Non Enarrabile Textum

Allusive Ekphrasis in Francisco Javier Alegre’s Alexandrias

Abstract
Neo-Latin literature in colonial New Spain has a rich history that has only in recent years garnered broader interest from scholars. One of the most unique works produced in New Spain during this time is Jesuit scholar Francisco Javier Alegre’s Alexandrias, an epic that depicts Alexander the Great's conquest of the Phoenician city of Tyre. As there is scant scholarship analyzing the literary elements of the Alexandrias, this paper focuses only on Alegre’s usage of ekphrasis—a detailed description of an object—in book one of the epic, rather than attempting to explore every allusive aspect in this dense text. Through allusive ekphrasis, Alegre elegantly incorporates the work of ancient poets such as Ovid not only to highlight his own ability as a poet, but also to subtly address topics that would otherwise be inappropriate for a Jesuit priest to write about. In addition to this more noticeable usage of allusion, Alegre’s specific manipulation of poetic language in this scene also reveals a potential reading of Alexander the Great as a historical analogue to Hernan Cortés, both of whom gained fame through conquest. Analysis of this text—even through an allusive lens alone—reveals the intricacy with which Alegre and his contemporaries were composing their works, and emphasizes the value of deeper investigations into Neo-Latin literature.

Keywords
Neo-Latin, Latin literature, epic poetry, Alexander the Great, allusion, ekphrasis, colonial literature, Jesuit literature, New Spain

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INTRODUCTION

After two centuries of literary development in a scholarly environment steeped in classical tradition, colonial New Spain during the 18th century produced a variety of Neo-Latin authors and works that continued the nearly two millennia-long legacy of Latin epic literature. The Jesuit scholar Francisco Javier Alegre's epic—the *Alexandrias*—was one such poem composed during this blooming period in colonial Mexican Latin composition, and it stands out as an epic set both in the distant past and in the old world, rather than the works set in the more contemporary new world composed by Alegre's cadre. Alegre's epic is focused on the conquest of Tyre by the eponymous Alexander the Great, heightening the historical record of this event to a suitably dramatic, epic narrative. The *Alexandrias* began as a supposed poetic exercise while Alegre was a student, after which the project was revised and published two decades later in 1773 and once again in 1776 (Kaimowitz, 1990, p. 135). The product of this long publication cycle is a meticulously constructed epic, comprised only of four parts and less than 2,200 lines, which masterfully utilizes and subverts the long-standing poetic techniques of Latin epic. In the first book of the epic, the scenes of ekphrasis—a detailed description of an object—stand out

![FIGURE 1. Francisco Javier Alegre, poet and Jesuit priest. Courtesy of the Ministry of Culture of Mexico.](image-url)
as key moments in the epic where Alegre utilizes allusion in order to convey the depth of his literary knowledge to readers, as well as to subtly incorporate sexual and romantic content that, as a Jesuit scholar, he would otherwise be unable to write.

**ANALYSIS**

**Comparisons Between Alegre’s Cloak Ekphrasis and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses***

The first significant ekphrastic scene in the narrative occurs when the Tyrians—cautious of the Macedonian army that has appeared outside their city walls—send a delegation to assess the Greek king’s intent. This delegation carries gifts and food to prepare a banquet, arriving at the camp with the hope that Alexander is susceptible to their plots (*bilingueis exposuere dolos*). Although the statues, clothing, and crown presented are impressive in their own right, the focus is on the masterfully made *chlamys* (cloak) depicting the mythological tale of the Phoenician princess Europa’s abduction by Zeus.

Alegre presents a disjointed depiction of the interwoven tale of Zeus, Europa, and Europa’s brother Cadmus, focusing on smaller vignettes that only provide a basic summary of their tale. The most direct reasoning for this short depiction is brevity; Alegre compresses this scene as key moments in the epic where Alegre utilizes allusion in order to convey the depth of his literary knowledge to readers, as well as to subtly incorporate sexual and romantic content that, as a Jesuit scholar, he would otherwise be unable to write.

| Utque duce adstiterunt coram, pacisque bilingueis Exposuere dolos, epulas mentitaque dona Exponunt[,] venerum monimenta augusta parentum [75] Tum geminas patrio fulgenteis murice vesteis, / Eoisque gravem gemmis, auroque coronam, Atque auro pariter chlamydem, gemmisque rigentem / Cui varium manus addiderat Phoenissa decorum, Nam *chlamyde* in media torvi sub *imagine tauri* [80] Sideram exosus sedem pater altus Olympi Stabat Agenoridum campis, atque arva secabat Corniger. / O quid non superum vel pectora cogat / Darus amor! Parte ex alia *pulcherrima virgo* Forma *ilusa* Dei spirantia cornibus aptat [85] Serta subens, mulctequ manu *candentia laevi* / *Pectora*, mox super *Armeni de pelle leonis* *Tegmen* agit fulvo, maculisque insigne coruscis; Nec verita *insidum* saltu conscendere virgo est, *Insidet cui ignara Deo*, iamque ille per undas [90] Carpit iter, spumant rapido vada caerula cursu. / Singula mirantur Danai, Rex farier orsus: Haud vestrum ignoramus iter, nec munera duri Spernimus, O Tyrii; sed debita moenia fatis Poscimus. Haec Ferte. Aemathio parere tyranno [95] Non Poenos, meritis unquam aut certasse pigebit, / Sin autem coeci obsintunt, Divisque repugnant, Arma parate animis, vos tristia fata maneunt. | And so they stand before the leader, and they laid out two-tongued treacheries of peace, and they place a banquet and fabricated gifts. They place the revered statues of the ancient forefathers[,] then gemmed garments gleaming with traditional purple, And a crown in gold, heavy with Eastern gems, and an equally gold mantle/cloak, bristling with gems, to which Phoenician hand had added varied ornaments, Now in the middle of the cloak under an image of a wild bull, the high father of Olympus—hating the starry seat of the sons of Agenor—stood on the Phoenician fields, [and] the horn-bearing one was tearing the field. O which of the gods or which hearts does harsh love not compel! In another part the most beautiful maiden, playful in her form, happily places garlands on the horns of the god, and she soothes with her hand the shining chest of the bull on the left[,] Right above [this image] He/[Cadmus] brandishes the shield of the golden pelt of the Armenian lion, marked with its brilliant spots. The maiden is not fearful to mount the treacherous [god] with a leap, not knowing on which god she might be sitting upon, and now that god takes off through the waves, they foam the cerulean shallows in their rapid course.

The Greeks admire each [image] one by one, The king begins to say: “By no means are we ignorant of your journey, nor do we, hard-hearted, spurn your gifts/duties, O Tyrans: but we demand the walls owed by the fates. It will not ever bother you/the Phoenicians to submit to a Macedonian king, or to have contested with services/tribute, but if they resist blindly, and resist the gods, prepare your arms with courage, the sad fates will await you all!”
to a mere 11 lines, while Ovid—the most concrete allusive inspiration—dedicates 42 to Europa and Zeus alone in the second book of the *Metamorphoses* (*Met*. 2.833–875). It is noticeable that Alegre mentions Cadmus at all in this rapid retelling, as Europa and Zeus by themselves act as serviceable representations of the Phoenicians and Greeks in the overarching narrative of Tyre and Alexander. By choosing to include Cadmus in so few lines, Alegre points to a larger narrative timeline for the house of Agenor—the father of Europa and Cadmus—as a whole. Cadmus's inclusion betrays this ekphrasis's allusive connection to Ovid, who indeed does depict a larger story on the house of Agenor and directly ties in Zeus's abduction of Europa with Cadmus's story. While Alegre does not explore this scene with the same descriptive depth as Ovid, the key elements of Ovid's myth are embedded in Alegre's depiction. Even in excluding much of Zeus's planning and instead focusing on the same events Alegre depicts, Ovid's retelling includes much more detail:

His colour was white as the untrodden snow, which has not yet been melted by the rainy south-wind . . .

And, when her fear has little by little been allayed, he yields his breast for her maiden hands to pat and his horns to entwine with garlands of fresh flowers. The princess even dares to sit upon his back, little knowing upon whom she rests. The god little by little edges away from the dry land, and sets his borrowed hoofs in the shallow water; then he goes further out and soon is in full flight with his prize on the open ocean. She trembles with fear and looks back at the receding shore, holding fast a horn with one hand and resting the other on the creature's back. And her fluttering garments stream behind her in the wind. (Ovid, 1916, pp. 119–121)

The general impetus behind Europa's abduction is the same for both authors. Ovid claims that *maiestas et amor* (majesty and love) cannot exist concurrently, that Zeus's desire overrides his sensibilities and makes the god liable to do anything to satiate himself (*Met*. 2.846–847). Alegre blunts this harsh characterization by blaming *durus amor* (harsh love) as the undeniable force that compels Zeus. In both cases Zeus's motivation is very clearly his *amor*, which leads into the remainder of the myth. Curiously, beyond the use of *amor* to explain
Zeus's action, there is no romance present in the rest of the Alexandria. This absence is striking given Alegre's usage of the sex- and romance-filled Metamorphoses, as well as his juxtaposition of Alexander with the epic hero Aeneas, whose romantic excursion results in a centuries-long hatred between the Carthaginians and Romans. The lack of amor in Alexander's story is likely an implicit literary boundary for Alegre. Although Alegre excuses his inspiration from the ostensibly heretical writers of antiquity by claiming to continue the literary tradition of "imitation of the best," he still holds back from "imitating" the sexual subject matter that would be unacceptable for a Jesuit priest to write about (Kaimowitz, 1990). As the main narrative eschews romance and sex, it follows that scenes such as this ekphrastic retelling of Zeus's abduction of Europa stand out even more and serve as even clearer reminders of the romantic and sexual works that Alegre is connected to.

Interaction Between Europa and Zeus

The most compacted section of this ekphrastic scene is also the most allusive, as Alegre rapidly covers the actual content of the myth in eight lines after his proclamation on the power of amor:

Durus Amor! Parte ex alia pulcherrima virgo
Forma ilusa Dei spirantia cornibus aptat
[85] Serta subens, mulcetque manu candentia pectora
Pectora, mox super Armeni de pelle leonis
Tegmen agit fulvo, maculisque insigne coruscis;

Nec verita insidum saltu conscendere virgo est,
Insident cui ignara Deo, iamque ille per undas
[90] Carpit iter, spumant rapido vada caerula cursu.
(Alex. 1.83–90)

In describing Europa's approach to Zeus, Alegre fluctuates between using the exact same diction as Ovid and conveying the general meaning of Ovid's writing. Instead of describing the specifics of Zeus facilitating his meeting with Europa through ordering Hermes, Alegre focuses on the key actions between Europa and Zeus. First, Europa is depicted by Alegre as a pulcherrima virgo (most beautiful maiden), aligning closely with Ovid's description of her as regia virgo (royal maiden) (Met. 2.868–869). Another key descriptor of Alegre's Europa is ilusa (playful), which condenses Ovid's claim that Europa is outside with her maids to play, ludere (Alex. 1.84). While seemingly avoiding the exact wording Ovid uses, Alegre still depicts the same meaning and narrative setup that is conveyed in Ovid's myth. One key example of this fluctuation is in Alegre's description of Zeus in bull form. First, Alegre describes the action of Europa placing a garland on the horns of the bull as placing a serta on the cornibus (Alex. 84–85). This reverses Ovid's description, which has Zeus himself lowering his cornua for sertis (Met. 2.867). Alegre not only flips the agent of the action, but also changes the horns from the accusative object to a locative ablative. Second, Alegre converts Ovid's description of the bull's snow-white flank—latus niveum (Met. 2.865)—as having a gleaming body instead, candentia pectora. The result of these slight manipulations of words is a deliberate avoidance of using the same words or even similar case constructions as Ovid, despite depicting the exact same myth. One would expect even an incidental overlap between Alegre and Ovid's depiction of Zeus, yet Alegre's aversion to utilizing Ovid's exact language reveals just how closely he was comparing his ekphrasis to Ovid's myth. This ekphrasis's allusive connection to Ovid is strengthened considerably by the abrupt mention of Cadmus right before the climax of Europa's story.

Cadmus and Colonization

Cadmus has no direct place in Alegre's brief ekphrasis. Even in Ovid's retelling, Cadmus appears only after the disappearance of Europa to search for his sister, which leads to Cadmus's famous battle with the Theban dragon (Met. 3.1–94). Alegre's ekphrasis also has no direct reason as to why Cadmus is described, but nevertheless Cadmus is afforded two of the eight lines that should ostensibly be about Europa and Zeus. However, his very presence on the cloak weaves in Ovid's broader tale of the house of Agenor. Alegre uses the most distinct characteristics of Cadmus, focusing on describing his lion-pelt shield—Armeni de pelle leonis / Tegmen (Alex. 1.86–87)—more than Cadmus himself. In addition to the self-reflexive pseudo-ekphrasis within an ekphrasis, Alegre once again avoids directly quoting Ovid's description of the lion pelt as a leoni pellis (Met. 3.52–53). The simultaneous inclusion of Cadmus in this ekphrasis, while only describing him in almost caricaturized terms, raises the question of the purpose of Cadmus's inclusion. One potential answer is in his status...
as a Phoenician colonizer, an attribute that Alegre—who not only was born in colonial Veracruz, New Spain, but who was also the official historian of Mexican Jesuits—would be keenly aware of (Kaimowitz, 1990, p. 135). Ovid’s Cadmus is expressly told he could not return to his Phoenician homeland until he found Europa, which not only leads to his aforementioned battle with the Theban dragon, but to the founding of Thebes itself (Met. 3.3–5, 3.124–137). The historical Alexander, or even Alegre’s version, does not instantly compare to this theoretical colonizing Cadmus, as Alexander’s military campaigns revolved around his invasion into long-settled lands, while Cadmus had to “tame” the wild Theban landscape. There is, however, reason to believe that Alegre depicts Alexander in a similar manner to Hernán Cortés, whose siege of the island city Tenochtitlán echoes Alexander’s siege of the island city Tyre (Laird, 2020, p. 28). So rather than acting as a direct parallel to Alexander, Cadmus

exists in a conqueror-colonizer paradigm alongside Alexander and Cortés. It is also important to note another aspect of Cadmus's identity that Alegre would undoubtedly have related to: being exiled from one's home. The revised, final edition of the Alexandrias was published in 1776, nearly 10 years after Alegre and his entire order were expelled from New Spain (Laird, 2020, p. 20). This shared identity may explain Cadmus's inclusion in the otherwise compact tale of Europa and Zeus, as well as the potential links between colonization and conquest that permeate this ekphrasis. The existence of this complex interweaving of Cadmean past, Alexandrian present, and Cortésian future highlights Alegre's poetic skill and warrants further analysis, which ultimately falls outside the scope of this paper. Just as suddenly as Cadmus appears in the ekphrasis, the mythological narrative shifts back to Europa and Zeus for the final three lines of the scene.

**Innocence and Duplicity**

Both Alegre and Ovid stress the innocence of Europa in this myth, as well as the deceitful nature of Zeus in orchestrating Europa's abduction. The final lines of Alegre's ekphrasis deals entirely with these elements of the myth, describing Europa as ignara (ignorant) of the insidium (treacherous) Zeus as she climbs onto him (Alex. 1.88–89). Ovid's description is similar, with the nescia (unknowing) Europa being completely unaware that she was face to face with a god (Met. 2.868–869). This
innocence is accentuated by Zeus's intentional deception in his attempt to lure Europa. The description of imagine tauri (appearance of a bull) is critical to understanding this deceit, as on initial glance Alegre seems to use the word imagine as the literal depiction of Zeus as a bull on the cloak itself (Alex. 1.79). Ovid's usage of imago, however, reveals a deeper significance to Alegre's use of the word. Ovid also uses the exact phrase of imagine tauri to refer to Zeus, but Ovid's imagine describes Zeus finally casting aside his bull form once he has successfully abducted Europe (Met. 3.1–2). As is the case with his other uses of imago directed toward a character, Ovid's description of Zeus in this way is intended to also carry the connotation of deception. It is telling that Alegre actually uses the exact same phrase as Ovid, which he has seemingly avoided at all costs throughout the rest of the ekphrasis. One possible reasoning for this is that Alegre used the same phrase fully anticipating that only avid readers of Ovid might understand it, that a reader would have had to have seen the ways in which Ovid utilizes imago as a largely duplicitous description. This notion of duplicity is important not only in the ekphrasis, but within the context of the ekphrastic cloak's nature as a duplicitous gift to Alexander. The Macedonian rex (king) is able to discern the intent of the Phoenicians and negotiations immediately fall through, leaving both the Macedonians and the Phoenicians to reckon with the resulting fallout.

**CONCLUSION**

Despite its brief nature, this scene of ekphrasis in book one of the Alexandrias is a deeply complex one that weaves in the writing of Ovid both directly and indirectly, not only indicating Alegre's skill in poetic composition, but also toeing the line between appropriate and improper subject matter. Alegre's ekphrasis of the Phoenician gift cloak highlights Alegre's careful consideration of word form and placement in his allusions, but also a potential reading of the epic's exiles—such as Cadmus or Aeneas—as reflections of Alegre himself. A close reading of ekphrastic scenes such as this in the first book of the Alexandrias solely through an allusive lens reveals much about the intricacy of the text and the laborious efforts of Alegre, but still leaves behind many more elements in the text that are worthy of further study. Analysis of the Alexandrias helps a modern reader gain a greater insight into the less studied, yet meaningful corpus of Neo-Latin works in colonial America, as well as gain a better understanding of the way in which the tradition of Latin epic continued into modernity through the efforts of poets such as Francisco Javier Alegre.

**REFERENCES**


