

## MANIPULATING MARTYRDOM: CORNEILLE'S (HETERO)SEXUALIZATION OF *POLYEUCTE*

Since its creation in the season of 1641–42, Pierre Corneille's martyr-play *Polyeucte* has generated widely differing interpretations, more so than any other work by the playwright. The debate that first surfaced among Corneille's contemporaries, focusing on the orthodoxy of the tragedy's central theme of martyrdom, still continues to divide critical opinion. Thus, André Gide confidently asserts that *Polyeucte* 'se comporte en révolutionnaire bien plutôt qu'en chrétien', whereas Henry Carrington Lancaster observes the contrary: 'if [*Polyeucte*] disobeys the emperor, it is not because he is politically rebellious'.<sup>1</sup> In common with other portrayals of martyrs, some commentators have cast the tragedy's hero as a dubious manifestation of a suicidal fanatic, while others have detected a Christian apologia for the doctrine of grace.<sup>2</sup> This long-standing and ongoing discussion centring on problematic theological implications has tended to overshadow other aspects of the tragedy. The combination of the religious and sexual tensions that underpin the work, particularly with respect to the representation of friendship and marriage, is an essential factor contributing to the play's originality. Corneille's martyr creation is radical in its presentation of a sexualized saintly hero, a fact best illustrated by comparing details in *Polyeucte* with those presented in any of the sizeable number of martyr tragedies that had already appeared in Paris and the provinces in the preceding four decades.<sup>3</sup>

Corneille distinguishes himself from other martyr dramatists through his selection of an obscure martyr, one whose details would not be readily known to spectators, and a saint who is not even mentioned in the *Legenda Aurea*.<sup>4</sup> This is not the case with other martyrs dramatized until that point, typically

This article is based on a paper presented at the 'Sex and the Sacred' conference organized by the Department of French Studies at the University of Manchester on 25 March 2002. I am grateful to Michael Hawcroft for his comments and advice on a number of points discussed here, and to Richard Maber for drawing my attention to the 1643 frontispiece. My thanks go to the staff at the Catholic Central Library, London for their assistance in locating information about the Quattrocchi beatification.

<sup>1</sup> André Gide, *Journal 1939–1949: souvenirs*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 104 (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), p. 92 (journal entry of 12 August 1941); Henry Carrington Lancaster, *A History of French Dramatic Literature in the Seventeenth Century*, 5 vols (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1936), II, 323.

<sup>2</sup> Serge Doubrovsky views *Polyeucte* as a headstrong glory-seeker whose death is a means to achieving immortality (*Corneille et la dialectique du héros* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), p. 251). Gérard S. Jubecourt discusses the conflicting judgements of the play in 'Polyeucte est-il chrétien ou maître de soi, comme le veut Serge Doubrovsky?', *L'Esprit créateur*, 13 (1973), 196–203. Two notable studies, both written by clerics, assert the dominance of the work's Christian perspective: Jacques Calvet, '*Polyeucte* de Corneille: étude et analyse' (Paris: Éditions de la Pensée Moderne, 1932), and Julien-Eymard d'Angers, '*Polyeucte*, tragédie chrétienne', *XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, 75 (1967), 49–69.

<sup>3</sup> For a corpus of the martyr-play in seventeenth-century France, see P. Scott, 'Resistance Theories, Orthodoxy and Subversive Drama in Early Modern France', *Seventeenth-Century French Studies*, 21 (1999), 57–73 (pp. 67–70).

<sup>4</sup> Corneille observes: 'Saint Polyeucte est un Martyr, dont, s'il m'est permis de parler ainsi, beaucoup ont plutôt appris le nom à la Comédie qu'à l'Église' ('Abregé du martyre de S. Polyeucte écrit par Simeon Metaphraste, et rapporté par Surius', in Pierre Corneille, *Polyeucte martyr: tragedie* (Paris: Antoine de Sommerville & Augustin Courbé, 1643), sig. [ē2]). Unless otherwise stated, all references to the play will be taken from this edition, and original orthography has been reproduced, save for i/j and u/v, which have been resolved throughout to conform to modern usage.

the familiar characters of popular veneration such as Catherine and Eustace. This provides the obvious advantage of allowing authorial manipulation, and the extent of this is demonstrated in the 'Abregé', where a synopsis of the original legend is detailed. Corneille acknowledges his source as the tenth-century author Simeon Metaphrastes, whose work was revised by the late sixteenth-century hagiographers Surius and Mosander.<sup>5</sup> It is striking that Corneille's paraphrased narrative of Polyeucte's martyrdom bears scant resemblance to the plot of the subsequent tragedy, and John Cairncross does not exaggerate when he notes that 'in chalking out his plan, Corneille started with the substantial advantage of having invented almost all the details. No other tragedy of his owes so little to his sources.'<sup>6</sup> The original account highlights the intensity of the friendship between Polyeuct and Nearchos, with the latter fearing persecution 'non pour la crainte des supplices dont il estoit menacé, mais pour l'apprehension qu'il eust que leur amitié ne souffrit quelque separation ou refroidissement' ('Abregé', sig. [ē3]<sup>r</sup>). Significantly, Pauline, Polyeucte's wife, only merits a passing reference when her father delegates her to implore her husband to recant his new faith.<sup>7</sup> This version of Polyeuct's death has little in common with Corneille, who, after providing this account, adds:

Voila en peu de mots ce qu'en dit Surius. Le songe de Pauline, l'amour de Severe, le baptesme effectif de Polyeucte, le sacrifice pour la victoire de l'Empereur, la dignité de Félix que je fais gouverneur d'Armenie, la mort de Nearque, la conversion de Félix et de Pauline, sont des inventions et des embellissemens de Theatre. ('Abregé', sig. [ē3]<sup>v</sup>)

These are more than cosmetic amendments, for these seven details are crucial constituents of the drama. This effective reinvention of the legend is a justifiable enterprise in Corneille's eyes, since, as he explains in the *Examen*, saints' tales are only worthy of 'une croyance pieuse'.<sup>8</sup> The meticulous reference to his sources, and the admission of the remoulding of the story, do not provide any evidence as to the motives behind these changes. Corneille endeavoured to design a martyr-hero who conformed to his personal conception of sanctity, which arguably did not see any incongruity between physical love and religious fervour.

The passionate friendship shared by Polyeuct and Nearchos in Metaphrastes and other sources is diluted in the tragedy. While Néarque does encourage Polyeucte towards his conversion, it is his wife's dream that propels him to make the final, irrevocable commitment to faith. Polyeucte emerges as the dominant force of the pair, a portrayal that destroys any notion of equality, the essential cement of perfect friendship. David Halperin points out that heroic male comradeship excluded any hint of subordination on the part of one friend

<sup>5</sup> Laurentius Surius's revised account may be found in Zacharias Lippeloo, *Res gestae illustrissimorum martyrum, confessorum atque sanctarum virginum*, 4 vols (Cologne: Henry Falckenburg, 1594–6), 1 (1594), 125–31 (9 January).

<sup>6</sup> John Cairncross, 'Polyeucte: A Flawed Masterpiece', *Papers on French Seventeenth-Century Literature*, 17 (1982), 571–90 (p. 575).

<sup>7</sup> '[P]our dernier effort il lui envoie sa fille Pauline, afin de voir si ses larmes n'auroient point plus de pouvoir sur l'esprit d'un mary, que n'avoient eu ses artifices et ses rigueurs' ('Abregé', sig. [ē3]<sup>v</sup>).

<sup>8</sup> 'Examen de Polyeucte', in *Le Theatre de P. Corneille, Reveu et corrigé par l'Auteur*, 3 vols (Paris: Guillaume de Luyne, 1660), II, pp. xc–xcviii (p. xcii).

to another.<sup>9</sup> The fear that homosexual relationships could undermine traditional notions of hierarchy is a deep-rooted and recurring theme throughout history. In this connection, it is interesting that John Boswell argues that Polyeucte's legend presents an ideal of comradeship capable of varied readings:

Although the point of the story was manifestly to appeal to Christians in the face of Roman persecution, it may have evoked particular enjoyment for those sensitive to romantic relationships (or special friendships) with a party of the same gender, particularly since both men were soldiers, and there was a widespread and ancient Hellenistic connection between homoeroticism and the military. In Metaphrastes' version, Polyeucte is specifically said to have embraced death for love of Nearchos.<sup>10</sup>

Boswell suggests that, to certain readers, the original tale could serve as a positive marker of sexual difference. Corneille's alterations certainly strengthen the heterosexual element, and the pairing of the two men is ruptured. This raises the question of the dramatist's awareness of possible subversive readings of the source account. Sexual identity was not recognized or formulated during this period and there is an understandable reluctance to refer to homosexuality when identifying sexual behaviour before the nineteenth century. This has occasionally led some commentators to approach early modern sexuality with undue caution, yet 'the historical specificity of the concept [of homosexuality] should discourage us from applying it to previous centuries but not from investigating connections between sexual acts and sexual relations in premodern times'.<sup>11</sup> Traditional areas of male exclusivity such as close friendship, mentoring, and patronage, together with institutions like the military and academia, all had obvious erotic potential.<sup>12</sup> Mario DiGangi notes how 'Early modern representations of male intimacy reveal a multiplicity of possible social configurations, erotic investments, and sexual acts.'<sup>13</sup> The religious dimension of the source does not necessarily preclude such interpretations, as authorities as respectable as St Ælred of Rievaulx had recognized the possibility of monastic friendships assuming physical expression.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to the ambivalence of representing the nuances of homosocial

<sup>9</sup> 'Sexual love, at least as it is viewed within the cultural horizons of the male world, is all about penetration and therefore all about position, superiority and inferiority, rank and status, gender and difference. Friendship, by contrast, is all about sameness: sameness of rank and status, sameness of sentiment, sameness of identity' (David Halperin, 'How to Do the History of Male Homosexuality', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 6 (2000), 87–123 (p. 101).

<sup>10</sup> John Boswell, *The Marriage of Likeness: Same Sex Unions in Pre-Modern Europe* (London: HarperCollins, 1995), p. 145.

<sup>11</sup> *Homosexuality in Early Modern France: A Documentary Collection*, ed. by Jeffrey Merrick and Bryant T. Ragan (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. x.

<sup>12</sup> 'Within the network of male social bonds, many men evidently found emotional satisfaction in a passionate relationship with another man which they did not find with women. Construing those relationships, and interpreting the ways in which they were represented in literature, leads us into areas where certainty is impossible, and indefiniteness actually seems to have important advantages' (Paul Hammond, *Love between Men in English Literature* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), p. 30).

<sup>13</sup> Mario DiGangi, *The Homoerotics of Early Modern Drama*, Cambridge Studies in Renaissance Literature and Culture, 21 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 12.

<sup>14</sup> Ælred of Riveaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, trans. by Mark F. Williams (Scranton: Scranton University Press, 1994), p. 35. Ælred's comments about monastic friendship need to be understood in the light of his view of friendship being divided into carnal, worldly, or spiritual (based on Aristotle's three kinds of friendship based in utility, in pleasure, and in virtue: *Nicomachean Ethics*, book 8). The writer saw true friendship as comparatively rare (p. 105). It has been alleged

relations, the discourse of friendship evolved during the course of the Renaissance.<sup>15</sup> Michel Foucault comments that from the end of the sixteenth century, intense or exclusive male companionship began to attract censure for its potential dangers.<sup>16</sup> Peter Burke maintains that the shift in the conventions and practice of friendship may be partly due to the growth of print culture and the resultant diffusion of works such as Cicero's *Laelius* (= *De amicitia*), which became more widely available through fresh editions and translations.<sup>17</sup> The subversive edge to particular friendships was enhanced by the ambiguity of close relationships that borrowed terms used of lovers: in contemporary texts, the vocabulary for the emotional intensity of love is not usually distinguishable from the terminology applied to passion generally.<sup>18</sup> In France, this was possibly a long-term legacy of the immense quantity of printed works forming part of the discourse of exclusion targeting Henri III and his wayward affections.<sup>19</sup> For some individuals, such treatises may have acted as potent reminders that there were like people in history: this awareness did more than diminish isolationism; it was a significant step towards group identification. This led to the development of identifiable homosexual subcultures in major European cities possessing their own styles of dress, speech, and geographical spaces.<sup>20</sup> This trend coincided with, and undoubtedly gave rise to, a growing critical discourse of special male friendships.

Cultural anxieties about the potential for the tragedy to be misread possibly

that Ælred's enlightened opinions testify to same-sex erotic preferences, a possibility explored by Brian P. McGuire, 'Sexual Awareness and Identity in Ælred of Rievaulx', *American Benedictine Review*, 45 (1994), 184–226, and in *Brother and Lover: Ælred of Rievaulx* (New York: Crossroad, 1994).

<sup>15</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick uses the term 'homosocial' to refer to 'social bonds between persons of the same sex', ties that she sees as potentially erotic (*Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 1).

<sup>16</sup> 'Je pense que, au xvi<sup>e</sup> et au xvii<sup>e</sup> siècle, on voit disparaître ce genre d'amitiés, du moins dans la société masculine. Et l'amitié commence à devenir autre chose. A partir du xvi<sup>e</sup> siècle, on trouve des textes qui critiquent explicitement l'amitié, qu'ils considèrent comme quelque chose de dangereux' (Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits 1954–1988*, ed. by Daniel Defert and François Ewald, 4 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), iv, 744).

<sup>17</sup> Peter Burke, 'Humanism and Friendship in Sixteenth-Century Europe', in *Friendship in Medieval Europe*, ed. by Julian Haseldine (Stroud: Sutton, 1999), pp. 262–84 (p. 265). Alan Bray and Michel Rey propose that male friendship was dangerous in seventeenth-century England principally because 'friendship was then a public relationship not the private and comforting relation the word is apt to suggest today' ('The Body of the Friend: Continuity and Change in Masculine Friendship in the Seventeenth Century', in *English Masculinities 1660–1800*, ed. by Tim Hitchcock and Michèle Cohen (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 65–84 (p. 65)).

<sup>18</sup> 'Le vocabulaire de la passion amoureuse n'est pas plus fixé que celui de la passion en général et les tentatives faites pour le préciser n'apportent guère de clarification dans le lexique' (Michel Bouvier, *La Morale classique*, Moralia, 3 (Paris: Champion, 1999), p. 170). Similar examples are to be found in Surlus, where Nearchos's affections towards his friend are phrased in powerful terms: 'His dictis Nearchus conceptam ardentissimi amoris flammam' (Lippeloo, *Res gestae*, 1, 126).

<sup>19</sup> A renowned example is [Jean Boucher], *Histoire tragique et memorable, de Pierre de Gaverston Gentil-homme Gascon jadis le mignon d'Edoüard 2. Roy d'Angleterre, tirée des Chroniques de Thomas de Walsingham, et tournée de Latin en François. Dediée à Monseigneur le Duc d'Espéron* ([Paris?]: n.pub., 1588). Boucher, rector of the Sorbonne, used the historical precedent of Edward II and Piers Gaveston as an allegory with which to attack Henri III and the duc d'Épernon. This work is notable for the numerous instances of word play of appropriated terms with established double meanings referring to same-sex acts.

<sup>20</sup> Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Christianity and Sexuality in the Early Modern World: Regulating Desire, Reforming Practice* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 87–88.

occasioned Corneille to rework the legend, particularly since the irreverent parodying of saints' lives was a feature of libertine writing of the 1630s and 1640s.<sup>21</sup> The apparent similarities between the sodomite and the masculine friend are manifestly not entertained at all in this martyr-play.<sup>22</sup> Sodomy was intimately associated with disorder and treason, and the carefully crafted political message of *Polyeucte* is not afforded any grounds in which to be compromised. The pro-absolutist agenda of the drama is summed up in Sévère's final advice to the survivors of the twin executions of Néarque and Polyeucte: 'Servez bien vostre Dieu, servez nostre Monarque' (l. 1804). The lack of a tyrant in the play, a direct authority figure who is defied, is a subtle yet substantial deviation from the usual martyr-play narrative. Through the setting in the remote outpost of Armenia, the action is distanced from Rome, and the absence of the person of the emperor allows the sovereign to remain a benign figure.<sup>23</sup> Polyeucte's mission is not disrupted by the distraction of a soul-mate. Moreover, it can be argued that the lack of passionate male friendship implies that such a relationship would sit uneasily with the marital state. Corneille was aware of same-sex desire since, as Michael Hawcroft points out, *Clitandre* contains 'a kind [of] love that prefaces, dictionaries, and other dramatists did not explicitly mention or depict.'<sup>24</sup> Given this sensibility, it can be inferred that the author modifies the spirit of Metaphrastes' narrative in order to extinguish any homoerotic reading between the lines. Jean Racine would later undertake similar alterations with *Britannicus* (1669), even though his source, Tacitus's *Annals*, explicitly describes a sexual relationship between Nero and Britannicus.<sup>25</sup> In these instances, both Corneille and Racine '[adopt] censorious strategies to please French audiences for whom the play was intended'.<sup>26</sup> This phenomenon is not confined to literature, for it can even be detected in the iconography of St Sebastian, with its obvious glorification of a sensual male body. During the early modern period, artists move away from depictions of a solitary semi-nude figure, often tended by masculine angels (as typified by Van Dyck and Procaccini), to a more ubiquitous portrayal of St Irene holding the soldier and treating his wounds (notably Georges de La Tour). In this manner, the martyr is referenced to a female companion, silently affirming his heterosexuality, though the scene is firmly desexualized by Irene's pose as *pietà*.

The loosening of the coupling of Polyeucte and Néarque does not signify that all erotic attachments are abandoned: sexuality is an integral part of the

<sup>21</sup> Maurice Lever, *Les Bûchers de Sodome: histoire des 'infâmes'* (Paris: Fayard, 1985), p. 106.

<sup>22</sup> 'Perhaps there is always a potential ambiguity about intimacy between men. It may be so. But in early modern England such intimacy was peculiarly ambivalent, for the protecting conventions that ensured that it was seen in an acceptable frame of reference were often absent by the end of the sixteenth century' (Alan Bray, 'Homosexuality and the Signs of Male Friendship in Elizabethan England', in *Queering the Renaissance*, ed. by Jonathan Goldberg (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1994), pp. 40–61 (p. 56). These comments seem equally applicable to seventeenth-century French society.

<sup>23</sup> Doubrovsky sees *Polyeucte* as a renewed attempt, after *Cinna*, 'Pour sauver le Monarque des vicissitudes du Temps et de l'Histoire' (*Corneille*, p. 321).

<sup>24</sup> Michael Hawcroft, 'Homosexual Love in Corneille's *Clitandre* (1632)', *Seventeenth-Century French Studies*, 15 (1993), 135–144 (p. 143).

<sup>25</sup> Roland Barthes, *Sur Racine* (Paris: Seuil, 1963), p. 93.

<sup>26</sup> Gregory Woods, *A History of Gay Literature: The Male Tradition* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 83.

play. First and foremost, the action is set only two weeks after Polyeucte's wedding, rather than a long-standing marriage of several years as in the standard sources. This means that the relationship is unambiguously sexual: this differs from Corneille's other plays, where a forestalled marriage is often the cause of underlying tensions in the main characters.<sup>27</sup> The newly united couple are in the first throes of sexual satisfaction: gratification has not yet ceded to domesticity. Furthermore, there are no children to emphasize the procreative nature of the union, in contrast to Metaphrastes' version, where it is specified that the couple had several offspring.<sup>28</sup> In fact, in one of the earliest versions of the martyrdom, Polyeuct declares that he would rather sacrifice his children for Nearchos's sake, so important is the genuine love the couple share for each other.<sup>29</sup> This seems to suggest that Metaphrastes engaged in selective editing in order to neutralize the extremity of passion presented in the earliest accounts of the martyred comrades; there is a shift of emphasis in Corneille, where Néarque encourages his friend: 'Negliger pour luy plaire, et femme et biens et rang' (l. 75). The fact that the married couple is childless makes *Polyeucte* unique among all seventeenth-century martyr-plays. One of the few martyr tragedies to deal with a married couple concerns the legend of Eustace and his wife Theopista, two versions of which were staged in Paris, by Baro in 1639 and Desfontaines in 1642.<sup>30</sup> In these two plays, teenage children accompany the couple, and the marriage is in a mature stage: the physical character is therefore mellowed. The only other example to be found in seventeenth-century theatre is that of St Cecilia and her husband Valerian, the subject of three seventeenth-century tragedies.<sup>31</sup> This tale hardly extols erotic pleasure, however, since the pair suffer martyrdom on their wedding day, and the partners have vowed themselves to marital chastity (in de Nîmes's version, Valerian reluctantly agrees to this unusual condition only after being threatened by Cecilia's guardian angel).

*Polyeucte* opens on a note of discord, Néarque expressing astonishment that Polyeucte is disturbed at the distress Pauline is experiencing after a vivid dream involving his safety. Immediately, a connection is constructed between the protagonist and his spouse, and male and female are positioned in relation to each other. Polyeucte adamantly refuses to countenance his companion's amazement:

<sup>27</sup> Mitchell Greenberg, *Corneille, Classicism and the Ruses of Symmetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 119.

<sup>28</sup> Lippeloo, *Res gestae*, 1, 129.

<sup>29</sup> 'Homélie inédite prononcée dans le dernier tiers du quatrième siècle à l'anniversaire du martyre de Saint Polyeucte', in B. Aubé, *Polyeucte dans l'histoire* (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1882), pp. 73–104 (p. 85). Boswell interprets and translates the concept of authentic love, τῆς φιλίας τῆς ἐλικρνοῦς, as 'absolute love' (*Marriage of Likeness*, p. 143).

<sup>30</sup> Nicolas-Marc Desfontaines, *Le Martyre de S' Eustache tragedie* (Paris: Toussaint Quinet & Nicolas de Sercy, 1643); Balthasar Baro, *Saint Eustache martyr, poëme dramatique* (Paris: Antoine de Sommaville, 1649).

<sup>31</sup> Nicolas Soret, *La Ceciliade ou martyre sanglant de sainte Cecile, patron des musiciens* (Paris: P. Rezé, 1606); Charles de Lignières, *Caecilia, virgo et martyr, tragoedia christiana* (Paris: C. Thiboust, 1657); Jean François de Nîmes, *Tragedie de Ste Cecile couronnée et en sa vie et en sa mort comme vierge et martyre* (Autun: Blaise Simonnot, 1662).

POLYEUCTE

Mais vous ne sçavez pas ce que c'est qu'une femme,  
 Ny le juste pouvoir qu'elle prend sur une ame  
 Quand apres un long-temps qu'elle a sçeu nous charmer  
 Les flambeaux de l'Hymen viennent de s'allumer.

(ll. 9–12)

Unlike his comrade, Polyeucte has tangible experience of the sexual and emotional facets of the opposite sex, and from the outset contrasts favourably with the virginal Néarque, who, in his claim on Polyeucte's affections, represents a male universe.<sup>32</sup> As such, he is also a symbol of misogyny.<sup>33</sup> Polyeucte now belongs with his wife, and his concern is for her welfare, though Corneille employs a device that is a feature of this tragedy: the audience is led to expect a different course of events, when Polyeucte avoids an interview with Pauline. As she arrives a little later, Néarque promptly encourages his friend to flee:

POLYEUCTE

Elle revient.

NÉARQUE

Fuyez.

POLYEUCTE

Je ne puis.

NÉARQUE

Il le faut,  
 Fuyez un ennemy qui sçait vostre defect,  
 Qui le trouve aisément, qui blesse par la veuë,  
 Et dont le coup mortel vous plaist quand il vous tuë.

(ll. 103–06)

It appears that Néarque is attempting to put their friendship back onto its original footing: the relationship the former comrade-in-arms enjoyed until the marriage. Néarque's attitude towards the flesh, and particularly towards Polyeucte's evident enjoyment of his responsibilities as a husband and lover, was shared by a consensus of (Catholic and Reformed) moralists in early modern Europe, who, following the writings of St Augustine, branded pleasurable marital intercourse as adulterous.<sup>34</sup> In the mid-seventeenth century marriage was

<sup>32</sup> 'The new creed that Polyeucte ardently desires to embrace is just as ardently held beyond his grasp by his own sexual pleasure. Christianity, as it is represented by Néarque, takes on the coloration of an exclusively male community, or at least of a community which must, in essence, oppose the contamination of heterosexual indulgence' (Greenberg, *Corneille, Classicism and the Ruses of Symmetry*, p. 122). Randy P. Conner is of the opinion that homoeroticism is an integral feature of religious institutions, since homosexual men are attracted to sacral roles. See *Blossom of Bone: Reclaiming the Connections between Homoeroticism and the Sacred* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993).

<sup>33</sup> 'The heterosexual ventures towards an individual whose gender confines him within another world. The homosexual unites with an individual who does not lie beyond the divide which separates the world of men from the world of women. Hence the homosexual has a peculiar inward familiarity with what his partner feels' (Roger Scruton, *Sexual Desire: A Philosophical Investigation* (London: Phoenix, 1994), p. 283). These comments are interesting in the light of Néarque's inexperience with the opposite gender. Polyeucte, on the other hand, displays his heterosexual credentials from the start of the tragedy.

<sup>34</sup> Karen Newman, *Fashioning Femininity and English Renaissance Drama* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 19.

commonly held to be a tolerated remedy against lust, as well as for procreative purposes, though the Church firmly exalted celibacy above the married state. The Council of Trent had declared: 'If anyone says that the married state excels the state of virginity or celibacy, and that it is better and happier to be united in matrimony than to remain in virginity or celibacy, let him be anathema.'<sup>35</sup> Contentment was the preserve of the clerical caste, and Néarque's arguments had the infallible guarantee of patristic and conciliar authority: his misogyny is legitimized by theology.<sup>36</sup>

Polyeucte rushes off in haste, immediately after which Pauline talks of her former love, Sévère, a sign betraying her insecurity (I. 3). It is important to remember that she believes her past lover to be dead at this stage, and so the military figure is not constructed as a rival.<sup>37</sup> When Félix announces that Sévère is alive and about to arrive in Armenia, Pauline is horrified and is understandably reluctant to see him, for fear nostalgia might lead to long-forgotten feelings being rekindled. From this moment, Polyeucte and Pauline's marriage is seemingly under threat from both sides, from Pauline's past catching up with her, as well as the uncertainty of the implications of Polyeucte's newly adopted creed. When Pauline and Sévère meet in the second act, Pauline affirms her love for Polyeucte, and Sévère, despite his obvious distress, manages to remain composed, and bestows his blessing on the couple.<sup>38</sup> After he leaves, Pauline voices concern about Polyeucte's safety, referring to her dream: the meeting with her former beloved has served to reinforce her commitment to her husband. The underlying subtext of palpable tensions between the married couple is definitively resolved.

The anticipated sequence of events hinted at throughout the opening act of the play is turned on its head by the final act: Sévère does not prove to be a rival; Néarque does not wrench Polyeucte from his wedlock. Most importantly, the couple's relationship is restored. During the course of the tragedy, the neophyte's avoidance of his spouse, together with his zealous behaviour, implies that he has renounced the bonds of wedlock as incompatible with his new faith. When brought on stage to see Pauline prior to execution, he admits: '[. . .] Je vous ayme | Beaucoup moins que mon Dieu, mais bien plus que moy-mesme' (ll. 1279–80). This is a delayed response to Pauline's earlier declaration of fidelity in front of Sévère (l. 461). His marital love has been subsumed into divine love, and this has renewed it. On two occasions Polyeucte urges Pauline and Sévère to marry after his death. At first glance, this request appears callous, yet by this gesture Polyeucte reaffirms his duty of care towards his partner, publicly demonstrating his interest in the future welfare of Pauline.<sup>39</sup> This

<sup>35</sup> Session XXIV, Canon 10, *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, trans. and ed. by H. J. Schroeder (London: Herder, 1960), p. 182.

<sup>36</sup> On theological misogyny in both western and eastern spiritual traditions, see David D. Gilmore, *Misogyny: The Male Malady* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), pp. 79–97.

<sup>37</sup> René Girard argues that, in questions of rivalry between two active members of an erotic triangle, bonds of competitiveness and love are equally powerful and in many senses equivalent. See *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* (Paris: Grasset, 1961), particularly pp. 12–18.

<sup>38</sup> 'Puisse le juste Ciel content de ma ruine | Combler d'heur et de jours Polyeucte et Pauline' (ll. 564–65).

<sup>39</sup> W. S. Brooks has suggested that Polyeucte avoids his wife to diminish feelings of jealousy,

counsel is surely uttered without any genuine conviction that it will be followed. Sévère, the epitome of a seventeenth-century conception of nobility, would evidently not compromise his probity. Given Pauline's heightened sense of duty, it is unlikely that she would seek remarriage and betray her husband's memory. A widow enjoyed a certain status and a degree of independence in both Roman and early modern society, provided she did not seek another husband, as this was sometimes condemned as a sign of a lustful nature.<sup>40</sup> Moralists allocated much space in their works to arguments dissuading widows from a second marriage.<sup>41</sup> This had ancient precedents: in *Adversus Jovinianum*, St Jerome disparagingly casts remarriage as a step away from the brothel.<sup>42</sup> In 1645 Jacques Du Bosc, a writer otherwise known for his sympathy towards proto-feminists, held that remarriage was a form of adultery.<sup>43</sup> It is little wonder that Pauline instinctively reacts to the proposal with a suitable display of affronted indignation ('Tigre, assassine-moy du moins sans m'outrager' (l. 1583)).

The separation of the couple proves to be temporary, and Pauline is reunited to her husband in a particularly vivid fashion, a gentle nod from Corneille to the gore of provincial martyr-plays. Pauline rushes on stage spattered with the blood of her decapitated husband. She has been blooded, and the quasi-ritual of this baptism of blood is her conversion, as well as ensuring she will never remarry. There are sexual undertones to this scene, since the shedding of Polyeucte's bodily fluids achieves spiritual fulfilment in her. Even as late as the seventeenth century, it was a commonly held opinion that blood developed into semen (medical consensus tended to follow the Aristotelian imperfect male theory, asserting that the female body was too cold to perform this function).<sup>44</sup> Pauline is integrated into the Communion of Saints, and so the gulf between the couple is bridged as they form part of the same organism. As promised, his intercession ensures that the graces obtained by his sacrifice have been directed for Pauline's intention, and this is a world away from the death scene in Corneille's sources, where Polyeucte expires in front of Nearchos, uttering his name and extolling their fraternal unity.<sup>45</sup> Pauline is still empowered by the conjugal gaze of her husband, yet at the same time she has transcended that one-dimensional model of sanctity, the virgin martyr. Corneille invents a female saint whose behaviour does not rely on a stereotype: Pauline's ardent desire to embrace martyrdom is frustrated, and this representation differs from the usual fare of

'and in order to combat this, he attempts the opposite extreme of giving his wife to his rival' ('Polyeucte's Martyrdom—"une autre explication"', *MLR*, 72 (1977), 802–10 (p. 810)).

<sup>40</sup> *The Cultural Identity of Seventeenth-Century Woman: A Reader*, ed. by N. H. Keeble (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 252.

<sup>41</sup> Ian Maclean, *Woman Triumphant: Feminism in French Literature 1610–1652* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 94.

<sup>42</sup> Saint Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, in *Opera omnia*, ed. by J.-P. Migne, Patrologia Latina, 22, 3 vols (Paris: Migne, 1864–66), II (1865), 230–34 (book 1). Since Néarque seems inspired by Jerome's school of thinking, it is worth remarking that recent research has claimed that Jerome's misogyny is linked to his unresolved sexuality. See Virginia Burrus, 'Queer Lives of the Saints: Jerome's Hagiography', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 10 (2001), 442–79.

<sup>43</sup> Jacques Du Bosc, *La Femme heroique, ou les heroines comparées avec les heros en toute sorte de vertus* (Paris: Antoine de Sommerville & Augustin Courbé, 1645), p. 548.

<sup>44</sup> See Gail Kern Paster, "'In the Spirit of Men there is no Blood": Blood as Trope of Gender in *Julius Caesar*', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 40 (1989), 284–98 (pp. 286–87).

<sup>45</sup> Lippeloo, *Res gestae*, I, 130.

martyr-plays, where the spread of martyrdom in the final scenes is often of contagious proportions.<sup>46</sup> Her selfless willingness to suffer death for Christ ensures that Pauline does not forfeit the spiritual rewards attached to self-sacrifice. Thomas Aquinas is of the opinion that the merit of martyrdom lies chiefly in its acceptance, and God imparts grace at that moment.<sup>47</sup> The new widow does not perform the supreme witness for her faith, her role is rather that of an eyewitness to her husband's slaughter. Another manipulation of the martyr-play formula occurs with the notable absence of the customary reversal of traditional markers of gender attributes. Polyeucte does not passively resist an edict; he aggressively interrupts a public ceremony. This is exemplified in the frontispiece to the first edition, which provides an artist's impression of a moment not acted in the play. This engraving encapsulates the tragedy: Néarque is not alongside Polyeucte, he is relegated to the background, barely visible, showing little evidence of 'deux Cavaliers estroitement liez ensemble d'amitié' ('Abregé', sig. [ē2]<sup>v</sup>). Polyeucte is pictured attacking a female idol of voluptuous appearance (which is curiously represented as a male idol in the frontispiece to the 1660 edition).

Pauline, in her turn, does not 'become male' in her speech or attitude: she honours her husband, and is finally restored to her father's tutelage, thus patriarchy is left intact, though only after a moment of insubordination from Pauline until her father announces his own conversion (ll. 1720–83).<sup>48</sup> Narratives of virgin martyrs such as the Catherine group are marked by the strong content of aggressive sexual violence imposed on the martyrs by persecutors. This sexual element is one-sided and always frustrated, since every virgin is miraculously protected from being defiled. The erotic subtext in *Polyeucte* is both legitimate and consensual. The standardized depiction of a female saint generally casts her in some form of spiritual marriage to Christ, effectively an impossible exemplar for Christian women. In contrast to the solitary stance of a virgin martyr, Polyeucte does not dismiss his wife. He could have abandoned her using the canonical concept of the aptly named Pauline privilege, yet discarding his bride would have been tantamount to denying his sexual identity. This is not to say that the dramatization is the harmonious pairing of Polyeucte and Pauline, but it is certainly far removed from a posthumous union of Polyeucte and Néarque.<sup>49</sup> Marc Fumaroli has observed that 'le moteur du drame est le couple d'époux Polyeucte-Pauline', resulting in a lucid validation of the sacra-

<sup>46</sup> 'This ability to choose suffering required a freedom of choice that women were not seen to possess. Women had been cursed with pain as the burden they must bear for the fault of Eve. Pain was their lot. It could not be chosen because it was already ordained' (Lisa Silverman, *Tortured Subjects: Pain, Truth, and the Body in Early Modern France* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 128).

<sup>47</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, ed. by B. de Rubeis, C. Billuart, and others, 6 vols (Turin: Marietti, 1922), IV, 5 (II<sup>a</sup> II<sup>ae</sup>, 124. 4).

<sup>48</sup> On the phenomenon of masculine attributes in female saints, see Elizabeth Castelli, '“I Will Make Mary Male”: Pieties of the Body and Gender Transformation of Christian Women in Late Antiquity', in *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, ed. by Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 29–49.

<sup>49</sup> Bruce R. Smith's observation that 'all of Shakespeare's comedies and tragedies end with male friendship yielding place to heterosexual love' (*Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England: A Cultural Poetics* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 72) does not apply to *Polyeucte*, since friendship has already given way to matrimony.

ment of matrimony.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, were it not for Polyeucte's martyrdom, there is every indication that the couple would continue as a unit. Pauline's final words to her lover testify to the reciprocal devotion: 'Je te suyvray par tout, et mesmes au trépas' (l. 1681), a sentiment that Metaphrastes attributes to Nearchos.<sup>51</sup> Corneille blamed the commercial failure of his later martyr-play *Théodore* (1646) on the fact that the public did not want to see a virgin martyr on stage: it may well be that audiences found it easier to relate to the thinly veiled carnal elements in *Polyeucte*.<sup>52</sup> Corneille did not perceive a conflict between sanctity and sexuality, and his enactment contrasts sharply with contemporary narratives, dramatic and hagiographic.<sup>53</sup> Ecclesiastical hostility to marriage is deep-seated as well as enduring, for no conventional wedded couple has ever been canonized in the Church's history. On 21 October 2001 Pope John Paul II beatified Luigi Beltrame and Maria Corsini Quattrocchi (who died in 1951 and 1965 respectively), the first married couple to have been honoured by this ceremony. The official biography provided by the Congregation for the Causes of Saints specifies that the couple had renounced conjugal relations for the last twenty-six years of the marriage, sleeping in separate beds and cohabiting as brother and sister.<sup>54</sup> This unusual course of action was undertaken in order to fulfil a 'difficult vow of the most perfect'.<sup>55</sup> Expressions of human sexuality and growth in spirituality were, and still can be, perceived as mutually incompatible. In *Polyeucte*, Corneille offers an innovative heroic model whose intimacy with a woman is not posited as a fundamental obstacle to salvation.<sup>56</sup>

UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS

PAUL SCOTT

<sup>50</sup> *Héros et orateurs: rhétorique et dramaturgie cornéliennes*, Histoire des Idées et Critique Littéraire, 277 (Geneva: Droz, 1990), p. 411.

<sup>51</sup> Metaphrastes reports that the two companions both cried on hearing the imperial edict, as they feared that death would separate them. As a result of Polyeucte's conversion, however, the two men are bonded in an exultant commitment to a united death ('ô Polyeucte, edictum imperatoris nostri me ad Christi Jesu Dei mei certamen' (Lippeloo, *Res gestae*, I, 130). Corneille assigns comparable sentiments to Pauline, whose conversion posthumously cements her relationship to Polyeucte.

<sup>52</sup> In the *Examen to Théodore* (written in 1660) Corneille remarks: 'pour en parler sainement, une Vierge et Martyre sur un Théâtre n'est autre chose qu'un Terme, qui n'a ny jambes ny bras, et par conséquent point d'action' ('Examen de Theodore', in *Le Theatre de P. Corneille*, II, pp. cix–cxiv (p. cx)).

<sup>53</sup> 'Most saints were celibates whose rejection of family ties and parenthood was held up as a cause for admiration. In other contexts, Counter-Reformation writers could celebrate marriage and domesticity as enthusiastically as their Protestant counterparts, but not when it came to religious heroes whose lives partook of the divine. In the charmed sphere inhabited by saints, beyond the familiar world of sexual urges and family connections, even the basic polarity of male and female begins to break down' (Allan Greer, 'Colonial Saints: Gender, Race and Hagiography in New France', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 57 (2000), 323–48 (p. 347)).

<sup>54</sup> In this, the Catholic Church has proved itself consistent: some seventeenth-century Catholic reformers subverted the ritual blessing of the nuptial bed into 'the occasion of a solemn sermon about marital chastity rather than that of a noisy and ribald celebration of fertility' (Wiesner-Hanks, *Christianity and Sexuality*, p. 115).

<sup>55</sup> *L'osservatore romano* (English Edition), 10 October 2001, p. 11. The couple's enthusiasm for celibacy was emulated by all of their four children, two of whom became priests, one a religious sister, and the other daughter vowed herself to the canonical state of a consecrated virgin.

<sup>56</sup> Bernhard Lang argues that the traditional Christian view of heaven being a sexless state with men and women absorbed into divine glory was countered with an alternative conception during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This new ideal was 'an anthropocentric one with sexual human persons whose heavenly bliss is enhanced by, if not consisting in, the enjoyment of a partner of the opposite sex' ('The Sexual Lives of the Saints: Towards an Anthropology of Christian Heaven', *Religion*, 17 (1987), 149–171 (p. 167)). Corneille's martyr is undoubtedly more suited to the latter.

Copyright of Modern Language Review is the property of Modern Humanities Research Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

Copyright of Modern Language Review is the property of Modern Humanities Research Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.