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Letters and representations of female voices in late antique Greek rewritings of the *Alexander Romance*

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The so-called *Alexander Romance* is a fictionalized biography of Alexander the Great, which has been falsely attributed to the Hellenistic historian Callisthenes. This text has been continuously translated and reinterpreted across different linguistic, cultural and historical contexts.[1] The oldest surviving Greek *Alexander Romance* dates to the Roman Imperial period, and is known as the *α recension*.[2] The text comprises a series of literary layers, including rhetorical performances, heroic quests, travelogues, wonderous adventures and fictional letters. Furthermore, the linguistic register of this text significantly departs from the highly

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[1] On issues of authorship, see e.g. Stoneman 1994, 117–129; Jouanno 2002, 13–34; Hult 2018, 25–45. On the diffusion and mapping of the Alexander narratives, see Hägg 1980, 190–196; Konstan 1998, 123–138; Sanz Morales 2006, 129–388; Selden 2012, 19–59; Sanz Morales 2018, 189–193; Jouanno 2018, 468–478. Sanz Morales 2006, 129–388; Sanz Morales 2018, 189–193; Hult 2018, 25–45; Retsö 2018, 11–22.

[2] For a discussion concerning relative dates, chronologies and issues of authorship of the *a recension*, see e.g. Stoneman 1994, 117–129; Jouanno 2002, 1–37, especially p. 13, notes the mysterious and complex cultural character of the *Alexander Romance*; Whitmarsh 2018, 145–152.

Atticizing language of Imperial Greek and late antique literature.[3] Late antique and medieval rewritings, in particular, amplify the use of fictional elements, such as invented correspondences attributed to historical figures associated with the Macedonian campaign, as well as wondrous quests.[4]

In this article, I delve into the so-called *β recension*, dated to the 5th or 6th centuries CE, as opposed to the text of the *α recension*.[5] My focus lies on a series of letters purportedly written by female characters addressing Alexander.[6] I wish to argue that these epistolary texts provide instances in which women express themselves on matters of power, politics and dominance, while addressing their male recipient. The article revolves around the following questions: a) How is female subjectivity constructed within the context of these ancient epistolary texts? b) Do these epistolary texts afford opportunities for feminist readings that focus on gender perspectives? c) How do these letters ultimately serve as privileged platforms for understanding gender, cultural and linguistic differences? What interests me is not only the study of intertextual relations or cultural reception as such, but their potential significance for the construction of gender and cultural identity. Out of thirty-five preserved letters, there are fourteen exchanged between the Macedonian king and

[3] On the language and style of the *Alexander Romance* (*β recension*), see e.g. Jouanno 2002, 252–253; Karla 2018, 167–182.

[4] For the later reception of the *Alexander Romance*, especially in the context Byzantine and vernacular Greek traditions, see e.g. Holton 1974, 4–5; Jouanno 2002, 248–465; Moennig 2016, 159–189, Stoneman 2022, 1–13. In the context of vernacular Greek tradition, especially, the Alexander text is rewritten in verse, and presents the reader with an example of a newer poetic narrative about the ancient conqueror, in diverse literary and cultural contexts. On which, see Holton's 1974 critical edition of the poetic rewriting of the *Alexander Romance*.

[5] For an in-depth discussion of the *β recension*, see Stoneman 1991, 8–17; Jouanno 2002, 247–248; Stoneman 2011, 1–20. For the purposes of this paper, I follow Bergson's critical edition. I note the text of *the α recension* (Kroll's critical edition), only in instances where I compare passages of the *β* with the *α recension*.

[6] There are thirty-five preserved epistolary texts either preserved as embedded letters in the broader narrative, or independently in late antique and medieval epistolary anthologies. On which, see Merkelbach 1977, 230–252; Rosenmeyer 2001, 169–192; Whitmarsh 2013, 172–175; Arthur-Montagne 2014, 159–189.

various women.[7] Furthermore, six letters are authored by foreign and exotic women who address the Macedonian conqueror. The writers and recipients of these epistolary texts are historical (Persian women or Olympias) or purely fictional individuals (queen Kandake and the Amazons).

These epistolary texts show a strong interest in female subjectivity. By the term "female subjectivity", I mean that these female letter-writers construct themselves as rhetorical and speaking subjects, through the lens of the letter-format and epistolary communication. These epistolary texts then provide women with a platform to express themselves against Alexander the Great. The broader biographical and historiographical literature regarding the Macedonian conqueror often presents female characters as Alexander's objects of desire.[8] In contrast, the correspondences within the context of the *Alexander Romance* highlight these women as influential powerbrokers, kingmakers and formidable foes.

These letters are part of a broader process of rewriting the story of Alexander the Great in new cultural and historical contexts. It is worth noting that these female letter-writers are not the explicit voices of a female subject, but instead they are always thematized by an ancient male author or editor and his own assumptions and stereotypes. This phenomenon, common in premodern literatures, is defined as *transvestite ventriloquism*, signifying the conceptualization of the female experience by male authors.[9] Given the scarcity of ancient texts produced by female authors (with a few notable exceptions, such as Sappho's poetry), these epistolary texts elucidate the manner in which women are represented as

[7] On women in the *Alexander Romance*, see Carney 1996, 563–583; Mayor 2014, 336–338; Karla 2023, 230–243.

[8] For Alexander narratives as male-dominating traditions, see e.g. Peltonen 2023, 1–23; 98–143.

[9] For the concept of *transvestite ventriloquism*, see Harvey 1989, 115–138; 2002, 1–14. Elisabeth Harvey employs this concept in order to discuss a series of English Renaissance male-authored poems and the manner with which they construct female voices through the lens of specific intertexts. The lack of female-authored literature in the context of the ancient canon makes this concept useful in order to read literary and cultural representations of women in ancient, male-authored texts.

speaking and rhetorical subjects —expressing their own views, interpretations and perspectives— in ancient literary sources.

From a literary perspective, the use of fictional letters illustrates how these Alexander texts engage with contemporary literary and rhetorical trends. These letters are written in terms of the rhetorical tradition of the *progymnasmata*, and the rhetorical practices of *ethopoiea* and *prosopoeia*. In other words, the identities of these letter-writers are constructed in terms of historical individuals.[10] In her discussion of the letters in the *Alexander Romance*, Jacqueline Arthur-Montagne divides them into three categories: a) documentary letters; b) ethopoietic letters; c) miracles letters.[11] According to her analysis, "these categories activate three different 'horizons of expectation' triangulated through historiographical, rhetorical and travel genres in the Hellenistic and Imperial periods".[12] However, it is worth noting that these categories are not mutually exclusive and often overlap with each other.[13]

On the level of cultural identity, the late antique interest in the correspondences of historical or pseudo-historical individuals of the classical and Hellenistic periods of Greek cultural history is also part of a broader classicising discourse of the Roman Imperial period.[14] In the context of the *β recension*, especially, the editor employs the epistolary medium as a tool for creating a more homogenous, culturally and linguistically Hellenocentric and monotheist or Christianizing narrative.[15] In this manner,

[10] For the rhetorical practices of *ethopoiea* and *prosopoiea* in late antiquity, see e.g. Pernot 2017, 205–216; Webb 2017, 139–154; Petkas 2018, 193–208. For the *ethopoeia* and *prosopoeia* in connection to the letters in the context of the *Alexander Romance*, see Arthur-Montagne 2014, 170–178.

[11] Arthur-Montagne 2014, 159–189.

[12] Arthur-Montagne 2014, 160.

[13] Ibid.

[14] For the broader interest of Imperial Roman and late antique authors and intellectuals in the classical period of Greek literature, see e.g. Whitmarsh 2005, 41–56; Kaldellis 2008, 13–41.

[15] On the cultural discourse of the *β recension*, see Jouanno 2002, 248–265; Garstad 2015, 467–507; Garstad 2016, 679–695; Garstad 2018, 49–77; Jouanno 2018, 468. In my analysis, following Garstad's readings (Garstad 2018, 49–77), I argue that the use of fictional letters, in particular, creates a conveyed monotheistic or Christianising discourse that often juxtaposes a rather monotheistic hero to pagan and foreign women (e.g. Alexander and the Persian women; Alexander and the Amazons).

correspondences between foreign characters are substantially shortened or entirely omitted, whereas letters that present us with Hellenocentric views are further underlined. Consequently, the classicising division between the Greek and the Barbarian, as constructed in the context of the *a recension*, is further stressed through the means of the letter-form. Moreover, Alexander is often presented as a monotheistic conqueror who writes to and battles against pagan and exotic women.[16] In a letter-exchange between the conqueror and the Amazons, for instance, the former is presented as a monotheistic and male conqueror who fights against these pagan women-warriors.[17] In this sense, the epistolary format further nuances discourses of gender and cultural identity. In all these respects, these letters are an integral part of a complex literary and cultural product of Imperial Greek and late antique literature.[18]

So far, modern scholarship has studied these letters focusing either on intertextual relations or on cultural reception.[19] The purpose of this article is, therefore, twofold: it explores how the epistolary medium constructs female agency in the context of a broader male-dominating narrative, and it provides a comprehensive study of discourses related to cultural and gender identities in the context of late antiquity. In the subsequent sections of this article, I discuss a series of letters produced by the Persian women, queen Kandake and the Amazons.[20]

[16] See e.g. Jouanno 2002, 248–254 where she notes the culturally homogenous and Hellenocentric character of the particular recension. On the editor's care and effort to rewrite Alexander as a hero that is more aligned with Christianising and monotheistic literary and religious discourses, see also Jouanno 2002, 254–257; Garstad 2018, 49–77.

[17] See *Alexander Romance* 3.18-22.

[18] For a discussion and reevaluation of the *Alexander Romance*, see Konstan 1998, 122–138; Jouanno 2009, 32–48; Selden 2017, 421–446, Whitmarsh 2018, 132–133; Jouanno 2018, 467–477; Jouanno 2020, 209–220; Konstantakos 2021, 56–57. See especially Selden 2017, 426–428, who discusses the *Alexander Romance* as a text that undermines the cultural agenda of classicism and Atticism, by adopting a more vernacular language and showing a strong interest in aspects of ancient Egyptian history and culture.

[19] See Rosenmeyer 2001, 172–173.

[20] My translations of the *Alexander Romance* are based on Dowden's translation (Dowden 1989, 650–735) with corrections, when it is considered necessary. It is worth noting that Dowden's translation is based on a reconstruction of the *Alexander Romance* that takes into account different Greek versions of the narrative.

Persian women and Alexander the Great: epistolography and discourses of power

In the second book, Darius' mother addresses her son.[21] The letter follows a correspondence between Darius and various foreign figures within his court or among his allies, including the Persian satraps and the Indian king Porus. Consequently, the reader is presented with a Persian and foreign perspective on the campaign.[22] The letter from the Persian queen serves as a signpost, underlining the concept of intimate epistolary communication, effectively combining the notions of family relationships with Imperial politics. Throughout her letter, the woman presents Darius, and by extension, the external reader, with the idea of Alexander as virtuous and just conqueror. In this way, the Persian woman acts as an advocate of Alexander. The letter bears similarities to the one preserved in the *a recension*. In a broader context, the text evokes cultural and literary registers from the classical period of Greek history, as well as classical representations of Greeks and Barbarians.[23] The letter's focus on the Persian royal family, in particular, alludes to Aeschylus' *Persians*. The tragic drama unfolds within the Persian court after the naval battle of Salamis and retells the Greek victory from a Persian perspective. The *Persians* serves as a cultural and literary precedent highlighting the division between the Greek and the barbarian worlds.[24] The Persian queen-mother's letter then alludes to this classicizing cultural polarity, emphasizing the superiority of Alexander (and, consequently, the Greeks) over Darius and the Persians.[25] The opening lines

[21] See *Alexander Romance* 2.12. For a discussion of the Persian queen-mother as a powerbroker in the *Alexander Romance*, especially in the context of the *α recension*, see Karla 2023, 230–243.

[22] See *Alexander Romance* 2.10–12.

[23] For the use of classical and Hellenistic historiographical traditions in the context of the *Alexander Romance*, see e.g. Jouanno 2002, 127–190.

[24] See also Whitmarsh 2013, 184, where he notes the literary and cultural parallels drawn from Aeschylus' *Persians* in the correspondence between Darius and Alexander. For a discussion of the *Persians*, and the cultural divide between Greek and Barbarian, see e.g. Hall 1989, 56–100.

[25] For a broader discussion of the relationship between Alexander and the Persians, as portrayed in a wide variety of ancient sources, see e.g. Brosius 2003, 169–193, especially p. 169 where she points out that the Persians are always perceived through the

of the letter feature the conventional greeting formula (Δαρείῳ τῷ ἐμῷ τέκνῳ χαίρειν).[26] Additionally, the letter draws on a range of literary parallels from broader, Atticizing Alexander literature, especially concerning the treatment of the Persian family by the Macedonian conqueror.[27] In biographical and historiographical narratives, these references serve as tools of rhetorical characterization that elucidate Alexander's moral qualities.

The text of the letter in the *β recension* omits the name of the Persian queen-mother, Rhodogyne, as it is preserved in the *a recension*: Ῥοδογούνη μήτηρ Δαρείῳ τέκνῳ χαίρειν (your mother, Rhodogune, to my child Darius, greetings).[28] The opening formula in the *β recension* excludes any formal royal nomenclature, using only kinship terms: a mother addresses her son. In this way, the text becomes more personal and informal. Furthermore, the tendency to omit cultural details about foreign senders and recipients highlights the text's Hellenocentric character. The letter underscores the personal character of epistolary communication while highlighting the Greek elements of the narrative, portraying Alexander as the sole true Great king. Darius' mother leverages her maternal status to influence her son, the Persian Great King, and alter the course of the story. On a metaliterary level, it serves as a prolepsis, foreshadowing Darius' eventual fate within the narrative: Τὸ γὰρ μέλλον ἄδηλόν ἐστιν. Ἔασον οὖν ἐλπίδας ἐπὶ τὸ κρεῖσσον καὶ μὴ ἐν ἀποτομῇ χρησάμενος ἀμφιβάλλων τοῦ ζῆν στερηθῇς (The future is unclear. Give up your hopes for an improvement in the situation and do not, when you are in doubt, act inflexibly and lose your life).[29] In this manner, the epistolary text appears to interact with the wider narrative. Darius'

lens of Hellenocentric cultural discourses.

[26] *Alexander Romance* 2.12 (Bergson 91, 4).

[27] On the relationship between Alexander and the Persian women, see also Arrian *Anabasis of Alexander* 2.12; Plutarch *Alexander* 21.4-5; Diodorus Siculus *Historical Library* 17.38.4-7; Curtius *Histories of Alexander the Great* 3.12.18-23. For a discussion of the passages, see e.g. Carney 1996, 563–583.

[28] *Alexander Romance* 2.12 (Kroll 80, 5). Trans. Dowden 1989, 694 with corrections when it is considered necessary.

[29] *Alexander Romance* 2.12 (Bergson 91, 6–7). Trans. Dowden 1989, 694. For Darius' end in the narrative, see *Alexander Romance* 2.20 (Bergson 112–113, 7–14; 1–6).

mother also acknowledges how Alexander treats her and her family as true royalty: ἡμεῖς γάρ ἐσμεν ἐν μεγίστῃ τιμῇ παρὰ Ἀλεξάνδρῳ βασιλεῖ καὶ οὐχ ὡς πολεμίου μητέρα ἔσχε με ἀλλ' ἐν μεγάλῃ δορυφορίᾳ, ὅθεν ἐλπίζω εἰς συνθήκας καλὰς <ὑμᾶς> ἐλεύσεσθαι (After all, we receive the greatest respect from King Alexander: he has not treated me as the mother of an enemy, but with great courtesy, and as a result I hope that a decent agreement will be reached).[30] By acknowledging the status of the Persian women, the Macedonian king redefines himself as the Persian Great king.[31]

Ancient sources concentrating on Alexander highlight his self-restraint and benevolent treatment of the foreign royal family. By means of comparison, Arrian's account of the Macedonian king, titled *Anabasis of Alexander*, includes an anecdotal story regarding how they were treated when the Persian princess prostrated herself before Hephaestion instead of the Macedonian king.[32] Instead of offering a Persian perspective on the Macedonian campaign, the letter further underscores the idea of Greek superiority over the Persians. In the realm of political discourse, the letter engages with late antique and early Byzantine concepts of world-dominion (οἰκουμένη) and Imperial political order.[33] It portrays Alexander as the "world master" or *kosmokrator* of global empire. In terms of political discourses and representation, the political characterization *kosmokrator* was employed, in late antique and Byzantine contexts, to refer to the emperors.[34] Here, Alexander is depicted as the almost unchallenged Great King and Emperor, whose status re-

[30] *Alexander Romance* 2.12 (Bergson 91, 7–9). Trans. Dowden 1989, 694.

[31] For Persian women as guarantors of Persian Imperial order in the context of the Greek Alexander narratives, see Carney 1996, 570–571; Stoneman 2022,1–13; Karla 2023, 230–243.

[32] See Arrian *Anabasis of Alexander* 2.12.6–8. For a discussion of the passage, see e.g. Mclnerney 2007, 429.

[33] For Alexander and late antique as well as Byzantine concepts of world dominion, see e.g. Jouanno 2018, 463–464.

[34] For the motif of *kosmokrator* in late antique and Byzantine rewritings, see Jouanno 2002, 258–261; Jouanno 2004, 19–41; Whitmarsh 2018, 145–152; Kaldellis 2022, 216–241, esp. 216 where he notes that the Byzantines refashion Alexander as "a proto-Christian emperor".

mains unquestionable.[35] In contrast, Darius is portrayed as a character who disrupts the world order by challenging Alexander's dominion: Μὴ οὖν ταράξῃς, τέκνον, τὴν οἰκουμένην (Do not inflict chaos on the world, child: the future is unclear).[36] By presenting Alexander's kingship, the Persian queen evokes a Roman reinterpretation of the Macedonian conqueror.

The text concludes with the Persian queen-mother's plea that Darius will listen to reason. The letter's conclusion is followed by Darius' reaction: ἀναγνοὺς δὲ Δαρεῖος ἐδάκρυσεν ἀναμιμνησκόμενος τῆς ἑαυτοῦ συγγενείας. ἅμα δὲ ἐταράσσετο καὶ ἔνευε πρὸς πόλεμον (Darius read and wept, remembering his family bonds; but at the same time he was in confusion and came down on the side of war).[37] Darius is both moved and disappointed by his mother's behaviour. On a further level, the passage shows how these letters interact with the broader narrative, often serving as rhetorical devices of characterization that elucidate different traits of the characters. In other words, the letter emphasizes Darius' strong connection to the Persian royal family.

After Darius' demise, Alexander engages in a series of correspondences with the Persian women, beginning with Rhodogyne, Stateira and Roxane, followed by a separate letter addressing his future bride, Roxane.[38] The epistolary texts in the *β recension* are shorter in length compared to those preserved in the *α recension*.[39] The letters construct these female letter-writers as speaking and rhetorical subjects, presenting them as guardians of the Persian political order and symbols of the continuity of Persian monarchy. Through them, the Macedonian conqueror is established as the successor to the Great king, reinforcing Alexander's role as the guarantor of order and the ruler of the world. Alexander's first letter to the Persian women narrates Darius' death, his funeral and his hope that they would mourn for their father. This letter presents a first-person

[35] Cf. also *Alexander Romance* 1.29 (in *β* and *γ recensions*) where the conqueror is presented with the title of "king of the Romans and the whole earth". For a discussion of the passages, see Whitmarsh 2018, 151.

[36] See *Alexander Romance* 2.12 (Bergson 91, 5–6).

[37] *Alexander Romance* 2.12 (Bergson 91, 10–11). Trans. Dowden 1989, 694.

[38] See *Alexander Romance* 2.22 (Bergson 119–122).

[39] On which, see Jouanno 2002, 252.

account of Darius' death and funeral, in contrast to the text's broader third-person narrative.[40] The letter concludes with the Macedonian king expressing his wish for others to kneel before Roxane, acknowledging her as his queen (προσκυνεῖσθαι δὲ αὐτὴν ὡς Ἀλεξάνδρου γυναῖκα βούλομαι καὶ κελεύω. ἔρρωσθε. I also wish and order her to receive obeisance from now on as Alexander's wife).[41]

Alexander's initial letter invites a response from the Persian royal women, who collectively write to the Macedonian king. In the first part of their letter, they acknowledge his superiority over the Persians and position themselves as responsible kingmakers who present him as their new great king. These female letter-writers represent the idea of the Other, as depicted in literary and cultural registers of the classical period. From a literary standpoint, this portrayal evokes the Greek historiographical tradition related to Persian royal women. For example, Herodotus, in his *Histories*, refers to the influence of the royal women, by characterizing the Persian queen, Atossa, as "all powerful".[42] In the context of the broader historiographical tradition, Atossa is also presented as the woman who invented epistolography as a means to exert public influence and political power. Furthermore, the historians and biographers of the classical and Hellenistic periods portray a series of Persian women as smart court politicians who interfere in (male) political affairs.[43] As noted by Maria Brosius, "this catalogue of Persian royal women exerting power at the royal court and, by all accounts, acting without

[40] Cf. also *Alexander Romance* 2.20 (Bergson 112–113, 7–14; 1–6). For a discussion of the passage, see e.g. Rosenmeyer 2001, 183–184.

[41] *Alexander Romance* 2.22. (Bergson 120, 3–4). Trans. Dowden 1989, 703.

[42] See e.g. Herodotos *Histories* 7.4.1 ἡ γὰρ Ἄτοσσα εἶχε τὸ πᾶν κράτος. For scholarship on Persian royal women and the ancient tradition of historiography, see Brosius 2020, 149–160.

[43] On Atossa in the broader historiographical tradition, see Hellanicus (*FGrH* 4 F 178); Clemens of Alexandria *Stromata* 1.16.76.10 καὶ πρώτην ἐπιστολὰς συντάξαι Ἄτοσσαν τὴν Περσῶν (The first one to compose letters was Atossa of the Persians). For a discussion of the passages, see Rosenmeyer 2001, 25–26. On Persian women, in general, see Herodotus *Histories* 9.114–119; Ktesias (*FGrH* 688 F14) on Amestris, the wife of Xerxes I; Ktesias (*FGrH* 688 F16); Plutarch Artaxerxes 14.10, 16.1, 17.1, 19.2-3. 32.1, Deinon (*FrGrH* 690 F15b) on Parysatis' interference in Persian court politics. For a discussion of the passages, see Brosius 2020, 149–150.

(male) control or restraint shaped the Greek view of Achaimenid women."[44] In other words, the Greek historiographical tradition perpetuates stereotypical, fictional and negative representations of Persian women, political power and the strategic use of letter-writing. Of course, this is a fictional representation and does not necessarily correspond to ancient historical realities. In the *Alexander Romance*, however, these women are portrayed positively, unlike other Persian and barbarian characters in the plot.

The motif of the *kosmokrator* is again employed by the female letter-writers. The motif is repeated nine times, emphasizing the idea of Alexander as a "world master".[45] As noted, this repetition reflects late antique and early Byzantine discourses of *imperium* and world dominance.[46] The letter constructs the Persian women as agents of Alexander, advocating his rule as the new Imperial world order. In essence, this letter, written by foreign and female letter-writers, reimagines the Macedonian conqueror as a new Roman ruler. It is worth noting that the concept of power and *imperium* is negotiated through epistolary means, presenting these texts as an ideal tool for imperial governance.[47]

In the second part of the letter, the women formally acknowledge Alexander as "the new Darius", the Great king. While the Macedonian conqueror could be recognized as the new Great King of Persia without their intervention, their high royal status allows them to appropriate structures of royal and patriarchal power, serving as influential kingmakers. By sending letters, they introduce Alexander to the Persian public, and, by extension, to the external reader: Ἀλεξάνδρῳ προσκυνοῦμεν τῷ μὴ καταισχύναντι ἡμᾶς. ἐγράψαμεν δὲ παντὶ τῷ τῶν Περσῶν ἔθνει· ἰδοὺ νέον νῦν Δαρεῖον οἴδαμεν Ἀλέξανδρον μέγιστον βασιλέα. (We do obeisance to Alexander, who has not shamed us, and we have written to the whole of the Persian nation, declaring that "we recognise

[44] Brosius 2020, 149.
[45] See Jouanno 2002, 252; Kaldellis 2022, 217.
[46] See Kaldellis 2022, 216–217.
[47] On the letter-form as reflecting discourses of power and governance, within the *Alexander Romance*, see Rosenmeyer 2001, 174–184; Whitmarsh 2013, 176–186.

Alexander, as the new Darius, the Great king").[48] Here, the letter serves as a metaliterary commentary, highlighting the concept of Imperial power and epistolary communication. On a deeper level, negotiating political power through the means of letter-writing reflects the broader use of epistolography in governance and administration across various Hellenistic, Roman Imperial and late antique contexts.[49]

Furthermore, by placing emphasis on the process of epistolary communication, these female letter-writers comment on the use of letters as an authentication device.[50] In her analysis, Arthur-Montagne notes the documentary and practical character of the letters that emphasizes a broader authentication strategy: "Perhaps these letters were carefully crafted to persuade readers of their status as genuine correspondence".[51] In other words, the letter is depicted as containing documentary and historical practices, in contrast to the broader narrative. It is important to note that both Darius' mother and his wife are portrayed as the letter-writers. The latter holds great importance for the line of succession as she is the bearer of the heir to the throne. The letter also serves as a cultural and civic commentary, presenting the idea that these Persian women are inclined towards flattery, as they readily acknowledge the superiority of the Greeks over the Persians.[52] What is innovative here is that these Persian women, who are depicted as adherents of Persian religion and customs, reconfigure Alexander as a pious and monotheistic conqueror. In other words, the women present the Macedonian conqueror as a guarantor of Imperial power, a "proto-Christian emperor".[53] Nevertheless, these Per-

[48] *Alexander Romance* 2.22 (Bergson 121, 4–6). Trans. Dowden 1989,704 with modifications.

[49] For the use of letters in governance and administration in Hellenistic, Roman Imperial and late antique contexts, see Rosenmeyer 2001, 24–34; Ceccarelli, Doering, Foegen and Gildenhard 2018, 1–42; Ceccarelli 2018, 147–184; Mari 2018, 121–146; Osborne 2018. 185–204.

[50] On the use of letters in the *Alexander Romance* as authentication devices, see Arthur-Montagne 2014, 160–170, especially, p.161–162 where she discusses documentary letters in a broader literary and cultural context.

[51] Arthur-Montagne 2014, 161.

[52] On the manner that classical and Hellenistic historiography portrays Persian women as skilled court politicians and powerbrokers, see Brosius 2020, 149–150.

[53] On late antique and Byzantine rewritings of Alexander as a "proto-Christian" emperor, see Kaldellis 2022, 216.

sian women letter-writers are uniquely positioned within the broader narrative, as they are the only foreign characters that are presented in a positive light.

From a cultural perspective, the letter significantly departs from the *a recension*. In this context, there are several references to ancient Persian and Greek deities who are portrayed as patrons of the Macedonian conqueror.[54] In the *β recension*, references to pagan deities are entirely omitted. Alexander's genius and dominion over the world are presented as the outcome of fortune: ἡ τύχη Ἀλεξάνδρῳ βασιλεῖ πάσης τῆς οἰκουμένης Ῥωξάνην πρὸς γάμους ἄγει (Fortune gives Roxana in marriage to Alexander, king of the whole world).[55] Here, the reference to *Tyche*, a Hellenistic deity, is seemingly reduced to a mere narrative device. By way of comparison, in his analysis of *Tyche* in late antique chronicles, Benjamin Garstad notes that religious and cultic references to the Hellenistic personification of fortune remain a persistent Hellenistic feature in late antique discourses and genres, partly due to the lack of a broader mythology.[56] Subsequently, the text of the letter conveys religious and social commentary concerning ancient cults and a more modern (monotheistic) worldview. In contrast to the *a recension*, where Zeus leads them to wedlock, in the *β recension* Alexander's wedding to Roxane is portrayed as the result of fortune.[57] In general, the editor

[54] See *Alexander Romance* 2.22 (Kroll 97, 6–9) εὐξάμεθα ἂν οὐρανίοις θεοῖς τοῖς κλίνασι τὸ Δαρείου διάδημα καὶ Περσῶν καύχημα αἰώνιόν σε καταστῆσαι βασιλέα τῆς οἰκουμένης, ὡς λογισμῷ καὶ φρονήσει καὶ δυνάμει ἰσόρροπος πέφυκας τοῖς Ὀλυμπίοις θεοῖς (we pray to the celestial gods, who have extended over you the diadem of Darius, to make you eternal boast of the Persians and king of the world, because you are born equal to the Olympian gods in mind, intention and power). The translation of *the α recension* is my own. For a discussion of the passages, see also Jouanno 2002, 256–257.

[55] *Alexander Romance* 2.22 (Bergson 121, 6–7). Trans. Dowden 1989, 704.

[56] For Tyche as the personification of fortune, see Sfameni Gasparro 1997, 67–109. For Tyche in late antique contexts, see e.g. Garstad 2005, 93–97 where he discusses Tyche in the context of Malalas' chronicle. See especially p. 95 where he points out that: "Tyche, nevertheless, continued to be popular and persistent in late antiquity, as a willful and personified explanation of life and literature, as an embodiment of civic pride, and as an object of cultic devotion".

[57] Cf. *Alexander Romance* 2.22 (Kroll 97, 16–17) Ῥωξάνην δέ, ἣν ἔκρινας σύνθρονον εἶναί σοι, ὡς ἐκέλευσας προσκυνοῦμεν, ὅταν Ζεὺς αὐτὴν εἰς τοὺς γάμους ἄξῃ (we

of the *β recension* depicts Alexander's conquest more as an outcome of mere fortune or sometimes divine Providence. While this epistolary text does not serve as Christian rewriting of the text, the editor's monotheistic and Christianizing interpretation of the letters is conveyed through the way that he reshapes traditional perceptions of Alexander's monarchy and its later reception.[58]

Alexander's response to the Persian women concludes the epistolary communication. In a similar monotheistic and pious tone, the Macedonian king rejects the divine honours that these women wish to bestow upon him, emphasizing his moral nature. The letter is rewritten in a manner that evokes Christian nuances: Ἐπαινῶ ὑμῶν τὸ φρόνημα. πειράσομαι οὖν ἄξια τοῦ γένους ὑμῶν φροντίσαι. κἀγὼ γὰρ φθαρτὸς ἄνθρωπος γεγένημαι. ἔρρωσθε (I applaud your sentiment. And I will struggle to act worthily of your affection—since even I am a mortal man. Farewell).[59] In his brief response, Alexander presents himself as a pious conqueror and an ideal letter-writer, summarising the nature of his kingship. He praises the Persian women for their royal spirit, but underscores that he is only mortal. In other letters as well, Alexander's monotheistic piety is contrasted with the pagan practices of foreign women, such as the Amazons.[60] Alexander's response to the Persian women is followed by a brief letter he writes to Roxane [as elsewhere] and another to his mother, Olympias, in which he takes great care of the various needs of the Persian royal family.[61] Throughout the epistolary exchange with these women, Alexander is depicted as a caring and ideal ruler.

bow to Roxane as you ordered, whom you chose as your co-rule, when Zeus leads you to wedlock).

[58] See also Whitmarsh 2018, 149–150 where he notes Alexander's refashioning as a great king and conqueror, conveying a reference to the multifaceted character of Hellenistic monarchies.

[59] *Alexander Romance* 2.22 (Bergson 122, 1–2). Trans. Dowden 1989, 704.

[60] *Alexander Romance* 3.25–26 (Bergson 168–173).

[61] *Alexander Romance* 2.22 (Bergson, 3–9).

Alexander and exotic women: Queen Kandake and Alexander

In the subsequent section, I delve into a series of letters between Alexander and exotic women. In these contexts, the classicizing divide between Greek and barbarian, monotheistic/pagan and Christian is further highlighted. The third book includes a series of correspondences with heroines from exotic lands, such as the Macedonian conqueror and Queen Kandake and his letter-exchange with the Amazons.[62] These letters are embedded in the broader third-person narrative and offer the reader a first-person narrative of the events of the Macedonian campaign. They also construct a cultural and literary discourse about the Other: The letter-writers are again constructed as foreign and non-Greek, female and often non-monotheistic or pagan. These letters again contrast the Hellenizing as well as Christian virtues of Alexander the Great with these foreign women. However, they do not dominate the wider narrative, as the epistolary texts in the context of the second book (e.g. the letters of the Persian women or Alexander's correspondence with Darius).[63] These epistolary texts are transmitted in shorter form: Obscure cults, customs and foreign gender norms are silenced or omitted. In other words, they are less rich in ethnographic details compared to the letters of the *α recension*.

After conquering Persia and India, Alexander decides to visit the palace of Semiramis, which is connected to queen Kandake of the kingdom of Meroe.[64] The name Kandake refers to the title of the queen in the kingdom of Meroe, which was ruled by a series of matrilinear monarchs.[65] This episode presents a fictionalized perception of Roman Imperial geography, combining geographical and documentary information

[62] For Alexander's correspondence with Kandake, see also Dowden 1989, 720n86; Rosenmeyer 2001, 184n24 where they both note that the episode existed as a separate fictional narrative which was not necessarily an epistolary text. See also Karla 2023, 230–243.

[63] Rosenmeyer 2001, 173.

[64] *Alexander Romance* 3.18 (Bergson 152–153, 13; 1–3). For Semiramis, see e.g. Nawotka 2017, 211.

[65] For the name Kandake and the matrilinear monarch of Meroe, see e.g. Mayor 2014, 389–391; Nawotka 2017, 210–212.

about India, Asia and Africa.[66] Kandake is presented essentially as an Ethiopian queen. The letter constructs a fictional and cultural discourse about a fascinating and exotic kingdom which lies on the borders of Egypt. This representation of Ethiopia is part of the broader tradition that constructs the Ethiopians as a faultless people that lived happily in the south of the Nile.[67] Kandake's letter-exchange with Alexander combines the rhetorical categories of a documentary letter with an *ethopoeia*. They present us with a fictional correspondence but often include historical and documentary details, underlining a literary strategy of authentication. In this manner, these letters blur the boundaries between the "fictional" and the "real". [68] They are used as plot devices that could add some authenticity and historical currency to the wider narrative.

To understand how Kandake is constructed as a speaking and rhetorical character, we should first turn to Alexander's initial letter to the queen.[69] In this context, the Macedonian conqueror conveys his desire to see the kingdom in person. The epistolary text is presented in formal terms as a letter of request. In the opening lines, Alexander justifies his letter-writing: after his journey to Egypt, his attention was captured by the exotic kingdom that lies towards the south. Therefore, he asks for permission to enter the realm. The letter addresses queen Kandake of the kingdom of Veroe. Meroe is here twisted to Veroe.[70] The letter effectively refashions the exotic queen into a completely new (late antique Greek) cultural context.

Despite the fact that the epistolary text does not explicitly allude to a specific literary and cultural context, it constructs a vague literary discourse referring to Hellenistic and late antique place names. In her

[66] On which, see Nawotka 2017, 211–212 where he also discusses the late reception of the episode in Byzantine and Arabic rewritings of the *Alexander Romance*.

[67] See also Homer *Odyssey* 1.23–24; Herodotus *Histories* 3.17–25; Diodorus Siculus *Historical Libraries* 7,18,3.31.4. For a discussion, see e.g. Snowdon 1970; Van Wyk Smith 2009, 281–331; 410–411; Jouanno 2014, 130 n. 9; 134–135

[68] For a discussion of the letters as an *ethopoeia*, see Arthur-Montagne 2014, 160–170.

[69] See *Alexander Romance* 3.18 (Bergson 153, 4–8).

[70] Cf. *Alexander Romance* 3.18 (Kroll 115, 10–11) Βασιλεὺς Ἀλέξανδρος βασιλίσσῃ Κανδάκῃ τῇ ἐν Μερόῃ καὶ τοῖς ὑπ' αὐτὴν τυράννοις χαίρειν (Queen Kandake at Meroe and the princes under her, greetings. Trans. Dowden 1989, 721).

study of the episode, Corinne Jouanno notes that Kandake is reinterpreted through the lens of Greek and, especially, Biblical intertexts, thus conveying "a progressive disafricanisation" of the epistolary material.[71] The reference to the kingdom of Veroe, instead of Meroe, conveys a series of different cultural references: on a primary level, Veroe could refer to the city of Veroia in the kingdom of Macedon, or the city of Veroia, in Hellenistic Syria. By means of comparison, the reference to the Kingdom of Veroia could also evoke a Biblical reference to the second book of the *Maccabees*.[72] Additionally, the letter in the *β recension* does not include ethnographical information about ancient Egyptian culture and geography, as they are preserved in the *α recension*.[73] For instance, references to the importance of ancient Egyptian shrines are inserted in a vague manner (παρὰ τῶν ἐκεῖ ἱερῶν).[74] The letter effectively omits all the cultural references to the relationship between Veroe and Egypt, which are preserved in the *a recension*. The religious cult of Amon Ra is also totally silenced.[75] In contrast, the letter, as it is preserved in the *β recension*, reproduces a cultural and literary discourse which evokes Biblical narratives. The letter is concluded with Alexander's request to send him whatever they deem worthy.

Kandake's letter serves as both a documentary and an ethopoeitic piece. The letter reads as follows: Βασίλισσα Βερόης Κανδάκη καὶ πάντες οἱ τύραννοι βασιλεῖ Ἀλεξάνδρῳ χαίρειν (Queen Kandake of Veroe and all the princes to king Alexander, greetings).[76] She constructs herself as a speaking and rhetorical subject by appropriating structures of political power: she, as a queen, dominates the men of her kingdom. The epistolary text underscores the queen's identity, as a person of col-

[71] See Jouanno 2014, 130.

[72] See *Maccabees* 2.13.4. On the rewriting of placenames and the Biblical echoes of the text, see also Jouanno 2002, 249n12.

[73] On which, see Jouanno 2014, 130–133.

[74] See *Alexander Romance* 3.18 (Bergson 153, 5). Cf. *Alexander Romance* 3.18 (Kroll 115, 11–14) in which Alexander refers, in detail, to the Egyptian priests, the local shrines, and the cult of Amon Ra.

[75] Cf. *Alexander Romance* 3.18 (Kroll 116, 3; 8; 11) where Kandake refers to Amon Ra and his cult three times. For a discussion, see Jouanno 2002, 252.

[76] *Alexander Romance* 3.18 (Bergson 153, 9–10). Trans. Dowden 1989, 721 with slight modifications.

our, stating: μὴ καταγνῷς τοῦ χρωτὸς ἡμῶν. ἐσμὲν γὰρ ταῖς ψυχαῖς λαμπρότεροι τῶν παρὰ σοῦ λευκοτάτων (Do not think the worse of us for the colour of our skin. We are purer in soul than the whitest of your people).[77] These initial lines of the letter reference a Hellenocentric reception of people of colour and the concept of Ethiopian dark skin is contrasted with their pure souls, which is part of the wider ancient and late antique perceptions of Ethiopia as an exotic land. The letter also incorporates the epistolary motif of gifts accompanying the letter. Similar to Alexander's letter, the list of gifts, consisting of exotic materials and goods, holds more significance for the external reader than for the intended recipient of the letter.[78] This combination of documentary and fictional elements in the letter serves as a means of authentication employed by the editor of the Alexander narrative. It blurs the distinction between the fictional and the documentary, enhancing the credibility of these fictional heroes in the context of a historical account.[79] The letter concludes with a *recusatio*: καὶ γράψον ἡμῖν τὰ περὶ σοῦ, ὅτι πάσης τῆς οἰκουμένης ἐβασίλευσας. ἔρρωσο (And write to us about yourself since you have become king of the whole world. Farewell.).[80] The letter's conclusion evokes the political vocabulary of empire and world-order (πάσης τῆς οἰκουμένης). The ending can be interpreted as either the queen's desire to learn more about Alexander's adventures (γράψον ἡμῖν τὰ περὶ σοῦ) or as indication that even if Alexander becomes the master of the world—as suggested by the motif of *kosmokrator*— she would have little interest in his campaigns. Consequently, the letter's conclusion appears more as a gesture indicating "do not write back".[81]

Queen Kandake's episode concludes later in the narrative when Alexander disguises himself as a messenger to personally deliver his letter along with a caravan of gifts.[82] Firstly, this part of the narrative effec-

[77] *Alexander Romance* 3.18 (Bergson 153, 10–11). Trans. Dowden 1989, 721.
[78] See *Alexander Romance* 3.18 (Bergson 154, 1–8).
[79] On the manner that the letters combine the fictional and historical/documentary categories, see also Arthur-Montagne 2014, 169.
[80] *Alexander Romance* 3.18 (Bergson 154, 9). Trans. Dowden 1989, 721 with slight modification.
[81] On the letter's conclusion, see Rosenmeyer 2001, 185.
[82] *Alexander Romance* 3.20–22.

tively ends any possibility of further epistolary communication between the Macedonian conqueror and the exotic queen. Secondly, Alexander's disguise as a messenger serves as a metaliterary comment on the process of epistolary delivery, reflecting the sender's anxiety regarding the delivery of the missive. Additionally, this episode provides commentary on the overlapping categories of the fictional and the real, with what occurs within the context of the letter-exchange being interpreted as genuine and honest communication, while the broader narrative (Alexander's disguise) is considered fictional and deceitful.

Alexander and the Amazons

An episode between Alexander and the Amazons contains a final correspondence between Alexander and exotic, warrior-women who live in an isolated and magical island. These letters contain many ethnographical details concerning the Amazons' way of life and military culture which refer more to the external reader than the actual readers of the letters.[83] Literary and cultural representations of the Amazons serve as characteristic references to the Other, across different classical, Hellenistic and late antique literary registers and traditions. In this manner, these letters find parallels with a broader, classicising historiographical tradition according to which Alexander encountered the Amazons living in the east, after his campaigns in Persia and on his way to India. There are also implicit references to epic narratives about Amazons, such as the story about the Amazonian queen Penthesileia and Achilles, drawn

[83] For the story of Alexander and the Amazons in the broader Alexander tradition, see Diodorus Siculus *Historical Library* 17.75–77; Strabo *Geography* 11.5.3–4; Plutarch *Alexander* 46; Arrian *Anabasis of Alexander* 7.13.2–3; Curtius Rufus *History of Alexander* 6.5.24–32; Justin *Philippic Histories* 2.4.33; 12.3.5–7; 42.3.7. For a discussion of the passages, see Andres 2001, 111–122; Baynham 2001, 115–126; Carney 2000, 263–285; Amitay 2010, 78–86; Mayor 2014, 319–338; 474 n. 5. On the ancient and late antique literary and cultural tradition about the Amazons, in general, see e.g. Amitay 2010; Mayor 2014, 319–338; Andres 2017, 155–180. For a discussion of the correspondence between Alexander and the Amazons in the *Alexander Romance*, see Rosenmeyer 2001, 187–192; Arthur-Montagne 2014, 173–174.

from the epic cycle.[84] Moreover, these epistolary texts evoke the story of Tomyris and Cyrus, as narrated especially in the Herodotean *Histories*.[85] All these narratives offer cultural and literary background against which to read the representations of the Amazons in the *Alexander Romance*.

Unlike the broader tradition about the conqueror and the Amazons that presents these women as mere objects of desire, the *Alexander Romance* constructs these women as speaking and rhetorical subjects that express their will against the Macedonian conqueror. In an initial letter, he addresses the Amazons as a group: Βασιλεὺς Ἀλέξανδρος Ἀμαζόναις χαίρειν. (King Alexander to the Amazons, greetings!)[86] The subsequent section of the letter briefly summarizes his victories over foreign peoples in a first-person narrative.[87] The conclusion reads as an invitation: ὑμεῖς δὲ συναντήσατε ἡμῖν γηθοσύνως. οὐ γὰρ ἐρχόμεθα κακοποιῆσαι ἀλλ᾽ ὀψόμενοι τὴν χώραν, ἅμα δὲ καὶ ὑμᾶς εὐεργετῆσαι. ἔρρωσθε (Meet us with joy; we do not come to do you ill, but to see your country and at the same time to do you good. Farewell!)[88] The letter-writer declares his amiable intentions and asks for a meeting with the female warriors.

The Amazons' response preserves much of its pagan character, as it is preserved in the context of the *a recension*.[89] Here too, the female letter-writers employ the conventional epistolary formulas of opening to declare war: Ἀμαζονίδων αἱ κράτισται καὶ ἡγούμεναι Ἀλεξάνδρῳ βασιλεῖ χαίρειν. ἐγράψαμέν σοι, ὅπως εἰδῇς πρὸ τοῦ σε ἐπιβῆναι ἐπὶ τοὺς τόπους ἡμῶν, ἵνα μὴ ἀδόξως ἀναλύσῃς. (The leading Amazons and the mightiest to Alexander, greetings: We have written to you so that you may be informed before you set foot on our land and not have to withdraw ignominiously!)[90] The use of the adjectives αἱ κράτισται καὶ ἡγούμεναι exaggerates the idea of military virtue and power of the ancient women warriors. The Amazons respond to Alexander's letter in

[84] The story about the Amazonian queen Penthesileia and Achilles was represented in the lost epic poem of *Aethiopis*. For a discussion, see e.g. Fantuzzi 2012, 267–286.
[85] For the story of Tomyris and Cyrus, see Herodotus *Histories* 1.205–214.
[86] *Alexander Romance* 3.25 (Bergson 168, 5). Trans. Dowden 1989, 726.
[87] *Alexander Romance* 3.25 (Bergson 168, 6–11).
[88] *Alexander Romance* 3.25 (Bergson 168, 11–12). Trans. Dowden 1989, 726.
[89] *Alexander Romance* 3.25 (Kroll 124–125).
[90] *Alexander Romance* 3.25 (Bergson 168–169, 14–15;1). Trans. Dowden 1989, 726.

order to clarify that they will not tolerate any invasions. The first lines of the letter are read as an interpretation of the adjective σπουδαίας: διὰ τῶν γραμμάτων ἡμῶν διασαφοῦμέν σοι τὰ κατὰ τὴν χώραν ἡμῶν καὶ ἡμᾶς αὐτὰς οὔσας σπουδαίας τῇ διαίτῃ. (By our letter we shall make clear the nature of our country and of ourselves, who have a way of life to be reckoned with.)[91] The Amazons are presented as agents that are able to write and to defend their own country. In her analysis, Arthur-Montagne notes the manner that the letter conveys a military tone, by playing with the idea of σπουδαίαι: "For Alexander, the Amazons are 'to be reckoned with' as enemies in combat. For the reader, the Amazons, their way of life, and their legendary country are 'worthy of attention'."[92] Consequently, the text functions as metaliterary commentary, emphasizing the idea of the epistolary form as a means of negotiating political and military sovereignty. These women are allowed to write the final word in the narrative. By exploring the means of the letter-form, they are therefore presented as being in control of the broader, male-dominating narrative.

The subsequent section of the epistolary text contains a series of ethnographical discourses relating to these women's culture and military discipline, as well as their adherence to the ancient Greek traditional religion.[93] There is also an explicit reference to the Amazons' practice of procreating with their men and taking their female offspring to be trained in the Amazons' military way of life.[94] In terms of cultural and gendered discourses, the letter serves as commentary, constructing this all-female and pagan community as the absolute perception of the Other. Further on, the Amazons highlight that this long excursus of their culture and habits is meant to be read as a warning. Additionally, they comment on Alexander's military conquests: should the Macedonian army attempt to conquer them, they will be shamed for fighting against women. Should they win, they will be known to have wrongfully harmed women; should they lose, meanwhile, they would be presented as the

[91] *Alexander Romance* 3.25 (Bergson 169, 1–2). Trans. Dowden 1989, 726–727. For a discussion of the passage, see Rosenmeyer, 2001, 188; Arthur-Montagne 2014, 174.
[92] Arthur-Montagne 2014, 174.
[93] *Alexander Romance* 3.25 (Bergson 169, 7–9).
[94] *Alexander Romance* 3.25 (Bergson 169, 9–11).

strongest military power that did not manage to conquer women (ἐὰν δὲ πολεμίων κρατήσωμεν ἢ πάλιν φύγωσιν, αἰσχρὸν αὐτοῖς καταλείπεται εἰς ἅπαντα χρόνον ὄνειδος. ἐὰν δὲ ἡμᾶς νικήσωσιν, ἔσονται γυναῖκας νενικηκότες).[95] Nonetheless, the Amazons are presented as having absolute control over the narrative. The conclusion reads more as an ambivalent invitation to battle. On a further level, it resonates with Alexander's previous letter: βουλευσάμενος οὖν ἀντίγραψον ἡμῖν καὶ εὑρήσεις ἡμῶν τὴν παρεμβολὴν ἐπὶ τῶν ὁρίων (When you have reached a decision, write us a reply; you will find our camp on the boarder.)[96] In other words, this letter-exchange creates the impression of a military engagement through the means of the epistolary form.

By way of comparison, the Amazons' letter finds linguistic and semantic parallels with the story of the warrior-queen Tomyris and Cyrus, in the Herodotean *Histories*.[97] In particular, the letter's military and imperative character evokes the message Tomyris sends to Cyrus, before any battle occurs.[98] In the course of the narrative, the Persians and Cyrus lure the Massagetae into a banquet and kill them, after having intoxicated them with wine. The queen's son is captured after this trap.[99] Tomyris then sends a missive with a herald to Cyrus (πέμπουσα κήρυκα παρὰ Κῦρον), demanding the release of her son and the Persians' immediate departure from her lands.[100] Her swift response is also presented in an imperative manner: ἀποδούς μοι τὸν παῖδα ἄπιθι ἐκ τῆσδε τῆς χώρης ἀζήμιος, Μασσαγετέων τριτημορίδι τοῦ στρατοῦ κατυβρίσας (give me back my son and depart unpunished from this country; it is enough that you have done despite to a third part of the host of the Massagetae).[101]

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[95] *Alexander Romance* 3.25 (Bergson 170, 7–9).

[96] *Alexander Romance* 3.25 (Bergson 170, 10–11). Trans. Dowden 1989, 727.

[97] Herodotus *Histories* 1.211–216. For a discussion of the episode, see e.g.

[98] Herodotus *Histories* 1.206; 1.212; 1.214. For the function of letters in the context of the Herodotean *Histories*, see Rosenmeyer 2001, 45–60; Bowie 2013, 73–83.

[99] Herodotus *Histories* 1.211.1–2.

[100] See Herodotus *Histories* 1.212.1–2. On the use of heralds in order to deliver oral messages, see e.g. Bowie 2013, 77. See also Bowie 2013, 80–82 where he discusses how oral and written communication is blurred in the *Histories*.

[101] Herodotus *Histories* 1.212.2. Trans. Godley 1920, 267. Cf. *Alexander Romance* 3.25 (Bergson 168–169; 15; 1).

As in the letter of the Amazons, the missive contains ethnographical information about the Persians' consumption of wine.[102] Here too, the employment of ethnographical discourse functions as social and historical commentary. According to Tomyris' interpretation, drinking leads Persians to madness.[103] Cyrus' reaction to the message is his total neglection. The reader is presented with the idea of epistolary discourse that allows this female queen to express herself as a speaking and rhetorical subject. Epistolary communication is again interpreted as a means that allows women to appropriate patriarchal structures of power. The episode is concluded with the death of Cyrus the Great.[104] In the *Alexander Romance*, the Amazons clarify in a similarly imperative manner that they would not accept any intrusion in their lands.[105] These literary allusions to the Herodotean episode of Tomyris highlight the divide between a male and virile —here increasingly monotheistic conqueror— contrasted to barbarian and pagan women.

The Macedonian king's response contains a counter-argument, concerning the nature of his campaigns against the Amazons: it would be shameful if the Macedonian men campaigned and were defeated by the Amazons, but, on the other hand, it would also be shameful if they did not fight these warrior-women at all.[106] The letter brings up the idea of a civilized, virile, army which fights against these women on the fringes of culture. In the context of the *α recension*, the letter includes Alexander's vows to a series of ancient Greek deities – including Zeus, Hera, Ares and Athena – not to harm the Amazons. In contrast, the letter of the *β recension* contains only Alexander's vows to his father and mother (ὄμνυμι ὑμῖν ἐγὼ ἐμὸν πατέρα καὶ ἐμὴν μητέρα μὴ ἀδικῆσαι ὑμᾶς)[107]

[102] See Herodotus *Histories* 1.212.2. Cf. *Alexander Romance* 3.25 (Bergson 169, 1–12).

[103] See Herodotus *Histories* 1.212.2.

[104] See Herodotus *Histories* 1.214.

[105] See *Alexander Romance* 3.25 (Bergson 168–169, 15;1) ὅπως εἰδῇς πρὸ τοῦ σε ἐπιβῆναι ἐπὶ τοὺς τόπους ἡμῶν, ἵνα μὴ ἀδόξως ἀναλύσῃς.

[106] *Alexander Romance* 3.26 (Bergson 171, 4–6). For a discussion of the letter, see e.g. Rosenmeyer 2001, 188; Jouanno 2002, 256.

[107] *Alexander Romance* 3.26 (Bergson, 171, 8–9); Cf. *Alexander Romance* 3.26.4–6 (Kroll 126, 8–9) ὄμνυμι πατέρα ἡμῶν Δία καὶ Ἥραν καὶ Ἄρην καὶ Ἀθηνᾶν νικαφόρον μὴ ἀδικῆσαι ὑμᾶς (I swear to our father, Zeus, Hera, Ares, and to Athena who brings victory, not to harm you). For a discussion, see Jouanno 2002, 256.

Here too, this rewriting serves as cultural and gender commentary: there is a strong contrast between the cultured and monotheistic Alexander as opposed to the pagan women. In the letter's conclusion, Alexander offers a resolution: the Amazons could choose to advance to the borders so that they would be seen by the Greeks. Moreover, they are asked to provide their services to the Macedonian army. The letter implies that they would work either as mercenaries for his army or as their concubines. The epistolary text concludes as follows: βουλευσάμεναι δὲ ἀντιγράψατε ἡμῖν. ἔρρωσθε (When you have reached a decision, write us a reply. Farewell.)[108] In this context, the letter's conclusion evokes the previous letter of the Amazons, sustaining the idea of dialogue in the means of the letter-form.

In a final letter to Alexander, the Amazons decide to allow the Macedonians to enter their country: Ἀμαζόνων αἱ κράτισται καὶ ἡγούμεναι βασιλεῖ Ἀλεξάνδρῳ χαίρειν. δίδομέν σοι ἐξουσίαν ἐλθεῖν πρὸς ἡμᾶς καὶ θεάσασθαι ἡμῶν τὴν χώραν (The leading Amazons and the mightiest, to king Alexander, greetings: We give you permission to come to us and see our country).[109] In her reading, Rosemeyer notes that "the very act of writing back to Alexander is the first step in submission: they are bullied by his letter, tempted by his terms."[110] By employing the epistolary form, these women assert traditional structures of patriarchy, and therefore construct themselves as speaking and rhetorical subjects. It is the Amazons who decide to offer their allegiance to the Macedonian conqueror. The letter's final lines refer to Alexander as their δεσπότης or ruler, evoking a reference to the motif of the *kosmokrator*.[111] The letter concludes any further interaction between Alexander and the Amazons. In this manner, the reader is presented with the Amazons' interpretation of the story.

By way of comparison, the conquest of the Amazons is also mentioned in a subsequent letter Alexander sends to his mother Olympias.[112] This letter presents the interaction between the conqueror and

[108] *Alexander Romance* 3.26 (Bergson 172, 1–2). Trans. Dowden 1989, 728.
[109] *Alexander Romance* 3.26 (Bergson 172, 4–6). Trans. Dowden 1989, 728.
[110] Rosenmeyer 2001, 189.
[111] *Alexander Romance* 3.26 (Bergson 172, 13).
[112] See *Alexander Romance* 3.27 (Bergson 173, 4–6). For a discussion of the letter, see Rosenmeyer 2001, 189.

the warrior-women in a much shorter version. All in all, by employing the letter-form, these women are allowed to express their own views and perspectives, against the backdrop of a male-dominating narrative. Furthermore, the letters underscore the agenda of the editor of the *β recension* who tends to rewrite Alexander in terms of a Christianising and monotheistic cultural discourse, as opposed to the female and pagan warrior-women. In all these respects, the letter exchange between Alexander and the Amazons undermines traditional representations of gender and dominance.

Conclusions

Through my analysis, I have shown how fictional letters within the *Alexander Romance* serve as platforms that construct discourses of gender and cultural identity. In particular, the use of the letter-form allows the women characters to construct themselves as speaking and rhetorical subjects. In this manner, they manage to express their views, effectively shifting the perspective of the broader narrative from a male to a female point of view. In the context of the late antique rewriting of this fictionalized biography of Alexander the Great, these letters construct complex literary and cultural representations of women: Pagan and exotic females are strongly contrasted to a pious and, often, monotheistic Alexander. These cultural representations of female characters are aligned with the broader (Christianizing) agenda and cultural politics of the editor of the *β recension*. These women often serve as representations of the absolute Other, effectively undercutting all civilised norms of late antique Christian and Roman society. On a deeper level, these epistolary texts function as signposts that contain metaliterary comments concerning epistolary communication, the process of epistolary delivery or fictional letter-writing. In the realm of late antique literature and fictional epistolography, these letters are uniquely positioned within the broader context of ancient fictional letter collections, as they present us with the sole instances in which women purportedly write about political power and dominance.

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