The Wounded Amazon in Art: A Psychoanalytic Approach

Rarely have archaeologists applied psychoanalytic theories to Greek and Roman art, though scholars and psychoanalysts have regularly employed them to better understand ancient myths and art from the Renaissance onwards (e.g. Caldwell 1989, Adams 1993). Scholars have approached the well-documented myths of the Amazons in Greek and Latin literature from many points of view (e.g., duBois 1982, Block 1995). I apply here psychoanalytic theory to partially explain the popularity of the Sciarra Amazon Type for the male Roman viewer. I focus on displacement and repressed narcissistic wounds and castration anxiety from childhood, without implying pathology or advocating reductionism.

Three famous bronze statues of wounded Amazons were dedicated in the sanctuary of Artemis at Ephesus in approximately 430 B.C. Each was frequently copied, especially in marble and almost exclusively in Roman Imperial times. Each series of copies and variations/adaptations are termed the Sciarra, Sosikles, and Mattei types. The especially evocative Sciarra Type portrays a standing Amazon with her raised right arm resting over her head. Her short chiton leaves her large breasts exposed and emphasized by framing drapery folds. Originally painted in red, the bleeding wound between her right breast and underarm dramatically contrasted with her light skin. She is dying. Her traditionally male enemy is unseen and unknown (Bol 1998).

The Amazons were unmotherly, battering their male children (Hp. *Art.* 53.1-10; D.S. 2.45.3) and, according to Strabo (11.5.1), living apart from them. Amazons cauterized the right breasts of their female children so they could become fine archers (Hp. *Aër.* 17.12-18; D.S. 2.45.3; 3.53.3), in effect blunting their potential maternal character. While Classical aesthetics insisted on portraying the body whole, the viewer could unconsciously perceive the wound near the breast as referencing its removal. The rage of war and wound near the breast suggest rage at the missing nurturing mother: a real wound in payment for the psychological wounding. The dripping wound contrasts with the breast that should have dripped milk.

The wound is an example of displacement of female genitalia. In Celsus and possibly the Hippocratics, the vulva is associated with a wound, a connection consistent with violent Greek and Latin sexual vocabulary (Staden 1991, Henderson 1991, Adams 1982). Its position is appropriate: the gesture of the raised arm and consequently raised right breast are erotically charged; both the crotch and armpit are depilated hollows. The vulva/wound highlights the reason for her defeat: she is a woman.

The wound has an etiological component. The removal of the right breast may allude to castration and the resultant female genitalia; the bleeding from the wound, menstruation, the monthly recalling of the wounding. For the male child, the bleeding and fantasies of castration were potential sources of anxiety that remained repressed in adulthood. (Note Plin. *H.N.* 7.64-66, 28.77-86; Col. 3.357-366 on menstruation.) Traditional psychoanalytic interpretations of Medusa’s beheading (e.g., Freud 1955; Seeling 2002) offer an etiological parallel, and Diodorus (3.52.4,7) places both Gorgons and Amazons in Libya. (Paradoxically, the oneness of the remaining breast in the myth gave the Amazons a phallic character accounting partially for their manly nature.)

Despite the myth’s inherent misogyny, the Amazon’s pain in death is muted. She stands with a calm expression befitting a cool, Classical aesthetic. The emotion-filled subtext was largely understated and the statue was more acceptable to a civilized audience. The Amazon appears weak, passive, beautiful, and erotically charged. Although her beauty partially reflects Classical aesthetics, these characteristics contrast with her hated or feared character, suggesting the mother as first perceived and desired but lost in the rage over her absence. Her punishment, the wound and death, allows for her former character to come to the fore. (For this reason, Achilles can fall in love with the dying Penthesileia and the frightening gorgoneion can become the beautiful Medusa Rondanini.) Given the sculpture’s Classical origins, Romans might well have perceived it as “high art” with the unconscious ideas safely repressed.

Not coincidentally, the Sosikles Type showed an Amazon wounded at her right breast; the Mattei Type, at her thigh.

Adams, James. 1982. *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins.

Adams, Laurie Schneider. 1993. *Art and Psychoanalysis*. New York: HarperCollins.

Block, Josine. 1995. *The Early Amazons*. Leiden: Brill.

Bol, Renate. 1998. *Amazones Volneratae*. Mainz: Philipp von Zabern.

Caldwell, Richard. 1989. *The Origins of the Gods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

duBois, Page. 1982. Centaurs and Amazons. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan.

Freud, Sigmund. 1955. “Medusa’s Head.”In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, edited by James Strachey, 18:273-274. London: Hogarth Press**.**

Henderson, Jeffery. 1991. *The Maculate Muse*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Seeling, Beth. 2002. “The Rape of Medusa.” *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*. 83:895-911.

Staden, Heinrich von. 1991. “Apud nos foediora verba.” In *Les latin medical*, edited by Guy Sabbah, 271-96. Saint-Étienne: Université de Saint-Étienne.