

The problem of value in shakespeare's troilus and cressida



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Why, she is a pearl

Whose price hath launched above a thousand ships

And turned crowned kings to merchants. (2. 2. 81-3)

The world of Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* does not distinguish decidedly between the Greeks and the Trojans. Though the Greek camp is a makeshift assembly of tents pitched on the shores of Troy, and the Trojan society is the courtly palace of Priam and his sons, both societies value the same ideas and objects: honor in men, and beauty and faithfulness in women, as revealed haphazardly through appearances and acts. The inadequacy of such measures of worth, their failure to be absolute and their failure to be made known, results in the incestuous, inbred world of *Troilus and Cressida*, where war is conducted as among brothers and sisters: filled with petty rivalries, meaningless, repetitive commerce between camps, and showy tramping back and forth in place of true conflict. Unable to live or act without considerations of value, the cast of *Troilus and Cressida* create and operate in their own fallen world.

Troilus and Cressida opens immediately in this world of judgment and appraisals. Troilus's mini-blazon in appreciation of Cressida " Her eyes, her hair, her cheek, her gait, her voice (1. 1. 56)" is soon followed by Pandarus's attempt to raise Troilus's station in Cressida's eyes: Have you any eyes, do you know what a man is? Is 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. 262-266). The humor in the opening scenes of the play does not arise from the gap between the way women are

<https://assignbuster.com/the-problem-of-value-in-shakespeares-troilus-and-cressida/>

celebrated and the way in which men are, but rather from Shakespeare's demonstration that the modes of appraisal are in fact the same; both reduce men and women to objects of desire. In the opening scenes of the play, the lovers do not confront each other except as mediated by Pandarus, who undertakes first to sell Cressida to Troilus (already a lovesick buyer), and then to sell Troilus to Cressida (who is merely playing at being hard to get), through a series of comparisons to other lovers and actors in their tightly scripted world.

Pandarus's role in *Troilus and Cressida*, mediating action by attempting to mediate "or provoke" desire, is a problematic one. His exchanges with both Troilus and Cressida are awkward not just because he is the uncle of a well-born woman reduced to the role of a fool or a go-between, but because his praises at times seem to border on the unnatural and the incestuous. In his praise of Cressida, for example, Pandarus cannot help but twice throw in the admission that she is his niece, which forces us to take the dialogue uneasily even if we had not understood it in that way. For my part, she is my kinswoman, says Pandarus; I would not, as they term it, praise her (1. 1. 45-47). A few lines later, he again laments: Because she's kin to me, therefore she's not so fair as Helen. An she were not kin to me, she would be as fair a Friday as Helen is on Sunday (1. 1. 78-80). Speaking of Troilus to Cressida one scene later, Pandarus returns to the theme of illicit admiration. Unable to exalt Troilus as much as he would like himself, he posits a non-existent female relation to perform the desire for him: Had I a sister were a grace, or a daughter a goddess, he should take his choice (1. 2. 244-46).

Though this is all part of the show, the business-side of love, Pandarus nonetheless helps to set the claustrophobic and ingrown atmosphere of the play. Taken together, these scenes put Pandarus beyond the role of go-between until he seems not just the champion of the young lovers but their pimp, which he will come to realize by the play's end. In his closing remarks, Pandarus, the poor agent despised, identifies himself with bawds and traders in the flesh (5. 10. 36, 46). If the society of Troilus and Cressida is diseased, and the actors in this society are brethren and sisters of the hold-door trade, Pandarus has willingly held the door open for others to pass through (5. 10. 51).

But he is not alone in this charge, which is symptomatic of the undifferentiated society of the play. It reaches the highest levels, as seen marvelously through Ulysses's humiliating treatment of Cressida upon her arrival at the Greek camp. After the Greek general Agamemnon receives Cressida with a kiss, Ulysses "for no apparent purpose" extends the reception to include all of the other Greeks, from ancient Nestor to cuckold Menelaus: Yet is the kindness but particular. / Twere better she were kissed in general (4. 5. 20-21). Ulysses places himself at the end of this string of kisses, but when it comes to be his turn, rejects Cressida's induced generosity. Why then, for Venus sake, give me a kiss, / When Helen is a maid again, and his, Ulysses says, imposing an impossible condition, the sullied Helen's maidenhood, on the kiss (4. 5. 49-50). Ulysses, it seems, sets up this scenario in order to expose Cressida as a woman befitting of his conception of her, so that he is able to then pass judgment upon her as she exits with Diomedes:

Fie, fie upon her!

There's language in her eye, her cheek, her lip;

Nay, her foot speaks. Her wanton spirits look out

At every joint and motive of her body. (4. 5. 54-57)

Ulysses, too, in his lowest moment, reveals himself to be an agent in the hold-door trade.

Ulysses's lines are also significant for another reason. When he requests that Cressida be kissed in general, rather than in particular, Ulysses offers the reader one of the play's major dichotomies, that of the gap between what is general "absolute or unified" and what is particular contingent or private. It is apt (as far as something like this can be apt) that Agamemnon, as the general of the Greeks, should kiss Cressida; it is not apt that all of the men should then follow suit. By divesting the Greek camp of even this small level of hierarchy in command, Ulysses further contributes to the pervasive lack of hierarchy in all aspects of the play's world. Ironically, the compulsion of characters in *Troilus and Cressida* to judge and assess the value of people and actions leads, in the end, to a non-hierarchical society in which everyone is low and equally low. The beautiful Helen flirts shamelessly with Pandarus in 3. 1, her only appearance in the play, and Pandarus's insinuations extend not just to Helen and Cressida but even to Cassandra, the mad prophetic daughter of Priam and not so much a traditional sex object. As he tells Troilus before being cut off: "I will not dispraise your sister Cassandra's wit, but" (1. 1. 48-9).

The role of the pimp, as exhibited by Pandarus in *Troilus and Cressida*, is an unnecessary social role because desire does not have to be performed “through Pandarus’s attempts to raise the stock of both Cressida and Troilus” or mediated. The people do not need a pimp because they have their own private desires and decisions that can be played out in their own time. This is perhaps what gives *Troilus and Cressida* its trace of tragedy: the play world is hostile to any sort of true union between Troilus and Cressida because it insists on turning private and subjective valuations into public and absolute ones. Ulysses’s speech in 1. 3, upholding the specialty of rule and the observance of degree, priority, and place in warfare as in human societies, seems bombastic in the context of the play (78, 86). Ulysses celebrates these ideas in word but not in act, as seen in his tasteless setup of Cassandra, inviting and then rejecting her kiss.

Like Ulysses, the men and women of *Troilus and Cressida* take pleasure in the human ability “and need” to judge and choose, but then show themselves to be dissatisfied with the results of their judgments and choices because they allow for a world of unclear authority and no absolutes. In 2. 2, set at Priam’s palace in Troy, Priam and his sons discuss the merits of returning Helen to the Greeks rather than continuing to wage war against them. Hector opens with a call to let Helen go, conjuring up all the Trojan lives that have been lost in her defense:

If we have lost so many tenths of ours

To guard a thing not ours nor worth to us,

Had it our name, the value of one ten,

<https://assignbuster.com/the-problem-of-value-in-shakespeares-troilus-and-cressida/>

What merit's in that reason which denies

The yielding of her up? (2. 2. 21-4)

Hector's mathematical calculation, perhaps an exasperated one after long years of war, is met by Troilus's disgust, that Hector would weigh the worth and honor of Priam's kingdom on a scale of common ounces (2. 2. 26-8). Troilus rejects reason as an empty tool designed to give men comfort, something to line gloves with (2. 2. 38), and when Hector gently reminds him, Brother, she is not worth what she doth cost / The keeping, Troilus responds with the play's central question: What's aught but as tis valued? (2. 2. 51-3). Troilus's question, and his tragic awareness of the emptiness objects take on absent from any desire or esteem, drives the action of Troilus and Cressida, from Achilles sulking in his tents to Cressida's infidelity with Diomedes and even to Troilus's pre-consummation apprehension toward his beloved.

When Hector claims that value does not reside in the assessor, but possesses its own estimate and dignity / As well wherein tis precious of itself / As in the prizer (2. 2. 54-6), Troilus responds with a strange rhetorical illustration in which one chooses a wife from one's appetites and desires but then follows through in marriage for his honor (2. 261-8). In other words, appetite compels honor through the link between our two types of valuation; we will honor something, that is, value it, because we have once desired it, valued it, in another way. Value does not exist independently of the valuer, as an absolute, because it demands motive, from appetite or from honor, for

its livelihood. It is a complicated argument, but in the end comes to this: Helen must be fought for because she was once valued.

Hector loses the argument because he is, like Troilus and Paris whom he reproaches, a young man whom Aristotle thought / Unfit to hear moral philosophy (2. 2. 166-7). The Trojans, like the Greeks, want to have it both ways, to be able to desire and to pass judgments of worth, but also to reach after absolutes, to conduct societies and wars based on standards of absolute authority and transparent laws. Thus, though Hector suggests that taking Helen away from her husband is morally questionable, he allows Helen to remain, because the appearance of joint and several dignities must be preserved (2. 2. 193).

In Act IV of the play, Paris, in a light and philosophical moment, asks Diomedes, Who, in your thoughts, deserves fair Helen best, / Myself or Menelaus (4. 1. 53-4). Diomedes responds with perhaps the play's only clear-minded treatment of the problem of overestimating value in conducting both public and private life. Menelaus, he says, deserves Helen because he seeks her though she has been contaminated, without consideration for pain or cost; Paris deserves her because he still defends her, ignoring his debasement of her and his own debasement through causing the loss of his kin (4. 1. 55-60). Both merits poised, says Diomedes, each weighs nor less nor more; / But he as he, the heavier for a whore (4. 1. 65-6). Though cynical, it is a fitting sentence in a cynical play, in which Shakespeare gives each man and woman his or her own script " the freedom to value and assess and the freedom to act based on these judgments" and then presents to us the ill-fated result. This is the realization that Pandarus comes to at the <https://assignbuster.com/the-problem-of-value-in-shakespeares-troilus-and-cressida/>

end of Troilus and Cressida, when he laments, perhaps in Shakespeare's voice, Why should our endeavor be so loved, and the performance so loathed? (5. 10. 39-40).