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## CRISEYDE / CRESSEID / CRESSIDA: WHAT'S IN A NAME?

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Shakespeare's main source for *Troilus and Cressida* (1601/2) was, most probably, the 1599 Francis Thynne edition of *Troilus and Criseyde* in which *The Testament of Cresseid*, composed towards the end of the fifteenth century by the Dunfermline maker Robert Henryson, was appended to Chaucer's text. It is my opinion that the dramatist set out to blend the two very different treatments of the "heroine" that he found in these works into a coherent whole, and my aim in this paper is to show how he performed such a delicate literary graft. In so doing I wish to prove that the "operation" was successful in that it produced not the stock figure of a "shallow coquette"<sup>1</sup> whose metamorphosis from Troilus' lover to Diomedes' whore is too swift to be believable, but a well-rounded character whose reasons for doing what she did are, if not morally spotless, at least understandable.

When stating that Shakespeare set out to fuse Chaucer's and Henryson's treatments of Criseyde / Cresseid, I do not wish to suggest that he was attempting to reconcile polar opposites. His task was much more difficult - that of combining the ambivalent with the forthright.

Chaucer's interpretation of the lady's character and actions - particularly as regarded her motivations for deserting Troilus - was ever anything less than open-ended; here he took his cue from French and Italian sources. As C. David Benson points out, although Benoît de Saint-Maure (*Roman de Troie*, c. 1160) "draws a conventional lesson from the affair about the untrustworthiness of women"<sup>2</sup> he gives the "heroine" a long final speech in which "Briseida", although condemning herself as an opportunist, also pleads self preservation as an excuse. Alone and friendless in the Greek camp, she needed a protector, to be bought at any price. In *Il Filostrato* (c. 1338), while Boccaccio plays lip-service to Guido delle Colonne's harshly anti-feminist approach (*Historia Destructionis Troiae*, 1287) he seems rather to lose interest in than actively wish to condemn "Criseida"

1 W.W. Lawrence, *Shakespeare's Problem Comedies* (London and New York: The Macmillan Company, 1931) p. 197.

2 C. David Benson, *Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990), p. 2.

after she leaves Troy. Boccaccio and Benoît have one thing in common: they never say exactly why the object of female affection changes overnight.

Chaucer takes this tendency to extremes. Not only are we left in ignorance as Criseyde's feelings for Diomedes, it is not even really certain that she committed herself to Troilus in the first place. In her soliloquy of Book II (ll. 708-805) the question of whether or not she is stricken isn't even mentioned; such pitfalls as the loss of honour and freedom resulting from such a match are uppermost in her mind. In the chamber scene of Book III she is cool-headed enough to know exactly how to deal with her lover's trumped-up charges of infidelity. The "few bright tears" she sheds when her loyalty is called into question are most certainly of the crocodile variety, since she knows very well that "a full misty morrow" is often followed by a merry summer's day<sup>3</sup>. Having realized that Troilus has a seemingly infinite capacity for self-chastisement (which generally leads to unstinting self-sacrifice, most important in the bedroom context!) she exploits him to the maximum. While the consummation itself is accompanied by exquisitely poetic declarations of love, nocturnal ecstasy must always give way to the cold light of morning. One should note that it is Troilus who feels obliged to propose a repetition of the happy event while Criseyde will only go so far as to assure her lover that she has him "fast in minde"<sup>4</sup> –implying, I believe "Whether the relationship continues or not" It goes without saying that there exists a multitude of interpretations for her reactions in these and other scenes, but this is the whole point. Ambiguity is her watchword, and the fact that she becomes an unreliable and somewhat incoherent penpal in Book V should hardly come as a surprise to anyone.

In contrast, Henryson's Cresseid is frankness personified. She may well have proved "fickill and frivolous" with Troilus and whored with Diomeid (all this by her own confession) but she is given very good reasons for so doing. Allowing her Trojan lover to survive his despair-fuelled suicidal urges on the battlefield (thus cleansing Cresseid of blood-guilt) may well be a striking innovation, but the Scotsman's real masterstroke was to make Calchas undergo religious conversion. Whereas in previous accounts he had been the priest of Apollo (emphasis being placed upon the god's oracular functions) here he presides over the temple of Venus and Cupid. While his daughter is not an actual priestess like Hero, she has dedicated herself to the goddess and her son in the Marlovian, carnal sense. Unlike Chaucer's creation she is wholly committed to love-considers herself a

<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde* ed. John Warrington (1953; rept. London; J.M. Dent & Son Ltd. 1991) Bk. III II. 1058-1664.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* I 1486.

living (self) sacrifice to her tutelary divinities. This does beg the question as to what the relationship between sex and steadfastness is, yet in the fatally blasphemous prayer to her two supposed "protectors", Cresseid makes it abundantly clear that she would have remained faithful to the men in her life if perverse (served by blind) fate had not decreed otherwise:

O fals Cupide, is nane to wyte bot trow  
And thy Mother, of lufe the blind Goddes!  
Ye causit me alwayis understand and Erow  
The seid of lufe was sawin in my face,  
And ay grew grene throw your supplie and grace.  
Bot now allace that seid with froist is slane,  
And I fra luifferis left and all forlane<sup>5</sup>.

Her cry of loss and longing for the men whose society she has been torn from:

Quha sall me gyde? quha sall me now convoy  
Sen I fra Diomeid and Nobill Troylus  
Am clene excludit...?<sup>6</sup>

is indicative of that kind of helpless dependence which, while hardly amounting to love in the highest sense, certainly represents much more than Criseyde's notion of it as "politic allegiance". Henryson is almost completely sympathetic towards his heroine, despite her lapse:

Yit nevertheles quhat ever men deme or say  
In scornfull langage of thy brukkilnes,  
I sall excuse, als far furth as I may,  
Thy womanheid, thy wisdome and fairnes.  
(Henryson 108)

How, then, was Shakespeare to fuse wilful ambiguity and cool calculation with a pathetically hotblooded eagerness to be loved? When it came to judging the character, how might Henrysonian forthrightness be balanced against Chaucerian coyness?

Let us tackle the second question first. It was relatively easy for Shakespeare to let Criseyde off the hook upon which Guido delle Colonne (and his English translator John Lydgate) had hung her. He did so by playing the detractors at their own game. While Chaucer and Boccaccio only touched upon the setting for the love affair when it affected the two parties concerned, both *Historia*

<sup>5</sup> Robert Henryson, *Poems and Fables* ed. H. Harvey Wood (1933; rpt. Edinburgh: The Mercant Press, 1978) p. 109.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

*Destructionis Troiae* and *The Troy Book* were chronicles of the war as a whole, the giant backdrop against which Troilus and Criseyde play out their relatively minor rôles. In the play less attention is paid to the courting couple than to the social environment of martial strife and political intrigue they are forced to inhabit. The reader/spectator is therefore obliged to weigh Cressida's treachery against the pervading morality of the times, and here, "morality" means "rotteness".

Thersites, the "deformed and scurrilous Greek" who acts as commentator/one-man chorus throughout, treats corruption as a way of life. He is so accustomed to witnessing it that he is incapable of believing that anyone would think twice before prostituting their own highflown ideals and boasts. Ulysses pontificates upon the Greeks' failure to acknowledge respect for one's superiors (the speech on "degree", I.ii.75-186) before attempting to pit Ajax (whom he regards as a mere bumpkin) against the great Achilles. Achilles brags to Hector's face that he will say him easily in single combat (IV.v) before failing miserably to do so and ordering a whole troop of Myrmidons to act as hired assassins (V.vii, IV.viii). Even the noble Hector, despite his objections to spilling blood on Helen's behalf in II ii, is not above killing a man (whom he refers to, for no apparent reason, as a "beast") for his armour (V.vi). Helen is a whore, Menelaus a cuckold and an idiot to boot (V.i.54-58) and the strife that marital infidelity has engendered may be described in the same terms, given that it only amounts to an excuse for the Greek commanders to theorize about the noble –and lost– virtue of chivalry on the battlefield while sending thousands to their deaths, more often than not (as in Ajax's case, although he defies expectations by neither fighting Hector nor dying by his hand) for purely political reasons. Thersites sees right through them;

All the argument is a whore and a cuckold, a good quarrel to draw  
emulous factions to death upon<sup>7</sup>.

In a world where false promises and empty aspirations are ten-a-penny, why should anyone expect Cressida to be faithful to Troilus, to transform such vows of eternal dedication as the following into palpable act?

Time, force and death  
Do to this body what extremes you can;  
But the strong base and building of my love  
Is as the very centre of the earth...  
(IV.ii.103-6)

7 William Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida* ed. Daniel Seltzer (New York: The Signet Classic Shakespeare, 1963) II iii 74-76. All quotations taken from the play refer to this edition and will appear bracketed in the main body of the text.

Thersites certainly doesn't; he has her marked down as a "drab" (V ii, 101), a Trojan counterpart to Helen, before even clapping eyes on her; as the type of individual who will not think twice before giving the lie to the heartfelt declarations of eternal fidelity he imagines (as usual, quite correctly) that she has uttered. Nevertheless we the audience/readership know that Thersites is a typical case of professional deformation –that constant exposure to self-betrayal has encouraged him to revel in it, to take sado-masochistic pleasure in condemning a sin he knows he himself is not free of. Should we not simply ameliorate his judgement and content ourselves by saying that Cressida, even if she is no better than her male contemporaries, is certainly no worse?

I myself regard this as far too easy an option: easy in the sense that it ignores Shakespeare's debt to Henryson; to the idea that Cresseid/Cressida, however fickle, is a woman capable of total self-sacrifice to the man she happens to be with at the time. Whereas a Ulysses proves so willing to betray his own professed values that he is no more than a bombastic oratorical shell, we know that Cressida was, at one point at least, passionately in love with Troilus. She says so herself, in the speech that ends I.ii. We must believe her because said speech is, in fact, a soliloquy. While Ulysses chooses to expound highflown moral values before a listening public, she awaits a moment of privacy (the only one Shakespeare gives her) in which to declare her true feelings. She has to; being the Criseyde type (a woman who does not wish her inner secrets to be made public) she fears her ever-present uncle's loose tongue;

But more in Troilus thousand fold I see  
Than in the glass of Pandar's praise may be  
(I.ii.296-7)

Here, then, Shakespeare has applied Marlowe to Chaucer: Cressida, like Hero, needed no persuasion on Pandarus' (Leander's) part to fall in love; beguiling words are superfluous. He presents us with an impulsive woman –a Cresseid, in fact. However, this is a Cresseid with a cool Criseydean head on her shoulders, –here the Trojan war background, as well as Chaucer, comes into play.

Cressida knows what men are like. Unlike Criseyde, who shuts herself up in her chamber for most of the action and seems to believe that the vaguest conception of history being made outdoors is the price she has to pay for keeping herself –and the workings of her mind– from the public eye, she is out and about. There is no danger of her having to ask, like her Chaucerian counterpart "For Goddes Love, is the siege away?"<sup>8</sup>. On the contrary, she is aware that her best

8 Geoffrey Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde* Bk II I. 123.

defense against the (Trojan) male of the species is an up-to-date knowledge of what each and every one of them is up to. Her judgements upon the passing cavalcade of heroes which precedes the soliloquy of II i are strikingly perceptive. Living with the Trojan war for so long has shown her that renéguing upon highflown promises is the order of the day, and Troilus' ardent declarations may prove to be no exception to the rule. Once he knows that he has an easy conquest it might be prove all too simple to leave her on the shelf, and it is better to keep him guessing;

Women are angels, wooing;  
Things won are done, joy's soul lies in the doing  
(I.ii.298-9)

This strikes the ideal balance between Chaucer and Henryson; a woman who is deeply in love, yet has the good common sense to keep her mouth shut about it. Under the joint influence of Troilus and Pandarus she lapses for what is to prove a fatal moment, but it is not long before head takes over from heart again with the realization that she had been right to believe that the intensity of his passion will soon lessen. After the consummation he wishes to absent himself as quickly as possible –to smoke the proverbial cigarette, no doubt, and gloat upon his sexual prowess. Cressida has ceased to be so terribly important, and Troilus' song of farewell (the aubade) takes up exactly four lines (IV ii 12-15) The woman who has given herself to him despite her better judgement knows exactly what is going on his mind: she bitterly regrets allowing a mixture of softheartedness, love and lust to place her at the mercy of a potentially disinterested male. Shakespeare has steered her too close to Henryson for her own comfort:

Prithee, tarry;  
You men will never tarry.  
O foolish Cresseid! I might have still held off  
And then you would have tarried.  
(IV.ii.15-18)

Small wonder, then, that the last words she speaks to Troilus in the play are "My lord, will you be true?" (IV.iv.101) The fact that he sheds bitter tears and virtually demands her to be "true of heart" (IV.iv.58) is neither here nor there; Prince Charming will only ever profess to adore the unobtainable. Love him though she still does, the fact that she now doubts the wisdom of considering Troilus as a partner for life goes some way to explaining her decision to ditch him.

Not the whole way, however, and perhaps Shakespeare intended to take yet another leaf out of Chaucer's book by refusing to let us see exactly why

Diomedes is able to seduce her so easily, even if he does go directly against the grain of *Troilus and Criseyde* by allowing us to witness the seduction scene itself (V.ii). My theory, however, is that our heroine, in committing herself to Troilus, has let the mask of Criseydean aloofness slip so far down that she finds it impossible to set it in place again. The passionate woman –the Cresseid– that always struggled beneath surface sophistication, has now asserted herself for good; the distinction between appearance and reality has been blasted away.

And, ironically, it is Greek hypocrisy and cynicism –particularly that of Ulysses– which forces her to realize that, in present company, any attempt on her part to stage a show of aloofness to affairs of heart will be a waste of time. When she first enters the Greek camp Cressida is still capable of acting out the rôle of icy coyness –that of the worldlywise *femme fatale* who knows enough about men to keep them at a distance. She feels that she owes at least this much to Troilus who, after all, is still only a suspect when it comes to betraying vows.

However, she is a little too worldly for her own good. The (apparently) shy and retiring Criseyde might have passed muster before Ulysses and his impromptu welcoming committee. Cressida does not: by attempting to use coyness as a means of building the Greek hero up for, quite literally, a "kiss off", she plays right into his hands. The consummate actor and double talker treats the notion that anyone –especially a Trojan– should attempt to play him at his own game by reversing the rules with disbelieving contempt. He refuses to entertain the notion that playful ambiguity might be used as a disguise for, first, heartfelt affection for another man, second, contempt for profferings of false friendship. By implying that he should grovel for her favours, Cressida is only attempting to give him a verbal slap in the face –one which he returns, with interest;

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's sake give me a kiss, When Helen is a maid again...	

(IV.v.47-50)

All Trojans are whores, in one way or another. It is in Ulysses' interest to bombard the listening Ajax with this message. Although the latter is not the brightest of souls, he **had** just about worked this out for himself but, in attempting to egg him on to face Hector, "Polumetis Odysseus" refuses to desist from the use of a spade where a spatula will do. Here comes Cressida/Cresseid –the daughter of Calchas. Why should it not be the case that turncoat begets whore–

Thersites' Helen counterpart? Our heroine has very definitely turned up at the wrong place at the wrong time.

And she never bounces back from the "blow" that Ulysses has dealt her—never recovers her old composure. She now knows that, to the Greeks, superficial appearance is a substitute for the spiritual cleanliness that no-one is expected to possess. She has let herself down in her host nation's eyes; has paraded an ambiguous attitude towards vice and virtue by substituting the white (artificial purity) that should overpaint the black (corruption) with a Criseydean grey area which, to the Greeks, is closer to black than white. In a world where virtue amounts to keeping vice well hidden, Cressida has branded herself—quite unwittingly—as being hopelessly shallow. Should she now perform a *volte-face* and make a declaration of her affections she will only be regarded as a hypocrite as well as a whore.

She chooses, then, to play the game by the Greek rules—to do what everyone expects of her, she adopts Cresseid—the wanton sexual animal—as her new mask, a defence against obvious Greek hostility towards intelligent women.

Her new protector, however, is just like all men—especially Troilus. He wants a reward for his attentions—in the shape of sex—immediately, and Cressida is by now too hopelessly confused and frightened by her hostile reception to refuse. The new mask very quickly becomes a way of life and, before she knows it, she is in love with the new man in her life. She is the type of person who needs someone to adore and Diomedes may well prove to be no worse than Troilus who, remember, she has already seen through. In point of fact Henryson reveals him to be no better than his rival; he will eventually throw her over.

Criseyde / Cressida / Cresseid—what's in a name? In Shakespeare's case, nothing. He demonstrates that self-sacrifice to passion and the self-preservation instinct—the felt necessity both to feign aloofness for and indulge oneself in lust with the object of affection need not be mutually exclusive; that, placed in the right social setting (provided by the Trojan War chroniclers) there is no reason that Chaucer's and Henryson's character should not cohabit the one body. His play is a perfectly constructed bridge between its two major sources.

## DISSIDENT READING: SUMMARY

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Once it was possible to assert that anti-Semitism is irrelevant to *The Merchant of Venice*. Lillian S. Robinson says she was persuaded of this; one should set it aside and address "the real point of the work"<sup>1</sup>. The usual liberal-conservative way to retrieve the play nowadays is encapsulated in Helen Vendler's remark, which Christopher Ricks (in the course of a discussion of T.S. Eliot's anti-Semitism) endorses: "Shylock, in Shakespeare's imagination, grows in interest and stature so greatly that he incriminates the anti-Semitism of Belmont"<sup>2</sup>. So, in a paradoxical sense, Shylock wins—not in the world, of course, but in Shakespeare's imagination. From the left, Terry Eagleton also finds Shylock the paradoxical victor: he "is triumphantly vindicated even though he loses the case: he has forced the Christians into outdoing his own "inhuman" legalism"; he unmasks "Christian justice as a mockery"<sup>3</sup>. It is Shylock who has respect for the spirit of the law, Portia who discredits the law through hyper-ingenious quibbling. Allen Bloom offers a staunchly right-wing interpretation. He says Shylock asks for trouble, for he has "the soul of a man who has refused to assimilate. He is consequently distrusted and hated. He reciprocates, and his soul is poisoned"<sup>4</sup>. It is all Shylock's fault, for not abandoning his own culture and adopting "western values".

So it is possible to get diverse readings from *The Merchant*, not all of them offensive. But what about ordinary readers and audiences who are situated partly or wholly in subordinate cultures—Jews, women, Blacks, lesbians and gay men, lower-class people? Should we expect them to unravel such intricately divergent readings in order to find a cultural space in which they may recognize themselves?

1 Lillian S. Robinson, *Sex, Class, and Culture* (New York and London: Methuen, 1986), p. 35.

2 Christopher Ricks, *T.S. Eliot and Prejudice* (London: Faber, 1988), p. 118. On reading *The Merchant*, see Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* (Berkeley: California U.P. and Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1992), pp. 299-302.

3 Terry Eagleton, *William Shakespeare* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp. 37-8, 41.

4 Allan Bloom with Harry V. Jaffa, *Shakespeare's Politics* (New York and London: Basic Books, 1964; Chicago U.P., Midway Reprint, 1986), p. 21.