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# Disbelieved Through Millennia: Cassandra as Woman Truth-Teller and Translator

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Disbelieved Through Millennia: Cassandra as Woman Truth-Teller and Translator

by

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## Abstract

This paper investigates two major characterizations of the mythological figure Cassandra, reading her in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and Seneca's *Agamemnon* as a woman truth-teller and translator. It develops a notion of translation as negotiation of discursive space and breaking open of boundaries, including boundaries between pairs of languages, experiences, times, and places. This sense of translation draws on the reception theory of Charles Martindale and privileges the discursive location of the translator as integral to their translation; a specifically female translator occupies different discursive spaces than her male counterpart due to the social experience of gender. In Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, Cassandra's speaks previously unspeakable acts of violence undergirding the Atreid house and breaks open conventional language with translational strategies. In Seneca's *Agamemnon*, Cassandra translates the moral chaos and violence around her into a new moral order of equilibrium; she translates by a re-vision of her surroundings that reverses power dynamics. Finally, a coda studies alternative appearances of Cassandra as truth-teller and translator in survivors of sexual assault and in the biblical figure of Mary Magdalene. Survivors empowered by #MeToo break open the boundaries of normalized violence within the patriarchy and bring the unspeakable into the open. Mary Magdalene's message in the Gospels offers a message of hope, redemption, and healing, commissioned by Jesus himself to speak the truth of the Resurrection.

Introduction: *De Translationibus*

I summarize Cassandra in my title, “Woman Truth-teller and Translator.” That Cassandra speaks truth is already well established; it is essential to her role as prophetess and clearly communicated in most mythological iterations, even trickling down into contemporary pop culture. Her role as translator, however, is my innovation, and necessitates further explanation. Additionally, my emphasis on *woman* translator might appear to reflect an undergraduate writer’s penchant for adjectives, but I include it with motivations both theoretical and personal.

First, translation establishes a common ground between the otherworldly work of Cassandra’s prophecies and the everyday work of a classicist such as I. The notion of translation allows for a new kind of analysis of Cassandra—it ‘unties’ Cassandra and her prophecy from Apollo alone. Any translator knows that the source text governs her in many ways, but a large part of translation also rests in the translator’s hands, her education, perhaps even her current reading. Even with a single, stable source text, the options for a translational ‘output’ are multiple—and the distinctions between these outputs often lie in the discursive location of the translator. I will address in further detail just what I mean by ‘discursive location’ in subsequent sections. At present, I will briefly unpack the primary influences on my notion of *translation*.

First, Anne Carson’s translation of Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* transformed the shape of this project. Carson devotes much of her introduction to the *Agamemnon* to Cassandra; she describes her as “a self-consuming truth,” an ultimately “ungraspable” figure “with her language that breaks open” (4). Even as I read on into the text, these descriptions resonated with me, brought Cassandra closer to me. Cassandra, in Carson, speaks two languages at once—English and Greek, onomatopoeia and speech, past and present—such that it is difficult to understand plainly what she means. I understood eventually—there is nothing plain about what she says and no

plain way to understand it. When Carson writes that Cassandra “makes her prophecies [by] removing a boundary in [herself],” I understood that Cassandra removes the boundary between the intelligible and unintelligible, the speakable and the unspeakable. Carson especially marks this boundary-breaking by mixing two languages: Greek and English.

This realization finally unlocked to me what seems to trouble many when it comes to survivors’ accounts of sexual assault. There is no plain way to recount what happened—a survivor must speak what her culture, perhaps even her perpetrator, tells her is unspeakable. She must remove the boundary in herself that allows her to function every day, remove the compartmentalization necessary to live after such violence. The truth of sexual assault and survivorship does not fit neatly into a single language, and it does not fit neatly into prevailing conceptions of narrative and rationality. The truth of sexual assault—ungraspable in a single utterance or language—challenges fixed notions of meaning and history.

Theoretical frames of translation and reception address these unsteady notions of meaning and history, and in this scholarship I finally discovered a theoretical inroad to the questions in Cassandra that most resonated with me. Charles Martindale summarizes his landmark work *Redeeming the Text*, a primary influence on my theoretical stance, as “[an] alternative approach to the positivistic modes of interpretation (with their teleological assumptions)...which reflect the certainties and settled procedures of the ‘Enlightenment’... [namely,] commitment to a single rational method” (xiii). From Martindale, I grew into a posture that did not entirely discard the inheritance of the Enlightenment (as some postmodernists are wont to do), but instead operated with an alternative that befits my work as a classicist and a Christian, seeking to sow healing in what is broken in worlds both ancient and contemporary.

I develop a hermeneutic that produces new readings of Cassandra with contemporary implications—a mode of interpretation for ancient texts and perhaps survivors’ accounts of sexual assault, allowing for complexities and multiple layers of meaning and expression. No longer positivistic, a hermeneutic of translation that is rooted in reception embraces ambiguity and tension as part of the process of speech. No utterance, so long as it is understood as translation, is straightforwardly ‘innocent’ or ‘original’ or ‘right’. No survivor’s account, then, can be straightforwardly labeled as ‘wrong’ for its departure from traditional norms of rational narration.

In subsequent chapters, I will develop analyses of Cassandra as woman truth-teller and translator in two major texts: Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* and Seneca’s *Agamemnon*. I will address the relevant socio-cultural contexts and more fully develop my theoretical framework in classical reception, eventually moving to close-read Cassandra’s speech in each text. Finally, in the Coda, I find Cassandra in contemporary life and in the Christian tradition, investigating alternative modes and incarnations of truth-telling and translating. As I study Cassandra through these various appearances, I write back to the millennia of disbelief, and I hope to establish a hermeneutic through which we might finally receive and believe Cassandra’s truth.

## Chapter 1

### The Unspeakable Spoken: Cassandra in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*

Cassandra—her name evokes a familiar trope of the disbelieved woman, and this trope derives from a long literary tradition with its roots in Greece. Cassandra first appears in ancient literature to speak for herself in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, where she approaches the gates of Mycenae as a captive approaching her death. Before she enters the gates, however, Cassandra's prophetic speech ranges over acts of violence in the past, present, and future, and she mediates the space between the divine and human. This chapter will focus on Cassandra as she appears in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* as a translator between realities— primarily the human and the divine— uttering previously unspeakable acts of violence. First, I develop a theoretical framework of classical reception, aided by the scholarship of Charles Martindale, grounded in a dialectic of historicity and timelessness, foregrounding the space between reader and text. Next, I move to establish the task of the woman translator, which is to negotiate the space between similarity and difference. From there, I address background information on Cassandra as a mythological figure whom Aeschylus adapts for the purposes of justice in the *Oresteia*. Finally, I close read Cassandra in the text and hear her break open boundaries with her language, translating disparate experiences and violent acts that had never before been breached.

#### I. Theoretical Framework & Context

Before approaching Cassandra in the text, I move to establish the theoretical meaning of our relationship to Aeschylus, the *Agamemnon*, and its characters. While plenty of classicists already engage in the work of close reading and cultural analysis across millennia, I choose to pause and clearly state my approach.

The reception theory articulated by Charles Martindale provides a helpful framework for the present study. While his most influential work, *Redeeming the Text*, focuses on Latin poetry,

the paradigm arguably applies to all studies of classical reception. In the postscript to *Redeeming the Text*, he sums up among his main arguments: “any text has to be treated *both as transhistorical and as contingent on a particular moment of history* if it is to be interpreted” (Martindale 104). With this in mind, we draw near to the *Agamemnon* aware of and informed by its historical context.

To establish this awareness, I draw on many scholars with sophisticated and insightful analyses of the ways in which Aeschylus responds to his moment in history with its culture, politics, and literature<sup>1</sup>. This essay will scratch the surface of this rich body of scholarship, occasionally referencing analyses that are most relevant to understanding Cassandra and the environment of violence in which she translates. I move forward in the paradigm that the *Agamemnon* is both transhistorical and contingent on its moment in history: its first performance at festival around 458 B.C.E. in Athens.

Martindale further discusses the relationship of reader to text in more personal terms. In his concluding section, he ponders:

Perhaps, the word is not frozen, not dead, but capable of being redeemed and of redeeming, whenever a reader, accepting her own historicity, makes an act of trust, and commits herself to a text in all its alterity, takes, in other words, the risks—and they would be risks—of being read, of relationship. (106)

This passage demonstrates the fundamentally human and relational character of reading and reception, as individuals approach a text and begin the processes of inquiry and interpretation. As much as our theoretical commitments inform and shape our interpretations, we are still persons, with all of our *historicity*, making meaning. The alterity of a text lies not just in its status as not-

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<sup>1</sup> See especially the commentaries and forewords offered in volumes edited by Alan H. Sommerstein, Christopher Collard, Oliver Taplin, and Eduard Fraenkel.

me, but also in its entrenchment in a particular moment and place at great distance cultural and chronological distance—an informed and honest reading of the Greeks makes this apparent. The act of trust occurs in accepting the mutual historicities of reader and text and daring to establish a relationship between them. Thus, readers must approach the *Agamemnon* of 458 B.C.E. and carefully attuned to the historical context of Aeschylus and the historical context governing their interpretive work, trusting that something meaningful can and will arise when these realities are placed in relationship to one another.

While discussing the question of historical or chronological distance, the context of Greek tragedy offers a helpful segue into the work of transhistorical dialectic. It was essential to the tragic mode to look to stories of the past and adapt them into the current moment, deriving meanings from old stories that are relevant to the contemporary world. Cassandra Csencsitz sums up this work succinctly: “the dialectic of the archaic and the everyday are part of the DNA of these plays” (46), drawing on the practice that the Athenian stage was forbidden from displaying directly contemporary events, but instead relied on myth to represent current issues. With this in place, the tragic poets themselves looked to stories of the past as a source of meaning for their lives. Thus, we follow the model literally bred into the tragedies (using Csencsitz’ language) when we read them with an eye for both their historicity (appearing in the fifth century B.C.E.) and their transhistorical nature (being read and interpreted today).

This framework necessitates a brief look at the salient historical context for the *Oresteia*, and Athens’ precarious political footing at this moment stands out as a primary factor. Among the events looming in the Athenian consciousness were the unsolved apparent murder of Ephialtes, the stirring tensions that would bloom into the First Peloponnesian War, and domestic unrest through processes of democratization— Alan H. Sommerstein summarizes this moment as

“a crossroads in [Athens’] history, from which she might go on to greatness or to ruin” (25-29).

The opening moment of the *Agamemnon* presents a similar ‘crossroads’ moment for the house of Atreus, whence Agamemnon might live in glory for his victory at Troy—entering the house with royal fanfare—or might be cut down by domestic upheaval—netted and slaughtered in the highly vulnerable and domestic location, the bath. This crossroads of Athenian history, fraught with anxiety and optimism, sets the stage for the *Oresteia* and the appearance of Cassandra, who lived and prophesied through her city’s crossroads and watched it fall to ruin.

Additionally, the performance context for the *Oresteia* reinforces its highly public and communal exploration of contemporary issues and structures. First, the performance of this trilogy at the Great Dionysian Festival indicates its position as a *public* work of art that in many ways centered on Athenian identity; Collard records that this festival “demonstrated the communal values of the *polis*... [and] came increasingly to focus and display the ethos of a proudly democratic, but frequently self-questioning city” (xvi). In contrast to contemporary theater, which requires leisure and expense, the tragedies at festival had essentially the entire voting populace in the audience and thus concerned itself with issues of interest to the general public<sup>2</sup>. While the *Agamemnon* remains at the Atreid household at Mycenae, the final play of the trilogy, *Eumenides*, moves the action to Athens. Here, Athena establishes the Areopagus Council as the official mechanism of justice, and Collard describes this movement as “a founding emblem of Athens’ moral and political ethos” (xvi; *Eum.* 566-1020). Thus, the *Agamemnon* appears in a communal context where Athenians examined and affirmed their political—in the sense of the *polis*—identity, which in many ways originates with the divinely-ordained

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, it also ought to be noted that the ‘general public’ in this context likely excludes women, children, and slaves, but the problems and questions related to this label exceed the scope of this paper. Taplin helpfully explains that “this is still an extraordinarily high proportion of the potential public (unimaginable in our modern world)” (xiii).

Areopagus Council as the primary means for dispensing and defining justice. As this essay will later discuss, Cassandra plays a key role in facilitating the emergence of justice despite the horrific cycles of violence and vengeance currently looming upon her death.

## II. Task of the Woman Translator

Next, I turn to the question of translation, and more specifically, the meaning and work of the woman translator. Of course, on a simplified literal level, translation occurs in comprehending the meaning of words in one language and formulating a message of general equivalence in another language. The level of equivalence might shift, but it also hinges on a given comprehension of the meaning in the original text. Martindale describes the theoretical work of the translator: “translation, in short, negotiates the discursive space generated within the poles of ‘similarity’ and ‘difference’” (89). He also notes that the poles of similarity and difference are not objective themselves, but theoretically constructed—a translator’s understanding and construction of sameness and difference determines the outlines of the discursive space (89). For present purposes, the ‘discursive space’ which Martindale articulates refers to the 2400 years separating Aeschylus from the current moment.

To explore the significance of the woman translator, I not only look to theory but also to incarnation, examining the work and utterance of Anne Carson. This essay will not only use her translation of the *Agamemnon*, but also refer to her artistic commentary to understand her approach to the work of the woman translator. I read this work as communicating experiences and truths across the borders between realities that hearers experience—across the difference between the experiences of a man and woman, god and mortal. I do not imply or suppose that the difference between men and women is essential in the same fashion as the difference between gods and mortals; instead, I accept that the differences between men and women are in many parts socially constructed but that those social constructions exist as part of cultural reality.

The responses to Anne Carson's 2009 translation of the *Oresteia* demonstrate some tenable notions about what is 'similar' and what is 'different' between contemporary cultures and the Greeks of Aeschylus' time—in other words, various constructions of those 'poles' between which translation exists. Michael Wood in *The London Review of Books* argues that "Carson's strategy [of translation] is... to remind us that we are [the Greeks'] contemporaries, that we have not left the violent domain they so fiercely drew for us" (17). In Wood's formulation, Carson's translational work edges toward the 'sameness' side of the scale, emphasizing how we share with the Greeks a violent reality. Wood implicitly assumes that other translations of the *Oresteia* do not lean in the same direction, instead leaning towards the pole of difference between the Greek language and world and the world of English-speakers.

Brad Leithauser responds in the *New York Times Book Review* to Carson's translation with mixed feelings, as he notes "there are moments when [Carson's] diction stoops, so low I had trouble remembering I was dealing with men godlike in their splendor" (15). What Leithauser assumes here, however, is that the Greeks and their English-speaking readers agree that the men in the *Oresteia* are indeed 'godlike in their splendor'— this claim is certainly subject to dispute, especially as Agamemnon blunders across the purple fabric in an act Seth Schein labels "moral blindness" (13). Orestes does not uniformly strike audiences as godlike, either, as a matricide, and Aegisthus is very consistently read as a wily, if not cowardly, opportunist. It would be a mistake, however, to get caught on this point of Leithauser's; it merely shows how constructions of what is similar between different bodies of readers affect a conception of a translation's effectiveness. He too picks up on Carson's emphasis of the constant of violence (15), thus sharing some of Wood's ideas about where the poles of sameness and difference lie.

Altogether, the task of the translator exists in managing the ‘discursive’ space between sameness and difference in a given text as it compares to the target audience and language. Sameness and difference can be contested and constructed, however, and different ideas about these poles result in different assessments of and approaches to translation. Anne Carson, as a woman translator herself, posits violence as a location of sameness between Aeschylean Greece and today’s audiences.

A translator must negotiate sameness and difference at the linguistic level as well, balancing mismatches in syntax, vocabulary, phonology, and more as she produces a translation. Anne Carson discusses the particular linguistic difficulty in working with Greek as a source text and English as a target text: “Greek feels more earthly, raw, truthful than other Western languages. Down in the roots of itself” (Csencsitz 47). She comments further that “Ancient Greek is like a big lion turning and turning in play before lying down... And English a little jumpy cat” (Csencsitz 47). This means that as she negotiates the discursive space of similarity and difference, she must negotiate this fundamental difference in linguistic expression and structure, leading her to use language in English that can somehow communicate the rooted truth-expression of Greek.

This comment from Carson lends itself to a comparison of Carson and Cassandra, both as women translators. Carson, in translating the Greek of Aeschylus (and Sophocles and Euripides) must translate a laden truth from a language with a unique mode of expression into another that is, in some ways, significantly weaker in expression. What can Carson do as she has a lion on one hand and a jumpy housecat on the other? And in what other instances do we see these troublesome pairs, in which the translator must find a space for herself?

Perhaps a similar pairing occurs in the contrasting experiences and languages of gendered difference<sup>3</sup>. Anecdotally, I observe that men and women speak differently in each other's presence compared to when they are surrounded by their own gender—both men and women wave off topics in mixed-gender groups as 'girl stuff' or 'guy stuff', unintelligible to members of another gender and ineligible for shared conversation. I might draw this in parallel with Cassandra, whom Clytemnestra—often read as possessing male-qualities in Agamemnon's absence and murder<sup>4</sup>—assumes cannot speak Greek (*Ag.* 1050-1063). Cassandra not only operates across the gap between Greek and her native Trojan tongue, but she also translates truth from the realm of the divine into the weaker language of mortals, as we will investigate later.

A further parallel might lie in women who translate the visceral experiences of assault into the feeble framework of literal language. Cassandra also participates in this kind of translation as she recounts Apollo's attempted rape<sup>5</sup>. All these varieties of translation demonstrate a sort of discursive mismatch, spreading those poles of similarity and difference further apart or altering their angles to each other. The poles of sameness and difference in literal languages— as in English and ancient Greek— lie in a more or less direct line of each other, and their locations are visible to their scholars. The poles for human versus divine experience, however, might be more difficult to map, and the poles for women's versus men's experiences might be nearly invisible. Nevertheless, the translator must be attentive to their mapping and find a space for herself between them, even if her hearers are unaware of the map.

The task of the woman translator, then, is to negotiate the space between difference and similarity in the source text, language, and experience and the target text, language, and

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<sup>3</sup> The phenomenon of racial code-switching also exhibits an important parallel but exceeds the scope of this essay.

<sup>4</sup> See *Ag.* 11, 483-485, 938, 1400-1405, 1625 (in contrast to 'womanly' Aegisthus).

<sup>5</sup> 1080-1082, 1203-1212, 1270.

experience. The translator makes her own assessment of where those poles lie, and a competing map can create tension on the effectiveness and coherence of the translation. Nevertheless, the woman translator assesses what she sees as the same and different, claims a place between them, and utters a truth that has not been uttered before from her particular place on the discursive map.

### III. Background Myth and Aeschylus' Characterization

The remaining step preceding a close reading of the text lies in some basic background on the figure of Cassandra. This essay does not endeavor to detail all the literary origins of her character, but instead a brief survey to give some context to her appearance in the *Agamemnon*.

Cassandra first appears in the ancient literature in the *Iliad*, where she appears as the 'most beautiful of Priam's daughters' (adapted from Murray, 13. 365). When Odysseus encounters Agamemnon in the *Odyssey*, he briefly recounts his murder alongside Cassandra and his efforts to save her from Clytemnestra's violence (11. 420-425). In Homer, Cassandra is simply a beautiful Trojan princess. Sometime between Homer and Aeschylus, some additional mythological content arose concerning Cassandra. Since she is Trojan royalty, the Greeks' ravaging Troy upon their victory, and notably their pillage of the Temple of Athena, are very significant to Cassandra.

As demonstrated in figure 1, some narrative existed of the Lesser or Oilean Ajax



Figure 1: Giuseppe Maria Mitelli, *The Greeks Dragging Cassandra out of the Temple (Plate 3)*, 1663, engraving, Fine Arts Museums, San Francisco.

dragging Cassandra out of the temple. This seventeenth century engraving by Giuseppe Maria Mitelli portrays one man tearing at prophetic fillets binding her hair and another

dragging her left arm towards the edge of the image. She collapses to the ground in protest and her clothes fall off her body due to the violent altercation. Other Greek soldiers still brandish their weapons to threaten other suppliants in the temple; their seizure of those seeking refuge in the temple demonstrates a dramatic breach in Greek warfare protocol, dishonoring religious standards of the day.

Both the engraving and the myth leave the moments following this image ambiguous, and Paula Debnar highlights the importance of this ambiguity. While some interpretations of the myth might have Oilean Ajax rape Cassandra in the ensuing disorder<sup>6</sup>, Debnar says that the evidence is inconclusive, and she even goes so far as to argue that Aeschylus purposefully suppresses this narrative of rape. Further, Debnar argues that Aeschylus *needs* Cassandra to arrive at Mycenae as a *parthenos* in order for her to effectively begin the cycle of justice and fit bridal imagery (138-142). While this claim of authorial necessity for a cohesive drama might appear far-fetched, prevailing scholarly sentiment does understand that the *Oresteia* revolves around justice, especially as facilitated by Athenian democracy. Athenian democracy, in the *Eumenides*, is represented by Athena, the quintessential virginal woman—not even her conception can be linked to sexuality. Additionally, the three plays of the *Oresteia* demonstrate a progression toward the democratic ideal, and I argue that the *parthenoi* in each play demonstrate a similar progression toward the virginal ideal. First is Cassandra, a *parthenos* despite Apollo’s attempted and Agamemnon’s imminent violations. Next is Electra, a *parthenos* who is nevertheless embroiled in excessive emotions of mourning for her murdered father and may yet marry. Finally comes Athena, who, as previously discussed, is timelessly and quintessentially a

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<sup>6</sup> This mythological form will be further discussed in Chapter 2 as it appears in Virgil and Seneca.

virgin. With this pattern and Debnar's arguments in mind, Cassandra emerges as a virgin who, despite attempted rape, facilitates the *Oresteia's* larger move toward justice.

Cassandra's appearance as a bride and sacrificial victim facilitates a reading of Cassandra initiating justice through a parallel with the corrupted sacrifice of Iphigenia. As the chorus expresses their dismay at Cassandra's prophetic utterance, their narration of "drops of blood yellow-dyed" (Collard 1121) flowing in their hearts directly echoes their description of the sacrifice of Iphigenia at Aulis where they mention "her yellow dyed dress streaming to the ground" (239). This image reverses the roles in the sacrificial scene; where Iphigenia had been bound and frightened, the chorus now feels afraid and paralyzed as Cassandra speaks freely.

Iphigenia's dress leads to another parallel, too, and Debnar draws on other scholarship that compares the soldiers' stripping of Iphigenia with Cassandra doffing her prophetic garments (135, *Ag.* 1264-1268). While Cassandra on one hand exclaims "it is Apollo himself who strips me of my prophetic dress!" she also exclaims to her emblems and by extension, the god, "Fall there and be damned!" (Collard 1266-1270). These exclamations render Cassandra's divestment as an act of defiance, agency, and purpose before she approaches her death. This stands in contrast to Iphigenia, who went to her death silenced, unwilling, and unknowing; Cassandra represents a more suitable sacrifice, since she is willing and virginal, according to Debnar (136). While both Cassandra and Iphigenia appear as sacrificial and virginal victims, Cassandra's sacrifice initiates justice because of her freedom and agency in approaching death.

Aeschylus adapts fable to present Cassandra as aware of her imminent death through animal metaphor. John Philip Harris offers a cogent account of this adaptation through studying the swan metaphor in the text<sup>7</sup> and the associated fables. Harris focuses on textual evidence to

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<sup>7</sup> Cassandra's speech at 1321, Clytemnestra's speech at 1445.

suggest that the ‘swan song’ – a beautiful song only sung when the singer knows their death is imminent—was attested in fable and adapted by Aeschylus to reinforce Cassandra as a tragic figure prophesying at her death’s door (540-558). While this simile only appears briefly in the *Agamemnon*, Harris uses it to develop an argument for Aeschylus’ adapting fable, whereas other scholarship focuses on his adaptation of epic. Clytemnestra speaks the swan song simile as she stands over the bodies of Agamemnon and Cassandra and dialogues with the chorus; she looks down on them and mocks, “she [lies here] too, his lover, after singing her last death-laden lament like a swan” (1445-6)<sup>8</sup>. Harris also comments on the mythic categorization of the swan as Apollo’s bird, making it particularly appealing to Aeschylus’ purposes. This particular association adds a dramatic irony since Clytemnestra speaks the simile, while there is no evidence she understands Cassandra’s role as an Apollonian seer and victim who is aware of her impending death. Instead, the simile falls into the pile of wild animal and bird comparisons spoken by those who fail to hear or believe her<sup>9</sup>. Cassandra, as presented by Aeschylus and adapted from other ancient sources, knows of her impending death and creates a beautiful song of sorrow upon approaching Mycenae.

Since Cassandra somehow knows of her death, her prophetic role merits further discussion. The basic premise is this: Cassandra had prophetic powers, either before or as a result of Apollo’s pursuit of her. After she denied the god’s advances, he cursed her with always being disbelieved, despite telling the truth in her prophecies. Debnar suggests that Cassandra’s role as a seer was a relatively late poetic creation, and Aeschylus’ particular handling of her power as a result of a physical encounter with Apollo may well be his own creation (132).

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<sup>8</sup> In Carson: “Yes here he lies. And she like a swan that has sung its last song / beside him” (1090-1091).

<sup>9</sup> 1050, 1063, 1141-1154, 1316-1317.

In Aeschylus' portrayal, Cassandra briefly describes the encounter, and various readings of this description offer various accounts of Cassandra's prophetic power. In Carson, she was "the local prophet" before Apollo ever sought Cassandra (905). According to Carson, then, Cassandra's prophetic ability had no relation to Apollo's advances, and she received no benefit from his affections. Cassandra recounts in Carson's translation, "I said yes but *defaulted*" (903, emphasis added), eliminating the possibility of 'shortchanging' or 'deception' that other readings imply—the language of 'default' emphasizes an unwelcome inability or entrapment. Mary R. Lefkowitz, by contrast, suggests that "As his part of the bargain, Apollo had given her the gift of prophecy," and that Cassandra failed to contribute appropriately, nevertheless keeping the prize of prophecy and—in an act of divine justice—receiving the curse of disbelief (107). Collard's translation falls in line with this interpretation, as he offers in Cassandra's voice: "Though I had consented to Loxias, I *cheated* him" (1208, emphasis added). Both these interpretations concur that Cassandra at one point agreed to sex with Apollo, but one way or another the sexual act was not consummated, and Cassandra left the interaction without any change to her sexual status.

Cassandra's appearance as prophetess also falls into an identifiable historical pattern of ecstatic prophecy mediating between the divine and human realms. Sabina Mazzoldi devotes extensive study to Cassandra's prophetic function in the *Agamemnon* and concludes that her ancient Greek audiences would recognize her as a reflection, if a hazy one, of current religious practice, primarily that at Delphi (145, 151-152). Mazzoldi argues that Cassandra as *mantis* prophesies in two main stages: ecstasy and rational mediation. While she offers a detailed account of the steps within each stage as they correspond to the text, Mazzoldi's overall conclusions are more relevant here, especially as she highlights that Cassandra's periods of ecstatic utterance are not the nonsense they might appear to audiences, namely the chorus: "her

message is consistent with visions sent by divinity, but seems irrational and incomprehensible for man” (149). This appearance of irrationality and unintelligibility, first articulated by Clytemnestra before Cassandra has begun to speak, arguably contributes to Cassandra’s reception with disbelief by the Chorus (1050-1063). Nevertheless, this hostile reception stands in tension with Mazzoldi’s argument that Cassandra’s ecstatic prophecy appears as a recognizable and credible religious practice. As I turn to Cassandra’s utterances and reception in the text, I will investigate this tension in further detail.

While the remaining issue of Cassandra’s narration (alternatively, translation) of the past will appear in later discussions, at present a summary suffices that for Aeschylus, Cassandra was a princess of Troy who at some time or another became a prophetess and had a physical encounter with Apollo. In this encounter, she spurned his advances and thus received a curse of disbelief. Cassandra’s prophetic process also mirrors historical religious phenomena and connotes a sense of credibility to her Greek audiences, held in tension with her characteristic reception of disbelief. Aeschylus adapts the myths and fables at his disposal to present Cassandra as a *parthenos* with a prophetic awareness of her fate at Mycenae. This particular adaptation, according to the analysis developed by Debnar, makes for a parallel to the sacrifice of Iphigenia. This parallel places Cassandra as a more willing and more suitable sacrifice than her predecessor, and thus she begins the cycle of justice in the *Oresteia*.

#### IV. Speaking the Unspeakable

Finally, I turn to the details of *Agamemnon* to see how Cassandra operates as a translator, and how in this act, she utters previously unspeakable acts of violence. Carson, in her introduction to the *Agamemnon*, compares Cassandra’s prophetic work to the paintings of Francis Bacon: both “remove a boundary” in themselves in their artistic processes (4). Figure 2 shows an iconic



Figure 2: Francis Bacon, *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*. 1944, oil and pastel on fibreboard, Tate Gallery, London.

triptych by Francis Bacon, which he himself saw as a representation of the Eumenides, who end the trilogy and complete the

cycle of justice. Taking

seriously Anne Carson’s description of Cassandra as “a microcosm of [Bacon’s] method” (6), I must attend to the shocking, ambiguous, metaphorical, and violent elements—all of which appear quite obviously in the triptych—in Cassandra’s words and seek to understand the work they accomplish. Carson comments further that Cassandra “appears with her language that breaks open” (4), breaking open the divide between the human and the immortal, breaking open the chronological divides of past, present, and future, breaking open the divide between symbolic and literal.

Where does Cassandra begin this process of breaking open? Even in her first words on stage, she breaks open the boundaries between human and divine, English and Greek, crying out in Carson’s translation: “OTOTOI POPOI DA! / Apollo! / O!pollo! / Woepollo! O!” (733-737). This utterance, in Carson’s hands, purposefully works cross the borders of Greek and English, exclamation and address. She pronounces a traditional Greek exclamation of sorrow, which, for reference, Collard renders more traditionally: “O-o-o-oh! Horror! No! / O Apollo, O Apollo!”

(1073-1074) but even here, Cassandra breaks apart the borders between verbal and embodied expression.

This exclamation also breaks chronological barriers: Cassandra's screams make present to her other instances of violence, notably her assault by Apollo, since just a few lines later she calls out,

god of my ruin oh

yes you destroy me oh

yes it is absolute this time (Carson 751-753)<sup>10</sup>

In her first words onstage, Cassandra's laments translate experiences of the past into the present. She also struggles to translate an existential experience of horror and violence into the target language, landing near a pole of sameness in tone but not in specific verbal expression.

Cassandra, in her acts of translation, proceeds to focus on the unspeakable violence that undergirds the house of Atreus and which will promptly consume it. After her last line lamenting to Apollo and rhetorically asking, "Oh where, wherever have you led me?" the Chorus blandly informs her that she is in the Atreid household (Collard 1086-1089). However, she redefines and translates their location as "a godless house, with much on its conscience—/ evil bloodshed by kin, carving like meat—/ a place for slaughtering men, a floor sprinkled with blood!" (Collard 1089-1091). Here, she uses her divine knowledge and uses it to alter a gloss ignorantly offered by the chorus. She translates her transtemporal vision of the Atreid crimes into a distorted and polluted image of religious rite. This line especially connects her with Bacon: she literally looks

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<sup>10</sup> Collard renders these lines more traditionally: "...my destroyer! / You have destroyed me without effort for this second time" (1081-2). I retain the original spacing in this passage to introduce Carson's use of the space of the printed page as another discursive space, as I will discuss later.

around at the gates of Mycenae, but she translates her divine vision of this place into a symbolic landscape riddled with horror and gore.

The chorus fails to understand Cassandra's translations, and they refuse to speak the rich symbolic language into which Cassandra translates. After they hear Cassandra narrate Clytemnestra's entrapment and murder of Agamemnon and a brief lament for Cassandra's own fate, the chorus will have none of it: "You are someone demented, possessed / by a god, crying out unmusical music / about your own self, *like a nightingale* sounding / and calling insatiably" (Collard 1140-5, italics added). With this declaration, the Chorus doubly declares that they cannot or will not accept the language Cassandra offers. It is in the wrong pitch for their ears, to draw on the music analogy, or in an animal language.

The animal language not only connotes barbarity—as in Clytemnestra's early statements—but it also connotes an impending act of taming, which Debnar aligns with proper sexual initiation through marriage (135). The combination of the specific nightingale comparison with the Greek conception of taming of young women through marriage renders the chorus' statement as doubly demeaning—Cassandra is barbaric, unintelligible, and in need of proper male subjugation. Both these analogies serve to draw boundaries around Cassandra and her speech using common derogatory tropes, such as the hysterical (and hence, 'crying out') woman and the young woman as a wild animal who must be tamed<sup>11</sup>.

Cassandra responds to the Chorus' remark and reinforces that her translation, in line with the nightingale, expresses meaning in both common language and in a symbolic language. She exclaims in Collard's translation, "Oh the nightingale's end! So clear in her song!" (1146). This language of *clarity* demonstrates that Cassandra, and presumably the general Greek audience too,

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<sup>11</sup> See also Clytemnestra and the chorus at 1050, 1062, 1066-1068.

understands the content of the nightingale’s song, even if its form is somewhat foreign. The nightingale’s song is identifiably a lament, and a lament about male violence, following the myth back to the violence of Tereus against Philomela. As it appears in Ovid<sup>12</sup>, the myth features Procne, wife to Tereus and sister to Philomela. On a trip, Tereus rapes Philomela and cuts out her tongue when she threatens to inform others of his atrocity. She nevertheless communicates it to her sister by weaving a tapestry and the two enact their revenge by preparing a feast for Tereus of his own children—an ancient trope linking the house of Atreus to this myth. When Tereus discovers this, he chases after the sisters to kill them, but the gods turn Philomela into a nightingale and Procne into a swallow. This myth imbued into the nightingale an expression of sorrow, both because of male violence and because of the dire circumstances to which it brings women. The chorus uses this nightingale analogy to insinuate that Cassandra is unintelligible, while Cassandra’s response demonstrates that the nightingale’s song *is* intelligible, to hearers with a sensitivity to metaphor and story.

After Cassandra appropriates the nightingale metaphor to demonstrate her own intelligibility in a symbolic language, she moves to translate her impending fate into a new form in the present. In Carson’s rendering, Cassandra utters:

but for me waits

*schismos*

of the double-edged sword: *schismos*

means

a cleaving a cutting a splitting a

chopping in two (845-852)

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<sup>12</sup> *Metamorphoses* VI. 412-674.

Carson here chooses to have Cassandra translate on a highly literal level, glossing the Greek term ‘*schismos*’ with a variety of English equivalents<sup>13</sup>. Carson renders these lines in irregular indentation, as she handles most of Cassandra’s utterances in prophetic fury. This representation demonstrates a kind of meta-translation between the spoken and the written; Carson uses space on the page to negotiate the difference between speech and text. The sameness between them is *space* and irregularity. As we look on the page, the arrangement of the words defies our typical constructions. As the words appear in speech, they too fail to fit into our traditional arrangements. Carson captures Cassandra’s moment of translation with the space surrounding her words, giving us a literal space on the page to represent the discursive space which is so characteristic of Cassandra’s work.

#### V. Conclusion

While her legacy trickles down to us simply as a disbelieved woman, Cassandra appears in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* in a paradigm of translation as she translates divine realities into human terms and breaks open linguistic and chronological borders. I approach Cassandra in this text by accepting the historicity of the *Oresteia* and the historicity of my own moment, daring to establish a relationship between these historical moments informed by their contexts. Cassandra as a woman translator strikes out a space for herself between the poles of similarity and difference, much as our contemporary Anne Carson does. Cassandra emerges from her mythological background as a woman who speaks acts of violence that lurk silently beneath the surface: she is the first to break open the door through which justice will walk.

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<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately I lack the familiarity with Attic Greek to make meaningful comment on whether or not this move has precedent in the original text.

## Chapter 2

### Cassandra Translating Moral Order in Seneca's *Agamemnon*

#### I. Introduction

Next, I move several centuries down the line to study a new drama by the same name: Seneca's *Agamemnon*. This chapter will retain the dual focus on translation and Cassandra, as she similarly appears in this Roman work. Where the previous chapter focused on Aeschylus' reception and adaptation of myth, this chapter will ask similar questions of Seneca's text in its own place and time. For Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, my own language abilities led me to rely on other translators, primarily Collard and Carson, but in Seneca, I will use my own translations. I make this choice for both practical and theoretical reasons: I find no available translations by women of the Senecan text, and I remain committed to maintaining contact with female voices at every stage of the project. Meanwhile, I will make extensive use of close reading in the Latin and gratefully take cues from translational authorities<sup>14</sup>. Confident in my linguistic competence, I assume the role of woman translator, bridging the gap between Seneca and my readers.

Another important point of introduction is the relative dearth of scholarship on Seneca's *Agamemnon*. While the Aeschylean text occurs with a fabulous variety of translations, scholarly angles, and intertextual readings, Seneca's text has received relatively little attention. Further, Cassandra in the Senecan *Agamemnon* has received almost *no* attention at all, a phenomenon on which the scholars who have recently studied her frequently comment. This gap gives my writing both more urgency and freedom (perhaps uncertainty)—lacking a preexisting body of scholarship to which I might respond, my discussion is among the first focused discussions of Cassandra in the Senecan *Agamemnon*.

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<sup>14</sup> As in occasional echoes of John G. Fitch, whose translation is readily available in the Loeb Classical Library, or in the guidance of my professor and advisor, Dr. Owen Ewald.

As in the preceding chapter, this discussion will make use of other scholars' socio-cultural and literary analyses, where available and appropriate, for context, insight, and framing. Additionally, Charles Martindale's reception theory will again assist in establish my discursive relationship to Seneca and Seneca's relationship to Aeschylus, not to mention Cassandra's relationship to truth and prophecy. Later sections will close read Cassandra's appearance in the text and her mode of translation in the Roman Imperial/post-Augustan/Senecan context. While Aeschylus' Cassandra translated previously unspeakable truths from a divine realm of understanding into a human realm of understanding, Seneca's Cassandra translates the chaos of the world around her into clear, if mysterious, utterances of moral order.

## II. Socio-Historical and Literary Context: Senecan Drama

While Aeschylus' *Oresteia* occurred in a highly public and ostensibly political context, Seneca's *Agamemnon* operates in a distinct paradigm of theater, literature, and their social meanings. The height of Greek tragedy undoubtedly brought together the entire Athenian public around the fifth century B.C.E.; in contrast, Senecan drama presents some difficulty in ascertaining its performativity and social function. Scholars face a prevailing ambiguity when they consider the performance of Roman drama—the tension between recitation (or, 'drawing-room drama') and public performance is ultimately unresolved. R.J. Tarrant, in his widely-regarded 1978 article, considers that "[p]erhaps tragic poets at this time made no exclusive choice between the stage and the reciting room, but composed for both as the opportunity arose, as Pomponius Secundus may have done even in Seneca's day" ("Senecan Drama" 260). Elaine Fantham concurs that "We do not know precisely when Seneca wrote his tragedies, or whether he intended any of them for the stage," similarly drawing on Tarrant's scholarship (123). Thus, the specifics of Senecan drama remain elusive and complicate any comparative analysis of Greek and Roman theatrical

practice for these two *Agamemnon*s. Nevertheless, I will use cautious comparative analysis when possible and applicable, while avoiding simplistic compare-and-contrast models.

R.J. Tarrant remains the eminent scholar of Senecan drama, especially in its relationship to classical Greek tragedy, and he steers the conversation away from such comparisons between these two bodies of drama. Tarrant, in a briefer exploration of Seneca's relationship to Greek drama than his sustained study in 1978, concedes the appeal of reading Seneca alongside the Greeks, since the works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides constitute "the only other corpus of serious drama to survive from antiquity" aside from Seneca ("Greek and Roman" 215). Analysis need not be absolutely limited by this historical infelicity, however. Tarrant uses a variety of examples of and comparisons with postclassical literary figures, including Ovid, Pomponius Secundus, and Varius, to emphasize the "'Romanness' of Seneca's plays more explicitly than has previously been done" (217). Further, he suggests three main areas that demonstrate its being 'of the time and place' of first century A.D. Rome: focus on tyrannical power, focus on pathology of emotions, and a global background for characters and action (228-229). These, in essence, reflect Seneca's political, philosophical, and social consciousness, and they could easily lead to a very lengthy discussion of Seneca's politics, Stoicism, and other biographical bits. For the purposes of the present study on Cassandra in the *Agamemnon*, however, these studies have only *ad hoc* relevance; we will address them only as they are necessary to understanding the work of Cassandra.

Following Tarrant's lead, other scholars generally emphasize the bodies of Greek and Roman tragedy as distinct and advise against simplistic comparison. While Seneca retains many Greek conventions, such as the Chorus, strophic and antistrophic sections, and messenger speeches, Fantham argues that "Seneca's tragedies... [occur] independent of specific Greek

models” (124). Instead, Seneca’s literary and theatrical moment is distinctly Roman: Christopher Trinacty highlights Ennius and Accius as “vital intermediaries to Seneca’s dramaturgy” in addition to the Augustans, on whom Tarrant focuses (30). Fitch also comments that “Aeschylus’ celebrated Agamemnon is no more than a distant ancestor of the Senecan play [and] Seneca’s Acts 1 and 2, and scenes 2 and 3 of Act 5, have no precedent in Aeschylus’ drama” (123). This sentiment represents the prevailing contemporary consensus<sup>15</sup>, largely building on the canonical work of Tarrant, on Seneca’s relationship to the corpus of Greek tragedy, despite a historical tendency of the scholarship to make direct comparisons.

Denis Henry and B. Walker further elucidate Seneca’s relationship to his social, political, and literary landscape, offering a specific analysis of the *Agamemnon* in a canonical study. They begin with T.S. Eliot’s essays connecting Seneca with Shakespeare and other Elizabethan tragedy, and I retain their summary and analysis for sake of space and in admiration of their concision. They marvel that, excepting Eliot, most critics “have endeavored to apply to [Seneca’s] plays traditional dramatic canons, derived more or less directly from Aristotle” (1). Eliot no longer relies on these standards, which were already antiquated by Seneca’s time, but utilizes the freer conventions of Elizabethan drama for analysis.

Adopting from Eliot the freedom for analysis without Aristotelian preoccupations, Henry and Walker turn to comparative analysis of the larger bodies of Greek and Senecan tragedy, arguing that in Aeschylus, “it is impossible to isolate *moral lessons* or to speak of a *drama of ideas*. The artistic wholeness of an Aeschylean play is... realized in terms so physical that to abstract from it a theme is impossible” (2). In contrast, they consider each of the Senecan plays a ‘meditation’ on a subject—*Medea* and *Phaedra* on passion, *Thyestes* on power, *Oedipus* on

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<sup>15</sup> John Lavery in 2004 presents a conspicuous exception in “Some Aeschylean Influences on Seneca’s *Agamemnon*,” where he offers pages of side-by-side textual comparison.

unnaturalness— “using abstractions in preference to specific expression” (2-3). While Aeschylean tragedy—and here I specify the *Agamemnon*—creates a web of imagery and embodied expression, Senecan tragedy—again, the *Agamemnon*—builds with bricks of the abstract. This fits well within Henry and Walker’s claim that the body of Senecan drama is preoccupied “with ethics and with ideas such as fatalism, human freedom, and so on” (2), especially in contrast to the public, democratic function of Greek tragedy with, fittingly, more practical interests. The theatrical context of the Aeschylean *Agamemnon* involved thousands of people and actors onstage; we can speculatively consider that the Senecan *Agamemnon* occurred in a more private environment, making it more conducive to abstract considerations.

A discussion of Senecan drama must also address the contemporary practices of *declamatio* and political concern at the forefront of Roman drama. In a brief but authoritative survey of the Early Empire period, Roland Mayer highlights the dual influence of recitation and declamation<sup>16</sup> as characteristic of the period’s literature, and he even cites Seneca’s *Phaedra* as an example (60-61). Additionally, Mayer argues for considering the cultural penchant for declamation as a “taste for the extreme” that sought to show “how language could be made as vivid and exciting as, say, the dance of the pantomime or a beast-fight. Language itself had to become spectacular” (62). With this view in mind, I attend to Cassandra’s speeches with an emphasis on their spectacular and performative elements. In light of contemporary literary taste, Cassandra’s affective and dramatic (for lack of a better word) speeches do not fit into the ‘hysterical woman’ model that might tempt today’s readers. Rather, Cassandra’s extreme forms of speech present her in line with Seneca and his peers in their verbal arts that tested the limits of

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<sup>16</sup> Not to be confused with *denunciation*, a word with similarly Latinate roots and scholarly register. Mayer helpfully offers a gloss for the term at hand, *declamation*: “the extemporaneous speaking upon a fictive (and often improbable) topic” (61).

language. This spectacular verbal style befits Cassandra in her unique role as prophetic voice narrating such spectacles as the judgment of Paris and Agamemnon's murder<sup>17</sup>, which themselves might be read as 'improbable' events so laden with cultural meaning and mythological repetition that they approach 'fictiveness'.

Guided by the analyses of these scholars, I read Seneca's *Agamemnon* knowing that it occurs in and responds to a moment in Roman history fraught with complicated notions and experiences of tyrannical power and a changing body of literature. Senecan drama represents a distinctly Roman form of tragedy, born out of postclassical art, and this necessitates a more measured approach to comparing Greek and Roman tragedies. Thus, Seneca's *Agamemnon* is decisively *not* an 'adaptation' or revision of the Aeschylean text.

Rather, I consider *both* the Senecan and Aeschylean *Agamemnons* as translations of an underlying myth less subject to chronological change than actual texts (which are typically considered characteristic of translation). This paper chooses to read these *Agamemnon* tragedies side by side because of its fundamental interest in the character of Cassandra as she appears in the myth that both these dramatists adapt. Well aware of the typical pitfalls into which previous scholars have fallen when they read these two tragedies together, I move forward allowing Seneca his own *context* and *content*. I attend to how Seneca understands Cassandra speaking in his own Roman moment and text; I do not attempt to make simple comparisons for their own sake. I ask, *What does Cassandra uniquely speak in her Senecan characterization? What truth does she tell, and why does it matter?* Both Aeschylus and Seneca translate a similar ancient story and make it new, and this shared story features Cassandra in crucial capacities.

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<sup>17</sup>726-733 and 877-909.

Further, despite the historical hazards in connecting these two dramas, it is a fact of current readership that most readers approach the Senecan text with an awareness of or familiarity with the Aeschylean *Agamemnon*. Much as readers of Virgil read the *Aeneid* with eyes conditioned by reading Homeric epic, a theoretical stance grounded in reception allows for—even necessitates—a comparison between these historically and culturally distinct texts. Although we cannot know if Seneca’s audiences in the first century C.E. knew Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*, we can assume a fundamental familiarity and reverence for the text in most Roman elites. Additionally, readers of Seneca in the twenty-first century certainly carry a similar familiarity and reverence. Grateful for the current availability of these texts, I view the broader scope of the mythology adapted by Aeschylus and Seneca and make meaning from studying their original contexts and from evaluating their current place and perception in the lives of twenty-first century readers.

### III. Reception Theory and Senecan Translation of Myth

Next, I address in more detail the theoretical relationships among the underlying myths, Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, Seneca’s *Agamemnon*, and current readers in order to locate Cassandra and her own translational role. I reemphasize the previous assertion from Charles Martindale that “any text has to be treated *both as transhistorical and as contingent on a particular moment of history* if it is to be interpreted” (104). The previous section discussed the Senecan *Agamemnon*’s contingency on a particular moment in history—in the beginnings of the Roman Empire—and introduced interpretations based on this context, especially in relationship to cultural questions of power, Stoicism, and its concomitant concerns of emotion and morality.

Further, this text is contingent upon a postclassical literary tradition, descending distantly from the Athenian dramatic tradition upon which the Aeschylean *Agamemnon* is contingent. As I

turn to the question of mythological adaptation and translation, I will discuss *how* the mythological threads in Seneca's text reflect both their contingency and their timeless reach to us. I will investigate these connections in Martindale's framing, which reckons with the Drydenian scheme of three translational modes: metaphrase, paraphrase, and imitation (83). The previous survey of the dominant scholarship on Seneca makes it clear that Seneca does not translate Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* in any of these modes. Instead, Seneca's text is a translation of the underlying myth, and I will develop a reading of this translation as a paraphrase.

To understand the underlying myth as a *text* is a claim in its own right, especially since I do not focus on manuscript evidence, but Martindale's formulation of translation nevertheless supports this move. In a section titled "Untying the Text," he writes:

[D]iscussions of translation usually assume that the meaning of the original is fixed, and that the translator's task is to reproduce it as far as possible in the target language... [instead, it is] always an act of interpretation, of rendering readable, which might involve (for example) foregrounding some elements and erasing others... Translation, like interpretation, becomes rather a saying in other words, a constant renegotiation of sameness-within-difference and difference-within-sameness. (86)

Martindale's movement from an understanding of the text and its meaning as 'fixed' into a paradigm of reception and 'slippage' occurs over the entire scope of *Redeeming the Text*, and I take this as a given within the context of reception theory and some structuralist and post-structuralist influences. However, the specific language that here describes a reception theorist's view of a text makes myth an excellent candidate; what else is myth except "constant renegotiation of sameness-within-difference and difference-within-sameness" (86)? Myth

persists through times and cultures because it, by its nature, exists in this discursive space that emphasizes the interplay of sameness and difference.

Further, the ‘meaning’ of myth is never stable, even in its most ‘canonical’ forms, as in common perceptions of Homeric or Ovidian texts. Rather, myth always appears in a specific form—perhaps a specific *translation*—that does ‘foreground’ and ‘erase’ some elements; there is no mythological utterance or performance that is innocent or absolutely original. An interlinear translation of myth is not even possible, since we cannot read a single text as *the Myth*; it is, in essence, a system of signs in which readers and authors are constantly engaged in making meaning with subtle variations in the arrangement of signs<sup>18</sup>. Borrowing Roland Barthes’ formulation of myth as a “second-order semiological system” (198), utterances or ‘translations’ of myth involve an additional level of ambiguity, interpretation, and slippage alongside translations in ‘first-order semiological systems’, namely languages. Thus, we conceive of myth as a *system* of signs, rather than a stable and concrete text, that produces various and unstable meanings dependent upon individual translations and engagements. This conception allows a reading of Seneca’s *Agamemnon* as a translation of myth while maintaining aforementioned theoretical commitments about what the act of translation is.

Before turning to the Senecan text, I address proximate mythological utterances related to Cassandra in order to illuminate Seneca’s own adaptation. The previous chapter reviewed Cassandra’s notable literary appearances prior to Aeschylus in order to understand his adaptation of myth; in the intervening 600 years between Seneca and Aeschylus, Cassandra appears in a few important dramas. First, she is among the eponymous Trojan women in Euripides’ *Troades*, but given the previous assertion that Seneca’s works occur independent of Athenian tragedy, little

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<sup>18</sup> This reading, even beyond the brief citation, is certainly influenced by Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies* and similar readings in Structuralism.

attention to this appearance is necessary. More relevant to the present study are Cassandra's handful of appearances in Virgil's *Aeneid*, a proximate predecessor to Seneca's *Agamemnon* in both time and subject matter. In Book II, during Aeneas' narration of the fall of Troy, she first appears prophesying doom, yet *non umquam credita* as the Trojans make to open the walls and

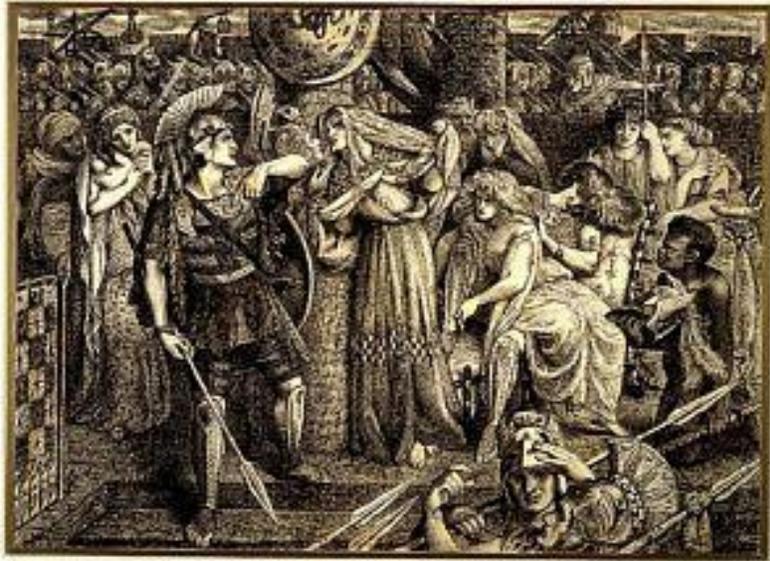


Figure 3: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Cassandra*. 1869, drawing, The British Museum, London. Included in Pharr's *Aeneid*, 99.

bring in the horse ('[was] not ever believed' 246-7). This moment serves as the inspiration for Dante Gabriel Rossetti's drawing in Figure 3, where Cassandra stands in 'prophetic madness'—especially in the sense of prophetically *angry*— at the center of the image reproaching a

warrior, presumably Hector.

Later in Book II, Aeneas mentions, among Trojan warriors, Coroebus who is *insano Cassandrae incensus amore/ et gener auxilium Priamo* ('afire with frenzied love for Cassandra/ and a son-in-law and an aid to Priam' 343-344). While the Oilean Ajax and the Greeks desecrate the temple of Minerva in Book II, Aeneas narrates, *Ecce trahebatur passis Primaeia virgo/ crinibus a templo Cassandra adytisque Minervae* ('Behold, Priam's maiden [daughter], was being dragged by her loosed locks from the temple, even from the inner shrines of Minerva' 403-404) and Coroebus nearby, who *[n]on tulit hanc speciem furiata mente* ('[could] not bear this sight, with a maddened mind' 407) and throws himself into the fray to rescue her. These moments constitute a significant mythological development; while Aeschylus provides no

indication of Cassandra in romantic relationship, Virgil presents a clear relational role as betrothed to Coroebus<sup>19</sup>. Additionally, in Pharr's pedagogically-ubiquitous edition of the *Aeneid*, he glosses Coroebus in these instances as "suitor of Cassandra" (112). Since this passage twice describes Cassandra with *virgo, virginis* and narrates Coroebus' valiant efforts to save her from the violence of Ajax and the Greeks, I argue that Virgil presents Cassandra as an unviolated virgin until her rape by Oilean Ajax<sup>20</sup>. These appearances in Virgil merit discussion for their 'set-up' of Senecan translation of the myth; they constitute the immediate translational background for Cassandra's story. In summary, Seneca receives Cassandra in her mythological context through Virgil as a disbelieved Trojan prophetess and princess, betrothed to Coroebus and raped by Oilean Ajax as she is dragged out of the temple of Minerva.

#### IV. Translations of Order, Disorder, and Morality

To begin, Cassandra speaks moral truths regarding one's relationship to death that a Stoic perspective might privilege. She begins speaking onstage at the opening of Act 4: *Cohibete lacrimas omne quas tempus petet/ Troades... cladibus questus meis/ removete: nostris ipsa sufficiam malis* ('Hold back the tears which all time will seek, Trojans... stop your complaints for my troubles. I myself will be enough for our misfortunes' 659-663). This measured approach to misfortune immediately introduces Cassandra as a 'moral center' and works against the 'raving madwoman' stereotype. Although Cassandra begins to speak in prophetic ecstasy later in the scene<sup>21</sup>, Seneca's characterization *begins* with a model of Stoic emotional balance, which holds the truth of her life as full of misfortunes (*cladibus, malis*) yet refrains from excessive emotional expression, and she sees herself as part of a larger community (*omne tempus, nostris*)

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<sup>19</sup> This becomes so well known in later mythological adaptations that Hector Berlioz features an aria on this relationship in Act 1 of his 1865 opera based on the *Aeneid*, *Les Troyens*.

<sup>20</sup> Compare to Aeschylus' 'suppression' of the rape element here, as discussed in Ch. 1, §3.

<sup>21</sup> 726-774.

through time. Borrowing Tarrant's summary of Stoic concerns, she will not participate in pathological excess of emotions, but she maintains a chronologically and geographically global background for her words (228-229).

The chorus consistently rebuts Cassandra's Stoic responses and aligns Cassandra with mythological traditions of mourning, despite her declared stance apart from these traditions. Just after Cassandra's opening exhortation against common mourning, the chorus responds,

*Lacrimas lacrimis miscere iuvat.*

*Nec tu, quamvis dura virago*

*patiensque mali,*

*poteris tantas flere ruinas.*

*Non quae verno mobile carmen*

*ramo cantat tristis aedon,*

*Ityn in varios modulate sonos*

('It helps to mix tears with tears./ Not even you, although you are a tough heroine and enduring misfortune,/ are able to bewail such disasters./ Nor [is] the wretched nightingale,/ which sings its wobbling song,/ 'Itys,' in various tones,/ measuredly, from a spring branch' 664-672).

Although these lines come from the chorus, it is worthwhile to dwell on them for their reference to another mythological thread that Aeschylus similarly weaves into his characterization of Cassandra<sup>22</sup>. The chorus here compares the mourning capacities and functions of Cassandra and Procne, who as previously discussed, embodies an 'unintelligible' and 'excessive' form of mourning as a *tristis aedon*, partially on account of her own murderous action. Cassandra's

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<sup>22</sup> See Aeschylus, Chorus at 1140-1145, Cassandra at 1146, as numerated in Collard. For a discussion of this imagery, see Ch. 1, middle of §4. This mythological thread appears notably in Ovid, also: see footnote 10.

stance toward her past misfortunes transcends labels of animal qualities and excess; she presents a Stoic approach of balance, offering a particular contrast to the emotional excesses of Clytemnestra (in vengeance and occasional regret) and Agamemnon (in arrogant triumph). Cassandra, in Seneca, begins her presence onstage as a positive model of bearing misfortune, finally introducing a form of emotional and moral order among the other characters' imbalance.

Since Cassandra speaks such Stoic truth at the center of the drama despite her status as captive, she speaks a moral order that rearranges power. In Alessandro Schiesaro's argument for Seneca's drama as a re-vision of the epic tradition, he fails to read Cassandra as the 'anchoring point' and translator of disorder into order. While he admits that the fragmented dramatic structure renders Cassandra a possible protagonist "at the heart of the second [act]," he also denies her agency, as he notes that she "sees more and better than anybody else, but the price [for her vision]... is inscribed in her power's dark, chthonic origin" (180, 186). While Cassandra's prophetic powers are inextricably linked with Apollo's sexual advances, their origin is not necessarily "dark [and] chthonic" (186). Apollo is not a god of the underworld, as the language would suggest, and in Aeschylus Cassandra declares to the chorus that she "had consented to Loxias" (1208) before she spurned him, while Seneca offers no specific comment on Cassandra's sexual encounter with Apollo anyhow. Thus, Cassandra's prophetic power does not limit her agency in Seneca, especially since she translates some of the play's key reversals into moral aphorisms, as I will investigate.

In uttering and translating these key moral aphorisms, Cassandra creates a through-line in the drama whether or not she speaks in prophetic fury. During her first episode of vatic ecstasy,

which begins with the signal *Ubi sum?*<sup>23</sup> ('Where am I?' 726), she narrates Agamemnon's murder in the near future and speaks to her beloved Trojans in the underworld, informing them of their new victory at Agamemnon's death. At the end of a section of trimeter, she calls out: *Spectate, miseri: fata se vertunt retro!* ('Look, [all] you wretched ones: the fates turn back on themselves!' 758). In Cassandra's utterance, a single thread of fate stretches from the miseries of Troy's fall to the moment of Agamemnon's death; she creates continuity which facilitates a moral order that reverses dominant power dynamics. In a later speech also narrating Agamemnon's murder, she repeats this theme of fate's continuity and reversal of present order: *Venere fata. Sanguinem extremae dapes/ domini videbunt, et cruor Baccho incidet* ('The fates have come. The final feasts of the lord/ will see blood, and gore will fall onto Bacchus' 885-886). Here, the theme of reversal is doubly present, not only in the *fata* but also in concrete imagery: the triumph and luxury of Agamemnon, embodied in a lavish meal with fine wine, will transform into gore and guts. The Trojans, and especially Cassandra as a member of the royal family, experienced a similar reversal as the Greeks inflicted violence on them; now that *venere fata*, Agamemnon will know this reversal and moral order will be restored.

At the close of the play, Cassandra speaks the final word of the play which establishes and concludes its emphasis on moral order via power reversals. After Agamemnon's death, Electra, Aegisthus, and Clytemnestra engage in fiery dialogue while Cassandra remains silent, but as Clytemnestra turns to order Cassandra off to death, Cassandra speaks for herself:

*perferre prima nuntium Phrygibus meis*

*propero: repletum ratibus eversis mare,*

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<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, Tarrant comments that "Sudden darkness marks the onset of Hercules' madness and hallucinations" in Seneca's *Hercules Furens* (307). This might build an argument for Cassandra as 'mad' or as 'heroic', but because of the focus on the *Agamemnon* apart from Seneca's other works, this comparison exceeds the scope of the paper.

*captas Mycenas, mille ductorem ducum,  
ut paria fata Troicis lueret malis*

(‘I hasten first to bear the message/ to my Phrygians: the sea [is] filled with overturned ships/ the Mycenaeans [are] captured, even the general of a thousand generals,/ so that he might pay fates equal to Trojan misfortunes’ 1005-1008)

Here, Cassandra bookends Act 5 with her vision of moral order threading from Troy to Mycenae; Act 5 begins with her narration of Agamemnon’s murder, when she cries out to her kin, *vicimus victi Phryges* (‘we, the conquered Phrygians, have conquered!’ 869), and here she closes Act 5 as Agamemnon pays the price for his temporary victory. The *victi Phrygii* stand in parallel to the many sunken Greek ships, which paid the price for Ajax’s desecration of the temple of Minerva and rape of Cassandra<sup>24</sup>. Even in the result clause above, the verb *luo, luere*—perhaps related to the Greek verb for ‘ransom’, *λυομαι*—connotes a sense of transaction or debt, implying even more strongly than *patior, pati*, an ‘equilibrium’ upon Agamemnon’s death. Order is restored by the movement of the fates, leveling excesses of power and hubris.

Even after Agamemnon has paid the price of death, Cassandra asserts that the equalizing effect of the fates will continue. Clytemnestra shouts, *Furiosa, morere!* (‘Die, you madwoman!’ 1112) while Cassandra coolly retorts the play’s final utterance, *Veniet et vobis furor* (‘And madness will come to you all’ 1112). Moral order, according to Cassandra, will be further established; Clytemnestra’s excesses of emotion and power will be cut down by the impending revenge of Orestes. As Clytemnestra uses ‘madness’ to demean Cassandra and assert her own status above Cassandra, this aphorism shows that *furor ipsa* will cut down Clytemnestra within her own family. This parallels the death of Agamemnon, a violent victor, cut down by the very

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<sup>24</sup> 528-578.

same spirit of violent victory in his own wife. Cassandra's resonant utterance here translates all these parallels across time and relationships into a single aphorism that resonates with all the drama's reversals of power.

In Cassandra's encounter with Agamemnon, she demonstrates a form of translation across chronological and geographical boundaries by re-visioning present images of Mycenae with meanings inflected by the past, namely the violence enacted at Troy. When Agamemnon attempts dialogue with Cassandra to welcome her to Mycenae, Cassandra persistently translates her present surroundings into the context of the past<sup>25</sup>—Agamemnon remarks *festus dies est* ('It's a joyful day' 791) but Cassandra retorts, *festus et Troiae fuit* ('and it was a joyful day at Troy' 791). When he asks exasperated a few lines later, *Credis videre te Ilium?* ('Do you believe you're seeing Ilium?' 794), Cassandra makes the connection clear: *Et Priamum simul* ('and Priam, the very same' 794). With this persistent alternate vision, Cassandra infuses her surroundings with the past. Further, when she sees Agamemnon as a new Priam, she translates his figure from its current status as victor into its real, permanent meaning, identical with Priam's—a king cut down dishonorably in his own palace. The sameness in this translation occurs mostly on the symbolic and cultural level.

This exchange further demonstrates Cassandra's translational power to reveal Agamemnon's ostensible hubris into its true status as moral blindness. Anna Lydia Motto and John R. Clark characterize their interaction as "a lowly stichomythic repartee of halflines" in which Agamemnon "is baffled by Cassandra's statements and appears to stand uncertain and uncomprehending" (139). These characterizations indeed resonate, since he responds with self-centeredness and rich dramatic irony, assuring Cassandra, *Hic Troia non est* ("This is not Troy,"

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<sup>25</sup> I wrote this analysis of Cassandra's 'double-vision' of Troy and Mycenae before noticing Alessandro Schiesaro's very similar reading of this passage in "Seneca's *Agamemnon*: the Entropy of Tragedy," pp. 184-185.

795). As previously discussed, Cassandra's translation of Mycenae into Troy points to a metaphorical equivalence between them<sup>26</sup>, which Agamemnon's limited and hubristic vision cannot comprehend. Agamemnon also attempts to soothe Cassandra, *Ne metue dominam famula* ('Do not fear the mistress, slavegirl,' 796) here unwittingly foretelling Cassandra's death at the hands of Clytemnestra; the audience, familiar with the Aeschylean formulation, would undoubtedly detect this dramatic irony and sense its de-heroizing effect on the title character. As Agamemnon ignorantly speaks back to Cassandra's translations, her vision of moral clarity via reversal of power comes into focus.

Another irony emerges from Motto and Clark's observation, since they note that Agamemnon's ignorance mirrors Cassandra's prophetic possession. They describe him standing "uncertain and uncomprehending" (139), mirroring Agamemnon's own observations of Cassandra—he calls her *ista vates corpus effusa ac tremens* ('that prophetess, her body spread and trembling' 786) and notes her awakening *marcente visu* ('with drooping vision' 789). According to Motto and Clark, his description of Cassandra in her prophetic fainting also applies to his own waking condition, and her oracular vision supersedes the limited, arrogant vision of Agamemnon, who is a *Marmaricus leo*<sup>27</sup> ('Carthaginian lion' 739) laid low and transformed into a *hispidus aper* ('bristly boar' 892). These disparate descriptions of Agamemnon, spoken by Cassandra in prophetic mode, emphasize his unheroic status, especially in comparison to Cassandra, who sees and translates all these events clearly, above animal status. It is also worth noting the tones of gendered violence in Agamemnon's description of Cassandra; her *corpus*

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<sup>26</sup> This parallelism begins with Eurybates' speech and continues especially in Cassandra's utterances. For a more dedicated study of the similarities between these two characters speeches, see Schiesaro, "Entropy."

<sup>27</sup> Michael Hendry provides an interesting study of the textual ambiguity of the lines surrounding this phrase, although they are more relevant to a study of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus than of Cassandra. Additionally, this occurrence of lion imagery links Seneca to Aeschylus (828, 1257-9) and Wolf (3, 8, 138).

*effusa ac tremens* (786) and half-conscious state connote an unnerving vulnerability, especially to sexual violence. Although Cassandra is already a survivor of violence at the hands of Apollo (although this receives little to no treatment in Seneca), Oilean Ajax, and Agamemnon, it is Agamemnon himself who will soon be a victim of violence at the hands of his vengeful wife<sup>28</sup>, despite the irony of his comments on Cassandra's vulnerable body. Rather than inquire into Cassandra's visions or consider them at all, he proceeds oafishly, uncomprehending of the ironic import of his words for Cassandra's fate or his own.

#### V. Conclusion

I have now read Cassandra in a new appearance and literary context as translating in a novel mode—as she sees the violent people and acts around her, she translates them into a moral order characterized by reversals of power and restoration of balance. While contemporary accounts of moral order might contradict Seneca, today's readers must nevertheless reckon with Cassandra's power to speak truth in a world otherwise awash with disorder and acts of violence. Additionally, I have outlined the qualities that make Seneca's mythological utterance unique to his time and place, leading to contextualization of Cassandra's truth-telling in *her* time and place in the Senecan text.

These hermeneutic processes are not only relevant to studying an ancient drama, however, and I push these theoretical commitments into our understanding of women truth-tellers in *our* time and place. Our world is similarly awash with disorder and violence as in Seneca's world, not least of all as our newsfeeds glut with headlines of chaos, mistrust, and anxiety. When we approach women who dare to speak of a moral order—especially an order in which no woman deserves to be assaulted, whatever she chooses to wear or drink—we must

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<sup>28</sup> Lots of scholars have studied the gendered implications in Clytemnestra's murder of Agamemnon, especially in Aeschylus, sometimes reading sexual pleasure into her homicide.

listen with patience and attention. When these women's stories upend the reputations of rich and powerful men, we can desist with our worries that 'no man is safe' from a new culture of truth-telling—even since Seneca's *Agamemnon*, 'great men' have fallen (in much worse ways) in the face of women's true testimonies.

### Coda: From Myth to #MeToo

The preceding chapters examined Cassandra's appearances in ancient myth, studying some primary texts in which she is 'canonized' into the Western mythological imagination. With these characterizations in mind, I turn to read Cassandra in alternative texts and contemporary incarnations. The classicist's work of studying the ancient texts is in some ways easier than drawing broader, more contemporary socio-cultural connections because the political valence of classical studies is far less obvious than cultural criticism in one's own moment. Yet, as I spent more and more time with Cassandra in her Aeschylean and Senecan contexts, she began to appear more and more often in the world around me.

#### I. Cassandra Speaks in Survivors

Early in the stages of the project, I frequently explained my research as an investigation of Cassandra as 'woman truth-teller.' I retain this description and add the title of 'translator,' understanding translation in a broader sense that, as previously discussed, makes truth known in a new way. As the cultural landscape shifted in the wake of #MeToo, and later on, the Kavanaugh hearings, Cassandra's resonance was hard to miss.

In the #MeToo movement, countless women broke the silence associated with sexual assault and rape culture and found courage and solidarity to speak truth. The hashtag, frequently posted on Twitter and Facebook with or without other user commentary, made known the prevalence of sexual assault. Its presence across social media told survivors that they were not alone in their experiences; it responded to and liberated women who, like Cassandra in the Aeschylean *Agamemnon*, said "I was ashamed to speak of it before" (Carson 899). The #MeToo movement worked to remove the burden of shame from survivors and create a sense of solidarity. Co-founder of the movement Tarana Burke commented on National Public Radio's

*TED Radio Hour* that, before she began sharing other women's stories of assault, "I thought it was just me and Maya Angelou." The #MeToo movement makes painfully obvious that no woman is alone in her survivorship of assault. Cassandra might join a chorus of women—including Daphne, most famously—who spoke that they, too, were assaulted by Apollo. Obvious (to some) is the parallel to the chorus of women finally unveiling that they were violated by powerful male figures such as Harvey Weinstein and R. Kelly.

In the chapter devoted to Cassandra in Aeschylus, I argue that Cassandra speaks truths that had never before been breached, unveiling histories of violence behind Agamemnon and his house. In this vein, we can read Cassandra as speaking acts of violence that were previously unspeakable yet lurked beneath the surface of a powerful man's history—not just the crimes of Agamemnon's forebears, but also his own crimes in sacrificing Iphigenia and taking Cassandra captive. #MeToo empowers survivors to speak the unspeakable that was perpetrated by powerful men and unveil the history of sexual violence that has *always* undergirded male power structures. While #MeToo has been accused of increasing or abetting false allegations against men<sup>29</sup>, I argue that this movement has pulled back the curtain on the violence that was once regarded as 'normal'. Naming this violence and drawing it into the light of public discourse—much as Cassandra does for the Mycenaean chorus and her Athenian audiences—is far from promoting false allegations. Nor does this public honesty produce some 'losers', namely, men with social power<sup>30</sup>. Instead, it sets a precedent of truth-telling, even when the stakes are high.

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<sup>29</sup> See, for example, Armstrong Williams for *The Hill* in 2018, "#MeToo madness could destroy male college athletes," and Jeremy Diamond for CNN in 2018, "Trump says it's 'a very scary time for young men in America.'" For poll evidence, see NPR's Tovia Smith, "On #MeToo, Americans More Divided By Party Than Gender," where she surmises "more than 40 percent feel the [#MeToo] movement has gone too far."

<sup>30</sup> See Williams and Diamond, as above.

The stakes in this form of truth-telling reached new heights during the Senate hearings preceding the confirmation of Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh. I was already in the thick of this research project by the time Dr. Christine Blasey Ford testified in front of Congress and the rest of the nation. Objections to Kavanaugh’s confirmation based on policy and court record notwithstanding, the debate surrounding Kavanaugh quickly turned into a ‘he-said, she-said,’ especially because of the time elapsed since the incident occurred.

Former Senator Jeff Flake’s comments following Dr. Ford’s testimony echo the chorus’ response to Cassandra after she divulges her ‘shameful’ survivorship. Flake says blandly, “It was impossible not to be riveted with her testimony. She was compelling. That was impactful. It really was... That was a big deal” (quoted by Trautwein). Compare with the Aeschylean chorus just after Cassandra speaks the truth of her Apollonian assault and curse: “Yet we at least think that you prophesy convincingly” (Collard 1213). Note especially the shared language of ‘compelling’ or ‘convincing’—it recalls respectability and credibility politics, which have little to do with outcome or action. Instead, they comment on the women as if they are performers. Even as both the chorus and Senator Flake—and of course Senator Orrin G. Hatch<sup>31</sup> in his memorable description of Dr. Ford as “an attractive, good witness... [and] pleasing”—ostensibly describe the woman’s testimony as affective, their ensuing decisions are not at all informed by this experience. Both Cassandra and Dr. Ford speak about assaults that happened years or decades ago, and neither of these incidents can be corroborated by other parties.

Instead, their testimonies hinge on their presentation as witnesses and survivors, and they must navigate what *New York Times* gender editor Jessica Bennett calls “The ‘Tight Rope’ of Testifying While Female.” On one side of this tight rope lies emotional expressiveness and

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<sup>31</sup> Quoted by Sheryl Gay Stolberg and Nicholas Fandos for the *New York Times*, “Brett Kavanaugh and Christine Blasey Ford Duel With Tears and Fury.”

affect, which quickly leads to labels of ‘hysterical woman’ or ‘nonsensical’ testimony. On the other side lies stoicism and detachment, which quickly leads to accusations of ‘insincerity’.

Bennett records the trial as a “glaring double standard: a woman who gained trust by maintaining ultimate composure—by balancing her expertise with being unthreatening—and a man who tried to convince the world... by losing it: waffling between anger and tears, red in the face.”

Cassandra too wrestles with this double standard and (also unsuccessfully) walks a similar tightrope, where she balances her testimony alternating between the two poles of prophetic ecstasy<sup>32</sup> and calm, rational declaration<sup>33</sup>. The balancing act makes for a ‘compelling’ or ‘convincing’ testimony, but as previously discussed, this success does not equal a change in action. Neither Dr. Ford nor Cassandra would receive any kind of positive reception if they exhibited the same kind of testimony and temperament that earned Judge Kavanaugh understanding and sympathy, even presidential approbation<sup>34</sup>.

The chorus in Aeschylus sounds eerily familiar to contemporary demands for ‘evidence’ that may not always exist: “I’m like that too, at a loss for words... We should be discussing this from clear knowledge; guessing is different from knowing clearly” (1360-1366). For the chorus, Cassandra’s testimony did not qualify as ‘clear knowledge’. Because of this, however, the only evidence they *can* receive is Agamemnon’s dead body. I cannot help but ask, *What else do they expect?* Clear knowledge, in some cases, can only come from testimony. Who, in this case, can testify? Only Cassandra, or perhaps the perpetrator, Clytemnestra. In the Senate hearings, an FBI investigation was supposed to provide the ‘clear knowledge’ to justify a vote for confirmation. In

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<sup>32</sup> As numerated in Collard: 1072-1173, 1214-1257, 1305-1311.

<sup>33</sup> 1178-1212, 1258-1303, 1316-1330.

<sup>34</sup> See President Donald Trump’s tweet: “Judge Kavanaugh showed America exactly why I nominated him. His testimony was powerful, honest, and riveting [...]”

the context of the hearings, and the larger conversation around sexual assault, a similar sentiment declares: *believing [a survivor] is different from knowing clearly.*

Cassandra, in my view, is an archetypal figure to speak truth to power. Just as every survivor who contributes to #MeToo speaks truth to the patriarchal structures that conceal and

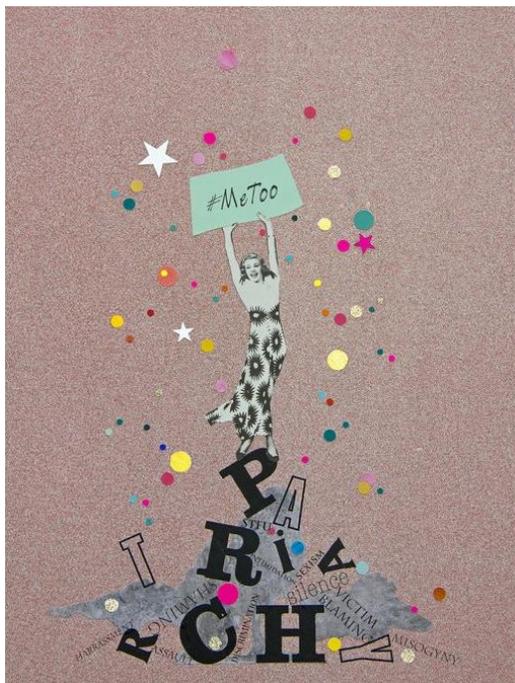


Figure 4: Kathleen Morris, "Standing on the Patriarchy." Featured by Jessica Bennett, "The #MeToo Moment: Art Inspired by the Reckoning." The New York Times, 12 Jan 2018.

normalize sexual assault, so too Cassandra speaks to the structures that conceal Atreid crimes. Although the fate of the house of Atreus is already decided, the fate of our current society is yet undefined—perhaps with enough collective force, the patriarchal structures that have silenced survivors' accounts might yet crumble.

Kathleen Morris depicts this possibility with whimsy in 'Standing on the Patriarchy,' where the banner of #MeToo is held high above the deconstructed word *patriarchy* and its symptoms and structures: misogyny, victim blaming, silence, harassment, assault. We might imagine Cassandra as

among the first female voices to loosen the ties holding together the patriarchy and gendered violence which #MeToo works to eradicate. Or, perhaps, the woman who proclaims #MeToo participates in Cassandra's energy and echoes belief and hope back to her, across the millennia.

## II. Cassandra in the Christian Tradition?

As I worked through Cassandra's appearances in the great mythological tradition inherited by Western cultures from Greece, I began to ponder whether she might appear in other mythological traditions, albeit in altered form. I looked next to the ancient institution with the greatest myth-

making power in my upbringing: the Catholic Church<sup>35</sup>. I intend no sacrilege when I discuss the Church as a producer of myth—I again refer to myth from a Structuralist lens, as discussed in Chapter 2, such that it connotes a system of signs through which meanings are constructed. The Church provides a robust selection of signs, evident in the long history of Christian visual and written art.

To find Cassandra in the Church, I had only to read the Gospels and find another disbelieved woman truth-teller who passes through mythological tradition with ambivalent reception—Mary Magdalene. She appears in all four Gospels present at the Crucifixion and at the tomb as among the first witnesses of the Resurrection<sup>36</sup>, but the Gospel accounts offer little else on her character, besides her devotion to Jesus’ ministry and her own healing from seven demons<sup>37</sup>. Despite this lack of historical data, she has persisted in religious imagination in quite disparate iterations—Mary Ann Hinsdale describes this ambivalent persistence as “a simultaneous canonization of Mary Magdalene as a prominent disciple, prophet, and apostle, while still maintaining her marginalization as a prostitute” (78, citing King). Hinsdale addresses the confused or insidious hermeneutics which led to identifying Mary Magdalene as a sex worker or otherwise sinful woman, although it exceeds the scope of this study (78-81). These identifications echo the tendencies to understand Cassandra as ‘shortchanging’ or ‘cheating’ Apollo in a form of moral defiance<sup>38</sup>. Even Debnar’s otherwise astute reading of Cassandra in the *Oresteia* commodifies her as a virginal body and sacrifice without attending to her actual utterances regarding justice.

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<sup>35</sup> Of course, I could also refer to the broader Christian tradition. I choose to focus on the Catholic Church, however, because of its historical ubiquity and its specific influence on me.

<sup>36</sup> Matt. 27:55-56, 28:1-10; Mark 15:40-41, 16:1-11; Luke 23:49, 24:1-11; John 19:25, 20:1-18.

<sup>37</sup> Luke 8:1-3.

<sup>38</sup> See discussion in Chapter 1, §3.

In both these cases, mythological confusion, facilitated by patriarchal readings, diverts attention from the most powerful and compelling roles of these women and the truths they speak. As an alternative to the patriarchal readings of Mary Magdalene, Hinsdale emphasizes developing a ‘Magdalene function’ for truth-telling women in parallel with the ‘Petrine function’ so emphasized in Catholic discourse on church leadership (82). Why has it proven so difficult to imagine, emphasize, and emulate Mary Magdalene as a woman apostle and witness to the crucifixion and resurrection, especially when these functions are so easily ascribed to Peter and John?

Despite the historical tendencies to misread Mary Magdalene (and likewise Cassandra) into a variety of negative feminine stereotypes, Mary appears in the Gospel as the first one to speak the truth of the Resurrection. Robert Kiely describes the mythological image of Mary Magdalene, as historically received, as “fixed in a permanent state of *hysterical* self-recrimination” that at once affirmed and denigrated women’s emotional expression (16, emphasis mine). This description echoes Cassandra, especially in the Aeschylean *Agamemnon*, where her ecstatic affect makes for good drama but nevertheless elicits animal metaphors and disbelief from the chorus. In parallel, the image of Mary Magdalene as ‘hysterically self-recriminating’ makes for a convenient (to the patriarchy) depiction of a notable woman apostle that nevertheless conforms to the ubiquitous and negative ‘hysterical woman’ stereotype. By fitting Mary Magdalene and Cassandra into misogynist stereotypes, patriarchal readings of these myths undermine the power and truth of these women and their witnesses.

As frustrating as it is to encounter the historical disfigurations of Mary Magdalene's role as witness and apostle, I now turn to honor the witness she provides in the Gospel of John<sup>39</sup>. At the open of Chapter 20, Mary arrives at the tomb before dawn and discovers it empty; she tells Peter and the beloved disciple and they promptly return as a group. After Peter and the beloved disciple return to their homes from the empty tomb, Mary remains there weeping. Here, Jesus appears to her alone, calls her by name, and instructs her to carry a message to his other followers. The passage concludes, "Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her" (*New Revised Standard Version*, John 20:18). Mary bears the message that forms the foundation of the Church.

In this Gospel account, Mary is *the first* to encounter Jesus after the Resurrection and the first to hear the message of the Ascension—she sees him at the tomb in verse 14, while the other disciples encounter him five verses later in the locked upper room. In fact, Mary *translates* the disappearance of Jesus' body into the Resurrection, Ascension, and fulfillment of the scriptures—the Gospel writer describes that Peter and the beloved disciple "did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead" (John 20:9). Jesus, a few verses later, instructs Mary to tell them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God" (John 20:17), and she brings the message to them—a *translation* in the most literal, Latinate sense<sup>40</sup> of the word. Mary is, in this account, the most important witness to the Resurrection, since she makes it known to the group that will eventually form the body of the Church.

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<sup>39</sup> The longer ending of Mark would also make an excellent candidate, but I choose John simply out of personal preference. It is worth noting, however, that Mark explicitly describes that "when [the disciples] heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, *they would not believe it*" (16:11, emphasis added).

<sup>40</sup> 'having brought [a message] across', from *trans* (across, preposition) and *latus* (having brought, past perfect participle of *ferro, ferre*)

Although the Gospel offers no comment on how the disciples received her message, it does prioritize Mary Magdalene as the first and archetypal messenger of the good news.

This study of Mary Magdalene departs from Cassandra in a very profound way—while Cassandra most often speaks truths of doom or violence, Mary Magdalene offers a message of fundamental healing and restoration. I choose nevertheless to read Cassandra and Mary Magdalene side by side as women truth-tellers because their messages have the power to transform the people and societies around them for the better. If we can heed Cassandra’s voice that unveils systems of patriarchy, suppression, and violence, we will inch closer to creating a world of justice. If we can likewise heed Mary Magdalene’s voice that offers hope, healing, and Christ-ordained space for women truth-tellers, we will participate in creating a world reflective of the love of God.

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@realDonaldTrump. "Judge Kavanaugh showed America exactly why I nominated him. His testimony was powerful, honest, and riveting. Democrats' search and destroy strategy is disgraceful and this process has been a total sham and effort to delay, obstruct, and resist. The Senate must vote!" *Twitter*, 27 Sept 2018, 3:46pm, <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1045444544068812800>.

## Appendix A: Suggested Reading on Cassandra

Over the course of this project, I have gratefully received many suggestions and ideas for how and where to read Cassandra. Because of limitations of time and resources, I was unable to pursue the many promising lines of inquiry where I might find her or other figures who speak in her legacy. Below is a brief list of possibilities, all of which I hoped to fit into the project at some time or another.

### Women's Re-visions of (Cassandra's) Myth

Barker, Pat. *The Silence of the Girls*. Doubleday, 2018.

Oates, Joyce Carol. *Angel of Light*. E.P. Dutton, 1981.

Wolf, Christa. *Cassandra*. Trans. Jan van Heurck. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984.

### Alternative Cassandras

Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring*. Houghton Mifflin, 2002.

Weil, Simone. *Waiting on God*. Harper Classics, 2009.

### Women's Commentary and Criticism

Norris, Mary. *Greek to Me*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2019.

Woolf, Virginia. "On Not Knowing Greek." *The Common Reader*. University of Adelaide, 2015.

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## Appendix B: Two Journal Entries on Cassandra

*Inspired by Christa Wolf's travel essays accompanying her novel, Cassandra*

7/16/18

I sit with Cassandra through the eyes and mouth of Aeschylus as I eat my lunch, as I sit on the rocks at the beach, as I swing in a hammock under towering firs. I bite my nails out of contemptible habit, out of empathy, out of breath as Cassandra sits motionless in the chariot. Her eyes are wild and dark. I sit with her as she noiselessly absorbs the exchange between her captor Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, watching each word stream toward the ultimate gory fulfillment. Her vision cuts through the pretense, tears the fabrics to shreds, and demasks Clytemnestra; all that remains is the floor sprinkled with blood<sup>41</sup>. That's why she hesitates to get out of the chariot. She sees the gore, she hears the knife striking the flesh with a sickly thud. She tastes the cup of blood-libation, and she assuredly smells the death, lingering and strengthening through the generations. Why place her foot in it and complete the immersion?

--

Sitting with Cassandra makes me want to listen to Rage Against the Machine and all the other political punk I can think of. I feel the violence of the guitars buzzing in my bones. I throw my head with the pounding beat. The aggressive images and language and vocals fill my body with energy, destructive (but productive?) energy. The lyrics on my lips tear apart the injustice I see, shred the systems I detest. (*Yeah the movement's in motion with mass militant poetry... It's the beats and the lyrics they fear / The rage is relentless / We need a movement with a quickness.*<sup>42</sup>) I conduct the sound waves, I conduct the energy; while I thrash my neck and growl with the music, it is mine. I didn't write the words, nor the music, but for the moments it's in my lips and

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<sup>41</sup> Line 1092 of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, trans. Christopher Collard.

<sup>42</sup> "Take the Power Back" by Rage Against the Machine, self-titled album.

in my body, I seize it. When the song is over, I return to my normal mode, speech in my stereotypically feminine voice, offering my political and intellectual sentiments in aesthetically-pleasing packages of verbal constructions. But when the music turns on, then I'm raging and swearing and tearing with more ferocity than can fit in my 120-pound body. (*Roll right, roll call! But now we're alright, we're all calm!*<sup>43</sup>)

I like to imagine that Cassandra creates a similar process. Apollo's prophecy seizes her, but she just as much seizes it. Maybe Apollo's oracles are not unlike Tom Morello's guitar licks; she takes them up into her self and conducts their message with a terrifying electricity. The crackles and the shattering light in her utterance make her audience turn their eyes and ears away, ask her to turn down the volume and shut down the plant. We dial it louder, louder than our bodies can hold, because *it's all the same*<sup>44</sup>. In her voice she unveils generational violence. In her song, she relentlessly makes images of familial transgression; gory, surreal pictures of hatred and evil that no one wants to name, no one wants to see. As she sings and rages and writhes, she tears away the veils of generational silence. She speaks larger than life, far beyond the limits of everyday language, with the lasting resonance of instrumentation with only her voice. Then, with a breath, she returns to plain speech, and the late arrival of her everyday voice startles her hearers.

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Who is this exhausted prophetess, once a princess, now a slave? How has she withstood the loss of her family, her home, and her autonomy, only to be assaulted and insulted again by the onslaught of prophetic fever?

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<sup>43</sup> "Roll Right" by Rage Against the Machine, *Evil Empire*.

<sup>44</sup> Aeschylus, line 1239.

Cassandra offers no answer, only herself and her voice. Cassandra survived it. Cassandra speaks. She denies her hearers' offers of inspirationalist<sup>45</sup> platitudes. She knows the death before her; she knows the disasters behind her. With truth and pity for mortal men on her lips, Cassandra walks into the palace.

8/2/18

I've reached the point where I gaze at Cassandra on the stage and I no longer know what to say.

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She screams over and over again: revulsed by the bloodied children of Thyestes; horrified at Clytemnestra's raised, sword-wielding arm over the ensnared Agamemnon; grieved at her home and her family's unceremonious end; appalled at the adultery; exhausted by the burden of prophecy. Finally, she looks toward the house. No longer in the sins of the past and no longer immersed in the future of doom, she stands resolved for the journey at hand. She grows quieter, more concise. *Hello, gates of Hades*<sup>46</sup>. Walks with purpose, one step at a time.

One scream more: flowing human blood in the house, the ancient odor. *It's so evident*<sup>47</sup>, but of course they don't recognize it.

Silent steps. At the threshold.

Turns, slowly, runs her eyes over each old Argive man. Their steady gazes discomfited, vacillating between unwanted understanding and ignorance. Resist the urge to look away. Resist the kernel of comprehension. *You, / you, / I pity*<sup>48</sup>. A rush of air ripples her clothes, her hair loose, no longer in prophetic fillets. Door closes; she is gone.

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<sup>45</sup> A self-coined neologism: an 'inspirationalist' sentiment expresses empty "You're so brave!" or "You inspire me!" as a weak platitude for those who have endured suffering, such as illness, sexual assault, or other catastrophes.

<sup>46</sup> Carson, 965.

<sup>47</sup> Collard, 1311.

<sup>48</sup> Carson, 1003-1005.

No one knows what to say. The old men start their talking, because they don't know what else to do. Everyone is relieved, breath comes a little easier. The trembles remain. Still here, too, are the prophetic staff, the bands which clung to her neck until her final moments.

*Final moments?* At least here before us. It's not our business to judge what we don't see ourselves. We didn't understand what she was trying to say, anyway.

She seemed pretty worked up about it.

More screams, these more undignified than the first. Still, not for us to judge.

We never know what to say in these situations.

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What can I say at this point?

I'm among the countless readers who encounters Cassandra in this moment of discomfort. I empathize with the Chorus' paralysis, hesitation, unwillingness to find out more. But I, too, am disgusted by this pattern. The only questions they ask (beyond the rhetorical ones of disbelief and misunderstanding) needle into Cassandra's moments of deepest shame and trauma. When she leaves, the Chorus appropriates her message, as if she had never articulated it first.

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How can I respond to this woman and the violence she speaks, the violence she's endured? How do I respond, acknowledging my complicity in this voyeuristic and resistant chorus? My misunderstanding, confusion, frustration with her alternately enigmatic and graphic images?

--

My questions echo the vacillation of the Chorus just after she exits. I choose to respond, to incorporate her message, to investigate its darkness and its light. My intimidation and my hesitation—I leave them to the millennia of the disbelievers.

I believe her. I hear her. And I write back to her and her disbelievers.