



PROJECT MUSE®

Sex and the Single Amazon in Twelfth-Century Latin Epic

David Townsend

University of Toronto Quarterly, Volume 64, Number 2, Spring 1995, pp.
255-273 (Article)

Published by University of Toronto Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/511661/summary>

Sex and the Single Amazon in Twelfth-Century Latin Epic

I even made poor Louis take me on Crusade. How's that for blasphemy? I dressed my maids as Amazons and rode bare-breasted halfway to Damascus. Louis had a seizure and I damn near died of windburn, but the troops were dazzled.' This is Eleanor of Aquitaine speaking, not perhaps as she was, but as she is imagined in *The Lion in Winter*.¹ As a teenager going to summer stock in southern Indiana, I was shocked and delighted by Eleanor's reminiscences of the Second Crusade, as by the other Plantagenet perversities acted out that muggy July night. At sixteen, this became the twelfth century for me, soon to be reinforced by the film version of the play, and supplemented by Kenneth Clark's *Civilisation* episode on the age of the cathedrals.² But Clark, alas, offered neither Amazons nor homosexual heirs to the throne of Henry II.

When I was a child, I read as a child, but having become a medievalist, I put away childish interpretations. In the intervening twenty-three years, I have learned with a vengeance to distrust such popularizations. I now know that in regard to the image of Eleanor trotting through a bitterly contested Middle East done up as an Amazon, 'our caution ... cannot be too extreme.' Eleanor indeed went East with female companions, and a Greek chronicler towards the end of the twelfth century likened her to a second Penthesilea, suggesting that her fellows 'behaved in an even more masculine way than the Amazons.' But not until we reach the Victorian account by a disapproving Agnes Strickland do we actually find the queen and her ladies themselves donning Amazon garb. So much for windburn and bedazzled troops.³ Perhaps (I still cannot help thinking during occasional lapses) the twelfth century was poorer for the loss.

On the other hand, Eleanor surely knew an Amazon when she saw one. Benoît de Sainte-Maure would dedicate the massive *Roman de Troie* to her about ten years after the Crusade. There Penthesilea and her army appear with much pomp, and in considerable detail.⁴ Maybe Eleanor, beholding her anachronistic representation, might approve: *si non è vero, è ben trovato*. I long for the imagined Eleanor's subversion of the rules others made for her. I remember the space her nostalgic recollection opened for me, as I churned through the void between my own anomalous desires and the brutally enforced norms of a respectable small town. Professionally, however, I have to settle for Amazons where I can find them.

Penthesilea, thee I invoke.

Walter of Châtillon's long Latin epic, the *Alexandreis*, dates from the last quarter of the twelfth century.⁵ At the beginning of book VIII, after his victory over his nemesis Darius and before the Indian campaigns that will lead swiftly to his hybris-ridden downfall, Alexander the Great receives a visit from Talestris, Queen of the Amazons:

Lamenting Memnon's death with endless grief,
 three times the Dawn had strewn her radiant beams
 through all the earth, when earth's sole conqueror,
 valiant and swiftly lunging toward all peril,
 approached Hyrcania's boundaries with his host. 5
 He'd scarcely gained the victory, or heard
 the supplications of the lisping Bagoas
 to grant bloodstained Narbazanes his life,
 when Queen Talestris of the Amazons
 approached the camp with virgin retinue,
 aflame with her desire to see the king. 10
 All peoples dwelling from the Caucasus
 to rushing Phasis' wide-encircling stream
 received this woman's laws. When once an audience
 was granted to her with the king, she swiftly
 descended from her horse, with quiver slung
 from her left arm, and carrying two darts. 15
 (The dress of Amazons does not obscure
 their bodies wholly. On the left, their chests
 are bared; their garments settle on the rest
 and hide what must be hidden, though the soft
 raiment doesn't fall below the knee-joint.
 The left teat is preserved until adulthood
 to nurse their infants of the female sex;
 the other one receives an early searing
 to ease their wielding of the pliant bow
 and leave them unencumbered for the javelin.) 23
 Perusing, then, the king with wary eye,
 Talestris marvelled that his meagre body
 ill fit his fame, and silently she pondered
 where the great virtue of the unvanquished prince
 might lie concealed: the simple savage mind
 respects and judges all according to
 their bodies' beauty and their splendid raiment,
 and thinks none capable of mighty deeds
 save those whom nature has seen fit to bless
 with shapely body and a charming form.
 But sometimes mightier courage dwells inside

a middling body, and illustrious power
transgresses all the body's limbs to rule
somewhere within obscure and darkened members.

35

And so the queen, asked once for what she'd come,
whether she sought some great boon of the king,
responded that she'd come to fill her womb
and leave again to bear an offspring shared
with such a prince: she judged herself as worthy
that from her he might sire a kingdom's heirs.
If from that birth a noble woman issued,
the daughter would attain her mother's realms;
if there came forth a male, he'd be returned
for nourishment under his father's tutelage.
The king inquired whether Talestris cared
to take up arms beneath him, but she pleaded
her realm now lacked a guardian. Finally
she took the gift of thirteen nights and gained
what she was seeking. Then she turned her steps
back to her realm's throne and ancestral cities.⁶

48

Some modern readers know Walter better for his lyrical and satirical poems in the accentual metres that appealed to post-romantic conceptions of medieval literature: these works are conducive to the wide appreciation of the 'Goliardic' Latin verse long associated with Helen Waddell's 'Wandering Scholars.'⁷ Walter also wrote an extended prose treatise against the Jews.⁸ But despite any relative inattention from modern students, his hexameter epic was his *magnum opus*, attested by some two hundred surviving manuscripts, many of them heavily and systematically glossed.⁹ Nor was the popularity of the poem restricted to the thirteenth century's burgeoning academic culture. Vernacular adaptations testify to the breadth of its appeal.¹⁰ The work's currency in circles of high political power was already presupposed by its dedication: Walter's patron William of the White Hands, bishop of Sens from 1169 to 1176 and archbishop of Reims from 1176 to 1202, was also the uncle of Philip Augustus.¹¹

The poem draws on a Latin prose text of the early imperial period, the *Historiae Alexandri Magni Macedonis* of Quintus Curtius Rufus, as its principal source.¹² Walter sometimes follows Curtius very closely indeed, but at others he amply demonstrates his willingness to handle his principal source more freely: he modifies or omits episodes, adds digressions, often to provide epic coloration, and conflates the text with other sources.¹³

Twentieth-century criticism of the *Alexandreis* has in large part organized itself around several central topoi of traditional philological

criticism. Treatments often focus on the epic's classicizing tendencies, so that Walter comes to be judged by his success or his failure at reproducing the aesthetic, and to some extent the ethos, of the Gold and Silver Latin epic.¹⁴ Much attention is paid to Walter's use of Curtius and to his synthesis of this with other materials from the Alexander legend and from the Latin poetic tradition.¹⁵ And extensive argument obtains over the engagement or withdrawal of the text from the pressing political issues of its day.¹⁶

In so far as the poem resonates against the controversies surrounding the French prosecution of the Crusades, we can read it as one of medieval high culture's principal monuments to the long history of Western Orientalism. Its literary constructions of the newly accessible East must necessarily evoke as intertexts other, more fantastic materials in the Alexander tradition, like the *Letter of Alexander to Aristotle* embedded in another vastly popular Latin text, the *Historia de preliis*.¹⁷ Less foregrounded in the poem, and thus understandably bypassed in recent criticism, is the representation of gender: Walter generally presents Alexander as a sexless being in a homosocial environment, and indeed, Walter's practice of omitting many of the episodes in Curtius that cast a pall over Alexander's character covers the traces of gender and sexuality issues.¹⁸ But the appearance of the Amazon queen affords a remarkably easy *entrée* into such concerns. A close reading of the passage reveals a deeply embedded problematic of gender, a problematic that intersects the incipient Orientalism of this underread masterpiece of the twelfth century.

Memnonis eterno deplorans funera luctu,
Tercia luciferos terras Aurora per omnes
Spargebat radios cum fortis et impiger ille
Terrarum domitor, in cuncta pericula preceps,
Hyrmanos subiit armato milite fines.

5

The opening lines of book VIII, with their conventional epic allusion to Aurora's grief at the tomb of Memnon, betray an immediate debt to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and to the *Aeneid*.¹⁹ But at the caesura of line 3 comes a first seam in the construction of the passage, as the text moves from mythological description to the representation of martial prowess. We can read this juxtaposition as entirely commonplace, a derivation from the previous epic tradition. Nevertheless, in the *Alexandreis* it reflects the amalgamation of two profoundly different kinds of source, namely the epics and the prose historiographical discourse of Curtius. Much criticism focuses upon the synthesis of these voices, but it is possible instead to read the poem as existing at the intersection of their dialogic tensions, as constituted precisely by the intertextual relays that the reader must negotiate to construe the text.²⁰ In the gap that opens up in the

middle of the passage's third line, there arises, overlapping but not coinciding with the dialogue between these competing discourses, a gendered tension between the passivity of the female Dawn and the behaviour of the Macedonian conqueror. Although one could read this tension as purely conventional, verbal repetition militates against such a dismissal: *terras* of line 2 is set off against *terrarum* of line 4 in almost exactly symmetrical relation to the caesura of line 3: while Aurora scatters her tears through all lands, the still-unnamed Alexander appears as those lands' conqueror. Both gender and the militarist expansionism of Alexander's project thus become visible in this space.

Quos ubi perdomuit uitamque cruentus ab ipso
 Narbazanes molli Bagoa supplicante recepit,
 Haut mora, uisendi succensa cupidine regis,
 Gentis Amazoniae uenit regina Talestris
 Castraque uirginibus subiit comitata ducentis.

10

Two lines of circumstantial detail now intervene between the opening of the book and the arrival of Talestris. Here we learn that Alexander spares the treasonous Persian general Narbazanes at the prompting of 'effeminate Bagoas.' With this reference, the text encodes an interpretive lack, depending as it does for comprehension on a network of references that undermine the work's self-sufficiency. A late-thirteenth-century gloss from Vienna, National Library 568 reflects the necessity of such supplementation:

Hic dicit quod Narbazanes reconciliatus fuit Alexandro per blanda uerba, sed auctor subitice ueritatem quoniam Narbazanes duos filios pulcherrimos habuit quibus abutebatur Alexander. Qui ab Alexandro inpetrauerunt pacem patri suo Narbazani, sed quoniam hoc Alexandro fuit dedecus, et ideo tacuit auctor.

Here he says that Narbazanes was reconciled to Alexander by pretty words, but the author hushes up the truth that Narbazanes had two very beautiful sons whom Alexander abused. They begged peace for their father Narbazanes from Alexander; but since this redounds to Alexander's dishonour, so, therefore, the author keeps quiet.²¹

Only by the recognition that the poem's ideal reader is already familiar with the material from Curtius and other sources can we recognize these lines as classic *praeteritio*, highlighting precisely that which they purport to omit. But if Walter is attempting to whitewash Alexander here, as this and other glosses in the same manuscript suggest,²² and as some modern scholars have asserted on the more general issue of the hero's portrayal in the poem, we must concede that he has been singularly clumsy about

it. Even given the choice of detail with which Walter contextualizes Talestris's arrival, he could have omitted Bagoas altogether; and even given Bagoas's presence, Walter surely could have spared him the epithet 'molly.' If we choose to ignore the text's signposts towards Alexander's gender and sexuality, we can only rescue Alexander's normative virility by casting aspersions on Walter's competence to produce the effects critics have proposed he intended.

Omnibus hec populis, dorso quos Caucasus illinc
Circuit, hinc rapidi circumdat Phasidos amnis,
Iura dabat mulier. cui primo ut copia facta est
Regis, equo rapide descendit, spicula dextra
Bina ferens, leuo pharetram suspensa lacerto.

15

The text's immediate valorizations of gender and sexuality as interpretive issues do not easily allow us to dismiss details of Talestris's entrance as though they were inevitable in the representation of the Amazon queen, and so unworthy of sustained attention. Walter does indeed follow Curtius's account remarkably closely for the rest of the episode,²³ but details of his adaptation tellingly depart from mechanical versification of the source. The ensuing lines give particular emphasis to Talestris's gender by radically splitting the nominative subject between the demonstrative *hec* of line 11 and *mulier*, line 13, at the final position in its sentence. The victorious Alexander has just granted clemency to a parricide at the prompting of his catamite; now a ruler who governs a wide territory described in some geographical detail is emphatically asserted, at the last possible moment in the syntactical unit, to be a woman. She swiftly dismounts and carries two javelins and a quiver with her to her audience with the king.

Vestis Amazonibus non totum corpus obumbrat.
Pectoris a leua nudatur, cetera uestis
Occupat et celat celanda, nichil tamen infra
Iuncturam genuum descendit mollis amictus.
Leua papilla manet et conseruatur adultis,
Cuius lacte infans sexus muliebris alatur.
Non intacta manet sed aduritur altera lentos
Prompcius ut tendant arcus et spicula uibrent.

20

23

Lines 16–23 present something like an ethnographical description. If the attention to detail given the garb of the Amazons represents a kind of cultural tourism, the searing away of the right breast in childhood can be read as the inscription of their society's organization upon their bodies. In this context, Amazonian dress becomes a kind of gloss both sup-

plementing and partially covering over the body-as-text. In that gloss, the dialectic of concealment and revelation, thematically announced in line 16 – ‘the Amazons’ garb does not veil the whole body’ – unsettles any perceived naturalism of dress and its relation to the body’s social meaning. The left breast – that left intact by Amazon society – is revealed; their garments cover ‘the rest,’ and particularly, we are told, ‘conceal what ought to be concealed.’

Perhaps the phrase *celat celanda* merely provides a poetic variation on the preceding *cetera occupat* – Walter has added it to an otherwise close paraphrase of Curtius’s corresponding sentence. But the nature of what must be concealed is here manifold. The exposure of the female breast already suggests that *celanda* means something significantly different to the Amazons than to the society of the West. *Celanda* clearly denotes the sexual organs and substitutes for another gerundive, *pudenda*. This imputes universality to the prohibition against exposing the sexual organs. But the indeterminacy of the relation of *cetera* to *celanda* leaves open the question of what, in the eyes of the Amazons themselves, must be concealed. At the end of line 19 we pass from the description of Amazon fashion to their practice of nursing children – females only, so that the boys both vanish from our sight and are the focus of our attention by yet another *praeteritio* (of which the missing term is this time not Curtius, but the reader’s consciousness of gender as a binary opposition) – and so to the cauterization of the right breast. In the light of the sartorial gloss that has preceded the reading of the Amazon body, it is not clear whether the missing breast is simply part of the *cetera* which happen to be concealed, or of the *celanda* that must be rendered invisible. Nor, if the absence of the breast is indeed a *celandum*, is it self-evident in whose eyes it is a site for potential shame, in those of Walter and his readers, or in those of the Amazons themselves.²⁴

I read these lines as thus implicated not only in a tension between concealment and revelation, but more deeply in the gendered dialectic of sexual organs as lack or possession of the phallic signifier of cultural power.²⁵ Under concealment and revelation there lies the more fundamental grid of the male and female genitalia and the divergent meanings of their concealment. If the male sexual organs must be concealed, it is in order to keep the phallus veiled, and so to protect it against challenges to what Kaja Silverman has called the ‘dominant fiction’ that the phallus as transcendent guarantor of power and cultural meaning is equivalent to the penis. Unveiling the phallus risks the beholder’s recognition that phallic transcendence is hardly matched by ‘the’ male organ’s limitation and mutability.²⁶ If the female genitalia must be concealed, according to that same dominant fiction it is because the scandal of lack must be covered over. The ideology of patriarchy demands that we must understand sexual difference as what the female body is deprived of.

But the seared breast of the Amazon queen introduces a third term of difference into the obsession with the phallus or its absence as the binary opposition upon which gender is founded. The seared breast represents the construction of social power not upon a naturalized lack, a 'castration' that is the always already given of female bodily existence, but rather upon a choice determined by the contingent norms of a given society, a choice by which the excision of the biologically natural effects not the deprivation of power, but an access to it. Talestris's cauterization *produces* the power of her socially determined subjectivity. Patriarchy maps its metaphor of 'castration' onto the female body in order to secure the dominant fiction; but the lack it imputes remains figurative. Amazon society, by contrast, demands a literal and physically exacted deprivation; but it offers inclusion in the social body as compensation for that introduction of lack into the subject. I want to suggest that enormous conceptual strain is thus placed on a continued patriarchal reading of Talestris's body: by juxtaposing the patriarchal imposition of a figurative lack onto the subject with the Amazons' imposition of a literal one, the text problematizes the very notion of 'castration' upon which the dominant fiction depends. Talestris's cauterization is not simply a reverse 'castration' by which the female aspires to hardness and is thus masculinized: Talestris remains very much a woman, coming to Alexander with the possibility of conception in mind, and capable of nurturing a child with the breast that her dress reveals. The concealment of the female *celanda* is refigured. No longer does that concealment mask an ontological 'lack.' It veils, rather, a socially determined lack that carries with it the consequence of socially constructed power. The bow and javelins wielded by the Amazons, those same weapons with which Talestris has already made her appearance before the Macedonian king, are the visible tokens of that power. Such weapons, in Alexander's eyes, might well stand for the phallus; but to Talestris, they are rather the tokens of her status as a woman inducted into Amazon society; and it is to her perspective that we will be more compellingly guided in the lines that follow.

Perlustrans igitur attento lumine regem,	
Mirata est fame non respondere Talestris	25
Exiguum corpus, taciturnaque uersat apud se	
Principis indomiti uirtus ubi tanta lateret.	
Barbara simplicitas a maiestate uenusti	
Corporis atque habitu ueneratur et estimat omnes,	
Magnorumque operum nullos putat esse capaces	30
Preter eos, conferre quibus natura decorum	
Dignata est corpus specieque beare uenusta.	
Sed modico prestat interdum corpore maior	
Magnipotens animus, transgressaque corporis artus	
Regnat in obscuris preclara potentia membris.	35

The text now stands poised between a dominant fiction of male plenitude and a realization of Amazon 'castration' as a positive term effecting the possibility of being-in-society. It is at the same time poised between the dominant fiction (that phallus and penis are one) and a space in which Talestris's own subjective vision of her self becomes articulable. If the text has regarded Talestris, up to this point, as the object of its gaze, Talestris now gazes back. In line 24, she 'wanders over' the king with a careful eye and finds his scanty body lacking. In her silence she speculates – as she does not, explicitly, in Curtius's version – as to where the *virtus* of this man lies. In the Latin, even more than in the English of our own readings, the line between virtue and virility begins to blur as we ponder etymology, to say nothing of raw sound. Alexander's virtue, along with his power and his manliness, is hidden somewhere Talestris cannot lay eyes on it. Talestris's silent contemplation focuses our attention on the fact that the emperor is indeed clothed, and for good reason. Her unspoken speculations as to what he may, or may not, have under the hood throws the notion of the veiled power of the phallus back on itself. Her aporia ridicules the phallus precisely in its concealment. If Alexander's hidden parts are not more impressive than what he shows off, she has clearly decided, then he is hardly the eighth wonder of the world she came to inspect.

A medieval audience was if anything more likely than a modern one to have grasped the comic incongruities of Alexander's position. Thomas Laqueur has traced in much detail the dominance of a so-called 'one-sex' model of sexual difference in Western culture up until the late eighteenth century.²⁷ In a world where sexual difference, according to such a paradigm, signified greater or lesser perfection on a continuum, and where women were seen as beings possessing analogous sexual equipment to men's, but turned outside in as a sign of their inferior status, the signification of power by the phallus must have been even further valorized than it is for twentieth-century readers, who have simultaneous access to other conceptions of difference that have come to the fore since the Enlightenment – 'two-sex' conceptions that, for better or worse, imagine sexual difference not as degrees of perfection ranking individuals along a single scale, but as a more fundamental dimorphism of somatic and psychological reality.

If the text allows such a rupture as I have delineated in the dominant fiction of phallic signification and power, if it opens such a space for the expression of Talestris's female subjectivity, it nevertheless moves immediately to contain the threat that this heterodox perspective represents. I am struck by the fact, however, that it does not circumscribe Talestris's alternatively gendered gaze as partial and inauthentic in terms of sex, but, rather, generalizes upon the barbarian simplicity that fails to recognize the distinction of inward power from external appearance. Walter has introduced the dangerous possibility that Talestris's female subjectivity

signifies a construction of gender in society alternative to Alexander's normative *virtus*. Now Walter negates that possibility not by appeal to gender, much less to sex, but in terms of an ethnically marked distinction between hermeneutic sophistication and naïve observation. Talestris fails to read Alexander's *virtus* appreciatively not because she is a woman, but because she is a barbarian. This defence of Alexander strikes me as the lamest of apologiae. Certainly, my reaction reflects deep-seated personal inclination. But other passages in the *Alexandreis* also suggest a commingling of voices that undermines the privileging of any one among them. The indeterminacy of the poem's dialogic relations leaves the reader adrift to order their hierarchy, or not to do so, in the freedom of his or her own reception.²⁸ But more specifically, the baldness of this representation of the ethnic Other, reflective of the text's position in the history of modern xenophobia in the West, creates for itself in nine lines perhaps as many difficulties as it lays to rest, as the following paragraphs attempt to sketch.

These lines assimilate the evaluation of the relation between body and inner virtue to the typological interpretation of the text: inside the bodily *integumentum* resides the mighty spirit, a kernel of meaning that the barbarian cannot grasp, but in which lies the body's true significance.²⁹ Yet in order to accumulate its assertions of the invisibility of inner virtue, the passage focuses precisely on that body which it chides Talestris for regarding without reference to what lies hidden within it. In nine lines the body appears four times (*corporis*, line 29; *corpus*, line 32; *corpore*, line 33; *corporis*, line 34), returning repeatedly even as the text urges the reader's understanding to transcend it, lest he or she, too, turn out to be a barbarian. Nor has this body yet escaped from the literal-minded gaze of Talestris against which Walter protests so profusely: the body is still represented as Talestris chooses to evaluate it, and the text merely reacts against this vision by negating it. Alexander's outward appearance lacks the *maiestas uenusti corporis*, the majesty of a lovely body; the positive term of this discourse remains the status of those 'upon whom nature has seen fit to bestow a seemly body of charming appearance.' Notably absent here is any assertion, in contradiction of Talestris's gaze, that Alexander's male body is to be judged by a male standard of appearance. The language the text uses to suggest that prettiness is not everything represents Alexander's physical reality in language more generally used of women: *venustas* is by both etymology and classical usage the property of Venus, not of Mars.³⁰ The defence of Alexander's inner majesty thus lands the king in an even worse situation than that in which Talestris' silent appraisal has left him. She does not merely find him lacking; she finds him lacking according to a standard by which women are judged, but here itself employed by a woman. Perhaps Talestris would be more favourably impressed by her fellow Amazons.

In terms aligned with post-Lacanian feminism, the defence attempts to shield the phallus from Talestris's single-mindedly physical, and so literal, gaze. If it succeeds in vindicating Alexander's possession of the phallus as the transcendent signifier of power, it does so by denying the unproblematic equivalence of the phallus with the penis, of power with the specificity of the male body. If Alexander's virtue is vindicated at the expense of that virtue's straightforward connection with his physical stature, a crack has opened in the dominant fiction. 'Mighty spirit' must 'transgress' the body's limbs in order to sustain its rule; 'illustrious power' has retreated to a habitation in *obscuris membris*. Thus the text leaves Alexander stuck on the horns of its dilemma.

It remains unclear, however, whether even here the phallus can rest safe from Talestris's scrutiny. Her evaluation, at once cool and salacious, may well continue to speculate as to just which obscure members have become the place of retreat. A hermeneutically informed understanding, of course, would recognize that these members are figurative, and that the body's types and shadows have their ending in the transcendent dwelling place of virtue. But for a moment, learned reader, give Talestris her way: like the queen she is, she will probably have it in any case. What if these obscure members are themselves still physical? *Obscurus* is, in fact, in this context a rather strange choice of words on Walter's part – and the entire sentence is his free elaboration of his source.³¹ Its usual meanings run along the lines of 'gloomy, dark, obscure.' In Vergil, a grove is *obscurus*; the night is *obscura*; of language, the word can mean obscure or incomprehensible. The *obscurum* is imperfectly known, uncertain, concealed from knowledge. The word suggests only with some contortion the higher intelligibility of inward understanding. If these out-of-sight members are physical, they are indeed covered over, and so darkened. We are back to the organs, then, that earlier were described as universally *celanda*, requiring concealment. These may well be Alexander's private parts, the declared goal of Talestris's sojourn: she has after all come, as she will soon tell us, specifically in order to be inseminated by the universal conqueror.

Even so, these organs are more than concealed; potentially, they are unintelligible or indistinct, and with this my mind cannot help but run to Luce Irigaray's exploration of the indeterminacy of the female body.³² Perhaps, if these *membra* are physical, they belong to Alexander and still point ahead to Talestris's imminent acquisition of what she has come for; but perhaps they represent an alternative somatic correlative of power altogether. Perhaps they are the organs of Talestris's own fecundity – not only obscure in their concealment, but *unheimlich* in the castration fear they engender in a patriarchal subjectivity constituted in terror of the potential loss of phallic power.³³ (Perhaps, indeed, this is an eruption of 'two-sex' thinking against the dominant ideology of the age.) Both these

valuations come together, interpretively as well as at the literal narrative level, in the climax of Talestris's appearance.

Ergo rogata semel ad quid regina ueniret,
 Anne aliquid uellet a principe poscere magnum,
 Se uenisse refert ut pleno uentre regressa
 Communem pariat cum tanto principe prolem,
 Dignam se reputans de qua rex gignere regni 40
 Debeat heredes. fuerit si femina partu
 Proditā, maternis pocietur filia regnis.
 Si mas extiterit, patri reddetur alendus.
 Querit Alexander sub eone uacare Talestris
 Miliciae uelit. illa suum custode carere 45
 Causatur regnum. tandem pro munere noctem
 Ter deciesque tulit, et quod querebat adepta
 Ad solium regni patriasque reuertitur urbes.

Alexander wants to know whether Talestris has come to ask for something big. She replies straightforwardly enough. She wants to go back home pregnant with a child sired by so great a prince. She judges *herself* worthy to mother the offspring of Alexander. Her proposal is thoroughly contractual: if the issue of this union is a woman (and a woman of rank, *femina*, at that), she will inherit the 'maternal realms.' A male child will be returned to sender. The language is overwhelmingly loaded. Talestris's daughter will emerge into the world a gendered being, born into a matrix of social relations in which her standing is guaranteed by her mother and her society.³⁴ Talestris's potential male offspring is scarcely even represented as her son: *mas* can apply to humans, animals, and even plants. This child awaits an identity which, if it is imparted at all, will be received at the hands of its father, to whom it will be restored 'for sustenance.'³⁵

The fate of such a child is indeed precarious. Perhaps one can read the gerundive *alendus* straightforwardly as 'to be nourished.' But it emphasizes just as plausibly that the child is in a state of requiring nourishment, 'needing to be nourished.' How Alexander will accomplish this in the absence of the child's mother is unclear. Of course he will provide the boy with a wet nurse. But in the framework of the entire episode's continuous focus on the physical, I cannot but attend to the fact that here Talestris's own source of power, entirely outside the discourse of the phallus, comes to the margin of awareness. Talestris's left breast is capable of nurturing her daughter, as her right arm displays the prowess that will guarantee that daughter's position in Amazon society. Alexander must rely, for the nourishment of the male child that may come of this union, upon an unnamed and unacknowledged woman. That child will

already have been born from Talestris's own *obscura membra*, whose power depends on no tenuous relay between the body and its concealment of *virtus*: her literal body is itself its own power, in need of no act of tropological alienation.

Talestris thus refuses to look beyond Alexander's physical stature for what she is seeking not out of arbitrarily and wilfully bad hermeneutics, but out of knowledge and choice. She knows what she wants from the start, and her search for a somatic *virtus* (a *mulieritas*, if you will) will not be diverted, either by the defensive tactics of the (possibly disingenuous) narrator or by Alexander's own initial parry of her request: immediately following her proposal, Alexander changes the subject, in what looks very much like a counter-offer. Would the Amazon not like to make some time for warfare under him (*vacare sub eo*, where Curtius had read *cum ipso militare*, to fight with him)? Falling back once again on figurative language as a defence of his prowess, Alexander devises a way to make sure he remains on top, at least metaphorically: whether he will be able to maintain that relation in a more physically constituted relationship, like the one Talestris proposes, is perhaps a more open question. But Talestris, in a rather ladylike gesture allowing the gentleman to save face, pleads a previous engagement: her kingdom, without her, would lack a guardian. 'At last, as a gift, she carries the night thirteen times, and having gained what she was seeking, returns to her kingdom's throne and to the cities of her ancestors.'

Talestris has clearly won this combat for discursive space, which has rather unobtrusively raged for forty-eight lines of an epic generally read in the twentieth century, when read at all, as an inscription of the dominant cultural values of its time. Not merely does she receive the gift of thirteen nights; she carries them one by one, each encounter with Alexander an active exercise of her choice. Finally, with supreme irony, she returns to her *patrias urbes*. What can this (yet another detail Walter adds gratuitously to Curtius's version) possibly mean, in a society that is not merely matrilineal, but exclusively female? In both prose and verse, I have rendered *patrias* as 'ancestral'; R. Telfryn Pritchard, in his prose translation, gives his reader 'native'.³⁶ But how, in idiomatic English, might we capture the jarring incongruity of a term at the centre of whose connotation lies fatherhood as conceived by the tribes of Latium?

One answer is fairly straightforward, given the context: Talestris has it all. By biological fact, the Amazons all have fathers. That those fathers are rendered invisible and absent in Amazon society suggests that in Talestris's social discourse it is *she* who represents the Lacanian Name-of-the-Father and so wields the phallus that is its signifier. The fiction of any natural correspondence of the phallus to male anatomy is shattered. In its abjection from phallic signification, the penis has become the unspeakable term of human intercourse, as are the female genitalia in the patriarchal

world into which she has made her brief counter-insurgency. Behind the catachresis of the notion that the Amazon cities could be 'paternal' lies another trope. By synecdoche the paternal function is here absorbed into the maternal, which is thereby universalized. In much the same way, though with reversed polarity, patriarchal discourse has long insisted that the universalizing language of 'man' incorporates the experience of women.

Under such an interpretation, Talestris would indeed bring forth her subjectivity out of a most unlikely context. But at what price of fulfilling, on another level, the deepest stereotypical fears of patriarchy that female power carries with it, inevitably, the threat of male castration? I see another possibility, born of my own desire in the first instance, but not at the expense, I'd still maintain, of the text's integrity. Talestris has indeed shattered the illusion of any natural correspondence between the Law of being-in-society and the particulars of male anatomy. But what she takes away appears as castration only from within that illusion of the equivalence of phallus and penis. In contrast to what the text fears that she threatens to take away, and to what Alexander himself seems to fear in his counter-offer to take the queen on as a sidekick in combat, she offers Alexander that same physicality with which she insists on regarding him. Taking away the phallus, she holds out to Alexander the reality of his body, and the pleasure of thirteen nights with a real woman whose spear stands propped in the corner, and whose body itself bears the marks of her prestige. We have no indication in the text that he can or does recognize such an offer for what it is. He is perhaps too obsessed with *aliquid magnum*, some big thing he should be bestowing out of his own turgid sense of largesse. But Talestris resolutely puts forward what to patriarchy is as much a scandal as the threat of castration. She makes it clear that she has indeed come for what Alexander has below the belt, but on her terms, not his. In so doing, she ultimately unveils not the phallus, but rather the penis, the sign not of transcendent power but of the male body's partiality and contingency. She offers Alexander a freedom that he appears unable to accept.

But what she offers does suggest an alternative explanation for her return to the *patrias urbes*. Perhaps, by insisting on calling the body the body, and by resisting the metaphorical identifications that crush somatic reality under the weight of cultural significations, Amazon society offers a space for an alternative male subjectivity, one in which fatherhood signifies not power and disembodiment, but the body's real presence. The *Historia de preliis* describes the carefully controlled circumstances under which the Amazons come together with the men of their race.³⁷ Nothing in the account suggests the subjugation of the men. Though Walter chose here to follow Curtius instead, this alternative account remained within the horizon of his contemporaries, as surely as did Curtius at those points when Walter departed from him.

Still, in the *Historia de preliis* I cannot find the presence of men, and so my own presence as embodied reader, *within* Amazonia itself. Nor can I find it in later medieval accounts. In the late fourteenth century, in *The Book of the City of Ladies*, Christine de Pizan described the founding of the Amazon state as the reconstitution of a society in which men had previously made great slaughter.³⁸ Perhaps we should count Christine, one of the most erudite women of her day, among Walter of Châtillon's readers: by her time, the *Alexandreis* had been a standard of the literary curriculum for nearly two centuries. So I have to go still further afield in search of Amazon men.

I have to shift to my own horizons and leap from twelfth-century epic to twentieth-century feminist science fiction. In *The Gate to Women's Country*, Sheri S. Tepper constructs her own cities of women, peopled by the descendants of those who survived a nuclear holocaust. Beyond the town walls lie the garrisons – a militaristic, exclusively male culture where men in touch with the Warrior Within can chant and drum to their hearts' content.³⁹ In Women's Country only a few 'soft' males find a place. Reproduction is assured for both communities by carefully controlled periods of mating between the women's and men's societies, and mothers surrender the male offspring of these unions to their 'warrior fathers' at the age of five. At age fifteen, the boys choose whether to become warriors or to return through the Gate to Women's Country. But the zealously guarded secret of Women's Country is that the fathers of the children these unions ostensibly produce are not the testosterone-poisoning cases encountered at the semi-annual carnivals. The true fathers are the men harboured within Women's Country itself. Rejects and refugees of the dominant patriarchy that supposes itself the source of life, they are possessed of their own concealed and tenderer strengths.

Tepper's vision poses its own problems. Her women govern their cities by elitist meritocracy, and with very little humour. Her elimination of male aggression by sustained selective breeding explains sexual oppression by appeal to a crudely essentialist biologism. By that same blithe faith in genetics she dismisses diversity of sexual preference as treatable hormone imbalance. In any case, Talestris's society is of course not Women's Country. But it does appear to be a place where everyone knows what women want, and where men who learn the answer to that vexed question perhaps also find the reality of their own embodiment.

Walter of Châtillon was no feminist. The *Alexandreis* is no feminist text. But it *is* a work of remarkable and underappreciated subtlety, and its commingling of voices allows a great deal to slip through the gaps of its construction. If it celebrates Alexander, it does so with continuously ironic qualification. If it purports, however half-heartedly, to defend him from Talestris's momentary gaze, it creates room for her to speak in the gaps between its dialogically juxtaposed languages. How many medieval readers of the poem may have heard her voice? Perhaps no one can answer

that question definitively. If the copious surviving glosses on the poem settle the matter, the answer lies in a manuscript I have not seen, and whose annotations are not printed. Clearly, at least some people in the twelfth century *were* capable of appreciating a dirty joke. Some could perceive the margins around normative masculine identity, as the copious eleventh- and twelfth-century literatures against and in favour of homosexual activity attest – margins that the literature of romance was also exploring in a generally heterosexual context.⁴⁰ Then, as now, such a reading might well have struggled against an orthodox reception of the text. Finally, the twelfth century I imagine as a modern reader includes, after all, Eleanor of Aquitaine (or at least, as on a palimpsest, the divine Katharine Hepburn in bogus Plantagenet drag) dressing her women as Amazons and riding bare-breasted halfway to Damascus. If I write, willfully enough, my own gloss on Walter, it will be covered over in its turn. Mine too is another voice in the margin of his text.

NOTES

- 1 James Goldman, *The Lion in Winter* (New York: Random House 1966), 43.
- 2 Kenneth Clark, *Civilisation: A Personal View* (London: BBC 1969, 1970), ch 2.
- 3 D.D.R. Owen, *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Queen and Legend* (Oxford: Blackwell 1993), esp 148–52.
- 4 Ibid; Benoît de Sainte-Maure, *Le Roman de Troie*, ed Léopold Constans, 6 vols (Paris: Fermin Didot 1904–12), lines 23,357ff.
- 5 H. Christensen, *Das Alexanderlied Walters von Châtillon* (Halle: Buchhandlung des Waisenhauses 1905), 10, dates the composition of the poem to 1178–82; Carlotta Dionisotti, 'Walter of Châtillon and the Greeks,' in Peter Godman and Oswyn Murray, eds, *Latin Poetry and the Classical Tradition: Essays in Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon 1990), 90–6, argues for substantial completion by 1176. Neil Adkin argues for the first release of the poem between September 1179 and September 1180 in 'The Proem of Walter of Châtillon's *Alexandreis*: "Si ... nostros uixisset in annos,"' *Medium Aevum* 60 (1991), 207–21.
- 6 The blank verse translation is my own. The present essay glosses not my translation, itself an interpretation of the text, but the Latin original of lines 1–48, as given below from Colker, *Alexandreis*, 199–201. My readings will suggest aspects of Walter's text from which the translation may be seen to diverge. The reader of the present essay will have to weigh my rendering dialogically against the exposition provided in the following pages. For easier cross-reference, I have provided line numbers against the verse translation, corresponding to the blocks of the Latin text as given below.
- 7 Helen Waddell, *The Wandering Scholars* (London: Constable 1927). Walter's rhythmical verses have been available in good editions for generations, thanks to Karl Strecker, ed, *Moralisch-satirische Gedichte Walters von Châtillon*

- (Heidelberg: Carl Winter 1929); the *Alexandreis*, however, waited fifty years for the services of Marvin Colker, who edited *Galteri de Castellione Alexandreis* (Padua: Antenore 1978).
- 8 *Tractatus contra Iudaeos*, *Patrologia Latina* 209, cols 459–574.
 - 9 For a census of surviving manuscripts, see Colker, *Alexandreis*, xxxiii–xxxviii; for the glossing tradition, see R. DeCesare, *Glosse latine e antico-francesi all' 'Alexandreis' di Gautier de Châtillon* (Milan: Vita e Pensiero 1951). Colker, *Alexandreis*, 277–514, prints excerpts from the glosses of four manuscripts.
 - 10 Colker, *Alexandreis*, xviii–xx.
 - 11 J.R. Williams, 'William of the White Hands and Men of Letters,' in *Anniversary Essays in Medieval History by Students of C.H. Haskins* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 1929), 365–87.
 - 12 John C. Rolfe, trans and ed, *Quintus Curtius*, 2 vols (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press 1946).
 - 13 For Walter's sources, see the summary by R. Telfryn Pritchard in the introduction to his prose translation of the poem (Toronto: PIMS 1986), 11–14.
 - 14 E.g. Max Manitius, *Geschichte der lateinischen Literatur des Mittelalters*, vol 3 (Munich: Beck 1931), 924–5; Otto Zwierlein, *Der prägende Einfluss des antiken Epos auf die 'Alexandreis' des Walter von Châtillon* (Stuttgart: Steiner 1987), 87 et passim.
 - 15 E.g. Christensen, *Das Alexanderlied*, 102–64.
 - 16 F.J.E. Raby, *A History of Secular Latin Poetry in the Middle Ages*, 2nd ed, vol 2 (Oxford: Clarendon 1957), 79, denying any engagement with current affairs; asserting the resonance against contemporary events are Henriette Harich, *Alexander Epicus: Studien zur Alexandreis Walters von Châtillon* (Graz: Verlag für die Technische Universität Graz 1987), 2–3, and Maura Keyne Lafferty, 'Reading Latin Epic: Walter of Châtillon's *Alexandreis*,' diss Toronto 1992, 163–89.
 - 17 R. Telfryn Pritchard, trans, *The History of Alexander's Battles: Historia de preliis – The J1 Version* (Toronto: PIMS 1992). George Cary, *The Medieval Alexander*, ed. D.J.A. Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1956) provides an account of the rich and varied development of the Alexander tradition in the centuries before and after Walter.
 - 18 Pritchard, *Alexandreis*, 10.
 - 19 Cf. *Metamorphoses* XIII.578–9; *Aeneid* IV.584–5 and IX.459–60.
 - 20 David Townsend, 'Militi barbaries incognita linguae: Other Voices and Other Visions in Walter of Châtillon's *Alexandreis*,' *Allegorica* 13 (1992), 21–37.
 - 21 Gloss printed in Colker, *Alexandreis*, 458; the translation is mine.
 - 22 The glossator of the Vienna manuscript in fact seems especially eager to point out the possibility of homosexual elements in the legend and then to commend Walter for his omissions. A gloss on II.437 is even plainer about it: '*consciis archanis quia simul peragebant uicium sodomiticum. Vel consciis aliis rebus archanis et melius secundum propositum auctoris quoniam auctor celat in hoc libro que sunt celanda*' (Colker, 384); '*conscious of his secrets because at*

the time they were committing the vice of Sodom; or *conscious* of other secret matters, and better thus according to the author's intention, since in this book the author conceals those things which ought to be concealed.' On the resonance of the glossator's phrase *celat ... celanda* with the passage I discuss here, see below.

23 Curtius VI.v.24–32.

24 At this juncture, I want to juxtapose with my reading the current politics of breast cancer and mastectomy. The *New York Times Magazine* for 15 August 1993 ran Susan Ferraro's essay 'The Anguished Politics of Breast Cancer' as its lead story, using for its cover illustration one of the poster-sized photographic self-portraits of New York artist Matuschka. Strongly sidelit, head swathed in white fabric blown by an off-camera fan, the subject looks to her left with some introspection and wistfulness, but holds her arms at an angle of self-assurance. The conventions are those of fashion photography. But the low-backed white dress is skewed to reveal the scar of a radical mastectomy, with the caption, 'You can't look away any more.'

I wrote this essay about the time a friend was struggling to decide on her treatment after a lumpectomy. At that time I remembered Matuschka's image as one of extraordinary courage, combined with uncompromising self-assertion. Perhaps I also respond to it because its shocking appropriation of a commercialized aesthetic employs the same tactic as the AIDS imagery collective Gran Fury: AIDS (unlike breast cancer) is a health risk in which I have a first-person stake. In any case, the scandal of the image exposes what Alexander, and perhaps Walter, would sooner drape in cloth.

25 Jacques Lacan, 'The Signification of the Phallus,' in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton 1977), 281–91.

26 Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York: Routledge 1992), 15–51. See also Charles Bernheimer, 'Penile Reference in Phallic Theory,' *Differences* 4:1 (1992), 116–32.

27 Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press 1990).

28 Townsend, 'Other Voices,' 26–8.

29 Carolyn Dinshaw has been among the most recent to trace the conventionally gendered distinction of (carnal/feminine) letter and (spiritual/masculine) typology in the Pauline tradition: *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press 1989), 21–2 et passim.

30 Cicero, *De officiis* I.130: 'cum ... pulchritudinis duo genera sint ... uenustatem muliebrem ducere debemus, dignitatem uirilem' (*Oxford Latin Dictionary*, s.v. *uenustas*, def 2). Walter has heightened the effect of Curtius, who uses the word *corpus* only once in the source passage, and *venustas* not at all.

31 *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, s.v. *obscurus*.

32 Luce Irigaray, 'This Sex Which Is Not One,' trans Claudia Reeder, in Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, eds, *New French Feminisms* (Brighton: Harvester 1980), 99–106.

- 33 Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny,' trans James Sheridan, Standard Edition, vol 17 (London: Hogarth Press 1955), 219-56.
- 34 I can't help recalling the ecstatic shouts of Joannie Caucus's daycare charge, Ellie, in *Doonesbury* in the early 1970s, on hearing the news of her sister's birth: 'It's a woman! It's a baby woman!' Garry Trudeau, 'And What Do We Have for the Witnesses, Johnnie?' (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston 1973, 1975), n.p.
- 35 This problem of the indeterminate identity of the male child might well provide an *entrée* into a wider gendered reading of the poem as a whole, since it gathers into the discussion Alexander's own obsessions with parentage, often suppressed by Walter but abundantly present in the intertext against which the poem presses: plagued by the rumours of his own illegitimate status as the child of the sorcerer Nectanabus, he compensates by his concern to gain the title 'son of Jove' - a title which by the end of the poem constitutes a principal indication of the hybris that will bring him to the unfavourable, and fatal, attention of the Goddess Natura.
- 36 Pritchard, *Alexandreis*, 180.
- 37 *The History of Alexander's Battles*, 77-9.
- 38 Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, trans Earl Jeffrey Richards (New York: Persea Books 1982), 40-1.
- 39 Sheri S. Tepper, *The Gate to Women's Country* (New York: Bantam Spectra 1988).
- 40 John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1980), 207-302. The romances of Chrétien de Troyes are predicated on the double binds of masculine identity; in *Erec and Enide* in particular, the social perils of excessive sexual love, however licit its context, dominate the narrative: David Staines, trans, *The Complete Romances of Chrétien de Troyes* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1990), 31-5.