

The relationship between Pylade and Oreste

By Brad Walton

In the eighteenth century, European literature was still heavily indebted to classical models, from which it derived a great deal of both form and content. In classical literature several male couples were recognized as embodying intense friendships of a romantic or homoerotic kind. Achilles and Patroclus, Theseus and Perithous, Hercules and Hyacinthus were examples commonly drawn from mythology. Many historical examples, such as Harmodius and Aristogeiton and Alexander and Hyphaestion, were of considerable interest to the Greek historian Plutarch, whose works were extremely widely read during in the 18th century.

Another exemplary mythological couple were Orestes and Pylades. The classic description of their love is found in a dialogue attributed to the Greek writer Lucian (ca 125-ca180 a.d.). Lucian's works had been available in printed editions since the late fifteenth century and had influenced Erasmus, Rabelais, More, de Bergerac, Swift, Fielding and Voltaire. A complete edition, prepared by the great Dutch scholar Tiberius Hemsterhuys, made Lucian's works easily available to 18th-century readers.

In a dialogue called *Erotos* ("Affairs of the Heart") the author compares the merits and advantages of heterosexuality and homoeroticism, Orestes and Pylades are presented as the principal representatives of homoerotic friendship: "Taking the love god as the mediator of their emotions for each other, they sailed together as it were on the same vessel of life...nor did they restrict their affectionate friendship to the limits of Hellas....as soon as they set foot on the land of the Tauride, the Fury of matricides was there to welcome the strangers, and, when the natives stood around them, the one was struck to the ground by his usual madness and lay there, but Pylades 'did wipe away the foam and tend his frame and shelter him with a fine well-woven robe,' thus showing the feelings not merely of a lover, but also of a father. But when it had been decided that, while one remained to be killed, the other should depart for Mycenae to bear a letter, each wished to remain for the sake of the other, considering that he himself lived in the survival of his friend. But Orestes refused to take the letter, claiming Pylades was the fitter person to do so, and thus showed himself almost to be the lover rather than the beloved."

The wider context of these remarks, especially section 53, which, following shortly after, describes the physical intimacy open to male pairs, indicates that the love exemplified by Orestes and Pylades would not necessarily have excluded even more overt homoerotic or homosexual elements.

The fame of Lucian's works in the 18th century, as well as the generally well-known tradition of Greco-Roman heroic homoeroticism, would, it seems to me, have made it

natural for theatre audiences of that period to have recognized an intense, romantic, if not positively homoerotic quality, to the relationship between Orestes and Pylades.

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