

Troilus and cressida: parsing truth in divisive, misogynic spirit

[Literature](#), [William Shakespeare](#)



Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* is set against Homer's *Iliad*, an epic singing of the pride-induced "wrath of Achilles" in all its ugly consequences which stem from the idea of personal worth and value. This *Iliad* depicts honor, glory, love, and loyalty, which Shakespeare examines more critically by questioning the nature of value and worth through a romance between two originally minor characters, Troilus, and Cressida, in relation to the environment around them, and comes to conclude that these intangible perceptions do not truly exist except within oneself. This notion is derived from Nowotny's criticism that a "bi-fold authority" of factual reason and "poetic 'reason'" reigns over the human soul (Nowotny 292). In attempting to validate imagination with experience, Troilus' world of glorious virtue is shattered. Shakespeare accentuates these classical virtues through the richest setting of antiquity to make their destruction all the more impactful, and, as soon as he demonstrates their degradation, ends the play. So does the final scene bruise the reader with its abruptness as does the disintegrated world bruise Troilus with its hypocritical standards.

At Hector's death, the political stalemate of the Trojan War, which having reflected the tension between Nowotny's two authorities, begins to give way to Greek victory — the victory of merry sensation achieved through not its own merit but through the frailty of its antithesis, spiritual reason; the Trojans. The constant presence of misogyny within this drama, whether by Shakespeare as conscious device or unconscious product of Elizabethan society, begs us to realize the paradox between idealistic truth of the spirit, and truth as empirical knowledge. Worth is determined by the experience and observations of others, yet their assignment of worth onto another

subject is indicative of their own poetic values, which, then again, must be influenced by larger society. Troilus is the main defender of Helen's value, which he says is defined only by the deaths of thousands, yet he is also the character who most desperately seeks to fulfill his own romanticized values and who becomes overwhelmed with anger that his demeanor overall transforms by the end.

5. 2 is the central scene in which we see this transformation develop. "India", "pearl", "merchant", "sailing", and "convoy" give a sense of trade and transaction. The pearl's value comes from its rarity, and it is rare because it is difficult to find under vast oceans, introducing the importance of discovery and pursuit. Troilus woos himself by wooing Cressida because loving her provides Troilus opportunity to discover and measure his achievements — his own virtuous character — against others. He is on business to acquire treasure, treasured because it gives access to other valuable things. Hence, the pearl is tied to a greater, shifting market. Cressida's fluctuating worth suggests she is a manifestation of the values Troilus creates for himself. She does not possess any apparent worth of her own. When his great impression of love and fidelity is disproven, Cressida becomes the scapegoat for the faults of Troilus' own opinions, shaped through his impermanent, material environment. As Kermode suggests, value depends on opinion that itself depends on the appearance of the object. He says values like honor, fame, glory, arise from mass comprehension of earthly actions. They are inherently public opinions,

conceived by an entire group, which the individual cannot conjure or achieve by his own persons.

Nevertheless, the inherent principle of value is contested given Troilus's assertive speech in 5. 2. After witnessing Cressida dedicate herself to Diomedes, Troilus says: He deems the truth, the physical action witnessed, a lie because he cannot believe his eyes. His personal conviction is so strong that reality is questioned. Reality and truth to him might then be a body of thought and spirit, untouchable by sight and sound. Troilus may still uphold righteous virtues, his own truths, even if their corporeality — Cressida — is lost.

Later in the play, we see that he does not. He curses the deceptive dynamic between men and women, and accepts rage, bloodlust, and revenge as appropriate reactions to his disillusionment of moral goodness, disfiguring his young, naive character. And thus, the truths that could have still remained true after Cressida's infidelity, fall apart. Nowotny says " The Cressida betraying him before his eyes is Cressida, but is not the Value he had taken her to embody" (291). This idea is made possible by misogyny for if men did not place their own values onto women, then Cressida in her own right, as a single being — not two — does not betray Troilus at all. Rather, Troilus is betrayed by his own lapse of judgement when he realises there is more to Cressida than just the qualities he supposed about her. In typical misogynistic fashion, men blame women for their own shortcomings. His manipulation of her image is made clear in the following interaction with Ulysses:

Troilus. Was Cressid here?

Ulysses. I cannot conjure, Trojan.

Troilus. She was not, sure.

Ulysses. Most sure she was. (5. 2. 131-4)

Evidently, the values he believes her to have is not there; she has been unfaithful. Ulysses, on the side of empirical knowledge and reason (Nowotny 286), tries to convince him that Cressida is in fact there, and that value depends on factors outside of the individual mind. Yet, Troilus still attempts to hold to his intrinsically created worth by postulating: Diomedes' Cressida is one who "to her own worth...shall be prized" (4. 4. 132). To Diomed, Cressida is valued by her physically apparent traits and will be treated by opinion. Diomed does not project himself onto her.

The use of anaphora — each word building on top the last — from moving beauty to profound spirituality to the entire order of both heavenly and earthly existence, brings Troilus' dilemma to climax. He now becomes aware of his problem ("madness of discourse"), which is also the problem of the entire play itself; that truth lies between knowledge and ignorance (Plato as cited by Kermode), between action and thought, and how difficult it is to navigate towards that truth when the vulgar reality in which all men must live jarringly injures the soul. Reason renders itself unreasonable without being unreasonable. Irrationality appears rational without straying from its

own irrational logic. All this, he unfairly invests into Cressida with his repetition of “ This is not she”.

He continues, The incalculable truth is clearly expressed when described as more divided than the sky and earth. Troilus directly draws truth to Cressida’s body as both are supposedly indivisible. The diction of, “ spacious”, “ breadth” and “ division” evokes a greatly palpable energy to lay matters out. Perhaps truth is then the physical chasm between sky and earth itself, the irresolute space between divinity and body. And that the sky must be borne by Atlas so that it’s crushing weight doesn’t kill us all perhaps suggests the two entities must stay apart, because when they do embrace, as illustrated by Troilus’ encounter and reaction, we are left with a bitter, grim and stinging aftermath that is never mollified by Shakespeare — never mollified because it is not a tragedy by fate but a problem society has brought about itself.

Troilus’ mention of “ Ariadne’s broken woof” is interesting. Does he refer to Ariadne’s string or Arachne’s web? The division of truth is so vast that it materializes into geographical space, yet is still so densely and confusingly made that not even a string can guide him in true direction, or perhaps that threads cannot even be woven through, in that he cannot assemble anything of sense. The connotation of string, anyhow, is continued: Evidently, the “ instance” or proof of Cressida’s treachery is so torturous and concrete to Troilus that he compares it to dying and death, the ultimate irreversible notion. Upon witnessing the desolation of his oaths and honors, he will never retain them again. First by allowing Troy to trade Cressida away without

protest, and then by readily accepting the depravity and disgrace of such consequences, Troilus is a participating member of his hypocritical society. It seems he values exalted beliefs, like the integrity of war politics, more than he does Cressida herself. Perhaps then he did not truly love her, but rather, romanced her. The implication of “instance” as a swift and temporal moment underscores this. In the next stanza, however, he juxtaposes “Pluto’s gates” with “strong as heaven itself”. Heaven and hell, holding equally substantial yet contrasting positions, echo again his divided mind. The real Cressida is most definitely false in virtue, and the false Cressida — the one of his poetry, being “tied by the bonds of heaven” to his disposition — is most definitely true as part of an identity he defines himself with. Mann uses the economics of demand and supply to interpret value (wherein price is determined by consumer demand) and suggests that Value is “whatever men deem necessary for their existence.” (Mann 31) Hence, a woman’s identity revolves around that of a man’s.

Shakespeare asks, “[I]s not birth, beauty, good shape, discourse, manhood, learning, gentleness, virtue, youth, liberality, and such like, the spice and salt that season a man?’ (1. 2. 244-6) These things, the strings of poetic guidance and reason, untie their bonds to Troilus as he declares them “slipp’d, dissolved, and loosed”. Then, by the “five-finger-tied” knot, love-token glove, Cressida’s love and faith mutate into “fragments, scraps” and “bits and greasy relics” that are “o’er-eaten” and are “bound to Diomed” — an obviously misogynic concept that takes away women’s’ inherent worth as people equal to men. The language of appetite suggests their values are

formed by simple, unfair and fickle instinct. Women are foods to nourish the consumer's own sense of self.

Cressida's interaction with Diomed in 5. 2 recalls a similar encounter with Troilus in 3. 2. At the Greek camp, she flirts with Diomed, first holding off yet never allowing him to leave, but eventually gives in to sleep with him. She continuously changes her mind, as seen through the giving and taking back of the sleeve, but we don't know if this behavior is genuine contention or only a performance of resistance in order to validate her apparent worth, a performance she is highly aware of, as depicted by her words in 3. 2.

Cressida realises that being easily won by Troilus tarnishes her image of chastity and innocence, that by pursuing him, her value decreases. She berates herself for accidentally revealing her desire and seeks to leave the situation in order to preserve her image because image is the only authority she and other women possess. She must adhere to the features of her objectification if she wishes to be in demand of, needed, valued — to thereupon provide men essential manifestations of identity so that she might by some chance have any semblance of a person. Her "kind of self" longs to surrender to a man for comfort and protection among a misogynic society, while her "unkind of self" agonizes at giving up her own (decidedly limited) autonomy to become even more reliant on men. Yet again she is spilt into two, and with both Troilus and Diomed, she "tarries", unable to deduce a solution. That this tactful delaying and banter repeats itself makes us wonder whether Cressida authentically loved Troilus — whether her affection was voluntary or an excellently compelled reaction to her position in Troy. The

tone of her confessional speech, however, leads us to believe she truly is at odds with herself. She admonishes her disloyalty by interjecting her own thought —“ O false wench!” — and she acknowledges a cruel fact that she is now among men who, unlike Troilus, judge by action and opinion, by telling Diomed that Troilus “‘ Twas [one] that loved me better than you will.” She knows her valued has considerably lessened when she is apart from Troilus, and regrettably works to re-establish it for a place in society.

The consciousness Cressida exhibits in both scenes points to an independent integrity, unrightfully oppressed. Indeed, she has agency as woman, but nearly all her freedoms are limited by the male gaze, forcing her to play a game of social grace that is fundamentally constructed to her disadvantage. She knows the game well and plays it well because she tells Troilus not to think she shows “ more craft than love” yet still attempts to gauge her own worth by stating it impossible to be both wise and in love at once for even gods cannot achieve it, defending herself and challenging him. Her speech inspires Troilus to swear his oaths and bind them together, safely cementing her value. This technique fails to capture Diomed in the same way because, as said previously, Cressida is not a reflection of his own regarded virtue. The Greek know her only by the beauty they see and lust they feel, not by any wisdom derived from the divine spirit.

Troilus’ attitude towards Cressida is also his attitude towards Helen in 2. 2, as it is for all womanhood in his saying, “ Think, we had mothers” (5. 2. 136) upon Cressida’s deceit. He declares, he explicitly states that Helen has no merit equal to that of their soldiers and that it is terrible to waste “ a drop of

Trojan blood” for her individual cause. Cressida, like Helen and all other women, is valuable as a “ theme of honour and renown”, inspiration for men to build greatness of off. Again, she is a medium through which Troilus attempts to establish his masculinity that is the “ spice and salt that season[s] a man” (1. 2. 246). In this way, Cressida indeed holds much value within a problematic framework. Troilus the misogynist is consequently responsible for the attribution of to-be-falsified values onto Cressida, leading him and us readers to question what truth is.

Nowotny writes that action will always deform the concepts it seeks to embody, and that society built on those concepts collapses when attempting to uphold them. In similar vein, the protagonists clinging to societal values destroy themselves in their endeavor to preserve the very thing they then lose. For example, Achilles refuses to fight because his pride and honor has been insulted. He supposes that abstaining from battle will force the Greeks to understand his worth; however, by doing so, his friend and lover — the single source of his humanity — is killed. Achilles is driven to vengeance in a lowly, deplorable, and underhanded manner. He embodies the reverse of what eternal, glorious reputation he desperately sought. Desperation seems also paramount to Cressida’s example, in which she becomes the epitome of falsehood by pledging her loyalty so strongly, and by striving to appeal society as the ideal woman. Virtue to Achilles is an opinion-based virtue that can be perpetually injured, lost and regained. It appears to Troilus as something that cannot be salvaged once ruined and as something capable of changing reality itself. Either way, there is certain destructive nature in

dedicating oneself to constructed value, whether that originates from organized society or individual mandate.

Interestingly, the play illustrates a decidedly un-organized society. There is turmoil and distraction, and things, matters, states, fall apart. Events inconsistently succeed agency. Nothing is resolved, and Shakespeare's concern over what value and truth are and how to live amongst conflicting truths isn't really answered. The "'unbodied figure of the thought', whatever it may be, can never be realized in action." (Nowotny 291) Nowotny moreover says this notion is the starting point of a question the play seeks to answer, that is, "What way of life will stand against the unsatisfactoriness of fact, as compared with hope, of action as compared with the ideal it was meant to embody"? And he says Shakespeare answers it with "'The way of life that stands, is the way of Troilus'...his refusal even in the face of the misshapen fact of [Cressida's] treachery to deny the reality of the values by which he has lived."

I do not think the speech or actions of Troilus agree with Nowotny's conclusion that Troilus' refuses to deny his reality. It is more so that by denying it, he takes on another that is similarly hyper-represented. Troilus becomes intensely distraught and also unforgivingly vicious. His manner is infused with figurative language, such as the biting of his sword or the catastrophe of his swing, which, arguably, elevates his terrible values instead of his goodly ones. Still, he lives unreasonably, as if there is meaningful melodrama in violence, as if there is some monumental quality about inspired wrath and jealousy. He revels in his passionately engendered,

miserable anger with the same hyperbolic language that he uses to describe his old loving emotions, pre-5. 2. Instead of amorous Pluto, he now references beastly Vulcan. He still composes poetic reason, though now in opposition to those typically valued. Troilus' character at last inverts itself like everyone else. He tells Hector that "[Hector] ha[s] a vice of mercy in [him]", which is "[f]ool's play," and that "venom'd vengeance" (5. 3. 47) should "[s]pur them to ruthless work, rein them from ruth." (5. 3. 48) He no longer regards Troy's greatest hero as a chivalrous knight, but as a timid fool. Good is now pathetic, and ugly is respected.

There are still exacerbated values and drama involved. But this is drama only for us, the audience who can see the gestalt of the play. We can recall all relevant plots and characters and smaller problems into a certain artistic mass; however, for Troilus, the drama is absolutely real and relevant. It would be unfair to say he purposefully adopts a poetic sense of vengeance and degradation of the soul simply for the sake of drama. A certain meta-theatre with Thersites watching Ulysses watching Troilus watching Cressida comes to mind, made ridiculous to some degree. The satirical meta esteems the play's subtle absurdity, and in re-seeing the confounding sequence of Troilus and Cressida, we begin to feel its actualization of our paradoxical existence. The play ends as Troilus' original truths end, leaving us alone to reflect on how we would fair in our own lives, now made aware of its plagued nature.