

Cassandra: A Poetic Drama in One Act

by [Evelyn Hooven](#) (January 2019)



Cassandra Being Dragged out of the Temple of Minerva, Antoine Rivalz, 1700

In our era, as we try to give formerly hidden or disregarded matters of assault their due, it may be worthwhile to enlarge even our broad perspective and consider some of the ancient roots in thought and legend that concern violation by the mighty of the less powerful.

Cassandra, in accord with her truest nature, rejects the advances of the god Apollo himself. Apollo makes cunning use of his awareness of the adolescent's nature and combines the erotic with the gravely punitive. Beyond the social and professional worlds of which, at this time, we're acutely aware, we enter the realm of the spirit which here is isolated and injured. The realm of legend suggests the size and gravity of the domain where we now try to seek redress and closure. Cassandra's prophetic gift must exact a radical summoning of courage.

Here is my telling of the instance when Cassandra receives her prophetic gift.

(Troy before the Ten Years' War. The marriage and ceremony of Paris and Helen. Shouts of strained festivity, intermittent and far away. The action takes place at the temple of Athena. The temple has fenced garden, a quality of shelter and quiet.

Enter Apollo disguised as a beggar, a kind of raffish scamp from the operatic, comic world.)

APOLLO

(Elaborately looking both ways)

I thought I would come to see

The interestingly unholy matrimonial.

Helen is part goddess

And, besides, I watched

Her marriage to Menelaus—

Quite a boring, drawn-out thing.

I don't know where those Spartans

Find their priests.

I thought this time 'round

I'd spice things up a bit,

Beg and clown until

(Grandiose self irony)

I revealed myself.

But early in the ceremony

I got tired of standing

With the rabble

All agog at hospitality

And tired of all those Trojans

Manfully ignoring unsavory facts,

Offering Helen all courtesy—

More, I thought, than her due;

And I was bored—incredibly enough—

Even with myself . . . Apollo,
I thought, how many times
Have you played this pranklet,
Isn't there any way besides disguise,
Anything new but another you?
It's gotten to be a routine!
Have you lost your resource,
Must you spend your (ironical sigh) eternity
In repetition?
Look, Apollo, I said,
I'm leveling with you:
Today, here and now,
Find something new.
Then I saw what seemed
Like a teenager—
Hair long, figure very lithe—
Swaying, way beyond
The ordinary fidget
In restless distress;
And, though she was with
The family party—
Held a cloak

Loosely folded and ready.
Between the crowd
And her own turning
This way and that,
I couldn't see her face.
Interesting, not beautiful,
I guessed. A beautiful
Young girl would be poised
For the ceremony
And not fidget so.
She'd be enchanted with it all
And see herself, in time, in Helen's place.
What does she mean, though,
Making her way, stealthy
Indecipherable
Away from this assembly?
I'll follow her.
She moved through the roads
So quietly and quickly
I could hardly keep up
Without making noise.
I thought:

This girl,
Who doesn't seem flirtatious,
Has gone to meet a lover
When she won't be missed.
How clever of her to get away
During the rush and strain
Of festivities . . .
Is she headed for the temple?
Is she some hypocrite
Asking forgiveness
For the sin
She's about to commit?
But why of Athena—
Unchaste's not necessarily unwise,
And wisdom isn't chastity.
She seemed,
In her long cloak and hood,
Directed straight here—
Then disappeared.
I thought: she'll arrive,
Then her lover,
I'll find a place to hide.

Have I made a mistake?

Has she changed her mind?

I think I'll have

Another look around.

(Exit Apollo in one direction as Cassandra enters from the opposite one. She is about sixteen: potentially strong and simple, though confused right now. She is wearing a plain robe, cloak with hood, and sandals. Her demeanor is flushed, anxious and uncertain.)

CASSANDRA

I couldn't stand it there!

Everyone trying to pretend

It was a perfectly normal marriage

Like Hector's to Andromache.

How can my parents seem

So conciliatory and serene?

As they made ready,

I watched them convince themselves

That they are not dishonored,

That the female was unhappy,

Not disloyal,

And the male a rescuer,

Not a marauder.

The tyrannic festivity

Carries its own momentum,

And I'm a solitary

Dissenter, abstainer . . .

Why should it bother me so

That Helen is stolen

By my brother,

Her husband's guest?

After all, her husband

Is no kin of mine.

Still, I hope no one

Noticed me gone.

I was so restless,

Wanted to thrash my way,

But inched it quietly

Past this one and that

And another one,

All the time calming

The wildness . . .

(Pause)

Helen is beautiful—
When she walks past,
No matter who you are,
You want to reach out and touch her.
Her clothes glide and sway,
The folds of her gown
Seem to blossom . . .
That won't be me when I grow up.
I can't go Helen's way.

(Pause)

Or Andromache's either—
She's so quiet and motherly
As though she's known
The secrets of earth
Too long to explain—

(Clear admiration)

Not letting on,
Saying yes or no
So modestly,
Yet all the time,

Wiser than anyone . . .
Except, of course, Hector.
I'm so glad it wasn't Hector
Stole another man's wife.

(Pause)

They wanted me to be married
Before long—a cure
For restlessness, solitude—
For everything that they say
Bothers me. I don't want it.

(Realizing it for the first time. Startled, then serene)

I never wanted to live a long time;
I want to know my deed,
Do it and go.

(Begins to move slowly towards shrine of Athena)

If my deed isn't Helen's
And isn't Andromache's,
Then, what?

(Her monologue turns, with no intrusive transition, into her prayer to Athena)

That's why I came to you, Athena,
Because when I asked my mother,
She smiled and said,
I see that Cassandra is self-willed
Like her brothers. No spouse
Will do but one of her own choosing;
She will not marry

(Cassandra registers the irony of this)

For family dignity
Or to bear princes—
Cassandra must be truly in love . . .
The knowing Hecuba smile
That once inspired such confidence
Chilled me, but I left it at that . . .
Queen Hecuba, I've no wish
To make you sorrowful,
But Cassandra's solitude
Feels insoluble.

Cassandra, my father once said,
Feels strange signals
In markings on the temple;
An elaborate imaginer
Still afraid of the dark;
Let the right man arrive
And the fright will go.
Barter for shadows,
Said my mother,
The cries of the newborn;
There are cries of fright
Far different from the dry shriek
Of sacrifice or war—

Is there something wrong with me, Athena,
That I sense this marriage as death knell,
As—were I to dare pronouncements—a doom?

(Relief and fear at having said it out)

O, Athena, I'm lonely and need help
From you who had no mother;
More than for beauty

Love or marriage,

I feel a need for wisdom.

(Enter Apollo breathless from running. Cassandra, kneeling at Athena's statue, has her back to him. Apollo tries to get a look at Cassandra's face. His asides are delivered straight out to audience.)

APOLLO

So there she is after all;

I'm not sure of her name,

Though I did meet all her family

Years ago. And even if

There should be more to her

Than meets the mere eye,

I'd like to see her face.

CASSANDRA

(To the goddess)

Athena, I'm bewildered.

Until the moment that she came,

I felt the soul was everything

(Ironic smile from Apollo)

And all real beauty, within,
And not only man
But woman as well
Able to have noble hopes.

Since she came, I find
My body too soothed by silks,
Too scratched by wool;
And I'm not at all sure
Why anyone does anything.

APOLLO

(Aside)

I think I'll decide to stay.

(Sprawls)

CASSANDRA

I look at the ceremonial

And the room becomes too small.

There are messages,

There are whispers,

And I listen for a melody

Beneath the public noise.

Am I modeled wrongly,

Is Cassandra other

Than what it's comely

To be?

APOLLO

(Aside)

So that's her name!

I should have remembered . . .

CASSANDRA

Athena, I feel alone in the world,

And very much afraid.

APOLLO

(Aside)

These few years were a long time
For a female mortal;
She grew from some holy, silent child
To a young woman strangely compelling.

CASSANDRA

Sometimes it seems
That no one welcomes me.
As Helen arrives
They're attentive and alert;
Andromache's announced
And there's a warm content;
When I approach,
I sense a stiffness
From behind the door,
A submerged interrogative
Or turning away . . .
No gladness
When it's Cassandra.

(Cassandra continues to move her lips in prayer. Apollo's

next aside is simultaneous with this. He inches up to her, slightly histrionic.)

APOLLO

There is no lover.

What an odd, high-flown girl;

I hadn't thought of it this trip,

But why not? It'll be more

Interesting, wiser too,

That that old beggar prank.

CASSANDRA

(Barely audible)

Fears take root in me,

Grow and will not break;

Help me, Athena.

Something strange governs me,

And nothing is as it was.

APOLLO

(Close behind Cassandra)

Why so long upon your knees, Cassandra?

(Startled, Cassandra whirls around. Apollo stands back, solemn while he speaks aside, then resumes his rakish pose.

Aside, to audience)

She's a lot prettier than I thought.

All those spiritual murmurs

Didn't lead me to expect this . . .

(To Cassandra)

You have a remarkable face;

I've been trying to get a look at it;

I know an artist sent me out

In search of unusual faces;

He'll make you a sketch

At a special rate.

CASSANDRA

(Composing herself with difficulty)

I've no gold or silver with me,
Not even coins . . .
Besides, this is a temple;
Try some other time.
You can ask my parents . . .

APOLLO

(Aside)

The lady's very courteous
To interrupting beggars—
A princess if ever there was.

(To Cassandra)

Ask your parents?
Are you the kind
Who stays a child forever?

CASSANDRA

(Straining to be courteous)

I'm no child;

I've griefs you'd never
Understand.

APOLLO

To be sure—if you say so.
But, meaning no disrespect,
Has no one yet
Made a woman of you?

CASSANDRA

(Infuriated)

You have no right—

APOLLO

Give me the right, Cassandra.
If I ask a question,
You can ask me one.

CASSANDRA

How do you know my name?

APOLLO

Do you want to use up your question that way?

CASSANDRA

What is your question?

APOLLO

I asked it, already.

Why so long upon your knees, Cassandra?

CASSANDRA

I've come to ask for a kind of purification.

APOLLO

What a large thing to ask.

Do you wish to be set apart

Like some high princess?

Are you proud, Cassandra?

CASSANDRA

You've already used up your question.

Now it's my turn.

APOLLO

(Aside. Enthusiastic)

Oh, Cassandra, if you'd only go
The ways that you renounce,
You'd be quite an adventure to know
Though, as I recall, you're not even
Part-goddess.

CASSANDRA

(Reflectively)

Where did you come from?

APOLLO

That's easy. The same place you did.
I watched you leave, then followed.

CASSANDRA

But why? And where were you before?
I'm sure I've never seen you.

APOLLO

We're both too interrogative
To play at questions one at a time;
But it was my turn.

CASSANDRA

The wedding distressed me.
I needed to be alone,
And still do, if you won't
Consider that rude.

APOLLO

(Half ignoring her)

Don't be too hard on Helen.
She is part-goddess—
An enchanting woman
Whose fate will be magical.
She's wiser than Oedipus
And much more lucky.

CASSANDRA

She doesn't strike me as wise.

APOLLO

You needn't be envious, Cassandra;

You're younger than she is,

And, though not as beautiful,

There is something about you

That quite stirs me.

CASSANDRA

I don't feel the same way

About you.

APOLLO

Not yet.

But you will.

CASSANDRA

Now that I see how arrogant you are,

I ask again to be left alone;

You did intrude upon me, you know.

APOLLO

So speaks the humble, questing penitent;
Far be it from me to interrupt
Your falsely modest self-congratulation.

CASSANDRA

None of that is true.

APOLLO

Oh, it's all right, Cassandra.
To err is really quite divine;
I'm a charlatan, too.

(Blaze of light appears and quickly fades)

CASSANDRA

Who are you—really?

APOLLO

I'm someone even higher than Hector.

CASSANDRA

When I asked you to go away—

APOLLO

I wasn't offended.

It meant my disguise

Was very effective . . .

Come now, you needn't be

Intimidated. Is someone

Beyond Hector

So unimaginable to you?

CASSANDRA

Who are you?

APOLLO

Be patient.

Ask me a larger question first;

Anything you like . . .

CASSANDRA

(Brief pause. Tentative)

Do you sense
That I have any special deed
Of my own?

APOLLO

(Cagey. Testing her)

You will make some fine prince
A stately wife—like Andromache.
You look disappointed.
Isn't Andromache's fate
Good enough
For a modest and holy girl?

CASSANDRA

It isn't a matter of good enough—

APOLLO

Then—

CASSANDRA

It's a matter of—divinely ordained
Or even—appropriate.

APOLLO

Would having an eminent lover

Be appropriate?

Would that be a deed

Special enough

To please Cassandra?

Why do you hesitate?

Why not dance or embrace me?

CASSANDRA

What has a bewildered girl

To do with splendid lovers?

It's too great an honor.

APOLLO

A bewildered girl

Can be a splendid lover herself.

CASSANDRA

Is that my special deed?

APOLLO

At the moment—why not?

CASSANDRA

And the future?

APOLLO

(Aside)

The future, you stupid girl!

For all I know Troy will burn

And you'll be taken concubine,

Lose your mind and die young.

(To Cassandra, exasperated but feigning gallantry)

This is the present, Cassandra,

The extraordinary present . . .

I came to Troy disguised as a beggar,

Do you mean to make me beg in earnest?

CASSANDRA

If I'm to make
Some man a stately wife,
Surely there can be
No lover now.

APOLLO

No one need know.
I'm the sort
Who can be very discreet.

CASSANDRA

I'll know. My dreams
Will turn to flesh too soon.
Need one explain
That marriage is more
Than solemnized carnality?

APOLLO

Solemnized carnality! How you talk. . .
Have you guessed who I am, Cassandra?

CASSANDRA

(Confused)

You're—someone extraordinary—

I'm not sure.

(Blaze of light during which Cassandra startles mightily, tries to get away. Apollo prevents her, holds her by both wrists.)

APOLLO

Don't be afraid.

You don't even know

Just which god I am.

CASSANDRA

I'm—not ready for you!

APOLLO

What arrogance!

How could you ever be?

CASSANDRA

Once or twice I've dreamed—

APOLLO

Your dreams!

CASSANDRA

Of a true love. I don't believe

I'm ready for it.

And—excuse me, Sir—

I don't believe it's you.

APOLLO

Cassandra, a god

Who might command you

Offers himself.

It's a great honor.

Think of the child you might—

CASSANDRA

Like Helen?

APOLLO

What's wrong with that?

CASSANDRA

Once I dreamed—

APOLLO

(Trying to contain his rage)

Your dreams!

Cassandra, I desire you,

Let's be lovers.

CASSANDRA

I don't mean to offend you—

I'll make it up to you somehow;

I'll fast, pray, tangle

My hair, wear coarse garments,

Walk barefoot on stones, or even coals—

APOLLO

Ugh! Please—nothing

So vulgar as that!

I dislike petty sacrifices.

You have offended me.

CASSANDRA

I'm sorry.

APOLLO

(Cajoling. Cassandra's refusal is clearly not real to him.)

Though I didn't expect

Immediate consent

From a virgin of sheltered dignity,

You are incorrigible,

Even a little priggish;

But you appeal to me

And I must have you.

I give you a few minutes more

To play out your maiden

Hesitation,

And then—the garden . . .

CASSANDRA

(Emphatic, though frightened)

No!

APOLLO

What's the matter, Cassandra?

Am I not quite impressive?

CASSANDRA

I want to find my own deed

And my true love;

I don't want to be some—

APOLLO

(Very sarcastic)

Plaything of a god—?

CASSANDRA

If you must put it that way.

APOLLO

(No longer containing his anger)

I thought you were proud, Cassandra.

Now I see you're too humble;

You've set your sights

Much lower than a god.

All you want is assurance

That you're not outclassed

By your distinguished

Sisters-in-law.

Some simpering Trojan warrior

Will remind you

Of your virtuous brother . . .

Would you like me to strike

Andromache dead

So Hector can be your mate

Or—true love, as you

So quaintly put it?

CASSANDRA

God though you are,

Please go out of this temple

And leave me to myself.

APOLLO

Cassandra!

(Pause)

I like your courage.

It moves me to offer you

One more chance.

Cassandra, you are just

At the brink of womanhood

And have the makings

Of a remarkable creature.

Be my bride this hour.

CASSANDRA

How many brides for an hour

Has your godship had?

APOLLO

Many.

CASSANDRA

And will have many more.
What does one less matter?

APOLLO

Very well. I wanted you.
More than I expected.
You are not the sort
One overcomes by force,
And I feel a certain deference
For your age. I'm leaving,
Let me kiss you before I go.

(Cassandra is relieved. An embrace)

I give you a gift,
Cassandra.
Since you are concerned
With dreams
And the future—
Have them.

Have the future

Before you all the time:

You are now a prophetess.

(What follows must be done in a clearly improvisatory way. No god-like omniscience or preconception. He is furiously angry and is making up as he goes along the worst retaliations he can think of.)

To the first gift I add another.

One that will guarantee

Your purity

And privacy.

You asked me to leave you

To yourself. I will,

And so will everyone else!

CASSANDRA

(Slow. Trying to take all this in)

You mean that people will be afraid?

APOLLO

Yes. I grant you

Perpetual loneliness

And incessant dreams.

Cassandra, I really wanted you.

(Holding his ground)

Extraordinary dreams;

Haunted secrets

That are also

Plain facts.

(Very improvisatory)

Purified you will be,

And severely wronged, always.

You will not have a moment's peace.

Dream the truth

Tell all the truth

And no one will ever

Believe you.

Live with your visions only,

They will hurt you.

They'll be true,
But no one will ever
Believe you.

(Drops disguise—cloak, matted wig, etc. A real blaze of light. Hold. He is splendid, Michelangelesque.)

CASSANDRA

(Real terror)

Apollo!

APOLLO

(Moves downstage. Aside.)

I went a bit far,
But she had several chances.
And because of her
I felt something akin
To—were I human—
I would call it pain.
She took retribution

A bit too stoically.

If she had wept, got down

On her knees, wrung my hands

A bit, I might have thought

It over-put a time limit-

Something like that-

But-she stood there and took it.

Besides, it's gotten too complex

To think about. Adventure

Can get complex.

(EXIT. Blaze of light remains)

CASSANDRA

(Distraught. To the place where Apollo last stood)

I'm only young, Apollo,

You have forever to live;

Please, reconsider,

Apollo!

This was only a visit for you,

But it's all the life I have . . .

(Straightens up. All plaintiveness and pleading stop. It is apparent that she sees something terrible. She whirls about, eyes moving from walls to ceiling. She puts hands on eyes, hands on head. Is changed, more adult, speaks with authority and great dignity as well as submerged horror.)

Send Helen away.

Send the stranger

Who is no brother at all.

His name is P A R I S,

He—who-is-wed-with-ghastly-death.

(Blackout)

Evelyn Hooven graduated from Mount Holyoke College and received her M.A. from Yale University, where she also studied at The Yale School of Drama. A member of the Dramatists' Guild, she has had presentations of her verse dramas at several theatrical venues, including *The Maxwell Anderson Playwrights Series* in Greenwich, CT (after a state-

wide competition) and *The Poet's Theatre* in Cambridge, MA (result of a national competition). Her poems and translations from the French have appeared in *ART TIMES*, *Chelsea*, *The Literary Review*, *THE SHOP: A Magazine of Poetry* (in Ireland), *The Tribeca Poetry Review*, *Vallum* (in Montreal), and other journals, and her literary criticism in Oxford University's *Essays in Criticism*.

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](https://twitter.com/NERIconoclast)