

Troilus and Cressida (Spring 2024)

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Even in Shakespeare, characters cannot escape their genre. It's why *Midsummer's* lovers end happily, while Romeo and Juliet kill themselves; why the treacherous court destroys Hamlet and Falstaff, while Rosalind absconds to the Forest of Arden. The genre of *Troilus and Cressida* is notoriously slippery. The play was originally registered, in 1609, as a history, and the editors of the First Folio placed it between the histories and tragedies (and neglected to list it in the table of contents). Yet the preface to the 1609 Quarto emphasizes the play's humor: among all Shakespeare's comedies, the publisher claims, "there is none more witty than this" [Bevington, 446–7]. Satire, exemplified by the caustic comedies of Ben Jonson, was in vogue in the early 1600s, when *Troilus* was written—though Shakespeare's play, as David Bevington notes, is "a different kind of satire, not of witty exposure, but of disillusionment" [445].

Troilus and Cressida presents a world in which love and honor boil down to absurdities. In this confounding atmosphere, it seems unimaginable that idealists like Troilus or Hector—never mind the cynical Cressida—might get what they want. Which is why, before turning to any of the play's notable lovers or warriors (in the size of its cast, at least, *Troilus and Cressida* resembles Shakespeare's histories), we shall first consider its foremost avatars of perversity:

Pandarus and Thersites

Shakespeare's play combines a romance (adapted from Chaucer) with a martial epic (inspired by Homer). Marjorie Garber describes how these two strands "become, in the course of the play, inextricably intertwined," and from a certain perspective they are mirrors: in one, "Troilus woos Cressida, trying to get her into bed"; in the other, "the Greeks woo Achilles, trying to get him out of his bed and onto the battlefield" [538]. Though the courtly Pandarus and (per the *dramatis personae*) the "scurrilous" Thersites may seem to have little in common, they too act as mirrors: "Pandarus's role is to cheapen the lovers"; Thersites' "to cheapen the heroes"

[Van Doren, 176–7]. To achieve this, Shakespeare expanded a minor character in Homer’s poem¹ and reinvented the most memorable one in Chaucer’s.

It is useful to recall Pandarus’s first appearance in *Troilus and Criseyde*, about 500 lines in. Troilus is secretly pining for a beautiful widow, and Pandarus—who happens to be her uncle—overhears the young man’s distress. “Allas!” he exclaims, “who causeth al this fare? / O mercy, god! What unhap may this mene?”² Troilus replies angrily—he will not admit the cause—but Pandarus, “that neigh malt for wo and routhe,”³ is undeterred:

Now freend, . . . if ever love or trouthe
Hath been, or is, bi-twixen thee and me,
Ne do thou never swiche a crueltee
To hyde fro thy freend so greet a care;
Wostow nought wel that it am I, Pandare?⁴

[Chaucer, I.551–88]

Chaucer’s Pandarus is an avuncular busybody; he may prate, but no one doubts his good intentions. Contrast those lines with the beginning of Shakespeare’s play. Troilus is refusing to “war without the walls of Troy / That find such cruel battle here within” [I.i.2–3]. Pandarus, who has entered with the prince, seems incapable of answering without double entendre:

Pandarus: Will this gear ne’er be mended?
Troilus: The Greeks are strong, and skillful to their strength,
Fierce to their skill, and to their fierceness valiant;
But I am weaker than a woman’s tear,
Tamer than sleep, fonder than ignorance,
Less valiant than the virgin in the night,
And skillless as unpracticed infancy.

¹ In the *Iliad*, Thersites appears once, in Book II. A common soldier, he curses Agamemnon and is beaten into submission by Odysseus.

² In Nevill Coghill’s translation [22]: “Good gracious! What’s the reason for this fuss? / Merciful God, whatever can it mean?”

³ Coghill [23]: “almost melting with compassion”

⁴ Coghill [23]: “Dear friend, are love and friendship out of fashion? / If ever truth, as between you and me, / Existed, never show such cruelty / As not to share your miseries with candour! / Don’t you know well that it is I? It’s Pandar!”

Pandarus: Well, I have told you enough of this. For my part, I'll not meddle nor make no farther. He that will have a cake out of the wheat must tarry the grinding.

Troilus: Have I not tarried?

Pandarus: Ay, the grinding; but you must tarry the bolting.

Troilus: Have I not tarried?

Pandarus: Ay, the bolting; but you must tarry the leavening.

Troilus: Still have I tarried.

Pandarus: Ay, to the leavening; but here's yet in the word "hereafter" the kneading, the making of the cake, the heating of the oven, and the baking. Nay, you must stay the cooling too, or you may chance burn your lips.

[I.i.6–26]

Such a different Pandarus! Unlike in Chaucer's poem, he knows exactly what Troilus wants—and he offers not compassion but vulgar puns. He also speaks in prose—in fact, with the exception of a bawdy song or two, he does not use verse until the play's final lines, when he steps partly out of character to deliver a scathing epilogue.

For all these changes, the fundamental question remains in Shakespeare as in Chaucer: why does Pandarus want so badly to get his niece in bed with Troilus? There is no indication he expects payment for his efforts—though it couldn't hurt his fortune for Cressida (so far as we know, his only family in Troy) to marry a prince! It seems important that Chaucer presents Pandarus as a failed lover. "Thou coudest never in love thy-selven wisse,"⁵ says Troilus, and Pandarus concedes the point: "Right so fare I, unhappily for me; / I love oon best, and that me smerteth sore . . ." [Chaucer, I.622; 666–7].⁶ Is helping Troilus a distraction from his own aching heart? A chance to live vicariously through another man's conquest?

Likewise, Shakespeare does not suggest Pandarus is being paid, though it's easy to imagine this version of the man—a more frankly transactional figure—fantasizing about royal rewards. "Thus is the poor agent despised," he groans at play's end, after a heartbroken Troilus

⁵ Coghill [25]: "In your own love-affairs you seldom shine . . ."

⁶ Coghill [26]: "It's just the same, unhappily, with me; / I love one best, and oh my heart is sore!"

rejects him. “O traitors and bawds,⁷ how earnestly are you set a-work, and how ill requited! Why should our endeavor be so loved, and the performance so loathed?” [V.x.36–9]. But Shakespeare is more elliptical. His Pandarus does not seem to be a frustrated lover. In his own words, he is simply one of countless underappreciated “traders in the flesh” [V.x.45]. Yet for most of the play, he seems to view this particular dalliance as more than just work—he seems positively aroused! We have already heard the sex-stuffed patter with Troilus; Pandarus brings the same energy to his first scene with Cressida—who encourages and, to his delight, bests him. “Do you know what a man is?” he demands, pleading Troilus’s case:

Pandarus: Is not birth, beauty, good shape, discourse, manhood, learning, gentleness, virtue, youth, liberality, and such like, the spice and salt that season a man?

Cressida: Ay, a minced man; and then to be baked with no date in the pie, for then the man’s date is out.

Pandarus: You are such a woman a man knows not at what ward you lie.

Cressida: Upon my back, to defend my belly; upon my wit, to defend my wiles; upon my secrecy, to defend mine honesty; my mask, to defend my beauty; and you, to defend all of these; and at all these wards I lie, at a thousand watches.

Pandarus: Say one of your watches.

Cressida: Nay, I’ll watch you for that; and that’s one of the chiefest of them too. If I cannot ward what I would not have hit, I can watch you for telling how I took the blow, unless it swell past hiding, and then it’s past watching.

Pandarus: You are such another!

[I.ii.246–64]

The standard Shakespearean puns turn rancid when we remember the punsters are related! And the rancidity spreads. In Act Three, Cressida has finally agreed to see Troilus, at Pandarus’s house; the old bawd sets the mood as Troilus waits:

She’s making her ready; she’ll come straight. You must be witty now. She does so blush, and fetches her wind so short as if she were frayed with a

⁷ If Pandarus is the play’s foremost bawd, and Cressida a kind of traitor to love, its most obvious traitor is another relative: Cressida’s father, Calchas, a priest who foresaw Troy’s destruction and defected. In keeping with the play’s cynicism, the worst sinner gets the least scorn; in fact, Calchas—who convinces the Greeks to trade a Trojan prisoner for his daughter—may be the only one on either side who ends up satisfied.

spirit. I'll fetch her. It is the prettiest villain; she fetches her breath as short as a new-ta'en sparrow.

[III.ii.28–32]

Troilus sounds breathless himself as he anticipates the tryst:

Even such a passion doth embrace my bosom.
My heart beats thicker than a feverous pulse,
And all my powers do their bestowing lose,
Like vassalage at unawares encount'ring
The eye of majesty.

[III.ii.33–7]

Pandarus then reenters, with a veiled Cressida, and curdles whatever romance was in Troilus's lines. "Come, come," he urges, "what need you blush? Shame's a baby." Apparently quite ashamed, Cressida tries to escape, but Pandarus cuts her off:

What! are you gone again? You must be watched ere you be made tame, must you? Come your ways, come your ways; an you draw backward, we'll put you i' th' fills. [*To Troilus*] Why do you not speak to her? [*To Cressida*] Come, draw this curtain, and let's see your picture. Alas the day, how loath you are to offend daylight! An 'twere dark, you'd close sooner. [*To Troilus*] So, so; rub on, and kiss the mistress.

[III.ii.38–48]

More than just a bawd here, Pandarus is directing a sex scene with exceedingly anxious actors—whose anxiety he cannot be bothered to understand, let alone soothe. He seems to think (possibly with cause) that if he doesn't lead them to bed himself, they'll never get there. (Imagine if Shakespeare had written the Nurse or Mercutio into *Romeo and Juliet's* lovemaking—he could hardly have equaled the effect of Pandarus here.) We'll look closer at this scene when we focus on the lovers; for now, let's jump ahead. It is the morning after their first—and, it turns out, only—night together, and Troilus and Cressida are bemoaning the "busy day, / Waked by the lark" [IV.ii.8–12].⁸ Enter Pandarus:

Pandarus: How now, how now, how go maidenheads? Here, you maid, where's my cousin Cressid?

⁸ Again, the parallels to—and ultimate contrast with—*Romeo and Juliet* are illuminating.

Cressida: Go hang yourself, you naughty mocking uncle!
You bring me to do—and then you flout me too.

Pandarus: To do what? To do what? Let her say what. What have I brought you to do?

Cressida: Come, come; beshrew your heart! You'll ne'er be good,
Nor suffer others.

Pandarus: Ha, ha! Alas, poor wretch! A poor *capocchia*! Hast not slept tonight?
Would he not—ah, naughty man—let it sleep? A bugbear take him!

[IV.ii.23–33]

In a moment, an even-less-welcome caller, Aeneas, shall arrive with news: Cressida must go to the Greeks. But Pandarus has already shattered whatever illusions the two lovers might have held about the meaning of their relationship. (Or Cressida, at least—Troilus has no lines here, and could well be delighted by Pandarus's allusions to his prowess.) One night of sex is all they get; for the bawd, that's all that matters.

Pandarus is far less interested in the war outside Troy's walls. The men returning each day from battle register only as foils to Troilus:

Pandarus: Hark, they are coming from the field. Shall we stand up here and see them as they pass toward Ilium? . . . I'll tell you them all by their names as they pass by, but mark Troilus above the rest.

Enter Aeneas.

Cressida: Speak not so loud.

Pandarus: That's Aeneas. Is not that a brave man? He's one of the flowers of Troy, I can tell you. But mark Troilus; you shall see anon.

Enter Antenor.

Cressida: Who's that?

Pandarus: That's Antenor. He has a shrewd wit, I can tell you, and he's a man good enough. He's one o' th' soundest judgements in Troy whosoever, and a proper man of person. When comes Troilus? I'll show you Troilus anon. If he see me, you shall see him nod at me.

[I.ii.174–90]

Troilus finally passes by, and then Pandarus is done. "Here comes more," Cressida says. "Asses, fools, dolts; chaff and bran, chaff and bran; porridge after meat," Pandarus replies: "I could live and die in the eyes of Troilus" [I.ii.235–8]. We hear echoes of Shakespeare's greatest anti-warrior, Sir John Falstaff, appraising his ragtag troops: "Tut, tut! good enough to toss; food for

powder, food for powder. They'll fill a pit as well as better" [*1 Henry IV*, IV.ii.64–5]. But Pandarus is not opposed to fighting; he simply doesn't care. The play's true critic of war—and debaser of honor—is Thersites.

Not that Thersites cares any more than Pandarus for the dead and doomed. He is Shakespeare's most committed misanthrope, with an unerring nose for bullshit. Naturally, given the moral universe of *Troilus and Cressida*, he has no power to do anything but rail against it. Homer's Thersites is a soldier, but the status of Shakespeare's character is less clear. Ulysses calls him "a slave" [I.iii.193], but this could be contempt more than a literal statement—as when a Trojan taunts Thersites on the battlefield: "Turn, slave, and fight" [V.vii.13]. Ulysses also suggests Thersites serves the Greek giant, Ajax: he describes how Achilles—delighted by Thersites' mocking impressions of the Greek leaders—"hath inveigled [Ajax's] fool from him" [II.iii.90]. Yet when Ajax orders him to run an errand, Thersites insists, "I serve thee not. . . . I serve here voluntary" [II.i.92–4], and no one contradicts him.

Whatever "voluntary" means in this context, "fool" seems key; it fits with another moment, when Thersites deals one insult too many to Patroclus, who responds angrily. "He is a privileged man," Achilles reminds his friend [II.iii.57]. That is, Thersites has the fool's "privilege": he may speak truth to power, like King Lear's Fool and, in a lighter mode, Feste in *Twelfth Night*. That the Greeks—least of all humorless Ajax!—would *want* such a man undermining their siege strains credulity. Thersites isn't even very funny; his method is to pile relentless, unfiltered abuse on everyone he encounters—or imagines encountering. When we meet him, he is so intent on crafting a private insult, he does not hear Ajax screaming for him:

Ajax: Thersites!

Thersites: Agamemnon—how if he had biles, full, all over, generally?

Ajax: Thersites!

Thersites: And those biles did run—say so—did not the general run, then? Were not that a botchy core?

Ajax: Dog!

Thersites: Then would come some matter from him. I see none now.

Ajax: Thou bitch wolf's son, canst thou not hear? Feel then.

[II.i.1–11]

The beating that follows is just a warm-up. As Ajax pounds away, Thersites not only continues to instigate—he seems to welcome the punishment:

Ajax: Thou stool for a witch!

Thersites: Ay, do, do! Thou sodden-witted lord, thou hast no more brain than I have in mine elbows; an asinico may tutor thee. Thou scurvy-valiant ass, thou art here but to thrash Trojans, and thou art bought and sold among those of any wit like a barbarian slave. If thou use to beat me, I will begin at thy heel, and tell what thou art by inches, thou thing of no bowels, thou!

Ajax: You dog!

Thersites: You scurvy lord!

Ajax: You cur!

Thersites: Mars his idiot! Do, rudeness; do, camel; do, do!

[II.i.42–54]

I could have quoted a dozen more lines. If it weren't so horrible it would be hilarious—but is that Thersites' purpose? Do beatings from brutes like Ajax justify his own brutal philosophy?

The arrangement clearly displeases him. “How now, Thersites?” he accosts himself when alone:

What, lost in the labyrinth of thy fury? Shall the elephant Ajax carry it thus? He beats me, and I rail at him. O worthy satisfaction! Would it were otherwise—that I could beat him, whilst he railed at me. 'Sfoot, I'll learn to conjure and raise devils, but I'll see some issue of my spiteful execrations.

[II.iii.1–7]

In a different play, this speech might have birthed a villain, whose “spiteful execrations” ensnare the heroes. But in *Troilus and Cressida*, the scheming is left to Pandarus and, more subtly, Ulysses. Thersites must settle for profaning just about every famous name Shakespeare throws at

him. We've already heard his opinion of Ajax (whose simple courage and tenacity make him one of the most admirable men in the *Iliad*). Here's a sampling of his other hits:

- Regarding the Greek army's nominal leader and his brother, whose loss of Helen to Paris started the war:

Here's Agamemnon, an honest fellow enough, and one that loves quails, but he has not so much brain as ear wax. And the goodly transformation of Jupiter there, his brother, the bull—the primitive statue and oblique memorial of cuckolds To be a dog, a mule, a cat, a fitchew, a toad, a lizard, an owl, a puttock, or a herring without a roe, I would not care; but to be Menelaus! I would conspire against destiny.

[V.i.51–63]

- Regarding the two Greeks most famed for wisdom and experience:

O' th' t' other side, the policy of those crafty swearing rascals—that stale old mouse-eaten dry cheese, Nestor, and that same dog-fox, Ulysses—is not proved worth a blackberry.

[V.iv.8–11]

- Regarding the fierce Diomedes, destined to take Cressida from Troilus:

That same Diomed's a false-hearted rogue, a most unjust knave. I will no more trust him when he leers than I will a serpent when he hisses. He will spend his mouth and promise like Brabblers the hound, but when he performs, astronomers foretell it; it is prodigious, there will come some change. The sun borrows of the moon when Diomed keeps his word.

[V.i.90–6]

- Regarding Patroclus, Achilles' dear friend (and, according to later, homophobic traditions, his lover):

Thou art said to be Achilles' male varlet. . . . Why, his masculine whore.

[V.i.15–17]

- Regarding the great warrior himself:

Then there's Achilles, a rare engineer. If Troy be not taken till these two [Achilles and Ajax] undermine it, the walls will stand till they fall of themselves.

[II.iii.7–9]

- Regarding the whole goddamned war:

Here is such patchery, such juggling, and such knavery. All the argument is a whore and a cuckold, a good quarrel to draw emulous factions and bleed to death upon. Now, the dry serpigo on the subject, and war and lechery confound all!

[II.iii.70–4]

None of these insults is really necessary: their targets prove their awfulness with every word and deed. Why then do we not tire of Thersites? Perhaps because there is no one else like him—not in Homer or Chaucer or anywhere else in Shakespeare. Besides, he does not spare himself. Cornered by Hector on the battlefield, Thersites’ only hope for survival is honesty:

Hector: What art thou, Greek? Art thou for Hector’s match?
Art thou of blood and honor?

Thersites: No, no. I am a rascal, a scurvy railing knave, a very filthy rogue.

Hector: I do believe thee. Live.

[V.iv.25–9]

How terribly ironic that Hector’s sense of honor—arguably the sole commendable ideal in all Troy—leads him to his death in the final act, after sparing Thersites. (More on that later.) This word, *honor* (or a variant), appears 31 times in the play: Hector, Troilus, Aeneas, Paris, Priam, Achilles, Ulysses, Nestor, Diomedes, Patroclus, even Pandarus all speak it at least once. But never Thersites. He does not need to. His every utterance measures the chasm between the men slaughtering each other and the honor they cite as justification.

Well, not *every*. He also has plenty to say about the play’s other main theme, love—though of course he reduces the feeling to its basest form. “Lechery, lechery, still wars and lechery; nothing else holds fashion. A burning devil take them!” he exclaims after watching Diomedes ravish Cressida [V.ii.197–9]—yet he greedily seeks what he curses. “They say [Diomedes] keeps a Trojan drab, and uses the traitor Calchas’ tent,” he mutters at the end of the *previous* scene, then concludes: “I’ll after.” The disgust he professes—“nothing but lechery! All

incontinent varlets!”—does not cool his desire to spy on lechers and varlets [V.i.97–9]. He seems as much a voyeur, in his own hateful way, as Pandarus—both apparently celibate men who take perverse pleasure in watching what they do not (cannot?) have.

Most of Thersites’ commentary during the travesty of Diomedes and Cressida is garden-variety cynicism, no different from that of Ulysses (who is also watching, separately, with Troilus). At times they might be echoes:

Cressida [to Diomedes]: Now, my sweet guardian! Hark, a word with you.
[Whispers]
Troilus [Aside]: Yea, so familiar?
Ulysses [To Troilus, aside]: She will sing any man at first sight.
Thersites [Aside]: And any man may sing her, if he can take her cliff. She’s
 noted.
[V.ii.8–13]

But it’s hard not to hear arousal, as Cressida strokes Diomedes’ cheek, in asides like “How the devil Luxury, with his fat rump and potato finger, tickles these together. Fry, lechery, fry!” [V.ii.55–7]. And when Cressida gives Diomedes the sleeve she had accepted from Troilus, Thersites’ excitement builds like any lover’s: “Now the pledge; now, now, now!” [V.ii.65]. He manages to cheapen an already degenerate love scene, and—functioning as a kind of audience surrogate—makes us feel even dirtier. At least someone is enjoying something in this sadistic hell of Shakespeare’s.

His final appearance comes a few scenes later. Having already survived Hector, he must convince yet another Trojan killer to spare his life:

Margarelon: Turn, slave, and fight.
Thersites: What art thou?
Margarelon: A bastard son of Priam’s.
Thersites: I am a bastard too; I love bastards. I am bastard begot, bastard instructed, bastard in mind, bastard in valor, in everything illegitimate. One bear will not bite another, and wherefore should one bastard? Take heed, the quarrel’s most ominous to us. If the son of a whore fight for a whore, he tempts judgment. Farewell, bastard.

Margarelon: The devil take thee, coward!

[V.vii.13–23]

Margarelon is justifiably scornful, but that was not the speech of a coward. Surely it takes as much courage to repel a man with words as with a sword or spear. In a later tragedy, set in a similarly unforgiving universe, a greater bastard, Edmund, heaps his own brand of scorn on “legitimate” rivals:

Why brand they us
With base, with baseness, bastardy? base, base?
Who in the lusty stealth of nature take
More composition and fierce quality
Than doth within a dull, stale, tired bed
Go to th’ creating a whole tribe of fops,
Got ’tween asleep and wake?

[*King Lear*, I.ii.9–15]

Whatever else may be true of bastards, in Shakespeare’s plays at least they are survivors, whose enforced position on the margins of society enables them to see others more clearly. Often that sense of clarity leads the bastard to declare war on their supposed betters. Thersites may want nothing to do with the war he is caught in, but few at Troy cut deeper.

Troilus and Cressida

Now to the lovers. As with Pandarus, it’s helpful to contrast Chaucer’s characterizations with Shakespeare’s. The hero at the start of *Troilus and Criseyde* is hostile to love; he mocks lovers as “verrey foles! nyce and blinde”⁹—until Eros pierces his heart with an arrow [Chaucer, I.202]. Falling for Criseyde is thus a kind of punishment. Troilus spends a few weeks secretly pining for the unsuspecting lady before Pandarus pries out the news.¹⁰ Chaucer devotes all of Book II to Pandarus’s elaborate plots: first to win from Criseyde a chaste pledge to love Troilus

⁹ Coghill [10]: “fools that you are—and blind”

¹⁰ Troilus is lovestruck in early April [Chaucer, I.155–6], and he tells Pandarus around May 3 [Chaucer, II.56].

For all that Shakespeare changes in the plot, his Troilus—passionate, self-indulgent, intoxicated with the idea and language of love more than the act (he mentions no prior affairs)—isn't very different from Chaucer's. The revisions are more substantial for Cressida, who—unlike Criseyde—does not seem to be a widow. We might therefore assume she'd be more open to Troilus's love suit, but Cressida regards the handsome young knight with skepticism. From her first appearance, in the play's second scene, she is witty and perceptive—another in Shakespeare's long line of superior romantic heroines—and more than a match for her uncle; whereas Pandarus easily managed his scene with Troilus (who needs something from him), with Cressida (from whom he needs something) he comes off merely foolish. Here he is comparing Troilus to his magnificent eldest brother:

Cressida: O Jupiter! there's no comparison.

Pandarus: What, not between Troilus and Hector? Do you know a man if you see him?

Cressida: Ay, if I ever saw him before and knew him.

Pandarus: Well, I say Troilus is Troilus.

Cressida: Then you say as I say, for I am sure he is not Hector.

Pandarus: No, nor Hector is not Troilus in some degrees.

Cressida: 'Tis just to each of them; he is himself.

...

Pandarus: Th' other's not come to't; you shall tell me another tale when th' other's come to't. Hector shall not have his wit this year.

Cressida: He shall not need it if he have his own.

Pandarus: Nor his qualities.

Cressida: No matter.

Pandarus: Nor his beauty.

Cressida: 'Twould not become him; his own's better.

[I.ii.61–89]

Pandarus tries again as the Trojan warriors return from the field. In Chaucer's poem, a similar scene is central to Criseyde's falling in love, as Pandarus convinces Troilus to ride conspicuously past her window, "right in thy beste gere" [Chaucer, II.1012].¹³ Upon seeing

¹³ Coghill [81]: "In your best armour"

this valiant figure, Criseyde “wex as reed as rose”¹⁴ [Chaucer, II.1256]—and reconsiders her aloofness:

. . . hir lyked al y-fere,
His persone, his aray, his look, his chere,
His goodly manere, and his gentillesse,
So wel, that never, sith that she was born,
Ne hadde she swich routhe of his distresse;
And how-so she hath hard ben her-biforn, . . .¹⁵

[Chaucer, II.1266–71]

Shakespeare makes several key changes, starting with the entrance of Troilus, who does not seem to have conspired in advance with Pandarus. This is all the text provides:

Cressida: What sneaking fellow comes yonder?
Enter Troilus.
Pandarus: Where? Yonder? That’s Deiphobus. ’Tis Troilus! There’s a man,
niece! Hem! Brave Troilus, the prince of chivalry!
Cressida: Peace, for shame, peace!

[I.ii.221–5]

As usual, actors and directors have considerable freedom to interpret the scene—but “sneaking” does not sound like an effective move. Pandarus does not even recognize Troilus at first, and Cressida seems mostly embarrassed by the spectacle. Finally, mercifully, Pandarus is called away by a messenger from—who else?—Troilus! Alone at last, Cressida delivers a bombshell revelation, the most significant departure yet from Chaucer’s poem: she has been secretly in love with Troilus the whole time!

Words, vows, gifts, tears, and love’s full sacrifice
[Pandarus] offers in another’s enterprise;
But more in Troilus thousandfold I see
Than in the glass of Pandar’s praise may be.
Yet hold I off.

[I.ii.275–9]

¹⁴ Coghill [89]: “turning red as rose”

¹⁵ Coghill [90]: “Liked what she saw thus gathered in a glance, / His person, his array, his countenance, / His goodly manner and his gentle breed, / So much that never yet since she was born / Had she felt such compassion in his need / Of her, for all the hardness of her scorn.”

Cressida more than “holds off”—she goes out of her way to *dispraise* Troilus (at least to Pandarus, who won’t shut up about him). Why? She answers immediately, though it isn’t hard to guess:

Women are angels, wooing;
 Things won are done, joy’s soul lies in the doing.
 That she beloved knows nought that knows not this:
 Men price the thing ungained more than it is;
 That she was never yet, that ever knew
 Love got so sweet as when desire did sue.
 Therefore this maxim out of love I teach:
 Achievement is command; ungained, beseech.

[I.ii.279–86]

Shakespeare does not say how old Cressida is, but she is unmarried, beautiful, and—being the daughter of a priest of Apollo—of high status (at least until her father’s defection, though no one in the play seems to hold this against her). We may reasonably infer that she is young: older than Juliet or Ophelia, perhaps, but still inexperienced. We hear of no other suitors, past or present. With what has she purchased this worldly cynicism? This view of love as one more battlefield, where lovers either command or beg for mercy?¹⁶

Let’s pause this thought for a moment. Cressida’s main fear, insofar as we may believe her, is to lose her tenuous control over Troilus—and thus her own fate, for what but an elevating marriage can she realistically aspire to? She cannot know what Troilus *really* wants—certainly not when his mouthpiece is a pander, but even were he to woo in his own voice, could she trust it? Or would his desires and gallantry vanish the moment he “won” her, whereupon she’d be soiled goods. This is not an unreasonable concern in any setting, yet for Cressida it has become dogma.

¹⁶ In this blending of inexperience and cynicism, the Shakespearean heroine Cressida most resembles Portia, and indeed *The Merchant of Venice* is set in a gilded, decadent society not unlike Troy. Once again, the key difference is genre: whereas Portia is the unwavering master of her comedy, Cressida is repeatedly victimized.

Again, let's contrast Shakespeare's character with Chaucer's. Criseyde too is reluctant to admit her desire, but she has different concerns. When Pandarus first blabs of Troilus's love, she begins rolling the possibilities around in her mind, reminding herself of the good things she has heard of Troilus, and not just from her uncle:

And eek I knowe, of longe tyme agoon,
His thewes goode, and that he is not nyce.
Ne avauntour, seyth men, certein, he is noon;
To wys is he to do so gret a vyce;¹⁷

[Chaucer, II.722–5]

Criseyde does not seem to doubt Troilus's good intentions or character. Instead, when she considers what "the hardest is," she notes that "Men mighten deme that he loveth me" [Chaucer, II.729–30].¹⁸ Yet even this does not especially bother her. "What dishonour were it un-to me, this?" she concludes:

May I him lette of that? Why nay, pardee!
I knowe also, and alday here and see,
Men loven wommen al this toun aboute;
Be they the wers? Why, nay, with-outen doute.¹⁹

[Chaucer, II.731–5]

It's true Criseyde stretches out her deliberations, needs more nudging from Pandarus. Yet her overall aim is to convince herself: first, that Troilus may love her; then, that she may love him back: first chastely, then sexually. She worries not how Troilus, being satisfied, might change, but what others might think, should they couple. In contrast, Shakespeare does not show Cressida falling for Troilus at all: she admits her love up front, then searches for reasons *not* to act on it. Which is to say, we are back to the question of why she doubts Troilus. But why should

¹⁷ Coghill [70]: "And more than that, I've known for many a day / That he's no fool, his character is good; / Certainly, he's no boaster, so they say, / He's too intelligent, that's understood."

¹⁸ Coghill [71]: "Let us suppose the worst that could befall: / *People might know he was in love with me.*"

¹⁹ Coghill [71]: "Would that dishonour me? Why, not at all! / Can I prevent him? Not that I can see. / One hears about such cases constantly; / A man will love a woman without permission / From her; is she the worse for that condition?"

she trust him, when the two men in her life prior to Troilus are her father, an exemplar of faithlessness, and her uncle, a bawd? When her world values rhetoric more than integrity? No longer a widow, Shakespeare's heroine lacks even the memory of a happy union. As for the mythic romance that is the play's foundation, the tale of Paris and Helen—though blessed by Aphrodite, who helped the pair flee Greece for Troy—is also about broken vows, albeit with a woman as the faithless one.²⁰ The cataclysm that follows Helen to Troy is hardly an endorsement of succumbing to desire.

Nevertheless, Cressida concludes her soliloquy on a note of apparent resolve:

Then, though my heart's content firm love doth bear,
Nothing of that shall from mine eyes appear.

[I.ii.287–8]

She then disappears for two acts, as Shakespeare focuses on the Trojan War from both sides. Yet the very next time we see Cressida, she consents to a hookup. What changed?

To answer, it's worth lingering on the preceding scene, when Pandarus visits Paris and Helen (in her only appearance) to excuse Troilus from dining with his father. (Apparently Troilus can't do anything on his own.) "What exploit's in hand? Where sups he tonight?" Paris wonders, and Helen chimes in:

Helen: You must not know where he sups.

Paris: I'll lay my life, with my disposer Cressida.

Pandarus: No, no; no such matter; you are wide. Come, your disposer is sick.

Paris: Well, I'll make excuse.

Pandarus: Ay, good my lord. Why should you say Cressida? No, your poor disposer's sick.

Paris: I spy.

[III.i.79–90]

Clearly Troilus's secret is out at court—and not only with the amorous Paris, who might be most sympathetic. ("Troilus had rather Troy were borne to Greece / Than Cressid

²⁰ Helen, who leaves her husband for another man, turns out to be a model for Cressida.

borne from Troy,” Aeneas remarks upon learning Cressida has been traded to the Greeks [IV.i.46–7].) But why should Troilus need a night-time alibi unless he were expecting something more to happen than his usual routine of wishing and sighing? We hear this in his own words as he waits keenly in Pandarus’s orchard:

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 palates taste indeed
 Love’s thrice-repured nectar? Death, I fear me,
 Sounding destruction, or some joy too fine,
 Too subtle, potent, tuned 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.

[III.ii.16–27]

If Troilus could conjure Cressida with words alone, surely this would do it—but where is she? The mirror of his desire is desperation. “I stalk about her door / Like a strange soul upon the Stygian banks / Staying for waftage,” he tells Pandarus [III.ii.7–9], who hurries to retrieve her, and finally—veiled and blushing and possibly seeking an escape route—she meets him face to face.

Again, what has changed since Act One? I think we must consider the possibility that Shakespeare, juggling so many characters and events, simply didn’t have the pages to further develop this relationship. But we can make several inferences from what he did write. For if Paris, Aeneas, etc., know Troilus loves Cressida, Cressida likely knows they know—how could someone who talks to Pandarus each day not suspect the whole city is gossiping about her! In this oppressive atmosphere, she can’t hold out forever; maybe the simple fact of Troilus making a move of his own—actually showing up himself to woo

her—persuades her to drop the act and take what she too desires. Pandarus’s commentary during these initial moments, though creepy (“How now, a kiss in fee farm!” “What, billing again?” [III.ii.48–9 & 55]), indicates that both lovers are eager for contact.

All that being said, Cressida remains hesitant, even fearful. She does not speak until Pandarus exits (to make a fire), and her first words to Troilus—possibly ever—are to ask him to “walk in” [III.ii.58]—away from potentially prying eyes. Troilus’s eager reply (“O Cressid, how often have I wished me thus!” [III.ii.59]) suggests he has interpreted “in” to mean “into my bed,” and for only a moment Cressida agrees:

Cressida: Wished, my lord? The gods grant—O my lord!

Troilus: What should they grant? What makes this pretty abruption? What too-curious dreg espies my sweet lady in the fountain of our love?

Cressida: More dregs than water, if my fears have eyes.

Troilus: Fears make devils of cherubins; they never see truly.

Cressida: Blind fear, that seeing reason leads, finds safer footing than blind reason stumbling without fear. To fear the worst oft cures the worse.

[III.ii.60–9]

Troilus speaks like another Romeo, but Cressida’s language is knottier. Her point seems to be that fear of the unknown is more than just prudent: by fearing the worst, we can avoid it. Troilus has nothing useful to offer back. “O, let my lady apprehend no fear,” he coos. “In all Cupid’s pageant there is presented no monster” [III.ii.70–1]. Coming from a man whose city is existentially threatened thanks to love, who for seven years has been fighting to defend the spoils of love, these lines are ridiculously, staggeringly naive—or they would be, if sincere; Troilus may be spouting whatever platitudes he hopes will calm his lady’s nerves. Either way, she isn’t buying. He tries harder:

Cressida: Nor nothing monstrous neither?

Troilus: Nothing but our undertakings when we vow to weep seas, live in fire, eat rocks, tame tigers, thinking it harder for our mistress to devise imposition enough than for us to undergo any difficulty imposed. 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.

Cressida: They say all lovers swear more performance than they are able, and yet reserve an ability that they never perform, vowing more than the perfection of ten and discharging less than the tenth part of one. They that have the voice of lions and the act of hares, are they not monsters?

Troilus: Are there such? Such are not we. Praise us as we are tasted, allow us as we prove; our head shall go bare till merit crown it.

[III.ii.72–88]

We must remember these lines in the morning, when Troilus delivers Cressida to the Greeks with scarcely a protest. Meantime, she again invites him inside, but before Troilus can answer Pandarus returns and reinserts himself in the conversation. Cressida reverts to her mocking self—perhaps to deflect her uncle’s unwanted insinuations:

Pandarus: What, blushing still? Have you not done talking yet?

Cressida: Well, uncle, what folly I commit, I dedicate to you.

Pandarus: I think you for that. If my lord get a boy of you, you’ll give him me. Be true to my lord; if he flinch, chide me for it.

Troilus [To Cressida]: You know now your hostages, your uncle’s word and my firm faith.

Pandarus: Nay, I’ll give my word for her too. Our kindred, though they be long ere they be wooed, they are constant being won. They are burrs, I can tell you; they’ll stick where they are thrown.

[III.ii.96–108]

Then, without warning, Cressida makes the kind of declaration she had once warned all women not to make:

Cressida: Boldness comes to me now and brings me heart.

Prince Troilus, I have loved you night and day
For many weary months.

Troilus: Why was my Cressid then so hard to win?

Cressida: Hard to seem won; but I was won, my lord,
With the first glance that ever—pardon me:
If I confess much you will play the tyrant.

[III.ii.109–15]

This sudden reminder of old fears startles her, and she tries to hedge her confession with practiced coolness: “I love you now, but not, till now, so much / But I might master it”

[III.ii.116–7]. Then, unable to hold the pose, she reverses herself endearingly:

In faith, I lie;
 My thoughts were like unbridled children grown
 Too headstrong for their mother. See, we fools!
 Why have I blabbed? Who shall be true to us
 When we are so unsecret to ourselves?
 But, though I loved you well, I wooed you not;
 And yet, good faith, I wished 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. See, see! your silence,
 Cunning in dumbness, for my weakness draws
 My very soul of counsel. Stop my mouth.

[III.ii.117–29]

Apparently once Cressida gets started, she can’t stop herself—but why start at all?

Perhaps she is responding, on some level, to Pandarus: his destabilizing mix of prurience and praise leads her, against her better judgment, to tell the truth. *Don’t listen to my vicious uncle*, she might be urging Troilus: *listen to me*—until his silence unnerves her! When Troilus finally does what she asks and kisses her, Pandarus can’t help himself. “Pretty, i’ faith,” he murmurs, and Cressida instantly pulls back:

My lord, I do beseech you, pardon me;
 ’Twas not my purpose thus to beg a kiss.
 I am ashamed. O heavens, what have I done?
 For this time will I take my leave, my lord.

[III.ii.131–5]

Troilus and Pandarus both protest and Cressida stays, but she grows less comfortable by the moment:

Troilus: What offends you, lady?
Cressida: Sir, mine own company.
Troilus: You cannot shun yourself.

Cressida: Let me go and try.
 I have a kind of self resides with you;
 But an unkind self, that itself will leave
 To be another's fool. I would be gone.
 Where is my wit? I know not what I speak.

[III.ii.139–46]

It's tempting to hear in these lines a prophecy of what shall happen in two acts, when Cressida indeed leaves Troilus to be Diomedes' "fool." But there is a more straightforward meaning. Cressida has given part of herself to Troilus, she says—a romantic cliché. But this self is really "unkind," or unnatural: it goes against its own nature—its instinct for preservation—"to be another's fool." This "another," then, is not Diomedes but Troilus himself, and Cressida is not predicting her own betrayal of Troilus: she anticipates *Troilus* making a fool of *her*. It is this foolish self she wants to "shun."

Troilus hears absolutely none of this. "Well know they what they speak that speak so wisely," he assures her [III.ii.147]. Could she be mocking him, however subtly, in her reply?

Perchance, my lord, I show more craft than love,
 And fell so roundly to a large confession
 To angle for your thoughts. But you are wise,
 Or else you love not, for to be wise and love
 Exceeds man's might; that dwells with gods above.

[III.ii.148–52].

Now it's Troilus's turn to risk offense, though inadvertently: his aim is not to criticize

Cressida—she is, after all, just a weak woman—but to praise himself:

O! that I thought it could be in a woman—
 As, if it can, I will presume in you—
 To feed for aye her lamp and flames of love;
 To keep her constancy in plight and youth,
 Outliving beauty's outward, with a mind
 That doth renew swifter than blood decays;
 Or that persuasion could but thus convince me
 That my integrity and truth to you
 Might be affronted with the match and weight
 Of such a winnowed purity in love;

How were I then uplifted! But, alas,
I am as true as truth's simplicity,
And simpler than the infancy of truth.

[III.ii.153–65]

God the dude is boring! Still he drones on, and now he is the one prophesizing:

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,
Wants similes, truth tired with iteration, . . .
“As true as Troilus” shall crown up the verse
And sanctify the numbers.

[III.ii.168–78]

I find this interminable (even edited), but evidently Cressida does not. Perhaps his earnestness unexpectedly moves her: in a world of degrading artifice, there is power in insisting on truth, however clichéd.²¹ She sees his prophecy, and raises:

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 swallowed 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! . . .
Yea, let them say, to stick the heart of falsehood,
“As false as Cressid.”

[III.ii.179–91]

This, in its melancholy specificity, is far more poignant than her partner's. Its images of time-worn Troy foreshadow not only her own fall, in Act Five, but the city's impending collapse. (They also anticipate a similar speech by, of all people, Ulysses, who shall loathe Cressida on sight [IV.v.216–20].)

²¹ The clichés build on each other until they transcend their tawdry circumstances and become meta. In all three speeches that conclude the scene—Troilus's as well as Cressida's and Pandarus's to follow—Shakespeare leverages his audience's knowledge, cultivated by generations of poets, of the betrayal to come.

Of course, the scene would not be complete without Pandarus interjecting. “Go to, a bargain made; seal it, seal it; I’ll be the witness,” he says impatiently—then further delays the climax long enough to make his own prophecy:

If ever you prove false one to another, since I have taken such pains to bring you together, let all pitiful goers-between be called 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!

[III.ii.192–98]

In an irony even Shakespeare couldn’t have foreseen, the names of the two lovers are mostly forgotten today, but “Pandar” lives on, pejoratively, as both noun and verb. Would Pandarus the man even have cared? His prophesizing sounds perfunctory to me: the impulse of a man loath to give anyone the last word. The lines that follow, and that finally conclude the scene, seem more enthusiastic:

Whereupon I will show you a chamber, which bed, because it shall not speak of your pretty encounters, press it to death. Away!

Exeunt [Troilus and Cressida].

And Cupid grant all tongue-tied maidens here
Bed, chamber, Pandar to provide this gear!

[III.ii.202–6]

Truly it is Pandarus’s triumph as much as Troilus’s, performed for his pleasure as much as Cressida’s. We can only hope they savor their one night before the fall.

Diomedes and Cressida (and Troilus and Pandarus)

The descent happens immediately: the very next scene begins with Calchas, Cressida’s father, begging the Greeks to trade a high-ranking Trojan prisoner for his daughter. Agamemnon agrees and sends Diomedes to fetch her.

In the *Iliad*, Diomedes may be the fiercest Greek after Achilles, and he wins nearly as much glory. In Book IV, inspired by Athena, he takes over the battle and defeats, among many others, Aeneas and Ares (who runs howling back to Olympus); he even wounds Aphrodite, as

though avenging—to the extent anyone can—the goddess’s role in sparking the war. There are no such glories in Shakespeare’s play; the gods are absent, and Diomedes battles Aeneas with words only, during a brief pause in the fighting. The result is a fine parody of Homeric bombast:

Aeneas: Health to you, valiant sir,
During all question of the gentle truce;
But when I meet you armed, as black defiance
As heart can think or courage execute.

Diomedes: The one and other Diomed embraces.
Our bloods are now in calm, and, so long, health;
But when contention and occasion meet,
By Jove, I’ll play the hunter for thy life
With all my force, pursuit, and policy.

Aeneas: And thou shalt hunt a lion that will fly
With his face backward. In humane gentleness,
Welcome to Troy. Now by Anchises’ life,
Welcome indeed! By Venus’ hand I swear,
No man alive can love in such a sort
The thing he means to kill more excellently.

Diomedes: We sympathize. Jove, let Aeneas live,
If to my sword his fate be not the glory,
A thousand complete courses of the sun!
But, in mine emulous honor, let him die
With every joint a wound, and that tomorrow!

[IV.i.10–29]

“This is the most spiteful gentle greeting, / The noblest hateful love, that e’er I heard of,” Paris exclaims [IV.i.32–3]: a just description that still misses the lunacy of these barbaric men forced to play nice. Really, the best you can say for Shakespeare’s Diomedes is that he knows exactly what all the fighting is worth, and he’s willing to say it aloud. As they walk together to Cressida’s house, Paris can’t help but solicit his enemy’s opinion:

Paris: And tell me, noble Diomed, faith, tell me true,
Even in the soul of sound good-fellowship,
Who, in your thoughts, deserves fair Helen best,
Myself or Menelaus?

Diomedes: Both alike.
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 dishonor,
 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 pleased to breed out your inheritors.
 Both merits poised, each weighs nor less nor more;
 But he as he, the heavier for a whore.

[IV.i.51–66]

If Hector could speak like this in council, if *any* Greek leader called out Menelaus to his face, the bloated warriors might all pop like balloons. But when truth comes from a foe, Paris can too easily dismiss it, though Diomedes has lots more to say:

Paris: You are too bitter to your countrywoman.
Diomedes: She's bitter to her country. Hear me, Paris:
 For every false drop in her bawdy veins
 A Grecian's life hath sunk. For every scruple
 Of her contaminated carrion weight
 A Trojan hath been slain. Since she could speak,
 She hath not given so many good words breath
 As for her Greeks and Trojans suffered death.

[IV.i.67–74]

This is both misogynistic and the most heartfelt expression of comradery in the play. No matter: before the day is out, Diomedes shall seize his own false lady to flaunt before her cuckold—but that's leaping ahead. First, Shakespeare cuts back to Troilus and Cressida, who have no idea how near they are to the end. On the contrary: Troilus is trying to sneak away—or so Cressida fears:

Troilus: Dear, trouble not yourself. The morn is cold.
Cressida: Then, sweet my lord, I'll call mine uncle down.
 He shall unbolt the gates.
Troilus: Trouble him not.
 To bed, to bed! Sleep kill those pretty eyes,
 And give as soft attachment to thy senses
 As infants' empty of all thought!
Cressida: Good morrow, then.
Troilus: I prithee now, to bed.

Cressida: Are you aweary of me?
Troilus: O Cressida, but that the busy day,
 Waked by the lark, hath roused the ribald crows,
 And dreaming night will hide our joys no longer,
 I would not from thee.

[IV.ii.1–11]

That “hide” suggests Troilus still wants to keep their relationship a secret—all the reason Cressida needs to mistrust him:

Prithee, tarry; you men will never tarry.
 O foolish Cressid! I might have still held off,
 And then you would have tarried.

[IV.ii.16–18]

Does she know about other men firsthand, as Ulysses shall suspect [IV.v.54–63]? Or is this just a rational assumption in a stew of toxic masculinity? Cressida finally coaxes Troilus back inside when Aeneas comes knocking; “I would not for half Troy have you seen here,” she says [IV.ii.41], and on this they can agree. But Troilus soon reenters, alone, and Aeneas delivers his message: Cressida must leave ASAP with “the Grecian Diomed” [IV.ii.62]. Here is the entirety of Troilus’s reply:

Troilus: Is it concluded so?
Aeneas: By Priam and the general state of Troy.
 They are at hand and ready to effect it.
Troilus: How my achievements mock me!
 I will go meet them. And, my Lord Aeneas,
 We met by chance; you did not find me here.

[IV.ii.66–71]

And then he’s gone. “The young prince will go mad,” Pandarus mutters when he hears [IV.ii.75]. He spares no thought for his niece, who reenters next. This is how Cressida reacts:

Pandarus: Thou must to thy father and be gone from Troilus. ’Twill be his death;
 ’twill be his bane; he cannot bear it.
Cressida: O you immortal gods! I will not go.
Pandarus: Thou must.
Cressida: I will not, uncle. I have forgot my father.
 I know no touch of consanguinity—

No kin, no love, no blood, no soul so near me
 As the sweet Troilus. O you gods divine,
 Make Cressid's name the very crown of falsehood
 If ever she leave Troilus! . . .
 Tear my bright hair, and scratch my praised cheeks,
 Crack my clear voice with sobs, and break my heart
 With sounding Troilus. I will not go from Troy.

[IV.ii.90–108]

Whose death, Pandar? Shakespeare cuts back to Troilus, who—having accepted the loss as unavoidable—is leading Diomedes and the Trojan delegation back to Cressida. “I’ll bring her to the Grecian presently,” he announces:

And to his hand when I deliver her,
 Think it an altar, and thy brother Troilus
 A priest there off’ring to it his own heart.

[IV.iii.6–9]

Noble-sounding words—but why “priest” instead of “lover”? A priest can love from afar; no one expects him to fight for a woman—or even lodge a protest, apparently. Was Cressida right all along? Having “achieved” her body, has Troilus lost interest? For all her fears, she resists this conclusion. When Shakespeare cuts back to Cressida, Pandarus is urging her to “be moderate.” “Why tell you me of moderation?” she retorts:

The grief is fine, full, perfect, that I taste,
 And violenteth in a sense as strong
 As that which causeth it. How can I moderate it?
 If I could temporize with my affections,
 Or brew it to a weak and colder palate,
 The like allayment could I give my grief.
 My love admits no qualifying dross;
 No more my grief, in such a precious loss.

[IV.iv.1–10]

On cue, the true man of moderation, of “qualifying dross,” reenters. Cressida throws herself into his arms—even Pandarus begs for an embrace [IV.iv.12–14]!—but when Troilus finally speaks, he offers only self-serving mythologizing:

Cressid, I love thee in so strained a purity,
 That the blessed gods, as angry with my fancy—
 More bright in zeal than the devotion which
 Cold lips blow to their deities—take thee from me.

[IV.iv.23–6]

Again the religious language, with Troilus as devotee and Cressida a goddess to be worshipped, not wed. You can hear the gradual realization that her man is not going to fight for her:

Cressida: And is it true that I must go from Troy?

Troilus: A hateful truth.

Cressida: What, and from Troilus too?

Troilus: From Troy and Troilus.

Cressida: Is't possible?

[IV.iv.29–31]

Not only possible, Troilus promptly confirms: imminent. His tone-deaf reply leaves the impression that his greatest regret is the lack of time for goodbyes:

And suddenly, where injury of chance
 Puts back leave-taking, justles roughly by
 All time of pause, rudely beguiles our lips
 Of all rejoindure, forcibly prevents
 Our locked embrasures, strangles our dear vows
 Even in the birth of our own laboring breath.
 We two, that with so many thousand sighs
 Did buy each other, must poorly sell ourselves
 With the rude brevity and discharge of one.

[IV.iv.32–40]

And so on, with the remaining seven lines—nearly half the speech—focused on “injurious time,” lurking somewhere in the distance, rather than injured Cressida, shivering before him. He never does manage “goodbye.”

Am I being unfair to Troilus? There is nothing he can do to keep Cressida in Troy: the deal has been made, and armed men are waiting impatiently for her outside. But again, let's compare Chaucer's version of the scene to Shakespeare's. Only by recognizing how woefully the latter Troilus fails his test can we fairly judge Cressida later.

It's true that Chaucer's lovers have more time to process the bad news. Troilus is even present, early in Book IV, when the Trojan Parliament agrees to swap Cressida for Antenor, a sorely missed advisor. He then is comforted by Pandarus, whose instinct is to minimize the loss: "For al-so seur as day cometh after night, / The newe love, labour or other wo, / Or elles selde seinge of a wight, / Don olde affeccious alle over-go" [Chaucer, IV, 421–4].²² When Troilus vociferously rejects this argument, Pandarus urges him to flee the city with Criseyde, but Troilus does not want to cause further trouble or injury:

Yet drede I most hir herte to pertourbe
With violence, if I do swich a game;
For if I wolde it openly distourbe,
It moste been disclaundre to hir name.
And me were lever deed than hir defame,
As nolde god but-if I sholde have
Hir honour lever than my lyf to save!²³

[Chaucer, IV, 561–7]

Thus, when he finally calls on Criseyde, Troilus has considered his options and deemed them all bad. Criseyde, who has already learned of her fate, swoons at the sight of him. Thinking her dead, Troilus draws his sword and prepares to kill himself, but she awakens just in time to stop him. She argues their separation will be only temporary: she'll convince her father to let her return, or she'll trick him, or the Greeks and Trojans will negotiate a peace. But Troilus is not convinced: partly he fears that, surrounded by "lusty" Greeks, she will "dullen of the rudenesse / Of us sely Troianes"²⁴ and forget him [Chaucer, IV, 1485–90]; but mainly he can't imagine life without her, not even for a day. "And if ye goon, as I have told yow yore," he concludes, "So

²² Coghill [194]: "For just as sure as day will follow night, / New love, or work, or other predilection, / Or the mere fact of seldom having sight / Of someone, can obliterate affection."

²³ Coghill [199]: "Yet most I dread her heart might be perturbed / By violence, were I to play that game, / For if the town were openly disturbed / It must result in slander on her name, / Which I would rather die for, than defame; / And God forbid that ever I prefer / Saving my wretched life to saving her."

²⁴ Coghill [232]: "And you will see so many a lusty knight / Among the Greeks, . . . / And you will tire of the rusticities / Of us fool-Trojans . . ."

thenk I nam but deed, with-oute more” [Chaucer, IV, 1497–8].²⁵ And so he finds himself echoing Pandarus: “And lat us stele away bitwixe us tweye; / And thenk that folye is, whan man may chese, / For accident his substaunce ay to lese” [Chaucer, IV, 1503–5].²⁶ Still Criseyde urges patience: if they flee, people will assume Troilus is a coward. She promises everything will work out if they stay faithful to each other, and he finally, sadly assents.

Again, I’ll grant Shakespeare’s Troilus has far less time to react, let alone strategize. But his *only* move, as hypocrites and thugs tear Cressida away, is to passively accept his fate. The contrast with Paris, who clings to Helen through seven blood-soaked years, is telling. What might Troilus have done if he were half as selfish as his oily brother? “I know what ’tis to love,” Paris offers as consolation; “And would, as I shall pity, I could help!” [IV.ii.10–11]. Are any lines more galling? Now is the time to tell Paris exactly what he could do to help—not only Troilus but every fool sacrificing all so that one man can have his prize.

Instead, Troilus aims his bitterest words at Cressida, whose perfidy he treats as inevitable. “A woeful Cressid ’mongst the merry Greeks! / When shall we see again?” she wails, but he dodges the question:

Troilus: Hear me, love. Be thou but true of heart—
Cressida: I true! How now! What wicked deem is this?
Troilus: Nay, we must use expostulation kindly,
 For it is parting from us.
 I speak not “Be thou true” as fearing thee,
 For I will throw my glove to Death himself
 That there’s no maculation in thy heart;
 But “Be thou true,” say I, to fashion in
 My sequent protestation: be thou true,
 And I will see thee.

[IV.iv.55–66]

²⁵ Coghill [232]: “And if you leave me, as I said before, / Then think of me as dead and nothing more.”

²⁶ Coghill [232]: “Let us steal off together right away! / For think what folly it is, when we can choose, / To grasp a shadow, and a substance lose!”

That conclusion might apply to Criseyde, overconfident in her power to manipulate her father and wait out the war, but *Cressida* is fully aware of her precarious position; she is not headed blithely toward temptation—she is being frog-marched there, and she is miserable. But his argument at least reminds her that commitment runs both ways: in their final moments of privacy she blurts out, “My lord, will you be true?” She shall not speak another line to him, not even to reply to his pompous answer:

Who, I? Alas, it is my vice, my fault.
 Whiles others fish with craft for great opinion,
 I with great truth craft mere simplicity;
 Whilst some with cunning gild their copper crowns,
 With truth and plainness I do wear mine bare.
 Fear not my truth. The moral of my wit
 Is “plain and true”; there’s all the reach of it.

[IV.iv.100–7]

Such gilded language! A rhyming couplet! But if the standards are “simplicity” and “plainness,” I’ll take any of her half-line protestations to his barrage. Further disproving his point, Troilus then picks a fight—as prolix as it is pointless—with Diomedes, who enters at that moment with Paris, Aeneas, and other Trojan lords. As Troilus hands over Cressida, he asks Diomedes to treat her well; do this, he continues, and “If e’er thou stand at mercy of my sword, / Name Cressid, and thy life shall be as safe / As Priam is in Ilion” [IV.iv.112–15]. Predictably, Diomedes bristles at the implication he’d ever need mercy; turning to Cressida, he announces he esteems her not to earn any thanks from Troilus, but because “The luster in your eye, heaven in your cheek, / Pleads your fair usage” [IV.iv.117–18]. Doubtlessly sensing his foe’s amorous intent, Troilus escalates:

Grecian, thou dost not use me courteously,
 To shame the seal of my petition to thee
 In praising her. I tell thee, lord of Greece,
 She is as far high-soaring o’er thy praises
 As thou unworthy to be called her servant.

I charge thee use her well, even for my charge;
 For, by the dreadful Pluto, if thou dost not,
 Though the great bulk Achilles be thy guard,
 I'll cut thy throat.

[IV.iv.120–7]

Smoldering with jealousy, Troilus turns Cressida's farewell into a test of his superiority to those imagined Grecian youths; he makes a rival of Diomedes before the latter can volunteer! Not that Diomedes—among the most contrary men in the play—is unwilling to live down to Troilus's bad opinion. “When I am hence, / I'll answer to my lust,” he boasts; “and know you, lord, / I'll nothing do on charge” [IV.iv.130–2]. Troilus gets in one more threat before finally remembering his love:

I'll tell thee, Diomed,
 This brave shall oft make thee to hide thy head.
 Lady, give me your hand, and, as we walk,
 To our own selves bend we our needful talk.

[IV.iv.135–8]

Those are his last lines to her, at least onstage. We can only guess what “needful talk” shall pass between them, but the other princes do not care. The instant Troilus, Cressida, and Diomedes exit, Hector's trumpet sounds, reminding everyone of their priorities:

Aeneas: How have we spent this morning!
 The prince must think me tardy and remiss,
 That swore to ride before him to the field.
Paris: 'Tis Troilus' fault. Come, come, to field with him.

[IV.iv.139–42]

Quite a reversal from Paris's earlier “pity”! Now even he longs for battle—perhaps to assuage the guilt he must, on some level, feel.

After four scenes in Troy—the longest stretch in the play—Shakespeare cuts back to the Greek camp, where nearly all the remaining action will occur. Ajax is preparing to fight Hector in single combat, but first Diomedes enters with Cressida, and every Greek lord falls over

himself to make an impression. Imagine how Cressida must be feeling: torn from everything she knows and loves, dependent on barbarians who for seven years have laid siege to her home and slaughtered her countrymen—and here is how she is met:

Agamemnon: Is this the lady Cressid?
Diomedes: Even she.
Agamemnon: Most dearly welcome to the Greeks, sweet lady.
Nestor: Our general doth salute you with a kiss.
Ulysses: Yet is the kindness but particular.
 'Twere better she were kissed in general.
Nestor: And very courtly counsel. I'll begin.
 So much for Nestor.
Achilles: I'll take that winter from your lips, fair lady.
 Achilles bids you welcome.

[IV.v.17–25]

That's three fearsome warriors, and three unasked-for kisses. Directors have choices to make. Do Agamemnon and Nestor, perhaps even Achilles, gently kiss Cressida, or is this more like an assault? Either way, how does she react? Later in the scene, after Cressida has left with Diomedes, Ulysses is withering in his censure:

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 encounterers, 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 sluttish spoils of opportunity
 And daughters of the game.

[IV.v.54–63]

Ulysses was the very man who suggested, when the scene began, “'Twere better she were kissed in general,” and his tirade comes, as we shall see, after Cressida pointedly does *not* kiss him. Notwithstanding his suspect motive, we might still ask if the text supports the criticism. Following Achilles' kiss, Menelaus moves to take his, but Patroclus, comparing himself to Paris,

cuts in line—twice! As his comrades roar with laughter, Menelaus tries again, and only now, five forced kisses in, does Cressida speak:

Menelaus: I'll have my kiss, sir. Lady, by your leave.
Cressida: In kissing, do you render or receive?
Patroclus: Both take and give.
Cressida: I'll make my match to live,
 The kiss you take is better than you give;
 Therefore no kiss.

[IV.v.35–9]

Thus, having gotten her bearings, Cressida deftly manages to *avoid* kissing someone. She does it again, as noted, with Ulysses:

Ulysses: May I, sweet lady, beg a kiss of you?
Cressida: You may.
Ulysses: I do desire it.
Cressida: Why, beg then.
Ulysses: Why, then, for Venus' sake, give me a kiss,
 When Helen is a maid again, and his—
Cressida: I am your debtor; claim it when 'tis due.
Ulysses: Never's my day, and then a kiss of you.
Diomedes: Lady, a word. I'll bring you to your father.

[IV.v.47–53]

True, in his last few lines Ulysses claims *not* to want a kiss—but this disdainful turn comes only after he says, without apparent irony, “I do desire it.” Cressida halts his advance—“Why, beg then” is like cold water—and his tone suddenly shifts. *Beg?* he seems to say. *From one more harlot?* Cressida diplomatically cuts him off before he can finish the insult, and Diomedes hurries her offstage. It's easy to see why Ulysses, the master manipulator, would resent a woman for effectively playing cards he'll never have. But what is “wanton” or “sluttish” about Cressida, at her most vulnerable, using her only weapons—wit and beauty—to dodge as many latches, give as little offense, and remain as true to Troilus as possible?

What is possible soon changes, however. All that remains is for Troilus, goaded by—who else?—Ulysses, to witness the inevitable faithlessness. It is Cressida's first night in camp, and

Diomedes—who hours earlier had *not* been one of the Greeks lined up for kisses—has come to claim his share. It's never explicitly clear what she has promised or he expects, but Troilus, Ulysses, and Thersites—all spying from the shadows—waste no time leaping to conclusions:

Diomedes: Will you remember?
Cressida: Remember? Yes.
Diomedes: Nay, but do, then,
 And let your mind be coupled with your words.
Troilus [Aside]: What should she remember?
Ulysses [To Troilus, aside] List!
Cressida: Sweet honey Greek, tempt me no more to folly.
Thersites [Aside]: Roguery!
Diomedes: Nay, then—
Cressida: I'll tell you what—
Diomedes: Foh, foh! come, tell a pin. You are forsworn.
Cressida: In faith, I cannot. What would you have me do?
Thersites [Aside]: A juggling trick—to be secretly open.
Diomedes: What did you swear you would bestow on me?
Cressida: I prithee, do not hold me to mine oath;
 Bid me do anything but that, sweet Greek.
Diomedes: Good night.
Troilus [Aside]: Hold, patience!

[V.ii.14–30]

Whatever Cressida had sworn to give Diomedes, she obviously regrets it now. But what can she do? Diomedes is no doting Nestor or emasculated Menelaus; he is a powerful warrior who has appointed himself her guardian—as, hoping to uncover some trace of honor, she reminds him several times [V.ii.8 & 47]. If he demands recompense, can she really refuse? She might try to evade, buy herself time—she might even swear: *later*. Then as she waits alone, remembering her life only yesterday, she feels guilty and, when next she sees Diomedes, tries desperately to undo her promise.

He will have none of it, and his rising anger—whether genuine or performed—frightens Cressida enough to compel both physical affection and *another* promise:

Diomedes: Foh, foh! adieu; you palter.
Cressida: In faith, I do not. Come hither once again.

Ulysses [*To Troilus, aside*] You shake, my lord, at something. Will you go?
You will break out.

Troilus [*Aside*]: She strokes his cheek!

Ulysses: Come, come.

...

Diomedes: But will you, then?

Cressida: In faith, I will, la. Never trust me else.

Diomedes: Give me some token for the surety of it.

Cressida: I'll fetch you one.

[V.ii.48–61]

She ducks into her tent and returns with the sleeve Troilus gave her (in exchange for her glove). This is for Troilus the ultimate proof of betrayal, but from Cressida's perspective what else of value (short of herself) does she have that might convince Diomedes to further put off his pleasure? Regardless, she immediately regrets it and again begs a do-over:

Cressida: You look upon that sleeve; behold it well.

He loved me—O false wench! Give't me again.

Diomedes: Whose was't?

Cressida: It is no matter, now I have't again.

I will not meet with you tomorrow night.

I prithee, Diomed, visit me no more.

[V.ii.69–73]

Thersites' commentary—"Now she sharpens. Well said, whetstone!" [V.ii.74–5]—is nasty nonsense: these are not the words of a woman playing games, let alone enjoying herself.

Diomedes, however, is in his element:

Diomedes: I will have this. Whose was it?

Cressida: It is no matter.

Diomedes: Come, tell me whose it was.

Cressida: 'Twas one's that loved me better than you will.

But, now you have it, take it.

Diomedes: Whose was it?

Cressida: By all Diana's waiting women yond,
And by herself, I will not tell you whose.

Diomedes: Tomorrow will I wear it on my helm,
And grieve his spirit that dares not challenge it.

[V.ii.87–94]

He's already counting his spoils: by tomorrow night, Diomedes plans to have bedded one Trojan and killed another. How could he not know whose sleeve it was, given his chest-thumping argument with Troilus that morning? Forcing Cressida to say her lover's name, and imagining his imminent humiliation and death, stimulates Diomedes no less than the expectation of sex. And he does expect sex, as Shakespeare makes plain in consecutive puns:

Diomedes: What, shall I come? The hour?

Cressida: Ay, come—O Jove!—Do come—I shall be plagued.

[V.ii.104–6]

“I shall be plagued” is an apt motto for Cressida, though when Diomedes scurries away and she is alone—or so she believes, as Troilus, Ulysses, and Thersites are all still spying on her—she offers a curious elaboration:

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.
 What error leads must err. O, then conclude
 Minds swayed by eyes are full of turpitude.

[V.ii.109–14]

Even for this play, this is difficult language. The straightforward reading seems to be that, though Cressida still remembers loving Troilus, her heart has changed: her newfound love for Diomedes, though erring (like all women's love), has overruled her judgment. But can this really be her meaning? She interacts with Diomedes in three separate scenes; no other Greek spends more time with her. Yet prior to this confession, she has said nothing to suggest she feels anything approaching love for him. Shakespeare gives her the wittiest speech in the play to explicitly say she loves Troilus. Yet when she first lays eyes on Diomedes [IV.iv.108–38], she says nothing—not a single aside—to suggest she even notices him. And supposedly by nightfall he has won her heart? It seems preposterous to consider.

But then what else could she be saying? Clearly something has become more important than loving Troilus, but why must it be any tender feelings for the brutish Diomedes? She sees her *circumstances* as clearly as she sees him; she knows firsthand now how easily any Greek leader might force himself on her. If it must be someone, she might well conclude, Diomedes is as good as any—at least, like Troilus, he can speak the language of chivalry. In fact, he’s willing to speak it publicly! “[A]nd to Diomed / You shall be mistress, and command him wholly,” he announced when they met [IV.iv.118–20].

Recall Cressida’s witty speech again, particularly its conclusion:

Therefore this maxim out of love I teach:
Achievement is command; ungained, beseech.

[I.ii.285–6]

If this is correct, the best way to ensure Diomedes continues to obey her commands—which presumably include protecting her—is to fuel but never satisfy his desire. It worked beautifully with Troilus, after all, until she gave in to her own desire (and her uncle’s nonstop pestering); the very next day, she was torn from his arms—and he let go. Lesson learned . . . except Diomedes is no Troilus. Not only will he not be put off, it’s dangerous to keep trying—and Cressida knows it. Why then does she attribute all this to her foolish heart? Maybe it’s easier to tell herself she loves Diomedes than admit to such a cold-eyed calculation. Better to chalk up your disgrace to a “fault” inherent to womankind than to fully acknowledge the peril you’re in.

With that Cressida exits, never to be heard again. But Troilus remains onstage, with his interlocutor Ulysses, and he has much to unpack, starting with disbelief:

Ulysses: All’s done, my lord.

Troilus: It is.

Ulysses: Why stay we, then?

Troilus: To make a recordation to my soul
Of every syllable that here was spoke.
But if I tell how these two did co-act,

Shall I not lie in publishing a truth?
 Sith yet there is a credence in my heart,
 An esperance so obstinately strong,
 That doth invert th' attest of eyes and ears,
 As if those organs had deceptious functions,
 Created only to calumniate.
 Was Cressid here?

[V.ii.117–27]

This might seem merely rhetorical (though Ulysses helpfully confirms that Cressida was indeed “here but now” [V.ii.130]). But Troilus persists, as though he could philosophize his way into another reality:

This she? No, this is Diomed's Cressida.
 If beauty have a soul, this is not she;
 If souls guide vows, if vows be sanctimonies,
 If sanctimony be the gods' delight,
 If there be rule in unity itself,
 This was not she. O madness of discourse,
 That cause sets up with and against itself;
 Bifold authority, where reason can revolt
 Without perdition, and loss assume all reason
 Without revolt. This is and is not Cressid.

[V.ii.140–9]

On the one hand, there's an easy rejoinder: Cressida, like each of us, is no single thing. Troilus's fault—the fault of countless immature lovers, in Shakespeare as elsewhere—has been to believe he can freeze her exactly as she appeared at her loveliest. Cressida would have crashed off that pedestal eventually—if not in an enemy camp with Diomedes, then some other way. Never mind the absurdity of “sanctimonies” in the midst of a war caused by the breaking of a marriage vow: Troilus's inability to see Cressida in all her messy personhood is proof enough (if more were needed) that he exemplifies, in Harold Bloom's words, “the illness of falling in love, of being *in love* with someone, rather than simply loving another” [337]. Troilus is in love with his goddess; when she changes her aspect, he no longer recognizes her.

On the other hand . . . this is an extraordinary speech! I have been hard on Troilus, but as this outburst builds he pushes himself within sight of shores Hamlet would soon reach (or had reached already, depending on the exact chronology of these plays²⁸):

Within my soul there doth conduce a fight
Of this strange nature that a thing inseparate
Divides more wider than the sky and earth;
And yet the spacious breadth of this division
Admits no orifice for a point as subtle
As Ariachne's broken woof to enter.

[V.ii.150–5]

Extraordinary—and characteristically ostentatious. Hamlet not only thinks deeper thoughts; even at his most furious he finds simpler, clearer language to express them. Troilus seems incapable of “O, most wicked speed, to post / With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!” [*Hamlet*, I.ii.156–7], or “The dram of evil / Doth all the noble substance often dout, / To his own scandal” [*Hamlet*, I.iv.36–8], or “in my heart there was a kind of fighting / That would not let me sleep” [*Hamlet*, V.ii.4–5]. Anyway, Troilus is not really interested in pursuing this, and he pivots in the conclusion:

Instance, O instance, strong as Pluto's gates,
Cressid is mine, tied with the bonds of heaven.
Instance, O instance, strong as heaven itself,
The bonds of heaven are slipped, dissolved, and loosed,
And with another knot, five-finger-tied,
The fractions of her faith, orts of her love,
The fragments, scraps, the bits, and greasy relics
Of her o'createn faith, are bound to Diomed.

[V.ii.156–63]

²⁸ Though scholars typically date *Hamlet* a year or two earlier, Act Two of that tragedy contains metatheatrical references to a play set during the fall of Troy which “was never acted, or if it was, not above once; . . . ’twas caviar to the general” [II.ii.375–88]—a clue, perhaps, that Shakespeare wrote *Troilus and Cressida* first? Either way, both plays share themes—faithlessness in love; the hollowness of vengeance; the burden of reputation—that were clearly on Shakespeare’s mind at the time.

We have heard Troilus “regarding Cressida as his private banquet” before [Bloom, 338]: the tendency is evident from Scene 1, when he and Pandarus reduce Cressida to “a cake out of the wheat” [I.i.14–15], and it resurfaces as he waits for Cressida to take him to bed: “What will it be,” he fantasizes, “When that the wat’ry palates taste indeed / Love’s thrice-repured nectar?” [III.ii.18–20]. Scorned in love, Troilus—like all men in this pitiless world—finds no recourse but to make war; the young knight who once wondered, “Why should I war without the walls of Troy / That find such cruel battle here within?” [I.i.2–3], has now found ample cruelty outside:

Hark, Greek: as much as I do Cressid love,
 So much by weight hate I her Diomed.
 That sleeve is mine that he’ll bear on his helm;
 Were it a casque composed by Vulcan’s skill,
 My sword should bite it. Not the dreadful spout
 Which shipmen do the hurricano call,
 Constringed in mass by the almighty sun,
 Shall dizzy with more clamor Neptune’s ear
 In his descent than shall my prompted sword
 Falling on Diomed.

[V.ii.170–9]

Of course, his next breath reveals plenty of hatred for Cressida too:

O Cressid! O false Cressid! False, false, false!
 Let all untruths stand by thy stained name,
 And they’ll seem glorious.

[V.ii.181–3]

For a man who so fully identifies with truth,²⁹ “untruth” may be the nadir of character. Yet “simple” Troilus is performative to his core, and he caps this diatribe with punning bravado:

Farewell, revolted fair—and Diomed,
 Stand fast, and wear a castle on thy head!

[V.ii.189–90]

²⁹ “I am as true as truth’s simplicity” [III.ii.164]. “As true as Troilus’ shall crown up the verse” [III.ii.177]. “Fear not my truth. The moral of my wit / Is ‘plain and true’; there’s all the reach of it” [IV.iv.106–7].

“Farewell, revolted fair” is actually not his final pronouncement on Cressida. The following day, while hurrying to the field, Troilus encounters Pandarus bearing a letter from Cressida. Troilus—who moments earlier had declared, “Not fate, obedience, nor the hand of Mars . . . should stop my way” [V.iii.51–7]—is sufficiently curious to stop and read, though whatever Cressida wrote moves him only to tear up the letter and scatter the pieces:

Words, words, mere words, no matter from the heart;
Th’ effect doth operate another way.
Go, wind to wind, there turn and change together.
My love with words and errors still she feeds,
But edifies another with her deeds.

[V.iii.108–12]

Thus—with one last feasting image—Troilus charges into battle, where according to Ulysses he fights “With such a careless force and forceless care / As if that luck, in very spite of cunning, / Bade him win all” [V.v.40–2]. At one point he even duels Diomedes and Ajax together [V.vi.9–11]. Yet for all Troilus’s ferocity—more than anyone in the play, he comes closest to resembling a Homeric hero in these scenes—we never learn whether he beats Diomedes. (It seems reasonable to assume he’d mention it, if so!) Instead, the final act focuses on the death of Hector. When Troilus announces his brother has been killed—“and at the murderer’s horse’s tail, / In beastly sort, dragged through the shameful field”—he rages nearly to the point of incoherence:

Troilus: Sit, gods, upon your thrones, and smile at Troy!
I say, at once let your brief plagues be mercy,
And linger not our sure destructions on!
Aeneas: My lord, you do discomfort all the host.
Troilus: You understand me not that tell me so.
I do not speak of flight, of fear, of death,
But dare all imminence that gods and men
Address their dangers in.

[V.x.4–14]

In what language do “brief plagues” and “sure destructions” not count as talk of death? As for fear, a few lines later Troilus imagines how the news of Hector’s death will, “in a word, / Scare Troy out of itself” [V.x.20–21]. (In the Folio text, he even advises his comrades to “march away” rather than keep fighting [V.x.21].) Regardless, to add to his apparently still unconsummated feud with Diomedes, Troilus proclaims a new grudge against his brother’s killer, Achilles: “thou great-sized coward,” he rants, “I’ll haunt thee like a wicked conscience still, / That moldeth goblins swift as frenzy’s thoughts” [V.x.26–9]. He ends with a couplet generic enough for half-a-dozen Shakespearean tragedies and histories:

With comfort go;
Hope of revenge shall hide our inward woe.

[V.x.30–31]

Except . . . this play is neither. And before Troilus can make his final, heroic exit, who should pop up one last time but Pandarus? Troilus wants nothing to do with his old “broker-lackey,” and he leaves him with a curse: “Ignomy and shame / Pursue thy life, and live aye with thy name” [V.x.33–4]. The prince may claim the high ground, but Pandarus—incorrigible, self-satisfied, and dying of syphilis—gets the last word. “A goodly medicine for my aching bones!” he exclaims, then turns with a rictus to the audience:

Good traders in the flesh, set this in your painted cloths:
As many as be here of Pandar’s hall,
Your eyes, half out, weep out at Pandar’s fall;
Or if you cannot weep, yet give some groans,
Though not for me, yet for your aching bones.
Brethren and sisters of the hold-door trade,
Some two months hence my will shall here be made.
It should be now, but that my fear is this,
Some galled goose of Winchester would hiss.
Till then I’ll sweat and seek about for eases,
And at that time bequeath you my diseases.

[V.x.35–56]

One of Shakespeare's favorite ways to end a play is a direct address to the audience, but his speakers are typically solicitous and eager for applause. Remember Puck:

Give me your hands, if we be friends,
And Robin shall restore amends.

[*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V.i.429–30]

And Rosalind (or the actor playing her):

If I were a woman, I would kiss as many of you as had beards that pleased me, complexions that liked me, and breaths that I defied not; and I am sure, as many as have good beards, or good faces, or sweet breaths, will, for my kind offer, when I make curtsy, bid me farewell.

[*As You Like It*, Epilogue, 16–21]

And the anonymous player who closes out the *Henry IV* plays:

First my fear, then my curtsy, last my speech. My fear is, your displeasure; my curtsy, my duty; and my speech, to beg your pardons. . . . My tongue is weary. When my legs are too, I will bid you good night, and so kneel down before you, but, indeed, to pray for the queen.

[*2 Henry IV*, Epilogue, 1–31]

We hear it in song:

A great while ago the world begun,
With hey, ho, the wind and the rain;
But that's all one, our play is done,
And we'll strive to please you every day.

[*Twelfth Night*, V.i.398–401]

And in sonnet:

Thus far, with rough and all-unable pen,
Our bending author hath pursued the story,
In little room confining mighty men,
Mangling by starts the full course of their glory.

...

Which oft our stage hath shown; and for their sake,
In your fair minds let this acceptance take.

[*Henry V*, Epilogue, 1–14]

And in what may have been Shakespeare's intended farewell to the theatre:³⁰

Now I want
Spirits to enforce, art to enchant;
And my ending is despair
Unless I be relieved by prayer,
Which pierces so that it assaults
Mercy itself and frees all faults.
As you from crimes would pardoned be,
Let your indulgence set me free.

[*The Tempest*, Epilogue, 13–20]

With *Troilus and Cressida*, for once, Shakespeare gives his ever-hungry audience a rotten fig. Sure, Pandarus would appreciate empathy from those groaning in the crowd, and he doesn't want to be booed, but does it really matter when he'll soon be dead? Shakespeare has been seeding this ambivalence from the start, when the play's armed prologue, after setting the scene, tells us:

Like or find fault; do as your pleasures are;
Now good or bad, 'tis but the chance of war.

[Prologue, 30–31]

Maybe that works for the audience, but I don't think anyone in *Troilus and Cressida* has much to do with pleasure. It scarcely seems to exist, except in fleeting fantasies. The rest of the time, the men fight to make others more miserable than themselves, and the women just try to survive. No one has the luxury of simple enjoyment. It all adds up to make Pandarus's final line superfluous. He does not need to bequeath any diseases, real or metaphorical—there are plenty already at Troy.

Paris and Helen

We're nearly ready for the play's warriors, but first let's consider another pair of lovers—more famous now than Troilus and Cressida, yet apparently to Shakespeare less interesting. The

³⁰ Yes, Shakespeare collaborated on several plays after *The Tempest*, but—as I will argue when I (eventually!) get there—it's tempting to imagine he found life in the country dull and decided to un-retire.

measure of Paris is his oblivious response to his brother's loss of Cressida: "I know what 'tis to love; / And would, as I shall pity, I could help!" [IV.iii.10–11]. If there is more to the man than shameless selfishness, I cannot find it.

Helen warrants a few more words. It's worth remembering that in *Doctor Faustus*, by Shakespeare's early rival in greatness, Christopher Marlowe, the mere sight of Helen inspires perhaps Marlowe's most enduring lines: "Was this the face that launched a thousand ships, / And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?" Faustus marvels as Helen's spirit passes before him [Marlowe, V.1.89–90]. Yet she does not speak a word herself, and her dramaturgical function is to symbolize the final degradation of Marlowe's tragic protagonist, who sells his soul for infernal knowledge, only to squander it on parlor tricks and pranks: as the devils gather to drag him to hell, rather than repent Faustus distracts himself with sex.

Shakespeare's Helen, by contrast, inspires clichés and dirty puns. She appears in only one scene, midway through the play, and enters to chamber music. To the servant who announces her, she is "the mortal Venus, the heartblood of beauty, love's invisible soul" [III.i.31–3]. Pandarus—who has come to the palace to beg a favor of Paris—seems less impressed. "Fair be to you, my lord, and to all this fair company," he flatters by rote: "Fair desires in all fair measure fairly guide them, especially to you, fair queen. Fair thoughts be your fair pillow." Helen makes the obvious retort: "Dear lord, you are full of fair words" [III.i.43–7]. The chatter that follows does not enliven things:

Pandarus: Fair prince, here is good broken music.

Paris: You have broke it, cousin; and, by my life, you shall make it whole again; you shall piece it out with a piece of your performance. Nell, he is full of harmony.

Pandarus: Truly, lady, no.

Helen: O, sir!

Pandarus: Rude, in sooth; in good sooth, very rude.

Paris: Well said, my lord. Well, you say so in fits.

Pandarus: I have business to my lord, dear queen. My lord, will you vouchsafe me a word?

Helen: Nay, this shall not hedge us out. We'll hear you sing, certainly.

Pandarus: Well, sweet queen, you are pleasant with me. But, marry, thus, my lord: my dear lord and most esteemed friend, your brother Troilus—

Helen: My Lord Pandarus, honey-sweet lord—

Pandarus: Go to, sweet queen, go to—commends himself most affectionately to you.

Helen: You shall not bob us out of our melody. If you do, our melancholy upon your head!

[III.i.49–68]

Paris knows perfectly well what Pandarus wants; presumably so does Helen, though—irritated that Pandarus has interrupted—she is more interested in goading him:

Pandarus: And, my lord, [Troilus] desires you that, if the king call for him at supper, you will make his excuse.

Helen: My Lord Pandarus—

Pandarus: What says my sweet queen, my very, very sweet queen?

Paris: What exploit's in hand? Where sups he tonight?

Helen: Nay, but my lord—

Pandarus: What says my sweet queen? My cousin will fall out with you.

Helen [To Paris]: You must not know where he sups.

Paris: I'll lay my life, with my disposer Cressida.

[III.i.74–84]

Pandarus tries to deny it, and Paris loses interest—he even agrees to cover for Troilus at supper—but Pandarus, as is his wont, won't shut up. “Why should you say Cressida?” he presses. “No, your poor disposer's sick.” “I spy,” Paris replies, and—to Helen's delight—Pandarus clumsily changes the subject:

Pandarus: You spy? What do you spy? Come, give me an instrument now, sweet queen.

Helen: Why, this is kindly done.

Pandarus: My niece is horribly in love with a thing you have, sweet queen.

[III.i.88–95]

What?! To deflect attention from Troilus, Pandarus . . . implies Cressida really wants Paris? Or will any “thing” do? Who can say! At least he gives Helen a rare chance to be witty:

Helen: She shall have it, my lord, if it be not my Lord Paris.

Pandarus: He? No, she'll none of him; they two are twain.

Helen: Falling in after falling out may make them three.

Pandarus: Come, come, I'll hear no more of this. I'll sing you a song now.

Helen: Ay, ay, prithee. Now by my troth, sweet lord, thou hast a fine forehead.

Pandarus: Ay, you may, you may.

Helen: Let thy song be love. This love will undo us all. O Cupid, Cupid, Cupid!

[III.i.96–107]

I don't get the "forehead" joke—is Helen calling him a cuckold? Why? Never mind, because

Pandarus finally sings!

Love, love, nothing but love, still love still more!

For, O, love's bow shoots buck and doe.

The shaft confounds not that it wounds,

But tickles still the sore.

These lovers cry, O ho! they die!

Yet that which seems the wound to kill

Doth turn O ho! to Ha, ha, he!

So dying love lives still.

O ho! a while, but Ha, ha, ha!

O ho! groans out for Ha, ha, ha!—Heigh ho!

[III.i.111–120]

The song is exactly what you'd expect from Shakespeare by way of Pandarus: an extended play on the familiar connection between death ("O ho!") and orgasm ("Ha, ha, he!")—and a perfect choice when love and war are yoked so closely. While Helen and Paris luxuriate in each other, countless men die horribly outside. They could end the bloodshed any time—but why bother? It does not really touch them. As the scene ends, music gives way to the sound of soldiers retreating from battle—a spectacle the lovebirds can only romanticize:

Paris: They're come from the field. Let us to Priam's hall

To greet the warriors. Sweet Helen, I must woo you

To help unarm our Hector. His stubborn buckles,

With these your white enchanting fingers touched,

Shall more obey than to the edge of steel

Or force of Greekish sinews. You shall do more

Than all the island kings: disarm great Hector.

Helen: 'Twill make us proud to be his servant, Paris.

Yea, what he shall receive of us in duty

Gives us more palm in beauty than we have,

Yea, overshines ourself.
Paris: Sweet, above thought I love thee.

[III.i.141–52]

Helen at least seems humble, aware of Hector’s superiority—though perhaps it’s just courtesy. Paris hears another invitation for lust. Their exit concludes the most frivolous scene in the play; if cut no one would miss it—unless to wonder why Shakespeare did not include Helen of Troy in his play about the Trojan War. But the queen whose beauty launched a thousand ships is a fantasy no one could live up to; Shakespeare’s Helen does not even try.

Hector and Achilles

The obvious parallel between Hector and Achilles is that the former is the Trojans’ greatest hero and the latter is the Greeks’. But the mortal foes have a subtler congruity in *Troilus and Cressida*, which Homer only hints at. In the *Iliad*, Hector seems to disapprove of the cause of the war: he refuses to sit with Helen in Book Six, and in front of both armies he calls Paris “curse to your father, your city, and all your people” [Homer, 3.58]. At the same time, he takes tremendous pleasure in warfare and its spoils. ““There’s the mound of a man who died in the old days, / one of the brave whom glorious Hector killed,”” he imagines future generations saying—“... and my fame will never die” [Homer, 7.103–5]. When another Trojan, Antenor, argues for returning “Argive Helen and all her treasures” to the Greeks [Homer, 7.402], Hector is not mentioned in the assembly, but Paris objects and the war continues.

Shakespeare revises all this considerably. The first mention of Hector emphasizes failure: according to Cressida’s servant, the great man was recently struck down by Ajax, “the disdain and shame whereof hath ever since kept Hector fasting and waking” [I.ii.33–5]. (In Book Seven of the *Iliad*, Ajax momentarily topples Hector, but—aided by Apollo—he leaps right back up, and the rivals exchange gifts and part “bound by acts of friendship” [Homer, 7.344–8].

Shakespeare's Ajax, by contrast, is a colossal oaf.) In the next scene, Aeneas challenges the Greeks on Hector's behalf:

If there be one among the fair'st of Greece
 . . .
 That loves his mistress more than in confession
 With truant vows to her own lips he loves,
 And dare avow her beauty and her worth
 In other arms than hers—to him this challenge.
 Hector, in view of Trojans and of Greeks,
 Shall make it good, or do his best to do it,
 He hath a lady wiser, fairer, truer,
 Than ever Greek did compass in his arms;³¹
 And will tomorrow with his trumpet call,
 Midway between your tents and walls of Troy,
 To rouse a Grecian that is true in love.
 If any come, Hector shall honor him;
 If none, he'll say in Troy when he retires,
 The Grecian dames are sunburnt and not worth
 The splinter of a lance.

[I.iii.265–83]

I could sooner imagine the callow lords of *Love's Labour's Lost* issuing this challenge than anyone in the *Iliad*—where, outside medieval romance, does fighting well equal loving well? We may suppose Hector wants to salvage his pride after losing to Ajax. Might he also be trying to justify the rape of Helen? Such beauty surely belongs with men who can appreciate it! Yet when Hector finally speaks for himself, two scenes later, he urges King Priam to concede:

Let Helen go.
 Since the first sword was drawn about this question,
 Every tithe soul, 'mongst many thousand dismes,
 Hath been as dear as Helen; I mean, of ours.
 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,
 What merit's in that reason which denies
 The yielding of her up?

[II.ii.17–24]

³¹ Not that Hector will listen to his wise wife when, in the final act, she begs him not to fight in the battle that shall kill him.

This is essentially Antenor's point in the *Iliad*, and Diomedes makes a similar, cruder argument later in the play, as we heard. But Hector struggles to articulate it, muddying the verse with parentheticals and concluding with a roundabout emphasis on "merit," as though embarrassed by his pragmatism: less a call to the moral high ground than a dispassionate weighing of pros and cons. He is blunter a bit later, after Troilus (not Paris) objects: "Brother, she is not worth what she doth cost / The keeping" [II.ii.51–2].

Here then is the congruity: after seven long years, Shakespeare's Hector has, like Achilles, lost interest in fighting, though for different reasons. In the *Iliad*, Achilles has a straightforward motive for withdrawing into his tent: Agamemnon dishonored him by claiming a slave, Briseis, whom Achilles had captured in battle and marked for himself. Yet Shakespeare does not mention Briseis at all. When the play begins, Achilles has apparently been sulking for some time; the only explanation we get comes from Ulysses:

The great Achilles, whom opinion crowns
The sinew and the forehead of our host,
Having his ear full of his airy fame,
Grows dainty of his worth, and in his tent
Lies mocking our designs. With him Patroclus
Upon a lazy bed the livelong day
Breaks scurril jests,
And with ridiculous and silly action
(Which, slanderer, he imitation calls)
He pageants us.

[I.iii.142–51]

In this as everything, Ulysses is a biased reporter, but his diagnosis jibes with Achilles' behavior, starting with his first entrance, when he pulls an enraged Ajax off Thersites. Thersites repays the favor by turning on Achilles, who seems to have assumed the vicious fool respects him. (After all, everyone else does—at least to his face!)

Thersites: A great deal of your wit, too, lies in your sinews, or else there be liars.
Hector shall have a great catch if he knock out either of your brains. A
were as good crack a fusty nut with no kernel.

Achilles: What, with me too, Thersites?

Thersites: There's Ulysses and old Nestor—whose wit was moldy ere your
grandsires had nails on their toes—yoke you like draft oxen and make you
plow up the wars.

Achilles: What? What?

[II.i.98–107]

Clearly Thersites has struck a nerve. Achilles is by every account the superior warrior, so why should he bleed for jerks when he can mock them comfortably from the sidelines?

The pattern repeats itself a few scenes later. This time, Achilles gives Thersites what sounds like a cue to begin the “pageant” that Ulysses disparaged: “Come, what’s Agamemnon?” [II.iii.42–3]. After some banter, mainly at the expense of Patroclus, Thersites again takes aim at Achilles: “Agamemnon is a fool to offer to command Achilles, Achilles is a fool to be commanded of Agamemnon, Thersites is a fool to serve such a fool, and this Patroclus is a fool positive” [II.iii.61–4]. Agamemnon and the other lords then enter, seeking an audience, and Achilles stomps off, vowing to “speak with nobody” [II.iii.68]—though he consents to an offstage visit from Ulysses. When Ulysses reports back to Agamemnon, he has more to say about the stubborn warrior:

Possessed he is with greatness,
And speaks not to himself but with a pride
That quarrels at self-breath. Imagined worth
Holds in his blood such swoll'n and hot discourse
That 'twixt his mental and his active parts
Kingdomed Achilles in commotion rages
And batters down himself. What should I say?
He is so plaguy proud that the death tokens of it
Cry “No recovery.”

[II.iii.168–76]

Yet as plausible an explanation as pride is, it does not appear to be the whole story. For Achilles too has fallen in love—and with a Trojan princess! Again, we hear the news first from

Ulysses, who never passes up an opportunity to exert leverage (or demonstrate the scope of his spy network):

Achilles: Of this my privacy
I have strong reasons.

Ulysses: But 'gainst your privacy
The reasons are more potent and heroic.
'Tis known, Achilles, that you are in love
With one of Priam's daughters.

Achilles: Ha? Known?

Ulysses: Is that a wonder?

...
All the commerce that you have had with Troy
As perfectly is ours as yours, my lord;
And better would it fit Achilles much
To throw down Hector than Polyxena.

[III.iii.189–208]

Homer does not mention Polyxena, but later poets inserted her—much like Troilus and Cressida themselves—into the narrative to deepen the pathos. We'll return to this chilling exchange when we discuss Ulysses in depth. For now, suffice it to say he is not wrong. The moment they are alone, Patroclus implores his friend to end the relationship:

To this effect, Achilles, have I moved you.
A woman impudent and mannish grown
Is not more loathed than an effeminate man
In time of action. I stand condemned for this.
They think my little stomach to the war
And your great love to me restrains you thus.
Sweet, rouse yourself, and the weak wanton Cupid
Shall from your neck unloose his amorous fold
And, like a dewdrop from the lion's mane,
Be shook to air.

[III.iii.216–25]

How far Patroclus has fallen since the *Iliad*! In Homer's telling, he is one of the best men at Troy, a stirring combination of compassion and ferocity, whose climactic rampage in Achilles' armor must be slowed by Apollo before Hector can fell him. (In fact, only after another Trojan spears Patroclus between the shoulders does Hector land the death blow.) In Shakespeare, he is

one more shackle weighting down Achilles—though he manages, in this brief speech, to show more self-awareness than most of his comrades. Furthermore, his vulnerability moves Achilles more than Ulysses’ insinuations—not back to the war but in a wholly unexpected direction:

Achilles: I see my reputation is at stake;
My fame is shrewdly gored.

Patroclus: O, then, beware!
Those wounds heal ill that men do give themselves.
Omission to do what is necessary
Seals a commission to a blank of danger;
And danger, like an ague, subtly taints
Even then when we sit idly in the sun.

Achilles: Go call Thersites hither, sweet Patroclus.
I’ll send the fool to Ajax and desire him
T’ invite the Trojan lords after the combat
To see us here unarmed. I have a woman’s longing,
An appetite that I am sick withal,
To see great Hector in his weeds of peace,
To talk with him and to behold his visage,
Even to my full of view.

[III.iii.227–41]

This “combat” is the challenge Hector sent, through Aeneas, “To rouse a Grecian that is true in love”—the very ideal that both Ulysses and Patroclus, in their disparate ways, urge Achilles to renounce. Yet the better part of Achilles, the part still capable of love, longs to meet Hector in “weeds of peace”—Hector, whom we left vainly trying to convince his fellows to trade Helen for peace. What drives these reluctant warriors to their fatal meeting instead?

Recall that, speaking before the Trojan assembly, Hector initially gave the pragmatic case for relinquishing Helen: “she is not worth what she doth cost / the keeping.” In defense of the status quo, Troilus and Paris make hollow, self-serving speeches. “O theft most base, / That we have stol’n what we do fear to keep!” Troilus concludes [II.ii.92–3]; “But I would have the soil of her fair rape / Wiped off in honorable keeping her,” Paris adds [II.ii.148–9]. Hector disagrees, respectfully but with intensifying righteousness:

Paris and Troilus, you have both said well;
 And on the cause and question now in hand
 Have glozed—but superficially, 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 distempered blood
 Than to make up a free determination
 ’Twixt right and wrong; for pleasure and revenge
 Have ears more deaf than adders to the voice
 Of any true decision.

[II.ii.163–73]

Their youth notwithstanding, he attempts to school his brothers in moral philosophy, setting aside the cost-benefit analysis and appealing now to principles:

Nature craves
 All dues be rendered to their owners. Now,
 What nearer debt in all humanity
 Than wife is to the husband? If this law
 Of nature be corrupted through affection,
 And that great minds, of partial indulgence
 To their benumbed wills, resist the same,
 There is a law in each well-ordered nation
 To curb those raging appetites that are
 Most disobedient and refractory.
 If Helen, then, be wife to Sparta’s king,
 As it is known she is, these moral laws
 Of nature and of nations speak aloud
 To have her back returned. Thus to persist
 In doing wrong extenuates not wrong,
 But makes it much more heavy.

[II.ii.173–88]

The reasoning is valid but, alas, unsound; the entire war is a testament to the brittleness of human laws, and nature is either the instrument of divine whims, as in Homer, or altogether indifferent, as in Shakespeare. And Hector seems to know it, for he changes his mind midline:

Hector’s opinion
 Is this in way of truth; 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.

[II.ii.188–93]

What prompts this turn? “The reversal at first seems out of character,” Harold Goddard notes [26]:

Yet it is exactly what we see around us every day, what we ourselves are forever doing, if, like the vast majority, we are reasonably decent, well-meaning persons who defer to the opinions of everybody else, especially of our own class.

A director can intensify this peer pressure by showing how the others react as Hector speaks. We may assume the majority—at least, the most visible and vocal—disagree. Do they ignore him? Do they shout or even jeer? Regardless, as his words pile up around him, Hector yields. He has spoken “in way of truth” to no effect; at least he can salvage his honor.

In fact, Hector’s final lines in the scene—after Troilus applauds him for having “touched the life of our design” [II.ii.194]—acknowledge that honor has been driving him all along:

I have a roisting challenge sent amongst
The dull and factious nobles of the Greeks
Will strike amazement to their drowsy spirits.
I was advertised their great general slept
Whilst emulation in the army crept.
This, I presume, will wake him.

[II.ii.208–13]

“Have sent,” Goddard emphasizes: “what a light that past tense sheds over the preceding scene! Here doubtless is the real reason why Hector capitulated. He had already committed himself, and did not have the courage to change his mind” [28]. This seems too harsh: if every Trojan had cheered his proposal to return Helen, I think Hector would have found plenty of courage. But no one, save old Priam, sides with him, and so he seals his doom.

Doom is still three acts off, however, and his nemesis must first be lured back to the fight. As intended, Hector’s challenge sets in motion the events that “wake” Achilles, though an

unrequested assist comes from the man whose turn under the microscope has finally come,

Ulysses

Opposing those who claim the crafty Greek is “Shakespeare’s mouthpiece in the play,” Goddard argues instead that Ulysses “turns out, under analysis, to be more nearly its villain” [12]. If Ulysses is more villainous than others, it is because he alone seems committed to war at any cost; his underlying motive is not honor or glory but the very fault he attributes to Achilles: wounded pride. We hear this clearly in his first great speech (of many), the main point of which is that the Greek army has lost its sense of “degree,” or rank:

And this neglection of degree it is
That by a pace goes backward with a purpose
It hath to climb. The general’s disdain’d
By him one step below, he by the next,
That next by him beneath; so every step,
Exempl’d by the first pace that is sick
Of his superior, grows to an envious fever
Of pale and bloodless emulation:
And ’tis this fever that keeps Troy on foot,
Not her own sinews. To end a tale of length,
Troy in our weakness stands, not in her strength.

[I.iii.127–37]

As we have heard, Ulysses believes Achilles is the root of misguided ambition: the mere soldier lording above the generals—Ulysses included, of course. He then spends nearly as many lines griping about the satirical “pageants” in Achilles’ and Patroclus’ tent:

And in this fashion
All our abilities, gifts, natures, shapes,
Severals and generals of grace exact,
Achievements, plots, orders, preventions,
Excitements to the field or speech for truce,
Success or loss, what is or is not, serves
As stuff for these two to make paradoxes.

[I.iii.178–84]

Nestor interrupts to concur, but Ulysses is not done, revealing the extent to which Achilles (aided by Patroclus and Thersites) has offended him—not just professionally but personally, by denying his value:

They tax our policy and call it cowardice,
 Count wisdom as no member of the war,
 Forestall prescience, and esteem no act
 But that of hand. The still and mental parts
 That do contrive how many hands shall strike
 When fitness calls them on, and know by measure
 Of their observant toil the enemies' weight—
 Why, this hath not a finger's dignity.
 They call this bed work, mapp'ry, closet war;
 So that the ram that batters down the wall,
 For the great swinge and rudeness of his poise,
 They place before his hand that made the engine,
 Or those that with the fineness of their souls
 By reason guide his execution.

[I.iii.197–210]

Hector's challenge, which immediately follows, thus gives Ulysses a prime opportunity to force Achilles back into his place: the head manipulating the hand; degree restored. As he explains privately to Nestor:

What glory our Achilles shares from Hector,
 Were he not proud, we all should share with him.
 But he already is too insolent,
 And we were better parch in Afric sun
 Than in the pride and salt scorn of his eyes,
 Should he scape Hector fair. If he were foiled,
 Why then we did our main opinion crush
 In taint of our best man. No, make a lott'ry,
 And by device let blockish Ajax draw
 The sort to fight with Hector; among ourselves
 Give him allowance for the better man,
 For that will physic the great Myrmidon
 Who broils in loud applause, and make him fall
 His crest that prouder than blue Iris bends.

[I.iii.366–79]

The implication, buried in plain sight, is that Ulysses cares less about returning Achilles to battle—Hector’s aim—than humiliating him. For, he concludes, “hit or miss, / Our project’s life this shape of sense assumes: / Ajax employed plucks down Achilles’ plumes” [I.iii.383–5].

The wisdom of this “policy” is never really tested, though not for lack of effort by Ulysses. As planned, Ajax is selected to fight Hector, and Achilles begins to radiate envy—especially after the other generals, following Ulysses’ advice, snub him. “What, am I poor of late?” Achilles muses, truly puzzled. “’Tis certain, greatness, once fall’n out with fortune, / Must fall out with men too” [III.iii.74–6]. But he resists the logical conclusion:

But ’tis not so with me;
Fortune and I are friends. I do enjoy
At ample point all that I did possess,
Save these men’s looks; who do, methinks, find out
Something not worth in me such rich beholding
As they have often given.

[III.iii.87–92]

Fortunately, Ulysses has lingered, book in hand, to teach Achilles—who is suddenly eager for conversation:

Achilles: What are you reading?

Ulysses: 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.

[III.iii.95–102]

Still Achilles fails to make the connection. Ulysses elaborates:

I was much rapt in this,
And apprehended here immediately
Th’ unknown Ajax. (Heavens, what a man is there!)
A very horse, that has he knows not what.
Nature, what things there are

Most abject in regard and dear in use!
 What things again most dear in the esteem
 And poor in worth! Now shall we see tomorrow,
 An act that very chance doth throw upon him.
 Ajax renowned? O heavens, what some men do,
 While some men leave to do!
 How some men creep in skittish Fortune's hall,
 Whiles others play the idiots in her eyes!
 How one man eats into another's pride,
 While pride is fasting in his wantonness!

[III.iii.123–37]

And elaborates further:

Time hath, my lord, a wallet at his back,
 Wherein he puts alms for oblivion,
 A great-sized monster of ingratitude.
 Those scraps are good deeds past, which are devoured
 As fast as they are made, forgot as soon
 As done. Perseverance, dear my lord,
 Keeps honor bright; to have done is to hang
 Quite out of fashion, like a rusty mail
 In monumental mock'ry.

[III.iii.145–53]

Finally, 35 lines into this latest speech. 180 lines into the scene, and nine scenes into the play, Ulysses makes the point explicit:

Then marvel not, thou great and complete man,
 That all the Greeks begin to worship Ajax,
 Since things in motion sooner catch the eye
 Than what not stirs. The cry went once on thee,
 And still it might, and yet it may again,
 If thou wouldst not entomb thyself alive
 And case thy reputation in thy tent,
 Whose glorious deeds, but in these fields of late,
 Made emulous missions 'mongst the gods themselves
 And drave great Mars to faction.

[III.iii.180–9]

Let us pause to note how these arguments could be turned to justify Achilles' scorn of Ulysses, Agamemnon, and the other generals. For if they are so wise in warcraft, why have their armies still not taken Troy? Achilles has not been sulking for seven years! After such prolonged

failure by his “betters,” is it any wonder Achilles stopped following them? At what point in the siege did Ulysses start hanging his authority on rusted reputation rather than bright new deeds?

But if Ulysses can no longer impress, he can still insinuate and threaten. To that end, as we heard, he lets Achilles know *he* knows about Polyxena. This seems to genuinely surprise Achilles: “Ha? Known?” is all he can muster. Ulysses is ready:

Is that a wonder?
 The providence that’s in a watchful state
 Knows almost every grain of Pluto’s gold,
 Finds bottom in th’ uncomprehensive deeps,
 Keeps place with thought, and almost, like the gods,
 Does thoughts unveil in their dumb cradles.
 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

[III.iii.194–206]

How long has he been waiting for occasion to give this perfectly awful speech? Whatever may or may not happen on the battlefield, Ulysses is master of his state—as Troilus shall soon find, to his everlasting torment. As for Achilles, he is left to wonder what else Ulysses has taken from his “commerce” with Troy.

Turns out, not only has he fallen for a Trojan princess, he has promised both Polyxena and her mother to stop fighting—though we do not learn this until the final act, when Achilles receives “a letter from Queen Hecuba, / A token from her daughter, my fair love, / Both taxing me and gaging me to keep / An oath that I have sworn.” He continues:

I will not break it.
 Fall Greeks, fail fame, honor or go or stay,
 My major vow lies here; this I’ll obey.

[V.i.39–44]

This is more than pride or resentment—it’s treason! Not that Shakespeare does anything with the revelation—he tosses it into the mix so cursorily, so late in the action, it’s difficult to take seriously. But it shines a retroactive light on Achilles’ deepest motives and struggles. “My mind is troubled, like a fountain stirred, / And I myself see not the bottom of it,” he mutters to himself following his conversation with Ulysses [III.iii.306–7]. When next we see him, he strives mightily for clarity—for his simpler, heroic past—but he misreads the scene and only further muddies things.

“The End Crowns All . . .”

We have come to my favorite stretch of the play—followed by a mad dash to an end that has failed to satisfy many critics. After returning to Troy to wrest Cressida from Troilus, and then back to the Greek camp to gawk at Cressida’s arrival, Shakespeare at last brings together Hector and his adversaries. The occasion for the visit is Hector’s challenge—which was, recall, “To rouse a Grecian that is true in love” [I.iii.279]; the joke that any part of foul-mouthed Ajax fits the bill goes unacknowledged.³² Aeneas, still speaking on Hector’s behalf, asks whether the combatants should fight to the death or permit others to separate them; Achilles hears overconfidence in the question, but Hector does not take the bait:

Agamemnon: Which way would Hector have it?
Aeneas: He cares not; he’ll obey conditions.
Achilles: ’Tis done like Hector, but securely done,
 A little proudly, and great deal misprising
 The knight opposed.
Aeneas: If not Achilles, sir,
 What is your name?
Achilles: If not Achilles, nothing.
Aeneas: Therefore Achilles; but, whate’er, know this:
 In the extremity of great and little,
 Valor and pride excel themselves in Hector,

³² Ironically, the very man Hector was hoping to fight—and whom his superiors all conspired to sideline—might be the truest Grecian lover, willing (assuming what we learn is true) to forsake war for his beloved across the battlefield.

The one almost as infinite as all,
The other blank as nothing.

[IV.v.71–81]

The exchange highlights something we should keep in mind: this seems to be the first unarmed meeting between many of these men. That neither Aeneas here, nor Hector later in the scene, recognizes Achilles may seem implausible, considering they have spent seven years fighting each other. But it suggests how little anyone has bothered—or been able—to know their enemies. Which of course is a truism—perhaps even a precondition—of war: it’s easier to slaughter strangers.

Hector and Ajax commence dueling, and from the spectators’ reactions Ajax seems an unexpected match for the Trojan prince. Diomedes of all people calls for “no more” [IV.v.116], and though Ajax is eager to keep fighting Hector takes the proffered out and embraces him:

Thou art, great lord, my father’s sister’s son,
A cousin-german to great Priam’s seed.
The obligation of our blood forbids
A gory emulation ’twixt us twain.
Were thy commixtion Greek and Trojan so
That thou couldst say, “This hand is Grecian all,
And this is Trojan; the sinews of this leg
All Greek, and this all Troy; my mother’s blood
Runs on the dexter cheek, and this sinister
Bounds in my father’s,” by Jove multipotent,
Thou shouldst not bear from me a Greekish member
Wherein my sword had not impressure made
Of our rank feud. But the just gods gainsay
That any drop thou borrowed’st from thy mother,
My sacred aunt, should by my mortal sword
Be drained!

[IV.v.119–34]

Like Diomedes and Aeneas earlier in the act, even Hector is guilty of (to quote Paris again) “The noblest hateful love” [IV.i.33]. This speech is ludicrous not only because of the impossible distinctions Hector articulates, but because (unlike Diomedes and Aeneas) he seems

wholly sincere—I doubt neither that he loves Ajax today nor that he would dismember him tomorrow. Ajax is moved—to a point. He thanks Hector, calls him “too gentle and too free a man,” and reminds him: “I came to kill thee, cousin, and bear hence / A great addition earned in thy death” [IV.v.137–40].

Then the other Greek heroes approach, each with his own unmistakable style.

Agamemnon begins, dripping pomposity. The abbreviated Quarto version contains everything of substance the Greek chief says:

Worthy all arms, as welcome as to one
That would be rid of such an enemy—
From heart of very heart, great Hector, welcome.

Between are smug reflections on “husks / And formless ruin of oblivion,” on “faith and troth, / Strained purely from all hollow bias-drawing” [IV.v.162–70]. Hector replies with an obligatory thanks, and Menelaus steps forth—to his inevitable shame. Not even Hector can resist a jab at Helen’s cuckold:

Menelaus: Let me confirm my princely brother’s greeting.
You brace of warlike brothers, welcome hither.
Hector: Who must we answer?³³
Aeneas: The noble Menelaus.
Hector: O, you, my lord? By Mars his gauntlet, thanks!
Mock not that I affect th’ untraded oath;
Your quondam wife swears still by Venus’ glove.
She’s well, but bade me not commend her to you.
Menelaus: Name her not now, sir; she’s a deadly theme.
Hector: O, pardon! I offend.

[IV.v.173–81]

It beggars belief that Hector could have meant these lines innocently—or be surprised to hear they offend. Menelaus is simply impossible to respect—though the next Greek in line does

³³ This is more than just another instance of foe not recognizing foe. Menelaus all but announces his identity—how many other “princely brothers” does Agamemnon have? (I checked—the answer is none.) Apparently the man for whom the entire war is being fought does not warrant a place in Hector’s memory.

his yammering best to earn another insult:

I have, thou gallant Trojan, seen thee oft,
 Laboring for destiny, make cruel way
 Through ranks of Greekish youth, and I have seen thee,
 As hot as Perseus, spur thy Phrygian steed,
 Despising many forfeits and subduements,
 When thou hast hung thy advanced sword i' th' air,
 Not letting it decline on the declined,
 That I have said to some my standers-by,
 "Lo, Jupiter is yonder, dealing life!"
 And I have seen thee pause and take thy breath,
 When that a ring of Greeks have hemmed thee in,
 Like an Olympian wrestling. This have I seen,
 But this thy countenance, still locked in steel,
 I never saw till now. I knew thy grandsire,
 And once fought with him. He was a soldier good,
 But, by great Mars, the captain of us all,
 Never like thee. Let an old man embrace thee;
 And, worthy warrior, welcome to our tents.

[IV.v.182–99]

"'Tis the old Nestor," Aeneas dryly notes, but Hector's admiration seems genuine, and the old man, through Hector's eyes, achieves a measure of dignity.

Hector: Let me embrace thee, good old chronicle,
 That hast so long walked hand in hand with time.
 Most reverend Nestor, I am glad to clasp thee.
Nestor: I would my arms could match thee in contention,
 As they contend with thee in courtesy.
Hector: I would they could.
Nestor: Ha!
 By this white beard, I'd fight with thee tomorrow.
 Well, welcome, welcome.

[IV.v.200–9]

Alas, he is on a roll and cannot stop, so Ulysses cuts him off, prompting my favorite poetry in the play—remarkable as much for its unexpectedness, following so much hot air, as for the words and thoughts themselves.³⁴

³⁴ They seem to have made an impression on Shakespeare also. Does Prospero's famous speech, a decade later, with its "cloud-capped tow'rs" and "gorgeous palaces" fading to naught [*The Tempest*, 152–6], echo Ulysses' prophecy here?

Nestor: I have seen the time—
Ulysses: I wonder now how yonder city stands,
 When we have here her base and pillar by us.
Hector: I know your favor, Lord Ulysses, well.
 Ah, sir, there's many a Greek and Trojan dead,
 Since first I saw yourself and Diomed
 In Ilion, on your Greekish embassy.
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.
Hector: 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.
Ulysses: So to him we leave it.

[IV.v.209–25]

Like the others, Ulysses then invites Hector to feast in his tent, and the scene might end there, were there not one more Greek in the receiving line. When last we saw Achilles, he desired to meet Hector in “weeds of peace.” No longer.

Achilles: I shall forestall thee, Lord Ulysses, thou!
 Now, Hector, I have fed mine eyes on thee;
 I have with exact view perused thee, Hector,
 And quoted joint by joint.
Hector: Is this Achilles?
Achilles: I am Achilles.
Hector: Stand fair, I prithee. Let me look on thee.
Achilles: Behold thy fill.
Hector: Nay, I have done already.

[IV.v.229–35]

Hector's line can be played lightly or mockingly, but it's disrespectful either way, and Achilles chooses to escalate.

Achilles: Thou art too brief. I will the second time,
 As I would buy thee, view thee limb by limb.
Hector: O, like a book of sport thou'lt read me o'er;
 But there's more in me than thou understand'st.

Why dost thou so oppress me with thine eye?

[IV.v.236–40]

Achilles' comrades must be gaping at the show—is this what they wanted when they plotted to humble him? Still Hector keeps his cool, even after Achilles, like a bad tragedian, repeatedly invokes the gods:

Achilles: Tell me, you heavens, in which part of his body
Shall I destroy him? Whether there, or there, or there?
That I may give the local wound a name,
And make distinct the very breach whereout
Hector's great spirit flew. Answer me, heavens!

Hector: It would discredit the blessed gods, proud man,
To answer such a question. Stand again.
Think'st thou to catch my life so pleasantly
As to prenominate in nice conjecture
Where thou wilt hit me dead?

Achilles: I tell thee, yea.

[IV.v.241–50]

Finally Hector's patience breaks:

Wert thou an oracle to tell me so,
I'd not believe thee. Henceforth guard thee well,
For I'll not kill thee there, nor there, nor there,
But, by the forge that stithied Mars his helm,
I'll kill thee everywhere, yea, o'er and o'er.

[IV.v.251–55]

I find these words more chilling—and convincing—than all the bombast that preceded them.

Ever gracious, Hector tries to restrain himself—with an assist from Ajax, apparently won over by his cousin's charisma—but the damage is done. The return of Achilles to war, and Hector's march to inglorious death, seem inevitable:

Hector: You wisest Grecians, pardon me this brag;
His insolence draws folly from my lips.
But I'll endeavor deeds to match these words,
Or may I never—

Ajax: Do not chafe thee, cousin.
And you, Achilles, let these threats alone,
Till accident or purpose bring you to't.

You may have every day enough of Hector,
 If you have stomach. The general state, I fear,
 Can scarce entreat you to be odd with him.

Hector: I pray you, let us see you in the field.
 We have had pelting wars since you refused
 The Grecians' cause.

Achilles: Dost thou entreat me, Hector?
 Tomorrow do I meet thee, fell as death;
 Tonight all friends.

Hector: Thy hand upon that match.

[IV.v.256–69]

But still the match is uncertain. For in the very next scene, Achilles receives the letter from Queen Hecuba, on behalf of Polyxena, and determines to uphold his oath *not* to fight [V.i.37–47]. He returns to his tent, this time not to satirize Greeks but to banquet with Trojans. Yet next morning Hector at least is still champing at the bit. He heads home only to arm himself, but his wife, Andromache, and sister Cassandra beg him to stay. They see the future that Hector—still setting his worth by his honor, and his honor by his arms—will not:

Hector: Ho! Bid my trumpet sound.

Cassandra: No notes of sally, for the heavens, sweet brother.

Hector: Be gone, I say. The gods have heard me swear.

Cassandra: The gods are deaf to hot and peevish vows.

They are polluted off'rings, more abhorred
 Than spotted livers in the sacrifice.

Andromache: O, be persuaded! Do not count it holy
 To hurt by being just. It is as lawful,
 For we would give much, to use violent thefts,
 And rob in the behalf of charity.

Cassandra: It is the purpose that makes strong the vow,
 But vows to every purpose must not hold.
 Unarm, sweet Hector.

Hector: Hold you still, I say.
 Mine honor keeps the weather of my fate.
 Life every man holds dear, but the dear man
 Holds honor far more precious-dear than life.

[V.iii.13–28]

At this point Troilus enters, also armed, and Hector proves he has not only heard the women's arguments, but at his core agrees with them:

How now, young man, mean'st thou to fight today?

...

No, faith, young Troilus; doff thy harness, youth.

I am today i' th' vein of chivalry.

Let grow thy sinews till their knots be strong,

And tempt not yet the brushes of the war.

Unarm thee, go, and doubt thou not, brave boy,

I'll stand today for thee and me and Troy.

[V.iii.29–36]

On the surface this is nonsense: Troilus has not only fought before now, he has, if we credit Ulysses (by way of Aeneas), already earned a reputation as “a true knight”—one who, “in heat of action / Is more vindicative than jealous love” [IV.v.96–107]. What then is Hector's sudden concern but an acknowledgement that this war, waged for “a whore and a cuckold” [II.iii.71–2], is no longer worth the risk. But Troilus, having spied on Cressida and Diomedes the night before, now endorse this theme, and in his bitterness reframes *Hector* as the misguided fighter:

Troilus: Brother, you have a vice of mercy in you,
Which better fits a lion than a man.

Hector: What vice is that? Good Troilus, chide me for it.

Troilus: When many times the captive Grecian falls,
Even in the fan and wind of your fair sword,
You bid them rise and live.

Hector: O, 'tis fair play.

Troilus: Fool's play, by heaven, Hector.

Hector: How now, how now?

Troilus: For th' love of all the gods,
Let's leave the hermit pity with our mother,
And when we have our armors buckled on,
The venom'd vengeance ride upon our swords,
Spur them to ruthless work, rein them from ruth.

Hector: Fie, savage, fie!

Troilus: Hector, then 'tis wars.

[V.iii.37–49]

Troilus is not wrong! Yet Hector still believes he can transcend the savagery—even shield his younger brother from it. Again he tells Troilus not to fight, and again Troilus refuses to heed—and then Cassandra reenters with their father, Priam, and it is Hector's turn for obstinacy:

Cassandra: Lay hold upon him, Priam, hold him fast;
 He is thy crutch. Now if thou lose thy stay,
 Thou on him leaning, and all Troy on thee,
 Fall all together.

Priam: Come, Hector, come; go back.
 Thy wife hath dreamt, thy mother hath had visions,
 Cassandra doth foresee, and I myself
 Am like a prophet suddenly enrapt
 To tell thee that this day is ominous:
 Therefore, come back.

Hector: Aeneas is afield;
 And I do stand engaged to many Greeks,
 Even in the faith of valor, to appear
 This morning to them.

Priam: Ay, but thou shalt not go.

Hector: I must not break my faith.

[V.iii.59–71]

“What pages those lines recapitulate!” writes Goddard [33]:

It is like a great allegorical painting in words. Andromache is Love and Womanly Intuition. Hecuba is Motherhood. Cassandra is Divine Prophecy. Priam is Age, Experience, Wisdom—earthly Prophecy. The dreams, visions, and divinations are the Gods, or from the Gods, themselves. And they are arrayed unanimously against war.

And who, or what, are arrayed against *them*? The “faith” and “honour” of a man who dares not break a vow taken in what he himself denounced as “a bad cause.” That, and the romantic fury of a disappointed boy, who is bent, not on the welfare of his country, but on personal revenge for the perfidy of a woman he has overridealized.

Nevertheless, bad causes and romantic fury carry the day, as increasingly they do for

Shakespeare until the grace of his late romances.

After Hector and Troilus head to battle, Shakespeare compresses a huge number of events into a handful of short scenes: Troilus and Diomedes fight [V.iv]; Patroclus is slain and Achilles demands vengeance [V.v]; Troilus and Diomedes fight again, joined by Ajax, and Hector bests but spares Achilles [V.vi]; Paris and Menelaus fight [V.vii]; and finally, Achilles sics his Myrmidons on Hector [V.viii]. The way Shakespeare races through these seminal moments is the

main reason, I think, the play's conclusion—though thematically apt—has left some critics so unsatisfied they have speculated someone other than Shakespeare wrote it. This overstuffed speech by Agamemnon, striving to rally his men, takes me back to the days of *Henry VI*:

Renew, renew! The fierce Polydamas
 Hath beat down Menon; bastard Margarelon
 Hath Doreus prisoner,
 And stands colossus-wise, waving his beam,
 Upon the pashed corpses of the kings
 Epistrophus and Cedius. Polixenes is slain,
 Amphimachus and Thoas deadly hurt,
 Patroclus ta'en or slain, and Palamedes
 Sore hurt and bruised. The dreadful Sagittary
 Appals our numbers.

[V.v.6–15]

In this catalogue of multisyllabic names we recognize one—Patroclus—and we don't wait long to learn his fate. Nestor enters and orders soldiers to “bear Patroclus' body to Achilles” [V.v.17]. The death of Patroclus is one of the great set pieces of the *Iliad*, yet Shakespeare leaves it offstage; he does not even say who killed him—though, following Homer, Achilles clearly blames Hector. If I had to guess, the choice to downplay Patroclus's death followed from the changes to his character: from noble warrior to “masculine whore” [V.1.17]. In the *Iliad*, Patroclus insists on fighting in Achilles' place, but this seems unlikely in the world of *Troilus and Cressida*, and it's difficult to imagine a scene in which his death—at whoever's hands—is anything but farcical or cruel. Given Hector's penchant for sparing inferior opponents—including Thersites in the previous scene and Achilles in the next one—would he even deign to deliver a killing blow?

Regardless, upon learning of Patroclus' death (which also happens offstage), Achilles storms on, armed and calling for Hector, “thou boy-queller” [V.v.45]. Thus, what finally motivates Achilles to return to battle is the same force that had led him to retire: his love for

Patroclus overriding his love for Polyxena. Unfortunately for Shakespeare's Achilles, he is out of practice, and his first crack at Hector ends in humiliation: at some point during the fight, Hector pulls back and offers to "pause." Achilles is properly offended, though he does accept the mercy:

I do disdain thy courtesy, proud Trojan.
 Be happy that my arms are out of use.
 My rest and negligence befriends thee now,
 But thou anon shalt hear of me again;
 Till when, go seek thy fortune

[V.vi.14–19]

Achilles then exits. Rather than pursue, Hector spots a Greek clad in "goodly armor" [V.viii.2]. He offers battle, but the Greek quails. Rather than extend more mercy, Hector chases after the doomed man:

Stand, stand, thou Greek; thou art a goodly mark.
 No? Wilt thou not? I like thy armor well;
 I'll frush it and unlock the rivets all,
 But I'll be master of it. Wilt thou not, beast, abide?
 Why then, fly on, I'll hunt thee for thy hide.

[V.vi.28–32]

In the *Iliad*, Hector seals his doom partly by stripping Patroclus's corpse of Achilles' armor (which Patroclus has been wearing); the sight of Hector cavorting in his own armor only stokes Achilles' rage. But Shakespeare has diminished Patroclus too much for this, and he sends Hector after some anonymous warrior instead. Isaac Asimov makes an interesting point about the un-Hectorish couplet that concludes the scene [129]:

Nowhere in Homer, nor anywhere else in this play, does Hector give anyone reason to think he would ever call a foeman "beast" or take the attitude that war is a hunt, with other men playing the role of animals, and it is partly because of this that some critics doubt that Shakespeare wrote the last act. And yet it is necessary for Hector to do something of this sort, in order that he might earn the retribution that now falls upon him.

It is hard to believe that Shakespeare—or any capable playwright—could have intended for a single moment of weakness such as this to "earn" Hector the ignominious death that follows. If

we are to infer anything from this sudden obsession with a random suit of armor, I think it is that even Hector cannot fully control himself on the battlefield. And if he is capable of such dehumanization, what might a man of lesser character do?

We are about to find out, for Achilles reenters, surrounded this time by his followers, the Myrmidons. Since he cannot beat Hector alone, he has raised a mob.

Come here about me, you my Myrmidons;
Mark what I say. Attend me where I wheel;
Strike not a stroke, but keep yourselves in breath;
And when I have the bloody Hector found,
Empale him with your weapons round about;
In fellest manner execute your arms.
Follow me, sirs, and my proceedings eye.
It is decreed, Hector the great must die.

[V.vii.1–8]

Between their exit and Hector's entrance is an interlude in which Paris and Menelaus battle—"The cuckold and the cuckold-maker are at it," a delighted Thersites narrates [V.vii.9–10]—and Margarelon, "a bastard son of Priam's" [V.vii.15], in disgust spares Thersites, who in the space of a few lines foils both Achilles, out for vengeance, and merciful Hector. The stage then clears, and Hector drags on the corpse of the Greek he has killed for armor. Hector then does something that would be inexplicably stupid, were it not for his faith in the chivalry of others: in the middle of the battlefield, before anyone has called an end to the fighting, he declares his "day's work done" and throws down his sword, having "hast thy fill of blood and death" [V.iii.3–4]. Of course, this is when Achilles and the Myrmidons find him:

Achilles: Look, Hector, how the sun begins to set,
How ugly night comes breathing at his heels.
Even with the vail and dark'ning of the sun,
To close the day up, Hector's life is done.
Hector: I am unarmed. Forgo this vantage, Greek.
Achilles: Strike, fellows, strike! This is the man I seek.

[V.viii.5–10]

Thus, thugs kill Hector—who does not even get a dying speech—and Achilles takes the credit: “On, Myrmidons,” he crows, “and cry you all amain, / ‘Achilles hath the mighty Hector slain!’” [V.viii.13–14]. As in the *Iliad*, Achilles ties Hector’s body to his chariot (actually, Shakespeare’s Achilles ties Hector directly to his horse [V.viii.21]); unlike in Homer’s epic, Achilles has no opportunity to redeem himself by returning the body to Priam. It is Troilus, reporting Hector’s death to his fellows, who gets the final word on Achilles: “He’s dead, and at the murderer’s horse’s tail, / In beastly sort, dragged through the shameful field” [V.x.4–5]. For once, Troilus speaks unvarnished truth.

* * * * *

What follows we have covered already: Troilus’s counterproductive, nihilistic rant; his shunning of Pandarus; and Pandarus’s vicious closing lines. What we’re left with—other than diseases—is disillusionment as profound, in its shattering of ideals, as anything in *Hamlet*, *Othello*, or *King Lear*. I am not suggesting someone in *Troilus and Cressida* rivals, in heroism or villainy, the indelible figures of the tragic masterworks—but that is the point. Shakespeare took two of the great tales of love and war and drained them of greatness; it does not exist in the Troy he imagined—only ordinary men and women and their messes. If this resonates more with us than in Shakespeare’s day—when *Troilus and Cressida* may not have received a single public performance—I’m not sure that evinces our improvement as a species.

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