Feminism and Shakespeare's Cressida: "If I be false . . ."

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In the late 1960s, Jeanne T. Newlin posited the modernity of Shakespeare's Troilus and Cressida in terms of its adaptability to twentieth-century issues. One aspect of particular interest in Newlin's study is the seemingly disparate ways in which Cressida has been portrayed on the stage. In William Poel's 1912 production, Cressida was obviously older and more experienced than Troilus, and she became the shaping force of the tragi-comedy genre to which Poel assigned the play: Cressida's "frivolity led to the comedy of the early scenes, but the earnestness of her betrayal blended with the tragic finality" (Newlin 360). Ten years later when the Marlowe Society of Cambridge University staged the play, its tone was reflective of the weariness Europeans were feeling in the aftermath of war. But the implications of Cressida's portrayal captured more than just war-weariness, as a reviewer in The Observer noted at the time: "I doubt whether there is a young man in these islands to whom it is not a clear and simple play . . ." (qtd Newlin 362-363). That is, not only did the young men now more clearly understand the Greek warrior scenes, but a great many of them also assumed the universality of woman's betrayal. These same parallels were used in the London Mask Theatre's 1938 anti-war rendition of the play as England once again teetered on the edge of conflict. By 1960, however, a more abstract, allegorical production was performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company at Stratford-on-Avon: "the production moved toward a 'gradual isolation of Hector and Achilles, symbols of the conflict between chivalry and brutal opportunism to which the ruin of Troilus by the faithless Cressida is secondary' " (Newlin 368-369).

What is significant in this fifty-year pattern is the continuity of interpretations concerning Troilus and Cressida's relationship — the "ruin" of the young Troilus is repeatedly rooted in the "frivolity" and "wantonness" of the
“faithless” Cressida. This is not a pattern limited to dramatic productions of the play, however. The following is a survey of literary criticism concerning Cressida from the late 1940s to the mid-1980s, and it reveals a parallel continuity that remains a solid forefront of critical attitudes until the late 1970s. In terms of genre classification for *Troilus and Cressida*, Michael Jamieson has claimed that attitudes toward the play since 1920 “have undergone a revaluation so radical as to amount to a rediscovery” (126). However, this survey will demonstrate that in terms of attitudes toward Cressida, there was no such long-term progression. In fact, until the early to mid-1970s, critics actually focused upon Cressida very little; when they did, it was with varying versions of her betrayal in terms of Cressida as “the Trojan drab.” With the advent of feminist critical perspectives, however, there was indeed a “radical” re-­viewing of this characterization and of Cressida’s function in the play — so radical, in fact, that all of the major traditional interpretations of Cressida’s character have been brought into question.

I

Before examining the ways in which feminist critical interpretations have challenged and broadened our understanding of Cressida, it is important to survey the six major patterns into which traditional responses have fallen. Surprisingly, one of the most prevalent “responses” to Cressida has been virtually to ignore her as an entity in the play. Certainly not all analyses would require her direct inclusion; but she is, time and again, excluded from essays addressing issues such as the love relationship, social order and social action, honor (or the lack thereof), what is truth and what is falsity — that is, issues that would seem especially to call for the inclusion of an analysis of her character and her function in the play (see, for instance, Cole; Council; Greaves; Jamieson; Leech, “Locality”; Leech, *Dramatist’s*; Lyman). Such quantities of silence about a particular character begin to claim the definition of a very powerful response, albeit a mute one. Additionally, there is a unique twist on this silence, this time from sources where we might most expect comment — critics whose perspectives are directed specifically at the women in Shakespeare’s canon (Ewbank, Mowat, Sexton). One can only wonder, in this instance, if such exclusion falls under the category of critical precedence, consternation at a seemingly stereotypic “bad” woman, or . . . ?

If the silence surrounding Cressida is notable, it is exceeded by the prevalence of the second pattern: those reviewers who have distinguished Cressida in one term only — that of the whore. This approach views the
young woman as not only the epitome of perfidy when she enters the Greek camp, but as having been so from beginning to end of the play. This attitude far outweighs other responses to Cressida, and it spans the five decades under review in this survey. To demonstrate its pervasiveness, I have drawn on representative readings from each decade. In the 1940s, we can look to such notable Shakespearean scholars as Theodore Spencer and E.M.W. Tillyard. Spencer emphasized the rapidity with which Cressida supposedly breaks her promise to Troilus: “Cressida, the object of Troilus’ passionate devotion, after swearing to him that she will be forever true, betrays him the very first night after their separation” (111). Spencer mourned the passion Troilus wastes on “the worthless Cressida” and concluded that “Cressida is a whore; and the nobility of Troilus, shining through his own sensuality and the murky lustfulness of his environment, is disillusioned and betrayed” (116, 121). This same evaluation was echoed by Tillyard in his assertion that the Cressida we first meet “is anything but the regal character” Troilus has made us envision (75-76). Tillyard termed the scene in which Cressida is kissed and passed around by the Greeks as “broadly comic” and further insisted that, while Cressida is grieving over her forced separation from Troilus, “we feel that even then the thought flashes through her that the merry Greeks may compensate for what she is losing. Troilus behaves with dignity” (78). Undoubtedly, many readers would prefer to dissociate themselves from Tillyard’s burdensome “we.”

In the 1950s, Troilus was not always seen as quite so noble, but Cressida remained “weak,” “an absolute of perfidy,” and a die-hard “daughter of the game” (Knowland 254; Dunkel 334; Muir 99). It is interesting to note a “sign of the times” in these appraisals, similar to what Newlin observed in various eras’ stagings of Troilus and Cressida. In the literary responses of the 1950s, there was an adamant assertion that Shakespeare surely did not mean to condemn all women with Cressida’s scarlet nomenclature: “Cressida does not stain our mothers . . . Cressida did not cancel out Rosalind and Viola; the failure is true only of one woman, or at most . . . of one type of womanhood” (Muir 106; Knowland 364).

In the 1960s, scholars continued to depict Cressida as “whore,” though with some diversity of approach. Derick R.C. Marsha remarked that after Pandarus’s bawdy jokes, an audience “must know that Cressida cannot be ‘stubborn chaste.’ Nor, indeed, does Troilus’ later behavior give any indication that he really believes her to be so” (185). Thus Marsha manages not only to castigate Cressida from the beginning of the play but to excuse Troilus’s later abandonment of her as well. Several scholars emphasized Cressida’s perfidy in terms of Troilus’s self-illusion, blaming Cressida’s “equally proficient employment of
her ‘chastity’ as an allurement” (Bernhardt 139) — ironically echoing Angelo’s charges against the chaste Isabella in Measure for Measure — or suggesting that though Troilus tries to cling “momentarily to an almost Rousseauistic belief in the truth of the heart [V.ii.118-124] . . . the belief in the deceptive nature of the sense will not do to uphold the value of Cressida” (Soellner 260). We cannot leave this decade, however, without examining the perspective of Cressida set forth by the Shakespearean scholar A.P. Rossiter:

She is a chatty, vulgar little piece, and in the rhyming soliloquy at the end (where she speaks what she takes for her mind), the principles of the lothly chaste heroines of amour courtois are brought down exactly to the level of Mrs Peachum’s advice in The Beggar’s Opera: “O Polly, you might have toy’d and kissed, / By keeping men off you keep them on.” (132)

Rossiter’s entire discourse maintained this extremely derogatory tone — “she must have power and (as she thinks) makes every man dance to her tune” (133). Rossiter further posited an interesting reversal of the play’s actual turn of events when he suggested that Cressida’s “kissing the Greek generals all round as soon as she meets them” caused Ulysses thus to see her as part of the “sluttish spoils of opportunity” (133). Rossiter noted that Cressida’s inability “to stick to her design,” her failure of intentions, is common in the play; but no other character was described by Rossiter in terms that so inherently reveal antagonistic sexism toward a character.

What is especially interesting in the critical response to Cressida of the 1970s and 1980s is not merely that traditional views continue the “whore” definition (Foakes, Schwartz, West) but that several feminists reinforce this tradition as well. Juliet Dusinberre, for instance, classified Cressida as part of the “whore” genre. Though Dusinberre defined Cressida’s “womanhood” as thus encompassing some facet of power in terms of its use as a “political bargaining point,” she validated Troilus’s feelings at the same time that she discounted Cressida’s: “In her first encounter with Troilus [Cressida] counterfeits the confession of a lovesick girl, baffling Troilus who really feels that confusion” (64). Coppelia Kahn also attempted to combine the “argument for a whore” with a sense of power in its social correlation when she suggested that “Ulysses’ vision of emulative chaos finds its final expression in Troilus’ response to Cressida’s wanton sexuality” (96), and Kahn concluded that Cressida’s “If I be false” approach is merely “rhetorical” (97). Gayle Greene and others have discussed Cressida as acting in terms of the dictates of her environment, and this will be discussed in a later section; but Greene also viewed Cressida in her first scene not as Troilus romantically describes her but as a “coquette,” and Greene suggested that “descriptions of Cressida as ‘stubborn-chaste, against all suit’ (1.1.97), and of Helen as a ‘theme of honor
and renown' (II.i.199), are belied by the actual women . . .” (SEL 281, 276). Though later feminist interpretations will challenge these assumptions, it is noteworthy just how entrenched were such notions of “Cressida-as-whore.”

Not all traditional responses to Cressida have ignored her function in the play or cast her as the “daughter of the game” from beginning to end. The third traditional pattern of analysis has been a little less harsh in approach (though, in actuality, no less negative). It centers on the conclusion that there is some limitation inherent in Cressida’s nature that makes her betray Troilus. Elaine May Eldridge denied Cressida’s wantonness but asserted that it is a failure of imagination on Cressida’s part not to believe that she really could be loved by Troilus. Cressida believes, according to Eldridge, that “she can survive only as long as she keeps her relation with Troilus static, and therefore tries to protect herself by teasing him . . . even if the circumstances she describes [at the end of I.ii] prove true, she is also willing her own pathetic limitedness” (86-87). In 1967, H.A. Hargreaves lamented the efforts of earlier scholars whom he viewed as “floundering in efforts to make Cressida overly important” (49). He noted that, “fortunately,” Troilus was again seen as “the single focal point of the play”; Cressida was simply “frail, all too human” (50). Other scholars have observed Cressida’s limitations in what they considered her too easy abandonment of a “vision of eternal fidelity”; or that she is “dominated by fear . . . a timid, prudent person”; that she is limited by her “unstable and fickle nature . . . Passively she allows herself to be carried on the tide of events”; or simply that her behavior “is weak and trying” or “resigned” (Legatt 258; Slights 46-47; Ure 42; Smith 21; Barber 529; McAlindon 32). Thus if Cressida’s betrayal is not an act of blatant prostitution, it is a sign of her womanly frailty. That such traits are deemed synonymous with her gender was typified in Camille Slights’ transference of descriptions to the inactive warrior, Troilus, at the same time that she denigrated the woman, Cressida:

The portrayal of a Cressida who would lie upon her back to defend her belly mocks Troilus’ description of her as “too stubborn-chaste” to be won, and, conversely, the weak, womanish Troilus of I.i. renders ridiculous Pandarus’ description of him in I.ii. as a warrior with bloodied sword . . . (43)

Published in 1974, Slights’ analysis perpetuated stereotypic responses that demand acts of war from men and condemn women for their sexuality and, by inference, agree with the concept that they are weak and limited creatures.

There is a similar result in the fourth pattern of traditional critical analysis of Cressida. This pattern has surfaced most typically since 1960, when numerous scholars asserted that Cressida is acting within some convention
(epic, chivalric, rhetorical, comic, and so forth), and thus her actions function to support or mock that particular convention. What repeatedly occurred, however, is that these arguments turned into discussions of what was still depicted as Cressida’s one-dimensional, wanton behavior. Rosalie Colie suggested that Shakespeare was “travest[ing]” several devices and forms in *Troilus and Cressida*, especially the epic and, ultimately, Chaucer himself. Within this genre, conventional attitudes have entrenched the assumptions “that Troilus must die and Cressida be cast out as a leper” (321); yet, Colie asserted, perhaps Shakespeare went too far in his mockery with a final passage that is extremely ironically bitter. With no comic opposition for resolution, Colie insisted, “this play denies its tragic component” (321). Whether we agree or disagree with this analysis, it seems straightforward in its discussion to this point. However, Colie then made certain judgments of Cressida that slip outside her original framework of the convention; now Cressida is “coarse,” obviously a woman experienced in love, is equated with Pandarus as two “equivocators, not quite liars but certainly not truth-tellers either,” and ultimately is described as “giving herself in game and willy-nilly, in earnest and acquiescent, to another lover” (336-337). Colie asserted that both Troilus and Cressida “predestine” themselves to be what they are (that remains unnamed in the essay with regard to Troilus, though named as “false” for Cressida). But in Cressida’s case, she is not just false “by the power of a predestinating tradition, but false also because of the extreme triviality of her character” (339). So, in spite of her function as part of a convention, Cressida remains somehow more at blame because of a weak character.

Other critics have pursued similar arguments in discussing the conventions of courtly love (A.A. Ansari) and of heroism (Robert Ornstein), but one of the most interesting was William W. Main’s discussion of the “feminine role” itself. By convention, Main stated, an Elizabethan love plot may portray the feminine role in one of four ways: she “may be a romantic modest maid, a satiric forward maid, a satiric shrew, or a pathetic penitent” (172). However, he cautioned, if we try to force Cressida into one of these slots, “we obscure her complexity by over-simplification, for Cressida is an amalgam of all our roles” (173). Again, so far so good. But the discussion slips not into a celebration of Shakespeare’s creation of Cressida’s diversity within the framework of convention, as one might expect from the introduction, but into another kind of stereotype that lies outside of the conventional roles Main established. While acknowledging that Cressida can shift between several of these categories within one scene, Main ultimately declared that “she is all of these — romantic, satiric, and pathetic; however, her eclectic qualities focus from her swearing and forswearing of love” (174). The final scene of Cressida
we have from this analysis is not that her role is adjusted within the dictates of convention but that she is not much more than the stereotype of an equivocating female, now promising her love and now withdrawing it.

The fifth traditional critical response to Cressida has almost become a convention in itself; while man may be equated with order in the universe, woman is synonymous with disorder in her society. More importantly, at the basis of such an analogy is the assertion that woman is weak and/or promiscuous and, therefore, causes a breakdown in order. Most scholars working within this pattern of analysis in Troilus and Cressida look, of course, to Ulysses' renowned speech stressing order and degree. Kenneth Muir reminded us that this powerful Greek warrior is not relying upon divine ordering of the universe but rather on natural law. In Muir's analysis, however, it is "natural" only to men:

There was a strong dramatic reason for this impressive establishment of the idea of order, for, at the climax of the play, when Troilus witnesses Cressida's unfaithfulness, we witness the breakdown of order. . . . The build-up of order by Ulysses is a necessary preparation for the chaos which seems to result from Cressida's unfaithfulness. . . . [Ulysses warns Achilles that] it is individual worth and individual deeds that are more important than a man's position in the hierarchy of order. ("Shakespeare" 71-72)

For a woman, there is no position in that hierarchy; she is an outsider who has no worth (unless assigned by a man) and whose deeds can only serve to crumble that man-made order. While David Bevington asserted that he was not "unsympathetic" to Cressida, he also cast her in the role of disrupter. Bevington noted that Troilus must pick between love and duty. Yet when Cressida must do the same, he described her as "giv[ing] up, hating herself for doing so" and concluded that "this surrender to will and appetite in her . . . is emblematic of a universal disorder, and is partly caused by it" (503). R.A. Foakes more directly placed blame upon Cressida, for both the decay of Trojan society and values and for her own degradation: "The flippancy of Cressida matches the bawdy of Pandarus, and establishes the atmosphere of Troy" where adultery and promiscuity are familiar; "perhaps Cressida's casual acceptance of the idea takes her half way to deed itself" ("Reconsidered" 144). Foakes did not deny a certain amount of culpability on Troilus's part, but what are we to make of the concluding assertion that Troilus and Cressida "ends fitly . . . the truth of Troilus is rescued from his faults . . . and Cressida's curse on herself has been fulfilled — her falsehood has become proverbial" (149-150)? In this construction, Cressida-as-woman is a corrupter of Trojan society, and therefore, her corruption at the hands of the Greek soldiers is only "fit."
The sixth and final traditional perspective of Cressida is closely connected to woman-as-chaos and deserves review before turning to the feminist challenges to these standard readings. Not unlike those scholars who have attempted to justify Cressida's behavior within a certain convention, many have asserted that Cressida acts only as she can, considering her circumstances and her environment. Some have approached this perspective in the by-now familiar negative "justification" mode; however, here we also begin to see a turn toward the feminist analyses of Cressida that attempt to look behind the curtain of her actions and the accounts of others in order to understand more clearly her character and her function in the play. The split in this particular pattern is one of chronology as well; the more denigrating readings are centered in the mid-1960s, but by the early 1980s the feminist critical influence has become apparent. For instance, in the earlier analyses, there were still such commonplace statements as, "The character of Troilus may be somewhat more romantic and less unattractive than that of Cressida ... Cressida is no better than Troilus, but it is difficult to determine exactly how much worse ..." (de Almeida 331). Even so, this critic noted the relatively comparable sanity of Cressida in terms of Helen's behavior and, therefore, concluded that Cressida's behavior is "sane" under the circumstances (331-332). Another analysis, similar in its duality, echoed the same assertions of relativity of behavior couched in the assumption that Cressida does, indeed, lure the Greeks to her:

The fact that Cressida has been conditioned by this particular society — like Pandarus's, her speeches are aphoristic and bawdy — permits an unconsciously ironic revelation of how obedience to prescribed ends distorts human impulses which conflict with idealized commitments. . . . Cressida is on the defensive in a patriarchal society. The soldiers put on their armor in order to fight to survive to fight again; she puts on a titillating seductiveness. (Callahan 64)

It is the discomfort with a woman's sexuality or the assignation to woman of the role of sex object that continually surfaces as a basis for many of the traditional patterns of response to Cressida. Is she "titillating"? Is she a "whore"?

In the above quotation, Callahan did categorize Cressida's actions as defense mechanisms; and by the end of that decade (the 1960s), typical responses to Cressida's actions within this traditional critical stance were beginning to focus upon the "patterned or ritualistic way . . . puppet-like" that Cressida reacted to the Greeks and at times to Troilus (Oates 143). By 1980, however, the sense that Cressida was acting in the only manner open to her in her circumstances exemplifies the beginning of a feminist revisionist attitude
toward Troilus and Cressida. These are “beginning” analyses because many of them still harbor fugitive echoes of the old, traditional patterns’ failings. Arlene Okerlund’s “In Defense of Cressida,” for example, presents for the first time a recognition that Cressida’s actions are essentially the same as those of Shakespeare’s “unadulterated” heroines in the sense that all of them must deal with the world on its own terms. Okerlund notes that in the opening scene Cressida is “an innocent young woman with all the intelligence and energy of Shakespeare’s comic heroines,” that she “possesses the wit, charm, vitality and passion of Rosalind or Portia” (3-4). But Cressida’s world is immoral and corrupt, and instead of the previous attitude of woman-as-chaos and corrupter of that world, Okerland suggests that Cressida is being forced into certain actions in spite of her inherent goodness. Okerlund makes the astute observation that for Cressida there is no Arden, no source of sustenance and revival, only the decadent world of Troy. What remains disturbing in this analysis, however, is a final assignation to Cressida of evilness. Cressida changes, Okerlund claims, “into a faithless, capricious dissembler . . . as the action develop[s], Cressida becomes caught up by the evil that surrounds her. To survive, she not only adopts the evil ways of the world, but eventually perpetuates corruption herself” (3-4). We are perilously close to the traditional view of woman as disrupter of order and society, undermining Okerlund’s singular recognition that the missing link here is an Arden, not Cressida’s strength to persevere.

Marilyn French has also offered fresh insights into Troilus and Cressida; yet she, too, slips into traditional patterns of response. French has claimed that sexual disgust is the “donné” of the problem plays and asserts that “the disparagement of sex . . . underlies the schizophrenic value-system that informs worlds like Troy” (165). She places blame for this “with the males . . . the masculine principle has become its own end” (154). Yet French repeatedly accepts the male characters’ valuation of Cressida; she refers to Helen’s and Cressida’s moral worthlessness (as symbolic of the war’s futility) and asserts that “Cressida shows herself easy in the world and knowledgeable about sexual matters in a way no other Shakespearean heroine is” (159). In an apparent reversal of her original assertion that the “failure rests with the males,” French then emphasizes the failure of the women characters since they are “accepting the masculine principle” (163). What ultimately occurs in French’s reading of Troilus and Cressida is that we all, readers and critic alike, are left floundering in a maze of contradictions due largely to a failure to maintain distinctions between “male” and “masculine principle.”

More salient feminist responses in the “Cressida-and-her-circumstances” pattern do begin to emerge, however. Lisa Jardine reminds us that Cressida
becomes Diomedes' ward, and therefore, her actions under the circumstances at the Greek camp "might (at the outset of the scene at any rate) be merely dutiful behavior toward Diomedes" (99n). Jardine does not explore Cressida's behavior further, but she makes one other important observation. "In Troilus and Cressida V.ii., three male eavesdroppers provide relentlessly patriarchal commentary on" Cressida's behavior (99n). Thus the "actions" of Cressida for which critics have traditionally condemned her are those voiced by characters who have a vested interest in upholding the male-dominated political structure. Gayle Greene also concludes that critics have erred in accepting male characters' evaluations of Cressida, whose behavior is not a sign of "the innate depravity of women, as male characters and critics claim, but that her price has fallen" — and that is a luckless fate in a mercantile society (Fem. & Marxism 39). Two important conclusions are drawn from this recognition: first, that in accepting a masculine valuation of herself, Cressida represents a woman's typical psychological pattern to define herself in relation to how others value her; and second, it becomes apparent that Shakespeare is more sympathetic to Cressida's depiction when we see her in context of the men and society she encounters, that is, "the stereotypical in her character occurs in a context that constitutes a critique of stereotyping" ("Shakespeare's Cressida" 145). Thus, if we more carefully observe Cressida and her world, we not only come to a better appreciation of Cressida as a character but of Shakespeare's artistry as well. With this reading of Cressida's behavioral to her circumstances, we enter the realm of scholarly, enlightening feminist analyses of Cressida's function in the play as a whole. As Carol Thomas Neely observes, "Cressida's infidelity to Troilus is not ignored or defended [by feminists] but explained as a result of her role as an object defined, controlled, exchanged by men, and totally dependent on them" ("Fem. Modes" 8).

II

Feminist scholars have made numerous other inroads into reshaping the traditional patterns of response to Troilus and Cressida. In first exploring traditional analyses and noting the major patterns as outlined, I began to despair at what seemed to me an overwhelming disparagement of a character and a play that I had found beautifully complex, moving, and rich in interpretative possibilities. It was only with the feminist "discovery" of this play that attitudes began to change. Feminists and those influenced by their work have not only countered each of the traditional patterns of response but
have added several new avenues for exploration as well. Lisa Jardine and Gayle Greene countered the traditional pattern of “Cressida-and-her-circumstances,” as discussed above; other patterns are also being re-addressed:

_The “whore” pattern:_ Not surprisingly, the most vigorous feminist responses have been in reaction to the tradition of Cressida-as-whore. Raymond Southall, in an early attack on such readings, takes both Wilson Knight and E.M.W. Tillyard to task. Cressida is not a whore, Southall asserts; she is merely a bartered commodity — not just by Troilus but by all men, including her father (223). Southall particularly disputes the assumption, typically conjoined with “Cressida-as-whore,” that Troilus, in Tillyard’s term, is a “romantic and unfortunate lover” (228). Like any other member of the “gluttonous and lecherous capitalistic society,” Southall notes, Troilus merely wanted “access” to Cressida (228). Indeed, what emerges in the text is “Shakespeare’s political humanism” (232). Katherine Stockholder also denies Cressida’s role as whore and points to another important reversal. Noting the violent images of ulcers, gashes, knives, and so forth that Troilus employs in 1.1.51-64, Stockholder asserts, “This violence, together with this treatment of Cressida as sex object, prepare us for the total reversal Troilus makes at the end of the first scene” (542). Therefore, Troilus’s reversal needs to be observed as much as Cressida’s.

These early denials of Cressida as whore led the way for the seminal renunciation of such one-dimensional attitudes in Grant Voth’s and Oliver Evans’ 1975 study. They argued that the complexity of Cressida’s character and her role in the play deserved more critical attention than such elements had previously received. This assertion has been supported and expanded upon by Carole McKewin, Gayle Greene, and others. Voth and Evans begin with the observation that critics have agreed for too long that “Cressida is mere prostitute, a cold and calculating woman” (231). Closer observation reveals that her movement in the play parallels that of Troilus’s “from awareness to self-deception and back to awareness again” (231). In the beginning of the play, Cressida is astute; she knows what Trojan men value in women in spite of the admiring language they sometimes invoke. Yet as her affair with Troilus progresses, she is persuaded to his “ideal” vision; however, the realities of the Greek camp draw her back to her original awareness: “she reluctantly returns to her initial and more accurate, if less attractive, understanding of the way things go in the world” (231). It is “unattractive” because it holds no illusions about love, but “it is a more legitimate approach to love than is Troilus’ corrupt idealism,” when one considers their world (234). Voth and Evans also discount the “whore” perspective’s assumptions that Cressida
willingly and abruptly submits to or encourages her abuse by the Greek warriors. It is "utterly unclear" why Ulysses initiates the kissing scene, though it does serve to force Cressida once again to rely upon her wits for survival. It is important to recognize the reluctant Cressida who finally submits to the actions of the real world; there is regret and "perhaps even . . . pathos" in her final lines: "Troilus, farewell! one eye yet looks on thee; But with my heart the other eye doth see" (V.i.107-108) (236). Carolyn Asp has also recognized a pathos in Cressida's situation, rooted in the "very assumption that she has no intrinsic value apart from that reflected back to her by observers" ("Defense" 409). If there is any "folly" to Cressida's actions, Voth and Evans argue, it is only in giving way to Troilus's ideal vision when it is she who knows the truth of the world; however, they continue, it is "a folly which we feel has won her a disproportionate amount of blame" (237). Here, many readers will undoubtedly be more willing to rejoin the collective "we."

In M.M. Burns' study of Troilus and Cressida, another insightful distinction is made: if we, as readers, do not passively accept other characters' evaluations of Cressida but look instead to her actual responses, a very different portrayal of Cressida emerges. Though Pandarus's language is certainly bawdy, Cressida's is not; in fact, she often avoids Pandarus's innuendos (such as when they are observing the warriors parade forth) by responding in the form of questions and by noticing the people around her, virtually ignoring Pandarus (106-107). She is not notable for being a whore but rather, Burns asserts, for her "clearer sight and straighter language" (108). This is hardly the Cressida viewed by Rossier as "a chatty, vulgar little piece."

Gayle Greene has also responded to the concept of Cressida as a whore in her study of "Women on Trial in Shakespeare," published in the Fall 1982 issue of Topic, which is devoted to the Elizabethan woman:

Cressida fails her chastity test as readily as Isabella passes hers, and though the men in the play see her as the simplistic of stereotypes, she is not the "whore" (V.ii.110) that the disillusioned Troilus or Thersites call her, nor that critics, taking them at their words, have likewise pronounced her. She is actually a fascinating and sympathetic study of a character in relation to a society that has made her what she is — that values her little yet insists that she be as she "is valued" (II.ii.52). Defined in relation to one lover, her characterization implies a critique of an exclusively relational conception of self-hood which leaves woman with only "A kind of self" (III.ii.140). (12)

Not unlike the traditional responses, feminist analyses often overlap "patterns"; and Greene further suggests that it may be the very negation of woman's worth in terms of sexual power that underlies Cressida's inability "to function as regenerative agent of a social order that remains as diseased as it is male-dominated" (12). That is, it is not woman who creates chaos in society,
but rather man’s devaluing of her that does so.

Cressida’s “limtedness”: In this traditional response pattern, we noted the repeated assertion that Cressida was weak, frail, encompassed by fear, or, as some critics summed it up, “womanly.” R.A. Yoder has responded most thoroughly to this pattern by following the strong, significant actions of Cressida throughout the play. First, Yoder counsels, it is erroneous to assume that Cressida is sexually experienced because of the way in which she speaks since Shakespeare’s virginal heroines, such as Rosalind and Juliet, speak in the same manner (122). Indeed, it is Troilus’s language that is suspect; he is supposed to be “mad in Cressida’s love,” but he joins Aeneas in “the very council that has dealt the blow.... [Pandarus] reacts more passionately than Troilus. He is left to console Cressida whose grief, so unlike Troilus’s, points toward tragic intensity...” (120). When Cressida is passed around among the Greeks, she is “essentially a captive [and] has no real power to refuse” (122). She is smart enough, however, to know that wit and spirit are her most effective means to play the Greeks’ game. Nor is she shocked at their rude behavior, because “there is in her less illusion than in Troilus and an adaptive reserved strength. She is indeed a daughter of the game,” but not the game of love — of war (122). It is that game by which she has been raised, as has everyone in this decaying society, and Cressida acts not with weakness but with intelligence and skill to survive.

Cressida within a convention: This pattern has received less attention from feminists than some others, but G.K. Hunter has explored one of the most prevalent conventions that traditional criticism has relied upon — courtly love and heroic traditions of language, which focused sharply on Cressida’s betrayal of the romantic and “true” Troilus. As Hunter notes, while Troilus speaks with “heroic protestations” of the good intentions of men like himself, Cressida replies with comments that reveal

for her, monstrosity in love is not essentially a matter of language, nor of the discrepancy between the life and the mind and the limits of action, but of masculine unreliability in promising adoration but being casual and inattentive in actual affection. (48)

It is Cressida who moves beyond the confines of convention, and when Troilus continues to boast that he would certainly be absolute in his constancy, “Cressida listens to this and says (her finest moment?): ‘Will you walk in, my lord?’” (Hunter 48). It is through such close attention to the text, rather than relying upon the observations of other characters, that feminist scholars turn our attention to the complexities and truth of the situation. Troilus does not overvalue Cressida; he values language — his own — and the illusions he can create thereby. Ironically, even while disclaiming rhetoric,
Troilus emphasizes it, to the exclusion of the real person and situation that he confronts. As Hunter notes, for Troilus, Cressida “is scarcely there at all” (49). Certainly, his behavior after their brief night of love supports Cressida’s earlier questioning of his constancy. Hunter reminds us that it is Cressida’s function in the play (as it is Juliet’s, Cordelia’s, and Perdita’s) to be part of the “front-line troops in a campaign to deflate a rotundity of language” into which lovers so often fall (50). Thus, Shakespeare uses Cressida to mock such rhetorical conventions, not to hide behind them.

M.M. Burns has also suggested that Cressida’s function in the play is to destroy the conventions of the chivalric ideal. In observing the patterns of aggression that serve as the design of *Troilus and Cressida*,

men are turned into objects of fear, to be cut apart physically, and women turned into objects of scorn to be cut apart figuratively. The spuriously heroic chivalric ideal of man as warrior and woman as mistress dissolves into a parody of itself... (128)

Burns further suggests that, if we closely pursue Hector’s speech on this subject in I.iii.273–283, we see the result of this “chivalric” episode — honor for the man, dishonor for the woman — is not at all an “accidental figure of speech... nor is it accidental that the disgrace will be living and the ‘honour’ connected only with death” (128). It is the very convention of the chivalric ideal itself that Shakespeare is questioning, and Cressida’s function in that aspect of the play must not be ignored.

III

Feminist scholars’ analyses of *Troilus and Cressida* have not been limited to the de-mythicizing of traditional response patterns, however. In addition to awakening readers to variations between the text and many standard assumptions about Cressida, feminist interpretations have also contributed new avenues of exploration. Velma Bourgeois Richmond, in her survey of “Shakespeare’s Women,” notes that Cressida, Cordelia, and Desdemona all have one thing in common — they are motherless. These women are “less competent and assured than is Juliet, however sad her end” (337); and with this observation at hand, Richmond suggests that a “feminine model seems, then, more important than a father figure, unless the young woman can develop through being without parental supervision, as in many comedies” (337). This assertion is not fully developed in the essay since it is a survey approach, but the idea raises provocative questions for feminists to explore
regarding the feminine developmental processes and the effect of role models (or lack thereof).

Similar queries regarding differences in gender responses are raised by M.M. Burns’ analysis of Act IV, Scene V, when Cressida enters the Greek camp:

When a society falls into a general state of aggression, even people like Hector cease to deal fairly with others as individuals; as Ulysses advocates (for ulterior reasons), they cease to distinguish “particular” people. At least one character in this play, however, does try to distinguish among other individuals and to distinguish as an individual, in the faceless flux of aggression around her. In so doing, Cressida surely contravenes the usual critical assessment of her character. (105-106)

This perspective returns, ultimately, to the questions of how particular characters make choices between desire and duty, between self and other. Not only does this cause us to assess the moral dilemmas and resolutions, and possible distinctions between how a male or a female character makes those decisions, but also how societal influences help shape the choices made by each. There are certainly many such facets open to exploration by feminist scholars in Troilus and Cressida.

These issues lead us to another point regarding ways in which further scholarship will add to our understanding of Troilus and Cressida and other Shakespearean plays, an approach which I will refer to as a “mutuality” of interdisciplinary exploration. That is, literary feminists can and should draw upon the work being done in other disciplines to enhance interpretations of Shakespeare's canon. Gayle Greene has explored this avenue in relation to feminism and Marxism; Jonathan Culler has done so in terms of feminism and deconstruction. Psychology, of course, is another discipline that has much to offer to literary studies, as Janet Adelman’s articulate feminist psychoanalytic evaluation of Troilus and Cressida reveals. Newly developing feminist studies in the field of psychology, such as Carol Gilligan’s recent attempts to refocus attitudes toward female personality development, concepts of self, motives, and moral commitments, also suggest promising applicability. In Gilligan’s studies of how men and women respond to decision-making when there is no simple right or wrong answer, no solution in which some person will not be hurt, she has discovered certain interesting and apparently gender-specific differences in response. Gilligan reports that men are more likely to define a “morality of rights,” while women define a “morality of responsibility” (98-99). The distinction, as Gilligan defines it, is that:

The moral imperative that emerges repeatedly in interviews with women is an injunction to
care, a responsibility to discern and alleviate the “real and recognizable trouble” of this world. For men, the moral imperative appears rather as an injunction to respect the rights of others and thus to protest from interference the rights to life and self-fulfillment. (100)

Thus, women are described as responding in terms of responsibility and an inclusion of others in their moral decision-making processes, while men respect others’ rights and therefore respond in a pattern that excludes others in order to protect themselves. Gilligan has demonstrated such distinctions in terms of Antonio and Portia in The Merchant of Venice (105), and the result certainly constitutes an appropriate analytical basis for further exploration of Burns’ suggestions that Hector and Ulysses, under such stress, cease to particularize others or to deal fairly with them — that is, they exclude — in order to give preference to their own priorities, while Cressida continues in her attempts to distinguish both among and as an individual — that is, inclusively.

There are many more facets of literary and interdisciplinary analysis that feminist criticism can explore in order to reshape interpretations of characters and our understanding of their functions within Shakespeare’s plays. Carole McKewin has suggested that feminist criticism in Shakespeare, for whatever purpose or perspective, promises “new directions in the reading, teaching, and appreciation of Shakespeare’s art” (164). Cressida and the questions of her “falseness” are richly deserving of such attention.

Works Cited


