London is the New Troy

Every culture has an origin story; a narrative that explains how a nation of people settled down and answers the fundamental questions of existence. How did we get here? These myths were often passed down through traditional storytelling, perhaps with some basis in historical truth.

Elizabethan England certainly did not lack dramatic origin stories. Shakespeare's history plays are based on real people, places, and events that Shakespeare uses to dramatize England's journey into a nation ruled by Queen Elizabeth I.

However, medieval England believed in another origin story: that London was once called "Troynovant" or "New Troy" and that Englishmen were the direct descendants of Aeneas, one of the respected heroes of the Trojan War.

In Geoffrey of Monmouth's 12th century chronicle Historia Regum Britanniae, Brutus was the name of the first King of Britain. According to legend, Brutus is the great-grandson of Aeneas who travels to Greece and comes upon a group of Trojan refugees who have been enslaved by the Greeks. Brutus becomes their leader and forces the Greek king to let them go. Brutus and his Trojan refugees then sail away to find a new homeland. After sailing by North Africa and Gaul, they finally hear about the island of Albion, where giants live. King Brutus defeats the giants on Albion and builds a city along the river Thames, which becomes "Troia Nova" (New Troy). After Brutus' twenty-four year reign as the first King of Britain, he divides the island up amongst his three sons who become the patriarchs of England, Scotland, and Wales. Only much later, according to this legend, does the city of Troy move get renamed to London.

While this myth gave Elizabethans a direct connection to the heroes of classical literature, there was another reason why they were obsessed with the story of the fall of Troy. According to tradition, Troy was a city of merchants. If Troy fell, and London was "New Troy," what did that mean to the growing class of merchants in London who were becoming more powerful than the older, feudal aristocrats of England?

Shakespeare wrote his plays during uncertain political times. Queen Elizabeth not only faced challenges from abroad with the Spanish Armada, but from within as members of the old aristocracy thought they could outmaneuver a woman. One such challenger was the Earl of Essex, who was known as "England's Achilles."

The Earl of Essex had an extremely antagonistic relationship with the Queen, as his chivalric beliefs about knighthood did not align with the reality of a female monarch. Not only did Essex secretly correspond with Spain and Scotland to undermine her succession to the throne, but he also made openly disrespectful remarks about her physical appearance. While most courtiers praised Elizabeth for her beauty, hoping for her favor, the Earl of Essex publicly insulted her as an "aging woman." Queen Elizabeth I, however, held her ground in these public quarrels and would sometimes bestow favors on the Earl of Essex, only to take them away.

In response, the Earl of Essex tried to stir up a nationalist movement to become the savior of English interests in Ireland against the Irish leader the Earl of Tyrone. In 1591, Essex took it upon himself to dub twenty-one knights at the siege of Rouen, and continued to gain followers. Over the next decade, Essex dubbed so many knights, making them swear allegiance directly to him, it became difficult for Elizabeth to revoke titles from all Essex’s men.

In 1598, as Shakespeare began writing Henry V, Hamlet, and As You Like It, the Earl of Essex led his loyal knights on an unsuccessful military campaign in Ireland. It’s possible that this approaching war was personally significant for Shakespeare, as his wife’s younger brother John was conscripted into the military and recorded on the muster rolls, although it’s not certain if John was sent to fight Spanish forces or on Essex’s Irish campaign.

Of course, a wealthy Earl can make promises to his countrymen that he will bring back the glory days of English knighthood, but those promises didn’t hold up well in the woods and bogs of Ireland. After Essex put on a big ceremonial show in Dublin on St. George’s Day in 1599, he led four thousand foot soldiers and five hundred cavalry through the Irish countryside, looking for a fight. The Irish, seeing this pageantry, decided to keep the English on the move, drawing them deeper into the Irish countryside, and avoiding conflicts. After a length of time, young Englishmen, anxious for glory through battle, started a series of foolish maneuvers. Tempers flared. Some grew bored and went back home to England. Essex had promised these men military glory, but had no plan. Rumors began to make their way back to London and Queen Elizabeth’s court. Keeping men on the battlefield indefinitely was expensive.

Essex had organized one of the largest forces to fight the Irish, yet it only led to a series of inconclusive battles. He returned to England in disgrace. Queen Elizabeth soon stripped him of his office and put him under house arrest.

Essex continued to lose all his wealth and power and when he was released in 1601, he began organizing a conspiracy against Elizabeth. He stirred
up followers who were upset with Elizabeth’s reign. Then, he sought out the Lord Chamberlain's Men, Shakespeare's acting company, and offered to pay them 40 shillings more if they would perform a special production of Richard II, in which an English monarch is deposed. That plan was quickly discovered and Essex then led a hasty rebellion of about 200 people against the Queen. He was arrested, charged as a traitor, and beheaded in February 1601 in the Tower of London.

Shakespeare’s Troilus & Cressida was written shortly after the Essex uprising. His acting company was shaken up by interrogations, as they narrowly avoided involvement in Essex’s plans against the Queen. As a writer, Shakespeare would have to be careful not to take sides, but the play expresses discontent with fighting a long, pointless, meaningless war.

While it can be said of many of Shakespeare’s plays that their foreign location is a substitute for Elizabethan London, setting his next play in Troy certainly was an easily recognizable metaphor for his contemporary audiences. After all, Essex was England’s Achilles.

Since the story of the Trojan War was familiar to every Elizabethan schoolboy who learned Latin by translating passages of Homer, Virgil, and Ovid, Shakespeare takes the advantage by starting in the middle of the war, where both sides are stalled. Men on both sides are impatient, looking for some opportunity to declare a clear winner so they can all go home. By Act II, the Greeks offer the Trojans an olive branch—give the famous beauty who started this whole war, Helen of Troy, back and we can all go home.

The Trojans are tempted to take this offer. But will they? Enter Troilus the Trojan, a young soldier in love. Shakespeare turns this war play into a love story, where Troilus is more Romeo then Henry V. We meet Troilus ready to discard his armor because he’s wounded by Cupid’s arrow over Cressida. Forget Helen of Troy—Troilus can’t live without his beautiful Cressida.

Shakespeare always finds the humanity in these classical characters and surprises the audience with new insights about human nature. In his plays, we meet wise fools and foolish advisors. Shakespeare could have followed the Western literary tradition, like Chaucer, of siding with the Trojans as the more romantic heroes while the Greeks are the boorish antagonists. Instead, Shakespeare shows us both sides of the battlefield, finding drama and passion in all of these soldiers as flawed humans with petty foibles. And somehow, Shakespeare even finds comedy in this long, unrelenting war.

In the end, we experience a play where Greeks and Trojans act and behave more like Shakespeare’s contemporaries than their classical counterparts. Elizabethan knights on the battlefield are just dressed in Trojan clothes. Even the characters are aware that this Trojan War will make them famous one day, and their behavior will be under scrutiny many generations later. However, that doesn’t stop them from scheming, teasing, flirting, plotting, whining, conniving, and generally showing the worst of human nature. The fool Thersites, on the Greek side, watches this bad behavior with glee.

While time creates a sense of historical distance with the Trojan War, Shakespeare shows us a side of the Trojan War that’s uncertain, dangerous and even absurd. Shakespeare still gives some hope to hold onto, in the midst of interminable war, two people can fall in love. And perhaps, as Shakespeare shows us his version of the Trojan War, we can gain some insights to the larger questions: how did we get here, on this battlefield, and what can we learn from these ancient characters?

By Heather Helinsky, dramaturg

No director, no designers... Just great actors

For this production, there are no directors or designers in the conventional sense. The actors arrive with their lines learned, stage the play, and open after a few days of rehearsal, bringing us one step closer to the excitement and spontaneity experienced in an Elizabethan playhouse.

Mairin Lee
Cressida

Brandon J. Pierce
Troilus

Lindsay Smiling
Agamemnon

Luigi Sotille
Hector

Susan Riley Stevens
Thersites

Greg Wood
Ulysses

Schubert Theatre

July 26 thru Aug 6