HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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# **Comus**: A Mask presented at Ludlow Castle 1634

John Milton 1608-1674

*Background*

Brought up in a loving family among brothers and sisters, John Milton went on to acquire extensive fame for himself and his country, by his extraordinary imaginative power, his incisive political *writings,* and his firm moral code. It would be fair to say that Milton is the second to Shakespeare for brilliance in shaping and building the English language into the world energy gift it is today. Within the master achievements of English as a literary force, many would agree that *Paradise Lost,* 1667, reaches the summit of the British literary imagination. That epic has no parallel in any expression of the English language, British or other.

John Milton, with his feminine features and intensely bookish preoccupations, will have come across to youthful companions as off the mainstream of the male growth curve. The impression, however, was deceptive. Milton's growth was to pulse with an intensity masculine curve, which will take him across a series of lifetime causes--free speech, the right to divorce, rights of conscience, liberty of political speech--all asserted in the course of an intensely public life. By the time Milton completed his primary schooling at St Paul's in London, he had earned a good knowledge of the classical languages, plus Spanish and Portuguese, and the foundational Near Eastern languages--Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic; no small achievement on the masculine growth curve. He had become an adept at such exercises as translating a Greek text into Latin, then (the same text) back again into Greek. Bring on your barbells.

The intensity with which John projected himself into his early school tears at St. Paul's was a reliable harbinger of the high gravity he was destined to bring to the work of his mind in the following years. In 1629 Milton graduated from Christ College, Oxford, after which he spent six years living with his family, studying languages and cultures, and starting into his own lyrics--think of '*L'Allegro'* and '*Il Ponderoso,*' ' On the Morning of Christ's Nativity,' or 'On Shakespeare,' in which he recognized his worthiness to stand inside the vast tradition of his own nation's achievement. This before he reached the age of thirty.

*The classical tradition*

John Milton was a prodigy, especially when it came Io languages. He knew many languages, and among them the most difficult. He also moved preferentially through the language of mythology. He knew how to set up a verbal stage with the relevant window dressing in which to frame the references required by this or that tale, and he knew well how to interweave these stage properties of the classical tradition into a formal, subtle and disciplined pattern. He was a master of impish variations on the hexameter.

This is to speak of one man's fitness to further, in poetry, some of those endless prompts left to the descendants of Greco-Roman antiquity. To begin to discuss the classical tradition more widely would mean to look at the entire classical landscape of western Europe from the sixteenth to the late seventeenth centuries. At the same time it will mean to look at those works of art, architecture and to a lesser degree music which owe their birthright to the genius of the Greeks and Romans. It will not be until the Romantic Movement that we will stumble onto a new readership, deeply seasoned toward a bond breaking of strictures, and onto the moment in which we find ourselves today, complexified, uncomfortable rhyming, but at home with a Gaudi Cathedral.

*Comus. 1634*

It is evident that Milton was an early blooming genius. The two poems before us, in the present entry, were composed when Milton was in his later twenties and living at home after graduation from

Cambridge. These two poems launch a daring as well as erudite poetic career; they also show us how deeply Milton was infused with the classical tradition.

*Comus* is a mask, a literary entertainment of a genre popularized during Stuart times, and noted for its growing popularity, as an entertainment adorning feasts, banquets or royal festivals. (Ben Jonson was widely known for creating those cultural enrichments, which go far back into many traditional cultures. A gripping fictive-historical account of mask-making's cultural function can be found in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*, 1974, which is involved with masks and mask- making practices in Ibo culture. It is of great importance to note the connection between the literary mask--Ben Jonson, Milton--and the--mask--Ibo culture--which presents before the tribe, resembling the literary mask in that like it the tribal mask too is a communal act, staged for group benefit.)

The full title of the Mlitonic text before us is A MASK PRESENTED AT LUDLOW CASTLE, 1634; a mighty title emphasizing high dignity and celebration. Milton himself was known to have been of the company on the occasion of the present mask, as were the children of the Lords and Ladies who made up the company. The tale--perhaps one thinks of Shakespeare's *A Mid Summer Night's Dream*--transports the audience to a kind of fairyland in which darkly real issues are in conflict.
The performers are few--six in number--and the central issues-- maidenly flight, evil pursuit, chastity, magical protection --are evident and urgent. The plot is dynamic and aerial, and surprisingly forceful. We are gripped by it. How does that work?

Two brothers wander in the wood, but lose track of their accompanying sister, and are wild to find her. Fortunately an attendant spirit appears, identifying himself; and assuring the wanderers.

*Before the starry threshold of Jove's court my mansion is, where those immortal shapes…*

The spirit makes it plain that the supernal heavens have only scorn for the evil modes of the world below; nonetheless this spirit of good will do what it can to help the desperate youths. At which point the frantic search sets off in earnest. We realize, gradually, that the absent sister has fallen into harm's way. The rough hexameters carve a harsh path of rhyme into the alarming situation.

The harm in the alarming situation is the corrupt and sinister Son of Circe. (Circe. who, in Greek mythology and square in the middle of Homer's *Odyssey*, captures Odysseus and his men and does her best to turn them all into swine.) Comus, this ill fated offspring, has caught up with The Lady of Milton's tale, and is exercising his seductive powers over her. (He is threatening her with a potent narcotic, which she struggles to resist, and a probably poisoned platter of her favorite dishes.

He has fastened her into an ethereal chair, in which he seems nigh onto raping her. Needless to say, intervention comes in the nick of time. The spirit, the Lady herself, chaste as adamant, and the river nymph, Sabrina, ultimately cooperate to rout the bestiality of Comus and his band of ruffians. In the end *Comus* forces on us unexpected insights. In the first place we are argued down by The Lady's devastating rejection of the assault. Comus himself has been ineffective. The Lady is herself a single startlingly cogent self-defense. Needless to add, that in a contest pitting Comus against the Lady of Milton's poem, Chastity will emerge unscathed.

Milton has everything to do with the power of language he lends to the Lady for her self-defense. It should certainly be added, to whatever we ascribe to Milton regarding the greatness of his language here, that the ultimate in classical- tradition felicity would seem available to Milton in the two poems we feature in this entry. Milton himself is a privileged recipient of a literary linguistic tradition going back into the early monastic traditions of Christianity. (One might think of the early work being accomplished by Cassiodorus and Boethius at the close of the Roman Empire, to analyze and provide a framework for the systematic study of the Roman language.) That Christian instructional system persists through the High Middle Ages to ground the highly organized availability of the culture-ready Latinized English of Milton at St. Paul's and in his Classics- laden young man poems, *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*.

At the point where we are with Milton, in the cultural history of the Renaissance, divers tendencies are bringing their energies to bear on the preparation of a self-developing English. Major texts are still being published and printed in Latin, the language of court and business. The major nations of western Europe--some entangled with England through conflict or commerce--are exporting the capacities and literary merits of their own modern tongues. English is starting to include, within its own repertoire, matured use of its gathering complexities; our second Miltonic example, *Lycidas*, ia a perfect example of this capaciousness, written as it was only three years after *Comus.*