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You've Got Mail: Epistolography, Mapping, and Authenticity in Early Literature of
Alexander the Great

Alexander the Great, in a letter to his mother, describes his attempt at exploring the depths of the ocean. He makes a hand-sized hole in a large jar, puts the jar in an iron cage, and attaches a nearly-2000 foot chain from the cage to his ship. He keeps the hole closed during his descent, only opening it upon the ocean floor, so he could reach his hand out and grasp at whatever wonders awaited him there. Only a few sections later, in the same letter, he describes his attempt at exploring the skies, searching for that critical point where the sky touches the earth. He captures two native birds—large, white, and strong—and does not allow them food for two full days. He makes a human-sized bag out of ox skin, attaches it to a wooden yoke, attaches the yoke to the birds' necks, and climbs into the bag. He holds up two spears, with a horse's liver (the birds' food of choice) attached to each, and the smell makes the birds instantly rise, bringing Alexander close to the sky's limit.

In the former instance, a monstrous fish chomps at the cage, holds it in its mouth, and drags Alexander with his ships all the way to an unidentified island, on which it spits them out. In the latter one, a half-bird, half-man creature appears in the skies and suggests that Alexander return to earth as quickly as possible; the creature points Alexander's eyes to a far-away snake curled up around a small circle, advising him to aim for that circle, as it is the world. Each instance, however, ends with Alexander remarking to his mother that the event taught him to "make no more attempts at the impossible" (123). Yet the work containing this letter, the famed

Alexander Romance, continues to describe countless impossibilities throughout the explorations of one of history's most widespread figures. The *Romance*, then, is a conglomerate of many different stories and traditions mingling the historical life of Alexander the Great with fantastic legends. As these opening anecdotes make clear, it is not wholly historical, but it is also not wholly legendary; it draws on Alexander's historical battles with Darius and his conquests throughout the East. Because of his characteristic ambition and widespread travels, Alexander was always just out of reach from the public's hands, and it makes sense that such a life would seamlessly mold into such legends. As Richard Stoneman puts it, these legends "began to crystallize around his person even as the catafalque bearing his body rolled across the desert from Babylon" (*Romance* 4). Alexander's life, then, has always been tied up with legend, and it can be difficult to extricate one from the other.

The sheer impact of the *Alexander Romance* complicates this fact, as the Greek text has been translated into over 16 languages, extending well into the Middle Ages, and became the basis for much literature about Alexander (and about other legendary kings and heroes, for that matter). One could even argue that the *Alexander Romance* is among the most widespread, influential, and long-lasting texts in history. Saskia Dönitz notes that Alexander literature was translated into Hebrew from late antiquity to the Middle Ages, and "of all non-Jewish material that entered the Jewish tradition, the story of Alexander the Great more than any other found its way into Hebrew literature" (21). Juan Pedro Monferrer-Sala argues that texts surrounding Alexander had an unusually large impact on Syriac literature and that the Syriac translation of the *Romance* is among the most influential of these (41). Z. David Zuwiyya points to the *Romance*—instead of historical accounts—as the basis for Arabic notions about Alexander, noting that these stories "permeated many genres of medieval Arabic literature including history,

geography, wisdom literature, Quranic exegesis, and stories of the prophets” (73). In medieval English literature, Alexander as a historical figure becomes a warning on “Fortune’s Wheel,” indicating how even the mightiest rulers are doomed to fall. And the *Alexander Romance* offers inspiration for countless medieval romances to come. For as wide as Alexander the Great’s rule extended—from Greece, down to Egypt, across Asia, and through Persia (from modern-day Turkey to modern-day Afghanistan)—the rule of the *Alexander Romance* is even wider, stretching across all major world languages and seeping into world literature. And unlike Alexander’s short-lived empire, which became fragile and fractured after his death, the *Alexander Romance* persists in its widespread influence throughout the ages.

While the opening tales of the sea’s deeps and sky’s heights represent Alexander’s unlimited ambition and fantastic quests throughout the *Romance*, they also represent one of the *Romance*’s primary tools for narration—letters. This particular letter is one of two to his mother, Olympias, in which Alexander relates through first-person narrative some of the most unbelievable stories in the *Romance*. Other types of letters occur a striking number of times, for a wide variety of uses. They are often used as instruments of war, none more so than the correspondence between Alexander and Darius as they fight for control of Persia. In these letters, Alexander and Darius often engage in rhetorical battles of wits—letters become a mode of combat, and messengers become instruments of war. Alexander reads one of his own letters to his troops in order to boost morale through his superior intellect (72). He also uses letters to update his loved ones back in Greece, such as Olympias and Aristotle, his teacher. These letters, as exemplified earlier, detail incredibly fantastic adventures and mark how far Alexander has pushed into the civilized and uncivilized worlds. Finally—and especially toward the end of the *Romance*—he sends and receives letters in an attempt to learn more about mythicized figures

such as the Amazons, which I will later focus on in detail. As a whole, these letters drive the text's plot, often being the primary source of narration for Alexander's escapades—a fairly unparalleled phenomenon throughout the romance genre. While the *Romance* is far from the epistolary novel, it is important to note this early use of letters to advance a story, made most popular (to a modern English audience) in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. The importance of letters for narrating the *Romance* points to far more ancient roots for the epistolary tradition than one might assume.

This study examines Alexander's correspondence with the Amazons in the *Romance* against another influential author, Plutarch's, use of letters as documentary evidence in his *Life of Alexander*. A far cry from the legendary nature of the *Romance*, Plutarch's *Life* claims historical roots, and scholars generally favor the *Life* (and other similar works) over the *Romance* as an authentic source of information about, well, Alexander's life. But extricating fact from fiction can prove just as difficult in Plutarch as in the *Romance*—if not more difficult, since Plutarch's historical tone and credible-sounding citations naturally beg to be read as facts. My paper argues that these texts have more in common than meets the eye; neither text is truly “historical,” and each text embraces inauthentic materials (especially letters) to further its Alexandrian stories. My paper also uses each text to think about pre-modern conceptions of communication and documents, and how letters specifically bleed through both real and imagined spaces, often telling of people characterized by their “Otherness.” Letters become road maps in each text, marking the author's intention and cultural information at each stop along the way, so it is particularly fitting that letters convey space—space between the sender and the recipient, space traveled to convey the message, spaces described in the letters themselves. This

creates a better understanding of late-classical and medieval sensibilities while speaking to more modern questions about intertextuality and cultural difference.

Ancient Letters: From Reality to the *Romance*

Ancient customs of “authentic” letters provide an important basis to set against letters in the *Romance* and *Life*. The most recognizable characteristic of ancient Greek letters, an opening and a closing remark, is very similar to the most recognizable characteristic of letters today. John Muir speculates that the ancient Greek letter in its recognizable form, with a greeting and a signoff, began between the late-fifth and mid-fourth centuries BC, at least one hundred years before the time of Alexander the Great. These letters “begin with ‘A to B, greetings’ (or a slight variant of that) and usually end with a single word of good wishes ‘Farewell’ or ‘Best wishes,’” and this form developed from messages written down without opening or closing remarks (Muir 1). From there, the ancient Greeks utilized the letter format both privately and publicly. In private letters, writers often began by wishing their addressee well and stating that he or she was also well. They also often thanked the addressee for a previous letter and noted gifts or other physical items accompanying the letter (Muir 3). Public letters, or letters from government figures, were “nearly always written in a direct, unrhetoical manner and quite punctilious in their use of proper titles” (Muir 5). Leading Greek figures, therefore tended to be efficient, proper, succinct, and controlled in their official correspondence.

However, the historical Alexander the Great apparently broke the rules of proper letter-writing. Plutarch notes in *Phocion* that “after Alexander had become great and had conquered Dareius, he dropped from his letters the word of salutation, ‘χαίρειν,’ except whenever he was writing to Phocion; him alone, like Antipater, he used to address with the word ‘χαίρειν’” (17.6). If Plutarch’s account is accurate, then from the early 330s BC to the end of his life in 323 BC,

Alexander very scarcely opened his letters with greetings or salutations, which goes against the elites' tendency to open their letters with proper greetings and titles. At the time of Alexander's conquest over Darius of Persia, the Macedonian king had already campaigned in the Balkans and conquered Asia Minor; afterwards, he continued to push Eastward, including a campaign into India [Figure I]. He was known and feared far and wide, so perhaps it makes sense that something as small as greeting customs in letter-writing would not be a concern for him, the Great King.

Figure I: Reference map, Alexander the Great



The Alexander of history, though, differs from the Alexander of myth in many respects. The mythical Alexander takes the historical Alexander's fantastic qualities and amplifies them, suspending reality by offering a larger-than-life view of an already-larger-than-life figure. The historical Alexander's widespread conquests throughout the little-explored East lend themselves to legend, as those receiving this news back in Greece could only imagine the different peoples and places that Alexander both visited and defeated. Stoneman in his introduction to *Alexander*

the Great: A Life in Legend argues that “in the *Alexander Romance* the historical Alexander is almost entirely overlaid by another Alexander, a protean character who is able to embody some of the deepest fears and longings of the human condition” (2-3). The *Romance*, then, is not so much about what Alexander did but what he hoped to do—not so much about what is real, true, or possible but what is longed for in a world where no place is impassable and no race unconquerable. It is perhaps interesting, then, that the mythical Alexander—an Alexander in an unlimited world—uses letter greetings that the historical Alexander, very much a part of the real world and all of its customs, was said to drop. Even after mythical Alexander defeats Darius, he still uses the customary letter greetings even among people of highly skeptical historical accuracy, such as the Brahmans, Queen Candace of Meroe, and the Amazons.

The Amazonian Correspondence

The letters surrounding the Amazons in particular imply a relationship between history, myth, letters, and storytelling. The Amazons are a highly mythicized group of warrior women, whose precise geographic location varies across sources, but is often associated with Scythia. According to popular myth, the Amazons lived in a society by themselves, engaging with men only for reproductive purposes or in battle. Hippolyta, the queen of the Amazons, appears in many myths surrounding the traditional Greek heroes; Heracles’ ninth labor involves retrieving Hippolyta’s girdle, and in other myths Theseus conquers the Amazons and takes Hippolyta back to Athens as his wife. In classical myth, the Amazons are depicted as objects for conquering; yes, they can represent a threat to male-dominated society, but nevertheless they are constantly subdued by heroes and warriors. There may have been a historical basis for these mythical Amazons, though. Adrienne Mayor details archeological evidence for the existence of Scythian female warriors, namely battle-scarred women buried with weapons. For example, one young

female warrior had “wounds from a battle-axe in the skull and a bent bronze arrowhead embedded in the knee...Two iron lances were plunged into the ground at the grave’s entrance and two more spears lay beside the skeleton inside. A massive armored leather belt with iron plaques lay next to a quiver and twenty bronze-tipped arrows with red-stripped wooden shafts” (63). Not only does this describe a female warrior, but apparently a successful one buried with incredible decorum. Mayor notes that this is not an anomaly; many regions associated with the mythical Amazons have many tombs of female warriors. Perhaps the myths surrounding the Amazons grew from knowledge of, or encounters with, these historical women—though the details of how the mythical Amazons live are not necessarily characteristic of the lives of historical female warriors. The myths surrounding the Amazons suggest that points of difference, points of cultural alterity, become mythicized when the dominant culture does not know how to accommodate their historical existence.

In the *Romance*, Alexander’s interaction with the Amazons is entirely narrated through letters—first, a series of correspondence with the Amazons themselves, and then a letter to his mother, Olympias, describing the interaction. These two recipients represent two different kinds of narration, though both are achieved through epistolography. Alexander’s letters with the Amazons precede the physical interaction between the two, while Alexander’s letter to his mother reports events that have already happened. By using these letters alone to narrate Alexander’s time with the Amazons, the author gives “before and after” information instead of narrating the actual events in “real time.” For contrast, Alexander’s interactions with the Brahmans and with Queen Candace of Meroe begin with letters, but move into a physical visit that the narrator describes in “real time.” By ascertaining both Alexander’s and the Amazons’ intentions through the “before” letters and hearing Alexander recall their interaction in the

“after” letter, we as readers get a sense of Alexander’s itinerary on his visit to the Amazons’ country, but we do not get to see it happen. We have to trust the contents of each letter—or do we? Are we as readers supposed to entertain any notion of truthfulness, or are we supposed to sit back and allow ourselves to be entertained by pure fiction?

Jacqueline Arthur-Montagne offers three useful categories for examining letters in the *Romance*, with each category becoming less and less “historic”: documentary letters, ethopoetic letters, and miracle letters. According to Arthur-Montagne, documentary letters employ formal features such as a more common vocabulary, mentioning previous letters, making specific demands and/or including specific numerical detail, and requesting return mail. These elements contribute to a more historical sense of the letter, even if its author, addressee, or content is not verifiably historic. Ethopoetic letters do not exhibit these features of documentary letters, instead using rhetoric to craft archetypal portraits of a group of people. These letters primarily aim to give the recipient or reader a sense of what makes the people in question who they are. Finally, miracle letters most suspend plausibility; they are long, first-person narratives detailing experiences with exotic or faraway lands, creatures, and races. Notably, ethopoetic and miracle letters do not have parallels in real correspondence; documentary letters alone mimic real letters. I find Arthur-Montagne’s categories critical to thinking about how narration operates in the *Alexander Romance*, and I will use them throughout my study. However, she classifies Alexander’s letter exchange with the Amazons as purely ethopoetic, whereas I see the first pair of letters as ethopoetic and the second pair of letters as documentary, with some blurring of categories between both. Reading these letters in conjunction with the miracle letter from Alexander to Olympias reveals a more fluid functioning of letters in this section of the *Alexander Romance*.

The first pair of letters between Alexander and the Amazons expresses ethopoetic intentions, consistent with Arthur-Montagne's definition. When Alexander nears the land of the Amazons, he sends a letter as their first mode of contact; he greets them, describes a few of his previous expeditions, and invites the Amazons to come meet his men, "for we have not come to harm you, but to see your country and to do you good. Farewell" (143). This initially expressed purpose lays the groundwork for an ethopoetic letter to come, as Alexander wants to learn more about the Amazons' country and how they live their lives there. Further, this first letter is an ethopoetic letter itself, as it does not use the formal elements of a historical letter as laid out above; Alexander is more concerned with introducing himself and his band of followers. Even though Alexander in his letter told the Amazons to "Come to meet us rejoicing," the Amazons write a return letter instead (143). They greet Alexander (using a real formulaic greeting, but without referring to him as the customary "King") and state the purpose of their letter: "The leaders of the Amazons greet Alexander...This letter will inform you about our country, and about us and our way of life" (143). The letter's purpose, then, matches Alexander's stated purpose to see their country and is wholly ethopoetic; the focus is simply on learning more about how the Amazons live, which is sure to provide a more fantastic or unbelievable account rather than something resembling a historical one.

The remainder of the Amazons' first letter fulfills this purpose, describing the amazing details of their ways of life, but it notably includes elements of the documentary letter as well. The majority is ethopoetic: "Our country is completely encircled by a river, and it takes a year to travel around it... We, the virgins who dwell in it, number 270,000, and we are armed... The men live on the other side of the river and farm the land... Any of us who have decided to be deflowered move to the men's territory. Any female children are returned to us at the age of

seven...” (143-44). The letter thus explains where the Amazons live and how their society works. After describing the ways in which they subdue their enemies, the letter ends with a threat: “Now beware, Alexander, that the same thing does not happen to you. Take counsel, write to us again; you will find our camp at the frontier.” Thus the letter abruptly ends, without the customary “farewell” with which Alexander ends each of his letters and with which a majority of ancient letter-writers ended their own correspondence (Muir 3). This makes the threat more biting and suggests a lack of respect for Alexander’s stature. However, it is significant that this threat includes the request of a reply letter. This element of documentary letters makes sense in the context of late antique practicalities; it is a way to ensure that the addressee has received the letter, as the author typically does not deliver the letter personally. However, as I will later discuss in more detail, this practical element of sending letters does not apply in this case, as Alexander’s men and the Amazons are standing opposite each other at this point, with only a river separating them. They can most likely see each other receiving these letters, or at least perceive if one party fled the area before sending a reply. Thus, requesting a reply letter serves no practical function, but instead mimics this quality of real letters in late antiquity. This signals the shift in correspondence from ethopoetic letters to documentary letters; it begins to blur the lines between history and fantasy as we are asked to consider the highly mythicized Amazons as authors of formally plausible letters.

In Alexander’s reply letter, he moves away from his initially stated purpose of simply learning more about the Amazons; perhaps he was triggered by the Amazons’ threat, or offended by their lack of formal titles or a formal farewell in addressing him, or perhaps he never truly held this intention in the first place. After greeting the Amazons again, he opens with a boast: “We have made ourself lord of the three continents and we have not failed to set up trophies of

all our victories. It would be seen as shameful in us if we did not campaign against you too” (144). This is a far cry from his statement in the first letter that he has not come to harm them, but suggests instead that it is only natural for his men to engage them in battle, since doing otherwise would be shameful. Notably, though, it shares ethopoetic goals by explaining to the Amazons the type of people that he and his men are. He continues his letter by offering the Amazons a way out of what seems like imminent attack; if they cross the river and show themselves along with their men and send “horsewomen” as tributes each year, *then* Alexander and his men will not harm them. He swears this upon his parents, which makes it more of an oath than his previous statement that he would not harm them, but nevertheless Alexander’s rapid switch on the issue should make the Amazons seriously consider whether he will keep this oath. Nevertheless, Alexander continues the documentary customs that the Amazons started in their initial letter: “Take counsel and inform me of your decision. Farewell” (144-45). He is asking for continued correspondence, and he reinstates the “Farewell” custom that the Amazons (perhaps rudely) had dropped.

The Amazons’ final reply letter moves more solidly into the world of documentary letters, including specific, itemized details about everything they are going to “pay” as tribute to Alexander. This reflects the customs of purchase and receipt letters (Arthur-Montagne 168). They greet Alexander again, referring to him as King this time, as they have decided to submit to his rule:

The leaders of the Amazons greet King Alexander. We give you permission to come to us and to see our country. We undertake to pay you 100 talents of gold each year, and we have sent 500 of our strongest warriors to meet you, bringing with them the money and also 100 pure-bred horses. They will remain with you for one year. If any of them is deflowered by any foreigner, she may remain with you. Write and tell us how many choose to remain with you, send us back the remainder and we will send you replacements. We will obey you whether you are near or far. We have heard of your bravery and generosity. We dwell beyond the edges of the world, but still you have come

to be our lord. We have determined to write you and to dwell in our own land, obeying you as lord. Farewell. (145)

This itemization reads much like actual accounts of transactions. Granted, there are differences: this list of three is shorter than typical accounts, and it uses large, round numbers (100, 500, 100). As a point of comparison, a receipt letter between someone named Menches and Dorion, which Arthur-Montagne discusses, includes nine items of various numbers, including some small and indivisible by ten (100, 20, 13, 13, 10, 4, 1, 61, 100). So, while this Amazonian letter does not exactly replicate a historical receipt letter format, it certainly mimics it by using an itemized list and specifically including the numbers that will be sent. Additionally, it twice mentions future correspondence, which is another element of documentary letters: “Write and tell us how many choose to remain with you” and “We have determined to write you.” Just like the previous letters, it uses traditional greetings: “The leaders of the Amazons greet King Alexander” at the beginning and “Farewell” at the end. The Amazons live beyond the edges of the world, and thus beyond the limits of plausibility, but their use of recognizable letter formats merges documentary and ethopoetic letters as well as fantastic and historical sensibilities.

After this epistolary account of the Amazons, the narrator of the *Romance* continues to utilize a letter format for storytelling—this time with a miracle letter (to use Arthur-Montagne’s categories again) addressed to his mother. He opens his letter using the formulaic greeting: “King Alexander greets his sweet mother, Olympias.” He then employs a typical convention of historical letters by mentioning their previous correspondence: “As far as concerns my first achievements up until we reached Asia, I am sure that you are fully informed by my previous letters” (145). While thus mimicking historical letters in the beginning, Alexander goes on to describe fantastic journeys such as one to the pillars of Heracles and one encountering “dog-headed men, and men without heads who had their eyes and mouths in their chests; we saw men

with six hands, others with bulls' heads...still others were hairy like goats and had heads like those of lions" (146). Sandwiched between these two encounters of mythical journeys and animalistic races is Alexander's retelling of his meeting with the Amazons:

We mounted an expedition against the Amazons and marched as far as the river Prytanis....[after crossing it] we came to the river called Thermodon, which flows through a level and fertile country. Here dwell the Amazons, who are larger than other races of women, and remarkable for their beauty and strength. They wear flowery garments and carry silver weapons and axes: iron and bronze are unknown among them. They are notable for their intelligence and quick wits. As we approached the rivers where the Amazons live – it is a very wide river, hard to cross and full of wild animals – they crossed over themselves and lined up against us. But we persuaded them by a series of letters to submit to us. We took tribute from them and continued toward the Red Sea as far as the river Tenon. (146)

By including the Amazons in his miracle letter, Alexander solidifies their belonging among strange nations or mythical peculiarities. Small details such as the Amazons being larger than normal women and the river surrounding their land being full of beasts reinforce this association. Beyond this, however, Alexander's retelling of the encounter after the fact offers additional details that he did not give during the initial correspondence with the Amazons. First, we learn here that the Amazons crossed their dangerous river and lined up, presumably in battle formation, against Alexander and his men. This puts additional stress on the correspondence; Alexander's opening letter introducing himself and requesting to see their land in peace seems silly when imagining the situation later described in this letter to Olympias. The Amazons and Alexander would not have been physically far apart since the Amazons had crossed the river, and battle would have appeared imminent, yet Alexander chooses to send a letter to these warrior women lined up for battle instead of merely sending an envoy or even marching against them, like one might expect of the mighty conqueror. Since earlier sections of the *Romance*, especially surrounding Alexander and Darius, offer precedent for letters used as instruments of war, it is surprising that the exchange with the Amazons begins with a physical threat of war (described

only in the letter to Olympias) yet ends in peace, with the Amazons completely submitting to Alexander. He obtains control over the Amazons, but he does not physically conquer them as the reader might expect.

As Alexander's letters with the Amazons add to his imperial conquests, questions of epistolography lead into questions of geography and real versus imagined space. As a means of communication, letters have to be sent across physical space, whether a more "real" space, such as Alexander's letters to Darius, or a more "imagined" space, such as his letters to the Amazons. In general, the treatment of letters in the *Romance* ignores this practical element; we can read the letters, but we don't often hear who the messenger is or how far he has to travel to deliver the letter. Only during Alexander's exchanges with Darius does the narrator mention Alexander sealing a letter, giving it to Darius' messengers, and including the gold they brought as a gift (since gifts often accompanied letters in the ancient world) (72). In the case of the Amazonian correspondence, as mentioned previously, the unnamed messenger wouldn't have had to travel very far; Alexander and his men were already in the Amazon's territory, and the Amazons themselves had already crossed the river, which was the most cumbersome physical barrier between the two parties. But the *Romance* does not have to concern itself too much with practicalities; it represents an imagined world where geography and spatial considerations are not barriers to Alexander's desires. Especially in the case of the Amazons, the *Romance* uses geographic space to characterize its inhabitants rather than to specifically map out Alexander's conquests. For example, the river Thermodon that surrounds the Amazons' land is riddled with wild beasts, making the topography just as fantastic as the myths surrounding the Amazons themselves. The author of the *Romance* is not concerned about precisely where the Amazons live, but rather what their surrounding space says about them as a culture.

The Role of Mapping

The *Romance*'s conception of "imagined" space finds a visual representation in medieval *mappae mundi*, specifically the Hereford map (c.a. 1250-1300). As previously mentioned, the *Romance* remained popular in many translations and editions through the medieval period, speaking to its compatibility with, and adaptability to, the medieval conception of the world. In addition, Stoneman notes that medieval *mappae mundi*, with their characteristic T-O form, are "certainly based on a map commissioned by Julius Caesar, the detail of which seems then to have been used to illustrate the world history of the fifth-century writer Orosius. The tripartite division of the world goes back to Herodotus and Hecataeus, and was transmitted to the medieval world by Orosius and Isidore of Seville" (*Life in Legend* 80). The Hereford map is a representative example of a long tradition of maps; even before the time of Alexander the Great, maps were circular and likely had a layout very similar to *mappae mundi* (79). Since the classical text extends to later times, and the medieval map reaches back to previous times, the two fit together nicely. On a conceptual level, both the *Romance* and Hereford map emphasize culture and history over exact location. The map's cartographer organizes space by value judgments as to a place's relative importance, so these maps are only loosely accurate in their geography (a tendency which the *Romance* shares). Major continents are placed in logical sections based on cardinal directions, with Asia in the East, Africa in the Southwest, and Europe in the Northwest, but the maps are oriented with the East at the top and the West at the bottom.

Nevertheless, this general accuracy uses geography as a model for representing history and culture; the map cannot help anyone physically travel from Crete to Babylon, but it can illuminate Crete's role in Greek mythology, through the myth of the Minotaur, and the Tower of Babel's importance in Biblical teaching. These maps commonly take a T-O form, which

according to cultural geography scholar Kathy Lavezzo consists of “an ‘O’-shaped ocean defining a circular earth (*orbis terrarum*), divided by a ‘T’ representing the trio of waterways (the Don, Nile, and Mediterranean) believed to divide the three continents of the earth (Asia, Africa, and Europe)” (152). Lavezzo describes these maps as Eastern-oriented, with Asia occupying half of the circle and both Africa and Europe occupying a quarter each. The cartographer devotes the most space to the myths and history of Asia; Jerusalem is the center of the map and thus the center of the cultural world. Regardless of its impracticality for physical travel, an inscription on the Hereford map suggests that these types of maps reached a broad audience (much like the *Romance*): “Let all who have this history—or who shall hear, or read, or see it—pray to Jesus in his divinity...” (Westrem 11). This shows first that the map’s contents had potential to be heard, read, and seen, and second that the cartographer actually saw his work as a history rather than a map, even though it contains many elements of more-than-questionable historical accuracy.

While the Amazons and the river Thermodon do not appear on the Hereford map, the strange beasts surrounding their land, along with the Amazons’ mythical or fantastic qualities, relates to the outer edges of the Hereford map. These edges contain peculiarities that are not quite part of the plausible world, such as people with one foot that they hold above their faces to block the sun (called Sciapods) and people without faces who have eyes and a mouth on their chests instead (called Blemmyes). It follows that one particular version of the *Romance* (the latest version) includes a section on the “unclean nations” – a typical find in the map’s outskirts – in between Alexander’s ethopoetic letters with the Amazons and his miracle letter to his mother. According to the logic of the *Romance*, while the Amazons are more mythical figures, they still exist within the seen world and are allowed to occupy a civilized space. However, they

are never too far away from implausibility and savagery, as exemplified by the immediately-following “unclean nations” section. In this section, a highly Christianized Alexander prays to God to close up “two mountains in the unseen world,” shutting in these unclean nations so they cannot contaminate the seen world (186). Following his prayer, the mountains close an 18-foot gap, and Alexander builds the indestructible Caspian Gates and plants 3,000 miles of dense shrubs to enclose twenty-two nations. This decision is explained: “They used to eat worms and foul things that were not real food at all – dogs, flies, snakes, aborted foetuses, dead bodies and unformed human embryos; and they ate not only animals but the corpses of humans as well” (187). Alexander did not want to risk these practices becoming part of the inhabited world, so he cut these people off from it once and for all, much like the Hereford map keeps peculiarities around the outskirts to make room for the ‘real,’ culturally significant places in the map’s middle.

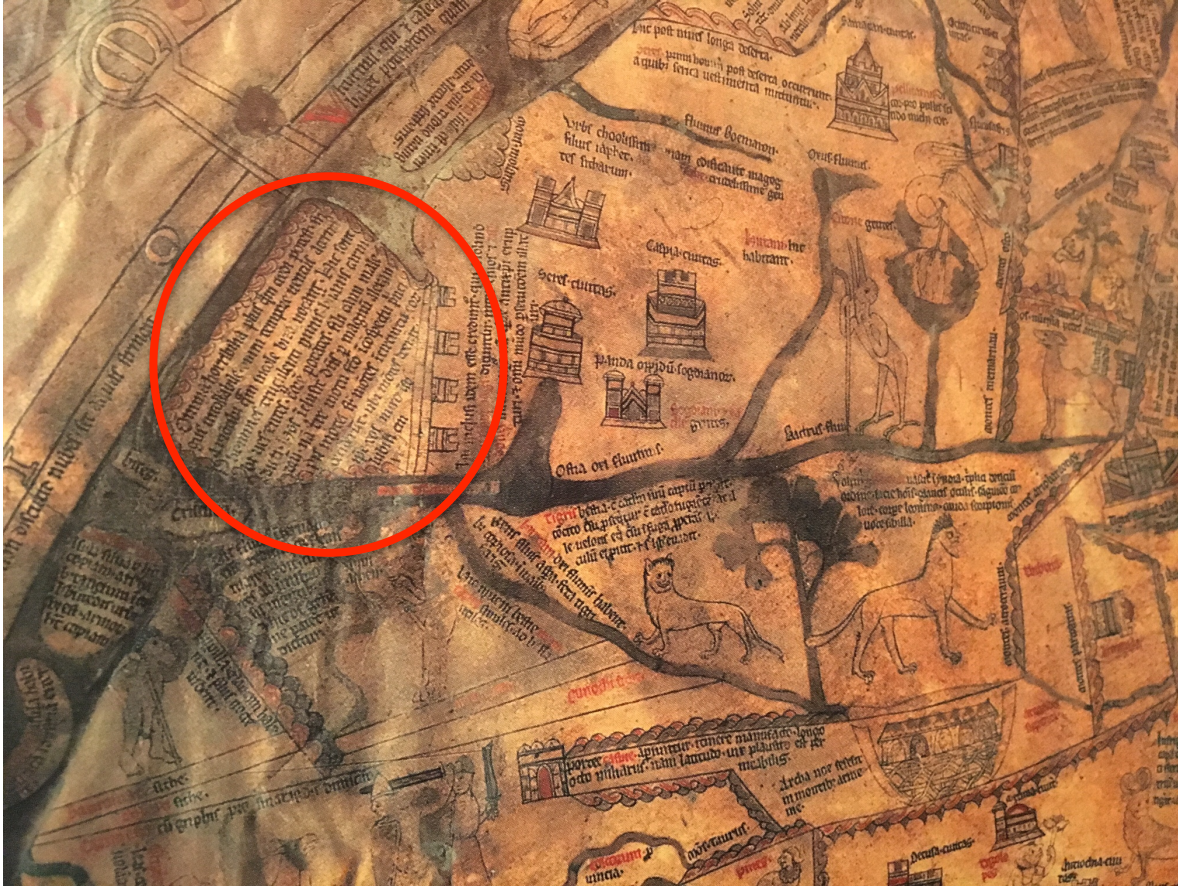
In the Hereford map’s top left corner [**Figure II**], there is a long inscription hemmed in by a wall that shares a similar story to the *Romance*’s “unclean nations” section, speaking to the similar ways the text and map conceptualize space. The map describes the subhuman practices of these nations much like the previously quoted text:

[Here are] all kinds of horrors, more than can be imagined: intolerable cold, a constant blasting wind from the mountains, which the inhabitants call ‘bizo’. Here are exceedingly savage people who eat human flesh and drink blood, the accursed sons of Cain. The Lord used Alexander the Great to close them off, for within sight of the king an earthquake occurred, and mountains tumbled upon mountains all around them. Where there were no mountains, Alexander hemmed them in with an indestructible wall. (Westrem 69)

This map, a self-proclaimed work of history, includes the fantastic details that make the *Romance* a clear work of fiction. It does include some more plausible details, such as the extreme cold and wind, while excluding some more savage ones, such as eating fetuses and embryos.

While this makes the map inscription read slightly more realistically than the *Romance* section,

Figure II: Enclosing the Unclean Nations



the problem remains that Alexander could not have plausibly shut out whole nations of people from the known world by hemming them in behind some mountains and inciting a divinely ordained natural disaster. Neither work values precise historical accuracy; instead, they shape the world by telling stories—some plausible and others inconceivable—about the world as it could be. This world is full of unimaginable and even horrific practices, to be sure, but it is also full of mystery and excitement and unlimited unknowns to discover. As when Alexander encounters, learns about, and gains control of the highly mythicized Amazons using formulaic letters, the *Romance* is able to blend fantasy and plausibility to create the world for which Alexander had his characteristic $\pi\acute{o}\theta\omicron\varsigma$, or yearning desire. It opens up the potential that the world contains more than the dominant society may allow for, such as capable female warriors in the case of the Amazons.

Authenticity: Letters in Plutarch

Whereas the *Romance* and the Hereford map draw on historical people, places, and events to bring an element of reality into an ultimately fantastic world, many sources about Alexander strive for historical preciseness above all, imitating lost first-person accounts. While letters in the *Romance* contain elements of historical letters, there is still no doubt that they are fictitious; yet many historical sources also use letters to detail the life of Alexander the Great—none more so than Plutarch's *Life of Alexander*. In fact, J. Enoch Powell lists the letters of Alexander as one of Plutarch's main sources, "expressly cited in altogether more than thirty places" (229). Powell continues to list Plutarch's other sources with the frequency of their citations: Aristobulus, Chares, and Onesicritus (6 citations); Callisthenes (3 citations); Duris, Eratosthenes, and the Diary (2 citations); and sixteen others cited once (229-230). Many of these source authors, including Aristobulus, Onesicritus, and Callisthenes, accompanied Alexander on his journeys and thus can be considered more reputable sources, though their works only survive through citations by later authors. While some debate the accuracy of these sources, nevertheless Plutarch's decision to draw from historians and first-person accounts speaks to the conception of the world prevalent in his work—a world searching for facts and plausibility.

Although Plutarch draws from historical sources, he expressly states in the beginning of his *Life* that it is in fact a life, not a history:

For it is not Histories that I am writing, but Lives; and in the most illustrious deeds there is not always a manifestation of virtue or vice, nay, a slight thing like a phrase or a jest often makes a greater revelation of character than battles where thousands fall, or the greatest armaments, or sieges of cities. Accordingly, just as painters get the likenesses in their portraits from the face and the expression of the eyes, wherein the character shows itself, but makes very little account of the other parts of the body, so I must be permitted to devote myself rather to the signs of the soul in men, and by means of these to portray the life of each, leaving to others the description of their great contests. (1.2-3)

Perhaps surprisingly, just as the *Romance* cares more about Alexander as a character than precise historical details, so too Plutarch cares about capturing the essence of Alexander as a person. He wants to report the ὁμοιότητας or likenesses of Alexander instead of the mere historical details about his battles and conquests. Powell argues that letters of Alexander “form almost the sole source of the digressions illustrative of character” (230), but letters also serve as the ultimate judge of accuracy in historical disputes. For example, in one battle description Plutarch notes that Chares attributed one of Alexander’s thigh-wounds to Darius, but that “Alexander, in a letter to Antipater about the battle, did not say who it was that gave him the wound; he wrote that he had been wounded in the thigh with a dagger, but that no serious harm resulted from the wound” (20.4-5). By quoting from this letter, Plutarch suggests that if someone as relevant as Darius wounded Alexander, surely he would have included the detail in his letter. Therefore, while Powell is correct that the letters often give details about Alexander’s character, such as his interest in medicine and his readiness to aid his friends (8.1), Plutarch also uses letters to confirm or deny matters of historical fact, especially in relation to other historians such as Chares in the example above.

While Plutarch mentions letters for these reasons a striking number of times throughout the *Life of Alexander*, he includes the text of a letter with a greeting and conclusion only once, in a letter from Alexander to Aristotle. Plutarch reports the text of the letter as follows:

Alexander, to Aristotle, greeting. Thou hast not done well to publish thy acroamatic doctrines; for in what shall I surpass other men if those doctrines wherein I have been trained are to be all men’s common property? But I had rather excel in my acquaintance with the best things than in my power. Farewell. (7.4)

Unlike Alexander’s letters to Aristotle in the *Romance*, which include fantastic details of his campaigns, this letter is short, terse, and reproachful, expressing disappointment with his teacher. Alexander, or Plutarch, uses a greeting form similar to historical letters, but instead of the

standard χαίρειν (rejoice, greetings) he uses εὖ πράττειν (fare or do well, greetings). This choice seems particularly biting given the first three words of the letter: οὐκ ὀρθῶς ἐποίησας. He has pressed his wish that Aristotle do well—which should be a polite greeting—against an accusation that Aristotle did not do well. This establishes Alexander’s tone in the letter and signals the criticism to come. Additionally, before “copying” the letter, Plutarch notes that Alexander had crossed into Asia at the time of sending this letter, so at this point he would have had plenty of discoveries to share. However, as Plutarch is more concerned with characterizing Alexander as a person, he uses this strange letter to show Alexander’s characteristic desire to be the best, to be truly great. It is not enough for Alexander to understand Aristotle’s doctrines; he wants his understanding to surpass all others, knowing τὰ ἄριστα, the best things. In a work that mentions Alexander’s letters time and time again, it seems unusual for this to be the only one Plutarch reports in a full letter format, with a greeting, message, and farewell. Then again, it perfectly aligns with his assertion that his work is a life rather than a history; this letter tells the reader about Alexander’s likenesses far more than a list of how many people he killed would.

Although Plutarch states that he is more concerned about developing the character than confirming history, nevertheless he often acknowledges the relationship between fact and fiction and expressly allies himself with the factual side. This tendency occurs during his discussion of the Amazons. The only action he mentions in this section is that an Amazon came to Alexander—a far cry from the lengthy correspondence between Alexander and the Amazons in the *Romance* and even from the details he gives Olympias in the second letter. Plutarch immediately names the historians who attest to this visit: Cleitarchus, Polycleitus, Onesicritus, Antigenes, and Ister. He then lists the historians who classify this as fiction: Aristobulus, Chares, Ptolemy, Anticleides, Philo the Theban, Philip of Theangela, Hecataeus of Eretria, Philip the

Chalcidian, and Duris of Samos – a notably longer list than those on the “fact” side (46.1). Then, he uses one of the historical Alexander’s letters as further evidence agreeing with those who call it fiction: “And it would seem that Alexander’s testimony is in favour of their statement. For in a letter to Antipater which gives all the details minutely, he says that the Scythian king offered him his daughter in marriage, but he makes no mention of the Amazon” (46.2). Once again, Plutarch proves historical inaccuracy based on what a letter of Alexander *did not* say. In general, to use a letter as evidence speaks to the historical, documentary, and/or true quality of letters; if the historical Alexander wrote these things down in a letter, they must have actually happened to him, and if he did not mention something as seemingly important as an encounter with the Amazons, then it likely did not happen. Plutarch takes letters as facts, and uses them to prove that Alexander’s encounter with the Amazons is a work of fiction. Without taking into consideration the spuriousness of Alexander’s letters, Plutarch’s conclusion stands to reason; the historical Alexander would not have come into contact with the mythical Amazons. However, who’s to say that he couldn’t have encountered female warriors at some point along his conquests? Had that happened, Alexander’s men likely would have taken the female warriors for Amazons, as that would have been a point of reference for females engaging in battle. Plutarch’s accurate, structured, historically-verified world does not have a space for such warriors to even exist.

This use of letters is problematic; the documents that Plutarch claimed to be Alexander’s letters almost certainly were inauthentic, fictional ones—and thus not reputable sources to debate historical details or to paint an image of a historical person. Many critics have suggested that Plutarch used a published collection of Alexander’s correspondence in writing his *Life*; however, most only offer the sheer number of times Plutarch mentions Alexander’s letters in the *Life* as

evidence for this suggestion, which seems to me a circular argument. Lionel Pearson supports proponents of Plutarch using a letter collection: “This view seems all the more likely now that two papyrus texts have been discovered containing collections of fictitious letters, including letters to and from Alexander” (448). Based on this discovery, Plutarch may have had a collection of Alexander’s correspondence, but they still would not have been historically accurate or authentic. Pearson also argues that “a letter which serves a purpose, whether to vindicate Alexander or to ridicule him, or which contradicts the existing historical accounts must be open to suspicion; and even when a quotation is plausible, proof of authenticity is quite impossible” (447). By that standard, all letters in Plutarch should be open to suspicion, as they all either characterize him according to Plutarch’s goal of writing a life, or create points of dispute with other historical writers. Yes, the *Life* is more historically accurate than the *Romance*, but we should resist the urge to take statements written in a historical or documentary tone as fact; the letters that Plutarch cites are likely no more authentic than the letters that are clearly fabricated in the *Romance*, yet one work is considered fact and the other fiction.

Fantasy Over Fact

Literature surrounding Alexander encourages the fluidity of history and myth, as his highly ambitious nature and widespread conquests lend themselves to legendary material. Even a more historical text like Plutarch’s *Life* does not wholly capture the “historical” Alexander, including some fictional, imaginative, and even mythical elements. The *Life* and the *Romance* come together at the myths surrounding Alexander’s birth; each describes Olympias being visited by a god, Zeus Ammon, in the form of a snake, and that the god is Alexander’s true father rather than Philip (Plutarch 2.4-3.1, *Romance* 35-42). The *Romance*, where we would expect this kind of magical, implausible material, actually provides a slightly more plausible explanation

(though still lacking historical basis). In this version, the Egyptian prophet and magician Nectanebo dresses up as Ammon in disguise and tricks Olympias into sleeping with him, thinking he was a god. Even though Nectanebo later turns himself into a snake and then an eagle, the story surrounding Alexander's conception—while inaccurate—is at least scientifically plausible in the *Romance*. Plutarch, however, describes a serpent “lying stretched out by the side of Olympias as she slept” and later describes Philip's visit to an oracle about seeing “a god, in the form of a serpent, sharing the couch of his wife” (2.4, 3.1). Stories of incredible heroes descended from a god are common in Greek myth, and it stands to reason to want Alexander the Great mentioned among the ranks of other demigods such as Theseus, Aeneas, Sarpedon, and Heracles (whose ancestry Macedonian kings such as Alexander liked to claim, in order to have both heroic descent and a birthright to Greece). However, if the existence of Amazons or even female warriors was too outside the realm of possibility of Plutarch to include as fact, it does not quite hold that he includes Alexander's implausible parentage as fact. Nevertheless the difficulty of writing about Alexander without appearing fantastic or unrealistic remains, as stories about Alexander encourage the reader to let go of this need to sift through fact and fiction and instead submit to the inherent literary quality of Alexander's adventures.

Concerns about fantasy versus fact in Alexandrian literature find a concise summary in Strabo's *Geography* (a convenient title in relation to this study): “All who wrote about Alexander preferred the marvellous to the true” (2.1.9). Though Strabo seems to intend this comment disdainfully, I think it is one of the reasons why the *Romance* and other stories about Alexander hold so great an influence in the classical, medieval, and modern worlds. It links the *Romance* with Plutarch's seemingly-opposite *Life* through the common goal of acquainting the audience with Alexander's character first and foremost. By using fictional letters as historical evidence,

Plutarch exploits the confirming power of written documents; if it is written down it must be true, and doubly so if it is both written down and sent in communication to another person.

Without Plutarch's historic, documentary, and matter-of-fact tone, his constant citing of spurious letters might be received much like letters in the *Romance*, which often mirror ancient letter-writing customs in form while deviating from plausibility and authenticity in content. As

Alexander travels across the known and unknown world, so do his letters, following him in battle against Darius, in the land of the Amazons, and even in the ocean's depths and sky's heights.

None of these "locations" can be definitively pinned down on a modern map, and even if they could, they would not reflect the role of letters and mapping in these texts or in ancient culture.

Instead, places become background to people and stories, as the Hereford map represents visually. Much like images and inscriptions on the map give a place for cultural and historical details, each letter in the *Romance* drops a pin, whether on culturally "other" details such as the Amazon's way of living or on more historically accurate ones such as the struggle with Darius.

The *Romance*, *Life*, and Hereford map taken together in this way suggest that matters of fantasy have a unique capacity to imitate history while entertaining a much more expansive worldview than the known world could offer.

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