



John Milton: *Comus*: A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle

(1637)

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Genre: Masque. Country: England.

Comus is the first of Milton's major works. It is a masque (an allegorical drama with music, precursor of opera), written for a private performance in 1634 and then published anonymously in 1637. The central character is Comus, the enchanter, described as a son of Bacchus and Circe. His name derives from the Greek *kōmos*, revelry, and already in Greek mythology *Kōmos* was a son of Dionysus, or Bacchus. Milton's masque has been commonly called by this name since the late seventeenth century, although the fuller title is used in good editions of Milton's poems. The text survives in several versions reflecting corrections or revisions, some made during or after performance.

Not yet a militant Puritan, Milton was not averse to seeking friends, and perhaps patronage, within the aristocracy. *A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle* was composed for a festivity in the Great Hall at Ludlow castle (now a rather sad ruin) on the Welsh border on Michaelmas night, September 29, 1634, to honour the official installation of John Egerton, Earl of Bridgewater, as President of the Council of Wales and Lord Lieutenant of Wales and the Marches, both of which appointments had actually taken place in 1631. [Cedric Brown, *John Milton's Aristocratic Entertainments* (Cambridge UP, 1985) was the first to unearth much of this contextual information.] There is a reference to this in the "new-entrusted Scepter" (35) of the children's father in the opening speech. Bridgewater was the son-in-law of the Dowager Countess of Derby, now aged about seventy and long associated with poets. Her first husband had been Fernando Stanley, Earl of Derby (d. 1594), for whose company some of Shakespeare's early plays had been written. Edmund Spenser dedicated poems to her, and she participated in two of Ben Jonson's masques. She had been the sponsor of a brief "entertainment" by Milton, *Arcades*, some two years before. This connection was highly advantageous for the largely unknown young Milton.

Masques, often expensively staged performances with much music and dance and special effects, had become popular with the royal court and under Charles I were being used to promote an ideology of Platonic love and pastoralism supporting the king's absolute and personal rule (from 1629-40 Charles ruled without Parliament). In some ways Milton's masque is not so different. It contains music, written by Henry Lawes, an acquaintance of Milton's father and the King's music-master. It allows for the standard contrast of anti-masque (comic or grotesque movements representing disorder) and gracious, harmonious dancing. It also contains some fashionable Platonism and pastoral allegory, while spirits descend on wires and sing. But the main implications of this Miltonic variant of the form are highly unusual.

Milton had probably never actually seen a masque, since they were private court and aristocratic entertainments.

But he could have read the published texts and talked to Lawes, or his father, about them. Perhaps the distance of Ludlow from London, plus the Calvinism of Bridgewater himself, encouraged Milton covertly to challenge the cultural politics of the genre, although we should remember that Bridgewater was a member of the Privy Council, a friend and supporter of Charles and the Duke of Buckingham, and that, later on, after civil war had broken out and the king had been beheaded, Bridgewater's son would be calling for that unconscionable rebel Milton to be executed. For the performance of *Comus* in 1634, however, it was still possible for a Royalist family to invite an incipient Puritan to work for them — especially an unknown young man like Milton. They may have known nothing about him. In any case, it was chiefly the musician, Henry Lawes, who was responsible for the masque and who played the role of the Attendant Spirit. It was probably Lawes rather than the Bridgewater family who invited Milton to do the libretto (as it would be called if this were an opera). It was Lawes who was responsible for publishing the first edition, anonymously, in 1637.

The plot concerns two brothers and their sister. The parts of the three children were played by the Earl's daughter, the Lady Alice, aged 15, and her brothers aged 11 and 9. They are lost in a journey through the woods. Left alone, "the Lady", as she is called, encounters Comus, disguised as a local villager. Deceived, the Lady follows him, only to be captured and brought to his pleasure palace. Meanwhile her brothers, searching for her, discuss chastity, and philosophy, until they meet the *Attendant Spirit*, who has been sent to aid them: he takes the form of a shepherd, offers them as protection the magic herb Haemony, and tells them how to find their sister. In the next scene, the palace is discovered and the Lady seated on an enchanted chair, unable to move and apparently threatened with rape. Comus holds a necromancer's wand in one hand, and with the other offers a drink from his magic cup. But the Lady refuses: "Fool do not boast,/ Thou canst not touch the freedom of my minde/ With all thy charms" (662-64). Comus urges the Lady to "be not coy" and drink from his magical cup. Just as he says "Be wise, and taste", the brothers rush in and chase off Comus and his bestial rout. The Lady, however, remains bound to her chair. With a song, the Spirit conjures the tutelary spirit (protector), Sabrina. She frees the Lady, whereupon the three children are reunited with their parents in a triumphal celebration. A song presents them thus:

Here behold so goodly grown
Three fair branches of your own,
Heav'n hath timely tri'd their youth,
Their faith, their patience, and their truth...
To triumph in victorious dance
O'er sensual Folly and Intemperance. (967-74).

Comus is much longer than other masques, and the poetry clearly predominates over song and dance. Comus' first speech is written in the jaunty measure of "L'Allegro", one of Milton's earlier poems: "Meanwhile welcome joy, and feast,/ Midnight shout, and revelry,/ Topsy dance and jollity". But soon the language makes other suggestions: "Tis only day-light that makes Sin" and threatens licence and obscenity as it hails the "Goddess of Nocturnal sport/ Dark-vaild Cotytto" (128-9).

In the main central passage (659-822), Comus, played by a professional actor, delivers richly suggestive speeches, a parody of the court's philosophy but wonderful poetry, in which he denounces "the lean and sallow abstinence" and praises the Lady's looks: "Beauty is Nature's brag". The way the seducer leads up to this praise is easily the most seductive in English poetry since Shakespeare. It is clearly influenced by the rhythm and sparkle of a Shakespearean speech, but it has its own inner logic, alien to Shakespeare's flourish. At one point for example Comus claims, and the language is magnificently anti-puritan:

Wherefore did Nature powre her bounties forth,
With such a full and unwithdrawing hand,
Covering the earth with odours, fruits, and flocks,

Thronging the Seas with spawn innumerable,
But all to please, and sate the curious taste?
And set to work millions of spinning Worms,
That in their green shops weave the smooth-hair'd silk
To deck her Sons; and that no corner might
Be vacant of her plenty, in her own loyns
She hutch't th' all-worshipt ore and precious gems
To store her children with; if all the world
Should in a pet of temperance feed on Pulse,
Drink the clear stream, and nothing wear but Frieze,
Th' all-giver would be unthank't, would be unprais'd,
Not half his riches known, and yet despis'd... (710-24)

The “green shops” are a remarkable idea, as are those industrious spinning worms. We hear, behind the persuasive rhetoric, a young poet discovering his voice and articulating, among many other things, his father’s profession as money-lending capitalist, one whose livelihood depends on the general ambition to exploit what the world gives, not to resist its pleasures.

The passage continues with further praise of nature’s fertility, and with the important idea that will recur later in *Paradise Lost*, that mineral riches actually grow in the earth. If we do not make the best use we can of the natural world God has given us,

we should serve him as a grudging master,
As a penurious niggard of his wealth,
And live like Natures bastards, not her sons,
Who would be quite surcharg'd with her own weight,
And strangl'd with her waste fertility;
Th' earth cumber'd, and the wing'd air dark't with plumes,
The herds would over-multitude their Lords,
The Sea o'refraught would swell, & th' unsought diamonds
Would so emblaze the forehead of the Deep,
And so bestudd with Stars, that they below
Would grow inur'd to light, and com at last
To gaze upon the Sun with shameless brows. (725-36)

The marvellous rhythms are Shakespearean (“the wing'd air dark't with plumes” is a characteristic variation), but the theme has reached beyond and behind Shakespeare, behind to the world of fairy lore that he exploited in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, with its added layer of classical myth, and beyond to the conflicts that were beginning to define the new world that had come into being since Shakespeare’s death in 1616. Eventually those “unsought diamonds” will grow in the Deep “inur'd to light”, if not cultivated, until they come, like Satan later, “To gaze upon the Sun with shameless brow”.

At 756-99 the Lady replies to Comus with more praise of chastity. (The Lady is one of the few characters in Milton to resist temptation.) She then develops an argument that becomes almost a defence of a puritan socialism, a covert sermon about conspicuous expenditure in big houses like this one. Nature has enough for everyone if not exploited by the rich.

If every just man that now pones with want
Had but a moderate and beseeeming share
Of that which lewdly-pampered Luxury

Now heaps upon some few with vast excess,
Nature's full blessings would be well dispensed
In unsuperfluous even proportion (767-73).

Eventually the Lady is rescued from her frozen chair by the intervention of a higher power, Sabrina, who embodies the nearby river Severn (and so celebrating the border country over which Bridgewater now presided). She sings, and there is music to accompany her, but she also represents the power of poetry to “unlock/ The clasp charm and thaw the numbing spell” (851-2).

Though the world of the masque seems ethereal or other-worldly, its vocabulary and rhythms frequently evoking *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in fact there is much in the immediate context that had deeply serious implications. The Bridgewater children, Alice in particular, had recently complained of demonic possession, and had been treated with protective amulets and St. John's wort by the well-known physician John Napier (Breasted, 411-12). In a sense the masque replays her cure. The Earl himself in his capacity as a judge had recently given an extremely fair-minded ruling in a long-drawn out case of rape of a fourteen year-old girl, Margery Evans, by a powerful local official (Marcus, 66- 85). This may have been in the minds of those present on this big occasion, more especially as Michaelmas was a Holiday associated with public administration and justice (Mortimer, 111-19). The lessons for the day from Ecclesiasticus 38 to 44 are about greatness (“Let us now praise famous men”), about sitting on the judges' seat and the wisdom of ancient prophecies. The gospel for the day, Matthew 18, denounces the man who offends against children: “it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea”. Milton may not have known these details of the Bridgewater family when he first composed the masque, though if he was present he will probably have noticed the uncanny connections at the time of the performance in Ludlow.

There was another reason why the subject of the masque was extremely risky and needed to be handled with great delicacy. An extraordinary sexual scandal had recently afflicted the family of the Dowager Countess's eldest daughter Anne (sister of Frances, Bridgewater's wife). Her husband, the infamous Earl of Castlehaven, had had his servants frequently rape both his wife and his step-daughter, who was married to his own son. He was also accused of sodomy. He was executed in May 1631. The Dowager Countess was now supporting Anne and her daughter. Milton makes tactful reference to her role in his earlier brief entertainment, *Arcades*, but in *Comus*, given the subject, he had to be careful not to insult his hosts, and especially not the young virgin playing the Lady. In particular he must avoid having the references to rape and chastity seem ironic. [John Creaser, 307-17, argued against Barbara Breasted (1971, 201-24), but does think, as I do, that Milton had to work hard to make sure that the audience did not think of the scandal.] Bridgewater, an upright judge, and now Lord President of Wales, was no Castlehaven.

The sensitivity of the topic is clear from the differences between the versions of the text preserved. Lady Alice's part is trimmed in the Bridgewater manuscript, closer to the acting version (perhaps to make the part more manageable for the girl), while *Comus*'s argument against virginity and most of his explicit sexual threats are cut. These passages were all restored when the text was published anonymously in 1637, and again in Milton's first book of poetry in 1645. The masque is also preserved in the Trinity manuscript, a precious record that Milton had started keeping of his work during the period of retirement at Hammersmith. (It is so-named because it was left to Trinity College, Cambridge, where it remains.) There we can see Milton adding or altering stage-directions, for example, as he gained a better understanding of the craft and the resources available.

Chastity was an unusual topic for a masque, but very important for the young Milton. Several years later, in 1642, he still made much of his urge to chastity in one of his more revealing autobiographical statements (*Apology*, *YP* I, 891-3): “if unchastity in a woman whom Saint Paul termes the glory of man, be such a scandall and dishonour, then certainly in a man who is both the image and glory of God, it must, though commonly not so thought, be much more deflouring and dishonourable”. In the same passage he contrasts the “thick intoxicating

potion which a certaine Sorceresse the abuser of loves name carries about” with “the charming cup” of chastity and love. Magic potions like these two contrasting drinks derive from the same world of folklore and romance as Circe or her son Comus. But in Milton’s thinking their effects are elaborated by a devotion to philosophy, especially, he says, Plato and Xenophon. These references to his reading in the years of retirement when he wrote *Comus*, give us a clue to what these sexual fantasies of scandal, dishonour or deflowering were really about. He is thinking especially of Socrates, and in particular of the speech in the *Symposium* that Plato puts into the mouth of the beautiful young Alcibiades about how he had tried unsuccessfully to seduce Socrates. The contrast of two kinds of Eros is one aspect of the speech that Socrates himself delivers.

The intensity of this commitment to chastity makes the Lady of *Comus* unnervingly like the “Lady of Christ’s” — as Milton had been called at Cambridge. But it also implies an equally strong need to struggle with its opposite. The Elder Brother evokes that contrary state of the soul, with a remarkable profusion of liquid *l* sounds:

When lust
By unchaste looks, loose gestures, and foul talk,
But most by lewd and lavish act of sin,
Lets in defilement to the inward parts,
The soul grows clotted by contagion,
Imbodies and imbrutes, till she quite lose
The divine property of her first being. (463-69).

He goes on to evoke the state of the carnally sensual soul, in a passage that recalls Plato’s *Phaedo* 81D, as similar to the shadow one sees around new-made graves and Charnel vaults, “loath to leave the body that it lov’d”. To which the Second brother replies with a line that usually raises a laugh in the theatre: “How charming is divine Philosophy” (476).

Milton’s sexual attitudes at the time may be read through his friendship with Charles Diodati. In a couple of mildly flirtatious letters of 1637 to Charles, he urges him to come back to London where they could meet more often, and where Milton himself was thinking of moving, to the Inns of Court. But he also describes his love for his friend in language that oozes Platonic idealism and the quest for Beauty. At the same time he admits to a secret, indeed blushing, desire for immortal fame as a poet. The feelings are all mixed up and hard to measure. The intensity of the friendship makes it look homoerotic, though not what we nowadays call homosexual. Nonetheless the ideal of chastity may well have emerged as strongly as it did from his struggles with submerged feelings for Charles Diodati, and it probably affected his ideal of all close relationships in later life. In particular Milton’s idealism about marriage is evident here for the first time. At around the same time, late autumn 1637, Milton also added to the text of *Comus* a long and passionate speech in praise of “the sun-clad power of Chastity” (782) and “the sage/ And serious doctrine of Virginitie” (786-7), as well as Comus’s response: “She fables not, I feel and I do fear/ Her words set off by some superior power” (800-1).

The masque’s concluding lines, spoken by the Attendant Spirit, sum up the moral lesson.

Mortals that would follow me,
Love vertue, she alone is free,
She can teach ye how to clime
Higher than the Spheary chime;
Or if Vertue feeble were,
Heav’n itself would stoop to her.

Virtue, that is, can teach you to climb above the music of the spheres to heaven. The last two lines Milton wrote

in the guest book of Count Camillo Cerdogni when he was visiting relatives of Charles Diodati in Geneva, 10 June, 1639. The association of freedom and virtue became a dominant theme in Milton's writings.

Henry Lawes's music survives for five songs from the masque in two manuscripts in the British Library. Handel also composed music for three songs and a trio as part of a private arrangement of the masque first performed in June 1745 at Ludlow Castle.

Some scholars have proposed that, since masques refer constantly to other masques, the intertextual relationship of Milton's may include Ben Jonson's *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue* which in turn alludes to *Cupid's Banishment* (though neither had been published in 1634). We must put a stop to any conflict, says Jonson's Mercury, "Twixt Vertue and hir noted opposite/ Pleasure". Milton's would then be a further response. But in her book *Reading Masques: The English Masque and Public Culture in the Seventeenth Century*, Lauren Shohet locates *Comus* within a group of temperance masques performed in the 1630's, including Davenant's *Britannia Triumphans*. Perhaps Milton's actively influenced the others. In this context Milton's "Reformist masque" is made to seem much less peculiar: it joins in a "dialogue across social boundaries" and is "rather of a piece with its decade".

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