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Thersites the ironist (Shakespeare the jester)

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Abstract. This article discusses the way in which one of William Shakespeare's licensed fools, namely Thersites, becomes the dramatist's *medium of ironic message* and his spokesperson in one of the most controversial dramas of his time, *Troilus and Cressida*. On the basis of an analysis of the ironic content of the drama and the roles that Thersites fulfils, it will be shown that he deserves to be described as one of Shakespeare's wise fools. The jester will also be presented as the ironist and who, in contrast to other characters, is able to discern fully the real state of things which underlies the appearance. By his sarcastic remarks, filled with invective and mockery, Thersites shapes the perspective of the readers on the entire drama and on its characters, showing what war really is – a senseless and witless activity with "fools" fighting on both sides.

Key words: Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*, Thersites, irony.

1. INTRODUCTION

The figure of the licensed fool whose folly is entirely professional and whose history goes back as far as antiquity constitutes the basis for William Shakespeare's character of the jester both in his early and late plays and, what is even more noteworthy, not only in comedies but also in tragedies.[1] An appropriate example is Feste, Olivia's licensed fool in the dramatist's festive comedy, *Twelfth Night,* and the Fool from *King Lear.* Both of them are among those of Shakespeare characters to whom a considerable number of works of criticism have been devoted. On the other hand, not so much has been written about Thersites, the Greek soldier and Achilles' licensed fool, whom we come across in the play constituting a mixture of both tragedy and comedy, *Troilus and Cressida*. As for

[1] At the time Shakespeare wrote his plays the institution of the licensed fool had fallen into disrepute, especially with the adherents of Puritanism, the members of the higher social stratum and some of Shakespeare's contemporaries. For instance, in the prologue to *Tamburlaine* Christopher Marlowe disapproves of the "popular vulgarity" characteristic of the theatre clown, which according to him is out of place in tragedy, the form of drama traditionally regarded as a "high" art (Laroque 1993, 35).

Feste and Lear's Fool, they are characterized by certain critics as wise fools and sometimes also as ironists, *inter alia*, due to their role of distant observers of events and their ability to accurately indicate the imperfections of the world and of other characters (see e.g. Halvorson n.d.; Warde 1913; Weiss 1876). As I shall attempt to show, Thersites also deserves the name of the wise fool, the ironist and even more than that.

In the first section of this study, on the basis of excerpts derived mainly from Shakespeare's dramas supported by some historical records, a profile of Shakespeare's wise fool will be outlined. The next section will be devoted to Thersites, who will be presented as an ironist and a wise fool. Afterwards, the ironic contents in *Troilus and Cressida* with special reference to the figure of the licensed fool will be analyzed. In the fourth section, for a better understanding of the topic under discussion, some significant information about the drama will be included. Ultimately, further instances of ironic contents will be given and Thersites will be presented as Shakespeare's medium of ironic message.

2. SHAKESPEARE'S WISE FOOLS

Apart from being familiar with the tradition of the English Motley in particular, Shakespeare was undoubtedly also acquainted with the history of the court fool in general, as in his various works he provides the reader with an insight into the role he performed in the court and into numerous privileges he possessed.[2]

For example, in the second scene of *Troilus and Cressida* Thersites is called by Achilles: "my cheese, my digestion" and asked: "why hast thou not served thyself / in to my table so many meals?" (2.3, 99). From what Achilles says, we may guess that cheese was most probably thought to be good for digestion. This, however, also gives us a hint about one of the functions of the fool in the court. In *Art of Prolonging Life* Christopher William Hufeland (1970, 283) asserts that the fool's office was in fashion because, among other things, it served as a good sanitary system: "Laughter is one of the greatest helps to digestion with which I am acquainted; and the custom, prevalent among our forefathers of exciting it at table by jesters and buffoons was founded at true medical principles. In a word, endeavour to have cheerful and merry companions at your meals. What nourishment one receives amidst mirth and jollity, will certainly produce good and light blood." Owing to the belief in laughter's salutary influence on health and the fact that the first person to be associated with it was the merry jester, with time he started to appear not only at the court of the monarch but also at the courts of wealthy noblemen, like barons or counts, and "even Cardinals and Bishops had their professional makers of mirth" (Doran 1858, 42).

As for the Elizabethan Motley in particular, apart from *As You Like It*, it is probably *Twelfth Night* that constitutes the richest source of information and provides the reader with the best and the most reliable insight into the figure of the witty jester and into the

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[2] Throughout the centuries most licensed fools were men. In Shakespeare's dramas as well as in most of the satirical literary works of his contemporaries we also come across only male fools. Hence, in this paper the jester will be described with the use of the male pronoun. It needs to be underlined, however, that, according to some historical and literary sources, the office of the jester could also be held by a woman. John Doran, for example, devotes a whole chapter of his book to the figure of the female fool (Doran 1858, 62-68).

role he played in the English court. For instance, from the beginning of the third act we find out that Feste lives "by the Church" (3.1, 153). Taking into consideration that the name of the fool comes from the Latin word *festa* – meaning 'feast' or 'festival' – we may judge that his whereabouts is apparently not accidental, since in Elizabethan England it was precisely the churchyard where most popular festivals of a certain significance took place (Warren and Wells 2008, 102-103). As Laroque (1993, 41) informs us,

> It was partly for geographical reasons – since the churchyard performed the same functions as did *agora* for the ancient Greeks, [the agora (meaning "assembly" or "gathering place") was the center of artistic, athletic, spiritual and political life of Greek city-states (Ring et al. 1996, 66)] and was the natural place to meet – but also for reasons connected with current beliefs and superstitions: festivals were still more or less consciously regarded as occasions when the world of the spirits came in contact with that of the living.

Therefore, despite the fact that Feste is employed by Olivia, the churchyard is a natural place for him to stay. This also clarifies why the fool resides occasionally at Orsino's court.

Combining in himself the nature of the jester and the minstrel, Feste makes the most of his talent as a singer, pleasing with his chansons both Olivia and Orsino, as well as all other characters (with the possible exception of Malvolio). During the night frolics in Olivia's house, Sir Andrew and Sir Toby inform us that:

> SIR ANDREW the fool has an excellent breast ...
> A mellifluous voice, as I am true knight ...
> SIR TOBY To hear by the nose, it is dulcet in contagion. (2.3, 124-126)

From Sir Toby's remark we conclude that Feste is so talented in singing that others catch the tune played by him at once, whether they want to or not. Just like his apt remarks, his songs also are carefully selected to suit the occasion on which they are sung, so that listeners could be put into a state of reflection on the beauty of the melody and the nature of things.

If we wish to obtain some information about the Motley's privileges, they should be looked for in *As You Like It.* In one of the scenes Jacques, who himself is "ambitious for a motley coat," provides the reader with a vivid description:

> JACQUES O, that I were a fool!
> I am ambitious for a motley coat ...
> I must have liberty
> Withal, as large a charter as the wind,
> To blow on whom I please, for so fools have;
> And they that are most galled with my folly,
> They most must laugh. And why, sir, must they so?
> The why is plain as way to parish church:
> He that a fool doth very wisely hit,
> Doth very foolishly, although he smart,

Not to seem senseless of the bob. If not,
The wise man's folly is anatomiz'd
Even by the squand'ring glances of the fool.
Invest me in my motley; give me leave
To speak my mind, and I will through and through
Cleanse the foul body of th' infected world,
If they will patiently receive my medicine. (2.7, 83-84)

The most important privilege of the licensed fool, from which all others stem, is the so-called license of speech. It permits the fool to tell the truth (no matter how bitter it is) straight in the face of his master, whether it be a nobleman or the king or the queen themselves. Examples are to be found in such plays as *Twelfth Night*, *Troilus and Cressida* or *King Lear*, in which each one of the three jesters (Feste, Thersites and King Lear's Fool) are free to call their masters (Olivia, Achilles and King Lear) fools, which in fact they constantly do. King Lear is called by his jester even less than that: "Thou wast a pretty fellow when thou hast no need to / care for her [(Lear's daughter)] frown. Now thou art an 0 without a figure. I / am better than thou art, now. I am a fool; thou art nothing" (sc. 4, 134).

However, to have liberty "to blow" on whomever one pleases is not all; one also has to know what can or should be done with such freedom. For that reason the office of the licensed fool was always expected to be held by a person with a reasonable degree of mental and linguistic skill and flexibility, owing to which he would be able to afford his listeners a chance to laugh either at themselves or at others (this distinguishes the professional artificial fool from the natural fool – either a mentally or physically disabled person whose folly was not feigned and who in Elizabethan England was also present at the monarch's or noble men's courts). That is why, according to Doran (1858, 6), in ancient times these were usually court philosophers or poets who were also expected to perform the role of licensed fools in the king's court. "They appear[ed to exercise], generally with impunity, a marvelous license of speech, and [to communicate] disagreeable truths to tyrants who would not accept an unpleasant innuendo from an ordinary courtier, without rewarding it with torture or death." The author also states that such harshness of speech subsequently becomes characteristic of the modern jester. Moreover, "Some describers of old court manners assure us that there was often more wise and profitable counsel to be found under the cap bells of the jester, than under many a mantle which hung from the neck of venerable statesmen ... From the oldest period, the jester is represented bald, and wise men" (50, 54). Doran's *The History of Court Fools* provides us with certain instances that testify to the wisdom and talents of the professional fool. One of them concerns Cardinal Richelieu's fool, Boisrobert. Not only did he write tragedies which subsequently were published by Richelieu as his own, but, among other things, he also founded the French academy (10).

No wonder that the office of the professional fool was held by people with above-average intelligence and artistic talents, since sometimes, for being unable to hold his tongue or for using it inappropriately, the fool could be executed, dismissed from the court or at least whipped. Anna Whitelock (2008, 30) cites Eustace Chapuys' postscript to the letter from 1535 in which he informs that, Sexton *vel* "Patch" (the first fool of the Privy Chamber) was banished from the court by Henry VIII for "speak[ing] well in his presence of the Queen and Princess [Catherine of Aragon and Mary] and call[ing] the

Concubine [Anne Boleyn] 'ribaude' and her daughter [Elizabeth] 'bastard'". Archibald Amstrong *vel* "Archy" (d. 1672) who was in turn appointed as a licensed fool in 1603 and served in the courts of James I and Charles I (31), and was dismissed from the court for his overtly expressed hostility to Archbishop Laud.

In his dramas, Shakespeare provides the readers with evidence that the jester could be punished for speaking unwisely. Lear's Fool, for example, is constantly threatened by the King with being whipped: "Take heed, sirrah – the whip" (sc. 4, 130). The frivolous Feste is intimidated by Olivia who wants to dismiss him from her court: "Go to, you're a dry fool. I'll no more of you. / Besides, you grow dishonest" (1.5, 105). Thersites, although treated indulgently by Achilles, is in turn constantly beaten by Ajax, whose folly the fool tries to correct, but unfortunately to no avail. However, owing to their good sense of observation and empathy, the three jesters are able to adapt themselves to every situation and to avoid punishment. As Viola states:

> VIOLA This fellow is wise enough to play the fool,
> And to do that well craves a kind of wit.
> He must observe their mood on whom he jests,
> The quality of persons, and the time,
> And, like the haggard, check at every feather
> That comes before his eye. This is a practise
> As full of labor as a wise man's art,
> For folly that he wisely shows is fit.
> But wise men, folly-fall'n, quite taint their wit. (*TN* 3.1, 156)

3. THERSITES AS THE IRONIST AND THE WISE FOOL

What makes the jester wiser than others? One of the roles given to Achilles' licensed fool by Shakespeare is that of an ironist, i.e. someone who has the ability to see things as they are, not as they manifest themselves.[3] His role is all the more important, since one of the main themes of the drama is the delusiveness of appearances appearing in heterogeneous forms. Apart from such court fools like Feste or Lear's Fool, the one who also deserves the title of the ironist is Thersites. He maintains a distance from the events happening, becoming an observer of the actions of characters which strengthens the bond between him and the readers. From now on they are more willing to accept the jester's point of view which is more objective than that of the characters who are fully engaged in what is happening within the world of drama. Thersites is a commentator on events too; his function can therefore be compared to that of the chorus in ancient Greek drama (Słowiński 1990, 238).

Shakespeare also endows the jester with the role of the wise fool. Directed by the Socratic principle: "I know that I know nothing", Thersites is the only character who is fully aware of his folly, which paradoxically makes him the wisest person of all. As Feste would grasp it: "Those wits, that think they have thee, do very oft / Prove fools, and I that

[3] Most of Thersites' utterances are filled with sheer invective in which there is relatively little irony, however, the aim of this paper is to draw reader's attention also to his ironic remarks and to the fact that the role of ironist should also be ascribed to him.

am sure I lack thee may / Pass for a wise man" (*TN* 1.5, 104). Similarly to Socrates, Thersites assumes one more role, that of a messenger of fate who makes an effort to "preach to his fellowmen the supreme importance of [self-]knowledge" (*Encyclopædia Britannica* 1793, 820) in order to restore balance in the seemingly finite and stable world, in which chaos starts to dominate (Słowiński 1990, 238). By concealing his wise head under the motley and allowing others to call him a fool, the jester manages to create an image which is contrary to his actual personality. It enables him to trick anyone who judges others by their appearance and is unwilling to make an effort to see what reality is. In this respect, in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, Fry (1973, 39-40) points to the distinction between *eiron* – "the predistened artist ... the man who deprecates himself, ... makes himself invulnerable" and *alazon*, that is an "impostor, someone who pretends or tries to be something more than he is" and who most often becomes *eiron's* predestined victim. By exercising his sharp sense of humour permeated with sarcasm on anyone who acts out of his ignorance or "tries to be more than he [or she] is", Thersites exposes their folly in front of his listeners, giving them a chance to correct it.

4. THERSITES' VERBAL DUELS – POSITIVE DESTRUCTIBILITY OF VERBAL IRONY

Instances of the jester's ironic statements in *Troilus and Cressida* can be investigated in an immediate context from the perspective of irony as a specific semantic-discursive mechanism. By the immediate context I understand the exchange of lines between two or more characters in a given scene, with special reference to the utterances in which verbal irony is employed.

This type of irony, in which language is used as an instrument, operates within the internal system of communication, namely between the characters who by engaging in a verbal battle want to ridicule their opponent (this can be distinguished from situational irony, which is more situation-oriented).[4] The diversity of ways in which verbal irony can be expressed by characters is huge. Abrams and Harpham (2012, 194) determine verbal irony as "a statement in which the meaning that a speaker employs is sharply different from the meaning that is ostensibly expressed." It may relate to a particular attitude or evaluation of a speaker concerning either a person or a situation, "but with the indications in the overall speech-situation that the speaker intends very different, and often opposite attitude or evaluation" (194). In its most basic form the postulated sense of a statement will be the opposite of the one formulated, for instance, when one says ("I am happy that you see my point") when he or she feels to be utterly misapprehended. There are however several other forms of verbal irony, such as sarcasm, rhetorical question or understatement which can be used by characters as a means of expressing the implicit criticism or disapproval. Examples taken from the drama under discussion will illustrate the above idea.

[4] Situational irony is a type of irony involving a situation the outcome of which is contrary to what was expected (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2002, 196). A proper example can be traced in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet,* in which the poison given to Juliet by Friar Laurence – which was supposed to rescue her from marriage with Paris and, subsequently, bring her and Romeo together – leads instead to the disaster, since Romeo – unaware of Laurence's intrigues – kills himself seeing Juliet in the grave.

One of characters at whom Thersites rails most is Patroclus. When in act two, scene three the two engage in a conversation, the fool pretends not to have an opinion about the soldier. As soon as Patroclus asks for the fool's judgment, Thersites makes use of his naive invasive curiosity by proving him a fool:

> PARTOCLUS … Tell me, I pray thee, what's Thersites?
> THERSITES Thy knower, Patroclus. Then tell me, Patroclus what art thou?
> PATROCLUS Thou must tell, that knowest.
> ACHILLES O tell, tell.
> THERSITES … Patroclus is a fool.
> …
> PATROCLUS Why am I a fool?
> THERSITES Make that demand of thy creator. It suffices me / thou art. (2.3, 99-100)

Ironically, it is Patroclus himself who asks the jester for an opinion he is not ready to accept.

When, in the fifth scene, the two again engage in a verbal battle, Thersites turns Patroclus' words against him by asking simple rhetorical questions:

> THERSITES … Now the rotten diseases of the south, the guts-griping, ruptures, catarrhs … take and take again such preposterous discoveries!
> PATROCLUS Why, thou damnable box of envy, thou; what mean'st thou to course thus?
> THERSITES Do I curse thee?
> PATROCLUS Why, no, you ruinous butt; you whoreson indistinguishable cur, no.
> THERSITES No? Why art thou then exasperate ...? (5.1, 164)

Despite the fact that Patroclus regards himself as far more noble and dignified than a mere fool, the latter brings the soldier to his own level by using violent expressions and citing his own words, which makes Patroclus' blood boil at once.

Even more violent exchanges of sentences may be observed between Thersites and Ajax, since the latter treats the fool as a servant, only because he is not a volunteer in the Greek army. For example, being curious of the content of the proclamation, which stated who should fight a duel with Hector, Ajax urgently demands that the fool give it to him. Being more willing to side with Ajax's horse (which according to him is "the more capable creature" (3.3, 134)) than with his master, the jester ignores the soldier. When ultimately Ajax manages to avert Thersites' attention by using force, he is given the title of a "mongrel / beef-witted lord!" As soon as Ajax employs irony in an attempt to remove the ground from under Thersites' feet: "I will beat thee into handsomeness!", the fool responds by saying that he "shall sooner rail [Ajax] into wit and holiness!" (2.1, 85).

Despite the fact that it is Ajax's "horse [which] will sooner con an oration than [Ajax will] / learn a prayer without book" (2.1, 85), Thersites makes an attempt to draw Ajax's attention to his excessive pride: "Thou grumblest and railest every hour on / Achilles, and thou art as full of envy at his greatness as Cerberus is at Proserpina's beauty" (2.1, 86). Unfortunately, Ajax is deaf to the jester's remarks. Hence, the only reasonable thing that the jester can think of is to rail at Ajax even more by playing on the meaning of his name. He ridicules him in front of his comrades and makes him aware that he is a fool, for he

"knows not himself" (2.1, 81): "Ajax, thou stool for a witch!" (2.1, 86), "For whomsoever / you take him to be, he is Ajax" (2.1, 87), I say this Ajax (87).[5] Hearing his own name, Ajax becomes even more enraged, as he has no distance to himself whatsoever. Despite the fact that Thersites fails to correct Ajax's arrogance, he manages to preserve his honor by refusing to side with somebody who by beating him tries to deny his status as jester. In fact by behaving in such a way, Ajax successfully raises his rank as a fool, becoming a "proclaimed fool."

On the whole, on the basis of the above examples, we may observe that through skillful use of verbal irony tinged with sarcasm and thanks to the assumed pose of an ignorant man the fool makes himself superior to his interlocutors through rightly exposing their flaws, which they insistently try to hide or refuse to acknowledge. The ability to play on the meaning of the words *ad hoc* and to conceal the intended message behind the literal meaning of what he says allows the fool to put his interlocutors into a state of confusion and force them to contemplate their shortcomings. The rejection of the ironist's apt remarks becomes all the more difficult, since it is an interpreter himself who discovers their hidden ironic content. The wise fool becomes the master of a situation as opposed to the victim of an ironic statement. This will be even more clearly visible on the basis of the examples presented in the last section of this paper.

5. A PROBLEM PLAY

Troilus and Cressida is one of Shakespeare's dramas in which the non-conformist spirit of the playwright is best reflected and in which the elements of both official and non-official Renaissance culture and literature become effectively interconnected. Not only does the play take the form of "mongrel Tragicomedie", written probably to tease such fellow writers as Sir Philip Sydney, but it also includes the character of the jester whose voice is among those which are most visibly marked within the drama and whose presence cannot remain unnoticed (it is all the more important, since in Homer's *Iliad* Thersites is a minor character and does not have the status of the licensed fool).[6]

The attempt to clearly define and classify the play poses endless problems for critics, because Shakespeare also denies the readers the opportunity to experience both the release typical for a comedy and the purification of emotions through tragic *catharsis*. Moreover, as Faber (1990, 137) puts it, in *Troilus and Cressida* Shakespeare "explores the ultimate human irrationality, the collective death wish that makes the compulsive, suicidal, tragic decisions of an individual Romeo, Hamlet, Othello, Antony, or Lear look like harmless child's play. [Here, the dramatist] grapples with the ultimate human tragedy – war" – which influences all the characters, even Thersites.

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[5] According to *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English* Dictionary (1972, 51), the term Ajax (which nowadays is pronounced – /'eɪdʒaks/) in Elizabethan times was pronounced – /ə'dʒeɪks/ and was used jocularly for "a jakes" – the Elizabethan word for a mouldy outdoor toilet.

[6] Sir Philip Sydney (quoted in Laroque 1993, 318) made an open protest against all fools, particularly against the theatre clown. In *The Defence of Poesie* he expresses his disapprobation for plays characterized by mixed genres, "But besides these grosse absurdities, howe all their Playes bee neither Tragedies, nor right Comedies, mingling Kinges and Clownes … so as neither the admiration and Commiseration, nor the right sportfulnesse is by their mongrel Tragicomedie obtained … But if wee marke them well [the Ancients], wee shall finde that they never or verie daintily matche horne Pipes and Funeralls."

This is the reason why most of the *dramatis personæ* are presented by Shakespeare in an unconventional way, i.e. in opposition to the prevailing dramatic practices of his time. As Main (1961, 171) states, “between 1598 and 1603 the drama yields definite, recurring character roles or types, such as the romantic lover and the satiric lover, the perennial hero and villain, or the fool and the critic.” Shakespeare’s characters however are resistant to such a classification, since they constitute the “amalgams” of different personalities. For instance, Cressida is described by Main (173-174) as a mixture of four roles: “a modest maid, a satiric or forward maid, a conscienceless shrew, and a patient fallen.” Hector, Homer’s traditional ancient hero, is in turn depicted not only as a hero but also as a villain.

In the time of the prolonged war and chaos even Thersites becomes “both a satirist and a butt of satire” (177). However, I cannot not agree with Main that Thersites is as ambivalent as the other characters mentioned above and that he is a coward, because he refuses to fight in the final battle. To my mind – since he is a jester – by refusing to pretend to be a hero, he stays true to himself, which prevents him from experiencing an identity crisis, as in the case of Cressida who admits to having more that “one kind of self” (3.2 ,119) or Troilus who, after confessing love to Cressida, decides to abandon her for the good of the cause. Thersites refuses to actively participate in the Trojan war even at the cost of demeaning himself (“No, no; I am a rascal; a scurvy, railing knave; / a very filthy rogue” (5.4, 182)). He does it for the same reason, for which he earlier refused to give Ajax the proclamation, even at the cost of being beaten. If he did that, he would contradict himself and betray his beliefs, becoming as hypocritical and ambivalent as those who were criticized by him.

How did it happen that he got there, anyway? It needs to be noticed that, unlike all the other soldiers, Thersites serves in the Greek army “not voluntary” but “under an impress” (2.1, 88). The fact that he is forced to participate in war, something he utterly despises, and stays in this pathological environment, being constantly beaten by Ajax, becomes the source of the fool’s resentment, expressed by him in bitter and savage terms:

> THERSITES How now, Thersites! What – lost in the labyrinth
> of thy own fury! Shall the elephant Ajax carry it thus? He beats
> me, and I rail at him. O worthy satisfaction! Would it were
> otherwise – that I could beat him , whilst he railed at me.
> ‘Sfoot, I’ll learn to conjure and rise devils but I’ll see some
> issue of my spiteful execrations ...
> After this, the vengeance on the whole camp! – or,
> rather, the Neapolitan bone-ache, for that methinks is the
> curse depending on those that war for a placket. (2.3, 98)

It is noticeable that Thersites, “A slave whose gall coins slanders like a mint” (1.3, 76), is entirely aware of his wrath and envy: “Sfoot, I’ll learn to conjure and raise devils but I’ll see some / issue of my spiteful execrations” ... “I have said my prayers, and devil Envy say ‘Amen’” (2.2, 98). Due to the fact that his personality becomes corrupted and that he still has a need to reprove ignorance of other characters the jester cannot be regarded as a wise man, someone who accepts everything that happens to him with a composure and who does not have a need to correct anyone apart from himself. Nevertheless, the fact that he is moved by the ignorance of others and undertakes the

effort to correct it makes him the wisest person of all “the fools” whom the readers come across in this play. To my mind there is a tremendous difference between somebody who either acts foolishly and refuses to recognize his faults (just as Ajax does) or is proud of such an attitude (as in the case of Achilles), and somebody who is fully aware of his defects and acts with a good intention of bringing others to the same kind of recognition. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Thersites stubbornly and decisively disavows any kind of link with other characters:

> THERSITES Would your fountain of your mind were clear
> again, that I might water an ass at it! I had rather be a tick
> in a sheep than such a valiant ignorance. (3.3, 134)
>
> To be a dog, a mule, a cat, a fitchew,
> a toad, a lizard, an owl, a puttock, or a herring
> without a roe, I would not care; but to be Menelaus, I
> would conspire against destiny! Ask me not what I would
> be, if I were not Thersites, for I care not to be a louse of
> a lazar, so were I not Menelaus. Hey-day! Sprites and fires! (5.1, 165-166)

Thersites constantly curses those who led to the Trojan war and by turning everything “inside out” exposes the absurdity of such violence. In fact, he is the only character who, from the very beginning to the end, strives to show what the Trojan war really is – a senseless and witless activity with “fools” fighting on both sides.

Owing to the fool’s jeers, all the characters which in *The Iliad* are pictured as demi-gods, gods or goddesses again become ordinary people with all their frailties and flaws. As Muir (2008, 23) puts it,

However much we deplore Thersites, some of the mud he throws is bound to stick; and after we have heard Ajax compared to bear, an elephant, a mongrel, an ass, a horse, and a peacock; after we have heard Achilles compared to a cur; After Menelaus has been described as worse than a herring without a roe or than the louse of a lazar – and some would remember that Cressida ended as a lazar – they cannot climb again to their Homeric pedestals.

His constant ironic and sarcastic asides cast a shadow over other characters’ deeds and words, effectively preventing the reader from siding with any of them and adopting the subjective point of view.

6. THERSITES AS SHAKESPEARE’S MEDIUM OF IRONIC MESSAGE

Apart from analyzing instances of irony employed by the jester and other characters from the point of view of the utterance as a specific semantic-discursive mechanism, we should also pay attention to statements that can be identified as ironic or that carry an ironic message only in the broader context (of a given scene or even the whole drama) (cf. Wołowska 2011, 79). Simultaneously, it is noteworthy that on the higher level of communication (the external dramatic level) Shakespeare passes an ironic message also

directly to the readers excluding either only a victim of irony or all the *dramatis personæ*.[7]

In order to achieve that effect the dramatist employs not only verbal irony but also dramatic irony, which, as Pfister (1991, 56) states, occurs when "the internal and external communication systems interfere with each other and overlap". Dramatic irony is a term mostly defined and described in the context of a theatrical play being staged, but it can also relate to drama as a written text. According to Abrams and Harpham's (2012, 186) definition,

> Dramatic irony involves a situation in a play [either tragedy (tragic irony) or comedy] or a narrative in which the audience or reader [and possibly some fictional characters] share with the author knowledge of present or future circumstances of which a character is ignorant; in that situation, the literary character unknowingly acts in a way we recognize to be grossly inappropriate to the actual circumstances, or expects the opposite of what we know that fate holds in store, or says something which anticipates the actual outcome, but not at all in the way that the character intends.

The knowledge possessed by the audience and possibly by some dramatic figures places them a step ahead of the victim of irony who acts out of ignorance of his or her own condition. Paradoxically, the more the audience knows the bigger the tension becomes, as there is always some victim of ironic course of events who, from our perspective, is not only unconscious of acting ignorantly, but as Muecke (1986, 81) states, he or she is "confidently unaware of his/[her] ignorance." Moreover, this type of irony can work so well here, as the subject matter of the play is canonical. Noticeably, in *Troilus and Cressida* it is the jester's asides that most often become the source of such, so-called, "discrepant awareness" (Pfister 1991, 50).

For instance act two, scene three begins with Thersites' lengthy monologue – one of the jester's mock-prayers in which he rails at the Greek soldiers. Being disturbed by Patroclus, the fool devotes a litany of curses also to him: "Heavens bless thee from a tutor, and a discipline come not / near thee! Let thy blood be thy direction till thy death!" (2.3, 99). After calling Thersites "Good", Patroclus makes an attempt to annoy the jester with an ironic remark: "What, art thou devout? Wast thou in prayer?" (99). Rather than engaging in a verbal duel, Thersites chooses to admit his interlocutor is right: "Ay; the heavens hear me" (99). Unaware of what the fool has just asked the gods for, Patroclus responds with the declaration of affirmation ("Amen"). This becomes the source of dramatic irony, as both the jester and the readers know that his response should pull down all Thersites' curses on Patroclus' very own head, and provides the jester with a worthy satisfaction, so that there is no need for the further exchange of sentences.

Later in the drama, in the fifth scene of the fourth act, Hector, in the company of Troilus, pays a visit to Achilles in a Greek camp. While the commanders greet each other very kindly, especially Hector, who calls Agamemnon's brother "sweet lord Menelaus",

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[7] According to Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni (qtd in Wołowska 2011, 79), apart from irony that can be discerned in the utterance of a single character which formally takes place on the level of the opposition between the author and a character, the reader can also distinguish an ironic content which on the higher level can be identified as a message of the author to the reader reflected in the opposition author – receiver.

the reader can suddenly hear Thersites' aside comment: "Sweet draught, 'sweet' quoth a! Sweet sink, sweet sewer" (5.1, 166). The fool at once turns the meaning of the epithet ("sweet") inside out by juxtaposing it with scatological abuses. It is hardly possible not to notice the bitter comment consisting of four oxymora which, to my mind, in this particular passage can be as well considered as a variation or a shortened version of an ironic simile (e.g. "as sweet as draught"). It is additionally enhanced not only by the numerous repetitions (which make the whole utterance ironic at any event), but also by the use of alliteration. Consequently, to the end of this scene, through the eyes of Thersites the reader notices that the way the Greek and Trojan soldiers behave, which in the face of war was thought to be a part of the code of honor, an act of kindness, now can equally well be perceived as an expression of hypocrisy.

Another virtue that Shakespeare refuses to idealize in his drama is love. Once more it is Thersites who constantly draws the attention of the readers to the fact that something which appears to be or is referred to by other characters as love is in reality nothing more than "Lechery, lechery!" (5.3, 177). As Faber (1990, 144) states, for the fool "no conflict between love and war exists; rather they are the same thing – appetite, impulse… In *Troilus and Cressida* we witness the reptilian behavior, whether the scene involves a battle or a bedroom."

Unlike in *The Iliad,* in Shakespeare's drama the relationship between Helen and Paris, as well as Helen's sexual infidelity, forms only the shadow plot for Troilus' and Cressida's ambiguous relationship and the unfaithfulness of the latter (Muir 2008, 31). In this respect, the most telling scene is the second scene of the last act in which "Cressida and Diomedes are enacting their comedy of coquetry and seduction. Watching them Troilus enacts his tragedy of disillusionment, watched and monitored by Ulysses" (33). As befits the ironist, Thersites assumes the role of an observer and commentator of the whole scene.

While throughout the scene Troilus disbelieves his ears and eyes: "Was Cressid here?", ... "She was not, sure", ... "This she? No; this is Diomed's Cressida.", ... "This is, and is not, Cressid" (5.2, 173-174), Thersites has no doubts about what he sees: "Roguery!", ... "A juggling trick", ... "Fry, lechery, fry!" (5.2, 168-172). Also Cressida's pompous declaration:

> CRESSIDA Troilus, farewell! One eye looks on thee,
> But with my heart the other eye doth see.
> 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, 173)

is put by the jester into simpler terms: "THERSITES A proof of strength she could not publish more, / Unless she said 'My mind is now turned whore'" (5.2, 173).

Even if Troilus finally comes to the conclusion that Cressida is "False, false, false!" (5.2, 176), it does not prevent him from shifting the whole responsibility on to Diomedes, which gives him another reason to continue the bloody slaughter. In the context of the whole scene, it is difficult not to agree with the wise fool's ironic statement that "All the argument is a whore and a cuckold – a good quarrel to draw emulous factions and bleed to death upon!" (2.3, 100).

According to Faber (1990, 145), the attempts of the characters to "rationalize the irrational, to justify the unjustifiable ... [in the face of the war] result in the kind of verbal hypocrisy and moral schizophrenia that occurs in *Troilus and Cressida*". Not only do they start to act immorally, but they also violate the principle of decorum by "continually losing their hold on the style which is appropriate to their traditional reputations or to the fine qualities which are intermittently realized for them in the course of the play" (McAlindon 1969, 30). According to McAlindon (1969, 30), Latinate diction is one of the things introduced by Shakespeare to achieve the discordant effect, so that he can "focus [the readers'] attention on the graver maladies which afflict the Greeks and Trojans." The author points out that the Renaissance linguistic theory of the imperfect speech was "used as an omen of personal and social disorder" (30).

Shakespeare employs the figure of the bitter fool to provide the contrast to the rest of the characters and to the variety of linguistic styles they represent. Not only does Thersites constitute the reverse of a great ancient hero, but also the jesters' satiric invective contrasts with the pomposity of the Trojans, the grandiloquent declarations of Troilus and Cressida and the commonplace remarks of the Greeks. As has been pointed out, the situation Thersites finds himself in corrupts his personality and as a result also his language. However, he still fulfils his role as the wise fool and an ironist, constantly drawing attention to the folly and hypocrisy of other characters and to the senselessness of the idea of war.

As the Romantic poet Heinrich Heine (qtd in Muir 2008, 23) most rightly points out, "Whereas the classical Greek poets seek to glorify reality, and soar into the ideal, [Shakespeare] presses more into the depth of things; the keen-whetted shovel of his intelligence digs into the quiet earth of appearances, disclosing to our eyes their hidden roots." The heroism and splendor omnipresent in Homer's *Iliad*, to which Shakespeare refers in his drama, are subjected by him "to a less than sympathetic scrutiny" (37). In order to turn the meaning of the ancient epic poet's work inside out and pass the ironic message directly on to the readers Shakespeare employs the character of the bitter jester, who (with the use of the sharp blade of irony and sarcasm) restlessly strives to correct our perspective on the entire drama and on its characters, their words and deeds. Thanks to him more realistic account of events than that presented by Homer may be revealed. The wise fool can be therefore granted the title of the author's mouthpiece and the dramatist's *medium of ironic message*. "Thersites is Shakespeare himself in a cynic masquerade, that he may watch the whole game and be privy to the monstrous immorality" (Weiss 1876, 96).

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