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## Troilus and Cressida: Shakespeare's Ungenred Promise Play

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*Troilus and Cressida*: Shakespeare's Ungenred Promise Play

*Troilus and Cressida* is a complex play of dualities and contradiction. Because of its confusing nature, many audiences have struggled to make sense of it. Since genre is one of the easiest ways to make sense of a play, naturally one of the looming questions about the confusing play is “What genre is Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*?” It has been called a tragedy, “a comedy of disillusion,’ . . . ‘a wry-mouthed comedy,’ . . . a satire . . . a piece of propaganda . . . a morality . . . and (of course) a Problem play” (Rossiter 74). Both critics and dramatists remain perplexed as they try to categorize it. Perhaps this is why the play has remained unpopular for much of its history—readers and audiences don’t know what to do with such a seemingly haphazard play. Yet beneath the perplexing shadow of confusion lies a play that is profound: “It is still full of puzzles, but that fact has been recognized as a virtue rather than a defect—its difficulties are generative, its obstacles fruitful” (Dawson 6). In retrospect, we begin to understand that *Troilus and Cressida* is “un”genred, but that this lack of category allows it to resist conformities and expand its scope. Although the play does not have a specific genre, it hovers somewhere between comedy and tragedy, and this flexible label allows the audience to make a more profound interpretation of the play because the limitations of interpretation that usually come with genre are absent.

*Troilus and Cressida* takes place during the Trojan War, fought over Paris’s Helen, and tells the story of Troilus, a Trojan prince, and his lover, Cressida. Yet the play is not simply a

love story—it is also the story of philosophic Ulysses, trying to motivate an apathetic and sulky Achilles, the political and physical war between the Greeks and the Trojans, and ultimately, Cressida’s betrayal of Troilus. Initially, at least, *Troilus and Cressida* most closely resembles a tragedy, as all of the events that take place in the play seem to end in misery and woe to the characters. Troilus doesn’t get Cressida in the end, and he doesn’t get his revenge; the Trojans are beaten back, and Hector is killed; there is victory on the side of the Greeks, but they only manage to win by seemingly revengeful and sinister means (Achilles can only kill Hector by taking him by surprise). All seems dismal by the end of the play—a perfectly good enough example of a “tragedy” for the lay audience. But does the play conform to the traditional “Greek tragedy” standards? After all, *Troilus and Cressida* hearkens back to that era, and is decidedly Greek in its roots.

As Aristotle’s *Poetics* is probably one of the most well-known and classical definition of tragedy and “all discussion of tragedy, whether it be Shakespearean or any other, sooner or later, returns to Aristotle” (Drakakis 1), then the play should ideally live up to some of Aristotle’s requirements for the tragedy. Thus, we turn to Aristotle to determine whether the play meets the “requirements” of tragedy.

Aristotle requires the plot of a traditional tragedy to be “an imitation of an action that is complete, and whole, and of a certain magnitude; for there may be a whole that is wanting in magnitude” (Aristotle). By this definition, a tragedy must be “whole” and of a large “magnitude”—it demands a grand scheme of things. *Troilus and Cressida* is certainly set up on a large scale, as it takes place during the Trojan War. However, there are so many elements of the play—the lustful and short-lived nature of Troilus and Cressida’s love, the anti-climatic fight between Ajax and Hector, and Achilles’s backhanded murder of Hector—that are anticlimactic,

so resistant of the *magnitude* that Aristotle calls for. *Troilus and Cressida* resists that magnitude, simply because all of the moments that should be amplified are actually reduced to moments of weakness or anticlimax.

If *Troilus and Cressida* cannot be called a play of magnitude, can it qualify as a play that is *whole*? Aristotle says, “A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end . . . A well constructed plot, therefore, must neither begin nor end at haphazard, but conform to these principles.” So does *Troilus and Cressida* begin or end haphazardly? It might begin innocently enough, with Troilus declaring his love for Cressida—there isn’t much haphazardness about that. However, it certainly ends in chaos. Troilus claims revenge on Diomedes, with whom Cressida was unfaithful:

No space of earth shall sunder our two hates:  
 I'll haunt thee like a wicked conscience still,  
 That mouldeth goblins swift as frenzy's thoughts.  
 Strike a free march to Troy! with comfort go:  
 Hope of revenge shall hide our inward woe. (5.2.27–31)

Troilus’s passionate speech, filled with threats of a large magnitude such as “haunt,” “revenge,” and “woe,” are ultimately unrealized, and therefore anticlimactic. Troilus does not receive the revenge he was looking for on Diomedes, and the play ends without the realization of Troilus’s threats and yet also without total resignation to despair—it ends without satisfying, ends without having an end. It seems to end before the real “end” of the story, before either the death of Troilus or his sworn foe is realized and genre can be ascribed.

Yet another demand of the tragedy is that it is “an imitation not only of a complete action, but of events inspiring fear or pity. Such an effect is best produced when the events come on us

by surprise; and the effect is heightened when, at the same time, they follow as cause and effect” (Aristotle). Of course, there can be nothing as pitiful as Troilus overhearing his Cressida succumb to Diomedes’s advances. But is this pity enough? No, Aristotle demands more: “The tragic wonder will then be greater than if they happened of themselves or by accident; for even coincidences are most striking when they have an air of design . . . Such events seem not to be due to mere chance. Plots, therefore, constructed on these principles are necessarily the best” (Aristotle). Perhaps some of the events in *Troilus and Cressida* are tragic, but do they always have an air of design? When Ajax and Hector fight, but end up at a draw, the play has been leading up to this fight thus far. There is a certain element of “chance” and unexpectedness, not only in this ending to the fight, but throughout the play.

If Shakespeare has so obviously dismissed the standards befitting a tragedy, does it still deserve the title of tragedy? Since *Troilus and Cressida* does not meet the requirements to be seen as a traditional tragedy, can it be placed in the “opposite” genre of comedy? One would be hard pressed to call *Troilus and Cressida* a comedy, but as comedy is the most obvious alternative to tragedy in the category of genre, we cannot completely disregard it. And *Troilus and Cressida* does have some elements that hearken to the comedy. Although we see no “cases of mistaken identity in connection with bed-tricks, identical sets of twins, disguise, and cross-dressing,” there is some “caustic wit, ironic detachment, and a subversive penchant for puns and wordplay” (Massai). For example, near the beginning of the play, at the moment that Cressida is supposed to be admiring Troilus from afar, aided by the flattering words of Pandarus, she instead mocks both Pandarus and Troilus by making light of the great praise Pandarus attempts to bestow upon Troilus. When Pandarus explains that Helen “praised his [Troilus’s] complexion above Paris,” Cressida replies, “Paris hath color enough . . . / Then Troilus should have too much

...the other higher is too flaming a praise for a good complexion” (1.2.86–91). Cressida’s mocking carries the playful, light tone of the comedy.

This presence of wit and humor continues throughout the play. Just before Cressida and Troilus are about to consummate their love, Pandarus has continued to insert his presence into their conversation, adding humor and wit to what should traditionally be a tender and private love scene. For example, Troilus says to Cressida, “You have bereft me of all words, lady” (3.2.47), and then Pandarus snidely replies, “Words pay no debts, give her deeds; but she’ll bereave you / o’the’deeds too, if she call your activity into question” (3.2.48–49). Here, Pandarus puns on the word *deed*, most obviously implying that Troilus needs to act rather than talk to show his commitment to Cressida. Obviously, his words have sexual implications, as well as implications about an actual legally binding deed that allows the couple to consummate their love. Pandarus’s pun ridicules Troilus and exposes the couple to a joke at the expense of their sexuality—clearly a convention of comedy rather than tragedy. However, although the play mocks lovers and heroes throughout its duration, it does not follow all of the conventions of Shakespeare’s comedies.

In Shakespearean comedy, there is usually a marriage—a marriage, along with a reaffirming of society. Society is first disrupted and then restored to harmony. For example, in *As You Like It*, the love between Rosalind and Orlando and Phoebe and Silvius is upset, and for most of the play these couples are thwarted from their love of each other. However, at the end, all of the mishaps are mended, and the couples receive their happily ever after. Troilus and Cressida do not even come close to getting this blissful ending. Their love, along with their world, is upset and disrupted, but never restored to harmony. In fact, “any expectations of the kind we entertain at the outset of more typical comedies are here quickly knocked off course, nor

are we ever allowed the empathy with the characters common, in different ways, to both comedy and tragedy” (Dawson 4).

What can be gained by Shakespeare upsetting the traditional boundaries of genre? Clearly, *Troilus and Cressida* exhibits elements of both comedy and tragedy, neither the clear cut winner of the genre category. Yet it is this refusal to be categorized, to be characterized, that gives *Troilus and Cressida* more depth. German poet Heine said, “*Troilus and Cressida* is neither a comedy nor a tragedy in the usual sense; it belongs to no special kind of poetry, and still less can it be judged by any received standard” (Dawson 5). Essentially, the play thrives on dualities—juxtaposing characters, events, sentiments, and meanings in order to resist genre. Shakespeare uses this duality to comment on the limitations of genre and propel the play beyond those limitations.

One of the ways in which Shakespeare uses the lack of genre to expand the meaning of his poem is to draw partially upon the conventions of a genre and then upset it by not fully realizing those conventions. For example, one of the hallmarks of tragedy is pleasurable misery. Perhaps it may seem masochistic, but Freud argues that there is an “abandonment of a number of possibilities of gaining satisfaction and the temporary toleration of unpleasure as a step on the long indirect road to pleasure” (qtd. in Drakakis 3–4). Shakespeare, instead of allowing readers a “toleration of unpleasure” that eventually ends in an indirect but ultimately satisfying and tragic ending, thwarts readers of these “pleasurable” miseries. All miseries in the play seem to end without chance of redemption or even meaning at times. Hector dies without the ability to be heroic, Troilus neither gets his revenge nor his love back, the Greeks win their victory, but do it through sinister means, and all seems miserable and inconclusive. As readers, we don’t quite know what to do with this strange and abrupt ending. And we are not rewarded with a

pleasurable misery like we should be in a tragedy: “Troilus’s passion and despair are set within a philosophical essay on history, so that the audience is struck by how indifferent the greater world is to Troilus’s personal agony.” This is set in sharp contrast to other tragedies, such as *Hamlet*, where “the opposite is true: the corruption of Denmark is intimately integrated with Hamlet’s personal sense of corruption: the world around him contributes to and reflects his personal tragedy” (Marsh 241).

Because we expect the world to end along with the tragedy, (as they so often seem to in other tragedy), we are jarred by the unsympathetic ends that the characters meet with. In this way, Shakespeare uses a traditional tragic convention and turns it around. Why does he do this? Its effect is depressing and unsatisfying, but requires more inner reflection from the audience than a clichéd tragic convention would elicit. Audiences and readers internalize the play more because it seems to speak more closely to reality, where the world doesn’t end when something tragic happens.

Shakespeare also employs irony, a hallmark feature of comedy, in *Troilus and Cressida*, but uses it differently by creating a commentary about deeper, more universal themes—yet another effect of the ungenred play’s ability to push the audience past the conventions of genre. The political philosophies that Shakespeare introduces within the play are constantly satirized and mocked, but in a decidedly tragic manner. For example, Troilus’s speech when he discovers Cressida’s unfaithfulness is much more poignant and heartfelt than his previous empty speeches about his love for Cressida:

This is she? No; this is Diomed’s Cressida.

If beauty have a soul, this is not she;

If souls guide vows, if vows be sanctimonies,

If sanctimony be the gods' delight,  
 If there be rule in unity itself,  
 This was not she. O madness of discourse,  
 That cause sets up with and against itself!  
 Bifold authority! where reason can revolt  
 Without perdition, and loss assume all reason  
 Without revolt; this is, and is not, Cressid. (5.2.135–44)

The speech itself introduces irony, for the assumptions that Ulysses makes in his speech about degree in Act I assume that “the universe *ought* to be an integral whole, in which everything has its proper status in a divinely-ordained hierarchal order, and therefore an absolute value, an absolute integrity” (Rossiter 65). Troilus uses this reasoning to attempt to reason Cressida back to her former self: if “beauty have a soul, this is not she,” and if all of the “truths” that he had previously assumed were correct are right, then “this is not she.” However, the irony is that this new, false Cressida *is* Cressida, and therefore, all of Troilus’s “if” statements are rendered false, and the order and degree that Ulysses stressed are false. Troilus is then calling into question the link between perception and law, trying to align the law of the ordered universe with the “law” that Cressida must love him because she is Cressida. So are Ulysses’s theories incorrect? Or is Troilus simply ignorant of the truth? This is the kind of reasoning and deep reflection that Shakespeare achieves for his audience by applying irony to a deeper, overarching theme than we would ordinarily find it applied to in a comedy. Shakespeare once again defies the bounds of genre to push the audience to reflect on something deeper.

Another function of genre that Shakespeare renders impossible in *Troilus and Cressida* is a tragic one—namely, the audience’s ability to sympathize and connect with the tragic hero.

“The audience is collectively encouraged to *identify* with the tragic hero, to move through the same experience as a figure such as Hamlet, in order to reach a point where the working out of the character’s neurosis onstage produces a catharsis in the spectators through which tension is relieved.” (Rossiter 63). This catharsis is not met by Shakespeare’s characters. Troilus, perhaps the most obvious choice for sympathy, is less effective as a jilted lover because his motives towards Cressida seem lusty, and his object of affection seems silly at best. After she is wooed by Diomedes, she says, “Troilus farewell, one eye yet looks on thee, / But with my heart the other eye doth see” (5.2.106–7). We see “Troilus’s idealized queen of courtly romance is not there. She is a chatty, vulgar little piece, and in the rhyming soliloquy at the end . . . the principles of the loftily chaste heroines of *amour courtois* are brought down exactly to the level of Mrs. Peachum’s advice in *The Beggar’s Opera*” (Rossiter 63). So what does the audience do with characters that can’t be sympathized with? Shakespeare forces audiences to see the characters as they truly are—full of flaws and inconsistencies—and forces them to focus more readily on the overarching political and philosophical messages of the play, messages that may be more important than the characters themselves (and that a true tragic hero might overshadow).

So what are the effects of the viewer as they see an ungenred play? *Troilus and Cressida* triggers a reaction in the audience—they are jarred by the lack of a coherent ending and must make sense of the play. This need to find meaning triggers reflection of the play’s purpose (whether philosophical, political, or moral). Some viewers, plagued by the inaccessibility of the lack of genre, will fail to come to any greater analysis of the play. They will label it as difficult, problematic, and confusing. Yet, by insisting that the play have a typical genre assigned to it, viewers miss Shakespeare’s purpose. He attempts to call into question the traditional genres and forces viewers to analyze freely. Such unstructured interpretation is often discouraged by our

current educational system and our society's tendency to categorize, and yet it is this very independence can lead to a more profound conclusion about any number of elements within the play.

Although *Troilus and Cressida* may be neither tragedy nor comedy, refusing to be labeled, we find greater depth in the play because of this difficulty. Because of its denial to conform to the standards of any genre in particular, the text refuses easy interpretation, and forces audiences to respond, react, and think for themselves while simultaneously showing the limits of the other genres, which don't have the same ability to procure interpretation without preconceived generalizations. And while the play remains complicated to dissect, especially for those unwilling to look at the play without comparing it to Shakespeare's other plays, for those who are willing to look past the difficulties of interpretation, they find a play full of deep philosophical, political, and literary value. They will find less of a problem play and more of a *promise* play—a play that promises depth and reward.

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