

**PARADISE LOST: A
DRAMA IN FOUR ACTS,
ADAPTED FROM JOHN
MILTON'S EPIC POEM**

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Paradise lost: a drama in four acts, adapted from John Milton's epic poem by Walter Stephens

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WALTER STEPHENS

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PARADISE LOST.

A DRAMA IN FOUR ACTS.

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BY

WALTER STEPHENS.

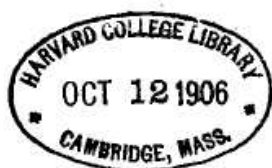
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John G. ...
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Optimi maximi causā validissime.

PREFACE.

IN presenting to the public in dramatic form this adaptation from John Milton's great epic poem, "Paradise Lost," I am fully conscious of its manifold shortcomings; but my chief aim has been to offer, if possible, to my readers a simple yet well-constructed drama, whilst utilising at the same time Milton's own ideas and methods, since it is impossible, more especially as regards his own words, to improve upon his sublime and majestic utterances.

The great poem itself, in relation to both preceding and succeeding drama, resembles one of those massive and majestic fortress rocks which remain apart, like Milton and all his works, in solemn, lonely grandeur. For, as one notable writer has already averred—and I refer to Dr. Stopford Brooke, to whom I am indebted for many of the thoughts I here venture to express—he has no predecessor and no follower; whilst we, who humbly attempt at so vast a distance to look up to the height on which he sits with Homer and Dante, feel we may paint the life, but yet hardly dare analyse the work of this great singer and maker, whose name shines only less brightly and brilliantly than Shakespeare's on the long and splendid roll of England's immortal poets.

I have also endeavoured—to use Milton's own words as regards the drama—to show that "tragedy is of power by raising pity and fear or terror, to purge the mind of those and suchlike passions; that is, to temper and reduce them to just measure with a kind of delight, stirred up by reading or seeing these passions well imitated."

This being his view, I am convinced that it was his full intention to dramatise his immortal poem for the stage, but that the tragic circumstances of his blindness prevented his accomplishing the task. In making this statement, I am conscious that I lay myself open to both learned and unlearned criticism; but I assert it because I find that it was between the years 1639-40 he undoubtedly conceived "Paradise Lost" as a drama, and it was also present to his eyes; in fact, four different drafts of it existed, and to mention one specific instance, I would recall the

lines in Book IV. (32-41)—viz. Satan's invocation to the Sun, which runs as follows:—

“ O thou ! that, with surpassing glory crowned,
 Lookest from thy sole dominion like the God
 Of this new world, at whose sight all the stars
 Hide their diminished heads ; to thee I call
 But with no friendly voice, and add thy name,
 O Sun ! to tell thee how I hate thy beams,
 That brings to my remembrance from what state
 I fell, how glorious once above thy sphere ;
 Till pride and worse ambition threw me down,
 Warring in Heaven against Heaven's matchless King ! ”

This, we know from Aubrey and Phillips, was intended as the beginning of the drama, whilst during the winter of 1639-40 we have abundant proof from Milton's jottings in a MS. now in the library at Trinity College, Cambridge, seven pages of which MS. are filled with subjects, and detailed sketches of the form for these subjects, sixty-one of which are scriptural, and thirty-eight from British history. Most of them, when they are at all expanded, are in dramatic form ; but the epic and the pastoral are now and then suggested. The most remarkable thing, however, is that in the years 1640-42, more than twenty years before the work was completed, the subject of “ Paradise Lost ” as an epic poem was conceived ; yet, of the four drafts I have referred to, three standing together at the head of the list, the fourth set down some time afterwards, are all in dramatic form.

It was after Milton's great work, the “ Defensio,” and his removal to Petty France, Westminster, probably before the middle of the year 1652, that he became blind, otherwise he would undoubtedly have completed his great conception of “ Paradise Lost ” as a drama. It is quite possible and feasible for an author to conceive a poem in dramatic form before committing it to writing in prose or otherwise. In 1658, however, he began the great epic, and completed it in 1663.

I have ventured, whilst omitting the full stage directions, to base my tragedy upon the outlines of those set out in the MS. in the library at Trinity College, Cambridge, and also upon those in the poem itself, as well as the four drafts I have previously mentioned.

In asserting what I have—and I am not alone in this respect—I adduce as an additional and conclusive argument that Milton would have completed his drama for pecuniary reasons also, owing

to the pitiable sum he received for the immortal poem itself, some £23 only in all! He became totally blind in the middle of the year 1652, and there is no doubt he felt the surrender of all his hopes as regards his great conception as a drama very keenly. It is interesting here to note the fact that Dryden, with the consent of Milton, once constructed a play from "Paradise Lost" entitled *The State of Innocence*, but stated in his preface that the original was undoubtedly one of the greatest, most noble, and most sublime poems which either this age or nation has produced. The verse of the great epic is blank verse, being, as it is, the unrhymed metre used by Surrey in his translation of the Fourth Æneid, whilst it had been Milton's habit to use blank verse also in drama, as, for instance, in his *Comus*.

The style of "Paradise Lost" is throughout great—in fact the greatest in the whole range of English poetry; so great, that when once we have come to know, honour, and love it, we find it gives life and supreme dignity even to the commonplace.

There is further a matchless majesty in the conduct of the whole of his thoughts, and a music in the majesty which fills it with intensely solemn and sublime beauty. The Latinisms and various forms of expression belonging to other languages are somewhat frequent, but the inimitable style is never prosaic.

I have endeavoured to deal with the poem in dramatic form in a spirit of reverence as befitting so sacred and lofty a theme, dealing, as it does, with the greatest of all human tragedies save one; for its interest is partly connected with its theology, which possesses a grandeur capable of artistic treatment, whilst the great overshadowing idea of the immortal epic is the sovereignty of God. In the fierce and inevitable struggle, I have striven also to keep to the chief central idea of the poem—namely, that God is always certain of supreme victory; whilst the problem of the origin of evil and the struggle of a moral being against evil without him is also set forth. The latter, it has been urged, is the artistic motive of the poem; whilst it has in all ages and in all literatures keenly interested mankind. It is, I believe, with other great writers and profound thinkers, the very foremost subject of art. We are all excited by the temptation and the intense inward strife it causes; and though here we have evil tempting those who had never known evil, yet we feel that we are in a world of beings who belong to our common humanity, "but without the all-modifying element of evil." We all read "Paradise Lost"; first, because the great story interests us, and next because we love and reverence it as a work

of art which forms such a splendid unity and whole, created by the lofty and imperial imagination of a consummate genius.

I think that Milton's original idea of the poem as a drama was rather of the Shakespearean than of the Hellenic type, as exemplified in his tragedy of "Samson Agonistes" so strongly. "Paradise Lost" is one of the few universal poems of the world; imperial and majestic in the sense that the work of Homer and Virgil and Dante and Shakespeare is; worthy also to exercise supreme command over the heart and intellect of all ages. Its intellectual glory and transcendent beauty are beyond all human praise; whilst its faults should be spoken of by smaller men with reverence. Whoever reads it, and studies it, will feel his whole spiritual nature uplifted and enlarged thereby, for it has been said of its author :—

"Thy soul was like a star and dwelt apart;
Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea,
Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,
So didst thou travel on life's common way
In cheerful godliness; and yet thy heart
The lowliest duties on herself did lay."

I have endeavoured to keep the characters of Adam and Eve throughout the tragedy as the archetypal man and woman, fresh from the Eternal's hands. They are essentially primal. It is interesting doubtless to note here that throughout the whole realm of sacred art there is nothing which represents Milton's primal characters, save Michael Angelo's two frescoes in the Sistine Chapel. To those who care only for the agony and joy of the human struggle, as depicted in the story of Faust, Hamlet, or Ædipus, or for "the storm of human action," as expressed in Achilles or Æneas, the great epic poem of "Paradise Lost" will not appeal to them so strongly.

In my earnest and sincere desire to produce this adaptation on the English stage, I was met at the very outset with an official rebuff. In submitting my MS. to the public censor of stage plays, it was returned to me with the polite intimation that, being "scriptural," it was against the Lord Chamberlain's rules, and therefore "ineligible for public licence." The public censor, I may remark with all respect, is not, nor can he ever be, a dramatic critic in the ordinary sense. He is a guardian of public morals, not a judge of a play as a work of art, or even as a work of intelligence. He is, further, the paid official of the Government, authorised to carry out certain primitive rules as regards the licensing of plays for public

performance, which, alas, does not release one from a stultifying, dogmatic and wholly unwarrantable, though traditional, restriction. That being so, I do not intend to enter into a discussion here as to the wisdom of his office, since we see no such public official existing as regards our literature, the Press, and fictional work, or the justice of his official *ipse dixit* in the case of my own play. To his decision I bow until a better and more enlightened state of things prevails in this country. It is my intention, meanwhile, to endeavour to arrange to produce the drama, both in America and Germany, where a more intellectual and chastened state of things happily exists as regards the licensing and production of plays on their respective stages, and also those of Rome and Paris. A great outcry arose from all parts of the country when the decision of the public censor became known, the Press taking up the matter, not only in this country, but in America and on the Continent, whilst I received a large number of letters from persons in various stations of life, begging me to produce the play and so test the censor's official ruling. It was my intention, though I was aware that to aim high in playwriting was theatrical bad shooting, to stage the tragedy in London in response—so I conceived—to a great intellectual appeal, not only from my own countrymen, but also from those in America, but I was prevented from the very outset. We are all aware that religion, both in classical and Christian periods, gave birth to the drama, yet in these so-called enlightened days of the twentieth century, a dramatic author is debarred from presenting on the English stage a play which simply follows in the steps of those which taught the very religion which all sacred Scripture reveals and upholds. It is a most unnatural hostility which the rules of the Lord Chamberlain disclose—a separation, as it were, of a mother from a child—in the refusal to allow the production of religious plays on our stage of to-day by those whose ancestors gave birth to the sacred drama itself. I therefore contend that a play dealing with a great human tragedy depicted in Holy Writ is highly educational and beneficial, both spiritually and morally, to its beholders; for such plays touch the very heart of mankind, and anything that effects this gains ever a supreme victory for good. Mankind must have vent for its feelings, instincts, and passions, and it is in such religious plays, as also those of a secular character, these find full and adequate expression. There should never be any inherent antagonism between the public censor and dramatic authors and their works, since their plays had their earlier origin in the early