Articulating the Identity of Wonder Woman Through Myth

In ancient myth Amazons are constructed through comparison and contrast with Greek, and at times specifically Athenian, society. The studies of Page duBois, Kristina Passman, Andrew Stewart, and William Blake Tyrrell may differ in their emphases and inflections, but they help readers to develop a general portrait of Amazon identity through disparate sources and centuries. They show us that, to a large extent, Amazons are configured as opposites to Greeks. Amazons are not Greek and not patriarchal. Amazon women do not conform to a Greek ideological identification with the inside of the house. Rather, they ride horses and fight. And their battle style—in light armor and/or on horseback—contrasts with the interlocking hoplite foot soldiers who serve as a symbol of Classical Athenian democratic community. The Amazons are sometimes presented as adhering to the male heroic code; they may also be presented as sexually desirable—though unmarried or unavailable—females. When I encountered some recent depictions of Wonder Woman, who is nominally an Amazon, I thought about the Amazons' identification through comparison and contrast. But instead of considering how Wonder Woman relates to the ancient Greeks, I decided to look at how her identity is articulated through her relationship to figures from Classical mythology. In what follows I'll discuss four texts: *Diana: Princess of the Amazons* (2020) by Shannon Hale, Dean Hale, and Victoria Yang, *Wonder Woman Wrestles Circe's Sorcery* (2017) by Matthew K. Manning and Ethen Beavers, *Wonder Woman and the Pandora Plot* (2020) by Ivan Cohen and Greg Schigiel, and *Wonder Woman: Tempest Tossed* (2020) by Laurie Halse Anderson, Leila del Duca, et al.

In the graphic novel *Diana: Princess of the Amazons* a young Diana struggles to find her place in Amazon society. As the only child on the island of Themiscyra, she is lonely, and she

attempts to make a friend out of clay. When the sculpted clay figure appears to become animate, it encourages Diana in a series of pranks and goads Diana into proving herself by opening the door to Tartarus, something only a true Amazon can do. Unfortunately, Diana's new friend is not a friend at all: she is Circe in disguise, and she knows that Diana's opening of the fateful door will release a horde of monsters. When the monsters attack, Diana summons the other Amazons, but Circe, now revealed, turns them into animals. Queen Hippolyta keeps Circe at bay while Diana, at her mother's urging, manages to re-close the door. Circe takes the form of a bird to fly away, and Diana takes her place more contentedly among the Amazons. She makes amends for her pranks, is appointed as a steward of the island's wildlife, and bonds with her mother.

Circe is a featured character in book 10 of Homer's *Odyssey*. The granddaughter of the Sun, she inhabits the island of Aeaea, where Odysseus and his men land on their journey from Troy. She turns some of Odysseus' men into pigs, but Odysseus receives help from Hermes, avoids a similar fate, and gets his men returned to human form. However, Odysseus succumbs to Circe's enchantment in another way: he stays with her for a year before his men press him to continue the trip back to Ithaca. The Homeric episode explores gender dynamics. Circe uses her powers to flip the male/female hierarchy, and though Odysseus seems to restore it with Hermes' help, Circe's sexual allure and its effects on Odysseus suggest that female power is not entirely subordinated.

The Circe of *Diana: Princess of the Amazons* also disrupts accepted hierarchies, though not the hierarchy of gender. Appealing to Diana's insecurities like the Homeric Circe appealed to Odysseus' desires, Circe encourages Diana to push against the adult/child social hierarchy by skipping lessons and playing tricks on the Amazons. Circe's attempt to free the monsters kept in

Tartarus is another move against the status quo and its disposition of powers. This Circe uses others to sow disorder, as she orchestrates Diana's childish misbehavior and the more cosmically consequential attack of the monsters. In the course of the graphic novel, Diana comes to support order and finds a more established place in her society. Queen Hippolyta even ultimately speaks of Diana as if she occupies the pinnacle of the Amazon hierarchy: "Diana, you are the best of us" (132). The graphic novel uses Circe as a female non-role-model which Diana finally opts against, and her new sense of self is partly defined by that choice.

Diana—grown into Wonder Woman—meets Circe again in the easy reader *Wonder Woman Wrestles Circe's Sorcery*. In the search for a necklace stolen from a museum, Wonder Woman tracks Circe to a tropical island and then follows her through a portal into a different dimension. Despite fighting in unfamiliar and disorienting territory, Wonder Woman uses her magic lasso and invisible jet to capture Circe and bring her back to Gateway City. The stolen necklace is returned, and two museum guards whom Circe had changed into pigs are returned to their human forms. The book closes with Wonder Woman leaping triumphantly from her jet over the Gateway City Bridge.

Wonder Woman Wrestles Circe's Sorcery affirms Wonder Woman's identity through the conflict and contrast with Circe. That Circe represents a possible, alternate path for Wonder Woman is illustrated when Wonder Woman pauses by a pool on the island and sees her own reflection shift into Circe's. But when the two fight in the new dimension, Wonder Woman recalls her defining moment as an Amazon—her victory in the competition to become Wonder Woman and serve as the Amazon's ambassador in the wider world. This memory fortifies her as she works to subdue Circe. And ultimately Wonder Woman undoes Circe's deeds: the guards' animal metamorphosis is reversed and the necklace is restored to the museum. In a final

difference from Circe, Wonder Woman puts her powers to use to serve and save others, while Circe is selfishly interested in procuring a piece of jewelry for herself. Not only is Wonder Woman decisively not Circe, but she is also the "right" kind of woman.

Another easy reader, *Wonder Woman and the Pandora Plot*, uses Pandora—who, like Circe, is a mythological example of the "wrong" kind of woman—to bring the character of Wonder Woman into relief. In Hesiod's *Works and Days*, Pandora is created by Zeus to cause problems for humans and is given gifts by the other gods. Opening a jar, she releases troubles into the world; closing it, she keeps hope in the jar. While Pandora herself doesn't make a direct appearance in *Wonder Woman and the Pandora Plot*, the jar does. Usually kept in a vault on the Amazons' island of Themiscyra, the jar is taken by Ares and planted in a New York museum from which it is stolen by Giganta, a human woman able to increase her size and prompted to undertake the theft by a dream. A leak in the jar is making people violent, and Wonder Woman learns from her mother that the effect will be permanent if the jar is entirely opened and the troubles dispersed during an upcoming planetary alignment. That's what Ares is banking on, and because only a human can open the jar, he is using Giganta to complete his plan. However, Wonder Woman persuades Giganta to resist Ares, reseal the jar, and repair its crack with the magic lasso. Although Giganta is surprised that Wonder Woman trusts her with her "most powerful weapon" (64), Wonder Woman concludes that the lasso isn't her most powerful weapon: hope is.

The mythological Pandora serves as a comparison/contrast case for both Giganta and Wonder Woman. Giganta seems to be a new Pandora: she is used by a god (Ares rather than Zeus), and her opening of the jar will cause misery for humans. But when Giganta defies Ares' plan and closes the jar, she acts of her own accord for the safety of humans. Wonder Woman's

urging is instrumental in turning Giganta into a benign Pandora, and Wonder Woman herself can also be seen as a revised Pandora of sorts. Like Pandora, Wonder Woman was gifted by the gods (20), but she works in the cause of human security, not misery. While the mythological Pandora leaves hope in the jar, Wonder Woman sees hope as a force out in the world and in humans, a view reinforced by Giganta's change of heart. Giganta may resume being a villain in the DC universe, but Wonder Woman more definitively departs from the example of a "bad woman" established by the myth of Pandora.

In the YA graphic novel *Wonder Woman: Tempest Tossed*, Anderson, del Duca, et al. give audiences a different view of the Amazon-turned-superhero. They present an awkward, teenaged Diana who is separated from Themiscyra when she leaves the island to aid some refugees caught in a storm at sea. After spending time in a refugee camp herself, she is brought to New York City by a gay couple, Steve and Trevor, who work for the UN. There, she lives with a Polish immigrant, Henke, and her granddaughter Raissa. Diana helps Raissa provide free meals for the neighborhood children, but their efforts on behalf of the community run afoul of corporate designs to develop the area commercially. The same corporation runs a child-trafficking ring, and Diana uses her powers to rescue some captured young people. The graphic novel ends with Diana and her new friends visiting the Statue of Liberty and embracing the idea of an America open to immigrants and committed to social justice. Although Diana uses more-than-human means in her fight with the child-traffickers, for the most part the graphic novel downplays her heightened physical powers, focusing instead on her efforts to use her background—like her gift for languages—to help others. Gone is Wonder Woman's signature outfit, replaced by the jeans and t-shirts of contemporary America. This is Wonder Woman *incognita* and politically correct, a progressive role model.

Anderson uses Greek goddesses to chart Diana's identity and her new connection to the United States. Readers are told that Athena, Aphrodite, Demeter, Artemis, and Hestia created the Amazons as "a race of peace-loving warriors—forged to protect the world" (10-11). These same goddesses granted the Amazon queen's wish for a child and turned a clay baby into the animate Diana. Painfully awkward and weak at the time of her sixteenth birthday on Themiscyra, Diana prays to the goddesses, asking Athena for wisdom, Aphrodite for compassion, Demeter for the Earth's strength, Artemis for a hunter's skill, and Hestia for continued protection of the Amazon's island as well as help in becoming "a worthy Amazon" (18). Diana brings the goddesses' gifts to bear in the sea-storm, the refugee camp, and New York. Upon arrival in the city, Diana notes the likeness between the Statue of Liberty and the goddess Hestia, whose province is the hearth and home. By the end of the graphic novel, Diana is an animate manifestation of Hestia in the here and now, an enlivened Liberty, and Diana achieves her dream of becoming a "worthy Amazon" by championing American ideals and protecting those who need her help. Themiscyra and New York are connected by Hestia's protection of the Amazon island and the Statue of Liberty's promise of safe harbor to immigrants, by Diana's early training among the Amazons and her use of that training as she works for justice in the modern metropolis. Awkward no longer, Diana realizes her identity as "a worthy Amazon" not by staying on Themiscyra but by coming to America and putting the gifts of the goddess into action.

While the ancient Greeks used their own social norms as a basis for articulating the Amazons through comparison and contrast, the texts I've discussed here use Classical mythology to express who Wonder Woman is and isn't. She is like Hestia and the other goddesses of Themiscyra; she is unlike the destabilizing mythical females Circe and Pandora. She is also

unlike the Amazons of Classical myth in that she aims to protect, not attack, humans beyond Amazonian society. The Amazons of Classical myth and DC comics stay on the margins. The one group is antagonistic, the other benevolent, but both renditions retain Amazons as outsiders. Wonder Woman becomes an exception by moving from our margins to center, from our outside to inside. This movement may seem, may even be, a positive affirmation of female power, yet it may also signal the subordination or domestication of female power as it is rendered unstrange and undifficult, a force to be called on rather than reckoned with. I am reminded of Passman's discussion of "good" Amazon-esque figures in cinema—characters like Sarah Connor in the *Terminator* series and Ripley in the *Alien* films—whose fighting is seen as positive because it is undertaken in the service of protecting and mothering. Although Passman's essay was written before the recent bout of Wonder Woman media, I think of Wonder Woman as a quintessentially "good Amazon" in Passman's sense. And yet the very phrase makes me ask: when "good" is defined by patriarchal society's sense of gender-appropriate behavior, is a "good Amazon" an Amazon at all? Just as Wonder Woman becomes geographically distanced from the island of Themiscyra, she seems exiled—in terms of ideology and identity—from her mythological ancestors.

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