JOHN MILTON

MILTON'S COMUS

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Few poems have been more variously designated than *Comus*. Milton himself describes it simply as “A Mask”; by others it has been criticised and estimated as a lyrical drama, a drama in the epic style, a lyric poem in the *form* of a play, a phantasy, an allegory, a philosophical poem, a suite of speeches or majestic soliloquies, and even a didactic poem. Such variety in the description of the poem is explained partly by its complex charm and many-sided interest, and partly by the desire to describe it from that point of view which should best reconcile its literary form with what we know of the genius and powers of its author. Those who, like Dr. Johnson, have blamed it as a drama, have admired it “as a series of lines,” or as a lyric; one writer, who has found that its characters are nothing, its sentiments tedious, its story uninteresting, has nevertheless “doubted whether there will ever be any similar poem which gives so true a conception of the capacity and the dignity of the mind by which it was produced” (Bagehot’s *Literary Studies*). Some who have praised it as an allegory see in it a satire on the evils both of the Church and of the State, while others regard it as alluding to the vices of the Court alone. Some have found its lyrical parts the best, while others, charmed with its “divine philosophy,” have commended those deep conceits which place it alongside of the *Faerie Queen*, as shadowing forth an episode in the education of a noble soul and as a poet’s lesson against intemperance and impurity. But no one can refuse to admit that, more than

any other of Milton's shorter poems, it gives us an insight into the peculiar genius and character of its author: it was, in the opinion of Hallam, "sufficient to convince any one of taste and feeling that a great poet had arisen in England, and one partly formed in a different school from his contemporaries." It is true that in the early poems we do not find the whole of Milton, for he had yet to pass through many years of trouble and controversy; but *Comus*, in a special degree, reveals or foreshadows much of the Milton of *Paradise Lost*. Whether we regard its place in Milton's life, in the series of his works, or in English literature as a whole, the poem is full of significance: it is worth while, therefore, to consider how its form was determined by the external circumstances and previous training of the poet; by his favourite studies in poetry, philosophy, history, and music; and by his noble theory of life in general, and of a poet's life in particular.

The mask was represented at Ludlow Castle on September 29th, 1634; it was probably composed early in that year. It belongs, therefore, to that group of poems (*L'Allegro*, *Il Penseroso*, *Arcades*, *Comus*, and *Lycidas*) written by Milton while living in his father's house at Horton, near Windsor, after having left the University of Cambridge in July, 1632. As he was born in 1608, he would be twenty-five years of age when this poem was composed. During his stay at Horton (1632-39), which was broken only by a journey to Italy in 1638-9, he was chiefly occupied with the study of the Greek, Roman, Italian, and English literatures, each of which has left its impress on *Comus*. He read widely and carefully, and it has been said that his great and

original imagination was almost entirely nourished, or at least stimulated, by books: his residence at Horton was, accordingly, pre-eminently what he intended it to be, and what his father wisely and gladly permitted it to be—a time of preparation and ripening for the work to which he had dedicated himself. We are reminded of his own words in *Comus*:

> And Wisdom's self
> Oft seeks to sweet retired solitude,
> Where, with her best nurse, Contemplation,
> She plumes her feathers, and lets grow her wings,
> That, in the various bustle of resort,
> Were all to-ruffled, and sometimes impaired.

We find in *Comus* abundant reminiscences of Milton's study of the literature of antiquity. "It would not be too much to say that the literature of antiquity was to Milton's genius what soil and light are to a plant. It nourished, it coloured, it developed it. It determined not merely his character as an artist, but it exercised an influence on his intellect and temper scarcely less powerful than hereditary instincts and contemporary history. It at once animated and chastened his imagination; it modified his fancy; it furnished him with his models. On it his taste was formed; on it his style was moulded. From it his diction and his method derived their peculiarities. It transformed what would in all probability have been the mere counterpart of Caedmon's Paraphrase or Langland's Vision into Paradise Lost; and what would have been the mere counterpart of Corydon's Doleful

Knell and the satire of the Three Estates, into Lycidas and Comus." (*Quarterly Review*, No. 326.)

But Milton has also told us that Spenser was his master, and the full charm of *Comus* cannot be realised without reference to the artistic and philosophical spirit of the author of the *Faerie Queene*. Both poems deal with the war between the body and the soul—between the lower and the higher nature. In an essay on 'Spenser as a philosophic poet,' De Vere says: "The perils and degradations of an animalised life are shown under the allegory of Sir Guyon's sea voyage with its successive storms and whirlpools, its 'rock of Reproach' strewn with wrecks and dead men's bones, its 'wandering islands,' its 'quicksands of Unthriftihead,' its 'whirlepoole of Decay,' its 'sea-monsters,' and lastly, its 'bower of Bliss,' and the doom which overtakes it, together with the deliverance of Acrasia's victims, transformed by that witch's spells into beasts. Still more powerful is the allegory of worldly ambition, illustrated under the name of 'the cave of Mammon.' The Legend of Holiness delineates with not less insight those enemies which wage war upon the spiritual life." All this Milton had studied in the *Faerie Queene*, and had understood it; and, like Sir Guyon, he felt himself to be a knight enrolled under the banner of Parity and Self-Control. So that, in *Comus*, we find the sovereign value of Temperance or Self-Regulation—what the Greeks called σωφροσύνη—set forth no less clearly than in Spenser's poem: in Milton's mask it becomes almost identical with Virtue itself. The enchantments of Acrasia in her Bower of Bliss become the spells of Comus; the armour of Belphoebe becomes the "complete steel" of Chastity;

while the supremacy of Conscience, the bounty of Nature and man’s ingratitude, the unloveliness of Mammon and of Excess, the blossom of Courtesy oft found on lowly stalk, and the final triumph of Virtue through striving and temptation, all are dwelt upon.

> It is the mind that maketh good or ill,
> That maketh wretch or happie, rich or poore:

so speaks Spenser; and Milton similarly—

> He that has light within his own clear breast
> May sit i’ the centre, and enjoy bright day:
> But he that hides a dark soul and foul thoughts
> Benighted walks under the mid-day sun;
> Himself is his own dungeon.

In endeavouring still further to trace, by means of verbal or structural resemblances, the sources from which Milton drew his materials for *Comus*, critics have referred to Peele’s *Old Wives’ Tale* (1595); to Fletcher’s pastoral, *The Faithful Shepherdess*, of which Charles Lamb has said that if all its parts ‘had been in unison with its many innocent scenes and sweet lyric intermixtures, it had been a poem fit to vie with *Comus* or the *Arcadia*, to have been put into the hands of boys and virgins, to have made matter for young dreams, like the loves of Hermia and Lysander’; to Ben Jonson’s mask of *Pleasure reconciled to Virtue* (1619), in which Comus is “the god of cheer, or the Belly”; and to the *Comus* of Erycius Puteanus (Henri du Puy), Professor of Eloquence at Louvain. It is true that Fletcher’s pastoral was being acted in London about the time Milton was writing his

Comus, that the poem by the Dutch Professor was republished at Oxford in 1634, and that resemblances are evident between Milton’s poem and those named. But Professor Masson does well in warning us that “infinitely too much has been made of such coincidences. After all of them, even the most ideal and poetical, the feeling in reading *Comus* is that all here is different, all peculiar.” Whatever Milton borrowed, he borrowed, as he says himself, in order to better it.

It is interesting to consider the mutual relations of the poems written by Milton at Horton. Everything that Milton wrote is Miltonic; he had what has been called the power of transforming everything into himself, and these poems are, accordingly, evidences of the development of Milton’s opinions and of his secret purpose. It has been said that *L’Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* are to be regarded as “the pleadings, the decision on which is in Comus”—*L’Allegro* representing the Cavalier, and *Il Penseroso* the Puritan element. This is true only in a limited sense. It is true that the Puritan element in the Horton series of poems becomes more patent as we pass from the two lyrics to the mask of *Comus*, and from *Comus* to the elegy of *Lycidas*, just as, in the corresponding periods of time, the evils connected with the reign of Charles I. and with Laud’s crusade against Puritanism were becoming more pronounced. But we can hardly regard Milton as having expressed any new decision in *Comus*: the decision is already made when “vain deluding Joys” are banished in *Il Penseroso*, and “loathed Melancholy” in *L’Allegro*. The mask is an expansion and exaltation of the delights of the contemplative man, but there is still a place

for the “unreproved pleasures” of the cheerful man. Unless it were so, *Comus* could not have been written; there would have been no “sunshine holiday” for the rustics and no “victorious dance” for the gentle lady and her brothers. But in *Comus* we realise the mutual relation of *L’Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*; we see their application to the joys and sorrows of the actual life of individuals; we observe human nature in contact with the “hard assays” of life. And, subsequently, in *Lycidas* we are made to realise that this human nature is Milton’s own, and to understand how it was that his Puritanism which, three years before, had permitted him to write a cavalier mask, should, three years after, lead him from the fresh fields of poetry into the barren plains of controversial prose.

The Mask was a favourite form of entertainment in England in Milton’s youth, and had been so from the time of Henry VIII., in whose reign elaborate masked shows, introduced from Italy, first became popular. But they seem to have found their way into England, in a crude form, even earlier; and we read of court disguisings in the reign of Edward III. It is usually said that the Mask derives its name from the fact that the actors wore masks, and in Hall’s Chronicle we read that, in 1512, “on the day of Epiphany at night, the king, with eleven others, was disguised after the manner of Italy, called a Mask, a thing not seen before in England; they were appareled in garments long and broad, wrought all with gold, with *visors* and caps of gold.” The truth, however, seems to be that the use of a visor was not essential in such entertainments, which, from the first, were called ‘masks,’ the word ‘masker’ being used sometimes of

the players, and sometimes of their disguises. The word has come to us, through the French form *masque*, cognate with Spanish *mascarada*, a masquerade or assembly of maskers, otherwise called a mummery. Up to the time of Henry VIII. these entertainments were of the nature of dumb-show or *tableaux vivants*, and delighted the spectators chiefly by the splendour of the costumes and machinery employed in their representation; but, afterwards, the chief actors spoke their parts, singing and dancing were introduced, and the composition of masks for royal and other courtly patrons became an occupation worthy of a poet. They were frequently combined with other forms of amusement, all of which were, in the case of the Court, placed under the management of a Master of Revels, whose official title was Magister Jocorum, Revellorum et *Mascorum*; in the first printed English tragedy, *Gorboduc* (1565), each act opens with what is called a dumb-show or mask. But the more elaborate form of the Mask soon grew to be an entertainment complete in itself, and the demand for such became so great in the time of James I. and Charles I. that the history of these reigns might almost be traced in the succession of masks then written. Ben Jonson, who thoroughly established the Mask in English literature, wrote many Court Masks, and made them a vehicle less for the display of ‘painting and carpentry’ than for the expression of the intellectual and social life of his time. His masks are excelled only by *Comus*, and possess in a high degree that ‘Doric delicacy’ in their songs and odes which Sir Henry Wotton found so ravishing in Milton’s mask. Jonson, in his lifetime, declared that, next himself, only Fletcher and

Chapman could write a mask; and apart from the compositions of these writers and of William Browne (*Inner Temple Masque*), there are few specimens worthy to be named along with Jonson's until we come to Milton's *Arcades*. Other mask-writers were Middleton, Dekker, Shirley, Carew, and Davenant; and it is interesting to note that in Carew's *Coelum Brittanicum* (1633-4), for which Lawes composed the music, the two boys who afterwards acted in *Comus* had juvenile parts. It has been pointed out that the popularity of the Mask in Milton's youth received a stimulus from the Puritan hatred of the theatre which found expression at that time, and drove non-Puritans to welcome the Mask as a protest against that spirit which saw nothing but evil in every form of dramatic entertainment. Milton, who enjoyed the theatre—both "Jonson's learned sock" and what "ennobled hath the buskined stage"—was led, through his friendship with the musician Lawes, to compose a mask to celebrate the entry of the Earl of Bridgewater upon his office of "Lord President of the Council in the Principality of Wales and the Marches of the same." He had already written, also at the request of Lawes, a mask, or portion of a mask, called *Arcades*, and the success of this may have stimulated him to higher effort. The result was *Comus*, in which the Mask reached its highest level, and after which it practically faded out of our literature.

Milton's two masks, *Arcades* and *Comus*, were written for members of the same noble family, the former in honour of the Countess Dowager of Derby, and the latter in honour of John, first Earl of Bridgewater, who was both her stepson and son-in-law. This two-fold relation arose from the fact

that the Earl was the son of Viscount Brackley, the Countess’s second husband, and had himself married Lady Frances Stanley, a daughter of the Countess by her first husband, the fifth Earl of Derby. Amongst the children of the Earl of Bridgewater were three who took important parts in the representation of *Comus*—Alice, the youngest daughter, then about fourteen years of age, who appeared as *The Lady*; John, Viscount Brackley, who took the part of the *Elder Brother*, and Thomas Egerton, who appeared as the *Second Brother*. We do not know who acted the parts of *Comus* and *Sabrina*, but the part of the *Attendant Spirit* was taken by Henry Lawes, “gentleman of the Chapel Royal, and one of His Majesty’s private musicians.” The Earl’s children were his pupils, and the mask was naturally produced under his direction. Milton’s friendship with Lawes is shown by the sonnet which the poet addressed to the musician:

> Harry, whose tuneful and well measur’d song
> First taught our English music how to span
> Words with just note and accent, not to scan
> With Midas’ ears, committing short and long;
> Thy worth and skill exempts thee from the throng,
> With praise enough for Envy to look wan;
> To after age thou shalt be writ the man,
> That with smooth air could’st humour best our tongue.
> Thou honour’st Verse, and Verse must lend her wing
> To honour thee, the priest of Phoebus’ quire,
> That tun’st their happiest lines in hymn, or

story.
Dante shall give Fame leave to set thee higher
Than his Casella, who he woo'd to sing,
Met in the milder shades of Purgatory.

We must remember also that it was to Lawes that Milton's *Comus* owed its first publication, and, as we see from the dedication prefixed to the text, that he was justly proud of his share in its first representation.

Such were the persons who appeared in Milton's mask; they are few in number, and the plan of the piece is correspondingly simple. There are three scenes which may be briefly characterised thus:

I. The Tempter and the Tempted: lines 1-658.

Scene: A wild wood.

II. The Temptation and the Rescue: lines 659-958.

Scene: The Palace of Comus.

III. The Triumph: lines 959-1023.

Scene: The President's Castle.

In the first scene, after a kind of prologue (lines 1-92), the interest rises as we are introduced first to Comus and his rout, then to the Lady alone and "night-foundered," and finally to Comus and the Lady in company. At the same time the nature of the Lady's trial and her subsequent victory are

foreshadowed in a conversation between the brothers and the attendant Spirit. This is one of the more Miltonic parts of the mask: in the philosophical reasoning of the elder brother, as opposed to the matter-of-fact arguments of the younger, we trace the young poet fresh from the study of the divine volume of Plato, and filled with a noble trust in God. In the second scene we breathe the unhallowed air of the abode of the wily tempter, who endeavours, "under fair pretence of friendly ends," to wind himself into the pure heart of the Lady. But his "gay rhetoric" is futile against the "sun-clad power of chastity"; and he is driven off the scene by the two brothers, who are led and instructed by the Spirit disguised as the shepherd Thyrsis. But the Lady, having been lured into the haunt of impurity, is left spell-bound, and appeal is made to the pure nymph Sabrina, who is "swift to aid a virgin, such as was herself, in hard-besetting need." It is in the contention between Comus and the Lady in this scene that the interest of the mask may be said to culminate, for here its purpose stands revealed: "it is a song to Temperance as the ground of Freedom, to temperance as the guard of all the virtues, to beauty as secured by temperance, and its central point and climax is in the pleading of these motives by the Lady against their opposites in the mouth of the Lord of sensual Revel." *Milton: Classical Writers*. In the third scene the Lady Alice and her brothers are presented by the Spirit to their noble father and mother as triumphing "in victorious dance o'er sensual folly and intemperance." The Spirit then speaks the epilogue, calling upon mortals who love true freedom to strive after virtue:

Love Virtue; she alone is free.
She can teach ye how to climb
Higher than the sphery chime;
Or, if Virtue feeble were,
Heaven itself would stoop to her.

The last couplet Milton afterwards, on his Italian journey, entered in an album belonging to an Italian named Cerdogni, and underneath it the words, *Coelum non animum muto dum trans mare curro*, and his signature, Joannes Miltonius, Anglus. The juxtaposition of these verses is significant: though he had left his own land Milton had not become what, fifty or sixty years before, Roger Ascham had condemned as an "Italianated Englishman." He was one of those "worthy Gentlemen of England, whom all the Siren tongues of Italy could never untwine from the mast of God's word; nor no enchantment of vanity overturn them from the fear of God and love of honesty" (Ascham's *Scholemaster*). And one might almost infer that Milton, in his account of the sovereign plant Haemony which was to foil the wiles of *Comus*, had remembered not only Homer's description of the root Moly "that Hermes once to wise Ulysses gave,"16:A but also Ascham's remarks thereupon: "The true medicine against the enchantments of Circe, the vanity of licentious pleasure, the enticements of all sin, is, in Homer, the herb Moly, with the black root and white flower, sour at first, but sweet in the end; which Hesiod termeth the study of Virtue, hard and irksome in the beginning, but in the end easy and pleasant. And that which is most to be marvelled at, the divine poet Homer saith plainly that this medicine against sin and vanity is not found out by man, but given and taught

by God." Milton's *Comus*, like his last great poems, is a poetical expression of the same belief. "His poetical works, the outcome of his inner life, his life of artistic contemplation, are," in the words of Prof. Dowden, "various renderings of one dominant idea—that the struggle for mastery between good and evil is the prime fact of life; and that a final victory of the righteous cause is assured by the existence of a divine order of the universe, which Milton knew by the name of 'Providence.'"

16:A It is noteworthy that Lamb, whose allusiveness is remarkable, employs in his account of the plant Moly almost the exact words of Milton's description of Haemony; compare the following extract from *The Adventures of Ulysses* with lines 629-640 of *Comus*: "The flower of the herb Moly, which is sovereign against enchantments: the moly is a small unsightly root, its virtues but little known, and in low estimation; the dull shepherd treads on it every day with his clouted shoes, but it bears a small white flower, which is medicinal against charms, blights, mildews, and damps."

COMUS.

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A MASK

PRESENTED AT LUDLOW CASTLE, 1634.

BEFORE

JOHN, EARL OF BRIDGEWATER,

THEN PRESIDENT OF WALES.

The Copy of a Letter written by Sir Henry Wotton to the Author upon the following Poem.

From the College, this 13 of April, 1638.

Sir,

It was a special favour, when you lately bestowed upon me here the first taste of your acquaintance, though no longer than to make me know that I wanted more time to value it, and to enjoy it rightly; and, in truth, if I could then have imagined your farther stay in these parts, which I understood afterwards by Mr. H., I would have been bold, in our vulgar phrase, to mend my draught (for you left me with an extreme thirst), and to have begged your conversation again, jointly with your said learned friend, at a poor meal or two, that we might have banded together some good authors of the antient time; among which I observed you to have been familiar.

Since your going, you have charged me with new obligations, both for a very kind letter from you dated the sixth of this month, and for a dainty piece of entertainment which came therewith. Wherein I should much commend the tragical part, if the lyrical did not ravish me with a certain Doric delicacy in your songs and odes, whereunto I must plainly confess to have seen yet nothing parallel in our language: *Ipsa mollities*.19:A But I must not omit to tell you, that I now only owe you thanks for intimating unto me (how modestly soever) the true artificer. For the work itself I had viewed some good while before, with singular delight, having received it from our common friend Mr. R. in the very close of the late R.'s poems, printed at Oxford; whereunto it is added (as I now suppose) that the accessory might help out the principal, according to the art of stationers, and to leave the reader *con la bocca dolce*.20:A

Now, Sir, concerning your travels, wherein I may challenge a little more privilege of discourse with you; I suppose you will not blanch20:B Paris in your way; therefore I have been bold to trouble you with a few lines to Mr. M. B., whom you shall easily find attending the young Lord S. as his governor, and you may surely receive from him good directions for shaping of your farther journey into Italy, where he did reside by my choice some time for the king, after mine own recess from Venice.

I should think that your best line will be through the whole length of France to Marseilles, and thence by sea to Genoa, whence the passage into Tuscany is as diurnal as a Gravesend barge. I hasten, as you do, to Florence, or Siena, the rather to tell you a short story, from the interest you have given me in your safety.

At Siena I was tabled in the house of one Alberto Scipione, an old Roman courtier in dangerous times, having been steward to the Duca di Pagliano, who with all his family were strangled, save this only man, that escaped by foresight of the tempest. With him I had often much chat of those affairs; into which he took pleasure to look back from his native harbour; and at my departure toward Rome (which had been the centre of his experience) I had won confidence enough to beg his advice, how I might carry myself securely there, without offence of others, or of mine own conscience. *Signor Arrigo mio* (says he), *I pensieri stretti, ed il viso sciolto*,21:A will go safely over the whole world. Of which Delphian oracle (for so I have found it) your judgment doth need no commentary; and therefore, Sir, I

will commit you with it to the best of all securities, God's dear love, remaining

Your friend as much to command
as any of longer date,

HENRY WOTTON.

Postscript.

Sir,—I have expressly sent this my footboy to prevent your departure without some acknowledgment from me of the receipt of your obliging letter, having myself through some business, I know not how, neglected the ordinary conveyance. In any part where I shall understand you fixed, I shall be glad and diligent to entertain you with home-novelties, even for some fomentation of our friendship, too soon interrupted in the cradle.21:B

19:A It is delicacy itself.

20:A With a sweet taste in his mouth (so that he may desire more).

20:B Avoid.

21:A "Thoughts close, countenance open."

21:B This letter was printed in the edition of 1645, but omitted in that of 1673. It was written by Sir Henry Wotton, Provost of Eton College, just in time to overtake Milton before he set out on his journey to Italy. As a parting act of courtesy Milton had sent Sir Henry a letter with a copy of Lawes's edition of his *Comus*, and the above letter is an acknowledgment of the favour.

TO THE RIGHT HONOURABLE22:A

JOHN, LORD VISCOUNT BRACKLEY,