

The Firebrand Short Guide

The Firebrand by Marion Zimmer Bradley

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Characters

Thus, Bradley overturns the tradition began by Homer and Aeschylus of a jealous Klytemnestra and a victimized Cassandra to create an epic which affirms the goddess-centered values of Cassandra and her Amazon mentors. Her mother Hecuba, although subdued as Priam's wife in Troy, is the daughter of a nomad tribe and sister to Penthesilea, queen of the Amazons, who teaches the young Cassandra her warrior ways. Her other teacher, Queen Imandra of Colchis, provides the model of the queenly woman and the keeper of serpent and healing lore, which Cassandra learns in the Serpent Palace of Colchis. Thus the female characters in the novel fall into two traditions—one the domesticated "house women" who accept the new patriarchal regimes, such as Cassandra's mother and sisters and even Queen Imandra's daughter Andromache, the wife of Hector, and the other the "warrior women" descended from Penthesilia.

The cleavage between Cassandra and her mother Hecuba, then, recalls the myth of Demeter and Persephone but focuses on the lost daughter who is rescued not by her biological mother, but by the spirit of the Great Mother which is within herself.

This "difference" between Cassandra and the others persists in the novel, as Cassandra continues to be misunderstood and misinterpreted, both her warrior and her prophetic capabilities devalued. Two relationships emerge to break this isolation, however, one with Helen, her brother Paris's Greek prize, and the other with Aeneas, her sister's husband.

Helen herself is a twist upon the traditional queen of fated, destructive eros, incarnation of the foreign goddess Aphrodite created, Cassandra thought, "by men . . . to excuse their own lechery."

The two women, both considered "different" and threatening in their Trojan home, become soul mates and fast friends. The love between Cassandra and Aeneas opens new dimensions of feeling, as Cassandra comes to appreciate the role of passion and the irrational in an outlook which had been primarily skeptical and controlled.

The legendary heroes, too, are stripped of their glamour. Achilles is a "mad child," trapped in codes of honor and vengeance, and Priam's family a nest of squabbling princelings. Hector, although brave and decent, lacks the spirit and vision to carry forth the legacy of Troy, and Paris, Cassandra's psi twin, is selfcentered and vain, spurning the insights his sister offers. Wily Odysseus, although good-hearted and sympathetic, is a seagoing con man whose feeble attempts to soften the ravages inflicted on defeated Troy prove ineffective. Only Aeneas, able to act with valor and to empathize with others as well, truly embodies the ancient spirit, represented by the Palladium which he carries away from doomed Troy.



Social Concerns/Themes

Dedicated to Mary Renault, whose well-known series on the Greek hero Theseus and other re-creations of the classical past set a benchmark for historical fiction, *The Firebrand* chronicles the fall of Troy and the return of King Agamemnon to Greece, bearing as his prize the Trojan princess Cassandra.

Familiar from Homer, Aeschylus, and Euripides, these tales are rendered more fabulous by Renault's use of archeological traditions which celebrate the Bronze Age cultures which were giving way before the invasion of iron-using tribes from the north. These tribes also brought with them new gods, the Olympians, and new social forms, the patriarchal rule of state and family and the subjection and enclosure of women. The closing scene of Bradley's novel, far different from that of Aeschylus, adopts a tradition discovered in a tablet in Athens' Archaeological Museum in which the Zakynthians claim lineage from Cassandra who, freed from her captivity to Agamemnon by Klytemnestra, has established a dynasty loyal to the "old ways" which revere the Great Goddess displaced by the new gods of the Akhaians and Aphrodite, their creation, whose vanity led Paris to slight Poseidon and the river deities, spelling the defeat of Troy.

The central conflict Bradley presents in the epic is that between Apollo, the Sun Lord, whose dominion over the oracles gives Cassandra her gift of prophecy, and the Great Goddess, the Earth Mother, into whose mysteries Cassandra was initiated in Colchis, Medea's city, where the old ways still rule and Queen Imandra holds her throne herself. In such parts of the world as Troy, where the old ways are beginning to erode, Queen Hecuba, Cassandra's mother, has given over much of her birthright to King Priam, who rules in the Akhaian fashion and will pass his heritage on to his sons, not his daughters. Thus Colchis becomes Cassandra's spiritual home and Imandra her spiritual mother, to whom she returns after escaping besieged Troy and then Mykenae itself, where she learns the ways of the Great Snakes, the serpent lore which represents the old ways and whose wisdom remains hidden in the hearts of its initiates. Along with this wisdom goes her training as a warrior with the Amazon queen Penthesilea, her aunt, whose forces finally fall in the defense of Troy and who, along with the Kentaurians, represent ways more in tune with the Great Goddess and the natural world. On the opposite sides are the Greeks (Akhaians), epitomized by the monstrous Akhilles, who dishonors Hector's slain corpse and rapes the dead Penthesilea, and Agamemnon, the arrogant, cold-hearted Mykenean king whose self-gratifying pride destroys not only Troy, but ultimately himself as well.

One of the strongest elements in Bradley's historical fiction is the depiction of intense family ties, both positive and negative. Cassandra's relationships with her mother, sisters, and brothers is an emotional center of the novel, her destiny to be forever seeing and forever ignored is worked out against the backdrop of conflict over Paris' return to Troy with Helen, wife of the Greek Menelaus. One theme found in Bradley's works is that of emotional sensitivity and intimate communication, including the ability to know other's thoughts and feel other's feelings, as Cassandra does with her spoiled, headstrong twin brother Paris, as well as to be forced to see and compelled to speak



the future—Troy in flames. Part of the curse placed on her by Apollo is not to be understood or to be constantly misunderstood, as Cassandra is by her mother and sisters, from whom she is compelled to seek emotional attachment from other women more able to support her independence and "differentness," especially the Greek Helen, who is also mistrusted by the others.

Love and emotional fulfillment are also present when Cassandra, a maiden dedicated to the service of the Sun Lord in his temple at Troy, meets the Greek Aeneas, her sister Creusa's husband. One of the few positive male figures in *The Firebrand*, Aeneas' special destiny as the carrier of the Trojan heritage to Rome shows in his gentleness, his respect for women and the old ways. Their brief affair, set in the last days before earthquake and the invading Akhaians, is a tender interlude before the destruction of Priam's family and Cassandra's rape by the Greek muscleman Ajax before becoming Agamemnon's battle prize. Freed to return to her beloved Colchis by the avenging Klytemnestra, Cassandra is left to carry on the alternative epic of the Trojan women and with her son Agathon to create a new heritage for her race in a new city "far to the west . . . where men and women need not be enemies," very much a switch from the tragic endings of Greek epic and drama, where Cassandra shares Agamemnon's fate, assassinated at the hand of Klytemnestra.



Techniques

Bradley's tone and approach to the matter of Troy is that of the historical novelist rather than the fantasy writer.

Character and setting are realistic and demythologized, their scientific and anthropological basis emphasized. Centaurs and Amazons are prehistoric tribes living a difficult life on the high plains, and the wars between the Greeks and Trojans are the result of trade and economic rivalry, their outcomes more dependent on access to iron weapons than on heroism.

As Bradley explains in her afterward, the more linguistically correct spellings—k's rather than c's—are chosen over the more familiar Latinized versions.

The characters themselves are life-sized and humanized, vulnerable, Cassandra's own temperament a mixture of the visionary and the practical and skeptical, a combination which brings her afoul of the gods themselves, when she suspects an apparition of Apollo to be only a randy priest in a gilt mask. The backdrop of her story is an epic clash between two ways of life—new and old, patriarchal and matriarchal—lends scope to Bradley's canvas without the heroic underpinnings traditional in this type of fantasy writing. The paradigm of transition between two ways of being is matched in the narrative by dual settings and characters which epitomize the division. The "civilized," patriarchal cities of Troy and Greece are balanced by the wilder, more ancient domains of Colchis and the Amazons, alternative sources of knowing which give Cassandra the balance she needs to complete her psychic growth.

The closeted, cloistered world of the "house-women" has a counterpart in the bustling, brawling world outside into which Cassandra ventures. Even the deities mirror these divisions—the ancient powers of the Serpent mother, Apollo, and Pallas Athene in opposition to the "sky gods" of the Greeks and their more sanitized goddesses, Hera and Aphrodite.

Bradley's world of transition and divided loyalties is marked by ambivalence, in values and in characters. Cassandra's allegiance, divided between the Great Mother and Apollo, is both her enlightenment and her downfall, as her growing skepticism and self-awareness leads her to spurn the advances of Apollo, in the person of the priest, and thus to the famous "curse" that her prophecy would be forever disregarded. The brother-sister dyad is a Bradley staple fully realized in Cassandra and Paris—the sister with "sight" and insight, self-knowledge, and empathy, and the brother without, narcissistic, self-centered and oblivious to the consequences of his actions.

The narrative structure of Bradley's novel, too, is a gloss on the epic tradition.

Framed in the beginning Prologue, an aged Cassandra, the "oldest of the women at the hearth," sets straight a wandering minstrel singing the Homeric tale for his bread with her own tale of Troy. The dissonance between these two perspectives, of which author

and reader are always conscious, lends tension to the narrative, and the Utopian ending, the "new city" in an unknown west, lends a futuristic slant to the traditional tale.

Key Questions

Like *The Mists of Avalon* (1982), *The Firebrand* is a good choice for reading by groups interested in Goddess lore and traditions, as well as those interested in the heroic epic itself. The emergence of Cassandra as a metaphor for the self-discovering woman and her role in her community, especially as the communicator of both warnings and wisdom, has been international, and readers may know of Christa Wolf's rendition of the same tale. *The Firebrand* can be used as a companion piece in classics and world literature course work.

1. How does Bradley's version of the fall of Troy fit with what you know about the Homeric tradition and Greek mythology in general? How does she portray the Greek pantheon, especially their role in the story of Troy?
2. What is the view of the Homeric heroes, especially Agamemnon, Achilles, and Odysseus? How is her portrayal of Helen, Klytemnestra, and Cassandra herself different from the Homeric tradition?
3. Much of *The Firebrand* is actually a family drama, concerned with Cassandra's relationships with her parents and siblings, especially her mother, Hecuba, and her brother Paris. How does her family contribute to Cassandra's growth into an heroic young woman? How do they contribute to her feeling that she is constantly misunderstood?
4. How does Cassandra's time in Colchis, with Imandra, and her journey with the Amazons and their queen, Penthesilea, contribute to her developing awareness of herself as a leader and a woman?
5. The Homeric hero Achilles plays a special role in Bradley's novel. What does he say about the heroic ethic, the masculine ideal?



Literary Precedents

The tale of Troy is most fully told in Homer's epic, and the fortunes of its chief characters further developed in the Golden Age dramas of Aeschylus, especially Agamemnon, the first of his trilogy on the fall of the house of Atreus, and later in Euripides' Trojan Women. The popularization of Greek myth and Homeric epic for new generations of readers has long been a staple in both mainstream historical fiction and in fantasy literature. Feminist interpretations of classical drama and epic poetry which identified their patriarchal context and recast the image of the famous villainesses and victims—Klytemnestra, Medea, and Cassandra—were popular during the 1970s and 1980s, as were new perspectives on prehistory, including Abby Wettan Kleinbaum's *The War Against the Amazons* (1983) and Sarah B. Pomeroy's *Goddesses, Wives, Whores and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (1975), and especially Merlin Stone's *When God Was a Woman* (1976), one of the first well-known works on the Great Goddess, and Marija Gimbutas's *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe: 6500-3500 BC* (1982).

In her search to create characters with whom modern readers can identify, Bradley draws heavily on an archaeological tradition which celebrates the Great Goddess and nature religions and questions the warlike, patriarchal values of classical Greek culture. This emphasis was widely popularized during the 1980s and 1990s as the works of Joseph Campbell (*The Masks of God*) and others on Goddess mythology and archeology, and on the resurgence of the Demeter-Persephone myth as an organizing principle for epic.

Bradley's Troy carries on the heritage of Crete, another center of Goddess worship whose excavation, like that of Troy itself, had done much to humanize what had been considered mythic and literary alone which the German writer Christa Wolf did in her novel *Cassandra* (1984) for high culture what Bradley does for a popular audience. In restoring Cassandra to the center of the Trojan tale and reinvesting her with ancient wisdom and powers, she reverses the tradition of the pathetic, victimized madwoman. The image of female strength and competency and of the nurturing, intuitive mother figure has been a staple of the Bradley canon, as has been the image of the woman warrior, the Amazon, and the quest for a vision uniting the female and male principles into a more life-giving whole. In recent years an even more popular version of the woman warrior can be found in the television series *Xena, Warrior Princess*, MCA Universal's spinoff from its *Hercules* series and a cult favorite.

Related Titles

Although many of Bradley's novels are set in the classic period, *The Firebrand* is the only one set in the Homeric dark ages.



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