

# A “NOTABLE FOUNDATION OF HEARSAY”: CREATIVE APPROPRIATIONS OF TROY IN CHAUCER, CHAPMAN, AND SHAKESPEARE

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**Abstract:** An extended and precociously brilliant exercise in “parodic intertextuality,” Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida* (1602) mangles its two main sources, George Chapman’s translation of the *Iliad* and Chaucer’s courtly romance, *Troilus and Criseyde* (ca. 1385). The play ruthlessly debunks rose-tinted representations of the Trojan war by dramatizing it as beset by gossip, venality and hypocrisy. It not only suggests that the fall of Troy was just the first awful misfortune in the endless series of atrocities that constitute history, but it also undermines the authority of Tudor histories that commonly held Britain was founded by a Trojan, Brut. Shakespeare thereby implies that the idea of a unitary British identity stretching back to the noble days of yore – a form of primordialism that has resurfaced in recent years – is built on nothing other than a “notable foundation of hearsay.”

**Keywords:** *Troilus and Cressida*, *Iliad*, Shakespeare, Chaucer, rumour, history

Fame is a form – perhaps the worst form –  
of incomprehension.

Jorge Louis Borges.<sup>1</sup>

Set during the death throes of Trojan civilisation, Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida* dramatizes a mythological past beset by decidedly postmodern problems. The martial heroes of yore find themselves between a rock and a hard place – as perhaps most sentient beings are today. They may either act against their better

<sup>1</sup> Jorge Louis Borges, *Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999) 41.

judgements, as Hector does when he fatefully ignores ill-omens, or indulge in a cynical disengagement from politics in the manner of Achilles, Patroclus and Thersites, who memorably dismisses the war with which Western Literature commences as nothing but lechery: “Lechery, lechery; still, wars and lechery; nothing / else holds fashion: a burning devil take them!” (*Troilus and Cressida*, V.ii.192-3)<sup>2</sup> Primarily based on Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* and George Chapman’s translation of the *Iliad*, Shakespeare’s disenchanting retelling of this piece of Trojan apocrypha stages the transmission of corruption, cynicism and a precipitous sense of *ennui* through hearsay. One of the principal sources for Shakespeare’s English history plays, Samuel Daniel’s *First Four Books of the Civil Wars* (1595), displays the “selective amnesia”<sup>3</sup> characteristic of historical writing in spades. Daniel moralises about the English victory at Agincourt: “Ungrateful times that impiously neglect / That worth that never again times shall show / O what eternall matter here is found! / Whence new immortal *Illiads* might proceed.”<sup>4</sup>

In Shakespeare’s telling, however, the young King’s achievements evaporate into ambiguity, while his *Troilus and Cressida* views the tall tale of Troy as *matter* in the sense employed in the play – that is, as pus pouring out of history’s “botchy core” (II.i.6). And it pays to remember that for a Tudor audience it is not only Western Literature that starts with Troy, but also British history – the Quarto edition of the play even bills it as the *The Famous Historie of Troylus and Cresseid*. Histories commonly included “the legendary account of Britain’s founding by the Trojan Brut” that had been “exploited by Henry VII to justify his claim to the throne (since he claimed descent from Brut) and by Henry VIII to justify his break with Rome (since with Brut as its founder England would be an *imperium* as ancient as Rome).”<sup>5</sup> But the play puts paid to Daniel’s “primordialism,”<sup>6</sup> showing all the talk of honour and duty to be a mere cover story for the worse excesses of human appetite, while the war’s events, Shakespeare implies, were motivated by

<sup>2</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Norton Shakespeare*, gen. ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: Norton, 1997). All references are to this edition and cite the act, scene and line numbers parenthetically.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Baldo, *Memory in Shakespeare’s Histories: Stages of Forgetting in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 2012) 16.

<sup>4</sup> Samuel Daniel, *First Four Bookes of the Civil War, The Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, ed. Geoffrey Bullough, 8 vols. (London: Routledge, 1957-1975) 3:421.

<sup>5</sup> Phyllis Rackin, *Stages of History: Shakespeare’s English Chronicles* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990) 21.

<sup>6</sup> Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism: A Critical Survey of Recent Theories of Nations and Nationalism* (New York: Routledge, 1998) 144-68.

gossip, a fundamentally anti-social form of sociability. In this respect, then, this article considers Shakespeare as a reader, rather than a writer. I contend that his approach to the grand narratives of the past is devoutly critical, as subtly exposes the “incomprehension” that lies at the heart of prevalent understandings of the past.

After all, while Chaucer’s deliberately dim-witted narrator is bowled over by compassion for the lovers – “Thise woful vers, that wepen as I wryte!” (I.7)<sup>7</sup> – Shakespeare’s tone is one of fury both at seeing lives thwarted or destroyed by the personal agendas of impotent old men,<sup>8</sup> not to mention forms of creativity that seek to exonerate or immortalise their petty caprices. Perhaps this is why Shakespeare amplifies the instrumental treatment of Cressida. Despite being a civilian, she is callously exchanged without a second thought. Yet, in Chaucer’s courtly romance, Hector rightly insists that since “she nys no prisonere” (IV.178), so it is illegal to “selle” (IV.182) her and only after protracted discussion and being cowed by fear of the besieged Trojan public’s response – “The noyse of peple up stirte thanne at ones, / As breme as blase of straw iset on-fire” (IV.183-84) – do the leaders reluctantly agree to the exchange. Shakespeare emphasises her tragic passivity, whereas Chaucer’s focus on the legalities of prisoner exchange implies that this “tragedie” would not have happened had the authorities had stuck to their own laws.

It is primarily through the play’s pervasive use of gossip as a form of toxic sociability and sublimation of aggression that Shakespeare viciously debases this *Gründmythos*. And it is when his adaptation and omission from his sources is examined closely that this debasement can be most clearly perceived. Still, I believe that, like Genet, his obscenity is never obscene because it foregrounds the constitutive obscenity of foundational tales, which might well be understood as one of the several outrages – Cain and Abel, Chronos and Zeus, Romulus and Remus – with which cultures start. Indeed, Diomedes’ oxymoron that the Trojans are “pleased to breed out your inheritors” (IV.i.70) perceives Trojans as focusing on short-term gratification rather than the continuation of their civilisation. Fathoming the intricacies of Shakespeare’s transmission of Homer and Chaucer is

<sup>7</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Poetical Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F.N. Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957). Subsequent references are to this edition and cite the book and line numbers parenthetically.

<sup>8</sup> “Menelaus is ingeniously shown to be a fool by Homer” by suggesting that Zeus will punish Paris for stealing his “Virginal wife.” Jessica Wolfe, “Chapman’s Ironic Homer,” *College Literature* 35, no. 4 (2008): 166. Elsewhere, he is described as a “soft spearman.” George Chapman and Richard Hooper, *The Iliads of Homer* [...], 2 vols. (London: John Russell Smith, 1888) 17, 587. All references are to this edition and cite the book and line numbers parenthetically.

also significant because the play's intended audience, an elite coterie of lawyers, would have had a detailed understanding of the play's key sources, not to mention an awareness of their nation's (completely spurious) relationship to Troy. Bearing Margaret Rose's concept of "parodic intertextuality,"<sup>9</sup> in which a work's implied readership is fully aware of the sustained allusion made by one text to others, in mind, this essay analyses the intertextual relationship of Ulysses' speech about the importance of social hierarchy to its principal sources, before turning to the crucial significance of gossip in the play as a whole. Ultimately, Shakespeare's gossip-laden appropriation of Troy offers a complex critique of how creative interpretations of the past commonly denude their subjects – that is, the people enmeshed in history – of their vital particularity through the sort of moralisation and generalisation to which hearsay is prone.

### Debasing History: Homeric and Shakespearean Irony

Instructed by the "goddess of estate" (*Iliad* 2, 132), Athene persuades Ulysses, who is neither retreating with the "rude multitude," nor preventing their departure, to persuade the Greeks to continue the siege. She suggests they are all indebted to the nameless Greek dead, the forgotten "multitude" that "exceed" even Homer's "song" and are commonly written out of history altogether. His speech persuading the generals to remain is partly motivated by revenge, which is the cause of the deaths in the first place, and partly by gossip. Long (and completely erroneously) thought to be Shakespeare's statement of the Elizabethan World Picture or even his personal conservative credo, Ulysses' famous speech about the necessity of "degree" must be seen in its dramatic context, in which it is a response to gossip about Achilles' penchant for satirical pastiche over military action, a histrionic enthusiasm wholly absent from the sources:

The great Achilles, whom opinion crowns  
The sinew and the forehead of our host,  
Having his ear full of his airy fame  
Grows dainty of his worth, and in his tent  
Lies mocking our designs. With him Patroclus  
Upon a lazy bed the livelong day  
Breaks scurrile jests;  
And with ridiculous and awkward action,

<sup>9</sup> Margaret Rose, *Parody: Ancient, Modern and Post-modern* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 17.

Which, slanderer, he imitation calls,  
He pageants us.

(I.iii.142-51)

The demi-god has grown complacent and is dining out on his former fame. As with all juicy gossip, Ulysses not only defers its main content – “He pageants us” – but in his adverbial phrase – “Upon a lazy bed” – he draws a subtle parallel between the “awkward action” of sodomy and that of parody, an analogy recurrently made in anti-theatrical polemics of Shakespeare’s day.<sup>10</sup> The problem, he continues, with their cynical mockery is that it has led to an inhuman ambivalence: “Success or loss, what is or is not, serves / As stuff for these two to make paradoxes” (I.iii.183-84). Their actions display a perverse sense of superiority to those embroiled in historical events – for the most part against their wills and better natures. As that most colourful of humanists, Lodovico Settembrini, memorably inveighs: “*Das Paradoxon ist die Giftblüte des Quietismus, das Schillern des faulig gewordenen Geists, die größte Liederlichkeit von allen!*”<sup>11</sup> Although I have elsewhere argued that Shakespeare’s “antithetical historical practice”<sup>12</sup> in the *Henriad* (1595-99) might best be understood as an elaboration on the Cretan Liar paradox, *Troilus and Cressida* (1602) questions the value of paradox as means of conceiving the world, implying it can easily degenerate into sententious clichés of the sort Settembrini denounces. History’s numberless and nameless dead deserve better than “fond paradoxes to make fools in the ale house laugh” (*Othello*, II.i.140-41).

Whereas Shakespearean history normally diversifies the number of viewpoints on any given historical situation – as with Williams in *Henry V* or the tavern scenes in *Henry IV* – in Ulysses’ famous speech, dialogue from the *Iliad* is repositioned and conflated into a monologue. Moreover, as Mihoko Suzuki astutely points out, “[t]he concept of ordered hierarchy that Ulysses so authoritatively adumbrates is borne out neither by the world of the play as Shakespeare represents it nor by Ulysses’ later actions.”<sup>13</sup> Initially, the imagery of Ulysses’ conservatism picks up on Homer’s description of Nestor’s call to arms,

<sup>10</sup> I elsewhere explore this in considerable detail; see Sam Gilchrist Hall, “*In Mendacio Veritas: Telling the Truth through Lies in 1&2 Henry IV and Henry V*,” *Cahiers Élisabéthains* 91, no. 1 (2016): 1-14.

<sup>11</sup> “The paradox is the poisonous bloom of quietism; the bauble of an intellect that has become incurious, the greatest slovenliness of all.” Thomas Mann, *Der Zauberberg* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 2015) 308. The author’s translation.

<sup>12</sup> Gilchrist Hall 3.

<sup>13</sup> Mihoko Suzuki, “‘Truth Tired with Iteration’: Myth and Fiction in Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*,” *Philological Quarterly* 66, no. 2 (1987): 165.

following Atreus' dream. Homer's Nestor uses the example of "bees," whose "Swarms [that] rise out of a hollow rock, repairing the degrees / Of their egression endlessly" (*Iliad* 2, 72-73). But Shakespeare's Ulysses employs this metaphor to discredit Achilles and emphasise the need to continue fighting: "When that the general is not like the hive / To whom the foragers shall all repair, / What honey is expected?" (I.iii.80-83) Interestingly, this allegory is also found in the Archbishop of Canterbury's trumped-up justification for going to war in the opening scene of *Henry V*. The religious leader draws from Erasmus' pacifist tract *Institutio principis christiani* (1516),<sup>14</sup> but completely inverts Erasmus' message about the orderly society of the bees being a good example of how a Christian prince, such as Rabelais's Pantagruel, should tend his own garden and not seek to expand his territory. Understanding the full extent of Shakespeare's irony is contingent upon a close familiarity with Erasmus' well-known manual.

Shifting perspective from apian image to a cosmic one and following Ptolemy's geocentric model of the universe, Ulysses continues: "the planets and this centre / Observe degree, priority and place" (I.iii.85-86). But while this could be said of the planets themselves, the same cannot be observed of the Gods from whom their names derive – Saturn, for instance, castrated and usurped his father and ate his own children, while his remaining son, Zeus, whom Homer himself characterises as the Godfather of a celestial mafia, had to administer an emetic to his father to get him to vomit up his half-digested siblings. Wilfully blind to the brute force behind any social hierarchy, Ulysses continues: "Take but degree away, untune that string / And hark what discord follows. / Each thing meets in mere oppugancy" (I.iii.109-11). In other words, inherited prerogative prevents chaos.

Likewise, in Homer, Ulysses extolls the merits of autocracy:

the rule is most irregular, where many rule  
One lord, one king, propose to thee; and he,  
To whom wise Saturn's son, hath giv'n both law and empery  
To rule the public, is that king.

(*Iliad* 2, 172-75)

Leaving aside Zeus' (and, for that matter, Saturn's) own disregard for the "[p]rerogative of age" (I.iii.107) – not to mention, the manifest differences between how Homer characterises Zeus and how he is invoked – Shakespeare's Ulysses amplifies this idea through negative exempla:

<sup>14</sup> Andrew Gurr, "Henry V and the Bees' Commonwealth," *Shakespeare Survey* 30 (1977): 61-72.

Strength should be lord of imbecility,  
And the rude son should strike his father dead:  
Force should be right; or rather, right and wrong,  
Between whose endless jar justice  
lose their names, and so should justice too.  
Then everything includes itself in power,  
Power into will, will into appetite;  
And appetite, an universal wolf,  
So doubly seconded with will and power,  
Must make perforce an universal prey,  
And last eat up himself.

(I.iii.114-24)

Without proper social order, brute force will dictate judicial proceedings, rather than the jarring of opposing councils – an ironic assertion in a speech that itself conflates dialogue. He suggests that without “degree” the world will descend into a Hobbesian war of all against all, with each individual pursuing their rapacious and implacable appetites. The only possible outcome of this would be wholesale destruction both of society and humanity itself. While in Homer gustatory metaphors abound and are used for personification of the “insatiate field” or in connection with Gods – as when Ajax threatens Hector that the war will not be over “till Mars, by you, his rav’nous stomach fills” (*Iliad* 7, 56) – Shakespeare uses the idea of appetite to describe our will to power, which, unchecked, will not stop until it has destroyed everything including itself.

Jessica Wolfe cogently examines George Chapman’s shifting relationship to Homer’s irony, identifying a pervasive interest in the “Irony of self-deception and consequent self-defeat,”<sup>15</sup> especially in his dramatic works. Such is the irony apparent in Ulysses’ critique of appetite. Not only was the war itself motivated by carnal appetites, but also his reason for giving the speech is Achilles’ satire, a form of mimesis that reduces everything to its lowest common denominator – though often, in this case, with good reason. Homer’s Ulysses even beats the crippled plebeian truth-teller into submission with the symbol of the highest privilege, Agamemnon’s “sceptre” (*Iliad* 2, 156)<sup>16</sup> characteristically using sheer “strength” to dominate “imbecility” or weakness.

Still more disturbingly, in Shakespeare, it is Ulysses that orchestrates perhaps the closest thing to a gang rape on the Elizabethan stage: he suggests that the

<sup>15</sup> Wolfe 163.

<sup>16</sup> Skeptron (σκηπτρον).

defenceless Cressida be shared among the common soldiers and "kissed by the general." Absent from the meeting of the generals in the Shakespearean version, a further irony is that it was originally Thersites that evokes the dangers of "appetite" in his castigation of Atrides:

would'st thou yet again  
Force from some other lord his prise, to soothe the lusts that reign  
In thy encroaching appetite? It fits no prince to be  
A prince of ill, and govern us, or lead our progeny  
By rape to ruin. O base Greeks, deserving infamy,  
And ills eternal!

(*Iliad* 2, 199-204)

In the *Iliad*, Thersites attracts Ulysses' ire because he points out the tendency that the powers that be have to perceive the status quo as the natural order of things, but he does not mention the self-destructive nature of "appetite."

David Hillman's observation that "it is hard not to see all the idealizing talk in the play – about principles, reason, degree, honour, value and so on – as cover stories for something much less impressive; the condition of humanity here seems merely sordid and petty, as if the alternative to escaping from the human condition from above is escaping it from below,"<sup>17</sup> is implicit in the play's source, where the venality and hypocrisy of the generals is quite manifest. Far from affirming moral values like the indissoluble tie of matrimony, the war is simply a shameful instance of a sovereign pursuing his own desires and a politically expedient cover for the generals to fulfil their own unbridled appetites, as Homer's Thersites reminds Atrides: "Thy tents are full of brass; and dames, the choice of all, are thine" (*Iliad* 2, 195).

### **Gossip and the Weight of Futurity**

While *2 Henry IV* opens with the theatrical embodiment of dishonesty, Rumour, honestly disclosing her intension to spread misinformation, *Troilus and Cressida* is constituted by gossip. Achilles lazes about because he is confident in his reputation; the affair between Troilus and Cressida happens because of Pandarus' verbal machinations; Ulysses manipulates Achilles into action by hearsay: "these Grecian lords [...] even already / They clap the lubber Ajax on the shoulder, / As

<sup>17</sup> David Hillman, "The Worst Case of Knowing the Other? Stanley Cavell and *Troilus and Cressida*," *Philosophy and Literature* 32, no. 1 (2008): 77.



if his foot were on brave Hector's breast" (III.iii.143-45). And while, in Chaucer, Troilus fears that Cressid will be seduced by her father's report of the Greek gallants or simply raped – "He shal som Greke so preyse and wel alose, / That ravysshen he shal yow with his speche, / Or do yow don by force as he shal teche" (IV.1473-75) – in Shakespeare, it is Troilus himself who betrays feelings of inadequacy in comparison to what he has heard about the Greeks: "I cannot sing, / Nor heel the high lavolt [...] fair virtues all, / To which the Grecians are most prompt and pregnant" (IV.v.92-94) – not that she has asked him to do any of these things.

The play displays a peculiar awareness about future gossip. Even as Troilus and Cressida promise themselves to one another, they seem to comprehend the generalisations latent in their personal misfortunes. Foreshadowing their literary afterlives, Pandarus provides a coda to their exchange of vows, commenting: "let all pitiful goers-between be called to the world's end after my name; call them all Pandars; let all constant men be Troiluses, all false women Cressids" (III.ii.199-203). Aware of her double bind, when Diomedes questions her about the love token of a sleeve that Troilus gave her, she reflects in an aside displaying tragic foreknowledge: "'Twas one's that loved me better than you will" (V.ii.90). In stark contrast, Chaucer's Criseyde speaks of a "future tyme [...] / Koude I nat seen" (V.748-49) and many of Chaucer's characters recurrently cite ancient *auctouree* to bolster their arguments – anachronistically, of course, as these authorities would postdate Troy – while his narrator recurrently emphasises his debt to his sources. His narrator refuses to "chide" this "sely womman" (V.1093) because "she was so sory for hir untrouthe" (V.1098) and, crucially, because "[h]ire name, alas! Is punysshed so wyde" (V.1095). In short, then, the weight of futurity weighs heavily on Shakespeare's protagonists, whereas it is doing justice to the past that concerns Chaucer.

Hearsay actually constitutes what Hillman identifies as the play's "drive to generalization; a displacement from particular circumstances and situations to universals – a shift from the ordinary to the metaphysical."<sup>18</sup> It denudes the present of any vitality, frustrates individual agency and breeds a complacent cynicism of the sort already mentioned. Such is Helen's shocking lassitude that Pandarus and Cressida initially chatter about: "Hector was gone, but Helen was not up" (I.ii.54). That is, she cannot even be bothered to get out of bed to see a war being waged on her behalf, whereas she actively encourages Hector's participation in the original: "Hector, by Helenus' advice, doth seek / Advent'rous combat on the boldest Greek" (*Iliad* 7,1-2).

<sup>18</sup> Hillman 77.

Linguistically, the closest relatives of this "merry Greek"<sup>19</sup> (I.ii.101) in the Shakespearean canon are its garrulous prostitutes, such as Mistress Quickly and Doll Tearsheet, who speak back against male vanity and warmongering in Shakespeare's histories. Helen has realised that she, like the prostitute Bianca in *Othello*, "must be circumstanced" (III.iv.196), but remains playfully irreverent. When Pandarus comes to gossip with her and Paris about Troilus' infatuation with Cressida, the inauspicious history of Troy is put on hold:

PARIS            [...] Nell, he is full of harmony.  
PANDARUS    Truly, lady, no.  
HELEN         O, sir  
                  [*She tickles him*]  
PANDARUS    Rude, in sooth, in good sooth very rude.  
PARIS         Well said, my lord. Will you say so in fits?

(III.i.48-52)

"[I]f you tickle us, do we not laugh?" (*The Merchant of Venice*, III.i.54-55): in this astonishing extra-temporal exchange, Shakespeare stages a profound historical insight. Satirically humanising the passive and silent historical personage – in the *Iliad* as in Chaucer, Helen is all but mute – Shakespeare reminds the audience that history, however ancient or grand, records the tribulations of living people, who were subject the same spontaneous physical reactions and aches and pains as everyone else.

By the second scene of the play, the crucial role and key features of gossip are made apparent. Gossip (or hearsay) can be distinguished from the protean figure of Rumour (or her classical antecedent, *Fama*) because, according to Keith Botelho, it is local, "intimate" and "concerned with the moral reputation of those being talked about," while "rumor is unverified and ambiguous information with deliberate designs affecting a larger social group."<sup>20</sup> In contrast to Chaucer, in which the hero first catches a glimpse of the heroine in the temple, Cressida and Pandarus stand upon the Trojan battlements, gossiping about the returning soldiers entering the city, unconcerned for their well-being or the result of the day's fighting. It is she that first catches sight of him. Initially, Pandarus praises the returning soldiers, but then debases them: "O brave Troilus! Look well upon him, niece. Look you how his sword is bloodied and his helm looks more hacked

<sup>19</sup> In fact, Greek, in the period, was a euphemism for a prostitute (*OED*).

<sup>20</sup> Keith Botelho, *Renaissance Earwitnesses: Rumor and Early Modern Masculinity* (Bern: Springer, 2009) 10.

than Hector's [...] Had I a sister were a grace, or a daughter a goddess, he should take his choice. O admirable man! Paris? Paris is dirt to him, and I warrant Helen to change would give an eye to boot" (I.ii.213-15; 217-20), whereas in Chaucer he and his niece agree simply that Troilus is of the "same pris" (II.181) as his elder brother.

In this regard, Pandarus' irreverent chat embodies the three core features of gossip. First, gossip involves the comparison of certain extrinsic and fungible values. Second, it is reliant upon our biological predilection for rivalry and is essentially comparative, as Ulysses observes: "For honour travels in a strait so narrow / Where one but goes abreast" (III.iii.148-49). Finally, its debasing or even scatological tendencies bring our rival crashing back down to earth, as when Pandarus compares the archetypal lover Paris to "dirt" – excrement in Shakespearean parlance. Likewise, in Shakespeare, Pandarus hyperbolic use of comparative structures to describe his niece titillates Troilus – "fairer than ever I saw her look, or any woman else" (I.i.33) – whereas in Chaucer's rendering his attitude is more far more ambivalent: "If she be fayr, thow woost thyself, I gesse" (I.882).

Lacanian notion that envy is caused by the feeling that someone has "stolen our *jouissance*"<sup>21</sup> is certainly evidenced by the response of Menelaus to Paris' abduction of his wife. After a series of flattering comparisons of Troilus with Hector, Paris and Antenor, Pandarus arouses his niece's interest by activating just this sort of envy:

CRESSIDA At what was all this laughing?  
PANDARUS Marry, at the white hair that Helen spied on Troilus' chin.  
CRESSIDA An't had been a green hair, I should have laughed too.  
PANDARUS They laughed not so much at the hair as at his pretty answer.  
CRESSIDA What was his answer?  
PANDARUS Quoth she, 'Here's but two and fifty hairs on your chin, and one of them is white.'  
CRESSIDA This is her question.  
PANDARUS That's true; make no question of that. 'Two and fifty hairs' quoth he, 'and one white: that white hair is my father, and all the rest are his sons.' 'Jupiter!' quoth she, 'which of these hairs is Paris, my husband?' 'The forked one,' quoth he, 'pluck't out, and give it him.' But there was such laughing! and Helen so blushed, and Paris so chafed, and all the rest so laughed, that it passed.

(I.ii.139-55)

<sup>21</sup> Fredric Jameson, *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 2016) 22.

Having missed the joke, Cressida is "green" with envy and her interest in Troilus is piqued by Pandarus' report of his wit: he turned an unflattering estimation of his manliness to his credit, impressing another woman and upsetting Troy's prodigal son, Paris. Pandarus even stirs Cressida's jealousy with a still cruder schoolyard tactic: "I think Helen loves him better than Paris" (I.ii.99-100).

However, comparison is most clearly apparent in the recurrent questioning of Helen's value, especially when estimated by its human cost. Cressida's second lover, Diomedes, inveighs: "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" (IV.i.71-74). While the *Iliad* opens by questioning the validity of the war and Chaucer keeps the war firmly in the background, with his narrator claiming to be unable to describe it, nowhere is there anything as bilious as Diomedes' attack on Helen, not even Robert Henryson's Middle-Scots sequel, *The Testament of Cresseid*, in which Diomedes banishes her, Troilus forgives her and she promptly dies of leprosy. Shakespeare's Diomedes reduces her to a worthless hunk of putrid meat or "carrion weight" on a butcher's scales, as apt to be consumed by a foolish old King as by a vain prince. Rather than taking this to heart, Paris uses a mercantile analogy, presumably to remind Diomedes that such an idiom does not befit his social status: "you do as chapmen do: / Dispraise the thing you desire to buy" (IV.ii.77-79). Unpleasant as they may be, such metaphors are appropriate: Helen's flesh has been stolen and Cressida's is traded.

Gossip depends upon an appraisal of certain mutable external qualities of its victims, which can be infinitely quibbled about. Pandarus continues:

PANDARUS Helen herself swore th' other day, that Troilus, for a brown  
favour—for so 'tis, I must confess,—not brown neither,—

CRESSIDA No, but brown.

PANDARUS 'Faith, to say truth, brown and not brown.

CRESSIDA To say the truth, true and not true.

PANDARUS She praised his complexion above Paris.

CRESSIDA Why, Paris hath colour enough.

PANDARUS So he has.

CRESSIDA Then Troilus should have too much: if she praised him  
above, his complexion is higher than his; he having colour enough, and  
the other higher, is too flaming a praise for a good complexion. I had as  
lief Helen's golden tongue had commended Troilus for a copper nose.

PANDARUS I swear to you, I think Helen loves him better than Paris.

(I.ii.85-100)

This extra-historical bout of repartee plays on the difficulty in defining the extent to which something or somebody possesses a particular quality by suggesting that any such estimation is always relative. It ends by implying that Helen's praise is deceptive and playfully questions Troilus' sexual morality, not Cressida's: in early modern Europe (presumably rather unconvincing) prosthetic noses were forged out of copper for those disfigured by syphilis.

Implicit in the structure of gossip is what Chaucer's Troilus explicitly states, when he suggests that "By his contrarie is everything declared" (I.637). Yet, by suggesting "What is aught, but as 'tis valued," (II.i.52) Shakespeare's Troilus modifies this notion. Things are not simply defined by their opposite – dry is not wet, hot is not cold – but rather their worth is contingent upon the extrinsic value they are assigned in relation to other things. Ironically, his estimation of Cressida's relative worth is wholly out of kilter with the other Trojans, for whom by association with her treacherous father she is damaged goods apt to be exchanged with the Greeks. His brother informs her: "Thou art changed for Antenor" (IV.iii.16). Indeed, as Suzuki points out, the two dominant ways of being the play, cynical disregard for one's fellows and acting bad faith, "share in the pervasive refusal to acknowledge differences,"<sup>22</sup> as does, of course, the practice of exchanging one person for another, especially when their legal status is quite different.

Towards the end of this relatively long non-essential scene, when the discussion returns once again to qualities, Troilus' notion that things are somehow constituted by their extrinsic value is undermined by Pandarus exclaiming: "Do you know what a man is? Is not birth, beauty, good shape, discourse, manhood, learning, gentleness, virtue, youth, liberality, and so forth, the spice and salt that season a man?" (I.ii.231-34) in mock-outrage. "Ay," responds Cressida expanding his culinary metaphor, "a minced man" (I.ii.235) – one, in other words, whose spiritual attributes have been irretrievably mangled.

## Identity and History

It is easy to miss the philosophical significance of gustatory metaphors in a bout of repartee.<sup>23</sup> However, just because this dialogue is not in earnest does not mean it is without philosophical seriousness. It implicitly formulates what Shakespeare's favourite philosopher, Montaigne, stated explicitly in *An Apology for Raymond Sebond*:

<sup>22</sup> Suzuki 167.

<sup>23</sup> Botelho establishes that such metaphors were commonly employed in connection with Rumour. See Botelho xv.

[T]he privilege whereof our soule vaunts, to bring to her condition whatsoever it conceiveth, and to despoile what of mortall and corporall qualities belongs unto it, to marshall those things which she deemed worthie her acquaintance, to disrobe and deprive their corruptible conditions, and to make them leave as superfluous and base garments, thicknesses, length, depth, weight, colour, smell, roughnesse, smoothnesse, hardnesse, softnesse, and all sensible accidents else to fit and appropriate them to her immortall and spirituall condition.<sup>24</sup>

Montaigne's slippery rhetorical move here itself betrays an intriguing scepticism. He begrudgingly endorses a form of naïve realism, suggesting that "qualities" are universal and eternal and enable perception, while maintaining, nonetheless, that such perceptions are, at best, inaccurate and at worst, positively inhuman. Ultimately, Montaigne suggests, Reason, which he elsewhere compares to a tyrant, seeks to explain and classify, not understand.

However, as in metaphor, this process of explanation results in us saying what something is by reference what it is not. An identity is fashioned by external qualities, just as the practice of prisoner exchange is based on "the fundamental assumption that a person could be one term in a stable relationship of equivalence, and that substitutions could in fact be made with ease."<sup>25</sup> When it comes to other people, our drive to identify risks mincing them into a lifeless mush of external attributes in much the same way as the servant Alexander's copious mock-blazon to Ajax does (see I.ii.18-27), while estimating by appearances leads to assumptions about their spiritual qualities, as when "Troilus's observations of Criseyde's height, physique, demeanor, and gestures lead him, as they might all men observing her, to 'gesse' that she possesses inner virtues."<sup>26</sup>

Such judgments lead to us forgetting the fact that history happens to embodied individuals. The jury may be out on whether Helen of Troy actually had a face that sailed a thousand ships, but it is certain that she tickled someone at some stage in her life. Indeed, once the qualities that constituted Troilus' ego-image of his lover's identity are shattered, he is completely baffled, observing "This is and is not Cressid" (V.ii.146) – a comment perhaps inspired by Henryson's version, in which Troilus passes Cressid, now as leprous beggar, spurned by her second lover

<sup>24</sup> *Essays vvvritten in French by Michael Lord of Montaigne [...]*, trans. John Florio (London: Melch. Bradwood, 1613) 2:263.

<sup>25</sup> Anne McTaggart, "Shamed Guiltless: Criseyde, Dido, and Chaucerian Ethics," *The Chaucer Review* 46, no. 4 (2012): 373.

<sup>26</sup> McTaggart 373.

and fails to recognise her, proving that extrinsic qualities are changeable. In Shakespeare's version, Troilus remains stubbornly incapable of any sort of empathetic understanding because his version of Cressida is simply the sum of all of various immutable qualities, which he himself dreamt up. She, however, displays an awareness of her awful situation in her valediction: "Troilus farewell! One eye yet looks on thee / But with my heart the other eye doth see [...] what error leads must err" (V.ii.108-9; 111). Chaucer's narrator defends her, albeit in an accidental insult, when he considers her a "fysse withouten water" and moralises that "all that comth, comth by necessitee" (IV.958). Throughout the romance, "Our view of Criseyde is thus complicated by a kind of double-vision: the visible, external appearance of her dishonour is consistently called into question by Chaucer's portrayal of her conscience and by the narrator's insistence on her innocence."<sup>27</sup>

The problem of identity is made explicit when Hector and Ajax duel. The Trojan prince refuses to harm his half-Trojan adversary because he is:

my father's sister's son,  
A cousin-german to great Priam's seed.  
The obligation of our blood forbids  
A gory emulation 'twixt us twain.  
Were thy commixtion Greek and Trojan so  
That thou couldst say 'This hand is Grecian all,  
And this is Trojan; [...]'  
Thou shouldst not bear from me a Greekish member  
Wherein my sword had not impressure made  
Of our rank feud.

(IV.vii.4-10, 14-16)

Both Greek and Trojan, the pugilistic Ajax's identity cannot be easily isolated. Hector's conundrum clearly foregrounds the absurdity of wholly identifying people according to certain qualities – whether it be social status, race, nationality, gender or sexuality. After all, living, breathing people are always both a mixture of, and simultaneously more than, such qualities – an insight worth heeding in our own age of incessant gossip and identity-politics. It is, furthermore, more than mere coincidence that Shakespeare's meditation on the morally and socially corrosive effects of gossip coincided with a sudden and unparalleled proliferation of information in his age. His contemporary, Robert Burton complains of digital

<sup>27</sup> McTaggart 373.

burnout in the most literal sense in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, when he writes of “a vast Chaos and confusion of books, we are oppressed with them, our eyes ache with reading, our fingers with turning. For my part I am one of the number.”<sup>28</sup>

Chaucer’s tale concludes with a beautiful Boethian *contemptus mundi*. The narrator suggests that Greece and Troy, Helen and Menelaus, Troilus and Cressid and all “worldly contrarieties may be transcended by Christian theology,”<sup>29</sup> emphasising the essentially transitory nature of desire and beauty alike: “This worlde [...] passeth soone as floures faire” (V.1841). Shakespeare, in contrast, displays scepticism, if not downright cynicism, about creativity; as *Troilus and Cressida* makes clear, art has had a hand in aestheticizing outrages since its inception. Yet, it is through creative engagement with the past alone that the spell cast by its stories can be disenchanting. In this regard, Hillman’s assessment of it as “Shakespeare’s most self-consciously philosophical play”<sup>30</sup> is not too far off the mark.

However, the play’s beguiling philosophical power lies not in the rarefied language of the monologues on the “theme of honour and renown” (II.ii.198), which Hector’s mugging of a Greek for his glitzy armour and Achilles’ ambush and murder of him expose as nothing but cynical posturing. Rather, Swinburne’s famous observation that the play is a “[...] hydra-headed prodigy, [which] at once defies and derides definitive comment”<sup>31</sup> should be read as a statement of *Troilus and Cressida*’s philosophical procedure: it exposes the “incomprehension” at the heart of creative appropriations of famous events, thereby frustrating the construction of individual and collective identity based on external qualities. As an extended exercise in “parodic intertextuality,”<sup>32</sup> the play certainly “defies and derides” glorification of an outrage at the root of literary history. Far from being founded on the noble days of yore, the myth of a unitary British identity is built on what Philip Sidney bases historians’ authority: nothing other than a “notable foundation of hearsay.”<sup>33</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (New York: New York Review Books, 2001) 24.

<sup>29</sup> Molly Murray, “The Value of ‘Eschaunge’: Ransom and Substitution in *Troilus and Criseyde*,” *ELH* 69, no. 2 (2002): 335.

<sup>30</sup> Hillman 24.

<sup>31</sup> Algernon Charles Swinburne, *A Study of Shakespeare* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1880) 200.

<sup>32</sup> Rose 17.

<sup>33</sup> Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry, or The Defence of Poesy*, revised and expanded for the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition by R.W. Maslen (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2001) 89.



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