ON CRESSIDA’S DEFENCE

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Cressida is one of Shakespeare’s female characters who has drawn the most negative criticism. It is difficult to defend Cressida’s position when we realize that the same day as she is taken away from Troilus she promises love to Diomedes. However, Cressida’s behaviour is defensible on the basis that little by little she is being stripped of all her self respect and her sense of belonging.

As we said, Cressida is one of the female characters who has drawn most negative criticism. We should listen to her talk, and then reach our own conclusions. Pandarus has been trying to convince her to love Troilus while she has been pretending she is not interested. Later on, however, in her soliloquy, besides letting the audience know her true feelings toward Troilus, she expresses the reasons for her secrecy in the following terms:

Women are angels, wooing:
Things won are done: joy’s soul lies in the doing:
That she beloved knows naught that knows not this,
Men prize the thing ungain’d 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,-
Achivement is command; ungain’d, beseech:
Then, though my heart’s content firm love doth bear,
Nothing of that shall from mine eyes appear.

(I. 2. 282-95).

In this scene many critics have seen that she is showing the arts of the coquette, as M. C. Bradbrook says, because she likes Troilus and pretends not to:
Cressida’s soliloquy proclaims her simple creed, the art of the coquette raised to a rule of life, based on the assumption that what is to be looked for in a man is simply ‘lust in action.’ (103)

For me, in this scene, Cressida is acting as any normal woman of the period would. Even in my own times a somewhat similar philosophy held. Besides, there is something in this scene that the critics have missed. At the end of their verbal exchange she tries to remind Pandarus he should be the one to protect her honour. Instead he is a bawd.

Bradbrook then goes on to the scene in Calchas’ garden: her first and only meeting with Troilus, where according to Bradbrook she betrays her own arts completely to Troilus:

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. 2. 113-19).

While Bradbrook sees her acting like a coquette, for me, in this scene, Cressida is beautiful in her sincerity. She even adds later:

I wish’d myself a man,
Or that we women had men’s privilege
Of speaking first. (III. 2. 127-9).

This is one of Cressida’s problem, she is aware of the injustice of the system and resents having to act as a woman was supposed to.
Bradbrook then passes on to their waking up together, when Cressida says:

Prithee, tarry;-
You men will never tarry.-
O foolish Cressid!- I might have still held off,
And then you would have tarried. (IV. 2. 15-8).

In this scene which reminds me of Juliet’s trying to convince Romeo to stay longer, Bradbrook reaches the following conclusion: "Cressida, as Ulysses was shortly to observe, is ‘a natural daughter of the game’" (103). I do not agree. I think that Ulysses is too hard on Cressida. But we will talk about it later.

I cannot help but feel sorry for Cressida in the next scene, with Pandarus’s entrance in the nuptial bedroom and his nasty comments:

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

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! ah, poor capoccia!
Hast not slept to-night? would he not -a naughty man-
Let it sleep? a bugbear take him! (IV. 2. 23-33).

I find it one of the scenes in which the other characters (Troilus mocks her too) are more cruel towards Cressida. There is not the slightest respect for her feelings. Her later behaviour should come as no surprise. A little later on, on learning that Cressida has to go to the Greeks, Pandarus’s only regard is for
Troilus's suffering. While he insists that their separation will mean Troilus's death the only consolation he offers to Cressida's tears is "go and cry."

The bargain that sends Cressida to the Greek camp is sealed without any regard for her feelings. She is just an expendable object that has been exchanged for something that is considered more valuable than her. And what does Troilus do? He acts too tamely, too civilized, and too histrionically. He starts by comparing himself to a priest who is offering a sacrifice at an altar. To protect his lady's reputation, Troilus had asked Eneas to say they have met by chance. However, now in front of Diomedes he starts acting as if he owned Cressida and he patronizes Diomedes:

Welcome, Sir Diomed! here is the lady
Which for Antenor we deliver you:
At the port, Lord, I'll give her to thy hand;
And by the way possess thee what she is.
Entreat her fair; and, by my soul, fair Greek,
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. 4. 109-116).

Diomedes, who knows how to treat ladies and does not miss the opportunity to make a pass at them, makes fun of the young man's demands. He knows that because of the exchange Cressida now belongs to the Greeks. Besides, she is an attractive lady - "The lustre in your eye, heaven in your cheek," (118) -and he will not miss the occasion to make a pass at a pretty lady - "I'll answer to my lust." It is very enlightening that in this scene Cressida does not say a word. She has been observing both gentlemen and perhaps making the natural comparisons.

When Cressida - the exchanged merchandise - reaches the Greek camp she is kissed down the ranks. The first one to kiss her is Agamemnon. Nestor, in a conciliatory manner, exclaims: "Our general doth salute you with a kiss," statement that brings about Ulysses' pun "'Twere better she were kissed in general" (IV. 5. 21). During the first five kisses, Cressida is silent. Cressida's witty retort to Menelaus and her pretension that Ulysses begs for her kiss, is too much for Ulysses, who now does not like Cressida, and so to Nestor's
observation that she is "A woman of quick sense" (54) - a woman with a quick brain, - he replies with a totally macho comment:

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. 5. 54-63).

Some critics have adopted Ulysses's observation as the play's statement on Cressida, while others, with whom we agree, have observed that, up to that moment, there is nothing in Cressida's behaviour to justify Ulysses's bitter remarks on her.

On taking her leave from Troilus, among a lot of weeping and other protestations of love, Cressida claimed she would be "A woeful Cressid 'mongst the merry Greeks" (IV. 4. 56). But when we see her again, in her retorts to Menelaus and Ulysses, the only words she utters, she sounds like a very merry Cressida. What has happened in the two or three hundred yards that separate both camps? That same night she is familiar towards Diomedes, whom she calls "My sweet guardian." He is a very different man from Troilus. Diomedes means business and cares not for flirting, and Cressida, who apparently made him a promise when they were on their way, - "I prithee do not hold me to mine oath,/ Bid me do any thing but that, sweet Greek" (V. 2. 26-7) - wants to go back on her word. She tries to play hard to get, the way she did with Troilus. But because of his angry refusal to join her game, she ends up by asking him to come again.

The accusers of Troilus blame him for not thinking of wedding Cressida, while the defenders claim it is "courtly love" and in courtly love marriage is never mentioned. However in all of Shakespeare's plays marriage is always mentioned. I cannot think of a Shakespeare play where courtly love is all the lovers are looking for. In Cressida's defence I have to mention how
she has been soiled. She is the only one to show discretion, and everybody knows about their affair. If we believe Pandarus, she was a virgin before that night (IV. 2. 23). But she loses all. In the Greek camp her father apparently supports her affair with Diomedes: "She comes to you" (V. 2. 4), Calchas says to Diomedes. In Troy she was a lovable character, while Diomedes' Cressida is disgusting. One single day separates both events. Even less, by the night of the same day that Cressida wakes up all in love with Troilus, she receives Diomedes, and she is already the drab Diomedes keeps, in Tersitls' words. Troilus has promised her nightly visitations, and he really goes to see her that very first night, only to find she is already familiar with Diomedes. Did Shakespeare not realize this scene takes place on the night of the same day? Shakespeare, probably influenced by Henryson's Testament of Cresseid, in which she develops leprosy, after having contracted syphilis, tried to show the fast corruption that takes place in sweet Troilus's Cressida. Cressida is another casualty in a war that should not be fought: "Brother, she is not worth what she does cost/ The keeping" (51) as Hector tries to convince Troilus about the advisability of returning Helen to the Greeks. Besides lives, Helen's abduction causes the loss of self respect. With reference to the other two problem comedies it has been said that the bed-trick shows that, for a man, one woman in bed is the same as another. Cressida, in the Greek camp seems to say that one man is the same as another.

However, in Cressida's defence we can say:  

1) Her uncle pushes her into an affair with Troilus while her father supports her affair with Diomedes and, though she tries to keep her affair with Troilus secret, he has not been that careful and as a result, everybody seems to know about it.  
2) She resents the fact that women cannot act like men.  
3) Troilus does not mention marriage to her.  
4) She is an expendable object. The Trojans exchange her for Antenor whom they consider more valuable.  
5) No sooner does she arrive in the Greek camp, than she realizes she does not inspire any respect, and she is not going to be respected. On the way to the Greek camp a sexual proposition is made to her; on her arrival she is kissed down the ranks; she is referred to as a "daughter of the game;" and known as Diomedes' drab.

The combination of all the above results in Cressida's loss of self-respect and her desire to enjoy the little -sex- that life can offer in the present circumstances.