

Alexander the Great Through the Postcolonial Lens



Figure 1

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Dedications:

I dedicate this thesis to my amazing parents, Camilla and George. You have both shaped the person I am today and I am so grateful to have you as my parents.

Dad, from as early as I can remember you have always had a passion for history, especially Greek history. Thank you for passing that passion onto me. My love and interest for Alexander the Great was born because of you and listening to Manfredi's audiobook in the car.

Mum, thank you for your constant support, for reading and editing not only my thesis chapters but every single research paper I have written since I started my academic career. Your honest feedback and advice are the reasons my writing has improved as much as it has. Thank you for always taking my calls when I needed to procrastinate or if I need someone to listen while I worked through a problem.

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Abstract:

The aim of this thesis is to determine the extent to which colonial ideologies influenced Mary Renault's reinterpretation of Alexander the Great's life. It also aims to analyse whether Renault's novels support or oppose Edward Said's postcolonial theory and the effects colonialism has on modern culture and literature. This thesis will analyse the first two novels of Renault's trilogy against Said's postcolonial theory as well as comparisons with other postcolonial literature. Focusing on Renault will allow for an interesting examination of themes such as sexuality, conquest, cultural interactions and her personal impact on her writing. Renault is one of the most well-known historical fiction authors and to this day she continues to impact the contemporary literary world. Colonialism impacted the world in the 19th and 20th centuries and those effects have become so intertwined with human history that it is almost impossible to remove oneself from it completely. This thesis will examine *'Fire from Heaven'* and *'The Persian Boy'* against Said's postcolonial theory in order to understand to what extent it played a role in Renault's writing as well as to determine whether Renault embraced colonial ideology or actively attempted to separate herself from its grasp. Colonial ideology influenced Renault's work on Alexander the Great. While her unique approach allowed her to stand out, she simultaneously supports and challenges Said's postcolonial theory.

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Introduction:

Postcolonial theory is a beneficial theory when discussing the effects of colonialism and imperialism. Postcolonial theory is effective in terms of examining the social, political, and cultural impact colonialism had on colonised regions throughout the 19th and 20th centuries; the Western colonial period. There is an abundance of literature on this topic. Scholars such as Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, and Gayatri Spivak have all implemented postcolonial theory into their own research. Edward Said wrote *'Culture and Imperialism'* as a continuation of his book *'Orientalism'*. *'Orientalism'* discussed Western dominance over the East and the false narratives that were created as a means of justifying Western imperialism.¹ *'Culture and Imperialism'* focuses on the effects colonialism has had on culture, more specifically literature. Said examined how the myths and narratives that were created during Western imperialism continue to be seen in postcolonial literature. In the British Empire, English literature was strategically used to promote colonial rule by spreading British culture and values to the colonised people.²

The influence the West had during the colonial period has continued to impact politics, academia, culture and society, and the role of literature is significant. The history of colonisers and the colonised cannot be studied separately as they have become so intertwined.³ According to Said in *'Culture and Imperialism'*, literature, fiction or non-fiction, will almost always have themes of colonialism and imperialism. Said draws on the novels from authors such as Joseph Conrad and his novel *'Heart of Darkness'*, a novel that retells the story of a man and his experiences in the Congo while under Belgian rule.⁴ Another author Said refers to is Jane Austen and her novel *'Mansfield Park'*, a novel with multiple themes, one being colonialism and the wealth it brought to the family.⁵ These two books, along with others, support Said's notion that it is virtually impossible to create a novel devoid of a colonial or Western perspective, regardless of the storyline. Said highlights the inherent challenges in breaking away from such ingrained patterns when creating narratives, especially for authors who grew up in Western countries that participated in colonisation. Applying the colonial culture framework to the first two books in Renault's trilogy on Alexander offers a rich

¹ Shrikant B. Sawant, "Postcolonial Theory: Meaning and Significance," *Proceedings of National Seminar on Postmodern Literary Theory and Literature.*, 2012, 122.

² Shrikant B. Sawant, "Postcolonial Theory: Meaning and Significance," 124.

³ Lutfi Hamadi, "Edward Said: The Postcolonial Theory and the Literature of Decoloization," *European Scientific Journal*, 2014, 41.

⁴ Vybarr Cregan-Reid, "Heart of Darkness—a Summary," in *Encyclopædia Britannica*, April 26, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Heart-of-Darkness>.

⁵ "Mansfield Park," Jane Austen's House, accessed February 3, 2024, <https://janeaustens.house/jane-austen/novels/mansfield-park/#:~:text=Jane%20Austen>.

theoretical lens through which to explore the complex interplay of power, identity, gender, and cultural dynamics during this period. It will allow for an enhanced understanding of the narrator nuances and contribute to a comprehensive analysis of Renault's portrayal of Alexander's life and to what extent her writing agrees or disagrees with Said's postcolonial theory.

There are countless novels that have retold the life of Alexander the Great. Choosing to focus on Renault's work felt like the obvious choice, given that her historical fiction novels are well-regarded for their historical accuracy. Her novels on Alexander offer a profound interpretation of his motivations, his relationships and the complexities of his personality. Her novels are also some of the best works in contemporary literature and they explore timeless themes of ambition, love, and sexual identity while remaining true to the historical events that took place. Although her novels are interesting and stand out from others, it is Renault's own personal history that adds a unique insight to her portrayal of historical figures. Her experiences as a nurse during World War II, her relationship with Julie Mullard, her move to South Africa during apartheid, and her own homosexual experiences and gender identity all contribute to her distinctive writing of love, identity, and sexuality.

Alexander's life and his achievements have been told and retold throughout the centuries which in turn has created an almost fantastical element to his life. The resources available are endless, however, the original story of his life has been lost to time. We now rely on what was written by three trusted classical historians, Arrian, Plutarch, and Curtius for the foundation of literary accounts of Alexander, but scholars grapple with the limitations of these primary materials.⁶

Despite the time period in which Alexander lived and the mythology surrounding his life, he is still very much relevant in aspects of our world today. Alexander was; to put it bluntly, a coloniser and his god-like reputation was beneficial during Western colonialism. Tuhin Bhattacharjee, makes a claim that the British Empire used Alexander's conquest in India as a means to justify their own exploitation of India and her people. Bhattacharjee states, "[t]he invocation of Alexander's memory in an attempt to legitimize British hegemony over the Indians was, therefore, spurious and involved a distortion of the past."⁷ These observations highlight how Alexander's conquests were appropriated to reinforce colonial narratives.

⁶ Elizabeth Baynham, "Chapter One: The Ancient Evidence for Alexander the Great," in *Brill's Companion to Alexander the Great* (Brill, 2003), 1–29.

⁷ Tuhin Bhattacharjee, "Indo-Greek Culture and Colonial Memory, Or, Was Alexander a European?," *Rupkatha Journal* 7, no. 2 (2015): 25.

Methodology:

I plan to read the first two novels in Renault's trilogy. The reason for only focusing on the first two is because this thesis focuses on Alexander's life and the influence colonial culture had on Renault's retelling of his story. In the third book, *'Funeral Games'*, Alexander is dead and the focus shifts towards the collapse of his empire. Although it is an interesting book, the focus is no longer on Alexander but rather shifts the focus to his successors and the power struggle that takes place. By focusing on the first two books, I am able to concentrate on the primary texts that feature Alexander at the centre. This allows for a more detailed analysis of his representation within the postcolonial themes related to his life and campaigns.

The study of imagology was developed as an academic way of studying national stereotypes.⁸ Imagology will be instrumental in dissecting stereotypical imagery created by Renault in the trilogy. The analysis will focus on the relationships between auto-images (self) or in this case Alexander and his men and hetero-images (other) or the different people and cultures Alexander interacts with.⁹ The focus on exploring how cultures are represented in literature and how these representations shape readers' understanding are crucial in determining colonial ideologies in the novels. This approach allows for a nuanced examination of Renault's trilogy, aligning with Said's postcolonial theory while adding a dimension of imagology to enrich the exploration.

While reading *'Fire from Heaven'* and *'The Persian Boy'* I will pay careful attention to Renault's language and imagery, especially when there are mentions of 'other', 'culture', 'beliefs' or 'power dynamics.' These topics are important for the analysis regarding Said's postcolonial theory and are also focused on in Said's *'Orientalism'* and *'Culture and Imperialism'*. Understanding how Renault portrays both Macedonian and Persian culture and society and also the perspective with which she is writing from, will benefit the analysis and help with the application of postcolonial theory.

Comparisons between Renault's work and other postcolonial literary works may provide additional insight. By having a good understanding of Renault's life before reading *'Fire from Heaven'* and *'The Persian Boy'* will enable me to identify cases in which her portrayal of Alexander or any other characters were influenced by her own life.

I aim to answer the following question, *"To what extent did colonial ideology influence Mary Renault's reinterpretation of Alexander the Great, and to what extent does her writing support or oppose Edward Said's postcolonial theory?"*

⁸ Joep Leerssen, "Imagology: On Using Ethnicity to Make Sense of the World," *Porównania* 21, no. 2 (2016): 13.

⁹ Joep Leerssen, "Imagology: On Using Ethnicity to Make Sense of the World," 16.

This thesis will conduct an analysis of the first two books in Renault's trilogy of Alexander the Great. The first novel, *Fire from Heaven* focuses on Alexander's childhood in Macedon, his relationship with his parents, and his developing friendships with the men who would one day join him on his conquest of Asia. *Fire from Heaven* also gives us a glimpse at Alexander's relationship with his closest friend, Hephaestion. This relationship as well as Alexander's sexuality will be discussed in chapter 4. *Fire from Heaven* concludes with the death of Alexander's father, King Philip. Alexander becomes King of Macedon. *The Persian Boy* shifts from the Macedonian point of view with Alexander at the focus to the perspective of a Persian boy, Bagoas, who at around 14 years old became a eunuch. This change of narrator is important and the reasons as to why Renault made this choice is discussed throughout. *The Persian Boy* follows the life of Bagoas as he navigates Persian court until he eventually joins Alexander's campaign. The novel focuses more of the coming together of Macedonian and Persian people and culture as well as Alexander's personal relationships, sexuality, and his interactions with this new world. *The Persian Boy* ends with Alexander's death.

Each chapter will explore themes present throughout Renault's first two novels from her trilogy. The themes are; 'Mary Renault and Colonial Culture Framework', 'Conquest and Culture', 'Civilization and Barbarism', and the final chapter is 'Sexuality and Colonialism'. An analysis based on themes is beneficial as it allows for a deeper understanding of the author's perspectives and intentions when writing. The themes also provide a focal point for the analysis which in turn allows for a more in depth understanding of the story. Each chapter will discuss examples from both novels against Said's postcolonial theory as well as his colonial culture framework. Comparisons between Renault's work and other novels that have similar themes will also be conducted. This comparison adds to this analysis as one can see the extent of colonial ideology present or absent from Renault's work.

The literature regarding both postcolonial theory and Alexander the Great is available in abundance. However, the combination of Renault's historical fiction and Said's postcolonial theory allows for a fresh perspective on the implantation of postcolonial theory within topics such as the fusion of ancient cultures and LGBTQ+ focused literature. Renault's novels are not just a retelling but a reinterpretation of Alexander's life, that reflect the cultural and political contexts in which she lived. By applying postcolonial theory, this thesis investigates how Renault's 20th century perspective influenced her portrayal of ancient historical figures. The majority of the novels studied by Said in *Culture and Imperialism* are fictional books set in the time period of 19th and 20th century Western colonialism. Renault's novels, although to a certain extent are fictional, they are based on a

character that existed and based on the sources we have today, the events she wrote about were accurate. Renault did allow for her own values and beliefs to influence her retelling, especially regarding homosexuality. The topic of same-sex relationships in ancient Greece is also fairly well researched. However, same-sex relationships in ancient Greece were very different to what they are today. The dynamic between Alexander and Hephaistion and Alexander and Bagoas is portrayed by Renault in a more contemporary manner. The themes that will be discussed aim to provide a well-rounded analysis of aspects of postcolonial theory.

This thesis is offering a comprehensive analysis that bridges literary studies and postcolonial theory. However, unlike Said's work, this thesis also focuses on Renault's life and to what extent she allowed her personal life to impact and influence her reinterpretation of Alexander's life. When scholars write about Renault focus is placed on her sexuality and the impact her stories had on the homosexual community.¹⁰ The fascination with Renault's sexuality may be due to the time period in which Renault lived. In the early 20th century, homosexuality was illegal in Britain and the community was marginalised and prohibited in mainstream literature. However, Renault's first novels brought same-sex relationships to the forefront and validated homosexual experiences.¹¹ Renault had the ability to bring historical fiction and same-sex relationships to the forefront of literature during a time when the topic of homosexuality was taboo. Her writing illustrated the complexities of same-sex relationships within the backdrop of ancient Greece and her trail blazing novels is what many focus on when discussing Renault. Although I too will focus on sexuality and gender identity in this thesis, I will be examining it against Said's postcolonial theory. Sexuality will not be my only focus as I will also examine the manner in which Renault writes about different cultures, their interactions, Alexander and his personality, and most importantly the extent to which Renault moves towards or away from colonial ideologies. I hope to add to the already extensive literature regarding Renault, Alexander the Great, and Said and postcolonial theory. These three elements will hopefully add to the discussions surrounding the impact of literature on cultures and societies.

Structure:

Chapter 1 will discuss Said's postcolonial theory and Mary Renault's life. Said's work in '*Orientalism*' and '*Culture and Imperialism*'; postcolonial theory, orientalism, and colonial culture, will provide critical insight into Renault's depiction of historical settings and characters. Both postcolonial theory and colonial culture framework are critical when analysing the cultural,

¹⁰Lisa Moore, "Lesbian Migrations: Mary Renault's South Africa," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 10, no. 1 (2003): 25.

¹¹ Lisa Moore, "Lesbian Migrations: Mary Renault's South Africa," 23.

political, and social impacts of colonialism. The legacy of colonial rule continues to shape the world and, in this case, literature. These theories are important in the analysis and understanding the broader cultural and historical influences on Renault's work. Understanding Western discourse that was popular during the time of the British Empire and Renault's early years and how colonial powers represented colonised people allows for us to properly understand the nuances of Renault's writing, what she writes and what she does not write.

Chapter 1 will allow for us to gain better insight into the kind of person Renault was. Renault spent the majority of her life in Great Britain and she was also born during the height of the British Empire. Therefore, she grew up surrounded by colonial ideologies. Renault grew up feeling different from other girls she grew up with, she found it easier to relate and interact with men rather than women. Towards the end of World War II Renault and her partner Julie moved to South Africa and Renault turned her focus to historical fiction. Her focus on ancient Greece gave her the platform to explore same-sex relationships while removing her own sexual identity as inspiration. Despite removing herself from her work, elements of her own life, her ideologies, and her experiences found their way into her work.

Chapter 2 is the start of the analysis of Renault's work with the implementation of Said's theory. The exploration of the complex dynamic of conquest and culture's interaction through Said's postcolonial theory and Renault's historical fiction is valuable in understanding how one interprets the effects of colonialism. Renault's depiction of Alexander the Great highlights his respect for the diverse cultures he encountered. Alexander actively embraces the cultures and ways of life he comes across during his conquest throughout Asia. These actions reflect a blending of cultures, though they caused friction with his Macedonian ranks. Renault's portrayal of Alexander mirrors her own experiences adapting to life in South Africa, where she navigated a new cultural landscape. Renault's work provides a platform to examine the intricate dynamics of cultural conquest, offering insights into themes of identity and cultural integration. Elements that are at the core postcolonial theory.

Chapter 3 delves into a theme that is seen throughout most postcolonial theory research, the idea of 'us' versus 'them', 'East' versus 'West'. Examining the themes of civilization and barbarism within Said's postcolonial framework and Renault's historical narratives is crucial for a deeper and more critical understanding of cultural interactions and imperial legacies. Said's theory often portrays the East as the 'other' and this portrayal is evident in *'Fire from Heaven'*. *'The Persian Boy'* reverses this dynamic, presenting Persia as more civilised than the Greeks and Macedonians. Through the

Persian eunuch Bagoas' perspective, we see the Macedonians depicted as barbaric, challenging conventional colonial narratives. Renault highlights cultural differences and the tensions they create. This cultural blending contrasts with the typical colonial narrative of imposing civilizations. Alexander's conquests, driven by a desire for unification rather than cultural domination, diverge from motives of 19th and 20th century Western colonialism. By presenting both Greek and Persian perspectives, Renault challenges the simplistic dichotomy of civilised versus barbarian, highlighting the complex nature of cultural identity and superiority. The theme of civilisation and barbarism illustrates that these two terms are perceptive dependent.

Chapter 4 delves into both Renault's and Alexander's experiences regarding sexuality, gender, and personal relationships. A major theme throughout Alexander's life is his sexuality. This chapter will examine the relationship between sexuality, gender, and colonial power through the lens of Said's postcolonial theory. It reveals how colonial ideologies influenced gender roles and sustained power hierarchies. The depiction of same-sex relationships in her work, set against the backdrop of ancient Greece, allows for a nuanced exploration of love and loyalty that contrasts sharply with colonial-era stigmatisation. Renault's personal experience and the colonial sexualisation of the East further shaped her portrayal of characters and relationships, reflecting broader themes of sexuality and power. Her decision to cast Bagoas as the narrator for '*The Persian Boy*' is most certainly an interesting choice, especially when discussing the theme of sexuality. Bagoas added a dimension that could not have been obtained through any other character's point of view.

Chapter 1: Mary Renault and Colonial Culture Framework

Mary Renault was born in London as Eileen Mary Challans in 1905.¹² Renault's mother was referred to as 'traditional' by Zilboorg, and Renault struggled to identify with her mother. Renault's father was a general physician which allowed the family to live comfortably in London's East End.¹³ Her father encouraged her interest in books and shared with her his collection including those of Dickens and Kipling.¹⁴ Renault was a tomboy during her childhood and would often reenact the adventures she had read about in Kipling's novels.¹⁵ She was well educated having attended a boarding school in Bristol and continued her studies at St. Hugh's College, Oxford.¹⁶ Renault graduated with a degree in English and up until she went to nursing school, she spent her time working minimal paying jobs and writing.¹⁷ In 1933 Renault made the decision to study nursing, as "nursing she declared, made her a much more realistic person" and "gave her a sense of responsibility".¹⁸ It seemed that Renault wanted to gain more life experiences as she felt the more experiences she had, positive or negative, the better she would become as a writer.¹⁹ Renault is known, especially from her early novels, to have used her own life as a source of inspiration. Her time training as a nurse at Radcliffe influenced her first novel *Purpose of Love*.²⁰ Almost all of Renault's characters, the gender of their names, and their sexual relations were vague. Renault may have done this as a way around the stigma of homosexual or bisexual relationships. In October 1933, Renault was transferred to a new living quarter and here she became acquainted with Julie Mullard.²¹ Although they did not automatically become friends, after some time the two began a sexual relationship.²² Throughout their lives together, both women had relations with men but in the end, they chose each other. They continued to work as nurses in England. They kept their romantic relationship a secret and would often take holidays in order to spend time together.²³ Renault worked as a nurse and continued writing in her spare time. In September 1939, war was officially declared and, as nurses, both women were required to serve.²⁴ Working in a hospital during the war was chaotic and for Renault it was inspiring, so much so that her experiences led to her writing *The*

¹² Caroline Zilboorg, *The Masks of Mary Renault* (University of Missouri Press, 2013), 2.

¹³ Caroline Zilboorg, *The Masks of Mary Renault*, 2.

¹⁴ Caroline Zilboorg, *The Masks of Mary Renault*, 5.

¹⁵ Caroline Zilboorg, *The Masks of Mary Renault*, 6.

¹⁶ Caroline Zilboorg, *The Masks of Mary Renault*, 5-7.

¹⁷ Caroline Zilboorg, *The Masks of Mary Renault*, 23.

¹⁸ Caroline Zilboorg, *The Masks of Mary Renault*, 46.

¹⁹ Caroline Zilboorg, *The Masks of Mary Renault*, 46.

²⁰ Caroline Zilboorg, *The Masks of Mary Renault*, 49.

²¹ Caroline Zilboorg, *The Masks of Mary Renault*, 60.

²² Caroline Zilboorg, *The Masks of Mary Renault*, 62.

²³ Caroline Zilboorg, *The Masks of Mary Renault*.

²⁴ Caroline Zilboorg, *The Masks of Mary Renault*, 80.

Charioteer'.²⁵ The novel served as a transitional piece between her contemporary novels and historical fiction. Julie and Renault remained in London throughout the war and treated civilians during the Blitz.²⁶

In October 1945 Renault and Julie began imagining their lives outside of England. They decided to move to South Africa. Although both women knew little about South Africa, it was a part of the commonwealth, warmer than England, and it was new and exciting. They lived in Cape Town for the majority of their lives in South Africa.

It was during her move to South Africa when Renault shifted her focus to ancient Greece and historical fiction. In a letter to a friend Renault stated "one of the greatest fascinations of historical writing is to compare the dilemmas of the present with those of the past".²⁷ In *The Charioteer*, Renault developed a moral and political stance that inspired her exploration of ancient Greece, where homosexuality was a distinct and accepted identity.²⁸ This differed from the societal attitudes towards homosexuality in England. Renault noted that in ancient Greece, homosexuality was not just about physical attraction but was openly acknowledged as an integral part of one's identity. This recognition fascinated Renault, as it represented a viable social identity, free from societal prohibition. Throughout the rest of her career, Renault published novels that were highly popular within homosexual fiction and her novels and stories had significant meaning for gay and lesbian readers.²⁹ Despite her fame within homosexual groups, Renault sought to distance herself from this association as a way to maintain her reputation as a serious writer.³⁰ Her shift to fiction also saw a shift from writing about homosexual women to homosexual men. This may have been done as a way for Renault to continue to write about same-sex relationships but in the case of ancient Greece, it was seen as normal and Renault was able to write freely about these relationships without hiding behind ambiguity. "Renault developed a genre of historical homosexual fiction that had a lasting impact both on the sexual revolution and on gay and lesbian literature."³¹

In March of 1954, Julie and Renault took a trip to Greece. This trip allowed Renault to visit places she had written about as well as inspiration for her later novels.³² However, upon their return to South Africa, the country had become politically unstable as the apartheid regime continued. In

²⁵ Caroline Zilboorg, *The Masks of Mary Renault*, 83.

²⁶ Caroline Zilboorg, *The Masks of Mary Renault*, 97.

²⁷ Caroline Zilboorg, *The Masks of Mary Renault*, 139.

²⁸ Caroline Zilboorg, *The Masks of Mary Renault*, 141.

²⁹ Lisa Moore, "Lesbian Migrations: Mary Renault's South Africa," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 10, no. 1 (2003), 24.

³⁰ Lisa Moore, "Lesbian Migrations: Mary Renault's South Africa," 25.

³¹ Lisa Moore, "Lesbian Migrations: Mary Renault's South Africa," 43.

³² Caroline Zilboorg, *The Masks of Mary Renault*, 152.

1948 the National Party (NP) was voted into power and for the next 42 years South Africa was under the apartheid regime. Apartheid was institutionalised racial segregation and discrimination enforced by the government. The apartheid system marginalised the Black population, racially defined residential and public areas were created, along with separate and inferior education systems for Black children, and there was restricted economic opportunities for people who were classified as non-white. Both Renault and Julie were white women and, therefore, a part of the privileged minority. However, the apartheid government implemented strict gender norms and heteronormative standards.

Apartheid laws made homosexuality a crime and both gay men and women were disproportionately at risk of violence, incarceration, and arrest.³³ Gay women, due to their gender and sexual orientation, frequently experienced double prejudice. Gay women were marginalised by the patriarchal structure of apartheid culture, which idealized heterosexual masculinity.³⁴ However, gay men were the main focus of the mainstream narrative surrounding homosexuality. It may be that because of this, Renault and Julie did not ever experience any sort of discrimination, regardless of the fact that they were two women living together. It is not mentioned in Zilboorg's biography as to whether they did or did not face discrimination.

Furthermore, Renault and Julie were active in a number of organizations that fought against the apartheid regime. Renault was chosen as the president of P.E.N which was an "international society of poets, playwrights, editors, essayists, and novelists."³⁵ However, during her time as president, Renault did cause some controversy when she refused to lower the membership requirements in order for Black people to join the organization.³⁶ In a letter, Renault attempted to explain her reasoning saying, "a double standard is essentially patronising, and is recognised as such by serious writers of any race or sex."³⁷ A classmate of Renault from her university years described Renault as "very right wing and pro-colonial and imperial".³⁸ While Renault actively participated in organizations opposing apartheid, her formative years in England might have significantly and subconsciously shaped her ideologies. Being pro-colonial suggests that, during her school years, Renault supported colonialism, a practice historically associated with the United Kingdom. It is plausible that Renault internalised notions of racial superiority as a white European. Her decision,

³³ Nicky Falkof, "Sex and the Devil: Homosexuality, Satanism, and Moral Panic in Late Apartheid South Africa," *Men and Masculinities* 22, no. 2 (May 27, 2018): 273–93, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184x18774097>.

³⁴ Nicky Falkof, "Sex and the Devil: Homosexuality, Satanism, and Moral Panic in Late Apartheid South Africa,"

³⁵ Caroline Zilboorg, *The Masks of Mary Renault*, 166.

³⁶ Caroline Zilboorg, *The Masks of Mary Renault*, 170.

³⁷ Caroline Zilboorg, *The Masks of Mary Renault*, 170.

³⁸ Caroline Zilboorg, *The Masks of Mary Renault*, 7.

along with Julie, to move to a Commonwealth country, where their status as British citizens offered protection, implies a deliberate choice to reside in a nation where, as white women, they would belong to the privileged minority. The influence of colonial ideologies on Renault's decisions may have subsequently shaped her literary works.

Understanding Renault's life and her background is essential in understanding the impact of colonial ideologies in her writings and depictions of the life of Alexander the Great. Postcolonial theory and Said's colonial culture framework are important in understanding how authors were influenced by colonial culture and integrated orientalism into their novels; authors such as Conrad, Austen, Kipling, and Mary Renault.

Said first discusses postcolonial theory in his book '*Orientalism*' where he primarily focuses on the representation of the East that were created by the West during the colonial period. Said defines Orientalism as a Western concept that perpetuates prejudices and sustains colonial power structures.³⁹ Theorists have expanded on Said's work by studying colonial legacies, representations of the "other", and imperialism's impact on culture, identity, and knowledge production. Many scholars feel that '*Orientalism*' and Said's work allowed for the development of postcolonial theory.⁴⁰ In his book, Said focuses on the West's construction of the East as the "other", distinct from and inferior to the West.⁴¹ Said discusses how people of the East and their cultures were often based on stereotypes, myths, and fantasies perpetuating a distorted and dehumanizing image of the East in the eyes of the West.⁴²

Said continues his examination of the postcolonial period in his second book '*Culture and Imperialism*'. In this book, the conversation of Orientalism continues and Said focuses on the impact of imperialism on culture and, most importantly, literature. Said highlights the influence of imperialist ideas in modern Western society, emphasising its role in influencing literary works and cultural representations.⁴³ Said contends that imperialism is profoundly rooted in Western culture formations and advocates for the thorough investigation of its impact and ramifications. Throughout '*Culture and Imperialism*' Said refers to a number of some of the most famous literary novels, including, Jane Austen's '*Mansfield Park*', Rudyard Kipling's '*Kim*', and Joseph Conrad's '*Heart of*

³⁹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

⁴⁰ Naifa Al Mtairi, "Edward Said: Post-Colonial Discourse and Its Impact on Literature," *Education and Linguistics Research* 5, no. 1 (January 28, 2019): 1, <https://doi.org/10.5296/elr.v5i1.14287>. (6)

⁴¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism*.

⁴² Edward Said, *Orientalism*.

⁴³ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994).

Darkness'. These novels represent imperialist ideas prominent in the 19th and 20th centuries. By examining these novels, Said aimed to illustrate how colonial attitudes, power dynamics, and cultural representations were reflected and perpetuated in literature, offering light on the complicated relationships between imperialism and culture. Said's choice of novels allowed him to investigate the broader ramifications of imperialism on creative production. By analysing these specific works, he aimed to show how literature reflected and shaped imperialist ideas, that went on to shape societal views. Said emphasises the intricate interplay between culture and imperialism, stating that literature is deeply intertwined with the historical and political processes of imperial dominance.⁴⁴ Within his colonial culture framework, the examination of colonialism's influence on narrative structures reveals how the imperial experiences shape storytelling and reinforces or challenges power dynamics within literary works.

Scholars have added to Said's work with their own. Postcolonial theory and colonial culture have been implemented in research that discuss colonialism all over the world. Hernán Vidal applied postcolonial theory in order to discuss the crisis of Latin American literature.⁴⁵ Others have used postcolonial theory to discuss literature, education, and politics. Rizvi and Lingard state in their work that, "since education was a central site for the exercise of colonial power, both in the metropolitan centre, where it was through education that the legitimising discourses of colonial adventures were just and in the colonial societies, where education provided the structuring mechanisms of asymmetrical power."⁴⁶ They suggest that education served as a tool in upholding colonial power. Elleke Boehmer wrote a book titled '*Colonial & Postcolonial Literature*', which underscores the ongoing relevance and challenges of postcolonial theory and discourse in understanding and addressing the legacies of colonialism in literature and society.⁴⁷

It is important to understand the impact colonialism and imperialism had, and still has, on literature. Colonialism is an ideology that functions to establish authority over colonised nations not only in the realms of language but also in shaping literary and cultural representations.⁴⁸ During the period of empire, imperialism, and colonisation, novels and literature played a role in the culture of the bourgeois society. "[N]ovels participate in, contribute to and help to reinforce perceptions and

⁴⁴ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*.

⁴⁵ Hernán Vidal, "The Concept of Colonial and Postcolonial Discourse: A Perspective from Literary Criticism," *The Latin American Studies Association* 28, no. 3 (January 1, 1993): 113–19, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0023879100016976>.

⁴⁶ Fazal Rizvi and Bob Lingard, "Edward Said and the Cultural Politics of Education," *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 27, no. 3 (September 2006): 304, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596300600838744>.

⁴⁷ Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* (1995; Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, n.d.).

⁴⁸ Naifa Al Mtairi, "Edward Said: Post-Colonial Discourse and Its Impact on Literature," 1.

attitudes.”⁴⁹ Well-known novels were read during the colonial period and many, like the ones examined by Said, contain the orientalism narrative, the focus on ‘us’ versus ‘them’, the civilized West and the backwards, barbaric East. Literature, both novels and academic, fell into the trend of continuing the spread, of what Said called, false images of the East that was created by the West.⁵⁰ Said emphasised the interconnectedness of imperial history and the significant literary works produced during that period, highlighting how literature mirrors the societal and historical context of its creation.⁵¹ Colonialist literature, influenced by notions of European cultural superiority, was shaped by these theories.⁵²

⁴⁹ Bill Ashcroft and D P S Ahluwalia, *Edward Said* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2002), 91.

⁵⁰ Lutfi Hamadi, “EDWARD SAID: THE POSTCOLONIAL THEORY and the LITERATURE of DECOLONIZATION,” 40.

⁵¹ Lutfi Hamadi, “EDWARD SAID: THE POSTCOLONIAL THEORY and the LITERATURE of DECOLONIZATION,” 42.

⁵² Lutfi Hamadi, “EDWARD SAID: THE POSTCOLONIAL THEORY and the LITERATURE of DECOLONIZATION,” 42.

Chapter 2: Conquest and Culture

The basis of Edward Said's argument regarding conquest in his postcolonial theory and more specifically in *'Culture and Imperialism'* is that through conquest comes control and power and from there cultural interactions take place. These cultural interactions can take the form of imposing colonial culture on the colonised populations or the blending of the two or more different cultures.

The interactions between the two cultures, Greek and Persian falls into Said postcolonial theory but maybe not in the same way in which Said discusses it. Said and Renault interpret the coming of two cultures differently. It should be understood that Said is coming from a place of anti-colonialism, while Renault is coming from a place of pro-colonialism. These differing perspectives result in how each of them interprets the coming together of cultures.

In *'Culture and Imperialism'* the focus is on the loss of culture through colonial rule and the forced acceptance of Western beliefs and ideas.⁵³ The narrative Renault creates is less harsh and with a sense of appreciation for the fusion of these two cultures rather than the negative narrative created by Said. Said mentions the novel *'A Passage to India'* by E.M. Forster. In a passage Said highlights how Forster utilises his novel to investigate the cultural relations between Indians and Europeans, depicting both the potential and the limitations of mutual understanding within the colonial setting.⁵⁴ The British seek to engage profoundly with India but find hurdles and eventually find it impossible to bridge the cultural differences.⁵⁵ Said uses *'A Passage to India'* as a way of showing that despite the efforts of the British to integrate into Indian culture, they lacked the understanding of the culture and country at its core and struggled to grasp it. Said states, "[t]he novel returns to a traditional sense of social propriety in its last section".⁵⁶ What Said discerns from this is that E.M. Forster intentionally returns to the conventional narrative form of English novels, emphasising topics that they are more familiar with. This imposes a sense of completion and stability that contrasts with the story's previous study of culture.

Conquest was a fundamental part of colonization from the earliest historical records. Land, territories, and resources have always been taken by some sort of force, and was usually accompanied by violence. According to Said, conquest has had a significant impact on cultural landscapes, creative expressions, intellectual discourses, and the development of identities within

⁵³ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*.

⁵⁴ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 256.

⁵⁵ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 256.

⁵⁶ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 256.

imperial contexts.⁵⁷ Conquest is a complicated process that develops and reshapes cultural interactions, power dynamics, and social institutions, rather than a single military event. Said emphasizes that conquest is tied to the creation and spread of cultural representations and narratives that legitimize and sustain imperial dominance.⁵⁸ During the colonial era between the 19th and 20th centuries, the main propaganda that was spread throughout colonial powers was that places in the East and the South needed help developing and it was the duty of the West to aid with their development. Instead, colonial powers used conquest to impose their dominance over colonised territories in order to gain resources, power, and enforce their own cultural norms and values on the colonised people. While at the same time reinterpreting native cultures for their own benefits and gains.

Renault grew up with the British Empire propaganda regarding their duty to assist the South in developing from their barbaric way of life. Despite the environment with which she grew up in and during her school years in which it was said she was pro-colonialism; her writing does not give that away. Renault worked as a nurse throughout World War II and that experience influenced her writing. *'The Charioteer'* was influenced by people she had met while tending to soldiers.⁵⁹ During her work as a nurse having been exposed to the trauma of war which can have an effect on one's body and mind, impacted Renault in her later writing. *'The Charioteer'* was the last fiction novel Renault wrote. She shifted her focus to historical fiction and wrote novels about stories from ancient Greece. She focused on the lives of famous Greek heroes such as Theseus and of course Alexander the Great.

Alexander the Great is famous for many things but the thing he is most famous for his is great military mind which led him to victory in all the battles he faced in his life, big or small. Renault's first-hand experience of the devastation of war may be the reason why she avoids writing about it in her novels. Renault allowed her life to influence her writing, before she moved to historical fiction, all her novels had been inspired by her own life events.⁶⁰ She did not completely remove herself from her historical fiction, more of this is discussed in Chapter 4. In both *'Fire from Heaven'* and *'The Persian Boy'* Renault chooses to focus more on Alexander's interpersonal relationships, his personality, and his life while almost taking a step away from his military triumphs. One almost always expects to read about his great military campaigns when reading anything about the young conqueror, however, as we will see throughout this paper, Renault enjoys breaking the mould and

⁵⁷ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*.

⁵⁸ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*.

⁵⁹ Caroline Zilboorg, *The Masks of Mary Renault*, 83.

⁶⁰ Caroline Zilboorg, *The Masks of Mary Renault*.

retelling famous stories from different perspectives. That is not to say that Renault avoided the theme of conquest entirely, merely that she focused on other elements.

As Said has said, with conquest, culture and identity follow in one way or another. This is what happens during Alexander's conquests of Asia. Renault focuses on Alexander's personality and his interactions with his soldiers, men, women, and the cultures he comes into contact with. As Alexander travelled from Greece to Asia, he set about freeing Greek territories that had been under Persian rule. It was upon his arrival in Egypt that we see the first instance of Alexander coming across a culture and a way of life different from his own. Unfortunately, Renault does not provide much detail of his time in Egypt. *'The Persian Boy'* is narrated by a Persian eunuch, Bagoas, and at the time Alexander was in Egypt, Bagoas was in Persia with King Darius III. However, Bagoas along with King Darius III hear that, "Egypt had opened its arms to Alexander, hailed him as liberator, and proclaimed him Pharaoh."⁶¹ Alexander did not become the King of Egypt but their Pharaoh. Although this may seem insignificant it is not. By Alexander accepting the title of Pharaoh, he also accepting of the years of tradition that had been present in Egypt for many years before Alexander arrived. This event is the first we see of Alexander conquering a territory that is in so many ways different and strange to what he knew and yet, he was welcomed by the people of Egypt

This is not to say that Alexander's time in Egypt left no mark on the country and its history. It did. However, Renault does not explore the aftermath of Alexander's time in Egypt. Renault stated in her 'Author's Note' that, "[i]t has been impossible to find room for all major events, even, of his crowded life, or to demonstrate the full scope of his genius. This book attempts only an angle shot with certain highlights."⁶² This note perfectly encapsulates why some events, such as Alexander's time in Egypt was summarised into a sentence.

As Alexander continues to travel through Asia, he begins introducing elements of the cultures he comes across into his own life. One of the first steps Alexander takes to joining the Greek world with the Persian world is when he marries Roxane. Roxane was the daughter of a tribal leader. Although his army was disturbed to find out that their king was going to take a foreigner for his first wife rather than a Macedonian, Alexander went through with the wedding. He tells Bagoas, "I've known a long time I ought to marry in Asia. It is necessary. The people *must* be reconciled."⁶³ This

⁶¹ Mary Renault and Tom Holland, *The Persian Boy* (London: Virago Press, 2014), 39.

⁶² Mary Renault and Tom Holland, *The Persian Boy*, 281.

⁶³ Mary Renault and Tom Holland, *The Persian Boy*, 166.

quote from Alexander perfectly sums up his intentions, he wanted Asia and Greece to unite and marriage was a way of joining two people and in this case, two nations together. His marriage to Roxane was the first but certainly not the last marriage aimed at uniting the two nations. Upon their arrival back to Babylon from India, Alexander arranges for himself to marry Darius III's daughter, Stateira.⁶⁴ Alexander took this wedding one step further and proclaimed that, "[a]ll my own friends, my generals, and the best of my Companions, will be marrying Persian ladies."⁶⁵ Marriage is a strong unifier of people and cultures. Colonisation that took place between the 19th and 20th centuries, mainly within the British Empire saw the physical unity of interracial relationships as "critical to the formation of empire."⁶⁶ It is safe to assume that these marriages were forced, more for the Persian women than for Alexander's men. These marriages can be seen as a form of conquest. Not all conquest takes the form of battles and wars. Conquest in the form of marriage results in children of mixed heritage, half Persian and half Macedonian children, the true symbols of unity between the two nations. Unfortunately for Alexander, it is unknown whether he had any children from either Roxane or Stateira.

Marriage was not the only manner in which Alexander embraced this new world. After advice from Bagoas himself, Alexander began wearing Persian-styled clothing. For example, Alexander was set to try Bessos for the murder of Darius III, not only did Bessos kill Darius III with the intention to become the next Great King, he was also Darius III's cousin. For the trial, Alexander "had a beautiful new robe made, purple bordered with white, the Great King's colours, for state occasions."⁶⁷ Bagoas was thrilled and informed Alexander that by wearing Persian dress, the Persian people at the trial would respect him for "a king must look like a king."⁶⁸ Alexander may have worn the robe out of respect for the Persian tradition but also to remind all the Persians who were in attendance that he was their King.

Alexander continued to adapt to Persian ways which was beneficial for his relations with the people he was conquering and had already conquered. However, his own Macedonian army felt that they were losing their leader, the man they had trusted and followed to the end of the world. At one-point Bagoas had overheard some men talking saying Alexander "had gone barbarian, it was disgusting,"⁶⁹

⁶⁴ Mary Renault and Tom Holland, *The Persian Boy*, 239.

⁶⁵ Mary Renault and Tom Holland, *The Persian Boy*, 240.

⁶⁶ Carina Ray, "Interracial Sex and the Making of Empire," in *A Companion to Diaspora and Transnationalism*, ed. Ato Quayson and Girish Daswani (Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2013), 190.

⁶⁷ Mary Renault and Tom Holland, *The Persian Boy*, 137.

⁶⁸ Mary Renault and Tom Holland, *The Persian Boy*, 137.

⁶⁹ Mary Renault and Tom Holland, *The Persian Boy*, 243.

Bagoas realised that “[h]e was growing foreign to them, as he came closer to us.”⁷⁰ Based on what Renault writes throughout the book it seems as though Alexander’s main goal was to unite Greece and Persia, from his marriage to Roxane, the implementation of Persian dress and tradition into his own life, leaving cities he conquered to continue to run themselves, as long as they recognised him as king, and even leaving Persians in charge rather than his own men at some settlements. All these actions imply he had set out to unify the world.

Renault spent the majority of her life in England and therefore had lived within the English culture, however, once she moved to South Africa, a country completely different to the one she had grown up in, there is no doubt certain aspects of her life changed. Despite her novel on Alexander being historical fiction, Renault allowed certain aspects of her own life to seep into Alexander’s story. Renault’s move from England to South Africa impacted her writing which is why there is such a strong focus on Alexander’s adjustment to the new world in which he found himself. There are many connections between Renault and Alexander. Their adventures to new places, learning of new cultures, values, religions, and new perspectives is something Renault drew on. As seen in Chapter 1, Renault integrated into South African society. Despite her background and her race, she fought, to a certain extent against the Apartheid rule. Her understanding of the injustices created under Apartheid encouraged her more to remove events of violent clashes between Alexander’s army and the people they encountered.

Conquest was an important element to colonialism and has many different forms. Cultural fusions, interactions between different people, their languages and their beliefs were a direct effect of conquest and depending on one’s point of view, this took be inferred as either a positive or a negative result. That is not to say that colonialism as a whole impacted positively or negatively on the people that were colonised but rather that certain aspects can be seen either way. In *‘The Persian Boy’* Alexander acceptance of certain Persian traditions was respected by the Persian people and therefore he earned their respect. However, to his Macedonian army, they felt he was becoming someone they did not know.

⁷⁰ Mary Renault and Tom Holland, *The Persian Boy*, 243.

Chapter 3: Civilisation and Barbarism

In the context of Said's postcolonial theory, 'other' primarily refers to the East, the inferior and uncivilised. However, throughout Renault's novels the dynamic is different. It is evident more in *'The Persian Boy'* how the East, being Persia, is described as more civilised than the Greeks and even more so than the Macedonians. *'The Persian Boy'* was written from the perspective of Bagoas, a Persian eunuch who was trained to serve King Darius III but after Darius' death Bagoas found his way to Alexander and quickly fell in love with him. Having this unique point of view from a Persian throughout what can be described as Alexander's most successful period gives us an insight into how the Persian people saw and felt about the 'barbarians' from the West. Said, in both his books, focuses on the postcolonial period of the 20th century. Therefore applying his theory to a period when the East, specifically Persia, was far more modern, civilised, and advanced than that of Macedon requires a nuanced examination of the dynamics between the two countries and their people.

Additionally, culture plays an important part in understanding postcolonial theory. Culture allows us to differentiate 'us' from 'them' and serves as a source of identity.⁷¹ Macedonian culture was very different to Persian culture and both are explored in Renault's novels. In both Persia and Macedonia, culture consists of their belief systems, their gods, their ritual practices, and how they understand and navigate the world in which they live. In *'The Persian Boy'*, Renault highlights the differences between the two groups as well as the way Alexander embraces certain aspects of Persian culture and the tension this causes between him and his army. Postcolonial theory aims to understand the extent to which cultures of the colonised people have been shaped by the culture of the colonisers.

The theme of 'other' in Renault's novels are interchanged between the Greeks and the Persians, depending on the perspective of the narrator. In *'Fire from Heaven'* the 'other' or the barbarians as they are often referred to as, are the Persians. In *'The Persian Boy'* that changes and the term barbarians is used to refer to the Greeks and Macedonians. We often see the terms barbarism and civilization in text about the ancient world and the societies that were present. Civilisation can mean different things to different societies. It is academically accepted that Greeks became the first civilised society as they had invented the concept of laws, politics, philosophy, and the arts.⁷² In fact

⁷¹ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 12.

⁷²Phiroze Vasunia, "Barbarism and Civilization: Political Writing, History, and Empire," in *The Oxford History of Classical Reception in English Literature*, ed. Norman Vance and Jennifer Wallace (Oxford University Press, 2015), 153.

Greeks referred to everyone who was not Greek as barbarians.⁷³ The debate between civilisation and barbarism has continued throughout history but not always used in those two specific terms. During the colonial period between the 19th and 20th centuries Western European countries often saw themselves as more civilised than people living in the East or the South. They measured their civilisation by the advances in their technology, religion, and knowledge. This sense of superiority was used as a means to justify the colonial rule over countries in the East and South.

Said discusses barbarians and its implication with colonial discourse whereby the terms are most often used when discussing colonised people or cultures.⁷⁴ Said critiques the dehumanising portrayal of colonised populations as barbarians and emphasizes how such labels are used to justify colonial control. The term barbarian and ‘other’ are one in the same and both underscores how colonial ideologies devalue indigenous cultures, reinforcing hierarchies of power and superiority within imperial systems.⁷⁵ Said also discusses the concept of civilisation. Civilisation as a constructed idea was used by the West to validate colonial dominance, particularly during the West’s control of their colonies. In the same way Greeks described non-Greeks as barbarians, the West enforced the notion that people who did not practice the same religions, were less socially developed, and “did not conform to Europeans notions of civilization”⁷⁶ and were automatically labelled as barbarians.

Anthropologically and historically the stages of society development went from ‘savage’ to ‘barbarian’ to ‘civilized’.⁷⁷ The rate of development, however, may have differed between societies during that period in time. The Greeks may have been the first to become civilised but as we will see throughout ‘The Persian Boy’, there were many things the Greek and Macedonian army did, including Alexander himself, that Bagoas found to be very barbarous. Because of the difference in cultures, religions, political ideologies, and philosophies, it is difficult to properly define civilisation and barbarism.

Many historical novels that were written about colonialism address the theme of civilisation and barbarism. This theme is engraved in many people’s ideas of life in the 19th and 20th centuries. The

⁷³ Matthew Ogali, “Advance Journal of Education and Social Sciences ARISTOTLE’S THEORY of BARBARISM and the DIALECTICS of CIVILIZATION,” *Advanced Journal of Education and Social Sciences* 7, no. 12 (2022): 2.

⁷⁴ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 1994.

⁷⁵ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 1994.

⁷⁶ Phiroze Vasunia, “Barbarism and Civilization: Political Writing, History, and Empire,” in *The Oxford History of Classical Reception in English Literature*, ed. Norman Vance and Jennifer Wallace (Oxford University Press, 2015), 131.

⁷⁷ William Adams, “Civilizations, Barbarians, and Savages : The Social and Political Nexus of Diffusion,” *Civilisations* 25, no. 3 (1975): 320.

civilised and advanced West justly conquered the barbaric East and South to bring these countries and societies to the same level of civilisation. That is how it was portrayed throughout the West. The brutality that was present in colonised lands and the stealing of natural resources and forced labour, however, was less widely known.⁷⁸

A novel that is mentioned by Said in '*Culture and Imperialism*' and also engages in the civilisation and barbarism debate is Joseph Conrad's '*Heart of Darkness*'. This novel follows the journey of Kurtz as he travels along the Congo River.⁷⁹ In an analysis of the novel Raskin highlights the complexities of the civilising missions and touches upon the blurred lines between civilisation and barbarism, as seen in Conrad's depiction of the West's connection with the indigenous cultures.⁸⁰ Conrad's novel also addresses what many 'civilised' societies thought during 5th century and that was that "barbarians had the ability to tear the fabric of civilisation into shreds"⁸¹, civilised societies saw themselves as the protectors of civilisation. In his analysis, Raskin explores the concept that isolating the white man from society and immersing them in the jungle environment results in a gradual decline to the level of their surroundings.⁸²

The theme of civilisation and barbarism in Renault's novels about Alexander is continuous throughout the books. Renault grew up familiar with the colonial ideologies of the barbarians in the South and the duty of the West to assist in their civilisation. Renault used the differences between civilisation and barbarism to emphasise the differences between the two nations. Throughout the two novels we see Alexander adopting Persian customs. Alexander's goal for conquering Persia and the East was not to spread civilised Greek ideologies but to create unity. Many Persians according to Bagoas felt that being conquered by a barbarian from a tribe in the North would cause the Persian culture to collapse.⁸³ Alexander's conquest was not motivated by the same reasons as those of the European empires in the 19th and 20th centuries, however, the talk of civilised and barbaric societies, cultures and customs was still present during Alexander's time.

'*Fire from Heaven*', focuses on Alexander's childhood, his parents, and his interpersonal relationships. Throughout the novel, the point of view changes between numerous different people and with that comes different perspectives. In terms of the people of Greece, mainly the Athenians,

⁷⁸ Matthew Ogali, "Advance Journal of Education and Social Sciences ARISTOTLE'S THEORY of BARBARISM and the DIALECTICS of CIVILIZATION," *Advanced Journal of Education and Social Sciences* 7, no. 12 (2022): 3-4.

⁷⁹ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 1994.

⁸⁰ Jonah Raskin, "Imperialism: Conrad's Heart of Darkness," *Journal of Contemporary History* 2, no. 2 (April 1967): 121.

⁸¹ Phiroze Vasunia, "Barbarism and Civilization: Political Writing, History, and Empire," 133.

⁸² Jonah Raskin, "Imperialism: Conrad's Heart of Darkness," *Journal of Contemporary History* 2, no. 2 (April 1967): 129

⁸³ Mary Renault and Tom Holland, *The Persian Boy*.

they were seen as the most civilised nation by the people of Macedon. Throughout *'Fire from Heaven'* Philip insists that he wants Alexander to be Greek, to be clever like the Greeks, and so he hires one of the most famous philosophers, Aristotle, to become Alexander's tutor.⁸⁴ The relationship between Philip and Alexander's mother, Olympias, can best be described as tumultuous. Although Olympias was not Philip's only wife, she was the mother of his heir and therefore referred to as Queen.⁸⁵ The interactions between Philip and Olympias were chaotic and violent. Olympias was not Macedonian, she came from a surrendering territory, because of this she was seen as a barbarian or described in the novel on multiple occasions as a witch, compared to the Macedonians. In a fight between Olympias and Philip, Philip referred to where Olympias came from as "back-country".⁸⁶ In the same argument Philip said "My son is a Greek, not one of your barbarous cattle-lifting hillmen."⁸⁷ Again here it is shown that there were levels or degrees of barbarianism and civilisation.

Greeks were more civilised than the Macedonians, Persians were more civilised than the Greeks and Philip and other Macedonians believed that they were more civilised and less barbaric than the territories and villages that surrounded them. Philip wanted Alexander to be considered Greek in order to increase Alexander's legitimacy and acceptability among the Greek people. Philip wanted to create stronger links with the Greek world and bolster Alexander's claim to the throne by highlighting Alexander's Greek ancestry.⁸⁸ Once grown-up, Renault highlights an incident in which Alexander decided to shave his face. Many thought he did this because men in Athens had clean shaven faces while Macedonian men generally kept their facial hair.⁸⁹ However, Alexander said that "a beard gives the enemy a handhold."⁹⁰ Although a minor incident, it does allow for reflection on how individuals negotiate their identities with diverse cultural contexts and a way for Alexander to appear more Greek and, therefore, more civilised.

Furthermore, *'The Persian Boy'* allows us to see the Persian perspective of Macedonians and Greeks. In one of the initial chapters Bagoas describes the people from the west colourfully by saying "[t]here were barbarians there whom I had heard my father speak of, red-haired savages who painted themselves blue; they lived north of the Greeks, a tribe called Macedonians."⁹¹ This

⁸⁴ Mary Renault and Tom Holland, *Fire from Heaven* (London: Virago Press, 2018).103.

⁸⁵ Elizabeth D. CARNEY, "Olympias," *Ancient Society* 18, no. 0 (January 1, 1987); <https://doi.org/10.2143/as.18.0.2011355>. 9.

⁸⁶ Mary Renault and Tom Holland, *Fire from Heaven*, 15.

⁸⁷ Mary Renault and Tom Holland, *Fire from Heaven*, 15.

⁸⁸ Elizabeth D. CARNEY, "Olympias,"11.

⁸⁹ Mary Renault and Tom Holland, *Fire from Heaven*, 171.

⁹⁰ Mary Renault and Tom Holland, *Fire from Heaven*, 204.

⁹¹ Mary Renault and Tom Holland, *The Persian Boy*, 14.

depiction of the Macedonians as barbarian contributes to their marginalization and subjugation. It reinforces a hierarchical relationship where the Persians view themselves as the dominant power. This dynamic reflects a form of cultural imperialism, wherein the Persians cultural norms and values are far superior to the uncivilised Macedonians. The Persian Empire was much larger than that of Macedon, its army and its economy were also stronger than the Macedonians. Therefore, they were the dominant power and yet they still became the colonised party⁹², which goes against our understanding of colonisation.

During the 19th and 20th centuries, The British Empire stood as one of the most expansive empires in history, propelled by Britain's financial resources, ample manpower, and advanced means of colonisation. Its reach extended across continents from Africa to Asia, shaping our modern understanding of colonialism through its sheer size and influence.⁹³ However, the historical narratives of Persia and Macedon present a contrast to this imperial expansion. This is important in understanding the analysis of Renault's writing and postcolonial theory. Persia was the dominant territory and viewed the Macedonians as barbarians thus were initially unthreatened by the news of Alexander and his army marching towards Persia. Bagoas said, "[h]is heir was only a young lad, so there was no longer need to be concerned about them."⁹⁴ This quotation sums up how Persians felt about the Macedonians. They felt as though their superiority in size and their civility made them impossible to conquer.

'*The Persian Boy*', through the eyes of Bagoas, creates a clear picture of the differences between Macedonian and Persian culture and customs which continues to create a divide between the two groups of people. Renault's choice to focus on the perspective of Bagoas is interesting because in most writings about Alexander's life, he is mentioned but never given that much attention, while some wonder if he even existed.⁹⁵ Renault may use the character of Bagoas to bring in a different view point for Alexander as well as a way to enhance his character. Renault may have found herself relating to Bagoas in some aspects. Both Renault and Bagoas came from the large and powerful empires and both moved away from that to more 'lower class' lifestyles. Renault moved from Britain to South Africa and Bagoas went from living a life of ease and a certain level of luxury to living with Alexander and his troops, enduring the rigors of their travels to India and back.

⁹² Bipan Chandra, "Colonialism, Stages of Colonialism and the Colonial State," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 10, no. 3 (January 1980): 272–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472338085390151>. 274.

⁹³ M. S. Alam, "Colonialism, Decolonisation and Growth Rates: Theory and Empirical Evidence," *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 18, no. 3 (June 1994): 235–58, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.cje.a035272>. 239.

⁹⁴ Mary Renault and Tom Holland, *The Persian Boy*, 14.

⁹⁵ Shaun Fitzroy Tougher, "The Renault Bagoas: The Treatment of Alexander the Great's Eunuch in Mary Renault's the Persian Boy," no. 3 (January 1, 2008): 77.

One difference that Bagoas mentions frequently, is the Macedonians and their wine. Unlike Persian nobility, Macedonian soldiers enjoyed wine and would often consume large amounts at night with their dinner. This was shocking to Bagoas. Persian custom was to offer wine with dessert, after the main meal had been consumed, however this was not the case for the Macedonians as Bagoas stated, “the Macedonians drank from the start.”⁹⁶ The theme of wine continues throughout the book and creates the image that Macedonian soldiers were reckless, ill-mannered, and rowdy due to the amount of wine they drank. Bagoas looked forward to the days when they were going into battle, because that was the only time Alexander did not drink wine with dinner.

Alexander’s military expeditions were intended to conquer Asia and a wide range of people. The idea of a shared humanity across national boundaries was fostered by his goal of a unified empire incorporating many cultures and ethnicities.⁹⁷ Rather than imposing Greek culture only, Alexander promoted the blending of cultures and faiths throughout the lands he conquered. He encouraged tolerance and understanding among varied populations.⁹⁸ Alexander’s marriage to Roxane is evidence of that. This goal of Alexander’s goes against the ideas of colonisation that took place between the 19th and 20th centuries. Said explores this relationship between colonisation and culture.

Cultural domination is a means of reinforcing colonial control and asserting superiority over indigenous cultures.⁹⁹ Although there were tribes that initially resisted Alexander, it seems that the Macedonian soldiers were far from reluctant to embrace different cultures and traditions. This is evident in their reaction to Alexander marrying Roxane and according to Renault, “[t]hey were only quiet by his conferring the rank of Queen on her.”¹⁰⁰ Renault’s perspective as an English woman writing about Macedonian history may indeed shape her portrayal of these dynamics. As a member of a former colonial power, Renault, her own cultural-background, and biases could influence her writing of the events discussed as well as the reactions of those involved.

⁹⁶ Mary Renault and Tom Holland, *The Persian Boy*, 138.

⁹⁷ E Badian and Franz Steiner Verlag, “Alexander the Great and the Unity of Mankind,” *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte* 7, no. 7 (1958): 12.

⁹⁸ E Badian and Franz Steiner Verlag, “Alexander the Great and the Unity of Mankind”, 12.

⁹⁹ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 1994.

¹⁰⁰ Mary Renault and Tom Holland, *The Persian Boy*, 168.

Chapter 4: Sexuality and Colonialism

Edward Said's postcolonial theory discusses how ideas of masculinity, femininity, and sexuality were intertwined with imperial discourse and ideology. In his book *'Culture and Imperialism'* he analyses how gendered identities and behaviours were prescribed, performed, and controlled within colonial settings, shaping social relations and power dynamics.¹⁰¹ By investigating how gender roles intertwined with imperial ideas, Said offers insight on how gendered norms and expectations were employed to sustain colonial power and control over colonised people.

'Culture and Imperialism' discusses gender and gender roles during the colonial period.

Conventional ideas of masculinity and femininity were used by imperial regimes to uphold hierarchies and power relations.¹⁰² It was customary to connect masculine qualities like strength, reason, and authority with the coloniser and to impose femininity, weakness, and submissiveness, on the colonised.¹⁰³ In the case of Renault's novels, there is no obvious representation of masculine and feminine regarding the two territories, Macedon and Persia. However, if we were to apply a Western colonial perspective, it could be said that Macedon was the masculine party while Persia was the feminine. That is being said only because Macedon conquered Persia. This theory can also be applied to Alexander and Bagoas, a Persian eunuch who narrates *'The Persian Boy'*, as people. Alexander, the strong, undefeated male and Bagoas the weak, submissive female. Bagoas' submission to Alexander was instinctive for him as that was how he had been trained as a young boy.¹⁰⁴ However, his true dedication and love formed after sometime when he says to himself, "looking after him as he walked away, I will have him, if I die for it."¹⁰⁵ The implication of gender roles created by colonial ideologies is present in Renault's work when analysed with postcolonial theory.

A perfect example of gendering of nations or territories was the West's sexualisation of the East. It is a topic discussed by Said in *'Culture and Imperialism'* but mainly in his first book *'Orientalism'*. Although Renault may not have intended for this when writing *'The Persian Boy'*, she did create a sexual fascination with the East by taking a seemingly minor character and creating a romantic storyline between Bagoas and Alexander. Said discusses in *'Orientalism'* the sexualisation of the

¹⁰¹ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*.

¹⁰² Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*.

¹⁰³ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*.

¹⁰⁴ Mary Renault and Tom Holland, *The Persian Boy*, 23-25.

¹⁰⁵ Mary Renault and Tom Holland, *The Persian Boy*, 95.

East, particularly the Middle East in Western depictions of the people in the region.¹⁰⁶ The link between the East and sexuality is common in Western conceptions of the Orient. These depictions often paint the region as exotic, enticing, and mysterious. This continual sexualisation reinforced the notion of the East as the “other”, distinct from the logical, civilised West, and maintains power disparities between the two.¹⁰⁷

Renault’s narrative of Bagoas, and Alexander’s fascination with him taps into the sexualization of the East and the Western exoticization of Eastern peoples. Depending on one’s perspective, Alexander and Bagoas’ relationship can be seen as one born of mutual affection between two men or as a dynamic between a powerful Western leader and an exotic Eastern eunuch. The fact that Bagoas was also a eunuch may have played a part in Alexander’s fascination with him. The latter interpretation highlights the imbalance of power between them, considering Bagoas was trained from a young age to serve and provide pleasure to his master.¹⁰⁸

In the 19th century literature and art portrayed a hyper-sexualised East. This romanticised picture of the Orient as a place of sensuality and seduction impacted Western artistic depiction and fed Eastern-related desires. Images of Eastern men and women in literature and art reinforced the sexualised portrayal of the Orient.¹⁰⁹ The images born from Western artists represented the East as a land of seduction and sensuality and provided a platform for exploring in sexual fantasies that may have been repressed in Western society.¹¹⁰ These images and fantasies might have been a contributing factor to Renault’s decision to create a main character out of Bagoas and make him the main object of Alexander’s sexual desire, rather than Hephaestion.

This perception of the masculine and feminine and the influence of such binary mentalities is evident in Renault’s life and writing. Renault focuses much of her writing on the relationships between the male characters. Despite her attempts to focus on males, same-sex relationships, and in a way, move away from colonial ideologies of gender, there is evidence that growing up in a colonially powerful country influenced her writing and her portrayal of certain events and characters. Although Bagoas and Alexander were technically in a homosexual relationship, she incorporates more feminine characteristics to Bagoas’ character. During certain periods of

¹⁰⁶ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 1979.

¹⁰⁷ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 1979.

¹⁰⁸ Mary Renault and Tom Holland, *The Persian Boy*.

¹⁰⁹ Naji Oueijan, “Sexualizing the Orient,” *Essays in Romanticism* 14, no. 1 (January 2006): 7–25, <https://doi.org/10.3828/eir.14.1.1>.

¹¹⁰ Naji Oueijan, “Sexualizing the Orient,” 2.

uncertainty and war, Bagoas would often cry to Alexander and Alexander would comfort him.¹¹¹ The act of crying and showing such emotion was and still is seen as a sign of weakness and something men did not do but women would. Throughout ‘The Persian Boy’ Bagoas takes on the role of submissive ‘female’ while, Hephaistion, is always seen as Alexander’s equal. There is a scene in which Alexander is “giving audience to Macedonians”¹¹² while Bagoas watches from the sidelines. During this, Alexander receives some letters, one being from his mother and while reading his mother’s letter “Hephaistion, leaning easily on his shoulder, was reading it with him.”¹¹³ By allowing Hephaistion to read his personal letter gives us an understanding of their relationship dynamic and how it was built on mutual respect and equality. This contrasting portrayal of two of Alexander’s most important relationships highlight the fact that Renault was unable to stray too far away from the colonial culture ideology of submissive female even though she attempted to by giving Bagoas a platform.

Renault’s choice to narrate through the voice of Bagoas is an attempt to go against colonial ideologies by encouraging a minor, conquered person to have a voice. This decision by Renault humanises the conquered presenting a nuanced depiction of historical events that challenge the simplistic civilised versus uncivilised dichotomy prevalent in colonial narratives. Bagoas’ intimate perspective on Alexander provides readers with a glimpse into the conqueror’s humanity and personal struggles, contrasting with the reverence and adoration that is frequently associated with Alexander. Renault’s decision to retell possibly the most important period in Alexander’s life through the eyes of a Persian eunuch is an interesting choice. In many retellings of Alexander, Bagoas is mentioned only a handful of times and his role in Alexander’s life is portrayed as inconsequential. Renault brings the two men’s relationship to the forefront.

According to Jeremy Rosen, the writing technique employed by Renault is known as “minor-character elaboration” and “it is a genre in which a minor character from a canonical text is transformed into the narrator-protagonist of a new text.”¹¹⁴ Another author who implemented this genre was Madeline Miller in her novel ‘*The Song of Achilles*’. Miller’s novel retells the story of Achilles and the Trojan war through the eyes of Patroklos who was Achilles’ companion, friend, and lover. Even after his death, Patroklos continues his narration up until Achilles dies and the two

¹¹¹ Mary Renault and Tom Holland, *The Persian Boy*, 124.

¹¹² Mary Renault and Tom Holland, *The Persian Boy*, 105.

¹¹³ Mary Renault and Tom Holland, *The Persian Boy*, 105.

¹¹⁴ Maria Antonietta Struzziero, “A New Voice for an Ancient Story: Speaking from the Margins of Homer’s Iliad in Madeline Miller’s *The Song of Achilles*,” *Anglica. An International Journal of English Studies*, no. 30/1 (2021), 135.

men are together again in the afterlife.¹¹⁵ It is quite fitting that Miller and Renault chose to highlight minor characters from the lives of these two great men, reshaping their narratives to place these figures at the forefront as both protagonists and lovers in the retelling of these heroes' stories. It is also fitting that throughout many retellings of Alexander, the comparison between him and Achilles is almost always mentioned.

There is an instance in which Bagoas mentions that Alexander and Hephaestion had visited the temple of Achilles and Patroklos.¹¹⁶ It is safe to say that Alexander and Hephaestion during their lives and in the many years after their deaths are still portrayed and compared to Achilles and Patroklos. Their friendships, their level of intimacy, their love, and their dedication to each other are parallel.

In Alexander's life he is Achilles, but both Hephaestion and Bagoas fulfil the role as Patroklos. Having two men as Patroklos does create an interesting comparison but at the same time creates depth in both men's relationship with Alexander. Throughout *'Fire from Heaven'* Renault only alludes to Alexander and Hephaestion having sexual relations by mentioning they often shared a bed. Their relationship was portrayed by subtle interactions. An intimate moment between Hephaestion and Alexander is when Hephaestion says, "I love you. You mean more to me than anything. I'd die for you any time. I love you."¹¹⁷ Alexander does not say anything similar back to Hephaestion leaving the reader unsure as to whether Alexander loved Hephaestion as much as Hephaestion loved Alexander.

However, we do get to see how much Alexander loved Hephaestion after his death. Achilles and Alexander both had such intense reactions to the death of their partners. Achilles' reaction to the death of Patroklos was to brutally kill the Trojan prince Hector in the most spectacular way. In fact, it was Achilles' intense reaction that inspired Miller to write her novel.¹¹⁸ Miller believed that Achilles' reaction was nothing less than a man losing his great love. The same can be said for Alexander, he did not eat or drink, and he chopped his hair short.¹¹⁹ Renault references Patroklos through Bagoas memory of the story Alexander had told him, "I remembered Achilles, shearing his hair for Patroklos."¹²⁰ After the death of Patroklos, Achilles commanded his men that if and when

¹¹⁵ Madeline Miller, *The Song of Achilles* (2011; repr., London Bloomsbury Paperbacks, 2011).

¹¹⁶ Mary Renault and Tom Holland, *The Persian Boy*, 254.

¹¹⁷ Mary Renault and Tom Holland, *Fire from Heaven*, 138.

¹¹⁸ Maria Antonietta Struzziero, "A New Voice for an Ancient Story: Speaking from the Margins of Homer's Iliad in Madeline Miller's the Song of Achilles," 136.

¹¹⁹ Mary Renault and Tom Holland, *The Persian Boy*, 258.

¹²⁰ Mary Renault and Tom Holland, *The Persian Boy*, 259.

he should die, they must mix his ashes with Patroklos'.¹²¹ After the death of Hephaistion, Alexander sent a priest to Ammon's oracle to ask for Hephaistion to be made a deity.¹²² Both men's action displayed the need to see their lovers in the afterlife and to be given the opportunity to be with them forever.

Renault is famous for her portrayals of sexuality in her novels, particularly homosexuality. The majority of Renault's novels focus on male sexuality as it was said by multiple people, including Renault herself, that she found it easier to relate with men than with women.¹²³ Renault had relationships with both men and women but ultimately spent the majority of her life with her partner Julie.

Same-sex relationships were not as stigmatised in ancient Greek society as they were during the colonial period in the 19th and 20th centuries. Renault was able to explore homosexuality more freely in her novels because of this cultural openness and historical accuracy. Renault was able to explore the intricacies of human relationships without the fear of criticism by setting them against the backdrop of ancient Greece. Same-sex relationships were a part of life in ancient Greece and Renault was able to kill two birds with one stone, as she was able to write accurate historical novels as well as write openly about same-sex relationships and love. This is evident in the evolution in her writing from *'Fire from Heaven'* to *'The Persian Boy'*.

The term homosexuality did not exist when Alexander or Achilles was alive. Same-sex relations were common throughout the ancient world. These relationships, specifically in Greece and Macedon were purely for pleasure, and were between an older man (bearded) known as erastes and a younger man (clean-shaven) known as eromenos.¹²⁴ What was looked down upon was same-sex relations in which the older man was submissive to the younger man. The basis of these kinds of sexual relations was respect and submission from the eromenos and pleasure given to the erastes.

'Fire from Heaven' shows us the start of Alexander and Hephaistion's relationship but Renault is careful to not fully divulge the exact nature of their relationship. When they were still young boys Alexander and Hephaistion shared many moments alone. For instance, Renault writes "he had not withdrawn, but, backed to the sloping gable-roof sat propped lightly against Hephaistion, trustful

¹²¹ Madeline Miller, *The Song of Achilles*, 2011.

¹²² Mary Renault and Tom Holland, *The Persian Boy*, 260.

¹²³ Caroline Zilboorg, *The Masks of Mary Renault*.

¹²⁴ Moira Scully T, "Secrets of the Sheets: An Exploration of Alexander the Great's Sexuality," in *Tiresias Volume 5*, ed. Mackenzie Pritchard, Elakkiya Sivakumaran, and Jordan Tardif, 2020, 22.

and warm. This thought Hephaestion, was the true perfection of happiness”¹²⁵ this extract is an insightful example of the manner in which Renault wrote about their relationship. There is a certain level of intimacy in the way Hephaestion reacts but it is not obvious whether it is just companionship or something more. However, upon other instances there is a much clearer image portrayed. One is after Hephaestion overhears the other boys talking about his relationship with Alexander and after being asked about it, Hephaestion likely punched the person who had asked him.¹²⁶ The boys who Alexander and Hephaestion grew up with were not the only ones concerned about their close relationship. Alexander’s mother, Olympias was too. In fact, she said to Alexander, “[s]oon your father will be making you a marriage. It is time you showed him it is a husband he has to offer, not a wife.”¹²⁷ Alexander was insulted by her comment, Renault does not go into detail about why. We can, however, make the assumption that, because Alexander and Hephaestion were not in a classic *eromos* and *erastes* relationship, Alexander may have felt a level of disrespect from his mother’s comment.

There is a transition of sexual references from *‘Fire from Heaven’* to *‘The Persian Boy’* as Renault becomes more confident about expressing her thoughts of sexuality through her novels after living in South Africa where her relationship with Julie was much less scrutinised. It is evident that throughout *‘Fire and Heaven’* Renault is rather reserved but becomes more vocal in *‘The Persian Boy’*. This evolution in her writing may be because of years living “freely” in South Africa after having had to hide her relationship with Julie in colonial England. Renault and Julie kept their intimate relationship private while they both lived and worked in England. In order to spend more time together Renault and Julie would often rent a house in the countryside and spend their days together, taking walks, cooking food, and Renault would write.¹²⁸ Homosexuality only became legal in England in 1967.¹²⁹ The legalisation of same-sex relationships happened once Renault and Julie were already living in South Africa. The early years of their intimate relationship had to remain secret, and this may have caused a certain level of frustration and even fear of getting caught. Renault moved away from non-fiction and began focusing on ancient history, specifically, ancient Greece, this allowed her to openly explore same-sex relationships.

¹²⁵ Mary Renault and Tom Holland, *Fire from Heaven*, 104.

¹²⁶ Mary Renault and Tom Holland, *Fire from Heaven*, 104.

¹²⁷ Mary Renault and Tom Holland, *Fire from Heaven*, 172.

¹²⁸ Caroline Zilboorg, *The Masks of Mary Renault*, 2013.

¹²⁹ UK Parliament, “Regulating Sex and Sexuality: The 20th Century,” UK Parliament, accessed April 14, 2024, <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/relationships/overview/sexuality20thcentury/#:~:text=Sexual%20Offences%20Act%201967,heavier%20penalties%20on%20street%20offences..>

'*The Persian Boy*' contains many more interactions, references, and events that contribute to the narrative of Alexander's sexuality, especially with Bagoas, and the power he had over the people who loved him. Bagoas first served King Darius III before being given to Alexander by Nabarzanes as a symbol of his new found loyalty to the Alexander. However, according to Renault, Nabarzanes later attempted to revolt against Alexander but was defeated by the new Persian King.¹³⁰

From the time Alexander began planning to conquer Persia up until his death, everything is written through the eyes of Bagoas. We lose a lot of Alexander and Hephaistion's relationship and are only privy to their interactions in public. We do not know when and if Alexander and Hephaistion had any sexual relations during this time and if they did, Bagoas does not speak of them. Renault subtly references Alexander and Bagoas' sexual encounters but illustrates their feelings in different ways. Bagoas was always there when Alexander needed him and even when he did not. Bagoas was in constant service for Alexander and his love for his king was unconditional and pure. Alexander gave Bagoas a horse as a gift and encouraged Bagoas to take part in dancing contests and was delighted when he won.¹³¹ Alexander was patient, kind, and gentle with Bagoas.¹³²

However, after realising his feelings for Alexander and knowing the special relationship he had with Hephaistion, his jealousy towards Hephaistion ran deep. Although he never tried to poison Hephaistion, he did plan out how he would.¹³³ Bagoas did not want to share Alexander's affection with Hephaistion and he said to himself, "[t]here could only be one Patroklos."¹³⁴ Although after sometime, Bagoas learned to live with Hephaistion and vice versa. It was only after Hephaistion's death that Bagoas realised why he meant so much to his King. Bagoas enquired why Hephaistion had been so important to Alexander and Alexander's response was, "[h]e knew me."¹³⁵ In that moment Bagoas understood why and maybe also came to the realisation that no matter how much he loved Alexander and Alexander loved him, there was only one Patroklos, and it was Hephaistion.

By giving Bagoas a major role in Alexander's story it allowed her to create a male-female relationship with two men. Because Bagoas is not a major character in the story of Alexander, Renault had to create a lot of what she wrote about him from her own imagination.¹³⁶ Renault did

¹³⁰ Mary Renault and Tom Holland, *The Persian Boy*, 137.

¹³¹ Mary Renault and Tom Holland, *The Persian Boy*.

¹³² Mary Renault and Tom Holland, *The Persian Boy*.

¹³³ Mary Renault and Tom Holland, *The Persian Boy*, 106.

¹³⁴ Mary Renault and Tom Holland, *The Persian Boy*, 127.

¹³⁵ Mary Renault and Tom Holland, *The Persian Boy*, 266.

¹³⁶ Shaun Fitzroy Tougher, "The Renault Bagoas: The Treatment of Alexander the Great's Eunuch in Mary Renault's *The Persian Boy*," *New Voices in Classical Reception Studies*, no. 3 (2008), 79.

create Bagoas to take a more feminine role in Alexander's life compared to Hephaestion's role as Alexander's strong and masculine lover and friend. Bagoas brings an element of softness to the hardships Alexander faced during his conquests. Bagoas fulfils the female role created by colonial ideologies that were learned by Renault during her life in England, she was able to manipulate how those gendered roles were portrayed and by who.

The theme of sexuality during 19th century colonialism and its impact on literature is shown in more ways than one through Renault's work. Her own sexuality and life experiences played an influential part in the creation of Bagoas as well as her interpretation of Alexander and his desires.

Conclusion:

Chapter 1's focus on the life of Renault formulates the backbone for the analysis. Having an understanding of Renault's life provides the groundwork for understanding her writing style. We learnt that Renault grew up during the British Empire and how the ideologies she grew up with influenced her writing throughout her career. Renault was a nurse during World War II, she was a lesbian in 20th century Britain, and she moved to South African during the apartheid era. The experiences in her work and her personal life shaped Renault's perspectives on life, love, and society. In turn, these perspectives and her experiences played a key role in her writing. Having the knowledge of Renault's life allowed for identifying themes throughout her books, especially in her Alexander trilogy. Throughout this paper, it was evident that many of the elements written regarding Alexander's life were parallel to those of Renault. She is known to have drawn inspiration for her characters from her own life. Before Renault switched her focus to historical fiction, her novels always related back to a period in her own life. Renault's characters were often sexually ambiguous but despite that, she became popular with homosexual readers. Renault's move to historical fiction, especially ancient Greece, allowed her to write about acceptable same-sex relationships. A comprehensive analysis of Renault's work required a comprehensive understanding of her life. Chapter 1 shed light on important events that resulted in her influential retelling of Alexander the Great.

Chapter 1 did not only focus on Renault but elaborated on Said's postcolonial theory and his colonial culture framework. Postcolonial theory, as established by Said, offers a framework to study power structures and narratives in regions previously colonised, persisting even after the formal end of colonial rule.¹³⁷ The distinctions between 'us' and 'them', the West and the East, as discussed in Said's *'Orientalism'*,¹³⁸ continues to be relevant in postcolonial culture, and in literature. Said's postcolonial theory was a guiding lens to understand the impact of colonial influence on historical literature. Said's second book, *'Culture and Imperialism'* continued his exploration into the dynamics of 'us' and 'them' within postcolonial culture, however, his focus was on literature. His research delved into the relationships and power structures embedded in narratives. Said highlighted the inherent challenges in breaking away from such ingrained patterns when creating narratives, especially for authors who grew up in Western countries that participated in colonisation. *'Culture and Imperialism'* emphasised the need for a nuanced understanding of how historical and cultural contexts shape literary works, either intentionally or unintentionally. Applying the colonial culture

¹³⁷ Naifa Al Mtairi, "Edward Said: Post-Colonial Discourse and Its Impact on Literature," 2.

¹³⁸ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 1978.

framework to Renault's trilogy on Alexander offered a rich theoretical lens through which to explore the complex interplay of power, identity, and cultural dynamics during this period. It allowed for an enhanced understanding of the narrative's nuances and contributed to a more comprehensive analysis of Renault's portrayal of Alexander's conquest against colonial ideologies.

Chapter 2 began the analysis of Renault's work. By looking at the theme of conquest and culture this chapter examined both Said's and Renault's perspective of the cultural fusion that took place during 19th and 20th century Western colonialism. Said focused on the negative and harmful impacts of conquest, mainly the cultural loss and forced assimilation of colonised people. However, Renault offered a more positive view, portraying cultural fusion in a holistic light. Despite their differing perspectives, understanding the effect conquest had on the culture of both the coloniser and the colonised is an important part of understanding the way Renault interpreted British colonial ideology and whether or not she agreed or disagreed with it. Renault uses Alexander's exploration of Persian culture in a way that allows the reader to gain a better understanding of Alexander as a curious, respectful, and excited person. Alexander is often portrayed as a military genius and one of the most successful conquerors from the ancient world. The manner in which Renault allows him to interact with Persian culture and people shows a different side to him, a side that is not often seen in other literary works. In fact, Renault is very careful not to become too involved in Alexander's military life, instead of writing about his strategy meetings, she writes about his dinners with his companions and friends. Although, one cannot write about Alexander and completely ignore his campaigns in Asia, Renault chose to focus on the aftermath of his conquests.

In chapter 3 we saw Renault elevate and reinterpret Said's notion of Orientalism. Instead of the strict 'us' versus 'them' or the theory of 'other' Renault's comparison takes the form of 'civilisation' versus 'barbarism'. The terms *barbaric*, *barbarian*, and *civilised* can be found throughout *Fire from Heaven* and *The Persian Boy*. Renault, unlike Said, creates fluidity with these terms. *Fire from Heaven* is based mainly on Alexander's life growing up in Macedon, therefore from the Macedonian perspective, the Persians are the barbarians and are often referred to as such throughout the book. However, *The Persian Boy* is written from the Persian perspective and with this, the terms change, Macedonians are the barbarians and the Persians see themselves as civilised. This interchangeability creates a dimension to postcolonial theory that is not explored in Said's writings. Said focuses on the rigid classification of 'East' and 'West' and the way in which colonial ideology created the image of the 'other'. The theme of civilisation and barbarism intertwines with postcolonial theory in the way it classifies different groups of people based on the

perspective of an outsider while at the same time provides a different point of view with which this classification can be switched depending on the perspective.

In chapter 4, themes such as masculinity and femininity were examined through the lens of postcolonial theory and the way the West portrayed the East as the submissive and weak female while the West was portrayed as the strong and heroic male. This gendering of the coloniser and colonised illustrates how gender roles and identities were manipulated during 19th and 20th colonial period. Gender and sexuality are themes that are present throughout all Renault's novels, they also played an important role in her identity and her life. Renault gives a voice to a minor historical character in *'The Persian Boy'*, Bagoas, a Persian eunuch. By doing so, Renault humanises a person the Macedonian army would have seen as uncivilised and barbaric, not only because he was Persian but also because of what he meant to Alexander.

Renault's portrayal of Bagoas and Alexander's relationship sheds light on the complexities of their bond and the obvious power dynamic within the relationship. Renault is not the only author to create a story through the eyes of a minor character. Madeline Miller's *'The Song of Achilles'* brings Achilles' lover, Patroklos to the forefront. The similarities between the two novels create a comparison between two famous ancient Greek men and what impact their partner's had on their lives. Renault's novel takes it a step further by creating a love triangle with Alexander at the centre and Bagoas and Hephaestion both receiving love and affection from him. The implications of gender roles and how these roles influenced Renault's depiction of Alexander's relationship was examined. The theme of sexuality enabled Renault to infuse more of her person experienced into her writing, providing us with greater insight into the influence or lack thereof, that colonial ideologies had on her work.

Ultimately, Renault's work underscores the lasting impact of colonial ideologies on literature and the complex interplay between personal identity and historical context. The implementation of Edward Said's postcolonial theory provided an accurate framework with which the analysis of *'Fire from Heaven'* and *'The Persian Boy'* could be conducted. Throughout the themes that were discussed, examples in Renault's literary work support Said's overall claim that literature written in the postcolonial period would be influenced by colonial culture to a certain extent. By examining Renault's narrative through Said's theories, we gain a deeper understanding of the intricate dynamics of cultural conquest, identity, and the legacies of colonialism. Renault's interpretation of the life of Alexander the Great and his relationships with his own army and the people he

encountered during his campaigns offers a compelling case for exploring the complexity of cultural and sexual identities in the context of a postcolonial era.

It can be seen in both novels, however it is more evident in *'The Persian Boy'*, that Renault actively attempts to distance herself from Said's colonial culture, as well as from postcolonial theory. Her focus on Bagoas for instance, allows her to explore a minor character and create an entire narrative around him and his perspective. She is able to give a voice to the colonised. However, there are instances where Renault falls into the postcolonial traps. The masculine and feminine relationship she created between Alexander and Bagoas is similar to the colonial ideology of the same relationship between the coloniser and colonised portrayed during the 20th century colonial period. Colonial ideology played a role in Renault's reinterpretation of Alexander the Great and despite her tendency of standing out, Renault was not fully able to remove herself from the last effects of the colonial period.

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