

THE RENAULT BAGOAS: THE TREATMENT OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT'S
EUNUCH IN MARY RENAULT'S *THE PERSIAN BOY*¹

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INTRODUCTION: THE INFAMOUS BAGOAS

The eunuch Bagoas is an infamous minor character in the story of Alexander the Great (see, for instance, Guyot 1980: 190). He features most significantly in Quintus Curtius Rufus' *History of Alexander*: 'the only surviving full-length story of Alexander the Great in Latin' (Spencer 2002: 80), dating probably to the first century CE.² Described as: 'an exceptionally good-looking eunuch in the very flower of his youth' (6.5.23), Bagoas was the lover of the Persian King Darius III and is gifted to Alexander by Nabarzanes 'the fugitive chiliarch and regicide' (Bosworth 1988: 98). The eunuch becomes Alexander's lover, and uses his influence with the king to gain pardon for Nabarzanes, as well as to secure the destruction of the Persian Orxines, the satrap of Persis (10.1.22–38).³ It is through the story of the innocent and noble Orxines in particular that Curtius conveys his hostility to the eunuch. Orxines earns the enmity of Bagoas for not paying him court. Orxines had refused to do so, declaring: 'he paid his respects to the king's friends, not his whores [non scorta], and that it was not the Persian custom to regard as men those who allowed themselves to be sexually used as women' (10.1.26) (Yardley tr. 1984: 240). Thus Bagoas hatches a plot to destroy Orxines, using his influence with Alexander gained through his sexual services. Eventually Orxines is condemned to death for having plundered the tomb of Cyrus the Great. Going to his death, Orxines rebukes Bagoas to his face, declaring: 'I had heard that women were once rulers in Asia but this really is something new – a *eunuch* as king!' (10.1.37) (ibid.: 240)⁴. However, Curtius' concern is not so much with Bagoas, but with the deterioration of the character of Alexander the Great. He remarks: 'At the end of his life, his degeneration from his former self was so complete that, though earlier possessed of unassailable self-control, he followed a male whore's judgement to give some men kingdoms and deprive others of their lives' (10.1.42) (ibid.: 241).

Bagoas also features in a famous episode from Plutarch's *Life of Alexander* (67.3–4). Whilst at Gedrosia Alexander: 'went to watch some contests in dancing and singing and his favourite Bagoas won the prize'; Plutarch continues: 'thereupon the young man came across the theatre, still in his performer's costume and wearing his crown as victor, and seated himself beside the king. At the sight the Macedonians applauded loudly and shouted to Alexander to kiss the winner, until at last the king put his arms around him and kissed him'.⁵

For modern historians, however, the major interest of Bagoas seems to have been whether he even existed. In 1948 Tarn rejected what he perceived to be fabricated stories and wrote Bagoas out of history.⁶ He was clearly relieved to do so, unhappy that Alexander should be thought to be a homosexual. However, in 1958 Badian countered Tarn's arguments,⁷ though his concern was the issue of the reliability of sources for Alexander rather than the figure of the eunuch himself. Interestingly, Bagoas has continued to be a controversial figure: though he featured in Oliver Stone's biopic *Alexander* (2004), it was not made explicit in the film that he was a eunuch, and his love scene with Alexander was cut, apparently due to the anticipated sensitivities of the audience.⁸

One individual who does seem to have been interested in Bagoas for his own sake is the novelist Mary Renault; she embraced him wholeheartedly, making him the narrator of the second novel of her Alexander the Great trilogy, *The Persian Boy* (published in 1972).⁹ He

also appears in the third novel of the trilogy, *Funeral Games* (published in 1981), though no longer as narrator. In this article I want to analyse Renault's treatment of Bagoas, and also to consider why he might have appealed to her as a character.

MARY RENAULT: LIFE AND WRITINGS

Mary Renault was born to a doctor and his wife, Frank and Clementine Challans, in the East End of London on 4 September 1905.¹⁰ She was taught locally until she was fifteen, when she went to Clifton Girl's School in Bristol.¹¹ From October 1925 she studied English in Oxford at St Hugh's College, graduating in 1928.¹² In 1933 she began to train as a nurse at the Radcliffe Infirmary in Oxford, qualifying in 1936. It was at the Radcliffe Infirmary that she met her life-long lover Julie Mullard, though Zilboorg (2001) has emphasized Renault's bisexuality. After qualifying she worked as a nurse whilst also writing novels. Following the Second World War Renault devoted herself full-time to her writing, and in 1948 she and Julie Mullard emigrated to South Africa, after she had won the MGM Award for her fourth novel *Return to Night*. They settled in the Cape in 1958, which was home to Renault for the rest of her life. She died on 13 December 1983.

Renault is famous for her eight historical novels, usually praised for being 'meticulously researched'.¹³ However, she did not embrace that genre until after moving to South Africa; her first six novels have contemporary English settings (though *The Charioteer* is set during the Second World War). The first was published in 1939, and all but the last, published in 1953, were written in England.¹⁴ It is notable, however, that the last of this series of novels, *The Charioteer*, made the significance of Classics in the thought of Mary Renault more explicit than before, taking its central image from Plato's *Phaedrus*, a copy of which belonged to the central character Laurie Odell. *The Charioteer* also made more explicit the homosexual theme of Renault's work.

RENAULT'S TREATMENT OF BAGOAS

The most notable feature of Renault's Bagoas is that the negative treatment of Curtius has been rejected and the eunuch has become the wronged innocent. Renault's generally scathing assessment of Curtius is worth noting. She writes:

Muddled sensationalism is typical of Curtius, an unbearably silly man with access to priceless sources now lost to us, which he frittered away in the cause of a tedious literary concept about the goddess Fortune, and many florid exercises in Roman rhetoric ... The favours of Fortune being conducive to hubris and nemesis, Alexander's story is bent that way by recourse to Athenian anti-Macedonian agitprop, written by men who never set eyes on him, and bearing about as much relation to objective truth as one would expect to find in a *History of the Jewish People* commissioned by Adolf Hitler. This had been revived in Augustus' time by Trogus and Diodorus, who found in a king three centuries dead a safe whipping-boy for the divine pretensions of the living ruler (Renault 1974: 412–3).¹⁵

Renault is thus not just concerned to present a more positive Bagoas, but to rescue Alexander. In Renault's version of the Orxines episode the satrap is guilty of the alleged crimes, especially the plundering of the tomb of Cyrus. Bagoas is allowed a personal axe, but a legitimate one; Orxines had caused the destruction of his family, and thus bears the responsibility for Bagoas' castration at the age of ten (11 and 338–9). One might suspect that this radical revision of Curtius is due indeed to Renault's idolisation of Alexander the Great, but in her Author's Note she is at pains to prove the inaccuracy of Curtius' account of the Orxines' episode (412).¹⁶

Given the scanty references that exist for Bagoas, Renault obviously has to flesh out his story from her own imagination. In particular she suggests that Bagoas' ultimate fate was to live out his days in Alexandria, having accompanied the body of Alexander to Egypt. This is revealed by allusions in *The Persian Boy*,¹⁷ and then more fully described in *Funeral Games*, where Bagoas is instrumental in Ptolemy's plan to hijack Alexander's body.

As Alexander's devoted lover, Renault has to establish Bagoas' reactions to the king's other partners, Hephaestion and Roxane.

Of the two, Bagoas is more troubled by Hephaestion as he is a male rival for Alexander's love. He initially thinks of killing him but soon dismisses this idea; finally some mutual respect is achieved between the two when they both recognize and facilitate Alexander's need for each of them. Whilst Bagoas did hold back from attempting to kill Hephaestion, Roxane is depicted as showing no such compunction; she tried to kill Bagoas by sending him poisoned sweets as if from Alexander (248).¹⁸ Thereafter Bagoas is keen to avoid contact with her, and records happily Alexander's limited attentions to his wife.

Renault also imagines Bagoas' strong reactions to those hostile to Alexander; in particular he has murderous thoughts toward both Callisthenes and Cassander (209 and 392).¹⁹

One aspect of Curtius' account of Bagoas that Renault is happy to follow is the beauty of the eunuch.²⁰ Much of the eunuch's impact with people is built upon this quality. The captain of the troop who sold Bagoas into slavery describes the boy's beauty at length in order to get a good offer from the dealer: 'A real thoroughbred, the antique Persian strain, the grace of a roe-buck. See those delicate bones, the profile ... the hair shining like bronze, straight and fine as silk from China ... Brows drawn with the fine brush. Those great eyes, smudged in with bistre — aha, pools to drown love in! Those slender hands ...'(12).²¹ Oromedon, the eunuch who trains Bagoas for service with Darius III, is awed by his protégé, saying that reports have proved true for once, and he calls Bagoas 'Gazelle-Eyes' (125); the Athenian mercenary Doriskos is said to eat Bagoas 'with his eyes' (82). Nabarzanes is also affected by the eunuch's beauty despite his preference for female lovers, and his plan to gift Bagoas to Alexander is based upon his appreciation of the impact of the eunuch's beauty (107).²² Renault also conveys Bagoas' beauty by the eunuch's own preoccupation with it. In particular Bagoas dreads becoming a stereotypical fat eunuch, and determines to keep himself slim and fit.²³ He is anxious that people would look at him in later life and wonder what Alexander ever saw in him (331). Renault also defends the reality of beautiful eunuchs in her Author's Note, citing as proof the eighteenth-century castrati, in particular Farinelli (41). Interestingly, Renault suggests that Bagoas' vanity was an aspect of his character which pre-dated his castration; as a child he had been caught looking at himself in his mother's mirror, an object which he seems to remember in detail, describing its decoration of a winged boy, and its provenance from Ionia (12 and 18).²⁴

Through Bagoas, Renault also addresses diverse aspects of eunuch history in general: the creation of eunuchs for the slave trade, their material value and the risk of the operation (12); the training of eunuchs for service at the royal court, and the diverse roles that eunuchs could play there, from attendance on women to the post of Chief Eunuch. The power this could bring is established through the case of the other Bagoas, the eunuch king-maker and king-killer, and Bagoas also refers to the fact that some eunuchs craved power (224). In addition Renault conveys well the insecurity of eunuchs in royal service, their dependency on the successes of their masters. This is seen especially in the reaction of the eunuchs to the fall of Darius III and the death of Alexander himself (96, 408–9).

Renault develops her portrait of Bagoas with reference to known eunuch behaviour. In relation to the taking of bribes, Bagoas admits that he did take some, though small ones, he never guaranteed results, and he always told the king. Interestingly he defends bribe-taking by saying that it was more dangerous not to take them, for you would risk earning people's enmity (40 and 43). Bagoas himself reflects upon the eunuch habit of gossiping; when

describing the Chief Eunuch of his first master (Datis, the gemstone dealer) reporting to the harem political news which he had picked up in the bazaar, Bagoas comments that his delight at relaying the news was perfectly understandable, for 'It was all he had' (14). Bagoas says eunuchs are inherently curious since they have lost a part of their lives and have to fill it 'from the lives of others' (167). Bagoas' habit of eavesdropping on royal audiences and councils is thus seen as typical. At one point whilst still serving Darius III, Bagoas makes a hole with the royal nail knife in the leather curtain which separates the royal tent's throne room from the sleeping quarters, so that he can see what is going on (79).²⁵ Alexander is perfectly aware of Bagoas' habit of eavesdropping, and teases him several times about his nosiness (272–3, 383).²⁶ Of course Bagoas' enthusiasm for observing and listening in places where he should not assists Renault herself; an uninformed narrator would not be very compelling (289).²⁷

Renault also tackles one of the enduring questions about the nature of eunuchs: can they feel desire? Given that one of Bagoas' key services is as a sexual partner for men,²⁸ ample scope is given for this investigation. When Bagoas is being trained by Oromedon for service with Darius III, part of that training is in love-making. Oromedon says that some eunuchs do lose sexual sensation, but Bagoas it seems is able to 'conjure the images of desire' (31). Bagoas himself says that sex for eunuchs whilst not a need 'is a pleasure' (156), and observes that Darius showed 'no sign of knowing a eunuch can feel anything' (34). When Bagoas sleeps with Alexander, it seems that he even experiences orgasm (140).

It is important to stress, however, that Renault does not depict eunuchs as a homogeneous group: variety and individuality is possible. When shopping in the bazaar in Susa, Bagoas studies all the other eunuchs, and notes that some were 'soft and fat with breasts like women' whilst others 'were shrivelled and shrill like careworn crones. But a few stood tall and straight, with some look of pride in themselves' (15, also 24). It is indicated that some eunuchs like men, some like women, and some like both (28–9). Some eunuchs can sing well, some cannot (35). Bagoas reflects: 'There are eunuchs who become women, and those who do not; we are something by ourselves, and must make of it what we can' (45). This stress on individuality is in fact a major theme of Renault's work in general; she insists that all humans are singular beings and should be judged accordingly, not by race, gender or social status.²⁹

One aspect of Renault's Bagoas which is particularly noteworthy is his origin, for unusually he was of a noble Persian family.³⁰ Renault has not simply blundered here though; she is perfectly aware that such a background for a eunuch in the Persian empire would have been rare,³¹ and in fact Bagoas begins his memoir by addressing this very issue. He declares: 'Lest anyone should suppose I am a son of nobody, sold off by some peasant father in a drought year, I may say our line is an old one, though it ends with me. My father was Artembares, son of Araxis, of the Pasargadai, Cyrus' old royal tribe.' Whether Renault had in mind the story of the noble eunuch Gadatas in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* (5.2.28, 5.3.8, and 8.4.2), is not revealed by her.³² What is interesting is that Renault is not alone in preferring a eunuch protagonist of noble birth; Anne Rice's *Cry to Heaven* (published in 1990) tells the story of the castrato Marc Antonio Treschi, a Venetian noble castrated through the machinations of his elder brother Carlo. Perhaps the social status of the eunuchs in question provides the novelists with more to play with. Bagoas' background certainly informs the Orxines episode; and the link with Cyrus the Great provides a neat bridge to Alexander's own interest in that king.

It is quite clear from Renault's treatment of Bagoas that she had acquired a good knowledge about the lives, careers and nature of eunuchs in antiquity. Unfortunately she does not indicate in her Author's Note how she had acquired this information. The reference to the beauty of Farinelli, justified on the basis of a portrait of him, is augmented by a quote from the diary of the musicologist Dr Charles Burney, who published his *History of Music* in the late eighteenth century (1776–89). This suggests that Renault turned to the subject of the castrati of opera for information and inspiration. What is remarkable about Renault's depiction of eunuchs, and of Bagoas in particular, is that she takes a stance against accepted wisdom

about eunuchs, which had developed through centuries of orientalism dating back to Greek and Roman times.³³ An example from the early twentieth century is Penzer's discussion of eunuchs in his 1936 study of the Ottoman harem (Penzer 1965: 134–51). Noting the scarcity of eunuchs in Turkey when he conducted his research (he was only able to meet 'two, or possibly three, of these strange beings') he declares 'They had been a necessary evil where despotism and polygamy held sway, but now they are a thing of the past—and already have returned in our minds to the pages of the Arabian Nights, where alone they seem rightly to belong' (150). As part of his coverage of eunuchs he provided an overview of their history. He asserts: 'as a general rule the power of eunuchs has brought in its trail nothing but cruelty, intrigue, corruption and disaster', and cites as proof a passage from Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* on the power of eunuchs under the emperor Constantius II (inspired of course by the account of Ammianus Marcellinus), and notes with some relief that: 'there were those who feared not to attack this cancer that was rotting the heart of the Empire' (Penzer 138). Penzer reluctantly also includes treatment of the: 'physical and mental condition of eunuchs' in order to illuminate the harem system and explain: 'its gradual decay and fall, so largely caused by the introduction and increasing influence of this unproductive, sterile, unnatural, and altogether unwholesome member of society—the eunuch' (140). These were the kind of views Renault had to confront in her depiction of eunuchs in *The Persian Boy*. That they were still prevalent, or at least relevant, later in the twentieth century, is appropriately illustrated by the depiction of eunuchs in Gore Vidal's *Julian*, published in 1964. In general eunuchs are fashioned by Vidal or by his narrators, especially Julian, in a rather lurid manner: they are corrupt, effeminate, degenerate and enormously fat.³⁴ The worst offender is of course Euesbius the grand chamberlain of Constantius II (so once again we return to the especial inspiration of Ammianus Marcellinus). It is perhaps telling that in her Author's Note Renault declared: 'There is a widespread modern delusion that all eunuchs became flabby and gross' (Renault 1974: 411). Significantly, when a eunuch appeared in one of her earlier historical novels, *The Mask of Apollo*, he was depicted as stereotypically fat and lecherous (Renault 1966: 123 and 184). This suggests that it was the project of, and the research for, *The Persian Boy* which produced a more nuanced approach in Renault herself.

RENAULT'S INTEREST IN BAGOAS: MOTIVES?

As has been seen, Renault can manipulate Bagoas and his story in clear directions for her own purposes. But why might she have chosen Bagoas as her narrator in the first place?

As the title of the novel itself suggests, ethnicity is one answer. As a Persian, Bagoas allows for a Persian perspective on the Macedonians and Greeks in general, and on Alexander in specific, just as Renault wished (Sweetman 1993: 264). That other celebrated writer of historical fiction, Gore Vidal, has described the device as 'excellent and rather novel' (Vidal 1973:15). Thus Renault deliberately avoids repeating the perspectives of the extant source material on Alexander, and allows a Persian view to be the norm, providing her readers with an appreciation of the culture and civilization that Alexander conquered. Bagoas' favoured position with Alexander also allows for a dialogue about their different cultures as the two learn from each other. Alexander's increasing Persianization is thus well traced, and the influence of Bagoas upon Alexander is allowed for. Indeed the union between Bagoas and Alexander ultimately symbolizes the King's desired union of East and West (Sweetman 1993: 268).

Another possible factor is the need to find a practical solution to telling the complex story of Alexander.³⁵ As Oliver Stone seems to have found, given the numerous versions of his film *Alexander* (2004), it is a great challenge to condense the story of Alexander into a meaningful and effective narrative.³⁶ In *The Persian Boy*, the sequel to her earlier *Fire from Heaven*, which told the story of Alexander's life up to the murder of his father Philip, Renault sidesteps

having to narrate the detail of Alexander's life from his accession to his meeting with Bagoas after the death of Darius. By focusing on a Persian a much more satisfying narrative results, without sacrificing the impact of Alexander's story, for Bagoas is able to report the progress of the Macedonians and the effect it had on the Persians. The episodic remainder of Alexander's life then takes centre stage, rather than being a coda to the story of his early conquest of Persia. (Perhaps Oliver Stone would have been better advised simply to adapt *The Persian Boy* for the screen, though then he would have faced the problem of a homosexual eunuch as hero.) Of course, Renault's strategy underlines again that it is Alexander's attitude to Persia that is at the core of her interest in the story.

No doubt Renault was also drawn to the story of Bagoas by the physical union between the eunuch and Alexander. Bagoas' sexual life fits Renault's tendency to have homosexual or bisexual men as her protagonists from *The Charioteer* onwards (Zilboorg 2001: 131).³⁷ Not only does Bagoas sleep with Darius and Alexander, he was forced to sleep with a variety of men by his first master in Susa, and he also sleeps with Oromedon, Doriskos and Ismenios. He tells Oromedon he is not attracted to women, though it is unclear whether this was to please Oromedon or because of the memories of his mother and sisters' fates (Renault 1974: 29).³⁸ Thus Bagoas provides Renault with another queer voice. Of course, he also serves to clarify the issue of Alexander's sexuality.³⁹

The reference to Bagoas' dance may have appealed to Renault too. She had an intense love of theatre and performing arts, and several of her male friends were actors and dancers.⁴⁰ She had already made an actor the narrator of *The Mask of Apollo*. Renault certainly develops the brief reference to music and dancing; they become major aspects of Bagoas. Under his first master he plays a harp and sings; once in Darius' service he trains to dance, with the intention of keeping the king's favour (Renault 1974: 37). And dancing becomes an instrument to seduce Alexander (ibid.: 135–6).⁴¹

It is likely that Bagoas' close relationship with Alexander also provoked Renault's interest in the eunuch. Bagoas fell in love with Alexander and became not just his lover, but also his loyal defender. The sensation that through Bagoas Renault is able to express her own love and defence of Alexander is irresistible (see, for example, Renault 1974: 412–4). Abraham (1996: 78) comments that: 'Like Bagoas, [Mary Renault] can only tell Alexander's story'. Renault was clearly preoccupied with the young king.⁴² Not only did she write the trilogy, but Alexander also appeared at the end of *The Mask of Apollo*, when the narrator (the actor Niko) meets him at Pella, and it is notable that Renault's only 'straight' history book is on the king, *The Nature of Alexander* (Renault 1975). Further, Alexander is alluded to at the end of Renault's first historical novel *The Last of the Wine* (published in 1956), when it is revealed that the memoirs of Alexias were discovered by his grandson (also called Alexias), who was: 'Phylarch of the Athenian horse to the divine Alexander, King of Macedon, Leader Supreme of all the Hellenes'. The first novel of the trilogy, *Fire from Heaven*, has been described as 'almost a love letter to the boy hero' (Sweetman 1993: 256), and it has been noted of *The Persian Boy* that: 'The plot itself is a seduction—the first third taken up with the slow advance of Alexander ... [who] advances like a lover' (ibid.: 268). As indicated above, the progress of Alexander's campaign prior to his meeting with Bagoas is all told in reportage; they do not meet until page 111 (Renault 1974). But Bagoas has already developed a keen interest in the figure of Alexander; and when he hears of Alexander's reply to the Persian Queen Mother Sisygambis, following her mistaking of Hephaestion for the King, that 'he is Alexander too', Bagoas confesses that 'something sighed in my heart' (Renault 1974: 40). The relationship of Alexander and Bagoas is also anticipated by the latter's relationship with the eunuch Oromedon, who was in his twenties and 'seemed [to Bagoas] no more like a eunuch than a shaven Greek' (Renault 1974: 25). The sensuous lovemaking of Alexander and Bagoas is also striking, and Sweetman comments: 'Nothing in Mary's earlier books quite prepares the reader for these moments' (Sweetman 1993: 269). Perhaps since Bagoas was a Persian he

allowed Renault to present a more unrestrained depiction of male love than her Greek characters did.

But Renault's enthusiasm for Alexander was also based on his achievements as King. She insists that Alexander needs to be judged by the standards of his own day. She is not happy with those who demonize Alexander or defend him weakly (for example, Tarn) (see Sweetman 1993: 257–8). Bagoas' moments of defence begin to sound like Renault herself. In her Author's Note Renault calls Curtius 'an unbearably silly man' (1974: 412), whilst Bagoas says that 'Some silly man' wondered why Persians did not marry Macedonian women at Susa. He exclaims: 'Where were these wives to come from?', and concludes: 'Why waste words on such folly'.⁴³ Renault's identification with Bagoas has been memorably noted by others. Zilboorg (2001: 205) comments: 'Renault gives Bagoas a voice and is to a degree herself the Persian Boy, the author of Alexander's life as recounted in this novel', whilst Vidal (1973: 15) observes: 'With ease she becomes her narrator Bagoas.'

The blurring of the lines between Bagoas and Renault⁴⁴ is further emphasized by the eunuch's role as nurse to Alexander.⁴⁵ It is Bagoas who tends the series of illnesses and injuries Alexander suffers following their meeting.⁴⁶

RENAULT AND EUNUCH IDENTITY

One final question remains: was Bagoas' eunuch-hood also an important factor in Renault's attraction to him?

She is certainly able to explore her customary concern with gender through Bagoas. Sweetman suggests that Bagoas is: 'the "female" lover ... who seems to represent for Mary a solution to the problem of gender by being...of neither, yet of both sexes at once' (Sweetman 1993: 294).⁴⁷ Zilboorg also comments on Bagoas' gender identity: 'The Persian boy is an anomaly. As a eunuch, he is neither woman nor man; he is mutilated to serve the needs of others, and his own sexuality becomes impossible to determine' (Zilboorg 2001: 190). For Zilboorg, Renault's treatment of Bagoas is thus representative of the novelist's foregrounding of the 'instability at the very heart of sex and bodies'.⁴⁸ Certainly there is much scope with Bagoas for confusing gender identities. Bagoas feels that as a eunuch he would never be a man (Renault 1974: 14, 48, 60), but he can demonstrate masculinity through bravery and strength.⁴⁹ He acknowledges that some eunuchs do have active military roles (183). He can question the masculinity of non-eunuch men, especially Darius (71).⁵⁰ This theme is also emphasized by Sisygambis, who is contrasted with Darius, and whom Alexander says would have been a great king if she had been born male (347–8).

It can be wondered, however, if Renault's interest in eunuch gender identity was more personal. Is it possible that Renault saw herself as akin to a eunuch, neither male nor female? Bagoas is part of the harem, but feels the need to break away from it to join male society. He declares he has to escape the chattering women, an attitude very reminiscent of Mary Renault's own attitudes to other women (Sweetman 1993: 12; Beard 1993) (also Renault 1974: 17). Renault was a woman who generally disliked women and preferred the company of men, indeed would have preferred to be a man (Sweetman 1993: xiii, 152, 177, 283; Hoberman 1997: 78). In this, Renault is reminiscent of one of her other characters, Eurydike, a relative of Alexander the Great (she was the daughter of Kynna, Alexander's half-sister), and one of the central characters in the third instalment of the Alexander trilogy, *Funeral Games*. Throughout that novel Renault presents Eurydike as a transgressor of gender boundaries, as a woman who wanted to be a man and to play a full part in the male arenas of war and politics.⁵¹ We are told that Eurydike: 'had known as long as she could remember that she should have been a boy' (Renault 2002: 118).⁵² In the aftermath of her marriage to Philip, the half-brother of Alexander, she feels 'women an alien species, imposing no laws upon her ... She would not endure the tedium of female talk' (193). Reflecting on the issues of gender and

power, she wishes that she were a man (253). Ultimately Eurydike is betrayed by her biology, for when the moment comes for her crucial speech to the Assembly she is incapacitated by the onset of her period: 'cheated by her body at a great turn of fate' (253–77).⁵³ Just like Eurydike, Renault, of course, could not be a man. Thus she may have felt that she was herself in the limbo world of the eunuch.

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ENDNOTES

¹ I would like to thank the anonymous referees for their extremely helpful comments, corrections and suggestions.

² On Quintus Curtius Rufus see Baynham (1998), and also Spencer (2002). For an edition and translation see Rolfe (1946). The history has also been translated for Penguin by Yardley (1984).

³ The reference to Alexander's 'credulous ears' (10.1.28) reminds one of Ammianus Marcellinus' account of the influence of eunuchs with the Roman emperor Constantius II: 18.4.4.

⁴ Renault (1975:197) notes the ridiculousness of this remark given recent Persian history, for another eunuch, also called Bagoas, had held sway.

⁵ Tr. Scott-Kilvert (1973: 325). Bagoas also surfaces in Plutarch's *How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend* 24, where the influence of Bagoas with Alexander is asserted. Aelian, *Historical Miscellany* 3.23, also records a story that Alexander dined with a Bagoas in Babylon just before his death, but Lane Fox (1973: 531) doubts this, citing Pliny, *Natural History* 13.41, although he thinks: 'Indica 18.9 (despite Berve) is the neatest proof of his existence and high favour'. Here Arrian records that Alexander appointed as trierarch the Persian Bagoas, son of Pharnuches. The identification of this Bagoas with Bagoas the eunuch has been doubted by others, not least Renault (1975: 184) herself.

⁶ Tarn (1948: vol. 2, 319–22), in an appendix entitled 'Alexander's Attitude to Sex'. Bosworth (1988: 99 n. 218) notes other doubters.

⁷ Badian (1958). He argues that in the Nabarzanes episode and the Orxines episode Curtius is credible, the kissing episode could be true, that Dicaearchus cannot be easily dismissed as a liar, and that the theory of the peripatetic portrait is modern invention.

⁸ It should be noted, however, that in 2007 Oliver Stone released on DVD *Alexander, Revisited – The Final Cut*, which restored Bagoas' story (clearly much indebted to Mary Renault's *The Persian Boy*). Not only do we see Bagoas getting into bed with Alexander and beginning to make love with him, we see the introduction of Bagoas to Alexander in Babylon, by what appears to be a chief eunuch. This scene indicates that Bagoas was a eunuch. Bagoas also gets a deathbed conversation with Alexander, and the eunuch's fate and relationship with Alexander is reflected upon by the aged Ptolemy.

⁹ The first volume was *Fire from Heaven*, published in the UK in 1970, but published in the USA in 1969. Renault's preoccupation with Alexander is notable, and I intend to explore it elsewhere.

¹⁰ Renault was a pseudonym for her writing career, taken from a character in Otway's *Venice Preserv'd* and hero of an abandoned novel. For Mary Renault's life and work see Sweetman (1993) and Zilboorg (2001). For earlier treatments see Burns (1963); Wolfe (1969); Dick (1972); and Green (1979).

¹¹ Here she wrote a musical comedy about Dido and Aeneas, and discovered Plato in the school library.

¹² At Oxford it seems that her love of ancient Greek art developed (as well as her love of theatre), and she also attended lectures by Regius Professor of Greek Gilbert Murray. Renault also decided that she wanted to be a writer rather than a teacher, and in the spring of 1928 resolved to write a novel set in the Middle Ages.

¹³ Zilboorg (2001: x). The eight historical novels are *The Last of the Wine* (1956); *The King Must Die* (1958); *The Bull from the Sea* (1962); *The Mask of Apollo* (1966); *Fire from Heaven*

(1969; 1970); *The Persian Boy* (1972); *The Praise Singer* (USA 1978; UK 1979); and *Funeral Games* (1981).

¹⁴ They are: *Purposes of Love* (1939); *Kind are her Answers* (1940); *The Friendly Young Ladies* (1944); *Return to Night* (1947); *North Face* (1948 USA; 1949 UK); and *The Charioteer* (1953 UK; 1959 USA). Zilboorg (2001: 139–40) argues that the shift to historical novels allowed Renault to address 'transgressive sexuality' freely, and also to address the Universal.

¹⁵ For her views on Curtius as a source see also Renault (1975: 120–1). There has been recent criticism of Renault's hostile attitude to Curtius: see Baynham (1998: 5–6) and Spencer (2002: 212–3).

¹⁶ She cites especially the evidence of Aristoboulos in Arrian. Similar arguments are made by Hammond (1983: 157).

¹⁷ Renault (1974: 154, 218, 229, 269–70, 289).

¹⁸ Alexander beats Roxane when Bagoas has revealed the plot to him.

¹⁹ Bagoas' attitude to Cassander is also dwelt on in *Funeral Games*.

²⁰ Renault is in fact usually preoccupied with beauty; Simonides in *The Praise Singer* is a rare ugly character, though he has a beautiful brother and wonders what it would be like to be beautiful. The inspiration for Bagoas was in fact a beautiful object: the look of the eunuch was modelled on Michelangelo's head of a slave, a copy of which Renault had seen in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford: Sweetman (1993: 268). This image was reproduced on the back cover of the dustjacket of *The Persian Boy* when it was published by Longman in 1972.

²¹ Bagoas also hears praise of his beauty in the bazaar (17), and Darius comments on Bagoas' beauty (36).

²² Alexander later tells Bagoas that he is still beautiful (333).

²³ Renault (1974: 15, 17, 18, 19, 37, 63, 330). He is wont to check his face in a mirror (128, 230).

²⁴ It is striking that Renault's biographer David Sweetman cites in the dedication of his book an extract from a letter from Mary Renault to himself about his boyfriend Vatcharin Bhumichitr which runs: 'I feel sure that had such a competitor appeared at the court of Alexander, it would have given Bagoas some very anxious moments ...'.

²⁵ Bagoas then finds that the Chief Eunuch Boubakes has followed his example.

²⁶ He also senses Bagoas' manipulation: 'You Persian fox!' (309). Sometimes, however, Bagoas chooses not to eavesdrop (350).

²⁷ Renault (1974: 289): Bagoas regrets not having witnessed the meeting of Alexander and Poros.

²⁸ Bagoas refers to his lovemaking skills as an art: Renault (1974: 22). He is pimped from the age of twelve (20). On Bagoas and desire see also Kopelson (1994: 121–2).

²⁹ e.g. the homosexual community in *The Charioteer*.

³⁰ It seems odd then that Zilboorg (2001: 181) asserts that Alexander's relationship with Bagoas crosses boundaries of sex, gender, race and class. Bagoas had become a slave but his noble origin is never forgotten.

³¹ Though 'not fanciful' she suggests (Renault 1974: 412).

³² See also Gera (1993: 203–4) and Guyot (1980: 204). Gadatas' castration was punishment inflicted by the Assyrian king. He ended up becoming Cyrus' chief mace-bearer.

³³ Though it should be noted that the Greeks and Romans could also express more positive views about eunuchs: for this and a more detailed discussion of the modern reception of eunuchs see Tougher (2008).

³⁴ See for example Vidal (1993 [1964]: 46–7, 62–5, 67, and 334–9). The other narrators are Libanius and Priscus. Of course Mardonius and Eutherius, as allies of Julian, are depicted differently, but even Eutherius is represented as being enormously fat in the Gallic episode. It is also interesting that Vidal (1993: 67) depicts Eutherius as a post pubertal eunuch though there is no evidence for this. It seems he wants to distinguish him from the typical eunuch, to account for his good qualities.

³⁵ I would like to thank one of the anonymous referees for this suggestion.

³⁶ Robert Rossen's earlier film *Alexander the Great*, released in 1956, also betrays this problem.

³⁷ Exceptions are Theseus and Simonides, but note the comments of Abraham (1996: 67). On Renault's tendency to focus on male characters see, for example, Hoberman (1997: 73–88).

³⁸ Bagoas goes to a female whore to learn more skills in lovemaking but is disgusted by her 'crude squirmings' (36–7). He could have slept with an ugly girl he paid for but he does not (52–3).

³⁹ On her views on Alexander's sexuality see, for instance, Renault (1974: 410–41), but also Renault (1972: 375). For the relationship of Bagoas and Alexander in *The Persian Boy* see also Kopelson (1994: 114–5).

⁴⁰ For her own acting experiences at University and in the Infirmary see Sweetman (1993). See also Zilboorg (2001: 24–6) on Renault's involvement in amateur dramatics in Bath when she lived in Bristol after graduating. On Renault's friendship with the dancer David Poole see Sweetman (1993: 182) and Zilboorg (2001: 217). In *The Persian Boy* (Renault 1974: 294 and 374) Bagoas refers to his actor friend in the train. Thettalos also surfaces in *The Persian Boy* (Renault 1974: 372, 390). Notably Alexander is an artist and a performer himself (294).

⁴¹ Also: Bagoas dances (152); he dances for Poros (290); he dances at Karmania after the desert crossing (330–3); he dances at Ekbatana (370); he performs a wardance at Babylon (397).

⁴² Sweetman (1993: 27 and 256) describes the impact on Renault of the Acropolis head of Alexander she saw in the Ashmolean.

⁴³ Other examples of defence: on the fate of Parmenion (171); on the revenge of the Athenians by creating a negative image of Alexander (269); on the massacre of the Indians (278); on Alexander riding in the chariot at Karmania (330). Reames (1997–Ongoing) criticizes Mary Renault for her apologetic approach and her blind admiration of Alexander, which she feels get in the way of the telling of the story.

⁴⁴ However, there are also striking parallels between Bagoas and Alexander, as Abraham (1996: 75) realizes: 'both boyish looking, both performers, both courtesans, both dependent on love'.

⁴⁵ On Renault's general use of her medical experience in her novels see Zilboorg (2001: 73 ff).

⁴⁶ Bagoas cleans Alexander up when he is brought back across the Jaxartes having drunk bad water (Renault 1974: 194); he treats the shin splinter, and also Alexander's arrow wound (275); he dresses Alexander's ankle (277); he treats Alexander after he was shot by the Mallians (311 ff.); and of course he attends Alexander during his final illness, when the King says: 'Bagoas looks after me better than any doctor' (401). Note also Alexander's nursing of Hephaestion (373).

⁴⁷ Notably Renault (1974: 238) stresses the similarity in appearance of Roxane and Bagoas.

⁴⁸ Zilboorg (2001: 226), quoting Grosz. For Renault's tendency to destabilize gender categories see also Hoberman (1997: ch. 6), esp. 86–8 on Bagoas.

⁴⁹ Renault (1974: 37, 85, 98, 132, 133, 256, 274, 410). Bagoas' manliness is recognised by Heilbrun (1976: 234).

⁵⁰ Renault (1974: 71). Note also Nabarzanes' views on Darius (85).

⁵¹ On the character of Eurydike, and Renault's attitude to her, see, for instance, Sweetman (1993: 292–3) and Zilboorg (2001: 231–3). Renault's treatment of Eurydike deserves more extensive analysis. Sweetman and Zilboorg, I would suggest, take too negative a view of Renault's treatment of Eurydike; the picture is more ambivalent.

⁵² Roxane comments on Eurydike's mannishness (180), and thinks of her as an 'unsexed virago' (203).

⁵³ It is also clear, however, that Eurydike is incapacitated by her hostility to Alexander the Great: she could have learnt more from his example (Renault 2002: 200, 269, 270, 278, and 281). I hope to explore this more fully elsewhere.