



# The sage Nightingale and *Cassandra*: Drafting the future of nursing

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** In a period of hopelessness motivated by a restrictive Victorian society that confined women to the domestic realm, Florence Nightingale wrote the cathartic *Cassandra* (1852) in an attempt to transform her despair into rebellion.

**Aims:** To discuss Nightingale's approach to women's role in *Cassandra*.

**Methods:** Historical Research was used to analyse *Cassandra*. Data gathered from primary and secondary sources were synthesised and reported in terms of their historical context and significance.

**Findings:** Adopting the genre of 'sage writing', Nightingale positions herself as a female messiah in an autoreferential narrative that projects women's future possibilities for release.

**Discussion:** Assuming the identity of a prophetic Greek heroine cursed to never be believed, Nightingale's *Cassandra* claims professional work as the liberating solution for Victorian women.

**Conclusion:** For the first time, Nightingale predicts in *Cassandra* some incipient prerequisites for a future nursing path for women's change.

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### Summary of relevance

#### Problem or issue

Substantial contributions of Florence Nightingale to women's rights are less well known.

#### What is already known

Florence Nightingale's work conditioned the professional configuration of nursing from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onward. Florence Nightingale's most recognised contribution came during the Crimean War.

#### What this paper adds

In her veiled autobiographical account *Cassandra* (1852), Nightingale points to professional work as a path for women's liberation. Nightingale's *Cassandra* sketches for the first time prerequisites for a future profession of nursing.

## 1. Introduction

Florence Nightingale (1820–1910) not only contributed to the development of British nursing from the nineteenth century onward, but also conditioned the configuration of nursing for the rest of the world. Although some research has challenged the status quo of her professional contribution (Nelson & Rafferty, 2010; Williams, 2008), Nightingale's work supported hospital reformism (McDonald, 2020), the original role model for clinical academic nursing (Pattison et al., 2020) and the theoretical basis for nursing professional development (Bostridge, 2008; McEnroe, 2020).

Nightingale's lesser-known facet as an advocate for women's access to the social sphere beyond Victorian restrictions has remained in the shadow of her professional contribution. This work analyses how her valuable essay *Cassandra*, written in 1852 in a transitional phase of grief and despair and eventually published in 1928, can be understood as a feminist transgressive plea in which Nightingale reveals her relationship with Victorian conventions in a veiled autobiographical story in which, for the first time, professional prerequisites for nursing may be observed.

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## 2. Background and aims

In the Victorian society of the mid-nineteenth century, British women were excluded from education, voting, and the opportunity to access professions (Griffin, 2012; Midgley, 2006). They lacked voice and faced many barriers to participating in the public sphere (Martin, 1999). Women were viewed as wives or mothers, and the woman who was neither wife nor mother was called the ‘odd woman’ or the ‘redundant woman’ (Stark, 1979).

These limitations did not prevent young Florence Nightingale from delving into an appealing intellectual restricted world against the opposition of her mother and sister under the secret guidance of her father (Showalter, 1981). After many tries (Bostridge, 2008), in 1849 (Ellis, 2020), she was able to visit Kaiserswerth, and she witnessed how women deaconesses, led by Theodor Fliedner, provided high-quality nursing care based on study and training (Kreutzer & Nolte, 2016). In a British industrialised society in which a significant number of health issues arose from filthy and strenuous working conditions, this experience strengthened Nightingale’s natural calling towards care. Additionally, her experiences accompanying her mother on charitable visits to the sick provided a way to escape Victorian rigidity (Holliday & Parker, 1997).

In 1852, during a period of hopelessness motivated by a restrictive society with no appearance of change, ‘my present life [was] suicide’ (Woodham-Smith, 1951), Nightingale wrote *Cassandra* in an attempt to transform her despair into rebellion (Woodham-Smith, 1951). This essay belongs to a three-volume work, *Suggestions for Thought* (1852), which relayed her views on religion, the working class, and the female issue. Initially, Nightingale intended to write a novel through a dialogue between two characters, Fariseo and Nofriani, in which she would discuss divine law and moral right. Nightingale’s writing ultimately resulted in a revolutionary essay about women’s roles and work and their torturous position facing lives of enforced idleness in the mid-Victorian period (Ellisor, 2005). In this context, a close analysis of *Cassandra*’s intersection between female position and professional work may offer new perspectives.

## 3. Methods

In this study, the historical research method was used. Historical research is the ‘systematic collection, critical evaluation, and interpretation of historical evidence’ (Polit & Beck, 2008) with the purpose of gaining insights from the past in light of the present (Renjith et al., 2021). The historical primary source was *Cassandra*. Secondary sources were related literature. Data gathered from primary and secondary sources were synthesised and reported in terms of their historical context and significance. Findings regarding Nightingale’s view in *Cassandra* were interpreted in relation to the secondary sources.

## 4. Findings and discussion

### 4.1. An outcry against women’s repression

*Cassandra* remained formally unpublished during Nightingale’s lifetime. Initially, the work settled in the form of an essay that was completed just before her departure to Crimea War and that was privately shared in 1860. Nightingale revised the essay many times and sought the advice and acquiescence of men, such as the popular John Stuart Mill and Benjamin Jowett, rather than sending the manuscript to the literary women she knew so well (Showalter, 1981). Although Nightingale’s voice won overwhelming endorsement in the late 1850s after her actions in the war, her literary *Cassandra* was not heard much until the twentieth century,

when it became widely available with the publication of the 1928 edition (Monros-Gaspar, 2008).

Nightingale’s choice of the *Cassandra* myth as the frame for her narrative is revealing. In the Greek literature, *Cassandra* was a Trojan princess captured by Agamemnon who had rejected the love of Apollo. She was sentenced to receive the gift of prophecy but to never be believed (Showalter, 1981). Thereafter, *Cassandra* became a prisoner of her own knowledge: she could predict the future, but no one would listen to her claims (Ellisor, 2005). In this sense, *Cassandra* is both an insightful feminist treatise and a veiled autobiography; in fact, Nightingale referred to herself more than once in her letters and diaries as ‘poor *Cassandra*’ (Cook, 1942; Shaddock, 1995). She sensed the possibilities of the figure of this feminine myth as the symbol of women’s-imposed limitations but also as the voice of their expected appropriation of a previously forbidden sphere of action (Monros-Gaspar, 2008).

*Cassandra* can be considered a first-person female prophetic narration that denounces the lack of activity and the absence of the female voice in the lives of upper-class women of the Victorian era (Monros-Gaspar, 2008). In particular, *Cassandra* is the product of Nightingale’s confinement to the domestic sphere as mandated by her mother Fanny and her sister Parthenope (Ellisor, 2005) in a period of emotional despair when it appeared that her family would never allow her to be trained as a nurse (Showalter, 1991):

“And family boasts that it has performed its mission well, in as far as it has enabled the individual to say, I have no peculiar work, nothing but what the moment brings me, nothing that I cannot throw up at once at anybody’s claim”; in as far that is, as it has destroyed the individual life (Nightingale, 1979, p.38).

This confinement frequently led Nightingale to evade reality by daydreaming, something that she sometimes considered a sin, and sometimes a way for young women to escape their idle lives and develop their intellectual, spiritual and social inclinations (Monros-Gaspar, 2008). The writing of *Cassandra* was a necessary release for her (Ellisor, 2005): “I have come into possession of myself”, she wrote to her father upon finishing the document (Showalter, 1981).

The cathartic outcry against feminine oppression manifested in *Cassandra* was not translated into explicit support for political activism. To understand Nightingale’s peculiar position in the field of women’s rights, or what recent scholars have called ‘feminine language’ (Hallett, 2021), her turbulent relationship with Fanny and Parthenope due to their continuous recriminations against Florence’s desires for freedom should be considered determinants of her own approach. As Nightingale’s female relatives were strongly conventional for their time, her desires for progress and equality remained constrained, and the lifelong contest with her mother and sister limited the terms of her feminism (Showalter, 1981).

### 4.2. The female sage

Paradoxically, Nightingale assumed in *Cassandra* the role of a social reformer who placed her voice (Landow, 1990) at the centre of the public discourse (Monros-Gaspar, 2008). Indeed, as a gendered reappraisal of the figure of a sage woman, Nightingale employed in *Cassandra* many techniques that characterised the genre of sage writing (Landow, 1990). The genre, which was very popular in the Victorian era, was a creative nonfiction approach in which the writer instructed the reader about contemporary social issues from a position of moral superiority (Carlyle, 1858; Landow, 1990). Victorian women did not usually write as sage writers (Landow, 1990). The concept of sage women was related to more pejorative labels, which evidenced how patriarchal structures impeded women’s freedom and their access to knowledge (Monros-Gaspar, 2008).

Nightingale employed the sage characteristics acts of creating a public self in an age when women were not supposed to have public selves (Landow, 1990). She emphasised the social differences between men and women that allowed the former to have a social occupation and to cultivate intellect in society: 'But a woman cannot live in the light of the intellect. Society forbids it' (Nightingale, 1979, p.37). Beyond this, she challenged the theory of separate spheres (Rosenberg, 1982) and pointed to the silence of women as one of the symptoms of the social malady of her time. Provocatively, she placed women as co-responsible for this condition:

"Women are never supposed to have any occupation of sufficient importance not to be interrupted, except 'suckling their foals'; and women themselves have accepted this, have written books to support it, and have trained themselves so as to consider whatever they do as not of such value to the world or to others, but that they can throw it up at the first 'claim of social life.' They have accustomed themselves to consider intellectual occupation as a merely selfish amusement, which it is their 'duty' to give up for every trifler more selfish than themselves" (Nightingale, 1979, p.32).

Nightingale was demanding with women, which led her, at times, to present mixed feelings towards them. Sometimes she became impatient when they had to defy male schemes: "It is acknowledged by women themselves that they are inferior in every occupation to men" (Nightingale, 1979, p.40). Other times, she considered women incapable of thinking or 'unreasonable children' (Shaddock, 1995).

In this respect, Nightingale establishes in *Cassandra* a four-part prophetic narration (Landow, 1990) in which she positions herself in the sage's higher position, outside of society and following the laws of God. In the first part, Cassandra points to some signs of her time that help readers situate in a particular context:

Why have women passion, intellect, moral activity . . . and a place in society where no one of the three can be exercised?" (Nightingale, 1979, p.25).

In the second part, sage Nightingale interprets the previous phenomenon as a symptom of falling away from God. In this sense, she describes the way women rejected the opportunity to exercise intellect and remained in dream worlds:

"We fast mentally, scourge ourselves morally, use the intellectual hair-shirt. In order to subdue the perpetual day-dreaming, which is so dangerous!" (Nightingale, 1979, p.27).

In the third part, Nightingale highlights the extended state of death-in-life of Victorian women:

"Those conventional frivolities, which are called her 'duties', forbid it. Her 'domestic duties', high-sounding words, which, for the most part, are but bad habits?" (Nightingale, 1979, p.37).

Finally, the Cassandra sage claims change and offers a vision of future joy: "Free – free – oh! Divine freedom, art thou come at last?" (Nightingale, 1979, p.55).

*Cassandra's* intersection with sage writing can also be found through Nightingale's explicit attempts to appeal to the audience's conscience. In this respect, the discontinuous form of the text permits repeated separate pleas to move the readers (Landow, 1990). The more she intensifies and pauses her statements, the more possibilities she has to be effective. This intended discontinuity may also be motivated by a desire to ingratiate herself with male voices despite sacrificing her own (Snyder, 1993). The gap between this intended male rhetorical form and her need to articulate a feminine discourse in a context of censorship has been documented (Showalter, 1991).

Nightingale's attempts to appeal to the audience's credibility are also manifested when she remains ambiguous concerning the identities of the speaker and the female messiah (Ellisor, 2005). It should be remembered that women had to be cautious when speaking about themselves in a context in which female self-representation was under suspicion (Choperena, 2021). In this respect, the first-person narrative and all personal allusions were eliminated after a male revision of the text (Showalter, 1991). This shift from feminine to masculine reflects an effort to overcome traditional gendered barriers (Ellisor, 2005).

Ultimately, Nightingale denies societal restrictions to write and speak as an ungendered female sage. Cassandra places Nightingale in opposition to the audience in the manner of conventional male sages but offers a nonconventional reading of a discourse that projects future women's working possibilities through a powerful tone that enhances her credibility.

#### 4.3. Cassandra: Drafting the future of nursing

In the mid-nineteenth century, the professional domain was closed to single, low-social-status 'odd women', who were limited to work as governesses, dressmakers, factory workers or household servants (Stark, 1979). Except for philanthropic charity, which was considered a legitimate extension of women's natural capacities, Victorian women were usually prevented from developing other activities outside the home (Choperena, 2021; Stark, 1979).

*Cassandra* is an act of rebellion against the conventional life of women, who were excluded from assuming any serious work:

"A woman dedicates herself to the vocation of her husband; she fills up and performs the subordinate parts in it. But if she has any destiny, any vocation of her own, she must renounce it, in nine cases out of ten" (Nightingale, 1979, p.40).

In this respect, Nightingale's bitterness at attempts to suppress women's intellectual power is evident:

The great reformers of the world turn into the great misanthropists, if circumstances or organisation do not permit them to act. Christ, if He had been a woman, might have been nothing but a great complainer" (Nightingale, 1979, p.55).

To understand Nightingale's approach to the nature of work, it is necessary to highlight how religion was positioned in her life. When she was 17, Nightingale experienced the first of four religious revelations that occurred during her lifetime: "On February 7th, 1837, God spoke to me and called me to His service" (Woodham-Smith, 1951). These religious experiences became compelling translations of her intellectual concerns (Holliday & Parker, 1997; Showalter, 1981):

"Jesus Christ raised women above the condition of mere slaves, mere ministers to the passions of the man, raised them by this sympathy, to be ministers of God. He gave them moral activity. But the Age, the World, Humanity, must give them intellectual cultivation, spheres of action" (Nightingale, 1797, p.51).

Given the problem, the sage Nightingale projects a characterisation of a liberating professional path as an outlet for Victorian women's suppressed energies (Hallett, 2021):

"But if ever women come into contact with sickness, and crime, and poverty in masses, how the practical reality of life revives them! (...) If they see and enter into a continuous line of action, with a full and interesting life, with training constantly kept up to the occupation, occupation constantly testing the training - it is the beau-ideal of practical, not theoretical, education - they are re-tempered, their life is filled, they have found their work, and the means to do it" (Nightingale, 1979, p.41).

From there, some topics addressed by Nightingale in her powerful discourse can be understood as projected features of the future profession of nursing. On the one hand, *Cassandra* reflects how the suffering of others can be used as a way for women to achieve deserved recognition. In this sense, women's natural willingness to address suffering requires that they leave their state of idleness and enter men's professional world. In this way, the text becomes a direct challenge to enter the masculine space and assert women's professional power (Ellisor, 2005). Furthermore, Nightingale characterises the contemporary issue of deprivation of food as a dangerous starvation of the soul and the intellect, which is one of the main enemies of her desire for rigour and solid work. In this respect, the parallelism established between corporal and intellectual needs helps Nightingale connect the contemporary physical dimension with a future intellectual realm:

“To have no food for our heads, no food for our hearts, no food for our activity, is that nothing? If we have no food for the body, how do we cry out?” (Nightingale, 1979, p.41).

Finally, Nightingale denounces the defects of a system that left the care of the sick to untrained women following sporadically benevolent impulses (Stark, 1979):

“How different would be the heart for the work, and how different would be the success, if we learnt our work as a serious study, and followed it out steadily as a profession!” (Nightingale, 1979, p.38).

What emerges most strongly from *Cassandra* is the necessity for women to take their lives seriously and to train themselves to conduct professions properly and wholeheartedly (Stark, 1979). In a Victorian restrictive context, her explicit support for women's development and the projection of a new women's liberating path in terms of professional work should be highlighted.

## 5. Conclusion

Before her Crimean deeds, Florence Nightingale wrote *Cassandra* in 1852, long, as a desperate act of rebellion against women's confinement in Victorian society. This veiled autobiographical sage writing positions the author as a new messiah calling for change and shaping her progressive incipient nursing vocation. To achieve women's expected freedom, Nightingale focuses attention on work as a previously forbidden to women realm, but that is actually a liberating path. Invoking the tragic heroine of Greek myth, Nightingale's *Cassandra* struggles to be heard between contemporary misled women who remain in the shadow of the domestic domain but should follow a new professional nursing path fraught with unexpected working possibilities.

## Ethical statement

Ethical statement is not applicable.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Authorship contribution statement

**Ana Choperena:** Conceptualisation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Funding acquisition. **Virgina La Rosa-Salas:** Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing.

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