Glorification, Degradation, and Restoration: Variations of Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons

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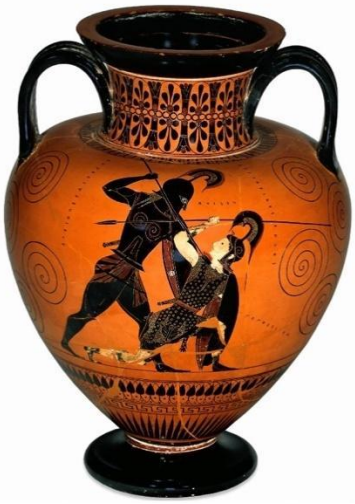
Introduction

The Amazons have been a topic of discussion among classicists, artists, archaeologists, historians, and literary scholars for centuries. To this day, books are still being published that question whether the tribe of warrior women truly existed in ancient times[1]. In antiquity, references to the Amazons could be commonly found both in literature and art, most famous being the Parthenon's western metopes, which portray an Amazonomachy. Due to their perceived warlike nature, many of the ancient accounts and images of the Amazons revolve around battles; the most recognizable battle with the Amazons is a tale from the Trojan War. During the Trojan War, Queen Penthesilea lent her strength and the strength of her Amazonian army to Troy. While in battle, Penthesilea faces the legendary warrior Achilles, and she falls. Upon removing her helmet, Achilles is said to have fallen in love with the Amazon queen and laments her death (Arctinus). Though Homer never writes about the battle between Penthesilea and Achilles, a selection of other authors and vase painters of the time decided to approach the tale (e.g. fig. 1). It becomes clear that the story of the queen of the Amazons was widely known in both Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome.



Exekias. Black Figure Amphora. c.530-525 B.C. Pottery. British Museum, London.

[1] See, Mona Behan, and Jeannine Davis-Kimball. *Warrior Women: An Archaeologist's Search for History's Hidden Heroines.* New York: Warner Books, 2003;
Adrienne Mayor. *The Amazons: Lives & Legends of Warrior Women Across the Ancient World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014;
Lyn Webster Wilde. *On the Trail of Women Warriors: The Amazons in Myth and History.* New York: Constable and Company, 2000.

However, the telling of the tale of Penthesilea and Achilles did not end in antiquity. Penthesilea's story has captivated over a dozen writers from ancient times to the contemporary era, and their captivation has ushered in numerous rewritings of the tumultuous tale. Her story has been retold in many literary forms: epic poetry, short story, fictional biography, and drama, and each form brings a different lens through which to portray her character. Each version paints a distinct portrait of the Amazon Queen, some describing her as a being to be awed by the gods, others labeling her as an unethical warmonger.

In her book, *Adaptation and Appropriation,* Julie Sanders defines what an adaptation is and what purpose each individual adaption serves. She explains that "adaptation studies mobilize a wide vocabulary of active terms: version, variation, interpretation, continuation, transformation, imitation, pastiche, parody, forgery, travesty, transposition, revaluation, revision, rewriting, echo" etc., and many of these terms will have a place in this survey (Sanders 18). Every version of Penthesilea's Troy intervention follows the same basic plot of Penthesilea entering the Trojan War and her ultimely death. The details, however, are always subject to change; even Penthesilea's interaction with Achilles disappears from literature for almost two millennia.

Whatever changes were made to the tale as it began to evolve over the centuries came as a result of the changing times. Sanders notes that "adaptation is frequently involved in offering commentary on a sourcetext" (18). When authors tackled rewriting the tale of Penthesilea, they were offering their own commentary on the original source, and many of those authors were following the ideas and ideologies of their times,

especially those that surrounded women. In some iterations, the authors posit that a woman such as Penthesilea is undeserving of a lover; in others, she must be punished for her unladylike actions. In comparison, there are some stories where she is praised greatly for her accomplishments as a woman, a queen, and as a warrior, regardless of how she dies in the end. The positive and negative portrayals of Penthesilea are a balancing act of both their authors and their time period. Excluding a few outliers, a pattern emerges among the sources from antiquity to the modern era, showing a journey from glory to degradation for Penthesilea before slowly being built back up to a strong, or at least complex female character.

Ancient Literature

Ancient Greece and Rome produced some of the most well-known and diverse mythology. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are perhaps the most famous of these myths. As stated in the introduction, though Homer's accounts covered a span of many years in regards to the Trojan War, his accounts leave out the fight between Penthesilea and Achilles. This battle actually takes place between the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey.* Homer only briefly mentions the Amazons in the Iliad as many authors had yet to give names to any specific Amazon heroines.

The Amazons were an opportunity to define male heroism by the strength posited by the Amazons. The Amazons were often perceived as a foreign threat to the Greek way of life, but the poetic imagination wondered away from that ideal. Abby Wettan Kleinbaum opens her book, *War Against the Amazons*, by examining the Amazons' roles in ancient mythology: "If the Amazon excels in military prowess, then the skill of the hero who defeats her is even more extraordinary. If she is beautiful and pledged to virginity, then the sexual power of the hero who wins her heart and her bed is without measure" (Kleinbaum 1). The sole purpose of an Amazon in ancient literature was not just to be defeated but to prove the might of the hero whom she faced. Myth always would prioritize the male heroes over the Amazons when they were paired together in stories; an Amazon's defeat did not make her any less great. In order to test a heroes might accordingly, she had to be appropriately great to begin.

Arctinus

Though the tale of Achilles and Penthesilea was likely passed down orally for some time, the earliest known written account of the battle was written by Arctinus of Miletus. Unfortunately, little is known about Arctinus. He was a Greek poet, and it is presumed that he lived around the seventh century BCE. His most well known epic, the *Aethiopis,* is where the story of Penthesilea and Achilles first appears. Though the work has been lost, a summary survives of it today:

> The Amazon Penthesileia, the daughter of Ares and of Thracian race, comes to aid the Trojans, and after showing great prowess, is killed by Achilles and buried by the Trojans. Achilles then slays Thersites for abusing and reviling him for his supposed love of Penthesileia. (Arctinus 507)

This basic summary will be a template to which all of the texts in this paper will be compared, as it is essentially the original account. It is important to note that in the summary there are no defining statements made about Penthesilea. There is no description of her appearance, and Arctinus does not provide her motivation for entering the war. The only information given about her is her skill level and her parentage. She is not just an Amazon but a daughter of Ares, the God of War, making her a demi-goddess, which places her on par with classical heroes such as Heracles and Theseus, and explains the "great prowess" that is briefly mentioned. Through this summary, only the skeleton of the story remains: who Penthesilea is, what she did, and who killed her. Even the love Achilles feels for her is only "supposed." It is hard to know if this is the true original plot

of the Amazon intervention in the Trojan War, but it is the earliest written version that exists.

Apollodorus

The next account of the story comes from Apollodorus' *The Library*. Apollodorus was another Greek author and scholar, but he lived during the second century BCE, almost 500 years after Arctinus. This account is only slightly longer than Arctinus' version, but provides slightly more information:

> Penthesilea, daughter of Otrere and Ares, accidently kills Hippolyte and was purified by Priam. In battle she slew many, and amongst them Machaon, and was afterwards herself killed by Achilles, who fell in love with the Amazon after her death and slew Thersites for jeering at him. (Apollodorus 211)

The basic skeleton of the tale remains, but in this iteration, more information is given about Penthesilea herself. Unlike Arctinus' text, two specific people are named as her parents. Ares remains the father, while Otrere, an Amazonian queen, is named as the mother. With this information, it is not only revealed that Penthesilea is a demi-goddess but that she is also a royal amongst the Amazons—a queen. Also provided is motivation for Penthesilea entering the war. After accidentally killing her sister, Hippolyte, she seeks out Priam to purify her of her deed. It can be inferred that her participation in the war is either part of the purification or her way of repaying the debt accrued by the purification. Her relationship with Achilles also becomes clearer. The love he feels for her is no longer "supposed," as Apollodorus clearly states that Achilles "fell in love with the Amazon after her death" (211). Yet, in its brevity, there is still a lot of information lacking in this

account as well. Details about the incident with Hippolyte and Priam would shed more light on Penthesilea as a character. Apollodorus and Arctinus mention that she is a skilled fighter, but very little information is given to support that claim. Finally, the details of her death are non-existent, almost making the event anticlimactic due to lack of details, if only for the fact that she was killed by the great hero Achilles.

Quintus Smyrnaeus

Luckily, Quintus Smyrnaeus sheds lights upon many of the details missing in Arctinus and Apollodorus' work. Quintus was a famous Greek poet who lived during the latter part of the fourth century CE, another 600 years after Apollodorus. He is most famous for his *Posthomerica* (aka *The Fall of Troy*), which he published in 14 books. Book 1 of Quintus' *The Fall of Troy* turns the tale of Penthesilea into an epic poem, giving action and detail to the bare outlines of Arctinus and Apollodorus. Generally, the same basic skeleton that the first two authors created is used, but the details, descriptors, and action sequences are explained in more detail. First, details about Hippolyte's death and Penthesilea's motivation for coming to Troy are given:

> Her own sister's death, for whom
> Ever her sorrows waxed, Hippolyte,
> Whom she struck dead with her mighty spear,
> Not of her will—'twas at a stag she hurled.
> So she came to the far-famed land of Troy.
> Yea, and her warrior spirit pricked her on,
> Of murder's dread pollution thus to cleanse

Her soul, and with such sacrifice to appease
The Awful Ones, the Erinnyes, who in wrath
For her slain sister straightaway haunter her. (Quintus 5)

Quintus presents Penthesilea as a pious woman, a trait that would have been greatly admired in Ancient Greece. Her dedication to her soul as well as her sister's soul makes her a respectable character in the era that this piece was written.

Quintus' version of the story also offers more in the sense of dialogue. Penthesilea is given dialogue which defines her as a person, and other characters are given dialogue that offers a third party opinion of Penthesilea in the setting of the events. One such piece of dialogue comes from Andromache, Hector's widow:

Ah hapless! why with arrogant heart dost thou
Speak such great swelling words? No strength is thine
To grapple in fight with Peleus' aweless son.
Nay, doom and swift death shall he deal to thee.
Alas for thee! What madness thrills thy soul?
Fate and the end of death stand hard by thee!
Hector was mightier. (9,11)

Though her words come from a place of grief, having just lost her husband, they show the sense of initial disbelief that many characters harbored towards Penthesilea. Excluding her grief, Andromache is also making assumptions about Penthesilea based on her gender. After her military displays on the field, however, Penthesilea manages to both

change people's perception of her and inspire the Trojan women to fight alongside her, as evidenced by a speech made by Tisiphone, Meneptolemus' wife:

> Friends, let a heart of valour in our breasts
> Awake! Let us be like our lords, who fight
> With foes for fatherland, for babes, for us,
> And never pause for breath in that stern strife!
> Let us too throne war's spirit in our hearts!
> Let us too face the fight which favoureth none!
> For we, we women, be not creatures cast
> In diverse mould from men…
> See ye not yonder a woman far excelling
> Men in the grapple of fight? Yet is her blood
> Nowise akin to ours, nor fighteth she
> For her own city. (35).

Most of the characters do not assume upon first glance that Penthesilea could be such a valuable asset to Troy, but are quickly convinced once they view her in battle. The preconceived thoughts about a woman in battle are mirrored by Achilles and his comrades when they meet Penthesilea on the field:

> Woman, with what vain vauntings triumphing
> Hast thou come forth against us, all athirst
> to battle with us, who be mightier far
> Than earthborn heroes. (47,49)

Achilles does not even attempt to refer to Penthesilea by her name, and instead refers to her as "woman," patronizing her in comparison to the other people on the field. Unfortunately for Penthesilea, she was unable to prove her might against these foes. Achilles quickly strikes her down while she is in thought about her next move. Kleinbaum notes this scene in particular as an indicator of Quintus' created personality for Penthesilea: "As she spied Achilles about to drag her from her horse, Quintus has her muse over whether she should beg for her life or fight on and attempt to strike with her sword. But the hero gave her time for neither, for Quintus's Achilles impaled the Amazon atop her horse with one long death-dealing spear" (Kleinbaum 24). After her death, Achilles' perception of her shifts from negative to positive after he removes her helmet:

> Then, there as fallen in dust and blood she lay,
> Rose, like the breaking of the dawn, to view
> 'Neath dainty-pencilled brows a lovely face,
> Lovely in death…Yea, and Achilles' very heart was wrung
> With love's remorse to have slain a thing so sweet. (Quintus 55)

It is important to note that in Quintus' version, Achilles' love is based on Penthesilea's beauty and not her skill in battle.

It is also worth examining the language that Quintus uses to describe Penthesilea because it can clarify Quintus' opinion of her as a character. The descriptions that he uses for her can be divided into two categories: descriptions of her warrior prowess and descriptions of her maidenly beauty— both of which are positive. The terms that allude to her skill as a warrior include: "Penthesilea of the flying feet," "at her side / Paced

Death," "A lioness," "her might / was adamantine," and more (17, 25, 27, 33). The feminine descriptors include: "flawless fair," "is she not / Most wondrous like the heavenly Goddesses," or "for she was / Flawless" (7, 17, 55). Interestingly, the two sets of descriptors are intermingled in the text together. Rather than being allocated to specific scenes where they would be deemed specifically appropriate, the descriptors are used interchangeably throughout the text. Her first full description in the poem attests to this:

> The tireless War-god's child, the mailed maid,
> Like to the Blessèd Gods ; for in her face
> Glowed beauty glorious and terrible.
> Her smile was ravishing : beneathe her brows
> Her love-enkindling eyes shone like to stars,
> And with the crimson rose of shamefastness
> Bright were her cheeks, and mantled over them
> Unearthly grace with battle-prowess clad. (7).

This passage contains both portrayals of Penthesilea's beauty as well as allusions to her military might, showing that they are not mutually exclusive.

Where Quintus makes changes to the original outline is also of interest. Perhaps most interesting is the inclusion of a funeral for Penthesilea at the end of the poem. Sharing Achilles' opinion, the funeral was only approved on account of "the imperial loveliness / of Penthesilea" (63). Unlike previous sections where she was praised for both her beauty and her might, the reason for her funeral throws her military accomplishments to the side. In her final moments, it posits that her greatest accomplishment in life is her

feminine beauty. However, the very fact that there is a funeral points to her glorification in ancient times. Only the greatest of heroes, such as Patroclus, were given lengthy descriptions of their funerals in ancient literature.

What Quintus' text presents is a close examination of a particular character from a group that greatly fascinated the Greeks and Romans. As stated in the introduction, Amazons were a popular subject in a wide array of Greek and Roman art, including vases, sculpture, and architecture. Women's rights were limited in antiquity, and they were almost always confined to the home. The Amazons are the exact opposite of the women of the time. Whether real or mythical, the Amazons were almost unimaginable because of their contrast to Greek and Roman women.

Medieval Literature

The transition from the ancient sources to the medieval texts was quick, but it was jarring. The new ideology of the Middle Ages harshly affected the portrayal of the Amazons. According to Kleinbaum, "many historians argue that women found greater freedom and opportunity in the early and high Middle Ages than they had enjoyed in Roman times. For Amazons, however, conditions got considerably worse…Amazons were no longer required to test the mettle of a hero" (39). This can be seen clearly in Chaucer's "Knight's Tale." Though he does not write about Penthesilea specifically, Chaucer, one of the most prominent authors of the medieval period, included Amazons in some of his medieval work. Unlike the heroic and battle-filled tales of Amazons from Ancient Greece and Rome, Chaucer's Amazons have been conquered and domesticated. Ypolita has been married to Theseus, and Emelye picks flowers and prays for her virginity helplessly (Chaucer 868, 1053, 2282-2330). These are not the brave and powerful Amazons of ancient mythology. They are now no different from any other noblewoman, as what made them unique has been stripped away from them.

The medieval period also ushered in a hatred for the Amazons. When they were not being portrayed as conquered, domestic goddesses, their power and prowess was depicted as negatively as possible. Kleinbaum notes that this is depicted by "authors like Joseph the Exeter, Guido de Colonna, John Lydgate, and others [, who] had already eliminated Amazon sexuality. Their cruel and bloodthirsty warrior-women were utterly unlovable, and indeed were hideously dismembered" (Kleinbaum 61). If the Amazons

did exhibit any of their previous qualities as daughters of the God of War, they were punished severely for it.

Medieval Sources: Dictys and Dares

Dictys of Crete, who wrote *Chronicles of the Trojan War*, was at the beginning of the transition from the ancient period to the medieval period. According to the Oxford Classical Dictionary, Dictys lived during the late 2nd or 3rd century CE, placing him in the ancient period, but his work would come to influence many of the medieval writers. Dictys' view of Penthesilea is established from her very first introduction in the text, which is simultaneously much more ambiguous and much more negative than its predecessors: "Why she was coming to Priam's aid, whether for money or simply because of her love of war, was uncertain; her race, being naturally warlike, was always conquering the neighboring peoples and carrying the Amazon standards far and wide" (Dictys 79). Though the narrator claims not to know her intentions, his postulations show a negative predisposition towards the Amazons, one that regards them as greedy and blood-thirsty. This idea is perpetuated after Hector's death, when Penthesilea wanted to go home and had to be bribed with "much gold and silver" in order to stay and fight (87). These are not the traits of bravery and dedication that were depicted in earlier accounts.

Penthesilea's fate in Dictys' version is also much different than that of the ancient versions. There is no love and no mercy: "Achilles [finds] Penthesilea among the cavalry and, hurling his spear, [hits] the mark…he [seizes] her by the hair and [pulls] her off her horse" (88). This act is far more personal than simply knocking her off the horse with his spear. By grabbing her by the hair he is establishing dominance and using something

about her femininity against her. This is not the moment of her death, however. After finding her "half-alive…it was decided to throw her, while still alive enough to have feeling, either into the river to drown or out for the dogs to tear apart, for she had transgressed the bounds of nature and her sex" (88). In ancient times, the most glorious way to die was in battle, and though this account appears in the transition between and ancient and medieval literature, it is still set in the period where that is the ideal death. This type of death is denied for Penthesilea, and as a result she is not only tortured physically but mentally as well.

As noted earlier, the Amazons lose their role as the testers of heroes in the medieval era. Kleinbaum notes that "some of Dictys's diversions from Homer and from the events of the epic cycle serve to deprecate the character of Achilles and to make his slaying of the Amazon queen Penthesilea an ordinary, indeed almost trivial, incident" (Kleinbaum 43). The battle scene is not as drawn out or exciting in Dictys' account as it was in Quintus'; in fact, the battle between Penthesilea and Achilles ends rather quickly, without anything of note. Without any challenge presented, this battle means nothing to Achilles, and leaves many to wonder why it is even included in Dictys' account of the Trojan War. The final line of the story may answer that question: "But thus the queen of the Amazons, having lost the forces she had bought to aid Priam, died in a way that befitted her foolhardy character" (88). Whereas the ancient stories were about Achilles, this version was very much about Penthesilea herself, though not in a good way. Dictys' story serves as a cautionary tale about what happens when women try to act like men.

Though its mention of Penthesilea is much shorter and less detailed, Dares the Phrygian's *History of the Trojan War* is still important to note in the evolution of Penthesilea as a character. Dares lived approximately 200 or 300 years after Dictys, during the 5th century CE, according to the Oxford Classical Dictionary. Kleinbaum explains that "a love between Penthesilea and Achilles would have been impossible [because] in Dares' tale, Achilles is dead when Penthesilea arrives" (48). With this information, the story has already lost an important plot point. Without Achilles, there will likely be nothing beyond the battle, whether Penthesilea dies or not, and this is the case. This sets a pattern that becomes very important for many of the medieval pieces of literature that feature Penthesilea—the removal of Achilles.

Not much is said about the battle, and only a sentence is dedicated to Penthesilea's end: "Finally Penthesilea wounded Neoptolemus, and then fell at his hands; in spite of his wound, he cut her down" (Dares 163). The lack of attention paid to this scene of the war shows that Dares has little concern for Penthesilea as a character, but "his omission of a death scenario for Penthesilea makes his otherwise tawdry and inept account a model of taste and discretion, when his "History" is compared to later medieval accounts in which Neoptolemus dismembers the Amazon queen on the battlefield" (Kleinbaum 48). However, Dictys and Dares played a large role in medieval tales that followed. According to R.M. Frazer, who wrote the introduction to Dictys and Dares' *The Trojan War; The Chronicles Of Dictys Of Crete And Dares The Phrygian*, "in Western Europe, the knowledge of Greek and therefore of Homer, died out. Medieval writers, as we have seen, based their accounts on Dictys and Dares; furthering the anti-Homeric tendencies they found in these sources" (Frazer 7). Though it can be said that neither

Dictys nor Dares' writing falls into the category of medieval literature, arguing instead that they existed as early as the first century CE, their influence on the tales produced by the time period earn them a notable place among the authors of the middle ages.

Joseph of Exeter

Joseph of Exeter's epic poem, *The Ylias of Dares Phrygius,* shortly covers Penthesilea's intervention in Book Six. Joseph of Exeter lived during the 12th century in England as a poet writing in Latin. He wrote *The Ylias of Dares Phrygius* in 1190. Like other medieval depictions, Joseph of Exeter's Penthesilea is devoid of any femininity, but unlike the other medieval stories, she is somewhat likeable. There is not truly a reference to whether Penthesilea actually has any skill on the battlefield. Her first introduction states that she is lending "her might to men", and though she is said to launch two attacks during the time of the poem, she only kills one man before being killed herself—a stark contrast to the droves she would kill in previous renditions. This fact makes the men's comments toward her seemingly more truthful when one notes that she "should be shamed—a hand scarce fit / for spinning bears [her] standards and effeminates / [the men's] arms" (Joseph of Exeter 609-611). This is an attack both on her femininity and at her battle skills.

Her femininity is also brought into question by the speaker. Joseph of Exeter is one of the first in the medieval period to even comment on Penthesilea's appearance, and his words are less than kind:

No lavish care for looks
Or beauty bother her; rough visage, tawdry clothes,
Are hers; the gold threads on her arms flash out in wrath.
Her laugh, her words and eyes reveal no levity
Or weakness all her acts conceal her womanhood. (589-594)

There is nothing beautiful about this reincarnation of Penthesilea; not only that, but she is portrayed as actively disregarding her physical appearance. Without her beauty, there is nothing to fall in love with, which is why it is convenient that this is another tale that lacks Achilles.

The circumstances of her death are also unique to this tale. Like the others, she is brought down by a spear to the chest, but her fall is worth noting:

Pyrrhus with his blade transfixed
Her left-hand breast. Thus proud Penthesilea fell,
Without her sword. So great her sex's modesty,
She drew her purple cloak and flaming robes around
Her legs and angrily declaimed at fate, and died. (647-651)

Rather than depict the gruesome details of her downfall, Joseph of Exeter chooses to focus his writing on her attempts to conceal her body in an attempt at modesty. In previous portrayals of Penthesilea, she had little concern for her gender; her largest concern was her performance in battle. The Penthesilea from ancient texts would have cursed her gender if it had created any obstacles for her as a warrior, but Joseph of Exeter's Penthesilea seems to cling to her modesty despite lacking femininity.

Guido delle Colonne

The story written by Guido delle Colonne in his *Historia Destructionis Troiae* fits neatly into what many think about when they imagine a stereotypical medieval scene. This version comes almost 100 years after Joseph of Exeter's poem, 1287, but was written in Italy. While the setting is still a battlefield, it is described as if it is a jousting match between knights. Penthesilea faces many opponents, but her nemesis is Pyrrhus, son of Achilles in this edition. They face each other many times, and many times Penthesilea "threw him from his horse to the ground" (Guido 206). His numerous defeats at the hands of a woman are embarrassments to Pyrrhus, and this leads to the violent climax that was her death:

> Although she did not cast him down from his horse, she broke her lance against him so that she wounded him so seriously, and left the shaft of her lance in his body. On account of this the uproar was very great, and many Greeks rose against Penthesilea to avenge him, so that by superior strength they burst the throngs of Penthesilea's helmet. Pyrrhus then, on account of the fury of his animosity…accosted Penthesilea, since Penthesilea then lacked her helmet and was completely exhausted by the forces rising against her…Pyrrhus arrived swiftly to strike her, and with the strength of his arms struck her heavily between the shoulder and the top of her shield with his sword that he cut off her arm by the violence of the bow and severed it from its natural joint at the shoulder….Pyrrhus, in satisfaction of his vengeance, hacked her whole body to pieces. (208)

Though Penthesilea had won fairly, she was ambushed by the Greek men, she had her armor removed, and she was held in place while Pyrrhus slayed her. The event shows a complete lack of respect for Penthesilea and the Amazons' involvement in the battle.

True to the medieval pattern, Guido minimizes his description of Penthesilea's appearance. He is only concerned with who she is in the scope of the battle. Important to this scope is Penthesilea's reason for coming to Troy. Penthesilea "was closely bound to Hector in friendship on account of the exceeding merit of her valor," and this is why she is coming to Priam's aid (202). It is important to note that Penthesilea's and Hector's relationship is only one of friendship in Guido's version, as the medieval Penthesilea was without love. In Dictys' version, when Penthesilea learns of Hector's death she wants to leave, but Guido's version shows Penthesilea ready to avenge Hector's passing. This slowly begins to return her to her former glory as a queen dedicated to friendship and not riches, a trend that will continue into the Renaissance.

Renaissance Literature

Since the Renaissance is known for returning to the ideals and beliefs of ancient times, many of the stories of Penthesilea begin to reflect this paradigm shift. Many of the Renaissance texts, however, still have echoes of their medieval counterparts. Many of the stories begin with Penthesilea being a sexless virgin, yet there is a return of the idea of love in the life of Penthesilea, though it is not for Penthesilea. Often in the Renaissance tales, Penthesilea is motivated by her love for Hector, reviving a sense of femininity for the heroine. Unfortunately for Penthesilea, she still remains unloved in these stories, as in the medieval tales; Achilles is still absent in the interactions with the queen, so there is no chance for the ancient realization of love and beauty. The Penthesilea of the Renaissance is a lover but is incapable of being loved because she has stepped out of the bounds of womanhood.

Giovanni Boccaccio

In 1374, Giovanni Boccaccio published his book *On Famous Women*, which contained small biographies on dozens of notable women of and before Boccaccio's time. One of the women that Boccaccio chooses to write about is Penthesilea. Though it is short, he attempts to capture Penthesilea's entire life in this short, two-page biography. Boccaccio sets the tone of his description of Penthesilea with his first two words—"The virgin" (Boccaccio 65). Though it has been suggested for a long time that the Amazons may be a chaste tribe, this is the first description of Penthesilea in which her virginity is directly addressed. Boccaccio then takes a great deal of time to describe her physical appearance and how it contradicts her lifestyle: "Scorning her great beauty and mastering

the softness of her body, she dared to wear the armor of her predecessors, to cover her blond hair with a helmet, and wear a quiver at her side" (65). With the return of attention to Penthesilea's beauty, there now seems to be a battle between whether she should be beautiful or deadly; she cannot be both.

In keeping with a smooth transition from the last author, Colonne, Boccaccio also notes that Penthesilea loved Hector, but this depiction of the love is much clearer and stronger:

> Some are pleased to believe that Penthesilea, hearing of the prowess of the Trojan Hector, loved him ardently without having seen him. Wishing to leave as successor to her reign a child of such noble parentage, she willingly moved a great number of her people to the might enterprise of aiding Hector against the Greeks. (65)

Though the biography begins by describing her as a virgin, it is clear that Boccaccio's Penthesilea is not one of the sexless Amazons from the medieval period. Here, she is clearly seeking out a sexual partner in order to strengthen her reign and family line, similar to stories of other Amazons from ancient times.

Her death, unfortunately, is quickly glossed over by Boccaccio, and, similar to the medieval authors, Achilles has no part in it. She simply receives "a mortal blow" from an unknown Greek and falls "wretchedly among the Greeks" (65-66). Despite giving little detail about her death, Boccaccio indicates in his conclusion that Penthesilea and the Amazons deserve recognition:

> Some may be surprised by the fact that women, no matter how armed, dare to fight against men. However, surprise will cease if we think of the fact that custom had changed their nature, so that Penthesilea and women like her were much more manly in arms than those who were made men by Nature but were then changed into women or helmeted hares by idleness and love of pleasure. (66)

In this conclusion, Boccaccio actually compares Penthesilea to some men and states that she is better than them, but at the same time, according to Kleinbaum, Bocaccio's "main goal in writing about Penthesilea is to exhort men to manliness, not to praise and honor brave women" (Kleinbaum 62). Boccaccio states that men are manly by nature and changed into women by idleness, but that Penthesilea and the Amazons are only manly because they were never taught how to be feminine. Because of this, Boccaccio's Penthesilea is a paradox of feminine beauty and masculine strength, confusing those who may want to love her.

Christine de Pizan

Christine de Pizan's work offers unique commentary into the tale of Penthesilea as she is the only woman to write on the queen. In her book, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, which she published in France in 1405, she includes a chapter about Penthesilea and the Amazons. Even the title of the chapter, "About Queen Penthesilea and how she went to the rescue of the city of Troy" already displays how Christine de Pizan's approach to Penthesilea is much different than many of her contemporaries. "Coming to the rescue" of Troy implies a much more heroic and likeable role in the battle than how she was described in many of the previous stories. Additionally, because Christine de

Pizan has decided to have such a zoomed in focus on Penthesilea in the conflict, her story develops a much more personal relationship between Penthesilea and the reader in comparison to the stories where she was an intruding character in the conflict.

Christine de Pizan's Penthesilea shares many similarities with Boccaccio's Penthesilea, but those similarities are expanded on and given more life and reason. The first similarity is that Penthesilea is a virgin and that she came to Troy out of love for Hector. Unlike Boccaccio, who attributed Penthesilea's desire for Hector to her desire for a strong heir, Christine de Pizan states that Penthesilea "was naturally drawn to him since they shared the same qualities [and] heard so much about him that she began to love him with a pure and noble heart and desire about all else to go and see him" (Christine de Pizan 43). This description paints Penthesilea, not as someone looking to elevate her own standing, but as someone who is already on equal standing with Hector. This kind of gender equality was unique for Christine de Pizan's writing, and Kleinbaum notes this in her book: "Her feminism permeates her work, and the basic tales and themes that served as a foundation for all late medieval and early Renaissance literature in the West spring from her pen transformed" (Kleinbaum 65). This is the first time in any iteration of the Troy tale that Penthesilea has been described as being an equal to any of the heroic men of Greece or Troy.

Christine de Pizan also adds another scene which has not been seen before in any of the tales. Shortly after Penthesilea arrives at Troy and is told that Hector was killed by Achilles, she is taken to Hector's body:

> Here they brought Queen Penthesilea, who no sooner glimpsed the body through the open chapel door than she fell on her knees in front of Hector and greeted him as if he was still alive… 'This never would have happened because I would not have allowed it. If your killer were still alive, I would surely avenge your death and thus extinguish the great sorrow and anger which are burning up my heart as I see you lifeless before me"…As she knelt before the corpse, Penthesilea's words reached the great crowd of barons, knights and ladies who were all gathered there and moved them to tears. (Christine de Pizan 44-45)

Rather than condensing this into a simple statement about how greatly Penthesilea grieved Hector's death, Christine de Pizan chose to give a detailed description of her grief and how it affected the people around her. This humanizes Penthesilea and gives the reader reason to sympathize with her.

After this great scene of grief, Penthesilea quickly takes to the battlefield with her Amazons and immediately launches an attack at Pyrrhus. Christine de Pizan rationalizes Penthesilea's rage towards Pyrrhus by explaining that "if Penthesilea felt hatred for the father, she certainly didn't spare the son" (45). Penthesilea's rage in the war is a result of emotional scorn, not a natural proclivity for being a warmonger. This does not take away from her skill on the battle field, though. In battle, "Penthesilea performed the most extraordinary of feats," and she "accomplished more in that time than ever Hector himself could have done" (45-46). Unlike earlier stories, such as Quintus' tale in which Penthesilea was told she would never be as great as Hector, or Boccaccio's tale in which

she was struck down by a nameless man, Christine de Pizan gives Penthesilea ample credit by attributing skills to her that may have been greater than Hector's.

The death written for her by Christine de Pizan seems to be taken directly from Guido delle Colonne. After Penthesilea attacks and seriously injures Pyrrhus, his ego sustains a greater injury. When he returns to battle, he urges "his valiant men to concentrate solely on surrounding Penthesilea and separating her from her companions," and, when they have, they "smash all her weapons and tear off a good part of her helmet" (45-46). Rather than cleaving into her body as Pyrrhus does in Colonne's version, Christine de Pizan's Pyrrhus "struck her such a blow that he split her whole skull in two" (46). Unlike Guido's story, this scene seems less like a deserved punishment and much more like a trap. There is no commentary to follow that implies Penthesilea stepped out of line and deserved her fate; instead, Christine de Pizan notes the great grief that follows Penthesilea's death and how "the Amazons never knew any other queen to rival her" (46).

John Lydgate

In the early 15th century, John Lydgate published his own version of the Troy tale in the form of an epic poem called *Troy Book*. His rendition seems much like a poetic translation of Guido delle Colonne's stories, following many of the major plot points from the medieval tale. Given the importance of language in poetry, it is vital to examine the way Lydgate describes Penthesilea when he first introduces her:

> And of this lond was Pantysyllya
> Whilom lady and governeresse

Ful renomed of strengthe and hardynes
Thorughoute the world, bothe in lenghte and brede;
And yit in soth to speke of wommanhede,
For all her might she had a huge pris,
For bothe she was virtuous and wys,
Wonder discret, and had an honest name,
Natwithstondynge the excelle of fame
Of her renoun in armys and the glorie. (Lydgate 3804-13)

In just nine lines, Lydgate has praised Penthesilea for her strength, hardiness, womanhood, worth, virtue, wisdom, discretion, honesty, and military skill. Being the first description the reader has received of her, it sets the tone for the rest of the tale about how she will be viewed.

When Penthesilea arrives in Troy and learns of Hector's death, she began to cry and immediately requested that Priam send her to avenge him:

But whan that she comen was to Troye
And herde telle by relacioun
That he was ded, momst worthi of renoun,
To whom she was so loving and so trewe,
Anoon she gan to chaungen cher and hewe
And pitously for to wepe and crye,
And ferd in soth as she wolde deye
For verray wo and hertly hevynes,

And thought she wold thorugh hir worthiness
Avenge his deth platly, yif she may
On the Grekis. (3848-58)

This display is much different than many of the other actions by previous incarnations of Penthesilea. Rather than gathering her army and going straight to the battle either enraged or after grieving, Lydgate's Penthesilea seeks Priam's permission to avenge Hector, which is a step back from the strong feminist character that Pizan had produced just a decade earlier.

When Penthesilea enters the battle, like in Colonne's story, she severely wounds Pyrrhus, who later retaliates by hacking her in the shoulder and cutting her into pieces. Lydgate poetically adds that due to his own wounds "evere in on Pirrus so gan blede / Nighe to the deth of his mortal wounde, / for lak of blod that he fil to grounde" (4342-44). So despite falling to Pyrrhus' blade, Penthesilea still killed him as well. Kleinbaum also notes that later "the Greeks throw her body into a deep lake and it is miraculously fished out to be given to the Trojans for burial during the peace negotiations" (Kleinbaum 60). Rather than leave her body on the battlefield, return it to the Trojans or the Amazons, or perform funeral rites, the Greeks choose to harken back to Dictys' tale where they throw Penthesilea cruelly into the river to drown.

Romantic Literature: Heinrich von Kleist

The Romantic Era produced only one known adaptation of the tale of Penthesilea, but it is perhaps one of the most memorable and unique: Heinrich von Kleist's play *Penthesilea*. Kleist was born in 1777, and published his play, *Penthesilea,* in 1808. The writings of Kleist are diverse, and cover many topics and ideas, but it is Elisabeth Krimmer's belief that his writings encapsulate the war themes of German Romanticism, themes that "[pondered] the ennobling effects and creative power of war, [sought] to negotiate the relation between warfare and the sublime, and [suggested] the possibility of warfare as a rational and containable activity" (Krimmer 69). Particularly, she notes "the intimate link between war and the concept of the sublime" that was shared by many critics of the time (66). Though war was not at the forefront of many Germans' minds, it was often a topic of discussion among authors and philosophers. Krimmer especially notes that "writers and theorists of German Romanticism emphasize [war's] regenerative, even creative force" (67). While the act of warfare is often seen as destructive, many of the theorists at the time tried to discern what good could come from it, whether it creates stronger men or a more well intact sense of nationality. Looking at *Penthesilea* through this lens, there is a breakdown of these ideals, which Krimmer attributes to Penthesilea's gender:

> Quite literally, the ultimate goal of an Amazon campaign is not to kill, but to give birth. Where traditionally men have the power to take and women the power to give life, the Amazons have arrogated both realms to themselves. In the Heraclitean sense of the term, wars are literally deadly but figuratively generative. In contrast, Kleist's war is literally generative, but ultimately destructive. (76)

The purpose of the Amazons' participation in the Trojan War is revealed in the early scenes of the play; they are said to be there for their Festival of Roses, in which they have come to capture men in order to reproduce. This causes much confusion early in the play because the Amazons are not pledged to either the Greeks or the Trojans, and they fight against both sides—a big change from previous versions of the battle. This sets the stage for a play that is centered completely around a sexual appetite, especially one in which Penthesilea, the female, is in complete control.

First, one should examine Penthesilea as an individual character as she is described by others in the play. She does not technically appear or have any lines until scene 5, so the first four scenes are the Greeks talking about her. The way in which she is described is much like a pendulum. In some descriptions she is a strong military leader:

> The Scythian heroine where she sits mounted
> in martial panoply before her maids,
> Plumes flowing from her helmet, skirt tucked high,
> Her palfrey tossing gold and purple tassles,
> Hooves stamping on the muddy ground beneath. (Kleist 6-7)

While in others she is portrayed as a love-struck, pubescent teenager:

> Instead, she turns
> And with a look of utter wonderment,
> Suddenly like a girl, a sixteen-year old
> On her way back from the Olympic Games,
> Addresses a companion by her side:

Oh Prothoë, I do not think my mother,

Otrerë, ever laid eyes on such a man! (7)

While she is not the glorious, idealized Amazon queen of the ancient myths, Kleist's Penthesilea at least has more depth than the shallow character presented by medieval authors for mere slaughter and mutilation.

Perhaps her most outstanding trait, as written by Kleist, is Penthesilea's stubbornness. Throughout the entire play, it is her stubbornness that drives the plot forward. This stubbornness is illustrated as early as scene two, as Penthesilea attempts to scale a cliff face after capturing Achilles in order to take him back for the Festival of Roses:

All their attempts to hold her back: in vain

With gentle force she pushes them aside,

The women right and left, and restlessly

Trots to and fro along the rifted edge,

Seeking some narrow path that would provide

A passage for a wish that has no wings…

When suddenly she tumbles, horse and rider,

Amid a clattering of loosened rocks,

A smashing fall, as if straight into Orcus,

Down to the lowest level of the cliff—

And neither breaks her neck nor learns a lesson:

She merely girds herself to climb again. (15-16)

At the risk of her own life, she continues to try to climb the wall of rock. This wall becomes a symbol for the people and obstacles that attempt to hold her back from loving Achilles as the play progresses. Like she does at the wall, she will fall, regardless of how many times she gets back up to pursue Achilles again.

When she first appears in person rather than in retelling, the other Amazons have all secured their men for the Festival of Roses and are ready to leave. Penthesilea could easily take any man from the field, but she is determined to have Achilles. Her Amazons all argue against this desire, as they believe she is being crazed:

> The violence of that fall which struck your breast
> Has set your blood aflame, stirred your senses;
> You're trembling, dear, in every youthful limb!
> We all beseech you, make no rash decision
> Until your mind regains clarity. (Kleist 32)

Her stubbornness prevails, and she convinces her Amazons to allow her continue to chase Achilles, despite fears of death and upsetting the goddess Diana, who presides over the Festival of Roses. Within the scope of this play, Achilles also arises as an interesting foil to Penthesilea. He is equally as stubborn and pursues Penthesilea with the same fervency, despite equal pushback from the Greeks. Kleinbaum points out that Kleist's "hero is as mad as his Amazon" (Kleinbaum 176). By setting Penthesilea and Achilles up with similar qualities, they become equals, something that is foreign to many of the preceding texts. To return to the idea of this play in the scope of German Romantic war ideals, Krimmer discusses Penthesilea's and Achilles' roles in the play:

> Both Amazons and Greeks wage war as a form of politics by other means: the Greeks to defend and conquer territory, the Amazons to propagate their own kind and hence secure the continued existence of their state. The only ones who have lost sight of all political goals are the two protagonists of the play, Penthesilea and Achilles... Penthesilea and Achilles' war…results in abhorrent savagery and madness. (Krimmer 77)

These two stubborn characters who are overcome with sexual ideals begin to slowly corrupt the sublime ways of war and cease any means of its production.

Those sexual ideals do come to fruition for both Penthesilea and Achilles when they come to meet on mutual terms, with Penthesilea believing that Achilles is her prisoner. Prothoë believes that Achilles is going to kill Penthesilea, but he exclaims that he wants 'to take her for [his] wedded queen" (Kleist 76). This is the first outward expression from Achilles that he has strong feelings for Penthesilea and it is greeted with exuberance by Prothoë. When Penthesilea learns that she will be taking Achilles back to the Festival of Roses, she is overjoyed:

> And now, my heart, release the stagnant blood
> That waits, as if attending his arrival,
> Heaped up within both chambers of my breast.
> You winged couriers of untrammeled joy,
> Sweet liquors of my youth, spring forth and fly
> With all your might rejoicing through my veins,
> And let the message, like a crimson flag,

Be flown through all the kings of this face:

The young son of the Nereid is mine! (80)

She speaks as if having Achilles in her possession has brought her back to life in some way. With this, the pendulum suddenly swings back toward her being represented as a teenage girl. When they are together, Penthesilea takes the time to explain everything to Achilles—her life story, the ways of the Amazons, and the practice that is the Festival of Roses. During the explanation of the Festival of Roses, one the most sexual scenes of the play is introduced, in which Penthesilea adorns Achilles' body with Roses:

PENTHESILEA

There, don't move.—

Hold still, I said! You'll find out very soon.

—Only this light and winding wreath of roses

Around your temples, back behind your neck—

Down to your arms, your hands, your legs, your feet—

Up to your head again—and now it's done

What are you breathing?

ACHILLES

The breath of your sweet lips. (87).

Kleist creates closeness between Achilles and Penthesilea that has never existed in any text that existed before it. This scene is literally Penthesilea exploring Achilles body, while they both find themselves trying to catch their breath from sexual tension. Krimmer observes that "whereas both the Amazons and Greeks pursue wars that are, in the

Clausewitzian sense of the term, political acts, Achilles and Penthesilea are engaged in a war of passion" (Krimmer 77). This particular scene is the climax of that war for Penthesilea and Achilles, as they have finally met to embrace, not only for the first time in the play, but for the first time in literary history.

But where there is sexual tension for Kleist, there must also be violence. At first glance, Kleist's Penthesilea may seem like a much more elevated and powerful female character given that she overcomes Achilles and has such control over her sexual desires, but the text diminishes all of that glory by making her insane. The ripples of Penthesilea's insanity are noted by Kleinbaum:

> The Amazons know the doom and horror of nightmare are upon them when their mad queen has trampled the three amazons attempting to restrain her from battle. No medieval or Renaissance Amazon queen, aided by scores of unicorns or griffons, was ever reported to turn on her own warriors. (Kleinbaum 177)

Kleist's Penthesilea is unique in that she is an outsider not just from the Greeks and the Trojans, but from her own people as well, but this is not the case until she begins to lose her sanity on account of her desire for Achilles. This furthers the idea of Penthesilea and Achilles separating themselves from the organization of the nations they belong to and destroying those ideals that the battles seek to achieve because they begin to alienate themselves from their own people.

Penthesilea's madness ultimately brings the play to a gruesome end. Kleinbaum notes that "from its very first telling, the love story of Achilles and Penthesilea had a rather perverse, offbeat, indeed necrophiliac element. It was not the Amazon, but the

corpse of the Amazon, that inspired Achilles' love. And Achilles himself had created that corpse. The story dated from almost three millennia before his time, but Kleist was the first to develop its full erotic and sensual potential" (Kleinbaum 170,172). This necrophiliac element is also reversed in Penthesilea due to the fact that Penthesilea actually kills Achilles first in Kleist's play, and, in a similar fashion, is overcome with unimaginable grief. According to Krimmer, as Kleist rewrites the tale, "it is the heroine, not her male counterpart, who cannot hold up under the strain of battle. In its conflation of savagery and femininity, *Penthesilea* draws on the contemporary discourse of women as 'Hyanen' [Hyena]"(Krimmer 78). While alone with Achilles, she is thrust into a blind rage and attacks him. The scene is later retold by an Amazon, Meroë, who witnessed it:

> He, crimson with his own blood, writhing, reaches
> Out to her soft cheek, touches her, and cries:
> Penthesilea! My bride! What are you doing?
> Is this the rosy feast you promised me?
> But she—a lioness would have heeded him,
> However ravenous and wild for prey,
> Howling her hunger through the snowy wastes—
> She sinks—tearing the armor off his body—
> Into his ivory breast she sinks her teeth,
> She and he savage dogs in competition,
> Oxus and Sphinx chewing into his right breast,
> And she into his left; when I arrived,
> The blood was dripping from her mouth and hands. (Kleist 127-128)

Achilles is completely unsuspecting of what befalls him when Penthesilea came. He had given himself so freely to her, left everything and everyone else that he knew behind in order to go to the temple of Diana with her, yet she mutilates him unknowingly. This mutilation seems to harken back to the medieval stories in which Penthesilea was killed by Pyrrhus and had her body mutilated after the fact without remorse, though what follows is a testament against that. After she kills Achilles, Penthesilea goes into an almost trance-like state, and none of her Amazons seem to be able to communicate with her:

> At length we ask her, with our hair on end,
> What she has done: No answer. If she knows us:
> No answer. If she would follow us: Now answer.
> Then horror seized me and I fled to you. (129)

Her comatose state indicates a state of shock or dissociation that could be linked with an upsetting, traumatic experience. When Penthesilea regains her conscious state of mind, she cannot remember what she has done. When her Amazons reveal the deed to her, she is in disbelief:

> HIGH PRIESTESS
>
> You struck—
>
> PENTHESILEA
>
> —Tore him apart.
>
> PROTHOË
>
> My Queen!

PENTHESILEA

Or did it happen differently—?

MEROË

The monster!

PENTHESILEA

Did I kiss him to death?

HIGH PRIESTESS

Oh Heaven!

PENTHESILEA

No? Didn't kiss him? Really tore him? Speak!

HIGH PRIESTESS

Woe unto you! Go hide yourself away!

Let everlasting midnight cover you!

PENTHESILEA

—So it was a mistake. A kiss, a bite,

The two should rhyme, for one who truly loves

With all her heart can easily mistake them. (144-145)

This is another example of the uncomfortable balance Kleist creates between sexuality and violence. Penthesilea speaks as if what she did to Achilles was an act of love, rather than a bodily mutilation. Despite her insanity, this also speaks to an idea of sexual ignorance among the Amazons as well as a natural inclination towards violence; combining the two sets the stage for a merciless ending. Similarly, Kleinbaum notes that "in his image of Penthesilea 'kissing' Achilles to death, Kleist saw something that Freud

attempted to give ‘scientific’ expression almost a century later. In his *Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud specifically cited Kleist’s *Penthesilea* as an example of the impulse of cruelty in human love relationships” (Kleinbaum 178-180). Despite this cruelty, Penthesilea is completely overcome with grief for what she has done. In her grief, “she follows him” in death by committing suicide (Kleist 148). Like every version that preceded it, Penthesilea still dies, but this time, it is by her own hands.

Modern Literature: Laurence Binyon

By the modern era, the tale of Penthesilea and Achilles had almost returned to what it was almost three millennia prior. Authors began to work with Arctinus' original template, rather than the stories created by Dictys and Dares before the medieval period. English poet Laurence Binyon lived from 1869 to 1943. In 1905, he published his poem "Penthesilea." His poem is the first to really return to the ideals and plot of the ancient tales. The story begins the same way as the Quintus Smyrnaeus tale—Penthesilea has accidently killed her sister, Hippolyta; however, Binyon takes creative license after this point. In Binyon's "Argument," instead of Penthesilea coming to Troy to be purified by Priam, as in the Quintus story, Penthesilea has come because "she means to challenge the victorious Achilles, and in battle throw away her life for atonement of her sister's blood" (Binyon 6). This departure from every other tale's motivation paints a picture of a less proud version of any other previous iterations of the Amazon queen. The suicidal intention does harken back to the ending of Kleist's play but for different reasons.

Regardless of her intentions, Penthesilea still carries herself proudly throughout the entirety of the poem:

> In that moment the far door
> Was opened: lo, upon the threshold gleamed
> The splendour of an armed Amazon
> Coming towards him; her eyes sought his own;
> Slowly, and yet without a pause she came;
> And those that saw her deeply breathed; she moved
> As if a clearness from within inspired

Her motion, challenging her inmost thoughts. (Binyon 15)

Penthesilea cannot enter the gates of Troy and present herself in a way that gives away her intentions. Prior to the accidental slaying of her sister, she is still a great queen and a military leader, and now, more than ever, she needs to present herself as such. In addition to fighting off her internal thoughts, she also has to challenge the preconceived notions of those around her, especially Priam:

Proudly she spoke; but he, as old men will,
Because he wondered, was displeased, nor knew
How to rub clear the dimmed sense of his grief,
And pausing half incredulous replied,
'What hast thou said? Abuse not these old ears.
Thou know'st that I have suffered—who art thou?
A woman! Art a woman, and would lift
Thy hand against Achilles? Never hand
Of man prevailed against him yet, and thou
A woman made to bear and suck babes. (16)

Her gender is her greatest enemy when it comes to convincing the Trojans that she is capable of fighting against Achilles, whether she believes this fact or not. Regardless, Penthesilea successfully defends herself against Priam's attacks against her womanhood and manages to be given permission to fight against Achilles.

Yet, Penthesilea still finds herself trying to perpetually prove that she is not just a woman. Before a grand banquet with Priam and Andromache, Penthesilea is allowed to bathe, yet she changes back into her battle armor:

> At his right hand,
> Admired of all, Penthesilea sat,
> Still in her bright mail, though unhelmeted;
> For when she had bathed, they brought her women's robes
> But she refused; for in her heart she thought,
> I shall be deemed but as a woman is
> And they will put no faith in me for deeds. (22-23)

The thought of wearing women's clothing rather than a suit of armor causes Penthesilea to worry that she will be deemed unable to battle Achilles. Before Penthesilea enters the battle, Binyon has already created an interesting dialogue about gender relations in respect to war.

The gendered dialogue continues after the dinner when Andromache visits Penthesilea and reveals that she believes Penthesilea is a Goddess come to avenge Hector:

> O my great hope, how easy was thy lure,
> How sweet and now how bitter to my taste!
> The folly of my fond heart bites my heart.
> The gods are loth to be revealed when they
> Take among men disguises: but oh no,

Thou art a woman, thy face speaks the truth.
And yet, yet, if a woman, whence and why
Comest thou, what madness pricks thee so to dare
What scarce a God might compass, when my own
Great Hector whom none else could vanquish fell? (26)

Again, this is a severe departure from the Quintus Smyrnaeus version, where Andromache was the first to question Penthesilea's skill and motivation for coming to fight for Troy. Binyon's Andromache practically worships Penthesilea from the moment that she sees her approaching the city. It creates a sense of solidarity amongst the women, as Andromache is the only person to initially support her.

When Penthesilea and her Amazons go to battle, she is once again attacked for her gender. Thersites, friend of Achilles, chides Troy for enlisting Penthesilea's help: 'Lo, to-day

Troy's latest hope, there comes to challenge thee
A woman.' Then Achilles laughed aloud…
…Achilles laughed: 'Come, yet another day
I shall have peace and leisure from the fight.
I wore a woman's robes once, feigned their ways
In Scyros, and I know them.' (40)

Achilles joins the joking by saying that the fight will still be equal and enjoyable because he had once worn women's clothing and he knows their ways because of it. The Amazons' and Penthesilea's strengths are questioned and mocked, especially on the

battlefield. The mockery does not last for long, though. After a few battles, of which Achilles chooses not to participate in, a runner returns to the camp and informs Achilles that the Amazons are ravaging the Greeks:

> ‘Come to the trench, Achilles, come and see!
> Not women are these Amazons but wolves!
> Like Mænads, maddened beyond strength of men,
> They rage and with amazement bear us down.’ (44)

This is the moment when everyone, from Priam to Achilles, even the reader, realizes that Penthesilea and the Amazons are a powerful force not to be mocked. When Achilles and Penthesilea finally meet, Penthesilea makes a speech about not judging one by their gender:

> ‘Nay, thou shalt not think such scorn
> Of me that am a woman. Men are bold,
> All men are bold, and women are all weak,
> Thou think’st, yet when a woman’s heart is bold,
> By so much more it can outmatch a man’s
> As all her strength is in extremity,
> Sped like a shaft that stops but in a wound!
> Though but a woman, thou hast cause to fear
> And fear me most, because I stand alone.’ (56)

Penthesilea lectures Achilles about the dangers of speaking in absolutes about “all men” and “all women.” Though she wishes to die, she still will not allow any man to speak

badly of her based on something as meaningless as her gender. By telling Achilles that he had reason to fear, though, he felt the need to move immediately, and slew her with his spear. At this point in Binyon's poem, the narrative returns almost exactly to that of the ancient variations: Achilles removes Penthesilea's helmet and recognizes her beauty. Thersites chides him and calls him Paris for loving her. Achilles lashes out at Thersites before returning to mourn Penthesilea's body.

Conclusion

Though this paper ends at the modern era, the tale of Penthesilea still lives on today in such works as Robert Graves's poem, "Penthesilea," Robert Nye's play, *Penthesilea*, and John Banville's play, *Love in the Wars*. There are also many contemporary heroines that seem to have been inspired by the great Amazonian queen. Currently captivating many viewers is the television series *Game of Throne,* which is based on George R.R. Martin's book series, *A Song of Ice and Fire.* Within this universe, the character Brienne of Tarth shares many recognizable traits with Penthesilea. Brienne is a female knight, who is often chided for being a woman fighting in the wars. She greatly admires Renly Baratheon and comes to fight for him, similar to how Penthesilea admires Hector when she comes to fight for Troy (*Game of Thrones* "Season 2"). When Renly dies, she continues to fight, but later finds herself falling in love with Jaime Lannister, the Achilles figure of the opposing side ("Seasons 3-4"). Given the fact that the show is still running, Brienne's fate is still unknown, but given the number of similarities that she shares with Penthesilea, it can be assumed that she may be slain by Jaime Lannister.

However, there is another adaptation that has been around much longer than *Game of Thrones.* Though it is not a literal adaptation of the Penthesilea tale, the saga of Wonder Woman begins in such a way that the parallels cannot be ignored. Kleinbaum lays out these similarities in her book:

> Americans have especially enjoyed the fantasy of Wonder Woman. Making her debut in 1941, she was an Amazon princess, the daughter of Queen Hippolyta who left the female society of Paradise Island to help the United States of

> America fight the Nazis, just as Penthesilea had come to aid the Trojans so many years ago. (Kleinbaum 206)

Similar to many of the versions of the Penthesilea tale, Wonder Woman is also questioned due to her gender, but, given her upbringing on Paradise Island, she refuses to let gender inequality stand in her way. Wonder Woman's existence in the mainstream paved the way for her to become a feminist icon.

One of the key factors that allows Wonder Woman to continue on the path as this feminist icon is that she did not die as Penthesilea did—she does not die at all. She continues to be an ongoing character in the DC Comics universe, her story continuing for decades past her intervention in the Second World War. This raises the question: What would have happened to the character of Penthesilea and her perception if she had not been killed by Achilles, Pyrrhus, or Neoptolemus? However, this is a question that will likely never be answered. In many rewritings of any story, there are certain occurrences that simply are never changed, and Penthesilea's death is likely to remain unaltered for many renditions to come. Though the details and the harshness are up for interpretation, Penthesilea always falls while fighting at Troy.

From her first appearance on each page of the works in which she appears until her death, she is allowed a unique personality that is formed by each individual author. When women have always been seen as lesser than men, the image of a strong, rebellious, warrior queen makes excellent literary fodder for authors across the western world. Some chose to embrace her figure, while others chose to destroy her.

Whatever decision was made by the author often followed a trend also followed by his contemporaries, suggesting that the ideas of the times largely influenced their

perception of the Amazons and Queen Penthesilea. For the ancient writers, though the Amazons represented a foreign invading force, Penthesilea was glorified enough to lift Achilles up even higher when he defeated her. The medieval writers did not share the same high opinions of her, as many authors took out their animosity towards her rebellion by having her body mutilated and making her unloved in their texts. Renaissance authors slowly began to return to the ideas shared by the ancient writers but still clung to many of the sources from medieval times, while Heinrich von Kleist turns the entire tale on its head by marrying the ancient with the absurd. The tale comes full circle by the modern era when Binyon revives the original ancient version of Penthesilea, though he inserts some of his own modern commentary about her gender. This distinct pattern creates a unique journey for Penthesilea in which her character returns to the same plot after 3000 years yet has suddenly acquired dozens of lifetime's worth of personality traits. As each new writer approaches her story, they apply their own ideals to her personality. Many authors may also be inspired by some of the previous texts from any of the time periods outlined in this paper.

With the changing political atmosphere surrounding women in the United States today, there are many possibilities for what could become of the Penthesilea tale if a contemporary author attempted to write an adaptation applying our 21st century beliefs. Many authors today are pushing for more strong, female heroines in literature, and Penthesilea has many of the basic traits necessary to build up that archetype, depending on which version of her tale one examines. As mentioned earlier, every iteration of the Penthesilea tale ends with her dying, but a more female friendly rendition could possibly find a way to remove that; if not, it could potentially make her death seem more like a

historical necessity (e.g. implying that her death brings about the end of the Amazons) than a message about stepping outside of gender roles. Regardless of the path a new author takes, Penthesilea and her many lives will always be a reflection of the time in which the tale is written. A new author cannot claim the tale as their own if he or she does not make a change to the text, and that change will likely reveal the principles of the author.

I pledge that I have neither given nor received any unauthorized aid on this paper.

-Samantha Baldwin

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