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978-0-521-12326-6 - John Milton's Aristocratic Entertainments

Cedric C. Brown

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

MIXED IN MODE and expressing their unique occasions, combining arts of poetic celebration with drama, spectacle, music and dance, masques and aristocratic entertainments are rarely simple to describe from the page. When the poet concerned is John Milton, the poetry offers to stand out more self-sufficiently than usual, and Milton clearly thought about the self-sufficiency of his texts, especially when he revised them for publication. Yet in other ways the task of assessing his entertainments is more difficult than usual, since this poet who used many conventions rarely used them uncritically, and his response to occasion was likely to be more than a matter of form.

In fact, Milton's three major occasional texts in English of the 1630s – *Arcades*, *Comus* and *Lycidas* – have, in their various ways, presented persistent difficulties to understanding. With the entertainments the problems are not so much, as they once were, with understanding the modes of masquing itself. It is true that there are peculiarities of situation behind *Arcades* and *Comus*, which gave them unique forms. There are, in other words, adjustments of customary organisation to note. Nevertheless, the modes of masquing in general, which still apply to his texts, have attracted ample critical attention in recent years. The particular difficulties of Milton's pieces would seem to be more to do with the independent and even revisionary characteristics of his writing for aristocratic occasions. They are to do with his attitude, and his sense of his own role as a poet.

The main part of this book attempts a comprehensive examination of both Milton's aristocratic entertainments, that is, the verses which formed part of a family entertainment at Harefield, in Middlesex, in the early 1630s and which Milton

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himself subsequently called *Arcades* (the Arcadians), and the masque performed at Ludlow Castle on Michaelmas night, 1634, which literary tradition has called *Comus*. *Lycidas*, the Cambridge elegy for Edward King, occupies a special place at the end of the book, which finally provides an overview of Milton's sense of vocation in the 1630s, as it is expressed in his three major occasional compositions of that period.

In assessing the entertainment texts in their various states, before and after performance, and in publication, I find that one characteristic emerges as of central importance: their ardently, idealistically reformist spirit. Delicately though he managed effects of celebration in his texts – and I would not want to belittle his courteous arts in that regard – Milton did not simply celebrate his noble patrons. Young though he was, the independence of his celebratory writing exceeds even that of 'laureate' Ben Jonson. If we call his entertainments aristocratic, then it must be in the sense not that they merely rehearse or consolidate social ideals of nobility but rather that they insistently prescribe the reformation of the leading class considered as a whole, just as parts of *Lycidas*, rather less delicately, prescribe the reformation of most of the clergy. Through festivity, nobility itself is seriously evaluated, its education under particular scrutiny. Milton's entertainments are peculiarly, and in the end problematically, reformist in intent. Problematically, because the evidence of the Bridgewater manuscript of *Comus* suggests that the zealotry and stringency of Milton's text were modified by the organisers in the interests of more conventional social decorum in a celebratory situation. It would seem, also, that Milton himself experienced problems of accommodation between exhortation and celebration in the composition of the Ludlow masque, and in its revisions.

One may illustrate this reformist exploitation of convention from the peculiarly Protestant signature at the very end of the masque. The cast of Milton's language can be shown by comparing it with the song of Michaelmas day in the popular *Hymnes and Songs of the Church* of the ardently reformist George Wither, another poet with a sense of a mission. Wither's last stanza, which is about angelic offices remembered on that day, begins:

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For, many of that glorious Troope,
 To bring us Messages from Thee,
 From Heav'n vouchsafed have to stoope,
 And clad in human shape to be – ¹

For all the superiority of style, the stooping of heaven in Milton's last line is of the same kind as Wither's: 'or if vertue feeble were / heaven it selfe would stoope to her'. Throughout the action of the masque, the stooping of heavenly grace has been by the agency of an angelic being. This couplet is Milton's sealing mark, and he re-used the lines in 1639 in his entry in the autograph book of Count Camillo Cerdogni in Geneva, on the return leg of the Italian tour. He had not forgotten the doctrinal characteristics of his longest composition to date:

If Vertue feeble were
 Heaven itself would stoope to her.
Coelum non animum muto dum trans mare curro.

Joannes Miltonius Anglus

The familiar tag from Horace – 'I change my sky but not my mind, when I travel across the sea' – would seem to indicate that John Milton, Englishman, was asserting that, by the grace of God, his faith had been uncontaminated by his sojourn in popish lands. His other extant autograph – 'Ἐν ἄσθενείᾳ τελειοῦμαι – also signifies grace and leaves a distinctly Protestant mark.²

Yet there was also play with conventional modes of masquing in that last couplet of Milton's masque. As a spirit ascends to the heavens, the lines recall the mechanical inventions of court masques, which more and more in the Caroline period gloried in their ability to lower and raise from the heavens, contriving to suggest thereby that heaven itself had indeed come to earth in that court. With some wry irony Heaven's stooping recalls the language of such court ritual. Thus, for example, when Inigo Jones brought the queen and the lady masquers down on clouds, surrounded by stars, in the most spectacular such effect yet, Aurelian Townshend had dutifully written in 1631:

Where Divine Beautie will vouchsafe to stoope
 And move the Earth, 'tis fit the Heavenly Spheres
 Should be her Musick, and the Starrie Troope
 Shine round about them like the Crown she weares.³

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At both Harefield and Ludlow, Milton's special wit was to infuse the rituals of masquing with the live language of religious definition. Especially at Ludlow, it is masquing, but in a more stringent vein. One could say in fact that the whole 1645 volume corresponded to a model of gentlemanly occasional writing, but that it also carried a disturbing reformist spirit in its major compositions.

Some of the specific features of the religiousness of Milton's programme in the Ludlow masque have not been adequately appreciated. Hence, for example, my initial approach to the masque is to highlight the challenge of the adversary, Comus, the spirit of customary degeneracy in festivity in palace halls. An iconographical approach to Comus is insufficient in itself to realise the place of the *kōmos* as badge of degeneracy in Milton's continuing thought about the fate of nations, distinguishing those which had a true magistracy from those that did not. A more philological approach, based on a sense of history, and mixing literary and biblical sources, can realise the urgency of this reformist thought. To centre on the generally instructive idea of the *kōmos*, which is also to see the particular relevance of chastity, gives us one way, too, in which we can escape too specific a topical reference to the infamous Castlehaven scandal, or even the rape case of Margery Evans in the Welsh court.⁴ What Milton offers, in *Comus*, and what is of continuing importance in his political thought, is a general analysis of the importance of aristocratic example, as tested in the conduct of the feast.

I feel also that the consistent strength of spiritual instruction must be felt throughout the action of *Comus*. It is mediated through the Attendant Spirit but derives from the idea that religious education is the basis of exemplary conduct, even in the leading class. With the two boys in particular, the Spirit plays substitute for pastor, and acknowledges that he is doing so in his deference to his authority, 'a certain shepherd lad'. Many readings of the masque have failed to acknowledge how the ministry of the word underpins the education and readiness described in the action of the boys, yet Milton is clearly indicating that godliness should be seen as support to all other educational achievements or qualities of mind. As for the Lady, one can hardly miss the pious orientation

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of her social thought: where in masque but in Milton's masque would one find expounded so openly, if at all, how luxury for the few means deprivation for the many? The Lady's arguments about the use of nature show in themselves a radical reorientation of the emphases of celebration in masque. Even in the slighter *Arcades*, nightly pieties are at the centre of the true Arcadianism.

Also exemplifying the idealistic, reformist imperatives of the masque, the use of Sabrina opens the vision into the national, showing an ideal of a prosperous land on the banks of the river, pitied of God and resting on pious temperance. Confusions about specific applications of the doctrine of grace in connection with Sabrina have often served, in the past, to obscure the realisation of this public aspect of the Welsh presidential masque. Again, Milton's celebratory method here approaches some norms of masque and idealistic pastoral drama, offering a pointed adaptation of common pastoral figures, but now distinctively allied to a historical vision based on pious idealism. *Arcades* plays out a similar idealism, though concerning a class rather than a whole people.

The Sabrina section of the masque also gives full and explicit expression to Milton's pastorly ideal of the role of poetry to instruct the nation, the ideal expressed so clearly also in *Lycidas*. In the magical displays of this part of the masque, the power of poetry is being suggested for all to contemplate, a poetry which forges ideal images to move the mind. The idealism about the functions of poetry is akin to Sidney's apology and Spenser's practice. It is an issue keenly debated by Milton himself in his *Commonplace Book* and in other writings. Again, I do not think that Milton's statements about the power of the 'true poet' have been sufficiently realised as being embodied in the scheme of the masque; neither have the dynamics of what I have called the suasive design of the masque, by which stringent realism is finally supplanted by idealism in pastoral formulations.

Yet, vital though these instructional, reforming functions were in Milton's texts, their effects can only truly be seen against the demands of writing for the original occasions. Throughout this book I have assumed that there are particular arts of occasional writing, which the modern reader would do well to appreciate

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before judging some aspects of Milton's entertainments. The challenge of realising occasion in relation to Milton's texts is however no simple matter.

For the Harefield entertainment of which Milton's verses formed a part we seem to need to understand a familial gesture on a private occasion. One's sense of the situation and attitudes of a large family at a particular time is bound to be conjectural, especially considering the relatively modest amount of documentation. Nevertheless, we know enough of the situation at Harefield at the time that *Arcades* was performed to make sense of some of the features of Milton's text, especially with regard to the ideas of bringing courtly festivities to the house and of the happiness of a residence at Harefield for some of the younger members of the family. Accordingly I have provided what is I think the fullest account yet of the familial situation and of its possible relevance to Milton's 'Part of an Entertainment'.

For the Ludlow masque there are various aspects of occasion to consider. With regard to the known roles of Henry Lawes as Attendant Spirit and of the three youngest children of the Earl of Bridgewater, criticism has always known what it needed to know. Nevertheless, accounts seem often to have forgotten the modes of pretence and have often ignored the delicacies of tone in the writing for these roles, especially in relation to the Elder Brother. Anyone who has seen the masque performed sympathetically with children of approximately the right ages will understand how plausible and delightful, as well as intricate and exemplary, Milton's writing for the young Egertons was, whilst his exploitation of the protean part for Henry Lawes remains one of the most remarkable pieces of sustained invention in any masque, full of touches of comic pretence, yet finally hieratic, fashioning a mouthpiece for an earnestly didactic poet.

The more public aspects of the Welsh gubernatorial situation must also be considered. The three young aristocrats, reflecting their parents, show the kind of pious education on which good governance is based. When the spirit of degenerate luxury is driven from the place, a new spirit can be called in to exercise her powers of chaste influence, thus allowing, as I have said, a vision of pious prosperity in the land around a river. In the triumph of this ritual action, one could say that resources of great visitors from

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court have been shown and also that a strength has been drawn from the region and its people. There is a complex combination of resources of persons and place, a coming together in hopeful augury.

Such a combination reflects the inaugural occasion of the masque, performed on a symbolic day on the new President's first visitation to Wales. Milton's text refers to the occasion as a feast of gratulation. With that and other considerations in mind I have offered to set the whole Michaelmas occasion into context by describing the tour of the Earl of Bridgewater as President of Wales in 1634. Evidence comes from several sets of documents, some of them not fully exploited before or not known to Milton scholarship. Various household records, for example, and some sets of correspondence concerning Bridgewater and Henry Lawes, give one a sense of the President's movements, activities and attitudes during this summer visitation, showing not only the journeys to and from Wales, but also the travelling that was done in the Welsh Marches, North Wales and Cheshire. The various entertainments offered to Bridgewater and his family at large houses in the summer of 1634 included another dramatic one, a banquet entertainment at Chirk Castle, in August. That text, like much of this information, allows one to see how persons and place, President and principality, came together in celebration.

With Milton's two aristocratic entertainments, then, an idealistic, reforming authorial intent, on the one hand, and a complex relationship to particular occasions, on the other, add up to a very special, teasing case for literary texts of this kind, and it is made all the more special by the unusually rich textual resources. For both entertainments the priceless record of Milton's autograph Trinity manuscript gives us ample evidence of textual development both before and after performance. In both cases, the first printings came some while after performance – three years after with *Comus*, some thirteen years after with *Arcades* – so that the occasion of publication was more than usually distanced from performance, thus bringing new perspectives into view. And the textual records are particularly rich for *Comus*, because as well as the authorially controlled manuscript and printed texts we have a presentation manuscript, the Bridgewater manuscript, given to Bridgewater as a memento after performance, and this manu-

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script seems to reflect something like what actually happened on the performance night. There can be no more telling story of the development of texts for an aristocratic festivity and subsequent publication than this one; the tracing of this development is a running theme throughout the book.

My first account of these texts keeps in constant view some of the evidence of Milton's revisions before performance and therefore aims at a sense of Milton's design for performance rather than for print. Initially most of my quotations are from the Trinity manuscript text at the relevant stage of development. At the same time, for the Ludlow masque I have noted instances of the more considerable cuts and alterations effected in the Bridgewater manuscript, usually illustrating damage done to Milton's design. Then, mainly in Chapter 6, I have tried to analyse, somewhat selectively, the drift of the '1637' changes made by Milton in preparation for the text being published to the nation at large. Even the smaller *Arcades* text shows characteristic changes in preparation for the new occasion of publication. My intention throughout is not to repeat the exercise of a detailed analysis of all textual changes, of the kind set out in the evidence of S. E. Sprott in his edition of the early *Comus* texts, but rather to highlight the issues underlying the chief textual changes, with regard to Milton's addresses to his occasion of performance and print. It is from the evidence of the changes for the 1637 text of *Comus* and the 1645 text of *Arcades* that I develop the last section of the book, concerning the development of Milton's sense of vocation in the period of the 1630s. The alterations made for publication are visibly in the spirit of the poet of *Lycidas*: they show a growing determination to take opportunities to speak out to the nation, in something approaching prophetic address. Intricate though the evidence is, I believe that it tells a story of considerable importance for the understanding of Milton's career in these years before the Civil War.

Milton's art in these texts, as in the 1645 volume at large, is the art of occasional writing, relatable, as Helgerson has said, to other volumes being published at that time.⁵ With the entertainments Milton's address to his original occasions, for performance, was always complicated and displayed to an unusual degree the kinds of tension endemic to such texts.⁶ In particular, there are tensions

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to be observed between the pastorly impulse, characteristically rigorous about the ways of men, and a sense of decorum for the happy, celebratory occasion, in the development of the Trinity manuscript text of these entertainments. But it would seem that some of the many difficulties of critical understanding in the twentieth century have connected with readers taking too little care to grasp the particular nature of occasional address present in whatever text was being used. Despite that amateur disclaimer on the title page, Milton seems to have taken the opportunity of publication of the masque not only to immortalise a celebratory occasion but also to realise a *new* occasion, in an address to a more general readership in the nation. When one is discussing the intricacies of tone in the parts of the children, for example, it makes some difference whether one reads Trinity manuscript in a state before performance or whether one reads the printed text of 1637, in which perceptible damage was done to the nice judgement of the children's parts. By 1637, the fine touch with individual parts mattered rather less. Or, to give a more blatant example, it is important to realise that Milton's problematically extended epilogue in 1637 speaks out as to a general readership, through the Attendant Spirit, in a way which would have been somewhat disruptive to the original performance, in which masquers and audience at Ludlow were sent in piety to their beds. There are other examples. It also matters, I believe, to realise that the sense of decorum in relation to occasion is different in the Bridgewater manuscript, because that text seems to embody the priorities of some other party or parties (which I have called the 'censor' in the Appendix) than Milton to the demands of occasion. In whichever version we read either entertainment, we discover a continuing story of constantly shifting, sometimes urgent dialogue with occasion. For that reason, in one way or another, with differing degrees of emphasis, each major stage of both entertainments has been considered against a sense of the occasion to which it belongs.

In the closing chapter of the book, which picks up from the rather hortatory post-performance changes in the text of *Comus*, I have not offered a comprehensive account of *Lycidas*, but have suggested, in a tentative spirit, a main device by which its prophetic address to the nation might be realised. Although the

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prophetic element in Milton's sense of his role as a writer has quite often been considered, especially in recent years, mainly in relation to *Lycidas* and to the later career, as far as I know this prophetic gesture, reading the death of the righteous man as a sign to the nation, has not been documented before. To debate the relative importance of the prophetic element in Milton's elegy for King, no easy matter, is also to bring into question another instance of changing functions of a text in two different occasions of publication, first in the Cambridge memorial volume, another celebratory occasion, then in yet darker times in a volume addressed to the nation at large. As with the masque text, the prophetic dimension took on new importance in the retrospective publication. A full discussion of the relationship of different versions of the *Lycidas* text to their occasions is however beyond the scope of this book. I am chiefly concerned to bring *Lycidas* into the discussion to relate it to the increasingly prophetic element in the masque text, and in that way to document something of the development of Milton's sense of vocation through the 1630s. Milton's sense of vocation is the factor which gives clearest indication of the peculiarities of the programmes of his major occasional poems in this period.

A last word about interpretative arguments. Anyone working in close detail on these early poems of Milton is uncomfortably aware that he is picking a way through a minefield of debate. The difficulties of Miltonic masquing apart, *Lycidas* notoriously shares with *Comus* a history of confusion about the meaning and method of certain passages of Miltonic pastoral. There is doubtless a book to be written in analysis of the source of difficulty in the Miltonic pastoral. Although the present book is not chiefly devoted to questions of academic polemic, certain views about the two entertainments (and even about *Lycidas*) have, openly or tacitly, been challenged, especially where those views are or have been prevalent. It has sometimes proved convenient for the sake of clarity of definition to make an argument by offering an adjustment to some usually recent theory. Specialists will note that I have not been exhaustive or even-handed in my references to scholarly opinion, but selective: there is no intention to offer here another attempt at the Variorum Commentary. This may however be the place to mention, finally, one book, Maryann Gale