

From Theseus to Alexander:
Ancient Greece through the eyes of Mary Renault by S.L. Ager

For those of us who enjoy genre reading, there is nothing as sublime as the discovery of an author who not only writes well in the genre, but who also is an outstanding artist in her/his own right. I like science fiction as a genre, but it's pretty exhausting wading through the piles of bad science fiction that you need to go through in order to find one really rewarding author. I also like thrillers, but it's even harder in this genre to find a writer as accomplished as Donna Tartt, whose book *The Secret History* was reviewed recently in *Labyrinth*. And as for historical fiction, well, novels like *Gone With the Wind* are hard to find; I spent enough years of my life wading through the terrible 'bodice-rippers' of Frank Yerby to know that.

That's why it seemed like such a blessing for someone like myself, a Greek historian, to discover the works of Mary Renault. Renault herself wasn't a classicist, though her research into the periods she chose to write about was nonetheless impeccable. But it's more than the research – Mary Renault had an uncanny talent for conjuring up a living world that remains utterly convincing. In all the years I've spent studying ancient Greece, I've never felt it come alive as it does in the pages of her novels. Not only is she able to bring onstage figures of history as real, three-dimensional humans (in a way that's pretty infrequent in genre writing), she is also able to make us imagine and understand the context in which they lived. No one else has ever persuaded me to believe in the Greek gods, but Mary Renault can do it!

Renault's interests generally led her to write of the ancient Greeks, though she did produce some novels in a contemporary setting as well; she never appears to have had any interest in writing about Rome. But within the world of ancient Greece, her interests were very broad, and ranged all the way from the mythic world of the Bronze Age heroes to the Hellenistic Age. In virtually every case, the quality of her writing ensures her a place as a literary artist that goes much beyond her reputation as a writer of 'merely' historical novels (in bookstores that continue to make a distinction between 'fiction' and 'literature', it's not uncommon to find Mary Renault in the 'literature' section).

Although her books were not written in 'chronological' order, as it were, it makes sense to survey them that way. That means going right back to the heroic age to look at her two Theseus novels, *The King Must Die* and *The Bull from the Sea*. In these books she tells us the tale of the life of Theseus, who is the narrator of his own story, from birth (conception, really) to death. These works always remind me of Mary Stewart's Arthur trilogy, in tone and general feeling. Theseus, like Merlin, is something of a loner, who must find his own way in the world, but who nevertheless has a destiny that the gods have devised for him. One of the most fascinating things about the Theseus books is the way Renault rationalizes the more fantastical elements of Theseus's myth. The Cretan Labyrinth, the Minotaur, the descent to Hades, the battle with the Amazons – all of these are presented in a way that makes them wholly convincing and realistic, yet never strips them of a sense of the mystical. Nor does it reduce the terror that they hold; if anything, it enhances it. Renault also weaves in the more modern scholarship on the history of the Bronze Age. The Cretans whom Theseus encounters are very clearly Arthur Evans's Minoans, and the eruption of Thera plays a pivotal role. And if you've never understood the downside of the Theseus-Ariadne romance, Renault can certainly make you see it!

Her book *The Praise Singer* is set in a much later period, the 6th century BC. It's a good read, like all her novels, though if asked to choose, I would say this is one of her lesser works. It tells the story of Semonides, the poet of Keos, who attained fame and fortune in the late Archaic Age. This he did largely through the standard devices of poets in ancient Greece: public and royal patronage. So while the novel provides interest in the events of Semonides's own life (he is one of Renault's more sympathetic characters), its real centre is the court of Athens: the tyrant Peisistratos, and his sons Hippias and Hipparchos. The intrigues and machinations of the tyrants, and the doom that hangs over their family, provide the focus for a story that once again effortlessly evokes the wider world: the brilliant world of Archaic Greece just before the dawn of the Classical Age.

The Last of the Wine is a novel that takes place a century later, still in Athens. Its setting is the Great Peloponnesian War, the 27-year conflict between Sparta and Athens that brought the Classical Age to a close. Its main characters, Alexias and Lysis, are semi-fictional (inspired by brief references in the ancient sources to largely unknown individuals), and the story of their lives, and their love for each other, is powerful enough to stand on its own. But beyond these two, Renault has all the tragic events

of the Peloponnesian War and its brutal aftermath to draw on, as well as the far more well known figures of late Classical Athens. Characters such as Socrates and Alcibiades play a vital role in the story, and Renault offers compelling portraits of both of them.

Another famous philosopher is a significant player in Renault's novel *The Mask of Apollo*. Socrates's younger contemporary Plato was an awesome intellect, so cerebral that his humanity is at times difficult to grasp for the modern reader of his dialogues. But Renault is able to portray him as a human, a man of passion and conviction; and yet at the same time she does not shrink from exploring how conviction and idealism can be repellent when untempered with compassion for weakness. The main character of the book (who again is the narrator) is a man who has great understanding for weakness and human foibles, since he portrays them on stage all the time: he is the tragic actor, Nikeratos. Nikeratos inadvertently becomes involved with Plato and the Syracusan politician Dion, and their plans to bring about the 'just society' in Syracuse, plans doomed to failure in the human scheme of things. The tragedy of Syracuse, and of Dion, is observed feelingly by Nikeratos, who convinces the reader (if not Plato) that greatness of soul can be found in even such a 'frivolous' person as a stage performer.

The final novels I want to discuss here are in some ways a culmination of Renault's art. They are the three novels of the Alexander trilogy: *Fire from Heaven*, *The Persian Boy*, and *Funeral Games*. Alexander is a figure that Mary Renault always felt a great fascination for; he is the subject of one of her non-fictional works, a biography entitled *The Nature of Alexander*. That fascination seems to have been less for Alexander as a great military conqueror, than for the mysticism of his nature. The mystery that lay at the heart of Alexander apparently dissuaded Renault from the standard first person narrative she used in her other novels about ancient Greece. Alexander remains too much a mystery to be explicated by himself in that way, and so we see Alexander from the outside, and learn of him through his impact on others. In spite of that distancing, however, Renault gives a gripping psychological portrayal of a man who was driven by many things, by furies as well as by ambition and the search for glory. If family dysfunction leaves its mark on children, we don't need to look much further than Alexander's parents, Olympias and Philip II, as they are depicted in *Fire from Heaven*. This first book in the Alexander series tells the story of his life up until the age of twenty, when he came to the throne of Macedon. The second book, *The Persian Boy*, takes an entirely different and intriguing approach. We are back to first

person narrative again, but not through a Greek this time. Rather the person, through whose eyes we see the adult conqueror Alexander, is a captive, an enslaved Persian eunuch, Bagoas. *The Persian Boy* is, more than anything, a love story, and one of the most poignant ones I've ever read; Bagoas's love for Alexander makes Romeo and Juliet pale in comparison. The final novel in the Alexander trilogy actually takes place after the death of Alexander. When he was on his deathbed, he is reported to have said that he foresaw great funeral games upon his departure from this world. If so, it was a true vision, as students of Hellenistic history will know; Alexander's empire and his remaining family were torn apart by murder and strife and wars that lasted for decades: great funeral games indeed.

If asked to report on a personal favourite amongst Mary Renault's body of work, I don't think I could narrow it down to just one. If I were to be allowed to choose *two*, I would pick *The King Must Die* and *The Persian Boy*; if I could add two more, they would be *Fire From Heaven* and *The Mask of Apollo*. Of course, I could just keep on adding by twos until I encompassed them all! There's nothing I like more, when I've found a book I like, than recommending it to others – so, whether you like historical novels as a genre or not, I can guarantee you won't be disappointed if you open a book by Mary Renault.