

Humanities Institute
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Troilus and Cressida. 1602

Shakespeare

Overview.

Problematic. Shakespeare was prolific—thirty six plays, a hundred sonnets, narrative poetry—and it is natural to want to see patterns in this large body of work. While it seems defensible to make a broad tripartite division among this writer’s comedies, tragedies, and history plays—many of which of course blend into one another—there are several plays—we like to call them ‘problem plays’—which present issues, or stage debates, rather than making us weep, cry, or muse on the past of mankind. It has been customary to refer to *Troilus and Cressida*, *All’s Well that Ends Well*, and *Measure for Measure* as ‘problem plays.’ Each of these plays is designed to ‘make you think.’

Darkness. The thinking that follows in the present play is dark. The Trojan War, which is the dominant backdrop of the work, is incomplete. We are seven years into the fighting, and the turmoil of personal revenge, infighting, and hostility has eaten away at the personalities of the fighters. There is no end in sight, at the end of the play, which ends abruptly with Hector killed by Achilles and Troilus defeated by his arch Greek rival Diomedes. Neither side, nor any individual, seems able to show the way forward. Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* comes to mind, as we review the uncanny modernity of the Shakespeare before us. What are we waiting for? What were we struggling for? What, after all, was this play-thing with which we were looking into our own destiny?

Characters

Priam, king of Troy

His sons:

Hector

Troilus

Paris

Deiphobus

Helenus

Margarelon, bastard son of Priam

Trojan commanders

Aeneas

Antenor

Pandarus, uncle of Cressida

Greek commanders

Agamemnon, Greek general

Menelaus, his brother

Achilles

Ajax

Ulysses

Nestor

Diomedes

Patroclus

Thersites, a deformed and scurrilous Greek

Calchas, a Greek prophet

Alexander, servant of Cressida
 Servant of Paris
 Servant of Troilus
 Servant of Diomedes

Helen, wife of Menelaus
 Andromache, wife of Hector
 Cassandra, daughter of Priam, a prophetess
 Cressida, daughter of Calchas

Story

Plots. There are two plots in this play—both drawn from Shakespeare’s understanding of Homer’s Trojan War tale, the *Iliad*— and they reinforce one another only indirectly. It is their subtle point of jointure that gives the play its power, and mystery.

Crux. There is first of all the story of the *Iliad*, incorporating all the main characters from Homer’s work, and by and large dealing with them as Homer did, and, accordingly, playing out the same narrative as Homer’s—with the obvious exception, as revealed in Shakespeare’s title, that two characters of minor importance in Homer are given a central position in the love story that Shakespeare grafts onto the original. The Homeric narrative, as it plays out in this play, is already seven years into the war. Both sides are wearing thin, the crux of the battle seems indefinitely postponed, and the warriors palpably anticipate some decisive combat, which will swing the war one way or another.

Separation. It was Shakespeare’s choice to concentrate on a couple of individual figures, from within this panorama, figures of romance—but with a bitter edge to it—whose deep involvement with both sides in the war makes them narratively natural to the continued portrayal of the larger picture. Troilus (son of Priam) and Cressida (daughter of the Greek prophet Calchas, who had been instrumental in guiding the Greeks to Troy in the first place.) are at the outset of the play together in Troy, though separated in the sense that Troilus, heartbroken at being apart from her during a military engagement, is engaged in fighting. Nor is this the only time that Troilus will be separated from his love. By the mid point of the play Cressida, whose father is a Greek prophet (Calchas), is returned to the Greek camp, in exchange for the Trojan hero, Antenor, who has been captured by the Greeks. For the remainder of the play, therefore, the two lovers will be separated, and Troilus exposed to the most dread pains of jealousy and anguish.

Double plot. We have spoken previously—in discussing *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *The Taming of the Shrew*—about Shakespeare the geometrician, who has a penchant for elaborated plot lines, which have a way of resolving into seamless images. In the present instance, however, Shakespeare seems fascinated with the challenge of plot structures which never quite meet at the seams. Troilus and Cressida are united through much of the beginning of the play, and in their oneness he generates passionate love language, which several times melts the frequently edgy, and occasionally sassy, language of his lady love, Cressida. After Cressida has been returned to her father, Calchas, and promised in marriage to the Greek warrior, Diomedes,

Separation 2. Troilus finds himself mired in longing and jealousy, taking the romantic theme of the play into its own dimensions, which conclude with the defeat of Troilus by Diomedes. In its asymptotic fashion, this romantic story development of the two main figures never quite converges with the ‘main theme,’ the cut from the *Iliad* which is moving into finality—the defeat of Troilus by Diomedes and the killing of Hector by Achilles. We are confronted at the end by what some of us modernists have called a ‘play about a play,’ and what, from a more geopolitical perspective, might be called a play about how war bumbles into place, shattering lives and crossing out its own achievements—perhaps reminding us, thus, of a modern classic like *Catch-22*.

End. By the end of the play, Cressida and Troilus separated, by her marriage to Diomedes, and by his heartbreak, Achilles having been lured from his long sulk, and having killed Hector, the war is unfinished, and the play is unfinished, except in the sense that ‘being unfinished’ is what the war was about, not to

mention the romance of Troilus and Cressida, which has had the cards stacked against it from the beginning. We have been immersed in the private honor squabbles of a large family of ego hungry landowners, and in the doomed sparks of a romance which has no chance of advancing beyond the stage of adolescent wit and longing. We are in the hands of a dramatist who is a highly poetic realist. Even in

Romeo and Juliet, as we recall, the wholehearted passion of the lovers—I mean, no trace there of Cressida's witty tongue—is embedded in a cross family rivalry which dooms it from the outset.

Themes

Romance. Troilus and Cressida are embedded in the midst of a great squabble of a war, which seems to have lost its dignity and direction. We might compare them to two lovers in a Hemingway novel, caught in a fleeting but therefore extremely intense romance, in the midst of a world which is unravelling; or to the two lovers in Resnais' film, *Hiroshima*, their passion and despair equally divided. In the end Cressida comes off either as a flirt, or little disposed to repel her admirers, but at her most loving she makes beautiful linguistic music with Troilus in the Trojan camp.

Scurrility. When we look for the 'common man' in Homer, we usually stop at Thersites, who is the man on the street in the army, dirty mouthed, contemptuous of fine manners and empty sentiments. In the present play, in which he manages to pour vicious contempt over all the fine muckety-muck of generals and heroes, he keeps the low and dirty tone ready at hand.

Wisdom. To our surprise, Ulysses, who is known in Homer and generally in Greek culture, as a trickster, a MacGyver or Houdini who can get out of any trap, crops up as a figure of wisdom and good counsel in *Troilus and Cressida*. At several points, and especially when declaiming the long and subtle speech on *degrees*, Ulysses sounds like the spokesman for the play's author, or if not that for a widely held, culturally conservative Elizabethan perspective on society and nature. Everything in nature has its place—the concept of the 'great chain of being' would be the ongoing eighteenth century view of his theme, in Shaftesbury and Reynolds—and therefore order is the sought for condition, in healthy societies or areas of nature. Ulysses vigorously promotes this order-oriented thematic, in the midst of a chaotic human struggle in which the center cannot hold.

Jealousy. Troilus is the poster boy for jealousy, an emotion in the analysis of which Shakespeare is a master—*Othello*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*—and the fragility of his confidence in Cressida is amply justified by her sassy and flirtatious manner, her eye for the guys, while at the same time she appears to adore Troilus.

Homoeroticism. Thanks to Thersites' dirty mouth and scurrilous intrusions we are quite aware that Achilles and Patroclus are lovers, and that Achilles has found frequent use for his prick in bed play with his buddy. On the whole, however, the homoerotic in this male military society is trumped by the boisterous taste for social interactions and the play of masculine power.

Main Character. We may look on Troilus as the main character of this play, for he it is whose romantic love gives the heart to the work, although, to be sure, there is a bevy of more potent and self assured figures in the play. Troilus is a hero—Pandarus praises Troilus, to Cressida, as a greater hero than Hector—but he is afraid he will lose Cressida, and in the end he is correct; he is defeated by Diomedes, and separated from Cressida for good.

Parallels. Jean Giraudoux's *La Guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu* (*The Trojan War will not take place*) is a WWII era, satire-comedy, on the dependence of wars on the will and planning of the people, who are forever suckers for the military solution to their problems. Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* similarly mocks the mixture of micky mouse with lethality in the business of war, which tramples on human values, in the pretense of defending them. Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* blends deep modern romance with constant reminders of the bleakness of war, and can help us with our understanding of the Trojan War, which was ignited by a reckless *affaire de coeur*.

Illustrative moments

Heartbroken. At the outset of the play, separation from his beloved has held Troilus back from participation in the war. As we enter the play Troilus has decided to participate, joining his brethren on the Trojan side. He is recovering from heartbreak.

Love and parting. After intense togetherness, passionate love and language between them, Troilus and Cressida are forced apart again by circumstances. She is being returned to her father, Calchas, on the Greek side, while Troilus must remain with his fellow Trojan. Genuine separation pain tortures them.

Pledges. When Cressida is called back to the Greek camp, and must leave Troilus, she and her lover exchange pledges of fidelity and everlasting love. Troilus, the underconfident, has no idea for what a short time these pledges will last.

Defeated. Troilus, a fine lover and only a good fighter, is in the end defeated in single combat, by the Greek warrior Diomedes, who has taken Cressida for his wife. A bitter outcome for Troilus.

Discussion questions

In *Troilus and Cressida* Shakespeare portrays a complex rough and tumble military world, which has come to a standstill in the midst of a war which no one seems able to win, and among people who have been fighting against each other for so long that they have virtually become parts of a single family. Do you see this play as an indictment of war in general, or of this war in particular? Does Shakespeare seem to you generally opposed to war? In his English history plays? In *Coriolanus*? In *Cymbeline*? What was going on militarily in England itself, that could have had a bearing on the way Shakespeare treats war?

What kind of image of Achilles does Shakespeare develop in this play? Is this the powerful hero who figured importantly in Homer, as a Greek force which was long waiting to be unleashed? Or is this a priming, easily hurt, wounded giant, who would rather snuggle away with his sugar pie boyfriend, Patroclus, than engage with the Greeks on the battlefield? How does Shakespeare describe the pressures that finally bring Achilles onto the battlefield? What are those pressures?

Why do you think Shakespeare chose Troilus, a relatively minor figure in the Trojan retinue, to serve as his individual example of romance and its peril? Could it have anything to do with the sources Shakespeare used for this play? Please explain.