

Cambridge University Press
978-1-316-63337-3 — Comus
John Milton , Edited by A. W. Verity
Excerpt
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COMUS.

“A MASQUE PRESENTED AT LUDLOW CASTLE,
1634.”

V. C.

I

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[More Information](#)

3

DEDICATION¹ OF THE ANONYMOUS EDITION OF
1637.

*“To the Right Honourable John, Lord Brackley, son and
heir-apparent to the Earl of Bridgewater etc.”*

“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 *Thyrsis*, so now in all real expression

Your most faithful and most humble Servant,

H. LAWES.”

¹ Reprinted in the edition of 1645: omitted in that of 1673.

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[More Information](#)

4

“*The Copy*¹ of a Letter written by Sir Henry Wotton to the Author upon the following Poem.”

“From the College, this 13 of April, 1638.

Sir,

It was a special favour when you lately bestowed upon me here the first taste of your acquaintance, though no longer than to make me know that I wanted more time to value it and to enjoy it rightly; and, in truth, if I then could have imagined your farther stay in these parts, which I understood afterwards by Mr H., I would have been bold, in our vulgar phrase, to mend my draught (for you left me with an extreme thirst), and to have begged your conversation again, jointly with your said learned friend, over a poor meal or two, that we might have banded together some good Authors of the ancient time; among which I observed you to have been familiar.

Since your going, you have charged me with new obligations, both for a very kind letter from you dated the 6th of this month, and for a dainty piece of entertainment which came therewith. Wherein I should much commend the tragical part, if the lyrical did not ravish me with a certain Doric delicacy in your Songs and Odes, whereunto I must plainly confess to have seen yet nothing parallel in our language: *Ipsa mollities*. But I must not omit to tell you that I now only owe you thanks for intimating unto me (how modestly soever) the true artificer. For the work itself I had viewed some good while before with singular delight; having received it from our common friend Mr R., in the very close of the late R.'s Poems, printed at Oxford: whereunto it was added (as I now suppose) that the accessory might help out the principal, according to the art of Stationers, and to leave the reader *con la bocca dolce*.

Now, Sir, concerning your travels; wherein I may challenge a little more privilege of discourse with you. I suppose you will not blanch Paris in your way: therefore I have been bold to trouble you with a few lines to Mr M. B., whom you shall

¹ Omitted in the reprint of 1673, this letter was given in the edition of 1645.

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 Excerpt
[More Information](#)

COMUS.

5

easily find attending the young Lord S. as his governor; and you may surely receive from him good directions for the shaping of your farther journey into Italy where he did reside, by my choice, some time for the King, after mine own recess from Venice.

I should think that your best line will be through the whole length of France to Marseilles, and thence by sea to Genoa; whence the passage into Tuscany is as diurnal as a Gravesend barge. I hasten, as you do, to Florence or Siena, the rather to tell you a short story, from the interest you have given me in your safety.

At Siena I was tabled in the house of one Alberto Scipioni, an old Roman courtier in dangerous times; having been steward to the Duca di Pagliano, who with all his family were strangled, save this only man that escaped by foresight of the tempest. With him I had often much chat of those affairs, into which he took pleasure to look back from his native harbour; and, at my departure toward Rome (which had been the centre of his experience), I had won his confidence enough to beg his advice how I might carry myself there without offence of others or of mine own conscience. '*Signor Arrigo mio,*' says he, '*i pensieri stretti ed il viso sciolto* will go safely over the whole world.' Of which Delphian oracle (for so I have found it) your judgment doth need no commentary; and therefore, Sir, I will commit you, with it, to the best of all securities, God's dear love, remaining

Your friend, as much to command as any of longer date,

HENRY WOTTON."

Postscript.

"Sir: I have expressly sent this my footboy to prevent your departure without some acknowledgement from me of the receipt of your obliging letter; having myself through some business, I know not how, neglected the ordinary conveyance. In any part where I shall understand you fixed, I shall be glad and diligent to entertain you with home-novelties, even for some fomentation of our friendship, too soon interrupted in the cradle."

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[More Information](#)

6

THE PERSONS.

THE ATTENDANT SPIRIT, afterwards in the
habit of THYRSIS.

COMUS, with his Crew.

THE LADY.

FIRST BROTHER.

SECOND BROTHER.

SABRINA, the Nymph.

The Chief Persons which presented were :—

The Lord Brackley ;

Mr Thomas Egerton, his Brother ;

The Lady Alice Egerton.

COMUS.

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 aerial spirits live insphered
 In regions mild of calm and serene air,
 Above the smoke and stir of this dim spot
 Which men call Earth, and with low-thoughted care,
 Confined and pestered 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 enthroned 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,
 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

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[More Information](#)

8

COMUS.

The unadorned bosom of the deep;
 Which he, to grace his tributary gods,
 By course commits to several government,
 And gives them leave to wear their sapphire crowns
 And wield their little tridents. But this Isle,
 The greatest and the best of all the main,
 He quarters to his blue-haired deities;
 And all this tract that fronts the falling sun 30
 A noble Peer of mickle trust and power
 Has in his charge, with tempered awe to guide
 An old and haughty nation, proud in arms:
 Where his fair offspring, nursed in princely lore,
 Are coming to attend their father's state,
 And new-intrusted sceptre; but their way
 Lies through the perplexed 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 despatched for their defence and guard!
 And listen why; for I will tell you now
 What never yet was heard in tale or song,
 From old or modern bard, in hall or bower.

Bacchus, that first from out the purple grape
 Crushed the sweet poison of misused wine,
 After the Tuscan mariners transformed,
 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 grovelling swine?)
 This nymph, that gazed upon his clustering locks,
 With ivy berries wreathed, and his blithe youth,
 Had by him, ere he parted thence, a son
 Much like his father, but his mother more,

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 Excerpt
[More Information](#)

COMUS. 9

Whom therefore she brought up, and Comus named :
 Who, ripe and frolic of his full-grown age,
 Roving the Celtic and Iberian fields, 60
 At last betakes him to this ominous wood,
 And, in thick shelter of black shades imbowered,
 Excels his mother at her mighty art ;
 Offering to every weary traveller
 His orient liquor in a crystal glass,
 To quench the drouth of Phœbus ; which as they taste
 (For most do taste through fond intemperate thirst),
 Soon as the potion works, their human countenance,
 The express resemblance of the gods, is changed
 Into some brutish form of wolf, or bear, 70
 Or ounce, or tiger, hog, or bearded goat,
 All other parts remaining as they were.
 And they, so perfect is their misery,
 Not once perceive their foul disfigurement,
 But boast themselves more comely than before,
 And all their friends and native home forget,
 To roll with pleasure in a sensual sty.
 Therefore, when any favoured of high Jove
 Chances to pass through this adventurous glade,
 Swift as the sparkle of a glancing star 80
 I shoot from heaven, to give him safe convoy,
 As now I do. But first I must put off
 These my sky-ropes spun out of Iris' woof,
 And take the weeds and likeness of a swain
 That to the service of this house belongs,
 Who with his soft pipe, and smooth-dittied song,
 Well knows to still the wild winds when they roar,
 And hush the waving woods ; nor of less faith,
 And in this office of his mountain watch
 Likeliest, and nearest to the present aid 90
 Of this occasion. But I hear the tread
 Of hateful steps ; I must be viewless now.

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 Excerpt
[More Information](#)

10

COMUS.

COMUS enters, with a charming-rod in one hand, his glass in the other; with him a rout of monsters, headed like sundry sorts of wild beasts, but otherwise like men and women, their apparel glistening: they come in making a riotous and unruly noise, with torches in their hands.

Comus. The star that bids the shepherd fold
 Now the top of heaven doth hold;
 And the gilded car of day
 His glowing axle doth allay
 In the steep Atlantic stream;
 And the slope sun his upward beam
 Shoots against the dusky pole,
 Pacing toward the other goal 100
 Of his chamber in the east.
 Meanwhile, welcome joy and feast,
 Midnight shout and revelry,
 Tipsy dance and jollity.
 Braid your locks with rosy twine,
 Dropping odours, dropping wine.
 Rigour now is gone to bed;
 And Advice with scrupulous head,
 Strict Age, and sour Severity,
 With their grave saws, in slumber lie. 110
 We that are of purer fire
 Imitate the starry quire,
 Who, in their nightly watchful spheres,
 Lead in swift round the months and years.
 The sounds and seas, with all their finny drove,
 Now to the moon in wavering morrice move;
 And on the tawny sands and shelves
 Trip the pert faeries and the dapper elves.
 By dimpled brook and fountain-brim,
 The wood-nymphs, decked with daisies trim, 120

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II

Their merry wakes and pastimes keep :
 What hath night to do with sleep ?
 Night hath better sweets to prove ;
 Venus now wakes, and wakens Love.
 Come, let us our rites begin ;
 'Tis only daylight that makes sin,
 Which these dun shades will ne'er report.
 Hail, goddess of nocturnal sport,
 Dark-veiled Cotytto, to whom the secret flame
 Of midnight torches burns ! mysterious dame, 130
 That ne'er art called but when the dragon womb
 Of Stygian darkness spets her thickest gloom,
 And makes one blot of all the air !
 Stay thy cloudy ebon chair,
 Wherein thou ridest with Hecate, and befriend
 Us thy vowed priests, till utmost end
 Of all thy dues be done, and none left out ;
 Ere the blabbing eastern scout,
 The nice Morn, on the Indian steep
 From her cabined loop-hole peep, 140
 And to the tell-tale Sun descry
 Our concealed solemnity.
 Come, knit hands, and beat the ground
 In a light fantastic round.

The Measure.

Break off, break off ! I feel the different pace
 Of some chaste footing near about this ground.
 Run to your shrouds within these brakes and trees ;
 Our number may affright. Some virgin sure
 (For so I can distinguish by mine art)
 Benighted in these woods ! Now to my charms, 150
 And to my wily trains : I shall ere long
 Be well stocked with as fair a herd as grazed
 About my mother Circe. Thus I hurl