

DAMIAN'S DOMAIN  
by John Welchman

There's a special intricacy in the working arena activated by Damian Moppett that commands a subtle complexity of responses. It's not just that his practice is multimedia in form and inter-discursive in origin and effect. Rather, *The Visible Work*, his show at the Contemporary Art Gallery, proves something that has been partially evident all along (though also intermittently disguised): his moves as an artist must be seen as an ensemble of strategies, while the conflicted drama he directs is an inquiry into the very nature and implications of making. Not that this devolves into something as potentially febrile as the etiquette of working or the personal routines of artistic production (though these are clearly ingredients in his cultural recipe—better, dishes in his feast). Instead the main drainage system for Moppett's torrent of images, objects and signs traverses a kind of underworld of forms, a dark but nourishing place where the roots and tentacles of process proliferate and tangle. From one point of view Damian's domain is the very inverse of Plato's transcendent world of ideal forms—it deals with process, not product; with corrupted concepts, not perfect ideas; with vernacular imprecision, not divine exactitude. At the same time, it is well-stocked with ordering precepts, with indices, quasi-logical accumulations, serial interludes and veins of structural consistency.



Damian Moppett, *Untitled (Impure Systems)*, 1999, Fuji crystal archive print mounted on board, 121.9 x 101.6 cm.

<sup>1</sup> Melanie O'Brian, "Impure Systems and the Chaos of the Anti Urban: Damian Moppett Interviewed," *Mix Magazine* (Winter 2001–02), p. 24.

In a career that's scarcely a decade old, his early efforts include numerous photographic series of objects; of architecture shown at the signal *Vancouver 6* exhibition (1997); and the *Untitled (Impure Systems)* sequence from 1999, Fuji crystal archive prints mounted on board, shot in the hang-room zone of his studio while waiting around during a fashion shoot, imaging vernacular sculptural doodles run-up with in situ materials—lighters, film cartridges, packaging, Scotch tape, cigarette packs, candles, small boxes and so on; and *Untitled (Heroic Tertiary)* (2002), a sequence of C-prints of singular, unshorned goats grazing in a nondescript pasture.

In painting, he made works in acrylic on canvas in the late eighties representing comic-book style biomorphic heads and spewing addenda in the manner of Basil Wolverton; and, in the late nineties, a notable group of oil on paper reprises of the work of Rubens: *The Garden of Love (After Rubens)*; *The Triumph of Bacchus (After Rubens)*; *The Kermis (After Rubens)*; *The Bacchanal of the Andrians After Titian (After Rubens)*; *The Fall of the Damned (After Rubens)*—works, as the artist suggested of the Kermis images, which surreptitiously upset "the calm of the pastoral," rhyming the barn with the ghetto.<sup>1</sup>

In the idioms of sculpture and installation (loosely speaking), Moppett gave us *Worm in Studio 1* and *2* (2000) and other clumpy bio-masses—horse head (1 and 2), vein, intestine, artery, head; *Endless Rustic Skateboard Park (Bacchic Peasant Version)* (2002), a model made from ABS plastic pipe, plaster and wood, exhibited with the Kermis paintings series; and *Peasant Dance* (2001) a multi-panel maquette for an unrealized film, comprising a plot synopsis, photos from LA's Chinatown and introduced by a copy of Ruben's *Peasant Dance* painting.

At CAG, Moppett has produced a three-ply fractal archive—the planes and strata of each assemblage constituting a matrix of resistances or accelerations for the formation of the others. The subtle gearing of this associational machine becomes apparent even as we designate the subjects, objects, materials and genres of the artist's triple apparatus. The series of some fifty drawings have as their material graphite and paper; their genre is a kind of neo-realist symbolic portraiture, crossed with studies of object-relations; while their subject—ostensibly artists, works, items and locations that have influenced Moppett over the years—is, of course, association itself. Some drawings image a single salient work by an artist (Medardo Rosso, Michael Asher); some are portraits (Hollis Frampton, Brancusi); some represent houses (Studio House, Driftwood House) or parts of a dwelling (Basement, Trap in Basement); some are titled after islands (Galiano Island, Denman Island); others after caravans, travel trailers or mobile homes. Some drawings sketch a work by the artist himself (Horse Head in Progress), yet others specify an object (whether a "house" or a "minimal sculpture") that, while quite precisely rendered, is "unidentified." And there are several drawings that proffer a pair of proper name references (Ed Ruscha and Mason Williams; Isaac Babel and [Philip] Guston). These binomial suggestions betoken the many other levels of referential imbrication folded into the series. We notice, for example, that the drawings titled after islands actually picture camps or caravans; and that the drawing, *Michael Asher*, shows another caravan, which recalls the noted project he undertook at all three installments of the Munster sculpture exhibition in 1977, 1987 and 1997.<sup>2</sup> We are alerted here to the presence of a system of subterranean reference—part rhizomous, part nefarious—that while finally predicated on the artist himself, reshuffles the very notions of "influence" and "lineage."

The drawings constitute an emblem book for the management of Moppett's allegorical relation to art. Part manual, part scrapbook, combining the analogical family album and a dream diary, they share something of the concrete irrationality that underwrote Salvador Dali's theory of critical paranoia: they are images called into existence by a zealously hermeneutical consciousness for the very sake of interpretation or commentary—some of which is deliberately opaque. As such, the drawings form a kind of moat and drawbridge around the castle of Moppett's aesthetic imagination. They guard against too much incursion by the inquiring mind—and, we might add, by the mind that guides the hand that made them—but at the same time they offer seasonable points of entry into an edifice that's as comfortably declarative as it is happily arcane.

At first glance, the pottery pieces seem both more provisional and pragmatic. Their materials are clay and ceramics; their generic affiliations split between the apparent utility of the vessel and the parasculptural denomination of the mobile, while their preliminary subject is the uncensored pragmatics of craft acquisition. Looked at from one point of view, each ceramic item is a crooked "X" marked on the learning curve of a diligent amateur



Michael Asher, "Installation Münster (Caravan)," Münster, Parkposition 4th Week, July 25–August 1, 1997 (Alter Steinweg, facing Kiffe Pavilion, Parking Meter Nr.275/274).

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Sculpture Projects in Münster," *Artforum International* (Vol.36, September 1997).

in search of formal control over an infinitely pliable material rendered through a notoriously recalcitrant technique. That technique itself is crucial here; there's something ironically perfect in the sensational gap between formlessness and iconic commonality (cup, plate, bowl, vase) implied by the term normally used for wielding clay into circumspect shape: the "throw." The "throwing" of a pot captures quite exquisitely the repressed turbulence of this transition from utter matter to pure volume. But, it also emerges as one of the key navigational terms convened, sometimes covertly, in this exhibition to annotate the passage between clusters and distributions, forms and meanings, which is, perhaps, Moppett's central preoccupation.

If the drawings are a dispersed summa of influences—a tangible matrix of probing devices zoning in on specific operations of memory and desire in the formation of the artist—the ceramics offer an interrogation of the becomings of form that is simultaneously more literal and more historical. More literal because Moppett has deliberately hitched up here with the does of primal matter, blobs of earth itself, the transformation of which—at least in any reflection on it, metaphorical or otherwise—is simultaneously epic, biblical and mundane. Nothing beats clay and the devices which work it—hands, feet, water, spinning wheel—in the stakes of sheer rendition. It is the first term that inflects the very condition of formation. But more historical too, because while the drawings map out the sketchily contingent pathways of Moppett's *Bildungsreise*, the shaping, firing and glazing of clay is part of a curious and quite particular epicycle in the history of modern art—a history that begins with two parallel moments that shift the boundaries between high art and the working of clay, from different directions.

It was the foundational work of Auguste Rodin, based on a move from the expressive malleability of clay to the plaster cast and thence to the burnished finality of bronze that granted a new permission for the vocabulary of ceramics—or at least that aspect of it that privileged the urgent will to form—to cross over into the language of art. The key term here was "modelling," the incessant act of pressing, prying and paring the clay until it was bruised into "life." Rodin restored to clay its own property of lumpiness, turning it against the double smoothness of the vessel wrought on the wheel and the polite frictionlessness of the neo-Classical body. As with a similar tendency in photographic discourse, we encounter a second moment of boundary confusion in the rise of a ceramic practice self-consciously predicated on an alliance with fine art—the so-called arts pottery that was launched in Europe and North America in the later years of the nineteenth century under the loose auspices of the "arts and crafts" movement.

Enabled by these points of convergence between the erstwhile separated terrains of pottery and art, the twentieth century witnessed a minor lineage of conjunctions. They ranged from Picasso's studio at Vallauris in the south of France and the school of mid-century art-ceramics it engendered, to the relatively rare entry of ceramic practice into the domain of the avant-garde—

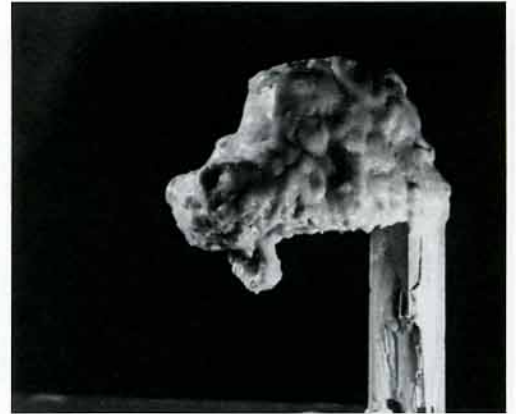
as with Isamu Noguchi's essentially telluric dialogue with Japanese ceramics in the thirties and again in the fifties, to Peter Voulkos and the Craft-to-Art movement (or American Clay Revolution) in California, beginning in the fifties and sixties, and, more recently, the award of Britain's Turner Prize in 2003 to Grayson Perry, the self-described "transvestite potter from Essex."

Various post-Rodinesque devotions to the sheer materiality of clay, its unending capacities for form-generation and the seemingly involuntary physical abandon it induced became almost default items in the apologia for twentieth century abstractions. In his autobiography, Hans Hartung, for example, pens a lyrical passage championing the aesthetic palpability of clay. "I saw," he writes, "in the slabs of paste-like soft clay the possibility of working more profoundly, something I couldn't do either on canvas or using any other support." "Here," he continued, "I could beat, scrape and incise, deeply or lightly. A real joy ensued from gathering, kneading, inventing irregular forms, maltreating the clay to give it a rhythmic surface!"<sup>3</sup> It's important that for Rodin, the tempestuous malleability of clay was, in a sense, merely the preface to a far grander purpose than the articulation of rhythmic form. As I have noted elsewhere, he was obsessed with the passage in the thinking body from physical effort to conceptualization, and in order to comprehend and express it, he parcels up the body's energies into specific parts:

*Nature gives my model, life and thought; the nostrils breathe, the heart beats, the lungs inhale, the being thinks, and feels, has pains and joys, ambitions, passions and emotions. These I must express. What makes my Thinker think is that he thinks not only with his brain, with his knitted brow, his distended nostrils and compressed lips, but with every muscle of his arms, back, and legs, with his clenched fist and gripping toes.*<sup>4</sup>

Rodin's itemization of bodily expenditure is strung together in a crescendo of organic continuities, and counts on the healthy, expressive transcendence of thought as it wells up within and around the body. His breathless list of parts, coupled with their intensive agencies, suggests that his communion with clay is founded in a body-based positive that is virtually reversed in the counter-corporal, abstract negation of Hartung.

Moppett's pots are thrown into relief, in another sense, through their display. The artist's flatter pieces are exhibited on four "stables" fabricated from welded steel. Resting on the floor of the gallery, the largest version is around three feet tall and sustains up to a dozen clay objects. The other stables are mounted on plinths, and have a disc-shaped "shelf" suspended from the main element—which necessitates that the four or five pieces stationed on them are correctly balanced. Answering to the stables are three hanging mobiles fashioned from steel pipe. The largest accommodates some fifteen of Moppett's lipped vessels while the two smaller mobiles support around ten. These elaborate armatures are the matrixial brackets of a



Damian Moppett, *Horse Head in Studio*, 1999, silver gelatin print, 61 x 72.6 cm.

<sup>3</sup> Hans Hartung, *Autoportrait*, ed. Monique Lefebvre (Paris: Grasset & Fasquelle, 1976), p. 203 (my translation).

<sup>4</sup> Auguste Rodin, in conversation with a Canadian newspaper reporter, cited by Albert E. Elsen in *Rodin's Thinker and the Dilemmas of Modern Public Sculpture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 29; originally in *Saturday Night*, Toronto, December 1, 1917. My discussion of Rodin is based on "Culture/Cuts: Post-Appropriation in the Work of Cody Hyun Choi," chapter 8 of my *Art After Appropriation: Essays on Art in the 1990s* (Amsterdam: G+B Arts International, 2001).

bilateral system that thrives on difference and repetition. In fact, Moppett's binomial impulse is almost unstoppable: primary or singular colours are pitted against the earthen-hued ochres of the unglazed clay; support from the floor meets suspension from above; mobility confronts stasis; utilitarianism is neutered by Modernist design; presiding over it all is the sheerly sensuous opposition of metal versus mud.

There is a release for all of this—in the form of a final relief that borders on comic relief. As intense and directed as it is, our enmeshment in Moppett's web of forms, materials and references, is never without an exit-line that leavens—even debunks—the conceptual symmetries or buried frames of reference that unravel as we move through the exhibition. The artist makes pointed reference to one of the possible locations for this move when he shifts orientation in his discussion of the relative values of the amateur pottery and his Modernist-inflected mobiles. He advocates for their material and conceptual equilibrium: "I want their weights to be equal. I want them to be balanced"; and then makes what at first glance is the surprising suggestion that he "see[s] the pairing as humorous, but not disrespectful towards the capacity or history of either form."<sup>5</sup> As we would expect, Moppett's comedic impulse arises from an amalgam of genres and juxtapositions. It's a subtle blend of deadpan and quizzical irony intermittently stirred by the mild slapstick of material incongruity. These ingredients are activated by an often fanciful finesse of perception that has us play out a cathartic reaction to, say, the brazen polarity of a lumpy pot and immaculate Modernist metalwork—while at the same time (or very shortly after) we are perfectly aware of the conceptual and material rigour that set them up. All this is possible because Moppett is an expert puppeteer of the impromptu. He is a guardian spirit of that signal recalibration of the quotidian that underwrote the avant-garde project from Cubism to Pop to eighties Appropriation and beyond—moments that brokered some of the few outcrops of laughter in a generally serious century—whether it was the smutty wordplays of Picasso, Warhol's fitfully mirthful multiples or the re-presented jokes of Richard Prince.

<sup>5</sup> Damian Moppett, email to the author, January 24, 2005.

The third visual regimen in the exhibition addresses a different kind of formation (loosely speaking, a musical rehearsal) rendered in another format, this time a three-channel video installation. Each monitor shows a single instrument—drums, guitar and keyboard—from set-up to warm-up to session, and all are played by Moppett himself. In each case the sound-issuing apparatus and the body-parts that manipulate it, filmed up close, command the image, so that anything incidental or anecdotal—the artist's body, the context or location, etc.—is either glimpsed imprecisely or altogether foreclosed. While the monitors are arranged in the exhibition space in a manner that mimics the layout of a band onstage, this is the only gesture that reinforces the situating narrative of musical performance. Part quasi-structural analysis, part garage rock home video, the installation rejigs the sonic and visual components of music-making into a network of discordant

overlays, fractured consistencies and near aporia. This triple refrain deconstructs the elemental operations of a three-ply band, while the artist arrogates to himself the manipulation of collaborative production, and comes through it all as an entropic melody-buster.

If, as Deleuze and Guattari interestingly conjecture, “music is a creative, active operation that consists in deterritorializing the refrain,” they also point to the paradoxical thirst of music “for every kind of destruction, extinction, breakage, dislocation.”<sup>6</sup> On the one hand their rather romanticized association of music with childhood, feminine and minority becomings; on the other that potential for the conscription of music (drums, trumpets, cymbals) for militaristic, even “fascist” ends. While Moppett’s “dictatorship” of the band alludes to these politics, ever-present in metal and ultra-hard rock, he also has over-coded beat and celebrity with the mundane, the contextual and the repetitive; so that his voiceless song-line becomes a mantra for the hidden side of composition, a confection of all that is surplus to the final groove of a track—but at the same time that which makes it up.

Moppett takes his place in a distinguished genealogy of contemporary artists who have managed to captain their craft through the Bermuda Triangle edged by categorical innovation, æsthetic parody and social critique. I’m thinking here of the very different work represented by Marcel Broodthaers’ *Museum of Modern Art* project from 1968–75, John Baldessari’s humorously transgressive structuralism (as in *Blasted Allegories* (1978)), and, above all, the work of LA-based artist, Mike Kelley—from his early performances to the *Craft Morphology Flow-Chart* (1991) and

<sup>6</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Vol. II, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp. 300, 299.



Mike Kelly, *Craft Morphology Flow Chart*, 1991, 114 found homemade dolls, 60 black-and-white photographs, one drawing (acrylic on paper), 33 folding tables, dimensions variable. Installation view “The Carnegie International 1991,” Carnegie-Mellon University, Pittsburgh. Collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.



Mike Kelly, *Categorical Imperative*, 1999, mixed media, dimensions variable. Installation view in artist's studio. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen

<sup>7</sup> Mike Kelley, *The Big Tent* (1979), handwritten performance script, archive of the artist, np. These remarks are adapted from my "Survey" essay for *Mike Kelley* (London: Phaidon, 1999).

*Categorical Imperative* (1999)—from the yarn doll floor pieces to his noise band drumming. Kelley pushes harder, longer and louder than everyone else. His rebarbative folk cosmologies are debaucheries of uncertain cultural becomings, picked out in a belligerent crusade for convergence and the ramshackle pursuit of goofily pointed homologues. He is obsessed with the vanishing point of structures, the places before and after logic settles into fashion or doctrine. His ironic reports on these conditions, scooped from sci-fi mags and comic strips, pulp fiction, thrift stores or textbooks on object relations and psychological modelling, are voiced like a one-man Associative Press: "I'm big chief information" as he put it in *The Big Tent* (1979), "information grows out of me."<sup>7</sup>

There is no doubt that Moppett is heir to Kelley's unique combination of vernacular appropriation, formal organization, cascading self-reference and conceptual sophistication. Both artists have made their marks in a similarly wide range of idioms: drawing, performance, sculpture, installation, video and music. But Moppett has staked out a rather different, if overlapping, territory. His vernacular is geographically, materially and generationally distinct from Kelley's—as are his forms. The inquiry he undertakes into his own history is likewise less insistent than Kelley's, inevitably shorter, and yet at the same time seems to have digested some of the older artist's outcomes. While Kelley often makes his imagery literal—in his voluminous explicatory writings, or when he renders repression or the erasures of memory as a physical "sublevel" zone that rhymes with a cave or a basement or dust bunnies under the bed—Moppett trades in images and objects that arise from the transmissive space behind them. This helps us to understand that Moppett's conceptual orientation is founded on the play of the meta-referential and that the primary orientation of what he produces is formed from the nature of production—all of which gives rise to an estimably vigorous and utterly contemporary discourse on the very nature of referring.

Figuring his work thus makes Moppett's enterprise sound a little like a last outcrop of late formalism. Its significance is caught up in a vast nest of framing devices, with it always looping back onto scenes of origin, whether personal, artistic or historical. There's certainly something to this, especially if the artist's pieces are considered one by one or set by set. Yet when examined as a grid of positions rather than a sequence of points—as the present exhibition insists—the mesh of references doesn't just bind them up with no way out, it administers what I'll call here a kind of social permeability. First, the closeness of its weave of allusions creates a moiré pattern refracting the legibility and inevitability of cause-and-effect interpretation, lending it a shimmering, ghost-like gestalt. Secondly, if we look at it closely, even stare it down, Moppett's referential prolixity is occasionally undone. Sometimes it's caught with its guard down, sometimes it generates things that its organizing intelligence might never have imagined, and sometimes—this might be the most important and persuasive of these unravellings—Moppett's way of assembling objects and concepts betokens the social

trauma of making. The first two dissolves emerge, as we glimpsed above, at moments when the ironic or parodic effects of a work are at a premium, or when a piece is simply odd, offbeat or funny—and there are many such moments in Moppett. The third is never obvious and seldom consistent. It arrives at those moments when the weight of the social is extruded, often painfully, right through the artist's referential mesh.

As an exception that might prove the rule, one stand-alone work by Moppett, his DVD projection *1815/1962* (2003), is an allegory for this vector of his practice. In it Moppett layers his persona as an actor with two numbers in collision that he envisages, almost in Deleuzian terms, as rhizomous extensions of a personal and collective cultural formation. By playing out a ritual of stealth hunting, rhyming the metal pincers of the trap with the elements of Modernist sculpture, he opens up a commentary on the mythological origins of frontier culture, its conversion of the animal into commodities and currency (the becoming-animal in reverse) and the enormous space unfurled between the foundational form of the trap (an icon of menace, necessity and profit) and the beguiling quiddity of a sixties gallery object (exemplifying the comfortable formal will that animates the house style of high Modernism). *1815/1962* pivots on the jaws of entrapment and invites us to meditate on the double logic of forging. At the same time it implicates the artist in a lineage which is almost devouring. It crosses survival with indulgence, design with form and fate with genealogy.

If *1815/1962* opens up a view onto cultural formation that is simultaneously violent and funny, Moppett's preferred engagement with the social is more commonly brokered through a reflection on the stakes of the art world's own negotiation. Even in a piece as seemingly remote from social concerns as the photographs of *Untitled (Impure Systems)* (2000)—which portray the graft of DIY hobbyism loaded with adolescent ennui to offer a "depiction of [wasted] time"—Moppett maintains that "social critique" is the "allegorical component of the work." His portraiture of "brand-name items" zigzags through an encounter with the commodity defined in recent times by Ashley Bickerton's caustic logos and decals, Haim Steinbach's mesmeric etiquettes of display and the auratic deflation conjured up by Prince's work with the iconography of Marlboro. At the same time, Moppett signals his awareness that in this work the impure systems he takes on gives rise to a more "abstract" form of "sociological aspiration."<sup>8</sup> Such abstraction is based on Moppett's unremitting investigation of the primal scenes of art production—the studio with its seething accumulations of material and that mad kaleidoscope of inherited forms, genres, movements and styles that spin through the obsessions of a young person who becomes an artist in this generation (Moppett once referred to himself as an "extreme fetishist").<sup>9</sup>

As clearly signalled in the current exhibition, these founding discourses for art make up a visual imperative, a core of education and desire, which Moppett re-articulates with the protocols of non-art activity, whether ceramics,



Damian Moppett, *1815/1962*, 2003, single channel video installation, duration 16 minutes.

<sup>8</sup> Melanie O'Brian, p. 24.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*



music or the quotidian—knowing all the while that his real work lies in the space between them. As he remarked about the drawings at CAG, his aim throughout is to create a filtration system for the familiar, “an image bank [that is] highly personal and specific while at the same time being recognizable, common and anonymous.”<sup>10</sup> That the containing allegory for Moppett’s work might be found, as I suggested at the outset, in the dimension of the dramatic, is underlined by the artist’s own reflections. Moppett locates in the Renaissance dramas of Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe (particularly *Troilus and Cressida*), powerful emblems for two of his enduring concerns. The first is a model of implication itself, as Shakespeare makes “his characters’ literariness, their belatedness, part of the subject matter of his play.”<sup>11</sup> The second follows the specific implications of the abandonment of “character and order” “in a nefariously calculating yet excessive world,” as the critic Nathaniel Heisler puts it, “where itemization and categorization diminish the concept of the epic into an unrecognizable collage, reducing its structure and moral assurance to the status of mere commodities in a confused and chaotic market.”<sup>12</sup>

*Troilus and Cressida* indeed seems the perfect reference here. Neither a “history” play nor a comedy or a tragedy, much of its significance lies in the way it fails to be either—leading to a sense that history, comedy and tragedy have somehow been submitted to their own diminishment by the circumstances of the present. The shapes of the clash between self and destiny, history and the present, chaos and order that Shakespeare takes on are clearly discernable in Moppett’s referential network. Debased as it might be, the “epic” but uneven struggle of the Renaissance character with violent and metaphoric times meets the social strife of Damian’s domain half a millennium later. There’s still too much history (and too few lessons learned from it); sense is still stymied by too many metaphors and series; art has once again long lost both the certainties of form and genre (modernism) and the stridency of their deconstruction (critical postmodernism).

So what to do . . . da dom . . . da dom? Or maybe, how to refrain?

<sup>10</sup> Damian Moppett, email to the author, January 24, 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Anthony B. Dawson, ed. William Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 32.

<sup>12</sup> Nathaniel Heisler, *Epic Fragmentation: A Study in Parts of Shakespeare’s ‘Troilus and Cressida’ and Marlowe’s ‘Dido, Queen of Carthage’*, BA Thesis (Peterborough, ON: Trent University, 2004), p. 4.

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