Romancing the Amazons: Boccaccio’s Teseida and Chaucer’s Knight’s Tale

Suzanne Hagedorn
College of William & Mary

In this paper, I will consider how the genre of romance functions as a space for medieval writers to explore characters and geographical spaces that are "Other" or beyond the boundaries of the known world by analyzing the representation of Amazon warrior women in late medieval romances. Specifically, I will be focusing on Boccaccio’s Teseida and Chaucer’s Knight’s Tale, two works in which Amazons are depicted as fearless fighters who conquer neighboring tribes—and who are conquered in turn.

The reception history of the Teseida and its glosses (chiose) illustrates some of the tensions inherent in medieval interest in Amazons: on the one hand, a fascination with (and even celebration of) their boldness and physical prowess, and on the other, a tendency to domesticate their fierceness into more traditional and socially acceptable forms of female behavior (much as the Amazon women of the Teseida revert to stereotypes of courtly ladies after they are conquered by Teseo, prince of Athens). Scribal additions to Boccaccio’s own chiose to the Teseida in some Quattrocento manuscripts of the poem that I have examined contain extensive interpolations that provide the reader with additional information about Amazons culled from historical and chronicle sources. These scribal interventions suggest both fascination that these bold, unconventional women exerted over the (presumably male) copyists of the poem, and the scribes’ desire to incorporate ‘factual’ information about this supposedly historical tribe into the margins of Boccaccio’s fiction. Moreover, the program of illustrations in one notable Teseida
manuscript now housed in a church library in Naples tends to assimilate the representation of Ipolyta and her attending Amazons to iconographical conventions associated with the Virgin Mary, making the Amazon queen appear larger than life in some scenes from the poem's early books. Significantly, however, she shrinks down to normal scale upon her marriage to Teseo.

Although the particular Teseida manuscripts I discuss were all copied after Geoffrey Chaucer's death, his dealings with Boccaccio's Teseida in the Knight's Tale reflect similar tensions. Chaucer's ambiguous portrayal of Theseus as a conqueror throughout the Knight's Tale and his sympathetic depiction of the captured Amazon princess Emelye in her unsuccessful attempt to evade an unwanted marriage suggests a fascination with these unconventional women and their refusal to be governed by the social norms traditionally governing female behavior. In the resolution of the Knight's Tale's plot, however, the more conventional desire to show these bold women submitting to men and marriage prevails; the romance concludes with an idealized view of conjugal bliss between the Amazon princess Emelye and her husband Palemon. Nevertheless, we may still debate whether Chaucer intends the reader to share his knightly narrator's celebratory attitude toward Emelye and Palamon's wedded bliss or to view it with skepticism—a skepticism that the Miller and his subsequent Tale clearly voice about the male ability to contain an unruly woman through marriage. Chaucer's decision to place the destabilizing fabliau world described in the Miller's Tale directly after the high chivalric romance of the Knight's Tale draws the reader's attention to the generic expectations and limitations of medieval romances.