Polyeucte and the Speeds of Sects (Sex)

Polyeucte and Fanaticism

Fanatic. Terrorist. Martyr. These words are often splashed across the news headlines, pinning the violence of crimes to the overabundance of religious zeal. Such stories blur together to create an archetype: an impressionable young man, seduced to convert to another religion by an older friend whom he admires (and loves) deeply, becomes radicalized by his passion for his newfound religion, and seeks to change the corruption and the idolatry that he perceives around him. The two men turn to violence, destroying sites of idolatrous worship and announcing their faith publicly. The convert seeks to follow his friend to the end and die a martyr’s death.

Rather than a modern-day headline, the tale depicted in Corneille’s *Polyeucte* (1643) is a martyrological tragedy and presents an unsettling resonance to this contemporary moment—a resonance that is apparent in Brigitte Jaques-Wajeman’s 2017 staging of Corneille’s play, which casts Polyeucte as a religious terrorist.¹ In Corneille’s original tragedy, set in colonially occupied Armenia in AD 250, the eponymous Polyeucte is drawn to the Christian faith by his dear friend and fellow Armenian, Néarque. The two men, spurred by their religious passion, rush into the Roman temple and smash the idols of the pagan gods, and then are promptly condemned to death for such a blasphemous transgression against the state.

Some critics have insisted that the conflation between contemporary trends of religiously motivated violence and the role of religion in the play is not a productive one. In the French Wars of Religion (1562–98) that predated the play and in contemporary shootings and bombings in synagogues, temples, and churches around the world, the violence is inflicted on other bodies, on the elimination of the worshippers of a competing faith. In contrast, as Barbara Selmeci Castioni
notes, Polyeucte only dreams of inflicting violence on himself and not on others per se (only the idols of the pagan temple are demolished). Critics of Jaques-Wajeman’s staging insist on this difference: Polyeucte, as a martyr, cannot be read in a genealogy of fanaticism.

But I agree with Ross Lerner that early modern considerations of fanaticism are not so far from our contemporary moment, especially if we consider not the object of fanatical violence but rather the ways that fanaticism itself is used to rhetorically winnow out worthy lives from expendable ones as well as the temporalities of fanaticism. Lerner contends that

Reformation condemnations of fanaticism, usually meant to justify state violence, live on in systemic strategies of racialized neocolonial brutality that rely on terms such as “terrorist” and “fundamentalist” to vindicate war, indefinite detention, torture, murder, dispossession, and economic immiseration—in short, to make many lives, especially in the so-called Greater Middle East, “ungrievable.”

Polyeucte, too, asks whose lives are expendable and whose lives are grievable, a question that resonates with the governance of the time of life.

As a Roman colony, Armenia is managed by Félix, a Roman governor appointed by Emperor Décie. In the play, the emperor himself never makes an appearance. Félix is unsure of his decisions and unsteady in his grasp on power but clings adamantly to the goal of protecting valuable life, sometimes at the cost of executing perceived contaminants (fanatics). To secure his foothold in the region, Félix has married his daughter Pauline to an Armenian noble, Polyeucte, despite Pauline’s heart truly belonging to Sévère, a war hero and favorite of the emperor. Even Félix says, “Polyeucte est ici l’appui de ma famille” (Polyeucte is the support of my family here [3.5.1053]), heightening how Polyeucte’s Armenian heritage allows Félix a certain kind of authority as the outsider, the Roman governor of Armenia. This is why Polyeucte and Néarque’s conversion is “n’est nullement un délit privé” (hardly a private crime), as Serge Doubrovsky insists, but also a political one. Their affinity stands as an affront to both the pagan Roman religion and the colonial purchase on the territory. The Armenian Néarque is executed quickly, but Polyeucte’s life—as an anchor to the colony and as a relative of the governor—hangs in the balance. The plot centers on the attempts made by Pauline and Félix to dissuade Polyeucte from following through with his fanatical demise. Polyeucte, in return,
parries this management of his own life, in large part because of his deep attachment to the executed Néarque. A particularly queer version of Christian passion emerges: a type of ardor that is difficult to distinguish from their mutual love for one another, a love that provokes the two men to stray from and to disrupt the normative colonial, religious, and political management of heteroreproductive life.

This chapter explores Polyeucte’s destabilization of temporality on two levels: the intimate scale of relationships and identity—the nature of converting one’s religion and one’s identification through seduction—as well as the larger political and biopolitical scale. The fanatic presents a governmental crisis in managing the time of life and thus serves as an apt illustration of the quandary: if biopower hinges on the augmentation of the value of life, what happens considering the martyr’s (or the fanatic’s) drive toward death, a loosening of the life-oriented grasp of the biopolitical?

Analyzing Polyeucte through the angle of fanaticism allows us a deeper investigation into the ways that the play overturns temporal norms. By this, I rely on Lerner’s definition of early modern fanatics (following Edmund Spenser) as “organs’ of divine might who undergo a self-loss so total that they can become purely passive instruments of God.”6 The very nature of the fanatic as organ forebodes the possible emptying of identity. Indeed, conversion and fanaticism imply that one can shift identities and affinities. Temporally sedimented identifying markers, such as genealogy, family, or nobility, are eschewed in favor of the contingencies of the affective, seductive, and amorous—emotions that might sway conversion. Polyeucte can thus be considered in dialogue with contemporary (and past) anxieties about conversion—or what today’s media might call “radicalization.” After discovering the sad truth that his beloved Pauline has married Polyeucte, Sévère reflects on Polyeucte’s previous status: “Polyeucte a du nom, et sort du sang des rois” (Polyeucte has a renowned name, and descends from the blood of kings [2.1.420]). The suddenness of Polyeucte’s religious conversion shatters the primacy of genealogy, blood, and tradition that others venerate—identities that hinge on a temporal sedimentation. Doubrovsky has argued, “As the head of the Armenian nobility, descended from the blood of kings and as a Christian adherent, Polyeucte reverses order and hierarchy, destroying the empire proclaimed by Tully and founded by Augustus. The revolt against the pagan gods is also a rebellion against the legitimate source of power and the decrees of Décie.”7 These temporally inflected structures of identification—nobility and kingly blood—no longer have the same potency. Polyeucte
repeatedly declares the unsuturing of the sedimentered legal and sexual ties that had bound him to his previous subject position, and gestures toward a type of subject position founded on contingencies: affinity, attunement, and desire. He becomes an emptied-out organ. Polyeucte’s previous temporally charged status and identity is constantly lauded and reinterpreted by others not only to remind him of what he risks leaving behind with his death but also to reinforce the normativity of the very structures within which identity can even be articulated and legitimized. To convert, here, is not necessarily a “religious” gesture but rather inscribes a specific type of political upheaval, or a strong, radical break with one kind of temporal timeline (of genealogy and blood), thus inaugurating a new network of liaisons and a new queer time.

A second queerness implicitly opposes the natural temporality of heteroreproduction (e.g., marriage and children) with the unnatural reproduction as instigated by Sévère. In the play, Stratonice, Pauline’s friend, suggests that Néarque ripped Polyeucte from Pauline’s arms. She describes Pauline’s husband’s conversion explicitly as a seduction:

Néarque l’a séduit:
De leur vieille amitié c’est là l’indigne fruit.
Ce perfide tantôt, en dépit de lui-même,
L’arrachant de vos bras, le traînait au baptême.
Voilà ce grand secret et si mystérieux
Que n’en pouvait tirer votre amour curieux. (3.2.807–12)

(Néarque seduced him
This is the disgraceful fruit of their old friendship
This traitor, earlier, despite himself
Tore Polyeucte from your arms, drove him to baptism.
Behold this secret, so mysterious
That even your inquiring love could not draw from him.)

In her discourse, the Roman Stratonice’s hatred of Christians is apparent. She directly counteropposes the married, heterosexual love that Pauline can provide (“de vos bras”) with another type of generative love (“amitié”) that Néarque’s seduction is founded on. Painted as such, the conversion does not merely enact a change in religious comportment or social status, but explicitly swaps out marital love for the “disgraceful fruit” begotten of same-sex friendships. We might also recall that Polyeucte and Pauline are newly married and do not have children. Therefore, Stratonice’s discourse highlights the queer time of
seduction, especially transgressive seduction: an attachment between men that risks yielding shameful fruit. Ibbett reminds us that in this play “maternity is constantly present as potential,” alluding to Corneille’s dedication to Anne of Austria as “‘having given birth to miracles,’ a discreet nod not just to her patronage or religious devotion but also to the great relief brought about by the birth of the long-hoped-for future Louis XIV, the year before the play appeared.”8 Polyeucte’s conversion is transgressive not because of the “birth” of a new Christian thanks to his tender same-sex friendship with Néarque, but because of its queer reappropriation of maternity-as-potential. Since maternity-as-potential can be thought of as a temporal not yet, this engendering force is unsu- tured from heteroreproductive or genealogical relations: Polyeucte’s conversion as “indigne fruit” shows that maternity as potential might also derive from “une vielle amitié” (an old friendship).

In Stratonice’s eyes, Polyeucte does not embody the fanatic, or the “epistemological mystery of individuals who annihilate themselves to becomes instruments of divine violence.”9 That is, the anti-Christian sentiment cannot accept that Polyeucte has emptied himself to be a vessel of God; rather, they presume that he is a vessel of Néarque’s manipulation, that he is emptied only to receive seductive love from his friend, a connection that posits a queer origin to Polyeucte’s conversion. This bodily emptying and engendering, which might even be thought of as a type of queer progeniture, is apparent in the source text. For John Boswell, noted historian of gay sexuality, the historical Polyeuct-Nearchos couple (from one of the source texts that inspired Corneille) stands as one of three key early Christian queer martyr pairs. Drawing on Benjamin Aubé’s account in Polyeucte dans l’histoire, Boswell reminds us that “St. Polyeuct and Nearchos . . . were described in their fourth-century biography as ‘brothers, not by birth, but by affection.’”10 They enjoyed “the closest possible friendship, being both comrades and fellow-soldiers.”11 More than merely fraternal affection, however, Boswell, citing Aubé, recounts an episode in which the historical Nearchos and Polyeuct learn that all Christians are to be executed for their faith. Polyeuct attempts to comfort his friend in the face of imminent death, but Nearchos has other worries:

“But this, dearest (φίλτατε) is precisely what weighs on my soul. There is something worse than the death of humans: the separation that I fear might take place . . . for I had feared that I would lose you from my love (φιλίας) and that we would lose the unity of our soul (συνειδήσεως)” . . . Polyeuct then roused within himself
the organ of his soul, and reaching for Nearchos with his bodily eyes, took his hand and asked, “Is this then what you feared, Nearchos, and was this your suspicion about us from the beginning? Did you realize this about the bodily part of our love?”

The phrase “organ of the soul,” as Lerner reminds us, was a frequent term that Renaissance English readers would have recognized as linked to fanaticism. Theologians such as John Calvin, Lerner suggests, “referred to prophets as ‘organs’ (organa, organes) of the Spirit, and related terms (such as versions of the words ‘instrument’ and ‘vessel’) can be found throughout his work.” Seventeenth-century French contemporaries would have understood “organe” to also evoke one person being used by another entity as a conduit. “Des personnes dont le Prince se sert pour declarer ses volontez, De ceux par l’entremise & par le moyen desquels on fait quelque chose,” (Those persons whom the Prince uses to declare His will, those by whose intermediary and by means of which one does something) as indicated in the 1694 Dictionnaire de l’Académie française. The fanatical organ becomes, in Stratonice’s paranoia, akin to a womb or a matrix, a site of male-male progeniture of “disgraceful fruit.”

Polyeucte in Corneille’s version, however, is depicted as a type of fanatic who is both an organ and embodied—paradoxically emptied out and made vibrantly fleshly at the same time. According to Aubé and Boswell, the strength of this “bodily” love and the fear of being separated from one another propels Polyeucte to convert; thanks to this same forceful attachment they also pursue the adamant destruction of the temple, as we shall see. In the source text, a fleshliness is present, a repetition of the word “bodies,” “eyes,” and “roused,” which intimates a richly corporeal bond rather than a purely metaphysical conversion. With the specter of such corporeality at its origin, Néarque and Polyeucte’s love is not merely “an old friendship” but a deeply felt, physical, and sensuous attachment to one another.

Fleshliness, then, introduces a doubly transgressive stuckness: it is that which needed to be superseded or transcended to obtain a martyred death, but it is also that which founds and fuels queer attachment between Polyeucte and Néarque, a source that generates affection and pleasure. Flesh catalyzes not only Polyeucte’s desire for conversion but also the desire to not be separated from his beloved friend. In this regard, flesh is the troubling bit that remains, as Eric Santner puts it. Polyeucte, facing his pending execution, while eager for his execution and to obtain his heavenly rewards, remarks on the difficulty of leaving
behind attachments to the flesh: “Honteux attachements de la chair et du monde, / Que ne me quittez-vous, quand je vous ai quittés?” (Shameful attachments of the flesh and of the world, / Why do you not leave me, when I have left you? [4.2.1107–8], emphasis mine). Despite his desire to leave the temporal domain, it is not so easy to free oneself from the anatomopolitical injunction, because we are so trained to believe in the ultimate good of cultivating more life, attached to the promise of always extending the quality and temporality of life itself. In the source text, Polyeucte’s flesh, we must recall, is also the site of desire and longing, the site of being “roused” with “bodily eyes”: the remnant of his love for Néarque. Taking into account the temporality of the martyr and the temporality of queer same-sex friendship, the velocity at hand in this chapter is one of passionate attunement: temporal intensities and hastenings that are aligned perfectly with that of one’s beloved. This queer velocity, however, veers directionally away from the normative trajectories of marriage, lineage, and empire.

The Temporality of the Flesh

Starobinski insisted on the political implications of Polyeucte’s conversion and martyred death, and in this colonial-governmental terrain, two competing political temporalities are at stake. Sovereign decision making needs to happen almost instantaneously, since deciding on the exception, as Carl Schmitt has suggested, occurs with a nearly deictic immediacy. That is to say, the determining of the state of exception deciding that which is exceptional) happens in the “now” insofar as “the precise details of an emergency cannot be anticipated, nor can one spell out [in advance] what may take place in such a case.”16 The exception is autoreferentially deictic: he who can determine the state of exception is the sovereign, and the very moment of determining enacts or performs a sovereignty. This transformation, Schmitt says, is akin to the miracle in theology; the instantaneous and exceptional event that suspends the norms (of law or of the natural world) and thereby inaugurates faith in the system.17 In contrast to the immediate deixis of sovereignty stands the longer-term biopolitical investment that seeks to conserve life. In Corneille’s play there is a background anxiety over to augmenting, conditioning, and orienting life toward an imagined reproductive, future good.18 The state is thus poised between haste and extension. As Foucault has demonstrated, under sovereignty, “power was essentially a right of seizure: of things, time, bodies, and ultimately of life itself; it
culminated in the privilege to seize hold of life in order to suppress it,”¹⁹ that is, power’s ultimate privilege under sovereign rule was its destructive capacity. Instead of the deductive power of sovereignty, the diffusive force of biopower, incites and invests in the body—in bodily capaciousness, vitalities, and intensities. The flesh, and particularly the martyred flesh, highlights a temporal paradox that is compounded by the colonial setting. “If the martyr’s desire to die reveals a desire to stage an ending and to decide on questions of duration that are usually imagined to be beyond human control,” suggests Katherine Ibbett, “a similar but contradictory desire to manage life is also evident in the projects of reason of state.”²⁰ Using examples from Jean-Baptiste du Tertre’s Histoire générale des Antilles (1667), Ibbett shows how the colonial context of Polyeucte offers this paradoxical time: the French colonial project in New France and the Antilles was a charged site for both political expansion (possibly destroying conquered life) and terrain for cultivating and conserving sustained settler-colonial life. As Polyeucte is set in the Roman colony of Armenia, the time of life in the context of the play is similarly both shortened and lengthened in one colonial thrust, a thrust that has a winnowing function that decides between valuable and inviable lives.

In Polyeucte the sovereign’s deductive capacity—swiftly executing the transgressive Néarque, for example—is enacted through an instantaneous temporality, one that can be thought of as “digital” (a decisive, binaristic temporality), whereas biopower’s incitement occurs though “analogic,” or gradual processes of extending and prolonging. The power of the aforementioned sovereign exception rests with the governor, Félix, who must decide if he will execute the rebellious Polyeucte, or if he will continue to invest in life. Sustaining the settler colony in Armenia and prolonging his precious foothold in the region hinges on fostering the chronobiopolitical management of the time of life. At heart, both sovereignty and biopolitics are invested in stabilizing life vis-à-vis a proper, imagined end; biopolitics purports to be a system that holds death in abeyance (extending life), while sovereignty wields the threat of an accelerated, untimely end to yield submission and obedience.

I take as a point of departure, following Santer, that biopolitics is a complex, messy, and intricate form of power and knowledge, and it does not neatly supersede sovereign forms of governing life; nor are its workings without points of weakness. Foucault contends that biopolitics is implemented through a microphysics of power, a “physics of a relational and multiple power, which has its maximum intensity not in the person of the king, but in the bodies that can be individualized by these relations.”²¹ Santer suggests that
We could say that the precariousness, the fragility—the “nudity”—of biological life becomes potentiated, amplified, by way of exposure to the radical contingency of the forms of life that constitute the space of meaning within which human life unfolds, and that it is only through such “potentiation” that we take on the flesh of creaturely life. Creatureliness is thus a dimension not so much of biological as of ontological vulnerability, a vulnerability that permeates human being as that being whose essence it is to exist in forms of life that are, in turn, contingent, fragile, susceptible to breakdown.22

To cross apply Santner’s analysis, the problem of the fleshliness in Polyeucte is grounded in the martyr’s desire to be released from the biopolitical cultivation of more life and to remain unstymied by (even eagerly coveting) the sovereign threat of death. By actively inviting the sovereign threat of execution, the martyr then may possibly detour or hijack one of sovereignty’s main sources of power, but the question still remains: to how to dispense with or to dissolve a remaining attachment to the flesh.23 The martyr is both dead and alive—proleptically dead, because he or she undertakes actions that hasten the punishment of death, but also stubbornly alive—the martyr must be a priori alive and possess the valuable, vulnerable “creatureliness” of life to become a “nude” subject that can be seized and killed.

Similar to Andromaque’s oblique relationship to the cultivation and preservation of life as analyzed in chapter 2, Polyeucte does not merely hold up a death drive as a facile oppositional block to the “conservationist” tendencies of biopower or to the sovereign decision (as if he were to say, “I strip you of the power over my life or death by actively seeking my own sacred death”). Polyeucte represents both preservable, manageable life and the potential pathogen—the enemy within (the community). In tension with the sovereign and biopolitical temporal thrusts, the martyrological drive inaugurates, or founds, something else: a temporality of fleshliness that is both forestalled and hastened. In other words, the presence of the flesh and the fleshly desire in Polyeucte trouble the neat tale of a fanatical martyr who would race to his death. The queer velocity is elicited through his lingering, troubling attachment to the flesh and to Néarque (“Shameful attachments of the flesh and of the world” [4.2.1107]) that causes Polyeucte to parry the temporal forces that would seek to seize and manage his own life (whether in the biopolitical extension of life or the sovereign threat of death).
Corneille himself admits that there is a troubling hastiness in *Polyeucte*. In his *Examen* he signals that the pacing of the events of the drama does not quite fit with the conventions of the unity of time: “Doubtlessly, if we hold the poem up to our standards, the sacrifice takes place too soon after the arrival of Sévère, and consequently this event will diverge from verisimilitude due to the necessity of obeying the rule.” Corneille conveniently places the blame on the “rules” and on “custom.” Despite the deference Corneille feigns to pay to the rules, Jacques Scherer notes that, instead of working within the unity of time, Corneille simply skirts this constraint: “Corneille’s solution was simply to evade the problem itself: it would suffice not to mention the length of time assigned to the action.” Corneille’s ignoring the temporal frame, however, yields more problems than solutions. The crush of events violates the aesthetic tenets of staged action, but the haste of Polyeucte’s desired martyrdom also risks defying Church doctrine. Speed becomes reinterpreted as a sign of fanatical excess. André Georges dissects whether such an excessive display of zeal would be acceptable: “Saint Cyprien, bishop of Carthage proclaims: ‘Everyone,’ he would say, ‘should be ready to confess one’s faith but no one should race to meet one’s martyrdom.’” Therefore, speed itself becomes an evaluative tool, to diagnose the aptness of Polyeucte’s conversion and the appropriate tempo of racing toward desired death.

I read *Polyeucte* as being in dialogue with another conversion, that of Saint Paul, a former Jew and Roman persecutor of Christians. Paul’s “miraculous” conversion to Christianity, subsequent apostleship, and writings to early Christian churches offers fertile ground for thinking of political theology and Pauline philosophy regarding the body of the church. I take a cue from Julia Reinhard Lupton who, reading Shakespeare, argues for an understanding of “Paul as a fellow traveler of inter-communal negotiation and epochal transformation.” Although Corneille does not directly cite Pauline epistles (beyond the nominal reference to the character of Pauline), like Shakespeare, Corneille was navigating questions related to the presence of religious tradition in the face of immense change. *Polyeucte*, Ibbett reminds us, “represents the late Empire and early Church to a seventeenth-century audience themselves imagining, in the first decades after Edict of Nantes, just how divine law and political expediency might be made to work together.” Corneille’s play implicitly asked the unresolved question of how those of differing faiths—Protestant and Catholic—could coexist
harmoniously in the name of civic unity. Thus, while Corneille’s use of Paul might be more speculative than evident, the context is similar and resonant between the playwright and the saint: both Paul and Corneille highlight the “epoch-making ‘forcing’ of change that is far from a simple step outside the inherited tradition in question.”

Pauline philosophies of time help underscore the queerness of Polyeucte’s own velocities and thus necessitate a slight digression to unpack Paul’s temporal positions. Paul, in his second letter to the Thessalonians, ominously signals that the end of time will only occur once the “falling away” has taken place and the “man of sin” is revealed. Paul writes: “And now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time. For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back (katechon), will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming” (2 Thess. 2:6–8).

Marc De Wilde wryly points out that though Paul assures us “and now you know,” many scholars, commentators, and even Church Fathers did not, in fact, know; all were relatively perplexed over what the “restraining” or “delaying” force, or katechon, could be. Paul signals that the katechon is what delays a certain falling away or revelation. But is such a force positive or negative, and what constitutes the force itself? The katechon could signal a means of holding at bay, forestalling the coming of the Antichrist (the “man of sin”) and the end of times. This would bolster what De Wilde calls the “state-affirming tradition” in Pauline philosophy, a mode of interpreting the katechon as necessitating the state’s orderly force of justice, holding the apocalypse at bay. In this light “the sovereign thereby acquired a theological legitimacy, justifying state violence as a necessary means to prevent worse, namely the ‘falling away’ and the revelation of the Antichrist.” Within the play, the state-affirming tradition of the katechon is most clearly presented by Félix who paints himself a representative of order to extend life, restraining the “chaos” of Polyeucte’s conversion: “Je flattais ta manie, afin de t’arracher / Du honteux précipice où tu vas trébucher; / Je voulais gagner temps, / Pour ménager ta vie” (I indulged your madness in order to drag you / From the shameful abyss into which you will stumble / I wanted to buy time, to spare your life [5.2.1573–75]). Even with the words “arracher” or “précipice,” Félix signals his “holding back” of an imminent collapse, reinforcing his position as a state-affirming restrainer of disorder.
For Schmitt, the katechon was the key to understanding the necessary function of the sovereign, De Wilde suggests, noting: “The sovereign has to protect the existing order and suppress lawlessness at all costs, even if it requires violating the laws.”

Such a move invokes a state of exception that elevates the ruling power’s reaction to crisis into a “powerful myth that supports his claims to power: the myth of the divine right of kings.” Therefore, as long as the sovereign both curates the threat of pending end times and establishes himself as the katechonic force forestalling the end, he can hone power within “a type of interregnum situated between redemption and fall.” In other words, temporal experience is simultaneously the keystone of sovereign power and the product of such sovereign, katechonic forestalling.

The state makes time—by holding in abeyance the end.

Problematically, because the katechon is a temporal paradox, the inverse reading is also true; the katechonic restraint could in fact signal a “state-critical” tradition if the restraining force were viewed as an “obstacle to eternity.” In other words, the opposite reading would hold that the orderliness of the state, which holds the apocalypse at bay, is actually the “sinful one” that delays the bliss of the hereafter. In opposition to the “state-affirming” tradition, the “state-critical” reading of the katechon would celebrate Polyeucte’s haste in breaking the Roman pagan idols and rushing to his reward. Polyeucte’s vision of himself aligns with “revolutionaries in whose anarchistic violence [Benjamin] recognizes traces of a divine law-destroying violence.” Such foundational violence pushes past the obstructionist techniques of the state, a life-preserving state that would endeavor to forestall the end. The play transforms the same violence that would be a “lawmaking” violence (the death of a rebellious transgressor) into a Benjaminian “law-annihilating violence” (the death of the martyrs that shatter the law in order to catalyze a new kind of interest, community and identity).

After Polyeucte has converted, he urges Néarque to “come out” as a Christian, repeating the word “allons” (let’s go) multiple times to urge him to hasten: “allons aux yeux des hommes / Braver l’idolâtrie, et montrer qui nous sommes” (Let us go before the eyes of men / Stand up to idolatry and show who we are [2.6.645–46]). Néarque responds in horror: “Mais dans ce temple enfin la mort est assurée,” while Polyeucte retorts: “Mais dans le ciel déjà la palme est préparée” (But in the temple death is assured in the end / But in heaven the reward is already prepared [2.6.661–62]), opposing the finitude of “enfin” against the eager anticipation of “déjà.” Polyeucte chides Néarque, “Mais loin de me presser, il faut que je vous presse!” (But far from pushing myself, I
must press you to hasten [2.6.682]). In this tension between delaying or hastening the end, the katechon is a force that will either preserve or complete the order of things. What is essential to remember here is that Corneille’s play collapses the two figures of the katechon, showing that sovereign power is always tenuous or incomplete (failing to hold back the end) and that revolutionary power—especially revolutionary power founded on deep, fleshly, affective attachments—is likely to undermine itself, as it might hesitate to bring about the end.

Like many other neoclassical tragedies that begin with a missing center of sovereign gravity—consider Racine’s Phèdre or Iphigénie—in Corneille’s Polyeucte the authoritative voice is present but is founded on shaky ground: the distant emperor’s desires are transmitted through the representative, Félix, who himself is unsure, paranoid, and vacillating. When Pauline comes to beg her father to free her husband Polyeucte, she has to remind him that he is, in fact, acting in the stead of the emperor: “Au nom de l’empereur dont vous tenez la place” (in the name of the Emperor, in whose stead you stand [3.3.918]). But she is unable to complete her plea because Félix interrupts her to underscore that he is just the representative, the prosthetic tool of the emperor. “J’ai son pouvoir en main; mais s’il me l’a commis, / C’est pour le déployer contre ses ennemis” (I have his power in hand; but if he granted it to me / It’s to deploy it against his enemies [3.3.919–20]). Félix merely wields power “in hand,” but this power is not total; it is only invoked in certain particular instances or states of exception against “enemies” or transgression. We are thus faced with a question of Polyeucte’s martyrizable, vulnerable flesh: is it a valuable life or an enemy contagion?

There is a clumsy instrumentality with which Félix invokes the necessary violence of capital punishment. He only has power “in hand” since he is not the sovereign himself. Benjamin explains this clumsiness or roughness in the exercise of capital punishment by suggesting that it reveals “a kind of lawlessness at work in the legal order, an immediate violence that escapes attempts at legal regulation. Confronted with this violence, the laws prove to be powerless and fragile, incapable of checking the excess on which their applicability seems to depend.” And indeed, Félix’s muddling indecision sets him to be a prime candidate for Benjamin’s vision, set forth in the Origin of German Tragic Drama, of what De Wilde calls the “tragic image of a sovereign who is faced with a permanent catastrophe and proves unequal to his task . . . falling victim to doubt and despair instead.”

Félix’s failure to stand in for the emperor and to preserve the empire has direct consequences for the temporality of the play. Massimo
Cacciari underscores that the temporality of empire itself derives from the slowness of the katechon:

the temporality proper to the form of empire is the epoch. The will to power of empire is expressed in epoch making. *Epoché* means suspension, stopping, motionless delay. Time no longer moves from moment to moment (*movimentum*) and in empire time takes on its exact form . . . To *katechon*, neuter, and *bo katechon*, masculine, derive from *katechein*, which means: to detain, to contain, to slow down, and that which slows down or he or she who slows down. To be epoch making means to be able to detain or contain all that dissolves the supremacy of the ruling spiritual-political form. We could differentiate between the power that truly stops the energies that aim at dissolving a given order and those that limit themselves to keeping them at bay or containing them. But it is clear that both dimensions intersect.  

Empire, Cacciari reminds us, paradoxically needs the “energy of the adversary to last as long as possible” and achieves this “duration” by “slow[ing] down the energies that constitute the body of the adversary, for it knows that their explosion will also spell the end of empire.” Thus, for empire to extend its duration, and to shore up its force, it engages with a conservational, slow temporality, one that conditions and extends life and the specter of the adversary: in this case, the transgressive bodies of the fanatics.

Cacciari shows that the empire requires the tempo of the *epoché* (the “suspension, stopping, motionless delay”), but this slow monumental- ity can be hijacked by revolutionary force, which seeks to accelerate where empire would slow down, as Polyeucte eventually dreams. Polyeucte urges his friend, “Ne perdons plus de temps: le sacrifice est prêt: / Allons-y du vrai Dieu soutenir l’intérêt” (Let us waste no more time: the sacrifice is ready / Let us go there to sustain the interests of the true God [2.6.711–12]). The empire has a temporal weak point: it can only sustain its temporality of freezing by “slowing down the energies that constitute the body of the adversary,” as Cacciari suggests. Total elimination of the adversary would spell doom for empire, since without an adversary there is no opponent against the katechon’s delaying or withstanding can be enacted. Through haste Polyeucte sees his violence and his actions as justified; not only does haste counter the “slowness” of empire, as Cacciari points out, but haste also character- izes the martyr’s desire for the glorious end—*déjà*. 
By understanding the temporal governance and violence incited by the katechon, we can better understand Polyeucte’s haste as a foundational violence—ripe with potential for new community making. “How,” asks Ward Blanton regarding Pauline philosophy, “does a new community form burst into existence on the site of an imperial execution, in which someone is abandoned to the strategic imposition of imperial sovereignty? How, in such a case, can something happen besides the routinization of sovereign power?”46 Paul, like Polyeucte, tells the story of radical break with tradition, but a break that founds and ignites something new.47 Furthermore, it is significant that Paul was once a persecutor of Christians whose reversal, or conversion, then signals a founding of the Church (a new kind of Christian identity). Similarly, Polyeucte’s reversal not only challenges preexisting norms of governance but also lays the groundwork for another type of community, one rooted in (queer) affinity and identity. As Blanton highlights, “One of the tasks presented by . . . philosophico-Paulinist constellations is to uncover the way radical dispossession irrupts in the contestation of existing, world-constituting logics, allowing for the invention of new identifications oriented around the formerly uncountable, zero-level status of the excluded.”48 In this light, marginalized identities, from the denigrated status of “Christian” to the specter of same-sex love, all coalesce to emerge as new, previously unthinkable nodes of identification.

The Temporality of Paranoia

From the very beginning, the play depicts a mode of governance in which the time of life is both intensively managed and scrutinized, but this intensity is also distilled via the vague “telephone chain” of command from Rome to Armenia. The physical gap itself provokes and ignites the spectator’s imagination, as Ibbett suggests: “the spectator is asked to imagine himself in relation to particularly pressing political demands, as the governor figures wrestle with problems . . . Is there room for equivocation in complying with a distant order? When must orders from afar be obeyed, and when ignored?”49 Diegetically, because of this gap of distance, Félix opts to rule via haste. Politically, we must reconsider the deployment of time within the sovereign state when its rule is delayed in distant colonies—which exposes an essential paranoid structure within colonial power. Because of the “state-affirming” tradition of the katechon, if the state posits itself as the forestaller of the end, then paranoia—probing what dangers or threats lie in wait
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ahead—becomes its characteristic temporal weapon. In the first scene in which we meet Félix, the appointed Roman governor of Armenia, he seems far from sovereign. Significantly, his paranoia, and the investment in knowing and capturing his family’s closeted thoughts conditions much of the future-oriented, fearful temporality of his rule.

Contemporary queer theory elucidates the allure of and addictive qualities of paranoia. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick shows how the reading practice associated with the “hermeneutics of suspicion” produces a cohesive “strong theory” of reading and interpretation. Paranoid reading “places its faith in exposure,” because it trusts that revealing the hidden meanings of a text or of a situation is the key to preventing, ameliorating, or addressing the situation. For Sedgwick, paranoid reading is strongly associated with a specific kind of temporality, a heightened, fearful relationship to the future: “The unidirectionally future-oriented vigilance of paranoia generates, paradoxically, a complex relation to temporality that burrows both backward and forward: because there must be no bad surprises, and because learning of the possibility of a bad surprise would itself constitute a bad surprise, paranoia requires that bad news be always already known.” The temporality of paranoia and that of the katechon would appear to go hand in hand, insofar as the katechon itself is deeply uncertain, and is precisely sustained by certain paranoid questions: is the end near? What will hasten or forestall this demise? The state-affirming tradition thus requires a paranoid “burrowing” back and forth to prevent the “bad surprise” of the arrival of the “lawless one.”

Félix urges his daughter Pauline, against her wishes, to see Sévère, but Pauline balks. She had previously been betrothed to Sévère, but because he had long been thought dead, only two weeks prior Pauline had acquiesced to marry Polyeucte. The ever-paranoid Félix fears that the returned soldier will use his status as the emperor’s favorite to retaliate against Pauline for her marriage to Polyeucte. Félix insists, “Il faut le voir, ma fille / Ou tu trahis ton père et toute ta famille” (You must see him, my daughter / Or you betray your father and all your family [1.4.249–50]). In Félix’s case, solidifying political favor from Décie, staying in Sévère’s good graces, and maintaining order all depends on his hasty governance choices. Ironically, as Christopher Semk notes, regarding Félix’s clumsy timings and Sévère’s arrival, “Sévère nearly always appears on the stage too late to be effective. Sévère arrives too late to marry Pauline, who has already married Polyeucte, he arrives too late to save Polyeucte from death, and he arrives too late to convert at the end.” There is an out of timeliness associated with any attempt to create (heterosexual) order.
Overall, Félix’s anxieties stem from no clear present cause, but rather from a wildly spiraling imagination of future outcomes. Of course, paranoia proliferates when it is both supported by the facts one uncovers and uncorroborated by them: the absence of the expected secret meaning only prompts deeper digging and more insistent stripping away of layers of obfuscation. Félix’s decisions often run counter to the evidence that his daughter and his advisors provide; they stem largely from his own paranoid imagination. Even after Polyeucte has “come out” as a Christian and is set to be executed, Sévère pleads with Félix on behalf of Polyeucte as a gesture of compassion. Yet Félix adamantly refuses to accept this possibility: Sévère’s discourse is a trap, Félix believes, because Sévère is simply feigning sympathy to prompt Félix’s clemency, which Sévère would then use to indict him.53 “De ce qu’il me demande il m’y ferait un crime / Épargnant son rival, je serais sa victime” (Sévère would make a crime of the same act he begs of me / Sparing Sévère’s rival, I would become his victim [5.1.1463–64]). With the hypothetical tenses of “il m’y ferait” and “je serais,” Félix envisions a future in which he would be the victim of the same kind of trap that he ends up devising for Polyeucte; he “knows” this type of deception so intimately, because it is a fantasy of his own paranoid construction.

Amid this crisis of authority in colonial governance, Félix clings obstinately to one project: he has been charged with the conservation of life, as Ibbett reminds us.54 The temporal “burrowing” of paranoid reading, the back and forth of imagined and forestalled futures and present-day actions, is the regime under which both the forestalling of the katachonic end and a chronobiopolitical management can take place. One of Félix’s governance strategies, to forestall an unwanted (bad surprise) end, is to inoculate against future transgressions. He makes sure that Polyeucte witnesses Néarque’s demise.

Du conseil qu’il doit prendre il sera mieux instruit,
Quand il verra punir celui qui l’a séduit.
Au spectacle sanglant d’un ami qu’il faut suivre,
La crainte de mourir et le désir de vivre
Ressaisissent une âme avec tant de pouvoir,
Que qui voit le trépas cesse de le vouloir. (3.2.879–84)

(He will better understand the orders he must follow
When he will see the punishment of the one who seduced him.
He’ll be made to follow his friend’s bloody, spectacular end
The fear of death and the desire to live
Can seize a soul with so much power
That he who witnesses such an execution will cease to desire it.)

Félix hopes that the bloody spectacle of Néarque’s death will detour Polyéucte from his intended plan and augment the martyr’s desire for life. In this instance, Félix uses execution as a strategy to increase life (“le désir de vivre”), highlighting that death (the spectacle of death) is necessary to increase the investment in life and to heighten the biopolitical governance of life. But his governance via the future-oriented temporality of paranoia falls short, as we shall see.

**Sex and Sects: Conversion through Seduction**

It is significant that Félix’s threat of death targets “the one who seduced him,” in other words, using the death of Néarque (the “seducer”) to change Polyéucte’s position. On one level, this does follow the source text and the pathos-filled moment analyzed above, when Polyéucte cannot bear the thought of being separated from his beloved Néarque. On another level, with the phrase “the one who seduced him,” instead of using Néarque’s name, Félix pinpoints the crime on Néarque’s transgressive act and alludes to the fact that what must be inoculated against is not just the politically disobedient conversion, but also the possibility of future wayward affinities and attachments. Pierre Richelet’s *Dictionnaire français* (1680) scene defines “séduction” as a deceptive form: “Tromperie dans des choses qui regardent la Religion, ou les moeurs” (Deception in affairs regarding religion or mores). Complicating this understanding that seduction is rooted in deceit, the verb “séduire” contains a certain ambivalence about whether the deception is religious or a pleasurable (sexual) one. Antoine Furetière’s *Dictionnaire universel* (1690) notes this divide more clearly: “Séduire. Abuser quelqu’un, luy persuader de faire le mal, ou luy mettre dans l’esprit quelque mauvaise doctrine . . . Les plaisirs nous seduisent & nous empeschen de songer à notre salut” (To exploit someone, to persuade him to do evil, or to put in his mind some bad doctrine . . . Pleasures seduce us and impede us from thinking about our salvation). The possibility of seduction, and the uses of deception, only serve to augment a paranoid mentality, especially in the case of Polyéucte. How might one augment the desire for life, and the pleasures of life, while at the same time discerning between deception and reality, seduction
or fanaticism? When Stratonice complains that Néarque has seduced Polyeucte, the implication the seduction-conversion took place not through lies and deception, but rather by planting the seeds of interest toward a competing set of (sexual) values (“quelque mauvaise doctrine”). But what does it mean to be converted through seduction?

Conversion itself, of course, carries multiple connotations. To consider another Pauline example, Jonathan Goldberg reflects on the queerness of Caravaggio’s *The Conversion of Saint Paul* (1600), with the saint in a moment of religious ecstasy—or conversion—lying prone in what Goldberg reads as a queer position. Saint Paul is on his back with his legs akimbo, splayed open: “Is [conversion] as the etymology of the word suggests, a turn with? Or is it a turning around? Or back? Does it represent a break? An end? A beginning?” In Goldberg’s musings, we see that conversion is intimately tied to temporality, whether it inaugurates the new or completes the old. Paul’s conversion, like Polyeucte’s, signals a radical break with tradition, but a break that founds and ignites something new. Ward Blanton calls this the Paulinist “clearing,” asking: “how is one to construe, historically and theoretically, the new, change, or that which is not captured by current regimes? However, where Paul would disavow fleshly genealogy for spiritual affinity, Caravaggio’s aesthetic depicts Paul in the throes of ecstasy, a corporeal, embodied image of *jouissance* that for Graham Hammill “resuscitates the flesh that Paul relinquishes.” Conversion, queer pleasure, and fleshly remainders entwine. Similarly, Corneille’s play shows that the conversion can be a site of nongenealogic affinity and identity, and revitalizes the remnant of flesh in Polyeucte’s intensified erotic attachment to Néarque. Flesh is significant in terms of its temporality here: it metonymically marks both a temporal “straightness” and a queerly contingent “veering” or seductive straying. The temporally linear version of the flesh is echoed by the affirmations of others who state that Polyeucte “a du nom, et sort du sang des rois” (Polyeucte has a renowned name, and descends from the blood of kings [2.1.420]). Flesh, however, also retains its queer “stuckness” as the carnal remainder of erotic attachment between the men, marking a strange velocity that tends toward martyrdom (the haste to follow one another) instead of a normative velocity of progeniture and the “blood of kings.”

In the drama the multiple senses of conversion, from sexual to religious, are condensed in what Goldberg calls the “condition of unnameability [recalling] the well-known formulation about sodomy as the crime not to be named among Christians”, or, to use Stratonice’s term, the “secret mystérieux” (mysterious secret). Throughout
much of the first act Pauline seeks to know “What is this secret?” (1.2.111) and urges Polyeucte to tell her what is happening between him and Néarque: “Mais mon déplaisir ne vous peut émouvoir! / Vous avez des secrets que je ne puis savoir! / Quelle preuve d’amour!” (But my distress does not move you! / You have secrets that I can’t know! / And this is proof of love! [1.2.115–17]). While she invokes (heterosexual) love between herself and Polyeucte to remedy his secretive silence, the literal meaning of her jab is also true: the secrets that Pauline cannot partake in are indeed a proof of a hidden love, the love between Néarque and Polyeucte. In these opening scenes, the secret at hand, the secret between Néarque and Polyeucte, can be polyvalently read as that of conversion to another sect (Christianity) or else as that of a type of unnameable sexuality.

For Goldberg, the moment of Paul’s unexpected and incomprehensible conversion from Jew to Christian, from the persecutor Saul to the believer Paul, unravels the received notions of identity and identification. In Paul’s own conversion narrative as recounted in the Bible’s book of Acts, Paul underscores how his companions heard the voice of God, but could not see; and Paul himself, upon opening his eyes, is blinded for three days. Conversion and the representation of the unrepresentable are explicitly and particularly aligned in this event. The theatrical representation of that which is unseeable—whether sexual affinity or miraculous conversion—sets the terrain for alternate, other kinds of representational pathways, all uniquely grounded in velocity.

The “excluded” and “unnameable” statuses of the sexual-religious conversion merge in Corneille’s play on words around “sexe” and “secte.” Several times throughout the play Christianity is labeled a “secte,” an insult that is not too far away from its paired paronomastic twin, “sexe.” Thus, just as Caravaggio’s particular form and aesthetic offer Goldberg and others an occasion to consider the queer fleshliness that cannot be fully relinquished, Corneille’s Polyeucte preserves this stubborn remainder (and intimate attachment between Polyeucte and Néarque) through the form of rhetoric.

For first-century Roman rhetorician Quintilian, whose work deeply influenced early modern writing and rhetoric, the trope of paronomasia “attracts and excites the attention of the hearer by some resemblance, equality, or opposition of words,”61 and is commonly called a pun. For Northrop Frye, paronomasia points to something secretive, private, a sort of sticking moment in the rhythm of conversation: “Paronomasia is one of the essential elements of verbal creation, but a pun introduced into a conversation turns its back on the sense of the conversation and
sets up a self-contained verbal-sound-sense pattern in its place.” For an instant, the doubled sounds snag the smooth flow of discourse. In Corneille’s play, the paronomasia of sect and sexe yields a surprise speed, in which one word and its twinned other are heard simultaneously, almost too quickly to be caught, slipped in together in a unison pair. The rushed language instantaneously creates an “inside” and “outside” to the conversation, the presented word, and its back-turned double.

Corneille’s description of “leur secte” echoes the ways one might speak of a marginalized (sexual) identity group and resonates strongly, even anachronistically, with modern homophobic language. Comforting Pauline, who fears Christians, Stratonice says at the beginning of the play: “Leur secte est insensée, impie, et sacrilège / Et dans leur sacrifice use de sortilège” (Their sect is crazed, impious, and sacriligious, / And in their sacrifice, use sorcery) [1.3.257–58]. Later, after Polyeucte has converted, Pauline begs her father to save Polyeucte, saying, “Ne l’abandonnez pas aux fureurs de sa secte” (Don’t abandon him to the furies of his sect [3.3.909]); she thereby emphasizes the powerful, irrational passion within this denigrated group. In yet another example, the ever-compassionate Sévère, despite the fact that his rival Polyeucte’s death could allow him to marry Pauline, tries to defend Christianity to his friend, noting, “La secte des chrétiens n’est ce que l’on pense, / On les hait, la raison je ne la connais point / . . . Par curiosité, j’ai voulu les connaître” (The Christian sect differ from our conception of them, / We hate them, but I have no idea for what reason / . . . Out of curiosity I wanted to know them [4.6.1412–13; 4.6.1415]). Here, he marks his openness to learn more about these otherwise denigrated people. In fact, in comparison to Stratonice’s vitriolic speech, Sévère finds the hatred that the “secte” of Christians experiences to be unjustified, a position of sympathy for those in another “secte” (or affinity for another sect and sex) that extends the parallel between anti-Christian and homophobic speech in the drama. In all these—treasonous sacrilege, crazed passion, and curious temptation—we see that the conceptual and cultural difference between sects and its homonym, sex, are not so far apart. Sévère’s comment expresses a longing to mingle with Christians, perhaps to expose himself to the possibility that he too may be “seduced” into the faith, as Néarque seduced Polyeucte; in this case, the religious transformation would occur through knowing (“connaître”), which redoubles the sexually euphemistic quality.

The conflation between sex and sect is most apparent in Stratonice’s grasping for a term to describe Polyeucte. Unable to pin down precisely
the nature of his crime, she resorts to a logic of accretion. She attempts to explain to Pauline why Polyeucte is no longer the spouse he was, but to do so she pulls together a dozen terms:

C’est l’ennemi commun de l’état 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. (3.2.780–84)

(He is the common enemy of the State and the gods,
A villain, an infamous one, a rebel, a perfidious man
A traitor, a scoundrel, a coward, a parricide,
A disgusting plague on all the good people,
An impious blasphemer: in one word, a Christian.)

Ultimately, these insults are not able to fully answer the question of why he is no longer worthy of being her spouse; it is unclear why Stratonice needs to resort to so many insults to prove her point. Pauline herself even says, weakly, in his defense: “Ce mot [chrétien] aurait suffi sans ce torrent d’injures” (This word [Christian] would have sufficed without this torrent of insults [3.2.785]). Stratonice’s phrase “en un mot,” set up by the colon, promises some sort of logical justification anchoring the avalanche of invectives (“to sum up”). The word is doubly insufficient, not only because it tops off such a hyperbolic stream of insults so weakly but also because, in Stratonice’s eyes, Polyeucte has not “merely” converted. He has shattered the former bonds between himself and the state, his family, and more.

As Stratonice renarrates to Pauline the event of Polyeucte’s conversion, she still cannot fully name the “thing” that troubles her so deeply. She recounts how Polyeucte retorts to Félix, who tries to stop the pair from further desecration of the temple:

“Quoi! lui dit Polyeucte en élevant sa voix,
Adorez-vous des dieux ou de pierre ou de bois?”
Ici dispensez-moi du récit des blasphèmes
Qu’ils ont vomi tous deux contre Jupiter même.
L’adultère et l’inceste en étaient les plus doux. (3.2.835–39)

(“What!” said Polyeucte, raising his voice
“You adore these gods of stone and wood?”)
Here, please spare me the narrative of the blasphemy
That both vomited against Jupiter himself.
Adultery and incest were the sweetest of these blasphemies.)

In her recounting, she highlights that she does not wish to repeat Polyeucte and Néarque’s injurious words. The closest she can get to recounting what they said is to hint that, in their “vomited” blasphemous speech, they targeted Jupiter for sexually transgressive actions. She loosely associates their own accusations with her own viewpoint of Christians as sexually and morally deviant.

The pun, then, becomes a node where the velocity or swiftness of mistaking one word for another allows for an unexpected intimacy on the level of signification. Frye suggests, we recall, that paranomasia “turns its back on the sense of the conversation,” but this image of back-turning, rather than a simple refusal, generates something private, intimate and contained. The doubled meaning of “sex” and “sects” and the production of excess meaning through sonic sameness, is not simply a metaphor; it is itself a pathway of presenting, affirming, and attuning attachments between Néarque and Polyeucte. Laurie Shannon, analyzing classically derived figures of “insistently same-sex friendship with complex relationships to eroticism” in the English Renaissance underscores that “they cast the friend as ‘another self’ and merged a pair of friends as ‘one soul cast in two bodies.’” The pun itself embodied this twinned status: two meanings in the same sound, one soul in two bodies. In this light, the conversion, as well as the desire to convert, highlights the intersections between “sexe” and “secte”; Néarque and Polyeucte’s love is not merely a “une vieille amitié” (an old friendship), but a deeply felt, physical and sensuous attachment to one another, affirmed and performed through the doubled quickness of the punned term.

Corneille’s version of the story presents the men’s bonds through the subtle, repeated ways that Néarque and Polyeucte seek sameness and togetherness rather than separation and difference. After Félix has Néarque executed, he asks, “Et notre Polyeucte a vu trancher sa vie?” (And our Polyeucte saw his friend’s life cut short? [3.4.957]). He hopes that witnessing the horrific spectacle of his friend’s death will prompt Polyeucte to retract. Albin responds, “Il l’a vu, mais hélas! Avec un oeil d’envie. / Il brûle de le suivre au lieu de reculer” (He saw it, alas, with an envious eye. / He burns to follow Néarque instead of retreating. [3.4.958–59]). Polyeucte’s response to seeing his friend executed echoes the corporeality in the historical fragment that Boswell emphasizes.
The deadly cut of martyrdom is not one that Polyeucte resents or fears; rather, his main preoccupation is the very act of separation, not being allowed to follow (“suivre”) his dearest Néarque, just as we saw in the source text, where Nearchos fears losing the “unity of our soul.”

As Shannon underscores, in Sovereign Amity, “likeness in both sex and status is (the only) political equality in period terms; on the basis of this likeness, writers stress the making of a consensual social bond or body that is not inherently subordinating.” In other words, if “secte” is used as a pejorative term, and wielded to justify execution and denigration, the fact that Néarque and Polyeucte insist on their likeness underscores a “poetically powerful imagining of parity within a social form that is consensual.” The autonomous “sovereignty” of their friendship, to take a cue from Shannon, thwarts the chronobiopolitical governance of life as managed by Félix, since they remain immune to both threats of execution (and thus immune to execution itself, as a political weapon). Therefore, this type of queerly intimate sovereignty, wrought from sameness, becomes troubling on both an affective and political scale.

Racing to Baptism

Because of the emphasis on sameness, whether in the redoubled word of sex (“sects”), or in the fear of separation that propels Polyeucte’s affective attachments, much of the language of Néarque “seducing” Polyeucte hinges on the expression of what I have called passionate attunement, as they seek to calibrate their emotions and their intensities of feeling for each other. At the very beginning of the play, Néarque initially assumes that Polyeucte’s willingness to defer his baptism is a sign of his wavering faith. Polyeucte asks if the haste is even necessary, wondering if he must continue to repudiate his wife: “L’occasion, Néarque, est-elle si pressante / Qu’il faille être insensible aux soupirs d’une amante?” (Is the occasion, Néarque, so pressing / That it is necessary to be insensitive to the sighs of one’s lover [Pauline]? [1.1.21–22]). Néarque’s urgent haste is unseemly, Polyeucte initially thinks. He later adds, regarding the baptism, “Bien que je le préfère aux grandeurs d’un empire / Comme le bien supreme et le seul où j’aspire / Je crois, pour satisfaire un juste et saint amour / Pouvoir un peu remettre, et différer d’un jour” (Even though I prefer baptism to the glories of an empire / as the highest good and the only one to which I aspire / I believe, to satisfy such a just and sacred love / To be able to push it back a little
bit, and defer it by a day [1.1.49–52]). Importantly, Polyeucte does not cite his fear of retribution or political scandal in the wake of his conversion. Rather, he cites affective markers—the lull of amorous sighs or of feminine charms—as the impetus for delaying his conversion: “Vous ne savez pas ce que c’est qu’une femme: / Vous ignorez quels droits elle a sur toute l’âme, / Quand après un long temps qu’elle a nous charmer, / Les flambeaux de l’hymen viennent de s’allumer.” (You do not know what a wife is like / You don’t know what rights she has over your whole soul / When, after having charmed us for a long time, / The flames of marriage have just been ignited [1.1.9–12]). To think back to the katechon, in this instance the delaying force (forestalling the wished-for end of conversion) is linked to Polyeucte’s heterosexual love. In Néarque’s eyes, Polyeucte’s delay is also the measure of his sense of the incompatibility between his love for his wife, his love for Néarque, and his love for God. Temporality itself (his delay) becomes imbricated with sexuality and a means of signaling his anxiety about the multiple irreconcilable desires that tug on him. Néarque interprets this delay as a signal that Polyeucte initially wishes to cling to the comforts of his heterosexual life and his respected place in governance. Néarque oddly insists on expediting the rite before the heightened ardor of conversion cools:

Il est toujours tout juste et tout bon, mais sa grâce  
Ne descend pas toujours avec même efficace  
Après certains moments que perdent nos longueurs,  
Elle quitte ces traits qui pénètrent les cœurs,  
Le nôtre s’endurcit, la repousse, l’égare,  
Le bras qui la versait en devient plus avaré  
Et cette sainte ardeur qui doit porter au bien  
Tombe plus rarement ou n’opère plus rien  
Celle qui vous pressait de courir au baptême,  
Languissante déjà, cesse d’être la même  
Et pour quelques soupirs qu’on vous a fait ouïr  
Sa flamme se dissipe, et va s’évanouir. (1.1.29–40)

(He is always ever good and righteous, but his grace  
Is not always bestowed with the same efficacy  
After we’ve lost key moments through our tarrying  
She (grace) that penetrated men’s hearts, now turns her back.  
Our heart, grown hardened, pushes her away and strays,  
The arm that once poured it out becomes more parsimonious
And this holy zeal which should lead us to good
Comes more and more rarely, or fails to move at all
That which pressed you to run towards the baptism,
Languishing now, is no longer the same
And for a few sighs that you were made to hear
This flame diminishes and will vanish.

Néarque uses corporeal imagery—of arrows penetrating hearts, of open arms—to present the pleasures that he offers in rather sensual, physical, terms. One kind of flesh (same-sex attachment, intimacy) is thus proffered in exchange for another: Polyeucte’s relinquishing of his marriage love. In Néarque’s language of promptitude counteracts the possibility of delay, a _katechonic_ delay that would allow Polyeucte to cede to his wife’s fears. Therefore, Néarque’s precipitousness also takes on a type of queer velocity: a haste that is wrought from the intensity of their affection for one another, which also aligns with their desire to speed along toward their demise, in contradistinction to the “state-affirming” delay of Pauline and her father.

Polyeucte answers Néarque’s accusations of weak Christian faith by insisting on the sameness of their passionate experiences. He says, “Vous me connaissez mal: _la même ardeur_ me brûle / Et le désir accroît quand l’effet se recule” (You misunderstand me: _the very same ardor_ burns within me / And desire only increases when the effect disappears [1.1.41–42], emphasis mine). Polyeucte affirms that he too is rushing to convert: “Oui, j’y cours, cher Néarque / Je brûle d’en porter la _glorieuse marque_” (Yes, I run there, dear Néarque / I burn to bear the glorious mark [1.1.93–94]). While religious fervor and sexual ecstasy have long borrowed rhetoric from one another, the particularity of the language is noteworthy here—which is composed not only of eroticized eagerness but also of speed. The haste serves as the sign of his desire; with “j’y cours” and the repetition of “brûle,” Polyeucte signals an affirming speed that signals his willingness to leave the delaying force of marriage for another kind of attachment—one to Christianity and to Néarque.

To cinch his argument in favor of conversion, Néarque begins to put forth an even speedier rhetoric:

Nous pouvons tout aimer: il [Dieu] le souffre, il l’ordonne
Mais à vous dire tout, ce seigneur des seigneurs
Veut le premier amour et les premiers honneurs.
Comme rien n’est égal à sa grandeur suprême
Il faut ne rien aimer qu’après lui, qu’en lui-même, 
Négliger, pour lui plaire, et femme, et biens et rang.
Exposer pour sa gloire et verser tout son sang.
Mais que vous êtes loin de cette ardeur parfaite
Qui vous est nécessaire, et que je vous souhaite. (1.1.70–79)

(We can love everything: He tolerates it, he orders it
But to tell you the truth, this lord of lords
Wants to be first in love and in honors
Since nothing is equal to his supreme glory
After him, you can love nothing else, other than himself.
You must neglect, to please him, wife, goods, and rank.
Reveal yourself for his glory and pour out your blood.
But how far you are from this perfect ardor
That is so necessary for you, and that I wish you.)

Although “que je vous souhaite” grammatically indicates “that I wish for you” (the conversion and God’s love), in Néarque’s phrasing it is also possible to read it as an exclamation, “how I desire you!” In the ambiguity of expression within “je vous souhaite,” similar to the multiplicity afforded by the pun, Néarque can travel from generalities of loving all (“Nous pouvons tout aimer”) to an urgent entreaty with which Néarque presses Polyeucte to accept a specific kind of “ardeur parfaite” (perfect ardor). Desire animates the intensity with which Néarque exhorts Polyeucte to accept Christianity. The “perfect ardor” that Néarque wishes for his friend is both affectively intense and vague.

At work in this speech is the rhetorical figure of metalepsis, indicating a sliding chain of similitudes. It is a trope less popular than its cousins, metonym and metaphor, and its status in early modern rhetoric was a confused one: many people did not know whether to laud or loathe the term for its destabilizing possibilities. For example, the phrase “angel wings on the mountain’s back,” to signify a snow-covered mountain, requires a slippage of metonym to metonym: the snow is white and soft as like angel feathers, the mountain is covered with snow, the mountain’s side looks like a hunched back. In the phrase “angel wings on the mountain’s back,” however, “snow” as the prime animating figure, drops out. In his rhetorical treatise, Quintilian calls metalepsis “an intermediate step . . . signifying nothing in itself, but affording a passage to something. It is a trope that we give the impression of being acquainted with rather than one that we actually ever need.” Later, he says that “we need not waste any more time
We should note Quintilian’s particular emphasis on rushing over (and effectively effacing) that trope which is, itself, self-effacing: a trope with a temporal implication, whose blatant minimization reveals an implicit forcefulness.

Metalepsis ties together through enchained likenesses: the metonym of a metonym is a strange kinship indeed. Although metaphor is a rather conventional trope trading in similitude, in its cousin, metalepsis, meaning is stretched beyond its clearly linkable significance. If metaphor, according to Brian Cummings, “transfers a name to something unlike but not so unlike itself,” metalepsis is the trope that “stretches metaphor a little further than we want to go, perhaps even to the breaking point.” Metalepsis generates queer ties, enabling A and C to adjoin together, two terms that “ought not” normally be naturally twinned, but are able to be linked topically, grammatically through ties that rush connections in meaning. Metalepsis is the generating figure that knits together, but must also render invisible the common linking agent: “the peculiar power of metalepsis in Renaissance theory is precisely that it leaves certain steps in the exchange invisible,” notes Cummings. This trope “makes space for imagination, for language as fiction or fantasy. In this figure we do not know how we have got to where we are, as if we have been transported by an unseen mechanism.” This sudden propelling forth happens invisibly: we are aware of the thrust of movement, but we don’t necessarily “see” the intermediary linkages themselves.

In fact, many scholars have picked up on how Néarque’s primary insistence in the first scene of the play dissolves the heteronormative ties that bind Polyueucte to his wife: he urges his friend to ignore his wife’s tears and pleas. This zealousness is often explained by religious enthusiasm or the excesses of fanaticism. Left out of his speech, and thereby perhaps overlooked by scholarship, is an attention to an invisible linking mechanism. For Néarque to urge Polyueucte to accept this “ardeur parfaite . . . que je vous souhaite” (the perfect ardor . . . that I wish you”), the intimate, “bodily” affection between the two men, and their fear of being separated from one another, becomes a major impetus. Néarque loves Polyueucte and thereby urges his conversion; Polyueucte loves Néarque and wishes to convert, like his friend. Metalepsis hastens the action along yet remains itself unseen. It deliberately leaves out the crucial linking term—the stubborn, fleshly love that Polyueucte and Néarque hold for each other. The spectator must infer or provide the missing pieces, joining far-stretched concepts together to articulate the connection that can only be seen by the traces it leaves
behind. Possibly, implicit in Quintilian’s denigration of the trope is an uneasiness about metalepsis’s subversive potential.

Attuned Speeds

In the play Polyeucte and Néarque seek not only to speed up their actions (conversion, announcement, martyrdom) but also to hasten the sought-after end. They also attune their tempos to one another; this attunement reveals another way that queer velocity might “directionally” diverge from norms of sexuality and intimacy without outright undoing them. A musical paradigm for this visible secrecy, or the open secret, might be the overtone or harmonic in music. When two instruments play notes in perfect harmony, an unexpected, higher extra pitch is generated. Importantly, the harmonic tone is not actually “played” by the musicians but produced as a supplementary product of the perfect matching of two notes. The supplementary sonic pleasure can only be grasped through perfected articulation. Instead of being sounded marginally or edged out, such desire is apparent, in plain sight, but only caught by the trained ear to the unexpected, lingering overtones.

Early modern scholars of music theory, physics, and mathematics suspected the presence of overtones, but could not fully account for or explain them. The puzzle was this: when a note was played, say on a vibrating string on a violin, if one listened closely, one could hear a few faint, specific, higher resonances at the same time. Another way of discerning these ghostly higher tones (or “upper partials”) was to play a stringed instrument and to watch or touch certain higher-pitched strings while the lower note (called the “fundamental”) was being played.

This phenomenon was observed by René Descartes in his “Abregé de la musique,” a treatise on music theory, pleasure, and taste. He notes that, “I have seen through experience in the strings of the lute or whatever other instrument that it be, that if you touch one, the force of the sound will vibrate all of the other strings which are tuned higher by a fifth or a major third . . . yet the force of this harmonization can only come, without a doubt, from their perfection or imperfection.” For Descartes, the sympathetic vibration of neighboring strings by certain intervals was enough to assert that there was a “natural” basis for certain notes to be harmoniously brought together. Such productive resonances, only effectuated through perfect attunement, provided poetic inspiration for seventeenth-century dramatists to write on the
resemblance between music and love. Even if the mechanics of such a phenomenon were beyond their grasp, this trope appears, for example, in Pedro Calderón de la Barca’s *El médico de su honra* (1637):

Dicen que dos instrumentos
Conformemente templados,
Por los ecos dilatados
Comunican los acentos:
Tocan el uno, y los vientos
Hiere el otro, sin que allí
Nadie le toque; y en mí
Esta experiencia se viera;
Pues si el golpe allá te hiriera,
Muriera yo desde aquí.75

(They say that two stringed instruments,
When perfectly in tune,
Transmit the tones by echoing each other:
Play the one, and the other, though untouched,
Is moved by the whisper of the wind.
And so it is with me:
If a blow struck you there, I would die here.)

Attunement performs a bond of perfected similitude (“Conformemente templados”) that also affirms a bond of love. Yet, like the overtone itself, such a love is “hiding in plain sight”—the connection is apparent but not overtly stated.

The physical and mathematical reason for this mutual vibration would not be discovered until the mid-eighteenth century.76 These ghostly higher tones, simply put, were byproducts of the string vibrating many different ways at once. The string has a main speed, or frequency of vibration, called the “fundamental.” At the same time, the string vibrates more quickly, in perfect integer multiples of this fundamental frequency, and the faster vibrations cause the string to be “split” or subdivided into perfect halves, thirds, and so on, divided at places called “nodes.” These smaller subsections, because “shortened,” produce the faint higher pitches of the overtones.

The overtone depends upon perfectly calibrated speeds of vibration, and similarly, unison and repetition, in Polyeucte and Néarque’s language, enact kind of overtone through their calibrated queer velocities. Like paranomasia, this unison can be thought of as a redoubled,
swift sameness. In the pivotal scene of act 2, when the two men finally decide to present themselves as Christians (to come out and “montrer qui nous sommes”), while they do not actually speak in unison, they do the next closest thing: repeat and recite each other’s words to the letter, producing, in effect, a redoubled, intensive sameness and attunement that could allow for an overtone. Polyeucte says, as Néarque hesitates:

Il faut (je me souviens encore de vos paroles)  
Négliger, pour lui plaire, et femme, et biens, et rang,  
Exposer pour sa gloire et verser tout son sang.  
Hélas! Qu’avez-vous fait de cette amour parfaite  
Que vous me souhaitiez, et que je vous souhaite?  
S’il vous en reste encore, n’êtes-vous point jaloux  
Qu’à grand’peine chrétien, j’en montre plus que vous? (2.6.686–92)

(One must [I still remember your words]  
Neglect, to please him, wife, goods, and rank  
Reveal yourself for his glory and pour forth your blood.  
Alas, what have you done with this perfected love  
That you wished me, and that I wish you  
If there is any left in you, are you not ashamed  
That barely Christian, I show it more than you?)

In his insistence that he is quoting Néarque exactly, Polyeucte reveals that he is alarmed at the disaccord wrought by the “j’en montre plus que vous”—by his demonstrating an intensity that is out of sync with and more than Néarque’s. He seeks to rectify this through a performance of “unisson”; his unifying repetition reasserts the “amour parfait,” which points to both Christian love and the love between the two men. Polyeucte’s inserted parenthetical remark underscores that what he says (or is about to say) are actually Néarque’s words, preserved and memorized, and recited to draw his friend in to perfect attunement. The goal is for the two to vibrate with the pleasure of the harmonic sameness. Here, the overtone serves as a figure of supplemental queer affection, hiding in plain sight.

While attunement is the means of highlighting sympathetic resonances between the men’s bodies, Corneille also uses the figure of discord to evoke the inviability of an intimate relationship. Pauline expresses her anxiety over feeling terribly disjointed from her husband. Stratonice comforts her, describing marriage as follows:
On n’a tous deux qu’un cœur qui sent mêmes traverses,
Mais ce cœur a pourtant ses fonctions diverses,
Et la loi de l’hymen qui vous tient assemblés
N’ordonne pas qu’il tremble alors que vous tremblez,
Ce qui fait vos frayeurs ne peut le mettre en peine:
Il est Arménien, et vous êtes Romaine
Et vous pouvez savoir que nos deux nations
N’ont pas sur ce sujet mêmes impressions. (1.3.145–52)

(You both have a heart that feels the same hardships
But this heart, however, has various functions
And the hymeneal law that ties you together
Does not command that he tremble when you tremble.
That which makes you afraid cannot affect him:
He is Armenian, and you are Roman
And you should know that our two nations
Do not have the same opinions about this subject.)

This sentiment, of course, is in contradistinction to the attuned, sympathetic vibrations seen before in the Calderón quotation and in Néarque and Polyeucte’s language. Stratonice insists on the naturalness of difference between people who love each other. While the two men employ the rhetoric of “sameness” to emphasize their passion (for God, but perhaps also for each other), Stratonice’s description of Pauline’s relationship emphasizes differences—differences that range from the microlevel of the body to the macrolevel of culture and nationality. Trembling, whether from fear or erotic pleasure, is an action that occurs almost outside of personal agency, motivated primarily by affect, and Stratonice’s dismissal that they need not both tremble also shows that their velocities need not be attuned.

Overall, the instantaneity of Polyeucte’s conversion shatters the ways that identity was founded before—aligned with blood, genealogy, lineage—and we might also add marriage to this list. Pauline speaks of her marriage to Polyeucte in purely functional terms, comparing her previous love for Sévère with her duty-filled marriage to Polyeucte: “Et moi, comme à son lit je me vis destinée, / Je donnai par devoir à son affection / Tout ce que l’autre avait par inclination” (And I, as I found myself fated for his [Polyeucte’s] bed/ I responded with duty to his affection, / But the other [Sévère] had my love from my own inclinations [1.3.214–16]). This marriage is an orchestrated commitment—constructed, false, unnatural—and it stands as a foil
to the effortless attunement and sameness exhibited by Polyeucte and Néarque. While Polyeucte foregrounds the crisis of the “colonial governor” representing imperial interests from afar, Félix’s methods of governance through paranoia falls short. Instead, the intensity of the tempos performed by Polyeucte and Néarque, as well as their confirming “sameness”—both in their speeches and in terms of the proliferating sameness of memetic spread—reveal how speed allows the articulation of certain unnameable desires. As analyzed before, these desires are not only law destroying but also foundational of a new kind of community, or a new kind of love. Desire is a magnetizing force between self and other, between this time and the (desired or foreclosed) future.

In Polyeucte the conservative tempo of empire and the state-affirming katechonic force it purports to purvey are destabilized. Félix’s governance, as the extension of empire’s authority, is shaken when his values and his mandate—the biopolitical maintenance of life through genealogical reproduction—are threatened by the revolutionary transformations represented by Christianity. In Corneille’s paronomastic doubling of sex and secte, we see how the shattering, unrepresentable experience of conversion inaugurates a new lawlessness: these new Christians are characterized by unruly attachments, attachments that are reproductive according to a completely different logic from the previous governance paradigms. Where Félix’s world is characterized simultaneously by a commitment to the predictable, plodding trajectories of marriages and bloodlines and a paranoid anxiety that such an approach will fail, Polyeucte and Néarque celebrate a love based on passionate attunement. In this way, the “end” of martyrdom that Polyeucte and Néarque hasten toward is not an end at all, but rather a shattering, radical inauguration of the new: an alternative to the chronobiopolitical imagination whose limits are made all too clear in Félix’s paranoia and vacillation.