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## Portrait of a Dancer

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*The story of Pylades, idol of the Roman Empire,  
a dancer who started a craze rivalling that of  
the modern radio crooner or moving picture star.*

## Portrait of a Dancer —————

by Lillian B. Lawler

**A**T some time during the last century before the beginning of the Christian era, there was born in the remote village of Mestarnae, in Cilicia (Suidas, s. v. *Pylades*), now southern Turkey, a boy who was destined to rise from complete obscurity to the fellowship of princes. It was to be his lot to invent a form of entertainment, a new kind of dance, which should sweep through the world like wildfire and remain the most popular feature of the theater until the Dark Ages settled down over the dying Roman Empire.

We know this dancer only as Pylades. Whether this was his real name (Cilicia was primarily Greek, and a name drawn from classical mythology would not be an anomaly

even in a humble family), or whether it was assumed as a *nom de théâtre*, we have no way of determining. In the third century B. C. there had been a famous actor of the same name, whose epitaph, by Alcaeus of Messene, is still extant (*Anth. Pal.* 6. 412). It is quite possible that our Pylades adopted the name of this distinguished predecessor. At any rate, the renown of the Cilician Pylades became so great that the name soon was practically a synonym for achievement in his field; and later artists adopted it, generation after generation, hoping to acquire thereby some of his genius and popularity.

The date of the birth of the dancer Pylades is not recorded. He seems to have launched his new dance form in about 22 B. C., and he was at the height of his career in 18 B. C. (*Dio Cass.* 54. 17. 4). In 2 B. C. he financed an elaborate festival, but did not perform in it because he was *hypergeros* (*Dio Cass.* 55. 10. 11). This word is usually translated "extremely old," and in most connotations it does mean just that. However, it would be inconceivable that a dancer would be in a state of senile decay only twenty years after beginning his career. Most dancers today make their professional debuts while in their teens, and retire from active dancing at about thirty. Even assuming that Pylades started upon his new type of dance when he was as old as thirty (which is highly unlikely), he would still be

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In addition to her editorial work, Miss Lawler has taken an active interest in the American Classical League, and has contributed much to the success of its Service Bureau. Her invaluable manual on the Latin Club is widely used by teachers. And as her story of Pylades indicates, she is the outstanding authority on the dances of the classical period.

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but fifty years of age in 2 B. C. I believe that the word *hypergeros* in this connection merely denotes "over age"—i.e., for active dancing; and I believe that in 2 B. C. Pylades was somewhere between forty and fifty years old. That would place his birthdate between 52 and 42 B. C. It is intriguing to conjecture that he may actually have been born while Cicero was governing Cilicia as proconsul—i.e., between 52 and 49 B. C., with the latter date the more likely.

### *Early Training*

OF THE boyhood and youth of Pylades we have no direct knowledge. He must have been of servile extraction, for later he seems to have been a freedman of Augustus. From the accounts of his skill which have come down to us, we may be sure that he began his professional training at a very early age. He was blessed with a beautiful body (his breathtaking appearance in later life is well attested); to develop it to its full glory of suppleness and strength must have taken years of rigorous training and abstemious living. It is probable that he was trained both as a tragic actor and as a dancer. The two careers were at that time distinct; but the elaborate code of gestures known collectively as *cheironomia* was common to both. Of these gestures, amounting almost to a sort of sign language, Pylades became a master. Athletic sports must also have had a part in his training; Lucian (*Orch.* 78) emphasizes the importance of boxing and wrestling in the development of a dancer.

Evidently the young man was more deeply impressed with his studies in tragedy than with his training in the dance. However, in the world about him the appeal of Greek tragedy was rapidly lessening—so much so that it looked as if the great themes of mythology were to pass from the stage altogether. Accordingly Pylades (or his master for him) seems to have turned his attention to dancing rather than to acting.

As we have already noted, Pylades appears upon the historical scene in 22 B. C. We are told (Suetonius, frag., Roth. p. 301; Zosimus 1. 6. 1) that in that year he and another dancer, Bathyllus of Alexandria, a freedman

and favorite of Maecenas, astonished the world with a new kind of entertainment—a combination of drama and the dance. Whether the two planned their innovation together, or whether they came upon similar forms independently, or whether one imitated the other, we do not know. We do not even know in what city they evolved their ideas, but it was probably in Rome. Certainly they achieved their greatest triumphs in that city. From the first, Pylades was the dominant figure of the two. He confined himself to plots from tragedy and, to a lesser extent, history, while the work of Bathyllus was more closely akin to comedy—i.e., it probably was a burlesque of mythological and tragic themes.

The new art was immediately successful—almost sensationally so, in fact. The two "inventors" rapidly developed and improved it, and imitators arose in great numbers. In time the genre came to be known as *Italikē orchēsis*, *Italica saltatio*; and the performers were called *pantomimi*.

### *A New Spectacle*

THE NEW spectacle was unlike anything which the classical world had ever beheld. The audience assembled in a theater the stage of which was set with elaborate scenery. The performance began with music—but not the music of the lone flute of tragedy, so familiar to the Greeks and Romans. Pylades had substituted an orchestra which must have been completely overwhelming to his audience—a combination of Pan-pipes, lyres, cymbals, tympana, and the wood-and-iron percussion instrument operated by the foot, and called the *scabellum*. (Not many years later the Egyptian sistrum was to be added to the instruments of the orchestra.) After the introductory music, a prologist (*praeco*—Augustine, *De doctr. Christ.* 2. 25. 38) came forward, and summarized briefly the story which was to be enacted. When he had finished, the chorus, reduced now to an off-stage choir, began to sing; and then, with a flourish, the *pantomimus* appeared, resplendent in a flowing robe of silk embroidered with gold and jewels, a swirling cloak, and a great mask

with closed mouth. Making use of the old Greek art of *cheironomia*, "speaking gestures," and displaying all the intoxicating grace and suppleness, agility and strength and virtuosity for which he was famous, the great dancer acted, rhythmically, a scene from an ancient myth. In it, he assumed one part, as a rule; but so great was his skill that he suggested other characters, simultaneously. With a twist of his long cloak, we are told, he could portray "a swan's tail, the tresses of Venus, a Fury's scourge" (Fronto, Loeb, II, p. 104). He leaped and crouched, twisted and turned, performed dazzling feats of balance (Galen 6. 155; Lucian, *Orch.* 71; Libanius, *Orch.* 68-69), halted in poses of statuesque beauty (Libanius, *Orch.* 118). At the end of the scene, the dancer withdrew. During a short musical and choral interlude he changed costume and mask, to reappear as another character in the next scene of the mythological story. This was repeated four or five times, until the whole of the legend was unfolded. The performance closed in a final burst of music, and a tumult of applause.

### *Effect on Audience*

MODERN parallels suggest themselves at once—the "one-woman plays" of Cornelia Otis Skinner, the fantasies of the Chinese stage, even the skits of "quick-change artists" in vaudeville. The performance of the *pantomimus* was like all of these, yet unlike them, too. It was highly stylized and artificial, and it deliberately avoided realism. To watch the performance understandingly seems to have required a considerable amount of imagination on the part of the spectators. Yet with all these apparent defects the dance-drama was immensely popular. The effect upon the audience was unbelievably powerful. Repeatedly eye-witnesses speak of the dancer as appearing to be more than human, the actual incarnation of a divinity. Sophisticated Roman nobles hung breathless upon his every movement, and impressionable women screamed and swooned, even as they do today when watching and listening to popular crooners.

Bathyllus habitually made use of light,

happy themes, suited to his delicate, voluptuous style of dancing, and he favored feminine roles. Pylades, on the other hand, adhered to the "grand style." Ancient commentators say that his art was dignified, solemn, inspiring, deeply moving (Athenaeus I. 20; Plutarch, *Quaest. Conv.* 7. 711 f). He portrayed the gods and heroes of ancient tragedy—their loves and hates, their sorrows, transformations, deaths. His repertoire seems to have been tremendous. His dance, we are told, was directly inspired by the old *emmeleia*, solemn dance of tragedy. In his performances, the *emmeleia* seemed to develop naturally, to go on to a fuller expressiveness, a greater subtlety, a newer significance. In time, the style of Pylades prevailed as the norm for the pantomimic dance, and the lighter style of Bathyllus disappeared. In a very real sense, Pylades saved the plots of Greek tragedy for the theater. From our point of view, that would seem to be his greatest contribution; but we are told (Macrobius, *Sat.* 2. 7) that when the emperor Augustus asked him what he considered his most important service to his art, he replied that it had been his augmentation of the musical accompaniment, with "the sound of flutes and pipes, and the voices of men," as he phrased it, quoting from the *Iliad* (10. 13).

### *Hercules a Favorite Role*

PYLADES' outstanding roles were those of Dionysus and the maddened Hercules. In the former, he actually seemed to be the god incarnate (*Anth. Plan.* 290); so divine was he, says the epigrammatist Boethus (*Anth. Pal.* 9. 248), that if Hera could have seen him she would have laid aside her jealousy, and claimed that he was her own son, not Semele's! The Hercules role was a favorite of the dancer himself, but some of his audiences seem to have felt that in it he was a trifle too "mad." On one occasion a spectator remarked audibly that this Hercules did not walk properly; whereupon the fiery-tempered dancer pulled off his mask, threw it violently on the stage, bellowed, "You fools, I am dancing a madman!" and shot arrows at the offending spectator (Macrobius, *Sat.* 2. 7). That the

characterization must really have been excellent is attested by the fact that the emperor Augustus enjoyed a "command performance" of it in his own triclinium.

Pylades and Bathyllus became the rage of polite society. Freedmen though they were, they were lionized and fawned upon. Like Hollywood celebrities two thousand years later, they hobnobbed with royalty, and even had some political power. Apparently the smaller cities of Italy clamored for a glimpse of them. An extant inscription (*CIL* 10. 1074) attests that Pylades, at least, "went on tour" to Pompeii; presumably he visited other towns as well. Both of the great dancers opened schools; but the school of Pylades far eclipsed that of Bathyllus. Pupils flocked in—even members of the Roman nobility aspired to be pantomimic dancers! Soon the two humble Greeks held the great Roman Empire in the hollow of their hands.

### *Formal Contests Unlikely*

APPARENTLY there were no regular contests in the new dance form, as there had been in tragedy and comedy in ancient Athens. We do read (*Quintilian* 6. 3. 65) of one informal contest, in the days of Augustus, between two pantomimic dancers "qui alternis gestibus contendebant." The emperor himself is said to have remarked that, of the two, one was a *saltator*, the other merely an *interpelator*—one danced, the other interrupted! This remark would imply that the two contenders were not the great artists, Pylades and Bathyllus. Two centuries later, Lucian specifically says (*Orch.* 32) that pantomimic dancing was not included in the public competitions, as being too high and solemn for criticism. He does say that one Italian city had a dancing competition; but we may safely assume that the dance of the pantomimes was not included in it.<sup>1</sup> The late writer Nonnus, in his *Dionysiaca* (19. 133–282), portrays a pantomimic contest between two followers of Dionysus, the general outlines of which must have been suggested to the author by an actual contest which he had seen; but Nonnus was writing some five hundred years after the time of Pylades.

Contests or no contests, however, rivalries inevitably developed between the great masters of the new dance form; and in these the public soon began to take a noisy part. Before long, the very appearance on the streets of one or the other of the leading dancers was a signal for rioting and bloodshed. Augustus watched the situation with rising displeasure; and Rome awoke one morning to discover that the stormy Pylades had been banished from Italy. The exile of the freedman dancer did not cause nearly so much stir as did that of the freeborn poet Ovid, some twenty-five or twenty-six years later, but there were similarities in the two cases. Quite evidently the emperor was acting in both instances under the apprehension (symptomatic of all dictators) that he must supervise and censor other people's conduct. Also, the real reason for the exile was in both cases withheld from the public. Pylades was banished, say various writers, either (1) because of his rivalry with Bathyllus (*Dio Cassius* 54. 17. 5); or (2) because of his rivalry with Hylas, his most outstanding pupil (*Macrobius, Sat.* 2. 7. 19); or (3) *dia stasin* (*Dio Cassius* 54. 17. 4–5)—an ambiguous phrase, which could imply "on account of sedition" against the emperor, or merely "on account of his faction"; or (4) because on one occasion when a noble spectator dared to hiss him in the theater, Pylades "thrust his third finger" at him—a gesture somewhat akin to "thumbing the nose" in the modern code of depreciation (*Suetonius, Aug.* 45). I have always been inclined to believe that the "suspicion of sedition" explanation may have been the real one. Pylades was certainly an independent thinker; and as a Greek he would naturally come by a love of freedom and a hatred of dictatorship. It may be that Augustus was displeased with some emphasis upon the ideals of freedom and democracy in Pylades' dancing, rather than with the rioting of his partisans and those of Bathyllus. At any rate, when the emperor later expostulated with the uncowed dancer for squabbling with his rivals, Pylades replied fearlessly (*Dio Cassius* 54. 17. 5; *Macrobius, Sat.* 2. 7) that the emperor was ungrateful—that it was in

fact advantageous for a dictator to have dancers quarreling in the city, so as to keep the people's minds off politics!

We do not know where Pylades spent his exile. It is entirely possible that he simply went on a lucrative tour of provincial towns! In 18 b. c. he was recalled, apparently by popular demand. He seems to have been restored to imperial favor; and the renewed and unchecked street riots which ensued would indicate that Augustus took to heart his shrewd, if ironic, political advice.

### Colorful Personality

THROUGHOUT his life, Pylades seems to have been a very colorful personality. In spite of his lowly birth and social standing, he feared no one, from the emperor down; and his retorts, some sharp, some pithy, some witty, became famous. He seems to have been impatient, temperamental, and explosive, but his artistic standards were high, and he never compromised where they were concerned. For a spectator who failed to appreciate his work he had nothing but scorn, vigorously expressed. He stooped to a practical joke now and then. On one occasion when a crowd demanded that he dance for them, then and there, he responded by sitting absolutely still, as if pondering; asked for an explanation, he replied that he was portraying a great general thinking out a campaign! (Macrobius, *Sat.* 2. 7).

### Pylades as a Teacher

HE WAS a rigorous and effective teacher, brutally frank in his criticisms of his students. The Carian Hylas, his most famous pupil, who later rivaled Pylades himself in popularity, seems to have been a frequent victim of his ready tongue. Once, we are told, when Hylas rose on tiptoe to express the idea "great Agamamon," Pylades shouted, "That is 'tall Agamamon,' not 'great'!" On another occasion, when Hylas was dancing the character of the blinded Oedipus, Pylades cried out, "But you walk as if you could see!" (Macrobius, *Sat.* 2. 7). Although *pantomimi* in general soon came to be regarded as an immoral lot, and frequently were accused of

corrupting public morals with their seductive rhythms, no scandal has touched the name of Pylades. Hylas, on the other hand, was publicly scourged in the atrium of his own house (Suetonius, *Aug.* 45); and even Bathylus' reputation was not above reproach.

### The Wealth of Pantomimists

LIKE ALL famous *pantomimi*, Pylades seems to have become immensely wealthy. We hear of the purchase of "scripts" for dance-dramas (*fabulae salticae*) from reputable authors at high prices (Juvenal 7. 87-97), in the Hollywood manner. Pliny the Elder (7. 39, 40, 128) speaks of performers' salaries that amounted to 500,000 sesterces a year and over—\$25,000 in money value, with a purchasing power of some ten times that amount. Seneca (*Ad Helv.* 12. 6) mentions dowries of a million sesterces (\$50,000) as not uncommon among women pantomimic dancers. Later, in the reign of Marcus Aurelius, it became necessary to put a "ceiling" on dancers' salaries and on production costs for their dance-dramas (*Script. Hist. Aug.*, *Marcus Aurelius* 11. 4). We have already noted the fact that in 2 b. c. Pylades, retired and wealthy, assumed the full expense of a sumptuous public festival in which a large number of dancers performed.

### A Manual for Dancers

WE ARE quite familiar today with popular books on tennis by tennis champions, on diving by Olympic divers, and on the art of the dance by famous dancers. Accordingly it does not strike us as odd that Pylades now turned his hand to a treatise on the dance. The work itself, unfortunately, is lost. However, an essay on the same subject (*Peri Orchēseōs*), written in the second century of the Christian era, is still extant. The essay is attributed to Lucian, but some scholars have doubted the authenticity of this attribution. It is not beyond the bounds of possibility that the work is actually in some degree the treatise of Pylades, "modernized" and impersonalized by Lucian or one of his contemporaries. Such adaptations of the works of earlier authors are, of course, quite common in Greek and Roman literature. However,

even if the later treatise is genuinely by Lucian (throughout this paper it is cited as his work), there can be no doubt but that Lucian made use of Pylades' book. To a lesser extent, Libanius' rhetorical treatise, *Hyper tōn Orchēstōn*, written in the fourth century and also still extant, must have been influenced by it.

### *The Art of the Dance*

FROM these essays, and from what we know of Pylades himself, we can conjecture something of the nature of his book. Like Lucian's work, it was probably a dialogue, the usual form for a Greek or Roman treatise. It must have treated of the origins of the dance, of the functions of the dance, and of the author's philosophy of the dance, in the typical Greek manner. It must have emphasized particularly the sedate, dignified, highly polished type of dance which the author himself espoused. It certainly stressed the importance of grace and agility on the part of the dancer, as well as natural ability in the portrayal of character. It may have outlined a program of training, diet, and study for the prospective dancer. It must have contained sections on mythological and tragic themes appropriate to the dance, for the ideals of Pylades in this respect were, as we have seen, very high. It may have included specific information on the elaborate symbolism and convention which the author himself did so much to work out and establish for the pantomimic dance. Considerable attention may have been given to correct gestures and figures. Appropriate costumes and masks may have been discussed, and there may have been some remarks on scenery. There must have been some treatment of accompanying music, both vocal and instrumental. There may even have been included (as there is in the treatises of Lucian and Libanius) an attempted denial of the repeated charge that the pantomimic dance was seductive and had a bad moral effect upon spectators.<sup>2</sup> In style the work probably was brilliant and forceful, for remarks attributed to Pylades by other writers show a characteristic, rapier-like quickness

and directness. Whether Pylades' book was for the general public, or was primarily a textbook for his own pupils, we do not know; but it is likely that it was for the layman, and that it partook somewhat of the nature of the various treatises on music, on songs, on harmony, etc., which were so numerous and so popular in antiquity.

Another activity of modern celebrities—the endorsing or promoting of some product, diet, etc.—may actually have been a secondary consideration (and source of revenue) for the great pantomimic dancers. We have no specific mention of such activity on the part of Pylades; but in the days of Lucius Verus, the pantomimic dancer Paris was famous for an effective depilatory (Galen 12. 454).

### *Craze for Dancing*

THE DANCE form which Bathyllus favored had disappeared by the second century; but that which Pylades had begun went on and on in the ensuing centuries, to unbelievable heights of popularity. Seneca (*Controv.* 3. praef. 10) speaks of the dance in his time as a veritable "craze"—*morbus*. Lucian (*Orch.* 79) tells us how rapt spectators sometimes sat for whole days in the pantomimic theaters, drinking in mythological spectacles. Rich families had private troops of dancers. Performers of any skill at all, both men and women, became immensely wealthy. Emperors fraternized with them, and accorded them special privileges. Caligula (Suetonius, *Caligula* 54) even performed as a *pantomimus* himself; and Nero is said to have put the dancer Paris to death either because he regarded him as a rival artist (Suetonius, *Nero* 54), or because Paris would not teach him his skill (Dio Cass. 63. 18. 1). Costumes and staging became incredibly sumptuous. Poems were set to pantomimic dancing (Ovid, *Trist.* 2. 519–520; 5. 7, 25–30); even ordinary orations (Tacitus, *Dial.* 26), panegyrics (Pliny, *Pan.* 54. 1), and philosophical treatises (Lucian, *Orch.* 35; Athenaeus 1. 20) were accompanied with rhythmic gesturing. One horribly perverted form of the dance appears in the time of Plutarch (*De sera num. vind.*

554 B)—a performance in which Christian martyrs were forced to dance wearing “golden tunics and purple robes,” which burst into flames, killing the dancers before the eyes of the spectators.

Meanwhile, the morals of the professional dancers sank lower and lower. Demetrius the Cynic, and Aelius Aristides the rhetorician, led violent attacks upon them; but Demetrius, won over by the efforts of the dancer Paris (Lucian, *Orch.* 63–64), at length abandoned his opposition. In the days of Libanius, dancers were held in such low esteem that that distinguished author plumes himself not a little upon his courage in daring to defend them in public! Ultimately the steady influence of the Church made itself felt; and at some time in the sixth century, after a last defense by Choricius (*Apologia Mimorum*), the pantomimic dance, now too corrupt for redemption, passed into oblivion.<sup>3</sup>

### *Origin of Pylades' Dance Form*

MUCH HAS been made, in this paper and elsewhere, of the originality of the dance forms of Pylades and Bathyllus. They were original, in a very real sense; but I believe it is possible to see in them elements which go back to remote antiquity. As a matter of fact, the pantomimic dance may be regarded as something of a reversion to an early stage of Greek drama—the one-actor phase, in which a single performer, with the aid of varying costumes and masks, portrayed a series of mythological characters. The great difference, of course, lies in the fact that the tragic actor spoke or sang, from early times, while the pantomimic dancer performed with gestures alone. There is, however, another connection which seems highly significant. It will be re-

called that Bathyllus was an Egyptian Greek—from Alexandria. One of our sources (Athenaeus 1. 20) associates his dance with that of the Egyptian city Memphis. Not long ago, in a paper entitled “Proteus Is a Dancer” (*Classical Weekly* 36 [1943] 116–117), I recalled Lucian’s remark (*Orch.* 19), “The ancient Egyptian Proteus is nothing but a dancer,” and set forth my belief that in the legend of Proteus, with his many changes of form, we have a combination of several elements; and that “one of those elements may well be, as Lucian suspected, an old ritual dance, perhaps to a sea or river divinity, in which a prominent individual, or a priest, or a priest-king, portrayed mimetically (and spectacularly) a sequence of ideas such as ‘lion,’ ‘fire,’ ‘serpent,’ ‘water,’ etc. This dance may have been developed spontaneously in many different parts of the ancient world. We know that such dances are common to all primitive races today. They are offered to divinities of all sorts, and they are invariably accompanied by an illusion of spiritual ‘possession’ or identification of the dancer with a god or with the animal or thing portrayed.” Such a dance would go back to prehistoric times. Something like it may have been found in both Greece and Egypt, for the legend places Proteus now in Greece, now in Pharos or Memphis in Egypt. In Memphis, dancing was a feature of the cult of Ptah, and also of the famous Memphian mysteries. I should not be surprised, then, if the pantomimic dance of Pylades and Bathyllus had in it some elements which stemmed ultimately from a very old “Proteus” dance, which was either Greek or Egyptian or a combination of both. It is interesting to note, incidentally, that Libanius (*Orch.* 80) refers to Egypt as the “first parent” of the pantomimic dance.<sup>4</sup>

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Lillian B. Lawler, “*Orchēsis Iōniskē*,” *TAPA*, 74 (1943) 60–71, esp. 71.

<sup>2</sup> The work of Libanius is avowedly a refutation of an attack upon the dance by Aelius Aristides, a writer of the second century. Some scholars think that the treatise attributed to Lucian is a reply to this same attack.

<sup>3</sup> For a good general discussion of the pantomimic dance see Ludwig Friedlaender, *Darstellungen aus der*

*Sittengeschichte Roms*, tenth edition, revised by Georg Wissowa (Leipzig, Hirzel, 1921–23), II, 125–135; also, Lucian, *Peri Orchēsōs*, and Libanius, *Hyper tōn Orchēstōn*.

<sup>4</sup> Friedlaender (*op. cit.* [see note 3] 125) says that H. Bier, in his dissertation *De Saltatione Pantomimorum* (Bonn, 1920), ascribes an Egyptian origin to the pantomimic dance. The dissertation is inaccessible to me.