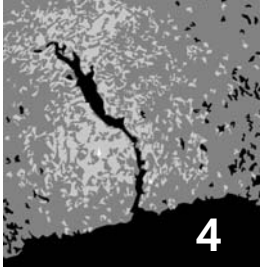

Warrior Women, Virgin Forests, and Green Hells

Genuinely striking, the milky green stone that dangles from a leather cord around the neck of the older man on the splintered wharf keeps drawing my eye. "Is it a frog?" I finally ask, no longer able to contain my curiosity.

The man nods. "This stone is very old. It is called '*muiraquitã,*'" he says, shading the pendant with his hand so that I can get a better look.

"You mean one of those talismans that the Amazons are said to have given to their lovers as a token of their encounters?" I ask, suddenly connecting a word I had carefully sounded out in books (moo-ee-rah-kah-TAH) to the smooth, cool, and curiously luminous object that he now slips off and places in the cup of my hand.

"Yes," he says. "Perhaps it is true, and perhaps it isn't, but I like to think that one of those women warriors could have given this frog as a gift to one of my great-great-grandfathers long before the Europeans ever dreamt of setting foot here."

Present in accounts by various European writers, jade amulets such as this one still turn up from time to time in today's Amazon.[1] Called *muiraquitã, murayataka,* or *takua,* these frog-shaped stones give a tactile presence to a multitude of stories about the warrior women who have long claimed a privileged place in images of Amazonia.[2] In bestowing the name of these women upon the world's biggest river and the vast lands that surround it, sixteenth-century Europeans underscored the simultaneously alluring and hostile aspects of New World nature. Unlike the coquettish female figures who appeared alongside them in a number of early representations of the Americas, the warrior women embodied a world at once enormously dangerous and immensely rich.

The Amazons as Classical and Old World Myth

Enigmatic from the start, the Amazons—a name that does not appear to be Greek in origin—made their first known appearance in early versions of the *Iliad*. The epic formula "Amazones antianeirai," or "Amazons like unto men," marked them as a race of females who were the equal of males in battle. Indeed, it was said they cut off their right breasts in order to better wield their bows and arrows.[3] Some classical authors located the Amazons near Greece; others consigned them to Libya and even Atlantis, and still others, including the fourth-century B.C. historian Herodotus, placed them in Scythia or Asia Minor.[4] Contemporary archaeological evidence argues for the myth's partial basis in a historical people of the southern Russian steppes called the Sauromatians, among whom the women (who rode horseback) appear to have enjoyed a privileged status.[5] While there is no proof that these horsewomen were the origin for the Greek stories, which probably were in circulation long before the Greeks became aware of the Sauromatians' existence, they most likely played a part in the progressive "barbarization" of the Amazons.[6]

With time, the Amazons grew not just more bellicose, but more complex and mysterious. Transformed from women seen as men's equals into women openly hostile to men, they began acquiring individual personalities in later epics. One of the first and most memorable of these figures was Penthesilea, queen of the Amazons, whom Achilles slew in battle when she took the part of Troy against Athens.[7] The coupling of belligerence and sexual allure in the figure of Penthesilea—whose name means "she brings sorrow to the people"—constituted a thorny problem in terms of the Greek honor code.[8] In the course of fighting, the Amazon queen had exhibited a healthy dose of the martial valor called *thumos,* which the early Greeks saw as a property exclusive to males. Achilles therefore had done battle with a suitable opponent. Because *thumos* was said to leave the body upon death, however, the corpse at Achilles' feet was that of a beautiful woman, whose slaying was cause for shame and not rejoicing.

The balance between the Amazons' allure and their off-putting fondness for combat shifted over time to reflect new social and political realities. In early Athens, stories of Amazons summarily crushed in battle played a key role in bolstering a marriage system that had little place for independent women. With the passage of the centuries, different stories emerged. The tale of the Amazon invasion of Athens in revenge for the rape of the princess Antiope followed the Persian invasion of the city in

the fifth century. Achilles and Penthesilea, the original warring couple, later reemerged as lovers, while another Amazon queen, Thalestris, jumped into bed with Alexandros instead of confronting him on the battlefield.

And yet, although ideas about the Amazons changed dramatically in accord with historical circumstances, representations of them in Greek epics and in vase and mural painting, sculpture, mythography, and funeral oratory continued to encapsulate a series of contradictions. Depicted alternately as passionate and hostile, as women who must be won by strong men and female warriors who would rather die than submit to male authority, the Amazons in art and myth almost certainly mirrored shifting roles among, and attitudes toward, Greek women.[9] Likewise, the warrior women's fluid identity allowed their passage over time into other cultures.

A number of medieval European authors based their accounts of Amazons on classical sources such as Herodotus.[10] However, the Amazons were unquestionably best known to the general public through the accounts of medieval travel writers. One of them was Sir John Mandeville, who referred to the inhabitants of the all-female island of "Amazonia" or "Feminye" as "noble and wise warriors." Another was Marco Polo, who extolled the great riches of the women on the Female Island of the Arabian Sea. These travel accounts in turn fed into those sorts of chivalric romances of the sixteenth century that Miguel de Cervantes would later lampoon in *Don Quixote*.[11]

The increasingly close association between the Amazons and prodigious wealth in the late Middle Ages may have stemmed from classical authors' descriptions of their gold and silver armaments. The fifth-century B.C. historian Hellanicus, for instance, identified the Amazons as a "golden-shielded, silver-axed, female, man-loving, male-infant-slaying" army.[12] Heavily metaphoric (gold and silver were too soft to be used as weapons), these classical descriptions illustrated the warrior women's suprahuman prowess in battle by placing them in the company of mythic figures such as Calypso with her gold belt, Cupid with his golden arrow, and Apollo with his gold cloak, bow, and lyre. Medieval travel writers, eager to impress their readers with the exotic riches of foreign lands, made far more literal connections between the Amazons and precious metals. In fact, the impetus for later descriptions of warrior women who traipsed about in golden crowns, oversaw great subterranean mines, and wept tears of purest silver lay in the very concrete quest for New World treasures.[13]

New World Amazons

References to the "women without men" of Matinino (variously identified as Martinique, Montserrat, and Guadalupe) appear in the writing of Columbus, who thought he had reached the Indies and was therefore looking for Marco Polo's wealthy Amazons.[14] He thus did not register surprise when, in January 1493, a native informant told him about an island inhabited solely by women and very rich in *tuob*—an indigenous term for gold or copper. In a letter summarizing his first voyage, written some two months later, Columbus reported that these women were said to use bows and spears to attack others and to protect themselves with plates of armor made of bronze. Recasting earlier accounts of a "masculine" and "feminine" island, he situated the Amazons beside a neighboring island to the west of Matinino inhabited exclusively by men.[15] His claim that the Amazons periodically mated with these men—whom he identified as "*canibales*"—established a direct and early parallel between the New World Amazons and a group of men who feasted on human flesh.

And yet, despite their partial roots in Old World sources, the warrior women were more than a collection of preexisting stories that the Europeans imposed wholesale on the New World. The Amazons had closer ties to a long-established narrative tradition than did the golden king, but they too were hybrid creatures. At the same time that the writers who described them looked to medieval travel writers for embellishment, they drew on a variety of native stories and beliefs as well.

Native reports of Amazonlike women were not limited to the Caribbean islands where Columbus had reconnoitered. Strikingly similar traditions cropped up among Cariban, Arawakan, Salivan, and Tupian linguistic affiliations throughout Amazonia, the Orinoco basin, the Guianas, and the West Indies, from as far south as the Araguaia, Tocantins, and Paraguá Rivers in eastern Brazil and northern Bolivia to as far north as the greater Antilles.[16] North of the Amazon River, these women were often called Aikeam-Benano, or "women-who-live-alone." South of the river, they were likely to be known as Cougnantaisecouima, or "women-without-men."[17] There were also reports of a queen or leader of the Amazons called "Cuna Ateare" or "Conori." Usually placed at the headwaters of the Trombetas River, this Amazon queen is said to have ruled over seven settlements in the Guiana highlands.

These early references to all-female societies find present-day echoes in native Amazonian myths about women in an early time who pos-

sessed a series of sacred pipes or ceremonial flutes that guaranteed their dominance over men.[18] At the time, these reports all but ensured the emergence of a series of composite narratives by the Europeans. The Amerindian elements that crept into the explorers' first- and second-hand reports in turn prompted the authors of chivalric texts to emphasize particular elements in their accounts of warrior women.[19] For example, Columbus' reports of an "island without women," themselves a meshing of medieval and native sources, reverberated in the description of the Amazons in the extremely popular chivalric romance *Las sergas de Esplandián,* by Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo, first published in 1510.[20] Quite likely following Columbus' lead, Rodríguez de Montalvo placed his island of women on the right-hand side of the Indies close to the Terrestrial Paradise. Big, bold, and black (rather than very white, as they were in most medieval accounts), his Amazons shared the predilection of Columbus' natives for the martial arts. His explanation that the warrior women's weapons were made of gold "because it was the only metal on the island" echoed Columbus' borrowed descriptions of an island rich in *tuob*. Even Rodríguez de Montalvo's claim that the Amazons fed captive men and their own male babies to griffins trained to eat any man who landed on the island echoed Columbus' reference to the cannibals with whom the women supposedly mated from time to time.

Thus, the "women-without-men" who emerged in early explorers' reports were strikingly different from their classical cousins. Their seclusion, for instance, did not necessarily translate into martial activity directed at men. Only some sixteenth-century European writers followed classical sources in describing them as one-breasted.[21] These and other differences have led some scholars to argue that the designation "Amazon" merely may have been a way of making observations about some New World females intelligible to readers back home.[22] However, the fact that medieval Europeans had no trouble identifying Marco Polo's island full of equally unwarriorlike women as "Amazons" argues for a more literal understanding of the term.

Hernán Cortés, for instance, appeared convinced of the Amazons' flesh-and-blood existence. In 1518, the explorer—an avid fan of chivalric novels—received a contract from the Spanish governor of Cuba, Diego Velázquez, to explore westward from the islands. "It is said," the governor affirmed, "that there are people with large, broad ears and others with faces like dogs, and also where and in what directions are the Amazons, who are nearby according to the Indians whom you are taking with you."[23] In a letter written in 1524 to Charles V of Spain, Cortés

referred to reports of "numerous, well-populated provinces along the coast adjacent to the towns of Colima" where the natives claim there is "much treasure" as well as "a district inhabited by women without men." Although his ensuing search for the Amazons failed, it was Cortés who, in 1535, named the supposed "island" of California after the Amazon queen Califia, who appeared in the fifth book of Rodríguez de Montalvo's romance.[24]

The Amazons' physical presence was yet more palpable in the Dominican friar Gaspar de Carvajal's description of a group of female warriors whose arrows quickly made the Spanish brigantines of Francisco de Orellana bristle like porcupines.[25] Nothing in this narrative—one of the earliest descriptions of New World Amazons by a European, and almost certainly the most influential—suggests that the friar found these fearsome, long-haired warriors to be anything less than flesh-and-blood descendants of the female warriors of Greek myth.[26] It is precisely this ability of the Amazons to transcend boundaries of time and space that rendered them suitably gigantic fragments of a New World nature whose hugeness and unfamiliarity inspired, even as they terrified, the Europeans.

The Amazons as Giants

To the extent that they encapsulated irresolvable tensions about the place of women in society even as they deflected attention from "the unknown, the limitlessness that terrified the Greeks," the Amazons of classical antiquity were themselves giants.[27] However, their larger-than-life qualities underwent important changes in the hands of sixteenth-century explorers. While the New World Amazons continued to incorporate anxieties related to an untrammeled female sexuality, the primary object of concern in Carvajal's famous account of the warrior women was not their threat to particular social institutions, but their embodiment of a simultaneously rich and forbidding New World nature. This nature appeared to the friar not just as *a* female, but as at least two very different sorts of women, hostile and alluring.[28] As human containers of immense, forbidding alien surroundings, Carvajal's "Great Mistresses" did not trigger the same sort of physical desire as a Penthesilea, whose likeness men prayed they might find in their bed on returning home from war.[29] They did, however, inspire an all too obvious lust for New World riches.

Like virtually all of his fellow chroniclers, Carvajal set out to describe in detail the people and places that he and the expedition encountered during their passage down the Amazon in 1541–42.[30] The friar had more pressing aims, however, than the usual desire to secure recognition for past discoveries while drumming up the funds for new ones. Above all, he sought to justify and celebrate the actions taken by the leader of the expedition, Captain Francisco de Orellana, and his men in the face of charges of treason. Orellana's principal accuser was Gonzalo Pizarro, under whom he had set out to look for El Dorado and the Land of Cinnamon. After the expedition quickly ran out of supplies, Pizarro sent ahead the captain and some sixty men, including Carvajal, to look for food. Unable or unwilling to return to the main party, Orellana and his crew continued down the entire length of the river on a momentous nine-month journey that Pizarro, shamed and angry at his own resounding failure, saw as a betrayal.[31]

The presence of the Amazons in the midst of a hotly contested mission that brought back little or nothing of material value set Carvajal's chronicle apart from any number of other accounts of New World expeditions that had failed to produce significant riches. His firsthand report of the encounter between the men and the warrior women would serve as a basis for paraphrasing and endless embroidery for a large number of subsequent reports by other writers.[32] Primarily second- and thirdhand accounts, only a handful of these narratives would describe allegedly face-to-face meetings between the Amazons and particular Europeans, and none would be nearly as dramatic. For example, although Columbus' son Ferdinand asserted in retrospect that a group of aggressive female prisoners had led the admiral to give credence to reports of Amazons on the island of Matinino, Columbus himself never claimed to actually have seen the warrior women.[33] Likewise, almost a century after Carvajal penned his famous chronicle, Bernard O'Brien described how his father, Cornelius, and four other Irishmen made their way up the Amazon and encountered "masculine women" called Cuna Ateare, who had "very small right breasts like men, [treated] by arts so that they do not grow, in order to shoot arrows."[34]

The proximity of the author to the alleged eyewitness distinguishes O'Brien's account from most descriptions of the warrior women. Nonetheless, his narrative lacked both the novelty and the epic dimension of Carvajal's original firsthand description of a full-fledged battle involving significant numbers of natives and Europeans. Carvajal's account is also distinguished by its forceful conflation of the at once hostile and

alluring Amazons with a rich and yet off-putting land. His chronicle provided a different, ultimately complementary vision of the region and of the New World from the one embodied by the golden king.

Although the friar devoted only a few paragraphs to others' reports of the Amazons' rich kingdom and a scant page to his own description of the men's furious battle with these "Great Mistresses," their presence permeated an account marked by its intense ambivalence. While the golden king had been an effective and alluring icon for great wealth that remained maddeningly elusive, the Amazons embodied a land that inspired both desire and fear. Although the sorts of contradictory sentiments they instilled in Carvajal were not unusual in colonial chronicles, his oscillation between positive and negative descriptions pushed these tensions to an extreme.

Like El Dorado, the land of which the Amazons were the supreme rulers was distinguished by its enormous wealth. The white-as-alabaster villages that followed one upon the other boasted a surfeit of turtles, meat, and fish, as well as biscuit (manioc) in such abundance as to feed "an expeditionary force of one thousand men for one year." Crammed with game animals, fruit-bearing trees of all sorts, and vast stores of what looked to Carvajal like acorns, wheat, and olives, the lush riverbanks seemed to him to be "as good, as fertile, and as normal in appearance as our Spain." [35]

Extensions, like the golden king, of a prodigious nature, the Indians of this new country initially appeared every bit as rich and wondrous as the land. While their tortoiseshell armor and brilliant headdresses struck the Europeans as thoroughly exotic, their "jewels and gold medallions" suggested the presence of a series of reassuringly familiar treasures. Decked out in "gold and [splendid] attire," the natives were as welcoming as the lush riverbanks full of fruit trees and animals. Exhibiting a wealth of "manners and good breeding" that again recalls the gilded monarch, they showered the Europeans with food and drink "and all with as much orderliness as if all their lives they had been servants."

If the lands through which the men passed were rich, those that they did not get to see were said to be even richer. Secondhand reports of these marvelously wealthy territories emphasized the "very great wealth of gold and silver" in the Amazons' direct possession. These treasures, like those of El Dorado, were distinguished by their artifice. No dense lair of primeval vegetation, the Amazons' "excellent land and dominion" included a glittering city with not just one, but five very large buildings that served as places of worship. The gold and silver with which the

city brimmed had been crafted into wondrous objects including "many gold and silver idols in the form of women, and many vessels of gold and of silver for the service of the Sun."

The use of jewel-toned feathers to decorate the ceilings of their temples underscored not just the Great Mistresses' astounding wealth, but also their cultured, more courtly side. Like the golden king, they displayed a regal bearing—at least when at home. Carefully attired in cloaks of fine wool, they wore their flowing hair loose to the ankles. Atop their heads perched golden crowns "as wide as two fingers." At a time when many Europeans still ate with their hands or with rustic table implements, those Amazons "of rank and distinction" employed gold and silver eating utensils as casually as we today would make use of plastic picnic forks.[36]

And yet, if the Amazons were every bit as rich as the golden king and their city every bit as much a display of artifice, their kingdom was unlike El Dorado in its vast dimensions. El Dorado compressed the riches of the Americas into a carefully contained space (a walled city, a kingdom, or a lake ringed by mountains), but the realm of the Amazons appeared to sprawl without limits. Thus, while Ralegh's Juan Martínez reached the golden city of Manoa after a relatively short journey, a man who sought to traverse the Amazons' domain was "destined to go a boy and return an old man."

Moreover, whereas the golden king was the very model of civility, the Amazons displayed a number of frankly barbaric traits. Alluring in their supreme wealth, they could also be extremely hostile. "Very white," "very robust," and "of very great stature," the Amazons demanded description in superlatives and were giants in the most literal sense. However, as the moniker "Great Mistresses" suggests, they were also giants in terms of the power they wielded over others. Both their prodigious wealth and their exceptional fierceness set them apart from the other Indians. ("They are rich and feared," Nuño de Guzmán wrote succinctly in a 1530 letter to the Spanish king.)[37]

The other Indians' fear of the Great Mistresses did not mean that they themselves were pacific, however. The same supposedly docile and courteous natives who welcomed the Spaniards with shows of the land's bounty regularly turned on them with "murderous" and "evil" intentions as soon as the men turned their backs. Tormented at night by great clouds of mosquitoes, the Spaniards found themselves by day obsessed with the lack of food when the natives began withholding their bounty. The beauty of the scenery that rose up before them could not sustain the

men, who, fearful of native ambushes, found themselves reduced to eating the boiled leather of their own belts and shoes rather than venture into a dangerous forest that may have been full of game, but also was full of Indians. ("Hunger was our only sauce," Carvajal noted grimly in one version of his narrative.)[38]

Even at their most cruel and murderous, these other Indians were no match for the Amazons, whose ferociousness they tauntingly described to the Spaniards. Unlike the golden king, the Great Mistresses possessed a taste for riches surpassed only by their fondness for war. The discomfiting boundlessness of their kingdom found echoes in their unbridled savagery upon the battlefield. As frightening to their own troops as they were to the Spaniards, the Amazons would summarily execute any man who showed the slightest sign of hesitation in the heat of battle. Carvajal described how in a fierce battle that erupted on 24 June, ten or twelve of these female captains fought so courageously that "the Indian men did not dare to turn their backs, and anyone who did turn his back they killed with clubs right there before us, and this is the reason why the Indians kept up their defense for so long."[39]

Quick to exhibit their mastery over men on the field of battle, the Amazons also flaunted their dominance when it came to lovemaking. Thus, while accounts of El Dorado only hinted at the more grotesque aspects of a king who literally became a golden object, accounts of the Amazons pointed to their openly unnatural use of men for their own pleasure. When, as Carvajal noted delicately, "that desire came to them," they made war on a neighboring overlord, taking captives whom they kept as lovers for "the time that suited their caprice."[40] Once pregnant, they sent their erstwhile partners packing. (The friar's account made no reference to the Amazons' alleged custom of bestowing jade keepsakes upon their lovers in a manner that Sir Walter Ralegh would later compare to the exchange of valentines.) Following the birth of the ensuing children, they destroyed or sent away the male offspring to their fathers, raising the females "with great solemnity" and instructing them "in the arts of war."

Their fierceness in battle situated the Amazons somewhere between the golden king and a whole assortment of New World monsters. To the degree that sex and eating were often linked semantically (the English "he devoured her with kisses" still finds multiple analogues in colloquial Spanish and Portuguese), the sexually dominant Amazons constituted a special class of cannibal. Although they did not actually eat people, their unnatural appetites made them apt containers for an all-consuming na-

ture.[41] In this sense they resembled less the gold-plated king than they did other, far more fearsome aberrations such as the Ewaiponoma, whom Ralegh later described as men with eyes in their shoulders and mouths in the middle of their breasts.[42]

Their refusal to submit to any man, including the far better armed intruders convinced of the superiority of their civilization, distinguished the Amazons from a number of other female personifications of the Americas. Their essential wildness prompted artists to depict them as surrounded by fierce animals (usually lions or stags, meant to evoke the hunt) and often naked and armed with a bow and arrow. These illustrations provided a dramatic contrast to myriad portraits of voluptuous, even coquettish Indian princesses wearing grass or parrot-plume skirts and carrying lacy-looking feather fans. Laden with fruit and wreathed in flowers, those more pacific and welcoming Americas were the obvious extensions of Father Manuel da Nóbrega's Garden of Delights. Sometimes overtly flirtatious, often suggestively recumbent, their tousled hair and naked shoulders implying a luxuriant seductiveness and accompanying spirit of accommodation, they were entirely foreign to their warlike sisters.

The Amazons' martial impulses and their willful use of men in procreation flouted European gender expectations.[43] Like the golden king's apparent squandering of natural riches, their belligerence seemed to cry out for intervention from without. Not surprisingly, sixteenth-century European literary treatments of the Amazons often ended with the warrior women abjuring their martial ways. Converted to Christianity, they cheerfully surrendered not only their religion but also their matriarchal culture to become model wives and mothers.[44]

However, as I already have suggested, the warrior women were far more than a particularly graphic expression of sixteenth-century anxieties about gender. Although the mingled fascination and terror that they inspired in the Europeans had much to do with actual male-female relations, it sprang first and foremost from encounters with a New World nature that regularly placed men, as Carvajal said, "in great danger of death." For the friar, the meeting of the waters (in this case the Solimões and the Rio Negro) was no shimmering testament to nature's grandeur. Rather, it was all too vivid proof of nature's violence and terrifying force.[45]

An embodiment of this tremendous power, the Amazons inspired false fear because they, like Penthesilea—or a Dolphin on land—were mortal. They succeeded in peppering the Spanish ships with arrows, but

the better-armed Europeans were able to pick off a number of their assailants. "Our Lord was pleased to give strength and courage to our companions, who killed seven or eight—for these we actually saw—of the Amazons, whereupon the Indians lost heart, and they were defeated and routed with considerable damage to their persons," Carvajal reported. The Amazons did, however, force the Spaniards into a hasty retreat, undercutting their triumph: "The Captain ordered the men to get into the boats with very great haste, for he did not wish to jeopardize the lives of all, and so they got into the boats, not without some trouble, because already the Indians were beginning to fight again."[46] Nonetheless, the encounter with the warrior women promised an eventual victory over a land that the friar identified as the personal property of the Great Mistresses.

By making the Amazons the object of concern in his account, rather than a far more immense and amorphous nature, Carvajal played into false fears and assured the Amazons' identity as giants. Further illustration of this is found in Carvajal's insistence that the Spaniards readily understood the natives, and that the natives comprehended them. Unwittingly confirming that the real object of the men's fear was not the Amazons per se, Carvajal time and again described how the natives listened in deferential silence or with "keen interest" to Orellana as he "speaks," "urges," "commands," "explains," "reports," and "proclaims." Some of these passages would be downright funny if their future import for the natives were not so ominous. When, for instance, the captain explained that the Spaniards were Christians and "not like them [the natives] who walked in the paths of error" by worshipping stones and man-made images, the "very attentive" audience appeared to nod its assent.[47]

By no means the only chronicler to minimize or to deny obvious difficulties in communication between the Europeans and the natives, Carvajal still outpaced many of his peers.[48] Words actually took the place of food as Orellana regularly "sustain[ed]" the starving men with assurances that they would prevail.[49] The captain's ability to create "a haven of clear understanding" carved out a comforting alternate space for men besieged on every side by a terrifying nature that found expression in a people who eschewed language for "senseless" yells, bewildering dances, and a cacophony of trumpets, pipes, and drums.

The tremendous fear of the unknown that lay behind the friar's insistence that the natives clearly understood the Spaniards further solidifies

the Amazons' importance as a particular sort of giant. Alien on the one hand, the warrior women, with their deep roots in Western literature, were, on the other, almost familiar and thus oddly reassuring. Moreover, as the stuff of myth, they conveniently transcended boundaries not only of gender, but also of time and place. In so doing, they conferred a larger-than-life status upon the beleaguered Spaniards.

The New World Amazons' ability to bestow such a mythic aura helps explain an otherwise puzzling facet of Carvajal's text. Although the friar repeatedly condemned the other natives as "warlike," "arrogant," and "devilish" and deplored their "wicked sacrifices," he had almost nothing bad to say about the Great Mistresses. Since it is they who commanded the other natives, the Amazons bore direct responsibility for the crew's travails. Nonetheless, even when their troops wounded him in the side ("If it had not been for [the thickness of] my clothes, that would have been the end of me") Carvajal did not denounce the warrior women, but rather called attention to their valor. ("More than an hour was taken up by this fight [between the Spaniards and the natives], for the Indians did not lose spirit, rather, it seemed as if it was being doubled in them, although they saw men of their own number killed, and they passed over them, and they merely kept retreating and coming back again.")[50] This lack of criticism is doubly strange, since these women's sexual license, lust for battle, and fondness for graven images would all appear cause for the strictest censure on the part of a Roman Catholic priest.

The friar's admiration for the manlike Amazons served in part to feminize the other Indians, who surely would have run away from the better-armed Europeans were they not so afraid of their women captains. So although the Amazons were indeed courageous, their valor highlighted the cowardice of the men whom Carvajal described on other occasions as fighting "like wounded dogs."[51] At the same time, the friar's genuine wonder at the Amazons again confirms their identity as giants who magnified the Spaniards' own achievement in confronting a nature so immense it ensured its own mythic status.

A number of Carvajal's contemporaries were quick to dismiss his claims as fabulation—or, at best, confusion on the part of a crew whose members mistook a group of long-haired men for women. However, the king's swift acceptance of his and Orellana's version of the story confirmed the Amazons' hold upon the imagination of many of these men's peers.

It is possible that Carvajal and Orellana cynically invented a battle with the Amazons in order to divert attention from Pizarro's accusations. Loath to face a disgruntled king—and a charge of treason—empty-handed, the friar constructed a fantastic interlude that transformed what would have been a grim list of battles and privations into a grand and heroic achievement. However, his urgent tone and the concrete details he offered argue for an actual encounter between the frightened and exhausted Spaniards and what they believed to be a New World incarnation of Greek myth. Moreover, the alacrity with which the great river down which they had sailed became known back home as "the Amazon" (and not, for example, "the Orellana") suggests the enduring fascination of this particular set of at once native and European giants.

The Amazons and Their Legacy

On the surface, stories of the Amazon had less of a direct impact on European colonization than did accounts of the golden kingdom, which played a major role in opening the interior of South America to settlement and exploitation.[52] In addition, while both the king and the warrior women were distinctly peripatetic (reports of Amazons continued to surface in various locations, from Chile to Paraguay to California), there is an obvious semantic bond between the Amazons and Amazonia.[53] Then again, while some contemporary writers see El Dorado as outshining all other colonial accounts of the Americas, others pronounce stories of these women to be "the most authentic and luminous of all New World myths."[54] In reality, the two figures, and the larger stories about nature that they embody, are profoundly intertwined. Not only did the Amazons signal the proximity of El Dorado, but they served as the more wild and dangerous flip side of an ostensibly pacific golden king.

The active resistance to intruders so obvious in accounts of the sixteenth-century Amazons contrasts with the subversive quality of an El Dorado that always remained just out of reach. The warrior women's willingness to fight to the death foreshadowed later struggles in which a theoretically female (but often, actually sexually ambiguous) Amazonian nature would fight back with all its might against intruders. Much like the lowland Indian, or *auca,* onto whom early-twentieth-century European rubber magnates would project their own propensity for violence, the Amazons possessed something that the Europeans needed and

wanted. The mystery of the Amazons, which went beyond purely material riches, lived on in the native shamanic powers that would awaken both fear and wonder in later Europeans, whose own cures would prove no match for tropical ills.[55]

Their ability to encapsulate the immensity of Amazonian nature helps explain the Amazons' enduring appeal among European writers. After noting that these "manlike women have their abodes in great forests, and on lofty hills," the seventeenth-century Jesuit father Cristóbal de Acuña expressed his conviction about the reality of the Amazons' existence. "A lie of this magnitude," he declared, as if stating the self-evident, could not have taken hold "in so many tongues and so many nations, with so many hues of truth."[56]

A full century later, in the 1740s, Charles de la Condamine, one of the first and best known of a long line of European "scientific travelers," again referred to the reputed presence of warlike women in the interior of Guiana.[57] Eighteenth-century maps continued to show islands inhabited by the warrior women, and as late as 1818, Drouin de Bercy, author of a comparative study of Europe and the Americas, argued for their existence.[58] Likewise, even while he lent scant credence to the Amazons of Greek myth, the nineteenth-century German naturalist Robert H. Schomburgk reported hearing accounts from the Macusi and the Carib Indians of "separate hordes" of warlike females toward the head of the Corentyn River.[59]

While the Amazons, like the golden king, gradually ceased to be an object of pursuit, the portrayal of Amazonian nature as a warrior woman continues into the present.[60] Even though the region does not hold a monopoly on belligerent landscapes, the Amazon has regularly inspired such images at different points in time. One of the single most obvious descendants of the early Amazons is the Green Hell of early-twentieth-century Latin American novels, essays, and short stories. Much like Roosevelt's hostile Brazilian wilderness, this verdant inferno flaunted its riches even as it resisted conquest from without.

Rooseveltian Wildernesses and Green Hells

Full of feathery bamboo, tall trees with foliage "as delicate as lace," and swarms of "gorgeous butterflies," Roosevelt's distinctly female wilderness could be both beautiful and fragile. This same wilderness, however, had a more violent side. "The very pathetic myth of 'beneficent nature'

could not deceive even the least wise being if he once saw for himself the iron cruelty of life in the tropics," the ex–U.S. president declared. "Entirely indifferent to good or evil," this nature "works out *her* ends or no ends with utter disregard of pain and woe."[61]

Roosevelt juxtaposed this female nature with a virile Anglo-Saxon civilization destined to wrap both the wilderness and a series of less developed and less vigorous cultures in its transformative embrace. Nonetheless, even while he clearly thought of Amazonia as a female presence to be subjugated in this Darwinist drama, he did not develop the idea of the region as an actual woman. In this sense, he was very different from a number of Latin American writers of the epoch. Not just theme and setting, the hostile wilderness became an actual personage in works such as Alberto Rangel's *Inferno verde,* or Green Hell, a collection of short stories that opened the door to a series of early-twentieth-century *novelas de la selva,* or "jungle novels."[62]

Supremely rich and actually beneficent on some occasions, Rangel's Green Hell on others was a lethal entity. Much like Carvajal almost four centuries before him, Rangel described alternately a forbidding tangle and a luxuriant expanse. On the one hand, his Green Hell was a "MOST FERTILE VALLEY-kingdom of running Waters, orchard of Orchids and Palm Trees, empire of the rubber trees." On the other it was an "undifferentiated, dense, disordered mass of leaves and branches, twisted fronds caught up in knots of vines that claw each other by the legs."[63] Not only did this fighting, biting jungle lash out against itself in an unbridled fury, but it attacked any intruder foolhardy enough to throw himself into the fray.

Perversely attractive in its chaotic energy, Green Hell displayed an erotic side that recalled the Amazons of classical antiquity. At the same time, Rangel's description of an invisible pollen that would alight upon the necks of unsuspecting passersby in a caustic caress foreshadowed any number of later evocations, including the Colombian novelist José Eustacio Rivera's allusions to "the aphrodisiac parasite that covers the ground with dead insects" and "the disgusting blooms that throb with sensual palpitations, their sticky smell as intoxicating as a drug" in *La vorágine,* or The Vortex. "No cooing nightingales here, no Versaillian gardens or sentimental vistas!" exclaims the book's narrator, lest the reader of this most famous of all early "jungle novels" somehow fail to get the point.[64]

Despite the heavy air of sexuality that, many decades later, would

lead German filmmaker Werner Herzog to equate Amazonian nature with "overwhelming misery and overwhelming fornication, overwhelming growth and overwhelming lack of order," Green Hell also had a primeval, even virginal side.[65] Rangel anticipated Roosevelt, as well as a number of later Latin American writers, in his focus on the Edenic aspects of this verdant inferno. In the first story in his collection, for example, a "tender tapestry of grasses" curiously reminiscent of Father Nóbrega's *hortus amoenus* leads to a lake ringed by every imaginable species of animal—a scene that the narrator compares to a rustic illustration for the Book of Genesis.

Very unlike the *hortus amoenus,* however, this marvelous tapestry quickly becomes a tangle of fetid grasses when the sun appears. Only when the rains return does the pestilential swamp and "veritable catalogue of insect life" revert to a luxuriant lagoon. Like the jungle in the Portuguese writer Ferreira de Castro's later novel *A selva,* which remains "a fantastic and spectacular play of shadows and light," it inspires admiration at the same time that it prompts a visceral horror.[66]

Even when they focused on the landscape's primeval, paradisal aspects, Rangel and his fellow authors continued to insist upon the need to transform this "ogre who devours worlds."[67] In his stories, as in a number of novels by other writers of the period, the apparent protagonist is almost always an urban transplant whose dreams of personal profit are part of a larger vision of national integration of which Roosevelt undoubtedly would have approved. In the end, however, it is inevitably a defiantly enormous nature that dominates these often pedestrian works.

Although these dreamers failed where the U.S. president appears to have emerged triumphant, their defeat was meant to be provisory. Rangel, for his part, actually had his jungle prophesy its own eventual capitulation to a worthy suitor who had yet to make his presence known. "I am," asserts the vocal (indeed, quadrilingual) jungle, "the land promised to superior, vital, vigorous races, blessed with strength and intelligence and fortified with money: and one day, they will come to plant in my bosom the definitive work of civilization, which the first immigrants, the poor and humble *pionniere* of the present, trace confusedly between curses and the gnashing of teeth."[68]

Green Hell's assurances that later generations would come "to the tamed and cultivated land, to lay the deep foundation of the *urbs,* where once stood the provisory shelter of the *settler*" would seem to second

Roosevelt's view of the inevitability of progress. In so doing, Rangel appears to have drawn back from the image of a perennially defiant warrior woman. However, much like Bates' dream of a "glorious new civilization under the equator," Green Hell's vision of her own impending transformation from the "Gehenna of tortures" into "the mansion of hope" was set in an indefinite future. Despite these assurances of her ultimate domestication, Green Hell continued to rout all would-be invaders with a violent energy far more convincing than her florid words.

The single biggest difference between the early-twentieth-century Green Hell and Carvajal's warrior women lies in the reasons for their hostile actions. While the Amazons fought because it was their nature, Green Hell expressly responded to provocations from without. Rangel, who wrote during the dizzying apogee of a Rubber Boom that extended from the mid–nineteenth century into the beginning of the second decade of the twentieth century, was very clear about the motives for Green Hell's often lethal actions. In one story, "Maiby" (the name of an Indian woman), he described the frenzied search for rubber in terms of rape and crucifixion.

Impaled on a rubber tree like some "extravagant brunette orchid," the at once Christlike and bizarrely sensual victim is an all-too-obvious double for the land itself. ("The martyrdom of Maiby, with her life trickling into the little basins used by rubber collectors, would still be less than that of an Amazon offering itself up as nourishment for a commerce that exhausts it," the narrator asserts.)[69] It thus represents a larger crime "committed not out of Love, by an insanely impassioned heart, but out of the collective Ambition of thousands of souls crazed by a universal greed."

The specific historical context and political message of the early jungle novels underscores the varying possibilities and purposes of the Amazons as a broadly defined narrative legacy. Although clearly a descendant of the sixteenth-century warrior women, Green Hell was no mere re-creation of a timeless myth. Written for a Latin American public, rather than a European one, these novels reworked the old theme of a threatening, elusive nature to new, nation-building ends. If Carvajal's warrior women served as convenient containers for a landscape that threatened to devour the explorers, the Green Hell of writers caught between their own admiration and distrust of Europe embodied, even as it concealed, the contradictions in official modernizing schemes.[70] Fearsome in its resistance, the jungle of the jungle novels was also marvelously original. The often involuntary admiration that a defiantly vir-

ginal Green Hell inspired in the Latin American reader distinguished these accounts from the superficially similar Rooseveltian celebrations of a kind of progress in which an early-twentieth-century U.S. public was coming more and more to place its faith.

Second Eden as "the Second Sex"

Particularly obvious in descriptions of a walking, talking jungle, the legacy of the Amazons goes far beyond personifications of a resistant female nature. Time and again, the warrior woman reappears beneath the surface of seemingly El Doradian portrayals, such as the majestic forest that Bates pronounced "grand in its perfect equilibrium and perfect simplicity." The margins of Amazonian streams were "paradises of leafiness and verdure," the sparkling brooks were full of "perennial and crystal waters," and even the parasites were part of a parade of wonders in an Amazonia that abounded in "little Edens."[71]

An infinitely desirable woman, tropical nature regularly appeared as an ideal spouse for an implicitly male, European-style civilization.[72] However, in order to produce a glorious new human race under the equator, she first would have to be wooed and won. This courtship process—which took the form of scientific investigation—was unflaggingly reverential. Thus, even while some of Bates' descriptions are mildly erotic (the solitary scarlet passionflower "set like a star within the green mantle of creeping plants," the juxtaposition of the "massive, dark crowns of shady mangoes" with Amazonian women's glossy and luxuriant hair), nature remained a "solemn temple" that demanded the utmost respect.

And yet, while this contained eroticism only enhanced the nineteenth-century naturalists' enthusiasm for an ideal nature, hints of a less than templelike Amazon often crept between the lines of their accounts. For instance, although Bates described the voracious leaf-cutter ants with his usual enthusiasm, he went on to blow up these pests with gunpowder. His portrayal of an earth "encumbered with rotting fruits, gigantic bean-pods, leaves, limbs, and trunks of trees," that was at once the birthplace of "the great world of vegetation" and a grotesque cemetery revealed an ambiguity similarly reminiscent of the warrior women's fearsome allure.

Bates' contradictions also confirmed that the "sovereign nature" that he would woo with science could be a royal pain. "I enjoyed the voyage

on the whole," he wrote in one of various sections of the book guaranteed to please armchair travelers. Yet he also complained of the scanty fare, the confinement of the canoe, the trying weather—frequent and drenching rains, with gleams of fiery sunshine—and the woeful desolation of the river scenery.[73]

Likewise, although he followed his account of a seemingly interminable march through tepid shallow water with a celebration of the "lusty health" that one enjoyed while living "this free and wild life on the rivers," his description of a "brain-scorching vertical sun" is all too believable. While similar accounts of obstacles are routine in Roosevelt's *Through the Brazilian Wilderness,* Bates' attempts to play down his discomfort give these episodes a particular vividness. "A drizzling rain fell all the time, and the ground around the fires swarmed with stinging ants, attracted by the entrails and slime which were scattered about," he wrote before going on to assure the startled reader that the journey was, "by and large, quite pleasurable."[74]

The resistant underside of Bates' elsewhere "perfect," "bounteous," and invitingly beautiful (female) nature is nowhere more visible than in his account of his return to England: "The want of intellectual society and of the varied excitement of European life, was also felt most acutely, and this, instead of becoming deadened by time, increased until it became almost insupportable. I was obliged, at last, to come to the conclusion that *the contemplation of Nature alone is not sufficient to fill the human heart and mind.*"[75] So, although he continued to call for the union of civilization and nature, he himself abandoned his long courtship by returning home.

Virgin Forests

Similar acknowledgments of the concealed willfulness of an outwardly beneficent, distinctly female nature mark portrayals of the Amazon as a Disappearing World. Although his focus on tropical nature's primordial qualities set Lévi-Strauss apart from Bates, he and a number of subsequent writers revealed a similar frustration with this nature's resistance to their own grand schemes.

The near obsession with surfaces in Lévi-Strauss' descriptions of the clouds whose feeble, hollow shadows recalled the flats of a stage set and of the forest that first struck the visitor as "a mass of congealed bubbles, a vertical accumulation of green swellings" attests to this frustration.[76]

Although its jewel-like landscape was breathtaking in its beauty, the Amazon of *Tristes tropiques* was also often full of dust, of bleak, treeless expanses, and of mud. It therefore comes as no surprise that this resolutely elusive nature flatly refused to answer his prayer by letting him in on "the secret of its virginity." The Amazon's more obdurate qualities came to the fore once more when the threat of torrential rains and malarial fevers forced him to retreat precisely in the moment when he finally encountered a previously uncontacted tribe. Although he continued to invoke the splendors of wild nature, with its accompanying freedom, the constraints that this same nature placed on the expedition could not be more clear.

The fierce and sometimes brutal nature that glimmers beneath the surface of some of the most apparently ideal depictions of Amazonia lives on in images of a harsh and untamed jungle that coexists with today's fragile Rain Forest. The ads presently used to attract eco-tourists to the Amazon highlight the same dual nature that found expression in both Green Hell and the sixteenth-century warrior women. It is true that one can trace an evolution from calls to experience the "great adventure" of "the lush, dark, exciting jungle" in the 1980s to shimmering invitations to explore an intricate web of flora and fauna in the "Virgin Forest" of the 1990s. Nonetheless, both virgin and virago remain not just present, but inextricably intertwined, in current images and accounts of the Amazon. Although they have different meanings than they had fifty or five hundred years ago, they are both part of larger chains of narratives that periodically converge.

"Rich beyond measure" in terms of its biological diversity, the "endangered" forest is also a "thrilling habitat" full of "Stone Age Indians," "untamed wildlife," and "astonishing surprises that will set your hair on end."[77] Thoroughly gigantic in its natural wealth and plethora of yet-to-be-discovered species, this Rain Forest recalls a scene from one of the later "jungle novels" in which a newcomer to the Amazon stares into a night illuminated by "colossal fireflies." "Behind these forests," he warns his companions with equal measures of dread and anticipation, "lies the great beyond!"[78]