

6-15-2019

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Recommended Citation

Manuel Antonio Jacquez (2019) "Questioning the Ways of Milton: Stratford Festival's Paradise Lost," *Early Modern Culture*: Vol. 14 , Article 37.

Available at: <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/emc/vol14/iss1/37>

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Questioning the Ways of Milton: Stratford Festival's *Paradise Lost*

Adapted by Erin Shields
Directed by Jackie Maxwell
Stratford Festival, Stratford, ON
Performance Date: September 13, 2018

Reviewed by MANUEL ANTONIO JACQUEZ

The premise of a theatrical adaptation of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* raised many questions to my mind: *How much, if any, of Milton's original language will be used?* So much of the original meaning of *Paradise Lost* is invested in Milton's words. *Will the actors performing Adam and Eve be naked?* After all, there are theological stakes to Adam and Eve's nakedness and their perception of their naked bodies before and after "The Fall." *What happens when an actor embodies Satan, God, or God the Son?* In the theater it is commonplace for actors to embody allegorical figures or deities, but gender, ethnicity, age, and many other factors of the outward show of these Christian figures could become especially significant. For example, wouldn't presenting God the Son with an actor's corporeal body blur the distinction between God the Son as a spiritual part of God before his mortal life as a man afterward? *Will Satan be portrayed as a tragic hero?* Percy Bysshe Shelley famously interpreted Satan as a wronged avenger and considered him morally superior to Milton's portrayal of God. When adapted for the stage, would Satan only garner further sympathy if given the opportunity to flex his rhetoric before a live audience? Finally, my most pressing question: *Why is Paradise Lost being adapted for the stage in 2018 and spearheaded by women creatives?*

Canadian playwright Erin Shields asserts in her program note that what drew her to adapt Milton's epic poem is its centrality to the classical literary canon. Like other pillars of the traditional canon established by white male critics, *Paradise Lost* is the product of a male perspective and features nearly all male figures within its narrative. As such, Shields produced an adaptation that re-envisioned *Paradise Lost* akin to Lin Manuel Miranda's revisionist adaptation of the life story of one of America's founding fathers in *Hamilton*. Like Miranda, Shields identified with the narrative's central figure: "Satan appeared to me as a woman. Satan rebels against God, is punished for her revolt and devises a masterful plot for revenge... In short, Satan is a complicated, irresistible protagonist, and I wanted to explore that journey from a perspective closest to my own." Shields's reconceptualization of Satan as a rebelling feminine figure made her adaptation both faithful and purposefully loose. Shields adapted each of the major plot events and even conversations depicted in Milton's epic, but modernized much of his language and substantially added her own questioning commentary. In her opening soliloquy, Satan (Lucy Peacock) bluntly asked the audience, what significance does Milton's

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epic even hold for our “increasingly secular society?” For Shields, the appeal to revisiting *Paradise Lost* was in returning to Western society’s foundations and scrutinizing them. Whereas Milton’s epic sought to “justify the ways of God to men,” Shields’s adaptation sought to question the ways of Milton and the Christian creation myth for the men *and* women of 2018.

In Shields’s *Paradise Lost*, Satan was a soliloquizing tragic protagonist, breaking the fourth wall to engage with audiences. As I suspected before seeing the production, lending Satan the platform to address a live audience reinforced her perception as a romanticized tragic hero. Lucy Peacock’s charismatic swagger as Satan was powerfully punctuated by her raw outbursts of anger and resentment. With God (Juan Chioran) and God the Son (Gordon S. Miller) played by male actors, Shields and director Julie Maxwell added a gendered divide to Milton’s original conflict. As a feminine figure rebelling against the ultimate representation of male authority established in Christianity, Peacock’s Satan evoked contemporary women’s questions of how and why they should conform to laws defined by a male patriarchy. The male Adam (Qasim Khan) and female Eve (Amelia Sargisson) further contributed to this dynamic. Satan and Eve’s resemblance to one another was highlighted by their similar inquisitiveness and wit, while Adam’s easy confidence and nonchalance mirrored God and God the Son’s own habits of mind and motion. The gender of the ensemble cast who alternatively embodied Satan’s fallen allies and God’s faithful angels appeared to inconsistently correspond to the gender identities of their roles. Satan’s followers seemed to retain their male identities from Milton’s poem, but the angels appeared to be a mix of male and female figures. The weight of the gender dynamics of this adaptation seemed to lie more with the central characters, but further complications arose in this production’s representation of Sin (Sarah Dodd) and Death (Devin McKinnon).

The complications of allegorical staging were a central challenge in this adaptation. In Milton’s epic, Sin’s outward appearance is first described as a “woman to the waist, and fair, / But ended foul in many a scaly fold, / Voluminous and vast, a serpent armed / With mortal sting” (II.650-3).¹ Instead of adapting Milton’s original description of Sin or any of the other characters, Maxwell and her team devised symbolic contemporary dress. Satan wore an all-black outfit with a tank top, leather pants, and boots, while God was attired in a professional light-gray suit, and God the Son was barefoot and in all-white. At the start of the play, Satan initially wore a gray trench-coat of the same hue as God’s suit, but quickly cast it off in an act of defiance. In attiring each of the characters in symbolic weeds, Sin and Death’s costuming carried considerable weight in what the production culturally judged to be an accurate representation of evil. In place of Milton’s own problematically sexist portrayal of death, the production attired both Sin and Death like an offensive cultural stereotype of the poorer classes. Costumed with a stained white tank top, slipping pants, and a visible pink thong, Dodd delivered Sin’s dialogue in an exaggerated uneducated accent, with mispronounced words, while gesturing like a slob. This portrayal appeared to be intentionally played up for laughs and my audience found it very funny. As an insinuation that this should be the epitome of what Christian sin should look like, I found this choice to

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strongly evoke classist prejudices. Similarly, Sin's counterpart Death was represented along classist lines. Death was presented as a sort of stereotypical street punk, wearing a hoodie in which he had stuffed various weapons and delivered his dialogue with his own stereotypically lower-class accent. Perhaps this was a commentary upon modern Christianity's own negligence of certain populations; however, Satan's revulsion and the audience's guided laughter did not seem to direct any sympathy for these figures.

At the start of my review, I noted how many of my initial thoughts about a stage adaptation of *Paradise Lost* concerned the politics of dramatic representation. This production presented many fascinating uses of the theatrical medium. Satan's political performance during the fallen angels' debate in Pandemonium translated into a compelling live performance before a theater audience. Raphael's account of the war in heaven was changed into a play-within-the-play performed by the angels in a rag-tag imitation of the grand story, similar to the Mechanicals' earnest, yet bumbling performance of 'Pyramus and Thisbe' in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Adam and Eve's representation of their pre- and post-fallen states was cleverly communicated through their use of the third-person in their dialogue before the Fall and discovery of first-person after the Fall. The presentation of their nakedness was also smartly adapted, as the actors at first wore nude body suits and only after their knowledge of good and evil were able to perceive their naked bodies, wearing nothing at all in their final scenes. Like Milton's epic there was a lot to unpack and decipher. Overall, the most exciting aspects of this adaptation were the critical questions it posed to Milton's *Paradise Lost* from a feminist and modern perspective. Presented in a minimalist black box theatre style, the production felt less like passive entertainment and more like theatre as laboratory or forum, presenting Milton's and Shields's ideas and welcoming debate.

Following the performance, I overheard another audience member enthusiastically proclaim to their friend, "I guess I like Milton!" I wonder how this person's opinion of Milton would develop should they be inspired enough to read his original work. On the one hand, this production preserved many of the most captivating aspects of Milton's epic, but on the other hand, Shield's adaptation put considerable pressure on the patriarchal power structure of Christianity in Milton's poem, was openly cynical of Milton's distinction between good and evil and was fully skeptical of Milton's God's divine plan and benevolence. This audience member would probably be surprised and potentially dissatisfied should they read the original poem. In 2018, *Paradise Lost* remains a staple of British literature survey courses and is read in full in upper-division courses. Regardless of individual readers' response to the content of the poem, what now seems especially striking or exciting about *Paradise Lost* is the boldness of Milton's original gesture to adapt, revise, and complete the Christian myths. It carries the same spark as Lin Manuel Miranda's recent boldness in adapting and revising the mythology of America's founding fathers. Shield's adaptation of *Paradise Lost* repeats this daring gesture, reinforcing our current moment's interest in revisiting foundational narratives to examine their makeup and influence as well as our willingness to scrutinize the past and reimagine it to better match our present.

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Notes

1. Quotations and line numbers cited are based on *The Riverside Milton* edited by Roy Flanagan (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998).

Manuel Antonio Jacquez is a Ph.D. candidate at Ohio State. His dissertation concerns early modern London professional playwrights' dramaturgy of visual spectacle with chapters centered on Christopher Marlowe's, William Shakespeare's, John Webster's, and John Ford's plays.