CHAPTER FIVE

ALEXANDER AND ROME

It took a long time before Alexander’s greatness really came home to the Romans, although they were the people who, as far as we can tell, gave him the epithet ‘the Great’, and it took even longer before he made an impact on individual Romans. The earliest record we have of Alexander is in Plautus’ *Mostellaria*, 775-7, where the slave Tranio brackets him with Agathocles, tyrant of Syracuse: *Alexandrum magnum atque Agathoclem aiunt maxumas / duo res gessisse: quid mihi fiet tertio, / qui solus facio facinora inmortalia?* The text is striking for two reasons. Alexander and Agathocles form a curious combination when seen through modern eyes and Alexander is here given the epithet ‘the Great’ for the first time, which in Greek literature we find earliest in the first century AD, in the treatise peri; u{you~.

If we can believe Plutarch, Appius Claudius Caecus had already used the epithet in a speech, in 280, in which he reminds the Romans of their boast that they would have taught Alexander a lesson, had he landed in Italy: Plut. *Pyrrh.* 19.1 Ποῦ γὰρ ὑμῶν ὁ πρὸς ἀπαντᾷ ἀνθρώπους θρυλούμενος ἀεὶ λόγος, ως, εἰ παρῆν ἐκεῖνος εἰς Ἰταλίαν ὁ μέγας Αλέξανδρος καὶ συνηνέχθη νέος ήμῖν καὶ τοῖς πάτραισιν ἠμῶν ἀκμάζοσιν, οὐκ ἂν ὑμεῖτο νῦν ἀνίκητος, ἀλλ’ ἢ φυ- γῶν ἂν ἢ που πεσῶν ἐνταῦθα τὴν Ῥώμην ἐνδοξότεραν ἀπέλιπε; It is of course doubtful whether Plutarch has reported the speech of the blind censor correctly. Beyond doubt is the fact that, after the Roman legions had given short shrift to the invincible Macedonian phalanx, a heated discussion took place as to whether the Romans would also have been able to stop Alexander had he marched against the West. We find a late echo of this discussion in Livy 9.17-9. Here Livy compares the numbers and strength of the armies which both sides would have deployed, the quality of the commanders and the good fortune they had met with in

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1 ‘They say that Alexander the Great and Agathocles are the two men who have performed the greatest heroic deeds. How about me as a third, I, who with my bare hands have performed immortal deeds?’

2 ‘Where is that story now that you were always going on about to anyone who wanted to listen that if the great Alexander had come to Italy and had come across us in our youth and our fathers in their prime, his invincibility would now not be sung, but he would either have been chased away or he would have been killed there and thus would have enhanced the glory of Rome?’
their wars. In an argument, which in spite of the speculative and tendentious nature of this digression, is nevertheless cogent, Livy explains that Rome would have been able to deploy many more troops in such a ‘home tie’, and that it had at its disposal a number of generals, who if not individually, then in any case together, and in the long run, would have been too strong for Alexander. Besides, the young man would undoubtedly have fallen victim to his own vices. Plutarch has acquainted us with similar views, although they lead to the opposite conclusion. The main surprise in all this is the deeply felt and long-lasting resentment of the Greeks against Rome due to their defeat.

If we disregard for a moment Scipio Africanus Minor, who was apparently mysteriously sired by a serpent, as was Alexander, then it is only in the first century BC that Alexander begins to play a important part in the imagination of some of the dynasts. Before presenting the relevant data about Pompey, Caesar and Antony, I would like to follow Peter Green in making a distinction between on the one hand *imitatio* or even *aemulatio* of Alexander, and on the other hand *comparatio* (Green 1989). We speak about the latter when others, historians, panegyrists or poets, compare somebody with Alexander. This does not necessarily say a lot about the ambitions of this person. We should only speak of *imitatio* c.q. *aemulatio* when Alexander is consciously emulated. This distinction is useful for pointing out the difference in this respect between Pompey and Caesar, who are put on a par in older studies about this subject. It was to be expected that Pompey, after his impressive successes in the East, and especially after his victory over Mithridates VI Eupator, himself a great admirer of Alexander, was proclaimed the new Alexander by his court historian Theophanes. But even