



Truths not yet believed: Florence Nightingale's *Cassandra* as a social autobiography of Victorian women

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Abstract— This article examines *Cassandra*, an autobiographical essay written by Florence Nightingale, in its various experiments with the autobiographical form and its implications about representation and individuality. It demonstrates how *Cassandra* blurs the distinction between autobiography and political tract. Nightingale's autobiography makes us rethink characteristic features of the autobiography form like the retrospective structure, the conversion narrative, and moments of self-reflection, when viewed from the position of women. *Cassandra* emerges as a work of persevering intellect from within a social space that had denied women the ability to articulate a critical understanding of their constricted lives, and demands a more meaningful role for women outside the family. *Cassandra* takes the shape of a collective autobiography bordering on a feminist tract that envisions a change in society on behalf of all women.

Keywords— autobiography, *Cassandra*, feminism, Florence Nightingale, Victorian women



Florence Nightingale (1820-1910) is known to us as the "Lady with the Lamp," bringing forth the image of a gentle woman with a candle, soothing wounded soldiers at night in a hospital ward. For many, she is the mother of the nursing profession, who typified qualities like sacrifice, patience, and sympathy for the sick. Yet we must remember that in mid-nineteenth century England, only men were permitted to be waged medical professionals, whereas women were confined to domesticity, and volunteer work at best. Nightingale was in fact one of the earliest women to demand the professionalization of care work that women were anyway expected to do at home, and transformed it into professional nursing. She was also an ardent reformer, an astute statistician, and an indefatigable champion for questioning the crushing idleness imposed on the lives of middle-class English women.

Nightingale today has a mixed legacy. In the medical profession, some see her as an important hospital reformer (McDonald, 2020), but she is also regarded as not representational of the modern nursing profession by others (Hogan, 2020). Her feminism is also questioned. She evaded a direct conflict with society over the right of women to work by inserting professionalization into the older and more conventional forms of activity permitted to women like charity work, which did not militate too

strongly against the ethic of nurturing womanhood. She also lacked empathy for women of a different class or race. But she was a strong critic of the conventional Victorian family, and reinterpreted the Bible by showing women's duty as outside the family. *Cassandra* (1852) --- her autobiographical essay --- within its Victorian context, has been seen to stand as an important text in the English feminist tradition in line with Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* and looking forward to Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* as Elaine Showalter puts it (1981). albeit with defects, and is viewed as a significant text that demanded an intellectual and productive role for middle-class women.

Cassandra was described as an essay in its initial title, and can be seen as a precursor to Nightingale's arguments in demanding productive work for women. But it bears a prophetic tone and a looming warning for those who do not believe the truths of *Cassandra*. Its title name is derived from Greek mythology. *Cassandra* depicted in the *Iliad* is the daughter of Priam and Hecuba, and she is a prophet who was cursed by Apollo to never be believed for her prophecies, as was the fate of her prophecy of the destruction of Troy. Her truths would never be given credibility even by her family. Florence Nightingale is understood as re-creating the mythical *Cassandra* in a new

light, in her autobiographical essay of the same name, a prophet whose truths must be heard and believed. *Cassandra* has been viewed as “adopting the genre of ‘sage writing’, where Nightingale positions herself as a female messiah in an autoreferential narrative that projects women's future possibilities” (Choperena and Rosa-Salas, 2022, p. 444).

Nightingale's *Cassandra* is generally regarded as a veiled autobiography that was inserted in her three-volume work titled *Suggestions for Thought to the Searchers after Truth*, which were her writings on religion, family life, and morality that was privately printed in 1860. It is also regarded as an important influence on John Stuart Mill's writings on women's rights (Cornick, 2012). *Cassandra* was written before Nightingale began her vocation of administrative and nursing reform, and it preceded her subsequent life full of meaningful work that more fully absorbed her energy. It was written at a time when she chafed at the uselessness of her life, and when she identified with women in similar conditions, though we do need to qualify her critique by noting that its area of concern is limited to upper- and middle-class white European women.

Though Florence Nightingale did not perhaps intend *Cassandra* to be an autobiography (as it was published along with several of her writings on religion and morality), it reflects some of the issues she encountered as a Victorian woman. Interestingly in this text, she uses the plural pronoun ‘we’ to include all women. The plural pronoun demonstrates the sheer impossibility for British women of the mid-nineteenth century to write a conventional individual autobiography, like John Stuart Mill could do, which dealt with personal goals. *Cassandra* can be viewed as a sustained and analytical narrative that exemplifies through its very form, an elaborate and thoughtful treatise about women that subverts the assumptions of individuality, that are typically inherent in our understanding of the autobiography form.

Nightingale's text implies that there seems to be no ‘I’ because the author conceives of her life in a way that is also the pattern of the lives of women in her situation. The text begins with the word ‘one’ that suggests a depersonalized subject position and implies a universal voice that she adopts for her sex. She uses the plural form of “we” to refer to women in her situation, for instance in the phrase, “look at the poor life which we lead”. It is clear that she is writing not just her own autobiography, but the autobiography of an entire generation of women. She indirectly refers to her own writing, both as a substitute for work as well as a voice given to point out the subjection of Victorian women in her class-position:

If they [women] were strong, all of them, they would not need to have their story told, for all the world would read it in the mission they fulfilled. It is for commonplace every-day characters that we tell our tale because it is the sample of hundreds of lives (or rather deaths) of persons who cannot fight with society, or who, unsupported by the sympathies about them, give up their own destiny as not worth the fierce and continued struggle necessary to accomplish it. (Nightingale, *Cassandra*, p. 39-40)

There seems to be no possibility of writing a personal life-story here, precisely because for women like her, there was no possibility of realizing individual potential -- with no conventionally individual achievements, women therefore had no tale to tell. As she says, “so many hours spent everyday in passively doing what conventional life tells us, when we would so gladly be at work. And is it a wonder that all individual life is extinguished” (Nightingale, *Cassandra*, p. 38)? For Victorian middle-class women, marriage was to be the whole of their lives and Nightingale sees the wife as subsumed in the shadow of her husband -- “Behind his destiny woman must annihilate herself, must only be his complement. A woman dedicates herself to the vocation of her husband...if she has any vocation of her own, she must renounce it, in nine cases out of ten” (Nightingale, *Cassandra*, p. 40). Women writers like Margaret Oliphant partially escaped this fate of having to give up a vocation because ironically, widowhood and a lack of income as Nightingale herself points out, both forced and permitted a woman to work and such women may then have had a life to reveal.

The idea of wasted time in the life of women at home without a role for useful public work is central to the theme of the subjection of women in *Cassandra*. The text itself is the kind of uninterrupted and systematic thought-work that women of her time were denied, not only by a lack of opportunity and a systematic education, but a lack of continual stretch of time for themselves to be able to create meaningful work. At the same time, *Cassandra* dramatizes the impossibility of self-narration for women through its form, which underscores its suspended temporality that was a characteristic of the lives of women.

The linear developmental lives of men that were full of progress and growth, as recorded in several male autobiographies at the time, can be contrasted with the static, non-developmental female domestic lives of women. Her choice of the mode of essay-cum-autobiography is deliberately chosen as appropriate for her subject. For Nightingale, the genre of novels created a world of fantasy which could sedate women and could not arouse them to struggle for a purposeful life -- “they are exhausted, like those who live on opium or on novels, all

their lives - exhausted with feelings which lead to no action" (Nightingale, *Cassandra*, p. 41). If conventional autobiographies revealed the personal lives of men and analysed their growth and struggles, *Cassandra* reveals the personal domestic lives of all women and analyses their stunted growth, and the almost futile struggles of women against convention -- "One would think we had no heads or hearts, by the total indifference of the public towards them. Our bodies are the only things of any consequence" (Nightingale, *Cassandra*, p. 42). The emphasis on the neglect of women's intellectual growth and sense of purpose reveals the unhealthy focus on women as mere material objects.

The elaborately argued textual form Nightingale creates in *Cassandra* for a sustained and powerful critique of women's position in Victorian England, is a part of the kind of sustained work which she desires for all women -- productive work which requires concentration of time and which is unavailable to them. *Cassandra* works as an effective political critique of women's position in her time because it builds and fortifies her argument in the form of a tract as opposed to a fragmented form like the diary, which tends towards revealing everyday life and can sometimes lack an engagement with larger concerns. For Nightingale, her text as a sustained form of thoughtful writing is an example of what women seek and need in their lives - the ability to reflect on and create a meaningful life - which is possible only through a judicious use of time for one's own intellectual pursuits. She notes how women don't need a patch-work kind of experience, but a systematic education. The constant demands on a woman's time by others for frivolous reasons makes it impossible, as she says, "to pursue the current of one's own thought" and thus women "become incapable of strenuous work" (Nightingale, *Cassandra*, p. 43). Her own writing is projected as her desire to record and share with other women, not only the meaninglessness of their lives but also to point out the lack of social space to even articulate protest:

Women dream till they no longer have the strength to dream... those dreams go at last. All their plans and visions seem vanished ...they do not even remember them... Later in life, they neither desire nor dream, neither of activity, nor of love, nor of intellect. The last often survives the longest. They wish if their experiences would benefit anybody, to give them to someone. But they never find an hour free in which to collect their thoughts, and so discouragement becomes ever deeper and deeper... (Nightingale, *Cassandra*, p. 49)

Cassandra as a form of critique can be seen as an attempt to accord a steady, focused, and analytical

narrative to women's lives against their fragmentary and unfocused lives leading to their inability to engage in even a casual conversation for more than a few minutes, as she points out. She notes how the sheer lack of a length of time available to women prevented the articulation of a political act like speaking for the self and others, and wore away their intellectual energies.

Nightingale suggests that women in being denied the opportunity of discussion and reading may tend to have conservative views of society to their own detriment, than if they were permitted to read, debate, and argue. She provides a materialist view of the trivial minds and political views that women possess, which for her is because of a lack of intellectual nourishment: "For woman is 'by birth a Tory,' has often been said -- by education a 'Tory,' we mean" (Nightingale, *Cassandra*, p. 46). Women are shown as being treated little better than children, in that all intellectual effort in them is stifled, for e.g., in the practice of reading aloud to them which she compares to a slow, continuous torture -- "it is like lying on one's back, with one's hand tied and having liquid poured down one's throat. Worse than that, because suffocation would immediately ensue and put a stop to this operation. But no suffocation would stop the other" (Nightingale, *Cassandra*, p. 34).

Nightingale recognizes the historical contradiction in which women were placed -- an ethic of work had developed for men, but women were still cast in the older aristocratic mode of leisure and ornamental worthlessness. She repeatedly argues for an equivalence of time with money, and argues for how society loses valuable productive labour if women cannot contribute to its progress. She asserts the necessity of work for women by giving professional work the significance of a vocation, and by adding the necessity of training to the sketchy acts of charity that women were permitted to do.

Cassandra does not adhere to the standard conventions of the autobiographies of her time and this is due to the constrained lives of women that cannot conform to the conventional form. It does not have a retrospective structure like the autobiographies of John Mill or Edmund Gosse, who delve into their childhood and trace a change or growth from the past. Nightingale's autobiography, which was cast as an essay, resides in the present continuous as if to emphasize the relentless monotony and stagnation of a woman's life. John Mill's autobiography ends with a sense of accomplishment, and with the hope that he may continue the autobiography if he lives to achieve more through his writing. The end of Nightingale's text hovers on weariness and futility. In its ending though, it does gesture towards a symbolic hope of a second coming of a female Christ who could liberate women.

The form of the typical autobiographical conversion moment takes a new twist in *Cassandra*. Nightingale does not convert to a new form of faith or philosophy. Rather, she grows through her writing and analysis into a new understanding. *Cassandra* is permeated with religious references but the writer redefines Christianity and interprets lines from the Bible on her own terms. For instance, Nightingale breaks out of the space of feminine autobiographical writing about family life by critiquing the Victorian concept of a woman's duty towards family on religious grounds. She redefines individuality by placing it outside the family and into community or society. This is done by interpreting Christ as a figure who advocates a commitment to the larger community over and above the family. Work is projected as a means of self-realization and as a contribution to the progress or benefit of mankind.

The retrospective structure of a conventional autobiography is replaced by showing the causal connection between the lack of opportunities for women, and the gradual loss of their identity. *Cassandra* as a social autobiography of Victorian women shows the impossibility of growth for a woman into an individual identity. The text places responsibility on men and women for the confinement of women to the home – “men are afraid that their houses will not be so comfortable, that their wives will make themselves 'remarkable' -- women, that they will make themselves distasteful to men; they [women] write books (and very wisely)... to persuade themselves that domestic life is their sphere and to idealise the ‘sacred hearth’” (Nightingale, *Cassandra*, p. 52). It is not clear what sort of writings by women Nightingale is referring to but many Victorian novels, that depict marriage as the happy end of a woman's life, would fit this category.

There can be no female figure of self-reflection in *Cassandra* as there might be in conventional autobiographies because of the sameness of women's lives. The figures depicted here are of men against whom she seeks to rethink the identity of women. This is done by imagining men in the impossible situation of doing the trivial things women do, like visiting during the day or doing ornamental needlework. Through this image of men in feminine roles, she seeks to then imagine women in the position of professional men whose time is valued as productive and of a profitable nature.

One significant figure of self-reflection though, is that of Christ, through whom she sanctions her project of criticizing social conventions, by showing him as a figure of protest, because he could act on his wish to reform society – “The great reformers of the world turn into the great misanthropists, if circumstances or organization do not permit them to act. Christ, if he had been a woman.

might have been nothing but a great complainer... The next Christ will perhaps be a female Christ” (Nightingale, *Cassandra*, p. 53). Christ is seen as a reformer only because he could act on his reformatory impulses and therefore symbolizes what a complaining woman would be perceived as, if she could act on her complaints against the world. Nightingale shifts the figure of self-reflection from male to female, and past to future by wishing for a female Christ to come.

Cassandra is an autobiographical text that does not glance backwards to analyse the present, but in examining the present, posits a future. For instance, of marriage she says “the intercourse of man and woman--how frivolous, how unworthy it is! Can we call that the true vocation of woman -- her high career?... The true marriage... probably does not exist at present upon earth” (Nightingale, *Cassandra* 44). The text moves into a futuristic vision of a quasi-religious mode of salvation for women. It is clear that a hoped-for Saviour, like Christ was for all men, will not battle for her own freedom but will give voice to the liberation of all women – “till at last there shall arise a woman, who will resume, in her own soul, all the sufferings of her race, and that woman will be the Saviour of her race” (Nightingale, *Cassandra*, p. 50).

Cassandra does not finally reveal a sudden conversion to a faith or ideal as many autobiographies did, but offers a growth into and a reinterpretation of an already held religious conviction by giving it a materialist slant and a political telos. If Christ has raised women to the level of humanity by according them a spiritual life, Nightingale insists that “the Age, the World, Humanity, must give them [women] the means to exercise this moral activity, must give them intellectual cultivation, spheres of action” (Nightingale, *Cassandra*, p. 50).

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