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The Gauntlet of Mars, the Glove of Venus: A Reading of William Shakespeare's Troilus and Cressida

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At the heart of this reading is an analysis of the ways in which Shakespeare structures the plot of *Troilus and Cressida*, and of how he treats the source material at his disposal. The omissions and additions that Shakespeare makes to the generic and confusing myths must be examined carefully: the essay newly considers the choices that the playwright made in order to select from the stories known to his time the material that would be useful for the composition of his plot.

Keywords: *Troilus and Cressida*, myth, drama, classical sources, plot structure

I. From Myth to Drama

The story of Troilus and Cressida, on which Shakespeare based his play, is, as is well known, a medieval myth, consisting of a tale of love, betrayal and death, in which the protagonists have names taken more or less directly from the Trojan saga. The cast of the medieval story is thus made up of characters from the ancient myth, but enlisted in a narrative quite different from the versions attested in Greek and Roman sources for a story set against the backdrop of the Trojan War. The critical literature on the sources available to Shakespeare, and in particular on the texts that mediate between him and the ancient sources[1], is both robust and wide-ranging[2].

1 The sources accessible to Shakespeare on the story of Troilus are Boccaccio's *Filostrato* via Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*; but fundamental for the Trojan events is *The Recuyell of Historyes of Troye*, an English translation of Raoul Lefèvre's *Recueil des Histoires de Troie*, published in 1473-1474, which is generally regarded as the first complete printed text in English.

2 The bibliographical reference for ancient sources remains Boitani 1989b; more generally, for Shakespeare's debt to Chaucer's mediating texts, and to Boccaccio

At the heart of this reading is an analysis of how Shakespeare structures the plot of his play, and how he treats the material at his disposal. The omissions and additions that Shakespeare makes to the generic and confusing myths must therefore be examined carefully[3]. In other words, it considers the choices that the playwright makes in order to select from the stories known to his time the material that would be useful for the composition of his plot.

While it may be useful to reconstruct the genealogical chain of the myth, as has been meticulously done by others, by going back to the ancient and medieval sources that Shakespeare uses, from a compositional point of view, the key datum is something else. Shakespeare is presenting a version that is new and unprecedented, because the questions and problems that the dramatist has to face are different from those of a writer or a poet. Shakespeare does not have to tell a story: he has to make it happen in the theatre. And this is the same problem that Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides had with the versions of the myths then in circulation: how to make the myth happen on the stage.

A hotly debated question in the critical literature is the genre to which *Troilus and Cressida* should be assigned. In the headings of the various early editions of the play, the title page of the 1609 quarto reads "History", but the "Address to the Reader" added in the second state refers to the play as a "Comedy", and the First Folio describes it as "The Tragedy of Troilus and Cressida". Defining the genre of *Troilus and Cressida* (as well as of other Shakespeare plays) seems to be a topic that fascinates modern critics, who feverishly analyse the tone and mood of a play scene by scene, taking the temperature of whether it is comic, tragicomic, or dark comedy; but for Shakespeare, for his audience, and for the culture of his time, the question of genre was much more blurred and nuanced than our modern categories might lead us to believe. To simplify, but without doing too much

via Chaucer, see the contributions in Boitani 1989a; in particular, for the use of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* in *Troilus and Cressida*, see Davis-Brown 1988. In general, the selection of key critical entries in the annotated bibliographical survey of Plescia 2015, 283-290 is very useful.

3 For possible similarities between Shakespeare's work and Euripides' texts, at least those tragedies available in English translation from the mid-16th century, see Arnold 1984. For a thorough survey of the circulation of Euripides' texts in 15th- and 16th-century Europe, see Pasqualini 2023.

injustice to the reality of the matter, it can be said that since the rediscovery and Renaissance revival of ancient dramatic genres, the term 'Tragedy' has been claimed to define a drama with a negative ending for the protagonist(s), while 'Comedy' defines a plot with a positive ending; falling between them is a series of intermediate genres more or less reinvented on the basis of an inaccurate understanding or interpretation of ancient texts[4]. Shakespeare, though, is a playwright, and what interests him is the composition of a drama, the making of theatre. From the theoretical sources – writings and treatises – that they may have known directly or indirectly, Shakespeare and his contemporary playwrights were able to derive a set of coordinates that functioned as 'instructions for writing a drama'. Many decades ago, Brian Morris, one of the few scholars to approach *Troilus and Cressida* from an exclusively dramaturgical point of view, raised the question of the availability of Aristotle's *Poetics* in the Elizabethan period, and also recalled the importance of a text, *A Warning for Fair Women*, published in 1599 (i.e. very close to the composition of *Troilus*), in which 'Tragedy' appears as a character and describes her function:

> Tragedy
> I must haue passions that must moue the soule,
> Make the heart heauie, and throb within the bosome,
> Extorting teares out of the strictest eyes,
> To racke a thought and straine it to his forme,
> Untill I rap the sences from their course,
> This is my office.[5]

Indeed, as has recently been pointed out, Shakespeare could have known the *Poetics*, at least indirectly, in partial translations or

4 This is the case of Poliziano, who invented the term *fabula satyrica* for his *Orpheus*, a genre modelled on Euripides' satire drama *Cyclops*, and which would have the characteristic of mixing weeping and laughter, joy and sorrow; on the importance of Euripides' satire drama in relation to Shakespeare for the invention of modern tragicomedy, see Dewar-Watson 2018, 118ff.

5 "There is scant evidence indeed that the popular playwrights of the Elizabethan period had the *Poetics* in mind when they constructed what they called 'tragedies' and perhaps the nearest thing to a discussion of the nature of tragedy in the period when Shakespeare came to write *Troilus and Cressida* is found in *A Warning for Fair Women*" (Morris 1959, 482).

through treatises that provided paraphrases[6]. But the statement of Tragedy/Melpomene about her mission in the 'domestic tragedy' *A Warning for Fair Women* must be taken into account: to stir the soul, to make the heart beat and palpitate in the bosom, to draw tears "out of the strictest eyes", to tear a thought and hold it in its own form, to "rap the senses from their course" (Christensen 2021, 206; 5). This was clearly what the Elizabethan audience of the time, and the playwrights themselves, with their very fluid or amorphous ideas about the distinction between 'dramatic genres', expected tragedy to do[7].

In *Troilus and Cressida*, Aristotle's name appears in the second scene of Act II, in Hector's mouth (and it seems almost a joke), with an indirect quotation from the *Nichomachean Ethics* (Bevington 2015, 390). But, as we have said, Shakespeare would have been able to draw on Aristotle, and on the *Poetics* in particular, through the Latin versions widely circulated at the time, and also through the paraphrase of some parts of the text in Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poesie*[8].

Aristotle prescribes six elements that are needed to make tragedy. Of these, four – *lexis* (style), *dianoia* (reasoning; concept), *melos* (song), *opsis* (spectacle) – are subsidiary, the other two, the most important. The first of these *is mythos* (plot), and the second, *ethos* (character). But the *mythos/plot* "is the origin and as it were the core of tragedy"[9].

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6 As is well known, the first Latin translation of Aristotle's *Poetics* did not appear in England until 1619, and the first edition in English translation was in 1708 (Dewar-Watson 2004). On the availability of the text and contents of the *Poetics* in English culture through versions and paraphrases, starting from the first decades of the 16th century, see the recent work by Dewar-Watson 2018.

7 For *A Warning for Fair Women,* I refer to the recent edition and commentary by Christensen 2021.

8 Lazarus 2015, 507: "There was no language in which the *Poetics* was printed in the sixteenth century in which it was not available in England. Few scholars doubt the facility of English readers in Latin, at least, which was the common tongue of the educated west". Lazarus also offers a valuable survey of Aristotelian editions in the original text or Latin or Italian translation found in English libraries in the 16th century (Lazarus 2015, 530-31).

9 Aristotle, *Poetics*, 50a 10-50b1: "ἀνάγκη οὖν πάσης τῆς τραγῳδίας μέρη εἶναι ἕξ, καθ᾽ ὃ ποιά τις ἐστὶν ἡ τραγῳδία: ταῦτα δ᾽ ἐστὶ μῦθος καὶ ἤθη καὶ λέξις καὶ διάνοια καὶ ὄψις καὶ μελοποιία […] ἀρχὴ μὲν οὖν καὶ οἷον ψυχὴ ὁ μῦθος τῆς τραγῳδίας, δεύτερον δὲ τὰ ἤθη" [So Tragedy as a whole necessarily has six parts, according to which tragedy is of a certain sort. These

The first concern, therefore, is to construct the composition of the plot: the characters are in fact secondary and must reveal their character – Aristotle teaches – through the events presented on the stage[10]. So the process becomes: to choose the materials and to put them together in a sequence that has "a beginning and an end, and a certain extension",[11] and in which the characters "reveal themselves through the facts"[12]. What materials did Shakespeare have at his disposal for the creation of plots and characters?

As far as the ancient sources of the myth are concerned, Shakespeare's knowledge of the *Aeneid* and, at least in some form, of the *Iliad* is more or less taken for granted in the current state of research. Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* contains (almost) all the elements of the story, but has a different structure. It is, as we have said, a chivalric poem about betrayed love: although defined by Chaucer as a 'Tragedy', it is a narrative poem that reflects the conventions of medieval poetry, from which it takes its plot and overall structure. For the basic material of the Trojan story, William Caxton's *Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye* was certainly also crucial[13].

Shakespeare, then, selects and assembles his mythical material, mainly, but not exclusively, from Caxton and Chaucer. As is often the

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are plot, characters, style of diction, reasoning, spectacle, and song. […] Plot is the origin and as it were the core of tragedy]. I translate οἷον ψυχή with "as it were the core" because *psyché* here is not an abstract or spiritual concept, but is, rather, intended as a metaphor for the metal frame holding up a structure, just as breath holds up the body. My reference edition for the *Poetics* is the one edited by Kassel (1965).

10 Aristotle, *Poetics* 50a 16-20: "μέγιστον δὲ τούτων ἐστὶν ἡ τῶν πραγμάτων σύστασις. ἡ γὰρ τραγῳδία μίμησίς ἐστιν οὐκ ἀνθρώπων ἀλλὰ πράξεων καὶ βίου" [The most important element is the structure of the events, because tragedy is not a representation of persons, but of actions, of life].

11 Aristotle, *Poetics* 49b 25: "ἔστιν οὖν τραγῳδία μίμησις πράξεως σπουδαίας καὶ τελείας μέγεθος ἐχούσης".

12 Aristotle, *Poetics* 50a 20: "οὔκουν ὅπως τὰ ἤθη μιμήσωνται πράττουσιν, ἀλλὰ τὰ ἤθη συμπεριλαμβάνουσιν διὰ τὰς πράξεις".

13 "For the narrative of Trojan war, Shakespeare relied more on Caxton and Lydgate, than on Homer and Chaucer, and especially (perhaps entirely) on Caxton. William Caxton translated and printed *The Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye* in about 1471-5, from Raoul Lefèvre's *Recueil des Histoires de Troie*, the best known of the French translations of Guido's *Historia Troiana*" (Bevington 2015, 420).

case, reading the undertext on which Shakespeare seems to overwrite his work gives the impression that his access to the ancient sources was more fluid and freer than the data we know today would suggest. Take, for example, the scene in Act I, scene ii, in which Pandarus and Cressida look down from above and describe the Trojan warriors: Aeneas, Antenor, Hector, Paris, Helenus, and Deiphobus. The view is from an elevated position:

> Pandarus
> Here, here, here's an excellent place; here we may see most bravely. I'll tell you them all by their names as they pass by, but mark Troilus above the rest. (*Troilus and Cressida*, I.ii.176-78)

The purpose of Pandarus' watch is very clear – to search for the silhouette of Troilus among the warriors, and draw Cressida's attention to him:

> Pandarus
> 'Tis Troilus! There's a man, niece. Hem! Brave Troilus, the prince of chivalry! […] Mark him. Note him. O brave Troilus! Look well upon him, niece. Look you how his sword is bloodied and his helm more hacked than Hector's, and how he looks, and how he goes. O admirable youth! He ne'er saw three and twenty. – Go thy way, Troilus, go thy way! Had I a sister were a grace, or a daughter a goddess, he should take his choice. O admirable man! (*Troilus and Cressida*, I.ii.219-29)

The scene appears, through the mediation of various suggestions taken from episodes of chivalric novels, as a rehash of the episode of the Iliadic scene of *Teichoskopía*, in which Helen, from the top of the walls of Troy, describes and presents to Priam the warriors lined up in the Achaean camp (*Iliad* III, 121-244). Shakespeare turns his gaze inside the walls of Troy: we must imagine that the "excellent place", ideal for seeing the warriors parade one by one, is high up, opposite the city gate through which the champions pass on their way back to the city from battle.

Another instance of resonance – or, more precisely, consonance – with an ancient source is the image in Cassandra's vision of Paris as "our firebrand" who will set fire to all of Troy[14]. Several ancient

14 "Our firebrand brother Paris burns us all" (*Troilus and Cressida*, II.ii.110).

sources mention that before the birth of Paris, Hecuba dreamed of giving birth to a burning torch[15], but it is in Euripides' *Andromache* that Cassandra intervenes in the story. At the moment of birth, confirming the queen's nightmare, the little prophetess cries out against her newborn brother: "Cassandra shouted her order to kill him, / the city of Priam's great ruin"[16].

The ruinous valence that Shakespeare imposes on Helen's name itself is also very evocative[17]. Thus Cassandra demands, "Cry Trojans, cry! A Helen and a woe" (II.ii.111). The allusion to ruin contained in Helen's very name is the focus of a passage from *Agamemnon*, in which Aeschylus plays with the semantic value of √ἑλ- to recall the ruinous fate contained in Helen's "too fair" name, to the point of reducing it to a triplet of pseudo-etymological linguistic compounds alluding to ruin: *helenaus*, *helandros*, *heleptolis*:

> Who could have been the one who gave
> her such a precise name?
> For she is indeed
> *Helenaus* – Ruin of ships, *Helandros* – Ruin of warriors,
> *Heleptolis* – Ruin of the city[18].

Be that as it may, by direct or indirect means, or more likely by autonomous poetic reinvention, the Aeschylean insight into the ruinous secret hidden in the name of the Fatal Woman is revived by Shakespeare with the name 'Helen', through which, as juxtaposed to 'woe', we hear the sound of ruin.

But rather than pursuing a sophisticated, erudite hunt for further consistencies and points of connection with the ancient and medieval texts that might have been accessible at the time, a much

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15 See for example the allusion to Hecuba 'pregnant with the torch' in Virgil, *Aeneid*, vii.319-20: "Another queen brings forth another brand, / To burn with foreign fires another land".

16 Euripides' *Andromache*, 297-98: "βόασε Κασάνδρα κτανεῖν, / μεγάλαν Πριάμου πόλεως λώβαν".

17 To my knowledge, this possible relationship with the ancient text is not adequately highlighted in the commentaries on *Troilus*.

18 Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, 681-90: "τίς ποτ' ὠνόμαζεν ὧδ' / ἐς τὸ πᾶν ἐτητύμως […]; ἐπεὶ πρεπόντως / ἑλέναυς, ἕλανδρος, ἑλέπτολις". Aeschylus' word-play on the name Helen is echoed in Euripides, *The Trojan Women*, 891-92.

more interesting track is to highlight the points of diffraction, the junctures where Shakespeare clearly and deliberately deviates from the sources. For, as we have said, Shakespeare has a task and a problem: to make drama out of the material of myth. And the question is: what does Shakespeare do with the myth of Troilus, how does he treat it in order to make it theatrical? It is the same task and the same problem that was faced by the ancient tragedians: to treat the myth as building material, to take its pieces apart and put them back together again, so that a plot can be created which has its own dramaturgically articulated and self-supporting development. In *Troilus and Cressida*, as in all his works in which the plot is wholly or partly familiar to the audience, Shakespeare must resort to the same strategy of manipulating material that was at the heart of the dramaturgy of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. How can the story of Troilus and Cressida be told on stage? How can the threads of the love story and the Trojan War be interwoven? And it is here that the divergences, rather than the convergences, must be measured against ancient and medieval versions.

For example, the first divergence from the Homeric version depends on the Caxton version of Lefèvre's Trojan Tales: the action – which incorporates the most important episodes of the *Iliad*, including the deaths of Patroclus and Hector – takes place in the seventh, not the tenth, year of the Trojan War (I.iii.12). It is not just a matter of such minor details, however: in *Troilus and Cressida*, certain scenes from the Trojan myth are completely rewritten to reflect the new conceptual framework that Shakespeare imposes on the myth for the construction of his drama. Some episodes of the *Iliad*, handed down through medieval tradition, are transfigured in a new, entirely dramatic, light. In *Troilus and Cressida*, the Homeric version of the duel between Ajax and Hector is fruitfully crossed with another famous duel, that between Glaucus and Diomedes (*Iliad* VII, 186-312; *Iliad* VI, 119-236). Thus, in the play, the duel between Hector and Ajax (who is a Trojan half-breed due to a contaminated medieval tradition) is not suspended after the clash (as it is in the *Iliad*, with the exchange of the fatal gifts between the two heroes)[19], but before the duel: the recognition of the relation-

19 Hector gives Ajax the sword with which he will commit suicide; Ajax gives Hector the belt with which his corpse will be attached to Achilles' chariot (*Iliad*

ship of kinship, like the relationship of hospitality in the Homeric poem, prevails over any reasons for warlike enmity (*Iliad* VI, 234-36).

The farewell scene between Hector and Andromache also appears in a completely different light compared not only to its Homeric precedent, but also to its treatment in the medieval versions (Caxton II, 620). Nothing remains of the happy family scene presented in the *Iliad*, with Andromache's entreaties and Hector's loving, though firm, response, through to the touching and pathetic embrace of little Astyanax, frightened by his father's helmet (*Iliad* VI, 466-73). The farewell scene in *Troilus and Cressida* becomes a choral scene in which Hector is deaf to every call:

> Andromache
> […] I have dream't
> Of bloody turbulence, and this whole night.
> Hath nothing been but shapes and forms of slaughter.
> (*Troilus and Cressida*, V.iii.10-12)

But Hector does not believe Andromache and her prophetic dream, haunted by visions of blood and ghosts of death; nor does he believe Cassandra, who already sees his end celebrated in a macabre dance:

> Cassandra
> O, farewell, dear Hector!
> Look how thou diest! Look how thy eye turns pale!
> Look, how thy wounds do bleed at many vents!
> Hark, how Troy roars! How Hecuba cries out!
> How poor Andromache shrills her dolour forth!
> Behold, distraction, frenzy and amazement,
> Like witless antics, one another meet,
> And all cry, 'Hector! Hector's dead! O Hector'!
> (*Troilus and Cressida*, V.iii.80-87)

He disbelieves and disobeys Priam, who recalls the visions of Andromache, Hecuba and Cassandra, and begs him not to go to battle, not by appealing to his filial love and respect, but because it is clear that if he dies, Troy will fall:

VII, 299-305): the mention of the "ἐχθρῶν ἄδωρα δῶρα" is in the monologue of Ajax's suicide, in Sophocles (*Ajax*, 661-65).

CASSANDRA
Lay hold upon him, Priam, hold him fast;
He is thy crutch. Now if thou lose thy stay,
Thou on him leaning, and all Troy on thee,
Fall all together.

PRIAM
Come, Hector, come. Go back.
Thy wife hath dreamt; thy mother hath had visions,
Cassandra doth foresee, and I myself
Am like a prophet suddenly enrapt
To tell thee that this day is ominous.
Therefore, come back.
(*Troilus and Cressida*, V.iii.59-67)

"Unarm, sweet Hector" (V.iii.24), says Andromache to him. "This day is ominous", Priam repeats to him, and this is not just his father's voice; these are the words of the King of Troy (V.iii.66). But Hector is unmoved: "Mine honour keeps the weather of my fate" (V.iii.26). What matters is honour – *his* honour: the fate of the city, the fall of Troy, which will inevitably follow his death, seems to matter very little to him.

The situation in which Achilles retreats from battle is also completely new. With the merger of the Homeric figures of Chryseis and Briseis in the figure of Cressida, the original motive for Achilles' being offended and angry has disappeared. In Shakespeare's version, the motivation for Achilles' retreat into his tent is both more vague and much more elaborate in terms of the character's *ethos*: Achilles withdraws because he no longer enjoys fighting, and his decision seems irrevocable. When Agamemnon and Nestor pass by his tent, he mumbles through clenched teeth like a whimsical and irritated boy: "I'll fight no more 'gainst Troy" (III.iii.56). But the emphasis is not only on his bored indolence: it is also on his love for Polyxena, a theme already present in versions of the chivalric tradition known to Shakespeare through Caxton's *Recuyell*. In the letter he receives from Hecuba, there is a reminder of a pact more important than any glory, than any honour:

ACHILLES
Fall, Greeks; fail, fame; honour, or go or stay;
My major vow lies here: this I'll obey.
(*Troilus and Cressida*, V.i.42-43)

Love and the pact that seals it are worth more than any lust for honour, any vow for glory and the cause of war. Achilles will hold to this position until the unleashing of his animal rage in the terrible scene of his revenge on Hector after the death of Patroclus.

II. "Beginning in the middle"

But let us return to the overall construction that Shakespeare imposes on the mythical material. That the playwright is well aware that the first critical point to be resolved is how to weave the plot of the play, and in particular where to begin, is clear from what the Prologue in Armour announces:

> Prologue in armour
> Our play
> Leaps o'er the vaunt and firstlings of those broils,
> Beginning in the middle, starting thence away
> To what may be digested in a play.
> (*Troilus and Cressida*, Prologue 26-29)

"Beginning in the middle": drama must always begin *in medias res*, unlike the poems of Boccaccio and Chaucer, which can take the time they need to tell a story stretched out in time – the story of Troilus from beginning to end. Faced with the choice of where to begin the story, Shakespeare chooses to present Troilus as a young man in the throes of the desires and sufferings of love, sacrificing an important aspect of Troilus's character and a piece of history that was present in both the *Filostrato* and *Troilus and Criseyde*. In ancient and medieval poetry, the myth of the young hero, wild, rude and unwilling to love, who suddenly falls in love, has a vital tradition that has continued through the centuries. Such a story is presented as a rite of passage and at the same time as the punishment of Venus, who demands honour and devotion from those who despise her power[20]. Shakespeare's play, in contrast, does not include the *metánoia* from wild teenager

20 It is the tragic story of Hippolytus in eponymous tragedy by Euripides, which has a long history through the centuries, up to the story of Iulus' conversion because of Simonetta's vision in Angelo Poliziano's *Stanze per la giostra di Giuliano*.

to young lover: Troilus is presented as madly in love with Cressida from the very first scene of Act I. The martial side of his character, although present in some scenes, is not dominant in Shakespeare's character profile, and will only explode in the final act of the play. The young man is certainly rich in spirit and courage, as is evident in his dialogue with Hector, whom Troilus spurs to the ruinous decision to go to the battlefield despite any warnings, pleas and dire omens (V.iii.29ff). But this Troilus is no longer just *philostratos*: Mars may shine in his sky, but for much of the play, Venus shines brighter.

It is an act of weighing and measuring of elements that Shakespeare engages in, preparing the fabric with which to build the drama – which is, to quote Aristotle, the *ethos* of the characters. So Shakespeare redraws not only the profile of Troilus, but also that of Cressida, as we shall see, not to mention the complex and wonderfully theatrical profiles he presents of Ulysses, of Thersites, and of Pandarus[21].

But the first and most important action of filtering, weighing and adjusting is that which Shakespeare exercises on the *mythos*, above all in his investment in the double scenario, the double front: Troy and the Achaean camp. In the sources available to Shakespeare, the setting of the story is either almost exclusively in the Achaean camp or almost exclusively in the city of Troy. In the case of the various versions of the Trojan Saga collected in the *Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye*, with all their divergences and variations from Homer, the setting remains that of the *Iliad*, in which incursions within the walls of Troy are rare and sporadic. In the case of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, almost the entire poem takes place within the walls of Troy, centred on the love affair between Troilus and Criseyde, with only Book V shifting the setting to the Achaean camp, with Diomedes' forcible removal of Criseyde, the consummation of the betrayal, and ultimately the death of Troilus.

In the script of *Troilus and Cressida*, the dramatic movement consists of a programmatic strategy of deviation from the (not Aristote-

21 To the construction of the *ethos* of these characters, in themselves or in relation to previous versions of the story, critics have devoted many brilliant and illuminating pages. I would like to recall the reading proposed by René Girard who dedicates no less than five chapters of his *Shakespeare* to the characters of *Troilus and Cressida. The Theatre of Envy*: Girard [1990] 1998: 199-220; 221-29; 230-46; 247-58; 259-69. The risk, however, is to push the limits of psychological interpretation into over-interpretation.

lian, but pseudo-Aristotelian) unity of place, and Shakespeare seems very careful to balance the weight of the action between the two settings. It is as if there were a revolving stage or a double screen (and some modern theatrical versions have taken their cue from this dramaturgical writing for their set design) in which acts and scenes take place in parallel or in sequence, alternating according to this scheme:

I.i-ii	Troy
I.iii	Greek camp
II.i	Greek camp
II.ii	Troy
II.iii	Greek camp
III.i-ii	Troy
III.iii	Greek camp
IV.i-ii-iii-iv	Troy
IV.v	Greek camp
V.i-ii	Greek camp
V.iii	Troy
V.iv-v-vi-vii-viii-ix-x	Greek camp
V.xi	Troy

The colours of the conceptual landscape of the Trojan set are very different from those of the Achaean set: the effect Shakespeare achieves is a combination in which the greatest attention is paid to the balance between the two scenarios, but with a focus on the scenes in which the forays from one camp to the other take place.

We are now in the seventh year of the Trojan War, the last year of the war in the tradition of the stories collected by Caxton upon which Shakespeare draws. Compared to the ancient myth, there is no longer any Chryseis, the daughter of Chryses returned to the Trojan priest; there is no longer any Briseis, the slave girl taken by Achilles to compensate Agamemnon for the theft of Chryseis. There is, instead, Cressida (or as she still is Lefèvre-Caxton, 'Breseyda'), who in the medieval versions of the story is no longer the daughter of the Trojan priest Chryses, but the daughter of Calchas. The latter, though in the Achaean camp, is a Trojan priest who has fled to the enemy after abandoning his homeland, having foreseen the fall of Troy

through his prophetic powers. Cressida is full of grace, and she is beautiful, even more beautiful than Helen (Pandarus' words) – only a little less blonde[22]. Cressida has remained in Troy – "I have forgotten my father" (IV.ii.97), she proudly declares – and has no intention of following her traitorous father into the enemy camp (IV.ii.110). But the capture of the Trojan Antenor by the Achaeans leads Calchas to ask for an exchange, the Trojan prince for his beautiful daughter. It is an exchange between prisoners that sets in motion the second part of the drama, but it is not, as in the *Iliad*, the exchange between Chryseis and Briseis responsible for provoking Achilles' wrath. It is the exchange instead of a Trojan man for a Trojan woman – Antenor, captured by the Achaeans, for the beautiful Cressida, so that she may be reunited to her defector father, and herself be called upon to become a defector. There is always a passage from one camp to another, but it is not the same exchange. Shakespeare subjects the myth to a filtering treatment, the aim of which is to take episodes from previous versions and transform them into a new form. This is also the case, for example, with the story of Achilles' retreat to his tent. With the original, Homeric cause of his anger removed from the script, Achilles does indeed spend much of the play within his tent, but out of a vicious, unmotivated laziness. This Achilles is not "proud", but "covetous of praise"; he is "surly borne", he is "strange"; or rather, he is sick with "self-affection" (II.iii.231-33)[23].

But what are Achilles and Patroclus doing in the tent? Could it be, as in the splendid image from an ancient symposium bowl[24], that, tired of war, they are looking after each other, applying bandages and ointments to their wounds? Or could it be, as we read in the *Iliad,* that

22 *Troilus and Cressida*, I.i.39-41: "An her hair were not somewhat darker than Helen's – well, go to – there were no more comparison between the women." Bevington, in the comment *ad loc*, cites Sonnets 127 and 130 as evidence of Shakespeare's adherence to the Petrarchan canon, claiming that here "Pandarus concedes a point in Helen's favour" (Bevington 2015). It seems to me that here Shakespeare is joking with the Petrarchan and chivalric canon about the obligatory 'blondness' of the Ladies.

23 The series of adjectives "covetous of praise", "surly borne", "strange", "self-affected", is in an exchange between Nestor, Ulysses and Diomedes that is artfully played out in order to bait Ajax against the rival champion.

24 The reference is to *kylix* F 2278 signed by Sosias, dated c. 500 BCE, from Vulci, preserved in the Altes Museum in Berlin.

when Achilles retreats from battle, Patroclus watches him in silence, as Achilles plays the zither and sings the deeds of the heroes that will bring them death but also immortal glory? (*Iliad*, ix.186-91). No, Shakespeare is not Homer, and does not want to be Homer: we are now in a theatre, and inside the tent Achilles and Patroclus are acting, making theatre. This is how Ulysses describes them: they are lying idly "upon a lazy bed", mocking the leaders of the Achaeans. But this is not simply general mockery: it is theatre. Patroclus "breaks scurril jests; / And with ridiculous and awkward action / Which, slanderer, he imitation calls" (I.iii.146ff), mocks all the heroes one by one. He is like "a strutting player", who makes his moves and, using pitiful caricatures, parodies Agamemnon's greatness with exaggerated words, while Achilles, thrown on the bed, laughs and cries, "Excellent. 'Tis Agamemnon just". And then he does Nestor, imitating his manner by stroking his beard before speaking, and then parodying his frailty, and the failings of his age, the fact that he coughs and spits, and because of the trembling of his hands cannot hook his gorget – and Achilles still exclaims, "Excellent. 'Tis Nestor just." (I.iii.164; 170) Ulysses continues:

> Ulysses
> And in this fashion,
> All our abilities, gifts, natures, shapes,
> Severals and generals of grace exact,
> Achievements, plots, orders, preventions,
> Excitements to the field, or speech for truce,
> Success or loss, what is or is not, serves
> As stuff for these two to make paradoxes.
> (*Troilus and Cressida*, I.iii.178-84)

According to Aristotle, the natural tendency to mimesis is the characteristic that distinguishes the human species from other living beings: even in children, it is the way of learning about life, of gaining access to the world through imitation, and at the same time of experiencing pleasure[25]. It is on this idea of mimesis – a presentation rather than a

25 Aristotle, *Poetics* 48b 5-9: "τό τε γὰρ μιμεῖσθαι σύμφυτον τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ἐκ παίδων ἐστὶ καὶ τούτῳ διαφέρουσι τῶν ἄλλων ζῴων ὅτι μιμητικώτατόν ἐστι καὶ τὰς μαθήσεις ποιεῖται διὰ μιμήσεως τὰς πρώτας, καὶ τὸ χαίρειν τοῖς μιμήμασι πάντας". [Since childhood human beings have an instinct for representation, and in this respect, they differ from the other animals in that they are

representation of the world – that Aristotle bases the emergence of poetry, and especially of theatrical poetry, which, by deviating from reality, gains access to a dimension that makes facts and characters presentable in a more "serious, more philosophical" way than history can[26]. In this sense, poetry – and theatrical poetry par excellence – is the creative activity of the world. It is a matrix of life, a doubled, staged and en-acted life, a life that takes place in an amplified form through the device of the theatre. The paradoxical theatre that Patroclus stages in the tent to amuse his Achilles is the childish game of imitating the great by ridiculing them; but only in a grotesque sense, which is a degradation of the fundamental value of poetic mimesis. Imitation is used as a parodic weapon, subverting for the sake of ridiculous amusement what is taken to be the real. This, too, is theatre within the theatre.

There is no need here to recall the sublime instances in which Shakespeare uses the theatre within the theatre as an amplifying but faithful mirror, increasing the legibility of reality, giving representation (that is, visibility and utterance) to what would otherwise remain secret and silent. In *Troilus*, in contrast, the scene in the tent evokes the drift of theatre towards an anamorphic mirror, overturning values that are taken for granted. The cabaret that Patroclus and Achilles put on inside their tent to pass the time is the degeneration of that principle of representation/presentation on which Aristotle had hinged the philosophical relationship of poetry to reality – and on which Shakespeare himself constructs the scene of the comedians in *Hamlet*. The making of theatre in *Troilus* is therefore also meant to undermine the very philosophical value of theatre itself as the producer of truth and reality, reducing it, as in the episode in the tent, to a paradoxical inversion of normally perceived reality, which includes not only the parody of Agamemnon's arrogance but also the exposure of the details of Nestor's senile frailty. Theatre is also a children's game, cruel and stupid like all children's games. The bad theatre in Achilles' tent is the

much more imitative and learn their first lessons by representing things. And then everyone enjoys representations.]

26 Aristotle, *Poetics* 51b 6: "διὸ καὶ φιλοσοφώτερον καὶ σπουδαιότερον ποίησις ἱστορίας ἐστίν· ἡ μὲν γὰρ ποίησις μᾶλλον τὰ καθόλου, ἡ δ᾽ ἱστορία τὰ καθ᾽ ἕκαστον λέγει". [For this reason, poetry is more philosophical and serious than history, because poetry tends to speak of universals, while history speaks of particular facts.]

counterpoint that positively underlines the fact that, on a dramatic level, the only way to make things happen is to stage them.

This is what Shakespeare does in the play of *Troilus and Cressida* as a whole, choosing to take what was the subject of an epic poem and put it into the form of a drama; and specifically, act by act, scene by scene, constructing a syntax of events that all happen, one by one, on stage. One for all, as in the case of Troilus' gift to Cressida, which she in turn gives to Diomede. In the medieval poems, Troilus discovers Criseyde's betrayal by chance: Chaucer, for example, tells us that Troilus sees the 'broche' he gave Criseyde[27] on the collar of a "manere cote-armure" torn from Diomedes in battle by his brother Deiphebus (*Troilus and Criseyde*, V.1650-66); at this point he realises that all is lost and decides to go and die in battle. Even in Shakespeare's *Troilus*, the episode of the gift is central to Cressida's betrayal; however, the scene is not narrated, but performed live. Troilus enters the Achaean camp as a member of the Trojan delegation and is then escorted by Ulysses to the tent of Calchas, followed by Thersites. On the unexpected arrival of Diomedes, Ulysses and Troilus hide, as also does Thersites, and spy on the seduction scene, in which Cressida succumbs to Diomedes' wooing, her response sealed by the gift of the 'sleeve', which she had received from Troilus and which, after some skirmishing, she now hands over to her new lover. In the medieval version of the story, the betrayal is symbolically underlined by the surrender of the precious object, which, from a pledge of love, becomes the token that the lover displays in the joust or in battle to remind him that his valiant deeds are dedicated to his Lady. Shakespeare, on the other hand, renounces the mediation of the symbol, shortens the distance between the narrative and the action, and transforms this cue into a scene of great theatre within the theatre.

It is a double scene of seduction and betrayal: the first scene takes place live but in the background inside the tent; the second scene in the foreground but set 'apart', with the counterpoint of Troilus' sad comments, the call to courage of his 'friend' Ulysses, and the vulgar overwriting of Thersites' words. The division of the scene – Cressida and Diomedes *vs*. Cressida and Troilus – is sealed by the wonderful

27 Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, V.1040-1041: "And ek a broche – and that was litel nede – / That Troilus was, she yaf this Diomede." (Chaucer, ed. Benson 2008).

image with which Troilus rescues the truth of his inner scenario and the scenario of Troy itself, in the most beautiful monologue of the play:

> Troilus
> This she? No, this is Diomed's Cressida.
> If beauty have a soul, this is not she;
> If souls guide vows, if vows be sanctimonies,
> If sanctimony be the gods' delight,
> If there be rule in unity itself,
> This is not she. O, madness of discourse,
> That cause sets up with and against itself!
> […]
> Cressid is mine, tied with the bonds of heaven.
> (*Troilus and Cressida*, V.ii.144-61)

As Aristotle teaches, in tragedy one does not enact a pre-established *ethos*; rather, but the character assumes their *ethos* through action. This is never more clear than with Cressida: "This she?" No: there is a Cressida with Troilus, there is a Cressida with Diomedes. It depends on the setting, it depends on the scenario. Perhaps, as Troilus himself suggests, this insight is just a "madness of discourse". Or perhaps, no doubt, it is an effect of the theatre.

III. "Love, nothing but love"

"Fry, lechery, fry" – so Thersites comments on Cressida's live scene of betrayal. But Thersites knows only the language – corrupt, pornographic and fundamentally hyper-puritanical – of "devil Luxury"; what he can imagine are only the most sordid details of sexual intercourse "with his fat rump and potato finger, tickles these together" (V.ii.57-59). Thersites knows no code, no vocabulary, no alphabet of love. But it is Love, "love, nothing but love", that is the protagonist of *Troilus and Cressida*[28], and the compositional problem that Shakespeare has to solve is how to combine the story of Troilus' love and betrayal with the action of the Trojan War. As we have seen, the balance between the Trojan camp and the Greek camp is a problem that Boccaccio does not have to solve in his *Filostrato* and Chaucer does not have to solve in his poem. Even less is it an issue in Caxton's collection of tales

28 So Paris in III.i.107, and Pandarus in III.i.109.

of the Trojan War, which is the principal source of much of the material for Shakespeare's play. In Chaucer's poem (and before it, Boccaccio's), the geometric figure around which the narrative structure is built is the circle, in which the centre is one: Troilus and his love – desired, consummated and then betrayed – for Cressida. In neither poem is war the factor that drives the story to the catastrophic end of Troilus's death/suicide. The love of the two lovers could continue – and this was their promise – across the border between the two fronts: the walls of Troy, the edge of the Greek camp. In the two medieval poems, it is Cressida's betrayal that breaks the harmony of the circle.

Instead, in the entirely dramaturgical construction of his *Troilus*, Shakespeare works with a double scene and a double focus: the geometric figure of *Troilus and Cressida* is the ellipse: Troy on one side, the Greek camp on the other, but also, on a conceptual level, War on one side, Love on the other. The "cruel war" (*Prologue* 5) immediately evoked by the Prologue is echoed in the first scene of the tragedy with the reference to "such a cruel battle", the other war, the battle of love, that dwells in Troilus' heart (I.i.3). And if it is true that the struggle of love can consume the lover in the elasticity between desire and disappointment, war is evil in every sense: it is fierce, it is macabre. In *Troilus*, the condemnation of war is more radical and decisive than perhaps anywhere else in Shakespeare's plays. These are the words of the protagonist at the beginning of the play, in some of the most powerful and icily impressive lines in the tragedy:

> Troilus
> Peace, you ungracious clamors! Peace, rude sounds!
> 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 starved a subject for my sword.
> (*Troilus and Cressida*, I.i.85-89)

The name 'Helen', as we have seen, echoes the sound and meaning of 'woe' (II.ii.111). Around her, two ranks of madmen fight to replenish her daily supply of blood, her reserve of make-up. Troilus immediately declares that he will not play this game: he has a more important game to play, the game of love with Cressida. "Let Helen go," suggests Nestor, and this is what Diomedes says of Helen:

Diomedes
For every false drop in her bawdy veins
A Grecian's life hath sunk; for every scruple
Of her contaminated carrion weight
A Trojan hath been slain. Since she could speak,
She hath not given so many good words breath
As for her Greeks and Trojans suffered death.
(*Troilus and Cressida*, IV.i.71-76)

But it is not just the war-weary Achaeans who feel like this. The same view is echoed from the Trojan front by Priam, who wants to give up Helen in order to end the war for which so many Trojans have died. It is the same voice that rises in unison from the two fronts: the Trojans will give Helen back and the war will end. At one point, even Hector seems to agree that this is the way to end the war:

Hector
Let Helen go.
Since the first sword was drawn about this question,
Every tithe soul 'mongst many thousand dismes
Hath been as dear as Helen – I mean, of ours.
(*Troilus and Cressida*, II.ii.17-20)

Here, though, the soul of the son of Mars explodes in Troilus:

Troilus
I would not wish a drop of Trojan blood
Spent more in her defence. But, worthy Hector,
She is a theme of honour and renown,
A spur to valiant and magnanimous deeds.
(*Troilus and Cressida*, II.ii.197-200)

If there were no Helen, there would be no occasion – no scenario – for fame. In the sky of *Troilus and Cressida*, however, and especially in Troilus's birth chart, it is not just the light of Mars that shines.

Troilus
In characters as red as Mars his heart
Inflamed with Venus. Never did young man fancy
With so eternal and so fixed a soul.
(*Troilus and Cressida,* V.ii.171-72)

Mars is also red because he is inflamed by Venus: these are the red imprints, the red marks on the heart of Mars. Troilus himself is inflamed by the conjunction of the two planetary lovers, but for much of the play Venus shines brighter. It is her light that is stronger, truer. Shakespeare succeeds in interweaving the story of love with the story of war because he creates a gap between the two divine names, a difference in potential, as these gods, as always, play out their skirmishes to the detriment of mortals: and, just as happened in the ancient depictions of the myth, and later again in the artistic imagination of the Italian Renaissance, in *Troilus*, Venus wins out over Mars.

The game of Mars is always terrible, senseless, ignoble: so it was in the *Iliad*, where Ares rages without reason or purpose; and so it is again in *Troilus*, especially in the field of the Greeks. Here, we have to listen to the epithets and insults of the villain Thersites, and of Ulysses himself. Agamemnon is a pompous braggart, who "has not so much brain as ear-wax" (V.i.52); Ulysses is a cunning henchman, a "dog-fox", who knows only how to sow discord and combine idle plots that seem cunning but bear no fruit ("is proved worth a blackberry", V.iv.11); the wise Nestor is a "mouldy" old man, a "stale old mouse-eaten dry cheese" (II.i.101-2; V.iv.9-11). Ajax is a "blockish" (I.iii.389), "brainless" idiot (376); Achilles is hysterical, "self-affected" (II.iii.233), "sick of proud hearth" (84), prey to his moods and the instability of his pettish lunes (128), a disease – to such an extent, Ajax adds, that it would be a gift to call him Melancholy[29]. The only episode in which Achilles seems to become civilised is when, faced with Hecuba's letter reminding him of the promise of the marriage pact with Polyxena, he decides again, for a brief moment, to leave the field and remain faithful to the pact of love (V.1.36ff)[30]. For the rest, unlike in the *Iliad*, not even the death of Patroclus manages to humanise the mixture of vain sloth and ferocity with which Achilles' soul is impregnated. But the Trojans are just as rhetorical and vain, all blinded by abstract and absolute values – as abstract as the rage that drives Achilles to kill. War is the bestial outburst of Achilles and his

29 So Ajax: "You may call it melancholy, if you will favour the man" (*Troilus and Cressida*, II.iii.84-85).

30 Achilles' falling in love with Polyxena had already been stigmatised by Ulysses in III.iii.194ff.

Myrmidons, who rage over Hector's body like ferocious, cowardly dogs. The spirit of Mars is rampant where love is lacking. But in Troilus, it is not war that stirs the strongest feelings, the truest passions. Between the gauntlet of Mars and the glove of Venus (IV.v.179-80), the soft glove of Venus is far more powerful.

Of course, all the male protagonists of the drama are warriors, but they are also – or could be – a community of loving spirits: all Lovers, Greeks and Trojans. It is to this community that Aeneas invites the Greeks; and the call is promptly answered by Agamemnon, who swears to recall all "our lovers":

> Aeneas
> If there be one among the fair'st of Greece
> That holds his honour higher than his ease,
> That seeks his praise more than he fears his peril,
> That knows his valour and knows not his fear,
> That loves his mistress more than in confession
> With truant vows to her own lips he loves,
> And dare avow her beauty and her worth
> In other arms than hers – to him this challenge:
> Hector, in view of Trojans and of Greeks,
> Shall make it good, or do his best to do it,
> He hath a lady, wiser, fairer, truer
> Than ever Greek did couple in his arms;
> And will tomorrow with his trumpet call,
> Midway between your tents and walls of Troy,
> To rouse a Grecian that is true in love.
> If any come, Hector shall honour him;
> If none, he'll say in Troy when he retires
> The Grecian dames are sunburnt and not worth
> The splinter of a lance. Even so much.
>
> Agamemnon
> This shall be told our lovers, Lord Aeneas.
> (*Troilus and Cressida*, I.iii.265-85)

And so, in the lofty and noble imagery that Aeneas evokes in his ambassadorship to Troy, the long and bloody conflict could be resolved: under the power of love, the war could be transformed into a grandiose chivalric joust in which each lover fights to prove his Lady's honour and worth in the contest. The stakes, the war itself, would thus be transformed into a gentle and civilised ordeal in which, by

elevating the specific conflict over the possession of Helen, it could be established whether the women to whom the Greek knights dedicate the duel are more or less beautiful, more or less worthy, than the women for whom the Trojans take the field. Loving spirits, no longer warriors; sons of Venus, no longer sons of Mars. Or rather, warlike spirits, but in the sense that the marks that Mars has engraved on their heart are red because they are inflamed by Venus. A "maiden battle", therefore, which may also end in an embrace: "The issue in the embracement" (IV.v.149): the duel chivalrously interrupted between the 'cousins' Hector and Ajax, their fraternal embrace ending the quarrel, seems to promise that this is possible. The final act of the war, in which the enraged Mars triumphs through the barbaric cruelty of Achilles, shows that it is not to be.

But *Troilus and Cressida* does not only stage the chivalrous alternative to the horrors of war; it also stages, above all, the triumph of the power of Love. There is no need for Cressida, like Boccaccio and Chaucer's Criseyde, to be a widow (i.e., by implication, a woman expert in love). Cressida is a young girl here, but above all, she is a loving spirit, she is *filia Veneris*, and is not afraid to declare herself as such: she even wishes she were a man in order to declare herself first to Troilus (III.ii.124-27). Indeed, Love needs courage and the actions of present bodies, loving bodies. Without this, it is a vain abstraction – and Shakespeare's *Troilus*, which measures an enormous distance from the lamentations of the *Filostrato* and the skirmishes of Troilus' emotions in Chaucer's poem, is an ideological manifesto against abstractions. The plaintive letters that Troilus sends to Cressida to remind her of their pact are useless; the last letter that Cressida writes to Troilus after their betrayal has been consummated is nonsensical, literally meaningless, and almost offensive, because it is rhetorically full of empty words:

> Troilus
> Words, words, mere words, no matter from the heart.
> Th' effect doth operate another way.
> (*Troilus and Cressida*, V.iii.107-08)

In *Troilus and Cressida*, Shakespeare gives no space to the dimension of long-distance love, which, since the great classics of medieval literature, had been entrusted to the exchange of words written in letters. In this play, there is no love at a distance, no love in the abstract: love

is captured in the details: "Her eyes, her hair, her cheek, her gait, her voice" (I.i.51) – it is the grace that Troilus sees in the particulars of Cressida's person. And, conversely, love is the light of beauty that Cressida sees in Troilus: and she sees it for herself. It is the passion – barely delayed by a preliminary skirmish that serves to heighten the erotic charge – that makes the intercourse between Troilus and Cressida inevitable and immediate. Cressida does not need the rhetorical pirouettes, the tricks of the ruffian Pandarus, to fall in love: in the end, the broker-between serves no purpose in the development of the drama. Love consists of charm and enchantment, of embraces and kisses, of lovers' tears that mingle, of sighs that become one breath.

Troilus and Cressida is an ideological manifesto against abstraction: "Words pay no debts; give her deeds" (III.ii.54). For Troilus, it will be facts: these are the proof that love must pass in order to prove its existence:

> Troilus
> Praise us as we are tasted, allow us as we prove.
> (*Troilus and Cressida*, III.ii.87-88)

Facts, not words. Love is made up of pleasure that is instantly acted upon, instantly enjoyed – the very concreteness of enjoyment in unison. Love is a meeting of bodies, and therefore, it is mutual; otherwise, it does not exist. "She was beloved, she loved; she is, and doth" (IV.v.292), says Troilus of Cressida.

Love is conjugated only in the present tense: to put it in Greek words and images, it is not the image of *Pothos*, languidly abandoned to the nostalgia of the past, nor that of *Himeros*, the still unfulfilled desire, reaching into the future. Love is Eros, nothing else. Love, nothing but love. The distance of the present from the past and the future is expressed in the powerful image that appears surprisingly, in Act V, in the mouth of Agamemnon:

> Agamemnon
> What's past and what's to come is strewed with husks
> And formless ruin of oblivion.
> (*Troilus and Cressida*, IV.v.167-68)

It is an extraordinarily philosophical Agamemnon who speaks of Time here, and sees past and future as the layer of the sawdust of husks,

shavings and slag, from which the streets were kept clean. Past and future are only slag, the shapeless ruins of oblivion[31]. It is only, Agamemnon concludes, "this present moment", the aorist moment when, after the polite embraces between the warriors of the opposing sides, the war can finally end, with the decisive duel between Hector and Achilles.

Love, too, must come to terms with time, which is here and now, and is always scarce for lovers. This is why love in *Troilus* is also expressed with the accents of the 'aubade', the song of defiance against the light of dawn, against the "guastafeste" – "busy old fool, unruly Sun" (IV.ii.1ff)[32] – that forces the lovers' embraces to a standstill.

Love is courtesy, it is the sound of a song, it is dancing grace. And it is of this, of the "fair virtues" of the Greeks – the idea that the Greeks are more civilised, more polite, more courteous than the Trojans – that Troilus is pre-emptively jealous, even before the betrayal of Cressida and Diomedes looms:

> Troilus
> I cannot sing,
> Nor heel the high lavolt, nor sweeten talk,
> Nor play at subtle games – fair virtues all,
> To which the Grecians are most prompt and
> pregnant.
> (*Troilus and Cressida*, IV.iv.84-88)

Within this framework, Cressida is complete, noble, nonchalant. In the "kissing scene", when she arrives at the Achaean camp and is

31 So Fusini: "Quel che è stato e quel che si appresta a venire, [Agamennone] lo paragona al pavimento cosparso di paglia – così si tenevano pulite le strade allora, con una specie di segatura fatta di trucioli, di scorie – *busks*, gusci vuoti. L'avvenire appare così ad Agamennone: come una strada vuota cosparsa di resti informi, rovine dell'oblio. È un'immagine potente, una visione agghiacciante: l'avvenire, e cioè il tempo sospeso, in attesa, è una scoria" ["What has been and what is about to come, is compared [by Agamemnon] to the pavement strewn with straw – that is how the streets were kept clean then, with a kind of sawdust made of shavings – busks, empty shells. This is how the future appears to Agamemnon: like an empty road strewn with formless remains, ruins of oblivion. It is a powerful image, a chilling vision: the future, meaning time suspended, waiting, is mere refuse". Fusini 2015, 19, my translation].

32 I derive the expression "sole guastafeste" from the title of the article on John Donne's splendid *Aubade* by Bizzotto 2023.

greeted very warmly and very physically by the Achaean warriors, she does not flinch[33]. Cressida knows how to get on in this world and immediately understands that if the code is, as it seems, to greet the beautiful guest with kisses and hugs, then one must play along. In this, too, Shakespeare's *Troilus* is an ideological manifesto against convention: inscribed in the sign of the nobility of love, and the ideological and aesthetic revolution with which *Troilus* is littered, is also Troilus's own noble concern, when he discovers the betrayal, to preserve the good name of women from indiscriminate condemnation by those who, in Cressida's case, might "square the general sex":

> Troilus
> Let it not be believed for womanhood!
> Think, we had mothers. Do not give advantage
> To stubborn critics, apt, without a theme
> For depravation, to square the general sex
> By Cressid's rule. Rather think this not Cressid.
> (*Troilus and Cressida*, V.ii.135-39)

"Rather think this is not Cressid". Love is a pas de deux, and this is how it is presented. Love wavers, doubles, 'depends' – on possibility, proximity, time, circumstances. It is not supportive of the cause of truth against falsehood, as lovers claim and promise each other in pacts that seem made to be broken[34]. Love is never loyal, never faithful, it is never transparent: it is another form of 'truth'. Cressida in the Achaean camp has difficulty remembering Troilus, because she is now elsewhere. Cressida's splitting is not just a punch line, evoking the mirroring that is the hallmark of *Troilus*' dramaturgy. It is also an act of love, a way of telling the truth about love: that love is either 'here and now', or it is not at all. Troilus wisely recognises that if she is elsewhere now, she is a different Cressida; she is another because she is elsewhere. Cressida has not betrayed herself (or Troilus), she has doubled herself, because her body, transferred from Troy to the Achaean camp, is now elsewhere, and therefore another.

33 The kisses-scene is in *Troilus and Cressida*, IV.v.

34 See the promises Troilus and Cressida exchange, all based on the principles of "True *vs* False" in III.ii.164-91.

No, Thersites is not right. Certainly, the Thersites of the play is a sublime figure from the point of view of the construction of his *ethos*, and his words have the effect of reshaping and shifting the silhouettes of all the characters, illuminating other, possible, features of their figure that only the livid light of his dazzling gaze can bring into focus. Everyone is a "fool" to Thersites (II.iii.56-57), and he, who plays the role of the Fool in the play, says so. But Thersites is neither the voice of truth, nor the voice of reality, nor the voice of anti-militarist conscience, as has been argued and repeated in so much critical literature, to the point of reading the character in an entirely positive light. Shakespeare's Thersites is a cynic, imbued with bad moods, impaired in the organs of sense and feeling that allow true 'knights', Troilus first and foremost, to understand love. No, Thersites is not, is never, right.

"Lechery, lechery, still wars and lechery" (V.ii.201-02); Thersites morbidly sees only lust in Cressida, in Troilus, in Diomedes. And before that, in Helen and in Paris, and in Helen and Menelaus: "a whore and a cuckold" (II.iii.69) are the icon and the emblem, but reversed, standing tall on the field of the Trojan War. Patroclus is "Achilles' brach" (II.i.111), his "masculine whore" (V.i.17), against whom he wishes everything, from (predictably) syphilis to kidney stones. He turns his pathogenic evil eye on the organs of the homoerotic sexual relationship, which is depraved and repulsive to his Puritan imagination. War is "nothing but lechery" (V.i.96), but when Thersites invokes "peace and quietness", it is only because he is not interested in either the exploits of war or the exploits of love, and with his misanthropic soul, he seeks only his own tranquillity (II.i.81-82). His is an empty sky, populated by sad passions, deprived of the light of Mars and deprived of the light of Venus, which set fire to everything, even the heart of Mars.

He does not know, Thersites, he cannot understand what Shakespeare teaches and proclaims in *Troilus*: a psychomachy is always at work between Mars and Venus. When the conjunction works, war can be sublimated into a knightly tournament and become an occasion to honour the Lady. But when love fails, when it withdraws, war reclaims its space. War is nothing but a degraded and substitutive form of the enterprise of love.

"Nothing but lechery": this is what Thersites thinks and says, because he babbles, foaming with rage, about things he does not know.

"Love, nothing but love" is the response of Troilus and his tragedy. Troilus himself becomes a warrior again at the end of the play: but he only becomes *philóstratos* again when all is lost for his love. Only when all love is lost.

IV. What if Troilus doesn't die?

We know that the Troilus who comes to Shakespeare is certainly not the Troilus of the ancient myth. But it is not unprofitable to go back to the Greek and Latin sources of the myth in order to trace the focal points of its literary and iconographic history. If, indeed, we can justifiably rule out the possibility that many of the details of the myth were known to Shakespeare, some of the ancient junctures of the story may still be useful for understanding how the character, the figure, and the story of the protagonist are reconfigured in the course of the medieval tradition, through scraps, omissions and reinventions.

The only mention of Troilus in the *Iliad* is at the end of the poem (*Iliad* XXIV, 257), when Priam, among the deaths of his sons, laments the death of Troilus *hippiochármes*, "who loved horses". It is therefore certain that Troilus was already dead before the events of the tenth year of the war reported in the *Iliad*. The question that arises when analysing the Greek and later Roman traditions of the myth is whether Troilus died as a child, killed by Achilles, or whether he died as a young man, fighting with Achilles in battle, and thus at an age appropriate to the role of a knight and a warrior. The second version – death in a duel with Achilles on horseback in the field – is certainly later, and is less common in the literary and iconographic tradition. Its most authoritative witness is Virgil, who, in the *Aeneid,* tells us that among the scenes that Aeneas sees depicted on the Temple of Juno in Carthage is the death of Troilus, in a battlefield encounter that represents an "impar congressus" between the "infelix puer" and Achilles, who finally kills him (*Aeneid*, 1.474-78).

According to the first, and much more common, version of the myth, Troilus was instead killed as a child, in an ambush set up by Achilles, who catches Troilus as he accompanies his sister Polyxena to fetch water from a spring. In archaic times, Troilus' fatal encounter with Achilles is one of the best-attested myths in pictorial art. Pictorial representations of Troilus' death tell a clear story that can be briefly

summarised. When Achilles emerges from his hiding place, Polyxena drops her water jug and runs away. Troilus rides away on horseback, while Achilles pursues on foot. Achilles finally catches up with him at the sanctuary of Apollo Timbraeus, where he cuts off his head[35].

Within this main version of the death of young Troilus, two sub-variants stand out. Achilles is said to have killed Troilus immediately after his landing in Troy by ambushing him while he was doing gymnastics in the temple of Apollo Timbraeus; or according to another variant, Achilles fell in love with Troilus, was rejected by him, and then killed him in Apollo's temple[36], triggering a battle with Hector and the other Trojan heroes to recover Troilus' body. In return, Apollo (according to some sources, Troilus' father) decreed that Achilles should die before the fall of Troy.

Returning to Virgil's version, the details seem to reflect a martial context, and already the first commentator on the *Aeneid*, Servius, recognises Virgil's treatment of the myth as an innovation that changes the traditional story[37]. However, although the Virgilian version is in the minority, the image that Aeneas sees carved on the temple of Juno in Carthage had an important influence on the tradition of the Troilus myth. It is probably this image of an exemplary duel (and not the far more brutal archaic and classical story) that leads to the invention of the character of Troilus as one of the bravest warriors among the Trojans. And it is this story of Troilus that gradually takes shape over the centuries, reaching Shakespeare through Chaucer and Caxton's *Recuyell*.

In the ancient sources, the character of Troilus was not only linked to Troy by the onomastic kinship in Troilus / Troy; he was also charged

35 It is interesting to note the shift in mythographic focus from Troilus to Polyxena, who at first appears as an entirely secondary character; only from the 5th century BCE does Polyxena take a leading role in literary and iconographic sources due to her relationship with Achilles.

36 Licophrones, *Alexandra*, vv. 307-10.

37 Servius, *Comm. ad Aeneid*, 1. 474: "[…] Troili amore Achillem ductum palumbes ei quibus ille delectabatur obiecisse: quas cum vellet tenere, captus ab Achille in eius amplexibus periit. Sed hoc quasi indignum heroo carmine mutavit poeta". [Achilles, who had fallen in love with Troilus, sent some pigeons before him; Troilus, trying to catch them, was caught by Achilles and died in his embrace. But as this episode was unworthy of the hero, the poet changed the story in his poem.]

with a magical-prophetic value. According to the Mythographus Vaticanus, an oracle had predicted that Troy could not be conquered if Troilus reached the age of twenty[38]. It is not known whether this marginal, but symbolically important, detail of the Troilus myth reached Shakespeare by any means. But two elements of Shakespeare's *Troilus* that could be read together are worth mentioning.

In the finale of the play, there is a kind of announcement of Troilus' death in the duel with Diomedes, into which he has thrown himself furiously, moved also by the sight of Cressida's sleeve, which he had seen hanging as an ornament from the helmet of his enemy and rival. At the end of the duel, Diomedes proclaims:

> Diomedes
> Go, go, my servant, take thou Troilus' horse;
> Present the fair steed to my Lady Cressid.
> Fellow, commend my service to her beauty;
> Tell her I have chastised the amorous Trojan
> And am her knight by proof.
> (*Troilus and* Cressida, V.v.1-4).

Instead, in the scene immediately following, we learn from the words of Ulysses that Troilus is alive and well, performing heroic deeds and seemingly invincible:

> Ulysses
> Troilus, who hath done today
> Mad and fantastic execution.
> Engaging and redeeming of himself
> With such a careless force and forceless care
> As if that luck, in very spite of cunning,
> Bade him win all.
> (*Troilus and Cressida*, V.v.37-42)

Troilus is once again a very 'son of Mars'. Hector is now dead, slaughtered by Achilles' Myrmidons, and Agamemnon, declaring the death of the Trojan champion, proclaims: "Great Troy is ours, and our sharp wars are ended" (V.x.10). But will this prove true?

38 Myth Vat. I.210: "Troilo dictum erat si ad annos XX pervenisset Troia everti non potuisset."

In his earlier introduction of Troilus, Ulysses has already indicated that he is seen as the second hope for Troy after Hector: "They call him Troilus, and on him erect / a second hope, as fairly built as Hector" (IV.v.109-10). During the battle, Nestor offers a warning: "There is a thousand Hectors in the field" (V.v.19). On the other side, when Troilus announces Hector's death to the Trojans, he says that he does not speak "of flight, of fear, of death": his concern is who will make the announcement to Priam and Hecuba (V.xi.12ff). "Hector is dead. There is no more to say" (V.xi.22) – and the drama could end there. But it does not.

What is important, we have said, is to identify the points of inflection in the construction of the *myth/plot* of this drama in relation to the preceding tradition. It is worth recalling another passage from the *Poetics*, in which Aristotle stresses the need for the playwright to make a surgical cut in the mythical material: unlike the historical narrative, which must recount the sequential development of all the events that occurred in a given period, the poet must choose a narrative nucleus and build around it "a beginning, a middle and an end". From this point of view, the Iliad – says Aristotle – is the example par excellence, because the poem does not begin with the beginning of the war and does not end with the end and the conquest of Troy, but Homer, "in a divine way", takes only a part of the story and does not try to dramatise it as a whole[39]. Shakespeare does the same in his *Troilus*, taking a

39 Aristotle, *Poetics* 59 a 19-37: "περὶ δὲ τῆς διηγηματικῆς καὶ ἐν μέτρῳ μιμητικῆς, ὅτι δεῖ τοὺς μύθους καθάπερ ἐν ταῖς τραγῳδίαις συνιστάναι δραματικοὺς καὶ περὶ μίαν πρᾶξιν ὅλην καὶ τελείαν ἔχουσαν ἀρχὴν καὶ μέσα καὶ τέλος, ἵν᾽ ὥσπερ ζῷον ἓν ὅλον ποιῇ τὴν οἰκείαν ἡδονήν, δῆλον, καὶ μὴ ὁμοίας ἱστορίαις τὰς συνθέσεις εἶναι, ἐν αἷς ἀνάγκη οὐχὶ μιᾶς πράξεως ποιεῖσθαι δήλωσιν ἀλλ᾽ ἑνὸς χρόνου, ὅσα ἐν τούτῳ συνέβη περὶ ἕνα ἢ πλείους, ὧν ἕκαστον ὡς ἔτυχεν ἔχει πρὸς ἄλληλα. […] διὸ ὥσπερ εἴπομεν ἤδη καὶ ταύτῃ θεσπέσιος ἂν φανείη Ὅμηρος παρὰ τοὺς ἄλλους, τῷ μηδὲ τὸν πόλεμον καίπερ ἔχοντα ἀρχὴν καὶ τέλος ἐπιχειρῆσαι ποιεῖν ὅλον· λίαν γὰρ ἂν μέγας καὶ οὐκ εὐσύνοπτος ἔμελλεν ἔσεσθαι ὁ μῦθος, ἢ τῷ μεγέθει μετριάζοντα καταπεπλεγμένον τῇ ποικιλίᾳ. νῦν δ᾽ ἓν μέρος ἀπολαβὼν ἐπεισοδίοις κέχρηται αὐτῶν πολλοῖς […]". [As for the art of exposition in verse, it is clear that, just as in tragedy, the story must be constructed dramatically, round a single piece of action, whole and complete in itself, with a beginning, middle and end, so that like a single living organism it may produce its own peculiar form of pleasure. It must not be such as we normally find in history, where what is required is an exposition not of a single piece of action but of a single period of time, with all that happened during it to

part of the story that has a different beginning, development and end from the whole story of Troilus that was available in the tradition, and that his audience could know. And the most dramaturgically significant point of diffraction is precisely the ending. In *Troilus and Cressida*, Troilus does not die; according to the strange non-ending of Shakespeare's play[40], everything is still open, everything is possible.

At the end of the drama, Troilus is not dead, but – and we are warned of this from the very first lines of the play – he has already reached, and passed, the fateful age of twenty (I.ii.227). Perhaps the fall of Troy never happened.

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one or more people, events that have a merely casual relation to each other. [...] So in this respect, too, compared with all other poets Homer appears, as we have already said, divinely inspired, in that even with the Trojan war, which has a beginning and an end, he did not endeavor to dramatise it as a whole, since it would have been either too long to be taken in all at once or, if he had moderated the length, he would have complicated it by the variety of incident. As it is, selecting a single part of the story the poet uses many incidents from other parts.]

40 As is known, the tragedy (un)ends with Pandarus' epilogue in V.xi.35-56.

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