

Hypatia's Last Lesson

A one-act play

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Translated by Alex Ladd

Hypatia's last lesson: recapturing her story through dramatic imagination

Hypatia's Last Lesson dramatizes the circumstances surrounding the barbaric murder of Hypatia (370-415 AD), the pagan philosopher, astronomer, mathematician, teacher, and only woman director of the Academy of Alexandria in antiquity. Historians typically point to the date of her death at the hands of religious fanatics, in 415, as the symbolic beginning of the Middle Ages (along with the closing of Plato's Academy in Athens at approximately the same time). Although mine is a free dramatic rendition of Hypatia's life, I also tried to be as faithful as possible to the historical facts, consulting the meager existing biographical sources¹ on this fascinating woman as well as

¹ An article by Nancy Nietupski, «Hypatia of Alexandria: Mathematician, Astronomer, and Philosopher» which appeared in the second volume of *Alexandria – The Journal of the Western Cosmological Tradition* (edited by David Fideler, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Phanes Press, 1993, p. 45-56), was very helpful to me, since Nietupski comments the several sources we have on Hypatia (beginning with the eight primary written sources), followed by the English translation of three of the most important of these sources, trans-

that of other historical figures of the time who inhabit my play or are mentioned in it, such as: Synesius of Cyrene, bishop and former student of Hypatia's (whose letters to her have survived); Governor Orestes; the patriarchs, Theophilus and Cyril of Alexandria; Pulcheria, the empress of Byzantium; and Paladas of Alexandria, the grammarian. This did not prevent me from inventing several characters, allowing me to dramatize historical information I deemed essential for a play of this type. A case in point is Demetria, Orestes' actress wife. Her confrontation with Hypatia helps bring to life the famous run-in Orestes had with Hypatia while he was her love struck disciple. It also helps dramatize reports that point to a link between Hypatia's murder and the opening of a theater in Alexandria by order of Orestes in his capacity as governor. Making Orestes a playwright who writes under the pseudonym Aristeus of Thebes is one of several whims I gave in to, in a tribute, of sorts, to Aristotle's notion that the realm of historical facts is what did happen (the particular) and that dramatic poetry is what may happen (the universal). Of course, it helps that in this case we know so little about what happened anyway. Hypatia's young students at the Academy are also fictitious and include Ebonius, a freed slave; Nazarius, a Jew; Kariotis, a spy who delivers Hypatia to Cyril's followers; and Stella, a recent arrival to the Academy and daughter of Synesius (contradicting the historical record that tells us that the Bishop of Pentapolis' two sons died in infancy). And although Synesius' demand that the church accept his marriage before becoming prelate is well documented, my profile of his wife, Lavinia, is solely the product of my imagination and addresses the lack of biographical data on her.

Hypatia's Last Lesson was first published in Portugal in 2004 as a full-length in three acts. In that version, the last hours of the philosopher's life make up the second act, which engages in a sort of theatrical dialogue with a present-day story of school violence. From that full-length came this one-act play about Hypatia, fulfilling an idea I first had a few years ago, which now has become reality thanks to the encouragement of Susan Rowland, responsible for the very first staged reading of this work (based on the English

lated by Jeremiah Reedy: "The Life of Hypatia", from The Sudda, "The Life of Hypatia", by Socrates Scholasticus, and "The Life of Hypatia", by John, Bishop of Nikiu (p. 57-64).

translation of Alex Ladd), in Ithaca (New York State, USA) at Cornell University (Robert Purcell Community Center, Lecture Hall, 11/08/2010)². This then is a new play that isn't entirely new, since I have also added a prologue and an epilogue that help this shorter variant stand on its own, separate from its longer predecessor.

In between the first version of my play in 2002 and the present, I had the opportunity to read Maria Dzielska's *Hypatia of Alexandria* (in the Portuguese edition, 2009), which argues, among other things, that it is a misreading of the historical record to maintain that Hypatia would have been 45 years old at the time of her death. The Polish scholar proposes – for the first time – that Hypatia would have been far older and would have already celebrated her 60th birthday in 415 A.D, the year Hypatia was murdered. Although Dzielska's thesis revising the year of Hypatia's birth (which she moves back to 355 AD) seems plausible, I decided to keep to the original narrative surrounding Hypatia. So my tale follows the traditional interpretation of the historical data, which places her death in the flower of her fortieth year, a choice also made by Spanish filmmaker Alejandro Amenábar in his film *Agora* (2009), the first and remarkable foray of Hypatia into cinema, where she is played by British-born actress Rachel Weisz.

My starting point for writing this play was the poem that ends it and that actually pre-dates the rest of the text. In this poem we are given to understand that the mathematician Theon – Hypatia's father – was still alive when his daughter's life was cruelly taken from her, which would be historically inaccurate and is contradicted by the play itself. In fact, Demetria, in a scene with Orestes, refers to Theon in the past tense, leading us to understand that he was already dead at the time. Lucinda explicitly makes reference to the existence of differing versions of Hypatia's death in the play and in the poem. Lucinda – an *anima*-like being – is a teenage mask I created for myself as the author, giving me the creative freedom and distance I needed in order to

² The staged reading of *Hypatia's last lesson*, under the direction of Susan Rowland, was presented at Cornell University as part of the program of "On the Edge: Psyche in Ethics, the Arts and Nature!: A Conference of Research in Jung and Analytical Psychology (10th-14th August 2010), held jointly by The Jungian Society for Scholarly Studies and the International Association for Jungian Studies.

avoid writing a play informed merely by the historical evidence. Lucinda's decision at the end of the play allowed me to maintain these divergent versions of Hypatia's fate, underscoring symbolically how little we know for sure about this woman philosopher. It was this uncertainty that triggered in me the desire to resort to dramatic imagination to reinvent Hypatia as a character in a play, one that seeks to communicate with us by way of emotion and ideas, by theatrical playfulness and by intuition, maker of symbols.

Ithaca, 11th August 2010

Armando Nascimento Rosa

«Quelle âme avait chanté sur des lèvres plus belles,
et brûlé plus limpide en des yeux inspirés?

Le souffle de Platon et le corps d'Aphrodite
sont partis à jamais pour les beaux cieux d'Hellas!»

Leconte de Lisle, *Hypatie* (1847)

Characters

Lucinda – A young student, the author

Hypatia of Alexandria – A philosopher from Alexandria

Synesius of Cyrene – Bishop of Pentapolis, Hypatia's former student

Stella – Synesius and Lavinia's daughter (played by Lucinda)

Lavinia – Synesius' wife

Orestes – Governor of Alexandria

Demetria – An actress, Orestes' wife

Nazarius – Hypatia's student, Jewish

Kariotis – Hypatia's student, a spy working for Cyril

Ebonius – Hypatia's student, Nubian

Cyril – Patriarch of Alexandria

The hooded ones – followers of Cyril (all actors available for scenes in question)

Helen of Tyre - A character played by Demetria

Simon Magus – A character in Demetria's play

Pulcheria – Empress of the Eastern Empire

Two Guards – (extras mixed with the audience)

The play can be cast with a minimum of ten actors (four women and six men), with the same actress playing Lavinia and Pulcheria, and the same actor the roles of Cyril and the actor playing Simon Magus.

Prologue

LUCINDA (*Surrounded by books, notebooks and a laptop*): I was impressed when I heard her story. I'd researched her on the Internet and wanted to build a plot using historical characters. I ordered books by mail and fell asleep one day reading one of these [books], when the ghost of Hypatia visited me.

(*Enter Hypatia muttering quickly uttered words, incomprehensible*)

I don't know if I'm asleep or awake, but you still talk to me. You are a voice hidden in my eyes. When I discovered you existed I felt your shadow. You come to me and ask me what I want.

HYPATIA: Lucinda, I want you to write my story. Stories outlive the lips that utter them. Mine needs you so as not to slip into oblivion. What use is it if books mention me but remain closed on shelves, or if recordings of my story go unplayed? Theater, though is a living book for those willing to read it. My name is Hypatia, I teach in Alexandria, and die every time this play is performed. But I will be born anew in your words. (*Lucinda opens the laptop and types excitedly*) Write, Lucinda *write*. From this evening on, I inhabit your computer.

I will introduce you to the characters in my play. Behold, the actors arrive. (*Light up on all of the characters in the play*) The stage is a space where laughter and sadness are shared. (*Exeunt all except Synesius, Stella and Lavinia. Lucinda is dressed as Stella*)

Scene 1

Synesius of Cyrene, a man in his forties, appears and addresses the audience. His attire, a light toga, tells us he is a priest.

SYNESIUS: My name is Synesius, Synesius of Cyrene – it is customary among us to add the place of birth to one's name. I was born the same year as Hypatia, 470 AD. Although we were the same age, she was my teacher in

matters of the spirit. At 21, I left Cyrene and moved to Alexandria to study with this woman whose fame had spread throughout the Mediterranean. Astronomer and philosopher, scholar of heavenly bodies and of the soul's stars. Hypatia was the first woman to teach at – and to manage – the Academy of Alexandria, the famed institution built in the image of Plato's Academy in Athens. What I am today, what I know today, I owe to her. Her wise lessons awaken divine sparks that lie dormant in the skulls of the living. Students of all faiths are welcome in Hypatia's school provided they exhibit a natural desire to learn. Only in Alexandria, a city founded by the Macedonian hero to unite people and beliefs in peaceful coexistence, is such a school possible. At the time, I had already been seduced by the word of Christ. Hypatia admires the Messiah, but she is an adherent of Pythagoras' religion. For her, Jesus is one among the enlightened spirits that descended upon the Earth after Orpheus and Plato, Euclid and Plotinus. She does not want to elevate one above the other, only a pantheon where every one of them has an altar will satisfy her. It is for this reason the sectarians have accused her of never having renounced her pagan creed. They don't understand that more than tolerance, Hypatia represents love of diversity. There had not been a female voice like hers in philosophy since Socrates' teacher – Diotima – closed her eyes forever. Hypatia says, half-jokingly, that perhaps she is the reincarnation of Diotima. And who is to say she's not? *(a fit of coughing)*

She taught me how our spirits can be free. By the time I left Alexandria it was to embark on my own path. I am also a man of action, you see. I fought and was victorious in battle against the Vandals in Libya. Then in Pentapolis, the province where I was born, I accepted a position of power, not without reluctance. I was sent to Constantinople, and there I cut the taxes that weighed so heavily on my city. I grew even more in my countrymen's esteem. I fell in love with Lavinia, a young Egyptian and married her. We had three children, two boys and one girl. Sadly, our two boys died while still young. But our daughter survived. She is now a woman. We gave her the name of Stella. *(Stella appears and speaks to her father)*

STELLA: Father, you'll get tired from talking so much. Besides, you are boring these poor people with your memories. Not to mention what it will do to your bronchitis.

SYNESIUS: Let me go on, child. I can tell from their eyes that at least some of them are following closely what I say. *(he resumes his monolog)* One day, the patriarch Theophilus, on a visit to Cyrene, was taken with my oratory skills, and decided to make me Bishop of Pentapolis. I had trouble seeing myself as a robe wearing servant. I reflected for months whether or not to accept. I ended up saying yes, but I set certain conditions: I would not give up my belief in the preexistence of the human soul and the eternity of the universe. And they should not dare to try to make me believe in that nonsense of the resurrection of the body on Judgment Day. The body is but a robe that we shed when the frayed fabric is no longer enough to entangle the spirit within. *(another fit of coughing)* The Church would have to accept me *as I was* if they wanted me in their ranks. *(Lavinia appears, bringing him his miter, which he puts on his head. Both walk, hand in hand, downstage)* And above all, I would never renounce my marriage to Lavinia. Conjugal love in no way diminishes my qualities as a shepherd of souls. Only then did Theophilus baptize me in the cathedral and make me bishop as my wife and Stella looked on proudly.

LAVINIA: It was an unforgettable ceremony. And the great Hypatia sent an inspired letter to Synesius, congratulating him on his courage, our courage, in confronting the prejudice of the emotionally retarded. *(Synesius cough and sits on the edge of a bed, the one that will be his deathbed)* But our enemies plotted so hard against us that I lost two sons when they were still little, and now it is Synesius who dies, day-by-day. My warrior bishop is forty-three, I'm thirty-eight, and I'll be a widow soon. Asthma eats away at his lung and will steal him from me. And my daughter, all that I have left, wants to go away and leave me alone in this sad old house.

STELLA: There you go again mother, with your fretting. It is not as if I were going to Finisterra. Alexandria is not that far.

SYNESIUS: Let the kid go. She's at an age where she should begin tend to her spirit. I die happy knowing she will study at Hypatia's Academy, as I once did.

LAVINIA: But you were a man, you could fend for yourself. She will be a fatherless child in Byzantium's second largest city.

SYNESIUS: Stella will get a letter of recommendation written by my hand. Hypatia will take her in as if she were her own daughter.

LAVINIA: But the trip, my God, the trip! The roads are so dangerous, with thieves lurking at every crossroad. Ever since they split the empire in two, there is no safety anymore. Barbarians threaten everywhere. (*Synesius coughs again*) It's not enough that I lose a husband to this damned disease. Now I am going to lose my only child. Oh! The ancestral gods I renounced in order to marry you are taking their revenge on me. (*She hides her face as she cries*)

SYNESIUS: Don't be so dramatic, Lavinia, this is not a Greek tragedy staged in Egypt. The barbarians are at Rome's gates, but Constantinople will endure for centuries to come.

STELLA: Oh mother, please don't go on like this, or I'll end up not knowing what to do. I'll travel with a caravan of pilgrims returning from the Holy Land. They'll pass through Alexandria. I'll be safe. (*Synesius lies down, motionless, and Lavinia covers him with a black cloth, mourning in silence. Stella addresses the audience*) But I did not go just then. I waited two more years. My good father died and my mother needed me, and I her. Only now do I know how much I needed her, because she too left me. It is as if my father and brothers had waded to her in her dreams to join them. Lavinia died from food poisoning after eating a mushroom stew. She prepared a different dish for me that day.

LAVINIA: (*she looks out at the audience while eating from a clay bowl*) Stella wanted to go to Alexandria to study, but she didn't, because of her

mother. She was afraid to leave me with my sorrows. These dried mushrooms I bought from a Phoenician will free her from the burden I've become to her. Besides, ever since Synesius died, I'm no longer alive. I go to him. I am sure he and my boys need me. The bite of an asp killed Cleopatra, but I'm more plebeian. The poison of imported mushrooms is enough for me.

(Lavinia writhes in agony and succumbs. Stella mutters a prayer beside her in silence. Then she resumes her monolog)

STELLA: I bade my dead mother a last farewell, and left for Alexandria with a group of merchants. I dressed as a man so as to go unnoticed. When I reached the city, Hypatia was waiting for me in the square. A soldier relative of mine had delivered my letter to her beforehand telling her of my arrival. *(Enter Hypatia)*

Scene 2

HYPATIA: Welcome, dear Stella. I see Synesius' glow in your eyes. He was a great friend whom fate took away too early. Your father was a great soul.

STELLA: I know, and I am proud of that. But it was with you that he learned to think. I hope you will illuminate my path with your teachings too. Nobody knows the Greek masters – who brought so much glory to philosophy – like Hypatia.

HYPATIA: Who brought us all so much glory, you're right. But they no longer do. I do not want to mislead you, Stella. Philosophy is now a beautiful woman who everyone thinks they know but who is dead inside. She goes by the same name as always but now she applies plenty of makeup to hide her age. She's but a mummy now. She plays dead so as not to be killed. You came to me to learn the art of invoking the dead. Beware that they do not accuse you of being a witch because of me. We live in a strange time of ignorance and fanaticism. All that remains of Greece now is a vague love of myths, and of Rome the fresh smell of gladiators' blood. Christ announced a different

God but soon his heirs marred what he said with ridiculous dogma. You know, Stella, I sometimes think my mission is futile. Few humans can evolve in this dark world.

STELLA: Please don't talk like this. Hypatia is a living star that radiates light on the young. My father died, and then my mother, but I have not lost my love for life. Love of learning is my last refuge. I believe in the future, otherwise I would not have come to you. I've dreamed day and night of the day I'd finally join your school. (*exhilarated*) I'm in Alexandria, with you... It all still seems so unreal.

HYPATIA: Your enthusiasm is contagious. Maybe I exaggerate. As we age we have the illusion the world will die with us. (*she looks up at the sky, ironic*) Look, it's all Saturn's fault. Its path has crossed Mars', which always makes me grouchy. (*Both laugh*) Come on, I'll show you where I live. You will be my guest, the daughter, or sister, I never had.

Scene 3

Demetria, sitting in front of a mirror, putting the finishing touches on her makeup.

DEMETRIA: (*combing her hair*) Orestes, bring me the diadem from the ivory safe! (*Louder*) Orestes, did you hear me? Watch out, I'm an actress – when I scream, I'm capable of shattering glass. (*Enter Orestes awkwardly, crown in hand*)

ORESTES: Where have all of the servants in this palace gone? Why do I have to do the work of the eunuchs and maids! (*hands her the crown*)

DEMETRIA: Thank you my dear, you're a darling, (*she pats his groin*) But there's nothing of the eunuch in you. I sent my maid to buy face powder and the servants are busy with the feast. I need you here next to me. I'm so insecure, Orestes. I don't know how the public will react to my performance.

ORESTES: Come on, Demetria, they'll give you a rousing ovation. You're my wife, after all. The guests at a premiere can't afford to displease the governor, can they?

DEMETRIA: Oh, how nice of you. Any applause will be the result of your power and not my talent. (*Annoyed*) You might as well say what you really think: That I am a failed artist.

ORESTES: If you were a failure I would not have made you my wife. (*caressing her*) After all, it was your art that encouraged me to reopen the city's largest theater, closed for twenty years since Theodosius issued his order. You know very well that today I will face down my enemies, the enemies of your art – a nasty crowd of religious fanatics who spit on everything that is noble and alive. The Church has become the most dangerous of sects since Cyril was made a bishop. It is Christ's church in name only. They burn pagan altars, desecrate synagogues, cast the vilest slander on anyone who does not submit to their tenets. The reopening of the theater will not just be another mundane act by the governor. I see it as a political gesture of the first order. What has made Alexandria a city like no other is tolerance for thoughts and beliefs; it is a place where different worlds can come together. Theater will help us relearn what the city has forgotten.

DEMETRIA: What you say might be true. But rather than reassure me, you only make me more nervous. I know so little about politics. The only politics I know is how to play my part well, how to thrill the audience so they can put themselves in the place of the characters, to suffer and laugh with them.

ORESTES: And that's all I ask of you today, dear Demetria. The more sublime your art, the more successful my plans. People sometimes don't know what they most need. There are three drugs in life that we should become addicted to: theater, love and intelligence. That's why I'm addicted to you. (*they embrace*)

DEMETRIA: But that's not what you learned in Hypatia's school. It seems to me the only drug Hypatia is addicted to is intelligence. For her, theater is good only insofar as it agrees with her philosophy.

ORESTES: You're being unfair. I learned a lot from Hypatia, and what she most taught me is the importance of thinking for oneself.

DEMETRIA: (*contemptuous*) Think, think, think... This woman is a brain with ovaries. She's a theorem put forth by her father, the mathematician. Hypatia reminds me of the story of Athena, the goddess without a mother, born fully-formed from her father's skull. For her, the body is only a way station for her spirit.

ORESTES: You never could hide the jealousy you feel for her.

DEMETRIA: You loved her so much, and in a way you can never love me. (*She grabs Orestes possessively*) For me love can only be felt in the flesh. And this woman always confuses me because she professes a pure love, which is reserved only for the angels. If she were ugly or crippled, that would be one thing. But no. Hypatia is gorgeous, and she struts her virginity before to her adoring followers. She is not of this world, Orestes. (*they separate*)

ORESTES: None of us is entirely of this world, Demetria, and she knows this better than anyone. Hypatia is a perpetual outsider. That is why they hate her so.

DEMETRIA: I don't hate her. I'm just annoyed by how she carries herself.

ORESTES: I wasn't referring to you, but the fanatics who slander her. By the way, she greatly admires the theater, even if you don't believe it. I remember the fascination with which she spoke of Sophocles in class. And she made us all laugh when she told us that Plato only wrote dialogues because he was a failed playwright. I bet Hypatia will be there tonight, at your show, sitting unnoticed in a corner seat.

Scene 4

On stage, Hypatia and Stella, who marvels at what she sees. Two students, Nazarius and Kariotis, roam about talking, while another, Ebonius, consults a papyrus.

HYPATIA: This is the famous Academy you've dreamed of for so long. It is named the Museum because it is dedicated to all of the muses.

STELLA: It's breathtaking! Is it connected to the library?

HYPATIA: Yes. We work in what remains of the old library. There we can engage the sages who lived before us in dialog. Even with all of the destruction it has suffered, none other in the world comes close to it. It is a maze I'm sure you'll love to get lost in.

STELLA: I always imagined it to be like Noah's Ark – A ship that saves us from a flood of ignorance, in a sea of forgetfulness.

HYPATIA: You have a poetic soul. But the ark today is in danger of sinking. If only I could be a Noah and keep all of this alive for centuries to come. But there are petty voices that want to submerge this treasure that belongs to all of us. They constantly threaten to burn it. Mark my words, I'll die in a fire in this temple, while reading one of Archimedes' scrolls. The mediocre can't tolerate that which isn't. Be careful Stella, always protect yourself against them! The mediocre are dangerous adversaries. *(Nazarius and Kariotis, disciples of Hypatia, approach talking)* Look, here come two of my students. I want to introduce you to Nazarius and Kariotis. *(to them)* Your new classmate, Stella, Synesius' daughter! *(they greet one another with a slight bow)*

NAZARIUS: Welcome to the Academy. Your father is one of the more illustrious names to have passed through these halls.

KARIOTIS: (*slightly disdainful*) Let's hope you can live up to his example.

STELLA: I'll do everything in my power.

KARIOTIS: Did you live in the same city where your father was bishop?

STELLA: Yes, until I chose the road to Alexandria.

KARIOTIS: And you've never been enrolled in school before?

STELLA: No, never. The lyceum in Pentapolis forbids women students. But I didn't miss much. I had private lessons with the best local teacher, my father.

HYPATIA: Kariotis, are you going to tell me the reason for this interrogation! Should I put you in charge of admissions now? Is that it? What kind of a way is this to welcome your new classmate? You'd never guess you were a student here.

KARIOTIS: I'm sorry, professor.

HYPATIA: It's Stella you should apologize to, not me.

STELLA: Never mind. I'm a bishop's daughter. I'm used to rejection.

NAZARIUS: Kariotis meant no harm. He's not a bad fellow, but sometimes he can be a little inappropriate.

HYPATIA: And *you*, always defending him. It does him no good at all. Each one of us must face our prejudices. Otherwise we will never acquire true knowledge. (*Ebonius, the Nubian student, approaches*)

EBONIUS: What lesson am I missing here, right in the middle of the courtyard, professor? And in the company of such a beautiful young woman... I hope it is not a fleeting visit or, worse, an optical illusion.

HYPATIA: Ebonius is another classmate of yours, Stella. The Nubian has not taken Plato's lesson to heart. He's too attached to the body's wonders to access the soul's beauty.

EBONIUS: I shall get there yet, professor, but at my own pace. In the Symposium, the philosopher says that access to the spirit's intuition begins with the delights of the body's beauties. I confess I'm still at the beginning stages. But I'm making progress. Besides, if this young lady did not also have a beautiful soul, how could she be here at our Academy?

STELLA: Thanks for the compliment, classmate.

HYPATIA: Kariotis does not seem very convinced.

EBONIUS: (*mocking*) Oh, but Kariotis's standards of beauty are quite different from mine.

KARIOTIS: Good day. I did not come here to argue with freed slaves. Goodbye, professor. (*Exit*)

Scene 5

EBONIUS: I don't know what brought this guy here. He's worse than when he came six months ago. He's a reactionary.

NAZARIUS: You angered him, Ebonius. His loyalties are torn between our Academy and Cyril's Church, where he is an acolyte.

EBONIUS: Why must you always come to the rescue of your darling? You'll get hurt, mark my words! Kariotis is treacherous. You have no idea the things he says when you're not around. He thinks all Jews should have been expelled from the city long ago.

NAZARIUS: I never heard him say that, even after the attack on the synagogue.

EBONIUS: He's using you.

HYPATIA: It was a mistake for me to have admitted him. I thought his interest in philosophy was genuine and that his presence here could help ease the hostility of the Church against the knowledge taught at the Academy. But I was wrong. And now I try to ignore my worst premonitions.

STELLA: How so, professor? Can you share them with us?

HYPATIA: *(to Nazarius)* I wish I could trust him like you do, Nazarius, but your judgment is clouded. I suspect Kariotis is nothing but a spy working for Cyril, and that my teaching has absolutely no effect on him.

NAZARIUS: I don't want to believe that.

EBONIUS: Who knows the stories Kariotis makes up just to please his boss. Bishop Cyril is as perverse as he is eloquent. *(to Stella)* I know from personal experience, Stella. When I was a child, I was his slave, until Hypatia bought my freedom, that is.

STELLA: It must be terrible being a slave. My father said slavery is a moral leprosy forgotten by philosophers.

HYPATIA: And we will pay dearly for this blindness... *(fearful)* But please, don't tell anyone about my suspicions. It's enough that we're engaged in this silent war. Especially you, Nazarius, I ask of you that you please keep it a secret.

NAZARIUS: You can count on me, professor.

EBONIUS: Nazarius can't be trusted when he's anywhere near Kariotis. Passions trump reason.

NAZARIUS: You should know. You fall for every Nile beauty who shakes her bracelets near you.

HYPATIA: You two need to reign in your passions if you wish to devote yourselves seriously to philosophy. The mind must learn to control the flesh and prepare for when it no longer inhabits the body. Philosophy teaches us to die, because physical death sets free the immortal light that dwells within us.

STELLA: So says Plato in *Phaedo*.

EBONIUS: But it is no easy task.

HYPATIA: Growth is always painful. What's easy never takes us far. And now I must go. The governor asked me to prepare his horoscope for the coming months. He seems very restless. We're all restless.

NAZARIUS: Are you not going to today's theater reopening?

HYPATIA: You know what I think of the theater. It can be a noble motivating force for the spirit, or it can descend into pure frivolity. I do not know which play Demetria has chosen. But one thing is certain: It's bound to be a big role that will give her plenty of opportunities to shine. (*Laughter*)

EBONIUS: It is called *The Passion of Helen of Tyre*. The author is one Aristeus of Thebes, but it must be a pseudonym. I know who Helen of Troy is, but I confess I've never heard of Helen of Tyre till now.

HYPATIA: (*worried*) It can't be. Orestes gave in to his wife's whims. He has to cancel the show. This play will provoke the fury of the orthodox Christians. Cyril will think Orestes made a conscious decision to publicly attack his Church.

STELLA: But what's so dangerous about Helen of Tyre?

HYPATIA: There's no time to explain now. I have to run to Orestes' palace. We must avoid another bloodbath in Alexandria.

NAZARIUS: It's not prudent to go alone. Can I go with you?

HYPATIA: If you wish, thank you. And you Ebonius, you can continue to show Stella the back rooms of the Academy.

EBONIUS: *(Smiling complicitly at Stella)* Nothing would give me more pleasure, professor. *(Each pair leaves the stage in opposite directions)*

Scene 6

Cyril, a miter on his head, scribbles at a podium. Enter Kariotis.

CYRIL: You're late today, my child. I thought perhaps you'd been converted by that pagan mermaid.

KARIOTIS: You should never doubt my loyalty to you, Cyril. I stayed late at the Academy because Hypatia introduced me to a new student, Bishop Synesius' daughter.

CYRIL: That fornicator bishop begat a daughter who pretends to be as smart as a man. And she left the sinful home of her father to come learn from a heretic woman preacher of the mistakes of the ancients, who never knew the word of Christ. Oh God, give me strength to fight your enemies! *(worried)* You, Almighty, who gave courage to the early Christians who were persecuted and slain in the arenas of Rome, give me a sword with which to crush the wickedness in this world. You wanted the Empire to convert to your faith, and now your Church holds absolute power. Neither Jews nor pagans will thrive in this sinful city. History will remember the righteous hand of Cyril. We must crush the serpent.

KARIOTIS: It won't be as easy as burning the temple of Serapis and demolishing its stone idols. The Academy is a venerable institution, and Hypatia is an adviser to the governor, who represents imperial power in Alexandria.

CYRIL: The kingdom of God is more powerful, and God is on our side. Today very grave things will happen. Orestes wants to provoke me with the opening of the theater, no doubt incited by Hypatia.

KARIOTIS: What does the theater have to do with our church?

CYRIL: Theatre is not just lewd fun, it is a pagan cult to Dionysus. By putting that whore he took as his wife on stage, Orestes wants to rub his obscene faith in my face. I cannot allow these bacchanalian rites to compete with my Eucharist. Just yesterday I passed by the Museum, and the riffraff were gathering at the door. It was Hypatia, come to speak to the masses. More people came to see her than came to hear me say Mass on Sunday. She must think herself a special envoy from Olympus. Hypocrite! I find it very hard to believe she's a virgin. Unless, of course, she is referring to her astrological sign. She is, after all, so fond of preparing her charts.

KARIOTIS: But Cyril, Hypatia can't be blamed for Orestes' decision. Like all the Platonists she takes a very stern view of the theater.

CYRIL: Don't be naive, dear Kariotis. (*Strokes his hair and caresses his face*) I understand you wish to defend her. After all, you are her student. I understand your hot young blood is not indifferent to this shrew's seductive powers. But learn from me, I have lived more than you. Devious are the ways of guilt. A man can be punished for transgressions he did not commit. What matters is that justice be done. The alliance between Hypatia and Orestes will be the downfall of this ambitious woman.

KARIOTIS: (*defiant, rejecting Cyril's caresses*) And this spirit of revenge of yours, Cyril, is it appropriate to a good Christian? Jesus turned the other cheek. It didn't occur to him to crush others.

CYRIL: I forgive your insolence. My love for you prevents me from censuring you. It is clear that Christ turned the other cheek and humbled himself so as to bring praise to his ministry. But his destiny was the cross and martyrdom because he was the Son of God. We are just His humble servants. We cannot adopt his conduct in full. The fate of the Church of Christ is not to see itself crucified on Mount Calvary. We must assure that it endures through the centuries, even if for this it is necessary, at times, to forget the example of its founder.

Scene 7

Orestes sits reading a papyrus, the script of the play. Hypatia is visibly anxious. Nazarius is slightly detached, but showing signs of listening to the conversation.

HYPATIA: Orestes, I hope you've reflected on the madness of your order.

ORESTES: What's the matter Hypatia? You seem flushed! You'd think you were being chased by a mob. The show hasn't even begun yet. Demetria is in the dressing room putting on her makeup, and I decided to sit a little while here on stage before the show.

HYPATIA: I was just at your home. They told me you were already at the theater. Orestes, listen! You should not have chosen a play with such a controversial subject. Cyril is looking for any excuse to incite the mobs.

ORESTES: Whatever I do will always be an affront to Cyril. Just reopening the theater is more than enough reason for him to mobilize his gangs. Even if Demetria were to enact the Passion of Christ and play Mary Magdalene, Cyr-

il would object that we were mocking the gospels. To avoid confrontations, I've increased the number of soldiers at the theater.

HYPATIA: But Orestes, was it really necessary to choose the story of Simon The Magician for this premiere? All Gnostics are damned in the eyes of the Church, because they've never bowed to Rome's dogmas. These rebels took it upon themselves to invent a wide variety of myths. And you had to find the most scandalous of all. Simon The Magician, who claims to be an envoy from Heaven, and discovers the world's soul embodied in a young prostitute from the docks of Tyre. Both will wander through the Roman provinces preaching free love and universal harmony fifteen years after the death of Christ. You can't find a greater blasphemy to enrage Cyril.

ORESTES: You needn't recite the plot. After all, it was you who told me the story in class one day. I only decided to make it into a play.

HYPATIA: Ah! So it's you who hides behind the name of Aristeus of Thebes, who no one has ever heard of before.

ORESTES: (*proud*) A governor is entitled to write plays, even more so if he is married to a talented actress. (*changing the subject*) Did you bring the horoscope I asked you for? I want to consult it before I enact my new policies.

HYPATIA: Astrology is not the answer to everything, Orestes. I had so much on my mind that I forgot to bring it. But if you are so anxious to see it, I can have it brought. (*loudly*) Nazarius!

NAZARIUS: (*he is close by*) Yes, professor.

HYPATIA: Do me a favor. In rushing to come here, I left the governor's horoscope in my office. Can you bring it to us before the curtain goes up?

NAZARIUS: Of course, teacher. (*exit*)

ORESTES: To have a disciple like him must be of great comfort to the soul. I miss the time when I was one of them.

HYPATIA: *(neither of them notice Demetria, who listens from the wings)* Orestes, you have always listened to my advice. I ask that you cancel this performance. Put aside your pride at having written this play. Convince Demetria to cancel. Explain to her the risks we all run. Cyril's Church is the official religion of the Empire. We, the pagans, as they call us, are a minority and we're fast losing influence. The Empress in Constantinople is an obsessive churchgoer who spends her days in confession. Your job is not safe, friend. One night on stage can cost you your career. Go tell Demetria to take her makeup off, before she cries tears of disappointment. Better she cry now than all of us later. *(Demetria makes her presence known and approaches)*

DEMETRIA: *(wounded)* The Great Hypatia is jealous! I am getting ready to bring my character to life, and meanwhile madam professor here is on stage plotting with my husband. Philosophers have always been jealous of actors. You want to rob me of my moment of glory but I am the actress here, not you. There are so many pulpits where you can shine as an orator, why the hell must you deny me mine? It's clear you have no clue what the theater is. You may be very versed in Plotinus' ideas and Ptolemy's constellations, but you know nothing of the theater. You arrive here, and with a snap of the finger you want to cancel the show. Hypatia gives orders and we all follow. But I won't cry alone. There is a huge team that works night and day to make an opening night a success. Theatre is a collective effort, it is not like you writing your books home in solitude. This stage that you see here, these musicians who've rehearsed for hours on end, my actor friends who've come all the way from Rome. How will I look when I tell them there is no play? *Why?* Because Dr. Hypatia, Alexandria's second lighthouse, has given us the red light!

ORESTES: Calm down, Demetria. I understand you are upset, but Hypatia is here to help.

DEMETRIA: (*sarcastic*) Very well, Orestes, after all it is your play. Let's shut it down at the request of the censor. But we mustn't rip-off the public. So, I propose a little skit that we can rehearse now because it's almost time to open the doors. You might be familiar with the story. It is a star-crossed love story, but it has nothing to do with religion. Feel free to chime in if I get anything wrong. (*professorial, to the audience*) Ten years ago, governor Orestes governed absolutely nothing; he was a mere student at the Academy, yearning for wisdom. Or better said, he yearned more for his teacher than the subject at hand. (*Hypatia moves to leave*)

HYPATIA: (*speaks to Orestes*) I refuse to be debased by your wife.

DEMETRIA: (*gesturing firmly for her to sit*) Please, I want you to stay. If you are a she-man as they say around town, then you'd have the guts to sit through scenes from your life. Have you forgotten the proverb by Palladas the Grammarian, who heaped so much praise on you? "A stage this life and a comedy, let grave things be, learn how to dance or live in misery." (*Hypatia listens, uncomfortably. Demetria resumes her skit. Hypatia gets up to leave but she continues to observe from a distance*)

The young Orestes is madly in love with his teacher. Pretty teachers always have this effect upon their students. Youth are easily distracted by the ardor of nature and forget to nurture their spirit. But Hypatia is an iron virgin, and she intends to give her pupil a lesson. One day, after class, he works up the courage to declare his love for her.

ORESTES: Demetria, stop with this silliness now!

DEMETRIA: I can't, I'm rehearsing today's skit. Moving right along then... Our Orestes opens his heart to his teacher, but he has no clue the answer she has in store for him in her panties. With one fell swoop, the great Hypatia puts her hand on her crotch (*Demetria accompanies her words by removing from her undergarments a cloth, red with blood.*) And she takes out a rag soaked with menstrual blood. Oh, what a disgusting sight! You see, female philosophers also have periods, just like all women do. It is then that Hypatia

teaches him the lesson, shoving the filthy rag under his nose (*Demetria displays the towel to Orestes, who turns his face, embarrassed*): 'Look closely at this cloth, boy! This is what you love in me. It's not a pretty sight!'... These were her words. The young Orestes ran away, mortified. The terrible shock could have left him impotent till his dying days. It's no wonder. Put yourselves in his place. He'd worked up the courage to declare his love for this wise woman and, just like that, she dangles before his nostrils the red proof of her childbearing years. And with so many days in the month, the poor boy had to open up to her just when she was at her bloodiest, as I am today. He mustn't have any luck at all.

ORESTES: Stop, Demetria! Haven't you had enough?

DEMETRIA: I'm almost finished. I just need to give the moral of the story, which is the best part. (*professorial*) Orestes abandoned this love for her as hopeless and ever since he's devoted himself passionately to his studies and to politics. But Hypatia's act, as cruel as it might have seemed, was not without rhyme or reason. No. She wanted to show Orestes that he loved in her the *lowest parts* of the human condition. To climb the ladder of knowledge it was necessary that he douse his sexual feelings and ignite the passions of the spirit. All philosophers have their allegories. Plato chose the cave. Hypatia preferred sanitary napkins. Who am I to criticize? ... (*Orestes claps slowly, ironically*)

ORESTES: Bravo, dear. You always were a genius at improvisation. Is this then what you propose we put up instead of my play?

DEMETRIA: That's right. Does it please you? At least no one can say it's not historically accurate.

HYPATIA. (*approaching again*) You opened a wound in our friendship that will never be healed. You have no right to make a mockery of me and my most sacred beliefs.

DEMETRIA: Now you know how I felt when I saw you conspiring against a play I've been preparing for months. You also have no right to deprive me of what is most sacred to me: My art, my theater... Now we're even, Hypatia.

HYPATIA: I've failed in my mission. Don't expect me to stay and watch the story of Helen and Simon Magus. I just hope that what I fear doesn't come to pass. Goodbye and Heaven help us. (*more to herself than to them*) I am going to look for Nazarius. I'm surprised he's taken this long. He could have gone and come back by now.

Scene 8

At a reflecting pool, Nazarius crosses path with Kariotis.

Kariotis: (*he grabs Nazarius and strokes his torso*) Why the hurry, Nazarius? You go out on the town and don't even invite me?

NAZARIUS: If I had, you know I would, Kariotis. You know I've had my eyes on you. But let go of me. I'm late. I have to deliver this to Hypatia.

KARIOTIS: What piece of paper is this that's more important than me?

NAZARIUS: I can't show you, it's a letter to Orestes.

KARIOTIS: You've been promoted to governor's messenger boy. What a big man! (*he grabs his arm and twists it to force him to drop the letter*) But first you'll give me this letter, little Nazarius. You see, I've been appointed mail inspector. Homeland security, you understand.

NAZARIUS: Let go of me Kariotis, you're hurting me. You're going to break my arm. (*the pain forces him to drop the letter*) You barbarian!

KARIOTIS: And that's why you like me. Barbarians are hot.

NAZARIUS: That's a confidential document. Don't even think of opening it!

KARIOTIS: (*he removes the seal and opens it.*) No thinking involved, really. There, it's open. Well, well, another of Hypatia's horoscopes for His Honor the governor.

NAZARIUS: (*nervously*) What now?

KARIOTIS: Nothing. Just stay there quietly and don't do anything foolish. (*reading*) Our dear Orestes has many adverse alignments of stars on the horizon. The heavens are not on his side. Look what a shame. Precisely today when his wife is getting ready to go out on stage in her birthday suit.

NAZARIUS: Why are you so stupid, Kariotis? Hasn't the Academy taught you anything?

KARIOTIS: But I'm serious. Isn't acting Demetria's gift to the world. At least that's what those who saw her on stage before she married Orestes say. It's a pity the play she chose, though. Bishop Cyril is not in the least happy.

NAZARIUS: That play will never be performed.

KARIOTIS: How can you say such a thing?

NAZARIUS: Hypatia advised Orestes to give up his plan, so as not to provoke Cyril.

KARIOTIS: Hypatia, defender of Cyril! You expect me to believe that? (*grabs him and plays with his hair*) You spend too many hours thinking in that damn library and it's not good for your pretty little head. (*he kisses him*) Why don't you think of me instead? It's much healthier than reading scrolls and chanting the Torah.

NAZARIUS: I'm going to tell you something, but you must promise absolute secrecy.

KARIOTIS: Of course. Have you been playing spy?

NAZARIUS: I overheard Hypatia's conversation with the governor. *The Passion of Helen of Tyre* was written by Orestes. Hypatia didn't even know. He learned of the story of Simon Magus when he was her student ten years ago. *(Cyril appears suddenly, as if emerging from the shadows)*

Scene 9

CYRIL: What an interesting story your friend has to tell! *(Kariotis and Nazarius abruptly separate, the astrological chart falls from Kariotis's hand into the reflecting pool. Cyril speaks to Kariotis)* I took the liberty of following you, Kariotis. In the heat of sin, many secrets are revealed. But now the time for penance has come. *(six sinister hooded figures appear; monastic costume, faces hidden by hoods and masks)*

KARIOTIS: *(terrified)* What do you want of me, Cyril? I seduced the Jew to get information about Hypatia. I work for you and our Church.

CYRIL: I know, you have nothing to fear, you've passed the test.

NAZARIUS: *(to Kariotis)* Disgusting traitor! *(he retreats and attempts to escape)*

CYRIL: Grab the lamb, Kariotis! *(Kariotis obeys and grabs Nazarius by the wrists)* And now our boy will tell us loudly and clearly: Who is the moral author of the piece that we must censor today? We must know the name to make an example of the heretic. We must cleanse Alexandria of this pagan plague that has descended upon us. Who is it, boy?

NAZARIUS: It's the governor.

CYRIL: No. I said the *moral* author. It is a female *moral author*, is it not? These brothers need to hear her name, so they can fulfill their mission.

NAZARIUS: No slander will come out of my mouth.

CYRIL: Refresh his memory, Kariotis!

KARIOTIS: (*nervous*) I don't want to hurt him!

CYRIL: So you prefer to suffer the punishment we reserve for sodomites?

KARIOTIS: No, never!

CYRIL: We're waiting.

KARIOTIS: Speak, Nazarius! Who taught Orestes the plot of this play? (*Kariotis plunges Nazarius's head into the reflecting pool*) Just the name! (*he repeats this several times, each time leaving Nazarius's head underwater longer. Kariotis becomes alarmed with his silence*) Say her name, you Jew shit! I don't want to have to kill you!

CYRIL: If you tell us the name I'll absolve you of your sins, which are many and serious. You should consider this torture as a baptism of sorts. We do not want you to die, my son. You're still young and can redeem yourself. Your faith is the sister of ours. You merely need to say the name of the guilty party!

NAZARIUS: (faintly, after Kariotis has pulled his head out of the water) Hypatia.

CYRIL: Louder, son! Two of our brothers are a bit deaf.

NAZARIUS: (*faintly, after Kariotis has pulled his head out of the water*)
Hypatia.

CYRIL: Everyone heard what this friend said. Our suspicions have been confirmed. Let us go to the theater. The show should be starting. (*Exit all, except Nazarius, who is left sobbing by the pool, and Kariotis. The two lock eyes one last time, then Kariotis exits. Enter Stella and Ebonius, looking for Nazarius.*)

Scene 10

STELLA: What happened to you Nazarius, were you robbed?

EBONIUS: And why are you crying? Who did this to you?

NAZARIUS: I'm crying because I'm a coward. I'm no better than a worm. I want to die, Ebonius, to die. You were right. Kariotis is a new Judas.

EBONIUS: I imagined he was behind this.

STELLA: Hypatia was worried about you when she couldn't find you. She seems to be able to guess the future.

NAZARIUS: They want to kill Hypatia. We must stop them!

EBONIUS: Are you delirious? Who does?

NAZARIUS: Cyril's men.

Scene 11

Oriental music. The stage is lit with torches. Enter Demetria as Helen of Tyre, a concubine, doing a dance of veils. Sitting in the lotus position, is the

actor who plays Simon Magus, dressed in desert garb. The dialog begins when the music ends. Hooded men stand in the audience.

HELEN OF TYRE: I danced just like you asked me to.

SIMON MAGUS: Thank you, Helen. You dance to the rhythm of the planets. You're the woman I've been looking for in all of the ports of Africa and the Bosphorus.

HELEN: But you don't even know me. How could you be looking for me?

SIMON: Because we've met in previous lives. In your eyes I see the reflection of faces I've loved for many centuries, from the beginning of time.

HELEN: I really believe that. Often I dreamed a prophet who can fly comes searching for me and whisks me off to see the world, as if I were his guiding star. My roommate laughs at me. She says we all dream of a magic man who will save us, but as soon as he'd arrive we'd just betray him with our next customer. But we're very different. She forgets her dreams. But how did you know you'd find me in a brothel on the pier?

SIMON: Because I searched everywhere else. Was not Christ born in a lowly stable? When I saw you in this brothel I realized you didn't belong here. Your calling is higher than satisfying the lowly fantasies of the flesh. Helen, I am the magician of your dreams, capable of doing wonders. Of soaring through the air and landing as softly as a dove. Of ordering rocks to spout fresh water like a spring. Of talking with wild beasts and taming them with lullabies. Of reciting a poem and inspiring people to awaken their inner God. So call me Simon Magus. We go through life asleep. If you come with me, we can awaken anyone who will listen to us, in the villages, the towns and in the countryside.

HELEN: But I'm a sinner. What I can give you that the others can't?

SIMON: Listen, Helen, you are the soul of the world. You don't know yourself, but you have the power to inspire. You will be the female pope of my religion. I am the spirit of the world that seeks to shine, but alone I grow sad and my flame dies. That is why I need you, and you me. The two of us together, we are as strong as gods. Love can make us invincible.

HELEN: *(laughing in ironic amazement)* The soul of the world is a whore, and the spirit of the world a magician! I've never met anyone as crazy as you! But if it's the law of love that you will preach to the world... *(Simon signals 'yes' with a nod)* Then I'll be your wife and travel through the remotest roads of the earth with you. The soul and the spirit embrace each other in our bodies. Never before has this bed dreamed of a nuptial as sacred as this. *(they relish an amorous embrace. The hooded men burst through the audience, amid screams of protest and whistling)*

Hooded # 1: Put a stop to this filth!

Hooded # 2: They're making fun of our Messiah! They'll burn in the hell!

Hooded #3: This is an outrage! It seems like a gospel of Mary Magdalene.

Hooded #1: I bet a pagan witch wrote this trash. *(Orestes interrupts the play. he walks to the middle of the stage and tries to calm things down)*

ORESTES: Silence, gentlemen. We're in a theater. No one here is trying to offend anyone's beliefs. The actors are merely playing parts. Use common sense and appreciate that this is the language of art we're hearing.

HOODED 2: Death to all pagans! *(we hear insults followed by a projectile thrown by one of the hooded ones, which strikes Orestes in the head, causing him to fall. Demetria rushes anxiously to her husband. The hooded men run across the stage and grab torches)*

DEMETRIA: *(to the audience)* Guards, arrest the criminal! *(Orestes lifts his*

bloodied head and orders the arrest of the rioters. Two extras, in costume, immobilize Hooded man #2 and carry him off stage)

ORESTES: Whip that one who assaulted me until he spits out the names of all those responsible for this terrorist act!

Scene 12

Stella and Hypatia descend from a chariot. Two steps suggest the entrance to Hypatia's house.

HYPATIA: The show should just about be over now. I have the most awful premonitions.

STELLA: How do you think it went? Ebonius assured me he'd let us know if there were cause for alarm.

HYPATIA: I feel badly you didn't go with him because of me. Not that I like to stoke the fire of Eros among my students, but maybe you should have gone. But you only just arrived. Visit it when you can, it's the best theater in the city.

STELLA: We'll leave it for another day. After discovering poor Nazarius in that state, I have no desire to attend a theater premiere. Shall we go inside, professor?

HYPATIA: *(Looking up at the sky)* Let's stay out here a little longer. It's a warm March night, I know you must be tired from your trip... But I feel goose-bumps all over, as if invisible beings wanted to communicate with me and I cannot decipher their language. How sad, Stella, to be deaf to the greater mysteries of the universe. *(like someone trying to hear something inaudible)*

STELLA: How strange that precisely you should say this, teacher. You who have deciphered like no one else the mysteries of philosophy and mathematics, astronomy and music! *(to the audience as if speaking to imaginary listeners)* Hypatia knows the secrets of Eleusis, so I am not amazed that she hears the voice of spirits. *(Turns to her)* Tell me which of them dictated this tune to you: *(hums)* «In picking, mum, the daffodils, I fell below...»

HYPATIA: How do you know this song? I was your age when I wrote it.

STELLA: My father learned it from you. He taught it to my mother, and she would sing me to sleep with it on moonlit nights. I've memorized the lyrics.

HYPATIA: I'd like to hear it in your voice. I'll get the flute. Maybe this is what the muses want of me. *(serious)* A farewell song.

STELLA: Why farewell? I just arrived today.

HYPATIA: *(cutting short the conversation)* Farewell, I say, before we go to bed. *(gets up to get the flute)* I forgot the flute on the bench in the garden. It could have been stolen.

STELLA: I used to hum this song to my mother. I feel her next to me every time I sing it. It's as if I were the kidnapped Persephone calling to her mother from the land of the dead.

(Hypatia sits on the step and begins playing the flute, both sing in duet)

STELLA:

In picking, mum, the daffodils,
I fell below.
Down here, mum, in these darker hills,
I miss you so,
The Lord of Death was my abductor,
His pomegranates, a raven's offer

Now I became to love this endless night
 My heart is stuck on to him with no fight

HYPATIA:

You've asked that life should give another choice
 And life in me won't live apart from you
 The desert land is crying in my voice
 For I no longer know how grain grow through

STELLA:

In picking, mum, the daffodils
 I soon forgot
 Within the night of life that thrills
 I died a lot
 I'm sacred by his love for me
 I slept but now my eyes can see
 Mother, I'm longing for your brilliant light
 My love for death is such a painful plight

HYPATIA:

Behold, in Spring you'll join your hands with me
 And leave your husband waiting there alone
 The soul of all the world, daughter, you'll be
 Beyond life and death you'll find your new home

STELLA: (*After finishing the song, alarmed*) Look. Here comes a throng of people. It looks like a mob. What are they doing on the streets at this hour?

HYPATIA: Listen Stella. If anything should happen to me, you can live in my house. I have no children. I only met you today, but it's as if we've always been friends. Being Synesius' daughter, it's as if you were my daughter too. I've put this in writing, so you'll have everything you need. Continue studying at the Academy if they don't close it. Anyway, whatever happens, never give up. The path of the spirit is long and bitter. But sweet and eternal

will be the fruits you reap. And remember, I'll be watching you from the beyond.

STELLA: (*anxious*) So then what Nazarius says is true? These people intend to kill you?

HYPATIA: Yes, Stella! And I prefer a cup of hemlock to this pack of beasts who make their way here. (*Looking at the sky*) My soul is now like Persephone who asks her mother, Demeter, to take her quickly from this hell.

STELLA: (*throws herself into the arms of Hypatia*) How horrible, Hypatia! To kill you who are the brightest object in the desert. My fate is to lose those I most love. First my father, then my brothers, then my mother, and now my teacher.

HYPATIA: Bear your burden with courage, sweet girl. The conflicts of the gods cause panic in mortals. I choose as my epitaph the question that Palladas, a friend who went before me, posed (*recites an epigram of Paladas of Alexandria*):

«Could it be we are really dead
and only seem to be alive,
Us Greeks, who've fallen from grace,
and imagined life to be a dream,
Or are we alive and was it life that died instead?»

Scene 13

Hooded men walk to the front, some carrying torches. Kariotis is among them.

Hooded # 1: It is very dark here. I can't tell who the witch is.

KARIOTIS: I'll find Hypatia for you. *(he walks towards the two)* Good night, professor *(he kisses her on the cheek)* Giving after-hour music lessons, are you?

HYPATIA: Aren't you ashamed of yourself? To come with a silver tongue after all of the evil you've done to Nazarius and all of us?

KARIOTIS: Evil never comes in ones, teacher. And there's nothing I can do about that.

HOODED #1: *(screaming)* Let's get her, brothers! The pagan snake will no longer plague Alexandria. *(two hooded men grab her arms violently)*

HOODED #2: *(he grabs Stella's arm)* And her student? Should we take her with us and give her one last lesson?

KARIOTIS: Let go of her. She just arrived today. They barely know each other. *(The hooded man obeys Kariotis. The enraged mob grabs Hypatia and lead her off stage. Stella is left alone with Kariotis)*

Scene 14

STELLA: *(tries to go after the mob, but Kariotis prevents her, blocking her way)* These monsters will kill her. Someone has to do something. Call the authorities... I can't believe you, a disciple of hers, delivered her into the hands of these assassins.

KARIOTIS: I saved your life. Don't go looking for reasons to put yourself in danger again. Nobody can stop the fury of the mob. Hypatia to them is a pagan devil who must be slaughtered. They'll tear her clothes off and parade

her around the square. But they won't be satisfied until they've scraped her flesh off with oyster shells and burned what's left of her on Mount Cinaron.

STELLA: So that's how they'll kill her... and you describe it like a cruel butcher. I wanted to come to Alexandria so badly but not to come face to face with sheer evil. I don't know why you spared my life. Never expect any gratitude from me! (*Kariotis begins to speak but Stella covers her ears with her hands*) Please don't defile her anymore with your words! Go to them. You are of their ilk. You and I have nothing in common except the fact that we are both standing on this same ground on this cursed night. (*Kariotis exits. Stella runs, confused, into the audience and there crosses paths with Cyril, disguised as an old beggar*)

Scene 15

CYRIL: Where are you off to, my child? Shouldn't you be in the safety of your home? (*Stella cannot keep from crying*) Don't cry for your teacher. I was hiding in the bushes. I saw the sad fate that befell her.

STELLA: We need to get help. They'll kill her!

CYRIL: Oh, my child, her heart has already stopped beating. There were so many of them and their anger was so great.

STELLA: Why such hatred? Hypatia is harmless. She's dedicated her life to science and teaching.

CYRIL: And what good did so much knowledge and science do her? She suffered a fate more shameful than that of adulterers and sorcerers. And she was betrayed by one of her own students. Do not take her to be a role model, my child. She practiced the sin of idolatry. It was the will of God that joined

these humble people in this act of popular justice. These people of faith have no idea what is taught at the Academy or what books lay in its shelves. They lead simple lives of hard work far removed from the ambition of the wise, whose studies never profited them. Hypatia for them is a heretic, a sinner not worthy of forgiveness, one who rejected our church's flock. It was her pride that provoked their wrath. Everything is all right, my child. God knows what he does. The good Christian does not need the magic of the stars, or philosophies that cast doubt on everything. And so what if this woman born of the wrong sex dies? And so what if the shelves of all of the libraries burn? All we need is the word of Our Lord in the Bible, a book worth more than all of the other books put together.

STELLA: What kind of beggar are you? Under the guise of poverty, lies a vile apostle of ignorance. Your God cannot be the father of Christ. A God of love and compassion does not incite his children to murder.

CYRIL: (*taunting*) You naughty girl, you've seen through my disguise! I thought my beggar's costume would let me mix with the masses. You see, I know a thing or two about theater. I am Bishop Cyril, patriarch of this city. My uncle Theophilus made your daddy bishop. It was a pleasure to meet you. Stop by the cathedral someday and open your heart to the true path! (*Exit Cyril. Stella is petrified; she opens her mouth as if to respond, but holds back*)

Scene 16

Orestes, with his head bandaged, and Demetria anxiously awaiting the arrival of Pulcheria, the empress-regent. In the background, an imperial chair.

DEMETRIA: Will she never get here? She called us urgently and then she's not here to welcome us.

ORESTES: Pulcheria is engaged in a war of nerves. It's her show of authority. She just wants me to feel the full brunt of her power.

DEMETRIA: A very tenuous power. Pulcheria is empress only as long as her brother's voice doesn't change. As soon as her kid brother has hair on his chest she'll go back to the nunnery once and for all.

ORESTES: Maybe not. They say little Theodosius is as weak as his father. Even when he reaches manhood, his sister will continue to direct the destinies of Byzantium. (*challenging Demetria*) Women like to control men's shadows, and men for their part don't even realize they are being manipulated. Grown men never stop sucking on the nipple of women who are but stand-ins for their mothers.

DEMETRIA: The reverse is even truer. Men feel they must always control women.

ORESTES: You're so stubborn! You are so theatrical. Hypatia would still be alive if you'd only followed her advice, and I would have been spared the embarrassment of being assaulted by a bunch of fanatics. Alexandria will slip between my fingers, you'll see. Pulcheria was only waiting for an excuse. And your spectacle yesterday gave her the excuse she was waiting for.

DEMETRIA: My spectacle, not, *ours!* Don't forget: The play was yours. And if what you say is true, if she gives you your walking papers, so what? A city that spits at the theater and incites the murder of noble spirits does not deserve your energy. If you persist, you'll end up like Hypatia, with your bones roasted in the public square.

ORESTES: You're right, Demetria. After all this, I just feel like going as far away as possible with you.

DEMETRIA: You see, and then you say I order you about, Orestes. I only read what's in your soul.

Scene 17

Enter Pulcheria, in imperial garb, dressed as a widow.

PULCHERIA: You were forced to wait a little because the morning novena was ending. I called you for two reasons. I'll start with the least important one. *(to Demetria)* Demetria knows I despise her predilection for the stage. I am a Christian and the theater was born with the false gods of Greece. It is a vice that must be excised from our customs. I was very displeased to learn she proceeded with that immoral show; it is unbecoming of a governor's wife ...

DEMETRIA: *(forcefully)* ... It barely started and right away that riffraff invaded the stage!

PULCHERIA: Do not interrupt me! It's a good thing they did. *(does the sign of the cross)* God asserts His will in this world through the poor of spirit.

DEMETRIA: Does Your Excellency then prohibit me from exercising my profession?

PULCHERIA: You won't need to, as you'll see... I now come to the second reason I've called you. Orestes, your conduct was irresponsible. You gave in to the vanity of this woman who pranced half-naked on the biggest stage in town. This then led you to arrest a good Christian, and to whip him to death in a dungeon.

ORESTES: But Oh great Pulcheria! This man struck me on the head and belonged to a sect of dangerous troublemakers. The same ones that took the life of the great Hypatia.

PULCHERIA: *(bored)* We're not talking about her case but yours, Orestes. You lost whatever authority you had over the people of Alexandria. I am obliged to remove you from office. But in honor of your past good service, I

intend to transfer you to the island of Cyprus to administer our copper holdings there.

ORESTES: (*bitter*) So then I'll be a foreman on a forgotten island. Well, my empress. I willingly accept your generosity. Perhaps actors, like Demetria, are treated better there. But I have one last request.

PULCHERIA: Go on!

ORESTES: I pray you do not permit this monstrous crime, which has forever tarnished the history of our city, go unpunished. What did Hypatia do to deserve the dreadful way in which she died?

PULCHERIA: I feel no sympathy for the pagan, but that does not prevent me from pitying her in this time of mourning. So, I sought the advice of a trusted advisor to guide my decision. He suggested we forget the blood spilled, and that we avoid the senseless spilling of even more blood. This woman was a lost soul. For sure God will lead her, in death, to the true light. Let not vengeance eat away at our hearts.

ORESTES: I ask for justice not revenge!

PULCHERIA: The greatest justice is that bestowed by God.

DEMETRIA: (*sarcastic*) I'd be curious, Your Excellency, to meet such a wise advisor.

PULCHERIA: (*Enter Cyril, with seraphic smile*) Here he is! You can kiss his hand and obtain his blessing before sailing for Cyprus. (*Cyril extends his hand*)

ORESTES: (*Sarcastic humility*) Oh no, my empress! We've been fighting the fire at the library. Our lips are chapped from the heat and smoke. They could taint the holy hands of Bishop Cyril.

Scene 18

Stella and Ebonius stand by a closed door. Behind the door is a fire, indicated by flashing lights and smoke.

STELLA: Nazarius, open the door! We know you're in there.

EBONIUS: Are you crazy? Open the door! Do you want to burn to death?

STELLA: He doesn't answer. Did he lose consciousness?

EBONIUS: (*pushes at the door without success*) This nut locked himself inside. (*finally succeeds in forcing the door open*)

STELLA: I can't see anything in the smoke! (*finding him*) Look, there he is on the ground!

EBONIUS: I'll get him.

STELLA: Be careful, Ebonius, the ceiling is about to fall. (*Ebonius disappears into the room while Stella stays behind and watches him. Ebonius then exits carrying the unconscious Nazarius. He lays him on the ground and both try to revive him. Stella wets his lips with a flask. Nazarius comes to*)

EBONIUS: Let's get out of here. This floor is about to give. (*They carry him downstage*)

NAZARIUS: (*very shaken*) Why did you wake me? I wanted to die in the company of my books.

EBONIUS: The third attack on the library this year. But this is the most serious of all.

STELLA: It's hard to believe anyone could do this. Libraries are forests of knowledge, but when we burn them they don't grow back.

EBONIUS: *(to Nazarius)* Why do you want to die? Don't you think there's been enough death already? Hypatia was not enough, now they want to kill the dead masters who live only in books. We can't let them win. We won't let this Academy close while we're still alive, and as long as there is a single manuscript left, we'll fight to keep it open.

NAZARIUS: These barbarians threw torches into the reading rooms.

STELLA: I came just in time to watch places I only dreamed of burn. Alexandria, I arrived too late.

NAZARIUS: And I've betrayed Hypatia. I don't deserve your friendship. I should have been left inside, black and charred.

EBONIUS: Oh! Then at least we'd have one more black student, though I rather like being the only one.

STELLA: Listen, Nazarius! You said what you did under torture. They were set on killing Hypatia no matter what. They went through that with you just to scare us all.

EBONIUS: It's urgent we save her work. They've burned the general reading section. But everything Hypatia has left us is still safe in her office.

NAZARIUS: *(With renewed spirit)* Thanks for giving me strength, friends. I feel like the phoenix rising from the ashes. Do you know what I'm going to do? Put out this fire so that it does not spread to the rest of the museum.

EBONIUS: You do well! We'll join you after we make sure her writings are safe.

(Stella and Ebonius exit and run into Kariotis carrying scrolls in a wheelbarrow. Stella and Ebonius surround him.)

Scene 19

STELLA: What are you doing here?

EBONIUS: Where do you think you're taking this?

KARIOTIS: To its final resting place: the bonfire.

STELLA: How could you ever have been Hypatia's student?

KARIOTIS: These writings are the enemies of my faith.

EBONIUS: You're not going to kill her a second time. These works are all we have left of her for future generations.

KARIOTIS: Her legacy will be her violent death. People love a bloody crime.

STELLA: Every one in your sect is jealous of Hypatia, even in her death. Your beloved Cyril couldn't stand the fact that she would get bigger turnouts at the forum than he would at his sermons from the pulpit. And you're that murderer's lackey who invokes God's name every chance you get.

KARIOTIS: Bitch! You just arrived yesterday and you've already cast your lot with this slave.

STELLA: You're the slave, the slave of the devil you're possessed by.

KARIOTIS: (obscene gestures) You're possessed, bitch, by your black lover for whose flesh you pine.

EBONIUS: Don't insult Stella in front of me (*Ebonius throws him to the ground and they fight. At one point, Kariotis pulls out a short dagger and takes Stella hostage, placing the blade on her neck*)

KARIOTIS (*to Ebonius*) If you touch those scrolls, she is a dead woman. (*Two hooded men appear and take the cart with the scrolls off stage. Kariotis releases Stella*)

Scene 20

Synesius, facing the audience, a living ghost.

SYNESIUS: (*looking at Stella, who is behind him, perfectly still*) No, daughter, I have not come to get you. The time has not yet come for you to travel to this side. But my grief is great. The Alexandria you found has little to do with the city I loved so much. I, the dead Synesius of Cyrene, am here to tell you that the enemies of Hypatia got what they wanted. Only two or three of her books are now known, because all the rest were lost in the flames. Even more appalling is the glory that's been bestowed on Cyril, who everyone knows was the brains behind the crime. But that did nothing to tarnish his image. The old fox was born the same year I was and lived until the ripe old age of seventy-four... Eventually, they canonized him. That's right! They made him a saint. Saint Cyril of Alexandria, celebrated by Catholics on February 9 and by the Orthodox on June 9. And in 1882, Pope Leo XIII proclaimed him a doctor of the Church. I am a theater ghost but I am not a liar. Consult an encyclopedia if you don't believe me. Goodbye my friends. And listen to some advice from a bald man who is long dead, who was made bishop, but who never remained silent in the face of lies: Never pray to Saint Cyril! (*he laughs and exits*)

Scene 21

All of the actors are on stage collecting the papers strewn about. They take turns reciting the poem, whose title is read aloud by the actress who played Stella: Hypatia's Last Lesson – a poem in seven stanzas. The reading is shared by the entire cast in a sort of staged reading. Hypatia's monologs should be read by the same actress who played her.

LUCINDA: I wrote a poem before writing this script – another fictitious version of her last day. At the time I still knew very little about Hypatia, and I still know so little. And we have so little left of hers to know her by. We must, by necessity, invent her truth.

A storm was rising in your soul
 Like the cloud of dark dust brewing in the distance
 The hot desert wind blew in your direction
 And though it knew not the intricacies of geometry
 it soon invaded the portal to your Academy
 Always fearless, you rushed to get a closer look
 at Zeus' wrath. You called out to your disciples
 And though your mind was more akin to Plato's
 You gave your final lesson in the style of Aristotle
 peripatetic as you wandered through windswept cloisters
 "It is the lot of humans not to know what fate awaits them!"
 You might have said looking at the attentive and grateful face
[of a student

Who reminded you of Synesius
 Like a Cassandra oblivious of her sudden auguries

Your lesson barely finished, a messenger approached
 With news to break your heart:
 Your father lay fallen on the stairs
 Of the library where he'd labored
 He cried for his daughter the philosopher,
 In delirious and babbling theorems,

Your father wished to see you before giving up the ghost,
Restless horses awaited at the doors of your temple of knowledge
with a chariot to take you to him
You did not think twice. You ran outside in distress
To give a hand of wisdom to your dying father
But it was a trap they'd set
to get you into their monstrous clutches
It was not your father's life that was at risk
But yours Hypatia
The angry mob attacked your chariot
like dreadful living puppets
And dragged you out into the night
They set your frightened horses free
And tied you to a loosened wheel
They brought sacks filled with stones
and oyster shells with which
to pelt you. And they called themselves, imagine,
disciples of Christ.
The demented mob snarled words they were taught to say
and showered you with those deadly objects
They called you pagan witch and
worshiper of Hermes, a false God.
They said you invoked the souls of the dead
Greek masters when you taught
That your classes were dens of debauchery
that you swung naked like a concubine
in the puerile arms of your students
that you preached our souls live many lives
and that you'd lived many as a man
That you were a disciple of vicious Sapho
and that you must be a hermaphrodite
because no woman could ever be so wise
That you mocked the angry God of Moses
and claimed he was a boogeyman to scare small children

Suddenly, you heard no more, your face an open wound
 a female Christ without her crown of thorns

Before unconsciousness set in and wiped your senses blank
 You still had time to wonder:
 Why must I give up my body
 with so much suffering and humiliation?
 Is fortune so flighty in her ways
 that my death need be so weighty?
 No, Plato you were wrong!
 If you had experienced yourself an agony as deep as this,
 you would come to know that evil is not
 merely the absence of good
 Evil is its own being,
 it has a face, empty and dark,
 Evil exists, possesses an archetype,
 Evil was written into the blueprint of Creation,
 vomited by the minor god who created this universe
 evil, evil...

They continued to kill you even in death
 possessed by obscure demons
 they tore to pieces your naked body, bloodthirsty Agave's,
 and they paraded your tattered corpse like a hunting trophy
 Your executioners claimed for Christ their ugly deed
 But who could square such beastly act
 with the Nazarene's painful legend of love?

Your last lesson Hypatia
 Like Socrates', was your own death,
 No hemlock this time, but simply blood,
 the blood of your torn flesh,
 soaked up by the sands,
 the dust of Alexandria

From this infected globe your spirit was expelled
 You were too much for it, more light than it could stand
 The Heavens cried for you infuriated tears
 and assailed the streets with a violent storm.
 The rain soon washed away the traces of this crime
 From the streets where your bleeding body had been dragged
 Your remains sated the hunger of stray dogs

Your students, latter day Antigones,
 trod the wet city in fear
 But they found nothing to place in your grave
 Not even a bone stolen from the teeth of hounds
 Among the mourners there was one staring up into the night, hands
 [raised to heaven
 giving comfort to the helplessness of all:
 – Look, my friends, companions in this pain,
 Hypatia is now a living star
 A divine spark returning to her heavenly abode
 far beyond this world of death and illusion
 Nothing of her substance did she leave in the vile prison of this world
 Only the memories of her in us who loved her purely.

Epilogue

Lucinda again typing on her laptop, Hypatia observes near her.

LUCINDA: That's how the play ends: With a frightening poem. But I still want to know more about who you were, Hypatia. I recreated the last day you spent on earth twice with you, but what I really wanted was to hear a lesson of yours, to watch your thoughts in action. I never did get to know you...

HYPATIA: Don't worry, Lucinda. What we've created together is enough for me to be remembered by a few. Anyone who watches this play can imagine their own Hypatia. From now on there will be a ghost of mine out there who will make the loneliness of everyone in this room a little less heavier.

THE END

Hypatia's last lesson had its very first public performance in this English translation, by Alex Ladd, as a staged reading presented in Ithaca (New York State, USA) at Cornell University (Lecture Hall; Robert Purcell Community Center), on the 11th of August, 2010, during the First Joint Conference of the International Association for Jungian Studies (IAJS) with The Jungian Society for Scholarly Studies (JSSS): «On the Edge: Psyche in Ethics, the Arts and Nature - A Conference of Research in Jung and Analytical Psychology» (1—14/8/2010). Armando Nascimento Rosa took part in the session with an author's opening lecture and a post reading debate with the audience, thanks to the support from CIAC (Investigation Center of Arts and Communication) / FCT (Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology).

Director – Susan Rowland

Cast

Lucinda – A young student, the author: **Gabrielle Milanich**

Hypatia of Alexandria – A philosopher from Alexandria: **Alex Fidyk**

Synesius of Cyrene - Bishop of Pentapolis, Hypatia's former student: **Alberto Lima**

Stella - Synesius and Lavinia's daughter (played by Lucinda): **Gabrielle Milanich**

Lavinia – Synesius' wife: **Evangeline Rand**

Orestes - Governor of Alexandria: **Joel Kroeker**

Demetria – An actress, Orestes' wife: **Rebecca Pottenger**

Nazarius - Hypatia's student, Jewish: **Jeff Levering**

Kariotis – Hypatia's student, a spy working for Cyril: **Robert Mitchell**

Ebonius– Hypatia's student, Nubian: **Dennis Pottenger**

Cyril - Patriarch of Alexandria: **Darrell Dobson**

The hooded ones - followers of Cyril (all actors available for scenes in question)

Helen of Tyre - A character played by Demetria: **Rebecca Pottenger**

Simon Magus – A character in Demetria's play: **Darrell Dobson**

Pulcheria - Empress of the Eastern Empire: **Evangeline Rand**

Two Guards - (extras mixed with the audience)