

**COMUS;
L'ALLEGRO**

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Comus; L'Allegro by John Milton

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JOHN MILTON

**COMUS;
L'ALLEGRO**

Clarendon Press Series

MILTON

COMUS



Oxford

AT THE CLARENDON PRESS

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THE present edition of 'Comus' is taken from 'The English Poems of John Milton,' edited by R. C. Browne, M.A., for the Clarendon Press.

COMUS is called by Milton himself, or by his publisher, on the title page of the first edition, 1637, 'A Maske.' This sense of the word 'Mask' is obsolete, because the entertainment it denoted has been unknown to English manners since 1640. In that brilliant period of court life which was inaugurated by Elizabeth and terminated by the Civil War, a Mask was a frequent and favourite amusement. While a 'Masquerade' is a diversion in which the company is masked, a 'Mask' came in the latter part of the 16th century to denote a spectacle exhibited by performers disguised to represent some allegorical or mythological character. Mercury and Phoebus, Time and Truth, Envy and Zeal, and other, often buffoon parts were sustained, sometimes by hired performers, at other times by gentlemen and ladies. The whole exhibition consisted, partly of pageantry, partly of music with an accompaniment of words, and partly of dialogue serious or comic.

The dramatic mask of the 16th century has been traced, in germ at least, as far back as the time of Edward III. But in its perfected shape it was a genuine offspring of the English renaissance, a cross between the vernacular mummy or mystery-play and the Greek drama. No great court festival was considered complete without such a public show. Many of our greatest dramatic writers, Beaumont, Fletcher, Ben Jonson, Middleton, Dekker, Shirley, Carew, were constrained by the fashion of the time to apply their invention to gratify this taste for decorative representation. No less an artist than Inigo Jones must occasionally stoop to construct the machinery.

The taste for grotesque pageant must have gradually died out before the general advance of civilisation. The 'Mask' by a process of evolution would have become the 'Opera.' But the gradual encroachment of Puritan sentiment in the nation after the accession of Charles I threatened these more

costly shows along with the legitimate drama. It often happens that just when a taste or a fashion is at the point of death it undergoes a forced and temporary revival. So it was with the 'Mask.' In 1633 came out Prynne's *Histriomastix*, and his overheated and intemperate onslaught naturally begot in court circles a reaction in favour of theatrical amusements. The Inns of Court and Whitehall vied with each other in the splendour and solemnity with which they brought out—the lawyers, Shirley's 'Triumph of Peace,'—the Court, Carew's 'Caelum Britannicum.'

It was in this hour of reaction that Milton, æt. 26, was prevailed upon by Lawes, the composer, to write words for a mask which was to celebrate the entry of the Earl of Bridgewater on his office as Lord-President of Wales. It was one of the caprices of fortune that thus made the future poet of the great Puritan epic the last composer of a Cavalier mask.

Comus is a Greek word (*κόμος*) signifying 'revel,' 'revelling,' 'revellers.' The idea was personified by later Greek art, when Comus became the representative deity of mirth and revel.

This personification was taken up, along with the rest of classical mythology, by the poets of the renaissance. Erycius Puteanus, a professor at the catholic university of Louvain, was author of a piece in Latin, mixed of prose and verse, bearing the title of 'Comus.' This dramatic extravaganza was first published in 1608. But it had several editions, and it can hardly be doubted that Milton had seen it, though the edition printed at Oxford with the date 1634 was probably posterior to Milton's poem, and occasioned by it. But if Milton owed to the Latin author the suggestion of a name or a subject, he has carried it out with a vigour of imagination which is entirely his own.

TO THE RIGHT HONOURABLE

JOHN, LORD VISCOUNT BRACKLEY,

Son and Heir Apparent to the Earl of Bridgewater, &c.

MY LORD,

This Poem, which received its first occasion of birth from yourself, and others of your noble family, and much honour from your own person in the performance, now returns again to make a final Dedication of itself to you. Although not openly acknowledged by the Author, yet it is a legitimate offspring, so lovely, and so much desired, that the often copying of it hath tired my pen to give my several friends satisfaction, and brought me to a necessity of producing it to the public view; and now to offer it up in all rightful devotion to those fair hopes, and rare endowments of your much promising youth, which give a full assurance, to all that know you, of a future excellence. Live, sweet Lord, to be the honour of your name, and receive this as your own, from the hands of him who hath by many favours been long obliged to your most honoured parents, and as in this representation your attendant *Tbyrsis*, so now in all real expression,

Your faithful and most humble servant,

H. LAWES.

COMUS.

THE PERSONS.

THE ATTENDANT SPIRIT, afterwards in the habit of Thyrsis.
COMUS, with his Cousins.
THE LADY.
FIRST BROTHER.
SECOND BROTHER.
SABRINA, the Nymph.

THE CHIEF PERSONS WHICH PRESENTED WERE

The Lord BRACKLEY.
M^r. THOMAS EGERTON, his brother.
The Lady ALICE EGERTON.

The first Scene discovers a wild wood.

The ATTENDANT SPIRIT descends or enters.

BEFORE the starry threshold of Jove's court
My mansion is, where those immortal shapes
Of bright ærial spirits live inspher'd
In regions mild of calm and serene air;
Above the smoke and stir of this dim spot, 5
Which men call Earth, and with low-thoughted care
Confin'd, and pester'd in this pinfold here,
Strive to keep up a frail and feverish being;
Unmindful of the crown that Virtue gives,
After this mortal change, to her true servants 10
Amongst the enthron'd gods on sainted seats.
Yet some there be that by due steps aspire
To lay their just hands on that golden key
That opes the palace of eternity:
To such my errand is, and but for such, 15
I would not soil these pure ambrosial weeds,
With the rank vapours of this sin-worn mould.

But to my task. Neptune, besides the sway
 Of every salt flood and each ebbing stream,
 Took in by lot 'twixt high and nether Jove, 20
 Imperial rule of all the sea-girt isles,
 That like to rich and various gems inlay
 The unadorned bosom of the deep;
 Which he to grace his tributary gods
 By course commits to several government, 25
 And gives them leave to wear their sapphire crowns,
 And wield their little tridents; but this ile,
 The greatest and the best of all the main,
 He quarters to his blue-hair'd deities;
 And all this tract that fronts the falling sun, 30
 A noble peer of mickle trust and power
 Has in his charge, with temper'd awe to guide
 An old and haughty nation, proud in arms:
 Where his fair off-spring nurst in princely lore,
 Are coming to attend their father's state, 35
 And new-entrusted sceptre; but their way
 Lies through the perplext paths of this drear wood,
 The nodding horror of whose shady brows
 Threats the forlorn and wandering passenger.
 And here their tender age might suffer peril, 40
 But that by quick command from sovran Jove,
 I was dispatcht for their defence and guard;
 And listen why; for I will tell ye now
 What never yet was heard in tale or song,
 From old or modern bard, in hall or bow'r. 45

Bacchus, that first from out the purple grape
 Crush't the sweet poison of misused wine,
 After the Tuscan mariners transform'd,
 Coasting the Tyrrhene shore, as the winds listed,
 On Circe's island fell: (who knows not Circe 50
 The daughter of the Sun? whose charmed cup
 Whoever tasted, lost his upright shape,
 And downward fell into a groveling swine)
 This Nymph that gaz'd upon his clust'ring locks,
 With ivy berries wreath'd, and his blithe youth, 55