

Gay and Lesbian Studies in Art History

Whitney Davis



Gay and Lesbian Studies in Art History

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Gay and Lesbian Studies in Art History has also been published as *Journal of Homosexuality*, Volume 27 Numbers 1/2 1994.

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The Haworth Press, Inc., 10 Alice Street, Binghamton, NY 13904-1580 USA

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gay and lesbian studies in art history / Whitney Davis, editor.

p. cm.

“Also . . . published as *Journal of homosexuality*, volume 27 numbers 1/2, 1994” -- T.p. verso.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-56024-661-8 (alk. paper). – ISBN 1-56023-054-1 (pbk. alk. paper)

1. Homosexuality and art. 2. Arts. I. Davis, Whitney. II. *Journal of Homosexuality*

N72.H64G39 1994

93-49027

701'.03-dc20

CIP

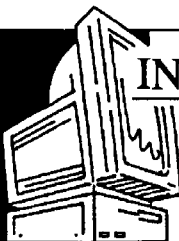
Gay and Lesbian Studies in Art History

Whitney Davis, PhD
Editor



The Haworth Press, Inc.
New York · London · Norwood (Australia)

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Introduction

When the editor of the *Journal of Homosexuality*, Professor John De Cecco, approached me about the possibility of editing a special volume on lesbian and gay studies in art history, I immediately thought how useful such a work could be—and also how difficult it would be to produce it. In colleges and universities around the country and abroad, courses are being developed that focus on the intersection of lesbian and gay history, culture, and identity, on the one hand, and the visual arts, or visual culture more broadly conceived, on the other hand. No comprehensive textbook for use in such courses has been written. For a variety of reasons, it would probably be premature to attempt to do so, for it is not even obvious what the courses could or should cover. But any teacher will recognize the need for a collection of readings that will serve a variety of purposes in the classroom: it should introduce students to historical and cultural materials apart from the ones most familiar to them; it should provide examples of the different kinds of scholarly and interpretive perspectives that have been brought to bear on these materials; it should suggest something of the diversity of the field of study and also something of its underlying coherence; and, perhaps most important, it should provoke students into thinking for themselves and, in the end, into improving on their teachers' efforts. In this volume, the authors and I have tried to be attentive to all these considerations. We hope to have produced a collection that can be consulted both by advanced scholars and by beginning students or general readers; that does not concentrate on one body of historical and cultural materials or prefers one scholarly or interpretive ap-

[Haworth co-indexing entry note]: "Introduction," Davis, Whitney. Co-published simultaneously in the *Journal of Homosexuality* (The Haworth Press, Inc.) Vol. 27, No. 1/2, 1994, pp. 1-10; and: *Gay and Lesbian Studies in Art History* (ed: Whitney Davis) The Haworth Press, Inc., 1994, pp. 1-10. Multiple copies of this article/chapter may be purchased from The Haworth Document Delivery Center [1-800-3-HAWORTH; 9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. (EST)].

proach over others; that ranges, as far as practicable, from the ancient through the medieval, early modern, and modern worlds; that includes work both by established, relatively senior scholars in the profession of art history and by more junior scholars and students; that encompasses writing by women and men, lesbians and gay men, heterosexuals and homosexuals, white scholars and scholars of color; that springs from personal, social, and professional self-definition as “bi,” as “gay,” as “antihomophobic,” or as “queer”; that presents important but little-known or new evidence, accompanied by original documentation and interpretation, as well as reconsiderations of relatively familiar events, objects, images, or texts; that considers issues concerned not only with the history of art as such but also with art history as a profession or discipline with its own history; that mixes a more traditional, “objective” form of scholarly writing with a more personal, “subjective” form—a relationship, or dichotomy, that several of the papers explore as one of their explicit concerns.

As I mentioned, it would be premature, I think, to attempt a synthesis of lesbian and gay art history or, in broader terms, a complete survey of the multiform presences (and absences) of same-sex sociality and eroticism in the field of visual representation—a handbook, as it were, of all of the available materials, approaches, and conclusions. For one thing, as many of the papers show, important historical evidence in many domains has just been discovered very recently and is only now being evaluated. For some areas, such as the analysis of homosexual, homoerotic, or homosocial themes in medieval art, so much work remains to be done that generalization would be foolhardy. All of the papers have had to contend with the fact that the historical record itself has been so constructed, managed, and published that materials of direct interest to lesbian and gay studies have often literally dropped out of immediate view or have completely disappeared. It is worth noting, for instance, that several authors encountered considerable resistance from artists’ estates, copyright holders, and other authorities in obtaining permission to present the necessary materials in a context such as this volume. At the most basic level of research, the history of representations connected with nondominant social groups and practices can sometimes only be written, in principle, as

an interpretation of what cannot be found. The history of the destruction of the visual records of homosociality, homoeroticism, and homosexuality—whether through casual neglect or systematic suppression—is such that some of the most mundane questions (was such-and-such an artist “homosexual”? who owned such-and-such an image?) cannot be definitively answered. At best, a comprehensive interpretation could only be, in many domains, a comprehensive admission that the record is partial and distorted—a fact, of course, that has historical and cultural meaning in itself.

For another thing, the analytic frameworks we use to direct, conduct, and criticize our research are themselves rapidly changing and in some cases are being vigorously discussed within the field of lesbian and gay studies in art history. Many of the papers, for example, reflect the wider debate in contemporary lesbian and gay scholarship about “essentialist” or “constructionist” understandings of lesbian and gay histories, identities, and cultures, with associated (although not identical) debates about the relative merits of psychological and/or sociological explanation, of causal explanation and/or interpretive description, and of humanistic and/or post-humanistic (“post-structuralist,” “post-modernist”) modes of analysis. Whatever position one takes on one or the other or no side of such issues—I have left it to individual authors to develop their own approaches—they go to the very heart of the field of lesbian and gay art history. What the field marks out today as its proper domain of inquiry will almost certainly not be what it will be tomorrow—for we are still at that exciting but frustrating preliminary stage of research where evidence discovered or interpretations offered today will fundamentally shape the future field rather than merely add incrementally to it. It is important to notice that this volume is not a collection of writing about the conceptual basis of lesbian and gay art history or cultural studies; although matters of nomenclature necessarily arise, it does not directly tackle theoretical issues. Instead, the authors work by example. They attempt to mobilize both historical and conceptual resources in ways that will help to establish a field through concrete acts of research and interpretation rather than abstract fiat. Despite the “top down” flavor of some of the essays, drawing, as they do, on contemporary social or critical

theory, our project is essentially “bottom up”: we work from and in relation to specific historical moments and cultural cases.

Although I did not expect the authors would want, or be able, to write seamless, comprehensive narratives or to attempt to generalize about large areas of the history of art, I certainly would not have opposed such attempts. Thus, in retrospect, it is significant, I believe, that almost all of the authors have chosen to investigate a comparatively small-scale, well-defined historical instance or cultural object in close focus—a single work of art, a particular iconographic tradition or theme, a small group of artworks by a coherent group of artists, a tightly interrelated complex of texts and images, or a specific institutional practice. In investigating these historical situations, frequently the authors turn to information about the wider economic, social, political, and cultural history of lesbian and gay artists and viewers or about earlier formations of same-sex sociality and eroticism in the Western tradition, depending, here, on the work of social historians, literary critics, sociologists, anthropologists, and others. But equally often they work the other way around: they attempt to come to terms with the primary material itself—with visual art in its particular social and cultural contexts—to help establish a framework for thinking about the wider economic, social, political, and cultural developments. The most important general assumption here is simply that visual evidence can make both specific and general contributions to our wider understanding. We will be pleased if this volume suggests to non-art-historical readers how rich and suggestive the art-historical record can be. Although several recent anthologies of lesbian and gay cultural-historical studies have been published, all of them focus preponderantly on literary texts and nonliterary written documents (with the distinguished exception of a few essays which have used archaeological and ethnographic evidence). Ironically, it has particularly been in the study of modern European cultural history—for which the resolution of the art-historical and material record is especially good—in which textual objects, and various text-critical methods, have been specially privileged (this is partly due, no doubt, to the privileging of writing and printing in modern European society itself). It is also worth observing that contemporary lesbian and gay studies in the humanities—increasingly going under the label of

“queer studies” or “queer theory”—have been chiefly associated with the efforts of literary historians and critics trained in deconstructionist, psychoanalytic, and other movements in recent critical theory and with contemporary media studies; art historians and social historians have participated much less vigorously in this endeavor. But despite an unfortunate demonizing of documentary or “positivist” labors in some quarters of “queer theory,” and an equally unfortunate hostility to “theory” in some quarters of lesbian and gay historical studies, there is absolutely no reason why historical and hermeneutic awareness cannot go hand in hand—and it is perhaps art historians, who tend to straddle social-historical and literary-critical approaches, who are best placed to carry out an effective synthesis.

I did not expect that many authors would choose to write an explicitly theoretical or philosophical essay. But this is certainly not to say that the essays in this volume do not engage foundational conceptual problems. Apart from their implicit contributions to the historical understanding of “homosexuality” itself, or of same-sex socialities and eroticisms in history, one particular conceptual concern is a leitmotif of many of the essays: how does a late twentieth-century art historian address herself or himself to same-sex socialities and eroticisms in the visual art of the past, and what kinds of present-day personal, professional, and political interests and issues are involved in doing so? In one of the most interesting and perhaps controversial moves of the essays in this volume, several authors frankly avow their own sexual or erotic attraction to images of desirable masculine or feminine beauty produced in the past and to their personal interest in images—whatever their “original” meaning in context might have been—that seem, to a present-day viewer, unavoidably to evoke homosexual or at least homoerotic connotations. Two authors suggest that their own careers as art historians ultimately precipitated from an interest in sexually or erotically appealing works of art; others hint at the same process. (Of course, these statements need, in themselves, to be placed within an historical context and deserve further interpretation. It is, for example, a long-standing component of lesbian and gay historical experience in the visual field that “personal identity” should be shaped, sometimes directly and sometimes obliquely, in relation to both domi-

nant or canonical and noncanonical or “subversive” cultural images working in intricate cross-mappings.) Several other authors consider the relation between their art-historical research and their desire to understand the situation of lesbians and gay men today, particularly in the context of the AIDS crisis, waves of homophobic violence, and pressing concerns for recognition and equality in the law, the workplace, and elsewhere. Political projects of social criticism—antihomophobic in their basic dimensions—and of gay- or “queer”-positive subcultural or cultural affirmation are inseparable, the authors argue, from our understanding of visual representation in the past and the lessons of its expression and suppression. In his provocative essay, Steven D. Nelson shows directly how art-historical consciousness and contemporary political activism and critique necessarily come together—in his example, in the production and evaluation of sex-positive graphics in the service of community AIDS education—but many of the other authors explore similar dynamics. Several authors, in fact, notice how a closer contact between personal, professional, and political experience and historical scholarship has helped them resolve long-standing, general hermeneutic difficulties about interpretive “subjectivity” or the very rationale for historical scholarship itself. For some readers, all of these personal, professional, and political interests—this “subjectivity”—may seem to be at odds with the scholarly activity of understanding the past “on its own terms” or “in its own context,” the favorite phrases of historicisms or social-cultural determinisms of all sorts. In my own essay for this volume, partly working from the example of essays such as these, I take the often frank subjectivity of contemporary lesbian and gay scholarship in art history not only to be a gesture of self-reflexiveness associated with recent “critical” thinking in art history (although it certainly is that) but also, and more fundamentally, to be one of the essential conceptual or cognitive conditions of art history itself, inherited from its initial practical and philosophical formulation in the work of J. J. Winckelmann at the end of the eighteenth century. Thus I regard lesbian and gay scholarship in art history as one of the necessary logical fulfillments of art history itself rather than a mere excrescence upon or within it. Whether my interpretation holds water, however, is ultimately immaterial. If the evidence of these papers is any guide,

it is part of the basic, concrete reality of lesbian and gay scholarship today that it must continually refer to and reflect on its most contemporary experiential basis—a reality which abstract scientisms, whether historicist or text-critical, often want to deny. (In this regard, there seems to be little concrete difference between the scientisms of some traditional positivist scholarship and of some contemporary poststructuralist theory.) To hold on to this fundamental “personal” condition of professional practice as well as remain faithful to the “contextual” approach in historical analysis is, admittedly, a delicate balancing act. It might require some experimentation with the received formats for art-historical writing itself, as several papers in the collection recognize. Whether readers will judge the final results to be relaxed and confident or strained and uncertain, the problem, at least, has been faced.

Finally, a few words about the nature and production of this volume are in order. For some years the editor of the *Journal of Homosexuality* had hoped to devote a special issue to art history. In fact, at earlier times, he approached two senior art historians, pioneers in establishing lesbian and gay studies within art history, but their busy schedules prevented them from taking on the project. When I accepted the invitation to edit this volume, I immediately began badgering a number of possible writers—hoping, in all cases, to commission substantially original and recent work (often based on oral presentations I had heard or work-in-progress I had encountered), a condition that has been met in this volume. For a variety of reasons, a number of possible contributors had to decline my invitation. Some were too busy, some had other plans for their recent research, and some were unable to meet our tight deadlines. Unfortunately, several of my correspondents felt that they could not take the professional risk of publishing their work or of being publicly identified as associated with lesbian and gay scholarship in art history; a number of lesbian and gay scholars are currently working in hostile or homophobic environments. If our volume succeeds in helping to make it possible for these scholars to begin to teach and publish without fear, we will have achieved perhaps our most important goal.

In consultation with the writers who were eventually able to participate, I began to place some general limits on the scope of the

project. We focus on interpreting works of painting, sculpture, and the graphic arts. Photography and film are represented in part in the collection because art historians (along with social historians, film and literary critics, and others) have worked with these media and in part because there is significant overlap, at the levels of method and theory, between the study of the fine and graphic arts and the study of photography and film. Needless to say, however, there are fine anthologies of gender studies or lesbian and gay studies in photography, film, and electronic broadcasting with which we could not hope to compete. (By definition, such anthologies can have no time-depth before the middle part of the nineteenth century, and we strongly hoped to introduce more long-term and diversified historical perspectives into discussions that threaten to be dominated by cultural experiences of modern print and electronic media.) Architecture has been excluded from this collection, although, again, recent publications suggest the interest and importance of work in this field. The contributors to this volume are, without exception, art historians. Although artists, art critics, literary critics, and many others have much to say about lesbian and gay issues in the visual arts, this volume is intended to represent the recent directions of scholarship within art history as a professional discipline. The papers are limited to Western art history broadly conceived—to the cultural tradition of visual representation in the Euro-American context from the Greco-Roman to the modern periods. Pre-Greek or non-Western or archaeological and anthropological art history would require an altogether different conceptual framework. For example, to the extent that many small-scale traditional or “tribal” societies lack a cultural category of or for “art” in the Western sense, it would be meaningless to talk about their “art history” without dealing with phenomena such as dance, masking, dress, body art, ceramics, and so forth (a consideration that Western art historians themselves have increasingly entertained for Western “art history”). I felt that it would diffuse our volume too much to attempt to incorporate studies of this kind. I hoped to achieve rough parities in our chronological coverage—given the fact, perhaps unfortunate but apparently inevitable, that the overwhelming preponderance of lesbian and gay scholarship in art history, or scholarship concerning same-sex sociality and eroticism in the visual field, has

focused on the culture of the past three centuries. In this collection, there are three essays on ancient and medieval materials, three essays on early modern Europe (Renaissance through Enlightenment), three essays on the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and three essays on contemporary (post-war) culture—a very rough balance in terms of the general division of interest in lesbian and gay studies today. With more space at our disposal, we could easily have increased the depth of our coverage, within its stated range, to include (for example) writing on ancient Greece (well covered in several excellent recent anthologies) or post-contact colonial or ethnic traditions affected by Western art. As I have noted, however, comprehensive chronological coverage was never part of our ambition. Indeed, it gradually retreated in significance compared to our desire to achieve diversity in other respects—especially in the personal background, scholarly training, intellectual interests, and professional status of the contributors themselves. One final limit on the authors' flexibility was imposed editorially: I requested that they give me no more than twenty-five typewritten pages, preferably less. (A couple of the papers went over this limit, and a couple came in well under it; most met it more or less exactly.) In addition to making room in the volume for as much different work as possible, this shorter format would, I hoped, encourage many of the authors to develop more personal reflections than they would have done had they had a chance to write up everything they know about a complex topic.

Our initial proposal to Dr. DeCecco was prepared in February, 1992. At this time, most of the contributors were able to prepare at least a preliminary abstract of their paper, if not a preliminary draft, stating their essential methods and interests. Once the proposal was accepted, after outside review, in April, 1992, the papers were written, revised, and editorially reviewed and the laborious, frustrating work of securing illustrations and permission to reproduce them was carried out. The manuscripts were turned over for production in January, 1993. The members of the Gay and Lesbian Caucus of the College Art Association, of which I served as Co-Chair (with Erica Rand) in 1992-94, were my chief source of ideas and support and will, I hope, be among our first readers; many of the papers in this volume began life as papers delivered at one of the several sessions

sponsored by the GLC at annual meetings of the CAA. Professor John De Cecco has been welcoming and helpful throughout the process of turning a brief proposal into a volume. The individual authors have helped me to think about the direction of the volume as a whole and have been extremely patient in awaiting its production. In addition, I want to thank four scholars who were not able to participate, Norman Bryson, Jonathan Katz, Richard Meyer, and James Saslow, for their support and practical suggestions, friendly criticisms, and intellectual encouragement.

Whitney Davis

Ambiguity and the Image of the King

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SUMMARY. The following essay explores problems posed by a recently-published fresco (dated to the first century AD) that depicts Alexander the Great standing opposite an unknown female figure. The fresco is unusual in its use of conventional or codified figure types, in particular a widely-found statue type known as the "Alexander with the Lance," and for its placement of Alexander in anecdotal relation with a woman. While discussions of the picture thus far have tried to identify the scene depicted (by reference to histories of Alexander's life), the following analysis takes the difficulty of doing so itself as a motivated aspect of the image. I argue that the fresco's mode of representation is to bring together figure types whose conventional fields of meaning are in conflict with one another, and then to highlight this conflict in order to comment upon the fields (or figure types) themselves. In this case, the fresco's ambiguity in signification (the undecidability of its reference) enables a highly strategic critique of the "Alexander with the Lance" because the latter, as a prototypical "image of the king," depends upon the necessary and transparent extension of its signs. By virtue of the anecdotal relation between "Alexander" and the depicted female figure (an Aphrodite type) the fresco's critique reveals the close association between the claims for representation made by the image of the king and the patriarchal structures of power they seek to instantiate. The fresco thus offers remarkably direct data for understanding the intersection of

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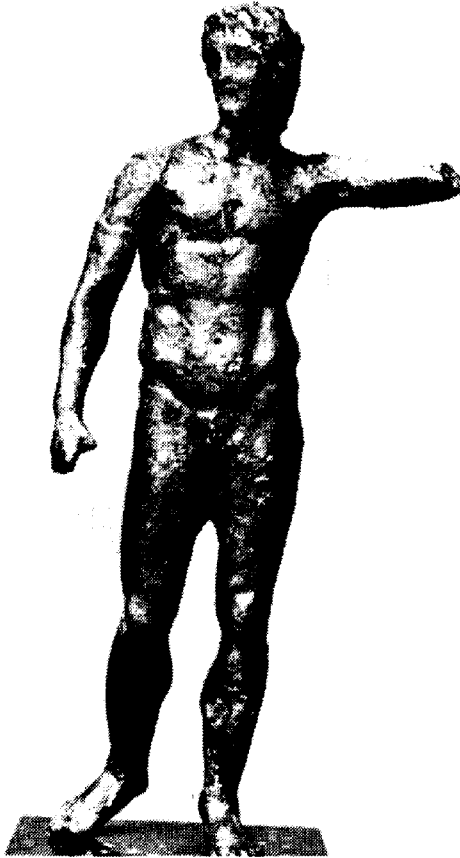
[Haworth co-indexing entry note]: "Ambiguity and the Image of the King," Mack, Rainer Towle. Co-published simultaneously in the *Journal of Homosexuality* (The Haworth Press, Inc.) Vol. 27, No. 1/2, 1994, pp. 11-34; and: *Gay and Lesbian Studies in Art History* (ed: Whitney Davis) The Haworth Press, Inc., 1994, pp. 11-34. Multiple copies of this article/chapter may be purchased from The Haworth Document Delivery Center [1-800-3-HAWORTH; 9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. (EST)].

representation and gender in the early Roman empire. I suggest in conclusion that because the image seems also to posit a specifically gendered (male) gaze, its critique is extended to the spectator and thereby provides data for understanding the intersection of the practice of representation (here, viewing) and gender.

I am interested, in this paper, to describe a relationship between representations. More specifically, I want to describe an alteration in the meaning of an image that is effected by the taking up of that image in or by another image. More specifically still, I want to show how this alteration is made possible by the coding of the first image as denotational of value in such social categories as those of ethics, of gender, and of socio-political power. It is by virtue of this coding, moreover, that my description of an alteration in meaning will come to consider alternative modes of representation (ways of describing the world) as prejudicially ordered by and ordering "real" social histories. But the analysis will here remain incomplete, for the relationship between representation and the "real," though critical, will not be explored as possibly anything other than ambivalent. This is problematic in some respects, for example insofar as the study does not adequately pursue the question of who in fact produced and viewed these images. But the ambivalence is also programmatic, as suggested by my use of quotation marks, and a sign for my own desire to validate one of the two modes of representation described here. For the first image, what I will call *the image of the king*, claims for representation a kind of transparent relation to the real such that there can be no doubt as to the truth of what is depicted *and how it is depicted* (see Figure 1). But the second image, a wall painting from Pompeii, makes clear the ideological force of this claim by uncovering its intimate association with patriarchal structures of power (Figure 2). Not only does the fresco thus demonstrate the importance of *the image* for the health of *the king*, it does so precisely by inhibiting any easy movement beyond representation itself. With this example in mind, then, that of an other way of describing, I would like to forestall my argument by turning first to a story.

. It derives from a late antique biography of Alexander the Great, a text conventionally attributed to Pseudo-Callisthenes and now known as the "Alexander Romance." As with most extant ancient

FIGURE 1. "Fouquet" bronze statuette from Alexandria. After the "Alexander with the Lance" by Lysippus, late fourth century BC. Paris, Louvre.



writings on Alexander, including those biographical treatments whose aim is encomiastic, this text will employ the king and his life as a field for the discussion of a limited range of ethical problems. This range is generally set by a concern for Fortune and its deleterious effect (for example on an Alexander who is too young and intemperate), but the ethical structures at issue have to do primarily with Greek notions of masculine virtue and the problems posed for

FIGURE 2. Alexander and a woman. Wall painting from Pompeii (VI, *Insula Occidentalis*, no. 42), mid-first century AD.



it by Alexander's contact with the East.¹ Our story is one such discussion, a cautionary tale about *hybris* that is conceived as a problem of gender and its hierarchies of power particularly as these are cross-cut by the dangerous difference of the East. What makes the story of special interest, though, is the critical role played by representation.

As often in the course of his mythicized military campaign, Alexander finds himself confronted by an eastern leader unwilling to acknowledge his demands for tribute, sign of deference to his pow-

er. In this episode, his opponent is a woman: Queen Kandake, descendent of the legendary first female sovereign, Semiramis. Determined to triumph, Alexander devises a plan that seems at first to be another example of his genius for strategy. He will gain entrance to the queen's palace by dissembling himself as no more than a messenger. But the plan fails, for as he is led through the luxurious halls, as soon as he is seen, the king is captured by the power of recognition. Kandake has already and surreptitiously had his royal portrait drawn. She guides the fooled Alexander to her bedroom, reveals the image, and makes this final, devastating speech:

Do you recognize your portrait? Why do you tremble? Why are you troubled? You, the sacker of Persis, the conqueror of the Indians, the man who threw down the trophies of the Medes and Parthians, now without wars or army are in the power of Queen Kandake. So learn, Alexander, that, if any man thinks he is supreme in wisdom above all men, another mortal will display greater wisdom than his.²

Dramatized here is the betrayal of the king by his image, a betrayal of the unequivocal meaning of the image of the king as an image of patriarchy. And this betrayal proceeds precisely and, as we will see, necessarily from a change in what can be called the gender of the image.³ Because Kandake has assumed control of the gaze, taken over the reins of representation, the significance of Alexander's portrait is reversed. It must, as she observes with her first question, be re-cognized, for it is no longer here the image of patriarchal rule.⁴ It has become, rather, the very mechanism by which that rule is undone. Thus is the moment of re-cognition the true moment of Alexander's defeat: to recognize this new image is to see the power of the queen. It is to see, in particular, the undermining of that set of ethical values by which the image of the king had made its claim. Kandake's triumph, the topsy-turvy triumph of feminine power, is emblematic here of a series of potential threats to masculine virtue. Alexander is in danger not only of being hybristic, but also of succumbing to sexual desire (the bedroom entrapment), of putting himself in a subservient position (taking the role of messenger), and of being tempted by Eastern *luxuria* (the queen's palace). Though forming here the dramatic context for Kandake's pos-

session of Alexander's image, these threats are more clearly its precipitates. By indicating what is at stake in having control over the representation of the king, they provide for us a key to understanding how his image is constructed and why Kandake's gender makes a difference.

There is nothing in this story that suggests an alteration in the appearance of the portrait of Alexander. What I claim as the critical subversion, a change in the gender of the image, exists only at the anecdotal level: possession of the image by a woman, a possession whose effect is to reverse the gendered claims of the image, is literal. What I would like to pursue is the possibility for this subversion, this re-gendering, within the process or at the level of representation itself. The Pompeian wall-painting that I have mentioned is, I think, an extraordinary instance (Figure 2).⁵ It is unusual, among extant images of Alexander, for placing the king within a narrative field and, most critically, in relation to a woman. This pictorial context initiates a series of conflicts strikingly analogous to those dramatized in the story of Kandake's triumph. The king's relationship to the woman is marked, in other words, by the same set of potential threats to masculine virtue. But the ethical critique thus initiated by the fresco is focussed not on Alexander himself, as a potentially real historical subject, but on the image of Alexander. More like Kandake than like her author, the painting takes hold of Alexander's portrait and alters its significance by manipulating the context in which it appears. As I want to show, this manipulation constitutes a mode of representation that is other than and rigorously critical of that at work in the image of the king. That this should constitute a change in the gender of that image will follow, then, from the degree to which the latter's mode of representation is inseparable from its efficacy as denotational of patriarchal rule.⁶

The fresco's figure of Alexander is a quotation or copy of a long-codified and highly influential statue type known as the "Alexander with the Lance" (Figure 1).⁷ By the evidence of textual descriptions, as well as a substantial history of replication, it can be described as the single most important representation of the Macedonian king. In fact, after its invention by the king's official sculptor, Lysippus, it became conventional as a sign for the new kind of royal power inaugurated by Alexander's conquest of the Persian