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# The Curious Case of Hobbes's Amazons

SUSANNE SREEDHAR\*

**ABSTRACT** Hobbes's philosophy involves a fundamental shift in ideas about the theological, metaphysical, and axiological significance of sex, gender, reproduction, and the family. He fundamentally rejects the idea that dominion is naturally or divinely ordained, using a strategy I call 'dethroning.' In this paper, I argue that the Amazon myth, which Hobbes invokes in every version of his political theory, is one such act of rhetorical dethroning in that it attacks naturalized familial and gender hierarchies, denying natural parent/child, as well as husband/wife, relations of rule and subordination. Substantive discussions of Hobbes's use of the Amazons in the secondary literature are few and consist of contradictory understandings of the example, with some seeing it as a prototype of early feminism and others seeing it as a retrenchment of misogyny and racism. I use my interpretation, one that makes sense of the example by reference to the internal logic of Hobbes's overall philosophical and political project, in order to examine both sides of this debate.

**KEYWORDS** Hobbes, Amazons, women, patriarchy, feminism

TALES OF AMAZONIAN WARRIOR WOMEN may be the last thing one would expect to find in the work of a seventeenth-century philosopher like Thomas Hobbes. Yet he invokes one story about them in every version of his political theory, from *The Elements of Law* to *De Cive* to both the English and Latin versions of *Leviathan*. This story tells of how the Amazons made contracts to procreate with men from nearby tribes whereby they retained control over their female children and returned their male infants to their fathers. Though the story is told in only a couple of lines, its iteration throughout Hobbes's body of work suggests that it carries more weight than its perfunctory treatment would suggest.

To the extent that the Amazon example has been taken up in present-day scholarship, it has often been by scholars who are interested in representations of women in history and philosophy. There are two contradictory trends in the secondary literature. The first trend emphasizes the egalitarian or even protofeminist potential of Hobbes's use of the Amazon example. One scholar deems it part of Hobbes's "important theoretical deconstruction of male

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suprematism.<sup>1</sup> Another says that, by offering a “positive example for female authority, [Hobbes] disrupt[s] conventional views.”<sup>2</sup> One even goes so far as to say “a mixed-gender but matriarchal society would, in fact, be the more natural story for Hobbes to have told.”<sup>3</sup>

The other common trend in the secondary literature invokes his use of the Amazons as part of a larger critique of Hobbes from a modern-day feminist perspective. One commentator claims that the Amazons are in the text to frighten, that the story he tells about female power “would have filled most of his readers with fascinated horror.”<sup>4</sup> Others see Hobbes rationalizing a narrative in which “women are subordinated and Amazonian tendencies repressed.”<sup>5</sup>

What are we to make of these diametrically opposed readings of this short but obviously powerful example? Which is the better interpretation of the text, and what is at stake philosophically? This paper offers an interpretation of the Amazon example and then explores and adjudicates various disagreements about it in the secondary literature. I begin by setting out who the Amazons were—or were thought to be—and what Hobbes says about them.

#### I. THE AMAZONS: SOME BACKGROUND

The core of the accepted story in seventeenth-century Europe was that the ancient Amazons were warrior women who lived in all-female societies that were ruled as gynarchies. They were famous for a number of things: fighting great battles, scorning marriage, hating domestic chores, and cutting off one breast so as to better handle their weapons. How they procreated was one of the most well-known parts of the story: the Amazons would have sex with men in nearby areas and keep the female offspring. Different versions have different accounts of what happened to the male offspring. In one version—and this is the one Hobbes draws on—Amazons arranged to have sex with men from neighboring regions on the condition that they would keep the female children and give the male children to their fathers. Apparently, the neighboring men very much wanted to engage in these contracts since male children born of the Amazons were thought to become great soldiers. According to Herodotus, the Scythian men wooed the Amazons because of “their strong desire to obtain children from so notable a race.”<sup>6</sup> In another version of the story, the goal of the men was simply to have sex with an Amazon woman, which was apparently a boastworthy thing to do. In the versions in which male offspring were not given to their fathers, they were killed outright, exposed for someone else to take if they did not die first, or kept as slaves to do the domestic tasks the Amazon women so despised.

Most people in seventeenth-century Europe thought that the Amazons had been real; that is, they thought that they existed as a matter of historical fact. There

<sup>1</sup>James Grantham Turner, *Libertines and Radicals*, 294.

<sup>2</sup>Joanne H. Wright, *Origin Stories*, 90, 92.

<sup>3</sup>S. A. Lloyd, “Power and Sexual Subordination,” 58.

<sup>4</sup>Mary Nyquist, *Arbitrary Rule*, 297.

<sup>5</sup>Karen Green, *Woman of Reason*, 52. See also Carole Pateman, *Sexual Contract*, 43–50, and “‘God Hath Ordained,’” 445–63.

<sup>6</sup>Herodotus, *Persian Wars*, 4.III. Cf. Nancy J. Hirschmann, “Hobbes on the Family,” 253.

was some minor dispute: Pufendorf and Spinoza express skepticism, and by the eighteenth century, there was widespread doubt.<sup>7</sup> There is no question, however, that Hobbes thought that the Amazons actually existed; he introduces them in *Leviathan* by saying, “we find in history” (*L* 20.4, 129).<sup>8</sup> For the purposes of this paper, it does not matter whether the Amazons actually existed or what parts, if any, of the stories told about them were true. What is important is what Hobbes and his contemporaries thought about the Amazons.

Hobbes presents the Amazons as evidence of the possibility of female dominion in the normal course of the development of the family and society. He mentions them four times: once in *Elements*, twice in *De Cive*, and once in *Leviathan*.<sup>9</sup> I will discuss each mention next, beginning with the single mentions in *Elements* and *Leviathan* and then turning to the two mentions in *De Cive*. In each text, the Amazons appear in his account of “dominion paternal and despotical.” A note about terminology: the question with which Hobbes is concerned in this discussion is how “dominion” over children is established.<sup>10</sup> To whom does the child belong, or who has “title” or “rights” over the child? In their edition and translation of *De Cive*, Richard Tuck and Michael Silverthorne point out that Hobbes’s use of “dominion” here follows Roman law and connotes ownership: “The *dominus* is both master (or lord) and owner of the *servus* [which they translate as slave].”<sup>11</sup> ‘Paternal,’ for Hobbes, refers to both mothers and fathers; what he is talking about is parental dominion/authority.<sup>12</sup> The question is: How do parents come to own and rule over children?

Hobbes’s views on this matter are idiosyncratic. He defends a doctrine of ‘original maternal dominion,’<sup>13</sup> the idea that dominion over a child is originally in that child’s mother. His main argument for this view, repeated every time he brings up the topic, is that the mother obtains rights over her child because she preserves it. Preservation is the basis for dominion; when preservation ceases, so does dominion. If the mother abandons the child, then whoever adopts and takes care of it has dominion. This is an instance of the general Hobbesian principle of the “mutual relation between protection and obedience,” which governs sovereign and subject (*LA Review & Conclusion*.17, 497). This principle is a cornerstone of Hobbes’s political philosophy, and it starts here—with the mother.

If mothers originally have rights over children, then how do fathers ever acquire those rights? (Hobbes rejects the possibility of shared dominion; only one person can have dominion at a time.) He posits a few different ways a father—or

<sup>7</sup>Samuel Freiherr von Pufendorf, *Law of Nature and Nations*, Book 6, Chapter 1, Section 9, Page 446; Benedict de Spinoza, “Political Treatise,” Chapter 11, Paragraph 4, Page 603.

<sup>8</sup>Hobbes’s works are cited by part (if applicable), chapter, paragraph number, and page number. I will use *L*, *DC*, and *EL* as abbreviations for *Leviathan*, *De Cive*, and *The Elements of Law*.

<sup>9</sup>Since they are identical in meaning, I treat the mentions in the English and Latin *Leviathans* as one.

<sup>10</sup>The discussions of paternal dominion are located at *The Elements of Law*, II.4.1–8, 131–34; *De Cive*, 9.1–8, 107–10; and *Leviathan*, 20.4–8, 128–30.

<sup>11</sup>Richard Tuck and Michael Silverthorne, “Key Words,” *De Cive*, xlii–xliii.

<sup>12</sup>This is clearest in *The Elements of Law* II.4.1, 131. Fathers and mothers exercise paternal power. Scholars take it for granted that ‘paternal’ for Hobbes includes reference to mothers.

<sup>13</sup>While others use this phrase, Joanne Wright seems to have coined it. See her “Going against the Grain,” 123–55.

anyone besides the mother—can get dominion over a child and he spells out the mechanisms in some detail. Most interested in cases where dominion over the child is determined by agreement, he canvasses a variety of options for child custody by providing a taxonomy of what he calls, in *The Elements of Law*, “covenants of copulation.” First, there are covenants in which one parent is subjugated to the other. In this case, the child belongs to the dominant parent. He explains that when a woman has subjected herself to a particular man’s control, he also gains authority over her children. For Hobbes, mastery is a transitive relation. This covers not only mothers who are subjected to fathers but also fathers who are subjected to mothers, as he tells us happens when a queen has a child with one of her male subjects (*EL* II.4.7, 133–4; *DC* 9.5, 109; *L* 20.6, 130).

Second, there are cases where both parents are subjects in the same commonwealth. In these cases, the child goes to whichever parent is specified in the civil law. Hobbes thinks this will most often be the man, but he emphasizes that it need not be (*L* 20.4, 128–29).

Third, if the parents live outside a commonwealth—that is, in a state of nature—then the child goes to whomever the two parents have agreed will get it. Here, the point is made almost entirely by the example of the Amazons. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes writes:

We find in history that the *Amazons* contracted with the men of the neighboring countries, to whom they had recourse for issue, that the issue male should be sent back, but the female remain with themselves, so that the dominion of the females was in the mother. (*L* 20.4, 129)

And in *The Elements of Law*, Hobbes writes:

Of covenants that amount not to subjection between a man and woman, there be some which are made for a time and some for life; and where they are for a time, they are covenants of cohabitation, or else copulation only. And in this latter case, the children pass by covenants particular. And thus in the copulation of the Amazons with the neighbors, the fathers by covenant had the male children only, the mothers retaining the females. (*EL* II.4.5, 133)

Here, he makes two further distinctions: “covenants of copulation” can be temporary (“for a time”) or permanent (“for life”); they can involve domestic relations (“covenants of cohabitation”) or not (“covenants of copulation only”). To illustrate this last category, he offers the example of Amazon women. In Hobbes’s taxonomy, the contract he references here would count as a covenant of “copulation only, for a time.”

He continues the taxonomy saying that a covenant of cohabitation can be “for society of bed only” or “for society of all things.” The former establishes concubinage; the latter marriage. As in the Amazon case, dominion in concubinage passes according to the agreement the particular couple makes. Unlike the Amazons, a concubine is usually “supposed to yield up the right of her children to the father.” Similarly, a wife usually “yieldeth the government” to her husband, and so he “hath for the most part also sole right and dominion over the children.” One exception involves a queen’s marriage to one of her subjects (*EL* II.4.7, 133–34).

The *De Cive* version of the Amazon contract goes as follows:

For a woman [in the state of nature] can dispose of her right as she pleases by means of an agreement, as the Amazons once did; they conceived children by their neighbors, restored the male children to them, and kept the females for themselves, all by agreement. (DC 9.6, 109–10)

Note that he emphasizes that arrangement happens “all by agreement.”

*De Cive* includes an additional mention of the Amazons a few paragraphs earlier. Here, Hobbes invokes them in an argument against “custom” as a justification for patriarchy. Custom cannot justify patriarchy because there have also been matriarchal customs. Offering the Amazons as an example of female sovereignty, he adds a clause about other cases of female sovereignty:

And custom is not against [the mother’s dominion], because women, in the person of the Amazons, did at one time wage wars against their enemies and handled their offspring as they pleased, and there are several places today where women have sovereign power. (DC 9.3, 109)

It is not clear to whom he is referring in this last clause. He could be referring to the various queens around Europe in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries,<sup>14</sup> such as Queen Isabella in Castile and Mary and Elizabeth Tudor in England. He could also be talking about other matriarchal societies that were then rumored to exist in the New World. Scholars disagree on the referent of this phrase: Johann P. Sommerville and Edwin Curley say that Hobbes was referring to the European queens; Ioannis Evrigenis and Mary Nyquist think that Hobbes was referring to matriarchal societies outside of Europe.<sup>15</sup> As we will see later, quite a bit hangs on how to interpret this particular phrase.

Those four sentences are the only times Hobbes explicitly references the Amazons in his corpus. However, we should not take the small quantity of text to mean that the example is not important for Hobbes or that interpreters need not take it seriously. Though there are only four sentences on the Amazons, there is every reason to think that Hobbes is committed to the example and the point behind it. First, the discussion of which the Amazon example is a part—the discussion of parental dominion—inhabits a fixed and important place in the text and the argument. It appears in a similar place in every one of his major works of political philosophy and is a crucial part of the foundation for his social contract theory. Second, though some things about the general discussion of parental authority change between the different works, the Amazon example remains constant. As we have seen, the three repetitions of the example are almost verbatim.

Let us recap the philosophical points of Hobbes’s argument. If there is no contract, the dominion is in the mother unless she abandons the child. If the mother subordinates herself to a man, the father or not, he gets dominion over her children. If the parents live in a commonwealth, the child belongs to whichever party the laws of that commonwealth specify. If the parents do not live

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<sup>14</sup>Note here that only a queen *regnant*, who rules in her own right, equivalent in rank to a king, will count as a female sovereign for Hobbes. Queen *consorts* and queen *mothers* do not count. Queen *regents* might be a tricky case and what we say about them will depend on whether we think they are true sovereigns.

<sup>15</sup>Curley, *Leviathan*, 130n9; Sommerville, *Hobbes’s Ideas*, 73; Evrigenis, *Images of Anarchy*, 116n159; and Nyquist, *Arbitrary Rule*, 297.

in a commonwealth, they can make a contract ahead of time as to who will get the child. Thus, there are three ways that men can get dominion over children. (1) They pick up an abandoned child. (2) They live in societies with patriarchal and patrimonial laws. (3) They enter into a state-of-nature preconjugal contract with the mother. The Amazon story illustrates the last option.

While Hobbes could have encountered the Amazon myth in a number of places (e.g. Homer, Xenophon, and Pliny the Elder), both Edwin Curley and Noel Malcolm identify Quintus Curtius's *History of Alexander* as a likely source.<sup>16</sup> Stories about the Amazons were sufficiently common that we cannot make too much of any single version; however, the Curtius version closely matches Hobbes's own retelling. Curtius describes a meeting between the Amazonian queen Thalestris and Alexander the Great. Thalestris arrives at Alexander's camp, intent on procreating with Alexander, surrounded by three hundred women dressed in armor and carrying spears. He agrees to her terms: she will give him any male offspring and take the female as her own. Thalestris is described as fierce, fearless, independent, powerful, and sexual.<sup>17</sup>

This is a story of two independent sovereigns agreeing to exchange goods and services. Thalestris was queen of the Amazons and Alexander the Great was king of Macedon. The involvement of these specific individuals is symbolic: to maintain the Amazon tribe's numbers, the interactions must have taken place between many individual men and Amazons. It could not simply have been Thalestris and Alexander.

In his discussion of Hobbes on international relations, Malcolm notes that the Amazon contract is a contract between independent states. He remarks that "One unusual international (or transnational) agreement which caught his [Hobbes's] eye was that practiced by the ancient Amazons," but he does not elaborate on the

<sup>16</sup>Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 129; and Noel Malcolm, *Thomas Hobbes*, 2:309ng.

<sup>17</sup>Quintus Curtius Rufus, *History of Alexander* 6.5.24–32, quoted in J. C. Yardley and Waldemar Heckel, *Alexander the Great*, 197. The full passage is:

Granted an immediate audience, she ordered her company to halt while she went forward attended by 300 women: as soon as she caught sight of the king she leaped unaided from her horse, carrying two spears in her right hand. The dress of Amazons does not entirely cover the body: the left side is bare to the breast but clothed beyond that, while the skirt of the garment, which is gathered into a knot, stops above the knee. One breast is kept whole for feeding children of female sex and the right is cauterized to facilitate bending the bow and handling weapons. Thalestris looked at the king, no sign of fear on her face. Her eyes surveyed a physique that in no way matched his illustrious record—for all barbarians have respect for physical presence, believing that only those on whom nature has thought fit to confer extraordinary appearance are capable of great achievements. When asked if she had a request to make she unhesitatingly declared that she had come in order to share children with the king, since she was a fitting person on whom to beget heirs for his empire. A child of the female sex she would keep, she said, but a male she would give to his father. Alexander asked if Thalestris wished to accompany him on his campaigns, but she declined on the grounds that she had left her kingdom unprotected, and she kept asking him not to let her leave disappointed in her hopes. The woman's enthusiasm for sex was keener than Alexander's and she pressed him to stop there for a few days. Thirteen days were devoted to serving her passion, after which Thalestris headed for her kingdom and Alexander for Pathiene.

For a more extended discussion of this passage, see Susanne Sreedhar, "Theory of Sexuality," 260–79.

point.<sup>18</sup> In chapter 13 of *Leviathan*, the international situation is one of Hobbes's three examples of extant states of nature. While individual Amazons are not in the state of nature with regard to other Amazons, nor are individual Greeks with regard to other Greeks, the Amazons and the Greeks are in a state of nature with regard to each other. This interpretation is supported by the fact that Hobbes describes the Amazon contract as being with "the men of the neighboring countries," indicating that he sees the exchange as happening between separate political entities. I would go further than Malcolm and say that the Amazon contract is at heart a contract of international *trade*. However, the "goods" at the heart of the Amazonian trade agreement point to another reason this particular example is so salient for Hobbes. Depending on how strongly we read the claim, sex and its products (children) seem to be drastically revalued in the Hobbesian account; in the Amazons story, they are relegated to the status of trade goods, much like tea and sugar.

The next question is how to interpret this example. My approach is to ask: Exactly what work is the Amazon contract doing in Hobbes's argument? Why does he invoke it? Does he need it logically or rhetorically? If so, why? Once we understand what Hobbes requires the example for, we will be in a better position to assess the various interpretive disputes in the secondary literature.

## 2. UNDERSTANDING THE PURPOSE OF THE AMAZON EXAMPLE IN HOBBS

The question of power over children was a crucial question for Hobbes, because his political theory is built on the rejection of doctrines of natural hierarchy. The generally accepted view in Hobbes's time was that males naturally ruled over family and that fathers, not mothers, naturally ruled over the children.<sup>19</sup> Some scholars, most notably Gordon Schochet, have called this "patriarchalism."<sup>20</sup> There were patriarchalists of various stripes. While the divine right of kings was one prominent view, there were also patriarchalists who rejected the idea that God ordained kings but still thought that fathers naturally (and maybe divinely) ruled the family. For our purposes, patriarchalism is a political ideology specific to seventeenth-century Europe. However, it is not simply the 'ism' of patriarchy. While patriarchy describes a kind of familial or social organization, patriarchalism as a political theory posits the rule of the king as analogous or similar to the rule of the father.

Although Hobbes rejects the naturalness or inevitability of patriarchy, he certainly endorses some forms of patriarchy in practice.<sup>21</sup> However, what he endorses is patriarchy by "artifice" and "convention," not by nature and God. What is crucial, then, is his rejection of "natural" hierarchies. For that reason, it makes sense to reframe the position that Hobbes is rejecting as "natural chauvinism,"

<sup>18</sup>Noel Malcolm, *Aspects of Hobbes*, 451.

<sup>19</sup>It is, of course, true that in early modern England widows could be heads of households and women could even govern a family estate, either temporarily in their husband's absence or in the longer term as a dowager duchess. However, these are exceptions that prove the rule, since they all involve a woman ruling only because a man is temporarily or permanently absent.

<sup>20</sup>Gordon J. Schochet, *Patriarchalism*.

<sup>21</sup>Indeed, Gabriella Slomp points out that "the very notion of *artificial* patriarchalism reinforces his own argument of the limitless power of the state, in so far as the sovereign can introduce a form of inequality that otherwise would be denied by nature" (*Political Philosophy of Glory*, 99).

meaning the belief that some groups are naturally superior to and rule over others.<sup>22</sup> In my view, Hobbes “dethrones” patriarchy, even as he validates existing forms of it. I would argue that Hobbes’s philosophical dethroning of patriarchy and natural hierarchies generally is at least as important as his validation of extant instances of those hierarchies.

The core of early modern chauvinism was Aristotelian. Aristotle believed in ontological heterogeneity and hierarchy, guided by teleology. Some kinds of beings were simply superior to others, like humans to nonhuman animals and plants. Similarly, men were superior to women, adults to children, and freemen to natural slaves. This inequality was natural and universal, not a product of society. In the *Politics*, Aristotle says that naturally the “male is more fitted to rule than the female” just as the “elder and fully grown is more fitted than the younger and undeveloped.”<sup>23</sup> This philosophy sits alongside his distinctive embryology, which gives the male biological priority in the ‘generation’ of the child and primarily accords to the female a subordinate role, dealing with matter rather than form.

The influence of these Aristotelian ideas is ubiquitous in early modern thought. In the sixteenth century, Jean Bodin endorsed Aristotle’s views on the natural superiority of males over females and the rule of fathers over mothers and children.<sup>24</sup> The Dutch philosopher Hugo Grotius argued for male rule on the principle that dominion arose from “generation” and then accrued to the father who is “to be preferred in Regard to the Dignity of the Sex.”<sup>25</sup> Sir Robert Filmer, author of *Patriarcha*, adds Christian theology to the mix. Rule by the father was God-given, according to Filmer: just look at the book of Genesis. Divinely ordained patriarchy was also natural in the Filmerian view, since God created nature. Addressing himself directly to Hobbes’s *De Cive*, Filmer says, “But we know that God at the creation gave the sovereignty to the man over the woman, as being the nobler and principal agent in generation.”<sup>26</sup> While we do not know whether Hobbes read Filmer in return, Hobbes would have been familiar with the doctrine of the divine right of kings, which is now associated with Filmer but was put forth by both James I and Charles I.

The divine right of kings likened the king’s rule over his subjects to the father’s rule over his wives and children, but especially over his children. Divine right theory took this hierarchy to be natural and God-given, outside of our control, and certainly not the result of a human action like a social contract. Rule, in this view, is not constructed; it is written into the nature of things. Natural chauvinism, as I am using the term here, is therefore an ontological claim that hierarchies in both politics and the family originate in, and are justified by, things outside of us.

A crucial part of Hobbes’s political philosophy is to show that this view is mistaken, not primarily because he cares about the family but because he wants

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<sup>22</sup>While chauvinism is often associated with male chauvinism, it need not be. Hobbes would have been equally opposed to female chauvinism as to male chauvinism, had it been necessary to oppose it.

<sup>23</sup>Aristotle, *Politics* I.12.

<sup>24</sup>Jean Bodin, *Six Books*, 6–7, 10–12. Unsurprisingly, as a supporter of Salic Law, Bodin argued that the rule of women is unnatural and criticized Elizabeth I.

<sup>25</sup>Hugo Grotius, *Rights of War and Peace*, book II, chapter V, paragraph 1, 509.

<sup>26</sup>Filmer, *Patriarcha*, 192.

to insist that the authority of the sovereign is *nonnatural*, a result of contract. For him, all people—both men and women—are naturally free and equal, and *any* relationship of authority is the product of agreement.

The Hobbesian rejection of chauvinism takes two forms. The first is a series of objections and the second is a picture of an alternative.

Hobbes raises three main objections to the cogency and coherence of chauvinism. First, generation cannot ground dominion because it would create two masters and no one can serve two masters. Second, chauvinism bases paternal rule in the natural superiority of males over females, and this is false. Rejecting appeals to what he calls “the excellence of their sex,” Hobbes points out that a battle would be necessary to establish the superiority of any one man over any one woman (*L* 20.4, 128; see also *DC* 9.3, 108 and *EL* II.4.2, 132). Third, for Hobbes, the idea of natural hierarchy is not only false but also pernicious. People tend to think of themselves as more capable of ruling than others and doctrines of natural hierarchy invite incessant controversy, competition, and conflict. This is why natural law commands people to acknowledge each other as equals.<sup>27</sup>

Hobbes’s account of the family is crucial to his provision of an alternative. He has to explain where parental authority comes from, if it does not come from God or nature. Because origin stories were crucial at this time, Hobbes’s rejection of chauvinism requires him to offer something else in its place. He gives a story about dominion originating in protection (the maintenance and sustenance of life, the nourishment and care of the child), which establishes the original dominion of mothers, not fathers. He also paints a picture of dominion resulting from contract. The Amazon contract works to illustrate and bolster this latter picture.

At least one scholar has noticed that Hobbes uses the Amazon story exactly to invalidate the notion that patriarchy was natural or inevitable. As Johann P. Sommerville reads him, Hobbes invokes the Amazon story as a counterexample against Filmer’s view. Sommerville emphasizes that “Hobbes was no feminist” and insists that he is not a critic of the patriarchal system of England. Rather, Hobbes is trying to refute Filmerian patriarchalism, in particular, by showing that nature does not give fathers the right to rule either mothers or children. This is where Sommerville sees the Amazon example coming in:

Hobbes had no wish to open a back door to patriarchalism by admitting that the father always and necessarily comes to hold dominion over the mother and children. Such an admission might have suggested that there is some characteristic in human nature—comparable in its universality to the principle of self-preservation—from which we can read off political and ethical conclusions, and in particular the conclusion that fatherhood confers power. He *therefore* argued that there have been societies in which women exercised dominion, instancing the Amazons, and noting that in a number of contemporary commonwealths the sovereign was a woman.<sup>28</sup>

I find Sommerville’s point about the rhetorical function of the Amazon story convincing. At the heart of Hobbes’s political project is the rejection of God-based

<sup>27</sup>See Kinch Hoekstra, “Hobbesian Equality,” 76–112.

<sup>28</sup>Sommerville, *Hobbes’s Ideas*, 72–73, emphasis added. It is plausible but not certain that Filmer was the target here: we do not know whether Hobbes had read Filmer before completing his major political tracts in the 1640s and 1650s. Filmer’s manuscript had been written, but we do not know whether or how widely it had been circulated in Hobbes’s time.

or nature-based accounts that enthrone authority. Thus, at least part of what the Amazon example is doing is providing a shield against chauvinistic doctrines, like those of Bodin, Grotius, and Filmer, which, as I have said, date all the way back to Aristotle.

At this point, one might wonder why Hobbes needs the Amazon story in particular. After all, he has ready at hand other examples of females exercising dominion in the recent queens of Europe. However, queens do not work as counterexamples to chauvinism because a number of chauvinists accepted the legitimacy of queens; Filmer and John Knox are two obvious and important examples. Rarity and exceptionalism made it possible to accept queens into a patriarchalist system, though philosophical gymnastics were sometimes required. For example, according to Filmer, all sovereigns rule with the “right and natural authority of a supreme father.”<sup>29</sup> Since he explicitly accepted the rule of queens, Filmer would have had to say that queens rule as fathers.<sup>30</sup> The point is that chauvinists made attempts, successful or not, to accommodate the small number of female sovereigns in Europe.

Unlike the small handful of queens in early modern Europe, the Amazons represented ordinary, nonexceptional cases of female dominion. It seems important to Hobbes that the Amazons actually existed and that the procreative contracts actually happened. As Sommerville points out, he needs to foreclose a “back door” to theories of natural rule. It would threaten his argument if patriarchy were so close to inevitable that the exceptions were limited to a few individuals. He needs matriarchy to be a genuinely possible alternative as a way of organizing society and not just a kink of the system when there is no male heir for a sovereign. This is what the Amazons provide.

One final piece of evidence. Hobbes is clearly aware that his argument needs a strong premise about the genderless nature of authority. In a number of different contexts, Hobbes insists that sovereignty is gender-neutral, making declarations such as “authority does not take account of masculine and feminine” (*L* 42.78, 372) and “though *man* may be *male* and *female*, *authority* is not.” The context of the latter quotation is revealing. It is found in his English autobiography where he is answering objections to his views. Speaking of himself in the third person, he says,

Besides, his making the King judge of doctrines to be preached or published, hath offended you both; so has also his attributing to the civil sovereign all power *sacerdotal*. But this perhaps may seem hard, when the sovereignty is in a Queen. But it is because you are not subtle enough to perceive, that though *man* be *male* and *female*, *authority* is not.<sup>31</sup>

Notice what is happening here. Hobbes is clearly aware that some of his readers were having a difficult time with his unequivocal endorsement of queens and the legitimacy of female rule. When given the chance to tone down the claim or even recant it, he refuses. Instead, he doubles down on the idea of genderless authority. In fact, he is a bit insulting to his “unsubtle” opponent.

<sup>29</sup>See Filmer, *Patriarcha*, 11. I discuss Knox’s rationalization of Elizabeth’s rule below. Even if Hobbes was not familiar with Filmer’s work, he would have known Knox’s.

<sup>30</sup>For a useful discussion of this point, thanks to Johann P. Sommerville.

<sup>31</sup>Hobbes, *Considerations*, in *English Works*, 434.

To recap, the Amazon story serves two purposes for Hobbes. The primary purpose is to illustrate and evince his account of dominion and how it is transferred. But it is not dominion over women that is at issue; rather, it is dominion over offspring. In the Amazon case, the parents make a contract ahead of time about who will get dominion over the children. The fathers acquire dominion over their sons not by God or nature, nor because they protect their sons (though presumably that is required for them to maintain dominion); rather, the fathers get dominion over sons because the mothers transfer that dominion to them in accordance with the terms of a preexisting contract. That is what the Amazon example is meant to demonstrate, as Hobbes makes clear in every retelling.

The second purpose of this story is to refute the idea that custom justifies male rule over women. The example of the Amazons serves to illustrate and support Hobbes's claim about the nature of political rule—sovereignty—as being wholly artificial and therefore gender-free. Every version of his political theory contains an argument against the idea that men naturally rule women, but only in *De Cive* does Hobbes invoke the Amazons to this other end.

Both of these uses of the Amazon story can be understood as instances of dethroning commonly held ideas: in the first place, the idea that there is a naturally or divinely unique value in human sexuality and the children it produces, and in the second, the idea that male rule is naturally or divinely ordained. The second is easier to see because Hobbes is explicit about it, while the first must be extrapolated from the Amazon story. But both are implications of one of his most central theses, the thesis that all relationships of rule are a result of contract, of artifice, that there is nothing in nature, natural law, or God's plan that affords one human being authority or dominion over another. The contractualization and artificialization of all human relationships, particularly hierarchical ones, requires the stripping away of any notions that some human relationships are special and so not subject to the rules of contract. Hobbes is ruthless in this regard. However, the Amazons remain a highly contested part of Hobbes's theory because of debates over how to interpret Hobbes on gender. I next turn to the question of how the example is taken up in the secondary literature.

### 3. ENGAGING RECENT INTERPRETATIONS OF HOBBS'S AMAZONS

Despite increasing attention to questions about gender in Hobbes scholarship, his discussion of the Amazons remains a relatively neglected topic. Strikingly, those who do discuss the example interpret it in diametrically opposed ways. Some scholars emphasize the potential for female liberation, gender egalitarianism, and even matriarchalism, while others read it as part of a larger phenomenon in which women (and perhaps other groups) are erased or disparaged in the narrative of Hobbes's political theory. I discuss each perspective in turn.

#### 3.1. *The Protofeminist/Egalitarian Reading*

One leading trend in the literature—at least in its strongest form—sees Hobbes as a feminist before there was feminism. James Grantham Turner reads the

Hobbesian Amazons as embodying the opposite of characteristics that were then seen as appropriate for women: proud rather than self-denying, aggressive rather than pacifying, openly sexual rather than modest and virginal. As such, they play a role in Hobbes's "important theoretical deconstruction of male suprematism."<sup>32</sup> Turner explains,

Steering close once again to the ribald imaginings of libertine satire, Hobbes assumes that without the 'bridle' women would express their 'natural lust' in complete and carefree promiscuity ("it cannot be known who is the Father"), and would establish dominion over the child—the *only* form of hegemony in the state of nature not founded upon raw violence—by merely expressing their will. The means of this expression are fundamental acts—nurturing the child or exposing it to die—or powerful voice, 'in declarations' of paternity or 'contracts' like those of the Amazons. . . . Hobbes's 'natural' woman [is] an autonomous, Amazonian creature fully equipped for 'War,' with the additional capacity to exercise 'Dominion' through the voice.<sup>33</sup>

There are two reasons to reject this very strong version of the protofeminist reading. First, Turner overstates the liberatory potential of Hobbes's texts. He asserts that the Amazonian picture of fierce, independent female sexuality is what *would* happen in the absence of the constraints of patriarchal civil society, but at most Hobbes can be read as saying this is what *could* happen. Second, recognizing that the Amazons are independent and powerful does not automatically mean that they are a liberatory representation of women. If we accept Mary Nyquist's account (as described later in the paper), their power might be precisely intended as a "horror" to appall readers.<sup>34</sup> In order to read Amazonian independence and power as implying any sort of "deconstruction of male suprematism," one must, in addition, accept the premise I offered in section 2, namely, that Hobbes invokes the Amazons as a viable and legitimate representation of rule.

In a more moderate tone, S. A. Lloyd offers another protofeminist-sounding reading of Hobbes's Amazons:

Nothing in Hobbes's theory necessitates the subjection of women. And while we can tell one story about how slight gender-based differentials in strength could have snowballed into systematic institutional disempowerment of women, other stories are compatible with Hobbes's conceptual framework. The Amazons, who form a separate society of women, reserving all positions of political and military command and titles of honor for themselves, constitute one such alternative story. A mixed-gender but matriarchal society would, in fact, be the more natural story for Hobbes to have told. Women who bear and nourish children have dominion over them, and those children are under both a natural duty of gratitude and an obligation of obedience to them in perpetuity. This is a striking relation of natural dominion that would put all men under the obligation of obedience to their caretaking mothers.<sup>35</sup>

Lloyd's Amazons are an "alternative" vision of human society, one she sees as more consistent with Hobbesian precepts than the patriarchy he actually endorsed. In her reconstruction, the Amazons are best understood as a kind of stepping-stone to the matriarchal vision that Hobbes, if he had been true to his own principles, would

<sup>32</sup>Turner, *Libertines and Radicals*, 294.

<sup>33</sup>Turner, *Libertines and Radicals*, 88.

<sup>34</sup>Nyquist, *Arbitrary Rule*, 297.

<sup>35</sup>Lloyd, "Power and Sexual Subordination," 58.

have articulated. To note the methodological point, Lloyd is also taking liberties with the text, but in different ways than Turner. Her point is that *if* Hobbes were to have taken his principles to their logical conclusions, then he would not have ended up justifying patriarchy. Since he did not do that, she—and by extension we—can do it on his behalf.

Joanne H. Wright gives the most developed version of this reading of Hobbes on maternal right and the Amazon story. Wright catalogs the ways Hobbes's view on the family "goes against the grain," as she puts it.<sup>36</sup> In service of this goal, she details the received views on the Amazons that Hobbes would have known about and which he explicitly rejects.

One of Wright's most compelling pieces of evidence concerns Queen Elizabeth. It is widely known that Hobbes was a great admirer of Queen Elizabeth. But he, unlike most of his contemporaries, did not have a hard time fitting that admiration into his theoretical framework. Consider the case of John Knox, whose 1558 *First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* bemoans the ascendancy of the various Queen Marys, complaining that the whole world is being taken over by Amazons. Then Elizabeth came to power. In a society where many saw female rule as unnatural, dangerous, or even profane, Elizabeth still managed to inspire staunch defenders, even if they had to maneuver carefully. The general strategy was to argue that she was the exception that proved the rule. Knox claims that God himself had ordained Elizabeth. This exceptionalism in turn reinforces the idea that all other women were inferior and subordinate to men by both nature and God.<sup>37</sup> Some English writers tried to distinguish between regal rule and conjugal rule such that Elizabeth would have been subject to any husband she took. She did not take a husband, so this distinction was never tested. The patriarchalist/chauvinist conception of authority thus can survive this one instance of female sovereignty, the rare exception in which there is no male heir. Or so those like Knox try to show.

While many of Hobbes's contemporaries wrestled with how to fit acceptance or approval of Queen Elizabeth into a framework based on a commitment to the undesirability of female authority, which was often epitomized by the Amazons, Hobbes takes the opposite approach. Instead of beginning with ideas about the naturalness and superiority of patriarchy and then struggling to make sense of certain female sovereigns, he begins with the case of female sovereignty and generalizes from it to talk about parental authority. Though there were other positive narratives of female rule on offer (as I will discuss below), Wright is not exaggerating when she characterizes Hobbes's as going against the grain.

There is a way in which it is ironic that, of all the seventeenth-century male political philosophers, it is Hobbes who ends up as a champion for the Amazons. Wright emphasizes that the Amazons represented both androgyny and an inversion of the gender hierarchy, thereby constituting a major threat in a world where the Aristotelian and scriptural visions of sexual difference was seen as the basis for familial, social, and political order. Thus, Hobbes, *the* theorist of political order,

<sup>36</sup>Joanne H. Wright, "Going against the Grain," 123–55.

<sup>37</sup>For a discussion of Knox's views on the Amazons, see Kathryn Schwartz, *Tough Love*, 11–13.

invokes what was then often a powerful symbol of disorder. According to Wright, he does so, if not with approval, then definitely without disapproval: “In this sustained argument about the Amazons, Hobbes creates a space in his political theory for an alternative conception of women, thereby disrupting conventional views.”<sup>38</sup> Wright reiterates this theme of creating space for different conceptions of women, which she thinks “permit[s] the reconfiguration of gender—from patriarchalism to a rough egalitarianism.”<sup>39</sup> In this vein, Hobbes’s use of the Amazons serves to “empower women, both politically and reproductively” though Wright is quick to say that this was not his intention. Wright, like most sympathetic feminist readers, makes no claim that Hobbes himself was trying to do any of this.<sup>40</sup>

For Wright, as for Lloyd and Turner, the Amazons, the approval of female sovereignty that they imply, and Hobbes’s discussion about maternal right in general can be extracted and extended from the rest of his text; moreover, doing so could (and maybe would) produce a genuinely feminist vision. Wright says that “If Hobbes had carried forth his suggestive images of Amazons, queens, and independent women from the state of nature into his social contract, his script of citizenship would read very differently. . . . [Should we] extract Hobbes’s insights . . . [on gender] . . . we could fashion the beginnings of an egalitarian, feminist script.”<sup>41</sup>

Thus, we can characterize the Turner/Lloyd/Wright view as: the Amazons should be read as a representation of the power of women and the validation of female rule that sends a message not only about the past but also about possibilities for the future. Were one to want to construct a profeminist Hobbes, the Amazons would be a very helpful piece of evidence indeed.

Quentin Skinner can be included here, though he is not interested in the extracting and extending of Hobbes’s logic done by Turner, Lloyd, and Wright. For their book, *Feminist Interpretations of Thomas Hobbes*, Nancy Hirschmann and Joanne Wright conducted an interview with Skinner and Carole Pateman. There, Skinner defends Hobbes’s views on women against Pateman’s criticisms. Of the Amazons, he says, “They formed a commonwealth of women,” which served to highlight that commonwealths were only *mostly* formed by men. Skinner points out that there was a queen regnant when Hobbes was born in 1588, that he never endorsed the Salic Law, the French rule of succession that barred women from inheriting the throne, and that he saw nothing problematic about female authority. He states, “For Hobbes there is no difficulty with having a woman as our sovereign representative.”<sup>42</sup> Skinner is a unique member of this interpretive camp because he is the only one who does not want to go beyond Hobbes to ask what we, now, could do with Hobbesian principles. Skinner is putting forward his claims simply as a reading of Hobbes himself, not in service of mining Hobbes or the social contract

<sup>38</sup>Joanne H. Wright, *Origin Stories*, 92.

<sup>39</sup>Wright, *Origin Stories*, 101.

<sup>40</sup>Wright, *Origin Stories*, 120. Though Wright makes it clear that she thinks Hobbes, unlike his contemporaries, found a “positive example for female authority” in the Amazons, in the end, she explicitly denies that she thinks Hobbes is properly called a “profeminist” (*Origin Stories*, 104). Nonetheless, Wright’s reading is a profeminist—or at least egalitarian—one.

<sup>41</sup>Wright, *Origin Stories*, 95.

<sup>42</sup>Quentin Skinner, “Hobbes, History, Politics, and Gender,” 28.

tradition for hints of feminism or misogyny. This is important. It means that the more egalitarian reading does not depend on cherry-picking and extracting choice quotations to hold up for the scrutiny of twenty-first century politics.

In terms of the interpretation I have been developing, we can say that the logic of Hobbes's argument—in itself—does not provide determinate grounds for a protofeminist reading of his work. However, we can underscore the possibility that Hobbes's rejection of natural hierarchies played a role in the long arc toward actually changing the social and political status of women. It may go too far to say there are seams of feminist gold in Hobbes, but we can at least say he pulls down some significant barriers and clears some of the path that feminists would later walk down.

### 3.2. *The Amazons as Part of the Historical "Defeat of Women" Story*

At the other end of the interpretive spectrum, some scholars suggest that Hobbes is participating in a kind of conjectural history about the inevitable development of society toward patriarchy. On this view, humanity naturally, inevitably, and desirably tends toward a state where men rule over women outside the home and the father rules over the mother and children inside it. This idea was indeed common in Hobbes's time. Matriarchal societies play a role in this narrative; they may exist, but only temporarily. They fail and disappear because they are an inferior form of rule. Patriarchy's inherent superiority means that it will always win out as a way to organize human society.

On this view, Hobbes is retelling, with approval, the received view that the Amazons exist in order to be overthrown. The Amazons only appear in order to underline the subsequent erasure of women in his account of political society.

Carole Pateman, one of the original and fiercest feminist critics of the social contract theorists, talks about this narrative in terms of what Engels called "the overthrow of mother right."<sup>43</sup> Mothers have original right over children, but women are subordinated to men and so men get the supreme rights in the family. While Pateman herself does not explicitly invoke Hobbes's Amazons as part of the overthrow-of-mother-right story, Karen Green develops that line of thought. Green describes a long tradition, extending from ancient Athens to early modern England, of deploying the Amazons rhetorically to demonstrate the superiority of patriarchy. The Amazons had existed, but men conquered them, which explains and justifies the subordination of women in Athenian society. Green suggests that Hobbes is making this move with the Amazons by trading on the way in which their myth was employed in Ancient Greece. She says,

According to the Athenian myth, the early Athenians defeated the Amazons. . . . It is plausible that the function of this myth was to give a hypothetical explanation for an existing state of affairs, the inferior position of women in Athenian society. The barbarity of the defeated Amazonian world, in which there is no marriage, men and women fight to the death, and fatherhood does not exist, rationalizes the Athenian society in which women are subordinated and Amazonian tendencies repressed.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>43</sup>Frederick Engels, "Origin of the Family."

<sup>44</sup>Green, *Woman of Reason*, 52.

Like the Sabine women of ancient Rome, the Amazons of ancient Greece tried but failed to defeat their male opponents. These narratives of female defeat serve not only to support ideas of female weakness and inferiority but also to justify women's historical subordination to men.

As critics like Pateman and Green would acknowledge, these thoughts are absent in Hobbes's text itself. The argument, then, must be that we can infer these ideas from the way he uses the Amazons. Indeed, there is a larger story that seems to support this. As we have seen, Hobbes does posit a kind of mother-right in his account of original maternal dominion. It appears that women give up their natural dominion over children when they submit to men, who form commonwealths that institute patriarchal laws. In this sense, the mother-right does indeed get "overthrown" in Hobbes's story. And once he turns to discussing civil society, he does not mention mothers again, describing families as consisting of fathers, children, and servants (*L* 20.15, 132).<sup>45</sup> Therefore, even though he does not explicitly make this connection with the Amazons, this interpretation maintains that the connection is there. As Green says, "Hobbes, with his mention of the Amazons, shows some awareness of the very myths of the historical 'defeat of women' which fueled later speculations about the existence of an original matriarchy."<sup>46</sup>

Interestingly, Green also suggests that Hobbes's story about maternal dominion has "emancipatory implications," since women could always conceivably win their natural maternal power back.<sup>47</sup> If women's subordination is a result of their forced consent, then the situation can be undone. Green also argues that Hobbes shares some important commitments with Christine de Pizan, saying, "had [he] spent more time discussing women, he might, like de Pizan, have upheld women as a model of citizenship."<sup>48</sup> But while Green does acknowledge these "emancipatory implications" and generously compares Hobbes to de Pizan in this regard, her reading is not like Lloyd's or Wright's. Green really does seem to read Hobbes's use of the Amazons as part of an "attempt to rationalize women's historical subjection,"<sup>49</sup> which both Lloyd and Wright would deny. So Green's work evidences a complexity when it comes to Hobbes. Ultimately critical of Hobbes (in particular for his implausible moral psychology), she also acknowledges the feminist potential of his account; indeed, she argues that he has more feminist potential than Locke, which is not the common view.

My own interpretation of Hobbes offers another possibility for his use of the Amazonian story, posing a challenge to the approach just reviewed. If I am right about the role that the Amazons play in Hobbes's argument, then they cannot be part of the "defeat of women" narrative that scholars like Green and Pateman

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<sup>45</sup>As Theresa Brennan and Carole Pateman put it, "in Hobbes's theory, the lady vanishes" ("Mere Auxiliaries," 191).

<sup>46</sup>Green, *Woman of Reason*, 50. Green reiterates this claim in "Christine de Pisan and Thomas Hobbes," 461.

<sup>47</sup>Green, *Woman of Reason*, 53.

<sup>48</sup>Green, *Woman of Reason*, 63. For a more in-depth comparison, see the entirety of Green's "Christine de Pisan and Thomas Hobbes."

<sup>49</sup>Green, *Woman of Reason*, 53.

attribute to him. If the Amazons exist only in order to be overthrown, then Hobbes loses his ability to counter those who claim that men naturally and inevitably rule women. In order for there to be a genuine backstop against theories of natural hierarchy, there have to be actual viable alternatives. Reading Hobbes's use of the Amazons as part of a triumph-of-patriarchy story would introduce a deep tension into Hobbes's theory. Since this point will be central to my critique in the next section, I discuss it more fully there.

### 3.3. *The Amazons as Part of a Sexist, Racist, and Colonialist Narrative*

The most sustained critical stance in this context comes from the literary historian Mary Nyquist, who argues that Hobbes's philosophy should be understood to embody and encourage the sexism, racism, and imperialism endemic to early modern thought.<sup>50</sup> The imagery of the Amazons plays a central role in her argument since, for her, it relies on and reinforces colonialist tropes and values.

Nyquist's interpretation of Hobbes is complex. Let me reconstruct the key claims as they relate to the Amazons. Much of her argument is about the state of nature, and it begins with what I take to be a true claim: that Hobbes's state of nature is presented in the text as a generic condition of humankind without any historical or geographical specificity. It could exist for anyone anywhere; it is simply the condition humankind is in without a government. She further notes, "For academic philosophy, this has been its preferred significance."<sup>51</sup> This seems true both as a characterization of how Hobbes views the state of nature and as a characterization of how it has been taken up by academic philosophers. According to Nyquist, however, both are radically misguided. Far from being generic and ahistorical, Hobbes's state of nature is coded as the condition of a barbaric, anarchic world of "savages" associated with the New World.

Hobbes's use of the Amazons is an important part of the narrative Nyquist tells about his philosophy. In chapter 13 of *Leviathan*, Hobbes gives his famous argument that life in the state of nature is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." At the end of the chapter, he offers three examples of real-life approximations of the state of nature: civil war, the relations between states, and the Americas. The Americas were associated with the state of nature. Further, the word 'brutish' was code for 'savage' and, in particular, for Amerindigenous people. As Nyquist reads him, Hobbes brandishes the image of the barbarous, savage, uncivilized tribes of the Americas as a warning, in order to persuade people of the benefits of civil society.

One might wonder what that has to do with the Amazons, who were in Ancient Eurasia, not in the early modern New World. However, as we will see below, the Amazons of ancient myth were sometimes invoked in this context. One of the marks of supposedly uncivilized barbarity and depravity was failing to follow the gender and sexual codes of the civilized world, understood as referring to England and a few other countries in Europe. Savages were often portrayed as

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<sup>50</sup>Nyquist, *Arbitrary Rule*. Parts of this position are found in the works of other writers, but Nyquist's is the best, most complete, and convincing one. For example, Mary Evans gives an extended critique of Hobbes's treatment of women but does not adduce the Amazon story as evidence. See her *Feminism and the Enlightenment*.

<sup>51</sup>Nyquist, *Arbitrary Rule*, 283.

ambiguously gendered, living in a state of sexual and moral free-for-all without a concept of marriage. Women being in charge and taking up men's roles, like fighting, was both a sign and cause of the fearsomeness of the state of nature. Thus far, though, there would seem to be little connection with Hobbes. However, he does use the word 'brutish' to describe the state of nature, and that might have colonialist connotations for Hobbes's readers and possibly for Hobbes himself. The Amazons as a trope might well have played a role in the cultural representations of Amerindians.

Potentially the best piece of evidence for Nyquist's claim that Hobbes's Amazons represent a degrading view of women comes from consideration of the frontispiece of the 1642 edition of *De Cive*.<sup>52</sup>

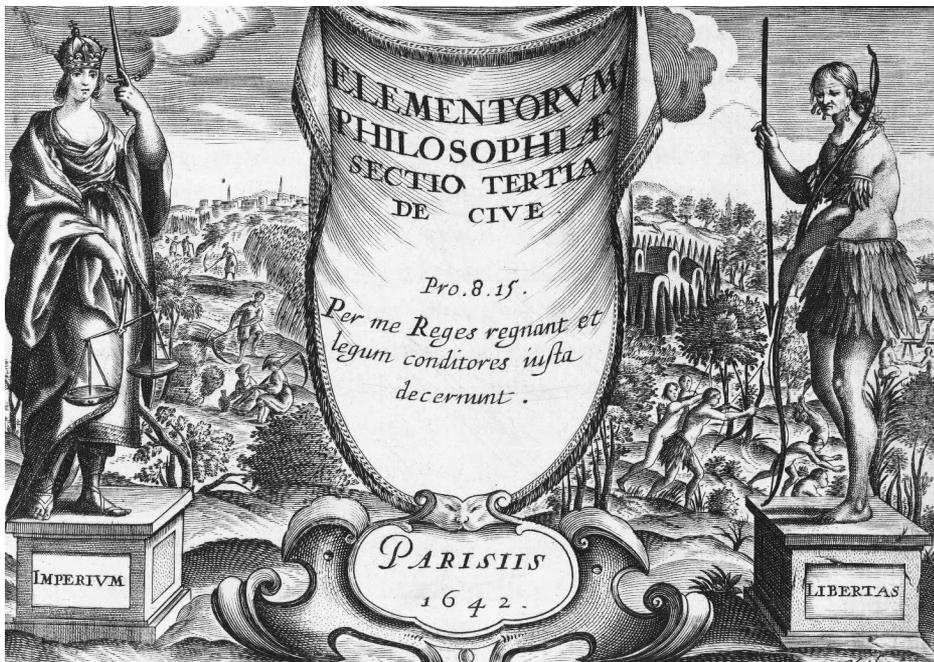


Figure 1.

The bottom half of the frontispiece contains two side-by-side images. One represents "Imperium" (rule/power/order/government) as a beautiful woman posing in front of abundant crops and a city. Imperium has a sword in one hand and scales of justice in the other. Life under Imperium is civilized and prosperous: it is peaceful and plentiful. Opposite Imperium is "Libertas." Libertas is a woman, according to Nyquist, but a masculine or masculinized one. Holding a bow in one hand and a spear in the other, she is emaciated, hunched over, and wretched. Apparently, she resembles portraits of Matoaka (commonly known by her

<sup>52</sup>There is a similar design on the first 1647 edition but not on the second 1647 edition. I will limit my discussion to the 1642 version, though there is much to say about the others.

derogatory nickname, Pocahontas). Behind her are scenes of war, brutality, and destitution; there are even signifiers of cannibalism (a human arm being roasted on a spit). Life under *Libertas* is violent and horrific.

Nyquist calls the 1642 *Libertas* “unmistakably Amerindigene,”<sup>53</sup> and there is a widespread consensus among scholars that this is the case.<sup>54</sup> The image can be traced back to John White’s earliest representations of Native Americans in England in the 1580s, which were in turn popularized by Theodore de Bry. The particular image of cannibalism in the background of *Libertas* copies one of de Bry’s depictions.<sup>55</sup> Given *De Cive*’s publication history, Hobbes himself almost certainly approved the 1642 image and may have helped design it.<sup>56</sup>

For Nyquist, specific features of the image of *Libertas* imply a link to the Amazons; in fact, she calls the image “Amazonian *Libertas*.”<sup>57</sup> The gender-ambiguous savage is armed and has a belt strapped around her right breast, the one the Amazons cut off so they could better hold their weapons. Nyquist points out ways in which seventeenth-century representations of indigenous American people look Amazonian and the continuity between those representations and Hobbes’s *Libertas*. This symbolism, she claims, would have been obvious for Hobbes and his audience.<sup>58</sup>

Nyquist explicitly takes aim at commentators “who have occasionally made Hobbes a profeminist advocate of *Mutterrecht*.”<sup>59</sup> She does not give any references to particular scholars or works, but she is talking about the positions like those of Turner, Lloyd, and Wright (discussed above), who view Hobbes’s use of the Amazons in a more egalitarian light. In stark contrast, Nyquist makes Hobbes into an antifeminist advocate of sexist, racist, colonialist imperialism. For her, Hobbes’s Amazons are not a representation of power and the viability of female rule, but precisely the opposite. Now, it is important to remember that what Hobbes is specifically concerned about is the brutish aspect of humanity as a whole in a state of nature. The image in the frontispiece is primarily intended to portray the horrors of the state of nature, not to disparage women. Indeed, a properly civilized,

<sup>53</sup>Nyquist, *Arbitrary Rule*, 285.

<sup>54</sup>Relevant discussions of the *De Cive* frontispiece include M. M. Goldsmith, “Picturing Hobbes’s Politics?,” 232, 234; Ioannis D. Evrigenis, *Images of Anarchy*, 82–88; Quentin Skinner, *Republican Liberty*, 100–102; Margery Corbett and Ronald Lightbown, *Comely Frontispiece*, 224–25; Srinivas Aravamudan, “Hobbes and America”; Kinch Hoekstra, “Natural Condition of Mankind”; and Philip Manow, “We Are the Barbarians,” 141–64. All agree that the 1642 *De Cive* *Libertas* is Amerindian. Only Nyquist, Moloney, and Evans explicitly claim that the image is Amazonian.

<sup>55</sup>Skinner, *Republican Liberty*, 102.

<sup>56</sup>Evrigenis argues that Hobbes was not involved with 1647 version of the frontispiece, which people agree is much less “savage” (*Images of Anarchy*, 86).

<sup>57</sup>Nyquist, *Arbitrary Rule*, 288.

<sup>58</sup>There is other scholarly support for Nyquist’s reading of Hobbes’s *Libertas* and her critique of his philosophy. For example, Pat Moloney details the way in which sixteenth- and seventeenth-century world maps placed allegorical figures alongside various continents. She says, “America was a naked Amazonian warrior, often astride an armadillo or alligator, bearing a bow and spear, dressed in a feathered skirt.” Moloney also sees the savage woman on the 1642 *De Cive* title page as an Amazon and says that “the personification of America as a man-eating Amazon on the title page of *De Cive* was a powerful representation of New World anarchy. . . . America was a woman who could eat men for breakfast; she was a terrifying image of the untamed dangers and disorder of the western hemisphere” (“Hobbes, Savagery, and International Anarchy,” 193–94).

<sup>59</sup>Nyquist, *Arbitrary Rule*, 296.

feminine woman is a positive image; we see this with “Imperium.” However, it is true that the representation of the depravity of the state of nature is enacted through and with representations of gender confusion. One great horror of the state of nature is the idea that women might have power and, relatedly, might not be properly feminine women. We can grant Nyquist, then, the claim that the 1642 *De Cive* frontispiece takes advantage of commonly accepted ideas about and aversions to the perceived gender confusion of the New World.

Although she offers some compelling arguments, ultimately Nyquist’s interpretation of Hobbes’s text is unconvincing. To begin with, there is a gap between the claim that the image on the title page of *De Cive* in some sense represents the Amazons and a claim about the significance of the Amazon example as it is used in the actual text, that is, in his discussion of parental dominion. On the face of it, there is no reason to presuppose a connection between the two; the former can hence be negative while the latter is neutral or positive.

Nyquist has two strategies for addressing this concern. First, much depends on how *De Cive*’s reference to other places in the world where women have sovereign power is interpreted. Recall that in one of the four sentences that mention the Amazons, Hobbes says,

And custom is not against [the mother’s dominion], because women, in the person of the Amazons, did at one time wage wars against their enemies and handled their offspring as they pleased, and there are several places today where women have sovereign power. (*DC* 9.3, 108)

Nyquist and Evrigenis claim that Hobbes is talking about women having sovereign power in the Americas.<sup>60</sup> But Hobbes might instead be talking about the queens of Europe; and, in fact, this is how Skinner and Johann P. Sommerville read him.<sup>61</sup> The phrase is ambiguous, so we cannot be sure. However, to the extent that we read the reference as about the Americas, that is a direct connection between the Amazons of the procreative contract example and *De Cive*’s so-called “Amazonian Libertas.”

Even if Nyquist can establish a connection between the textual Amazons and the image in the frontispiece, there is a deeper problem for her view. Nothing in the way that Hobbes actually describes the Amazons hints at anything negative. Even if Nyquist is right about the word ‘brutish’ and about the Hobbesian state of nature, that simply does not carry over to the Amazon story in the parental-right discussion. The way Hobbes describes the Amazons in that discussion in the text gives the reader no sense at all that he had any negative associations with them.

Nyquist, in fact, sees this. She observes that Hobbes uses Amazons as “historical exemplars of maternal right” in a way that sets him apart from his contemporaries. She then offers the *De Cive* 9.3 quotation discussed above and says,

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<sup>60</sup>About this passage, Evrigenis says, “This is a loose application of Hobbes’s standard formula for specific examples of the state of nature, according to which he offers an ancient and a contemporary example. Although he refers here to the ancient practice of the Amazons, Hobbes is well aware of the fact that the name was applied routinely by his contemporaries to women either found or thought to exist in unchartered territories” (*Images of Anarchy*, 116n159).

<sup>61</sup>See above, n. 15.

Hobbes need not specify contemporaneous 'savage' societies, because pre-civil societies, of which the Ancient Amazons are in any case exemplars, generally have well-established links with female rule, while the present-day Americas and, occasionally, Africa, are frequently associated with Amazons. A state of nature in which sexually promiscuous women are solely responsible for determining both paternity and the continued existence or nonexistence of their offspring would have filled most of his readers with fascinated horror, horror that Hobbes's dispassionate, scientifically neutral language merely intensifies.<sup>62</sup>

Nyquist acknowledges that Hobbes describes the Amazons using "dispassionate, scientifically neutral language." But rather than think that is a challenge to her view, she instead says that this neutral language "intensifies" the "fascinated horror" that his readers would have felt. This is her second strategy for addressing the concern I raised above, that there is no connection between the Amazons of Hobbes's textual argument about parental right and the supposedly Amazonian "Libertas" on the *De Cive* frontispiece.

Paul Ricoeur calls this method of interpretation the "hermeneutics of suspicion."<sup>63</sup> Nyquist is arguing that Hobbes intends to evoke negative emotions with his neutral and nonemotional use of examples, that he is making a point that would have been readily understood by his contemporaries but may be less obvious to us now because we lack some of the associations. But it is not clear what evidence could present a challenge to Nyquist's interpretation. If we are suspicious of everything an author says, what could possibly alleviate that suspicion? Like many readings that rely on subtext, it is in an important sense unfalsifiable.

Of course, this debate and these problems are not unique to Hobbes or Hobbes interpreters. They represent long-standing differences and disagreements about the nature of interpretation. My purpose here is not to advocate for one side or the other. Rather, I want to point out that if what I have said in section 2 is correct, Nyquist's interpretation must be rejected. Adopting a "hermeneutics of suspicion" would rule out the possibility of an interpretation that does justice to the internal logic of Hobbes's project as a whole.

Recall the rhetorical and logical functions of the Amazon story that I developed above. It is clearly important to Hobbes that the Amazons actually existed and that the procreative contracts actually happened so that they are able to represent ordinary, nonexceptional, and legitimate cases of female dominion. My suggestion is that the importance the Amazon example has for Hobbes can be explained by the role they play in his rejection and dethroning of natural chauvinism.

Central to Hobbes's political project was the rejection of divine or natural accounts of authority, and so at least part of the function of the Amazon example was to provide a defense against natural chauvinism. But if this is the case, then neither Nyquist's nor Green's interpretation can be correct. What Hobbes needs to prevent backsliding into chauvinism, which sees male dominance as natural, is a *genuine* case of female rule, a stable and actual gynarchy. If viable matriarchies were impossible because unnatural, then Hobbes's move against the chauvinists would not work. Insofar as it is a counterexample to chauvinism, it will not work if

<sup>62</sup>Nyquist, *Arbitrary Rule*, 297.

<sup>63</sup>Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics*.

it is a story about the ultimate, necessary, and inevitable subordination of women to men and children to fathers. As I read it, therefore, Hobbes invokes the Amazons in a positive—or at least positively valenced—way. That is, they are not in the text to be criticized, mocked, or insulted. If Nyquist is right that the Amazons function as a threat to civilized society, then they cannot play the role in the argument that Hobbes needs them to play.

In addition to the argument about the logic of Hobbes's theory, recall that there is also textual evidence that works against these interpretations. And that is Hobbes's insistence that, "though Man may be male and female, Authority is not."<sup>64</sup> This is difficult to reconcile with the claim that Hobbes endorses patriarchy as inevitable as well as desirable and that he uses the example of the Amazons and maternal right in service of that narrative. It is even harder to reconcile with the claim that Hobbes is invoking or relying on notions that female rule is monstrous or dangerous.

Nyquist's view has some genuine initial appeal because, of course, it is quite true that philosophers tend to claim universality by seeking to abstract away from particular circumstances, when in fact their ideas—including their abstractions—are always situated in their time and place. But Hobbes has the virtue of being sensitive to this: his point is precisely that we should not infer necessity from the arrangements we see around us. He makes this clear when he invokes the Amazons in his critique of "custom" in *De Cive*, discussed above.

One final point. For Nyquist's argument to make sense, the common understanding of the Amazons in Hobbes's day must be seen as negative. However, the example he uses does not seem negative in the text. As we have seen, Nyquist argues that Hobbes does not need to call attention to the negative associations of the Amazons for his readers because they would automatically draw the inferences that she attributes to them. But is this true?

On the one hand, there were indeed a variety of negative associations with the Amazons. In the popular culture of early modern Europe, the Amazons sometimes functioned as a cautionary tale. Proof of the danger and foolishness of female rule, the Amazons were presented as everything that goes wrong when you let women be in charge. At other times, the Amazons were simply like other oddities and monstrosities nature could throw up. But just as the existence of mutant two-headed animals does not undermine the naturalness or desirability of having just one head, the existence of the Amazons does not undermine the naturalness or desirability of male rule. Rather, societies like that of the Amazons are self-correcting aberrations.<sup>65</sup>

On the other hand, a number of positive associations with the Amazons existed as well. There is a history of elevating the Amazons in European political thought dating back to the fourteenth-century writer and philosopher Christine de Pizan. In her most famous work, *The Book of the City of the Ladies* (1405), de Pizan describes a variety of utopian matriarchies, including a long-lived society of Amazons. There are debates over how to understand de Pizan's work, of course, but Green argues that

<sup>64</sup>Hobbes, *Considerations*, in *English Works*, 434.

<sup>65</sup>For a discussion of the negative representations of Amazons in Hobbes's time, see Margaret R. Somerville, *Sex and Subjection*, 22–23.

Christine's exploitation of the Amazonian stories operates in a very direct way to show that women's lack of power is merely conventional, not natural. At a period during which the accounts of the Amazons were accepted as historically accurate they provided a potent example to women of what was possible.<sup>66</sup>

Green's point about de Pizan is in line with my interpretation of Hobbes's use of the Amazons; it is part of his attempt to reveal all power relationships as conventional instead of natural.

For de Pizan, the Amazons represented both a specific picture of women free from marriage and a broader picture of female authority. They were a stage in the development of her matriarchal utopia, not the end point. Nevertheless, ideas of Amazonian power were associated with female rulers in Europe for centuries after de Pizan. Queen Elizabeth was associated with the Amazons not only because of her status as female sovereign but also because she remained unmarried for her entire life and rule. In Elizabethan England, Amazonian images that were ambivalent or even positive found their way into popular culture.<sup>67</sup>

Celeste Turner Wright canvasses the representations of Amazons in Elizabethan literature, categorizing the tall, valiant heroines as they appear in various works of fiction of the period.<sup>68</sup> Hippolyta and Penthesilea are the Amazons who receive the most attention in Elizabethan literature. To some (Shakespeare, Fletch, Chaucer), Hippolyta was a queen; to others, she was a princess; but to all she was Amazonian royalty. She was portrayed as warlike at certain times and as servile at other times. If Hippolyta is a conflicted representation of Amazons, Penthesilea is not. She is depicted as the paradigm of "heroic virtue" by many of the most famous sixteenth-century novelists and playwrights, including Spenser, Gibson, and Heywood. Shakespeare and others casually mention her "as if confident of being understood." Penthesilea is as beautiful as she is deadly, and stories about her found their way across the continent.<sup>69</sup>

Thus, for present purposes, it is enough to note that there were at least three kinds of representations of Amazons that are relevant for early modern political thought. First, there seems to be the cautionary-tale depiction in which Amazons signify the dangers of female rule. Second, there seems to be the colonialist image in which Amazons were associated with the New World, indicating savagery and the opposite of European civilization. Third are the powerful and admirable Amazonian heroines of art and literature. All three kinds of representations circulated in early modern Europe.

We therefore cannot assume, as Nyquist does, that Hobbes's readers would have reacted with "horror" to his retelling of the Amazon story. Instead, we should take his matter-of-fact description at face value and conclude that he sees the

<sup>66</sup>Karen Green, "Christine de Pizan," 27.

<sup>67</sup>There is even evidence that Elizabeth herself owned tapestries based on de Pizan's *The City of Ladies*, though these tapestries have been lost. See Susan Bell Groag's "New Approach, 7–12; and *Lost Tapestries. The City of Ladies* was translated into English and printed in 1521, and while de Pizan is not mentioned by name in Elizabeth's writings, Bell argues that she would have been familiar with the work (*Lost Tapestries*, 35). Green argues that de Pizan's influence extended much beyond her own time and details the ways in which that influence can be seen in depictions of and in Elizabethan rule (Green, "Phronesis Feminized," 23–38).

<sup>68</sup>Celeste Turner Wright, "Amazons," 433–56.

<sup>69</sup>Wright, "Amazons," 438.

Amazons and matriarchies generally as a perfectly viable form of rule, no better or worse than patriarchies. He may be drawing on contemporary associations with the Amazons or resisting them (or both). My point is that the logic of his argument rules out interpretations according to which Hobbes's Amazons are both undesirable and doomed.

#### CONCLUSION

In stark contrast to the chauvinists, who held that both dominion of the father within the family and dominion of the king over his subjects are natural and divinely ordained, Hobbes insists that these structures are wholly artificial. Whatever normative or political significance we attribute to them is a matter of convention, not nature. In principle, sperm, sex, and children are much like flowers, sugar, tea, or any other good that can be exchanged. When Hobbes describes the Amazons as disposing of their offspring "as they pleased," this is brought vividly to life: he believed that parents could dispose of their rights over children like they can dispose of their wares. So it is unsurprising that he offers a picture of motherhood, the parental relationship, and marriage that is shorn of sentiment, that is conspicuously devoid of inherent value or veneration, that is reduced to the ordinary.

This, I argue, is a crucial part of Hobbes's project: he takes sex, reproduction, and the family—which were thought to occupy a special status metaphysically, morally, and spiritually/theologically—and renders them ordinary, stripping them of their privileged status. Then, much like now, certain ideas and institutions around sex and gender were exalted. Marriage and motherhood were thought to be special, even sacred. Hobbes is *dethroning* these ideas. He does this not because he cares all that much about the metaphysics of the *family* but because he cares about the metaphysics of *politics*. He wants to strip political authority of its special status, the kind that natural or divine-right patriarchalism gave it, because in the end that status is both wrong and dangerous.

For Hobbes, the Aristotelian view about natural hierarchy, far from grounding social stability, was a cause of disorder. He had to destroy those corroded, untrustworthy foundations for politics in order to build a new foundation, one that could last indefinitely and would not be prone to civil war. After all, Parliament rebelled against Charles I even though he claimed to rule by divine right. Divine right was not a bulwark against civil war; indeed, it might have contributed to it. The debunking of chauvinism was a necessary first step in constructing a genuinely stable commonwealth. In that project, the Amazon warriors come to his aid.<sup>70</sup>

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