***Troilus and Cressida***

Genre

Modern critics have considered this play a tragedy, a tragi-comedy, a comedy, or a satire. It seems fairly clear that the editors of the First Folio considered it a tragedy, as it appears between the histories (all of which derive from fairly recent English history) and the tragedies (which include many plays derived from other countries’ histories, usually further back in time than the English history plays).

Purpose

There is a difference in purpose between two kinds of works sometimes called “satire.” In one, the cynical author attacks an ideal because it is not real; these works tend to be bitter because the author has stopped believing in a previously treasured ideal. In the other kind, the satirical author attacks reality because it falls short of an ideal; these works tend to be angry because the author has continued to treasure an ideal although people are not living up to it.

To determine how to read this play, it would be helpful to figure out whether it gives us any evidence that there are ideals which persist in war and love. Speeches by Ulysses and Hector indicate that there is at least one leader on each side who believes in honor; Troilus’ love for Cressida suggests that at least one lover believes in loyalty. Therefore, one can make a case for the play as a satirical comedy.

On the other hand, the plot of the play is ironic and cynical, and most of the other characters are cynical.