

Although he was one of the most enduring figures in the swirl of early narratives surrounding the Amazon, the golden king was by no means the only giant. Transposed to the New World, the warlike Amazons of Greek myth figured among his principal rivals in terms of fascination and staying power.¹ It is they, not he, who gave the region originally known as “the Freshwater Sea” (Mar Dulce) or Marañón (Maranhão) the name by which we still know it.²

In reality, the Amazons were not so much competitors of as they were complements to the gilded monarch. With their domain often situated close beside El Dorado on old maps of South America, these warrior women, like the golden king, represent an uneasy confluence of European and native stories. Also like him, they regularly functioned as exaggerated fragments of a rich, alien, and seemingly limitless nature that threatened to swallow up the astonished Europeans. Only slightly less elusive than the golden king, they too withheld their riches from the eager Europeans.

However, unlike accounts of El Dorado, which generally played down the more unsettling elements of tropical nature, tales of the warrior women actively highlighted the tension between the New World’s stupendous wealth and its grotesque and frightening aspects. They also initiated a long and ongoing tradition of female personifications of the Amazon region by outsiders and insiders.

The first chapter in this section begins with a consideration of the warrior women’s roots in both Greek myth and Amazonian tradition. It then goes on to discuss the New World Amazons and some of their equally “gigantic” descendants. The second chapter contrasts female figures from the Encantado stories with the warrior women. Here, the Gold of gold miners’ stories serves as my prime example. (As before, I use capital letters to distinguish an Enchanted Being.) Many different

women all in one, this capricious femme fatale also may appear as a chaste and beneficent Woman in White, or as a snake or caiman who protects the ravines where men dig for precious ore.

And yet, if the warrior women are giants while Gold turns out to be a consummate shape-shifter, the miners who describe “her” often redeploy others’ images of themselves as rapists of a virgin land, thus purposefully drawing attention as the subjects of false fear. While I do not wish to minimize the genuine environmental destruction the miners cause, or to play down the often calamitous effects of their assaults on native peoples, I stress the ways in which these men serve as convenient villains in an international drama. As a result, even as my examples newly illustrate the division between competing visions of the Amazon, they also reaffirm the fluid boundary between them.