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Nina Ekstein

Trinity University, nekstein@trinity.edu

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Andromaque, V,v:

Disorder, Irony, and Progression

by

Nina C. Ekstein

The denouement of Andromaque (V,v), as is the case in most tragedies, brings with it a return to order, but the impression of order lies off stage with Andromaque's ascension to the throne rather than on stage with Oreste and Pylade. On stage, disorder reigns, and this disorder is a result of several factors: the pressing necessity of a quick departure, Oreste's madness, and, significantly, the ironic instability of language in this scene. This instability takes the form of statements whose meaning later changes in the light of some subsequent action or information. Such shifts in meaning are not uncommon in Racine's theater; for example, in the first scene of the play, Oreste optimistically states: "Ma fortune va prendre une face nouvelle;" (l. 2). Later events indeed bear out a change in Oreste's fortune, but it is a considerably different change than Oreste had anticipated. In the last scene of a tragedy, however, meanings normally stabilize as part of the return to order, and consequently frequent shifts of this sort are unexpected and merit close examination.

In the first speech of the last scene, Pylade, fearing Andromaque's power and desire to avenge Pyrrhus's death as well as Hector's, urges Oreste to leave: "N'attendons pas que l'on nous environne :" (l. 1593). Before the scene is over, Oreste will indeed be surrounded, not by the outraged

citizens of Epire, but rather by images of Pyrrhus, Hermione, blood, serpents, and furies. The onset of his madness is signaled by the line: "Mais quelle épaisse nuit tout à coup m'environne?" (l. 1625).

Oreste rejects Pylade's plea to leave, saying: "Non, non, c'est Hermione, amie, que je veux suivre. / A son dernier arrêt je ne puis plus survivre. / Partez : j'ai fait le crime, et je vais l'expier." (ll. 1597-99). The words "son dernier arrêt" and "suivre" take on a radically different meaning when Oreste learns that she is dead. And he will expiate the crime, not by dying at her feet, but in madness.

Pylade then describes Oreste, in his relationship with Hermione, as: "toujours l'instrument et l'objet de sa rage," (l. 1601). Oreste gives a new sense to these words by hallucinating Hermione's anger, thus serving, himself, as the instrument of her rage, while at the same time imagining himself as the focus of that anger, "l'objet."

Oreste's angry invocation of the gods functions in the same manner: he is, in his own estimation, "au comble des douleurs" (l. 1616), his "eort est rempli" (l. 1620), he is "du malheur un modèle accompli" (l. 1619). Yet the meaning of these statements changes as Oreste becomes mad: his fate, in fact, has not yet been realized. An extra-textual irony is suggested as well, for Oreste's traditional destiny is to avenge his father's murder by killing his mother. The gods may indeed have chosen to persecute Oreste, as he believes, but his conclusions ("je meurs content, et mon sort est rempli." l. 1620) are premature.

The frequency of these ironic shifts in meaning suggests

a flurry of activity in this scene. For each shift in meaning reflects a change of context, which itself is the result of some event. And indeed, events, past (Hermione's death), present (Oreste's madness), and even future (Clytemnestra's death), alter the context and challenge the stability of the characters' discourse.

While disorder and instability pervade, nonetheless, the obsessive image of the enraged Hermione dominates this scene and gives a sense of finality and closure to the play. Hermione is, of course, a primary object of Oreste's and Pylade's discourse throughout this scene (27 of the 66 lines of the scene relate directly to her). But simply as an object of discourse, Hermione's presence does little to contribute to closure. Rather, we find two curiously parallel progressions, each of which Oreste himself arrests and turns back to the moment of Hermione's fury.

The first progression is made up of the events of the play considered from Oreste's perspective (which Oreste runs through in the penultimate scene): his arrival, his attempts to obtain Astyanax and to lure Hermione back to Greece, the murder of Pyrrhus, and Hermione's rejection and anger. Upon learning of her death, Oreste turns next to suicide: "Où sont ces deux amants? Pour couronner ma joie, / Dans leur sang, dans le mien il faut que je me noie; / L'un et l'autre en mourant je les veux regarder." (ll. 1621-23). But before being able to carry out his plans, he goes mad; in his madness, he hallucinates a vision of Hermione demonstrating her love for Pyrrhus and her hatred of Oreste. This vision seems to mark a return to two scenes earlier (v,iii) where Hermione fully bared both

her loathing for Oreste and the naked force of her love for the dead Pyrrhus. Rather than continue his steady progression towards suicide, Oreste replaces that final step with the image of his greatest suffering: Hermione as she last appeared to him.

The second progression is the one imagined by Oreste in his madness. Here, it is not a succession of events, but rather of hallucinated beings and objects. Hermione seems to have a whole cortege following behind her:

Quels démons, quels serpents traîne-t-elle après soi?  
 Hé bien! filles d'enfer, vos mains sont-elles prêtes?  
 Pour qui sont ces serpents qui sifflent sur vos têtes?  
 A qui destinez-vous l'appareil qui vous suit?

(ll. 1636-39)

Instead of abandoning himself into the hands of the "filles d'enfer" and their "appareil," as he first proposes ("Venez, à vos fureurs Oreste s'abandonne." l. 1641), Oreste moves the progression backward to Hermione and her cruel tortures: "L'ingrate mieux que vous saura me déchirer;" (l. 1643).

In both instances, the forward progression is arrested. The play cannot go any further because Oreste, the only remaining protagonist alive and on stage, will not do so. Instead, he substitutes the image, taken from the past, of a living, rejecting, enraged Hermione. This obsessive image, eternally fixed in Oreste's madness, perhaps more than any other element in this denouement scene, brings with it a sense of finality and closure.