

**REVIEW<sup>1</sup>: LAURA MONRÓS GASPAR. 2011.  
CASSANDRA THE FORTUNE-TELLER. PROPHETS,  
GIPSIES AND VICTORIAN BURLESQUE.  
BARI: LEVANTE EDITORI. ISBN: 978-88-7949-575-2.**

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This book is an important contribution to the studies of classical tradition and reception, as well as to the studies of feminism and literature in the Victorian period. Keeping in the line of the serious and detailed publications that stem from the researchers linked to the Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama at Oxford, this book deals with the cultural processes of reception of Cassandra's myth in the Victorian burlesque theatre. Moreover, the scope of the work is to unveil 'the ongoing dialogue between present and past civilizations in order to apprehend the cultural processes which have shaped modern societies' (p. 15), a target which is brilliantly accomplished thanks not only to the clarity of the thorough exposition but also to the comprehensive critique of the data and their historical contexts.

The main body of the book falls into four chapters and three appendices, apart from an extensive introduction devoted to the character of Cassandra 'from Homer to the 1600s'. In fact, this introduction is key to the understanding of the book as a whole, as it clarifies the different versions that explored and refigured the appealing female archetype of Cassandra from the first attested sources in Graeco-Roman Antiquity until the seventeenth century. Paying due attention to each one of them, Laura Monrós underlines the importance of the tradition that makes Cassandra as a prophetess a prefiguration of the Victorian Cassandra eventually associated with witches, gypsies, and popular fortune-tellers. In this sense, Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* will prove an important literary antecedent, although from Chaucer to Sheppard there is ample evidence that Cassandra's foreknowledge is the prevailing feature in the artistic and literary refigurations of her myth.

Chapter one is focused on the influence of translations on the different appropriations of the time. Especially concerned with the translations of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and Homer's *Iliad*, this chapter deploys an exquisite and rigorous sensitivity to the importance of translations as 'cultural interventions' (p. 61). The excerpts taken under consideration are highly relevant for the characterisation of Cassandra both in the source and the target texts, which range from Robert Potter's in 1777 to Edward Hayes Plumptre in 1868. As Laura Monrós sums up, "whilst nineteenth-century translations of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* evoke peripheral Cassandra-like social types such as gypsies and fortune-tellers, the translations of the *Iliad* connect the Trojan princess with literary women in accesses of frenzy" (83).

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The syncretism between these two translated depictions “results in a system of signs which accounts for Victorian relations of power in terms of class and gender” (88).

Chapter two examines nineteenth-century Cassandra in a wide range of artistic recreations illustrative of the gestures, movements and attitudes that are conspicuously attributed to Hecuba’s daughter. It is possible to trace a sort of evolution in the representation of these portrayals of Cassandra from the Regency to Victorian England with all their religious, social, cultural, and political implications. Furthermore, this development is explored as a social semiotics in relation with the growing interest in characters like prophets, gypsies and fortune-tellers. In this sense, Laura Monrós places due emphasis on the fact that whilst early eighteenth-century Cassandra is characterised by sorrow and agitation, late Victorian interpretations allude to a demonesque sage woman related to witches, sorceresses and other *femmes fatales*, which testify to the patriarchal reactions against the claims for equal rights on behalf of the poorer classes, particularly women.

Chapter three turns to the comic reception of Cassandra from the eighteenth-century comic street theatre to the equestrian burlesque of the nineteenth century. Once more the analysis of the exhaustive recollection of data deserves recognition, most of all because of the accurate view on the importance of these popular genres as precedents of the burlesque and precursors of a more responsive Cassandra.

Chapter four ends with the study of the burlesque genre and the case in point of Robert Reece’s play entitled *Agamemnon and Cassandra, or; the Prophet and Loss of Troy*. The importance of the burlesque is proved on the grounds not only of the merits of a genre that goes beyond topical allusions and recurrent puns, but also of the valuable possibilities that opens to the research of the reception of Greek tragedy in Victorian England. Laura Monrós’s study manages to prove both qualities. Following the understanding of Reece’s play as an ‘intertextual extravangaza’ proposed by Fiona Macintosh, Laura Monrós shows the implications of this particular refiguration of Cassandra within the context of the New Woman debate: “Reece combines hackneyed allusions to Cassandra with humour. The comic variable introduces an alternative equation in which laughter might serve as a catalyst for questioning social realities, in this case the relation between women and knowledge” (p. 193).

This book is completed with three appendices. The first appendix deals with some of the illustrations that have been mentioned or studied throughout the book. The second appendix provides a list of ‘Modern Cassandras’ as refigured in verbal, performance, and plastic art from the fourteenth century to 1953. The third appendix is a full edition, with notes and apparatus, of Robert Reece, *Agamemnon and Cassandra, or; the Prophet and Loss of Troy*.

The scrupulous edition as well as the philological detail displayed on texts and contexts are some of the most evident qualities of this remarkable book. It is squarely backed up and partakes in the valuable methodology of reception studies and classical tradition, where the names of Lorna Hardwick in the U.K. and Carmen Morenilla in Spain have taken the lead. In fact, Laura Monrós’ work belongs to the research team GRATUV (Grup de Recerca i Acció Teatral de la Universitat de València), which has a long experience in the research and documentation of the performances and plays from the Ancient Theatre till the present.

There are only two minor objections to the book. One of them has to do with the typography of the Greek letters, which have no breathings and need some revision. Page 78 has also wiped out the circumflex accents. Readers would have appreciated it if translations of the Greek and Latin texts had been offered. Needless to say that despite these minor defects, scholarship will welcome this accurate and invigorating publication.