

Amazing Space: Portrayal of Grace in Corneille's *Polyeucte*

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Abstract

Polyeucte is a text replete with polarities that reflect *Polyeucte*'s dilemma of whether or not he should postpone his Christian baptism in deference to his non-Christian wife's fear for his safety. Underlying the dilemma is the question of grace, which is coeval with the writing of the text. Corneille's use of space and his portrayal of the function of sight underlie the terms of the dialectic posed by the question of grace and provide a structure for both the Jansenist and the Molinist sides of the argument.

When *Polyeucte* opens *in medias res*, *Polyeucte* himself is caught between two propositions. On the one hand, *Polyeucte*'s non-Christian wife Pauline has been pressing him to delay his intended baptism, and on the other hand his Christian friend Néarque tries to convince him to proceed with the baptism as soon as possible. This dilemma is embedded in a text replete with unresolved polarities, the hallmark of French classical drama. The setting is Mélitène, Roman military headquarters, a strategic crossroads between East and West. Romans cross family boundaries with Armenians. Roman Pauline bridges two worlds by her espousal to Armenian *Polyeucte*, and her father Félix bridges two worlds by being Roman governor of Armenia. The play's unity of action is precisely hinged on the balance between the baptized and the unbaptized while the unity of time will prescribe that any impending decision to be baptized be actualized that

very day. Unity of place assures that the psychological tension caused by the dilemma as well as by questions of love and duty and fidelity be resolved within the palace while *bienséance* requires that violence like the destruction of the pagan idols take place outside the palace off stage. The ubiquitous duality of appearance vs. reality takes shape in the dream topos as Pauline's fears become reality when her former lover Sévère returns. Such polarities constitute the surface structure of the play. Polarities on another level have been investigated by various critics. André Georges has distinguished two modes of conversion to Christianity in *Polyeucte*, one sudden and one progressive (35), and two actions of grace, one on the intellect and another on the will (39). Hadley Wood's emphasis on the importance of the play's religious theme highlights Néarque's moderating stance as a counterbalance to Polyeucte's intense Christian passion (54). Paul Scott sees the play as a heterosexualization of an essentially homosocial legend and thus ascribes the play's originality to its "combination of religious and sexual tensions" (328). Only Ralph Albanese has identified the polarities in terms of the pivotal role played by space and time. Thus he sees that "élévation/bassesse, mobilité/immobilité, et constance/inconstance font partie intégrante de la vision ironique sous-jacente au discours poétique de *Polyeucte*" (212) ["upward movement/downward movement, mobility/immobility, constancy/inconstancy are an integral part of the underlying ironic vision in the poetic discourse of *Polyeucte*"]. It is my purpose to show how Corneille uses space to portray the terms of the dialectic posed by the question of grace, which is coeval with the writing of the text. I also wish to show to what extent the sense of sight functions in the reception of grace within the context of space.

Space is defined by its boundaries and exists in the text both on the narrative level and on the physical level. When *Polyeucte* begins *in medias res*, a boundary has already been set and we recognize it by its breach. On the narrative level dreams open new spaces and here a space has been opened, a boundary breached, by Pauline's dream in which she has seen the death of her new husband Polyeucte and fears the return of Sévère, the man whom she had loved but rejected in favor of her duty to her father's wishes. Pauline's reaction to her dream is to protect her husband Polyeucte by wanting to close the space on the physical level and restrict him to the palace. This restriction is the narrative's way of obeying its own rule of unity of place. The opening lines establish, then, the preliminary conflicts in the play: dream and reality, the strong and the weak, man and

question in the persons of his characters.

At issue is the resurgence of the dispute between two fourth-century theologians, Pelagius and Augustine of Hippo, on how personal salvation is attained. Pelagius had maintained that personal salvation can be effected by one's good acts alone, thus placing the emphasis on the importance of an individual's free will. Augustine, on the other hand, had believed in the attainment of salvation as a function of God's choice and an individual's own naturally endowed good will, thus placing the emphasis on God's free gift of grace, which the theologians called "grâce efficace" (efficacious grace). Enter Molina, a sixteenth-century Jesuit, who presented a conciliatory stance in the age old question. He affirmed the activity of free will while maintaining that one is predestined by the foresight of one's own merits in cooperation with a grace called "grâce suffisante" (sufficient grace), a grace which has its full effect only if one's free will cooperates with it. Now it is 1640, two years before the probable first staging of *Polyeucte*, and Cornelius Jansen in his *Augustinus* espouses Augustine's "grâce efficace" side of the argument, condemns the Jesuit followers of Molina as Pelagian heretics and Jansenism is born.⁴

It is 1642, and Corneille's Nérarque is on stage discussing God's grace with his friend Polyeucte. God, he says, "est toujours tout juste et tout bon; mais sa grâce / Ne descend pas toujours avec même efficace" (29-30) ["Ever all-good, all-righteous, yet His grace / Does not fall ever with like efficacy"]. By splitting the theological term "grâce efficace," then locating the two words of the fixed term at the privileged riming point in the two verses and stretching to use "efficace" as noun all serve to bring to the fore unequivocally the pivotal argument of grace. Corneille has Nérarque very diplomatically represent both sides of the argument to Polyeucte while the latter has been contemplating delaying his baptism. First, he asks Polyeucte to reflect on the Molinist position of reliance on one's own free will, for he may change his mind if he defers his baptism: "Avez-vous cependant une pleine assurance / D'avoir assez de vie ou de persévérance?" (25-26) ["But can you be indeed so certain, you'll / Have spirit or tenacity enough?"]. His next question is designed to make Polyeucte reflect on the Jansenist position of dependence on the ultimate decision of God in the matter: "Et Dieu, qui tient votre âme et vos jours dans sa main, / Promet-il à vos yeux de le pouvoir demain?" (27-28) ["Has God, on whom your life and soul depend, / Granted your prayers due strength for this tomorrow?"]. In the end Polyeucte does, of course, flee the palace and get baptized and in doing so Corneille

has him espouse by his action the Molinist position of free will in the argument. Let us remember that Corneille was himself formed by the Jesuits at Rouen. In all of this Corneille has opened the space of the narrative to include the contemporary question of grace as motivating factor in Polyeucte's decision. The triumph of grace by Polyeucte's flight occurs precisely because the spatial boundaries of the palace have been able to be transgressed.

I have thus far examined the conflict that subtends the issue of grace with respect to narrative space embodied in the text. The issue of grace is also allied to the theatrical catalyst that embodies grace in space on the stage and in the text. That catalyst is not a pervading embodiment of grace in symbol but rather a force that fills the theatrical space at multiple points with its effect of deterrence. That force is sight which determines whether or not Polyeucte will cooperate with grace.

The dream, as sight, not only opens space in the play but it also functions as a negative space because it does not take place on stage and it is sight imagined, disconnected from reality but nonetheless endowed with fear that deters. The obverse of the dream, the actual encounter of another through the sense of sight, necessarily does fill space on stage. In fact, sight fills the text of *Polyeucte* with reference to itself and it serves as a force that deters. Néarque considers that if Polyeucte should see Pauline, this sight of her may deter him from leaving the palace and cooperating with the grace to receive baptism:

Néarque: Fuyez.

Polyeucte: Je ne puis.

Néarque: Il le faut:

Fuyez un ennemi qui sait votre défaut,
 Qui le trouve aisément, qui vous blesse par la vue,
 Et dont le coup mortel vous plaît quand il vous
 tue. (103-06)

[Nearchus: Flee.

Polyeucte: I cannot.

Nearchus: But you must;

Flee from a foe who knows where you are weak,
 Has found the soft spot, wounding with a gaze,
 Whose fatal blow delights you as it slays.]

Here Pauline is styled by Néarque in the same terms as the myathi-

cal basilisk whose sight alone kills. As a serpent inflicting a mortal blow, the basilisk evokes the tempting serpent of Eden whose convincing lures caused the first sin and expulsion from Eden and thus the need for redeeming grace in the first place.⁵ It is in this vein of sight of the other that we see a threat to grace and the need for grace to redeem. If Polyeucte sees Pauline, he may change his mind about cooperating with grace and if he changes his mind, he will need grace even more.

Just as in Néarque's mind the sight of Pauline poses a threat to Polyeucte, so Pauline fears the sight of Sévère whom she had seen in her dream and who has now returned from his heroic exploits. She fears that seeing him might deter her from her conjugal duty to Polyeucte and her filial duty to her father Félix, for it was in obedience to her father that she had espoused Polyeucte and not Sévère. What is important to remember is that, like the mortal blow of the basilisk's gaze, it is simply the sight of the person that causes the threat:

Pauline: Moi, moi! que je revoie un si puissant vainqueur
Et m'expose à des yeux qui me percent le coeur!

...

Dans le pouvoir sur moi que ses regards ont eu,
Je n'ose m'assurer de toute ma vertu,
Je ne le verrai point.

Félix: Il faut le voir, ma fille,
Ou tu trahis ton père et toute ta famille. (339- 350)

[Pauline: I, I! am I to see one more this victor,
And bare myself to eyes that pierce my heart!

...

With all the power his eyes have had on me,
I dare not guarantee my virtue intact!
I will not see him.

Felix: You must see him, child,
Or you'll betray family and father.]

In obedience Pauline consents to see Sévère but not before begging from her father the time to prepare for the sight of him: "qu'un peu de loisir me prépare à le voir" (359) ["With leisure to prepare myself to see him"].

On the other hand, Sévère does not dread the sight of Pauline because he is unaware that she is betrothed to Polyeucte. There is no fear of fall from grace. In fact, he regards the sight of her as a divine experience:

Sévère: Pourrais-je voir Pauline et rendre à ses beaux
yeux
L'hommage souverain que l'on va rendre aux
dieux?

...

Fabian: Vous la verrez, seigneur.

Sévère: Ah! quel comble de joie!
Cette chère beauté consent que je la voie!
Mais ai-je sur son âme encore quelque pouvoir?
Quelque reste d'amour s'y fait-il encor voir?
Quel trouble, quel transport lui cause ma venue?
Puis-je tout espérer de cette heureuse vue? (367-78)

[Severus: May I see Pauline, paying to her beautiful eyes
The sovereign homage they would give the
Gods?

...

Fabian: My lord, you'll see her.

Severus: Ah, what perfect joy!
My precious love is willing I should see her!
Do I still have some sway upon her heart?
What trace of tenderness still lingers there to
see?
What pangs, what bliss does my arrival bring?
May I hope all from this auspicious sighting?]

When his servant Fabian does tell him that Pauline is betrothed,
Sévère still wants to lay eyes on her but then expire in purity:

Sévère: Pauline, je verrai qu'un autre vous possède!

...

Voyons-la toutefois, et dans ce triste lieu
Achevons de mourir en lui disant adieu.

...

Je ne veux que la voir, soupirer et mourir. (422-36)

[Severus: Am I, Pauline, to see another love you?

...

But I shall see her, in this dreary place,

Shall wrest my death in bidding her farewell.

...

I merely wish to see her once, and die.]

The multiplicity of references to sight of the other without actually seeing the other serves to highlight the tense psychological drama leading up to the actual visual encounter, which ends in Sévère's promise to seek immortality in battle and Pauline's promise to recommend his name to the gods. This psychological drama takes place on the space of the stage. One pivotal event that does not take place on the stage is Polyeucte's actual baptism. This is so because it is not the baptism itself that constitutes the drama in *Polyeucte* but rather the availability of grace for conversion to follow through with the baptism. The only way we know that the baptism has taken place is by a simple mention of Polyeucte as Christian in a dialog between him and his Christian sponsor Néarque. When he tells Néarque that he is going to the pagan temple, Néarque asks: "Oubliez-vous déjà que vous êtes chrétien?" (639) ["Have you so soon forgotten you are Christian?"]. The baptism has already taken place. But, of course, it is not to worship but rather to destroy the pagan idols that Polyeucte wishes to go to the temple and it is this event that is to take place as a spectacle, a visual event for all to see him as a Christian witness. Ironically, it must take place off stage since the portrayal of violence is precluded by *bienséance*:

Polyeucte: Allons, mon cher Néarque, allons aux yeux
des hommes
Braver l'idolâtrie et montrer qui nous sommes.
(645-46)

[Polyeucte: Come, dear Nearchus, come in all men's sight
Brave the idolatrous, show what we are.]

Grace is here portrayed not in its immediate efficacy resulting in the sacrament of baptism (the Jansenist view) but rather in the free will choice of Polyeucte to perform a deed (the Molinist view). Polyeucte is a Christian not because he is named a Christian in baptism but because he performs like one. Knowing the consequences of destroying the pagan idols, Néarque proceeds to moderate Polyeucte, admitting that he himself would fear the torments of death should he follow him to the temple (674-75). In addition, he admits that the initial fervor of his own grace as Christian has been diminished in time (697-700). But it is Polyeucte's visible example of fervor that acts on Néarque as a grace that convinces him to join him, and

this accord of the two is represented by Néarque's repetition of what Polyeucte has just said and then adding:

Néarque: Allons faire éclater sa gloire aux yeux de tous.
(719)

[Nearchus: Let's make his glory shine in all men's view.]

Conversely, Polyeucte is to be influenced by the visual example set by Néarque, but this time as a deterrent force. When Félix wishes to press Polyeucte to repent after he does destroy the pagan idols, he orders that Polyeucte witness the martyrdom of Néarque as a "spectacle sanglant d'un ami qu'il faut suivre" (881) ["The bloody sight of a friend one has to follow"]:

Félix: Du conseil qu'il doit prendre il sera mieux instruit
Quand il verra punir celui qui l'a séduit. (879-80)

[Felix: He'll better learn what course he must pursue,
When he will witness his seducer's death.]

Of course neither the destruction of the pagan idols nor the martyrdom of Néarque is represented on stage but rather reported, the former via a *récit* of Stratonice, Pauline's confidante, and the latter via an eyewitness report of Albin, Félix's confidant. Both events are spectacles driven by grace and both occupy the space opened in the narrative to accommodate *bienséance* and the unity of place.

In like manner, after Félix has ordered Polyeucte to be put to death because he remains obdurate in his decision not to repent, Pauline announces herself as Christian, and this she has done because Polyeucte's death has been a visible example to her and has enlightened her:

Pauline: Mon époux en mourant m'a laissé ses lumières;
Son sang dont tes bourreaux viennent de me
couvrir,
M'a dessillé les yeux et me les vient d'ouvrir.
Je vois, je sais, je crois, je suis désabusée:
De ce bienheureux sang tu me vois baptisée.
(1724-28)

[Pauline: My husband, as he died, illumined me;
His blood, your butchers have just sprayed on me,
Has just unveiled my eyes, at last wide open.

I see, I know, believe, am rid of error:
 You see me baptized by his blessed blood.]

Evidently, then, grace has been contagious as a power beyond reason and in *Polyeucte* it is grace that substitutes for passion as the counterbalance to reason in the age old conflict. The pivotal role of grace is made no more clear than in the text's fulcrum, the very geographical center of the text, a most appropriate place to weigh two terms of a conflict. It is here that Corneille balances the two schools of grace, one in each hemistich, balanced equally by the caesura. Pauline tells her father Félix that to demand Polyeucte's repentance under pain of execution is tantamount to ordering his death because he is obstinate in his Christian faith. Félix responds that the decision is Polyeucte's: "Sa grâce est en sa main, c'est à lui d'y rêver" (907) ["His pardon's in his hands, for him to gain."] The key, of course, is the play on the word "grâce." On the one hand, Félix is talking about pardon, that unconditional absolution he as governor can extend to Polyeucte and thus effect his "salvation." This represents the "grâce efficace" of the Jansenist side of the grace argument. On the other hand, he is talking about grace, that "grâce suffisante" of the Molinist side of the argument, that grace of God with which Polyeucte can cooperate "en sa main" ["in his hands"] by using his own free will. This center-enhancing verse is the fold in the text, that place where the two terms of the argument reside in the formal space of the text. It is also the place which leaves the potential for another space to be opened in the text. The second hemistich of the verse crystallizes the manner in which grace can be portrayed in space: "c'est à lui d'y rêver" ["It's for him to think about."]⁶ For sure "rêver" here signifies "to think about," but another sense with its kinship to all that is visual in a dream is also evoked, for "rêver" also means "to dream." Like Pauline's dream, Polyeucte's reflection on grace both as the governor's effective pardon and as God's free gift would open up a new space in the text, a space that would weigh in a measured and schematic way the pros and cons of repenting, not only for being converted to Christianity through God's grace but also for freely acting on it politically. In the final analysis, of course, Polyeucte opts to cooperate with God's grace, "grâce suffisante," rather than to accept the "grâce efficace" of Félix's pardon. For him it is a closed issue and in his martyrdom off stage in Act V he ushers in the closure of the theatrical space that was opened with Pauline's dream in Act I.

NOTES

¹ Citations from the text of *Polyeucte* are from the Rat edition. Unless otherwise noted, English translations are from the Solomon translation.

² Translation mine.

³ Translation mine.

⁴ For the purposes of this study I have reduced the theological dispute to its bare essentials. For a thorough treatment of the origins of Jansenism and the arguments of the dispute see Sedgwick (especially 5-8, 14-46), Bénichou (121-54) and Lewis (82-88).

⁵ In many ways *Polyeucte* is both the converse and the fulfillment of the Eden story. In Corneille's landscape Polyeucte leaves the palace willingly because of the grace he has received and tends toward redemption in the baptism he will receive. In the archetypal Eden story Adam leaves the landscape by expulsion because of his sin and then, as the prototype of humanity, awaits the saving grace of redemption. In this respect Polyeucte is the Adam redeemed by the grace of conversion and baptism.

⁶ Translation mine.

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