

## Queer Desires and Satirised Empires: Notes on Aubrey Menen's *A Conspiracy of Women* (1965)

David Lunn

*SOAS University of London*

Aubrey Menen seems, from the state of the rather scant scholarly literature devoted to him, to be a writer in constant need of “revisiting” or “reintroducing”.<sup>1</sup> His obscurity and erasure is well demonstrated by the title of Mary Jane Hurst’s 1994 article, ‘Reintroducing Aubrey Menen’, wherein she attempted to “reclaim his relevance for literary and cultural studies” (p. 129). This is an unfortunate requirement, for Menen occupies a unique place in the history of what is understood as queer literature, as well as post-colonial, satirical, and indeed English-language literature altogether.<sup>2</sup>

In attempting to account for the ways in which writers such as Menen have been largely elided from postcolonial studies and English literary history, Susheila Nasta points to the operations of literary history writing and canon formation that have “done much to exclude such voices, placing them in categories for convenience which do more to distort than clarify” (2002, p. 22). Thus a separation is effected between “Indo-Anglian” or early “nationalist” writings, such as that of Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao, and a “later post-war Asian group of so-called ‘immigrant’, ‘expatriate’, or ‘diasporic’ writers” (*ibid.*). Her explanation is convincing: the complexities of Menen and other writers, whose biographies and writings do not slot neatly into such categories, are unable to be understood from within the narrow confines of these “academic orthodoxies”, and an unfortunate “repetitive myopia in reading practices” (*ibid.*) has led to the neglect of these important precursors to the broadly accepted canon of postcolonial writing in English.<sup>3</sup> This is of particular importance given the queer positionality that Menen’s work articulates. The call to consider such works is therefore not an assimilationist one, but rather is intended to disturb and demonstrate the limits of all canon formations, even one as supposedly emancipatory and liberating as that of postcolonial literature.

Another issue of canonicity is raised by the enduring inscrutability of satire, the mode in which Menen’s novels revel, which lends to the texts a superficial transience—a sense that they are “of their time”—and to the critic and scholar an easy way out of treating such supposedly flippant or “light” texts with the seriousness that they perhaps deserve, but that anyway feels almost incompatible with their style. Ruvani Ranasinha draws our attention, perhaps satirically, to the difficulties of reading Menen’s satires, then as now:

Significantly, the first reviews of *The Prevalence of Witches* . . . paid little attention to Menen’s satire of imperialism and of the British residents, interpreting his portrayal of the European colony as “a queer but agreeable lot [who] sit talking, talking and talking.” The object of satire

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<sup>1</sup> Compare one of the reviews of a 2010 “complete and unabridged” re-publication of four of his novels (Cheerath, 2011, pp. 240–43) and one of the very few academic articles on his life and works (Hurst, 1994, pp. 129–94).

<sup>2</sup> Other short but useful studies of Menen do exist: see, *inter alia*, Mohammed Elias (1985), and a four-page section from Leela Gandhi (2008). More recently, Rajorshi Das has examined aspects of sexuality in Menen’s autobiographical writings (2017) and returned to Menen’s infamously banned retelling of the Ramayana (2018).

<sup>3</sup> Gandhi makes a similar point: “Menen deserves a more respected place in the annals of the Indian English novel—as do his contemporaries. Although tentative and often awkward, the novels of the 1930s and 1940s chronicle and respond to a remarkable era in world history. And, contrary to harsh judgement, they are the legitimate forerunners of the new postcolonial or diasporic novels produced by the new generation of postnational cosmopolitans.” (Gandhi, p. 218). Her formulation remains problematic: to my mind, Menen’s works resist simple categorisation under the “Indian English novel”. Cf. his own attitude to being described as Indian: “On the whole, I prefer not to be called ‘Indian’. I am *not Indian*; I don’t speak a word of any Indian language (except achcha). I am not Hindu or Muslim and I don’t kill people who are. I am by birth, language and inclinations English, in fact so English that I do not like embarrassing other Englishmen by saying so.” (Menen, 1947–48).

constantly shifts in the text leading the same reviewer to observe: "*The Prevalence of Witches* is a diverting squib. I must confess I was not always quite sure whom or what it is aimed at; but the general effect was to leave me vaguely stimulated."<sup>4</sup>

What is required is a wholesale reappraisal of Menen's many significant writings. His status as a popular and prolific satirist—of empire, race, social and sexual mores, and more besides—active particularly in the period of Britain's colonial withdrawal, invites us to reconsider the processes of formation of postcolonial writing in the metropole, while his sexuality and mixed-race identity, foregrounded in his autobiographical writings and a crucial backdrop to his fictional creations, complicates any attempt to categorise him or his writing.

The occasion of the "Queer" Asia conference on "desire, decriminalisation, and decolonisation"—and this resulting volume—thus presented the perfect opportunity for a foray into Menen's writings, given his treatment of queer desires, his satirising of empire, colonialism, and what we might term uneven cultural encounters, and the fact that most of his writings appeared either side of the 1967 decriminalisation of homosexual acts in the United Kingdom. Menen's *Conspiracy*, as much of his other work, embodies and enacts a queer positionality—that is (following de Lauretis (1991), Halperin (1995), and Dowson (2000) among others), a perspective that is uniquely and powerfully placed for "interrogations of *all* normative and non-normative acts, desires, perceptions, and possibilities" (Giffney, 2004, p. 74), including here gender roles and relations, empire and colonialism, religious sentiments and practices, and yes, sexualities in their many forms.

Menen was born in London in 1912, to an Irish mother and Indian father. In his collection of autobiographical essays, Aubrey Menen wrote with biting irony on the apparently "whimsical" idea of his parents' "bringing up an Indo-Irishman as a Briton" (1954, p. 8). But, as that text and others show, his was a clear-eyed critique of British or English society, alongside empire and colonialism, patriotism, and nationalism in all its forms—British, certainly, but Indian too—that drew on his mixed-race ancestry as a comic resource. As he quipped at the opening of his 1954 "autobiographical essay on national pride":

My ancestors on my mother's side were brigands who infested a range of hills overlooking the Lake of Killarney, called Macgillicuddy's Reeks. Two things are known to have run in their blood—a tendency to end up on the gallows and an itch to harry the English. I have managed to eradicate the first (1954, p. 7).

In what follows, I offer some notes on another of his anti-colonial or anti-imperial satires, *A Conspiracy of Women*, which, as the title might suggest, combines critique of some of his favourite recurrent themes with ironic and queering perspectives on gender roles and sexuality. I do so in the hope of bringing to renewed attention Menen's careful, bitingly funny, and at times quite profound satirical retelling of Alexander the Great's encounter with Persia and India, in which he sends up imperialism, colonialism, nationalism, gender norms, and heteronormativity more broadly, with dry wit and in eminently readable prose. His inherited and uneradicated "itch to harry the English" is on full display (at least if one is content to elide British imperialism with the English alone), and the novel marks, along with the rest of his oeuvre, a satirical landmark in anti-imperial and postcolonial writing in English.

### Queer lines on Alexander the Great

One day when Alexander the Great was sitting in his tent he said to his friend Hephaestion, "Hephaestion, have you ever thought about the fact that women make up half the human race?" "Once," said Hephaestion. "And what did you think about it?" said Alexander.

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<sup>4</sup> Ranasinha (pp. 28–9) here quotes Peter Quennell's 'Review of *The Prevalence of Witches*', *Daily Mail* (London), 22 November 1947. *Prevalence*, Menen's first novel, is perhaps the most widely discussed in the academic literature: see Hurst (1994); Nasta (2002, pp. 48–50); Ranasinha (2007).

“I thought it was a pity,” said Hephaestion. (Menen, 1965, p. 3)

Menen is hardly the first to make a homoerotic subject of Alexander the Great, and the suggestion that Alexander shared more than friendship with his general Hephaestion has been an enduring and contested one.<sup>5</sup> However, the factuality or otherwise of this homosexual relationship is, here at least, beside the point. Menen’s satirical innovation is to posit this as a scandalous open secret<sup>6</sup> amongst the men and women of Alexander’s army and community, and to interpolate it into what is otherwise a gendered comedy of manners between men and women. The opening lines of the novel quoted above, in which Hephaestion casually suggests that it is a pity that half the world’s population are women, are framed by two distinct prefaces. The second, addressed to women, reads in part:

When you have finished this book you will observe that all I have done is remove the Serpent from the Garden of Eden. As you have always known, he was never necessary; Eve was perfectly capable of conducting the whole affair herself. In this book she continues to do so.

It is a story about a number of clever women and some silly men. I hope you will see yourself reflected in the women, and I daresay you will find your husband or your lover somewhere among the men. (Menen, 1965, n.p.)

The first, however, is addressed to “Men of Good Will”. Such men must wonder, Menen suggests, why it is that when all they want is for the world to live in peace and harmony, they never seem to get their way. The answer, he suggests, is very simple:

I have had to travel four continents and spend a lifetime in study to find it. But like all important truths, it is very simple. As a matter of fact, it is so simple that I have been able to state it in the first seven lines of this story. If you are pressed for time, those are all you need to read. (Menen, 1965, n.p.)

Those seven lines are the ones quoted above.

Of course, these lines don’t immediately read as homosexual (though perhaps they are intrinsically queer). However, as the novel progresses, one of the key plot drivers is Alexander’s search for a wife—or, as it turns out, three. The lady Berenice is a Persian woman who has married Bathyllus, a Macedonian attendant in Alexander’s army, and is a key plotter throughout. In one scene, she prepares the princess Barsine, daughter of King Darius, and the other chosen brides for their coming nuptials:

Berenice began straight away with an explanation of Alexander’s motives in marrying. Then, with delicacy and tact she approached the most thorny subject to be dealt with that day. “Since, then, ladies, this is a political move, you must expect certain...well, unusual features in your marriages. The great honour of being married to the Master of the World will have, of necessity, some disadvantages. [...] Such a person cannot be expected to have the time to indulge in the conjugal life in all its fullness. Indeed, I think I can say that he will not fulfill the normal duties of a husband.”

“Of course he won’t,” said Princess Barsine in a ringing voice. “I don’t know whether it had reached Zadracarta—if that *is* the place you come from, Lady Berenice—but in Persepolis everybody knows he sleeps with a general called Hephaestion.”

“That is nothing but a scandalous invention,” said Berenice, shocked.

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<sup>5</sup> I am not qualified to parse the sources of, or scholarship on, classical antiquity. Those with an interest may consult, among other sources and for a sense of the debate: Cartledge (2004), Lane Fox (1973), Martin (2012), and Renault (1975).

<sup>6</sup> This phrasing unintentionally echoes Anjali Arondekar’s formulation of “the archive as an open secret” (2005, p. 13). Menen’s writing of Alexander’s sexuality—intended, as we see here, to be read in the spaces between the lines—creatively parallels Arondekar’s and others’ insistence on reading beyond the limits of the archive to find historical—and, indeed, contemporary—truths, perhaps even “secrets...encrypted” (*ibid.*, p. 26). I am grateful to Daniel Luther for the reference.

“In Zadracarta,” said the Princess with a laugh, “you probably burn ’em alive. But my brother sleeps with his footman, and the footman took good care that the whole court knew, the insolent whelp.” (Menen, 1965, p. 138)

So far, a fairly transparent commentary on differing attitudes to homosexuality: Berenice is scandalised, while the sophisticated Barsine is accepting of rumoured and actual homosexual practices, whether in her husband-to-be or brother. Menen’s suggestion is to plot the acceptability of such practices onto a urban/urbane–provincial/rustic axis within the context of the Archaemenid Empire—Persepolis as the ceremonial capital; Zadracarta (modern Gorgan) as a distant and relatively newly-incorporated town—without any suggestion that the former represents a “decadent” or “debauched” lifestyle that might otherwise lazily attributed to the corrupting influences of metropolitan living.<sup>7</sup> This presentation of probable capital punishment for these practices as not only provincial, but worthy of disdain, is particularly significant in the context of then ongoing debates over the decriminalisation of homosexual acts in Britain—*A Conspiracy* was published in 1965.

Of course, Alexander is not the only one to abstain from conjugal relations: Hephaestion too avows that he has no preference to his bride, “As long as she has no preference for *me*. I have no intention of laying a finger on her. Nor, I think, has His Majesty.” (Menen, 1965, p. 136) Hephaestion’s disavowal of heteronormative conjugality is immediately preceded by two sly, satirical exchanges. In the former, Hephaestion informs Eumenes and Craterus of Alexander’s decision that the three of them should immediately take Persian brides, “to leave a settled and contented country behind us” as they march on towards India. But he also adds that Alexander himself will take three wives:

Craterus exploded. “If Alexander does anything so depraved, so bestial, so contrary to any morals and decency, my men will lay down their arms. They’ve followed him all this way only because to them he’s a hero. If he prefers to be a debauchee, they’ll give him the lesson of his life.”

“I don’t think they will,” said Eumenes. “In fact, I think Alexander knows your men better than you do. I consider his idea most ingenious. They will forgive him marrying *three* wives because obviously he cannot have fallen in love with any of them. And falling in love is one thing a hero may not do.” (Menen, 1965, p. 134)

The latter sees Hephaestion commission Berenice to find Alexander his *three* wives:

“But I have been thinking of a wife,” said Berenice.

“So has Alexander,” said Hephaestion. “He has decided that conjugal love is not for him. He was, I understand, struck with remorse at being unfaithful to Bucephalus.”

“I have never heard of her.”

“Him,” said Hephaestion. “He is a horse.”

“Oh,” said Berenice, “yes, a horse. What, my lord, in the name of sanity *do* you mean?”

“It was my fault. I told him to practice thinking of his wife as his horse and he tried, with the result that I have mentioned.”

“But women are not horses,” said Berenice.

“No,” said Hephaestion. “It would have been easier for him if they were. But as you say, they are not.”

“And in any case, you cannot ride three horses at once.”

“Alexander can,” said Hephaestion... (Menen, 1965, p. 135)

The whiff of an excessively close relationship with one’s horse perhaps recalls another figure from European antiquity, the Roman Emperor Caligula, whose supposed intention to appoint his horse as a consul has been suggested as a rather clever piece of Roman punning (Woods, 2014). Nevertheless, Menen creates humour through the analogy of wife and horse, and the less-than-subtle implications of trying to “ride” three at once. But the greater irony is in

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<sup>7</sup> Earlier in the novel, Berenice refers to Zadracarta as a “dreadful little provincial city” (Menen, 1965, p. 12).

Craterus' reaction: what his men will find depraved, bestial, and contrary to decency is the idea of Alexander marrying three women at once—other relations are left unremarked; while for Eumenes, the only thing that cannot be forgiven in a hero is falling in love. These suggestions upend conventional morality in 1960s Britain at least: depravity and debauchery are the province of homosexuals. They also deliciously subvert the traditional model of the epic hero: certainly, falling in love is not a major theme in the classical epic, though assignations and sexual escapades are common; of course here, Menen implies that if Alexander has loved anyone, it is either Hephaestion or his horse.

The Alexander–Hephaestion relationship remains a subtext throughout, and instances of their homoerotic or homosocial closeness abound. The denouement of the continuous allusions comes in the final pages of Menen's novel:

The march back to the river was a disaster. The army starved as it would its way along an inhospitable coast among a savage people. But it survived.

Hephaestion did not. He caught a fever and suddenly died. The grief of Alexander was so great and so prolonged that his generals rebuked him, saying it was unbecoming for a man to grieve for another man in such a fashion. They said that it would give rise to the suspicion that they had been lovers—and since the generals did not think that they were, we may be sure that they were not. Alexander curbed his grief. (Menen, 1965, p. 243)

The conceit is a common one: it's one thing to engage in homosexual acts, but don't be *seen* to do so. Particularly given the traditionally hyper-masculine context of an army, Menen and we the readers share a covert, sly knowledge that all was not as it was pretended to be.<sup>8</sup>

### **"To make love in foreign ways"**

Besides, of much greater concern than Alexander's homosexual relationship with Hephaestion is his direction to the men of his army to marry foreign women. This plot is central to the development of Menen's comedy of manners, and through it he constructs his satires on empire and the imperial encounter, particularly through preconceptions of foreignness.

The device is developed when, at a banquet, Berenice is invited to philosophise in the company, and thus usurp the traditional prerogative, of the men. Disputing on the theme of peace, she opines, "I shall maintain that peace is obtained through love." (Menen, 1965, p. 31) As Alexander consumes more and more wine, he reaches a state wherein "what she said does not greatly matter. It was what Alexander, now considerably fuddled, thought she said that counted." (Menen, 1965, p. 32) And so the stage is set for his morning-after epiphany. The decidedly hen-pecked Bathyllus (see n. 7), a Macedonian soldier now married to the Persian Berenice, is summoned and, within the comic strictures of Alexander's less than penetrating questions, declares himself very content in his marriage ("Berenice is not the sort of woman you *quarrel* with.") And so:

"Good," said Alexander. "You are happy with her, and I am sure she is happy with you. She is a remarkable woman, Bathyllus," said Alexander. He leaned his head to one side in the gesture that the painter Apelles had made famous. "Conjugal love and peace," he said.

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<sup>8</sup> Despite my above-expressed disinclination to delve into the classical scholarship, it is perhaps worth mentioning Lane Fox's contention that "descendants of the Dorians were considered and even expected to be openly homosexual, especially among their ruling class, and the Macedonian kings had long insisted on their pure Dorian ancestry." (1973, p. 67). The character of Bathyllus, a philosophically-inclined soldier in Alexander's army who ends up married to Berenice, is taken by his Persian acquaintance Anaxarchus to drown his sorrows in wine and song. He ends up drunk, and taking the singing girl to bed, until "The door burst open. Bathyllus stood on the threshold, sober and white. 'Anaxarchus,' he said in a strangled voice, 'she's a boy.'" (Menen, 1965, p. 77). Having earlier declared to Berenice—as a demonstration of his cultured civility—"I'm a Macedonian, but I feel I'm an Athenian" (*ibid.*, p. 13), his conclusion on being tricked into taking a boy to bed is simple: "'The Persians,' he said to the empty room, 'are pigs.'" (*ibid.*, p. 77). If space permitted, we might also read the character of Bathyllus against that featured in Juvenal's *Sixth Satire: Against Women*, (in)famously illustrated by Aubrey Beardsley.

Then he looked straight into Bathyllus' eyes. "Thank you," he said. "Tomorrow I am inviting all my officers to follow your example. Each of them, at my request, will take a foreign wife." (Menen, 1965, p. 34)

The women among the camp followers—after a debate on referring to themselves as wives, whores, or "Lady Companions"—determine to thwart this plan. While their concerns are initially about their own precarious status ("When this thing gets going, Alexander is going to ban us from the camp in the name of peace, decency and the sacred bonds of matrimony"), the situation takes a comic turn when one of the women, "Mother", intervenes:

"...I think we are making a mistake. I've listened to you all and it seems to me that what you're doing is looking after yourselves. But what about our menfolk? [...] Now, girls, have you given a thought to what our boys are going to be made to do?"

"Marry," said a voice helpfully.

"Marry *foreigners*," said Mother and at this word she shivered. "Foreign women with foreign blood in their veins, [...] And what of our Macedonian boys? What is going to be their reward for going out there and fighting in the front line to save our country from the invader?<sup>9</sup> What is their reward for being ready to lay down their lives for Macedon? To come back to bed with a foreign woman, to make love in foreign ways. I've got nothing against Alexander. [...] But who put this idea—this horrible idea—into his head, girls? Who else but a foreign woman?" (Menen, 1965, pp. 93–4)

The camp women, led by Iris, form a reactionary group, calling themselves "The Daughters of Macedon", and dedicate themselves to the preservation of traditional, Macedonian ways, and the eradication of supposedly unwholesome foreign influences and practices. In the course of the army's stay in Susa, and while Alexander receives new prospective brides, the Daughters make quite an impression on the soldiers, going so far as to build a temple to Macedon and recruit soldiers into another group, the "Guardians of the Daughters of Macedon". Of course, as this is Menen, their appeals to nationalistic and patriotic fervour—and to morality—are portrayed in a distinctly sardonic fashion:<sup>10</sup>

The soldiers did not take Alexander's marriage to heart. Iris had met three of the rankers in her temple a little earlier, three rough, blunt soldiers [...]. She had asked them what they thought.

The first soldier had run his hand over his chin, feeling the bristles of his beard. "Don't know rightly, Iris," he said. "But it seems to me that marrying one woman is morals. Marrying three at once is politics. Morals is morals and there's no getting away from that. But politics—well, I've never held with them and never got mixed up in them."

"Sleeping with three foreign women at the same time is morals too," Iris retorted. "Of the barnyard."

The second soldier laughed. "I did it once. In Egypt. But I was eighteen." (Menen, 1965, p. 143)

Alexander's and his soldiers' grand mass marriage proceeds unimpeded.<sup>11</sup> And it is against the backdrop of this failure of the Daughters' campaign that Alexander's army begins to move towards India. Or, in Hephaestion's words, and perhaps Menen's most biting satirical line of the novel: "Well, gentlemen, we're on the move. We are going to India. He doesn't know where it is or what it is, but he's made up his mind to conquer it." (Menen, 1965, p. 133)

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<sup>9</sup> Of course, the Macedonians were themselves the invaders at this point. Such is rhetoric.

<sup>10</sup> See too Menen, 1965, pp. 102–24.

<sup>11</sup> In recounting the Susa weddings, Menen takes his readers on an imaginative detour by the way of Arrian, the Roman historian whose second-century *Anabasis* has long been the primary source on Alexander's campaigns in Persia and India. A complete English translation of this text has been available since 1884, though Menen may have referred to later translations. Gandhi observes that much of his work "implicitly draws upon the culture and aesthetic arising from a certain type—and class—of homosexual experience. So, for instance, his novels and essays record a passionate, almost predictable, love for the artefacts of Greek and Roman antiquity..." (Gandhi, 2008, p. 216); we may simply add here that he was obviously also versed to some degree in the classics as literature and history.

### Imperial encounters...and analogies

The encounter between east and west is the focus of the fourth part of Menen's novel. In terms reminiscent of his earlier reworking of the epic *Ramayana*—*Rama Retold* (1954)<sup>12</sup>—Menen frames King Ambhi of Taxila as a puppet of the Brahmins at his court. On the arrival of Alexander and his army on the western banks of the Indus, he is reassured by the "Principal Brahmin" of the "famous University of Taxila" that "exactly the same thing had happened twenty thousand years before, but that this was not surprising because it was well known that everything happened all over again every twenty thousand years." Since Taxila had not in fact been invaded that time round, according to the astrologers, the king could relax:

Thus reassured, King Ambhi once more called for his state umbrella and strolled back to his palace in the cool of the evening. This was what was so pleasant about living in Taxila; there were no problems at all. The Brahmins had solved them all several hundred years before. (Menen, 1965, p. 150)

The satirising of caste roles, and the supposed superiority of the Brahmins, is supplemented by Menen's treatment of that most quintessential emblem of the British colonial encounter with India: *sati*, *suttee*, or widow immolation. In this, once again, the self-styled Daughters of Macedon play an oversized role.

The discussion of this issue begins with rumour, as soldiers recount to Iris, interspersed with ribald speculation, what they have heard about "what goes on there" (Menen, 1965, p. 152). Ribaldry aside, the issue of *sati* is inextricably bound up with other profoundly sexualised aspects of the encounter. Consider Anaxarchus' tour of Taxila University:

"Visitors," said the Principal, "usually like to see this room for its human side. All the students here are devoted to discovering the various ways of two persons having sexual intercourse. I may say it is not from any motive of vulgar curiosity that they do it. [...] But the sexual act is mentioned a great many times by the Authorities, and a deep critical study of the text, it is hoped, will throw new light on what they meant, symbolically, by the sexual act." (Menen, 1965, p. 161)

The parallels to a desexualised, post-Victorian understanding of ancient Indian multivalent attitudes to human sexuality are obvious. Meanwhile, the three wives of Alexander display quite divergent reactions on encountering a Shiva *lingam* on a tour of a temple:

Roxana worked her fan so hard that it made a clattering noise. "And what," she said in an outraged voice, "might *that* be?"

"That," said the Princess, "is exactly what it looks like. And flutter your fan as you may, Roxana, you'll never convince me that you've never seen one before."

"Do you mean to tell me," said Roxana, "that these abominable Hindus worship that...that...*thing*?"

"Did you ever know anybody over the age of puberty who didn't?" asked Barsine. (Menen, 1965, p. 178)

All this comes together with the questions of "foreign" practices, beliefs, and *sati*, which Menen weaves into his comedy of manners ("Many a husband, especially long-lived ones, after suffering a lifetime from a dedicated wife, had felt that the immolation was all, or almost all, to the advantage of the woman": Menen, 1965, pp. 196–7). The Daughters learn of an imminent case of *sati*, and despatch a group of soldiers to "rescue" the widow. They do so, but on bringing her to the Macedonian camp both they and the Daughters are mystified at her apparent lack of gratitude (Menen, 1965, pp. 198–205).

This encounter, and its comical denouement, well recalls Gayatri Spivak's provocative formulation of "white men saving brown women from brown men" as epitomising the British colonial encounter and the supposed civilising mission of empire, even if as in this case it is

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<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of this novel, and its banning in India, see Das (2018) and Chandran (2010).

largely women attempting the “saving” (Spivak 1988/2013).<sup>13</sup> In this instance, the subaltern woman is quite literally rendered unable to speak (for herself): she is brought to the Macedonian camp bound and gagged; and even when untied, her “Sanskrit” is unintelligible to her would-be liberators, as their Greek and Persian is to her. The Chief Brahmin struggles to explain to King Ambhi why the Macedonians would do such a thing, though invites once again the reader’s amusement (“‘It seems,’ said the Brahmin, ‘that these Macedonians are bigots.’”: Menen, 1965, p. 206). And the point remains throughout Menen’s satire: civilisation, or its lack, is emphatically a function of perspective; any such “mission” is thus inherently implausible.

Beyond the specific question of *sati*, both sides are also satirised from the opposite, or Indian, perspective. The Chief Brahmin is horrified by the familiarity of the Macedonians, and recounts his meeting them to the King:

“What are they like, these people from the West?”

The Brahmin paused, as though searching for a word. [...] Words were very important in Taxila, for Sanskrit was very rich in words, and each word had a specific and often very subtle meaning. It was the mark of an educated man to know these fine shades and to appreciate them when they were employed.

“They are *gregarious*,” said the Chief Brahmin. Ambhi looked up in surprise. This was an extremely rare word, but it conjured up a picture of sweaty and noisy forgatherings on the other side of the water which was quite spine-chilling. In Taxila, nobody forgathered. The people were rigidly divided into castes and subcastes and divisions of subcastes, none of which intermingled. The King and all his subjects ate alone since there was practically nobody that it was safe to invite. (Menen, 1965, p. 165)

He continues his explanation in terms that are immediately recognisable as satirical commentaries on British attitudes to the differences between them and Indians. “They are a very *young* people”, recounts the Brahmin, as a partial explanation as to why they might be so attached to a theory so potentially deleterious to social order as “Freedom” (Menen, 1965, pp. 166–7). And in the most amusing of twists, he finds virtues in the activities of the Daughters of Macedon:

It seems these women [of easy virtue] have organized some sort of exclusive group of men and women who are devoting themselves to keeping the race pure. They are against marriages between people of different blood.

“You see?” said Ambhi. “Exclusiveness is part of human nature, however much you try to drive it out. These women seem to have the glimmerings of civilization.” (Menen, 1965, p. 168)

Ultimately, Menen is taking aim at mutual ignorance and misunderstandings. In a tone that, for this scholar of the colonial period at least, firmly calls to mind the misadventures of British empire-builders, he remarks:

Thus the Indians were convinced that the Macedonians were ignoramuses; the Macedonians were sure that the Indians were fools; and the stage was properly set for the historic encounter between the East and the West. (Menen, 1965, p. 172)

### Some Conclusions

In her relatively brief treatment of Aubrey Menen and his oeuvre, Nasta sounds a note of caution:

As the author of over ten novels, 12 non-fiction works and numerous journalistic pieces, he was quick to establish an international reputation as a reporter and critic. Menen’s fiction, however, was not the subject of a great deal of serious critical scrutiny. He has frequently been seen as

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<sup>13</sup> Of course, Spivak would not have been surprised by this kind of novelistic version of the encounter: as she observed of her “sentence”, “sometimes brown and white women worked in”: *ibid.*, p. 93.

little more than a transient “Anglo-Indian curiosity”, more interesting for his mixed-ethnic background and a declared homosexuality.... (Nasta, 2002, p. 47).

My aim here has been to scrupulously avoid such exoticising tendencies. However, his sexuality and racial identity are nonetheless key to any discussion of his queering, anti-colonial satire; as Nasta goes on to suggest, citing Hurst, “the insights gained by the contradictory realities of his own cultural background form a ‘radical subtext’ to the stories he chooses to tell.” (Nasta, 2002, p. 48, quoting Hurst, 1994, p. 132).

Nowhere is this more evident than in his radically confessional autobiographical writings. Bringing the empire home was a peculiar feature of Menen’s musings. Consider his dry wit on the marriage of his parents:

The year was 1910. The supremacy of the white races over the coloured ones had never been so firmly established. My mother’s announcement to her family that she meant to marry a black man quite spoiled the Delhi Durbar for them. (Menen, 1970, pp. 29–30)

Unfortunately, there is not the space here to fully consider Menen’s autobiographical works. But I want to draw on one parallel with *A Conspiracy of Women*. It concerns the encounter with the University of Taxila, which is ultimately very disappointing for Anaxarchus and the perennially unfortunate Bathyllus who, in his search for the finer things in life, is once again disappointed, after hearing of the sex research and idea of the world as disc on an elephant on a turtle: “I had always thought that when we got to the East we would find people who lived more in the spirit than we do” (Menen, 1965, p. 162). The swipe at the orientalisising tendencies of westerners in search of some authentic spirituality in “the East” is clear, and comes even more to the fore when read in tandem with Menen’s recounting of some of his own early sexual encounters. He recounts his first sexual—heterosexual—experience, which came about in Paris when his mother packed him off to the opera so she could conduct her own sexual liaison without him underfoot. Juliette, a young French woman of impressive bearing and apparently voracious sexual appetite, certainly satisfied and entertained him for a while, but:

I had dodged all her questions about my parents. But one afternoon she told me how fascinated she was by the colour of my skin. Since she had seen more of my skin than anybody I knew, I told her how I had come by it.

It was a disaster. From that day on she insisted that I had mystic depths in my eyes. Mystic depths got mixed up, later, with hidden sources of sexual powers. She was sure I worshipped Siva. (Menen, 1970, p. 75)

The encounter with Juliette is followed soon after by an encounter with Claude, a male French prostitute, again in Paris. The encounter was paid for, which clearly made Menen uncomfortable, but it was precisely in this situation that he found a release from the orientalisising expectations that pursued him elsewhere:

I did not love him: I had no need to love him. Our bodies took each other and the morning stars sang together. It is that secret which, when we grow old, we begrudge the young.

Claude and I slept in each other’s arms until morning. Claude smiled a lot, mentioned the weather once or twice, took his money, and we made for the bar. He asked me no questions; he did not think I was mystic. (Menen, 1970, p. 82)

This has been a perhaps inescapably historicist reading of Menen’s writing. Such is not to suggest an absolute tendency on the part of *this* author towards such readings, nor is it intended to foreclose other readings of Menen’s undeniably versatile, polyvocal, and enduringly relevant texts. Rather, this is intended as a first step—or, given the recurrent “reintroductions” alluded to above (*pace* Hurst, Nasta, Ranasinha, Das), yet another in an increasingly long line of first steps—towards placing him and his works firmly in the postcolonial English literary canon, and recognising the originality and verve in his satirical, engaged, creations. Yet it aims to do so alongside a recognition of the queer positionality of Menen’s texts: an anti-imperial and more

broadly anti-normative stance that has much to offer us today, not least of all in its challenge to the abovementioned exclusivities and ellipses that still characterise the English and postcolonial literary canons.

If writing about music is indeed akin to dancing about architecture (or, in an earlier iteration of the aphorism, singing about economics), then writing seriously about satire can be equally frustrating. The point to bear in mind, of course, is that Menen crafted his witty and entertaining satires to very serious purpose, especially in the imperial and postcolonial period in Britain. I can only hope I have managed to convey a sense of not only his humour, but also its import; the futility or otherwise of such efforts I leave to others to judge.

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