

## The Best of the Macedonians: Alexander as Achilles in Curtius' *History of Alexander*

Traditionally, Quintus Curtius Rufus' *History of Alexander*, the main Latin source for the reign of Alexander the Great, has been studied primarily from a historical perspective, with the majority of scholarship being devoted to the historian's date and sources (e.g., Dosson 1887, Tarn 1948, Atkinson 1980, Hammond 1983). More recently, however, scholars have become increasingly aware that Curtius' work, like all ancient historiography, contains a marked literary dimension as well, and, as a result, have begun to study the work from a more literary perspective (e.g., Currie 1990, Baynham 1998, Spencer 2002). Following in this growing tradition of literary scholarship on Curtius, I seek in this paper to shed light on one particular aspect of Curtius' complex, but underappreciated, literary design: his portrayal of Alexander as a second Achilles. While based on historical fact, Curtius' depiction of Alexander as Achilles serves, I argue, a particular literary purpose, namely, to highlight the dark side of Alexander's character—his *ira* and his *vis*—and, thereby, to reinforce the central moralizing theme of the work as a whole.

In the first section, I present the case for Curtius' depiction of Alexander as Achilles. To begin with, I consider the passages where Curtius makes the Alexander-Achilles connection explicit: (i.) Alexander at the siege of Gaza, where Curtius compares Alexander' act of dragging Betis' body around Gaza to Achilles' act of dragging Hector's body around Troy (Curt. 4.6.29); (ii.) Alexander's marriage to Roxane, where Curtius depicts Alexander as justifying his marriage to a barbarian wife by reference to Achilles' quasi-marriage to Briseis (Curt. 8.4.26). Next, I consider the passages where the Alexander-Achilles connection emerges implicitly. A few such passages, I argue, include: (i.) Alexander's lamentation for the death of Statira, Darius' wife (Curt. 4.10.18-24), a passage which casts Alexander in the role of the Achilles of *Iliad* 24; (ii.)

the three successive letter exchanges of Alexander and Darius—letter exchanges which, when taken together, subtly evoke the three pairs of speeches during the embassy to Achilles in *Iliad* 9 (Curt. 4.1.7-14, 4.5.1-8, and 4.11.1-21).

In the second section, I consider the meaning of Curtius' depiction of Alexander as Achilles. To come to terms with this question, I begin with Achilles' symbolic resonance in Roman culture. Following King 1987 and Harris 2001, I contend that the Homeric hero's symbolic resonance for the Romans was primarily negative; whereas the Greeks tended to conceive of Achilles as a noble and tragic figure, the Romans tended to conceive of him as a figure of supreme rage and violence. Thus, with the Roman view of Achilles in mind, I argue that Curtius' depiction of Alexander as Achilles should be regarded as fundamentally damning; despite his many good qualities, Curtius implies, Alexander was, at heart, something of a demonic force. From there, and by way of conclusion, I connect Curtius' depiction of Alexander as Achilles to the central moralizing theme of the work as a whole. This central moralizing theme—which posits that Alexander began as a good king but became an evil tyrant due to his supreme good fortune (Tarn 1948)—finds support, I suggest, in Alexander's depiction as Achilles: the Alexander-Achilles connection both foreshadows the king's moral decline before the fact (Books 3-5), and underscores his moral decline after the fact (Books 6-10).

#### Works Cited

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