

Back to the Garden Again: Directing *The Fall*

Like the rest of the York Creation sequence, *The Fall* is blessed with a short and relatively straightforward text and some interesting staging problems. Unfortunately, due to a highly restricted budget and baggage allowance, the University of Alberta Lewditores' production of this pageant had to forgo most of the lavish spectacle that was likely a major part of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century performances of the pageant. The angel's wings should have been large, feathered affairs, for instance, not pleated triangles of fabric. At least his sword was real. Visions of extensive, lush, and exotic vegetation surrounded by a wall or wattle fence – the stuff of medieval art and poetic dream vision – dwindled down to little more than the single necessary tree. But again, at least it was a tree – an actual tree-trunk, fitted on-site with artificial leaves and flowers and real fruit – rather than a more awkwardly anachronistic two-dimensional tree or painted backdrop. We even had a golden fountain, fashioned from a half barrel, courtesy of A.F. Johnston's own little Edenic garden – our nod to the original producers of the pageant, the York Coopers. I suspect that the Coopers would have had an actual working fountain, if they had one at all; here, silver thread 'sprayed' from a bejewelled golden (plastic) chalice that symbolized the Passion, the eventual consequence of the events represented in this pageant.

The forbidden fruit was an apple, in accordance with medieval tradition – the word 'malum' meaning both 'apple' and 'evil' – but of a luridly yellow variety, similar to the golden fruit of some medieval representations, which stood out well against the green foliage and large burgundy flowers of the tree itself. Appropriately, the fruit caused our only major problems during performance. A gust of (diabolical? divine?) wind temporarily felled the Tree of Knowledge just prior to our first performance; the tree was fine but most of our forbidden fruit, which had been threaded and tied to the tree for easy plucking, scattered. The fruit was easily collected again but their 'stems' all remained attached to the tree; apples needed to be rethreaded and added to the tree for each performance.

Our serpent costume, created by Sheila Christie, was based on details from a variety of medieval representations of The Temptation, including, for the mask in particular, a famous pane in York Minster's Great East Window, in which – as in many other versions – the face of the serpent resembles that of Eve, but with a more elaborate, fashionable headpiece. The costume was visible onstage at the beginning of the pageant, before Satan, whose opening lines were delivered on ground level, literally took on the serpent's 'likeness' (l.23) and entered the garden. The costume was then left onstage at the end, after Satan's exit, thus leaving the serpent in the garden, no longer 'possessed' by Satan. Satan's exit is explicitly called for in the text, but the relevant stage direction – '*Tunc Satanas recedet*' (l.82 sd) – does not explain whether Satan should actually leave the stage; he could, after all, simply withdraw – 'recede' in the modern sense – to the back of the wagon, so as not to upstage the subsequent temptation of Adam, and step forward again when an angry God addresses him as the serpent. The verb itself, and thus the intended action, is ambiguous, forcing interpretation and staging choices. Our staging allowed the actor, Michael Evans, to change from devil into angel, while the serpent itself was cursed onstage, doomed never again to walk upright (at least until the next performance). The doubling of good and evil, a relatively common staging practice in moral interludes, might possibly have been considered an unnecessary distraction in a medieval guild production of the pageant; for all we know, apprenticing coopers regularly vied for these roles. However, it kept our airfare costs to a necessary minimum, while subtly emphasizing that, whatever his intentions, Satan is, like the angel, ultimately operating according to God's plan.

One might well wish that John Clerke had clarified the action at this point. A mid-sixteenth-century scrivener in York, Clerke is responsible for most of the correction and annotation in the extant manuscript – the official Register of the plays – which he apparently checked against the words and action of the play as performed. His annotations for this particular pageant are restricted to a single missing line of dialogue (l.170) and the unnecessary addition of 'diabolus' alongside the first two speech headings assigned to 'Satanas' (ll.1, 25; see also Beadle, *The York Plays*, 18–19, 419); marginal attribution of the angel's speeches to 'diabolus' would have helped our case considerably. Still, while it lacks absolute textual authority, doubling the two roles goes some way to explain an otherwise ambiguous stage direction – one of relatively few original stage directions in the cycle as a whole. It might also account for a notable silence in the dialogue: Satan never responds to God's curse, neither as himself nor as the now cursed serpent. In our production this silence was unremarkable since Satan, who spoke through the serpent, was already gone; the serpent lay still.

We also made a few minor changes to the dialogue itself, either to eliminate remaining archaisms ('betid', l.132; 'swink', l.161), or to better retain specific aspects of the original, such as alliterative patterns and gestural indications, lost or muted in the translation that served as the official Register for this production. For instance, the PLS text rendered Adam's reaction to his realization of guilt as 'Buried for sorrow, why are not we?' This is accurate on a literal level but awkward, and lacks the implicit action of the original: 'And for sorowe sere why ne myght we synke' (l.113). The line does indeed suggest that Adam wishes to sink into the ground but it also has gestic force: the actor should here sink down *to* the ground (or rather the wagon surface) in a conventional expression of grief, 'Taking the measure of an unmade grave' (*Romeo and Juliet* 3.3.70). Our Adam said, 'For sorrow to the ground I sink', and did so; Eve did not but remained standing, well apart from Adam, as suggested by the use of the conditional plural construction in the original line.

The York Eve is explicitly open to suggestion, be it human, divine, or diabolic – less wilful or proud, than a sort of *tabula rasa*. She not only repeats verbatim, to Adam, Satan's injunction to 'Bite on boldly', but also, earlier, echoes Satan's vocabulary and alliterative patterns. These echoes, too, were muted in the PLS translation. In the original text, Eve asks the serpent 'Why, what-kynne thyng art thou / Pat telles this tale to me?' and Satan introduces himself as 'A worme, þat wotith wele how / Pat yhe may wirshipped be' (ll.54–5); Eve then asks, with richly excessive alliteration, 'What wirshippe shulde we wynne therby?' The translation was more prosaic and redundant in construction: Satan describes himself as 'A snake, who knows you too / May also worshipped be'. The problem for the translator, of course, is that the usefully alliterative 'worm' no longer serves as an adequate alternative to 'snake' or 'serpent'. We at least partly restored the alliterative pattern but differently, with 't' rather than 'w', so that Satan's self-introduction, following an initial hiss (on 'snake'), now echoed Eve's initial question:

EVE. Why, what sort of thing are you
 That tells this tale to me?
SATAN. A snake, who tells you true
 How you might worshipped be.
EVE. What worship would we win thereby?

The hope was that our translation would subtly counteract the antifeminist bias of the medieval original. Having the serpent imitate Eve, more than she him, still draws the two into intimacy and collusion – an important effect of

the original alliterative echo – but makes her appear less of a blank. Satan has to work at this seduction, meeting her on her own verbal ground rather than just looking like a more fashionable version of herself; she is thus not simply the emblem of woman-as-vanity found in so many representations of the Temptation, nor purely ignorant.

On the other hand, we probably undercut this revisionism, inadvertently, in our attempt to clothe the primordial couple much as I suspect they would have been clothed in a medieval production of the play. We could not afford untanned leather or even proper woolen hose and so opted for the anachronism and relative convenience of cotton and spandex. Still, we tried to make the ‘naked’ suits resemble the conventional nakedness of late medieval art: Adam had genitalia sewn onto his codpiece; Eve was in this particular sense a blank. I had second thoughts about this during the performance itself; if I could have done it again, I would have put a codpiece on her hose as well to give her at least a pubic triangle. Yet this might only have exasperated confusion on one particular point: as we later discovered, several audience members thought that the actor playing Eve was male, as would have been the case in a medieval production. Admittedly, Leanne Groeneveld – familiar to some of those same audience members from two previous Lewditores productions in Toronto, *Youth* (1992) and *Mankind* (1995) – does look very different in a bad blond wig, and without a little black dress and stiletto heels. Prior to casting I had toyed with the idea of cross-dressing *both* Adam and Eve, to make a point about the gendered assumptions and conventions that are part of the tradition – scholarly as well as theatrical – of the boy actor, which tend to render ‘boys and women ... cattle of [one] colour’ (*As You Like It* 3.2.402–3). But I kept Eve female, never suspecting that anyone would think her otherwise, nor that the obvious lack of genitalia on the costume could be seen as masculine disguise. Those gendered assumptions are perhaps stronger than I had thought.

No one mistook Adam, played by Len Falkenstein, for anything other than masculine, despite the obvious falsity of his genitalia. To keep those genitalia from signifying anything at all too early in the production, we kept Adam inconspicuously seated for the first half of the pageant, and carefully blocked his subsequent movements until his realization of guilt, shame, and nakedness. We had initially hoped to effect the surprise for the audience more simply by means of the aforementioned, sadly unaffordable wall around the garden. I am convinced that some sort of wall, a ubiquitous feature in medieval representations of gardens, would have been used for the play and that it would have been high enough to screen Adam’s genitalia until – but only until – the crucial moment of revelation. I have little doubt that his genitalia were somehow

represented: the Ken® doll is a modern invention; Adam's nakedness is not construed as lack, either in the play or in any medieval biblical commentary I have seen, but specifically as a problematic presence to be hidden.

God, however, was most notable for his absence. A textually explicit separation between the human and the divine begins here, both in the play and in the biblical episode it represents; henceforth, until the Incarnation, God is supposed to be invisible to all humanity. In this production, God was unseen, not only by Adam and Eve but also by the audience, forcing them into sympathetic alignment with the fallen couple that represents them onstage. Not coincidentally, this also allowed us one less, necessarily elaborate costume, and hence more luggage space. It also afforded me, as director, type-cast as the voice of God, a pleasant and privileged view of the play. While I watched the play, sewing stems onto apples, constantly renewing paradise, I also watched audience reactions to what happened therein. When Adam saw that he was naked, so did the audience, and – much like the actor himself – both were ashamed. And when God called Adam, booming out from behind the audience, most of them jumped and looked around in all directions every bit as nervously as Adam did. I saw this, and it was good. In this respect, at least, the production worked as it should – as I think the play once did – despite any inadequacies of the production due to budget or to my own (lack of) direction.