

When Robert Rossen created his film based on the life of Alexander in the mid-1950s, he presented a tale in the cinematic epic tradition, driven by a hero confident in his own destiny, favored by the gods, following in the footsteps of heroes, especially Achilles. Oliver Stone, crafting his own artistic vision nearly fifty years later in *Alexander* (2004), presents instead a tragedy riddled with ambiguity. His Alexander stands at the vortex of a series of dualities -- father/mother, Greece/Asia, heterosexual/homosexual, god/man, vision/blindness, reason/madness -- and although possessed of strength and resolve, is also haunted by forces which threaten to consume him, among them anger, pride, and even self-doubt.

Myths, gods, and heroes form part of Alexander's story for Stone as they had for Rossen, but here again where Rossen puts forward a purely glorious and heroic interpretation, Stone highlights tensions and contradictions. In his film, the gods are not benevolent beings, and the suffering of heroes becomes a major theme. Stone spins a complex web of mythological symbolism around Alexander; while figures such as Herakles, Prometheus, and Achilles are significant in the film and deserve discussion in their own right, I focus on the god Dionysos, who is invoked repeatedly through both narrative and visual allusion as a way to signal and explore Alexander's darker side. Among other Greek tragedies, Euripides' *Bacchae* served as inspiration while Stone was writing the *Alexander* script; the film seems to owe much to the *Bacchae* with reference to Dionysos, introducing themes of transformation (even hallucination), wildness, and madness. Indeed, the Dionysian element looms large in other of Stone's films, most notably *The Doors* (1991), where rock star Jim Morrison, played by Val Kilmer (who re-appears in *Alexander* as Philip II), becomes a twentieth-century Neos Dionysos. In *Alexander* as in *The Doors*, Stone focuses on what happens to his protagonist *after* success is attained, and in both films the theme of Dionysian excess plays a major role. Thus Stone follows Alexander into India, where the god himself had travelled; Rossen had barely taken him east of Persia.

The strong use of Dionysian themes and imagery in *Alexander* suggests that for Stone, Alexander's most dangerous enemy was not Darius III, the Persian army, his parents, or any of the conspirators or barbarians who cross his path, but rather his own self. Stone articulates an inner struggle between *sophrosyne* and *hubris*, rational and irrational; this sense of Alexander as his own potential *nemesis* is compounded by the lack of a single, clearly drawn antagonist in the film. Stone's characterization marks a major departure from Rossen's earlier conception of Alexander and in general subverts expectations of the cinematic epic hero.