CHAPTER II

Polyeucte and Book Four of the Aeneid

CORNEILLE'S RESPONSE TO THE CHALLENGE OF THE QUARREL can be read in the structure of his next three plays, which are probably also his greatest. The relationships of the individual plays to each other and to the concerns of the Quarrel are quite complex and will require considerable space to unravel. I intend to argue eventually that Corneille conceived of Horace, Cinna, and Polyeucte as a kind of trilogy or carefully interconnected group of plays that might qualify for consideration alongside the Gerusalemme liberata of Tasso as a major oeuvre. The trilogy does not come into existence, however, except with the last of the three plays, Polyeucte, which also shows the clearest, most direct relationship with the Quarrel. For this reason, I shall start with Polyeucte and, later on, relate it to Horace and Cinna. Concerning Polyeucte I shall argue, first, that Corneille wrote it as a Christian analogue of book 4 of the Aeneid, the episode of Aeneas and Dido; then, that it was the Quarrel of the Cid and Tasso together that led him to this rectification of Vergil.

Rectification may be defined as the process by which a playwright, through the introduction of substantial changes, can seek to enhance the decorum of a subject borrowed from history or literary tradition. In extreme cases it may allow him to salvage a subject that otherwise would be deemed too archaic, violent, or shocking for public taste. Formally, there would appear to be only two possible categories of rectification, depending on whether the playwright acknowledges or conceals the links be-
tween his own play and the source, or sources, that provide its subject matter. La Mort de Pompée offers several examples of openly acknowledged rectification, the most striking of which concerns the character of Cléopâtre. Roman historians and Lucan, in the Pharsalia, all depict the Egyptian queen as a lascivious temptress; Corneille, as he explains in the Examen, paints her instead as nobly ambitious. He has, in other words, undertaken quite openly to rehabilitate the reputation of one of the most notorious women of the ancient world. The ostensible source of Rodogune is also history; and in the Avertissement to that play, Corneille cites a pertinent passage from Appian of Alexandria and then proceeds to indicate how and why he thought it wise to invoke the poet’s right to modify historical fact. Appian’s story narrates a long struggle for power—two sons against their mother, who kills one son and is forced by the other to drink poison. None of the principals is in any way noble. Corneille rehabilitates the character of both sons and, while preserving the queen’s death by poisoning for a spectacular denouement, changes the incidents, or “acheminements,” leading up to it. Most notably, he sees to it that the surviving son remains totally innocent of his mother’s death; the queen still dies of poison, but it is self-administered. This rectification, like a number of others in the play, resembles the rectification of Cléopâtre in Pompée. There is, however, a major difference between Rodogune and Pompée in that the historical incidents in Rodogune are so obscure that no one would have noticed the playwright’s changes if he had not called attention to them himself.

In the “Discours de la tragédie,” Corneille at one point expresses dissatisfaction with Sophocles’ treatment of the murder of Clytemnestra. He cannot tolerate (“je ne puis souffrir”) that Orestes should kill Clytemnestra by design or that Electra should egg him on to such a horrible, unnatural act. These aspects of the story are totally inconsistent with the modern rule, unknown to the Ancients, that the main heroes should be sympathetic. Having detailed the deficiencies of Electra, Corneille proceeds then to explain how one might go about correcting them:

Pour rectifier ce sujet à notre mode, il faudroit qu’Oreste n’eût dessein que contre Egisthe; qu’un reste de tendresse respectueuse pour sa mere-lui en fit remettre la punition aux Dieux; que cette reine s’opiniâtât à la protection de son adulte, et
qu'elle se mit entre son fils et lui si malheureusement qu'elle reçut le coup que ce prince voudroit porter à cet assassin de son père. Ainsi elle mourroit de la main de son fils, comme le veut Aristote, sans que la barbarie d'Oreste n'out fit horreur, comme dans Sophocle, ni que son action méritât des Furies vengeresses pour le tourmenter, puisqu'il demeureroit innocent. (Oeuvres, 1:81)

It is obvious that the rectifications here go in exactly the same direction as the rectifications actually made in the historical sources of Rodogune. In fact, as Marc Fumaroli has shown in a brilliant article, Rodogune is like a palimpsest in which one can read at various levels and with varying degrees of clarity the traces of many literary and historical analogues ("Tragique païen et tragique chrétien," p. 629). To simplify somewhat, one can say that Corneille seems to have used the Hellenistic historical source—the story of the Syrian queen and her two sons—in order to conceal a more important connection between Rodogune and Electra. This is not the place to examine the possible motives for such a concealment. Suffice it to say that the playwright must have found it easier and safer to introduce radical changes into the story of an obscure Syrian queen than into the universally known story of Clytemnestra. Corneille would one day undertake to rectify Oedipus Rex quite openly, but only after he had long since become "le grand Corneille." To summarize, then, La Mort de Pompée illustrates openly acknowledged rectification, whereas Rodogune is an example of rectification in part concealed.

I have taken these examples of rectification from Corneille's later work, but the playwright did not wait until Pompée and Rodogune to practice rectification. A good example can be seen as early as L'Illusion comique. Corneille's previous work and first real tragedy had been Médée, in which the heroine's awful crime is preserved intact from antiquity, along with the ferocity of her hatred for Jason and for her rival, Créuse. A few months later, in L'Illusion comique, the playwright came back to the same subject matter; and, in the little tragedy of act 5—the tragedy in which Clindor and Isabelle act out the roles of Théagène and Hippolyte—he elaborated a hidden rectification of the Medea story.

The relevant action is contained in two scenes—5.3 and
4—the last of which Corneille dropped from the play after 1660. In the first scene, Hippolyte surprises her husband, Théagène, in a garden at night as he is awaiting the arrival of Rosine, a princess with whom he is determined to have an affair. The situation parallels the moment when Médée berates Jason for leaving her for Créuse. Indeed, at seven points in the exchange between husband and wife, it is clear that Corneille is actually borrowing arguments from Euripides. Though Hippolyte echoes Médée from time to time and finds herself in a Medean situation, she is otherwise quite unlike her Greek counterpart, however. In particular she is far from vengeful. Indeed, toward the end of the confrontation, despairing of deflecting Théagène from his chosen path and fearing for him and for herself when the liaison is discovered, as surely it will be, she resolves very sadly to commit suicide.

If Hippolyte is thus a “rectified” version of Médée, Théagène becomes in turn a redeemed Jason. For not only is he so touched by his wife’s love that he is converted suddenly to the cause of marital fidelity, he continues to defend this new cause when, a moment later, his mistress Rosine arrives. Scene 4 functions as a reprise of scene 3, but also as a corrective to it. Théagène is once more castigated as a faithless lover, but his situation has changed so that he appears excusable now: he is breaching a commitment to his mistress, but only in order to acknowledge a higher commitment to his wife. Just as we saw Corneille exonerate Antiochus for his mother’s death in Rodogune, so here the playwright rehabilitates Jason by effectively expunging his guilt while retaining his crime. The paradigm allows for a major change in decorum without sacrifice of dramatic interest; and Corneille will make use of it in one form or another in his next four plays. Rodrigue, Horace, and Polyeucte, inasmuch as they prove “unfaithful” to a mistress, a friend, or a wife, can all be viewed as descendants of Jason—or rather of Théagène, for like Théagène, the redeemed Jason-figure of L’Illusion, they all have justifiable reasons for acting as they do. Cinna, who remains faithful to Emilie when he ought not to, is the exception that proves the rule; and the price he pays for not being bolder is to relinquish to Auguste his role as hero in the play: Cinna, ou la Clémence d’Auguste.

During the Quarrel of the Cid, the brunt of criticism fell not
on Rodrigue's action in killing his mistress's father in a duel but rather on Chimène's failure to cease loving Rodrigue, and more specifically on her supposed acceptance of Rodrigue as husband at the end of the play. The marriage of Rodrigue and Chimène, a historical fact, was obviously not in harmony with contemporary French ideas of decorum. Corneille knew he had a problem and attempted to deal with it by leaving the prospect of marriage somewhat in doubt. The maneuver seems to have satisfied the general public; but Scudéry, in his Observations, took the view that since it was historical, the marriage of the lovers could not be avoided. At the same time, it was so repugnant to morality that it rendered the whole subject intrinsically bad and totally unsuitable for the theater (Gaste, pp. 73–77). When Chapelain came to answer this criticism later on in the Sentiments, he granted that the subject was defective as treated by Corneille, but argued that the poet is always free to modify history and that Corneille's fault consequently lay not in choosing an unusable subject but in failing to change the subject so as to remove what was offensive in it: "Que si [le Poète] est obligé de traiter une matiere historique de cette nature [non conforme à la raison], c'est alors qu'il la doit reduire aux termes de la bien-seance, sans avoir egard à la verité, et qu'il la doit plusost changer toute entiere que de luy laisser rien qui soit incompatible avec les regles de son Art; lequel se proposant l'idée universelle des choses, les espure des defaux et des irregularités particulières que l'histoire par la se­verité de ses loix est contrainte d'y souffrir." Chapelain goes on to suggest three ways in which Corneille might have altered the historical facts in order to recuperate the defective subject:

De sorte qu'il y auroit eu sans comparaison moins d'inconve­nient dans la disposition du Cid, de feindre contre la verité, ou que le Comte ne se fust pas trouvé à la fin le veritable Pere de Chimene, ou que contre l'opinion de tout le monde il ne fust pas mort de sa blessure, ou que le salut du Roy et du Royaume eust absolument dependu de ce mariage, pour compenser la violence que souffroit la Nature en cette occasion, par le bien que le Prince et son Estat en recevroit; tout cela, d dispose­nous, auroit esté plus pardonnable, que de porter sur la scene l'évenement tout pur et tout scandaleux, comme l'historie le fournissoit. (Gaste, p. 366)

These proposals, stated with little nuance, may sound slightly
ridiculous; but basically they are not different from the kinds of changes that Corneille himself undertook in *L'Illusion* or that he would later introduce into *Pompée* and *Rodogune*. Unlike the disguised rectification of * Médée* in *L'Illusion*, however, the rectification that Chapelain has in mind here is one that would be openly acknowledged: Chimène would still be called Chimène. Corneille would not have been at fault if he had followed a course like this—or if he had taken the perhaps more expedient path of rejecting the subject outright. The two points that Chapelain wished to make were these: that Corneille did have a choice in the matter (which is what Scudéry had denied) and that, in any event, what the poet ought not to have done was to use the lovers’ marriage unaltered—or, in the words of the *Sentiments*, to “l'exposer à la veue du Peuple, sans l'avoir auparavant rectifié.”

Now that we know what is meant by rectification, let us proceed to see whether it can be demonstrated that *Polyeucte* is a disguised rectification of the Aeneas-Dido story in book 4 of the *Aeneid*. In order to discern rectification, we must read the two texts together, as it were, and note a basic similarity against which certain divergences will stand out as particularly meaningful. The rectification will consist in the sum of those divergencies that tend toward an enhancement of decorum.

Both stories, the Christian play and the pagan epic, recount the exploits of a hero with a mission. Both heroes are in danger of neglecting this mission for love of a woman, and both are sent warnings not to dally. Both men heed these warnings, undertake the preparations necessary to accomplish their mission, and meanwhile try to hide their plans from the woman. The woman, when she finds out what is happening, confronts the hero with his “infidelity” and tries to persuade him to give up his mission in deference to love. The motivations for all these actions, as we shall see in a moment, are substantially different in *Polyeucte* from what they were in the *Aeneid*. Even on the level of plot, however, *Polyeucte* diverges in one very significant way from the *Aeneid*, and that is in its ending. In Vergil’s poem the hero actually forsakes the woman, who out of shame and grief commits herself to the funeral pyre as her faithless lover is sailing off without her to found Rome. Polyeucte, on the other hand, though he leaves Pauline, does not forsake her. Because he refuses to renounce his Christian faith, he must suffer martyrdom;
but before he dies, he prays to God for his wife's conversion. And at the end of the play, after his own death, that prayer is answered. The Christian mission differs from the pagan mission in that it excludes no one from joining in. Aeneas never thinks—because Vergil never thought—that he could take Dido along with him on his journey. Corneille and Polyeucte see things otherwise; and the denouement is pointedly different.

If we look at the play and the epic at other levels, we see similar patterns of convergence and divergence. Pauline, for example, resembles Dido in that both see themselves as victims of a lover's betrayal. In character or decorum, however, the women are virtual opposites. When Dido first hears of Aeneas's plan to leave Carthage, she explodes with raw fury:

> saevit inops animi totamque incensa per urbem
> bacchatur, qualis commotis excita sacris
> Thyias, ubi audito stimilant trieterica Baccho
> orgia noctumusque vocat clamore Cithaeron.

(l. 300–303)

She rages through the city
Like a woman mad, or drunk, the way the Maenads
Go howling through the night-time on Cithaeron
When Bacchus' cymbals summon with their clashing.

(p. 97)

Later she castigates Aeneas in a tirade of unmitigated verbal violence:

> nec tibi diva parens, generis nec Dardanus auctor,
> perfide, sed duris genuit te cautibus horrens
> Caucasus Hyrcanaeque admirunt ubera tigres.

(l. 365–67)

You treacherous liar! No goddess was your mother,
No Dardanus the founder of your tribe,
Son of the stony mountain-crags, begotten
On cruel rock, with a tigress for a wet-nurse!

(p. 100)

Still later she vows eternal vengeance and begs the gods and the Furies to pursue her faithless lover with relentless torment:

> at bello audacis populi vexatus et armis,
> finibus extorris, complexu avolsus Iuli
> auxilium imploret videatque indigna suorum
funera; nec cum se sub leges pacis iniquae tradiderit, regno aut optata luce fruat ur, sed cadat ante diem mediaque inhumatus harena. haec precor, hanc vocem extremam cum sanguine fundo. tum vos, o Tyrii, stirpem et genus omne futurum exercete odiis cinerique haec mittite nostro munera.

Let him be driven by arms and war, an exile,
Let him be taken from his son, Iulus,
Let him beg for aid, let him see his people dying
Unworthy deaths, let him accept surrender
On unfair terms, let him never enjoy the kingdom,
The hoped-for light, let him fall and die, untimely,
Let him lie unburied on the sand. Oh, hear me,
Hear the last prayer, poured out with my last blood!
And you, O Tyrians, hate, and hate forever
The Trojan stock. Offer my dust this homage.

(p. 109)

This magnificent passage may well have suggested to Corneille the imprecations of Camille in Horace. The emotional pitch and the rhetorical movement of the two speeches are very close; and if there is a significant difference, it lies only in the more controlled, more deliberate fury of Camille, whom Corneille shows choosing to act the role of fury to Horace. Nothing in any of the speeches of Pauline seems to echo any of Dido's feverish excesses, however. Indeed, Pauline is so very restrained in her response that, except for one thing, one might suspect that her restraint had no connection at all with the Vergilian text. Pauline’s confidant, Stratonice, at one point sounds very much like Dido, however; and Pauline gently, but firmly, rebukes her. The exchange occurs when Stratonice comes in to report the scandalous act that Polyeucte has just committed during the temple ceremony:

PAULINE

Il est mort!

STRATONICE

Non, il vit; mais, ô pleurs superflus!
Ce courage si grand, cette âme si divine,
N’est plus digne du jour, ni digne de Pauline.
Ce n’est plus cet époux si charmant à vos yeux;
C'est l'ennemi commun de l'Etat et des Dieux,
Un méchant, un infâme, un rebelle, un perfide,
Un traître, un scélérat, un lâche, un parricide,
Une peste exécrable à tous les gens de bien,
Un sacrilège impie: en un mot, un chrétien.

PAULINE

Ce mot aurait suffi sans ce torrent d'injures.

STRATONICE

Ces titres aux chrétiens sont-ce des impostures?

PAULINE

Il est ce que tu dis, s'il embrasse leur foi;
Mais il est mon époux, et tu parles à moi.

(3. 2. 776–88)

The outburst of Stratonice links the play to the epic, and, doing so, allows us not just to see but to measure the distance separating Pauline from Dido. Pauline’s moderation is so great in this scene that it verges on true Christian virtue. Unlike Dido, she expresses no desire at all for retaliation:

Apprends que mon devoir ne dépend point du sien:
Qu'il y manque, s'il veut; je dois faire le mien.

(3. 2. 795–96)

She is even careful to distinguish the man from the act:

Quelque chrétien qu'il soit, je n'en ai point d'horreur;
Je chéris sa personne, et je hais son erreur.

(3. 2. 799–800)

Dido’s vituperation upon learning of Aeneas’s betrayal is only one sign of her lack of self-control. Another, earlier manifestation was seen in her burning passion for the Trojan hero and her willingness to enter into a liaison with him. Pauline shows no such weakness. On the contrary, her behavior throughout the play never ceases to be absolutely correct. She is, of course, married to the hero, so that her love for him is always fully sanctioned. Her dealings with Sévère are no less proper. She agrees to see him only when her father forces her to do so; and she makes no effort to conceal her feelings about Sévère from Polyæucte. Her husband, as a consequence, far from being jealous, only admires his wife’s nobility of character all the more.

These differences stand out with special clarity when they
are seen against the common ground of the two heroines' final resort to suicide or its prospect. Dido's self-immolation as Aeneas's ships are setting sail forms the magnificent conclusion to book 4 of the *Aeneid*. It restores dignity to the Carthaginian queen and makes up in part for her earlier loss of *pudor*. The parallel scene in *Polyeucte* occurs toward the end of act 4, after Polyeucte, in order to provide for his wife's happiness after his death, has commended her to the safe-keeping of Sévère. Left alone with Sévère, Pauline is quick to scotch any hopes her Roman suitor might have and rejects categorically any possibility of marriage to him after Polyeucte's death:

Mais sachez qu'il n'est point de si cruel trépas
Où d'un front assuré je ne porte mes pas,
Qu'il n'est point aux enfers d'horreurs que je n'endure,
Plutôt que de souiller une gloire si pure,
Que d'épouser un homme, après son triste sort,
Qui de quelque façon soit cause de sa mort.

(4. 5. 1341-46)

At this point in the action, Pauline is somewhere between the pagan world and the Christian. Were she already a Christian, her contemplation of suicide would be accounted sinful. Since she remains a pagan, in spite of her virtually Christian trepidation as regards the fate of suicides in the afterworld, the force of her determination may still function, and indeed does function, to ennoble her in the eyes of the audience. It is significant, however, that whereas for Dido suicide was a means of restoring a lost *pudor*, for Pauline it would have served instead to forestall a threatened loss of *gloire*. If Pauline were to follow the example of Dido in the matter of suicide, it would only be in order to ensure not resembling her otherwise. So, again, a point of overlap enables us to gauge the difference between the epic and the play and thus to note the degree of rectification.

The great confrontation scene of act 4, an echo of a similar encounter in book 4 of the *Aeneid*, offers a chance to see the distance that Corneille has put between Polyeucte and Aeneas. In the face of Dido's barrage of recriminations and insults, Aeneas maintains a steadfastly heroic composure. He is touched by the suffering that his departure is causing, but he does not show that he is touched: "ille Iôvis monitis immota tenebat/lumina et
obnixus curam sub corde premebat" (I. 331–32); "Jove bade him keep/Affection from his eyes, and grief in his heart/With never a sign" (p. 98). Dido notes his impassiveness and interprets it as a sign of unfeeling: "num fletu ingemuit nostro? num lumina flexit?/num lacrimas victus dedit aut miseratus amantium est?" (I. 369–70); "When I was weeping/Did he so much as sigh? Did he turn his eyes,/Ever so little, toward me? Did he break at all,/Or weep, or give his lover a word of pity?" (p. 100). Aeneas sighs, but only out of Dido's presence. Later, Dido's sister, Anna, comes to beg Aeneas at least to delay his departure. Once more the hero remains steadfast ("immotus"), impervious to pleas and tears: in a famous simile, the poet compares him to a mighty oak tree able to withstand the blast of the fiercest storm (I. 441–49). From the outset Dido has characterized her faithless lover as cruel (I. 308, 311); his lack of apparent emotion throughout only confirms her initial suspicions that he no longer has any interest in her.

With Polyeucte it is quite pointedly different. Pauline opens the scene with a mild rebuke: "Vous n'avez point ici d'ennemi que vous-même," and proceeds to remind her husband, first, of his obligations, not to her, but to his forebears and his subjects. Having failed to dissuade him from his course by these more general appeals, she comes finally, like Dido, to reproach him for his infidelity to her: "Cruel, car il est temps que ma douleur éclate,/Et qu'un juste reproche accable une âme ingrate" (I. 1235–36). Her reproaches, used only as a last resort, express her own sense of hurt and incomprehension more than any hatred of Polyeucte: "C'est donc là le dégoût qu'apporte l'hymnéeé?/Je te suis odieuse après m'être donnée!" (I. 1251–52). Most important of all, Polyeucte reacts to this tenderness with a sigh and, eventually, tears:

**POLYEUCTE**

Hélas!

**PAULINE**

Que cet hélas a de peine à sortir!
Encor s'il marquoit un heureux repentir,
Que tout force qu'il est, j'y trouverois de charmes!
Mais courage, il s'émeut, je vois couler-des larmes.

(4.3. 1253–56)
Polyeucte not only is moved; he shows he is moved by the tears he freely sheds. Polyeucte’s God demands the first love: “Il ne faut rien aimer qu’après lui, qu’en lui-même” (1. 74); “Je vous aime, / Beaucoup moins que mon Dieu, mais bien plus que moi-même” (ll. 1279–80). He does not require, like Jove, that the hero stop up his ears to human suffering, however. Pauline does not, of course, succeed in deflecting Polyeucte from his purpose, but Polyeucte’s tears are a sign to her that he has not ceased loving her and a promise that she need not, like Dido, be left behind. The sharp dichotomy seen in the Aeneid, where the hero conceals all of his emotions and the heroine none of hers, gives way in Polyeucte to a more evolved and temperate decorum shared by both lovers, a decorum that mitigates the pain of separation by affirming, on another level, the survival of their union: Pauline hates her husband’s “error,” not Polyeucte himself; Polyeucte accepts separation from his wife in this world, but prays for reunion with her in the next.

The other roles in the play may also be seen as part of a rectification of book 4 of the Aeneid. Néarque, for example, functions as the modern equivalent of Mercury, the divine messenger sent by Jove to warn Aeneas. Like his ancient counterpart, Néarque admonishes the hero not to neglect his mission for love of a woman, but rather to break away decisively and without further delay:

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tu nunc Karthaginis altae
fundamenta locas pulchramque uxorius urbem
extruis, heu, regni rerumque oblite tuarum?
ipse deum tibi me claro demittit Olympo
regnator, caelum et terras qui numine torquet,
ipse haec ferre iubet celeris mondata per auras:
quid struis, aut qua spe Libycis teris otia terris?
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(ll. 265–71)

What are you doing,
Forgetful of your kingdom and your fortunes,
Building for Carthage? Woman-crazy fellow,
The ruler of the gods, the great compeller
Of heaven and earth, has sent me from Olympus
With no more word than this: what are you doing,
With what ambition [are you] wasting time in Libya?

(p. 96)
Quoi? vous vous arrêtez aux songes d’une femme!
De si foibles sujets troublent cette grande âme!

(1. 1. 1–2)

Quoi? vous mêler aux voeux d’une troupe infidèle!
Oubliez-vous déjà que vous êtes chrétien?

(2. 6. 638–39)

non fugis hinc praeceps, dum praecepitare potestas?

heia age, rumpe moras. varium et mutabile semper femina.

(ll. 565–70)

Seize the moment
While it can still be seized, and hurry, hurry!

Shove off, be gone! A shifty, fickle object
Is woman, always.

(p. 107)

. . . ce qu’on diffère est à demi rompu.
Romppez ses premiers coups [=ceux du diable]; laissez pleurer Pauline.
Dieu ne veut point d’un coeur que le monde domine.

(1. 1. 64–66)

Hâtez-vous donc de l’être [=d’être chrétien].

(1. 1. 93)

Fuyez.

—Je ne puis.
—Il le faut:
Fuyez un ennemi qui sait votre défaut.

(1. 1. 103–4)

Perhaps the major rectification regarding Néarque has to do with the status of the messenger as compared with that of the hero. In the Aeneid, the messenger is divine; the hero, mortal—a traditional contrast that Tasso retains in the Gerusalemme, where the messenger is the angel Gabriel. In Polyeucte, God manifests himself and his truth by sending down to mankind, not a god-like messenger with a specific message, but rather an extraordinary capacity by which ordinary men may understand God’s message for themselves. This capacity, grace, figures prominently in each of the two main scènes between Polyeucte
and Néarque. In act 1 Néarque argues that his friend has already received the grace of God, but stands in danger of losing it if he fails to act on it at once:

\[
\begin{align*}
& \ldots \text{sa grâce} \\
& \text{Ne descend pas toujours avec même efficace;} \\
& \text{Le bras qui la versoit en devient plus avare,} \\
& \text{Et cette sainte ardeur qui doit porter au bien} \\
& \text{Tombe plus rarement, ou n'opère plus rien.}
\end{align*}
\]

(1. 1. 29–36)

In act 2, on the other hand, it is Polyeucte, fresh from baptism, who enjoys the purer state of grace. Consequently the new convert now begins to play the role of "messenger" himself and, in a curious reversal, enlightens Néarque just as, before, Néarque had enlightened him. In the \textit{Aeneid} it would have been inappropriate for the hero to contradict Mercury and unthinkable for him to appear superior in any way. In \textit{Polyeucte}, however, since all divinity is lodged in God and God's grace, it is natural that the hero should surpass his original, human mentor.\(^9\)

In fact Polyeucte overrules his friend on another matter even before receiving the gift of baptismal grace. Like Mercury, Néarque takes a very dim view of women and consequently of love. In the \textit{Aeneid} no countervailing argument is heard, from either the hero or the poet. Corneille, however, intends to save Pauline, and he lays the groundwork for her salvation in the very first scene of the play, where Polyeucte speaks up in defense both of his wife and of the legitimate pleasures of the conjugal bed:

\[
\begin{align*}
& \text{Mais vous ne savez pas ce que c'est qu'une femme:} \\
& \text{Ni le juste pouvoir qu'elle prend sur une âme,} \\
& \text{Quand après un long temps qu'elle a su nous charmer,} \\
& \text{Les flambeaux de l'hymen viennent de s'allumer.}
\end{align*}
\]

(1. 1. 9–12)

Though a Christian, Néarque seems to be clinging still to an earlier, pagan conception of love or to a conception of heroic mission that at least tends to exclude love for a woman. In the matter of love, Polyeucte knows more than Néarque from the outset; and this knowledge can be taken as another sign of Polyeucte's superiority.

The epic and the play alike focus primarily on the story of a
hero who, at the instigation of some divine power, abandons a woman in order to fulfill his mission. The "rectified" couple exemplify a new, enhanced decorum; more tenderness, more understanding mark all their relations with each other, moderating the effect of the breach that opens up between them and preparing the way for their eventual reunion in the faith of Christ. The process of rectification extends beyond this central story, however, and embraces also a secondary story that revolves around the hero's rival. The rival in book 4 of the Aeneid is Iarbas, a neighboring king who is also the son of Jove. Vergil gives this role nowhere near the prominence that Corneille lends to the role of Sévère in Polyeucte; but the situations and themes are so close that one can see the derivation—and the accompanying rectification—very clearly, nevertheless. Iarbas figures four times in the action of book 4, usually as an unseen agent. At the beginning Anna mentions him as the most important of the various suitors whom Dido, before meeting Aeneas, had always rejected out of fidelity to the memory of her slain husband, Sychaeus (ll. 36–38). The next we hear of Iarbas is as a motivating force behind Aeneas's departure: for it is Iarbas who, angered by news of Dido's liaison with the Trojan hero, has complained to his father, Jove, thereby precipitating the dispatch of Mercury to warn Aeneas not to stay any longer in Carthage (ll. 195–218). The two remaining mentions of Iarbas both have to do with possible complications once Aeneas has left. Dido foresees either that Iarbas will do her harm out of a spirit of vengeance (ll. 325–26) or that she will have to agree to marry him (ll. 534–36). It is in part to avoid this very fate that she decides instead to commit suicide. The parallels with Polyeucte are not hard to see: both Iarbas and Sévère are rivals from the past who constitute some sort of threat for the present and future, particularly for the woman. Inside the framework of overall similarity, the differences are many and obvious, however. Aeneas and Iarbas never meet in the Aeneid; Polyeucte and Sévère not only do meet but come to admire and eventually to try to help one another, Polyeucte by offering Pauline to Sévère, Sévère by agreeing to intervene to save Polyeucte. More important, Sévère and Pauline confront each other on a much higher ethical plane than Iarbas and Dido, without loss to the play of any of the sense of danger associated, in the epic, with the rival's possible or likely retaliation.
Corneille accomplishes this rectification largely through the character of Félix.

When Pauline rejected Sévère and then married Polyeucte, she was not acting as a free agent, as Dido was when she refused Iarbas's offer of marriage and then entered into a liaison with Aeneas. Pauline had been totally dependent on her father; and it is thus Félix who, in the play, bears the responsibility for the affront to the rival. As a consequence, it is also he who most fears the rival's vengeance. Félix's dread of what might happen when Sévère learns of Pauline's marriage becomes a central theme and a key motive force in the play; and it is connected with the problem of reading Sévère's character for what it really is. Pauline has seen her former suitor in a dream, "la vengeance à la main" (I. 222); and Félix is panic-stricken upon learning of Sévère's approach: "Que ne permettra-t-il à son ressentiment?" (I. 324). Even Sévère's confidant, Fabian, tries to dissuade his friend from meeting with the married Pauline: "Vous vous échapperez sans doute en sa présence: /Un amant qui perd tout n'a plus de complaisance" (II. 437–38). Pauline herself somewhat later expresses similar fears about how Sévère and Polyeucte may react when they confront each other in the temple ceremony: "Adieu: vous l'y verrez; pensez à son pouvoir,/Et vous resouvez que sa faveur est grande" (II. 632–33). These fears and these precautions all rest on the assumption that Sévère, the rejected suitor, may well resort to vengeance, may act, that is, more or less like Iarbas.

Pauline is not always so fearful as in the two instances cited above; and she tries to reassure her father at the outset that Sévère is "trop généreux" to think of taking vengeance. It is Polyeucte, however, who has the greatest faith in Sévère:

Et je ne pense pas qu'on puisse avec raison
D'un coeur tel que le sien craindre une trahison.

Allez, tout son crédit n'a rien que j'appréhende;
Et comme je connais sa générosité,
Nous ne nous combattrons que de civilité.

(2. 4–5. 603–4, 634–36)

The revelation of Sévère's true nobility of character and the confirmation of Polyeucte's faith in him come out in two key scenes with Pauline: during their first interview when, contrary
to what Fabian predicted, Sévère does not “s’écapper” nor lose his sense of “complaisance”; then, later, during the scene in act 4, when Sévère not only relinquishes all hope of gaining Pauline for himself, but accedes to her plea that he try to save Polyeucte, his rival.

Félix, who witnesses neither of these interviews, persists in anticipating the worst of Sévère, however. “Il est homme, et sensible, et je l’ai dédaigné,” he says to his confidant at the end of act 3, in a scene that represents, ethically speaking, the lowest point in the play’s action:

Et des mépris reçus son esprit indigné,
Que met au désespoir cet hymen de Pauline,
Du courroux de Décie obtiendroit ma ruine.
Pour venger un affront tout semble être permis,
Et les occasions tentent les plus remis.

(3. 5. 1035–40)

And he reiterates these fears later on, just before the catastrophe:

Peut-être dès demain, dès la nuit, dès ce soir,
J’en verrois des effets que je ne veux pas voir;
Et Sévère aussitôt, courant à sa vengeance,
M’iroit calomnier de quelque intelligence.
Il faut rompre ce coup, qui me seroit fatal.

(5. 1. 1497–1501)

In the Aeneid it is Iarbas’s complaint to Jove, king of the gods, that undoes the happiness of Dido. Sévère does not in fact appeal for redress to the emperor Décie; but Félix is afraid that he might, and that fear alone suffices to precipitate the tragedy. Just as Rodogune preserves the death of the mother—common both to the historical incident and to the Electra legend—while freeing the son of any blame, so here in Polyeucte the end point of the action in book 4 of the Aeneid—the separation of the lovers—remains intact, but the “acheminements” leading up to it have undergone a radical change that frees not only the hero but the heroine and the rival also from any blame. Sévère lives up to his hard-sounding name (and resembles his Vergilian counterpart) only once in the play, when he explodes in anger at Félix for not having believed his professions of good faith and for having sent Polyeucte accordingly to his death:
La faveur que pour lui je vous avois offerte,
Au lieu de le sauver, précipite sa perte!
J'ai prié, menacé, mais sans vous émouvoir;
Et vous m'avez cru fourbe ou de peu de pouvoir!
Eh bien! à vos dépens vous saurez que Sévere
Ne se vante jamais que de ce qu'il peut faire;
Et par votre ruine il vous fera juger
Que qui peut bien vous perdre eût pu vous protéger.

(5. 6. 1751–58)

Without the obtuseness of Félix, the play could not end as it does with a catastrophe for which none of the three principal heroes need bear responsibility. Félix is clearly a scapegoat figure and, just as clearly, an essential element in the play's rectification of the *Aeneid*. It is perhaps in secret recognition of this character's usefulness that Corneille finally "saves" Félix too—through a conversion to the Christian faith that effectively releases him from the threat spoken above by Sévere.¹⁰

*Polyeucte*, in conclusion, is clearly an unacknowledged (that is, hidden) rectification of book 4 of the *Aeneid*. All the major characters, all the important incidents serve to link the play to Vergil’s epic and, at the same time, delineate significant differences between the two works. It remains to be seen, in the next chapter, why Corneille chose to modernize the Vergilian text in this fashion.