

Troilus and Cessida

W.Shakespeare

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From a metapoint of view this play would have been more enjoyable had I been familiar with the Iliad. Having never read it, I can only rely on hearsay when it comes to its contents, and thus unable to compare it with Shakespeare's rendering of it. Of course it is possible to read it on its own merits with no prior knowledge of Homer yet without this comparison the play becomes a bit flat with a somewhat puzzling plot. Every narrative presupposes a common context shared by author and audience alike and thus a fair amount of prior knowledge of those who watch and listen. One may wonder how common the intimate knowledge was of the common public, not very much one surmises, and thus for most spectators the whole set-up was a mere spectacle, maybe soon forgotten in pursuit of other pleasures and entertainment. But Shakespeare did not write solely for the common man, although there was where the money was to be had, but also nodded to his fellow writers and intellectuals, as well as, one surmises, for his own pleasure. Now of course the plays by Shakespeare is high-culture just as the operas of the 18th and 19th century, but at the time they mainly served as popular entertainment of which there were, unlike today, not such an extensive and vulgar supply. Poor folks had no choice but to turn to the little there was to be had, had they had one, most likely they would have turned away. Thus until the 20th century high- and low culture were locked in an embrace, no doubt to the benefit of both. Now they tend to go separate ways, to the detriment of both. Low brow culture becoming more and more vulgar and shallow, while high culture being deprived of yet another constraint evades a challenge the overcoming of which would have enhanced it further. As I never tire of pointing out, imagination demands obstacles to overcome in order to thrive, and the special nature of Shakespeare's plays would probably never have come about had he not had the demands of a large public to contend with, be it, as noted, to a large degree a captive one. This may be an occasion to insert a lengthy digression. There is a lingering doubt as to the very existence of Shakespeare, although those who give vent to it are dismissed as crackpots. The contention is, however, basically non-falsifiable. The point, shed of fancy, boils down to whether the plays were the outcome of individual effort or the fruit of a collective effort. Our more or less romantic idea of the genius prefers the former and scoffs at the concept of creative work by a committee, although at some time in our recent history it might have met with some sympathy be it only political. The dedicated Shakespeare scholar and aficionado will have none of it, seeing in all the plays the working of a single intellect (albeit that the authenticity of some of the more obscure plays are up for doubt). I suspect that the solution is as obvious as it is prosaic. Shakespeare worked with a troupe of actors and it is unlikely that they followed his orders as if given by God, there being no tradition of playwrights authority at the time, that would come later. Obviously they would have a say when it come to presentation and wording. It is also unlikely in view of this speculation that the plays were printed before they were performed. I find it much more likely that they were in

the nature of afterthoughts after the plays had been performed a number of times, no doubt the performances varying significantly between themselves, being in the nature of dry runs. Thus the end results should be thought of as compilations with a significant collective input but fashioned through a sole responsibility, and that it is what counts and what provides unity of presentation. There is nothing more remarkable by that than the fact that Shakespeare borrowed freely and that his plots were seldom if ever of his own creation, it is not therein that true creativity resides, imagination comes into play when forming the well-known in different ways. Similarly Shakespeare borrowed from his troupes and fashioned in his own way. A good author listens to what people around him have to say, picking up idioms and pet ideas, but never putting them down literally.

Now to the play itself. A mere outline of plot says little, even if clever, its true valor lies in its presentation. Thus it is rather pointless to point out that the Trojan prince Troilus, younger brother of Hector and Paris (among others) is in love with fair Cressida, a match encouraged by her uncle, while her father has deserted to the Greek¹. Now her father schemes with his Greek allies (assuming he is not Greek) to make an exchange of a captured Trojan commander with his daughter, on whom one of the Greeks have amorous designs. She is picked up and she and her lover Troilus have a last union in which they pledge their love and fidelity before she is abducted. Later on while joining a mission Troilus gets access through the machinations of crafty Ulysses to the tent where she is kept. Through an artifice he is able to listen in on her betrayal of Troilus encouraging the court of the Greek lover. Troilus is overcome by jealousy and despair, yet able to keep his patience and not to reveal his presence. He vows though to kill him in battle. And a battle there is led by Hector, who disregards the sombre forebodings of his sister Cassandra and goes ahead. Hector is victorious in battle, mowing down with his sword the Greek soldiers opposing him, causing great losses. He also meets Achilles in combat and bests him, the latter is, however, humiliated and thirsty for revenge he attacks with his aides unarmed Hector resting after battle and kills him, then goes on bragging that he killed him. Troilus seems to have survived though although he does not seem to have killed his rival. What happens later we do not know as the curtain falls definitely after the eleventh scene of the fifth act in one of Shakespeare's longer plays.

The greatness does not lie in the plot but in its execution, including among other things the ability of the author to engage us in it, a challenge the bigger, the more contrived and artificial the plot. Then of course a plot provides a coat-hanger on which to attach digressions, philosophical or poetical, as well as bon mots and striking aphorisms to be remembered and quoted, not to mention pure beauty of language, parts of which can be exemplified, although isolated examples of do not convey the accumulative effect (there is never any short-cut to reading the whole play). Another noteworthy aspect of a play is the different modes and registers purveyed by different characters, ideally each one uniquely determined by their way of speaking. We are treated to the somewhat tiresome soloquays of a Ulysses, the earnesty of a Troilus and at the extreme the rather distinctive address of the minor character Therestied whose idiom is that of a self-conscious parody of a holy

¹ This point is a bit confusing. In the list of personae she is listed among the Trojans along with her uncle, but in the foreword to the play in the Oxford edition, she is referred to as a Greek princess. It makes a difference in the way you read the plot

fool.

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