

# [Greek prophetess-cassandra](https://assignbuster.com/greek-prophetess-cassandra/)

THE CURSED PROPHETESS
Oracle, in the Ancient Greek world, was a shrine where people
went to seek advice from prophets or prophetesses (individuals who had
special powers to speak on behalf of a god or foretell the future). Besides
referring to an altar, the word oracle also refers to the prophet or
prophetess, and to his/her prophecy (Cassandra). The Ancient Greeks
wholly believed in these sacred persons. When disease would corrupt a
city, the people would go to the shrines to ask a prophet to speak on behalf
of the gods. Once the Greeks knew the cause of the plague, they would do
everything in their immortal power to convince the gods to relieve them
from their suffereing. In the same way as Oedipus, the king of Thebes,
asked Tiresias (a prophet) to speak for the gods explaining why his people
were suffering, in Oedipus Rex. The Ancient Greeks believed their fate
lay in the powers and oracle of the prophets and prophetesses. There was
one prophetess, however, that was an exception to this belief. Although
Cassandra was the most beautiful and intelligent prophetess, in Greek
mythology, her prophecies were never believed.

Stories of gods falling in love with or lusting after young beautiful
women appear everywhere in Greek mythology, and the case of Cassandra
is no exception. Greek gods chose their prey because of some
distinguished characteristic or part of their geneology. Cassandra was a
lovely young woman, and described by Homer as the most beautiful of
Priams daughters. Apollo, similarly, was the most handsome of the
young gods. Cassandra describes Apollo as someone who struggled to
win me, breathing ardent for me (Lefkowitz 15).

Cassandra, daughter of Queen Hecuba and King Priam of Troy,
was a beautiful young woman blessed with the gift of prophecy by the god
Apollo. In return, she was supposed to love him, but at the last minute she
shunned Apollo. As an act of revenge, Apollo added a twist to her gift:
Cassandra was doomed to tell the truth, but never to be believed (Cohen
50).
Cassandra has always been misunderstood and misinterpreted as a
madwoman or crazy doomsday prophetess. She has always been shown
in paintings with her long hair flying around her shoulders in what was
considered lunatic fashion, scantily clad, and helpless on her knees in the
face of her predicted doom. However, there is so much more to
Cassandra than her maddened predictions and pitiable treatment.
Cassandra was a great, intelligent heroine who was cursed by the gods for
not playing by their rules. She is a tragic figure, not a madwoman
(Lefkowitz 4).

Cassandras gift began with her falling asleep in the temple of
Apollo. As he looked down on her, her beauty roused him. He promised
to teach her the art of prophecy in return for lust. Cassandra agreed to his
terms, but after accepting his gift of prophecy, she denied him her body.
Apollo was outraged and added a condition to the gift: though Cassandra
would always speak the truth, no one would ever believe her. Already I
prophesised to my countryment all their disasters...(but) Ever since that
fault I could persuade no one of anything. He begged Cassandra to give
him one last kiss, and as she did so, he spat into her mouth, when he
backed away, the curse was planted (Lefkowitz 20).
Once Cassandra had been cursed by Apollo, and she would never
be believed, Troy was doomed. Countless times before and during the
Trojan War Cassandra predicted what would come of the war, but no one
believed her. Always it was Cassandra who recognized a face, who
predicted a fateful occurrence, who ran around the ramparts of the city
with her hair flying around her shoulders, crying and spouting oracles that
no one understood. Most people considered her insane and tried to subdue
her, but she was only trying desperately to warn her people of impending
disaster.

One of Cassandras most famous predictions was that of the Greek
siege behind the gift of the Trojan horse. Four times (the horse) struck
(the gates): as oft the clashing sound of arms was heard, and inward
groans rebound. Yet, mad with zeal, and blinded with our fate, we haul
along the horse in solemn state; then place the dire portent within the
towr. Cassandra cried, and crusd th unhappy hour; foretold our fate;
but, by the gods decree, all heard, and none believd the prophecy
(Lefkowitz 40). The Trojans wouldnt believe Cassandra, and accepted
the gift. Soon after, the city was sacked and everyone was killed or taken
prisoner.
Later that night, the Greeks found Cassandra in Athenss temple
clinging to her image, under the goddess protection. The Greeks dared
not touch her in the sanctuary of a goddess, but Ajax the Lessor stepped
forth and tore her from the altar and dragged her out. Ajax then continued
to rape her and force his strength onto her. Not one Greek protested
against the sacrilege, because of this, Athenas wrath was deep.
One of the worst things a Greek could do to anger the gods was to
violate someone in the sanctuary of a god. Suppliants were supposed to
be protected and inviolable, especially at an altar. This space was
considered sacred, the place for sacrifices to be made, and the desecration
of such a holy place was sure to anger the gods.
Athena went to Poseidon and asked for a bitter homecoming to the
Greeks. He did just that. Poseidon stirred up the whirlwinds and waters
and shipwrecked many of the ships. At the height of the storm, Ajaxs
boat was shattered and sank, he held tightly to a rock, but because of an
arrogant comment (the sea could not drown him), Poseidon broke off the
jagged bit of rock and Ajax was swept under to his death (Hamilton
211-12).

Prior to Ajaxs death, however, he gave Cassandra to Agamemnon
as a gift of the war. The tragedy begins with Clytaemnestra,
Agamemnons wife, awaiting his return from Troy, outraged and
determined to kill. Clytaemnestra had perfectly legitimate reasons for
despising Agamemnon: he killed her former husband, Tantalus, and her
baby, he married her by force, and ordered the sacrifice of their daughter,
Iphigeneia, in order to calm the winds when the Greeks set sail for Troy.
When Cassandra and Agamemnon arrive, Clytaemnestra greets them
warmly and tries to comfort Cassandra in her misery of slavery.
Agamemnon follows Clytaemnestra into the palace, but Cassandra
remains outside, caught in a trance, refusing to enter the palace (Lefkowitz
54).
Cassandra could smell blood, and she saw visions of Thyesetes (a
man who unknowingly ate his own son.)No! It is a house God hates,
where men are killed and the floor is red with blood. I hear children
crying.... Crying for wounds that bleed. A father feasted-and the
flesh of his children. Cassandra could see the past horrible events that
had taken place in that house. The servants of the palace were confused.
It was as if she had been there. More wild words poured from her lips. It
seemed as if she had seen what had happened in that house through the
years, like she stood by while death followed death. Then finally, the
prophecy of her own death, two more deaths would occur that day, she
said, I will endure to die. She then turned toward the palace doors,
powerless, and faced her fate as she entered the palace (Hamilton 254).

Today, a Cassandra is someone whose true words are never
believed. Her name also means One who entangles men (Lefkowitz 6).
These two definitions summarize perfectly the life that Cassandra had.
Beautiful and intelligent, she entangled Apollo. Her beauty roused him so
much, he granted her a gods gift, in return for her love. When she
agreed, but later refused to let him touch her, he cursed her life and her
gift. She would forever lack credibility and persuasion. It was her fate
always to know the disaster that was coming and be unable to avert it.
Cassandra was a woman of passion, wisdom, and beauty, her only fault
was that she tricked a god was forever cursed by it.
Gods cursing mortals for not cooperating is commonly found in
Greek mythology. Men (women as well) had to keep the laws of the gods,
and fully deserved any punishment they received for disobeying or defying
the god in question. Greek gods could be very childish and immature.
When an immortal disobeyed a god, and the god didnt get exactly what
he/she asked for, they punished the immortal in many different ways. The
gods took something away from the individuals or they put a limit on their
abilities such as: cursing the individual to fall in love with himself
(Narcissus), cursing the individuals ability to speak by only allowing her
to repeat what others said (Echo), and in Cassandras case cursing the
credibility of her prophesies. Apollo cannot be blamed for treating
Cassandra harshly because she refused to let him defile her, yet Cassandra
herself is not fully to blame, for she was intelligent enough to manipulate
and trick Apollo into giving her a godly gift. At any rate, Cassandra is an
intriguing mythical heroine whose life was doomed for knowing the truth,
but never being able to convince others of her knowledge.