Cold War *Basileus*: Alexander as Allegory in Moore's *Watchmen*

In his 1986 graphic novel, *Watchmen,* Alan Moore gives his anti-villain, Ozymandias, aka Adrian Veidt, frequent in-text parallels to Alexander the Great. This allusion does a great deal of work within the text to establish Veidt as a conqueror-cosmopolitan and is a line of reception that has received little to no attention in scholarly works on the novel. In this paper, I argue that Alan Moore's references to Alexander the Great in *Watchmen* are meant to ask the same questions of Adrian Veidt, that can be raised about Alexander himself: At what point does the benefit of political unity brought by a leader outweigh the human cost of its establishment? In examining both of these figures side by side, I argue that Moore's reception of Alexander raises the same question about the *basileus* himself as it does his superhero admirer.

In framing this narrative across time and space, Moore adds a global and historical perspective by connecting a philosophical issue of 1986, when he penned *Watchmen,* to the classical past. Moore uses the theme of an imperial brotherhood of man as a grim, but necessary, response to his novel's heightened Cold War missile race, which spreads panic, extends Richard Nixon's presidency to an incredible sixteen years, and leaves the Doomsday Clock at five-to-two-minutes to midnight throughout the graphic novel (Moore 1987: 50). Veidt's feigned alien attack on New York City gives mankind the illusion of a non-human enemy and thereby creates a kind of political unity among humans, but at the cost of a lie, and, ultimately, millions of lives. This is framed as horrible, but necessary, and is ultimately allowed by other characters who are his critics. Alexander, who created an empire that spanned continents and centuries and redefined what it meant to be Greek, is Veidt's natural parallel. In making Veidt an Alexander-

like figure, Moore tells us that he too changes history at a high human cost, while asking us: was it worth it, and when is it worth it?

Throughout the graphic novel, Veidt makes frequent references to Alexander the Great, through his own costume, discussion of Alexander himself, and most importantly, through questions he raises. Veidt, whose costume is his crime-fighting alter-ego Ozymandias, resembles a Hellenistic king, and espouses a desire to see mankind united against an external evil under one common banner in which they could all flourish (Moore 1987: 328). This view is one explicitly drawn from William Tarn's reading of Alexander the Dreamer (Tarn 1933), criticized by Badian (1958). Just as Tarn's Alexander is motivated by a brotherhood of man under one Greek banner (Badian 1958: 426), Moore's Veidt cites as constant motivation for his actions "A world united" (Moore 1987: 200). When he compares himself openly to Alexander, Veidt does not necessarily align himself with the Alexander of fact, or even of historiography. Rather, Veidt buys wholesale into the same school of thought as Tarn.

I will also examine critiques of Alexander and Tarn by Badian (1958) and Thomas (1968), as well as the in-universe critiques of Veidt by his fellow superheroes, Nite Owl and Dr. Manhattan. Badian (1958) questions whether Alexander truly had such altruistic motivations to begin with (440), and Thomas (1968) questions if the human costs of imperialism could ever truly make up for any good motivations at all (259), despite Tarn's attention to the positive aspects of the Hellenistic Greek world. Likewise, Veidt accomplishes world peace in the face of a nuclear crisis, but at a severe human cost, and by means of extreme deception. Dr. Manhattan and Nite Owl serve as critics, asking him at what point it was worth it, and question his motives. Moore takes the legacy of Alexander to be that of the conqueror-cosmopolitan who changed the world with a short reign, and asks at what point a man who conquers or harms others can be

considered “good,” and to what degree unity among differing peoples is possible. In his character of Ozymandias, Moore adapts these questions to his own context, leaving them similarly unanswered, and making the question a long-term, almost universal one in the face of world-changing events.

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