SEEING SELVES IN *TROILUS AND CRESSIDA*

"What's aught but as 'tis valued?" Troilus' question, posed to Hector as an argument for keeping Helen, articulates one of the central problems in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*.[1] The claim attempts to close the gap between being – what is aught – and being perceived – what is valued – in such a way that one's identity becomes what others understand that identity to be. As the play suggests, one way of conceiving this formation of identity is in terms of the humoral body. The early modern body, as Gail Kern Paster has argued, was an extremely permeable entity, constantly altered by the elements surrounding it. For this reason, she states, "to understand the early modern passions as embodying a historically particular kind of self-experience requires seeing the passions and the body that houses them in ecological terms – that is, in terms of that body's reciprocal relation to the world."[2] This understanding of the humoral body, constructed in relation to the world it inhabits, allows one to understand one of the play's answers to Troilus: that identity is formed through looking. In Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, it is the gaze of the other that constructs the self, in metaphysical and metaphorical terms.

To recognize this, one must trace – however briefly – an early modern theory of sight as a material experience, through Marsilio Ficino's *Commentary on Plato's Symposium* and André du Laurens' *A Discourse of the Preservation of Sight*. At first glance, these treatises seem to represent opposing poles in early modern thought, the former a Neoplatonist discourse on the soul's relationship to love, the latter a Galenic treatise on the anatomy of the eye. My reading, however, resists such characterization, as it attempts to demonstrate the degree to

[1] William Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*, ed. by David Bevington, The Arden Shakespeare, Third Series (London: Thomas Learning, 1998), 2.2.52. Hereafter cited in the text.
[2] Gail Kern Paster, *Humoring the Body: Emotions and the Shakespearian Stage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 18.

which both texts, despite their purported Neoplatonist or Galenic associations, theorize the nature of sight in similar, material terms.

Having done so, it will then be possible to revisit *Troilus and Cressida*, to read the play as negotiating these theories in its treatment of value in love and war. Achilles' speech in Act 3 Scene 3 and his ensuing debate with Ulysses function as the literary site in which the arguments of Ficino and du Laurens are refashioned, ultimately rewritten, as a discourse of the self's composition through looking. In speaking of the "self" in *Troilus and Cressida*, it should be noted, this paper deliberately avoids the terms "identity" and "subjectivity" as used by Linda Charnes in her impressive study *Notorious Identity: Materializing the Subject in Shakespeare*. Charnes' argument proposes an interesting, although problematic, distinction between the terms: whereas as identity is textually inscribed on characters, bearing the traces of power in its production of the self, subjectivity is the non-textual site of resistance, through which the character relates to his or her textual identity.[3] Applied to *Troilus and Cressida*, however, it becomes difficult to imagine how the characters of Shakespeare's play could function extra-textually, as they exist precisely through a textual constellation of signifiers.

The paper concludes by suggesting the extent to which Shakespeare's play, through its mediation of looking, may be theorizing its own conditions of performance in early modern England, with regard to the bodies of spectators on and offstage alike. As Joseph Roach argues in *The Player's Passion*, recognizing the humoral composition of the body is a prerequisite to understanding the function of that body within the early modern playhouse. On the basis of that claim, this paper applies the discussion of looking in *Troilus and Cressida* to the practice of looking at Troilus and Cressida onstage.

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[3] Linda Charnes, *Notorious Identity: Materializing the Subject in Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 8.

I. The Materiality of Sight

Writing in the fifteenth century, Marsilio Ficino describes sight in terms of the spirits that connect the humoral body to the soul. Although the product of humoral vapors, the spirits animate the body in such a way as to transgress the distinction of corporeal/incorporeal; as Joseph Roach states, "Spirits mediate between mind and matter – transforming thought into action, shaping what would otherwise be a collapsed bag of pus and bile into a form in God's image."[4] Because of this ontological status, the spirits transform sight into a profoundly material process, in which the eyes emit spirits: "just as this vapor of the spirits is produced from the blood, so also it itself sends out rays like itself through the eyes, which are like glass windows."[5] These rays, as Ficino proceeds to explain, contain droplets of blood, a kind of condensation of the humoral vapors.

For this reason, when one looks at another person, the eyes project spirits into the object of one's gaze. Ficino explains in the following: "what wonder is it if the eye, wide open and fixed upon someone, shoots the darts of its own rays into the eyes of the bystander, and along with those darts, which are the vehicles of the spirits, aims that sanguine vapor which we call spirit?"[6] As these rays enter the object of one's gaze, they are become blood once again: "Hence the poisoned dart pierces through the eyes, and since it is shot from the heart of the shooter, it seeks again the heart of the man being shot, as its proper home; it wounds the heart, but in the heart's hard back wall it is blunted and turns back into blood."[7] Insofar as the body is composed of blood, distilled into different humors,

[4] Joseph R. Roach, *The Player's Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1985), 40.
[5] Marislio Ficino, *Commentary on Plato's* Symposium *on Love*. Trans. by Sears Jayne. (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1985), 159.
[6] Ibid. 160.
[7] Ibid. 160.

the injection of another's blood effectively reconstitutes the body, and thereby the self. Looking, as theorized in Ficino's work, entails more than the exchange of glances. Contained within those glances are both spirits and the blood through which these spirits manifest themselves. To look at another person, then, is to invade that person.

Shortly after Ficino's text was circulated through England, another treatise on the humoral body was translated and published, modifying the degree to which sight could be understood as material. André du Laurens devotes the tenth chapter of his treatise *A Discourse of the Preseruation of Sight* to explaining: "*How we see, as namely whether it be by the sending foorth of spirits, or by taking in of the formes of things.*"[8] Although he provides nine reasons that prove the eye sees by emission, du Laurens eventually concludes that "wee see by receiuing only and that there goeth nothing out of the eye, which may serue for the making of vs to see."[9] If his argument rejects Ficino's claim that the act of looking sends spirits into the world, du Laurens nevertheless maintains a material conception of sight, as he states that in looking, "wee receiue nothing but the forme which is produced of the obiect," and adds that this form "is a certaine reall thing seated in the ayre and eye."[10] The form, after traveling through the air, enters the eye in the same manner as Ficino's spirits.

Although sight does not reconstitute the body in terms of humoral composition, du Laurens' theory of looking does suggest the degree the eye represents a place of permeability in the early modern culture. As he states in the fourth chapter of the treatise, the eye, though it does not emit spirits, allows the passions to reveal themselves:

> as the face doth shadow out vnto vs the liuely and true image of the minde, so the eyes doe lay open vnto vs all the perturbations of the same: the eyes

[8] Andre du Laurens, *A Discovrse of the Preservation of the Sight: of Melancholike diseases; of Rheumes, and of Old age* (London, 1599), 37.
[9] Ibid. 42
[10] Ibid. 44; Ibid. 45

> doe admire, loue, and are full of lust. In the eyes, thou maist spie out loue and hatred, sorrow and mirth, resolution and timoroussnes, compassion and mercilesnes, hope and despayre, health and sicknes, life and death.[11]

The marginal note, offering a gloss of the text, furthers the argument that the eyes conform to the passions: "All the passions of the minde are to be espied and seene in the eye."[12] If du Laurens denies the materiality of sight in terms of spirits that move through ocular emission, he nevertheless maintains that looking is a quasi-material process; not only do the forms of objects enter the eyes, but the eyes are a site in which the humoral composition of a person is made manifest.

II. The I that Cannot See Itself

In Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, Achilles provides the means of linking this discussion of sight with the question of selfhood. His discussion with Ulysses connects looking to Troilus' question "What's aught but as 'tis valued?" in such a way as to make sight a metaphor for the way in which value is produced. Achilles muses that, selves, like the eyes with which they see, know their value through other people:

> The beauty that is born here in the face
> The bearer knows not, but commends itself
> To others' eyes; nor doth the eye itself,
> That most pure spirit of sense, behold itself,
> Not going from itself, but eye to eye opposed
> Salutes each other with each other's form. (3.3.104-9)

[11] Ibid. 19
[12] Ibid. 19

Like the eye that cannot see itself, and must know its value through the look that others offer, Achilles puns on the self as another I, one that needs the mirror of other people to know its worth. It is "eye to eye opposed" that beauty and worth are transmitted back to the I. Achilles traces this exchange of glances to make looking the basis of knowledge, as it is in looking at others, looking back on the self, that the self comes to know its worth: "speculation turns not to itself / Till it hath traveled and is mirrored there / Where it may see itself" (3.3.110-2). Through this meditation on sight, Achilles refashions the arguments of Ficino and du Laurens to establish looking as the literal, if not quite material, means by which the self is constituted.

In attempting to lure Achilles into battle, Ulysses develops this discussion of looking into a kind of philosophy that he then maps onto the Trojan War. He states that "The present eye praises the present object," affirming Achilles in his claim that looking provides the basis of both value and knowledge (3.3.181). To explain why Ajax is now the favorite of the Greeks, he extends this understanding of sight in the following passage:

> Then marvel not, thou great and complete man,
> That all the Greeks begin to worship Ajax,
> Since things in motion sooner catch the eye
> Than what stirs not. (3.3.182-5)

For Ulysses, warriors like Ajax and Achilles are valued to the degree that their actions "catch the eye" of other soldiers. René Girard locates, within this exchange of glances, the means by which warriors, as proud men, come to value themselves: "nothing matters more than the looks of other men. These looks, and the desires they signal, must be visibly focused upon the proud man at all times, to keep his own desire well supplied with models of what

becomes, for him, self-adulation."[13] It is the gaze of these soldiers, in other words, that enables Achilles and Ajax to know and to value themselves. In making this claim, Ulysses appropriates the relationship of sight to beauty that Achilles first articulates and reifies it in contextualizing this relationship within the pageantry of the battlefield.

Formulated as such, Ulysses' understanding of sight recalls, and at the same time anticipates, the play's representation of Cressida as a figure thoroughly constructed by the gaze of the other. In the speech that ends her first appearance onstage, Cressida advances a conception of looking that is similar to Ulysses', differing only in relationship to love rather than war. She claims that, "Men prize the thing ungained more than it is," and uses this statement to justify the dissembling that, in her view, will make her more valuable to Troilus: "Then, though my heart's contents firm love doth bear, / Nothing of that shall from mine eyes appear" (1.3.280; 1.3.285-6). Her plan borrows from du Laurens' assumption that passions, particularly those of love, manifest themselves in the eyes. Cressida's effort to increase her value in the eyes of Troilus can therefore be understood as a subversion of her own eyesight, an attempt to upset the natural coursing of humoral spirits through the body to their proper place in the eyes. However destructive this plan may seem in terms of humoral theory, it demonstrates Cressida's awareness of the glances by which value is produced, at the same time that it announces her strategy to disrupt, and thereby manage, the system of looking that Achilles and Ulysses describe.

When Cressida appears with Diomedes, supposedly alone but in fact a spectacle under the watchful eyes of Troilus, Ulysses, and Thersites, her attempts to resist the Greek's advances show the failure of her initial scheme. If Cressida once claimed to cleave her mind's desires from the function of her eyes, she maintains this power still, exclaiming:

[13] René Girard, "The Politics of Desire in *Troilus and Cressida*," in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 207.

"Troilus, farewell! One eye yet looks on thee, / But with my heart the other eye doth see" (5.2.113-4). Here, Cressida refashions the disjunction between eyes and mind in order to maintain a kind of fidelity to Troilus, attempting to preserve his place before the mind's eye, while the corporeal eye, tied to the body through the heart, looks to Diomedes. It is the failure of this splitting that, as Cressida herself states, spells her infidelity:

> 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. (5.2.115-8).

Cressida attributes the inability to separate her mind's desire from her eyes to a fault inherent to her body, stemming from her "sex." The suggestion borrows, in a way, from the assumption that the humoral bodies of men and women are constructed differently, women being conceived with less heat and therefore subject to incontinence. As Gail Kern Paster notes, female incontinence refers to a general inability on the part of a woman to control the humoral liquids within her body, one that transcends the body into other forms of uncontrollability: humoral discourse "characteristically links this liquid expressiveness to excessive verbal fluency. In both formations, the issue is women's bodily self-control or, more precisely, the representation of a particular kind of uncontrol as a function of gender."[14] In stating that her eyes can no longer be divorced from the desires of her mind, but that in fact the one determines the other, Cressida reinscribes herself in the humoral discourse, as well as the system of value, that she initially resisted. The claim proves, in humoral terms, Gayle Greene's claim that "Even in the deepest anguish of which she is capable, Cressida can never lose sense of herself as an object, as an appearance for an

[14] Gail Kern Paster, *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 25.

appraising eye."[15] Despite her resistance, Cressida's own statements reveal the degree to which she has been constructed through the gaze of the other, becoming an object valued only to the degree that Troilus, Diomedes, and other men appraise her.

The structure of looking in this scene, as Thersites and Ulysses watch Troilus watching Cressida, suggests a meta-theatrical framework, one that recalls the distance of the spectator from the spectacle in an early modern playhouse. As such, it returns to the argument between Achilles and Ulysses on the nature of sight, which transforms into a discussion of performance when Thersites enters it. He notes that Ajax, supposedly the favorite of the Greeks, now "goes up and down the field, asking for himself" (3.3.246-7); Ajax, as Thersites claims, is looking for himself, his worth, in the look with which other soldiers greet him. It is a kind of performance, in which Ajax "stalks up and down like a peacock," looking for himself in applause (3.3.253). Just as Thersites takes the words of other and turns them into satire, here he converts Ajax's performance into a form of parody, appropriating the terms that Ulysses uses to describe the value of warriors. Thersites' mock performance, however, exposes the threat inherent to any system that produces selfhood in terms of sight. He, with Patroclus, performs "the pageant of Ajax," effectively becoming Ajax under Achilles' approving eye (3.3.272-3). In doing so, he dramatizes the ease with which one's identity may be taken away; to the extent that being is synonymous with being perceived, to personate someone in the sense of early modern acting is to become that person.

In this way, Thersites anticipates Cressida's struggle to establish herself outside the exchange of gazes that she recognizes as the foundation of value. As Cressida has already

[15] Gayle Greene, "Shakespeare's Cressida: 'A Kind of Self,'" in *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, ed. by Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene, and Carol Thomas Neely (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 142.

argued, against the theory of sight that Achilles and Ulysses present, performance always contains a gap between what is seen and what is felt: "They say all lovers swear more performance than they are able, and yet resolve an ability that they never perform, vowing more than the perfection of ten and discharging less than the tenth part of one" (3.2.81-4). Her argument is that the spectacle of playing, offered to the lover as spectator, never fully represents what remains within the beloved who enacts this performance. Cressida thereby argues, against Achilles and Ulysses, that sight does not constitute the self; indeed, such a notion would undermine the interiority by which she attempts to establish the truth of her love, inadequately manifested in appearance. Paul Yachnin views Cressida as increasingly implicated in the masculine exchange of glances as the play progresses: "Cressidea's movement is from secrecy, a conventional attribute of inwardness, to a dynamic doing and undoing of her own visible self under the pressure of the determining gaze belonging to Troilus and Pandarus."[16] The genealogy presented here, however, suggests that Cressida has a nascent awareness of the looks that will later construct her, in response to which she argues for interiority as something that lies beyond the gaze, unable to be penetrated either by the looks of others or in her own presentation. In same manner that her attempt to control looking resists a masculine conception of sight, Cressida's understanding of performance further undoes this theory of looking, intersecting Thersites' mock pageant in its effort to appropriate and thereby undermine the claims of Achilles and Ulysses.

III. Theories of Spectacle

[16] Paul Yachnin, "Eye to eye opposed" in *The Culture of Playgoing in Shakespeare's England: A Collaborative Debate.* Anthony B. Dawson and Paul Yachnin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 85.

Following Cressida and Thersites, as they move from a discussion of sight to an argument on the nature of personation, this analysis can now trace a similar movement within *Troilus and Cressida*, as it presents theories of looking in order to mediate its own conditions of performance on the early modern stage. In examining this meta-theatricality, I do not claim to offer a phenomenological reading of performance, following Jeremy Lopez in assuming: "the plays contain within themselves most of the evidence needed to understand what audiences expected and enjoyed and experienced."[17] Rather, my argument is that *Troilus and Cressida* responds to the material conception of sight represented by Ficino and du Laurens, with its implications for a humoral body, to suggest how playgoers may have conceived their relationship to spectacle. The question, and its answer, have little to do with the actual, lived experience of spectators; instead, this tracing of meta-theatricality is designed to show how Shakespeare's play attempts to manage such experience through the discursive work of the play itself.

The arguments of Ficino and du Laurens connect to one theory of performance, in which the materiality of sight would have meant a profoundly physical response to personation on stage. In the same manner that looking involves the emission of spirits from the eye of the spectator to the eye of the spectacle, watching a play requires an exchange of glances, and at the same time spirits, between actor and playgoer. As Joseph Roach argues, "It was widely believed that the spirits, agitated by the passions of the imaginer, generate a wave of physical force, rolling through the aether, powerful enough to influence the spirits of others at a distance."[18] Within the early modern playhouse, the spirits conjured by the actor in the midst of personation would travel through the ether to enter the bodies of spectators, moving them to similar emotional responses: "The spirit moves the actor, who,

[17] Jeremy Lopez, *Theatrical Convention and Audience Response in Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), 7.
[18] Roach, *The Player's Passion*, 45.

in the authenticity of his transport, moves the audience."[19] Taking the claim from Francis Bacon that, "the strongest points of origin for the signals, as well as the most receptive terminals, are the eyes," Roach connects the physicality of response in the playhouse to the materiality of sight advanced by Ficino and du Laurens.[20] His argument, moreover, mobilizes the claims of Achilles and Ulysses into a theory of early modern playing. In the same way that the I cannot see itself, but knows its being through the looks of others, the actor locates the force of his performance in the spirits he sends into the eyes of the playgoer, who then reflect these spirits back to the actor in the physicality of their response.

Against this conception of playing, *Troilus and Cressida* uses Thersites's mock pageant and Cressida's statement on performance to assert a different theory of personation. Insofar as Thersites mobilizes the theory of looking that Achilles and Ulysses articulate, his version of Ajax strutting up and down the field satirizes the claim that one knows oneself through other's looks. It voids the materiality of sight of meaning in the context of performance, opening a semantic space in which Cressida argues for interiority as something that grounds but is inadequately rendered by performance. When she tells Troilus, "I have a kind of self resides with you, / But an unkind self that itself will leave / To be another's fool," she anticipates his looking at her when she seems to betray him with Diomedes (3.2.143-5). The metatheatrical scene in which Thersites and Ulysses watch Troilus watching Cressida establishes the two selves that she previously articulates, the one seen by the spectators, the other residing within her as interiority. Cressida's attempt to protect this interiority corresponds to what David Hillman describes as an increasing closure of the body in the early modern period as mediated in the distinction between inner and outer space:

[19] Ibid. 44-5.
[20] Ibid. 46

> the old physiological understanding of sensory activity (such as sight and hearing) as based upon something (eye-beams, rays, waves) entering and leaving the interior of the body was changing to fit in with a considerably less permeable model of the way the body naturally works, the concomitant of a vastly increased sense of urgency (as well as ambivalent anxiety) regarding the need for inner and outer to kept separate.[21]

Articulated in terms of performance, as Cressida does, this claim to interiority disrupts the material understanding of personation as a humoral exchange of spirits through gazes. It suggests, as Christopher Crosbie asserts, that "Shakespeare's approach remains consistently from the *outside looking in*, and knowledge of the body (which is, by necessity, objectified) becomes a process of penetrating examination."[22] For Cressida, and for *Troilus and Cressida* as a whole, the spectator who views the body of another from the outside cannot access its interiority; indeed, it establishes this inner space in the very act of attempting to penetrate it with the gaze.

Locating this argument within Cressida's own performance, against the masculine assertions of Achilles and Ulysses, the play presents a gendered critique of personation based on the transfer of spirits. It rejects the materiality of vision and, with it, the humoral claim that the self is constituted through looking. In place of the arguments of Ficino and du Laurens, as mobilized by the Greek warriors of the play, Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* asserts an interiority that looking can neither create nor penetrate. It is by this interiority that Cressida asserts her allegiance to Troilus, and by the failure to recognize this inaccessible interiority that he, like other spectators of the play, assume her betrayal.

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[21] David Hillman, *Shakespeare's Entrails: Belief, Scepticism, and the Interior of the Body* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 7-8.

[22] Christopher J. Crosbie, "Goodly Physic: Disease, Purgation, and Anatomical Display in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*" *Renaissance Papers* (1999): 81.

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