

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



## “Desire is Death” in Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*

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“Lechery, lechery; still, wars and lechery; nothing else holds fashion” (5.2.193), bawls Thersites about the Greek-Trojan conflict at the close of Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida* (1601-2).<sup>1</sup> Here, the use of *hendiadys* emphasizes the conjunction of love and death that permeates the play through various manifestations linking lust, love, and desire to disease, war, and death. Shakespeare’s play presents a corrosive variant of a compelling convergence of eros and thanatos in early Greek myth and art. One prominent way in which this coupling of love and death manifested itself was through the Greek perception of erotic desire as the onset of a pathological disease (Faraone 43), a convention carried down to the Renaissance. *Erōs*, or erotic seizure, sets human beings literally on fire as desire boils the innards, and burning passion—via humours and spirits—inflames the victim inside and out (Padel 116-17) in a total body experience, incomparable to the erotic heat suggested by “watered-down” (Faraone 44) metaphors ubiquitous in potboiler romance novels. *Erōs*, the Greek god of love, violently “melts” or “burns” his victims, or “strikes” them with a hammer (45). According to the sixth century B.C.E. poet Anacreon, “madness and battlenoise” were the knucklebones—gaming pieces—of *Erōs*, who was “classically the hunter with the bow, hard to fight, invincible... stressing the old association between *toxa* the weapon and the toxic poison dart” (Vermeule 156-7). Represented in Greek art as “a frighteningly demonic figure,” *Erōs* was hard to distinguish in early vase paintings “from other hostile figures like the *keres*, the Harpies, and other winged death-demons” (Faraone 45-6). Operating as a formal principle of Greek myth and literature, love and

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<sup>1</sup> All references to Shakespeare are from *The Norton Shakespeare*. I would like to thank Jessica Dyson, Niamh Cooney, and Jana Pridalova for organizing the wonderful opportunity for intellectual exchange at the Love and Death in the Renaissance Conference, Northern Renaissance Seminar Series, University of Leeds, May 2010, and a special collection of essays issuing from it. Much thanks to Andrew Griffin and the anonymous readers for their generous and helpful comments. A special thanks to Jessica Dyson for her patient readings and helpful editorial comments. As a textual note, Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Eudemian Ethics* are abbreviated respectively as *NE* and *EE* in the parenthetical citations.

death, explains anthropologist Emily Vermeule, “were two aspects of the same power” (157), depicted, for instance, in the myth of Persephone, Hades’s abduction of a maiden into the underworld, or in the story of Helen of Sparta, in which the prototypical abduction by a god is varied with a human abductor, Paris of Troy, aided by the gods.

As these two archetypal myths indicate, the figure of a beautiful woman is often found at the junction of love and death. “The figure of the beloved woman whose image haunts and escapes the lover intersects with that of death” through *pothos*, “the desire for what is absent, a desire that is a suffering because it cannot be fulfilled” (Vernant 101-2). According to Jean-Pierre Vernant, “amorous *pothos* for Helen, that reigning supreme over Menelaos’s heart” in Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon*,

populates the palace deserted by his wife with phantoms (*phasmata*) of the beloved, with her apparitions in dreams (*oneirophantoi*) .... Radiant with charm, haunting and ungraspable, Helen is like a person from the beyond, doubled in this life and on this earth in herself and her phantom, her *eidōlon*. A fatal beauty created by Zeus to destroy human beings, to make them kill one another at the walls of Troy, she ... deserves the appellation “slayer of men” .... She who is “most beautiful” also incarnates ... the savage and murderous Ker. In her, desire and death are joined and intimately mingled. (102)

Diomedes in Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida* expresses a similar view regarding Helen when the Greek caustically decries her as the cause of the decade-long carnage known as the Trojan War:

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. (4.1.71-76)

Even as he denounces Helen as an archetypal *femme fatale* whose viral beauty creates havoc, Diomedes himself, afflicted by “an envious fever” (1.3.133) of emulous rivalry in lust and war,<sup>2</sup> actively participates in Cressida’s infidelity to the point that at the play’s close, Troilus defiantly repels the supposedly false Cressida as an erotic source of

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<sup>2</sup> See also Girard’s notion of rivalry based on “mimetic desire” (200). I thank Robert Appelbaum for turning me on to Girard’s essay.

death. Never mind venting about wasteful carnage as Diomedes does, Troilus actively flees from Cressida's arms to the erotic embraces and "intimate rendezvous" (Vernant 99) of war. As Vernant reminds us, the ancient Greek word *meignumi* for sexual union also meant to join and meet in battle (100). In his anger at Cressida's betrayal, Troilus repulses the bane of love for the glories of "beautiful death" (Vernant 95) when by such martyrdom, he will die ignobly as the subjugated female in the fatal embraces of battle.

As Vernant's discussion of *pothos* and Thersites's pronouncement of lechery suggest, desire in its varying forms—craving, lust, or longing for something lost or missed (*OED* 1-3)—lies at the junction of love and death, *bella* and *bellum*. I argue that love and death converge for the Trojans and the Greeks of *Troilus and Cressida* embroiled in martial and erotic pursuits precisely because they are afflicted by akratic and vicious rather than virtuous desire. Akrasia is the endemic lack of rational self-control that was of such vital concern to the early moderns in their efforts of bodily and moral self-discipline.<sup>3</sup> Shakespeare's iconoclastic rendition of the medieval romance and the Greek epic portrays the decline of the Homeric world through the decay of heroic values and ideals. Love has debased to licentiousness, reflective of the contemporary English court under James I (Clarke 210-11): "the ravished Helen, Menelaus' queen," who "With wanton Paris sleeps" (*T&C*, Prologue, 9-10), embodies the sex-and-power nexus—involving both male-female and male-male relations—that underlies the internecine war between the Greeks and the Trojans. The play's abundant moral disquisitions against a backdrop of ever intriguing conjunctions of love and death invite an Aristotelian prudential analysis of how desire unguided by virtue begets a snare of false pleasures, "chaos" (1.3.125), and death. My aim, however, is not simply that of conventional ethical criticism: to "identify moral imperatives in the plays to put forward conclusions about Shakespeare's guiding moral principles" (Knapp 31).

While rigorous in its ethical examination, this study rests equally on the phenomenological approach. Emerging out of body studies, historical phenomenology, as an interpretive approach, tries to imagine how emotions or other interior phenomena "might have been experienced differently by early modern subjects" (Paster, Rowe, and Floyd-Wilson 2-3). Such a phenomenological lens may offer more insight into Hector's abrupt acquiescence in 2.2 or Cressida's sudden surrender in 3.2. In this view, "the moral relevance of the plays," James Knapp claims, "resides less in their representation of moral precepts and more in Shakespeare's dramatic representation of moral situations" (32). Because we "as readers and viewers make judgments after the act," not

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<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Michael Schoenfeldt, *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England*, 40-73, a discussion of Book II on Temperance of Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*.

in “real time” of the act itself, our assessments tend to be dogmatic applications of “universal,” or culturally-accepted ethical precepts. Finer discernment, however, insists on the phenomenological particularities of a specific character within a moral situation—“the problematic heart of ethical action” (Knapp 36) that Shakespeare presents before us with all the intensity and inconsistency that characterize lived experience. While the play operates within the ethical principles of his time, the dramatic experience of “false” Cressida, for instance, “complicates any straightforward attempt at moralizing” (Knapp 32). Ethical evaluation of her “inconstancy” must be tempered with phenomenological understanding of her particular situation within the embedded mutability of circumstances. Knapp declares that “the treatment of moral situations in Shakespeare does not necessarily imply an interest in moral prescription” (30). Nothing could be truer in *Troilus and Cressida*. Infected by the Renaissance fascination with the coupling of eros and thanatos, Shakespeare used the story of Troilus and Cressida in a decadent epic world to his aesthetic and moral purposes. The interlocking plots of love and war allowed him to present multiple conjunctions of desire and death both as theatrical entertainment and as tragic situations to provoke inhabited (as opposed to abstract) moral thought—beyond banal reassertions of virtue over vice.

Desire, in its sense of longing and craving, is correlated to the Thomist notion of *appetitus*. Aquinas defines *appetitus*—a compound of *ad*, “towards”, and *petere*, to “aim at” or “desire”—as “the universal tendency of anything to seek what completes it” (Miner 16). Desire, in itself, is morally indifferent; it is rather the goods of desire that distinguish a praiseworthy from a blameworthy action. Aquinas distinguishes three types of appetitive goods corresponding to the three kinds of lives listed in increasing value—the pleasurable, the civil, and the contemplative (Aristotle, *NE*, 1095b15-20). Like Aristotle’s typology of friendship, the objects of desire are useful (*utile*), pleasant (*delectabile*), and intrinsically good (*honestum*) in ascending ethical value (Miner 17). As Aquinas explains,

Two of these, the pleasurable and befitting, have the aspect of an end, because both are desirable on account of themselves. The befitting is said to be the good according to reason, which has a certain pleasure joined to it. Whence the pleasurable, which is divided against the befitting, is the pleasurable according to the senses. Now reason is both speculative and practical. Therefore the life is called sensual (*voluptuosa*), which places the end in the pleasure of the senses. The life, however, is called civic (*civilis*), which places the end in the good of practical reason, e.g. in the exercise of virtuous deeds. (Aquinas, *Sententia libri Ethicorum* 1.5.4–5; qtd. in Miner 17-18)

In contrast, the life called contemplative (*contemplativa*) “places its end in the good of speculative reason, viz. in the contemplation of truth”—intellectual and moral. Given the understanding that the contemplative life is fully compatible with civil life of virtuous activity for the commonweal, this ultimate good, or “chief end” (Aristotle, *NE*, I.1.1094a22; *Antony and Cleopatra*, 4.13.27), is predicated “chiefly o[n] the *honestum*, then of the *delectabile*, and lastly of the *utile*” (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*.5.6 reply to objection 3; qtd. in Miner 19).<sup>4</sup> However, the Trojans and the Greeks of Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida* habitually seek what is pleasant and useful, and rarely what is intrinsically good in their martial and erotic pursuits. In Shakespeare’s caustic depiction of the Trojan War, these venereal and martial desires, unmoored from virtue, converge in death. “Desire is death” (Sonnet 147, l. 8) when an ethos of love and male honour corrode into a toxic blend of lust, disease, and war.

This decay of desire is prefigured in Plato’s double-sided representation of *erōs*. In the *Symposium*, Socrates allegorically speaks of *Erōs*, offspring of Penury and Resource, as the desire “to possess the good forever” (Plato 206a10). In this “ceaseless striving for the noble and beautiful” (203c), the feminine and the masculine, or emblematically, Venus and Mars, might commingle in the virtuous pursuit of eros and martial glory (as they do briefly in Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*), informing the Renaissance ideal of the courtier as both “the perfect warrior and the perfect lover.”<sup>5</sup> However, in *Phaedrus*, a dialogue which, like the *Symposium*, aims to steer pederasty towards noble ends and away from its potential abuses of licentiousness and exploitation of youth, Plato makes reference to desire also as a base appetite. At the sight of a beautiful boy,

a man who was initiated [to philosophical wisdom] long ago or who has become defiled is not to be moved abruptly from here to a vision of Beauty itself when he sees what we call beauty here; so instead of gazing at the latter reverently, he surrenders to pleasure and sets out in the manner of four-footed beast, eager to make babies; and, wallowing in vice, he goes after unnatural pleasure too, without a trace of fear or shame. (250e-251)

Further into the dialogue, Socrates adumbrates the initiate’s eventually successful struggle to control his base appetites in an analogy of the charioteer who tries to align the black horse, “companion to wild boasts and indecency,” with the white horse, “a

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<sup>4</sup> For further discussion on the debate between contemplative and active life, see my essay, “Leisure, Idleness, and Virtuous Activity in Shakespearean Drama.”

<sup>5</sup> Jones-Davies 39; see also Ben Jonson, “Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue,” 490: “what is noble should be sweet” in the union of Virtus and Amor.

lover of honor with modesty and self-control; companion to true glory” (253d-e), instead of himself becoming infected by the black horse’s base desires.

When the object of love is a beautiful woman, the double-sidedness of *erōs* correlates with a perceived dual nature of woman. Apart from the misogynistic Greek view presented above showing woman as an agent of death, a different strand of thought from the Platonic (and medieval courtly) traditions offers a more positive view of female beauty, which, in its promotion of noble human love, aspires to the divine rather than descending to base appetites. In the Platonic tradition, a beautiful woman was the earthly image of the divine, filling its viewer with love, or desire for the Good: “women’s eyes ... are the *ground*, the books, the academes, / From whence doth spring the true Promethean fire” (*Love’s Labour’s Lost*, Quarto [1598], 4.3.291.8-9, my italics). Helen, in Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*, is held up as “the mortal Venus, the heart-blood of beauty, love’s visible soul” (3.1.30-31). The “mortal Venus” makes reference to the two Aphrodites of Plato’s *Symposium*, a heavenly Venus associated with noble love and an earthly one associated with lust (Plato, *Symposium*, 180d-185c; Clarke 218). According to Pausanias’s distinction between the two,

the common, vulgar lover ... loves the body rather than the soul, the man whose love is bound to be inconstant, since what he loves is itself mutable and unstable. The moment the body is no longer in bloom, ‘he flies off and away,’ his promises and vows in tatters behind him. How different from this is a man who loves the right sort of character, and who remains its love for life, attached as he is to something that is permanent... [Heavenly] Love’s value to the city as a whole and to the citizens is immeasurable, for he compels the lover and his loved one alike to make virtue their central concern. All other forms of love belong to the vulgar goddess. (Plato, *Symposium*, 183e-184, 185c)

Lest the distinction between heavenly and vulgar love be misunderstood as a false dichotomy, the neoplatonist Pico della Mirandola reminds us that “the desire of love aroused by earthly beauty” is of two kinds—bestial and human: “While a purely sensuous instinct will incline to misplace the source of visual beauty in the body and seek the fruition of beauty in animal pleasures alone, the human lover will recognize that the Venus who appears clothed in an earthly garment is an ‘image’ of the celestial” (Wind 118-19). Virtuous human love thus possesses qualities of both heavenly and vulgar love. Being human, a virtuous lover naturally experiences the symptoms of lust:

when he sees a godlike face or bodily form that has captured Beauty well, first he shudders and a fear comes over him like those he felt at the earlier time; then

he gazes at him with the reverence due a god .... Once he has looked at him, his chill gives way to sweating and a high fever, because the stream of beauty that pours into him through his eyes warms him up.... (Plato, *Phaedrus*, 251a-b)

Significantly, this desire is described in the conventional Greek way as the onset of a pathological disease. Being virtuous, however, the lover contentedly diverts base appetites within himself to noble action for personal and civil good. The Trojans and the Greeks in Shakespeare's world of debased desire prove unable to do as much. The reification of beautiful women—Helen and Cressida—emphatically registers the spiritual malaise within martial manhood fatally interweaving disease, war, and death. Shakespeare's dramatization of the Trojan War offers searing insight into the coupling of love and death as women and martial honor *qua* "objects of competition" (Aristotle, *NE*, IX.8.1169a21) converge in a fatal distortion of virtue as the pursuit of external goods. Aristotelian ethics with its moral sophistication proves indispensable to show the ways in which the Trojans and the Greeks engaged in martial and erotic pursuits are afflicted by akratic rather than virtuous desire. In *Troilus and Cressida*, desire, in its varying forms, turns to decay through war, disease, and self-delusion. In Shakespeare's hands, the conjunctions of love and death present themselves, furthermore, as peaked nodes of phenomenological experience.

### **I. Martial Manhood: "The Enterprise is Sick"**

While the Trojans, on the whole, come off more sympathetically than the Greeks, both societies are founded on heroic notions of honour, glory, and reason, punctured incessantly by the scabrous utterances of Thersites, the play's "leering chorus" (Bevington 135). "In the world of this play," as Douglas Cole observes, "the myths that men say they live by—honor, love, prowess, order, and degree—are contradicted by their behavior, which in most cases is founded on pleasure, envy, revenge, and self-delusion" (82). In the first act, Ulysses speaks over sixty lines on the importance of "degree" and the "chaos, when degree is suffocate" (1.3.125), or insubordination growing rank within the ranks: "every step, / Exemplified by the first pace that is sick / Of his superior, grows to an envious fever / Of pale and bloodless emulation" (31-34). Instead of banding together in a worthy purpose, the Greek soldiers are engaged in petty squabbles over egos, built solely at the expense of one another. Each pursues his own appetites and undisciplined desires:

Achilles and Ajax nurse dreams of martial supremacy. Achilles, the acknowledged champion, has gone so deeply into his dream of greatness that he

has begun to ape the Trojan courtiers and has secretly acquired a Trojan mistress, Polyxena. Patroclus is moved by an appetite for mockery, and Diomedes by unvarnished lust. (Clarke 225)

Ulysses attributes the Greek stagnation not to the standard military problem of “insubordination in the ranks” but to insubordination, period. His complaint is precisely that there are no ranks among the squabbling Greek princes: the “enterprise is sick” “when degree is shaken, / Which is the ladder to all high designs” (1.3.103, 101-2). But has Ulysses diagnosed the problem correctly and completely in pointing to an issue of power? If the Greeks are so ill motivated, perhaps the problem lies not only in “policy,” or strategy, but, rather more importantly, in the inherent sickness of the enterprise, namely, the lack of a “high design”. Indeed, the entire war lasting ten years originates as a power struggle over a woman, who, characteristic of the culture, is seen as an appendage of male selfhood. Ulysses’s flawed diagnosis shows how far the Greeks have strayed in their notion of excellence (*areté*) from the Aristo-Platonic pursuit of virtue for its own sake—as the noble thing to do—to the desire for external goods such as honour, fame, and women merely to elevate their social standing in relation to others. Aristotle in *Eudemian Ethics* distinguishes between the nobly thinking man (*kaloskagathos*) who chooses external goods such as wealth, honour, and power for the sake of pursuing what is noble, and the conventionally good man (*agathos*) who seeks them because they are deemed good by society (Whiting 166). The contemplation and the pursuit of the divine is the measure by which the nobly thinking man chooses and seeks goods outside of himself—whether “goods of the body or money or of friends or other goods” (Aristotle, *EE*, VIII.3.1249b18).

While the Greeks are divided in individual pursuits, the Trojans’ effort to rally together under Helen, “a theme of honour and renown, / A spur to valiant and magnanimous deeds” (2.2.198-99), betrays false pretensions to virtue. Helen inspires men not to virtue but a misguided *virtus*, or male valour, grounded on emulous rivalry blown to epic proportions in the so-named Trojan War. Once caught in the debacle, they must justify the bloody enterprise: as war-weary Troilus in the opening scene exclaims, “Peace, rude sounds! / Fools on both sides. Helen must needs be fair / When with your blood you daily paint her thus” (1.1.85-87). “All the argument” regarding the war is indeed a painted “whore and a cuckold, a good quarrel to draw emulous factions and bleed to death upon” (2.3.65-66). All are infected by “an envious fever / Of pale and bloodless emulation” (1.3.133-34), “creat[ing] many conflicts ... emptie[d] of all content” (Girard 202).



Self-advancement, to be sure, is not a bad thing. Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics* endorses a notion of self-love, which entails other-oriented actions in the aim of promoting personal virtue: “the good man should be a lover of self (for he will both himself profit by doing noble acts, and will benefit his fellows), but the wicked man should not; for he will hurt both himself and his neighbours, following as he does evil passions” (IX.8.1169a12-15).

This form of virtue-driven rather than ego-driven self-love is the basis of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, the standard text in moral philosophy at the universities, with more than sixty editions published before 1600 (Menut 317), emerging from the Reformation struggles as “a keystone of both Catholic and Protestant education” (Schmitt 94), and the golden mean, a cultural staple of the Renaissance.<sup>6</sup> Whether Shakespeare read Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* is less important for my argument than the fact that Shakespeare, working within a rich humanist milieu, was familiar enough with his ethics—as textual evidence reveals—to make *Troilus and Cressida* (and other plays) nuanced and complex dramatizations of the Aristotelian concept of virtuous action. The play, as W. R. Elton argues, was probably written for performance at the Inns of Court, serving an audience largely of law students and barristers trained in rhetoric and logic. Their humanist background would have acquainted them with both Aristotle’s ideas and the classical narrative of “ravished Helen” and of the ensuing “quarrel” (Prologue, 9-10) between the Greeks and the Trojans, as recounted in the Prologue (*Troilus and Cressida and the Inns of Court Revels*, 4). Although Elton provides ample evidence to indicate that *Troilus and Cressida* was performed as part of law-revels entertainment, the play’s bitter disillusionment and dark deflation of heroic ideals point to a more sombre ethical inquiry underlying the playful burlesque. This play’s focus on choosing the right course of action in an alliance of reason and desire warrants an Aristotelian examination, which gives a sense of how the more sophisticated of early modern spectators and readers might have responded to ethical questions important to that era.

Good action in life, according to Aristotle, is the product of two kinds of wisdom, philosophical and practical: philosophical wisdom is the knowledge of what makes a good life, and practical wisdom, the knowledge to achieve that end. Together, they attain flourishing at both the personal and civil level: “virtue makes us aim at the right mark, and practical wisdom makes us take the right means” (Aristotle, *NE*,

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<sup>6</sup> See also Schmitt and Skinner, 1992: Vol. 3, 778; Elton, 1997: 337, n. 2, for a copious bibliography; Turner, 2006: 47–50, 62–63, 65 and 86–90, with additional bibliography, for the influence of the *Nicomachean Ethics* on Sidney’s *Defense of Poesy*; Poisson, 1966: 210–11.

VI.12.1144a6-9). “[V]irtue in the strict sense,” because of its “implied practical wisdom,” is to be distinguished from “natural virtue” (VI.12.1144b15, 19), operating from the emotional side: “The person of mere natural virtue has proper passions without practical wisdom, and the person’s actions are guided by, or due to, passions” (Klagge 6). On the other, intellectual, side from passion, practical wisdom must also be distinguished from raw “cleverness” (VI.13.1144b14), which would include adept political strategizing without philosophical wisdom, as with Ulysses. Virtue and practical wisdom, or prudence, its humanist equivalent, are wedded thus in an intertwining of the moral and the rational. Not to be mistaken as solely rational, virtue, properly understood, integrates the passions: the virtuous man, in desiring to do what his reason dictates, distinguishes himself from the rationally continent man who takes good action through mastery of his sometime contrary desires (VII.9.1151b33-1152a3). Virtue then is the habituated integration of passion and reason in actions toward personal and civil good. Prudence, virtue’s deputy, facilitates just action “at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with right motive, and in the right way” (II.6.1106b20-22).

Grounded on the just mean, prudence, through deliberation, has “the capacity to ‘excite and temper’ our passions,”<sup>7</sup> disposing the rational will to act towards a virtuous end. “The origin of action,” Aristotle explains, “is choice, and that of choice is desire and reasoning” (*NE*, VI.1.1139a32), or what Aquinas, the foremost Aristotelian commentator of the medieval period, simply calls will, “a rational appetite, an inclination toward goods perceived by intellect and subject to rational deliberation” (Miner 35). When working properly, that is, undisturbed by unruly passions, man’s will, the ultimate cause of all action, chooses pleasant and useful things according to what is good and noble, the chief end. In sum, choice, or its Latin equivalent, election, is rational desire, and, thus, man, rather than an animal subject to the sensitive appetite, is associated with choice: “such an *origin* of action is *a man*” (VI.2.1139b 4-5; my italics). As W. R. Elton notes, however, old Nestor in *Troilus and Cressida* mangles Aristotle’s idea (“Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*,” 335):

... choice, being mutual act of all our souls,  
 Makes merit her election, and doth boil,  
 As ’twere from forth us all, a man distilled  
 Out of our virtues .... (1.3.342-45)

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<sup>7</sup> Thomistic explanation of Aristotelian ethics (*Summa Theologica*, 1a.81.3 reply to argument 3), as clarified by Christopher Tilmouth, 28.

Apart from the textual support that these lines offer for Shakespeare's familiarity with Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, probably through mediated sources, the misconstrual of Aristotelian ethics by the play's characters reveals the overthrow of virtue and rational will by ego-driven *virtus*. Whereas for Aristotle, man is the distillation of rational choice dispatching moral action, for Nestor, "man" is the supreme warrior "distilled" out of the collective skills of the Greeks. Virtue is stripped to martial prowess, and choice is merely the selection of their best warrior to represent them in Hector's challenge to a one-on-one fight, an empty ritual of honour. Old Nestor's speech encapsulates the ego-driven honour prevailing in both the Greek and Trojan camps—the pride and the source of moral canker in that heroic society.

If the wisest among them is thus infected by the allure of glory, one cannot expect sagacity in the others. Traditionally, the disputation, as Elton explains, consisted of "sequential arguments displaying orderly distinctions, syllogistic reasoning and logical consequence" (*Troilus and Cressida* and *the Inns of Court Revels*, 94). Act 2, scene 2, however, presents a mock-disquisition on whether to return Helen and thereby to cease war in which young Troilus is the loudest proponent for honour-seeking combat. To this end, he comes up short in virtuous prudence—what Aristotle recommends for integrating the passional and rational faculties towards just action at the right time, in the right way, and for the right end. Troilus's speech instead reveals how he allows personal circumstance to distort judgment, the process of rational "election":

I take today a wife, and my election  
Is led on in the conduct of my will;  
... how may I avoid,  
Although my will distaste what it elected,  
The wife I chose? (2.2.60-66)

Rejecting "Reason and respect" (2.2.48), Troilus uses an analogy of commitment to one's spousal choice to make the case for retaining Helen and thereby continuing the war. In the spirit of a mock-disputation, we might lay out Troilus's argument in the following two syllogisms:

I. Choice of Wife (Troilus)

P 1: One must stand by one's choice.

P 2: I have chosen a wife.

Conclusion: I must remain true to my wife.

II. Choice of Policy: Keep Helen (Trojans)

P 1: A people must stand by its choice of action.

P 2: The Trojans have kidnapped Helen.

Conclusion: The Trojans must keep Helen (i.e., continue fighting).

In Aristotelian and Thomist ethics, the practical syllogism illustrates the deliberative process by which one chooses a course of action (*NE*, VII.3.1147a-b; *De Anima* 434a16-21). The first premise is usually a general ethical principle that applies universally, and the second, a particular opinion regarding a specific situation that connects the act to the principle. The universal vs. particular distinction correlates with deliberative choice by the rational appetite as opposed to apprehension by the sensitive appetite. In his election speech, Troilus includes a “sceptical argument that action is determined by will, and that will is under the sway of the senses” (Soellner 261): in other words, one acts all too often as “passion’s slave” (*Hamlet*, 3.2.65), as Troilus clearly does in his single-minded desire to have Cressida. Given this prefiguring of subsequent “distaste”, the conclusion to Troilus’s syllogism is roughly and ruefully the adage: “You make your bed; you lie in it.” Electing to take a course of action despite knowledge of ill consequence aligns with the akratic condition of “having knowledge but not using it... as in a man asleep, mad, or drunk” or, more pertinently, “under the influence of passions” (Aristotle, *NE*, VII.3.1147a11-14). Syllogistically speaking, Troilus climbs briefly to the rational deliberation of the level one premise but finds himself grounded at the level two premise, apprehending a particular good by the sensitive appetite. Exercising mainly the sensitive appetite, as Troilus does, constitutes akrasia, which, according to Aristotle, involves particular knowledge, rather than universal knowledge (*NE*, VII.3.1147a1-3) that concerns immaterial goods such as knowledge, virtue, and other abstractions.

Troilus’s sexual urgency regarding Cressida also clouds rational judgment regarding the problem of Helen. Troilus’s argument for “commitment to wife” as an analogy for “commitment to war” is hard to square, in Elton’s words, with “Paris’s extra-marital adventure and the abductor’s continued violation of the marriage vow” (335). Indeed, Hector, as the proponent of reason, brings up the clinching point that “moral laws / Of nature and of nations,” there “To curb those raging appetites that are / Most disobedient and refractory,” “speak aloud / To have [Helen] back returned” (180-5). This opposing universal principle indicates that a deliberating mind must assess Syllogism II against an additional Syllogism III:

### III. Choice of Policy: Return Helen (Trojans)

P 1: A wife belongs with her husband.

P 2: Helen is with Paris, her abductor.

Conclusion: Helen must be returned to Menelaus, her husband.

The prudent man would consider, likewise, other syllogisms to take account of possibly other important factors at the outset and in response to changing circumstances through time. Unlike the prudent man, Troilus sings a one-note tune of glory, which bids to stay the course in a “foolish consistency, the hobgoblin of little minds” (Emerson 57). In his view, the Trojans must “stand firm by honour” (2.2.67) for no other reason than to avoid unbearable self-reckoning. If the possession of beautiful women ranks men and nations in an emulous rivalry that animates this heroic world, the Trojans, Troilus claims, have the highest prize and must hold on to Helen—as long as she is deemed the desire of every man. To “Beggard the estimation which [they] prized / Richer than sea and land” (90-1) would be to admit that the Trojan War was a stupidity of monumental order. Bluntly put, the Trojans have committed stupidity and further stupidly continue it to avoid the truth of their colossal folly: as Hector avows, “Thus to persist / In doing wrong extenuates not wrong, / But makes it much more heavy” (185-7). Seduced by the allures of women and honour, the Trojans, first embarking on their venture, were “crowned kings [turned in]to merchants” (82), in whom the sensitive appetite overthrew reason and compelled them to brave sea and land to attain the Grecian queen. Now to save face, the Trojans must remain “passion’s slave[s]” in a corrupt embrace of love and death.

The proponent of rational prudence in the debate regarding Helen is Hector, who exhibits the right moral reaction to the “superficial” (2.2.164) arguments of Paris and Troilus, which “do more conduce / To the hot passion of distempered blood / Than to make up a free determination / ’Twixt right and wrong” (2.2.67-70). Instead of self-reflexively exalting the “service”—as Troilus and Paris do—to praise the human “prizer ... infect[ed]” by a “dot[ing]” will, Hector calls for contemplating the divine Good—“the god” (2.2.55-8): more simply put, pursue virtue for its own sake rather than for its extrinsic rewards. For “value dwells not in particular will” and action; “’tis precious of itself” (2.2.52-4). Hector’s distinction between “particular will” and divine Good reminds us of the Aristotelian and Thomist differentiation between the particular and the universal objects of apprehension. As Robert Miner explains, the sensitive, as opposed to rational, appetite cannot directly desire the ultimate end of *bonum honestum*:

It is confined to wanting things that are either pleasant or useful. In this sense, it is limited to particular goods.... [In other words, an] irrational animal can desire anything apprehended as pleasant or useful, but it cannot ask itself, “Is it good to want pleasant things?” Only a rational animal can abstract pleasure and utility as universals, and reflect upon their relation to the good as such. (Miner 24)

It is strictly a human privilege to desire “immaterial goods that the sense does not apprehend, like knowledge, virtue, and other things of this sort” (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I.80.2 reply to objection 2; qtd. in Miner 24). Hector’s remonstrance, however, falls on deaf ears since the Trojans, seeing Helen merely as a particular good for pleasure or usefulness, apprehend like irrational animals through the sensitive appetite rather than like deliberative human beings through the rational appetite: in Hector’s words, “pleasure and revenge / Have ears more deaf than adders to the voice / Of any true decision” because these hot-blooded “young men, [as] Aristotle thought / [are] Unfit to hear moral philosophy (2.2.165-6, 172).

When push comes to shove, however, Hector’s prudential stance suddenly collapses before an entrenched heroic ideology:

Hector’s opinion

Is this in way of truth—yet ne’ertheless,  
My sprightly 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 [national and personal] dignities. (2.2.189-92)

Despite all his talk about not “mak[ing] the service greater than the god” (56), Hector does just that in abandoning reason: he is precisely one of those “great minds, of partial indulgence / To their benumbèd wills” (177-78), which he reprehends. In *Eudemian Ethics*, Aristotle observes of the Spartans: “They are right in thinking that the contested goods are acquired by virtue rather than vice, but wrong in thinking these things superior to virtue” (1271b7-10). This moral critique aptly applies to the Trojans here and *a fortiori* to the Greeks, who rallied behind the Spartan king, Menelaus, the wronged husband of Helen. Both sides, seeing the war as a necessity of national and personal honour, fail to exit the feuding mindset to re-assess properly *why* they are fighting.

The abduction of Helen, emblematic of male and national contest for power, was a fruitful subject of *utramque partem* (double-sided) argument taught at the grammar

school during Shakespeare's time. Erasmus's *De conscribendis epistolis*, probably Shakespeare's handbook for letter writing in grammar school, suggests a number of arguments regarding the Helen question (Soellner 255). The Trojans might have done well to consider more carefully that if they were "unwilling to return the stolen Helen to her Menelaus ... that so many very brave men should enter battle; the fortunes and even the lives of so many people should be thrown into extreme jeopardy" (qtd. in Soellner 255-56). This catastrophe would be attributed to "a very foolish ruler on account of the most shameful love of an effeminate youth and hardly a man, Paris" (Erasmus qtd. in Soellner 255). The Greeks, on the other side, might have done well to persuade "Menelaus that he should rather neglect Helen than that because of a woman unworthy in life, he should bring so many thousands of noble men into peril of life, and seek her again by the tumult of the whole world, who even if she should return, ought not to be received" (Erasmus qtd. in Soellner 256).

Despite the usefulness of such exercises toward the acquisition of analytical skills, the problem of Helen is admittedly more difficult for Hector in "real time." Jean-Pierre Vernant's analysis of Hector in a passage of the *Iliad* (22.122-9) sheds light on the phenomenological complexity of his dilemma. Handing Helen over to the Greeks would entail "a meeting with the enemy" in which Hector would find himself "in the position of a quasi-woman" in relation to Achilles:

For a moment [Hektor] dreams of an impossible accord that would allow the warring confrontation of the two men to be avoided. He could lay down his shield and spear, take off his helmet and his arms, walk toward Achilles and offer him Helen and all the riches that the Achaeans could wish for. However, if he approached the Greek without his warrior's equipment, *gumnos*—a term which in this military context means "unarmed"—his enemy would kill him without mercy. But the text does not merely say *gumnos*; it adds a comparison that displaces the word's meaning: *gumnos*, "exactly like a woman" .... (Vernant 99)

Perhaps such a thought flits through Hector's mind at that enigmatic juncture when he claims that his opinion is in the "way of truth—yet ne'ertheless" (2.2.188) abruptly accedes to the general view of keeping Helen and continuing the war.

The dangers of being in a feminine, unarmed state are both real and subliminal, as indicated by Achilles's assurance "to procure safe-conduct for his person" (3.3.264) for Hector's visit to the Greek camp and also by Hector's facetious self-reference: "There is no lady of more softer bowels, / More spongy to suck in the sense of fear, / More ready

to cry out, ‘Who knows what follows?’ / Than Hector is” (2.2.10-13). Indeed, Hector’s demise at the play’s end comes about when he is caught off guard in a state of *gumnos*. After overcoming Achilles in 5.6, Hector allows his tired opponent to escape unharmed: perhaps the pleasure of seeing him flee like a woman was greater than the price of a future encounter with him. Hector, however, still seeks a physical prize for his ascendancy over Achilles: the armour of a foe overcome in an “intimate rendezvous of battle,” “*gumnos*—disarmed, denuded” like a woman “subjugate[d]” (*damazō*) in an erotic encounter (Vernant 99-100). Just as Hector disarms himself after successfully achieving the “sumptuous armour” (5.6.26) of another Greek, Achilles comes upon him in that very moment of “rest and negligence” (5.6.17). In the *Iliad*, Achilles kills Hector in a one-on-one combat, after which the victor, “as is customary, takes off Hector’s armor.” The Greeks, crowding around him, each “strick[e] a blow at him” (Vernant 100), scorning his disarmed, denuded body as feminine: “See now, this Hektor is much softer to handle ... than he was when he set fire to our ships” (*Iliad*, 22.373-4; qtd. in Vernant, 100). In Shakespeare’s play, Achilles is presented as a dastardly figure, who ignoring Hector’s bidding to “Forgo this vantage” over an “unarmed” man (5.9.9), commands his Myrmidons to “Empale him” (5.7.5) dead. To some extent, Achilles resembles Aufidius, chaffing with anger at his superior foe, Coriolanus:

Mine emulation

Hath not that honour in’t it had; for where

I thought to crush him in an equal force,

True sword to sword, I’ll potch at him some way

Or wrath or craft may get him. (*Coriolanus*, 1.11.12-16)

But Shakespeare’s Achilles has neither the fury of Homer’s warrior nor the intelligent interiority of Aufidius that might lend these two dignity: he is, instead, a cold-blooded phlegmatic whose passion for revenge only musters second-hand action belying the boast that “Achilles hath the mighty Hector slain!” (5.9.13). Achilles’s base conduct takes the play’s pandemic of “envious fever” (1.3.33) to its logical, amoral extreme, revealing how emulation vitiates both itself and all honour pursued contrary to virtue. Instead of virtue and valour, war in *Troilus and Cressida* has produced humoral disorders of “distempered blood” (2.2.168) on the side of the Trojans and “bloodless” (1.3.134) phlegmatism on the side of the Greeks, which will be cleansed by Death, the ultimate chastiser.



## II. Troilus and Cressida: Aubade to Virtuous Love

As Larry R. Clarke once observed about *Troilus and Cressida*, the erotic centre of the play is the love of the eponymous pair. The romance of the young lovers Troilus and Cressida keeps the play from becoming utterly sordid and petty in a jaded world of debased ideals, and, conversely, “the failure of this love signals the failure of Trojan ideology and the approaching fall of the city” (220). The tropic convergence of love and death, generation and decay, is a moral pattern inscribed in historical and literary determinacy. Though depicting the events during the Trojan War before Aeneas’s flight to Italy and the founding of Rome, the play, in collapsing the birth and fall of Rome into one, reveals a society circumscribed by that historical conflation. As Heather James observes, “the founding acts of Empire turn out to contain the seeds of its destruction” (123). Within that declension, the young lovers, Troilus and Cressida, are further bound by a romantic destiny, which seems to strip their personal identities and reduce their actions to aphorisms: “as true as Troilus” and “as false as Cressid” (3.2.168, 183). Following and innovating upon the medieval practice of anachronistic revision of classical legends, Shakespeare presents courtly love in a toxic environment of war and lechery (5.2.193), within which it cannot thrive. The couple’s experience becomes a tragedy of epic love, or, in another sense, heroic love (*amor heroycus*), a misnamed Renaissance euphemism for lovesickness.<sup>8</sup> The two are, in a manner of speaking, Romeo and Juliet placed in a world overrun by concupiscent pursuits of sex and power. Unlike Romeo and Juliet’s open ardour, the love between Troilus and Cressida, assailed by “late empire” decadence, entails much more complex sexual psychology: Troilus’s expressions of love are rhapsodic but self-absorbed, philosophical and postured; Cressida expresses both the caution of a woman cynically aware of male infidelity and resignation to the role of women as political and economic pawns. The surrender of their love to the inevitable forces of debased desire becomes a moving portrayal of sexual psychodynamics in Shakespeare’s skillful hands.

On the male side of the sexual divide, one had to be wary of *femmes fatales*: “intercourse with female demons (*succubi*)” was believed to be “especially threatening, for such creatures attempted to draw out as much semen as possible, thus drastically debilitating any man” (Weisner qtd. in Dollimore 100). But Troilus temporarily sets aside male fears of treacherous women in the case of Cressida:

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<sup>8</sup> This linkage occurred through some etymological confusion of eros with *herus* (master) and *heros* (hero) by Latin translators of early Greek medical texts (Wells 124).

O that I thought it could be in a woman—  
 As, *if* it can, I will presume in you—  
 To feed for aye her ramp 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 winnow'd 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. (145-57, my italics)

Here, Troilus praises Cressida on an alliance of passion and reason operant in men but rarely in women. Nevertheless, this backhanded compliment, in retaining doubt expressed in the subjunctive mood, engages in foolish self-effacement in the event of female betrayal, whereby his creditable fidelity would turn out to be “simple” credibility. More importantly, despite touting man as the steward of reason, his present wooing betrays him as a victim of desire outrunning reason. Troilus tries to allay Cressida's fears with extravagant vows—despite claiming, “Few words to fair faith”—that he will be “truer” than “what truth can speak truest” (87-89). He sets aside consideration of harm to her person, as well as his own through the potential loss of vital force during intercourse.

Troilus's “giddy” (3.2.16) anticipation of joy in their sexual union depicts the play's most acute example of the coupling of desire and death. His mind imagines love as a joy “so sweet / That it enchants my sense” as “thrice repurèd nectar” upon a “watery palate” (3.2.17-20). At the same time, the *ecstasy* of love so powerfully upsets him from his ordinary state that he fears death,

Swooning 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.... (3.2.21-25)

As Thomas Wright (1604) explains, “the imagination and passions ... prevail so mightily that men, in great pain, or exceeding pleasure, can scarce speak, see, hear, or

think of anything, which concerneth not their passion” (52). Physiologically, he would be experiencing “a dilation of the heart, which drives the blood and vapours in veins and arteries towards the extremities” (Park 468). Whether he is also alluding to the dissolution of self in the sexual union, Troilus anticipates the consummation as a primal act so intense that it resembles the exhilaration of war at the brink of life: “As doth a battle, when they charge on heaps / The enemy flying” (3.2.26-27). Here, Shakespeare emphatically draws on the ancient Greek convergence of “the hand-to-hand combat of male warriors under the sign of thanatos and the amorous encounter of a boy and girl under the sign of Eros” (Vernant 99). Despite Troilus’s apparently romantic sentiments, such a comparison of love to frontline combat suggests that in his amorous pursuit, self-enhancement is more his aim than love for Cressida. As we see later, when Cressida’s forced departure cuts short their love, Troilus easily reverts to the masculine call to battle because by clear-cut gender parameters of that heroic society, “womanish it is to be” not “afield” (1.1.103-4)

On the female side, Cressida’s well-grounded fears have to do with a “monstrousness in love” (3.2.75-6), whereby male lovers “swear more performance than they are able, and yet reserve an ability that they never perform” (78-9). Revising *virtus*, Cressida claims that having “the voice of lions,” they, in fact, exhibit “the act of hares” (81-2). While she fears the loss of control and reputation implicit in female surrender to male importunity, Troilus sees the situation from a male perspective of “taking,” fearing only that his physical ability to make love to her will not “match the infinite reach of his will and appetite” (Bevington 109): “that the will is infinite and the execution confined; that the desire is boundless and the act a slave to limit” (76-7). While he may afford to rhapsodize on the disjunction between his infinite will and his finite ability to realize that boundless desire, Cressida is constrained by the vulnerability of the female position and the harsh realities that face a fallen woman.

Despite her watchful stance, Cressida surprisingly drops her guard twenty lines later: “Boldness comes to me now, and brings me heart. / Prince Troilus, I have loved you night and day / For many weary months” (3.2.101-04). We may ask here, as we did with Hector in 2.2: “Why the sudden change?” Larry Clarke argues that Cressida is not able to “hold off” (1.2.264) love because she is weak (221). I believe, however, that the truth lies closer to Karl Jaspers’s phenomenological idea of [wo]man as a “natural character of impulses and passions, [subject] to the immediacy of what is now present” (Jaspers 20; clarified in Oates 19). Within the patriarchal society under which the play operates, a woman is subject to the authority of her father or her husband. Her father Calchas has defected to the Greek camp; her uncle Pandarus, the “bawd” (1.2.259), acts lubriciously as her surrogate father. Cressida is in love with Prince Troilus, but her lower social

station makes the possibility of marriage slim, especially during the unstable circumstances of war. Under derelict care, her inconsistent behaviour is less erratic than the tyranny of events and decisions which claim her. Overwhelmed in the presence of her beloved, Cressida is simply unable to restrain her pent-up love. Shortly thereafter, she repents her frankness and excuses herself to go: “O heavens, what have I done? / For this time will I take my leave, my lord” (3.2.127-28). To support his claim of her weakness through self-division, Clarke refers to her subsequent flustered speech:

I have a kind of self resides with you;  
But an unkind self, that itself will leave  
To be another’s fool. Where is my wit?  
I would be gone. I speak I know not what. (3.2.135-38)

Critics like Clarke have often invoked this speech to argue her inconstancy. While the text lends itself to such a reading setting “you” (Troilus) against “another,” I argue that self-division and emotional ambivalence are certainly understandable at the prospect of an irretrievable loss of chastity, equivalent to female selfhood. In the divergence of her wits, the rational side of her (“wit” as “mental faculties” [*OED* 3c]) wants forever to defer that loss while the sensitive side (“wit” as “bodily senses” [*OED* 3b]) wants to join with Troilus. With the departure of her (rational) wit, instinct guides her in this “want-wit” (*The Merchant of Venice*, 1.1.6), perturbed state to follow suit in physical departure. This speech evinces faltering as a self-preserving response on Cressida’s part, rather than inconstancy as Clarke believes. If this speech alludes to her impending infidelity, it is only as another example of accurate divination in the play by female characters who intuit impending events without the power to evade them.

Unlike Troilus’s self-deception, Cressida’s candid avowal of confusion (3.2.138) is a laudable attempt at cognitive appraisal of her affective state. Cressida reveals wisdom, which Troilus acknowledges (139), by stating the problem in a terse aphorism: “to be wise and love / Exceeds man’s might: that dwells with gods above” (143-4). This Socratic humility and disarming semblance of feminine ruse (“Perchance, my lord, I show more craft than love, / And fell so roundly to a large confession / To angle for your thoughts” [140-2]) properly and charily wins Troilus’s trust. Playfully declaring that she’ll “war with” (158) Troilus on who will be “truer” and “simpler” (156-7), Cressida incarnates the Venus *armata*, which exemplifies the Renaissance notion of *discordia concors*. Troilus’s reply, “O virtuous fight, / When right with right wars who shall be most right” (158-59), signals the Ovidian reversal of the lovers of war to warriors of love, momentarily sheltered from death and its manifold emanations. Allegorically, this brief scene represents the Harmony of Mars and Venus, Strife and

Love (Wind 86) in virtuous emulation, the essence of Aristotelian friendship in which concern for self and other perfectly coincide (Aristotle, *NE*, IX.8.1169a18-20).

All too quickly this harmony is broken in the next lines as Troilus smugly envisions himself as the aphoristic model of true love for lovers to come, leaving Cressida to ponder the possibility of her name going down in history as the simile of infidelity. Cressida's self-effacing reflection is somehow more endearing than Troilus's rhapsody of self-glory. (As Girard observes, the "sensitive spectator finds Troilus insufferable" [190].) At such a moment, Troilus's and Cressida's pledges of love appear more to isolate the lovers in solitary reflection than to bring them together in intimacy. In the light of formidable forces working against her happiness, Cressida ultimately abandons herself to whatever joy she can find, though her brief "rapture" (3.2.119) etymologically punctuates her status as prey. While Troilus and Cressida represent the play's potential for virtuous love, the possibility all too soon vanishes after the lovers' coupling in the viral air of daybreak, and they succumb to the inexorable forces of debased desire around them. Victims of martial politics, the young lovers, in parting, also diverge in gendered responses to war's compulsions—sex and death.

Beyond an allegorized reading of their failed love, Troilus and Cressida present themselves distinctly as individuals who respond to love's end in markedly different ways. While the couple are confined and commemorated by legend "as true as Troilus" and "as false as Cressid" (3.2.168, 183), a closer look at the circumstances of their actions reveal them not to be the genderized moral opposites they appear to be, upholding male constancy over female infidelity. In a seminal essay on the play indicting the mimetic rivalry that pervasively corrupts male action, René Girard sums up the superficial reading of *Troilus and Cressida*, inscribed in a sexist critical tradition: "Cressida has falseness and infidelity written all over her from the beginning. She alone behaves disgracefully, and Troilus never commits any sin against the faith the two lovers swore to each other" (192). As Girard further explains,

Shakespeare makes allowance for the male chauvinism in his audience, just as he makes allowance for the prejudice against Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*. In both instances, the traditional clichés are restated, to the satisfaction of the groundlings and [still] many [critics], but the subtler message invariably subverts and reverses the conventional message. (193)

Cressida's realist stance towards love reveals a fractured self, a response to being buffeted by adversities: during lovers' talk, Cressida alludes darkly to "an unkind self, that ... will leave / To be another's fool" (3.2.135-7). Because her later disconsolate

grieving at the news of their necessary parting seems to reveal genuine love for Troilus, this statement shows less a tendency toward infidelity than an anticipation of a “wantonness” enforced by circumstance. Troilus’s calm submission to the dictates of family and country confirms the suspicion that Cressida voiced before her sexual surrender that men are not as faithful to women as they claimed to be. To add insult to injury, Troilus, disregarding how her grieving attests to love, enjoins her twice to be true—a stance of patronizing doubt that will prompt her to do exactly the opposite.

To be sure, Troilus has the “facts” on his side:

But these “facts” grossly distort the higher truth of the relationship. Not only did he betray Cressida too, but he betrayed her first and her own betrayal can be read, at least in part, as an act of retaliation, of vengeful escalation, and therefore as an *imitation* of what Troilus has done to her. (Girard 197)

What Girard means by Troilus’s betrayal is his noticeable retreat from love after a night of amorous pleasures, something more significant than post-coital dullness if Shakespeare took the effort in the first place to “insis[t] slyly on the collapse of Troilus’s desire” (192). If life is characterized by a kind of unrest, or ceaseless desire, two principal ways in which men in the heroic society of Shakespeare’s play appease it is through martial activity that defines a man and through sexual intercourse. In the play’s opening scene, the two come into conflict: Troilus cannot fight well because he is so distracted by his desire for Cressida. Once achieved, sexual ecstasy offers him a “momentary obliteration of self” (Dollimore 111) and a brief sense of completeness before mutability reasserts itself. In the clearer light of the morning after, however, Troilus appears to rue the “expense of spirit in a waste of shame” (Sonnet 129, 1), that “dangerous squandering of energy” (Dollimore, 100) in the loss of semen: “Before, a joy proposed; behind, a dream” (Sonnet 129, 12). Since martial activity is what Troilus believes constitutes a man, the sudden calling away of Cressida is a timely boon, relieving him of the burden of disconnecting from her.

As Girard insightfully argues, Troilus is “a remarkable example of bad faith”:

As soon as he becomes jealous, he feels like an innocent victim. He has pushed Cressida into the arms of Diomed, but he does not realize this any more than he realizes Cressida was first pushed into his arms by the other man who desires her, Pandarus. Like all of us, he remembers selectively. Among his sentiments and his actions, he remembers only those that consolidate his image of himself as a virtuous man, abominably wronged by others but never guilty himself. He does not remember the discontinuity in his love for Cressida. (Girard 197)

So “assured” in his “possession of the girl,” Troilus, “in turn, feels possessed, a prisoner of love,” and, ironically, “his only desire is to flee” (Girard 193). Troilus resigns to the news of their impending separation with dubious calm, Girard argues, because “the decision fulfills his secret wish. The impending transfer will put just the right distance between himself and a woman whose excessive devotion he finds flattering, natural, legitimate, but cumbersome” (Girard 194) because his first allegiance is to *virtus*. Like all idealists, Troilus is self-deludedly sincere, insisting he is “as true as Truth’s simplicity” (3.2.156): he finds himself in the sanctimonious right only because “Cressida did not give him the time to be unfaithful” (Girard 192).

In act 5, scene 2, as Troilus and Ulysses look on, a “palter[ing]” (5.2.47) Cressida surrenders to Diomedes, confessing her bifurcated mind:

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. (5.2.107-12)

The first two lines seem to show Cressida thinking back on Troilus but swayed presently by concupiscence (“heart”). Cressida’s equivocation vis-à-vis Diomedes, in conjunction with her avowal that Troilus “loved me better than you will” (5.2.90), indicates, however, that she turns from Troilus with reluctance. A defenceless woman at the Greek camp swarming with sex-starved soldiers, Cressida must find a protector. She faults herself for having more liberal attitudes toward sex than a gentlewoman should. Yet it is this self-condemnation that provokes pathos and highlights her circumscribed situation rather than her moral culpability. Trained to obey father and lover as lord, Cressida has internalized the patriarchal rebuke of the inconstant woman—cynically or ingenuously—even as she, in response to circumstances larger than her agency, must pass from Troilus to another man.

Her degradation is too facile as she deliberately parses her declension. The reduction of her life to an aphorism, “as false as Cressid” (3.2.183), is foretold by three embedded aphorisms,<sup>9</sup> which form a syllogism:

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<sup>9</sup> I thank Andrew Griffin drawing my attention to the power of aphorisms in the play. Griffin argues in his essay, “The Banality of History” that “History remains in *Troilus and Cressida*—as a humanist

Premise 1: “The error of our eye directs our mind.”

Premise 2: “What error leads must err.”

Conclusion: “Minds swayed by eyes are full of turpitude.” (5.2.107-12)

Applying the universal conclusion to her particular case, Cressida believes that she, ruled by her sensitive appetite, is licentious. The law students of the Inns of Court, trained in logic and ethics, might have recalled in connection to Cressida’s logical discourse the syllogisms that Aquinas—a continuing influence on Renaissance theology and philosophy—offered to compare the actions of the virtuous and the akratic person (*De Malo*, 3.9, reply to objection 7):

Choice by Rational Appetite

P1: No fornication is to be committed.

P2: This act is fornication.

Conclusion: This act is not to be done.

Apprehension by Sensitive Appetite

P1: Everything pleasurable is to be enjoyed.

P2: This act is pleasurable.

Conclusion: This act is to be done.

Here, the virtuous person chooses sexual restraint by rational appetite; however, the akratic person, moved by both the rational and sensitive powers, is ultimately swayed by the sensitive appetite to engage in sex. Cressida reproaches herself as this “incontinent and soft” (Aristotle, *NE*, VII.3.1147b23) person who weakly succumbs to lust.

Cressida’s divergent eyes in this passage, in conjunction with the “two selves” speech (3.2.135-38), also calls to mind, however, a popular image in Renaissance iconography of Prudence with two faces looking both forward and backward and holding a mirror (Woodford 524; Bryskett 188). Read with this gloss, Cressida arguably demonstrates the attributes of Prudence—foresight, memory, circumspection, and self-knowledge (Woodford 524). As a woman, she has only sexuality to wield, a limited power ultimately bestowed by men: Her “holding off” can only go so far with Diomedes, who becomes easily impatient with her “palter[ing]” (5.2.47): “I’ll be your fool no more” (30). Cressida must eventually surrender to Diomedes because being the mistress of one man is preferable to being sexual prey for many men—in their eyes, a whore. Clear-sightedly knowing that she “shall be plagued” (105)—mentally, emotionally,

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historiography demands—the story of universal truths grounded in individual human action rather than in the impersonal forces of a cultural *gestalt*, but these actions are at best banal and at worst pathological” (par. 9).



pathologically—Cressida prudently tries to confine the damage by keeping to her Greek “guardian” (7, 46).

Moral choices in real life and on stage are, indeed, more complicated than the necessarily simplified Thomist example on lust, which presents two opposing syllogisms. Multi-faceted situations in actual life require the consideration of additional syllogisms accounting for other factors playing into the moral choice. Such is the case with Cressida. Her consent to be with Diomedes does not signify that she is reductively a licentious woman. A tacit but cardinal reason why Cressida agrees to be with Diomedes is that she needs a male protector at the Greek camp. The following is a syllogism to reflect this critical factor contributing to her decision:

Premise 1: Having a protector is good.

Premise 2: Diomedes is a protector.

Conclusion: I must have Diomedes as a protector.

This auxiliary yet decisive syllogism dramatically corrects her self-condemnation: instead of being licentious, Cressida is a continent woman, who chooses the best alternative given her circumstances. Accordingly then, the “heart” of line 108 may refer less to base appetites than the *anima*—that which animates with emotion and motion—of Aristotelian moral psychology based on *De Anima (On the Soul)* and *Nicomachean Ethics*. Not surprisingly, Aristotle’s conception of psycho-physiology locates the seat of the soul at the heart, the source of heat and life, governing the entire body (Sirasi 107). It is Cressida’s endeavour to make the best of a bad situation that the three male voyeurs Ulysses, Troilus, and Thersites, rebuke with impunity:

Ulysses: She will sing any man at first sight. (5.2.9)

Thersites: A juggling trick: to be secretly open....

A proof of strength she could not publish more

Unless she said, ‘My mind is now turned whore’. (5.2.24, 113-14)

Troilus: O Cressid, O false Cressid! False, false, false. (5.2.177)

Cressida is considered “false” for trying to live as decently as possible under wartime conditions created by patriarchal authorities. As Girard claims, “her intelligence as well as her inability to play the coquette make her more likable than Troilus and all the male heroes who do not even perceive the identity of their lechery and of their war” (Girard 193). Only “in recognizing the process by which Cressida is reduced to a masculine construction,” Paul Gaudet rightly claims, can a reader, here a third-removed voyeur, “begin to oppose entrapment” (127) in the play’s corruptive masculine ideology. In its

patriarchal representation of Cressida as a whore, *Troilus and Cressida* self-consciously presents our response to her as a matter of heart-probing debate for the self and spectators as *individuals* rather than as a community of judges.

The fact that Cressida might take small pleasure in an otherwise desolate situation should not detract from her prudent choice. Contrary to the patriarchal standards by which she condemns her conduct, she is not morally “soft”: as a continent person, Cressida possesses “endurance” (Aristotle, *NE*, VII.31147b23) and in more favourable circumstances might have ascended to virtue. For the difference between a virtuous and a continent person in her wretched situation, I believe, is one of self-assurance. The virtuous person in dire circumstances still holds her head up, believing in her moral worth, unfazed by the compromises life demands of her. Nurtured in a different time and space, Cressida might perhaps have become such a virtuous woman. In the circumstances of *Troilus and Cressida*, her weakness is certainly no worse than the debased desire afflicting the masculine world of the play. The difference, to her credit, is that Cressida, with moral wisdom, lacks the agency to avoid a humiliating course of action whereas the Trojan and Greek warriors, in full agency, akratically and viciously choose to continue in their sexual and martial concupiscence.

When upon their separation Cressida pointedly asks Troilus whether he believes she would be unfaithful, he discreetly replies with a “No, but”:

something may be done that we will not,  
And sometimes we are devils to ourselves,  
When we will tempt the frailty of our powers,  
Presuming on their changeful potency. (4.5.94-7)

Though he would do well to remember this insight into human nature, Troilus, agitated by the shadow show of Cressida’s “infidelity,” casts these words to the wind—much as he shreds her letter, “the play’s most vivid metaphor of fragmentation” (O’Rourke 155): “Go, wind, to wind! There turn and change together” (5.3.110). Despite his rational capacity to understand, Troilus cannot empathetically understand Cressida’s inconstancy as that “tragic instability of [wo]man” (Oates 19), not an aphoristic female weakness. The play is less a condemnation of female inconstancy than a broad commentary on mutability as a shared human condition—“One touch of nature makes the whole world kin” (3.3.169)—and the infidelity of time: “Man lives only in the present, a continuously changing present that consumes him and goes on to new flesh” (Oates 25). Troilus would do better to remind himself, as his coolness ensuing intercourse indicates, that “Things won are done; joy’s soul lies in the doing” (1.2.265),

taking comfort in the fact that he and Cressida had “achieved genuine, if fitful, communication. The ability to share suffering is one of the marks of love, and at their parting their mutual suffering was real, if confused” (Clarke 224). To demand more, as Troilus does, is jealous cupidity—grousing over others having her when he himself cannot have her—or worse yet, relegating her to widowhood.

Debased desire in *Troilus and Cressida*—bestial love and brutal war—converges in death. In his revolt against lechery, Troilus makes war on life itself in a final coupling of love and death as his ardour for Cressida is replaced by a vengeful fury against Achilles, illustrating the collaboration of Aquinas’s concupiscible and irascible passions. In the face of only momentary release from ceaseless unrest that sexual ecstasy affords, Troilus welcomes “the stasis of death,” which “pre-empt[s] the failure and loss which is mutability” (Dollimore 111). According to Denis de Rougemont, “the taste for war follows a notion that life should be ardent, a notion which is the mask of a wish for death” (qtd. in Dollimore 67). In a final irony, Troilus’s aspirations to heroic death will not turn out as he intended, for he will die as the subjugated female in the fatal embraces of combat. Singular as law-revel entertainment, Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida* presents intriguing conjunctions of desire and death as intense nodes of phenomenological experience to move us in thoughtful reflection beyond moral didacticism. Shakespeare’s power as a philosophical dramatist lies in his mastery of—as compared to Troilus’s failure in—the art of coupling the universal and the particular, the power of universal values and the intensity of the lived experience in thought-provoking and emotive ways.

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