CHAPTER III

Polyeucte: Vergil and Tasso

TO INDICATE THE PRESENCE OF RECTIFICATION, AS I attempted to do in the previous chapter, is not, of course, to explain it. For explanation, one has to seek answers to two questions: What motivated the poet's decision to work with a particular text; and what motivated the particular means by which he chose to "rectify" it? In the case of the little tragedy in *L'Illusion comique*, one can suppose that Corneille chose to revise elements of the story of Medea because he had just come from writing * Médée*. The story was fresh in his mind, and it would be natural for him to be interested in exploring other dramatic possibilities that might be found in the material. One can posit also that the playwright transposed the Medea story to a vaguely modern setting (or perhaps to a neutral setting, one at least that is not presented as ancient), in order to bring the action closer to the audience's normal frame of reference (as he had done in two of his comedies, for example, by setting them forthrightly in Paris). To this, one would have to add that the little tragedy in act 5 is only a small part of a more complex work that altogether constitutes both a summary of the playwright's own past achievements and a manifesto expressing the poet's faith in the theater and in his own talent. Concerning *Polyeucte*, one might cite the prestige of Vergil, the *Aeneid*, and its famous lovers as possible reasons for Corneille to have been drawn to the subject. And the hidden rectification of * Médée* in *L'Illusion comique* could serve as precedent for transposing the material borrowed from Vergil. Why the playwright should have chosen to situate the Vergilian story in a Christian, hagiographical setting is less easy to understand, however. Corneille was a devout Christian; and there had
been a few (though not many) plays with religious themes on the profane stage, that is, outside the colleges, where, on the contrary, the genre flourished. But in adapting *Le Cid*, he had taken care to excise all the specifically Christian elements found in the work of Guillén de Castro. The Christian subject of *Polyeucte* represents a deliberate reversal, then, of the poet's earlier attitude toward treating religion on the stage; and the reason for this reversal is not immediately apparent. This question, as well as several others, is clarified, however, if we examine *Polyeucte* and its rectification of Vergil in the context of the Quarrel of the *Cid* and its consequences.

The theory of rectification as the seventeenth century understood it rests, as we have seen, on the dual assumption that the poet is always free to alter history but morally bound to alter it only for the better. In the *Cid* Corneille had erred in retaining intact certain offensive elements inherited from history; but Scudéry had also been at fault, in a different way, when he claimed that the poet could not change historical fact. Chapelain believed that out of literary contention one could sometimes gain a clearer insight into the mysteries of poetical creation. The theory of rectification constitutes one of the key dialectical discoveries of the *Sentiments*, and Chapelain presents it in the form of a double response to Scudéry and Corneille. Because he views criticism, like literature, as a continuing development in history, he invokes the example of earlier poetical practice and earlier critical response in adumbrating his own modern theory. Though, as we saw earlier, he cites both Vergil and Tasso as authorities, it is Vergil and book 4 of the *Aeneid* that figure most prominently in the critic's thought at this point.

Chapelain begins by recalling the fact, well known in literary history at the time, that Vergil had radically altered historical fact in recounting the story of Dido and Aeneas:

Le Poète ne considère dans l'histoire que la vraie-semblance des evenemens, sans se rendre esclave des circonstances qui en accompagnent la vérité. De manière que pourvu qu'il soit vraie-semblable que plusieurs actions se soient aussi bien peu faire conjointement que séparément, il est libre au Poète de les rapprocher, si par ce moyen il peut rendre son Ouvrage plus merveilleux. Il ne faut point d'autre preuve de cette doctrine que l'exemple de Virgile dans sa Didon, qui selon tous
The two-hundred-year discrepancy mentioned by Chapelain may be exaggerated. In any event, the historical figures of Dido and Aeneas did live in different times and could never in fact have known each other. Moreover, though the real Dido had indeed founded Carthage, she had killed herself only to honor a commitment to the memory of Sychaeus, her husband, and to avoid a forced marriage to Iarbas. Vergil probably chose Dido as his heroine because he wanted to include within his poem some kind of explanation for the age-old hostility between Rome and Carthage; then, once he had chosen her, he remodeled the character along the lines of earlier literary heroines like Calypso, Nausicaa, and especially Medea, all of whom function as obstacles of foreign extraction impeding the progress of the hero toward his rightful goal (Pease, ed., *Aeneidos Liber Quartus*, pp. 12–14). For all we know, Vergil may in fact have started with a literary model and then sought some kind of historical equivalent. Through the ages, however, critics have tended to assume the opposite and, as Chapelain does, have stressed the changes made in the historical sources of the poem.

Most readers of the *Aeneid*, one must assume, never questioned Vergil’s procedures in book 4, even if they knew enough to be aware of them. They simply gave themselves over to the beauty and poetic truth of the story, like Macrobius, who said: “Indeed, the beauty of Vergil’s narrative has so far prevailed that, although all are aware of the Phoenician queen and know that she laid hands on herself to save her good name, still they turn a blind eye to the fiction, suppress in their minds the evidence of the truth, and choose rather to regard as true the tale which the charm of a poet’s imagination has inplanted in the heart of mankind” (*Saturnalia*, 5.17.6). Others, however, were not so quick as Macrobius to excuse Vergil. Several Christian writers from Africa—Tertullian, Minucius Felix, and Jerome in particular—were disturbed that Vergil had sullied the reputation of a chaste queen; and from the protestations of these critics emerged in time the tradition of a chaste, historical Dido alongside that of
the unchaste, Vergilian Dido. Boccaccio, Petrarch, Buchanan, and others had kept alive the memory of an innocent Dido in the modern era, so much so that in 1641, only a few years after the Quarrel, Boisrobert wrote a play called La Vraye Didon ou la Didon chaste, perhaps intended to counterbalance the Vergilian Didon of Scudéry that had been published in 1637, when the Quarrel over the Cid was still raging.²

The ongoing debate over the two Didos contained, in any event, all the elements necessary to formulate the theory of rectification; it remained only to set them in the proper relationship to each other, which is what Chapelain accomplished in the following page from the Sentiments:

Ainsi l’Observateur, selon nostre avis, ne conclut pas bien quant il dit, que le Cid n’est pas un bon sujet de Poème Dramatique, pour ce qu’estant historique, et par consequent veritable, il ne pouvoit estre changé, ny rendu propre au théatre, d’autant que si Virgile par exemple a bien fait d’une honnesté femme une femme impudique, sans qu’il fust necessaire, il auroit bien peu estre permis à un autre de faire pour l’utilité publique d’un mariage extravagant un qui fust raisonnable; en y apportant les ajustemens, et y prenant les bihais qui en pouvoient corriger les defauts. (Gaste, p. 368)

Chapelain stops short of joining those who blame Vergil, on moral grounds, for having traduced Dido, but he makes it clear that nowadays a poet would be well advised to strive to achieve the highest decorum possible:

Nous scavons bien que quelques-uns ont blasmé Virgile d’en avoir usé de la sorte, mais outre que nous doutons si l’opinion de ces Censeurs est recevable, et s’ils connoissoient autant que luy jusqu’où s’estend la juridiction de la Poesie, nous croyons encore que s’ils l’ont blasmé ce n’a pas esté d’avoir simplement alteré l’histoire, mais de l’avoir alteré de bien en mal; de maniere qu’ils ne l’ont pas accusé proprement d’avoir peché contre l’Art en changeant la verité, mais contre les bonnes moeures en diffamant une personne, qui avoit mieux aimé mourir que de vivre diffamée. Il en fust arrivé tout au contraire dans le changement qu’on eust peu faire au sujet du Cid puis qu’on eust corrigé les mauvaises moeures qui se trouvent dans l’histoire, et qu’on les eust rendües bonnes par la Poësie pour l’utilité du Public. (Gaste, pp. 368-69)

Elsewhere, at the close of the Sentiments, as we have al-
ready seen, Chapelain says that poets and critics alike must be judged, in part, in relation to the time in which they lived. Flaws that only since have come to be perceived as such remain flaws, but cannot in justice be held against earlier poets; modern poets, however, must beware of imitating what they, now, should be able to recognize clearly as flaws. The implication for Corneille was clear: the enthusiastic acceptance of the Cid by persons of literary sensitivity and good taste suggested that it, like the Aeneid, was a poem containing, along with some possible flaws, a store of genuine poetic truth and beauty. Profiting from the controversy occasioned by the attacks on the Cid, Corneille easily could, and obviously should, take steps in the future to avoid the kind of flaws that had marred the Cid. He had not, like Vergil, gone so far as to invent his heroine’s shortcomings; he had only kept a shocking marriage provided by history. But he could employ the poet’s right to invent, a right guaranteed in the Aeneid, to go even further and to improve upon history. The requirement that action be bienséante as well as vraisemblable was in the nature of a newly emerged (or emerging) rule for the poet; it was a way of reconciling the various demands of poetry and morality, a means of pleasing both the ardent admirers of Vergil (like Macrobius) and the dissenters on ethical grounds (like Tertullian and Jerome). Corneille, in short, was being urged to keep the dramatic effectiveness achieved in the Cid while adding to it a stricter, more appropriate heroic decorum.

Polyeucte fulfils just such a purpose. More than that, it shows that it is fulfilling that purpose by revising the very materials of book 4 of the Aeneid. The play in effect combines the traditions of the two Didos and gives us a chaste Dido who nevertheless meets and falls in love with, and marries, her Aeneas. If Vergil had done the same, Tertullian and Jerome would have joined Macrobius in unstinted praise of the Aeneid. By this combination of the two Didos, Corneille, for his part, stood to silence the critics of the Cid and perhaps win the ultimate prize of universal acclaim. The point where Polyuecte most obviously reflects the Quarrel and the Sentiments in particular would appear to be the scene in act 4 where Pauline rejects the idea of marriage to Sévère after the death of Polyuecte. This situation is the exact parallel of the situation in which the real, chaste Dido found herself; but Corneille has so beautifully meshed the his-
torical chaste Dido with the corrected Dido derived from Vergil that one cannot detect any difference at all between the two. On the other hand, Pauline’s very strict sense of propriety is in clear contrast to Chimène’s (to some) shocking hesitations at the end of the Cid. The new heroine, far from yielding to temptation, as Corneille’s critics said Chimène was guilty of doing, takes a position of the utmost severity and refuses a marriage that even her husband has tried to urge upon her. Polyêucte acts, then, to correct the Cid by means of rectifying book 4 of the Aeneid.

The idea was not, of course, to cast blame on Vergil. If such had been the playwright’s aim, he obviously would not have concealed the rectification as he does. The point was to join the march of poetry through history as deliberately as possible, to exploit what was best in the poetic tradition handed down from antiquity, to learn from past errors and even perhaps to profit from the storm over the Cid, so that eventually one might add significantly to the treasury of great poetry available to man. Other great poets of the past might have been able to help Corneille to this goal just as well as Vergil. But by general consensus, Vergil was the greatest poet who had ever lived. The fact that the greatest epic poem of all time had, by coincidence, raised some of the same sorts of criticism as those leveled against the Cid made it natural that Corneille would pay special attention, after the Sentiments, to book 4 of the Aeneid. The decision to rectify the story of Dido and Aeneas itself, however, implies not just a desire to advance beyond the Cid, but a firm determination on the part of the playwright to impose upon himself in the process the most stringent of theoretical exigencies conceivable.

There remains the related question of why Corneille decided to retell the Vergilian story through the life of a Christian saint. Though Chapelain laid on the poet the obligation to make changes only for the better, nowhere did he advise Christian themes or even explicitly Christian standards of behavior. He did, as we have seen, encourage Corneille to ponder certain of the lessons of Tasso’s career, however; and if Corneille acted on this advice and turned to Tasso, particularly to the Discorsi, as seems likely, he would have found there in the theory of the successor to Vergil a magnificent supplement to the Sentiments—a grander, bolder, more poetic, and more imaginative
articulation of Chapelain's most cherished ideas, a modern poetics of unquestioned authority.

The Discorsi is in fact two fairly substantially different works. The Discorsi dell'arte poetica, written perhaps as early as 1561-62 but not published until 1587 (six years after the Gerusalemme) contains three books devoted one each to the invention, disposition, and poetic ornamentation of heroic subjects. The Discorsi del poema eroico of 1594, on the other hand, is an expansion of the earlier work and, among other things, an attempt to answer critics of the Gerusalemme. Not much has been changed from the youthful version, but a great deal has been added: an introductory chapter, lengthy passages in the sections on invention and disposition (now books 2 and 3) and a much fuller treatment of elocution in three books rather than the original one. The shorter work has the advantage of greater coherence, but the mature richness of Tasso's thought in the Discorsi del poema eroico makes the later work more valuable. In 1639 Jean Baudoin translated and appended to the end of his Recueil d'emblemes divers (pp. 577-619) a short text of Tasso's entitled, rather misleadingly, "Du poème heroique": it is in reality only book 1 of the Discorsi dell'arte poetica, on the invention or discovery of heroic subjects for poetry. Italian versions of one or the other of the Discorsi were available, however; and, if he did not already own a copy, Corneille would have had no trouble finding one to buy or borrow. In what follows I shall refer to the expanded treatise, the Discorsi del poema eroico, as edited by Poma.

Tasso's remarks on the choice of a properly heroic subject are predicated on two main assumptions: the poet must be free to manipulate his material so as to produce the desired aesthetic effect; and he must aim at the marvelous without loss of verisimilitude. The subject, to begin with, must be exceptionally illustrious (p. 101). Inasmuch as it is improbable that great noble deeds should have gone unnoticed and unrecorded, the poet ought to draw his subject from history (p. 84), and more specifically from an era neither so recent as to inhibit his freedom to introduce changes nor so remote as to seem excessively alien to the audience (pp. 98-99). The subject should also be based on true religion. True religion, for one thing, serves to rationalize
the marvelous, which is indispensable. Religious subjects of a sacred nature, however, cannot be modified in any way and therefore should be avoided (pp. 93, 98). Love, provided it is noble and not base, is very appropriate (pp. 104–8). And though tragic heroes must have a flaw, epic heroes represent, and must embody, the highest virtues conceivable; in the modern era, epic heroes must therefore necessarily be Christian: “Laonde proporrei de gran lunga la persona di Carlo e d'Artu a quella di Teseo e di Giasone” (p. 98). These requirements are obviously designed to fit and to justify the Gerusalemme in particular; except for the matter of the tragic hero's having to have a tragic flaw, they also apply very well to Polyeucte, however, even though the time-frame in the play is Christian Rome rather than the Middle Ages.

Tasso includes much more than practical advice about choosing a subject, however; in books 2 and 3 he develops, rather at random but still quite clearly, a fully articulated theory of literary history that sets the modern poet into meaningful relationship with the greatest poets of antiquity. Thus, in the process of refuting the idea that romance, a new form, is essentially different from epic poetry—a burning question in the debate of the Gerusalemme versus the Orlando furioso—Tasso is at pains to distinguish between those poetic elements, such as the unity of the fable, that he deems constant generic requirements, and other elements, including decorum especially, that are subject to change:

È la natura stabilissima nelle sue operazioni, e procede sempre con un tenore certo e perpetuo (se non quanto per difetto e inconstanza della materia si vede talor variare), perché, guidata da un lume e da una scorta infallibile, riguarda sempre il buono e il perfetto; ed essendo il buono e il perfetto sempre il medesimo, conviene che il suo modo di operare sia sempre l'istesso. Opera della natura è la bellezza, la qual consistendo in certa proporzione di membra con grandezza convenevole e con vaga soavità di colori, queste condizioni, che belle per se stesse una volta furono, belle sempre saranno, né potrebbe l'uso fare ch'altrimente paessero; si come all'incontro non può far l'uso sì che belli paiano i capi aguzzi o i gosì fra quelle nazioni ove si vegghiano nella maggior parte degli uomini e delle donne . . . .
Topica la natura e l'arte sono annoverate fra le cagioni le quali hanno costanza, perché non sogliono variare i loro effetti. . . . (pp. 135-36)

Le cose poi, che dall'usanza dependono, come la maniera dell'armeggia, i modi dell'avventure, i costumi de' sacrifici e de' conviti, le cerimonie, il decoro e la maestà delle persone, queste, dico, come piace all'usanza che oggi vive e signoreggia il mondo, si possono accomodare. (p. 136)

It would be inappropriate today, Tasso says, for the daughter of a king to go to wash clothes in the river like Nausicaa; and Trissino was rightly blamed for imitating Homer in things that changing custom has rendered less praiseworthy.

Notable among those things, besides unity, that Tasso tends to view as constants are poetic talent (in the sense that it can occur in its absolute fullness in any age) and such basic genres as epic poetry and tragedy. There is a very brief passage that might be construed as leaving the door open, not to the creation of new genres, but at least to the emergence of permutations hitherto neglected (p. 132). On the whole, however, Tasso is very conservative as to genres; and he repeats several times the idea that epic and tragedy are differentiated both by their modes (one being narrated, the other represented) and also by their subject matters (epic with a perfect, tragedy with a flawed, hero). The question of high poetic competence he discusses in relation to two non-artistic factors that define and, in certain ages, limit it to some extent:

Replicherò in questo luogo quel che altre volte ho detto, cioè che l'eccellentissimo poema è proprio solamente della eccellentissima forma di governo. Questa è il regno; ma il regno non può esser ottimamente governato con falsa religione. Conviene adunque all'ottimo regno la vera religione; e ove sia falsa pietà e falso culto d'Iddio, non può essere alcuna perfezione nel principe o nel principato. Però i poemi ancora partecipano dell'istessa imperfezione; ma il difetto non è dell'arte poetica, ma della politica, non del poeta, ma de' legislatori. (p. 95)

This important distinction allows Tasso to praise Homer and Vergil as supreme poets at the same time that he notes the presence in their poems of certain imperfections deriving from the
times in which the poets lived. We have seen much this same combination of veneration for the Ancients and recognition of their necessary limitations elsewhere, in the Sentiments of Chapelain: "Ceux qui viennent apres [les Anciens] heritent bien de leurs richesses, mais non pas de leurs privileges, et les vices d'Euripide ou de Seneque ne scauroient faire approuver ceux de Guillen de Castro." The job of the poet, as Tasso sees it, is to cling to what is true and valid in the works of the Ancients but to change what is outmoded or discredited: "In questa parte non fu lodato il Trissino, ch'imitò in Omero quelle cose ancora che avea rendute men lodevoli la mutazione de' costumi" (p. 137).

If certain things remain constant in poetry, other things change, then; and the history of poetry is in large part an evolutionary process, in which Vergil or the Aeneid appears as the intermediary stage between the very archaic and the modern. On the matter of variety of incident, for example, a central theme in the debate over the relative merits of Ariosto and Tasso, Tasso adopts a moderately modernistic stance:

Non era per aventura così necessaria questa varietà a tempi di Virgilio e d'Omero, essendo gli uomini di quel secolo di gusto non così isvogliato; però non tanto v'attesero; maggiore nondimeno in Virgilio che in Omero si ritrova. Gratissima era a' nostri tempi, e perciò devevano i nostri poeti co' sapori di questa varietà condire i loro poemi, volendo che da questi gusti si delicati non fossero schivati. . . . (p. 139)

The only check to this increasing emphasis on variety of incident is the absolute requirement, never subject to changing taste, that a poem, however numerous its episodes, must still show a clear unity of structure: "ma che nondimeno uno sia il poema che tanta varietà di materie contegna, una la forma e l'anima sua . . . " (p. 140). Of more interest to a student of Polyheucte, however, are a series of remarks concerning evolving heroic decorum in epic heroes. Aeneas, Tasso points out, is shown to bear intense physical pain (from a leg wound) with much greater fortitude and restraint than such earlier heroes as Hercules and Prometheus, who moan and groan at great length. Since a minor character of the Iliad, Eurypylus, is said to have resembled Aeneas in this respect, the sense of evolution in the hero's behavior is somewhat blurred, however (pp. 151-52).
More to the point is an extended passage in book 3 dealing with the moral aspects of the ending of the *Aeneid*, in which Aeneas ignores Turnus's pleas for mercy and runs him through with a sword. This passage of the *Discorsi*, known commonly as the "Difesa di Virgilio," was accidentally dropped by the printer, so that Corneille could not have read Tasso's conclusion, which exonerates Vergil on the grounds that he lived before the time of Christ and, in any event, represented, on this score, a marked improvement over Homer: "Giusta fu dunque la vendetta e lecita al cavaliero gentile (il quale non può esser riputato crudele da' gentili, o in comparazione degli altri), e molto più convenevole che la vendetta fatta d'Achille" (p. 160). The beginning of this comparison, which was not dropped, makes it clear enough, however, that Tasso viewed Aeneas as, on moral grounds, a superior epic hero to Achilles: "Ma Virgilio, se non m'inganno, vide meglio il decoro generale, perché formò in Enea la pietà, la religione, la continenza, la forza, la magnanimità, la giustizia e ciascun'altra virtù di cavaliero; e in questo particolare il fece maggiore del fero Achille . . . " (p. 156).

Another transformation that interests Tasso has to do with love, the theme of which he sees growing steadily in importance from Homer to Vergil to modern writers of epic and romance. Not only, however, does the sheer amount of attention paid to the amorous emotion change over time, so also does the nature of love itself. In the beginning men viewed love as little more than concupiscence and so subordinated it to the irascible faculty and to reason. Given the frame of reference, it is understandable that Homer should have taken wrath as his theme rather than love. As Saint Thomas has since shown—thus refuting Plato—there exists, however, a higher, nobler love that is not an appetite but a function of the will. This love, Tasso maintains, has in fact superseded wrath as the most appropriate, most praiseworthy of all heroic virtues: "Ma gli antichi o non conobbero questo amore, o non volsero descriverlo ne gli eroi; ma se non onorarono l'amore come virtù umana, l'adorarono quasi divina; però, niuna altra dovevano stimar più, conveniente a gli eroi. Laonde azioni eroiche ci potranno parer, oltre l'altra, quelle che son fatte per amore" (p. 106). This new type of love includes, but is not restricted to, the love that martyrs show for Christ: "Ma i poeti moderni, se non vogliono descriver la divinità dell'amore
in quelli ch'espongono la vita per Cristo, possono ancora, nel formarvi un cavaliere, descriverci l'amore come un abito costante della volontà . . . ” (p. 106). Tasso makes no overt reference to the *Gerusalemme liberata*, but his remarks on the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid* clearly serve to account for his own poem, both in its resemblance to its two earlier models and also in its *differentiae*. The basic rules of the epic genre are unchanging, and Tasso obviously is not going to claim a higher degree of poetic skill than Vergil or Homer possessed. Coming after them, being a poet of the Christian era, however, he carries with him the advantage of knowing, as his predecessors could not, what the true religion and what the highest virtues are. Though Paolo Beni, extrapolating still further, will reach the conclusion that the *Gerusalemme* therefore is a greater poem than either the *Aeneid* or the *Iliad*, Tasso himself does not transgress the bounds of modesty. Nevertheless the *Discorsi*, especially in its expanded version, is clearly an apology for the *Gerusalemme*, or at least for the kind of epic that Tasso wrote in the *Gerusalemme*.

The view of literary history that emerges from the *Discorsi* involves more than rectification as understood by Chapelain. Vergil, as Tasso saw it, understood heroic decorum better than Homer, just as he himself, as a Christian poet, saw truths that even Vergil had failed to grasp. Yet he does not speak of one poet’s “correcting” the imperfections or deficiencies of another. He sees poets as belonging to their age and each age as perceiving certain truths with less or more clarity. There is in the *Discorsi* a strong sense of cultural or ethical or religious evolution or progress; and this movement carries with it whole peoples, including their greatest poets. Chapelain’s argument for rectification suffers from being at once too specific (too tied to the particular flaws of the *Cid*) and too abstract (too random and too vague as to its mode of operation and its ultimate justification). Tasso’s view, more comprehensive and far nobler in conception, proposes, in place of mere rectification, the magnificent image of the world’s greatest poets *succeeding* one another across the ages, each one doing all that it is possible to do in his own time.

*Polyeucte* conforms almost perfectly with Tasso’s prescriptions for heroic poetry and in several ways seems even to echo passages in the *Discorsi*. Corneille had received permission to dedicate the play to Louis XIII; when the king died, the play-
wright addressed his dedicatory letter instead to Anne of Austria, Louis's widow. It was the first and only time in his long career that Corneille dedicated a work to a monarch. (The *Imitation de Jésus-Christ* would be dedicated, however, to the pope, Alexander VII.) The queen's piety and her exalted position set her quite apart, in Corneille's mind, from all other mortals; only the Christian subject matter of *Polyeucte* justified his desire to seek for it the royal protection:

> Toutes les fois que j'ai mis sur notre scène des vertus morales ou politiques, j'en ai toujours cru les tableaux trop peu dignes de paroître devant [Votre Majesté]. . . . Pour rendre les choses proportionnées, il failloit aller à la plus haute espèce, et n'entreprendre pas de rien offrir de cette nature à une reine très-chrétiennne . . . à moins que de lui offrir un portrait des vertus chrétiennes dont l'amour et la gloire de Dieu forment les plus beaux traits, et qui rendent les plaisirs qu'elle y pourra prendre aussi propres à exercer sa piété qu'à délasser son esprit. (*Oeuvres*, 3:472)

The most illustrious themes for heroic poetry, Tasso thought, must necessarily involve Christianity; and the ideal conditions for the heroic poet included living under a Christian monarch (p. 95). *Polyeucte*’s Christian subject and the playwright’s dedication of the work to the queen thus realize the fundamental aims of the *Discorsi*.

In the Examen, Corneille points out, moreover, that he took care in selecting the subject of *Polyeucte* not to restrict the poet’s prerogative to introduce changes: “Je me suis donné des licences que [Heinsius, Grotius, et Buchanan] n’ont pas prises, de changer l’histoire en quelque chose, et d’y mêler des épisodes d’invention” (*Oeuvres* 3:480). The fact that their subjects had been biblical and his merely hagiographical explains and justifies the different procedures because “nous ne devons qu’une croyance pieuse à la vie des saints, et nous avons le même droit sur ce que nous en tironn pour le porter au théâtre, que sur ce que nous empruntons des autres histoires; mais nous devons une foi chrétienne et indispensable à tout ce qui est dans la Bible, qui ne nous laisse aucune liberté d’y rien changer.” Tasso had made the same distinction that Corneille makes here, and for the same purposes: “Ma l’istorie e le scritture sono sacre o non sacre; e delle sacre alcune hanno maggior, altre minore
autòrità; maggior autorità hanno l’ecclesiastiche e le spirituali. . . . Nelle istorie [di questa] qualità a pena ardisca il poeta di stender la mano . . . ” (p. 98). Similarly, just as Tasso says in the *Discorsi* that true religion serves to guarantee the credibility of certain marvelous events in the poem (p. 93), so Corneille argues in the Examen that, in the Christian context of his play, the sudden conversions of Pauline and Félix at the end do not transgress the limits of verisimilitude: “Félix . . . se convertit après [Pauline]; et ces deux conversions, quoique miraculeuses, sont si ordinaires dans les martyres, qu’elles ne sortent point de la vraisemblance, parce qu’elles ne sont pas de ces événements rares et singuliers qu’on ne peut tirer en exemple. . . . ”

We have seen how the decorum of the three heroic characters—Polyeucte, Pauline, and Sévere—represents a conscious (and concealed) rectification of the decorum of Aeneas, Dido, and Iarbas in the *Aeneid*. This bears an obvious analogous relationship to the differences that Tasso notes between the ferocity of Achilles and the relative mildness of Aeneas or between the importance of love in ancient and modern epic poems. More specifically, we can see that *Polyeucte* stresses love in two important ways specified by Tasso in the *Discorsi*. Tasso says that the modern poet may content himself with depicting the new, noble form of love as it is exemplified in “un cavaliere,” but its most sublime manifestation is found in the love that impels a man to risk his life for Christ (p. 106). Corneille, in the person of Polyeucte, combines as it were the knight and the martyr, thus achieving the very highest stage of heroic virtue. Tasso, in commenting on the greater role given by Vergil to the theme of love as compared with what one finds in the *Iliad*, goes on to note that, even so, the *Aeneid* gives scant treatment to several amorous situations and characters that modern poets would be sure to exploit more fully. Vergil, he says, has been blamed by some for having feigned the love of Dido and Aeneas (thus besmirching the queen’s reputation): “Parea nondimeno a costoro che Vergilio fosse stato più ristretto e parco che non siamo noi altri, perché molte cose e’ poteva dire dell’amor d’Enea, molte di quello d’Iarba, molte di quello di Turno e di Lavinia, le quali da lui sono tacuite o a pena accennate” (p. 104). The role of Sévere-Iarbas quite clearly agrees with Tasso’s conception of how a modern poet would recreate book 4 of the *Aeneid*. 
There is, however, one very important point on which Polyeucte is not in agreement with the Discorsi. According to Tasso it is the epic hero who must needs be Christian, and, ideally, a martyr in order to illustrate and embody the modern world's highest conception of virtue; the tragic hero, when he is mentioned, is said to be essentially different in that he is not perfect but flawed. Such, Tasso held, were the natural rules of the two genres of epic and tragic poetry:

Richiede la tragedia persone né buone né cattive, ma d'una condizione di mezzo: tale è Oreste, Elettra, Giocasta, Eteocle, Edippo la cui persona fu da Aristotele giudicata attissima alla favola tragica. L'epico all'incontro vuole il sommo delle virtù; però le persone sono eroiche come è la virtù. Si ritrova in Enea l'eccellenza della pietà, della fortezza militare in Achille, della prudenza in Ulisse. (pp. 102–3)

Ma quell'illustre ch'abbiamo detto esser proprio dell'eroico, può esser più o meno illustre: quanto la materia conterra in sé avvenimenti più nobili e più grandi, tanto sarà più disposta all'eccellentissima forma dell'epopeia. (p. 103)

Imitano il romanzo e l'epopeia le medesime azioni, cioè l'illustrì; né solo è fra loro quella convenienza, d'imitar l'illustrì in genere, che è fra l'epico e 'l tragico, ma ancora una più particolare e più stretta d'imitare il medesimo illustre: quello, dico, che non è fondato sovra la grandezza de' fatti orribili e compassionevoli, ma sovra le generose e magnanime azioni degli eroi, e non si determina con le persone di mezzo fra 'l vizio e la virtù, ma elegge le valorose in supremo grado di eccellenza. . . . (p. 130)

Polyeucte is obviously conceived, in the manner of Achilles and Aeneas, as a hero in whom virtue shines forth with unadulterated, sublime power and beauty. He is an epic hero, not a tragic hero of middling goodness, like Oedipus or Orestes. Corneille's remarks on the perfect character of his hero could be—and probably are—directed above all at Tasso in the Discorsi: “Ceux qui veulent arrêter nos héros dans une médiocre bonté, où quelques interprètes d'Aristote bornent leur vertu, ne trouveront pas ici leur compte, puisque celle de Polyeucte va jusqu'à la sainteté, et n'a aucun mélange de foiblesses” (Examen).

There are other differentiae of the epic that Corneille, for the present, leaves alone: namely, the depiction of a group of
wicked persons opposed to a group of virtuous heroes and the ensuing double reversal, whereby the wicked go from good to bad fortune and the virtuous from bad to good; and the arousal, not of pity and fear, but admiration. These, as we shall see, will come in time with La Mort de Pompée and Nicomède. Félix, though he serves much the same narratological function as the evil characters of the modern epic, is not in fact wicked; and his conversion spares him, as we have seen, an imminent fall from “good” to “bad” fortune. As for the emotions aroused by the play, surely they include both pity and admiration as well, perhaps, as fear. Corneille was attracted to epic actions and heroes as early as the Cid and in his next play after Polyeucte, that is, in La Mort de Pompée, he would make open use of an epic source: the Pharsalia of Lucan. In Polyeucte he conceals the link to Vergil’s poem that we have examined in some detail; but he makes no attempt to hide the fact that his hero—a Christian and a martyr—is not a flawed hero.

This represents an essential point of disagreement between Corneille and Tasso. It does not rule out the influence of Tasso on Polyeucte, however; on the contrary, it seems in a way only to confirm it. For if Corneille himself is to join the company of the world’s greatest poets, he must, even as Tasso himself did, reexamine the poetic heritage in whose wake he is traveling, keep what is true and valid, revise what is not, and in general renew rather than repeat the past. By giving his heroes a new, higher, Christian decorum, he rectifies the Aeneid. Since he shares with Tasso the same true religious faith that enlivens both the Gerusalemme and Polyeucte, he cannot aspire to introduce ethical or religious corrections to Tasso. He can, however, challenge the Italian poet’s claim that epic and tragic poetry represent radically distinct genres that ought never to be mixed. I am not suggesting that Corneille would not have created an idealized, epic type hero if he had not read the Discorsi. As we have seen, his interest in ethical rectification goes back as far as L’Illusion comique, not to mention the Cid itself. I mean only to indicate that if Corneille was, in fact, intent on emulating Tasso, he need not have been upset by the idea of differing from Tasso. On the contrary, Tasso’s idea of the succession of great poets implies a constant dialectic, so that by presuming to annex to tragedy certain sublime features that his predecessor had reserved for the epic, Corneille
was really proving how well he had assimilated the main lesson of the Discorsi.

We began in the previous chapter with a reading of Polyeucte based on book 4 of the Aeneid and end here with an examination of the play's relationship to the Discorsi of Tasso. There is, in this ordering, something like a fiction, something arbitrary in any event. For there is no way to tell whether Corneille actually began with the idea of rectifying the Aeneid and from there went on to the idea of recasting book 4 in terms of the life of a Christian saint. He might almost as well have proceeded contrariwise, and in all probability worked from both directions at the same time or in alternation, always adjusting the one perspective to the other. Act 4 of Polyeucte has two moments of sublimity: one, when Polyeucte weeps as he listens to Pauline's sad complaints; the other, a few moments later, when Pauline rejects all prospect of marriage to Sévere and instead enlists his aid in saving Polyeucte. The poetic processes by which the playwright created these and other great scenes in the play must lie forever beyond the ken of criticism to understand in all their complexity. Suffice it to say that the Aeneid, the Discorsi, the Cid, and the Sentiments appear to be useful texts for illuminating some of the central meanings of Polyeucte. Great poets do more than copy old poems or repeat their own earlier successes. They change what they touch, take things somehow always one step further than those who preceded them, become part of the living poetic (and therefore textual) tradition by renewing it. In Polyeucte Corneille makes what seems a conscious bid for greatness, and he calculates carefully his relationships to Vergil, to Tasso, and to the issues raised by the Quarrel at the same time that he takes the risk of striking out boldly on his own. In a more profound sense than Chapelain had meant, Corneille elected to treat his career as a magnificent heroic adventure; and Polyeucte can perhaps best be looked on as the poet's ultimate quest—and at the same time his greatest prize.