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Reviewed Work(s):
Published by: www.thisroughmagic.org
Stable URL: http://www.thisroughmagic.org/andrew%20article.html
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by Brian Andrew

Within the last few hundred years, critics of all sorts have tried to understand the inner workings of John Milton’s *Comus*. Performed for the Earl of Bridgewater and his family during the Michaelmas celebration of 1634, the masque’s poetic message has long been in debate. In one of the first major critiques of the drama, Samuel Johnson was at a loss with regards to the masque’s true intentions. Characterizing *Comus* as being “deficient” and full of “action [that] is not probable” Johnson had trouble coming to any concrete conclusions concerning the masque. Though ultimately labeling Milton’s early entertainment as “tediously instructive,” Johnson never elaborated on what that instruction may, or may not, have been teaching. Later critics have had similar quandaries. Perhaps Stanley Fish quantified the matter best when he labeled *Comus* studies as being “preeminently a criticism of problems” as readers and audiences have been unable to discern which character’s voice holds the ultimate authority in the drama. In the article “*Comus*: The Inglorious Likeness,” B.A. Rajan described the quagmire of *Comus* criticism with the following statement:
The most popular view is that the Lady wins largely by refusing to lose and that Comus walks off with the forensic and poetic honors. Other suggestions are that the Lady is right but not the Elder Brother, that both the Lady and Comus are wrong and the epilogue right, that nobody and nothing is right except the whole poem and even that the whole poem seems to have gone wrong somewhere.[5]

With such a disturbing history of criticism left in its wake, Comus can not only be viewed as a flawed piece of literature by its detractors, but also as a unique and interesting challenge by its adherents. In my own reading of the work, I am inclined to agree with William Shullenberger, whose essay “Into the Woods: The Lady’s Soliloquy in Comus” labeled the masque as a coming of age tale.[6] With this viewpoint in mind, I would like to expand on Shullenberger’s original idea by linking Milton’s Comus to the literature of the female conduct books that found their way into print throughout England’s 16th and 17th centuries. If one chooses to view Comus in light of the fact that women were to adhere to the triad of chastity, silence, and obedience, the results of the masque make more sense. By breaking the rules of silence she must follow, the Lady can be viewed in the opening of the masque as exuding the characteristics of wanton sexuality and a lack of chastity. As the masque progresses, however, the Lady is systematically tested in order to discover whether or not she is as flawed as she may seem.

Any study of Comus must begin by defining it for what it is: a masque. A form of courtly entertainment, the English masque of the late 16th and early 17th centuries incorporated elaborate staging, masked dancers, and music within the confines of its
revels. The English masque was also rooted in the symbolic, oftentimes revolving around an allegorical message that would both educate and inspire those who watched. The allegorical and/or moralistic ideas expressed throughout the performance were punctuated by an elaborate dance held at the end of the entertainment “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 in this way that the masque’s message was passed along to its audience.

Milton’s masque both exploits and builds upon these ideas. While requisite song and dance may be found throughout the work, Milton’s *Comus* also provides large tracts of extremely dense dialogue. Every major character is given the opportunity to speak at length about the performance’s two major subjects: virtue and chastity. Virtue and chastity are not only discussed by the Lady and her brothers, but also become an issue for Comus and the chorus-like Attendant Spirit. These are topics that the audience cannot avoid and must reflect upon as the masque progresses.

Being the first character to enter the platform, the Attendant Spirit addresses the audience with a discussion of virtue. Describing Earth as a “dim spot” where men are “[c]onfined, and pestered” by their own “feverish being[s],” the Attendant Spirit specifies that such conditions could change if individuals opened themselves up with virtue’s “golden key” (lines 5, 7, 8, 13). The Attendant Spirit also introduces us to the
masque’s primary setting: Comus’s forest. A place of dubious nature that is associated with an evil conjuror, Comus’s “drear wood” is full of “peril” (lines 40, 37). It is here that Comus accosts unsuspecting travelers, compelling them to “intemperate thirst” (line 67) and “sensual” “pleasure” (line 77) before ultimately transforming his victims into inhuman beasts. This location, therefore, is ultimately a testing ground for those who pass through it. Individuals who refuse Comus’s entreaties will be spared while those who give in will not. Though the Attendant Spirit claims to “[defend] and guard” (line 42) unsuspecting travelers, he is a far cry from a knight in shining armor. He is, like everything else in Comus’ forest, not what he appears. While the Spirit is in the woods to serve a purpose, his position is one of guidance rather than brutal aggression. Watching events as they unfold, the Attendant Spirit is a greater help to Milton’s audience then he is to Comus’s victims. The Spirit helps us understand that the challenge awaiting the masque’s protagonists will be one where reason plays a key role.

When the Lady enters the stage more than one hundred lines after the Spirit’s avowal that Comus ranges the forest, the topics of reason and testing are once again brought to light. Searching for her brothers, the Lady stumbles onto the platform after hearing the “riot and ill-managed merriment” (line 172) that Comus and his followers provided only moments before. Though specifying that she is “[loath] / To meet the rudeness and swilled insolence / Of such late wassailers” (liners 177-179), the Lady also
states that she willingly followed the noise as she is not quite sure how to navigate the “blind mazes of this tangled wood” (line 181).

No longer in the presence of her brothers or guardians, the Lady is left to fend for herself as best she knows how. Though understanding the plight she is in, the Lady concludes that her situation will turn out for the best if she relies upon her virtue and reason. Confessing that the spot in which she now stands was once the area “of loud mirth” (line 202) that spawned a “thousand fantasies […] / Of calling and beck’ning shadows dire” (lines 205-207) within her imagination, the lady calms herself by reasoning through the situation. The Lady states, “These thoughts [of fantasies] may startle well, but not astound / The virtuous mind, that ever walks attended / By a strong siding champion, Conscience” (lines 210–212). Placing faith in her own virtue, the Lady also expounds upon the idea that her adherence to “Chastity” will ultimately keep her safe. According to the Lady, chaste individuals cannot be harmed as “the Supreme good, t’whom all things ill / Are but as slavish officers of vengeance, / Would send a glistening Guardian if need were / To keep my life and honour unassailed” (lines 217-220).

Interestingly enough, the Lady’s outlook is similar to that voiced by her Elder Brother. Feeling his sister to be free of danger, the Elder Brother believes that inner
virtue will provide the Lady with enough strength and constancy to handle anything.

The Elder Brother states:

She that has [chastity] is clad in complete steel,  
And like a quivered nymph with arrows keen  
May trace huge forests, and unharbored heaths,  
Infamous hills and sandy perilous wilds,  
Where, through the sacred rays of chastity,  
No savage fierce, bandit, or mountaineer  
Will dare to soil her Virgin purity….
(lines 420-427)

Thus, according to the Elder Brother, the Lady can defend herself against any “savage” person or situation due to the “steel” “clad” chastity, or virtue, that she wields. This outlook, however, comes across as particularly one-sided and naïve. Though important attributes to be sure, an individual’s virtue and chastity can only keep so many of the world’s dangers at bay – and for so long. This is an idea that the Lady’s Second Brother quickly picks up on. Though “musing meditation[s]” on morality can make us feel “cheerful,” such reflections are worthless unless tempered with enough experience to know how to handle various situations (lines 386, 388). “Danger[ous]” persons, according to the Second Brother, “will [never] wink [at] [an] opportunity, / [To] let a single helpless maiden pass / Uninjured,” particularly if the situation is in their favor (lines 401-403).

This, of course, is the major problem of Milton’s masque: i.e., will the Lady’s virtue and chastity be enough to protect her from Comus and his sexual overtures?
Remaining virtuous due to the cloister she has experienced, thanks to her brothers and well-bred lifestyle, the Lady is now free to test that virtue once she is alone in the forest. Upon encountering the conjuror, the Lady is systematically lured to Comus’s palace through trickery and trapped in his magic chair until rescue comes. Until this event happens the audience is left to wonder why the Lady finds herself trapped. What has the Lady done to deserve her predicament, especially if virtue and chastity are on her side? In order to answer the aforementioned questions, and understand what Milton is trying to tell us, one must first look to the female conduct books of the 16th and 17th centuries.

A popular form of literature at the time of their production, female conduct books discussed everything from how a woman was to dress to how she should behave both in the company of others and alone. Though differing on the more mundane of issues, these books all shared one major ideology: women were to behave in a chaste, silent, and obedient manner at any and all times. Described by Kim Walker as being “an inter-linked set of virtues,” the triad of chastity, silence, and obedience was unique in that if one behavioral pattern was broken then, by implication, all were. Disobedience to a husband or father implied a willingness to talk to men outside of the family, which led to a lack of chastity. Discourse with men outside of the family implied disobedience to a husband or father, which led to a lack of chastity. A lack of chastity implied that discourse with men outside of the family had occurred, which implied lack of
obedience to a father or husband. Chastity, of course, lay at the center of this behavioral pattern as it was chastity that defined “the very foundation of a woman’s value and worth” to the patriarchal order.\[9\]

Milton was, no doubt, aware of such conduct books and their messages. Of the countless conduct books written during the early part of the 17th century, Richard Brathwait’s *The English Gentlewoman* holds particular interest for the current study. The book shares Milton’s “predisposition to Puritanism,”\[10\] was published three years prior to *Comus*, and adds insight to many of the occurrences found within Milton’s masque.

Like all conduct books, Brathwait’s diatribe discusses the many forms of ideology concerning how a woman should, and should not, act. Broken into nine sections and focusing on everything from proper apparel to the finer points of gentility, Brathwait connects the topics of action and virtue at the beginning of his chapter on female behavior. Brathwait states: “Vertue is the life of action, action the life of man: without the former, all actions are fruitless.”\[11\] As virtue and action are codependent, good ladies should adhere to the following advice:

Actions are to be seasoned with discretion, seconded by direction, strengthened with instruction, lest too much rashnesse bring the undertaker to destruction. In the maze or Labyrinth of this life, many be our cares, mighty be our feares, strong be our assailants, unless we have that brazen wall within us to fortify us against all occurrents.\[12\]
The above passage is unique in that it truly mirrors the Lady’s plight at the beginning of Milton’s masque. Trapped within the “blind mazes of this tangled wood” (line 181), the Lady is uncertain as to the direction she should take. Becoming lost in the “Labyrinth of [the] life” that Brathwait speaks of, the Lady falls short of the critic’s advice by failing to build any “brazen wall” to “fortifie” her situation. One way for the Lady to “fortifie” herself, according to Brathwait, would be to remain quiet as she travels through the woods. Brathwait states: “Truth is, [women’s] tongues are held their defensive armor; but in no particular detract they more from honor, than by giving too free scope to that glibbery member.”[13] Too much speech was detrimental as it could not only draw men in, but also reflect on the honor of the woman.

Such is the case with the Lady of Milton’s masque. Alone and unsure of her direction, the Lady lacks the discretion to keep her behavior in proper early modern check. Failing to take Brathwait’s advice, the Lady decides to be as vocal as possible with the hope that “[s]uch noise” will be “heard” (line 227) by her missing brothers. It is for this reason that the Lady erupts into song. The song, a less than provocative appeal to Echo, entices Comus from the forest due to what it represents. As unrestricted female speech is an earmark for wanton behavior, Comus is justifiably intrigued. He has found – or so he thinks – the perfect victim, one who will need very little coaxing to embrace the “intemperate thirst” (line 67) and “sensual” “pleasure” (line 77) that he has in mind.

Characterizing the Lady’s speech as “divine enchanting ravishment” (line 245), Comus
is reminded of both Circe and the Sirens. Whereas the songs of these lustful women simply “lulled the senses” to “slumber,” the Lady’s voice is more enticing; it “float[s] upon the wings / Of silence” and inspires “the home-felt delight […] of waking bliss” (lines 260, 249-250, 262-263).

Comus decides then and there to make the Lady his queen and tricks her into following him home by disguising himself as a simple shepherd. Feeling that she can trust Comus as he fails to look like the individuals who people the “tap’stry halls / And courts of princes,” the Lady incorrectly reasons that her guide is both “honest” and full of “courtesy” (lines 322, 324-325); such behavior continues to go against prescribed early modern behavior. Within Brathwait’s discussion of correct female conduct, the critic not only admonishes his readers to remain silent, but also to beware of strangers. Brathwait states: “To enter into much discourse or familiarity with strangers, argues lightnesse or indiscretion: what is spoken of Maids may be properly applied by an useful consequence to all women: They should be seen and not heard.”[14] Such advice is interesting as it continues to emphasize negative aspects viewed in the Lady’s outward behavior. Luring Comus to herself through song, the Lady continues to wound her virtue by openly conversing with the unknown conjuror as such action “implies want or weaknesse” within the female character.[15]
And yet one must acknowledge that these actions (i.e., talking to strangers or being overly talkative), though problematic to early modern society, are not proof of weakness. Holding open discourse may “argue” and “imply” wanton behavior or indiscretion, but argument and implication are far from certainty. And this is the case for the Lady as well. Though initially looked upon by Comus as an easy sexual target, the Lady is far from being one. She is not loose and is by no means interested in letting go of her virginity without a fight. When we next see her she is a prisoner, trapped in Comus’s magic chair, and being importuned for sex. Rather than allow Comus to make his case of “lady, be not coy, […] / With [your…] Virginity” (lines 737-738), the Lady chooses instead to argue against him. The Lady states:

I had not thought to have unlocked my lips
In this unhallowed air, but that this juggler
Would think to charm my judgment, as mine eyes,
Obtruding false rules pranked in reason’s garb.
I hate when vice can bolster arguments,
And virtue has no tongue to check her pride.
(lines 756-761, italics mine)

Rather than be silent (as her pride may dictate her to be), or acquiescent (as her earlier behavior may have implied), the Lady argues strenuously and vehemently against her attacker until rescue arrives. She will not give in; though Comus may ultimately defile her body, he cannot defile her virtue: “Fool, do not boast; / Thou canst not touch the freedom of my mind” (lines 662-663). This demeanor is exactly what Brathwait speaks of earlier when he states: “In the maze or Labyrinth of this life, many
be our cares, mighty be our feares, strong be our assailants, unless we have that brazen wall within us to fortify us against all occurrents.” In this case, the Lady’s “brazen wall” against her assailant is her refusal to check her virtue at the door, even though he has her at a physical disadvantage. This defense is quite unexpected to Comus, and successful. His initial response at the end of the Lady’s outburst, “She fables not” (line 800), is obviously one of shock; before he can truly collect himself, the Lady’s rescuers appear.

In the end the Lady is released by her brothers with the aid of Sabrina. The Lady is also described, along with her brothers, as being one of “[t]hree fair branches” that have been “timely tried” by “hard assays” and come out of the experience “victorious” (lines 969, 970, 972, 974). The brothers’ victory comes from the saving of their sister. The Lady’s victory is perhaps more complicated, though no less rewarding. She is obviously wiser for what has occurred, which is a triumph in itself. The Lady’s other success, I believe, can be seen in the upholding of her reputation. Though the Lady may have seemed one way to her early modern audience as the masque began, she ends the entertainment with her virtue firmly intact. Her virtue is vindicated due to the strength of her convictions and, in a way, this idea also ties back to Brathwait. The Epilogue to Brathwait’s text states that a true gentlewoman is as follows: “Her desire is to be, rather than seeme, lest seeming to be what she is not, she gull the world, but her selfe most, by playing the counterfeit.”[16] As in many cases, appearances can be deceiving; this is an
idea that Milton plays with throughout the masque’s entirety. Hardships, however, give us the opportunity to see ourselves for who we truly are if we are strong enough to rise to the occasion.

Endnotes:


“pretentious type of publication” belonging to the tradition of Puritan English writers” (Hull, p. 153 and 32).


[12] Ibid., 29-30, italics mine.


[14] Ibid., 44, italics mine.

[15] Ibid., 42.

[16] Ibid., Epilogue.