

# Bitter Fruit: Troilus and Cressida in Queen Elizabeth's Court

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In his introduction to the Folger edition of *Troilus and Cressida* Louis B. Wright wrote, "Some scholars have been tempted to see a precise parallel between the situation in the Grecian camp and conditions in England during the period of the Earl of Essex's quarrel with the Queen and his subsequent rebellion. Such an interpretation, however, raises many problems... [the author] would not have been so unwise as to put his neck in a noose by writing a thinly disguised political allegory certain to bring down upon his head the wrath of the authorities."

Later, however, he makes this observation: "One reason for [the story of Troy's] popularity was the belief that Englishmen were 'true Trojans,' that London had been founded by Brutus, the great-grandson of Aeneas, and that the English nation had sprung from this noble Trojan."<sup>1</sup> R.A. Foakes amplifies this with the observation that the Elizabethan writers Heywood, Spenser, and Drayton also affirmed the London-Troy connection. "These poets were all celebrating the famous origins of Britain, and the ancestry of Queen Elizabeth... The Queen even quartered the arms of a mythical Trojan in one version of her official coat of arms..."<sup>2</sup>

Certainly the author of *T&C* makes little attempt to conceal the contemporary background of his bitter satire, most strikingly in its closing lines when Pandarus recalls "some galled goose of Winchester," a blatantly insulting reference to the Bishop of Winchester, under whose wing brothels so flourished that a prostitute was commonly called a "Winchester goose." The author means for us to understand that, in this play, Troy is London.

In fact, allegory was the accepted literary device for those who wished to comment on the political scene. This was Spenser's method. Indeed, in an age of near total press control ("Art made tongue-tied by authority," as Sonnet 66 complains) what other method would be left? Not that the authorities didn't understand.

Take the case of Elizabeth I and *Richard II*. When reminded that members of the Essex faction had arranged a performance of this play (in which a vain

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and effeminate Monarch is deposed by the virile rebel Henry Bolingbroke) as prelude to the ill-fated rebellion of her favorite (who had often been compared to Bolingbroke), she is said to have snapped, "I am Richard II. Know ye not that?"

Then there was the mysterious uproar that surrounded a 1597 play called *The Isle of Dogs*. England is an isle, of course, and "dogs" was Elizabethan slang for playwrights, but this play was filled with such terrible yet never explained "seditious and slanderous matter" that the authorities wiped all trace of its text from the public record.

In light of this it would be fair to take at his word the declaration Shakespeare put in the mouth of his truth-loving Prince Hamlet when he warns the Queen's chief councilor, Polonius, "The players... are the abstract and brief chronicles of the time." (II.ii) Later, he informs the deceiving daughter of this scheming politician, "The players cannot keep counsel; they'll tell all." (III.ii)

This from a character, nominally the prince of a Danish Court long past, who will banter elsewhere about London theater gossip of the years immediately following the Essex Rebellion, including specific reference to the Globe Theater and the "late innovation" (ie, rebellion). (II.ii)

That Shakespeare was playing the same game as many of his fellow writers in self-evident. But the audacity of his political satire has rarely been explored.

It was as far back as 1869 that the scholar George Russell French first identified the character of Polonius as a lampoon of William Cecil, Lord Burghley, Queen Elizabeth's principal minister. French even went on to note that Burghley's son, Robert, and daughter, Anne, might be taken for Laertes and Ophelia.<sup>3</sup> Sir Edmund K. Chambers later concurred.<sup>4</sup> Since then, the evidence for this identification has continued to accumulate to the point where it is conclusive.

Following the declaration of Hamlet, I am inclined to study Shakespeare's plays as abstracts and brief chronicles of his time. I find they make a tapestry that provides an illuminating real world background to his art, an art in which the drama of court life is vibrantly reflected. In pursuing this I will cite a number of scholars who have detected patterns of imagery and incident interconnecting the plays and poems of Shakespeare. My assumption will always be that the author was inspired by reality.

The general consensus has been that the plays *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, *Hamlet*, *T&C*, and the enigmatic poem *The Phoenix and the Turtle* were all composed in the years prior to and following the Essex Rebellion, that is, between 1599 and 1602. These are the works we will look at.

In *The Question of Hamlet*, Harry Levin rightly observed, "*Troilus and Cressida* has close affinities with *Hamlet* in composition and in temper."<sup>5</sup> In

his introduction to the Signet edition of *T&C*, the late Daniel Seltzer continues this line of thought: "It may be helpful to observe... that many of the problems that challenge Hamlet's mind are paralleled by those that confuse the Trojan princes and the Greek generals. In both [plays] the authority of law is opposed by individual desire or private principle... the definition of honor, 'rightly to be great,' is strenuously argued by those who have most at stake."<sup>6</sup>

D.A. Traversi, in *An Approach to Shakespeare*, develops this theme. "The Trojan devotion to honor... is devotion to an abstraction that has no sufficient basis in reason... but to abandon honor for its lack of rational foundation is to expose oneself to the danger of lethargy, to a rooted disinclination to act at all." He then notes, "The relation of this to *Hamlet*, and in particular to such a soliloquy as, "How all occasions do inform against me" (IV.iv) is worth careful consideration."<sup>7</sup>

My immediate concern here is to consider the close relationship between the characters, Troilus and Hamlet, as well as the respective courts in which they operate. Both young men are princes of the realm, romantic idealists with a keen sense of honor and a great hunger for truth. (Truth is a word never far from Troilus' lips.) Both experience deep love for women of doubtful constancy. For Hamlet, both Ophelia and the Queen are not to be trusted. Troilus will eventually discover there is little difference between his Cressida and the adulterous Helen of Troy who, like Gertrude, is a central figure in her court.

Some might object that Troilus lacks the stature of Hamlet. He has been decried by Jusserand in *A Literary History of the English People* as "a whining babbler."<sup>8</sup> But I.A. Richards demonstrates in an essay published in *Speculative Instruments* that that characterization is mistaken.<sup>9</sup>

Ulysses, a man in touch with the "mystery" (ie, the secrets) of the Trojan state as well as his own, describes Troilus to his king as "a true knight... firm of word... his heart and hand both open and both free... manly as Hector, but more dangerous." (IV.v.96-104)

It is in his handling of Cressida's betrayal that Troilus reveals his true depth of character. Richards argues that Shakespeare, either "through the Language or the Tradition," was familiar with Plato's *Republic* and used it extensively in this play. He then quotes from it: "...a good man who is ruled by reason will take such blows of fate as the loss of a son or anything very dear to him less hardly than other people.... Reason says that nothing in man's existence is to be taken so seriously, and our grief keeps us back from the very thing we need as quickly as possible in such times, [which is] to take thought on the event...." (ibid).

Richards goes on to show how Troilus, when he witnesses Cressida's

betrayal (V.ii), goes through the changes advised. He is not torn apart by this profound wounding of his heart. Instead, as Coleridge wrote, “having a depth of calmer element in a will stronger than desire, more entire than choice... the same moral energy is represented as snatching him aloof from all neighborhood with her dishonor.”

Troilus is no “whining babbler,” he is Hamlet’s ideal, the man “that is not passion’s slave.” (*Hamlet* III.ii)

Add to this that the speech Hamlet requests of the Player King laments the fall of Troy. Or recall Troilus’ uncanny echoing of Hamlet’s response to a nosy Polonius on what he reads—“Words, words, words...” (*Hamlet*, II.ii.192)—with his own response to an equally nosy Pandarus—“words, words, mere words; no matter...” (*T&C*, V.iii.108)

But for the alert reader these two scenes, considered together, can yield much interesting matter. In Hamlet’s scene he is treating Polonius as a man who would pander his own daughter to a prince. He calls him “a fishmonger,” and soon follows this with the extraordinary line, “For if the sun [Sun God, King] breed maggots in a dead dog, being a god [King] kissing carrion—Have you such a daughter?” (II.ii.181-2) Such evaluations of character do not deter the ever ambitious Polonius. Only a little later, in an aside, he tells us he will “contrive the means of meeting between him and my daughter.” (II.ii.211)

Lest we dismiss this as coincidence, we are given in these same scenes additional echoes, linking both the princes and their busy-body advisors. The book Hamlet reads, written by a “satirical rogue,” reports “old men have grey beards; that their faces are wrinkled, their eyes purging thick amber and plum-tree gum; and that they have a plentiful lack of wit, together with most weak hams” (196-200). Compare this with the complaining self-pity of Pandarus: “A whoreson rascally tisick so troubles me... that I shall leave you one o’ th’s days. And I have a rheum in mine eyes too, and such an ache in my bones that, unless a man were cursed, I cannot tell what to think on’t.” (101-106)

Did the author find in these two a common inspiration? Unless it was he who suffered from a “lack of wit,” I think so. There are other subtle touches linking Pandarus to Polonius and his prototype, Burghley.

As the power behind the throne of Elizabeth, William Cecil and Robert, the son he groomed to succeed him, were figures of extraordinary cunning and ambition. The bond the father forged with Elizabeth began when she was a defenseless girl accused of carrying the child of the treasonous Thomas Seymour and Cecil the shrewdest of the court lawyers sent to interrogate her. It lasted with unbroken intimacy till the day Cecil died. On the Continent, diplomats jokingly referred to England under him as “Cecilium.”<sup>10</sup> After Robert Cecil had crushed Essex, James of Scotland advised his ambassadors in

London that the little man was “king there *in effect*.”<sup>11</sup>

In *T&C* there is a comic encounter (III.i) between a servant and Pandarus where much is made of confusion concerning Lords, rank and God’s annointed. After mixing up the Lords of Troy with the Lord above, the servant tries to pin down Pandarus and the condition of his “honor.” “You are in the state of grace,” he would know. The misunderstanding in the old man’s response is telling. “Grace? Not so friend. Honor and lordship are my titles.” Pandarus has not heard what others would have, that is, a reference to the spiritual state necessary for salvation. Instinctively, he has modestly demurred from a title—Grace—reserved for those of royal blood. That he assumes the meaning tells the joke, another pointed jab at the Cecil family’s ascendancy over the English aristocracy, represented by Essex.

A number of scholars, including Dover Wilson, have suggested Essex as the model for Hamlet.<sup>12</sup> G. Wilson Knight, however, speaks for a whole tradition when, in *Shakespeare and Religion*, he finds “...the satire in *Troilus and Cressida* far too insulting for a poet whose tragic period was partly brought about by a personal sense of loss at Essex’s fall. And if Hamlet was so clear an Essex portrait, and Polonius a study of Burghley, surely Gertrude or Claudius must have seemed to correspond to Queen Elizabeth, and would not this have been suicidal?”<sup>13</sup>

So runs the conventional wisdom and so has it stymied all reasonable inquiry into Shakespeare’s relationship to the world he lived in and his favorite setting, the court. But what does the author tell us that could shed some light on this problem?

Daniel Seltzer makes some telling links between the steps Troilus takes on the path to self-knowledge, and those Shakespeare delineates in one of his most personal poems:

The subject matter of this poem clarifies the nature of Shakespeare’s thematic concerns in [T&C]... *The Phoenix and the Turtle* describes the remarkable union of the mythical Phoenix and the Turtledove, in which love was so complete that even Reason stands amazed at the sight. In this mating, we are told, “number... in love was slain,” for two separate lovers became one, and “Property” itself—the defining essence of the individual thing—was “appalled.” These two lovers, in themselves all “Beauty, truth and rarity,” do not survive their own union, but are consumed “In a mutual flame,” even as each finds absolute perfection in the other. In this play no miraculous marriage of “Truth and Beauty” deserves the repose of death. What Troilus sees, though the truth, runs counter to his ideal, and to this ideal, he is as constant as any genuinely tragic hero [such as Hamlet]. His vocabulary, as he tries to convince both

himself and Ulysses that what he has seen cannot actually have taken place, is very similar to that of *The Phoenix and the Turtle*. “If there be rule in unity itself,” he cries, “This was not she” (V.ii.138-39)—recalling the paradox in the poem that number (ie, that “one” cannot be “two”) “was slain,” that the lovers merged into one entity, yet preserved their distinct essences. Building upon the conceit that there must be two Cressidas [“This is, and is not, Cressid.”], he elaborates the most painful truth in the play: that what has seemed glorious and admirable, is not so. (xxxiv-v)

No one would suggest Shakespeare wrote *The Phoenix* about birds. Obviously, they stand for real people. Troilus compares himself to that emblem of eternally faithful love, the turtledove (III.ii.179). Hallett Smith, writing in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, comments, “Some critics have thought that the phoenix and the turtle darkly hint at Queen Elizabeth (who was often represented symbolically by the phoenix) and the Earl of Essex.”<sup>14</sup>

The great Lord Burghley ridiculed as Polonius and Pandarus? The Virgin Queen of sacred memory scorned as a faithless strumpet? For some scholars these are dark waters indeed. Again, G. Wilson Knight would speak for them. “The whole argument about the Shakespeare-Essex relation is shadowy and without evidence.” (ibid)

Yet most of what touches the actual life of Shakespeare is shadowy and without evidence. But if the court of Queen Elizabeth and the Queen herself was his true subject, then this lack of evidence is not surprising, particularly if what Shakespeare has to say is true. Early in the play, Cressida and Pandarus have a curious exchange. He says, “You are such a woman a man knows not at what ward you lie.” (Ward is a position of defense in swordplay.) She replies, “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.” (I.ii)

Honesty, of course, means chastity. She seems to imply that her reputation for that depends on secrecy and the backing of this key advisor. Is this the Virgin Queen and Burghley in private conversation? I think so.

We have grown used to the idea that Richard III’s reputation was blackened by Tudor propaganda and subsequent English historians who followed that line. It has been said that Shakespeare was one of this ilk—though his *Richard III* may, in reality, be a portrait of the crook-backed Robert Cecil. However that may be, it is only very recently that we have come to see how artificially whitened Elizabeth’s own reputation has been. The figure drawn by Carolly Erickson in her 1983 book, *The First Elizabeth*, is far closer to a Gertrude or Cressida than the sanitized tradition has ever allowed.

As Seltzer notes, Shakespeare does indeed elaborate the most painful truths

in his plays: “what has seemed glorious and admirable, is not so.”

One may well wonder how Shakespeare knew—and how he escaped getting his neck put in a noose for daring to “tell all.”

Two plays usually placed in the years immediately preceding the ones under discussion are *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*. In both appear fools, Touchstone and Feste, as “all-licensed” as the nameless Fool in *King Lear*. And in both plays, Shakespeare has other characters admire in glowing terms the professional fool’s ability to speak truth to power and “cleanse the foul body of the infected world, if they will patiently receive my medicine.” (*ASTI*, II.vii.61-62) In this regard, it is significant to recall that Olivia reminds her offended steward that Feste is her “allowed fool” (*TN*, I.v) just as Achilles must remind Patroclus, his favorite, that the scurrilous Thersites “is a privileged man.” (*T&C*, II.iii) At Elsinore the only fool referred to is the beloved “poor Yorick,” whose skull the Prince holds in such proximity to his own. Perhaps there is no Fool in *Hamlet* because Hamlet is the Fool. A disgruntled Polonius does complain to the Queen, “Tell him his pranks have been too broad to bear with/And that your Grace hath screened and stood between/Much heat and him.” (*Hamlet*, III.iv)

I believe Shakespeare drew from life. Like other great writers he wrote what he knew. Since his subject was court life, he tells us plainly he enjoyed the protection of some great patron.

Polonius and Pandarus are Burghley, Gertrude and Cressida the Queen. Hamlet and Troilus may have been inspired in part by Essex but they are clearly mixed with elements of the author himself, the most amazing court jester who ever lived. Who he truly was remains an open question.

## Notes

1. Louis B. Wright, *Troilus and Cressida* (1966).
2. R. A. Foakes, “Troilus and Cressida Reconsidered,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 32 (1963).
3. George Russell French quoted in Tom Bethell’s “The Case for Oxford,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 268:4 (October 1991).
4. *ibid.*
5. Harry Levin, *The Question of Hamlet* (1959).
6. Daniel Seltzer, ed., *Troilus and Cressida* (Signet Classics, 1963).
7. D.A. Traversi, *An Approach to Shakespeare*, 2nd ed., revised (1956).
8. Jusserand, *A Literary History of the English People*, iii, 253.
9. I.A. Richards, *Speculative Instruments* (1955).

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10. Charlton Ogburn, *The Mysterious William Shakespeare* (1984).
11. Charlotte Stopes, *The Life of Henry Wriothesley, the 3rd Earl of Southampton* (Cambridge, 1922).
12. Dover Wilson, *What Happens in Hamlet* (Cambridge, 1935).
13. G. Wilson Knight, *Shakespeare and Religion* (1967).
14. Hallett Smith, *The Phoenix and the Turtle*, introduction (Riverside, 1974).