

DEATH SONG

A play by Terry Kroenung

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SCENE--- *The sacred circle of the Amazons.*

SET--- *Bare stage. Circle in center defined by light only. Out of view UC is a raised platform where Artemis will later appear.*

MOLPADIA, a girl just turned 18, is fighting ANTIANEIRA, a strong woman in her late 20's. They use short swords and bucklers. Their dress is simple tunics and sandals. No armor is worn. Their hair is loose. This is a "friendly" match.

Drums and flutes are providing a driving rhythm to the fight, which is underway as the lights come up. Music builds as the fight builds.

Molpadia is flashy, cocky, tries too hard. She seems less friendly and relaxed about the fight than her opponent, who is clean, precise, focused. Antianeira ends up putting the younger woman down and forces her to yield. Music stops.

ANTIANEIRA

You've bettered yourself.

MOLPADIA

And lost.

ANTIANEIRA

But you lasted twice as long this time.

MOLPADIA

And lost! (*ignores her outstretched hand, rises on her own; starts to walk off L*)

ANTIANEIRA

Molpadia! (*Molpadia stops, but does not turn to her*) Observe the forms, please.

MOLPADIA (*turning; in a surly tone*)

Always the forms. Never the substance. (*Antianeira waits her out; Molpadia makes a cursory salute*) "Blood and iron", my Lady Antianeira.

ANTIANEIRA (*returning salute smartly*)

"The moon kisses all." Go now. Clean up for prayers.

(*Molpadia stalks off L. PENTHESILEA, a strong woman in her early 30's, has appeared from DL*)

PENTHESILEA

Her skills are progressing remarkably.

ANTIANEIRA

But her heart is mired in pride.

PENTHESILEA

It may take a full team to pull free. That's why she has a mentor.

ANTIANEIRA

I'm afraid the team is not working together in the harness.

PENTHESILEA

Yet. Don't give up on your apprentice too easily.

ANTIANEIRA

I haven't. But I'm sorely tempted to use the whip on this stubborn bullock.

PENTHISILEA

We should go gently with this one. Foundlings are different from native-born Amazons. No shared parentage or history...constant questioning and testing...taking longer to feel a part of the tribe...

ANTIANEIRA

If they ever do.

PENTHESILEA

You have to help that to happen. How is she doing in her other lessons, besides combat?

ANTIANEIRA

Oh, she's sharp as a new blade---when she's in the mood. But it seems she mostly marks time until fight class.

PENTHESILEA

Hmmm. And who might she remind us of in that?

ANTIANEIRA *(smiles)*

But I grew out of it.

PENTHESILEA

Only after I dragged you, kicking and screaming.

ANTIANEIRA (*shrugs*)

That's how we enter the world.

PENTHESILEA

And how most of us leave it.

ANTIANEIRA

I only hope the Fates have given her a long time to wait for that.

PENTHESILEA

None of us gets to choose the---

ANTIANEIRA

Really? But we do choose our battle names.

PENTHESILEA

I remember when you announced yours at council. Just her age, too.

PENTHESILEA/ANTIANEIRA

"Antianeira will I be...know that it means 'Against the sea'!"

PENTHESILEA

Cheeky bitch.

ANTIANEIRA

We all thought we could pummel Poseidon in that class.

PENTHESILEA

I remember you having too much wine and giving it a try.

ANTIANEIRA

That was a very tiny boat! Thanks for pulling me out. Were you ever that way?

PENTHESILEA

I chose Penthesilea for a battle name!

PENTHESILEA/ANTIANEIRA

"Compelling men to mourn"!

ANTIANEIRA

She's already chosen her name, you know.

PENTHESILEA

Has she? And...?

ANTIANEIRA

Molpadia.

PENTHESILEA

Ahh..."Death Song". Presumably that of her enemies.

ANTIANEIRA

One hopes. But there's a darkness to this one that worries me. A brooding about her unknown parentage. She seems adrift, out of sight of land, on the wine-dark sea. As quick to anger as a shaken wasp's nest...

PENTHESILEA

Try to channel it. The rest of us will help.

ANTIANEIRA

Thank you. You'll need to. And now I'd better help her get ready for prayers.

PENTHESILEA

I need to do the same for Hippolyta. "Blood and iron."

ANTIANEIRA

"The moon kisses all."

(Penthesilea exits UR; ANTIANEIRA exits DL; Molpadia enters UL, in white robe and silver head circlet; she stops in the center of the circle of light, kneels)

MOLPADIA

Great Lady of the Moon, hear your humble daughter. I am grateful for the home you've given me here, for the sisters who've taken me in. If the Fates were to measure my life to a thousand years, I could never repay you...nor them.

But I feel like a thorn in a tender breast...causing pain with every breath. And suffering the same. I'm out of place. Are those truly hateful stares I feel from all I pass, or do I merely dream them? No mother, no father, no city. Living on the good graces of these great women...like a stray cat no one wants, but which obligation forbids killing.

Who am I? Child of light, or child of storm? Spawned by love, or spawned by rage? Why do I seek to embrace the one, but end up consummating with the other? What god drives me to clutch my sword, even at the smiles of my sisters? What is this pernicious anger that devours my soul?

Great Lady of the Silver Bow, Artemis, Huntress Supreme...help me to a destiny before this flame consumes me! Clear my path to you...send me an omen, a sign...a token of your favor. Whatever it may be, I shall accept it, rather than drown in this terrible unknowing. I will take my assigned road, whether it lead to wisdom or folly.

- 5 -DEATH SONG

(Flute music begins, soft and reverent, with slow muffled drums underneath. Penthesilea, Antianeira, and HIPPOLYTA, Queen of Amazons, enter from DR, DL, and UC respectively. They are dressed like Molpadia. They take triangular positions around the circle, with Molpadia DC. Antianeira holds a strange long sword in both hands, horizontally)

HIPPOLYTA *(handsome, regal; in her mid-30's; she holds a chalice)*

Great Lady of the Moon, hear your humble daughter. Drink of our prayers. bathe in our love, as we bathe in yours. Silver us with your strength.

(ARTEMIS is revealed by silvery light, UC on raised platform; she is beautiful and powerful at the same time; she wears a simple white tunic, head circlet, and carries a silver bow)

ARTEMIS

Who calls to the Huntress? Who sings to my ancient soul?

HIPPOLYTA

Hippolyta, She of the Stamping Horses...Queen of Amazons.

ARTEMIS

I see a shadow in your sacred circle. A cloud passes before the face of the moon.

HIPPOLYTA

Where is this cloud, Huntress?

ARTEMIS

Before you.

(Lights dim slightly, leaving Molpadia in an ironic spot of brightness)

ANTIANEIRA

My apprentice is troubled, Lady. *(walks to center of circle with sword)*

ARTEMIS

My brother troubles her...to her great misery, I fear.

PENTHESILEA

The Lord Apollo?

ARTEMIS

No. Hold the sword up to my light. The sword you found on her bed, as if from nowhere.

(Antianeira holds the sword over her head. A red light surrounds her)

HIPPOLYTA

Where did it come from, Lady?

ARTEMIS

My brother forged it...for his bastard daughter. Ares, God of War...Lord of Battle.

MOLPADIA *(steps forward)*

My father? *(reaches for sword)*

ARTEMIS *(stepping down, entering top of circle; Amazons kneel)*

Accept your token...

(Molpadia grasps sword; drums quicken; she is bathed in red light)

ARTEMIS

...And embrace your folly.

(Molpadia begins to sing. It is a haunting, wordless keening, notes that are terrifying and terrified at the same time. It builds for the rest of the play, broken only by her occasional pleadings. The sword takes on a life of its own, possessing Molpadia completely. She spins, whirls, goes through an elaborate attack/defense sequence similar to an Asian kata. The perplexed Amazons move away from her, to the edge of the circle. Artemis has returned to her lighted position atop the UC platform. She makes all the same moves as Mopadia, using her bow, as if she is a grim puppeteer. Music builds in speed and intensity, then stops. Molpadia and Artemis freeze)

ARTEMIS

Daughters...arm yourselves. Her path is paved by Ares, and can end only in blood and iron...unkissed by the moon.

(Amazons exit quickly, as Molpadia and Artemis resume their previous movements, only more quickly. Hippolyta returns first, in the simple Amazon tunic, with a sword. She fights with Molpadia, who does all the attacking. Hippolyta is obviously reluctant)

MOLPADIA

Help me, Your Grace! I can't stop it!

HIPPOLYTA

Throw the cursed sword away, child!

(Molpadia tries three times to hurl the sword across the stage, punctuated by drums. The sword will not leave her hand. Her song resumes, and the sword impels her toward Hippolyta again)

MOLPADIA

I'm so sorry!

HIPPOLYTA

Lady of the Silver Bow...Help her!

ARTEMIS

Her cord has been measured. Even the gods must bend to the will of Fate.

(The fight resumes, this time with Hippolyta reluctantly attacking. Penthesilea enters with 2 short swords, and it becomes a two-on-one duel, with Molpadia using sword, hand, and foot with incredible speed)

HIPPOLYTA

Grab her and hold her! I'll try to pull the sword from her hand!

(Penthesilea tries to bear hug Molpadia, but is sent flying across the circle, stunned)

MOLPADIA

Forgive me, my sister!

ANTIANEIRA *(rushing into the circle with sword and buckler)*

No, child...forgive ME!

(She attacks Molpadia savagely, holding nothing back. Hippolyta attacks the same way. Molpadia's eerie singing continues)

MOLPADIA *(to the heavens)*

What sin have I committed?!

ARTEMIS

You are mortal. Suffering is your birthright.

MOLPADIA

But my father is---

ARTEMIS

---In the sword, child. Pray to him. But hope not. He is what he is.

(The fighting and singing continue at a frantic pace, to appropriate music. The feeling should be of Bacchic frenzy. Penthesilea recovers, rejoins the fight with a spear. It is now an incredible four-way combat, with Artemis still pantomiming all of Molpadia's moves with her bow)

MOLPADIA *(sings this)*

Father---!! *(Hippolyta falls from a kick)*

Father---!! *(Penthesilea falls from a pommel punch)*

Father---!! *(Antianeira falls from a bind)*

(Molpadia is dead center, still singing, still in a red light from above. The sword points straight up into the light, as if of its own will. The red light vanishes, replaced by backlight only. The Amazons recover and stab her simultaneously. Molpadia shrieks. Music stops)

MOLPADIA

---Why have you...begotten me?

(She falls dead. Blackout)