

# Mythic Women in Victorian England: Cassandra and Florence Nightingale<sup>1</sup>

Laura Monrós Gaspar

*Universitat de València*

## Abstract

This paper seeks to examine the transmission of Cassandra in Victorian England as a prelude to subsequent reworkings that consider the myth the epitome of the silenced discourse of women. Florence Nightingale's relation to the Cassandra myth both in her personal life and in her essay *Cassandra* (1852) configures the heroine as a model to the vindication of the rights of women. Modern constructions of the myth read it as an archetype of the appropriation of the patriarchal discourse by gender minorities.

## 1. Preliminaries

The aspects of the Cassandra myth that were generally highlighted in the Victorian era are her lack of the gift of persuasion and her prophetic visions in Troy and Argos. Although the main source for the nineteenth-century Cassandra was Homer's *Iliad*,<sup>2</sup> powerful symbols associated with these interpretations —like the prophetic frenzy reflected in the body and the discourse of the heroine— directly recall other texts like Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*.<sup>3</sup> The Homeric and

---

<sup>1</sup> The research carried out for this article was funded by the Spanish Ministerio de Educación through the research project HUM2006-13080FILO. I am most grateful to Dr. Fiona Macintosh, Dr. Carmen Morenilla and Dr. Miguel Teruel who read this article and made valuable suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> For a list of translations of Homer's *Iliad* in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries see Clarke (1986). For an account of the interpretations of the homeric Cassandra as a prophetess see Iriarte (1999: 51). For further references see Neblung (1997).

<sup>3</sup> I refer here both to the original texts and adaptations. For the history of the performances of *Agamemnon* see Macintosh et al (2005).

---

## PROCEEDINGS 31<sup>ST</sup> AEDEAN CONFERENCE

Aeschylean Cassandra is frequently represented in the Victorian arts rending her hair or tearing her clothes; mocked, despised and uttering a constant stream of barely intelligible words. Florence Nightingale, however, sensed the possibilities of the figure of Cassandra as the symbol of women's limitations throughout the century, but also as the voice of their appropriation of a forbidden sphere of action reversing the conservative reworkings of the myth that had prevailed throughout.

This article seeks to analyse the new concepts of womanhood and femininity that Florence Nightingale depicts in her essay entitled *Cassandra* (1852) within the context of the reception of this classical figure. Nightingale's use of the myth differs in many ways from much Victorian discourse on the silenced prophetess, configuring the heroine as shorthand for the vindication of the rights of women.

### 2. Florence Nightingale and *Cassandra*

Florence Nightingale's *Cassandra* was privately printed during the nineteenth century as part of her essay *Suggestions for the Thought to Searchers after Religious Truth* (1852). The next edition of the text is dated 1928, when it was reprinted as an appendix to Ray Strachey's *The Cause: a Short History of the Women's Movement in Great Britain*. The first version of *Cassandra*, conceived as a novel, develops the theme of the confinement of the upper-class woman of her time through a dialogue between Fariseo and Nofriani reported by the former after his sister's death. The third part of this *Cassandra*, edited by Snyder in 1996, ends with the following sentences, which are not included in the final text:

Oh! call me no more Nofriani, call me Cassandra for  
I have preached + prophesied in vain. I have gone  
about crying all these many years, Wo to the people!  
And no one has listened or believed. And now I cry,  
Wo to myself! For upon me the destruction has  
come. (1996: 278)

This is the only instance in which the heroine is mentioned in the essay. What remains of that Cassandra in the printed version is her discourse; a first-person female prophetic narrator that denounces the lack of activity and the absence of a female voice in the lives of upper-class women of the Victorian times.

When Florence Nightingale wrote *Cassandra* she was only a young lady of thirty two whose intellectual ambitions were those of a social reformer. The social critique presented in *Cassandra* involves, fundamentally, the role of women in Victorian England.<sup>4</sup> As such, not only does it reflect upon gender equality, but it also represents a powerful tool for Nightingale to express her concerns about her own future and lack of occupation.<sup>5</sup> The personal notes and letters written between 1820 and 1854, before the Crimea years, shed light on many of her approaches to the topics set out in her essay. In addition, particular events of her youth draw personal connections with the classical myth that expound her conceptions of the figure of the sage woman as a social reformer.

Even though women's lack of voice in society is a recurrent topic in *Cassandra*, Nightingale develops her ideas on the matter more deeply in the second section of her essay, where she emphasizes the social differences between men and women that allow the first to have an occupation without the interruptions of the 'domestic duties' –that were always carried out by women– and to cultivate intellect in society. The well-known theory of the male and female spheres by which society forbade women a public discourse is refuted and challenged by Nightingale, when she points to this silence as one of the symptoms of the social malady of her time. She presents the situation thus:

You are not to talk of anything very interesting, for the essence of society is to prevent any long conversations and all *tête-à-têtes*. “Glissez, n'appuyez

---

<sup>4</sup> Florence Nightingale never declared herself a militant feminist. Nevertheless, her own biography and particular feminism had a strong influence on the sociological discourse of her time. Cf. Showalter (1981).

<sup>5</sup> According to Kahane (1995), Nightingale's use of language in *Cassandra* is related to the effects of rage, in psychoanalytical terms, on the feminine narrative voice of the essay.

## PROCEEDINGS 31<sup>ST</sup> AEDEAN CONFERENCE

pas” is its very motto. The praise of a good ‘*maitresse de maison*’ consists in this, that she allows no one person to be too much absorbed in, or too long about, a conversation. She always recalls them to their ‘duty’. (1979: 33)

The subjugation of women in conversational matters is also reported by Nightingale in an undated private note written around 1851, where she states the following:

But why, oh my God, cannot I be satisfied with the life which satisfies so many people? I am told that the conversation of all these good clever men ought to be enough for me –why am I starving, desperate, diseased upon it? Why has it all run to vanity in me, to –what impression am I making upon them? ... That, as (Channing says) the ground of sincerity lies in talking of what you are interested about– so none of the subjects of society interests me enough to draw me out of vanity. (Vicinus & Nergaard, 1990: 47)

Nightingale’s unusual talent and keenness to learn exceeded her family expectations. A few women relatives and friends whose intellectual interests didn’t fit in the traditional feminine mould of the time responded sympathetically to her aspirations; but these were only rare exceptions. In particular, she found strong opposition to her plans in her mother and sister, whose lifestyle was closer to what Nightingale rejected rather than to what she expected from women. Before she started her ‘mission’, Nightingale fell into a number of deep depressions caused by the social obligations that forced her to comply with the domestic duties that distracted her from other intellectual activities. This idea is developed in *Cassandra* specifying that the food she longs for is the food of the soul and the intellect:

To have no food for our heads, no food for our hearts, no food for our activity, is that nothing? If we have no food for the body, how we cry out [...] But suppose one were to put a paragraph in the 'Times', *Death of Thought from Starvation*, or *Death of Moral Activity from Starvation*, how people would stare, how they would laugh [...]. (Nightingale [1852] 1979: 41)

The vocation of Florence Nightingale was mainly rooted in a need to overcome the idleness and passivity that ruled the lives of women in the nineteenth century, and also from the firm belief that she had received a call from God. Four times she records some mystical experience.<sup>6</sup> The first one was on 7 February 1837, before her seventeenth birthday: "She wrote that God had spoken to her and called her to His service, although what that was to be was unclear" (Vicinus & Nergaard, 1990: 17). In 1848 she received her second call, only four years before the publication of *Cassandra*. The archives held at the Florence Nightingale Museum in London show how she was often unwell during those years: she had a nervous collapse in 1843 and became ill again at the beginning of 1844 and 1845.

The scorn of her want of knowledge, the strong belief in the call from God, the habit of day-dreaming that pushed her to fear her own madness, and the physical collapses suffered in those years inevitably link the life of Florence Nightingale with the nineteenth-century representations of the figure of Cassandra. In 1861, in response to a letter written by Nightingale to Benjamin Jowett on his comments about her work, Jowett expresses his apologies to his friend for having misunderstood her writings and taken her as Cassandra: "About Cassandra I see that I was mistaken. I did not exactly take Cassandra for yourself, but I thought that it represented more of your own feeling about the world that could have been the case" (Quinn, 1987: 8).

---

<sup>6</sup> Nightingale's mystical experiences have been interpreted in various ways (Showalter, 1981: 398 n7; Calabria, 1987). Here I read them in association with the myth of Cassandra.

## PROCEEDINGS 31<sup>ST</sup> AEDEAN CONFERENCE

Despite this affront to the sensitivity of her friend, the truth is that as late as 1874, after the articles written by W. R. Greg in the *Contemporary Review* under the title *Rocks ahead; or the Warnings of Cassandra*, Jowett was still addressing Nightingale in one of his letters in a very familiar, and consented, way as “My dear Cassandra” (Quinn, 1987: 264). It is not surprising, then, that when she decided to write her essay, she chose to place this female heroine at the centre of her thoughts.

The facts of Nightingale’s personal life that I have presented along this section show that even though her own experiences fit in the conventional mould of representation of sage women —Cassandras— of her age, her text does not stand by the patriarchal tradition that resentfully scorns the words that come from a menacing *other*.<sup>7</sup> Nightingale’s Cassandra is not mad nor frenzied, and the physical after effects that she suffers derive from the impositions of the dominant structure. The hysterical episodes of the Victorian woman that she represents stem from the forced idleness that rules her life and not from the possession of any menacing knowledge. Nightingale states: “I see the numbers of my kind who have gone mad for want of something to do” (qtd. in Vicinus & Nergaard, 1990: 39). Thus, in spite of her continuous rejections of any feminist label (Woodham Smith, 1980: 485-7), her *Cassandra* stands out as a crucial text for the liberation of the voice of women in the nineteenth century.

### 3. Speechless Madness vs. Voiced Knowledge

Between the writing of *Cassandra* in 1852 and its wide publication in 1928, last nineteenth-century refigurations of Cassandra begin to exploit, by and large, models of the ‘evil’ women that have been much studied by Victorian scholarship over the last decades (Auerbach, 1982; Casteras, 1986; Dijkstra, 1982; Stott, 1992). With the social and intellectual advances of women in the second half of the century, especially with the passing of the Divorce and Matrimonial

---

<sup>7</sup> For an account of Nightingale’s revision of the myth of Cassandra as a feminine reappraisal of Carlyle’s theories on the prophet see Jenkins (1994: 16-26).

Causes Act in 1857, the concept of sage women began to be related to other more pejorative labels such as witches, sorceress, fallen women and ultimately *femme fatales*, which evidenced the fear with which the patriarchal structures of the age approached the freedom of women and their access to knowledge.<sup>8</sup> This results in the syncretism of the representational forms of this demon-esque woman sage with the figure of Cassandra by the turn of the century.

Considering D.G. Rossetti's *Cassandra* sonnets and drawing (1870), and the *Cassandra* paintings by Frederick Sandys (ca.1895) and Evelyn de Morgan (1898),<sup>9</sup> there is a clear relation between the physiological description of Cassandra, in terms of the frenzied possession, that characterises her visions of the future, and the issues regarding women's appropriation of knowledge and discourse.<sup>10</sup> Cassandra is grotesqued and uglyfied by a mainstream culture that

---

<sup>8</sup> E.g.: The first Bill to enable Married Women to dispose of Reversionary and other Interest in Personal Estate, (177) III.533, which meant a crucial step for the economic independence of women was passed in 1854. For an account of the creation of the woman reader in the first decades of the nineteenth century see Pearson (1999). Deborah Cherry explains how "Paintings of witches and sorceress were among the many images in high art and popular culture to negotiate the representation of the learned woman and thus to participate in ferocious and at times violent contestations over middle-class women's education and professional training" (2000: 162).

<sup>9</sup> Casteras studies Sandy's painting in her approach to the representation of sage women in Victorian art and claims that:

Madness or possession by supernatural forces is another common denominator shared by many of the women in these paintings. The sorceresses have great mental powers and cunning, but they are seized either by uncontrollable rage or a force greater than themselves that propels their evil magic. Often the female body seems possessed, from twisting torso and clothes, to electric hair, riveting gaze, telekinetic powers, and open mouth. (1982: 169)

Many of the physical aftereffects of the possession of knowledge analysed by Casteras are also depicted in Rossetti's *Cassandra Sonnets* and drawing. Cf. Monrós (2006).

<sup>10</sup> Deborah Cherry explains how "Paintings of witches and sorceress were among the many images in high art and popular culture to negotiate the representation of the learned woman and thus to participate in ferocious and at times violent contestations over middle-class women's education and professional training". (2000: 162) For an account of the creation of the woman reader in the first decades of the nineteenth century see Pearson (1999).

## PROCEEDINGS 31<sup>ST</sup> AEDEAN CONFERENCE

rejects truth outside the canon. Her voice, unheard, disregarded and mocked has not got any authority over a discourse built on a traditionally patriarchal set of values. As stated above, Florence Nightingale's *Cassandra* only became widely available with the publication of the 1928 edition. After all, it seems that although Nightingale's Cassandra-like voice won an overwhelming endorsement from the 1850s, after her actions in the Crimea War and her intervention in the reform of the British Army, her literary *Cassandra* was not to be much heard until the twentieth century. Even though Florence Nightingale's approach to Cassandra constitutes a novelty within the context of the genre of sage writing, she was not alone in her reading of the myth. The American journalist Margaret Fuller (1810-1850) also chose Priam's daughter to claim a higher education for women, far from the idleness that the social obligations of the time imposed on them. Fuller became first editor of *The Dial* in 1840, and by 1845 she had accepted a position in the literary department of the *New York Tribune* (Urbanski, 1980: 9, 101). In 1843 she wrote the essay "The Great Lawsuit: Man *versus* Men; Woman *versus* Women" for *The Dial*, which was transformed in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century and Kindred Papers Relating to the Sphere, Condition and Duties of Woman*, published in 1845. In her essay, Fuller refers to Cassandra thus:

Women are, indeed, the easy victims both of priest-craft and self-delusion; but this would not be, if the intellect was developed in proportion to the other powers... When the intellect and affections are in harmony; when intellectual consciousness is calm and deep; inspiration will not be confounded with fancy. Then 'she who advances | With rapturous, lyrical glances, | Singing the song of the earth, singing | Its hymn to the Gods,' will not be pitied as a mad-woman, nor shrunk from as unnatural. The Greeks who saw everything in forms, which we are trying to ascertain as law, and classify as cause, embodied all this in the form of Cassandra. ([1845]1971: 105)



Like Fuller herself, Nightingale's Cassandra confronts these clichés and starts the discursive rebellion that will underlie the characterization of the myth down to the twentieth century. Nightingale's *Cassandra* and the feminist appropriation of the myth itself, provide a missing link in the history of the voice of women in Victorian England.

With the publication of *Cassandra* as an appendix to Ray Strachey's *The Cause*—a history of the Women's Liberation Movement written by one of its activists—, and Virginia Woolf's reference to the essay in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) only one year after its publication, Cassandra re-entered feminist discourse. The scope of interpretations of Cassandra in feminist texts widened, as did the potential readings of Nightingale's essay as an 'outcry' against the oppression of women, especially after the more conservative and patriarchal reworkings of the myth of the second half of the nineteenth century. It could be argued that the transmission of the Cassandra myth in Nightingale prepares the ground for other future revisionings of the female figure, which search for the subjectivity of the Greek heroine. Nightingale's Cassandra doesn't only represent an important step in the liberation of the voice of women in contexts of male oppression, but it also points out the salient features of the heroine that are essential for the evolution of the transmission of the myth in the contemporary arts. As a consequence, Cassandra's words and thoughts are brought to the foreground in Christa Wolf's *Cassandra* (1983), Julia Pascal's *Theresa* (1990) or Coss, Sklar and Segal's *The Daughter's Cycle* (1977-80), for instance, forcing the audience to hear her wailing not only as a 'mad' prophetess but also as a refugee or a rape victim. In these modern representations of the myth, both the patriarchal voice that scorns her knowledge and the grotesque representations of her signs of madness gradually fade in favour of the emancipated cry that Nightingale longed for in her *Cassandra*.

## References

- Agress, L. 1978. *The Feminine Irony. Women on Women in Early Nineteenth-Century English Literature*. London: Associated University Presses, Inc.

## PROCEEDINGS 31<sup>ST</sup> AEDEAN CONFERENCE

- Auerbach, N. 1982. *Woman and the Demon; the Life of a Victorian Myth*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Bellringer, A.W. and C.B. Jones. Eds. 1975. *The Victorian Sages. An Anthology of Prose*. London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd.
- Calabria, M. D. c1997. *Florence Nightingale in Egypt and Greece. Her Diary and "Visions"*. Albany: State University of New York.
- Casteras, S. P. 1982. *The Substance or the Shadow: Images of Victorian Womanhood*. New Haven: Yale Center for British Art.
- . 1990. "Malleus malificarum or the witches' hammer: Victorian visions of female sages and sorceress". *Victorian Sages and Cultural Discourse. Renegotiating Gender and Power*. T.E. Morgan. Ed. 142–170. New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press.
- Cherry, D. 2000. *Beyond the Frame. Feminism and Visual Culture, Britain 1850–1900*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Clarke, M. L. 1986. *Greek Studies in England 1700–1830*. Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert Publisher.
- Dentith, S. 1998. *Society and Cultural Forms in Nineteenth-Century England*. London: Macmillan Press Ltd.
- Dijkstra, B. 1986. *Idols of Perversity. Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture*. Oxford and New York: OUP.
- Foster, F. M. K. 1966. *English Translations from the Greek. A Bibliographical Survey*. New York: AMS Press, Inc.
- Fuller, M. 1971 [1845]. *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. New York: Norton.
- Greg, W. R. 1874. *Rocks Ahead or The Warnings of Cassandra*. London: Trübner & Co.
- Holloway, J. 1953. *The Victorian Sage: Studies in Argument*. London: Macmillan.
- Hurst, I. 2006. *Victorian Women Writers and the Classics: the Feminine of Homer*. Oxford: OUP.
- Iriarte, A. 1999. "Le chant interdit de la clairvoyance". *Cassandre*. M. Goudot. Ed. 42–64. Paris: Éditions Autrement.
- Jenkins, R. Y. 1994. "Rewriting Female Subjectivity: Florence Nightingale's Revisionist Myth of Cassandra". *Weber Studies: An Interdisciplinary Humanities Journal* 1. 16–26.
- Kahane, C. 1995. *Passions of the Voice. Hysteria, Narrative and the Figure of the Speaking Woman 1850–1915*. Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press.
- Landow, G. 1990. "Aggressive (Re)interpretations of the Female Sage. Florence Nightingale's Cassandra". *Victorian Sages and Cultural Discourse*. T.E. Morgan. Ed. 32–45. New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press.

## Laura Monrós Gaspar

- Macintosh, F., P. Michelakis, E. Hall, and O. Taplin. Eds. 2005. *Agamemnon in Performance 458 BC to AD 2004*. Oxford: OUP.
- McDonald, L. Ed. 2003. *The Collected Works of Florence Nightingale. Florence Nightingale on Society and Politics, Philosophy, Science, Education and Literature*. Vol 5. Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfried Laurier University Press.
- Monrós, L. 2006. "D.G. Rossetti configurando una *Cassandra* prerrafaelita". *El teatro greco-latino y su recepción en la tradición occidental*. F. De Martino and C. Morenilla. Eds. 405–429. Bari: Levante Editori.
- Neblung, D. 1997. *Die Gestalt der Kassandra in der antiken Literatur*. Stuttgart/Leipzig: Teubner.
- Nightingale, F. 1979 [1852]. *Cassandra: An Essay*. Old Westbury, New York: The Feminist Press.
- Pearson, J. 1999. *Women's Reading in Britain 1750-1835. A Dangerous Recreation*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Prins, Y. 2005. "OTOTOTOI: Virginia Woolf and 'The naked cry' of Cassandra". Macintosh, Michelakis, Hall, and Taplin. 2005. 163–185.
- Quinn, V. and J. Prest. Eds. 1987. *Dear Miss Nightingale. A Selection of Benjamin Jowett's Letters to Florence Nightingale 1860–1893*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Showalter, E. 1981. "Florence Nightingale's Feminist Complaint: Women, Religion, and *Suggestions for thought*". *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 6. 395–412.
- Snyder, K.V. 1993. "From Novel to Essay: Gender and Revision in Florence Nightingale's *Cassandra*". *The Politics of the Essay: Feminist Perspectives*. R. E. Boetcher Joeres and E. Mittman. Eds. 23–40. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- . 1996. "Nofriani Unbound: The First Version of Florence Nightingale's *Cassandra*". *Victorian Literature and Culture* 24. 251–290.
- Stott, R. 1992. *The Fabrication of the Late-Victorian Femme Fatale: the Kiss of Death*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Strachey, L. 1938. *Florence Nightingale*. London: Chatto and Windus.
- Urbanski, M. M. O. 1980. *Margaret Fuller's Woman in the Nineteenth Century. A Literary Study of Form and Content, of Sources and Influence*. Westport, Connecticut; London, England: Greenwood Press.
- Vicinus, M. and B. Nergaard. Eds. 1990. *Ever Yours, Florence Nightingale. Selected Letters*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Woodham-Smith, C. B. F. 1950. *Florence Nightingale, 1820–1910*. London: Constable.