

WOMEN AND LEADERSHIP: OLYMPIAS

Excerpts from Plutarch's *Life of Alexander* (2nd CENTURY CE)

2 1 As for the lineage of Alexander, on his father's side he was a descendant of Heracles through Caranus, and on his mother's side a descendant of Aeacus through Neoptolemus; this is accepted without any question. 2 And we are told that Philip, after being initiated into the mysteries of Samothrace at the same time with Olympias, he himself being still a youth and she an orphan child, fell in love with her and betrothed himself to her at once with the consent of her brother, Arymbas. 3 Well, then, the night before that on which the marriage was consummated, the bride dreamed that there was a peal of thunder and that a thunder-bolt fell upon her womb, and that thereby much fire was kindled, which broke into flames that travelled all about, and then was extinguished. 4 At a later time, too, after the marriage, Philip dreamed that he was putting a seal upon his wife's womb; and the device of the seal, as he thought, was the figure of a lion. 5 The other seers, now, were led by the vision to suspect that Philip needed to put a closer watch upon his marriage relations; but Aristander of Telmessus said that the woman was pregnant, since no seal was put upon what was empty, and pregnant of a son whose nature would be bold and lion-like. 6 Moreover, a serpent was once seen lying stretched out by the side of Olympias as she slept, and we are told that this, more than anything else, dulled the ardour of Philip's attentions to his wife, so that he no longer came often to sleep by her side, either because he feared that some spells and enchantments might be practised upon him by her, or because he shrank for her embraces in the conviction that she was the partner of a superior being.

7 But concerning these matters there is another story to this effect: all the women of these parts were addicted to the Orphic rites and the orgies of Dionysus from very ancient times (being called Klodones and Mimallones) and imitated in many p229 ways the practices of the Edonian women and the Thracian women about Mount Haemus, 8 from whom, as it would seem, the word "threskeuein" came to be applied to the celebration of extravagant and superstitious ceremonies. 9 Now Olympias, who affected these divine possessions more zealously than other women, and carried out these divine inspirations in wilder fashion, used to provide the revelling companies with great tame serpents, which would often lift their heads from out the ivy and the mystic winnowing-baskets, or coil themselves about the wands and garlands of the women, thus terrifying the men.

3 1 However, after his vision, as we are told, Philip sent Chaeron of Megalopolis to Delphi, by whom an oracle was brought to him from Apollo, who bade him sacrifice to Ammon and hold that god in greatest reverence, 2 but told him he was to lose that one of his eyes which he had applied to the chink in the door when he espied the god, in the form of a serpent, sharing the couch of his wife. 3 Moreover, Olympias, as Eratosthenes says, when she sent Alexander forth upon his great expedition, told him, and him alone, the secret of his begetting, and bade him have purposes worthy of his birth. 4 Others, on the contrary, say that she repudiated the idea, and said: "Alexander must cease slandering me to Hera."

9.4-11

4 In consequence of these exploits, then, as was natural, Philip was excessively fond of his son, so that he even rejoiced to hear the Macedonians call Alexander their king, but Philip their general. 5 However, the disorders in his household, due to the fact that his marriages and amours carried into the kingdom the infection, as it were, which reigned in the women's apartments, produced many grounds of offence and great quarrels between father and son, and these the bad temper of Olympias, who was a jealous and sullen woman, made still greater, since she spurred Alexander on. 6 The most open quarrel was brought on by Attalus at the marriage of Cleopatra, a maiden whom Philip was taking to wife, having fallen in love with the girl when he was past the age for it. 7 Attalus, now, was the girl's uncle, and being in his cups, he called upon the Macedonians to ask of the gods that from Philip and Cleopatra there might be born a legitimate successor to the kingdom. 8 At this Alexander was exasperated, and with the words, "But what of me, base wretch? Dost thou take me for a bastard?" threw a cup at him. 9 Then Philip rose up against him with drawn sword, but, fortunately for both, his anger and his wine made him trip and fall. 10 Then Alexander, mocking over him, said: "Look now, men! here is one who was preparing to cross from Europe into Asia; and he is upset in trying to cross from couch to couch." 11 After this drunken broil Alexander took Olympias and established her in Epirus, while he himself tarried in Illyria.

39 1 Alexander was naturally munificent, and became still more so as his wealth increased. His gifts, too, were accompanied by a kindly spirit, with which alone, to tell the truth, a giver confers a favour. 2 I will mention a few instances. Ariston, the captain of the Paeonians, having slain an enemy, brought his head and showed it to Alexander, saying: "In my country, O King, such a gift as this is rewarded with a golden beaker." "Yes," said Alexander with a laugh, "an empty one; but I will pledge thy health with one which is full of pure wine." 3 Again, a common Macedonian was driving a mule laden with some of the royal gold, and when the beast gave out, took the load on his own shoulders and tried to carry it. The king, then, seeing the man in great distress and learning the facts of the case, said, as the man was about to lay his burden down, "Don't give out, but finish your journey by taking this load to your own tent." 4 Furthermore, he was generally more displeased with those who would not take his gifts than with those who asked for them. And so he wrote to Phocion in a letter that he would not treat him as a friend in future if he rejected his favours. 5 Again, to Serapion, one of the youths who played at ball with him, he used to give nothing because he asked for nothing. Accordingly, whenever Serapion had the ball, he would throw it to others, until the king said: "Won't you give it to me?" "No," said Serapion, "because you don't ask for it," whereat the king burst out laughing and made him many presents. 6 With Proteas, however, a clever wag and boon companion, he appeared to be angry; but when the man's friends begged his forgiveness, as did Proteas himself with tears, the king said he was his friend again, whereat Proteas said: "In that case, O King, give me something to prove it first." Accordingly, the king ordered that five talents should be given him. What lofty airs his friends and bodyguards were wont to display over the wealth bestowed by him, is plain from a letter which Olympias wrote to him. She says: "I beg thee to find other ways of conferring favours on those thou lovest and holdest in honour; as it is, thou makest them all the equals of kings and providest them with an abundance of friends, whilst thyself thou strippest bare." 8 Olympias often wrote him in like vein, but Alexander kept her writings secret, except once when Hephaestion, as was his wont, read with him a letter which had been opened; the king did not prevent him, but took the ring from his own finger and applied its seal to the lips of Hephaestion. 9 Again, though the son of Mazaeus, the most influential man at the court of Dareius, already had a province, Alexander gave him a second and a larger one. He, however, declined it, saying: "O King, formerly there was one Dareius, but now thou has made many Alexanders." 10 To Parmenio, moreover, Alexander gave the house of Bagoas at Susa, in which it is said that there was found apparel worth a thousand talents. 11 Again, he wrote to Antipater bidding him keep guards about his person, since plots were being laid against him. 12 To his mother, also, he sent many presents, but would not suffer her to meddle in affairs nor interfere in his campaigns; and when she chided him for this, he bore her harshness patiently. 13 Once, however,

after reading a long letter which Antipater had written in denunciation of her, he said Antipater knew not that one tear of a mother effaced ten thousand letters.

68 1 Here Nearchus came up to meet him, and Alexander was so delighted to hear of his voyage that he eagerly desired to sail down the Euphrates himself with a large fleet,¹⁰⁷ and then, after circumnavigating Arabia and Africa, to enter the Mediterranean by way of the pillars of Heracles. 2 And vessels of every sort were built for him at Thapsacus, and sailors and pilots were assembled from all parts. 3 But the increasing difficulties of his march back, his wound among the Malli, and the losses in his army, which were reported to be heavy, led men to doubt his safe return, inclined subject peoples to revolt, and bred great injustice, rapacity, and insolence in the generals and satraps whom he had appointed. In a word, restlessness and a desire for change spread everywhere. 4 For even against Antipater, Olympias and Cleopatra had raised a faction, Olympias taking Epirus, and Cleopatra Macedonia. 5 When he heard of this, Alexander said that his mother had made the better choice; for the Macedonians would not submit to be reigned over by a woman.

77 1 Most of this account is word for word as written in the "Journals." 2 And as for suspicions of poisoning [poisoning Alexander], no one had any immediately, but five years afterwards, as we are told, upon information given, Olympias put many men to death, and scattered abroad the ashes of Iolas, alleging that he had administered the poison. 3 But those who affirm that Aristotle counselled Antipater to do the deed, and that it was entirely through his agency that the poison was provided, mention one Hagnothemis as their authority, who professed to have heard the story from Antigonus the king; 4 and the poison was water, icy cold, from a certain cliff in Nonacris; this they gathered up like a delicate dew and stored it in an ass's hoof; for no other vessel would hold the water, but would all be eaten through by it, owing to its coldness and pungency. 5 Most writers, however, think that the story of the poisoning is altogether a fabrication; and it is no slight evidence in their favour that during the dissensions of Alexander's commanders, which lasted many days, his body, although it lay without special care in places that were moist and stifling, showed no sign of such a destructive influence, but remained pure and fresh.

6 Now, Roxana was with child, and on this account was held in honour among the Macedonians; but she was jealous of Stateira, and therefore deceived her by a forged letter into coming where she was, and when she had got her there, slew her, together with her sister, threw their bodies into the well, and filled the well with earth, Perdiccas being privy to the deed and partner in it. 7 For it was he who was at once in the greatest authority, dragging Arrhidaeus around after him to safe-guard, as it were, the royal power. Arrhidaeus was Philip's son by an obscure and common woman named Philinna, and was deficient in intellect owing to bodily disease. 8 This, however, did not come upon him in the course of nature or of its own accord, indeed, it is said that as a boy he displayed an exceedingly gifted and noble disposition: but after Olympias gave him drugs which injured his body and ruined his mind.

Diodorus Siculus on Olympias

19.11 1 In Macedonia, when Eurydicê, who had assumed the administration of the regency, heard that Olympias was making preparations for a return, she sent a courier into the Peloponnesus to Cassander, begging him to come to her aid as soon as possible; and, by plying the most active of the Macedonians with gifts and great promises, she was trying to make them personally loyal to herself. 2 But Polyperchon, with Aeacides of Epirus as his ally, collected an army and restored Olympias and the son of Alexander to the throne. So, as soon as he heard that Eurydicê was at Euia⁶ in Macedonia with her army, he hastened against her with the intention of deciding the campaign in a single battle. When, however, the armies were drawn up facing each other, the Macedonians, out of respect for the position of Olympias and remembering the benefits that they had received from Alexander, changed their allegiance. 3 King

Philip with his court was captured at once, while Eurydicê was taken as she was making her way to Amphipolis with Polycles, one of her counsellors. 4 But after Olympias had thus captured the royal persons and had seized the kingdom without a fight, she did not carry her good fortune as a human being should, but first she placed Eurydicê and her husband Philip under guard and began to maltreat them. Indeed she walled them up in a small space and supplied them with what was necessary through a single narrow opening. 5 But after she had for many days unlawfully treated the unfortunate captives, she ordered certain Thracians to stab Philip to death, who had been king for six years and four months; but she judged that Eurydicê, who was expressing herself without restraint and declaring that the kingdom belonged to herself rather than to Olympias, was worthy of greater punishment. 6 She therefore sent to her a sword, a noose, and some hemlock, and ordered her to employ whichever of these she pleased as a means of death, neither displaying any respect whatever for the former dignity of the victim whom she was unlawfully treating, nor moved to pity for the fate that is common to all. 7 Accordingly, when she herself met with a similar reversal, she experienced a death that was worthy of her cruelty. Eurydicê, indeed, in the presence of the attendant prayed that like gifts might fall to the lot of Olympias. She next laid out the body of her husband, cleansing its wounds as well as circumstances permitted, then ended her life by hanging herself with her girdle, neither weeping for her own fate nor humbled by the weight of her misfortunes. 8 After these two had been made away with, Olympias killed Nicanor, Cassander's brother, and overturned the tomb of Iollas, avenging, as she said, the death of Alexander. She also selected the hundred most prominent Macedonians from among the friends of Cassander and slaughtered them all. 9 But by glutting her rage with such atrocities, she soon caused many of the Macedonians to hate her ruthlessness; for all of them remembered the words of Antipater, who, as if uttering a prophecy on his death bed, advised them never to permit a woman to hold first place in the kingdom.

35 1 In Europe when Cassander, who was besieging Tegea in the Peloponnesus, learned of the return of Olympias to Macedonia and of the murder of Eurydicê and King Philip, and moreover what had befallen the tomb of his brother Iollas, he came to terms with the people of Tegea and set out for Macedonia with his army, leaving his allies in complete confusion; for Polyperchon's son Alexander with an army was waiting to attack the cities of the Peloponnesus. 2 The Aetolians, who wished to please Olympias and Polyperchon, had occupied the pass at Thermopylae and barred Cassander from the passage. Cassander decided against forcing his way through this region, which was difficult to attack, but he secured boats and barges from Euboea and Locris and transported his army to Thessaly. 3 Hearing that Polyperchon and his army were in position in Perrhaebia, he dispatched his general Callas with an army, ordering him to carry on the war with Polyperchon. Deinias, however, in order to occupy the passes, went to meet the soldiers who had been sent out by Olympias and gained control of the defiles ahead of them. 4 But Olympias, on learning that Cassander and a large army were near Macedonia, designated Aristonoüs general, ordering him to fight Cassander, 5 and she herself went to Pydna accompanied by the following: Alexander's son, his mother Roxanê, and Thessalonice, daughter of Philip son of Amyntas; also Deïdameia, daughter of Aeacides king of the Epirotes and sister of that Pyrrhus who later fought against the Romans, the daughters of Attalus, and finally the kinsfolk of Olympias' other more important friends. Thus there were gathered about her a large number of persons, but persons for the most part useless in war; and there was not a sufficient supply of food for people who were about to endure a very long siege. 6 Although the risk involved in all these circumstances was clear, none the less she decided to remain there, hoping that many Greeks and Macedonians would come to her aid by sea. 7 She had with her some of the Ambracian horse and most of the soldiers who were accustomed to serve about the court, also those of Polyperchon's elephants that remained, for Cassander had gained possession of the rest of the elephants in his previous expedition into Macedonia.

36 1 Cassander, going through the passes of Perrhaebia and arriving near Pydna, surrounded the city from sea to sea with a stockade and requisitioned ships, missile weapons of all sorts, and engines of war from those who wished to become his allies, with the intention of laying siege to Olympias by land and sea. 2 Being informed that Aeacides king of the Epirotes was about to come to the aid of Olympias with an army, he sent out Atarrhias as general, giving him an army and ordering him to meet the Epirotes. 3 Atarrhias carried out his orders quickly and by occupying the passes from Epirus succeeded in holding Aeacides inactive. Indeed, most of the Epirotes set out for Macedonia against their will and were mutinying in the camp; and Aeacides, who wished at all costs to aid Olympias, by releasing from the army those who were disaffected and taking those who wished to share the fortunes of war with him, although he showed his zeal for a fight to the finish, was not a match for his opponents because

few of his army remained. 4 Those of the Epirotes who went back to their native land rebelled against their absent king, condemned him to exile by a public decree, and made an alliance with Cassander. This was something that had never happened in Epirus from the time when Neoptolemus the son of Achilles was king of the land; for sons had always succeeded to their fathers' authority and had died on the throne up to this time. 5 Cassander received Epirus in his alliance and sent Lyciscus to it as regent and general, at which the people throughout Macedonia who had previously held apart from the alliance abandoned the fortunes of Olympias in despair and joined themselves to Cassander. Her only hope of aid was from Polyperchon, and this was also unexpectedly crushed; 6 for when Callas, who had been sent by Cassander as general, drew near Polyperchon in Perrhaebia and camped there, he corrupted most of Polyperchon's soldiers by bribes so that there remained only a few and these the most faithful. Thus Olympias' hopes were humbled in a brief time.

Pausanias 1.11.4

[4] Olympias on her victory behaved wickedly in the matter of the death of Aridaeus, and much more wickedly to certain Macedonians, and for this reason was considered to have deserved her subsequent treatment at the hands of Cassander; so Aeacides at first was not received even by the Epirotes because of their hatred of Olympias, and when after wards they forgave him, his return to Epeirus was next opposed by Cassander. When a battle occurred at Oeneadae between Philip, brother of Cassander, and Aeacides, Aeacides was wounded and shortly after met his fate.

Athenaeus *Deipnosophistae* 13.560

But Duris the Samian says that the first war carried on by two women was that between Olympias and Eurydice; in which Olympias advanced something in the manner of a Bacchanalian, with drums beating; but Eurydice came forward armed like a Macedonian soldier, having been already accustomed to war and military habits at the court of Cynnane the Illyrian.

"Heidelberg Epitome" (an anonymous summary of events after the death of Alexander, from 323 to 316 B.C.)

5 Then after a while Antipater died, and Polyperchon took over as guardian and overseer of the royal government. At that time Olympias treacherously killed Arrhidaeus and his wife Eurydice. 6 Then Cassander bribed some of the royal attendants, and treacherously killed Olympias, Roxane and Roxane's son Alexander the son of

Alexander, who was heir to the whole kingdom. This happened in Macedonia [(?) after the death] of Olympias the mother of Alexander.

Justinus: Epitome of Pompeius Trogus' *Philippic Histories*

[14.5] In the meantime Eurydice, the wife of king Arrhidaeus, when she learned that Polysperchon was returning from Greece into Macedonia, and that Olympias was sent for by him, 2 being prompted by a womanish emulation, and taking advantage of her husband's weakness, whose duties she took upon herself, 3 wrote in the king's name to Polysperchon, desiring him "to deliver up the army to Cassander, on whom the king had conferred the government of the kingdom," She made a similar communication to Antigonus, in a letter which she wrote to him in Asia. 4 Cassander, attached to her by such a favor, managed everything according to the will of that ambitious woman. 5 Marching into Greece, he made war upon several cities; 6 by the calamities of which, as by a fire in the neighborhood, the Spartans were alarmed, and, distrusting their power in arms, enclosed their city (which they had always defended, not with walls, but with their swords) with works of defense, in disregard both of the predictions of the oracles, and of the ancient glory of their forefathers. 7 Strange, that they should have so far degenerated from their ancestors, that, when the valor of the citizens had been for many ages a wall to the city, the citizens could not now think themselves secure unless they had walls to shelter them. 8 But during the course of these proceedings, the disturbed state of Macedonia obliged Cassander to return home from Greece; 9 for Olympias, the mother of Alexander the Great, coming from Epirus to Macedonia, with Aeacides, king of the Molossians, attending her, and being forbidden to enter the country by Eurydice and king Arrhidaeus, 10 the Macedonians being moved, either by respect for the memory of her husband, or the greatness of her son, or by the indignity with which she was treated, went over to Olympias, by whose order both Eurydice and the king were put to death, he having held the kingdom six years since the decease of Alexander.

[14.6] But neither did Olympias reign long; for having committed great slaughter among the nobility throughout the country, like a furious woman rather than a queen, she turned the favor with which she was regarded into hatred. 2 Hearing, therefore, of the approach of Cassander, and distrusting the Macedonians, she retired, with her daughter-in-law Roxane, and her grandson Heracles, to the city of Pydna. 3 Deidameia, the daughter of king Aeacides, and Thessalonice, her step-daughter, rendered illustrious by the name of Philippos, who was her father, and many others, wives of the leading men, a retinue showy rather than serviceable, attended her on her journey. 4 When the news of her retreat was brought to Cassander, he marched immediately, with the utmost expedition, to Pydna, and laid siege to the city. 5 Olympias, distressed with famine and the sword, and the wearisomeness of a long siege, surrendered herself to the conqueror, stipulating only for life. 6 But Cassander, on summoning the people to an assembly, to inquire "what they would wish to be done with Olympias," induced the parents of those whom she had killed to put on mourning apparel, and expose her cruelties; 7 when the Macedonians, exasperated by their statements, decreed, without regard to her former majesty, that she should be put to death; 8 utterly unmindful that, by the labors of her son and her husband, they had not only lived in security among their neighbors, but had attained to vast power, and even to the conquest of the world. 9 Olympias, seeing armed men advancing towards

her, bent upon her destruction, went voluntarily to meet them, dressed in her regal apparel, and leaning on two of her maids. 10 The executioners, on beholding her, struck with the recollection of her former royal dignity, and with the names of so many of their kings, that occurred to their memory in connection with her, stood still, 11 until others were sent by Cassander to dispatch her; she, at the same time, not shrinking from the sword or the blow, or crying out like a woman, but submitting to death like the bravest of men, and suitably to the glory of her ancient race, so that you might have perceived the soul of Alexander in his dying mother. 12 As she was expiring, too, she is said to have settled her hair, and to have covered her feet with her robe, that nothing unseemly might appear about her.