

Arya, Katniss, and Merida: Empowering Girls through the Amazonian Archetype

Beverly J. Graf

Myths illustrate timeless human truths, yet their various iterations reflect the needs and fears of the specific age in which they occur. Recently, young female archers invoking the myth of the Amazon have come into vogue on large and small screens alike.¹ In contemporary incarnations, there are now so many female archers in media that screenwriters are able to parody this phenomenon with the imaginary blockbuster quadrilogy *The Amazon Games*, featured in Lake Bell's comedy *In a World* (2013).² As protagonists, three recent young female archers serve to exemplify the trend: Princess Merida of *Brave* (2012), Lady Arya Stark of *Game of Thrones* (2011–), and Katniss Everdeen of *The Hunger Games* (2012). They embody a new twist on the ancient Greek Amazonian archetype, providing insight into what the Amazon myth means today. A quick review of the salient characteristics of the Amazon myth in antiquity will set up a discussion of how that prototype is both perpetuated and altered in these contemporary depictions of onscreen Amazons. These three figures indicate a perceptible shift both in how the Amazonian archetype is depicted by filmmakers and studios and in how it is intended to be received by the audience. This shift may represent a new variation on the action hero, reflecting changes in contemporary society at large.

The Amazon in Classical Antiquity

While their historical existence is uncertain, from the seventh century BC through the Roman period Amazons figure abundantly in the world of art

and myth throughout classical antiquity.³ They appear in Greek sculpture, vase painting, and large-scale painting such as Mikon's famous murals in Athens, as described by Pausanias (1.17.2–4).⁴ While the written and visual sources reveal developments in the Amazonian topos over time, key characteristics persist.⁵ According to Herodotus' *Histories* (4.110–16), Amazons are warrior women who live apart from men on the edges of the known world, either around the Black Sea near Scythia or near Ethiopia.⁶ In the *Iliad*, Homer describes the Amazons as “man-like” (*antianerai*, 3.189), implying that they have both the appearance and martial strength of men.⁷ These androgynous women have adopted the heroic male warrior ethos: they are skilled in the arts of war like their divine patron Ares and are admired as worthy adversaries for male heroes.⁸ This sentiment is echoed by Pindar when he describes Bellerophon's defeat of the Amazons: “He assailed from the lonely bosom of the chill air that army of womankind, the archer host of Amazons” (*Olympian* 13.87–90).⁹ Later, that depiction in visual and written sources shifts yet again, from a massive female army to individual female warriors, such as Hippolyte, who are tamed by great heroes.¹⁰

The Amazons' otherness is increasingly emphasized through their costume. In early visual sources, Amazons wear the armor of Greek male warriors.¹¹ By the time of the Persian Wars, however, Amazons are depicted as hordes of alien invaders in Scythian and other foreign garb, presenting a fundamental threat to Greece's very survival.¹²

Rather than representing a feminine role model, Amazons embody everything a typical and proper Athenian woman should not be. In addition to their martial exploits, Amazons hunt with a bow in emulation of their other divine patron: Artemis, huntress and goddess of the wild, also known as *potnia therôn* (“mistress of wild beasts”; Diodorus Siculus, 2.46). They are not confined to the home (*oikos*) or bound by the norms constraining ordinary Greek women. They have sex without marriage and value their female offspring much more highly than their male children.¹³ Because they present a challenge both to the society at large and to the male hero, Amazons are both dangerous and desirable, and so they must be tamed, or killed. Accordingly, their defeat in battle and subsequent sexual taming is attributed to numerous heroes, including Herakles, Theseus, Achilles, and Bellerophon.

Although perhaps not linguistically accurate, the ancient popular etymology of the word “Amazon” as *a-mazon*, “without breast,” also indicates how these women defied norms.¹⁴ The breast is a focal point for defining identity for the typical female and her role in Greek society, and for the Amazon as her antithesis. Literary sources including Strabo (11.5.1–4) claimed that Amazons had their right breasts seared off at a young age so as to improve their mobility with weapons including the bow.¹⁵ Although the archaeological record does not show such mutilation in the visual depictions of Amazons,

metaphorical breastlessness may refer to the warrior women's androgynous nature and appearance, or literally to the flat chests of young girls who are not yet women. This breasted or non-breasted signifier will also figure into the following discussion of contemporary young onscreen female archers.

Reflections of the Ancient Amazonian Archetype

Multiple aspects of the Amazonian archetype shape three young archers in contemporary cinema and television: Princess Merida (Kelly Macdonald), Arya Stark (Maisie Williams), and Katniss Everdeen (Jennifer Lawrence). Although as characters their social classes and situations are different, all three girls actively contravene their society's norms by pursuing the masculine heroic ethos and independence over romance, marriage, needlework, appearance, and other traditional feminine pursuits. Furthermore, rather than identifying with their mothers as part of normative gender development, these three girls share the sort of bond with their fathers that is usually reserved for sons, triggering associated social transgressions.

All three characters learn the normative male skills of the hunter and warrior from their supportive fathers or paternal mentors. Before his early death, Katniss' father teaches her how to use the bow and arrow to take down prey with one shot through the eye, from a considerable distance. This skill, together with the fierce detached mind-set of the hunter and warrior, enables her to feed her family and to defend herself when she subsequently volunteers for the Hunger Games. As the first-born child of King Fergus (Billy Connolly) and Queen Elinor (Emma Thompson) in the tenth-century Scotland of *Brave*, Merida has no need to hunt for survival. However, as a small child she, too, is drawn to the bow and arrow, and to the independence of the masculine warrior's ethos. Despite his wife's disapproval, Merida's father gives her the weapon for her birthday and teaches her how to use it. Merida grows up to be a fiercely skilled mounted archer who shoots from her galloping horse, like the ancient Amazons. Such is also the case with Lady Arya Stark, the youngest daughter of Eddard Stark, Lord of Winterfell in George R. R. Martin's medieval fantasy novel *Game of Thrones* (1996). In the premiere of the HBO television series (Episode 1.1, "Winter Is Coming"), Arya is introduced as so skillful an archer that she easily bests her brother Bran while their father looks on. The literary source material privileges swordplay, and Arya does not learn archery until the third volume of the book series. In the HBO series, Arya receives a small foil as a gift from her brother Jon, and her father agrees to hire an expert trainer for her: "If you're going to own a sword, you better learn to use it" (Episode 1.3, "Lord Snow"). Despite the growing importance of her swordsmanship, the producers' choice to introduce her as an archer from the outset aligns her with the Amazonian archetype.

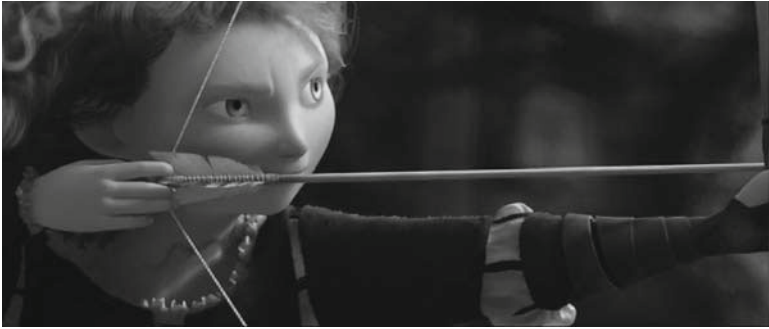


Figure 6.1 Merida (voiced by Kelly Macdonald) takes aim in *Brave* (2012). Walt Disney/Pixar.

All three young women also exhibit an Amazonian bond with the wild, manifested via their association with wild animals, the wilderness, and a corresponding fierceness in their own nature. Like all the Stark children, Arya acquires an orphaned direwolf early in Episode 1.1. While all direwolves are fiercely protective of their masters, Arya's direwolf, Nymeria, is particularly fierce, like Arya herself. In Episode 1.2 ("The Kingsroad"), Nymeria defends her mistress by attacking Prince Joffrey, and Arya is forced to send her into the woods to escape the royal family's death sentence. While it is uncertain how the HBO series will handle the remaining source material, by Martin's third volume, *A Storm of Swords* (2011), Nymeria becomes the queen of the wild wolves, and Arya a kind of *potnia therôn*.¹⁶

Katniss, with her ease in the wild and skill at hunting, also manifests the *potnia therôn* aspect of the Amazons' patron deity, Artemis. The first scene of the movie introduces her as a young woman completely at ease in the wild. When she arrives in the Capitol, one of her first choices is to filter out the urban environment by activating the virtual reality screen in her room that depicts scenes of the forest, where she is most at home. Katniss manifests an unusual bond with wild animals as well, communing with the deer she almost shoots and with mockingjays later in the film. It is not the forest or wild beasts that threaten Katniss but her fellow humans, especially the "civilized" residents of the Capitol.

As a princess in a family film and the first Disney-Pixar heroine, Merida does not shoot Bambi through the eye, but she is nonetheless wild. She battles her mother Elinor's daily indoctrination on the proper role of a princess, rejecting feminine norms of dress and deportment, including her mother's famous admonition: "Princesses do not chortle." Merida

does chortle, and she escapes the confines of the castle at every opportunity to ride alone in the woods, shooting arrows from horseback. She is an excellent rider who has an intuitive bond with her horse. In the internal psychological wilderness that Merida cannot yet control, the dark side of the Amazons' patron deity manifests. Merida uses magic to escape her mother's control by turning Queen Elinor into Artemis' totem animal: the bear.¹⁷ In fact, *Brave* was originally titled *The Bear and the Bow*.¹⁸

While these Amazonian heroines do not live apart from civilization, each lives on the wilder edges of her world. In the post-apocalyptic world of *The Hunger Games*, Katniss resides in District 12, far from the Capitol. Further, she habitually slips beneath the barbed-wire barriers of the district into the wild. Likewise, Arya is a child of the fierce north, where old gods reign, close to the Wall and the wildlings. And Princess Merida lives in a fantastic medieval version of the uncouth Scottish north, where witches, curses, and enchanted wild bears hold sway.

All three girls concern themselves with men's pursuits, rather than the pursuit of men. Merida issues this feisty declaration at the tournament for her hand in marriage: "I'll be shooting for my own hand." Teen Katniss does express some romantic inclinations, but romance is merely a subplot. Even when her mentors make it clear that romance is a survival strategy in the Hunger Games, Katniss rebels. In a striking gender reversal, it is Katniss' teammate Peeta (Josh Hutcherson) who bats his eyes for the camera and plays the romance angle for the crowd. While Arya may be too young for romantic interests of her own, she certainly rejects the romantic fantasies of her older sister Sansa (Sophie Turner) and her girlish flirtations with Prince Joffrey (Jack Gleeson).

While their reasons and socio-economic circumstances vary, all of these heroines reject societal preoccupations with traditional feminine appearance and arts. When Lord Stark (Sean Bean) tells her that "a little lady shouldn't play with swords," Arya retorts, "I wasn't playing. And I don't want to be a lady" (Episode 1.3, "Lord Snow"). She names her sword Needle in a pointed reference to her lack of talent in the needlework in which Sansa excels, and she spends most of her time in the series disguised as a scruffy boy. Merida too rejects feminine norms, complaining to her mother, "I'd rather die than be like you!" when Queen Elinor tries to corral her headstrong daughter into dressing and behaving like a princess. Merida's body and her unruly mane constantly pop out of their constraints. Her flame-red hair was consciously designed to have a life of its own.¹⁹ As writer/director Brenda Chapman said, "I wanted an athletic girl. I wanted a wildness about her, so that's where the hair came in, to underscore that free spirit."²⁰ Similarly, Katniss is uninterested in her looks or the red carpet. When the Capitol stylists try to squeeze Katniss into feminine norms

during the makeover session, the assistant stylists complain that they will need to scrub her again to remove the coal dust of District 12.

Adapting an Ancient Archetype to Contemporary Norms

These three contemporary onscreen archers reflect key characteristics of the Amazonian topos, but specific changes reflect how these Amazons are intended to be understood by the audience now, as opposed to in antiquity. Arya, Merida, and Katniss are depicted as admirable heroes, for both sexes and all social classes. This marks a change even from recent female warriors such as Xena, whom females can identify with, but males can ogle.²¹ This shift stems in part from the bow—a seemingly archaic tool—as weapon of choice.

Like the gun, the bow is a technological equalizer. Although it takes strength and skill to wield, the bow's lightness enables girls like Arya, Merida, and Katniss to compete with larger, stronger males. Whereas swords are heavy and expensive to forge, and require a considerable time to master, the bow is the weapon of the commoner. In a contemporary context of democratic uprisings, archery has reappeared prominently in popular cinematic and television culture as the symbolic equalizer of the one and the 99 percent. Consider Hawkeye in *The Avengers* (2012), the glowing arrows of the Epirus Bow in *Immortals* (2011), and the perennial popularity of Robin Hood. Archers on the small screen include the hero in the ongoing CW series *Arrow* (2012–) and Daryl Dixon of AMC's *The Walking Dead* (2010–). Despite marked differences of social class, Princess Merida, Lady Arya, and impoverished commoner Katniss can all learn to be equally proficient with the bow.

These contemporary depictions of the Amazon highlight the massive transformation that the myth has undergone in its intended reception by the mass audience. Instead of a perversion that men find desirable to conquer, these young female warriors are designed as admirable heroines in their own worlds, and as role models for girls and boys alike. Cinematic gender lines are beginning to blur for both the protagonists and the audience, as both sexes embrace characteristics traditionally labeled “masculine” or “feminine.” In *The Hunger Games*, Katniss' teammate and competitor Peeta is the sweet-tempered baker and decorator, while Katniss is the cool-headed archer-hunter. Even with its female lead, the movie is designed to appeal to both a male and a female demographic; the film's success at the box office suggests that this strategy is working. The opening-weekend box-office receipts of over \$152 million more than made back the film's approximately \$78 million budget, and receipts as of July 2014 totaled more than \$408 million.²² Studio executives know that Hollywood

doesn't spend or reap that much money from an exclusively female audience. That very success reflects a degree of blurring of traditional gender roles in society at large, as women continue to work outside of the home and men assume domestic responsibilities.²³

As Jennifer Stuller discusses in her book *Ink-Stained Amazons and Cinematic Warriors: Superwomen in Modern Mythology*, early females in action who were not overt antagonists tended to be objects: victims, muses, or trophies.²⁴ Arya, Merida, and Katniss are subjects who drive their respective stories, not mere love interests of male heroes or token members of a team formed around a central male hero. They are three-dimensional characters with flaws and strengths, specifically designed to subvert the passive princess or damsel-in-distress motif. As Pixar's first female protagonist, Merida is also the antithesis of the 1937 Snow White, the original passive Disney princess. As Brenda Chapman observed, "Fairy tales have gotten kind of a bad reputation, especially amongst women. So what I was trying to do was turn everything on its head . . . [M]ainly I wanted to give girls something to look at and not feel inadequate."²⁵ When Merida causes problems, there is no prince coming to the rescue; she has to fight her own way to solutions. And while all three girls can and do accept help, none is helpless. Not only do these characters wield the Amazon's weapons in war and the hunt, they also battle the typical feminine destiny society planned for them—and are applauded for it.

The relative lack of hyper-sexualization of these new Amazons is noteworthy. Both Katniss and Peeta have to parade themselves on the red carpet of the Capitol in full makeup and sexualized couture, as do the other male and female contestants.²⁶ But when they fight, both male and female combatants have functional, gender-neutral uniforms: no high heels and leather bikini for Katniss, compared to the customary skintight swimsuit of Wonder Woman in her many media incarnations, the micro-miniskirt of Hit-Girl in *Kick-Ass* (2010), or Xena's leather corset. Such costumes turn those Amazonian figures into sexual objects for the heterosexual male audience and complicate their function as examples of empowerment for the female demographic. Similarly, Disney-cute Merida is not overtly sexualized. Although partly a function of the "family film" genre, the designers consciously aimed for a round face and muscular body type, not the extremely thin yet buxom body of earlier Disney princesses such as Aurora or Cinderella.²⁷ Merida's usual attire, a plain and uncorseted version of her princess' gown, emphasizes freedom of movement by allowing her to ride and shoot without hindrance—not sexualization.

While HBO's *Game of Thrones* has become famous for sexually objectifying many of its characters—men and women both—the two overtly Amazonian characters, Arya and the lady-knight Brienne of Tarth, are not

objectified in the way that, for example, Sansa, Cersei, and Rose are. Even though Ygritte, the fur-clad wildling Penthesilea of the series, is sexual, the camera doesn't ogle her more than it does her lover, Jon Snow. Arya is disguised as a boy for most of the HBO series in order to improve her chance of eluding her father's enemies. She is never sexualized via her attire, or lack thereof. While arguably her youth plays a role in avoiding the typical Hollywood emphasis on female objectification, youth is not a sufficient explanation when one compares Arya to her sister Sansa. Pre-pubescent Sansa is depicted as the normative female child in the Stark household, and as such she is dressed in a much more sexualized fashion than Amazonian Arya. This new type of Amazon de-emphasizes Hollywood's typical hyper-sexualization.²⁸

New Amazons for a New World?

So, do these heroines represent the tip of the spear of real change in how girls and women are depicted on screen? Too many times, the massive success of a female-driven film would be heralded as the advent of a new trend, only to end up being dismissed as a one-off phenomenon. Hollywood would then go back to business as usual—where the boys are—as regards the characters, the desired audience demographic, and the filmmakers.²⁹ Females are still greatly underrepresented, on and behind the screen. And while Merida is Pixar's first female protagonist, it is notable that Brenda Chapman, her creator and the film's initial director, was replaced by a male director during the film's last 18 months of production.³⁰

Moreover, these new Amazonian heroines might have been granted such freedom and viewed so positively by both sexes in part because of their youth. Arya, Merida, and Katniss are all within the culturally understood transitional stage separating the girl from the woman. This transitional period triggers the conflict not only in their own psychosocial development between what is gender-normative and what they choose, but also in what society will allow. Tomboys are permitted by many societies for a while, but eventually the social pressures to conform to the feminine norm are enforced.

However, the appearance of these new Amazons in the action genre is cause for hope. Action is designed as a power fantasy, and it is clearly the most popular genre worldwide. Much of this is due to the changes in the film business itself and an ever-increasing emphasis on the foreign, as opposed to the domestic, market for profits.³¹ Studios concentrate more and more on tentpole movies year-round, not just in the summer, and these movies center on franchise properties such as superhero comics or young adult novels. According to Mark Gill, the president of Millennium Films,

“Eight years ago, there were roughly 150 wide-release movies. Last year there were 115.”³² Action is designed to inspire and adrenalize the audience as we identify with the hero. Sadly, there are still relatively few female action heroes. When they do appear, they still make news as novelties.

The question is whether these new Amazons and their stories will finally represent a breakout for female-driven projects or will be dismissed, like so many others before them, as one-offs and quarantined to the edges of the genre world like the Amazons of antiquity. The jury is still out, but there are surely reasons for optimism about this new generation of popular heroines who appeal to both sexes.

Notes

1. For these and further examples of archers on screen, see Boucher (2012) and Dodes (2012).
2. See Dodes (2013).
3. On the Amazons' historical existence, see the afterword to Pressfield (2002) 399–400.
4. For the text of Pausanias, *Descriptions of Greece*, see Jones (1918).
5. See Hardwick (1990) 14–36.
6. For the text of Herodotus, *The Histories*, see de Sélincourt (1972).
7. For the text of Homer's *Iliad*, see Allen (1931).
8. On Amazon queens such as Penthesilea as the daughters of Ares, see Diodorus Siculus 2.45–46; on Queen Hippolyte's war-belt of Ares, see Apollodorus K11. For the text of Diodorus Siculus and Apollodorus, see Trzaskoma (2004).
9. For the text of Pindar, *Olympians*, see Sandys (1961).
10. Hardwick (1990).
11. As in a vase painting in the British Museum depicting Achilles killing Penthesilea, queen of the Amazons, during the Trojan War: see Hardwick (1990) 24. For visual representations of Amazons more generally, see von Bothmer (1957).
12. A vase painting in the Ashmolean Museum depicts a battle between two Amazons and Theseus plus a companion; see Hardwick (1990) 25.
13. See duBois (1982) 25–48, 110–28.
14. For further hypotheses, see Weinbaum (1999) 88–89.
15. For the text of Strabo, *Geography*, see Jones (1917).
16. Martin (2011) 883–84.
17. See duBois (1982) 25–48 for the link between Artemis and her cult animal, the bear.
18. Smith (2012) 11.
19. Murphy (2012) 14.
20. Quoted in Murphy (2012) 14.
21. Knight (2010), esp. 290.
22. See the movie's page at boxofficemojo.com.

23. See Chaker (2014) for American Red Cross statistics on the sizeable uptick in the number of boys taking babysitting classes.
24. Stuller (2010).
25. Quoted in Murphy (2012) 14.
26. French (2014) 34.
27. Murphy (2012) 14.
28. French (2014) 32–37.
29. Note the key research on gender disparity in family films being conducted by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media; see Casserly (2012).
30. Murphy (2012) 14.
31. French (2014) 34–35.
32. French (2014) 34–35.

Classical Myth on Screen

Edited by
Monica S. Cyrino and Meredith E. Safran

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