

The past is a foreign land: Alexander, Hephaestion and the love that dare not speak its name

By Jon Hewitt for HIS201: The Uses and Abuses of History.

'The past is a foreign land' is a unique quote that has entered popular culture and taken on a somewhat proverbial interpretation since it was first written. The quote profoundly questions contemporary society's ability to truly understand history and the role that history plays within society. Historians are limited by their personal life experience when attempting to understand and interpret the past. When using this quote as a lens to view the controversy surrounding historical interpretations of the relationship between Alexander the Great and Hephaestion, it becomes clear that the past truly is a foreign land.

The quote 'The past is a foreign land' has become part of the public vernacular since it was first coined. It was author L P Hartley who was credited with authorship of the quote in its original form 'The past is a Foreign Country' in his 1953 novel *The Go Between* (Dirda 2002, p. 113). Hartley's novel tells the story of a 65-year-old man revisiting his past after discovering a childhood journal (Gardner 2013, p. lxxi). The novel explores the complexity of the human relationship to time itself and the paradox that results in humanity's nature of experiencing a detachment with the past, yet never escaping it (Gardner 2013, p. lxxi). In 1985, David Lowenthal released an academic piece of literature titled *The Past is a Foreign Country*. It examines the concept of the past and how it influences humanity's relationship with the present through heritage, nostalgia, and repossession (Harris 1986, p. 721). In 2004, author Gianrico Carofiglio published a psychological mafia thriller with the same title, which was also adapted into film in 2008 (Italian Film Festival 2009). With the translation from Italian to English, we first see the quote as 'The past is a Foreign Land'.

The role of history in contemporary society must be recognised, as it is the knowledge acquired throughout time that is interwoven into the very fabric of contemporary society. Through the knowledge of history, an understanding of the present may be gained. Without this knowledge, society would be inclined to invent a past that would support its ability to navigate contemporary issues (Crabtree, D 2001). In the same way, on an individual basis, a personal history gives meaning and context to life experiences. Therefore, the history of any society has the same function on a societal level (Corfeild, PJ 2008). History encompasses everything from science, technology, politics, war, economics, medicine, the arts and sociology. For this reason, the need for a knowledge of history is fundamentally inescapable (Corfeild, PJ 2008). In contemporary society, history provides achievements to be inspired by, calamities and failures to learn from, heroes to emulate and villains to be wary of (Crabtree, D 2001). History provides society with a base of knowledge and experience with which to frame any contemporary issue or point of view (Crabtree, D 2001). The fundamental role of history in contemporary society is not something that is easily quantified, as it is often intangible. Despite this, it influences and moulds the very understanding of the present.

It is important to acknowledge the role that history plays in contemporary society. However, it is equally important to acknowledge the role of mythology. Historians apply a framework of critical examination of sources to come as close to an understanding of accepted 'factual events' as possible (Berger 2009, p. 490). The concept of myth, in contrast, is often perceived as unguided and without agency or accountability (Bell 2003, p. 75). To regard myth in such simplistic ways ignores the complexities and its role in nation building, culture and social cohesion (Bell 2003, p. 75). Myth takes the role of simplifying the complexities of history, flattening the nuances, exaggerating and dramatising performances and presenting a digestible narrative that is often used by nation builders in uniting populations (Berger 2009, p. 492). The need for such myths can be seen clearly in the mythologising of 'great' battles, which validate military action, ancient origins, providing legitimacy to claims over land ownership and the mythologising of individuals who provide inspiration and admiration (Liu & Hilton 2005, p. 539). Myths are in a constant state of creation, dissemination, negotiation and reconstruction, helping to define social and national identity (Lui & Hilton 2005, p. 537). Whilst it is apparent that both history and myth are intertwined in nation building, conflict between history and myth is bound to arise when historical truths do not fit the narrative of mythology. This could be argued is the case with the mythologising of Alexander the Great as an icon of Greek heterosexual masculinity (Bell 2003, p. 77). Myth and history cannot easily be delineated from one another, however their role in constructing and maintaining imagined communities, particularly nationhood, is essential.

It is with this understanding of the relevance of history and myth on contemporary society that the current debate over same sex marriage can be viewed historically, particularly via ancient Greece. The debate over the nature of the relationship between Alexander the Great and Hephaestion is a prime example of how interpretations of history can shed light on current contemporary issues (Reames 2010, p. 184). Alexander took the throne of Macedon after his father's death in 336 BC (Cartledge 2005, p. 228). He went on to conquer much of the known world before dying at the age of 32, having left a legacy that would enshrine him as an icon of Greek heroism and masculinity (Cartledge 2005, p. 228). During his life, Alexander had three wives yet it was the controversial relationship with his childhood friend Hephaestion that was the most enduring (Cartledge 2005, p. 228). In contemporary historical studies, Alexander has been portrayed as homosexual or bisexual by some historians whilst fervently defended from such allegations by others (Reames 1999, p. 89). It is impossible to determine with absolute certainty whether their relationship was platonic or sexual with the historical evidence available (Reames 1999, p. 82). The profound love and commitment these two men felt for one another, however, is not questioned as it is well recorded by Grecian biographers Arrian, Diodorus and Plutarch (Fox 2004, p. 190). The extent to which historians debate and defend such queries as to the nature of the relationship is particularly telling of contemporary society's attitude towards masculinity and homosexuality.

In contemporary western society, it is taken for granted that sexuality, like gender and race, determine an individual's identity. Despite this, throughout history the meaning and social implications of sexuality have varied greatly. Before the 19th century, there was regulation and repression of specific sexual acts that were not deemed conducive to procreation (Davidson

2001, p. 15). However, these acts were not indicative of any 'type' of individual. Therefore, the repression of such acts can be linked to the need for ruling classes to maximise labour capacity and in turn repress pleasurable pursuits (Foucault 1976, p. 6). Carl Westphal first coined the term homosexual in 1869, in an article describing 'contrary sexual sensations' (Davidson 2001, p. 15). Similarly, the term heterosexual did not appear in medical or scientific literature until the late 19th century and like 'homosexual', it was used to describe a sexual attraction that was rooted in pleasure rather than procreation and was therefore deviant (Seidman 2003, p. 47). In the early 20th century, amidst women's emancipation and men shifting from blue-collar to white-collar work, preserving gender roles became synonymous with stabilising social order (Seidman 2003, p.48). Heterosexuality was then defined as the healthy and normal sexual attraction whilst homosexuality became stigmatised as a threat to gender roles and the very fabric of society (Seidman 2003, p. 49). In an effort to recognise where homosexual behaviour may take place, the identity of the homosexual was constructed. This was a personage, a childhood, mannerisms, a physiology and an anatomy that was separate from the 'norm' of the heterosexual (Foucault 1976, p. 43). The construction of the 'homosexual' as a threat to gender roles and therefore society at large remains at the forefront of contemporary debates over same sex marriage and LGBTQ rights (Seidman 2003, p. 49). Through examining the history of heterosexuality and homosexuality in western society, it is clear that interpreting sexual acts as defining intrinsic identities is a relatively modern construct that is a result of a specific social environment.

Greek history and the way in which the Ancient Greeks view of sexuality differs from our own serves as a vivid example of the effectiveness of cultural constructions on identity. Art and literature from ancient Greece portrays same-sex relationships with great frequency, often portraying them as necessary for social cohesion and male development (Stearns 2009, p. 33). The most common of these relationships found throughout the ancient Greek world was that of Pederasty involving an older man known as the *erastes* ('a male who loves') and a younger man in need of tutelage, known as *eromenos* ('the beloved') (Davidson 2001, p. 41). The practice of pederastic relationships was not only sexual but firmly entrenched in the institutions of the military and education (Stearns 2009, p. 33). Whilst Pederastic relationships were common and even promoted in ancient Greece, other same-sex relations that did not involve an age difference were also well documented (Foucault 1984, p. 194). Same-sex relations were rarely exclusive and were viewed as additional outlets for love and sexual desire rather than as alternative to heterosexual relations (Stearns 2009, p. 33). This fact would lead many to presume that the term 'bisexual' would be a better term to describe Greek sexuality than 'homosexual', yet it is apparent that the Greeks did not acknowledge two separate types of desire, making the term bisexual equally insufficient (Foucault 1984, p. 188). The study of Greek sexuality sheds light on the fundamental flaw in the contemporary view of sexual identity as something that is a binding part of identity.

Changing attitudes towards same sex relations have affected how historians interpret the relationship between Alexander and Hephaestion. Whilst there is no direct evidence of a sexual relationship, some historians argue that same sex relations were so commonplace at the time that stating the fact explicitly would have been inconsequential (Reames-Zimmerman 1999, p.

82). There is documented evidence that Alexander's parents, Philip and Olympias, expressed concern over their son's apparent lack of interest in women (Fox 2004, p. 57). Alexander modelled himself on the Greek hero Achilles and Hephaestion on Achilles's male lover, Patroclus, paying tribute to their heroes and proudly emulating them (Arrian 1971, p. 67). A letter written by Greek philosopher Diogenes to Alexander provides further evidence, accusing him of 'being ruled by Hephaestion's thighs' (Reames-Zimmerman 1999, p. 91). Arrian documented that when Alexander married his second wife Barsine, he gave Drypetis, Barsine's sister, to Hephaestion so that he could be uncle to Hephaestion's children (Arrian 1971, p. 354). Most telling of the relationship were the numerous accounts of Alexander's grief over Hephaestion's death. It was documented that Alexander lay with the body for a full day and night. He also had Hephaestion's doctor killed, ordered sacrifice to be offered to Hephaestion as a demigod and had the shrine of Asclepius, the god of medicine, razed to the ground (Arrian 1971, p. 373). It is further documented by numerous biographers of Alexander that he ordered the construction of a funeral pyre at Babylon at an unprecedented cost of 10,000 talents (approx. US\$7 billion) and ordained a period of mourning throughout the East (Arrian 1971, p. 373). Whilst historians cannot look into the bedroom of Alexander, it is not unreasonable to suggest the possibility that Alexander's relationship with Hephaestion was not only intimate but perhaps sexual, given the evidence available.

Portrayals in popular culture of Alexander and his relationship with Hephaestion illuminate how history is interpreted through the moral standards of the present. Prior to the 1990s, biographers chose to reserve comment on Hephaestion, only tackling the unavoidable reaction to his death (Reames 2010, p. 188). It appears that historians who do not wish to broach the topic of Alexander's sexuality also chose to avoid commenting on Hephaestion's place in history (Nikoloutsos 2008, p. 237). Hollywood similarly avoided the topic in its first biopic, '*Alexander the Great*' released in 1956 starring Richard Burton, only briefly mentioning Hephaestion, whilst Alexander and Ancient Greece are portrayed as emphatically heterosexual (Alexander The Great 1956). In the 1964 television adaptation starring William Shatner, Hephaestion does not feature at all (Reames 2010, p. 188). These depictions of Alexander have further served to fuel the myth-making machine that has promoted Alexander as an icon of masculine heterosexuality (Reames 2010, p. 188). In 2004, Oliver Stone's '*Alexander*' controversially attempted to tackle the subject of Hephaestion's relationship with Alexander (Alexander 2004). Stone deliberately creates an atmosphere of erotic tension around the relationship and yet he does not portray any physical expression of desire (Alexander 2004). In the film's tensest moment between the two men, Stone introduces an explicit and violent sex scene between Alexander and his wife in an attempt to reassert Alexander's masculinity (Nikoloutsos 2008, p. 237). The film was subsequently met with protests from Greek nationalists who objected to the homoerotic undertones, insisting that such insinuations were an offence to their national icon (Nikoloutsos 2008, p. 229). In light of these portrayals of Alexander and the erasing of Hephaestion within popular culture at various times, it is evident that history is often manipulated in order to fit a desired and acceptable narrative.

The complex nature of engaging in the debate over Alexander and Hephaestion's relationship is made clearer when L P Hartley's quote 'The past is a foreign land' is used as a starting point.

Sociologist Michel Foucault argued in his seminal book *'History of Sexuality'* that homosexuality and heterosexuality are social constructs that reflect contemporary values and ideals that are fundamentally different to those of ancient Greece (Foucault 1984, p. 188). There is no equivalent word in the Greek language for homosexual as the concept simply did not exist. There were sexual acts but no definitive sexual identities (Reames 2005, p. 3). Historians cannot therefore expect to find in ancient texts or artefacts any descriptions of homosexual relationships that would be analogous with contemporary definitions of homosexuality (Nikoloutsos 2008, p. 237). The contemporary models of friendship, romance and fidelity do not translate to the world of the ancient Greeks. For a strong friendship to take on a sexual element would not have been deemed as indicative of the relationship, it was simply sexual expression (Reames 1999, p. 94). Sexual relations were not necessarily seen to be a betrayal to an existing relationship, nor were same sex relations seen to be a threat to one's masculinity (Reames 1999, p. 94). In light of these differences, it is extremely complicated to come to any definitive conclusions regarding the nature of the relationship, as the basic definitions simply do not translate.

Examining the debate between historians over the relationship between Alexander and Hephaestion, the relevance of the quote 'The past is a foreign land' from L P Hartley's novel *'The Go-Between'* is profoundly clear. Concepts of sexuality, gender, romance, fidelity and friendship are constructs that are the result of specific values, ideals and moral codes that are both cultural and time specific. It is therefore a great disservice to the past for historians to allocate present day concepts to historical figures or events where they would not have existed. The fervent nature with which historians have debated Alexander and Hephaestion's relationship is far more indicative of present day attitudes towards sexuality, masculinity and the debate over same sex marriage than it is those of ancient Greece. It would therefore be wise for historians engaging in such debates to reflect on the quote 'The past is a foreign land'.

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