. Some critics would say that, consequently, Troilus and Cressida fails dramatically by demanding too much of its puzzled and frustrated audiences. I would disagree, but would also caution that should an audience (or a director) expect primarily comedy from it, this play will not work. In this drama I do not think Shakespeare was attempting comedy at all—a certain amount of humor, yes; comedy, no. Rather, in Troilus and Cressida Shakespeare was working primarily within the tragic mode, but for various reasons he failed, or chose not, to create true tragedy. This play is a problem tragedy, a tragedy without catharsis. 2

Although famous for mingling comedy and tragedy, Shakespeare characteristically and immediately establishes a dominant comic or tragic mode in most of his dramas. But in the problem plays Shakespeare balances comic and tragic elements in more equal proportions than he does in other works. Freud has written that an audience is more strongly inclined toward finding a comedy funny if it expects comedy (408). The same psychological principle may operate in tragedy: if spectators anticipate tragic drama, they are more likely to make the appropriate responses to it; having already consented to suspend disbelief, they are predisposed to allow themselves to be manipulated toward catharsis. All the problem plays seem more generically ambivalent than Shakespeare’s traditional comedies and tragedies, which from their opening scenes decisively announce and reinforce their dominant mode.

To create tragedy (or comedy) Shakespeare utilized many devices: plot structure, setting, language, and characterization. For instance, the audience is first influenced by setting, which helps establish a tragic or comic mode. The dark, dangerous alleys of Iago’s Venice, the blasted heath in Macbeth, the ghost- haunted midnight of Hamlet’s Elsinore, the increasingly claustrophobic confines of Romeo and Juliet—all help evoke the tragic world in which mistakes are inescapable and fatal, a world of narrowing and darkening vistas, limited

possibilities, and doomed inevitability. Such spiritual landscapes ultimately mirror the tragic world view in which some central problem becomes the protagonist’s whole universe; for the tragic hero sees but two solutions to his or her consuming dilemma: to attain heart’s desire or to die. When Romeo learns of his banishment, his anguished cry expresses the characteristic myopia and extreme self-absorption of the tragic hero:

There is no world without Verona walls,
But purgatory, torture, hell itself.
Hence-banished is banish’d from the world,
And world’s exile is death: then banished,
is death mis-term’d .... (3.3.17–21)³

It is Juliet, of course, rather than Verona per se that he cannot fathom living apart from; their love now constitutes his world and his primary identity, without which he is a lost soul. So, too, Desdemona’s “infidelity” damns Othello: “Perdition catch my soul, / But I do love thee! and when I love thee not, / Chaos is come again” (3.3.90–92). Troilus uses similar language to describe separation from Cressida: “I stalk about her door / Like a strange soul upon the Stygian banks ... ” (3.2.7–8).⁴

_Troilus and Cressida_ has three settings: “Priam’s six-gated city” (Pro. 15), Troy itself, as much prison as refuge for its inhabitants; the hideous, tedious, vermin- and plague-ridden Greek camp; and finally the Dardan plains. Significantly, the only open space in the play is this wasteland, alternately regarded as playing field and killing field. Here, as the bloody sun sets and “The dragon wing of night o’er-spreads the earth ... ” (5.9.17), Hector dies horribly. Curiously _Troilus and Cressida_ both begins and ends _in medias res_ (Arnold 39). While the play concludes in scenes of bloody battle and terrified flight from the field, it opens in an Ilium that seems orderly and civilized, if sterile. Rather than a brawl, like that which begins _Romeo and Juliet_ and _Othello_, we are given “Brave / Troilus, the prince of chivalry!” (1.2.231–32), mooning about, a lovesick soldier shirking combat and complaining in stereotypical Petrarchan fashion about unrequited passion. This ambiguous opening scene could serve as well for comedy as for tragedy.

The Prologue operates similarly, mixing dramatic modes. Its language establishes major themes and images, prefiguring the entire play. The Prologue announces that it is “Beginning in the middle” (29). We learn that Greek “princes orgulous, their high blood chafed,” have come to perpetrate “cruel war” (2, 5). These lines and that describing the war as “tickling skittish spirits” (20) begin the long process of deflating the heroes and trivializing the enterprise, whose unworthy cause is that “The ravish’d Helen, Menelaus’ queen, / With wanton Paris sleeps ... ” (9–10). This point is emphasized: “—and that’s the quarrel” (10). In short, it’s a whore’s war, as Thersites might put it. The Prologue further

³. References to Shakespeare plays other than _Troilus and Cressida_ are from the Hardin Craig edition of _The Complete Works of Shakespeare_ (Chicago: Scott, Foresman, 1951).
⁴. References to _Troilus and Cressida_ are from the Arden edition, edited by Kenneth Palmer (New York: Methuen, 1982).
undercuts the traditionally heroic and tragic grandeur of the Trojan War by referring to it as “broils” (27), and Thersites calls it “clapper-clawing” (5.4.1). Characters often regard the war as mere sport—part gamble, part game—and the Prologue advises us to take it and the play lightly: “Like, or find fault: do as your pleasures are . . .” (30). Thus the Prologue sounds the theme of chaos come and fed and maintained by vain, self-indulgent, arrogant, brutal men obsessed with concerns simultaneously frivolous and bloodthirsty. The war is irrational and therefore indefensible from the first, and certainly in the final analysis. Shakespeare explores the ultimate human irrationality, the collective death wish that makes the compulsive, suicidal, tragic decisions of an individual Romeo, Hamlet, Othello, Antony, or Lear look like harmless child’s play. In Troilus and Cressida Shakespeare grapples with the ultimate human tragedy—war.

This play is a tragedy because its underlying structure and themes are tragic, and it is a problem tragedy because it does not produce catharsis. Two forces in the play block catharsis; while they initially seem opposites, they actually represent a single, underlying problem. First, Shakespeare creates a more devastating catastrophe in this play than in any other of his tragedies; second, he chooses not to give us a tragic hero. The nature of the Trojan War determines both.

Whatever else it is, catharsis seems to be an emotional experience. This point is significant since most critics agree that the difficulty with Shakespeare’s problem plays is the peculiar, often negative, emotional reactions audiences have to them. The “pity and fear” that Aristotle believed tragedy purged us of seem appropriate responses in an audience given that tragedies end in death or defeat for the hero. Comedies, of course, often end in marriage. This play concludes not with the marriage of Troilus and Cressida but with Hector’s ignominious murder and mutilation. The fall of Hector has been explicitly linked throughout the play with the fall of Troy itself. Significantly for its problematic nature, then, this play’s catastrophe has greater implications than that of any other Shakespearean tragedy, for while Egypt, Verona, Venice, Denmark, Scotland, and Lear’s England survive, perhaps even benefit from, the death of their heroes, we know that Troy will vanish forever. The apocalyptic destruction of Troy may well push Troilus and Cressida beyond the tragic pale—in Juliet’s words, “. . . past hope, past [cure], past help!” (4.1.45)—beyond redemption and restoration, even beyond fear and pity, into something very like existential despair.

Another aspect of this play’s catastrophic ending is that Hector’s death dooms, rather than saves, his society. Hector is murdered, not sacrificed. Traditionally, the tragic hero is something of a scapegoat: Romeo and Juliet “Do with their death bury their parents’ strife” (Pro. 9), and their “Poor sacrifices” (5.3.307) allow Verona a space of peace; Hamlet’s death restores stability and legitimacy to Denmark; Macbeth’s fall signals a new era of prosperity in Scotland; Antony’s and Cleopatra’s suicides make possible the Pax Romana. Even in the more ambiguous final scenes of King Lear and Othello, when the protagonists die, their societies are also rid of their worst members, those “fiends,” Edmund, Regan, and Goneril and the “honest Iago.” Shakespearean tragedies emphasize the nobility and self-determination of the hero’s ending.
The tragedies also stress the attendant restoration of the hero’s society. Certainly, there is always the painful awareness of the terrible price paid for that restoration and the sense that it might instead have been effected “comically”: Romeo and Juliet’s marriage and children might have ended the feud as the play contains multiple clues that old Montague and Capulet are heartily sick of fighting; and how much better for Denmark a King Hamlet than a King Fortinbras. Still, even in the “glooming peace” (R&J 5.3.308) of Verona or in full view of the “dismal” sight (Ham. 5.2.378) of the catastrophe at Elsinore, one can imagine a collective sigh of relief arising from the long-suffering citizens. Troilus and Cressida concludes very differently: we know that an entire society is laid waste. For Priam’s kingdom this is literally the war to end all wars. The scope of the coming holocaust is too great; we cannot emotionally grasp it. And the ugly ambiguity is reinforced by Shakespeare’s choice to end the play not with a cathartic bang but with Pandarus’ whimper.

Catharsis is also prevented in this play because Shakespeare does not give us a tragic hero with whom to identify, with whom to move through the intense process of suffering and clarification, to a cathartic climax. An emotional experience, catharsis enlarges us perhaps more than it uplifts. Eugene O’Neill believed that both the Greeks and the Elizabethans “felt the tremendous life to [tragedy]. It roused them to a deeper understanding of life . . . They saw their lives ennobled by it” (qtd. in Clark 146). Tragic catharsis signals that shock of recognition we feel when, by a kind of emotional parasitism or identification, we experience with the protagonist a greater, fuller knowledge of himself, and therefore of humanity; in doing so we gain greater understanding of ourselves.

To understand better the “problem” of Troilus and Cressida, it is necessary, I believe, to place the play within the classical context that Shakespeare drew upon when he selected the Trojan War as a dramatic subject. Shakespeare’s Troyan and Greek heroes may not have tragic stature, but they have the classical flaw (hamartia or sin) of the tragic hero: hubris, the overweening pride that causes man to forget his own humanity. Hubris is the compulsion to be as a god, to cross those boundaries that both define and restrain humans or, in Aeschylus’ beautiful words, to trample “down the delicacy of things / inviolate” (ll. 371–72). Given the global influence of the American dream of unlimited upward mobility, it may well be difficult for twentieth-century audiences to relate to hubris, but it fascinated both the early Greeks and the Elizabethans, who feared “vaulting ambition.” In the great Greek tragedies, hubris is usually made manifest when the protagonist breaks a taboo.

Often, the act which signals hubris specifically involves the destruction of a female, for hubris reflects a nihilistic willingness to destroy the future, symbolized by woman’s procreative power. In the Agamemnon we learn that Agamemnon has killed a pregnant rabbit, sacred to Artemis (Aeschylus II. 114–38). To “pay back” Artemis and to free the Greek fleet from her subsequent prohibition, Agamemnon chooses to sacrifice his young daughter, Iphigenia, on the altar of this goddess, to whom young wild animals (and, ironically, virgins) are sacred. While Artemis has posed this choice between killing his daughter or making
impossible the Greek military expedition to Troy, the decision remains Agamemnon’s. His final choice has implications that far exceed killing a rabbit, or even his daughter. Agamemnon chooses to align himself with “masculine” values and to dispossess himself of “feminine” claims. His is a death wish. The decision reveals his willingness to destroy the entire Trojan civilization, an evil whose consequences include not only Agamemnon’s own death but the crippling of his own society: only a few of the thousand ships Helen supposedly launched survive to return to Greece a decade later.

Whether a man deliberately murders his daughter or turns his mistress over to his enemies, crimes against women and family reveal the hero’s symbolic attempt to deny and destroy the “weak” emotional part of himself which he has been culturally conditioned to fear and loathe. But the human psyche violently resists being split, and psychologically appropriate retributive justice erupts—after all his efforts to evade his fate, to escape himself, Agamemnon is welcomed from Troy by his wife, Clytemnestra, who murders her daughter’s murderer with a (phallic) knife as he luxuriates in a (uterine) bath. And Troilus’ greatest fear is fully realized: Cressida does cuckold him, does make him a bastard through psychic analogy by calling into question the honor of his mother. That is, he describes Cressida’s infidelity as a universal crime (like Eve’s) that will “soil our mothers” (5.2. 1–3). Most important, Cressida moves beyond his control, just as he fears he will lose control over himself. Believing himself unmanned by the woman, he descends into pitiless violence to win back his virility, his honor, his identity.

For the tragic hero, hubris can only result in catastrophe, which precipitates anagnoresis (the recognition of who he is and what he’s done—of his sin, thus of his human fallibility and of his bond with other humans). Ironically, then, hubris leads to apotheosis; the hero who once wished to be like a god comes through suffering to know and accept his limitations, his mortality, and in so doing experiences the revelation of a god. The hero becomes more like a god by having become more fully human. In modern parlance, the tragic hero integrates himself and achieves his full potential, even as he is destroyed. Paradoxically, by accepting human limitations, he transcends them. In tragedy the hero’s death or defeat becomes a sacrifice which saves his society—rather than destroying the future, he makes it possible. Offstage, the audience undergoes sympathetic catharsis and, at some level, rational or emotional, conscious or unconscious, also comes to a fuller understanding of itself, its fellows, and the human condition.

In Troilus and Cressida all this is prevented because, while Shakespeare has given us many of the elements of tragedy, he withholds crucial ingredients: there is no tragic hero who can move us to catharsis, partly because Shakespeare has created a dramatic situation so terrible that it precludes heroism. If Shakespeare borrowed anything from Homer beyond general outlines of the Trojan story and occasional echoes of Chapman’s language, he drew upon the Greek’s preoccupation with the psychology of warfare. Homer recognized that war reflects a deep, ugly, ineradicable part of the human psyche and that, paradoxically, it can
call forth in man the best and the bestial. Not only does the *Iliad* explore the dark, savage, ignoble waste of war, but it also celebrates martial glory. However, in *Troilus and Cressida*, Shakespeare’s focus is narrower than Homer’s. Both show the powerful attractions of war. But Shakespeare seems more intent on examining how war corrupts. Little that is redeeming remains in Shakespeare’s Troy.

Aristotle argues that tragedy imitates a grand, serious, and complete action. The idea of grandeur ties in with the necessary appropriateness of a tragedy’s elevated language to its main character—a hero who must, Aristotle argues, be “noble,” though flawed. What constitutes the tragic hero’s nobility? First, “nobility” (the potential for tragic stature) seems inherent, compounded of instinctive virtue, courageous strength, and insightful intelligence. Second, even the finest potential must still find expression in external circumstances. Perhaps certain forces are so powerful, or environments so degrading, that noble action becomes virtually impossible. Contrary to popular opinion, which tends to regard military conflict as ennobling and character-building, a world at war may be just such an environment.

All of Shakespeare’s tragedies open in desperate times; the difference is in the degree of desperation, its intensity and social influence, its reach in time and space. Troy and Greece have been locked in mortal combat for at least seven years (1.3.12). In contrast, Verona is plagued only with “discords” (*R&J* 5.3.294); there the “ancient grudge” (*R&J* Pro. 3), the conflict between Montagues and Capulets, is a local feud, not a war. In *Hamlet* Fortinbras and Norway threaten Denmark but have not actually invaded and seem, for the moment, to have been bought off. At the opening of *Antony and Cleopatra*, Egypt and Rome have had only skirmishes, apparently remedied by diplomacy. In *Othello* and *Julius Caesar* the wars commence after the plays begin. What discord Lear’s England experiences is created by the King’s own division of his kingdom. Only in *Macbeth* do we get full-scale warfare. Significantly, Marilyn French links *Macbeth* and *Troilus and Cressida*: “Both plays focus on war and on status; in both [masculine] power is not the greatest, but the only good” (155).

Troilus and Cressida have grown up in the shadow of the protracted conflict between Troy and Greece and learned its lessons well (Yoder 22). As Stephen J. Lynch explains, “... the war outside the gates of Troy has shaped the quality of love within, where relationships are characterized by combat and competition: women dominating the chase, men the kill” (359). While Lynch’s first assertion is accurate—war has certainly formed these characters—his second seems absurd. Does the fleeing rabbit “dominate” the wolf? The remarkable similarity between the appetites of the wolf and the predatory lover—as both Lynch (359) and Gayle Greene (138) characterize Troilus—is revealed throughout the play by the young Prince himself as he characteristically uses food imagery to

5. For a brief but pertinent comparison of the Trojan and Viet Nam wars, see R. A. Yoder, “‘Sons and Daughters of the Game’: An Essay on Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*,” *Shakespeare Survey*, 25 (1972), 11–25.
describe (and dehumanize) Cressida. Thus he distances himself from the real woman.  
 
It may be futile to ask whether Troilus or Cressida might have had “the right stuff,” given less powerful forces arrayed against them. Unquestionably the play does not provide a character of tragic stature. Certainly the Greeks are never contenders. Thersites speaks fairly accurately of “That dissembling abominable varlet, Diomed . . . that stale old mouse-eaten dry cheese, Nestor, and that same dog-fox Ulysses . . . that mongrel cur, Ajax . . . that dog of as bad a kind, Achilles . . .” (5.4.10–15). Ali are fools: “Agamemnon is a fool to offer to command Achilles, Achilles is a fool to be commanded of Agamemnon, Thersites is a fool to serve such a fool, and this Patroclus is a fool positive” (2.3.64–67). In the Troyan camp, Hector comes closest to being the play’s tragic hero, but Shakespeare simply does not give him enough space in the play to dominate it. More important, Hector has limited insight. It is not merely that his younger, rasher brother Troilus outargues and overrides the more admirable Hector in two key scenes (the Troyan council and the final conflict) that suggests Hector’s limitations; in fact, his wrongheaded decisions are the very kind that tragic heroes traditionally make, setting in motion the events that grind toward catastrophe. Rather, the problem is that in his death scene Hector gives no indication of having learned anything about himself or his situation. No revelation mitigates his brutal assassination by Achilles’ mob of Myrmidons: Hector’s wretched end is not a tragedy but a waste of shame.  
 
Obviously, to dispense with Cressida as a noble heroine presents no difficulty. Critics have had field days slingling mud at this daughter of the game, and finding bad enough names to call her has often seemed the only real challenge. Thersites is probably the most creative: “. . . any man may sing her, if he can take her clef: she’s noted” (5.2.10–11). Ulysses’ words are cruelest: he calls her the “sluttish spoils of opportunity” (4.5.62). Actually, that Cressida is such easy game (if you’ll pardon the pun) suggests a trap laid for us. Recently, however, a number of persuasive articles ably defending Cressida have appeared.  

6. For an analysis of Troilus, the Greeks and Trojans locked in Oedipal conflict, see Emil Roy, “War and Manliness in Shakespeare’s Troilus and Cressida.” In “Fratricide and Cackoldry: Shakespeare’s Doubles,” Joel Fineman explores other psychological interpretations of the play, especially “. . . the problem that Shakespeare repeatedly represents in his plays—. . . (the male’s) psychological need to build a distance between himself and his desire, lest he lapse into the psychotic discovery of No Difference between self and object, between his self-regard and his imagination of his mother, between his identity and the context of his identity” (103). Representing Shakespeare: New Psychanalytic Essays, ed. Murray M. Schwartz and Coppelia Kahn (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1980), pp. 70–109.  

bly does not inherently possess, and she certainly never achieves, heroic stature, but her circumstances and her society help make her what she is—a survivor who sells her single commodity to the highest bidder. She knows only too well that she is not for all markets. Every man in her life, including Troilus, treats Cressida as though she were a whore. Why blame her for internalizing those expectations and acting upon them?

As the intensity of critical invective unleashed at the unhappy Cressida should surprise us, so too should the slavish adulation accorded Troilus. For instance, Brian Morris writes:

Those very qualities which make [Troilus] a great warrior, his passion, ruthless single-mindedness, his refusal to compromise, cannot but destroy him if he should fall in love with a woman who is less than his ideal. The superlative nature of his qualities marks him as of the house and lineage of heroes. (488)

Still less objective is the judgment of William Lawrence: “[Cressida] is a seasoned coquette. . . . Troilus is an ardent, idealistic young fellow, thoroughly under the fascination of a sensual and calculating woman” (139). In assessing Troilus’ vaunted nobility, we need look no further than his language. Troilus, rather than Cressida, is the sensualist, imaginative only in his ability to rationalize getting what he wants, which is to “wallow in the lily beds” (3.2.11). Throughout, Troilus is either explicitly critical of the female sex, viewing women as weak, cowardly, irrational creatures, or implicitly contemptuous of them (despite their allure), describing them as food, animals, diseases, or merchandise (including “soil’d” silks, 2.2.70–71). Both he and Cressida speak of love and war interchangeably, as when they agree to “war” with each other: “O virtuous fight, / When right with right wars who shall be most Right!” (3.2.169–70). Compare such martial language with that of Romeo’s first meeting with Juliet: Romeo addresses her as “dear saint” (1.5.103), introducing the religious imagery that dominates their conversation and strikingly reveals his love and respect for her, as well as signaling his commitment to her.

To view Troilus as a sweet innocent in the clutches of the Spider Woman, or to castigate Cressida as a nymphomaniac opportunist, is to ignore the multitude of qualifying clues in the language and action of the play. The play cannot engage both our emotions and our intellect fully if we side wholly with, or against, Troilus and Cressida. Indeed, the preeminent functions of Pandarus and Thersites may be as distorting lenses through which we sometimes view the lovers and which help prevent our permanently adopting such extreme views. Thus the warping operation of Thersites and Pandarus acts to correct our own perspective on Troilus and Cressida, and on Troilus and Cressida, as eyeglasses correct defective vision by distorting it in the opposite direction. Shakespeare presents this couple as flawed and ultimately ruined characters who almost achieve a moment of glory in their love for each other. What should come through is the sense of loss: “The expense of spirit in a waste of shame / Is lust in action . . .”

8. I heard this wonderful description of Pandarus’ and Thersites’ functions in R. Mark Benbow’s Shakespeare class at Colby College, more years ago than I care to document publicly.
KRISTINA FABER

(Sonnet 109). In this play it is predominantly war lust which disfigures the human spirit. Thersites once again clinches it: "Lechery, lechery; still wars and lechery; nothing else holds fashion" (5.2.195–96).

Carl Sagan has provided fascinating insights into man's capacity for evil—wars and lechery—in his book, The Dragons of Eden. He explains the tripartite structure of the human brain: the "reptilian" or "R-complex”; the limbic system which surrounds the R-complex; and the neocortex "surmounting the rest of the brain" (Sagan 58). As well as having different, though interrelated, structures and functions, these three neurological systems represent evolutionary stages in primate development: reptile, mammal, human. Sagan links the most primitive part of the brain, the R-complex, with "aggressive behavior, territoriality, ritual and the establishment of social hierarchies" (63) and also with "sexual function" (157–58). Although the neocortex, the neurological area that is most elaborately developed in humans, consists of "about 85 percent of the brain" (Sagan 64), the "old" or reptilian brain still exerts a powerful influence on us: "... it is striking how much of our actual behavior—as distinguished from what we say and think about it—can be described in reptilian terms" (Sagan 63).

Consider Troilus and Cressida in these terms. In both language and behavior, we see that love is war, that both involve aggression, territoriality, ritual, and social hierarchy. All these work to the detriment of women, especially, in the play: Helen is "ravish'd" (Pro. 9); both she and Cressida are moved like pawns between Greek and Troyan "turf." Even the most attractive code in the play, that of chivalry, binds the women with absolute rituals—chaste constancy paradoxically within an adulterous relationship, for instance. Cressida knows the rules of that game; her pessimistic assessment of Troilus' self-proclaimed eternal vows, "tied with the bonds of heaven" (5.2.153), proves only too true:

Women are angels, wooing;
Things won are done; joy's soul lies in the doing.
That she belov'd knows naught that knows not this:
Men prize the thing ungain'd more than it is. (1.3.291-94)

Women occupy the very bottom of the Troyan and Grecian social hierarchies, kept firmly in their place by, again, violence and ritual.

Troilus explicitly links love and war in his first words: "Why should I war
without the walls of Troy, / That find such cruel battle here within?" (1.1.2–3). Despite his later spirited defense of the enterprise in the Troyan council, here he admits freely that the Trojan war is irrational and its raison d'être, absurdly unworthy:

Fools on both sides, Helen must needs be fair
When with your blood you daily paint her thus,
I cannot fight upon this argument;
It is too starv'd a subject for my sword. (1.190–93)

His last line once more brings in food imagery to suggest that both love (lust) and battle (blood lust) are appetites—reptilian appetites. More than Troilus does, Cressida understands that love is as much danger as pleasure, for men hold the
final advantage. In her witty exchange with her uncle, she mixes fencing, feeding, and erotic terms to describe her felt need to be forever vigilant: "Upon my back, to defend my belly [that is, trade sex for food]; upon my wit, to defend my wiles; upon my secrecy, to defend mine honesty; my mask, to defend my beauty; and you, to defend all these; and at all these wards I lie, at a thousand watches" (1.2.265–69).

When we reverse the original cliché, we have "war is love." This motto, too, the play illustrates. LaBranche explores an important motif in *Troilus and Cressida*: "the friendly meeting of enemies" (445). Such exchanges as that between Aeneas and Diomedes just before Cressida’s departure for the Greek camp should strike us as curious, to say the least. Note Aeneas’ first line, in which he defines the value that he then swears to violate:

_Aeneas._ In human gentleness,  
Welcome to Troy! Now by Anchises’ life,  
Welcome indeed! By Venus’ hands I swear  
No man alive can love in such a sort  
The thing he means to kill, more excellently.  

_Diom._ We sympathize. (4.1.21–26)

Paris neatly sums up their dialogue: “This is the most despiteful gentle greeting, / The noblest hateful love that e’er I heard of” (4.1.33–34). After the contest between Ajax and Hector, Achilles says to the Trojan, “Tomorrow do I meet thee, fell as death; / Tonight, all friends” (4.5.69–70). LaBranche comments:

Indeed, war certainly does pervert “good sense,” that is, human rationality and humane kindness. But the oddity is not that warriors invented a chivalric code which to some small degree mitigates the horror of war. Nor is the real problem, as LaBranche believes, “conflicting demands of love and war” (445). In this play no conflict between love and war exists; rather, they are the same thing—appetite, impulse, manifestations of what Sagan calls the old brain. In *Troilus and Cressida* we witness reptilian behavior, whether the specific scene involves a battle or a bedroom.

War can be seen, then, as a *psychomachia*: a single human’s struggle against himself. Arnold emphasizes that the Trojan War set “... ‘kindred’ speakers of the same language and worshippers of the same gods against each other...” (38). Even Troilus recognizes that the “Fools on both sides” are alter egos. More specifically, though, warfare symbolizes a _lost_ battle against oneself—the warrior has surrendered to his reptilian self. That is why the language of war is always absurd: “We had to destroy the village to save it.” Troilus calls such language “the madness of discourse, / That sets up with and against itself!” (5.2.141–42). Such rationalizations represent human ability (language and reason—the main functions of the neocortex) at the service of reptilian impulse,
attempting to rationalize the irrational, justify the unjustifiable. The attempt only
results in the kind of verbal hypocrisy and moral schizophrenia that occurs in
_Troilus and Cressida_, a pathological duality that Cressida (and of all the
characters, only Cressida) acknowledges in herself when she says that she has
more than one "kind of self" (3.2.146). Troilus recognizes her duplicity when he
witnesses her betrayal and cries in agony:

>This is, and is not, Cressid.
>Within my soul there doth conduce a fight
>Of this strange nature, that a thing inseparate
>Divides more wider than the sky and earth... (5.2.145-48)°

But he never sees his own duplicity, that he has led her to expect his protection,
at the very least, and then abandoned her to his enemies.

Ironically the "false, false, false!" Cressida (5.2.177) is the only character in
the play who expresses any regret for her actions, who has at least some
conscience and consciousness of her faults: "Cressida's movement in the play is
from awareness to self-deception and back to awareness again, a counterpoint to
Troilus's movement, whether it be from innocence to awareness or from igno­
rance to animal rage" (Voth and Evans 231). Lynch notes, "while Troilus
engages in self-love and calls it a sanctified and winnowed purity, Cressida
engages in 'folly' and 'craft' and calls it 'folly' and 'craft'" (360). In other words,
Troilus falls to _hubris_; Cressida experiences _anagnorisis_. The fact that neither
combines these characteristic attributes of a tragic hero reinforces the problem­
atic nature of this play.

That the play offers numerous instances of broken vows has become a critical
commonplace, and many commentators have studied the discrepancies between
words and actions. For instance, Diomedes demands the impossible of Cressida,
that "... your mind be coupled with your words" (5.2.15). Ulysses's great speech
on order is followed immediately by his petty plot to manipulate Achilles into
taking the field again. As LaBranche points out, this tactic "... demands a sudden
reevaluation [of Ulysses], as he now reveals himself to the audience as a secret
practitioner not only against his inferiors in the military hierarchy, but also
against his superiors, from whom he has withheld the information about
Achilles' love for Polyxena [Troilus' sister]" (444). But seen in the context of
Sagan's neurological model, Ulysses' speech suggests two further interpreta­
tions. First, given that "aggressive behavior, territoriality, ritual and the estab­
lishment of social hierarchies" are linked to the old brain and reptilian behavior,
the speech on order stands not in contrast to the irrational war effort but as part

° For a detailed examination of Troilus' speech in 5.2.145ff., see Elizabeth Freund. " 'Ariachne's Broken
Woof': The Rhetoric of Citation in _Troilus and Cressida_," _Shakespeare and the Question of Theory_, ed. Patricia
Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (New York: Methuen, 1985), pp. 19-36, And in " 'This Is and Is Not Cressid': The
Characterization of Cressida," Janet Adelman argues that in the first part of the play, "Our most intense engagement
[and therefore much of our sympathy] is with her..." (124). However, after she reaches the Greek camp, Cressida
"becomes radically unknowable, irredeemibly other" (128) to us as well as to Troilus. Adelman explains this shift
in terms of Troilus: "... Cressida's inconsistency is accompanied by a radical inconsistency of characterization; and
both occur at once because both are reflections of the same fantasy" (120). _The Mother Tongue: Essays in Feminist
and parcel of it. Organized violence would be impossible without the military machine, itself dependent on aggression, territoriality, ritual, and hierarchy. Second, though the impulse to hierarchy and ritual is reptilian, language is neocortical, human (Sagan 77). As Thersites says, to be “languageless” is to be a “monster” (3.3.263). Our usual response to that which seems beyond our control, such as war, is to rationalize it, as for instance Ulysses does brilliantly in the Grecian council scene.

While others in the play may not be as eloquent as Ulysses (always excepting Thersites), being human, they have enough of the neocortical gift of gab to justify their broken vows and violent crimes. Thus Troilus tells Cressida that her exile “From Troy and Troilus” is “A hateful truth” (4.4.31, 29) rather than a diplomatic decision which might conceivably be revoked. Achilles announces that “It is decreed Hector the great must die” (5.7.8), moments before he commands his Myrmidons to batter the unarmed Troyan to death. Their wording—“it” is “a hateful truth,” “decreed”—allows both men to shift the blame neatly off themselves onto . . . what? Fate? National security? After all, they’re just following orders. What matters is that their language reveals their priorities: Troilus chooses the war (the familiar: reptilian violence) over love (change: nurture, equality, responsibility). His choice actually furthers the war effort: having Cressida in the Greek camp will provide yet another welcome rationale for more aggression, ritual combat, and territorial claims. So, too, Helen is the “cause” of the larger conflict (French 154–55), and Desdemona’s “infidelity” is “the cause” of Othello’s “having” to kill her (Oth. 5.2.1, 3). Perhaps Troilus gave Cressida up without a struggle so that the excitement of wooing and winning could be extended. Would he have relinquished her so easily had he not already “had” her? Cressida knows the answer: “Things won are done . . . ” (1.3.292). Achilles’ priorities are made equally plain by his behavior. The Greek jettisons without regret his vow to Polyxena and her mother, as well as all other rules of the chivalric code, which futilely seeks to make bloodbaths logical and heroic, to rationalize the reptilian.

Thus Troilus and Cressida operates within the tragic rather than the comic mode, but it ultimately withholds catharsis. From the Prologue, which evokes the audience’s knowledge of the fall of Troy, creating specific expectations of catastrophe, Shakespeare has manipulated the audience toward a tragic conclusion. Despite the “lighter” first half of the play, its underlying plot structure, the overriding dramatic vision, as well as its language and spiritual landscapes, have been tragic. Typical of Shakespeare’s tragedies and problem plays, the imagery in Troilus and Cressida emphasizes darkness, disorder, disease, dementia, deceit, dirt, decay, and death. Typically, too, sex and sexuality, especially as embodied in women, are treated as mere appetites and regarded as contemptible though pleasurable. The increasingly dreadful and claustrophobic settings also contribute to the tragic mode. The play properly concludes with Hector’s death, not with the marriage of the lovers. But not even Hector achieves tragic stature: he never recognizes his own contribution to the catastrophe, and his death dooms, not saves, Troy. Moreover, the destruction of an entire civilization is too
great a catastrophe to grasp emotionally. We see finally that the Greeks and Troyans all have surrendered, as Ulysses feared, to power, will, and the greatest, wolfish appetite of all: blood lust. And this terrible truth about ourselves—that our vaulting ambitions may lure us to the pit, that we are as reptilian as human—represents the final, unresolvable problem of Troilus and Cressida.

Works Cited


ARNOLD, MARGARET J. “‘Monsters in Love’s Train’: Euripides and Shakespeare’s Troilus and Cressida.” Comparative Drama, 18.1 (Spring 1984), 38–53.


BOAS, FREDERICK S. Shakespeare and His Predecessors. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1886.


LYNCH, STEPHEN J. “Shakespeare’s Cressida: ‘A Woman of Quick Sense.’” Philological Quarterly, 63.3 (Summer 1984), 357–68.


