

Beneath the Surface: Motives for Rhetoric and Action in *Troilus and Cressida* A Response to Vernon Loggins et al.

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In the final act of Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* Troilus agonizes over what to him seems actions of betrayal by Cressida. She had vowed to love only him and now Troilus spies on her as she involves herself with Diomedes. Troilus curses what appears to be incongruity between Cressida's words and her subsequent actions. He sums up the matter after reading the letter she writes to him that Pandarus delivers: "Words, words, mere words, no matter from the heart; [...] / But edifies another with her deed" (V.iii.109-15).¹ It is the theme of action contradicting rhetoric. The play is rife with examples of characters behaving in ways that seem to undercut the words they have spoken. In his article "Rhetoric and Action in *Troilus and Cressida*," Vernon Loggins points out numerous characters in *Troilus and Cressida* who do not seem to do what they say they will, or do what they say they will not. He cites example after example for what he calls the "pattern of rhetoric-action disagreement."² Troilus begins the first scene vowing not to fight and he leaves the scene heading to battle with Aeneas. He begins the play "weaker than a woman's tear" (I.i.9), as he claims, but finishes the play bent on revenge and battle. Cressida claims in her soliloquy that she will not capitulate to Troilus (I.ii.260-73), but the first time the lovers share the stage she "plunges headlong into a relationship with the prince."³ Hector begins the council scene opposed to keeping Helen and abruptly changes his position and continues to fight for her. Ulysses' famous speech on order and degree is, according to Loggins, only "lip service,"⁴ which he undermines by conspiring with Nestor. For Loggins, Ulysses' public position—his

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rhetoric—is “diametrically opposed to his private one,” which we see in his action to “trick” both Achilles and Ajax.⁵

Numerous critics have noted that the major characters’ rhetoric and action do appear contradictory,⁶ or as Loggins puts it, “[...] what major characters say is undercut by the actions they later take.”⁷ Pointing this contradiction out, however, does little more than scratch the surface of what is really happening here. If we dig a little deeper we discover that the same motivating value or desire of the individual characters dictates both their rhetoric and their action. Loggins even seems to recognize that more than a surface contradiction is taking place when he mentions almost in passing “that the public actions taken by the characters [...] are in part determined by their private concerns.”⁸ What Loggins and most of the other critics⁹ fail to do is to develop the idea of “private concerns” determining both rhetoric and action. This idea of consistent motive for both rhetoric and action in the main characters can readily be seen in Ulysses.

True, Ulysses loves to talk and use elevated, over-blown rhetoric; it takes him sixteen lines to ask permission to speak (I.iii.53-68). Nevertheless if we can push aside the flowers of his language for a moment, we see that they stem and bloom from solid, logical roots. Ulysses calls for a return to the proper order in the Grecian army, for all nature even “The heavens themselves, the planets and this center / Observe degree, priority, and place” (I.iii.85-86). Agamemnon is the king and he should reassert his authority over the army, especially Achilles. By refusing to fight, Achilles creates discord within the army and encourages the “chaos” that Ulysses predicts follows the removal of “degree” or order.

Ulysses is right. Without proper order and place the army is not efficient or effective, and, as he points out, it is this lack of order that “keeps Troy on foot, / Not her own sinews” (I.iii.135-36). Ulysses’ argument is sound, and neither he nor Agamemnon nor the other generals present debate its validity. But the trouble arises when Agamemnon inevitably asks Ulysses that now that they know what is wrong with the army, “What is the remedy?” (I.iii.141). In response

Ulysses sets off on another long speech that is not really the solution but a more specific description of the "Achilles problem." This time, however, he departs from the high level of order of the planets and "the glorious planet Sol" (I.iii.89), and instead he talks about how Patroclus pretends to be Agamemnon and others in jest in order to amuse Achilles. How quickly the argument turns from noble concerns about the army to personal pride and having one's dignity and feelings hurt. Intuitively attuned to Ulysses' zigzagging, Nestor saves the original point of the argument by demonstrating how mockery infects others in the army and weakens the order Ulysses so eloquently argued for earlier. Agamemnon has not maintained the order he should have; but Ulysses is understandably cautious about how to address this issue. By focusing the argument on Achilles, and linking the appeal to Agamemnon's pride, Ulysses demonstrates he knows what his society values, and how best to motivate his leader to take control of the army. Ulysses, as well as Nestor, knows how to manipulate others. In this case by appealing to Agamemnon's pride.

But Ulysses' speech on order and degree goes beyond his desire to influence others. For Ulysses, order and degree are not only efficient and effective, they represent moral values.

Take but degree away [...] [and]
 Force should be right—or rather, right and wrong,
 Between whose endless jar justice resides,
 Should lose their names, and so should justice too.
 (I.iii.109, 116-18)

It is not true, as Barbara Everett claims, that "[...] Ulysses proposes a remedy as simply self-conscious as the malady: that Achilles should be triggered into action by vanity [...]"¹⁰ In his suggestion to use deception and let Achilles' pride bring him back to the battle, Ulysses is not demonstrating values as selfish as Achilles'. Though the problem and the proposed remedy are built on the value the characters give to pride and outward honor, the remedy's foundation lies on the solid ground of understanding and reason. Ulysses knows both Achilles

and Agamemnon are prideful, and he logically reasons that pride should be used to motivate them both to action.

At the foundation level there is no conflict between Ulysses' rhetoric and his actions. As Troilus later states it, "We may not think the justness of each act / Such and no other than the event doth form it" (II.ii.118-19). The intent and not the means to the end, in this case, determine justice and injustice, right and wrong. Thus we can see Ulysses deliver a speech calling for order and degree and then immediately plan out a deception to be played on Ajax and Achilles, and still know that at the foundation level, the level of right and wrong, Ulysses does not consider himself hypocritical. He is able to align the motivation for his actions with the motivation for his rhetorical stance. Though the actions may seem less just than the rhetoric, the intent behind them both is the same. Gayle Greene notes that Ulysses' language may make "right and wrong [...] lose their names."¹¹ But it would be incorrect to conclude that right and wrong, thereby, lose their meaning.

In the Trojan council scene we see just how conscious, how public, the separation can be between rhetoric and action. Hector condemns the Trojans' continued seizure of Helen.

Let Helen go.

Since the first sword was drawn about this question
Every tithesoul, 'mongst many thousand dimes,
Hath been as dear as Helen—I mean, of ours.
If we have lost so many tenths of ours
To guard a thing not ours—nor worth to us,
Had it our name, the value of one ten—
What merit's in that reason which denies
The yielding of her up? (II.ii.16-24)

Hector suggests they look seriously at not just the logic of the argument, but also the worth or value behind the argument. Hector is asking for a discussion of Trojan values. And Troilus answers that there is no value, only as given by the particular individual or individuals: "What's aught but as 'tis valued?" (II.ii.52). The two positions are irreconcilable. Hector claims objects, people, actions possess intrinsic

value; Troilus counters that all things are assigned value by individuals or society. Are they fighting for Helen because she is valuable? Or as Troilus would have it, is Helen valuable because they are fighting for her? Hector argues "'Tis mad idolatry / To make the service greater than the God" (II.ii.55-56). For him their reasons to keep Helen are neither logical nor moral.

The reasons you allege do more conduce
To the hot passion of distempered blood
Than to make up a free determination
'Twixt right and wrong; [...] (II.ii.167-70)

But then suddenly, in mid-sentence, he agrees to keep Helen: "—yet ne'ertheless, / My sprightly brethren I propend to you / In resolution to keep Helen still" (II.ii.188-90). Loggins makes the case that Hector changes his mind not because of some seemingly honorable gesture ("tis a cause that hath no mean dependence / Upon our joint and several dignities" [II.iii.191-92]), but because he needs to save face, to redeem himself from having suffered a blow from Ajax earlier in battle (I.ii.30-32). Hector, Loggins claims, cares little for whether they keep Helen or not, other than that she makes a good excuse to keep fighting. "He is willing to risk public destruction for private satisfaction."¹² But this is not necessarily so. I do not think the text supports the idea that Hector acts purely in self-interest or in opposition to his values as revealed in his rhetorical stance.

When Hector argues first to give Helen to the Greeks he acknowledges that this would be right and just, but we know that by this time he has already issued the challenge of combat that we are led to believe is for Achilles, and not Ajax, the one he logically would want to re-fight if his only desire was to "save face" for himself. "This challenge that the gallant Hector sends, / However it is spread in general name, / Relates in purpose only to Achilles" (I.iii.315-17). In order to stay true to his own set of values, Hector feels he cannot repent of the challenge and so he reverses his stance—he must agree in *resolution*, not principle, to keep Helen because he feels this is the only way to save his own and all of Troy's military and political dignity. It is the

prior vow made with words that prompts his action of continued fighting.

Now certainly the value of remaining true at all times to your vows is called into question, particularly after Hector's second vow to meet Achilles in battle. When Hector prepares to go out to battle, to "endeavor deeds to match these words" (IV.vii.143-44), his wife and sister try to talk him out of it. Andromache: "Do not count it holy / To hurt by being just" (V.iii.19-20); Cassandra: "It is the purpose that makes strong the vow, / But vows to every purpose must not hold" (23-24). Hector's reply reveals his motivating belief or value: "Life every man holds dear, but the dear man / Holds honor far more precious-dear than life" (27-28). Now while it may be argued that Hector has his values messed-up, it is nevertheless true that the *same* values motivate both his rhetoric and his actions.

Perhaps the strongest examples of characters seemingly not acting in accordance with their rhetoric are the two title characters, Troilus and Cressida. But again, taken at the fundamental level of intent or motivation it is the reasons *why* they say what they say and *why* they do what they do that is important, and it is not particularly helpful just to point out the fact that there is surface contradiction between their words and their deeds. In the first scene Troilus argues against the war and against its cause:

Fools on both sides. Helen must needs be fair
 When with your blood you daily paint her thus.
 I cannot fight upon this argument.
 It is too starved a subject for my sword. (I.i.86-89)

After such a statement it is odd when next we see Troilus in the council scene argue to keep Helen, the cause of the war. Why the seemingly sudden change? Perhaps he "cannot fight upon *this* argument"—Helen, but he has found a new argument he can fight for. He is in love with Cressida, and seems to be willing to do much to go to bed with her. In his argument with Hector, Troilus seems to be referring to Helen, but he also may be projecting his own possible future with Cressida.

I take today a wife, and my election
 Is led on in the conduct of my will;
 My will enkindled by mine eyes and ears,
 Two traded pilots 'twixt the dangerous shores
 Of will and judgement. How may I avoid—
 Although my will distaste what it elected—
 The wife I chose? There can be no evasion
 To blench from this and to stand firm by honor.
 We turn not back the silks upon the merchant
 When we have spoiled them; [...] (II.ii.60-69)

Cressida is the daughter of the Trojan traitor Calchas who is in the Greek camp. An end to the war would probably mean the departure of Cressida and the revelation of her relationship with Troilus. Troilus needs to keep the war going, and so he counters Hector's talk of reason with an appeal to his honor to ensure the continuation of the fighting.

Nay, if we talk of reason,
 Let's shut our gates and sleep. Manhood and honor
 Should have hare hearts, would they but fat their thoughts
 With this crammed reason. Reason and respect
 Make livers pale and lustihood deject. (II.ii.45-49)

It is the perfect argument to influence Hector, who, we have already seen, feels that his honor and all of Troy's honor has been threatened, and who sees honor and dignity as two of the most basic values of life. With Troilus we see another character who actually reverses his rhetorical stance: claiming the war is unworthy of his support and then arguing in favor of it. But it is not that the character's fundamental motivation has changed; it is a matter of taking the rhetorical position that best serves that motivation in a given situation.

In his love-sick moaning in the first act it is natural for him to play the broken-hearted lover who has no reason to fight outside the city walls when he finds such a cruel battle within his own heart.

Why should I war without the walls of Troy
 That find such cruel battle here within?

Each Trojan that is master of his heart,
Let him to field—Troilus, alas, hath none. (I.i.2-5)

Then Aeneas enters, and Troilus is unable or unwilling to give him a good reason for not being on the battlefield. And in order to keep his desire for Cressida from becoming public knowledge Troilus must grab up his arms again and excitedly return to the battle with Aeneas. So even here Troilus is still acting according to the same motivation that prompts his words, though the two, actions and words, are in this case contradictory.

By the end of the play Troilus is thoroughly the crushed lover and he can find no other outlet for his emotions but the war, so he goes forth seeking revenge upon the man whom he supposes stole his lover. Once again being driven to behave in a manner contradictory to his original rhetoric, but in both his rhetoric and his behavior he is driven by the same passion.

Cressida could be viewed as the character most deserving of sympathy because she is the major character least in control of her own situation. In many ways her rhetoric makes no difference, she will be bartered with by the Greeks and the Trojans no matter what she says, or does for that matter. Still it is a little surprising to hear her speak as if she is not interested in Troilus, and that she will not give in to his advances in act one scene two, and then in act three she almost immediately gives herself to him. But, in the moment Cressida confesses her feelings to Troilus we learn the true nature of her previous rhetoric:

Hard to seem won; but I was won, my lord,
With the first glance that ever—pardon me:
If I confess much, you will play the tyrant.
I love you now, but till now not so much
But I might master it. In faith I lie:
My thoughts were like unbridled children, grown
Too headstrong for their mother. See, we fools!
Why have I blabbed? Who shall be true to us,
When we are so unsecret to ourselves?
But though I loved you well, I wooed you not—
(III.ii.106-15)

Here Cressida admits that she was lying to herself when she claimed to be uninterested in Troilus; she was, in fact, won over "With the first glance." And much later she seems to admit that she goes after whatever catches her eye:

Troilus, farewell. One eye yet looks on thee,
But with my heart the other eye doth see.
Ah, poor our sex! This fault in us I find:
The error of our eye directs our mind.
What error leads must err. O then conclude:
Minds swayed by eyes are full of turpitude.
(V.ii.107-12)

Thus, though at first her rhetoric is seemingly contradictory to her actions, she later reveals her rhetoric was not a true reflection of her desires, and so it should not surprise us when her true actions contradict her untrue rhetoric.

It could be argued that Cressida is all along playing the situation, that she only pretends to love Troilus because that seems the safest course to take for a young woman who must rely upon the mercy of others, and who has a father who is a traitor to her benefactor's cause. Perhaps her underlying motivating principle is simply self-preservation. This would account for her seemingly sincere confession of love to Troilus, as well as her words and actions in the betrayal scene with Diomedes. But I do not think this argument would effectively account for her dramatic lamenting in front of Pandarus when he tells her she is to be given to the Greeks. There does not seem any need for such a show, if it were a show, to be played out in front of him—unless it is her attempt to feed herself one of her own convincing lines. Of course, this makes her a much less sympathetic character than she would be otherwise.

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NOTES

¹All references to Shakespeare's texts are from *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York: Norton, 1997).

²Vernon Loggins, "Rhetoric and Action in *Troilus and Cressida*," *College Language Association Journal* 21.2 (1991): 93-108.

³Loggins 100.

⁴Loggins 103.

⁵Loggins 104.

⁶For example, Stephen J. Lynch, "Hector and the Theme of Honor in *Troilus and Cressida*," *The Upstart Crow* 7 (1987): 68-79, points out the discrepancies between what Hector "advocates [...] in theory [speech]," and what he appears to favor "in action" (70); Jeffrey L. Porter discusses the failure of speech to remain consistent with action in *Troilus and Cressida* in "Shakespeare and the Motives of Rhetoric: The Failure of Speech in *Troilus and Cressida*," *Postscript* 4 (1987): 55-64; T. McAlidon claims that Hector's "greatest failures" are in the area of "establishing a proper relation between words and deeds" (31), see "Language, Style and Meaning in *Troilus and Cressida*," *PMLA* 84 (1969): 29-43; Lawrence D. Green analyzes the "inconsistencies between word and action" in *Troilus and Cressida*, and states that because of these "inconsistencies in the Trojan council scene" no sense can be made of the resulting action (32), see "'We'll Dress Him Up in Voices': The Rhetoric of Disjunction in *Troilus and Cressida*," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70.1 (1984): 23-40.

⁷Loggins 95.

⁸Loggins 96.

⁹I must note that Lynch does introduce the idea of a consistent motive for both rhetoric and action, in Hector at least: "Thus, his apparently conflicting actions—his refusal to keep Helen as well as his agreement to keep Helen—issue from a consistent concern with self-glorifying appearances" (73). But he does not develop this though further, nor does he expand it to include any other characters.

¹⁰Barbara Everett, "The Inaction of *Troilus and Cressida*," *Essays in Criticism* 32.2 (1982): 123.

¹¹Gayle Greene, "Language and Value in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*," *SEL* 21.2 (1981): 174.

¹²Loggins 107.