

CHAPTER 9



OLIVER STONE'S UNMANNING OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT IN *ALEXANDER* (2004)

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When the film *Gladiator* hit the big screen in 2000, its financial success began a revival of the sword-and-sandals epic that had been defunct since the last major classical-era film, Anthony Mann's *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964), spurring production of stories ranging from the fall of Troy to the battle of Thermopylae to the conquests of Alexander the Great.¹ While *Gladiator*, *Troy* (2004), and *300* (2007) tend to share a common patriarchal characterization of the male protagonist as a hero who is strong, active, and above all, heterosexual, Oliver Stone's film *Alexander* (2004) presents the Macedonian general as excessively emotional, under the sway of his overbearing mother, and, unlike the male leads in the other films, sexually ambiguous: bisexual if not homosexual. Ancient epic films, in general, often use the male lead to represent a powerful standard of masculinity through the main characters' familial and/or sexual relationships, their agency, moral fortitude, and the "safe" heterosexualizing of their bodies. Such representations starkly contrast male antagonists in the same films who appear as feminized, weak, and cowardly and who often tend to exhibit "aberrant" sexual behavior such as incest and possible pedophilia, who transgress traditionally held concepts of gender, or who simply fail to follow conventionally accepted masculine stereotypes. *Gladiator*, *Troy*, and *300* present traditional masculinity and heterosexuality not only as positive but

also as an antidote to the tyranny and despotism that threatens their patriarchal and democratic worlds.²

Oliver Stone's *Alexander* differs markedly from this shared representation of ancient patriarchal masculinity, as the eponymous character fails to conform to the standard tropes for male protagonists, especially in his public and private displays of love and affection. The result is that this Alexander the Great ultimately resembles many of the "villains" in ancient films, and indeed he is portrayed as acting less "manly" than his recent cinematic counterparts, such as Maximus, Hector, Achilles, and Leonidas. Therefore, while these films present traditional masculinity and heterosexuality as positive, heroic, and admirable, *Alexander* inverts these traits, challenging the typical representation both sexually and emotionally. In other words, as the elder narrator—Ptolemy, one of Alexander's generals—explains, Alexander's only defeat was by his friend Hephaestion's thighs. The result of this inversion is the rendering of his masculinity and ultimately his heroism as ambiguous at best. While most of the other films were commercially successful, the story of Alexander of Macedonia failed both financially and critically, which may have resulted from its atypical portrayal of a classical hero.

These cinematic representations of proper masculinity rely on and in fact reinforce heteronormativity, a constructed perception that holds heterosexuality as the normal, default identity for members of a society, and therefore the only accepted expression of sexuality. Indeed, it is considered so "natural, universal, and monolithic" that any variations from heterosexuality are considered deviant and thus are devalued and shunned.³ According to Wheeler Winston Dixon, in most films the "state of nonstraightness is essentially suspect."⁴ To demonstrate one's heterosexuality and therefore follow the "norm," one can engage in heteroperformance. Marriage, male-female sex, and procreation all are deemed suitable displays of heterosexuality precisely because they reinforce traditional patriarchal gender roles. This heteroperformance can occur either actively, through character dialogue or action, or passively, via clothing, an actor's body type, or a prop such as a wedding ring.⁵

Each of the male protagonists in *Gladiator*, *Troy*, and *300* fit the mold of a strong, heteroperformative male in terms of both their physical bodies and their actions or, more precisely, their interactions. The toned bodies of Maximus, Achilles, Hector, and Leonidas are all on display in these films, ranging from Maximus's one shirtless scene, to a partially nude Achilles, to a completely nude Leonidas. Their bodies are also depicted as engaging in manly action like fighting hordes of

barbarians, single-handedly killing numerous Trojans, or slaying wave after wave of Persians. Strength and aggression then become active indicators of each hero's masculinity. As Lynne Segal argues, conceptions of "true manhood" typically involve "toughness, struggle and conquest" and an "increasing glorification of a more muscular, militaristic masculinity."⁶ As evidence, one need only consider the film *300*, where the sculpted bodies of the Spartans are as much a spectacle as the battles themselves.

Each of these films goes to great lengths to try to ensure that none of these male bodies appear in a homoerotic fashion by safely heterosexualizing the scenes with easily identified heteroperformative markers. The reason for these markers is to ease the (usually American) audience's apprehension and perhaps expectation that male bodies in any stage of undress in a film set in the classical world are a possible gateway to homosexual desire. Onscreen male-male relationships, according to John M. Clum, are rife with anxiety because they have the potential to threaten the demarcation between heterosexual and homosexual interaction.⁷ Thus the all-male gladiators in *Gladiator* wear knee-length tunics that conceal their bodies from both the audience and especially from their fellow warriors, and they never, ever are seen bathing together or even sleeping in close proximity. Maximus's own heterosexuality is always reaffirmed through constant reference to his wife and child, reinforcing his status as both husband and father. His desire to return to his murdered family, if only in the afterlife, supersedes all other desires, both political and sexual, and indicates that his heteroperformative role as father and husband is key to his masculine identity.

In *Troy*, Hector likewise is identified through his role as husband, father, and protector, all traditionally masculine functions, and it is only during such scenes with his wife and infant son where his body is safely on display. These scenes thus provide proof that Hector is a "proper" heterosexual male who has married and produced a legitimate heir, thereby fulfilling his expected manly duties. Achilles is also portrayed as a heteroperformative male from his first scene dozing in postcoital bliss with two women to his "romance" with the Trojan priestess, Briseis. Though not a father in the film, Achilles is depicted as paternalistic through his safely heterosexual relationship with the young Patroclus, now conveniently changed to his "cousin," thereby cancelling out any homoerotic relationship between the two and eliminating the potential for the affection shared between them to be construed as anything other than solidly heterosexual.⁸

Finally, *300* goes to exceptional lengths to depict the Spartans, especially Leonidas, as staunchly heterosexual, by attempting to mask any

homoeroticism with hypermasculinity and even deflecting accusations of homosexuality onto others, such as the Athenian “boy-lovers.” The Spartan warriors are portrayed as safely heterosexual either through noting that all assembled have “grown sons to carry on their names” or through the presence of both father and son in the army together. In both cases, the presence of male heirs reaffirms the Spartans’ performative heterosexuality. And then there is Leonidas himself, who literally engages in heteroperformance by being the only one of these males shown having intercourse (with his wife, naturally). Unlike *Gladiator* and *Troy*, *300* has the only extensive and graphic sex scene involving the male protagonist, which serves to further normalize Leonidas’s heterosexuality and, perhaps more important, also provides a safe setting for the gratuitous display of the male body.

While *Gladiator*, *Troy*, and *300* all present a common conceptualization of normative masculinity and its expression through heterosexual activity, they also share a common depiction of aberrant or nonnormative masculinity, which is presented in the form of each film’s villain. These exclusively male antagonists are generally presented as feminized, excessively irrational and emotional, sexually “confused,” or some mixture of these qualities. One thing is for certain: these villains, in spite of being male, lack the heteronormative masculine qualities of their adversaries and typically seek to quash the “real” man who stands against them. In fact, these antagonists have not only blurred the traditional boundaries of masculinity but also intentionally disrupted the formerly tranquil, “democratic” political system. According to Ina Rae Hark, ancient epic films tend to follow a predictable political narrative that centers on proper (masculine) political power being “perverted by unmanly tyrants” who themselves are unmanned because they lack the traditional “signifiers of masculinity” and appear as effeminate or possess nonnormative bodies.⁹ This feminization is therefore both the source and the telltale sign of their tyranny.

The emperor Commodus, the antagonist of *Gladiator*, fits this stereotype from his very first scene where he is seated in an ornate, armored wagon while wearing luxurious furs and purple robes. This physical decadence indicates that Commodus is pampered and leads a life of ostentatious wealth and luxury, a stark contrast to the harsh life of the Roman soldiers, especially Maximus. Commodus’s effeminacy is made apparent not simply by his contrast with the soldiers but by his similarity to the only other person in the scene similarly dressed: his sister, Lucilla. In later scenes, Commodus always appears in fresh, vibrant clothing or armor that seems too perfect and clean, implying simply ceremonial usage instead of actual combat use. Commodus’s

wicked nature is made vividly apparent through his violent mood swings and his deviant and dangerous sexuality, which includes an overt incestuous desire for his sister and leering, pedophilic intimations toward his young nephew. His excessive emotionality paints Commodus as both unstable and dangerous, to those close to him as well as the Roman state itself, since most of his political activities are costly attempts to make the people of Rome love him. Moreover, as Commodus himself says, he is "terribly vexed" throughout the film, and this vexation leads him into a downward spiral of paranoia and murderous violence. But it is his deviant sexuality that is the most insidious danger, since it threatens the heterosexual family unit (both his own and that of Maximus), one of the core elements that defines proper heteroperformance.

In *Troy*, Hector's brother, Paris, embodies some aspects of the feminized villain, and he is mostly responsible for the Trojan War, although his role in the film is not so much as a direct antagonist to the hero as it is a foil by which the masculinity of Hector and Achilles can be contrasted. In terms of his physical body, Paris's feminization is conveyed by his slight build and smooth features, which are augmented by his frequent wearing of silky, open-chested robes; this physical weakness is compounded by his complete lack of any skill in battle, one of the defining traits of the masculine hero. In fact, even when Paris finally attempts to be strong and courageous, by facing the significantly larger and stronger Menelaus, he fails miserably by ignoring Hector's tactical advice and then quite literally crawling away from the fight to cower between his brother's legs. However, it should be noted that despite these numerous antiheroic traits, Paris's masculinity is not entirely unredeemable, since the entire cause of the war was his heterosexual seduction of Helen. His physical relationship with Helen thus somewhat mitigates his effeminacy.

Paris's counterpart in terms of feminization is Agamemnon, whose antimasculine qualities are witnessed more through his actions (or lack thereof) than through his physical body or sexuality. If one aspect of heteroperformance in these films is for men to physically exert themselves through battle, then Agamemnon comes up short because, with one (cowardly) exception where he stabs king Priam in the back, he does not directly engage in fighting. In fact, rather than enter the fray, Agamemnon avoids the battles, preferring instead to send other men to fight and die in his place. This avoidance of warfare and cowardly slaying of an unarmed old man, in a temple no less, proves he is not honorable, either as a warrior or as a man.

But none of these come anywhere close to *300*'s effeminate extravaganza of the Persians and their tyrannical leader, Xerxes. Virtually every Persian seen up close wears "Eastern" attire (silky robes, scarves, or headdresses), which, combined with an abundance of eyeliner and ubiquitous piercings, represents feminized decadence and stands in obvious contrast to the simple, unadorned, and thus masculine attire of the Spartans. Literally arriving on the backs of countless slaves, Xerxes himself is a hyperfeminized male. He has the muscular and toned physique of the Spartans, but it is a body awash in feminized accessories and modifications, such as ornate bracelets and necklaces, a head-to-toe coating of gold makeup, long, manicured fingernails, a thoroughly shaved body (even down to the eyebrows, which are penciled in), and countless piercings. In short, there is not the slightest indication that Xerxes is a typical male, least of all a heterosexual one.

Unlike these other films, Stone's *Alexander* offers up a nontraditional hero, defying and even flouting conventional depictions of male protagonists. Rather than resembling heroes such as Maximus, Achilles, Hector, and Leonidas, Alexander instead recalls (sometimes literally) the feminized and tyrannical antagonists such as Commodus, Agamemnon, and Xerxes. Stone's presentation of Alexander, ancient conqueror of the "known world," challenges the heteronormative stereotype in a variety of categories, including his clothing and physical appearance, overt homosexuality, inability to engage in heteroperformative acts, excessive emotionality, and feminized conduct in both political and personal affairs.

Considering the importance of the visual representation of a character for conveying hetero- or homosexuality, rarely does the body or attire of Alexander convincingly suggest normative masculinity. Throughout the film, Alexander's clothing makes him appear young and boyish, if not infantile. For example, as a child of about five and later ten, Alexander is clothed almost exclusively in white robes, which naturally indicate innocence and purity. However, as an adult (of 18 years), Alexander still wears the white clothing of his youth. Juxtaposed with the presence of his overbearing mother, Olympias, this dress hinders the audience's acceptance of Alexander as an independent adult. Strikingly, on the eve of the great battle of Gaugamela against the Persian emperor, Darius, Alexander's battle attire, including his armor, is again white (with the exception of a red cloak) and recalls the white armor worn by the villain, Commodus, in his gladiatorial combat with Maximus. Alexander's masculinity, and by extension his leadership and battle prowess, are further brought into question by the exceptional shortness of the lower half of his tunic, or "skirt." Whereas the tunics

of the other Greek soldiers extend down to near their knees, Alexander's barely extends past the lower groin. This childish short "skirt" and white attire consistently undermine the supposed greatness and masculinity of the protagonist, yet they are understated in comparison to Alexander's attire after his arrival in Babylon.

After Alexander and his men discover the royal harem, from this point forward Alexander's traditional/heroic masculinity is openly and permanently compromised. As Alexander and his generals take in the sights of the harem, they are greeted by numerous beautiful and seductive women who dance and writhe in an effort to entice the men. Noticeable among them are several groups of women wearing open-chested robes and sporting long, dark, luxurious hair. It is only on further examination that these "women" are in fact recognized as men, or at least eunuchs. After a brief interlude with one of the eunuchs, the next time Alexander appears, his clothing replicates the fine robes of the harem eunuchs and, also like them, he is shown wearing heavy eyeliner, a trait that will continue throughout the rest of the film. Like the choice of boyishly white clothing, the direct appropriation of eunuch attire visually emasculates Alexander in front of his men and the audience.

This visual emasculation of Alexander is only strengthened by his overt disdain for heterosexual relationships and avid embrace of an alternative sexuality. Guided by the narration of an elderly Ptolemy, the audience learns that Alexander was never once defeated in battle, "except by Hephaestion's thighs." Thus begins a series of flashbacks establishing a long-standing homoerotic relationship between Alexander and his companion Hephaestion, starting with their early childhood. During his youth at the feet of Aristotle, the young Alexander learns that homosexual relations between men is not a corrupt thing, provided that it is not simply an expression of passion or lust. When the relationship pushes each to exceed the other in virtue, then it is entirely acceptable.¹⁰ Yet the film pointedly fails to establish a virtuous homosexual relationship between Alexander and Hephaestion, and it instead gives the impression of a relationship based on emotion instead of reason. In light of Aristotle's rule about male relationships, the film provides no tangible, virtuous byproduct of their relationship.

Although no overt homosexual love scenes occur between Alexander and Hephaestion in the film, their relationship is a constant theme that undermines any even remotely heteroperformative acts. Even as a young boy, Alexander expressed an interest in Hephaestion, albeit obliquely. While observing with his father a series of cave paintings depicting various Greek myths, Alexander explains that his favorite



Figure 9.1 Alexander (Colin Farrell) receives a shoulder massage from Hephaestion (Jared Leto) in *Alexander* (2004). Warner Bros.

hero is Achilles, not because of his strength or god-like qualities, but because Achilles “loved Patroclus and avenged his death.”¹¹ Much later, after entering Babylon and looking out over the darkened city, Alexander confides in Hephaestion: “It is you that I love. No other.” As the two embrace, it is important to note that this first scene overtly expressing love between the two is also the first scene where Alexander appears in the above-mentioned Eastern, “feminized” attire and makeup. These two elements, the homosexual relationship and the feminization, work together to undermine the traditional masculine and heroic nature of the classical male protagonist.

Although the relationship between Alexander and Hephaestion would not have raised any eyebrows among their contemporaries, provided that each ultimately engaged in heteroperformative activities such as marriage and parenthood, Alexander’s open relationship with the eunuch Bagoas further highlights his character’s active negation of traditional masculinity.¹² During the harem scene, where by all conventionally masculine standards, Alexander should be interested in the women, they instead are literally just passing through the scene, as he sets his sights on the eunuch Bagoas, much to the dismay of a visibly jealous Hephaestion. As eunuchs are often used in classical films to display imperial decadence and imply some form of deviant sexuality, Alexander’s open courting of Bagoas clearly connects him to these “negative” stereotypes. Even by Aristotle’s own standard within the film, Alexander’s sexual interest in the eunuch, made abundantly clear by Bagoas’s erotic and suggestive dance in a later scene, indicates more a surrender to passion than to reason and virtue. Tellingly, when Alexander openly embraces then kisses Bagoas after the dance, his Macedonians—and even the purportedly

“feminine” Indians—are taken aback by this brazen repudiation of expected masculine behavior.

While it is true that some of Alexander's men engage in quasihomosexual activities, these instances are fleeting and do not appear to be defining features of their sexuality. During the Babylonian harem scene, Parmenion is briefly shown caressing the face and cupping the chin of one of the eunuchs. In another instance, during Alexander's wedding, when he offers to make the Bactrian women the official wives of the men, some men in the crowd ask, “What about the boys?” But since the question is followed by hearty male laughter, the request appears as jest. Even so, both of these instances treat any inclination toward bi- or homosexuality on the part of the Macedonian men as merely secondary. In fact, the wives and children of Alexander's men come up frequently in conversation, and the mutiny that occurs on the riverbank in India is the direct result of the men wanting to return to their families. Such concern and longing for their heterosexual relationships clearly overshadows any marginal references to homosexual activities. By contrast, Alexander's flagrant sexual excesses, especially with Bagoas, challenge the traditional expectations of both his onscreen cohort and the film audience to such a degree that his character is more deviant than normative and thus shares more in common with the likes of Commodus and Xerxes than with Maximus or Leonidas.¹³

Though male sexual relationships were generally accepted among the classical Greeks (and by extension, the Macedonians), it was also generally expected that a man would eventually take a wife and produce a legitimate heir. According to the film, Alexander technically accomplishes both of these tasks, but they are done with great reluctance, possibly even revulsion, which undercuts their very significance as cinematic markers of proper masculinity. A husband/father such as Maximus, Hector, or Leonidas does not shirk his familial responsibilities, but rather embraces them. In the case of Alexander, several of those close to him, including his mother, his generals, even Hephaestion himself, all urge him to have a son. On the surface, these requests appear mostly political because such offspring would allow the smooth continuance of his empire should anything happen to Alexander. In fact, to bolster the notion of political utility, the Macedonian generals demand that Alexander take a Macedonian wife as his first, in order to produce a legitimate Macedonian heir. When Alexander spontaneously chooses Roxane, a Sogdian princess, as his first wife, not only does the action fail to mollify the Macedonians, but it also fails to provide convincing evidence of Alexander's heteroperformative masculinity.

Although it could be argued that the marriage to Roxane was a political maneuver of alliances, as was the case with many ancient rulers, the scene of Alexander's wedding night reveals that even the heterosexuality implied by the marriage is illusory. In his bedchamber, Alexander is waiting for Roxane but is instead greeted by a somber, and possibly drunk, Hephaestion. Apparently fearing that he will lose Alexander to his new wife, Hephaestion presents him with a gold ring set with a large red stone, which Alexander promptly places on his ring finger. Even though Hephaestion appears to be letting go of Alexander and their relationship, especially when he wishes a son for the new husband, the exchange of the ring and its placement on a finger obviously associated with matrimony clearly represents an inversion, or perhaps a repudiation, of the recently concluded marriage ceremony between Alexander and Roxane. As such, at the very moment that Alexander appears to be engaging in a highly significant heteroperformative act, it is in fact negated by what essentially amounts to a wedding ceremony between himself and Hephaestion.¹⁴

Even during the awkward consummation scene between the husband and his new bride, Alexander's full potential as both a (heterosexual) man and an adult are called into question. During a virtual reenactment of an earlier scene between Alexander's father and his mother, where Alexander witnesses Philip essentially raping Olympias, Alexander violently forces Roxane upstairs to a bed where the two are disrobed during their struggles. As Roxane appears to submit to Alexander's advances, she notices Hephaestion's ring on his finger, which he promptly removes, only to have her throw it across the room. With this connection to his homosexual relationship (temporarily) out of the way, Alexander once again attempts to consummate his marriage, only to be stopped by the snakelike armband on Roxane, an immediate reminder of Alexander's mother, conveniently conveyed by a quick flashback to Olympias's snake-filled quarters.

This sexually charged and confused scene presents several obstacles to a heteroperformative, masculine Alexander. First, the violence between the couple differs markedly from the intimate scenes between the normative masculine heroes and their wives, and if the proper sexual relationship in such films between husbands and wives is more about intimacy than brutality, then Alexander easily fails to measure up. Second, the violence is a direct link back to the sexual aggression of Alexander's father, whom the film consistently portrays as an out of control political and sexual tyrant.¹⁵ Finally, the overt association of Roxane with Alexander's mother fails to normalize their matrimonial relationship and instead problematizes it as Oedipal and thus

deviant.¹⁶ The final nail in the coffin of Alexander's traditional masculinity during these wedding night scenes is when, after intercourse with Roxane, he quietly picks up Hephaestion's ring and replaces it on his finger, effectively negating any heteroperformance that had taken place.

Perhaps one of the most important heteroperformative duties that Alexander neglects is the siring of a legitimate heir. After his wedding night, the next time he has any significant interaction with Roxane is immediately after the sexually charged dance of Bagoas during a drunken interlude in India. As Roxane departs to her chambers in disgust after his passionate kiss with and embrace of Bagoas, Alexander stops her, and pleads, "I will come tonight." Roxane's response—"And I will wait"—clearly indicates not only that Alexander will not be joining her intimately but that he apparently has not done so for quite some time, perhaps not even since their wedding night.

By contrast, the one constant factor in any domestic scene with Alexander post-Babylon is not his wife but the unmistakable presence of Bagoas, often in various stages of undress. The unmistakably sexual nature of their relationship is first alluded to through shared seductive glances, and of course with the kiss and embrace following Bagoas's dance, but most obviously in a scene in Alexander's tent where he disrobes completely, then watches as Bagoas does the same, and finally motions the eunuch to join him. These openly sexual scenes between Alexander and Bagoas far exceed any screen time given to Alexander's intimacy with Roxane (let alone Hephaestion), further distancing him from the traditional husband's matrimonial and, above all, sexual role. As per the masculine norm, it is the duty and obligation of a husband to have intimate relations with his wife and even more so to father a child, especially for Alexander since his role as king/emperor obligates him to provide an heir. Alexander's general failure in this regard is striking and presents him as either unable or, more likely, unwilling to fulfill this critical responsibility.

This rejection of his proper masculine role peaks during the film's climax, and, as on his wedding night, when Alexander has an opportunity to embrace his role as a heteroperformative male, he literally rejects it. In a telling scene immediately after the death of Hephaestion, Roxane surprisingly informs Alexander that she is pregnant with a son, a development never clarified by the filmmaker. Instead of embracing her (and his unborn heir), Alexander actually recoils in horror from Roxane when she tries to place his hand on her abdomen, screaming, "Never touch me again!" Thus, at the film's end, one of Alexander's last acts is a direct renunciation of his expected duties as both a

husband and a father, spurning both his wife and child. Such selfish disregard for the heterosexual family unit completely negates his masculinity and, by association, his heroism for the audience.

Alexander's inability to comply with the heteroperformative masculine ideal is compounded by his emotional instability, a trait he shares with the antagonists of the other films and which is similarly connected to his descent into despotism. In sharp contrast to the reserved and stoic natures of Maximus, Hector, and Leonidas, Alexander is constantly prone to emotional outbursts, bouts of weeping (or at least, he is frequently teary-eyed), and other stereotypically feminine expressions of emotion. He is often near tears in scenes with his mother, his father, and members of the Macedonian nobility, on the battlefield after Gaugamela, and directly in front of his own troops as he tried to quell a mutiny. Recognizing his constantly fragile emotional state, Philip at one point tells him, "Don't look so hurt all the time, Alexander. Be a man," while his mother later orders Alexander to "stop acting like a boy." In both of these instances Alexander's masculinity as well as maturity are both challenged, once again undermining his manliness by calling attention to his excessive emotional instability.

Scenes between Alexander and his mother typically display emotional outbursts that are in marked contrast to Olympias's strength of character and determination. For example, immediately after the death of Philip, Alexander, in a frenzy, tries to blame Olympias for his murder but instead is forced to listen to her well-laid plans for securing his political future, plans that include executing his opponents, confiscating their lands, and seizing the throne. Because she has to spell out these actions to Alexander as if he had never thought of them before, Olympias appears much more decisive and active than her son, and thus that much more masculine. In another instance, also regarding succession, Olympias again has to tell Alexander the appropriate way to become Philip's legitimate heir, which includes taking a Macedonian wife and siring a child of his own. When Alexander balks at this idea, his stated reason is that he and Hephaestion love each other, implying their love would preclude him from a traditional marriage. Olympias's response, that Alexander must "never confuse feelings with duties," reveals that he is ruled by emotion instead of the more masculine reason. Such an admonition challenges Alexander's masculinity, first because it shows that his unstable emotions override his sense of political duty and, second, because the rebuke comes from a woman who appears to have more masculine qualities than he does.

The underlying question about this portrayal of Alexander is whether Stone intended to invert the standardized classical film traits

of masculine protagonist with feminized antagonist. Stone himself has said in numerous interviews that his vision of Alexander was crafted to be nuanced, complicated, and somewhat ambiguous, not the typical hero movie-going audiences—especially American ones—expect. As Stone explained, “Alexander was not only a conqueror, a builder, but he also had a fascinating blend of masculine and feminine qualities. Many of the Greek heroes were known for their sensuality, for their femininity as much as for their masculinity.”¹⁷ By presenting both “masculine” and “feminine” aspects of Alexander’s character, Stone contends that he was creating a more historically accurate portrayal of his personality. In contrast to the other three films’ heterosexualized and sanitized masculinity, Stone’s hero was intended to be a more progressive reading on the Macedonian leader that embraced the pansexual aspects of his nature. Stone himself has correctly noted that by the standards of the ancient Greeks, there was “nothing unusual” about Alexander’s relationships with both men and women, and defining him as “polymorphous or pansexual” would not have challenged the ancient world’s reception of Alexander as a hero.¹⁸ Coupled with his public displays of emotion, which Stone refers to as an expression of the hero’s compassion, Alexander does indeed defy the mold of the typical classical hero onscreen.

The problem with Stone’s presentation of Alexander is not that he crafted a multifaceted, sexually nuanced hero, but that he tried to do so in a genre of film that has generally eschewed such subtleties. If *Gladiator*, *Troy*, and *300* are any indication, heteronormative heroes are not only a general rule; they are expected by audiences. The director even noted that his own 19-year-old son and his friends were put off by the “gay scene” between Alexander and Hephaestion, which spoiled the notion of Alexander’s heroism for them. Stone mused, “They wanted a warrior and nothing else. They did not want to see a man with vulnerabilities . . . We only want clearly defined heroes and villains, no subtleties in between.”¹⁹ His son’s interpretation of the film was not isolated, as indicated by the scarce return at the US box office and the ubiquitous negative reviews of the film, many of which savaged the casting decisions and the editing in addition to the concept of a sexually ambiguous hero.²⁰

What Stone further failed to realize is that all the qualities he ascribed to Alexander, despite their historical accuracy, have long been considered cinematic tropes of villains and tyrants. Where Maximus, Achilles, Hector, and Leonidas are paragons of heteroperformativity, Alexander is their feminized antithesis. They are defined by their unwavering devotion to their heterosexual unions, yet Alexander

purposefully shirks his expected masculine duties and abandons himself to his decadent desires. In complicating the figure of Alexander, Stone either unconsciously or uncritically undermined the very heroism he was trying to glorify. Ultimately, the portrait of Alexander that emerges is not that of a classical hero, but that of the classical feminized tyrant, a corrupted and degraded inversion that unmans Alexander's supposed greatness.

NOTES

1. This chapter is an extensive revision and expansion of an argument first presented in Pierce (2008).
2. The following discussion of heteroperformance in *Gladiator*, *Troy*, and *300* is partially derived from my lengthier treatment in Pierce (2011) 40–57.
3. Ingraham (1994) 207.
4. Dixon (2003) 1–2.
5. See Chopra-Grant (2006) 96 for discussion of how performance connects to masculine identity.
6. Segal (2007) 89, 91, 92.
7. Clum (2002) xix.
8. On the long history of the likely homosexual relationship between Achilles and Patroclus in both the *Iliad* and Greek literary culture in general, see Crompton (2006) 3–6.
9. Hark (1993) 152.
10. For the focus on virtue, as opposed to self-gratification, in male-male relationships and their acceptance in classical Greek society, see Skinner (2010) 123–24.
11. On the sexual relationship between Alexander and Hephaestion as a mirror of that of Achilles and Patroclus, see O'Brian (1992) 57.
12. See Cartledge (2004) 228 for the lack of stigma attached to Greek homosexual relations.
13. Winkler (1990) 45–47 notes that the classical Greeks had a conception of an antitype of masculinity, a *kinaidos*, a socially and sexually deviant male, who by definition did not exhibit appropriate “manliness” (*andreia*), and thus his identity was demoted from manly to feminine.
14. As O'Brian (1992) 59 has argued, “Alexander proved to be a reluctant homosexual.”
15. In addition to Philip's near-rape of Olympias, he also impregnates another wife, whose Macedonian lineage threatens the status of foreign-born Olympias, while the new child rivals Alexander's chances of succession. Furthermore, Philip's constant drunkenness reveals him to be dangerous and volatile, prone to violent outbursts or deviant

sexual behavior, such as his sodomizing of a young man during a drinking party.

16. For more on Alexander's confused and Oedipal sexuality, see Cartledge (2004) 230.
17. Crowdus (2005) 22.
18. Crowdus (2005) 22.
19. Craig (2005).
20. See Cyrino (2010b) 177, who argues the film's negative reception is partly due to its "lack of coherence about sexual and emotional issues."