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Anahtar kelimeler: *Troilus and Cressida*, Shakespeare, drama, sorunsallık
SHAKESPEARE’S TROILUS AND CRESSIDA AS A PROBLEM PLAY

Abstract

This paper focuses on the problem play elements in Shakespeare’s Troilus and Cressida. There are such elements in and about this play that enable the critics to categorize it as a problem play. Publication problems, elements of comedy, satire, and irony, elements of tragedy, problems with the unity of action, its tragic plot, and Shakespearean concept of tragedy, Shakespeare’s sources and possible reason for his alterations compared to his sources, and his characterization are the major reasons for the argument of this paper. Comments by certain critics will also be provided to help reinforce the problematic issues of Troilus and Cressida. All such arguments are clear indications of how Shakespeare’s Troilus and Cressida is constructed deliberately by Shakespeare in its current state which is termed as a problem play recently.

Keywords: Troilus and Cressida, Shakespeare, drama, problem play

Shakespeare’s Troilus and Cressida has certain elements so that it is not possible to term it as a tragedy, comedy, or history based on Shakespearean drama classifications. The play has a combination of elements from such genres, however it is the same combination that disables critics to label it as one. In addition, there are other reason in this paper that will help contribute to the problem in the play. Therefore, the critics have classified Troilus and Cressida as a problem play. Publication problems, elements of comedy, satire, and irony, elements of tragedy, problems with the unity of action, its tragic plot, and Shakespearean concept of tragedy, Shakespeare’s sources and possible reason for his alterations compared to his sources, and his characterization are the major reasons for the argument of this paper.

The major publications of the play are two Quarto editions in 1609 and the First Folio in 1622-3 (Shakespeare 2-3). The two different title pages of the Quarto editions present the play as “The Historie of Troylus and Cresseida” and “The famous Historie of Troylus and Cressida”. However, the First Folio entitles the play as “The Tragedie of Troylus and Cressida”. What seems to be a historical play in the beginning turns into a tragedy later. This problem with publication continues as the First Folio locates the play at the end of the histories and the beginning of tragedies; so the previous classification of the play seems to lurk on the Folio. It could mean that the editors of the Folio were not sure where to place and how to classify Troilus and Cressida (3).

Another reason for the problem in the play rises from the existing elements of comedy, satire, and irony. The characterization of Thersites, being so close to that of a fool, brings much laughter along with irony. His comments on other characters, asides, and action clash with what the other characters say or do, strengthening the ironic tone and moving him closer to a foil character. Although Shakespearean idea of tragedy has certain notions to create moments of comedy in tragedies to release tension before the upcoming tragic moments, the amount of comic seems to be exaggerated in Troilus and Cressida, especially in Act II Scene III;

ACHILLES: (...) Come, what's Agamemnon?

THERSITES: Thy commander, Achilles. Then tell me, Patroclus, what's Achilles?
PATROCLUS: Thy lord, Thersites: then tell me, I pray thee, what's thyself?

THERSITES: Thy knower, Patroclus: then tell me, Patroclus, what art thou?

PATROCLUS: Thou mayst tell that knowest.

ACHILLES: O, tell, tell.

THERSITES: I'll decline the whole question. Agamemnon commands Achilles; Achilles is my lord; I am Patroclus' knower, and Patroclus is a fool.

PATROCLUS: You rascal!

THERSITES: Peace, fool! I have not done.

ACHILLES: He is a privileged man. Proceed, Thersites.

THERSITES: Agamemnon is a fool; Achilles is a fool; Thersites is a fool, and, as aforesaid, Patroclus is a fool.

As a “privileged man”, the free-talk by Thersites provides the most comical scenes. However, his words are not merely comical but satirical as well. His simple logic of “fooling” people seems less harsh compared to his later comments in the same scene as “Here is such patchery, such juggling and such knavery! All the argument is a cuckold and a whore; a good quarrel to draw emulous factions and bleed to death upon. (…) And war and lechery confound all!”. His “boils on the bold politic with savage insights” (Thomas 23) are coupled with his views on politics as juggling and war as futile. On the Greek side, Hector shares Thersites’ resolutions on war (2.2.14-24). Although Thersites’ language is savage, his meaning is clear; the siege on Troy is laid by fools and maintained by fools. Thersites also acts as Shakespeare’s device to criticize Elizabethan military politics, which will be discussed later in this paper.

The Greeks invite the Trojan Hector before their fight the following day to dine with them. Although they would try to kill him soon, they are courteous to break bread with their enemy. During that dinner, Achilles eyes Hector to find a soft spot through his armour to strike the next day. His intention is not chivalric or heroic at all, and it is arguable if he is heroic at all when he kills Hector without his armour and sword. However, the lack of chivalry does not apply only to Achilles of the Greeks; the so-called hero Troilus argues with his elder brother Hector on whether or not to return Helen. He urges on sending her back and saving the city, taking his character away from one with heroic ideals. On the other hand, Hector is against such ideas and seems like a rather heroic character. This is the crucial debate scene for Vivian Thomas (22) where the value of a person, now Helen later Cressida, is argued. First, we see the debate on the exchange value of Helen, and later the commodification spreads to Cressida. As Helen’s value seems a lot more than Cressida, the Trojans do not send her back to stop the war and therefore the death of too many people. This is not true for Cressida. She means less, just a woman, against the value of a man, the Trojan hero Antenor, who she is exchanged with.

Therefore, there is satire on the Greeks in terms of policy, heroism, and ethics, and on the Trojans in terms of honour and heroism. All these derivations from the classical Trojan war as told by Homer are intended to satirize Elizabethan politics as many take Achilles for the Earl of Essex and his lack of chivalry for his failed rebellion (Walker x). There are also questions on the so-called heroic characters’ morality, but the play does not settle such arguments (Baker 5).

Although there are many more instances that pulls Troilus and Cressida into the comedy classification, many tragic elements exist in the play as well. The first is the subject matter of the play. Simply put, it is a story of love and justice undone by circumstances and cruelty as Troilus and Cressida are separated against their will by greedy men. In this sense, the audience would love to see them die for their love as in Romeo and Juliet. The only tragic death belongs to a major heroic figure, Hector, however the hero/heroine are still alive at the end of the play.
Troilus and Cressida should have died like their counterparts, Romeo and Juliet, and their death would incite catharsis. However, we already know that killing is not a big matter for Shakespeare; He kills many heroes or entire courts in his tragedies. To make a proper tragedy though, we would expect Troilus rage and die in the battlefield as he is betrayed by his precious lover. Cressida’s actions are problematic as well. In Chaucer’s version of this classic story, *Troilus and Criseyde*, Criseyde has a reasoning,

‘But Troilus, syn I no better may,  
And syn that thus departen ye and I,  
Yet preye I God, so yeve yow right good day  
As for the gentileste, trewely,  
That ever I say, to serven feithfully,  
And best can ay his lady honour kepe:’ --  
And with that word she brast anon to wepe (Chaucer v. 1071-7).

On the other hand, Shakespeare’s Cressida does not go through peripeteia, a tragic twist of fate or a reversal of fortune. Unlike Criseyde, Cressida says “Troilus, farewell! Ah, poor our sex! This fault in us I find” (5.2.113-5). When compared with the intellectual character of Chaucer’s, this version of Criseyde/Cressida does not have such depth of character provided for her. She accepts and justifies her fall, not like a tragic event befell on her. It is argued that this characterization of Shakespeare’s results from the contemporary perception of Criseyde as a degraded female character as I will argue on in the characterization problems below.

Their separation is not tragic, as their union foretells. The night they spend together, organized by Pandarus, is a lustful union. This consummation scene is not depicted as a climax for a pure love relationship.

A simple point-by-point analysis of the major characters can provide a clearer understanding on them as untragic. The classical idea of tragedy requires some heroic deeds by the hero. However, the play opens with Troilus’ unarming: he is fed up with war and does not fight heroically for his country until his death. In terms of his reaction against Cressida’s exchange, he simply accepts it and does not devise a plan to stop it or unite with his lover later as in Chaucer’s version. A tragic hero has hamartia and death like Romeo. Furthermore, tragic heroes like Hamlet have (many) soliloquys which provide insights to their characters and reasoning. Troilus lacks all these qualities and is not tragic; he is not pathetic either.

In terms of viewing Cressida as a tragic heroine, some tragic deeds are expected from her as well. Yet, she simply obeys the commands of the patriarchal society. She accepts, obeys, and conforms, unlike Juliet. Cressida is labeled as a “daughter of the game” (4.5.63). She was not a character unfamiliar to the contemporary audience, and social conceptualization of Cressida in 1400s and 1500s portrayed her as a low fallen female figure. Therefore, Shakespeare’s treatment for her is not surprising at all. Shakespeare seems to have followed the convention.

The only tragic character seems to be Hector. Destiny, heroism, nobility, sacrifice, and death are applied to him: he is a tragic character. His ultimate death does not, however, mean a lot in the eyes of Elizabethans. It may even be said that Shakespeare punishes him to satire his character as heroism and valor are not much respected ideals for his audience.

Classical tragedy requires certain elements. To begin with, it is already seen that we cannot talk of peripeteia for Troilus. He loses Cressida, but does he ever deserve her in the first place? Besides, exchange of Cressida for Antenor is too early to be classified as peripeteia (announcement, Act 4.2: deed Act 4.4). The resolution that Troilus and Cressida are forever separated comes when he eavesdrops on Cressida (5.2). This scene can be taken as a mental torture.
for him. However, it must be followed by his death. Instead, we have Hector killed. The non-existing death of tragic hero/heroine resolves nothing, and there are more devastation to follow, Troy’s destruction yet to come, and more nobles to die. Therefore, we can conclude again that the denouement brings no solution or catharsis.

We can also evaluate Shakespeare’s alterations from the conventional story to bring about its problem. His primary source could be Chapman’s translation of Homer’s *Iliad*. This work mentions of a Chryseis and a Briseis, but both are unrelated to Troilus or Calchas, Cressida’s father. *Le Roman de Troie* by Benoit de Sainte-Maure focuses on a Briseida’s faithlessness, and it possesses many differences compared to *Troilus and Cressida* (e.g. Troilus is killed by Achilles before Hector). The famous *Il Filostrato* by Boccaccio is where we have the first mention of Criseida (unlike Briseis), and the story focuses on the lovers Troilus and Criseida. In terms of Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*, there are sharp differences observed as it has soliloquys by the major characters, more depth of characterization, less focus on war and other Greek and Trojan heroes; Chaucer’s work is a loving psychological study of the story. Interestingly enough, there are again plenty of arguments on the genre of *Troilus and Cressida*. The other sources could be *A Journal of the Trojan War* by Dictys Cretensis and *The Fall of Troy A History* by Dares Phryginus (Shakespeare 409-17).

Consequently, Shakespeare changed the story a lot and created a new version. He skips the background and even fast-forwards the story when Pandarus mentions of his many go-betweens. What could be the reason? A story of love and (female) betrayal was already familiar for the contemporary reader and theatregoers, and therefore the classical story would not appeal to them. There may be politic reasons for changes as well. In 1599, a ban was put on satire and epigram, which may have forced Shakespeare to ridicule his society and rulers through heroes of Iliad under the disguise of a tragedy.

There are many critics who comment on the problematic features of the play. In his *Shakespeare’s Problem Plays*, E. M. Tillyard states that the form of the play is “neither tragedy, comedy, nor history”, but Shakespeare formed the play deliberately as it is (33). As a reason for the altered story and problematic characterization, Tillyard insists on the satirical intentions of the play. He says that Shakespeare’s alterations, especially compared to Chapman and Chaucer, are welcome when we think of the political and cultural scene. Tillyard talks about the 1599 “ban on satire and epigram” compelling the dramatists and other literary figures to other forms which, as he provides other examples of the new type, “leave the reader not serene but "in an aroused state of scorn at human folly and futility”” (46);

Campbell holds that the difficulties of *Troilus and Cressida* vanish if it is read as a satirical comedy of this kind, if we expect it to leave us uneasy and apt to go on criticising the abuses we see about us. Shakespeare satirised not only Cressida but Troilus, not only Greeks but Trojans. Though not writing a pacifist tract he did attack undisciplined warfare where the generals quarrelled, which was only too common in some late Elizabethan expeditions (46).

Apart from Tillyard, the debate on the genre of Troilus and Cressida goes among many other critics. S. T. Coleridge states that “there is no one of Shakespeare’s plays harder to characterize” (89). For him, the play possesses “nothing from the mausoleum of history, or the catacombs of tradition” (90), emphasizing Shakespeare’s derivation from the classical story again. Swinburne comments on it as “this political and philosophic and poetic problem, this hybrid and hundred-faced and hydra-headed prodigy, at once defies and derides all definitive comment.”
Yeats and Jan Kott call it a tragicomedy (qtd. in Shakespeare 4). Northrop Frye’s solution for the problem of genre in *Troilus and Cressida* is to expand it:

Shakespeare's plays are classified by the Folio as comedies, tragedies, and histories, to which modern critics generally add romance as a fourth genre. *Troilus and Cressida* is hard to 'fit into' these categories (I use quotation marks because 'fitting' is not the point of generic criticism) because it has so many elements of all four (Frye 62).

It is ironic that one of Shakespeare’s own characters provides a very suitable definition for the term, like Frye’s. In *Hamlet*, Polonius, during his speech on drama, lists some genres of drama but then creates new terms such as "tragical-comical-historical (…)", which is rather true for the play in question. *Troilus and Cressida* includes elements from these three genres, therefore it cannot be fitted in one single genre excluding others.

Evlîm Doğan Adanur relates the genre problem to Shakespeare’s intellect to avoid imprisonment and execution which was often the case for acting against the crown (2). She regards the play as Shakespeare’s “response both to rampant change in the society and to the political unrest” (7) as previously mentioned. Ayşegül Yüksel in her essay entitled as “Troilus ve Cressida: Bozuk Düzende ‘Aşk’ ve ‘Savaş’” views the lack of heroic deeds as “war as a sport and turning into violence” (62, my translation) and a critique of a corrupted order (60). She can find no innocent characters in *Troilus and Cressida*. Yüksel agrees with other critics in labeling Hector dying as a hero for a cause he does not find just (65). *Troilus* is problematic as well when he mistakes “lust” for “love”; for Yüksel, Shakespeare means not to provide “poetic justice” but to examine from his “world view” (61).

All such arguments are clear indications of how Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Criseyde* is constructed deliberately by Shakespeare in its current state. The characters’ verbal and physical clashes with each other, their questioned ideals on war, heroism, love, and value, and the neither tragic nor comic integrity of the text as a whole result from and come to criticize the Elizabethan society and political figures in such a deep, twisted, and therefore problematic form and characterization as to enable the playwright to keep his head on his shoulders. Though it was not a popular play in its time as its publisher’s advertisement quotes “never stalled with the stage, never clapper-clawed with the palms of the vulgar” (Shakespeare 1), recent readers and audience found its problematicness as the source of its richness.

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