EPIC FRAGMENTATION: A STUDY IN PARTS OF SHAKESPEARE'S *TROILUS AND CRESSIDA*[1]

by Nathaniel Heisler

In his fragmentation of epic character, Shakespeare was stimulated by Michel de Montaigne's comments on the baffling variety of traits within individuals. References have often been made to Shakespeare's use of Montaigne's essays, but no work (to the best of my knowledge) has explored the links between Montaigne's "On the Inconstancy of Our Actions" and *Troilus and Cressida*. Arguably, the essay acts as a catalyst for the more extreme forms of fragmentation that Shakespeare employs in the conception of the world of *Troilus*. Montaigne says:

> *If I speak variously of myself, it is because I look at myself variously. All contradictions are to be found in me in some shape or manner. Bashful, insolent; chaste, lustful; talkative, taciturn; tough, delicate; ingenious, stupid; morose, affable; lying, truthful; learned, ignorant; and liberal, and miserly, and prodigal: I find all this in myself, more or less, according as I turn myself about; and whoever studies himself very attentively finds in himself, yes, even in his judgment, this mutability and discord.*[2]

Characterization in *Troilus and Cressida* does not operate according to the basic assumptions of unity that we generally ascribe to the holistic representation of identity. Montaigne's statement suggests that contradictions exist within every individual, and this is Shakespeare's basic assumption in *Troilus*. However, while Shakespeare is intent on exploring humanity's inherent contradictions, his characters are unaware that this is the game. They struggle to represent themselves within the literary confines of their epic characters, but their identities are not complete: leaving them to try and complete a thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle with pieces missing.

We can think of the characters in Shakespeare's play as being aware of their own existence as the dramatic conceptions of the actors playing them. Anthony B. Dawson suggests that:

> *What Shakespeare uniquely does . . . is to make his characters' literariness, their belatedness, part of the subject matter of his play. It is as if the characters were aware of their literary past, and mired in it. They are in a sense victims of their future fame.*[3]

If we allow the characters access to a certain foreknowledge of who they will become, then they will obviously act and interact differently within the dramatic presentation of the epic material. In *Troilus*, various characters seem at times on the verge of understanding the anachronistic situation they are caught in. This either leaves us with the sense that they are aware of their gradual fragmentation, or that they are sadly unaware, stuck in an ironic trap that only the audience is capable of appreciating. Agamemnon is an especially bad repeat offender. When he first addresses the Greek commanders, he talks of their trials, coming to the inevitable conclusion that this is "indeed naught else/ But the protractive trials of great Jove/ To find constancy in men" (1.3.19–21).[4] While these lines are meant to be

[1] This text is an abridged version of Nathaniel Heisler's senior thesis, *Epic Fragmentation: A Study in Parts of Shakespeare's 'Troilus and Cressida' and Marlowe's 'Dido, Queen of Carthage.'* (Peterborough, ON: Trent University, 2004).

[2] Michel de Montaigne, *The Essays of Michel de Montaigne*, trans. and ed. M.A. Screech (London: Allen Lane, 1991), p. 112.

[3] William Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*. Ed. Dawson, Anthony B. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 32.

[4] All quotations from *Troilus and Cressida* taken from: William Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*, Ed. David Bevington (London: Thompson Learning, 1998).

Heisler, Nathaniel. "Epic Fragmentation. A Study in the Parts of Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*". *Damian Moppett: The Visible Work. Vancouver:* Contemporary Art Gallery, 2005, 53-60.

said in a bluff manner (preferably pulling up his belt buckle and giving a little "huff"), the irony could not be greater, for the play leans toward exposing the inconstancy in men, and its characters can only last so long in the warring land before cracking under the pressure.

When greeting Hector at the challenge, Agamemnon gives a short speech that is also invested with stunning insight, but again it is unclear if he recognizes the implications of what he is saying:

> *Understand more clear:*
> *What's past and what's to come is strewed with husks*
> *And formless ruin of oblivion;*
> *But in this extant moment, faith and troth,*
> *Strained purely from all hollow bias-drawing,*
> *Bids thee, with most divine integrity,*
> *From heart of very heart, great Hector, welcome.*
> (4.5.166–72)

These lines are far too prophetic for the likes of Agamemnon, yet no one recognizes them to be anything more than a slightly pompous welcome. The lines draw the reader's attention to the question of time and agency in the play. The past and the future are "strewed with husks," perhaps referring to the hollow characters, such as Agamemnon himself, who are desperately struggling against the "formless" and "hollow." Not much time is required for characters to change shape, and this temporality, while not evident now, will soon come to be dominant in an increasingly mutable play.

Both Shakespeare's play and the characters within it are constantly struggling to negotiate their place in relation to the epic material on which they are based, in the face of the limitations and infinite possibilities offered by their rich sources. This negotiation results in a continuous attempt and failure to realize or assert a structured identity. Shakespeare does not conform to the basic assumptions of narrative. Barbara Everett describes the notion of "story" as something that "is not merely a random effect, but presupposes a creative wish to show how things hold together with a certain good purposiveness—a certain true coherence."[5] The playwright deliberately chooses to ignore this general formula. He takes no easy outs in this endeavor. He allows no possibility for closure (a concept he is more than wary of). He does not appeal to divine intervention, and there are no characters in the play capable of orchestrating success either by administrative abilities, manipulation or magic.

[5] Barbara Everett, "The Inaction of *Troilus and Cressida*," *Essays in Criticism* (vol. 32: pp. 119–35, 1982), p. 129.

Shakespeare does not allow himself a structure sufficient to hold the weight of the play. Instead, in time honoured epic tradition, Shakespeare "begins in the middle," placing his characters in the heat of the moment, ignoring the past, and refusing to create a historical ground on which the action can begin. In the *Ars Poetica*, Horace advanced the idea of beginning an epic

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"in medias res." By placing the poet in the middle of things, he will be better able to center the action and describe the unfolding events:

> *His aim is to fetch not smoke from a flash but light from smoke, that afterwards he may bring you marvels of the picturesque—Antiphates and the Cyclops, Scylla and Charybdis. He does not debate 'the Return of Diomed' from Meleager's death, nor the Trojan war from the twin eggs: he ever hurries to the crisis and carries the listener into the midst of the story as though it were already known; what he despairs of illuminating with his touch he omits; and so employs fiction, so blends false with true, that beginning, middle, and end all strike the same note.*[6]

[6] Horace, *Horace on the Art of Poetry*, trans. Ben Jonson, ed. Edward Blackney Henry. (New York: Book for Libraries Press. Freemont, 1970).

Shakespeare certainly places himself in the middle of the play chronologically, but he does not place himself at the center of the action. He does not begin at the moment of "crisis," but a touch too early. The audience has to wait through actionless acts before the pace explodes. The audience does not get a sense that they are at the heart of the Trojan War. Shakespeare's middle is downtime, and, while in the end Hector dies, for the most part *Troilus* is not "in the midst of the story," at least not the story that the audience expects to hear. The middle we find in *Troilus* is a void, leaving the audience with nothing save their assumptions about and previous conceptions of the epic. While Horace's "middle" is intended to illuminate, Shakespeare's is reductive and confusing.

From the beginning, the play is rife with opposition. Abstractions, such as honour, love (both physical and metaphysical) and war (and to a certain degree Helen) are placed on pedestals and called to dance. These abstractions cannot be fully realized, and as the play progresses everything disintegrates, is forgotten or is dissected beyond recognition. These concepts are debated using reason and fancy, wisdom and folly, by characters who are no more themselves than a few poor players, given lines and names. In fact, Shakespeare, in giving the characters names, especially those of epic players, puts demands upon them that unrealistically insists upon a depth they are not supplied with. Jutka Devenyi, in a chapter entitled, "Metonymic Impasse in *Troilus and Cressida*," states that:

> *The resulting discordance changes both the characterization and the plot line because the reader is biased by a set of expectations that the characters cannot transgress. Following from the nature of Shakespeare's dramatic material (the fixed plot and the mythological figures), characters are allowed only limited individuality while being perpetually forced to display their fixed identities. Because of the well known story, it is difficult for the dramatic personæ to be and merely to* represent.[7]

[7] Jutka Devenyi, "Metonymic Impasse in *Troilus and Cressida*," *Metonymy and Drama: Essays on Language and Dramatic Strategy* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1996), pp. 89–90.

The act of naming creates an emblematic identity which, once inherited, places strain on the characters as they struggle to fit the mold. "Æneas is Æneas" (*Dido* 2.1.84),[8] and "[Cressida] is and is not Cressid" (5.2.14).

[8] All quotations from Christopher Marlowe's *Dido, Queen of Carthage* taken from: *The Complete Plays*, ed. J.B. Steane (London: Penguin Books, 1986).

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In both cases, the character's name is expected to describe the character itself. We should have to do no more than say "Æneas" and all characteristics ascribed to "Æneas" will be implied. The problem results when the player is not capable of bearing the weight of the name. Laurie E. Maguire expressed this well:

> *Sometimes the self is imposed or inherited rather than discovered. This is unproblematic if the inherited self coincides with the evolved self; but if the two are in conflict the result can only be a divided self.*[9]

[9] Laurie E. Maguire, *Studying Shakespeare: A Guide to the Plays* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004), p. 20.

Each time a character is named, the characteristics associated with the iconic original are brought to mind, and each time the character named is found wanting.

Ideal after ideal is crushed as it is conceived on stage. To come to life in this dramatic fabrication is to come to the realization that definition and constancy are nearly impossible to negotiate. Seemingly arbitrary events occur throughout the play, feeding the drama's insatiable appetite for "what may be digested in a play." This persistent movement either draws the characters' attention away from their inherent complexity and their need to understand themselves, or it crushes them with their own weight. No character is unaffected. This is a world incapable of realizing itself, of learning from its mistakes or creating something fulfilling or real. Its ideals are hollow, and its interpretative powers sorely lack the ability to negotiate ambiguity. The young fly away from the control of the elders only to realize they no longer have any control over themselves. The elders try to rein in the youthful generation, only to realize that they are unable to sway the world in the ways they thought they could. Nestor is no more capable of swaying opinion than Priam. Instead they both sit in their respective councils as the surrounding characters pay them lip service.

It is difficult to approach the analysis of *Troilus*, as it seems the play's very purpose is to defy interpretation. As Heather James notes, "To catalogue the play's subversions of genre and textual precedent would be a daunting task, calling for annotated summary of every frustrating scene and nuance."[10] The play is intent on subverting anything it touches, and disentangling the resultant mess is oftentimes exhausting and frustrating. *Troilus* leaves the audience in the dark, depriving them of any sense of coherence as well as "depriv[ing] the characters of historical and personal significance."[11]

[10] Heather James, *Shakespeare's Troy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 92.

[11] John Bayley, "Shakespeare's Only Play," *Stratford Papers On Shakespeare* (W.J. Gage Limited, 1963), p. 61

The storyline is so well known that in order to interest the audience in the narrative, the original material requires reworking and modification. The dramatist is not creating the anticipation or the suspense of a mystery; instead he must build the action in such a way that it stands on its own, regardless of widespread knowledge of the material. By setting the play on a seemingly innocuous day in the Trojan War, Shakespeare first works to demystify the epic scope that Troy requires by virtue of being Troy. The play

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slowly unfolds with the councils of the Greek and Trojan Generals, Hector's challenge, the increasing possibility of Troilus and Cressida's union and the minor politics of Ulysses' attempted manipulation of Ajax and Achilles. It is then strange that it seems to come together, lazily pedestrian, in an almost mundanely pedantic middle period. This is a Day in the Life of the Trojan War, and not every day had a Trojan horse.

In *Troilus*, the actions of the characters are often times more relevant when viewed in contradiction to their own literary histories, than as continuing the progressive formation of characterization. Players mingle with their previously defined identities, trying to form a bond between some epic expectation and an insufficiently established scenario. Bayley sees the play "com[ing] from the knowledge of what went before and what must come after."[12] Instead of a holistic picture of the Trojan War, Shakespeare gives the audience just a taste, which leaves much to be desired. The audience is able to complete the narrative in their minds, but the dramatic action does not seek to satisfy their desire for completion. Using the epic as source material requires a different kind of dramatic action.

[12] *Ibid.*

It is not simply the epic material that is fragmented, but the characters themselves and their interactions. The play lacks a "novelistic" appeal where characters are fully formed to the point of hyperconsciousness.[13] In other Shakespeare plays the action is often driven by a character's urge, in that there is a clear link between the action and the character. We would not expect him or her to act any other way, and, while we might be surprised by the act, if we were to follow the play through, the desire and need for said urge would be apparent. In *Troilus*, impulse is immediate, and in the kind of action the characters take. This isn't to say that the characters in *Troilus* are thoughtless, but rather that their existence is fraught with textual complexities which seep into and confuse their thought processes. They are and are not the characters they represent.

[13] *Ibid.*

Troilus' prologue, describing the "six-gated city" of Troy, says the city is shut up by means of "massy staples/ And corresponsive and fulfilling bolts" (Prologue 17–8). The naming of the six gates is not a simple catalogue. Instead, the names seem to split into various factions divided by strangely placed "ands." Shakespeare's Troy is a world divided; yet it is unified by massive mechanical apparatuses. The result is a play pervaded by a sense of tension; a world whose fixtures, while physically indomitable, are slowly being broken down by a force far greater than any battering ram. The epic material has a similarly industrial inviolability. But Shakespeare's fragmentation stems from within. The strain is not physically on the gates, the characters or the plot: there are forces within all three whose opposition to unity slowly rends them apart.

Until late in the play one might be fooled into believing Hector is its moral center. He is the pillar of Troy, and he honourably claims to allow disarmed

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opponents the right to pick up their swords and keep fighting. All-in-all, he is a far more attractive figure than either of the main Greek warriors. But Hector does show signs of contradiction in his relationship with his wife, and perhaps more notably in his actions in the last scenes of the play. Hector first encounters Thersites who is a self-proclaimed coward. Hector realizes that Thersites would hardly be a challenge and allows him to live. Hector's second encounter is with Achilles (who has just heard of Patroclus' death). After fighting for a while, Achilles loses the advantage, and Hector, ever-graceful, allows the fallen warrior to catch his breath. Achilles is none-too-pleased by this charity, yet he still takes the opportunity to slink off. Up until this point Hector has played the game as he is expected to, but then he seems to make exception to his own rules. Shakespeare gives the stage direction "*Enter one in armour*," to which Hector responds:

> *Stand, stand, thou Greek! Thou art a goodly mark.*
> *No? Will thou not? I like thy armour well;*
> *I'll frush it and unlock the rivets all,*
> *But I'll be master of it. Wilt thou not, beast, abide?*
> *Why then, fly on. I'll hunt thee for thy hide.*
> (5.6.28–32)

While Hector is willing to allow Achilles and Thersites to escape under the ægis of honour, the great Trojan is not above fighting for a good suit. Thus, Hector violates his own rules of unity, calling into question his ability to cope with the broken world. When Hector reappears above the corpse of the warrior he has just killed, he is stripping it of its armour. Addressing the body he says, "Most putrefied core, so fair without,/ Thy goodly armour thus hath cost thy life" (5.9.1–2). As Hector stares at the body he sees a fragile and unimpressive host. Just as the name of every character in *Troilus* weighs more than the character being represented, the armour is what is remarkable about the fallen warrior. Hector's own name, like the armour, conjures images of heroism that have been tarnished by the man now standing over the prey he has just hunted on such an inglorious and greedy impulse. There is no substance within, and like the prologue, this dead man is no more than a "putrefied core" on the inside, if there are insides at all. But more to the point, we begin to wonder about Hector's core, which will in a short time be dragged around the field by Achilles.

As the action accelerates at breakneck speed through the final scenes, it becomes increasingly evident that the world of *Troilus* is hollow. Characters appear who are hardly more than apparitions. The suit of armour Hector claims is like the prologue, and in a way it is the prologue, a nameless suit of armour, who dies by Hector's hand. The play is beginning to consume itself. There is no longer a voice to guide the plot or to frame the world, and Hector is immediately visited with the consequences as Achilles arrives with his Myrmidons. The Greek has been roused from his lethargy (and oath to Polyxena) by the death of Patroclus and, "Together with his mangled

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Myrmidons,/That noseless, handless, hacked and chipped" (5.5.32–3), he has sought to kill Hector. These Myrmidons are frightening fragments of humanity, who seem to embody all that is incomplete within other characters. It is they who take the final major action in the play, the slaying of Hector, and, while Achilles makes his brazen claim, it is the forces of fragmentation that the Myrmidons represent that have truly taken the Trojan hero.

Troilus takes place within the deeply rooted and textured context of the epic tradition. It has a literary and mythological history that cannot be ignored as the very motion of the play and its structure so obviously grate against this precedent. Inevitably, Troy must fall. The audience knows that the Greeks will be unable to force Troy's walls, and while the death of Hector is supposed to be the great blow to Trojan confidence, the Trojans manage to preserve their city and Helen for years after. Thus, a great deal of *Troilus'* significance relies upon the anticipation of events that will not happen within the play. Part of the difference between the prologue which establishes the epic context of the play's limited action and the characters in the play is that the characters are gifted with the prestige, and perhaps the curse, of epic and mythological names. It is therefore assumed that they will have epic and mythical identities. But very shortly after the play begins this is seen to be false.

The past is not something that is visited very often in *Troilus*, and neither is the future. While the audience may thirst for some connection to the Trojan War that they know, they are merely given the names and places. Twists of fate or random events collaborate to forbid resolution both in the action and the characters' development. Troilus is able to have his one night with Cressida, but the two lovers do not resolve any of the questions they had before that fateful night. Was "the execution confined" or "the act the slave to limit?" Perhaps there are some things you just don't talk about, but the lovers are not given time. And if they were, it seems questionable whether they would be able to answer. The lovers alternate between trying to preserve the quiet and to break it. The morning after their encounter Troilus says, "Dear, trouble not yourself. The morn is cold," to which Cressida responds, "Then sweet my lord, I'll call mine uncle down./He shall unbolt the gates" (4.2.1–3). We know that as soon as Pandarus enters there will be no peace for the lovers, but Cressida seems to need to break the moment, as does Troilus, who wants Cressida to stay as he leaves her. But even if the lovers were able, or desired, to preserve this instant, the opportunity disappears as Pandarus enters just over twenty lines later, and not twenty lines after that Æneas arrives, to take Cressida to the Greeks. The scene is horribly uncomfortable. These are moments in *Troilus* that would best take place offstage. Everyone is more concerned with protecting the illusion that the lovers have met secretly, and in this furtiveness the lack of value placed on any kind of deeper love is seen. The lovers have finally succeeded in coming together, but the world and everyone in it seems intent on denying the moment.

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In *Troilus*, Shakespeare succeeds in fragmenting the world of the epic to an extraordinary degree. His play, in a sense, consumes itself, in the full realization that the construction of a coherent world is impossible. The play demands that the characters within the action try to negotiate those parts of themselves which are not congruous with their inherited names. But the characters are unwilling to look within, and half of the problem is that they work more towards fitting the mold of epic expectation than exploring their incongruities. To their benefit, Shakespeare does not allow his characters the opportunity for self-reflection, and those characters who catch a glimpse of the fragmentary nature of the world are often dangerously at risk, as such investigations require a firm grip on reality, a reality they are denied. Montaigne, who is well aware of the dangers of probing into this void, colourfully found at the end of his essay "On the Inconstancy of our Actions" that:

> *It is not the act of a settled judgement to judge us simply by our outward deeds: we must probe right down inside and find out what principles make things move; but since this is a deep and chancy undertaking, I would that fewer people would concern themselves with it.*[14]

[14] Montaigne, p. 131.

By fragmenting the world of the epic where coherent characters, such as Æneas, are said to epitomize virtue, the audience is confronted with the possibility that unity of character is an act of artifice, a concept held together with "massy staples/And corresponsive and fulfilling bolts." What better way to call into question the nature and power of fiction than by employing the greatest of fictions and deconstructing them piece by piece. Playwrights have to negotiate a liminal world that exists on a crest between fiction and reality. By exploiting canonical fictions whose breadth and influence are incalculable, Shakespeare attempts to redefine his existence as an author of a world that is on the brink of transcendence. By dismantling the world, he perhaps offers the possibility that it can be reconstructed, but in the play there is no such process. If there is the potential to recreate the world, it can only be found in allusion to the original epic, in which Achilles realizes the crime of his passion and returns Hector's body to Troy. But in a play whose very purpose is to distort and fragment the world of epic, it might be wise to question the validity of such hopeful enthusiasm, and instead question our ability to look within and confront a shattered mirror.

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