

Deception and the Pessimistic Prophecy: Iris and Cassandra in *Aeneid* 5

The appearance of Iris in *Aeneid* 5 is one of the more extraordinary scenes in a book filled with uncanny and disconcerting events. Here Iris, in the guise of the aged woman Beroe, relates one of the many prophecies of the *Aeneid*. In attempt to dissuade the Trojan women from continuing in their journey and, more broadly, to discourage Aeneas and possibly derail his mission to Italy, she adjures the Trojan women to burn their ships and give up on reaching the promised land of Italy, citing a warning from a dream-vision of Cassandra. Although this alleged supernatural warning is just as deceptive as one of O'Hara's "optimistic prophecies"--that is, prophecies that are interpreted with unwarranted optimism, such that the recipient is persuaded to undertake a course of action that he might have avoided had he known its more unfortunate consequences--it is meant to have the opposite effect. In fact, throughout the *Aeneid* this is the only example of what I would dub a pessimistic prophecy, one in which the future is described in a more discouraging fashion than is warranted, for the sake of derailing a course of action that may be helpful to the recipient. As such, it presents a uniquely bleak picture of relations between gods and mortals.

It seems strange, at first consideration, that Iris should invoke Cassandra to reinforce the veracity of her dream: although Cassandra was of course a powerful prophetess, the curse on Cassandra seems to limit her usefulness as a source. While most scholars have passed over this puzzling citation with minimal comment, I argue that Iris' invocation of Cassandra comments on Iris' own role in the *Aeneid*: this pessimistic prophecy underscores Iris' own failure. Cassandra appears infrequently in the *Aeneid*, but whenever she does, her significance strongly leans upon her identity as a doomed Priamid and symbol of the fallen house of Troy. Cassandra is evocative of failure, via both her own cursed gift of prophecy and the fall of her family. Here and

elsewhere, Iris' failure to deceive other characters, even through supernatural disguise, jars disconcertingly against her nominal superiority to the mortals she tries to manipulate, and her unsuccessful pessimistic prophecy invokes Cassandra with a specific intertextual effect: just as Cassandra fails to convince others of her warnings despite the truth behind them, likewise Iris fails to exert power over mortals despite being an Olympian goddess.

An even more troubling feature of this encounter is the manifest hostility that the Trojan women direct toward Iris. One of the Trojan women immediately sees through her disguise as Beroe, identifies her as a goddess, and urges the others to resist Iris *because of* her status as a divinity. In the *Aeneid*, most mortals receive visits from gods favorably, but the Trojan women are quick to (correctly) identify Iris as hostile and reject her precepts. In this way, the pessimistic prophecy becomes another failed tactic of the forces opposing the Trojans to derail the mission, a tactic that will not be repeated. Regardless, though Iris is unable to persuade the Trojan women to burn the ships, she still accomplishes this mission by maddening them. In this way, the divine hostility is shown to be irresistible by mortals, even when recognized.

Iris fails to disrupt the Trojan journey to Italy, but her appearance at this point in the narrative succeeds in interrupting the Homeric jaunt into the games and recalling the narrative from the lighthearted spirit of the games into the more characteristic Vergilian melancholy. Though the Trojans may be able to spend a lighthearted afternoon forgetting their troubles, Vergil's reality, as Putnam affirms, is simply not one of happiness and unqualified success. Like the farmer of the *Georgics* who must be constantly working to make the merest progress in his occupation, the Trojans face an unrelenting stream of challenges, and Iris and her pessimistic prophecy appear less as an unexpected intrusion than as a herald of normality, recalling them from their daydream to work.

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