

**MAYNARD`S ENGLISH  
CLASSIC SERIRS  
- NO. 29, COMUS**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649295531

Maynard's english classic serirs - No. 29, Comus by John Milton

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# COMUS

BY

JOHN MILTON

WITH INTRODUCTION AND NOTES

BY

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NEW YORK

MAYNARD, MERRILL, & CO.

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New Series, No. 29. June 29, 1902. Published semi-weekly. Subscription price \$3.00.  
Entered at Post Office, New York, as Second-Class Matter.

14425.29.12  
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JOHN MILTON

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## PREFATORY NOTICE.

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**JOHN MILTON** was born in London on the 9th of December, 1608, and died there on the 8th of November, 1674. He was thus a witness of the stirring events of the great Rebellion, in which he played a considerable part. He was educated at Cambridge, where, at a very early age, he attracted attention by his brilliant talents. After leaving Cambridge he passed some time upon the Continent, making himself thoroughly conversant with various languages, and studying the literature and history of the countries in which he lived. He seems to have there acquired an intense love of liberty, and a vehement hatred of oppression—traces of which manifest themselves in many of his writings.

Returning to England, he lived for a time in great retirement and poverty. But no distress could affect the vigor of his intellect or the fervor of his feelings and imagination. He was constantly engaged upon writings of the most varied description, and the fertility of his genius seems inexhaustible.

When Cromwell became Protector, he chose Milton for his confidential secretary, partly because so ardent an admirer of liberty could not fail to add luster to the cause which he espoused; partly because Milton's great knowledge of Latin was invaluable in deciphering and preparing political documents—for at that time Latin was the language of diplomacy; and partly because between the two men there existed a real affection, and each had a real admiration of the genius of the other. During this time Milton's sight began to fail him, and he became almost blind—a circumstance which gave rise to the sarcastic witticism of the Swedish Envoy: "There is but one man in England who can write Latin, and he is blind." This sad infirmity increased until Milton was completely deprived of sight.

After the Restoration, the poet was forced to seek the shelter of absolute seclusion from the world; yet, even then, his life was in great danger from the vengeance of the Royalists; but his misfortunes were perhaps his safe-guard. During his retirement he passed the greater part of his time in composing his great Epic of *Paradise Lost*, in which, as his blindness prevented him from writing, he was

assisted by his daughters, who seem ever to have been ready to render him their aid. It is said that most of his brilliant passages were composed at night.

So little was Milton appreciated by his fellow-countrymen, that he received for his great Poem, which perhaps stands highest among the productions of English poets, only five pounds. The first who directed the attention of Englishmen to the splendid merits of their countryman, was Addison; and since his time, Milton has ever ranked with the great Epic poets, the Greek Homer, the Roman Virgil, and the Italian Dante. Less original than the first, less polished than the second, less imaginative than the third, Milton will yet not suffer from comparison with his great rivals; and we may well excuse whatever of exaggeration is found in the famous lines of Dryden:—

“ Three poets in three distant ages born:  
Greece, Italy, and England did adorn.  
The first in loftiness of thought surpassed,  
The next in majesty; in both the last,  
The force of nature could no farther go.  
To make a third, she joined the former two.”



# COMUS, A MASK.

PRESENTED AT LUDLOW CASTLE.

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## THE PERSONS. *in order of appearance*

The attendant SPIRIT, afterward in the habit of THYRSUS.  
COMUS with his crew.  
The LADY.  
First BROTHER.  
Second BROTHER.  
SABRINA the Nymph.

The chief persons who presented were

The Lord BRACKLEY.  
Mr. THOMAS EGERTON, his brother.  
The Lady ALICE EGERTON.

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COMUS, the son of Bacchus and Circe, was a sorcerer, and the patron of revelry. His delight was to allure heedless travelers by proffering all kinds of riotous pleasures. Those who fell into his snares lost their human countenances, and received instead the heads of unclean animals, such as swine, goats, and the like.

A lady and her two brothers are represented as losing their way at nightfall in a wood haunted by Comus. The two brothers are compelled to leave their sister in order to try and recover the path. While the lady is left alone, Comus endeavors to induce her to become one of his followers, but she refuses to adopt his pleasures, refutes his reasonings, and the sorcerer is only able, by his spells, to rivet her to her seat. The two brothers, guided by an attendant Spirit, who has assumed the form of one of their father's shepherds, are enabled to discover their sister. But Comus escapes them, and the lady is only set free by the intervention of the Nymph Sabrina.

The poem is intended to show the beauty and the strength of virtue.

It was acted as a mask, or masquerade, in the gardens of Ludlow Castle for the entertainment of the family of the Earl of Bridgewater.

## 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 shapés  
 Of bright aerial spirits live inspir'd  
 In regions mild of calm and serene air,  
 Above the smoke and stir of this dim spot, 5

## COMUS.

THE meter, or measure, in which the poem is written, is called Heroic; because it is that which is best suited to the description of noble and heroic deeds or thoughts. Each line is divided into five feet; each foot consists of a short syllable preceding a long one, and is called an Iambus. Hence the meter is also called Iambic. The lines may be scanned thus:

Bĕfore | thĕ stār | rĕ thrĕs | hōld ōf | Jōv's Court.]

Occasionally we shall find a difficulty in scanning the lines, arising chiefly from the difference of pronunciation of particular words in Milton's time and our own; thus, in line 4, we have

In rĕ | giōns mĭld | ōf cālm | ānd sĕ | rĕne air.]

And in line 11:

Āmōngst | thĕ ōn | thĕrn'd Gōds | ōn sōn | tōd sĕtā.]

Sometimes we have a syllable too much:

Āftĕr | thĭs mōr | tō chāngĕ | tō hĕr | truĕ sĕrv | antā.]

This meter is the one in which Shakespeare's plays, and almost all English dramas are written; it is employed, with the addition of rhyme, by Dryden, Pope, and most of our great poets; without rhyme by Milton himself in the "Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained."

"Comus," the God of Revelry.

"A Mask," or Masquerade, an entertainment in which the actors were masked.

2. *Mansion*.—Not a house; but simply an abiding place; from *maneo*, to abide.

3. *Aerial*.—A word of four syllables, from *aēr*, the air.—*Inspir'd*. The word *sphere* means originally anything round. Hence, just as the word *round* came to be applied to any particular duties which occurred over and over again; so the word *sphere* came to be applied to the particular spot where people live and act; hence *inspir'd* means gathered together, collected.

4. *Serene*.—Pronounced *sĕrens*. Probably there was a resemblance to the sound of the French "*serein*."

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  
 Among 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 vapors of this sin-worn mold.  
 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,

7. *Pestered*.—This word, though it has rather fallen out of classical use, is quite good English; it signifies plagued, from *pestis*, a plague.

*Pinfold*, or *penfold*, a place where sheep were penned or pinned; i. e. shut up. We have both words in use—to pen or to fold sheep.

10. *After this mortal change*.—Perhaps “after this mortal has been changed for immortality;” or else “after this state of change is ended;” but cf. line 84.

11. *Enthroned*.—With the accent on the first, not enthroned.—*Sainted seats*—Sanctus sedes, holy seats.

15. *But*.—Except, translated into Latin by *nisi*.

18. *Ambrosial*.—Immortal. *Ἀμβροσιος* is derived from *ἀ* not, and *σπέρβ* mortal; so that the two words are the same. The change of *m* into *b* is very common. Thus we have *μάρτις*, *μπερτί* (which is almost unpronounceable), and then *σπέρβ*.

*Weeds*.—Garments. Thus we speak of a widow's weeds, a hermit's weeds.

20. *High and nether Jove*.—*High Jove*, or Jove who reigns on high, is Jupiter; *nether Jove*, or Jove who reigns beneath, is Pluto. The word *nether* is found in Netherlands, or low lands, low countries, and in nethermost.

24. *To grace* is to show favor to; from *gratia*, favor.

25. *By course*.—In turn. Zechariah served the priest's office in the order of his course. So we speak of various courses. The word