

Making a World at Opis: Ontological Theatre and the Limits of Persuasion in Arrian's *Anabasis*

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Abstract:

At Opis in 324 BCE Alexander faced mutiny and answered with a speech. Its arguments are slight, yet its consequences are astonishing: within days the army was weeping at his tent and pleading to return. Scholarship has often attributed this reversal to persuasion, but persuasion seems too frail an instrument for so violent a turn. This article offers another account. It reads Arrian's Opis episode (*Anabasis* 7.8–11) as ontological theatre. Andrew Pickering coined the term for cybernetics; here it is redirected towards rhetoric. Three registers converge at Opis: a material assemblage of scarred bodies, executed ringleaders, garments, and rivers; an affective ecology that converts anger into shame and shame into grief; and a cartographic performance that places an empire in rings around its king. At Opis, the army's world is remade.

Keywords: Alexander the Great, Arrian, affect theory, new materialism, ontological theatre, spatial theory.

Introduction: The Disproportion at Opis

A speech ought to persuade in proportion to the argument it contains. The Opis speech does not. Arrian sets the episode in 324 BCE, at a town on the Tigris, and he gives it four chapters of the *Anabasis* (7.8–11).¹ The episode begins with an army in revolt. A few days later, the same soldiers stand outside the royal tent, weapons discarded, weeping, unwilling to depart until their king relents (7.11.4). Between these scenes lies an extraordinary transformation. The question is what produces it.

The arguments themselves offer little help. Alexander begins with Philip. He recalls how his father found the Macedonians poor, wandering and clad in sheepskins, and gave them cloaks, cities, and laws (7.9.2). He places his own conquests beside Philip's and enumerates the wealth and honours he has bestowed. Of all that prosperity, he claims to have retained only a purple cloak and a diadem (7.9.8). He displays his wounds. He ends with a dismissal sharpened into humiliation: the men may return home and tell their countrymen that they abandoned their king to the protection of those he conquered (7.10.7). These are familiar rhetorical devices. Benefaction, comparison, reproach and shame belong to the ordinary repertoire of ancient *parainesis*. They explain the structure of the speech. But the tears remain unexplained.

Three approaches have dominated the scholarship, and each leaves this disparity in place. The first is historiographical. It asks whether the speech preserves Alexander's words or Arrian's reconstruction, and recent scholarship grants Arrian a shaping intelligence rather than the role of a mere transcriber (Bosworth, *From Arrian*; Stadter; Leon 333–47; Liotsakis 1–38). The second is rhetorical, dissecting the ethos, pathos and exempla of the oration. The third is political, examining the causes of the mutiny and the significance of the banquet that follows it. Tarn discovered in Alexander's closing prayer a doctrine of human brotherhood (2: 399–449). Badian attacked that

interpretation, and Bosworth reinforced the critique (Badian 425–44; Bosworth, *Conquest*). Roisman places the episode within the mounting crisis surrounding the succession (129–44).

The three approaches share a fundamental assumption. They treat the speech as an instrument of persuasion, something whose force resides in its intention and its argument. That conception cannot quite account for Opis. The army undergoes a more radical change than a revision of opinion. By the end of the episode, the soldiers occupy a different relation to their own past, to Alexander, to the Persians they despise, and even to the ground on which they stand. Minds may alter their convictions again. These men appear to have crossed into another condition altogether.

This article locates the difficulty in the prevailing concept of rhetoric itself. It proposes that the Opis speech is an act of world-making and describes the mode of performance involved as ontological theatre.

The term has an earlier history, and that history matters. Andrew Pickering uses *ontological theatre* for the strange machines of British cybernetics, treating them as devices that stage a world rather than merely represent one (17–24). Such a device presents reality as a working exhibit. This article redirects the term towards rhetoric. Some speeches function in precisely this fashion, and Opis is a particularly striking instance.

Two neighbouring traditions require distinction. J. L. Austin and Judith Butler teach us that utterances perform actions and acquire binding force through convention (Austin 4–11; Butler 24–41). Ontological theatre operates at a deeper level. A performative utterance works within a world whose categories are already established. Alexander intervenes in the categories themselves. Nelson Goodman's *worldmaking* comes closer, although his account remains concerned with symbol systems and versions (1–22). At Opis, the world is remade through matter, emotion and

space. Ontological theatre therefore names those rhetorical performances in which material, affective and spatial registers converge, so that an audience encounters reality as a different arrangement of relations and possibilities.

Arrian gives us another reason to look beyond the arguments, and he gives it at the very opening of the crisis. The soldiers begin the mutiny with a taunt about Alexander's parentage. Let him campaign with his father, they shout, meaning Ammon (7.8.3). The revolt thus begins as a quarrel over kinship. That detail deserves careful attention, because the episode ends with Alexander conferring a new kinship upon the Macedonians and sealing it with a kiss. Between the taunt and the kiss lies the central transformation this article seeks to describe.

The argument unfolds in four movements. The first establishes the theoretical framework. The remaining three read Opis as a material assemblage, an affective ecology, and a cartographic performance. One implication follows immediately. Once the speech's power is understood as ontological rather than strictly argumentative, the long dispute over its authenticity becomes less decisive. Its world-making work survives whether the words came from Alexander, Ptolemy, or Arrian himself.

I. Ontological Theatre

The framework draws on three bodies of thought, and it requires a defence against a predictable charge.

New materialism supplies the first strand. Karen Barad holds that entities do not precede their relations but are constituted through them, and she calls the condition entanglement (132–85). Jane Bennett attributes to matter a capacity to act that is not reducible to human intention, and she calls it vibrancy (20–38). Classical archaeology has begun to work in this idiom (Mol 715–29). The consequence for rhetoric is direct. If agency is distributed, then a speech is not a

transmission from one sovereign speaker to many passive ears. It is an event within a field of actors, and some of those actors are not people.

Affect theory supplies the second. Brian Massumi locates affect below cognition, in bodily intensities that outrun the meanings later fixed to them (23–45). Teresa Brennan treats affect as transmissible between bodies, so that a crowd's mood is manufactured rather than merely shared (1–23). Sara Ahmed shows that it is attachment rather than agreement which holds a collective together, and that feeling does its work by sticking to objects and to narratives (8–11, 29–46).

Here the predictable charge arrives. It runs as follows: this is a modern vocabulary, and it will make an ancient text say modern things. The Greeks possessed a vocabulary of their own that does much of the same work. Douglas Cairns has shown that *aidos* binds a man to the judgement of those whose regard he cannot do without, and that it functions as a social mechanism rather than as a private mood (1–47).² Angelos Chaniotis and his collaborators have established that Greek emotion is legible in the sources as a public and manipulable thing (11–36). The framework does not smuggle shame into Opis. Arrian's Macedonians already inhabit a shame culture, and their king knows it.

Critical spatial theory supplies the third strand. Henri Lefebvre argues that space is produced rather than given, and that representation is among the instruments of its production (26–53). Alex Purves has shown that Greek narrative makes space as it moves through it (1–23). Martin Pitts and Miguel John Versluys have described how an empire generates a global imaginary, in which scattered territories come to be thought of as one connected system (3–31).

Ontological theatre, then, names a performance in which the three registers act at once, and in which their convergence reconstitutes the reality an audience inhabits. There is a test for it. Where the effect of a speech exceeds its argument, and where the excess cannot be explained by

the speaker's authority alone, it is worth asking what the speech has done to matter, to feeling, and to space. Opis passes the test with unusual clarity.

II. Material Assemblage: Wounds, Garments, Rivers

The world at Opis is already in motion before Alexander opens his mouth. Arrian lists the grievances, and each one is material. There is the Persian dress that the king now wears. There are the barbarian Successors, drilled in Macedonian arms. There are foreign horsemen inside the squadrons of the Companions (7.8.2). The physical composition of the camp has changed, and the mutiny is a reaction to that change before it is a set of demands.

Then thirteen men die. Alexander leaps from the platform, indicates the ringleaders to his guards with his own hand, and has them led away for execution. A terrified silence falls, and only then does he climb back up and begin to speak (7.8.3). The conventional reading treats the executions as intimidation, and that is true as far as it goes. A materialist reading notices something further. The executions alter the physical composition of the assembly itself. Bodies are subtracted from it. The bodies that remain stand in a new relation to their own mortality, and they do so before a single sentence of the speech has been uttered. Whatever persuasion occurs at Opis begins with corpses.

The speech recounts Macedonian history through clothing. Philip encountered men in sheepskins and clothed them in cloaks (7.9.2). Alexander, when he takes stock of what the conquest of Asia has yielded him personally, names a purple cloak and a diadem (7.9.8). The distance between those two garments measures the scale of the imperial transformation. Macedon enters the story dressed in skins and emerges dressed for kingship.

The detail may seem decorative, particularly within so grand a catalogue of conquest. Bennett's account of vibrant matter invites a different reading. Clothing acts upon the body. A

cloak placed over a sheepskin alters appearance, posture, habit and the social meaning attached to the person who wears it. The change takes place repeatedly, in public view, through an object that travels with the body.

This makes the Persian dress at Opis materially consequential. The Macedonians encounter in it a form of power they are being asked to inhabit. Cloth carries the dispute into the most intimate routines of imperial life: what touches the body, what marks rank, what distinguishes one community from another. Alexander's attempt to reorganise the empire consequently reaches the soldiers through fabric before it reaches them through doctrine. The quarrel over Persian clothing belongs to the making of a different political world.

The most extraordinary object in the speech is the speaker's body. Alexander invites any man who has wounds to strip and display them, and he undertakes to display his own in return. There is no part of his body, he says, at least in the front, which is free of a wound. He then names the weapons that have marked him: sword, arrow, catapult bolt, stone, and club (7.10.1–2). This works as exhibit rather than as argument. Nothing here is adduced as evidence for a claim. The scar makes no assertion that the king shared the danger. The scar is the danger, still present, still legible, still on the skin. It is worth stating what follows for a theory of persuasion. The most powerful thing in the Opis speech is not a sentence.

The rivers enter the speech with striking insistence. The Hellespont, Granicus, Oxus, Tanais, Hydaspes and Indus appear in rapid succession, far more densely than the argument itself seems to demand (7.9–10). Barad's account of entanglement helps to explain their importance (139–41). These rivers form part of the speech's active machinery. Alexander recalls them as sites through which bodies have moved, armies have passed, and worlds have been joined. As he names them, those earlier crossings are brought into the present confrontation. Geography acquires a

temporal force: the distances that once separated Macedonia from Asia seem to fold into the space of the mutiny.

One detail makes this especially clear. Alexander composes the message that the departing soldiers are to carry home, and within it he refers to himself in the third person. He places himself among the crossings he has accomplished, including the Indus, "which has never been crossed by any one else except Dionysus" (7.10.6). The grammatical choice is revealing. Alexander momentarily becomes one element in a larger field of places, movements and heroic predecessors. The river, the traveller and the act of crossing belong to the same network. His authority emerges from his position within that network, and the speech makes the network itself part of the encounter at Opis.

Weapons complete the scene. The soldiers cast their arms down before the doors of the royal tent as a sign of supplication (7.11.4), and after the reconciliation they take them up again (7.11.7). The political transition is conducted in metal before it is conducted in words.

One further assemblage deserves notice. The speech survives through Ptolemy, through Aristobulus, through Arrian, and through a manuscript tradition, and recent work has stressed how much of the episode is Arrian's own composition (Liotsakis 12–18; Leon 333–47). The speech is therefore a mediated object all the way down. It does not follow that the analysis fails. The ontological work is performed within the narrative, and it is performed whoever performed it.

III. Affective Ecology: From Anger to Shame to Grief

An army that begins in fury ends in tears. The speed of the reversal is what needs explaining, and rational persuasion does not move at that speed.

The camp is saturated before Alexander speaks. There is a decade of marching in it, and exhaustion, and homesickness, and a suspicion that the king no longer needs the men who made him. The mutiny is an affective rupture before it is a political demand.

The executions produce the first change of state. Arrian's detail is precise: the arrests strike the crowd into a terrified silence (7.8.3). It would be a mistake to read that silence as an absence. Silence is a condition, and this one is made of fear. It arrests the momentum of the mutiny and clears a space in which some other feeling may take hold. The catalogue of rivers then fills the space. Each name carries a residue. The Hellespont holds the beginning of everything, and the Hydaspes holds the dead. The catalogue functions as an affective archive. It reactivates a memory that is distributed across thousands of bodies rather than stored in any one of them. Ahmed's account of stickiness describes the mechanism exactly (8–11). Pride adheres to the empire, and the empire ceases to be a policy and becomes an attachment.

Then the anger turns. Alexander sets Macedonian grievance beside Macedonian gain, and he sets both beside his own scarred body (7.9–10). Indignation becomes difficult to hold. A man cannot easily sustain his fury and his memory at the same moment, and it is memory that Alexander has just reactivated. Anger converts into *aidos*, and the conversion is the hinge of the episode.

The next move is the cruellest, and it is usually described too gently. Alexander withdraws. He shuts himself in the royal tent for two days and admits no one. On the third day he calls in the leading Persians and gives them the commands (7.11.1). He then gives them the names. There is a Persian squadron now, and there are Persian foot-companions, and there is a Persian regiment of Silver Shields, and there is a Companion cavalry (7.11.3). The gesture reads as punishment. But its function is replacement. What the Macedonians discover is that their identity is a set of titles,

and that the titles are portable. They had assumed that they were irreplaceable. The king shows them, without uttering a threat, that the world can be run without them.

Grief follows, and grief is the mechanism rather than the by-product. The men run to the tent and will not leave the doors by day or by night (7.11.4). What they mourn is their own necessity, not a policy. Arrian then records a detail that is easy to pass over. When Alexander comes out and sees them, he weeps as well (7.11.5). The synchronisation is mutual. The affective field closes around him too.

The resolution is conducted on the mouth. Callines, an officer of the Companion cavalry, states the grievance in its final form. It grieves the Macedonians that Persians are now called Alexander's kinsmen and are permitted to kiss him, while no Macedonian has been granted the honour. Alexander answers that he makes all of them his kinsmen and that they shall be called so from now on. Callines steps forward and kisses him, and whoever wishes does the same (7.11.6–7).

What has happened at this point deserves closer attention. Kinship functions here as a category before it registers as an emotion. Alexander does not tell the Macedonians that he feels for them what a man might feel for members of his family. He places them within the category of family itself. The term changes its range, and the kiss gives that change a physical form.

The opening of the crisis casts the gesture in a sharper light. The soldiers had taunted Alexander, telling him to go and campaign with his father Ammon (7.8.3). Their insult called his lineage into question. His reply reaches deeper than a defence of his ancestry. He alters the kinship structure within which both sides understand themselves, and the alteration takes place before them, in speech and then through the body.

Persuasion is too narrow a description for such an event. Austin's account of performativity presents another difficulty, since his performative utterances depend upon recognised conventions that confer authority upon the act. No established convention gave a Macedonian king the power to transform an army into kin merely by declaring it so. The category comes into being through its use. Alexander speaks a relation into existence, and the kiss materialises it.

The tears therefore belong to the transformation itself. They mark the moment at which the soldiers encounter a changed social world and recognise themselves within it. Something has been rebuilt around them, and they have become part of its new structure.

IV. Cartographic Performance: The Banquet as Map

The *Opis* speech is organised by geography with a persistence unusual even in ancient set-piece oratory. Rivers, mountain ranges, conquered peoples: the inventory continues after its evidentiary work is done. Lefebvre's proposition makes sense of this surplus (26–53). The catalogue is doing more than describing an empire. It constructs the spatial field through which empire can be imagined.

Its itinerary proceeds along a single course, from Macedonia through the Hellespont, Ionia, Lydia, Egypt, Mesopotamia, Babylonia, and Bactria, reaching India and finally the outer ocean (7.9.6–8). The effect is strangely coherent. The places cease to appear as separate destinations and become positions within one continuous expanse. The procedure is cartographic in character. A map makes distant objects coexist upon a surface; the speech performs the same compression within a voice.

The rivers carry much of the argument. In Greek geographical thought, rivers possess a limit-forming quality. The Hellespont separates Europe from Asia, while the Indus marks the world's farthest reach. Alexander's catalogue alters their function. Each river appears as something

to be crossed, then absorbed into the next stage of the journey. Movement acquires an almost limitless continuity. There is an ideological consequence. Once a boundary has been made permeable, its status as a boundary becomes difficult to sustain. Conquest can then be narrated as an uninterrupted extension of a march already in progress. Lefebvre's insight reaches beyond representation here. The soldiers inhabit the spatial order produced by the speech. Their conception of home changes with it.

That is the paradox at the heart of the mutiny. The men demand to go home, a demand grounded in the belief that Macedonia remains the place from which they once departed. The campaigns have altered its position. Macedonia had stood at the margin of the Greek world; the territories gathered into Alexander's account have transformed it into the centre of a transcontinental empire. The soldiers conceive of departure as a return to an earlier order. But the spatial logic required for such a return has already been dismantled by the conquests they celebrate. Their homecoming has become conceptually unstable. Home has been promoted.

Then comes the banquet, and the banquet is the argument made visible. Alexander sacrifices and gives a public feast, and nine thousand guests attend.³ The seating is the detail that matters. Alexander sits, the Macedonians sit around him, the Persians sit next to them, and beyond the Persians sit men of the other nations according to their standing. All of them draw wine from the same bowl. Greek seers and Persian magi begin the rite together. Alexander then prays for concord and for a partnership in rule between Macedonians and Persians, and the whole company pours one libation and sings the song of victory (7.11.8–9).

The seating plan functions as a map. Alexander is its point of origin, while proximity to him supplies its governing coordinate. Nine thousand bodies are distributed in ordered circles, turning political hierarchy into visible geometry. Every people occupies a position, and every

position derives its meaning from the king. The spatial world of the *Opis* speech has acquired furniture, bodies, and ritual. It can now be inhabited. The men demanding a return to Macedonia find themselves seated at its centre.

This reframes the longstanding dispute over the episode. Tarn interpreted the prayer for *homonoia* as an expression of human brotherhood; Badian argued that the evidence could not sustain that interpretation (Tarn 2: 399–449; Badian 425–44). For seventy years the debate has revolved around intention. Both sides treat the prayer as a statement from which Alexander's political programme might be reconstructed. The ritual permits another reading. The prayer ratifies a world. It does so before nine thousand witnesses arranged according to the spatial order that the speech has already created. Alexander may have possessed no settled doctrine corresponding to the ideals later extracted from the ceremony. The banquet required only that the order be enacted.

Conclusion

The Opis episode resists the categories in which it is usually contained. Read as ontological theatre, it becomes a performance in which three registers operate simultaneously. First comes a material assemblage of scars, garments, corpses, and rivers. Then an affective ecology converts anger into shame, shame into grief, and grief into the kiss that seals the transformation upon the mouth. Finally, a cartographic performance remakes the political map: Macedonia moves from the margin to the centre, while nine thousand men are seated within the spatial order that the ceremony has produced. The mutiny ends when Alexander's audience has acquired a new dwelling in the world, and loyalty has become the intelligible mode of life at that address.

Two consequences follow. The first concerns Arrian. For a century, the question of authenticity has occupied the foreground, while the present analysis can leave its answer aside. That indifference is itself a finding. The ontological labour resides within the narrative, regardless

of the hand that composed it. Arrian consequently appears as a maker of worlds in his own right, rather than merely as a conduit through which an event reaches the reader with varying degrees of distortion. The argument thus joins the recent emphasis on Arrian's composition as composition (Leon 333–47; Liotsakis 1–38).

The second consequence is methodological. Ontological theatre supplies a way of reading ancient speeches as practices that constitute political reality, accompanied by a test that may be applied elsewhere. Thucydides, Polybius, Livy, and Tacitus offer set pieces that invite such examination.

Two limitations remain. The evidence is literary representation, transmitted through a lengthy and interested tradition, so claims about affective or material processes remain interpretive rather than empirical. The framework has also incurred a philological cost; closer attention to Arrian's Greek and narratology would strengthen the argument.

The central claim survives these qualifications. At Opis, a mutinous army was gathered, with its rivers, corpses, scars, and cloaks, into a world that had not existed that morning, where loyalty became the only intelligible place to stand.

Notes:

1. References follow the standard book, chapter, and section numbering of the *Anabasis*.
Quotations are taken from Chinnock's public-domain translation and have been checked against the Greek text and facing translation in Brunt's Loeb edition (vol. 2); the two agree in substance at the points quoted here.
2. Cairns distinguishes *aidos* as prospective inhibition, felt before an act in anticipation of others' regard, from retrospective disgrace at a deed already done (1–47). The reading here turns on the prospective sense. What unsettles the Macedonians is less a past humiliation than the prospect, made vivid by the promotion of Persians into their titles (7.11.1–3), of being seen by their own community as dispensable.
3. Arrian's figure of nine thousand guests is not independently verifiable, and the argument does not depend upon its accuracy. What signifies is the seating plan, which is a structure and not a number.

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