Sonya Nevin, "Entry on: The Lion in the Gateway. The Heroic Battles of the Greeks and Persians at Marathon, Salamis, and Thermopylae by Mary Renault ", peer-reviewed by Susan Deacy and Elżbieta Olechowska. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2020). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/994. Entry version as of November 05, 2026.

Mary Renault

The Lion in the Gateway. The Heroic Battles of the Greeks and Persians at Marathon, Salamis, and Thermopylae

United Kingdom (1964)

TAGS: Alexander the Great Ancient Slavery Architecture Ares Artemis Athena Athens Bible Divination Eleusinian Mysteries Gods Graeco-Persian Wars Greek History Greek Philosophy Olympic Games Sparta





We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
Title of the work	The Lion in the Gateway. The Heroic Battles of the Greeks and Persians at Marathon, Salamis, and Thermopylae
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	United Kingdom, United States of America, Australia, South Africa
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ISBN	1st edition: 9780065160765; 2013 edition: 9780988510616
Genre	Historical fiction
Target Audience	Children (9–12)
Author of the Entry	Sonya Nevin, University of Roehampton, sonya.nevin@roehampton.ac.uk

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Creators



Mary Renault , 1905 - 1983
(Author)

'Mary Renault' is the pseudonym of Eileen Mary Challans. She was a prolific British-born writer known for her historical fiction set in classical antiquity. Following World War One she attended the Bristol boarding school, Clifton Girls School, where she studied ancient languages and excelled in history and literature. Despite opposition from her parents, she attended St. Hugh's College at Oxford University, planning to become a teacher. Her study included classical culture and ancient Greek and she spent a lot of time in the ancient Greek galleries of the Ashmolean Museum. She received encouragement from JRR Tolkien, then literature professor, and she aspired to become a novelist. She graduated in English Literature in 1928. She began publishing short articles and book reviews. In 1936 she completed nurse's training at Oxford's Radcliffe Infirmary and she served as a nurse throughout the Second World War.

She continued to write and took the pen name 'Renault' with the publication of her first novel. Most of Renault's early novels featured romances in contemporary hospital settings, although they include frequent references to ancient Greek culture. Renault was a lesbian and several of her novels depicted lesbian romances, such as the romantic comedy, The Friendly Young Ladies (1943). Her novel, Return to Night (1947) about a female doctor and her younger male lover, was a great commercial success. Renault moved to South Africa in its wake. She published The Charioteer (1953), a contemporary novel exploring male homosexuality and Platonic theory. She then began focusing on the historical fiction that she became more famous for. These included The Last of the Wine (1956) set during the Peloponnesian War, The King Must Die (1958) and its sequel The Bull from the Sea (1962) exploring the myth of Theseus, and a trilogy about Alexander the Great (1972-1981). She wrote two non-fiction works, The Lion in the Gateway: The Heroic Battles of the Greeks and Persians at Marathon, Salamis, and Thermopylae (1964), written for children, and The Nature of Alexander (1975). Initially Renault was a controversial figure because of her positive depictions of homosexuality; in time she became controversial for criticising

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aspects of the gay rights movement. Renault was an active member of the anti-apartheid Women's Defence of the Constitution League (from 1956) and protested against the South African government's imposition of legal restrictions on homosexuality. She was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature (1959) and became an Honorary Fellow of St. Hugh's College (1982). She died of lung cancer in South Africa in 1983.

Sources:

britannica.com (accessed: February 5, 2020);

"Renault, Mary (1905–1983), "Women in World History: A Biographical Encyclopedia, Encyclopedia.com (accessed: February 5, 2020).

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Additional information

Summary

Ch. I. The Arrow of Ormuz. *The Lion* opens with a description of the mountainous Greek landscape. We hear of boys guarding flocks from wolves and the presence of many more dangers from pirates and raiders. Many Greeks seek land through colonisation, with many going east to settle Ionia. The ancient Greek disposition is described – an independent spirit that rejects kings in favour of oligarchies and democracies, inquiring minds which ask questions and seek answers about all manner of things. The main city of this sort is Athens. Sparta is another powerful state, but they lost their love of art and philosophy. Their growing neighbour is the Persian Empire. Like Sparta it discourages questioning; it is a "vast unbroken web of despotic power" (p. 6). The Ionians grew soft and were conquered by the Lydians. The story of Croesus is told. The goodness of Cyrus the Great is described in contrast to the wickedness of Cambyses. Darius is introduced – not as good as Cyrus but better than Cambyses. We are then told of the rise and rule of Peisistratus in Athens. An account of Hippias' relationship with Darius follows, including a vivid scene in which Darius hears of the fall of Sardis. He asks "Mighty Ormuz" for vengeance against the Athenians. The scene moves to a Greek ship at sea. The crew learn of the fall of Miletus (p. 14) and the Greek defeat at the Battle of Lade.

Ch. II. Earth and Water. In this chapter, Darius demands earth and water from various regions as tokens of submission. The nomadic Scythians "of Crimea" (p. 17) refuse this homage and nor will they fight him. The Athenians and Spartans 'forgot all law and decency' in their indignation and they killed the heralds who brought Darius' demand. Sparta sends two men to Persia in atonement, although Darius refuses to execute them. The story of the Persian embassy to Macedon is related, in which Alexander prince of Macedon leads a massacre of the visitors. Some Greek cities Medize (Athens is excluded from this reference). The Athenians then hear of the approach of the Persian fleet. They send to Sparta for aid. Further detail is given about Spartan society. The Athenians send the runner Pheidippides, and the story follows his journey with bonus geographical and sporting history.

Ch. III. Trumpets at Marathon. The Athenians think of Theseus taming the Bull of Marathon as they wait for battle and are encouraged them.

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The army is made up of 'free citizens', but 'democracy run mad' means that the generalship revolves each day. Fortunately, a 'wise and decent man', Aristides, turns over his day to the most experienced general, Miltiades (p. 34). Miltiades convinces the army to attack; they do so at a run. The Plataeans are there too and they fight like heroes when it would have been easy to run away. Some say that Theseus appeared during the battle. The Persian army is defeated and they run for the ships. A Greek traitor uses a shield to indicate to the Persians that they should attack Athens while it is undefended. The Athenians rush back to their city and arrive fast enough that their presence dissuades the Persians from landing. The Athenians celebrate by making offerings to their gods.

Ch. IV. The Dragon Spreads his Claws. Darius dies. His son, Xerxes, begins preparations for a follow-up invasion of Greece. He is abusive towards his family and followers. He orders the Hellespont to be whipped when his bridge is swept away. The wondrously varied troops are described. Xerxes feels a moment of existential angst amidst the splendour and weeps. Demaratus comes to see him and we hear the back story of this former king of Sparta. Demaratus warns Xerxes that the Spartans will not run from him. He laughs.

Ch. V. The Lion in the Gateway. King Leonidas leads three-hundred men to Thermopylae. Xerxes laughs when he hears that they are waiting there, combing their hair and exercising. The Spartans hold the army off until the traitor, Ephialtes, shows the Persians a way through to surround them. The Greeks are killed, but Xerxes is the one remembered in ignominy for dishonouring Leonidas' corpse. The inscription erected in memory of the Spartans is quoted.

Ch. VI. The Flower of Thorns. We are now introduced to Themistocles, a leading figure at Athens. He expected to be in charge of the allied fleet, but accepted the supremacy of the Spartan, Eurybiades, in the interests of keeping the alliance united. Themistocles had ordered the evacuation of Athens. The Greek and Persian fleets clash of the coast of Artemisium near Thermopylae. A storm also wrecks a number of Persian vessels. Both fleets withdraw. Xerxes is disconcerted to learn that many of the Greeks are off celebrating the Olympic Games at which the winners are awarded only laurel wreaths.

Ch. VII. The Gold of Apollo. Xerxes send men to ransack the offerings at the sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi. The priestess, the Pythia, tells her

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attendants that the god can look after his own. The people of Delphi say that Apollo's weapons miraculously appeared at the entrance to the sanctuary and great rocks crashed down and frightened off the attacking Persians. Perhaps they were uncomfortable about their mission and felt the Pan's panic; perhaps the heroes of Delphi rose in Apollo's defence as Theseus came to help at Marathon.

Ch. VIII. The Undying Tree. This chapter goes back in time a little to tell the story of the Athenians' appeal to Delphi and the response given by the oracle. The city evacuates. At Troizen and on Aegina, the Athenians were given relief. A handful of temple staff and poor people stayed upon the acropolis. The Persians captured the site. A few Athenians jumped off the acropolis to their deaths; the others were all butchered. Hippias had returned. Hippias walked up the acropolis following Xerxes' order that he sacrifice there. Amidst the charred ruins, he saw Athena's olive tree had sprung green once again – the Athenians never forgot this symbol of hope.

Ch. IX. Salamis. The Greek fleet is now at Salamis. The leaders argue amongst themselves, anxious at the sight of Athens burning. Themistocles devises a trick that will compel both sides into battle at Salamis, where the Greeks will have the advantage. All of Xerxes' male advisors tell him to attack; the exception is Queen Artemisia of Halicarnassus, 'a Greek but not a traitor' as her lands were in the Persian Empire before she succeeded (p.97-8). She advises Xerxes to resist battle and to wait for their alliance to collapse. Xerxes ignores her advice, falls into Themistocles' trap, and watches as his fleet is destroyed in battle the next day. Themistocles and Aristides make peace. We know about this battle through Herodotus, but also through a participant – Aeschylus – whose play, *The Persians*, describes the battle and even finds pity for the defeated. Xerxes left his throne empty and it stayed empty for 150 years, until Alexander the Great claimed it. 2500 years later, the victory in the Persian Wars is still important. The Battle of Salamis was followed by the Battle of Plataea, then the Persians were finally defeated.

There is an illustration in each chapter. They depict: Darius firing an arrow (p. 13); Alexander of Macedon planning to massacre the Persian embassy (p. 21); the Battle of Marathon, with contrasting Greek helmets and Phrygian caps (p. 36); a map of the Aegean with an inset of the Persian Empire (pp. 44–45); Xerxes enthroned at the Hellespont (p. 49); Leonidas raising his spear aloft in defiance (p. 67); thoughtful

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Hippias examining the ruins of the Athenian acropolis (p. 90); a clash of many ships at Salamis (p. 103). The illustrations are full of period detail, with touches drawn from archaeology.

Following the narrative there is a brief description of the main sources used – Herodotus, Plutarch, and Aeschylus. There is a Timeline, from the so-called Dorian invasion to the Battle of Plataea "Final victory of the Greeks" (p. 118). The work concludes with a Glossary.

Analysis

Lion in the Gateway moves dynamically between historical narrative and scenes emphasising direct speech. The narrator's tone is that of an adult of the modern era explaining events of long ago to a thoughtful younger person. The narrative is based on ancient sources – primarily on Herodotus' *Histories*, with some inclusion of Plutarch's *Lives*, Aeschylus' *Persians* (pp.102–103), and inscriptions. These sources are mentioned often enough that the reader knows that this is what the narrative is based on, but there is no discussion of how sources might be used and weighed against each other. The book works to inform young readers about events of the past and to guide them in a moral interpretation of the deeds of their participants.

While very little knowledge is assumed of classical Greek history, some knowledge of the past is assumed. Biblical knowledge is assumed, for example, in explaining who Cyrus the Great is with reference to the Biblical story in the Book of Daniel (p. 6). Readers are orientated within time by the observation that Rome is "not yet important" (p. 17). Alexander the Great is assumed to be more familiar. Mention of an earlier Alexander of Macedon includes reference to "another of their Alexanders" who would later conquer Persia, without further explanation. Later on there is reference to Xerxes leaving the throne vacant until Alexander came to fill it c. 150 years later (p. 105). In this case there is an assumed knowledge of Alexander's campaigns, and an attempt to link the two wars in way that was already current in antiquity, and yet the remark is a little misleading in giving the impression that there was no Great King in the intervening years.

At some points, child readers are encouraged to recognise that ancient values do not always coincide with modern ones. When the Persian embassy offends the royal family of Macedon, the narrator

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explains why their behaviour would have been regarded as offensive (p. 20). Similarly, reference to a slave includes a brief discussion of the ancient attitude towards slavery, why slavery was awful for people who had been enslaved, and the observation that, "it had occurred to no one yet that it was evil" (p. 96).

Political values are presented as more directly comparable to modern values. The runner, Pheidippides, voices criticism of Sparta for a form of group think that creates "tyranny… in their own souls" (p. 31). Right from the out-set, the story is established as a conflict between despotic Persia and freethinking Greece (p. 6). Tyranny has taught the Greeks that "absolute power is no better than the worst man who can get it" (p. 9). Once the Greeks have been victorious, the narrator expands on some of these themes a little more, explaining that their victory is still important today, not just as an inspirational win against the odds, but as "victory for reason over blind obedience; for free choice over despotic power; for a man's right to be a living soul, not just the tool of a ruler" (p. 105). Good points about Persia ("good order at home, efficient administration, and handsome cities; their jewellers and painters and sculptors made beautiful things") do not outweigh the sense that a Persian victory would have "killed at the root almost all we value today because they were not free" (pp. 109–110).

The Greeks are not represented as perfect. They are shown frequently to fight amongst themselves and to act out of ambition. It is nonetheless the case that the image of the Greeks as presented by Herodotus is ameliorated here to create a clearer dichotomy. Although it is said that some cities Medized, the Athenians' symbolic gift of earth and water to Persia is omitted, reducing their culpability (p. 23). Miltiades' speech before Marathon says that if they win, Athens will become the 'greatest' Greek city, however the Herodotean original has been paraphrased to remove the ominous hints that Athens will dominate the others (pp. 34–35).

This rather strong emphasis on resisting tyranny may to some extent reflect Renault's life experiences. While one must be reluctant to emphasise biographical factors excessively, Renault had served in World War Two and the struggle against fascism was still recent history for her when she wrote *Lion in the Gateway*. This may also have influenced her depiction of death and self-sacrifice. The Athenians' decision to spend their public funds on a fleet is described as a commitment that they "would not buy today at the cost of

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tomorrow" (p. 72). Alexander of Macedon is described as having had to learn the bitter lessons of conflict and occupation that his father had tried to warn him of (p. 55). Pheidippides feels like he might die *en route* to Sparta (p. 29), but he struggles ahead because so much depends on him. Later he suspects that he will never run at Olympia; the narrator confirms that this suspicion was correct, but notes that his sacrifice was worth it and we still honour him today (pp. 31–32). The commitment of Leonidas and the other Spartans to die at Thermopylae is described in extremely positive terms and this positivity extends to others who are prepared to die, such as the helots. As their final day begins, the narrator notes mournfully that, "Evening would come for other men, and the long night; but neither sunset, nor night, nor age, nor time's forgetfulness would fall upon Leonidas and his Three Hundred" (p. 68). This is a paraphrasing of stanza four of *For the Fallen*, by Robert Laurence Binyon (1869–1943). This poem was written and published in 1914 in response to the massive loss of life by the allied forces at the Battle of Mons as they retreated before the advancing Imperial German Army. This stanza was used widely on war memorials and was adopted by the Royal British Legion as an exhortation for ceremonies of Remembrance. All of these passages are rather serious for a work for children and they communicate the serious message that while war is gruesome it is sometimes necessary to fight, and that those who die in such a cause have done the right thing. Someone who lived through both world wars might well feel that this was a necessary value to pass on and this narrative of ancient conflict provides an example from another age.

The gods feature throughout the work. They are mentioned in the first page as a key aspect of ancient Greek culture (p. 1). References to Greek religion inform readers about Greek culture and add characterisation, such as when Pheidippides recalls being initiated as a child (p. 27). This is also the approach before battle, when it is explained that the Greek "priests" sacrifice before battle and appeal to Ares (p. 35), although it would have been more accurate to mention Artemis (similarly Artemis is missing from the list of gods honoured after the battle, p. 40). At times there is an implication that the gods were real, for example when the omens stop once the heralds offer themselves as replacements, with the implication that they were caused by divine displeasure (p. 19). Typically their representation is more ambiguous: Pheidippides' vision of Pan may be real or may be the result of exhaustion (p. 30); Renault takes the opportunity to teach

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the reader the origin of the term "panic" (pp. 30 and 38); "some say" that Cleomenes' madness was caused by his bribery of the oracle, but Renault is not drawn on this further (p. 51, echoing Herodotus, *Histories*, 6.75 with 6.84); Leonidas thinks of himself as an offering to the gods following the prophecy that a king must die, but although the prophecy is proved accurate, Renault does not offer an opinion on its validity (p. 58). Events at Delphi are historicised: the Pythia is unclear because she smells smoking bay leaves and chews poison "cyanide" laurel leaf (p. 81). The Herodotean account of the miraculous defence of Delphi is retold; it is framed as – this is what Delphians told Herodotus – "we can think what we choose" (p. 82). This retains the vibrant feel of the original miracle story while gently reminding the reader not to take it literally. Persian religion is also acknowledged. Darius prays to "Mighty Ormuz", an older transliteration of Ahuramazda, and Xerxes thinks that the "gods of Persia" sent the traitor Ephialtes to him (p. 63). Magi and astrologers help Xerxes interpret his dream (p. 42).

While ancient pagan beliefs are a key part of the tale, Christianity also has an important part in the narrative. The narrator assumes that Christianity is a preferable belief system and one shared by the reader. Xerxes should have suspected that Demaratus would betray him as he did Sparta, but he did not think of that because feuding was so common in antiquity; "It was 500 years and more before Christ taught forgiveness" (p. 52) (it is noticeable that there is no resolution of the conflict between the apparently modern strength of suspecting someone on the basis of past actions and the modern strength of forgiveness). King Leonidas is said to have been decapitated and "hung upon a cross" (p. 69). This adjusts the Herodotean narrative to fit the Christian tradition in which Leonidas is a forerunner to Christ; Herodotus refers to his body being impaled, it is adjusted here to reflect the crucifixion (Hdt. 7.238). While Greek religion is represented as primitive by comparison with Christianity, Greek philosophy is by contrast compatible: Plutarch "never became a Christian, but the virtues he valued in his heroes ring just as true today" (p. 114).

Lion at the Gate gives readers a very good sense of the military aspects of the Persian War campaigns. The relationship between geography and troop placement is usually clear; the importance of shelter, provisions, and equipment is clear. There is no attempt to recreate an immersive account of the battles, but the struggle, risk,

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	and need for physical bravery and mental toughness are stressed. The Persians use of archery features; they are "great archers" (p. 12); the Persians' military skill is also mentioned; they fall upon the Ionians 'like hawks against day-old chicks' (p. 16). The variety of people within the Persian Empire also comes across, particularly in the description (based on Herodotus) of Xerxes' army (p. 61). The Greek victory is represented as a combination of military skill, moral courage, cunning leadership, and mistakes in the Persian leadership. There is no attempt to suggest that the Greeks were naturally superior, only that their political system was better thereby enabling them to play to their strengths.
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Alexander the Great Ancient Slavery Architecture Ares Artemis Athena Athens Bible Divination Eleusinian Mysteries Gods Graeco-Persian Wars Greek History Greek Philosophy Olympic Games Sparta
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adventure Adversity Authority Character traits Christianity Conflict Death Freedom Good deeds Heroism Hierarchy Historical figures History Integrity Masculinity Morality Oppression Political changes Sacrifice Values Violence War
Further Reading	Bridges, E., Hall, E., and Rhodes, P.J., eds., *Cultural Responses to the Persian Wars: Antiquity to the Third Millennium*, Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2007. Burns, Landon C., *Men are Only Men: The Novels of Mary Renault,* Minneapolis, MN: Critique, 1963. Dick, Bernard F., *The Hellenism of Mary Renault*, Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois Press, 1972. Sweetman, David, *Mary Renault*, New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993.

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Addenda

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