

'Cross-Temporal Icons: Amazonian Globality'

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Abstract

Recent studies of the female warrior figure, have shown that it is a character that needs rethinking and contributes to the subversion of the so called "female identity". The figure of these warriors or Amazons, comes up as a challenging one. On the one hand, seen as monsters and unnatural, and on the other, praised as erotic heroines, Amazons have for centuries inspired fascination and ambivalence both in western and eastern imaginaries. Represented across diverse cultural productions as an odd construction of power and gender, these figures have been typically used to test social conventions. Both belonging to and displaced from society. These cross-temporal artefacts, who question in-gender performativity, are seen in many cultural productions as a threat to social order. Amazons were figures through whom different social anxieties were portrayed but also challenged. They act as a trigger to call into question issues such as the crossing between sexual and social matters. I aim to argue for the "globality" of the figures of the Amazons, as they are a well-established literary icon in different cultures across the globe. Moreover, they have influenced diverse narratives and artistic productions. And when analysed, one might find that there are also representations which add to the counternarrative and resistance of gender roles throughout history.

Keywords: Amazons, gender, literature.

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When I started to prepare this presentation, I started thinking about an engaging and fresh manner of talking about the Amazons. Then in June, the movie “Wonder Woman” (2017) hit the cinemas. What is sexier and more interesting than a beautiful young woman in tight clothes fighting with a sword? I thought it had to be the start of my talk. Wonder woman is a 1940s creation by psychologist and myth enthusiast William Moulton Marston. Marston, drew on a mix of Greek mythology, blending stories from diverse sources and myths such as the ones of Pandora, Odysseus, and Atalanta and of course, the Amazons. The comic and its late movie, follow the story of Amazonian princess Diana, who is fated to help humanity to fight horror and terror with her over sexualized attire. After watching the movie, which I think is great, I could do nothing but wonder, what is it between war and female sexuality that attracts such enthusiasm of audiences of all over the world. This is nothing new. This a pattern repeated over centuries of female representation across the globe. Poets and writers have inspired characters in battling women who represent both the feminine and masculine and they have done so by inspiring themselves in mythological figures and ancient tales and created a character that represents androgyny. The figure of the warrior woman has been widely used throughout centuries in literature and popular culture, from Amazons to Valkyries and from Joan of Arc to China’s Fa Mulan.

When thinking about amazons, one wonders about different questions, what is an Amazon? are they a myth or were they a reality? What did they do to inspire thousands of years of cultural development? What is their role in world literature? What purposes do they fulfill? It is astonishing the richness and variety that these characters bring into narratives. And what elevates these warrior women to the category of global figures, is that it is persistent through time and space.

Folklore was a manner of passing on traditional and popular knowledge and traditions, and I take it as a primary form of literature. Most of these figures represented in literature are repeated at every stage of history with little variations. And it is no surprise, that figures of strong women are reproduced on and on in bellicose periods and are a constant leitmotif in different cultures. We have instances of this marvelous warring ladies tracing them back to Sumerian folklore, for example. We might be more familiar with ancient Catwoman “bastet” goddess of warfare, but also family and joy, and often represented as a vicious lioness. Warrior women with sexual natures are also found among the ancient Greeks. But where do we draw the line between myth and reality? Historians and archeologists have found plenty of evidence for different groups of nomad females living in central Europe, nowadays Ukraine, southern Russia and western Kazakhstan. Precisely these “tribes” might have influenced what we know now as the Amazon myth. In her work “Amazons” historian, Adrienne Mayor (2014) argues: “overwhelming evidence now shows that the Amazon traditions of the Greeks and other ancient societies derived in part from historical facts.” (Mayor, 2014, 11). Stereotypically, the amazons have been portrayed as man-like fighters. Amazons are first referenced with such name in written documents at about the 7th century BC and through time they have been depicted in literature and the arts in general. Their appearance has not changed much over the centuries either. They are represented as beautiful and they differ from normative women for their masculine performance.

Herodotus (484-c.425 BC) writes about them that they are a tribe of talented horse-riders skilled with bow and arrow. Amazons are quite civilized and they do have a

hierarchical order. The region where they come from is sufficiently distant to ancient Greece to symbolize a frightening, exotic and unknowable land populated by wild and threatening people, a geographical liminal space that separated the Greek civilization of those other barbarian tribes.

What is the significance of the Amazons in Greek mythology? The Greeks think about who they are, how to define themselves and their world. The Amazons limit this world. They help the Greeks to define who they are by opposition. The Amazons initially are a tool to situate and compare societies and to define, what Greek society stands for. They grant Greek men (and heroes in myths) to prove their masculinity through subjugation. Heroes can desire and take home and tame the amazons, but they will only take them home once their catch have become “women” and abandoned the identity that make their husbands masculinity be in danger. On the one hand, we have the barbarian Amazon and on the other hand, we have the domesticated virtuous lady. We see this in travel narratives but also in courtly love. In Schwarz words: “Desire governed by men and directed at women” (Schwarz, 2000, 34). The Amazons are not just not men, but also no women fully. They represent a gender paradox. Their strength and value do not fit their sex and society’s normativity. But most importantly is how authors deal with this paradox, and their manner of solving it is either killing the Amazon or taming her. And the only way of subduing her would clearly be marrying and making her fit into society’s assigned role for her sex. One must understand that Amazons might become wives, but also that wives could become Amazons which adds to the notion of interchangeability of labels and the fluidity of identity and possibilities of and for women. Thus, materializing patriarchy’s greatest fear, the replacement of male bodies and the performance of masculinity by those of women. They are a challenge to social order, power, and tradition. Amazons lead explorers to the edge of their world. That is why they are so popular in travelogues and travel narratives.

Marco Polo recounts encounters with female warring tribes in his travels. He mentions an island where only women inhabit it. The Spanish colonizers also write about amazons when they get to the Americas. In fact, Columbus and Francisco de Orellana mention them in their travelogues. We are not certain if following Marco Polo’s example and expecting to find the very same that the Venetian encountered, but they name the most important river of the South American continent after them. Walter Raleigh and John of Mandeville, both renown explorers mention encounters with these mythical creatures. What we are certain, is that Amazons tend to be referenced and seen mostly near water, a symbolic border space and a natural frontier and become the familiar ever-present stranger. Amazons represent the edge –both geographically and psychologically– and the perfect example of this is if one pays attention to the encounter with these figures. They live right at the threshold of society, or on the frontier of a territory. These characters are linked and present in stories of exploration and expressly one of the reasons why Romans kept playing with these figures and mixing them with their own folklore. These characters represent the value associated with land conquest as Schwartz states. Moreover, Amazons appear to be wild nomads inhabiting the unknown and unreachable, nevertheless, they represent a certain civility as their tribes and societies do have a hierarchical order. They play a marginal role geographically but not in literature.

From the middle ages onwards different artists have rediscovered the Amazons, from the Canterbury tales, Boccaccio's Decameron, and in numerous Renaissance paintings and plays. Performing various roles in literature for over a span of a thousand years. Generally, different types of Amazonian/ warrior figures can be easily spotted in different periods, but especially from medieval times onwards. Firstly, women in appropriately feminine roles who engage in inappropriate performance. And secondly, disguise plots in which the interchangeability of Amazons and men create a crisis of difference. And precisely this crisis is what makes the character of the Amazon such a unique and exploited one. Homoerotic tensions are to be found extensively in plays featuring amazons, for example Margaret Cavendish's *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity* (1656) or Charles Hopkins' *Friendship Improv'd* (1700). Plays containing these disguised women tend to demonstrate a heavily charged tone were inexplicably, men feel attracted to their male companions –not knowing that these companions are women who pose as men for a common cause–. As Rubik explains “The issue is solved, of course, because the boys turn out to be cross-dressed women after all, so that the excess of male emotion can be explained away as an instinctive attraction to the opposite sex.” (Rubik, 2014, 150).

This implies that both options disrupt the male homosocial process of connection and exchange. As Kathryn Schwarz states in her book “Tough Love”: “Amazonian narratives disrupt the idea of masculine hegemony by showing that women can intervene in its construction of performance, and this disruption raises further questions about the relationship of men to the abstract ideal of patriarchal control” (Schwarz, 2000, 35). By appropriating certain features of a masculine role Women destabilize male privilege. One should keep in mind that gender is the socially constructed role given by the community based on biological sex and that it has not been motionless, but modified by political and social discourses. The word "women" and its meaning have then evolved and have been constructed regarding different factors in different time spans. The term “amazon” is too, mostly a fluid term that changes some of its associations with time. Does the literary figure of the Amazon change with changing paradigms of nation and identity? Definitely. While Greeks see in Amazons foes limiting their frontiers, Romans see possible sexual partners. However, what is clear is that the category “Amazon” in world literature questions assumptions about gender, challenges some of the norms and values of patriarchy and masculine culture, and sometimes offers alternative values and opposition. Over time, the coinage “warrior women” loses some of its literal meaning and shifts to designate also women whose weapons are also verbal and strategic.

There are, as we have seen, multiple cultural references; that reflect the anxiety that these warrior figures represent (man-hater females, mean Goddesses...). But if there is any cultural text that has made an impact on the western civilization, that is the Bible. As In pre-Christian times, the legend of the Amazons had changed ever so slightly, it is under the influence of the Catholic church that the myth turns obscure and twisted this figures into baby-killers and man-haters. As Marta Vandrei explains in “Who will be a coward when a woman leads?": Boudica and the Victorian Female Hero: "The portrait of Boudica that emerges from history books and historical novels are muddled and variable used to demonstrate the unsuitability of women for positions of power without male guidance and, more importantly, the dangers of rejecting the civilizing and moralizing influence of Christianity. Boudica, for obvious reasons, could not exist comfortably in the realm of exemplarity, the natural home of such women as

Florence Nightingale and Joan of Arc, both of whom could demonstrate piety and obedience."(Vandrei, 2009, 3).

From medieval times, in obscure texts and documents, the Amazons figure twisted into something closer to evil than that of the help sent by the gods to aid humans in their battles. Renaissance amazons usually use their power to achieve non-virtuous and lustful ends. What one can be sure about the amazons is that they can both represent virgin and whore, virtuous and barbaric behavior. Throughout the European Renaissance, there was a rising reproduction of the image of the warrior woman or a Virago –the word "virago" could be translated as “masculine woman”–. At first, the term was used with positive connotations to describe women rulers who exercised a power that had been exclusively allowed to men and who enforced females in roles that were considered masculine, such as defending their lands against enemy attacks. Only in later years would the word "virago" come to be understood as "shrew". The female warrior is a figure consistent among European folklore and tradition.

Historical figures such as Gentile Malatesta, Bianca Maria Visconti, Caterina Sforza, Eleanora d’Aragon, Isabella and Beatrice d’Este, Catherine de’ Medici or Elizabeth I helped to idealize and inspire generations to come. Although restricted by their sex, these women ruled with iron wills and were treated as Amazons or Viragos and could exercise their political power. Their appropriation of the masculine roles was admired and applauded by many of their contemporaries. During the Renaissance, the figure of the ancient Virago/Amazon was seen with admiration and was represented by women who dressed in armor and who fought and commanded armies. Moreover, the image of the fighting woman gained importance and became popular in chivalric literature across the continent. Nevertheless, the figure of Christine de Pisan (1363-c.1434) prevails as a striking one in the creation of arguments in favor of women in war. In her *Book of the City of Ladies* and *The Treasure of the City of Ladies* (published 1405), Pisan envisions the idea of professional warrior women – specifically high born ones– as an active part of an army. She illustrates her point by giving historical examples of women leaders, such as the Queen of France, Blanche of Castile, and Jeanne d’Évreux, and included examples as the Amazons and also Queen Fredegund (545-547). In her second book *The Treasure of the City of Ladies*, Pisan argues the need for noble women to defend and protect their land from any attack if their husbands are gone:

...she [the lady of an estate] ought to have the heart of a man, that is, she ought to know how to use weapons and be familiar with everything that pertains to them, so that she may be ready to command her men if the need arises. She should know how to launch an attack or to defend against one if the situation calls for it. She should take care that her fortresses are well garrisoned (Pisan, 1985, 95)

It is probable that Italy, through the vast variety of states and kingdoms that it had, the country that has generated most acclaimed historical women warriors. Those females rose to power on many occasions due to the need to take on masculine roles to protect their family's honor and their territory. The female members of the ruling families needed to learn to exercise power in order to maintain their dominant status. Something as basic as schooling was considered in Renaissance Italy as an opening starting point to female independence.

The vast production of texts where amazons appear and play a role have been made, consumed and circulated by men. What happens then, when it is women who use and write about these figures? Sadly, the production existent for both variables, that is written by a woman and featuring Amazons, is very reduced. In my opinion, that hints to the fact that the employment of amazons in the arts is commonly a male fantasy of power control. Kathryn King, argues that by isolating women's literary traditions from that of men's, we have continued with the conception of separate spheres of activity and "excluded from consideration elements not readily assimilated by anxiety-of-authorship or subversion paradigms." (King, no page, 2003,). However, male writers were not the only ones to gain interest in the powerful images of battling women, many women writers praised these figures for their independence, wits and military talents, an example of this is the eulogy of Joan of Arc that Marie de Gournay made. Examples of chronicled warrior women such as Joan's served authors to mark the path that they thought a female leader should follow. It can be argued that by the 15th century, it is harder to find instances of females in a battle, as their role in the private sphere of the house was much more established than in pre-medieval times. However, we do find direct references to the Amazons, an example of this could be a poem addressed to Aemilia Lanyer's main patron, the Countess of Cumberland, exalts the virtue of said lady comparing her to many strong females of the Bible, specially making emphasis and drawing comparisons between their moral achievements:

Though famous women elder times have knowne,
Whose glorious actions did appeare so bright,
That powrefull men by them were over throwne,
And all their armies overcome in fight;
The Scythian women by their power alone,
Put king Darius unto shamefull flight:[...]
(Lanyer, 1465-1504)

Lanyer demonstrates that as a female, and oblivious to male anxieties over women at war, she is able to refer in her preface to strong women both of the past and present times who show themselves as militant leaders and do not hold back their female strength. For example she refers to Scythian women's, and here one must read Amazonian victory over Darius. The term Scythian is just another term used in antiquity to refer to those female nomad tribes that limited with Greek land.

However, the representation of Amazons is also complicated, especially from the Renaissance onwards, as Queens and important nobility ladies start to adopt iconography typically related to amazons. As Rubik states, "Though 'classic' Amazons are generally armed with bow and arrows and dress up in an armour during battle, they do not necessarily wear male clothes all the time, but are recognizable as women." (Rubik ,2014, 150). Queen Elizabeth I and Caterina Sforza are good examples of this. But one may wonder, how come these powerful women relate to figures of such a bad reputation? I have come up with two hypotheses. The first one is that in order for these figures to be allowed they have to have two main virtues. Primarily patriotism. They need to use their sword and wit for their country. This is easily seen in most of the examples of amazons that we have in pop culture also –we can talk back about wonder woman or to bring someone else into the conversation, the character of Katniss Everdeen in "The Hunger Games" or Brienne of Tarth in critical acclaimed "Game of Thrones"–, –and yes, I am thinking about wonder

woman—. And, remarkably, a sense of motherhood. A trait that is spotted in many Renaissance accounts of the Amazons. The representation of queens hold both qualities as they convey in an image both patriotism and the notion of the queen as the mother of the land. The character construction choices indicate the desire to embody a heroic image of womanhood. The rise in the portrayal of these figures might be understood as the portrayal of a certain anxiety towards social hierarchy that might have been seen in the period by the rise to power position of certain ladies. As Schwarz explains “amazons not only threaten to replace male bodies in the performance of masculinity, but demonstrate that homosocial privilege, as a claim about value based in power, may not belong only to men” (Schwarz, 2000, 40).

However, something that also comes up in the Renaissance precisely at the same time as these valuable women start to get represented as amazons, we see that in literature the terms “warrior women” and “Amazons” start to separate their meanings. The connotation for “amazon”, from then on, will tend to be negative or anchored in the past while the notion “warrior woman” will be more contemporary and positive in gender terms.

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