Doing What Comes Naturally: Olympias as Mother, Regent, and Royal Woman

Lisa Jackson

Lisa Jackson is pursuing a Master of Arts from San Francisco State University in the History of Gender. In the Fall, Lisa will write her thesis on gender and the American Communist Party.

ANDROMACHE (To Hermione): Even if a woman is married to a bad husband, she should be content with him and not engage in a contest of pride. If you had married a king in snowy Thrace, where one husband shares his bed in turn with many wives, would you have killed them? In that case, you would have shown yourself to be imputing sexual insatiability to all women. Disgraceful! We may suffer this disease worse than men, but we conceal it decently. My dearest Hector, I even helped you in your love-affairs, to please you, if ever Aphrodite tripped you up; and often offered my breast to your bastards, so as to cause you no offense. By doing this, I drew my husband to me by my virtue; but you, in your terror, do not even let a drop of the dew of heaven settle on your husband.¹

Andromache was the mythological ancestor of the Aeacid dynasty, rulers of a kingdom to the northwest of Macedonia called Molossia. She and her kinswomen would have been role models for young women in the Molossian court, including Olympias, the mother of Alexander the Great. Another influence may have been Eurydicé I, mother of King Philip II of Macedonia, and the first Macedonian royal woman to appear in known sources, who attempted in a public manner to safeguard the kingdom for her sons. The actions of Eurydicé I and the mythology of her ancestor Andromache would certainly have resonated in the competitive atmosphere of a polygamous royal marriage. A royal woman in such a setting had two duties: to produce a male heir for the kingdom and to promote her descendents as the rightful claimants to the throne. Following the examples of these two women, Olympias first played the dutiful wife in a polygamous household, then ruthlessly supported her children in succession politics in Macedonia and Molossia.

Ancient women did not write their stories. Most often, they appear in sources written by elite males, usually hostile to their subjects. Moreover, women typically served as either symbols of matronly virtue or moral decay in these narratives. Explained as symptomatic of the female gender, evidence of

moral decay is often juxtaposed with questions regarding social status and heritage. For these reasons, Joan W. Scott’s argument for the use of the intersectionality of class, race, and gender as an analytical framework is particularly salient in discussions of women in antiquity and “inequalities of power.” As Judith Hallett notes in her study of Cornelia, stories of fathers exercising their patria potestas over insubordinate sons functioned as morality tales that demonstrated to elite Romans when it was acceptable to take extreme measures. Ancient tales of women behaving badly likely served the same purpose—to reveal the consequences of non-elite or non-Greek behavior. The feminist historian must look beyond this moralizing by ancient male writers to find potential evidence for what women actually did.

In 2000, Elizabeth Carney published Women and Monarchy in Macedonia, the starting point for any study of royal women in this period. From the rise of the Argead dynasty to the end of autonomy with the Roman conquest, this book demonstrates how the power of the Macedonian king flowed to others in his clan, particularly the women in his immediate family. Carney argues that, in contrast to the traditional view of an unchanging system of governance, Macedonian monarchy evolved from the “domination of a clan,” as exemplified by the Argead dynasty of Philip II, to one “understood as an office held by a series of individuals” in the Hellenistic Era. Moreover, Carney maintains that this evolution is reflected in the changing status of Macedonian royal women. This is the context in which to begin a study of Olympias, the most famous, but not the only Argead royal woman whose public actions offended later historians.

Carney continued to examine the changing role of Macedonian royal women in her biographical sketch Olympias: Mother of Alexander the Great. In addition to her placement within the framework of an evolving Macedonian monarchy, Carney contends her Aeacid heritage and Homeric ancestors Andromache and Hecuba “shaped [Olympias’s] public conduct at critical moments in her life.” Upheld as loyal mothers and wives in ancient treatments of the Trojan War, both Andromache and Hecuba served as models for Olympias’s public behavior. In Women and Monarchy, Carney laments historians’ penchant for comparing Olympias with southern Greek, particularly Attic, notions of proper elite female behavior. Instead, Carney suggests that we begin with the “opposite assumption;” the expectations for elite Athenian

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5 Carney, Monarchy, 7.
6 Carney, Monarchy, xiii.

EX POST FACTO
women’s conduct differed from those for elite Macedonian women. To that end, it is necessary to know what constituted acceptable elite female behavior in ancient Greek society.

Susan Pomeroy’s book, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*, provides the essential information on the lives of elite Attic women in this period. Written because she wondered what Greek and Roman women did while the men engaged in political and military matters, Pomeroy’s forty-year-old book remains relevant to the study of women in antiquity. In addition to chapters on elite Attic women, the chapter on women in the Homeric epics is particularly useful because Olympias and her fellow Molossians claimed to be the descendents of several of these women. According to Pomeroy, the veracity of these legends carries less weight than the “poetic reflections of the evolving societies” they convey. Olympias would have appreciated this distinction—public presentation mattered to her more than her actual heritage.

In addition to these ancestral role models, a contemporary influence may have been her mother-in-law, Eurydicè I. In an article on female power in early Macedonia, Grace H. Macurdy reveals a royal woman whose treatment in the literary sources parallels that of Olympias. Both were depicted as ruthless and ambitious, willing to act like men in their quest for power. Macurdy’s article focuses on the question of whether Eurydicè I and Olympias were anomalies, or if their behavior indicated a Macedonian tradition of women’s involvement in affairs of state. Although the first Macedonian queen in known sources to have taken political action, Eurydicè I had no independent power according to Macurdy. Moreover, she contends that Eurydicè’s actions reflected her Illyrian heritage and not Macedonian customs. Like the limited sources available to her, Macurdy sees Eurydicè’s actions as symbolic of her masculinity.

With the exception of her contemporary, Aeschines, all available sources that document some part of Olympias’s life were written between 200 B.C.E. and 400 C.E, at least a century after her death in 316 B.C.E. Diodorus Siculus wrote a history of the Mediterranean in the late first century B.C.E. *The History of Alexander* by Quintus Curtius Rufus was written some time in the mid-first century C.E. Arrian’s *The Campaigns of Alexander* and Plutarch’s *Lives* were penned in the early second century C.E. With the exception of his name and evidence that he wrote an abridgement of a lengthy history by Pompeius Trogus, knowledge of Justin remains elusive. Ronald Syme argues that the *Epitome of the Philippic History of Pompeius Trogus* was written

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12 Macurdy, “Queen Eurydicè I,” 207.
sometime around 390 C.E. Contemporary accounts by Alexander’s official biographer Callisthenes, his friend and bodyguard Ptolemy, and the engineer Aristobulus are lost. The Alexandrian writer, Cleitarchus, whose works are also missing, probably wrote a history of Alexander shortly after his death, possibly at the behest of Ptolemy. Until recently, scholars classified these sources as either Vulgate or non-Vulgate, depending upon their relative usage of Cleitarchus as a primary source. According to Carney, Diodorus and Curtius read Cleitarchus. Curtius also used Ptolemy, as did Arrian. Aristobulus provided evidence for Arrian and Curtius. Plutarch cites these three among the twenty-four sources for his Life as well as “Letters of Alexander.” Only Diodorus lists Hieronymous of Cardia.

These sources provide snippets of information about Olympias. Because they deal exclusively with Alexander’s military career, Arrian and Curtius mention Olympias only occasionally. Plutarch gives intriguing, but conflicting images of Olympias in Moralia and Alexander. Diodorus and Justin provide sweeping narratives of Mediterranean history that include extensive sections on the reigns of Philip and Alexander. Two known inscriptions testify to Olympias’s activities during Alexander’s reign, as well as surviving fragments of a speech by Hyperides. The three suggest Olympias wielded considerable power in her son’s absence and give the impression that Olympias “did more than harass her son by letter.”

This essay will compare the available evidence about Andromache and Eurydice I with those on Olympias to determine how Aeacid and Argead traditions guided Olympias’s actions as royal woman, regent, and mother. Because elite Greek sources represent the bulk of known evidence, the first section will be an analysis of women’s status among the upper classes in Athens during this period. This will be followed by an examination of the women of Homeric epics, particularly her ancestor Andromache. Last will be a comparison of the evidence for Olympias and Eurydice I. In doing so, this essay will build on Carney’s assertion that Aeacid and Argead traditions shaped Olympias’ public presentation while informing her actions as royal mother and regent.

At first glance, elite women in Greece had much in common with those in Molossia and Macedonia. Women in each society had the primary responsibility of producing heirs and the secondary one of maintaining the family’s reputation through the perpetuation of religious rites. Marriages, like the one between Alexander of Molossia and his niece Cleopatra, that strengthened ties between neighboring dynastic families were not unlike marriages between close kin in Athens, designed to preserve a family’s oikos.

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15 Truesdell S. Brown, “Clitarchus,” The American Journal of Philology 71, no. 2 (1950): 134–155. Brown sites W.W. Tarn as leading the charge in a “new…sustained attack on one of the most heavily fortified posts of Hellenistic literary criticism, the ‘vulgate’ theory.” This new theory, which Brown says “leans heavily on the ‘mercenary source,’” puts Aristobulus above Clitarchus as source material for Rufus, Diodorus, and Justin.
16 Carney, Olympias, 136.

EX POST FACTO
This is where the similarities apparently ended. With the exception of the aforementioned religious duties, Attic women were excluded from the public sphere and political discourse. In a hereditary monarchy, this separation was not possible because public and private spheres were interconnected to such an extent that the ruling dynasty was the physical manifestation of the state. Royal women, therefore, had public roles to play, particularly when men were away fighting in wars.\(^\text{17}\)

Olympias and daughter Cleopatra are cited as recipients of grain shipments in several inscriptions, which could indicate a more active role for royal Molossian and Macedonian women (SEG IX.2). As Carney notes, the other shipments were listed as going to particular states and not the leaders of those states.\(^\text{18}\) Diodorus most often cites Olympias’s public reputation as a contributing factor in her successes, following Alexander’s death. Her connection to two ruling dynasties led Polyperchon to request her return to Macedonia to care for Alexander IV (Diod. 18.49.4). During the Successor Wars, correspondence from Olympias helped to maintain the allegiance of commanders of the elite fighting unit, the Silver Shields, (Diod. 18.62.1–2) and leading Attic citizens (Diod. 18.65.2). The power of her status as a representative of the Argead dynasty was such that armies sent out to prevent her from returning to Macedonia switched sides (Diod. 19.11.2–3). It struck fear into the Antipatrid Nicanor, who lied to her rather than admit that he had no intention of restoring autonomy to the Attic cities of Munychia and Pireaus (Diod. 18.64.3; 18.65.1). Once Olympias was in the hands of the man whose family she had systematically eliminated, even Casander had difficulty orchestrating her execution because of her position (Diod. 19.51.5). More about her use of the Argead bloodline in succession politics will follow, but first we must examine how she, and other Aeacids, formulated and maintained a connection to the heroes of Homeric epics.

By the time Euripides wrote *Andromache*, the Aeacid dynasty had established its mythological origins through her bloodline. A common practice among ruling families in antiquity, this constructed heritage helped legitimate Aeacid rule. As the mythological mother figure of Molossia, Andromache connected the Aeacids to Neoptolamus and his father Achilles. As a child of Peleus and the goddess Thetis, Achilles could boast divine origins, as could his descendants the Aeacids (*Andromache* 1246–1249). This ancestry distinguished Olympias and her children from the other members of Philip’s household.\(^\text{19}\) Perhaps produced first in Molossia during the early stages of the Peloponnesian War, *Andromache* continues the stories of several key figures in Homer’s *Iliad*.


\(^{18}\) Carney, *Olympias*, 51.

\(^{19}\) Carney, *Olympias*, 5–6.
The blatant anti-Spartan sentiment and the positive treatment of Andromache and Peleus lend credence to both the date and place of its initial production.\textsuperscript{20}

In the introduction to Euripides's play, translator Michael Lloyd argues that with the notable exception of the Trojan King Priam, heroes of epics were monogamous.\textsuperscript{21} If this were true, then the pseudo-polygamous setting of \textit{Andromache} may have been a plot device used by Euripides to provide the obvious dramatic tension derived from having bedmate and wife in close proximity. Moreover, the situation offers a multitude of comparison opportunities, including good wife–bad wife, Greek–Other, and rich–poor. As mentioned, the Greeks do not fare well in this juxtaposition. Andromache is presented as the ideal, devoted wife, while the Spartan Hermione is cast as a reflection of her adulterous mother Helen. When Hermione, Chorus, and Menelaus complain about her presence in the home, Andromache counters with the assertion that a good wife should assist her husband when he is smitten with a new woman (\textit{Andromache} 213–227).

Although Plutarch suggested that Philip and Olympias fell in love during a chance meeting on the island of Samothrace (\textit{Alex.} 2.1), it was more likely a marriage alliance intended to strengthen ties between Macedonia and Molossia.\textsuperscript{22} Therefore, it is possible that Olympias was aware of her pending nuptials when she left Molossia for either Macedonia or Samothrace. If that were the case, what would the young bride Olympias have taken from Euripides's cautionary tale? While there is no evidence of polygamy in the Molossian court, there is sufficient evidence of concubinage and illegitimate children among the elite. Possibly unfamiliar with royal Macedonian polygamous traditions, Olympias was potentially cognizant of extramarital relationships among the nobility. Regardless, Olympias must have known that her role in this marriage was to represent her country and to deliver a male heir. Once she accomplished this, and Philip began treating Alexander as heir to the throne, Olympias's position as the dominant wife would have been secure. Yet several sources present her as jealous of Philip's marriage to Cleopatra (\textit{Alex.} 9, \textit{Justin}, 9.5, 9.7). Plutarch contradicts himself, however, in "Advice to a Bride and Groom," when he cites Olympias as the model polygamous wife, who welcomed Philip's "Thessalian woman" into her home (\textit{Moralia} 141.23). This second image seems to be more plausible for two reasons. As the mother of the future king, Olympias would have been confident in her own position at court. Moreover, as a representative of the Molossian court and as a descendent of a resolute, devoted wife, like Andromache, it is possible that Olympias knew the value of presenting herself in public in a similar fashion.

Upon her arrival to the Macedonian court in 357 B.C.E., Olympias may have encountered a less ephemeral role model than Andromache—her mother-

\textsuperscript{20} Euripides, \textit{Andromache}, 13; On the possibility that it was first performed in Molossia, see J.L. Butrica, "Democrats and Euripides: \textit{Andromache}," \textit{Hermes} 129 (2001), 188–197.
\textsuperscript{21} Euripides, \textit{Andromache}, 7.
in-law, Eurydicê I. The last known reference to Eurydicê I in the sources is in a speech from 346 B.C.E., made by Aeschines (II. 28), whose use of the past tense implies that she was dead by this time.\textsuperscript{23} Mothers of kings wielded considerably more influence than wives, so it is likely that Olympias was subordinate to her, even after she gave birth to Alexander, the year after arriving at court.\textsuperscript{24} If rumors of her involvement in the deaths of her husband and several of her sons were false, Eurydicê I would still have been a formidable presence, simply through the power of her reputation as wife and mother of kings. For a determined, young royal wife like Olympias, Eurydicê I’s life must have read like a playbook on how to triumph in succession politics.

An early example of a royal woman accused of using sex to achieve political aims and of abusing her limited powers, Eurydicê I most likely only exists in the evidence because of her son Philip’s achievements. Macurdy and Carney also speculate that a possible Illyrian heritage would explain her more active participation in Macedonian politics and, hence, her place in the records.\textsuperscript{25} A connection to Illyria would be significant, as Illyrian royal women were trained to lead armies into battle. Philip’s part-Illyrian granddaughter, Adea Eurydicê, was said to have done so, in an effort to prevent Olympias from returning to Macedonia in 317 B.C.E.\textsuperscript{26}

Despite Philip’s fame, his mother is mentioned only rarely in available sources, three of them in connection with the turbulent years following the death of her husband, King Amyntas of Macedonia. One of two known wives of Amyntas, Eurydicê I gave birth to three sons and one daughter—Alexander II, Perdiccas III, Philip II, and Eurynoe.\textsuperscript{27} If Justin is to be believed, Eurydicê I conspired with her son-in-law to murder Amyntas and their children, so that Eurydicê I and this son-in-law might marry and he could be king (Justin 7.4—6). Diodorus names the son-in-law Ptolemy and implicates him in the murder of Alexander II, without mentioning a conspiracy with Eurydicê I. According to Diodorus, Perdiccas III assassinated Ptolemy while Philip II was serving time as a hostage in Thebes, as part of a peace agreement with Illyria (Diod. 15.60.3, 15.71.1, 16.2.4).

A third source, Aeschines, presents Eurydicê I as a devoted mother seeking the assistance of the Athenian general, Iphicrates, to secure the Macedonian throne for Perdiccas III and Philip II, both minors at the time of their older brother Alexander’s murder (Aeschines 2.26—29). As a contemporary of Philip II, Aeschines may have known what actually transpired. The speech itself was a recreation of one given before Philip II during Aeschines’s term as Athenian envoy to the Macedonian court. There are two problems with accepting this version at face value, however. Faced with accusations of accepting bribes from the Macedonian king, Aeschines most likely edited this

\textsuperscript{23} Carney, Monarchy, 45.  
\textsuperscript{24} Carney, Olympias, 24. Carney, Monarchy, 78.  
\textsuperscript{25} Carney, Monarchy, 48—49; Macurdy, “Queen Eurydicê I,” 210.  
\textsuperscript{26} Carney, Olympias, 74.  
\textsuperscript{27} Carney, Monarchy, 42.
recounting with that in mind. Second, Aeschines initially delivered the speech to Philip and, without a doubt, put a positive spin on the tale of the king's ascension.\textsuperscript{28} Nevertheless, this account of a royal woman taking political action in succession politics is "without known precedent" and may have inspired Olympias and Adea Eurydícē in the aftermath of Alexander's death.\textsuperscript{29}

Maintaining a link to her Aeacid family and their heroic roots not only strengthened her status, it also may have provided Olympias with some sense that she was protected.\textsuperscript{30} Faced with competition between heirs deemed healthy by Philip (\textit{Moralia} 178.22), Alexander would naturally have a close relationship with his mother, his most ardent advocate for succession. Olympias's power was limited, however, to associations with men and the military power at their command.\textsuperscript{31} Therefore, it was often necessary to call on them for assistance, particularly in the turbulent period following Alexander's death. Again, she had Andromache as a guide in these endeavors. When faced with the possibility of her son's murder, Andromache took immediate action in the only way her position as a slave allowed. With no living male kin to support her, Andromache turned to the closest male relative available—her son's paternal great grandfather, Peleus (\textit{II. 22.477–515}).\textsuperscript{32} She sent several envoys to him, requesting assistance against the machinations of Hermione and Menelaus, while taking refuge at the shrine of Thetis (\textit{Andromache} 40–45, 79–90). Peleus arrived just as Andromache has agreed to sacrifice herself in exchange for the life of her son and, in doing so, saves the old man's only living descendent.

Because Hermione was childless, she and Menelaus may have been concerned that Andromache's bastard son would be legitimated and sought to eliminate that possibility. Legitimacy appears to have been negotiable in succession politics in this period, exemplified in two stories about Alexander and Olympias. The first concerns Philip observing Olympias in bed with a snake (\textit{Alex. 2.4, 3.1}). The second, and more serious, one involved accusations made by Attalus at the wedding symposium celebrating his niece Cleopatra's marriage to Philip (\textit{Alex. 9.4–5, Justin 9.7.3–6}). While the former tale has been dismissed as mythology, created to lend credence to Alexander's claims of divinity, the latter incident has sparked intense debate among scholars for several reasons, but for this discussion the response of Alexander and Olympias is the most pertinent.\textsuperscript{33} After a violent exchange, in which he threw a cup at Attalus,
Alexander took his mother home to Molossia, before continuing on to Illyria. At least one source claims that Olympias tried to incite her brother to invade Macedonia over this insult. Unlike many women given in marriage alliances in other political settings, Olympias maintained ties to her homeland and used them when she felt threatened.34

After Alexander’s death, Olympias, her daughter Cleopatra, and Alexander’s sons were in a similarly dangerous situation with respect to succession. Alexander had eliminated his competition, creating a leadership vacuum among the Argeads. As Carney contends, many of the generals fighting in the Successor Wars would have been pleased to see an end to the dynasty.35 Coupled with the knowledge that her main rival, Cassander, intended to seize Macedonia, Olympias had to look for allies wherever she could find them. As with succession politics in the polygamous royal house, this was an instance in which maintaining familial ties proved beneficial. Like her ancestor, Olympias looked to the men most loyal to her for advice and assistance. Eumenes suggested that she stay in Molossia until the wars were decided (Diod. 18.58.2–4), but she chose to return and did so with the help of armies, led by Polyperchon and her cousin, Aeacides, king of Epirus (Diod. 19.11.1–2).

As portrayed in the sources, Olympias was a ruthless woman who, in seeking to elevate herself as an individual, assisted in the destruction of the Argead dynasty. The irony of these treatments is twofold: the absence of male heirs dictated Argead female involvement in succession politics, and Olympias’s actions mirrored those of the men vying for supremacy in the wars following Alexander’s death.36 Because she was a woman, Olympias was scrutinized using what Elizabeth Carney calls the “insidious niceness factor,” in which women were judged by ancient writers on the relative kindness of their actions.37 Olympias, on the other hand, may have judged her role models with less moralizing, deeming their successful endeavors proof that Andromache and Eurydicê I were deserving of her emulation.

34 Carney, Olympias, 3.
35 Carney, Olympias, 61.
36 Carney, Monarchy, 115–118.
37 Carney, Olympias, 1.
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