

## Troilus and Cressida: *Classical Past and Medieval Heritage*

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Among Shakespeare's 'classical' plays, *Troilus and Cressida* occupies an especially problematic place. The play is, to sum it up in an approximate formula, suspended between Homer and Chaucer, two authors and two styles not easy to reconcile with each other. Two scenes in particular in the play are characterized by a conflict between sources which entirely changes both the classical and the medieval features of *Troilus and Cressida*. This brief essay offers a reading of Act III, scene ii and a handful of lines in Act V, scene ix, drawing on Piero Boitani's lifelong work on the Troilus and Cressida story.

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Among Shakespeare's 'classical' plays, *Troilus and Cressida* occupies an especially problematic place. Because of its setting at the time, and indeed during, the Trojan war, it should be the most classically oriented, since that war is the subject of the *Iliad*, that is, of the first ever poetic document of the classical tradition in Western literature. On the other hand, due to the sources used by Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida* ought to be markedly medieval, because those sources, coagulating – via John Lydgate's *Troy Book* and Caxton's translation of the *Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye* – in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, one of the greatest poems of the late European fourteenth century, go back to a tradition which includes Boccaccio's *Filostrato*, Guido delle Colonne's *Historia Destructionis Troiae*, and Benoît de Sainte Maure's *Roman de Troie*, composed around 1160-1170 on the basis of the previous narratives by Dictys Cretensis and Dares Phrygius. As a matter of fact, the invention of the Troilus-Cressida love story, absent in classical accounts, and its insertion into the plot of the Trojan war, are due to Benoît (who calls Cressida "Briseïde").

Thus, Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* is, to sum it up in an approximate formula, a play as it were suspended between Homer and Chaucer, two authors and two styles not exactly easy to reconcile with each other. Furthermore, it presents two other fundamental features – the part played in the plot by Thersites and his opponent, Ulysses, and endless inconclusive discussions among the Trojan leaders, Hector, Aeneas, Paris, Deiphobus, Helenus. Neither Ulysses nor Thersites have anything to do with the love story of Troilus and Cressida, but a lot with the problem of power, authority, and order which are the essential political and military ingredients in the fighting of a war. As in the *Iliad*, Thersites plays the role of the simple soldier, the protester and the rebel against the strategy and the structure itself of the Greek army, whereas Ulysses is the general who affirms with the greatest possible strength the necessity for the maintenance of a rigid chain of command. On the other hand, the Trojan chiefs, who would indeed have a lot to do with the relationship between Troilus and Cressida and the decision to send her to the Greek camp, generally talk of *honour* and of another, admittedly more important, restitution, that of Helen to Menelaus, which would put an instant end to the war.

There are two scenes in the play where the conflict between sources entirely changes both the classical and the medieval features of *Troilus and Cressida*. The first is scene 2 of Act III, placed at the very centre of the play. It corresponds to the long key scenes of Chaucer's *Troilus* spanning from Book II, 967 to the end of Book III. It starts with Pandarus' announcement to Troilus that Criseyde is not ill disposed against him, upon which Troilus reacts, following Boccaccio's *Filostrato*, with the new vigour indicated by the famous Dantean simile of *Inferno* II, 127-32, *Quali i fioretti*:

But right as floures, thorough the colde of nyght  
 Iclosed, stoupen on hire stalkes lowe,  
 Redressen hem ayein the sonne bright,  
 And spreden on hir kynde cours by rowe,  
 Right so gan tho his eighen up to throwe  
 This Troilus, and seyde, 'O Venus dere,  
 Thi might, thi grace, y-heried be it here!' (II, 967-73)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The text of *Troilus and Criseyde* I use here is that edited by B. A. Windeatt for Longman (Chaucer 1984).

It goes on with the beautifully delicate moment when Criseyde looks at Troilus coming back from the battle, glorious in his arms, a “knight fulfilled of heigh prowess”, and exclaims, as if she were an Isolde who has just drunk the love potion that will tie her to Tristan forever, “Who yaf me drynke?” (II, 651). There follow the endless manoeuvres of Pandarus to persuade Criseyde to meet Troilus and finally managing to do so, literally pushing the young man into the lady’s bed, after which Troilus pronounces a first hymn to Love that contains a distinct Dantean echo from no less than *Paradiso XXXIII*’s Prayer to the Virgin:

Benigne loue, thow holy bond of thynges,  
 Who-so wol grace and list the nought honouren,  
 Lo, his desir wol flee with-outen wynges;  
 ffor noldestow of bowntee hem socouren  
 That seruen best and most alwey labouren,  
 Yet were al lost, that dar I wel seyn certes,  
 But if thi grace passed our desertes. (II, 1261-67)

Finally, having spent the night blissfully in Criseyde’s welcoming arms, Troilus sings his greatest hymn to Love at the end of Book III, picking up the author’s own Proem to that same Book, both passages being indebted to Boethius’ *Consolation* at its highest<sup>2</sup>. Criseyde, meanwhile, is slowly and gently won over, in a process that lasts over a thousand lines and feelingly follows the rules of courtly love. At one point, about three quarters of the way through this process, as she and her lover amiably converse in bed, Chaucer uses a simile which is not in Boccaccio and which implicitly compares her to a skylark being held in the claws of a hawk. Then he reports Criseyde’s answer to Troilus’ vows. She trembles like an aspen leaf when he embraces her tightly and when he says at III, 1206-08:

‘O swete, as euere mote I goon,  
 Now be ye caught, now is ther but we tweyne,  
 Now yeldeth yow, for other bote is noon’,

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<sup>2</sup> *Troilus and Criseyde* III, 1-52 and 1744-71, the former inspired by *Filostrato* III, 74-79 and ultimately by Boethius’ *Consolation* II, m. 8, the latter based on *Consolation* II, m. 8.

she replies with a shy but full confession that she had surrendered long before now:

To that Criseyde answerde thus anon,  
 'Ne hadde I er now, my swete herte dere,  
 Ben yolde, i-wis, I were now not here!' (III, 1209-11)

In Shakespeare's play, by contrast, the love plot is broken up into a series of short scenes which, beginning with Act I, scenes 1 and 2, are continuously interrupted by completely different episodes, such as the dissensions and debates within the Greek army or the Trojan leaders, and we don't hear of love until Pandarus sings his canzonetta *Love, love, nothing but love, still love, still more* to Helen and Paris in Act III, scene 1<sup>3</sup>. Finally, the meeting between Troilus and Cressida takes place, somewhat abruptly, in the following scene, giving the impression that his courtship of her has already taken place behind, so to speak, the curtains. In that second scene of Act III two things happen. First, Troilus pledges eternal faith to Cressida: "Troilus shall be such to Cressid as what envy can / say worst shall be a mock for his truth, and what / truth can speak truest not truer than Troilus" (III.ii.95). Second, Cressida confesses immediately, without any hesitation, to have loved Troilus for a long time: "Prince Troilus", she says, "I have loved you night and day / for many weary months" (113-14). When Troilus at this point asks, "why was my Cressid then so hard to win?" (115), Cressida blurts it all out:

CRESSIDA  
 Hard to seem won; but I was won, my lord,  
 With the first glance that ever – Pardon me:  
 If I confess much, you will play the tyrant.  
 I love you now; but till now not so much  
 But I might master it: in faith, I lie –  
 My thoughts were like unbridled children, grown  
 Too headstrong for their mother – See, we fools!  
 Why have I blabb'd? who shall be true to us,  
 When we are so unsecret to ourselves? –  
 But, though I lov'd you well, I woo'd you not;

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3 Quotations from Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* are from Kenneth Palmer's edition in the Arden Shakespeare (Shakespeare 1982).

And yet, good faith, I wish'd myself a man,  
 Or that we women had men's privilege  
 Of speaking first. Sweet, bid me hold my tongue,  
 For in this rapture I shall surely speak  
 The thing I shall repent. See, see, your silence,  
 Cunning in dumbness, from my weakness draws  
 My very soul of counsel. Stop my mouth.  
 (*Troilus and Cressida*, III.ii.116-32)

The hint Shakespeare has taken from Chaucer has become an eruption. Cressida shows her uncertainty, in a way, but her absolute certainty in another. She has loved Troilus for a very long time, and, as a kind of proto-feminist, she wishes she were a man or had a man's privilege. In medieval courtly culture, ladies never declare their love first. Cressida's eruption, which becomes ever more contorted and embarrassed in the rest of the scene, is a cultural revolution. I quote the relevant passages:

CRESSIDA  
 My lord, I do beseech you pardon me;  
 'Twas not my purpose, thus to beg a kiss.  
 I am asham'd. O heavens! what have I done?  
 For this time will I take my leave, my lord. (III.ii.135-38)

CRESSIDA  
 Let me go and try.  
 I have a kind of self resides with you,  
 But an unkind self, that itself will leave  
 To be another's fool. I would be gone:  
 Where is my wit? I know not what I speak. (III.ii.145-49)

CRESSIDA  
 Perchance, my lord, I show more craft than love,  
 And fell so roundly to a large confession  
 To angle for your thoughts. But you are wise,  
 Or else you love not; for to be wise and love  
 Exceeds man's might: that dwells with gods above. (III.ii.151-55)

Shakespeare's Cressida is not at all naïve. She passes from a feeling of shame, to one of self-oblivion, to a recognition of her 'craft'. She knows perfectly well what she is saying because Shakespeare seems to know how a woman's heart works. Chaucer does, too, but the

heart of Chaucer's ladies is over two hundred years old now, and conventions can change dramatically over such a period of time, as Chaucer had indeed acknowledged in *Troilus and Criseyde* itself:

Ye knowe ek that in fourme of speche is chaunge  
 With-inne a thousand yeer, and wordes tho  
 That hadden pris, now wonder nyce and straunge  
 Us thinketh hem, and yet thei spake hem so,  
 And spedde as wel in loue as men now do;  
 Ek forto wynnyn loue in sondry ages,  
 In sondry londes, sondry ben vsages. (II, 22-28)

Cressida is also sincere – ironically so, in view of what happens in the second part of the play, when she betrays Troilus with Diomedes fully confirming Boccaccio's misogynist proclamation in the *Filostrato* that "giovane donna, e mobile e vogliosa" (VIII 30, 1) is "volubil sempre come foglia al vento" (8) – an anticipation of "la donna è mobile qual piuma al vento" in Verdi's *Rigoletto* (III, 2) five hundred years later. Shakespeare's Cressida seems to know now what kind of reputation she will have in the future, from Lydgate and Henryson onwards, the very instant she proclaims her faithfulness forever:

CRESSIDA  
 Prophet may you be!  
 If I be false, or swerve a hair from truth,  
 When time is old and hath forgot itself,  
 When waterdrops have worn the stones of Troy,  
 And blind oblivion swallow'd cities up,  
 And mighty states characterless are grated  
 To dusty nothing – yet let memory,  
 From false to false, among false maids in love,  
 Upbraid my falsehood. When they've said 'as false  
 As air, as water, wind, or sandy earth,  
 As fox to lamb, as wolf to heifer's calf,  
 Pard to the hind, or stepdame to her son' –  
 Yea, let them say, to stick the heart of falsehood,  
 'As false as Cressid'.  
 (*Troilus and Cressida*, III.ii.181-94)

And with this second blow the courtly love code of the Middle Ages is destroyed for good.

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The second deconstruction Shakespeare operates on past culture concerns the epic, indeed Homer himself. This happens in a handful of lines in scene 9 of Act V of *Troilus and Cressida*, when Hector and Achilles finally meet in deadly combat, as in Book XXI, and above all XXII, of the *Iliad*, when the *menis* with which the poem had started, the 'wrath' or 'ire' of the Greek hero becomes *menos*, relentless homicidal fury, and an aspect of the cosmic conflict which involves elements, gods, and humans.

Shakespeare shows us Achilles already in scene 7. He is inciting his Myrmidons to pursue Hector:

ACHILLES  
 Come here about me, you my Myrmidons;  
 Mark what I say. Attend me where I wheel,  
 Strike not a stroke, but keep yourselves in breath;  
 And when I have the bloody Hector found,  
 Empale him with your weapons round about;  
 In fellest manner execute your arms.  
 Follow me, sirs, and my proceedings eye:  
 It is decreed Hector the great must die.  
 (*Troilus and Cressida*, V.vii.1-8)

In the meantime, Hector, after dragging the corpse of a dead Greek, is taking a rest and beginning to get rid of his armour: as the caption has it, he "*disarms*". Thus, at the opening of scene 8, we hear him say:

HECTOR  
 Most putrefied core, so fair without,  
 Thy goodly armour thus hath cost thy life.  
 Now is my day's work done: I'll take my breath.  
 Rest, sword; thou hast thy fill of blood and death. (V.viii.1-4)

Achilles comes upon him at precisely this moment. He addresses his enemy with the usual brutal haughtiness:

ACHILLES  
 Look, Hector, how the sun begins to set,  
 How ugly night comes breathing at his heels;  
 Even with the vail and dark'ning of the sun,  
 To close the day up, Hector's life is done. (V.viii.5-8)

Hector protests he is “unarmed” and asks his enemy to “forego this vantage” (9). Shakespeare is already practicing drastic censorship on Homer, where no such scene is present. Then, he has Achilles repeat with more violence what he had already said in scene 7:

ACHILLES

Strike, fellows, strike: this is the man I seek.

[*Hector falls*]

So, Ilium, fall thou next! Come, Troy, sink down!

Here lies thy heart, thy sinews, and thy bone.

On, Myrmidons, and cry you all amain,

‘Achilles hath the mighty Hector slain’. (V.viii.10-14)

This is a particularly vicious, unheroic Achilles, who has nothing to do with Homer’s. For in the *Iliad* (XXII, 205-7) Achilles had explicitly told his Myrmidons to stay away from Hector and leave the Trojan warrior to him. Shakespeare would have been aware of this had he read George Chapman’s translation of Homer’s *Iliad*, which began to be published in 1598, several years before *Troilus and Cressida* was composed. Chapman wrote: “Achilles yet well knew / His knees would fetch him, and gave signs to some friends (making show / Of shooting at him) to forbear, lest they detracted so / From his full glory in first wounds, and in the overthrow / Make his hand last” (XXII, 175-79). Thus *Troilus and Cressida*, in one respect the most ‘classical’ of Shakespeare’s plays, destroyed classical epic after having destroyed medieval courtly love. In doing so, Shakespeare showed both a good portion of realism and a good dosage of modernity.

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