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Alexander the Great and the English Novel

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HWLPAT001

A minor dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Arts in English Language and Literature

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature: _____

Date: 10 February 2012

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Abstract

This work focuses on the manner in which Alexander the Great is received and reconfigured within the confines of the contemporary English-language historical novel. The Macedonian king has held the attention of writers and artists throughout the centuries; this dissertation seeks to investigate how modern authors, working at a remove of centuries, with limited evidence, have contrived to fashion coherent literary narratives from his life, and how this process is influenced by the authors and the society for which they write.

The theoretical backbone of this approach is provided by reception theory, which provides a useful technical vocabulary and outlook by which to approach the phenomena which affect the comprehension of, and subsequent re-appropriation, of cultural artefacts. In order to provide a suitable framework for approaching contemporary authors, a brief overview of reception theory and the process of reception itself are provided. An overview of the historical sources demonstrates that their ambiguity and limited nature fail to impose any significant boundaries upon authorial interpretations. Thereafter, the first chapter proceeds to examine Alexander's legacy and how this has been perpetuated and understood in western civilization and literature, from Roman antiquity through to English authors such as Shakespeare and Fielding. It is noted that depictions of the Macedonian frequently tend to co-opt him towards a particular ideology or morality.

Two modern authors who have written significant or well-received novels of Alexander are then examined in detail: Mary Renault and Steven Pressfield. Each chapter examines the relationship between authorial concerns and the narratives of Alexander which these authors have subsequently fashioned, focusing on a close reading of their respective texts: Renault foregrounds issues of great personal significance to herself, such as Platonism, sexual ambiguity, and historical fidelity, whereas Pressfield's more contemporary military concerns heavily distort the narrative in favour of finding a parallel to modern wars and military activity. In each case, it is found that authorial concerns,

interests, and agendas have worked their way into the subsequent narrative in a manner that is often anachronistic or historically unfeasible.

The concluding chapter provides an overview of the similarities or shared characteristics in the process of reception and adaptation by the two authors. It is argued that “Alexander” is not only a concept which has, and is, redeployed according to (usually favourable) contemporary concerns and morality, but in the case of these authors goes beyond that to provide a space of introspection. The “gaps” in the historical evidence and their ambiguity function as a liberated “space of reception,” in which authors insert and explore concepts which are of personal significance; these are amplified or intensified by co-opting Alexander’s personal cultural significance.

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Introduction

...the modern historian of antiquity has been able, from generation to generation, to delineate a portrait of Alexander that seems to us now to owe more, often, to the environment of the historian than of Alexander himself.¹

English literature has long owed a debt to classical antiquity.² This dissertation seeks to investigate how a particularly significant figure from the ancient world, Alexander the Great, has been dealt with and understood within the confines of the contemporary English novel. The approach is particularly concerned with the cultural translation and reimagination that is necessitated by the act of transforming the life of the historical “Alexander” into a self-contained narrative, and what these reveal about authorial preoccupations.

The historical novel owes perhaps as much to the society it is written in as it does to the history it purports to retell. Lukács called upon the historical novelist to enable the reader to “re-experience the social and human motives which led men to think, feel and act just as they did in historical reality.”³ This “re-experience” must be rendered through the contemporary audience’s language and conception of reality. This, of course, is troublesome: we cannot, or can only know to a limited extent, the “historical reality” of a bygone era, particularly in the case of one as distant as the ancient Greek world. Moreover, the use of classical history complicates the matter further. Knowledge of the classical world has long been associated with cultural and intellectual elitism. While in 1976, “more Americans had heard of Alexander the Great than of Thomas Jefferson”,⁴ an intimate technical knowledge of Greek, Latin, classical authors and sources has long been the

¹ G.T. Griffiths, ed. *Alexander the Great: The Main Problems* (Cambridge: Heffer, 1966), ix.

² An excellent examination thereof is to be found in Gilbert Highet, *The Classical Tradition: Greek and Roman Influences on Western Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949.) A more contemporary source will become available in October of 2012 with the publication of *The Oxford Companion of Classical Reception in English Literature* (eds. David Hopkins and Charles Martindale.)

³ *The Historical Novel* (London: Merlin, 1962), 42.

⁴ Michael. A Flower, “Not Great Man History: Reconceptualizing a Course on Alexander the Great,” *The Classical World*, Vol. 100, No. 4 (2007), 417.

preserve of social or cultural elites within the Anglophone world.⁵ The increasing rarity of classical education, coupled with its relatively arcane nature,⁶ complicates matters further, as the author of a popular novel must contrive means to portray complicated, fragmented, and ambiguous sources as a unified narrative which must also present the intricacies of an alien society to an audience largely without a first-hand understanding of the material.⁷

So much for classical material in general; Alexander himself complicates matters further. The Macedonian king has long enjoyed a mystique that few other figures of his or indeed any era can match. Within his own lifetime, his deeds inspired countless artistic works, and these heralded a literary fascination which has endured for over two thousand years. This poses a considerable intertextual burden upon a novelist, as he or she must contend not only with the problems of research, sources, and audience, but must also grapple with this mystique, and the vast body of literary, historiographical, and philosophical opinions it has prompted throughout the centuries.

Finally, the particular demands of the English novel itself constitute a problem. A human life, particularly one as varied as Alexander's, seldom falls into a convenient narrative arc. The author is confronted with the dilemma of providing all that a contemporary audience requires of a novel—plot, protagonists, conflict, and so forth—from fragmentary and often contradictory sources, which outline a tremendously complicated life.

⁵ The most obvious example of this is, of course, the long association of a classical education with class in the English social structure, in which "classics was a central resource for the self-recognition and social closure practised an assimilated noble-bourgeois elite which dominated a market of cultural goods relatively unhindered by State intervention." [Christopher Stray, *Classics Transformed* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 29.]

⁶ While ostensibly more democratic than the English system mentioned above, present-day universities have contributed relatively little to the popularization of classics: the admittedly polemical pair, Victor Davis Hanson and John Heath, point out that in the United States, "Of over one million B.A.'s awarded in 1994, only six hundred were granted in Classics", [*Who Killed Homer? The Demise of Classical Education and the Recovery of Greek Wisdom* (New York: The Free Press, 1998), 3] while on the other hand professors and experts are generating increasingly vast amounts of hyper-specialized literature: "A comparison of the professional output of 1992 with that of 1962 reveals the remarkable growth in the industry of Classical scholarship in just the past three decades: twice as many scholars now publish 50 percent more material in twice as many journals." (2) The authors argue that the accumulated mass of secondary material has rendered the study of classics so cryptic and overwhelming that classicists "cannot master their own bibliographies." (ibid.)

⁷ For a useful overview of the issues and questions surrounding the translation of classical material, see Alexandra Lianeri and Vanda Zajko, eds., *Translation & The Classic: Identity as Change in the History of Culture*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.)

This dissertation intends to examine how authors have negotiated these problems. It investigates the means by which contemporary novelists have rendered Alexander in light of their personal values and preoccupations, and the literary phenomena which characterize these adaptations. Particularly, it seeks to investigate the role of the author's own character and preoccupations in the process of imposing a narrative, theme, and structure on the nebulous evidence of Alexander's life.

To this end, I have appropriated concepts and a theoretical approach from reception theory. Reception theory takes as its central concern the manner in which each new audience or reader interprets and constructs meaning for a text or artefact in light of their experiences and expectations.⁸ Marcuse offers the following definition of reception as applied to the history of a cultural artefact's reception:

Reception history is the history of the meanings that have been imputed to historical events. This approach traces the different ways in which participants, observers, and historians and other retrospective interpreters have attempted to make sense of events, both as they unfolded, and over time since then, to make those events meaningful for the present in which they lived and live.⁹

In short, reception theory stresses the necessity of an audience negotiating meaning with a text: there is no absolute or transcendent "purpose," but rather one that is fashioned by the interplay between the original artefact and the reader's expectations and understanding of reality:

A literary work is not an object that stands by itself and that offers the same view to each reader in each period. It is not a monument that monologically reveals its timeless essence. It is much more like an orchestration that strikes ever new resonances amongst its readers and that frees the text from the material of the words and brings it to a contemporary existence.¹⁰

⁸ Unfortunately, a detailed discussion of reception theory itself would prove unwieldy given the relatively constricting nature of this dissertation's length. Whilst it is a seminal work in the field and central to reception theory, Jauss' study [*Towards an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti, (Brighton: Harvester, c. 1982)] is somewhat theoretically dense. A more contemporary, and accessible, introduction to reception theory is provided in R. C. Holub, *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1984). Lorna Hardwick also provides a concise but helpful introduction in *Greece & Rome: New Surveys in the Classics No.33: Reception Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003)

⁹ "Reception History," last modified 6 March, 2009, <http://www.history.ucsb.edu/faculty/marcuse/receptionhist.htm>

¹⁰ Jauss, *Aesthetic of Reception*, 21.

To render this process of “negotiation of meaning” susceptible to literary analysis, reception theory relies upon the concept of an *Erwartungshorizont*. Generally translated in English as “horizon of expectations,” its creator Jauss did not rigidly define the term. Holub ventures to describe it as “an intersubjective system or structure of expectations, ‘a system of references’ or a mind-set that a hypothetical individual might bring to any text.”¹¹ The term is usually used to refer to the expectations, social norms, prejudices, and so forth by which each reader interprets a given text.

Thus an attempt to approach and render explicable an act of reception, the *Erwartungshorizont* of the audience—in the case at hand, each author may be considered “an audience” unto themselves—must be carefully examined, particularly in relation to the product of reception it yielded. In approaching the issue of examining the reception Alexander in the English novel, I have borrowed the model utilized by Hardwick in her own work on reception. She stresses investigation of the following characteristics of a work of reception:

- The artistic or intellectual processes involved in selecting, imitating or adapting ancient works—how the text was ‘received’ and ‘refigured’ by the artist...
- The relationship between this process and the contexts in which it takes place...
- The purpose or function for which the new work or appropriation of ideas or values is made...¹²

When applied to the study of a particular novel, these effectively translate to the investigation of relevant authorial characteristics and intellectual preoccupations, the audience or society which influences their writing, the “story” or narrative that they ultimately fashion, and the values or themes which they impose upon their interpretation of the Macedonian. The novels that each author produces are, in effect, artefacts of reception: they provide a means by which we may investigate how their own outlooks and interests affected their comprehension of the historical legacy of Alexander the Great. Informed by this approach, it can be argued that contemporary adaptations of Alexander the Great in the form of the English novel are less responses to or

¹¹ *Reception Theory*, 59.

¹² Hardwick, *Reception Studies*, 5.

reimaginings of a particular historical account than a space in which to explore authorial preoccupations and values.

The first chapter briefly outlines Alexander's biography and the problems posed by the extant sources for the Macedonian king before turning to an examination of significant receptions in western culture and literature. Thereafter we commence with critical analysis of particular authors and the manner in which they received and interpreted "Alexander." Mary Renault, as the most significant novelist of Alexander, takes first place. She is followed by Steven Pressfield, a more recent writer whose primary field of interest is that of warfare—ancient and modern.¹³ The dissertation concludes with an overview of the significant shared or divergent characteristics of both adaptations.

¹³ The most striking omission here is that of Valerio Massimo Manfredi's trilogy of novels focused on Alexander. These novels firmly belong in the "popular" genre, and offer little of interest to serious literary inquiry. Alexander scholar Paul Cartledge, for example, dismisses them as "literalist and unimaginative." [*Alexander the Great: The Hunt for a New Past* (Kent: Pan Books, 2005), 240.]

Chapter I: Alexander, Sources, and Reception

Alexander the Great is one of the most enduringly fascinating historical personalities. His appeal stems from both the unprecedented magnitude and of his achievements and the vast body of legends and traditions which they inspired. Even in antiquity he would become perhaps the most significant individual in classical letters.¹⁴

Alexander “changed the face of the world more decisively and with more longlasting effects than any other statesman has ever done.”¹⁵ Within his short lifespan, he overthrew the sprawling and cultured Persian civilization, and earned by his conquests an empire stretching from Greece to India. His wars were not merely for the sake of the sword: he founded over seventy cities throughout his empire, leaving citizens free to practise their own religion and culture.¹⁶ From the evidence of his achievements and what the historical sources imply, it seems his ultimate goal was the creation of an empire encompassing and uniting¹⁷ much of the known world. In life he achieved the titles of Hegemon in Greece, Pharaoh in Egypt, King of Kings in Persia; he became emperor of a colossal, ever-expanding empire created in little more than a decade; he was acclaimed a god.¹⁸

Unsurprisingly, his empire did not outlive his early death. But from the internecine warfare waged by his successors in their bids to lay claim to it emerged the Hellenistic world. The

¹⁴ “...who arguably inspired more writing than any other historical figure in the ancient Graeco-Roman world...” [Elizabeth Baynham, “The Ancient Evidence for Alexander the Great,” in *Brill’s Companion to Alexander the Great*, ed. Joseph Roisman (Boston: Brill, 2003), 3.]

¹⁵ N. G. L. Hammond, *Alexander the Great: King, Commander, and Statesman* (New Jersey: Noyes Press, 1980), 264.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 261.

¹⁷ Alexander’s attitude towards human equality, however, is contested. W.W. Tarn, most notably, argued for an Alexander who sought an empire of absolute equality between man: “[Alexander] proclaimed for the first time the unity and brotherhood of mankind.” [“Alexander the Dreamer,” in *Alexander the Great: Ancient and Modern Perspectives*, ed. Joseph Roisman (Lexington: D.C. Heath & Co., 1995), 213.] Tarn’s position has received considerable academic criticism. It is easy to anachronistically impute contemporary notions of liberalism and equality to a fundamentally different society; however, it remains a fact that Alexander attempted, controversially, to produce a fusion of Macedonian and Persian blood, which in itself seems to have been evidence of an unusually progressive mentality.

¹⁸ While this was certainly unusual, it must be remembered that in Alexander’s time there were already precedents for apotheosis of great achievers. Mythological figures such as Herakles had done so, and more recently the Spartan general Lysander seemed to have attracted a divine cult. The Roman emperors would make deification a common practice.

propagation of Greek culture and language throughout the near east both laid out the stage upon which the Romans would act out their own, more enduring, drama of imperial conquest, and facilitated the bilateral transmission of culture which would result in Christianity's introduction to Europe. It is arguably true, if somewhat dramatic, to say that "Alexander laid the foundations of the Greco-Roman civilization from which Western civilization eventually arose."¹⁹

Because of this diversity of legend and report, Alexander as a subject of study affords the scholar or writer an almost overwhelming number of concerns and interpretations; indeed, almost every aspect of his life is fiercely debated in academic circles.²⁰ From his deeds and life one can construct a romantic hero of chivalry or a genocidal destroyer, an *übermensch*, or the ultimate self-destructive alcoholic. He can represent the dynamic, competitive nature of the West or he can personify its military ruthlessness, its imperialism and its subjugation of other cultures on a monstrous scale. In short, he is a figure who allows literature an unusual scope for interpretation, and gives these interpretations an unusual significance by the magnitude of his own reputation. It is understandable then, that from his death until the present day, he has been understood, engaged with, and appropriated in vastly different ways by writers, artists, and historians. A brief survey of significant "Alexanders" throughout western history serves both to demonstrate his on-going relevance and the ease with which he can be seen in vastly different ways.

Even during his lifetime, the question of artistic and literary representation concerned Alexander. Literature played a significant role in the classical world. Texts such as *The Iliad* or the *Theogony* were not valued solely for their virtues as literature, but were considered repositories of knowledge by which to comprehend life. They offered models of exemplary behaviour and piety,

¹⁹ Guy MacLean Rogers, *Alexander: The Ambiguity of Greatness* (New York: Random House, 2004), 293.

²⁰ This is an uncomfortable truth which means that much of what I write of Alexander must necessarily simplify or run roughshod over uncertainties and controversies. The reader is urged to bear in mind that this section is intended more as a sketch of the material a writer must engage with rather than an impartial study of the subject matter; attempting to qualify or examine every statement would make for an unwieldy sprawl of text.

social order, and even cosmology. Texts and stories could be invoked to validate behaviour and morality, or even to validate rulership: Virgil's *Aeneid*, for example, is partly as an exercise in legitimizing both Augustus' authority as *de facto* emperor and the imperial "destiny" of Rome. Alexander clearly understood the importance of the arts in rendering his image to his subjects, and evidently attempted to control his representation by entrusting it only to certain artists.²¹ However, Alexander biographer Arrian notes that the conqueror was vexed by one particular artistic shortcoming:

...and Alexander, so the story goes, blessed Achilles for having Homer to proclaim his fame to posterity. Alexander might well have counted Achilles happy on this score, since, fortunate as Alexander was in other ways, there was a great gap left here, and Alexander's exploits were never celebrated as they deserved, either in prose or verse; there were not even choral lyrics for Alexander as for Hiero, Gelo, Thero and many others not to be compared with him, so that Alexander's exploits are far less known than very minor deeds of old times.²²

We infer from this the obvious fact that of the contemporaneous accounts and whatever literary works may have been attempted, none became the preferred or iconic "Alexandriad"²³; there would be no one text which established a monolithic Alexander. The absence of any authoritative work, the "gap" to which the quotation refers, gave later writers and historians great latitude in constructing their own version of Alexander because there was no authoritative account to challenge or engage with. Arrian, living centuries later,²⁴ informs us that "other writers have given a variety of accounts

²¹ "When the great Alexander himself was anxious to have his portrait painted by Apelles and his statue made by Lysippus in preference to all others, it was not as a mark of favour to them, but because he thought that their art would reflect as much glory upon themselves as it would upon himself." [Cicero, *Letters to His Friends, Volume I*, trans. W. Glynn Williams (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1927), 373-375.] Alexander also appointed an "official" historian, Callisthenes, whose output seems to have been more of an exercise in flattery than objectivity. Alexander evidently possessed a keen awareness of the value of a well-manipulated public image; see, for example, A.F. Stewart, *Faces of Power: Alexander's Image and Hellenistic Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). Note that as this is not a paper intended for specialists in Classical Studies, I have elected to exclusively use classical works in translation; I have also chosen to cite them as conventional books, rather than use the occasionally cryptic Classics referencing conventions.

²² *Anabasis Alexandri, Books I-IV*, trans. P. A. Brunt (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 51. Arrian's *Anabasis* is not to be confused with the more famous *Anabasis* of Xenophon: the term itself means "a march inland."

²³ A term which, incidentally, has been applied to Mary Renault's Alexander trilogy.

²⁴ Circa 86-160AD.

of Alexander, nor is there any other figure of whom there are more historians who are more contradictory of each other..."²⁵

Thus, attempting to reconstitute a history of Alexander from the available sources is a frustrating exercise. Of the vast historical and biographical works which he inspired, we possess only a fragment of texts which are substantially concerned with Alexander. These extant texts constitute an unsatisfactory body of evidence:

More than twenty contemporaries wrote books on Alexander and not one of them survives. They are known by quotations from later authors, not one of whom preserved the original wording; these later authors are themselves only known from the manuscripts of even later copyists and in the four main sources these manuscripts are not complete.²⁶

Of these surviving texts, the probable earliest is that of Diodorus Siculus. "Earliest," in this context, is deceiving, as his *Bibliotheca historica* was written some three centuries after Alexander's death;²⁷ furthermore, it is a broad history which deals with Alexander as a subject among many others, focusing largely on his military exploits. Similarly, the mysterious Justin²⁸ offers the *Epitome of Pompeius Trogus*, another universal history which touches upon the Macedonian conquests. Both these works suffer from "compression or conflation of events, confusion of names and places, and often faulty chronology"²⁹ as a result of their broad scope. The information they do present about Alexander as an individual is also fairly limited due to the need for brevity. Similarly, Arrian's *Anabasis*, traditionally considered the preferred source on Alexander,³⁰ offers little information about the personality and nature of the Macedonian king himself beyond some musings on his descent from Macedonian virtue into Eastern degeneracy and a final examination of his life. A Latin history of Alexander by one Quintus Curtius Rufus, a figure who evades chronological placement,

²⁵ *Anabasis*, 3.

²⁶ Robin Lane Fox, *Alexander the Great* (St. Ives: Penguin Books, 2004), 11.

²⁷ He appears to have written towards the conclusion of the first century BC.

²⁸ While nothing is known of him, it can be established from his work that he was writing somewhere after the second century AD.

²⁹ Baynham, "Ancient Evidence," 14.

³⁰ Arrian's reliability as a source for Alexander owes a great deal to the histories he claims to have consulted for his own work: that of Aristobulus, who participated in Alexander's campaign, and Ptolemy, likewise a friend and general of Alexander's, and the founder of the Ptolemaic dynasty in Egypt. (*Anabasis*, 3.)

survives shorn of its first two books and incomplete in the remainder. Finally, Lucius Mestrius Plutarchus—more famously known as Plutarch—offers a biography of Alexander in his *Parallel Lives*. This well-known comparison of Roman and Greek individuals is more an exercise in moralizing biography than objective history, as Plutarch happily confesses at the start of his Alexander biography.³¹

There is, of course, other evidence for the life and deeds of Alexander, particularly in the fields of numismatics and iconography. There are further literary sources such as the Metz Epitome, a minor historical summary, and Plutarch's essays on Alexander within his eclectic *Moralia*. However, these sources do little to corroborate the main literary evidence. Apart from their varying levels of completeness, the main sources also suffer from the fact that they usually had "an interest in recording, or creating, a particular image of their hero—or villain—for the edification of their contemporaries or posterity."³² Furthermore, it must be remembered that the composition of histories in antiquity was seldom an exercise in objectivity: Thucydides' famous insistence on fact-checking and objectivity³³ seems to have been the exception rather than the norm. Rather, histories were often written with didactic, moralizing, or propagandistic goals in mind.³⁴ Yet even in the presentation of facts of Alexander's life we find wild discrepancies and disagreement within the sources; as an edifying example, Cartledge identifies no fewer than "five mutually inconsistent or

³¹ "It must be borne in mind that my design is not to write histories, but lives. And the most glorious exploits do not always furnish us with the clearest discoveries of virtue or vice in men; sometimes a matter of less moment, an expression or a jest, informs us better of their characters and inclinations, than the most famous sieges, the greatest armaments, or the bloodiest battles whatsoever. Therefore as portrait-painters are more exact in the lines and features of the face in which the character is seen, than in the other parts of the body, so I must be allowed to give my more particular attention to the marks and indications of the souls of men, and while I endeavour by these to portray their lives, may be free to leave more weighty matters and great battles to be treated of by others." [Plutarch, *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, trans. John Dryden, ed. Arthur Hugh Clough (New York: The Modern Library, n.d.), 801.]

³² Cartledge, *New Past*, 244.

³³ "And with regard to my factual reporting...I have made it a principle not to write down the first story that came my way, and not even to be guided by my own general impressions..." [*The Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (Suffolk: Penguin Books, 1970), 24.]

³⁴ "Greco-Roman historiographical tradition did not even approach the standards of investigation which have become normal since the coming together of history and antiquarianism in the eighteenth century," writes T.P. Wiseman in *Clio's Cosmetics* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1979), x. This intriguing work provides a useful study of the use of rhetorical techniques and myth and their influence on historians in antiquity.

incompatible methods and modes”³⁵ of a certain individual’s execution. At best, he states, “we are usually unable to reach anything firmer than a high probability in explanation” when attempting to determine facts of or events in Alexander’s life.³⁶

“It is one of the paradoxes of history...[that Alexander] should have been handed down finally in history as an enigma,” wrote G. T. Griffiths.³⁷ Yet the extant sources for Alexander, by “virtue” of their contradictory natures, personal biases and incompleteness, fail to impose any significant boundaries upon or create a particularly authoritative construction of Alexander. This allows the reader great liberty in constructing his or her Alexander as they peruse these resources: as there is no particularly dominant account and no “real” portrait of Alexander, facts may be believed or discarded more or less according to the reader’s own inclination. Even under the somewhat more rigorous demands of Classical Studies as a discipline, academics argue for vastly different Alexanders from the same evidence: romantic dreamer, tyrant, drunkard, ruthless conqueror, or multiculturalist.³⁸ In short, he emerges from our sources as an unusually protean individual, able to be reconfigured to suit very diverse agendas. Our concern now turns to the phenomenon of his posthumous reception throughout the centuries. A detailed history of his literary afterlife throughout the centuries is beyond the scope of this chapter. Instead, a brief gallery of particularly significant or intriguing “Alexanders” serves to demonstrate how audiences have read or written the Macedonian throughout the centuries.

Possibly one of the most significant and earliest literary “Alexanders” is to be found in the body of material broadly classed *The Alexander Romance*. This was a sensationalized and fantastical history of his life which probably originated in Alexandria in the third century BC. It became a

³⁵ Cartledge, *New Past*, 263.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

³⁷ *The Main Problems*, ix.

³⁸ Lane Fox, for example, emphasizes romantic “yearning” (*pothos*) and heroism; Tarn’s heroic uniter of races has been mentioned; A. B. Bosworth, on the other hand, offers massacres and tyranny. [*Alexander and the East: The Tragedy of Triumph* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996)]

massively popular work throughout the centuries, and would eventually radiate out to much of the world. Ironically, it is likely that this fantasy has perpetuated Alexander's name far more effectively than any sober history: in the introduction to his translation of the Greek version, Stoneman notes that "It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that the legends of Alexander are as widely disseminated, and as influential on art and literature, as the story of the Gospels."³⁹ Translations of the Greek text are to be found in English, French, German, Italian, Bulgarian, Serbian, Russian, Magyar, and Hebrew, among many other languages.

The Greek *Romance* survives in its earliest form⁴⁰ from the third century AD, perhaps within Alexander's lifetime. Beyond the surprising revelation that Alexander is the son of an Egyptian pharaoh and sorcerer, it offers a vaguely accurate account of Alexander's life up until the death of the Persian king Darius. At this point the material turns to the obviously fantastical. Alexander encounters monstrous crabs, horse-men, and fleas the size of frogs, among other oddities. He attempts to explore the sea in a bathysphere, the heavens via two harnessed birds, and to find the lands of the blessed.⁴¹ These explorations, however, are all cut short. Supernatural agents in the forms of men and birds admonish him for his ambitions, emphasizing that as a mortal his explorations come dangerously close to hubris: "Turn back, O man, tread the land that has been given to you and do not lay up trouble for yourself."⁴² The Alexander of the Greek *Romance* is an idealized hero⁴³ who is not only a precocious conqueror, but also a figure who dangerously strives to overcome the limitations of human existence.

³⁹ *The Greek Alexander Romance* (London: Penguin, 1991), 2.

⁴⁰ There are actually three different recensions, "each containing material that differs considerably from that in the other two." (ibid., 8.)

⁴¹ Many elements from the *Romance* would later be appropriated for the various legends regarding Prester John.

⁴² *Alexander Romance*, 121.

⁴³ "In our opinion, Alexander the king of the Macedonians was the best and most noble of men, for he did everything in his own way, finding that his foresight always worked in harness with his virtues." (36.)

While Alexander was influential for both his successors and the Greek world in general, the Romans were perhaps the most historically significant population to engage with the Macedonian. In fact, given the provenances of our sources, “the Alexander that we know and reinterpret is himself a ‘Roman’ construct, a product of Roman sensibilities and worldview.”⁴⁴ The Romans, as a rule, had mixed feelings towards other cultures in general and the Greeks in particular. Despite this, the Macedonian king would be absorbed as an extremely significant and often positive figure in Roman literature and culture.

The slow decay of the traditional power-division mechanisms of the Roman republic allowed figures such as Sulla and Marius increasing personal authority and led to continual social upheaval throughout the first century BC. Pompey, himself a youthful overachiever, took Alexander as a role model; it was perhaps an inevitability that he would finally be dubbed Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus—“Magnus” being the Latin form of “the Great.”⁴⁵ The on-going decay of Republican government caused by hyper-achieving military and economic leaders would, of course, culminate in another civil war, in which Pompey would be defeated by another man spurred on by the example of Alexander’s glory: one Gaius Julius Caesar.⁴⁶ Thus, as traditional models of Roman republicanism became increasingly irrelevant to the *realpolitik* of expansion and power based on military strength, we find that two of the most significant figures of this autocratic evolution turned to Alexander as an exemplary figure. Later, Augustus would bring an end to the generations of civil strife in Rome and become, effectively, emperor. Although he aligned himself with calm Apollo and traditional Roman values, which meant overt association with a figure renowned more for war than for government would have been counterproductive, we find evidence that he too revered Alexander. Suetonius relates this anecdote following Mark Antony’s death in Alexandria:

⁴⁴ Diana Spencer, *The Roman Alexander: Reading a Cultural Myth* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002), xv.

⁴⁵ Plutarch’s *Life* claims that Pompey attempted to cultivate a connection between his appearance and that of Alexander’s, (740) and seems to indicate that comparison between the two was a frequent occurrence. (772)

⁴⁶ Plutarch tells us, for example, that Caesar burst into tears as a result of reading a history of Alexander, keenly feeling his inadequacy when compared to the Macedonian. (*Lives*, 861.)

[Augustus] had the sarcophagus and body of Alexander the Great brought forth from its shrine, and after gazing on it, showed his respect by placing upon it a golden crown and strewing it with flowers; and being then asked whether he wished to see the tomb of the Ptolemies as well, he replied, "My wish was to see a king, not corpses."⁴⁷

If Suetonius is to be believed, it would appear that in Augustus' estimation Alexander somehow transcended mere kingship in a fashion that other Greek⁴⁸ kings did not. Furthermore, it seems that Augustus briefly adopted the head of Alexander as his official seal.⁴⁹

Alexander did not, of course, function solely as a subject for emulation by ruthless men of action. Satirists such as Juvenal poked fun at his ambition, while even Livy mused on the result were Alexander to have fought Romans.⁵⁰ Philosophers found him useful as a representative of secular achievement, and frequently contrasted his worldly success with their more abstract concerns. Stoicism, for example, perhaps the most widespread and significant moral philosophical system of the Roman world until the dawn of Christianity, found in Alexander a very useful figure for moral edification. Seneca, in attempting to school Nero in the precepts and practice of Stoicism, frequently utilizes Alexander as a model of qualities to avoid: lust for glory, misguided emotion, and lack of self-control. The emperor and Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius reminds himself that "In death, Alexander of Macedon's end differed no whit from his stable-boy's."⁵¹ Instead of viewing him as a model of achievement and ambition, these philosophers foregrounded the magnitude of his deeds to demonstrate their ultimate futility.

While much classical learning and history may have faded from Europe as a result of the decay of the Roman Empire, Alexander proved surprisingly hardy as a figure in literature. Sources such as the various incarnations of *The Alexander Romance* inspired medieval authors to engage

⁴⁷ "The Deified Augustus," in *The Lives of the Caesars, Volume I*, trans. J. C. Rolfe (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1970), 149.

⁴⁸ For brevity's sake, I compress the reality of Ptolemy's Greco-Egypto-Macedonian dynasty into "Greek."

⁴⁹ Suetonius, "Augustus," 205.

⁵⁰ *History of Rome, Vol. 2*, trans. Rev. Canon Roberts. (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., 1905), accessed 10 December 2011, <http://mcadams.posc.mu.edu/txt/ah/Livy/Livy09.html>

⁵¹ *Meditations*, trans. Maxwell Staniforth (St Ives: Penguin, 2004), 65.

with and reconfigure Alexander according to the worldview of the time. This resulted in a large body of derivative literature which perpetuated public awareness of the conqueror. Noteworthy examples of such reception and retelling include the *Roman d'Alexandre* in France and the *King Alysander* in England.⁵² In many of these texts we find him reconfigured as a champion of chivalry and thereby Christian virtue, his pagan nature conveniently forgotten. Chaucer's monk gives us a clear idea of the popular conception of Alexander in medieval England:

The storie of Alisaundre is so commune
That every wight that hath discrecioun
Hath herd somewhat or al of his fortune.
This wyde world, as in concusioun,
He wan by strengthe, or for his hye renoun
They weren glad for pees unto hym sende.
The pride of man and beest he leyde adoun,
Whereso he cam, unto the worlds ende.
Comparisoun myghte nevere yet been maked
Bitwixe hym and another conquerour;
For al this world for drede of hym hath quaked.
He was of kyghthod and of fredom flour...

...For though I write or tolde yow everemo
Of his knyghthod, it myghte not suffise.⁵³

This is an intriguing description of a pagan conqueror in an era dominated by Christian values. We find Alexander's military achievements and personal behaviour reread in terms of the code of chivalry, and under this standard found not only to be exemplary but unsurpassable. Alexander's perceived relevance to the chivalric code was also demonstrated by his inclusion among the Nine Worthies, a group of mythological or legendary individuals considered to exemplify chivalry.⁵⁴

Even with the influx of classical knowledge occasioned by the renaissance, we find literary Alexanders which emphasize the magnitude of his glory and brilliance. When prevailing upon Marlowe's Faustus to raise the spectre of Alexander, the Holy Roman Emperor identifies his version of the Macedonian:

⁵² For a masterful treatment of the multifarious perceptions of Alexander in the medieval era, see George Cary, *The Medieval Alexander* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956).

⁵³ Chaucer, "The Monk's Tale," *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Bath: Oxford University Press, 1988), lines 2630-2654.

⁵⁴ Alexander was accompanied by two other classical figures: Trojan Hector and Julius Caesar.

Amongst which kings is Alexander the Great,
Chief spectacle of the world's pre-eminence,
The bright shining of whose glorious acts
Lightens the world with his reflecting beams,
As when I hear but motion made of him
It grieves my soul I never saw the man.⁵⁵

Intriguingly, Faustus is unable to conjure up the actual shade of Alexander with his diabolical powers, suggesting that Alexander himself is beyond Hell's reach.⁵⁶ Here, Alexander still personifies secular glory, but without the trappings of chivalry; he is instead constituted as a figure of enlightenment and human potential. Shakespeare similarly touches upon Alexander's greatness, even if it is by way of demonstrating its ultimate futility:

Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander
returneth into dust; the dust is earth; of earth we make loam; and why of that
loam whereto he was converted might they not stop a beer-barrel?
Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay,
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away.⁵⁷

It is, of course, only because Alexander was such a towering figure that the inevitability of his ultimate mortality is so significant. Later, we find in Dryden a "God-like hero"⁵⁸ of an Alexander, which depiction is inflated to in turn demonstrate the subversive and manipulative power of music. These literary Alexanders consistently emphasize the magnitude of his deeds and his unrivalled status, even if these are appropriated to serve other agendas.

The evolution of European attitudes towards absolute monarchy seems to manifest itself in depictions and readings of Alexander. The glorious "Alexanders" which had been so entrenched in medieval and renaissance literature gave way to new interpretations which reacted to his regal title, particularly in England:

⁵⁵ Christopher Marlowe, *Dr Faustus*, ed. Roma Gill (London: A & C Black, 1989), 9.23-29

⁵⁶ "...it is not in my ability to present before your eyes the true substantial bodies...But such spirits as can lively resemble Alexander and his paramour shall appear..." 9.42-48.

⁵⁷ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, in *William Shakespeare—Complete Works*, ed. Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen (New York: Modern Library, 2007), 5.1.158-162.

⁵⁸ "Alexander's Feast," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 7th ed. M. H. Abrams (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), 2109.

The English of the Restoration went further than most of the French in derogating Alexander. The critical spirit of the time found ancient heroes tiresome. People who were beginning to be conscious of their own enlightenment, and who tended to look on members of the newly created Royal Society as types of the modern hero, felt little attraction towards a man in armor galloping over Asia. In addition, Alexander's claim to be a god could hardly have pleased a nation that had so recently challenged the divine right of kings.⁵⁹

A vivid example of this re-evaluation can be found in Fielding's *Jonathan Wild*, a subtext of which deals with the distinction between "goodness" and "greatness."⁶⁰ Here, the master-thief and the Macedonian are found to be kindred souls. Fielding's *Wild* is a "passionate admirer of heroes, particularly of Alexander the Great,"⁶¹ and, when he is sunk in despair, philosophizes:

"What is the Life of a single Man? Have not whole Armies and Nations been sacrificed to the Humour [*sic*] of *ONE GREAT MAN*?...Why, I have ruined a Family, and brought an innocent Man to the Gallows. I ought rather to weep, with *Alexander*, that I have ruined no more, than to regret the little I have done."⁶²

Conquest, achievement, and secular glory under autocratic title: these are, for Fielding, no better achievements than those of brigands and thieves. Alexander's "greatness" is found to be wanting when weighed against "goodness," and as such the king is found to be a reprehensible tyrant.

Similarly, but for different reasons, the American colonies found little to admire in kings. Thomas Paine, for example, most definitely did not excuse Alexander of the sin of monarchy. In a striking fantasy essay, Paine crosses the Styx into "shadowy regions"⁶³ where he encounters an extremely protean shade of Alexander. The dead conqueror dons new guises constantly to avoid an

⁵⁹ G.C. Brauer, Jr. "Alexander in England: The Conqueror's Reputation in the Late Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries" in *The Classical Journal*, Vol. 76, No.1 (Oct. – Nov., 1980), 36.

⁶⁰ "But before we enter on this great Work, we must endeavour to remove some Errors of Opinion which Mankind have by the Disingenuity of Writers contracted: For those from their Fear of contradicting the obsolete Doctrines of a Set of simple Fellows called, in Derision, Sages or Philosophers, have endeavoured as much as possible, to confound the Ideas of Greatness and Goodness, whereas no two Things can possibly be more distinct from each other. For Greatness consists in bringing all Manner of Mischief on Mankind, and Goodness in removing it from them." [ed. Hugh Amory (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 8]

⁶¹ Fielding, *Wild*, 14.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 137.

⁶³ "New Anecdotes of Alexander the Great" in *The Writings of Tom Paine* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1894), http://oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=343&chapter=17001&layout=html&Itemid=27

unspecified punishment, not above assuming the shape of “a piece of dung,”⁶⁴ and Paine eventually meets him as a mere insect:

...holding up the emperor between my finger and thumb, he exhibited a most contemptible figure of the downfall of tyrant greatness. Affected with a mixture of concern and compassion (which he was always a stranger to) I suffered him to nibble on a pimple that was newly risen on my hand, in order to refresh him; after which I placed him on a tree to hide him, but a Tom Tit coming by, chopped him up with as little ceremony as he put whole kingdoms to the sword. On which I took my flight, reflecting with pleasure,—That I was not ALEXANDER THE GREAT.⁶⁵

Paine gleefully caricatures Alexander as possessed of all the worst qualities of tyranny, and metes out according “justice” in the afterlife, presumably only narrowly stopping himself from hammering out *sic semper tyrannis* for the reader’s edification. Alexander’s achievements presumably become troublesome for these writers and societies because they were by-products of autocracy. Thus, in rendering him for their contemporaries, these authors are obliged to show him and his deeds as negative, for applauding a king who aspired to global domination would undoubtedly cause some cognitive dissonance given the ideals of independence and freedom.

All of this, however, is not meant to imply universal disapprobation of Alexander due to his regal status. As the British Empire’s involvement with the Indian subcontinent increased, it was perhaps inevitable that some writers and politicians would look for historical parallels for their occupation. Given the emphasis placed upon classical education for the British elite of the time, it is unsurprising that he was a subject of tremendous fascination for Britons involved in India.⁶⁶ An intriguing pamphlet by one Major Edward Paske, published in 1870, concerns itself with the strategic concerns of the Empire regarding the Eastern Question. “History repeats itself,” he quotes⁶⁷ before

⁶⁴ Paine, “Anecdotes”

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ For a detailed examination of the use of Alexander and classical history in relation to British involvement in India and the literature of the period, see Christopher A. Hagerman, ‘In the Footsteps of the “Macedonian Conqueror”: Alexander the Great and British India,’ *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, Volume 16, Numbers 3-4 (2009): 344-392.

⁶⁷ “Observations on the Eastern Question: in its bearing upon the position and interests of the British Empire in the east,” *Bristol Selected Pamphlets* (1870): 6, accessed 4 April, 2011, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/60230352>

examining Alexander's plans regarding the development of his empire's infrastructure. Having outlined these, he offers this very intriguing claim:

The grand projects conceived and commenced by Alexander the Great, but which his untimely death prevented his bringing to completion, it has become the duty of England to accomplish, after the lapse of more than twenty centuries.⁶⁸

Within this sentence it is possible to identify two extremely interesting concepts. The first is that "lapse" implies some species of continuity between Alexander's empire and that of the British. Secondly, this continuation or resumption of Alexander's imperialism is not merely an interesting fact, but a moral obligation: "the duty of England," with all that "duty" connotes. Here, Alexander is positively invoked to legitimize the British presence in the same geography which the Macedonian marched millennia beforehand. He is thus read in this context as a forerunner and collaborator in the paternalistic colonial venture, whose noble legacy must be continued. Kipling echoes this idea in *The Man Who Would Be King*, where his two adventurous rogues validate their assumed right to rule by claiming to be "gods and sons of Alexander."⁶⁹

Alexander continues to be invoked, read, and reconfigured in the modern world. There exists an on-going squabble between contemporary Greece and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia over who Alexander "belongs" to. A particularly significant aspect of this debate involves the use of the Vergina star,⁷⁰ a symbol possibly associated with Alexander's dynasty. When the Republic of Macedonia adopted this design for a national flag, Greece swiftly imposed a year-long economic blockade in an attempt to force the Macedonians to abandon their co-option of Alexandrian symbolism. Furthermore, the Greek government petitioned the United Nations to

⁶⁸ "Eastern Question," 6.

⁶⁹ (Hoboken: Melville House Publishing, 2008), 42.

⁷⁰ This is a sixteen-ray sun or star, depicted on a larnax, which some archaeologists believe contained the bones of Alexander's father, Philip II. For a detailed examination of both nations' attempts at appropriating Alexander and his legacy, see L. M. Danforth, "Alexander the Great and the Macedonian Conflict" in *Brill's Companion to Alexander the Great*.

prohibit the flag from being displayed. The fundamental issue these actions reflect is the question of who “owns” Alexander. Both Greece and Macedonia have an interest in claiming the king as their own, as a symbol of their historic achievement and national identity.

Even when he is not being deployed in dialogues of national identity, Alexander’s depictions continues to excite interest and outrage. In 2004, a group of Greek lawyers threatened legal action against filmmaker Oliver Stone, based on his cinematic depiction of Alexander as a bisexual.⁷¹ Here the “crime” is failing to map Alexander to a contemporary, heteronormative sexuality; Stone’s (probably) accurate depiction of Alexander’s indiscriminating loves fails to correspond with contemporary western notions of acceptable masculine behaviour. Thus, it seems these lawyers were primarily objecting to what they saw as a negative depiction of a hero, wishing him to be anachronistically depicted as admirable by a particular set of contemporary moral values.

This has been, of course, a very one-sided and sweeping overview of Alexander’s many literary incarnations and readings. I have favoured western readings, leaving aside many fascinating “Alexanders:” the pious adherent of Zoroastrianism in the Persian *Shahnameh*, the minor Islamic prophet Dhul-Qarnayn, the Malay hero, and the pilgrim to Jerusalem in Hebrew tradition. However I believe this brief examination of sources and reception sufficient evidence to establish both that almost every society writes their own Alexander, and that he has been an enduringly significant figure in literature and ideology throughout the centuries. This established, I now wish to examine his use in the specific field of the modern English-language novel.

⁷¹ “Bisexual Alexander angers Greeks,” BBC.co.uk, last modified 22 November, 2004, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/4032245.stm>.

Chapter II: Mary Renault

...if tonight he had wanted all from me, instead of only a kiss to pardon him, I would not have withheld even my heart; no, not with all those dead men's souls drifting upon the air. It is better to believe in men too rashly, and regret, than believe too meanly. Men could be more than they are, if they would try for it. He has shown them that. How many have tried, because of him? Not only those I have seen; there will be men to come. Those who look in mankind only for their own littleness, and make them believe in that, kill more than he ever will in all his wars.⁷²

Alexander has returned from the commission of a questionable massacre in India to his lover Bagoas. After seeing the haggard and gore-covered king to bath and bed, Bagoas as narrator offers a spirited defence of the king's actions, culminating in this striking statement.

This passage from Mary Renault's *The Persian Boy* can be read on two levels. Superficially, it is the voice of an admirer chronicling and apologizing for the deeds of his lover. More subtly, however, it is an extra-textual response to centuries of opinions and received ideas of Alexander. This passage also serves to exemplify Renault's preoccupations in writing of the Macedonian king.

That the reader's perspective on the king is that of a devoted lover who is willing to forgive anything betrays her tremendous sympathy for her subject and the essentially positive stance of her novels. The choice of narrator affords no possibility of a neutral reading: this is no act of "re-evaluation," no attempt at offering "a balanced, objective view," but is instead an unrepentant encomium.

As such, the passage contains elements of apology. "It is better to believe in men too rashly, and regret" implores the reader to "believe" in the virtue of the king, to seek a forgiving and sympathetic perspective on his potentially heinous deeds. That others have killed "more than he ever will in all his wars" undermines the impact of his heinous acts and serves to diminish the fact that Alexander's military achievements demanded mass bloodshed. It acknowledges that there are

⁷² Mary Renault, *The Persian Boy* (London: Arrow, 2003), 282.

those, both in his lifetime and long thereafter, who have opposed Alexander. Bagoas' contempt for those who "believe too meanly" and "look in mankind only for their own littleness" could hardly be a response to his fictional contemporaries, as no-one in Renault's novels expresses such sentiments. Therefore, this comment must be understood to refer to individuals beyond the scope of the fictional text: the academics, writers, and historians throughout the centuries who have criticized Alexander, who have found in him "littleness." These opinions, these refusals to acknowledge the possibility of greatness in the figure of this Macedonian king, are according to Bagoas far more damaging than any war.

The text is not merely apology, however. Renault does not simply respond to centuries of criticism or disapprobation to say, "He wasn't that bad, despite the destruction he caused." Instead she goes beyond apology to actual justification. Bagoas asserts that "men could be more than they are"; implicit within this statement is an authorial belief in the possibility of the evolution or betterment of humanity. That it exists as a possibility—"could be"—means that this evolution is not inevitable but must be earned. Belief in improvement, of course, necessitates a scale of some sort, a belief in species of transcendent value or virtue. To Renault Alexander is not great for his genius in warfare or empire-building. Rather his deeds and life, even the greatest acts of slaughter, serve to redefine what is humanly possible, and thereby enhance humanity as a species: "He has shown them that." This both justifies all his misdeeds and clarifies Bagoas' (and simultaneously Renault's) statement about those who have killed far more through their own "littleness": the refusal to acknowledge Alexander's greatness is a refusal to believe in the possibility of humanity bettering itself.

Thus Mary Renault's portrayal of Alexander is not intended to merely depict the past or map the career of a brilliant conqueror. Instead her novels consciously defy centuries of negative portrayals, both classical and contemporary, to defend and praise what she saw as a remarkable individual, an individual she felt a tremendous sympathy and admiration for. Many of Renault's

characteristics, and her own beliefs regarding human virtue and philosophy, are to be found in her portrayal of Alexander. For her the Macedonian king was most important as a figure who defied his society and age to align himself with higher values, a phenomenon which she has re-envisioned through her Platonic personal philosophy. As such, the Alexander which emerges from her novels is intended to be read as a timeless example of human possibility.

Mary Renault

Mary Renault is best known for her novels of ancient Greece, which demonstrate both literary skill and technical knowledge. One academic suggests that the relative paucity of novels which take Alexander as their subject matter, when compared to the abundance of novels dealing with other classical figures, can be attributed to fear of competing with Renault.⁷³

Operating under the pen name Renault, Mary Challans seems, as biographer Sweetman notes, to have lived a somewhat contradictory life.⁷⁴ As a young woman, despite her conservative English upbringing and environment, she strove for financial and personal independence; yet she was “bored” by feminists and found “most women slightly pitiful.”⁷⁵ Despite achieving great commercial success and academic praise for her literary output as a female writer, she believed that men “had some extra reserve of neural strength, some capacity for sustained intensity and inner drive”⁷⁶ the lack of which rendered women artistically inferior. She lived in a near lifelong homosexual relationship, while her novels contributed a great deal to the sexual revolution and offered sympathetic portrayals of homosexuality; yet she “disliked sexual tribalism” and the notion of choosing a particular, exclusive sexual preference.⁷⁷ She opposed apartheid, engaging in Black Sash demonstrations and newspaper debate, but believed in a qualified franchise and the notion of

⁷³ Jeanne Reames, “Beyond Renault.” 2011. Accessed 05-07-2011, http://myweb.unomaha.edu/~mreames/Beyond_Renault/beyondrenault.html

⁷⁴ *Mary Renault* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), xi.

⁷⁵ Sweetman, *Renault*, 252.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 253.

⁷⁷ Sweetman, *Renault*, 273.

an elite.⁷⁸ Without any formal training in classical history and languages beyond school Latin, she produced novels of antiquity informed by “a peerless *Wissenschaft*”⁷⁹ which are frequently considered to be among the finest of historical novels.

Some of Renault’s apparent personal oddities become comprehensible when one discovers that her sensibilities and ideologies seemed to have been informed less by contemporary society than by extensive reading, drawn indiscriminately from sources such as medieval romance and Platonic thought. Indeed, Plato was perhaps her most significant teacher: having been exposed to him at eighteen,⁸⁰ she would draw from the philosopher’s dialogues “an ethical code that she attempted to maintain throughout her life,” focused on the potential and virtue of the individual.⁸¹ She went so far as to claim that “Everything decent and generous is done by the elite, everything mean by the masses.”⁸² Biographers note her lifelong rejection and wariness of any sort of “collective identity”⁸³ such as feminist, nationalist, liberal, woman, homosexual, and so forth; presumably this was a byproduct of a Platonic emphasis on the elite individual, rather than societies or movements.

This brief biographical sketch is not irrelevant to a study of her literary works; as Zilboorg notes, “[Renault’s] novels are in no way transparent autobiography for public consumption, but she constantly draws—for details as well as for subjects and themes—on her own private life.”⁸⁴ Her own experiences and interests such as nursing, the theatre, the second World War, nonconformist sexuality, and the classical world constantly find expression in her novels. Foremost in understanding

⁷⁸ Sweetman, *Renault*, 214.

⁷⁹ Bernard F. Dick, *The Hellenism of Mary Renault* (Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1972), xiii

⁸⁰ Caroline Zilboorg, *The Masks of Mary Renault* (Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 2001), 8

⁸¹ Sweetman, *Renault*, 36. Note, of course, that Plato was far from an advocate of mass democracy and individualism: in this context “the individual” should probably be read as the philosopher-king or enlightened individual rather than the average citizen. Plato, unfortunately, was not given to convenient epigrams by which to substantiate a claim in an academic paper; for a general idea of his elitist attitudes, see *The Republic*, in which the philosopher advocates rule by the elite, a covert eugenics program, and propaganda and deceit in governance.

⁸² Sweetman, *Renault*, 214.

⁸³ Zilboorg, *Masks*, 225.

⁸⁴ *Masks*, 27.

the relationship between Renault herself and her works, however, must be the philosophies and values of ancient Greece. Even her earlier novels, largely studies of heterosexual or homosexual romance in contemporary England, betray her interests by sporting a classical core: “These works...are filled with classical allusions and Platonic imagery,”⁸⁵ and demand “that the reader view her characters with a double vision and consider them as Hellenic souls imprisoned in modern bodies.”⁸⁶ Her final contemporary novel, *The Charioteer*, even takes its central concerns and titular metaphor from Plato’s *Phaedrus*.⁸⁷ Thereafter she would turn entirely to the ancient world for her settings, ranging from the mythological age of Theseus to the very historical Hellenistic world that emerged from Alexander’s conquests.

The underlying presence of Hellenic thought which Dick explored so usefully in his *Hellenism of Mary Renault* means that in attempting to read or interpret her historical novels, one must be aware that the underlying themes and imagery which we as students of English literature are so eager to find are themselves classical in nature. Renault did not write mere dramas in which classical institutions become a synonym for some contemporary concern—a particularly common and annoying example thereof is the use of imperial Rome as a commentary upon and stand-in for “imperialist America”⁸⁸—but crafted English fiction set in antiquity which is also animated with classical thought and motifs. Renault felt strongly about the concept of fidelity to what we can reconstitute of the past:

I have never, for any reason, in any historical book of mine, falsified anything deliberately which I knew or believed to be true. Often of course I must have done through ignorance what would horrify me if I could revisit the past...But one can at least desire the truth; and it

⁸⁵ Dick, *Hellenism*, xvi.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁸⁷ The allegory refers to a charioteer leading two horses. The charioteer himself represents human reason and intelligence, whereas one horse represents noble or moral impulses and the other irrational or negative desires. The wise man imposes unity upon the “horses” in order to proceed in life and philosophy, whereas others make no progress due to the conflicting directions of the harnessed animals.

⁸⁸ A deceptive practice: “Comparisons of modern America and imperial Roman have been flippantly common during the past two decades, based overwhelmingly on selecting specific displays of universal human behavior and then parading Roman quotes and stories in contrast with relevant American situations,” writes one Vaclav Smil in an article criticizing the tendency. [“America as a new Rome?” *The Washington Post*, last modified 15 April, 2010, http://voices.washingtonpost.com/political-bookworm/2010/04/america_as_a_new_rome.html]

is inconceivable to me how anyone can decide deliberately to betray it; to alter some fact which was central to the life of a human being, however long it is since he ceased to live, in order to make a smoother story, or to exploit him as propaganda for some cause.⁸⁹

As Dick observes, this loyalty to both classical values and history causes some problems for academic evaluation of Renault.⁹⁰ Otherwise intelligent and lucid studies such as Zilboorg's suffer in this regard, as they are only able to evaluate Renault's novels through the particular lenses of gender issues, queer theory, identity, and so forth; the classical thought which underlies her plots and events, and the classical imagery and references used to develop these, are usually left unquarried by academic writers within the discipline of literary analysis. Any attempt to investigate what Renault intended her Alexander novels to be, then, must take into account both the techniques and principles of the English novel and classical thought and knowledge.

Alexander was a subject of life-long fascination to Renault. In addition to a trilogy of novels focused on his life and its consequences, she wrote a non-fiction study entitled *The Nature of Alexander*. Her personal attitude towards Alexander bordered on worship: Sweetman identifies the first novel in the trilogy as "almost a love letter"⁹¹ to the Macedonian, and her private correspondence likewise betrays an almost religious fascination.⁹² The first of the historical novels, *Fire from Heaven*, concerns itself with Alexander's youth and upbringing until his accession to the Macedonian throne. The second, *The Persian Boy*, follows his conquests and concludes with his death, while the final novel *Funeral Games* depicts the wars of succession which follow. As a result of the fact that the final novel does not feature Alexander as a major protagonist or character, we shall restrict our attention to the other two.

⁸⁹ Mary Renault, "The Fiction of History", *London Magazine*, 1979 quoted in Sweetman, *Renault*, 158.

⁹⁰ In brief, he argues that in Renault's case, professors of English feel disinclined to evaluate her as a result of a lack of technical knowledge of the classical world, whereas the classicists feel that she must be in the purview of English Literature. This has resulted in a relatively small body of secondary literature. (*Hellenism*, 120-1)

⁹¹ Sweetman, *Renault*, 256.

⁹² In a letter, for example, she claims that a head of Alexander provoked "an almost physical sense of the presence of Alexander like a blazing sun below the horizon, not yet quenching the stars but already paling them...His face has haunted me for years..." (ibid.)

Renault's devotion to Alexander clearly affected her usage of resources. Her author's notes usually attempt to justify her use or dismissal of ancient authors, and the narrative she wrought from their works. She was quite willing to take both ancient and modern opinions to task in defending Alexander and justifying her own positive depiction of him. The Roman author and source Curtius, for example, is dismissed with the following assessment:

Muddled sensationalism is typical of Curtius, an unbearably silly man with access to priceless sources now lost to us, which he frittered away in the cause of a tedious literary concept about the goddess Fortune, and many florid exercises in Roman rhetoric.⁹³

She goes on to criticize later Roman sources as "written by men who never set eyes on [Alexander], and bearing about as much relation to objective truth as one would expect to find in a *History of the Jewish People* commissioned by Adolf Hitler."⁹⁴ Renault also notes that modern academics are also prone to inexplicably negative interpretations of Alexander: "More puzzling is a present-day outbreak of what one may call black-washing, since it goes far beyond a one-sided interpretation of facts to their actual misrepresentation,"⁹⁵ and of course proceeds to offer examples and arguments to respond to some of these.

In short, Renault showed a willingness to argue against both certain ancient sources and contemporary opinions in favour of her own positive vision of Alexander, and to disregard or interpret material as she felt appropriate. She did not feel constrained by the information provided by classical sources, but was quite willing to work selectively, choosing certain bones around which to build a particular literary body. An analysis of how she filled the gaps, as it were, demonstrates that she relied heavily on her own considerable knowledge of classical antiquity in conjunction with her own intellectual and philosophical leanings in order to fashion a satisfying whole narrative.

⁹³ *Persian*, 420.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 421.

The story that Renault has to tell of Alexander is not, foremost, an attempt to recount the history and events of his life. Rather, her primary concern is to depict the personality and mind of Alexander as a human being, a selective portrayal which she happily confesses to.⁹⁶ The most noticeable consequence of this approach is the lack of attention given to conflict. Surprisingly, Renault manages to sidestep the depiction of war for most of the novels. Only one battle, Chaeronea, is depicted in any real depth, and is included almost exclusively as a means of furthering character development. The narrator's status as non-combatant in *The Persian Boy* means that therein battles usually amount to Alexander going away briefly and returning. Renault preferred the allusive passage⁹⁷ or the later recount by a witness or letter or the dismissive reference⁹⁸ to avoid depicting wars or events which do not contribute to the focus on character.

These novels are an attempt to realistically depict a near-superhuman individual, and to map the consequences of his existence. *Fire from Heaven* follows the upbringing of Alexander, while the sequel *The Persian Boy* concerns itself with the potential the full-grown man has to affect the world. Renault's scholarship and love of antiquity are evident: these novels portray the culture, values, and institutions of the Hellenic world without any attempt to justify or overtly explain them to a contemporary audience. Sacrifices are made to diverse gods and orgiastic festivals are described, murder is not thought of as a particularly sinful or shocking pastime, diverse sexualities and polygamy are commonplace, and exotic names and Greek terms are employed liberally. The novels make no attempt to impose a Judeo-Christian moral veneer or reading, or to represent cultural practices which a contemporary audience might find distasteful in a more appealing light. This is, of

⁹⁶ "It has been impossible to find room for all the major events [of Alexander's] crowded life, or to demonstrate the full scope of his genius. This book attempts only an angle shot, with certain highlights." (*Persian*, 421)

⁹⁷ E.g., "The battle was fought by the lake, among the ash-groves and orchards and glittering poplar-trees, on slopes starred with yellow mallows or blue with irises, which the soldiers crushed under trampling feet or stained with blood. The lapis-blue waters were churned and fouled; the storks and the herons fled the reeds; the eaters of carrion watched each his neighbour drop from the sky, and swooped to the glut of corpses heaped upon on the grassy shores, or floating under the small-flowered rock." (*Fire*, 259)

⁹⁸ E.g., "From them, I pieced together the battle as best I could...I have it by heart; I can't bring myself to go over it again." (*Persian*, 60) Bagoas' attitude here reflects what could almost be a sense of boredom at the idea of filling his narrative with accounts of warfare.

course, a byproduct of Renault's devotion to the values of the ancient world and her refusal to distort facts of history as they are known.

Fire from Heaven

The first novel in Renault's Alexander trilogy could be dubbed a failed *Bildungsroman*. Although executed with skill, a measured and satisfying writing style, and an expert grasp of the subject matter, this narrative of Alexander's formative years is ultimately undermined by Renault's devotion to her protagonist. *Fire from Heaven* is clearly a study of the education and upbringing of Alexander, but the depiction of the protagonist's growth and development one would expect of the genre is subverted and rendered unsatisfying by his superhuman capabilities.

From the reader's introduction to the four-year old Alexander in *Fire from Heaven*, it is clear that he is precocious in almost every aspect. As he grows, he continues to defy his age in physical, psychological, and social terms, being able to conduct diplomacy, lead campaigns, tame horses, play musical instruments, and outwit full-grown warriors and politicians with tedious effortlessness. He is frequently described with words which connote value: a "gem-clear profile" (18), "a golden boy," (13), his face "as brilliant as a jewel set in gold." (10) In short, the characterization of Alexander suffers as a result of Renault's desire to do justice to her perception of his historical counterpart, as he is simply too perfect. His emotional range consists almost entirely of empathy for those around him, noble anger, or stoic competence. Without flaws, compelling weaknesses or quirks, he is a monotonous lead, as the reader may safely assume that every venture or activity he indulges in will be successful.

Renault tracks this overachiever's development in a milieu which is faithful to modern comprehension of the classical Greek world. Social position, rank, and racial or cultural boundaries are extremely restrictive and important. Behaviour is governed by inflexible social institutions and expectations: men have clear duties as warriors and politicians and a code of masculinity by which to

abide; women are prostitute-entertainers (*hetairai*) or house-bound wives; cultural identity, “Greek,” “Macedonian,” “barbarian,” “Persian,” is of absolute importance, and forms the basis of social cohesion.⁹⁹

These issues of cultural identity, socially-sanctioned behaviour, and ideological allegiance are at the core of *Fire from Heaven*. Within the first few pages of the novel, the young Alexander witnesses a ferocious argument between his parents, the Macedonian king Philip II and the queen Olympias. While initially this scene seems overtly and depressingly Freudian,¹⁰⁰ it is mercifully not the first scene in a lengthy study of neurosis and psychological trauma. Instead, it serves to introduce the antagonism between Alexander’s parents, and the underlying clash in cultural identity that Renault supplies as the motivation for this. *Fire from Heaven* focuses on Alexander’s education and upbringing: through his selection of pedagogues, Philip attempts to impose his virtues upon and mould Alexander into both a Greek and a suitably Macedonian prince.¹⁰¹ Similarly, Olympias spends much of the novel attempting to enlist Alexander’s sympathies against his father, going so far as to deny Philip’s role in his conception.¹⁰² Throughout the text, the growing Alexander has to negotiate both his parents’ bickering and their attempts to subvert his own personality with what Renault depicts as their own questionable qualities. His parents are portrayed as diametrically opposed

⁹⁹ One must bear in mind the philosopher’s thanks to fate, sometimes attributed to Thales, sometimes to Socrates, that he was “born a human being, and not one of the brutes; that I was born a man and not a woman; thirdly, a Greek and not a barbarian,” as it reveals most what must be understood about prejudice and social roles in the Hellenic world. [This version taken from Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers, Volume I*, trans. R. D. Hicks (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1925), 35.]

¹⁰⁰ Alexander, having crept into his mother’s bed, asks if she will marry him when he’s older (7); a moment later, his drunken father bursts into the room, unaware of his son’s presence, and strips naked: “He seemed to bristle all over; even the rod that hung in his black bushy crotch had risen by itself and was thrusting forward, a sight of mysterious horror.” (9-10) Alexander unsuccessfully attempts to supplant his father by ordering him away and telling him that he will marry his mother instead. (12)

¹⁰¹ E.g.: “Greek schooling, reason, civility, I mean the boy to have them as I have had” (*Fire*, 11); “He was seven years old, the age at which boys left the care of women. It was time to make a Greek of him.” (*Fire*, 40). Similarly, Philip acknowledges Olympias’ attempts to influence Alexander when he demands of her “Are you making *him* into a back-country, snake-dancing, howling mystagogue?” (*Fire*, 10)

¹⁰² “Your father!” she cried to him. ‘Zagreus be my witness, you are clean of *that!*’ Her fingers dug into his shoulders, so that he clenched his teeth with pain. ‘The day will come, yes it will come, when he will learn what part *he* had in you!’” (*Fire*, 63) While the historical Alexander was occasionally depicted as having a divine father, Renault does not dwell too heavily on this possibility, and instead employs the question of his paternity as a means of demonstrating Olympias’ fierce possessiveness. Note also the manner in which Olympias’ emotions are associated with pain or suffering for Alexander.

characters, who consciously attempt to lay claim to the cultural and psychological identity of the child. The *Bildungsroman* aspect of *Fire from Heaven* focuses on Alexander's relationships with, and defiance of, the attempts of those around him to mould his character.

This is reflected in an idiosyncrasy of the narration: Renault perhaps attempts to mediate the potential impersonality of the omniscient narrator with the limitations of the first-person by latching onto the perspective of secondary characters wherever possible. It is seldom that the novel directly reports Alexander's thoughts and state of mind; instead, in almost every scene, the narrative attention dwells on the perspective of secondary characters. These range from guards to diplomats to friends and family, but in almost every instance the reader is permitted more intimate psychological knowledge of these supporting characters than they are of Alexander himself: the internal thoughts of these characters are frequently identified, but Alexander is known largely through his actions and speech. This approach yields a somewhat kaleidoscopic portrait of Alexander himself, as he is portrayed from a variety of perspectives, but also renders him psychologically impenetrable. It also allows Renault to emphasize the exceptionality of Alexander and his deeds by portraying the shocked or admiring reactions they provoke in others. Combined with his implausible perfection, this approach has the unfortunate effect of further distancing Alexander from the reader.

The insight into the prejudices, expectations, and cultural values of those around Alexander serves to reinforce the novel's central preoccupation. The reader is afforded particular insight into the values and identity of those around Alexander, particularly his parents. Philip clearly represents conservative Greek masculinity and values. He is able to wield power and assert a powerful, but scarring, agency in an extremely patriarchal world. As a warrior, he is both capable of open battle and subterfuge, by which he strengthens his political position and "unifies" Greece under his banner. His body is grotesquely disfigured by a lifetime of applying his military prowess: "His arms and neck and legs were seamed with thick scars, white, red, or purple"¹⁰³ and he lacks an eye, reminding

¹⁰³ *Fire*, 9.

Alexander of the ogre Polyphemos who consumed Odysseus' companions.¹⁰⁴ He marries frequently¹⁰⁵ and has sex with both genders outside his polygamous unions. For Philip, the pinnacle of Greek culture and traditions, and a frequent synonym for these in the novel, is Athens: "He had been a lover of Hellas since he was a man...Athens was her altar, almost herself."¹⁰⁶ However, Philip's admiration—and Renault repeatedly compares his love for Greece to an unrequited longing for a beautiful woman—is one-sided. Despite being king of a powerful nation, Philip himself falls victim to cultural discrimination, as a Macedonian is not considered truly "Greek" by the Greeks themselves, and therefore cannot ever be fully accepted, despite his fantasies.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, Renault makes it clear that the Athens Philip loves—that of Socrates, Pericles, and the great cultural achievements of their time—no longer exists, and is now a mere shadow of its cultural and military glory, "an old painted whore."¹⁰⁸ His quest for "her" approval, then, ultimately makes him slightly foolish in the narrative. Thus Philip represents military prowess, *realpolitik* and gross masculinity, with his disfigured body and sexual promiscuousness. His allegiance to traditional Hellenic culture is somewhat subverted by the attitude Renault adopts towards it,¹⁰⁹ making him simultaneously a powerful but slightly pathetic character. As a result of his combination of strengths and flaws, Philip is by far the most believable and well-developed character in the novel.

Olympias stands in sharp contrast to Philip both in identity and the manner in which Renault portrays her. Obviously, in gender she is female, but, unlike Philip, retains her physical beauty. As a woman in Macedonian and Greek society, she does not enjoy social power or agency and cannot act independently. She seems to enjoy no authority as queen, or to have any particular power over Philip; rather the two are portrayed as antagonists throughout the novel. Whereas Philip is

¹⁰⁴ *Fire*, 9.

¹⁰⁵ "It was a proverb in Macedon, that the King took a new wife for every war." (62)

¹⁰⁶ *Fire*, 102-3.

¹⁰⁷ "Deep in his mind moved a knowledge that for Athenians freedom and glory went together; but he was like a man in love, who thinks the strongest trait of the loved one's nature will be easily changed, as soon as they are married." (103)

¹⁰⁸ *Fire*, 308.

¹⁰⁹ Note that Renault obviously had a great deal of love for Greece *prior* to the Peloponnesian War. By Alexander's day, however, she clearly felt that Athens had undergone cultural and intellectual decline.

associated with the qualities of classical Greece, Olympias is allied with a far older tradition. Hailing from Epirus, to the northwest of Greece, she claims her line to be sprung “from Achilles, and my mother from the royal house of Troy,” (10) making her bloodline “the first of all the Hellenes.” (317) Therefore, her values are those of Homer’s *Iliad*, an older, more mythological and savage tradition focused on the glory of the individual.¹¹⁰ She feels herself far nobler than mere Hellenes, speaking Greek “only as a courtesy to inferiors.” (44) In an attempt to facilitate some degree of self-determination, she resorts to witchcraft and orgiastic rituals, worshipping Bacchus and keeping pet serpents. If Philip is shown to be somewhat foolish in his love for Athens, then Olympias’ attempts at exercising power through sorcery are shown to be wholly delusional and pathetic.¹¹¹ This is, as Sweetman notes, typical of Renault’s attitude towards women in her later novels, who become increasingly marginalized and are finally either “irrelevant or murderous.”¹¹² Olympias is no exception, as the queen is constantly depicted a shrill, underdeveloped character, scheming fruitlessly or throwing hysterical tantrums. With her lack of agency, both personal and social, and her impotent magic, Olympias represents irrationality, the female, passion, bygone heroism and social subversion, and is clearly opposed to Philip’s qualities.

The thematic and personal antagonism between the parents thus pivots on the boy Alexander. “As king and queen, male and female, Macedonian and Greek, Alexander’s parents struggle to define him, to force him to choose between them, between two parts of himself,”¹¹³ observes Zilboorg. However, Zilboorg misses a more subtle pressure placed upon Alexander from beyond his family: his lifelong friend Hephaestion. Historically, this individual was Alexander’s closest friend, a trusted commander, and probable lover. Renault sticks closely to this tradition. Her

¹¹⁰ Most of Alexander’s conversations with Olympias occur in her chambers, in which there is a frequently-mentioned depiction of the sack of Troy. The repetition of this fact serves to further associate her with *The Iliad*. Note that, by Alexander’s time (356-323BC), perhaps four centuries had passed since Homer, who is estimated, should “he” even have existed, to have flourished in the 7th or 8th century BC.

¹¹¹ E.g., Alexander discovers a mammet with “a long thorn stuck through its phallus, but had failed to work on Philip, though often tried” (46) and when he questions his sister about their mother’s spells, she states “Those things you spoke of, they’ve never worked.” (243)

¹¹² Renault, 293.

¹¹³ Masks, 180.

Hephaestion is absolutely devoted to Alexander, but Renault infuses their relationship with a noticeable Platonic subtext. Hephaestion's affection, which develops with age into sexual longing, is frequently mentioned, and usually described with horrifyingly cloying imagery.¹¹⁴ This mawkish tone is significant. For Plato, there existed a vital distinction between love of the soul and virtue, and "baser" forms of attraction.¹¹⁵ By depicting Hephaestion's attraction in such clichéd and saccharine terms, juxtaposed against Alexander explicitly quoting Plato on the subject of virtuous love,¹¹⁶ she makes it clear that Hephaestion poses a threat of undermining Alexander's virtue by embroiling him in a "degrading" sexual relationship founded on the superficial rather than the virtuous.

These, then, are the three primary¹¹⁷ individuals who would lay claim to Alexander within the novel, and all, should his development be affected by them, represent somewhat questionable influences for him. The narrative arc within *Fire from Heaven* does not focus on Alexander's growing skills as a commander or warfare, but is built instead upon the relationships between him and those around him. The somewhat unsatisfying "development" that the protagonist undergoes is his defiance of these external influences and the assertion of his own character. Ultimately, the plot's tensions and conflicts are purely personal.

Against these rigidly defined social roles, Alexander is significantly portrayed as a transgressor of both personal and social boundaries. As a child, he is already somewhere between boy and adult both in appearance and capacity;¹¹⁸ Renault makes this explicit by referring to him in

¹¹⁴ For example, Hephaestion feels "as if his midriff were melting" at the sight of Alexander (148), "grows possessive" of him (164), is overjoyed when he finds that "Alexander was his own in the sight of everyone", (165) and wonders if he is a "fool and a coward, not to try his luck" (171), amongst many other adoring gazes and aching longings.

¹¹⁵ For an accessible introduction to Plato's outlook on love and its roles, see *Symposium*, in which Plato has Socrates and his interlocutors discuss the nature of love.

¹¹⁶ *Fire*, 207-8: Alexander discusses a book that "by Plato, that Aristotle never showed us." While not specifically identified in the novel, from the quotation we can deduce that this book is *The Symposium*.

¹¹⁷ Alexander does, of course, face other challenges in his development. As a child, he suffers under the unthinkingly harsh regime of his tutor Leonidas, but this relationship is somewhat underdeveloped and is purely adversarial. The relationships between Alexander, his parents, and his best friend are at the core of the novel and the formation of the young prince's character, and I shall therefore focus my attention on these.

¹¹⁸ "His dirty childish hands kept a managing grip on the reins, minding their own business, making no demand on his thought. Their capacity, so far beyond their growth, approached the freakish; it gave an uneasy feeling."

battle as a “shining man-child.” (125) His gymnastic teacher remarks that Alexander is unique in that he has not the limits nature places on other men in the matter of physical exertion, and can perform prodigies of strength on will alone. (51) His beauty, love of fine clothing, and fastidious attention to personal hygiene give him a feminine sheen in such a masculine society,¹¹⁹ while as a child his singing outrages Philip, who compares it to the performances of “Corinthian whores and Persian eunuchs.”(115) Moreover, he is unconcerned with issues of social expectations: he personally congratulates an actor, to his tutor’s dismay,¹²⁰ does not care to take a female or male lover for the purposes of sexual gratification, and violates the female-only sanctity of the maenads’ rituals. Renault’s Alexander is casually bisexual, and is unconcerned by his mother’s insistence that he prove his virility (and provide an heir) through heterosexual intercourse. (252) He is unaffected by prejudice on ethnic or racial grounds: he treats a “barbarian” Thracian boy as a social equal, while his father watches, “incredulous,” and labels this friendliness “un-Hellenic.” (106) Similarly, when Aristotle, upset at the murder of a friend, makes derogatory remarks about “barbarians,” Alexander finds it remarkable that the philosopher could generalize solely on grounds of ethnicity.¹²¹ He is free from the need to conform to social expectations, and exercises his own judgment rather than absorbing the received wisdom of his society.

As a result of his ability to transgress and ignore conventional social roles and expectations, Alexander’s relationships with the three key figures in the novel are characterized by negotiation. While he does occasionally lapse into taking his mother’s side, bonding with his father over shared qualities, and having “slavish” sex, the novel is ultimately the story of how Alexander is able to free himself from the negative characteristics of those around him.

(28) “There was a line across his forehead. It was scarcely a boy’s face at all. Nevertheless he was twelve years old...” (117)

¹¹⁹ Philip, contemplating Alexander’s unusual habit of shaving his beard, muses: “A Macedonian, a king’s son, what could have possessed him to make him ape the effete ways of the south? Smooth as a girl.” (213) His tutor Leonidas thinks that the young Alexander is “too beautiful for safety.” (43) Alexander, when comparing himself to his father, states that ‘I wear better clothes, that’s all. I like to do that.’” (149)

¹²⁰ “He was unable to stop the Prince from actually embracing this person, and giving him a costly arm-ring he had on, which the Queen was sure to inquire for. It was most unsuitable.” (171)

¹²¹ “Imagine calling Kyros the stuff of slaves, only because he was born a Persian.” (198) Kyros, or Cyrus the Great, was the founder of the Persian Empire. He becomes a significant figure in the second novel.

Authorial attitudes again undermine the effectiveness of the narrative in the matter of Alexander's bid to liberate himself from his mother's baleful influence. As a child he is utterly devoted to her and gladly takes her side in any dispute between his parents, as the introductory altercation establishes. However age alone is apparently sufficient to break her hold over him, and by fourteen he is quite willing to demonstrate his independence.¹²² Later, Olympias and her scheming are shown to have absolutely no emotional impact upon Alexander,¹²³ and towards the novel's conclusion he specifically forbids her from even mentioning her intrigues to him. (362) There is no significant character growth which accounts for Alexander's changing attitude towards his mother; it seems that Renault's antipathy towards women, which already caused Olympias to be portrayed as a negative and inconsequential character, simply allows him to shuck off this influence without any real effort or narrative expectation.

His relationship with his father, on the other hand, is far more nuanced. As a result of his initial loyalty to his mother, the few brief moments of sympathy between the two are usually contaminated by her plotting. A particular friction results from doubts as to Alexander's paternity, which his mother does much to encourage; this, and Alexander's liberality and romantic nature, cause much discord between father and son. Their moments of harmony usually result from their shared talent for warfare and political machinations,¹²⁴ and it is indeed by warfare that Alexander is finally able to free himself from his "debt" to his father. When the King brashly attempts to subjugate riotous soldiers himself, he is struck down; Alexander fights his way to the stricken king and kills the would-be regicides. Later, he tells Hephaestion that he considers this act enough to cancel the debt he owes his father by returning the act of "giving life."¹²⁵

¹²² E.g., Alexander insists on meeting his tutor Aristotle on his own, rather than with his mother; to her outrage he states, "It's for little boys, to be presented by their mothers. It's no way to come to a sophist, when one is grown-up. I'm nearly fourteen..." (154)

¹²³ "She told him all his father's wickedness; there was nothing new. He stroked her hair and echoed her indignation, his mind upon the war." (213)

¹²⁴ "Father and son exchanged looks, in a moment of perfect harmony; unalienated heirs of bronze-sworded chariot lords from beyond the Ister..." (100)

¹²⁵ "He gave me life, or he claims so. Whether or not, now I've given it him." (240)

Hephaestion's threat, that of degradation through lustful sex, is countered by recourse to virtue. In their intimate moments Alexander does not solely give himself over to the flesh, but instead speaks his mind and ideas.¹²⁶ His innate nobility—and Renault specifically mentions the idea of losing “virtue” as a result of giving in to sexual desire¹²⁷—is thus eventually communicated to Hephaestion: “Once having understood it, Hephaestion could himself achieve, in some degree, Alexander's power to drive the force of sexual energy into some other aim.” (248) Having specifically invoked Plato's notions of love earlier, Renault takes pains to show that Alexander manages to transform the relationship from one of degrading physical love to a higher plane on her idol's philosophical scale.

Alexander's personality does not allow him to merely become what his parents or lover would have him be; rather, *Fire from Heaven* is a study of how the boy is able to free himself these influences and, by the text's end, emerge as the man who can plausibly become “the Great.” From his father he gains knowledge of kingcraft, warfare, and a Hellenic education, but does not inherit his boorishness or sexual crudity. His mother's scheming, irrationality, and possessiveness are outgrown, but she gives Alexander an appreciation for romantic nobility and finery. In short, for Renault Alexander's greatness is not his allegiance to traditional Greek culture as represented by his father or the archaic mythology represented by his mother; rather, it his ability to overcome these influences and forge his own identity. Where the novel fails, however, is making Alexander's growth meaningful or complex. Renault's own fascination with Alexander results in a character who is so

¹²⁶ “He talked of man and fate; of words heard in dreams from speaking serpents; of the management of cavalry against infantry and archers; he quoted Homer on heroes, Aristotle on the Universal Mind, and Solon on love; he talked of Persian tactics and the Thracian battle-mind; about his dog that had died, about the beauty of friendship. He plotted the march of Xenophon's Ten Thousand, stage by stage from Babylon to the sea. He retailed the backstairs gossip of the Palace, the staff room and the phalanx, and confided the most secret policies of both his parents. He considered the nature of the soul in life and death, and that of the gods; he talked of Herakles and Dionysos, and how Longing can achieve all things.” (246)

¹²⁷ Alexander has the grace to gratify Hephaestion by having sex, “But if later he threw a javelin wide, or won a race by two lengths instead of three, Hephaestion always suspected him, without a word or a look to show it, of thinking that virtue had gone out of him.” “Virtue” here, of course, has nothing to do with Judeo-Christian notions of chastity, but rather man's independence and freedom from “sexual slavery” in the Platonic sense.

perfect that it is implausible that he could possibly fail; there is no real struggle within the narrative which he could possibly lose, which greatly enervates the effectiveness of the story.

Her own love of antiquity also manifests itself in her portrayal of Alexander's self-fashioned cultural allegiances. They are of his own choosing: he specifically models himself on Achilles and regards Homer's *Iliad* as "a sacred scripture."¹²⁸ *The Iliad* stands at the heart of the Greek world's sense of identity; as the greatest warrior ever born, Achilles represents the pinnacle of military virtue and the glory of the individual. He is taught by Aristotle, but the philosopher is depicted merely as a teacher of knowledge and sciences; for truly philosophical matters, the young Alexander turns instead to Plato.¹²⁹ From childhood, he pledges himself to Herakles, who supernaturally instructs Alexander before his first experience in combat, and whose code of honour Alexander conducts himself by.¹³⁰ Herakles' brief speech is the only instance in the novel where the supernatural is definitely active; this may well be a significant subtextual implication if one considers the mythology. Herakles was a god born mortal, and therefore had a particular interest in interceding on mankind's behalf; his immortality was earned by performing great deeds, as Alexander himself is driven to do. Therefore, it can be argued that Renault's Alexander is touching upon the threshold of divinity by aligning himself with Herakles.

Renault's Alexander is portrayed as a figure who is able to overcome the arbitrary conventions of his time and to opt instead for the transcendent. The narrative climax of the novel is the death of his father; this tokens Alexander's final liberation from the tyranny of others, leaving him free to pursue the conquest of Asia which will make his reputation. By refusing to let his identity be subverted by those around him, he is liberated to pursue his own standards of virtue and

¹²⁸ *Fire*, 170. Despite her supposed descent from Achilles' bloodline, typically it is *not* Olympias who imbues Alexander with an appreciation for the Greek hero and *The Iliad*, but rather a male childhood mentor.

¹²⁹ Renault's Aristotle is depicted as a purely scientific and rational observer, with human flaws and awkwardly conscious of some transcendent quality Plato possessed that he lacks: "Yet even this crisp thought evoked that formidable brooding presence; the old unease, the sense of something eluding the tools of measurement, defeating category and system, came hauntingly back with the summer scents of the Academy garden." (159)

¹³⁰ "But to cry for his own wounds would make Herakles forsake him. This had long been a part of their secret compact." (43)

behaviour. With this liberty, he chooses to be bound only the highest standards: those of Achilles, Herakles, and Plato. Renault's Alexander, as rendered in *Fire from Heaven*, is therefore an avatar of all that she sees as "purest" in the ancient Greek inheritance which she valued so highly and man's ability to transcend the mundane.

The Persian Boy

If *Fire from Heaven* is centrally a study of a gifted individual self-fashioning in defiance of society's expectations, *The Persian Boy* documents what that individual can do to society. *Fire from Heaven*'s final paragraph alludes to Alexander's upcoming campaigns in Persia; while *The Persian Boy* is set during these wars, like its predecessor it is concerned more with character and relationship than Alexander's battles. Here, the framing plot for Alexander's diverse conquests and exploration of Asia is, improbably, the romance: the relationship between the titular Persian boy and the Macedonian king gives structure to the otherwise overwhelming wars and adventures the king experiences.

At the core of the novel is the relationship between Greco-Macedonian society and Persian as Alexander steadily conquers the Persian Empire. The importance of society and culture to the novel is made obvious by Renault's choice of narrator. Whereas *Fire from Heaven* featured omniscient narration, *The Persian Boy* is told from the perspective of the eunuch Bagoas.

This is a significant departure. By narrating from a Persian perspective Renault is able to subvert the tradition of the effete, luxurious, cruel easterner that her Greeks perpetuate and complicate the narrative. Bagoas' perspective dissociates the western reader from identification with Alexander and his Greco-Macedonian subjects, and forces the reader to re-envision them from a fundamentally "other" perspective. Furthermore, it gives greater depth to the depiction of Alexander's relationship with his conquered subjects, as the reader comes to appreciate the Persians not merely some target of Macedonian military power, but as an advanced society in their own right.

The importance of the Persian perspective to the novel is such that Alexander only appears perhaps one fourth of the way in; until that point the novel is almost entirely concerned with Persians, with Alexander a distant figure in Asia Minor.¹³¹

The deflection from the omniscient to the personal is, arguably, not merely a matter of storytelling convenience. Bagoas is, for both Renault's personal and narrative leanings, a perfect choice of narrator. Although born of a noble line,¹³² he is taken into slavery as a child and gelded. Under these unfortunate circumstances his extreme beauty results in his being prostituted as a boy; "fortunately" his appearance eventually brings him to the attention of the royal household and he becomes the lover of the Persian king, Darius III. After the death of Darius following the decisive battle of Gaugamela Bagoas surrenders himself. He becomes Alexander's lover in turn, and thereafter follows the Macedonian king until his death in Babylon. As a noncombatant, he is unable to participate in battle for either side, and therefore Renault can largely omit detailed depictions of warfare from the narrative and focus on the details of court and personal life. As a Persian, he enables her to explore culture and prejudice on both sides, as Bagoas is both with his own biases and experiences discrimination from the Macedonians. As Alexander's lover, he is privy to the king's most intimate moments; but since Bagoas, unlike an omniscient narrator, has no need to pretend impartiality, Renault can allow him (and, by extension, herself) untrammelled scope for idolization of Alexander.¹³³ The first-person "I" of Bagoas here can be read as the "I" of Mary Renault herself; Bagoas' gushing, infatuated love for Alexander liberates her from the need for objectivity, and gives

¹³¹ For example, Bagoas tells us of Alexander's nation: "There were barbarians there whom I had heard my father speak of, red-haired savages who painted themselves blue; they lived north of the Greeks, a tribe called Macedonians. First they had come raiding; then they had the impudence to declare war, and the coastal satraps were arming...their own King had been killed...His heir was only a young lad, so there was no more need to be concerned about them." (6-7)

¹³² "I may say our line is an old one, though it ends with me. My father was Artembares, son of Araxis, of the Pasargadai, Kyros' old royal tribe." (1)

¹³³ There are frequent instances of justification or apologism for potentially dubious actions on Alexander's part. For instance, Bagoas describes Alexander's notorious penchant for drink as an oversight: "Cup for cup, he drank no more than before. But Baktrian wine should be mixed with two-thirds of water. Each cup he drank was twice the strength he was used to." (199) Bagoas acknowledges that others have written negatively of Alexander, but implies that his account is true: "Many tales were told of him, which I leave out, since those that were true are known by all the world, while of the false we have enough." (10)

her own admiration for the king free rein. Bagoas' body is also useful for her prejudices and concerns; Tougher suggests that his limbo-state of eunuchhood echoes Renault's own dissatisfaction with her female state.¹³⁴ Although he is able to fulfil the sexual function of a woman in the relationship, and indeed demonstrates many feminine qualities, Bagoas liberates Renault from the need to foreground a female perspective, and "literally embodies Renault's fictional negotiations among sex and subjectivity."¹³⁵ Historically, Alexander married Stateira, the daughter of Darius; she would have provided just as Persian and intimate a perspective as Bagoas, but one can imagine that Renault found the eunuch far more appealing as he shielded her from the concerns of a female narrator.¹³⁶

Renault's depiction of Bagoas echoes her exploration of Alexander's character in *Fire from Heaven*. Bagoas also transgresses boundaries and social roles; like Alexander, his unusual qualities allow him to transcend rigid definition. He is neither man nor woman, but something else; however, he is also distinct from other eunuchs in that he refuses to surrender his dignity and assiduously avoids corpulence.¹³⁷ His appearance is supremely beautiful, outclassing "woman, girl, or boy" (102)—making him superior to, and therefore distinct from, these groups. His voice is neither feminine nor masculine. Alexander tells him instead that it is "too pure" for a woman's voice and is rather like "the aulos, the deep-toned flute." (277) Although castrated, he is frequently shown to be capable of greater masculine agency than intact men, and while not a warrior he is able to kill.¹³⁸ He

¹³⁴ "The Renault Bagoas: The Treatment of Alexander the Great's Eunuch in Mary Renault's *The Persian Boy*," *New Voices in Classical Reception Studies* Issue 3 (2008), 83.

¹³⁵ Julie Abraham, *Are Girls Necessary?: Lesbian Writing and Modern Histories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 74.

¹³⁶ Bagoas himself is an extremely minor figure from our extant sources; Renault's depiction of him, however, relies almost entirely on invention, as she mentions in the afterword for *The Persian Boy*. For a useful examination of both the sources and Renault's interests in the eunuch, see Tougher.

¹³⁷ "There are eunuchs who become women, and those who do not; we are something by ourselves, and must make of it what we can." (39)

¹³⁸ E.g., Bagoas kills a full-grown Greek warrior who attempts to rape him. (*Persian*, 94) Of the cowardly Darius, Bagoas states "He struck me, for nothing. And if he is a man, then I reckon so am I." (*Persian*, 66) Later, when Alexander finds uncouth Macedonian soldiers tormenting Bagoas, he tells them in a rage, "But I see you can all be warriors, against one boy untrained to arms. And I tell you this – as I see him now, he looks more like a man to me than any of you do." (130)

plots murder on occasion, yet is able to function as a nurse when Alexander is incapacitated. This imbues him with both the power to nurture or destroy. Both by innate traits and personal resolve Bagoas is able to avoid becoming what his environment would make of him. This renders him a suitable partner for Renault's Alexander.

By depicting the development of the love between these two unusual individuals, Renault is able to both explore Alexander's psychology as a fully-developed man and his relationship with Persian society in general. The relationship between the two serves to echo the larger relationship between Greco-Macedonian and Persian societies: Bagoas' seduction of Alexander the man reflects the relationship between Persia and Alexander the king.

Seduction is a significant theme in the novel. It is the art in which Bagoas is instructed as a boy and by which he earns his keep in the royal harem. Later, it is by sexual seduction that Bagoas is first able to ensnare Alexander's affections. Sweetman goes so far as to compare the structure of the novel to that of a seduction, with Alexander's slow advance into the narrative echoing that of a lover.¹³⁹

More significantly to the novel's narrative, Alexander is shown to be culturally seduced. At first, he states to Hephaestion that "One should have some Persian oneself" (144) for social interactions and consults Bagoas for instruction. Stage by stage, the eunuch is able to convince Alexander to begin adopting Persian customs and garb. At first Alexander jokes that Bagoas is "making a Persian of him" (159) but soon comes to appreciate the finery and civilization of Persian culture. Ultimately Alexander acknowledges that it is Bagoas who taught him to respect and admire Persia: "From loving you, I first learned to love your people." (354) It is not a one-sided seduction, however: Bagoas himself is shown to develop a love of Greek culture, moving first from shock at the practices of the "barbarians"¹⁴⁰ to the point where reading Greek literature has him in tears.¹⁴¹ Thus,

¹³⁹ Renault, 268.

¹⁴⁰ Persian, 116. This entertaining inversion of Greek prejudice against Persian *barbaroi* is typical of Bagoas' initial reaction to the Macedonians, which is characterized by disgust and disbelief of their practices.

the interpersonal romance that is the novel's preoccupation serves as a metaphor and mirror for the larger relationship between Greco-Macedonian and Persian—and, as Alexander's inevitable death must bring a note of tragedy to the romance, his plans for the fusion of culture are similarly doomed.

Alexander's growing appreciation for Persian culture is not some insidious intellectual brainwashing on the part of Bagoas. The eunuch is rather a guide to the king, whose refusal to be bound by social prejudices or biases enables him to appreciate the sophistication of the Persians. Even before this education, he is shown to be annoyed by the parochial attitudes of his countrymen¹⁴² and states his admiration for Cyrus the Great, the founder of the Persian Empire.¹⁴³ His increasing affection for Persian practices does not herald a change of cultural allegiance from Greco-Macedonian to Middle Eastern. Instead Alexander is depicted as synthesizing a new, "higher" culture from both, based not upon nationality but virtue: to Bagoas he states, "Say I like your people, or find something of myself in them? Why say yours or mine. They should all be ours...Now it's time to make a new thing again."¹⁴⁴ Discussing Cyrus, his regal role-model, Alexander claims, "He chose men for what each man was in himself, not from hearsay and old wives' tales",¹⁴⁵ ignoring social evaluations in favour of personal estimation. His criteria appears to be transcendent achievement: "To hate excellence is to hate the gods...One must salute it everywhere, among unknown peoples, at the furthest ends of the earth; yet one must never cheapen it." (360) Alexander's ultimate goal thus

¹⁴¹ "[Greek] was strange after the Persian; sparer in language, stricter in form; but in time yielding up its secrets. When I first read the entrance of Hippolytos, offering his mountain flowers to the pure goddess he alone can see, my eyes ran over." (*Persian*, 254)

¹⁴² E.g., at a feast, of the Macedonian soldiery interacting with Persians: "At any difference of manners, they would laugh or even point. There were lords here, whose forebears had been kings before Kyros' time; but I was sure these uncouth westerners would have wished to see them carrying in the dishes. More than once, Alexander turned a cold eye on these boors; a few took notice, others pretended not to see." (*Persian*, 117)

¹⁴³ Alexander tells Bagoas, "Since I was a boy, Kyros has seemed to me the pattern for all kings, as Achilles—whom you won't know—is for all heroes" (*Persian*, 135) and that reading of Kyros' life "opened his eyes" (*Persian*, 145) to the virtues of Persians. Renault rather confusingly favoured unusual anglicized versions of names from antiquity; "Sokrates," "Bachkai" for "Bacchoi," "Kassandros" for "Cassander," for example. Intriguingly Alexander does not undergo this treatment; following this pattern he should be "Alexandros." Of course "Alexander" is so entrenched that it is likely she thought confusion would result from adapting this unusual spelling.

¹⁴⁴ *Persian*, 157.

¹⁴⁵ (150) Note that Bagoas is described as descending from Cyrus' tribe, further increasing his suitability as a counterpart for Alexander.

becomes the creation of a new race from both Macedonian and Persian strains, intended to mingle the excellence of both, and thereby liberated from the pettiness of discrimination. As such, Renault portrays Alexander's historic marriage of high-ranking Macedonians to Persian aristocratic females as a deliberate act of cultural fusion in the bid to create this "new thing"; similarly he raises a force of thirty-thousand Persians trained in Greek culture and Macedonian warfare. Renault's own elitism finds clear expression here: it is not authority, race, or culture by which her hero judges, but by virtue. Through his seduction by Bagoas, Alexander foregoes being merely "Macedonian", and instead becomes a product of the finest qualities of all his dominions: "He had spread his wings; the whole earth was his home." (244)

Renault again leverages Plato in depicting the relationship between Alexander and Bagoas. Discussing his plan to fuse the races, Alexander also comments that he would like Hephaestion to marry the sister of his, Alexander's, Persian bride, thus making Hephaestion's children his kin. Bagoas is somewhat jealous, to which Alexander reassures him, "'Dear one, forgive me. More than children are born of love. 'The sons of dreams'—do you remember?'" (354) This seems to be another clear invocation of Plato's *Symposium*, in which a distinction is drawn between the "offspring" of a sexual relationship and of an intellectual one: the products of an intellectual relationship may enjoy immortality, whereas the offspring of sex are far more mortal.¹⁴⁶ The impossibility of Alexander and Bagoas' relationship yielding physical children is obvious; Renault thus shows that it will "yield" the grand plan of the fusion of races, thus making their relationship far more significant in the narrative than any purely sexual one.

The conflict in the novel does not derive from the military conquest of the east, political intrigues, jealousy of Alexander's power, or even his possible hubris—although all these things do

¹⁴⁶ "After having chosen his partner, the older lover will conceive and give birth to all of the virtuous ideas and stories which he had been pregnant with for so long. Then, after the birth, and whenever his beloved is away, he will recall and cherish his precious progeny, the conversations they had together. But when the two of them are together, they will share the labor of raising their brood of thoughts. These couples tend to have a much closer relation to such spiritual offspring than we do with our own human children...Such children, being immortal themselves, bring their parents endless glory, and perpetual repute." [Trans. A. Sharon (Newbury Port, MA: Focus Philosophical Library, 1998), 60-1.

feature. Rather, the core or vital antagonism in the novel is between the elite, idealistic Alexander and his bigoted countrymen. While Alexander is quick to shed even his few prejudices—“I was mistaught as a boy,” he assures Bagoas, “I won’t insult you with what I was told to think about the Persians” (145)—the Macedonians in general remain culturally static, and this leads to conflict with Alexander’s liberal behaviour and objectives.

Traditional Macedonian culture is not, through Bagoas’ narration, displayed in a favourable manner. While Macedonians enjoy freedom of speech even with their king and are undoubtedly tough warriors,¹⁴⁷ they are also portrayed as boorish, coarse, heavy-drinking, and intensely xenophobic.¹⁴⁸ Similarly, as in *Fire from Heaven*, traditional Athenian culture is portrayed as a faded, dishonoured version of its former glory.¹⁴⁹ The true conflict in the novel is between these negatively-portrayed cultures and Alexander’s indiscriminating multiculturalism. Hatred of foreigners, particularly the “soft and rotten Mede” (158) (read “Persian”) amongst Macedonians leads to discontent and insurrection. A group of soldiers attempts to murder Alexander in his sleep; when asked the motivation for his attempted regicide a dying man croaks out “Barbar—” (166), clearly identifying Alexander’s cultural “betrayal” and love for Persians as the cause. Later, the historian-philosopher Kallisthenes is found to have been inciting further attempts on Alexander’s life on grounds of tyranny, and a would-be murderer is again found to have been particularly incensed by Alexander’s relationship with Bagoas: “He spat toward me. ‘Yes, and we’d have had you too, filthy painted barbarian whore.’” (268) In the end Kallisthenes’ discontent is found to have been spurred on by one of the titans of traditional Greek culture:

¹⁴⁷ A minor character, Black Kleitus, is held up as an example of the traditional Macedonian: “If you wanted a type of the old school, you found it here...He had fought under King Philip; he liked the old ways, free-spoken among one’s peers, despising foreigners.” (212)

¹⁴⁸ An intriguing question here is to what extent, if any, was Renault influenced by apartheid in constructing this narrative? While her intense desire to maintain historical accuracy has been mentioned, it is difficult not to draw a parallel between her prejudiced, unsophisticated, and rough-edged Macedonians and her reportedly negative attitudes towards the Afrikaans: Sweetman, for example, refers to her distaste for the “fettered, tribal obsessions of the despised Afrikaners.” (213)

¹⁴⁹ Bagoas complains of prejudiced Athenian opinions of Alexander: “So now, for mercy and honour shown to my people, my lord is barbarous; a tyrant, because he punished his would-be murderers, the right of their meanest citizen; a mere vaunting soldier, although wherever he went he brought Greece with him, the Greece he honoured, of which these *liars are the unworthy heirs.*” (272) (italics mine)

I think when they went over Kallisthenes' papers, they found letters from Aristotle. The philosopher had heard, it seemed, from his nephew how the King made barbarians his friends and officers; had required free Greeks to bow down to him along with this servile breed; had first taken to his bed a Persian eunuch, who'd even been in Darius' bed before; then stooped to marry a Sogdian savage, a mere dancer at a feast. And the philosopher had written (letters no doubt too precious to be destroyed) that such things would bring back the rule of tyranny and corrupt all good Greek ways. No means should be spared to make an end of it. (268-9)

Throughout *The Persian Boy* most of the danger to Alexander is posed not by war but by his own countrymen. Unlike Alexander, they are unable to escape the tyranny of popular opinion and social expectation. The narrative is constructed in such a manner that there is no way the reader could sympathize with their perspective; instead, their bigotry merely acts as a foil to Alexander's indiscriminating elitism. Their inability to escape the grim, hidebound attitude Renault characterizes them with renders them unable to understand Alexander's grand ambitions, and accordingly the masses attempt to destroy him.

In the end, bound by history, Renault must make Alexander sicken in Babylon, even as he finalizes grandiose plans to make it the capital of his world empire. Yet within the facts that history bequeaths her, Renault is able to reinforce the theme of xenophobia versus cosmopolitanism, by implying that it is Alexander's countrymen who destroy him. Kassandros, a childhood friend of Alexander who had stayed in Macedon for the duration of the war in Persia, arrives in Babylon near the novel's end. Utterly unaccustomed to Alexander's multicultural tendencies, he manifests all that is worst about Macedonian culture, "an arrogant, freckled, red-haired man, with the old-time Macedonian beard" who sees the Persian eunuchs as "noxious vermin" and is driven to fury at the idea of "barbarians" being allowed equality in the king's court. (398) Bagoas, nursing the ill Alexander, believes he will recover fully if treated correctly, and finally discovers that the delirious king had been given wine—fatal in his weakened condition. It is heavily implied, but Renault does not state as fact, that Alexander was "poisoned" by one Iollas, a confederate of Kassandros.

For Renault, the opposition to and destruction of Alexander by these individuals is an absolute tragedy. This finds expression in both the nature of Bagoas' narration and the sense of

mortality and loss which the novel develops.¹⁵⁰ Given the overwhelming sympathy towards Alexander that Bagoas demonstrates, the reader cannot imagine that there is any legitimate grievance that would justify murdering the king. Rather, Alexander's death is depicted as solely a result of the pettiness of others: "There are always men who take their own measure against greatness, and hate it not for what it is, but for what they are," observes Bagoas. (258) Alexander is "equal even to having the earth laid in his hands" (390) but he does not die because of hubris, divine retribution, or drunken excess. Rather he is destroyed by a jealous, inferior society as a result of their inability to accommodate his transcendent nature.

Conclusion

The fire motif which runs through Renault's novels is significant. Beyond obviously being the titular fire from heaven of the first novel, Alexander is frequently referred to in fiery imagery or associated with flames.¹⁵¹ For Alexander, fire is the dwelling-place of Zeus;¹⁵² for the Zoroastrian Persians fire is holy.¹⁵³ Herakles and Dionysus, in myth, achieved their divinity through fire or incineration. As Herakles is Alexander's divine patron, and given Alexander's association with holy fire, it seems likely that Renault was attempting to give the Macedonian a divine sheen.

This is unsurprising. For Renault, Alexander represented something utterly beyond the scope of human experience; having transgressed social convention and pushed to such heights of achievement, the barrier between mortal and divine may be the only one left for Alexander to transcend. She was clearly interested in presenting a heroic, almost messianic Alexander. Her treatment of the king in *Fire from Heaven* and *The Persian Boy* is complex, but at the core of these

¹⁵⁰ Bagoas is narrating in his old age, and mentions how his beauty has faded (231); even when Alexander is alive, the inevitability of his death is also alluded to: "I bent, as I washed him, and kissed his head. I had seen, where the lamplight caught the gold, two threads of grey," for example. (338)

¹⁵¹ E.g., a soothsayer addresses Alexander as "'child of fire'" (*Persian*, 263); of the aftermath of a battle: "This was the slag of the fire, when the bright flame had passed." (*Persian*, 190); a jealous warrior remembers Alexander in battle as an "enraptured presence cleaving the chaos, as lucid as a point of flame." (*Fire*, 180).

¹⁵² *Persian*, 186.

¹⁵³ *Persian*, 2.

novels is the relationship between Alexander and society. In her interpretation of Alexander as an admirable figure, she utilized her own conceptions of what was commendable in human behaviour:

...despite her concern with historical accuracy and her commitment to presenting the past on its own terms, Renault's values emerge clearly in her depiction of iconoclastic figures, courageous individuals who dare to do the forbidden, figures whose respect for individual merit transcends the attitudes of their particular culture.¹⁵⁴

Like Renault, her Alexander is unconcerned with the roles imposed upon him by his society, and refuses to be bound by them. By liberating himself from the pettiness of others, Alexander is able to pursue the higher. The values he elects as his models are drawn from his own frame of cultural reference, yes: Homer's *Iliad*, Platonic love, the indiscriminating benevolence of Cyrus. However, these choices also reflect Renault's evaluation of what was highest and most admirable in the classical inheritance. There is little evidence concerning Alexander's attitudes towards Plato; the fact that she held the philosopher in such high esteem, and has her Alexander admire his work and model his sexual behaviour after his notions of love, thus betrays her own authorial preoccupations. Similarly, Cyrus' indiscriminating benevolence as a ruler must have been admirable to her, and by depicting Alexander as impressed by his career attributes to him Cyrus' cosmopolitan attitude.

Through pursuing these self-imposed ideals and synthesizing from his environment "better" things, Alexander remaps human potential. Sweetman quotes Renault on the topic of the Apollo program and lunar expeditions:

A friend of ours was complaining about the flight on the lines of 'Could not this have been sold for a hundred pence and given to the poor?' Which is reasonable in a way; but I think humanity desperately needs to know that there are men capable of this transcendent courage, determination, character and skill.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ Zilboorg, *Masks*, 180.

¹⁵⁵ Renault, 259.

Arguably, Renault saw in Alexander in a similar light to the technological triumphs of space exploration. In overcoming the vast challenges of leaving the earth, the men who engineered space flight pushed back the boundaries of what is possible, and thereby improved the human species as a whole. Alexander, through his great achievements, personal virtue, and bid to create a new empire and race, similarly redefines what is possible: “Mary was writing a hymn to the best, the favoured, the outstanding, believing such heroes to be the means by which the species evolves.”¹⁵⁶ Renault’s Alexander is still a somewhat tragic figure. Despite his deeds, the full scope of his potential—as symbolized by the unfinished plans for Babylon and his empire at his death—is left unexplored, due to the inadequacy of those around him: “I felt the impatience of his greatness, reined and curbed by the dullness of lesser men.”¹⁵⁷

The “story of Alexander” which emerges from Mary Renault’s novels is thus a study of man’s ability to evolve and improve, to escape pettiness and bigotry, created in response to those who have doubted or criticized him throughout the centuries. In creating a character to represent this potential, her own personal values and beliefs clearly find expression.

¹⁵⁶ Renault, 269.

¹⁵⁷ Persian, 178.

Chapter III: Steven Pressfield

“Without *The Persian Boy* and *Fire from Heaven*, I wouldn’t be writing at all,”¹⁵⁸ confesses contemporary novelist Steven Pressfield. Mary Renault’s depiction of Alexander, as has been discussed, relied heavily on character and a faithful evocation of the classical era and its values; her novels do not, however, devote much attention to the nature of ancient warfare. Unlike his inspirational literary forebear, Pressfield demonstrates no such reluctance to depict conflict. He is a writer particularly concerned with warfare; all but one¹⁵⁹ of his popular novels have taken war, ancient or modern, as their central focus. Moreover, he has espoused a belief that conflict is central to all human activity and aspirations.¹⁶⁰ His apparent preoccupation with violence is however counterbalanced by a near-mystical philosophy of art and writing. It is unsurprising, then, that the novel of Alexander’s life he offers, *Alexander: The Virtues of War*,¹⁶¹ is characterized by a rigorous devotion to the nature and practice of military conflict in the ancient world. Far more intriguing, however, are the subtexts to be found in the novel. *The Virtues of War* finds within the history of the Macedonian invasion of Persia ample space in which to explore Pressfield’s own conceptions of the nature of Western military practices and the morality of war, whilst rendering Alexander an exponent of his own philosophies.

A striking image on Pressfield’s official website shows a battered paperback edition of his novel *Gates of Fire*, which depicts the Spartan stand at Thermopylae, atop a pile of spent ammunition shells.¹⁶² This photograph, the accompanying text reveals, was submitted by American servicemen in Afghanistan. That this submission was likely privileged and selected for Internet

¹⁵⁸ “Alexander the Great,” *Steven Pressfield Online*, accessed 22 August 2011, <http://www.stevenpressfield.com/category/additional-reading/alexander-the-great/>

¹⁵⁹ The exception being *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, which rather contradictorily is concerned with golf.

¹⁶⁰ This will be explained in detail later in the text.

¹⁶¹ (Berkshire: Cox & Wyman Ltd, 2005)

¹⁶² “The Rewards of Writing,” *Steven Pressfield Online*, accessed 23 August 2011, <http://www.stevenpressfield.com/2010/10/the-rewards-of-writing/>

“publication” due to the fact that it combines two of Pressfield’s most significant literary preoccupations.

That it was submitted by infantrymen at war was undoubtedly gratifying for Pressfield. Himself a former member of the United States Marine Corps, Pressfield seeks to engage with the members of his country’s armed forces through his work. His website operates a blog which aims to “help gain awareness of issues related to tribalism and the tribal mind-set in Afghanistan—with the goal of helping the Marines and soldiers on the ground better understand the different people they were facing in Afghanistan”¹⁶³ and frequently discusses issues relevant to the military. Moreover, he enjoys a somewhat rare success in military circles for an author of fiction, as one of his novels—the aforementioned *Gates of Fire*—is prescribed reading for enlisted men in the American armed forces, alongside such figures as Erwin Rommel and Sun Tzu.¹⁶⁴

That the photograph implies that a novel a story of foreign, ancient warriors fighting with bronze weaponry is popular amongst members of the American military is also significant. Pressfield’s conception of the usefulness of antiquity is characterized by a keen belief in the on-going relevance of bygone wars to the contemporary world. His novels thus strive to broker classical history to the modern world, rendering it a resource for examining the nature of present-day warfare:

Gates of Fire has a theme, and the theme is courage. It's also very much about the camaraderie of fighting men and of the warrior ethos...Today's Marines and soldiers, however, like the rest of us, are woefully undereducated. No one has studied the past, so we all feel as if we're the first people on the planet to be confronting the issues we're confronting. That's where a book like *Gates* fills a gap. Marines and Army guys read it and realize that the same stuff they're going through has been gone through by a lot of other warriors before them, and that those warriors and the societies they lived in had highly

¹⁶³ “About,” *Steven Pressfield Online*, accessed 22 August 2011, <http://www.stevenpressfield.com/about/>

¹⁶⁴ Marine Corps University, “United States Marine Corps Professional Reading Program,” *Marine Corps University*, accessed 22 August 2011, http://www.mcu.usmc.mil/lejeune_leadership/LLI%20Documnets/25%20Sep%2009%20Reading%20List%20by%20Grade.pdf

evolved codes of honor and conduct. It gives our young soldiers and Marines a longer historical perspective and inspires them that they're not alone and they're not the first...¹⁶⁵

He does not restrict himself to veiled fictional commentary, however. An article he wrote of Alexander, for example, poses the rhetorical questions "How did Alexander overcome Iraq? What can we learn from his campaigns and his victories? Are there parallels between the challenges he faced in his era and those the U.S. and its allies confront today?"¹⁶⁶ in its introductory blurb, clearly seeking to find "practical" applications of history rather than merely psychological enlightenment.

These preoccupations noticeably affect the portrayal of classical antiquity within his novels. Most jarringly, the use of anachronistic terminology and figures of speech continually puncture the reader's willingness to suspend disbelief when envisioning his narrative. This is most significant in the area of military jargon: ancient Greeks speak of "sergeants," "corps," "bivouacs," and "regiments." Pressfield is not unaware of the dissonance these terms cause, as indicated in his authorial foreword in *The Virtues of War*:

I have taken the liberty of using, on occasion, contemporary place names, such as Afghanistan, the Danube, and words such as miles, yards, acres, which obviously did not exist in Alexander's time, as well as such latter-day concepts as chivalry, mutiny, knight, guerrilla, and others, which technically have no equivalent in Graeco-Macedonian thought but which, in my judgment, communicate to the modern reader so vividly and so closely in spirit to the ancient import that their employment may be by the purist, perhaps, forgiven. (14)

While inappropriate military jargon is perhaps excusable, I would argue that terms such as "chivalry" or "guerrilla" come so heavily freighted with meaning that is utterly alien to Alexander's world that they distort the narrative. Much the same applies for the utilization of contemporary place names, as these run the risk of being almost wholly anachronistic: "Afghanistan," for example, denotes a modern country with a culture and borders wholly different to that experienced by Alexander's army.

¹⁶⁵ Goodreads, "Interview with Steven Pressfield," *Goodreads*, accessed 22 August 2011, http://www.goodreads.com/interviews/show/7.Steven_Pressfield

¹⁶⁶ Steven Pressfield, "Alexander the Great in Iraq," *Military.com*, accessed 22 August 2011, http://www.military.com/NewContent/0,13190,Pressfield_050904,00.html

Pressfield is also clearly uneasy with many cultural practices of the ancient world. The most striking example of this attitude is his desperation to avoid the depiction of any homosexual behaviour. His Alexander, for example, has this to say of his (historically almost certainly sexual) relationship with Hephaestion:

And let me make this plain, for those of a depraved cast of mind: the love of young men is bound up with dreams and shared secrets and the aspiration not only for glory but for that purity of virtue that their hearts perceive as soiled or degraded among the generation senior to themselves but that they, the youth, shall reinspect and carry through. This love is not so different from that of young girls for each other; it has its physical elements, but among those of noble mind, this is far superseded by the philosophical. Like Theseus and Pirithous, Heracles and Iolaus, like Achilles and Patroclus, young men wish to capture brides for each other; they dream not of being each other's men, but each other's best men. (128-9)

To imply that those who speculated as to the possibility of a homosexual relationship "depraved" is almost certainly untrue to the mores of Alexander's day. Moreover, "best men"—again evoking an anachronistic connotation, that of a Christian marriage ceremony—seems more strained attempt to circumvent historical probability than plausible explanation. This revisionist attitude does not stop at sexuality. A secondary historical casualty of Pressfield's more contemporary sensibilities is what one would consider the irrational or mystical. The magical rituals, Bacchic frenzies, and the possibility of Alexander's divine descent that Renault so faithfully explored are here determinedly avoided.

Alexander, speaking of his mother Olympias, clearly has no time for any sort of superstition or magical phenomena:

She informed me that Philip was not my father, but that on the night of my conception Zeus had visited her in the form of a serpent. I was God's son. She, my mother, was Heaven's bride. The queen had gone mad as a magpie. (113)

With this single condemnation Pressfield's Alexander is distanced from any association with such beliefs, rendering him rational and therefore safe for a contemporary, post-Judeo-Christian audience. Similarly, when an eclipse is taken as an omen, Alexander exasperatedly wonders if his officers are to "expound like schoolmasters on the astronomical correlatives of the sun and the moon?" (300) The historical Alexander's interest in divinity and myth—Herakles, Achilles, and so forth—renders this completely rational and secular attitude somewhat striking.

These representations and betrayals of historical fidelity are the natural result of Pressfield's intentions as an author. He consciously constructs his novels around themes, rather than characterization. Of his novel *Killing Rommel*, for example, Pressfield offers the following thoughts:

Rommel is not the villain...The trick that the book is playing on the reader is making him THINK that Rommel is the antagonist -- he is, after all, the enemy ... the guy we're trying to kill -- and then turning the tables at the end. We realize that Rommel does not embody the counter-theme, opposing chivalry and honor; he embodies the theme, demonstrating in his own person chivalry and honor.¹⁶⁷

The preoccupation with theme and values has the rather unfortunate effect of rendering Pressfield's characters somewhat wooden, more vehicles for exposition than convincing personalities.

Characters tend to declaim, rather than speak. In *The Virtues of War*, for example, the young

Hephaestion reprimands his clowning classmates:

'We will meet those youths of Persia soon enough upon the field of war. Will it suffice to prove ourselves the greater brutes? Never! We must excel the foe, not only as warriors but as men and as knights. They must say of us that we deserve their empire, for we surpass them in virtue and in self-command!' (130)

Pressfield's style is likewise affected. As he is intent on exploring abstract themes such as valour or honour, he evidently feels the need to employ a suitably rarefied vocabulary.¹⁶⁸ However, the evocation of brutal physical combat and the necessary concomitants of military training and soldierly speech demand a far more earthy vocabulary.¹⁶⁹ The coexistence of such varied terminology occasionally leads to an uncomfortable style. Consider the strange admixture of lofty register and concepts with profanity in *Gates of Fire*, after the protagonist has experienced a divine visitation:

I saw another light, a sicklier, cruder, more coarse illumination, and knew that it was the sun...The Egyptian marines told me later that I had uttered the word *lokas*, which in their

¹⁶⁷ "'Questions and Answers' with Steven Pressfield," *300SpartanWarriors*, accessed 23 August 2011, <http://www.300spartanwarriors.com/questionsanswers/qastevenpressfield.html>

¹⁶⁸ E.g., Alexander on the soldier's mentality: "What drives the soldier is *cardia*, 'heart', and *dynamis*, 'the will to fight.' Nothing else matters in war. Not weapons or tactics, philosophy or patriotism, not fear of the gods themselves. Only this love of glory, which is the seminal imperative of mortal blood, as ineradicable within man as in a wolf or a lion, and without which we are nothing." (*Virtues*, 29)

¹⁶⁹ E.g., Alexander on a military exercise: "Philip ordered shields uncovered too. Off came the oxhide liners. Curses rustled. Now the wet would work its mischief, the bronze facings would take hours of toil for the men to reburnish. We could hear the grumbling and bitching. Horse piss sluiced; you could smell shit now, from the men and the mounts, and liquor and leather, the acrid breath of the mingled squadrons mixing with the tang off the grass and the smell of oil on iron, which evokes battle like no other." (*Virtues*, 57)

tongue meant "fuck," and they had laughed even as they dragged my shattered body out into the light of day...The word was *Loxias*--the Greek title for Apollo the Cunning, or Apollo Crabwise...(11-2)

Pressfield does, however, seem to be aware of the idiosyncratic qualities of his prose, as the "narrator's" style of storytelling in *Gates of Fire* is specifically identified as unusual.¹⁷⁰

Pressfield's novels of the ancient world thus filter history through two distinct lenses. The first is his intention to find some moral or thematic purpose in constructing narratives out of historical events. The second is the need to render these narratives in such a fashion that they become "relevant" to the contemporary world. In pursuit of the latter, he perhaps goes too far in reinterpreting classical morality and culture in order to render it palatable and comprehensible for modern audiences. The need to make these tales accessible to military audiences is perhaps the most influential factor, as it forces both an annoying choice of words and the elimination of historical facts such as homosexuality, religion, and irrationality which are ill-at-ease with contemporary military values.

The exploration of themes and values of course necessitates an authorial belief or interest in such things. A final note about Pressfield, which is relevant to his Alexander novel, is his personal philosophy, as evidenced by his non-fiction work on the creative process.¹⁷¹ Much like his novels, his beliefs concerning the artistic process demonstrate a mixture of the profoundly mundane with the mystical and transcendent. For him, the creative process is an endless succession of struggle and suffering which the aspiring author, or indeed any individual seeking to "create," must immerse themselves: "The writer is an infantryman. He knows that progress is measured in yards of dirt extracted from the enemy one day, one hour, one minute at a time and paid for in blood."¹⁷² By

¹⁷⁰ The conceit of *Gates of Fire* is that the narrator survives the battle of Thermopylae and is captured by Persian forces. The narrative is thus his account of the battle as transcribed and translated by Persian scholars, who note "In preliminary interviews, the man's manner of speech proved to be a compound of the loftiest philosophical and literary language, indicative of a deep familiarity with the epics of the Hellenes, intermingled with the coarsest and most crude gutter argot, much of which was uninterpretable even to His Majesty's most knowledgeable translators." (4)

¹⁷¹ *The War of Art* (New York: 2003)

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 74.

exercising discipline which approaches the military—“the warrior and the artist live by the same code of necessity, which dictates that the battle must be fought anew every day”¹⁷³—the writer overcomes the reluctance to work which Pressfield interprets as universal. This unromantic process, however, gives way to a surprisingly mystical attitude. He argues that all exists “potentially,” and that the writer or artist functions as a conduit for the manifestation of these potential works in the real world: for example, Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony “needed someone. It needed a corporeal being, a human, an artist (or more precisely a *genius*, in the Latin sense of “soul” or “animating spirit”) to bring it into being on this material plane.”¹⁷⁴ Pressfield argues that all things exist in some mystical “other” realm, perhaps akin to a Platonic ideal, and that the grim business of confronting the blank page thus becomes, in the final analysis, a transcendent activity.

With these authorial elements identified, we now turn to a close reading of Pressfield’s take on Alexander the Great. I have elected to break the analysis of *The Virtues of War* down into two separate discussions. Initially, I wish to explore how Pressfield has foregrounded Alexander’s battles, and the narrative he has created from them. Thereafter I turn to a closer examination of his depiction of Alexander himself, paying particular attention to the way the character is moulded by Pressfield’s authorial preoccupations.

Warfare

Unsurprisingly, *The Virtues of War* bases its narrative around Alexander’s fighting achievements. The novel’s storytelling device is that it is the transcription of the lessons and thoughts of Alexander as conveyed to his brother-in-law, a junior officer in the Macedonian army. As such, the narrative is in the first person: Alexander himself is telling his story. This is a daring choice, for it is much easier to write from an external perspective (such as Renault did) of such a significant personality than it is to attempt to depict his reasoning and thoughts from the first-person. However, it does allow Pressfield

¹⁷³ *War of Art*, 14.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 117.

to give an “authoritative” account of Alexander’s strategies and battle philosophy, since it comes from the man himself rather than a third party.

The novel is unrepentantly fascinated with the trappings and practice of warfare. Alexander describes the weapons his infantry wield, the impact of cavalry, the structural organization of his divisions, and the philosophy of military strategy, among other esoteric details. The usefulness of formations is discussed in length, individual species of soldier are described in loving detail, and the execution of strategy in battle is given great attention. All of this contributes to the reader’s ability to envision the novel’s central focus: Alexander’s major set-piece battles. The emphasis on these conflicts in the novel’s structure mean that Alexander’s personal life, relationships, and other activities as king and empire-builder are almost treated as inconsequential, and usually mentioned in brief summary. They are generally only mentioned insofar as they help to establish the relationship between the major battles or to detail their consequences. An example of this would be the novel’s treatment of the battle of Issus. After twenty pages of intense detail about the battle, the strategies employed, military dispositions, graphic depictions of hand-to-hand combat and the direct aftermath of the fighting, Alexander casually mentions at the end of the chapter: “Nine months later, in Egypt, I am hailed as Horus, divine son of Ra and Ammon. Rapturous throngs line the thoroughfares; I reign as Pharaoh and Defender of Isis and Osiris. But I am not the same man I was before this clash along the Pinarus.” (239) This rather leaves the impression that the battle—one victory out of a career of spectacular military triumphs—is of far more import than these other achievements. Of course, Alexander’s life, as Renault found, was so dense with achievements and subjects that any novel must make some compromises in attempting to create a contained narrative, but *The Virtues of War* perhaps goes too far in its attention to conflict.

The Virtues of War is a novel which centrally attempts to construct a plausible account of the military strategies, devices, and ideologies Alexander and his army employed in his major set-piece battles during the conquest of the Persian Empire. However, there are far more interesting subtexts

to be found in the way Pressfield constructs this account. Pressfield's agenda—attempting to make this period of classical warfare “relevant”—manifests itself in both the terminology he utilizes and the ideological reading of the conflict he offers. Pressfield strives to offer an account of an ancient invasion of the East and to cast this drama in such a fashion that it is difficult not to read it in contemporary terms.

As this is a study of war, the depiction of the military itself is significant. Alexander's Macedonian army is constantly referred to in terminology which is strikingly similar to that one would expect to hear of postclassical European forces. Consider Alexander's account of his father's transformation of countrymen into professional soldiers:

It was my father's genius to forge these carlish highlanders into a disciplined modern army. He perceived the utility of recruiting such clansmen, who had been enslaved for centuries by their own vices and vendettas, to a new conception of soldiering, in which station and birth counted for nothing, but where a man might make his career on guts alone, and within whose order the very qualities that held the hillman in chains—his own clannishness, brutishness, ignorance, and implacability—would be transformed into the warrior virtues of loyalty, obedience, dedication, and the ruthless application of force and terror. (35)

The terminology employed and the values implicit in this paragraph are not those of the classical world. Homer would not have written of armies in such terms; indeed nor would Julius Caesar. Instead, this portrayal of an army seems to evoke contemporary notions. A culprit here is the choice of the adjective “modern.” It seems to imply a vast difference in technology and structure, an army that is the product of new techniques and resources, that renders all non-“modern” armies inferior: mechanized infantry and tanks, for example, versus cavalymen. Alexander's army was historically unrivalled, but this was more a by-product of evolution than revolution; the differences between the Macedonian army and those of the traditional Hellenic world were not tremendous.¹⁷⁵ A longer spear, a heavier emphasis on cavalry, and the rise of a professional soldier class, paid by the crown: these are evolutions of a traditional pattern, not the vast distinction that, say, the incorporation of a

¹⁷⁵ The true revolutionary was, in fact, Epaminondas of Thebes, “the watershed between the older and the newer battle tactics” [F. E. Adcock, *The Greek and Macedonian Art of War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), 89] of the Hellenic world. Under his generalship, the Thebans shattered both the Spartan army and its myth of invincibility at the battle of Leuctra; Alexander's father, being a hostage at Thebes in his youth, presumably took Epaminondas' innovations and strategies to heart.

firearm would represent. The vast difference implicit in “modern” simply did not exist in such a manner that would merit such a description, and therefore it creates dissonance for the reader. Moreover, the evident pride Alexander has for the social mobility permitted by his army also seems anachronistic. The heir of a traditional monarchy, regardless of how unusual he may have been, probably did not take tremendous pride in his egalitarianism. It is only some centuries later with Gaius Marius’ reform of the Roman army that some degree of blindness to social class becomes a significant and defining quality. The rustic peasant rising to the top on his own merits that this passage describes owes more to Napoleon’s army or the American military than the ancient world.

Indeed, the conception of warfare and its practice that the novel offers owes a great deal to non-classical sources. Pressfield admits to utilizing contemporary military practices in attempting to imagine classical warfare.¹⁷⁶ Moreover, the underlying philosophy of the practice of warfare is shaped by sources that range far beyond Alexander’s day: “I am indebted also to the memoirs and maxims of Caesar, Vegetius, Napoleon, Marshal Saxe, Frederick the Great...”¹⁷⁷ states Pressfield in his afterword. The net result of the incorporation of such a range of military thought is that *The Virtues of War* becomes something of a composite of centuries of European military thought overlaid on the structure of a classical-era battle narrative. The novel offers, for example, a chapter devoted to Alexander’s maxims of warfare, and these proclamations are extremely jarring in the narrative. They range from statements such as “Seek the decisive battle” (262) or “No advantage in war is greater than speed,” (264) which one would more readily imagine issuing from a Napoleon or a Rommel than a man originating from a culture which evinced belief in sacrificial omens and divine intervention in battle. Other statements, such as “All tactics in conventional warfare seek to produce this single result: a breakthrough in the enemy line” (265), go beyond merely jarring to actively untrue: from a tradition of warfare dominated by heavy hoplite infantry and slugging matches,

¹⁷⁶ “I was researching Alexander the Great. I wanted to know about his cavalry tactics. Unfortunately, the most recent ancient source for Alexander was written 400 years after his death. So I started researching modern cavalry tactics, figuring they probably haven’t changed very much.” *GoodReads*, “Interview”

¹⁷⁷ *Virtues*, 491.

Alexander's emphasis on cavalry and manoeuvrability was anything *but* "conventional." The incorporation of later military thought and ideas, combined with Pressfield's tendency to utilize anachronistic and jarring terminology, makes the novel consistently evoke a broad spectrum of postclassical associations.

Pressfield's Alexander, however, goes further in imparting a contemporary sheen to his narrative. His "unprecedented," democratic, professional army is frequently described as "Western" or "European."¹⁷⁸ Romans and Greeks did indeed have a strong notion of a division between the Persian world and their own.¹⁷⁹ However, "Western" is a problematic term, particularly with the capitalization: it is a term which, for the large majority of Pressfield's readership, means "western Europe and northern America." A term such as "Macedonian" or "Hellenic" could just as easily have sufficed to describe Alexander's army; thus, the employment of this specific term, and the implications it poses, seem to beg a deeper reading.

The first major battle of the novel, Chaeronea, pits the Macedonian army under Philip and Alexander against the combined forces of Athens, Thebes, and their allies.¹⁸⁰ Lined up to fight the enemy's elite unit, Alexander notes that "The Theban does not understand modern warfare," (86) again reinforcing the notion of some massive divide between "old Greece" and Alexander's army. More significantly, however, prior to this fratricidal battle Alexander states, "Today we will wring from Greece's grasp the standard of the West. From this day, we will be civilization's champions." (54) This idea becomes a vital concept in the novel. "The standard of the West" seems to imply a single, monolithic cultural entity, as opposed to the historical reality. "The West," Europe at the time, was a mishmash of semi-civilized or barbarian states and independent city-states, many of

¹⁷⁸E.g., "In three hours, on this day in spring, an army of the West has wreaked such devastation as no lord of Asia has ever sustained." (*Virtues*, 163) "No European army has even dreamt of holding the lands we do." (*Virtues*, 190).

¹⁷⁹ Herodotus, the "Father of History," for example begins his work by announcing his intention to "preserve the fame of the important and remarkable achievements produced by both Greeks and non-Greeks..." [Trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 3.

¹⁸⁰ Historically, this was part of Philip's campaign to "unify" Greece for the invasion of Persia.

whom were radically distinct in culture, ethnicity, and religion.¹⁸¹ The singular “West” thus becomes a gross oversimplification. More ideologically loaded, however, is “civilization”—apparently civilization is only “the West.” Alexander’s “Western,” democratic, dynamic, “modern” army apparently becomes the sole emissary of all that is civilized, and these “champions of civilisation” earn by their victory at Chaeronea the logistical and political freedom to march upon Persia.

As apparent avatar of the West and “civilisation,” Alexander must be depicted as having noble intentions, both in battle and for its aftermath. To the Macedonian army, he says, “we must do more, brothers, than overcome the enemy by might. We must show him that we are better men. Let no one dishonour himself in victory.” (78) When discussing plans for the liberation of Greek cities along the Aegean coast, Alexander notes, “If we prevail on the field today, the cities of the Aegean seaboard will topple to us like tiles. But we cannot permit chaos in this post-victory world. Liberty, order and justice are what we must bring if we expect to secure our rear and our lines of supply and communication...” (145) Thus the text establishes that not only is this Western force honourable in battle, but also purports to usher in a new age of freedom and justice in the lands it conquers.

The Persian Empire is frequently compared to Alexander’s Macedonian forces and set up as a counter-example. This is most obvious in that Persia is routinely referred to as “the East”: “Thus commences the greatest slaughter in the history of warfare between East and West,” (218) remarks Alexander of the battle of Issus. After the reader has been so well introduced to the independence, ingenuity, and tactical flexibility of the Macedonian army, the portrayal of the Persian forces comes as a stark contrast. Of his first battle against the Persians, Alexander claims, “not only two armies clash but two opposed concepts of warfare. The Persians duel in the grand and ancient manner; the Macedonians in the modern” (159), further emphasizing the distinction. The “grand, ancient” manner of the Persians is also depicted as foolish and superstitious. Consider the effect of the

¹⁸¹ The Gauls, Germans, Franks, and so forth of western Europe would, of course, eventually become largely “civilized” by the Romans, but the full extent of the Roman Empire was still centuries from Alexander’s day.

comparison between the despotic, old-fashioned Persian army and the rational, Western, Macedonian:

When our sarissa phalanx with the brigades of the Royal Guard advances on line, for example, its twelve thousand men appear to constitute a solid wall. In fact, the front is composed of nine autonomous brigades—six of the phalanx and three of the Guardsmen—each capable of independent action, and each subpartitioned into battalions, likewise competent. So that this single front contains thirty-six plates and thirty-five seams, each plate capable of acting on its own, if opportunity or peril so demands, without breaking the seam that unites it to the whole.

This is our order. Now consider the foe's.

The Mesopotamians intercepting us are one plate with no seams. Their numbers are ten thousand (a lucky figure in Chaldean numerology) and they are under one commander, Darius's brother-in-law Sisamenes, without captains beneath him authorized for independent action. (222)

The enemy's lack of a democratic command structure and slavish adherence to irrational mysticism render him superstitious and ineffective. Moreover, the Persians are constricted in their war-making by their elaborate rituals and decadence:

When the Persian king travels to war, he is accompanied by a baggage train a mile and a half long. That's not for the army; that's for him. His own personal stuff. He brings his wives and mother. His hairdresser accompanies him, and his cosmetician. The king brings everything that is dear to him, including his pet panther and his talking macaw...¹⁸²

Further descriptions of the lavishness and luxury of the Persian military combine to create an image of irresponsible and crippling excess. Not only is the West's foe to be seen as militarily incompetent, but softness and self-indulgence must also be insinuated. Pressfield's Alexander, of course, sleeps on a plank bed and is abstemious.¹⁸³ Finally, the enemy is shown to be morally questionable and inherently cruel. Alexander's field hospital is accidentally overrun by the Persians:

¹⁸² *Virtues*, 196. An understandable ornithological oversight on Pressfield's part here, however: macaws are New World parrots, so it is unclear where a Persian may have acquired one.

¹⁸³ He excoriates his countrymen: "There is my bed. It is two planks and a carpet. I eat half what you do and sleep a third as long." (457) Renault's Alexander, by comparison, loved spectacle and fine clothing, but that would apparently not do for a laconic military genius.

The king orders our fellows mutilated. Macedonians are painted with pitch and set afire; others are disembowelled. The Persians cut off noses and ears and hack off right hands. Here is butchery as only the barbarian of the East practises it. (202)

No specific individuals are responsible for the torture; it is “The Persian” in general, further dehumanizing the enemy. Thus Alexander’s campaign against the Persian Empire, as rendered by Pressfield, is the incursion of a Western, democratic, technologically advanced and highly mobile army against a religious, conservative, immobile, and autocratic force. The Western army seeks to bring “liberty” and “avenge ancient wrongs”¹⁸⁴ and inevitably routs the massed forces of the East due to its superior, “modern” arms and independent spirit.

“[T]he Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience,” argued Said,¹⁸⁵ and this first clash between “West” and “East” at the Granicus is the first stage in an escalating conflict in the novel, which functions as a textbook example of Saidian orientalism. Throughout the novel, the East and the Easterner serve merely as foils for “Western” virtues and characteristics; they enjoy no sympathetic portrayal or narrative of their own.¹⁸⁶ There is very little attempt at rendering the foe as anything remotely nuanced or developed. Alexander does occasionally refer to the valour of individual Persians, but these gestures are of little impact to the overwhelmingly negative portrayal.¹⁸⁷ The vastness and cultural diversity of the Persian Empire—the Persians, Medes, Egyptians, Bactrians, Sogdians, Indians, and so forth, that Mary Renault so vividly explored through Bagoas’ perspective—are here constantly reduced to “the Persian,” “the East”: the “Other.” The East provides an exotic and passive stage upon which the

¹⁸⁴ *Virtues*, 137. This refers to the Greco-Persian wars, which included events such as the battle of Marathon and the razing of Athens.

¹⁸⁵ *Orientalism*. (New York: Random House, 1978), 1-2.

¹⁸⁶ For a useful overview of Greek attitudes to non-Greeks from Homer to Alexander—frequently more nuanced, cosmopolitan, and liberal than Pressfield would seem to believe—see Ibn Warraq, “Classical Antiquity” in *Defending the West* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2007), 85-121

¹⁸⁷ Alexander refers, for example, to “the spectacular valour of the Persian knights” (158) at the battle of the Granicus, but goes on to discuss how their duelling style and pride ultimately lead to both their own deaths and the loss of leadership for the Persian forces—again, the Easterner is shown to be fundamentally irrational.

central European war drama is enacted, and by its own inferiority highlights salient “Western” traits.¹⁸⁸

The Persian armies yield, of course, in the face of superior Western might. Thereafter, Babylon, the largest city in the world, yields to Alexander without a siege. Immediately, the novel plunges into ethnography. Alexander has much to say of the glories of the city, its structure, and its population. The soldiery of the Persian Empire, the sole representatives of the East that have appeared thus far in the novel, were merely incompetent. However, at this stronghold of the East, the Easterner himself is found in his natural habitat:

This is the East. On the right hand, one beholds opulence beyond imagination; on the left, destitution that beggars description. The longsuffering of the peasantry approaches the holy. Their carriage and bearing possess a dignity unmatched even by kings of the West. But it is the dignity of a stone, weathering centuries, not of a man, descended of heaven. (365)

In his description of Babylon Pressfield hammers home the theme which he had only suggested earlier. The East is a land of slavery and of slaves who are enthralled by their very nature, of oppression and subordination, in sharp contradistinction to the hard-nosed freedom of speech and forthright agency of the Macedonians. Pressfield goes to the point of having Sisygambis, the Persian queen mother and therefore Other herself, make an unfavourable comparison between the two:

‘In the East there exists no objective standard of achievement, no impartial measure by which a man may establish or advance his station...It is not like the egalitarianism of your army, Alexander, which provides an unbiased arena, within which a poor man may make his fortune and a rich man prove worthy of his fame. Here no man exists, save in subordination to another.’ (374)

It is inherently alien and unfathomable to western minds: of the crime syndicates which operate in Babylon and their black market economy, Alexander can only say, “The scheme is as complex as a galaxy and as impenetrable as the mind of God.” (376) The intricate networks of crime and social hierarchy stifle all creativity and human aspiration. (376) Moreover, the Easterner is debauched:

¹⁸⁸ There is one exception to this, however, and that is Pressfield’s depiction of India and its philosophers. This will be dealt with in more detail in the discussion of the depiction of Alexander himself.

“The vocabulary of depravity is nowhere as encyclopedic as at Babylon,” (377) proclaims Alexander, before launching into a detailed list of the exact perversions and lechery on offer.

Unsurprisingly, Babylon and the East prove insidious. The Macedonian army soon begins to lose its austerity and self-discipline as a result of its occupation of Babylon. “I think that licence and fornication have robbed you of your wits!” (387) Alexander scolds his officers—the king, however, is no less proof.¹⁸⁹ By miring the Westerners in vice and debt through its indulgences, the East threatens to enervate the defining freedom and discipline of the invader. Pressfield seems to indicate that, no matter how noble the intentions of the Westerner, “democracy” cannot be introduced, despite Alexander’s best efforts.

Shortly thereafter, the Persian king Darius is betrayed and murdered by the usurper Bessus, and the Macedonians recover the royal corpse. For Pressfield, this is effectively the end of the Persian Empire—Bessus’ end is a mere aside later—as Alexander’s right-hand general proclaims: “the object of our exertions is gone’.” (402) Alexander’s conquests continue, but there is a sharp change in tone: “But the glory has gone out of it. The glory and the legitimacy.” (404) Alexander’s conquests no longer have a defined, justifiable goal.

“Legitimacy” is another surprisingly anachronistic term. It presupposes a moral sanction for war—“the just war”—without which war is ethically questionable. This is, as Renault herself pointed out,¹⁹⁰ untrue to the values of Alexander’s day. However, this is no mere subtlety to Alexander’s psychology; the loss of legitimacy in persecuting the war has ramifications for Alexander and his army. Pressfield has carefully arranged the historical matters of attempted regicide and rebellion by Alexander’s officers so that the reader rather has the impression that these things occur as a result of the loss of legitimacy in warfare.

¹⁸⁹ “I abhor such unsoldierliness, but I have gone as slack myself.” (*Virtues*, 392).

¹⁹⁰ “It needs to be borne in mind today that not till more than a century later did a handful of philosophers even start to question the morality of war. In [Alexander’s] time the issue was not whether, but how one made it.” (*Persian*, 423).

It is thus with the apparent karmic payback of waging illegitimate war playing havoc on his life that Alexander marches his army into a new landscape, which is absolutely rife for historical parallel: Afghanistan. Babylon was a landscape of corruption, enslavement, and listlessness; Afghanistan proves an incomprehensible hell. "The language of Afghanistan is Dari. Dari and five thousand others. Every tribe has its own tongue, and each is indecipherable alongside every other." (416) The tribesmen, the "wolf warriors," that Alexander faces are proof against any decency or Western expectations of chivalry in warfare: "The wolf warriors' religion is fatalism. They worship freedom and death. The language they understand is terror." (418) Their refusal to meet in the pitched, set-piece battles that Alexander proved so adept at forces him to adapt:

Tactics too had to adjust. Against the civilized foe, a commander has strategic targets he may seize or destroy, such as cities or supply depots, bridges or roads, the loss of which produces suffering in the foe and renders him tractable to accommodation. Against wild tribes this avails nothing. They own no property. They have nothing to lose. Indeed they care nothing even for their persons or their lives. To say one fights guerrillas is inexact. One hunts them, as one would jackals or wild boars, and one can permit oneself to feel pity for them no more than for savage beasts. (421)

Somewhat predictably for those who have the advantage of British, Russian, and American invasions of Afghanistan to contemplate, the attempt at overcoming the indigenous and religiously-motivated tribesman prove both ineffective and costs the Macedonian army their moral superiority: "The instrument of counter-guerrilla warfare is the massacre. One must learn this art if one hopes to prevail. There is a liability to this, however. It is combat shorn of chivalry." (421)

The Macedonians depart Afghanistan without a clear victory. The final set-piece battle of the novel takes place in India, by which point it is clear that Alexander's conquests have become indefensible: "Scouts describe plots tidy and flourishing, wives hardworking and loving, children bright and happy. In other words, the Macedonians have come to feel they are bringing war to paradise, and this they like not at all." (450-1)

Pressfield deliberately attempts to render classical history in such a fashion that it becomes of significance to contemporary military audiences, as discussed previously. The novel is not, at its

heart, an attempt to satisfy Lukács' demands for the faithful evocation of a bygone age. It is not a nuanced, objective look at a polytheistic civilization invading a sprawling, similarly alien empire; rather, by its portrayal of "East" and "West," it partially despecifies the story, making it easier to apply to other times and locations. Pressfield's "story of Alexander's wars" can easily be read as an attempt to depict the Macedonian army in the East as a near-exact parallel of "America in the Middle-East." His strained utilization of contemporary terms, the imposition of a moral awareness of the legitimacy of warfare and its absence, and the blatant utilization of anachronistic terms such as "West" and "East," which almost beg the reader to draw contemporary inferences, are thus all part of a comprehension of the ancient world which sees it as something that can be understood as a pre-enactment of American military exploits, a script which will find eternal repetition.

Foremost, the tremendous emphasis on East and West, with the ideological contemporary baggage attached to the terms, prompts reflection upon the present-day divide. That freedom and apparent democracy are so heavily associated with "the West" and slavery and social stagnation with "the East" again forces comparison to the modern world. The depiction of the Macedonian army as a democratic, professional, highly mobile force characterized by (relatively) advanced technology seems strikingly similar to the way in which the contemporary American military prefers to be portrayed. The emphasis on the modernity of the Macedonian army when compared to the "old-fashioned" and dictatorial Eastern armies, combined with the discordant use of contemporary military terms, could be applied without change to American conflicts with Middle-Eastern countries equipped with decaying Soviet Union-surplus equipment, operated by disinterested conscripts. That the Macedonian military is marching against an ineffective and alien other in the name of "avenging wrongs" and "bringing justice and liberty"¹⁹¹ to an "enslaved people" seems so anachronistic, and so neat a parallel to the purported goals of the American military in Iraq, that one could almost see Pressfield attempting to mould the Macedonians to fit contemporary concerns. The elimination of

¹⁹¹ Alexander may have reinstated freedom and democracy in the Greek cities of Asia Minor, but "certainly not for the non-Greek peoples of Asia, who merely exchanged one set of masters for another." (Flower, "Not Great Man History," 418.)

classical details which could get in the way of imagining this as a modern tale—the imposition of contemporary notions of sexuality or morality to Alexander, for example, or the way in which the Zoroastrian Persian is reduced to merely an inscrutable, inferior Other—smooth the narrative so that it may be more easily applied to the contemporary world. Similarly, the utilization of later western military thought and concepts urges the reader to draw the parallels between Alexander’s military adventures and later European exploits.

That the Macedonians win triumphantly and enjoy “legitimacy” when fighting conventional battles against another army—the Persians—for “freedom,” whereas their character and moral purpose fragments without said “legitimacy,” again seems to echo American perceptions of their own military experiences. Compare the jingoism that their involvement in the Second World War still produces, as opposed to the ambivalence about the unclear, lopsided war in Vietnam. “We must have a good war,” Alexander complains of the butchery in Afghanistan, “a war with honour.” (433)

Finally, Afghanistan is perhaps the most obvious example of Pressfield’s attempts at retelling Alexander’s story in light of contemporary concerns. “Afghanistan” is not merely an anachronistic name, but a misleading one. Alexander was fighting disparate Bactrian, Sogdian, and Scythian tribes, rather than some all-inclusive “guerrilla” clan. The inscrutable, fanatical, and death-obsessed warriors Pressfield portrays, who render Alexander’s advanced army helpless, seem to owe far more to the contemporary American stereotype of the “Islamic insurgent” than any ancient tribesman. In reality, Alexander married the daughter of a chief of one of these “jackals.” That his army has no apparent object in invading the country, no “legitimacy,” means that Alexander’s invasion is unfocused and irrational, costing lives and human dignity in a pointless and prolonged war that he must ultimately buy his way out of without honour.¹⁹²

¹⁹² “After twenty-odd months of chasing the Grey Wolf into dead ends and onto blind spurs, I saw wisdom and called up the cash.” (419)

If this reading is plausible—which, in light of Pressfield’s intentions of making antiquity “relevant,” I believe it is—then he seems to be less than sanguine about the possibilities afforded by Western intervention in the East. The Easterner either proves intractable and ineradicable, as in the case of the Afghani, or so mired in his own enslavement and exotic debauchery that the intervening Westerner will himself fall into corruption.

Alexander

Pressfield’s treatment of Alexander himself is consistent with the novel’s preoccupations with war. His Alexander, as we have mentioned previously, carefully distances himself from historical realities such as homosexuality or religious irrationality, no doubt in an attempt to render him more sympathetic to particular modern sensibilities. While Pressfield’s characterization is somewhat stilted, his portrayal of the king becomes a slightly tragic tale of personal obsession and self-destruction. The opening words of Alexander’s account clearly establish the novel’s interests:

I have always been a soldier. I have known no other life. The calling of arms, I have followed from boyhood. I have never sought another. I have known lovers, sired offspring, competed in games, and committed outrages when drunk. I have vanquished empires, yoked continents, been crowned as an immortal before gods and men. But always have I have been a soldier. (25)

The tremendous deeds of Alexander’s life that are not strictly part of his military genius are thus to be considered irrelevant or unimportant. This to be an examination of war; yet, for all the novel’s vast detail about the realities of battle, it is centrally an attempt at a meditation upon the nature of conflict on the personal level. The titular virtues of war are revealed not to be centrally talents for causing death and defeat of the enemy, but rather a means of self-improvement:¹⁹³

Such virtues as patience, courage, selfishness, which the soldier seems to have acquired for the purpose of defeating the foe, are in truth for use against enemies within himself—the eternal antagonists of inattention, greed, sloth, self-conceit, and so on. When each of us recognizes, as we must, that we too are engaged in this struggle, we find ourselves drawn to the warrior, as the acolyte to the seer. (50)

¹⁹³ Note, of course, that Pressfield’s “virtue” does not seem to have any foundation in classical thinking, unlike Renault’s Platonism.

The wars which Alexander wages within the text are thus simultaneously a conflict of nations and an arena for personal development. Pressfield's Alexander is noticeably abstemious, and contemptuous of the material rewards of conquest: "Do we make war for blood or treasure? Never! But to follow the path of honour, to school our hearts in the virtues of strife." (312) The warrior, and the warrior's virtues, are thus central to the novel; yet these terms and ideas are identical to those Pressfield expressed in his non-fiction work on the creative process. Pressfield exploits Alexander to fashion a parable for his, Pressfield's, own philosophy of creation and self-development. The author evinces a belief in an amorphous plane of possibilities, from which individuals manifest realities through self-application; Alexander becomes such a creator on a vast scale, but is ultimately undone by his failure to develop himself.

Pressfield's Alexander is born, is predestined, for war: "all that I know, I knew at thirteen, and truth to tell, at ten and younger." (25-6) It is not merely a question of personality; Pressfield imbues Alexander with a sort of ill-defined mental doppelganger, a daimon reminiscent of the voice that we are told Socrates frequently heard.¹⁹⁴ It is Alexander's "inhering genius," (65) which he claims "gifts you with omniscience." (254) For Pressfield, the daimon—or genius, as the terms are used interchangeably¹⁹⁵—is the unique component of the individual through which possibilities are brought into being.¹⁹⁶ Alexander repeats imagery from Pressfield's work on creativity, seeing himself and his daimon as agents of bringing into reality that which exists in potential: "I believe in the Unseen. I believe in the Unmanifest, the Yet To Be. Great commanders do not temper their measures to What Is; they bring forth What May Be." (293) His daimon is depicted somewhat darkly, for although it apparently augments Alexander's lucidity and skill in battle, it clearly has dangerous qualities:

¹⁹⁴ In *The Apology*, for example, Socrates tells the court "I have had it ever since childhood, a certain voice which happens, and every time it happens it always turns me away from whatever I am about to do, but never turns me towards anything..." [trans. Michael C. Stokes (Warminster: Aris & Phillips Ltd., 1997), 73.

¹⁹⁵ "Genius" is Latinate whereas "daimon" is of Greek extraction. Although the etymological origin of "demon," daimon was more neutral, meaning something like personal or local spirit.

¹⁹⁶ *War of Art*, 117.

‘He is not me,’ I have said, ‘but a creature to whom I am bound...This “Alexander” is greater than I. Crueller than I. He knows rages I cannot fathom and dreams beyond what my heart can compass. He is cold and canny, brilliant and ruthless and without fear. He is inhuman. (110)

Throughout the narrative, Alexander’s conquests and atrocities enable the daimon to increase its control over him. Contemplating his first major heinous deed, the razing of Thebes, he comments, “I am at war not with Thebes, I see, but with my daimon.” (121) By the time he has entered the questionable war in Afghanistan and has become accustomed to the commission of brutal and unjustified warfare, the daimon has grown tremendously: “In Afghanistan, my daimon begins to talk to me.” (424) As Alexander yields more of himself, his fortunes and character deteriorate, a danger of which he is conscious: “The daimon and the self are subordinate to the soul, but the daimon, should he overcome the self, may abrogate the soul. At that point a man becomes a monster.” (424)

By the end of Afghanistan, this has clearly begun to happen to Alexander. He murders his friend Cleitus, “in a drunken rage...the most infamous act I have ever committed.” (424) In India, he is conscious of the fact that his altered personality has compromised his ability to lead: “My officers now keep things from me. They withhold unsettling information, in fear of my fits of anger (which have got worse, I know, and for which I have myself alone to blame).” (179) Moreover, the entire decay of Macedonian moral purpose and legitimacy in the narrative may be considered as a result of Alexander’s failure to rein in the destructive urges of his daimon.

In India, matters come to a head, and a Greek actor delivers an obvious moral whilst likening Alexander’s life to a great work of drama: “Tragedy is the arrest of a man by his own nature. He is blind to it. He cannot transcend it.” (443) Pressfield offers as a counterexample for Alexander’s arrested development his general and friend, Telamon. This character—wholly of the author’s own devising, who serves as a recurring, ageless character in Pressfield’s novels, used to explore his own philosophy of creativity¹⁹⁷—was Alexander’s childhood mentor, and was apparently far more

¹⁹⁷ “There’s a recurring character in my books, named Telamon, a mercenary of ancient days. Telamon doesn’t say much. He rarely gets hurt or wounded. And he never seems to age. His view of the profession of arms is a lot like my conception of art and the artist...” “About,” *Steven Pressfield Online*.

valuable than his factual tutor: "Aristotle taught me to reason. Telamon taught me to act... He seemed to me then, and does to this day, the perfect incarnation of the soldier." (47) It is Telamon who imparts Alexander's philosophy of war and "manifesting the unmanifest," clearly establishing a link between Pressfield's philosophy and Alexander's personal trajectory in the novel.

In India, Telamon falls in with the gymnosophists, ascetic philosophers, and takes to Indian philosophy: "Their philosophy is ancient, profound, and subtle. It is a warrior philosophy." (443) It perhaps need not be said that Pressfield has an interest in *The Bhagavad-Gita*.¹⁹⁸ Telamon decides to claim his discharge from the Macedonian army to pursue this philosophy, to Alexander's surprise: "Being a soldier is not enough. All answers are not contained within the warrior's code. I know. I have lived it many lifetimes." (447) Having apparently achieved enlightenment through his conversion to a new philosophy of life, Telamon is now in a sufficiently privileged position to deliver the novel's moral conclusion: "[The sage] has mastered his daimon. For what is the daimon but that will to supremacy which resides not only in all men but in beasts and even plants and is, at its heart, the essence of all aggressive life?" (447) He invites Alexander to abandon all the trappings of his success and join him: "It seems to me that for a moment the king truly considered this. Then he laughed. Of course he could not go." (489)

Telamon is thus able to move on from external warfare for self-development to a purer "warrior philosophy," which is the sage's asceticism. The tragedy of the novel thus becomes Alexander's failure to join his one-time mentor in emulating this evolution; despite all his military achievements, he has ultimately been entrapped by his daimon, and is thus arrested by his own nature. Pressfield's "story of Alexander" is thus simultaneously intended as a parable of war for the edification of modern military readers, whilst also a narrative of personal tragedy as a consequence of the failure to develop the self. In the latter, he has clearly inserted and utilized his own personal

¹⁹⁸ *War of Art*, 161. Pressfield also happily admits to his novel *The Legend of Bagger Vance* being nothing more than "a rip-off" of *The Bhagavad-Gita*. ("Interview," *GoodReads*)

philosophy, yoking Alexander to his own beliefs regarding the nature of human achievement and development.

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Conclusion

It is altogether possible that Alexander himself would have been exposed to Plato's *Republic*, and therein the philosopher's famous objection to poets in his ideal society: for, he argues, if this world is merely an imitation of the ideal crafted by God, then the works of poets, imitating our reality as they do, stand "at a third remove from reality."¹⁹⁹ The position of the contemporary novelist is similar: that there was a real-life Alexander, of a certain height and appearance, who performed particular deeds, and died at a specific place, seems unquestionable. However, the "absolute" facts of his life are now obscured by history, and can only be reconstructed by reference to historical sources which stand at a second remove from his life; thus, these authors produce works which are built upon imitations and informed by guesswork. As narratives and perceptions of Alexander are further distanced from the historical reality by time and fragmentary evidence, personal and ideological agendas find increasing space in which to appear.

It is the reader's expectation that the historical novelist "give you, not just the bare bones of history, but something richer, more complete...you want him to put the flesh back on the skeleton that is history."²⁰⁰ It is in the soft tissue, as it were, that the process of reception finds its greatest liberty, as the author is hindered only to an extent by historical "fact." In the case of Alexander, it is obvious that the stories that modern novelists have rendered from the historical sources have been heavily influenced by their own concerns in the process of reception. The narratives that both authors have fashioned clearly found space within the "Alexander story" to insert and explore their own preoccupations. There are, however, some striking similarities in both adaptations.

Perhaps the most obvious consequence of the process of reception is the imputation of authorial values or philosophies to Alexander. Renault's Alexander repeatedly demonstrates a

¹⁹⁹ Trans. H. D. P. Lee (London: Penguin Books, 1970), 374.

²⁰⁰ Alessandro Manzoni, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Sandra Bermann (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 67-8.

Platonic moral and philosophical consciousness. The historical reality of this matter cannot be known; it seems unlikely, however, that a pragmatic warrior-king under the tutelage of Aristotle would have developed such a particular affinity for Plato. This seems to be far more a consequence of Renault's own enthusiasm for the philosopher than historical possibility. Similarly, Pressfield has Alexander expound upon a philosophy of achievement and creation that is almost identical to his own, very particular book on the subject. It perhaps indicates a great deal of sympathy for Alexander on the part of both novelists, if not admiration, that they would make the king into a proponent of their own respective beliefs.

Another significant commonality is what may be considered authorial self-insertion. Renault, admittedly, utilized an individual from the historical sources. However, the evidence concerning Bagoas is so limited that some historians question "whether he even existed."²⁰¹ Thus, Renault is almost unrestricted in fashioning a character out of this individual beyond the fact that he was a eunuch, and that he was extraordinarily beautiful.²⁰² Bagoas has been considered an authorial stand-in for Renault herself,²⁰³ and demonstrates many qualities she evidently found admirable. Pressfield's preternaturally long-lived/reincarnated Telamon is an entirely fabricated character, as he cheerfully admits. Both of these "fabricated" characters exist in close personal relationships with Alexander: Bagoas as his lover and Telamon as his teacher. Both assist his personal evolution in a manner that is essential to the narrative: Bagoas enlightens Alexander as to the virtue of Persians, initiating the cosmopolitan policy of racial fusion that leads to Alexander's demise, whereas Telamon teaches the youthful Alexander about the nature of battle, which is central to *The Virtues of War*. Essentially, both writers have inserted characters that can be considered authorial avatars who interact and guide their respective "Alexanders."

²⁰¹ Tougher, "Renault Bagoas," 77.

²⁰² Renault's afterword in *The Persian Boy* details the process of informed guesswork, source negotiation, and deduction involved in the creation of her Bagoas.

²⁰³ See Tougher, 83-4.

Finally, both narratives display Alexander as a somewhat transcendent figure, as beyond the confines of human nature. In Renault, this is patently obvious in her glowing depiction of his person and talents; Bagoas, however, confirms this when he tells Alexander “there has never been anyone like you.”²⁰⁴ In Pressfield’s novel, Alexander chastens his army, to which an officer responds by begging Alexander’s desire of them. When Alexander expresses his desire to for them to be “magnificent,” the officer responds, “You want us to be you.” To Alexander’s affirmative response, he states, “But we cannot! We are only men!”²⁰⁵ The first-person narration of *The Virtues of War* prevents Alexander from boasting of his achievements, but at the novel’s conclusion the narrator—the “student” to whom Alexander has been telling the story of the novel—also provides a glowing eulogy enumerating the king’s virtues: “Who has won what he has? Who shall ever again?”²⁰⁶

The narratives that Pressfield and Renault offer can be considered partially a fusion of judiciously chosen historical fact and evidence with authorial interests and values. Renault uses Alexander to explore themes of freedom, transcendence, and human evolution, whereas Pressfield finds within Alexander’s conquests a valuable resource for understanding and contextualizing contemporary wars. Both, however, envision Alexander as a superhuman or preternatural figure. This arguably gives the values that they impute to him greater significance: by depicting such an incredible figure, and then attributing him their own values or beliefs, these ideas can be seen as responsible for or contributing to this unusual achievement. Thus, as Alexander was considered a champion of Christian virtue in the medieval era, or as a model of boundless human potential in the Renaissance, in both authors’ narratives he functions as a sort of emissary for what they personally consider admirable. It seems that, at their core, these works remain part of a tendency towards co-opting Alexander to whatever system or philosophy is admirable. These receptions can be considered acts of appropriation driven by a desire to impart some percentage of Alexander’s tremendous reputation to authorial values.

²⁰⁴ *Persian*, 331.

²⁰⁵ *Virtues*, 238.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 488.

The process of reception, in terms of contemporary literary works about Alexander, is thus less affected by historical fact or modern audiences than it is by authorial values, as indicated by the very different narratives and characters that Renault and Pressfield offer. The “flesh” of fiction that the novelist must clad historical fact with is not, primarily, influenced by the need to translate or update a fairly fixed narrative for contemporary audiences, but instead as a space for exploring the author’s personal interests. I have suggested that, throughout the centuries, the reception of Alexander has often been characterized by a desire to co-opt or annex him for a particular cause or ideology. In the contemporary novel, however, Renault and Pressfield have arguably exploited the scope afforded by reception not merely to rewrite the Macedonian according to their own interests or ideals, but have moved beyond this to treat it as a space for introspection.

According to Emerson, the objective of a classical education is a deeper comprehension of the contemporary world: “We fill ourselves with ancient learning; install ourselves the best we can in Greek, in Punic, in Roman houses, only that we may wiselier see French, English, and American houses and modes of living,”²⁰⁷; in the case of Alexander, however, it seems that authors have rewritten him not to better illuminate the contemporary world—although Pressfield has, to an extent, attempted to do this—but primarily in an attempt to create “an Alexander” with personal significance for the respective author. Thus, the “reception” of Alexander by modern writers is in many ways an attempt to retroactively impose a personal meaning upon a fragmented and hazy historical reality.

²⁰⁷ “Circles,” in *Essays and Poems by Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Peter Norberg (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2004), 207.

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