

Review

Joost van den Vondel: *Lucifer*. Translated and adapted by Noel Clark. Bath: Absolute Press, 1990. £4.95.

In my article, "Watson Kirkconnell's Translation of Vondel: A Critical Appreciation" (*CJNS* 10, Fall 1989, p. 4 n. 3), I made mention of a new translation by Noel Clark of Vondel's *Lucifer* which had been used for a recent stage performance - probably the first staging ever of Vondel in English - in London, England. I am pleased to be able to report now that Clark's translation has been published and that it represents a truly fresh rendering, which is indeed very suitable for a stage performance of Vondel's masterpiece.

As he states in the preface (7), Mr. Clark's principal aim was "to bring LUCIFER out of the study and on to the stage in an actable form." He sees, rightly I think, strong elements of wit and irony in *Lucifer*, which were one of the main reasons why the play run afoul of orthodox Calvinist opinion and was banned by the civic authorities of Amsterdam after only two performances.

Though Vondel was a deeply religious man, his play is characterized by flights of imagination, irony and wit - as exemplified by his piquant, tongue-in-cheek explanation of what it was about Man that frightened the Angels, even before God's controversial decree revised their duties. The decree itself - admittedly only half the story, hence misunderstood - gives rise to what we might nowadays call a public relations fiasco, leading in turn to war. (7)

It is not surprising, therefore, that Clark's translation is far more contemporary in language than Van Noppen's, Modi's, and even Kirkconnell's. Occasionally, perhaps, it is too colloquial, as in the rendering of Vondel's "duizendduizende eenstemmige koralen" in Act II as "umpteenthousand choirs" (24); or "zweven" in the same act as "zoom" (29); aside from its colloquialism, the onomatopoeia of "zoom" is quite inappropriate. Also a bit off is the rendering of "meinedig schuim"

in Act V as "upstart scum" (58); while the vulgar "scum" renders "schuim" perfectly (and is also etymologically fitting, for "scum" is almost certainly derived from "schuim"), "meinedig" would have been more accurately and appropriately rendered as "perjured."

Like Van Noppen and Mody but unlike Kirkconnell, who uses blank verse for the non-choral parts, Clark uses rhyme throughout, a felicitous choice, I believe, which lends at least something of the requisite formal quality to his verse lines. In general, the rhymes are well handled; only in the rhyming of "feed on" and "Eden" in Act II (17) does the verse come perilously close to doggerel.

This version possesses less of Vondel's baroque amplitude than Kirkconnell's, which, on the whole, steers a middle course between the self-consciously poeticizing archaism of Van Noppen and Modi, on the one hand, and Clark's at times brash contemporaneity, on the other. However, Kirkconnell's translation, too, is essentially one of the "study" and probably would not work very well on the stage.¹ The contemporary, even colloquial quality of Clark's rendering has, therefore, a real virtue: more than any other English version, it will make *Lucifer* come alive on the modern stage. So Mr. Clark is to be congratulated for having made this dramatic masterpiece more accessible to English-speaking readers and audiences.

1 / That Kirkconnell was quite capable of writing poetic drama eminently suitable for the modern stage (after the model of T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, for example) is demonstrated by his *Let My People Go*, which portrays the confrontation between Moses and the Pharaoh just before the Exodus of the Israelites, and has indeed been successfully performed. For the text see Watson Kirkconnell: *Centennial Tales and Selected Poems*, Toronto: Published for Acadia University by University of Toronto Press, 1965, 203-222.