

**PIERRE
CORNEILLE**



POLYEUCTE

Pierre Corneille

Polyeucte

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

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Pierre Corneille was born in Rouen in 1606, the son of an official; was educated by the Jesuits, and practised unsuccessfully as a lawyer. His dramatic career began with the comedy of "Melite," but it was by his "Medee" that he first proved his tragic genius. "The Cid" appeared in 1636, and a series of masterpieces followed—"Horace," "Cinna," "Polyeucte," "Le Menteur." After a failure in "Pertharite" he retired from the stage, deeply hurt by the disapproval of his audience. Six years later he resumed play writing with "OEdipe" and continued till 1674, producing in all some thirty plays. Though he earned a great reputation, he was poorly paid; and a proud and sensitive nature laid him open to considerable suffering. He died in 1684.

The works of Corneille represent most fully the ideal of French so-called "classical" tragedy. The laws to which this type of tragedy sought to conform were not so much truth to nature as the principles which the critics had derived from a somewhat inadequate interpretation of Aristotle and of the practise of the Greek tragedians. These principles concentrated the interest of the play upon a single central situation, in order to emphasize which, subordinate characters and complicating under-plots were avoided as much as possible. There was little or no action upon the stage, and the events of the plot were narrated by messengers, or by the main characters in conversation with confidantes. Further, the "dramatic unities" of time and place, as well as of action, were held to be binding.

One result of these rules was to give an extraordinary importance to the speeches; and it is in the eloquence of these, in the grandeur and dignity of the versification, and in the lofty moral elevation of the characters, that Corneille excels. All of these qualities are admirably exemplified in "Polyeucte"; and in the conduct of the leading personages one may perceive the most persistent trait of this dramatist's treatment of heroic character—the conquest of the passions by the reason and the will. "Among the masterpieces of Corneille," says Paul de Saint-Victor, "'Polyeucte' is assuredly the greatest; and nothing in all his dramas equals the extraordinary beauty of the character of 'Pauline.'"

POLYEUCTE

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CHARACTERS

FELIX, Governor of Armenia.

POLYEUCTE, an Armenian noble, son-in-law to FELIX.

SEVERUS, a Roman Knight, favourite of the Emperor Decius.

NEARCHUS, an Armenian noble, friend to Polyeucte.

PAULINE, daughter to Felix, wife to Polyeucte.

STRATONICE, companion to Pauline.

ALBIN, friend to FELIX.

FABIAN, servant to Severus.

CLEON, friend to FELIX.

Three Guards.

The Scene is at Melitena, capital of Armenia. The action takes place in the Palace of Felix.

ACT I—POLYEUCTE. NEARCHUS

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NEARCHUS.

Shall woman's dream of terror hurl the dart?
Oh, feeble weapon 'gainst so great a heart!
Must courage proved a thousand times in arms
Bow to a peril forged by vain alarms?

POLY.

I know that dreams are born to fade away,
And melt in air before the light of day;
I know that misty vapours of the night
Dissolve and fly before the morning bright.
The dream is naught—but the dear dreamer—all!
She has my soul, Nearchus, fast in thrall;
Who holds the marriage torch—august, divine,
Bids me to her sweet voice my will resign.
She fears my death—tho' baseless this her fright,
Pauline is wrung with fear—by day—by night;
My road to duty hampered by her fears,
How can I go when all undried her tears?
Her terror I disown—and all alarms,
Yet pity holds me in her loving arms:
No bolts or bars imprison,—yet her sighs
My fetters are—my conquerors, her eyes!
Say, kind Nearchus, is the cause you press
Such as to make me deaf to her distress?

The bonds I slacken I would not unloose
Nothing I yield—yet grant a timely truce.

NEAR.

How grant you know not what? Are you assured
Of constancy?—as one who has endured?
God claims your soul for Him!—Now! Now! To-day!
The fruit to-morrow yields—oh, who shall say?
Our God is just, but do His grace and power
Descend on recreants with equal shower?
On darkened souls His flame of light He turns,
Yet flame neglected soon but faintly burns,
And dying embers fade to ashes cold
If we the heart His spirit woos withhold.
Great Heaven retains the fire no longer sought,
While ashes turn to dust, and dust to naught.
His holy baptism He bids thee seek,
Neglect the call, and the desire grows weak.
Ah! whilst from woman's breast thou heedst the sighs,
The flame first flickers, then, untended—dies!

POLY.

You know me ill,—'tis mine, that holy fire,
Fed, not extinguished, by unslaked desire
Her tears—I view them with a lover's eye;
And yet your Christ is mine—a Christian I!
The healing, cleansing flood o'er me shall flow,
I would efface the stain from birth I owe;
I would be pure—my sealed eyes would see!
The birthright Adam lost restored to me
This, this, the unfading crown! For this I yearn,
For that exhaustless fount I thirst, I burn.
Then, since my heart is true, Nearchus, say—
Shall I not grant to pity this delay?

NEAR.

So doth the ghostly foe our souls abuse,
And all beyond his force he gains by ruse;
He hates the purpose fast he cannot foil,—
Then he retreats—retreats but to recoil!
In endless barricade obstruction piles,
To-day 'tis tears impede, to-morrow—smiles!
And this poor dream—his coinage of the night
Gives place to other lures, all falsely bright:
All tricks he knows and uses—threats and prayers
Attacks in parley—as the Parthian dares.
In chain unheeded weakest link must fail,
So fortress yet unwon he'll mount and scale.
O break his bonds! Let feeble woman weep!
The heart that God has touched 'tis God must keep!
Who looks behind to dally with his choice
When Heaven demands—obeys another voice!

POLY.

Who loves thy Christ—say, must he love no other?

NEAR.

He may—he must! 'Tis Christ says, "Love thy brother,"
Yet on the altar of the Heavenly King
No rival place, no alien incense fling!
Through Him—by Him—for Him—all goodness know!
'Tis from the source alone each stream must flow.
To please Him, wife, and wealth, and rank, and state
Must be forsaken—strait the heavenly gate.
Poor silly sheep! afar you err and stray
From Him who is The Life, The Truth, The Way!
My grief chokes utterance! I see your fate,
As round the fold the hungry wolves of hate
Closer and fiercer rage: from sword and flame
One shelter for His flock—one only Name!
The Cross alone our victor over fears,
Not this thy strength,—thy plea—a woman's tears!