

Self-division and lack of self-knowledge in troilus and cressida and measure for ...

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In many ways, Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* and *Measure for Measure* are examples of his "problem plays" that are concerned with self-division and lack of self-knowledge. The former play deals with the duality of the characters and it is in the knowledge or lack of knowledge in this duality between the characters which makes it a problem play. Self-division is also implicit in the latter play, where the characters are forced to confront their different natures due to a crisis which is set upon them. Both the plays, like the innate nature of the problem plays themselves, are torn between how a character perceives himself or herself and how these characters perceive each other differently. Taking this point further, I wish to argue that both plays have a metatheatrical element in them, where my view of each of the individual characters differ from what the characters think of themselves, and that a complex character such as Cressida is actually aware of her mythical identity, whereas other characters, though still just as complex in character, are less aware of their metatheatrical presence and therefore think of their self-division as more of an intuition they have. How are Shakespeare's famous characters to "be themselves" when their names convey an absolute "identity" that is itself based upon a myth of loss? If, even as the "original" heroes of the "original" epics, they always already encode nostalgia?

Charnes' questioning deals with the ambiguous ideas of dual-identity and self-knowledge that leads to subjectivity in *Troilus and Cressida*. Although the play is reproduced by Shakespeare, the characters' identities are historically tied to the original heroes, making Cressida, inevitably, the one to leave Troilus for Diomedes. The characters themselves, seem to be

functioned to be aware of their own identity to a certain extent although Troilus discovers this much later than Pandarus and Cressida when he sees Cressida with Diomedes in the Greek camp. One may already assume, before even watching the play, that Troilus' identity is to be "true" and Cressida's to be "false" in their relationship. "Identity" derives from the Latin word "idem", meaning the same, the quality of being identical and the fact of being identical being who or what a person or a thing is. In this sense, Shakespeare and the actors who play the characters are bound to the nature of the play's historicism: the myth of Troilus and Cressida that has been repeated and multiplied many times have given an "identity" to the characters which subjects the actors to "play" the characters as they are destined to play. It is not only Shakespeare, the audience and the actors who seem to be aware of the subjectivity of these characters. Shakespeare designs Cressida to be self-aware of her own subjectivity.

Troilus: What offends you, lady?

Cressida: Sir, mine own company.

Troilus: You cannot shun yourself.

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.

Troilus: Well know they what they speak that speak so wisely.

Shakespeare plays with the word “ kind” and “ unkind” to show the literal split in her personality but also subtly underlines Cressida’s acknowledgement in her two split identities, where the “ unkind self” refers to her unnatural and therefore “ other” self. She warns Troilus that one of her self will eventually leave to another, Diomedes. Furthermore, she shows distress in her own knowledge of this and therefore claims to be offended by her own company, in this case, her identity. “ Where is my wit?” If the definition of wit is the capacity for inventive thought and quick understanding; keen intelligence, then the search for her wit could refer to her searching for knowledge of truth. She must be “ false” to Troilus in order to be her “ true” self. Nevertheless, Cressida tries to avert herself from her pre-decided identity. “ You cannot shun yourself” Troilus speaks that, in context, she cannot leave him from his company but this could also be taken into a wider reading: she cannot avoid herself from her identity and thus has no entitlement to selfhood. “ Shun” means to persistently avoid, ignore, or reject through caution, which could be taken as Cressida trying to break through the norms by avoiding or rejecting her identity. She wants to “ go and try” to eliminate her subjectivity by erasing her multiplicity from the past Cressida(s) that has- or have- existed before her. By doing so, she would be gaining her selfhood, in which I am referring to the state of having experience of one’s consciousness as belonging to oneself. However, “ selfhood” can also mean a person’s character, being egocentric. In this sense, Cressida’s selfhood seems paradoxical. She has a split dual identity, where one part of her wishes to remain with Troilus yet her efforts in trying to avert from her subjectivity and achieve selfhood brings out her other self,

which will leave him for another. Despite all of this paradoxical effort in losing herself to gain herself, she ends in a futile resolution. She realises the futility of her efforts for she seems to have self-knowledge of her fate.

As long as she has the “wit” of her subjected fate, she “would be gone”. Her role, like Pandarus says, is to “Leave all as I found it. / And there an end”, to play and then leave the stage as she has been identified to be. This shows that she is aware of the metatheatricality of the play, and that the Cressida that I see in her as an audience is the same as the Cressida that she sees in herself. Whilst Cressida seems to be aware of her split identity, Troilus is unable to comprehend with her. He says, “Well know they what they speak that speak so wisely”, which depicts that Cressida should “know” how she is subject to be gone, without himself knowing what he speaks, making him a character that lacks in self-knowledge as well as his knowledge in Cressida. He is too simple in mind to demystify the truth in her speech: ... my integrity and truth to you Might be affronted with the match and weight Of such a winnowed purity in love. How were I then uplifted! But alas, I am as true as truth’s simplicity And simpler than the infancy of the truth. Troilus’ integrity may mean that he has the quality of being honest and true.

However, it could also mean that he is in a state of being whole and undivided. Unlike Cressida, he is unaware of his self-divided identity in a metatheatrical sense and perceives his selfhood to be whole to himself. Shakespeare creates a character who is only able to see the truth in simple terms and therefore enables the play to proceed on its subjectivity: Troilus, who is as much of a legendary character as Cressida is, must be betrayed by Cressida. His truth in Cressida is at an infant state in Act two, which only

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matures later in Act five where he sees her “ other” self, with Diomedes. This, she? No, this is Diomedes’s Cressida. If beauty have a soul, this is not she. The separation of “ This”; the Cressida that he is seeing, and “ she” that he thought Cressida was shows that he is now able to comprehend the division in her identity. His division of Cressida shows that she was subjective to his ideologies: “ his” Cressida exists in his mind rather than the external world. He has made the mistake of seeing the truth in simplicity and thus mistaken her for another. Charnes states that “ to be ‘ taken for another’ is not to be taken at all. Rather, it is to be left behind, ‘ exchanged’ as it were, for this mysterious ‘ other’ for whom one is mis-taken”. Her comment suggests that Troilus has never truly taken her at all for he was unable to see the “ other” side of her identity. Once this truth becomes demystified, Cressida’s role is complete: like all of the other Cressida(s), she has betrayed Troilus. Therefore, she has achieved in fulfilling her role and “ Leave(s) all as (she) found it, and there an end” and is seen no more after this scene. Therefore, Shakespeare unveils the fear of identity, self-division and subjectivity by “ using” the famous characters and making them lose themselves in order to be themselves. The characters’ identities are identified once more in the play as they carry the weight of their names that convey an absolute “ identity” that is itself based upon a myth.

Different criticisms and interpretations of Measure for Measure can be accumulated around the reactions to the central characters in the play: Isabella and the Duke of Vienna. It is difficult to pin down whether these characters are good, bad, powerful, whether they are all or none of these things. Like the inherent nature of problem plays, the characters are

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problematic in a sense that different characters realise their self-division at different points (some may never realise their self-division) and it is therefore difficult to claim precisely when it is that these characters realise this. On a whole, I agree with Berger's view of the Duke "is less important or interesting that the Duke's view of the Duke". What the Duke views of himself is different from my view of the Duke, and this view applies similarly to the other characters as well. Isabella, much like Cressida, has self-knowledge of her identity from an early point in the play. Although Isabella's status as a nun may make her appear to be a character of intransigent innocence at first, she is actually has a fragile lenience, where she is a virgin but not quite a maid and not yet a nun. Much like her problematic status, problems are also raised in her self-knowledge of division in her identity. She has self that wishes to be free from male patriarchal society, remain a virgin and, therefore, sustain her innocence. However, her other self recognises her part in the patriarchal society: to be a woman in relation to a man. The problem arises from this division between her two selves. Her selfhood that wishes to sustain her innocence becomes paradoxical once she decides to act upon it; from protecting herself of her innocence, she is in recognition of all the things that are not innocent. Therefore, she can no longer be seen as wholly innocent, yet this does not make her guilty of innocence, in a sense that she is still a virgin. Either ways, in realising the dangers of her selfhood from an early point in the play, she is able to find a resolution for it. She finds a way to escape from the corrupted society by choosing to become a nun. Yes, truly. I speak not as desiring more, But rather wishing a more strict restraint Upon the sisterhood In becoming a nun, she will be able to preserve

her virginity and therefore her innocence from further corruption. She asks for further privileges to the nun not as a means of desiring for more worldly resources but in a means of asking for a “ more strict restraint” in order to restrain herself from losing her ‘ self’, her innocence. This emphasises on her knowledge that sisterhood is a place where she can escape from the sexual production system of the patriarchal society. This can be proven in Act Five when The Duke exclaims that in being a nun, Mariana cannot be classified as an individual in his view:

Duke: What, are you married?

Mariana: No, my lord.

Duke: Are you a maid?

Mariana: No, my lord.

Duke: A widow, then?

Mariana: Neither, my lord.

Duke: Why, you are nothing then; neither maid, widow, nor wife!

The Duke, in asking a list of questions on what she is, he makes Mariana prove his point that women are reduced to nothing through her replies being a list of cancellations. It is interesting to see how in some versions of the play, “ Why, you are nothing then; neither maid, widow, nor wife!” is written as a statement with an exclamation mark, whereas other versions “ Why, you are nothing then; neither maid, widow, nor wife?” end with a

questioning. One can read the exclamatory phrase as the Duke making a clear statement of what was perceived of women at that time in Vienna, whilst the phrase that ends with a questioning emphasises on the problem that not all women can be fully defined by his three categories; the Duke is in confusion of where to place Mariana in the patriarchal system. However, Isabella is partly free from this categorising as she has chosen to become a nun. In a Christian narrative, she becomes a daughter of God. The Duke creates multiple identities of himself through theatricality. Theatricality enables the play to end with him remaining as a supposedly good lord. He maintains the 'appearance' of a good ruler; whether he truly is a good ruler or not is debatable. For example, he deliberately humbles himself from his social position of a Duke as the friar until his true identity is revealed. He waits until Isabella publicly appears to lose her honour in a convincing way and yet without actually losing it so that when he comes back, he may appear to bring back her honour and therefore bring justice and law back in form. When he does reveal himself as the Duke, Angelo accepts that he has always been watched over by the Duke. O my dread lord, I should be guiltier than my guiltiness To think I can be undiscernible, When I perceive your grace, like power divine, Hath looked upon my passes. In a Christian narrative, the Duke can be seen as God, who sacrifices His son to the human world, watches over His children and gives final judgement on Judgement Day, where The Bible states that God "has set a day in which he purposes to judge the inhabited earth". There is a correlation of God and the Duke's actions, as the former claims to judge the "inhabited earth", meaning that He will judge the human beings that has populated in Earth, rather than the

Earth itself. Similarly, the latter judges the acts that have gone wrong in the play rather than criticising the corrupted state of Viennese society. In this sense, the Duke's decision in disguising himself as the friar can be seen as a "sacrifice" made in order to be able to retrieve his people from wrongdoings. He becomes a superior omniscient being.

Like God, who is the creator of things, the Duke has created a stage where he lets the problems arise whilst he waits until the problems epitomise the scene before he reveals his true identity. This shows that he is aware of the metatheatricality that derives from his self-duplicity and is also aware of how the others will react to it. Through him, one can see that human beings may not always be what they appear to be. Therefore, to have knowledge of others and in order to be able to govern them, one must first have self-knowledge of oneself. However, the point that has just been made is what the Duke may think of himself to be. Berger argues that what the Duke may think of himself differs from what he views the Duke to be. He argues through Graham Bradshaw's notion that the Duke is: A negligent governor who now believes that he must confront, but still wants to evade, a problem which he has helped to create...The point that immediately matters is not whether we believe that Vienna requires surgery, but that the Duke himself believes this and feels obliged to act accordingly. It could be argued that Vienna's precarious state, in terms of justice, is a reflection and therefore a result of his inability to govern the society effectively through a lack of self-knowledge. He sees himself as the role of a good Duke, who needs to act upon the problems that has risen, yet unable to recognise that he has helped to create these problems from the first place. Therefore, Berger names the <https://assignbuster.com/self-division-and-lack-of-self-knowledge-in-troilus-and-cressida-and-measure-for-measure/>

Duke as a “ negligent governor” who is self-divided: a part of him thinks that he must confront these problems and the other part of him wants to evade them.

In conclusion, I have explored how both the plays are torn between how a character perceives himself or herself and how these characters perceive each other differently. Furthermore, some of these characters are aware of the metatheatrical elements and use this understanding as a means of understanding themselves.