

## Death and Desire: Solutions to the Technical Problems of a Portrayal of Sainthood in Corneille's *Polyeucte*

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Although Corneille's *Polyeucte* portrays a saint's martyrdom, from the 17<sup>th</sup> century on audiences and critics alike have paid greater attention to the play's love triangle than to its religious thematics.<sup>1</sup> Critics have often used the love plot as ammunition in their attack of the sacred meaning. Voltaire disdained Pauline's saintly husband in comparison to her former lover Sévère and judged the play unlikely to move an audience without their obstacle-ridden love.<sup>2</sup> Modern critics have continued to privilege the play's love interest over its religious meaning and have even used the former to deny the latter. Thus Robert Nelson dismisses Polyeucte as a subsidiary character in a play about Pauline and Sévère (Nelson, 106) and characterizes Polyeucte's Christianity as a prideful, selfish search for transcendence through aristocratic *gloire* (Nelson, 102-106). Doubrovski believes the love plot reveals Polyeucte's need for complete liberty, for an *affirmation du moi* that contradicts any appearance of sainthood (Doubrovski, 248-51). For Evelyne Méron the confrontational Christian beliefs which drive Polyeucte to his death are not motivated by religious zeal but rather by a need to escape the prison of emotional commitment; his so-called sainthood stems from a *crise d'amour* not a *crise de foi* (Méron, 148-149).<sup>3</sup>

For other critics Polyeucte's role within the love plot undoes his claim to Christian virtue. Harriet Stone finds that Polyeucte's willingness to sacrifice Pauline to the personal *gloire* of saintliness undermines any real saintliness for which he might qualify (Stone, 25-

26). Barbara Woshinsky finds his brusque treatment of Pauline insulting and almost comic in its absurdity (Woshinsky, 48).

Even those critics who connect the love plot and religious plot do so at the expense of the latter. Matthew Senior sees Polyeucte's sainthood as an attempt to win back Pauline's love, an attempt that works precisely because virtue is eroticized in the play (Senior, 152-153). For Marie-Odile Sweetser, as for Octave Nadal, Polyeucte's spiritual drama is ultimately expressed through his affective life with Pauline. His first conversion convinces him, to the sorrow of all, that he must deny conjugal love; his second conversion reveals that his duty is, instead, to use conjugal love to bring Pauline to God (Sweetser, 125; Nadal, 209-212).

The emotionally engaging Pauline- Polyeucte- Sévère love triangle does not, however, necessarily divert us from the religious theme. Rather it forms part of a patterned motif of desire central to the Christian meaning of the play and necessary to the development of its action. The love plot in *Polyeucte* allows Corneille to solve several technical problems implicit in creating a martyrdom tragedy for the 17<sup>th</sup>-century French commercial stage. Through the love plot Corneille dramatizes the hero's spiritual development, the warfare Christians must wage with temptation and evil, and the sufferings of martyrdom.

The small number of martyrdom tragedies between 1630 and 1650 implies the problematic nature of such drama.<sup>4</sup> During these crucial years, the Catholic Church had relaxed its hostile attitude towards the theatre enough to allow the presentation of sacred material in plays written for the commercial stage (Lyons, 123).<sup>5</sup> And yet, despite their obvious combination of Christian subject matter and dramatic event, martyrdom tragedies were scarce, had mixed success, and often generated strong negative reaction. In 1645 Corneille's play *Théodore, vierge et martyre* closed after only five performances despite a good story fit to move a Christian audience. In fact, using *Théodore* as a case in point, d'Aubignac notes: « il ne faut pas s'imaginer que toutes les belles histoires puissent heureusement paraître sur la scène, parce que souvent leur beauté dépend de quelque circonstance que le théâtre ne peut souffrir » (79-80).<sup>6</sup> *Polyeucte* itself was not an unqualified, automatic success. Guests at the Hôtel de Rambouillet applauded Corneille's initial reading<sup>7</sup> with lukewarm politeness. In private, M. de Voiture discreetly indicated that the play, and particularly its Christian element, had not been enjoyed.<sup>8</sup>

Numerous reasons explain why so few good 17<sup>th</sup>-century French martyrdom tragedies exist within an otherwise dynamic and vital dramatic tradition. It was no doubt difficult to please a sufficiently large audience when treating an issue on which people had strong and divergent feelings. It may also have demanded a particularly delicate touch not to offend by the mixture of holy subject matter and worldly medium. Despite the Church's more relaxed attitude towards theatre, the commercial stage still struck many as too morally marginal for Christian subject matter.<sup>10</sup>

I wish to focus here, however, on the technical difficulties which Christian martyrdom tragedy also created for the playwright, technical obstacles created at the crossroads of the demands of commercial drama, the requirements of 17<sup>th</sup>-century Christian doctrine, and the strictures of classical *bienséance*. Generating an adequate plot, creating a noble hero whose plight moves us, and eliciting appropriate audience emotion were all problematic in martyrdom plays and may well help to explain the small number of these dramas.

Classical standards of propriety and 17<sup>th</sup>-century ideas about true faith severely restricted the potential of Christian martyrdom to generate enough action and create enough interest for the five acts needed in a commercially viable, full-length 17<sup>th</sup>-century French play. An extended debate between Christians and pagans could have created interesting plot material, but would have offended Christian *bienséance*. D'Aubignac recommends, for example, that authors avoid invectives against religion and pagan characters who speak ill of Christianity (1339). Jean Rotrou had, in fact, written a pagan/Christian debate into a draft of his martyrdom play, *Le Véritable Saint Genest*, but he never actually included it in any final version. Jacques Scherer surmises that Rotrou omitted this debate scene precisely because of its potential to offend (Rotrou, 1339).

An inner debate within the Christian martyr could also have generated dramatic action. For the 17<sup>th</sup> century, however, such self-doubt would have diminished the saintly hero, putting his faith in question and negating the spiritual value of his martyrdom. Corneille defends Polyeucte's difference from the morally ambiguous Aristotelian tragic hero by noting that his hero's saintly nature demands a lack of any weakness.<sup>11</sup> And d'Aubignac criticizes Rotrou's play because Genest's martyrdom should have led to the automatic conversion of all his pagan co-workers. If d'Aubignac saw a true act of God's grace as

working in such an irresistible fashion upon unbelievers, he certainly would not have appreciated the virtues of a Christian martyr with inner doubts.

Finally, torture and martyrdom themselves could have furnished plot material. However, physical torture can not continue for three or four acts with steadily increasing suspense and dramatic tension. In addition, since the rules of French classicism demanded that all physical violence be accomplished off stage, prolonged torture risked removing the Christian hero from the stage and shifting the focus of audience attention or diminishing dramatic interest.<sup>12</sup>

How then could one write an interesting, dramatic, full-length tragedy about a Christian martyr, centered on Christian themes? Padding the plot with elements extraneous to religion would compromise the Christian focus and taking refuge in doctrinally safe, poetic lyricism would reduce dramatic interest.

Corneille's solution depends on a crucial hierarchy which he establishes in the very first scene. Despite a friend's urging to immediate baptism, Polyeucte hesitates because of Pauline's entreaties, because of the "droits [qu']elle a sur toute l'âme..." (I.i.10).<sup>13</sup> When the friend wonders how Polyeucte will endure persecution if he can not resist his wife's tears (I.i.83-84), Polyeucte responds:

la pitié qui me blesse  
 Sied bien aux plus grands coeurs et n'a point de faiblesse.  
 Sur mes pareils, Néarque, un bel oeil est bien fort:  
 Tel craint de le fâcher qui ne craint pas la mort ;  
 Et s'il faut affronter les plus cruels supplices,  
 Y trouver des appas, en faire mes délices,  
 Votre Dieu, que je n'ose encor nommer le mien,  
 M'en donnera la force en me faisant chrétien.

(I.i.85-92)<sup>14</sup>

Torture and death do not frighten or weaken great hearts, particularly ones strengthened by divine grace, but the noble virtues of pity and love are more formidable enemies. Nothing frightens men of nobility, says Polyeucte, as much as the fear of displeasing the woman they love. No torture, no pain, no death can strike such fear in a noble heart. A noble Christian can accept physical pain and welcome death, « y trouver des appas », but the pain of love may overwhelm him.

Corneille makes a metonymic shift here. Desire of the loved one becomes the ultimate lure of the world just as fear of the loved one's disapproval, the nobleman's greatest terror, represents the ultimate torture, and loss of love symbolizes death. Once his love and compassion for Pauline are identified as the greatest threat to a single-minded devotion to God, once she clearly represents a rival claim on his soul, once his fear of displeasing her is labeled a fear deeper than the fear of "supplices" or death, Polyeucte's struggle with desire can represent all the sufferings of martyrdom and all the ordeals of sainthood.

Corneille's clever displacement allows him to stage a nuanced, prolonged presentation of Christian martyrdom. Classical dramaturgy may prevent us from seeing Polyeucte tortured, but we can watch Polyeucte suffer as his decision to remain a Christian costs him what he holds most dear. Propriety may prevent us from hearing a lengthy debate between Christians and pagans, but we can watch Polyeucte struggle between the love of his wife and the love of God, torn by the wish to have both and the necessity of prioritizing.<sup>15</sup>

This emotional equation of love and torture is reinforced and validated in Act II when Sévère, the bold soldier of exemplary valor, nearly faints at news of Pauline's marriage. His response to his servant's surprise ("Seigneur, qu'est devenu ce généreux courage?" [II.i.409])<sup>16</sup>, reemphasizes that love is the ultimate weapon against a noble heart.

La constance est ici d'un difficile usage;  
De pareils déplaisirs accablent un grand coeur;  
La vertu la plus mâle en perd toute vigueur;  
Et quand d'un feu si beau les âmes sont éprises,  
La mort les trouble moins que de telles surprises.

(II.i.410-414)<sup>17</sup>

Sévère's pain echoes Polyeucte's and keeps the martyr's suffering in our minds during Act II. Indeed, as Act II and the star-crossed love of Sévère and Pauline develop, we anticipate the further pain that these new developments will cause Polyeucte. The use of love to explore deeper values is certainly consistent with a 17<sup>th</sup>-century artistic tradition where the *instinct amoureux* of aristocratic literature often accompanies and spurs on heroic values. In addition Corneille's specific equation of love and torture is facilitated by the long-established traditions of chivalrous and Petrarchan language.

Polyeucte's first, and easiest, public ordeal involves confronting the fear of physical pain when forced to witness the offstage torture and execution of his fellow Christian (III.iii-v). Néarque's death strengthens, not weakens, Polyeucte's courage ("son coeur s'affermit au lieu de s'ébranler" [III.iv.960])<sup>18</sup> and generates such envious fervor in him that the guards must drag him *away from* the scaffold by force (III.v.999-1000). Corneille intensifies and prolongs his hero's trials through wrenching confrontations with his wife in Acts IV and V. The emotional pain of these conflicts causes more intense suffering than mere physical torture. We have already seen Polyeucte flee Pauline's presence for fear of her power over him (I.ii). Thus Polyeucte's prayer for God's help and strengthening during his martyrdom focuses not on withstanding physical pain but on the emotional torture of leaving Pauline, represented by "charmes", "plaisirs" and "attachements de la chair" (IV.ii.1116, 1107, 1109)<sup>19</sup> and on the pain of causing her grief, anger and disappointment. "[J]e craignais beaucoup moins tes bourreaux [de Félix] que ses larmes" (IV.i.1086).<sup>20</sup>

The final scene between Polyeucte and Pauline dramatizes this torture as Pauline confronts Polyeucte with a variety of increasingly strong temptations. She appeals to his ambition, to his honor, and to his self-protective prudence. He must think of the promise of his life (IV.iii.1173-1180); he must remember his duty to others (IV.iii.1202-1205); he should remain a Christian and continue to live by just pretending momentarily to recant (IV.iii.1223-1224). Polyeucte faces all these temptations without wavering. But when he is finally challenged by his love for her and his desire to make her happy, when her grief "explodes" (1235), when she bemoans his broken promises of constant love (1243-44), when she charges him with heartless abandonment (1245, 1249-50), when she accuses him of no longer loving her (1252), then he falters. The climax of the martyr's torture has been reached. Polyeucte groans, "Hélas!" (1253) and Pauline takes heart as she notices "il s'émeut, je vois couler des larmes" (1256).<sup>21</sup>

His momentary groans and tears are involuntary concessions to the pain of torture. His tears, he assures her, only reflect concern for the state of her soul. He remains firm under torture and, in true Christian fashion, prays for his torturer, begging God to lead Pauline to Christian faith and save her from eternal damnation (IV.iii.1263-72). He even sacrifices his own selfish interests and joins in his own torture when he tries to assure her earthly happiness by giving his rival Sévère blessing

and permission to marry her once he, Polyeucte, has died (IV.iv.1300-1312).

In the final scenes of martyrdom (V.ii-iii), Polyeucte remains unmoved by considerations of personal safety or ambition. None of Félix's threats or ploys can move him. "Mon choix n'est point douteux" (V.ii.1579),<sup>22</sup> he asserts. Then Pauline enters. "Mais j'aperçois Pauline. / O Ciel!" (V.ii.1579-80).<sup>23</sup> Desire again functions as the ultimate test, the ultimate torture, the displaced figure of the physical dismemberment of martyrdom. Again, under torture, Polyeucte cries out. But this time his cry "O Ciel!" is even more ambiguous, both an expression of pain and a prayer for divine strength. The heavenly answer arrives with Polyeucte's ability to choose finally between Pauline and God, to truly abandon his heart's desire.

Mais, de quoi que pour vous notre amour m'entretienne,  
Je ne vous connais plus, si vous n'êtes chrétienne.  
(V.iii.1611-12)<sup>24</sup>

If Pauline remains pagan, she will forever be dead to Polyeucte. Polyeucte accepts eternal separation from her if she chooses eternal separation from God. Thus the connection of desire and torture allows Corneille to focus over a fourth of the play on Polyeucte's martyrdom, gives him a way of displaying that martyrdom on stage, and allows him to intensify that martyrdom during the play, building suspense and dramatic interest.

A second technical challenge was the need to create internal conflict in the Christian hero without making him appear weak or unworthy of respect. In addition to using desire to portray martyrdom, Corneille uses desire, especially virtuous desire, to create internal conflict in his Christian hero. The typical tragic hero has been grasped by a passion that puts him in conflict with a world that eventually destroys him. But we must be able to imagine the hero without his passion in order to feel the tension generated in the conflict of the play. The conflict must seem both avoidable (since the hero could abandon his passion and make other choices) and unavoidable (since the intensity of his passion defines the hero). A Christian audience can not, however, wish for the hero to abandon a passion for God, even if this passion will clearly lead to martyrdom. And if the hero abandons his passion for God, we will lose all respect and concern for him and he will cease

being tragic.

Corneille successfully creates a conflicted Christian hero by casting virtuous desire and the desire for human virtue in the role of the antagonist. Corneille portrays the Christian hero's struggle towards saintliness not as the external battle between absolute evil and absolute good, the conflict between pagan sin and Christian virtue, wrong and right, but rather as the internal battle between worldly virtue and absolute virtue, the conflict between good and best.

Thus, in the very first scene, Polyeucte is tempted to delay his baptism by love and pity for his wife, not by lust, greed, sloth or some pagan enemy (I.i). In the second act Polyeucte debates with Néarque who wishes to prevent him from destroying the idols in the temple. Both agree on the evils of pagan religion. Their dispute involves the issue of strategy, timing. Néarque preaches moderation and Polyeucte is all flame. Reasonableness and balance fight against Christian passion and intensity.

Later, in prison for assaulting the temple idols, Polyeucte expresses disdain for the worldly attractions now proved false in comparison to the reality of God's presence (4.2). As we have seen earlier, his legitimate affection for his wife Pauline, an inherently good affection, represents the world. Polyeucte struggles between two *legitimate* desires that can not co-exist because the lesser one (the world, or Pauline) threatens to displace the greater (God). Concerning this, his friend, Nearque, observes:

Nous pouvons tout aimer, il le souffre, il l'ordonne ;  
 Mais, à vous dire tout, ce Seigneur des seigneurs  
 Veut le premier amour et les premiers honneurs.

...

Il ne faut rien aimer qu'après lui, qu'en lui-même,  
 (I.i.70-76)<sup>25</sup>

When Pauline then comes to plead with him, she evokes his pity, his love, his Christian concern, and his sense of responsibility to those who depend on him (IV.iii). Again, the struggle involves good and best, not evil and good. Even when the ambitious and cowardly Félix, the least virtuous of the characters, tries to persuade Polyeucte to recant, Corneille configures the scene as a struggle between human virtue and saintliness. Félix assures Polyeucte that he wants to know

more about Christianity and that he needs Polyeucte to live so that Polyeucte can instruct him in the faith and lead him to baptism (V.ii). Brotherly love, family devotion, and passion for evangelism tempt Polyeucte. Félix and Pauline's plea to renounce Christianity is the last test, the culmination of a sustained assault upon his will, the martyr's final torture.

Après avoir deux fois essayé la menace,  
Après m'avoir fait voir Néarque dans la mort,  
Après avoir tenté l'amour et son effort,  
Après m'avoir montré cette soif du baptême,  
Pour opposer à Dieu l'intérêt de Dieu même,  
Vous vous joignez ensemble ! Ah ! ruses de l'enfer !  
Faut-il tant de fois vaincre avant que triompher !  
(V.iii.1648-54)<sup>26</sup>

Corneille creates a picture of a saint in a spiritual, life and death struggle, torn between God and the world, where the world disguises itself as both desire for virtue and virtuous desire. Pity, responsibility, conjugal love, evangelistic enthusiasm, and God's work can be marshaled to combat God.

Finally, along with the technical challenges of generating plot and developing a conflicted Christian hero, the author of a Christian martyrdom tragedy faced the challenge of making the Christian heart of the play emotionally moving to the audience. Again, this seems easy, automatic even. But given the unacceptable nature of pagan/Christian debate, the impossibility of a hero with significant inner doubts, and the necessary absence of staged torture scenes, the playwright was left to invent ways of making either an encounter with transcendence or transcendence itself appear deeply real and emotionally commanding. Moving the audience by the hero's Christian faith or by a sense of God's transcendent presence required the delicate transformation of a highly personal and internal religious experience into a public event and the representation of the immaterial and ineffable in a material and verbal medium.

Since desire of legitimate conjugal love and of honor and virtue becomes the inner antagonist in *Polyeucte*, then the death of desire reveals the Christian transformation of the hero, the passing of the "old man". This death of desire leads inevitably to the desire of death, an

unhesitating willingness to endure, for one's faith, the loss of all desirable worldly goods, life included. Death becomes desirable, a reward for faith, because the sanctified hero will care for nothing in life enough to make him fear or regret death.

Subsequent to his baptism, Polyeucte decides to tear down the pagan idols, "... mourir dans leur temple, ou les y terrasser" (II.vi.644).<sup>27</sup> Now the previously insistent Néarque hesitates ("Vous trouverez la mort" [655] and, later, "Vous voulez donc mourir?" [673])<sup>28</sup> while the previously hesitant Polyeucte insists ("Je la cherche [la mort] pour lui" [655] and "Vous aimez donc à vivre?" [673]).<sup>29</sup> How can one desire the things of this life when so much better awaits in the next life? The absence of the instinctual desire for life signals the reality of Polyeucte's encounter with God through his baptism.

Virtuous desire represents the world while the death of desire represents the Christian's participation in God's transcendent reality. This inversion of desire, this move from virtuous desire to the death of desire and the desire of death marks the Christian's sanctification and explains why Polyeucte must be dragged from the scaffold where his friend has just been executed and where Polyeucte longs to find his own death (III.v.1000).

In Act IV, the imprisoned Polyeucte prepares to confront Pauline for the first time since his baptism. Fearing her power over him, he prays for God's help. God's presence reveals itself precisely in Polyeucte's lack of desire.

Je la vois; mais mon coeur, d'un saint zèle enflammé,  
N'en goûte plus l'appas dont il était charmé;  
Et mes yeux éclairés des célestes lumières,  
Ne trouvent plus aux siens leurs grâces coutumières.  
(IV.ii.1157-1160)<sup>30</sup>

Nowhere is the nature of the double shift by which Corneille dramatizes religious transformation and martyrdom so clear as in the culmination of this impassioned confrontation between Polyeucte and Pauline. "Tu préfères la mort à l'amour de Pauline! (IV.iii.1287),<sup>31</sup> she accuses. "Vous préférez le monde à la bonté divine!" (IV.iii.1288),<sup>32</sup> he rejoins. The structural parallelism of these lines equates death with God and love with the world. Corneille configures God, the transcendent, the Other, as the ultimate negation of the world, the death of desire.

Indeed, it is so instinctive for living creatures to desire life (and thus to desire desire), that only divine intervention could explain a sane person's death of desire, shown in an insistent desire for death.

Polyeucte himself clarifies that his desire for death does not stem from a hatred of life but rather from the death of desire, from the absence of any loves stronger than the love of God who has called him to martyrdom.

Je ne hais point la vie, et j'en aime l'usage  
 Mais sans attachement qui sente l'esclavage,  
 Toujours prêt à la rendre au Dieu dont je la tiens...  
 (V.ii.1515-17)<sup>33</sup>

The saint can not care for life enough that it would hold him back from following God even unto death. And for those like Félix, with less than holy desires, salvation necessitates the death of desire. We accept Félix's final-scene conversion because we witness his abandonment of the ambition that has driven him throughout the play, because we see the death of his desire, because he willingly abandons the power and rank that he has worked so hard to conserve.<sup>34</sup>

Ne me reprochez plus que par mes cruautés  
 Je tâche à conserver mes tristes dignités ;  
 Je dépose à vos pieds l'éclat de leur faux lustre.  
 Celle où j'ose aspirer est d'un rang plus illustre...  
 (V.vi.1765-68).<sup>35</sup>

Desire helps hierarchize the virtue of the characters according to the object of their desire. The paranoid and overly ambitious Félix selfishly desires power and influence, represented by Sévère; Sévère desires the virtuous Pauline; Pauline desires her husband, Polyeucte; and Polyeucte, though torn by love of Pauline, desires God. The nobler and less selfish the object, the more we respect the character.

Yet desire, at least human desire, also functions as the great leveler. Desire weakens inner strength and robs all the characters of the capacity for autonomous action. At the beginning of the play, Polyeucte, faced with Pauline whom he hopes to avoid, freezes in helpless immobility.

Polyeucte: Elle revient

Néarque: Fuyez.

Polyeucte: Je ne puis.

Néarque: Il le faut ...

(I.i.103)<sup>36</sup>

The imperative of religious commitment (*Il le faut*) contrasts with man's impotence (*Je ne puis*) while the inevitable arrival of worldly temptation (*Elle revient*) highlights the vain and labored effort to avoid it (*Fuyez. Je ne puis*).

Pauline fears a similar immobility of will should she be forced to see Sévère, her "si puissant vainqueur" (I.iv.339). She knows her resolve will not survive the onslaught of desire and begs her father to allow her to avoid all contact with Sévère (I.iv.339-350). Desire melts even the resolve of the great warrior Sévère for whom the mere sight of the desired object overwhelms his determination to express no regrets to Pauline.

Sévère: Fabian, je la vois.

Fabian: Seigneur, souvenez-vous ...

Sévère: Hélas! Elle aime un autre, un autre est son époux.

(II.i.459-60)<sup>37</sup>

Vulnerability to the presence of the desired object, paralysis of will, and loss of autonomy inevitably accompany human desire and distinguish it from divinely inspired desire, and thus the saved from the unsaved. After Polyeucte's baptismal encounter with God, his hesitation and paralysis disappear. Clear of purpose, he rushes to destroy the temple idols, tries to join Néarque's martyred death, and welcomes his own execution. Both Félix and Pauline, when saved, experience this same affirmation of will and divine empowerment. "Je vois, je sais, je crois, je suis désabusée" (V.v.1727)<sup>38</sup> exclaims Pauline as she dares her father to execute her as well. Félix with new courage and clarity of mind, abandons his political machinations and also welcomes death. "Souffrez que je vous livre une vengeance aisée" (V.vi.1764).<sup>39</sup>

Corneille effects several metonymic transformations of the figure of desire in order to combine dramatic interest and Christian focus. Eliding desire and pain allows him to dramatize the progressive torture of his Christian hero without losing dramatic interest or offending

*bienséance*. Equating the world with virtuous desire allows him to portray a conflicted Christian hero with whom we can empathize, yet who retains our respect. Finally, configuring Christian purification or union with God as the death of desire, and thus the desire of death, allows him to dramatize transcendence and the hero's encounter with the divine. Corneille's solution to the dilemma of the Christian martyrdom tragedy is economical and ingenious, but it is also flawed because it works too well.

The audience can so easily identify with Polyeucte in his desire of his wife, in his desire to attain love and honor, in his desire to combine love for God with love of a life well-lived that his abandonment of those desires is intensely confrontational. Our own attachments to life and to desire are put in question if we choose to identify with Polyeucte, so it should come as no surprise that the majority of viewers, even in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, chose to gloss over Corneille's carefully elaborated presentation of Polyeucte's martyrdom. If the deeply religious found the play an indiscreet rendering of private religious thoughts, those who balanced their faith with life in the world, found the play overly morbid and morose. Polyeucte has typically been seen as shallowly human, rather than deeply religious. His religion has been seen as static, artificial, undramatic and audiences have turned instead to characters more recognizably human, more caught in the world of desire. Audiences have focused on Pauline and Sévère and the play has become the story of star-crossed lovers.

Corneille successfully centers the action on his hero's martyrdom, he develops the hero's deep inner conflicts, and he finds a way to dramatize transcendence; but because he makes martyrdom and the quest of transcendence central emotional points, he makes it potentially uncomfortable to identify with his hero. We so well understand desire, the figure he uses to shape his play, that we prefer to remain caught up in the human desires that drive our own lives rather than identify with a hero who puts them all in question.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>According to Madame de Sévigné, Madame la Dauphine's interest and enthusiasm focused on Pauline, not Polyeucte. "Eh bien! Voilà la plus honnête femme du monde qui n'aime point du tout son mari!" Quoted in Corneille, *Théâtre Complet*, éd. Maurice Rat, Tome II, p. 815.

<sup>2</sup> De Polyeucte la belle âme  
 Aurait faiblement attendri  
 Et les vers chrétiens qu'il déclame  
 Seraient tombés dans le décri,  
 N'eût été l'amour de sa femme  
 Pour ce païen son favori,  
 Qui méritait bien mieux sa flamme  
 Que son bon dévot de mari...  
 Quoted from Voltaire's *Épître dédicatoire to Zaire*, in Corneille,  
*Théâtre Complet*, éd. Maurice Rat,

<sup>3</sup> Even the 19<sup>th</sup> century critics, who first stressed the reality of Polyeucte's conversion experience, spent far more time discussing Pauline's love than the religious significance of the play (Fogel, 89).

<sup>4</sup> H. C. Lancaster notes about ten martyrdom tragedies for the commercial stage during this period. There are a few other tragedies with a Christian focus, but they do not involve martyrdom or, as is the case with d'Aubignac's *Pucelle d'Orléans* (acted 1640, pub. 1642), are more about national martyrdom than religious martyrdom. I am using "tragedy" in the mid-17<sup>th</sup>-century sense of a noble and serious drama involving life and death situations, not in the Aristotelian sense. Arguments for the irreconcilable nature of Christianity and Aristotelian tragedy have been carefully re-examined by Gene Fendt in a recent article in the *Christian Scholar's Review* (Spring, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Louis' 1641 edict gave such productions implicit royal permission, if not approval (Lyons, 123).

<sup>6</sup> "We shouldn't imagine that all good stories can successfully appear on stage, because often their beauty depends on some circumstance that the theater can't tolerate."

<sup>7</sup> The play was first produced in the winter season of 1641-42 (Lancaster, II: 320).

<sup>8</sup> This incident is related by Corneille's nephew Fontenelle (Corneille, *Théâtre Complet*, éd. Maurice Rat, Tome II, p. 1).

<sup>9</sup> Racine's successful religious plays were, it should be noted, written for Saint-Cyr and not for the commercial theatre. In the case of *Polyeucte*, Corneille's additional mixture of sacred themes with conventions from the chivalrous love plots of worldly drama would have surprised, if not shocked, audiences. Nadal notes that few martyrdom plays of the period mixed sacred and profane loves in the same character (Nadal, 189).

<sup>10</sup> At Corneille's first private reading of the play at the Hôtel de Rambouillet, the truly devout found the play an indiscreet rendering of intimate Christian thoughts. (Corneille, *Théâtre Complet*, éd. Maurice Rat, Tome II, p. 1).

<sup>11</sup> Ceux qui veulent arrêter nos héros dans une médiocre bonté où quelques interprètes d'Aristote bornent leur vertu, ne trouveront pas ici leur compte, puisque celle de Polyeucte va jusqu'à la sainteté, et n'a aucun mélange de faiblesse. (8) "Those who want to fix our heroes in a middling goodness at which some interpreters of Aristotle limit their virtue, will not find what they want here, since Polyeucte's (virtue) extends to saintliness, and has no element of weakness."

<sup>12</sup> This first solution is used in Desfontaines' *Saint Alexis* (1650), Mlle Cosnard's *Les Chastes Martirs* (1650) and De la Calprenède's *Hermenigilde* (1643). The second solution plays an important role in La Serre's *Le martyre de Sainte Catherine* (1643) and is used at points in Rotrou's *Le Véritable Saint Genest* (1645). The solution taken by most dramatists of overtly Christian plays, however, was to combine both these strategies and between non-Christian padding and Christian lyricism somehow eke out a plot. The majority of dramatists, of course, avoided these problems entirely by writing plays whose subjects were not sacred.

<sup>13</sup> "You do not know what a wife is and what rights she has over one's whole soul."

<sup>14</sup> "The pity that wounds me well becomes the noblest hearts and has

no weakness in it. A beautiful woman has great power, Néarque, over men like me: a man who doesn't fear death might dread disappointing her; and if I must confront cruel tortures, enjoy them even, delight in them, your God, whom I don't yet dare call mine, will give me the force to do so when he makes me Christian."

<sup>15</sup> Nous pouvons tout aimer, il le souffre, il l'ordonne ;  
 Mais à vous dire tout, ce Seigneur des seigneurs  
 Veut le premier amour et les premiers honneurs.  
 Comme rien n'est égal à sa grandeur suprême,  
 Il ne faut rien aimer qu'après lui, qu'en lui-même,  
 Négliger, pour lui plaire, et femme, et biens, et rang,  
 Exposer pour sa gloire et verser tout son sang. (I.i. 70-76)

<sup>16</sup> "Lord, what happened to your noble courage?"

<sup>17</sup> "Constancy is hard to practice at these moments; these kinds of hurts overwhelm a noble heart; the most masculine courage loses all strength ; and when hearts are captured by such a perfect love, death bothers them less than these kinds of shocks."

<sup>18</sup> "His courage is strengthened instead of crumbling..."

<sup>19</sup> "Charms", "delights" and "bonds of the flesh".

<sup>20</sup> "I feared your executioners less than her tears."

<sup>21</sup> "He is moved, I see him tears falling."

<sup>22</sup> "My choice is not doubtful."

<sup>23</sup> "But I see Pauline. O God!"

<sup>24</sup> "But, no matter what our love encourages me to do for you, I no longer know you, if you aren't a Christian."

<sup>25</sup> We can love all, he suffers it, he orders it; but in all honesty, this Lord of lords deserves our first love and our first honor...All other things must be loved after him, and in him.

<sup>26</sup> “After having twice tried threats, after having made me watch Néarque die, after having tried love and its effect, after having shown me that thirst for baptism to fight God with God’s own cause, now you band together! Oh! Deceits of Hell! Must I conquer you so many times before a final victory!”

<sup>27</sup> “to die in their temple or destroy them there...”

<sup>28</sup> “You will find death” and “Do you want to die?”

<sup>29</sup> “I am looking for it [death] for Him” and “Do you really like living?”

<sup>30</sup> “I see her; but my heart, on fire with a holy zeal, no longer finds in her the lures with which it was bewitched; and my eyes, enlightened with divine understanding, no longer find the usual charm in hers (her eyes).”

<sup>31</sup> “You prefer death to the love of Pauline!” Note the ambiguity of the second term which can mean Pauline’s love or love for Pauline.”

<sup>32</sup> “You prefer the world to the goodness of God!”

<sup>33</sup> “I don’t hate life, I love the use of it but always without any attachment that feels like slavery, always ready to give it back to God from whom I received it.”

<sup>34</sup> Polyeucte speaks of having a new ambition, greater than the ambition for perishable worldly power (IV.iii.1188-92).

<sup>35</sup> “Don’t reproach me any longer because by my cruelty I tried to hold on to my pathetic honors; I lay at your feet the flash of their false glory. The glory I dare aspire to is of a nobler rank...”

<sup>36</sup> “Polyeucte: She returns. / Néarque: Flee. / Polyeucte: I can’t. / Néarque: You must.”

<sup>37</sup> “Sévère: Fabian, I see her ... / Fabian: Lord, remember ... / Sévère: She loves another, another is her husband.”

<sup>38</sup> "I see, I know, I believe, I am undeceived."

<sup>39</sup> "Allow me to provide you easy vengeance." Although it could be Sévère's heart that is calmed by this imagined vengeance, these lines also suggest that Félix himself feels a new calm now that his soul is not driven by a desire for life that leaves him always anxious and fearful.

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