

11. *Troilus and Cressida*

The history of Western civilization can be written as the story of the disastrous consequences of dualism. Dualism began in the ancient world as a philosophical and religious idea which gradually filtered into general consciousness and into language to the point where, from the Renaissance onwards, it became almost impossible for educated Europeans to think in any but a dualistic way. Dualism is the belief that everything in life can be divided into two opposing principles or constituents; but basically that matter and spirit are independent entities yoked together in life in violation of the essential nature of each. About two thousand five hundred years ago, a remarkable change took place in man's concept of the gods, the movement towards monotheism, a single male godhead existing independently of the created universe as pure spirit. In its most extreme form this leads to the universal dichotomy of God on one side and the world, the flesh and the devil on the other. Dualism sunders god and nature. It also sunders male and female, encouraging man to frame concepts of militant heroism which ride roughshod over the female in all its manifestations. And it sunders mind from body.

Dualism might not have been so disastrous had it not so often involved value judgements. That is, one of the artificially separated components is usually labelled good and to be fostered, the other bad, to be eliminated or suppressed. Thus man wages war against his own wholeness and the wholeness of his world, in the attempt to impose his own will, vain aspirations and blinkered vision on the world.

In the Middle Ages these beliefs were expressed in elaborate systems and hierarchies such as the Great Chain of Being. This envisaged the whole of creation as a chain each link of which was a species or class of objects. The chain descended from the throne of god, passed through all the heavenly orders - seraphs, cherubs, thrones, denominations, virtues, powers, principalities, archangels and angels to man, and then down through the beasts, birds, reptiles, fishes, plants and minerals, ending at the lowest stone. The image of links in a chain implied that each species shared properties or attributes with those above and below it.

The position of man in the great chain was critical, since that link alone had to hold together the heavenly and earthly, spiritual and material creations. And every individual man had to find a way of coping with the division of his being between faculties he shared with the angels, his reason and judgement, and those he shared with the beasts, his appetites, instincts and passions, and, of course, his mortality. Such a man is primed for tragedy.

Awareness of this problem and the stating of it in these terms had remained constant for over two thousand years, from Pythagoras through the Platonists and neo-Platonists to such Renaissance thinkers as Pico della Mirandola and Giordano Bruno, who was in England in 1583-5, where he met or influenced Raleigh, Marlowe, Sidney and John Dee (the original of Prospero).

Never was the problem more acutely felt and widely discussed than in Elizabethan England. Two very different views were held about how man should attempt to solve the riddle of his own divided nature. The more common was to assume that the chain was also a ladder, and that the duty of man was to climb as high as possible. An Elizabethan formulation of this idea was the translation of Romei's *Courtier's Academy* published in 1598 (two years or so before *Hamlet*):

It is in our power to live like a plant, living creature, like a man, and lastly like an angel; for if a man addict himself only to feeding and nourishment he becometh a plant, if to things sensual he is a brute beast, if to things reasonable and civil he groweth a celestial creature; but if he exalt the beautiful gift of his mind to things invisible and divine he transformeth himself into an angel and, to conclude, becometh the son of God.

[Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture*, 75]

But others held that if God had wanted us to be angels, he would have created us angels in the first place; that to aspire above the place allotted to us in the scheme of things was to fall into the sin of pride; that the unique challenge to man was to accept and attempt to reconcile within him the opposing forces, to achieve a balance and harmony of his faculties. Theologians and moralists tended towards the first party, poets towards the second.

Shakespeare, I suggest, belonged firmly in this second camp. All his mature works have this inner conflict at the heart. His favoured terms for it are 'blood' for the bestial side and 'judgement' for the angelic. Tragedy puts the protagonist in the situation where any imbalance or separation of blood and judgement prevents him from coping with the pressures upon him. Hamlet conspicuously fails to get the balance right until the last act, though he admires Horatio as one whose blood and judgement are well commingled. In *Hamlet* the conflict is within the mind of one man. In *Othello* it is separated out into two characters, Othello and Iago. In *Troilus and Cressida* it becomes a conflict between warring armies and the ways of life each is fighting for.

Qualities deriving from the blood are spurned by many moralists, but not by Shakespeare. Properly disciplined by judgement they appear as virtues: valour, honour, action, resolution, generosity, imagination, love ... But without that check they are exposed to corruption and appear as rationalization of impulse, credulity, hot-headedness, sentimentality, sensuality, appetite...

The Trojans are much more attractive than the Greeks. They are romantic idealists. But the ideals they live by and are prepared to die for are exposed as the idealization of worldly appetites such as sex, beautiful possessions, name and fame. They are not ratified by judgement, which would have revealed them to be unrealistic and self-indulgent. Stripped of the idealization and the bright plumage they are seen to be perilously close to several of the deadly sins. We see them in their most naked and degraded form in the figure of Pandarus.

Shakespeare's most immediate source was Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, where Chaucer transposed Boccaccio's version of the story to medieval Provence, where his Trojans live in strict accordance with the rules and ideals of Courtly Love. These he exposes as fragile and spiritually sterile. The ghost of Troilus in heaven sums them up as 'these wretched worldes appetites', and laughs bitterly as he looks down on 'all our work that follweth so / The blinde Lust, the which that may not last, / And shoulde[n] all our

heart on Heaven cast'. Shakespeare's version has no such Christian resolution, but the negative assessment of Troy is much the same.

Shakespeare's Troilus is trying to refine sensual experience, to load it with such extreme subjective value that it becomes a substitute for spiritual experience. With Cressida as more or less accidental object, and without regard for her intrinsic qualities, he works himself up to a pitch of sensual and emotional excitement which he mistakes for heaven – an absolute untouchable by time or chance. He literally idolizes Cressida, makes an idol of her. Having mistaken sexual excitement for love, he then invests his life and soul in that false love, and in the unfortunate Cressida, who has never laid claim to any of the qualities with which he invests her.

From the very beginning of the play, Troilus is presented as a callow adolescent. His language is inflated and overheated, and particularly exposed as such by juxtaposition with the sordid realism of Pandarus, who knows his niece and knows the ways of the world. Pandarus reduces the whole affair to what it essentially is, a matter of providing a bed and a chamber. But even without Pandarus to puncture them, Troilus' speeches betray the source of his feelings in enflamed sensuality, enflamed to the point of disease. He describes his own heart as an open ulcer. His first declaration of the quality of his love concentrates in a dozen lines a host of ugly images which undermine the intended sense: drowned, indrenched, mad, ulcer, handlest, ink, harsh, hard, gash and knife.

In Troilus' praise of Cressida's beauty Shakespeare uses a trick he invented for Orsino in *Twelfth Night*, and which is to reach its ultimate development in this play in relation to Helen, the ambiguous or back-handed compliment. In comparison with Cressida, Troilus claims, 'all whites are ink' and the cygnet's down is harsh. The trick is to give all the linguistic, poetic weight to the negative side of the comparison, thus leaving us with a vague sense of Cressida staining and spoiling everything she touches. The effect is unmistakable when we are later told that Helen's beauty 'wrinkles Apollo's and makes stale the morning'.

Troilus is not very bright. He is like an adolescent Othello, whose passion (whatever passion happens to be uppermost at the moment) leads him by the nose. Unlike Othello, Troilus does make some attempt at thinking. This is about the best he can manage:

I take today a wife, and my election
Is led on by the conduct of my will;
My will enkindled by mine eyes and ears,
Two traded pilots 'twixt the dangerous shores
Of will and judgement – how may I avoid,
Although my will distaste what it elected,
The wife I choose?

Troilus is convinced that he has here marshalled a strictly logical argument in favour of not giving Helen back. There are, however, at least two major errors in his logic which lead him to a preposterous conclusion. The first error is in his utter confusion about the meaning of the word 'will'. In Elizabethan usage the word had two almost opposite meanings. One of them is almost synonymous with judgement, as in our modern phrases

‘free-will’ and ‘will-power’. The function of this will is to rule over the passions. The other meaning is synonymous with passion itself, desire, appetite. It is in this second sense that Hector has just claimed, with perfect logic, that ‘value dwells not in particular will’ and that ‘the will dotes that is attributive / To what infectiously itself affects’. Troilus uses the word four times in six lines. In the first use the meaning is clear, and it is meaning 1:

I take today a wife, and my election
Is led on in the conduct of my will.

In other words, when one deliberately and freely chooses a wife, one does so by the exercise of one’s judgement. In his second use of the word – ‘My will enkindled by mine eyes and ears’, he seems to have drifted nearer to the second meaning, since passion is much more likely than judgement to be inflamed by the senses. It is the function of judgement precisely to resist the tyranny of the physical senses. His third use seems to be unequivocally meaning 2:

Two traded pilots ‘twixt the dangerous shores
Of will and judgement.

If Troilus had said ‘the dangerous shores of passion and reason, or blood and judgement, there would have been no problem. He would have been giving precise expression to the commonplace idea that passion and reason are equally dangerous opposites – a Scylla and Charybdis between which a man must steer in his perilous journey through a dualistic world. If he steers too close to the shore of passion, the fate of Othello awaits him; if too close to the shore of reason, the fate of Hamlet. But by choosing the exact words he does, in this context, Troilus gets himself into a linguistic and logical mess. His fourth use of ‘will’ – ‘although my will distaste what it elected’, the word seems to need both meanings at once. The will which elects is judgement, but the will which distastes is appetite. The confusion works to give to appetite a spurious status stolen from judgement.

Judgement is not the same as reason. Judgement is the faculty which does the steering between the dangerous shores – in Troilus’ own image, the pilot. But having made judgement itself into one of the dangerous shores, Troilus has to look elsewhere for his pilot, and this leads to his second error. Eyes and ears, far from being skilled pilots, are of all human faculties those most likely to be entirely at the service of the passions, and therefore prone to error. Cressida realizes this earlier than Troilus:

The error of our eye directs our mind.
What error leads must err; O, then conclude,
Minds swayed by eyes are full of turpitude.

A few lines later Troilus too has to repudiate the evidence of eyes and ears if he is to hold on to the illusions (themselves created by eyes and ears) on which his integrity has come to depend:

Sith yet there is a credence in my heart,

An esperance so obstinately strong,
That doth invert th'attest of eyes and ears,
As if those organs had deceptious functions,
Created only to calumniate.

Othello shows more self-knowledge than Troilus when, at the beginning of his collapse he says:

My blood begins my safer guides to rule,
And passion having my best judgement collid
Assays to lead the way.

Troilus is not consciously misusing language and twisting logic. The physical attractions of Cressida, transmitted to his mind by his eyes, are so strong that they sway his mind to concoct rationalizations by which he can justify that tyranny in pseudo-logical and quasi-religious terms, terms which the conventions of romantic love had made commonly available. His mind is reduced to finding reasons, quite unconsciously, for allowing himself to be ruled entirely by passion. As Hamlet puts it, 'reason pandars will'. Pandar himself objectifies the sordid reality on which Troilus erects his pseudo-religion, which is paralleled later in the play by the resplendent golden suit of armour in which is nothing more than a 'most putrefied core'. The same discrepancy between the fair without and the foul within is also to cost Troilus his life.

Troilus' contempt for reason is seen at its most overt in the great debate in the Trojan camp on whether to send Helen back. Hector has no difficulty in thinking straight and using language accurately. He berates Troilus:

Is your blood
So madly hot, that no discourse of reason,
Nor fear of bad success in a bad cause,
Can qualify the same? ...
The reasons you allege do more conduce
To the hot passion of distempered blood
Than to make up a free determination
'Twixt right and wrong: for pleasure and revenge
Have ears more deaf than adders to the voice
Of any true decision.

He speaks of the 'benumbed wills' and 'raging appetites' of those who can deny that the 'moral laws / Of nature and of nations speak aloud / To have her back returned'. Then, having delivered this opinion 'in way of truth', having, that is, made a free determination between right and wrong. He declares that truth of the decision is irrelevant, that the decision should not be made in terms of the truth and morality of the matter, but in terms of the 'joint and several dignities' of the Trojans. In other words, we would lose face if we admitted that we had been wrong from the start, so 'honour' requires that we continue to be in the wrong. Hector, in spite of his earlier demolition of Troilus' position, is now agreeing with him that anything in which one's honour is engaged is thereby made

gracious. Encouraged by this Troilus now appropriates still more outrageously the language of religion:

She is a theme of honour and renown,
A spur to valiant and magnanimous deeds,
Whose present courage may beat down our foes,
And fame in time to come canonize us.

This view of grace and saintliness in terms of valour displayed and fame acquired in any cause, runs counter to that of the church and shows clearly why the church could never ratify the ragbag of values covered by the term 'honour'.

Thus Troy commits itself to live and die for an honour which amounts to no more than to persist in doing wrong. Honour is as much a rationalization of an irrational passion for Hector as love is for Troilus, as Hector freely admits. Nevertheless he tries to make an absolute of it as something exclusively worth of the devotion of a man's life and faith. The play's verdict on the viability of this is evident in the description of Hector's death:

Come: tie his body to my horse's tail;
Along the field I will the Trojan trail.

Honour works only within an artificial context where everyone agreed to give it the same meaning and value. The Greeks have no interest in it.

The glamour and nobility of the Trojans is continually undercut by the imagery put into their mouths, imagery, for example, (far more than in any other play), of food, often distasteful, stale, leftover:

the remainder viands
We do not throw in unrespectful sieve,
Because we now are full.

The unconscious implication is that Helen is what is left of a dish that everyone has now had enough of, and is only being kept on the off-chance that someone might have a use for it warmed up in the future. Also in this play we find more images than elsewhere of buying and selling, especially of soiled clothing and second-hand goods:

We turn not back the silks upon the merchant
When we have soiled them.

Here the implication is that Helen, 'the ransacked queen', is too soiled to be returned to her husband. These images serve to tarnish the very qualities the Trojans are seeking to exalt.

When Troilus' ideals collapse, all he can see is the most disgusting evidence of appetite:

The bonds of heaven are slipp'd, dissolv'd, and loos'd;

And with another knot, five-finger-tied,
The fractions of her faith, orts of her love:
The fragments, scraps, the bits and greasy relics
Of her o'er-eaten faith are given to Diomed.

An imbalance in one direction invariably has to be paid for with a violent swing to the other extreme. We see exactly the same sudden transformation from unsustainable idealism to equally exaggerated disgust in Hamlet's

Nay, but to live
In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,
Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love
Over the nasty sty.

and in Othello's 'I will chop her into messes'.

After all the palaver about Helen in the first two acts, there is an almost sickening anticlimax at the beginning of the third, when we actually meet her and are given some insight into that for which so many Greeks and Trojans have died and will yet die. Pandarus' commentary on the dalliance of Helen and Paris reduces love to an ever-tickling sore. He rightly concludes that a love which is no more than hot blood, hot thoughts and hot deeds is a generation of vipers.

If Shakespeare is hard on the Trojans, he is even harder on the Greeks. If the blood of the Trojans is too hot, that of the Greeks is too cold and sluggish. If the Trojan disease is an inflammation and a fever, the Greek disease is a jaundice and a paralysis. The whole of the interminable Greek council of war in Act. I sc.3 is an elaboration of Hamlet's lines:

Thus conscience doth make cowards of us all
And the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought;
And enterprises of great pitch and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry
And lose the name of action.

Like Hamlet's soliloquies the Greek councils always end further from decisive action than they started.

Again, the language of the Greeks betrays the symptoms of their disease. Agamemnon's first speech is clogged with clumsy latinisms: conflux, tortive, errant, protractive, persistent. It is no wonder that all their plans have gone awry, 'bias and thwart'. Their talents are for 'bedwork, mappery, closet war'. The Trojans are free and debonair. The entry of Aeneas is like a breath of fresh air and shaft of sunlight into an airless room. The Greeks are embroiled in 'pale and bloodless emulation', squabbles about status, elaborate deceptions designed to get their lethargic champions onto the field,

to direct their energies outward towards the enemy rather than towards each other. Ulysses analyses the situation at great length. Whereas the Trojans are preoccupied with love and honour, the Greeks are preoccupied with power and status, and that too is a form of self-consuming appetite:

Then everything includes itself in power,
Power into will, will into appetite,
And appetite, an universal wold,
So doubly seconded with will and power,
Must make perforce an universal prey,
And last eat up himself.

Yet the outcome of all this analysis is yet another botched scheme aimed at resolving internecine conflicts. As Thersites puts it:

The policy of those crafty swearing rascals is not proved worth a blackberry. They set me up in policy that mongrel cur Ajax, against that dog of as bad a kind Achilles; and now is the cur Ajax prouder than the cur Achilles, and will not arm today; whereupon the Grecians begin to proclaim barbarism, and policy grows into an ill opinion.

The imbalance, incompleteness, of each side is most evident in their conflicting assessments of Helen. Helen is not, as Paris claims, 'her whom we know well / The world's large spaces cannot parallel'. But Diomedes is as far from the truth in the opposite direction:

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.

Similarly Cressida is neither the paragon of Troilus' overheated fancy nor the strumpet of Ulysses' cold analysis. Both are ordinary vulnerable women being used and abused by men in their love-games and war-games.

The Greeks are realists and rationalists. But reason alone, without sustenance from below, degenerates into apathy, paralysis, cowardice and cynicism. We see their values, stripped down and degraded, in the figure of Thersites. He and Pandarus are equally diseased. In Wilson Knight's words:

The critical intellect, by itself, unaided and unimpelled by intuition or some mode of faith, contains the seeds of its own destruction: it is uncreative, deformed. If values of beauty, love, honour, be subtracted from our view of man, what is left is profoundly stupid.

The image of swallowing is perhaps the most characteristic of the play – 'the hot digestion of this cormorant war'. To invest one's faith in temporal values, whether they

derive from the blood or the reason, is to make oneself hostage to 'time, force and death', and time devours all its hostages, swallows cities up. At the end of the play Thersites makes the most graphic and reductive use of this image:

What's become of the wenching rogues? I think they have swallowed one-another. I would laugh at that miracle; yet in a sort lechery eats itself.

It is as though the Greeks and the Trojans finally cancel each other out, leaving nothing but a littered desert:

What's past and what's to come is strewn with husks
And formless ruin of oblivion.

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