

## **The True Myth of Atalanta**

### **Dedications:**

to Barbara Pressman, who works with battered women, for providing me with a realistic picture of battered women and their batterers,

to my wife Victoria, an economics professor, for providing me with a realistic picture of certain characters in Greek mythology and other valuable literary criticism,

to all those other women who have excelled in traditionally male domains, and to those who, in a more enlightened world, would do so,

and to all those other men who have loving relationships with such women, and to those who, in a more enlightened world, would do so.

The mythologists don't know the whole story of Atalanta, the Greek woman who could run faster than any human, male or female. Why, they can't even agree on whether she married Melanion or Hippomenes, and she could have been born in either of two places, of either of two mothers and any of three fathers, one of whom is the head god Zeus! So it should come as no surprise if I tell you that some of the particulars on which the mythologists do agree are also incorrect. The true myth was revealed to me in a personal conversation with Athena, the Goddess of Wisdom. As another of Zeus' daughters, she took a sisterly interest in Atalanta's comings and goings; so this version of the myth can confidently be taken to be the definitive one.

It is true that her parents left her on a hill to die because they were disappointed in having had a girl instead of a boy - and Greece hadn't even adopted the one-child-only policy! Quite understandably, they were anxious to keep Athena in the dark about their whereabouts and identity, whence their use of aliases. It is also true that the goddess Artemis arranged for her to be suckled by a she-bear and adopted by a tribe of hunters, but her duties as guardian did not stop there. On Athena's insistence, Artemis undertook to see not only to Atalanta's survival but also to her education; so when she was of school age Artemis took her to Sparta and enrolled her in school. Why Sparta? Well, even at that tender age she already showed great talent as a runner, and the Spartan schools were famous for their athletic program.

By the time she was thirteen years old she was already able to run faster than everyone else in her school. She was proud of her superior speed and enjoyed being admired for it; so she chose her friends from among those who admired her and laughed at the boys who couldn't take being beaten by a girl. Why, then, did she end up offering to marry the first man who could beat her in a footrace?

It all began with her Greek Literature teacher. He ridiculed a play he was teaching his class - I'll tell you later which one - and she praised the play, its feisty heroine and the playwright who, she said, "must have been a good husband because he wouldn't be bossy."

"You would say that!" sneered the teacher, his voice seething with contempt. "Your parents abandoned you because they wanted a boy and you've been acting like one ever since: racing with the boys and wanting them to look up to you just because you can beat them. If you were a normal girl instead of an Amazon, you'd be looking for a boy who could beat you so that you could look up to him instead!"

From then on, whenever the other children spotted her they would point their fingers at her and chant 'Amazon!' until only her most ardent admirer dared to remain friends with her. Until then

she had had no problem with the A-word, but she was soon conditioned to hate it. And rather than associate with a boy who admired such a hateful creature as an Amazon, she ran away from school and back to Calydonia to rejoin her hunting tribe.

For a few years she shunned romantic involvement, but when Meleager, the leader of the tribe, won Olympic gold in javelin throwing, she decided that it was safe to fall in love with him even though she could outrun him. All went well until she speared a wild boar nobody else could hit, not even Meleager. Another hunter claimed the kill and, with it, the leadership of the tribe, but Meleager set the record straight and offered to abdicate in her favour instead, eliciting universal disapproval. At this point she decided that only by marrying a man swifter than herself could she attain that all-important normality; so she announced her now-famous offer to all comers despite Athena's sisterly advice to the contrary.

Now the mythologists would have us believe that she speared every suitor she outran. But powerful though she was, she was also gentle - if you don't happen to be a wild boar - so loser after loser returned whence he came wounded in spirit only. One of these, the mathematician and astronomer Aristarchus, shook her hand, congratulated her on her victory, wished her joy with whomever she married, and gave her his address in Samos in case she ever changed her mind. A dim recollection of happier times prompted her to take note of this information before bidding him adieu.

Finally the Spartan runner Melanion challenged her to a race. Like Meleager, he was tall, muscular and ruggedly handsome; so when he dropped Aphrodite's three golden apples in her path, she followed Aphrodite's advice instead of Athena's, picked up the apples and lost the race. Athena warned her that he may continue to place obstacles in her path to self-fulfilment, but she went through with the wedding anyway. Athena was not pleased, but she was resigned, and as a wedding present she saved the newlyweds from the mythologists' conspiracy to turn them into lions.

If this were a fairy tale instead of a myth, it would end with "and they lived happily ever after". They did live happily for a little while, but then a new problem arose. Melanion couldn't beat Atalanta in a fair race and he became increasingly concerned that she may leave him if she met a swifter runner on the track where she worked out. But he couldn't reveal his feelings to her: a Spartan man is not permitted to reveal the slightest vulnerability. Instead, he ordered her to abandon her hobby and spend more time attending to his needs. She resisted his demands, they quarreled, and his insecurity mounted until he ended the quarrel the way his father had taught him - by slapping her across the face. Then, thoroughly ashamed of himself, he apologized. She accepted his apology, and rather than risk further conflict she gave in.

But her concession made her unhappy, her unhappiness increased his insecurity, and his insecurity drove him to tighten his control over her, making her more unhappy and closing a vicious circle of escalating destructiveness. Finally he decided to take a mistress so that if she did leave him he wouldn't be alone. Soon she discovered evidence of his infidelity and confronted him with it, hoping that he would apologize and terminate the affair.

Now that she had demanded an apology instead of gratefully accepting it when offered, Melanion felt his control slipping away once again, and he strove to regain it: "What's a man supposed to do when he's married to a big, ugly Amazon?"

That was the most unkindest cut of all. Hoping for reassurance that he hadn't really meant it, she said, "That's not what you said when we first got married! If that's the way you really felt, why did you marry me?"

Now the vixen had trapped him in a lie! To extricate himself without losing face, he was going to have to tell another one: "Because you're strong enough to do all the housework yourself. That way I don't have to spend good money on a slave."

A slave! That was what he had wanted, and that was what she had become! Forced by his harsh words to face at last the intolerable truth she had denied for so long, she mustered all her resolve and read him the Declaration of Independence. "Well, I'm not going to be your slave any longer. From now on you're going to quit slapping me around, quit fooling around with other women, quit criticizing me all the time, quit running my life, and if you don't want to pay to get someone else to help me around the house you're going to help me yourself a little bit. Otherwise, so help me Athena, I'm leaving you!"

A wave of black panic swept over Melanion. He had lost control of her! He would lose her as well unless he answered her challenge in a way befitting a man. Uttering an oath that I dare not translate from the Greek, he struck her in the face, this time with his closed fist, and threatened to kill her if she left him, thus convincing her that she had no choice but to leave him before he killed her anyway.

But where was she to go? There were no battered women's shelters in those days, and if she returned to any of the places she had once lived, he would surely find her. She needed advice urgently and she knew to whom she must turn: Athena, whose previous advice had proved eminently sound. She hurried to Athena's temple and received the following reply to her tale of woe: "Unfortunately you can't go back to your tribe of boar-hunters. Once they find out you've run away from your husband, Meleager is about the only one who'll be on your side, and he can't take you away and shelter you himself because he's already married. As much as I hate to admit it, your best bet is to hide out with one of your former suitors, but check him out first to make sure that he isn't another Melanion."

It didn't take Atalanta long to decide which of her former suitors she should try first. Aristarchus seemed like a gentle enough fellow and she remembered his address; hopefully he'd be prepared to take her in even if she still couldn't marry him. She arrived at his house cold, hungry and extremely tired, and knocked on the door. As soon as he saw her his jaw dropped in amazement. Unable to speak, he gestured to her to come in. "My husband beat me and I ran away from him," she said. "You said to come here if I changed my mind, and - well, here I am. I can't divorce him because I'd have to reveal my whereabouts and he said he'd kill me if I left him; so I still can't marry you. Are you still interested?"

Aristarchus nodded, and then gestured to the table which was laden with food; he had just begun to eat supper when she arrived. She joined him and ate with avidity. Then she said to him, "Look at me and tell me the truth. Am I a big, ugly Amazon?"

Having found his voice at last, he at first said too little: "No, you're not ugly." Then, seeing the look of disappointment on her face, he said too much: "If I had wanted some soft little thing, I wouldn't have spent several hours a day for months training for a race in the hope of marrying you. I've never been much into sports. I'm into mathematics and astronomy. The Stoic philosopher Cleanthes says I'm impious because I keep saying that the Sun and not the Earth is the centre of the Universe, but I'm plotting the orbits of the planets to prove that I'm right. I was hoping to become famous and impress you that way, but when you insisted on marrying someone who could beat you in a footrace I interrupted my research to train for a race with you. Now that you've come, I'm quite happy to live in sin with you. I can't be much more impious than I already am. I'll even start training again if it'll make you happy, although for the life of me I can't see how I'll ever even come close to being able to beat you."

"That's all right, I've had quite enough of being beaten," she said. As she basked in his admiration, her terror of the A-word gradually disappeared, and she soon learned to love him even though he couldn't have beaten her in a wrestling match, let alone a race.

Were you expecting me to say that she lived happily ever after? Didn't you remember that she was in hiding? Her desire to resume racing and to gain her financial independence through paid work had to be put on hold until she was sure that Melanion had made his peace with her absence.

But Melanion had his own agenda, and peace wasn't on it. For six months he searched for her in every place he thought she might have gone. Finally he consulted once more with Aphrodite, confessing only to infidelity to explain Atalanta's flight, and was given the names and cities of Atalanta's former suitors. The first one he encountered was alarmed enough by his aggressiveness to alert the authorities, and the news spread until it reached Athena. Atalanta needed her help! But where was she?

At that very moment, she was training in a dark, secluded spot far from home to maintain both her physical condition and her anonymity. Her workout completed, she headed for home, ever alert and ready to sprint away at the first sign of trouble. How galling it was to be a fugitive like the animals she used to hunt! With some relief, she reached the relative safety of her home and kicked off her sandals. "Aristarchus!" she called. No answer. Probably he was hiding on her with the intention of jumping out at her and kissing her. She decided to look for him, hoping to spot him first, jump on him and kiss him.

She did spot him first, lying on his back battered and unconscious, with Melanion standing over him! "I told you I'd kill you if you ever left me," he growled, "but I'm prepared to give you one last chance. Come home with me, and I'll forgive you for running away."

Disregarding her self-preservation instinct she screamed at him, "You'll forgive me? How dare you say that to me after what you just did? You're just a big bully and I hate you! Get out!!"

"All right, then!" he screamed back. "If I can't have you, nobody can!" With that, he charged at her like a wild boar...

Athena had just arrived in Samos and was about to ask directions when she heard the angry screaming. Melanion had already found Atalanta and was about to kill her! Frantically Athena sped towards the sound. Could she get there in time? If not, would Atalanta's fleet feet save her?

"Apparently they did!" thought Athena with relief as she found Atalanta pouring water on the smaller of the two men who were lying unconscious on the floor. Athena offered her assistance, and after explaining her plan to Atalanta she worked her magic and disappeared. A moment later, both men rose to their feet, cured of their injuries. But Melanion had been shrunk to the same height and build as Aristarchus, so that his wife was now not only swifter than he was by a far wider margin than before, but just as tall and considerably stronger as well! Athena knew well the psychology of men like Melanion: just as she had predicted, he fled in horror and sued Atalanta for divorce on the grounds of adultery.

Atalanta married Aristarchus, resumed racing, found work teaching Physical Education to high school girls, and even managed to persuade her new husband to help around the house. Her non-standard lifestyle raised a few eyebrows but she had no trouble making friends. Now that she had obtained for herself the life she had always wanted as a child, she was determined to do the same for any children she might have.

Atalanta and Aristarchus had only one child, a daughter whom she named Athene after her mentor. On the latter's advice they moved to Athens to give their child the best academic education

the country could offer. But such was her mathematical talent that not even the best of schools could challenge her in that area. Fortunately there was a private tutor available on the premises with a special interest in training her to carry on his work. "What a mind our child has!" he boasted to Atalanta one evening. "She mastered Euclid's elements faster than I ever did, and she just discovered thirteen geometric figures that even Euclid didn't know about. I did some digging and found another child prodigy who also discovered them. His name is Archimedes, he's just her age, and his parents moved here for the same reason we did. I'm going to arrange an introduction."

"So now there's going to be a boy in my daughter's life," Atalanta thought to herself. "What sort of a boy is he?"

The two children quickly became inseparable, and Atalanta's maternal concern gave way to joy. One day she came home from work to find her daughter bubbling with irrepressible excitement. "Guess what, Mom!" beamed Athene, dragging Atalanta into her room and pointing to one of the thirteen wooden models on the floor and the fourteenth one that Archimedes was in the process of carving. "I found a way to transform one of these figures into another one of the same type, and I think I have a way of proving that no other figures of that type exist, except for the ones that were previously known."

"Even Euclid never discovered anything that original at the age of thirteen!" said Archimedes with the same admiration Atalanta so enjoyed coming from Aristarchus. "At that rate, Athene will soon become as famous as you!" Why is it, then, that neither the mythologists nor the mathematicians have ever heard of Atalanta's brilliant daughter?

It all began when the democratic government of Athens was replaced by an Oligarchy (now I know you historians are going to say that no such event occurred at any time during Archimedes' adolescence, but I said this is true myth, not true history). The Oligarchs set up a committee, headed by none other than Aristarchus' arch-enemy Cleanthes, to investigate what they considered subversive activities. Cleanthes had long been aching to silence that impious gadfly who wouldn't stop promoting Heliocentrism, and now he finally had the opportunity. He summoned Aristarchus to appear before his committee and gave him a choice: renounce his views or be barred from practising his profession. "I'll never give in to those goons!" he vowed to Atalanta. "I'll earn whatever I can by giving private lessons. I may end up making less money than you, but look on the bright side of it: I'll be taking over the greater part of the household duties!"

"If they fire me too, I'll teach self-defense to women privately, or I'll scrub floors if I have to!" Atalanta replied. "Whatever they do to us, I won't let them harm our child!"

Athene was not overly troubled by her reduced living standard; she had too many other things going for her, in particular the pleasure of learning. She enjoyed the humanities almost as much as the physical sciences, thanks largely to the inspiration provided by her Greek Literature teacher. The grade eight curriculum included Aristophanes' comedy about Lysistrata, the fictitious heroine who stopped the Peloponnesian War by persuading all the women on both sides to abstain from sex until the men made peace. After acting out the play, the class debated whether it would be a good thing if a real Lysistrata could be found to stop all wars - an educational approach encouraged by the democrats.

But the Oligarchs didn't want students to sharpen their minds by debating whether men should be warriors or wimps. They wanted to train all the men in the city to be warriors, and they wanted all the women to inspire the men to be warriors by choosing warriors and not wimps. The teacher was brought before Cleanthes' committee and fired, and her replacement was most anxious to avoid the same fate. Accordingly, he condemned the play, the man who wrote it, the Athenians who enjoyed watching it and the democrats who tolerated it. He even implied that "all those wimps" had been responsible for the military defeat inflicted upon Athens in the Peloponnesian War by the

evil city-state Sparta! Athene objected that warriors were not always the best of husbands, and now it was her turn to be taunted with the dreaded A-word.

At first she found the strength to defy her tormentors, for she had not only a loving boyfriend but loving parents as well. But as supportive as they all were, they could not shelter her from the constant mockery. With every friend who got inducted into the ranks of her foes her resistance crumbled until finally, unable either to flee, as her mother had done, or to endure any longer, she caved in. She expelled Archimedes and all his models from her life, replacing the latter by cosmetics and perfumes and the former by bigger, stronger, swifter boys less intelligent than herself. As disappointed as Atalanta was, she felt that it wouldn't be right to interfere. But when her daughter refused to take any more lessons in such an unladylike subject as higher mathematics and let her grades drop to avoid frightening her new boyfriends away, Atalanta could contain herself no longer: "You don't have to lower yourself like that to attract boys. Not every boy feels intimidated by your achievements. Archimedes, for one, adores you, and you'll meet others..."

"Yeah, sure, just like you did!" interrupted Athene with a scorn once reserved for her enemies. "Maybe you can be happy married to a guy who's not as strong as you and who's earning less money into the bargain, but I'm not a little kid any more and I couldn't even stand to go out with such a wimp!"

"Show your father some respect, young lady!" scolded Atalanta sharply. "You know perfectly well why he's earning less than he used to: he stood up to the Oligarchy! A wimp wouldn't have had the guts!" Frightened into silence by her mother's unexpected burst of anger, Athene listened sullenly while Atalanta, in the usual parental hope that exposing the unpleasant consequences of her own errors would dissuade her daughter from repeating them, proceeded to tell her own life story.

"Don't think I don't understand what you're going through," she began gently. "I had a Greek Literature teacher just like yours. He even hated the same play, and you'll never believe what he said about it! He said, 'Aristophanes thought it would be great if the women took over the country and forced the men to quit fighting the Peloponnesian War, and a lot of Athenian men watched the play while the war was going on and got a big turn-on over the idea of women leading them around by their you-know-whats. Don't you see what wimps those Athenians are? Spartan men won't take any nonsense from their women and Spartan women pick real men who won't take any nonsense from them, and that's why we kicked their butts in the war. As long as we continue to conduct ourselves like Spartans, we'll soon take over the whole country!'

"I was a high-spirited girl just like you, and I wasn't about to take any nonsense from him even if he was my teacher. I said, 'It's not worth getting bossed around just so that Sparta can take over the country! I enjoyed the play, I admire Lysistrata, and I think that Aristophanes must have been a good husband because he wouldn't be bossy.' And then he turned vicious, just like..."

"You see?" Athene interrupted her again. "The Oligarchs are right about why we lost the war! The Spartans say the same thing themselves! They boast that they can take over the whole country as long as they keep training all their men to be warriors and they've already taken over quite a bit of it. Shouldn't we Athenians start doing it too so that we can reestablish our rightful role as the country's leaders? And how can we encourage our men to be warriors if we're going to favour wimpier, gentle fellows like Dad and Archimedes and Aristophanes who are so soft with us that they'd be pushovers against the Spartans?"

All Atalanta had ever wanted from life was to be herself and to be appreciated for what she was. She had suffered greatly for such an innocent desire, and now she was being told once again - this time by her own daughter! - that it was she and not her persecutors who was in the wrong. Surely Athena would be able to reassure her and, hopefully, provide arguments with which she could convince her daughter as well.

"Ah yes, the supremacy of one city-state over another!" sneered Athena. "Just another Higher Cause for powerful people to justify the evil they do! Well, you didn't buy it from the Spartan authorities and there's no reason to buy it from the Athenian ones either.

"A wise warrior knows when to fight and when to quit fighting. The popularity of Aristophanes' play should have shown the Athenian government that the people were growing war-weary, and as democrats they should have accepted the Spartan peace offer and salvaged a partial victory instead of over-extending themselves in Sicily and dooming Athens to total defeat.

"The Oligarchs seem intent on silencing the dissenting voices altogether and modeling Athens after Sparta but without Sparta's one saving grace: the inclusion of women in public life. They may conquer a little more territory that way, they may even wreak revenge against Sparta, but they will have destroyed everything that made Athens worthy of bearing my name. And even in their own terms their success will be but temporary: when all the men have become warriors and all the women merely their appendages, who will be left to tell the warriors to quit fighting before they make so many enemies that an even more crushing defeat becomes inevitable?

"So, no, the Oligarchs are not right any more than the Spartans are, and you should certainly do all you can to encourage your daughter to resist them. But if she does not feel strong enough to endure the pain they are causing her, all you can do is to be there for her and hope that maturity will give her strength. If she does not wish to continue her father's work, suggest to him that he pass his notes on to Archimedes. He is destined to become the greatest scientist the country has ever produced, and he will see to it that Aristarchus gets due credit for his vision once it is accepted by a more enlightened society - one which does not judge scientific theories by their piety, and one which does not compel all its men to become warriors and all its women to hide their talents. And if there are still people who consult with me by then, I will see to it that you and your daughter too get all the credit you deserve."

It was in fact Archimedes' writings through which historians of astronomy learned that Aristarchus had believed that the Sun and not the Earth is the centre of the Universe some seventeen centuries before Copernicus and Galileo. The true myth of Atalanta had to wait somewhat longer to find a scribe.