

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE'S *CASSANDRA*:  
THE PROPHET'S PREDECESSORS AND DESCENDANTS

by

SARAH PAIGE ELLISOR

(Under the Direction of Roxanne Eberle)

ABSTRACT

I argue that *Cassandra* (1860) by Florence Nightingale is a seminal text in the canon of nineteenth-century women writers. I examine the influences upon Nightingale that shaped the creation of this radical essay: the muscular Christianity movement of mid-Victorian England, Romanticism, her religious beliefs, and Charlotte Brontë's novel *Shirley* (1849). These forces of influence blend to form a revolutionary essay—both in message and form—that argues for the release of women from the shackles of enforced idleness. *Cassandra*'s influence upon later female writers, namely Ray Strachey and Virginia Woolf, is evident in the relationships between *Cassandra* and Strachey's *The Cause* and Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. Noting the interrelationships of influence surrounding this essay, I maintain that *Cassandra* must be recognized as an integral text in studying the evolution of women's writing.

INDEX WORDS: *Cassandra*, Florence Nightingale, Women's roles, Muscular Christianity, Fragment, *Shirley*, *The Cause*, *A Room of One's Own*

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I dedicate this work to my parents: my mother, who instilled in me the love of reading, and my father, who gave me the joyous ability to find laughter. They have challenged me to have the discipline to strive beyond the ordinary, and they have shown their love for me every step of the way.

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## CHAPTER ONE:

### Introduction

Florence Nightingale wrote the following to her friend Miss Mary Clarke in 1844: “[...] And besides I had so much rather live than write; writing is only a supplement for living. Would you have one go away and ‘give utterance to one’s feelings’ in a poem to appear (price 2 guineas) in the *Belle Assemblée*? I think one’s feelings waste themselves in words; they ought all to be distilled into actions, and into actions which bring results” (qtd. in Cook 1: 93-94). Here, Nightingale belittles the power of writing and its potential effect in favor of a more productive lifestyle, yet she does not foresee her own future voluminous writings and their effects. In the Preface to *The Life of Florence Nightingale* (1942), biographer Edward Cook catalogs the vast quantity of administrative papers, letters, diary entries, manuscripts, and general notes found in Nightingale’s home. Nightingale bequeathed all of her papers to her cousin, Henry Bonham Carter (Cook vii). Her preservation of these papers, as well as her notes for their fate after her death, show how integral writing was to her life. I will focus my analysis of Nightingale’s writing on her revolutionary essay about women’s roles, *Cassandra*, part of her three-volume work, *Suggestions for Thought*, a book relaying her views on religion, the working class, and the woman question.

The largely autobiographical essay, written in the early 1850s and privately printed in 1860, illustrates the torturous position of women facing lives of enforced idleness in the mid-Victorian period. *Cassandra* begins with the haunting words of isolation brought on by acute self-awareness: “While one alone, awake and prematurely alive to it, must wander out in silence



and solitude—such an one has awakened too early, has risen up too soon, has rejected the companionship of the race, unlinked to any human being. Such an one sees the evil they do not see, and yet has no power to discover the remedy for it” (Nightingale 205). The opening words refer to the speaker’s knowledge of the evil that permeates society, one that seems to be incurable. Such a fatalistic description seems ironic given Nightingale’s immense contributions to the field of nursing and her works on the proper methods of disease control and prevention. Indeed, Nightingale is often portrayed as the angelic nurse of the Crimean War, sacrificing herself to provide much-needed maternal care to the injured and dying soldiers. Further investigation into Nightingale’s life shows that her work in the Crimean War was not a sacrifice, but rather a necessary release from the claustrophobic confines of the upper-class life of her family and their expectations of her. The writing of *Cassandra* was also a necessary, cathartic release for her; she wrote to her father upon finishing the document, “I have come into possession of myself” (qtd. in Showalter 319). She completed the original version of *Suggestions for Thought* in 1852 just before setting off for the Crimea.

*Cassandra* is the product of Nightingale’s confinement to the domestic sphere as mandated by her family. Her experience was predicated by her singular religious beliefs and a sense of calling, and her negotiation of the problem of idleness among upper-class women was rooted in her theological beliefs. She crafts *Cassandra* as a response to the systemic disease of idleness that plagued privileged, society women in mid-Victorian England, primarily through the patriarchal family atmosphere. Nightingale claims that women deserve to employ their God-given traits, an argument in the tradition of earlier female writers like Mary Wollstonecraft. She argues, “The Kingdom of Heaven is within us. These words seem to me the most of a revelation, of a New Testament, of a Gospel—of any that are recorded to have been spoken by our Saviour”

(qtd. in Cook 1: 307-8). In Chapter Two I will show that Nightingale challenges the socially prescribed roles for women by borrowing imagery from the prevalent muscular Christianity movement in mid-Victorian England. Such imagery allows Nightingale to contest these cultural assumptions and demand a woman's right to enter this celebrated sphere of work, competition, and holiness. She crafts her essay as a fragment, a famously Romantic form, to invoke the revolution inherent in that era as well as to imitate her message of a woman's fragmented time in the essay structure. As a result, *Cassandra* is a blending of masculine and feminine, Romantic and Victorian; this blending sets the stage for her ultimate prophecy: the coming of a female messiah. Nightingale implies that the time of salvation is present and the beginning stages of change are within women's reach.

Chapter Three examines Nightingale's influences in the composition of *Cassandra* by examining its relationship to Charlotte Brontë's novel *Shirley* (1849). Nightingale recorded in a diary entry that she read the novel only months before she began writing *Suggestions for Thought*. Brontë's novel has two heroines, Shirley Keeldar and Caroline Helstone, who both espouse their frustration with typically female roles and their visions for change. Brontë manipulates gender roles in creating a masculine heroine in Shirley and a seemingly submissive woman in Caroline. I maintain that while Nightingale must have been influenced by Brontë's novel when writing *Cassandra*, she consciously departs from the genre of the marriage novel to create a more radical text. Therefore, she progresses beyond other texts, such as marriage novels, set as the precedent for female writers.

In Chapter Four I turn to look at the female authors that Nightingale influenced through *Cassandra*. Ray Strachey notably includes a brief biography of Nightingale and the full text of *Cassandra* in her history of the women's movement, *The Cause* (1928). This first publication of

the essay allows for Nightingale's influence to spread to others, such as Virginia Woolf. Woolf refers to Nightingale and *Cassandra* only sparingly in *A Room of One's Own*, mentioning that, "Florence Nightingale shrieked aloud in her agony" (56). Whereas Woolf explicitly recognizes Nightingale's essay with only this slight reference, *Cassandra* should not be overlooked as an influence upon Woolf and her writing. Woolf employs quite similar arguments, and the modernist author's prophecy of change through a new written form palatable to a woman's lifestyle is reminiscent of Nightingale's creation of a fragmented essay, a form that predates Woolf by approximately seventy years.

A study of Nightingale's experimental form raises questions about the text's revision history. Nightingale revised *Cassandra* many times, experimenting with various forms and both male and female narrators, before finally settling on the form of the essay that was privately published in 1860. Her original drafts show both an essay portion and a section she referred to as a "novel." The novel evolved from a story with a heroine as narrator, to a male narrator, and finally found its final form in the essay version we now read.<sup>1</sup> She sent copies of the essay to John Stuart Mill and Benjamin Jowett, both prominent intellectual men, and they saw the genius of *Cassandra* and her writing overall. Jowett wrote, "It confirms me in my idea that you ought to write. I have no doubt that a great effect has been produced by it" (qtd. in Quinn 145). Though he suggested revisions to the essay, he pushed her to publish her work: "Your writings appear to me to be very effective. Don't you think that if one has any true ideas—whether about the Army, the position of women, or about subjects of theology—it is a duty not to let them be lost?" (qtd. in Quinn 42). Mill also praised Nightingale's perspective; she recalled his words: "Tell the world what you think—your experience. It will probably strike the world more than anything that could be told it" (qtd. in Cook 2: 221). Mill, a forthright advocate for women's

rights, recognized the unique voice of Nightingale, a woman who was determined to make her own productive vocation by leaving her family's house to aid in the Crimean War. However, though she sought the men's advice upon the work, she never revised it according to their suggestions nor publicly published it. Rather, Ray Strachey includes the essay as an appendix to *The Cause* in 1928, and Cook makes slight references to it in his 1942 extensive biography of Nightingale. In 1979 the Feminist Press at The City University of New York rescued the text and published it with an introduction by Myra Stark.

Critics debate Nightingale's strategies in writing and revising her text; Nightingale's choice of genre and of her solicitation of male peer reviewers give rise to the most fundamental questions that surround *Cassandra*. Elaine Showalter, in her essay "Miranda and Cassandra: The Discourse of the Feminist Intellectual," asks why Nightingale chose to send copies of her work to Jowett and Mill "rather than sending the manuscripts to any of the literary women she knew so well, such as Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Gaskell, or George Eliot" (320). Indeed, given the subject matter of *Cassandra*, it seems peculiar that Nightingale would appeal to male rather than female peers. The speaker of *Cassandra* notes the difference in gendered perspectives: "The state of society which some complain of makes others happy. Why should these complain to those? They do not suffer. They would not understand it, any more than that lizard would comprehend the sufferings of a Shetland sheep" (Nightingale 209). However, in another essay, "Florence Nightingale's Feminist Complaint: Women, Religion, and 'Suggestions for Thought,'" Showalter goes on to claim that Nightingale suffered from "matrophobia," a fear of her mother that consequently prevented her from trusting and forming relationships with other women (412).

Katherine Snyder sees Nightingale's motivations as more self-aware and intentional: she claims that Nightingale was caught in a "double bind," where "masculine privilege is both the object of her social critique and the ultimate source from which she seeks discursive authority" (Snyder 30). Denouncing Nightingale's revision choices, particularly those supposedly made in an effort to appease male readers, Snyder firmly declares that Nightingale "was entrenched in her historical moment" (36). She claims that in revising *Cassandra* so heavily, Nightingale obliterated the powerful female voice: "Having witnessed the fragmentation and cancellations of the manuscript, I regard Nightingale's essay as inhibited and concealing, a form of protective self-censorship rather than liberated self-empowerment" (35). Referring to the highly fragmented nature of the essay where Nightingale jumps from point to point without achieving any fluidity in writing other than a tone of frustration that unifies the essay, Snyder argues that Nightingale sacrifices a writer's voice to ingratiate herself with male readers:

Aligning herself with the masculine authority that was the subject of her critique may have enabled Nightingale to accomplish the social reforms that were her goals, but it played havoc with the voice of 'Cassandra.' The gaps and other structural and tonal peculiarities that characterize the essay testify to Nightingale's gendered and generic predicament, yet at least one recent critic has seen in them a subversive feminist poetics. (35)

As Snyder notes, Elaine Showalter sees such gaps *as* self-empowerment: "I would like to suggest that the gaps in the text of [...] Nightingale are sites of contradiction. They are the places where the writer's conflict between her internalization of patriarchal rhetorical forms and her need to articulate a feminine subjectivity reveals itself" (Showalter, "Miranda and Cassandra")

320). Showalter reads the fractured text as representative of Nightingale's struggles as a woman in patriarchal mid-Victorian England.

Snyder goes on to question Nightingale's choice of the essay genre; she claims that Nightingale's movement away from the novel to the essay represents her attempt "to distance herself from her heroine's story and problems" (25). However, she does note that the essay form creates a pivotal connection between speaker and author in the nineteenth century: "[...] Nineteenth century readers [...] took the immediate presence of the author and his consciousness as a preeminent and uniting generic feature. From this perspective, the essay is nonfictional and mimetic—it is an expression of the writer's actual experience and essential self" (24). Thus, Snyder asserts that Nightingale's change in genre was still too personal for contemporaries such as Jowett, and she claims that male readers probably saw the result as "indecent exposure" (25). Snyder faults Nightingale for allowing her novel to devolve into a more "appropriate" and less personal form:

She revised her writing to impress male figures of authority in her personal life and in the intellectual community, but these readers were affiliated with the conventional social authority that she criticizes in "Cassandra." Her relation to her readers thus motivated but also constricted Nightingale's revisions. The gaps that remain in her essay, evident in the manuscript's palimpsestic traces of the novel, bear witness to Nightingale's sense of the irreconcilable demands posed by her male audience. (32)

Disappointed by Nightingale's attempts to appeal to a male audience, Snyder sees *Cassandra* as an adulterated, lesser text compared to its original form.

Critics debate these issues in order to answer one central question: is *Cassandra* a feminist essay? Nightingale's willingness to make her work more palatable to male peers seems questionable given the fervid tone of her essay. Yet, Nightingale's history in dealing with the feminist movement casts its own shadow upon her work. Evelyn Pugh discusses Nightingale's involvement in the women's rights cause and her interactions with John Stuart Mill on the subject. Pugh describes Nightingale's lack of action in the movement: "In terms of active commitment it is undeniable that Florence Nightingale did little for the cause Mill championed. Eventually she became a member of the National Society for Women's Suffrage, contributed money, but refused to give her time. [...] Yet her most explicit statement about women's franchise indicated her lack of faith in the process" (133). She famously wrote Harriet Martineau that she was "brutally indifferent to the wrongs or rights of [her] sex" (qtd. in Pugh 123). Yet, such statements do not detract from the power of *Cassandra*'s message; Pugh argues that Nightingale's seemingly disparate opinions are simply the result of focusing on differing sources of female confinement: "It was the prison of upper class social conventions, not legal restrictions, that had stifled Miss Nightingale in her younger years. 'Cassandra' was a cry for freedom and time to engage in useful work and for women to control their own lives. In it was not so much as a hint of concern with either the vote or women's property rights. The basic issue of legal equality was ignored" (135). Pugh's assessment of Nightingale's statements cautions readers to understand the context implicit in her writings and her opinions.

Nightingale may have shuddered at the word "feminist," but her essay promotes an attitude for change and a hope for the future that is applicable even today. Over the course of this thesis I hope to show how integral Nightingale's *Cassandra* is to the canon of nineteenth-century British women writers, and consequently, to the development of feminist literature. Her

work was praised by notable men such as Jowett and Mill, and she is inextricably tied to two of the most studied women writers, Charlotte Brontë and Virginia Woolf.<sup>2</sup> Recognizing the interrelationships of influence surrounding this essay, I maintain that *Cassandra* must be recognized as a hallmark text in studying the evolution of women's writing.



## CHAPTER TWO:

*Cassandra*: The Merging of Two Worlds

Nightingale crafts *Cassandra* as a revolutionary intersection of worlds: masculine/feminine and Romantic/Victorian. She manipulates images and rhetorical forms to traverse both masculine and feminine cultural ideals while drawing from Romantic and Victorian literary traditions. This blending of polarities is a prelude to Nightingale's ultimate, albeit seemingly paradoxical, prophecy: the coming of a female messiah. Nightingale is intentionally ambiguous concerning the identities of the speaker, the dying woman in the final section of the essay, and ultimately the female messiah, yet her ambiguity lends itself to understanding the common universality of upper-class women who suffer under patriarchal society, and who see the potential for the future, including Nightingale herself. A prisoner of her own conventional family, Nightingale moves beyond the mid-Victorian status quo to create a revolutionary means of imparting her radical message for women's salvation. Writing in the Romantic fragment form and employing imagery from the muscular Christianity movement, Nightingale presents the problems inherent in the patriarchal system's treatment of women. *Cassandra* challenges both literary tradition and social mores in its effort to provide women with a tangible hope for change.

Women of mid-Victorian England endured constricting roles socially sanctioned by the family and the Anglican Church. The cultural ideal of muscular Christianity permeated society and solidified typical gender roles dictated by separate sphere philosophy. The term "muscular Christianity" was initially coined by T.C. Sandars in a review of Charles Kingsley's *Two Years Ago*, published in 1857 (Hall 7). Sandars discusses the type of man Kingsley portrays: "His

[Kingsley's] ideal is a man who fears God and can walk a thousand miles in a thousand hours—who, in the language of Mr. Kingsley has made popular, breathes God's free air on God's rich earth, and at the same time can hit a woodcock, doctor a horse, and twist a poker around his fingers" (qtd. in Hall 7). Donald Hall claims that the defining characteristic of this movement is "an association between physical strength, religious certainty, and the ability to shape and control the world around oneself" (7). Noting the transformation of society in mid-Victorian England wrought by scientific advances, religious doubt, and the burgeoning stages of a change in women's roles, Hall claims, "Muscular Christianity was an attempt to assert control over a world that had seemingly gone mad" (9). Critic William E. Winn states that the major leaders of this movement are novelist Charles Kingsley and Thomas Hughes, author of *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, an influential book for public school education. Winn notes that Kingsley's ideology is rooted in Thomas Carlyle's "gospel of work and a love for Old Testament morality" (66). Kingsley's heroes "always [fight] victoriously and [...] spread the doctrines of the English church" (67). He also characterizes Christ as a warrior: "The Lord Jesus Christ is not only the Prince of Peace; He is the Prince of War too" (qtd. in Winn 67). Though Kingsley disapproves of the term "muscular Christianity," Hughes embraces the label (67). He asserts that Christianity is for the strong rather than weak, and that "Christians were under the obligation to fight with their bodies, minds, and spirits against whatever was false" (69).

Through this social and religious standard men realize their spiritual potential and actively display their faith via physical activity and work, yet women lack such an opportunity. *Cassandra* continually describes the morbid idleness, due to a lack of vocation, that women face. Nightingale argues that women long to enter a more practical world: "Women dream of a great sphere of steady, not sketchy benevolence, of moral activity, for when they would fain be trained

and fitted, instead of working in the dark, neither knowing nor registering whether their steps lead, whether farther from or nearer to the aim” (217). As a result of their being shut out from this vocational realm, women lose themselves in daydreaming<sup>3</sup>: “It is the want of interest in our life which produces it; by filling up that want of interest in our life we can alone remedy it. [...] How obtain the interest which society declares *she* does not want, and *we* cannot want?” (207). Women’s lives are reduced to mere dreams of reality, a weak substitute for actively participating in actual employment and productivity. Nightingale asserts that women want to join the masculine world: “Women often long to enter some man’s profession where they would find direction, competition (or rather opportunity of measuring the intellect with others), and, above all, time” (210). Here, Nightingale explicitly states that women need direction, competition, a sharing of intellectual power, and time. Thus, women want not only to join the professional realm, but they want to be a part of the masculine world, one permeated by the muscular Christian ideal, where direction and competition are integral to defining one’s self as the ultimate man *and* the ultimate Christian. It is the lack of direction that leads to women’s physical and emotional weakness: “What these suffer—even physically—from the want of such work no one can tell. The accumulation of nervous energy, which has had nothing to do during the day, makes them feel every night, when they go to bed, as if they were going mad; and they are obliged to lie long in bed in the morning to let it evaporate and keep it down” (221). Women’s energy, unemployed and unappreciated, becomes a parasite within their own bodies. Because women cannot productively utilize their energy while trapped in the domestic sphere, they cannot attempt to define themselves in terms of the popular Christian principle, and thus, women’s idleness raises questions of both social and religious import.

In *Cassandra*, Nightingale imagines a life where women could enjoy a productive and moral vocation, one commensurate with the ideals of Christian manhood: “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” (219). She employs the atypical image of men in a parlor to illustrate how foolish society’s expectations of women are: “But suppose we were to see a number of men in the morning sitting round a table in the drawing-room, looking at prints, doing worsted work, and reading little books, how we should laugh! [...] Now, why is it more ridiculous for a man than for a woman to do worsted work and drive out every day in the carriage?” (211).

Nightingale criticizes a society that mandates women to fritter away their lives with such useless occupations, whereas men go forth to be productive, exemplary Christians. She implies that male and females should be held to similar expectations, where both men and women fulfill their moral vocations.

Nightingale believed she had a particular vocation awaiting her, recognizing in 1852 that she had felt “a call from God to be a saviour,” which she recorded in some autobiographical notes (qtd. in Cook 1: 43). Yet her propensity towards nursing had been recognized as early as 1844 when Nightingale questioned Dr. Howe, a well-known philanthropist, about the possibility of her dedicating her life to that profession (Cook 1: 43). Nursing shows the importance of both the suffering, physical body and the nurse’s role in alleviating physical pain. Nightingale later equates the arduous work of quality nursing with the soldiers fighting on the battlefield: “And shall we fight a heavenly battle, a battle to cure the bodies and souls of God’s poor, less well than men fight an earthly battle to kill and wound?” (qtd. in Cook 2: 142). Nightingale’s

imagery casts women in the role of “muscular Christians” as they fight a battle for God. She quotes the popular hymn “The Son of God Goes Forth to War”<sup>4</sup> to persuade women to become nurses: “The Son of God goes forth to war, who follows in his train? Oh, daughters of God, are there so few to answer?” (qtd. in Cook 2: 142). Nightingale compels women to follow this idealized version of Christ as an icon of muscular Christianity, and by doing so, they join this Christian battleground, claiming their own ground and fighting a spiritual battle.

The central image of “The Son of God Goes Forth to War,” Christ as warrior, implies that his followers would embody the masculine image of triumphant fighters. The hymn chronicles Christ and His followers’ victory over evil with the help of the “Master in the sky” and the “Spirit.” *Blood, pain, martyr, peril, and toil* illustrate the war-torn setting and Christianity becomes synonymous with competition and fighting. The final verse describes the “matron and the maid” who arrive in the end to “Around the Savior’s throne rejoice,” yet do not participate in the initial scene of fighting. The hymn clearly suggests the exclusivity of a masculine ideal of Christianity. Why would Nightingale employ this image in motivating her nurses and have such a personal connection with this hymn that it would be sung at her graveside? Nightingale argues that women must leave their present state of idleness, yet she does not simultaneously discredit the masculine way of life; rather, she challenges women to enter the masculine world. Thus, this hymn becomes a direct challenge for the women to enter the battlefield, a masculine space, to assert their own power. Nightingale combats a limited cultural standard by employing the movement’s imagery to defy its narrowness and call for the inclusion of females in the professional and productive worlds.

Cook describes how integral this hymn was to her life: “She had never tired of quoting it in messages to her nurses and her soldiers, and those who had been about her in the closing years

were often thrilled by fire which she still put into her recital of the lines” (2: 423). The hymn was sung over her grave in 1910 (2: 423). Nightingale’s affinity for the hymn and its imagery reflects her propensity to break free of traditionally female spheres to embrace a more masculine space, such as the battlefield, a space she enters during the Crimean War.

In *Cassandra*, Nightingale also simultaneously subverts the traditional praise of the physically superior body by also describing the divinity inherent within suffering. The opening lines of section II illustrate the blessing associated with such physical pain: “Yet I would spare no pang, / Would wish no torture less, / The more that anguish racks, / The earlier it will bless” (208). Editor Mary Poovey, in a footnote, claims that these lines are presumably from an evangelical hymn, yet the lines are actually part of Emily Brontë’s “The Prisoner” (1846).<sup>5</sup> With this image, Nightingale emphasizes the importance of the suffering and pained body rather than the physically triumphant one. Her allusions to “torture” and “anguish” signify the wounds upon Christ’s beaten and crucified body. Furthermore, these associations with Christ also signify the divinity within pain—Christ’s divinity that enables him to make the physical sacrifice of martyrdom. Yet, she claims that all can suffer as a means of sacrifice: “Yes, it is a privilege to suffer for your race—a privilege not reserved to the Redeemer and the martyrs alone, but one enjoyed by numbers in every age” (209). She describes the potential within pain: “Give us back our suffering, we cry to Heaven in our hearts—suffering rather than indifferentism; for out of nothing comes nothing. But out of suffering may come the cure. Better have pain than paralysis!” (208). Nightingale encourages women to shake off their shackles of paralysis and embrace a life of suffering in an effort to alleviate the pain of their current lives.

In hopes of effecting this change, Nightingale appealed to religious scholar, Benjamin Jowett, in seeking advice for revising *Cassandra*. Jowett, a notable author and academic, was

one of many writers who adopted the ethic of Christian manliness in their writings: “[...] It was ‘honest men’ of *Essays and Reviews* (1860) and their allies who took the manly ethos and ran with it for decades as they wrested the game from the Establishment old boys on the playing field of Victorian biblical studies” (Larson 84). I think that Nightingale consciously chose to appeal to male authority in revising her essay because this was her first attempt to enter the masculine world supposedly off-limits to the society woman. Furthermore, Jowett’s reputation as a religious scholar implies that Nightingale not only sought to find admittance into the masculine world, but particularly the masculine religious sphere. His and Nightingale’s relationship answers one of Nightingale’s own complaints about the state of male-female interactions: “Men and women meet now *to be idle*. Is it extraordinary that they do not know each other, and that, in their mutual ignorance, they form no surer friendships? Did they meet to *do* something together, then indeed they might form some real tie” (224). Nightingale not only enters the sphere of masculine theology, but she also forms a working relationship with Jowett, one that offers her both intellectual dialogue and an established place in this realm of male intellectuals. Her interactions with Jowett are just one example of Nightingale’s permeation of gender boundaries to establish herself in spaces traditionally not open to women.

Their dialogue also reflects their mutual desire to usher in new forms of Christianity. The editors of *Dear Miss Nightingale: A Selection of Benjamin Jowett’s Letters to Florence Nightingale 1860-1893*, Vincent Quinn and John Prest, suggest that Jowett shared Nightingale’s passion for updated religious beliefs: “Jowett was, in his way, a prophet. By stripping away outdated formularies, which so many of the more intelligent undergraduates found it impossible to subscribe to, [he believed] it ought to be possible to convert Christianity from a past to a

present fact” (Quinn xvii). In Jowett Nightingale happily finds a peer editor who can appreciate her vision for changes in society and religion.

Yet, Jowett believed *Cassandra* would be improved if “the reflections on the family took less the form of individual experience; this appears to me to lessen the weight of what is said & may, perhaps, lead to painful remarks” (qtd. in Quinn 4). Though critics such as Snyder fault Jowett for suggesting that Nightingale edit the personal elements of the essay, it should be noted that he applauded her voice as a woman:

Shall I say one odd & perhaps rather impertinent thing? You have a great advantage in writing on these subjects as a woman. Do not throw it away but use the advantage to the utmost. In writing against the world (‘Athanasia contra mundum’) every feeling, every sympathy, should be made an ally so that with the clearest statement of the meaning there is the least friction & drawback possible....  
(qtd. in Quinn 13)

Furthermore, Jowett wanted to aid Nightingale in her quest for the appropriate form for her essay; he proposes an array of possible revision options, including his suggestion of fragments:

Shall I offer two or three suggestions about them? My object would be to give you the least labour possible. (First of all there is the plan of abridging & rewriting them, but I set this aside because it appears to be impossible.)  
Secondly, suppose you were to publish the novel & imaginary conversations as they stood originally. Yet the novel might also be published as far as the death of Cassandra. And this plan might be combined with 3) The publication of the remainder in fragments....



‘Thoughts or fragments’ are not an ineffective mode of writing. And they impose no great obligation of connexion.... (qtd. in Quinn 8-9)

Jowett claims that Nightingale could rely upon the fragment form as an effective means of communication.

*Cassandra* is a fragment, an essay that lacks final revisions and remained unpublished during Nightingale’s lifetime; she privately printed only a few copies. Nightingale’s dense yet non-cohesive style is representative of the form made famous by Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s poetry. The genre allows Nightingale to illustrate her point of women’s divided time among many societal demands: the form imitates the message. Furthermore, this choice of genre is another way in which Nightingale deviates from general female behavior, such as writing marriage novels, like Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters,<sup>6</sup> and instead mimics that of male intellectuals, notably Coleridge. Coleridge employs the fragment form in many of his poems, particularly “Kubla Khan: Or, A Vision in a Dream,” which he subtitles “A Fragment.” The Author in “Kubla Khan” describes the writing process “in which all the images rose up before him as things, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions” (Coleridge 102). However, later, the images “had passed away like images on the surface of a stream into which a stone had been cast” (102). The speaker describes the inability of writing to hold fast to these images to present a coherent description of the vision. The fragment form reflects the limitations of words and structure to relay a particular idea. In *Cassandra*, Nightingale struggles with articulating her vision to those who will not heed her prophecy, as Nightingale implies by her allusion to the mythical heroine. Both the Author in “Kubla Khan” and Nightingale are unable to form one fluid and unified form of communication to describe their visions. Yet, rather than this inability signaling failures, their choices to work in the fragment genre reflect their emphasis

on the implied absence in their works. The Author of “Kubla Khan” emphasizes language’s powerlessness to capture some visions, and Nightingale emphasizes all that women lack in their limited roles, especially time.

In *Cassandra* Nightingale explicitly calls attention to the parallel between life and the fragment form:

All life is sketchy, -- the poet’s verse (compare Tennyson, Milnes, and Mrs. Browning with Milton or even Byron: it is not the difference of genius which strikes one so much as the unfinished state of these modern sketches compared with the studies of the old masters), -- the artist’s picture, the author’s composition – all are rough, imperfect, incomplete, even as works of art. (222)

Nightingale claims that “all life is sketchy,” and she specifically shows how a woman’s life and art are both sketchy: “[...] A ‘lady’ has too many sketches on hand. She has a sketch of society, a sketch of her children’s education, sketches of her ‘charities’, sketches of her reading. She is like a painter who should have five pictures in his studio at once, and giving now a stroke to one, and now a stroke to another, [...] should continue this routine to the end” (222).

*Cassandra* represents the intersection of a woman’s time and her art, and thus Nightingale describes both her message and her form; not surprisingly, *Cassandra* is a woman’s composition, a sketch, that rages against the fragmentation of women’s time. One of Nightingale’s central complaints in *Cassandra* is that women’s time is commandeered and wasted by societal demands, and therefore, women’s personal desires are often stilted by their lack of personal time to complete their own work: “Then as to solitary opportunities. Women never have half an hour in all their lives (excepting before or after anybody is up in the house) that they can call their own, without fear of offending or of hurting some one” (213). This

lifestyle is synonymous with a female's role: "They [women] are taught from their infancy upwards that it is wrong, ill-tempered, and a misunderstanding of 'woman's mission' (with a great M.) if they do not allow themselves willingly to be interrupted at all hours" (214).

Nightingale compares this plight with men and their occupations: "If a man were to follow up his profession or occupation at odd times, how would he do it? Would he become skillful in that profession? It is acknowledged by women themselves that they are inferior in every occupation to men. Is it wonderful? *They do everything* at 'odd times'" (218-19). The fragmented essay genre, rather than the novel, allows Nightingale to illustrate concretely women's lack of the long periods of time necessary to any serious intellectual pursuit.

The essay fragment also gives Nightingale the freedom to experiment with Romantic elements—a focus on the fulfillment of the self in relation to God, frustration with institutional society, and the implicit sense of revolution bubbling beneath the surface of the text. Critic D. F. Rauber maintains that the fragment is the penultimate Romantic form because its fragmented nature illustrates the poet's "aspiration for the infinite" and offers no sense of finiteness or closure (213). Though *Cassandra* is clearly a mid-Victorian text, Nightingale too shares an aspiration for the infinite. *Cassandra* is a record of her prophecy of change in women's lives. Rauber claims that the "romantic poet is faced by the prospect of devising forms that will reflect the infinite and the indeterminate" (214). *Cassandra*'s opening words detail the existence of an incurable evil, yet the speaker creates a message of hope in the prophecy of a future female messiah: "The more complete a woman's organization, the more she will feel it, 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" (227). Furthermore, Nightingale's own religious beliefs deviate from traditional, organized religion and move toward a more personal relationship with

God (Jenkins, “Revisionist Theology” 35). She often links herself to Christ in her writings: “I am 30, the age at which Christ began his mission. Now no more childish things, no more vain things, no more love, no more marriage. Now, Lord, let me only think of Thy will” (qtd. in Cook 1: 101). The fragment form represents Nightingale’s propensity toward an independent relationship with God—one that looks forward to the infinite—free of the restraints of Victorian religion as mediated by the Church.

Rauber claims that the fragment moves toward the infinite and creates “a strong sense of upward sweep” which usually signals an unavoidable “sudden fall” (215). He argues that the fragment avoids such certain doom “in the transformation of an unpleasant necessity into a triumphant virtue” (216). The reader of *Cassandra*, a presumed witness to the speaker’s deathbed scene, sees how such a climax becomes the “triumphant virtue” of the essay. The speaker’s death in the concluding section is welcomed: “Oh! if you knew how gladly I leave this life, how much more courage I feel to take the chance of another, than of anything I see before me in this, you would put on your wedding-clothes instead of mourning for me!” (Nightingale 232). The speaker’s conflation of a wedding celebration and death represents an inversion of the earthly norm of events, yet it is this inversion of celebration and mourning that signifies women’s deplorable situation. The events of one’s life are reversed, and the wedding is a time of mourning—of losing one’s individual self—and the funeral is a time of celebration as the restoration of one’s self.<sup>7</sup> Nightingale stresses the reversal of the earthly understanding. The speaker declares, “Free—free—oh! divine freedom, art thou come at last? Welcome, beautiful death!” (232). She notes that submission to prescribed roles leads to regression: “And so is the world put back by the death of every one who has to sacrifice the development of his or her peculiar gifts (which were meant, not for selfish gratification, but for the improvement of that

world) to conventionality” (232). The family system perpetuates itself, condemning both the individual and the world through its faithful adherence to establishment, and the only cessation is death. Death is a welcome exit for the individual, yet how can such an inherited system ever come to its own end? As Nightingale states in her opening, she proposes no certain remedy, yet one can see why her situation is so intimidating. Only those upon their deathbeds can find their way out; other women are too entrenched within the family network to hear Cassandra’s prophecy, to hear her identification of these problems and women’s silent suffering. The reader applauds the speaker’s death—a release from both her earthly and societal constraints, and rejoices in the simple message adorning the woman’s gravestone: “I believe in God” (232). The woman’s faith in her savior alludes to Nightingale’s prophecy in the coming of another savior, and her trust in such salvation, rather than any societal titles (such as *wife* or *daughter*) marks her tomb.

The emphasis on prophecy and religious discourse present in *Cassandra*, as well as Nightingale’s fragmented form, are characteristic of what George P. Landow terms the sage tradition of rhetoric. He defines this tradition as “a form of postromantic nonfictional prose characterized by a congeries of techniques borrowed, usually quite self-consciously, from Old Testament prophecy, particularly as it was understood in the nineteenth century” (33). Landow declares that Nightingale’s method aligns her with the biblical Jeremiah and Isaiah and her contemporary Carlyle (39). He discusses how volatile sage writing can be:

Episodic (or discontinuous) structure further characterizes sage writing, and this quality in turn relates to its aggressive confrontations with the audience. Sage writing is a high-risk form: like few other genres and modes, it attacks the audience, and in so doing it risks alienating it. One reason for the sage writing’s

episodic or discontinuous structure lies in its risk-taking. Since attacking the audience and its beliefs demands that the audience make a leap of faith, thereby shifting its emotional and intellectual allegiances, the sage will not always succeed. (35)

Nightingale risks frustrating her audience with her spirited call for a change in women's roles, and her own interpretation of biblical tradition leads her to more perilous ground: "She denies societal restrictions on female interpretation by making such interpretations in the first place, and she makes them specifically those of the female sage by aggressively reinterpreting the commonplaces of male-centered biblical and classical interpretation" (41). Such a reading of *Cassandra* shows how Nightingale purposefully adopts a masculine rhetorical form as a means of empowerment. Though Nightingale radically offers her own biblical interpretation, Janet Larson claims that debates of theology were a "safe" area of revolution for women: "Although theology was men's business, women's expected affinity for religious subjects made the Bible wars a relatively more acceptable arena in which they could exercise cultural power than in advocating 'women's rights'" (85). Nightingale achieves a precarious balance in this "safe" area of theology, though she willingly departs from years of male interpretation and biblical tradition to offer her own reading of scripture and her prophecy.

Thus, Nightingale negotiates the masculine world of theology as a means of espousing her call to challenge the societal regulations that suppress women. Nightingale claims that women typically follow the traditional and "pre-arranged" tenets of religion without any thinking of their own. Therefore, men cannot communicate with women about these ideas because they are seemingly heretical to such women: "He cannot impart to her his religious beliefs, if he have any, because she would be 'shocked'. Religious men are and must be heretics now—for we

must not pray, except in a ‘form’ of words, made beforehand—or think of God but with a pre-arranged idea” (223). Yet, Nightingale’s relationship with Jowett encourages the reader to see the inherent division in these words. Uneducated and idle women may follow religion in such simple-minded ways, yet those who enter into a dialogue with men and the sphere of male intellectuals may then foster, and seemingly create, their own religious beliefs.

Landow claims that the sage tradition Nightingale follows requires a negotiation of public and private space:

Although the sages frequently draw upon private experience, their speech is essentially public. I might point out that sage writing, like the Victorian novel, is paradigmatically Victorian just because it makes objective, public, political use of subjective, personal, private thought and experience. In keeping with the sage’s purpose, all the genre’s techniques contribute toward creating an idealized public self and public voice. (39)

Jowett had assumed that Cassandra and Nightingale were synonymous speakers, yet apparently Nightingale had quickly reproved him for such an assumption, prompting this comment: “About Cassandra I see that I was mistaken. I did not exactly take Cassandra for yourself, but I thought that it represented more of your own feeling about the world than could have been the case...” (qtd. in Quinn 8). Landow sees what Jowett assumed, but probably could not articulate in terms palatable to the sensitive Nightingale: she *is* writing her personal views and self into the essay, but she is simultaneously creating an “idealized public self and public voice.” Nightingale’s public voice is a careful construction, one rid of personal pronouns and novelistic elements that existed in previous versions of the text. Therefore, the speaker’s voice is one that seeks to be universal to all women rather than simply proclaiming only her own experience or a fictional

account. Jowett claims that the difficulty of revision would be “to separate the part which expresses your own feelings & thoughts from those which belong to other characters” (qtd. in Quinn 9). Yet, as Landow notes, the public voice is predicated by the experience of the private voice, thus the two cannot be separated. Nightingale purposefully combines the public and private spheres, a combination that reflects her purpose of thrusting women into the public sphere, a sphere beyond the private world of idleness—a sphere defined by males.

Nightingale creates idealized selves, characters, for herself. The title of the essay refers to the mythological Cassandra, a woman who accepted the gift of second sight from Apollo on the promise that she would sleep with him; when she reneged on her promise, Apollo qualified the gift of prophecy so that no one would believe her (Buxton 100). Thus, Cassandra becomes a prisoner of her own knowledge: she can predict the future but no one will listen to her claims. Nightingale also includes an epigraph referring to another prophet figure, John the Baptist, a forerunner of Christ who spread the news of the coming Messiah: “The voice of one crying in the’ *crowd*, ‘Prepare ye the way of the Lord”” (205). She amends the original word *wilderness* to *crowd*, reflecting her focus on women’s place in society. Again, the figure is one of isolation and prophecy, yet those who read further in Matthew’s gospel note that John the Baptist’s message was *heard*: “Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins” (Matt 3:5-6). Furthermore, upon hearing his proclamation, people came to him and he baptized them, in the name of preparing the way for Jesus. Nightingale alludes to John the Baptist’s isolation, yet she also provides the reader with an image of audience reception and action. Though Cassandra’s prophecies fell upon disbelieving ears, John the Baptist’s words elicited belief and consequent action. Notably, this difference signals another fundamental



difference— female inaction versus male action. Cassandra’s curse for not surrendering herself sexually led only to more pain, rape by Aias and murder by Agamemnon’s wife, Clytemnestra (Buxton 100). Her fate, brought about by preserving her body rather than submitting to Apollo’s wishes, results in its defilement and slaughter. Cassandra serves as not only an image of isolation, but also as a woman imprisoned by her own body and its physical suffering, whereas the reader sees John the Baptist baptizing others, cleansing them physically and spiritually in the water. He acts. Cassandra suffers. Nightingale does not offer a reconciliation of these images— male and female, acting and suffering—but perhaps she embeds the image of John the Baptist in an epigraph as the implied “remedy” to the social evil identified in *Cassandra*.

Thus, Nightingale’s revisions, those that edit out the main character of the novel and rely upon allusions, actually collapse the various allusions and characters into one voice—a voice of isolation, action, and prophecy. No wonder then that Nightingale predicts the arrival of a female Christ, a female version of the most ideal human being, and one in whom she posits her own voice and views. The division between her description of women’s lives and her own actions (such as her intellectual dialogue with Jowett) puts the coming of a female messiah into specific relief; her essay describes the current state of women, yet the image of a female Christ, read in tandem with the knowledge of Nightingale’s future social activist work, highlights the difference between what is and what can be. Such a demarcation between present and future again imitates traditional religious discourse, fervently proclaiming the future afterlife for those who believe. Yet, here Nightingale employs such language to describe the future for those who believe *her*. Not only does Nightingale enter the typically masculine realm of theological discourse, but she also elevates the speaker of *Cassandra* to both the role of prophet and savior. For it is not that the speaker is necessarily the female Christ, but rather that her role, like that of John the Baptist,

must inform others that such a future is possible—a future of change for women—such that then, with the promise of better things to come, women *themselves* find their own salvation.

This future hope is signified by Nightingale's prophecy of a female messiah. Jowett discusses the predicament of women and possible means of change:

It is an old complaint among those who want to alter the position of women that they won't have it altered; as some say they have learned their duties so perfectly or as others they are such complete slaves that any agitation of the subject falls flat & dead with them. I feel with you that here is something fearfully wrong in the world as it is. But, how to remedy, or even to describe the evil without doing harm it is difficult to conceive. It seems to require a true woman or queen, a female Christ, as you say, to show the way. It seems to demand a nature which unites all feminine sympathies & in a certain sense, graces, with an heroic temper & firmness of soul. (qtd. in Quinn 6-7)

He too understands how revolutionary this savior must be, and he implies that she must have certain male qualities—"an heroic temper & firmness of soul." Jowett, whether aware of his own pointed description or not, describes his friend Florence Nightingale here. She herself has these necessary qualities—qualities that push her to negotiate a masculine sphere in hopes of creating a new space for women. She actively enters the male intellectual world, both religious and literary, to craft a revolutionary fragmented essay that predicts the coming of a female messiah, or perhaps, herself. Critic Sue Zemka claims, "As always, it is not a passive salvation that Nightingale wishes for but rather the privilege of being a savior, the privilege of acting for others" (172).

Nightingale's prophecy of a female savior is the grand culmination of her manipulation of masculine and feminine imagery and forms. Imagining a female messiah plays upon the preconceived notions of a man's power in traditional Christian beliefs, and creates a synthesis of binaries—male/female, powerful/weak, ruler/ruled. Nightingale claims that Christ was the one true advocate for women: "Jesus Christ raised women above the condition of mere slaves, mere ministers to the passions of the man, raised them by his sympathy, to be ministers of God. He gave them moral activity. But the Age, the World, Humanity, must give them the means to exercise this moral activity, must give them intellectual cultivation, spheres of action" (227). She shows intimacy between the speaker and Christ, an intimacy that no longer exists between women and society: "'Is it Thou, Lord?' And He said, 'It is I'. Let our hearts be still" (208). By calling upon Christ's masculine authority as a woman's willing advocate in her campaign for change, Nightingale aligns herself with the ultimate male and creates space for a new type of female—the female messiah. Her claim that Christ "raised" women implies that women can be "raised" to new heights, including savior. She simultaneously invokes the ultimate male authority, Christ, and imagines a new authority for women. This prophecy of a female savior is reiterated by the revolutionary text of *Cassandra*; the text itself signals the merging of masculine and feminine qualities as a means of salvation for women.<sup>8</sup>

## CHAPTER THREE:

*Cassandra: The Evolutionary Product of Shirley*

On July 20, 1850, Florence Nightingale wrote in her diary, “Took a vapor bath, wrote letters, & read *Shirley*” (qtd. in Calabria 74). Nightingale read Charlotte Brontë’s novel while traveling with friends through Egypt, Greece, and Germany, only a couple of months before returning home and beginning to write *Suggestions for Thought*. I maintain that in addition to the discourses outlined in Chapter Two that affected Nightingale in the composition process, Brontë’s 1849 novel was clearly a fundamental influence for Nightingale in writing *Cassandra*. The novel’s heroines, Shirley Keeldar and Caroline Helstone, attempt to create a palatable existence, though as Victorian women they face troubling circumstances: the lack of a meaningful vocation, the possibility of spinsterhood, and the discriminatory beliefs traditional Christianity based upon literal biblical interpretation espouses about women’s roles. As I showed in Chapter Two, *Cassandra* foregrounds these turbulent issues as well. In many ways, Nightingale’s essay also inverts the major elements of *Shirley*: the difference between *Shirley*’s ordinary Eve myths and *Cassandra*’s prophecy of a future female savior, as well as the differing conclusions for the literary heroines, illustrate this inversion. Nightingale swaps *Shirley*’s return to the *past* in the Eve myths for *Cassandra*’s prophecy for the *future*, just as she trades the celebration typically associated with marriage for the speaker’s happiness in her imminent death. These changes mark *Cassandra* as the evolutionary product of the issues first introduced in *Shirley*. *Cassandra* and *Shirley* are critically significant texts in discussing the woman question,<sup>9</sup> and putting them in context with one another illustrates the fundamental problems facing women

in mid-Victorian England, problems that the authors themselves had to surmount before writing their texts.<sup>10</sup>

The attitudes of patriarchal muscular Christianity that resonated throughout mid-Victorian England affected Charlotte Brontë as well as Florence Nightingale. Ruth Jenkins, in “Radical Protestantism versus Privileged Hermeneutics: The Religion and Romance of Brontë’s Spirituality,” discusses the Evangelical bent of Brontë’s father, a parson: “In addition to any doctrinal affinities with Evangelicalism, Patrick Brontë shared its muscular attitudes toward Christianity, which although not exclusively Evangelical found vigorous reinforcement through the aggressive and uncompromising aspects of Calvinistic images of God: personifying this, her father, though a rector, carried a loaded pistol and discharged it daily” (66). Presumably modeled after Patrick Brontë, the combative male parsons and clerics of the novel who participate in many battles and skirmishes establish a tone of violence that trumps their Christian sensibilities. The narrator discusses what a parson should *not* be in the opening of Chapter Three: “I am aware, reader, and you need not remind me, that it is a dreadful thing for a parson to be warlike: I am aware that he should be a man of peace” (Brontë 36). The narrator later claims that Mr. Helstone had mistakenly chosen the wrong occupation: “The evil simply was—he had missed his vocation: he should have been a soldier, and circumstances had made him a priest” (Brontë 37). Referring to the warlike standoff at Whitsuntide, occurring on the day of the celebration of the Christian holiday Pentecost, Jenkins believes the scene illustrates the privileging of force over the traditional understanding of Pentecost as spirit-filled: “Brontë vividly depicts this aggressive Christianity when she presents her characters celebrating Whitsuntide. [...] Brontë’s rendering of this Victorian Pentecost, in contrast, portrays hatred and rigid theological positions, not the unprecedented communication and coalescence of believers

that the Christian holiday commemorates” (“Radical Protestantism” 79). The opening volume of the novel, detailing the lives of the bachelor male clerics and the widowed Reverend Helstone, sets a male-dominated and often violent atmosphere, one that reflects the patriarchal tenets of the Church.

When Brontë finally introduces the title character, Shirley Keeldar, she seemingly adds to the overwhelming cast of masculine characters. Shirley retaliates against patriarchal society by assuming a male persona, frequently referring to herself as “Captain” and employing masculine pronouns and imagery. She claims that she is something more than a woman: “Business! Really the word makes me conscious I am indeed no longer a girl, but quite a woman, and something more. I am an esquire: Shirley Keeldar, Esquire, ought to be my style and title. They gave me a man’s name; I hold a man’s position: it is enough to inspire me with a touch of manhood” (Brontë 200). In meeting the other women of the neighborhood she feels that “there was not a single fair one in this and the two neighbouring parishes, whom she should have felt disposed to request to become Mrs. Keeldar, lady of the manor” (209). Shirley’s role-playing shows both her dissatisfaction with being the typical societal woman and also her dissatisfaction with the women who surround her. Shirley often plays protector to her shy and seemingly timid friend, Caroline Helstone. Shirley’s self-constructed characterization implies that women must mask themselves and hide their femininity to attain power, even as they disassociate themselves from other supposedly lesser women. Her masculine persona spurs others and herself to action: the men of the village follow her command, the ladies join her in providing help to the men after the outbreak at the mill, and Caroline follows her many times (out of the church service, to witness the mill attack, etc.). Others, such as Mrs. Pryor, fault Shirley for her adopted mannerisms: “My dear, do not allow that habit of alluding to yourself as a gentleman to become

confirmed: it is a strange one. Those who do not know you, hearing you speak thus, would think you affected masculine manners” (209-10). Shirley takes “her remonstrance in silence,” but dismisses Mrs. Pryor’s comment as one of her “little formalities and harmless peculiarities” (210); she clearly does not think of her actions as strange.

Shirley need only look to Caroline to recognize the type of lifestyle she wants to avoid. Caroline is often meek and acquiescent, who, due to her economic status as an orphan, is forced to submit to a woman’s place in the home. Though the reader may initially view her as inferior to the more active Shirley, Caroline voices the most poignant declarations of her unhappiness as well as many of the novel’s most memorable speeches. She continually wishes for a profession and productive occupations of her time: “[...] She would wish nature had made her a boy instead of a girl, that she might ask Robert to let her be his clerk, and sit with him in the counting-house, instead of sitting with Hortense in the parlour” (Brontë 77). Caroline must also face the narrow-minded views of her uncle, Mr. Helstone: “He thought, so long as a woman was silent, nothing ailed her, and she wanted nothing. [...] He made no pretence of comprehending women, or comparing them with men: they were a different, probably a very inferior order of existence” (53). Caroline’s dependence on her uncle chains her to Mr. Helstone’s house and his views of a woman’s place in it.

Both the discontented Caroline and the posing Shirley foreground the central issues that Nightingale later takes up in *Cassandra*. Nightingale collapses the strong, willful Shirley and the more retreating Caroline into one voice of discontent. Nightingale’s speaker, as well as Shirley and Caroline, faces the constricting nature of Victorian society amid the backdrop of the muscular Christianity movement. These women long to move beyond the domestic sphere and assume life-long vocations so that they can be productive and fulfill their inherent potential. As

aforementioned, Shirley excitedly navigates the sphere of business and powerful decision-making in the majority of the novel. Yet, the spiritually impoverished Caroline enjoys no such opportunity: “I wish it [for a profession] fifty times a day. As it is, I often wonder what I came into the world for. I long to have something absorbing and compulsory to fill my head and hands, to occupy my thoughts” (Brontë 229). Caroline frequently expresses the same desire for a meaningful vocation that the speaker of *Cassandra* espouses: “Women often long to enter some man’s profession where they would find direction, competition (or rather opportunity of measuring the intellect with others), and, above all, time” (Nightingale 210). Unhappy with the limited opportunities of the domestic hearth, both women articulate their wish to enter a professional realm to find a sense of direction as well as validation through productivity.

Recognizing their desires as something more than just fanciful wishes, Caroline and the speaker of *Cassandra* both note the disconnect between God’s intended lives for women and societal expectations.<sup>11</sup> Just as Caroline wonders why she came into the world, *Cassandra*’s speaker asks, “Why have women passion, intellect, moral activity—these three—and a place in society where no one of the three can be exercised?” (Nightingale 205). Society’s expectations of women contradict their innate characteristics, arguably God-given traits, and thus, conventional adherence to women’s constricting social roles is in opposition to God’s will. Even God’s gift of life turns into a curse of futility in Victorian society. Caroline regrets the probable length of her life because she has nothing with which to fill it: “I have to live, perhaps, till seventy years. As far as I know, I have good health: half a century of existence may lie before me. How am I to occupy it? What am I going to do to fill the interval of time which spreads before me and the grave?” (Brontë 173). Caroline notes the injustice of mourning for a *long* life, a long life of nothingness. She feels that such an existence must be contrary to God’s plan:



“God surely did not create us, and cause us to live, with the sole end of wishing always to die. I believe, in my heart, we were intended to prize life and enjoy it, so long as we retain it.

Existence never was originally meant to be that useless, blank, pale, slow-trailing thing it often becomes to many, and is becoming to me, among the rest” (390). Similarly, Nightingale claims that society kills a woman’s goal to create a productive life: “Society triumphs over many. They wish to regenerate the world with their institutions, with their moral philosophy, with their love. Then they sink to living from breakfast till dinner, from dinner till tea, with a little worsted work, and to looking forward to nothing but bed” (214). Both women look forward to the termination of a voided life, whether the end of the day or one’s death, because society does not allow them to have a meaningful occupation, a productive outlet for their natural abilities.

The disparity between God’s will for women and women’s roles in society is parallel to the divergence between God’s will and inculcated biases against women in the Church and scriptures. Jenkins claims that society manipulates religious attitudes to fortify its own narrowly ascribed roles for women: “Although claiming divine design, patriarchal culture enlists the family and organized religion to serve as its agents for its agenda” (“Revisionist Theology” 35). Caroline and Shirley challenge the traditional reading of a biblical passage that many employ to denounce women as inferior. They discuss a passage from the book of 1 Timothy with Joe Scott, a working-class employee of the mill. Caroline, though hesitant, forthrightly declares her reading of this troublesome passage concerning the correct status of women: “Hem! I-I account for them in this way: he wrote that chapter for a particular congregation of Christians, under peculiar circumstances; and besides, I dare say, if I could read the original Greek, I should find that many of the words have been wrongly translated, perhaps misapprehended altogether” (Brontë 329). She willingly offers her interpretation of the Bible, considered by many to be an

infallible holy text, and her opinion concerning years of man's "misapprehension." Caroline does not question God or God's will for women; rather she challenges the correct translation and contextual interpretation of the passage. Joe Scott immediately assumes that Caroline's words are wrong because he has witnessed her supposed faulty intelligence: "[...] It war only a bit of a sum in practice, that our Harry would have settled i' two minutes. She couldn't do it; Mr. Moore had to show her how; and when he did show her, she couldn't understand him" (330). Joe's collapse of Caroline's theological interpretation and her dearth of mathematical reasoning supposedly supports his view of Caroline's intellectual impotence; yet Joe's example of Caroline's weakness only highlights the power of her interpretation. Though women lack appropriate education, they still possess powers of reason and interpretation.

Like Brontë, Nightingale also questions the discrimination women have always faced. She declares, "Passion, intellect, moral activity—these three have never been satisfied in woman. In this cold and oppressive conventional atmosphere, they cannot be satisfied. To say more on this subject would be to enter into the whole history of society, of the present state of civilization" (208). She claims that the "cold and oppressive conventional atmosphere" has always existed and that fundamental aspects of women have never been satisfied. Such an assertion about the entire history of time complements Caroline and Shirley's challenges of the biblical text; religious beliefs and theories are the crux of "the whole history of society, of the present state of civilization" and are fundamentally the source of Nightingale's discontent. She believes that social mores are the result of a society that willingly misunderstands God's will. Nightingale describes a time when women were more than victims to society: "Jesus Christ raised women above the condition of mere slaves, mere ministers to the passions of the man, raised them by his sympathy, to be ministers of God. He gave them moral activity. But the Age,

the World, Humanity, must give them the means to exercise this moral activity, must give them intellectual cultivation, spheres of action” (227). Just as the “Age” has inculcated misinterpretation of scriptures to confine women, so also it has reduced women to submit “to the passions of the man.”

Nightingale, frustrated by society’s appropriation of the family and religion to further the enforced idleness of women, believes in a personal faith—one void of man’s interference and limitations for women: “In contrast to these conventional forces, Nightingale delineates what she believes to be the appropriate role of the individual in relationship to the divine—a personal, almost mythical relationship with God, which taps the talents He has given” (Jenkins, “Radical Protestantism” 35). As I noted in Chapter Two, Nightingale felt called to be a savior, and she willingly follows this call from God, testament to her belief in a direct relationship with God.

Though Nightingale was able to surmount societal and religious challenges and establish her own close link with God, many women were too ensnared by the double web woven around them to escape. These women fall prey to both emotional depression and physical sickness as a result of their condition. In *Shirley*, Caroline’s unhappiness and her sense of impending spinsterhood trigger an emotional and physical collapse. Her deteriorating body and changed appearance signify the depression she feels: “That shape that, seen in a moonbeam, lived, had a pulse, had movement, wore health’s glow and youth’s freshness, turned cold and ghostly gray, confronted with the red of sunrise. It wasted. She was left solitary at last: she crept to her couch, still and dejected” (Brontë 259). Believing Robert and Shirley will marry, Caroline suffers: “She suffered, indeed, miserably: a few minutes before, her famished heart had tasted a drop and crumb of nourishment that, if freely given, would have brought back abundance of life where life was failing; but the generous feast was snatched from her, spread before another, and

she remained a bystander at the banquet” (252). Caroline refers to the metaphorical food she lacks, any type of sustenance for her unfulfilled spirit. Nightingale employs the same metaphor to expand upon women’s spiritual deficiency: “We have nothing to do which raises us, no food which agrees with us” (220). She claims that such “starvation” should be a genuine societal concern:

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, how all the world hears of it, how all the newspapers talk of it, with a paragraph headed in great capital letters, DEATH FROM STARVATION! [...] One would think we had no heads nor hearts, by the total indifference of the public towards them. Our bodies are the only things of any consequence. (Nightingale 220)

As *Shirley* shows, Caroline’s peers notice her changed appearance, yet they do not inquire about her sadness and emptiness. Caroline withers physically because she has no moral food for her spirit, and many would claim that she suffers from an eating disorder, a result of serious depression: “With no acceptable way to speak her [Caroline’s] psychological starvation directly, she speaks it through her body. As her life is wasted, so too her body wastes away” (Lashgari 147).<sup>12</sup> Barbara T. Gates claims that Nightingale herself was an “emotional anorexic” (86). Gates quotes one of Nightingale’s diary entries: “I am perishing for want of food. And what prospect have I of better? While I am in this position, I can expect nothing else. Therefore I spend my day in dreams of other situations which will afford me food” (qtd in Gates 86). These women have no sense of nourishment, yet they simultaneously have an overflow of nervous energy: “What these suffer—even physically—from the want of such work no one can tell. The accumulation of nervous energy, which has had nothing to do during the day, makes them feel

every night, when they go to bed, as if they were going mad; and they are obliged to lie long in bed in the morning to let it evaporate and keep it down” (Nightingale 221). Women’s bodies are in a perilous balance of deficit and excess; they lack productive outlets for their never-used talents and energies.

Both texts employ the nourishment metaphor to showcase women’s vacuous lives, and the discussion of physical sickness progresses to the next logical step: self-inflicted death. *Cassandra* and *Shirley* embed suicidal figures to illustrate how grave a woman’s situation can be. Caroline’s sickness conjures the image of another sick woman in *Shirley*: Mary Cave. The reader knows only that Caroline’s aunt was very sick and died, yet Gilbert and Gubar infer her death to be suicidal (388). Brontë’s ambiguous phrasing in Mr. Helstone’s narrative does imply a sense of agency as he says Mary “took her leave of him and of life” (53). Though the certainty of Mary Cave’s suicide eludes the reader, Brontë clearly illustrates that her death is a result of her depression. Mary “took her leave” of the prescribed role for her—marriage to a man who automatically believed her to be his inferior and of no integral significance to his life: “His [Mr. Helstone’s] wife, after a year or two, was of no great importance to him in any shape [...]” (Brontë 53). Nightingale admits that a suicidal withdrawal from such an undesirable prescribed role is understandable, but she cautions against it: “It might be that such an one might be tempted to seek an escape in hope of a more congenial sphere. Yet, perhaps, if prematurely we dismiss ourselves from this world, all may even have to be suffered through again—the premature birth may not contribute to the production of another being, which must be begun again from the beginning” (205). Nightingale foresees an evolutionary chain of progress and speaks on behalf of a group seeking change in the present. Suicide would be an individual end that would only perpetuate the suffering for both the individual and the group. Furthermore,

suicide, though a rejection of confined society life, also implies a rejection of God: “Some are only deterred from suicide because it is in the most distinct manner to say to God: ‘I will not, I will not do as Thou wouldst have me’, and because it is ‘no use’” (Nightingale 220). Again, Nightingale believes that women should not reject God, rather reject society’s foolish beliefs that employ God as the foundation for confining gender roles.

Though women face depression and the temptation of suicide, they often create sustaining narratives as a form of self-therapy. Nightingale admits that daydreaming is the product of a woman’s empty life: “It is the want of interest in our life that produces it” (207). She describes “the phantom companion of their fancy” and the fantasies of participating in fulfilling situations, such as nursing or loving relationships, which help women fill their long days of nothingness (206). Dreaming becomes women’s cherished and yet addictive occupation: “Dreaming always—never accomplishing; thus women live—too much ashamed of their dreams, which they think ‘romantic’, to tell them where they will be laughed at, even if not considered wrong” (218). Nightingale argues that dreaming does ameliorate an idle life, though the practice is non-productive; dreaming helps women look beyond their confined lifestyles to imagine something more.

Both Brontë and Nightingale employ narratives of biblical figures that, like daydreams, help women account for and endure their societal roles. Whereas the heroines of *Shirley* look back to the past to create narratives about an ordinary female figure, the speaker of *Cassandra* posits her hope in the prophecy of a future female savior. This is the fundamental difference in the narratives of *Shirley* and *Cassandra*, the difference between recreating the past versus looking forward, and it is critical to my claim that Nightingale creates a parallel yet inverted text of Brontë’s novel.

The heroines of *Shirley* create narratives about Eve, supposedly the first woman, and Louis reads Shirley's previously written *devoir* about a character named Eva. The repetition of this figure and her derivative forms shows the characters' interest in investigating, if not creating, an originary female type. Kate Lawson claims that Shirley's vision of this woman is directly contrary to biblical representations and Miltonic characterization: "This Eve is an origin (she is not secondary); she is pure (she is not 'in transgression'); and she could never be mistaken for Milton's cook" ("Imagining" 415). Lawson asserts that Shirley desperately seeks an originary figure as a means of understanding women's current predicament. Ultimately, Lawson argues, "[...] Brontë's search for an authentic origin for femininity in this chapter ends in failure," because Shirley's creation is not "truly *different* from masculine power" ("Imagining" 416).

The *devoir* figure, Eva, "[...] is not Eve; she is not the *first* woman; she is simply a woman at the dawn of time" ("Imagining" 420). This figure is actually "feeble and secondary, and can only be restored and redeemed by the male figure" ("Imagining" 421). Though the characters attempt to look back to find a sense of origin, a hallmark to understanding their current status as women in Victorian England, their representations and discussions ultimately fail. As Tara Moore pointedly notes, Shirley's myth narratives actually re-inscribe patriarchal status upon the woman figure.<sup>13</sup> And as Lawson declares, the ending of *Shirley* is concurrent with the failure of the Eve figure(s):

In its re-writing of the Genesis myth the novel abandons any attempt to rehabilitate Eve, to found an essential and pure femininity. Instead the novel records, as minutely and accurately as possible, the kinds of social relations which subject women. The new Genesis myth Brontë writes is a myth of subjection; it

should scarcely surprise us then that this new myth is neither optimistic nor consoling. (“Imagining” 424)

I maintain that the failure of Brontë’s myth narratives is that they look *back* to an origin in attempting to understand women’s current position. Brontë may be attempting representation rather than rehabilitation of her society. Nightingale, aware of the futility of looking backward in an attempt to understand, encourages her reader to look *forward* to the coming of a new divinity. Furthermore, Nightingale asserts that women have never had a better position: “It seems as if the female spirit of the world were mourning everlastingly over blessings, *not* lost, but which she has never had, and which, in her discouragement, she feels that she never will have, they are so far off” (227). Though discouraging, Nightingale believes that a woman’s means of enduring is found in looking forward; this expectation for the future encourages activity rather than passivity, change rather than status quo, hope rather than despair.

Nightingale challenges the regression of *Shirley*’s characters to instead envision the coming of a female messiah: “The more complete a woman’s organization, the more she will feel it, 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 227). Such a prophecy notes both recognition of the stifling condition of women’s roles in this era and the desire to see it changed; whereas Shirley and Caroline may recognize the problems plaguing their existence, they allow themselves to be subsumed into the dominant patriarchal culture by marrying. Rather than submitting to the patriarchal tradition, Nightingale defies convention by crafting a heretical second messiah. Ruth Jenkins, in her essay “Florence Nightingale’s Revisionist Theology: ‘That Woman Will Be the Saviour of Her Race,’”<sup>14</sup> discusses the incarnation myth of the female savior and Nightingale’s reclaiming of traditionally masculine theological writings and



patriarchal religion: “With this provocative revision, Nightingale challenges patriarchy’s exclusive position in sacred myth and subsequently its appropriation of Judeo-Christian religion. Thus, she revises, rather than completely rejects, the orthodox religious myth, both explaining women’s powerlessness and identifying ways to regain greater power” (38). Jenkins claims that such a myth asserts women’s deserved power and the rightful interpretations of God and God’s power:

This power—both conservative and revolutionary—*r*eturns to God for authority while simultaneously revising organized religion and orthodox beliefs. [...] In this way, Nightingale reclaims for women and other marginalized people what she believes to be true religious values and rejects self-serving patriarchal ones that rest on misinterpreted edicts. (“Revisionist Theology” 60)

Seeking a means of restoring God’s power as a corrective to the biased patriarchal system, Nightingale imagines a female savior who will raise women from their socially prescribed roles. As discussed in Chapter Two, Nightingale manipulates religious imagery and forms to challenge the contemporary religious beliefs and interpretations. In effect, Nightingale’s incarnation myth becomes a sacred text itself as critics including Jenkins, Larson, and Landow<sup>15</sup> argue that *Cassandra* can be read as a fifth gospel and as sage writing. She successfully creates a return to God’s authority—not society’s—through a prophecy of a female messiah, rather than imagining alternate forms of the originary woman, Eve. This return to God’s authority supports women’s independence from societal constraint.

Nightingale’s prophecy moves beyond the history of female figures to imagine a second messiah, a savior exclusively for females. Nightingale challenges the traditional muscular Christian images of Christ to imagine a female Christ who will save her race. Such a prophecy

combats traditional Christianity's narrow interpretations of Christ by foregrounding a figure with just as exclusive a focus, yet one who champions the usually-forgotten cause of women's needs. Heretofore, Christ and scripture had been monopolized by a patriarchal society, as seen in the dogmatic interpretations of scripture and children's teachings,<sup>16</sup> and Nightingale turns the tool of discriminatory Church and society to imagine new power and salvation for women.

Though Nightingale compels her audience to remember the trials of her title mythological figure, Cassandra, she imagines the salvation open to Cassandra and all women through a female messiah. Cassandra, an ignored prophet, and Eve, the supposed origin of the entrance of sin into the world, faced their own forms of damnation; no one believes Cassandra's prophecies because she reneged on a promise to have intercourse and she was eventually raped and murdered, and Eve was expelled from the garden of Eden and forced to bear the pain of childbirth and. The images and histories of these women (especially Eve) were fixed in Victorian times: these women suffered for their mistakes and their stories were part of the history of women's wrongdoing and consequent circumstances of women's lives. Thus, Nightingale moves from Brontë's recollection of Eve to project a savior for her title figure of Cassandra. She tries not to rehabilitate women's past, but rather provides hope for women. As discussed in Chapter Two, the speaker of Cassandra is not necessarily the imagined savior, yet her role as prophet of better times to come is an instrument of salvation for women. Women must learn to hope in the potential of a changed future rather than dwelling upon the past and attempting to account for their status, as the heroines of *Shirley* do.

As I have already argued, Nightingale departs from the novel tradition as a means of providing hope for a change in women's status. Her criticism of the novelistic form is especially

pertinent here in a comparison of *Shirley* and *Cassandra*. She criticizes the false representation novels give of marriage:

What are novels? What is the secret of the charm of every romance that ever was written? The first thing in a good novel is to place persons together in circumstances which naturally call out the high feelings and thoughts of the characters, which afford sympathy between them on these points—romantic events they are called. The second is that the heroine has *generally* no family ties (almost *invariably* no mother), or, if she has these, these do not interfere with her entire independence. (207-8)

Nightingale faults novels for creating unnatural “romantic events” which show the best qualities in the main characters, without the watchful and interfering mother’s eye. This “charm” of popular fiction understandably casts its spell on readers, yet it is not representative of actual courtship under the family’s guidance. Just as Nightingale proclaims, Brontë’s heroines enjoy an independence usually realized only in fiction. Though Brontë’s reader witnesses Shirley’s fight with her uncle over marriage, she and Caroline are both more independent than most women in making their marriages. Shirley is an orphan, and Caroline’s mother returns to her and assumes a fairy godmother status: she appears at Caroline’s greatest hour of need, magically reveals her identity in Caroline’s near-delusional state of sickness, and nurses her back to wellness. Caroline apparently does not blame her mother for leaving her as a young child in the hands of an abusive father. Both Caroline and Shirley’s experiences of romance and marriage are seemingly removed from the reality of marriages dictated by family and society that Nightingale denounces. Nightingale condemns the eyes of the “always present mother and sisters” who watch the budding acquaintance, one fed upon “the gossip of art, musical and pictorial, the party politics of

the day, the chit chat of society” (224). She claims that the family manipulates its own members: “The family uses people, *not* for what they are, nor for what they are intended to be, but for what it wants them for—for its own uses. It thinks of them not as what God has made them, but as the something which *it* has arranged that they shall be” (216). The family is a very present reality for mid-Victorian women, a reality that Nightingale claims is not accurately represented in the typical marriage plot novel. Instead, novels present the atypical, though eagerly desired, circumstances of marriage:

Lastly, in a few rare, very rare, cases, such as circumstances always provided in novels, but seldom to be met with in real life, present—whether the accident of parents’ neglect, or of parents’ unusual skill and wisdom, or of having no parents at all, which is generally the case in novels—or marrying out of the person’s rank of life, by which the usual restraints are removed, and there is room and play left for attraction—or extraordinary events, isolation, misfortunes, which many wish for, even though their imaginations be not tainted by romance-reading; such alternatives as these give food and space for the development of character and mutual sympathies. (226)

This eagerly sought “food and space” for the growth of a true relationship, Nightingale argues, is usually only present in fiction. She notes that reading romances can “taint” the imagination, presumably because novels create false expectations for women.

The fairy-tale-like ending of double marriages in *Shirley* could certainly give rise to such false expectations. The double marriages with a pair of siblings is reminiscent of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, another link in the heritage of novels that Nightingale condemns. Lawson questions Brontë’s ending in “The Dissenting Voice: *Shirley*’s Vision of Women and

Christianity,” claiming that the ending is “a bitter denial of the power of expression and action for which the two heroines have yearned throughout the narrative” (738). *Shirley*’s ending is a termination to the energy of rebellion brewing throughout the novel. One of the last images of Shirley is quite contrary to the opening depiction of her as semi-masculine businesswoman: “In her white evening dress; with her long hair flowing full and wavy; with her noiseless step, her pale cheek, her eye full of night and lightning, she looked, I thought, spirit-like—a thing made of an element,—the child of a breeze and a flame,—the daughter of ray and rain-drop,—a thing never to be overtaken, arrested, fixed” (Brontë 630). Though Louis claims she is not “to be overtaken, arrested, fixed,” Shirley is overtaken in marriage. Her fleeting and less than corporeal image illustrates the massive transformation Shirley makes throughout the novel. Just as Caroline withers in sickness, Shirley eventually becomes nothing more than a spirit. Yet, Shirley desires this marriage—desires to be dominated: “Improving a husband! No. I shall insist upon my husband improving me, or else we part” (619). The loss of Shirley’s voice in the final chapters of the novel signals the symbolic death of the self in her marriage. This “spirit-like” image reinforces the gradual decline of her body, her power, her title, her name, and her independent self. Yet, the convention of the marriage plot novel calls for the reader to rejoice in such an ending, though the educated reader should acknowledge the undercurrents of death and decay in these supposedly happy unions. The ending of *Jane Eyre*, a summation of Rochester and Jane’s happiness, does not have a parallel in the final chapters of *Shirley*; rather the narrative shifts focus and the former heroines are referred to by only their married names.<sup>17</sup> Brontë intentionally departs from the tradition of *Jane Eyre* to shock those who seek “sentiment, and poetry, and reverie” (Brontë 5). This movement suggests that Brontë attempts to write a more realistic novel of the struggles women face in mid-Victorian England.

Jenkins maintains that the ending of *Shirley* is concurrent with its opening statement: “Something real, cool, and solid, lies before you” (Brontë 5). Claiming that Brontë explicitly rejects romance, Jenkins argues that the ending is something much more than the surface image of fairy tale romance: “This paradoxical structure is consistent with Brontë’s agenda: this reverberation between enacting and subverting traditional romance scripts reveals the inherent tensions of negotiating a hegemonic social script and attempting to challenge it” (“Radical Protestantism” 88). Jenkins maintains that *Shirley*’s conclusion forces the reader to employ interpretative skills to recognize Brontë’s subversive meaning in this ending, just as believers (especially marginalized women, working class, etc.) should use their own interpretative skills to have a direct relationship with God (“Radical Protestantism” 92).

Rather than hide her message in undercurrents or subtle play with plot convention, Nightingale obviously, and quite intentionally, departs from the standard marriage plot novel. Fueled by her vehemence over the fictive accounts of romance and marriage in such works, Nightingale abandons this form to create a new “happy” ending: the heroine’s death. Section VII of *Cassandra* illustrates a dying woman relieved to be nearing her end: “Oh! if you knew how gladly I leave this life, how much more courage I feel to take the chance of another, than of anything I see before me in this, you would put on your wedding-clothes instead of mourning for me!” (232). The events of one’s life are reversed, and the wedding is a time of mourning—of losing one’s individual self—and the funeral is a time of celebration as the restoration of one’s self. The speaker declares, “Free—free—oh! divine freedom, art thou come at last? Welcome, beautiful death!” (232). She claims that the world continually regresses by living according to prescribed roles: “And so is the world put back by the death of every one who has to sacrifice the development of his or her peculiar gifts (which were meant, not for selfish gratification, but

for the improvement of that world) to conventionality” (232). The family system perpetuates itself through marriages such as those at the end of *Shirley*, condemning both the individual and the world through its faithful adherence to establishment, and the only cessation is death. Furthermore, the speaker’s words reinforce the disconnect between God’s will and society’s waste of the individual’s “peculiar gifts” which were intended “for the improvement of that world.” Nightingale challenges such establishment by purposefully manipulating the established genre of novel and the established tale of courtship and marriage. Her play with form signals her hope for a greater change—a change in the roles of women.

The reader of *Cassandra* recognizes that the dying woman does not have the traditional titles of mother and wife, nor her married name, engraved on her tombstone (232). Instead, she is anonymous except for one statement: “I believe in God” (232). Her belief in God simultaneously invokes her belief in a savior, namely a savior for other women so that they will not have to celebrate their time of death as a welcome relief from life. Benjamin Jowett wrote, “And do not let Cassandra die, but live & declare the works of God” (qtd. in Quinn 4). Jowett’s sentiment is a noble one, but Nightingale knew that Cassandra must die—she dies so that she can find some sense of relief from her earthly existence and so that others may learn from her example and learn to hope and believe in a change of women’s roles. Thus, Nightingale has her speaker look forward—simultaneously looking forward to a release from society and to salvation that cannot be wrested from looking backward. Nightingale, very religious in her own way, would know the story of Lot’s wife, a woman infamous for looking back: “Then the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the Lord out of heaven; and he overthrew those cities, and all the Plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground. But Lot’s wife, behind him, looked back, and she became a pillar of salt” (Genesis 19: 24-26).

Looking back, especially for a woman, seems to signal certain self-destruction, and more tellingly, a sense of eternal paralysis.

Nightingale, prone to thoughts of death and suicide,<sup>18</sup> must have seen herself in Caroline's struggles, and recognized her own propensity towards action in Shirley's passion. Presumably spurred by both of Brontë's heroines and the volatile debates surrounding women and their roles in society at work in *Shirley*, Nightingale began working on her own essay about women's place in society only months later. Her work marks her as a literary peer of Charlotte Brontë, a woman writer hoping to effect change, whose experiment is relevant to discussing the generic progress of both novel and essay. Nightingale is critical to understanding the scope of nineteenth-century female writers who shaped their own canon of provocative, rebellious, and socially problematic writing. *Cassandra* and *Shirley*, often unread and overlooked, are sister texts that discuss and offer means of survival, and even victory, over confining societal roles for women in mid-Victorian England.



## CHAPTER FOUR:

## The Literary Descendants of Florence Nightingale: Ray Strachey and Virginia Woolf

In previous chapters I have discussed critical influences on Nightingale in her composition of *Cassandra*. I now turn to look at *Cassandra*'s influence upon later writers: Ray Strachey and Virginia Woolf. Strachey's and Woolf's lives were inextricably linked in many ways: they met as young single women working for the suffrage movement; Strachey attended Woolf's Friday Club (an origin of the Bloomsbury Group); they traveled to visit one another many times; and Woolf's brother married Strachey's younger sister (Halpern 78-80). Though Woolf is now a feminist icon, largely because of her essay mandating a woman's independent space and finances, *A Room of One's Own*, Strachey was the first to write a stirring account of the women's movement. *The Cause: A Short History of the Women's Movement in Great Britain* was published in 1928 (one year before *A Room of One's Own* was published in 1929), and Strachey attached *Cassandra* as an appendix to the text. This was the first time *Cassandra* was published, though Nightingale privately printed *Suggestions for Thought* in 1860. Strachey's rediscovery of this volatile text not only enriches *The Cause*, but also leads to the influence *Cassandra* has on Woolf; this effect is illustrated by the numerous similarities between Nightingale's and Woolf's writing.

*The Cause* is the culminating product of years of Strachey's own work in the women's movement. She preferred non-militant feminist work, citing the effect produced by militant feminism: "[T]he militant behaviour of the Suffragettes is doing a lot of harm in Birmingham....[I]t isn't safe to go out in the streets for mobs follow any woman who looks

independent, and there have been several cases when perfectly non-militant or even anti-suffrage women have had to get police protection. The time of riots really seems to be coming—and it's rather horrible" (qtd. in Halpern 78). Her comments are reminiscent of Nightingale's own dislike of certain brands of feminism, as discussed in Chapter Two. Strachey, like Nightingale, worked tirelessly in political and administrative realms; she ran for public office several times, she assisted the first female M.P. (Lady Astor in 1919), and in 1923 she toured with Lord Robert Cecil to support the League of Nations (Halpern 82-83). In 1923, after her last election defeat, she turned more seriously to writing: "Everyone, both in her family and in Oliver's [her husband's], wrote sooner or later. It was 'like mumps,' she once said" (Halpern 83).

Strachey submits to her familial proclivity towards writing and produces *The Cause*, a detailed history of the women's movement. She identifies her goals for the text:

The organised Women's Movement, which is the subject of this book, is not yet at an end, and may therefore be in some ways unsuitable for treatment as an historical subject. It has, however, reached a stage at which its progress can be tabulated with some exactness; and so many of its aims have achieved that the various aspects of the movement can be put into their proper perspective in relation to the whole ideal, and the affair surveyed without the heat of controversy or the prejudice of propaganda. (11)

Strachey attempts to put aspects "into their proper perspective" so that the movement "can be tabulated with some exactness"; such language illustrates her goal of writing a correct history of the many factors of the movement.

She begins by identifying two major impetuses that spurred the movement's beginning, the French and Industrial Revolutions, and proposes the movement's year of birth:

It seems clear that this impulse came from the doctrines and philosophies which inspired the French Revolution, and that it received a further impulse from the economic changes of the Industrial Revolution. The Women's Revolt was, in fact, a by-product of these two upheavals, and although it took more than half a century for anything deliberate to become manifest, the real date for the beginning of the movement is 1792.

In that year Mary Wollstonecraft, inspired by the thoughts of 'Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity,' wrote and published her great book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. In this book the whole extent of the feminist ideal is set out, and whole claim for equal human rights is made; and although at the time it was little noticed, it has remained the text of the movement ever since. (12)

Strachey identifies a literary beginning as the definitive origin of the movement. Claiming Wollstonecraft's text as the event marking the birth of the movement shows the importance of this book and foreshadows the importance of other literature throughout the movement. Furthermore, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, as Strachey implies, embodies the revolutionary discourse that characterized the early Romantic period. As shown in Chapter Two, Nightingale herself extends this literary (and historical) tradition in *Cassandra* by including Romantic elements in her essay.

Though Strachey pays homage to the initial effect of Wollstonecraft's work and the radical sentiments of the French Revolution, she claims that the most influential time period for the women's movement is the nineteenth century: "[...] But the true history of the Women's Movement is the whole history of the nineteenth century; nothing which occurred in those years could be irrelevant to the great social change which was going on, and nothing was without its

share of influence upon it” (5). By claiming that “nothing” from that time period could be irrelevant to the movement, Strachey elevates the status of everything that occurred during that century, including the life and work of Nightingale.

She notably begins her discussion of the nineteenth century by describing the history of Nightingale, one of Queen Victoria’s contemporaries:

[...] But they all, in their own lives, encountered the peculiar disadvantages of being women, and there is no better way of making the grounds of their coming revolt clear than by describing some of their individual experiences and reactions to them.

The best example is perhaps Florence Nightingale, who brought to her revolt against the restrictions and limitations of young ladyhood the same passionate force which enabled her in later life to carry out her magnificent achievements. She was destined to be one of Victoria’s greatest subjects, but until she was more than thirty years old she was shut up tight within the conventions which forbade independent action to a woman. (18-19)

Strachey claims that Nightingale serves as “the best example” of Victoria’s revolutionary contemporaries. By describing Nightingale as “destined” to be one of the greatest subjects of the Victorian period, Strachey alludes to Nightingale’s own sense of call and purpose. She also recognizes the years of conventional constraint under which Nightingale suffered, yet it was during that time of confinement that Nightingale wrote *Suggestions for Thought*, evidence of her “passionate force.”

Strachey ends her discussions of Nightingale by addressing her writings and Nightingale’s attitudes toward women. Strachey assesses Nightingale’s text: “*Suggestions for*

*Thought* is very long, its arrangement is very confused, and it is a highly wearisome book to read. It is full of repetitions, and of things apparently irrelevant, and there is much in it which is not original” (27). She criticizes *Cassandra* as she simultaneously praises its overall effect:

It is a terrible piece of writing, a scornful indictment of society against which there is no possible defence. It is here printed in full and can be left to complete the explanation of the stirring of female discontent. No one who reads it through can wonder any longer that women began to ask more from life than the conventions of the early years of the nineteenth century allowed them. (29)

Claiming that the essay “can be left to complete the explanation of the stirring of female discontent,” Strachey attaches the essay as the first of two appendices to *The Cause*.

She also includes a bibliographical index in a second appendix for those readers who are interested in studying the movement further. “No mention is made in this list of the fiction of the period between 1837 and 1928. It is of course exceedingly important to an understanding of the changing position of women, but it has been so abundantly studied, and is so easily accessible that no detailed tabulation seems necessary,” she states (Strachey 419). Though Strachey chooses not to delineate other fiction, she both discusses and includes *Cassandra* in her text. By her special inclusion of *Cassandra* in her book, Strachey makes available what she sees as a paramount text, yet one that has heretofore been inaccessible and not greatly studied.

Strachey clearly sees Nightingale and her work as critical components of the women’s movement. She begins her history with a biographical sketch of Nightingale and ends the volume with the first publication of *Cassandra*, “one remarkable fragment” (29). In the intervening chapters, she outlines specific events that furthered the Women’s Movement during Victoria’s reign through post-World War I. Nightingale’s life and work serve as bookends to

this history of the women's movement. Strachey's placement suggests just how critical Nightingale's life *and* writings are to understanding the course of change for women.

Strachey's emphasis on literary beginnings and endings reinforces the centrality of *Cassandra* to the women's movement. As already mentioned, Strachey defines the beginning of the women's revolt as the publication of Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. She concludes the second appendix by envisioning the literary moment that will mark the end of this history: "The change in the type of heroine required for 'best sellers' is the real test, and it is not until the 'strong silent hero' ceases to 'dominate' the gentle heroine that the end of the Women's Movement will have arrived" (420). Her prophecy is partially realized in Nightingale's essay, for no 'strong silent hero' exists to dominate over the heroine. Furthermore, as I discuss in Chapter Three, the heroine seeks an alternative ending to the conventional marriage plot genre. Yet, *Cassandra* was obviously not a 'best seller,' though it does mark an important link in the evolution of female writers, one that Strachey defines as beginning with Wollstonecraft and obviously continues with her own history of the women's movement.

Strachey's interests after her writing of *The Cause* parallel those of Nightingale. Strachey moved on "to found and raise finance for her favorite interest, the Women's Employment Federation (of which she became head in 1934), fighting for the entry and promotion of educated women to the higher professions in what was still very much a man's world" (Halpern 85). Indeed, her combination of literary ambition and political work in the forefront of securing women's professions resonates with Nightingale's work that Strachey emphasizes in *The Cause*. Strachey's daughter, Barbara Strachey Halpern, remembers her mother's incredible work ethic: "As was usual for her, she worked too hard at too many things—two broadcasts a week and an article almost every day" (84). The sections on Florence

Nightingale in *The Cause* may not be only the record of an influential woman in the movement, but also the author's attempt to recognize a kindred spirit who worked tirelessly years before to make her own writing and work possible.

Virginia Woolf, rather than detailing the historical aspect of the women's movement, crafts a creative non-fictional account of women's situation and their needs. Her work, *A Room of One's Own*, demands that women have their own space and income. She cursorily describes the history of women's circumstances and imagines the women geniuses who have been stunted by a constrictive society. Her work seems to parallel Nightingale's *Cassandra*, but Woolf recognizes Nightingale's essay with only one sentence in *A Room of One's Own*: "Florence Nightingale shrieked aloud in her agony" (56). Woolf's brief description obviously reflects her opinion of Nightingale's intense and episodic text. Woolf also critiques the passion inherent in Charlotte Brontë's style in *Jane Eyre*, one permeated by passionate anger. Her criticism could easily apply to *Cassandra*:

[...] But if one reads them [the pages] over and marks that jerk in them, that indignation, one sees that she will never get her genius expressed whole and entire. Her books will be deformed and twisted. She will write in a rage where she should write calmly. She will write foolishly where she should write wisely. She will write of herself where she should write of her characters. She is at war with her lot. (69-70)

Woolf faults women writers for allowing their anger to infiltrate their writing, so much so that it interrupts the narrative and detracts from the characters. Certainly, one understands Woolf's description of *Cassandra* as a "shriek" in light of her treatment of Charlotte Brontë's intensity.

Strachey also criticizes the “terrible” essay, but notes the inevitable effect upon the reader—the reader’s true understanding of a woman’s situation (29).

Woolf denounces the intrusion of a woman’s writer’s feelings into her writing, but she seems to contradict this assertion in another essay, “Professions for Women.” In this 1931 work, Woolf describes the history of women writers and the growth of women’s professions. She at first dismisses her arduous path of becoming a woman writer by acknowledging those who had come before her: “For the road was cut many years ago—by Fanny Burney, by Aphra Behn, by Harriet Martineau, by Jane Austen, by George Eliot—many famous women, and many more unknown and forgotten, have been before me, making the path smooth, and regulating my steps” (“Professions” 284). She humorously credits the real reason why women writers have succeeded: “The cheapness of writing paper is, of course, the reason why women have succeeded as writers before they have succeeded in the other professions” (284). Yet, Woolf turns serious as she describes the first of two major obstacles in her career: killing the Angel in the House. She claims that such an act was “self-defence” because a writer must be her own woman: “For, as I found, directly I put pen to paper, you cannot review even a novel without having a mind of your own, without expressing what you think to be the truth about human relations, morality, sex” (286). She recounts the incident: “I turned upon her and caught her by the throat. I did my best to kill her. [...] Had I not killed her she would have killed me. She would have plucked the heart out of my writing” (286). Secondly, Woolf describes the second obstacle—learning to tell the truth about a woman’s bodily experiences. She remembers when intimidating thoughts of male convention interrupted her creative process:

Men, her reason told her, would be shocked. The consciousness of what men will say of a woman who speaks the truth about her passions had roused her from her



artist's state of unconsciousness. [...] For though men sensibly allow themselves great freedom in these respects, I doubt that they realize or can control the extreme severity with which they condemn such freedom in women. (288)

Woolf admits that she has not solved the second problem and says, "I doubt that any woman has solved it yet" (288). In this essay Woolf is candid about the writer's position and its influence on her work. She charges women to recognize the obstacles inherent to their positions as women in all professional fields.

Woolf discusses the highly emotional process of reclaiming her position as a legitimate woman writer from the male conventional assumptions about what female writing should be. She employs words such as "heart" and "passions." Here, Woolf admits just how personal writing is. Her descriptions in this essay seem to contradict her earlier critiques of both Brontë and Nightingale. She asserts that writing is a writing of the body; as such, should Woolf denounce the impassioned styles of both Brontë and Nightingale? Critic Alex Zwerdling has noted this tension in Woolf's writing. Her mission in exposing the wrongs of women's subjection is largely motivated by anger, yet she critiques others who make their feelings apparent. Zwerdling claims that her attitude resonates with modernist feminism when some women sought to ingratiate themselves with men: "[...] Most of the first feminists learned early that it was as important to reassure men as to awaken women. It was men, after all, who made the laws, controlled the universities and professions, and owned the property. Their cooperation was absolutely essential to the movement at least until the basic privileges of political power and financial independence were won" (72-73). Zwerdling traces Woolf's anger in her diary entries, a sentiment she channels in private writing so that she can assume a voice of detachment in her public writing: "Her diary and early drafts show how great a distance she travelled between

original impulse and finished product. The process of composition is consistently a search for greater control over intense feeling” (Zwerdling 76). Woolf herself is an angry writer, just like Brontë, yet she feels that the anger must be conquered to achieve more perfect writing.

Jean Long examines Woolf’s diary entries regarding *A Room of One’s Own*, particularly Woolf’s anxiety about her tone. Because of this concern, Woolf anticipates a negative reaction to *A Room of One’s Own*: “It makes me suspicious that there is a shrill feminine tone in it which my intimate friends will dislike” (*Writer’s Diary* 145). She further comments that “[...] as usual much is watery & flimsy & pitched in too high a voice” (qtd. in Long 80). The images of “shrill” and “pitched in too high a voice” suggest the “shriek” Woolf used to characterize *Cassandra*. Woolf tellingly employs similar imagery to describe her own work and Nightingale’s essay; what Woolf used as a critique of Nightingale’s text, she privately turns on herself in self-evaluation. The frustration of both female authors pervades and appropriately defines their texts.

As aforementioned, Woolf famously challenges the frustration that punctuates Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, but Long examines the discrepancies in Woolf’s critique. Long questions Woolf’s quantity of evidence: “[...] It is odd that not a word of Austen’s prose is quoted by Woolf to illustrate its perceived faultlessness. Charlotte Brontë’s ‘deformed and twisted’ prose, on the other hand, is quoted for a page and a half” (90). Long claims that Woolf actually manipulates Brontë to become her own silenced voice of anger:

I think Woolf also puts the passages from *Jane Eyre* to her own use, allowing their passion and eloquence to say what she herself was not yet ready to say. [...] By letting Brontë speak out in this way, Woolf has the best of both worlds: she is able without embarrassment to express her own anger through the voice of ‘a

most singular and eloquent woman' while at the same time, as an Angelically-compromised feminist writer, allowing herself to criticize Brontë's angry writing on literary grounds. (91)

Long's assertion of Woolf's ventriloquism is radical: Woolf superficially indicts Brontë but manipulates her criticism to voice her own similar feelings—feelings restricted by that Angel in the House that she supposedly killed.

I argue that Woolf, although she criticizes Nightingale and gives her little credit for her revolutionary essay, adopts the same form of ventriloquism by employing similar arguments and images that Nightingale first uses in *Cassandra*. For example, Woolf discusses the intersection of writing and the body in her description of the new directions women's writing will take, those that speak unmistakably to the precedent set by *Cassandra*, both in meaning and form. Woolf claims that women's available time for reading must be taken into account in the production of a new form: "The book has somehow to be adapted to the body, and at a venture one would say that women's books should be shorter, more concentrated, than those of men, and framed so that they do not need long hours of steady and uninterrupted work for interruptions there will always be" (*Room* 78). I argue in Chapter Two that Nightingale purposefully creates a highly fractured text to mimic women's time, fragmented by their many social duties and responsibilities. Woolf employs this argument, first made by Nightingale, and reinforces her assertion by illustrating the plight of a female intellectual, such as the fictional Judith Shakespeare: "She picked up a book now and then, one of her brother's perhaps, and read a few pages. But then her parents came in and told her to mend the stockings or mind the stew and not moon about with books and papers" (*Room* 47). Nightingale also cites both the family as a primary agent of sentencing women to a lifetime of idleness.

Woolf envisions the time when the novelistic form will not be a woman writer's predominant genre choice:

Yet who shall say that even now 'the novel' (I give it inverted commas to make my sense of the words' inadequacy), who shall say that even this most pliable of all forms is rightly shaped for her use? No doubt we shall find her knocking that into shape for herself when she has the free use of her limbs; and providing some new vehicle, not necessarily in verse, for the poetry in her. (*Room 77*)

Given Nightingale's revision choices that took her from a novelistic form to an essay, she too grappled with finding a "new vehicle" to express the "poetry in her." Indeed, it seems that Nightingale struggles with these genre-specific choices some seventy years before Woolf predicts a change for the future generations of women writers.

Woolf also mimics the key image of sleep in the opening lines of *Cassandra* in *A Room of One's Own* to show the isolation of women. Nightingale describes the isolation of wakefulness of a painfully aware woman: "Such an one longs to replunge into the happy unconscious sleep of the rest of the race! they slumber in one another's arms—they are not yet awake" (205). Woolf depicts the same sense of isolation for the one awake amid those who sleep: "One seemed alone with an inscrutable society. All human beings were laid asleep—prone, horizontal, dumb. Nobody seemed stirring in the streets of Oxbridge. Even the door of the hotel sprang open at the touch of an invisible hand—not a boots was sitting up to light me to bed, it was so late" (*Room 24*). Woolf and Nightingale illustrate the great isolation wrought by being the sole individual awake in the midst of others who sleep. The speaker of *A Room of One's Own* struggles with the discrimination and challenges facing women, particularly women writers. She clearly feels a loneliness akin to that of the speaker in *Cassandra*, one who feels she

“has awakened too early, has risen up too soon, has rejected the companionship of the race, unlinked to any human being” (Nightingale 205). Just as *A Room of One’s Own*’s speaker notes only an “invisible hand,” the speaker of *Cassandra* feels she is disconnected from humanity. This demarcation signals both the parallel between these two works, and suggests that both speakers are disconnected from their present reality, a world of sleep, in order to bring about great change through their writings.

Woolf’s conclusion to *A Room of One’s Own* marks the progression of women’s literary endings: Brontë employs the conventional ending of marriage, Nightingale ends her text with the speaker’s death, and Woolf calls for the creation of a space for a woman’s profession. Woolf calls for a physical space for female writers, yet she simultaneously demands another space: a space where women are respected for their professional choices and recognized as equals in such a sphere, namely by being able to frequent previously restricted libraries. Rather than choosing marriage or death, the speaker maintains her own room and living. Woolf claims that such a situation is necessary for the woman writer, yet one could conclude that this lifestyle is necessary for every woman’s physical and emotional health. Woolf credits those who made this evolution possible, “[...] Thanks to the toils of those obscure women in the past, of whom I wish we knew more, thanks, curiously enough to two wars, the Crimean which let Florence Nightingale out of her drawing room [...]” (*Room* 108). Here, Woolf credits Nightingale’s actions in evincing better opportunities for women writers to loose themselves from the societal drawing room and find their own space. Yet, interestingly, Woolf does not cite Nightingale for contributing to the evolution of women’s writing. Nightingale’s contributions are remembered only for her work in the Crimea, not the work she presumably created in the drawing room, *Cassandra*.

Though Woolf credits Nightingale for first stepping out of the drawing room and leading the way for other women, she recognizes that the present conditions for women are not ideal. She posits hope for change in referring again to the fictional Judith Shakespeare in the final pages of *A Room of One's Own*:

Now my belief is that this poet who never wrote a word and was buried at the crossroads still lives. She lives in you and in me, and in many other women who are not here tonight, for they are washing up the dishes and putting the children to bed. But she lives; for great poets do not die; they are continuing presences; they need only the opportunity to walk among us in the flesh. This opportunity, as I think, it is now coming within your power to give her. (113)

Woolf looks forward to the reincarnation of a figure who signifies changed lives for women:

For my belief is that if we live another century of so—I am talking of the common life which is the real life and not of the little separate lives which we live as individuals—and have five hundred a year each of us and rooms of our own; if we have the habit of freedom and the courage to write exactly what we think; if we escape a little from the common sitting-room and see human beings not always in their relation to each other but in relation to reality; and the sky, too, and the trees or whatever it may be in themselves; [...] but that we go alone and that our relation is to the world of reality and not only to the world of men and women, then the opportunity will come and the dead poet who was Shakespeare's sister will put on the body which she has so often laid down. (*Room* 113-14)

Woolf's prophecy of the dead poet reclaiming her female body and finding a changed world is parallel to Nightingale's vision of a female messiah. Both figures are supernatural presences that

are the means of salvation and reminders that the potential for change is within women. Woolf, a descendant of Nightingale's prophecy who has not yet witnessed the coming of a female messiah, encourages her audience to strive for change: "But I maintain that she [Judith Shakespeare] would come if we worked for her, and that so to work, even in poverty and obscurity, is worth while" (*Room* 114). Woolf and Nightingale both look forward to a better time for women, but they maintain that women should strive to improve their own lives and make such grand change possible.

Woolf notes the polyvocality of great works: "For masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice" (*Room* 65). Florence Nightingale's *Cassandra* hardly enjoys the fame and canonical respect of Woolf's essay, yet one should heed Woolf's words and strive to place Nightingale in the canon of nineteenth-century female writers. Woolf's call for the improvement of the status of women writers and of women evolves from the "shriek" of *Cassandra*. Nightingale's essay enacts both a revolutionary form and a liberating message for those women who are searching for something other than the conventional life of passivity. Strachey recognized the importance of this seminal work in women's literature, and she showcased it in her own work so that others could be influenced by its haunting message. Woolf, though she does not forthrightly praise Nightingale's achievement, employs parallel arguments and images in *A Room of One's Own*. *Cassandra* is a mother text for *A Room of One's Own*—a text of anger and revolutionary changes in form. Woolf overtly thanks Nightingale for stepping outside the drawing room to participate in the Crimean War, yet she implicitly pays tribute to *Cassandra* by enacting the same persuasive prose in *A Room of One's Own*.

## CHAPTER FIVE:

### Conclusion

Elaine Showalter claims that Nightingale herself identified with the mythical Cassandra: “In letters to friends, Nightingale sometimes referred to herself as ‘poor Cassandra,’ feeling that, as the mythical Cassandra, having rejected the love of Apollo, was doomed to utter true prophecies that would go unheeded, she, in rejecting marriage and the common lot of woman, had doomed herself to silence, hysteria, and futility” (“Miranda and Cassandra” 319). As mentioned in the Introduction, Nightingale discounts the power of writing in favor of a seemingly more productive lifestyle. She prides herself on the fulfillment of a moral, productive vocation, and writing, in her opinion, seems contrary to her practical viewpoint. Yet, Nightingale turns to writing to challenge her fear of silence. In *Cassandra* Nightingale writes of a girl’s fear of speaking outside the accepted domestic realm: “But a girl, if she has any pride, is so ashamed of having any thing she wishes to say out of the hearing of her own family, she thinks it must be something so very wrong, that it is ten to one, if she have the opportunity of saying it, that she will not” (226). She adds, “And yet she is spending her life, perhaps, in dreaming of accidental means of unrestrained communication” (226). Clearly, Nightingale steps outside the hearing of her family, embraces unrestrained communication, and therefore, rises above a world of silence, hysteria, and futility.

Nightingale describes the discouraging circumstances of women: “It seems as if the female spirit of the world were mourning everlastingly over blessings, *not* lost, but which she has never had, and which, in her discouragement, she feels that she never will have, they are so far



off” (227). Yet, she writes in her letters, “There is an old legend that the nineteenth century is to be the ‘century of women’” (qtd. in Cook 441). Nightingale herself was the catalyst committed to evincing this change: “I must strive after a better life for woman” (qtd. in Cook 102).

Nightingale works to create this better life by making tremendous advances in the nursing field and by wielding great administrative power. I maintain that she also creates this change through her writing. Though *Cassandra* was never publicly published in the nineteenth century, it garnered considerable respect among her peers. Furthermore, an essay’s power is not restricted to the time contemporary to its composition. Scholars studying *Cassandra* now can learn of varying attitudes to the women’s movement, the Church, the interconnectedness of women writers, and (more obliquely) connections between the Romantic and Victorian periods.

In *Cassandra* Nightingale claims, “The time is come when women must do something more than the ‘domestic hearth’, which means nursing the infants, keeping a pretty house, having a good dinner and an entertaining party” (229). This call for “something more” challenges women to step outside the home and take on new roles, writing included. Nightingale answers her own call by writing a revolutionary essay. *Cassandra* illustrates the promised pain of taking on such a challenge, yet Nightingale claims the superiority of struggle to idleness: “Better have pain than paralysis! A hundred struggle and drown in the breakers. One discovers the new world. But rather, ten times rather, die in the surf, heralding the way to that new world, than stand idly on the shore” (208).

Indeed, Nightingale is the “one [who] discovers the new world.” Nightingale blends contrasting elements to create an essay just as complex and forceful as her message. Her blending of masculine and feminine elements as a prelude to the prophecy of the coming of a female messiah predates Woolf’s concept of androgyny described in *A Room of One’s Own*.

Woolf claims, “It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly” (104). Nightingale was arguing for this conception of “man-womanly” seventy years before Woolf.

Nightingale finds authority by citing Christ’s words and looking forward to a time when women can be restored to their God-given potential. She claims that the words of Christ are ever-present: “He might well say, ‘Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away’. His words will never pass away” (231). In the Introduction, I referred to Nightingale’s denouncement of writing. Convinced of the superiority of action over mere words, she constantly strove to imitate Christ’s works. However, here she recognizes the eternal power of Christ’s words. Presumably, when Nightingale made arrangements for her papers after her death, she finally recognized the power of her own writings and the potential of their enduring presence beyond her death. *Cassandra* is a testament to this presence that signifies an implicit activism at work within the text. Nightingale struggled with defining a demarcation between active work and passive life, such as writing. Yet, *Cassandra* suggests that an intersection between active productivity and writing is possible, even probable. Ray Strachey and Virginia Woolf are the true heirs to Nightingale’s text because they too seize this critical dual role as writers and women working for change. Nightingale’s *Cassandra* heralds the revolutionary intersection in the history of women’s rights and the evolution of women’s writing—an intersection of productive activism and the written word.

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<sup>1</sup> See “From Novel to Essay: Gender and Revision in Florence Nightingale’s ‘Cassandra’” by Katherine Snyder for a full description of the history of the many forms of *Cassandra*.

<sup>2</sup> Showalter notes that *Cassandra* is a hallmark text that provides a “link” between Wollstonecraft and Woolf (“Feminist Complaint” 396).

<sup>3</sup> I will discuss Nightingale’s discussion of daydreaming more fully in Chapter Three when I investigate women’s dreams and narratives.

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix A for the full text of the hymn.

<sup>5</sup> Also see “The Prisoner” (1846) by Emily Brontë: “Yet I would lose no sting, would wish no torture less, / The more that anguish racks, the earlier it will bless” (lines 57-58).

<sup>6</sup> I will investigate Nightingale’s departure from the marriage novel genre further in Chapter Three by comparing and contrasting *Cassandra* to *Shirley* by Charlotte Brontë.

<sup>7</sup> Though Christian ideology sometimes characterizes Christ as the bridegroom to the Church, his bride, I do not think Nightingale manipulates this image here. She is deliberately reversing the sentiments that characterize the earthly celebration of marriage and the mourning that usually attends death. Though most Christians agree that death is a time of a reunion with Christ and should be celebrated, such joyous sentiments are usually trumped by the grief of loss.

Nightingale’s speaker welcomes her death as a young bride usually welcomes her wedding, not implying that Christ is her bridegroom, rather that she will be free of the institution of marriage and another prescribed role.

<sup>8</sup> Claire Kahane, in “The Aesthetic Politics of Rage,” analyzes Nightingale’s argument as a form of outrage: “Unlike rage, outrage by its very nature is a force for change, is political” (128). She claims that outrage in the nineteenth century, such as Nightingale’s, led to feminism and essays:

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“Although Nightingale herself refused the label feminist, in *Cassandra* her outrage turned the complaint to political account, enabling an identification with women that was ultimately empowering” (143).

<sup>9</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, claim that “*Shirley* is more consciously [...] a novel about the ‘woman question’” than any of Brontë’s other works (374).

<sup>10</sup> In “Women Writers, Women’s Issues,” Kate Flint discusses the challenges Charlotte Brontë and her sisters faced in writing revolutionary texts and the very nature of their rebelling against society in their profession of writing.

<sup>11</sup> This disconnect is a fundamental point in Ruth Jenkins’s argument which will be discussed later in this essay.

<sup>12</sup> Lashgari’s “What Some Women Can’t Swallow: Hunger as Protest in Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley*” illustrates how both heroines of the novel battle forms of hunger, and arguably, self-starvation.

<sup>13</sup> Moore, in her essay “Women and Myth Narratives in Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley*,” discusses both Shirley’s and Caroline’s myth narratives. She claims that Shirley’s myth narratives are representations of the patriarchal system inculcated within her, whereas Caroline “creates more realistic myth narratives which display her ideals of an independent female community” (477).

<sup>14</sup> This essay claims that Nightingale was opposed to the discriminatory roles for women that were justified by religious discourse. Thus, a disconnect results between society’s definition of gender roles and God’s will. Nightingale does not experience the typical Victorian crisis of religious doubt, rather, she attempts to surmount the societal roles so that she can fully experience her calling to serve God.

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<sup>15</sup> Landow compares Nightingale to Old Testament prophets and their sage writing. He also describes the connections between Nightingale and Carlyle.

<sup>16</sup> Larson discusses the different teachings and attitudes towards scripture developed through boys' and girls' conduct books in the Victorian era.

<sup>17</sup> In "Radical Protestantism versus Privileged Hermeneutics: The Religion and Romance of Brontë's Spirituality," Jenkins claims that *Shirley* is a novel of interpretation. As such, she reminds the reader to view the ending through the lens of the opening lines of the novel: "If you think, from this prelude, that anything like a romance is preparing for you, reader, you were never more mistaken. [...] Something real, cool, and solid, lies before you [...]" (Brontë 5). Brontë seeks to represent reality, and in *Shirley*, emphasizes and mimics the role of patriarchally inscribed scripts. As such, the reader should not think that Brontë surrenders to conventional ending, rather she exposes and mimics traditional roles for women.

<sup>18</sup> Sue Zemka, in her chapter "But Do We See One Woman Who Looks Like a Female Christ?: The Messiahs of Florence Nightingale" in the larger study *Victorian Testaments: The Bible, Christology, and Literary Authority in Early-Nineteenth-Century British Culture*, discusses the curious intersection of repetitive Christ and death imagery that permeates Nightingale's writings. She specifically claims that though death is a significant trope, it usually signals not an end, but Nightingale's "reemerging at the end more bent on her existence as a public servant, a public voice, an incarnation of the gospel of work" (177). See also "Not Choosing To Be: Victorian Literary Responses to Suicide" by Barbara T. Gates. Gates claims that Nightingale conquers her thoughts of suicide by the "legitimate form of Victorian suicide"—"not literal death but renunciation of self" (81).

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## APPENDIX: “The Son of God Goes Forth to War”

The Son of God goes forth to war,  
 A kingly crown to gain;  
 His blood red banner streams afar:  
 Who follows in His train?  
 Who best can drink his cup of woe,  
 Triumphant over pain,  
 Who patient bears his cross below,  
 He follows in His train.

That martyr first, whose eagle eye  
 Could pierce beyond the grave;  
 Who saw his Master in the sky,  
 And called on Him to save.  
 Like Him, with pardon on His tongue,  
 In midst of mortal pain,  
 He prayed for them that did the wrong:  
 Who follows in His train?

A glorious band, the chosen few  
 On whom the Spirit came;  
 Twelve valiant saints, their hope they knew,  
 And mocked the cross and flame.  
 They met the tyrant’s brandished steel,  
 The lion’s gory mane;  
 They bowed their heads the death to feel:  
 Who follows in their train?

A noble army, men and boys,  
 The matron and the maid,  
 Around the Savior’s throne rejoice,  
 In robes of light arrayed.  
 They climbed the steep ascent of Heav’n,  
 Through peril, toil and pain;  
 O God, to us may grace be given,  
 To follow in their train.

Words: Reginald Heber, 1812.

Music: “All Saints,” Henry S. Cutler, 1872.  
 ([www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/s/o/sonofgod.htm](http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/s/o/sonofgod.htm))