

The Inverted World of the Amazons: Aspects of a Persistent Myth in Early Modern Greek Literature*

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The myth of the Amazons has been one of the most potent and popular of all Greek myths from its inception to the present day. In the first part of this paper, a presentation of its basic elements is attempted. This presentation takes into account the transformations of both the myth and the means by which it is presented (from ancient Greek narratives and depictions to present day comics and graphic novels), as comprehensively as possible. The second part focuses on major Amazon appearances in early modern Greek literature and provides an analysis, much indebted to feminist criticism and Bakhtin, of the inverted world of the Amazons in the *Chapbook of Alexander* (late 17th century), which constitutes its central theme. Additionally, it briefly examines the duel of the last epic hero of Greek literature, Digenis Akritis with the Amazon Maximou, as presented in the 15th-century Escorial version of the text.

The myth of the Amazons has been described as the most potent of all Greek myths.¹ Several stories about an autonomous and ferocious race of women warriors, who founded a society where men were either subordinate or absent, were widely circulated already in Antiquity.² In early written sources, the Amazons make their appearance in Homer as *antianeirai* (not man-hating, but rather equivalent to men),³ but in

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¹ See e.g. the opening remarks in Lefkowitz, 1990:15 and Rothery, 1995:1–3. The very expression “the most potent of all Greek myths” is used to advertise Rothery, 1995 on its back-cover.

² Contemporary accounts retelling the story of the ancient Amazons range from illustrated popularised books (e.g. Valasca, 2005), general histories (e.g. Jones, 2005; Bristol, 2009) and encyclopedias (e.g. Salmonson, 1991) to more specialised studies (e.g. Tyrrell, 1984; DuBois, 1994; Stewart, 1995; Weinbaum, 1999; cf. Sobol, 1973); for Amazons in Greek art Bothmer, 1957 remains essential; best scholarly monograph produced so far is Blok, 1995.

³ *Iliad* 3.189 and 6.186; for the meanings of *antianeirai* see Blok, 1995:169–85.

other archaic/ancient narratives they are *androktonoi* (man-killers) or *androleteirai* (destroyers of men),⁴ attributes that leave little doubt about their ferocious character. The basic features of their myth are summarised by Pomeroy (1994:23–4):

The Amazons, a group of warrior women, were said to live in northern Anatolia, or even farther east in the barbarian world. One explanation of their name is that it is derived from *a* (without) *mazos* (breast). According to this fanciful etymology, they cut off their right breasts in order to draw their bows more easily. They resorted to men of neighboring tribes for sexual intercourse. Females were reared, but male children were sent away, or crippled to be used as servants. Many Bronze Age heroes are said to have fought against them, in all cases successfully.

Amazon appearances in ancient Greek literature left many blind spots regarding the details of their existence and many Greek authors attempted to fill in the gaps.⁵ This was not an easy task: as is often the case with Greek myths, various versions were available and the information authors had in hand was often contradictory. Take their location for example: based on different accounts, the Amazon homeland could be placed in Asia Minor (most prominently on Pontos, near the river Thermodon, where also their capital, Themiscyra), or Thrace and Scythia (up to South Russia), or even Libya and the whole of North Africa.⁶ Their relation to Greek heroes was not so straightforward either: for example, Hercules, in early visual material, fights with an Amazon Queen who is very frequently named Andromache.⁷ But later, he appears in Pseudo-Apollodorus' *Library* (a text traditionally ascribed to the 2nd century BC author Apollodorus of Alexandria, but nowadays dated in the 2nd century AD) trying to bring the girdle of the Amazon Queen Hippolyte in what was eventually canonised as the ninth of his twelve labours.⁸

From the 5th century BC, especially after the Persian Wars, in Attica, Hercules' Amazonomachy gradually gives its place to the Amazonomachy of the new hero of democratic Athens, Theseus, who abducts the princess Antiope, thus causing an Amazon invasion of Attica.⁹ The abduction (and rape) of the Amazon as well as the invasion of Attica signal a departure from earlier Amazon motifs and become extremely fashionable in Athens, as visual material clearly testifies.¹⁰ More importantly, this

⁴ *Androktonoi* (as a translation in Greek of Scythian *Oiorpata*) in Herodotus, *Histories* 4.110. *Androleteira* appears in a scholion on Pindar, *Nemean* 3.64 (Blok, 1995:150; cf. 178–9).

⁵ For a detailed account from 5th c. BC to Byzantine times see Blok, 1995:83–93.

⁶ See Blok, 1995:83–4; Tyrrell, 1984:55–63; for data and readings of recent archaeological findings see Wilde, 1999, Davis-Kimball and Behan, 2002 and Guliaev, 2003.

⁷ An index of relevant plates in Bothmer, 1957:234.

⁸ Detailed analysis of Hercules and the Amazons in Blok, 1995:349–430.

⁹ See e.g. Isocrates, *Panegyricus* 68–70 and *Panathenaicus* 193; cf. Plutarch, *Theseus* 26–28.

¹⁰ Analysis and quantitative data concerning vase painting in Blok, 1995:379–81; cf. Stewart, 1995:594. Monumental architecture (Parthenon, Apollo temple at Bassae) and painting (Stoa Poikile, Theseion) provide similar findings (though with disagreements; compare e.g. DuBois, 1994:64–6 and Blok, 1995:380, note 98).

Amazonomachy plays a central role in the formation and celebration of the new democratic identity in the Athenian *polis*.¹¹ As DuBois (1994:66–67) convincingly argues:

Theseus becomes Herakles' replacement in the thinking of democratic *polis*, as a hero who encounters the other — the Amazons — and by defeating them establishes boundaries at the edge of the world within which the *polis* will define itself. The builders of the Parthenon [...] used the analogy between Centaurs, Amazons, and barbarians, to represent the victory of the *polis* over the Persians, [and] the human combatants on the metopes preserve the sacred space, fixed in static opposition to the forces of animality, chaos and sexual violence that the Centaurs and Amazons exemplify.

Although this picture may be more nuanced and even rectified in some details,¹² the fact remains that, from then on, the Amazons become a familiar stranger; their world, conveniently located far enough not to be seen but close enough to pose a threat, constantly opens symbolically to the present: “new stories, like those [...] connected with the spread of their [the Amazons'] eponymous function among an increasing number of cities, were regularly assigned a place in mythical prehistory. Claims that Alexander the Great had actually met the Amazons are also indicative of the urge to relate the Amazons to the contemporary situation” (Blok, 1995:84). Indeed, whenever a new hero emerged, an encounter with the Amazons seemed imperative and this is the case for both the Hellenistic Alexander and the new epic hero of late medieval/early modern Greek literature, Digenis, as we will see below. In Alexander's case, a new trend appears: he does not fight with the Amazon Queen Thalestris; instead, the latter approaches him with the eugenic proposal to create an excellent heir to her kingdom from the best father available, but the attempt fails.¹³ The historicity of this and all similar Amazon stories was already questioned in Antiquity,¹⁴ but this did not change the appeal that the Amazon myth exercised on human imagination.

In terms of gender, the Amazons presented a puzzling paradox, since their manly valour could hardly suit their sex and furthermore their society strikingly contradicted the values of historical patriarchal societies. Yet throughout Antiquity learned authors, with more or less critical attitudes, repeatedly tried to solve this paradox. Perhaps even more importantly, the Amazons outlived the scholars of ancient Greece. Western European culture from Roman times onwards was constantly based on and inspired by the Greeks.¹⁵ Amazon stories, especially in the frame of Alexander's encounters with monstrous people, were extremely popular throughout the medieval and early

¹¹ This is the main argument of Tyrrell, 1984 and DuBois, 1994.

¹² See e.g. Stewart, 1995:574; cf. Blok, 1995:118–36.

¹³ Alexander's encounter with the Amazons appears in all surviving (historical and literary) sources. However, there is no sexual proposal in the *Alexander Romance*, unlike all the “vulgate” traditions (Diodorus, Curtius, Justin), but even there, no evidence of an offspring is provided (detailed analysis in Baynham, 2001).

¹⁴ See e.g. Baynham, 2001:118–19 and Blok, 1995:83–93.

¹⁵ For a bright analysis of the classical foundations of our world see Goldhill, 2005.

modern periods all over Europe,¹⁶ and when the New World was discovered, a new home to accommodate the Amazons was added to the ancient ones: the Americas, and in particular the regions around the river named after them.¹⁷ Rumours about the Amazons flooded the media of the time, prominent political figures like Queen Elizabeth I were repeatedly, yet in a complicated manner, paralleled with them,¹⁸ and the Amazon theme inspired artists throughout the (early) modern period up to the present.¹⁹ Of course, transformations of both the myth and the means by which it is presented must be considered inevitable.²⁰ And nowadays it is TV, the movie industry and comics/graphic novels where the Amazons appear more vigorously, including a great variety of heroines from the adventurer Lara Croft and Bill's avenging Bride in Tarantino's *Kill Bill* to the crime-fighting superheroine Wonder Woman and the chakra-throwing Xena.²¹ To show only some of the persistent elements of the Amazon myth in present day pop culture, Wonder Woman or Princess Diana,²² is significantly the daughter of the Amazon Queen Hippolyta and was born in Themiskyra, the capital of their Paradise Island.²³ Wonder Woman is a courtesy of DC comics, whose recent titles include *Amazons Attack* (2007) among many others,²⁴ and one of the most pleasantly surprising findings of my research for this paper was that in the DC *Action*

¹⁶ Comprehensive guides for the medieval Alexander include: Ross, 1963; Boitani et al., 1997; Cary, 2009. To my knowledge, there is no monograph on medieval/early modern Alexander and the Amazons, but frequent references may be found in books about monstrous races of the period (e.g. Williams, 1999; Friedman, 2000). Independent Amazon appearances in medieval narratives on defeated barbarians (e.g. Goths) pose the interesting question of the interrelation of gender and ethnicity (see Pohl, 2004:24–32 and Geary, 2006:26–42).

¹⁷ See Rothery, 1995:139–63 and Weinbaum, 1999:128–51.

¹⁸ The Amazonian/virago Queen was a paradox herself, but this was part of her idealisation and image manipulation (see Orgel, 1996:118 and note 15, where also bibliography to which add Raber, 2000 and Montrose, 2002; for her representations as an Amazon see Schleiner, 1978; cf. Hadfield, 2006:279–85 and Schwarz, 2000:49–78).

¹⁹ One famous example is Rubens's *Battle of the Amazons* (for this and other similar early modern works see Poeschel, 2001; for modern representations see the next two notes).

²⁰ In modern times, the word also described tall, athletic women who gradually became hypermuscular (for their representations from 1700 to present see Fierstein et al., 2000). Besides that, in contemporary criticism, the word denotes various categories of women (e.g. cross-dressers like Arkell-Smith [as in Wheelwright, 1989], lesbians/"butches" [as in Curb, 1996], even Eastern European women [as in Glajar and Radulescu, 2004]), but these usages/representations were out of the scope of this paper.

²¹ For these and other modern Amazons see Mainon and Ursini, 2006.

²² Diana is the Latin equivalent of Artemis. Amazons were associated with Artemis already in Antiquity (see Blok, 1995:45 and note 67). The association is complicated, but visual representations modelled after Artemis (as of the Ephesian Amazons; see Bothmer, 1957:216–23) reinforced the linkage (various relevant theories and data in Blok, 1995:37–63 and 407–30).

²³ According to Dionysios Scythobrachion (2nd century BC), as cited by Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History* 3.53.4, the Libyan Amazons lived on an island called *Hespera*. The tradition lives on in various sources and places (many explored by Weinbaum, 1999).

²⁴ One of the most impressive recent Amazon appearances in DC's titles is in the Eisner awarded *Y: The Last Man* (Vaughan and Guerra, 2003–8). Amazon appearances in comics/graphic novels deserve separate investigation.

Comics and *Superman* series, an Amazon Maxima has appeared: she was in desperate search for a suitable mate to father an heir to her glorious realm, the ideal candidate in her view was Superman, she made several advances on him, but was rejected by the Man of Steel.²⁵ Mind you, it is not only the invoked Alexander-Thalestris story to be noted here, but also the name of the Amazon which is surprisingly similar to that of the Amazon Maximou in *Digenis*.²⁶

Although some aspects of the Amazon myth remain surprisingly persistent through time and space, genealogies of influences are hard to establish. And if the Amazon myth is indeed one of the most potent Greek myths, part of its age-resistance is due to its appearance in the Alexander adventures. The immense popularity of the Greek hero in both East and West has led to countless narratives dealing with his life and deeds that make it practically impossible today to establish their genealogical links, let alone to critically edit them.²⁷ Even in the case of the early modern Greek tradition, which is relatively measurable since the text has been preserved in only 13 manuscripts (excluding the two manuscripts of the *Diegesis of Alexander and Semiramis*; ed. Moennig, 2004) and about 70 editions (counting c. 20 for the rhymed and over 50 for the prose version),²⁸ it is difficult to speak of anything else but groups of texts that resemble each other but still bear many differences, major or minor. My intention is not to examine these differences, but to focus on the Amazon appearance in the *Fyllada* or *Chapbook of Alexander* (first, latent, edition c. 1680; first surviving edition 1750), admittedly the most popular early modern Greek chapbook of all times.²⁹ In this version of Alexander's story,³⁰ there is no actual encounter with the Amazons. Their Queen does not appear in the text and has no aspirations of marrying or mating with him. Instead, Alexander is the one who reaches the Amazon land and sends an emissary to announce his arrival and to demand his proper welcoming and their subsequent submission. The Amazons send him a letter in response which reads as follows (my emphasis and translation):³¹

²⁵ Maxima was created by Roger Stern and George Perez (first appearance in *Action Comics* 645, September 1989). In *Action Comics* 652, April 1990, Superman rejects her offer to mate with him, stating that he has no desire to father despots. The offer was repeated and rejected again in *Superman: The Wedding Album* (December 1996); cf. *Superman: The Man of Tomorrow* 7 (Winter 1997).

²⁶ Though there is no conclusive evidence, *Digenis* was available in English since 1956 (Mavrogordato, 1956) and the creator of Maxima, the well-known Roger Stern, or Uncle Rog, is a famous book-eater who stirs all sorts of material from all kind of sources in his stories.

²⁷ See the insightful comments in Veloudis, 1989:θ'–λγ', esp. ιβ'–ιγ', where the practice of older "critical" editions, e.g. by Bergson, is proven wrong.

²⁸ Data as in Kechagioglou, 1999, 2:164–65; cf. 172–73 for bibliography. Standard edition of the rhymed version is Holton, 2002 and of the prose version Veloudis, 1989.

²⁹ See Veloudis, 1989:κδ'–κς'.

³⁰ Edited text based on the first surviving edition, but with readings from the 1776 Venetian edition and the Meteora manuscript too (see Veloudis, 1989:119–24).

³¹ Text from Veloudis, 1989:89 (I have modernised the spelling and accentuation).

Επιστολή Αμαζόνων προς τον Αλέξανδρον

Εκ τες Αμαζόνες τες φρικτές και ανδρειωμένες εις τα άρματα, οπού ο κόσμος όλος έχει γροικημένον το όνομά μας, εις τον βασιλέα Αλέξανδρον. Μηνούμεν όλες μας και παρακαλούμεν την βασιλείαν σου ότι να μην έλθεις εις τους τόπους μας. Διατί ο τόπος μας είναι πολλά κακός και θέλεις κακοπαθήσει και ελπίζομεν πως θέλεις γυρίσει άπρακτος. Διατί στεκόμεσθεν ανάμεσα δύο ποταμών και το νησί μας τόσο είναι μέγα, οπού έναν χρόνον δεν το γυρίζει τινάς. Και εις το νησί μας άνδρας δεν κατοικά, μα αντίπερα εις τον ποταμόν στέκουν όλοι και φυλάγουν τα ζώα μας. Και εις κάθε πέντε χρόνους έρχονται εις ημάς και όποια θέλει διά να γεννήσει παιδιά, παίρνει από έναν εις το σπίτι της και κάνουν αντάμα έως έναν χρόνον. Και ωσάν τελειώσει ο χρόνος, πάλιν πηγαίνουν διά να φυλάγουν τα ζώα. Και οπόταν έλθει πόλεμος εις εμάς, ευθύς απερνούμεν τον ποταμόν και αντάμα ερχόμεσθεν. Και τότες μας ακολουθούν και οι άνδρες μας διά να μας φυλάγουν τες τέντες μας και να μας υπηρετούν. Και είμεσθεν παρά φύσιν δυνατές εις τον πόλεμον και εις τα άρματα. Και κανένα έθνος δεν ευρίσκεται να μας νικήσει, διατί εβγάζομεν στρατεύμα διαλεκτόν παράνου από οκτακόσιες χιλιάδες. Λέγομεν ακόμη και τούτο, ότι όποια λαβωθεί εις τον πόλεμον λαμβάνει μεγάλην τιμήν από τες άλλες και όποια σκοτωθεί την υμνούμεν ωσάν θεόν και όποια ήθελε κάμει ανδραγαθίες μεγάλες εις τα ξένα τα φουστά έχει μεγάλες τιμές και δώρα άπειρα. Και εάν έκαμες βουλήν διά να μας πολεμήσεις και μας νικήσεις, καμίαν εντροπήν δεν θέλομεν έχει διατί είμεσθεν γυναίκες και παράξενον δεν θέλει είναι. Ειδέ και σε νικήσομεν, λογιάζομεν πως θέλεις λάβει μεγάλην κατηγορίαν και εντροπήν από όλον τον κόσμο, πως ενικήθης από γυναίκες. Και αυτό οπού σου γράφομεν θέλεις το στοχασθεί καλά με όλους τους συντρόφους σου διά να μην το μετανοήσεις. Όμως ημείς δεν φαινόμεσθεν τόσο ενάντιες. Και γράψε μας ό,τι θέλεις διά να σου στείλομεν, χωρίς να κάμεις τον κόπον εδώ. Και δος μας την απόκρισιν εις ετούτα που σου γράφομεν, διατί τα φουστά μας στέκονται ετοιμασμένα.

Letter from the Amazons to Alexander

From the Amazons, terrible and brave [lit. manly] in arms, whose name is renowned to the whole world, to King Alexander. We all request and ask of your highness not to come to our lands. For our land is very rough and will cause you trouble, and we hope that you will return from your quest empty-handed. For we are located between two rivers, and our island is so big that it takes over a year for someone to go round it. And on our island no man lives, but all men are located on the far bank of the river and guard our animals. And every five years they come to us, and any of us who wants to bear children takes one each to her house, and they spend up to a year together. And when the year ends, they go back to guard the animals. And whenever a war comes to us, we immediately cross the river and we all come together. And then our

men also follow us to guard the tents [in our military camps] and to serve us. And we are abnormally [*para fusin*] strong in war and in arms. And there is no nation that can defeat us, for we have an excellent army consisting of over eight hundred thousand [warriors]. We also tell [you] this, that whoever is injured in war receives great honour from the others, and whoever is killed is [then] praised like a god, and that whoever displays great bravery [lit. does manly deeds] against foreign armies has great honours and countless prizes. And if you have decided to fight with us and you defeat us, we shall have no shame, for we are women and it will not be strange. But if we defeat you, we believe that you will be greatly accused and shamed by everyone, for you will have been defeated by women. And consider well what we are writing to you, together with your companions, or you will regret it. However, we are not so averse [to accepting your requests]. So write us what you want us to send you, without you making the effort [of coming] here. And give us your response to what we have written you, for our armies are standing ready [for war].

Again, many aspects of the Amazon myth concerning, for example, their homeland (on an island, between two rivers) or the organisation of their society, remain persistent; but, as mentioned above, my intention is not to establish their genealogy,³² but rather to provide an overall reading of the Amazon world in this specific realisation, on its own merit. Of course, several theoretical tools could be applied here. For example, one could employ “homosexuality” in combination with heterosexuality to explore the tensions that exist within systems of socio-erotic connection as the one described in the text;³³ or, perhaps more expectedly, one could rely on feminist critiques of patriarchal discourse, in order to reveal the hegemony of the male/phallus in the ways in which the female subject is constructed within the text’s language.³⁴ For, the deep sexism of the passage is striking: the Amazons describe themselves as *andreiomenes*, that is, manly; their power is described as *para fysin*, that is, aberrational; their deeds of valour as *andragathies*, that is, manly deeds; the ones who die in battle, even though feminine (*opoia, alles*), are worshipped like a god (*theon*), not goddesses, and so on. As a major feminist theorist observes (Irigaray, 1985:85): “women’s social inferiority is reinforced and complicated by the fact that woman does not have access to language, except through recourse to ‘masculine’ systems of representation”. In this

³² For those with access to the TLG (<http://www.tlg.uci.edu/>) and interested, the Amazon letter (with differences) appears in the various recensions as follows: *Recensio* α 3.25.5–11; β 3.26.15–27; γ 3.26a(=29).19–41; ε 38.2–3; F 105; E 105; *Byzantina poetica* 5489–5549; *Rimada* [=R] 2468–2518.

³³ The suggested approach requires a separate analysis; for homosexuality, desire and literature see the pioneering work of Sedgwick (1993) and the sophisticated book of Schwarz (2000).

³⁴ Despite their differences, most major feminist thinkers from Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray (see conveniently Moi, 2002:100–172) to the more radical Butler (see conveniently Salih and Butler, 2004) would agree on the idea that sexual difference is simultaneously constructed within and reflected upon all socio-symbolic orders of our male dominated culture, particularly language.

particular passage, Amazons could not but be described as *andreiomenes* (manly) and their deeds of valour as *andragathies* (manly deeds), not because of their aberrational masculinity, but simply because *gynaikomenes* (“womanly”) or *gynaikagathies* (“womanly” deeds of valour) do not exist in the Greek language and the system of culture and power it evokes. Or, as another major non-feminist theorist puts it: “language is not a neutral medium [...]; it is populated — overpopulated — with the intentions of others” (Bakhtin 1981:294).

For Bakhtin, language at any moment of its existence is “heteroglot”,³⁵ words are always half-foreign, and all utterances have a multivocal and dialogic character (Bakhtin, 1981:276):

The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue.

This is exactly what happens in the *Fyllada*. In this adaption, the utterance that has taken place at this particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, takes a clear stance in the social dialogue concerning this “aberration of nature” that is called an Amazon. In a neat and tidy fashion, the otherwise autonomous, ferocious, brave and proud women warriors are presented as being aware of and submitting to the deficiencies of their sex (I quote from my translation): “And if you have decided to fight with us and you defeat us, we shall have no shame, for we are women and it will not be strange. But if we defeat you, we believe that you will be greatly accused and shamed by everyone, for you will have been defeated by women”. And since they are women they act accordingly: their attitude towards Alexander is submissive (they actually plead with him not to come to their land and they readily consent to send him whatever he asks for). And as is often the case with many texts, this specific realisation of the Alexander-Amazon story is much more telling of the man who composed it and his socio-ideological environment than of his subject-matter itself. Early modern Greek literature, in general, is written by men, addressed to men, consumed and disseminated by men.³⁶ Though this is not always the case,³⁷ in this particular text it is

³⁵ See Bakhtin, 1981:291: “Thus at any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups of the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth”.

³⁶ This is a characteristic of Western and world literatures too; if taken seriously it would throw many of our classics into controversy, as Booth’s juxtaposition of Bakhtin and Rabelais with feminist criticism has shown (Booth, 1982). Though one of the first women authors in the European Middle Ages is Greek (princess Anna Comnena), there are no early modern Greek texts authored by women surviving (see however the possible attribution of a late 15th-early 16th century text to a woman author in Beijerman and Gemert, 2006:18–19; cf. Gemert and Beijerman, 2010:22–25).

³⁷ Take the oration of Queen Elizabeth I at Tilbury on 9 August 1588 for example: her wording “I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a King” has been

more than clear that we are dealing with a *male* redactor who finds it impossible to deal with the blurring that the Amazon as a category imposed on sexual differences. Women warriors in the text not only have to conform to their gender, but also their world is nothing but an inversion, an image-mirror of a would-be male society. In fact, I would rather read it as a male fantasy: men live isolated on an island, spending most of their time with their male companions, while women on the river bank spend their lives serving them. Every now and then, whenever a man feels like it, he takes any woman to his bedchamber and spends as much time as he wishes with her. When he gets bored with her, he sends her back to her serving duties, and picks up a new girl. Is this wishful thinking? In my view, it clearly is. But one should also not fail to notice the anxieties of a male living in a Christian society, tied by constraints of marriage and monogamy that the excerpt equally reveals: even in a fantasy, sexual intercourse is not connected with sexual pleasure. “Heteroeroticism is consummated in the production of children” (Schwarz, 2000:8).

The second major appearance of Amazons in early modern Greek literature³⁸ occurs in relation with Greek literature’s last epic hero, Digenis. *Digenis Akritis* has come down to us in six different manuscripts, which constitute six significantly different versions, making it thus impossible to reconstruct one single original text from those surviving.³⁹ However, it has long been established, though not with general consent, that the version closest to the original (that was composed in the 12th c.) is that preserved in the 15th-century Escorial manuscript.⁴⁰ Digenis as a hero bears many similarities with Alexander — and it has been convincingly argued that the prototype for the creation of Digenis has been Alexander of the popular tradition.⁴¹ Nonetheless, the Escorial version of *Digenis* provides an interesting account of the hero’s encounter with the

considered inappropriate (Orgel, 1996:118: “This is not the rhetoric of an Amazon; Amazons do not present themselves as weak and feeble women”) and the oration has been presented as a fabricated myth (Frye, 1992). However, more recent evidence advocates its authenticity (Green, 1997).

³⁸ A third major Amazon appearance is found in the still critically unedited translation of Boccaccio’s *Teseida* or *Θησείος και Γάμοι της Εμίλιας*, which was published in Venice in 1529. Since only parts of the text have so far been edited (see Follieri, 1959 and Olsen, 1990) and the complete Venetian edition was not available to me, I decided not to include *Teseida* in this analysis. To my knowledge, there are no other appearances of Amazons in early modern Greek texts, but an Amazon does appear in the *Charta* of Rigas (analysis in Liakos, 2001). There are also many women warriors in modern Greek folksongs, who deserve separate investigation, most probably in a monograph that could be modelled after Dugaw, 1989.

³⁹ See Jeffrey, 2004:xviii–xxvi.

⁴⁰ For an overview of the debate over the primacy of either Escorial or Grottaferrata, see Alexiou, 1993. Standard edition of Escorial is Alexiou, 1995; cf. Jeffrey, 2004 (edition with English translation of both Escorial and Grottaferrata).

⁴¹ See Veloudis, 1989:πθ’–ογ’; Moennig, 1993, by restricting his comparison to the byzantine versions of the Alexander Romance, proves that there is no concrete influence of the latter on *Digenis*. However, even he admits that “there do exist scenes including elements common to *Digenes Akrites* and the various recensions of the *Life* [of Alexander], and it can be regarded as *certain that the redactors of the former poem were aware of the widely diffused tradition of Pseudo-Callisthenes and his successors*” (Moennig, 1993:114–15; my emphasis), an admission generally downplayed in his paper.

Amazon Maximou,⁴² which differs significantly from the one we have seen in the *Chapbook*. Since I have provided a detailed analysis of this episode elsewhere,⁴³ here I will necessarily be brief. As I argue there, in this episode, which ends up in what we would call today a one-night-stand, we have a clear departure from romance morals and a return to the epic ethos. In *Digenis Escorial*, the Amazon Maximou appears again as *antianeira* in the Homeric sense: she is equivalent to men. She is treated equally, she is respected and feared and, unlike all other female characters of the epic, has a name.⁴⁴ However, in the end of this episode, she has to accommodate herself within the constraints of her female nature, as a result of her being defeated in battle by the main hero. The language used is again significant (I quote in my translation *Digenis* E 1596–98):⁴⁵ “By taking her virginity, I caused her the following three harms: the first is that I had her [which ambiguously means both that he defeated and that he deflowered her], the second that she was disgraced and the third and most important that she lost her *andreia* [that is, ambiguously again, her manly valour]”.

Before reaching this point in *Escorial*, we have the actual description of her duel with *Digenis* which is a real masterpiece — for the readers’ convenience it has been appended to this paper. Through a careful selection of vocabulary which is well-placed in specific structural parts of the episode, the duel becomes the metaphoric vehicle for a sex scene which, in literal terms, does not exist. I have highlighted the relevant verses and words in the Appendix, but it must be underlined that the scene is both masterly designed and sophisticatedly executed, and there is much more to it than just the simplistic and rather obvious at first sight symbolism of swords, sticks, spears and clubs that the hero thrusts forward and that are in parts used to administer blows to the flanks of the heroine’s charger (*Digenis* E 1544–7) and in others, to savagely crush the heroine’s saddle (*Digenis* E 1559–60). In my earlier analysis, I used the interpretative tools of Iser’s “implied reader” and Gombrich’s *Gestalttheorie*,⁴⁶ to show that in *Digenis* E there is a whole series of signs which force us to see a sex scene that is otherwise exhausted in just one crude statement (*Digenis* E 1576: “και το επεθύμα η Μαξιμού γοργόν της το εποίκα”, that is, “and I quickly did to Maximou what she

⁴² Maximou is not actually called an “Amazon” in the *Escorial* version, as she is in the *Grottaferrata* and other versions (for details see Ricks, 1996), but this does not mean that this impressive woman warrior who is accompanied in the *Escorial* version — and the *Escorial* version only (see Ricks, 1996:322) — by a “powerfully marked *epic* style” (Fenik, 1991:47; my emphasis) and bears similarities to the *antianeirai* of the Homeric tradition, as we will see below, could be classified as anything but an Amazon. In my view, the omission of the “Amazon” name here must be due to poor transmission of the text.

⁴³ See Tassos A. Kaplanis, “Ο Διγενής και η Μαξιμού στη διασκευή Ε: γλώσσα, παράδοση και ποιητική μιας ερωτικής συνέντευξης”, presented at the International Conference *Neograeca Medii Aevi*, VI (Ioannina, 29 September–2 October 2005), peer-reviewed and approved for publication since 2006, but the volume has not yet appeared.

⁴⁴ This fact passes unmentioned even in specialised studies, which otherwise scrutinise the role of women in the text (see e.g. Ekdawi et al., 1993 and Garland, 1990).

⁴⁵ For the translation provided in Jeffreys, *Digenis*, 357, which differs slightly from mine, see the Appendix.

⁴⁶ See mainly Iser, 1974 and Gombrich, 2003.

desired”). Other readings are of course possible⁴⁷ and today I would be inclined to view the episode also as a significant example of what Bakhtin (1981:76) considers parody, that is, an “intentional dialogised hybrid”, within which “languages and styles actively and mutually illuminate one another”. In this duel, the parody of the battle becomes the metonymy of sex, and in *Digenis E* in general, the epic ethos is illuminated by the marginal romance elements, the literary style emerges from a strong oral background, the predominant vernacular character is undermined by learned linguistic occurrences and up to the present day and most probably for many years to come, the first early modern Greek text will arguably be considered a late medieval artifact.⁴⁸

To conclude, Amazon appearances in early modern Greek literature are, as expected, related with great male heroes: Alexander and Digenis. Digenis’s encounter with the Amazon Maximou involves both her defeat in battle and a sexual intercourse, thus it can be placed in the same genealogical line with those of other great Greek heroes like Hercules and Theseus. Amazons’ appearance in the *Chapbook of Alexander* generally follows the trends of its antecedent, the Hellenistic Alexander: the hero does not fight any Amazon, but the text provides a detailed description of the Amazon world, which has been demonstrated to be an inversion, an image-mirror of a would-be male society. The male redactor of the text, unable to deal with the blurred category of women warriors, makes them conform to their gender and reinforces the social inferiority and linguistic exclusion of women that characterised not the Amazons’ but his — and, unfortunately, to a large extent still, ours — society and culture. Perhaps the best way to close this paper would be by subscribing to Wayne Booth’s bold statement (Booth, 1982:74): “In short, I finally accept what many feminist critics have been saying all along: our various canons have been established by men, reading books written mostly by men for men, with women as eavesdroppers, and now is the time for men to join women in working at the vast project of reeducating our imaginations”.

⁴⁷ A reading as the one provided by Schwarz (2000:137–74) for the swordfight between Britomart and Artegall in the *Faerie Queen* with the use of “homosexuality” would be equally revealing.

⁴⁸ From the subjects mentioned only the oral background has been adequately investigated (Fenik, 1991; cf. Sifakis, 1989; Sifakis, 1992). For the notion of early modern in Greek literature and the position of *Digenis* in it see Kaplanis, 2009.

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Appendix

Digenis and Maximou: An Erotic Encounter

(Διγενής E 1539–1599 (see Alexiou, 1995:142–44); Translation: Jeffreys, 2004:355–57)

Και ως είδεν τούτο η Μαξιμού, απάνω μου εκατέβη·
κοντάριν εμαλάκιζεν, την κονταρέαν με δώσει (1540)

και ταύτα το κοντάριν της έριψα παρά μίαν
 και σύντομα έριψα ραβδίν, την Μαξιμούν ελάουν:
 “Ελέω τα κάλλη σου, κυρά, βλέπε μη κινδυνεύσεις·
 αλλά ας δώσω, <Μαξιμού>, την φάραν σου ραβδέαν
 και εκ την ραβδέαν, Μαξιμού, νόησε με τίναν έχεις”.
 Και εγώ ραβδέα έδωσα την φάραν στας κουτάλας
 και ανάσκελα εξήπλωσεν η θαυμαστή η φάρα.

Και τότε πάλι η Μαξιμού ούτως με παρεκάλει:
 “Κύρκα, φοβήσου τον Θεόν και απέ συμπάθησέ μου
 και ας φέρουν πάλιν άλογον, διά να κάτσω απάνω
 και να νοήσεις, άγουρε, και την εμήν ανδρείαν”. (1550)

Και εγώ αυτήν παραχωρώ ίνα καβαλικεύσει
 και αν ένι η γεύσις έμνοστος, πάλι να δευτερώσει.
 Τον Λίανδρον εφώνιαξεν και φέρνει της ιπάριν,
 πηδά κι εκαβαλικευσε και παίρνει και κοντάριν
 και από μακρέα μ’ εφώναζε: “Εδά σε βλέπω, Ακρίτη!”.

Και το κοντάρι εμάκρυνε, την κονταρίαν με δώσει.
 Σπαθέαν της φάρας έδωκα απάνω εις το κεφάλιν·
 τα δύο μέρη εσχίσθησαν κι έπεσαν παρά μίαν
 ήτον και <η> σέλα πάντερπνος, όλη κατεζουλίστην (1560)

και απέμεινεν η Μαξιμού πεζή, ελεεινή εις τον κάμπον.

Το υπόδημά μου εφίλησεν και ούτως με παρεκάλει:

“Κύρκα, φοβήσου τον Θεόν, πάλιν συμπάθησέ με
 εις την μωρίαν τούτην,
 ότι παρά σαλών και άτακτων ανθρώπων εδιδάχθην
 και εσύ μόνος με κέρδισε και άλλος μη με κερδίσει”.

Και <τότε> εγώ την Μαξιμού ούτως απιλογήθην:

“Μα τον Θεόν, η Μαξιμού, ουκ έν’ το ενθύμημά σου·
 η κόρη τήν εγώ φιλώ των ευγενών υπάρχει·
 έχει γαρ πλούτος άπειρον και συγγενούς ενδόξους (1570)

και αδέλφια πολυορεκτικά και αδελφούς πλουσίους
 και πάντας εξηρνήσατο και μετά μέναν ήλθεν
 και ο Θεός ο πάντων δυνατός αυτός να μας χωρίσει.
 Ειδέ αν ορμείς να πορνευθείς, εγώ να σου το ποίσω”.
 Και επέξενσα τον μαύρον μου και λύω τ’ άρματά μου

και τό επεθύμα η Μαξιμού γοργόν της το εποίκα.
 Και απείτις το έκαμα εγώ της Μαξιμούς της κούρβας
 ευθύς εκαβαλίκευσα και επήγα εις το κοράσιον.
 Και τότε της βεργόλικος άκο το τι της λέγω:
 “Είδες, ομμάτια μου καλά, τι ανδραγαθίας εποίκα;” (1580)
 Και τότε το κοράσιον άκου το τι μου λέγει:
 “Είδα σε, ομμάτια μου καλά, το φως των οφθαλμών μου,
 το πώς εμονομάχησες όλους τους απελάτας
 και όταν εμονομάχησες την Μαξιμούν την κόρην·
 και εις το στενόν το πέραμαν, εις το βαθύν το ρυάκιν
 πολλά πολλά μου άργησες· πιστεύω να την είχες”.
 Και τότε την βεργόλικον ούτως την συντυχαίνω:
 “Ως έδωσα το ιπάριν της την ύστερην ραβδέαν,
 εξέπεσε η Μαξιμού από το ιπάριν κάτω·
 ήτον και <η> σέλα πάντερπνος, όλη κατεζουλίστην,
 και πιστευsé με, λυγερή, ότι σε λέγω αλήθειαν,
 ότι πολλά λυπήθηκα τα δύο της τα φαρία”. (1590)
 Και τότε το κοράσιον εγέλασε μεγάλως,
 στρεφνά γλυκέα μ’ επερίλαβε και εμέν εσυχοφιλεί·
 και τότε το κοράσιον ούτως το συντυχαίνω:
 “Μετά το φθείρειν Μαξιμούν τρία κακά έποικά την:
 πρώτον μεν ότι είχα την, δεύτερον ότι εντράπη,
 τρίτον και περισσότερον εχάσεν την ανδρείαν της
 και πομπεμένη απόφευγεν από τον Μιλιμίτσην”.

When Maximou saw this, she charged at me;
 she wielded her spear to give me a thrust (1540)
 but then I instantly knocked her spear away
 and promptly knocked away her stick; I said to Maximou:
 “I have compassion on your beauty, lady, be careful that you don’t run into danger;
 but let me give your charger, Maximou, a blow with my stick
 and from the blow, Maximou, understand with whom you are dealing”.
 I gave the charger a blow on its flanks with my stick
 and the marvellous charger collapsed with its legs in the air.
 Then in turn Maximou pleaded with me thus:
 “Sweetheart, fear God and from now on pardon me;
 let them bring another horse for me to sit on (1550)
 and you will understand, youngster, my bravery also”.
 I allowed her to remount
 and, if the experience were to her taste, she could make another attempt.
 She shouted out to Liandros and he brought her a horse;
 she sprang into the saddle and took a spear as well

and shouted to me from a distance: “Now I’m ready for you, Akritis the Frontiersman!”
She thrust her spear forward, to strike me with it.

I struck a blow with my sword on her charger’s head:
the two halves were split apart and fell in an instant.

The saddle was very pretty but it was completely crushed (1560)
and Maximou was left there on foot, pitiable on the battlefield.

She kissed my shoe and pleaded with me thus:

“Sweetheart, fear God and once again pardon me for this stupidity;

I have been instructed by mad and unruly men:

take me, you alone — no one else may”.

And then I replied thus to Maximou:

“By God, Maximou, what you want is impossible.

The girl whom I love comes from a high-born family;

she has boundless wealth and glorious kinsmen (1570)

and highly desirable sisters and rich brothers,

but she has renounced all these and came with me,

and it is God who has power over all things who will separate us.

But if you are starting to prostitute yourself, let me do the job for you”.

So I dismounted from my black steed and undid my armour

and quickly did to Maximou what she desired.

And after I had done this to Maximou, the slut,

I immediately mounted and went to the girl.

Listen to what I said then to the slender girl:

“Did you see, my lovely eyes, what brave deeds I did?” (1580)

Listen to what the girl then said to me:

“I saw you, my dear eyes, light of my eyes,

how you fought all the guerrillas on your own

and when you fought the girl Maximou on your own.

And by the narrow crossing, by the deep stream

you lingered a long, long time: I believe you had her”.

Then I responded thus to the slim girl:

“When I gave her horse the final blow with my stick,

Maximou fell down from her horse;

the saddle was very pretty but it was completely crushed; (1590)

and believe me, slender one, that I am telling you the truth,

that I was very upset about her two chargers”.

And then the girl laughed loudly,

she embraced me tightly and sweetly and covered me with kisses.

Then I responded thus to the girl:

“When I violated Maximou, I wronged her in three ways:

first, because I had her, second, because she was disgraced,

and third and worst of all, she lost her valour

and she was humiliated and fled from Milimitsis”.