

Persuasion, Emotion, and the Letters of the *Alexander Romance*

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Mixture is the letter,
the epistle which is not a genre, but all genres, literature itself.
Jacques Derrida, *The Postcard* (48)

The presence of over thirty letters embedded in the Greek *Alexander Romance* has garnered frequent attention from scholars of epistolography, novels, and fiction.¹ These letters are widely distributed throughout the three books of the *Romance*, attributed to various characters in the plot. What is most striking about the deployment of letters in the narrative is the mixture of different epistolographical types. From battle briefs, boastful barbarian epistles, and lengthy letters of marvels, it is clear that the epistolary frame here operates in very different capacities. I know of no other work of ancient fiction that incorporates so many different epistolary forms. If it is fair to regard epistolography as a spectrum of genres,² then the *Alexander Romance* spans the full register from functional to philosophical.

Sorting the sources and interrelationships of these letters has been a challenge for critics, further complicated by the tangled transmission history and the multiple recensions of the *Alexander Romance*. Reinhold Merkelbach's seminal study in 1954 made a crucial and intuitive distinction between the lengthy 'Wunderbriefe' and the novel's shorter letters: he claimed that the latter category represents the remnants of a lost epistolary novel about the life of

¹ Hägg 1983, 126 regards the incorporation of letters as the 'most important innovation' on the part of the author. For the most recent treatments, see Konstan 1998, Rosenmeyer 2001 (ch. 7), and Whitmarsh 2013 (ch. 6).

² See the introduction of Morello and Morrison 2007, 13: 'Rather than attempting to construct a more generous (or a more watertight) definition of the letter...we could think of this genre as a kind of spectrum.'

Alexander and functions in the *Romance* as personifications of the protagonists.³ And although some have resisted Merkelbach's theory of the epistolary novel,⁴ his division based on length and theme remains. Most scholarship on the *Romance*'s letters addresses one group and ignores the other, or makes an argument only for a selection from each group. This approach is not entirely misguided: the textual fluidity of the *Romance* suggests that no two versions had precisely the same line-up of letters, which permits localized groupings from individual recensions. But this treatment does not respond to the realities of reading the *Alexander Romance*, where the audience encountered all sorts of letters reshuffled alongside one another.

In this article, I would like to revisit the letters of the *Alexander Romance* (hereafter *AR*) through the lens of the ancient reader. I organize the letters into three categories – documentary, ethopoetic, and miracle letters – according to both formal criteria and the modes of engagement they establish with the audience. These categories activate three different 'horizons of expectation' triangulated through historiographical, rhetorical, and travel genres in the Hellenistic and Imperial periods. I aim not to replace one strict typology with another, but rather to suggest three points along an epistolary spectrum to which the various letters of the *AR* gravitate. The numerous recensions of the novel, and the considerable variation between these recensions, suggest that *AR* was the product of many hands over a long period of composition.⁵ For this reason, I refer to the composer of the *AR* as the 'author(s)' and include numerous recensions of the text in my study, highlighting variations where appropriate.

Documentary Letters

Like his Hellenistic successors, Alexander must have written and received numerous letters for both official and personal correspondence. The delicate project of preserving his missives is emphasized in Plutarch's *Life of Eumenes*: here Alexander, after rashly incinerating the tent of Eumenes the record keeper, demanded duplicate copies of all official letters from his generals and

³ See Merkelbach 1954, 32-50.

⁴ Whitmarsh 2013, 89-92 offers a thorough and recent rebuttal of Merkelbach's *Briefroman*.

⁵ For the chronology and authorship of the *AR*, see Gunderson 1980, 7-33 and Dowden 2008, 650-654.

satraps. Plutarch himself claimed to have access to Alexander's letter collection, quoting from it twice in the *Life of Alexander*,⁶ and because Quintus Curtius and Arrian mention such letters in their histories, early scholars believed that a collection of Alexander's correspondence circulated soon after his death.⁷ Modern critics continue to debate whether individual letters attributed to Alexander in histories and fictional works are genuine or fictitious.

This study of the epistolary genres of the *AR* begins with 'documentary letters': letters whose formal features make them plausible historical documents, but whose authenticity is beyond verification. Perhaps these letters were carefully crafted to persuade readers of their status as genuine correspondence. Fictitious letters presented as authentic documents participate in a phenomenon William Hansen has termed 'pseudo-documentarism,' 'an author's untrue allegation that he (or she) has come upon an authentic document of some sort that he (or she) is drawing upon or passing on to his (or her) readers.'⁸ But it is also possible that the author(s) of the *AR* assembled and transmitted letters they believed to be genuine. The genetic history of the novel's letters is not important here: I am not interested in whether some of the *AR*'s letters are authentic but *why* they might be considered as such.

The documentary letters of the *AR* are convincing because they meet specific criteria characteristic of authentic, non-literary correspondence. In the process of identifying these criteria, however, we must also contend with what we mean by 'authentic' and 'non-literary.' Welles' *Royal Correspondence in the Hellenistic Period*, for example, categorizes the non-literary letter as 'a purely practical instrument of communication...uninfluenced by rhetorical schools.'⁹ Yet the criterion of practicality is unproductive for the letters of the *AR*, whose variety defies many of the classifications imposed by scholars of epistolography. In order to understand what makes the documentary letters credible, we should instead examine the characteristics of letters Hellenistic and Imperial readers would have encountered in their daily lives: family com-

⁶ Plutarch's *Life of Eumenes* 2.2. In the *Life of Alexander* 8.1, Plutarch argues on the basis of Alexander's letters (ὡς ἐκ τῶν ἐπιστολῶν λαβεῖν ἔστιν) that he was interested in medical practice. The scholar quotes a letter to Aristotle in 7.6 and another to Parmenio in 22.5.

⁷ Kaerst 1892, 603-604.

⁸ Hansen 2003, 302. See also Ní-Mheallaigh 2008, 404: '[pseudo-documents] lend the fiction an air of authenticity, veracity, and documentary importance by creating...an extraliterary referent such as that which is normally attributed to historiography.'

⁹ Welles 1934, xliv. Authentic letters, under Welles' definition, have practical applications and immediate implications for both writer and recipient, whether the recipient is an individual or even an entire *polis*.

munications, business transactions, petitions, and inscribed royal correspondence. These constitute a genre of letters for which we have plentiful evidence and from which we may draw criteria of authenticity.

From a philological standpoint, we gain some insight from Welles, who examines the syntax and semantics of inscribed letters from Asia Minor. Welles notes that his selection of seventy-five letters is distinguished by a clear and concise style, neglectful of rhetoric: ‘no exaggeration, no accumulation of phrases, no artificial turns of expression.’¹⁰ Hiatus is not consistently avoided. *Koine* sound-changes occur with increasing frequency over the course of the Hellenistic period, and Ionic, Aeolic, and Doric influences are present in many inscriptions, according to their geographical origins. Vocabulary is intelligible and unambiguous, with few *hapax legomena*.¹¹ In short, the Greek which readers encountered in royal Hellenistic correspondence was not the literary Attic prized by Second Sophistic authors in their fictive epistles.

In addition to the philological criteria suggested by Welles, my own review of Hellenistic and Imperial papyri identifies three narrative criteria of non-literary correspondence. First, non-literary letters frequently allude to letter-writing activity and the materiality of the epistolary medium, particularly in the introduction and conclusion of the letter. *P. Oxy.* XVIII 2190, for example, preserves a letter from an Alexandrian student to his father around 100 CE.¹² Within the first twelve lines of the fragmentary introduction, our student reminds his father twice of his own writing activities: ‘I wrote to you earlier... I wrote to Philoxenus’ associates’ (11-12). In the conclusion, the student acknowledges a recent letter his father has sent him and claims to have distributed gifts according to the instructions in that letter (καὶ ὧν ἔγραψας ἔπεμψα μετ’ ἐπιστολῆς ἐκάστῳι ἡμικάδιον, 61-62). The student’s attention to previous letters, as well as his recognition of materials shipped and received, is a regular feature of correspondence in non-literary letters.¹³ This attention to detail was surely necessitated by the difficulty of ensuring delivery confirmation in the ancient world.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 1934, xlvi.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 1934, lxxxv.

¹² Transcription and translation from Hutchinson 2007, 19-23.

¹³ Two additional examples include *W. Chr.* 50 (*BL* II.2) and *P. Cair. Zen.* I 59037: the former discusses writing in both Greek and Egyptian for the benefit of its reader, while the latter emphasizes the unreliability of ensuring letter delivery. In a survey of Bagnall and Derow 1981, thirty-eight of the fifty-two papyrus letters (excluding decrees and letters of receipt) include references to letters in the past or future.

A second feature common to non-literary letters is the specificity with which senders acknowledge their addressees and make demands. Writers of all letters, literary and non-literary, naturally provide some justification for their correspondence. But whereas literary authors usually offer a short pretext before expounding on impersonal themes and subjects, non-literary authors address specific transactions between themselves and the recipients of the letters. The pseudo-historical letter of Demosthenes to the Athenians (*Letter 4*), for example, cites the slander of Theramenes as a pretext for addressing the council, but then declaims generically about Athens.¹⁴ By contrast, a letter from an Alexandrian physician of the first century BCE issues detailed instructions to Egyptian priests for transporting a corpse from the Fayum.¹⁵ In another non-literary example, a certain Demophon writes to Ptolemaios requesting particular flute-players, drums, and castanets in preparation for a festival.¹⁶ Non-literary letters may also include sentiments unrelated to the primary interests of the correspondence, but do not muse at length on philosophical topics.

Finally, authors of non-literary letters often request return mail to themselves or a third party. In petition letters to Ptolemaic rulers, for example, constituents implore the king to influence local magistrates with letters of his own. A third century woman named Philista supplicates Ptolemy III to write to her *epistates* for redress from the bathman Petchon, who scalded her with jugs of hot water.¹⁷ In the same year, Ctesicles the Alexandrian asks Ptolemy to write the *strategos* on behalf of his court case against his daughter.¹⁸ Nor were the Ptolemies the only addressees expected to return a prompt response to sender. Horos the *basilikos grammateus* in 242 BCE demands immediate feedback from Harmais the *topogrammateus* regarding the overpriced oil in his district.¹⁹ Even the student from *P. Oxy.* 2190 harries his father for an opinion about the best teachers in Alexandria (32).

Turning our attention back to the *AR*, we may now see how documentary letters deploy the criteria of non-literary correspondence. Of the many letters between Alexander, Darius, and their subordinates over the course of Books 1 and 2, four have also been discovered in papyri that are independent of the

¹⁴ Hercher 1873 is the only complete text of pseudo-historical letters; see Rosenmeyer 2006, 110-112 for a translation of Demosthenes' *Letter 4*.

¹⁵ SB I 5216, *Sel. Pap.* 104 in Bagnall and Derow 1981, 236 (no. 145).

¹⁶ *P. Hib.* I 54 in Bagnall and Derow 1981, 201 (no. 125).

¹⁷ *P. Enteux.* 82, *Sel. Pap.* 269 in Bagnall and Derow 1981, 195 (no. 117).

¹⁸ *P. Enteux.* 26, *Sel. Pap.* 268 in Bagnall and Derow 1981, 202 (no. 126).

¹⁹ *W. Chr.* 300 in Bagnall and Derow 1981, 161-162 (no. 97).

novel.²⁰ The existence of these papyrus letters, separate from the Ps.-Callisthenes text, suggests that readers of the *AR* encountered them in contexts outside the novel. One such letter from Darius to Alexander appears in both *PSI* 1285 and Book 2.10.6-8A of the novel, and provides our first example of the documentary letter in our discussion:

King Darius to Alexander, greetings.

You wrote us an arrogant letter in which you request that we meet you in Phoenice. We are not yet coming to such a point for the gods from the east to settle in the west. Are you willing then to send (προπεμπομέναι) my mother, wife, and child back to me, accepting (λαμβάνων) the things agreed upon (τὰ προομολογηθέντα) for you in the earlier letter? If you are not willing (εἰ δὲ οὐ βούλει), I will consider that my mother has been escorted to the gods, that my children have never been born, and I myself will not cease from avenging your violence. It has been written to me that you have treated my family with respect. But if you indeed were doing and maintaining justice on my behalf...but if you hope, using your reasoning, for what is impossible, and because of this you distribute godlike honors to my family, I want you to know that even the gods will be vexed at your big-talk, and from now on you may be merciless to my family, and injure and take vengeance upon my children as if they were an enemy's. Neither by doing these kindnesses will you make me your friend, nor by doing injustice will you make me your enemy. Both of these things will be on the same level for me, insofar as you are held by the same reasoning. Therefore, make your final decision clear to me, so that I may know it.

(*PSI* 1285, Col. IV 17-41 in Giuliano 2010)

King Darius to Alexander:

You wrote us an arrogant letter in which you request that we meet you. You are not yet coming to such a point for the gods from the east to settle in the west. I bear witness to the manner in which you treated me. For I consider (δοξάζω γάρ) that my mother has gone (πεπορεύσθαι) to the gods, and that I did not have a wife. I will not cease from taking vengeance on your violence. For it has been written to me, that you treated my family

²⁰ Four letters of the novel appear also in papyri: (1) *P. Hamb.* 129 1-30 corresponds to Darius' letter to the satraps in 1.39.3-5; (2) lines 31-56 of the same papyrus appear in Darius' letter of submission in 2.17.2-4 of the novel; (3) *PSI* XII 1285 17-41 arrives in 2.10.6-8 of the *AR*; (4) lines 42-48 of the same papyrus appear in 2.10.9-10 of the novel. An additional letter in *P. Hamb.* 129 appears comparable to the letter from Porus to Alexander in 3.2.2-5 in the novel, but the two are not similar enough to be equated.

with respect. And if indeed you were doing and on my behalf possibly...distributing godlike honors to my family. From now on, you may be merciless to my family. Injure and take vengeance on my children as if they were an enemy's. Neither because you are doing these kindnesses will you make me your friend nor by doing injustice will you make me your enemy. Both of these things are on the same level for me. Therefore, make your final decision clear to me, so that I may know it.

(2.10.6-8A)

The letter from Darius to Alexander in 2.10 strongly resembles the papyrus version, suggesting that the novel's author copied from a source common to both. Important differences between the two nevertheless exist. First, the papyrus version is longer and more rhetorically sophisticated than the novel's letter. The papyrus letter, for example, establishes an antithesis between Alexander's options: on the one hand, he may accept a bribe in exchange for the safe return of the Persian royal family, which Darius offers in an extended participial clause (λαμβάνων...). The following sentence completes the antithesis by vowing vengeance if Alexander 'does not wish' (εἰ δὲ οὐ βούλει). The novel's version drops this antithesis completely; instead, Darius jumps to the immediate conclusion that his family is lost (δοξάζω γὰρ). Further evidence for the sophistication of the papyrus letter is its attempt to engage philosophical material. Darius admonishes Alexander for seeking the impossible and warns him about divine dissatisfaction with his 'big-talk.' This discussion of mortal limits and divine vengeance is absent from the novel's version. The papyrus letter in *PSI 1285* evinces some rhetorical ambitions, while the novel's letter by comparison appears abrupt and inelegant.

In its lack of elegance, the novel's version of the letter from Darius to Alexander reflects the philological criteria of non-literary correspondence. The simplicity of syntax and vocabulary make for easy reading: difficult forms in the papyrus are omitted in the novel (προομολογηθέντα), while compound forms are reduced or replaced with simpler equivalents (πεπορευῆσθαι for προπεμπομέναι). Both versions meet the narrative criteria of non-literary correspondence. First, Darius frequently mentions the writing process and material letters: he recalls an 'arrogant letter' sent by Alexander, as well as written reports on the wellbeing of his family. Second, the letter addresses a specific transaction between Alexander and Darius (the abduction of the royal family), and makes demands of its addressee. Finally, Darius requires return mail from Alexander regarding his 'final decision.' In sum, the letter from

Darius to Alexander in 2.10 has been tailored as a persuasive document that advertises its authenticity to readers by way of imitation.

More compelling for our study of the documentary letters is the possibility that readers had encountered similar letters prior to reading the novel itself. In what context this letter of Darius would have been accessible to readers, we cannot say. Perhaps the letters of *PSI* 1285 and *P. Hamb.* 129 are remnants of an earlier epistolary novel, as Merkelbach suggests. Perhaps these letters circulated as a collection of authentic correspondence, available both to discerning historians and fiction writers. A familiarity with such letters independent from the novel, or at least a knowledge that such collections existed, would assure the reader of the *AR* that the letter he or she encountered in the fiction was an authentic document. Readers who recognized 2.10.6-8 of the novel as Darius' famous letter about his captive family would have greater reason to trust its veracity.

While it is possible that some of the novel's documentary letters are conscious forgeries by the author(s), in the case of these papyrus letters it seems more likely that the author(s) played the role of copyist. Modern critics hesitate to ascribe the *AR* to a single author, preferring to discuss the activities of an editor or redactor who assembled various puzzle pieces into the extant novel. If we regard him as compiler, not an inventor, we must consider that the author(s) of the *AR* was as convinced of the veracity of these documentary letters as his readers.²¹ Hägg distinguishes the fictional goals of the *AR* from more earnest works of Alexander history, arguing that the author(s) regarded himself more 'tragic poet' than historian, whose aim 'was to arouse fear and pity...[to collect] sensations rather than facts.'²² But the inclusion of documentary letters which the author(s) himself believed authentic suggests a more serious venture than tragic sentimentality or pseudo-documentary playfulness.

Retrieving the authorial intent behind the documentary letters is, of course, an impossible venture, but our second example from the *AR* may help distinguish a line between persuasion and play. In Book 3.18β, Alexander receives a letter from Queen Candace of Meroë:

²¹ Hägg 1983, 127: 'Pseudo-Callisthenes probably regarded [them] as a collection of authentic letters.'

²² *Ibid.* 1983, 126.

Queen Candace of Meroë and all the princes to King Alexander, greetings: Do not despise us for the color of our skin. For we are brighter in our souls than the whitest of your people. We are in number 80 squadrons ready to do harm to those who attack us. The emissaries sent by us are bringing you 100 solid gold ingots, 500 young Ethiopians, 200 chimpanzees, an emerald crown of a thousand pounds of gold, 10 strings of unbored pearls, 10 certified staters, 80 ivory chests, and various kinds of animals from our country: 5 elephants, 10 tame leopards, 30 man-eating hounds in cages, 30 fighting bulls, 300 elephant tusks, 300 leopard skins, 3,000 ebony wands. So send us immediately the men you want to collect these things. And write to us about your affairs when you have become king of the whole world. Farewell.

Initially, Candace's identity problematizes any attempt to categorize this letter among the documentary letters in the *AR*, because her semi-mythical status undermines a central criterion of plausibility. Documentary letters are credible because they posit correspondence between historical characters, and Queen Candace of Meroë is not historical in the same way as Alexander or Darius III. It is true that Hellenistic and Imperial historians were familiar with Meroë, a land located in modern Sudan near the sixth cataract of the Nile. Diodorus Siculus describes Meroë as a religious center (3.6), citing Agatharchides of Cnidus as his source (3.11). Quintus Curtius notes that Alexander desired to visit Ethiopia, but that the timing was inconvenient (4.8.3).²³ But in the novel, there is considerable confusion about the land's geography: 3.18 places Candace at the palace of Semiramis in Babylon. Aleksandra Szalc argues persuasively that this confusion in the *AR* is related to the persistent conflation of Africa and India in the Graeco-Roman imagination.²⁴

If the precise location of Candace's land was unclear to some ancient readers and writers, the personage of Candace herself remained even more so. The name 'Candace' is derived from the Meroitic *ktke* or *kdke*, 'queen mother.'²⁵ In his *Aithiopica*, Bion of Soli claims that all mothers of Ethiopian kings were named Candace,²⁶ and Acts 8.27 refers to the religious conversion of a certain

²³ For a fuller list of ancient sources on Meroë, see Stoneman 2008, 134-138.

²⁴ Szalc (forthcoming): 'The long-perpetuated inability to differentiate between the land of Aethiopia and the black Aethiopes indirectly produced the conflation of Africa and India in common belief, as Indians were also noted for their dark complexion.' Szalc's article proceeds to uncover some elements in the Candace episode of the *AR* that are likely derived from ancient geography and historiography about India.

²⁵ Wenig 1980, kol. 313, 'Kandake.'

²⁶ FGrH 668.

Candace's eunuch. Therefore, the name 'Candace' activates a long tradition of African queens, but not a specific individual. Alexander's visit to Meroë makes manifest this tradition in the form of a single, opulent queen who plays opposite to Alexander as the second coming of Ninus' Semiramis. And Candace's letter to Alexander is a model document that contributes to her materialization. First, the letter conforms to Welles' stylistic attributes of non-literary letters. There are no complex rhetorical constructions in the grammar, little challenging vocabulary (excepting the exotic gifts), and hiatus occurs occasionally.²⁷ Her letter opens with the traditional formula for rulers and their associates, as well as the formalities of greeting and farewell (χαίρειν, ἔρωσο).²⁸ In terms of narrative criteria, Candace mentions the act of writing and addresses a specific gift-giving transaction with arrangements for the delivery of goods. She also requests return mail: a letter from Alexander when he has conquered 'the whole world.'

A comparison with a Hellenistic letter from Tebtunis further demonstrates the plausibility of Candace's letter. Goods exchanged in historical documents are rarely as exotic as Candace's chimpanzees and emerald crowns, but the receipt-style listing of items with alpha-numeric abbreviation is common in authentic records of transactions and does not occur in literary texts. This selection from *P. Teb.* 11 preserves a letter of receipt to confirm goods sent by a certain Dorion to Menches to aid in Menches' reappointment bid for *kommogrammateus* in 119 BCE.²⁹

Menches son of Petesuchus, *kommogrammateus* of Kerkeosiris in the division of Polemon in the Arsinoite nome, to Dorion son of Eirenaeus, one of the 'first friends.' I acknowledge that I have had measured out to me by you in the 51st year 100 artabae of wheat on the *doxikon* standard, justly measured, the wheat being new, free from adulteration and sifted, and in like manner 20 artabae of lentils, 13 of bruised beans, 13 of peas, 10 of mixed seeds, 4 of mustard, 1 of parched pulse, total 61 of pulse, 100 of wheat.

(trans. Grenfell, Hunt, and Smyly 1902)

Candace enumerates luxury goods the way Menches lists lentils, with a precise count and description of each item. The queen's gift pearls are unpierced

²⁷ For example, σκυτάλαι ὀγδοήκοντα.

²⁸ See Letters 10-13, 18 in Welles 1934 for standard greetings in the intrapersonal correspondence between Hellenistic kings, associates, and their officials.

²⁹ Grenfell, Hunt, and Smyly 1902, 73.

(ἀπρήτων) and Dorion's gift wheat is unadulterated (ἄδολον); Alexander can expect exactly thirty hounds and Menches thirteen artabae of bruised beans. Both Hansen and Ní-Mheallaigh recognize the use of superfluous detail in pseudo-documentary texts as a strategy to convince the reader of a document's authenticity: 'the accumulation of [detail] is calculated to lend an air of greater veracity to the fiction and to achieve the so-called 'reality-effect.'³⁰ Candace's letter employs excessive detail to this end and, in doing so, actually imitates authentic letters of purchase and receipt.

Not all forgeries aim to persuade an audience of their authenticity for the purpose of deceit alone. By attributing a highly persuasive documentary letter to the semi-mythical Candace, the author(s) of the *AR* tests the credulity of his readers, engaging them in a pseudo-documentary game of wit. Can the reader distinguish fact from fiction in a text that plays so freely with both? By contrast to the Darius-Alexander correspondence, for which we have evidence of independent circulation, it seems likely that Candace's letter is an authorial invention. Perhaps this letter represents the author(s)' own attempt to innovate on the documentary letters: if we can imagine the author(s) of the *AR* in the role of both reader and writer, transmitting 'authentic' letters when the evidence is plentiful and fabricating documentary letters in turn, the genre gains new traction with the novel's audience. Within an overtly fictional account of Alexander's adventures, the documentary letters remind readers of the novel's factual underpinnings and test their faculties of discernment. The *AR* may well relay 'not what Alexander was, but what Alexander meant,'³¹ but the text presents itself as a relic of the historical man upon whom the legend was based.

Another possibility is that the play between authentic and fictitious in the documentary letters respond to Alexander's own ability to transform fantasy into fact, not only in the novel but in the Graeco-Roman imagination.³² Like a prism, Alexander converts a monochromatic sketch of the unknown world into a rich palette of colorful characters, including the Babylonians, Brahmans, Amazons, and Ethiopians. In that case, the letter of Candace marks a transitional point between the documentary letters and the ethopoietic letters, where the aim is no longer persuasion so much as characterization. Both categories strive to animate the protagonists of the *AR*, but the ethopoietic letters, as I will

³⁰ See Hansen 2003, 305-306 and Ní-Mheallaigh 2008, 407-408.

³¹ Dowden 2008, 652.

³² Stoneman 2003, 325: 'The history of the Greek world assumes a different complexion following the death of Alexander. Within the space of a few years, its subject changes from that of the Greek homeland and its neighbors to that of the whole near east including Egypt and the lands west of the Indus.'

show, are willing to exceed the limits of plausibility in order to illustrate the minds and emotions of their authors.

Ethopoetic Letters

Scholars ancient and modern have long recognized the association between letter-writing and *progymnasmata*, school exercises best attested from the Hellenistic and Imperial periods which prepared students for rhetorical composition and declamation.³³ In one such exercise, *ethopoeia*, students wrote and delivered speeches in the voice of a fictitious, literary, or historical persona, capturing their very essence (τὸ οἰκεῖον).³⁴ Successful characterizations imitated the vocabulary, dialect, and emotions deemed appropriate to both the character and the occasion. Training in characterization was advantageous for all branches of oratory, and the letter-form soon evolved as a popular medium for such exercises.³⁵ By the Second Sophistic, authors like Alciphron had transformed the ethopoetic letter into a high literary art, attempting to sustain appropriate characterizations without falling into non-Attic solecisms or anachronisms.³⁶ While fictive epistolography could stand as a genre in its own right, the letter also made an increasing appearance in the novels.

The ethopoetic letter is a form well-represented within the *AR*, determined by a very different set of criteria than the documentary letters. Documentary letters require plausible authors and addressees; ethopoetic letters do not. Documentary letters strive to persuade the reader of their authenticity; ethopoetic letters craft portraits of the novel's protagonists, 'to have the letter-writers' differing characters emerge from their ways of writing and of interpreting

³³ Stowers 1986, 34 notes the flexibility of letter-writing exercises by comparison to the rest of the rhetorical tradition: 'Letter writing remained only on the fringes of formal rhetorical education throughout antiquity. It was never integrated into the rhetorical systems...there were never any detailed systematic rules for letters as there were for standard rhetorical forms.'

³⁴ Similar exercises include the *eidolôpoia*, the characterization of someone dead, and *prosôpopoia*, the personification of a non-human entity, such as the sea.

³⁵ Nicolaus, a sophist and teacher of rhetoric in fifth century Constantinople, notes the close connection between *ethopoeia* and letter-writing in his *Progymnasmata*: 'To me, [*ethopoeia*] also seems to exercise us in the style of letter writing, since in that there is need of foreseeing the character of those sending letters and those to whom they are sent' (trans. Kennedy 2003, 166).

³⁶ See Rosenmeyer 2001, 255-263 for the evolution of *ethopoeia* from exercise to art form.

events.³⁷ Finally and crucially, ethopoetic letters leave traces of their rhetorical origins; figures and techniques described in the rhetorical handbooks regularly appear within these letters.

The ethopoetic letter also encompasses a span of more or less sophisticated forms, ranging from school exercises to high literary works. Less sophisticated examples are often straightforward stereotypes of famous characters from Greek myth or literature. The *Progymnasmata* of Hermogenes and Aphthonius suggest Achilles as a standard subject for *ethopoeia*:³⁸ schoolboy familiarity with the Homeric hero and his notorious rage makes him a perfect prompt.³⁹ More nuanced ethopoetic letters, like the pseudo-historical letter collections, portray philosophical or historical characters, and strive for historical verisimilitude and precise Attic Greek to win over a discerning, elite audience.⁴⁰ Far from offering explicit statements of identity, these letters implicate their readers as interpreters and critics: can the reader determine the letter-writer's character by reading between the lines and thereby learn something from this positive or negative *exemplum*?

That Alexander was a popular character for ethopoetic letters is evidenced by a student composition from the Graeco-Egyptian schools of the second century CE, a letter from Alexander to the Carthaginians preserved on an ostrakon:

Alexander to the Carthaginians,
] you will remain unnoticed and they (καὶ αὐτοὶ)... [
] ...keeping guard (φυλασσοντες), because [
] ...they have sent to... [
] they have given tribute (λογισαν) [
] ...and I, having received fifty [
]

³⁷ Hägg 1983, 126.

³⁸ Milne 1908, 128: 'The recourse to mythological characters, especially Homeric heroes,... seem to be more of the nature of exercises in composition.'

³⁹ Stirewalt 1993, 21-22: 'More advanced students prepared letters appropriate to a particular character... Thus the letter was readily available and adaptable as a small complete unit for exercise in literary composition well above the elementary level.'

⁴⁰ Rosenmeyer 2006, 99: 'The use of well known names, specific places, even precise dates was required if the anonymous author wished the details of his letter to ring true, since the audience evaluated the work according to standards of verisimilitude and probability.'

] therefore I have been recalled (κλημαι οὖν) [
] ...so that [

(ostracon XIV in Milne 1908)

The fragmentary nature of the ostracon obscures the content of this school exercise, and it is difficult to assess any statements of identity for either Alexander or the Carthaginians. While there are no compositional errors or corrective notes of the sort commonly found in these exercises,⁴¹ the syntax and vocabulary are uncomplicated. The presence of φυλασσοντες (instead of φυλαττοντες) as well as the occurrences of unresolved hiatus (κλημαι οὖν) preclude any serious pretensions to rhetorical Attic. This letter is an example of the simple *ethopoeia* exercises used to master composition in a creative format, and illuminate another of the famous peoples of Alexander's expeditions.

The *AR* likewise contains less sophisticated ethopoetic letters of this sort. While documentary letters advertise themselves as relics of bygone celebrities, ethopoetic letters bring the imaginary to life. We might envision the letter of the Brahmans in 3.5β as a scholastic composition on the theme, 'What would the gymnosophists write to Alexander?'

The Gymnosophists, to the man (ἄνθρωπον) Alexander, write this letter:
 If you come to us to make war, you will profit nothing. For you will not have anything to take away from us. But if you want to take away the things we have, there is need not for war, but a request, not to us, but to divine providence above. If you want to know who we are, we are naked men accustomed to practice philosophy, fashioned not by ourselves but by divine providence above. For practicing war is your occupation, but practicing philosophy is ours.

Nothing in this letter enhances its credibility: it ignores the formalities of salutation and farewell, and shares none of the narrative features of non-literary correspondence. The gymnosophists demand nothing, refuse nothing, and make little more of their missive than a statement of identity. Identity, however, is precisely the point of *ethopoeia*, and in this capacity the letter of Brahmans accurately portrays their true essence in the Greek imagination.⁴²

⁴¹ Misspellings and grammatical errors are commonly corrected in ostraca of this sort; see ostraca IV, VII, X, XV, and XVI in Milne 1908.

⁴² It is certainly worth asking to what extent this letter and the description of Alexander's engagement with the gymnosophists was based on an actual meeting. Szalc 2011, 24: 'The

The gymnosophists appear detached from contemporary politics and warfare, addressing Alexander as *ἄνθρωπον*, either ignorant or dismissive of his standard title of βασιλεύς. Their indifference towards profit is countered by their devotion to divine wisdom, an essential feature of their superhuman reputation among Greek and Roman readers.⁴³ Finally, by juxtaposing Alexander's warmongering with the peaceful pursuits of the Brahmans, the letter presents gymnosophist practice as a gateway to the hero's own intellectual journey. By playing up their best and worst stereotypes, this letter paints a vivid portrait of the gymnosophists in their own words. Daniel Richter has recently argued that Brahmans began to upstage Egyptian priests as the heirs to mystical wisdom in the early Imperial period: 'India, in contrast to the known world of Egypt, was just slightly more real for early imperial readers than it was legend... Indian wisdom [became] a suitable substitute for Egyptian in the early imperial Greek imagination.'⁴⁴ It is this legendary world that the ethopoetic letter of the *AR* accesses when the gymnosophists write to Alexander.

A similar aim to animate the legendary drives the correspondence between Alexander and the Amazons at the end of Book 3. Sending emissaries to demand safe passage through Amazonian territory, Alexander receives a lengthy ethnography in epistolary form (3.25.5-11). The proud tone of the letter is consistent with the culture of Amazonian warfare:

The leading Amazons...to Alexander, greetings:

We have written to you so that you are aware before setting upon our lands, so that you don't depart in an ignominious fashion. By our letter we will show clearly the nature of our country and that we are worthy of attention (*σπουδαίας*)...

placing of the wise men somewhere far, at the edges of the known world is a literary convention. Still, it does not deny the historical authenticity of Alexander's encounter with the naked philosophers of India. In all probability, the meeting took place in Taxila in the spring of 326 BC.'

⁴³ Richter 2011, 204: 'The Indian sages themselves are something more than human: they know the future; they have magical knowledge of the hidden contents of other men's minds; they levitate.'

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 2011, 205.

Rosenmeyer has adroitly noted that the information in the Amazons' letter is for the benefit of the reader more than Alexander.⁴⁵ The message familiarizes the reader with the Amazons by playing with the double meaning of *σπουδαία*: 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.' Through the epistolary form, the author(s) of the *AR* reaffirm long-held notions about a mythical nation of women and the reader suspends disbelief to enjoy an intimacy with the fantastical.

Let us now turn to two pairs of letters in the *AR* that attempt more sophisticated exercises in *ethopoeia*; these letters are explicitly staged in performance settings and employ impressive rhetorical techniques. The *AR* has historically been slighted for its lack of erudition: modern critics still judge its style as 'limp and rarely [rising] above mediocre.'⁴⁶ While the novel does not demonstrate the learned elaboration we find in the sophistic novels, the paired letters below confirm that a more nuanced *ethopoeia* was possible.

Darius' first letter to Alexander in the *AR* exudes pomposity fit for a Persian king. As disdainful as he is patronizing, Darius urges Alexander to return to his mother and take his Macedonian invaders with him (1.36). Three days later, Alexander responds with a letter of his own, countering Darius' insults line by line (1.38). The paired letters function like the paired speeches common in histories, employing an antithetical parallelism to rhetorical effect. Darius' letter opens with a string of titles to proclaim his divinity; Alexander claims only to be 'son of King Philip and my mother Olympias.' Darius sends Alexander a whip for continued discipline, a ball so he may play with children his own age, and money so he can afford the return fare for his army. Alexander responds that he will use the whip to lash barbarian enemies, the ball as a symbol for global domination, and the money as an advance on Darius' future tribute to the Greeks. Matching Darius blow for blow, Alexander derives advantageous interpretations from the same words and symbols that Darius intended as insults.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Rosenmeyer 2001, 188: 'This letter of the Amazons goes far beyond a simple answer to Alexander's greetings. Alexander presumably has already heard of their exploits and customs; he would not be writing to them in the first place if he was not familiar with their situation.'

⁴⁶ Dowden 2008, 651.

⁴⁷ Rosenmeyer 2001, 180: 'Thus Alexander takes complete control of the production of meaning in both his and Darius' letters; he is the omnipotent reader who can determine 'meaning' according to his own will or judgment, can use the same words to mean totally different things.'

If Darius' letter dismisses its addressee as a child, Alexander rises to the occasion like a model schoolboy. Alexander's letter opposes Darius' insults in the style of 'refutation' (ἀνασκευή), applying the strategies of counter-argument described in rhetorical handbooks. Nicolaus' *Progymnasmata* instructs students to refute neither obvious truths nor acknowledged falsehoods: counter-arguments should contest the middle ground, attacking credible but unproven claims.⁴⁸ In like manner, Alexander does not deny Darius' wealth or contest the charge, patently false, that he himself requires continued nursing from Olympias. Instead, Alexander refutes Darius' claims to divinity, which are believed by Persian subordinates and even by Alexander's own men. Students of rhetoric pursued a number of avenues to attack the logic of an argument, on the basis of 'what is unclear, implausible, impossible, inconsistent, inappropriate, and inexpedient.'⁴⁹ Alexander targets three of these flaws in his refutation of Darius' divinity (1.38β):

It is a disgrace that Darius, great king of the Persians, who is swollen with great power and who rises with the sun, should fall into base slavery to a mere mortal like Alexander. Do the titles of the gods, when they come to men, really confer great power and wisdom upon them? How do the names of the immortal gods come to settle in perishable bodies? See indeed that on this point also you are scorned by us: that you are powerless over us, but you avail yourself of the titles of the gods and confer their powers on earth upon yourself.

It is inappropriate for a true god to be defeated by a mere man. It is implausible that the title of the gods alone could bestow divine power and wisdom. It is impossible that the immortal essence of a god could be contained in the ephemeral flesh of a human body. Using three counter-arguments, Alexander exposes Darius' counterfeit divinity and refutes the sovereignty he derives from it.

Alexander's favorite rhetorical technique targets the inconsistency and inexpediency of Darius' threats. Aelius Theon encourages students to turn an opponent's own argument against him in a refutation,⁵⁰ a method Nicolaus

⁴⁸ *Progymnasmata* of Nicolaus in Felten 1913, 29-30.

⁴⁹ Hermogenes' *Progymnasmata* 6 in Kennedy 2003, 79.

⁵⁰ Theon's chapter on refutation is available only in classical Armenian; see Patillon 1997, 111-112.

calls *μαχόμενον*, ‘the most contentious and most useful tactic.’⁵¹ In this strategy, the student demonstrates how the arguments his opponent has made in the past works against the advantage of his present situation.⁵² Alexander repeats this technique throughout the second half of his letter. While Darius brags of extraordinary wealth, Alexander turns his boast into a tactical error: the Macedonian army will fight more courageously for the promise of plunder. Darius’ contemptuous gifts likewise become symbols of Alexander’s world domination. When Darius construes himself as a god and his opponent as a bandit (*ἀρχιληστής*), Alexander forces the Persians into a corner: if Darius wins, he will have captured a mere brigand. If Alexander wins, he will have captured the empire of a great king.

If any doubts remain that Alexander’s letter reveals a master rhetorician at work, we need only examine the performance contexts in which the *AR* presents these ethopoetic letters. When Persian emissaries arrive at the Macedonian camp, Alexander reads Darius’ letter in front of his entire army (1.37). By the act of reading aloud, Alexander performs an *ethopoeia* of Darius, speaking in the king’s voice to capture the essence of his opponent. The emotional impact of this *ethopoeia* is immediate: the troops become fearful, requiring Alexander to drop the act and explain the exercise:

Men of Macedonia and fellow-soldiers, why are you disturbed at the things Darius has written, as though his letter had any real power?...But let us agree that the things he has written are really true. We have been guided by their illumination (*ἐφωταγωγήθημεν*), so that we may know against whom we have to fight bravely for victory, so that we may not feel the shame of being defeated.

The performance of Darius’ letter is so compelling that Alexander must remind his troops of the distinction between reality and fantasy.⁵³ The soldiers become an internal model of the novel’s readers as they hone their abilities to read between the lines and sort fact from fiction. Alexander as their guide (and ours) reframes the letter as an important tool with the striking world *ἐφωταγωγήθημεν*, ‘we were enlightened,’ demonstrating how powerfully and to what effect ethopoetic letters illuminate the character of their senders.

⁵¹ Nicolaus’ *Progymnasmata* in Felten 1913, 32.

⁵² A favorite example cited in the handbooks is Demosthenes’ *Against Timocrates*, where the orator rebukes Timocrates for introducing one law in opposition to another he had issued in the past.

⁵³ Darius experiences a similar emotional response from Alexander’s return letter (*ἐπὶ τούτοις ἐκινήθη*, 1.39).

A similar pair of letters appears in Book 3.2 between Alexander and King Porus. Like Darius, Porus refuses to acknowledge Alexander's royal titles in the salutation, instead branding him as a plunderer (πόλεις λεηλατοῦντι). Porus also adopts the title 'king of kings' and goes so far as to claim sovereignty over the gods by citing Dionysus' eviction from India as proof of his own power over the pantheon. Finally, Porus invents a new twist on Darius' boasts of infinite wealth. Instead of advertising India's commodities, he argues that Greece is worthless and therefore undesirable to ambitious kings: 'everyone desires that which is better.' As an exercise in *ethopoeia*, the letter of Porus typifies the foolish king who has learned nothing from the downfall of his predecessors. Claims of invincibility and supremacy over the gods exemplify the very essence of hubris, and Porus' attacks on Greece construe him as a paradigm of barbarian ignorance. Blindsided by his tyrannical viewpoint (βασιλικῆς θεωρίας), the Indian king places no value on Greek freedom and wisdom.

As with the paired letters from 1.36 and 1.38, Alexander reads the letter of Porus aloud to his army (3.2). We are not told how his soldiers react to this performance. Perhaps they, like their leader, have gained experience distinguishing fact from fiction. Interpreting this letter for his troops, Alexander recalls his previous *ethopoeia* of Darius' letter:

My fellow-soldiers, do not be disturbed once more by the letter of Porus. Remember the things which Darius wrote. For truly the barbarians are of one state of mind: senselessness...thus even barbarian kings, exulting in the magnitude of their army, are easily subdued by Greek wisdom.

Alexander encourages his troops, equating the boasts of Porus to the threats of Darius and deciphering the hubris of Porus as senselessness (ἀναισθησία). Alexander's performance also aids the reader's interpretation, demonstrating once more how to read the very essence of a character out of the words in his letter.

Alexander's response to Porus at the end of 3.2 applies the hero's favorite technique of *μαχόμενον*: he does not contest Porus' accusations about the worthlessness of Greece, but turns them against the king. First, Alexander repeats Porus' maxim verbatim – 'every man desires to take what is better and not to have what is lesser' – but follows it to its logical conclusion. Greece's poverty motivates her citizens to conquer prosperous nations like India, just as Darius' riches encouraged Macedonian soldiers to plunder Persia. Second, Alexander refutes Porus' divinity on the same grounds as he refuted Darius':

gods cannot be defeated by mere men. With plans to conquer India, Alexander proves his opponent merely ‘a loudmouth and absolute barbarian.’ Finally, Alexander concludes with an observation on the agency of letters: ‘your boastful words do not make me a coward.’ Rebuffing the emotional impact of Porus’ threats, Alexander emerges as the master, not the victim, of the ethopoetic letter.

The *AR* includes a spectrum of ethopoetic letters, all of which animate the characters Alexander encounters on his journey eastward. The less sophisticated examples, such as the self-descriptive letters of the Brahmins and the Amazons, embrace mythical stereotypes long-entertained in the Greek imagination. In these letters, the *ethopoeia* makes an overt statement of identity, leaving the reader with little guesswork about the characters they encounter. Advanced ethopoetic letters, by contrast, require a more sophisticated reading, which the novel facilitates with Alexander’s performances of *ethopoeia*. As Alexander performs Darius and Porus, his ability to animate their features frightens the soldiers as if they were meeting their enemies in the flesh. Illuminating Darius’ hubris, Porus’ senselessness, and Alexander’s rhetorical mastery, the ethopoetic letters play on the emotional as well as intellectual facilities of their readers.

Miracle Letters

In 1954, Merkelbach categorized three of the letters in the *AR* as ‘Wunderbriefe,’ distinct from the novel’s other letters in both length and content.⁵⁴ Hereafter, the appellation of ‘miracle’ or ‘wonder letters’ has been applied to the following three inset letters:

- (1) Alexander’s letter to Olympias and Aristotle about the edge of the world (2.23-41),
- (2) Alexander’s letter to Olympias about the Amazons and Heliopolis (3.27-28), and
- (3) Alexander’s letter to Aristotle about India (3.17).

It is clear that the miracle letters differ drastically from the documentary and ethopoetic letters: these are extended, first-person narrations of Alexander’s travels to mythical lands, his encounters with fantastical creatures and adversaries. For Merkelbach, the deployment of the letter-form for the *Wunderbriefe* operates as a strategy of authentication: ‘In order to make the miraculous adventures appear credible, they were dressed in the garb of letters, of

⁵⁴ Merkelbach 1954, 40-41.

quasi-authentic reports from Alexander to Olympias and Aristotle.⁵⁵ But the letter-form is a flexible frame, capable of conveying more than authenticity.⁵⁶ Gunderson's study of the letter to Aristotle about India notes that nothing in the letter indicates plausibility and that the letter's audience was 'familiar with Alexander's actual achievements as well as the sensational stories, rumors, and speculations associated with the king.'⁵⁷ In this section, I contend that the epistolary frame does not make the miracle letters more convincing, as in the mode of documentary letters. Rather, the letter-form of the miracle adventures frees the author(s) from the obligation of plausibility because it uses Alexander's own voice to describe the unverifiable segments of his travels.

It is first necessary to address the checkered transmission of miracle letters throughout the recensions of the Ps.-Callisthenes text.⁵⁸ The variations are dizzying, but a brief demonstration of the text's instability will suffice. The first miracle letter concerning the edge of the world, for example, is absent from Recension A, but appears in Recension β (as well as the Armenian and Byzantine versions). Recension γ includes a version of this letter, but redirects Alexander towards Jerusalem in 2.24-31; Codex L (Leidensis) includes this first letter, but with added materials, such as Alexander's diving bell (2.38). The second miracle letter concerning the Amazons and Heliopolis exists in both Recensions A and β with notable differences, but in Recension γ the letter-form dissolves into third-person narrative.

Further variation complicates the third miracle letter on India. This is preserved in letter-form only within Recension A of the Ps.-Callisthenes text (3.17). In Recensions β and γ , the author(s) have abridged the letter and rewritten its contents into a third-person narrative. It is likely, however, that an archetype of this letter, longer than the versions available in any of the Greek recensions, circulated independently before the composition of the *AR*. If this is true, Ps.-Callisthenes presents only an epitome of the lost archetype, but two distinct Latin translations likely preserve something closer to the original.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Merkelbach 1954, 45: 'Um die wunderbaren Abenteuer glaubhaft erscheinen zu lassen, kleidete man sie ein in das Gewand von Briefen, von gleichsam authentischen Berichten Alexanders an Olympias und Aristoteles.'

⁵⁶ Hägg 1983, 127: 'Here the aim is no longer to indicate the character of the correspondent; the fabulous material pours forth without restraint.'

⁵⁷ Gunderson 1980, 123. Rosenmeyer 2001, 173 notes the lack of narrative momentum in the miracle letters, primarily descriptive and ill-suited to personal correspondence: 'the stories are recounted *in* rather than *through* the epistolary medium.'

⁵⁸ Gunderson 1980 provides an invaluable overview of the various editions of the miracle letters in 38-45 and 76-90.

⁵⁹ Gunderson 1980, 34-35.

My analysis of the third miracle letter will therefore follow the Latin translations, unless otherwise noted.

Questions surrounding the authorship and origins of the miracle letters are less pertinent to the present argument, but their tangled transmission is significant because it challenges our understanding of the interaction between reader and letter. It is unclear whether the reader of one recension would have access to or awareness of the miracle letters that modern scholars do, or even the same letters as the reader of a different recension. Variation in content problematizes any analysis of how ancient readers received a given text, but Dan Selden provides a helpful approach in his recent work on ‘text networks’ in the Mediterranean during the High Roman Empire. Selden’s article reevaluates the ancient novel as the product not of a single author, but rather of an acephalous, autopoietic network of ‘textualizers’:

Scriptural systems such as the apostolic Gospels, the Enochic corpus, or the Lives of Pachomius—whose Coptic, Arabic, and Greek recensions all derive from different sources—constitute what we might profitably call discrete, if ultimately also overlapping—‘text networks’, autopoietic bodies of related compositions whose origins largely escape us and whose evolution, in the second and third centuries C.E., remained far from complete...In fact, what most typified the scriptural networks of the High Empire was not their stability, but rather their set (*Einstellung*) towards proliferation, where entropy increased in the course of each new (re)inscription.⁶⁰

Selden points to the *AR* as the fictional work most widely diffused through text networks. In several dozen languages and more than one hundred versions, authors from Afghanistan to Spain continuously recomposed the text, adapting the heroism of Alexander to their distinct religious and socio-political orders. Far from fragmenting the novel beyond recognition, text networks allowed the novel ‘[to offer] readers the vision of a differentiated world pacified and united where each community finds its place within the whole.’⁶¹

The text network provides a model for evaluating the miracle letters in light of their continuous recomposition and proliferation throughout the Graeco-Roman world and beyond. Once circulated through the hands of numerous textualizers, the *AR* is realized as a malleable framework onto which various audiences project regional ethnicities, geographies, and philosophies.

⁶⁰ Selden 2010, 6-8.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* 2012, 40.

The different locales and characters specific to each recension, which vary inexhaustibly, play a secondary role to the stable narrative features undergirding all three miracle letters. In other words, it is less important whether Alexander visits Jerusalem, Carthage, or India, or whether the author(s) accurately or inaccurately portrayed geography or chronology.⁶² Unspecific times and places are merely the stages upon which Alexander's greatest adventures are played out. It will be more productive to extract the structure common to all three miracle letters for a better understanding of how they function as a system.

Both Gunderson and Selden have identified Alexander's curiosity as a driving force of the novel's narrative.⁶³ The precedent for this is surely the force of desire (πόθος) in Arrian's *Anabasis*, which steers Alexander's course consistently throughout the text.⁶⁴ The hero's cultural and metaphysical inquisitiveness implicates every territory and population as subjects of his imperial and intellectual colonialism. This relentless curiosity is the foundation of a consistent narratological loop that regulates his adventures within the miracle letters. The formula below outlines the structural unit that repeats to form the narrative architecture of the letters, which I henceforth refer to as the 'exploration loop':

- (1) Alexander departs from familiar / conquered territory to explore unfamiliar / unconquered territory.
- (2) Alexander is warned against exploration by guides / locals / signs.
- (3) Alexander ignores warnings.
- (4) Alexander encounters miraculous men / creatures / objects which endanger himself / his army.
- (5) Alexander and his army conquer or flee obstacles.
- (6) Alexander departs from familiar / conquered territory to explore unfamiliar / unconquered territory.

⁶² Merkelbach's insistence on the author(s)' factual errors continue to be a focal point for modern scholars. Hägg 1983, 127: 'The book teems with chronological and geographical associations of the most absurd nature... Whether the author was ignorant of the actual facts or just did not care about them is not clear.' Dowden 2008, 651: 'Chronology and geography are grossly muddled; fact and inept fictions are indiscriminately combined.'

⁶³ Gunderson 1980, 124-125 and Selden 2012, 38.

⁶⁴ See the regular formula of πόθος ἔλαβεν and its equivalents in Arrian 1.3.5, 2.3.1, 3.1.5, 3.3.1, 4.28.4, 5.2.5, 7.1.1, 7.2.2, and 7.16.2.

This repeating loop constitutes the central narrative of the miracle letters, with minor variations and deviations.⁶⁵ An explicit iteration of this loop can be found in the first miracle letter in 2.32β:

Alexander departs from Persia to explore the desert.
 Guides warn Alexander about wild animals.
 Alexander proceeds with the journey.
 Alexander and army encounter φυτοί ('plantmen'), who attack.
 Alexander and army defeat the *phytoi*, killing many in battle.
 Alexander departs for green land.

The exploration loop repeats as Alexander encounters ὄχλωτοί ('mobmen,' 2.33), μηλοφάγοι ('apple eaters,' 2.33), invisible whipping divinities (2.36), six-footed beasts, and giant seals (2.37).

In the India letter, the exploration loop begins when Alexander describes himself *interiorem Indiam perspicere cupiens* ('longing to see the interior of India,' p. 6).⁶⁶ Departing from the Caspian Gates, he faces elephant-sized hippopotami (pp. 13-14), a night battle with mythical jungle beasts (pp. 17-22), a two-headed marsh monster (p. 29), and the hairy *faunos* giants and *cynocephali* ('dog-headed men,' pp. 32-33). Digressions from this sequence occur twice within the India letter: Alexander's second battle with Porus (pp. 23-27) and his consultation of the oracular trees (pp. 37-52). However, both of these episodes are firmly bookended by the exploration loop. Even the return trip to Phasis adopts the exploration loop, requiring Alexander to overcome griffins (p. 54), violent water-women (p. 57), and horned monsters (pp. 58-59).

On the one hand, these encounters with mythical men and beasts imitate the *paradoxa* we find in travel accounts and histories, like those of Ctesias.⁶⁷ Their purpose, as Lucian describes in the *True History*, is to entertain and delight, transporting readers to the faraway reaches of fiction. It is noteworthy that the greatest discrepancies between recensions of the *AR* occur when Alexander travels literally off the map, into the Land of the Blessed, for example,

⁶⁵ Gunderson 1980, 124: 'The Letter tells a tale combining interminable frustrations with supposedly unprecedented successes. The splendors balanced with the troubles...provide a rough model for the ensuing narrative.'

⁶⁶ Latin text in Bore 1973.

⁶⁷ Merkelbach 1954, 40: 'Wenn man sich nach verwandten Erscheinungen in der griechischen Literatur umsieht, wird man am ehesten an die Steigerung ursprünglich nüchternen ionischer *ιστοπῆς* zu abenteuerlichen Schilderungen fremder Länder bei Ctesias denken.' See also Gunderson 1980, 15-19.

or beyond the borders of India. The borders of the known world mark the liminal point between Alexander history and Alexander legend, and this liminality grants the author(s) a greater license for invention. In the miracle letters, Alexander transcends geography and chronology – into the depths of the sea, the upper limits of the sky – thereby freeing the letters from an obligation to plausibility and embedding the reader in pure fiction. Nowhere else does the *AR* embrace fantasy so fully.

On the other hand, the exploration loop also reflects the relentless march through inclement weather and hostile environments, pressing the weary reader to interrogate Alexander's perseverance and echo the critics within the novel. All three miracle letters supply numerous 'voices of reason,' who dissuade Alexander from the dangers ahead:

First Miracle Letter (β):	Persian guides (2.32), Persian guides (2.37), Macedonian soldiers (2.39), mythical birds (2.40), flying man (2.41)
Second Miracle Letter (A):	Ethiopian priest (3.28), sacred bird (3.28)
Third Miracle Letter (Boer):	Indians (p. 6), Indians (p. 28), Indians (p. 37), oracular tree (p. 51), Indian priest (p. 51)

From the outset of his adventures, Alexander's naysayers are usually members of his own expedition. The Persian guides in the first miracle letter warn against dangerous animals and the possibility of getting lost, concerns later voiced by Alexander's own soldiers. The Indians in the third letter are similarly alarmed at his plans to travel through monster-infested regions and unmapped territories. These admonitions go unheeded by Alexander, allowing the hero to demonstrate his superior prowess by overcoming the predicted challenges. Further into his journeys, Alexander finds himself confronted by divine opposition, often in the form of a supernatural creature. When two birds with human faces threaten divine repercussions in the first letter, Alexander immediately aborts his expedition to the Land of the Blessed (2.40). In the third letter, he reverses his march to the sea when an oracular tree instructs him to return to Phasis (p. 51). In these instances, Alexander's obedience

demonstrates mortal humility, to be juxtaposed with the hubris of Darius and Porus.

The recurrent naysayers in the miracle letters compel the reader to reexamine whether Alexander's curiosity represents a virtue or a vice. With contested exceptions,⁶⁸ the *AR* portrays the life of an idealized hero: we find no hint of the alcoholism, temper, or effeminacy attested in other accounts.⁶⁹ While the third-person narrative in the novel rarely alludes to Alexander's less desirable qualities, the letter-form allows the author(s) a new freedom of critique.⁷⁰ When the authorial voice is no longer the focalizer, Alexander becomes liable for the content of his own narration. Does he exaggerate the account, so much more fantastical than any other episodes of the novel's narrative? Do his ambitions betray an air of hubris? By framing the miracle adventures within the first-person letters of the hero, the reader too enjoys greater freedom to pass judgment on Alexander's indulgent curiosity, fruitless campaigns, and fatal consequences. These critiques are not overt, but linger in the miracle letters, accessible to a careful reader but untraceable to the authorial voice.

The license of the first-person epistolary over the third-person narrative is apparent in the transformation of the third miracle letter in Recension A into an India narrative in Recensions β and γ . Thus far, our analysis of the third miracle letter has been based on its unabridged form in the Latin translations. During its incorporation into the novel, the archetype underwent significant changes. Recension A preserves the letter-form of the archetype, as well as the exploration loop: Alexander and his men battle man-eating hippopotami (3.17.14-15) and endure the 'night of terror' with jungle monsters (3.17.18-

⁶⁸ Among the activities some regard as objectionable are Alexander's murder of his true father, Nectanebos (1.14), and his underhanded victory over Porus (3.4).

⁶⁹ Some scholars regard the *AR* as a deliberate counter to more critical histories of the Macedonian king. Pearson 1955, 446-447: 'The hostility of the philosophic schools towards Alexander is well known; they cherished the picture of an orientalized tyrant, corrupted by his good fortune and his flatterers...and they castigated the memory of Callisthenes for his flattery of the king and his invention of miracles which made him appear superhuman.' But Stoneman 2003, 328 points out that Alexander became an *exemplum* in philosophical schools, subject for argumentation but not historical judgment: '[They] could use him as examples of both vice and virtue and, ultimately, as a vehicle of timeless wisdom.'

⁷⁰ Gunderson 1980, 129: '[The author] presses us to notice Alexander's and the Macedonians' interminable encounters with beasts (to the point of monotony!), apparently calling upon us to judge as futile that relentless activity and curiosity which led Alexander to the oracle and as far to the east as his troops would go. Here once more Alexander's humanity is emphasized: he could be misled, indulge his curiosity, and engage in purposeless campaigns.'

22). After these episodes, Alexander meets the oracular trees. Thus Recension A includes an epitomized but faithful version of the archetype, inasmuch as its first-person voice, exploration loop, and naysayers permit the same critique of Alexander's curiosity and ambition. However, Recensions β and γ dissolve the letter into third-person narrative, patching it seamlessly into the preceding and succeeding chapters. Omitted are the naysayers and the exploration loop, as Recension β cuts immediately to the oracular trees. By dissolving the letter-form, Recensions β and γ eliminate features which would not conform to the narrative's overall idealization of Alexander.

If Alexander's curiosity drives the narrative within the miracle letters, his quest for immortality orients these scattered adventures towards a common *telos* and organizes the letters around a central theme.⁷¹ Outside the miracle letters, the text merely hints at Alexander's interest in immortality: during his visit to the Sarapeion, he asks the god to reveal the time and the manner of his death (1.33). When the Brahmans demand eternal life, the hero refuses: 'I do not have this power, for I am mortal' (3.6). But the novel never specifies his immortal ambitions – and the frustration of these ambitions – as explicitly as in the miracle letters. In the first miracle letter, Alexander does not initially designate his journey as a quest for immortality, but ominous pronouncements of his destiny quickly shape his objectives. When Alexander sets sail for a coastal island, the men reverse their boats when voices on the wind predict the time of his death:

Son of Philip, seed of Egypt,
 You have received a name which indicates the future
 Success you will achieve with courage.
 For from the womb you have been called 'Alexander.'
 You have fended off men by chasing them off
 And scaring kings off their possessions.
 But soon, at any rate, you will be an ex-man
 When the second letter of your name
 Has been fulfilled, which has the name 'lambda.'⁷²

⁷¹ Stoneman 1991, 21: 'The dominant theme of the wonder tales is the quest for immortality. This motif is combined with the historically attested – though controversial – facts of Alexander's seeking to be worshipped as a god.'

⁷² The λ representative of the thirty years of Alexander's life.

After this prophetic prediction, Alexander directs his full attention to achieving immortality and he presses the boundaries of human survival in the following series of adventures (2.38-41). He dives to the ocean floor in a glass bell, he leads an elite army to the Land of the Blessed and the Immortal Spring, and even travels to the furthest reaches of the aether on the back of a giant bird. Alexander's plans are thwarted at every turn: a sea monster eats the diving bell, Greek-speaking birds order him to withdraw from Paradise, and a flying apparition forces his giant bird back to earth. Even the immortal water, the most promising avenue in Alexander's quest, is wasted when the cook gives it to Alexander's daughter instead.

The third miracle letter begins in the same unassuming manner as the first, but likewise directs Alexander's attention towards immortality when the Indians remark on the impossibility of his expedition:

The inhabitants of the place explained to me that the ocean was gloomy and full of shadows, and that since no one must try to go farther than Hercules and Dionysus, two very pre-eminent gods, had dared to go, I would make all the larger impression as I, with human strength, went further than the gods. (trans. Gunderson 1980, 148)

By juxtaposing Alexander's expedition with the travels of Hercules and Dionysus, the Indians demarcate the borders of mortality. As in the first miracle letter, Alexander actually succeeds in surpassing the geographic limits set before him; with a great cost to his army, he reaches the cave of Dionysus and the ocean. But at the summit of his journey, the oracular trees temper this success by predicting the time and place of Alexander's death and demanding that he end his immortal pursuits. A similar warning is echoed in the second miracle letter when Alexander arrives at the sapphire temple of Nysa. Calling out from its golden cage, a sacred bird instructs Alexander to 'stop matching yourself with the gods, and turn back to your own palace, and do not be too hasty to ascend to the paths of heaven' (3.28). The admonitions in all three miracle letters humble Alexander's achievements, reiterating that even such vast dominion does not merit immortal status.

The quest for immortality is at the center of all three miracle letters, the projected apex of Alexander's ascent from Macedonian prince to world ruler. The inevitability of his premature death in Babylon, familiar to every reader of the *AR*, only heightens the excitement of his expeditions. Acknowledging that Alexander must survive every adventure only to die during his homecoming inspires a bittersweet pleasure in the hero's irrepressible curiosity, in a

campaign that will venture far beyond the wildest imagination but just short of Alexander's greatest ambition. As Alexander weeps at the prophecy of the oracular trees (p. 48), we see a mortal man emerge from the shadow of the invincible hero. The dream of immortal life, reflecting the dream of a united world empire, crumbles in the course of a single letter.⁷³ The tragedy and wonder of the Alexander legend resound in the hero's oath, 'I resolved never again to attempt the impossible' (2.41).

The three miracle letters of the *Alexander Romance*, in their many recensions, multiply the landscapes and marvels that Alexander and his army encounter in their expedition to the edges of the eastern world. A stable narrative structure undergirds the letters, however, downplaying the variables in light of the consistent emphasis on Alexander's curiosity and quest for immortality: his perseverance in testing the limits of mortality proves a central feature of every retelling. As these adventures were framed by Alexander's own voice, readers may simultaneously question the judgment of the novel's hero and share more deeply in his triumphs and tragedies. The length of the miracle letters, unparalleled by the documentary and ethopoetic letters, enabled them to circulate as separate works, independent from the novel. Yet within the framework of the novel, the miracle letters permit the reader to reconsider the whole with a heightened awareness of the hero's humanity, one that conditions the immensity of his ambitions and his failure to fulfill them.

I have argued that the epistolary genre in the *Alexander Romance* serves as a flexible framework for literary innovation, and that the novel adapts the letter-form to elicit a variety of reader responses. The documentary letters, for example, capitalize on the historiographical practice of incorporating and citing documentary evidence: crafted to appear authentic, they simultaneously invite and test reader credibility. Ethopoetic letters, by contrast, are a clear inheritance from the rhetorical schools. With Alexander as their guide, readers learn to decode and ascertain character from a letter's voice alone. Finally, the miracle letters play on ethnographies and travel narratives, but also strike a tragic note by arousing pity and fear on behalf of the protagonist. By juxtaposing Alexander's greatest achievements with his greatest disappointments, the miracle letters unveil a fallible mortal behind the legend.

The inclusion of letters in the *Alexander Romance* was not a matter of necessity. In countless recompositions and retranslations, various versions of

⁷³ Stoneman 1991, 21: 'So the search for immortality reflects the tragedy as well as the wonder of Alexander, the impermanence of his conquest as well as its immensity.'

the novel could and did function without its epistolary components. Some versions rewrote the letters into the third-person narrative; other versions deleted them altogether. The presence of such a large number of letters in the earliest versions of the novel does not, therefore, suggest that the author(s) included them as chance elements in a patchwork text. Instead, the letters of the *Alexander Romance* are precise tools of persuasion and emotion between writer and reader. We have long dismissed Demetrius' notion of the letter as a pure image of the soul, yet there remains in its place a nagging sense that reading someone else's letters offers admission into a secret, private world.⁷⁴

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⁷⁴ I express my gratitude to Susan Stephens and Maud Gleason, who have devoted tremendous time and attention to this paper from its conception to completion. I am also grateful to Grant Parker for reviewing my drafts, and for his insight on rhetoric and India. Finally, I would like to thank my anonymous reviewers for the careful corrections and insights.

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