

IN CRESSIDA'S DEFENCE

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ABSTRACT

Cressida is probably the most bitterly criticized of all Shakespeare's female characters. It is difficult to defend Cressida's position when we realize that she promises love to Diomedes the same day she had to part from Troilus. However, Cressida's betrayal is defensible because little by little she is being stripped of all her self respect, her sense of belonging.

RESUMEN

De todas las heroínas de Shakespeare, tal vez sea Cressida la más duramente criticada. No es fácil defender la posición de Cressida cuando nos damos cuenta que sólo unas horas separan las escenas de su despertar junto a Troilus y la de su promesa de entregar su amor a Diomedes. Sin embargo, la traición de Cressida es comprensible ya que poco a poco se la ha ido despojando de su propia estima.

Cressida is one of Shakespeare's female characters who has drawn the most negative criticism. It is difficult to defend Cressida's position when we realize that the same day she is taken away from Troilus she promises love to Diomedes. However, some critics have been too rash in blaming Cressida. In this essay I will try to prove that Cressida's behaviour is defensible on the basis that little by little she is being stripped of all her self respect, her sense of belonging.

Though the criticism that surrounds Cressida is generally negative, there are some critics who defend her. However J. A. Bryant's defence should be disregarded as he attributes to Cressida ideas that the play does not justify¹. We should listen to her talk, and then reach our own conclusions.

In act I scene ii Pandarus is trying to convince Cressida to love Troilus while she pretends she is not interested. In her soliloquy, however, besides letting the audience know her true feelings toward Troilus, she expresses the reasons for her secrecy in the following terms:

Women are angels, wooing:
 Things won are done: joy's soul lies in the doing:
 That she beloved knows naught that knows not this,
 Men prize the thing ungain'd more than it is:
 That she was never yet that ever knew
 Love got so sweet as when desire did sue:
 Therefore this maxim out of love, I teach,-
 Achievement is command; ungain'd, beseech:
 Then, though my heart's content firm love doth bear,
 Nothing of that shall from mine eyes appear.

(I.ii.288-97)²

In this scene M.C. Bradbrook has seen that Cressida is showing the arts of the coquette, because she likes Troilus and pretends not to, and so Bradbrook adds:

Cressida's soliloquy proclaims her simple creed, the art of the coquette raised to a rule of life, based on the assumption that what is to be looked for in a man is simply 'lust in action'. (103)

For me, however, Cressida is acting as any normal woman of the period would. We have only to remember that two decades ago this same philosophy was still held in Spain. Besides, there is something in this scene that the critics have missed. At the end of their verbal exchange Cressida tries to remind Pandarus that he should be the one to protect her honour instead of pushing her into an affair. But Pandarus, in his niece's words, is just «a bawd.»³

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

CRESSIDA.

Boldness comes to me now, and brings me heart:-
Prince Troilus, I have loved you night and day
For many weary months.

TROILUS.

Why was my Cressid, then, so hard to win?

CRESSIDA.

Hard to seem won: but I was won, my lord,
With the first glance that ever-pardon me-
If I confess much, you will play the tyrant.

(III.ii.111-18)

While Bradbrook sees her acting like a coquette, I only see a very passionate young woman who can no longer keep silent about the love she feels. It is as if her passion, which has been constrained for so long, is aching to burst out. However, her upbringing —her superego— reminds her that she should hold back her impulses, and verbalizes her fears in the following way: «you will play the tyrant.» For me, in this scene, Cressida is beautiful in her sincerity and I especially like the words that follow:

I wish'd myself a man,
Or that we women had men's privilege
Of speaking first. (III.ii.126-8)

This is one of Cressida's problems, and one of the greatest attractions she exerts on twentieth century readers: she is aware of the injustice of the system and resents having to act as a woman is supposed to. That is why Cressida is not a mere coquette; she has just been playing the role assigned to her by nature: the one of a woman.

Bradbrook then passes on to the scene where, after having spent the night together, the lovers wake up, and Cressida begs Troilus to stay longer:

Prithee, tarry;-
You men will never tarry.-
O foolish Cressid!- I might have still held off,
And then you would have tarried. (IV.ii.22-5)

In this scene, which reminds me of Juliet's trying to convince Romeo to stay longer, Cressida laments having yielded to her passion, «I might have still held off», but not because she experiences any regrets about having lost her maidenhood to Troilus, but because if he were not satisfied he «would have tarried»: would not leave her now, and in all probability would not let her go later. Bradbrook, however, reaches the following conclusion: «Cressida, as Ulysses was shortly to observe, is 'a natural daughter of the game'» (103), a statement with which I do not agree. Ulysses is too hard on Cressida, but this is a point we will discuss later.

I cannot help but feel sorry for Cressida in the scene that follows in which Pandarus' entrance in the nuptial bedroom and his nasty comments are enough to spoil any sensitive woman's most cherishing moments:

PANDARUS.

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

CRESSIDA.

Go hang yourself, you naughty mocking uncle!
You bring me to do- and then you flout me too.

PANDARUS.

To do what? to do what?- let her say what:
- what have I brought you to do?

CRESSIDA.

Come, come, beshrew your heart! you'll ne'er be good,
Nor suffer others.

PANDARUS.

Ha, ha! Alas, poor wretch! ah, poor capoccia!
hast not slept to-night? would he not- a naughty man-
let it sleep? a bugbear take him! (IV.ii.31-43)

This is one of the scenes in which the other characters show the most cruelty towards Cressida, even Troilus mocks her (48-51). There is not the slightest respect for her feelings —modesty, perhaps, would be a better word. First, Pandarus makes fun of the fact that she is not a maiden any more. Second, he asks her to put in words what she was doing the previous night. Third, he jokes about the groom's activity. Her later behaviour should come as no surprise, because all these little pieces added up are leading her towards becoming a true daughter of the game. For in a mocking tone or not she has been treated like one.

A little later on, but still in the same scene, on learning that Cressida has to go to the Greeks, Pandarus's only regard is for Troilus's suffering. It seems as if Pandarus could sympathize with Troilus because men are capable of suffering; women, however, seem to be regarded as belonging to a non-human species. And it is for this reason that while Pandarus keeps on saying that their separation will

mean Troilus's death, the only consolation he offers to Cressida's tears is to go and cry (IV.ii. 118).

The bargain that sends Cressida to the Greek camp is sealed without any regard for her feelings. She is just an expendable object that has been exchanged for something considered more valuable. And what does Troilus do? He acts too tamely, too civilized, and too histrionically. He starts by comparing himself to a priest who is offering a sacrifice at an altar (IV.iii.9-10) —Cressida is no more than a victim to be immolated. To protect his lady's reputation, Troilus had previously asked Aeneas to say they had met by chance (IV.ii.84). However, now in front of Diomedes he starts acting as if he owned Cressida and he even patronizes Diomedes:

Welcome, Sir Diomed! here is the lady
Which for Antenor we deliver you:
At the port, Lord, I'll give her to thy hand;
And by the way possess thee what she is.
Entreat her fair; and, by my soul, fair Greek,
If e'er thou stand at mercy of my sword,
Name Cressid, and thy life shall be as safe
As Priam is in Ilion. (IV.iv.116-23)

Diomedes, who likes what he sees and knows how to treat ladies, makes fun of the young man's demands. He knows that, because of the exchange, Cressida now belongs to the Greeks. Besides, she is an attractive lady — «The lustre in your eye, heaven in your cheek,» (126)— and he will not miss the occasion to make a pass at a pretty lady — «I'll answer to my lust» (141). It is very enlightening that in this scene Cressida does not say a word. She has just been listening to both gentlemen and perhaps making the natural comparisons.

When Cressida, the exchanged merchandise, —we should insist on that— reaches the Greek camp she is kissed in a way that has been termed «down the ranks». The first one to kiss her is Agamemnon. Nestor, in a conciliatory manner, exclaims: «Our general doth

salute you with a kiss,» a statement that brings about Ulysses' pun «'Twere better she were kissed in general» (IV.v.26). For the first five kisses, Cressida is silent. Cressida's witty retort to Menelaus and her pretension that Ulysses begs for her kiss, is too much for Ulysses, who now does not like Cressida, and so to Nestor's observation that she is «A woman of quick sense» (62) —a woman with a quick brain,— he replies with a totally macho comment:

Fie, fie, upon her!
 There's language in her eye, her cheek, her lip,
 Nay, her foot speaks; her wanton spirits look out
 At every joint and motive of her body.
 O, these encounterers, so glib of tongue,
 That give a coasting welcome ere it comes,
 And wide unclasp the tables of their thoughts
 To every ticklish reader! set them down
 For sluttish spoils of opportunity
 And daughters of the game. (IV.v.63-72)

Some critics have adopted Ulysses's observation as the play's statement on Cressida, while others, with whom we agree, have observed that, up to that moment, there is nothing in Cressida's behaviour to justify Ulysses's bitter remarks about her⁴. She has just been as witty as any man could, but she is a woman, and not in the least unwomanly, —a quality that according to Alfred Habegger would make a woman's witticisms acceptable to a man⁵, — but, a chattel, in a man's world, a world where women are abducted to make a point against the Greeks —as is Helen's case (II.ii.77-85)— or used as merchandise for exchange. In this scene the point I would like to draw attention to, is that Ulysses is no Don Quixote. Don Quixote does not see prostitutes, for him two «Mujeres ... del partido» are «Señoras» y «altas doncellas»⁶, while for cynical Ulysses a woman who has a brain as quick or quicker than a man's is just «a daughter of the game.»⁷

On taking her leave from Troilus, among a lot of weeping and other protestations of love, Cressida claimed she would be «A woeful

Cressid 'monges the merry Greeks» (IV.iv.56). But when we see her again, in her retorts to Menelaus and Ulysses, which are the only words she utters, she sounds like a very merry Cressida. What has happened in the two or three hundred yards that separate both camps? That same night she is familiar towards Diomedes, whom she calls «My sweet guardian» (V.ii.7). Diomedes, a very different man from Troilus, means business and cares not for flirting, and Cressida, who apparently made him a promise when they were on their way, —«I prithee do not hold me to mine oath, / Bid me do any thing but that, sweet Greek» (V.ii.31-2)— wants to go back on her word. She tries to play hard to get, the way she did with Troilus. But because of his angry refusal to join her game, she ends up by asking him to come back.

The accusers of Troilus blame him for not thinking of marrying Cressida, while the defenders claim it is «courtly love» and in courtly love marriage is never mentioned. However in Shakespeare's plays marriage is always mentioned. I cannot think of a Shakespeare play where courtly love is all the lovers are looking for. In Cressida's defence I have to mention how she has been soiled. She is the only one to show discretion, with the result that everybody knows about the affair⁸. If we believe Pandarus (IV.ii.31) or Cressida (I.ii.264-70), she was a virgin before that night. But she loses all. In the Greek camp her father seems to be looking forward to her affair with Diomedes: «She comes to you» (V.ii.5), Calchas says to Diomedes. In Troy, she was a lovable character, while Diomedes' Cressida is less sympathetic. A casual reading makes us believe that Act V takes place much later, that months must have passed by. However, less than one day separates both events; in the morning Cressida wakes up enraptured with Troilus, whereas at night she receives Diomedes. By then she has already gained the reputation as «the Trojan drab» that Diomedes keeps (V.i.107). Troilus has promised her nightly visitations, and he really goes to see her that very first night, only to find she is already familiar with Diomedes. Did Shakespeare not realize this scene takes place on

the night of the same day? Shakespeare, probably influenced by Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*, in which she develops leprosy, after having contracted syphilis, tries to show the fast corruption that takes place in sweet Troilus's Cressida⁹. The heroine is another casualty in a war that should not be fought¹⁰. «Brother, she is not worth what she doth cost / The keeping» (II.ii.55-6) as Hector tries to convince Troilus about the advisability of returning Helen to the Greeks. Helen's abduction not only causes the loss of lives, but also of self respect. With reference to the other two problem comedies, *All's Well that Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*, it has been said that the bed-trick shows that, for a man, one woman in bed is the same as all the rest. Cressida, in the Greek camp, seems to say that one man is the same as all the rest.

But there is a final point in Cressida's defence that I would like to draw attention to. Cressida in Troy had a home and servants, but when we see her in the Greek camp, all she has is the tent she shares with her father. There is something in your clothes and your habitat that contributes to your feeling respectable; your clothes make you act differently. To be stripped of your own clothes, of your uniform, can cause you to lose your self respect, as an American contemporary novel *The Camp* demonstrates. In *The Camp*, in order to totally demoralize the prisoners, they are stripped of their uniforms and underclothes and forced to wear an open gown, similar to those worn by the patients in a hospital—a real life instance where people are made to lose their self respect—. Cressida has not been stripped of her clothes, but there is not much in the Greek camp, a totally macho world, for her. You can play the lady in the court but not in a tent. And is there much use in trying to be respectable if, before hand, you have already being labelled «Diomedes' drab» and «a daughter of the game»?

Innocent or guilty?, we are not trying to exonerate Cressida's behaviour, however, in Cressida's defence we can say:

1) Her uncle pushes her into an affair with Troilus while her father supports her affair with Diomedes and, though she tries to keep her affair with Troilus secret, he has not been that careful and as a result, everybody seems to know about it.

2) She resents the fact that women cannot act like men.

3) Troilus does not mention marriage to her.

4) She is an expendable object. The Trojans exchange her for Antenor, whom they consider of greater value.

5) No sooner does she arrive in the Greek camp, than she realizes she does not inspire any respect, and she is not going to be respected. On the way to the Greek camp a sexual proposition is made to her; on her arrival she is kissed down the ranks; she is referred to as a «daughter of the game;» and known as Diomedes' drab.

6) She has been deprived of home and servants and lives in a tent in a soldiers camp.

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

NOTES

- 1 Up to the XX century all the criticism on Cressida is negative. Most critics contend that the play is deficient in poetical justice. John Dryden dislikes the fact that Cressida is false and is not punished. G.G. Gervinus criticizes what he considers Cressida's coquetry and betrayal. George Brandes wonders why Cressida becomes so odious and why Shakespeare was so bitter about her. Frederick Boas calls Cressida a «scheming cold-blooded profligate», while E. K. Chambers sees Cressida as a creation of a disillusioned Shakespeare who meant to square the general sex by her. In the 20th c. critics like Tucker Brooke see her somewhat soiled from the beginning and predestined to become more polluted. *Shakespearean Criticism*, Vol. 3: 532-648. Cressida's defence does not appear until the middle of this century. Besides Bryant, we could mention other such as Barbara Eliodora C. de M. F. De Almeida, who sees her as a wanton but also as a victim of circumstances: the point of honour is the adulteress Helen, and her uncle suggests her that her

- hopes lie in a liaison in Troy, and the same occurs in the Greek camp («*Troilus and Cressida: Romantic Love Revisited*,» *Shakespeare Quarterly*, XV, 4 (Autumn 1964): 327-32). Jan Kott sees Cressida as a twentieth century young girl, who has imagined love and gets it through a procurer («*Troilus and Cressida—Amazing and Modern*,» *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary*. Trans. Boleslaw Taborski, 1964. Norton, 1974: 75-83).
- 2 This and all subsequent quotations are taken from William Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*. Eds. Louis B. Wright and Virginia A. La Mar. (New York: Folger Library, 1966).
 - 3 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.261-66).
 - 4 Bertrand Evans in *Shakespeare's Comedies* comments, «the first three and a half acts have done nothing to prepare us for Ulysses's instant assessment when she enters the Greek camp ... her portrait as drawn prior to Ulysses description is irreconcilable with the description» (179).
 - 5 Alfred Habegger in «Nineteenth-Century American Humor: Easygoing Males, Anxious Ladies, and Penelope Lapham» (*PMLA* 91, 5 (October 1976): 884-99) shows that in nineteenth century American fiction unwomanly women were the only ones portrayed as capable of having a sense of humor.
 - 6 Cf. chapter ii of the first part of Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quijote de la Mancha*.
 - 7 Robert Grudin in «Contrariety as Disease and Cure: The Problem Comedies.» (75-117) in *Mighty Opposites: Shakespeare and Renaissance Contrariety* (Berkeley: U of C P, 1979) thinks that Ulysses' rationalism prevents him from understanding people who are in love: The failure of Ulysses' plan exemplifies the failure of rational forces to come to terms with passion throughout *Troilus and Cressida*; and Ulysses himself, defender of reason and enemy of passion, may be interpreted allegorically as a rational principle which can approach, but never fully comprehend or reform, the lawless and subjective world of the affections.... His master plan ... fails precisely because he ignores the possible effects of love on Achilles. When the Greeks are introduced to Cressida, Ulysses rejects her with gratuitous impoliteness, describing her later as something sordid and foul (IV.v.46-63). And when, ... he serves as guide to the agonized Troilus, Ulysses is amazed that love can drive a man so wild ... (85-6).
 - 8 Pandarus is the one to go to King Priam's court to present Troilus' excuses for his absence, with the result that the following morning Paris sends Aeneas and Diomedes to Cressida's home to look for Troilus. And Troilus does not mind to be seen in Cressida's home at those early hours.
 - 9 Bertrand Evans thinks that this fast corruption is a defect on Shakespeare's part: «In omitting dramatic exposition and trusting wholly to our historical knowledge of the heroine's future, Shakespeare is false to his own dramatic manner and to us» (179).
 - 10 In a very moving article, «'Sons and Daughters of the Game': An Essay on Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*» (*Shakespeare Survey* 25 (1972): 11-25), compares the Trojan war to the Vietnam war: Of all Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida* ... is our play because it

makes sense to Americans in the 1970s. We know ... the meaning of a protracted seven years' war. We know how the great designs of war fail in their promised largeness and how the Greeks must have felt tented in a foreign land ... Like the Trojans, too, we have heard endlessly the arguments for carrying on a war of doubtful justification. ... Last and worst, we know what this society and its war have done to our best youth —those not literally destroyed have suffered a degradation of spirit, and of those whose ideals are not fully corrupted, may have chosen a life of irreconcilable alienation. There is no doubt, *Troilus and Cressida* gives back our world. (p. 11).

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