

Penthesilea; or Not Just a Chronicle Play by Lynne Parks

NARRATOR WARRIORESS GHOST	Three manifestations of Penthesilea, a royal Amazon, of whom it is theorized from certain known fragments of texts that her story was told in a now missing book of The Iliad. These texts suggest that she killed Achilles at Troy.
ACHILLES, DIOMEDES, THERSITES	Greek warriors at Troy
HOMER	Attributed author of The Iliad and the Odyssey
ARISTOPHANES, ARISTARCHUS, ZENODOTUS	Three known editors of The Iliad and The Odyssey
HEINRICH VON KLEIST	German poet and playwright
HELENE CIXOUS	French literary and feminist theorist
PLAYWRIGHT	Of this play.
STAGEHANDS	Two indifferent helpers

Exaggeratedly grim raging melodrama. A parody of its derivative influences, namely Kleist's "Penthesilea." Highly stylized. NARRATOR is seated on a throne on a high middle platform. Lighting to enhance and suggest that the action occurring below her are sequences cued from her memory and speech. The set is designed in three platforms; the first a circle, the second a square, the third a plus sign. Together, they make a fragmented Venus symbol. The three Penthesilea's do not resemble one another. The GHOST is not seen or heard by other characters, except NARRATOR and WARRIORESS.

NARRATOR

I am an Amazon. One of Wisdom's fighting priestesses—praise Athene! I am the offspring of War and Harmony. A curious mix? Perhaps. I inherited my father's method and my mother's strategic insight.

Forcing men to mourn is my namesake. Forcing death's laughter onto mine enemy, splitting their battle faces into axe grins. This is the upshot of a warrior's deliverance. I lanced the clever Machaon and forever stilled his healing hands causing more Greeks to suffer the death of slow wounds.

I have heard it said that a woman warrior is not a woman. Rather, a woman who has killed the woman in her and taken on the ways of men. Then having embraced death's violence dies willingly to regain her lost femininity. What a conspiracy of men to disavow the obvious! When it is the lioness that hunts! It is in men's purposes to forget that it was the Amazon who perfected the art of war. Who invented the ax and cavalry? In the Three Tribes, we break the legs of all infant males to keep them from straying and killing the chickens—as all curs will. There is no honor in the ways of man.

How did one such as me come to be on the plains of Troy? Yet another of my race demeaned so extensively in these muddled affairs of men?

Thieving ships came in the night. Cowards! Heracles and his band, among them Achilles father, Peleus. And as they say, like father like son, rotten through and through. Heracles on his ninth labor, with his nine ships. Such a braggart's less than subtle implication to get a woman with child. His endeavors a con to get into a princess's bed.

My sister, Queen Hippolyte, named for the stampeding thunder of horses hooves, wore the golden prize Heracles sought. We met at river's edge. And that brazen fool, Heracles, outright demanded that my sister hand over the golden girdle of war—an undergarment? No, rather the treasure our immortal father bequeathed to our matriclan, the symbol of our fierce heritage.

My sister laughed. Then gave him her axe full swing. And, oh, my sister fought bravely, but the beast broke her mare's legs and she was thrown into the trajectory

of his bludgeon—a weapon so obviously conceived by a man. However, she chose to die rather than yield. And so, that she would not suffer death at the hands of such a man, or any man, I let loose my arrow and killed my black-maned sister.

King Priam of Troy had once in earlier life been greatly redeemed by the gods. And as such, he was granted the gift of redeeming others. To him I traveled, dodging the persistent Furies--the three sisters Jealous, Avenger, and Unresting—whose indignation at a sister killed, no matter how righteous a killing... I had broken their covenant. So I rode on my quest, past the camps of the Achaeans and there first saw the madman Achilles racing circles in his chariot, the corpse of Hector dragging behind. I watched many die in sacrifice to a monster's grief. His beloved Patrocles dead, bested by Hector, now, also dead. And so my penance is set. Priam pleads with me, his son slain; now I must lead the armies of Troy.

(From the back of the theater, WARRIORESS and ACHILLES burst through the doors with challenging roars. They race opposite one another down the aisles and each mount the right or left stairs and meet center stage.)

WARRIORESS

Not in strength are we inferior to men; the same our eyes, our limbs the same; one common light we see, one air we breathe, nor different is the food we eat. What then denied to us hath heaven on man bestowed: O let us hasten to the glorious war!

NARRATOR

Three times Achilles and I met. Three times I drove him from the field. Well met in the intimacy of combat, but I didn't care for his attentive preliminaries. So I killed him. And not merely a little death, it was thorough. (WARRIORESS and ACHILLES engage in combat. As directed by NARRATOR, WARRIORESS stabs ACHILLES between the legs then up through the torso.) Though Achilles could not be bested by a man, it left him to be bested by a woman. So I axed him. Or so I thought. But now we have to consider an unfortunate reversal of roles. (ACHILLES rises newly given life again. His actions are at first slow and confused and go unnoticed by

WARRIORESS. He regains his composure and sneaks up behind her and stabs her to death.) And I am now the ghost while he still walks. I will sing my tale. My last act of war. And then I will rest. In this cycle of life and death, death has only one action, memory—haunting. And history is the final scene in the act of memory. I give mine to you.

(Fade to dim light on NARRATOR. ACHILLES stands over WARRIORESS's corpse heaving with emotion. Bloodied sword in hand, he stares fixatedly at the body. Lights up on GHOST stage right screeching an anguish of the newly transported dead. She looks skyward toward the grid at what appears to be moving shadows of raptors.)

GHOST

What has become of me? What foul treachery has been handed down by the gods?! What have I left, but to circle above with my sisters gnarly beaked, a vulture, a harpy to you men of sin whom destiny, the never surfeited Poseidon sea hath cause to belch up you!

(ACHILLES utters a yell and collapses groaning and pawing at WARRIORESS's corpse, finally lowering himself to her and committing necrophily. GHOST watches, then speaks, inches forward and looks at what was formerly herself.)

GHOST

How many times must I endure getting pierced with his blunt sword? My eyes are open, skull backed on rocky ground, a fly crawls on my lower right lid. Lips agape, torn into a hole for his tongue to rape. (To ACHILLES) No wonder they call you lipless, you kiss for shit. (To audience) It's best to best a man before he impales you. (Back to ACHILLES) I had struck you down dead, but your bitch mother, Thetis, whined on account of her prematurely aborted fetus and Zeus granted you a second life. No one plead my case to rise from the dead. The divine always take the man's side.

So first the sword, now this shaft and to the hilt. He's fondling my gory tresses, he is moaning. I've got to listen to this as his mail tears into my dead thigh. You should have asked Zeus for a bigger penis while you were getting resurrected. Still yours if effective at ramrodding, pounding my corpse, inch by inch up the slope, knees clamping hold.

WARRIORESS

(As corpse.) I didn't feel a thing.

(Bright light on NARRATOR.)

NARRATOR

When my soon to be immortalized lover had exhausted himself on me, dog-faced Thersites, lewd and jeering cried out...

THERSITES

(THERSITES enters from stage left. Accuses ACHILLES and stabs WARRIORESS in the eyes with his spear.) Achilles, this is a filthy and unnatural lust!

NARRATOR

...he turned his spear toward my defenseless staring eyes and struck a twin blow. (NARRATOR overtly directs the actors below her with the snapping and pointing of fingers. Indifferent actors respond to her lines as imperative.) It was my ghost who watched as my lover swung a fist that gave Thersites a smile.

(ACHILLES kills THERSITES with one punch to the face.)

DIOMEDES

(DIOMEDES enters from stage left.) Achilles, you've killed my cousin, a righteous man and fellow Greek! You must atone for this murder. And as for the provocation

of this heinous act, Odysseus will take you to Lesbos where you will be tempted, yet unappeased. As for her... (DIOMEDES drags WARRIORESS downstage.)

NARRATOR

Angered, the ugly man's cousin dragged my limp and swelling flesh to the river and threw me in... (Two STAGEHANDS in black, below lip of stage, enter with two long cut-outs of waves and simulate the motion of water.)

ACHILLES

But, she must be buried!

DIOMEDES

What do I care if the bitch is left to wander the earth forever, alone, without solace, trapped and unable to reach the shores of Hades? My conscience is clear.

NARRATOR

But the necrophiliac rescued me. (ACHILLES pulls WARRIORESS slightly upstage and holds her. DIOMEDES exits stage left. NARRATOR calls after him.) Hey, you're forgetting something!

DIOMEDES

(DIOMEDES enters again then begins to unceremoniously drag THERSITES body offstage, but finds it too heavy. Calls to STAGEHANDS) Hey, could I get some help here?

STAGEHANDS

(STAGEHANDS set down waves and lazily and clumsily carry THERSITES offstage.)
Yeah, yeah...

GHOST

Heroes are always fools and that fool of a man Achilles is weeping, his tears falling into the Scamander, that indifferent river, that even now carries away bits of my gore.

WARRIORESS

Trust a man to fall in love with a corpse and weep because he doesn't get a response.
(Lights down on WARRIORESS and ACHILLES. Exit.)

GHOST

Strange, these accoutrements of the dead. If only I could wield a sword, I would know how to act! But this, I must learn how to use its influence. It's all I have left to carry on my war.

(From darkness.)

HOMER

Penthesilea...

GHOST

What's this?

HOMER

Penthesilea...

GHOST

I am summoned by my namesake. I must meet. (Exits.)

HOMER

Penthesilea...

(Lights up on ARISTARCHUS, ARISTOPHANES, ZENODOTUS, and HOMER. The three editors walk in a triangular pattern around a stationary HOMER. Editors have long white hair and beards and carry staffs, which at times they wave menacingly at HOMER. GHOST enters and watches undetected.)

ARISTARCHUS, ARISTOPHANES, ZENODOTUS (together)

Shhhh, quiet, quiet...

HOMER

Penthesilea does not appear in the modern text of The Iliad.

ARISTARCHUS

We said be quiet. Aristophanes, did we not say "be quiet?"

ARISTOPHANES

Indeed we did, Aristarchus. Homer is becoming a troublesome spirit.

ZENODOTUS

I'm afraid it's the nature of a poet to be troublesome.

HOMER

However, Achilles outrage of her corpse is characteristically Homeric...

ARISTOPHANES

...Indeed, however, it is not...

ARISTARCHUS

...so improbable that all controversy can summarily be dismissed...

HOMER

...and since she is mentioned in so many other classical texts...

ZENODOTUS

Shut up, you... you... oh dear, I'm afraid I've run out of vituperatives.

ARISTARCHUS

No matter, Zenodotus, we understand your point...

ARISTOPHANES

...yes, yes, Homer is indeed tiresome, guarding such a relentless mouth...

HOMER

...a passage about her may well have been excluded...

ARISTOPHANES

Ridiculous...

ZENODOTUS

Slanderous...

ARISTARCHUS

Heresy...

HOMER

...and it has been hypothesized that at some editorial juncture...

ARISTARCHUS

One wouldn't dream of suppressing what one knew to be authentic...

HOMER

...that this particular story was deleted because...

ARISTARCHUS, ARISTOPHANES, ZENODOTUS (together)

A woman could not have killed Achilles!

ZENODOTUS

Indeed not...

ARISTOPHANES

...the greatest hero at Troy...

ARISTARCHUS

It is obviously some sort of sabotage, some radical faction with an agenda, or else a joke...

ZENODOTUS

Poor in taste...

ARISTARCHUS

We have some responsibility as scholars to maintain purity and unity of text...

ARISTOPHANES

We must expunge all questionable sources verifying the use of such unseemly influence better left forgotten...

ZENODOTUS

...Homer was a man and the vigor of men is such that...

HOMER

...I copied the greater part of my double epic from the twelfth century poetess, Phantasia...

ARISTARCHUS

Adapting it to Greek appetites.

ARISTARCHUS, ARISTOPHANES, ZENODOTUS (together)

We are the ones who will determine the modern fate of his texts.

ZENODOTUS

We will make of his rhizomatic tales a fixed order of twenty-four books, twenty-five is such an unseemly number...

ARISTARCHUS

...of clear and closed text...

ARISTOPHANES

...eradicating any mystery as to its origins.

ZENODOTUS

Yes, I undoubtedly defer to you on that point, Aristophanes.

ARISTARCHUS, ARISTOPHANES, ZENODOTUS (together)

Because of us, he will be revered.

HOMER

I would also like to point out, for clarification's sake, that Priam was not the ruler of Troy, Hecuba was. Troy was the last stronghold of the Great Goddess among the nations of Asia Minor and the Mediterranean.

(ARISTARCHUS, ARISTOPHANES, ZENODOTUS move inwardly and malevolently toward HOMER as lights go down. Exit)

NARRATOR

And so, in regards to Homer and The Iliad, it is upon the editorial labours of the scholars at Alexandria...

GHOST

I will burn the place down.

NARRATOR

Quite.

GHOST

Now that I have discovered that intrigue exists beyond the grave, I will dip my feet into this newly accessible river of time, and avenge all injuries and wrongs that the future might possess.

NARRATOR

Some fool of a poet, a man, will summon a romance out of this using my story to talk about love because what woman who beheld Achilles—saw him “crown the hill like a statue made of brightness.” What woman could resist?

(Lights up on KLEIST at table covered with papers. GHOST approaches him when her name is spoken. KLEIST does not perceive GHOST.)

KLEIST

(Picking up review.) “Ah yes, Kleist, I find him gifted, but repellent, an example of modern confusion, feverishness, pathology.” I hate that Goethe! What power granted him the authority to pass judgment on exceptional quality in art. It’s not fair! O Penthesilea, my only bride, my work, my play.

GHOST

Is it possible that this wheedling ninny is asserting some claim upon my personage?
Who is this Penthesilea he refers to? (She moves closer.)

KLEIST

What kindred struggle of Love against the Laws of our Tribe. (He picks up his manuscript and reads.) "She had stopped her ear to every voice of reason: by the love god's most envenomed dart, they say her virgin heart's been nicked."

GHOST

I know nothing of this love you speak of, other than that he is a pesky distant cousin.

KLEIST

He had stopped his own ear to every voice of reason: Immanuel Kant's most biting critique, they say my faith in reason has been unhinged. I say that the ground at my feet has opened into the wide maelstrom of darkest abyss. "To do is better than to know. Reason is cold, and only the heart potent and creative." Penthesilea, my heroine!

GHOST

Give me that. (GHOST grabs the manuscript from KLEIST as he slumps forward onto the table. She reads aloud.) "Penthesilea... with her eyes glittering quite strangely... her susceptible and nervous nature! That crazy girl... that silly girl!" Girl?! Arrgh! And this? "Penthesilea, she herself staring drunkenly again at the Aegean's shining shape... the hollow-sided shewolf, ranging woods deep blanketed in snow, does not pursue with such hot hungriness the prey her hard eye's marked out for herself as she Achilles..." Hah! (GHOST knocks papers onto the floor. KLEIST rises confusedly and begins to pick them up.) You fool! If I chased the man, it was only to get the damned ostentatious gleam of his armor out of mine eyes! A warrioress pursues, you got that right buddy, but not out of love! Death rides at her side. And you will soon find the truth of it! (GHOST begins to tear and throw the papers in a fury. At

first, KLEIST scrambles after them but then grown afraid, runs away, offstage, with GHOST in pursuit.)

KLEIST

What?! Have I offended? Even the elements conspire against me! (Exit.)

(Lights down on KLEIST. LIGHTS up on CIXOUS.)

CIXOUS

"I said I owed my life to Kleist. For a long time I lived on the knowledge that he had existed. I owed him not only the will to live, but the will to live several lives. To be more than one feminine one or masculine one, to catch fire and burn to die of life because he caught fire, took on body, pain, and death for me. For anyone wanting his vision of life, a vision unequaled in demand and nobility. (GHOST has edged slowly into CIXOUS's spot. She paces behind her and listens.) Nietzsche says it is enough, "To feel the need to transform oneself and to speak through other bodies and other souls, in order to be a poet." That is true...

GHOST

That's all fine and good. You write of Kleist's Penthesilea, but what of me? Time's own Penthesilea? No mercy! The one good done by you? Your words have given me the vehicle for my revenge. (GHOST moves closer to CIXOUS threateningly.)

CIXOUS

...but Kleist goes further... he insists on passing through the bodies and souls of those who are stretched to the limit, those closest to the lifespring, and therefore, closest to life's origin...

GHOST

Let me introduce you not to life's origin, but to its close. (GHOST's hands close on CIXOUS's throat. Lights down. Sounds of choking.)

(Lights up on PLAYWRIGHT. She is sitting at her desk. Her motions indicate that she has just finished with a manuscript. She takes the last page out of her typewriter and organizes it into a pile of papers. She is startled to hear a voice speaking to itself from the darkness. Lights up on KLEIST.)

KLEIST

“It is extraordinary how everything I undertake these days goes to smash; how the ground always slides away from underneath my feet whenever I am able to make up my mind to take a positive step. But what seems so desolate to me as not to be described is always to be looking elsewhere for what I’ve never yet found anywhere, because of this strange nature of mine. It is impossible for me to go on living, my soul is so sore if I so much as stick my nose out of my window the daylight falling on it hurts.”

PLAYWRIGHT

(Looking around.) Hello? Is anyone there?

KLEIST

And should I find myself regarded as an entirely useless member of society no longer deserving of any sympathy, is extremely painful to me, really it robs me not only of my hope of future joy, but poisons all the past for me as well...”

PLAYWRIGHT

Hello, excuse me...

KLEIST

Oh, I’m sorry. Was I disturbing you?

PLAYWRIGHT

No. (pause) I just wanted to know who was there.

KLEIST

Pardon me. How rude. If only I'd known someone was listening, I would have put a cease to such dire ramblings.

PLAYWRIGHT

Then I'm glad I stayed quiet. I found your words reassuring.

KLEIST

Reassuring? I'm not quite certain how you could find anything remotely reassuring about them.

PLAYWRIGHT

You see, I have just finished writing my play, Penthesilea. And now that it is done, I want to make a place for myself, to lie bleeding upon a cold floor.

KLEIST

Ah yes, muses are such exacting creatures. But my dear lady, could it be possible that you are the companion I have sought for so long? Before you, I had asked so many others and always I had found them insincere, poseurs if you will, to that inclination toward death. And the startling coincidence, I too have written a play called Penthesilea.

PLAYWRIGHT

Are you the Heinrich von Kleist, or are you my Heinrich von Kleist?

KLEIST

I'm not certain of the difference. I know that I was born in 1777. Died... (Shrugs.) However, it's been a lifelong intention. And you?

PLAYWRIGHT

It's of no importance. Do go on with what you were saying.

KLEIST

Really, you don't mind?

PLAYWRIGHT

Please...

(GHOST has crept onto the stage and watches the proceedings.)

KLEIST

What a peculiar sensation, your interest. I was merely going to add that, "having kept up, from my earliest youth, a constant intercourse in my thoughts and writings with beautiful objects and courteous conduct, I have at last grown so sensitive that the slightest offense, to which everybody here on earth is after all exposed as a matter of course, wounds me doubly and triply..."

PLAYWRIGHT

I'm sorry, I don't mean to interrupt, but I have to ask you...

KLEIST

(A bit perturbed.) By all means.

PLAYWRIGHT

Have you ever felt possessed?

KLEIST

Possessed of what?

PLAYWRIGHT

No, no. I'll try to explain. You see, it wasn't me who really wrote this play. I carried through with all the physical motions. Yet, it were as if a spirit urged me on.

KLEIST

I don't quite understand.

PLAYWRIGHT

I have been used. I did not speak through Penthesilea, rather, she brutally spoke through me. Neither will I again ever know such purity of emotion as her rage, nor mend from its violent seizure.

GHOST

(GHOST bursts into laughter.) One more persuasion and it is done. (GHOST points to each KLEIST and PLAYWRIGHT in turn.) You want to die. You also want to die. Die, die, die, die, die! (GHOST suddenly begins to fade. She disappears.) What? My power ebb now that the deeds are done?

NARRATOR

My spirit has gone to feast in the Fields of Asphodel. It appears that Achilles has performed a burial service. I suppose he wasn't such a heel after all. That is a small compensation, however, I must grant issue with the main point again. I did not love him. I was accused of it. They attributed me as to saying, "I love you so much I could eat you up." Well, it was misconstrued. (NARRATOR rises from her throne and descends her platform. She continues walking across the stage, down the stairs, and into the audience. Spot follows.) It's true. I exposed his dying chest to the sun, but not to shower it with kisses. That's right, it wasn't my lips that devoured you, but my teeth! It's not about love, this is war, this is appropriation. I'm not your lunatic lover. And now your army is crowning the hill. Now the chant gathers strength and these words settle my flesh onto the sword. "Throw this virago to the dogs for exceeding womankind!" (NARRATOR collapses in the aisle. Kill spot.)

KLEIST

I feel that the moment has come to carry through with my lifelong directive. I feel humiliated by the law of nature which compels me to preserve myself. I here now claim for myself the moment of my death. (To PLAYWRIGHT.) Are you with me?

PLAYWRIGHT

Yes.

(A STAGEHAND approaches ceremoniously carrying a box of dueling pistols. Both KLEIST AND PLAYWRIGHT take a gun.)

KLEIST

Cast a cold eye on life...

PLAYWRIGHT

...on death, Horseman pass by."

(KLEIST and PLAYWRIGHT go through the motions of a formal duel, they aim, the lights go down, two shots are heard, we hear two thumps of falling bodies. A moment's pause and we hear a great uproar in the darkness as ALL of the players tear the prepared set into a jagged ruin. The noise stops followed by a series of flashing spots of the stage littered with the bodies of ALL of the players.)

END