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PROVIDENCE AND GRACE

*Lectures on Shakespeare's
Problem Plays and Romances*

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at first a victim of her ambition and passion, but quickly evolves into a fraud; finally, Isabel is a glacially pure maiden surrounded by flawed men, who do not bother to ask for her consent. Yet, the three plays have increasingly happier endings: Troilus does not get to marry Cressida, Bertram is forced twice to accept Helena, and there are several more or less welcome marriages in *Measure for Measure*.

Vincentio's omniscience, providence and grace set the trend for the romances, written in 1608-1611, at the end of Shakespeare's career. Old Gower in *Pericles*, Zeus in *Cymbeline*, and Time in *The Winter's Tale* act as omniscient forces in these plays. Like Vincentio, Prospero is both protagonist and author of his own drama; he acts as providence, shows grace, and leads *The Tempest* to a happy end.

Whereas in the mouldy mediæval tale of *Pericles* providence acts through winds and storms that crash or carry ships, in the other romances it uses humans as its agents. Pisanio, Belarius, Guiderius and Arviragus in *Cymbeline*, Camillo, Paulina, Antigonus and the shepherds in *The Winter's Tale*, and, of course, Prospero in *The Tempest* are benevolent forces, acting providentially. Favoured by providence, the romances are never allowed to slip into tragedy, despite the murderous plans of the likes of Dionyza, Cloten, Posthumus, Leontes, Sebastian and Antonio. The romances thus end in a state of grace, in festivals of forgiveness and reconciliation.

ONE

A whore and a cuckold

Troilus and Cressida

In 1600 Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*. The other great tragedies (*Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*) were probably composed in the period from 1604 to 1608. Between *Hamlet* and the other mature tragedies, Shakespeare penned three puzzling and frustrating plays: *Troilus and Cressida*, *All's Well that Ends Well*, and *Measure for Measure*. In 1896, Frederick Boas called them, *faute de mieux*, “problem plays”¹, and subsequent critics readily adopted this term (the Italian scholar Giorgio Melchiori called them “drammi dialettici”)². Sometimes, *Hamlet* is added to this group of texts united by an ethical and moral questioning that leads to a disillusioned view of love and power. The problem plays are neither tragedies nor comedies, neither histories nor romances. These hybrid plays are thus devoid of both tragic grandeur and erotic grace: the nihilism and “sex-nausea”³ that dominate

1. Frederick S. Boas, *Shakspeare and His Predecessors*, London: John Murray, 1910 (1896), 344-408.

2. Giorgio Melchiori, *Shakespeare. Genesi e struttura delle opere*, Bari: Laterza, 2005 (1994), 404-63.

3. John Dover Wilson, *The Essential Shakespeare: A Biographical Adventure*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1960 (1932), 118: “the strain of sex-nausea that runs through almost everything he wrote after 1600.”

death-infected¹ *Hamlet* sway here, too. The time is still out of joint, things are as rotten in Troy and in the Greek camp, in Vienna, Roussillon and Florence as in the state of Denmark. Copulation thrives in a sterile way – for Helen, “the face that launched a thousand ships”, and the easily won and easily lost Cressida are barren strumpets, Achilles and Patroclus are hopelessly effeminate.

Let us note, before we start reading *Troilus and Cressida*, that Shakespeare decided to recycle here one of the most famous stories of the West. The tale of loving Troilus and false Cressida was invented by Benoît de Saint-Maure, as a minor episode of his *Roman de Troie*, written around 1155-1160. Benoît's verse romance was translated into Latin prose by Guido delle Colonne in the thirteenth century, and was adapted into Italian in Giovanni Boccaccio's chivalric poem in octaves, *Filostrato* (c. 1335). Half a century later, Geoffrey Chaucer used Boccaccio in his long poem, *Troilus and Criseyde*, which ends with the famous envoy:

Go, litel bok, go, litel myn tragedye,
Ther god thi makere yet, er that he dye,
So sende myght to make in som comedye! (1786-88)²

1. See George Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire*, London: Methuen, 1970 (1949), 17-46, ch. “The Embassy of Death: an Essay on Hamlet”.

2. Geoffrey Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde* [c. 1385], ed. by Stephen Barney, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edn, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987, 584.

Chaucer calls his story a tragedy, but begs God to help him write a comedy as well, before he dies. In Chaucer's poem, as in Boccaccio's *Filostrato*, Troilus is killed by Achilles some time after Criseyde's betrayal. His soul ascends to heaven and, looking down upon the world, expresses a *contemptus mundi* in Christian terms. Shakespeare, however, allows his Troilus to survive his disgrace – which is, one may argue, considerably more cruel.

The story can also be found in the first book printed in English, Caxton's *Recueyll of the Historyes of Troy*, stamped in Ghent or Brugge around 1473. The Scottish bard Robert Henryson wrote *The Testament of Cresseid* in the fifteenth century, and a printed edition appeared in 1532. In this poem, Cresseid goes blind and ugly from leprosy after her betrayal, and encounters Troilus later by accident. Although he does not recognise her, Troilus is reminded of his love, and leaves the wretched woman all his fortune. When they unveil their identities, the two lovers are overcome by emotion, and Cresseid soon dies. We are still in the courtly love tradition. Finally, after 1598 George Chapman published installments of his translation of *The Iliad*. Thus, even if Shakespeare had only “little Latin and less Greek”, as Ben Jonson wrote and some doubt, he now had access to the Homeric portraits of Hector, Achilles, Ulysses and Thersites.

By late 1601, when he had probably completed *Troi-*

*lus and Cressida*¹, Shakespeare was thus able to draw on – nay, to toy with two immense yet already decrepit traditions: Homer’s ancient heroic epic, and Chaucer’s medieval courtly love romance. Like Cervantes, and like our post-modern writers (who are neither as post- nor as modern as they believe), Shakespeare uses and abuses the traditions from which he borrows his heroes and their outlook. The Trojans’ courtly pomp and chivalric eloquence, and Hector’s Christian magnanimity, seem obsolete and ineffective in a world of betrayal, prostitution, lechery and envy. In an equally distressing way, all ancient dignity seems to have deserted the Greek camp: Achilles’ heroism has lapsed into narcissism, lechery and cowardice, Agamemnon’s majesty is overshadowed by Menelaus’ horns, Nestor’s wisdom and Ulysses’ *Realpolitik* are corrupted by cynicism and annulled by Ajax’ symmetrical stupidity, and by Thersites’ constant slanders. Briefly put, ancient heroic and medieval chivalric virtues can no longer function as the ingredients of tragic destinies and sublime love. This is a corrupt, cynical, garrulous and inconsistent world, in which only Hector, the noblest of characters, is allowed to die, yet cannot redeem anything.

But I have run before my horse to market. The story first. Actually, there are more stories. The love story can be

1. William Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*, ed. by David Bevington (Arden 3), London: Bloomsbury, rev. edn 2015, ‘Introduction’, 14.

summarised very easily: Troilus, one of King Priam’s younger sons is in love with the daughter of the Trojan defector, Calchas. The girl’s uncle, Pandarus, serves as a go-between, and successfully procures his niece, Cressida, for Troilus. As easily bedded as wooed, Cressida spends a night’s embrace with Troilus before she is sent to her father, thus becoming a mere commodity, traded for a noble Trojan prisoner. Before leaving, she exchanges vows of fidelity with Troilus. The warrior Diomedes accompanies her to the Greek camp, and woos her in the process. When she reaches the Greek tents, all the Achaean generals kiss her in a memorable scene. As befits a disenchanting *raisonneur*, Ulysses interjects:

Fie, fie upon her!

There’s language in her eye, her cheek, her lip,
Nay, her foot speaks; her wanton spirits look out
At every joint and motive of her body. (IV.v.54-57)

Troyleless, Cressida yields to Diomedes as easily as she yielded to Troilus. She even gives the Achaean the sleeve that the Trojan prince offered her, and Diomedes hangs it to his helmet as a love and war trophy. An exchange of letters (there are more such epistolary exchanges in Chaucer) betrays Cressida’s falseness to grieving Troilus. On the first occasion, the two rival men chase each other, but their duel is burlesque, aborted and causes no more harm than the quarrel opposing Demetrius and Lysander in the dark forest of Athens.

Although the title would suggest that the focus is on Troilus and Cressida's love story, by the reckoning of one Arden editor, Kenneth Palmer, the love plot occupies only "33 per cent of the play, whether counting by lines or scenes"¹. The Greek and Trojan fights and councils, which should provide the backdrop of the love story, actually stifle it and cast it in the background – which is as cruel as it is ingenious. In the great order of the world, and in the great disorder of both amorous and martial affairs, what matters the erotic infatuation of a "sneaking fellow" (I.ii.229) with a "daughter of the game" (IV.v.63)? In a world where Ulysses talks, Achilles is angry, and Hector falls, who cares for Troilus' juvenile pangs of despised love? Seen against the great drama of the war, culminating with Hector's death, Troilus and Cressida's love story is puny, ridiculous, insignificant. And yet, the Trojan war itself, the epic clash of civilisations was triggered by a love affair. To put it more bluntly, in the words of deformed and slandering Thersites, "All the argument is a whore and a cuckold: a good quarrel to draw emulous factions, and bleed to death upon" (II.iii.74-76). Troilus and Cressida are thus only the junior and less catastrophic version of Paris and Helen.

Chaucer dedicates his entire poem to Troilus and Cressida's unfortunate love. It takes Troilus two and half

1. William Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*, ed. by Kenneth Palmer (Arden 2), London and New York: Routledge, 1990 (1982), 'Introduction', 39.

books and about 4000 lines to win Criseyde in Chaucer's poem. Their love lasts another book, and the betrayal occupies the fifth one. As C. S. Lewis argues:

In the Criseyde of the first three books Chaucer has painted a touching and beautiful picture of a woman by nature both virtuous and amorous, but above all affectionate; a woman who in a chaste society would certainly have lived a chaste widow. But she lives, nominally, in Troy, really in fourteenth-century England, where love is the greatest of earthly goods, and love has nothing to do with marriage. [...] If, in such circumstances, she yields, she commits no sin against the social code of her age and country [...]. By Christian standards, forgivable: by the rules of courtly love, needing no forgiveness...¹

In Shakespeare's play, Cressida is a "a woman of quick sense" (IV.v.53), as Nestor remarks – but so are most of Shakespeare's erotic heroines, from Juliet and Rosalind to Cleopatra, Helena and Innogen. When we first meet her, Cressida appears frivolous, witty, and utterly unimpressed by her suitor. Her discussion with Pandarus is peppered with sexual puns:

PANDARUS

Do you know what a man is? Is not birth, beauty, good shape, discourse, manhood, learning, gentleness, virtue, youth, liberality, and such like, the spice and salt that season a man?

1. C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love. A Study in Medieval Tradition*, Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1958, 183.

CRESSIDA

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

PANDARUS

You are such a woman! one knows not at what ward you lie.

CRESSIDA

Upon my back, to defend my belly; upon my wit, to defend my wiles; upon my secrecy, to defend mine honesty; my mask, to defend my beauty; and you, to defend all these: and at all these wards I lie, at a thousand watches. (I.ii.256-269)

"A minced man" may mean a eunuch, and the "date in the pie" probably refers to a man's addition. When the man's date is out, he is out of date, or useless. Cressida's lying on her back to defend her belly calls to mind the Nurse's dirty puns regarding Juliet falling upon her back when she has more wit (*Romeo and Juliet*, I.iii). Finally, when Cressida says that she lies at a thousand watches, we hear the typical Shakespearean pun about lying to someone and lying with someone ("For lying so, Hermia, I do not lie", Lysander tells his loved one in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, II.ii.51). Pandarus continues the bawdy talk with further sexual metaphors like "hitting", "blowing" and "swelling past hiding" (I.iii.272-274), familiar to us from *Romeo and Juliet*.

Although she is a young virgin, like Juliet, Cressida is not naïve. She knows perfectly well that Pandarus is "a bawd" (I.iii.286), and that

Women are angels, wooing:

Things won are done; joy's soul lies in the doing.
That she beloved knows nought that knows not this:
Men prize the thing ungain'd more than it is.
(I.iii.291-294)

Yet, ironically, she yields to Troilus as easily as Juliet does to Romeo, kisses on the first date, and unlike Hermia, lies with her lover that very night, rather than "further off, in human modesty" (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, II.ii.56). When, on that first date, Troilus asks her why she was "so hard to win" (III.ii.115), Cressida answers: "Hard to seem won; but I was won, my lord,/ With the first glance..." (III.ii.116-117). In the lengthy ensuing explanation, she plays again with the meanings of "I lie" (III.ii.120), and ends by asking Troilus to "stop her mouth" (III.ii.132). Troilus promptly kisses her, but Cressida coyly pretends that "'Twas not my purpose thus to beg a kiss" (III.ii.136). The scene calls to mind the conceited sonnet that leads to Romeo and Juliet's first kiss after summoning the images of pilgrims touching and kissing saints' statues. Although the kiss comes as quickly as in *Romeo and Juliet*, and the love that follows is as sensual and sexual as in the earlier play, unlike Romeo and Juliet's love, Troilus and Cressida's passion fails to obliterate everything else. It is as intense as any youthful passion, sexual and gallant as befits the medieval courtly love tradition, and ends in forced separation, as in *Romeo and Juliet*, yet it is devoid of sublime declarations and decla-