

Pylade, ami d'Oreste, and the critics

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More than half a century's worth of generalizations about the confidants in Racine's plays have led to a situation in which they are denied any characteristics as individuals. Some, however, are invested by the playwright with more than just a function. An examination of Pylade, 'ami d'Oreste' in *Andromaque*, shows that critics' responses to the role have varied between the nugatory and the inconsistent. In fact, in Pylade, Racine has created a confidant who has both a rounded character of his own and a palpable effect on the action of the play. The re-assessment of Racine outside the straitjacketed approach of the late twentieth century is at last beginning, and Racine's confidants can and should be re-evaluated and differentiated.

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In Roland Barthes's concise formulation, 'le confident racinien [...] est lié au héros par une sorte de lien féodal, de *dévotion*' (original emphasis). 'Au dogmatisme du héros s'oppose continuellement l'empirisme du confident. [...] Pour le confident, le monde existe; sortant de la scène, il peut entrer dans le réel et en revenir.'¹ So far, so good; such remarks hardly deserve René Pommier's notorious (but enjoyable) rejoinder, in which one of a number of disobliging observations is that

il arrive à Roland Barthes de dire, sur le ton de quelqu'un qui croit être le premier à les dire, des choses que bien peu de gens oseraient dire sans préciser que tout le monde pourrait les dire. Mais, dans ce maquis de fariboles que constitue *Sur Racine*, les lapalissades ne représentent que de bien rares et bien petites trouées.²

¹ Roland Barthes, *Sur Racine* (Paris: Seuil, 1963), p. 61.

² Jean Pommier, *Le 'Sur Racine' de Roland Barthes* (Paris: SEDES, 1988), p. 393.

Few of Barthes's detractors would go that far, but Barthes does have a weakness, and it lies in his urge to cap his *lapalissades* with provocative amplifications. Thus, on this occasion, the Racinian confidant is 'gauche et souvent très sot', while 'l'insignifiance autorise son ubiquité' (p. 61). One might ask how clumsy, stupid, and insignificant Narcisse and Œnone are, but I shall concentrate on Pylade, who, in the four-by-two structure of *Andromaque* – four main characters, four confidants, and no other actors save the non-speaking 'suite d'Oreste' – is routinely regarded as a confidant.

Barthes does not name Pylade, while Pommier – in a text that dwells extensively on *Andromaque* – quotes him just three times, in each case uniquely as a source of intelligence about *Andromaque* and *Hermione* (pp. 70, 315, 329). Strange bedfellows Barthes and Pommier may be, but they are not alone among modern exegetes – even those who devote many pages to *Andromaque* – in ignoring Pylade except in so far as they borrow his words to characterize *Pyrrhus* ('un cœur si peu maître de lui', 120),³ *Oreste* ('cette fureur extrême [...], vous n'êtes plus vous-même', 709-710), *Hermione* ('toujours prête à partir, et demeurant toujours', 131), and *Andromaque* ('cette veuve inhumaine', 109) or cite his provision of intelligence ('pour la veuve d'Hector ses feux ont éclaté', 108; 'aux ordres d'Andromaque ici tout est soumis', 1587). Another critic, Jean Rohou, whose approach could not be more different from Pommier's, emulates his feat of reading *Andromaque* in detail while barely mentioning Pylade. In a perspicacious analysis of the play's diplomatic intrigue, Timothy Hampton explicitly eschews the *Pyrrhus-Andromaque* plot in order to concentrate on *Oreste*, his embassy, and his

³ The figure indicates the line number. Except where stated, my quotations from *Andromaque* are from Act I, scene 3 (lines 1-142), Act III, scene 1 (lines 709-804), and Act V, scene 5 (lines 1583-1648) in the revised version (1676 and later) that forms the text of most modern editions. I also refer to the 1668 edition, found in Racine, *Œuvres complètes I. Théâtre-Poésie*, ed. by Georges Forestier (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), pp. 193-256; and *Andromaque. Texte de l'édition originale*, ed. by R.C. Knight & H.T. Barnwell (Genève: Droz, 1977).

tormented infatuation with Hermione – precisely those elements of the play’s structure in which Pylade is prominent; yet even he, too, mentions Oreste’s friend only in passing.⁴

Some critics quote Pylade without naming him. John C. Lapp, one example among many, gives an important passage (790-794, partly quoted below) without identifying the speaker.⁵ Others simply ignore him altogether. Yet Pylade has 126 of the 1,648 lines in the 1676 edition of the play; Andromaque herself speaks fewer than twice that number (236). Michael Hawcroft has justly remarked upon the large proportion of scenes in which Racine’s confidants speak,⁶ but, unlike the remaining confidants in *Andromaque*, Pylade speaks in *all* his scenes – and the other three have fewer than 160 lines between them.

It is true that Pylade is not one of Racine’s ‘quatre principaux acteurs’, his term for Pyrrhus, Andromaque, Hermione, and Oreste, all of whom appear in an extract from the *Æneid* that he quotes in both the first (1668) and second (1676) prefaces.⁷ Perhaps, on the face of it, the modern critical tendency to ignore Pylade coheres with his exclusion from the quaternity, but some commentators do find more to say. An extraordinary passage in René Jasinski’s engaging study compares Oreste and Pylade’s relationship to that of Racine and his cousinly confidant and helpmeet Nicolas Vitart; but even Jasinski, quoting part of Pylade’s important speech at the beginning of Act V (1583-1596), omits to name the speaker.⁸ For his part, Peter France, noting that the emperor Titus in Roger Planchon’s

⁴ Jean Rohou, *Jean Racine: Andromaque* (Paris: PUF, 2000). In another book, *L’Évolution du tragique racinien* (Paris: SEDES, 1991) Rohou mentions Pylade just once in a substantial chapter on *Andromaque* (pp. 53-105 (p. 57)); Timothy Hampton, ‘The Tragedy of Delegation: Diplomatic Action and Tragic Form in Racine’s *Andromaque*’, in *Fictions of Embassy: Literature and Diplomacy in Early Modern Europe* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2009), pp. 163-88 (pp. 171, 179, and 183).

⁵ John C. Lapp, *Aspects of Racinian Tragedy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1955), p. 67.

⁶ Michael Hawcroft, *Word as Action: Racine, Rhetoric, and Theatrical Language* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), p. 168.

⁷ Racine, ed. Forestier, pp. 197-98 and 297-98.

⁸ René Jasinski, *Vers le vrai Racine*, 2 vols (Paris: Armand Colin, 1958), I, 219-20 and I, 191.

production of *Bérénice* – at Villeurbanne in 1966 – was reduced to an insubstantial boy by his confidant Paulin, ‘the all-too-solid embodiment of Roman politics’, continues thus:

Something similar can be imagined in *Andromaque*. Pylade’s loyalty and common sense act primarily as a foil to set off the emotional twists and turns of his friend Oreste, but he may also be played as the dominant partner. [...] Pylade is there at the beginning and end – he does not live at tragic pitch and he survives.⁹

This discerning judgement might have prompted further analysis, but France turns instead to an evaluation of the play that relies almost wholly on the interactions of Racine’s *principaux acteurs*.

Probably the first critic to focus attention on Pylade was Perdou de Subligny, whose modest comedy *La Folle Querelle, ou la Critique d’Andromaque* had, for a time in 1668, better than modest box-office success at Molière’s theatre. According to Subligny’s preface,

[Corneille] aurait fait traiter Pylade en Roi à la Cour de Pyrrhus [...]; ou s’il eût manqué à le traiter en Roi, il n’eût pas cherché à s’en excuser, en disant qu’il ne l’est que dans un Dictionnaire historique, et qu’il ne l’est pas dans Euripide, car Pylade est Roi dans Euripide même. Il aurait introduit Oreste le traitant d’égal, sans nous vouloir faire accroire, qu’autrefois le plus grand Prince tutoyait le plus petit; parce que cela n’a pu être entre gens qui portaient la qualité de Rois.¹⁰

Proving that this is no idle or wasted aside, Subligny also alludes to Oreste’s *tutoiement* of Pylade and the latter’s princely status in Act I, scene 5 of his play (pp. 269-70). The fact that he saw fit to draw further attention to it in his preface shows how much these alleged departures both from the myth and from social propriety rankled.

We may pause to wonder what Subligny meant about not trying to justify oneself, for Racine certainly made no such excuses in *his* preface. Is Subligny saying he made them *viva voce* in company? It seems unlikely: the author of *Andromaque* knew his Euripides

⁹ Peter France, *Racine: Andromaque* (London: Arnold, 1977), p. 25.

¹⁰ Subligny, *La Folle Querelle, ou la Critique d’Andromaque*, ‘Préface’, in Racine, ed. Forestier, pp. 258-95 (p. 262). Racine’s play had been published four months before the premiere of Subligny’s.

as well as any man living. Whatever the explanation, R.C. Knight eventually took up the challenge:

Pylade, lui, y est solidement lié [= à la légende d'Oreste]. C'est dans tout le mythe antique le compagnon inséparable d'Oreste [...]. 'À quoi bon vivre sans ton amitié?', demande-t-il quand Oreste menacé de mort veut le renvoyer. Racine se souvient de ce dévouement (46) et le met en action (783-86). Les contemporains de Racine, vétillieux sur l'étiquette, ont demandé pourquoi, prince autant qu'Oreste, il se laisse tutoyer par lui. Son 'emploi' de confident l'emporte sur son rang.¹¹

Yet Subligny, for all his pernickiness, had taken a wider view: Pylade can be evaluated alongside Racine's *principaux acteurs* and Pylade alone of the confidants is included in a compendium of criticisms overheard by Éraste's valet:

Je me souviens, mot pour mot, de tout ce qu'on en dit. On demanda quel métier Pylade faisait à la cour de Pyrrhus? On dit qu'Oreste était un plaisant Roi. Pyrrhus? un sot. Andromaque? une grande bête, et Hermione une Guenippe. (*La Folle Querelle*, I, 1; p. 265)

Of course, none of these sideswipes is particularly damaging. Racine has parried the first one anyway, archly securing the audience's complicity in his exposition by underlining the artificiality of the cliché of two people meeting after a period apart. Oreste is speaking:

Qui l'eût dit qu'un rivage à mes vœux si funeste
Présenterait d'abord Pylade aux yeux d'Oreste? (5-6)

Subligny's bundling of Pylade (nine words of criticism) with Oreste (five) and the others (even fewer) justifies his returning to the question why Pylade was already in Épire, 'tout prêt à servir Oreste au besoin' (II, 13; p. 282), and his amusement at Pylade's handy knowledge of 'tous les détours obscurs' of Pyrrhus's palace (p. 283). Warming to his theme (though misquoting slightly), he has Hortense wonder '*de quels yeux une même personne peut voir ses yeux*. Voilà une étrange justesse d'expression' (III, 8; p. 293;

¹¹ R.C. Knight, *Racine et la Grèce* (Paris: Nizet, 1951), pp. 280-81. Numbers in parentheses indicate line numbers. Knight gives the sources in the myths, though I have not reproduced them.

original emphasis).¹² The more commonly encountered revised text includes Racine's judicious correction, one of many he made for the 1676 edition.

Corrections to Pylade's words occur in lines 12, 31, 32, 113, 122, 127, 719, 722, 752, and 1591-1592,¹³ though none is a response to the question of his princely status or to that of his presence in Épire. 'Generally', says Ian McFarlane in his efficient analysis, 'they [improve] tone and emphasis',¹⁴ but some of them, he observes, do more than that. Take, for example, this line from 1668:

Tout dépend de Pyrrhus, et surtout d'Hermione. (722)

The revision to 'et surtout Hermione' strengthens the psychological realism, says McFarlane, because 'it makes clear that [Pylade] feels in more danger from Pyrrhus, a danger that could also threaten Hermione' (p. 102). On the other hand, when he asserts that Pylade's heart-felt advice,

Au lieu de l'enlever, Seigneur, je la fuirais (752)

required revision because 'Pylade introduced his own persona (he is, after all, a confidant)' (p. 103), McFarlane is investing his evidence with more significance than it bears. In 1676, the line became the more familiar version, 'Au lieu de l'enlever, fuyez-la pour jamais'. Certainly, the *effect* is to efface Pylade, but we are entitled to doubt whether that was Racine's *purpose*. After all, McFarlane is right to say that 'the later version makes the tone more urgent [...] and places "jamais" at the rhyme'. That seems sufficient. Racine considered the sacrifice of Pylade's individuality an acceptable price for improved tone and greater emphasis. How do we know? Because the idea of deliberate effacement

¹² Subligny is alluding to lines 123-124 in the 1668 edition, spoken by Oreste.

¹³ My list excludes lines in which Racine changes only the punctuation.

¹⁴ Ian McFarlane, 'Reflections on the variants in *Andromaque*', in W.D. Howarth, I. McFarlane, & M. McGowan (eds), *Form and Meaning: aesthetic coherence in seventeenth-century French drama. Studies presented to Harry Barnwell* (Amersham: Avebury, 1982), pp. 99-114 (p. 105). Discussing line 127, McFarlane (p. 100) unaccountably inverts the correction. 'Apaiser' was replaced by 'fléchir' (not the other way round).

is demolished a few lines later by a correction that has the opposite effect. ‘Cher Pylade,’ says Oreste in the original version, ‘crois-moi, mon tourment me suffit’ (783). This becomes, in 1676:

Cher Pylade, crois-moi, ta pitié te séduit.

Thus does Racine underscore Pylade’s persona. For once unsure (I suspect), how to explain the variant, McFarlane takes refuge in a reference to Euripides, ‘where Oreste expresses similar sentiments about Pylade’s own future safety. [...] The variant also softens the self-centredness of Oreste who [...] is often cut off from the world by the intensity of his obsession’ (p. 108). Quite so; but the correction also falsifies McFarlane’s primary justification for the adjustment at line 752. Moreover, referring to the ‘considerable number of variants’ in the parts of Pylade and Cléone, ‘who accompany the most turbulent characters in the play’, he avers that ‘if these parts are not absolutely right, the tone of the whole is likely to be affected’ (p. 113). Quite so, again; but does he not thus come close to awarding Pylade some element of character?

Pylade appears in only three scenes, but what scenes they are! They are among the most important in the whole structure, consisting of I, 1, where he speaks the equivalent of 57 lines out of 142; III,1 (38 lines out of 97); and V,5 (31 out of 67). In each case, the remaining lines are spoken by Oreste with whom, in Acts I and III, Pylade is alone on stage; in Act V they are accompanied only by Oreste’s non-speaking entourage. Pylade, never on stage with anyone else, frames the play: he speaks as early as line 9, he makes the closing speech, and he participates in the scene which constitutes the fulcrum of the action.

We have noted that Pylade speaks in all his scenes. Principal characters excepted, in the whole of Racine’s theatre only two decidedly minor roles share that distinction. One,

Panope, scarcely more than a messenger, is limited to a hemistich in the last of her three scenes (*Phèdre*, V,7). The other, Agar, has five lines in one short scene (*Athalie*, II,3) .

Pylade, on the other hand, is fully engaged in every conversation with Oreste until, in the final scene, the latter takes leave of his senses. And even then – *especially* then – Pylade is no bystander.

Consider the scene in which, having lost patience with rational argument and exhortation, Oreste declares that it is time to act:

Pylade, je suis las d'écouter la raison.
C'est traîner trop longtemps ma vie et mon supplice.
Il faut que je l'enlève. (712-714)

While, to risk a truism, Pylade receives this confidence because he is Oreste's confidant, he is more than that. Racine does not label all his confidence-gatherers *confident(e)s* but alongside those that he does so label (two of them in this play), and others called *gouverneurs* and *esclaves*, Pylade is the only one designated *ami* in the *dramatis personae* ('Pylade, ami d'Oreste'). Racine underlines the designation at once. The speaker is Oreste:

Oui, puisque je retrouve un ami si fidèle (1)

Their friendship is often alluded to, most memorably by Oreste:

Ami, [...],
T'ai-je jamais caché mon cœur et mes désirs?
Tu vis naître ma flamme et mes premiers soupirs
[...]
Tu vis mon désespoir; et tu m'as vu depuis,
Traîner de mers en mers ma chaîne et mes ennuis
Je te vis à regret, en cet état funeste
Prêt à suivre partout le déplorable Oreste,
Toujours de ma fureur interrompre le cours,
Et de moi-même enfin me sauver tous les jours.¹⁵ (38-40, 43-48)

¹⁵ This is not to say that other characters in Racine's plays are not addressed as 'ami'. There are many who are, but in no case, *sauf erreur de ma part*, is the relationship of speaker to listener even supposedly on an equal footing.

This tells us a lot about Oreste, but the self-obsessed ambassador has delivered an appreciation of Pylade, too.¹⁶ That is why, announcing his intention to abduct Hermione, Oreste can heap on Pylade's shoulders, his broad shoulders, the blame for having advised against this course of action: 'Tes conseils n'ont plus de saison' (711). Even so, there are moments when Oreste shows he is grateful for Pylade's friendship and is aware of what it is costing him to remain steadfast (779-786, 795-796).

His status as *ami* has caused some writers to put Pylade back in his place – we have seen McFarlane doing so – or to seek excuses. In her classic study of confidants in seventeenth-century French theatre, Valérie Worth-Stylianou remarks that 'perhaps Subligny's criticisms hit home, for in later plays Racine avoids the ambiguous category of *ami*'.¹⁷ On the contrary, we have seen that he took no heed of Subligny where Pylade was concerned. The simple fact is that there is no *ami* in any of his other plays, even his earlier ones. Moreover, Worth-Stylianou's apparently unexceptionable statement that 'many other dramatists, from Pierre Corneille's *Médée* onwards, had used friends who have just been reunited to provide the exposition' (p. 96) is misleading in so far as it implies that *friends* were a commonplace of the device in Racine's day. They were not. Quinault somehow finds room for three in one play, *Astrate* (1664) – not that they do much – but has only one in the rest of his theatre (Arsamon in *Amalasonte*, 1657). No one could possibly forget Néarque (*Polyeucte*), but Pierre Corneille fields only one *ami* after his return to the theatre in 1659 (Albin in *Othon*, 1664), and Thomas Corneille has none

¹⁶ There is a moment later in this long speech (37-104) when, as is so often the case with Racine's obsessed dreamers, Oreste seems to forget that he is addressing an interlocutor and not just talking to himself; but he pulls himself together around line 90 and, reverting to a narrative mode, tells Pylade things his friend does not yet know.

¹⁷ Valérie Worth-Stylianou, *Confidential Strategies. The Evolving Role of the Confidant in French Tragic Drama (1635-1677)* (Genève: Droz, 199), p. 97.

outside the confines of his comedies until, finally and uniquely, ‘le comte de Salsbury, ami du comte d’Essex’, appears in his tragedy *Le Comte d’Essex* (1678).

In the chapter ‘Des Personnages ou Acteurs, et ce que le Poëte y doit observer’ in *La Pratique du théâtre*, the abbé d’Aubignac makes three points that are germane here.¹⁸ First, that ‘le poëte ne doit mettre aucun Acteur sur son Theatre qui ne soit aussi-tost connu des Spectateurs’ (p. 272).¹⁹ Racine identifies Pylade and Oreste – in that order – in line 6 (quoted above). Now, he generally names confidants within the first few speeches that their principals address to them – he even overdoes the routine in *Bajazet* (I, 1) – but that is all. Pylade apart, we are never afforded even the least glimpse of a confidant’s personal background.

Second, d’Aubignac observes that ‘tous les Acteurs qui paroissent au Theatre, ne doivent jamais entrer sur la Scène sans une raison qui les oblige à se trouver en ce moment plutôt dans ce lieu-là qu’ailleurs; autrement ils n’y doivent pas venir’ (p. 274). Unless dispatched on an errand, a confidant will accompany his principal, yet when Oreste meets Hermione (II, 2), despite the fact that ‘Pylade va bientôt conduire ici ses pas’ (II, 1; 387), Oreste’s friend is not with him. Why not? Because Racine does not consider him just a confidant. Oreste’s interview with Hermione may plausibly be witnessed by the silent Cléone without affronting the proprieties but Pylade could never have remained silent and, to risk a comment upon a hypothesis, would next have subjected Oreste’s self-deluding analysis (II, 3) to uncomfortable dialectic scrutiny. The other scenes between Oreste and Hermione (IV, 3 and V, 3) likewise take place in the presence, the always silent presence, of Cléone, but Pylade is never there because, with

¹⁸ François Hédelin, abbé d’Aubignac, *La Pratique du Théâtre*, ed. by P. Martino (Alger: Carbonel; Paris: Champion, 1927), pp. 267-81.

¹⁹ There are derogations for characters whose identity is concealed for dramatic purposes (pp. 273-74).

due acknowledgement to Knight, ‘son statut d’ami l’emporterait sur son “emploi” de confident’.

Third, ‘les principaux Personnages doivent paroistre le plus souvent, et demeurer le plus longtemps qu’il est possible sur le Theatre; parce que ce sont toujours les meilleurs Acteurs’ (p. 278). This is wise advice, but d’Aubignac’s justification for it, albeit the first of several, prompts the question as to which actor created Pylade. We do not know; no one says; but, given that Floridor played Pyrrhus and Montfleury Oreste, only two serious contenders were at the Hôtel de Bourgogne at the time.²⁰ One, La Fleur, a specialist in captains, fathers, and ambassadors who probably succeeded Montfleury as Oreste²¹ and later played Burrhus and Acomat, seems the obvious choice for Pyrrhus’s governor Phoenix. That leaves Guillaume de Marcoureau, sieur de Brécourt, lower in the company pecking order than Floridor, Montfleury, and La Fleur only because he was a relative newcomer. Tempted away from Molière’s company in the bitter struggle for dominance of the Paris stage, he shares with Mlle Du Parc, but with no one else at the Palais-Royal in the 1660s, the distinction of matching up to Floridor’s exacting standards for performers of tragedy. Certainly, therefore, one of ‘les meilleurs Acteurs’, Brécourt had played Taxile (*Alexandre*) and was later to create Britannicus and Xipharès. Whether or not Racine wrote the part with him in mind, his Pylade would have exhibited *character*. For Pylade is only secondarily a confidant. Subligny sensed it; Peter France sensed it; Jasinski sensed it by way of an extratextual context; McFarlane and Worth-Stylianou sensed it in spite of themselves.

²⁰ In so saying, I discount Poisson, Hauteroche, and Villiers, all of whom were better known for playing comic roles. In *Andromaque*, perhaps with the help of some *gagistes*, they would have formed the unspeaking ‘suite d’Oreste’.

²¹ I show elsewhere why this was so. See William Brooks, *Philippe Quinault, Dramatist* (Oxford, Bern etc.: Lang, 2009), pp. 331-32.

The year before Jasinski published his seminal study, Maurice Descotes emphasized Pylade's early apprehension of the contrast in Oreste between, on the one hand,

... cette mélancolie
Où j'ai vu si longtemps votre âme ensevelie (17-18)

and, on the other, the significance of his prestigiously arrayed entourage:

Le pompeux appareil qui suit ici vos pas
N'est point d'un malheureux qui cherche le trépas. (23-24)²²

Descotes thus demonstrates Pylade's perspicacity. In the first two encounters, Pylade is a shrewd adviser:

Pressez, demandez tout pour ne rien obtenir. (140)

When, later, Oreste spurns his advice, Pylade bows wearily to the inevitable:

Allons, Seigneur, enlevons Hermione. (786)

But he still offers shrewd advice, warning his friend not to arouse suspicion while he prepares to carry out the plan:

Gardez qu'avant le coup votre dessein n'éclate
Oubliez jusque-là qu'Hermione est ingrate. (801-802)

Of course, many confidants exhibit perspicacity, shrewdness, and complicity. Such qualities do not of themselves bestow the status of character. They do, however, number among the attributes whose presence or absence are *markers* of character. They are, we might say, *necessary*, but they are not on their own *sufficient* to bestow such status on Pylade. For that, we need something more.

In an article that Barthes probably never read and would surely, in any case, have considered beneath his notice, Harold Lawton long ago observed: 'There are occasions when a personage who, by reason of his or her relationship to a principal, might be expected to remain a mere confidant steps [...] to the forefront of the stage and to

²² Maurice Descotes, *Les Grands Rôles du théâtre de Racine* (Paris: PUF, 1957), p. 32.

important participation in the action.²³ These are wise words. As far as *Andromaque* is concerned, Lawton accords the status of confidant to Cléone, Céphise, and Phœnix but writes of ‘the special relationship between Oreste and Pylade’ (p. 28). Having made the remark he does not amplify it, but he scarcely needs to: it is governed by his earlier definition of ‘secondary character[s]’ as ‘personages who, normally possessing names and attributes known to history or legend, are necessary to the dramatic treatment of the subject and in some measure contribute to the tragic event’ (pp. 18-19). Indeed so: Lawton could have been describing Pylade.

Having provided Oreste with the intelligence that Hermione bemoans her predicament (129-131), Pylade takes the extra step of adding a decisive detail:

Quelquefois elle appelle Oreste à son secours. (132)

Truthful or untruthful, his words are intended as balm, but they provoke Oreste’s fateful command:

Eh bien! va donc disposer la cruelle
À revoir un amant qui ne vient que pour elle. (141-142)

And, as Hermione later reveals, Pylade does so (II,1; 385-387). At the very least, he is guilty of misjudgement. Given his positive qualities, we may not instantly recognize in his lack of tact the hand of fate pushing Oreste inexorably forward. But we recognize his words as something other than those of a confidant. The same might be said of his reaction to Oreste’s plan, quoted above (786): Pylade’s acquiescence is so jaded by his previous awareness of Oreste’s hopeless passion – ‘Que ne peut l’amitié conduite par l’amour’ (788) – that one senses that he knows he ought to have opposed the plan more firmly. This is clearly not an aside, in the sense of a remark made solely for the benefit of the audience, such as might happen in a comedy. Pylade may be addressing it to Oreste;

²³ H.W. Lawton, ‘The confidant in and before French Classical tragedy’, *MLR*, 38 (1943), 18-31 (p. 26).

or perhaps he is, quite simply, talking to himself. Either way, in this instance, as in the one discussed just before, Racine invites us to look into the motivation and the self-awareness of Pylade almost as insistently as he invites us to analyse the character of Oreste himself.

Further and perhaps decisively *sufficient* markers to bestow on Pylade fully-fledged character status are found in the final scene (V, 5). Alerted to events in the temple only as they unfold, he arrives with the ambassadorial entourage exactly when Oreste, repudiated by Hermione, is beginning to take leave of his senses. The confidant, the mere confidant, would serve as the embodiment of sanity, the conduit for naïve questions, the alarmed recipient of his principal's unhinged words. Pylade, however, acts. Indeed, he begins to do so even before realizing Oreste's state of mind, for without preamble he is chillingly explicit:

Il faut partir, seigneur. Sortons de ce palais,
Ou bien résolvons-nous de n'en sortir jamais. (1583-1584)

He may be out of breath: the break at the hemistich of line 1583 suggests it while also emphasizing what he has just said. Far from being, in Barthes's words, 'gauche et [...] très sot', he is decisive and commanding. No longer should exhortation be preferred to Pylade's inclusion of himself in his first-person plural imperative. 'Fuyez-la pour jamais' (752) was advice: this is nothing less than an instruction. 'Nos Grecs' can hold back the pursuers only 'pour un moment' (1585). Pylade takes charge. He has planned their means of escape:

Nos vaisseaux sont tout prêts, et le vent nous appelle.
Je sais de ce palais tous les détours obscurs. (790-791)

Pylade exhibits the 'ubiquité' Barthes complains of, but he is scarcely insignificant. Quite the reverse, for whatever Subigny may think of his extensive knowledge, it is consistent

with the logic of his character's preparedness, the logic of decisive (as opposed to precipitate) action that it should be Pylade who now gestures towards the 'secrète voie' (793) that leads to the point of embarkation:

Voilà notre chemin, sortons en sûreté. (1596)

But, as Richard Parish points out in his fine study of the playwright, it is 'manifestly impossible' for Oreste to leave at this juncture.²⁴ The (fictionally) unwitting (but authorially unsubtle) double-entendre in Pylade's words seems to indicate that the object of Oreste's obsession lives ('tandis qu'Hermione | Tient encore le peuple autour d'elle arrêté'; 1594-1595). Given his priorities, Oreste's initial response is perfectly rational:

Non, non; c'est Hermione, amis, que je veux suivre. (1597)

Racine's insertion of the word 'amis' at this point is no coincidence. It is important that the non-speaking actors of Oreste's ambassadorial suite *act* here; and we have all, alas, seen productions in which they merely loiter. On the contrary, they must be in close attendance at this moment – in close attendance, that is, to Pylade, who has taken charge, not to Oreste, whose entourage, strictly speaking, they are. In this way, they are included as *amis* because they are an extension of Pylade, a metaphor for his authority: their temporary metamorphosis into *his* companions as a sort of *suite de Pylade* emphasizes the loneliness of Oreste in his febrile state of false imaginings.

And so Pylade, unaware until this moment of Oreste's ignorance of Hermione's death, must explain and try again. The urgency of their predicament means that he has little time to listen to unreason – a neat reversal of Oreste's refusal to listen to reason (712, quoted above). No *gouverneur* could or would retain control so robustly, still less an *esclave*, a

²⁴ Richard Parish, *Racine: the limits of tragedy* (Paris, Seattle, Tübingen: Papers on French Seventeenth Century Literature/Biblio 17), 1993, p. 87.

lover, a mere *confident(e)*.²⁵ At the climax of the only scene in the rest of Racine's theatre that comes close in terms of sheer suspense, Acomat leaves without Atalide (*Bajazet*, V,11); but then, the grand vizier is no *ami*.

In this scene, Pylade's stature has risen – not by character *development* but because we see him re-assert his *pre-existing* character: he must again become the selfless, decisive saviour of Oreste's grand speech (38-48, partly quoted above); and while Knight is correct to refute Subligny's objection about *tutoiement*, neither of them notices that Racine avoids the *tutoiement* of Pylade in Act V by the expedient of not having Oreste address him. 'Partez', says Oreste (1599), a plural imperative that embraces the *amis* we have just been discussing: and that is all; indeed, Pylade himself will address the entourage as 'amis' in line 1645. Whatever might have been the nature of his relationship with Oreste in his ambassadorial pomp, Pylade assumes the senior role when hesitation or obstinacy will have fatal consequences, not only because 'Andromaque [...] commande qu'on le venge [Pyrrhus]' (1589, 1591) but also to save Oreste from himself (1647-1648, quoted below). To extend Peter France's comment, it is thanks to Pylade's not living at a tragic pace that Oreste survives, too.

Alain Niderst, denying Pylade any share of tragic grandeur as if that were the sole admirable element of Racine's tragedy, claims that Oreste's friend sees him as no more than

la simple manifestation d'un déséquilibre psychologique. [...] Ainsi s'expliquent les faibles vers prononcés par Pylade au tomber du rideau: 'Il perd le sentiment' (1645). Le destin n'est admis que par Oreste. Les autres acteurs le refusent.²⁶

²⁵ Not that they lack other qualities. The helpless *gouverneur d'Hippolyte*, for example, is a chillingly articulate witness of catastrophe (*Phèdre*, V, 6). For Amy Wygant's strikingly original analysis of Thérémène's *récit* and critics' responses to it, see her *Cultural Philology: 'Phèdre' and the construction of 'Racine'* (Oxford: EHRC, 1999), pp. 112-45.

²⁶ Alain Niderst, *Les Tragédies de Racine: Diversité et unité* (Paris: Nizet, 1975), p. 45.

Yet again, we see the impulse to denigrate Pylade. Michael Edwards's elegant and otherwise persuasive assessment concludes in similar vein – and with a nod towards Barthes – by sublimating Oreste's tragic status at the expense of a workaday Pylade:

Seule l'amitié d'Oreste et de Pylade décrit du côté des Grecs un rapport affectif authentique. Célébrée dans le tout premier vers de la pièce [...] et prolongée au-delà de la crise tragique par les derniers vers de Pylade – 'Amis le temps nous presse ... Sauvons-le' (1645, 1647) – leur amitié nous facilite l'entrée et la sortie du monde capiteux où les grandes questions sont résolues, l'appuyant sur une réalité plus ordinaire ('Me rendra-t-il, Pylade, un bien qu'il m'a ravi?', 104). Les derniers vers sauvent Oreste de l'univers supérieur de la tragédie pour le réintégrer dans un monde plus banal, celui du confident.²⁷

Celui du confident? When Worth-Stylianou, contradicting Edwards, avers that Pylade 'may be seen as a figure of authority in a world of chaos' (p. 97), she is correct, especially in the light of his contribution to the final scene. Rightly, too, she adds that Racine 'seeks to create a character whose role and authority is greater than that of a simple subaltern'. What a pity, therefore, that in attributing influence to the negative criticism of Subligny, she withholds from Racine the credit for doing precisely what he sought to do. Pylade saves his friend, and if that disappoints Niderst and Edwards, is it not then curious that Racine latterly invested this *ami* with sufficient nobility of tragic expression to encompass a vast image when he declares that Andromaque 'peut-être sur nous, | Veut venger Troie encore et son premier époux' (1591-1592)?²⁸

As to the lines Niderst condemns, they are powerful evidence of friendship, initiative, and yet again perspicacity. Here they are:

Il perd le sentiment. Amis, le temps nous presse;
Ménageons les moments que ce transport nous laisse.
Sauvons-le. Nos efforts deviendraient impuissants
S'il reprenait ici sa rage avec ses sens. (1645-1648)

²⁷ Michael Edwards, *La Tragédie racinienne* (Paris: La Pensée universelle, 1972), p. 112.

²⁸ The quotation is from the 1697 text. In previous editions, the passage had read: 'et peut-être qu'encor, | Elle poursuit sur nous la vengeance d'Hector'.

Pylade *functions*, then, as a confidant, just as Knight says, but he is also a character; one of Lawton's 'secondary characters' no doubt, but one who repays individual attention none the less. For the fact that this aspect of Pylade has been largely ignored, we can blame a critical methodology that sees in Racine a playwright whose dramatic structures can be reduced to replicated building blocks, one of which is 'the confidant'. Whatever its merits, that particular fashion has caused a legion of commentators to ignore or to apologize for an inconvenient character who resists alignment with the template – *et cependant quelle amitié que celle d'Oreste et de Pylade!*²⁹ Critical opinion, it is true, has begun to shift since the dawn of the present century. For, as John Campbell asks, mindful of the legend of Procrustes, 'What advantage is gained by taking living, individual plays and tailoring their limbs to fit a particular critical bed?'³⁰ Assessment of a properly protean Racine is again permissible, and we can once again evaluate – and appreciate – such characters as Pylade, ami d'Oreste.³¹

Notes on the contributor

William Brooks is Emeritus Professor of French in the University of Bath. A former editor of the journal *Seventeenth-Century French Studies*, he recently stepped down after four years as Chair of the Society. He has written extensively on seventeenth-century French drama, including the spoken plays of Philippe Quinault, several of which he has edited for publication. He has worked on Quinault's librettos, the history of theatre and the theatre and opera companies, and the letter writers Mme d'Huxelles and Elisabeth Charlotte, the Second Madame. He transcribed and annotated P. J. Yarrow's translation into English of selections from the memoirs of la Grande Mademoiselle (London: MHRA, 2010), and has recently completed the editing of four plays by Thomas Corneille

²⁹ Stendhal, *Racine et Shakespeare* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1970), p. 71.

³⁰ John Campbell, *Questioning Racinian Tragedy* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), p. 248.

³¹ The present article was completed and accepted for publication before the appearance of Edward Forman's masterly survey, 'Amy, qu'oses-tu dire? Friendship, Support and Challenge in Racinian Tragedy' (*Seventeenth-Century French Studies*, 34 (2012), 68-76), in the issue that turned out to be a memorial for our late friend Amy Wygant. My article, written for the same issue, was held over for reasons of space and, consequently, the force of my complaint that insufficient attention is paid to certain of Racine's characters is weakened. It does not seem appropriate to revise my remarks *après coup*: suffice to say that I endorse everything Dr Forman writes, including, specifically, his comments on Pylade.

that will together form one volume of that dramatist's *Théâtre complet*, to be published in Classiques Garnier in 2013.

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