

Literature Insights  
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# Shakespeare

## Troilus and Cressida

Terry Hodgson

*“The most  
modern of  
Shakespeare’s  
Plays”*

# PUBLICATION DATA

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Terry Hodgson

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## A Note on the Author

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Dr Hodgson is a Cambridge graduate and Senior Lecturer Emeritus in Literature and Drama of the University of Sussex. After a post-graduate Certificate of Education at Cambridge he spent three years teaching a variety of science and arts subjects at secondary level in the Royal Navy followed by two years in Paris where he taught English in a French *lycée*, studying at the Sorbonne and as a scholar of the British Institute in Paris. He married and became a British Council lecturer for four years in Turku, Finland where he taught English Language and Literature at the Finnish and Swedish speaking universities. Leaving Finland, he obtained a post for three years as Staff Tutor at the Oxford University Delegacy for Extra-Mural Studies where he organized and lectured on courses of his own devising in English and European literature and drama. When the University of Sussex took over responsibility for adult education he took up a joint post shared between the Sussex Schools of European and English and American Studies and the new Sussex Centre for Continuing Education where he became responsible for the organisation and teaching of many part-time undergraduate certificates and engaged in the full-time English undergraduate and post-graduate arts programme. He continued to teach summer and short intensive adult courses for Oxford and Cambridge University Continuing Education Departments.

He has been teaching Shakespeare, drama and literature for many years and has found it important and enlightening to teach with and perform under professional actors and directors. Taking many roles in Little Theatre productions of plays by Shakespeare, Chekhov, Brecht and many others has been similarly instructive. He has published books on modern drama, including one on Tom Stoppard, and an extensive dictionary of dramatic terms (*The Batsford Dictionary of Drama*). His post-graduate qualifications include a diploma in dramatic writing and his doctorate, consisting of an anthology of fifty poems with a related thesis, reflects his interest in creative writing generally.

# 1. Foreword

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*Troilus and Cressida* was probably written soon after *Hamlet* when Shakespeare was at the height of his powers. This may be confirmed by his brilliant creation of character, his complex handling of stage movement and his mastery of multiple styles of prose and blank verse. We have no evidence, however, that it was performed on the English stage before the twentieth century and for this there are several possible explanations. It is a play with a double plot, in which the love element, relating especially to the figure of Cressida, is counterpoised against a representation of the Trojan war. This would seem an attractive subject, as it was to Chaucer, although the general tone of Shakespeare's treatment of the two themes of the play is disconcertingly bitter and satirical. This would not, in itself, in the early seventeenth century, have made it unpopular, since it is in accord with the astringent tone of Jacobean plays by contemporaries such as Jonson, Webster and Middleton. But the play has a surprising structure, an apparent lack of conclusion, which is initially puzzling. It also contains a series of demanding intellectual debates which require considerable concentration in the theatre and may have been aimed, it has often been suggested, at a highly sophisticated audience, perhaps at the Inns of Court, rather than at the popular theatres. In addition it contains material which might have been seen as offensive to contemporary and powerful Elizabethan figures, especially at the dangerous period, just before the death of the old Queen. This may help to explain why there is no evidence of production in Shakespeare's time.

The puzzling form and the astringent, intellectual quality of the play may also be reasons why it was, in all likelihood, not produced on an English stage, with the exception of John Dryden's moralistic reworking of it, for three hundred years until the twentieth century. Since then, however, it has become very popular. Shakespeare's clinical analysis of idealist views of the nature of love would become more acceptable with the growth of Freudian depth psychology. So, too, would his mockery of heroic attitudes and martial rhetoric which anticipates the new style whereby Sassoon and Owen conveyed the experience of the wars which have ravaged the world since 1914.

This eBook treats *Troilus and Cressida* as a masterpiece in tune with human attitudes and literary and dramatic forms which developed through the last century. It

is highly dramatic and emphasis will be placed on the theatricality and modernity of a play unlike any other in the canon, even the ‘problem’ plays, such as *Measure for Measure* and *Alls Well That Ends Well*, with which it has been compared. The play which is closest would seem to be *Hamlet*, a very good reason for studying it in the depth it deserves.

I would like to salute the scholars, theatre directors, actors and theatre workers who have brought this play back to life on the stage. Among the scholars I count Charles Moseley, literary editor of this series, and thank him for his persistence in asking me to write this book. I would also like to include my wife in these acknowledgements for her recommendations and assiduity in checking and rechecking the text.

## 2. Story and Sources

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The story of Troilus and Cressida developed in the mediaeval period from vestigial references to it in classical Greek and Latin literature. But it derives from one of the most famous legends of antiquity, recounted in Homer's *Iliad*, which depicts the famous Ten Year War between Greeks and Trojans. Zeus, King of the Gods, decides that the earth contains too many human beings and allows the Goddess of Strife, Eris, to provoke a quarrel by throwing an apple, destined for the fairest, between Hera, Athena and Aphrodite. Aphrodite bribes Paris, brother of Troilus and son of Priam, King of Troy, to find her more beautiful than her two fellows. His reward will be the most beautiful woman in the world, Helen, wife of Menelaus, King of Sparta. When Paris steals her, Menelaus and his brother Agamemnon, King of Mycenae, assemble a fleet of the kings of Greece, sacrifice Agamemnon's daughter, Iphigenia, to get a fair wind and sail across the Aegean to Troy. The long war for the recapture of Helen ensues.

Troilus is one of the fifty sons of Priam, King of Troy, and brother to Hector, the most valiant Trojan warrior, and Paris, lover of Helen. He appears only briefly in *The Iliad* when Homer reports Priam lamenting Troilus' death (*Iliad* Book 24, line 257). Later accounts (especially Proclus's prose summary of the non-extant *Cypria*) report that he was killed by the Greek hero, Achilles. Archaic art from the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. onwards adds to our knowledge of the story. It portrays Achilles' ambush of Troilus, his pursuit and slaughter on the altar of Apollo and the battle over the Trojan's body. In Book I of Virgil's *Aeneid*, Aeneas, having travelled to Carthage, gazes in wonder at the representation of scenes from the Trojan War. Later Virgil describes Troilus, ill-matched in conflict with Achilles, carried along by his horses, fallen backwards but clinging to the empty car, clasping the reins, his neck and hair dragged over the ground and the dust scored by his reversed spear. This part of the story is not found in Shakespeare's play, which ends with Troilus crying vengeance on Achilles for killing and dragging Hector round Troy at his horses' tail.

The love story of Troilus and Cressida, which counterpoints Shakespeare's account of the war, does not appear in *The Iliad*. It is a purely mediaeval invention which derives from Benoît de Sainte-Maure's collection of legends in his *Roman de*

*Troie* (c.1165). Benoît inspired a Latin translation by Guido delle Colonne, on which Boccaccio (1313–1375) worked freely in a poem in nine cantos entitled *Il Filostrato*, composed in Naples in 1337–9. It begins in the middle of the Trojan War at the moment when Calchas, the Trojan High Priest, takes refuge in the Greek camp. His daughter Cressida remains in Troy and inspires a violent passion in Troilus, the last of Priam's sons. Troilus communicates with her through a clever go-between, Pandarus, Cressida's cousin. Cressida is delighted without appearing to seem so but finally Boccaccio voluptuously celebrates the lovers drinking together the cup of love. Their happiness is brief. In the course of a new battle, famous warriors are killed or taken prisoner. The two camps exchange captives and in this way Calchas obtains his daughter Cressida. Cressida departs from Troy in desperation, swearing her eternal love of Troilus, but soon forgets her vow. Troilus learns of this from his brother Deiphobus, who brings him a piece of the Greek warrior Diomedes' clothing on which is pinned a clasp which Troilus had given to Cressida. In despair Troilus throws himself into the battle in order to meet his rival and kill many Greeks but succumbs to the invulnerable Achilles. This is the basic story which Chaucer would reshape and which Shakespeare in turn altered. *Il Filostrato* has all the feel of Boccaccio's early and easy loves in Naples, with his Fiammetta among others, which he also uses in the stories of his *Decameron* (1350–55). It probably became known to the first major English poet, Geoffrey Chaucer (1340–1400), during his journey to Genoa and Florence as envoy of the English king in 1372 when Boccaccio was still alive in Florence. On the basis of *Il Filostrato*, Chaucer wrote his famous *Troilus and Criseyde* (c.1383–5). The English poet developed the characterization and where Boccaccio had concentrated on the story, Chaucer brings humour, especially to the completely reworked representation of Pandarus, and keen psychological insight to the passion of the lovers. Where the Italian story had emphasized the sorrow of Troilus, deriving this, so some critics conjecture, from Boccaccio's abandonment by Fiammetta, Chaucer, or rather his narrator, adds a more deeply sympathetic treatment of Cressida's conduct.

In the fifteenth century the story was taken up by several writers. In France the elegant French prose version of Loys de Beauvau (c.1410–1462) is important for its style. A little later Robert Henryson (c.1425–1500) wrote in Chaucer's *rime royal* the famous *Testament of Cresseid*, (printed as Book 6 of *Troilus* by Thynne in his complete edition of Chaucer in 1532) in which Diomedes tires of Cressida and abandons her. She takes refuge with her father and complains to Venus and Cupid of her fate. The gods gather in council to decide what punishment her blasphemies deserve. Saturn takes away her beauty and joy in life; Diana infects her with leprosy. Henceforth she