

Olympias and Infidelity in the Alexander Romances: A Cross Cultural Study

Jena Al-Fuhaid

Abstract The literary tradition romanticizing Alexander the Great began with the pivotal text, Pseudo-Callisthenes (ca. 200 A. D.), which was translated and disseminated along two trajectories: Eastern and Western. This thriving literary tradition established Alexander as an immensely influential figure, a king whose greatness was to be aspired to and emulated. The admiration for Alexander was a truly cross-cultural phenomenon, reflected in the majority of the Alexander texts, from England to the Middle East. However, if medieval texts were alike in their glorification and claiming of Alexander, they were even more united in their attitude towards, if not their treatment of, Olympias. This essay argues that closely examining the alterations regarding the representations of Alexander and Olympias at the two most disparate points along the trajectories: the Middle English *The Wars of Alexander* (ca. 1400) and the Arabic *Qissat Dhulqarnayn* (ca. 1200) reveals the underlying cross-cultural congruity in the Medieval period by illuminating the extent to which Alexander became a universal figure, transcending cultural boundaries, and Olympias became a controversial, polarizing, and variable entity, a figure of paramount importance who is both preserved intact and fundamentally altered.

Key words masculine championship; cross-cultural literature; claiming; feminine morality

Author Jena Al-Fuhaid is a Ph. D student at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. She is interested in cross-cultural medieval literature, focusing primarily on Arabic, French, and Middle English. Email: jalfuhaid@yahoo.com

“Long may you live, my lady, for you are pregnant with a boy child who shall be your avenger and become world conquering king of the whole civilized universe” (*Pseudo-Callisthenes* 28).

From the moment of Alexander the Great’s conception in *Pseudo-Callisthenes*, the original Alexander romance (ca. 200 A. D.), Olympias’ status is inextricably tied to that of her unborn child. Although this conception is a crucial part of the Alexander romances, it is incorporated into the Eastern and Western traditions very differently. In the Western tradition, Olympias is deceived by the Egyptian Pharaoh Nectanebus into believing that he is the god Ammon. In the guise of Ammon, Nectanebus sleeps with Olympias and begets a son, Alexander. Alexander is accepted as a son by King Philip of Macedonia, but the dubious circumstances surrounding his conception create

a problematic situation in which he must continually defend both Olympias and his position as Philip's heir. In the Eastern tradition, Alexander's military triumphs and god-like representation are perfectly preserved, but Olympias' depiction is decidedly different from the Western portrayal of her. Any hint of infidelity and the ensuing taint of immorality in Olympias' characterization, including the adulterous encounter that produced Alexander, has been eradicated. Instead, she is described as an honorable Muslim mother, one to whom Alexander is understandably devoted.

The close relationship between Alexander and Olympias is all the more noteworthy due to its preservation throughout the widely disseminated Alexander romances, despite a substantial amount of textual variation. The development of the Alexander romance along both the Eastern and Western tracks shows distinct correlations between these textual variations and the cultural and religious values of the different regions. A study of these alterations illuminates both cross-cultural congruities and disparities in the medieval period. This essay will analyze the depictions of Alexander and Olympias in the two most disparate Alexander romances, the Middle English *Wars of Alexander* (ca. 1400 A. D) and the Arabic *Qissat Dhulqarnayn* (ca. 1200 A. D). I will establish two distinct points: first, the extent to which the claiming of Alexander as a member of various cultures and religions was an authorial technique that transcended cultural boundaries; and second, the immense impact of the religious and cultural standards of each region on the depictions of Olympias. It is significant that in examining the representations of Alexander and Olympias, we find that the Eastern texts erase an important feature of the Western texts, the use of Alexander's affection for his mother to obscure Olympias' infidelity. Therefore, in this paper I will argue that there is a fundamental difference in the cultural attitudes informing the depictions of Olympias: in the medieval West, standards of feminine morality and fidelity are largely determined by masculine championship, whereas Eastern attitudes towards feminine immorality are characterized by such rigidity that even the championship of Alexander the Great would be insufficient redemption.

The Dissemination of the Alexander Romances

The Greek *Pseudo-Callisthenes* is the starting point from which the Eastern and Western trajectories originated. *Pseudo-Callisthenes* was then translated into Latin multiple times. The first Latin version is believed to be *Res gestae Alexandri Macedonis*, which was written by Julius Valerius circa 325 A. D. This text was then adapted into *Epitome Julii Valerii* in the ninth century. The other most significant translations are Archbishop Leo of Naples' *Nativita et Victoria Alexandri Magni Regis* (ca. 953 A. D) and *Historia de Preliis*, a tenth century adaptation of Leo of Naples' text. These four texts were then translated, primarily into French and English, and disseminated across Western Europe. The medieval French texts, such as the *Roman d'Alexandre*, *Le Roman de Toute Chevalerie*, *Mort d'Alexandre*, *Roman de Perceforest*, and the prose *Roman d'Alexandre* became the basis for the Middle English Alexander romances, such as *Kyng Alisaunder*. Despite the pervasive French influence, some of the Middle English Alexander romances, such as *The Wars of Alexander*, are believed to have been directly based on the Latin Alexander romances rather than on the intermediary

French texts.

In contrast, the Eastern trajectory is more complicated. It is believed that Pseudo-Callisthenes was translated directly into a Persian text (ca. 500 A. D.), which has since been lost. This Middle Persian text was the basis for the Syriac text known as the *Christian Legend Concerning Alexander* (ca. 500 – 600 A. D.), which was then translated into Arabic. This Arabic text (ca. 800 A. D.) became the source of the Ethiopian text, *The Life and Exploits of Alexander the Great* (ca. 1300 – 1500 A. D.). Luitpold Wallach and some scholars argue that there is a different lost Arabic text which “must have been derived from a Latin version of the *Historia de Proeliss* (Wallach 410), but the overall scholarly consensus seems to support the order of the Eastern texts as *Pseudo-Callisthenes*, the Middle Persian translation, the Syriac Alexander Legend, the Arabic texts, and the Ethiopian re-Christianized Alexander texts.

Texts Used in This Study

The most distant points along this Eastern and Western trajectory of Alexander texts appear to be the Middle English and Ethiopian texts. Despite the initial appearance of disparity, however, the Ethiopian Alexander is described by Andrew Anderson “as a most Christian king, champion, and propagandist, almost a savior and messiah” (Anderson 107). The Ethiopian descendant from the Arabic texts simultaneously represents a step further along the trajectory but a return to a previous religious characterization of Alexander. Thus, the two most disparate texts are the Middle English Alexander romances and the Arabic Alexander romances.

My purpose in looking at the most disparate texts within this particular trajectory is two-fold: to study the similarities and differences manifested in the texts and the cultural and religious influences that contributed to these changes. This paper first focuses on the Middle English *Wars of Alexander*.¹ According to Walter Skeat, “The main part of the narrative follows, with tolerable fidelity, the Latin text known as the ‘Historia de Preliis’ (Skeat xxi). But he adds that “the ‘Historia de Preliis’ was not the sole text which our translator consulted, and it is tolerably clear that another source [of the Middle English Wars of Alexander] was the Latin version of the story of Alexander by Julius Valerius” (Skeat xxii). *Qissat Dhulqarnayn*,² the Arabic text used for this paper, is drawn from two manuscripts that were “probably copied in the eighteenth or nineteenth century” (Zuwiyya 47).³ The title, which was conferred by the editor, Z. David Zuwiyya, can be translated as the Story of Alexander. According to Zuwiyya, the particular manuscripts consulted are based on Arabic texts from the 7th through the 13th century.

The “Claiming” of Alexander

A predominant theme in most of the Alexander romances is the glorification and claiming of Alexander. I use the term claiming to illustrate a consistent pattern throughout the romances in which Alexander is described by the author as the founder of a particular city or a member of a culture. Alexander is glowingly depicted across both the Eastern and Western trajectories, albeit with slightly varying degrees of approval. The one notable exception to this literary adulation is the Zoroastrian Persians, who as

Minoo Southgates states, “briefly dismissed him [Alexander] as a cursed enemy of God” (Southgate 278). The claiming of Alexander takes place in most of the Alexander texts, most particularly in *Pseudo-Callisthenes*, *Epitome Julii Valerii*, *Roman de Perceforest*, *Qissat Dhulqarnayn*, and the Persian *Iskandarnamah*. The following account describes how widely disparate cultures use the romances to claim Alexander as uniquely their own.

A degree of Egyptian influence is clearly recognizable in *Pseudo-Callisthenes*, despite the author’s anonymity. Richard Jasnow writes that “there is very good reason to think that portions of the Alexander romance derive from an actual written Demotic text about Alexander and Nektanebo” (Jasnow 103). As this Demotic text is not extant, this theory remains a hypothesis, but what can be asserted is that “the Nektanebo episode belongs to the earliest stage of the Alexander romance” (Jasnow 101). Thus, the very beginning of the Alexander tradition definitively illustrates the method by which Alexander is claimed. By replacing the Macedonian Philip with Nectanebus, the writer of *Pseudo-Callisthenes* establishes Alexander as Egyptian, most probably the son of an Egyptian pharaoh, but alternatively the son of Ammon, an Egyptian God. Telfryn Pritchard writes that “the unknown Alexandrine writer wished to promote the idea among the people that Alexander was in reality no foreigner but the son of a former king of Egypt, and that it was only right and proper for Alexander and his successors to be kings of Egypt” (Pritchard 125).

In his paper “The Earliest Elements of the Alexander Romance,” Alan Samuel describes the alteration of ancestry which enables Julius Valerius to claim Alexander as an illustrious member of Greek society:

The Latin of Julius Valerius adds [from Favorinus] a genealogy of Alexander which reaches back from Oceanus and Thetis and passes down through the families of Perdiccas or of Philip. It is quite traditionally Greek, implicitly makes Alexander a descendant of Achilles, and completely ignores the paternity of Nectanebo so strongly urged by the main thread of the narrative. (Samuel 432)

The claiming phenomenon is clearly indicated by this major deviation from the standard plot manifested in the romances thus far. To ignore Alexander’s Egyptian paternity so completely can only demonstrate Julius Valerius’ immense desire to claim Alexander.

One of the most dramatic transformations that Alexander undergoes is found in the Arabic Alexander texts. As Alexander Cizek points out, the alteration owes much to the writers [of the Arabic Alexander romance] “homologating some episodes from other writings or traditions” (Cizek 595), in this case, the Holy Qur’an. Z. David Zuwiyya writes that “with the Quranic mention of Dhulqarnayn, the pagan Greek king [Alexander] quickly assumed the role of the Islamic conqueror at the head of the Army of God, on a mission to traverse the world, submitting its peoples, and delivering God’s message” (Zuwiyya 7). While these are radical changes, they indicate the extent to which cultural and religious influences impact the presentation of Alexander, thus enabling the Arabs to claim him as well. Although the transformation of Alexan-

der is attributed to a verse (Q. 18 – 83 – 102) in the Quran, Brannon Wheeler argues that “a more discerning examination of the different texts shows that the later recensions of the Alexander stories are dependent upon the Quran as understood through the medium of early Muslim commentaries” (Wheeler 214). The commentaries served as a transition, with the Quranic exegetes establishing the connection using the same methods as most of the writers of Alexander romances. Wheeler writes that “by identifying Alexander with the Dhu al-Qarnayn of Q 18 – 83 – 102, the commentaries are able to make use of the images associated with Alexander in the context of the Quran and Islamic history” (Wheeler 213). From the exegetes, the writers of the Alexander texts created their own Alexander, known as Dhulqarnayn. Alexander was again definitively claimed, as possibly an Arab but most importantly as a Muslim hero, glorifying the religion of Islam.

The Persian romances are distinct from other Eastern texts because the claiming of Alexander is achieved by fundamentally altering his maternal parentage. This alteration, which makes a lengthy discussion of the Persian romances irrelevant in this paper, is created with the addition of a fictional history in which Philip is defeated by the Emperor of Persia, Darab. Under the terms of the surrender, Philip marries his daughter to Darab. The brief union comes to an unfortunate end:

Shortly afterward, noticing that his bride has a foul breath, Darab sends her back to her father [Philip], ignorant that she is pregnant. Philip conceals her pregnancy, and when she gives birth announces that the child, Alexander has been born to him by a concubine. In this Persian version of his birth, Alexander is a half brother of Darius, and therefore has a right to the Persian crown. (Southgate 279 – 280)

This passage illustrates how Alexander is claimed as a Persian, the son of a Persian king, thereby making palatable Alexander’s conquering of Persia and the Persian capitulation to his rule. The text also demonstrates the literary glorification of the Persians as a whole, with the depiction of them as “the bravest men in Alexander’s army” (Southgate 280).

As John Boyle notes, *Pseudo-Callisthenes* “was disseminated in translations over a wider area in Europe and Asia than any work before it” (Boyle 32). The textual alterations listed above further confirm that despite extreme cultural and geographic distance, the mindsets of the writers and their purpose in translating and adapting the texts were strikingly similar. The Alexander texts were not written solely to record and preserve history but also to use the legend of Alexander to glorify their respective cultures and religions. These texts illuminate Alexander’s transcendence of cultural boundaries in the medieval period.

The Intertwining of the Characters of Alexander and Olympias in *Pseudo-Callisthenes*

In most of the Alexander romances, the characters of Alexander and Olympias are ir-

revocably intertwined. Alexander's social position is fundamentally bound up with Olympias, but Olympias' status is even more strongly linked to Alexander, who both establishes her as the mother of a king and simultaneously undermines her status by providing a tangible reminder of her adultery. The following passage from *Pseudo-Callisthenes* indicates the interdependence of Alexander and Olympias in the original Alexander romance:

And he [Nectanebus] put aside the date-tree wood staff, got up onto the bed and turned Olympias toward him and mated with her. Then he put his right hand upon her side and said: "Invincible and indomitable child. Long may you live, my lady, for you are pregnant with a boy child who shall be your avenger and become world conquering king of the whole civilized universe. (Wolohojian 28)

These lines demonstrate that the characters of Alexander and Olympias are intertwined from the moment of his conception. Alexander is a "world conquering king," but he is first and most importantly his mother's "avenger" (Wolohojian 28). The immense effect of this connection is that Olympias is placed in a precarious but immensely powerful position because of her illustrious, yet undeniably adulterous, offspring.

That Alexander both undermines and aids Olympias in maintaining her tenuous status is evident in the following passage:

And days later, Alexander went in to him [Philip] and sitting near him said: "Philip, I shall call you by your name lest it seem hard for you to be called father by me . . . did you act rightly in attacking your own son, Alexander, and wanting to kill him? And wanting to take another to wife, even though you were denied nothing by your former wife, Olympias? . . . Now I beseech you to reconcile Olympias with you. I know that she will be persuaded for her son Alexander's sake, although you do not wish to be called his father." He said this and left. And he came to his mother, Olympias, and said: "Mother, do not be angry about what your husband has done to you; for your own faults are hidden to him, and I am the son of an Egyptian father. Now go to him and entreat him to be reconciled with you, for it is proper that the wife obey the husband." . . . Speaking thus, he reconciled his parents, while all the Macedonians marveled over him. (Wolohojian 42 - 43)

That Olympias' position with Philip is threatened by Alexander is clearly indicated by the phrases "lest it seem hard for you to be called father by me," and "for your own faults are hidden to him, and I am the son of an Egyptian father" (Wolohojian 43). Alexander's status as her "avenger" (Wolohojian 28) and the implication that the reconciliation is solely due to Alexander's intercession is equally evident in lines such as, "I beseech you to reconcile Olympias with you," and "thus, he reconciled his parents" (Wolohojian 43).

The most binding aspect of Alexander's and Olympias' literary intertwining in *Pseudo-Callisthenes* is Alexander's affection for his mother, which is demonstrated

throughout the text. One notable indication of his love for Olympias is found in the lines of a prophecy given to Alexander: “Alexander, the years of your life are ended; and you are not to have your wish of reaching your mother, Olympias; instead, you are to perish in Babylon and not to enter Macedon” (Wolohojian 131). The negation of Alexander’s wish indicates the accepted presupposition of his deep and lasting affection for his mother and is clearly one of the reasons for his assumption of the role of her “avenger” (Wolohojian 28).

Alexander and Olympias in the *Historia de Preliis*

The majority of the episodes from *Pseudo-Callisthenes* involving Alexander and Olympias are preserved in the previously mentioned Latin texts. The descriptions of Alexander’s conception and the importance of Olympias’ role in *Historia de Preliis* are quite similar to those of the Greek representations:

Cum ergo surrexisset a concubitu eius, percussit eam in utero et dixit: “Hec conceptio sit victorialis et nullomodo ab homine subiugabitur.” (Hilka 22)

(When he had arisen from lying with her, he struck her stomach and said “May this conception prove victorious and in no way will it be subjugated by man.”)

The repetition of the prophesying over Olympias’ “utero” (Hilka 22) emphasizes her crucial role in the creation of Alexander. The Latin tradition also preserves both Alexander’s defense and reproof of Olympias in connection with Philip’s remarriage:

Hec autem dicente Alexandro cepit Philippus rex flere et Alexander cum eo. Et intervallo facto egressus est Alexander et abiit loqui ad Olympiadem matrem suam et veniens ad eam dixit illi: “Mater mi, noli timere malam voluntatem patris mei, quia quamvis absconditum sit peccatum tuum, reprehension tua stabit. Bene etenim et iustum est ut uxor semper subiecta sit viro suo.” Et hec dicens duxit eam ad Philippum. Videns autem illam Philippus vocavit eam ad se at osculatus est eam.” (Hilka 55 – 56)

(After Alexander had said this, Philip began to weep and Alexander with him. After an interval had passed, Alexander left and went to speak to his mother Olympias. When he came to her he said to her “Mother mine, do not have the bad will of my father, for however hidden your sin may be, your blame will remain. For it is right and just that the wife always be subject to her husband.” With these words, he took her to Philip. When he saw her, Phillip called her to him and kissed her.)

The retention of this crucial passage in which Olympias is Alexander’s “Mater mi” (Hilka 55), but is also reprimanded for her “peccatum” (Hilka 56) sets the stage for the preservation of this textual attitude of both adoration and disapproval towards

Olympias throughout the entire Western dissemination of the Alexander romance.

Alexander and Olympias in *The Wars of Alexander*

As in *Pseudo-Callisthenes* and *Historia de Preliis*, *The Wars of Alexander* illuminates the textual interdependence of Alexander and Olympias early in the work with a description of Alexander's conception. The passage from the text is as follows:

Quen he was laide be-lyfe his liknes he changes
 Worthis agayn to a wee fra a worme turnys
 The kisses he keenly the quene & clappis in armes
 Langis sare to the layke & on-loft worthies
 Quen he had wroght all his will hire wame then he touches,
 And with a renyst reryd this reson he said
 "This concepcion with kyngis sal be called here-efter
 A verra victor a-vansid all the vayne werde. (382 – 389)

(When he was stretched out soon he changed his appearance
 He becomes again a man, he changes from being a dragon
 Then he kisses the queen and grasps her in his arms ardently
 Sorely longs to play and climbs on top
 When he had wrought his will, he then touches her womb,
 And with a mysterious voice this prophecy he said
 This conception shall be called among kings hereafter
 A true victor exalted throughout all the vain world.)

This portion of the text implies that Alexander will be a conqueror because of Olympias' actions. It is with his hand on "hire wame" (Skeat 386), that Nectanebus prophesies Alexander will be a great conqueror.

Once Alexander is an adult, his actions further illuminate the connection between Olympias and himself and the extent to which his status is dependent upon her. When Alexander arrives home and finds that Philip "Had wed him another wife & wayfid his quene / Ane Cleopatras called a grete kyngis doghter / And laft Olympadas & openly for-saken" (Skeat 822 – 824),⁴ he immediately champions his mother, temporarily renounces his allegiance to Philip, and ensures that Olympias and Philip are reconciled. Their reconciliation is chronicled as follows:

With that he fanges hire further to Philip hire ledis
 And he comly hire kist & cordis with hire faire,
 Anes with Olympadas & the tothire woydis
 And lofes hire lely to his lyfes ende. (Skeat 876 – 880)

(With that he takes her and leads her forth to Philip
 And he nicely kissed her and comes to an accord with her
 He unites with Olympias and dismisses the other

And he loves her faithfully until his life's end.)

Alexander's role in the rapprochement is paramount and indicates his understanding of how closely the preservation of status as Philip's heir is linked to his mother's status as Philip's queen.

Whether or not Alexander's actions are partially due to the preservation of his inheritance, Alexander's genuine attachment to his mother cannot be overlooked. Upon hearing that his mother is ill, Alexander immediately abandons his war, risking accusations of cowardice, to hasten home to her. Alexander writes to Darius:

Bot I warne the, or I wynd & will thou know
That for na drede I with-draw ne doute of thi pride
For baisting of thi bobance ne of this breme wordis
Bot for to se that is seke my semely modire. (Skeat 2012 – 2017)

(But I warn you, before I go, and want you to know
It is because of no dread that I withdraw or fear of your pride
Or dismay at your arrogance or your fierce words
But to see one who is sick, my lovely mother.)

By risking his reputation as a warrior and temporarily halting his ambition to conquer the world, Alexander demonstrates his love for his mother and his virtues of loyalty and devotion. The mutual affection of Alexander and Olympias is further shown by Alexander's final actions before his death, which are described as follows, "And afore hys deth, he wrote a letter unto hys moder / desiring hir to make no sorrow for hym" (Skeat 135 – 136).⁵ These lines indicate that Alexander's last thoughts are for his mother and that Alexander is in no doubt of Olympias' reciprocal affection for him, as evidenced by his preemptive desire to spare her any grief.

Alexander/Dhulqarnyan and Olympias/Al-Ghayda in *Qissat Dhulqarnyan*

The textual interdependence of Olympias and Alexander is intact and strongly indicated in *Qissat Dhulqarnayn*, despite substantial alterations to the text regarding Alexander's characterization. The opening reference to Olympias in the *Qissat Dhulqarnayn* is:

و قال بعض الرواة يقولون ان ذا القرنين من اهل الزنية و المواجنية فقال مقاتل و الكلبي انه كان
من اهل الخير و الشرف (8).

(Some transmitters say that Dhulqarnayn was from an adulterous and shameless people. But both Muqatil and al-Kalbi say that his people were good and honorable.) (Zuwiyya 68)

The allusion to the adulterous conception indicates that the Arabic writers were fully cognizant of the original version of Alexander's life but found it wholly unacceptable

for the background of an Islamic hero. This alteration reveals how closely Alexander's status is linked to his mother's morality, specifically indicated in this instance by her infidelity. Thus, to create an appropriately respectable ancestry for Alexander and reputation for Olympias, the Arab writers refuse to acknowledge the original version. The Arabic text is even clearer than the English translation in its reference to Olympias using the word "اهل", most accurately translated as 'family' rather than 'people.' In some Arabic dialects it is used interchangeably with the word 'wife,' further emphasizing the connection between Alexander and his mother. Aside from this opening assertion of the "good and honorable" character of his "people," the possible immorality of Alexander's mother is never addressed (Zuwiyya 68).

The linking of Alexander's status as the king's heir to Olympias' reputation is also suggested by the absence in *Qissat Dhulqarnayn* of any passages found in the Western romances that describe the fraught relationship between Alexander and the king. The succession of Alexander in *Qissat Dhulqarnayn* is simply presented in the lines:

ثم ان الملك قرب ذا القرنين و ادناه من نفسه وتولاه وقلده امر الملك وبر ا اليه منه و قال انت اول
باملك مني و احق فيه (9).

(Then the king brought Dhulqarnayn into his chambers, made him king.) (Zuwiyya 69)

This smooth transition from heir to king, and the absence of the episodes in which Alexander must defend and reinstate his mother to retain his status, illustrate the extent to which Alexander's position is tied to Olympias in *Qissat Dhulqarnayn*. In *Pseudo-Callisthenes*, *Historia de Preliis*, and *The Wars of Alexander*, Olympias' actions result in her status and consequently Alexander's status as Phillip's heir being questioned. In the Arabic texts, Olympias' position, morals, and fidelity, and consequently Alexander's position, are above reproach.

In *Qissat Dhulqarnayn*, Alexander's and Olympias' affection for each other is clearly demonstrated, which further links them in the Arabic texts. As in *The Wars of Alexander*, Alexander writes to Olympias when his death is imminent, opening the letter with the salutation, "إلى امي اعزها الله" (104), which Zuwiyya translates as, "To my mother, may God love her" (Zuwiyya 160). The word "اعزها" literally translates as 'beloved' or 'dear,' thus creating numerous possible interpretations of the phrase, such as 'to my mother, may Allah make her more dear,' or, 'to my mother, may she be beloved of Allah.' Despite the slight variations, all possible translations of the line clearly indicate Alexander's adoration of his mother. Olympias' response after receiving his letter, which amply demonstrates her reciprocal affection, is as follows:

ه فلما وصلها قراته و جمعت تبكي ثم ضمخت الكتاب بالعنبر و حبسته
عندها (105).

(When it [the letter] reached her, she read it and began to cry. Then she a-

nointed it with amber and put it in a safe place.) (Zuwiyya 160)

This exchange illuminates Alexander's Muslim virtues of respect for and devotion to his mother and the love and affection between Alexander and Olympias in *Qissat Dhulqarnayn*, cementing the textual intertwining of the characters of Olympias and Alexander.

Thus, in *Pseudo-Callisthenes* and along both the Eastern and Western trajectories, Olympias and Alexander are irrevocably connected. Although Alexander and Olympias are outwardly separate entities, within both the Eastern and Western Alexander traditions they are fundamentally intertwined and mutually dependent.

While the textual interdependence of Olympias and Alexander and the glorification of Alexander overtly exemplify cross-cultural congruity in the medieval period, the differing representations of Olympias in *The Wars of Alexander* and *Qissat Dhulqarnayn* reveal the underlying cultural disparity. This is not because of Olympias' representations in themselves, but because the textual characterizations reflect the differing cultural standards governing feminine morality. In *The Wars of Alexander*, the attitude towards Olympias is a curious mixture of overt condoning and inherent disapproval. This attitude is epitomized by Alexander's feelings towards his mother. As he is the dominant force in the romance, Alexander's attitude towards Olympias becomes the attitude of the text. Alexander's championship and continued defense of Olympias, despite his disapproval of her actions, are what determines her status, as opposed to her actual actions.

In *The Wars of Alexander*, Olympias is deliberately presented in such a way as to indicate that she is an adulteress, in spite of the divine pretense. After Nectanebus states, "Athill qwen, quod Anec "as I am enfourmed / Ane of the grettist of oure godis if grace & of might / I fynd, or it be fere to fleschely the know" (Skeat 306 – 308),⁷ Olympias says:

"Now certayn sire," sayd the qwene, "selly me thinke
Bot may I se this be soothe at ye me say here
Noght as a prophet ne a prest I prays sall thi selfe
Bot rehers the as hieghe gode & hie the for euire. (Skeat 326 – 329)

("Now certainly sire," said the queen, "I think this is strange
But if I can see what you have told me here is true,
I will praise you, not as a prophet or a priest
but as a high god and I will honor you forever.")

In these lines, Olympias exhibits her enthusiasm for divine adultery in promising to treat Nectanebus as a "heighe gode & hie the for euire" (Skeat 329). Her actions in the text are clearly immoral but have little bearing on her status. Regardless of Olympias' actual morality, Alexander's defense of his mother determines her position. When she has been set aside by Philip, Alexander states:

“Fadire,” quod this fell knight, “quen he this fest entirs
 The palme here of my first price I pray the resayfe
 For the to the weding or I winde of my wale modire
 And kaire me to a-nothire kyng to couple hire to wife
 Forthe to felsen ne to fologhe fallis me na mare
 Ne here to duell with thi douce deynes me na langer” (Skeat 823 – 830)

(“Father,” said this fierce knight, when he enters this feast
 “The palm leaf of my first victory, I pray you will receive
 Before I go forth to the wedding of my noble mother
 And betake myself to another king to join with her in marriage
 For it is no longer fitting that I help or follow you
 Nor does it any longer seem fitting for me to remain here with your sweet-
 heart.”)

Alexander’s later statements, “Dame, now is thar none other to do bot deme it thi se-
 luen / For as thi foly was before so foloweth afir“ (Skeat 735 – 736)⁸ and “Bees not
 a-gloped, madame ne greued at my fadire / If all ye synned him be-syde as your
 selfe knawis / thar-of na we may the wite it was godis will” (Skeat 874 – 876),⁹ in-
 dicate that he is well aware of Olympias’ previous indiscretion. Nevertheless, this
 “foly” (Skeat 736), matters little to her champion. Olympias remains Alexander’s
 “wale modire” (Skeat 825). Phillip and the text bow to Alexander’s affection for O-
 lympias, emulating his attitude towards her, and she remains Alexander’s adulterous
 but adored mother throughout *The Wars of Alexander*.

The Variable Determining of Feminine Morality in Western Medieval Literature

The masculine controlling of moral status within the Alexander romances indicates that
 Western attitudes towards feminine morality, especially regarding fidelity, are varia-
 ble. The actual morality of a woman’s actions, as would be impartially determined by
 societal standards, is largely immaterial; however, the male opinion of a woman’s ac-
 tions determines her status within the literature. This is not to say that chastity was
 not valued in medieval Western society. There was a long tradition valuing virginity,
 modesty, and chastity in women originating with the Virgin Mary. Nonetheless, the
 acknowledged admiration for chaste and virginal women existed within a social power
 dynamic that enables men to create women’s status, regardless of their actual chasti-
 ty. Infidelity or sexual indiscretion did not have a consistently prescribed outcome in
 Western society. Although morality and chastity were ultimately desired, they were
 not requisites for women being placed at the pinnacle of society, as evidenced by O-
 lympias, and also by Igerne, King Arthur’s mother. This variable treatment of femi-
 nine infidelity creates a certain disturbing privileging of masculine opinion throughout
 Western literature. By contrast, the presentation of Olympias in *Qissat Dhulqarnayn*
 illuminates the disparity between the Eastern and Western attitudes towards feminine
 immorality.

The Islamic attitude towards feminine immorality is extremely strict. The follow-

ing passage is a depiction of a well-documented incident from the life of the Prophet Muhammed (PBUH) :

A woman who had committed adultery is said to have come to the Prophet, confessed her offense, and asked that she be duly punished for it. Since adultery is a major offense (hadd), its punishment is death by stoning. The woman was pregnant. The prophet sent her away and told her to wait until she delivered. When she returned with the child in her arms, and again asked for her punishment, the Prophet sent her away a second time to nurse the child. Finally, she returned leading the child by the hand with a piece of bread in his mouth. Had the woman not returned and simply repented, she would have escaped punishment. But since she wished to expiate her sin, with her own blood, the Prophet ordered that she be stoned to death.

This Hadith reveals the underlying rigidity of the Eastern standards governing feminine morality. In a Muslim setting, despite Alexander's power and influence, any attempt to cloak Olympias' adultery, divine or otherwise, would be fruitless. In light of her infamous adultery, Alexander's defense and championship of Olympias would nonetheless be insufficient protection. Thus, the Islamic setting of the text and the characterization of Alexander as a devout Muslim hero necessitate the altered representation of Olympias' actions manifested in *Qissat Dhulqarnayn*; however, rather than erasing her presence in the text, the writers merely eradicate the adulterous conception of Alexander and capitalize on the textual intertwining of Alexander and his mother to exemplify two distinct points: 1) a positive side of Islamic culture: the high regard and deep respect for mothers in an Islamic society and 2) the new characterizations of Alexander and Olympias: Alexander as an Islamic hero, with the proper respect for and devotion to his mother, and Olympias as devout, caring, and moral, an ideal Muslim mother.

The religious influence on the depiction of the relationship between Alexander and his mother cannot be underestimated. Islam clearly indicates the exalted position of mothers in a Muslim society, as the Prophet Muhammed once said "Paradise lies at the feet of the mothers" (Murata ix). When examining the depiction of Alexander and Olympias' relationship in *Qissat Dhulqarnayn*, it is relatively easy to see that Alexander's interactions with his mother serve the purpose of illuminating his religiously appropriate devotion to her and that the Olympias in *Qissat Dhulqarnayn* has been deliberately constructed to personify the qualities of an ideal Muslim mother, worthy of Alexander's respect and affection. One example of this being: "Dhulqarnayn wrote his name on all the treasure and sent it to his mother in Alexandria" (Zu-wiyya 158),

An Arabic version of Alexander's death, which further demonstrates Olympias' portrayal as an ideal Muslim mother, is found in Umara's *Life of Alexander*:

Dhulqarnayn summoned his scribes and asked them to write his mother and to get help from the wise men of Persia. His letter read: "O mother, if crying

helps to alleviate the pain of things we miss, then let the sky cry for its stars, the ocean for its whales, the earth for its children, the birds for their nests, and the human for himself. Every hour somebody's fate arrives and brings upon death. Mother, I shall depart this earth, but the place I will go to is better than the one I am leaving." Dhulqarnayn's coffin was taken to Alexandria where his mother saw it. She ordered the coffin opened to see his face and said: "You have provided for others more than yourself. You have built many cities and helped many people in your life. You are now in the hands of God, the Almighty. Your wisdom has reached Heaven and all the regions of the earth. You are now forever asleep and can no longer advise. Bless you in death as you were blessed in life." (Zuwiyya 166)

In this version of the text, Olympias is again a devoted and pious Muslim mother, but she is also the illuminator of Alexander's virtues. Her concluding speech serves as a eulogy for Alexander. Olympias reiterates his accomplishments and virtues with the phrases "built many cities," "helped many people," "your wisdom reached Heaven and all the regions of earth" (Zuwiyya 166), and ends by emphasizing his status as "blessed" (Zuwiyya 166). Her final speech simultaneously commemorates Alexander and emphasizes her motherly devotion to her son, who is now "forever asleep" (Zuwiyya 166).

Conclusion

Olympias' overall representation in *Qissat Dhulqarnayn* is flattering, albeit somewhat one-dimensional. The Arabic Olympias may lose her controversial qualities, but the most important aspect of her character, the intertwining with Alexander, is preserved intact. Although Alexander's devotion to his mother in the Western Alexander romances facilitates the preservation of her original characterization, Alexander's attachment to the sanctified Olympias of *Qissat Dhulqarnayn* is in no way diminished. The reasoning behind the differing characterizations of Olympias in *The Wars of Alexander* and *Qissat Dhulqarnayn* is indicative of the variant criteria for determining feminine morality. The Western method creates a certain amount of latitude for feminine conduct but bows to masculine decisions regarding women's infidelity. By contrast, the Islamic attitude towards feminine infidelity is predetermined by the Quran and the Hadith. This attitude negates the privileging of masculine opinions found in Western culture but results in an inflexible system of judgment. Despite the differing criteria for determining feminine morality and fidelity within the Alexander tradition, the cross-cultural congruity is not limited to the glorification of Alexander and the textual intertwining of Alexander and Olympias. The two characterizations of Olympias reflect both the overtly disparate cultural attitudes and the fundamental underlying likeness behind the efforts to preserve her. Olympias' characterization may be variable, but Alexander's devotion to his mother never fails. In order to retain this relationship, the Arabic writers greatly altered the texts, not to erase the character of Olympias, but to preserve her, just as the Western writers condone Olympias' adultery and moral indiscretions because of the textual importance of Alexander's attachment to her.

Alexander's devotion to his mother transcends cultural boundaries, and its preservation in the Alexander romances along both the Eastern and Western trajectories reflects the underlying congruity of the writers' attitudes in spite of the extreme cultural distance and disparity. Therefore, within the medieval Alexander tradition, Alexander and Olympias are irrevocably intertwined, and although the representations of Olympias in the texts are culturally variable, to Alexander she forever remains his "wale modire" (825), "اعزها الله" (104), "may God love her" (Zuwiyya 160).

[Notes]

1. This paper uses the Skeat edition. Re-edited from M. S. Ashmole 44, In the Bodleian Library, Oxford, and MS. D. 4. 12, In the Library of Trinity College, Dublin.
2. *Qissat Dhulqarnayn* is the name given to the text by the editor, Z. David Zuwiyya in his book *Islamic Legends Concerning Alexander the Great*, Global Publications, 2001. This text itself is drawn from two manuscripts: 1) MS 61 in the Real Academia de la Historia and 2) MS 5397 in the Biblioteca Nacional.
3. It has been established that *Qissat Dhulqarnayn* is based on texts written by six medieval Arabic authors, Ka'b Al-Ahbar (7th century), Wahb b. Munabbih (8th century), Abd Al-Malik Al-Mashuni (8th century), Abd Al-Rahman b. Ziyad (8th century), Al-Masudi (10th century), and Abu Abd Allah Muhammad b. Al-Shatibi (13th century).
4. Had wed him another wife and made her, a woman called Cleopatra, a great king's daughter, his queen, and left Olympias and openly forsaken her.
5. And before his death, he wrote a letter to his mother, desiring her to not grieve for him.
6. Quoted from *Qissat Dhulqarnayn*
7. "Dear queen," said Nectanebus, " I am informed that one of our greatest gods of grace and power is going to come and sleep with you. "
8. Madam, there is no one to blame for this but yourself, for this folly has come after yours.
9. Do not be angry or grieved with my father for you have sinned against him, as you yourself knows, even if we say it was God's will.

[Works Cited]

- Anderson, A. R. "Alexander's Horns." *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, Vol. 58, (1927):100 – 122.
- Boyle, John A. "Literary Cross-Fertilization between East and West." *British Society for Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1(1977): 32 – 36.
- Larry Benson. *The Riverside Chaucer by Geoffrey Chaucer*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987.
- Cizek, Alexander. "Historical Distortions and Saga Patterns in the Pseudo-Callisthenes Romance." *Hermes*. Vol. 106, No. 4(1978): 593 – 607.
- Hilka, Alfons. *Historia Alexandri Magni* (Historia de Preliis). Germany: Verlag Anton Hein, 1976.
- Jasnow, Richard. "The Greek Alexander Romance and Demotic Egyptian Literature." *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*. Vol. 56. No. 2 (1997): 95 – 103.
- Pritchard, R. Telfryn. *The History of Alexander's Battles* (Historia de preliis-the J1 Version). Canada: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval studies, 1992.
- Samuel, Allen. "The Earliest Elements in the Alexander Romance." *Historia: Zeitschrift fur Alte Geschichte*, 35.4(1986): 427 – 437.

- Skeat, Walter, ed. *The Wars of Alexander*. London: N. Trubner & Co., 1886.
- Smithers, G. V. *King Alisaunder*. London: Oxford University Press, 1952.
- Southgate, Minoos S. "Portrait of Alexander in Persian Alexander-Romances of the Islamic Era." *Journal of the American Oriental Society*. Vol 97, No. 3(1977):278 – 84.
- Wallach, Luitpold. "Yosippon and the Alexander Romance." *The Jewish Quarterly Review, New Series*, Vol. 37, No. 4(1947): 407 – 22.
- Wheeler, Brannon. "Moses or Alexander? Early Islamic Exegesis of Quran 18:60 – 65." *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*. Vol. 57, No. 3, (1998): 191 – 215.
- Wolohojian, Albert trans. *The Romance of Alexander the Great By Pseudo-Callisthenes*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1969.
- Zuwiyya, Z. David, ed. *Islamic Legends Concerning Alexander the Great*. New York: Global Publications, 2001.