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Nina Ekstein

The Conversion of *Polyeucte*'s Félix

The Problem of Religion and Theater

The relationship between religion and theater gave rise in seventeenth-century France to much discussion and dissent, commonly referred to as the *Querelle de la moralité du théâtre*. The 1640s were a rare period during which religious subjects were popular on the French stage; almost all of the major playwrights wrote at least one play that could be thus categorized (Pasquier 201). I propose to examine the friction between the domains of theater and religion through a discussion of the two most enduringly famous religious plays of this period, Pierre Corneille's *Polyeucte* (1643) and Jean Rotrou's *Le Véritable Saint Genest* (1645). I will approach the broader issues by tackling the long-standing problem of Félix's sudden conversion in *Polyeucte*'s final scene.

The quarrel between religion and theater, or more precisely, the objections that religious authorities have to theater, date back to ancient times. Marc Fumaroli argues that the common belief that modern theater has religious roots may be based on a misunderstanding.¹ From the perspective of the seventeenth-century Church the two domains do not have, or perhaps rather should not have, anything in common, religion dealing with the sacred and theater entailing “un contrat mercantile” between actors and the public (450–51). Seventeenth-century thought on the relationship between religion and theater is in line with Plato's reflections on *mimesis* (Thirouin 22). In Platonic thought, the concrete reality of our world is merely a shadowy representation of the ideal, an ideal that is to be found in the higher realm of the divine. Plato and the seventeenth-century religious writers both criticize theater for compounding the distance from the ideal by providing an (inferior) imitation of reality, a reality that is itself but a pale imitation of

the ideal. Thus the theatrical representation is at a double remove from the “true” reality.² While the favor of Richelieu and the *Déclaration royale de 1641* help make this brief period of tolerance for religious plays possible, and while certain moderates such as François de Sales assert theater’s potential for moral utility, the voices and arguments rallied against the stage in France were strident and powerful.

There seems to be no doubt that Corneille and Rotrou were both profoundly devout men. We may thus assume that in writing *Polyeucte* and *Saint Genest* they sought to write sincerely Christian plays. It is important to establish from the onset that I am not interested in questioning the intentions of the authors. That the plays the two men wrote pose certain problems when judged against such devout intentions is not to be credited to the authors so much as to larger and more fundamental incompatibilities. It is worth noting at this juncture, however, the degree to which all discussion of religious theater seems to be personalized. Not only are the religious beliefs of Corneille and Rotrou at issue, but those of the literary scholar discussing their religious plays are as well. Kosta Loukovitch’s observation is shared by many, although usually stated less baldly: “La psychologie de Corneille dans ces deux pièces [*Polyeucte* and *Théodore*] est une psychologie théologique. Qui les étudie en profane, comme Lemaître, n’en saisit que la moitié, et la moindre” (231; see also Cairncross 571). If one speaks from outside a religious perspective, as I do, one may be readily dismissed for a lack of true understanding. If one speaks as a believer, a defensive posture toward all discrepancies or inadequacies is seemingly automatic. In discussion of other kinds of plays, the personal beliefs of the person examining the work are almost never at issue. The mere mention of religion, even in a context over 350 years old, remains polarizing.³

In *Polyeucte*, and later *Théodore*, Corneille seems to have set himself the challenge of reconciling theater and religion, perhaps the two most important domains in the playwright’s life. While *Théodore* is something of a failure in this regard, as Corneille himself implies in his 1660 *Examen* of the play (2:271–73), the far more successful *Polyeucte* gives rise to a wide range of reactions. There is no question that this play belongs to the small group of Corneille’s most revered works, yet the criticism of the integration, or lack thereof, of the religious and the profane is copious.

But let us turn to Félix. As the governor of Arménie, he represents the power and authority of the Roman emperor Décie. His primary characteristics are ambition, fear, and egotism. Félix married his daughter to Polyeucte to further his own career; he fears the newly powerful Sévère whose courtship of his daughter he rejected earlier; he puts the newly-converted Polyeucte to death because of that fear. Indeed, Félix interprets everything in reference to himself, and thus frequently misreads the behavior and attitudes of those around him. He is a poor father, willing to sacrifice his daughter for his own ends and completely insensitive to her feelings. Despite a scene of internal conflict (III.v) and occasional feelings of shame or affection, Félix seems to belong to another world than that of Polyeucte, Pauline, and Sévère. He shares none of their heroism and nobility of character.⁴ Indeed, one particular feature of Félix sets him even farther apart from his fellow characters and from the context of a religious tragedy: the curious resemblance he bears to a comic character. P. J. Yarrow suggests that he belongs in a comedy (160; see also Hémon 50); Jeanne Bem calls him “involontairement bouffon” and notes a certain similarity to Matamore (88–89); within the play, even Félix’s confidant, Albin, seems to mock him (V.i).⁵ Félix’s excessive self-pity, in particular, makes it hard to take him very seriously. A tragedy about martyrdom, however, can ill afford a character who is in any way comic.

The serious problem that Félix poses for Corneille’s *Polyeucte* comes not, however, from Félix’s character traits or from the disparities between him and the others. The Christian martyr requires a foil and a persecutor, roles that Félix fulfills very well indeed. Rather, Félix’s conversion in the final scene of the play, an act through which he moves to unite himself with Polyeucte, Pauline, and Sévère, and through which Corneille seeks to end the play on a note of transcendence, raises significant concerns. This conversion is an invention of Corneille and is not found in the source material. Almost everyone agrees that it comes as a surprise; many use less neutral terms, such as “joli tour de passe-passe” (Chauviré 9), “incroyable” (Hubert 346), and “incongrue” (Beaujour 443). One of the hallmarks of Corneille’s dramaturgy is a fondness for surprise. As I noted elsewhere, this playwright employs surprise in order to astound his audience and arouse their admiration; however, he is also at times tempted to go too far (20). Indeed the issue of *invraisemblance* is central to the objec-

tions that many have to Félix's conversion.⁶ In order to fully appreciate the issues raised by this metamorphosis, it is useful to approach the act from multiple perspectives: the religious, the literary, and the political.

From a religious perspective, the conversion of Félix, like that of Polyeucte and Pauline, is explained by grace. The notion of grace, whose importance in seventeenth-century France Bem emphasizes strongly (85), has been called "l'acteur principal de ce drame" (Picard 226). In his *Examen*, Corneille claims that "ces deux conversions [Pauline's and Félix's], quoique miraculeuses, sont si ordinaires dans les martyres, qu'elles ne sortent point de la vraisemblance" (1:982). Ever the skillful defender of his own theater, Corneille asserts as a given what others may view with some skepticism. What he neglects to mention is the curiously divergent forms that grace takes in Polyeucte, Pauline, and Félix, all within the space of less than a day. Polyeucte's actual conversion seems to have occurred shortly before the play begins. Pauline's conversion takes place at the moment she is spattered with her martyred husband's blood, while Félix's happens suddenly and spontaneously in the last scene of the play. André Georges, a vocal defender of a religious perspective as it pertains to Corneille's theater, attempts to justify the theological discrepancies ("Conversions" 35). He divides the action of grace into two categories: the lengthy, gradual process and the sudden reversal. He suggests that Sévère is in the midst of the first type ("Conversions" 47), and he further divides the second type of conversion in order to account for the differences between Pauline and Félix ("Conversions" 43–44), but he does not explain, theologically or otherwise, why the two should be different. If one argues from a religious perspective, as Georges does, there is no need to concern oneself with such matters: grace is mysterious, miraculous even, and cannot be explained.

It would be much easier to view grace as a satisfying explanation for Félix's conversion if there were not so many discrepancies. Not only are the mechanisms for conversion different for all of the characters, but there are two further theological areas of concern: the role of free will and that of merit. Certainly Corneille was well aware of the theological stakes at play and thus his discrepancies cannot be called errors of ignorance. One of the points of disagreement between Jesuits and Jansenists of the period concerns the role of free will in

conversion. For the former, to whom Corneille is invariably tied, divine grace is offered by God to an individual, who then may choose to accept or reject it; for the Jansenists grace is a sudden, gratuitous, and irresistible gift: one has no role in the matter (Dobrovsky 227; see also Georges, "Conflit" 256). Corneille, whose every play is testimony to his belief in free will (Loukovitch 255), has two of his characters in *Polyeucte*, Pauline and Félix, undergo a conversion that entails no reflection or consent whatsoever.

The role merit plays in the attribution of grace is even more serious. Is grace a function of individual merit or is it purely arbitrary? After all, there is a significant discrepancy between Félix and the others in terms of the virtues they possess. In discussions of *Polyeucte*, theological opinions on the issue of merit are divided. In most cases the problem is framed directly in terms of Félix: he simply does not deserve grace (Hémon 49 and Loukovitch 267), or as Michel Picard puts it: "Comment ce petit Ponce Pilate peut-il devenir un Paul de Tarse?" (225). Most find it easier to argue that merit is immaterial to grace than to assert Félix's worthiness. Georges Couton proposes a different solution to the quandary: Félix receives grace because he states in act 5, scene 2 that he wants to be a Christian: "Je te parle sans fard, et veux être chrétien" (1.1541). Of course that statement is a lie uttered in order to trick his son-in-law. "On ne badine pas avec la grâce," Couton asserts nonetheless (1651). The problem of merit is compounded when we consider the two individuals surrounding Félix at the moment of conversion: Pauline and Sévère. Jean-François de La Harpe was outraged by the contrast between Pauline and her father: "Il est convenable, remarque J. F. La Harpe, qu'une femme aussi vertueuse que Pauline se fasse chrétienne, mais non pas que Dieu fasse un second miracle en faveur d'un homme aussi méprisable que Félix" (cited by Georges, "Conversions" 35–36). Others are disturbed that the *généreux* Sévère is not converted while Félix is. Indeed, it is difficult to set aside the question of merit, yet if one does not, Corneille's denouement is profoundly unstable. Theologically speaking, in order for Félix's conversion to be palatable, it must be the case that merit does not matter and that Félix has in some sense consented to his conversion, despite the fact that there is no indication of either in the text. I do not believe that Corneille sought to encumber Félix's conversion with doubts and quandaries. Rather the playwright is serving

two masters in this tragedy, religion and theater, and it is difficult if not impossible to satisfy them both simultaneously.

The literary perspective is dominated by a different set of considerations: generic conventions, poetics, *vraisemblance*, morality and the *bienséances*, logical causality, and so forth. It is typical of a religious perspective to believe that everything in life happens for a reason. The same is true of a literary perspective: everything in a literary work happens for a reason as well. There are, however, enormous differences, the most salient of which is that the “reason” that would explain events in a work of literature must be discernable or else the work is considered defective, while divine reason often is not ascertainable. Thus merit, which, as we saw, may be dispensed with from a certain religious perspective, is far more important to a literary point of view because it is tied to morality and logical causality.

It is a convention of seventeenth-century tragedy that all characters must be accounted for in some fashion before the play may end. Corneille himself asserted the necessity of the conversions of Pauline and Félix in the closing words of his *Examen*: “Sans cela, j’aurais eu bien de la peine à retirer [Félix, Sévère et Pauline] du Théâtre dans un état qui rendît la pièce complète, en ne laissant rien à souhaiter à la curiosité de l’Auditeur” (1:982). Thus Félix’s conversion allows the play to end in keeping with the norms of the classical theater.⁷ On the other hand, his transformation presents the disadvantage of creating a sense of clutter in the denouement and significantly distracting from Pauline’s conversion. Several critics have noted a curious resemblance between Félix’s last-minute conversion and features of the denouement of comedy. Jean Schlumberger compares the conversion to the multiple marriages that are arranged almost arbitrarily at the end of some comedies (95–96), and Joseph Pineau sees a resemblance to the ending of numerous plays by Molière: “on quitte subrepticement la terre pour s’élever joyeusement jusqu’au paradis de la folie comique” (553). The comparison to comedy works to undercut the sanctity of Félix’s conversion. Thus Corneille’s choice to add the paternal conversion to the dénouement has dramatic consequences that he no doubt did not foresee, consequences that are consistent neither with religious theater nor with tragedy.

The cases of Pauline and Sévère are quite different from that of Félix, and from one another, in literary terms. Pauline’s conversion

is very successful: it combines strict causality (Pauline's contact with blood engenders her immediate transformation) with emotional appeal (Polyeucte shows his love for his wife in death). The case of Sévère is more mixed. His non-conversion makes some sense dramatically, as it provides someone to protect the newly Christian Pauline and Félix, as well as to convince Décie to halt persecution of the Christians. That Sévère does not convert makes no sense, however, in another respect: the contagion of conversion that may be seen to be at work in the case of Félix is absent in the case of Sévère. Such inconsistency is troubling.

Félix's conversion, while arguably *vraisemblable* from a religious perspective, is completely *invraisemblable* logically, psychologically, and dramatically. Indeed, this disjunction between the religious and literary perspectives is at the root of the problems posed by Félix. The inability of this conversion to unite satisfactorily the religious and literary strands in the play's final scene is indicative of the insurmountable distance that separates the two.

I mentioned earlier a third perspective that might be taken on Félix's conversion: the political. As the Roman governor of the Armenian state, Félix has political power and his actions have political consequences. Insofar as he will remain governor through the protection of Sévère, he can be said to embody the synthesis of salvation and political order, what Serge Doubrovsky calls the "salut de l'État" (258).⁸ The political perspective thus offers a means of integrating Félix's conversion into something larger. Unfortunately, the political arena has only a minor role in the play. Polyeucte and Sévère, both men with considerable political power, are completely uninterested in the subject. Polyeucte is wholly absorbed by his act of revolt and his consequent martyrdom, while Sévère is concerned only with Pauline. Furthermore, Sévère's promise of protection for Christians, while seemingly a political act, is in no way justified or authorized, as John Cairncross notes (588). Félix is the most political of the characters, but his political concerns are strictly personal, relating to his own ambition and fears. The larger interests of the state do not seem to play any role in his self-centered mind. Furthermore, nothing Félix says in his conversion speech or thereafter has the slightest political resonance. Thus, political considerations do not provide a useful context for Félix's religious conversion.

I would like to suggest focusing on a distinctly different element as a key to understanding Félix and his conversion: the theatrical. On more than one occasion, Félix demonstrates a decided inclination towards dramatic activity. He deals with the problem posed by his son-in-law in ways that show that he believes in the power of theater to influence its audience. First, he organizes a spectacle for which Polyeucte is the privileged spectator: the execution of Néarque. It has an effect on Polyeucte that is the opposite of what Félix intends: the young man seeks to replicate his friend's fate, not avoid it. Second, Félix takes on a role himself, pretending to be interested in Christianity and requesting instruction from Polyeucte (V.ii). He is no more effective as an actor than as a director, however. Polyeucte has little difficulty exposing Félix's misrepresentation, as Lawrence Harvey notes (323); the young martyr is perhaps aided by the fact that Félix also reveals that he is playing the role of the outraged Roman official for Sévère's benefit, while he simultaneously suggests a role for Polyeucte: "Pour lui [Sévère] seul contre toi j'ai feint tant de colère, / Dissimule un moment jusques à son départ" (ll.1544-45). Very soon thereafter, Félix simply abandons his role in frustration. What is noteworthy here is Félix's affinity for and recourse to the theatrical, a state of affairs that has attracted little attention.⁹

It is at this point that Rotrou's *Le Véritable Saint Genest* becomes pertinent to our discussion. Whereas the theatrical is secondary in *Polyeucte*, in *Saint Genest* it is a central consideration. A rapid examination of Genest's conversion as well as of the integration of theatrical and religious themes in Rotrou's play will serve to place Félix's sudden conversion in a new light. Genest, it will be recalled, is a famous actor called upon to give a performance to the court in celebration of Maximin's marriage to Dioclétian's daughter Valérie. The play selected is the reenactment of the historical martyrdom of Adrian which occurred a few years earlier. Genest, renowned for his depictions of Christian martyrs, discusses the theater in general with the emperor, the decor with the set designer, and rehearses his role on stage. Near the end of the second act the internal play begins, during the course of which, while enacting Adrian's conversion, Genest himself undergoes a conversion experience. After some difficulty convincing both his audience (the court) and his fellow actors that he

has indeed abandoned his theatrical role, Genest is taken off, tortured, and put to death.

Polyeucte and *Saint Genest* share significant features.¹⁰ Both open with a woman's dream that later proves to be prophetic. Both depict a process of conversion that leads rapidly to martyrdom. Both men seek to convert a woman; but whereas Polyeucte eventually succeeds through his own death, Marcelle, the female member of Genest's troupe, remains unmoved, fixed instead on the financial consequences of Genest's transformation. The domains that we discussed in conjunction with Félix's conversion—the religious, the literary, and the political—appear in *Saint Genest* as well. Here they operate as competing systems: the divine realm associated with Genest's conversion, the dramatic universe of the embedded play, and the onstage political reality of Dioclétien's world. Analogies between the three are frequent and obviously intended (see Hubert 339; Hénin and Bonfils 20–21). Indeed, such analogies serve to undermine hierarchy, thereby leading to mere equations wherein God's power is no greater than the actor's.

The explicit foregrounding of theater in *Saint Genest* ensures that the spectator will not be able to avoid the juxtaposition of theater with religion. Most glaring is the fact that the Christian martyr is an actor. Acting was a profession endlessly decried by the Church (see below); a conversion in such circumstances, although it may have been historically attested, no doubt rankled Rotrou's devout peers.¹¹ The conversion experience, once it is embedded in the illusion of theatrical performance in this play, retains a powerful association with theater. Rotrou's use of language is indicative of this inextricable interpenetration: theatrical vocabulary is employed heavily to describe the experience of conversion while the pagan characters have occasional recourse to a Christian lexicon (see Lagarde 455 and Seznec 172). Once the theatrical has been linked to the religious, the sacred can no longer break free.

The place to begin examining *Saint Genest* is, naturally enough, with Genest's conversion. The problems and uncertainty it occasions, unlike those in the case of Félix, are situated squarely within the play itself. What exactly does Genest undergo? There are two basic alternatives: either he has an authentic conversion experience or he does not, but the theatrical context complicates matters enormously. Let us consider the first alternative. Does Genest receive grace as a gratu-

itous and unmerited gift from God, as would seem to be the case for Félix? Is his experience “la représentation théâtrale d’un acte sacré” (Baschera 303)? Or rather is Genest’s conversion the result of imitation, specifically of the martyr Adrian? In other words, is playing a role sufficient to live the experience of the person portrayed? There is a hint of such a possibility in the case of Félix, as we saw above, when he states, however mendaciously, that he wants to be a Christian. If we accept conversion through imitation, however, we must acknowledge that in Rotrou’s play it is through the illusion of theater that Genest miraculously gains access to the truth of the Christian God. Such an approach lends credence to Rotrou’s likely intent, like that of Corneille, to integrate religion and theater. However, it also confirms all of the Church’s worst fears about the theater and the effects of *mimesis*: depicting passions leads to adopting them.¹² In either case the theater is made to share in the glory of the conversion.

It is also possible that no authentic conversion occurs, that the illusion of the theater has blinded Genest, convincing him of the reality of what is itself an illusion. Rotrou likely did not imagine that his seventeenth-century Christian audience would opt for this alternative, but it is noteworthy that he went to considerable lengths to make such a reading plausible. Genest himself voices the possibility that the celestial voice that he hears is a practical joke: “Quelqu’un s’apercevant du caprice où j’étais, / S’est voulu divertir par cette feinte voix” (ll.435–36). Furthermore, Genest is not able to inspire anyone else to convert, unlike Polyeucte.¹³ Genest’s isolation as a convert is also contrasted unfavorably with Adrian’s support in the interior play from fellow Christians: his wife Natalie and friend Anthyme. This isolation is also manifest in his martyrdom: Pauline witnessed the martyrdom of her husband and was influenced by it. As he dies offstage, Genest elicits pity in his executioners, but nothing more.

The incompatibility of the two alternatives concerning Genest’s conversion forces the spectator to make a choice, but Rotrou takes pains to deprive the spectator of grounds upon which to make it. John Lyons, in a seminal article, describes how the play insists upon the presence of incompatible viewpoints. In the final act, the impossibility of escape from this quandary is clear: “Neither side transcends the other, though each attempts to do so” (Lyons 612). Genest pities the non-believers, and they pity him. The “average” spectator will read-

ily accept that Genest is converted to Christianity. Rotrou, however, leaves ample space for the opposite conclusion through an even-handed, double perspective throughout the remaining scenes of the play. Does Genest transcend the illusion of theater, or is he a victim of that illusion? There is also a troubling disjunction between character and author: Genest, upon conversion, literally abandons the stage; Rotrou himself does no such thing and continues writing for the theater until his death (see Hénin and Bonfils 27; Nelson 43–44). The ambiguity of the play can be summed up in Lyons's final question in which he disquietingly suggests that the audience may choose to reject the concept of Christian grace: "If Genest is freed from his origins by theatre, cannot the audience be freed as well?" (616).

In the final analysis, we must ask whether *Saint Genest* is a play about religion or theater. Imbrie Buffum argues that baroque drama "is at its best when we can no longer distinguish between illusion and reality" (212). Indeed that uncertainty is central as the play opens: is Valérie's dream a mere illusion or does it have some tie to reality? This undecidable quality becomes rather less desirable, or scandalous even, when religion is introduced—here as in *Polyeucte* in the form of conversion—because the Platonic hierarchy is collapsed and therefore called into question. The domain of religion makes the question of illusion or reality a particularly grave one, while the domain of theater colors everything around it, including and perhaps especially religion. Pierre Pasquier reminds us of "l'une des clauses majeures du contrat dramatique: sur la scène et pendant la représentation, il est interdit de dire la vérité, il est interdit de ne pas faire semblant" (194). All is thus feint on stage: "Tout ce qui paraît sur scène [in *Saint Genest*] est ainsi marqué au sceau de l'illusion. Le miracle même devient suspect de contrefaçon" (Cavaillé 707). Even the metaphor of *theatrum mundi* which equates all reality with illusion will not suffice to erase the taint that the actual theater conveys with its deliberate illusion (see Baschera 304). Once the theater has been introduced as a theme in this play, transcendence of the theatrical is impossible: either one remains mired in the theatrical and its illusion, or else one transcends reality but only with and through the theatrical. Thus *Saint Genest* is either a play about theater, or it is a play about theater and religion. Religion cannot break free of theater.

What we have gleaned from *Saint Genest* concerning the relationship between theater and religion may be applied to *Polyeucte*. Both are theatrical works; and both contain embedded moments of theater, although obviously to a different degree. What I would like to suggest is that Corneille, by having Félix take on the theatrical roles of director and especially of actor, as we saw above, renders the status of his character's conversion undecidable in the same fashion as Genest's. I must reiterate that both Corneille and Rotrou doubtless sought to enact authentic conversions on stage. The problem is that they also created the conditions to call those conversions into question. That they both did so is hardly an accident but rather a function of the profound friction between theater and religion in seventeenth-century France.

Before concluding with an examination of that friction and its ramifications, I would like to show how Corneille creates the conditions to permit a reading of Félix's conversion as theatrical and false. We have already examined at length all of the problems raised by Félix's conversion; here I would like to focus on the last scene of the play when the transformation actually takes place. First the context: in the previous scene (V.v), Pauline rushes on stage straight from witnessing her husband's death and undergoing her own conversion, and she launches an attack on Félix that opens with "Père barbare" (l.1719). Before Félix has an opportunity to utter a word, Sévère enters (V.vi) with his own denunciation that begins with the decidedly parallel "Père dénaturé" (l.1747). The situation intensifies with this second intervention as Sévère menacingly promises Félix's "ruine" (l.1757). It is at that precise moment that the father's conversion occurs. It is entirely plausible that faced with consequences worse than those posed by a Christian son-in-law, Félix would take any steps necessary to pacify Sévère. Specifically, Félix would realize that the only way to appease the young man is through Pauline, who herself would be touched by nothing less than a paternal conversion to echo her own.¹⁴ Becoming a Christian would even efface his crime of persecuting the sect and notably of having put Polyeucte to death. Indeed, whether a stratagem or not, Félix's conversion works perfectly. Interestingly, Pauline and Sévère are more likely to accept his transformation at face value than is the spectator because they were not witnesses to the scene in which Félix pretended interest in Christianity to Polyeucte (V.ii). Corneille even embeds a few hints in support of a theatrical interpretation. First, Sévère, witnessing Pauline's joy at her father's conversion,

exclaims: "Qui ne serait touché d'un si tendre spectacle?" (I.1787). The choice of the word "spectacle" conveys the theatrical potential of the moment. He also confirms the line of reasoning I am positing here: "Si vous êtes Chrétien, ne craignez plus ma haine" (I.1800). Second, Félix's choice of words, particularly as he begins his conversion speech, might lend themselves to the hidden motive suggested above: "Arrêtez-vous, Seigneur" (I.1763), "Ne me reprochez plus" (I.1765). More conventional in terms of the language of conversion, but still subject to an ironic double reading, is the line: "Je cède à des transports que je ne connais pas" (I.1770). As in the case of Genest, once a character is associated with acting—as Félix is in V.ii—it becomes impossible for that character to disassociate himself from role-playing in the eyes of the spectator. I believe that Félix's ties to theatricality, placed judiciously throughout the play, are the basis for the widespread discomfort with Félix's conversion and authorize the non-standard interpretation we are suggesting here.

Félix constitutes a privileged point where Corneille's desire to achieve a synthesis between religion and theater in *Polyeucte* is both concentrated and breaks down. He is the only character who adopts the role of the actor (V.ii and, debatably, in V.vi). The actor, as Thirouin has convincingly shown, is the particular target of the Church's wrath in its long-running hostility towards the theater (55–81; see also Fumaroli, "Querelle" 1026). Actors are the agents of *mimesis* and thus represent the illusory and the false; furthermore, actors are responsible for arousing passions within the spectators by displaying such passions on stage (Thirouin 60). To suggest that Félix pretends to convert, that he is but an actor, undermines the dénouement of *Polyeucte* by introducing the notion of illusion. Where the theater revels in its own illusory nature, religion rejects and is outraged by any suggestion that it has ties to illusion. A religious tragedy that deals in transcendence and salvation cannot comfortably accommodate the notion of illusion.

The issue of hierarchy is central to the Platonic worldview as it maintains a two-level separation between religion and theater. With reality sandwiched between the two, there can be no confusion between religion and theater. Religious theater is an ungainly hybrid that collapses that separation, and thereby creates a leveling that encourages comparisons, analogies, and even rivalry.¹⁵ Juxtaposing the two domains within a religious play seriously hampers the Church's

ability to keep theater at a remove. Once theater and religion are allowed to come in contact with one another, other more specific similarities appear between them. The role of the priest may be compared to that of the actor through their ritualized performances. A play also bears a certain resemblance to the Mass in that both are spectacles enacted before an audience. M. J. Muratore develops this notion further: “Both ritual and drama are ceremonial in nature; both establish clearly delineated spatial zones; both use language in an atypical manner; and both rely on spectators to witness and interpret the events on stage” (111). Language is a particularly sensitive point because of the basic problem of referentiality. Augustine recognized the similarly seductive nature of both forms of discourse (Thirouin 173). Marco Baschera makes the uncomfortable ambiguity clear with his witty opposition of “la parole *sainte*” and “la parole *feinte*” (309). The clearest way to preclude any such analogy is to maintain *la parole en chair* as far away as possible from the theater. The Church’s deep hostility towards the theater is thus understandable.

It is my contention that within the context of seventeenth-century France all theater with religious subject matter, regardless of the piety and pure motives of the author, leads to a web of associations from which there is no safe return. Fumaroli recounts a fascinating example of the vulnerability of religion to analogy with theater. The Jesuit Father Cellot in his *Orationes* (1631) uses the technique of assuming ironically the voice of the other in order to convince the reader of the folly of that other’s position. He thus creates the personage Panurgus, an actor, in order to attack the theater through its ostensible defense. Cellot’s straw man, however, is too forceful and persuasive. He does what no contemporary defender of the theater had dared to do: he explicitly presents the theater as a rival to the Church and attacks the latter directly (Fumaroli, “Sacerdos” 471). Cellot is unable to control the ironic distance between himself and his creation.

Le “comédien criminel” que le P. Cellot veut faire parler en criminel est tellement persuasif que sa *persona* fictive ne se distingue plus de la personne de l’auteur jésuite qui le fait parler, et qui, croyant le perdre, se compromet lui-même. (476)

Father Cellot seeks to attack the theater but once he theatricalizes the subject by inventing a character and giving him voice, he himself can no longer escape the grasp of theater.

Some consider the theater to be ennobled by its contact with religion in the form of represented conversion and martyrdom (Seznac 171); others see it rather as a contaminating force for religion (Nicole and many others within the Church; see also Cavaillé 712). The examination of Félix and Genest leads me to conclude that religion and theater by their very nature chafe against one another. Because their relationship is unbalanced, religion alone is threatened by the friction between them. Theater is happy to assume the role and the discourse of the other, to be elevated to the realm of the divine. Religion cannot bear to be considered mere illusion. Corneille and Rotrou likely sought to bring about an ennobling and harmonious synthesis of the two domains, a union of the religious transcendence of the martyrs with the transcendent power of theater itself. They succeeded in creating enduring theatrical masterpieces, but also, perhaps unintentionally, they revealed the dangers theater poses for religion.

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Notes

1. "Cette disparition complète, pendant dix siècles, d'un des arts majeurs de la civilisation nous est masquée rétrospectivement par un mythe historiographique: le théâtre moderne serait né du théâtre liturgique, voire de la messe elle-même" (Fumaroli, "Sacerdos" 450).

2. "Au XVII^e siècle, le procès contre le théâtre est au fond un procès contre la représentation, un rejet du factice et du vain sous toutes ses formes, au nom de la pleine, véritable et unique Réalité" (Thirouin 22).

3. I am well aware that all acts of literary interpretation or criticism are based on ideological underpinnings. What is different in the case of religion is how the ideological stakes of theology inevitably push themselves to the forefront, often obscuring other issues.

4. This sense that Félix does not belong in the same play as the other three is reflected in appraisals of him as bourgeois (Claudel 294), base (Hémon 52 and Bem 88–89), grotesque (Chauviré 23), or ubuesque (Picard 224).

5. Albin criticizes his master's self-centered fears: "Que tant de prévoyance est un étrange mal! / Tout vous nuit, tout vous perd, tout vous fait de l'ombrage" (ll.1502–03).

6. There is an intertextual dimension to Félix's unexpected conversion at the end of *Polyeucte*. Émilie's sudden move from enemy of Auguste to faithful loyalist in the final scene of *Cinna* (1642–43) is almost equally unprepared and surprising. Corneille will stage a similar change of heart with Arsinoë in *Nicomède* (1651). While these two "conversions" are in no way religious in nature, they pose some of the same problems as Félix's.

7. "Aesthetically, it provides a trumped-up way of ending the play more or less happily—or of just ending it" (Harvey 315).

8. Beaujour notes that “[l]e miracle est nécessaire à la permanence de l’ordre temporel. Il remet sur ses fondations l’édifice de l’état menacé par la sainte folie de Polyeucte” (446). See also Mitchell Greenberg (144).

9. It would seem that there is a more ready association of the theatrical with the breaking of the idols (see Muratore 107 and Bem 90). Indeed for Bem, that is the only concrete example given following a wonderfully suggestive statement: “*Polyeucte* est aussi, comme *l’Illusion comique* et comme *Hamlet*, mais plus secrètement, une réflexion sur le théâtre” (90).

10. While the date of the first performance of *Genest* is uncertain, there is general agreement that *Polyeucte* predates it (Forestier 305–06).

11. One of the more intriguing details surrounding *Saint Genest* is the apparent silence that met its performance. We have absolutely no record of contemporary reaction to the play. Pasquier is surprised by the hush surrounding “une pièce aussi indispensable à la réflexion sur la moralité du poème dramatique” and ventures that “le silence entourant la création et la publication du *Véritable Saint Genest* est un silence embarrassé, voire réprobateur” (164).

12. According to Pierre Nicole, “on s’assimile fatalement à ce que l’on représente, et d’ailleurs, on ne peut le représenter que parce qu’on s’y est assimilé” (Thirouin 59).

13. Robert Nelson calls this the “essential irony” of the play (43), and Emmanuelle Hénin and François Bonfils note that this unexplained gift of conversion leaves the world unchanged (28).

14. I must give credit to my student John Davis for the general lines of the argument concerning the falseness of Félix’s conversion. It is worth noting that it takes an undergraduate, not touched by the reverence surrounding this play, to discern this possibility.

15. “Aussi étrange que la chose puisse aujourd’hui nous paraître, c’est bien un rapport latent de rivalité qui a pu s’instaurer entre l’Eglise et le théâtre” (Thirouin 64).

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