

The Atalanta Legend in Art and Literature*

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The Atalanta legend is a tale from classical Greek mythology.¹ Although fragmentary references and partial accounts of the legend are made by various classical writers and poets, only the later Roman writers, Ovid and Apollodorus, render a complete narration of the exploits of the heroine Atalanta. Nevertheless, Atalanta's adventures have been the subject for more modern writers, of whom Charles Swinburne and Walter Savage Landor, two nineteenth century English poets, are perhaps the most renowned. The ancient legend is also probed by feminists Sally Allen and Joanna Hubbs in order to provide support for their understanding of feminine destiny.²

This study analyzes the ancient Atalanta myth in its various versions through an examination of the pertinent literature and art. There are obvious inferences in this study related to the female athlete in culture, and the conflict which ensued where there is societal stereotyping of the female and the female athlete in a patriarchal society.

When analyzing Greek mythology two apparently different heroines by the name of Atalanta emerge.³ There is the Atalanta from Arcadia, the daughter of Iasus,⁴ who figured predominantly in the Calydonian Boar Hunt. Then there is the Atalanta from Boetia, the daughter of Schoeneus, who was famed for the swiftness of her running. The stories of the two are basically similar, except that different names are ascribed to Atalanta's father and to the suitor who later won

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1. Numerous standard texts on Greek mythology can be consulted. See for example George Howe and G. A. Harter, *A Handbook of Greek Mythology* (Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1970); F. R. B. Godolphin, ed., *Great Classical Myths* (New York: Random House, 1964); Robert Graves, *Greek Myths* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1981); Edward Trapp, *Crowell's Handbook of Classical Mythology* (New York: Crowell, 1970); Robert E. Bell, *Dictionary of Classical Mythology* (Santa Barbara, Cal.: ABC-CLIO, 1982); and M. P. O. Morford, *Classical Mythology* (New York: McKay, 1971).

2. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, tr. Frank Justus Millar, 2 vols. (London: William Heinemann, 1976); Apollodorus, *The Library*, tr. Sir James George Frazer, 2 vols. (London: William Heinemann, 1961); Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Poems and Ballads: Atalanta in Calydon* (New York: The Bobbs Merrill Co., 1970); Stephen Wheeler, ed. *The Complete Works of Walter Savage Landor*, vol. 2 (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1969); Sally G. Allen and Joanna Hubbs, "Outrunning Atalanta: Feminine Destiny in Alchemical Transmutation." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 6 (Winter, 1980): 210-229.

3. See Frazer's notes in Apollodorus, *Library*, 1: 398-399 for a detailed analysis of the different versions by ancient writers such as Theocritus, Ovid, Servius, Pausanias and Apollodorus when describing the various Atalanta stories.

4. Also known as Iasius, Iasion and Jasius.

her hand. The descriptions of Atalanta and her physical characteristics are consistent in all the renditions. It would seem to be highly improbable that there were two heroines partaking in analogous adventures, both surpassing men in physical abilities and suffering similar consequences. As often happens in oral tradition different names are assigned to minor individuals in stories, whereas the main character, in this case Atalanta, and the more significant events in the legend, remain constant. In their development and evolution Greek myths came under many influences, such as, according to Kirk, "historicizing legend, cult and ritual, the vicissitudes of oral tradition, [and] conscious literary elaboration and refinement."⁵

The Atalanta legend can be said to be composed of five parts. Three of these are well known and generally agreed upon, namely her early childhood, her participation in the Calydonian Boar Hunt and her speed in running. Two, however, are not generally acknowledged, namely the Argonaut Expedition and her victory over Peleus in wrestling.

The legend of Atalanta begins when she was left out on the wild mountain-side to die because her father, Iasus,⁶ rejected her as he was desirous of a male child. Legend has it that the baby girl survived by being suckled by a she-bear. She grew up freely in the forest, developing into a fiercely independent, physically fit female. She was found by some hunters, who taught her to shoot a bow and arrow, and to hunt. Her expertise in hunting was first demonstrated when she swiftly killed two Centaurs who had been taken with her beauty and attacked her.⁷ Later, it has been conjectured that she sailed with Jason in the Argonaut Expedition in search of the Golden Fleece. One of her most renowned adventures was the Calydonian Boar Hunt, in which she was one of the principal hunters and played a prominent role in its execution. She then participated in the funeral games held in honour of Pelias. The tale of Atalanta ended with a foot-race for her hand, and her subsequent marriage to Melanion.

Firstly, in analyzing the Argonaut claim, when Jason assembled "the nobles of Greece" to help him in his quest for the Golden Fleece, according to Apollodorus, Atalanta was definitely among those invited.⁸ However, she does not figure in any of the exploits of the Argonauts and is only mentioned in *The Argonautica* as having given Jason a spear as a token of her friendship. It is possible that Atalanta herself decided not to partake in this adventure, but Apollonius states that "greatly did she long to join him on that voyage." More likely Jason reluctantly negated her participation: "but yet of himself and willingly he held her back for he

5. G. S. Kirk. *The Nature of Greek Myths* (London: Penguin Books, 1974), 172.

6. See Frazer's notes in Apollodorus, *Library*, I: 398.

7. The Latin poet Propertius [*Elegies I-IV*, ed. L. Richardson (Norman: Oklahoma Press, 1977)] covers in his *Elegy II*, the attack of the Centaurs, Hylaeus and Rhoeteus, on Atalanta. In his poem Melanion comes to Atalanta's aid, but is wounded in this encounter, "an ultimate proof of his love." Initially Atalanta had rejected Melanion, but seeing him wounded she has a change of heart. This version plays no role, nor is advanced, in any of the other sources.

8. Apollodorus, *Library*, Bk. i. ix. 16. For a detailed discussion of Atalanta's certification as an Argonaut see D. N. Levin, *Apollonius: Argonautica Re-examined* (Leiden, Netherlands: Lugduni Batavorum, E. J. Brill, 1971), 26n. 2

feared grievous quarrels for her love."⁹ Thus, according to Apollonius, Atalanta was rejected because of her femininity, and not on account of her lack of skills or bravery. Although the general evidence appears to support the contention that Atalanta did not actually participate in the Argonaut Expedition, the significant fact that must not be underrated is that when the most outstanding warriors in the land were called together Atalanta was among those considered.

The most famous of Atalanta's adventures is the Calydonian Boar Hunt, which exhibits three themes commonly found in Greek mythology: a giant monster, which has to be destroyed, traditionally by the hero; the killing of one's own child; and intra-family disputes. In the legend a monstrous boar was sent by the goddess Artemis to destroy and ravage the country of Calydon in order to punish King Oeneus because he forgot her when he sacrificed the first fruits of the annual crops of the country to the other gods. Meleager, son of Oeneus and one of the heroes of the Argonaut Expedition, called together the finest hunters and bravest men of Greece to kill the animal, and he included Atalanta, "the pride of the Arcadian woods."¹⁰ Upon seeing her, Meleager was so taken by her beauty that he wished to have a child by her,¹¹ although he was already married to Cleopatra. Prior to the hunt Oeneus entertained all the hunters for nine days, and then on the tenth day, when the hunt was to begin, Cepheus and Ancaeus refused to go because a female, Atalanta, was included. Upon Meleager's insistence, Atalanta remained part of the hunting party, and, indeed, she was the first to hit the boar with an arrow. Meleager rushed to the wounded animal, making the final kill. Then he said to Atalanta: "Due honour shall your brave deed receive,"¹² and awarded her the boar's skin. The other hunters were infuriated and insulted that this honour was accorded a female, and took the skin from her. A fight resulted, and Meleager killed his two uncles. Althea, Meleager's mother, was so grieved by the death of her brothers that she killed Meleager¹³ and then hung herself.

The Calydonian Boar Hunt also served as the underlying plot for the play *Atalanta in Calydon*, a tragedy written by Charles Swinburne, an English poet of the nineteenth century. Swinburne is considered to be one of England's finest poets, but for many years he was defamed and severely criticized for his writings on the psychological bonding of man to others and himself, and also for his treatment of aberrant sexual themes. *Atalanta in Calydon*, first published in 1865, is "generally thought of as being his finest single work."¹⁴ The play is a

9. Apollonius Rhodius, *The Argonautica*, tr. Edward P. Coleridge (London: George Bell and Sons, 1889), Bk. i. 769-74.

10. Ovid, Bk. viii, 315-320.

11. Apollodorus, Bk. i. viii, 2.

12. Ovid, Bk. viii, 387.

13. Ovid, Bk. viii, 445-525, and Apollodorus, Bk. i. viii, 2-3. Another version of the death of Meleager is that he died in a battle between the Curetes and the Calydonians. Apollodorus mentions this version and it is the explanation that is substantiated by Homer in *Iliad*. However, the most common version accepted is that Meleager was killed by his mother.

14. A detailed discussion of Swinburne's writing style is given in the Introduction to Swinburne, *Poems and Ballads*, xi-xxxv.

study of the family and the conflicting love relationships between members. The major part of the play is devoted to Althea, the mother of Meleager, and to her conflict in love and loyalty to her son and to her brothers. She must choose to which family she is loyal, and in societies organized on matrilinear descent the mother's brothers are important. She rationalized that since she could not have any more brothers but could have more sons, that she would kill her son because he had killed her brothers. Brother-sister love, in this play, was stronger than mother-son love. However, according to Swinburne, Althea was swayed in her decision as she had not condoned her son's love for Atalanta, who was subsequently the cause of the death of her brothers. Althea's objection to Atalanta was based on Atalanta's strangeness, "she the strange woman." First of all she was not an Aetolian, being "foreign born"¹⁵ in Arcadia. Thus, she was not of the extended family of Calydon, but was an outsider, an intruder. Althea cried out after the death of her brothers that Atalanta:

Saw with strange eyes and with strange lips rejoiced,
Seeing these mine own slain of mine own.¹⁶

However, Althea's objection to Atalanta's strangeness was based more on another characteristic of Atalanta, that of being an "unnatural" woman:

Virgin, not like the natural flower of things,
That grows and bears and brings forth fruit and dies.
Unlovable, no light for a husband's house.¹⁷

Atalanta did not spin, weave or cook; she rejected a woman's duties and responsibilities. Instead, she modelled herself after men.

. . . I a maid
Hallowed, and huntress holy as whom I serve
Stand, girt as they toward hunting, and my shafts
Drawn; wherefore all ye stand up on my side,
If I be pure and all ye righteous gods,
Lest one revile me, a woman, yet no wife,
That bear a spear for a spindle, and this bow strung
For a web woven.¹⁸

Thus, it was the conflict of feminine "unnaturalness" and male "naturalness" that led to the conflicts and the resultant tragedies in this story. This led Slater to state that the tale of Atalanta is an excellent example of "sex antagonism."¹⁹ The male hunters resented a female's presence in the hunting party which represented the finest and noblest men in Greece, as they felt that it was lowering their status to have a female included among them. Meleager, who was in love with Atalanta, convinced them to accept her, and she proved her right to be part of this select group by demonstrating her skill and bravery under pressure. However, this act did not result in her acceptance by the other hunters, and

15. *Ibid.*, 1692, 633.

16. *Ibid.*, 1695-1696.

17. *Ibid.*, 634-636.

18. *Ibid.*, 873-881.

19. Philip Skater. *The Glory of Hera* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 260.

instead it further infuriated them, for she had shamed them by standing her ground and by being the first to wound the boar. Ancaeus, an Arcadian like Atalanta, grabbed a battle-axe and charged the boar to show the others "how far a man's weapons surpass a girl's."²⁰ The boar, anticipating his attack, charged Ancaeus, goring him in the groin and killing him. Thus it was demonstrated that it was not the weapon, but rather the skill of the user of the weapon, that was important. Atalanta's weapons had been a simple bow and arrow.

The men's honor was partially reinstated when Meleager made the final kill. However, the sex conflict re-surfaced when Meleager said: "Take thou the prize that is of my right, O fair Arcadian, and let my glory be shared with thee,"²¹ and presented her with the esteemed skin. The other hunters refused to acknowledge that Atalanta deserved the skin because she had drawn the first blood, as they maintained that a female should not be accorded the honors, the trophy of their hunt, even if she had made the first hit. They were insulted; their male egos were shamed. Thus, Meleager's uncles took the skin away from Atalanta, maintaining that if Meleager did not want the prize, then they "by right of birth"²² deserved it.

According to Apollonius, Jason refused to allow Atalanta to participate on the Argonaut Expedition because he feared that tragedy might result if one of the Argonauts fell in love with her. In the Calydonian Boar Hunt this fear was borne out. Meleager insisted that Atalanta be allowed to participate in the hunt because he loved her, and tragedy did ensue. Meleager's actions throughout were motivated by his love for Atalanta, so love, not common sense, dictated what he should do. Her physical beauty attracted him and inspired his advances of love. However, there is no mention whatsoever of Atalanta ever encouraging him in words or actions. There is only one reference to possible interest by her, that is when Meleager handed her the boar's skin, and Atalanta "rejoiced in the gift and no less in the giver."²³ However, she was an avowed virgin, and in all probability looked upon Meleager simply as a hunting companion and not as a lover. According to the myth, she welcomed the challenge to test her skills and kill the destructive beast, just like the male hunters.

Atalanta's athletic skills were again exhibited at the funeral games held in honour of Pelias, uncle of Jason. It was there that she wrestled against the great Greek hero Peleus, father of Achilles and participant in the Argonaut Expedition and the Calydonian Boar Hunt. Whether the Peleus-Atalanta contest was a final match after both had defeated other opponents, or whether it was the only match at the funeral games is unknown, for only that contest has ever been acknowledged in the literature. It is possible that both were so renowned for their wrestling skills that other preliminary contests were not deemed necessary. That wrestling skills were possessed by Atalanta is obvious from the various artistic representations depicting the contest. Indeed Gardiner claimed

20. Ovid, 392-393.

21. *Ibid.*, 426-427.

22. Apollodorus, Bk. i. viii, 2-3.

23. Ovid, 430.

that perhaps "the best illustration of a neck-hold occurred on a black-figured amphora in Munich, representing the wrestling match between Peleus and Atalanta."²⁴ For the match, Atalanta wore a tight fitting wrestling cap and short trunks, or shorts, while Peleus was naked as was the custom for male athletes in antiquity. There are several artistic representations of this match and the various scenes all show Peleus' hands in the same position, both on Atalanta's left arm. Atalanta, however, is shown in different positions, which varied from no hold at all, to her right arm over Peleus' shoulder, to her right hand seizing him by the back of the neck. There have been only scant literary references to this wrestling contest, and Ovid, in his *Metamorphoses*, did not even allude to it. While Apollodorus simply stated that such a match took place, he significantly disclosed that Atalanta was victorious.²⁵ When athletic talents were fairly equated Atalanta repeatedly proved her superiority. A notable reworking of the legend as found in Apollodorus was by the mythographer Hyginus, whose *Fabula 273*²⁶ asserts that Peleus won the match. Such an interpretation would represent a triumph of the male-centered Greek society.

After the wrestling match against Peleus, Atalanta "discovered her parents,"²⁷ but how this reunion came about was not elaborated on by either Ovid or Apollodorus. Despite being abandoned at birth because of her gender Atalanta survived without parental protection or support. Living a man's life she developed a man's skills and abilities. Indeed she became superior to men, defeating them at their strengths, such as hunting and wrestling. It is possible that these manly accomplishments would have played a decisive role in the reunion of father and daughter. Indeed, Atalanta had accomplished what a father would have wanted a son to accomplish, demonstrating superiority in the midst of acknowledged heroes. Now welcoming his daughter, Iasus belatedly undertook his fatherly duties and proposed that she marry. She was reticent, for when she consulted the oracle, the reply was: "A husband will be your bane, O Atalanta; flee from the intercourse of husband; and yet you will not flee, and though living, you will lose yourself."²⁸

Atalanta did not desire men and grew to womanhood as a virgin.²⁹ Her maiden life was filled with adventure and she was free to do whatever she desired. Thus, she determinedly repulsed "the insistent throng of suitors."³⁰ However, her father convinced her that she should marry, but she agreed to this only under the condition that her husband-to-be could surpass her in a race. Since she had previously proven her superiority over males in athletic endeavors, she was confident of victory, and thereby of remaining unmarried. She was like a confirmed, happy bachelor who agreed to his parents' wishes to marry but

24. E. Norman Gardiner, *Greek Athletic Sports and Festivals* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1910), 387.

25. Apollodorus, Bk. iii. ix. 2.

26. Hyginus. *Fabularum Liber* (1535; rep., New York: Garland, 1976). 273.

27. *Ibid.*

28. Ovid, x, 565-566.

29. Apollodorus, Bk. iii. ix. 2.

30. Ovid, 568-569.

who set such conditions that his continued lifestyle and bachelorhood was assured.

Reluctantly, Atalanta complied with her father's request, by devising a plan for achieving this purpose without publicly refusing to do so. If she was the winner of the race, by her own hands, "death shall be the reward of those who lag behind."³¹ Several suitors came and tried their speed, but death, not marriage, was their fate. Melanion,³² as a spectator, commented that no woman was worth death, but when he "saw her face, and her disrobed form . . . he was amazed."³³ Immediately falling in love with her, he appealed to the goddess Aphrodite in his quest to win the foot-race. When Atalanta saw Melanion she was similarly taken by his beauty, admitting to herself "if the harsh fates did not deny me marriage, you were the only one with whom I should want to share my couch."³⁴ During the race Atalanta got distracted by three golden apples thrown by Melanion, which he had received from Aphrodite. Thus, Melanion defeated Atalanta in the race, obtaining the right to marry her. The oracle was proven true, for while out hunting later they made love in a sacred place of Zeus and were transformed into a lion and lioness.

The Atalanta legend abruptly ends with her marriage, thereby vindicating the Greek patriarchal society. Her days of adventure were over as were her displays of prowess and participation in agonistic contests. In mythology, then, as in the modern day, a female athlete's career is ended by the prescribed societal sex-role determinants. A female, and perhaps even more notably an athlete-female, should marry, and thereby fulfill her social and biological role in life.

Three common themes in Greek myths are evident in this tale: contest for a bride; the use of tricks as solutions to a problem; and transformation into animals as punishment by the gods. The traditional bride contest is somewhat different in Atalanta's tale as the wooers, the suitors, are in contention, not with each other, but with the bride-to-be herself. Melanion was determined to defeat Atalanta, but he very quickly realized that his speed and running ability would not assure him of victory. His solution was to appeal to the gods, whereby Aphrodite gave him three apples to be used to divert Atalanta during the race. The trickery worked: "I forced her to take it up . . . and so impeded her equally with the weight of her burden, and with her loss in time."³⁵ Therefore, Aphrodite, who was hated by Artemis, the virgin huntress goddess whom Atalanta worshipped, played a decisive role in causing the mortal virgin Atalanta to be outrun and to be married. Artemis, then, punished Atalanta for the loss of her virginity by turning her into a lioness. Slater has argued that it was Artemis who sent the she-bear that suckled Atalanta when she was abandoned by her

31. *Ibid.*, 572.

32. Some writers call him Hippomenes. See Sir James George Frazer's notes in Apollodorus, p. 399, for discussion of the use of the various names by the ancient writers.

33. Ovid, 577-578.

34. *Ibid.*, Bk. x, 633-634.

35. *Ibid.*, Bk. x, 674-675.

parents,³⁶ and Artemis who later taught her hunting and archery skills. So, the goddess who was instrumental for Atalanta's initial survival and her rise to fame was also responsible for her final demise.

In Ovid's fable, trickery is not the sole factor in leading to Atalanta's defeat. Atalanta, after seeing Melanion, appeared confused and uncertain, "being in a strait betwixt her desire to conquer and to be conquered." She wished that Melanion would forget the race, but since he was "so madly set upon it, would that you might prove the swifter." She was "feeling for the first time the impulse of love, ignorant of what she does, she loves and knows it not." This feeling, love, affected her, for during the race: "O, how often, when she could have passed him, did she delay and after gazing long upon his face reluctantly leave him behind."³⁷ After Melanion threw the apples, Atalanta was conquered. Thus, Ovid implied that it was not only the gods, or trickery, that defeated Atalanta, but it was also her change of heart and resolve which had been brought about by her falling in love. It is possible, however, that Ovid included the love factor in his tale in order that the characterization of Atalanta would more suitably subscribe to the norm of a female in the society. Also, as apples were considered a love gift by the Greeks, the choice of apples in the tale was appropriate to societal expectations. The love factor is further emphasized by another writer, Theocritus:

When Schoenus' bride race was begun
Apples fell from one that ran;
She looks, she's lost and lost doth leap
Into love so dark and deep.³⁸

Ovid also pointed out that Atalanta was not affected by Melanion "himself . . . but the fact that he is still but a boy." And further on in the tale Atalanta stated: "Ah, how girlish is his youthful face."³⁹ It is possible that Ovid here was implying that Atalanta was a lesbian, for she did not desire men and lived as a virgin. Arguably, these same remarks could be interpreted that Atalanta was really a male and not only exhibited masculine tendencies, but also experienced masculine feelings.

Another emphasis has been placed on this tale by Walter Savage Landor in his poem "Hippomenes and Atalanta," first published in 1863.⁴⁰ Landor, considered one of the finest English poets and critics of the nineteenth century, appeared to emphasize the father-daughter relationship, which was never evident in the stories by Ovid or Apollodorus.⁴¹ In Landor's poem the pre-condition of marriage, that of winning the foot-race, was set by the father, who firmly believed that "none could match his girl in fleetness." Atalanta was

36. Slater, *Glory of Hera*, 260.

37. Ovid, Bk. x, 610, 630, 636-37, 66-62.

38. I. M. Edmonds, ed., *The Greek Bucolic Poets* (London: William Heinemann, 1928); Theocritus, III, 24-42.

39. Ovid, Bk. x, 615, 631.

40. Wheeler, *Walter Savage Landor*, 267-269. Algernon Charles Swinburne, after visiting Landor in Florence, when Landor was in his nineties, dedicated his play "Atalanta in Calydon" to him.

41. Charles Proudfit, ed., *Landor as Critic* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), 1.

referred to as “his” girl, and was portrayed as resolving to beat Hippomenes so as not to break her father’s heart. Although she pitied the suitor, she was determined to win; however trickery, the use of the golden apples, prevented her. When she saw Hippomenes at the finish line, she was bitterly disappointed and “stood in mute despair.”⁴² Landor’s poem does not center around Atalanta’s superior athletic talents, but rather on the rationale for the marriage of Hippomenes and Atalanta.

An interesting interpretation of the footrace of Atalanta is presented by Allen and Hubbs in their analysis of the work of seventeenth century alchemist Michael Maier. Maier turned to the Greek myth of Atalanta to demonstrate that nature could be imitated by alchemical power and thus that “Atalanta, like nature, must be brought into union with human needs.”⁴³ In his treatise Maier⁴⁴ uses not only words but also extensive pictorial representations, and thus symbolism, to express his beliefs. These symbols are critically analyzed by Allen and Hubbs, who conclude that:

Atalanta fugiens, the free feminine spirit, the spirit of Mother Nature trapped by the cunning youth who found the source of creative erotic energy stands as an allegory of technology triumphing over nature through the triumph of man over woman.⁴⁵

In support of the literary sources for the Atalanta legend there are numerous artistic representations, principally by Greek artists of the classical period. The only sculpture of Atalanta that has been preserved is that from the late classical period, 380-325 B.C., by Skopas of Tegea, who is considered to be one of the great Greek sculptors. Only a few of Skopas’ works have survived to the modern era and one, fortunately, is that of a “battered and masculine figure of Atalanta.”⁴⁶ As Skopas’ style was that of sculpturing “strong masculine bodies . . . which depicted an . . . heroic element, youthful strength and passion,”⁴⁷ his masculine representation of Atalanta was consistent with his other work. She is again portrayed by him in his work on the front gable of the temple of Althea Alea at Tegea,⁴⁸ where the theme for the gable was the Calydonian Boar Hunt.

The oldest vase painting depicting Atalanta is that on the Francois vase, the oldest Attic volute-krater, masterpiece of the potter Ergotimos and the painter Kleitias, circa 570 B.C.⁴⁹ Portraying the Calydonian Boar Hunt, Atalanta is depicted standing with her arm raised as if ready to throw the spear which is in her hand, but she appears to be slightly behind Meleager, who is in the act of goring the boar. On this particular vase the three males who figure most

42. Wheeler, *Walter Savage Landor*, 267, 5-6, 269, 95.

43. Allen and Hubbs, “Outrunning Atalanta,” 224.

44. For discussion of Maier’s treatise, *Atalanta fugiens* (Oppenheim, 1618), see ibid.

45. Allen and Hubbs, “Outrunning Atalanta,” 221.

46. Will Durant, *The Life of Greece* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1939), 497.

47. Karl Scheffold, *Classical Greece* (London: Methuen, 1967), 228.

48. See the description in Pausanias, *Description of Greece IV*, tr. W. H. S. Jones (London: William Heinemann, 1918). VIII, xiv, 5.

49. Located in the Museo Archaeologico, Florence, Italy. Vase number 4209, from Chiusi, an Etruscan site north of Rome.

prominently in the full Atalanta legend are all represented, namely, Meleager of Calydon, Peleus, with whom she wrestles, and Melanion, who races against her for her hand in marriage. However, in the actual Calydonian Boar Hunt only Meleager is a participant, while Peleus and Melanion are characters in other tales.

The Calydonian Boar Hunt is a popular tale in classical Greek mythology and numerous representations depicting the story have been found. The theme appears to have been particularly prevalent in the early Christian era and is pictured on several sarcophagi. For example, there are two burial vaults titled "Atalanta and Boar Hunt" on display in the Capitoline Museum in Rome, while another entitled "The Hunt of the Calydonian Boar," which is dated late second century A.D., is in the Cook Collection in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. The hunt is again the theme of a large fourth century A.D. Roman mosaic from Carthage, now housed in the British Museum. Although Atalanta, sitting astride a galloping horse, is the central character of the mosaic, the artist has purposely balanced her representation with that of Meleager, who is hunting a leopard. Atalanta's hunt is for a lion, which unfortunately is no longer evident on the mosaic.

Wrestling is another theme in which Atalanta figures on several vases. The Greek painter Olto has painted her in red-figure style, in a wrestling crouch position, with Peleus, on a cup dated c. 525-510 B.C. and now located in the Museo Civico, Bologna. Wrestling, in an upright position, is seen on an older black figure amphora, and again on another black and white figure amphora, apparently found in Olympia. The black figure vase is part of the Greek collection in the British Museum, while the black and white amphora is in the Antiquities Museum in Berlin.

There are other representations of Atalanta on vases; however, in these no particular theme or activity appears to be evident. For example, a painting in the inside of a cup by the Euaion painter, dated about 460 B.C., shows her standing in a two-piece outfit, beside a post, above which are hanging an oil flask and strigil. This cup is in the Louvre, Paris. Apollodorus states that Atalanta "planted a stake three cubits high"⁵⁰ in the middle of the designated race course, and thus it is possible that this painting represents Atalanta before the start of a foot-race for the honor of her hand. Seltman has claimed that Atalanta is standing beside "the winning post in the stadium,"⁵¹ and is holding an umpire's stick in her hand. In another red-figure bowl Atalanta is shown seated, as if listening to a male athlete who has a strigil in hand and is using it to scrape his arm. In this representation she is wearing only shorts, similar to the attire with which she was painted in the wrestling representations. The name, or significance, of the other person in the scene is unknown. Also unknown is the extent of Atalanta's athletic skills, as only foot-racing, wrestling and hunting are alluded to in the literature. On a red-figure bowl housed in the Museo Spina,

50. Apollodorus, I, Bk. iii, ix. 2.

51. Charles Seltman, *Women in Antiquity* (New York: Collier Books, 1956), 127.

Ferrara, Italy, painted about 440 B.C. by an associate of Polygnotos, she is shown with her arms above her head and, according to Seltman, is preparing for her wrestling match with Peleus. Unfortunately only a fragment of this artifact remains, and thus it is difficult to ascertain the exact nature of the activity taking place. A judge appears to be looking on, and another man (Peleus?) is right up under her arm with his chin on her breast. Her breasts are exposed, as she is wearing a strapless top on which there are openings for the breasts. This would have been a most unusual attire for wrestling! On the other side of Atalanta, looking on, is an athlete binding his hands as if to prepare for a boxing match. Thus, it may be possible that Atalanta was involved in a boxing match, however, again the attire was certainly not conducive to that activity, nor is there any reference to her participating in this sport in the literature.

In all the artistic representations she is depicted as participating in physical, masculine activities which were atypical for females. Her dress is also atypical of feminine attire at the time. On the other hand, a fifth century A.D. mosaic found near Piazza Armerina, Sicily, depicts female athletes also wearing two-piece athletic outfits. Indeed, such two-piece outfits have only in the latter half of the twentieth century been accepted as appropriate athletic attire for females. Also, one-piece suits, or rather trunks only, have still not been generally accepted by female athletes.

There were a few other athletic females who are given occasional reference in Greek mythology; however, none of them achieved the stature of Atalanta or was acclaimed in extensive myths. Cyrene was perhaps the most renowned of this lesser group. Similar to Atalanta, there appear two different origins for Cyrene, one as daughter of Hypseus, King of the Lapiths, and the other as daughter of Eurpylos, King of Libya.⁵² As both traditions have the same ending, it can be assumed that they were simply local variations that arose for the same myth. Cyrene did not care for such womanly tasks as spinning, and instead preferred tending her father Hypseus' flocks, where she had to develop physical skills and abilities. She became an excellent huntress and was claimed to be "one of the first of Artemis' followers,"⁵³ and like Atalanta she took part in the funeral games of Pelias. There, competing successfully in an athletic competition, she won the prize of hunting dogs. Pindar also wrote about her athletic ability in his Ninth Pythian Ode. He described how she not only fought and slew wild animals with swords and spears, but also successfully wrestled and strangled lions.

The strangling of a lion is the main theme of the tale of Cyrene, daughter of Eurpylos. A lion was ravaging the kingdom of Libya, and the king offered a portion of his land to whoever killed this beast. Here, a parallel can be drawn to the Atalanta legend, where Atalanta was invited to help rid Calydon of the

52. Thomas Boslooper, "The Image of Women in Classical Antiquity." *Proceedings of the Second World Symposium on the History of Sport and Physical Education*, ed. Maxwell L. Howell (Edmonton, Alberta: University of Alberta, 1971), 19-20. However, Howe and Harrer in *A Handbook of Classical Mythology* only present Cyrene as daughter of Hypseus.

53. Callimachus, *Hymns and Epigrams, Lycophron, Ararus*, tr. A. W. Mair and G. R. Mair (London: William Heinemann, 1921). Hymn III to Artemis, 215-220.

dreaded boar. Cyrene's feat is represented on a votive relief which shows her strangling a lion, and a crown is held over her head. An inscription of the relief elaborates:

Cyrene, Mother of Cities,
Slayer of Lions, in token of great hospitality.⁵⁴

On another statuette, which was discovered in the Temple of Apollo at Cyrene, Cyrene, attired like Diana, is shown having a strangle-hold on a lion.

Apollo saw Cyrene performing these feats, and marvelled "at the spirit of this woman, and her great might."⁵⁵ In love with her, he carried her off to Libya, where he found the city of Cyrene in her honor, and thus, the story of Cyrene ends. Both the Atalanta and Cyrene tales have similar endings: love and marriage.

Generally speaking, one sector of Greek mythology is primarily concerned with gods; another and somewhat larger one with heroes. Very few heroines, however, are highlighted in Greek mythology, and thus the Atalanta legend, in which the central figure around which the actions and adventures revolve is a female, is a rarity. Thus, although Atalanta could perhaps be considered the feminine counterpart of Theseus, the folk hero of classical Greece, she did not achieve "hero," or heroine status.⁵⁶ She was dissimilar to Theseus as she was not revered by Athenian girls, and did not become a role model for them. Her achievements were not held in high esteem, and indeed Athenian girls were not encouraged to emulate her exploits.

Atalanta was different to the other females of Greek mythology, and later Greek society. She was a "strange" woman, who did not desire marriage, and who loved adventure. The achievements for which she became famous were those of out-hunting, out-wrestling and out-racing men. Indeed, she surpassed men in their socially prescribed functions, performed the traditional masculine activities and physical skills with apparent ease and pleasure, and was victorious in agonistic festivals. She displayed such masculine tendencies as aggressiveness, bravery, courage, and athleticism. Indeed, she was not the subjugated, weak female who became the norm in classical Athens. Although Atalanta was a female by sexual differentiation, the gender role she exhibited was that of a male. And it is for that reason, being an "unnatural" female, that she did not achieve heroine status. Furthermore, she defeated heroes such as

54. In the British Museum, London, England. See also Boslooper. "The Image," 20.

55. Donald J. Sobol, *The Amazons of Greek Mythology* (London: Thomas Yoseloff, 1972). 128.

56. Concerning Atalanta's lack of heroine status, Joseph Fontenrose ["The Hero as Athlete," *California Studies in Classical Philology* 1 (1968). 76-79] has clearly pointed out that the paths to becoming a hero in Greek religion are many and often unpredictable. In analyzing four athletes, Kleomedes, Euthyklus, Oibatas and Theagenes, he endeavors to analyze commonalities and differences within and between the legends surrounding them and arrives at fourteen features that make up a hero. Kleomedes and Oibatas seem to have qualified in almost every feature, whereas Euthyklus and Theagenes differ somewhat. C. Kerényi, *The Heroes of the Greeks* (New York: Grove Press, 1960) points out that the mythology of Greek heroes is characterized by the fact that its emphasis is laid on the side of the human element, and hence it is understandable in a patriarchal society that heroines would not have the same popularity, particularly when superiority over the male is an issue. Erwin Rhode, *Pysche* (N.Y.: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1925) also makes the point that there was an enormous multitude of Greek heroes, but notes that there was an aristocracy of heroes of a higher rank. For deep societal reasons, Atalanta obviously never became one of that aristocracy.

Peleus in athletic competitions, and Greek society, from which our modern concepts of femininity and masculinity have evolved, could not accept a physically superior female.

Interpretation of the sources would convey a reticence by ancient writers to develop and glorify Atalanta and her prowess. Fundamentally they helped to define and redefine what was normal, appropriate and desirable behavior for the female gender. Subsequently their writings acted as instruments in the formation and perpetuation of suitable attitudes and expectations in a patriarchal society. However, such societal conformity was not perceivable in the artistic representations, where a masculine, physically strong female representation was apparent and acceptable.

The legend is of relevance to sport historians because it illuminates broader issues surrounding the cultural history of the depiction of the gendered “person-hero,” the gendered “body,” both in art and literature; and in the mythology of female-athletes. Ancient, and for that matter, more modern writers, obviously encountered difficulties creating a heroine out of the female Atalanta who surpassed males in the masculine domain of athletic physical prowess.