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Alexander for the Romans: The Ideology of Anger Control in Plutarch and Arrian

Alexander the Great served as the role model of such men as Pompey, Caesar, and, most notably in Plutarch's own era, Trajan who intended to emulate Alexander in his planned Parthian expedition. He is arguably the most powerful ideological force for militaristic autocratic forms of rule such as the Roman principate¹. Beyond his exemplary status for the grand style of military conqueror he also represents on the one hand the legitimization of monarchic rule of a type which served to validate the imperial succession, and on the other the fragility of an empire whose integrity is tied to the physical existence and personality of its founder². Augustus's act of honoring the tomb of Alexander the Great while in Egypt opened the door to any of his successors who might choose to align themselves symbolically with this glorious predecessor. The resurgence of the Alexander-motif under Trajan can therefore be interpreted from an ideological viewpoint as exerting politically a stabilizing and legitimizing influence in the post-Domitian era. There were problems with the Macedonian king's image, however.

In response to criticisms leveled at Alexander, based on his increasingly erratic behavior, Plutarch seems to provide at least a partial defense. In its origins, as I will demonstrate, this defense draws on Platonic psychology to counteract an attack that appears to center on Alexander's problems controlling his anger and is associated in particular with Roman stoicism³. The constituent elements of Plutarch's interpretation of Alexander are presented gradually and rely heavily on subtle variations in terminology and evocative word choice. Plutarch's explanation of Alexander's fiery constitution is the causal factor of his spirited (*thumoeidēs*) nature which in turn is linked to his lion-like (*leontōdēs*) character⁴. This complex is Platonic and is first encountered in the *Republic*.

Arrian by contrast tends to avoid the negative terms *thumos* and *orgē* in his depiction of the Macedonian conqueror, preferring instead to introduce a third term, *oxytēs*, which also is employed to denote the passionate aggressive tendencies exhibited in the king's behavior. This term in its superlative form *oxytatos* is linked to great courage (*andreiotatos*) in the peroration of Arrian's work. It is obvious to anyone reading the *Anabasis* that Alexander's courage as a leader was beyond question. The characteristic *oxytēs* is, on the other hand, much more tantalizing and less easily

¹ Alfred Heuss's well-known article ("Alexander der Große und die politische Ideologie des Altertums" *Gesammelte Schriften in 3 Bänden*, vol. 1, 1995: 147-186) is still the classic statement of Alexander's influence. Cf. p.150: "Vielmehr ist Alexander überhaupt für das gesamte Altertum der Inbegriff monarchischer Allmacht, die Inkarnation königlicher Würde und königlichen Anspruches schlechthin geworden."

² Well documented by Diana Spencer, *The Roman Alexander: Reading a Cultural Myth*, Exeter 2002.

³ See J. R. Fears, "The Stoic View of Alexander the Great", *Philologus* 118 (1974) 113-120.

⁴ See most recently Tim Whitmarsh, "Alexander's Hellenism and Plutarch's Textualism" *CQ* 52 (2002) 174-192

definable. It also appears as a negative characteristic in the apologetic section of the peroration, indicating quite strikingly its bivalent quality⁵.

In this paper I will contrast briefly the two alternate modes of idealization adopted by Plutarch and Arrian (against the backdrop of the other major accounts, e.g. Diodorus, Quintus Curtius Rufus, and Justin) to demonstrate how they both, through a careful manipulation of terminology when referring to Alexander's volatility, attempt to create a more appealing image that counteracts the mostly negative one encountered in Roman stoic writers such as Seneca. For philosophically inclined men like Plutarch and Arrian a vindication of Alexander in this regard was simultaneously a defense of Greek *paideia* and philosophy. Through his close association with Aristotle, Alexander unquestionably had access to the best that Greek *paideia* could offer. A major recurrent theme in Plutarch's *Lives* is the behavioral problems occasioned by a lack of education, specifically Greek philosophical training, most notably manifest in various Roman *Lives*. This paper will demonstrate how Plutarch, principally attuned to his Roman readership, subtly produces a portrait of Alexander that seeks to ameliorate somewhat the tarnished image of the conqueror.

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⁵ William V. Harris (*Restraining Rage: The Ideology of Anger Control in Classical Antiquity*, Cambridge Mass., London, 2001, p. 235, n. 29) appears only to be cognizant of the negative valuation of *oxytēs* as one of Alexander's weaknesses which he translates as "harshness".