

# The Amazonian Myth and Male Authorship in the Greek East

By Kris Perdue, kaperdue@uncg.edu

UNCG, Department of Ancient Mediterranean Studies and Archaeology

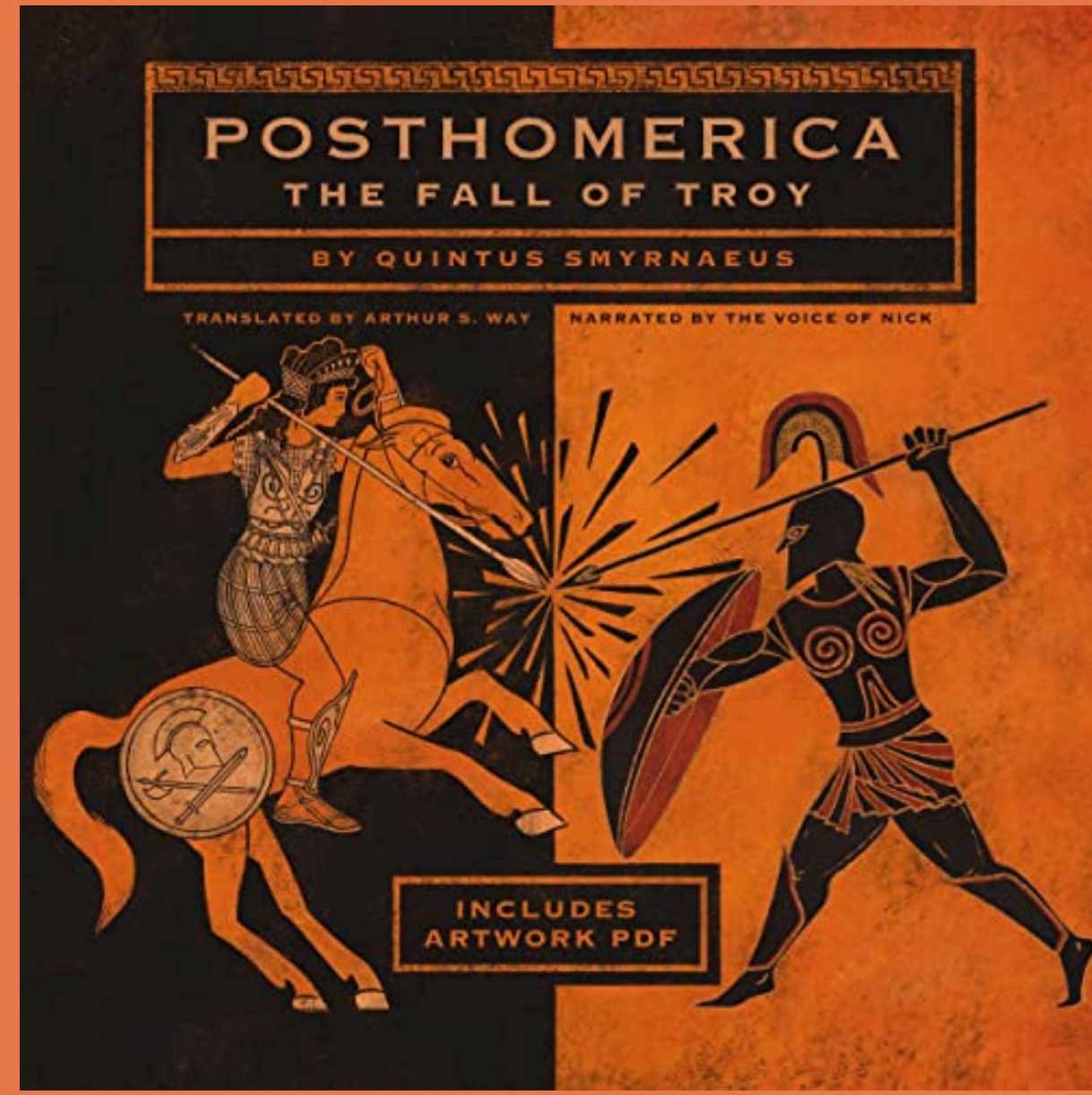


Fig. 1

## Quintus Smyrnaeus

- Greek epic poet from Smyrna (Anatolian coast)
- Dated around the 4<sup>th</sup> c. CE
- Wrote the *Posthomerica*, an epic poem of 14 books, following the style of Homer
- Covers period between end of *Iliad* and end of Trojan War
- Earliest surviving work on this period

like a goddess  
beautiful

daughter of Ares  
warlike  
modest  
fearless  
noble  
alluring  
lovely  
radiant  
fierce  
invincible

Fig. 4

## The Amazonian Myth

Although inspired by the historical Scythian and Sauromatai tribes of modern-day Iran and Ukraine, Amazon depictions are largely fictional, shaped by male authors' anxieties about female power and masculinity. These narratives served to both titillate and warn; while warrior women are alluring, they are dangerous and must be subdued to maintain male dominance. The Amazons, therefore, are not just mythical enemies, but embodiments of male anxiety over gender roles.



Fig. 7

## Introduction

Penthesilea was a mythological Amazonian warrior queen who came to the aid of Troy during the Trojan War. Her story is told in Quintus Smyrnaeus' *Posthomerica* (see sidebar). Quintus' depiction of Penthesilea reflects the values, fears, and gender ideologies of ancient Greek patriarchal society. Women in Greek literature are only permitted to express masculinity if they meet one of three conditions: they are divine (Athena), have mythological exceptions (Palaestra, the Amazons), or are ultimately "conquered" through death or marriage (Atalanta). Penthesilea fulfills all three. Her death at the hands of Achilles symbolizes the subconscious need of Greek authors to conquer female masculinity, restoring patriarchal order. **Greek authors such as Quintus symbolically confronted and defeated their fear of and attraction to female masculinity through myth, and therefore ensured the continuation and dominance of Greek patriarchal society by controlling the narrative young women learned about female masculinity.** I will explore these themes by focusing on the narrative treatment of three different (groups of) women: Trojan women, Penthesilea, and Antiope.



Fig. 2

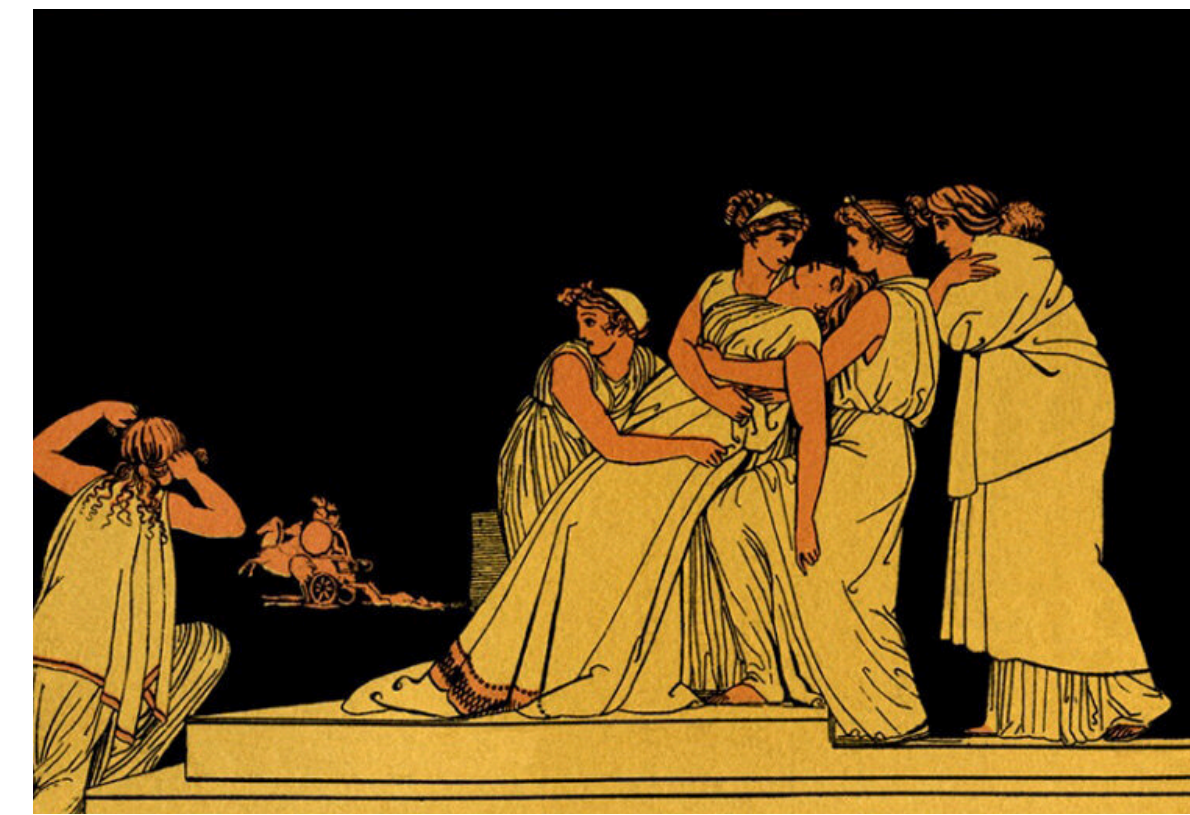


Fig. 3

## The Trojan Women

In Book 1, the Trojan women (Fig. 3) are inspired by Penthesilea to take up arms and fight, but a speech by Theano, a Trojan priestess, brings them back to reality. She reminds them that Penthesilea is an abnormality, that she and other Amazons are allowed to perform their masculinity because they are not the same as mortal women. The Amazons represented the threat of female agency and masculinity to Greek patriarchal society. *Parthenoi*, young women just reaching marriage age and closely aligned with the Amazons, were considered a threat because they were at the peak of their desirability, and thus at the peak of their ability to influence men with their allure, but were also considered to be young and impressionable. Thus, literature had to depict the path of a masculine woman as ultimately ending in submission to men, one way or another, to ensure that women would not try to follow this path and ensure the continuation of the patriarchy.

## Theano's Speech to the Trojan Women

"Wretched women, **untreated in the work of war** and **innocently eager** for a task that is beyond your powers...your strength will not match that of experienced Danaan warriors. The **Amazons devote themselves to cruel conflict**, horse riding and **manly pursuits** from their earliest years. That is why they always have a **warlike spirit** and are **not inferior to men**...as for Penthesilea, it is said also that she is the **daughter of mighty Ares**; hence she must be **peerless among women**..."

-Quintus of Smyrna, *Posthomerica*

## Penthesilea

Penthesilea (Fig. 2) is described with both masculine and feminine terms in the *Posthomerica*. This contradiction is representative of the boundary-pushing role of the Amazons and other masculine women in Greek literature. It demonstrates the internal struggle male authors in antiquity experienced between their attraction to and fear of these masculine women. They are at the same time desirable and dangerous. There is a strong emphasis throughout the narrative on Penthesilea's physical beauty and desirability to men. This sexualization invites the male gaze to look at and objectify her, which takes away from her power and individuality. At the same time, it is made clear by the narrative that Penthesilea would not make a good wife by Greek standards. The Amazons represent the allure of a powerful woman, but also the danger that comes with that, and the threat powerful women presented to the social order of ancient Greece.

## Penthesilea Enters Troy

"Penthesilea stood out among the Amazons as she came into the city of Troy. Hastening to gather around her, the Trojans were amazed at the sight of **invincible Ares' daughter** with her high greaves. She was **like a goddess**: her face bore an expression at once **fierce** and **radiant**; she had an **alluring smile**, her **lovely eyes sparkled like sunbeams** beneath her brows, a **modest blush** covered her cheeks, and over all this was spread a **divine grace** that enveloped her **warlike strength**."

-Quintus of Smyrna, *Posthomerica*

Penthesilea is symbolically and literally conquered through her death at the hands of Achilles (Fig. 5). In death, she loses her masculine traits and is described with exclusively feminine terminology. Her submission to Achilles and beauty are emphasized, and thus her appeal to the male gaze and submission to male dominance. Her death reinforces Greek patriarchy and the idea that all women will eventually be subject to it in one way or another.

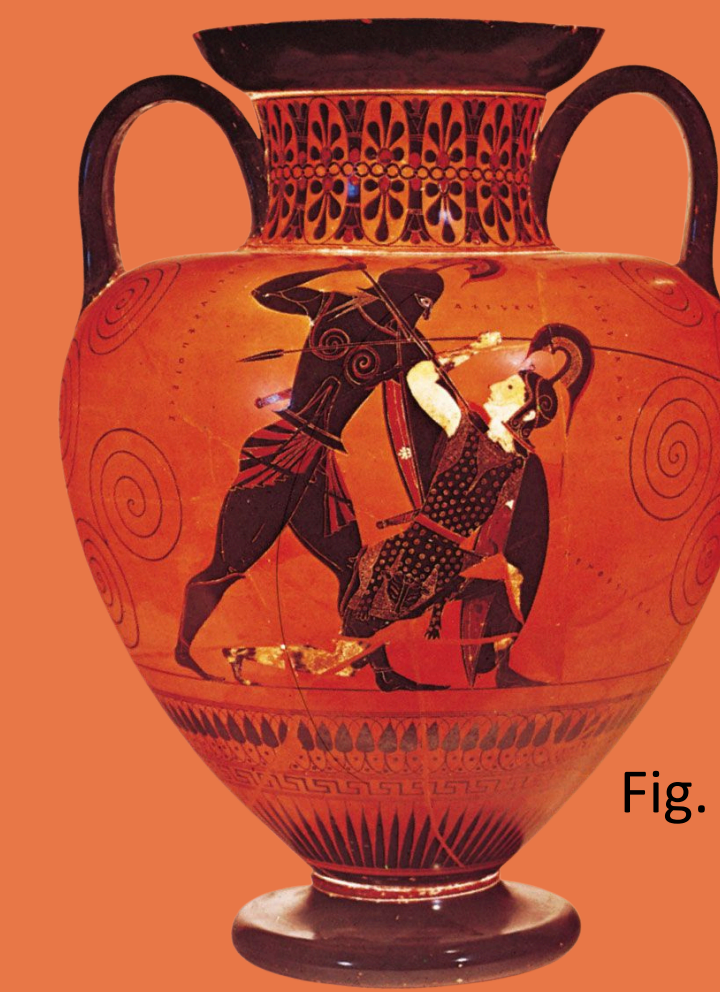


Fig. 5

## Death of Penthesilea

"Peleus son cut straight through Penthesilea and her handsome steed with one thrust of his raging spear, and she soon mingled with dust and death. She fell to the ground decorously, her **noble body modest** and showing nothing shameful as she stretched out **prone**, struggling convulsively round the spear, her swift steed fallen under her... Penthesilea fell from her swift steed, still **beautiful but with her strength destroyed**...Achilles continued sore at heart because he had killed her instead of taking her back to Phthia, land of horses, as his wife, so **perfectly beautiful** was she, and in appearance so **like a goddess**."

-Quintus of Smyrna, *Posthomerica*

## Antiope

The story of another Amazonian, Antiope, is an example of an Amazon who is "domesticated" into traditional Greek femininity through marriage. Antiope is kidnapped (Fig. 6), raped, and forced into marriage by the Athenian hero Theseus, and thus she takes on the subservient role expected of women in Greek society as a wife, unlike Penthesilea, who became subservient to men through her death. She was no longer a young woman (parthenia) and was now an Athenian matron who brought feminine honor to her husband. This conquering is symbolic of the conquering of female masculinity and parthenoi through the traditional route of marriage. The message to young women is thus reinforced that female masculinity always ends in male dominance.



Fig. 6

## Conclusion

- Penthesilea=strong female character created by male authors
  - present for the men to explore and conquer their fear of and attraction to these women
  - must be conquered, literally or symbolically
  - must be divine or a mythological exception to the norm
- Restrictions serve to box in female masculinity in order to control it
- Stories of masculine women served as warnings to Greek women to stick to their role, or bad things could happen
- Masculine traits were demonized, therefore reinforcing the patriarchy of ancient Greece

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- Fig. 1: <https://www.audible.com/pd/Posthomerica-The-Fall-of-Troy-Audiobook/B0B2JT5GBQ>
- Fig. 2: Armed Amazon, her shield decorates a Gorgon head; Tondo of Attic red-figure kylix, c. 500 BCE, Staatliche Antikensammlungen, Berlin. By Euphronios. Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=2770049>
- Fig. 3: Andromache Fainting on the Wall, <https://www.penguin.co.uk/discover/articles/ten-things-about-women-of-troy>
- Fig. 5: Exekias, Achilles slaying Penthesilea, Attic black-figure amphora, c. 530–525 BCE; British Museum, London. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Penthesilea>
- Fig. 6: Abduction of Antiope with Theseus and Pirithous, Attic red-figure belly amphora, c.500-490 BC, <https://www.meisterdrucke.de/>
- Fig. 7: Scythian gold comb from Solokha, early 4th century BC. Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=426403>