

Mysticism and Politics in Pierre Corneille's *Polyeucte*

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Abstract

Corneille's Polyeucte seeks an answer to the question of Christian identity and tries to define the relationship between religion and political power. Often read as a mystical play, Polyeucte is in fact a political play that captures the passage of Christianity from the spiritual movement of a minority to a politicized entity. Christianity learns and appropriates from Rome its political culture to become eventually the dominant world civilization.

Although the literary career of the playwright Pierre Corneille paralleled the rise of the absolutist government in seventeenth-century France, it is no accident that a dozen of his plays are set in ancient Rome. The Roman civilization offered the ideologues of the absolutist state models of military glory, civic heroism, and moral rigor (Desmond 142, quoting Louis Herland). In his first plays on Rome, Corneille was so fascinated with the classical subject matter that he adapted and used it as a metaphor for his contemporary France. In fact, the play *Horace* (1640) assured him the protection of Cardinal Richelieu, the builder of the French absolutist state.

Corneille did not, however, fall into idolizing the Roman model. Indeed, his later plays questioned the value of that ideological paradigm for seventeenth-century France. *Polyeucte* is one of the dramas in which the author exposes the inhumanity of Rome in its imperialist design. To the ancient ideal of stoic virtue Corneille opposes a young, passionate Christianity that succeeds in shaking off Rome's imperialist grip. Often qualified as a mystical play, *Polyeucte* does not stage a private mystical assent to-

ward supernatural reality; rather it reenacts a conquest of the political space that the Christian minority achieves to overcome its marginalization.

As the plot unfolds, *Polyeucte* relates the rise of Christianity in Roman Armenia during the time of Emperor Decius (250 AC). The title character, Polyeucte, is an Armenian nobleman, married to Pauline, the daughter of Roman Governor Félix. Before their union, Pauline was in love with a Roman soldier, Sévère, who is believed to have been killed on the battlefield. Governor Félix did not want Pauline to marry Sévère given his low birth. At the inception of the play Pauline narrates her premonitory dream in which she saw Sévère return to Armenia and kill her husband. In fact, as it happens, Sévère is alive, and wants to see Pauline. He is no longer a simple soldier, but the emperor's favorite, thanks to his great deeds in the battlefield. The news of Pauline's marriage shakes his courage. In the meantime, Polyeucte, a recent convert to Christianity, in an outburst of religious fervor, destroys statues of Roman deities in the temple during a ceremony of sacrifice. He and his friend, Néarque, are seized by Roman guards and imprisoned. Félix wants to save Polyeucte's life, but the zealous Christian chooses to die. He is executed, and his death brings about Pauline's and Félix's conversion to Christianity. Sévère, who witnesses these happenings, expresses admiration for the Christian faith.

Polyeucte is not primarily a religious or mystical play, but a political one: it depicts the process of Christian self-determination within an absolutist state. As a disciple of the Jesuits, Corneille allies himself with the philosophical proponents of the active will.¹ According to this position, one must not only contemplate the reality of the world: it is necessary to discern the will of God by contemplative means and apply it to a concrete action. But there is always a possibility that this active will at work might become a rival to civil power's interests. Thus, Corneille's Christians have a strong need to show who they are in order to affirm their religious identity, and thereby assert their independence from civil authority. Moreover, through intransigence leading to martyrdom, Christianity insures its position within the body politic.

Because it is often seen as a Christian play, *Polyeucte* has provoked considerable controversy among commentators. Some prominent intellectuals of the twentieth century, such as Paul Claudel and Simone Weil, from whom one would have expected a favorable opinion on a play dealing with a Christian theme, strongly criticized *Polyeucte* for its deformed representation of Christian dogma. In his *Journal*, Claudel expresses

the following judgment on Corneille's play: "On voit une espèce d'énergumène qui se rue au baptême, puis à des actes ostentatoires que l'Eglise a toujours condamnés" (294) [We see a kind of nutcase who rushes to baptism, and then to ostentatious acts that the Church has always condemned]. Simone Weil was also very critical of the ways in which Corneille conceived early Christianity. In *The Need for Roots* she writes:

Corneille himself is an excellent example of the sort of asphyxia which seizes Christian morality when it comes to contact with the Roman Spirit. His *Polyeucte* would seem to us comical if habit had not blinded us. Polyeucte, according to his version, is a man who suddenly realizes that there is a far more glorious kingdom to conquer than any of a terrestrial kind, and that a particular technique exists for doing so. He immediately feels obliged to set out on this conquest, without giving a thought to anything else, and in the same frame of mind as when he used formerly to wage war in the service of the Emperor. (136)

What is striking in the criticisms of these two advocates of mystical inspiration is the conquering and alienating aspect of *Polyeucte's* religiosity. For Claudel and Weil, a deep theological reflection seems to be absent from the play. The title character displays an epic unspiritual enthusiasm for his deeds. Thus, to a great degree, *Polyeucte* is a variant on *Horace*, an earlier play by Corneille whose protagonist exemplifies a complete surrender to the state's interests. In *Polyeucte's* Christian hero one finds the very same blind service to a cause with little consideration for socio-political decorum. Claudel and Weil disregard, however, the importance of the political dimension for Christianity that for Corneille is of crucial importance.

On the other hand, the prominent Corneille scholar Serge Doubrovsky fixates solely on the political content in Corneille's work and offers a rather reductive reading of *Polyeucte*. For Doubrovsky, the Christian setting is a mere reflection of the historical context of the time during which Corneille wrote. In his study of Corneille's dramaturgy, he claims that *Polyeucte* is not a Christian play because "le projet héroïque est, par nature, antichrétien" (225) [the heroic project is anti-Christian by nature]. I argue that this is not necessarily true. In fact, *Polyeucte* is a play about Christian heroism. Heroic Christianity might not be attractive to Doubrovsky's twentieth-century sensibility, impregnated as it is with the ideology of French

“laïcité,” but a militant wing has always been present within Christianity regardless of its particular denomination and assured its survival in face of political repression and persecutions.² Corneille shows how Christianity in contact with Roman culture adapts some of the latter’s military techniques in order to insure its survival. He is struggling to reconcile a new ideological context with an old form. My reading of *Polyeucte* approximates that of Michel Beaujour, who has explained the necessity of violence in the play as a part of the providential design to which Corneille subscribed (448). For Beaujour, the revolutionary acts of Corneille’s Christians convey an eschatological perspective in which Christian rebellion leads ultimately to the advent of a “monarchie de droit divin,” that is a monarchy invested by God’s grace. While I believe that grace is omnipresent in the process of Christian liberation in the play (for example, grace sustains the Christians’ struggle for their rights), it does not sanctify the establishment of the absolutist monarchy, as Beaujour has it. Corneille—an astute connoisseur of the French political scene—portrays the burgeoning of a political compromise (which in Corneille’s language is sometimes rendered by the term “accommodement”).³ As a consequence, conversion of the opportunist governor Félix is less a sanctifying miracle than a calculated political maneuver in face of the empowered Christian faction.

Thus *Polyeucte*, an essentially political play, epitomizes a blending of Christian humility with Roman conquering virtue which Christianity needs in order to gain legitimacy within the political arena. In this confrontation between the state’s interests and the rebellious forces within it, the state loses; it is no longer capable of containing rebellion within the sphere of its political sovereignty. Christian martyrdom and epic heroism are artfully blurred at the conclusion of the play; courage countervails humility and sets a model of behavior for the future. The conversion of the opportunist Roman governor and his daughter to Christianity announces the rise of a new political entity: the Christian state.

When referring to heroism Corneille employs in his plays the term *générosité*. This concept derives from the Roman virtue of *pietas*, which, during Cardinal Richelieu’s government in the early seventeenth century, was the ideological foundation of French absolutism. The virtue of *générosité* implied a complete surrender of one’s aspirations to the common good represented by the state. However, after Richelieu’s death, Rome’s preeminence as a universalist cultural paradigm for France appears to have been no longer acceptable; it began to be seriously questioned by the

intellectual elite of the country.

As the Corneille scholar Simone Dosmond (151) has remarked (quoting Robert Brasillach), after Richelieu's death Corneille's interests shifted to the representation of the rise of Christianity and nationalism, two currents that challenged the Roman state's imperialist manifest destiny. In the post-Richelieu plays, *générosité*, the virtue at the heart of absolutism, turns against the institution of the state, its own sponsor: it begins to give way to a passionate struggle against certain exclusionary tactics, against ways of effacing the presence of social and religious diversity. In the "Examen" of *Nicomède*, one of the post-Richelieu plays that stage rebellion against Rome's policy in the conquered territories (in this particular case, in Bythinia), Corneille underscores the fact that virtue is not reserved to native Roman citizens. "[La grandeur du courage] ne veut point d'autre appui que celui de sa vertu, et de l'amour qu'elle imprime dans les coeurs de *tous les peuples*" [The grandeur of courage does not want any other support than that of its own virtue and of the love that it imprints in the hearts of all peoples] (in Stegmann 520; emphasis mine). Yet virtue alone appears not to be enough for the opponents to the Roman domination; they strive for more than for virtue in itself. The attitude of those who oppose Rome's assimilating campaign becomes "grandeur du courage," which combines "vertu" and "amour." As the etymology of the word indicates, "courage" derives from "coeur," meaning "heart." This passionate transformation of *générosité* is found among the rebels of the province of Bythinia whose Roman-like virtue becomes infused with love of country. Under pressure from the rebellious forces within the body politic led by Nicomède, the son of the local king, Rome will have to redefine its policy toward those who refuse to surrender their particular interests to the demands of the state.

We find an analogous situation in *Polyeucte* where the state is no longer able to impose its absolute will; it has to negotiate with the rebels. *Polyeucte* portrays Christianity as an unbridled passion whose power countervails dedication to the priorities of state. The play enacts a rejection of Roman political and cultural assimilation in the colonized provinces. Christianity, a spiritual movement, displaces the purely political entity of the Roman state by borrowing its structures and infusing them with a zeal that the Roman spirit was lacking. In fact, *Polyeucte's* *générosité*, enflamed by a fresh Christian zeal, transcends allegiance to the state and renders homage to a new authority—the Christian God and his community of worshippers.

The rise of Corneille's protagonists above their ethnic and religious minority status elevates them into a powerful political faction within the body politic. How does the plot illustrate this process? In the search for his new Christian identity, the character of Polyeucte is defined by the dialectic of two figures: conquering hero and humble martyr. At the beginning of the play, Polyeucte expresses apprehension caused by his wife's dream in which she saw her former beloved Sévère return and kill her husband. Néarque, Polyeucte's friend who helped the protagonist to convert, reminds Polyeucte that he is as much a soldier as a Christian and therefore there should be no room for such fear in him: "Et ce coeur tant de fois dans la guerre éprouvé / S'alarme d'un péril qu'une femme a rêvé!" (I. 1. 3-4) [And this heart of yours so often proved in battle is halted by a woman's dreams!⁴]. Néarque reprimands Polyeucte by saying that he is a war hero for whom meekness of heart is inappropriate. The advice of the Christian Néarque shows the predominantly martial character of his faith. When in the next tirade he explains to Polyeucte the mystery of divine grace, his description of the working of grace evokes the urgent language of the battlefield circumstances. Such a view of grace indicates the assimilation of Roman stoic virtue by the Christian character. However, this foundation of Roman virtue grants the Christians the power they need to resist attacks from the repressive forces of the state. To be experienced and embraced, grace requires the same readiness and discipline as does military virtue. A delay in responding to it gives advantage to the enemy: "Après certains moments que perdent nos longueurs, / elle [la grâce] quitte ces traits qui pénètrent les coeurs, / [...] Tombe plus rarement ou n'opère plus rien." (I. 1. 31-32; 36) [After a span, our fumbling may let slip / Grace's shafts that touch men's hearts may lose their grip / So that the holy zeal ... loses these traits that affect our hearts, more rarely falls, or no more has effect].

The persuasive power of Néarque's words has an immediate effect on Polyeucte. When, after Sévère's arrival in Armenia, the Romans conduct a religious ceremony, Polyeucte sees in this occasion an instance of divine grace that will allow him to confirm his fresh Christianity. He decides to disrupt the ceremony and destroy the Roman gods: "Allons mon cher Néarque, allons *aux yeux des hommes* / Braver l'idôlatry, et *montrer qui nous sommes*" (II. 6. 645-6; emphasis mine) [Come, my dear Néarque, come in all men's sight/ Brave idolatry and show who we are]. Polyeucte's profession of faith takes the form of an epic war cry. His attitude shows a great deal of the ostentation of which Paul Claudel was so critical. But the reason

for this ostentation lies in the ambiguity of Polyeucte's feelings about Christianity itself. On the one hand, Polyeucte appears to accept that he is a Christian and that this implies a private relationship with the deity. On the other hand, his virtue rooted in the Roman heroic tradition, privileging the public sphere, makes it impossible for him to remain "private." The purpose of his clamorous "montrer qui nous sommes," therefore, is to thrust Christianity into the political life of the community. By his acts stimulated by Roman virtue, Polyeucte contributes to the transformation of a spiritual movement into a political force that is only partially concerned with theology. Thus we observe the rise of an awareness on Polyeucte's part that an unconditional submissive attitude will not be enough to gain political significance. Christians must display force in order to countervail the annihilating power of the state.

Louis Marin has shown the importance of the representation of force in early modern literature (19-21).⁵ Power creates the possibility of exercising action over someone or something. It does not necessarily signify action since its function is often limited to a representation of the potentiality of force. *Polyeucte* stages a manifestation of this power and its eventual outbreak directed against the authority of the state. The ascendancy of the Christian minority leads to an uprising illustrating the natural tendency of force to evolve into absolutism. Marin's analysis of the ineluctable evolution toward absolutism also sheds light on Christian martyrdom's evolution into civic heroism in the play. Polyeucte's exhortation to destroy the deities in the temple results in a surprising self-identification. While willing to detach himself from the Roman tradition of *générosité*, Polyeucte reconnects with a heroism that stresses the importance of the rhetorical dimension of heroic deeds. Violence triggered by the hero himself awards him the status of a martyr. Thus, rhetorically, heroism and martyrdom appear to be the two poles of a chiasmus: a heroic act can be represented as an act of martyrdom, and vice versa.⁶ However, Polyeucte displays ambiguity in his behavior. The ostentatious nature of his acts contrasts with the humility that one would expect from a martyr, and yet the reality of the political situation requires him to act violently. His faith is no longer private: his acts speak for the entire Christian community of Armenia.

To reach both sainthood on the theological plane and heroism on the political level, Polyeucte must blend vulnerability and superhuman strength. He attains sainthood through an empowerment acquired through Néarque's influence and his own knowledge of Roman virtue. Before the

desecration of the temple, Polyeucte's zeal reaches a point where it surpasses his teacher Néarque's heroic self. In a sense, Polyeucte's zeal represents the *générosité* that characterizes Horace in fighting for Rome's cause. At the beginning, Néarque had to help Polyeucte overcome doubts inspired by Pauline's dream. Now, Néarque is obligated to temper his friend's eagerness: "Ce zèle est trop ardent, souffrez qu'il se modère" (II. 6. 653) [Your zeal is too rash, temper it a little]. As the scene between the two friends unfolds, Polyeucte's heroic enthusiasm takes possession of Néarque as well. Néarque repents for his moment of weakness:

Vous sortez du baptême, et ce qui vous anime,
C'est sa grâce qu'en vous n'affaiblit aucun crime.
Comme encore tout entière, elle agit pleinement,
Et tout semble possible à son feu véhément,
Mais cette même grâce, en moi diminuée,
Et par mille péchés sans cesse exténuée,
Agit aux grands effets avec tant de langueur
Que tout semble impossible à son peu de vigueur.
Cette indigne mollesse et ses lâches défenses
Sont des punitions qu'attirent mes offenses.
Mais Dieu, dont on ne doit jamais se défier,
Me donne votre exemple pour me fortifier. (II. 6. 693-704)

[You've just been baptized; what is spurring you
Is Heaven's grace, no sin has compromised;
Still in full spate it sweeps restraints away,
And all seems possible to its high flood;
But this same grace, diminished in my soul
And ever weakened by a thousand sins,
Is so enfeebled in its efficacy
That everything appears beyond its strength.
This craven sloth, these cowardly prohibitions
Are punishments my sins have brought on me;
But God, on whom we ever should rely,
Gives me your example to strengthen me.]

The grace received in baptism resembles *générosité*. Its working stimulates heroic deeds rather than contemplative composure. It can be identified with force ("Dieu [...] me donne votre exemple pour me fortifier") [God... gives me your example to strengthen me].

In this scene Polyeucte is firm (in a state of grace), and Néarque is hesitant. Nevertheless, through the example of Polyeucte's zeal, Néarque too receives grace and concludes his tirade by exhorting Polyeucte to action: "Allons, cher Polyeucte, allons aux yeux des hommes / Braver l'idolâtrie, et montrer qui nous sommes" (705-6) [Come, my dear Polyeucte, come in all men's sight/ Brave idolatry and show who we are]. We notice that Corneille has Néarque repeat exactly the same words that Polyeucte used at the beginning of the scene. This rhetorical device conveys a possibility of emulative effect that Polyeucte's self-sacrifice will likely have on the Christian community. Thus, the action of grace upon human beings manifests itself by the action of men who promptly respond to their inner desire in order to expand the glory of God, which does not prevent them from maximizing their personal fame. Fame, inspired by grace, has the power of an exemplar that confers a sense of identity and emulation upon the entire Christian faction.

Inspired by Néarque's words, Polyeucte proclaims within the temple the superiority of the Christian faith over Pagan "idolâtrie." In his speech, he contrasts the multiplicity of Pagan deities of wood and stone to one God whose attributes are highly significant: "De la terre et du ciel est l'absolu monarque, / Seul être indépendant, seul maître du destin, / Seul principe éternel, et souveraine fin" (reported by Stratonice to Pauline, III. 2. 842-4) [Both of heaven and earth he is absolute monarch, sole divine Being, Lord of fate and sole eternal principle and sovereign goal]. The God of Polyeucte and Néarque has absolute qualities. The resemblance between the Christian deity and absolute kingship is remarkable. Both royal and divine authorities require total subordination from their subjects. At first glance, it seems that there is no trace of anthropomorphism in the Christian God's attributes. His traits are beyond the human limitations if compared to adulterous and incestuous Jupiter ("L'adultère et l'inceste en étaient les plus doux" [839] [Adultery and incest were the least of his vices]). In fact, however, Polyeucte's God is designed on the model of an absolute monarch. From a theological perspective, this comparison may be questionable. But as a rhetorical device, God as "seul maître du destin" [sole master of fate] has a definite appeal for virtuous individuals. The rhetoric of the divine borrows the language of the heroic to make Christianity comprehensible to a public raised on heroic images. One may debate whether this is a weakness of the religious argument in the play or its strength.

As Jacqueline Lichtenstein has suggested, Corneille's theater "re-

flects” or mirrors the absolute monarchy, affirming its values; and, at the same time, it “reflects” upon the state, that is, it offers a theoretical meditation on the nature of power (82).⁷ Corneille’s drama can therefore be seen as an expression of political theory. The playwright takes his subject matter from the life of the court but does not merely copy the observed reality: he transforms it into a lesson in how to act prudently in the political realm. And the court, on the other hand, contemplates the political and philosophical message of the play and learns from it how to govern prudently over the polity. By the same token, Corneille shows how the Roman Empire “presents” early Christianity with ways of expanding and exerting its political will. In this fashion, Polyeucte’s ostentatious Christianity “reflects” the political reality of Rome. It emulates the Roman civil power and gives it a theological dimension. As the divine and the profane overlap in the representation of acting in the world, the dramatist’s depiction of God’s absolute power and the absolute monarchy have many features in common. *Polyeucte*’s Christianity shifts the depository of absolutism from the realm of the state to the domain of religion. In this fashion, the state’s ideological tool (“les rois veulent être absolus....”) [kings want to be absolute] becomes an ideological instrument for militant Christians. Its theological dimension enables the Christian faction to surpass the transience of the state’s absolutism. By showing what a truly “eternal rule” is, Corneille’s play challenges the institution of absolutist kingship and, at the same time, affirms it by adopting and adapting its value system.

Polyeucte is a voice of its author in favor of a “political” Christianity that has not only a presence in the body politic but actually exercises its civil power ideologically. Corneille shows that if the civil power does not embrace Christian teachings, the conflict becomes a necessity. The state that does not share the Christian ideal will try to marginalize and destroy its proponents. In that case, the only option left to Christians is a struggle that does not preclude military confrontation. In the process, individual sacrifice might rise to the status of an exemplar that will exercise on the community the power of emulation. Corneille seems to be suggesting that the building of the Kingdom of God on earth is a continuous striving toward a compromise, an “accommodement” to the imperfect fallen world that aspires to reach beyond its transient condition. When grace stops operating in polities dulled or silenced by sin, the rhetorically powerful figure of the martyr and hero, such as Polyeucte, can bring renewal to the community.

NOTES

¹ On Corneille's affiliations with the Jesuit doctrine, see Marc Fumaroli's Chapter II, "Corneille et la Compagnie de Jésus," in *Héros et Orateurs* 64-208.

² The history of Europe is filled with examples of Christian non-pacifism: the response to the Muslim threat during the Middle Ages; the Christian encounter with Islam in the Iberian Peninsula; and the colonial expansion of European Christians beyond Europe from the sixteenth century on.

³ For example, we find the term "accommodement" used in *Le Cid* in the exchange between l'Infante et Chimène when l'Infante tries to persuade Chimène to compromise, to which Chimène replies "Les accommodements ne font rien en ce point" (II. 3.463).

⁴ My translations of *Polyeucte* are adapted from Samuel Solomon's translation in Pierre Corneille, *Seven Plays*, New York: Random House, 1969.

⁵ "Une force n'est force que par annihilation et, en ce sens, toute force est, dans son essence même, *absolue*, puisqu'elle n'est telle que d'anéantir toute autre force, que d'être sans extérieur, *incomparable*" (Marin 1981, 20).

⁶ Timothy Hampton has demonstrated the complexity of the character of Svenno in *Jerusalem liberata*. He has shown how Svenno, a Danish prince, rises from a glory-seeking, wandering knight to an ideological icon of the Counter Reformation (111-133). Svenno's initial ambiguity is neutralized by his death which grants him the aura of martyrdom.

⁷ Louis Marin has also suggested that there is rhetorically a chiasmus-like interdependence between the representation of power and the power of representation (1981, 8-9). Hence one could see in Corneille's play a representation of Christianity in its rise to the status of an institution, yet, at the same time, this representation exercises a powerful influence in determining the view of Christianity in the historical context in which the play was performed.

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