

Greek prophetess- cassandra



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

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 suffering. 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 genealogy. Cassandra was a lovely young woman, and described by Homer as the most beautiful of Priam's 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).

Cassandra's 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 prophesied to my countrymen 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 tower. Cassandra cried, and cursed the unhappy hour; foretold our fate; but, by the gods decree, all heard, and none believed 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 Athens 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, Ajax's 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 Ajax's death, however, he gave Cassandra to Agamemnon as a gift of the war. The tragedy begins with Clytaemnestra, Agamemnon's 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 Thyestes (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 didn't 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 individual's ability to speak by only allowing her to repeat what others said (Echo), and in Cassandra's case cursing the credibility of her prophecies. 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.