

Sarah Rasher

University of Connecticut - Storrs

Trojans in Drag in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*
and Marlowe's *Dido, Queen of Carthage*

Why couldn't early modern dramatists adapt the Trojan War with a straight face? It seems like a facetious question, since the multiple meanings of "straight" are so overtly on the table. And in terms of the two most notable early modern stage adaptations of the Trojan War narrative, Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* and Marlowe and Nashe's *Dido, Queen of Carthage*, so many of those meanings matter. Both plays cannot seem to stop laughing at their characters: whenever either play finds a serious moment, it soon descends into satire or histrionics. Both are overtly, puckishly homoerotic: *Dido* begins with Ganymede on Jupiter's knee and never lets the viewer forget it; *Troilus* turns Achilles and Patroclus's friendship into Cupid-infected lovesickness. And both plays meander through their narratives, wandering through wordplay and subplots that go nowhere, unable to keep to a straight path through their familiar stories.

All of the above has been observed by critics, and most recent readings of both plays acknowledge that they are in some way reacting to the high esteem in which early modern culture held Homer and Virgil.¹ However, it seems that despite frequently acknowledging the plays' similarities, critics have been reluctant to infer from them a *pattern* of arch, camp² retellings of the Trojan War. Perhaps this is because it seems presumptuous to claim that two is a trend;³ perhaps we fear over-

1 Rick Bowers explores this throughout "Hysterics, High Camp, and *Dido Queene of Carthage*." For *Troilus*, see G.K. Hunter, "Troilus and Cressida: A Tragic Satire," and Roger Strittmatter, "The Tortured Signifier."

2 See Bowers, as well as Douglas Lanier's *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture*, 17-18 and 38-39. I am using "camp" very deliberately, and not its near synonyms "burlesque" or "parody," precisely because of the gender-bending connotations of "camp." Camp can operate independently of queer culture, but as Bowers contends, forms of camp associated with queer cultures seem to have existed in the early modern period as well as now.

3 The trend extends to more than two plays. Thomas Heywood's *The Iron Age* is a Trojan War play with a muted but distinct camp sensibility, and Fletcher, Massinger, and Field's over-the-top *Queen of Corinth* draws significantly on the Dido legend.

reading the absence from the canon of a significant Trojan War drama that *isn't* camp. I contend that the two plays, taken together, give us enough to go on, since their similarities go far beyond the fact that both are satirical. They have such similar strategies for laughing at Troy. Both build upon doomed heteroerotic love narratives dilated and distorted by centuries of popular culture. Their sources reflect values of romantic love that are simultaneously anachronistic in relation to Greece and already quaint by the Elizabethan era. Shakespeare and Marlowe both turn those "straight" love tragedies into cynical genre-bending spectacles in which homoerotic desire is more plausible than true love – in other words, both playwrights transform their source material into camp. In doing so, they not only comment on the uneasy intersection of classical literature with popular culture, but also draw attention to the precarious roles of women in homosocial worlds.

In adapting the story of Troilus and Cressida, Shakespeare is contending not only with the tension between the *Iliad* and popular legend, but with Geoffrey Chaucer's verse epic version of the tale. *Troilus* is a camp version of Chaucer at least as much as camp version of Homer, acknowledging the extent to which the English cultural conceptions of the *Iliad* as a whole and the Troilus and Cressida myth in particular are products of the Middle Ages and medieval literature, rather than learned, allusive responses to classical epic. Shakespeare knows that what his audience⁴ "knows" about Homer does not necessarily come from Homer: Cressida does not even appear in the *Iliad*. And Chaucer's contemplative Criseyde resemble's Shakespeare's Cressida very little. Chaucer's Criseyde, is a richly human but ultimately traditional tragic heroine, intelligent and steadfast but ruled and defeated by fate. Shakespeare's Cressida is something else altogether, bawdy and opportunistic – a camp heroine.

Shakespeare makes sure that we are immediately aware of how he has transformed the familiar Cressida: the first he shows us of her is banter and wordplay. Unlike Chaucer, who presents Troilus as

4 Even, I contend, his educated audience, in the same way that educated Shakespeare fans today know the real content and significance of "To be or not to be" but also its pop cultural significance.

an anguished chivalric lover and leaves his Criseyde as a cipher until the second book of his poem, Shakespeare gives us Cressida almost immediately, and his version of her is not Stoic and chaste but witty and sexual. She is a Shakespearean comic heroine parachuted into ancient Troy, and this means she is incongruous with both ancient Greek and courtly medieval conceptions of womanhood. Her most overtly anachronistic characteristics are of the sort that women have always possessed but that male-dominated cultures have found undesirable, and her intelligence and inner strength are qualities that many of the male war heroes lack. In a Troy awash with male homoeroticism, Cressida is herself gender deviant.

Perhaps, in this world, there is no other way to be, and this is why the play establishes Cressida's sexual subjectivity through camp spectacle. In the second half of act one, scene two, Cressida and Pandarus watch and comment as the heroes of the Trojan War parade across the stage. This procession, in addition to serving the practical theatrical purpose of differentiating among a number of similarly attired characters, would have resembled the procession of allegorical figures in a masque or morality play. It also turns a scene from Chaucer into a pageant: Chaucer's Criseyde and Pandarus talk about the various Trojan heroes, but privately, in their absence. Within Shakespeare's own body of work, the scene also resembles the "Pyramus and Thisbe" sequence in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.⁵ In both, performers in a pageant-like spectacle take up the majority of the stage, oblivious to the burlesque banter that vies for the offstage audience's attention. But while in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the play-within-a-play and its slapstick usually command more attention (and laughter) than Theseus and Hippolyta's asides, the focus of the humor in *Troilus* is on Cressida and Pandarus, and in particular on the queer hilarity of a teenage girl and an old man remarking lecherously as a series of attractive soldiers parade for their approval.

Cressida's awareness of her own sexuality and individuality – she knows that her "wards" are

5 It does not seem coincidental that both plays are set in a fancifully idealized ancient Greece.

"upon my back to defend my belly, upon my wit to defend my wiles, upon my secrecy to defend mine honesty"⁶ – is comic its frankness but also bittersweet in its futility, as the scene sets her up as a woman who desires men but is trapped in a homoerotic world. Pandarus conveys the homoerotics of the scene most bluntly, trying to sell Cressida on Troilus's virtues but sounding as if he would like to hoard those virtues for himself: "I could live and die i'th' eyes of Troilus" (1.2.234-5). In addition, several of the jokes hint at the homoerotic intimacies of the war camp, which Achilles and Patroclus later prove true. Pandarus points out the hacks and dents that Hector's helmet has sustained in combat, and Cressida asks if they come from swords – a question with an oddly obvious answer, except to set up Pandarus's next line. Pandarus turns Cressida's bawdy implications into an accusation of omnierotic sexual passivity: "Swords, anything, he cares not; an the devil come to him, it's all one" (1.2.202-3). In the topsy-turvy world of *Troilus*, this accusation of deviant desire is a compliment: his indiscriminate sexual receptiveness is fearlessness.

If promiscuity, especially receptive promiscuity, is courage, then Achilles is even more of a coward than he seems when his love for Patroclus keeps him from leaving his tent. He has been penetrated by Cupid's arrow and by Patroclus, and now he refuses to be penetrated by anyone else. This is not a useful mindset for a warrior, but it is the expected one for a woman. It is unsurprising, then, that Cressida's plans for dealing with her love for Troilus foreshadow the problems facing the men at war. Her guiding maxim is, "Achievement is command; ungained, beseech" (1.2.284). If Troilus realizes he has conquered her heart, she has no leverage – his war for her heart has ended. Later in the play, Thersites implies that the same artificial strife is maintaining the Trojan War: "All the argument is a whore and a cuckold, a good quarrel to draw emulous factions and bleed to death upon" (2.3.69-71). It is not only that love is like war; more and more, war is like love, and the whores and cuckolds of poor

⁶ *Troilus* act 1, scene 2, lines 251-3. All quotations are from the Arden edition, ed. David Bevington. Subsequent citations will be parenthetical within the text.

logic and military aggression have overwhelmed Hector's common-sense observation that if they just sent Helen home, the war might end. War and desire are both absurd in Troy, and the only way Shakespeare can even attempt to narrate them coherently is to draw attention to that absurdity. An early modern viewer cannot take Troy at face value, so Shakespeare continually, incongruously gives him permission to laugh.

In *Dido*, as in *Troilus*, Marlowe and Nashe enter the realm of camp because of a logic problem, one that again reflects the tension between popular legend and ancient text. In early modern England, the love affair between Aeneas and Dido had long since escaped the bounds of the *Aeneid* itself, inspiring a popular image of Dido as scorned woman and Aeneas as heartless betrayer. "The wandering Prince of Troy," an anonymous popular ballad first printed in 1648 but most likely written and sung much earlier, removes all Virgilian context:

When Death had piercst the tender heart
of Dido, Carthagenian Queene,
And bloody knife did end her smart,
which she sustain'd in wofull teene:
Aeneas being shipt and gone,
Whose flattery caused all her mone.

This ballad's Aeneas is a flatterer who has broken Dido's "tender heart," whereas in Virgil, Aeneas does little to seduce Dido. She falls in love with his brave stories all on her own, and "suffering from love's deadly wound,"⁷ takes him on hunting trips, eventually luring him into a cave for a secret marriage and its consummation. Virgil narrates this section from Dido's perspective, and Aeneas seems almost entirely passive until Jupiter commands him to Rome.

Marlowe would have been aware of both of these versions of the narrative and of the ways in

⁷ *Aeneid* (4.1-2). All quotations are from David West's prose translation.

which they compete with and contradict one another. Rather than favoring one, he produces his own version of the story, re-centering it around Aeneas and reinventing him as a hero torn between his love for Dido and his duty to Jupiter. In the *Aeneid*, Aeneas has a pattern of loving and losing women, but in Marlowe's adaptation, this all but disappears – we see only tacit acknowledgment of the wife he lost in Troy and no foreshadowing of his future wife in Rome. Whereas Virgil's Dido is one romantic stop on a journey in which Aeneas has many female loves, Marlowe's Dido is an aberration requiring divine interference. In the *Aeneid*, Aeneas isn't that into Dido until Venus steps in, but by effacing Aeneas's heterosexual past, Marlowe creates an Aeneas who isn't that into *girls* until Venus interferes.

Marlowe's form of divine interference is decidedly more erotic and threatening than Virgil's, and therefore more absurd and camp. In the *Aeneid*, when Venus kidnaps Ascanius so that Cupid can impersonate him, she "pour[s] quiet and rest into all the limbs of Ascanius, and holding him to the warmth of her breast, she lift[s] him into the high Idalian woods" (4.692-4). She carries him with a grandmother's gentle care. Marlowe's Venus, on the other hand, seduces Ascanius. Initially, she lures him as a boy - she offers him sweets, jewelry, and Cupid for a playfellow – but what Ascanius really wants is a bow and arrow. The weapons with which Venus tantalizes him are unambiguously sexual: "Such bow, such quiver, and such golden shafts,/ Will Dido give to sweet Ascanius."⁸ Virgil's Venus maintains Ascanius's innocence, while Marlowe's Venus lures him with the promise of erotic power. She then performs the same trick on Cupid, suggesting that Dido's erotic attention will serve as a reward for his role in her scheme, whereas Virgil's Venus draws him into her plot simply by outlining her case for revenge. Marlowe turns Virgil's stately but vengeful goddess into a caricature of a lecherous old woman who cannot keep from eroticizing her own son and grandson. Her voyeurism and sexual meddling are not unlike Pandarus's, and her theatrical scheming resembles that of the Mama Roses and Auntie Mames of twentieth-century camp.

8 *Dido, Queen of Carthage*, 2.1.304-312. All quotations are from the Penguin *Complete Plays*.

The resemblance of Marlowe's Venus to these archetypal stage mothers is not coincidental, because it is really her son's career that she is manipulating, and in ways that undermine both Aeneas's own interests and the greater good. It is clear throughout the play that Aeneas's love for Dido is against nature not only because of Venus's machinations, but because the play persistently calls attention to his intimacy with Achates. In Virgil, Venus visits Aeneas in the presence of a group of shipwrecked soldiers; it is no accident that in Marlowe, she waits until Aeneas has sent the others away "Whiles I with my Achates rove abroad" (1.1.175). As soon as the two men are alone together, Venus declares, "Now is the time for me to play my part" (1.1.182). She has probably not interrupted an erotic moment, but she succeeds in pulling Aeneas's focus away from Achates and onto herself; the scene ends with Aeneas pleading for her to return, forgetting that Achates is still there and ready to listen to his "griefs."

Achates scarcely appears in book four of the *Aeneid*, the one in which most of the Dido story takes place, but in Marlowe, he works constantly to speak against the disorder that Venus has wrought. After Aeneas falls in love with Dido, Achates's warnings against her corrupting feminine influence sound more and more like the protestations of a jealous lover. He begs Aeneas to "Banish that ticing dame from forth your mouth/ And follow your foreseeing stars in all" (4.3.31-2). In pleading for Aeneas to fulfill his destiny as founder of Rome, Achates also becomes a mouthpiece for Jupiter, who, as no one in the audience has forgotten, is besotted with Ganymede. Jupiter needs a hero in his own image, geared toward civic creation and toward homoerotic desire, and Achates is the companion who ensures that both transpire. Our last view of Achates is through Dido's eyes: she spies him leading Ascanius onto a ship bound for Rome and deduces that Aeneas "means to fly" (5.1.85). Where Achates goes, so goes Aeneas. I have joked to friends unfamiliar with *Dido* that Marlowe has refashioned the ending so that Aeneas sails off into the sunset with his boyfriend to found Rome. This is flippant, but I contend that it reflects the tenor of both characters' exits from the stage: the last we see of Achates, he

is caring for Aeneas's son, and the last we see of Aeneas, he is echoing Achates's exhortations of noble duty.

I also contend that a flippant response conveys the overall effect of Marlowe's *Dido*, as well as the effect of Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*. It is not just that both plays poke fun at classical texts usually held sacred in the early modern period, but that they suggest the impossibility of doing anything *but* poking fun at them. Camp is always, at least in part, a corrective genre. It points out the parts of our culture that have become parodies of themselves – the ones we can no longer view straight on. Perhaps the reason why we are still uneasy about both Marlowe's *Dido* and Shakespeare's *Troilus*, often finding them difficult to read and perform, is that we still struggle to look directly at the ways we divide men and women, define love, and separate high culture from popular interpretation.

Works Cited

- "A proper ballad, intituled, The wandring Prince of Troy." London, 1648. *Early English Books Online*.
Web. 13 Feb. 2010.
- Bowers, Rick. "Hysterics, High Camp, and *Dido Queene of Carthage*." *Marlowe's Empery: Expanding His Critical Contexts*. Ed. Sara Munson Deats and Robert A. Logan. Newark: U of Delaware P, 2002. 95-106. Print.
- Chaucer, Geoffrey. *Troilus and Criseyde*. Ed. Michael Murphy. City University of New York, 1999.
Web. 13 Feb. 2010.
- Hunter, G. K. "*Troilus and Cressida*: A Tragic Satire." *Shakespeare Studies* 13 (1974-5): 1-23. Print.
- Lanier, Douglas. *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture*. New York: Oxford UP, 2002. Print.
- Marlowe, Christopher. *The Complete Plays*. Ed. Frank Romany and Robert Lindsey. New York: Penguin, 2003. Print.
- Shakespeare, William. *Troilus and Cressida*. Ed. David Bevington. Walton-on-Thames, Surrey: Thomas Nelson, 1998. Print.
- Strittmatter, Roger. "The Tortured Signifier: Satire, Censorship, and the Textual History of *Troilus and Cressida*." *Critical Survey* 21.2 (2009): 60-82. Print.
- Virgil. *The Aeneid*. Trans. David West. 2nd Ed. New York: Penguin, 2003. Print.