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***Cassandra the Fortune-Teller: Prophets, Gipsies and Victorian Burlesque.* Laura Monrós Gaspar. Bari: Levante Editori, 2011, pp. 330**

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The growing scholarly interest in Victorian popular performance can be noticed by the critical attention the field has been attracting lately. In England, three conferences have been devoted to this topic alone during 2012. The titles of the conferences – “Race, Nation and Empire on the Victorian Popular Stage” (Lancaster), “Politics, Performance and Popular Culture in Nineteenth-Century Britain” (Birmingham) and “The Popular and The Middlebrow: Women’s Writing 1880-1940” (Newcastle) – bear witness to how Victorian popular culture is positioning itself as an important field within the academia. A main concern is how the popular stage mirrors the Victorian public perception of social issues and how popular culture may shape contemporary political debate of the nineteenth century—a period Tracy C Davis and Peter Holland refer to as “the performing century” (2007: 7). The book under review presents a timely study of the origins, development and cultural reception of the Cassandra myth on the burlesque stage. Laura Monrós points out that the persistence of the Cassandra myth in English art and literature can be proved by the ample evidence that exists of representations of the Trojan princess as a prophetess, both from misogynist and subversive viewpoints. Another reviewer of Monrós’s volume, Joanna Brown, insists on the persistence of interpretations of Cassandra as “a powerful symbol of the silenced woman” and notices that she remains strong cultural influence up to late twentieth century (2012: 1). One of the central questions that occupy Monrós is how Victorian refigurations of the Cassandra myth engages with nineteenth-century social concern regarding women and education. The scholar generally looks into how the myth found its way into the English popular imagination and specifically examines how Victorian re-imaginings of Cassandra mirror the contemporary frame of mind highlighting the importance of the semiotic triangle of life, theatre and painting.

In the introduction she contends that there is a substantial gap of studies concerning Victorian representations of Cassandra on the English popular stage. The main scope of the volume is “to unveil the cultural processes behind the reception of the Cassandra myth in Victorian burlesque theatre” (2011: 14). With this objective in mind Monrós sets out to trace the persistence of the mythological heroine in English theatre history—by concentrating on popular entertainment of 18th and 19th century, she begins with a description of early Cassandra refigurations to later close with a case study of Robert Reece’s burlesque play *Agamemnon and Cassandra or the Prophetess and Loss of Troy* (1868). The volume as a whole intertwines the popular reception of classic mythology and its representation in art and on stage as an expression of socio-political concerns emphasising that “the semiotic dialogue between art and reality which employs nineteenth-century popular theatre [is] an essential tool for reading the social history of Victorian England” (2011: 14). This validates popular culture as a vehicle of social commentary although it is often juxtaposed with high- or middlebrow culture as serious art. On the contrary, as Barry J Faulk points out, popular forms of entertainment often acculturated its audiences and came to be invested with deeper content (2004: 23-24). The volume consists of a preface, an introduction and four chapters that are organised in a chronological order that narrows down from a general description of cultural interpretations of the Trojan princess to an analysis of a specific play. The arrangement offers the advantage of providing the reader with a complete cultural background of the Cassandra myth before reaching the final chapter. The three appendixes include illustrations, a list of modern representations of Cassandra and the full text of Reece’s play, which is particularly useful as supplementary material to chapter four. Finally, the work includes a list of references and an index.

Chapter one, "Cassandra and the Classics in Translation (1820-1868)" is concerned with nineteenth-century translations of the Greek classics centring mainly on Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and Homer's *Iliad* and briefly mentions other sources. Monrós argues that these texts provide a cultural substratum for burlesque re-figurations of Cassandra as witch, gipsy, and fortune-teller in the Victorian period. The scholar establishes the main topic by addressing important aspects the nineteenth-century interpretations of the Cassandra myth and linking them to the popular view on women at the time. The first part is dedicated to Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and offers a comparison of six different translations spanning five decades to describe the development of Cassandra into a witch or gipsy-like fortune-teller later to be popularized in Victorian burlesque. Providing a panoramic overview of six of the available translations between the 1820s and 1860s, from Hugh Stuart Boyd to Edward Hayes Plumtre, the author claims that the different examples mirror contemporary concerns about women and education as a potential threat to the patriarchal structure – an idea she returns to in subsequent chapters. Women's situation improved as the century unfolded and subsequently pejorative connotations describing the Trojan princess in terms of a witch diminished in literary translations. Martha Vicinus points out how Victorian women's status was undergoing a slow but irrevocable change and that education was one of the areas that underwent a radical improvement (1977: xiii). In this sense, Monrós's book testifies to how society responded to this change. The critic argues that 1860-interpretations of Aeschylus enhance Cassandra's prophetic ability and possession of knowledge in juxtaposition with her position as an outsider. This gave room for a connection between the Trojan princess and popular social icons as gipsies and strolling fortune-tellers that fascinated the Victorians. The second part considers depictions of Cassandra in terms of madness and hysteria through translations of Homer's *Iliad*. Monrós stresses how the popularisation of Homer in the Victorian period accommodates frequent allusions to Cassandra in burlesque as a madwoman. As the nine translations under consideration coincide with the staging of the first burlesque representation of Cassandra, these texts serve as a mirror of the contemporary ideological climate. The author describes how the frenzy imagery of her visionary powers rests upon Victorian cultural codes of feminine conduct and icons of female madness and weakness. Therefore, she

wishes to draw attention to previously overseen evidence of a specific vocabulary that points at Victorian views of female madness in translations of *The Iliad*. At the end, Monrós poses the question whether nineteenth-century burlesque Cassandra serves as an example that perpetuates or subverts Victorian womanhood. Indeed, the nineteenth-century popular theatre was a social space where the socially accepted was questioned and undermined through performance. Dagmar Kift contends that popular forms of entertainment "made mockery of middle-class interpretations of 'Victorian values' and set up their own alternatives in opposition" (1996: 2). Similarly, Judith R. Walkowitz highlights how popular culture in the Victorian period frequently transcended the social and cultural limitations of the working classes (1992: 43). In these lines Monrós adds the category of gender by analysing how burlesque Cassandra mirrors gender debates.

This is an idea that the author delves into in the following chapter entitled "Nineteenth-Century Cassandra" in an examination of literary, pictorial and popular representations of the mythological heroine. She stresses the significance of spiritualism and its impact on the Victorian imagination, yet she does not develop this thoroughly. Instead, the author makes an effort in describing the eighteenth-century perception of Cassandra, especially in France, as it is fundamental for any study of the Greek myth in Regency or Victorian England. After she has established the typical representations of Cassandra on the French stage by analysing gestures, movements and attitudes, the author links these findings to the nineteenth-century description of the Trojan princess in terms of a prophetess or gipsy-like fortune-teller anchored in the popular imagination of the period. Monrós argues that the reception of Cassandra in popular culture mirrors women's peripheral situation in access to knowledge as the tragic princess is rendered as a prophet, gipsy or fortune-teller. She proves this by analysing what she refers to as the semiotic triangle of life, art and theatre. A parallel between the pictorial representations of Cassandra and nineteenth-century translations of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* is drawn proving that her gestures, movements and attitudes stress her despair, which points at an underlying sociological discourse about women's underprivileged situation. The critic analyses how the Cassandra myth touches on major issues of the Victorian era concerning gender moving towards the conclusion that "the myth becomes the

epitome of a very specific female *other* in the late Victorian arts" (2011: 124; original emphasis).

Chapter three, "Comic Cassandra (1707-1854)", offers a description of the evolution of comic Cassandra from its French precursors in the eighteenth century to early nineteenth-century stagings of what Monrós refers to as 'comic Cassandra' in England. The author stresses the importance of the French forerunners as these paved the way for reworkings of Cassandra on the English popular comic stage. After tracing its origins, Monrós proceeds to give an overview of the character of Cassandra within Victorian burlesque as it, according to the author, testifies about "how the popularity of classical mythology went beyond high art" (2011: 126). Consequently, the study demonstrates that popular culture serves as a serious tool of social criticism. In a section considering the equestrian burlesque of early Victorian period she highlights that the bombastic stage effects in conjunction with a sophisticated display of animal exhibitions favoured a popularization of the classic episode of the siege of Troy. She points out that the equestrian burlesque marks a transition of parodist re-figurations of moral Cassandra towards representations of the princess as a shrew-like mastermind, which culminates in Robert Reece's *Agamemnon and Cassandra* – developed in the following chapter.

The fourth chapter consists of a case study of Robert Reece's *Agamemnon and Cassandra; or, the Prophetess and Loss of Troy* (1868) focusing on how Victorian burlesque adaptations of Cassandra manifest the social structures that both underpinned and undermined contemporary gender struggles. In this chapter, Monrós develops previous arguments of the Cassandra myth as an expression of the Victorian concern of women and education by stressing how burlesque stage representations of mythological heroine epitomizes "Victorian need to control knowledge" (2011: 189). She departs from a biographical note on Reece and then moves on to consider his plays and intertextual references. She examines the socio-cultural factors that endorse Cassandra and how the burlesque stage both displays and comments on women's social roles through laughter. This, she argues, both demonstrates gendered discrimination of education simultaneously as it denounces, subverts and reverses it through elements proper to the genre as breeches roles, word puns,

transformation scenes and star actors. In order to demonstrate this, Monrós describes the hybridity of textual sources central to Reece's play, something she refers to as "intertextual extravaganza" (2011: 180). The author offers a description of both Shakespearian tragedy and Celtic mythology, mentioning also private theatricals. She notices that Reece's adaptation of the siege of Troy anticipates late-Victorian intellectual struggles concerning the New Woman by analysing two female characters in the context of intertextual references to Shakespeare's tragedies *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*. Here, Reece's Clytemnestra is analysed in terms of an "anti-angel-of-the-house" version of Lady Macbeth, whereas Cassandra is interpreted as Hamlet-like New Woman. By this, the critic proves that Reece's work was groundbreaking as it was the first play to showcase Cassandra as an ungovernable woman with an active participation and a strong voice.

Interestingly, several experts in Victorian popular entertainment notice how the stage provided a public space for women where they could assume subjectivity and make their voice heard (Faulk, 2004: 112; Kift, 1996: 47; Vicinus, 1977: xviii-xix). Davis argues that the Victorian actress defied bourgeois codes of femininity as a submissive woman and highlighted aspects of self-sufficiency and independence (1991: 69). Then, it is not surprising that Victorian interpretations of a woman in possession of knowledge like Cassandra emphasise traits of hysteria, as educated women were perceived as a potential treat to the patriarchal structure. Thus, popular culture becomes a vehicle of social comment and a subversive tool as it undermines rigid values through laughter. One of Monrós's main claims in the volume is that the burlesque genre serves as a comic mirror of contemporary England, Reece's play reveals the recognition of women's changing situation and echoes a full spectrum of Victorian political and feminist Cassandra, and this is successfully demonstrated in her analysis of *Agamemnon and Cassandra*.

The volume under review serves as a valuable critical tool for researchers of a wide range of fields and may attract scholars of classical reception studies, gender studies or theatre history in particular. For instance, Lucía Romero Mariscalas welcomes the volume as an important contribution to studies of feminism and literature in the Victorian period (2011: 361). In addition, I consider *Cassandra the Fortune Teller* to be a significant work for researchers of popular culture taken that

it is an in-depth analysis of how Victorian popular culture provided a space for socio-political comment. Although the critic seems to concentrate too much on precedent sources to Victorian Cassandra at times, as for example in chapter two where the author spends great part speaking about eighteenth-century French theatre, this should not be taken as a flaw. On the contrary, it provides readers with crucial background information to nineteenth-century refigurations of comic Cassandra, as they are indebted to the French stage, which is fully explored in subsequent chapters. Thus this well-documented monograph presents an effort to unveil the cultural process behind nineteenth-century burlesque receptions of Cassandra and successfully shows how Victorian popular culture reflects the contemporary mindset concerning women and knowledge.

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