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# *Terrible Olympias* Another Study in Method\*

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“Scholarship has shown a marked tendency to blame the demise of the dynasty which ruled Macedonia from its historical beginnings on the actions of several women (most notably Olympias and Adea Eurydice), and scholars have not infrequently characterized the actions of these women as inference, driven only by revenge. Behind both notions lie unexamined assumptions”  
Elizabeth D. Carney<sup>1</sup>.

“What everyone knows is imprecise”  
M. Finley<sup>2</sup>

“The common man may still believe in fabulous comets crossing outer space, or in prehistoric monsters living at the earth’s core, but astronomers and geologists don’t swallow such fairy tales”.  
J. Verne, *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers*  
(Chapter 4: *Ned Land* [1869]).

*To my mother, M<sup>a</sup> Carmen Bernárdez Lorenzo*

**ABSTRACT** Olympias of Epirus is one of the main characters in the history of the emergency of Macedonia as an international power with Philip II and Alexander. Nevertheless, despite the many books, papers and studies that had been improving our knowledge about Argead Macedonia in times of the great Macedonian conquerors, the historians of the XIX<sup>th</sup> and XX<sup>th</sup> centuries treated Olympias in the same terms of the ancient sources. This uncritical perspective denotes a clear tendency and aims to reproduce gender stereotypes that comes to our own days.

**KEYWORDS** Olympias of Epirus, Historiography, Gender Studies, Polygamy.

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\* The title of this paper is clearly concerned with two other previous works, as they are the brilliant masterpiece of BADIAN 1958 and the excellent work of CARNEY 2010a. In a methodological perspective, I follow here my own previous works: ANTELA-BERNÁRDEZ 2014; 2018; 2020; ANTELA-BERNÁRDEZ – ZARAGOZÀ 2019. I am very grateful with the help and comments by E. Carney and D. Mirón. All the errors in this paper are mine.

<sup>1</sup> CARNEY 1994, 357.

<sup>2</sup> FINLEY 1983, 54.

Among the many historical figures around the character of Alexander the Great, his mother Olympias of Epirus is probably the most controversial. Ancient sources are certainly very hostile with Olympias, who was the victim of harsh defamatory propaganda by her enemies after her son's death. Many of the statements recorded by Greco-Roman tradition are clearly dubious in the light of our contemporary interpretation of the facts and our present knowledge of Argead Macedonia, and different studies during the last few years have shown that in general the information from the evidence must be analysed with care and prudence.

However, it seems difficult to assess to what extent the image of Olympias was built under the scope of the influence of Ancient Historiography until the great works about Alexander in our own days, despite the methodology of academic History, the criticism of the sources and the diffusion of many of the studies and papers that question the usual perceptions, so biased and blurred, concerning her life and historical value<sup>3</sup>. A brief survey about the words of the most classical Modern authors about Alexander displays a strong series of judgements, inherited from the ancient writers, that strongly remains against Olympias<sup>4</sup>. Far from exhaustive, our approach tries to observe some of these judgements and the clichés behind them.

To begin with, Ulrich Wilcken's *Alexander the Great* has often been considered as the most balanced study among the various biographies and studies concerning Alexander. A great Master of Papyrology, Wilcken was nevertheless far from a specialist (at least in our own days' notion) on Alexander, and his view of Olympias was definitely unbalanced:

“His mother Olympias, whom Philip made his *lawful* wife in 357, was the daughter of Neoptolemus king of the Molossians, whose dynasty was traced back to the son of Achilles and was therefore looked on as Greek, though the Molossians themselves, a tribe of Epirus, seem to have been barbarians, and were probably related to the Illyrians. In 356 Olympias, who was about twenty years old, gave birth to Alexander, and next year to his sister Cleopatra: *there were no further issue to this marriage*. So Alexander was not a pure Macedonian but had a dash of barbarian blood in his veins” (WILCKEN 1967, 53. My italics).

In the historical presentation of the character of Olympias, Wilcken first highlighted the barbarian nature of Olympias, and as a result, Alexander's lack of pure Macedonian blood. To accuse Wilcken of being close to Nazi ideology concerning the ideas of race and Arianism is absolutely incorrect, if we bear in mind both his personal trajectory and the date of publication of his book (1931), although it seems probable that some ideas of his lifetime found a small place in his work. Some of them, like this *pure blood* assessment, seem to have had some historical importance in his time, but if we bear in mind that Philip himself, Alexander's father, was actually the son of an Illyrian woman, Wilcken's statement lacked any kind of historical meaning to understand the Argead court in the age of Olympias, Philip or Alexander. On the other hand, it is quite surprising to read the description of the consideration of Olympias as Philip's *lawful wife*. We will go back to this later.

Wilcken continues:

<sup>3</sup> CARNEY 1993, 29: “Surviving sources on Olympias, mother of Alexander the Great and wife of Philip II of Macedon, display a level of hostility toward her perhaps equaled only by the source tradition about Cleopatra VII and Clodia. (...) Judgments of Olympias' career and motivation, her role in Macedonian political history, and her public prestige continue to reproduce the views of ancient sources uncritically”.

<sup>4</sup> On Olympias, vid. CARNEY 2006. Of relevant interest to our approach is CARNEY 2010a.

“Both Philip and Olympias were unusually strong and impulsive in temperament. Philip’s acts bear witness to tireless energy and strength of will, and to an indominate pertinacity in following his own purposes. His body, covered with scars, showed his bravery and a delight in battle which almost amounted to foolhardiness. These are all qualities which, perhaps even to a higher power, manifest themselves in Alexander. If, on the other hand, Philip is described to us in his private life as an unbridled voluptuary who gave himself up without restraint to the satisfaction of his sensual temperament, those of the contradictory authorities which represent Alexander as of a cool nature in amatory affairs are probably right. At any rate, the love of women never played a leading part in Alexander’s life, and he never allowed it to exert any influence on the prosecution of his great ambitions; it was simply to explain this that fictions were told of his love of boys. When he appears as a man of *demonic* passion, we may to a large extent trace here the inheritance of his mother Olympias, in whom this quality was intensified to the highest degree. But it is part of the wonderful combination of opposites in Alexander’s nature, that by the side of this passion he also exhibits a quite surprisingly cool and calm discretion” (Wilcken 1967, 54. My italics).

We can appreciate, in my opinion, two principal elements in this fragment. First, that the nature of Philip, despite his passion, is regarded as positive, in opposition to the kind of passion related to Olympias, whose nature is not just vindictive, but even demoniac (“*demonic*”!)<sup>5</sup>: a very simple judgement for a historian of the level of Wilcken. Secondly, we find that the cause of Alexander’s personality, and consequently the reason for his success, his greatness and historical impact, results from the opposition between the different passional nature of his parents. Wilcken fell here in an old trap, that of the Ancient Greek thought about the opposition of contraries. Wilcken’s description about Olympias is thus deeply revelatory.

“Since heredity alone cannot explain his character, the question that influence education had on him [Alexander] is all the more worthy of interest. Philip, who from the first saw his successor in Alexander, the offspring of Olympias, beside whom he had other wives, devoted himself to his boy’s education with great love and care” (WILCKEN 1967, 54).

This passage raises two questions that deserve attention. The first one is that Philip considered Alexander as his heir, a question always assured in the work until the final crisis and Philip’s murder, something to which we will return later. The second one is the fact that Olympias was not the only wife of Philip. We can then note the problematics of the reconstruction of the past made by Wilcken (and many others), depicting Olympias as a *lawful wife* and simply mentioning the rest of Philip’s wives

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<sup>5</sup> CARNEY 1993, 30: “The ancient sources, biased or not, are not always the basis for this assignment of motivation. Indeed, unpleasant motivation attributed to Olympias, while similar in ancient sources and modern scholarship, is not identical. Ancient sources tend to depict Olympias as motivated primarily by her difficult personality (they often imply that she liked to make trouble for trouble’s sake) and by her natural nastiness, whereas modern scholarship tends to stress vengeance and something very close to madness, despite the fact that no ancient source characterizes Olympias’ actions as mad and that very little stress is put on vengeance as her motivation. The actions of male contemporaries of Olympias, however brutal, are narrated in neutral fashion and their motivation is not usually pursued, although apparently it is assumed to be rational if ruthless host of negative adjectives and adverbs and are assumed (although rarely argued) to be emotionally motivated”.

with a very brief outline. Nothing is said here about the polygamy of the Argead Kings<sup>6</sup>, leading the reader to assume a known structure, that of monogamy and marital relationships in modern times (at least, in Wilcken's days) and one's own reality in relation to this important feature in Philip and Olympias' history, thus provoking a great distance between the understanding of the reader and the distant historical reality the historian has to describe and explain. Although alien to the reader or even to the historian, this historical but distant reality deserves to be dealt with and not being judged in a self-conscious manner in modern or personal terms, and validated as a historical feature of other cultures and times, as valid as our own, through the task and eyes of the historians.

“These pleasant relations between father and son came to an end, when Philip, son after his return from the Congress of Corinth (337), was seized by a passion for a fair Macedonian, Cleopatra, the niece of Attalus, and made her his lawful consort. This implied the repudiation of Olympias, and might ever endanger Alexander's claim to the succession” (WILCKEN 1967, 59).

As we can see, through the revision of the works of the authors chosen in this paper, the theme of Olympias' repudiation by Philip is a recurrent one in the interpretation of the facts. Nevertheless, just one of our sources, Justin, an author we can even consider to be of *minor* value within the collection of ancient historians on Alexander, recorded this information, which is not only dubious in itself but also seems to be the consequence of a specific scheme for conceiving marital relationships, from heteronormal binarism, and mostly from monogamy. Thus, if Philip took a new wife, Cleopatra, she must substitute, in this scheme of conception, from a monogamic point of view, Olympias as the *lawful consort*. Ancient Macedonian reality seems to have been more complex than this. Likewise, I still wonder about the credibility some historians show concerning the role passion played in Philip's, or even Alexander's, love life. Always depicted by Modern historians as a man of cold rationality and manipulative personality, Philip, the genius of military strategy and Politics, is subdued by irrationality when he fell in the arms of love's effects. This perception of Romantic Love that Wilcken records in the word “passion” invalidates Philip's self-control or skill, and drives him to a new scenario, if we follow the traditional explanations: to reject Olympias, to start a conflict against Alexander, to call into question Alexander's succession as his father's heir, and consequently, the murder of Philip. Passion is thus the ruin of men, according to this stereotypical, oversimplified view of the facts<sup>7</sup>. If we just look at logical historical interpretation, the son of Cleopatra and Philip who could

<sup>6</sup> My friend M<sup>a</sup> Engracia Muñoz Santos claimed my attention on the fact that although we know the Macedonian Kings were polygamous, we do not know if polygamy was a common feature in Epirus. If we follow, for example, the genealogical tree of the Molossian Kings made by LÉVEQUE 1957, 85, no clue of polygamy can be traced in the Epirot royal family before Pyrrhus. On the other hand, I guess no one among modern scholarship has tried to understand the impact of the Argead polygamy on those foreign women married with the Macedonian Kings, but a lot of words have been written about how jealousy (i.e., Olympias') can be a cause to understand and interpret historical facts. On Argead polygamy, cf. GREENWALT 1989; CARNEY 2000; 2015; MÜLLER 2015, 469-475.

<sup>7</sup> The idea that the conflict between Olympias and Philip was the cause of the break between father and son drives me to consider this kind of explanations as clearly patriarchal, where historians do not concede to Olympias the public ability to manage her confrontation with her husband by cause of being a woman, needing the intervention of another man, her son, to protect her, arbitrate and fight for her interests. Historians, then, create a scenario of man against man due to a woman. The world is actually full of this kind of simplified explanations, as fictitious as unfair with the complex experience of human life.

endanger Alexander's succession to the throne of Macedon would be twenty years younger than the crown prince Alexander. On the other hand, the aim of linking Philip's repudiation of Alexander's mother with the conflict between father and son again means a transgression of the substantial number of cases throughout the history of Humanity in the relationships between fathers and sons where conflict came from many other reasons different than those caused by how a father treated his mother's sons. While avoiding focusing on the detailed analysis of the facts, I think that reflections and categorical assessments like those that we find in the explanations of the facts that concern the final relationship between Alexander and his father must be left out, in order to open our mind to broad interpretative options. As historians, we have to be very careful about how we articulate our explanations, evading oversimplification of the reality that we choose to describe.

Moreover, if we stop for a while to consider the idea that Alexander's greatness is a result of the combination of the opposing forces of his parents' nature, we can note how this interpretation has had a long-lasting impact on historiography. Many years after Wilcken, for example, Margarete Bieber wrote her classic book *Alexander the Great in Greek and Roman Art* (1964), where she wrote the same idea as the key to her understanding of Alexander's personality and image in art:

“The historians describe her [Olympias] as arrogant, meddling, fierce, passionate, dramatic, and romantic (Plutarch, *Life of Alexander*, IX; Arrian, *Anabasis*, VII, 12). She was an ardent follower of the orphic and bacchic mysteries. She had snakes as pets and let them wind around the sacred staff of Dionysus.

(...) The passionate nature and romantic beauty of the remarkable woman are not expressed in these late minor works of art, but they may be found as her legacy in the portraits of her son Alexander.

(...) From his father, Philip, Alexander inherited his military virtues; from his mother, Olympias, he received his fiery and passionate nature, his ambition, his good looks, and romantic personality” (BIEBER 1964, 22-24).

Coming back to Wilcken, finally we can read how he described Olympias' involvement in Philip's murder:

“After all that had passed between Philip and Olympias, the suspicion was bound to arise that she either was privy to the murder or had instigated it. Her complicity cannot be at all confirmed, natural as it might seem in the case of so *vindictive* a character. But we must decidedly reject the idea that Alexander was implicated. That is a mere calumny of his enemies” (WILCKEN 1967, 60. My italics).

A character such as Olympias, whom Wilcken described so superficially, with adjectives like *demonic* and *so vindictive*,<sup>8</sup> can perfectly take on the enormous responsibility of having planned Philip's murder. Again, passion, and not explanations concerning politics, seems to take control of the interpretation of the facts. Likewise, the double yardstick is worthy of mention: although Alexander's implication in the conspiracy against his father was a clear calumny of his enemies, Olympias' participation in the magnicide of her husband was, at least, less dubious. This kind of judgement allows historians to keep maintaining a strong responsibility of Olympias in

<sup>8</sup> WILCKEN 1967, 268 got back to the use of the same concept for Olympias: “King Philip Arrhidaeus was murdered by the vindictive Olympias (317)”.

relation to facts that the scholars do not want to attribute to Alexander himself, the hero, at any rate in the historians' works.

“But he [Alexander] was annoyed, when Olympias, to *satisfy her hatred* for her rival, murdered the infant daughter, to which Cleopatra had recently given birth, in the arms of her mother, and forced the mother to commit suicide. The conflicts of the past, for which Alexander was not to blame, caused much *bloodshed*” (WILCKEN 1967, 62-63. My italics).

The innocent Alexander and the bloody, ruthless Olympias. To a certain extent, we face a good example of the *Achilles' complex* here. Another idea that must demand our attention is, thus, the pleasure provoked by violence and death to Olympias. There is nothing new in the usual historiographical portrait of the cliché of the demoniac personality of Olympias<sup>9</sup>.

As we can see, the place of Olympias in the academic scholarship on Alexander is very restricted, and she is just mentioned in relation to the shaping of Alexander's personality and his character, often more for his vices and faults than for his virtues, to which we must also add the conflict between father and son, understood as the reason for Philip's murder, and lastly the episode of Alexander's visit to Siwa and his aim of being recognized as Amon's son.

“The effort of the Greeks to analyse the idea of divine sonship in a rationalistic way led to the tale that Amon himself in the form of his sacred serpent had had intercourse with Olympias. Others again knew that Olympias had confessed this intercourse to her husband Philip, whereupon he repudiated her as an adulteress” (WILCKEN 1967, 129).

Here we can see in Wilcken the shadow of the western tradition about the rational nature of Greek thought, even in a question as irrational as religious feelings and thoughts. This is not the place to deal with this topic, but I want at least to point it out. However, again we can observe the responsibility attributed to Olympias, first in Alexander's aim to present himself as the son of the god, and secondly in the fact of being repudiated by Philip. Nevertheless, chronological details are not borne in mind here: if Amon had sexual intercourse with Olympias, it had to happen in 357/6 BC, when Alexander was conceived, and nothing seems to allow us to consider any kind of difficulty in the relationship between Philip and Olympias at that time. If she confessed to intercourse with the god to Philip and he decided to reject her because of her adultery, this maybe did not happen until 337/6, during the months preceding Philip's murder, and no Modern author has studied the fact that in ancient Greek culture this kind of reaction by Philip would probably mean a clear case of *hybris*, an aggression against the god's will, which would probably drive Philip to some kind of punishment (as his murder can be understood in the eyes of the Greeks for refusing a woman chosen by a god to have children. Our accounts on mythology contain plenty of this kind of stories). Finally, and mainly, if Alexander visited Siwah in 331, it is possible that the story of his mother's intercourse with the god would be a result of Alexander's propaganda during the campaign against Persia, and by no means can this be considered as ever really

<sup>9</sup> CARNEY 1993, 30: “Whereas the current historiographical trend in scholarship about the reign of Alexander disdains biography and resists speculation about the motivation of the great conqueror, most of those who deal with Olympias confidently assign motives to her actions, motives which are usually negative and almost always personal rather than political”.

having happened<sup>10</sup>. All this kind of discussion and evident incoherence in interpreting the account of the conflict between Olympias and Philip does not, however, have any place in many of Alexander's Modern biographies by brilliant scholars.

Oversimplification again subdues the criticism of the data and our knowledge of the facts.

Sometimes I have personally considered Wilcken's book as a breaking point, due to the influence it has had on the Anglo-Saxon scholarship about Alexander. My views often drove me to consider serious distances between Wilcken and the previous German tradition since Droysen. Olympias, in this case, can be considered as an exception, as far as we can trace in Wilcken the steps of what, in his own time, Droysen wrote in his stepping stone about Alexander in Modern Historiography.

“His exact opposite was his wife Olympias, daughter of the Epeirote king Neoptolemos, descended from Achilles. As a young man, Philip had met her at the mysteries celebrated on Samothrace and married her with the permission of her uncle and guardian Arybbas. Beautiful, secretive, glowing with banked fires, she was deeply devoted to the mysterious rites of Orpheus and Bacchos, the dark magical arts of Thracian women. In the nocturnal orgies, it is reported, one saw her leading all the rest in wild enthusiasm, brandishing thyrsos and snake, storming through the mountains. Her dreams reproduced the fantastic images that thronged her mind; in the night before her wedding she dreamt that a powerful thunderstorm was raging around her, that a bolt of lightning flew flaming into her womb and a wild fire shot out and spread farther and farther in consuming flames” (DROYSEN 2012, 62).

Droysen's portrait of Olympias, which came directly, unfiltered and with no *Quellenforschung*, from Plutarch, was elaborated from a clearly fictional and fantastic point of view. There was no detailed discussion by Droysen about the Bacchic cults, or about the responsibility of the royal family in relation to these public cults or their functions in the management of collective religious features<sup>11</sup>, or even about the kind of *secret cults* that the Ancient Greeks experienced (and here Olympias was not an exception, despite what Droysen seems to insinuate) within the context of mysteric religious practices. The reader is far from being informed about all these details, and the historian let anyone reading understand, from a self-understanding and Eurocentric, bourgeois, normative and patriarchal point of view: the portrait of Olympias is elaborated under this kind of judgement of a woman who did not fit in with the 19<sup>th</sup>-century ideals of expected feminine behaviour. On the other hand, the tone used to describe Olympias' relationship with religion and her personality stresses the idea of a possessed woman, a witch, almost mad, with a whimsical mind. We find no warnings about the possibility that many of the stories about Alexander's conception came from his own propaganda as King, once involved in the war against Persia. Even so, an implicit judgement about feminine pleasure is included here, with this description of the flame and the thunder in her womb, probably provoking the delightful fantasies of Droysen's male readers who looked more for fantasy than for the facts and truth about what really happened. As I have been pointing out, every one of these assessments and narrative lacks any kind of criticism or specific reflection about the very fictional

<sup>10</sup> On Siwah, Amon, Olympias and Alexander, see BOSWORTH 1977; JOUANNO 1995, both with discussion of the main details.

<sup>11</sup> See CARNEY 2010b, 46-47.

account of the Ancient authors, which in some points Droysen clearly replicates, as we can see in his words on Philip's death:

“The crowd breaks up in wild confusion. Everyone is aghast; everything is in ferment. Who shall receive the realm? Who shall save it? Alexander is the king's first born. But they fear his mother's wild hatred, toward whom, to please the king, not a few of them have shown contempt and disrespect. She is already in Aigai to hold her husband's funeral; she seems to have suspected these dreadful things, to have known in advance. They say that the murder of the king is her doing and that she kept the horses ready for the murderer. yet another sign that he is and born by black magic; that explains the king's loathing of him and his savage mother” (DROYSEN 2012, 68).

There are so many elements here worthy of comment, all of them far from any kind of aim to explain the facts, and built under a novelistic fantasy, where Olympias rather represents a kind of role, an archetype, than her own historical place and value. We retain the words (fear, wild hatred, dreadful things, black magic, Alexander's loathing of himself, savage mother) which are used as tools by Droysen to depict her, words that belong more to the historian than to History.

Droysen's historical description of Olympias as a witch and mad, which, however, has very little presence in his book, is a finely constructed character, despite the brief mentions of her to the readers, who have to use the elements in their own perception about women, motherhood, gender and marital relationships to understand her, using the helpful stereotypical parameters of the *femme fatale*:

“The men recalled the nocturnal orgies Olympias had celebrated in her native mountains; they knew about her magical arts, for which King Philip had put her aside” (DROYSEN 2012, 191).

This Olympia is clearly very close to many other stereotypical Ancient female characters, subdued by tough judgements based on the negative propaganda of the sources, such as Cleopatra or Fulvia. Intriguing Olympias did not feel any respect for the blood ties, says Droysen, although what we know about this kind of relationship does not allow us to accept this kind of interpretation<sup>12</sup>. Scanty information, and no place for discussion and controversy, comes into play when judging Olympias.

“Alexander's god-like quality would be ascribed, not to Olympias's confabulations about his birth, but rather to what Kallisthenes's own historical work would tell the world” (DROYSEN 2012, 327).

Again, Olympias is held responsible for lying, as she was for intrigues, and our author says nothing about the probable attribution of these stories about the divine claims of Alexander to the pen of Calisthenes, to quote the main example. Olympias is accused of having a kind of agency which, on the other hand, is the reason for the main critics against her, and she is held responsible for everything that can be condemnable. However, neither Alexander nor his close male comrades suffered from such a kind of harsh treatment or judgement.

<sup>12</sup> For example, against this kind of views, it is surprising to remember how Olympias took care of Thessalonike, a daughter of Philip with another of his wives (Nicesipolis), a clear clue to her respect for family ties and even a counterpoint to many opinions about her behaviour and personality.

“The secret contact he took up with the Aitolians after his son-in-law Philotas was executed was reason for that had been vested contact he took up with the Aitolians after executed was reason for caution, even if Olympias’s and warnings” (DROYSEN 2012, 397).

Once again, this is a harsh portrait which invalidates and despises Olympias and her opinions. Droysen did not leave aside the question of Argead polygamy, but his explanation once again lacked the necessary complexity for the reader to accept or understand a reality so distant from one’s own, contemporary reality, and he shows here the same interpretative paths that we have noted in Wilcken, with a century between them.

“Illyrian Audata and Elymiot Phila probably died before 357, the year in which Philip married Olympias. Satyros says of the two Thessalian women merely that Philip begat children with them; they therefore were not his lawful wives” (DROYSEN 2012, 443 n. 61).

We again face the cliché of the *lawful wife* already observed in Wilcken. Although Droysen mentioned the rest of Philip’s wives, his opinion resulted from a monogamous view, with a clear moral judgement of the existence of multiple wives, with no aim to present the complexity of this Argead cultural feature or to validate realities different from one’s own.

If we leave here the German, nineteenth-century tradition, from Droysen to Wilcken, and we focus our attention on the Anglo-Saxon branch of Historiographical Alexander, the first author of interest to us is W. W. Tarn. Notorious for many idyllic assessments and for the encomiastic tone of his biography about Alexander, the work of Tarn reproduced almost literally most of the aspects and tendencies we already noted until now.

“Though both his parents claimed Greek descent, he certainly had from his father, and probably from his mother, some Illyrian, i.e. Albanian, *blood*<sup>13</sup>. When his son was thirteen, Philip invited Aristotle to Macedonia to be his tutor; and, so far as his character was influenced by others, it was influenced by Aristotle and Olympias, by a philosopher who taught that *moderatio* alone could hold a kingdom together<sup>1</sup> and by a woman to whom any sort of *moderation was unknown*. Olympias was proud and *terribly passionate*, with an *emotional side* which made her a *devotee* of the orgiastic worships of Thrace; but she kept her son’s love all his life, and, though he inherited from Philip the solid qualities of capacity for affairs and military talent, *his nature was largely hers*, though not his mind. For if his nature was *passionate*, his mind was *practical*” (TARN 1948, I, 1. My italics).

No more comments need to be added about Tarn’s words to everything that I have just noted in the pages before concerning Wilcken and Droysen. Again, the contrast between body/emotion/passion vs. mind is stressed, as is the opposition between male moderation and female lack of it. Once again, the character or nature of Alexander’s personality is explained as a combination of elements from his father (positive) and his mother (negative). Olympias is still depicted as the fervent, terrible and passionate adept to some rites, whose details and kind we hear no explanation about, despite this seems

<sup>13</sup> In the same terms, HOGARTH 1897, 163-164.

to deserve great attention if we bear in mind their influence and presence in the life and religious policies of Alexander.

Tarn continued:

“Relations between Philip and Olympias had long been strained, for Olympias was not the woman to tolerate Philip's harem” (TARN 1949, I,1).

Clearly, we return to a vision of monogamy, and to a very novelistic judgement about Philip's polygamy and Olympias' relations with it. Also, the idea of a harem seems more than strange, because it places Philip close to the Great King of Persia, and at the same time stresses his lack of moderation, consequently provoking the immoderate anger of Olympias. Here I can not avoid feeling surprised by the fact that a woman, in a context of masculine polygamy such as that of the Argead Kings, could have felt shocked, after years and years of marriage and of sharing space with other wives of her husband, by the fact that her husband took a new wife, as in the case of Philip and Cleopatra. The contextual historical reality contradicts all these judgements, fabricated once again from the Modern contemporaneity of a perspective that does not leave much place to explain some well-known Macedonian traditions to the readers.

Tarn's judgement about Olympias was harsh and recurrent:

“He [Alexander] left Antipater with (probably) 9,000 foot and a few horses as his general in Europe, to govern Macedonia and Thrace, act as deputy Hegemon of the League of Corinth in his place, supervise the affairs of Greece, and keep Olympias quiet, a more difficult task” (TARN 1948, I, 10).

This is a strange appraisal. According to Tarn, for Alexander to keep his mother under control would have represented a more distressing task than the management of Macedonian rule over Greece and the preparations for the Persian campaign. Such a trivialization, besides devaluating History, the facts we know, our sources and even historical criticism, shows a trivialized picture of Olympias to the reader. This perception is also stressed in Tarn's description of Alexander after murdering Clitus:

“The son of Olympias was bound to be shaken by devastating gusts of passion; but though this showed in impatience, in irritability, in decisions repented of later, only once, apparently, did he absolutely lose control; then his wrath swept to its goal in total disregard of every other consideration, human or divine” (TARN 1948, I, 123).

We must note here that, in Tarn's words, the person responsible for the crime was not actually Alexander, but “the son of Olympias”, implying that Olympias was ultimately guilty of Clitus' death, more than her son, who was actually a victim after being conceived by such a mother<sup>14</sup>.

Despite this harsh treatment by Tarn, in clear coherence with what we have been underlining in other authors, the presence of Olympias in his book is quite small. This little space for Olympias, probably a way of despising her and her importance, is quite shocking if we confront it with the main role the author gave her in Alexander's personal nature and character. A central example is the work by George Cawkwell

<sup>14</sup> Cf. CARNEY 2010a, 189-190. On Tarn's view about Alexander's sex life, with a close revision of Tarn's *Alexander* and full bibliography, see MENDOZA 2021.

about Philip (1978), where Olympias is mentioned in not much more than 4 passages<sup>15</sup>. Master of masters, Cawkwell did not prove his skills as a researcher in his approach to Olympias, and he must be added to those using simple stereotypical views and generalizations that we have been reviewing in the last pages.

“All monarchies in less advanced societies are liable to the disorders caused by pretenders, but Macedon was particularly vulnerable by reason of the practice of polygamy. Speaking generally, polygamy was not practised in Greece. (...) So polygamy may not have been practised in Macedon by the ruling house alone, where it was regular. Philip had seven wives, none of whom appears to have divorced (save perhaps the mother of Alexander on grounds of adultery). (...) There was of course nothing peculiar to Macedon in such marriages other than polygamy which allowed the Macedonian Kings more frequently so to marry without offending those previously placated. But polygamy increased the number of heirs to the throne and the rivalry of factions at the court” (CAWKWELL 1978, 23-24).

The opinion in almost every sentence is clearly negative. Cawkwell did not inquire much, like many others, about female mortality during pregnancy in Antiquity, or neonatal mortality, or many other details of life itself in the time he was studying. The centre of his work, politics and warfare, stays far from daily human life, and Philip can be observed in Cawkwell’s work over 187 pages with almost no place or attention by the historian for the female characters surrounding the Macedonian king. The climax in this kind of methodology and in Cawkwell’s portrait of Olympias occurs in his account of the murder of Philip, linked by Cawkwell, as usual in the kind of tradition we are reviewing here, to the result of passional emotions, female (Olympias’) jealousy, and, of course, polygamy.

“Philip had seven wives. The sixth was the daughter of a Thracian king and the marriage set the seal of the Thracian campaign of the late 340s. Her arrival at the court in no way incommoded Olympias, who understood the needs of imperial policy. The seventh was different. (...) The marriage was an affair of the heart and instantly menaced the position of Olympias at court, and not only Olympias” (CAWKWELL 1978, 78).

“Olympias, however, was finished with Philip and Philip with her. If she was to regain her power and influence, it could be only when Philip had been replaced by her son” (CAWKWELL 1978, 179).

“There were two direct beneficiaries of the deed [of Philip’s death]. Alexander gained the throne and Olympias regained her influence. So some believed that one or the other incited Pausanias. Olympias was said to have returned promptly enough and publicly honoured the murderer’s corpse, through if she did she may have done so out of gratitude for her return” (CAWKWELL 1978, 180).

<sup>15</sup> Cawkwell seems to have followed here the steps of David G. Hogarth’s *Philip II and Alexander of Macedon* (HOGARTH 1897), in my opinion one of the founders of the English academic research and scientific tradition on Alexander, who scarcely mentioned Olympias in his book (7 mentions in 304 pages!), and when he did it he simply quoted (as Carney pointed out: see n. 18) the ancient sources’ judgements without criticism, depicting Olympias as Jezabel (HOGARTH 1897, 137). On Hogarth, see BORZA 1978; LOCK 1990.

In the next passage, the double yardstick between acts of men (Alexander) and acts of women (Olympias) is powerfully eloquent. Olympias is again portrayed as a bloodthirsty person:

“As one of the first acts of his reign, Alexander had Attalus murdered, just as his mother spilled her spite in the blood of the seventh wife’s baby” (CAWKWELL 1978, 180).

To a certain extent, in his work about Philip, Cawkwell wrote a history of men only, where women like Olympias and others, despite being close and intimate with the protagonists of his account, almost have no place reserved for them. His work can perfectly be marked as the type of traditional history. Perhaps, for this reason, we can observe some distance between him and some of the most relevant authors about Alexander from the 60s and 70s until today, such as R. D. Milns, Robin Lane Fox and Paul Cartledge, all of them close, at least in their treatment of Olympias, to the scheme we reviewed in Tarn, not so very different actually from that of Droysen or Wilcken.

The book by Milns, published in 1968, does not represent any kind of surprise, but just a general continuity for what we stressed in previous authors:

“On the sixth day of the Macedonian month Loüs, 356 (26th July) a son was born to King Philip and his wife Olympias. (...) The marriage between Philip and Olympias had taken place about a year before this. They had met at a celebration of the wild mystery religion that was performed in Samothrace. (...) The two fell in love at the first meeting and requested the consent of Olympias’ guardian to the marriage. Such an Alliance had strong political possibilities for the Epirote King and Arrybas gladly gave his consent” (MILNS 1968, 17).

The position between the infatuation of Philip and Olympias and the background of political utility is notable. Again, the strange use of romance as a historical explanation that seems to enunciate part of the explanation about the relationship between the characters of Olympias and Philip, even in the works of some of the most notorious historians, is absolutely shocking.

“The *love-match* between Philip and his wife, which Plutarch describes, was not destined to be of lengthily duration. Philip was an excellent general and a shrewd politician, but in his private life was much *addicted to drink* and to *sexual licence*. *Whatever may have been the Macedonian law of marriage*, Philip was not a believer in monogamy, though it must be stated that most of his marriages were of a political nature, formed for the purpose of cementing some desired alliance” (MILNS 1968, 18. My italics).

Evidently, Milns justified the different marriages of Philip, after criticizing his character and his non-monogamous tendencies, but did not warn the readers that this kind of behaviour was common among the Argeads, and not just a result of his Philip’s portray as a dissolute person. A monogamous Argead king would have really been a strange thing. The code of ethics from which the historian looked at the past and its characters has less in common with a complex and honest understanding of the facts, and much to do with the judgement of the present time. The message also invalidates any other option concerning emotional relationships among the many we know in our own days, and when Milns freely criticised other forms of love and relationship in a former time

he was, probably unconsciously, enforcing heteronormativity and monogamy in the way Western and European culture conceives and practises it.

“Through Olympias’ illustrious descent and forceful personality secured her predominance in his harem at least down to 337 – it is likely that she was the *legal wife*, while the technical status of the others was that of concubine – she was a woman of great pride and a passionate disposition, and it seems probable that she viewed Philip’s marriages and amours with a considerable resentment and wounded vanity. Philip, for his part, found his wife’s *domineering and violent nature* irksome. Besides, there was something frightening and mysterious in her unrestrained participation in the wild and orgiastic mystery religious. When the rift between the pair began cannot be said; but the hatred which was unleashed by her repudiation in 337 indicates *a bitterness and odium* on Olympias’ part towards her husband that was not newly formed.

Thus the young Alexander was brought up in an atmosphere of mutual dislike between his parents” (MILNS 1968, 19. My italics).

This view of the mysteries as wild, underlined by Milns in his description of Samothrace, is quite distant from most of what we know about ancient mystic rites. I guess it is a clue for us to show the tendency to confer a passionate and emotional, mystic and violent personality on Olympias, very helpful in the way of portraying her with the usual cliché as a person full of hate. Likewise, we return to the contrast between the Modern interpretation about the *legal wife* and the *harem* in the matrimonial and sexual relations of the Argead kings<sup>16</sup>. Lastly, Alexander’s personality is once again depicted as a result of the opposition of his parent’s antagonistic natures. Here, again, Olympia’s influence is clearly considered concerning the negative elements of Alexander’s character.

“Some indication of the influence she exerted over her son’s outlook during his childhood – an influence from which Alexander never completely broke free...” (MILNS 1968, 19).

Indeed, it seemed easier to make Olympias responsible for Alexander’s faults than to attribute to him the real weight of his decision and actions:

“Not only did Olympias encourage Alexander to believe in an outstanding destiny; but she also seems to have tried to turn the boy against his father, perhaps by belittling his achievements and pouring scorn on his moral laxity. Certainly in the later years of Philip’s life there was a deep dislike – even hatred – between father and son, and Alexander himself was eager, when King, to disclaim the parentage of Philip. Olympias, on the other hand, he always held in the deepest respect and admiration and some of her most horrible atrocities were passed over with little more than a mild rebuke. The reluctance – called by some restraint – that

<sup>16</sup> MÜLLER 2015, 470: “This exclusively monogamous view of the Greek writers causes misunderstandings of the polygamous structures and erroneous judgments on the legal and social status of the Great King’s wives and children. In Greek eyes, obviously, there could only be one legal wife with legitimate children. More wives with more children disturbed their world view and were considered as in some way illegitimate or at least of lower rank. This seems to be a misunderstanding. Of course, in polygamous structures, wives are ranked according to status. However, all of the women the king had married were his acknowledged wives and all of their children he had acknowledged were legitimate”. As we have seen through these pages, this was not just a common custom of ancient Greek writers, but also of Modern historians.

Alexander showed with regard to sexual matters may well stem from the deep hold that Olympias exerted during the first twelve years of his life and from the dislike of his father she instilled in him. One hesitates to indulge in the technical jargon of modern psychology, but there are many indications in Alexander's life of the notorious Oedipus complex" (MILNS 1968, 20).

These are tough judgements, and very superficial, that now add a new element to the construction of the historiographical portrait of Olympias and her influence over Alexander: the sexual dimension and the Oedipus' complex<sup>17</sup>. Again, in these oversimple interpretations, Olympias is blamed for almost everything wrong in Macedonia.

Milns continued along the path of many of the clichés we have already noted on these pages:

"One reason for this unpopularity may have lain in the fact that Alexander was not of pure Macedonian birth, the nobility wanting a full-blooded Macedonian to the throne. (...) The main reason is in all probability the hatred with which the arrogant overbearing Olympias was regarded by the nobility – and Alexander was clearly very much attached to his mother and deeply influenced by her; so much so, that his attitude towards Philip was strongly coloured by Olympias' detestation of her husband. To the nobility, then, the prospect of Alexander as King, with the dowager Olympias ruling through him, was unbearable" (MILNS 1968, 27).

These statements are actually almost unbelievable to anyone who knows a little about the history we are dealing with here. This is first, as we have stressed, due to the argument of blood, which is unsustainable; second, due to the uncritical fidelity to a corpus of sources heavily loaded with a misogynistic view about women, especially harsh to those who dealt with power; and finally, due to the origin of much of this information, which came from the hostile production against Olympias by her political enemies<sup>18</sup>.

The idea of Milns that the Macedonians could not accept Alexander as their king due to the influence his mother would gain is absolutely shocking. Against it, we must remember the fervent respect the Macedonians showed to Olympias in many occasions, such as the episode of the Battle of Evia clearly shows<sup>19</sup>.

As usual, the ending and highest point of Olympias' negative portrait crystallise in the account of the murder of Philip:

"In 337 he [Philip] formally divorced Olympias – "a jealous and evil-tempered woman", as Plutarch calls her – and took as his *lawful wife* Cleopatra" (MILNS 1968, 27. My italics).

We do not know if a divorce was an option in the royal court of the Argeads, but all the historians we have been analysing followed the dubious information recorded by Justin (Pompeius Trogus), although that this source's view was strongly conditioned by the Roman view and way of life, with divorces and concrete matrimonial features that

<sup>17</sup> About Alexander's sex life, vid. OGDEN 2010, with bibliography. Cf. also ANTELA-BERNÁRDEZ 2010.

<sup>18</sup> CARNEY 1993, 31: "Moreover, perhaps because of this unwarranted confidence in ascribing motivation to Olympias, modern scholarship sometimes supplements the already subjective judgments of antiquity. Scenarios and assumptions about Olympias have emerged that have little or no foundation in the ancient evidence".

<sup>19</sup> On this battle, see ZARAGOZÀ 2015.

probably had little in common with what we would find in the Argead kings' polygamy. On the other hand, here we return (again) to the difficulty of the historians of Alexander to confront and explain polygamy, and the need to always choose a *lawful wife* of Philip, which irremissibly drives them to the conception of Philip's marriage with Cleopatra as a substitution of Olympias. To justify this argument of substitution, and in the line of everything we have stressed here, Milns added:

“Olympias had shown as little regard for matrimonial fidelity as her erstwhile husband” (MILNS 1968, 28).

The judgement on female sexuality is opposed here to the acceptance of masculine desire, turning this supposed infidelity of Olympias into a condemnable fact, which finally resulted in great misfortunes and drama, but Philip's arguable infidelity is accepted with no further comments. Indeed, we still do not know anything about these infidelities of Olympias (in the text of Milns at least), beyond the fact that they were taken for granted by the historians, although the only possible infidelity known for Olympias would be her intercourse with Amon. I do not want to return to this again, but in my opinion, all these explanations based on causes like this kind of episodes, which had nothing to do with what probably happened, are still incorporated in the modern historical accounts with no reviews or reflections and argued as valid explanations of the facts.

We can now observe the question of Philip's murder:

“Plutarch says that ‘most of the blame devoted upon Olympias, on the ground that she had added her exhortations to the young man's anger and incited him to the deed; but a certain amount of accusation attached itself to Alexander also’. Justin says that ‘it was also believed that Pausanias had been instigated by Olympias the mother of Alexander, and that Alexander himself was not without knowledge of his father's murder’.

In fact, it does appear highly likely – though, of course, it can never be proved conclusively – that Olympias and Alexander were the forces that impelled Pausanias to the deed” (MILNS 1968, 30-31).

The fact of showing shared responsibility between Olympias and Alexander may perhaps be linked, with the attribution by Milns, to the Oedipus' Complex of Alexander, another stereotypical explanation that has found some echo even in films. On the other hand, despite this responsibility of Alexander in the death of his father Philip, the description of Olympias after Philip's death still stresses her violent and vindictive nature:

“Olympias returned to Macedonia, filled with hatred and burning for vengeance. To her savagery Alexander gladly sacrificed Cleopatra, Philip's recent bride, and her baby daughter” (MILNS 1968, 33).

Among divine, monstrous and savage, Olympias appears as a goddess to whom Alexander offered sacrifices. Everything is *very academic*, elaborated from a dubious critical approach. Beyond Philip, in the scarce mentions Milns made of her, Olympias' image is portrayed in the same usual terms:

“[Antipater], a man who had been the subject of a continuous barrage of complaints and slander by Olympias” (MILNS 1968, 249).

“Alexander’s terrible mother, Olympias, seized control of both Macedonia and Arrhidaeus for a brief while Antipater’s death. After murdering Arrhidaeus and instituting a Reign of Terror against the supporters of Antipater, she was herself put to death by Antipater’s ruthless son, Cassander” (MILNS 1968, 269).

About the end of Olympias’ life, a new element of clearly novelistic invention arises, when Milns stated at some point the idea that only someone worse than her could finally beat Olympias. How sad it is to observe, thus, the unjustified arguments (i.e. “Reign of Terror”) used by Milns and the others to flavour the information transmitted to the reader, unaware of the real complexity that the facts actually had.

If we now focus our attention on the work of Peter Green (1970), a book that enjoyed great prestige and recognition over time, we find the same ingredients in the history of Olympias that we noted before.

“Best to all, on about 20 July, his [Philip’s] wife Myrtale – better known to us by her adopted name Olympias – had given birth to a son: his name was Alexander” (GREEN 1970, 19).

From the very first instance, Olympias (*his wife*) is a deeply secondary character, in the shadow of a story about men and addressed to them. Green also coincided with his predecessors in his judgement about Argead polygamy, with words that can recall those of Cawkwell and the other authors of this paper’s tradition:

“Feudal societies such as Macedonia, Thrace and Illyria (in contrast to the political more developed Greek city-states) operated in a tribal system of kinship and reciprocal obligations. For them dynastic marriage, as an instrument of political self-insurance, stood second only to dynastic murder. (...) During his comparatively short life he [Philip] took no fewer than five wives” (GREEN 1970, 28).

“In the autumn of 357 the Regent of Macedonia married his Epirot princess. For the first time in his life he found that he had taken on rather more than he could handle. *Olympias was not yet eighteen* [My italics!], but already, it is clear, a forceful, not to say eccentric, personality. She was, among other things, passionately devoted to the orgiastic rites of Dionysus, and her Maenadic frenzies can scarcely have been conducive to peaceful domestic life. One of her more *outré* habits was keeping an assortment of large tame snakes as pets. Our sources, while admitting Olympias’ beauty, describe her variously as sullen, jealous, blood-minded, arrogant, headstrong and meddling. To these attributes we may add towering political ambition and a quite literally murderous temper. She was determined to be Queen in something more than name: this did not endear her to the Macedonian barons and was later to involve Philip in the most serious crisis of his career” (GREEN 1970, 28).

A slave –like the rest of the authors here– to the sources despite their clear bias and their determining value, every assessment of Green about Olympias, so freely stressed, can be perfectly applied to many other male characters around her, such as Philip or even Alexander, but just in the case of Olympias her behaviour and reactions seem subject to critical judgement.

“Philip decided, wisely, that what with political intrigues and the ubiquitous influence of Olympias, Pella was no place for the young prince at this stage of his career” (GREEN 1970, 39).

“The story does much to discredit that quasi-Freudian element which modern scholars have professed to discover in the relationship between Alexander and Olympias. The truth is less romantic, but of considerable significance for future events. Even at this age Alexander’s one over-riding obsession (and, indeed, his mother’s) was with his future status as King. If he had any kind of Oedipus complex it came a very poor second to the burning dynastic ambition which Olympias *so sedulously* fostered in him” (GREEN 1970, 39-40. My italics).

Even Alexander’s ambition is related to Olympias’ responsibility, and she is also guilty here of the oedipal relation with her son: Alexander is unharmed by Green’s Freudian observation about a complex that, on the other hand, we must recall used to affect sons and not mothers. This fact is, however, beyond Green’s perception. The clichés of our tradition can be seen in Green’s words.

“His [Alexander’s] claim to succession remained beyond challenge – until, that is, Philip suddenly put away Olympias on the grounds of suspected adultery, and began to encourage rumours that Alexander himself was illegitimate. At this point his latest marital adventure took on a new and ominous complexion” (GREEN 1970, 56).

Again, Green’s opinions and reflections followed the steps of the previous authors. Likewise, what is reprehensible in a woman is not evaluated in the same tone in a male:

“Philip, as we have seen, never confused marriage with mere casual amours. Even if Cleopatra, like Anne Boleyn, held out for marriage or nothing<sup>20</sup>, there was still no conceivable reason why Philip should repudiate Olympias much less Alexander, whom he had spent nearly twenty years in training as his chosen successor. There is one motive, and one only, which could have riven Philip to act as he did: the belief – whether justified or not – that Alexander and Olympias were engaged in a treasonable plot to bring about his overthrow. (...) So much seems clear. But the crucial point for the modern reader is whether or not Philip’s suspicions were in fact justified, and here the only possible verdict is ‘non-proven’. At the same time, it is not hard to see how such suspicions could have been arisen. From the very beginning, Olympias had encouraged Alexander to think of himself as King in his own right, rather than as Philip’s eventual successor. This, we need not doubt, was the main source of those ‘great quarrels’ between father and son, which the Queen’s *jealous temper* actively encouraged, and in which she invariably took Alexander’s side” (GREEN 1970, 62. My italics).

Once again, Olympias is solely responsible, guilty due to her temperament, according to Green, for every bad thing in Philip and Alexander’s history, with special attention to the conflicts between father and son.

These stereotypical observations about Olympias, repeated almost *verbatim* in the authors mentioned, acquired an aggravated tone in the work of Robin Lane Fox, published for the first time in 1974, a true benchmark in Alexander’s scholarship, the

<sup>20</sup> A clear example of the academic inability to explain Argæad polygamy: Anne Boleyn’s case is not comparable to the case of Philip’s women, because he did not need to divorce to marry again (!).

best-seller among the biographies about Alexander<sup>21</sup>. To begin with, we can trace how Lane Fox used the same traditional elements and explanations we have noted in this paper:

“Olympias was a woman of wild emotion, who would later show no scruple in murdering the family rivals who threatened her” (LANE FOX 2004, 23).

The wild emotions of Olympias’ depiction in Lane Fox made her the perfect scapegoat for any responsibility at a political level, exonerating Alexander. This provoked a new brutal assessment against the queen mother:

“He [Alexander] was living under the disgrace of Olympias’s dismissal” (LANE FOX 2004, 23).

“She was asking a high Price of his [Alexander’s] patience in return for the nine months she had taken to bear him. There can be no doubt that Alexander’s mother was both *violent* and *headstrong*. She was seldom, however, without provocation” (LANE FOX 2004, 45. My italics).

“The influence of this highly emotional character on Alexander’s development can be guessed but never demonstrated” (LANE FOX 2004, 45. My italics).

Alexander is here understood as a victim of the disgrace he had to suffer from having a mother like Olympias. There is a strong tendency about the idea of “bad mothers” which affected Olympias in historiographical terms, with a traceable history in Modern Historiography about Alexander<sup>22</sup>.

“Eurycide [Cleopatra] was a Macedonian, and an affair of the heart; children from a Macedonian girl, not a foreign Epirote princess, could upset Olympias’s plans for her own son’s succession, and as soon as the two wives’ families had met for the wedding banquet, that very suggestion had been voiced by Eurydice’s uncle (...). It seemed now for Olympias to return to her old authority” (LANE FOX 2004, 18).

The explanation about Philip’s marriage with Cleopatra as a consequence of love is poor, as we have already seen. If we also review the murder of Philip, we see that Lane Fox blamed Olympias in order to justify possible territorial links between her and the killer Pausanias, although the argument absolutely lacked historical reliability:

“But Epirus was Olympias’s home and place of refuge: she could claim past kinship with Pausanias’s people, accessible even in her exile, and she might not have found it hard to work on a nobleman whom Philip had recruited away from his local friendships” (LANE FOX 2004, 22).

<sup>21</sup> Badian harshly criticise the dubious scholar quality of the book. Cf. BADIAN 1976, 230: “There is not a chapter without similar gross errors and absurdities. This book astoundingly fails to fulfil its announced purpose. The author has neither the training nor the inclination for serious scholarship. Despite the displays of “erudition” and the arrogant polemics against scholars whose work he appropriates, this is essentially “a good yarn”, though rather long: an adventure story mid-way between historical journalism and historical fiction”.

<sup>22</sup> CARNEY 2010a, 189.

Here, Lane Fox avoided offering the reader information about the many other cases when Argead kings were killed by close relatives, so similar to Philip's murder, or a critical portrait about the territorial relationships within the kingdom of Macedonia, and nonetheless the author ventured to formulate a strange familiarity between Epirots and the people of Upper Macedonia, like Pausanias, reinforcing Olympias' involvement in Philip's death. This is a clue to the long path of the clichés, with their long shadow<sup>23</sup>.

“For Olympias, the murder had been timed and planned ideally” (LANE FOX 2004, 22).

Once more, Olympia is presented as the main party guilty for Philip's death, although she did not hold the weapon. Of course, the consequence of this assessment is the exoneration of the rest of the characters involved, even the murderer himself, free from any kind of penalty or negative view. All this weight falls, with not much justification and a great deal of literature, on Olympias. Despite what seems to be evident, i.e. that it was Alexander who mostly benefited from his father's death, Lane Fox preferred to maintain the tone against his mother:

“Arguments from timing and benefit make Olympias's guilt a probability, Alexander's only a speculation” (LANE FOX 2004, 24).

“It is Olympias who remains most suspect; her guilt will never be proved, and the role of her son should not be guessed, but it is all too plausible that Philip was murdered by the wife he tried to discard” (LANE FOX 2004, 25).

Passion and love affairs are again the key elements in this historical explanation of the facts, when we deal with Olympias, as we can read in the first attempt by Lane Fox to describe the marriage liaison with Philip.

“There was also a dispute about his [Alexander's] parents. Much of this was posthumous legend; the Persians later fitted Alexander into their own line of kings by a story that Olympias had visited the Persian court, where the King made love to her and then sent her back to Macedonian because her breath smell appallingly bad. There was more to the argument that nationalist romance, Olympias, it was said, probably by Alexander's own court historians, spread *wild stories* about the manner of Alexander's birth and referred his origins to a god: this will raise acute problems later in his life, but for the moment it is enough to remember that *Olympias was a divorced woman who might well disown the husband who betrayed her*. Her past behaviour and her character, *itself a problem*, make this only too plausible” (LANE FOX 2004, 44. My italics).

<sup>23</sup> CARNEY 1993, 35-36: “Not all the problems with hostility toward Olympias lie in the sources, nor does the nature of the sources explain why they have so frequently been read uncritically. We must recognize the fact that the image of the *virago* remains an extremely potent one in our own culture and it is very hard to give up a figure we so love to hate. The likes of the traditional figure of Olympias can be found virtually any night on television soap operas, wearing shoulder-pads, scheming, and making the plot go. In the past women so depicted were often royal –Eleanor of Aquitaine for instance– for because royal women were often the only prominent women and certainly the only ones with a modicum of political power. What we have here is a kind of *topos*, which like many other *topoi* continues to have powerful appeal. I shall refrain from considering exactly why we continue to be troubled by the association of women with power and why stereotypes associated with such women persist, but it is essential that we recognize and resist this fatal attraction”.

For any researcher who has studied Alexander's lifetime in depth, the paragraph sounds like pure fantasy, making some very condemnable judgements that stress the idea of historical reality (the assessment of Olympias as a separated woman is actually an authentic *summum*) that clearly intended to assure certain moral norms about life in present times, which are indeed not only reprehensible but absolutely inappropriate from someone like Lane Fox, who considers himself an academic.

From the point of view chosen by Lane Fox, to abandon the path of what really happened and enter this fantasy requires just one more step:

“Olympias was an orphan under her uncle's guardianship when Philip first met her; they caught each other's eye, so the story went, while they were being initiated into a mystery religion of *underworld demons* [My italics!] on the island of Samothrace; falling in love, they promptly married” (LANE FOX 2004, 44).

Love, which leads to passion, is the common thread to understand the relationship<sup>24</sup>. However, to someone who knows not much about the mysteries of Samothrace, to read Lane Fox's description of them as dedicated to *underworld demons* surely has the effect of feeding a negative idea (*demons*) that lately would fall directly on Olympias, leaving Philip unharmed:

“stories of her wild behaviour multiplied beyond the point of verification. They turned, mostly, on religion. Worship of *Dionysus, Greek god of nature's vital forces*, had long been established in Macedonia, and the processions which led to the slaughter of a goat and the drinking of its blood, or even in extreme cases to a human sacrifice, were nothing new to the *women* of the country. To the Greeks, Olympia was known as a devoted Bacchant, or reveller in the god's honour, and there must be truth in their exaggerations; she would lead the processions herself, and on Philip's Macedonian coins, as never before, the portrait of Heracles, ancestor of the kings, is often combined with the grapes and cups of Dionysus, a deity honoured in Macedonia but surely also a reference to the religious preferences of the queen. (...) Again, there is truth in this, for according to Cicero, Olympias kept her own pet snake, and snake-handling is a known practice in the *wilder sorts* of Greek religion.

(...) ‘Whereas others sacrifice tens and hundreds of animals’, wrote Aristotle's most intelligent pupil, ‘Olympias sacrifices them by the thousand or ten-thousand’. Theophrastus would have known Olympias personally, and although he had cause to slander her his remark confirms her strong attachment to religious ritual which letters and stories of doubtful authorship suggest. On Alexander this example would not be wasted. His mother's *wild mysticism* was also combined with a quarrelsome temper and a reputation, at least partly deserved, for atrocity, certainly, she quarrelled with royal officials and other women of the family, and whatever the truth of Philip's murder, she showed herself as capable as any other Macedonian of killing family rivals who threatened her. The methods and numbers of these murders were enlarged upon by Greek gossip, whereas in Macedonia they were not inexplicable, but here too gossip was founded on truth” (Lane Fox 2004, 44-45. My italics).

<sup>24</sup> MÜLLER 2015, 470: “political reasons are almost completely neglected by the Greek and Roman sources that tend to ascribe personal reasons to the kings who were polygamous: an enormous and perverted sex drive (a common feature of the Greek image of the tyrant who lacks *sophrosyne*). Very often, the polygamous kings are depicted as fools for love (often as too old to fall in love and marry and thus even more out of control) whose women exercise considerable and devastating influence on them”.

The text, that would probably deserve a great level of comments, places us, with a fierce aim, in the framework of the clichés that we have been describing, with no use of critical judgement or contextual reflection. Again, Olympias appears, in the usual negative fashion, as related to religion, and this leads us to the question of Alexander and Amon:

“Alexander’s fame’, wrote Callisthenes, very probably, ‘depends on me and history, not in the lies which Olympias spread about his parentage’. The lies, then, were a fact” (LANE FOX 2004, 214).

Here we can definitively see part of Lane Fox’s hermeneutic methodology: he quoted Callisthenes, although he casted some doubts saying saying “very probably”, inviting us to believe that this was what he really wrote. However, no specific quotation of the sources was included, and due to this, the statement seems to be more a result of Lane Fox’s rhetoric than of the surviving written evidence about Alexander from Antiquity. Nevertheless, although this rhetoric was not based on historical proof, Lane Fox inferred that Olympias’ lies were indeed a real fact. Literature is here dressed up as History in order to mislead itself, and consequently, also the reader.

“Though mother of a promising son, she had been dismissed from court in favour of a noble Macedonian wife and she had seen her son’s succession threatened. Like Dionysus’ mother, she was a foreigner; she was also a queen of heroic ancestry in her own right. Disappointed in her marriage or keen to assert her superiority over Philip’s many other women, she might well have spread a story that her son was special because he owed nothing to Philip and was child of the Greek god Zeus. Sexual knowledge in the ancient world was not enough to refute her, for the role of the female in conception was unknown, as it remained until the nineteenth century, and if mares in Thessaly could be believed to conceive through the agencies of a brisk west wind there was no reason why the queen of Macedonia could not have been visited by Zeus in equivalent disguise. The kings and heroes of myth and of Homer’s epic were agreed to be children of Zeus: Alexander, like many, may have come to believe of himself what he had begun reading of others. (...) Psychologists, too, would willingly see Alexander’s love for Hephaestion as a search for a father-figure, later found in Zeus” (LANE FOX 2004, 215-216).

Leaving aside the oversimplification of Alexander’s homosexuality, treated here by Lane Fox as a psychological complex, in a mockery of Freudian tone, the weight of the criticism was still on Olympias, on whom absolute responsibility always falls, even when we deal with those beliefs of her son that Modern historiography can hardly handle. The entire book is full of fantasy, and at least in the aspect we deal with here, a high level of misinterpretation and falsity is present, mostly in Olympias’ portrait, in order to give rise to a harsh image of her which, on a terminological level, coincides so much with what we have noted in the rest of our authors.

Nevertheless, the degree of interpretative licences taken by Lane Fox is very impressive, such as when he assured that Olympias was the Queen of Macedonia during Alexander’s absence:

“His mother Olympias was to act as Macedonia’s queen” (LANE FOX 2004, 91).

“Their surplus was sent to Olympias as queen of Macedonia” (LANE FOX 2004, 123).

“Olympia the queen regent” (LANE FOX 2004, 147).

“While Olympias was queen and Antipater mere general” (LANE FOX 2004, 452).

In my opinion, our information from the sources does not allow us to sustain this kind of statements. To some degree, Lane Fox seems very far away from what we can read in the ancient authors.

The interpretative licences of Lane Fox, however, show us how not only is the path of the clichés about Olympias have been maintained over time, but also it is continued, mostly word by word, in later authors of more recent years, in the English Historiography on Alexander, as we can see for example in the case of Paul Cartledge and his *Alexander the Great. The Hunt for a New Past* (2004), which came back to the same steps of the tradition with which we are dealing:

“Fingers of suspicion were pointed at Philip’s estranged wife Olympias, Alexander’s mother, and indeed at Alexander himself, perhaps with some reason” (CARTLEDGE 2004, 13).

“Beginning at the beginning, we may wish to *especulate* –there is no other way– about the characteristics, aptitudes and predilections Alexander inherited from his parents, Philip and Olympias. Here, for example, is Plutarch on the latter’s alleged enthusiasm for ecstatic religious mysticism...” (CARTLEDGE 2004, 19).

“Or perhaps Alexander suffered from a repressed Oeipus complex (his relationship with his mother is one of the great unresolved puzzles of his life). This at any rate is more plausible than the suggestions that he was either impotent or/and a preferred homosexual” (CARTLEDGE 2004, 19).

“More important to him than women, or than sex with women anyway, was his religion. Alexander was the classic *daisidaimôn* (Superstitious Man)” (CARTLEDGE 2004, 20).

“Both the neutral and the hostile sources paint a picture of Alexander as degenerating morally throughout his reign” (CARTLEDGE 2004, 20).

“And Philip’s union of body with Olympias is thought, plausibly, to have had something to do with Alexander’s own peculiarly potent combination of leadership qualities and passionate mysticism. On the other hand, the disunion of hearts between his parents was to lead to his estrangement from his father - a threat, as he apprehended it, to his succession to the Macedonian throne. And it probably also helped to foster a permanent deep-seated sense of insecurity for which he compensated in a variety of ways, not all of them pleasant or positive” (CARTLEDGE 2004, 50).

“His mother Olympias would have done nothing to discourage the idea [of Alexander?] that he [Alexander] was destined by heaven as well as by nature to succeed Philip –not least because this put her in the position of senior among Philip’s several (eventually seven in all) wives and queens” (CARTLEDGE 2004, 50).

“It is at least worth considering the hypothesis – graphically depicted by the novelist Mary Renault - that he was put off the act by the sight of his hirsute, battle-

scared, one-eyed father making *violent love* [My italics] to his mother. Alternatively, as already suggested, Alexander – appropriately for one who modelled himself on the Greek heroes of the mythical past – may have suffered from a repressed Oedipus complex”. (CARTLEDGE 2004, 207).

“On the other hand, there is equally no proof that Alexander was *impotent*, or a *preferred homosexual*”. (CARTLEDGE 2004, 207. My italics).

“(…) If *sex did not thrill Alexander, religion certainly did*. This facet of his character may well have been, in significant part, *an inheritance from Olympias*” (Cartledge 2004, 208. My italics).

In Cartledge, as in the other authors within our scope, Alexander’s personality was explained as a result of his parent’s mixed natures. Thus, his deep religious feeling and his supposed sexual behaviour were the responsibility of his mother, and her influence on Alexander is shown as clearly dangerous and harmful. We can also note a lack of the required accuracy in the explanations about the character of Olympias or even the Macedonian royal system and its forms of succession.

Although we could still observe many other authors or works, much of what we would probably find is the same as what we have been commenting here. On the other hand, although many of the authors under our analysis were well-known and notorious scholars on Alexander, I would like to look for some hope in the main masters on Ancient Macedonia during the XX<sup>th</sup> Century, such as, for example, N. G. L. Hammond or A. B. Bosworth, in order to see if they also oversimplified the complex historical character of Olympias.

In this respect, Hammond indeed exposed the lack of value of many of the clichés we have been showing here:

“In writing about the Macedonians we have to be on our guard against using modern terms which imply modern standards of outlook and criticism. Thus it is too easy to label the powers of a Macedonian king as tyrannical, whereas they were in historical fact constitutional; to condemn Philip as profligate for taking a seventh wife in the hope of another heir, unless we recall that the only competent heir, Alexander, had led the cavalry charge at Chaeronea and was expected to lead others in Asia; to select one wife as queen and call the others prostitutes, as Greek writers did; and to speak of divorce between Philip and Olympias, the mother of Alexander, when she withdrew to the Molossian court in Epirus”. (HAMMOND 1989, 16).

“The love-life of royalty attracts the sensationalist writer of every period. That of Philip and his seven or eight wives is no exception, and some of the stories about them deserve as much credit as a modern strip-cartoon” (HAMMOND 1989, 35-36)<sup>25</sup>.

<sup>25</sup> So similar to ELLIS 1976, 62: “In a polygamous situation there is no need to assume that she replaced Philip’s existing wives, Phila, Audata and Philinna; neither the morality nor the politics of the occasion demanded it. (...) Olympia was later to enjoy the superior status accorded the mother of the heir apparent”; 212: “Out of a wish to preserve for Olympias a position befitting the mother of Alexander the Great, commentators have commonly attempted to introduce artificial distinctions between ‘wives’ and ‘mistresses’. Philip’s morals have been more questionable than Alexander’s birth! Thus we often find the notion that when Philip married Kleopatra (which cannot be doubted) he must previously have ‘divorced’ Olympias, who (in turn) must hitherto have been his only surviving wife, her predecessors having conveniently died, been divorced into obscurity or been really concubines all along. The difficulty

“Ancient and modern writers have studied various aspects of Alexander’s personality. His sexual life, for instance, has been the subject of wild speculation. Some have supposed that his closeness to his mother and his continence in the presence of Darius’ mother, wife, and daughters were signs of sexual impotence; others just the opposite, that he travelled with a harem which provided him with a different girl each night of the year; and others that he had homosexual affairs with herds of eunuchs, Hephaestion, Hector, and a Persian boy. The truth is not attainable nor of much importance; for in the Macedonian court homosexual and heterosexual attachments were equally reputable, and the sexual life of Philip, for instance, seems to have had no effect on his achievements in war and politics. Disappointingly for sensationalist writers Alexander’s relations with women seem to have been normal enough for a Macedonian king” (HAMMOND 1989, 269).

“Justin 9.5.8-9.6.8 and 9.7.1-3 reported the divorce of Olympias for suspected sexual depravity (‘ropter stupri suspicionem’), the subsequent marriage of Philip to Cleopatra, the assassination of Philip by Pausanias, the background of Pausanias’ action, and the ‘belief’ (‘creditum est’) that Pausanias had been instigated by Olympias, not without the knowledge of Alexander. (...) What is the value of such analyses? A modern writer who accepts all the material in Diodorus and Justin at its face value has no criterion of judgement but simply chooses those details, incidents and comments which appeal to his concept of probability and his sense of what Philip intended and could have achieved. His version is inevitably subjective” (HAMMOND 1994, 14-15).

“Many features of the Macedonian court seemed strange to city-state Greeks. Whereas they were monogamous, the king was polygamous. He married ‘with war in mind’, or as we should say with policy in mind, since we are not almost continually at war. For that reason he usually married members of a foreign dynasty. His wives were all queens, and his children by them were all princes and princesses. Philip had taken four wives – none from the old kingdom – by 357.

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is that we have no shred of evidence for such a distinction between these liaisons, or, in the one instance for which we have much evidence at all, any sign that Olympias was divorced in order to make room for Kleopatra”; 215: “The question remains: why did Philip decide to take a new wife? Did he conceive a *grande passion* for a young girl, and, since she was too well born to take second place, find himself obligated to divorce Olympias, the mother of the next king? This will not do. (...) To accept the view that Philip moved [marrying Kleopatra] to replace his son because he suspected the youth and his mother of plotting to overthrow him follows largely from the prior assumption that they were plausibly incriminated later in his assassination; and, while circumstantial case may be made out for the latter, the former does not accord well with Philip’s own actions during the previous or following months”. Ellis is probably the most objective observer in the topics about Olympias, and he also dealt with the evidence from Justin about Olympias’s divorce, in 303, n. 12: “In the ancient world [Philip and Olympias’s divorce is recorded] only by Justin (9.5.9, 7.2, 11.11.5), but when here in senses not implying divorce in any modern sense), n. 20 (“Justin refers at 9.5.9 to the banishment of Olympias on suspicion of adultery (*expulsa... Olympiade propter stupri suspicionem*) and at 9.7.2 to her resentment over her *repudium* and the preferment of Kleopatra. At 11.11.3ff. he alleges that Alexander consulted the oracle of Ammon in 332/1 to inquire *inter alia* into his own birth, and explains this as the result of Philip’s denial of paternity and his divorce of Olympias for adultery. But, first, Arrian (3.3.2), Diodoros (17.51.3) and Curtius (4.7.27ff.), who all refer to the same incident, interpret the request quite differently – as an inquiry into his divine descent, not his immediate paternity. Justin’s rationalization therefore appears to be an interpolation designed to explain a query which was misunderstood in the first place. Secondly, debatable as the facts of Philip’s last year or so may be, it is absolutely impossible to credit that he denied paternity, which, apart from being Justin’s explicit affirmation, is in any case implicit in a charge of adultery against Olympias. Thirdly, the only sources we have for the time in question (and these admittedly are poor) have Olympias in Macedon during the wedding festivities, which strongly suggest that she had not been repudiated: Plu. *Alex.* 9.5; Justin 9.7.)”.

Before he died, he took three or four more, of whom only one was of the old kingdom. Philip has ‘many sons recognised in accordance with royal custom’. The leading lady at court was the Queen Mother. She played a prominent part in public life, as we have seen in the case of Philip’s mother, Eurydice. The mother of the king’s chosen heir might have herself airs, as Olympias probably did but her position was still unofficial” (HAMMOND 1994, 40-41).

Finding such a demonstration of methodological accuracy and interpretative warnings is a calming balsam that feeds hope. However, our hopes quickly vanish when we read Hammond’s treatment of the facts where Olympias is involved, where he fell again into the usual clichés:

“so Olympias, the legitimate wife’ (HAMMOND 1994, 172).

“to judge from the *passionate and violent emotions and behaviour of Olympias* in later life (...). His [Alexander] mother’s tears mattered most, and he went with her to Molossia. The previous trust between father and son was replaced with suspicion” (Hammond 1994, 173. My italics).

“Alexander and his jealous mother, Olympias” (HAMMOND 1989, 36).

“The story [about the ‘Pixodarus’ affair] ran that Olympias got wind of this, worked Alexander into a fit of jealousy and suggested that Philip was making the half-wit his heir.” (HAMMOND 1989, 65).

Compared with Hammond, Bosworth has usually been considered as an intense reviewer of the perception of Alexander. Nevertheless, in his brilliant *Conquest and Empire* (1988), an immediate masterpiece in Historiography on Alexander, Bosworth paid scarce attention to Olympias, something that seems quite strange and, when she appears in the book, the critical skills of Bosworth seem to be disallowed, and again clichés appear:

“Unashamedly polygamous, Philip...” (BOSWORTH 1988, 6).

“That situation changed abruptly in 337, when Philip decided on another dynastic marriage, this time to a lady of Macedon proper: Cleopatra (...). She was also (it is alleged) married for love, not for political reasons (as was the Elimote princess Phila, the only other wife of Philip who could be said to be of Macedonian extraction). That alienated Olympias, and a deep rift developed in the royal house. It was an insult direct, aimed at Olympias’ marital fidelity and also her non-Macedonian origins” (BOSWORTH 1988, 21).

“Alexander’s mother had returned from her self-imposed exile in Epirus at the news of Philip’s death<sup>12</sup> and was less inhibited in showing her satisfaction at the event. While Alexander was temporarily away from the capital she barbarously did to death both infant and mother” (BOSWORTH 1988, 27).

After this brief survey of contemporary tradition, mainly through English-speaking production, about Olympias, we realize first the clichés we have been noting through these pages, and their validity in many works of recognized success, both for public audiences and academic scholarship, up to the present day. We can consider these views about Olympias to be a clue to the usual perception of women –ancient and modern– in

history (at least), produced during the XIX<sup>th</sup> and XX<sup>th</sup> centuries as a result of the mentalities of their authors' own times. However, it is indefensible, at least in my opinion, to keep maintaining these views, in close continuity with those of the previous authors, in our own days, and to perpetuate them in the books and thoughts of our own age, in an acritical interpretation.

Secondly, through these pages it seems evident how Olympias and the historical accounts about her, affected by apriorism and Modern conceptions on gender, are not only useful to sustain poorly elaborated images and archetypes about her and her son Alexander, but also to show discourses in which women are subdued in History, and to maintain a traditional view about the forms and kinds of relationships of gender models, to perpetuate them in our present daily life.

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