

REVIEW–DISCUSSION

ALEXANDER IN LETTERS

Giustina Monti, ed., *Alexander the Great. Letters: A Selection*. Aris & Phillips Classical Texts. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2023. Pp. xiii + 256. Hardback, £110.00. ISBN 978-1-800-34862-2.

There is something delicious about rifling through another person's mail. This goes double if the correspondent in question is a celebrity like Alexander the Great, the subject of Giustina Monti's new edition of letters. There is no disputing that Alexander wrote and received letters during his relatively short reign. Quite a lot of them, as Monti illustrates with an apt quote from Plutarch at the beginning of her introduction: 'One should be amazed at the fact that he even had so much free time to write letters of this sort to his friends' (*Alex.* 42.1). Alexander's epistolary output promises to put us back in touch with an impressive network of addressees, including those whose voices have usually echoed from the geographical and scholarly margins of Greek historiography. While Olympias, the Amazons, and Porus were often afforded little more than a postscript in Alexander studies writ large, their worlds and worries come to the fore as they become the main actors in the *ēthos*-driven genre of the epistle. A new edition of selected letters, therefore, has the potential to tell Alexander's story in an unconventional way and with different priorities than those of the major monographs on the Macedonian and his conquests. And the appetite for the 'forgotten' elements of Alexander's life and afterlife has been well demonstrated by the popularity of more public-facing books in recent years, such as those of Anthony Everitt and Rachel Kousser.¹

But the challenge with the Alexander letters—as with all things Alexander, really—is the question of authenticity. And Monti is right to think that authenticity of all this Alexander correspondence needs addressing at both the macro- and micro-level of her edition. The topic of 'real vs. fictional' letters prompts important reflection in her preface (vii–viii), the introduction's section on the 'History of Modern Scholarship on the Letters' (51–66), and throughout the commentary, where a 'discussion of authenticity' is helpfully appended to each entry. As a scholar of ancient fiction foremost, this reviewer is inclined to think that the question, 'Is it real?' is perhaps the least interesting thing we can

¹ Everitt (2019) and Kousser (2024).

ask of an Alexander missive in the ancient textual record. But Monti's interest lies in the historical Alexander, not a life in legend,² and this comes through clearly in commentary entries that provide rich detail on the real people, places, and events that take prominence in her anthology. Authenticity is in fact one of the organising principles behind her selection of these letters in particular: 'I have decided to include only the letters which might be considered authentic (apart from the letter to Aristotle ...)' (ix). At its core, then, Monti's edition is an interesting experiment in what we might learn from collating only the remains of historical Alexander correspondence and interrogating what it can tell us about his evolving epistolographic habits (4–6), the most important recipients and themes of his letters (35–49), and their circulation in postclassical Greece and Persia (6–20). While there are several challenges that keep this experiment from being entirely successful, there is also much to be admired in the rigorous research and source criticism it synthesises for students of Alexander.

Let me begin with what works well in this edition. The forty-three passages, numbered as 'fragments' and organised chronologically, are cleanly presented, simply translated, with updated apparatus entries that will make it easier for anyone doing close philological work on the letters to pinpoint variants or textual problems. The commentary entries for each letter follow an organic formula of line-by-line explication, discussion of possible sources, and then the various scholarly opinions on the question of authenticity. Commentary entries are in English, as is standard for the Aris & Phillips Classical Texts, and will be helpful to any readers with limited Greek and Latin, as well as those consulting the commentary primarily for historical information. The chronological table on pp. 67–8 enables the reader to quickly find the letters most pertinent to any particular period of Alexander history, and to get an at-a-glance view of his addressees from F1 (the letter to the Athenians) to FF29–30 (letters to Antipater). Finally, the commentary is very thorough in its treatment of historical questions. There is rarely an intriguing or perplexing part of an Alexander letter that Monti does not address with dependable context. Why does Alexander promise to reveal secret prophecies of Siwah to Olympias alone upon his return (F6, Plut. *Alex.* 27.8)? His reticence, as Monti rightly highlights, is due to the precarity of the epistolary medium and the high stakes of Alexander's secret origins (155). What is this 'oily and fatty liquid' that spurts up near the Oxus River as the Macedonians prepare the site of Alexander's royal tent (F15a, Plut. *Alex.* 57.5–9)? Monti provides a rich assortment of perspectives from Theophrastus, Pliny, Vitruvius, Strabo, and Eustathius that highlight Alexander's Asian adventures as a source of geographical and ecological fascination in the classical tradition (177–8).

² A very different strand of Alexander studies exemplified by Stoneman (2008).

Indeed, the most valuable contribution of the commentary may well be the sheer number of ancient sources it enlists to interpret the historical facets of what are often compact epistolary summaries in the works of Plutarch and Arrian. In the main, the letter fragments are quite short, usually only three to five lines. But Monti's commentary entries are maximalist, alerting readers not only to the corroborating and conflicting evidence in other ancient historians, but also the limits of our knowledge about the people and places Alexander cites. The mention of 'Philoxenus' in FF11–12, for instance, leads to a robust discussion of Philoxenus *strategos* vs. *hyparchos* in Plutarch, as well as the possibility of other Philoxenuses (one and the same?) in Arrian and Diodorus, and even the Xenophilus in Quintus Curtius Rufus (165–8). The result is a rich prosopographic background that, if not always approachable for Alexander neophytes, does much of the heavy lifting for seasoned researchers. Monti's discernment also shines through when she compares the epistolary versions of events with other generic stylings of the same. On pp. 174–5, she pairs Alexander's letter to the soldiers in Hyrcania (F14, Plut. *Alex.* 47.1–4) with Quintus Curtius Rufus' version of the address as a rhetorical speech (6.3.1–4.1). Speculating that Curtius 'might have had at his disposal Alexander's letter as a starting point', she illustrates how the mere outlines of an epistle in Plutarch can be made to serve a new Roman readership with a rhetorical turn to the 'paternalistic imperialism' of provincial expansion. From the preface to her final commentary entries on the (admittedly inauthentic) letters to Aristotle, Monti's coverage of these letters as historical sources is superb.

One of the problems that the contextual abundance of the commentary makes plain, however, is how dependent the reader will be on these same entries to make sense of many of the letter fragments printed in the edition. That is, several of the selected passages in FF1–34 have been extracted from their original sources with such concision that we can glean no real understanding of their meaning without immediately flipping to the commentary or looking up the original source. Nowhere in the introduction or commentary does Monti explain the editorial rationale behind her presentation of the fragments, but the decision seems to have been to print in the edition only the text that captures the exact content of Alexander's letters. While I can certainly understand and appreciate the impulse to isolate the epistolary material from its narrative frame, the result is an edition that feels less like a record of correspondence than a text chain that we moderns have joined a little too late in the conversation. Take, for instance, the translated portion of letter F11b to Philoxenus. The entry as printed simply reads:

F11b: Plutarch, *De Alexandri Magni fortune aut virtute* 1.333a

O worst among men, what behavior of such sort have you ever discerned in me that you would flatter me with such pleasures?

Unless one already has a very thorough knowledge of the *Moralia*, it is virtually impossible to make any substantive sense of what is being communicated in this letter and why, or whether the passage in fact belongs to a letter at all. If we track down the commentary entry on p. 168, Monti explains (though not as clearly as one might wish) that this is a verbatim quotation, related to the prior fragment, of an Alexander letter denouncing Philoxenus for propositioning him with a beautiful boy. But I still found myself needing to return to the complete chapter in Plutarch in order to grasp what prompted such a forceful repudiation. In so doing, I discovered the entire episode to be couched in a broader discussion of sexual self-control among the actions (*praxeis*) befitting a philosopher. This is valuable information, not only for the interpretation of Alexander's missive but also the reason for its survival in the Plutarchan corpus. Yet this philosophical aspect of the letter finds no place in Monti's analysis. For this epistolary entry and others like it (e.g., F5, FF7a–8a, F26, F27, F29, F31), the brevity of the quoted fragment makes it essential to track down a fuller version, which undermines the advantage of a consolidated edition in the first place.

Another byproduct of this all-content, no-context presentation of the letters themselves is that the epistolary format of the quoted missive sometimes appears more important than it actually is, at least to the transmitting source. In F5 (pp. 84–7), Monti has gathered three letter fragments in which Alexander writes to his former teacher, Leonidas, with the smug announcement that his conquest of Syria has endowed him with so many spices that Leonidas will never again have to be 'stingy' (*μικρολογῆ*) with his sacrificial offerings. The epistolary dig—as could have been made clearer by simply printing *Alex.* 25.7 with 25.8—is a long-awaited comeback to Leonidas, who once scolded the young Alexander for using too much incense when he worshipped the gods. Monti provides excellent commentary on the value of the spices, the trade routes running through Gaza, and the Achaemenid tenor of Alexander's territorial claims. But what's missing in this conversation is the recognition of how these Alexander 'letters', authentic or not, are tapping into a contemporary industry of Alexander *chreiai*, which are designed to both illustrate Alexander's character and provide bite-sized servings of his worldview. The first of the three cited fragments, F5a, is from Plutarch's *Regum et imperatorum apophthegmata*—literally the 'sayings' of kings and commanders. And the fragment of Pliny (F5c) downplays the epistolary format so much that the word 'letter' never actually appears in the passage (though the verb *misit* gets the

point across). When we encounter these letters excised so sharply from their original contexts, we lose the rhythm and riposte of what is in fact a double *chreia* between Leonidas, who urges mortal prudence, and Alexander, whose liberal treatment of the gods is matched only by the scope of his divine ambitions. And these *chreiai* are far from a negligible source of power and knowing in the Imperial period.³ A large number of Alexander sayings survive in papyri and rhetorical manuals as well, and there is much more to be said about the relationship between *this* vibrant repository of Alexander material and the concurrent circulation of Alexander letters.⁴ Is it remotely important to Plutarch and his authorial agenda that this Alexander *chreia* comes to Leonidas as a letter? If so, what purpose does the epistolary frame serve? If not, then are there better, more robust (if perhaps less authentic) examples of Alexander epistolography that deserve to be in this edition?

Indeed, one of the main takeaways that this edition may leave with readers who are familiar with other strands of the Alexander tradition are the constraints that result from the strict pursuit of only ‘authentic’ letters. There is a real tension between this book’s rigorously historical commentary and Monti’s more nuanced recognition that ‘letters can still transmit a certain image of Alexander ... which was at least regarded as truthful at the time of Plutarch or his sources’ (viii). Now this is a promising formulation of what an anthology of epistles could do for Alexander studies at the intersection of classical history and the postclassical imaginary. And the idea of the letter as character portrait, as ‘image’, is foundational to Demetrius’ famous distillation of the epistle as an ‘*eikōn* of the soul’ (*Eloc.* 227). But because this edition is driven by a desire to anthologise and interpret only those specimens that might be defended as genuine, and indeed to redeem the reputations of both Plutarch and Chares of Mytilene as shameless gossips (e.g., 139, 172), Monti provides an excess of detail on some seemingly unresolvable questions of authenticity and not nearly enough about the ‘image of Alexander’ that Plutarch and his contemporaries received and reconstructed through his letters.

On pp. 10–29, for example, there is an extensive discussion about Chares as the source of the ‘only contemporary piece of information about Alexander’s letter-writing’ (vi). This analysis is motivated in large part by Monti’s contention that neither he nor the letters transmitted by him through Plutarch were nearly so prone to falsehood as once deemed in prior scholarship (20, 65–

³ See especially Goldhill (2009) 101: ‘The *chreia* has the advantage of being memorable, short, and, above all, powerful—a sign of power, and repeated as a demonstration of power. Hence its effectiveness in circulation ... It circulates a view of the world with striking efficiency.’

⁴ Theon, *Prog.* 98.24–8, 99.27–9, 100.4–7, 100.11–13; Him. *Or.* 54.35–52; Lib. *Prog.* 3.1; P.Mich. inv. 41.1–3; *BKT* 9.162. Hock and O’Neil (2002) 27–30 offer helpful discussion on Alexander *chreiai* that appear in both papyri and Plutarch.

6, 172–3). Fair enough. But this privileging of Chares and his theoretical collection of Alexander letters as the ‘only contemporary piece of information’ is tenable only if we restrict ourselves to prose historiography. What about the robust and indeed contemporary epigraphic corpus of inscribed Alexander letters addressed to entire city-states, like Chios and Priene, which were often reinscribed, referenced, and even invented within mere decades after his death?⁵ Doubtless, some of these inscribed letters, as Shane Wallace has explored, were fabricated by *poleis* that could not claim a genuine connection to the Macedonian king. But perhaps the more important point to realise is that, from the perspective of most ancient readers, ‘it would have been nearly impossible to disprove the authenticity of a letter or dedication’ among the multiplying postclassical claims on his legacy.⁶ The fictitious epistolary tradition is thus inextricably bound up with the preservation and transmission of all Alexander letters.

This is also true of the many letters in the *Alexander Romance*, which Monti clearly knows but regards as examples of the ‘reception’ of Alexander letters circulating in the centuries prior (x). The alpha- and beta-recensions of the Greek *Romance* contain a rich epistolary corpus of over thirty letters, many of which speak directly to the themes of Persian culture, kingship, and kinship that Monti flags as major topics of interest throughout her book (vii, 2–5, 16–18, 24–6, 35–6, 157–62). But because Monti views them as late receptions and in violation of Chares’ claim that Alexander reserved the greeting ‘*chairein*’ for Phocion and Antipater alone (29–30), neither these letters nor the accompanying scholarship on the dynamics and characteristics of the *Romance* epistolography receive more than a few citations. Indeed, the claim in the introduction that ‘there is almost no reference to Alexander’s correspondence’ in ‘the last three decades on epistolography in general’ (63) is flatly incorrect—as though, by focusing on the *Romance* materials, the excellent work of Rosenmeyer, Giuliano, and Whitmarsh has no bearing on ‘real’ Alexander epistolography.⁷ My argument is not that the *Romance* letters are or should be taken as authentic. There is broad consensus that these are fictional, or at least fictionalised, epistles with a certain (if still obscure) relation to the outgrowth of Alexander prose fiction in the Hellenistic period. But the fact of the matter

⁵ Nos. 3 and 5 in Heisserer (1980). Monti remarks on the address *formulae* of these inscribed letters (p. 27 and n. 120) but offers no further analysis or discussion of them as letters in the edition.

⁶ Wallace (2018b) 166; cf. Wallace (2018a) 64–6.

⁷ Rosenmeyer (2001) appears in the bibliography and offers a chapter-length study of the Alexander Romance letters on pp. 169–92. But Monti appears unaware of this chapter and cites on p. 63 only the ‘quick reference’ to Alexander letters in Rosenmeyer (2006) 34. Note also the extensive discussions of Alexander letters in Giuliano (2010) and Whitmarsh (2013); Monti cites the latter on p. 158 but does not engage with his arguments.

is that some versions of the *Romance* letters survive in papyri and inscriptions that actually predate Plutarch and his consultation of whatever survived of Chares in the second century CE. These include the Hellenistic *P.Hamb.* 2.129, a copy of the *Tabula Iliaca* from the early years of Tiberius' reign (*SEG* 33.802.1), and a school ostrakon likely composed in the first century CE (O.Ashm. inv. 502). What their existence illustrates is that Pliny, Plutarch, and Arrian did not simply receive an authentic epistolary corpus which later became adulterated by or adapted into counterfeit letters—an impression this book sometimes conveys. Rather, Alexander fakes and fictions were in the epistolary mix right from the very beginning.

There is something of Arrian in Monti's efforts to compile a corpus of authentic Alexander letters. In the impulse to cut through all the Alexander noise and ascertain what he actually wrote, to whom he wrote, and how this shapes our understanding of the man rather than the immortal. But this is a difficult goal to make good on, for reasons that Monti herself illustrates in her review of the protracted ping-pong match that is the 'History of the Modern Scholarship on the Letters' (51–66)—*authentic! spurious! authentic! spurious!* For most of the ancient Alexander letters, even those in this book, we are still left grasping at what 'could be' authentic or what a forger 'would' or 'would not have written' in a counterfeit. Monti proves such a conscientious commentator for this selection of letters that one cannot help but wonder about the result of an edition with fuller-bodied (if in some cases fictitious) examples of Alexander correspondence than are collated here. The Alexander letters directly to the Amazons in the third book of the *Alexander Romance*, for instance, rather than Plutarch's summary of a letter to Antipater that might have, but does not ultimately, mention the Amazons (F13). The inscribed record of Alexander's correspondence with Eresos about the expulsion and trials of its tyrants (*GHI* 83) rather than the more meagre evidence in F9 that Alexander 'wrote that all tyrannies had been abolished' (ἔγραψε τὰς τυραννίδας πάσας καταλυθῆναι, Plut. *Alex.* 34.2). Monti's commentary does an impressive job with the historical substance of the forty-three fragments in the edition; it will, and should, be consulted by every scholar working on the Alexander of Plutarch and Arrian especially. Those interested in the richness of Alexander epistolography, however, may find it a book that offers a rather narrow slice of the wider tradition, and one that leaves yet unanswered the question of why Alexander's letters captivate readers, in his time and in ours.

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