

John Banville

LOVE IN
THE WARS

*A version of Penthesilea
by Heinrich von Kleist*



Gallery Books

Dramatis Personae

PENTHESILEA, Queen of the Amazons

PROTHOË

ASTERIA

HIGH PRIESTESS

ACHILLES

ODYSSEUS

DIOMEDES

ANTILOCHUS

AGAMEMNON, King of the Greeks

GREEKS AND AMAZONS

Scene

A battlefield near Troy

Scene One

The darkness before dawn. ANTILOCHUS is seated on the edge of a darkened stage. Enter ODYSSEUS, laughing to himself and shaking his head in disbelief. Both are dressed in ragged, war-torn battle kit. Seeing ANTILOCHUS, ODYSSEUS hesitates, peering short-sightedly.

ODYSSEUS Who's that? My sight's not what it used to be.

ANTILOCHUS Odysseus, it's I, Antilochus.

What are you laughing at?

ODYSSEUS The damnedest thing.

You heard the rumour that went round the camp:

Penthesilea, and her Amazons,

Apparently intent on fighting us,

Were on their way to Troy to lift the siege?

Deiphobus, Priam's son, with all his men,

Marched out of Troy to meet their rescuer.

It wasn't looking good for us at all.

ANTILOCHUS *(Laughing)* A band of women, lift the siege of Troy?

ODYSSEUS They're only women, true, but can they fight!

The old boy, Agamemnon, said, Go out,

And set yourselves between the Amazon

And Trojan armies; don't let them join up.

ANTILOCHUS Like that?

ODYSSEUS Like that; no trouble to us.

ANTILOCHUS Sure.

ODYSSEUS There we were in the field, Achilles, me,
 The Myrmidons, all ready for the fight.
 What do we see? The Trojans battling, yes —
 But not with us.

ANTILOCHUS Then who?

ODYSSEUS The Amazons!

ANTILOCHUS No!

ODYSSEUS Yes, it's true. Penthesilea, it seems,
 She must have changed her mind, as women
 will.

ANTILOCHUS But why?

ODYSSEUS Who knows? And furthermore, who
 cares?
 We won't look in the mouth of this gift horse.

ANTILOCHUS What happened next?

ODYSSEUS The Amazons fell on
 The Trojan forces like a storm at sea,
 And scattered them as if they were mere spume.
 They ran, and barely got inside the gates,
 The pack of bitches howling at their heels.

ANTILOCHUS By God, I'm sorry I missed seeing that.

ODYSSEUS It was a sight, believe me.

ANTILOCHUS So, what now?

ODYSSEUS The old boy wants to offer to this Queen
 A pact of peace, and mutual defence.
 Of course, he doesn't trust her, but he thinks
 She and her mighty maidens might help us
 To bring that bastard Priam to his knees.
 He's charged me and Achilles with the task
 Of buttering her up.

ANTILOCHUS Achilles will
 Be just the lad for that.

ODYSSEUS No better man!

They laugh.

ANTILOCHUS Here is the dawn; I'd best be on my way.
 Hold up, I'll come with you. I want to get
 A look at this brave Amazonian Queen.

Enter ACHILLES with SERVANT.

ODYSSEUS (*With heavy irony*) Achilles! Hail to thee, O noble
 one!

ACHILLES (*To SERVANT*) Where is my sword?

SERVANT Here, sire.

ACHILLES glares at the sword.

ACHILLES Call
 this clean?
 I'll show you clean, you good-for-nothing dolt.

*He forces SERVANT to lean forward, and roughly
 polishes the sword on the back of his tunic, then
 finishes by delivering him a violent blow with the flat
 of the blade; SERVANT runs off.*

(*To ODYSSEUS*) You coming?

ODYSSEUS Certainly, O son of
 Thetis.
 Our friend Antilochus will go with us.
 He wants to see this Queen —

*Behind them, the stage lights suddenly come on, re-
 vealing a tableau: a band of AMAZONS and PROTHOË
 and, in their midst, PENTHESILEA. All are posed,
 perfectly still, dressed in battle-dress and armed with
 javelins and bows and arrows.*

Penthesilea.

*Pause. PENTHESILEA, perfectly impassive, looks slowly
 first at ODYSSEUS, then at ANTILOCHUS, finally
 settling her gaze on ACHILLES.*

Great Queen, we come in friendship, as you see.
 I am Odysseus, general of the Greeks.

Here is Antilochus, a general too,
And here the great Achilles, Peleus' son.
We come to say, how glad we Argives are
To find in you an enemy of our foes.
Long years we've fought the Trojans, bitter
years,
Far from our country, home and families.
We've little stomach left for making war.

ACHILLES glares at him angrily.

We watched you yesterday put them to rout,
Deiphobus and his troops; you fought like . . .
well,
Like men! And now King Agamemnon asks
That you will join with us, to bring down Troy . . .

He pauses, frowning, as PENTHESILEA, who obviously has been only half listening to him, gazes open-mouthed at ACHILLES; she turns to PROTHOË and speaks to her in a whisper; both women, silent now, turn and gaze with intense interest at ACHILLES.

PENTHESILEA

Have you an answer, Queen, that we may bring
To Agamemnon — ?

PENTHESILEA

You may tell your King,
The only answer we shall give will be
The snap of bowstring and the arrow's whine.

ODYSSEUS

But lady, you must see, you have a choice:
Either the Greeks or Trojans; them or us.
A choice? That I must make? *(To the AMAZONS)*

PENTHESILEA

Oh, soldiers, hear!
The men have come to tell us what to do.

The AMAZONS laugh, as at an old joke.

(To the GREEKS) You came here in good faith; now
go in peace.
But warn your King: the Amazons will fight

PENTHESILEA

Whatever army steps into their path.
You offer me a choice? Then I choose war.

ODYSSEUS But madam, I don't understand —

Of course.

Men never understand what women do.

She looks at ACHILLES again; her expression shows that the sight of him shakes her self-confidence; she turns and marches off at the head of the AMAZONS.

ACHILLES *(To ODYSSEUS)* What do you mean, that we've
no stomach left

For waging war? Speak for yourself, old man!

ODYSSEUS We don't all live for fighting, as you do.

Some of us have families at home.

ACHILLES Don't start that whinge! I've heard it all before.
(Puts on whining voice) 'I'm lonely, and I miss
my little wife.

Let's give up fighting Trojans, and go home!
That Queen — what is her name? Penthesilea — ?
Is more a man than either you old women.

ACHILLES turns and stalks away in anger.

ODYSSEUS You'd think he'd have his fill of blood by now.

ANTILOCHUS Come on, old friend, you'd better tell the King.

Exeunt.