

## Disputed paternity

The fourth branch of the Old French *Roman d'Alexandre*, sometimes entitled *La Mort Alexandre*, opens with a portent. A woman in the city of Babylon gives birth to a monstrous child:

A l'issue de may, tout droit en cel termine  
Que li biaux tans revient et yvers se decline,  
Estoit en Babilone nes d'une Sarrasine  
Uns mostres merveleus par volenté devine.  
Alixandres l'ot dire si manda la meschine.  
Deseure iert chose morte desi q'en la poitrine,  
Et desous estoit vive, la ou il faut l'eschine.  
Tout environ les aines, la ou il ventres fine,  
De ces plus fieres bestes qui vivent de rapine  
I avoit pluisors testes et font chiere lovine;  
Molt sont de male part et de malvaie orine,  
Ne se pueent souffrir, l'une l'autre esgratine.  
Molt par est grans mervele que Dieus el mont destine,  
Que la mort Alixandre veut demostrer par sinne.  
(Branch IV, ll. 1-14)<sup>1</sup>

[In May, in the middle of the season when the good weather returns and winter ends, in Babylon a Saracen woman gave birth by divine will to a marvellous monster. Alexander heard about it and had the girl brought before him. In the upper part, it was a dead thing down to its chest, and below, at the base of its spine, it was alive. Around its anus, where the abdomen ends, there were the fiercest of predatory beasts. They had several heads, and snarled like wolves. They are very vicious and nasty, they are hostile towards each other, one claws at the other. It is received as a wondrous sign of God's will, showing the death of Alexander through a sign.]

Babylonian astrologers are called and one interprets the monstrous child as an omen of Alexander's death, followed by wars between his twelve peers (line 29) and the collapse of his empire.

Alexander stays silent but he is terrified, and the colour of his face changes from red to black (ll. 36-42). He has observed a similar silence and distress after hearing the predictions of the speaking trees of the Sun and the Moon, which foretell his betrayal by his men and his death in Babylon (branch III, ll. 3781-3877). The monstrous birth comes after the journey to the Terrestrial Paradise, the encounter with the seasonal flower girls ( ll. 3299-3550), and the fountain of youth (ll. 3624-3712). These encounters present Alexander's army with promises of eternal youth and fertility, but the trees of the Sun and the Moon warn that Alexander is about to achieve his goal by conquering both India and Babylon. They warn him that his success will be as short-lived as the life-cycle of the flower-girls. It is in fact the talking trees that warn Alexander of his fate, not the monstrous birth that merely seems to herald its enactment.

The omen of the child was particularly significant for the fifteenth-century *remanieur* who produced the Besançon manuscript:

Environ l'issue du mois de may que le plaisance de l'esté commence avoir vigueur  
quant l'iver est terminé, vint a la congnoissance du roy Alexandre comment grant

renommee couroit que en la cite de Babillonne, estoit nez ung monstre merueilleux. Laquele chose oyant le roy, il manda venir devers luy la mere du nouvel né, de laquele il encquist toute la nature de sa imfecte generation. Et elle luy en declara la fachon au plus prez, disant que depuis la poitrine en aval, il estoit comme chose morte, sur l'esquine ressemblant a beste de rapine comme lyon en ses parties, et aiant pluseurs testes loupines, lesqueles estoient de si felonne nature que souffrir ne pouioent l'une l'autre remuer, disant oultre au roy que, par la nativité de ceste figure, les anguriens destinoient sa mort. (Nicolet Liscinsky, p. 345)

[Around the end of May, when the pleasantness of the summer starts to strengthen when winter has finished, it came to King Alexander's knowledge that a great rumour was circulating that in the city of Babylon a marvellous monster had been born. When the king heard this thing, he had the newborn's mother summoned to come to him and asked her about the nature of her corrupted issue. She described its appearance as closely as she could, saying that from its chest down it was like a dead thing, on its back it looked like a predatory beast, and like a lion in its limbs, having several lupine heads that were of such criminal nature that they could not bear each other's movement, and she also said to the king that the birth of this figure made the soothsayers predict his death.]

In this version, Alexander does not see the monstrous birth with his own eyes. Instead, the mother describes the child to him. This verbal portrait, and the rumours that alert him to the portent, are more powerful than the child itself. The reduction of the child to oral report is true to the *remanieur's* systematic omission throughout his text of marvels and supernatural episodes. Oddly, the portent is interpreted by one wise man as if the monstrous child were actually present:

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<sup>1</sup> Alexandre de Paris, Branch IV, *MFR*A, vol. II, ll. 1-14. All translations are mine.