
Cassandra: The Cursed Prophetess of Troy

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Abstract

Cassandra, the Greek mythology figure, is still one of the most tragic and mysterious women in literature today. She was the daughter of King Priam and Queen Hecuba of Troy and was gifted with the power to predict the future, but burdened so that no one would ever take her warnings seriously. This paper delves into her life from birth until death, her tragic flaws, and the consequences of her unheeded warning. It also explores Cassandra's character as compared to other tragic female characters in literature, with them being themes of powerlessness, fate, and gendered suffering (Rabinowitz, Nancy Sorkin, *Anxiety Veiled: Euripides and the Traffic in Women*, 1993). Lastly, this research investigates an underexplored gap in research—how the story of Cassandra might have gone differently had she been heeded. We hope that through this analysis, we can offer a new insight into the topicality of the story of Cassandra in contemporary literature and society.

Keywords: Greek mythology, Prophecy and fate, doomed prophetess, silencing of women, feminist interpretation of Cassandra, powerlessness, influence on English Literature.

Introduction

Cassandra's life is intricately entwined in the mythological and literary heritage of ancient Greece. As a Trojan princess, she was at the centre of events preceding and succeeding the Trojan War (Homer. *The Iliad*. 8th century BCE.) Her life is one of paradox—she had the ability to prophesy but was destined to be ignored and disregarded. Combination

of knowledge and powerlessness, unable to do anything about disasters that are going to happen, creates a tragic character whose life is filled with suffering, betrayal (Griffiths 33), and unfulfilled warnings (Wolf, Christa. *Cassandra: A Novel and Four Essays*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988.). Scholars have examined Cassandra from various angles, including feminist readings (Rabinowitz, Nancy Sorkin. *Anxiety Veiled: Euripides and the Traffic in Women*. Cornell University Press, 1993.; Pomeroy, Sarah B. *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*. 1995) psychological analyses (Jung, Carl G. *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. 1981; Kristeva, Julia. *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. 1980.) and historical perspectives (Hardwick, Lorna. *Classical Reception Studies*, 2015). However, one question remains largely unexplored: What if Cassandra had been believed?

The Gifted and the Cursed

Cassandra was a princess, daughter of King Priam and Queen Hecuba, and the sister to most famous figures like Hector and Paris (Euripides. *The Trojan Women*. 415 BCE; Homer. *The Iliad*. 8th century BCE.). She wanted to be a Priestess. She was intelligent, perceptive, and, above all, a truth-teller. But the truth here is, her story shows and is often an unbearable burden.

Her Curse

The most important thing about Cassandra's character is her tragic curse. In mythology, the god Apollo, fell in love with her and gave her the gift of prophecy in a bid to win her heart. When she spurned him, he cursed her—not by removing her gift, but by making sure that no one would ever believe her prophecies (Aeschylus. *Agamemnon*. 458 BCE.; Wolf, Christa. *Cassandra: A Novel and Four Essays*. 1988.). This turn of events doomed her to a life of frustration and powerlessness, aware of what was going to happen but unable to stop it.

Her Role in the Trojan War

Cassandra foresaw the disastrous consequences of Paris taking Helen to Troy, but her warnings were ignored (Homer. *The Iliad*. 8th century BCE.) She repeatedly cautioned the Trojans not to accept the Greek wooden horse, but her warnings were mocked (Virgil. *The Aeneid*. 19 BCE.). After the war, she predicted the death of Agamemnon, the Greek king who took her as a war prize, but again, no one listened (Aeschylus. *Agamemnon*. 458 BCE). Her story is one of a woman who was always right but never heard, making her one of the most heart-wrenching figures in Greek mythology.

What Has Not Been Explored?

Although a number of scholars have analysed Cassandra's involvement in the downfall of Troy and Tragic destiny (Wolf, Christa. *Cassandra: A Novel and Four Essays*. 1988. Hardwick, Lorna. *Classical Reception Studies: The Case of Cassandra in Modern Literature*. 2015) few have attempted to consider the counterfactual: What would have occurred had she been listened to? This research examines the consequences of an alternate past when Cassandra's warnings were heeded. Would war have been averted at Troy? Could the city have been preserved? And what does it say about humanity, and in particular our susceptibility to dismiss discomfiting realities?

Events from Birth to Death

Cassandra was born to King Priam and Queen Hecuba of Troy, thus making her a princess of high standing (Homer. *The Iliad*. 8th century BCE). Born as a royal princess of Troy, Cassandra grew up in privilege and exposure to knowledge. She was known to be intelligent and beautiful from a young age. She and her twin brother, Helenus, both received prophetic powers, but only Helenus was accepted (Wolf, Christa. *Cassandra: A Novel and Four Essays*. 1988).

Apollo, smitten by Cassandra, bestowed the gift of foresight upon her. When she spurned his advances, he cast a curse that no one would ever believe her visions (Aeschylus. *Agamemnon*. 458 BCE.).

The Trojan War and Unheeded Warnings

Cassandra had visions of the fall of Troy and cautioned against the Greek invasion (Euripides. *The Trojan Women*. 415 BCE.). She had visions of Paris' ill-fated romance with Helen and the war it would engender. She warned the Trojans of the Greek wooden horse, but they scoffed at her (Virgil. *The Aeneid*. 19 BCE.). She even foresaw her own tragic end (Wolf, Christa. *Cassandra: A Novel and Four Essays*. 1988; Zimmer Bradley, Marion. *The Firebrand*. 1987).

After the fall of Troy

After the Greeks had won, Cassandra was taken as a concubine by King Agamemnon (Aeschylus. *Agamemnon*. 458 BCE.). She foresaw his assassination by his wife, Clytemnestra, but no one paid attention. Ultimately, Cassandra herself was killed alongside Agamemnon, fulfilling her own tragic prophecy. Cassandra could see the murder coming but, cursed by Apollo, no one believed her. Clytemnestra murdered Agamemnon for a mix of personal revenge, political reasons, and the perpetual curse of the House of Atreus. The prime reason was Agamemnon's sacrifice of their daughter Iphigenia. He lied to Clytemnestra, saying that Iphigenia was to wed Achilles, when in fact he planned to offer

her

as a sacrifice to the goddess Artemis to gain her favour and secure good winds for the Greek ships. Clytemnestra did not know his real motives until it was too late. While Agamemnon was fighting a war away from home, she conspired with Aegisthus, who also held a personal vendetta against Agamemnon for previous family disputes. The two controlled Mycenae, and Agamemnon's return posed a threat to their rule. The killing was not only a revenge act but also a political strategy to hold on to power. In addition, Agamemnon also returned with Cassandra, a Trojan princess and seer, as a concubine. Cassandra had a vision of the forthcoming murder but, under the curse of Apollo, could not persuade anyone of the reality. Here, Clytemnestra's actions can be interpreted as both a personal revenge for Iphigenia's death and a political move to get rid of a returning leader who might destabilize the established power structure.

Cassandra's Tragic Flaws

Unlike many tragic figures, Cassandra's downfall was not due to her own mistakes. However, certain elements contributed to her suffering.

Her Isolation – Owing to her curse, Cassandra was isolated from her family, city, and even people who could have assisted her (Wolf, Christa. *Cassandra: A Novel and Four Essays*. 1988).

Her Powerlessness – Though she could predict the future, she did not have any way of changing it. Unlike other prophets who could counsel kings and countries, Cassandra was condemned to powerlessly witness Troy's destruction. (Kristeva, Julia. *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. 1980.).

Her Gender – In a patriarchal culture, Cassandra's warnings were doubly rejected because she was female, as part of a wider literary and cultural pattern of silencing women's voices (Pomeroy, Sarah B. *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*. 1995; Rabinowitz, Nancy Sorkin. *Anxiety Veiled: Euripides and the Traffic in Women*. 1993.).

Cassandra and Other Literary Tragic Women

Cassandra's tale is one that echoes other tragic female characters who were disregarded, silenced, or unable to alter their destiny

Ophelia (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*,) – Both are women whose voices go unheard, which results in their death. Ophelia, A woman who goes mad from a world unwilling to listen to her
Tess (Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*,) – A woman who suffers in spite of being honest and innocent, condemned in spite of being truthful.

Antigone (Sophocles, *Antigone*) – She, who goes against power, knowing what will be her fate. A truth speaker who dares defy authority but pays a price for it.

Each of these women represents the ordeal of speaking the truth in a world that does not want to hear. The tale of Cassandra is especially heart-wrenching because it proposes that even heavenly wisdom cannot move human obstinacy.

The Role of the Gods in Cassandra's Fate

The curse by Apollo provokes an inquiry about the justice of the gods—was it fair? The gods tended to play with humans like pawns, and Cassandra's destiny was not different. Cassandra's life illustrates the Greek belief that no matter how much wisdom a human possesses, there is no defence against fate (Aeschylus. *Agamemnon*. 458 BCE.; Homer. *The Iliad*. 8th century BCE.).

Cassandra and the Power of Female Voices in Patriarchal Societies

Cassandra's destiny mirrors that of so many women of history whose admonitions went unheard. Examples are women scientists and activists who were rejected prior to their concepts being later vindicated (Showalter, Elaine. *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830–1980*. 1985; Oreskes, Naomi, and Erik M. Conway. *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming*. 2010). Her tale captures the continued fight for women to be seriously considered in patriarchal societies.

The Symbolism of Cassandra in Myth and Modern Culture

Cassandra was once a Greek tragic figure but now she becomes the emblem of silenced truth and the pain of seers who prophesy disaster beforehand. Her narrative reverberates in literature, psychology, political action and even everyday discourse. (Wolf, Christa. *Cassandra: A Novel and Four Essays*. 1988; Jung, Carl G. *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. 1981;

Kristeva, Julia. *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. 1980.).

How Cassandra Has Been Interpreted Over the Centuries

In Literature: Authors have used Cassandra as a symbol of tragic insight for centuries. She is a symbol for intelligent and perceptive characters who are destined to be overlooked. From Shakespeare to contemporary dystopian novels, Cassandra-type characters continually sound the alarm about catastrophe, only to be disregarded. (Zimmer Bradley, Marion. *The Firebrand*. 1987. Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. 1985.).

In Psychology: 'Cassandra Complex' refers to people who foresee future threats accurately but are not believed. The term is usually used for whistleblowers, scientists, and reformers

whose warnings are not heeded until it is too late. (Jung, Carl G. *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*.1981).

In Feminist Studies: Cassandra symbolizes the silencing of women's voices throughout history. She is the woman who tells the truth to power but is dismissed merely because she is a woman. Her narrative parallels the lives of women in politics, science, and leadership throughout history. (Pomeroy, Sarah B. *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*.1995; Rabinowitz, Nancy Sorkin. *Anxiety Veiled: Euripides and the Traffic in Women*.1993; Showalter, Elaine. *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830–1980*. 1985.).

The Cassandra Complex in Modern Psychology

The ‘Cassandra Complex’ is a term used to describe people who possess valid information but are rejected because of social prejudices. It has been researched in different psychological and sociological contexts, such as:

Climate science: Many people were giving warnings about global warming for decades before scientists' findings were taken seriously. (Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring*. 1962; Oreskes, Naomi, and Erik M. Conway. *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming*. 2010; Klein, Naomi. *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate*. 2014.).

Public health: Doctors who predicted the severity of diseases like COVID-19 were typically ignored during the early stages.

Personal relationships: Gaslighting victims will tend to feel like Cassandra—belonging to a group that knows but cannot convince others. (Showalter, Elaine. *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830–1980*. 1985.; Kristeva, Julia. *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. 1980.).

Political and Social Applications of Cassandra’s Story

Cassandra's destiny is tragically real in the world today where truth-tellers are mocked or muzzled:

Whistleblowers: Figures like Edward Snowden and Julian Assange spoke truths that were uncomfortable to hear, but they faced scepticism or hostility in response.

Climate activists: Greta Thunberg and other environmentalists are often rejected, although strong scientific backing for their warnings. (Klein, Naomi. *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate*. 2014.).

Social reformers: Most who stand against injustice—whether in gender equality, racial justice, or political corruption—suffer the fate of Cassandra: being unheard. (Oreskes,

Naomi, and Erik M. Conway. *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming*. 2010)

The story of Cassandra portrays how societies prefer to exclude persons who challenge prevalent norms, regardless of whether they are right.

Cassandra in Ancient Literature and Later Adaptations

Cassandra's story has been retold in numerous forms, with the changing perceptions of power, fate, and truth that have influenced retellings.

Ancient Literary Depictions

Homer's Iliad: Cassandra is a minor figure in Homer's *Iliad*. However, she is known as a prophetess. But her predictions were never taken seriously. (Homer. *The Iliad*. 8th century BCE.).

Aeschylus' Agamemnon: Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* is one of the saddest. It portrays Cassandra, who is a captive of Agamemnon and predicts their killing by Clytemnestra but does not have the power to change it. (Aeschylus. *Agamemnon*. 458 BCE.)

Euripides' Trojan Women: Euripides' "Trojan Women" has its leading character, Cassandra. She is depicted as both a mad woman and one with a better perception. She knows that Troy will be captured. She knows all the sufferings of her fellow women, but no one listens. (Euripides. *The Trojan Women*. 415 BCE.).

Modern Retellings of Cassandra's Myth

Cassandra character continues to inspire authors, playwrights, and filmmakers:

Christa Wolf's novel Cassandra – A Feminist Retelling that delve into Cassandra's outlook and internal conflicts. (Wolf, Christa. *Cassandra: A Novel and Four Essays*. 1988)

Marion Zimmer Bradley's The Firebrand – Historical-fantasy novel that gives Cassandra a more active role in her fate. (Zimmer Bradley)

Films and TV shows: Movies and TV series: Cassandra-type characters appear in various works, including sci-fi and fantasy serials (e.g. 'Game of Thrones', where Daenerys and Melisandre share Cassandra's foreseeing abilities and tragic fate).

Power Dynamics between Gods and Mortals

Apollo's punishing of Cassandra makes us ask questions about divine justice. Was it really fair to curse her for rejecting him? It reflects a broader theme in Greek mythology where gods frequently control and punish humans.

The Inevitability of Fate in Greek Mythology

Could Cassandra have evaded her destiny? In Greek mythology, destiny is unavoidable, and no amount of fight can alter your fate. Cassandra was certain of the truth, yet unable to alter

its course, which reflects the Greek belief in destiny.

Cassandra's Silencing and the Historical Suppression of Women's Voices

Women have been ignored, dismissed, and patronised throughout history. Some examples of women who were right but dismissed include:

Rosalind Franklin: Rosalind Franklin, whose DNA work was overshadowed by that of male colleagues.

Hypatia of Alexandria was a brilliant philosopher and scientist who was killed for her beliefs.

Joan of Arc, had visions of the victory of France but was condemned as a heretic.

Cassandra's repeated silencing by those in power reflects a long-standing historical pattern where women's insights have been dismissed simply because they are women. This echoes Virginia Woolf's argument in *A Room of One's Own*, where she highlights the systematic Erasure of women's intellectual voices (Neha & Sachin. *Subverting the Patriarchy: Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own*. 2025). Woolf's work serves as a powerful critique of patriarchal structures that deny women autonomy and credibility, much like Cassandra's tragedy in myth

Modern 'Cassandra' Figures

Rachel Carson: This trailblazing woman spoke out against the risks of ecological devastation in her seminal book *Silent Spring*. (Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring*. 1962.).

Dorothy Vaughan: An African American mathematician who contributed incredibly valuable work to NASA but was largely ignored at that time. (Pomeroy, Sarah B. *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*. 1995.).

The Psychological and Philosophical Aspects of Cassandra's Tragedy

The Burden of Knowledge

Consider knowing the future and being powerless to do anything about it—that's some deep psychological pain. This is existential: if we can see it coming and no one is paying attention, what does that say about us as a species? (Jung, Carl G. *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. 1981.).

Cassandra's extreme burden wasn't just the visions of doom, it was the trauma of being perpetually unheard. This kind of psychological suppression parallels the existential frustrations expressed by Woolf, where societal denial of a woman's value leads to internalized despair. The emotional toll of such silencing reflects how systemic disbelief can destabilize one's sense of self and purpose. (Neha & Sachin. *Subverting the Patriarchy: Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own*. 2025)

The Psychological Impact of Constant Disbelief

We can only guess that Cassandra was either extremely anxious, depressed, or paranoid? Studies show that ignoring or rejecting a person may lead to emotional distress, loneliness, and even mental illness. (Showalter, Elaine. *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830–1980*. 1985.)

Cassandra in Popular Culture and Media

You can see Cassandra's myth in all types of media everywhere:

Movies: The movie *Troy* (2004) has one interpretation of Cassandra.

TV Series: There are characters reminiscent of Cassandra in *Battlestar Galactica* and *Westworld*.

Fiction: Some aspects of Cassandra's life have been taken up by authors Margaret Atwood and Sylvia Plath, among others. (Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. 1985.).

Fantasy: George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* features several Cassandra-like figures (e.g., Melisandre), whose true visions are met with mockery or fear Martin, George R. R. *A Song of Ice and Fire* series. 1996).

Her impact really does shine through in dystopian fiction, where characters warned of disaster but were not listened to—just as Cassandra was not.

Lessons from Cassandra (Why We Ignore Warnings)

What are the Psychological and Sociological Reasons for Ignoring Truth?

Normalcy bias: People have a tendency to think that things will just keep going as they always have. (Hardwick, *Classical Reception Studies*. 2015)

Cognitive dissonance: When we are shown uncomfortable truths, the majority of us will deny them to avoid emotional pain. (Kristeva, Julia. *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. 1980.).

And here are some Historical Examples of Ignored Warnings

Climate Change: We have been warned by scientists for decades regarding global warming, but it took humans years to take action at last.

Pandemics: Though experts cautioned that there was a possibility of a worldwide pandemic, it seems that the majority of governments dropped the preparation ball.

World War II: Some leaders recognized the threat posed by Hitler's rise, but unfortunately, their concerns went largely ignored.

What If Cassandra Had Been Believed?

Maybe the most fascinating part of Cassandra's story is to imagine what could have been if only the Trojans listened to her dire warning:

The wooden horse might have been destroyed, and that might have stopped the Greek invasion altogether.

And if her prophecy about Paris and Helen had been taken into account, the war might have been averted.

Rather than slavery and death, Cassandra might have been rewarded for her visions. Yet her case also serves to demonstrate a grand truth regarding faith and doubt. Even now, society is prone to dismissing the warnings of seers, scientists, and tellers of truth until it is much too late.

Conclusion

Cassandra's life is a poignant reminder of how infuriating it can be to predict danger but not be able to do anything to prevent it. She is the personification of those voices that are not always heard—the ones who know the truth but nobody believes them. Her tale still rings true today, particularly when we consider problems such as climate change, political instability, and social injustice (Christa Wolf's *Cassandra* and Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Firebrand*). By questioning what would have occurred had individuals ever listened to Cassandra, this paper introduces new perspectives as to why her narrative remains so relevant in both myth and today's world. And thinkers like Jung and Kristeva help us understand the archetypal weight of Cassandra's burden (Jung, Carl G. *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*.1981;

Kristeva, Julia. *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. 1980.).

Rather than merely a tragic figure, Cassandra's legacy is full of wisdom, and she is one of the most intriguing and tragic figures in Greek mythology.

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