

THE COMEDY OF TROILUS AND CRESSIDA

Troilus and Cressida is sometimes thought of as one of Shakespeare's Problem Plays, but I think of it as a comedy. Not a romantic comedy, like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *Twelfth Night*, but a satire, like the Greek comedies which were send-ups of Greek tragedies.

It is Shakespeare's irreverent take on Homer's *Iliad*, in which legendary Greek heroes are portrayed as ordinary mortals, subject to the same weaknesses and vices as the rest of us. This is Shakespeare at his most cynical, speaking not through Puck to say, 'Lord, what fools these mortals be!' but through Thersites to tell us that life is 'wars and lechery; nothing else holds fashion.'

The tone is set by the Prologue, who gives us the story so far and tells us -

that our play

*Leaps o'er the vaunt and firstlings of those broils,
Beginning in the middle*

(which is where, as some in the audience may know, Homer began)

starting thence away

To what may be digested in a play.

He seems almost to be saying don't expect too much.

*Like or find fault; do as your pleasures are;
Now good or bad, 'tis but the chance of war.*

It's a risky way to start a play, but Shakespeare was popular enough to get away with it.

Pandarus, Cressida's uncle and pimp, ignores convention at the end of the play too, speaking to the audience as if they were in the same trade as him.

*Brethren and sisters of the hold-door trade,
Some two months hence my will shall here be made:
It should be now, but that my fear is this,—
Some galled goose of Winchester would hiss:
Till then I'll sweat, and seek about for eases;
And at that time bequeath you my diseases.*

A nice way to end a play!

But then it began with young Troilus deciding not to fight the Greeks because all he could think about was Cressida, which is hardly the way for a hero to behave.

*Why should I war without the walls of Troy,
That find such cruel battle here within?
Each Trojan that is master of his heart,
Let him to field; Troilus, alas, hath none!*

He is not alone, though, in exercising his right to take a day off from fighting. Achilles and Ajax, on the other side, do the same. The *casus belli*, Helen's abduction by Paris, seems almost to have been forgotten. It certainly means nothing to Troilus.

*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.*

The central incident of the play, which leads to the killing of Hector by Achilles, has nothing to do with Helen, but only Hector's hurt pride, as Cressida's serving man explains to her in the second scene. Ajax, he says, 'coped Hector in battle, and struck him down; the disdain and shame whereof

hath ever since kept Hector fasting and waking.' So he sends Aeneas to the Greek camp with a challenge to send their best man to fight him in single combat. Everything that follows has much more to do with perceived slights to proud men than to any more serious cause.

Priam discusses the matter with his sons when he receives an offer from the Greeks.

*'Deliver Helen, and all damage else —
As honour; loss of time, travail, expense,
Wounds, friends, and what else dear that is consumed
In hot digestion of this cormorant war —
Shall be struck off.'*

In the debate that follows, it looks as if reason might prevail when Hector makes the case for Helen's return.

*If Helen, then, be wife to Sparta's king,—
As it is known she is, — these moral laws
Of nature and of nations speak aloud
To have her back return'd: thus to persist
In doing wrong extenuates not wrong,
But makes it much more heavy.*

At which point the play would end and history be changed if Hector did not unexpectedly come to a different conclusion.

Hector's opinion

*Is this, in way of truth: yet n'ertheless,
My spritely brethren, I propend to you
In resolution to keep Helen still;
For 'tis a cause that hath no mean dependance
Upon our joint and several dignities.
Truth is one thing, dignity another.*

Against this dubious moral background, Shakespeare shows us the legendary heroes in the most unflattering light. Ajax, Achilles and Patroclus in particular are gifts to Shakespeare's comic actors. At the beginning of Act II, we see little Thersites taunting big Ajax and big Ajax hitting him and getting more and more annoyed when Thersites refuses to give in and goes on insulting him.

Ay, do, do; thou sodden-witted lord! thou hast no more brains than I have in mine elbows... If thou use to beat me, I will begin at thy heel, and tell thee what you art by inches, thou thing of no bowels, thou!

Ajax goes on hitting him, Thersites goes on insulting him. Achilles and Patroclus intervene, so Thersites insults them instead.

Hector shall have a great catch, if he knock out either of your brains: a' were as good crack a fusty nut with no kernel.

Shakespeare treats none of them with respect, not even Helen, whose name Paris gives its common Elizabethan abbreviation. Introducing her to Pandarus, he says, 'Nell, he is full of harmony,' and when she speaks to Pandarus she sounds more like a Nell than a Helen.

And to make a sweet lady sad is a sour offence. Nay, that shall not serve your turn; that shall it not, in truth, la. Nay, I care not for such words; no, no.

Cressida is quite simply a whore. The scene in which Pandarus brings Troilus to her for the first time ends with him sending them to bed.

Whereupon I will show you a chamber with a bed; which bed, because it shall not speak of your pretty encounters, press it to death: away!

But there is another side to Shakespeare's comedy, which is to parody Greek tragedy. He stages debates between both Greeks and Trojans, which are very like the debates on right and wrong action which classical drama substituted for action itself. A dialogue between Ulysses and Achilles gives us one of Shakespeare's great speeches, the one that begins -

*Time hath, my lord, a wallet at his back,
Wherein he puts alms for oblivion,
A great-sized monster of ingratitudes...*

Ulysses, noted for his cunning, is using all his skill to persuade Achilles not to let Ajax fight Hector, but to do so himself. Your reputation, he says, won't last forever. You need to do something or people will forget you.

*For time is like a fashionable host,
That slightly shakes his parting guest by th'hand,
And with his arms outstretcht, as he would fly,
Grasps-in the comer: welcome ever smiles,
And farewell goes out sighing.*

It is the serious underbelly of Shakespeare's comedy. But the scene ends, as most of them do, on a laugh. Achilles, after an exchange with Thersites, makes his exit on a couplet -

*My mind is troubled, like a fountain stirr'd;
And I myself see not the bottom of it.*

To which, after Achilles has gone, Thersites replies -

Would the fountain of your mind were clear again, that I might water an ass at it! I had rather be a tick in a sheep than such a valiant ignorance.

The play is made up of scenes which vary wildly in character from high comedy to low, from dark to light. Among the darkest, most troubling, is the scene in which Cressida is brought to the Greek camp and the legendary heroes take it in turns to kiss her. The implication that she is to be shared out among them, not just kept by Diomedes, is unavoidable, as is the implication that she is willing for that to happen, perhaps even expects it. If we were not already sure that she was a whore, we must be now.

The play gathers pace in the last act, as if falling downhill to its ending. It starts with Thersites calling Patroclus Achilles's 'masculine whore', goes on to Troilus's agony when he sees Cressida give him up for Diomedes, then on to the final battle with sarcastic commentary by Thersites ('Now they are clapper-clawing one another; I'll go look on') and farcical entrances and exits when Ajax and Diomedes run in and out looking for Troilus until he runs after them: 'Come, both you cogging Greeks; have at you both!'

One of the funniest moments comes in the middle of the battle when Thersites is challenged by someone who introduces himself as 'a bastard son of Priam's'. Thersites tries to save himself by proclaiming his love of bastards.

*I am a bastard too; I love bastards: I am a bastard begot, bastard instructed, bastard in mind,
bastard in valour, in everything illegitimate. One bear will not bite another, and wherefore should
one bastard? Take heed, the quarrel's most ominous to us: if the son of a whore fight for a whore, he
tempts judgement: farewell, bastard.*

Immediately after, we see the hero Achilles get his gang of Myrmidons to kill the unarmed Hector.

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

When Hector is dead, Achilles makes sure that he is proclaimed the victor.

*On, Myrmidons; and cry you all amain,
'Achilles hath the mighty Hector slain.'*

The only problem with *Troilus and Cressida* is that it is more like a modern play than the kind of play we associate with Shakespeare. Is it a comedy or a tragedy? It is a comedy, but a comedy more like Joe Orton than Shakespeare. It is a very good play in its own right, but it is also a stepping stone to *King Lear*, which is a tragedy, but one that has its fair share of comedy too.

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