

Cassandra

Kassandra

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Set during and after the Trojan War, *Kassandra* explores the silencing and ostracization of the titular character, and Troy's political decay during the siege. Written at the height of nuclear tension between the Cold War superpowers, the novel dramatizes the struggles of Cassandra, a shrewd and observant truth-teller, against the backdrop of a military conflict that embroils both sides in a relentless fixation on winning an ultimately unwinnable war. Told in an inner monologue from a female perspective, the novel also indicts this militarism as a consequence of patriarchy, highlighting the objectification, marginalization, and trafficking of women that it normalizes.

The publication of *Kassandra* was preceded by Wolf's 1982 *Poetik*-lectures, held in Frankfurt am Main, West Germany, that chronicled the composition of *Kassandra*. The lectures, which criticized both the Western and Eastern bloc, were hugely popular, and their print publication was partially censored in the GDR.

Cassandra begins not with the announcement of a catastrophe, but after it has already happened: the city has been sacked and destroyed, and Cassandra herself is already in Mycenae, where she has been taken by Agamemnon and where she will die shortly. The story of Troy's demise and Cassandra's social exile is told in an inner monologue that recounts Cassandra's memories. In its broad strokes, the narrative follows the well-known events of ancient Greek mythology: after the abduction of Helen by Paris, a Trojan prince, her husband Menelaus and his allies launch a military campaign to retrieve her. The campaign lasts for roughly a decade before Troy is invaded by means of a ruse, sacked and burned, and its surviving inhabitants killed or enslaved.

Wolf, however, makes a series of innovations on this material. First, the narrative focus is shifted almost entirely on the inner goings-on of Troy. In her portrayal of a state with depleted resources, an ailing leader, and increasing fixation on the policing of language and opinion on the war, it is easy to see parallels to Wolf's experience of life in the GDR. That parallel is perhaps most poignant in Wolf's description of both personified and institutionalized censorship in Troy. The abduction of Helen, moreover, is revealed by Cassandra as a pretext to justify an expensive and increasingly unpopular standoff.

In its second notable innovation, Wolf tells the story from the perspective of a woman, in a style that Wolf herself characterizes as "subjective authenticity." This partially explains the novel's focus on events inside Troy; Cassandra never took part in any battlefield action. These structural features function as a critique of both the social and intimate effects of prolonged war preparations, and of a literary canon that is staked on the exclusion of women from agentic, sovereign subjectivity. The Trojan War, then, is not a mere example of this, but presented by Wolf as one of its sources. The

accompanying lectures in particular draw a connection between contemporary conceptions of heroism and manhood and the Greek epic's male protagonists.

Finally, the novel takes a realist, modernizing approach to the source material's depictions of magic, prophecy, and social custom. Cassandra, for instance, is presented less as someone with divine gifts of sight, and more as an observant woman whose "curse," it follows, is the result of her silencing and imprisonment. In this book, Cassandra is disbelieved because she is made to appear like an unreliable, insane, raving woman, in an allusion to the *Staatssicherheit's* infamous methods of discreditation.

The publication of *Cassandra* coincided with a peak of tension between the United States and the Soviet Union. The Euromissile crisis and subsequent implementation of the NATO double track strategy in 1979 had led to the stationing of missiles in East and West Germany, and had spurred intense protests and fears of a nuclear strike on both sides of the inner-German border. These fears and the transgressive nature of radiation became important rallying cries against the global arms race.

Cassandra was, amid these events, hugely popular, made even more so by Wolf's 1982 poetics lectures. The lectures drove home the point that the Trojans' fear in the narrative is analogous to Germans' fear of nuclear warfare. In addition, they added a prominent East German voice to the growing chorus of feminist critics who characterized the nuclear arms race as a system of and for patriarchy.

Yet the novel's reception was also conflicted and contested. In the GDR, the perception that Wolf had replicated the bourgeois move to replace class conflict with gender struggles generated controversy. Moreover, East German censors forbade all passages from the lectures – which were published in one volume with the novel in the GDR – that equated the nuclear threat from East and West. In a historical first, Wolf made use of her by then substantial fame to demand that the censored passages were marked by three dots. Illegal duplicates of these passages, transcribed from West German copies of the book, soon made the rounds in the GDR.

In many ways, *Cassandra* illustrates the complicated history of the reception of "GDR literature," particularly, as in this case, by an author who enjoyed international recognition. Yet the novel's enduring popularity demonstrates that its themes transcend that particular context. Its explorations of the slow erosion of public trust and communication, their replacement with empty propagandistic exclamations, the sidelining of expert knowledge, and the celebration of militaristic masculinity are of enduring political interest.

LANGUAGE: German / Deutsch

CENSORSHIP STATUS: