TROILUS AND CRESSIDA: An Introduction

Humphrey Tonkin, University of Hartford
tonkin@hartford.edu

Genre and kind

We are accustomed to thinking of Shakespeare’s plays as belonging to one of four categories, sub-genres, or kinds: tragedy, comedy, history, romance. While the terms tragedy and comedy require no explanation here, we should note that the term history describes not so much a separate generic category as a category defined by content: the histories all deal with English history. The last of these sub-genres, romance, was invented after Shakespeare’s day to describe a group of late comedies that did not seem to fit the definition of the earlier comedies, or at least constituted a kind of subdivision within Shakespearean comedy as a whole – but contemporary definitions were loose. Shakespeare often mixed his kinds: the Henry IV plays, while histories in their broad lineaments, contain many elements of comedy; Richard III, while it announces itself as a tragedy, is also a history play. Romeo and Juliet is clearly a tragedy, but its structure and mood have much in common with the comedies. Even the later, major tragedies – King Lear, Macbeth – have their comic moments.

But we know where these and the other plays I have mentioned fit in the generic classification: they are more one kind than another. Troilus and Cressida is more difficult to classify because it partakes of two different kinds at the same time, and in about equal proportions. Indeed its very subject is the uneasy relationship between tragedy and comedy, between heroism and absurdity. There is some evidence that the editors of the First Folio, the first collected edition of Shakespeare’s plays (1623) may have had a similar definitional problem: the play ended up wedged between the histories and the tragedies, unpaginated (though there may be other reasons for this evident last-minute improvisation). Here, it is called a tragedy, but in the original quarto edition of 1609 it is called The Historie of Troylus and Cresseida.

We think of Julius Caesar as one of Shakespeare’s more notable tragedies, but this study of the politics of history certainly has a kinship with the depictions of the English past in the history plays. Julius Caesar comes toward the end of Shakespeare’s series of English history plays, and represents a branching out to Roman history. Shakespeare turns to the Latin classics in a number of other plays too, among them Antony and Cleopatra and Coriolanus. But while these three plays deal with Roman history, Troilus and Cressida looks further back, to the misty story of the fall of Troy, perhaps the most enduring
narrative, part history, part legend, of the Romans’ Greek predecessors. Its ultimate origins lie in the great Greek-language epic Homer’s *Iliad*.

**The Troy story: The *Iliad***

We need to start a step or two back from the play itself, with the Troy story that inspired it. There is no story from the classical world that carries as much power as this story of Troy. It is recounted for us first in the *Iliad*, which describes the last few days before the end of the Trojan War, a war brought about when the Trojan prince Paris is sent by his father Priam, king of Troy, on an embassy to King Menelaus of Greece. There he meets and falls in love with Menelaus’s wife, Helen, renowned as the most beautiful woman in the world.

Paris has had an unusual upbringing. His mother Hecuba, shortly before his birth, dreams that he will bring about the destruction of Troy. Accordingly right after his birth he is abandoned on the slopes of Mount Ida, where shepherds raise him as one of their own. He is regarded as the most handsome man in the world, and so when Hera, Athene and Aphrodite all lay claim to a golden apple thrown among them by the goddess of discord, they turn to Paris to adjudicate. Hera offers him fame, Athene wisdom and skill in war, and Aphrodite the world’s most beautiful woman. He chooses Aphrodite, thereby triggering the rape of Helen and the Trojan War. Later, he is discovered and reconciled to Priam and Hecuba. This story of the prince living as a shepherd reappears in many forms and in many cultures. Shakespeare’s *Winter’s Tale* revolves around the abandoned princess Perdita (“the lost one”) and her rediscovery among shepherds. The story of Moses in the bulrushes is a variant of the legend, and the story of Jesus the god who comes down among ordinary people is another.

So Paris makes off with Helen and carries her back to Troy. Menelaus, with his brother and fellow-king Agamemnon, who serves as commander-in-chief, sails with an army to regain Helen, and a ten-year war ensues.

The *Iliad* recounts how Agamemnon initially refuses to give up his captive Chryseis, daughter of Calchas, a priest of Apollo whose island the Greeks have sacked. When a pestilence ensues (the gods intervene on both sides in this war, and their conflicts mirror the human conflicts), Agamemnon eventually gives her up, but takes Achilles’ captive Briseis instead, thereby causing Achilles to refrain from fighting with the Greeks and to take to his tent with his friend Patroclus. His anger at this dishonor and the fatal consequences of this anger are the main subject of the *Iliad*.

Achilles’ mother Thetis wants to show the Greeks how much they need Achilles, and she enlists the help of Zeus, who causes Agamemnon to have a false dream, leading him to test the loyalty of his men by telling them that they can go home. When they make a dash for their ships, Odysseus has to intervene and defeat their leader Thersites, who is described as an ugly and base-born Greek. A truce is declared. Paris engages in single
combat with Menelaus to settle the matter and has to be rescued by his patroness Aphrodite.

Athene, still smarting from her rejection by Paris, supports the Greeks against the Trojans. She has Pandarus treacherously break the truce by wounding Menelaus with an arrow. Diomedes kills Pandarus in heroic fighting.

Hector fights Ajax indecisively, but the war begins to go in the Trojans’ favor. Hector and his troops break through the walls the Greeks have built to defend their ships. The gods quarrel, but eventually Hector is driven back. All this while Patroclus tries to persuade Achilles to fight. Patroclus goes out in Achilles’ armor and is slain by Hector. This rouses Achilles to seek revenge. Although he is told that soon he will no longer be protected by the gods, he eventually kills Hector and desecrates his body. Priam begs for it back, and eventually Achilles consents, his anger now spent. Hector is buried with honor.

Thus the story in the Iliad. The hero Achilles who kills Hector is himself doomed: legends (and other lost texts) tell us that Achilles will be killed by Paris, shot in the heel, the one part of his body that is not immune to attack. And of course the fight itself takes place under the shadow of the coming fall of Troy, destroyed by the treacherous Greeks who enter the city in the belly of a wooden horse. Thus this story of heroes, and of the intervention of gods in the affairs of men, carries with it a melancholy strain: these great glories are all in the past, and they have been taken from us by human treachery or other human flaws. Indeed, the Troy story was the great example of a great city brought low by what Kimbrough calls moral and ethical disorder: the very war itself was an example of human folly, in which great men did great deeds, to be sure, but in some sense to no avail.

Above all, Troy’s destruction is a symbol of the futility of human endeavor: glories pass, and mortals die. “Iam seges est ubi Troia fuit,” writes Penelope to Ulysses in one of Ovid’s imaginary letters in the Heroides. The glory of Troy, the “topless towers of Ilium” as Marlowe describes them, is brought to destruction. “Dust hath closed Helen’s eye,” as Shakespeare’s contemporary Thomas Nashe puts it. Thus to meditate on Troy is to meditate on the destruction of civilizations.

The Troy Story: The Aeneid and beyond

For a description of Troy’s destruction, we turn to Virgil’s Aeneid. It is important to stress that that destruction turned on a trick: the building of the Trojan horse. The Greeks built a wooden horse which they filled with soldiers and left outside Troy’s walls. They made a great show of sailing away from Troy. The Trojans saw the horse as a gift from the gods to celebrate the Greeks’ departure. They hauled it into the city. In the middle of the night, it disgorged its contents, and the Greek soldiers opened the gates of the city to allow their comrades to enter. Thus the legendary and romantic history of Troy, and the
glorious buildings and towers that every description of it emphasizes, were brought down and erased.

The *Iliad* stops short of telling this part of the story. But it nonetheless describes the passing of an old order. The Roman poet Virgil’s *Aeneid* stresses the rising of a new order out of the ashes of the old. Aeneas of Troy, himself a son of the goddess Aphrodite and the human Anchises (and thus a successor to Paris – he who is the inspiration and indirectly the destroyer of Troy), will escape the flames, sail across the Mediterranean, and, after many adventures, found the colony that will later be the site of the city of Rome. In Book 2 of the *Aeneid*, Aeneas tells the story of his escape from Troy. It is Aeneas’ story that serves as inspiration for the First Player’s speech in *Hamlet* 2.3. In this speech, the venerable old father and king Priam is killed by the Greek Pyrrhus – and thus the old order falls to the new. But Pyrrhus is the son of Achilles, and thus he too is taking his revenge, both for the death of Achilles and also for the entire war against Troy.

Not only does Aeneas the father of the Romans escape from Troy, but after the fall of the city the Greek Odysseus (known as Ulysses among the Romans), King of Ithaca, seeking to return home, passes through a series of miraculous adventures that occupy Homer’s other great poem the *Odyssey*. And according to medieval legend Brute or Brutus, great-grandson of Aeneas, passing through a series of adventures, finally ends up in England and founds the British people.

So the Troy story was central to the classical legends and stories that came down to the peoples of western Europe. A certain Benoît de Sante-Maure, writing in France in the twelfth century, wrote a massive 30,000-line poem called the *Roman de Troie*, based on the late Latin prose version of Dares Phrygius, allegedly the work of an eye-witness (and thus even more authentic than Homer’s poem). The Italian Boccaccio, writing in the fourteenth century, adapted part of Benoît’s poem, the part where he retells the story of Chryseis, daughter of Calchas, in a long poem called *Il Filostrato*, the “man overwhelmed by love.” Chryseis becomes Criseida, and the story that Boccaccio tells deals with the time after her return to Troy. The Trojan Troiolo wins her love with the help of his friend Pandaro, who is also Criseida’s cousin. But when Calchas flees to the Greeks (taking his powers as a prophet with him), Criseida follows and abandons Troilus, who is overcome by grief.

**The Troy story in Britain**

A few years later, the English poet Geoffrey Chaucer takes up the story, adapting it from Boccaccio. In his hands, the characters spring to life, in part because he creates a very real tension between the narrator on the one hand and the moral center of the story on the other. This very modern-seeming approach to the story, in which the narrator is clearly half in love with Criseyde even as his narrative condemns her, creates some very real tensions, and the poem is given still greater depth by its extensive examination of the question of the lovers’ freedom of action or lack of it.
Pandarus, who in Boccaccio’s story is her cousin, becomes Criseyde’s uncle, thereby changing the relationship significantly. Pandarus convinces Criseyde that Troilus is madly in love with her, and he then arranges for the two to meet at a dinner hosted by Deiphobus, Troilus’ brother. At first their love is chaste, but Pandarus gets them into bed together. When Calchas demands the return of Criseyde, exchanged for the Trojan Antenor, the lovers are devastated, but soon Criseyde is seduced by the Greek Diomedes. She is racked by guilt and by a lingering love for Troilus, and indeed gives into Diomedes because she feels she has lost Troilus forever. Troilus cannot believe that Diomedes has taken Criseyde from him, until he sees her brooch on Diomedes’ armor. Furious, he rides into battle, fights with Diomedes and is finally killed by Achilles. The poem ends with Troilus looking down on earth from heaven and seeing earthly life as mere vanity. The poet calls on young lovers to turn instead to Christ – an admonition that hardly squares with the earthy story that he has just told with such gusto.

A hundred years later, the Scottish poet Robert Henryson returns to the story in The Testament of Cresseid and rewrites its ending. His Cresseid has been abandoned by Diomedes and punished by the gods, who ruin her beauty and strike her with leprosy. When Troilus rides by with a band of victorious Trojans, he does not recognize her, but gives her alms. She does not recognize him, learning his identity soon after, and sending him a ring she has had from him. She dies before then can meet one another again.

The popularity of the Troilus and Cressida story has been abundantly documented by scholars. By the time we reach Shakespeare’s day, Cressida is firmly established as a symbol of infidelity and Troilus as one of constancy. Such assumptions would surely have accompanied Shakespeare’s audience into the theatre, even if they did know Chaucer’s and Henryson’s sympathetic treatment of Cressida’s lightness.

Treatments of the Troy story were abundant in the fifteenth century, including John Lydgate’s Troy Book and William Caxton’s Recuyell of the Historyes of Troy, both of which concentrated on the war rather than the Cressida story. They abound in the sixteenth century too, for example in George Peele’s poem The Tale of Troy (1589) or Robert Greene’s collection of stories (whose frame is a lull in the Trojan war) Euphues, His Censure of Phialautus (1587). But there are two events in the sixteenth century that require our particular attention. The first was the translation, in the 1540s, by the Earl of Surrey, of two books of Virgil’s Aeneid, the second and the fourth. They were published after his death in 1557 in Tottel’s Miscellany. The second book is the one that deals with the escape from Troy. The translation is rendered in blank verse, the first use of blank verse in English. It was this form, associated, then, with epic poetry, that became the basis for the elevated diction of theatrical tragedy, in Sackville and Norton’s Gorboduc, in the plays of Marlowe and Kyd, and, ultimately, in Shakespeare.

Then in 1598, just a few years before Troilus and Cressida, the first seven books of Homer’s Iliad were translated into English by George Chapman. This was not the first Homer to appear in English: Arthur Hall translated the first ten books, inaccurately and tediously, in 1581. Chapman’s translation, however, was a great success, and it is altogether likely Shakespeare would have read this work by a fellow-dramatist. Indeed,
there are verbal echoes, and most of the Homeric incidents alluded to by Shakespeare come from the first seven books. So the Troy story came to him not just from the accumulated retellings of the middle ages (including, by the way, a reissue of Caxton’s *Recuyell* in 1596), but also mediated more directly through Chapman’s translation. Some argue that the play can be seen as a kind of rejoinder to Chapman’s excessive respect for the grandeur of the Troy story.

Shakespeare has written about Troy before – in his narrative poem *The Rape of Lucrece*, where Lucrece scrutinizes a painting of the fall of Troy (1366-1568), searching for ways of identifying her own predicament with figures in the painting. But Shakespeare’s version of the story goes back in the first instance to Chaucer; yet the mood is very different. This different mood springs as much as anything from an ambivalence about the past, and an ambivalence about the very nature of action – an ambivalence that is not confined to the characters but extends as far as Shakespeare himself.

**Troilus and Cressida and Hamlet**

The moment in *Hamlet* where Hamlet himself racks his memory for the speech about the death of Priam in Troy is an effort to reach into the past to find not just words but an entire form, an entire framework to serve as a means of ordering the present (much as Lucrece, in her despair, seeks to do the same). This is, after all, what literature is. The ordering principle that Hamlet seizes on turns out to be less simple than he supposes. Pyrrhus the son of the Greek Achilles avenges the death of his father by killing Priam, king of the Trojans. But Priam too is a father and the rightful king of the Trojans: in avenging the death of his father Pyrrhus kills another father and an anointed king: everything depends, in this little story, on whether one is on the side of the Greeks or the side of the Trojans, and therefore even this bombastic and old-fashioned (and therefore perhaps comforting) speech turns out to hide deep and troublesome ambiguities.

The Player’s speech in *Hamlet*, written (we assume) in 1599 or 1600, turns now, a year or two later, into a complete play of Troy (much as Queen Mab in *Romeo and Juliet* becomes *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, or *Pyramus and Thisbe* becomes *Romeo and Juliet*, depending on the order in which we believe them written), but it lacks the moral focus of its predecessor, lapsing into a kind of baffling cynicism that hangs over a couple of other Shakespeare plays of this period, *All’s Well that Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*. If, in the player’s speech, everything depends on whose side you are on, in *Troilus and Cressida* this ambivalence is even more evident: the action turns on a figure who belongs to both sides, Cressida, and on a figure who sticks to his own cause despite its evident deficiencies, Troilus. If the story that Shakespeare tells seems to lack a clear and single interpretation, we should remember that it comes in the aftermath of Shakespeare’s most demanding play, *Hamlet*. That play, too, lacks clarity of interpretation, though it radiates meanings. It is also a play that is full of energy and invention, and the same is true of *Troilus and Cressida*. 
The play presents a deeply anti-heroic view of the great Greek and Trojan heroes: a bumbling Ajax (who fights on one side but belongs to both) and a petulant Achilles, a windbag called Ulysses, and a kind of gap between the rhetoric of public discourse and the moral fiber of those who utter it. In fact, the play is populated with the cynical and the self-deluded – particularly the pair Pandarus and Thersites, the one an opportunist and the other a raider, the one the Trojan commentator primarily on the love of Troilus and Cressida, the other the Greek commentator on the follies of the Greeks. The story of Troilus and Cressida reduces the great and heroic Troy story to its symbolic lowest common denominator, in which Cressida in effect plays the role of Helen, who was abducted from Greece, and Troilus the role of the selfish and besotted Paris, who abducted Helen.

In Shakespeare’s play, these figures – Troilus, Cressida, Helen, Paris – are surrounded by characters out of the *Iliad*, old friends seen through a distorting lens – Priam, Hector, Paris, Deiphobus, Diomedes, Agamemnon, Menelaus, Ajax, Achilles, Ulysses, Nestor, Patroclus, all of them characters in Homer’s epic, but here reduced to the merely human, or given a quite different role (as in the case of Thersites, or Pandarus). It’s almost as though Shakespeare makes fun of the heroic and the epic. The same is true of Troilus’ own morality: there is a gap between his conception of honor and the nature of his desire for Cressida. Perhaps we can see the Trojans as representing the old order of honor, destined to be cut down and destroyed by the wily Greeks, but in Shakespeare’s play much of the conviction has gone out of this old sense of honor and the Trojans often seem to be merely going through the motions, merely imitating it.

But in truth there is also a gap between the grand rhetoric of this play and the notable limitations of its characters. “What’s Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba?” we seem to ask ourselves, as yet another grand speech is put in the mouth of one of the characters, who seems to render it as though he is play-acting. In *Troilus and Cressida*, as in *Hamlet*, there is a gap between rhetoric and reality, and an edgy pushing at the limits of meaning. In fact, one could argue that *Hamlet* and *Troilus and Cressida* are both of them Mannerist plays, in the sense that the Mannerist style pushes at form and space, contorting the human body and pushing at the frame of the picture as though unable to be contained in idealization. Thus the ideal is redefined by the contingent: there is a constant tension between the ideal (the grand speech of Ulysses on order, for example) and the actual (Ulysses the politician who utters it). We find a similar tension in the “what a piece of work is man” speech in *Hamlet*: a grand statement of a certain Renaissance ideal (often cited as such), delivered for the benefit of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who have just confessed that they have been sent to spy on Hamlet. Is the speech, then, a grand utterance of Renaissance idealism or a piece of obfuscation designed to be delivered to Polonius and the King?

We note, in the case of Hamlet’s speech, that interpretation is layered: a textbook statement of what it is to be human is delivered to two young men engaged in a spying operation, who are known to be engaging in such an operation by the speaker, who in turn perhaps wants what he says to be carried back to the people the young men are spying for. This layering of interpretation, so evident a characteristic of *Hamlet*, carries
over into *Troilus and Cressida*, where motives are hidden behind other motives, grand statements reveal base intentions, and meaning is contained in meaning like so many Chinese boxes. This layered complexity is nowhere clearer than in the triple presentation of Cressida with Diomedes in 5.2., where Troilus and Ulysses (Trojan and Greek) look on while Thersites spies on all four: Opportunism observed by Principle spied on by Cynicism. We are dealing, then, with extreme relativism. We might also note in passing that in *Hamlet* a young man of noble disposition deals with the apparently wavering nature of women: as Hamlet reacts to Gertrude, so Troilus reacts to Cressida.

Such sophisticated and multivalent narrative suggests a sophisticated audience. The early history of the play is shrouded in mystery, but one theory maintains that the play was first performed at the Inns of Court, perhaps as part of their Twelfth Night festivities, maybe in 1602/03. This makes sense of topical and temporal allusions in Pandarous’s final speech, it links the play with the despair and cynicism of the elite in the closing months of the old Queen Elizabeth’s reign, and it helps validate the complex retrospective and critique of the Troy story itself.

We do not need this hypothesis to acknowledge that the play was written in a particular theatrical context: a period of particularly sharp rivalry among dramatists and theatrical companies in London, in which the playwrights John Marston, Thomas Dekker and Ben Jonson were involved, and the Admiral’s Men and the Lord Chamberlain’s Men appeared to be at odds. Shakespeare alludes to the controversies of the period when Hamlet meets the Players and discusses the current theatrical gossip (2.2.325-50). *Troilus and Cressida* may be in part intended to satirize Ben Jonson’s rather solemn style: indeed seeing it as a satiric work first and foremost (rather than as comedy or tragedy) may make sense.

**The Play’s Opening**

But at first sight there is little of this complexity in the play’s opening words. *Troilus and Cressida* begins on a grandiloquent note – with an armed Prologue whose evocation of the Trojan wars resembles nothing so much as the speeches of the Chorus in *Henry V*, or indeed Henry’s speeches themselves – designed to bring within the scope of the play the canvas of history itself. The Prologue conjures up grand names:

To Tenedos they come,  
And the deep-drawing barks do there disgorge  
Their warlike fraughtage. Now on Dardan plains  
The fresh and yet unbruised Greeks do pitch  
Their brave pavilions: Priam’s six-gated city,  
Dardan and Timbria, Helias, Chetas, Troien,  
And Antenorides, with massy staples  
And co-responsive and fulfilling bolts,  
Stir up the sons of Troy. (1.Prol.11-19)
Compare this with the Chorus to Act 1 or Act 2 of Henry V, or Henry’s speech to his men before Agincourt, written a mere four or so years before:

Then shall our names,
Familiar in his mouth as household words,
Harry the King, Bedford and Exeter,
Warwick and Talbot, Salisbury and Gloucester,
Be in their flowing cups freshly remembered. (4.3.51-55)

In Henry V the opening Chorus, as with Romeo and Juliet, gives the impression that the play emerges from the initial poem – in the case of Romeo and Juliet an extremely formal and structured poem. Here, we see something similar: indeed, the idea is reinforced by what we know of the origin of dramatic blank verse in English renderings of epic (a tradition carried on, by the way, when Milton comes to write his epic Paradise Lost). Epic, Horace tells us in his Ars Poetica, begins “in medias res,” in the middle of things. So does Shakespeare’s play: “our play / Leaps o’er the vaunt and firstlings of those broils, / Beginning in the middle, starting thence away / To what may be digested in a play.” But in this case, the play that emerges seems to come loose from its moorings: it keeps escaping from its formality, its logic, its poem-ness. And, as for the epic substance of the play, it is, after all, about running off with someone else’s wife.... “All the argument is a cuckold and a whore,” as Thersites more aptly puts it.

Just a couple of years before, Ben Jonson’s play Poetaster featured an armed Prologue, a figure who donned a suit of armor, he alleges, to protect himself against “base detractors and illiterate apes.” Shakespeare’s Prologue is armed for a different reason: not because of instructions from author or actor, but so that he can be “suited” (in both senses of the word) to the substance of the play, the Trojan wars. But this suit of armor worn by the Prologue, while it allows Shakespeare to poke fun at Jonson by presenting himself as altogether more confident than his rival, perhaps sits on the Prologue uncomfortably: one of the questions we will confront in this play is whether the suits of armor actually contain anything of worth. Even the mighty Hector is for a while distracted by the pursuit of armor rather than the pursuit of his enemies. But that is still to come.

Following the Prologue the action is immediately deflated. The entry point is not the war at all, but Troilus and Pandarus – with Troilus in love, to excess. Troilus, calling for his servant, declares that he has no stomach for the war: the Greeks are strong and fierce, and the fight, by implication, worthy Troilus’ attention, but he is “weaker than a woman’s tear, / Tamer than sleep, fonder than ignorance, / Less valiant than the virgin in the night.” He announces, then, from the very beginning that he is distracted from honor by love, made effeminate by his desire. Pandarus is impatient with him, indeed declaring that he will “not meddle nor make no further.” Pandarus, as we later discover, is all for uniting sex partners, but quite unsentimental when it comes to grand utterances about love and war. In fact it is this tension – between grand aspirations and a kind of workmanlike approach to love and sex – that shapes the play. One is reminded of the none the less very different world of Romeo and Juliet, and the Nurse’s unreflective approach to her young charge’s love for Romeo.
Perhaps “workmanlike” is the wrong word, since Pandarus’s matter-of-factness on matters related to sex is part of a much bigger issue – the collapse of ideology and idealism that pervades the Greek camp and threatens to undermine Troy too. Achilles allows personal pique to distract him from his responsibilities, perhaps because he cannot fully endorse those responsibilities (he is galvanized into action only by the death of his beloved Patroclus); Ajax will fight, but mostly for the wrong reasons; and Troilus himself is turned aside by a love that may or may not be worth it, a love that seems caught between idealism and the vicissitudes and changeableness of human affairs (and he, like Achilles, commits himself to war only in anger at Cressida’s betrayal).

As the first scene gets underway, Pandarus immediately brings the action down from verse to prose, with images of milling grain serving as metaphors for the love relationship. Troilus, as insistently, seeks to elevate it to verse: Troilus, lifted to the stars and to the diction of great love by thoughts of Cressida, is frustrated by his inability to find any responsive emotion in Pandarus, who insists on seeing things as they are. Only after Pandarus has left can Troilus, beset by the sounds of war, express his feelings – and these feelings begin by a denunciation of the very cause of the Trojan war: “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 starv’d a subject for my sword.” He prefers instead to tie his fortunes to the love of Cressida and hence to Pandarus, and he uses an image right out of Petrarchan love poetry with a new twist: “Between our Ilium and where she resides, / Let it be call’d the wild and wand’ring flood, / Ourself the merchant, and this sailing Pandar / Our doubtful hope, our convoy, and our bark” (1.1.101-104).

And when Aeneas appears at the end of the scene, it is to tell us that Paris has been hurt by Menelaus – a piece of news that Troilus dismisses with a wave of the hand: “Let Paris bleed, ’tis but a scar to scorn: / Paris is gor’d with Menelaus’ horn.” Thus this little piece of wit reduces a major episode in the _Iliad_ that even involves the intervention of the goddess Aphrodite herself: Shakespeare wittily and repeatedly cuts the great Troy story down to size.

More to the point, the grand language of the Prologue is followed by an essentially comedic scene at the beginning of the action. The play, we will discover, really has two interrelated stories: the story of a particular series of episodes in the Trojan wars, culminating in the perfidious death of Hector, and the story of the lovers Troilus and Cressida, in which Cressida perfidiously betrays Troilus in the name of survival. Both the comedic and the tragic elements in the play are about betrayal – and even the audience is in some sense caught up in this betrayal when it is denied the neat, value-laden ending that it has grown accustomed to in the theatre. We will discover in the fullness of time that the shift from the heroic to the cynically comedic at the beginning of the play is matched by a similar shift at the end: from the heroics of Troilus’ defiance of the Greeks following the death of Hector to the final words of Pandarus in which he suggests that we are procurors all.
Next to the first scene of Troilus and Pandarus is a parallel scene with Cressida and Pandarus. But first, Cressida and Alexander talk about the encounter on the battlefield between Hector and Ajax (who is actually Hector’s nephew), which is again reduced to a mere occasion for a quip by Cressida: in Homer it occupies a sizable portion of Book VII. One has the impression, here and elsewhere in this play, that one is dealing with some Elizabethan version of the Reduced Homer Company.

Cressida, we note, talks in prose, even though Alexander initially talks in verse. When Pandarus arrives, himself a go-between from scene 1 to scene 2, the prose continues as the two of them look on at the parade of Trojans returning from the day’s battles against the Greeks. Cressida’s serial observations on the various Trojan generals are not only ironically layered allusions to Homer and other versions of the Troy story, but also a reprise of an old idea – the serial discussion of potential suitors, such as, for example, Portia employs, less formally, in *The Merchant of Venice*. Such discussions are occasions for acid female commentary on the shortcomings of their men, and this is very much Cressida’s mode – in the process of which she presents herself as no stranger to sex, no romantic dreamer, indeed as unsentimental as Pandarus himself.

But this worldly-wise stance may be designed simply to fall in line with Pandarus, to talk his language. Alone, she reveals at the end of the scene that “more in Troilus thousandfold I see / Than in the glass of Pandar’s praise may be.” She avoids expressing enthusiasm for Troilus, she tells us (in a series of rhyming couplets whose sing-song regularity turn them into a series of maxims) because it is important for a woman to hold back: “Men prize the thing ungain’d more than it is” (1.2.294). Such a tease fits well with Troilus’s romantic image of the “wild and wand’ring flood” separating him from the “India” of Cressida: it is lack, absence, emptiness that creates desire. An appetite sated is no appetite at all – and so much in this play has to do with the unsatisfactory nature of satiety, or, to put the matter in other terms, of the inability of the characters to elevate their cause above the petty contention of angry men over sexual possession. We might also note that Cressida in effect appeals to the techniques of commercial bargaining: do not show too much enthusiasm for the commodity you wish to buy.

**The Greeks**

We have met Troilus and we have met Cressida. It now remains to meet the Greeks. They occupy the third and final scene of Act 1, and they do so at considerable length. The scene has the form and the content of a kind of grand debate on the conduct of the war, a series of highly public speeches delivered with a kind of rhetorical sonorosity. Agamemnon speaks first, in 30 lines; Nestor follows in a further 24; then Ulysses in something over sixty lines, interrupted only by a brief speech of encouragement from Agamemnon. Then, a few lines later, he is off again for over 40 lines. Nestor replies in 10, and then Ulysses goes on for a further 15. And what do they talk about in this series of huge speeches? Agamemnon begins by suggesting that the failure of the Greeks to make headway against Troy over a period of seven years is simply Jove’s test of their
resolve: fortune may be against them, but ultimately Jove is for them – a sentiment echoed by Nestor in a series of grand similes.

But such a romantic view is undercut by Ulysses, who, in one of the great statements on civil order in all of literature, suggests that the Greeks’ problems spring from the fact that “the specialty of rule hath been neglected,” in other words hierarchy has not been observed, and each man has acted only for himself: “Take but degree away, untune that string, / And hark what discord follows. Each thing melts / In mere oppugnancy...” (1.3.109-111). And to illustrate the point, Ulysses uses the example of Achilles, who lurks in his tent and, with Patroclus, passes his time acting out the generals in mocking terms. “And in the imitation of these twain,” says Nestor, “...many are infect.” Of course, what Achilles and Patroclus are doing looks suspiciously like what the actors are doing in Shakespeare’s play: mocking the great Greek heroes and cutting them down to size. The irony would surely not have been lost on Shakespeare’s audience. And is there, then, an element of burlesque in the treatment of Ulysses? Is Ulysses the Greeks’ Polonius?

Ulysses’ speech was held up by Tillyard as one of the great illustrations of the “Elizabethan world picture,” the vision of ordered hierarchy that lies behind the Homily Against Rebellion, issued in the 1570s, or the statements on order in Richard Hooker’s Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity later in the century. Tillyard wished us to believe that such a world view dominated the thinking of the age. Today we would insist on adding some nuances to such an assumption, indeed questioning the actuality while recognizing the statement of the ideal.

The episode is not, I think, a simple vindication of Ulysses’ point of view – the Greeks trying to run a war and Achilles and company mocking their earnestness – but a statement about the gap between our aspirations and the rather limited scope of human endeavor, which is ineffectual in its power for good, and generally wrong. What Troilus says of love applies to most human affairs: “This is the monstruosity in love, lady: that the will is infinite, and the execution confined: that the desire is boundless, and the act a slave to limit” (3.2.79-87). Ulysses presents the party line with great power, but there is little evidence that he believes what he says.

The debate is interrupted by Aeneas, who arrives with Hector’s challenge to the Greeks – a challenge to single combat based more on notions of honor than on military expediency. Hector’s goal, after all, is to inject some spirit into the demoralized Greeks, the very opposite of what an effective military commander would seek to achieve. It is decided that Ajax, not Achilles, will meet it, and the hope is that the decision to pass Achilles over will finally galvanize Achilles into action. Furthermore, as Ulysses remarks, why use our best man and risk defeat?

(We might note, by the way, that Aeneas seems to function as messenger in this play: in 1.1 he accompanies Troilus as they leave at the end of the scene; in 1.3 it is he who carries Hector’s challenge to the Greeks; in 4.1 he conducts Diomedes, in 4.5 he
announces Hector when Hector arrives among the Greeks to meet his adversary Ajax, and in 5.10 it is he who accompanies Troilus before Troilus’s final speech.)

The second act opens, appropriately enough, with our meeting Ajax – and Thersites, the ultimate raider in this play, who systematically gets under the skin of the slow-witted Ajax. When they are joined by Achilles and Patroclus, Thersites attacks them to, but they laugh him off. Ajax, on the other hand, is made furious by Thersites’ taunts.

The structure of the play

Perhaps at this point we might pause to note the division of episodes between the Trojans and the Greeks. We might note that it is until 3.2 that Troilus and Cressida actually meet in the play, brought together by Pandarus. The rendezvous requires that Troilus get permission from Paris to absent himself from a dinner that night: thus the meeting with Cressida in effect takes place under the auspices of Paris and Helen, or at least with the memory of the meeting with them fresh in our minds. Act 4 is taken up with the separation of Troilus and Cressida, and then Troilus looks on at Diomedes and Cressida in Act 5. There are a few scenes set in Troy that do not deal with the love story, notably 2.2 and 5.3; 2.2 clearly parallels the Greek 1.3.
The causes of war

And now, in 2.2, it is a Trojan council that we must hear – of a very different kind from the Greek. Hector recommends that the Trojans simply hand Helen back to the Greeks, as Nestor has apparently suggested on the Greek side. It is Troilus who principally opposes such a suggestion:

Will you with counters sum
The past-proportion of his infinite,
And buckle in a waist most fathomless
With spans and inches so diminutive
As fears and reasons?  (2.2.28-32)

Helenus suggests that reason is actually a rather good guide, but Troilus dismisses such views as the special pleading of a priest: “Nay, if we talk of reason, / Let’s shut our gates and sleep.” But, says, Hector, such an attitude elevates the means over the end. No, says Troilus: if we choose a course of action we should stick with it. We were enthusiastic about Paris’s seizure of Helen, and we should stay with this resolve now. His rather powerful argument receives no rejoinder because Cassandra, the prophetess appears, crying that disaster will fall on Troy if Helen is not given up. Troilus reacts to this sudden intervention by arguing that Cassandra should not be listened to because she is mad, and he is followed by Paris who suggests that his honor is at stake and that in any case Helen is of such peerless beauty that it is right to defend her: “Well may we fight for her whom we know well / The world’s large spaces cannot parallel” (2.2.162-163).

Hector suggests that Paris and Troilus have used superficial arguments, “not much / Unlike young men, whom Aristotle thought / Unfit to hear moral philosophy.”

The reasons you allege do more conduce
To the hot passion of distemper’d blood
Than to make up a free determination
‘Twixt right and wrong.  (2.2.169-172)

And yet, and yet....  Even as the Trojans seem about to be seized by a sudden access of common sense, Hector makes clear that honor should be their first concern:

yet ne’ertheless,
My spritely brethren, I propend to you
In resolution to keep Helen still
For ‘tis a cause that hath no mean dependence
Upon our joint and several dignities. (2.2.190-94)

And so the war goes on.

We return in scene 3 to the venue of scene 1: the railing of Thersites. So we can see this Trojan debate as wedged between, or interpolated into, the bad behavior of the Greeks. “The vengeance on the whole camp,” says Thersites in an opening soliloquy, “or rather, the Neapolitan bone-ache; for that methinks is the curse depending on those that war for a placket.” His railing on Achilles and Patroclus is interrupted by the arrival of the Greek generals. “I’ll speak with nobody,” says Achilles, retreating to his tent. And no one can persuade him to come out, not even Agamemnon, who, holding to verse while surrounded by prose, suggests that such conduct will cause Achilles to be cut out of the Greek planning: “A stirring dwarf we do allowance give / Before a sleeping giant” (2.3.139-140).

“I do hate a proud man as I do hate the engendering of toads,” declares Ajax, even as those around him point out to one another that he is as proud as Achilles – but they flatter him in his hearing.

Much of what we have seen so far is background and exposition: Troilus the lover and Troilus the fiery young man, Cressida the engaging time-server, the sententious Greeks, the unrealistically idealist Trojans, the proud Achilles and the equally proud Ajax. The third act is focused on the play’s protagonists and on the twist of fate that will make their liaison shortlived.

The meeting of Troilus and Cressida

The third act begins with a scene in which Pandarus is at cross purposes with Paris’s servant – while music sounds in the background. He has come to Paris and Helen to ask Paris to bring Troilus’s excuse to King Priam for not being at dinner – a rather elaborate and unnecessary procedure that none the less allows us to meet Helen and provides Pandarus with an opportunity to entertain us with a song: "Love, love, nothing but love, still love, still more!" The scene, then, is a kind of mid-play interlude. “Disarm great Hector,” says Paris to Helen as the Greeks come from the field: Helen’s exercise of her charms on Hector has evidently worked (see 2.2) and must be maintained.

The scene is followed by the great meeting of Troilus and Cressida – a scene in which we meet an almost desperate Troilus, whose elaborate classical image to describe the role of Pandarus matches the earlier Petrarchan one:

No, Pandarus. I stalk about her door
Like a strange soul upon the Stygian banks
Staying for waftage. O, be thou my Charon,
And give me swift transportance to these fields
Where I may wallow in the lily beds
Propos'd for the deserver! O gentle Pandar,
From Cupid's shoulder pluck his painted wings,
And fly with me to Cressid!  (3.2.7-14)

One could certainly argue that the image of waiting on the shore of the river Styx to be transported to the underworld is hardly a cheerful image – except that it leads to a vision of delight. Yet this delight suggests a certain lack of moral compass (“wallow in the lily beds...”) that is disconcerting, and it also implies oblivion.

Troilus continues in this vein:

I am giddy; expectation whirls me round.
Th’ imaginary relish is so sweet
That it enchants my sense; what will it be
When that the wat’ry palate tastes indeed
Love's thrice-repured nectar? Death, I fear me;
Swooning destruction; or some joy too fine,
Too subtle-potent, tun’d too sharp in sweetness,
For the capacity of my ruder powers.
I fear it much; and I do fear besides
That I shall lose distinction in my joys;
As doth a battle, when they charge on heaps
The enemy flying.  (3.2.17-28)

Once again, the passionate Troilus speaks verse and the practical Pandarus prose. When the two lovers meet they talk, not like, say, Romeo and Juliet, but in prose like Pandarus. And their declarations of love are punctuated by the comings and goings of the uncle who has brought them together.

Nonetheless, at a certain point, as they talk of the beginnings of their love, they move into verse. Cressida emphasizes, as she has done before, the need to hold herself back, to stimulate Troilus’ desire:

I love you now; but till now not so much
But I might master it. In faith, I lie;
My thoughts were like unbridled children, grown
Too headstrong for their mother. See, we fools!
Why have I blabb’d? Who shall be true to us,
When we are so unsecret to ourselves?
But, though I lov’d you well, I woo’d you not;
And yet, good faith, I wish’d myself a man,
Or that we women had men's privilege
Of speaking first. Sweet, bid me hold my tongue,
For in this rapture I shall surely speak
The thing I shall repent.  (3.2.122-133)

But Cressida’s complicated and devious approach to love suggests an uncertain sense of self. No wonder, then, that, in a famous exchange of vows, each of the three characters involved – Troilus, Cressida, Pandarus – predict, in spite of themselves – how they will be remembered:

True swains in love shall in the world to come
Approve their truth by Troilus, when their rhymes,
Full of protest, of oath, and big compare,
Want similes, truth tir'd with iteration-
As true as steel, as plantation to the moon,
As sun to day, as turtle to her mate,
As iron to adamant, as earth to th' centre-
Yet, after all comparisons of truth,
As truth's authentic author to be cited,
'As true as Troilus' shall crown up the verse
And sanctify the numbers.  (3.2.174-184)

Yes (we say), we know the comparison. But then, with a ghastly inevitability, comes the equally well-known comparison that we associate with Cressida, who declares:

If I be false, or swerve a hair from truth,
When time is old and hath forgot itself,
When waterdrops have worn the stones of Troy,
And blind oblivion swallow’d cities up,
And mighty states characterless are grated
To dusty nothing-yet let memory
From false to false, among false maids in love,
Upbraid my falsehood when th' have said 'As false
As air, as water, wind, or sandy earth,
As fox to lamb, or wolf to heifer's calf,
Pard to the hind, or stepdame to her son'—
Yea, let them say, to stick the heart of falsehood,
'As false as Cressid.'  (3.2.185-197)

(Note the emphasis here on time.) And so it now only remains, in this solemn recital of commonplaces, to add Pandarus in:

Go to, a bargain made; seal it, seal it; I'll be the witness. Here I hold your hand; here my cousin’s. If ever you prove false one to another, since I have taken such pains to bring you together, let all pitiful goers- between be call’d to the world's end after my name-call them all Pandars; let all constant men be Troiluses, all false women Cressids, and all brokers between Pandars. Say 'Amen.'
(3.2.198-206)
And now all that is needed is to get them both to bed....

And of course it will end badly. In 3.3., Calchas asks, and Agamemnon agrees, that Cressida be exchanged for the Trojan prisoner Antenor (another name out of Homer and the Troy story: ultimately Antenor betrays the Trojans). Antenor, no more than a cipher here, carries with him a whiff of treachery: Cressida betrays Troilus in love; Antenor betrays the Trojans in war – they are a fit exchange. Diomedes is appointed to arrange the exchange.

**Ulysses and Time**

We return now, in the course of 3.3, this final scene in Act 3, to Achilles lurking in his tent, the story that we left at 2.3 to follow the fortunes of Troilus and Cressida. The Greek leaders, who before went to great lengths to get Achilles to call off his boycott, now set about humiliating him by treating him with as little respect as possible. Achilles is disconcerted: “What, am I poor of late?” He comes upon Ulysses reading a book (one is reminded of Hamlet and Polonius). When asked what he is reading, Ulysses replies:

A strange fellow here
Writes me that man-how dearly ever parted,
How much in having, or without or in-
Cannot make boast to have that which he hath,
Nor feels not what he owes, but by reflection;
As when his virtues shining upon others
Heat them, and they retort that heat again
To the first giver. (3.3.95-102)

And this gives Ulysses an opening to tell Achilles that his star is falling because the attention is turning to Ajax – a view supported by Patroclus. Says Ulysses, famously:

Time hath, my lord, a wallet at his back,
Wherein he puts alms for oblivion,
A great-siz'd monster of ingratiations.
Those scraps are good deeds past, which are devour'd
As fast as they are made, forgot as soon
As done. Perseverance, dear my lord,
Keeps honour bright. To have done is to hang
Quite out of fashion, like a rusty mail
In monumental mock'ry. Take the instant way;
For honour travels in a strait so narrow -
Where one but goes abreast. Keep then the path,
For emulation hath a thousand sons
That one by one pursue; if you give way,
Or hedge aside from the direct forthright,
Like to an ent'red tide they all rush by
And leave you hindmost;
Or, like a gallant horse fall'n in first rank,
Lie there for pavement to the abject rear,
O'er-run and trampled on. Then what they do in present,
Though less than yours in past, must o'er top yours;
For Time is like a fashionable host,
That slightly shakes his parting guest by th' hand;
And with his arms out-stretch'd, as he would fly,
Grasps in the corner. The welcome ever smiles,
And farewell goes out sighing. (3.3.145-169)

The speech is, of course, greater than the speaker, becoming in effect a grandly sententious number in a rhetorical entertainment, telling truth powerfully, but in a way oddly disconnected from the character of Ulysses. It of course links time with oblivion, but also with ingratitude, with a failure to remain faithful to the past: Cressida, serial lover, comes to mind, as she passes from hand to hand upon arrival in the Greek camp (4.5), though the image here is that of the politician, constantly in motion, constantly moving from handshake to handshake, constantly looking over your shoulder at the next important person to greet. The theme of Time, so dominant in _Troilus and Cressida_, reminds us that this story is dependent upon the particular accidents of time: it is, as Traversi suggests, a tragedy of situation rather than a tragedy of character: “Cressida’s falseness does not spring from a deep-seated perversity or even from a strong positive attraction for Diomed, but from the mere process of events, from a flaw inherent in the human situation.”

As circumstances change, values change, and as human events and attitudes cease to be relevant they are swallowed up by new events and attitudes. Troy was leveled by time and the Greeks; the Elizabethans lament frequently the passing of time – it is a major theme of Shakespeare’s sonnets. But, paradoxically, if “marble and the gilded monument” disappear, poetry (and things like the Troy story) endures.

The true Ulysses, we fear, may lurk not in his lyrical evocation of Time, but in the threatening speech that follows at line 195: “There is a mystery with whom relation / Durst never meddle, in the soul of state / Which hath an operation more divine / Than breath or pen can give expressure to. / All the commerce that you have had with Troy / As perfectly is ours as yours, my lord.” Some scholars have seen in this speech a chilling reminder of the efficiency of the Elizabethan secret service under Sir Francis Walsingham (d. 1590) and his successors. Thersites (5.4) refers to Ulysses as a “dog-fox.”

The present scene ends with Thersites appearing on stage to tell us that Ajax is strutting around like a peacock. Achilles wants to meet Hector, and first suggests that Patroclus ask Ajax to make that possible, leading to a funny episode in which Thersites pretends to be Ajax and Patroclus pretends to ask him about Hector. Achilles decides to write a letter
instead. But the scene ends with an expression of disquietude from Achilles: “My mind is troubled, like a fountain stirr’d / And I myself see not the bottom of it.”

**The transfer of Cressida**

The noose, meanwhile, is tightening. Diomedes arrives in Troy with Antenor (4.1), where he has evidently already met up with Paris and Deiphobus. The exchange between Aeneas and Deiphobus emphasizes their respect for one another, but their willingness to kill one another on the battlefield: the chivalric ideal. Paris suggests that Aeneas go on ahead to Calchas’s house to alert Cressida. He remembers that Troilus was excused from dinner (3.1) and may well be with Cressida. Says Aeneas, “Troilus had rather Troy were borne to Greece / Than Cressid borne from Troy” (4.1.47-48).

In response to Paris’s question as to whether he or Menelaus should have Helen, Diomedes’ response is indicative of the moral bankruptcy of the whole proceedings:

He merits well to have her that doth seek her,  
Not making any scruple of her soilure,  
With such a hell of pain and world of charge;  
And you as well to keep her that defend her,  
Not palating the taste of her dishonour,  
With such a costly loss of wealth and friends.  
He like a puling cuckold would drink up  
The lees and dregs of a flat tamed piece;  
You, like a lecher, out of whorish loins  
Are pleas’d to breed out your inheritors.  
Both merits pois’d, each weighs nor less nor more;  
But he as thee, the heavier for a whore. (4.1.56-67)

Between Helen the most beautiful woman in the world and Helen the whore there is a gap as large as the universe of the play. Cressida in effect epitomizes the two aspects of Helen. And we switch immediately following this tirade (of which I quoted only part) to Troilus and Cressida. The scene resembles the *aubade* in Act 3 of *Romeo and Juliet*, but there the beauty of the scene and the depth of emotion of the lovers are readily apparent. Here, the morning is cold (Troilus is commendably concerned that Cressida not catch cold in getting up when he leaves) and, even if the lark brings day, the lark also rouses “the ribald crows.” Night, says Troilus, is a “witch” that forces them apart. Replies Cressida, “Prithee, tarry. / You men will never tarry. / O foolish Cressid, I might have still held off, / And then you would have tarried.” The statement “You men will never tarry” suggests anything but the innocence of Romeo and Juliet’s parting.

Aeneas arrives and gives the news to Troilus; the two leave together. Even if Cressida, upon hearing that she must be exchanged for Antenor, swears that she cannot leave Troilus, still there is an edge to this scene that is distinctly unsettling.
In some measure this negativity is tempered by 4.4. Indeed, we need not doubt the sincerity of the *aubade* (4.2), nor need we doubt the conviction of Cressida’s lament in 4.4: Cressida explains to Pandarus: “The grief is fine, full, perfect, that I taste... / My love admits no qualifying dross, / No more my grief, in such a precious loss.” Troilus stresses that “Injurious Time, now with a robber’s haste / Crams his rich thiev’ry up.” References to time, as we have seen, are frequent in this play, and indeed the image that Troilus uses here is reminiscent of Ulysses’ speech about Time’s wallet, which emphasizes the “oblivion” that follows from time’s activities. We might note also that Cressida, rather surprisingly, talks about “tasting” her grief: images of appetite, of consumption, of tasting, are abundant in this play. Jonathan Miller, in the BBC version of the play, has Cressida hysterical in 4.2 and 4.4, which helps explain her later behavior with Diomedes, born of a kind of despair.

Troilus, in this same, poetically powerful speech, says that he and Cressida “that with so many thousand sighs / Did buy each other, must poorly sell ourselves / With the rude brevity and discharge of one,” victims, as it were, of the processes of exchange that govern both politics and human affairs generally (they are particularly important here: the two women in the play, Helen and Cressida [Cassandra and Andromache are less central], are essentially units of exchange, prizes whose currency generates both war and peace, and prizes whose value is determined in large part by people’s perceptions of that value, rather than in anything inherent to them). Troilus worries about Cressida’s fidelity; “I’ll be true,” she says – and they exchange tokens. The question of her truth comes up again, and is hardly allayed by Diomedes’ declaration to Troilus that he will accept no instructions or advice from his enemy, but will do exactly as he pleases. And so he does; this currency is infinitely negotiable.

The scene ends with Aeneas reminding us that on this day Hector is to fight with the Greeks’ chosen champion. His image of war links it with love quite directly, reminding us that the two are closely connected in this play: “Yea, with a bridegroom’s fresh alacrity / Let us address to tend on Hector’s heels.”

Cressida’s arrival in the Greek camp (4.5) hardly reassures us as she is passed from Greek to Greek, each of whom kisses her, she all the while becoming increasingly receptive to the kisses. Ulysses understands her nature, or thinks he does: he stresses both her beauty and her opportunism:

> 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.
> O these encounters so glib of tongue
> That give a coasting welcome ere it comes,
> And wide unclasp the tables of their thoughts
> To every ticklish reader! Set them down
> For slutish spoils of opportunity,
> And daughters of the game.  (4.5.54-63)
It is Ulysses too who commends Troilus to Agamemnon as “a second hope as fairly built as Hector.” When Hector chooses not to continue the fight against Ajax because Ajax is his kin, the presence of Greeks and Trojans together provides opportunity for the generous praise of adversaries. “I have, thou gallant Trojan,” says Nestor to Hector, “seen thee oft, / Labouring for destiny, make cruel way / Through ranks of Greekish youth.” Similar praises fly abundantly, but when Hector and Achilles meet, Achilles looks Hector over almost lovingly as he speculates on which part of the body will receive his death blow: the speech seems more erotic than military, more representative of Greeks and Trojans locked in an embrace than opposed as armies.

It is a powerful set of ideas, powerfully delivered. Indeed, one of the problems of this part of the play is that the sheer inventiveness, poetic quality and prolixity of the meditation on heroism and violence, honor and oblivion, history and folly that is provided here threatens to overwhelm the dramatic impetus of the play. Hector has already embraced Nestor as “good old chronicle,” and spoken of “many a Greek and Trojan dead” (213) since the beginning of the war. Says Ulysses,

Sir, I foretold you then what would ensue.  
My prophecy is but half his journey yet;  
For yonder walls that pertly front your town,  
Yon towers, whose wanton tops do buss the clouds,  
Must kiss their own feet.  (4.5.216-219)

Ulysses describes Troy as though it is a woman: “pert,” with “wanton” towers kissing the clouds. Hector’s response is firm, but oddly defeatist (indeed, hanging over the Trojan army is a sense of impending doom, of reversal before the inexorable force of Greece):

I must not believe you.  
There they stand yet; and modestly I think  
The fall of every Phrygian stone will cost  
A drop of Grecian blood. The end crowns all;  
And that old common arbitrator, Time,  
Will one day end it.  (4.5.220-224)

Increasingly one has the sense that there is no way out: Time and oblivion will be the ultimate winners.

**Endgame**

The end-game is beginning. Thersites opens the fifth act with his railing (and indeed throughout this scene he provides useful commentary on the action) – and Achilles, it seems, is thwarted in his intent to take arms by a letter from Hecuba, Priam’s queen, reminding him of his promise to her daughter Polyxena not to fight. When Hector arrives at his tent as arranged, Diomedes slips away claiming other business. Ulysses and
Troilus follow him (thus Ulysses the keeper of Greek ideology and Troilus the keeper of Trojan idealism and honor join forces as commentators on the ensuing action even as Thersites circles in the background commenting on all of the players).

The scene that follows is as wrenching as anything in the play. Cressida’s reluctant yet eager, eager yet hesitant acceptance of Diomedes is chronicled not only in her words but in the commentary of Troilus and Ulysses on it (and they provide details that might not be apparent to the audience) and the commentary of Thersites beyond them (“A juggling trick: to be secretly open” [24], “How the devil Luxury, with his fat rump and potato finger, tickles these together! Fry, lechery, fry” [55-57]). We might note that Thersites’ role here is a more extreme and negative version of the role of Pandarus as commentator earlier, for example in 3.2.

Her transfer of Troilus’ sleeve to Diomedes is of course symbolic of Cressida’s transfer of her affections, a sentiment to which she gives voice in a soliloquy at the end:

Troilus, farewell! One eye yet looks on thee,  
But with my heart the other eye doth see.  
Ah, poor our sex! this fault in us I find:  
The error of our eye directs our mind. (5.2.106-109)

Troilus’ reaction is not to believe what he sees, not to believe that this is really Cressida. “Think, we had mothers,” Troilus exclaims, “Do not give advantage / To stubborn critics, apt, without a theme / For depravation [detraction], to square the general sex / By Cressid’s rule.” It is clear that Troilus’s view of women in general and his love for Cressida in particular are compounded and confused: one can read this episode almost as a gloss on Hamlet. The scene ends with Thersites exclaiming, “Lechery, lechery, still wars and lechery! Nothing else holds fashion. A burning devil take them” (5.2.193-195).

We switch to the Trojan side (5.3). It is morning and Hector is armed. Andromache, Hector’s wife, speaks of dreams she has had and tries to dissuade Hector from fighting today. Cassandra does the same. When Troilus appears all armed, Hector stresses that he will do the fighting today and Troilus should not. Priam’s voice is added to the chorus seeking to dissuade them, but Hector heads out, with Troilus following – stopped only briefly by Pandarus with a letter from Cressida, which Troilus dismisses as mere “words.”

The battle begins. Diomedes and Troilus encounter and exit fighting, while Hector spares Thersites as somehow beneath his dignity (5.4). Diomedes bests Troilus and sends Troilus’s horse to Cressida as a gift (note, by the way, that the horse was frequently equated with the will, and particularly with sexual passion: Diomedes’ unseating of Troilus suggests that he has superseded Troilus in Cressida’s regard [as indeed we know]). But the fighting is not going well for the Greeks, as Agamemnon makes clear with his recital of names of victims, among them Patroclus “ta’en or slain.” Hector, Nestor suggests, is everywhere in the field, while Ulysses tells us that Achilles is finally
arming, and his Myrmidons are crying for Hector’s blood. Ajax is furious, and Troilus, for his part, is fighting “with such a careless force and forceless care...” (5.5.40).

In the following scene, Troilus takes on both Ajax and Diomedes – but Hector, encountering Achilles and feeling him unworthy his opposition (Achilles’ arms have long been out of use, he says), walks away from him – a grand gesture, but a foolish one. And it is followed by Hector’s pursuit of an anonymous soldier for his armor. Thus externalities replace internal worth: Hector compromises himself, perhaps fatally.

Indeed, right after this we discover how fatally. If Hector released Achilles because he was unworthy of fighting (which, we note, means that in some sense Achilles equals Thersites...), Achilles plans to surround him with his Myrmidons and kill him in cold blood (a refinement not in the Iliad but added by subsequent redactions). Thersites, we note, escapes from Margarelon immediately after this on the grounds that they are both bastards....

So, in 5.8, Hector has captured his armor (“Most putrefied core, so fair without...”), only to meet a different kind of hollowness, the hollowness of Achilles’ honor and chivalry: “Strike, fellows, strike: this is the man I seek,” exclaims Achilles, and Hector falls. Achilles drags his body off behind his horse. As we move into the final scene, our attention turns to Troilus, whose final speech is a combination of resignation and defiance, acquiescence in the inevitable and determination to fight on. He announces Hector’s death:

\[
\text{He's dead, and at the murderer's horse's tail,} \\
\text{In beastly sort, dragg'd through the shameful field.} \\
\text{Frown on, you heavens, effect your rage with speed.} \\
\text{Sit, gods, upon your thrones, and smile at Troy.} \\
\text{I say at once let your brief plagues be mercy,} \\
\text{And linger not our sure destructions on.} \quad (5.10.4-9)
\]

Aeneas reacts by suggesting that Troilus is upsetting the troops: “My lord, you do discomfort all the host.” Says Troilus in defiant response:

\[
\text{You understand me not that tell me so.} \\
\text{I do not speak of flight, of fear of death,} \\
\text{But dare all imminence that gods and men} \\
\text{Address their dangers in.} \quad (5.10.11-14)
\]

But defiance seems hollow next to the lamentations that will surely arise in Troy, and defiance gives way to resignation:

\[
\text{Hector is gone.} \\
\text{Who shall tell Priam so, or Hecuba?} \\
\text{Let him that will a screech-owl aye be call'd} \\
\text{Go in to Troy, and say there 'Hector's dead.'}
\]
There is a word will Priam turn to stone;
Make wells and Niobes of the maids and wives,
Cold statues of the youth; and, in a word,
Scare Troy out of itself. But, march away;
Hector is dead; there is no more to say.  (5.10.14-22)

But that is not all: the defiance returns:

Stay yet. You vile abominable tents,
Thus proudly pight upon our Phrygian plains,
Let Titan rise as early as he dare,
I'll through and through you. And, thou great-siz'd coward,
No space of earth shall sunder our two hates;
I'll haunt thee like a wicked conscience still,
That mouldeth goblins swift as frenzy's thoughts.
Strike a free march to Troy. With comfort go;
Hope of revenge shall hide our inward woe.  (5.10.23-31)

Revenge wrapped in despair, despair wrapped in revenge.... There is a similar tension in
these final moments between the grand Trojan story (to which Troilus is now fully
committed) and the sudden re-emergence of the Cressida story in the person of Pandarus,
who, absent since 4.4 and Cressida’s departure from Troy, now returns. Troilus at once
turns on him: “Hence, broker-lackey! Ignominy and shame / Pursue thy life, and live aye
with thy name.”

But it is Pandarus who takes center stage to bid us farewell. Like the bumble-bee, when
we have lost our stings (which prick and are to be found at the tail) and our honey, we
die. So the play, and Troy, and all else will die. The one legacy remaining, it seems, is
the legacy of disease that Pandarus, most enduring figure of all, will bestow on us all.
Thus Pandarus’s reappearance wraps the tragedy of Hector’s death and Troilus’ sworn
vengeance in an outer covering of comedy, and leaves us at the end suspended, with
nothing resolved. One is tempted to see the play as promising a continuation, a return to
the story of Troy perhaps, and perhaps a depiction of its final fall. But, if such was
Shakespeare’s intention, he did not return to the task. This is surely hardly surprising:
such cynicism is not easy to maintain, even if it does reveal itself for example in the play
Timon of Athens, another play that uneasily links comedy and tragedy and was written
soon after this (1606-1608).

Yet it is Hamlet, surely, that remains constantly in the background as we seek to make
sense of this infinitely complex and contorted play. The problem of putting feeling into
action, of finding structures to contain emotion and turn it to practical ends, runs through
Troilus and Cressida as well. The play may have fewer question marks than Hamlet, but
that is perhaps because the audience itself takes over the interrogation – or because even
the formulation of questions, to say nothing of answers, is hard to do. There is little to
reassure us in the moral universe of Troilus and Cressida, little to interrogate. Modern
productions have found dramatic opportunities in the very uncertainties of the play, and
its often nihilistic argument perhaps fits well with our own predisposition to satire and our own post-idealistic frame of mind.