The Case for Comus

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The Case for Comus

When John Milton was commissioned to write the text for the work we call Comus, he was twenty-four and unknown as a poet. The only thing he had published was a commendatory poem on Shakespeare included anonymously in the introductory matter to the Second Folio, which had appeared two years before in 1632. The commission for a masque almost certainly came his way through the musician Henry Lawes, who composed the music for Comus, and was a friend of Milton's father. Lawes was the house musician to the Earl of Bridgewater; before whom the masque was presented at Ludlow Castle, on the Welsh border, in September, 1634—Milton had several years earlier composed the brief entertainment Arcades, also with music by Lawes, for the same family. Comus exists in two quite different early states: the performing text—the script—that Milton initially provided his employers with, and the revised and greatly elaborated version that he subsequently prepared for publication.

A good deal of critical energy has been expended over the question of whether this work is really a masque. Milton seems to me to have settled this matter quite conclusively by titling it A Maske Presented at Ludlow Castle. The title Comus was devised for an eighteenth-century theatrical adaptation, in an attempt to transform it from an occasional work into a drama by focusing on its most memorable character. To start, then, with a definition: a masque, in the period, was most simply an entertainment including masked performers, primarily dancers. In its most characteristic form, it was a private entertainment that related to its audience in a manner significantly different from drama: it was basically celebratory; it was about the group it entertained and always ended by including them in the fiction. In court masques the usual way of bringing this about was to conclude the work with a grand dance, in which the masquers descended from the stage and took partners from among the spectators, so that what the audience began by watching they ended by becoming. It was more of a game than a show, an expression of aristocratic identity and privilege, with the masks providing a degree of freedom, even if only notional, from the constraints of place, office, and self.

Comus is, obviously, a very scaled down version of the form, but Milton called the work a masque and clearly thought of it as one. Part of the reason it looks so unlike those classics of the genre composed by Ben Jonson, Thomas Campion, and Sir William Davenant is that when we use those as the norms, we are comparing it with masques for the royal court at Whitehall, designed for the participation of
a significant segment of aristocratic society; whereas Milton's masque is designed to be performed by three children and their music teacher before the children's parents and their friends. It is very much a family affair. This is not to say that Milton is not taking a critical and even revisionist look at the masque genre, but it is the same sort of look he took at everything he turned his hand to—to argue that Comus is not "really" a masque is like saying that Paradise Lost is not really an epic because it does not look enough like The Iliad or The Aeneid.

The three child-stars were children of the Earl of Bridgewater—he had fifteen children in all, and these three were already experienced masquers, having performed at Whitehall in two of the most splendid Caroline productions, Tempe Restored (1632), with a text by Aurelian Townshend and costumes and settings by Inigo Jones; and the greatest of the Stuart masques Coelum Britannicum (1634), by Thomas Carew and Jones. Bridgewater was Lord President of Wales; this is equivalent to governor, except that it is not an elective office; the incumbent is appointed by the Crown in London, and the Bridgewater family home was near London. The family name was Egerton. He and his children therefore are outsiders at Ludlow. The natives in the masque are Comus and his animal minions, a bit of Miltonic plotting that reflects the general English attitude to the place: Wales in Milton's time was considered wild and uncivilized, and was very far from the center of both power and culture. The eldest of the three performing children was Lady Alice Egerton, aged fifteen, who played the Lady; the boys were John, aged eleven, and Thomas, aged nine. John ultimately succeeded his father as the next earl; Thomas died young; Alice eventually married a local landowner and settled in Wales, and her history is part of my subject. Henry Lawes, the composer (and their music teacher), played the Attendant Spirit, who in the manuscript is called a Guardian Spirit or, in Greek, Daemen, a classical figure similar to the Christian guardian angel, but much less effective as an agent.

Most discussions of Comus focus on its political or religious implications and its status as a precursor to Milton's ethical and revolutionary thinking in his prose pamphlets and major poems. I am concerned here, on the contrary, with its implications specifically as a private work, a family affair; these are what seem to me most significantly Miltonic. I focus on three questions: Why is Milton's ethical masque about three lost children trying to get home? What is wrong with Comus—why is he a villain? How happy is the happy ending?

I begin with the question of the masque's subject. It is usually claimed that the work was composed to celebrate the Earl of Bridgewater's installation as President of the Council and Lord Lieutenant of Wales, but a look at both the relevant dates and the text itself make it obvious that this cannot be the case, at least in any simple way: the masque was performed on Michaelmas Night, 29 September 1634; Bridgewater had succeeded to his Welsh offices more than three years earlier, in June and July 1631, though he did not take up residence at Ludlow Castle until
May 1634. The Attendant Spirit does seem to link the action of the masque to the earl's installation when he describes the Lady and her brothers as "coming to attend their father's state / And new entrusted sceptre"; nevertheless, the masque was not presented until a further four months had passed—the sceptre was hardly new. The selection of Michaelmas for the date of the performance was doubtless significant: the provincial courts began their sessions at Michaelmas, and the holy day would therefore have marked the beginning of the viceregal administration in situ. But the masque does not have the look of a public celebration: on the contrary, performed by the family children, organized and composed by their music teacher, who also played in it, it is very much a family affair. Definitively so, in fact: had it been a public celebration, the aristocratic young masquers would not have taken speaking parts; masquers can dance in public because dancing is the prerogative of every lady and gentleman, but acting is a profession, hence the continuing outcry throughout the Caroline period against Queen Henrietta Maria's court theatricals.

So the masque we call Comus was a family matter: this is not, of course, to say that it may not have been other things as well. Patron, composer, and poet all had their political views; moreover, the wildness of the Welsh as a danger to "good order" (the standard euphemism justifying control by a government several hundred miles away in London) was an old theme—a theme almost built into the very idea of Wales for the English—hence the identification of Comus and his rout as the natives. Leah Marcus has also made a persuasive case for explicitly anti-Laudian elements in the masque, though these, of course, may have more to do with Milton's interests at the time than with the earl's. I find attempts by Marcus and others to link the masque's concern with chastity to the Castlehaven scandal less persuasive, not least because, thanks to the work of Cynthia Herrup, the notorious case looks rather different now from the way it looked thirty years ago when the suggestion was first made. The Earl of Castlehaven (who was convicted of a complicated set of charges including orchestrating the rape of his own wife and committing sodomy with his servants) was Bridgewater's brother-in-law, married to Bridgewater's wife's sister; and the case was both genuinely sensational and a legal landmark: he was the first nobleman in more than a century to be executed on a charge other than treason. But as Herrup shows, the capital crime had more to do with subverting the concept of patriarchal authority than with kinky sex, and it is not clear to me that either Milton or his Egerton patrons were concerned in the masque with cleansing the family name. If Castlehaven had been the subtext, the masque would surely have been about what a good husband and father Bridgewater was, not about how highminded the children were.

Castlehaven was executed in 1631, a few months before Bridgewater's accession to his high office; and though the case was certainly a skeleton in the family closet, the closet was long closed. Here again, both the age of the children for whom the masque was written and Milton's own perennial concerns about personal integrity and the dangers represented by temptation seem more direct sources for
the focus on militant and inviolable innocence. But even if we decide that the work is indeed about viceregal politics and the errors of Laudian Anglicanism, or alternatively is designed as an antidote to spousal rape and routine domestic buggery, what has any of that to do with three lost children trying to get home? I shall return to the work’s cultural implications, but for the moment I am interested in the lost children, who strike me as the peculiarly Miltonic element. What keeps you from getting home? And where is home? And what happens when you do get there?

To begin with, to say that the children are going home is to occlude an important issue: Ludlow is home only in the sense that it is where their parents are to be found. Ludlow Castle was a crown property, the seat of whoever was Lord President of Wales, and as far as the natives are concerned, the inhabitants of the place are definitively outsiders (some would even say invaders): they are not at all at home. More to the point, then, is where the children are coming from. In one sense, they are coming from nowhere [or anywhere, or everywhere]: they find themselves, like Dante, like everyone, in the middle of a journey in a dark wood where the right way is lost. But in another sense, they are coming from home, or moving from one home to another, from the court at Whitehall to the court at Ludlow, and from Tempo Restored and Coelum Britannicum—the royal masques in which they danced at Whitehall—to this masque with no name for the viceregal court. Innocents they may be, but they are thoroughly experienced masquers, and they are moving from the most central of courts to the most peripheral, and (they may have felt) from the most civilized to the wildest.

On such a journey, what keeps you from arriving at your destination? Questions that might seem prior to this—what are these children doing alone in the woods in the first place; questions that raise precisely the issue of parental care and adult responsibility—are clearly not to the point: in these woods, we are all children alone. You lose your way in the woods in part simply through the exigencies of travel—or travail, the same word in Milton’s time: uncertainty, confusion, fog, “envious darkness” (as the Lady puts it), the natural malevolence of night, to say nothing of bad maps and unmarked trails. When life is construed as woods, that’s just life. But you also lose your way through deliberate misdirection, the misrepresentations of the villain Comus, who presents himself as a harmless shepherd offering help and hospitality but is nothing of the sort. Nor is this the whole story: There is yet another kind of misdirection and misrepresentation, in a way even more insidious than that of Comus: that of the Attendant Spirit, unquestionably good, divinely sent, who, however, also presents himself as a shepherd and isn’t (why the disguise?) and is supposed to be your guardian angel but actually is remarkably inattentive to your needs. He is not around when you get lost, has difficulty finding you himself, warns the boys about Comus but not their sister (who is the one who needs the warning and could profit by it); and though he is in charge of the rescue operation is unaccountably not there when it happens, so the boys muf it by driving Comus
and his minions off but not seizing his wand. The Lady still is not free, and the Attendant Spirit blames the boys—he told them to seize the wand—and they are too well mannered to ask him where he was when the action started. In this context, all the insistence on the absolute self-sufficiency of virtue sounds relentlessly upbeat, but what it really means is that you are completely on your own. There is no father, no guiding star; even your Attendant Spirit has lost you. What keeps you from getting home, then, is partly inexperience and partly misdirection, but mostly a degree of complexity in the journey that no amount of experience would prepare you to resolve: the difficulty, in this case the impossibility, of knowing good from evil. Both Comus and the Attendant Spirit look like innocent shepherds, both tell lies that sound like truth. How can you know the good lies from the bad ones?

Comus is, nevertheless, obviously the villain—though part of the point is surely that the fact is not obvious, until it's too late, or until someone who already knows explains it to you. It is made obvious only to the audience, and this is really significant, because for the audience Comus is the most attractive figure in the masque. Why is he a villain, then? What is bad about him, and how bad is he? Very bad, certainly: he turns people into animals, “Into some brutish form of wolf or bear, / Or ounce, or tiger, hog, or bearded goat.” The issue is complicated, however, by the clear implication that the transformation is their own fault—he is turning them into the animals “they really are.” He engages their passions and plays on their affections; but the passions and affections are theirs. Moreover, nobody can be transformed unwillingly; and once they are transformed, “so perfect is their misery. / Not once perceive their foul disfigurement, / But boast themselves more comely than before / And all their friends and native home forget / To roll with pleasure in a sensual sty” (II. 72–76). The sensual sty is construed here, by the Attendant Spirit himself, as a perfect form of pleasure; this is a bad thing, “misery,” and the worst part of it is that it preempts home, thereby subverting the whole point of the masque—getting home, for these happy travelers, is no longer the point of the journey. Even in the Attendant Spirit’s terms, the problem is not saving travelers from Comus, it is saving them from themselves; and the biggest part of the problem is that they do not want to be saved. The argument in favor of home, after all, has to be an argument against “perfect... pleasure,” pleasure that only the Attendant Spirit conceives as misery. So another way of looking at Comus is to say that he enables people to be what and where they want to be—and that is construed as a bad thing.

Comus in fact is a pleasure principle. We watch him at work, first as he responds to the Lady’s song:

Can any mortal mixture of earth’s mould
Breathe such divine enchanting ravishment?
Sure something holy lodges in that breast,
And with these raptures moves the vocal air
To testify his hidden residence;
How sweetly did they float upon the wings
Of silence . . .
(I. 244–50)

We notice his receptiveness to the experience—for a villain, he is a remarkably appreciative audience. His command of metaphor and poetic language, too, is striking—he has the most individual voice in the masque. As he continues to locate himself within a world of classical allusion, we are clearly being given a double signal by this verse.

I have oft heard
My mother Circe with the Sirens three,
Amidst the flowery-kirtled naiades,
Culling their potent herbs and baleful drugs,
Who as they sang would take the prisoner soul
And lap it in Elysium; Scylla wept,
And chid her barking waves into attention,
And fell Charybdis murmured soft applause;
Yet they in pleasing slumber lulled the sense,
And in sweet madness robbed it of itself . . .
(I. 252–61)

Circe and the Sirens are destructive figures, but they are not being presented as such here—the song is ravishing (a significantly double-edged word). Even in the small details, negative images are balanced by positive ones: baleful drugs with potent herbs, the prisoner soul with Elysium, fell Charybdis with soft applause, sweetness with madness; and indeed, the virtuous Lady's song is being compared to the dangerous and destructive song of the sirens. When a little later Comus says “I'll speak to her / And she shall be my queen. Hail, foreign wonder” (264–65), he is proposing a very subversive version of the meeting of Ferdinand and Miranda in The Tempest (“O you wonder! . . . I'll make you / The queen of Naples”)—subversive because it so perfectly realizes Prospero's fears: that admiration leads inevitably to seduction, to ravishment. Only here Comus is the victim, seduced and ravished.

What he offers, however, is not what is in his heart—adoration, marriage, a crown, regal power—but simple hospitality, the simplest, and therefore the most persuasive of lies. The Lady is tricked by what she is most familiar with, the civilized virtues of the courtly world she has just left, grace, charm, generosity; tricked by everything her experience tells her to trust. What she has not heard in Comus's voice is what he has addressed only to us, his courtly poetry, notoriously the medium of hypocrisy and seduction. Trapped by his hospitality, paralyzed on his throne, she nevertheless insists that she is not in his power (and perhaps more to the point, she does not understand the ways in which he might be in hers). She regards the lie as crucial: she has been deceived, therefore she has not really, willingly accepted him. Her will, she insists, remains free, armed with the cardinal virtues Faith, Hope, and Chastity (a more specific virtue than the more familiar Charity, but
equally canonical; these have not enabled her to see through him, but they nevertheless render her impervious to him—or to put it another way, render her unable to love him. They are, just as much as his magic, what paralyzes her.

The end of this romance is of course predetermined, and there is little suspense at this point in the drama; but the debate that forms this scene is addressed to us, not to the participants—the battle is for our judgment. Comus’s argument is a variant on the familiar “gather ye rosebuds while ye may” theme: make good use of time, pleasures are there to be enjoyed. But it has a larger ethical argument as well: that nature’s riches are here for use, and that not to enjoy them is rejecting God’s bounty; is, in effect, blasphemous. This argument has its specious elements, but (or perhaps therefore) it produces some of the best poetry in the masque. It seems to have engaged Milton’s poetic sensibility far more powerfully than anything in the Lady’s role, perhaps precisely because, as Shakespeare put it, the truest poetry is the most feigning.

The Lady’s answer is a firm argument in favor of moderation and temperance; but she also insists that Comus is misrepresenting nature; that it is not simply a treasure to be plundered but has ethical rules of its own. Behind this debate are, obviously, two antithetical views of nature. Comus assumes that nature is something other than us, and is therefore properly subject to us, ours to use, enjoy, or plunder; whereas the Lady assumes that nature is part of us, an aspect or extension of ourselves, that we must treat it and care for it as we treat our own bodies. This argument looks a little different when we realize that it is a version of the standard English argument against the behavior of Spain in the New World—though it too has its specious elements, and would surely have looked quite different still had Raleigh ever succeeded in discovering any gold in Guiana, that country that, notoriously, “hath yet her maidenhead.” Maidenheads, as Raleigh and his English backers from the virgin queen and the pacific king on down assume, are there to be taken.

The allusion to The Tempest is significant too because the debate over our relation to nature is related to Prospero’s implied debate with Caliban: What is our relation to newly discovered lands and their inhabitants—do they become ours, or have they an integrity that must be respected? Is the New World an extension of ourselves, or is it the Other? These are not simply literary questions, they are major legal issues in the age: What legal claim have Europeans to land in the New World? What claims do we have on nature? The standard argument is that natives can only be said to own the land if they work it, that is, farm it; hunters and fishermen live off it, give nothing back to it, do nothing that makes it theirs (this is an argument against Caliban, but it is also an argument against Prospero). The argument naturally had to be abandoned whenever the Europeans had to deal with farming Indians, but it indicates how far into European society these issues extended, because one thing the English were especially eager for the New World to provide was a large supply of great estates, a remedy to the problems of primogeniture: somewhere the younger sons of the gentry could go and be gentlemen and landowners in their
own right, be as good as their fathers and eldest brothers. Shakespeare takes a
darker and more complicated view of Prospero in his dealings with Caliban than
Milton does of the Lady facing down Comus; but just as Shakespeare gives Caliban,
through his astonishing verse, a larger presence in the play than Prospero’s view of
him will allow for, so Milton gives Comus more resonance than the Lady’s argu-
ments alone can dismiss. Caliban’s poetry is a telling refutation of Prospero’s view
of him as an inarticulate savage; Comus’s arguments can be argued away, but the
rich, sensuous, wonderfully inventive, indeed Shakespearean, poetry is Milton at
his best. In fact, it is tempting to think that as the Attendant Spirit was written for
Lawes to play, Milton wrote Comus for himself. There is no evidence that this is
the case, but for the first printed edition of the masque, Milton supplied an epigraph
from Virgil’s Second Eclogue, “Eheu quid volui miser mihi! floribus austrum / Perditus—” (Wretch, what have I longed for! The south wind, desperate, upon my
flowers . . .). The desperate, lovelorn shepherd Corydon bewails the coldness of his
beloved Alexis. Milton here speaks as Comus, in the grip of an impossible love.

I am not implying simply that Milton had divided loyalties. Milton’s masque
is precisely about how complicated the choice of virtue is as soon as it stops being
treated as an abstract question. Few of us set out to be deliberately wicked, but if
deception exists, it doesn’t do us much good to know our own minds. It is the de-
ceptive Other we need to know; and as the history of rhetoric amply demonstrates,
false arguments are as persuasive as true ones. Both the Attendant Spirit and
Comus present themselves as innocent shepherds; there is nothing to indicate that
one is good and the other bad—and neither is the real thing, both are lying. We
think we make free choices, but we don’t. Indeed, to claim, as Milton wants to
do here, that virtue is absolutely self-sufficient, he really has to load the case. The
Attendant Spirit says that Comus offers “to every weary traveler / His orient liquor
in a crystal glass / To quench the drought of Phoebus, which . . . they taste / (For
most do taste through fond intemperate thirst). . . .” (64–67), and that is what en-
ables them to be turned into animals. But is thirst really fond—foolish—and intem-
perate? Are we at fault for being thirsty after a long journey in hot weather? Even
in the Attendant Spirit’s terms, there is no indication that the weary traveler com-
mits any sin by drinking, that gluttony or greed is involved—it isn’t that the traveler
drinks too much, instead of taking only enough to quench the thirst, or covets the
crystal glass. How would one know not to drink? Is the crystal glass a tipoff, as it is
in a similar moment in Edmund Spenser, when Guyon is offered a drink at the
entrance to the Bower of Bliss, and smashes the glass to the ground? But in Paradise
Lost, what is good about the banquets the angels have in heaven is not the food,
which Milton understandably doesn’t try to imagine, but precisely the fact that it
is served on gold plates. Would the Lady reject even a meal from God? What does
the Attendant Spirit serve his drinks in? Is there any way of not falling for this
temptation short of refusing to quench one’s thirst? Total abstinence is not the same
as temperance. Isn’t this a claim that whatever evils we encounter are simply our own fault, a classic case of blaming the victim?

In revising the masque for publication, Milton produced a version about a third longer than the performing text, in which those arguments in favor of temperance and chastity get rewritten and elaborated, and grow even more doctrinaire. In particular, the Lady’s peroration on “the sage and serious doctrine of Virginity” and the Attendant Spirit’s long final speech about the absolute freedom of the virtuous mind were not part of the performance. The quality of innocence, unworlidentialness, abstraction, are things Milton wants to retain, elaborate, and strengthen, not edit out; and they therefore cannot be accounted for by saying that the performers were children. The famous passage in Areopagitica about refusing to “praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue” suggests that the primary virtue is experience, not innocence; but in fact there is a very strong desire, throughout Milton, to find ways to believe that whatever experience confronts us with, we really can hold on to our innocence; and that when we fail to do so, as we inevitably do, it’s through our own fault. For all Milton’s obvious emotional investment in the figure of Comus, it is surely not irrelevant that he was a fastidious and rather delicate young man, whose nickname when he was an undergraduate at Christ’s College, Cambridge, was “the Lady of Christ’s.”

So let us consider the Lady now. I focus here on the way she is finally released from her bondage by the production of another version of herself, the nymph of the River Severn, Sabrina, another embattled virgin. This resolution through duplication interests me because the work, in fact, is full of duplication—even of duplicity. The Attendant Spirit and Comus are the image of each other; Comus’s court is a parodic image of the court at Ludlow, which in turn is a miniature version of the court at Whitehall, with the earl representing, refiguring, mirroring the king. Mirror images, repetitions, and reversals are essential elements in the action. The Lady, when she first finds herself alone in the wood, invokes the nymph Echo, an auditory mirror image. Why invoke this figure? In a world that includes Attendant Spirits, to say nothing of the visible figures of Faith, Hope, and Chastity, there are obviously many other tutelary figures to invoke. What assistance can your own echo give you?

And if we press on the allusion, it becomes even stranger, in this antisensualist work. In Ovid, Echo is a nymph who was Jove’s confidante in his love affairs; but she was a bad confidante—she told everybody about them. She was so loquacious that she was punished by being condemned to speak only when spoken to, and then only to repeat what she heard. She fell in love with the youth Narcissus, who was in love only with himself, and killed himself when he found he could not possess the beautiful image of his own face, a visual echo—when he found that the self was not the Other. When Narcissus died, Echo too pined away, and was transformed into a rock; but she still retained the same power of repetitive speech. Is all this
relevant, or not? If so, it is difficult to see it as anything but a subversive moment, introducing self-absorption and a dangerous vanity into the purity of the Lady’s character. And if it is not relevant, what is Echo doing here?

One thing she might be doing is something musical. The echo song, in which the last part of the verse gets repeated as a refrain, or as an answer, was a popular form in the period. Jonson is fond of echo songs in his early masques, as, for example, in The Masque of Beauty: “It was for beauty that the world was made, / And where she reigns Love’s lights admit no shade. /—Love’s lights admit no shade. /—Admit no shade.” That is surely what we are led to expect here, the young poet’s exercise in this classic genre, with Milton imitating Jonson and Lawes imitating Alfonso Ferrabosco. Here is the song—and notice that the notion of Echo being invoked is not simply an abstract one, but is quite specific about the Ovidian allusion:

Sweet Echo, sweetest nymph that liv’st unseen
Within thy airy shell
By slow Meander’s margent green,
And in the violet-embroidered vale
Where the love-lorn nightingale
Nightly to thee her sad song mourneth well,
Caesst thou not tell me of a gentle pair
That likest thy Narcissus are?
O if thou have
Hid them in some flowery cave,
Tell me but where,
Sweet queen of parley, daughter of the sphere,
So mayst thou be translated to the skies,
And give resounding grace to all heaven’s harmonies.

(ll. 230–44)

What is baffling about this is the fact that Echo does not answer—“Grace to all heaven’s harmonies” would be the obvious refrain, seemingly an ideal text for Lawes’s melisma; but in fact, in Lawes’s setting, there are no repetitions at all in the song. This is quite unlike Ferrabosco’s settings of Jonson, or Robert Johnson’s of Shakespeare songs, or John Dowland’s of his own verse, or Lawes’s brother William’s settings of James Shirley’s masque songs in The Triumph of Peace in the same year. (This, in fact, seems to me one of the problems with it as a piece of music: it gives you no help; if you miss it the first time, you get no second chance.) Why does Milton go out of his way to defeat our expectations about this? Could it be part of the point, that the song is just as uncompromising and unresponsive as the Lady herself is? But of course, even if there were a reply, what could it say? Echo would only be able to repeat the Lady’s song—how would that help?

It does, certainly, emphasize the fact that the Lady has only herself to rely on. The Lady, singing to Echo, is literally singing to herself, and Comus therefore is, if not eavesdropping, at least overhearing the most private of communications. But it
also means that she is surrounded with—or creates for herself—a world of versions of the self, of solipsism. It is not only Comus and the Attendant Spirit who are mirror images; she herself compares her brothers to Narcissus (and if they are like Narcissus, they are also mirror images of each other). She cannot be released from Comus’s spell because her narcissistic brothers forget to seize his magic wand; the wand is necessary because it needs to be reversed—“Without his rod reversed, / And backward mutters of dissevering power, / We cannot free the Lady” (ll. 815–17). Good magic is bad magic backwards, its mirror image. This is why she can only be rescued by the production of yet another embattled maiden, another version of herself. Undoing things can never free us from the things themselves. This is a vision in which freedom is a repetition, the mirror image, of bondage.

Comus is in its way a love poem, full of a sense of both the potential richness of sensuality and its dangers; and full of a more subversive sense, too, of the inhumanity of virtue, the destructiveness of unresponsiveness—the Lady’s invocation of Echo does not even produce an echo. If we could imagine a version of Comus written from Comus’s point of view, what would the Lady look like? Noble and virtuous, or cold, rigid, and ultimately barren? I have often wondered whether Milton did not have the ambivalences of Shakespeare’s sonnet 94 somewhere at the back of his mind, the sonnet about those “that have power to hurt and will do none”:

Who moving others, are yet themselves as stone,
Unmoved, cold, and to temptation slow,
They rightly do inherit heaven’s graces,
And husband nature’s riches from expense,
They are the lords and owners of their faces. . . .

Owning one’s own face is clearly being represented as an unambiguous virtue. But all Narcissus owned, and all he wanted, was his own face, and that might give us pause. The Lady, too, “moving others,” is yet herself “as stone / Unmoved, cold, and to temptation”—not slow, but utterly impervious. Is this an unambiguous virtue, a model for ethical behavior? No doubt—all the critics assure us that it is; but praising someone by declaring her (or him) cold as stone does not promise much in the way of human responsiveness, feeling, or even decency. And of course perhaps the Lady is not the ethical model at all; perhaps the point is precisely how attractive temptation is—how attractive it has to be to tempt us. It is, after all, we, not the Lady, whom Comus tempts, we who find him attractive.

I want to look now at Comus in some other contexts. Shakespeare’s version of Milton’s masque is Venus and Adonis. The sexes are reversed, which makes for a rather misogynistic comedy in contrast to Milton’s high ethical morality play, but it is also true that though Adonis preserves his virtue, Shakespeare seems to have very little invested in his hero’s chastity. Adonis denounces Venus much as the Lady denounces Comus, as the embodiment not of love but of “sweating lust,” and Venus is certainly represented as gross and unattractive. Most readers, however, have
found the case a little loaded and Adonis rather prissy—even in Shakespeare’s moralizing culture, healthy adolescent males were not expected to turn down free sex with no consequences; the more so since in the traditional story, Adonis is as eager for Venus as she is for him. The ethical issue is not the main one for Shakespeare; *Venus and Adonis* is all about subverting norms, both the norms of canonical classical stories and of love poetry.

In fact, the most powerful and characteristic English Renaissance love poetry is just the sort of love poetry exemplified in Comus’s speeches, the poetry of seduction. In John Donne, Carew, or Andrew Marvell we can see how much the age had invested precisely in figures like Comus winning. That is, there is a way in which Milton’s battle of wills, with the virtuous Lady routing the charming seducer, is the really subversive conception. The age has a great deal invested both in the power of rhetoric and in men getting what they want. In such poetry, what they want is women, certainly; women, however, not simply as lovers, but as representatives or embodiments of something much larger, of new worlds, power, riches, a satisfaction that is a great deal more than sexual—“O my America, my newfound land!” The idea of the woman as a site of incredible riches or fabulous new lands is not simply a poetic fantasy. What men married for in the period was money, or position, or alliances. The woman was the enabling figure in the advancement and consolidation of male authority—this is why fathers were given the legal power to arrange their children’s marriages; it is also why women were provided with dowries: quite simply, no one would marry them otherwise. Children were legally their fathers’ possessions, women were legally their husbands’ possessions—it is to the point that the Lady is liberated from Comus only to be delivered into the keeping of her father: there is no imaginable alternative. The Lady is eloquent in her captivity about the freedom of her mind, but her mind is not free: far from it. In particular, she is not free to choose Comus, not because there is anything wrong with Comus but because the choice of her husband belongs to her father, not to her—she is free only to concur in his choice, and the situation would be no different if her suitor were the Attendant Spirit. What is wicked about Comus’s transformed minions is precisely that they have assumed that their minds were their own, exercised the freedom of their wills, ignored their fathers, decided not to go home.

Suppose we did imagine the masque from Comus’s point of view, as one can imagine *The Tempest* from Caliban’s. The touchstone of Caliban’s unregeneracy for Prospero is a more violent version of Comus’s seductive imperialism, his attempt to rape Miranda. But if one takes Caliban’s claim to be the king of the island seriously—and surely by any legal standard he has a good case—then that act looks rather different: it is, like the rape of the Sabine women, or the rape that enabled the establishment of Carthage, a foundational act. Miranda, Caliban says, would not merely have satisfied his lust, she would have founded a race, “peopled / This isle with Calibans” (1.2.349–50). Rape is the originary myth of empire. And in a different version of the story, Prospero, after all, might have decided not to bend his
efforts toward a pointless revenge and the restoration of the dukedom he had no
interest in ruling, but might have chosen instead to make the most of his exile in
this new world by allying himself with the island's ruler. In this scenario, Caliban,
not Ferdinand, would have been the right husband for Miranda—and, no doubt,
a romantic hero—and Miranda's feelings on the matter would have been irrelevant,
just as irrelevant as those of Alonso's daughter Claribel, married off unwillingly to
the king of Tunis.

Comus is more clearly the king of the woods than Caliban is king of the island,
and Milton's allusion to The Tempest in the first encounter with the Lady, already
cited, is in fact not to Caliban but to the charming and morally impeccable Ferdi-
nand: "I'll speak to her, / And she shall be my queen. Hail, foreign wonder." Argu-
ably, however, the real problem is that Comus is going about the seduction the
wrong way. He wants to be attractive to the Lady, but he really needs to be attractive
to her father. In fact, the earl might well consider this a good alliance: Comus rules
the woods, the earl rules everything else. If Comus marries the Lady, the family
rules everything. In this version of the plot, the Lady's virtue is taken care of by the
fact that what is in question is a marriage, not a seduction; and in any case, it is the
father who is being seduced, not the Lady. Her wishes are not exactly irrelevant,
but they are expected to coincide with her father's.

What is really wrong with Comus, then, is that he bothers with the Lady's feel-
ings at all. In this respect, the Castlehaven case, that skeleton in the family closet,
is actually very enlightening, not as a source, but as an index to the relevant social
norms. The initial charge against Castlehaven had nothing to do with spousal rape
or sodomy. Castlehaven had married his daughter to one of his favorite servants,
on whom he had settled a large amount of money. His eldest son, apparently fearing
that he would be disinherited, lodged a complaint against his father with the king.
It was only then that Castlehaven's wife brought her own complaint about being
forced to have sex with another servant, an event that had taken place several years
before. In his defense, Castlehaven insisted that he could not be prosecuted on such
charges. His wife's body and his daughter's hand in marriage belonged to him; he
could do with them as he pleased. The reason this was a bad defense was not that it
was incorrect. On the contrary, it was egregiously, blatantly, shockingly, dangerously
true. What was wrong with it, and ultimately made it a capital offense, was precisely
that it was correct, and thus exposed the basic flaw in the whole patriarchal system;
hence the invocation of the buggery charge, which was unambiguously prosecut-
able (though according to the legal definition of buggery at the time, Castlehaven
probably was not guilty of it).

So the Lady is rescued and delivered to her father—nothing subversive from
Milton the revolutionary there. What happens next? What is the happy ending;
what happens when she gets home? If we pursue Lady Alice Egerton's history a
little further, the reading I am proposing will sound less eccentric. She was fifteen
in 1634, when the masque was performed. She did not marry until 1650, at the
age of thirty-one—a distinctly advanced age for marriage in aristocratic families. The groom was a prosperous Welsh landowner, Richard Vaughan, Earl of Carbery, the title is less grand than it sounds, since it was in the Irish peerage—as an English peer, he was a mere baron. He was twice widowed, fifty-two years old—twenty-one years older than she, literally old enough to be her father—with several grown children. Lady Alice was well beyond the age of consent at this point and had not lived at Ludlow for more than ten years, but the match doubtless pleased her family well enough: Carbery was a royalist peer and a man of substance, though not of unambiguous character: some of his wealth was said to have been acquired through extortion and embezzlement. Moreover, as commander of a section of the royal army in Wales in 1644, he had been decisively defeated and accused of cowardice, or even of deliberately losing the battle. It was only through his connections and the assiduous courting of influential people that he managed to escape the heavy fine that was levied on him. Despite his royalist politics, he managed to live comfortably under the Commonwealth—his second wife, who died in the same year he married Lady Alice, so impressed Oliver Cromwell with her piety that he rescinded his order to have Carbery arrested. Doubtless the idea of Lady Alice as the third Countess of Carbery satisfied the Egertons; she was, after all, one of fifteen children, eleven of whom were daughters; how choosy could one be? By 1650, moreover, her father’s approval was no longer an issue: the marriage took place a year after his death—did she wait until he died to marry? In one respect, at least, her husband replicated her father: at the Restoration Carbery succeeded to Bridgewater’s former posts, the Lord Presidency of the Council and Lord Lieutenancy of Wales, offices he held until 1672, when he was removed, charged with malfeasance and exceptional cruelty to his servants and tenants. As one ambivalent eulogist put it at his death, he was ideally suited to high office, save for cowardice and a want of integrity.

Lady Alice, it will be observed, scarcely figures at all in this narrative. In a fulsomely adulatory poem addressed to her shortly after her marriage, variously entitled To Alice Countess of Carbery, on her Enriching Wales with her Presence and To Alice Countess of Carbery, on her first coming into Wales, the extraordinary Welsh poet Katherine Philips (“the matchless Orinda”) extravagantly praises her for the most vague and abstract virtues: for bringing light to the obscurity and chaos of Wales, for civilizing the wilderness, mostly for condescending to be there at all—what, indeed, Philips seems to ask, is she doing there? It is the same question Comus asks on hearing the Lady’s echoless echo song. The ode, hyperbolic and inscrutable, is a curious gloss on Comus, and suggests how little had changed in the way Alice Egerton was regarded, or presented herself, in the intervening twenty years. Whether the marriage was a happy one is not recorded; it may or may not be relevant that the couple had no children. Alice Egerton’s story, like most women’s stories throughout history, ends with marriage. In fact, for our purposes, it ends sixteen years before her marriage, with Milton’s masque.
Notes


