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# Letters From Madwomen in the Attic

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Letters From Madwomen in the Attic

By

Evan Gaydos

Cast of Characters

- : Cassandra of Troy
- : Ophelia
- : Bertha Mason-Rochester

ACT I

Scene 1

*Enter center stage, turn around*

INTRO/SELF:

Have you ever told someone the truth and they didn't believe you? Really liked someone who didn't like you back? Been told you'll turn out just like your mother? Have had someone say you were crazy? Cassandra of Troy, Ophelia, and Bertha Mason-Rochester: They are across time and stars and oceans, but they speak with one voice. To you they are the unheard prophetess, the tragic unrequited lover, the madwoman in the attic. History and literature have painted them in a certain light--but these are just sketches, silhouettes of them, not the women in full. Their stories, their voices--the potential that lies therein--could be colored a million different ways. Tonight just a shade of who they are will be examined, interpreted. I ask only that you open your mind to a new way of seeing them.

*Finishing setting stage, go to place, begin  
Cassandra*

CASSANDRA:

*Light candle/oil lamp; raise outstretched arms,  
palms upturned*

Hear, Grey-eyed Athena, I know you love Greece and the heroes of that land, but I request you hear me now. I have served you faithfully, angering the Lord Apollo in the process, but you have stood by me. Troy has fallen; you have given glory to the Greeks. Nothing will be left at the end and I will lose everything. I can only ask for your protection now, and leave it in your hands.

*Turn back towards the audience, telling the  
character's story*

Ever since Apollo fell in love with me and endowed me with the gift of prophecy I have been damned. Cursed because I scorned his love; he asked for more than I was willing to give. As he could not revoke what he had given, he poisoned it. No one would ever believe me. I was forced perfect foresight always, and yet ignored, unheard.

This fate, I thought...was at least something I could live with. Troy was a fortress few came to challenge. I spoke of things I saw, some things I did not even

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CASSANDRA: (cont'd)

understand. I tried to help my people. No one listened. But then on the day my two brothers, Hector and Paris, returned from Greece, everything changed.

*With disdain*

Golden-haired Helen. From the moment I first saw her, I was filled with dread. An unshakable terror like nothing I had ever experienced. And inside my mind, I began to see my home crumble; Troy, the impenetrable stronghold. Standing on the wall watching the ship come into port, I began to grow weak and shake. I nearly fainted. The most powerful visions flooded my mind all because of this woman.

*Loot at Athena, Pantheon*

Do you know what it is like to look at your family and instead see corpses?

*Pause, look through audience*

I see that which can and will be; having no power to stop it, no matter how loud I scream. I can only watch the nightmare unfold.

*Turn as if to speak to King Priam*

My King, my Lord. . . [Defeated] father. . . Please, please don't allow Helen into Troy. If you will ever listen to me, please listen just this once. I am begging you. Paris is young and foolish. Have him return Menelaus's wife. You can fix this. Father, don't fall under the charm of her beauty [he walks away]. . . no good will come of this.

*Turn as if to speak to Hector*

Hector, my brother, will you listen to what I say? It was always you who tried to believe me; loved me as a sister in a way no other sibling did. You know that this action will bring war. You know that Paris should never have taken Helen. Please Hector, think of your wife, your son! Help me save the family you have created just as I am trying to save ours.

*Turn back to audience*

Helen stayed, the Greeks came for her. They would not allow the daughter of Zeus to be stolen from them. Nor would they tolerate a man's honor disgraced because of his wife's infidelity. War extended and became a way of life. Two armies like waves crashed against each other. No one absolutely seized dominance; no one fell in absolute defeat.

*Tell to Athena*

Then that fateful day, when my brother Hector slew Patroclus--companion of Achilles--who then swore

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CASSANDRA: (cont'd)

vengeance and desired blood. Hector is now alone outside the walls of Troy. The two go into combat alone--man against man. Both are skilled warriors and my brother has Apollo on his side. I run up the steps to the top of the wall to watch. But as the battle wanes, I see Apollo leave. He leaves my brother.

*Yells directed at Apollo*

You have been here for Troy, sided with us this whole time! You can't abandon him now! You have to---!  
[Remembering their past relationship] I cannot ask you for anything. [Looks back at battle knowingly] Hector, I am so sorry.

Finally, there was Odysseus and the horse. How could we think it was a gift? That they would just leave?  
[Addressing father and a crowd] FATHER, DO NOT LET THAT INTO THE CITY! DO NOT BRING IT IN HERE! FATHER, PLEASE! NO, NO, WE SHOULD NOT BE CELEBRATING! THE GREEKS WOULD NOT GIVE UP SO EASILY! I screamed and railed against the happiness of my people. But for one final time, no one listened. They all said, "No, she is still mourning the loss of her brother. She knows not what she says." Troy was sacked that night and I took sanctuary here in the temple of Athena. [Gesture to current location, to Athena] And now I am here, telling you, asking you, begging you...

*Turns and hears a noise*

And now the Greeks come for me. Agamemnon or Ajax will be leading the charge. The Greeks will want to take me back; as a princess of Troy I shall make a much-coveted trophy for the leaders of the army. [transition location here, being grabbed] Agamemnon, be warned: you will find me a more fatal bride than Helen was to Menelaus. She who is the source of all this bloodshed. She claims she left for love, but I am taken by force and I will not go quietly. Hear me now: taking me back to Greece with you as your prize will not end well for either of us. [Propheying] Both you and I will soon join those we have lost to the Underworld. [Returning to "real world"] I know not what final fate awaits you--I cannot see that path. I will descend to Hades--a hero and a woman--destroying those who destroyed my people and avenging the fallen.

*Close off segment, move to Ophelia, retrieve daisy*

OPHELIA:

*Sitting, plucking the petals of a daisy*

He loves me, he loves me not, I love him, I love him  
not. . .

(CONTINUED)

*Continues to pull at the petals of flower in  
silence; begin reflectively*

Was it love? Did I want him to love me? Did I love him?

Ever since we were small we were friends. He was always there. We would tear about the castle, thick as thieves. Playing tricks on Laertes, performing puppet shows for the King and Queen, and sneaking sweets from the kitchen. When I lost my mother he was the one who hugged me when I cried and told me everything would be all right, then brought out our puppets to make me smile. He was the friend who held my hand through childhood. Even when Horatio became a member of our band, Hamlet and I were still closer, if only slightly. He was my best friend.

Then the King, Hamlet's father, died; and his mother quickly married his Uncle Claudius. I did my best to mirror what he was for me when I lost my mother, but he only became angry at everyone: his mother for her remarriage, his uncle for usurping his rightful place. As his behavior became more erratic he withdrew from those of us who were closest to him. I knew again the abandonment that I felt as a child.

One day Hamlet came to me and asked for my help. I became his confidante. He told me of his discovery of the murder of his father. I remembered, before the King died, I had often seen my father Polonius, and Hamlet's uncle, Claudius, in clandestine conversation. One time, I saw my father give Claudius a bottle he had recently received from my uncle, an apothecary in Rønne.

After I told him this, Hamlet saw me as his ally, the person providing the final answer he needed to solve the puzzle. He told me the ghost had said that the King was killed by the use of poison. He told me he was now playing "mad" to the Court as he decided what to do. He asked me to help him perpetuate the lie and not give him away. I promised. We were now partners, equals in this endeavor to unearth the truth. Exhilaration raced through me. Someone finally saw me as more than a silent spectator and valued me for what I knew.

We sat and planned, deciding to play the part of youthful lovers. I was to go to my father and tell him how Hamlet approached me in my rooms in the most peculiar manner, looking like one who did not know where he was or how he had gotten there. We hoped this would lead him to the belief that Hamlet's "love" for me was the source of his madness.

*New day for Ophelia, create movement to show time  
change*

(CONTINUED)

My father and Claudius decided to meet and brought me along. They wanted to catch Hamlet and see how he would react to me. My father never sees me for who I am; only my physical attributes. The King and Queen hoped my virtues would set Hamlet's mind to rights again. [*Act out flattering the powers that be*] I told them I hoped same. [*Stands back from scene*] These people saw only what I could do for them, but they did not really know what I could do. I listened as they praised the brilliance of this plan. I sent word to Hamlet by way of Horatio so he knew what I knew. [*Re-join scene, hear something*] At the sound of Hamlet's approach everyone scurried to "get in place." My father gave me a book, telling me it would give me an excuse for standing here alone. [*Reliving*] Hamlet enters the room, speaking to himself in the manner of one who is mad. I watch him, hoping he will give me some indication that he received my message. He addresses me.

*This segment can use circling as if there are two people, allowing the actress to "interact" with Hamlet*

"My Lord, how does your honor this day? I have tokens you gave me and I wished to return them to their benefactor."

You deny giving them to me.

My Lord, you know well you did. Am I honest? Am I fair? What does your Lordship mean?"

You mock my beauty, the form of power tapped by my father to affect you. I play along as if I do not understand. You tell me that you loved me--"Indeed, my Lord, you made me believe so." You then tell me I should not have believed you--"I was the more deceived."

Get thee to a nunnery. [*Looks with humorous, questioning look*] You decide to try and break me, as we are claiming that I love you. I will act broken.

*Appears shocked and hurt*

"God has given me one face and I paint myself another? That has made you mad? Oh, the noble mind o'erthrown! The prince of this land, the mold of form, the one who is always watched, quite, quite down!" [*Look to see Claudius and Polonius coming*] They come, your uncle and my father. "Oh woe is me, t'have seen what I have seen, see what I see!" Hamlet, go and be not found here!

*Move to new position*

Hamlet came to me in tears, telling me he couldn't do it--he couldn't kill the King. His golden opportunity

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)



OPHELIA: (cont'd)

had come and he faltered. Claudius had been praying he said and he did not have the stomach to attack a man that vulnerable. He dropped his head into my lap, more distraught, discouraged, and disgusted with himself than I had ever seen him. [*kneel down to match Hamlet*] Hamlet [*unsure, placing hands on Hamlet's hand and bringing him up to look him in the eye*] Hamlet, look at me. You have the strength and courage to carry out that task with which your father has charged you. Take heart, our cause is just. Those now in power were the first traitors. Here, take this dagger and keep it with you. Now you have the means should you get another opportunity. Don't be afraid to use it. If Claudius stood where you stand, in the position to eliminate you, he would not hesitate. Now, you have to go, you can't be found here. Go, take heart.

Hamlet came to tell me that he was dead, and I thought that meant the King. Hamlet told me it was my father Polonius, and that he was sorry. My father had been hiding and spying against our cause. I looked at Hamlet and told him that, while I was sad at the death, my father had betrayed the true King of Denmark and for that he had to be brought to justice in some way. If the circumstances had been right he would have treated Hamlet in kind or given Claudius the opportunity. Though I may be called cold-hearted, I could not blame Hamlet. Hamlet then told me that he was to leave for England and that I had to be strong as I would now be the one in danger. He was sorry to go, feeling as if he was abandoning me, a feeling we both knew so well. I told him I would reprise his role of madness to keep myself safe; as my father was now dead, this would not seem strange. Thus, I hoped to avoid suspicion. As Hamlet left, I found myself feeling empty. I do not understand. I can take care of myself, why would Hamlet's absence affect me in this way?

I heard that my brother had returned, due to the death of our father. I had been so focused on this ruse I knew not how long it had been since I appeared to be myself. You, Laertes, are in the drawing room with the King and Queen and I run to you. "Laertes, there's rosemary: that's for remembrance and pansies are for thought. Think of our late father and remember happier times. And fennel and columbine, and rue, some for me and some for you. [*Giggles*] Here, have a daisy and see who fancies you. I wanted to get you violets, but they withered when father died [*cries, but slowly turns into laughter again*] You've been gone ever such a long time, shall I sing a song for you?"

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

OPHELIA: (cont'd)

"They bore him barefaced on the bier/And in his grave rained many a tear/Fare you well, my dove/And you must sing "a-down-a-down/Call him a-down-a-down"/And will a' not come again?/And will a' not come again?/No, no he is dead/Go to thy deathbed..."

*"Exit" from scene with Laertes and stand further off as if watching him*

You were most affected, Laertes, I thought you would be harder to convince. Did you care for me more than I ever thought?

Laertes spoke of anger and vengeance towards Hamlet. He desired the chance to face him to avenge our father's death. [*Enters scene and relives moment*] "Laertes, why do you say these things? Why would you want to act upon these words? Hamlet did not kill our father maliciously or with intent. [*Defensively*] Our father was the one spying! Hamlet needed to watch out for himself, I warned him of this! Anyway, it was I who gave him the dagger he used--"

*claps hands over mouth, stops mid-sentence in realization of what she had said and done. Even against all her rationale, she begins to feel the repercussions of her actions. In a small voice* Father... Father I...I am responsi--...I gave Hamlet the dagger and told him to have no fear in using it. I did it for the right reasons! I know this is not a game! But what have I done? What have I become?

*Claps hands over her ears to shut out the idea that she is fully responsible*  
[*As if in realization*] Hamlet! He planted these ideas in my head, he made me play along, made me follow and love and help! And then he leaves! It's not my fault! I hate him! I DON'T KNOW! I don't know what is real anymore.

*Hugs self and huddles down allowing the mood to return to the present in the woods, no longer in the memory of the recent past.*  
Now, I am truly alone. I do not know if the plot we saw was real or a dream within a dream. The deepest desire I have now is to forget.

There's rosemary for remembrance and pansies for thought. There's rosemary for remembrance and pansies for thought. There's rosemary for remembrance and pansies for thought.

*Repeat this until feels finished, a few more times, as scene closes cue sound of rushing water.*

(CONTINUED)

*Close of segment, move to Bertha*

BERTHA:

*Roll up onto knees from sitting position to begin  
Bertha from Ophelia*

My mother, they said, was mad. Taken from me when I was young after fire and pain and time. A locked door forever separating us. I needed you. I needed you to tell me all the things you never told me. To tell me why people look at me with trepidation or stop talking as I come near. I never harmed anyone. What reason did they have to fear me? Was it because of you?

*Move to one side of the stage*

Whispers behind closed doors. My father, my brother; whispers of things we did not speak of, yet everybody knew. My mother's madness. They feared that I would become just like her. It was palpable, hanging in the air as if someone was continuously dying. I felt it in the way they looked at me. Quick glances as if I could not see them.

*Move to other side of the stage to show passage of  
time*

Later, whispers of my possible union with a well to-do young Englishman, he the property of a wealthy father and older brother, like myself. My brother Richard beat him at cards and intrigued him with tales of his sister's beauty: the most beautiful woman of the island, desired by all the young men; [shift in tone] a flirt, catch her while you can. It was a loud conversation overheard by the stranger's father, prompting an introduction of patriarchs. Richard believes he is cunning. However, to anyone who truly knows him, he is a whelp; shiftless, forever covering for his last scheme gone awry, while selling his newest. He had now decided to make me a part of his game.

*Come back to center stage--Now as if at wedding*

Two people joined in marriage. The two respective parties the least happy of all there. My father and Richard seemed pleased, subtly, in such a way that no one else would know. But I saw. They looked like two who successfully sold rotten fruit at the market. I will not let them have this day as victory. I am free of them and I will be happy. I will make this work.

Edward, my husband, and I moved to a small estate on the other side of the island. He asked if I was all right moving so far from my father and brother, they seemed concerned. I told him it was fine; I was ready for a new city, a new life.

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Weeks passed and Edward and I settled into each other's company. It seemed that our personalities might actually be well-matched. Edward was part of the high social life back in London. In an attempt to bring some of that back into his life, we began to invite people to our house for parties. I thought I could learn to be happy.

I began to lose track of time. I remember men's faces--but not what happened to them. Why do I not remember falling asleep when I wake? I don't know what I have done. This goes on for months. And then one night, I walk into my room to find a dress that isn't mine [*look of disbelief, turn to anger*] I only remember darkness and then Edward locking me away in our house. I know as I sit here that there are others.

Soon my husband tired of the island, or perhaps of its women. I'm not sure. He began to mutter about how we all looked the same and he could not look at them without thinking of me. His voice dripped with contempt and something else I could not name. Was it guilt? Self-loathing? My anger towards my loss of control blinded me to any pain he felt and inflamed my anger towards him.

He took me back to England, to the estate belonging to his family. The house was settled deep in the country so he could hide me away from the world. And it was here he locked me in the attic. [*Yells. Throws bowls*] Go ahead! Lock me away! You will rue the day you gambled with my brother and thought you won a prize! You believe this attic will hold me? I will haunt you throughout your life in any way I can! [*rage settles to reflection*] And then you left here, just like we left the island, to escape what made me who I am. You left here simply to escape me. I watched you from the window as you left and didn't look back; I wondered if you would ever return, if you would ever be free. I may haunt you Edward, but I am not the only woman who does.

People came and stayed; workers to care for the house. The housekeeper, Mrs. Fairfax, seemed simple, but at least was kind. Days passed and few knew of my existence in this dreary, dark country. You left me with Grace Poole, a woman of considerable years who drinks so much she must have had more regrets and haunted memories than both of us together. When she would fall into a slumber I would walk about the house. After all, I am mistress here; I believe I have the right. I prefer the house at night. In the darkness with only the moon and wind, I can imagine I am back home, not thousands of miles away. [*Wind sound effect*]

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

BERTHA: (cont'd)

I may not be happy, but perhaps I can find and learn contentment. Perhaps I can find myself again.

As the household settled into its new found routine, life here continued even though you were gone. However, the little girl you sent to live here--Adele--Edward, I found the letter you sent with her, and she could no more be yours than she could be mine. Even I could see that. But I read between the lines, you loved her mother. [*In frustration and disbelief*] She was one of those who hurt you, who haunted you! And yet you still cared! Why? ...why could you never care that much about me? [*Sighs*] I did my best to ignore the child's existence because she showed me everything I would never have.

Then *she* came. Jane Eyre, the governess for Adele. Aside from her propensity towards curiosity, she did not change my life greatly. At first. But then Edward, you returned. [*Pause, attempting to contain rage*] And I saw the way you looked at her from where I watched. You began to change, even desire her; in a way you *never* looked at me. [*Yells*] But you were mine! Mine by legal contract. I may not have desired it, but it was all I had and I had given it all I could! I didn't have your love, your attention, my family, my freedom. You had no right to take my last link to who I was, am, the last shred of my identity! I did my best to stop the two of you the only way I could. I tried to scare you, to hurt you, but nothing I did deterred you.

Then, [*pause, with gravity*] you asked her to marry you. And by some unholy power she agreed. The love you never had for me poured out for her; you were a different man. And I couldn't stand for that. I'd come down to your room at night, the room that we should have shared, and I watched you sleep as I wondered. How could she love you? You had lied to her, lied about me, told her she couldn't have seen what she thought she saw, blamed Grace to hide my existence. Grace tells me these things you know, though she doesn't think I understand. You might have become a different man for Jane, but how is this any better? [*Move from speaking to Edward*] I would end this in any way I could. I didn't want to hurt anyone, only to give myself as a warning. I went to Jane's room, but when I did I saw that veil. . . [*picks up veil, stares at mutters to self*] "I was supposed to be happy, to find love. Instead I lost everything." [*rips veil*]

*Move to show new day, looks out window*

Your wedding day. You were anxious; I could feel it throughout your house. You rushed Jane to the chapel;

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BERTHA: (cont'd)

the carriage was ready and waiting. It was now beyond my power to stop you. You locked me in my tower. I could only observe, hands pressed against the glass, awaiting what would happen. [*Looks strangely surprised*] You are coming back, you and Jane, and two other men--who could they... [*Looks hard*] Richard?! My brother returned to protect his "investment." The truth will now come out and the world will see me as you and he want them to; a burden, something to be feared. You will look at me and teach others to see me as you do, but you have never listened to me.

*Move from "window" to chair*

Jane is gone...and if it is possible you seem to resent me even more. You come up to my room, send Grace away, and just stare at me. Are you really seeing me for the first time? Or do you see me as a collection of lost moments you never had? Between you and me, or you and her? [*Falls asleep, wakes*] I wake, realizing I had slipped into sleep and you are sitting beside me holding my hand and stroking my hair. This is the most kindness you have offered me in years. You truly are lost Edward. As I start to stir you get up and move across the room. I will not attack you Edward, my anger towards you has faded and I see the hurt we are both in. We were never free and our ending: inevitable. Trapped in a marriage neither of us wanted enough, our past actions and our anger poisoned us.

I see it in your eyes: your regret for what you did to me, your love for Jane, and your desire to have done one good thing in your life. I'm sorry, Edward, I cannot bring her back to you. I am sorry.

*Rise, move*

You will always love her more than me, Edward. For some reason she fell in love with you and through that you learned to truly love in a way you could never love me nor I you. It was never meant to be. You never saw us as equal. You resented my beauty and because of that sought solace in your intellect and held that over me. Our relationship was doomed. Over these years I have at times hated you, yet pitied you. And then hated myself for doing so. All that ugliness and pain curling in on me.

But because you found love through learning to love another I can no longer resent you, hate you as I did. I have found that I love you enough that I want you to have that happiness that you began to understand. [*Go get candle*] For that to be I must purge all the hatred we created and the place that holds it. So now I know

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BERTHA: (cont'd)

what I must do. [*Go down center stage; have point of focus change for each person addressed*] I hope she comes back to you. Grace, I'm sorry for all the times you were blamed on my account. Edward, even though you never saw it, I love you. Mama, I am coming.

*Blackout*

*Blows candle out*

*Fin*