

Troilus & Cressida | summary of the play

The Greek army has laid siege to the city of Troy. Prince Troilus, the champion of the Trojan army, is in love with his fellow warrior Cressida. In a fateful moment, he meets the Grecian champion Achilles on the battlefield. Disarmed, Troilus finds himself at Achilles's mercy. Cressida rushes to his side to protect him. Achilles decides to spare Troilus's life. Weary of war, he returns to the Grecian camp with his lover Patroclus and refuses to continue fighting.

This undeclared truce offers an entirely unexpected break from the bloodshed – finally, people have time to breathe again. Troilus is all the more determined to woo Cressida. Cressida is at first reluctant to confess that she feels the same way, because she is afraid that Troilus will lose interest in her the moment he has had her. When her aunt Pandarus arranges for a secret encounter between the two, Cressida relents and declares her love for Troilus. They spend a night together.

At the crack of dawn, Cressida wakes up to see Troilus trying to sneak away. He denies it, but they do not have time to argue: Ulysses, shrewdest of all Grecian generals, has been hatching a plan to rouse Achilles back to battle – he knows that they cannot win this war without him. He also knows that Troilus is quick to anger when things are taken away from him. In a prisoner exchange, Cressida is taken from Troy and brought to the Grecian camp. There, she meets once again with Achilles and Patroclus. While Troilus sends a challenge to Achilles, purportedly to prove his love to Cressida, Cressida finds herself falling for two of her worst enemies, who take her seriously in ways that Troilus never has.

Meanwhile, Achilles sees that his refusal to fight is quickly costing all the fame, glory, and respect he once called his own. He is no longer considered a hero. On the day of the fight with Troilus, he has to make a choice: fight and be the Grecian hero once more, or refuse for the sake of love, for he fell for Cressida the moment he saw her risk everything on the battlefield to protect Troilus.

He chooses love; facing Troilus, he asks him to lay down his arms and embrace instead. Troilus acquiesces. A celebration is called, and both camps feast together. There could be a happy ending after all.

If only Troilus did not ask Ulysses to take him to see Cressida. He catches her confessing her love to Achilles and Patroclus, who reciprocate. Troilus returns to Troy to arm. All he wants is to see them dead.

The alarms are sounded. Achilles again refuses to fight. On the battlefield, Troilus seeks out Patroclus, making to kill the unarmed medic. Cressida moves to defend him, but Troilus overpowers her. When he has Patroclus at his mercy, Troilus moves to strike – only to pull back. He does not slay Patroclus.

That is when Ulysses steps out of the shadows and shoots Patroclus dead. Achilles finds his lover's dead body. Ulysses claims it was Troilus's doing. Achilles slays Troilus with his bare hands. Cressida is too late to prevent it. Achilles kills himself while she looks on. The war is lost for Troy. All is lost for her.

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Heads-up: Most of the roles will in all likelihood spend significantly more time on stage than they have scenes with lines, as both camps (the Trojan and the Grecian) will be filled with activity for most of the play. Categorising a part as major, medium-sized or minor is only in reference to the lines these parts speak, not the time spend onstage (and presents only a yard stick). All pronouns are used as generic masculinum/femininum and not intended to reflect the final gender of the part.

Troilus (m / blow us away) – *major part*

A skilful warrior and champion of his army desperately trying to hold onto his humanity in the midst of a war. He believes that the answer is love and pursues Cressida. When he spends a night with her and realises she cannot save him, he is lost. The moment she is taken from him in the prisoner exchange, he returns to clinging to her. When he sees her with Achilles and Patroclus, he gives himself up to the violence and in to the blood rage. In the final moments of the play will Troilus have to stand the final test: Does he kill an unarmed medic, or is there any humanity left in him worth saving?

Cressida (f / blow us away) – *major part*

A skilful warrior and intelligent woman, as witty as she is honest. Lover of music. Cressida has the heroic quality of being willing to sacrifice herself for others; what she is not such an expert at is facing and standing by her own needs and desires. She is constantly battling to meet all the expectations put upon her, both as a woman and a warrior, and to be true to herself. Her parents were found traitors, so she has to be above reproach. She considers herself so, until she falls in love with her enemies, Patroclus and Achilles. At first, she is able to ignore it in favour of her feelings for Troilus, but when she meets Achilles and Patroclus in the Grecian camp for the second time, she has to make a decision: Will she be true to Troilus, and what is expected of her as a woman and a Trojan warrior supposed to hate the enemy? Or will she be true to herself and act upon her attraction and affection for the two people she is supposed to hate?

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Achilles (f/m/d) – *major part*

Legendary hero, lover of Patroclus and champion of the Grecian army. The success of the siege hinges on his involvement in the war. Achilles is no longer willing to fight, however, afraid that the violence may change him beyond recognition, as his long-time lover and partner Patroclus has warned him. At first, he leaves it to Patroclus to make his excuses to the Grecian generals who are insistent he return to the field. At first he is determined, but then Ulysses makes it clear to Achilles that all his fame and glory relies only upon his achievements in battle. If Achilles wants to live forever in the memories of humankind, he has to return to battle, Ulysses claims; if he stays in his tent, he will be forgotten. When Cressida – the woman he fell for the moment he saw how she would so courageously sacrifice herself for another – is brought to the Grecian camp and Troilus sends Achilles a challenge to fight, Achilles has to make a choice: glory or love? An afterlife of all eternity, or a life in the here now with the man and woman he loves?

Patroclus (f/m/d) – *major part*

Medic in the Grecian army, gifted musician and long-time lover and partner of Achilles. Patroclus sees the world as clearly as any intelligent man of science, but he also views it with kindness. He is honest to a fault, happy to joke, and fiercely protective of those weaker than him – and perhaps a little too prone to self-sacrifice, much like Cressida. He refuses to bear a weapon, convinced that his humanity is all he has and that he must hold onto it, always obeying a the physician's vow: *Do no harm*. When Cressida – whose music he heard and fell for before he fell for her – comes into the Grecian camp, when Troilus goes after him as a result, Patroclus is defended by his friend Thersites, a slave and footsoldier who is no match for Troilus. That is when Patroclus has to make his choice: Will he give up his principles to defend his own life and that of a friend? Or will he continue to refuse to do harm to another, even in self-defence?

Pandarus (f/m/d with preference for f/d) – *medium part*

Noblewoman and aunt to Cressida, a keen judge of character. Pandarus has been entrusted with Cressida's care after Cressida's parents were sentenced as traitors to Troy, a role that finds her completely out of her depth. She considers herself unfit for it, in spite of her rapport with Cressida; that is why she goes to such lengths to set

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her niece up with Troilus, in spite of the fact that she harbours suspicions after Cressida's first encounter with Achilles and Patroclus on the battlefield that her niece's feelings may be more complicated than either of them is willing to admit. She also sees more of Troilus's inner trouble than either of them would like. Pandarus, however, wilfully ignores her own insights in her desperate attempt to make right the wrong of Cressida's parents and put herself as well as her niece above all suspicion. When it is decreed that Cressida must be given to the Greeks in the prisoner exchange, it is up to Pandarus whether she will stand up for her niece. She must decide what she values more: that she be above suspicion in her loyalty to Troy, or the happiness of her niece.

/ When Troilus finds out about Cressida and Patroclus and Achilles and arms for subsequent battle, Cressida gives a letter to her aunt to persuade Troilus to unarm. It is then up to Pandarus to decide what she values more:

Believe it or not, this is a funny part.

Ulysses (f/m/d) – *medium part*

Grecian general and Prince of Ithaca. Has a wife and young son waiting for him at home. He is the most intelligent of all, matched only by the Seer Cassandra, the only one whom he considers his equal – the only one he truly desires to conquer. Ulysses has looked at this war and seen through it: in order to survive, he needs to give up his humanity. So he does. Ulysses is focussed on one goal only, and that is to return safely home, and he will do whatever it takes. Or almost whatever it takes: Ulysses is a schemer, a plotter, a clear-eyed and admirably intelligent person, but he does not kill himself. This is what he clings to: his hands have not killed. When Troilus refuses to slay Patroclus in the final act of the play, Ulysses is put to the test: Is he willing to give up this last tether, this last excuse, this last shred of humanity and murder Patroclus in cold blood? Or will he pull back from the edge after all that he has done?

Cassandra (f / or blow us away) – *medium part*

Seer, sister of Troilus and Paris, and daughter of King Priam, lover of Aeneas. Cassandra knows the future, but she is cursed after refusing the advances of the God Apollo, and no one will believe her. Her only champion has always been her brother Troilus. At first, even Cassandra herself doubts the accuracy of her visions – the fall of Troy and the death of all those she loves –, convinced and determined that

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this story might have a happy ending, and works to bring this happy ending about. Only when Troilus turns on her after he has seen Cressida with her new lovers, calling Cassandra mad, does she finally realise her fate: that she is right, but never to be believed. The only question is: Do you give up? Or do you put up a fight?

Agamemnon (f/m/d) – *medium part*

King and supreme commander of the Grecian army. Older brother of Menelaus. When Menelaus asks him to lie siege to Troy – so that Menelaus may regain his wife Helena, who is currently in Troy with her lover Paris, brother of Troilus and son of Priam – Agamemnon says yes. He loves his little brother and would do anything to give him comfort. Instead of telling him so and giving him a hug, however, Agamemnon decides to raise an army and fight a war that he is not convinced should be fought at all. When Achilles refuses to fight, so do Agamemnon's doubts grow. He hangs in there, telling himself it is for his little brother's sake. But when Troilus and Achilles embrace instead of fighting in the challenge sent by Troilus, Agamemnon has to make a choice himself: Does he embrace Troilus and the possibility of peace? Or will he continue down this path of death and destruction with his beloved brother?

Aeneas (f/m/d) – *medium part*

Priest, friend to Troilus and lover of Cassandra. He is taken captive by Ulysses so that he may be exchanged for Cressida. Aeneas is as opposed to this war as Cassandra is, but he has not found the courage to be outspoken about it, especially not to his friend Troilus, whose respect he is afraid to lose, fearing the champion of Troy might consider him a coward if he admits to the extent of his pacifism. After he has been taken captive and exchanged for Cressida, he feels guilty towards Troilus and tries to make up for it by supporting Troilus's war efforts, much to Cassandra's chagrin. When Troilus arms for the final battle, after having discovered Cressida with her new lovers, Aeneas finally has to pick a side: support Troilus or stand with Cassandra in attempting to hinder him.

Thersites (f/m/d) – *medium part*

Footsoldier, honest to the point of insulting, cynical, funny, slave of Menelaus and friend to Achilles and Patroclus who do their best to protect him. He is always up for a joke, a game, a round of dice, trading insults. He looks right through everyone

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around him, and has no compunction about telling people just what he thinks of them. He calls himself a coward, because he would really rather not fight. It is only in the final battle, when Troilus threatens to kill Patroclus, that Thersites needs to decide whether he will continue to hide behind his cynicism or work up the courage to defend his closest friend, even if such a defenceless would almost certainly prove pointless against the champion of the Trojan army.

Paris (f/m/d) – *medium part*

Warrior, prince of Troy, brother to Troilus and Cassandra, son to Priam. Renowned to be the most handsome man alive, Paris went to Greece and returned with Helen, the Queen of Sparta and wife of Menelaus; they ran away together. As a consequence, Menelaus asked his older brother Agamemnon to raise an army and lay siege to Troy. Understandably, Paris has to battle feelings of guilt about his part in causing this war. He loves Helen, but most of all he wants to possess her, have her for his own; in public he justifies this war, says it is a matter of honour for the Trojan royal house not to be compelled to give up a woman by force like weaklings. When Troilus arms for the final battle, intent on ravaging everything in his path, Paris too needs to make a choice: whether to stand with his sister Cassandra in trying to prevent Troilus and the escalation of this war, or whether to keep encouraging it as he has done so far. It is Helen who finally inspires Paris to stand in his brother's way, even if it is to no avail.

Menelaus (f/m/d) – *small part*

King of Sparta, husband of Helen, younger brother of Agamemnon. All his life, Menelaus has been living in his older brother's shadow, working hard to win Agamemnon's respect. Only when Helena, the most beautiful of all woman, decided to marry him, did Menelaus finally manage to prove that he was as good as brother, 'a real man' and real King. When Helena leaves him for Paris and goes to Troy, Menelaus feels compelled to go after her; everything he is is at stake, his only source of self-confidence: his older brother's love. Through the course of the play, Menelaus must decide if a war and a beautiful wife are the only way to win his brother's and a King's respect, or if he might find a different way to make himself beloved than fear, wealth and conquest.

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Helen (f/m/d) – *small part*

Queen of Sparta, wife of Menelaus, lover of Paris. Helen has to battle with the immense guilt that she is facing: She considers herself the cause of this war (even though the war was naturally caused by geopolitical reasons). At first, she closes her eyes to this, trying to push the feelings away and focus on the love she shares with Paris. But Paris wants to possess her just as much as Menelaus, and in the final act of the play Helen has to decide whether she will finally begin trying to fight this war, or whether she will continue to accept that she is being used as an excuse to fight it.

Priam (f/m/d) – *small part*

King of Troy, father of Troilus, Paris and Cassandra. Priam has a small but decisive part, because it is up to him to decide in the uneasy truce whether Troy will end the war immediately by returning Helena to Menelaus, or keep on fighting. He refuses to make a decision, listening both to his sons who tell him that it is a matter of honour, not least of all Priam's, to continue the war, as well his daughter's advice and visions pleading for peace. Only when Troilus is about to leave for the final battle, caught up in his bloodrage, does Priam have to make a stand one way or another. He picks peace, standing with his daughter, but his decision comes too late.