GENDER AND MEDIEVALISM

AMAZONS AND GUÉRILLÈRES

Many feminist readers of medieval literature have a special interest in the Amazons, and many have taken on some of the singular interpretive challenges they present. Personally speaking, I am delighted, but not puzzled by Amazons as a woman-only community. Medieval culture had ample room to imagine women's communities, based on monastic models and other, gendered social groupings. Estates literature, for example, routinely grouped women as a distinct category, subdivided between nuns and laywomen, who were further subdivided in the relationship to men as maidens, wives, and widows. The Amazons belong to this heavily gendered cultural imagination, and for medieval people, they were probably a historical reality. What does puzzle me, however, is the relationship between women and warfare that is salient in most medieval Amazon representations. Their interface with patriarchal society was not as men's property but as men's adversary. What did it mean for feudal society to imagine women as soldiers?

In thinking about this question it is important to remember two features of feudal warfare. First, it was utterly brutal. Courtly tales such as the Arthurian romances, and even many chronicles, transform and ritualize a cruel, no-holdsbarred reality. To illustrate: "At the Battle of Bouvines in 1214, the Germans in the army of Emperor Otto IV used a new type of three-edged knife which was considered a particularly cruel weapon" instead of swords. In a war against the French, King Peter of Aragon poisoned the watering holes, killing thirty thousand horses. And in a conflict with England, the Flemish "dug pits and placed sharp stakes at the bottom that impaled the French knights."1 And second, warfare was incessant. Especially during the later Middle Ages, entire communities lived their lives in and around warfare, and this situation could endure for generations. Historical chronicles convey this aspect of medieval life very effectively. My own insight came from reading the Strasbourg Chronicle written by Jakob Twinger von Königshofen from the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. The chronicle tells of inconclusive battles, revolts, civic unrest, raids, shifting alliances, and rebellions interspersed with news of weather disasters and crop failure. Schemes to contain warfare were no more successful than efforts to insure the harvest.

What did it mean, then, to imagine an all-woman army? To provide a hypothesis, I will need some methodological assistance from a classic essay by Lillian S. Robinson.² Her topic was the lady knight of Renaissance epic. Although she has some valuable observations on medieval chivalry per se, what I find most helpful is her way of thinking about military women in literature, what she

calls her "allegorical mode" of interpretation (159). Characters like Brytomart have comparatively little to do with historical women's self-determination, independence, or political power. What they do signal is a reformed ideal of elite masculinity. Bradamante, Clorinda, or Brytomart were interesting and viable when certain "feminine" qualities were needed for real-world statecraft as it was practiced by males. These included the ability to balance competing religious, economic, or political interests; ability to compromise on points of honor in order to achieve a higher personal or moral expediency; and insight into one's historical or dynastic role beyond immediate desires (168). Poets in the service of rulers made excellent use of the fundamentally misogynist notion that womanhood equals mutability. The result was that the literary ideal of the lady knight served to guide men toward more effective statecraft.

Amazons, Robinson notes, were the military models for the Renaissance lady knights, although Amazons generally do not play a part in heterosexual love stories as do the lady knights. But like the lady knights, they say something about a masculine ideal. In fact, Amazons add a stark and rather terrifying dimension to medieval stories of war and statecraft: they are a futuristic image of an efficient army, professionally dedicated to its purpose, under strong central control. They contrast with other modes of military representation, which is to say they do not have the problems and entanglements that often occupy male knights. Amazons have group cohesion rather than errant individuality; they are not competitive with comrades in arms, as Arthurian knights often are; they are ruthlessly efficient in battle and tend to avoid messy truces and pardons; they are never idle, corrupt, or gluttonous; they leave the scene when the work is done; they obey their leadership without question. Above all, they have no distracting entanglements with the opposite sex. The possibility of making war without love is what makes the Amazon army a really powerful signifier in the medieval literary context. If chivalry is an idealized image of warfare in which love and statecraft are variously combined, then the Amazon army is an allegory of war without the contingencies of love. The troops of Amazon women were able to convey a chilling ideal that did not fit easily with conventional representations of military men, or with the conventional goals of romance or historical narrative. As an ideal fighting machine in a bloody and particularistic world, they would have been the dream team of any prince or potentate. The medieval Amazons' closest real-life analogue are probably the Knights Templar, who took vows of poverty, obedience, and chastity, and were strictly enjoined to avoid women, even their own female relatives (Bumke 298).

I would further hypothesize that the Amazon army conveyed a message of near total mobilization, consuming those members of society that normally would be non-combatants. In the Middle Ages, "the most glaring sex division of labor did not occur between the home and the field, workshop, or marketplace, but

between all of these locales and the field of battle" (Robinson 164). War was officially a man's world. Non-combatants, however, suffered extensive collateral damage. These non-combatants included women and children, nuns and monks, the elderly, clerics, peasants, and innocent bystanders—just about everybody except able-bodied men of the ruling elite. Putting women into this man's world has the symbolic effect of converting bystanders into agents of violence, and of making everyone a combatant. One text that conveys this idea is Wolfram von Eschenbach's Willehalm, where the exertions of women defending a castle are described in unusual detail. Not every medieval source mentions the Amazon's missing breast. One that does is Konrad von Würzburg's Trojanerkrieg. In an ethnographic digression based on the authority of Alexander the Great, Konrad explains how the Amazon mother cuts off her daughter's right breast to make her adept with sword and spear. The mutilated chest is called "Amazon," Konrad explains, and the whole people are named after it. His Amazons depict a society under total mobilization, in which even the resources of maternal careor anything the breast may signify in the medieval world—are turned to efficient violence.

The theory that the Amazons signal an optimal army in the fictional world of chivalry, as well as a vision of near total deployment, does not mean that they were unrelated to the experiences or expectations of women. "The allegorical mode," Robinson writes, "makes it possible for more than one set of correspondences to be suggested by the same character or incident" (170). Some women in the Middle Ages were military leaders, although their numbers may have been small. Others were capable of defensive warfare in the absence of male relatives (Bumke 350). Amazon names were bestowed on some medieval women as a term of praise. The notion of women exempt from physical force because of their physical strength must have been a fascination for medieval audiences. The same can be said for the overt play with gender mutability that is found in any medieval Amazon text. It would be satisfying to know more about how literary Amazons connected to the lives of medieval women. But the more accessible connection is to the lives and literature of women readers today. How does Amazon militarism look in a contemporary framework?

Monique Wittig's Les Guérillères was published in 1969 and the English translation appeared in 1971.³ It is both a feminist manifesto and a literary statement of lesbian self-determination. The title is a feminine plural nonce word, comprehensible from the existing French words for "female warrior" (guerrière) and "guerrilla" (guérilla). It supersedes "Amazon" as the woman warriors' self designation. To read Les Guérillères is to enter into Amazon subjectivity and understand Amazon lore and traditions from an Amazon standpoint. It is both humorous and erudite, and works very well in conjunction

with texts from the Middle Ages and antiquity. Above all, it places Amazon militarism in a contemporary utopian horizon.

The text of this feminist epic is a series of fragments, although they are sufficiently connected to allow the reader to construct a story. The Guérillères are on the verge of establishing a post-patriarchal utopia, the Glorious Age. A final battle against the opposing forces, who are not very vividly imagined in the text, is fought and won at the conclusion of the epic. For these Amazon descendants, the last battle is needed to ensure liberty. The warriors are fighting patriarchy, defined in a way familiar to medievalists as both symbolic domination and social oppression. Men per se are not the enemy, but horrible tortures are reserved for "those males who founded their celebrity on the women's downfall, exulting in their slavery whether in their writings in their laws in their actions. For these there are got ready the racks, the screw-plates the machines for twisting and grinding. The women stop their ears with wax so as not to hear their discordant cries...." (110). Thus misogynists meet their doom. Warfare itself is a varied and highly creative activity. There is a compelling depiction of a siege in which women, "their faces covered with shining powder," defend a city from the ramparts. They bare their breasts as a sign of defiance, but the enemy mistakes this gesture as surrender. The women wipe out the peace ambassadors (99). The scene is an excellent counterpart to the Willehalm passage mentioned above, where the women are compelled to transform themselves into minneladies to "compensate" the returning knights. Other battle fragments have the texture of science fiction or play-ground fantasy: "From pedal canoes in ambush behind the rocks the women attacked the bearded strangers when they attempt a landing. They make their machines move backwards if the men abandon their intention, and hide as best they can... They advance openly if the men show signs of approaching and greet them with clouds of arrows" (111). As these examples show, Amazon tactics involve the enemy's inability to "read" their culture. Their goal is total annihilation of the enemy and the establishment of a new symbolic order. Like their medieval counterparts, the Guérillères fight without compromise, as expressed in this fragment: "They say, hell, let the earth become a vast hell destroying killing and setting fire to buildings of men, to theaters national assemblies to museums libraries prisons psychiatric hospitals factories old and new from which they free the slaves" (130).

As a fantasy of an optimal fighting force, these woman warriors are comparable to the medieval Amazons. Again, they are a military ideal and a vision of total mobilization, although their historical root is contemporary. In the second wave, the theory and possibility of violence against the violence of oppression was hotly debated, as it was in the Civil Rights movement, in the students' and workers' revolt in France, and in the anti-war movement.

The Amazons as the dream team of radical feminism do make a difference. however. This difference lies in Wittig's avant-garde demonstration that language itself is a weapon, that words are material, and that literature is literal. Medieval writers expended much effort in recuperating Amazons to dominant schemes of gender representation. The larger task facing the Guérillères, however, is the creation of a new language appropriate to their selfunderstanding, as well as "truer" symbols, tales, and myths about who they are. Les Guérillères is written in fragments in order to do violence to literary form, and because the Amazons' self-knowledge and sense of the past is fragmented. The fragments embed bits from patriarchal tradition, which the Guérillères "read" against the horizon of their new, symbolic culture. These include Amazon lore as transmitted in medieval and classical sources, as well as information about witches, woman unionists, and other militant forebears. Amazons' names are exhaustively represented, usually in lists or clusters on otherwise blank pages. The names of male authorities such as Virgil and Herodotous, however, are lost to the Guérillères due to the systematic vagaries of textual transmission or cultural memory. Les Guérillères can easily be read along with Wittig's Lesbian Peoples: Materials for a Dictionary, which works almost as a reference guide to the epic.⁴ The experience is not unlike reading a medieval fragment with a scholarly commentary, except there is no hierarchical relationship between these texts. The Dictionary illuminates, but does not clearly follow from the epic. Words and stories are Wittig's weapons of choice: "They say, we must disregard all the stories relating to those of them who have been betrayed, beaten, seized, seduced, carried off, violated, and exchanged as vile and precious merchandise...they say that in the first place the vocabulary of every language is to be examined, modified, turned upside down, that every word must be screened" (134). The openness of the text permits the Guérillères to rethink and revise their own myths and symbols, avoiding the pitfalls of essentialism. Even Wittig's paratactic style is an intentional effort to avoid subordination on the level of grammar.

Sarah Westphal McGill University

¹Joachim Bumke, Courtly Culture: Literature and Society in the High Middle Ages, trans. Thomas Dunlap (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1991), 174.

²Lillian S. Robinson, "Women Under Capitalism: The Renaissance Lady," in *Sex, Class and Culture* (New York: Methuen, 1978), 150-76.

³Monique Wittig, Les Guérillères, trans. David Le Vay (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985).

⁴Monique Wittig and Sande Zeig, Lesbian Peoples: Material for a Dictionary (New York: Avon, 1979).