

International Conference The Cassandra Project. Prophetic *Furor* and Female Otherness

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BOOK OF ABSTRACTS

Anton BIERL (Basel University)

Cassandra as the Female Other and a Theatrical Means in Aeschylus' Agamemnon: Voice, Sound, Sight

This paper explores how Aeschylus uses the marginal figure of Cassandra as a theatrical means with multiple functions. To some extent, she complements the chorus enhancing its riddling and visionary tendencies. As a prophetic woman from Troy, she encompasses a wider perspective in respect of geography, time and truth. In her capacity as *mantis* she knows about the past, the present and future. As an emotional center she gives body to *pathos* and violence, since her prophecies concern her own immanent horrific death. Her visions drastically show what happens behind the scene in the house. Lastly, she is a metapoetic device mirroring the positions of the spectator, the actor, the chorus and the dramatic author.

SILVIA BIGLIAZZI (Verona University)

Like a Swan: How Studley Read Seneca Through Aeschylus

The paper reassesses John Studley's 1566 translation of *Agamemnon* by uncovering an unexpected interpretative lens at work in his handling of Cassandra. While Studley's version has usually been treated as a predictable exercise in mid-Tudor expansiveness and moralisation, framed by commendatory verses promising "pleasure and commodity" and by the translator's own commitment to encouraging virtue, its treatment of Cassandra disrupts this familiar picture. Nowhere in Seneca does Cassandra bear the full aesthetic colouring Studley gives her: a prophetic voice retrospectively figured as both nightingale and dying swan, whose final, unheard song becomes the measure of her tragic truth. This contribution argues that such imagery indicates not an attempt to reshape Seneca according to Greek tragic poetics, but rather that Studley read Seneca's Cassandra through the surprising filter of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, where Cassandra acquires precisely this swan-like interpretative frame. The result is a translation that rereads the Roman play from within, granting Cassandra a metapoetic significance absent from Seneca yet entirely consistent with Aeschylus' retrospective valuation of her voice. By demonstrating, first, that Studley could plausibly have encountered Aeschylean material, and second, that the specific motifs he employs match Aeschylus' handling closely rather than generically, the paper positions Studley's *Agamemnon* as a distinctive Tudor experiment: a Senecan tragedy read – and quietly recast – through an Aeschylean lens.

Francesca CICHETTI (L'Aquila University) and **Alessandro GRILLI** (Pisa University)

On Cassandra's Double Marginality: a Theory and a Case Study

In this talk we argue that Cassandra's ability to foresee the future is part of a broader set of traits that define her identity, which can be described as "double marginality". The first section examines the concept of Cassandra's double marginality, a condition shaped by two intersecting forms of exclusion. Beginning with classical Greco-Roman literature, Cassandra defies the traditional gender roles of prophetess and wife-mother, as prescribed by patriarchal norms. She rejects Apollo's sexual advances, challenging the typical relationship between a god and a prophetess. In response, Apollo curses her, granting her the power of prophecy but condemning her never to be believed. Furthermore, Cassandra never marries or forms a socially recognised, enduring relationship with a man, which further reinforces her marginalization within societal gender expectations.

The second section (*The "Martha Mitchell Effect"; or, Why No One Believes Cassandra*) builds on the theoretical premises of the first part and explores its complementary aspect: given the defining characteristics of the doubly marginalised subject, it is not difficult to show why their social group is

willing to reject the evidence in order to avoid compromising themselves in a relationship with such a subject. This point is argued through the analysis of what we might call a case of archetypal resurgence of Cassandra's myth, Matt Ross's TV show *Gaslit* (2022), based on Martha Mitchell's role as a whistleblower in the Watergate scandal. This section investigates not only how Cassandra's marginalised condition influences her role as a prophetess but also the broader cultural and social consequences of her exclusion, as reflected in the long chain of reception (in Jauss' sense) of Cassandra's myth.

Francesco DALL'OLIO (Independent Scholar)

"Digne soeur d'Hector!": Cassandra and the Fate of Troy in Berlioz's Les Troyens

While not being the first time Cassandra is featured in an opera, her appearance in Hector Berlioz's *Les Troyens* (composed in 1856-8) represents her greatest and more fascinating turn in the 19th century musical theatre. The prophetess is the absolute protagonist of this first part of Berlioz's majestic grand-opéra, in what is also a major deviation from the main source of this part of the drama, Book 2 of Virgil's *Aeneid*, when Cassandra was nowhere to be seen. In Berlioz, on the other hand, she takes centre-stage during the first two acts of the drama: it's through her eyes we saw the fatal entrance of the wooden horse in Troy, an event of which only she knows the true meaning. All throughout Act 1, Berlioz underscores her tragic understanding of the situation in contrast to the ignorance of everyone else, including her lover Coroebus. Then, in Act 2, when the city is falling to the Greeks, Cassandra becomes a sort of last representative and defender of the Trojan glory, exhorting a group of girls like her to kill themselves and die for the city, as a sort of ultimate sacrifice for the ruins of the city. Several different literary and theatrical traditions are here fused together, from Aeschylus' characterisation of Cassandra in *Agamemnon* to an echo of Virgil's Laocoön, and of course the musical and dramatic features of 19th-century musical theatre and its emphasis on the presence of a prima donna. The paper will explore and analyse how Berlioz fuses together all these different traditions in his work, in reference to both his cultural context and the mythical and literary tradition concerning Cassandra.

Marco DURANTI (Independent Scholar)

Obscurum poema. The Reception of Lycophron's Alexandra-Cassandra in the Early Modern Age

This essay focuses on the early modern reception of *Alexandra, or Cassandra*, attributed to Lycophron of Chalchides (III century BC). Despite being notorious for its difficulty – or perhaps because it was so – this poem was edited and translated into Latin by renowned scholars such as Joseph Scaliger and Wilhelm Canter. It consists of a prophecy uttered by Cassandra, which relates the later fortunes of Troy and of the Greek and Trojan heroes. Therefore, it witnesses the evolution of the figure of Cassandra in antiquity, namely in the Hellenistic age. This essay will enquire to what extent the image of Cassandra that was conveyed in that poem spread from erudite literature to the broader early modern literary landscape

Anne MORVAN (Nantes University)

The Prophetess and the Wooden Horse: Cassandra's Agentivity between Quintus Smyrnaeus' Posthomerica and Hospein's Equus Trojanus (1590)

The doomed prophetess Cassandra appears in epic and tragic poetry to forecast imminent misfortunes, Agamemnon's death or the fall of Troy. The dramatic potential of her prophecies is all the more enhanced as the realization of her predictions comes closer and happens within the poem. Thus, a face-to-face with the Wooden Horse, which embodies the fate of the city and the deceit of the Greeks, helps the poets to exacerbate her curse. Mere allusion in Virgil's *Aeneid* (II), this confrontation is extensively developed in Quintus Smyrnaeus' *Posthomerica* (XII). More than just words, the prophetess becomes even a character of action since she tries to destroy the Horse with an axe. This epic (and iconographic) motif finds a transposition in tragedy in the late XVIth, when Michel Hospein stages in Strasbourg a neo-Latin play inspired by Virgil: the *Equus Trojanus*. Cassandra unveils the stratagem in a long replica in which the playwright concentrates all the steps of her curse: cries of pain, predictions of the fall, exhortations to the Trojans, statement of impotency, silence. Indeed, the Wooden Horse crystallizes the tensions and paradoxes which cross Cassandra's prophecies: on the temporal level, because the present object hides the imminent catastrophe; on the agency level, since Cassandra predicts inevitable events but still tries to prevent them. Hospein's play, along with Quintus Smyrnaeus' poem, appears to be an interesting case study to understand the respective potentialities of epic and tragic poetry as well as the transposition of a motif from one genre to another. In tragedy, the genre defined by the representation of an action, which place may be left to a character deprived of any possibility of action?

Markus OPHAELDERS (Verona University)

Kybele, help us. Reflections on Christa Wolf's Cassandra

Christa Wolf's novel *Cassandra* (1983) treads the line between Utopia and Dystopia, as her previous one, *Nowhere. In no place* (1979) announces already in its title. It is also a great counterpoint (a parody in the original sense of the word): this counterpoint is simultaneously addressed to the beginning of Western literature, as its first testimony recounts the first great war of plunder that literary history has handed down to us. In this sense, it opposes the "Song of the Muses," who at the beginning of the *Iliad* are asked to sing the praises of the hero par excellence: Achilles. "Sing, O goddess, of the wrath of Achilles, son of Peleus!" He, but also Apollo, is contrasted by the anti-heroine Cassandra, punished by the latter for having refused to yield to him. More specifically, this counterpoint recounts the war from the side of those who lost it. Thus, the story centers on a woman who not only fails to win any battles, but is also contrasted with Penthesilea, who almost manages to defeat Achilles, the beast (this is the epithet *ornans*, or perhaps better: *disornans*, that Wolf uses for him), with whom she instead shares the fate of being killed by the Greeks. Finally, the story challenges the concept of the hero as an individual, arguing that life is a relationship, not a principle of individuation, and relationships, such as the family, have been, since ancient times, the prerogative of women.

Cristiano RAGNI (Verona University)

Cassandra and the Politics of Belief in Shakespeare's Troilus and Cressida

This paper examines the figure of Cassandra in *Troilus and Cressida* as an archetype of the marginalised mad woman, exploring how Shakespeare constructs her character through her prophetic insights that are repeatedly dismissed by a patriarchal and war-torn society. By analysing her role within the context of early modern portrayals of mental disability and gender, this paper aims to show that Cassandra's prophetic language not only grants her a fleeting opportunity to engage in a political discourse from which she would typically be excluded, but also that, on closer reading, there are moments when her wisdom is not wholly negated.

Anne Sophie REFSKOU (Aarhus University)

Passionate Prophetess or Hare-brained irritant: Emotional Reactions to Cassandra in Early Modern Literature

This essay proposes to read literary representations of Cassandra through the lens of critical and historical emotion studies. Focusing on a selection of early modern English texts, including Richard Barnfield's *The Legend of Cassandra* (1595), Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* (c. 1601-2) and Thomas Heywood's *The Iron Age* (1632), I will shift the critical focus from Cassandra's emotions – as expressed through her prophetic furor and other forms of affective behaviour – to the emotional reactions that she provokes in other characters and that early modern writers – through her – might seek to provoke in their readers: reactions ranging from fear, pity, anger, irritation and dismissal. In focusing on emotional reactions to Cassandra, rather than on Cassandra's emotions, the paper does two things: it adopts a model of understanding emotions as social reactions rather than as individual psychological states, and it seeks to bypass the longstanding emotion/reason binary through which Cassandra is too easily categorised as the irrational female other.

Beatrice RIGHETTI (Verona University)

The Silence of the Girls in Pat Barker's The Voyage Home

This paper examines Pat Barker's *The Voyage Home* as a contemporary feminist rewriting of the myth of Cassandra, reversing the tragic association of prophecy with silence, chastity, and unbelievability found in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and Euripides' *Trojan Women* and *Andromache*. In the Greek dramas, Cassandra's foresight is inextricably linked to her status as a virginal priestess, while her speech is framed as unintelligible or divinely coerced and thus effectively unheard. Barker retains Cassandra's prophetic gift but overturns the cultural logic that binds foresight to docility and enforced purity. In the novel, Cassandra speaks with an assertive, controlled rhetoric that allows her not only to navigate but to shape her social environment; at times, her interlocutors even partially believe the prophecy that will seal their fate. Parallel to this vocal authority, Barker restores Cassandra's agency over her sexuality. Once cast as the violated maiden of tragedy, she is reimagined as fully aware of the political and emotional stakes of her intimacy with Agamemnon, using both voice and body with strategic intent. These transformations culminate in the reconfigured space of her death, shifting the mythic scene from the sacrificial killing of a silenced virgin to a moment of deliberate self-possession, in which Cassandra consciously participates in determining the terms of her final act.

Isolde SCHIFFERMÜLLER and Elisa DESTRO (Verona University)

Prophecies of War. Reflections on Cassandra, a Novel and Four Essays by Christa Wolf

“Literature today must be peace research”, remarks Christa Wolf in her *Four Essays on Cassandra*, which she presented at the Frankfurter Poetik-Vorlesungen in 1982. Her project of an “aesthetics of resistance” to the threat of war searches for the sources of Western culture and traces the archaeology of a female voice whose prophetic potential has been silenced by male violence. The contribution examines the reception of Christa Wolf’s now canonical narrative, which was written in the divided Germany of the Cold War and explores its possible relevance today.

Emanuel STELZER (University of Verona)

The Cassandras of English Restoration Drama

With a couple of exceptions, Cassandra was absent from the Restoration stage. Yet, in the works of key playwrights during the second half of the seventeenth century, Cassandra’s portrayal proves to be multilayered and complex: medieval mediations are still present onto which co-eval social issues and constraints are engrafted. The character yielded herself to show off professional actresses’ bravura displays and, more importantly, could sway the audience’s engagement in different ways, depending on Cassandra being played as a traditional hag, an august prophetess, or a gentle aristocrat. This paper will focus on two plays: John Banks’ tragedy *The Destruction of Troy* (1679) and Elkanah Settle’s *The Siege of Troy*, which, from 1698 onwards, was variously adapted into a quite popular droll, an opera, and a tragedy also known and marketed as *The Virgin Prophetess*. It will be argued that Cassandra’s reception in Restoration theatre became a means to interrogate societal anxieties surrounding gender, authority, and truth in a period marked by significant social, religious, and political change, offering insights into the complex intersection of narrative, gender, and power within the theatrical landscape of the time.

Sarantis THANOPULOS (Presidente della Società Psicoanalitica Italiana)

Forza profetica e solitudine in Cassandra

Cassandra is one of the most paradigmatic figures in Greek tragedy. She pervades its entire space and, despite not having a leading role, her figure is fundamental for the comprehension of the moving of the tragic action from good to bad. On the tragic stage, the unfolding of events follows the path traced by hamartia: the initial unintentional error and the resulting concatenated errors, whose final catastrophic outcome is not conceived at the moment they occur. The dark premonition of disaster is always in the air, but it is ignored. Even when obvious signs of misfortune are perceived, usually by the chorus, the subjects acting on stage don’t want to know anything about it. They keep away from the feelings that create premonition: *eleos* (compassion for the suffering desire both of the one who inflicts the pain and the one who suffers it) and *phobos* (terror at the destruction of the relationship with the other and with the world). These eminently tragic feelings upset the internal world of the subject capable of experiencing them, resulting in an intense sense of loss and liberating the desire (longing) that loves mourning (Gorgias). The capacity for mourning is a profoundly feminine quality in women and men. Cassandra, therefore, represents, with her fate of not being believed, not only the blindness of the collective gaze that cannot see beyond its own nose, but also the repression of the intuitive female gaze, capable of seeing the future because it is inspired by an erotic, desirous vision of reality. This gaze is melancholic in its constitution; it suffers the loss of the other because it recognizes his/her difference, yet it is not depressive: it feels the void of the desired object but is not blind, it does not have a void within itself. Cassandra stands at the center of the conflict between a melancholic female gaze whose presentiment of the loss of the other becomes a warning premonition, and a blind male gaze that wishes to see only what confirms its self-referential actions.

Gherardo UGOLINI (Verona University)

Profezia e ideologia. Rappresentazioni di Cassandra nel nazismo

During the years of the Nazi dictatorship, the mythical saga of the Atreids enjoyed a certain degree of success through theatrical productions of Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*, original dramaturgical reworkings such as Hans Schwarz’s play *Kassandra. Eine Tragödie* (staged in 1941, in the midst of the world war), and *Agamemnons Tod*, the second part of Gerhart Hauptmann’s *Atriden-Tetralogie*, written between 1942 and 1943 during the months of the Battle of Stalingrad. From the analysis of these three texts, taken as case studies, no single, unequivocal ideological interpretation of Cassandra emerges that can be directly aligned with National Socialist ideology.

In the Berlin production of the Oresteia directed by Lothar Müthel in the summer of 1936, the actress Maria Koppenhöfer brings to life a Cassandra who expresses an archaic, dark world dominated by chaos and revenge – a world that, over the course of the play, is superseded by a new order of law and civilization, guaranteed by justice and authority. Schwarz's Cassandra, by contrast, appears to embody the patriotic fanaticism exalted by the regime and the desire for revenge of a people humiliated and offended by war and betrayal. In Hauptmann's drama, finally, Cassandra is not only the tragic victim destined for death, but a symbol in which trauma, memory, and powerlessness intertwine. She is a survivor who carries within herself the awareness of Troy's destruction and the foreboding of a new, imminent annihilation – an inevitable reflection of the catastrophe that Germany and Europe were experiencing in those years.

WORKSHOPS

Petra BJELICA (Verona University) and **Giovanna DI MARTINO** (UCL)

The Textual Voices of Cassandra

This workshop/seminar will attempt to bring together some of the texts presented during the rest of the conference. It will look at the ways the various re-writings of Cassandra talk to each other in an intertextual and comparative manner. The texts can be woven together and presented in a reading at the end of the workshop.'

Am WYCKOFF (Brown University)

Translation/Creative Writing

This workshop will explore nuances in rhythm, word choice, and sound across translations and their effect on performance across texts.

Emily PILLINGER, Priyanka BASU, and Rowan GARD (King's College London)

A Temple for Cassandra

'A Temple for Cassandra' combines insights from the creators' respective areas of research, performing arts, and activism. Our objective is to design an immersive scenography that will probe the fear and frustration – and glimmers of hope – that accompany looking into our world's uncertain future. The project foregrounds different ways of knowing and experiencing the world: it starts from the words of the prophet Cassandra, then integrates elements of indigenous Polynesian storytelling and navigation methods, global digital soundscapes, aim is to create a mythic world in which Cassandra's communications have been transformed into twenty-first century communications with the natural world, with the spiritual / divine, and with our future selves.