The archetypical character of the trojan war: its reflection in art

There have been many iterations of the tale of the Trojan War, with the Iliad being the most referenced account of the heroes that fought. William Shakespeare, having borrowed heavily from fellow writer Geoffrey Chaucer, recounts the Trojan War with the same events and heroes. However, in true Shakespeare style, the famous playwright offers his own spin on such events and heroes, introducing a very distinct sense of realism throughout the conflict in his play Troilus and Cressida. The Greek deities' roles in the retelling are reduced to the point of non-existence, only referred to by name to those involved. Shakespeare's break from tradition with the Homeric Iliad is evident in how Shakespeare portrays the heroes on either side of the conflict, his abandonment of the Greek deities' actions, and the various anachronisms he introduces in his play. Shakespeare takes the legendary Iliad and draws the epicness out of it, replacing it, in his play, with a deep sense of realism in the heroes and plot.

The first hero of note to display Shakespeare's break from tradition also happens to arguably be the most powerful warrior in the conflict, Achilles. In Mark Edwards' take on the Iliad, the god Apollo's rage-fueled plague against the Greeks " based not only on his support for Hector and Troy but probably also on the tale that Achilles killed young Troilus, Priam's son, in the temple of Apollo" (304). The fact that Homer initially depicted Achilles as Troilus's murderer apparently did not sit well for the plot of Shakespeare's play as Troilus is one of the titular and thus significant characters. Interestingly, Achilles, by comparison, is given a minimized role in the play. This is interesting because the Iliad is sometimes referred to as the rage of Achilles, so the break from tradition in this instance of Achilles is clear.

Achilles's relationships with others form an important part of the Iliad: his hatred of Agamemnon, his respect for Priam, his disgust with Thersites; but Shakespeare too breaks from tradition with this subject as well. In the Iliad, for example, according to Robert Fagles's version, in regards to Thersites, supposedly the truth teller of the common Greek warrior, " Achilles despised him most" (II. 256). Because of Thersites's brutal honesty in how the Greek commanders are faring, there are very few among the leadership that hold him in high regard. In Troilus and Cressida however, upon one of the interactions with Thersites, Achilles offers him to feast with him. After a particularly deep lone lamentation on the part of Thersites, Achilles later asks why he has not joined him in feasts, " Where…Art thou come?…why hast thou not served thyself in to my table so many meals? Come, what's Agamemnon?" (II. iii, 40-43). Achilles first asks where has Thersites been in his railing against the Greek leadership, extends a warm embrace in including Thersites in his feasts, and then empathetically asks what is Agamemnon to Thersites in a spirit of understanding. This represents a difference in relations between the Iliad and in Troilus and Cressida. In the Iliad, as plainly stated, Thersites is despised by all, including Achilles who is said to despise him most, yet in Troilus and Cressida, he extends the hand of friendship and understanding because they both, in reality, share the same message: this is not their war, this is Agamemnon and Menelaus's war. Thus, Shakespeare openly breaks from tradition by including Achilles's near brotherly manner towards Thersites, despite the insults occasionally slung his way.

The manner in which Achilles handles such insults, whether directed at him or to his cousin Patroclus, also shows Achilles rather cool headed demeanor in contrast to the fiery wrath portrayed in Homer's Iliad. When invited to join Achilles in his feasts, Achilles seeks to understand Thersites's views more completely and bids him to talk. The roles that Achilles, Thersites, and even Patroclus have is brought up for discussion, but it does not appear as though Achilles allows these words to affect him even as Thersites turns the subject into a slight against Patroclus. " Peace, fool! I have not done," Thersites exclaims to Patroclus, to which Achilles responds " He is a privileged man. Proceed Thersites" (Act II. iii 56-57). Thersites had just railed on Patroclus, calling him a fool and both Patroclus and Achilles know well of Thersites's vehement hatred towards Agamemnon along with most of the leaders of the Greek army. While Patroclus is quick to shut Thersites down, Achilles is the sympathetic voice, and perhaps it is because in truth, Achilles and Thersites share the same viewpoints on the Trojan War: that it is a useless war based on ego and greed. Achilles welcomes Thersites's continued criticisms if for no other reason but to understand him better than he may understand himself perhaps. It is with this relationship with Thersites that Shakespeare perhaps offers one of the more acute breaks from tradition.

Finally, near the end of Troilus and Cressida, the differences of Achilles's actions and character are completed as Shakespeare rewrites how Achilles ends Hector's life. In the Iliad, Homer states that Achilles had a divine intervention: Athena had disguised herself as Hector's ally, Deiphobus, in his frantic duel with an enraged Achilles. It was only after the illusion disappeared, that Achilles killed Hector, who was still completely armed and

thus died an honorable death (XXII. 248-432). However, Shakespeare has decreed that there would be no mystic forces or deities in his play Troilus and Cressida; he once again departs from tradition by offering a different rendition of Hector's death.

Hector's end, as depicted in the Iliad compared to the scene from Troilus and Cressida, does not come nearly so honorably on the part of Achilles who has ample assistance against an unarmed Hector. Near the end of another day of battle, Hector prematurely begins to disarm himself " Rest, sword, thou hast thy fill of blood and death." Not one moment passes by when Achilles and his gang of Myrmidons interrupts Hector in his apparent reverie, " Look, Hector, how the sun begins to set...To close the day up, Hector's life is done." Hector pleads with Achilles to face him when he is armed, " Forgo this vantage, Greek." Achilles, uncaringly, commands his men to attack " Strike, fellows, strike! This is the fellow I seek," and Hector is then killed (V. viii, 4-10). It is clear here that Achilles does not care whether Hector's death is honorable or not, and there is no confirmation even that Achilles was the one who had dealt the deathblow to Hector. Whether Patroclus's death earlier in the play enraged Achilles to the point of not caring about honor or Achilles thought that Hector was admittedly foolish to disarm on the field and thus deserved his death all the more is quite open to interpretation. However, it is clear that Achilles's killing of Hector was completely devoid of mysticism and honor, bravery and glory as told in the epic, thus confirming once more of Shakespeare's break from the story told in The Iliad.

On the discussion of characters, one of the main characters in Troilus and Cressida, Pandarus, varies greatly from the play as compared to the epic of

the Iliad. Pandarus, in the Iliad, is an archer who was a keen hunter and, following a brief truce between the opposing forces, is tempted by Athena with promises of glory and prizes were he to fell Menelaus with a single arrow. However, once the arrow is launched, Athena turns what may have been a fatal shot into a wounding one and thus the brutal war begins anew (IV. 99-153). Comparing to the smooth talking, shady panderer that Shakespeare portrays in Troilus and Cressida, one could almost assume that it was a different Pandarus mentioned in the Iliad by how different the two are in their roles. The only similarities between the two depictions of Pandarus is that the Trojan warriors in the Iliad sought to block the view of Pandarus's shot from the Greeks so he may aim critically without being seen, and perhaps there is some symbolism for that in Troilus and Cressida as Pandarus's motives too are hard to truly derive. In a way, Shakespeare twists the character of Pandarus to suit his own needs to tell the story. While Pandarus was only famous for his missed shot in the Iliad as an archer, he is known to have hidden aims and is known to be a master manipulator in the Shakespeare's play: a break from tradition most assuredly, but somewhat of a symbolic gesture one could assume.

Shakespeare's handling of characters is not in the least what changes when comparing the Iliad to Troilus and Cressida; being a man of his times, Shakespeare twists his retelling of the events of the Iliad to relate to the audience by eschewing the Greek deities' interventions and references to titles and sayings of religious nature. These anachronisms serve to further part Homer and Shakespeare in their respective tales. First, it is important to note that absolutely nowhere within Troilus and Cressida are there divine

interventions of any kind. The mortals of the play only mention the deities by name, and only then by their Roman names. This is significant because it is theorized the survivors of Troy went on to found Rome, thus many believe that Shakespeare went so far as to favor the Trojans, supported by the cowardly acts of Achilles and the brutish demeanors of the Greeks towards Cressida.

One could even note that, given Shakespeare’s hinted religious affiliations in nearly all of his plays, that the connection made to Rome holds special significance in Troilus and Cressida. Rome, after all, is the birthplace of Catholicism, and once again, in true Shakespeare style, the playwright offers many small references to the faith. What’s more is it is entirely possible to complete the analogy of comparing to the Trojans to Rome by comparing the Greeks to England. It is no secret that in the 16th century, Henry VIII severed all ties from the Catholic Church after several disputes over the annulment of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon. Therefore, the comparison is now complete: covertly, the Trojans represented Rome and Catholicism while the Greeks represented the onslaught of Protestantism in the hearts and minds of the English led by King Henry VIII. It is important to note that this may be one of the subtler, yet controversial changes to the tone of the events originally portrayed by Homer as Shakespeare may have intended to spread his own views throughout the play.

Various anachronisms introduced by Shakespeare serve to further differentiate Homer’s work from the famous playwright. On the subject of religion, the characters of Troilus and Cressida, as indicated earlier, introduce the saying of amen in agreement or assertion of a point,

something purely Christian in nature. Achilles, as a matter of fact, makes a reference to the Virgin Mary, perhaps hinting at Shakespeare's own religious preference as Achilles begins talking of the visit by Hector and oncoming lottery. " Marry, this, sir, is proclaimed" (II. i, 120). Marry is taken to mean as though Achilles is stating ' by the Virgin Mary', in the same manner as one might say ' by God' in today's time. Lastly, the introduction of the title of knight throughout Troilus and Cressida is another anachronism for the term knight implies nobility, honor, and chivalry and while this may have been a romantic term well known to the audience, such a title simply did not exist back in Homer's era. These anachronisms, as a whole, assist Shakespeare in taking Homer's Iliad and evolving it into a story more suited for his own needs and telling in Troilus and Cressida.

By portraying the Trojan War as thus, Shakespeare makes a statement of sorts: that sometimes heroes an audience glorifies are nothing more than mortals who share many of the same flaws and misgivings as the audience. The Greeks did not gain the honor they sought by attacking and sacking Troy in Troilus and Cressida, rather it is possible Shakespeare made an example of the Greeks' lecherous and cowardly ways. Shakespeare morphs the heroes he depicts in his adaptation to more closely reflect his vision of realism in such times. More than that, Shakespeare perhaps introduces a bit of his own spirituality by the mentions of amen to seal powerful sayings, and even calling on the icon of the Virgin Mary. In the end, these anachronisms serve to further divide the play of Troilus and Cressida from the epic of Homer's Iliad, and though Shakespeare may have been a fan of the epic, he clearly also had his reservations and critiques. By adapting Chaucer's earlier

work, Shakespeare gets to reinvent Homer’s epic in his own personal interpretation while dialing back the ferocity and power of both sides’ heroes to more realistic levels and removing all divine intervention save calling of Greek deities’ names. Plainly stated, Shakespeare’s telling of Troilus and Cressida can be described as an anti-Homeric Iliad, and perhaps he sought by taking the epic out of the epic, his audience could more closely connect with the heroes and ideals in this ancient war of pride, lust, and greed.