

**ALEXANDER THE GREAT IN THE HISTORICAL FICTION  
OF MARY RENAULT AND LOUIS COUPERUS:  
A STUDY IN CONTRASTING PORTRAYALS<sup>1</sup>**

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The impact made by the almost superhuman life and career of Alexander the Great upon the imagination of posterity has been enormous, not only in the Greco-Roman world and the later West, but also in the Middle East and Central Asia, generating numerous Alexander legends and romances across the centuries<sup>2</sup>. In Classical scholarship, too, Alexander often has as much appealed to the scholar's imagination as he has taxed his or her more sober historical-critical faculties, and assessments of his character and achievements diverge widely<sup>3</sup>.

This divergence also comes strikingly to the fore in the characterization of Alexander presented in the historical fiction of the English-South African novelist Mary Renault (1905-1983) and the Dutch novelist Louis Couperus (1863-1923), who have good claim to be regarded as this century's greatest authors of prose fiction set in Greco-Roman antiquity; Couperus, nearly three-quarters of a century after his death, is still revered by the Dutch as their greatest novelist<sup>4</sup>. Mary Renault devoted two novels, *Fire From Heaven* (1969) and *The Persian Boy*

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1 This article is based on a paper presented at the annual conference of the Atlantic Classical Association held at Acadia University in October 1995.

2 A fine study of the Alexander tradition during the Middle Ages is George Cary's *The Medieval Alexander*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956.

3 Much of this divergence of assessment and opinion is well surveyed and analyzed by John Maxwell O'Brien in his *Alexander the Great: The Invisible Enemy*, London and New York: Routledge, 1992, which accentuates the darker side of Alexander's character.

4 My judgment of the pre-eminence of Mary Renault and Louis Couperus is both quantitative and qualitative. Renault's reputation as an author rests almost entirely on her so-called "Greek" novels, a total of nine, published from 1956 to 1981. David Sweetman's *Mary Renault: A Biography*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1993, is excellent on Renault's writing of these, including the formidable research she did. Bernard F. Dick's *The Hellenism of Mary Renault*, Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972, London and Amsterdam: Feffer & Simons, Inc., 1972, which covers Renault's output as far as *Fire From Heaven*, is insightful on the unique qualities of the "Greek" novels: "By immersing herself in a world which most readers regard with a cinematic awe, she has so thoroughly assimilated the classical vision of life, love, war, and death that her fiction is like a collateral reading to Greek literature. ...it is unassailably clear that Mary Renault is one of the most creative historical novelists of our era and the only bona fide Hellenist in twentieth-century fiction" (pp.123-124). The fact that currently six of her "Greek" novels are available in Penguin paperback testifies to the canonical status of her historical fiction. From 1898 to 1920, Couperus published ten major works of prose fiction set in the Greco-Roman World: six novels, three mythological romances, and one collection of short stories; three of these (*Ancient Tourism*, 1911, *The Comedians*, 1917, and

(1972), to the story of Alexander, the latter in fact making it to the *New York Times* bestseller list in 1973 and eliciting an enthusiastic review by Gore Vidal, himself the author of two distinguished novels (*Julian* and *Creation*) set in the ancient world<sup>5</sup>. (Renault actually wrote what might be regarded as an Alexander trilogy; however, the third novel, *Funeral Games* (1981), relates the struggle for power and the succession, within Alexander's family and among his generals, after his death<sup>6</sup>.) In addition, Renault also wrote a historical biography of Alexander, *The Nature of Alexander* (1975), in which she, although not a classicist or a professional scholar, displays a sure-handed familiarity with the ancient literary sources and a considerable critical acumen in appraising the evidence<sup>7</sup>. Couperus' *Iskander* appeared in 1920. Like most of his historical fiction, it has never been translated into English, and therefore the translations offered are my own<sup>8</sup>.

My focus of comparison is mainly upon Renault's *The Persian Boy* and Couperus' *Iskander*, which cover, roughly, the same period in Alexander's life, the years in which he defeated the Persian Empire and made his epoch-making conquests as far east as India, culminating in his sudden death in Babylon in 323 B.C. Since Mary Renault's historical fiction, all of it set in the Greek antiquity, unlike that of Louis Couperus, which has also a strong Roman component, is so well known in the English speaking world, my treatment of *The Persian Boy* will be very brief, designed only to bring out salient aspects in her portrayal of Alexander in which her novel differs markedly from *Iskander*.

Renault used Arrian, whose *Anabasis* is universally recognized as superior, as her main literary source (with Plutarch coming in as a distant second), displaying an utter disdain for Quintus Curtius Rufus and his highly rhetorical and moralizing style of biography: "It was a bad day for history when Quintus Curtius enrolled at a Roman school of rhetoric<sup>9</sup>"; "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 conceit about the goddess Fortune, and many florid exercises in Roman rhetoric<sup>10</sup>." Arrian's sober but generally

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*Arrogance, the Conquests of Xerxes*, 1919) have been translated into English. Frédéric Bastet's *Louis Couperus: Een Biografie*, Amsterdam: E.M. Querido's Uitgeverij B.V., 1987, is copiously informative and perceptive on Couperus' Greco-Roman fiction. The most detailed and analytical study of this major portion of Couperus' oeuvre is W.J. Lukkenauer's, *De Omrankte Staf: Couperus' Antieke Werk*, Volume I, (University of Leiden doctoral dissertation), Katwijk: ALL in B.V., 1989, which draws upon earlier major scholarship by Elizabeth Visser and Théo Bogaerts. Volume 1 goes as far as *Herakles* (1913); the second volume has not (as yet?) appeared. It is interesting to note that, because of an unusual set of circumstances in connection with the secondary schools he attended in the Dutch East Indies and The Netherlands, Couperus started his study of the classical languages rather late by the standards of his day, not until his late teens, in fact, and was taught these then by his civil - servant father; he became quite proficient in Latin, but his facility with ancient Greek remained very modest. For testimonies regarding Couperus' stature in Dutch and world literature, see Alexander Zweers' article, "Repetition as a mode of narration in Louis Couperus' Van oude mensen, de dingen die voorbijgaan", *Canadian Journal of Netherlandic Studies*, 16 (1995), 35. Among the admirers of Couperus' works were Oscar Wilde, E.M. Forster, and Katherine Mansfield.

5 *Fire From Heaven*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1969; *The Persian Boy*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1972; Vidal's review is reprinted in *Matters of Fact and Fiction*, New York: Random House, 1977, pp. 17-19.

6 *Funeral Games*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1981.

7 *The Nature of Alexander*, Penguin Books 1983 (first published by Allen Lane, Penguin Books, in 1975).

8 For my reading of *Iskander* and the preparation of this paper, I have used: Louis Couperus, *Iskander*, fourth printing, Rotterdam: Nijgh & Van Ditmar's Uitgevers - Maatschappij, n.d. (early 1920's). A new critical edition of the complete works (Louis Couperus, *Volledige Werken*, general editor: Karel Reijnders, Utrecht: Veen Uitgevers, 1987-1996) has just been completed.

9 *The Nature of Alexander*, 134.

10 *The Persian Boy* ("Author's Note"), 432.

positive record, highly esteemed by scholars for its accuracy, lent itself well to Renault's portrait of Alexander, whom we see through the hero-worshipping eyes of the first-person narrator of her novel, the young eunuch Bagoas, who becomes Alexander's *eromenos*.

Mary Renault became increasingly bold in the portrayal of Alexander's homoeroticism and homosexuality. In *Fire From Heaven*, Alexander's relationship with his life-long friend Hephæstion, while having undeniably clear homoerotic undertones, stays clear of sexual intimacy. This ambiguity is also apparent in Renault's "Author's Note" to the novel, where she leaves the whole question open. In *The Persian Boy*, the sexual, physically intimate aspect of the relationship between Alexander and Bagoas is not left in any doubt. Although, as her biographer David Sweetman cautions, Renault always put some distance between herself and the burgeoning gay liberation movement of the 1970's<sup>11</sup>, it is hard to believe that she was not stirred by the spirit of the age to move to an unconcealed and overt portrayal of sexual closeness between Alexander and the young Persian.

From Bagoas' perspective in the novel, the reader is invited to value Alexander's increasingly cosmopolitan open-mindedness, an Alexander who came to like his Persian subjects, adopted many of their ways, especially in relation to dress and court ceremony, promoted Greek-Persian intermarriage, and thus, in short, put any narrow ethno-Hellenism behind himself. Although, in *The Nature of Alexander*, Renault expresses scepticism about Sir William Tarn's well-known idealizing view of Alexander as a kind of proto-Stoic or pre-Christian apostle of the unity of humankind<sup>12</sup>, the profound appreciation generated for the Alexander of *The Persian Boy* in this respect is hardly dissimilar. In a letter cited by Sweetman, Renault gives voice in her own words to her admiration for Alexander's lack of ethnic and racial prejudice, as she speaks of "this terrible legacy of Us and Them" and how "Alexander was almost uncannily aware of this factor in ways that are in advance of anything today"<sup>13</sup>.

In *Iskander*, Louis Couperus develops a much darker portrait of Alexander as well as of his relationship with Bagoas. Using the form of an omniscient third-person narrator who is, however, deeply empathetic to Alexander, the novel begins the narrative shortly before the battle of Issos, where Alexander inflicts his first massive defeat upon the Persian military might and captures the women and children of the royal Persian household. In order to introduce Bagoas earlier into the story, Couperus departs from his principal source, Curtius, by having the young eunuch, who had been Darius' favourite, fall in with Alexander at this point, rather than after the later battle of Gaugamela, the version which Renault follows. It is psychologically effective that Bagoas should join Alexander's retinue at the same time as Stateira, the wife of Darius, and Sisygambis, the queen-mother, for Alexander's relationship with these two royal women and the other members of the royal family, especially the children, receives a great deal of attention in *Iskander*, which follows all the ancient sources in depicting Alexander's behaviour towards these as characterized by a most touching courtesy and even affection. In *Iskander*, Alexander's bond with Stateira, with whom he has a short-lived marriage, is indeed one of deep love, and when she dies he is heartbroken. The royal women and children thus draw out and illuminate the good potential of Alexander's character. By contrast, Alexander's relationship with Bagoas, which receives a far more extensive and complex treatment than in Curtius, who gives Bagoas the equivalent of about two pages and constructs only a one-dimensional, hostile portrait of him<sup>14</sup>, takes on, immediately, a sinister aspect, as soon as Bagoas makes his first entrance to meet Alexander:

11 Sweetman (see note 4) mentions (273) that she told him she disliked "mass action" and "sexual tribalism".

12 *The Nature of Alexander*, 17 - 18.

13 Sweetman, 263. Sweetman documents that Renault was very much opposed to the apartheid system of her adopted country, but that at the same time she was sceptical about the effectiveness of boycotts and trade-sanctions.

14 Curtius 6.5.23, 10.1.25-37; Arrian does not even mention him.

Mutilated since childhood, he had lingered in an unnatural youth, and seemed younger than he really was. His amber-pale face was beardless, and his features fine and regular, his coal-black hair falling around his neck. His womanish mouth was scarlet-red, and his eye-brows and eye-lashes painted black. Blue-purple chalcedonite stones gleamed in his earrings, belt buckle, and finger-rings. His cruelly red lips were thin and closed, and his eyes held an enigmatic stare<sup>15</sup>.

The portrait could not be more different than that of Renault's Bagoas, who, in a physical description of himself at the beginning of her novel, underlines his boyish but at the same time aristocratic handsomeness<sup>16</sup>.

In order to avenge the humiliating defeat inflicted upon his country, Couperus' Bagoas resolves to destroy Alexander by enticing him to heavy drinking of wine spiced with mysterious herbs that lend the alcohol an even more intoxicating and destructive potency. He also mesmerizes Alexander with his dancing - the only strong suggestion in the novel of some sort of erotic attraction of Alexander to Bagoas. The seed for the suggestion that Alexander's later years were marked by an increasingly more serious alcoholism (if I may use this modern term) was probably planted in Couperus' imagination by Curtius, who makes much of the later Alexander's alleged proclivities for recurring and heavy drinking bouts. In Couperus, the theme of Alexander's alcoholism becomes obsessive and is not convincing. (In the *Nature of Alexander* Mary Renault, following Plutarch, questions, rightly, I think, the plausibility of an alcoholic Alexander<sup>17</sup>.) Later in *Iskander*, Bagoas, who has by now developed a hero-worshipping infatuation for the Macedonian world-conqueror, rues his intention to destroy Alexander and pleads with him to stop his excessive drinking, but to no avail. The sorry sight of Alexander, stuporously asleep after an out-of-control drinking bout, is vividly depicted in the following brief but telling passage:

In contorted sleep, following his drinking bout, Alexander lay upon the wrinkled and soiled crocus-coloured coverlets. He breathed snoring loudly, his arm trailing down to the platform of his bed, his fingers splayed in a final, rigid grip upon the cushion<sup>18</sup>.

In his magisterial biography, Frédéric Bastet puts forward the perceptive suggestion that Couperus was drawn to use Curtius as his main source because the highly rhetorical nature of the narrative and character depiction which is so characteristic of the Roman author had a strong affinity with his own style and manner<sup>19</sup>. The ancients would indeed have categorized the Dutch author's luxuriant, intricate, even at times involuted prose as Asiatic ("decadent" is the *fin-de-siècle* term that has at times been applied to Couperus) - but would also have recognized its frequent power and beauty. At their best, the pace of narrative, the lavishness of description, the thrust of dialogue, and the depth and complexity of character portrayal are dazzling in Couperus, and this is also true of *Iskander*.

One might also point to a link between *Fortuna* in Curtius and *Het Noodlot* (Fate, Doom) in *Iskander*. *Het Noodlot* is indeed a theme and motif that resonates powerfully in many of Couperus' novels, including his well-known *The Hidden Force* and *Old People and the Things*

15 *Iskander*, 99-100.

16 *The Persian Boy*, 4-5; this is a description of himself before he was castrated as an adolescent; however, it clearly holds true for the rest of his story. In her "Author's Note" (431), Renault has an interesting discussion regarding the false stereotype of the physical appearance of eunuchs.

17 *The Nature of Alexander*, 128-129.

18 *Iskander*, 344

19 Bastet (see note 4), 577-578, making extensive reference here to the scholarship of Elizabeth Visser.

*That Pass*<sup>20</sup>. But what is, in Curtius, little more than a "tedious literary conceit" employed without much verve and imagination, becomes also in Couperus' *Iskander* a haunting, menacing, and numinous presence, in its most frightening manifestation designated as *Het Spook* (The Spectre), which is overcome only in the final tranquillity of death. This Spectre overshadows Alexander as he descends into temporary madness after he has slain Cleitus in an outburst of fury:

These were nerves stretched to insanity, this was the sheer demonic madness which would drag him into his ruin, the invincible Spectre stronger than any supreme commander's genius and stronger than the greatest gift and favour of the gods to make the whole world kneel before him. And over and above all loomed mightily the Spectre<sup>21</sup>.

As a final point in the use Couperus made of Curtius, *Iskander* follows the Roman author closely in relating acts of sadistic cruelty ordered by Alexander: the crucifixion of two thousand Tyrian prisoners of war (Curtius 4.4.17); his monstrous execution of Bestis, the governor of Gaza, who is put to death in a manner deliberately reminiscent of Achilles' degradation and disfigurement of Hector's body in the *Iliad* (4.6. 26-29); and the judicial torture and murder of Philotas on charges of conspiracy (6.9.25-6.11.38). Almost needless to say, there is none of this in *The Persian Boy*<sup>22</sup>. The last episode receives a very lengthy treatment, as it also does in Curtius, and *Iskander* details even more vividly the savagery of the torture inflicted on Philotas to wrench a confession of guilt from him.

This paper has already alluded to the possibility of an homoerotic attraction of Alexander to Bagoas in *Iskander*. Unlike Renault, writing in the considerably more liberal early 1970's, Couperus, homosexual himself although married, could not go further than intimation, with no suggestion, let alone overt description, of physical intimacy. His 1905 novel, *De Berg van Licht* (*The Mountain of Light*), had raised a storm of controversy and numerous hostile reviews, especially in conservative Reformed and Catholic circles, for its sensational but even so psychologically insightful and not unsympathetic portrayal of the Roman emperor Elagabalus and his flamboyant homosexuality, androgyny, and transvestism, all of this intermingled with Oriental mysticism and fanatical devotion to the Sun-god (the account, carefully balanced between satire and empathy, of Elagabalus' public "wedding" to the charioteer Hierocles, is a masterpiece of Dutch prose): this *tour-de-force* work had proved to be too heady for the large majority of the reading public<sup>23</sup>. As it was, even the little that is intimated about the Alexander - Bagoas relationship in *Iskander* strongly repelled some readers and critics<sup>24</sup>.

But some racial prejudice may also have inhibited Couperus from developing the Alexander-Bagoas relationship along more positive homoerotic (if not fully homosexual) lines. Bagoas, after all, was not only a eunuch, a fact which alone made him repellent, but also a Persian, and Oriental. There is an ambivalence in Couperus' portrayal of the Persians, especially Persian men. On the one hand, the narrator clearly evinces admiration for the Persians, for the great antiquity of their religious and cultural traditions, and for the grave formality and dignity of their manners. On the other hand, the Persian men in *Iskander* also embody an element of the

20 Published in 1900 and 1906 respectively, both translated into English, and probably the best-known and most admired of Couperus' novels in the English-speaking world.

21 *Iskander*, 517.

22 In *The Nature of Alexander*, 162-164, Renault, on the basis of her analysis of the ancient sources, attributes a large measure of guilt to Philotas in failing to report to Alexander the existence of a conspiracy against him.

23 Lukkenaer (see note 4), 73ff.

24 Bastet, 576-577; "dégoutant" is how one critic characterized the Alexander-Bagoas relationship.

racial and ethnic stereotyping of "Orientals" in the Western imagination during much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: to some extent, they are seen as subtle, luxurious, and ultimately effete, and as such inevitably contrasted, implicitly at least, with the healthy, uncomplicated "Nordic" manliness of the young Alexander before he was corrupted by the East. In *Iskander*, therefore, as it is certainly not in *The Persian Boy*, with its first-person narrator perspective of the proud, aristocratic Bagoas, Alexander's "Orientalization" is an integral aspect, perhaps the fundamental catalyst of the tragic deterioration of his character, and this fact is also reflected in his deteriorating physical appearance, which becomes quasi-Oriental as he grows a wispy beard and acquires a sallow complexion, and, of course, increasingly wears Persian garments and royal insignia. All of this is tellingly underscored by Couperus' choice of a Persian variant of Alexander's name as the title for his novel and by his prefacing of Curtius' epigrammatic comment at the beginning of *Iskander*: *Et quem arma Persarum non fregerant, vitia vicerunt* - the latter reminding us that the stereotyping and prejudice were not absent in Greco-Roman antiquity either. But this judgment should be not carried too far<sup>25</sup>. For instance, the description of the "paradisaal" gardens in Babylon, which are lovingly tended by a wise old gardener (of whom Alexander becomes very fond), and which are almost instinctively sought out by Alexander to recline in during his dying days, years after he has first seen and fallen in love with them, is simply breathtakingly beautiful, and transcends any stereotyping regarding "Oriental" luxury and extravagance.

It would be most misleading to say that *Iskander's* Alexander is an unrelieved portrait of physical and psychological decline, of accelerating megalomania, paranoia, and alcoholism. As one can expect from Couperus, his Alexander is not a one-dimensional figure; the dark is almost balanced by the light. We see an Alexander who commands the sacred devotion of his soldiers, despite their periodic grumbling and even a near-mutiny, until his dying hours; who has a deep and tender love, homoerotically coloured, perhaps, but finely nuanced, for his life-long comrade Hephæstion; and whose charmingly courteous, even loving behaviour towards the women and children of the Persian royal family is exquisitely portrayed<sup>26</sup>.

The scenes of Alexander's dying and death are moving without being sentimental. (The utter lack of sentimentality is well displayed in the ghastly scene of the murder, ordered by the pregnant Roxana, of the two daughters of the late Stateira - to whom Alexander had been briefly married - by king Darius.) In *The Persian Boy*, Bagoas is the central figure, and very movingly so, in the last hours of Alexander, with whom he is physically present and whom he comforts. In *Iskander*, it is Sisygambis, the queen-mother, who moves to the centre and carries the denouement of the novel magnificently with her. She has come to love Alexander dearly as her own son, and experiences the most bitter grief over his death, but this soul-wrenching emotion is turned to religious ecstasy as she sees Alexander bathed, godlike, in an aureole of transcendent light, exclaims him Son of Zeus, and then resolves to make her own departure from this earthly life by starving herself to death. At the beginning of this scene, as she views Alexander's body, he appears to her to have reassumed his former heroic "Macedonian" youthfulness:

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25 In a perceptive review (*The New York Review of Books*, August 11, 1994, pp. 30-32) of a paperback reissue of *The Hidden Force*, which is set in the turn-of-the-century Dutch East Indies and is dominated by the issue of the apparently insuperable racial and cultural differences between the so-called East and West (much as E. M. Forster's *Passage to India* is), Ian Buruma well argues that the complex ironies and empathies Couperus brings into his novel preclude any blatant stereotyping, let alone racism. In *Iskander*, too, we cannot speak of such crudities.

26 The same critic mentioned in note 24 would have liked, however, "more love scenes" between Alexander and Stateira as well as, later, Roxana (Bastet, 576).

Still, he did not seem more than asleep. As he was now, so she had seen him, nine long years ago, enter with quick, youthful step her own tent in the captured camp near Issos - the adorable Conqueror and tender-hearted Subduer. Since then she had passionately worshipped him as her own son, and he had loved and honoured her as his only mother. At this thought, she laughed, sobbing softly in her mad grief, contemplating him who had been snatched away from her bent old age<sup>27</sup>.

Then, after her experience of the epiphany of Alexander's divinity:

She stopped her sobbing and her wringing of hands and cried out in holy ecstasy, "Son of Zeus", sinking in adoration before the bed<sup>28</sup>.

Bastet notes that *Iskander* has been called Couperus' "most significant and most successful historical novel"<sup>29</sup>. Though it is flawed and is markedly different from the more carefully researched *The Persian Boy* in crucial respects, such as in its heavy reliance on Curtius, its use of narrator technique, its psychological and ethnic-political perspective, and its general style and manner (most definitely "Asiatic" versus Renault's more "Attic" prose), it still compares well, in my judgment, with the 1972 novel. But, of course, no work of fiction or scholarship can ever have the final word on Alexander.

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27 *Iskander*, 609: with respect to "he had loved her as his only mother", Alexander's relationship with Olympias is virtually blanked out in *Iskander*.

28 *Ibid.*

29 Bastet, 576.