

Troilus and Cressida

INTRODUCTION

Troilus and Cressida, first heard of in a Stationers' Register entry of 7 February 1603, was probably written within the previous eighteen months. This entry did not result in publication; the play was re-entered on 28 January 1609, and a quarto appeared during that year. The version printed in the 1623 Folio adds a Prologue, and has many variations in dialogue. It includes the epilogue spoken by Pandarus (which we print as an Additional Passage), but certain features of the text suggest that it does so by accident, and that the epilogue had been marked for omission. Our text is based in substance on the Folio in the belief that this represents the play in its later, revised form.

The story of the siege of Troy was the main subject of one of the greatest surviving works of classical literature, Homer's *Iliad*; probably Shakespeare read George Chapman's 1598 translation of Books 1±±2 and 7±±11. It also figures prominently in Virgil's *Aeneid* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, both of which Shakespeare knew well. The war between Greece and Troy had been provoked by the abduction of the Grecian Helen (better, if confusingly, known as Helen of Troy) by the Trojan hero Paris, son of King Priam. Shakespeare's play opens when the Greek forces, led by Menelaus' brother Agamemnon, have already been besieging Troy for seven years. Shakespeare concentrates on the opposition between the Greek hero Achilles and the Trojan Hector. In the Folio, *Troilus and Cressida* is printed among the tragedies; if there is a tragic hero, it is Hector.

Shakespeare also shows how the war caused by one love affair destroys another. The stories of the love between Troilus and Cressida, encouraged by her uncle Pandarus, and of Cressida's desertion of Troilus for the Greek Diomedes, are medieval additions to the heroic narrative. Chaucer's long poem *Troilus and Criseyde* was already a classic, and Shakespeare would also have known Robert Henryson's continuation, *The Testament of Cresseid*, in which Cressida, deserted by Diomedes, dwindles

into a leprous beggar.

Troilus and Cressida is a demanding play, Shakespeare's third longest, highly philosophical in tone and with an exceptionally learned vocabulary. Possibly (as has often been conjectured) he wrote it for private performance; the 1603 Stationers' Register entry says it had been acted by the King's Men, and the original title-page of the 1609 quarto repeats this claim, but while the edition was being printed this title-page was replaced by one that does not mention performance, and an epistle was added claiming that it was 'a new play, never staled with the stage, never clapper-clawed with the palms of the vulgar'. An adaptation by John Dryden of 1679 was successfully acted from time to time for half a century, but the first verified performance of Shakespeare's play was in Germany in 1898, and that was heavily adapted. *Troilus and Cressida* has come into its own in the twentieth century, when its deflation of heroes, its radical questioning of human values (especially in relation to love and war), and its remorseless examination of the frailty of human aspirations in the face of the destructive powers of time have seemed particularly apposite to modern intellectual and ethical preoccupations.