

*“High Stakes” in the Symbolic Order:
John Banville’s Love in the Wars Read through Jean
Baudrillard*

*“Alto Risco” na Ordem Simbólica:
Love in the Wars, de John Banville Lido Através de Jean
Baudrillard*

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Abstract: *John Banville’s shrouded fictional territory suggests a Nietzschean world in which the notions of truth and reality are questioned and in the center of which humanity might find “an infinite nothing.” From Nietzsche’s bleak vision, the mind readily moves to Jean Baudrillard’s envisioned universe – even bleaker, perhaps – in which simulation is a “dominant mode of perception.” Baudrillard’s ideas are in dialogue with John Banville’s textual explorations of a territory of radical uncertainty. Elements of what can be seen as Baudrillardian third-order simulation are readily discernible in Banville’s late work, but in his play Love in the Wars, at focus in this article, it is Baudrillard’s notion of a pre-Renaissance symbolic order – an age of “the rule,” not of “the roll of the dice” – that has proved a superior analytical tool.¹*

Keywords: *Banville, Baudrillard; Love in the Wars; Penthesilea; Kleist; Greek myth.*

Resumo: *O território fictício e obscuro de John Banville sugere um mundo nietzschiano no qual as noções de verdade e realidade são questionadas e em cujo centro a humanidade pode encontrar “um nada infinito”. Da visão sombria de Nietzsche, a mente se move rapidamente para o universo imaginado de Jean Baudrillard – talvez ainda mais sombrio – em que a simulação é um “modo dominante de percepção”. As ideias de Baudrillard estão em diálogo com as explorações textuais de John Banville acerca de um território de incerteza radical. Instâncias daquilo que pode ser reconhecido como simulação da terceira ordem baudrillardiana são facilmente discerníveis no trabalho tardio de Banville; contudo, em sua peça Love in the Wars, foco deste artigo, a noção de Baudrillard sobre uma ordem simbólica pré-renascentista – uma era da “ordem”, não do “acaso” – provou ser uma ferramenta analítica superior.*

Palavras-chave: *Banville; Baudrillard; Love in the Wars; Pentésiléia; Kleist; mito grego.*

In John Banville’s play *Love in the Wars*, his interest in myth and the plays of Heinrich von Kleist is evident. Unlike his earlier play, *God’s Gift*, which turns on the Amphitryon myth, Banville’s adaptation of Kleist’s *Penthesilea* resurrects the ancient myth of an Amazon state, a society of one-breasted “women warriors.”² According to Greek myth, the Amazon Queen Penthesilea, “daughter of Otrere and Ares, had sought refuge in Troy”, where she “greatly distinguished herself in battle.”³ As the Amazons take shape in John Banville’s play,⁴ they ride

out of ancient myth, to be sure, but also out of his imagination and that of Heinrich von Kleist. Banville has stated that he sees Kleist's *Penthesilea* as a "tremendous piece of work, one of the great feminist texts." Moreover, he takes the figure of the queen herself to be a "wonderful invention" on the part of Kleist, and describes her, tongue-in-cheek, as "sexy, vulnerable, naïve and vengeful. Any man's dream girl, really."⁵ As for Banville's designation of the play as a great feminist text, I choose to regard that as an acknowledgement of the play's focus on the powerful queen of a mythical all-female state, run strictly by women, for women. It is a state led by a war lady whose lodestar is loyalty to the rules of her culture and who refuses to submit to men, except on the premises dictated by those rules. The primary tool of analysis here is Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulation and his notion of the symbolic order has proved particularly helpful. Other Baudrillardian ideas have also been relevant for analyzing certain parts of the play, as have aspects of the work of George Bataille, to whom Baudrillard is indebted.

In order to "map the transformations in the meaning of images over centuries of Western history" Baudrillard has outlined a scheme of a progression of social orders (Pawlett 72). If Baudrillard's scheme places the beginning of the first order approximately at the time of the Renaissance, then just what – a slightly forgetful and befuddled reader may wonder – was the state of affairs before that time? Was there a time when the sign reflected the real? Baudrillard's answer seems to be that predating the first order of simulacra was the symbolic order. This 'proto-order,' as it were, was presumably set apart from the 'proper' orders of simulacra in that in it, signs were "not referential and not arbitrary," but "relatively fixed" and certain (*ibid.* 74). They reflected, then, a basic "profound reality" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 6). Moreover, the symbolic order depends, as Baudrillard sees it, on "the rule" – a form in which "the stakes are high," the ritual "dominates," and "the logic of the duel" established (Gane 239). It consists of "exchanges, of challenges, of appearances: masks, dances, feasts, rituals" (Pawlett 74). In the symbolic order, such mythic forms "made the ritual play of masks meaningful," but to contemporary humanity, the loss of these forms causes anguish (*ibid.* 113). The age of the symbolic order is the age of "the rule" then, not – as might be said of the third order – of "the roll of the dice" (*ibid. ibidem*).

In Baudrillard's scheme of orders of simulacra, the counterfeit marks the first order of simulacra – ranging from the Renaissance up to the industrial revolution – in which "realness" still is attached to the sign and "competition stimulates the counterfeit" (Hegarty 49). According to Baudrillard, the "problem of the counterfeit" was "born with the Renaissance;" thus, it would not have plagued the symbolic order. In the feudal or archaic societies "of caste and rank" of this order, "social mobility [was] nil," but signs were bound and clear. Here, each sign "refers unequivocally to a (particular) situation and a level of status. Ceremony and counterfeit do not mix." Baudrillard warns that contemporary humanity should be sure to refrain from "yearning nostalgically" for a "revitalized 'symbolic order'" because it was "composed of ferocious hierarchies; the transparency of signs goes hand in hand with their cruelty" (Poster 138-39). Moreover, even if such an order existed, it was not, according to Baudrillard, a realm of "the absolutely real," or of "direct access to truth" (Pawlett 74).

In what follows, then, John Banville's *Love in the Wars* will be read in the light of Baudrillard's envisioned archaic symbolic order. My suggestion is that *Love in the Wars* is a gruesome illustration of the kind of cruel hierarchical system the philosopher associates with this order. While the first subsection surveys the Amazon society as it emerges in the play, the second one focuses on 'the duel'⁶ – the lethal game of power and desire played by Penthesilea

and Achilles. In the last subsection, aspects of Georges Bataille's notions on sacrifice and the festival have proved helpful in the analysis of what I see as ritual and sacrificial elements in the killing of Achilles.

Amazon Society: Myth of Origin, Rituals of Courting and Propagation

The Amazons of John Banville's *Love in the Wars* are hard-fighting, fast-riding, woman warriors, who are fiercely loyal to their state. The Amazon culture, with its rule-bound rituals and festivals, can be seen as akin to a Baudrillardian symbolic-order one. The origin the play assigns to the Amazon society, the secret story of the birth of its people, is presented by Penthesilea: "Before the Amazons, there was a race / Of Scythians, god-fearing, proud, warlike. / For centuries the Caucasus were theirs." Their rule ended, though, with an Ethiopian invasion in which the "menfolk all were killed, the young, the old, /Till not a single one was left alive" (51). Thanais, the Queen, is forced to marry the Ethiopian king and her subjects are raped and taken captive. In their captivity, the women prepare a rebellion against the Ethiopians. Drawing on their cultural skills, they secretly make sharp "strong blades" from their jewelry, to use against the king on his wedding day. On that day, the Queen herself plunges her blade "to the hilt" into the king's heart (*ibid.*). This act becomes the foundation on which an Amazon state is built – a "women's state," in which "no man's voice would sound, or eye would see" (*ibid.*). However, the new state fears attacks from armies of men; men are able to draw a bow "full stretch," while women archers are hampered by their breasts. Deciding on a radical course of action to defend their "fledgling state" against attacks, the queen, calling for and demonstrating a necessary sacrifice, slices off her right breast with a knife. From then on, they "were called the Amazons, / Or Breastless Ones" (52).

Talking with Achilles on the banks of the River Scamander, Penthesilea gives a nutshell version of this story to her rival and lover-in-spe. Although, the Greek warrior fails to take much interest in the subject of breastlessness, he asks about the sustainability of this society of women. He wonders how "This manless state you founded, how does it / Continue still to propagate itself/ without – ahem –! the input of us men?" (53) Penthesilea tells him the procedure is simple: on a yearly basis, the Amazon Priestess request Ares, god of war,

to name some noble warrior race / Whose fine first sons we'll pick on for our mates.
/ And when we learn their name and dwelling place, / A flush of wild excitement fills
our hearts ... and we ride out to war." (53-4)

According to their own idiosyncratic courting practices, then, the Amazons capture the "ripest bloom" of the "menfolk" and bring them back to Themiscyra, where they are put through "sacred rituals" associated with the Festival of Roses (54). When, in due time, this collective "wedding" ceremony has resulted in pregnancies, the Feast of Fertile Mothers is celebrated. The captured young men are then sent home, accompanied by the tears of fond mothers-to-be. Moreover, Amazon law stipulates that every young woman must accept as her mate, "the first man that the god puts in [her] path" (55), provided she conquers him in battle. An Amazon girl, then, is barred from romantic encounters with a youth of her choice. In view of this rule, it is surprising that by some form of royal privilege, Penthesilea seems exempt from this rule: her mother, Queen Otrere, has named Achilles as Penthesilea's future mate – "great Achilles waits, in ignorance" (*ibid.*). Yet, Penthesilea knows that she "would be cursed," submitting herself to a man not "won in battle," with her sword (46). Penthesilea's loyalty to

the system is revealed in an exchange between her and Achilles, in the company of Prothoë, Penthesilea's second in command. The queen impresses on Achilles that for her, gentle courting is not an option. Rather, she must hunt on the battlefield for the man her "heart has fixed on for its mate." Achilles retorts, "You speak as if some law prevented you" and Penthesilea confirms, "It does" (50). Achilles finds these rule-bound, martial mating practices "unnatural – unwomanly!" (*ibid.*). To Penthesilea, though, they are the law. As Agee (1998) has stated, Penthesilea does not "rebel against her nation" (xxvii), but obeys its rules.

The Festival of Roses, the Amazon mating feast, is the one occasion on which the women warriors are allowed sexual contact with men. It is a sacred ceremony which no-one, "on pain of instant death," is allowed to witness, except the brides themselves (Banville 54) – and presumably the participating grooms. It is during the Feast of Roses, then, that the Amazon state propagates itself. To turn to Georges Bataille here for elucidation, we find that it is in the nature of a festival to liberate animality; moreover, it entails excess. However, the "excess consecrates and completes an order of things based on rules; it goes against that order only temporarily" (Bataille 90). Thus, the Festival of Roses is one of excessive sexuality, but the excess contributes to the festival's aim, which is to maintain the societal order and the specific rules on which it is based.

Preparations for the rose festival are made by Amazon girls, "carrying baskets of roses and leading a throng of Greek prisoners bound together with ropes around which roses are twined" (Banville 31). Armed Amazons guard the prisoners. Gathering roses in the fields of Troy is no easy matter. The harvest is poor in the barren fields, the rose trees are scarce, and prisoners "easier to pluck than roses" (*ibid.*). Moreover, the girls find that roses have fierce thorns that prick them "to the core, until [they] bled!" (*ibid.*). The fusion of blood and roses foreshadows the fate of Achilles, whose expectation to celebrate the Feast of Roses with Penthesilea is violently thwarted in the end. The fate of the virginal Penthesilea is also foreshadowed as one girl reports having crawled out on a ledge to pluck a rose, which "shone wanly in its nest of moss, / A bud that was not ripened yet for love" and which seemed to her "the very womb of death" (*ibid.*). The roses then, in the context of the festival, seem to be fixed signs; each rose is one coin with two sides – fertility and death. The fixity of signs gestures toward the symbolic order. The Amazon society emerging in *Love in the Wars*, then, is a social order in which the rule dominates, through such aspects as ritualized courting customs and the Festival of Roses. It is, moreover, formed by the logic of the duel which is at focus in the next section.

Desire and the Duel: Penthesilea and Achilles

As suggested in the discussion of the rule-bound Amazon society, Penthesilea manifests traits associated with Baudrillard's symbolic order. Deeply committed to her Amazon culture, she is also a fierce commander of her army of women warriors. As the play opens, war is raging on the battlefields before a Troy besieged by the Greek army and the Amazons have suddenly fallen on the Trojans "like a storm at sea" (10).

Penthesilea's culture demands that she be a soldier, a general leading her troops; she should display "masculine" traits. To be sure, the queen and her Amazons can be said to have adopted forms of "male" behavior: they are fierce fighters, shoot with precision, and handle their horses expertly. Such skills are appreciated, of course, when observed by the Greek army and the Greeks, although attempting to diminish the Amazon women by designating them as "girls," reluctantly admit to being impressed by their prowess: "But gods! those girls can ride"

(19). The smugly misogynist – if the modern term be allowed in this setting – Greek general Odysseus criticizes the Trojans for running with the “pack of bitches howling at their heels” (10). Odysseus proceeds to praise the Amazons – no doubt the praise he offers is the highest which his androcentric mind can produce – by stating that they have “fought like ... well, / Like men!” (12). In a similar way, Achilles speaks of Penthesilea as being “more a man” than the generals Odysseus or Antilochus, whom by contrast he calls “old women” (13). I will return, below, to Penthesilea’s “manliness.”

If Penthesilea displays symbolic order traits, so does Achilles. One example of this is a verbal attack he launches at Odysseus. The latter has just sarcastically asked Achilles, who is preoccupied with Penthesilea, if he has forgotten about Troy – “the little business of a war to win?” (68). The remark prompts an angry outburst from Achilles: “Don’t condescend to me, you dry old stick! / Your caution and your cunning make me sick. / What do you know of daring, or of risk? / You do not live; all you do is exist” (70). Rejecting the older soldier’s “caution” and “cunning,” while celebrating daring and risk-taking, Achilles is cast here as a man of the symbolic order, insisting on intensity and “high stakes.” Achilles’ distinction between “living” and “existing” brings to mind Baudrillard’s (1994) concept of a zombie-like state of “death-in-life,” as opposed to death of the “classical, glorious” kind (*Illusion* 99), presumably favored by Achilles.

To Achilles, the male chauvinist of yore, then, doing battle with women is quite clearly unmanly and “un-Greek,” as it were: “Is there no pride left in the Argives’ hearts? / Today we fled before a band of girls. / We were surprised, did not know what to do; / To fight with females, that is not our way” (18). If he believes doing battle with women is unmanly, being saved by a woman in battle would no doubt be completely emasculating to him. Perhaps knowing this, at one point, as female warriors are “making mincemeat” of the Greeks (14) and a Trojan is “about to deal the finisher” to Achilles (15), Penthesilea surprisingly interferes on behalf of Achilles. She saves his life and rides away, laughing. Gloating, Odysseus reports that Achilles has been “rescued by a girl!” (16). Even so, almost to the end, Achilles can be seen to be assured of his superiority and fixed on the notion of mastering the Amazon Queen – body and mind. In John Banville’s own assessment of the figure of Achilles, the Greek warrior is “just a man” and “an idiot, so deeply in love with himself he cannot see what is in front of his eyes.”⁷ At any rate, he is enthusiastically sexist. In this, he is not alone among the Greeks, however. Rather, in Banville’s rendering, a good-old-boy mentality – if the phrase be permitted – seems to prevail in the Greek camp. Thus, King Agamemnon heaves a misogynist sigh as he refers to Penthesilea, and – clearly thinking of Helen and Menelaos – adds: “It was a woman brought us here, and now / Another woman comes to cause us grief” (Banville 18).

If Penthesilea, as indicated above, is inclined to fight like a man, displaying what might be termed masculine features in the battlefield, evidence of gender *ambivalence* is less easily discernible in her. As Joel Agee suggested, Heinrich von Kleist was apparently familiar with such ambivalence through the modes of expression of his sister, Ulrike von Kleist. Ulrike apparently “dressed like a man and was able to pass for one easily” (Agee xxiv). Kleist, uncomfortable perhaps with his sister’s unwillingness to display unambiguous signs of a single gender, reportedly appealed to her: “Amphibian, you who inhabit two elements always, waver no longer and choose a definitive gender at last” (ibid.). Unlike Ulrike von Kleist, then, Penthesilea does not waver, but remains fixed on Achilles – not just as a foe, but as a man. Increasingly, she desires him. It is, however, as a soldier and the rival of the Argive war hero that the Amazon queen must act, and in this her desire for the man acts against her. If she

admits to feeling as if “torn in two” (Banville 37), it is because she momentarily lets go of what seems to be the conviction of her culture – that the “health, survival or integrity” of the body is not a crucial matter (Baudrillard 2003. 17) – and instead, in line with what Baudrillard sees as contemporary western thinking, veers to “an individualized view of the body, linked to notions of possession and mastery” (*ibid.*).⁸ In this situation, the forces pulling at her – the demands of her culture on the one hand and her body on the other – appear irreconcilable.

Initially, Achilles’ desire for Penthesilea is overshadowed by irritation at his own failure to negotiate peace with her (Banville 14). It is also bound up with the losses the Amazons cause the Greek and Trojan armies: “The finest men of both our armies lay/ Like broken flowers scattered on the plain / ... and hundreds captured, too” (15). Apparently needing to denigrate the Queen, he maintains that she is no different from other women: “I know the type; I’ve tamed her kind before” (18). To him, then, doing battle with females is not the Greek way, but forcing them to sexual surrender is. With brutal crudity, he boasts that he has “never brought a woman to the ground,” / except to have his pleasure with her (*ibid.*). As events unfold, Penthesilea’s commitment to her culture and her army continues to come to clash with her desire for her foe, Achilles. Even Achilles’ fellow officers have noted the fierce attention Penthesilea pays Achilles in the battle field and they comment on it: “The hungry she-wolf, hunting in the snow / Would not so ravenously fix her prey / As she fixed on Achilles, Thetis’s son!” (15). Having initially speculated that her interest is fuelled by a need for vengeance for “some imagined insult,” they are baffled when, as touched on above, Achilles’ “life lay / in her hands, why, she gave it back to him – / and with a laugh!” (*ibid.*). With regard to issues of gender, the image of Penthesilea as the ravenous she-wolf, pinning down Achilles with her stare, brings to mind Patricia Coughlan’s astute suggestion – cited in the introductory chapter, above – that Banville’s fictions leave the “gender system untouched” (Coughlan 97). Again, I agree with this. Nevertheless, the image lingers of an unapologetic and still undefeated Penthesilea, eyes like a she-wolf, objectifying Achilles, self-proclaimed “tamer” of women, in the bright light of the female gaze.

Within the greater turmoil that is the war between Greeks and Trojans, into which the Amazon warriors have inserted themselves, Penthesilea and Achilles become locked in a private battle. This battle, unfolding within a symbolic order framework and dominated by “the rule” as it is, is in line with the logic of the duel – single combat, fought with weapons in the presence of witnesses. It is a life-and-death struggle. Moreover, according to the dictates of warfare and sexual desire, each of the combatants strives for possession of the body of the other – as prisoner and as sexual object. In Baudrillard’s terms, there is “strong seduction” here and the “stakes are high” (Gane 239). As vying contestants, both Penthesilea and Achilles seek, first, to demonstrate superiority in battle. Achilles can be seen to be assured of his superiority, almost to the end, and fixed on the notion of mastering the Amazon Queen – body and mind. Because Penthesilea is as confident of her skills in arms as Achilles is of his, she is determined to make him submit: “I’ll make him eat the dust under my feet, / that haughty Greek” (Banville 26). Although verbally less brutish than Achilles, she, too, sees the struggle between them partially in sexual terms. In Baudrillardian terms, moreover, the duel between Amazon Queen and Argive hero, seems to take place in the sphere of seduction; in this sphere, “neither sex is assured of its ... superiority” (*Passwords* 23). Compared to desire, “seduction is a more fatal game, and a more dangerous one too, which is in no way exclusive of pleasure, but is something different from jouissance” (*ibid.* 22).⁹ Seduction unsettles the identity and offers the “possibility of a radical otherness” (*ibid. ibidem.*). Being a “fatal” game played with high stakes,

the duel is, again, of the symbolic order. Moreover, because according to Baudrillard the interaction between the sexes is a form of both “rivalry and connivance,” the duel allows each combatant to find an “identity by confronting the other.” (*ibid.* 21). The significant aspect of sexual identity, then, is “a kind of becoming-masculine of the feminine and becoming-feminine of the masculine” (*ibid. ibidem.*). Thus, Achilles and Penthesilea are duelling rivals on the battlefield, but they are in collusion, too, in their reciprocal desire. With swords drawn, their unspoken consent seems to be to keep meeting in battle – the one form of communication open to them. Propelled by energies of war as well as of desire, their duel takes its own course within its delimited sphere of rivalry and connivance.

As the duel between Penthesilea and Achilles continues, the stakes are eventually raised. Meeting face to face in battle, Achilles’ question – “what will it be now, peace or war?” – and Penthesilea’s answer – “what peace is there for us, except in war?” (Banville 35) – suggest the entwined forces of warfare and desire, rivalry and connivance, in their exchange. As they fight, Achilles “knocks the sword and shield” from Penthesilea’s hands. Images of desire, war, and death merge as the pose of the disarmed queen, as specified in the stage directions, becomes one of sexual surrender: “She stands before him, her throat bared, her breast thrust out ... as if inviting an embrace instead of death” (*ibid.*). Achilles strikes a blow and she falls, unconscious. The Amazon troops have instructions not to “harm a hair” on Achilles’ head (*ibid.*) and Achilles, in turn, gives the queen over to her troops, again praising her according to his own gauge of excellence: “let them take her; she fought like a man” (*ibid.* 36). As a result of the blow to her head, Penthesilea suffers memory loss. Regaining consciousness after the fight, she is led to believe, by Achilles and Protoë both, that she has taken Achilles prisoner. Penthesilea is overjoyed with the presumed victory, because defeating Achilles in battle is the only condition under which her society will allow her to yield to him sexually. Achilles, aware that he won over her, nevertheless wants the queen to submit willingly. Failing to comprehend the depth of Penthesilea’s commitment to the rules of her society, he expects to clear the way for her ultimate submission by first simulating his own. As a result, he assures her: “I am your prisoner, of course I am!” (47). Trusting him, and believing herself in control, Penthesilea articulates her plans for a wedding, according to Amazon rules, with the warrior she thinks she has won in battle. She tells her troops, then, that the “greatest of the Greeks” is her captive and instructs the “flower girls” to bring their roses. Her primary worry seems to be whether “there be enough blossoms for the rite” (*ibid.*). Despite Protoë’s words of caution – “My Queen, please try to calm yourself” – she gives orders for “a fitting, godlike marriage feast” not just for herself, but for all the brides, who now “shall have fulfillment of their joy tonight!” (48).

As hostilities flare between Greeks and Amazons, though, Achilles loses interest in simulating defeat. Penthesilea is puzzled and Prothoë pleads with Achilles to tell the queen “the truth” (57). Heeding her, Achilles discards his mask of docility and claims her as his prisoner: “By all the rules of war you are my bride. / We met in battle, yes, but I was not / The one it was who fell” (58). Harshly, he adds that he does intend to “give” her a child, but it will not be reared in the Amazon capital of Themiscyra, and he will not follow her there. Instead, he will bring her to “bounteous Phthia, where I have my home” (57). At this moment of brutal truth, Penthesilea’s troops enter, bows drawn, demanding the release of their queen. Achilles tries to pull her away with him, but Odysseus thrusts her toward the Amazons, calling Achilles a “madman” (59-61). Thus, the power balance of the duel shifts again.

The scene evokes Penthesilea's earlier rhetorical question – “What peace is there for us, except in war?” (35) – and suggests a second question: What love is there for them, except in death? For Achilles and Penthesilea, the many phases of the duel have so far entailed something of what Baudrillard described as an “evocation and revocation of the other;” perhaps in “movements whose slowness and suspense are poetic, like a slow motion film of a fall or an explosion,” which are indicative of the “perfection of ‘desire’” (Poster 166).¹⁰ In its last phase, though, the duel points in the direction of ritual and death and the frenzy of festivals.

A Promised Festival of Roses

The moment Achilles' focus shifts from the high-stake intensity of his duel with Penthesilea, to the duplicitous performance of simulating defeat, he seals his own death warrant. In the symbolic realm, counterfeit and ceremony do not mix. It has been suggested that Achilles is poorly equipped to understand the “necessity that drives his beloved adversary” and that it is a “lethal mistake” for him to believe that he can “apeace Penthesilea with a game of make-believe” (Engdahl 15). Concurring, I think that it is because he misreads Penthesilea that Achilles attempts to play the game that ultimately kills him. Her anger at his slight and his trickery helps trigger in her the fury that, compounded by festival-induced frenzy, prompts her to sacrifice him.¹¹

Several readings of Penthesilea's excesses are possible, of course. First, Agee has suggested that Penthesilea is a warrior of Artemis. Just as Artemis, according to myth, punished Actaeon for violating her by seeing her naked, so Penthesilea, in a frenzied state, punishes Achilles for planning to violate her – by breaking rules stipulated by her society. Agee points out that, after her frenzy, Penthesilea is in an “exhausted trance” which “betray[s] all the symbolic signs of possession by her nation's goddess, Artemis” (Agee xxviii). Second, recalling the transformation of the Amazon Queen into a snarling beast, jaws dripping with Achilles' blood, it is useful to turn to Georges Bataille's notion of the excesses of the festival. According to Bataille, although animality is liberated at a festival and the most hallowed laws are deliberately violated, society's rule-bound order is defied “only temporarily” (Bataille 90). As indicated above, then, the Festival of Roses entails excessive sexuality, but serves, nevertheless, to maintain the societal order based on specific rules. Similarly, Penthesilea, while still in her “frenzy” of murder (*op.cit.* 100), “consecrates and completes” the rule-bound order of things. In addition, as suggested above, Penthesilea may be seen as performing a ritual sacrifice of Achilles. Because, according to Bataille, one purpose of sacrifice – apart from giving “destruction its due” – is to remove contagion, Penthesilea may be seen as attempting to “save the rest” of her society from “a mortal danger of contagion” (*op. cit.* 59). Here, the contagion for Amazon women would be linked to the temptation to submit to men they have not defeated in battle. Third, Penthesilea's killing of Achilles also illustrates the Baudrillardian view that the erotic exchange merges with the ambivalence and excess of sacrificial death. When Penthesilea bends over Achilles's dead body, the images of his wounds and of the roses she has given him, fuse in her crazed mind: “Oh, look at these red roses! And this wreath / Of bloody flowers round his shattered head, / This fresh, unfurlèd blossom in his neck”(Banville 75-6). The fusion of eroticism with the lethal violence of war suggests that Achilles's death is a partial exchange for that erotic encounter which the rules of Amazon society successfully has prohibited. To Penthesilea, Achilles's fatal wounds become so many roses plucked on the fields of Troy in preparation for a much longed-for Festival of Roses.

Driven by commitment to her culture, vengeful rage, and the “madness of sacrifice” (Bataille 55), Penthesilea has performed a ritual sacrifice of Achilles.

This article has established that John Banville’s play *Love in the Wars* displays elements of the pre-Renaissance symbolic order. The Amazon society, as it emerges in the play, is akin to the type of archaic society that Jean Baudrillard (2003) associates with the symbolic order. It insists on the rule; not to bow to the rule is to invite disaster. One question that arises here is whether the philosopher thought that, if contemporary Western societies “can no longer lay claim to truth” (45) it is in a symbolic-order society we may find some measure of truth. Although he apparently did not think that the symbolic order offers direct access to reality or truth, the answer seems to be “perhaps.” In this order, if it existed (and it is unclear if he thought it ever did), there would be intensity and high stakes: when you are alive, you live, and when you die, you do so in a “glorious” way (*Illusion* 99).¹² Standing to the side, observing life at a safe distance is not an option here. However, Baudrillard warned, “caste societies, feudal or archaic, were cruel societies,” trapped in “ferocious hierarchies;” so, if present-day humanity should feel drawn to this order and begin “yearning nostalgically ... for a revitalized ‘symbolic order,’ we should have no illusions” (Poster 139). It should be noted that Baudrillard (2005) made a distinction between, on the one hand, backward-looking practices that “aspire to regress to a real object” (such as a once-existing state) and hence, reprehensibly, cultivate “reactionary nostalgia” (74) and, on the other hand, a looking back that lacks this kind of aspiration. The latter, he seems to consider a necessary “form of mental strategy governing the correct use of nothingness or the void” (*ibid.*). Illusions or no illusions, though, Baudrillard seems to think that privileging such symbolic order features as the loss of self, death, sacrifice, and the rule, would allow humanity to move away from the random, which is a prime source of the radical uncertainty of the contemporary world. Seen in this light, the world of *Love in the Wars* – especially the Amazon society there – presents itself as other to simulation.

Notes

- 1 Part of this essay was originally published in *Reading John Banville Through Jean Baudrillard*, by Hedda Friberg-Harnesk (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2018), 111–132. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.
- 2 Graves, *Greek Myths*, vol. 1, 355. Graves notes that although the word “Amazon” generally is regarded as “derived from a and mazon, ‘without breasts,’ because they were believed to sear away one breast in order to shoot better” – a “fantastic” notion – the word may in fact be Armenian, “meaning ‘moon-women;” the derivation may be connected to the armed “priestesses of the Moon-goddess on the South-eastern shores of the Black Sea.”
- 3 Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, vol. 2, 313. According to myth, Penthesilea “drove Achilles from the field on several occasions.” One source “modernizes the story,” stating that Achilles speared her in their first encounter, and dragged her from the saddle by the hair. As she lay dying on the ground, the Greek soldiers cried: “Throw this virago to the dogs as a punishment for exceeding the nature of womankind!” (Graves, *The Greek Myths*, vol. 2, 320).
- 4 In analyzing Banville’s play, I have consulted Martin Greenberg’s English translation in *Five Plays* from 1988; Joel Agee’s *Penthesilea*, from 1998; and Horace Engdahl’s Swedish translation of Kleist’s play, in *Kleist Två Dramer Amfitryon Penthesilea*, 1987.
- 5 John Banville, e-mail, October 10, 2007. Banville also expressed disappointment with the lack of interest, in Ireland, in staging the play: “I managed to get the Jug [*The Broken Jug*] and Amfitryon [*God’s Gift*] staged here, but no one will touch Pent. [*Love in the Wars*], which baffles me.” (*Ibid.*)

- 6 For a prose example of Kleist's interest in the phenomenon of the duel, see his novella *The Duel*, from 1810.
- 7 John Banville, e-mail, October 10, 2007. More fully, Banville wrote: "poor Achilles, as well as being, as my wife would say, 'just a man', is such an idiot" Achilles, then, emerges as yet another male narcissist in Banville's work.
- 8 More fully, Baudrillard states that in "those cultures where the body is continually brought into play in ritual," the body is "not the symbol of life and the question is not that of its health, survival or integrity."
- 9 The reference is to Jacques Lacan's term "*Jouissance*" (enjoyment), which is that "remainder of gratification" the individual looks for in sexual relations. Because the subject's desire will "always be out of reach" it will be a lasting one – he or she will "continue to seek this object throughout his life, in all his pursuits." Judith Feher Gurewich and Michael Tort, *Lacan and the New Wave in American Psychoanalysis: The Subject and the Self* (New York: Other Press, 1999), 19.
- 10 Poster, *Selected Writings*. Baudrillard also suggests, here, that a "void, an absence" or a "meaninglessness" is "the sudden charm of seduction."
- 11 See details of Penthesilea's killing of Achilles in Friberg-Harnesk, *Reading John Banville through Jean Baudrillard*, Chapter 5, pp. 123-125.
- 12 Again, Baudrillard suggested that "in its classical, glorious sense," death "was the finest of man's conquests – subjective, dramatized death, death ritualised and celebrated, sought after and desired."

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