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NARRATIVE RELIABILITY AND SPATIAL LIMITATIONS IN *BAJAZET*

Récits are a standard feature in the classical theater, commonly used to bring information to an onstage universe which is limited by the unities of time and place. Action which occurs before the opening of the play finds its natural expression, given the convention of beginning the play *in medias res*, in narrative form. These are the *récits* of exposition. *Bajazet* is unusually rich in such *récits*: Acomat recounts Amurat's actions, Bajazet's youth, Acomat's own past, and how Roxane came to be able to see Bajazet (I, i, ll. 115-42, 145-56); and Atalide explains how she and Bajazet fell in love and how they have tricked Roxane in order to see each other (I, iv, ll. 357-88).¹

Action which occurs offstage during the course of the play is also frequently presented by means of a *récit*. Typically, in Racine's theater, these are the denouement *récits*, recounting often bloody events which cannot be shown onstage because of the *bienséances*, and which bring the tragedy to a close. Such *récits* may, however, occur at any point in the play, not merely in the fifth act, and they need not recount only violent events. The three *récits* that I propose to examine deal with an offstage meeting between Bajazet and Roxane which, given the classical tenets of *bienséance* and *vraisemblance*, might well have been presented onstage. Racine himself stated: "une des règles du théâtre est de ne mettre en récit que les choses qui ne se peuvent passer en action . . ." ² Racine's choice not to present this scene onstage, as we shall see, is significant.

This unusual series of *récits* has previously attracted critical attention. Both Jacques Schérer³ and Evert van der Starre⁴ have examined it in some detail. They have noted the discrepancies between the three accounts of this offstage meeting and have both concluded that Acomat's *récit* is not trustworthy. What I intend to show is that Bajazet's account is at least equally open to suspicion, that there is no final explanation of what exactly transpired between Roxane and Bajazet, and that these uncertainties are intimately related to the spatial limitations of this theatrical universe.

Récits, then, convey needed information to the characters onstage and to the spectators. But their function is not merely informational. Often *récits* are told with the intent of causing some desired reaction on the part of the addressee. This function will be termed "performative."⁵ The relevance of the information contained in such *récits* is secondary to the performative intent, and thus secondary to the relationship between the addressor and the addressee. Performative *récits* have great potential for distorting the actions recounted because the desire for a certain reaction has influenced both the substance and the presentation of the *récit*.

The *récits* which I will examine have both informative and performative functions. Acomat, Bajazet, and Roxane, in turn, each recount the same

event: the reconciliatory meeting between the latter two; and through these *récits*, Atalide and the spectator learn what transpired offstage during the entr'acte. At the same time, each *récit* is strongly colored by performative interests which obscure, to a greater or lesser degree, the communication of what actually occurred.

Act II ends with Atalide sending Bajazet off to meet with Roxane. She begs him to do whatever is necessary to save himself: “Dites . . . tout ce qu'il faut, Seigneur, pour vous sauver” (II, v, l. 792).⁶ Acomat's *récit*, at the beginning of the third act, describing what transpired between Roxane and Bajazet is prepared first by Zaïre's announcement (III, i, ll. 794-800) and then by Acomat's own brief introductory resumé (III, ii, ll. 845-46). Finally, he tells Atalide how, ‘plein de joie et d'espoir,’ he went to witness the conversation:

Et d'abord une esclave à mes yeux s'est offerte,
 Qui m'a conduit sans bruit dans un appartement
 Où Roxane attentive écoutait son amant.
 Tout gardait devant eux un auguste silence:
 Moi-même, résistant à mon impatience,
 Et respectant de loin leur secret entretien,
 J'ai longtemps, immobile, observé leur maintien.
 Enfin, avec des yeux qui découvraient son âme,
 L'une a tendu la main pour gage de sa flamme:
 L'autre, avec des regards éloquents, pleins d'amour,
 L'a de ses feux, Madame, assuré à son tour.
 (III, ii, ll. 878-88)⁷

His elated account of the happy couple sends Atalide into a fit of jealousy which is ultimately responsible for arousing Roxane's suspicions and consequently, Bajazet's death. Atalide vows never to see Bajazet again, at which point he appears onstage. Consumed by despair, she hints that she will kill herself. Bajazet then gives his own version of what occurred at the meeting between himself and Roxane:

A peine ai-je parlé que, sans presque m'entendre,
 Ses pleurs précipités ont coupé mes discours:
 Elle met dans ma main sa fortune, ses jours,
 Et, se fiant enfin à ma reconnaissance,
 D'un hymen infaillible a formé l'espérance.
 Moi-même, rougissant de sa crédulité,
 Et d'un amour si tendre et si peu mérité,
 Dans ma confusion, que Roxane, Madame,
 Attribuait encore à l'excès de ma flamme,
 Je me trouvais barbare, injuste, criminel.
 Croyez qu'il m'a fallu, dans ce moment cruel,
 Pour garder jusqu'au bout un silence perfide,
 Rappeler tout l'amour que j'ai pour Atalide.
 (III, iv, ll. 986-98)⁸

This *récit* clearly differs in tone from that of Acomat. Atalide, hysterical, and in want of reassurance, believes Bajazet. The spectator is tempted to follow

suit, sympathetic to both Bajazet and Atalide. However, upon reflection, one realizes that both Acomat and Bajazet have very good reasons for deforming the truth. Acomat is far enough removed from the situation so that one would assume him to be reliable in reporting the facts of the meeting; he is presented as a savvy, political man, in no way ruled by passion. Thus the spectator is first led to accept his appraisal of events. At the same time, however, Acomat has a tremendous, vested political interest in seeing this meeting end favorably; his whole future depends on it. And this bias colors his entire *récit*. Schérer suggests that Acomat does not hear what Roxane and Bajazet say (“leur secret entretien,” l. 883), but only observes.⁹ He also notes the intrusion of Acomat’s presence and perspective¹⁰ (he makes reference to himself thirteen times in his *récit*), curious in a scene in which he is almost entirely a spectator. Although the first person pronoun disappears briefly, it is precisely in these four lines (ll. 885-88) that Acomat most freely interprets events according to his own interests: “L’autre [Bajazet], avec des regards éloquents, pleins d’amour . . .” He paints a rosy picture of harmonious union. This is exactly what Acomat wants to see. The spectator has already observed, in the first act, how Acomat received rather inconclusive information from his spy, Osmin, and translated this information into an optimistic report to Roxane in order to persuade her to take action and declare Bajazet sultan (I, ii, ll. 213-17). Acomat’s account of the meeting is most certainly open to question. Van der Starre goes so far as to state that Acomat “est un ‘faux’ témoin, son ‘rapport’ n’est qu’une rumeur.”¹¹

Bajazet’s narration of the same events is, of course, far more appealing to Atalide. What Acomat had called “un *récit* fidèle,” Bajazet dismisses as “un *récit* infidèle.” Yet, if we admit Acomat’s bias in his presentation of the meeting, we must see that Bajazet has even greater reasons for deforming the truth. Acomat, unaware of Atalide’s feelings for Bajazet, tells her an essentially informative *récit*, performative only to the extent that he seeks to reassure himself (through the presence of an addressee) that all has been resolved. Bajazet’s *récit* is highly performative: he seeks to convince Atalide that his actions during the meeting were basically innocent, and that he loves her. In fact, lines 995-98 (“Je me trouvais . . .”) recount no actions; his reflections on his state of mind during the meeting exist only to appease Atalide. There is also a specific inconsistency between the two versions: in Acomat’s *récit* Bajazet speaks to Roxane, and one has the impression that he speaks at some length (“Roxane attentive écoutait son amant,” “un auguste silence,” “mon impatience”). In Bajazet’s *récit*, the emphasis is placed on the brevity of his own words (“A peine ai-je parlé, sans presque m’entendre . . .”). One has difficulty imagining why Acomat would lie about this particular element; Bajazet, however, has an interest in de-emphasizing the words in which he expressed his “love” to Roxane. The question of what Bajazet actually said to Roxane is never resolved. On the one hand, it hardly seems likely that he promised to marry her; and yet, on

the other hand, as Van der Starre suggests, “pendant la scène de réconciliation, Bajazet semble prononcer le mot-clef.”¹² What might he have said to satisfy Roxane who was angered at his earlier refusal to marry her?

Roxane’s own *récit* of the same meeting, which is told in the next scene, does not completely clear up the questions raised by the first two *récits*:

Tantôt à me venger fixe et déterminée.
Je jurais qu’il voyait sa dernière journée:
A peine cependant Bajazet m’a parlé,
L’amour fit le serment, l’amour l’a voilé.
J’ai cru dans son désordre entrevoir sa tendresse:
J’ai prononcé sa grâce, et je crois sa promesse.

(III. v, ll. 1021-26)

It is considerably shorter than the other two versions, and is told, performatively, in order to obtain a reassuring reaction from Bajazet (who is present onstage as Roxane tells her *récit* to Atalide). She wants assurances that her interpretation of what transpired between them is, in fact, correct. Therefore, like Acomat and Bajazet before her, Roxane’s narrative reliability is open to attack. Her *récit* would seem to support Acomat’s as both have interpreted Bajazet’s actions as being extremely conciliatory. On the other hand, the brevity of Bajazet’s words would seem to be supported by her similar use of “A peine . . . parlé.” Yet she mentions, in the last line, a promise that Bajazet has made to her (presumably verbal), a promise which is completely absent from Bajazet’s *récit*. What did he promise?

The result of these conflicting *récits* is confusion. Neither the spectator nor Atalide ever discovers what did occur. The veracity of each of the three *récits* is open to question. While we cannot state that any of the three characters lied in their *récits*, we are nonetheless left with three differing accounts, each presenting an interpretation colored by the individual narrator’s self-interests.

This is the most complete breakdown of the reliability of the *récit* in Racine’s theater. Generally, the *récits* in the classical theater, even given the deforming effect that any performative function might entail, are not employed in order to make the events described unclear. Agrippine’s long performative *récit* concerning her endeavors to place Néron on the throne (*Britannicus*, IV, ii), while certainly slanted in order to present herself in the best possible light to Néron, does not limit the spectator’s understanding of what has transpired. Even Julie’s *récit* of the combat in *Horace*, while certainly misleading, is merely incomplete. After the entr’acte, Valère’s *récit* provides the full story. In *Bajazet*, on the contrary, these three *récits* function to render fundamentally unclear an important constituent action of the play.

It is not surprising that this breakdown occurs in *Bajazet*, for this play differs significantly from Racine’s other tragedies. The subject is oriental rather than mythological or historical, the action is unusually complex, and there is no real positive hero. Above all, spatial considerations play a central

role in this tragedy. Roland Barthes introduces his discussion of the play by saying: “*Bajazet* constitue une recherche aiguë sur la nature du lieu tragique. On le sait, par définition, ce lieu est clos.”¹³ Space and time, the two primary theatrical limitations, both find complex thematic development in all of Racine’s theater. But, in *Bajazet*, Racine devotes greater attention, relative to his other tragedies, to dramatic space (i.e., the delimitations of the theatrical universe). The principal spatial delimitation is, of course, the seraglio, but even within the seraglio there are spatial limits; Bajazet is sequestered before the play opens, Roxane has him imprisoned before the fourth act, Atalide is held by the guards in the fifth act, and certain death awaits Bajazet outside of the room in which he has his last, and unsuccessful, meeting with Roxane.

The *récits* in this play both underscore, and are necessitated by, these multiple spatial circumscriptions. In particular, Atalide is excluded, as is the spectator, from Bajazet’s and Roxane’s meeting between the second and third acts. Contradictory *récits* are her (and our) sole source of information. In the first act, Acomat is similarly dependent upon the delayed, and therefore uncertain, reports of Amurat’s military activity. Barthes speaks of the seraglio in terms of the “obscurité des signes”¹⁴ therein. Indeed, it is as though the truth cannot pass intact through either its inner or outer walls.

Acomat, however, is less confined by these multiple enclosures than are Roxane, Bajazet, and Atalide, because he is only an adjunct of the tragic action and less limited by space (“La porte du serail à ma voix s’est ouverte”). On several occasions he speaks of leaving the seraglio, of escaping by sea. And, while Atalide is excluded, Acomat manages to be present at Roxane’s and Bajazet’s “secret entretien.” Interestingly, in his full report to Atalide, Acomat uses nine substantives indicating either a place, or implying movement between places (“palais,” “vaisseau,” “port,” “fuite,” “terres,” “palais,” “porte,” “serail,” “appartement”), and four verbs of physical displacement (“J’étais . . . sorti,” “j’ai couru,” “j’ai volé,” “je me suis dérobé”). In Bajazet’s *récit*, there are no such substantives and only the verb “je viens,” and none are found in Roxane’s brief account. Acomat’s choice of vocabulary seems to suggest a consciousness of the spatial dimension of the seraglio, and as he does not feel himself limited by the various enclosures, he verbally and physically passes from one place to another without difficulty. Roxane and Bajazet do not.

Bajazet, Atalide, and Roxane are immobilized by the almost labyrinthine confines of the seraglio. The information they receive must be filtered through its walls and, as we have seen, distorted or obscured in the process. Odette de Mourgues finds that, in *Bajazet*, “Alarming reports, false or true, are the mainspring of the dramatic movement . . .”¹⁵ These reports, in the form of *récits*, form a kind of armature for the play, coming at the beginning (Osmin’s report of Amurat’s activities), the middle (the three *récits* which we have examined), and the end (the reports of Roxane’s and Bajazet’s deaths). Furthermore, Racine devotes the better portion of an entire act to

récits and discussion dealing with a meeting that could have been easily represented onstage. The moment of greatest hope of reconciliation in this agitated and treacherous tragic universe takes place offstage, outside of the symbolic walls of the stage itself.

The three *récits* in the third act, then, have a number of functions. First, although the inconsistencies between *récits* leave important and unresolvable doubts, they do, to some degree, inform Atalide and the spectator of what has occurred. Second, they demonstrate to what extent the characters are caught in a web of lies, both to each other and to themselves, and how they are consequently incapable of separating the truth from their own desires and fears. Everything that one character says to another is open to suspicion. Finally, the presentation of the meeting in the form of multiple, conflicting narratives serves to underline the theme of spatial limitation and enclosure which permeates the play. The characters are separated from one another by their own desires and by the inner walls of the seraglio. They are similarly separated from the attainment of those desires by the outer seraglio walls which imprison them and keep them severed from the world outside, the non-tragic universe.

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Notes

1. The question of what exactly constitutes a *récit* is a complex issue. For this paper, I will use the term in a traditional manner: an extended, chronologically ordered series of events.
2. “Première préface” to *Britannicus* in Jean Racine, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Raymond Picard (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), p. 386.
3. Jacques Schérer, *Racine: Bajazet* (Paris: Centre de Documentation Universitaire, 1967), particularly Chap. V.
4. E. van der Starre, *Racine et le théâtre de l’ambiguïté* (Leiden: Universitaire Pers Leiden, 1966).
5. I have chosen the term “performative” rather than “perlocutionary” because the latter implies that the intended effects of the speech act have, in fact, been achieved, whereas it is characteristic of Racine’s theater that such verbal attempts to elicit a desired reaction generally fail. For a definition of the term “perlocutionary,” see Mary Louise Pratt, *Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1977), p. 81.
6. This and all further quotations of the play are taken from Jean Racine, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1950).
7. This is only part of his *récit* which, in full, extends from line 869 to 896.
8. The entire *récit* encompasses lines 982-1004.
9. Schérer, p. 126.
10. Schérer, p. 134.
11. Van der Starre, p. 133.
12. Van der Starre, p. 213.
13. Roland Barthes, *Sur Racine* (Paris: Seuil, 1963) p. 93.
14. Barthes, p. 97.
15. Odette de Mourgues, *Racine or the Triumph of Relevance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 87.