

A CRITICAL STUDY OF JOHN MILTON'S COMUS

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1958

Submitted to the faculty of the Graduate School of  
the Oklahoma State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
MASTER OF ARTS  
August, 1960

JAN 3 1961

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## PREFACE

I chose Comus as subject for my thesis because I thought the work necessary for such an assignment would answer my questions about the allegory. I had first read Comus in Milton 4J3 (1959) and found the images lovely, the language musical, the meaning elusive.

This paper is not designed to be an exhaustive study. My purpose has been to suggest an interpretation which is simple but comprehensive enough to express what I believe is the central idea in Milton's masque.

I should like to thank my advisers, Dr. David S. Berkeley and Dr. Samuel H. Woods, Jr., for their guidance in the preparation of this thesis. I am grateful also to Mr. A. P. Juhlin, Oklahoma State University library, for his help in obtaining material from the Oklahoma University, Western Reserve University, and Princeton University Libraries.

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## CHAPTER I

### THE PROBLEM

The temptation motif in Comus (1634) appears again in Milton's major poetic works. The idea of human liberty and the consequence of individual choice is thematic. An appreciation of Comus would seem then to be important, not only as a single aesthetic experience, but in its relationship to the Milton canon.

Comus does not lend itself to easy interpretation, but the student who expects research to help him understand it may find the commentary more an enigma than the text. He will be told that Comus is neither a masque nor a play; it is not an allegory but a pastoral drama; it is a musical drama. He will learn that "Haemony" may stand for Grace, Temperance, "reformed religion," or "divine philosophy." He will read that the theme is about virtue in general; about virginity in particular; about the soul's arrested "motion toward the flesh." He will discover that the Epilogue contains an image of the human soul and the Heavenly Bridegroom or that the Epilogue shows the Comus-Lady argument to be ironic. The student may lose faith in the scholars who have accepted the responsibility of explaining the beauties of literature; he may, with more harm to himself, lose faith in Milton's ability to communicate.

Comus has been given its most extensive critical attention in recent years. The emphasis has been upon elaborate interpretations, often syl-

logistic in form, which take as major premise a particular theological or philosophical attitude. That Milton created, if not better than he knew, better than the assignment required seems to be generally agreed. But when a scholar<sup>1</sup> can suggest that the meaning he finds in Comus may be too esoteric to have been observed either by the Ludlow audience or the cast, with the possible exception of Lawes, there is need yet once more for another study of Comus.

An entertaining and reasonably accurate picture of the student's dilemma, as he seeks the help of commentary, may be found in the first chapter of George W. Whiting's Milton and this Pendant World. He is a severe critic of the scholarly treatment Comus has received:

There is much sound criticism of Milton's masque (now invariably but incorrectly entitled Comus); but not infrequently conjecture or mere prejudice . . . obstructs the view or fills the air with barbarous dissonance.<sup>2</sup>

Whiting is one of the few who dare insist that "the poem itself should be the center of interest and of study and the test of all criticism."<sup>3</sup> This is advice that should be above dispute, that should encourage accuracy and clarity of interpretation. It is accepted as the standard by which the work undertaken here will be guided.

It is assumed that Milton's title A Mask Presented at Ludlow Castle justifies approach to this subject via the masque tradition. A review

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<sup>1</sup>Sears Jayne, "The Subject of Milton's Ludlow Mask," PMLA, LXXIV (1959).

<sup>2</sup>George W. Whiting, Milton and this Pendant World (Austin, 1958), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

of genre, therefore, precedes an interpretation which, it is hoped, may benefit the student of Comus.

An examination of Milton's sources is outside the limits of this paper. Comus is rich in allusions, and scholars continue to find new parallels for idea, image, and language. No attempt will be made to give an inclusive view of scholarship done in this field, but Milton's debt to a probable source will be considered when it explains a point then being discussed.

The principal text for this study is the Merritt Y. Hughes edition, Odyssey Press, 1937. The University of Illinois facsimiles, edited by Harris Francis Fletcher, 1943, will be consulted for earlier versions of Comus. Two manuscripts furnish evidence for an analysis of Comus as designed for the Ludlow performance: the Trinity Manuscript, in Milton's own hand, and the Bridgewater Manuscript, a stage copy. The 1637 version, published anonymously, and the 1645 edition are significant in comparison with the previous texts. An unpublished master's thesis, directed primarily toward Milton as craftsman, provides a line-by-line account of textual changes: "Milton's Revisions to Lycidas and Comus in the Manuscripts and the Editions," Billy Eugene Ice, Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College, 1952. It simplifies reference to the Fletcher facsimiles and, for this reason, should be noted as an auxiliary text.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE COMMENTARY

Comus was written to be performed at Ludlow Castle in 1634.<sup>1</sup> The celebration was in honor of Sir Thomas Egerton's assuming his office as Lord President of Wales. His children, all under fifteen, took parts in the masque, as did Henry Lawes, musician and friend of Milton. The surface narrative which relates the adventures of the three children is not at all complicated. The Lady and her brothers are "coming to attend their Father's state"; an Attendant Spirit has been sent "by quick command from Soveran Jove" to guide them through a "drear wood." Separated from her brothers, the Lady accepts help from Comus, son of Bacchus and Circe. She is taken to a "stately palace" and placed in an "enchanted chair." Comus can not persuade her to taste the "orient liquor" that would make her one of his followers. The Lady is rescued by her brothers and the Attendant Spirit, who are protected from Comus by the efficacy of a plant called haemony. She remains immobile in the chair until the Attendant Spirit invokes a river goddess, Sabrina. The young people continue their journey in company of the Spirit, who presents them to their parents at Ludlow Castle. Such is the simplicity and charm of the narrative. The more profound meaning is the difficulty.

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<sup>1</sup>For details of the assignment and performance see James H. Hanford, John Milton: Englishman (New York, 1949), p. 62. Also Merritt Y. Hughes, ed., John Milton: The Minor Poems (New York, 1937), pp. xxxix-xl.



Attempts have been made to interpret Comus as a purely topical allegory. R. Scott Stevenson uses the conflict between Royalist and Puritan views as a basis for his explanation.<sup>2</sup> Comus and his palace represent Charles and the court; the followers of Comus are the Royalists, who "gloried in their shame." The image of the palace or court is extended to include the prelacy with its "brilliant ritual" and "wicked practices." The "true" Church is, like the Lady, "in stony fetters, fixt and motionless." Stevenson finds the meaning of Comus in Milton's appeal that Parliament and "free religion" take the place of King and a State Church:

He urged them (the Puritans who hoped to reach 'the palace of eternity') to lay hands on the sorcerer. And this they did, but they failed to seize the wand and bind the enchanter, and the poet points again to the church still in chains and distressed and pleads with them to employ Purity to complete the task.<sup>3</sup>

G. F. Sensabaugh believes Milton to have given in Comus his attitude toward the debate between Puritans and Henrietta Maria's "coterie of platonic love."<sup>4</sup> The Puritans considered marriage sacred, the woman accepting an inferior, at least a submissive, role. The doctrine of courtly love stated that "physical beauty in woman demanded abject devotion from man." Its adherents "gravely discussed the pure state of their souls . . . and the immortality of love such as theirs." They reasoned that a beautiful woman is good; she can, therefore, do nothing which is not good. This argument gave sanction to "love far from pure or divine":

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<sup>2</sup>R. Scott Stevenson, "Milton and the Puritans," The North American Review, CCXIV (1921), 825-832.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 829.

<sup>4</sup>G. F. Sensabaugh, "The Milieu of Comus," Studies in Philology, XLI (1944), 238-249.

The Queen's coterie thus threw down a serious challenge to traditional ethics in matters of marriage and love; and Puritans, recognizing the challenge, soon replied through sermons and pamphlets.<sup>5</sup>

Sensabaugh thinks it "logical" that this debate would be reflected in Comus. Milton did not write in an "intellectual vacuum"; moreover, during the Horton period, he decided to "forego the joys of conjugal life" so that he might dedicate himself to study and poetry. He needed "support" for this "unPuritan step":

Hence, as he read deeply in Plato and the Scriptures, he grasped at the notion that those who held themselves untainted by women developed powers unknown and incomprehensible to libertines or to those enjoying the connubial state; and he set about to crystallize in Comus the sage and serious doctrine of virginity.<sup>6</sup>

Milton did not want his own ideal misunderstood as belonging to the cult of "chastity, beauty, and platonic love" practiced by Henrietta Maria and her court. In the figures of the Lady and Comus, Milton shows the difference between the "true" and the "false," and, Sensabaugh concludes, Comus "may represent false reasoning in court."

Reference to the "social milieu" is suggested by R. H. Bowers as "a way--not the way" of reading Comus.<sup>7</sup> He argues that the "play," as a performance, would have a meaning easily understood by its cast and audience. The theme would be "concerned both directly and obliquely with the emotional life of youth," not developed through complicated imagery of the "before and after." With emphasis upon "youth," the center of Comus

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<sup>5</sup>Sensabaugh, p. 242.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 246.

<sup>7</sup>R. H. Bowers, "The Accent on Youth in Comus," SAMLA Studies in Milton (Gainesville, Fla., 1953), pp. 72-79.

may be, not in the temptation scene, but in the children's presentation to their parents. No universal application is made in Bowers' summary:

The lurking dangers of the perilous woods are readily perceived and combated; after the unjust encounter youth is reassured by the happy outcome that this is a safe world, ultimately protected by the armed intervention of ever-watchful guardians. The danger was not really dangerous after all; this is the world of privileged children.<sup>8</sup>

The James Holly Hanford treatment of Comus is notable for interpretation of a "little allegory," which is the haemony passage, and the Epilogue. The Attendant Spirit, in a speech to the Elder Brother (ll. 617-656), reveals that a "certain shepherd lad" told him about the herb that would protect them from Comus and save the Lady. Hanford explains:

The shepherd lad is Milton himself; the herb, bearing in more favored soils the flower of poetry, is the Christian and Platonic ideal of virtue which the mature and gifted Lawes accepted from his lips.<sup>9</sup>

With regard to the haemony passage in its broader meaning, Hanford says, "The herb moly, . . . employed in Milton's elaboration of the Circe myth in Comus, may be taken to represent the sure guidance of Christian ethics."<sup>10</sup>

The imagery in the Epilogue is essential to the Hanford reading and to those immediately following. It may be well, therefore, to include here those lines that contain the Venus-Adonis and Cupid-Psyche images.

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<sup>8</sup>Bowers, p. 76.

<sup>9</sup>James H. Hanford, John Milton: Englishman (New York, 1949), p. 65; The "shepherd lad" is said also to be Charles Diodati (James A. Arnold, "John Milton's Masque: An Historical and Critical Study of Comus," unpub. Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 1951, p. 135).

<sup>10</sup>Hanford, "The Youth of Milton," Studies in Shakespeare, Milton and Donne (New York, 1925), p. 13.

The Attendant Spirit is describing the "Gardens Fair / of Hesperus" to which he will return:

Iris there with humid bow,  
 Waters the odorous banks that blow,  
 Flowers of more mingled hue  
 Than her purfl'd scarf can shew,  
 And drenches with Elysian dew  
 (List mortals, if your ears be true)  
 Beds of Hyacinth and Roses  
 Where young Adonis oft reposes,  
 Waxing well of his deep wound  
 In slumber soft, and on the ground  
 Sadly sits th' Assyrian Queen;  
 But far above in spangled sheen  
 Celestial Cupid her fam'd son advanc't,  
 Holds his dear Psyche sweet intranc't  
 After her wand'ring labours long,  
 Till free consent the gods among  
 Make her his eternal Bride,  
 And from her fair unspotted side  
 Two blissful twins are to be born,  
 Youth and Joy, so Jove hath sworn (ll. 992-1011).<sup>11</sup>

The Epilogue is, for Hanford, a "description of a paradise of heavenly love,"<sup>12</sup> and the Cupid-Psyche image expresses the "idea of a mystic marriage of the soul with God, the Heavenly compensation for a life of chastity on earth."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>All quotations of Comus will be from the Merritt Hughes edition, The Minor Poems (New York, 1937), unless otherwise indicated. All quotations from the Bridgewater and Trinity manuscripts will be from the University of Illinois Facsimile Edition, John Milton's Complete Poetical Works, ed. Harris Francis Fletcher (Urbana, 1943).

<sup>12</sup>Hanford, A Milton Handbook (New York, 1935), p. 130.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 127. See also William G. Madsen, "The Idea of Nature in Milton's Poetry," Three Studies in the Renaissance: Sidney, Jonson, Milton (New Haven, 1958), pp. 183-271. He adds to Hanford's reading of the Epilogue: "Cupid is Venus' son, but he is far above her; Psyche's side is unspotted, while Adonis is wounded; Venus sits sadly, while the offspring of Cupid and Psyche will be Youth and Joy. Surely Hanford is right in saying that Milton here sings of heavenly love" (p. 218).

A classification of the principal figures in the masque gives depth of meaning to the action, especially to the "conflict" between Comus and the Lady. Hanford sees the Lady as a "personification of purity"; Thyrsis, "divine protection"; Comus, "vice in its seductive form"; Elder Brother, "youth who by the study of philosophy has become secure in his understanding"; Younger Brother, "a neophyte who has not yet acquired a complete understanding." Hanford states the central idea of Comus in this way: "His [Milton's] theme is the unassailable security of the virtuous mind amid every circumstance of violence and wrong. Specifically he exalts the virtue of chastity."<sup>14</sup>

An "intellectual frame of reference," according to A.S.P. Woodhouse, is necessary to appreciation of Comus.<sup>15</sup> He asks first that the reader make a distinction between the "order of nature," the physical world and man as an existent in that world, and the "order of grace," concerned with "religious experience" and "man in his character as a supernatural being." An individual's attitude toward these "orders" is his "world-view." The position one should take in reading Comus, Woodhouse says, is that of the Christian humanists:

They insist that the order of grace is the superstructure whose foundations are securely laid in nature; that there is no interval between the

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<sup>14</sup>Hanford, A Milton Handbook, p. 126. See also Robert Martin Adams, Ikon: John Milton and the Modern Critics (Ithaca, 1955), pp. 1-34. He writes: "The central episode of this story is clearly the temptation; the sort of allurements which are dangled before the Lady and the sort of energies which enable her to withstand those allurements must determine in very large measure the allegorical meaning of the masque" (pp.5-6). He does not elaborate upon the Epilogue.

<sup>15</sup>A. S. P. Woodhouse, "The Argument of Milton's 'Comus,'" University of Toronto Quarterly, XI (1941), 46-71.

two orders, which merge in an area common to both; that grace comes to perfect nature (an idea including discipline), not to destroy it; that man's well-being must be defined in terms of the two orders simultaneously, and that what is for his good as a natural being cannot be for his harm as a supernatural, or vice versa.<sup>16</sup>

The "virtues" seen in the Lady--temperance, continence, chastity, and virginity--can, with this frame of reference, be catalogued. The first two belong to the order of nature, i.e., the field of "natural ethics." Chastity belongs to both orders, being not only religious (Christian) but known also by the "wise and virtuous philosophers . . . who strive upward to the very verge of the religious." Virginity is a symbol of the order of grace, belonging "exclusively" to that class.<sup>17</sup>

Woodhouse finds support for his interpretation in An Apology for Smectymnuus (1642). Here Milton outlines the progress in his learning that taught him the value of chastity. He read first "lofty fables and romances," then Plato and Xenophon, then the "doctrine of holy scripture." The latter showed him those "chaste and high mysteries" that the "body is for the Lord, and the Lord for the body." Man, the "image and glory of God," should not sin against "his own glory" and the "glory of God." He concludes:

Nor did I slumber over that place expressing such high rewards of ever accompanying the Lamb, with those celestial songs to others inapprehensible, but not to those who were not defiled with women, which doubtless

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<sup>16</sup>Woodhouse, p. 49. Sears Jayne insists that there is no clear division "between the two realms of nature and grace; if anything, it [the action] is divided into three realms: nature, grace, and glory" (pp. 534-535).

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

means fornication; for marriage must not be called a defilement.<sup>18</sup>

Woodhouse notes Milton's reference to marriage and the date of Smectymnuus but argues that the "doctrine of virginity . . . is regarded as a doctrine specifically Christian and hence one that would be eligible as a symbol of the order of grace."<sup>19</sup>

The "kingdoms"---nature, nature-grace, and pure grace---are found again, according to Woodhouse, in the Epilogue. The Spirit's description of the Hesperian Gardens, together with his comment about Venus and Adonis, presents a symbol of "life on the natural level: the life processes of 'most innocent nature,'"<sup>20</sup> The "List mortals" immediately before the Garden of Adonis image defines the meaning of those lines: "This is the world of nature as the chaste and religious are able to apprehend it, and only they."<sup>21</sup> "Celestial Cupid" and "far above" indicate that the Cupid-Psyche image belongs to an "order" above the "natural level" of the Garden; the two figures represent "the highest virtue and wisdom accessible on the natural level, or rather ascent to an area common to nature and grace." The "blissful twins," Youth and Joy, are to be understood as "Knowledge" and "Virtue," Woodhouse again using the autobiographical passage in Smectymnuus:

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<sup>18</sup>John Milton, An Apology for Smectymnuus, Prose Selections, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York, 1947), pp. 156-159. The allusion, observed by Woodhouse, is to The Revelation:

"And they sung as it were a new song before the throne, and before the four beasts, and the elders: and no man could learn that song but the hundred and forty and four thousand, which were redeemed from the earth.

"These are they which were not defiled with women; for they are virgins . . ." (Rev. 14:3-4, KJV).

<sup>19</sup>Woodhouse, p. 50.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 68.

Thus . . . study and reading led me to the shady spaces of philosophy, but chiefly to the divine volumes of Plato and his equal, Xenophon: where . . . I learnt of chastity and love . . . and how the first and chiefest office of love begins and ends in the soul, producing those happy twins of her divine generation, knowledge and virtue.<sup>22</sup>

The last six lines of Comus signify the order of pure grace:

Mortals that would follow me,  
Love virtue, she alone is free,  
She can teach ye how to climb  
Higher than the Sphery chime;  
Or if Virtue feeble were,  
Heav'n itself would stoop to her (ll. 1018-1023).

Here the Attendant Spirit, minister and "almost" a "symbol of Providence,"<sup>23</sup> expresses Milton's idea of "freedom through virtue" and directs the individual above the "music of the spheres" to the "Christian heaven."<sup>24</sup>

The commentary by E. M. W. Tillyard is remarkable for the importance attached to textual revisions in the 1637 edition. He writes:

The various changes within the Trinity Manuscript have no decisive importance; and the significant changes are those between the completed first draft as contained in the Trinity Manuscript (which I call the first or 1634 version) and the first printed text (which I call the 1637 version). These changes consist of additions to the Lady's refutation of Comus and to the Spirit's epilogue; and it is just in these added lines that I find the clue to the way Milton meant us to interpret the debate between Comus and the Lady.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Smectymnuus, pp. 157-158.

<sup>23</sup>Adams is content to call the Attendant Spirit a "guardian spirit," who does not "determine the events of the story, exercise any superhuman power other than his wisdom or attempt more than the release of virtue to establish its own destiny" (p. 24).

<sup>24</sup>Woodhouse, pp. 70-71.

<sup>25</sup>E. M. W. Tillyard, "The Action of 'Comus,'" Studies in Milton (New York, 1951), p. 83. This work appeared first in Essays and Studies, vol. 28 (1942), pp. 22-37.



Tillyard argues that the lines added to the Epilogue in the 1637 edition "put a different interpretation on the existing ones they followed."<sup>26</sup> Excised lines from the 1634 (Trinity) Prologue, with reference to the Hesperian Gardens, and the Second Brother's speech with "beauty like the fair Hesperian Tree" would have given to the Epilogue with its Gardens of Hesperus image either a "paradisiac or an erotic significance."<sup>27</sup> He continues:

Now in the earlier version they would have found only the paradisiac significance to the point: their expectation of the other would just be allowed to drop. But not so in the revised version: there the plain fertility symbolism of the Garden of Adonis would realize the expectation of an erotic significance in the other mythical garden. In fact the whole of the revised epilogue would be concerned with love, as well as some form of Paradise.<sup>28</sup>

The Spenserian Garden of Adonis image in the 1637 version means that neither Comus nor the Lady has the right attitude toward "nature" and "nature's gifts."<sup>29</sup> In the Garden of Adonis there is "all the bounty described by Comus and all the comeliness and order insisted on by the Lady. Both disputants are shown partly right and partly wrong." The allusion

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<sup>26</sup>Tillyard, p. 91. See also Michael Macklem, "Love, Nature, and Grace in Milton," Queens Quarterly, LVI (1949), 534-547. He accepts the Woodhouse frame of reference and finds, as did Tillyard, that the revised Epilogue gives Comus a meaning different from the 1634 version. The fertility symbol of the Garden indicates that chastity is not to be taken as a renunciation of love. The image of Venus and Adonis represents fruitful, monogamous love; to the "Celestial" Cupid and Psyche image belongs also the idea of chaste, heavenly love, the level of grace.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>Madsen's essay is based upon the "Lady's Christian attitude toward Nature"; she is, he says, "squarely in the classical-Christian tradition of Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine, St. Thomas, and Richard Hooker" (pp. 197-198).

to Venus recalls the story of Belpheobe, "militant chastity," and Amoret, the "pattern of perfect married affection." The Lady assumed for herself the role of "militant chastity," but she was "not really cast for Belpheobe but for Amoret."<sup>30</sup> The solution to a formerly "unresolved debate" is given in the revised Epilogue:

The play concerns chastity and the Lady is the heroine. Comus advocates incontinence, Acrasia; the Lady advocates abstinence. The Attendant Spirit gives the solution, advocating the Aristotelian middle course, which for the Lady is the right one; and it is marriage.<sup>31</sup>

The Brooks and Hardy essay is a reading of Comus as drama.<sup>32</sup> It is argued that the poem is dramatic in form and that both character and symbol are "more mythological than allegorical." The distinction is explained thus:

That is to say simply that the persons and objects here, as in myth, are conceived as having real, independent existence. They are not, as in allegory, more or less arbitrarily constructed vehicles, limited in their significant existence to the conceptual realities they carry.<sup>33</sup>

The action then must be viewed not as a conflict between the abstractions of Virtue and Evil but as a human trial; the Lady and her

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<sup>30</sup>Tillyard, pp. 93-94.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., pp. 94-95. Hanford thinks the "ascetic" doctrine of Comus does not become "ethical" until Paradise Lost: ". . . the rapture which had attached itself to the contemplation of the mystic Garden of Adonis is transferred to the lower but more comprehensible mysteries of the Garden of Eden" ("The Youth of Milton," pp. 161-162).

Woodhouse says that the Aristotelian mean was "perhaps always foreign to Milton's mind" (p. 55).

<sup>32</sup>Cleanth Brooks and John E. Hardy, ed., Poems of Mr. John Milton (New York, 1951), pp. 187-234.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 188.

danger are real. Comus is a lawless and "earthly spirit"; his court is a "kind of Paradise," opposed to the "kind of heaven" represented by Sir Thomas Egerton's court. The Attendant Spirit, less powerful in the "Wood" than Comus, becomes a human guardian when he takes the disguise of a shepherd; his function in the drama is to reveal its meaning, not to exert supernatural power. The Elder Brother's speech on "Saintly chastity" is not the philosophical center of the play, is not to be taken as Milton's argument for the "self-sufficiency of Virtue." The Brother's attitude is his own idealization; he can insist that Virtue will triumph because he is speaking of "personifications," not a real person. The irony of the speech is further seen in his words that angels will protect the "sincerely" chaste; the Lady has yet to prove her "sincerity" in the temptation scene.

The light-dark imagery in the Prologue is used by Brooks and Hardy to interpret the symbolism of haemony. The words "starry," "bright," "smoak," and "dim" emphasize the contrast between the "order and harmony" of the realm from which the Spirit comes and the "death-in-life" of "mortal existence." Milton's description of haemony, "darkish" with "prickles" because it grows in the "dim spot" which is earth, recalls, for Brooks and Hardy, the "crown that Virtue gives." The "crown" given by "Virtue" is both an admission "to eternity among the blessed" and a way of life:

'Virtue' perhaps consists simply in keeping one's eyes steadfastly fixed on eternity, on God. Reinforcing this notion is the suggestion that the 'crown' must be Virtue itself . . . . Those who would be crowned, the Spirit implies, must not be impatient for the end of their work, for the

work, or, better, the keeping of one's eyes on eternity. . . defines  
Virtue.<sup>34</sup>

Haemony is a symbol of Virtue and a symbol of Grace, the "bright golden  
flower":

The plant symbolizes Virtue in a state of awareness of its own imperfec-  
tion, expecting perfection only in heaven, Virtue that does not demand,  
of rational necessity, its flower here and now, that sees the abuse of  
itself, far from being impossible, so commonly exercised. . . that it  
seems now permanently robbed of its bloom in this soil. The perfection,  
the flower, of Virtue is Grace.<sup>35</sup>

The Attendant Spirit teaches the Elder Brother, in the haemony epi-  
sode, that the concept of a self-sufficient Virtue, supported with evi-  
dence from classical sources, is wrong. Neither the Lady's "chastity,"  
as expounded by her brother, nor the reasoned argument she gives to Comus  
is sufficient to free her:

The rational perfectibility of man's virtue is limited not only, as the  
younger brother has argued, by his lower nature, but, also, as it were  
from above, by the dependence of his whole nature upon God's Grace.<sup>36</sup>

Because the brothers do not seize Comus' wand, as advised by the Attendant  
Spirit, the Lady must have further help. Sabrina is a symbol of Grace,  
freely given, without which Comus can not be defeated.

The Epilogue is a "vision" to be understood as a three-level image:  
Venus-Adonis, Psyche-Cupid, and Heaven-Grace. Venus is the "great mother

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<sup>34</sup>Brooks and Hardy, p. 190.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 212. Adams has replied to this interpretation of  
haemony, "One does not offhandedly tell the members of a Christian  
commonwealth that Grace is unknown to them that they trample it under-  
foot." He accepts haemony as a "symbol of temperance" (p. 13).

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 213.

spirit"; Cupid is "intellectual or spiritual love." The Cupid-Psyche image represents the "compensation," earthly not heavenly, afforded an individual who has dedicated his life to chastity. The Venus-Adonis and the Cupid-Psyche images carry the note of imperfection. Adonis is not yet well; the marriage between Cupid and Psyche is "intended." As such, these images are on a "pagan" level. The last six lines introduce a "yet higher plane," "the plane of pure Grace." Perfection is not found on any "plane" lower than Heaven.<sup>37</sup>

The Sears Jayne reading of Comus accounts for the "elaborate philosophical equipage of the masque" by accepting Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) as Milton's "principal authority."<sup>38</sup> With the first speech of the Attendant Spirit, "the reader is plunged immediately into the mythological language of Renaissance Platonism,"<sup>39</sup> which is the point of view from which to reach Comus. Milton's "high and nether Jove" is a reference to Jove (Jupiter) in his mythological character as World Soul, i.e., divine providence. "Natural providence" in Ficino is usually represented by Prometheus, but this myth did not adequately serve Milton's purpose in Comus. He borrowed, therefore, the Neptune myth from another Renaissance Platonist, Petrus Calanna (1531-1606), who assigns to Neptune the function of natural providence. The action is confined to Neptune's realm, but

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<sup>37</sup>Brooks and Hardy, p. 234.

<sup>38</sup>Sears Jayne, "The Subject of Milton's Ludlow Mask," PMLA, LXXIV (1959), pp. 533-543. He observes that "Milton nowhere in any extant work mentions Ficino or acknowledges his debt to him . . . ." Milton does, however, "acknowledge a debt to Spenser, especially on the subjects treated in the Ludlow Mask, and a debt to Spenser on these subjects is largely a debt to Ficino" (p. 534).

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 535.

central to the masque is the "philosophical relationship between the realm of natural providence (Neptune) and that of divine providence (Jupiter)." Comus is an "agent of natural providence" and, as such, the choice he offers the Lady is between "two equally natural courses." Rejection of Comus is a decision to "throw off the chains of the body and return to God."<sup>40</sup>

So that the reader may understand the "soul's achievement of Platonic castitas," the concept of chastity as seen in the masque, Jayne gives Ficino's "view of the soul":

The function of the reason, as in Plato, is to control the lower parts of the soul; the function of the mens is to preserve the vision or memory of divinity which the soul brings with it from its life before this incarnation and which provides the means by which the soul finds its way back to God. In order to achieve chastity, or release from the bondage of the flesh, the reason part of the soul must first conquer the passions, but this alone is not enough; in order to escape its prison of the flesh the soul must not only free itself of the influence of the passions, through reason, but also, through the mens, remember its own previous purely spiritual (chaste) state and so be led by the mens away from the flesh and back toward God.<sup>41</sup>

The action of the masque may be divided into three stages, each stage representing a state of the soul: the soul is first "subject to the demands of the flesh," then made immobile with the help of "reason and philosophy," and finally, with the support of mens, Sabrina, begins the movement "back toward God."<sup>42</sup>

Milton is, Jayne says, indebted to Angelo Poliziana (1454-1494) for the use of haemony to represent "Christian philosophical knowledge, divine

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<sup>40</sup>Jayne, pp. 535-537.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 538.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., pp. 538-539.

philosophy." Poliziana had written that "the soul must have rejected sensation before it can acquire philosophical insight." Jayne offers further evidence for Milton's following Poliziana in using haemony to represent "divine philosophy": "Philosophy was regarded as rightly and necessarily esoteric, not available to the uninitiated, so the Attendant Spirit calls 'haemony' 'unknown.'"<sup>43</sup> The Lady's immobility after the introduction of haemony signifies the point at which the soul loses "entirely its motion toward the flesh." The mens, Sabrina, effects the "actual turn" back to God; Reason and Philosophy can stop the soul's progress away from God, but only the mens can apply "the salve of memory to rid the soul of its oblivio and remind it of the divinity it has forgotten."<sup>44</sup>

If a student should despair of understanding Comus, he may think it better to conclude with Don Cameron Allen that this masque is an artistic failure. Allen states that interpretation is complicated because the work belongs to no definite genre and because Milton has not achieved a dramatic and poetic "compromise" between "warring opposites."<sup>45</sup> The mythological figures and the emphasis placed upon ancient wisdom lead Allen to accept the setting as "pre-Christian Albion" and the temptation as "pagan." This view is, he thinks, further supported by the Attendant Spirit's return to a "pagan paradise."<sup>46</sup> No "true intellectual conflict" is established in the Comus-Lady debate; it is apparent "almost at once

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<sup>43</sup>Jayne, p. 540.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., pp. 539-541.

<sup>45</sup>Don Cameron Allen, The Harmonious Vision: Studies in Milton's Poetry (Baltimore, 1954), pp. 29-30.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p. 38.

that there is not the remotest danger of her accepting the offer of Comus." Despite insistence upon the power of chastity, "Comus escapes unpunished" and the Lady is saved "through the magic powers of a pagan water spirit."<sup>47</sup>

Controversy notwithstanding, it should be possible to reach a more or less precise statement of meaning. This is not to argue that at some point in the history of criticism scholars will present a reading thoroughly acceptable to everyone or that the student will one day think he has finished with Comus. If the allegory is indeed universal, it is subject not only to various interpretations but to the demands of a particular culture as well. It may be difficult, however, for the student to accept that each figure in Comus represents at once all that has been attributed to it. After being told a number of times that the center of the masque is the temptation, he may be uncertain how to reconcile with this the elaborate readings given the Epilogue. There is the further question of Milton's probable attitude toward concepts within the masque, Virginity, Virtue, Nature, Grace, and toward their application in general human experience. The student must not, in the words of Dr. Johnson, lie down and die between different opinions. It would seem logical to first consider the masque with respect to the purpose of its composition; such an approach is at least a positive step toward interpretation.

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<sup>47</sup>Allen, p. 36.



### CHAPTER III

#### COMUS AND THE MASQUE TRADITION

If Comus were seen in performance, some of the difficulties of interpretation evident to the reader would perhaps seem trivial or would even go unnoticed. There would be no close analysis of phrase or speech, no reason to expect that the meaning of the whole should be found in a single part. Interest would be concerned not only with idea but with music, dance, the general spectacle. Although Enid Welsford denies to Comus the label of a true masque, she says:

The full beauty of this world [the 'golden world' of Greek mythology] becomes apparent when Comus is acted, for if the actors speak their lines clearly and well, image after image of loveliness rises up in 'airy stream' like a cloud of incense made of the quintessence of all that was best in all the masques and entertainments and pastorals of the Renaissance.<sup>1</sup>

A member of the audience at a Christ's College presentation of Comus writes, "That night, the gods were among us, and yet we were all sane. For the moment the Poet was King among men." Those who had never seen Comus on the stage discovered "an added charm, as of a new delight added to life."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Enid Welsford, The Court Masque (Cambridge, 1927), p. 320.

<sup>2</sup>Charles Sayle, "Comus," Christ's College Magazine, XXIII (1908), 57.

Milton's title A Mask Presented at Ludlow Castle would indicate that he was consciously working with a particular art form. Appraisals of Comus, however, have been directed frequently to the question of genre. Don Cameron Allen can find no classification to which he would admit Comus:

Granted that we do not know a great deal about the masque and that those which we possess are essentially royal entertainments, still we must confess that Comus is so different from these as to be almost another thing. It is much longer than the masque as written by Jonson and Daniel; its cast of speaking characters is much smaller; its locale of action is much less fantastic; its plot, though not exactly more elaborate, is more tense; its theme more serious; it is totally wanting in humorousness; and its emphasis is more on dramatic crisis than on spectacle, dance, costume, and even singing . . . . The want of all these qualities disestablishes Comus as a true masque, although it does not make it into a drama.<sup>3</sup>

Brooks and Hardy read Comus as a pastoral drama;<sup>4</sup> R. H. Bowers calls it a play.<sup>5</sup>

It has been suggested that Milton wrote "a musical drama in the Italian style, that he did have in mind in writing Comus a crystallized dramatic form."<sup>6</sup> Gretchen Finney assumes that Milton's masque belongs to the seventeenth-century dramma per musica and cites La Catena D'Adone as a "source upon which Milton must almost certainly have drawn in the writing of Comus."<sup>7</sup> The dramma per musica had borrowed song and dance from

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<sup>3</sup>Allen, p. 31.

<sup>4</sup>Brooks and Hardy, p. 187.

<sup>5</sup>Bowers, p. 72.

<sup>6</sup>Gretchen L. Finney, "Comus, Dramma per Musica," Studies in Philology, XXXVII (1940), 500.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 486.

the masque and its other features from ancient drama, "the use of chorus, the indirect narration of action, the limitation of the number of characters, the insertion of philosophical maxims, adherence to the unities."<sup>8</sup> Finney points to certain parallels between Comus and Ottavio Tronsarelli and Domenico Mazzocchi's La Catena D'Adone (1626), a dramma per musica, which are significant not so much as a demonstration of source, she says, but as evidence that Milton was writing in this genre.

Eugene Haun thinks that the original Comus included more music than the five extant songs, and he places Milton's masque with "a group of pieces which constitute part of the development of musical drama in England."<sup>9</sup> He defines the genre of Comus thus:

In common with a number of other pieces called masques, Comus was a play in which music was integrated into the drama. They are not yet opera, but they are somewhat too dependent upon music to be classified simply as drama and yet not sufficiently dependent upon the dance to be allowed to stand without qualification as a masque. They are transition pieces leading toward an expanded musical drama.<sup>10</sup>

The problem of genre involves more than a mere classification because the formula by which Comus is studied may determine in part the interpretation. Milton was asked to write a masque, and he called the completed assignment A Mask. It would seem reasonable then to approach Comus via the masque tradition.

The English court masque, whose antecedents were the French and Italian court revels and ultimately the rituals of ancient mummers, had

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<sup>8</sup>Finney, p. 484.

<sup>9</sup>Eugene Haun, "An Inquiry into the Genre of Comus," Essays in Honor of Walter Clyde Curry (Nashville, 1954), pp. 224-225.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 229.

developed in a "characteristically haphazard way."<sup>11</sup> Ben Jonson, who introduced the antimasque, gave form and stature to this kind of court entertainment. For him "the masque was not a grand display of scenic splendour" but a "dramatic poem with spectacular and musical elements."<sup>12</sup> Insisting upon "exact scholarship" and "literary unity,"<sup>13</sup> he attempted to "make the masque into something which combined the solidity and permanence of poetry with the grace and vitality of the revels."<sup>14</sup> The action or plot-line of the masque was, for Jonson, an elaboration of what he called its "hinge":

The drama is a story with crisis and dénouement; the masque is an invention moving upon a hinge, or to put it another way, it is the logical working out of an idea which has to be taken for granted. The hinge of a masque was as a rule some riddling compliment of the sovereign, or an actual event, which was represented as taking place in Olympus or Arcadia or as being so magnificent an affair that divinities were brought down to celebrate it.<sup>15</sup>

Adaptations to make the masque suitable for other than court performance, to meet demands of theatre, had significant effect upon the form.

Enid Welsford says:

In the first place it led to the production of a type of play with something of the didactic abstract character of the earlier moralities, and secondly it led to a loosening of the form of the masque, and consequently to the occasional use of the term as a designation for any masque-like play or entertainment, particularly such as were acted by 'gentlemen of

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<sup>11</sup>Welsford, p. 250.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 175.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., pp. 174-175.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 273.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 256.

quality' at private houses instead of by players on the public stage. The most notable instance of this vague use of the term masque is Milton's Comus, which he calls a masque, but which Sir Henry Wotton describes more appropriately as a 'dainty piece of entertainment.'<sup>16</sup>

The above rejection of Comus as a masque, i.e, a court masque, does not preclude its acceptance into the catalogue of seventeenth-century works to which tradition it belongs. Miss Welsford recognizes that Milton was more successful than Jonson in giving artistic permanence to his work. Jonson's best masques do not depend upon the "occasioning circumstances" for their appreciation;<sup>17</sup> in them, she continues, "the imagination reaches the world of poetic magic," but "by way of the banqueting hall." In Comus, however, "the imagination is carried straight into the world of poetic magic, and the banqueting hall is forgotten."<sup>18</sup> Perhaps it may be suggested then that the form which had evolved in a "haphazard way" acquired in Milton's Comus the "permanence of poetry" that Jonson, the writer of proper masques, had intended but merely approached.

Although sources other than the seventeenth-century masque were influences on Comus, there are enough parallels between Milton's masque and its contemporaries to indicate his observance of the spirit if not the letter of a particular form.<sup>19</sup> The "heavenly visitant from the court of Jove," the second antimasque of dancers before the presentation of the children, the Spirit's Epilogue, the triumph of Virtue over Vice, the

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<sup>16</sup>Welsford, pp. 215-216.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 257.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 273.

<sup>19</sup>See Ralph Herbert Singleton, "The Sources of Comus" (unpub. Ph.D. dissertation, Western Reserve University, 1939), pp. 14-76.

presence of mythological figures either as character or in allusion belong conventionally to the masque of the period.<sup>20</sup> Lacking in Comus is the "essential element" of the masque, which is the "discovery of the masquers." Lady Alice Egerton, Lord Brackley, and Thomas Egerton did not appear in "disguise" but "carried roles in the unreal world of make believe identical to the roles they carried in real life."<sup>21</sup> By giving Comus a parentage of Bacchus and Circe, Milton departs from the Comus of Jonson and Erycius Puteanus (Hendrik van der Putten: Comus, sive Phagesiposia Cimmeria: Somnium, 1608). Milton made him more attractive than were his immediate predecessors, and use of the Circe-myth emphasized the power of Comus to "charm" or "enchant" his intended slaves.<sup>22</sup>

The foregoing discussion is not meant to silence controversy about the genre of Comus. But perhaps sufficient has been said to justify reliance upon the masque tradition for purposes of interpretation.

The study of Comus as a masque is not novel. Commentators have noted the importance of such a reading. Woodhouse, with the qualification that the orders of "nature" and "grace" be considered, has said:

Much of the misunderstanding of Comus springs from a failure to grasp the potentialities and limits of the masque form (with which confessedly Milton takes great liberties) and of Spenserian allegory.<sup>23</sup>

David Daiches, after observing the "didacticism" of the Elder Brother's speeches, wrote, "But we must remember that this is a masque. . .and

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<sup>20</sup>Singleton, pp. 34-44.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., pp. 30-32.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., pp. 105 ff.

<sup>23</sup>A.S.P. Woodhouse, "The Historical Criticism of Milton," PMLA, LXVI (1951), 1043.

without the music and the somewhat stylized dramatic action it loses a great deal."<sup>24</sup> Robert M. Adams, who thinks Comus has been "overread," regards genre as basic to interpretation:

Though it is often described loosely as a play and sometimes as a poem, Comus is so much a masque that this was its original and for a long time its only title. The masque is a form of literature designed primarily for public recitation and performance. Its major functions are triple: to voice a compliment, to present a moral allegory, and to provide occasion for a spectacle.<sup>25</sup>

An approach to Comus qua masque has been made by at least two commentators, Rosemond Tuve and A. E. Dyson.<sup>26</sup> The Tuve study is an attempt to "read" Comus as a series of images, the intended result being a "visual" appreciation of what was originally "visual in a special way."<sup>27</sup> Her treatment of Comus is a reminder that the "op-position" of images, e.g., the "motionless Lady" and the subsequent "free dancing figures" at Ludlow, contributes to an understanding of theme. She does not propose, however, to give the meaning of the masque because "meaning" is

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<sup>24</sup>David Daiches, Milton (London, 1957), p. 73.

<sup>25</sup>Adams, p. 18.

<sup>26</sup>See also James A. Arnold, "John Milton's Masque: An Historical and Critical Study of Comus" (unpub. Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 1951). This work is an extensive study of the form and probable staging of Comus. Sabrina is for Arnold "a kind of patron deity of Virginitly" (p. 99). In its "specific religious meaning," haemony is the "reformed religion of the English Puritans"; it is temperance "thematically" (p. 140). He expresses the argument of Comus thus: "Virtue is temperance, the control of the sensual appetite by the rule of reason . . . . All intemperance is evil, all virtue good (p. 205).

<sup>27</sup>Rosemond Tuve, "Image, Form and Theme in A Mask," Images and Themes in Five Poems by Milton (Cambridge, 1957), pp. 112-161.

"uncapturable in exposition."<sup>28</sup> It is "impossible," she says, to give the "meaning" of the Comus-figure:

. . . no form of paraphrasing poems is more outrageous in the eyes of a student of images, for a poet could himself have eschewed the precariousness of traditional figurative language if he had 'meant' such a capsule-summary as we might make apart from the discussion of his poem.<sup>29</sup>

The fullest appreciation of Comus is to be found, she says, in "the sense of having viewed an image of life itself."<sup>30</sup>

A. E. Dyson reads Comus in "terms" of its probable impression upon "an educated seventeenth century audience."<sup>31</sup> In support of his disregard for the Epilogue, other than calling attention to the "exquisite lyrical relief" it affords, he argues:

When Comus is transferred from the study to the stage, the main outline of its ideas, action and moral purpose unfolds gradually from its opening words; and the total effect of the masque is not only firmly established by the time that Sabrina fair makes her appearance, but practically finished and rounded off as well.<sup>32</sup>

The center of the masque is, in his interpretation, the debate between Comus and the Lady, between "Reason and Passion as controlling factors in human conduct."<sup>33</sup> The Elder and Younger Brothers are "ordinary

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<sup>28</sup>Tuve, p. 157.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 130.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 157.

<sup>31</sup>A. E. Dyson, "The Interpretation of Comus," Essays and Studies, VIII (1955), 89-114.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 91.



humans"; the Attendant Spirit is a "visitant from the purer regions far away from our fallen Earth." Comus is the adversary whose design is to "tempt the mind itself to confound good with evil."<sup>34</sup> Dyson says of Milton's temptation motif:

. . . when a devil or a fallen spirit, or an advocate of the passions against the Reason speaks, he is always warped in outlook, and subtly wrong in every detail. His views though intelligent, and embodying arguments which might, in a slightly different context be valid, do not correspond to reality, and if heeded, can produce only disastrous results.<sup>35</sup>

This essay should be remarked for its explanation of Comus, but statements about the Lady do not make quite clear her relationship to theme. Dyson first writes:

. . . the Lady stands not so much for Chastity as for self-control, insight and moral balance—or, to put this slightly differently, that she stands not for a particular virtue but for Virtue itself.<sup>36</sup>

He next develops the chastity symbol:

But in Comus, Chastity is more than an isolated virtue: it is symptomatic of spiritual wholeness and the life of Grace, and it is at the same time a special case, albeit the most important one, of that larger and classical issue, the control of the passions by the Reason.<sup>37</sup>

He takes the Lady to be "both allegorical and real," to be "Chastity (or Virtue) incarnate," to be "Virtue Triumphant." She is an "exponent

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<sup>34</sup>Dyson, p. 93.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

of Virginity in its most absolute form"; she represents "unswerving Virtue" and the "life of Grace."<sup>38</sup> If the Lady is both allegorical and real, there is then the question of which attributes--chastity, virginity, virtue, or grace--are to be equated with Reason in the debate with Comus, Passion, and whether they are the effect or the support of Reason.

An understanding of the masque's formal techniques will explain only in part the meaning of Comus. The gods and goddesses from mythology do not date the setting as pagan; nor does the magic of haemony and the nymph Sabrina ask more than a willing suspension of disbelief. The Spirit is a familiar person to the world of the masque. The plot is not expected to be dramatic, and the want of suspense is dictated not only by form but by taste. Although the modern reader of Comus may not have an opportunity to see it on stage, he may profit from recognizing that the original performers, the particular occasion, and the genre are important to an interpretation.

The Bridgewater Manuscript is accepted as the stage copy for the Ludlow performance of Comus. There seems to be no conclusive evidence regarding either the chronology of revisions in the Trinity Manuscript or the extent to which Milton himself is responsible for changes appearing in the Bridgewater version. David H. Stevens has suggested, however, that the latter "in its entirety represents a shortened version of the Trinity College Manuscript, being itself a fair copy."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>Dyson, pp. 98-114.

<sup>39</sup>David H. Stevens, Milton Papers (Chicago, 1927), p. 18.

Manuscript revisions which have encouraged the most comment and which have been considered to affect the meaning of Comus are those in the Prologue and Epilogue and the addition of the Lady's "Sun-clad power of Chastity" speech, found for the first time in the 1637 text. The Trinity Manuscript Prologue begins with "Before the starrie threshold of Joves court" and follows with reference to the "gardens," "roses," "hyacinth," and "celestial songs." These lines are crossed out down to "the smoke and stirre of this dim, narrow spot," then continuing much as does the modern version. The Bridgewater Prologue reads:

ffrom the heavens nowe J flye  
 and those happy Climes that lye  
 Where daye never shutts his eye  
 up in the broad field of the skye.  
 there I suck the liquid ayre  
 all amidst the gardens fayre  
 of Hesperus and his daughters three  
 that singe about the goulden tree.  
 there eternall summer dwells  
 and west wyndes with muskye winge  
 about the Cederne allyes flinge  
 Nard and Casias balmie smells  
 Iris there with humid bowe  
 waters the odorous bankes that blowe  
 fflowers of more mingled hew  
 than her purfld scarfe can shew  
 yellow, watchett, greene & blew  
 and drenches oft wth Manna dew  
 Beds of Hyacinth and Roses  
 where many a Cherub soft reposes.

Before the starrie threshold . . . .

There are two copies of the Trinity Epilogue. The first, crossed out in the manuscript, was moved in substance to the Bridgewater Prologue. The second, containing the Venus-Adonis and Cupid-Psyche images, has been carried down into the modern texts. The Bridgewater version reads:

Now my taske is smoothly done  
 J can flye or I can run  
 quickly to the earths greene end  
 where the bow'd welkin slow doeth bend,  
 and from thence can soare as soone  
 to the Corners of the Moone  
 Mortalls that would follow me  
 love vertue, she alone is free  
 she can teach you how to clyme  
 higher then the sphearie chime  
 or if vertue feeble were  
 Heaven it selfe would stoope to her

Some textual differences between the Trinity and the Bridgewater manuscripts may have been occasioned by theatre requirements. Eugene Haun suggests that Lawes moved the excised lines from the Trinity Epilogue so there would be an "opportunity to open the production with a vocal passage of some length."<sup>40</sup> The brief speech which comprises the performed Epilogue would seem to be a more adequate exit than the forty-eight lines in the Trinity, especially if the Spirit made his descent and ascent in a "machine." The 1637 text, which Milton edited for printing, begins "Before the starrie threshold of Joves court"; the Epilogue is the second copy from the Trinity manuscript. The 1645 edition, to which Milton affixed his name, follows the 1637 version.

The textual changes above noted provide material for a study of Milton's craftsmanship, but perhaps the images themselves are more important than their position in either the Prologue or Epilogue. In each case the imagery develops the "Regions mild of calm and serene Air" from which the Spirit comes and to which he returns. Apart from the Venus-Adonis and Cupid-Psyche figures, the "starry threshold" itself is not

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<sup>40</sup>Haun, p. 231.

affected, whether it is described first or last.

In the Trinity and Bridgewater manuscripts, the Lady's final speech to Comus ends with line 779 of the modern version, and Comus' following speech begins, "Come no more." In the 1637 and following texts the Lady says:

Shall I go on?  
 Or have I said enough? To him that dares  
 Arm his profane tongue with contemptuous words  
 Against the Sun-clad power of Chastity  
 Fain would I something say, yet to what end?  
 Thou hast nor Ear nor Soul to apprehend  
 The sublime notion, and high mystery  
 That must be utter'd to unfold the sage  
 And serious doctrine of Virginity,  
 And thou art worthy that thou shouldst not know  
 More happiness than this thy present lot.  
 Enjoy your dear Wit and gay Rhetoric  
 That hath so well been taught her dazzling fence,  
 Thou are not fit to hear thyself convinc't;  
 Yet should I try, the uncontrolled worth  
 Of this pure cause would kindle my rapt spirits  
 To such a flame of sacred vehemence,  
 That dumb things would be mov'd to sympathize,  
 And the brute Earth would lend her nerves, and shake,  
 Till all thy magic structures rear'd so high,  
 Were shatter'd into heaps o'er they false head (ll. 779-799).

The inclusion here of twenty-one lines affects the progress of an individual scene and the tone of the argument; it does not change the meaning of the masque as a whole.

If the first two versions may be assumed to represent Milton's accomplished purpose so far as the Ludlow Mask is concerned, the 1637 edition becomes the permanent art object. The lines specifically written for this edition are an intensification of theme, a further development of passages which appeared originally in the Trinity Manuscript but were not used in the actual performance. C. S. Lewis has observed that the tenor of Milton's general revision has been a sacrifice of spontaneity to moral purpose: "The poet cuts away technical terms and colloquialisms; he will

have nothing ebullient; he increases the gnomic element at the expense of the dramatic."<sup>41</sup> The Bridgewater version of Comus may be more closely related to the masque tradition than is the 1637 and subsequent texts. The Bridgewater manuscript is a less serious treatment of theme, is a less complicated expression of moral values. An interpretation then should consider Comus not only as a staged masque, with the traditional elements of the masque, but in the permanent form which Milton may have believed more consonant with the "high office" he had chosen for himself.

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<sup>41</sup>C. S. Lewis, "A Note on Comus," The Review of English Studies, VIII (1932), 176.

## CHAPTER IV

### AN INTERPRETATION OF THE ALLEGORY

The superiority of Virtue is a theme familiar to the seventeenth-century masque, and the central idea in Comus may be explained for the most part through contrast between masque and antimasque. From this point of view at least two statements of theme are reasonable: Virtue is preferable to Vice; Virtue is by definition invulnerable. But the first is commonplace, and the second is contradicted by human experience. Perhaps the meaning of Comus is to be found then in Milton's attitude toward the concept Virtue and in his answer to certain questions about virtue. Why and how should the individual become virtuous? How can he know a proper moral choice?

Milton departed from the conventional masque in one significant respect. The principal characters, the Lady and her brothers, are not disguised as mythological figures but instead appear as themselves. This may have been suggested by Lawes or by someone in the Egerton family; it may have been Milton's own design. But neither narrative nor allegory would be inappropriate to the occasion; it seems unlikely, for example, that Milton's theme would be a test of virginity.

It is here assumed that the theme of Comus concerns, on the narrative level, some relationship between the three young people and the concept Virtue; on the level of the allegory the theme becomes universal in application.

The framework for Comus is the image of a journey, a metaphor which suits both the dramatic and the allegorical needs of the masque. The action begins and ends with a physical setting in an earthly locale. The Attendant Spirit has been sent to "this dim spot, / Which men call Earth"; after his mission has been completed, he returns to "the Gardens fair / Of Hesperus." He has acted as guide to the young people during a time of testing, one of the many trials they must undergo before attaining perfection.

That both narrative and allegory concern the pursuit of virtue, not virtue absolute, is explicit in the text. In his first speech the Attendant Spirit says he has come to help those who "by due steps aspire" to the "crown that Virtue gives." The Lady, as she follows Comus to a promised "low / But loyal cottage," says, "Eye me blest Providence, and square my trial / To my proportion'd strength." When the Attendant Spirit addresses the parents, he sings:

Noble Lord, and Lady bright,  
I have brought ye new delight,  
Here behold so goodly grown  
Three fair branches of your own.  
Heav'n hath timely tried their youth,  
Their faith, their patience, and their truth,  
And sent them here through hard assays  
With a crown of deathless Praise,  
To triumph in victorious dance  
O'er sensual Folly, and Intemperance (ll. 966-975).

Further, if the Lady were Virtue Incarnate or Reason, Milton's Right Reason, she would have been sufficient in her own person to defeat Comus.

Milton's conviction that trial is requisite to virtue may be familiar enough not to need a full discussion here, but perhaps it would be helpful to give two quotations from "Areopagitica" which emphasize that for Milton



"the knowledge and survey of vice is in this world. . . necessary to the constituting of human virtue":<sup>1</sup>

Assuredly we bring not innocence into the world, we bring impurity much rather: that which purifies us is trial, and trial is by what is contrary ("Areopagitica," p. 224).

And:

He that can apprehend and consider vice with all her baits and seeming pleasures, and yet abstain, and yet distinguish, and yet prefer that which is truly better, he is the true warfaring Christian ("Areopagitica," p. 223).

To consider the young people in Comus as subject to discipline does them no discredit; it was to be two hundred years before a poet voiced his belief that children come into the world trailing clouds of glory. Milton believed the most important endeavor for the individual to be the pursuit of virtue, and the action in Comus presents the temptation and the successful trial that are essential to a growth toward perfected Virtue.

Although the Lady is the masque's principal character, the trial is one which includes her two brothers. The Attendant Spirit uses the plural pronoun in lines 36-42 when he makes known his role: he has come "for their defence," in support of "their tender age." When he presents the children to their parents, he again uses the plural pronoun. In some respects the "assays" seem an initiation to evil. The original performers were themselves young, not yet experienced in battle with the Tempter. The power which enables the two brothers to face Comus with safety is not

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<sup>1</sup>John Milton, "Areopagitica," Prose Selections, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York, 1947), p. 225. Further references to the prose works of Milton will be taken from this edition; the citation will appear parenthetically in the text.

within their own knowledge but is furnished them by the Attendant Spirit. They are, moreover, guilty of at least two errors in judgment. To leave their sister alone was unwise, whatever might have prompted their action. More serious is their ignoring, in the moment of conflict with Comus, the advice of the Spirit. They had been warned to take possession of Comus' wand. After Comus and his followers have been put to flight, the Attendant Spirit tells the brothers, "O ye mistook, ye should have snatcht his wand." Because of their mistake, the Lady remains imprisoned, i. e., not physically free. It may be argued with some justice that the "direct action" of the brothers is natural under the circumstances and "natural in relation to the audience, which expects and sympathizes with impetuous faults in young men."<sup>2</sup> It is because they are young and impetuous that discipline is needed; the incident in the wood is a part of their education.

If this is not the Lady's initiation to evil as such, she is, at least, unfamiliar with the symbolic wood in which she is left alone. She speaks of her "unacquainted feet / In the blind mazes of this tangl'd Wood" (ll. 180-181). She tells Comus that to find their way "In such scant allowance of Star-light, / Would overtask the best Land-Pilot's art, / Without the sure guess of well-practis'd feet" (ll. 308-310). She does not at first recognize Comus, not having the benefit of haemony which permitted the Attendant Spirit to know "the foul enchanter though disguis'd." She is not, however, "unprincip'l'd in virtue's book," and she brings with her to the temptation scene a degree of knowledge, her

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<sup>2</sup>Adams, p. 22.

faith, and a personal strength derived from them.

Milton would not have the individual left ignorant either of external evil or of human weakness. Isabel MacCaffrey writes:

To follow the road of trials, to look on the face of darkness as well as the bright countenance of truth--this was part of Milton's creed . . . .Devoted to the goodness of knowledge as one of his first principles, Milton would have agreed that total self-knowledge is necessary; but necessary for self-discipline. And, since we are by nature impure, a full searching of the dark places. . .was essential for him.<sup>3</sup>

The action in Comus dramatizes the "searching" of a "dark place," the symbolic wood through which the young people must pass on their journey. The image of the wood is outlined in phrases of this kind: "this drear Wood"; "this ominous Wood"; "the blind mazes of this tangl'd Wood"; "this leavy Labyrinth." "Labyrinth" represents for Milton "the difficulties of the dark voyage, the stage where. . .the deceitful sorcerer appears with 'baits and seeming pleasures.'"<sup>4</sup> It has been said that the figurative use of a journey creates

one of those archetypal images which are larger than metaphors because the idea seems to appeal to a deep and universal feeling about human life as a progressive development from birth to death.<sup>5</sup>

The journey in Comus is not, as in The Pilgrim's Progress, from "sin to salvation" or from "this world to the next." The immediate destination of the Lady and her brothers is their father's house, allegorically a

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<sup>3</sup>Isabel G. MacCaffrey, Paradise Lost as Myth (Cambridge, 1959), p. 212.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 188.

<sup>5</sup>Harold Speight, The Life and Writings of John Bunyan (New York, 1928), p. 94.

"resting place" analogous to those afforded Bunyan's Pilgrim; their ultimate destination is a spiritual one, the "native heaven" of the soul, "its proper home and the land of its birth" ("Learning Makes Men Happier Than Ignorance," p. 20). The images of the wood and the journey are mutually dependent so far as theme is concerned; the wood provides the setting for a particular temptation which the individual, the human soul, must face in "the smoke and stir of this dim spot."

The argument between Comus and the Lady is allegorically a conflict between Error and the Mind oriented to Virtue. As a personification of error or evil, Comus is the tempter who waits in the "dark places" of the mind; it is his voice that whispers, "Be wise and taste." He does not attempt to overcome man, to subdue the spirit or mind, with physical strength, but with "reasons not unplaussible" he hopes to conquer "easy-hearted man" and "hug him into snares" (ll. 162-164). Milton, recognizing that faulty reason can be most attractive, asserts that "specious things. . .are aptest to work with human frailty, even against the solidest truth that sounds not plausibly" ("The Reason of Church Government," p. 80). Reason is, for Milton, the "godlike principle in man,"<sup>6</sup> but fallacious reason is the "snare" of the tempter.

For purposes of the narrative, Comus is the "sorcerer" who inhabits the wood before Ludlow Castle. The allegorical Comus is found in that area which is a borderline between the darkness of utter falsehood and the light of Truth. The technique of specious reasoning is his strength; there is just enough truth in his persuasions to mislead the slothful

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<sup>6</sup>Basil Willey, The Seventeenth Century Background, (Garden City, 1953), p. 239.

mind into a wrong choice. Comus is himself victim to false reason: "We that are of purer fire / Imitate the Starry Quire, / Who in their nightly watchful Spheres, / Lead in swift round the Months and Years" (ll. 111-114). Comus gives here, Tillyard says, "the traditional picture" of a harmonious universe, "but what impudence in Comus to claim that his own disorderly revels are tuned to the music of the spheres."<sup>7</sup> Again, when Comus gives "praise" to Nature's "bounty" in an attempt to win the Lady, his speech is a distorted parallel to Truth. Of this Tillyard writes:

He is in the tradition of the Fathers of the Church praising the wonders of God's creation. . . or of the medieval theologians advising their disciples to seek God in His works.<sup>8</sup>

Comus must present his invitation in the guise of truth or the temptation is no honest trial. He does not represent Evil that is seen at once to be vicious; with his offer of "all the pleasures / That fancy can beget on youthful thoughts" he tempts the mind to accept him and his philosophy as a final value.

The Lady makes a particular choice to reject Comus.<sup>9</sup> The central question in Comus concerns the source of that knowledge which assures an

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<sup>7</sup>Tillyard, p. 89.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid. For other references to the sophistry of Comus see Dyson, pp. 93-111; Daiches, p. 71; Sensabaugh, p. 248; and Harry F. Robins, "The Key to a Problem in Milton's Comus," Modern Language Quarterly, XII (1951), 422-428. The Robins essay is an analysis of lines from Comus' third speech in the palace scene: ". . . and th'unsought diamonds / Would so emblaze the forehead of the Deep, / And so bestud with Stars, that they below / Would grow inur'd to light, and come at last / To gaze upon the Sun with shameless brows" (ll. 732-736).

<sup>9</sup>Enid Welsford says that Comus "turns" on an "act of free choice," p. 318; Dyson writes, "The interpretation of Comus centres upon what we make of the case between Comus and the Lady," p. 90.

intelligent choice between the false and the true, the source of strength which affords "unassailable security" to the "virtuous mind amid every circumstance of violence and wrong."<sup>10</sup> Adams writes:

The central episode of this story is clearly the temptation; the sort of allurements which are dangled before the Lady and the sort of energies which enable her to withstand those allurements must determine in very large measure the allegorical meaning of the masque.<sup>11</sup>

One method of acquiring knowledge is sense perception. The Second Brother does not necessarily represent this faculty of mind, but he makes clear the kind of information upon which he depends: "Or if our eyes / Be barr'd that happiness"; "hear the folded flocks"; "sound of pastoral reed." The confidence of the Elder Brother is from formal reasoning, or logic, a process which contributes knowledge and supports faith. His assurance that the Lady is protected from evil is based upon reason:

[His argument] is a metrical rendering of an exercise vigorously and positively setting forth its main proposition: that virtue will overcome all temptations and all other forms of evil. The Elder Brother's speech was in the form of the oratio: the proposition was stated; what it meant; examples; the marshalling of cases; and the final triumphant insistence on the proved validity of the proposition.<sup>12</sup>

There is little justification for supposing that his words are directed only to his less sophisticated brother or that the Second Brother's "How charming is divine Philosophy" is ironic. Harris F. Fletcher points out that the scene would not have seemed "insipid" or "inconclusive" to its

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<sup>10</sup>Hanford's statement of theme, A Milton Handbook, p. 126.

<sup>11</sup>Adams, pp. 5-6.

<sup>12</sup>Harris F. Fletcher, The Intellectual Development of John Milton (Urbana, 1956), p. 227.

original seventeenth-century audience:

. . .to its day and to its beholders in 1634, especially to the parents of the boys, they were expounding in beautiful English verses exactly the kind of material which they were constantly attempting to produce in their own grammar school work, and which Milton had attempted in his.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, Milton's own attitude toward logic as an ethical value would suggest that the scene is to be taken seriously: He believed that "logic existed solely to provide a guide to man's reason in order to justify the adoration. . .of God, virtue, right conduct, or any other of the Christian ideals."<sup>14</sup> It has often been noted that the brothers are little help to their sister, but their limited competence is related to theme. The "security" or the "energy" which can affect Comus and his "magic structures" is transcendent to either sense perception or human reason.

The Lady's strength to resist the temptation begins with a belief that she has freedom of choice. J. C. Maxwell points out that, in the debate with Comus, the Lady "lays claim at first to no special divine protection as a virgin, but puts the case on the widest possible principle, the freedom of the will."<sup>15</sup> Milton defended the "power and the freedom of the human will to stand firm,"<sup>16</sup> and in Comus the Lady's knowledge of this freedom supports her. Her first speech to Comus in the palace scene reads: "Fool, do not boast, / Thou canst not touch the freedom of my mind / With all thy charms, although this corporal rind / Thou has

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<sup>13</sup>Fletcher, p. 227.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>J. C. Maxwell, "The Pseudo-Problem of 'Comus,'" Cambridge Journal, I (1948), 377.

<sup>16</sup>Willey, p. 238.

immanacl'd. . ." (ll. 663-665).

The relationship to theme of the Chastity and Virginity concepts is one of the more difficult points in an interpretation of Comus. The Lady's "Faith," "Hope," and "Chastity" speech is not in the Bridgewater text; neither are lines 737-755 which contain the "List Lady, be not coy, and be not cosen'd / With that same vaunted name Virginity" appeal by Comus. Both are found, however, in the Trinity Manuscript and in the printed versions. The "Sun-clad power of Chastity" exposition by the Lady, with its mention of the "sage and serious doctrine of virginity," appears for the first time in the 1637 text. Whether the two passages noted first were omitted from the Ludlow performance out of respect for Lady Alice Egerton is a matter of conjecture. The Brother's speech on "Saintly chastity," used in all texts, presents a doctrine which is more fully developed by the other speeches:

So dear to Heav'n is Saintly chastity,  
That when a soul is found sincerely so,  
A thousand liveried Angels lackey her,  
Driving far off each thing of sin and guilt,  
And in clear dream and solemn vision  
Tell her of things that no gross ear can hear,  
Till oft converse with heav'nly habitants  
Begin to cast a beam on th'outward shape,  
The unpolluted temple of the mind,  
And turns it by degrees to the soul's essence,  
Till all be made immortal. . . (ll. 453-463).

The 1637 text emphasizes the mystic, or religious, tone of an argument upon which the Lady depends for strength in her conflict with Comus.

Alone in the wood, the Lady is momentarily frightened by the sound of Comus' dance, but she dismisses the "calling shapes" and "beck'ning shadows dire":



These thoughts may startle well, but not astound  
 The virtuous mind, that ever walks attended  
 By a strong siding champion Conscience.--  
 O welcome pure-ey'd Faith, white-handed Hope,  
 Thou hov'ring Angel girt with golden wings,  
 And thou unblemish't form of Chastity,  
 I see ye visibly. . . (ll. 210-216).

The "Charity" of the theological virtues, agape, would not have suited Milton's purpose here.<sup>17</sup> "Chastity" in this passage may be synonymous with Purity, chastity in mind or soul.<sup>18</sup> The Platonic Form appears elsewhere in Milton:

And certainly discipline is not only the removal of disorder; but if any visible shape can be given to divine things, the very visible shape and image of Virtue, whereby she is not only seen in the regular gestures and motions of her heavenly paces as she walks, but also makes the harmony of her voice audible to mortal ears ("The Reason of Church Government," pp. 55-56).

The Ideas here foreshadow the Elder Brother's reference to "solemn vision" and "heav'nly habitants" that he believes evident to his sister. Although Comus is moved by the Echo song, "Sure somthing holy lodges in that breast," he, a "thing of sin and guilt," is not driven "far off" by a "thousand liveried Angels." The Lady's choice remains an independent refusal to

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<sup>17</sup>Hughes suggests that Milton used "Chastity" rather than the theological virtue "Charity" because the meaning here is Platonic, Chastity being "the love of the Supreme Good which chastens all inferior passions" (Minor Poems, Notes, p. 231). John Arthos considers it "primarily a philosophic virtue": ". . . stirred by the most serious needs the mind discovers within itself creatures like angels, Faith and Hope and Chastity, seen visibly in all their truth" ("Milton, Ficino, and the Charmides," Studies in the Renaissance, VI (1959), 270).

<sup>18</sup>Milton used a similar image in one of the early Exercises: "If our hearts were as pure, as chaste, as snowy as Pythagoras' was, our ears would resound and be filled with that supremely lovely music of the wheeling stars. Then indeed all things would seem to return to the age of gold" ("On the Music of the Spheres," p. 19).

corrupt the "temple of the mind."

The palace scene is anticipated in the Attendant Spirit's Prologue. He gives the parentage of Comus, recalling the Circe myth and the "charmed Cup" which causes man to lose his "upright shape." The son "Excels his Mother at her mighty Art":

He offers to every weary Traveller  
His orient liquor in a Crystal Glass,  
To quench the drouth of Phoebus, which as they taste  
(For most do taste through fond intemperate thirst)  
Soon as the Potion works, their human count'nance,  
Th' express resemblance of the gods, is chang'd  
Into some brutish form. . . (ll. 63-70).

Further details appear in his speech to the Brothers:

And here to every thirsty wanderer,  
By sly enticement gives his baneful cup,  
With many murmurs mixt, whose pleasing poison  
The visage quite transforms of him that drinks,  
And the inglorious likeness of a beast  
Fixes instead, un moulding reason's mintage  
Character'd in the face. . . (ll. 524-530).

The first argument of Comus, promising "Refreshment after toil, ease after pain," is addressed to "mortal frailty." The Lady recognizes by this time that she has been deceived: the "ugly-headed Monsters" suggest anything but a "safe abode." She justifies her refusal:

. . . none  
But such as are good men can give good things,  
And that which is not good, is not delicious  
To a well-govern'd and wise appetite (ll. 702-  
705).

There follows Comus' attack on Abstinence and Temperance, his evidence being the "full and unwithdrawing hand" of Nature, which closes with his

appeal that "Beauty is nature's coin."<sup>19</sup>

When the Lady defends Temperance she is answering Comus' charge that "lean and sallow Abstinence" would result in "Nature's" becoming "quite surcharg'd with her own weight," "strangl'd with her waste fertility." It is not the fault of "innocent nature," she says, that "blessings" are not distributed in "even proportion": if each man had a "moderate and beseeming share" of the "abundance," Nature would not be "encumber'd with her store." She is pointing out to Comus the sophistry of his argument, denying the accuracy of his view. She continues:

. . . Shall I go on?  
 Or have I said enough? To him that dares  
 Arm his profane tongue with contemptuous words  
 Against the Sun-clad power of Chastity  
 Fain would I something say, yet to what end?  
 Thou has nor Ear nor Soul to apprehend  
 The sublime notion, and high mystery  
 That must be utter'd to unfold the sage  
 And serious doctrine of Virginity,  
 And thou art worthy that thou shouldst not know  
 More happiness than this thy present lot (ll. 779-  
 789).

The "Shall I go on?" introduction suggests that this is a continuation of her effort to show Comus the fallacy of his beliefs. Apparently he does not yet understand her unshaken resistance to "false rules pranked in reason's garb." Comus had urged, in his speech just preceding, "List Lady, be not coy, and be not chosen'd / With that same vaunted name Virginity." The Lady does not say that she is a fierce exponent of virginity; she rather tells Comus that he has neither "Ear nor Soul" to

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<sup>19</sup>For a discussion of Comus' carpe diem philosophy, see Fredelle Bruser, "Comus and the Rose Song," Studies in Philology, XLIV (1947), 625-644.

"apprehend" the "sage and serious doctrine of Virginité." The meaning of this passage is to be found perhaps in the contrast between Comus' idea and the Lady's Idea.

Comus is interested only in the temporal and earthly. The "misery" of his followers is so "perfect" that they "boast themselves more comely than before." Dyson says of them:

The victims of the cup are those who are degraded by unbridled sensuality to the status of beasts. They are travelling down the ladder of creation towards the brutes instead of upwards towards the angels. . . . Participation in animal pleasures has so blinded their minds, that they mistake their degradation for enlightenment and their wretched and godless state for the best of all possible worlds.<sup>20</sup>

The Lady is dedicated to moral and spiritual perfection. She does not accept as a value the world of which Comus would make her Queen; she is interested in the eternal and perfect Form. As a creation in God's "image," she has faith that diligence will not be unrewarded and hope that she will attain finally an immediate communion with the highest Good.

The Lady's impassioned speech disconcerts but does not defeat Comus: "And though not mortal," "a cold shudd'ring dew / Dips" him "all o'er." He again offers her the Glass:

. . . one sip of this  
Will bathe the drooping spirits in delight  
Beyond the bliss of dreams. Be wise, and taste  
(ll. 811-813).

At this point the Brothers, protected by haemony, put Comus to flight, but the further help of Sabrina is necessary for the Lady's freedom. The Attendant Spirit, Sabrina, and "Haemony" may not have been intended by

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<sup>20</sup>Dyson, p. 101.

Milton to have significance other than what they seem to be. The figure of the Genius appears elsewhere in Milton's poetry, and the Spirit may be no more than the Genius of this particular wood, a guardian angel sent to protect and shield the pure. Milton's possible attitude toward this figure, as well as toward Sabrina, is expressed in these lines from Daiches:

The nymphs and the local deities, the genii loci, had a special place in Milton's affections and he could not speak of their dismissal in the same tone of voice as that which he used in talking of the senior pagan gods. After all, the English countryside was peopled with local pagan spirits whom Spenser and his followers had pressed into the service of a national poetry.<sup>21</sup>

The function of Sabrina may be explained without reference to allegorical demands. Although Arnold notes that the audience would have been more attracted by the dance of the "noble children," he says:

From the point of view of spectacle, which is an essential feature of the masque form, the appearance of Sabrina and her nymphs. . . is the climactic moment of Milton's masque.<sup>22</sup>

Hughes suggests a relationship between Sabrina and the "purification of lust's victims" in "romantic literature."<sup>23</sup> Adams calls her a "chastity symbol," the "genius of the shore and the patroness of virgins."<sup>24</sup> In the Hughes and Adams reading, Sabrina assumes a not inappropriate ritualistic purpose. Moreover, such an image is consonant with others in

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<sup>21</sup>Daiches, pp. 44-45.

<sup>22</sup>Arnold, p. 116.

<sup>23</sup>Hughes, The Minor Poems, p. xlii.

<sup>24</sup>Adams, p. 17.

Milton where "streams, rivers, fountains, and springs are the sources of life-giving fresh water."<sup>25</sup> Sabrina is characterized by her innocence, her immortality, her goodness, and her gentleness. It is her "office best," she says, "To help ensnared chastity."<sup>26</sup>

Any acceptance of "Haemony" as divine in itself, as Grace or Providence, is awkward because, according to the text, it is "Unknown, and like esteem'd."<sup>27</sup> There is the same objection to Virtue or Temperance. Moreover, temperance is the attitude of mind which is evidenced in the Lady's conduct, and it is the lesson the Brothers have not yet mastered, i.e., they have not yet acquired complete self-discipline. "Haemony" in Comus is a guard against "enchantments," against betrayal by the senses. An individual who has the aid of haemony is assured a special kind of knowledge. The Lady mistakes Comus at their first meeting; the Attendant Spirit "knew the foul enchanter though disguised." The brothers are protected from Comus because they understand the real as opposed to the apparent meaning inherent in his person. The "magic"

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<sup>25</sup>MacCaffrey, p. 28.

<sup>26</sup>Sabrina is the Roman name for the river Severn. R. Blenner-Hassett suggests that Milton used the Sabrina myth because the masque was to be performed in Wales. The Geoffrey of Monmouth story is "transformed" into the "figure" Milton needed. The emphasis is upon Sabrina's "innocence" and "virginity," and upon the "political respectability" of her "paternal ancestry." "It is thus implied that Sabrina voluntarily sought death in the Severn to avoid the insane rage of Gwendolin. The historic fact that Gwendolin murdered Sabrina to rid herself of all trace of her husband Locrin's illicit love for Gwendolin's rival Astrild, is nicely evaded" ("Geoffrey of Monmouth and Milton's Comus: A Problem in Composition," Studia Neophilologica, XXI (1948-49), 216-221.

<sup>27</sup>For a reading of "Haemony" as "Christ's-thorn" see Edward S. Le Comte, "New Light on the 'Haemony' Passage in Comus," Philological Quarterly, XXI (1942), 283-298. Also Thomas P. Harrison, Jr., "The 'Haemony' Passage in Comus Again," Philological Quarterly, XXII (1943), 251-254, who supports Le Comte's thesis with a new source.

properties of the "small unsightly root" may be an allusion to "Thessaly or Haemonia as the land of magic."<sup>28</sup>

The Attendant Spirit is a supernatural being, but his purpose is not to bring miracles. He does fulfill his mission to protect the young people, as he would do for any "Servants" of "Virtue." The Attendant Spirit, called in the Trinity Manuscript a "Guardian spirit or daemon," is Platonic in origin. He is one of the daemons which, according to Hesiod, were "the souls of men of the Golden Age who are now the unseen guardians of all who deserve the protection of Zeus."<sup>29</sup> This would seem to be the extent to which his role in Comus can be clearly defined. It is interesting, however, to consider the implications of his being a representative of the Golden Age. He may serve then as Memory, not of some human experience but of a lost perfection. If the individual can know empirically only the less than perfect world of the here and now, what is the source of his knowledge of perfection? The Platonist would insist that the mind brought with it into the world of appearances an impression of the perfect world of Forms. MacCaffrey, on the other hand, suggests that man's concept of a lost Eden, or perfection, is part of racial memory. In commenting on Milton's statement that the mind is "destined, after wandering for a time on earth in innocence and purity, like some celestial visitor, to fly upward to its native heaven," she writes:

Although this destiny was marred and made uncertain by the Fall of Man, the memory of it remains in the midst of our present wanderings, to urge

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<sup>28</sup>Charles G. Osgood, The Classical Mythology of Milton's English Poems (New York, 1900), p. 39. See also Milton's "Elegy II":  
". . . you were not the less worthy to have your youth restored by the drugs of Haemonia. . ." (Minor Poems, p. 35).

<sup>29</sup>Hughes, The Minor Poems, Notes, p. 219.

the soul upward; for the Christian, nostalgia and hope live side by side.<sup>30</sup>

When the Attendant Spirit returns to the "Gardens fair / of Hesperus," he returns to the Golden Age restored, to a pagan Paradise symbolic of order, harmony, and perfection.

Milton's recurring use of the Hesperian Gardens in Comus suggests that the image was "haunting his memory."<sup>31</sup> The idea of an earthly paradise occurs as well in the earlier poems: "Let the Age of Gold restore you, Jupiter, to a wretched world";<sup>32</sup> "Time will run back, and fetch the age of gold / . . . And leprous sin will melt from earthly mould."<sup>33</sup> Similar imagery is found after Comus, but here

Milton first developed in detail his picture of an earthly paradise. A central feature of his picture is the Hesperian gardens, which are identified with the Elysian fields and the Isles of the Blest. It is a synthesis of much that had been written, from Homer to the authors of the sixteenth century, on these happy climes.<sup>34</sup>

The details of the Epilogue are a final contrast to the "wood." The language of the Attendant Spirit has its counterpart in the speeches

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<sup>30</sup>MacCaffrey, p. 24.

<sup>31</sup>John S. Diekhoff, "The Text of Comus, 1634-1645," PMLA, LII (1937), 718.

<sup>32</sup>"Elegy V," l. 136.

<sup>33</sup>"On the Morning of Christ's Nativity," ll. 135-138.

<sup>34</sup>D. T. Starnes, "The Hesperian Gardens in Milton," Studies in English, XXXI (1952), 51. See also Ethel Seaton, "Comus and Shakespeare," Essays and Studies, XXI (1946), 68-80. She thinks Tillyard "exaggerates the readiness of response of contemporary readers for 'a paradisiac or an erotic significance or for both at once.'" "The myth is not," she says, "a commonplace of poetry in the Elizabethan and the next period. Drayton and Daniel use it only to evoke the Golden Age. . . . Herrick makes nothing in his poems of any erotic implications in his title, though his themes give him ample opportunity" (p. 75).



of Comus. Comus refers to the "watchful Spheres" and to Venus—"Venus now wakes, and wak'ns Love"; when he tells the Lady of her brothers he calls them "some gay creatures of the element / That in the colours of the Rainbow live" (ll. 299-300). He discusses "Nature" and her "bounties." After hearing the Lady's song, he says:

. . . I have oft heard  
My mother Circe with the Sirens three,  
\* \* \*  
Who as they sung, would take the prison'd soul,  
And lap it in Elysium. . . (ll. 252-257).

The Spirit reveals that in the "Gardens," "The Graces and the rosy-bosom'd Hours, / Thither all their bounties bring." Iris, the goddess of the rainbow, "drenches with Elysian dew / . . . Beds of Hyacinth and Roses." Comus had promised, "Here dwell no frowns, nor anger, from these gates / Sorrow flies far" (ll. 667-668). He knows the language, but the denotation of his words is something different from the "paradise" of the Epilogue.

The images in the Epilogue may have been intended to be more suggestive than definitive in meaning. The Venus-Adonis and Cupid-Psyche figures have been fully discussed by commentators as an illustration of earthly or heavenly love. The exact meaning of the Garden of Adonis image is debatable; the best this paper can offer is an opinion that a student's reference to Spenser's Garden of Adonis will help balance previous elaborations. Whatever significance may be attached to the "imperfection" of the Garden, Milton, following Spenser, shows Adonis as having recovered from his wound and Psyche as having completed "her wand'ring labours long." Spenser speaks also of "continuall Spring," "laughing blossoms,"

"everlasting joy," "pretious dew," and "Paradise."<sup>35</sup> The Attendant Spirit may offer in the Epilogue an assurance for those disciplined in virtue. There is in Comus a note of the "paradise within" that appears in the later Milton. Excised lines from the Trinity Manuscript indicate that Milton first meant the Lady's "Faith, Hope, and Chastity" speech to contain such a reference: ". . .& while I see yee this dusky hollow is a paradise & heaven gates ore my head." The Elder Brother says:

He that has light within his own clear breast  
 May sit i'th' 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 (ll. 381-385).

Perhaps the imagery in the Epilogue illuminates the meaning of life as it may be in "the smoke and stir of this dim spot" and life as it can be with paradise regained.

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<sup>35</sup>Edmund Spenser, The Fairie Queene, The Complete Poetical Works, ed. R. E. Neil Dodge (Cambridge, Mass., 1908), III, vi, xxix-xl.

## CONCLUSION

An appreciation of Milton's Comus properly begins with the masque tradition. The figures of the Attendant Spirit and Sabrina and the magic of "Haemony" are usual devices employed to present a "world" never intended to meet the demands of common sense. As elements of the masque their purpose in Comus is secure. Efforts to attach allegorical labels to them are at best mere speculation.

The allegory, also an essential part of the masque, is expressed in the three central characters. The theme on its narrative level concerns the real Lady Alice Egerton, Lord Brackley, and Thomas Egerton. As young people yet subject to education and discipline, they meet the "sorcerer" and with support from the benign inhabitants of the wood are able to advance further in their understanding of ideal moral conduct. In its universal application the theme of Comus is developed from a conflict between Specious Reason and Virtuous Mind.

The perversion of reason is a continuing theme in Milton. Eve "falls" because she accepts the eloquent but false reasoning of Satan; Adam decides to share whatever future Eve has occasioned by her choice not because he was "deceiv'd," Milton says, but because he was "fondly overcome with Female charm." Adam is quick, however, to convince himself that God will not destroy his "prime Creatures. . .lest the Adversary Triumph." His argument is an ironic echo of the Son's speech to the Father which begins with line 144 in Book III. Adam does not know the divine plan for the universe; he does know that to choose with Eve is

to transgress God's commandment. In Paradise Regained Milton has Satan tempt the Christ with reasons "plausible to the world"; Dalila, in Samson Agonistes, is Samson's "specious Monster," his "accomplisht snare." She excuses her betrayal of Samson with "reasons in Love's law" which "have pass'd for good." Specious reason is not, in Milton, a self-contained image; it is visualized in juxtaposition to Right Reason, the perfect moral choice and understanding.

From the time of his early writings, Milton emphasized the importance of knowledge: the learning of the ancients, "truth and understanding," "faith and certain knowledge," "faith or the knowledge of God." The divinely given knowledge of God is not so clearly expressed in Comus as it is in Samson Agonistes, where Samson speaks of "rousing motions" and "presage of mind" that demonstrate the presence of God, or in The Christian Doctrine, where Milton states that "the Deity has imprinted upon the human mind. . . many unquestionable tokens of himself." But in Comus the knowledge which makes the "virtuous mind" "unassailable" is given by the Lady's intuition that hers is a "heav'nly guided soul" destined to "climb" above "this Earthy grossness."

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