

REVIEWS:

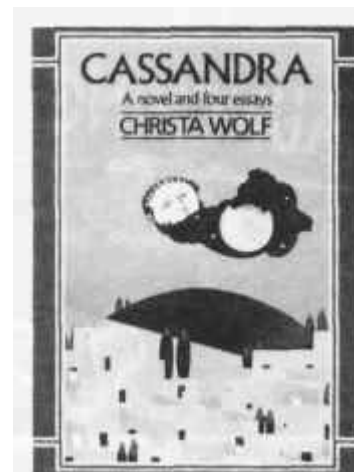
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always right in her prophecies but never to be believed. Wolf uses this ancient myth to make a moving and compelling statement about the world today in which 'when we try to cast our thoughts forward into the future, they bounce against a wall'.

There are two themes running through the whole book, the modern arms race and the cause of women. In the course of the novel *Cassandra* comes to situate herself and to understand her history. To do this she has to stand back from the prevailing interests and preoccupations of her society - to risk being called a traitor and, of course, being disbelieved. In Wolf's reconstruction, the Trojans go to war on completely false grounds which serve certain social ends and which rapidly come to be believed even by those who invented them. Thus *Cassandra* is punished for 'naming the deed' while those who perform it go free. The parallel with those who resist the arms race and those who perpetuate it is clear. The way in which the Trojan ruling elite elaborate on lies, perpetuate the war for war's sake, collude at hiding the truth and come to believe their own lies, repeats itself today in the doublespeak and half-truths given out by the leaders of the superpowers and their allies. As *Cassandra* says 'You can tell when the war starts but when does the prewar start?'

The book is also beautifully feminist in a way that is very satisfying. *Cassandra*'s strongest wish is that she could pass down from daughter to daughter the truth which would stand against the 'heroic' tales of Homer. She presents Achilles as a brute which, of course, he is, and the other 'heroes' of the *Iliad* as variously stupid, simple, scared and violent. The world of women (still involved in the earlier mother-worship) is, by contrast, strong, loving and relatively united. But the women's world is not set against the men's in implacable opposition. Two men, Anchises and Aeneas, both of whom escape Troy before it falls, are portrayed as gentle and sensitive. They can see through the mist of lies and male heroics, and have the sense to live. 'Between killing and dying there is a third alternative, living' says a slave woman in the novel. This is the alternative offered by the women's movement and the peace movement.

Wolf takes up this theme of female and male rationality in the essays that follow the novel. Perhaps, she says, if women had helped to think 'thought' over the last two thousand years, 'thought' would be different. Women have a capacity for self-



knowledge that is harder for men to attain, bred as they are in a climate of competition, sexual superiority and linear 'objective' thought. But she recognises the problem here. We do not want to 'go back' to pre-intellectual thought and we do not want to replace 'male' rationality with 'female' irrationality. There has to be a third way.

The third way requires the long and painful development of detached self-knowledge - a capacity to understand one's own history and to distance oneself from the myths and irrationalities which prevent criticism and protect; not to allow oneself to use either aesthetics or science to ward off reality; to see truth as it is behind the masks, to speak out, to protest against the lies. For all the desperation and blackness of the picture that Wolf paints, I find this an inspiring and optimistic book.

The inspiration comes partly from knowing that Wolf is an East German writer. Her book shows very clearly that there are those in Eastern Europe who see the madness of the present arms race in the same way as many in the Western peace movements do. This gives us some measure of hope as we battle against the wall of myth and ideology that justifies the arms race.

And, finally, the inspiration comes from Wolf's view of the strengths and necessity of a feminist struggle. For Wolf the real hero of the *Iliad* is *Cassandra* - not Achilles and his battle comrades. The book succeeds in justifying, refreshing and placing both feminism and the fight against nuclear madness. It is done in a marvellously written (and beautifully translated) novel and then elaborated by the accompanying pieces. The deep pleasure and validation that I got from reading this book will stay with me for a long time, I hope.

Elena Lieven

Female Prophecy

Cassandra: a novel and four essays
Christa Wolf
(translated by Jan van Heurk)
Virago £4.50

This book is a novel woven around the myth of *Cassandra* as found in the *Iliad* of Homer and the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus together with a series of four lectures/essays/reflections which provide the context for the writing of the novel. *Cassandra* was one of the daughters of Queen Hecuba and King Priam of Troy, the sister of Hector, the hero of Troy, and of Paris who, in 'stealing' Helen, wife of Menelaus, set off the Trojan Wars. *Cassandra* was a prophet, destined by the God Apollo to be