

Troilus and Cressida

SYNOPSIS

The Tragedy of Troilus and Cressida

The play begins with a prologue describing the situation in the middle of the war between the Greeks and Trojans caused by the Trojan Prince Paris having abducted Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world, from her husband Menelaus. The Greek army has besieged Troy, but at this point it does not appear that either side will win. Troilus, one of the brothers of the Trojan champion Hector, falls in love with Cressida, the daughter of Calchas, a Trojan who has gone over to the Greek side, leaving his daughter in Troy. Cressida's uncle Pandarus encourages their relationship.

The Greeks are quarrelling amongst themselves. Achilles, their greatest champion, refuses to fight and has withdrawn to his tent with his lover, Patroclus. Ulysses tries to persuade Achilles to come back by making him jealous because people say that Ajax is the greater warrior.

The Trojans also disagree about the value of continuing the war just to keep Helen. Hector says that she is not worth the lives she costs, but Troilus asserts that honour demands that they should continue the war. Finally Hector is brought round to this point of view.

Ajax has challenged Hector to single combat. The first day of fighting ends in a show of mutual respect. The Trojan general Antenor has been captured by the Greeks, and he is returned in exchange for Cressida, who is sent to join her father after only one night with Troilus. Almost immediately she is unfaithful to Troilus with the Greek Diomedes. Discovering this, Troilus is plunged into despair.

In spite of his sister's prophecies of doom, Hector goes out to fight Ajax again, but is killed by Achilles, who has finally been roused into action by the death of Patroclus, and Hector's body is dragged behind Achilles' chariot. With the fall of Troy certain, Troilus, disillusioned with love, takes on Hector's role as the Trojan champion and promises to avenge his brother by killing Achilles. Pandarus, who is very ill, closes the play with a lament about the problems of trying to facilitate sex between men and women, and the diseases associated with it.

Media:

DVD:

Troilus and Cressida (BBC TV Shakespeare 1981), dir. Jonathan Miller

CD Audio:

Troilus and Cressida (Marlowe Society)

Troilus and Cressida (Arkangel Complete Shakespeare)

Troilus and Cressida by William Walton (opera)

[Michael Mitchell]