

## Polyeucte's God

Marching boldly and joyfully to martyrdom, Polyeucte, hero of Pierre Corneille's first Christian tragedy Polyeucte, hardly appears as a humble, gentle follower of Jesus Christ. Like his Cornelian predecessors Don Rodrigue and Horace, this saint suggests, by his aggression and fearless zeal, that he seeks more to satisfy his pride and amour-propre through extraordinary deeds of courage than to fulfill a duty. Indeed, he never considers how he might bring Christ's message of hope and joy to his own people or even whether his defiance of imperial authority will compromise "cet ordre social . . . dont, de par son sang royal, il devait être le gardien."<sup>1</sup> Launching himself on the heroic quest at the first opportunity, he espouses the cause of Christianity because Jesus' promise of salvation to the faithful would accord him the "more permanent expressions or manifestations of his générosité"<sup>2</sup> that he so desires. As Claude Abraham states, "he may strive for heaven but only because there is a bigger and better glory there. . . ."<sup>3</sup> For Polyeucte, martyrdom is simply the best way to enshrine his own name in everlasting glory, and to his last breath, he will rejoice in his own triumphs, not God's, as Serge Doubrovsky well notes: "La 'palme' de Polyeucte, ce sont les 'trophées' d'Horace, mais avec une garantie éternelle. En mourant pour son Dieu, Polyeucte meurt donc exclusivement pour lui-même."<sup>4</sup> His eyes fixed on the splendor of his heavenly triumph, the martyr displays a self-assurance and a self-centeredness in his earthly trial that proves he is neither a staunch dévot who wishes to inspire his wife and father-in-law by his example,<sup>5</sup> nor a jealous husband who hopes to distinguish himself as a hero in his wife's eyes.<sup>6</sup> This saint's self-sacrifice should really be viewed as an act of self-adoration, and as

such, represents a betrayal of the fundamental teachings of Jesus Christ. The hero Polyeucte is in fact the contrary of the true Christian saint.

But how does this martyr, who dies for himself and not the Christian God, envision the Lord whom he professes to love? Does the image of the New Testament Christ ever touch his heart? Or does he call upon a harsh and demanding deity, the Jehovah of the Old Testament or even a pagan divinity, in order to justify his deed and bolster his courage before the scaffold? In other words, what sort of God has this neophyte embraced?

The question of Polyeucte's God has not hitherto been the subject of a thorough study. Some critics, passing quickly over the issue of the deity, have declared that the martyr has no understanding of the Christian faith. For example, Serge Doubrovsky describes Polyeucte's God as the perfect hero: ". . . Dieu, c'est le héros cornélien qui se met soudain à exister, le projet héroïque irréalisable qui se réalise" (Doubrovsky 242). Bernard Dort's opinion is similar:

Dieu n'est pas, pour Polyeucte, le Dieu chrétien, ce Dieu qui s'est fait homme. Son Dieu, ce n'est que le Roi, mais sublimé: un Auguste infini. Une pure image de Gloire. Le répondant absolu de la Gloire de Polyeucte. Une idole de Gloire à laquelle il n'est que de se sacrifier pour participer à la Gloire.

R. J. Nelson takes an even sterner view, declaring that the saint sees ". . . his God more in the terms of a militant pagan divinity than in those of the merciful, compliant, self-sacrificing Savior. . ." (Nelson 103).

Other critics have, however, seen the presence of a Christian deity in Corneille's tragedy. Antoine Adam, for instance, believes that Polyeucte is inspired to heroism by a great God of love:

Dieu n'est ni l'objet d'une pure adhésion intellectuelle ni l'auteur de préceptes et de formules. Il est amour, et objet d'amour. Il est une vie qui s'offre à l'âme, la pénètre, la transforme, l'élève à des hauteurs inconnues. Il est enthousiasme et ferveur. Il est le digne objet, le seul digne, de ces âmes héroïques et jeunes que Corneille avait peintes avec tant de complaisance et de bonheur. Mieux qu'une femme, mieux que la patrie, mieux que l'humanité, Dieu offre à l'homme généreux des raisons de servir, de se donner, de se dépasser.

Joseph Pineau suggests that Polyeucte's view of the divinity actually evolves in the course of the tragedy. The defiant hero adores at first a "suzerain suprême, semblable aux rois des temps classiques,"<sup>9</sup> who, like a "maître légaliste et avare" (Pineau 538), offers salvation only to His most prompt followers. This is certainly not the Christian God, but then, in Pineau's estimation, Polyeucte is really no more Christian than his Lord, since he only wants to join the élus so that he can be assured of "un bonheur qu'il ne veut pas laisser échapper" (Pinaud 538). Indeed, the martyr seems more interested in his heavenly reward than the service of Christ: "Le lien d'amour qui l'unissait au maître suprême est lui-même oblitéré par l'attente de la récompense promise" (Pinaud 542). However, Pineau believes that the saint finally meets the New Testament God and makes a true conversion to Christianity when he sees the reflection of love in Pauline's tearful eyes: "la

reconnaissance du 'conjugal amour' anime au coeur de Polyeucte l'image du Dieu qui aime l'homme" (Pinaud 549).

With so many differing opinions on the subject of Polyeucte's God, who, being claimed to favor martyrs, stands as perhaps the most crucial figure in the tragedy, a thorough study of the textual references to the divinity would seem to be in order so as to enable us to discern the true nature of this deity of heroes. Is it possible that the neophyte, whose emotions are battered from the pressures exerted by his friend Néarque, his wife Pauline and his father-in-law Félix, does not always see God in the same way? Could it be that he never truly evolves toward one image, but under the strain of his heroic quest, fluctuates between two deities--one loving and the other stern? To shed new light on this problem, we shall trace Polyeucte's religious development throughout the play, noting his attitudes toward the divinity from his pre-baptismal discussion with his mentor Néarque to his imprisonment and final confrontation with the pagan family who opposes his convictions.

The question of the nature of the deity arises in the very first scene of Act I wherein the Christian Néarque and his friend Polyeucte are engaged in a passionate discussion on divine will and grace. While affirming God's goodness, Néarque warns the catechumen not to delay baptism, since those who are slow to obey soon lose His favor. Like the orthodox Catholics of Corneille's age, he stresses that divine grace is a gift to be treasured as it may be offered only once:<sup>10</sup>

Et Dieu qui tient votre âme et vos jours  
dans sa main,  
Promet-il à vos vœux de le pouvoir demain?

Il est toujours tout juste, et tout bon,  
    mais sa grâce  
Ne descend pas toujours avec même efficace.  
Après certains moments que perdent nos  
    longueurs,  
Elle quitte ces traits qui pénètrent les  
    coeurs,

.....

Et cette sainte ardeur qui doit porter au  
    bien  
Tombe plus rarement, ou n'opère plus rien.<sup>11</sup>  
    (I, i, 27-32, 35-36)

Although insistent on his devotion to God, Polyeucte does not readily accept this view of the deity. Concerned for Pauline (who has foreseen in a dream her husband lying dead at the feet of her former lover Sévère), he feels that "pour satisfaire un juste et saint amour, il peut un peu remettre et différer d'un jour le baptême" (I, i, 51-52). Thus, the young convert who expresses trust in God's understanding, would seem to profess a faith in the compassionate Christ of the Gospels.

Néarque, however, does not hope in divine mercy, and, distressed by his friend's reluctance to heed the will of his Lord, launches into an even more passionate tirade. He warns the catechumen first of the devil's wiles and then of God's rejection of those who are incapable of absolute devotion:

Dieu ne veut point d'un coeur où le monde  
    domine,  
Qui regarde en arrière, et douteux en son  
    choix,  
Lorsque sa voix l'appelle, écoute une  
    autre voix.

(I, i, 69)

Yet Polyeucte still has his doubts. When he innocently asks "Pour se donner à lui faut-il n'aimer personne?" (I, i, 66-68), Néarque must once again reiterate the necessity for total submission:

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 sup-  
rême,  
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)

In fact, it is not until Pauline, the pagan enemy to his salvation, has made her entrance that Polyeucte consents to follow Néarque. However, the decision for immediate baptism does not mean that the neophyte has truly accepted his mentor's God. A fully committed convert would surely declare his desire for the sacrament, fervently proclaiming the teachings of his faith, but Polyeucte's apparent unease before his wife would seem to indicate that his flight to baptism is precipitated more by fear of appearing weak before the stern Néarque than by a yearning for grace. It is thus likely that the catechumen is still somewhat confused about the nature of the divinity. But even if he has actually embraced Néarque's God, his attempt to delay baptism out of pity and conjugal devotion suggests that it was not a harsh God who inspired him to the Christian

faith. In questioning the necessity of exclusive devotion, Polyeucte has implied that he was seeking to serve a benevolent and charitable deity. Le Dieu terrible is literally forced upon him.

The neophyte's perspective changes dramatically, however, after the baptism. Apparently fully converted to Néarque's God, he longs to prove his zealous devotion and to that end urges his mentor to join him in the destruction of the temple's idols so that they may both gain paradise through prompt martyrdom. But in Act II, the tables are turned, for it is now Néarque who hesitates in divine service while his determined friend preaches the dangers of delay.

At first Polyeucte, who ardently desires to display his heroic valor through this daring act, tries to convince Néarque by exalting the glory of martyrdom. When his friend reminds him that "dans ce temple enfin la mort est assurée" (II, vi, 661), the young hero retorts that "dans le ciel déjà la palme est préparée" (II, vi, 662). Thus, Polyeucte, who extols suffering and sacrifice, would seem to embrace a militant divinity who must be appeased by blood.

Unlike Polyeucte, Néarque is not dazzled by the martyr's crown. In fact, his horror of execution causes him to abruptly change his concept of the deity. Far from evoking a God who favors only his most ardent followers, he states that the Lord prefers his people to humbly and patiently await His call: "Il suffit, sans chercher, d'attendre et de souffrir" (II, vi, 659). Furthermore, he declares that salvation is won "par une sainte vie" (II, vi, 663). Néarque now believes that it is forbearance in trials and tribulations that will make us worthy of our celestial reward. His words suggest that in his heart, he really worships, as

did Polyeucte in Act I, a patient, understanding God who does not require so bold a service as self-inflicted martyrdom. Indeed, this Christian even doubts the value of martyrdom, for he states that his friend's life might be more profitable than his death to the persecuted sect: "Ménagez votre vie, à Dieu même elle importe: / Vivez pour protéger les chrétiens en ces lieux" (II, vi, 670-671). After the dogmatic tirades of the opening scene, Néarque is at last able to reveal that there is more to the Christian life than swift response to grace. Charity, humility and patience all play an important part in the matter of salvation.

No less adamant than Néarque was in the first scene of Act I, the proud Polyeucte confidently continues his march to martyrdom. When his mentor remarks that "Dieu même a craint la mort," (II, vi, 683), Polyeucte trounces this argument by echoing the speech wherein Néarque had evoked the image of a God who demands the ultimate sacrifice:

Il faut (je me souviens encor de vos  
paroles)  
Négliger, pour lui plaire, et femme et  
biens et rang,  
Exposer pour sa gloire et verser tout son  
sang.

(II, vi, 686-688)

Néarque is herein reminded that the God he gave Polyeucte favors only those daring enough to brave death. He has virtually no choice now but to capitulate in turn and join his friend in the destruction of the pagan gods. The image of the militant divinity has persuaded him as it persuaded Polyeucte.

After the assault on the temple, Néarque is



promptly executed and Polyeucte is sent to prison to await his sentence. However, the bold martyr has not yet uttered his last words on the nature of his God. In his last hours on earth, his reactions to his fate and his remarks to his loved ones will give us further insight into his relationship with the God for whom he will die.

Although still firm in his religious devotion, the Polyeucte we see at the beginning of Act IV is indeed a different man than the one who urged Néarque to choose martyrdom. Dreading to face his beloved wife from whom death shall soon separate him, the young Christian launches into a mystical and lyrical monologue in which he rejects the "[h]onteux attachements de la chair et du monde" (IV, ii, 1107). But the most remarkable aspect of these painful stances is Polyeucte's attempt to bolster alone his courage. Never once in his long tirade does the martyr actually address his God, as Joseph Pineau well notes:

Jamais le martyr cornélien n'entre-voit dans sa méditation le Dieu au visage humain, et la prière qui termine les stances n'est pas l'élévation de son âme vers ce Dieu personnel; elle n'oriente le coeur que vers un univers de jouissances mal définies. . . (Pinaud 542).

R. J. Nelson also comments on Polyeucte's strange attitude:

Yet, as he recites there his famous stances, one is struck not by the submissiveness to God but by the tone of regal power with which Polyeucte transcends the charms of this world and glories in those of the other. . . (Nelson 124).

This determined and desperate effort to renounce the world without praying for guidance and strength suggests that the saint may not really believe after all in the militant divinity. Selfish and proud, Polyeucte is merely attempting to renew his courage, for, having set himself on a path for honor and glory, he cannot turn back without tarnishing his image as a heroic martyr. It would thus seem that this neophyte is actually trying to block out the image of the God he knows in his heart in order to satisfy his ambition. His inability to pray to the deity who demands sacrifice is perhaps the best indication of his true religious attitude.

After mentally preparing himself for his march to the scaffold, Polyeucte appears once again as the bold and arrogant hero seeking the glory of martyrdom. Indeed, when Pauline comes to his cell, he sharply asks the intention of her visit so as to frighten her away by his fortitude:

Madame, quel dessein vous fait me demander?  
Est-ce pour me combattre ou pour me secon-  
der?

Cet effort généreux de votre amour parfaite  
Vient-il à mon secours, vient-il à ma dé-  
faite?

Apportez-vous ici la haine ou l'amitié,  
Comme mon ennemie ou ma chère moitié?  
(IV, iii, 1161-1166)

Continuing in this haughty manner, Polyeucte vaunts his ambition and exalts his martyrdom before the enemy to his salvation, Pauline. It is noteworthy, however, that Polyeucte, in defending his intentions, says little about his God. Even when his wife poses the question "Quel Dieu," (IV, iii, 1215), he gives no clue as to the nature of

his Lord, merely denouncing the pagan divinities that she worships. While he praises God for allowing him to find eternal renown in so glorious a death as martyrdom ("Les bontés de mon Dieu sont bien plus à chérir: / Il m'ôte des périls que j'aurais pu courir," IV, iii, 1225-1226), the saint does not attempt to acquaint Pauline with the deity he serves. As Han Verhoeff points out, "Polyeucte abandonne vite ses tentatives de convertir Pauline."<sup>12</sup> Once again, his refusal to call upon a militant divinity suggests that in the depths of his heart, he worships a God of love and mercy.

Further evidence of Polyeucte's faith in a benevolent divinity can be found at the end when the determined young hero, his heart suddenly touched by his wife's tears, drops momentarily the shield of stubborn resolve that was his defense against those who opposed his cause. His emotions reeling, the vulnerable saint loses sight of the militant deity and actually speaks of the God he knows in his heart. Praying that divine grace will open the eyes of his pagan wife, he declares that "Ce Dieu touche les coeurs lorsque moins on y pense" (IV, iii, 1276). Thus, when the hero forgets himself, his faith in the New Testament Christ is finally revealed.

The scene does not conclude however with any further elaboration on Polyeucte's true God, for Pauline's stirring command "Quittez cette chimère, et m'aimez" (IV, iii, 1279), puts the saint back on the defensive. In a passionate verbal jousting match with Pauline, who deplores his aveuglement, the young martyr exalts the path he has chosen. Yet, although Polyeucte does not mention again the bontés of his Lord, it is significant that never once during this heated debate does he justify his actions with reference to God. Furthermore, even

the arrival of Sévère, the representative of pagan Rome, does not incite him to invoke divine wrath. Throughout the entire scene with Pauline and Sévère, he makes no profession of faith to a harsh and bloodthirsty divinity. It therefore appears doubtful that the saint is inspired by such a deity. While pride prevents him from relinquishing the heroic quest for the love of Pauline--and Jesus Christ--Polyeucte at least acknowledges in his heart a God of love.

Polyeucte's appearance before Félix represents but another confrontation with an enemy who bars the way to paradise. Anxious to attain celestial glory, the saint does not fear arousing the governor's anger by proudly embracing martyrdom. Indeed, since attachment to a father-in-law is hardly as profound as that to a wife, his determination is not weakened by emotion. Indifferent to Félix's expressions of distress over his sad fate and distrustful of his professed interest in Christianity, Polyeucte maintains the emotional equilibrium necessary to remain faithful to his goals. With Félix, he never weakens enough to reveal a merciful God. In fact, his only allusion to the Christian deity is his stern warning of the Last Judgment. All will be judged by God, including the Roman governor:

N'en riez point, Félix, il sera votre juge,  
Vous ne trouverez point devant lui de re-  
fuge,  
Les rois et les bergers y sont d'un même  
rang,  
De tous les siens sur vous il vengera le  
sang.

(V, ii, 1527-1530)

In this passage, Polyeucte gives once again the impression that he worships a cruel divinity whose

wrath will descend on all those who do not serve Him. As with Néarque in Act II, scene vi, the young hero uses this image to force an issue, here his sentencing to a glorious death. However, as we have seen before, this is not Polyeucte's true God. Such will be evident in his last confrontation with Pauline.

Fearing to lose his courage in another emotional scene with his wife ("Mais j'aperçois Pauline./ O ciel! [V, ii, 1579-1580]), the martyr fends her off cruelly, first by ordering her to wed Sévère and leave him to his fate, and then by denouncing the pleas of his pagan family as but "ruses de l'enfer" (V, iii, 1653). However, even in this last stand for martyrdom, Polyeucte is moved enough by his wife's tears and protestations of love to speak of divine love and thus allude to his true God. While stating that the earth and heavens tremble before Him, the saint admits that the Christian God loves the children for whom His Son died:

Je n'adore qu'un Dieu, maître de l'univers,  
Sous qui tremblent le ciel, la terre, et  
les enfers,  
Un Dieu qui, nous aimant d'une amour infinie,  
Voulut mourir pour nous avec ignominie,  
Et qui par un effort de cet excès d'amour,  
Veut pour nous en victime être offert  
chaque jour.

(V, iii, 1657-1662)

Unfortunately, Polyeucte does not expand upon this image of his God. With the fire of martyrdom still burning in his heart, he goes on to denounce vehemently the pagan deities and to reaffirm his rebellious stand. At the end of his patience,

Félix finally condemns his son-in-law. Through defiance, the martyr has at last attained his goal. He has offered his life in what seems to be a ritualistic sacrifice to a bloodthirsty divinity.

Must we conclude from Polyeucte's bold last words and his stubborn dedication to his own glory that he has rejected in the end Christ in favor of a militant deity who will reward his daring? Who, then, is the real God of this selfish saint?

Considering how Polyeucte and Néarque have swayed between a harsh Lord and a loving one, their images of the divinity depending on their emotional state, it seems unlikely that Polyeucte ever truly worshiped an Old Testament Jehovah or a pagan deity. Motivated primarily by pride in his quest for martyrdom, the saint actually dies in adoration of his militant self, not a militant God. Thus, the image of the harsh divinity should be regarded as a psychological ploy used by Néarque and Polyeucte for persuasive purposes. When heroic resolve crumbles in a moment of vulnerability, the martyrs reveal that they have indeed placed their faith in a benevolent deity.

Yet, although he worships the Christian God, Polyeucte is truly a paradoxical Christian saint as he himself rejects the Christian virtue of love. To the end, he shows little compassion for Pauline, thus proving to the detriment of Pineau's hypothesis that he has not made a full commitment to the religion of love. Polyeucte is really an immature Christian, having never been able to resolve the conflict between his desire for heroism and his adoration of the Christ of the Gospels. His stumbling block is, of course, his pride, which makes him wallow in self-love rather than devote himself generously to his fellow men.

Thus, his march to the scaffold cannot be considered as an imitation of the Crucifixion, since the martyr, thinking only of his celestial reward, does not offer his life for the sake of humanity. While the saint may worship Christ in his heart, he understands virtually nothing of the doctrine of the New Testament.

While Polyeucte never gives a firm profession of faith in the Christian God, Corneille does not allow us to remain perplexed about the deity into whose kingdom the martyr has now entered. It is indeed significant that in the last scene God Himself intervenes in the human drama with a miracle that truly manifests His love: the offer of saving grace to Pauline and Félix. Although it may appear ironic that the pagans who abhorred Christianity are freely blessed while the martyrs had to seek out their God, striving to please Him through baptism and sacrifice, Corneille may well have chosen this unusual dénouement in order to proclaim his own faith in divine mercy. Essentially this last scene is a great Te Deum, a scene in which the love of God transcends all thoughts of punishment and retribution. Polyeucte's Lord has surely proven that He is compassionate and merciful. The martyr's heartfelt instincts were right.

Let us recognize then that the saint, though he lost sight of the Christian God in his quest for glory, at least acknowledges Him in his heart. The other divinity was but a means to an end.

Since the martyrdom of Polyeucte and the Te Deum of the last scene were witnessed by Sévère, the representative of imperial authority, this study of the divinity in Polyeucte might best be completed by a brief examination of this hero's religious beliefs as they are expressed in the scenes

immediately preceding and following his rival's execution. Indeed, even the Roman who came to make a sacrifice to the gods of his people will not remain untouched by the new faith, his words and actions revealing that he too has come to sense the presence of Polyeucte's God.

Although religion is the central issue of the tragedy, the Roman warrior's attitudes toward the deity--Christian or pagan--are not established until the latter scenes of the play. Indeed, Sévère, from his first entrance, appears as but another of the amants gallants of précieux literature. Faithful and tender, he worships Pauline as his supreme goddess, declaring: "je viens sacrifier, mais c'est à ses beautés/ Que je viens immoler toutes mes bontés" (II, i, 371-372), and is so broken-hearted by her affirmation of love for Polyeucte that he resolves to seek death in battle, "Si toutefois, après ce coup mortel du sort,/ Il a de la vie assez pour chercher une mort" (II, ii, 559-560). Devastated by the tragedy of lost love, Sévère will ponder nothing but his own grief until he undergoes a profound spiritual transformation that will at last open his heart and mind to the realm of the divine and to the fate of those who worship the Christian God.

The turning point for Sévère comes at a dramatic moment in Act IV when Pauline begs her astonished lover to save her husband. Although shaken at first by her request, the Roman's eyes are opened to the lofty concept of grandeur d'âme by his servant Fabian's callous mockery of Pauline and her "ingrate famille" (IV, vi, 1387). Incited to equal the martyr in noblesse d'âme, Sévère consents to protect his rival and in so doing makes the leap to heroism, a heroism more admirable than Polyeucte's, as he is motivated less by pride than by pity and charity. While he does want to prove



his worth to Pauline, declaring to Fabian that he seeks "la gloire de montrer à cette âme si belle/ Que Sévère l'égale et qu'il est digne d'elle," (IV, vi, 1393-1394), it is not mere vanity that prompts him to act magnanimously. Indeed, if winning Pauline's esteem were all that mattered, the prominent young warrior would save only Polyeucte and not risk his future by extending his favor to the entire Christian sect. But Sévère, through his spiritual evolution, has come to realize that true noblesse d'âme is manifested through absolute and unselfish devotion to a good cause, and so he displays his générosité to the most abject people of the empire, the state enemies, the persecuted Christians. Extolling their virtues (as the proud and ambitious Polyeucte never did), the Roman lets his benevolence shine through in a promise of allegiance:

Enfin chez les chrétiens les mœurs sont  
innocentes,  
Les vices détestés, les vertus florissantes,  
Ils font des vœux pour nous qui les persécutons,  
Et depuis tant de temps que nous les tourmentons,  
Les a-t-on vus mutins? les a-t-on vus rebelles?  
Nos princes ont-ils eu des soldats plus fidèles?  
Furieux dans la guerre, ils souffrent nos bourreaux,  
Et lions au combat, ils meurent en agneaux.  
J'ai trop pitié d'eux pour ne les pas défendre.

(IV, vi, 1435-1443)

The irony of this situation is that the pagan,

upon giving up his goddess Pauline, becomes--without the gift of grace that was necessary for Polyeucte and Néarque--a saint with a soul more resplendent than theirs, his mercy and charity being the noblest of Christian virtues. Thus, without knowing it, Sévère is really serving the Christian God, for he exemplifies, through his love for suffering humanity, the very essence of Jesus' teachings.

Sévère's situation becomes even more ironic when one considers his role in the last part of the play. Through his audacious promise to champion the cause of the Christians (see IV, vi, 1443), his condemnation of the Roman governor (see V, vi, 1755-1758), and his pardoning of the converts Pauline and Félix (see V, vi, 1803-1807), the young warrior ascends to kingship, supplanting Décie as the monarch by assuming the royal functions of judge, conciliator and law-giver. But a ruler of Rome would also have the duty of upholding the state religion, especially since the emperor was accorded the status of a demi-god. Sévère, however, who views with skepticism the divinities of his people (see IV, vi, 1419-1434), who refuses to condemn the enemy religious sect, and who promises to incorporate the Christians into the kingdom, actually betrays his own station. Perhaps the greatest miracle of this play is that the demi-god of Rome and Reason<sup>15</sup> comes to forge a strong link with the Christian God who would bless, probably more than Polyeucte's martyrdom, his dream of social harmony--a dream which will lay the foundations for the kingdom of God on earth. Indeed, as Michel Beaujour has well noted, it is up to such men as Félix and Sévère to carry out God's plan, since Polyeucte has done nothing to further the Christian cause amongst his brethren, and has, in his rashness, actually risked destroying the social order:

Le miracle de la conversion de Félix est nécessaire à la permanence de l'ordre temporel. Il remet sur ses fondations l'édifice de l'état menacé par la sainte folie de Polyeucte, et l'intervention même de Sévère qui s'exprime ici en porte-parole, en conseiller écouté de l'empereur, est garante de cette véritable révolution politique. . . (Beaujour 446).

And so, in a curious reversal of the natural hierarchy, Sévère emerges as the true Christian of the play, being superior to Polyeucte in both virtue and deed. Surely Corneille's God of mercy will not hesitate to grant him salvation.

In conclusion, it would seem that the Christian deity is known instinctively to both the martyr and the pagan. Although Polyeucte is blinded by self-love and Sévère has not yet fully seen the light of divine grace, we contend that Polyeucte is a profoundly Christian tragedy which illustrates a sincere faith in the teachings of Jesus Christ. Thus, the benevolent God of the New Testament truly appears to be the God of Polyeucte, Sévère--and Pierre Corneille.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Michel Beaujour, "Polyeucte et la monarchie de droit divin," French Review 36 (1963): 445.

<sup>2</sup> R. J. Nelson, Corneille: His Heroes and Their Worlds (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1963) 106.

<sup>3</sup> Claude Abraham, Corneille (New York: Twayne, 1972) 74.

<sup>4</sup> Serge Doubrovsky, Corneille et la dialectique du héros (Paris: Gallimard, 1963) 251.

<sup>5</sup> See Gérard Sthème de Jubécourt, "Polyeucte est-il chrétien ou maître de soi, comme le veut Serge Doubrovsky," L'Esprit créateur 13 (1973): 196-203.

<sup>6</sup> See W. S. Brooks, "Polyeucte's martyrdom--une autre explication," Modern Language Review 72 (1977): 802-10.

<sup>7</sup> Bernard Dort, Pierre Corneille dramaturge (Paris: l'Arche, 1957) 55-56.

<sup>8</sup> Antoine Adam, Histoire de la littérature française au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle (Paris: Domat, 1956) I: 538.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Pineau, "La Seconde conversion de Polyeucte," Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France 75 (1975): 539.

<sup>10</sup> W. S. Brooks clearly sums up the Catholic and Jansenist theories of grace: "The seventeenth-century orthodox Catholic view of grace was, broadly, that it is effective provided its recipient merits it by responding to it, but that if

he resists it or defers his response to it, it becomes weaker and weaker until eventually, having ceased to merit it, he ceases to be a recipient of it. . . . The Jansenist view was that a man is unable to choose of his own free will whether to accept or reject grace, in short, that grace is irresistible" (803-04). Furthermore, Kosta Loukovitch presents a solid argument against a Jansenist influence in Polyeucte in his L'Evolution de la tragédie religieuse classique en France (Geneva: Slatkine, 1977) 238-69.

11 Pierre Corneille, Oeuvres complètes, ed. André Stegmann (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1963). All references to Polyeucte will be from this edition.

12 Han Verhoeff, Les Grandes tragédies de Corneille: une psycholecture (Paris: Lettres modernes, 1982) 63.

13 Attacking superstition and promising justice and religious freedom, Sévère might be seen as a precursor of the roi-philosophe of the Enlightenment. Indeed, Gordon Pocock states that with Sévère ". . . we feel a breath of cool air from the eighteenth-century. . . ." (Corneille and Racine: Problems of Tragic Form [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973] 72).

