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Review

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REVIEW

Review of Brendan Prawdzik's *Theatrical Milton: The Primacy of Perception*

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Prawdzik, Brendan. *Theatrical Milton: Politics and Poetics of the Staged Body*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017. Pp. viii + 256. Hardcover, \$105

Most readers of Milton are probably aware that the poet had *some* interest in theater. From *Comus*, Milton's only work written for performance, to the drafts of *Adam Unparadiz'd*, the play about the Fall he eventually abandoned in favor of *Paradise Lost*, and to the closet drama *Samson Agonistes* that Milton did not intend for the stage but nevertheless wrote as a tragedy, a Janus-faced pattern emerges: the theater appealed to Milton, and he never fully submitted himself to its appeal.

At its most modest, Brendan Prawdzik's new book, *Theatrical Milton*, offers a systematic treatment of Milton's interest in theatricality and proves, in my opinion successfully, that this interest is a rather more significant one than previously assumed. Prawdzik looks at all of the above works and adds to the list other, less obvious examples, from the *Vacation Exercise*, Milton's juvenilia from the Cambridge years, to the *Animadversions*, the antiprelatical tract that tends to be left out of the poet's modern collected works, to argue that Milton kept returning to theatricality not only in those works that have generic affinities with the stage but across all of his many genres including lyric poetry, epic, and even the prose works.

To take but one example, in the first chapter Prawdzik focuses on the *Vacation Exercise*, Milton's contribution to a 'salting' ceremony at Cambridge. Since salting was a rowdy, carnivalesque ritual involving a comical oration in Latin, Milton's decision to

insert between the oration and the interlude an English poem with references to his own ambitions as a poet must have struck his audience as a curious choice. Prawdzik seizes on this choice to argue that Milton's fashioning himself as a poet in terms of rhetorical oration and theatrical performance indicates a departure from the Spenserian-Virgilian model of imagining poetic authority. While most of *Theatrical Milton* is chronologically organized, in this chapter Prawdzik looks ahead to *Paradise Lost* so that by connecting the *Exercise* with the epic poem he can show Milton had a sustained interest in the kind of staged performance in which the speaker delivers himself over to an audience. Yet, Prawdzik suggests, the poet's interest in theater was never so much in the genre of drama as in the broader idea of theatricality in the sense of a material, bodily relationship between a speaker and an audience. This is also to say that the famous passage in *Areopagitica* about books being 'as lively, and as vigorously productive, as that famous dragon's teeth' is in Prawdzik's reading a statement about Milton's desire to see his works as embodied versions of himself enabling a not just spiritual relationship between him and his readers.

The benefits of recognizing Milton's lasting investment in theatricality, in this sense of a space shared by a speaker and an audience, are in Prawdzik's view many: they shed further light on Milton's materialism and monism, they suggest a potentially queer and feminist Milton who imagines himself and authorship as such in feminine terms and who eventually grows more interested in justifying Eve's ways rather than God's, and, perhaps most importantly, they challenge views about the poet being an advocate of the modern, liberal, individualist subject.

But they also raise a number of intriguing questions. If theater had such a lasting appeal to Milton, why are his efforts in the genre so few and far between—a courtly masque, some notes toward a morality play about the Fall, and a closet tragedy? To put it more bluntly, why did Milton never write a proper play? Enfolded into this biographical question there are other, more conceptual problems. Does a chronological account of Milton's interest in theater reveal any kind of pattern? Did this interest decline or become stronger over the years? And perhaps most importantly: is there an identifiable core to this interest? Something essential about theater that continued to attract Milton even when he rethought his ambition to address a popular audience, and even when he abandoned his experiments with drama?

If at its most modest *Theatrical Milton* demonstrates that Milton had a sustained interest in theatricality, at its boldest the book is an attempt to show that the above questions are all connected. Prawdzik tells a story, the premise of which is that Milton's investment in theater was not only sustained but consistent. In fact, it's a teleological story that suggests Milton himself had understood the nature of his interest in theater only by the time of writing *Paradise Lost*. Finally, it is also a dialectical one: for Milton to fully exploit theatricality in his own work, he first had to experiment with drama (Prawdzik's chapters on the *Exercise*, *Comus*, and *Animadversions* focus on different facets of these experiments); then to reject it (after *Comus* Milton never writes for the stage again; after *Animadversions* he never speaks in the character of the stage fool again, etc.); and then to embrace it once again but this time in a different form. All of which raises the question: what was it about theater that Milton remained interested in even when he has already abandoned the many concrete aspects of theatrical performance?

The answers to this question are in Prawdzik's penultimate chapter on *Paradise Lost*, but they do not come quickly or easily. The chapter begins with the surprising claim that Milton abandoned the idea of writing in the genre of drama about the fall because the *narrative* structure of a play couldn't have served the theological purpose of justifying God's ways. The claim is surprising because, if anything, the epic would seem more narrative than drama, but that is Prawdzik's point—by emancipating theatricality from dramatic narrative, Milton was able to exploit its resources to disrupt the narrative structure of the epic. The surprises continue, however, when in the rest of the chapter Prawdzik focuses on two seemingly unrelated topics: first, the question of sight, especially what he sees as Milton's challenge to early modern theories of vision, and second, the plants with whom Adam and Eve share their lives in the Garden. Neither of these issues is new in the scholarship, but how are they related to each other? And what is their relation to theatricality?

Though Prawdzik isn't quite explicit about this, I believe the juxtaposition of sight and vegetable life serves to stress the point that perception is not fundamentally different from any other kind of relation but rather a specific case of it. The point is Merleau-Ponty's, whom Prawdzik references a few times earlier in the book, and who famously sees a chiasmic, mutually sentient relation between animate as

well as inanimate entities. For Prawdzik, this phenomenology of perception and relation is key to understanding how Milton seeks to justify the ways of both God and Eve in the Garden. The old question of how a fall could have happened before the Fall can never be answered by a narrative, Prawdzik argues, since the latter would simply replace the problem of cause with a myth. Instead, Milton's ambition is to provide an account of how Eve's feeling that she is a 'seeing unseen' is the root cause of the Fall. In Prawdzik's reading, however, this is not a problem of narcissism but of perception itself, and it is therefore perception that may be *in potentia* either the cause of the fall (insofar as it generates isolation and individuation) or of its redemption (in reestablishing relations). This is also to say that in Prawdzik's reading Milton's interest in theatricality is neither in drama nor in performance; it is rather in the ways in which theater stages a phenomenology of visibility and examines not only the conditions of seeing and being seen, but also the possibilities of both relating and individuation as they are always already coded into perception.

It would seem that almost four decades after *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* and after the libraries of books written on the subject, it is a hopeless enterprise to say something new and interesting about theatricality in the early modern period. But if the main New Historicist investment in early modern theatricality has been in the performance of the self and identity of the individual, Prawdzik's book suggests that for Milton theatricality is precisely a way of questioning the primacy of the individual. Whether the book is therefore a turn away from New Historicism or an extension of its methods is perhaps less important than the fact that it is part of a welcome trend to address epistemological and even ontological questions by literary analysis.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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