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Cressida's Shifting Identity: Performativity and Power in Troilus and Cressida

Shakespeare's Troilus and Cressida is a complex play to define. While it is nominally a tragedy about a scorned lover and a perfidious woman, much of the runtime is taken up by the interactions between the warring factions of the Trojans and the Greeks and by the conflicts within each camp. In his *Shakespeare and his Predecessors*, the 19th-century literary critic Frederick S. Boas points out that the central love story is based on medieval sources that draw only tangentially on the *Illiad* (Boas 370). These problems of definition extend to trying to explain Cressida's identity. The most straightforward and most superficial view is that she is, as Benoit de Sainte-More originally described her, according to Boas, in his *Le Roman de Troie* as an "attractive coquette, with a quick and ready wit and a changeable heart" (Boas 371). But is that really who she is? In *Troilus and Cressida*, Cressida's identity is not fixed or inherent but is instead shaped by the men around her and the social pressures she faces. As a woman in a patriarchal society caught in the turmoil of war, her identity is constructed through her relationships with the men in her life, and she must navigate these attachments for her own survival. Her shift in loyalty from Troilus to Diomedes can be seen not as an act of personal desire but as a pragmatic response to her circumstances.

The standard and traditional view of Cressida is that she is a superficial, fickle woman who toys with the emotions of the men around her. This reading frames Cressida as a character defined by her capriciousness, changing allegiances, and flirtations. Her identity is reduced to a stereotypical depiction of a woman whose desires are shallow and mutable, who is untrustworthy and arbitrary. This view fails to account for the complexity of Cressida's character and reduces her actions to mere manipulations of the men around her. It is a simplistic view that overlooks the external pressures and constraints Cressida faces, particularly as a woman in a patriarchal society where her relationships with men largely determine her value. Krims argues that Shakespeare's portrayal of Cressida "reflects the suffering when one's mother moved away to fill her own legitimate needs," illustrating a deep psychological conflict that shapes her actions (Krims 244). This moment highlights Cressida's internal conflict, as she recognizes that her desires are at odds with the expectations placed upon her, yet she feels compelled to follow the course laid out for her. This perspective renders Cressida's actions as unpredictable and disingenuous rather than a nuanced survival strategy within a brutal social and political context. For instance, Cressida herself states: "I have forgot my father. / I know no touch of consanguinity; / No kin, no love, no blood, no soul so near me / As the sweet Troilus." (4.2.97-100) This desperate cry illustrates her internal conflict and the pressures she faces to sever ties with her past for survival and loyalty to her love, Troilus.

A more modern interpretation could reveal Cressida as a character who adapts her identity based on the expectations and needs of the men around her, reflecting the pressures of navigating a patriarchal society. Rather than being simply a manipulative woman, Cressida's shifting allegiances can be understood as a survival mechanism. In the context of war and betrayal, where women have little agency, Cressida constantly morphs to meet the expectations

of the men in her life. Her seemingly contradictory actions, the professed love for Troilus followed by her quick turn to Diomedes, are not signs of disloyalty or deceit but rather of her attempt to align with the men who hold power over her, adjusting her behaviour to maintain some form of agency in a world that offers her little control. As Cressida says to Diomedes, "He that takes that doth take my heart withal" (5.2.88). Laurie Maguire explains that "Cressida will 'accept concubinage to avoid rape.' In other words, 'surrender becomes her last line of defense'" (Maguire 162). In this sense, Cressida's shifting identity becomes a tool for survival in a world where loyalty, love, and honour are often dictated by external forces rather than internal desires.

In considering whether Cressida's identity is innate or socially constructed, it becomes clear that her character challenges the binary between personal essence and social imposition. While Cressida's internal desires may play a role in her actions, her identity is far more shaped by the societal constraints and expectations placed upon her as a woman. Her role as a pawn in the male-dominated power struggles between Trojans and Greeks forces her to adapt continually, responding to the changing demands of the men around her. The instability of her identity highlights how identity, especially for women in patriarchal systems, is not something fixed or inherent, but instead a performance constructed through external influences. While one might argue that she has some agency in shaping her identity, her identity is not something she can claim or express independently from the social pressures she faces. As Cressida says, "Men prize the thing ungained more than it is" (1.2.280). Grace Tiffany notes that Cressida's acceptance of her role as an object of desire is an act of self-erasure, as she relinquishes control over her own identity to conform to male expectations: "Cressida's self-rejection is dramatized in her first scene, where she presents herself as something fundamentally other than she knows herself to be" (Tiffany 45). Therefore, Cressida's identity is not the product of an innate essence but a

dynamic, socially constructed process that reflects how the power structures around them shape women's identities.

Cressida in *Troilus and Cressida* embodies the complexity of female identity in a patriarchal society, illustrating the tension between personal desires and societal expectations. While she is often reduced to a stereotypical figure of fickleness and disloyalty, a closer examination reveals a character who constantly adapts her identity to survive. Her shifting allegiances are not simply acts of betrayal but rather responses to the pressures of a world that grants women little agency. We can see this in the figures above. Figure 1 shows her engaged in the flirtation, reaching for Diomedes, while Figure 2 shows her resisting and pulling away. However, if one looks closely, her eyes are drawn to him, so her resistance may be more feigned than it first appears. Shakespeare's portrayal of Cressida challenges simplistic readings by highlighting her internal conflict, wherein she navigates the competing demands of love, loyalty, and survival. As the play unfolds, it becomes clear that Cressida's identity is shaped not by an innate essence but by the male-dominated power structures surrounding her, which force her into roles she cannot escape. In this sense, Cressida is a powerful representation of the ways in which women's identities are often constructed and constrained by external forces, revealing the deep psychological and social struggles faced by women throughout history.

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