

### **Comus: Milton's Lady Victorious**

**Edward R. Raupp, Ph.D.**

Professor of Humanities  
Gori State University  
Gori, Georgia  
+995 599 11 66 56

[edwardraupp@gu.edu.ge](mailto:edwardraupp@gu.edu.ge)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5147-7835>

---

#### **Abstract**

In John Milton's *Comus*, a lady of spirited nature is depicted as one who overcomes the evil seductions of the scoundrel Comus, hence representing the inviolate maiden. This paper will examine the masque by critically discussing how John Milton subverts prevailing contemporary gender conventions in *Comus*. In positing The Lady as a strong, morally upright character, Milton thus refutes charges of misogyny frequently leveled at him, especially liable in the light of the more conflicted Eve in *Paradise Lost*. Milton's *Comus*, written at age 26, indicates how early in his life he began to question tradition and confirms his attitudes toward the female gender.

**Keywords:** *Comus*, Ludlow Castle, masque, Milton, morality

---

#### **Introduction**

John Milton's *Comus* (Milton, 2008/1634) is a pastoral masque, also known as *A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle*. It tells the story of a lady of exemplary virtues who strays from her two brothers in a dark wood and falls into the hands of the enchanter Comus. He threatens to deprive her of her chastity and virtue by seducing her with the sweet joys of sensual pleasure. It is through her steadfastness and, in the end, rescue by her brothers and the spirit Thyrsis that The Lady's purity is preserved. The masque explores virtue, temptation, and the victory of moral integrity over corrupting influences. Though obscured by his other works, Milton's *Comus* gives critical insights into his views on gender, character, and virtue. The masque was written in the year 1634 and reveals a tale of a powerful protagonist who was female and, hence, could not give in to any temptation, as provided by *Comus*, who is indecency incarnate. This study holds that Comus provides the counter-narrative to those charges of misogyny that are so often leveled at Milton, showing his early appreciation for female strength and virtue. This study aims to understand Milton's sometimes ambivalent views of the power and position of women in his work.

#### **Methods**

This paper uses a close textual analysis of *Comus*, its structure, characters, and themes, to throw light on how gender roles have been projected by Milton. Furthermore, comparative references are made between The Lady in *Comus* and Eve in *Paradise Lost* to bring out the development and complexity of the ways women have been portrayed by Milton. Secondary sources will contribute historical background information and scholarly interpretations of the masque convention and Milton's works as a whole.

The theoretical foundation of this study is poststructuralism, which highlights an analysis of the Lady, her chastity, and how virtue can triumph where seduction fails. For this text, the poststructuralist approach is going to mean a critical investigation of its deep structures, debunking previous readings and unleashing some kind of complex play of meaning. Poststructuralism deconstructs oppositions between such binary elements as virtue and vice, and chastity and seduction, and reveals how fluid and unstable these terms are within the narrative. This framework places a powerful emphasis on the interplay

between language, power, and ideology. On the one hand, it gives subtle insight into The Lady's resistance to Comus's temptations; on the other, it gives vivid expression to virtue. From a poststructuralist point of view, *Comus* is not just a moral allegory but a site of contested meanings where virtue is constructed and deconstructed in the incessant struggle against seduction.

### Results

Coiro (2009) notes that Milton's *Comus* is "in the middle of his authorial identity...a pivotal artistic experience that influenced all of Milton's subsequent work" (p. 89). In *Comus*, one encounters the intensity of his authorial identity. This is an important artistic experience that went on to affect everything he did afterward. This masque, performed in Ludlow Castle in 1634, was not some sort of artistic exercise, but rather a purposeful and strategic entry into the urbane literary and cultural circles of that time. For Milton, the use of *Comus* expressed a will to achieve recognition as a literary genius by demonstrating intellectualism and mastery of a complicated genre, the masque. Intertwining classical allusions, moral allegory, and daunting poetic modes, Milton seized the opportunity to demonstrate masterly control over his material placing himself among earnest and commanding writers able to take on the most respectable traditions of letters (Lewalski, 2003, pp. 76-77).

*Comus* also testified to Milton's versatility and ambition as a writer. In an age when versatility with verse was rewarded, the success that Milton managed to attain with his masque indicated that he was quite capable of moving beyond the conventional boundaries of letters. Whereas most masques of that era tended to lay greater emphasis on the aspects of spectacle and entertainment, Milton's writing was steeped in a strong moral and philosophical ideal. The virtue of chastity and the victory of purity amidst temptation are not ancillary to the tale. They are at the center of the narrative, reflecting Milton's strong moral convictions and his purpose to use great literature as a vehicle for deep moral reflection. This level of content in the masque

format supported Milton's ambition to be taken seriously across a range of literary genres. It helped to further establish him in the eyes of others as a writer of serious intellectual and artistic heft.

Furthermore, *Comus* represented Milton's strategic entrée into the world of courtly and aristocratic patronage. For any writer with serious aspirations to be heard and to exert influence in the 17th century, this was an essential step to take. As he hoped to make his work resonate with the cultural and political elite, Milton was pragmatic about positioning himself in influential networks that would advance his career. Since it was performed at Ludlow Castle in front of the Earl of Bridgewater and his family, *Comus* represented an act on the part of the masque's performers to fawn before patronage and earn a reputation with the upper classes of society. This was a powerful patronage that provided not just a platform for Milton to rise to great heights in the demonstration of his genius but also underlined strong ambitions for immortality in literature. *Comus*, therefore, was much more than a masque. It was rather like a declaration on the part of Milton of his literary ambitions and of his bid for enduring recognition in the annals of English literature.

As is the case with anyone who achieves some degree of success, there will always be critics. In the interest of full disclosure, we should note one critic of Milton's *Comus*. That would be Adams (1953), who complained that "The risk of overreading *Comus* may be great" (p. 19). Adams lamented the loss of the prestige of *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes* in favor of *Lycidas*, *Comus*, and the *Nativity Ode*. Adams is particularly exercised by the "overreading" of *Comus*, by which he means "overloading the allegory, probing too deeply into the background of the imagery, and enlarging upon the incidental implications of secondary concepts at the expense of the work's total structure" (p. 18).

Adams's criticism misconstrues the richness such interpretive approaches may yield for literary analysis. The deep exploration into allegorical elements and background imagery in the

poem does not detract from the total structure. On the contrary, it enriches our understanding of its thematic complexity and intellectual depth. *Comus* is a work steeped in intricate layers of meaning. Contemplation of these elements can help readers realize that a poem can be multidimensional in ways that are then going to afford a better means of recognizing how Milton's work engages with and makes some comments on, broader cultural and philosophical discourses. This process underlines its cohesiveness and the deliberate craftsmanship of its composition. It is only by accepting a more comprehensive analytic stance that we can do justice to the sophistication of Milton's art and appreciate more fully the moral and allegorical complexities of *Comus*. What Adams refers to as "overreading" is instead an imperative and enlightening task that enriches our experience with the work of Milton.

### Structure and Elements of the Masque

There is a rich weave of elements from classical mythology, Renaissance humanism, and Christian allegory contained within Milton's *Comus*. The masque has three main parts: the prologue, the main action, and the epilogue. The prologue opens with a pastoral scene, presenting the audience with two themes: virtue and temptation, given through the Attendant Spirit. The core action is based on The Lady's meeting with Comus, a god of revelry, who tries to seduce her from the path of virtue. The masque concludes with the dramatic confrontation between The Lady and Comus, in which at the last moment steadfast chastity is triumphant. The epilogue rounds off the Attendant Spirit's praise of The Lady's virtue and the audience reflects on the moral lessons through the narrative.

The elements of *Comus* are carefully interwoven to increase its thematic depth and allegorical resonance. Indeed, most of the major characters, such as The Lady, her brothers, and Comus himself, represent some moral or philosophical ideas. The Lady symbolizes chastity and virtue, therefore remaining a strong reflection of the Renaissance ideal of the virtuous lady resisting temptation by inner strength and purity. In

contrast, Comus is the vaunted representative of vice and sensual indulgence, luring his victims through deceitful rhetoric and spellbinding incantations. Moreover, the masque uses lush poetic diction and complex imagery to express its moral and philosophical messages. Symbolism and allegory are widespread in the elements, such as the charmed cup and the metamorphosis power of Comus's magic, which act metaphorically for the perils of temptation and the power of virtue. *Comus* does not only entertain readers through the well-structured narrative but also allows deep symbolic lessons of moral virtue to emerge in triumph over seduction.

The masque is a festive form of courtly entertainment in which music, dance, and elaborate staging combine to present moral and allegorical themes. Milton's *Comus* follows this tradition but with major innovations. Following are the elements of the masque in *Comus*:

### Dialogue and Monologues

In *Comus*, Milton crafted a compelling dialogue between The Lady and Comus, illustrating the rhetorical talent of the former and her unflinching moral clarity. Through this highly charged conversation, The Lady holds her own against Comus's cunning sophistry with reasoning and eloquence. Her ability to rebut Comus's seductive words of argumentation with reason and virtue strongly emphasizes her strength of mind. For instance, while Comus is trying to rationalize indulgence and excess, The Lady puts forward arguments that deal with natural law and divine order and maintains that true happiness and freedom are found in self-control and virtue. In this skirmish of speeches, not only is the beauty of expression, the topic of speech The Lady talks about, shown, but also the conviction Milton held that just this work of reason and integrity—a tight morality—might stand against a multitude of evils and temptations.

The clear morality of The Lady contrasts with the immoral importunings of Comus. Her chaste and pure character gives her a solid moral guide, which enables her to resist the seducer's temptations. Even amidst Comus's muddle of

taunting promises and illusions, The Lady does not yield. The clarity of her mind and the strength of her morals enable her to see through Comus's deceit and lead her ultimately to triumph over his dark enchantments. This interaction shows not only the strength of her character but also the general idea of Milton—that of the triumph of virtue over vice. Through making The Lady speak in her defense of principle, Milton charges her with moral conviction and the unbending power of virtue against corruption and temptation.

### **Songs and Music**

In *Comus*, songs and music are intrinsic constituents that add emotional depth and thematic reverberation to the narrative. The music for the performance of *Comus at Ludlow Castle* was written by Henry Lawes, the house musician to the Earl of Bridgewater (Orgel, 2003, p. 31. See Lawes's sheet music for Comus at Beer, 2008, p. 67). With their melodic appeal, these lyrical interludes underline moral and ethical dilemmas that The Lady passes through, contributing to the surging of her inner turmoil and steadfast virtue. The music takes the form of a counterpoint to the spoken dialogue and often encapsulates central themes of chastity, virtue, and temptation within the masque. In this regard, the harmonious interplay of song and verse not only heightens dramatic tension but also reinforces the moral strife The Lady endures while she wades through the seductive entrapments of Comus. In *Comus*, the incorporation of music and songs emphasizes the emotional landscape of the masque to make these highly abstract ideas of virtue and vice more real and relatable to the audience.

### **Symbolism and Allegory**

In Milton's *Comus*, the characters and their activities are steeped in symbolism and allegory, where the eternal struggle between virtue and vice is at issue. The Lady represents chastity and strength but finds herself lost in a dark, wild forest, confronting the world's dangers and temptations. The encounter of the Lady with Comus, an enchanter representing sensual pleasure and vice, becomes a central conflict that places her virtues at

the forefront. Comus attempts to deceive and seduce The Lady, to tempt her away from chastity by promising her pleasure and freedom. However, physically captive to the wiles of Comus, it is in this stubborn resistance of The Lady that she displays the innate strength of virtue and morality that is intrinsic to chastity. Her indomitable spirit and unwavering resolve to her ideals become the token for the triumph of interior purity and strength over exterior corruption.

Other characters around The Lady further describe the allegorical contest between virtue and vice. The two brothers represent protective familial love and symbolize moral support. Their efforts to save their sister demonstrate what standing together and what family and community can do to defend moral integrity. On the other hand, Comus's followers, charmed by his hedonistic appeal, show how people can easily yield to vice if they do not have a strong resolution provided by virtue. Likewise, the Attendant Spirit, dispatched by Jove but appearing as a shepherd, denotes divine guidance and the higher moral power by which, through their interventions, chastity could be preserved. In these characters, Milton allegorizes the eternal testing, through their relations to and interactions with each other, of virtue by vice but ultimately triumphing with the help of inner moral strength and outer divine intervention.

### **The Lady Victorious**

In *Comus*, The Lady is the strongest character, which reverses society's primary concept of gender roles at that time. While many heroines in literature make mistakes by either giving into temptation or needing to be saved, The Lady does not because she is intelligent and resourceful enough to see her way through tribulations. Important scenes that prove her strength are as follows:

### **Encounter with Comus**

The Lady's encounter with Comus speaks to her unyielding character and virtue in the face of the attempted seduction. When faced with Comus, with his temptations and moral corruption, The

Lady stands firm, countering Comus's deceitful rhetoric with reason and righteousness. Comus tries to seduce her into his world of sensual self-indulgence, telling her that her chastity is needless confinement: "Why should you be so cruel to yourself, / And to those dainty limbs which Nature lent / For gentle usage and soft delicacy?" (lines 683-685). Yet the Lady resists, staying true to virtue and purity, and insists on the power of her inner life above the allure of the outer world: "Thou canst not touch the freedom of my mind / With all thy charms, although this corporal rind / Thou hast immanacled" (lines 663-665). Her reply suggests an internalized passion for the truth that outer-world temptations cannot shake.

The Lady demonstrates her opposition through the use of eloquence in defending the source of empowerment, which is her chastity and is not a limitation in the poem. She argues that virtue is chosen for personal morals and at the same time serves as a defense against corruption, as symbolized by Comus. She confidently proclaims, "So dear to Heaven is saintly chastity, / That when a soul is found sincerely so, / A thousand liveried angels lackey her" (lines 453-455). This conviction is a test of her inner fortitude and spiritual resilience, epitomizing how her steadfastness in sustaining her chastity eventually leads to triumph over Comus's seductive attempts. In the encounter, Comus discovers the moral strength of The Lady, who, after everything, is the epitome of virtue that comes forth in triumph over all temptation. She retains her purity and righteousness.

### Rescue Scene

The unyielding virtue of The Lady has been portrayed as the cornerstone for her salvation; in other words, it is the triumph of moral integrity over physical constraint. In the masque, Comus casts spells on her and tries to seduce her by using his rhetoric to make her give up her chastity. Though Comus allures with his promises, he is matched in argument by The Lady who replies to his seductive appeal, showing thereby her firm resolution and inner strength. It is this unconquerable virtue that saves her from Comus's attacks and serves as the token of moral fiber. Such resistance brings forth a

message: though inner virtue is assaulted and threatened from without, it has no cause for alarm regarding the individual soul. Hence Milton celebrates chastity not only as an inner, inviolate quality, beyond the reach of physical captivity but as an ideal that resists attack with all its might from without.

The Lady's unyielding virtue is also designed by Milton as a means of heavenly grace and intervention. Here, The Lady calls on the protection and support of the Attendant Spirit and her brothers, since moral excellence naturally attracts divine protection. This is consonant with the larger theological framework of the work, whereby moral purity and righteousness receive an endorsement from heaven. Whereas her brothers and the Attendant Spirit play crucial roles in her physical liberation, it is The Lady's moral strength that galvanizes this intervention and thus positions her virtue as the true catalyst for salvation. Milton would not only celebrate The Lady's chastity but also posit her as a force strong and active enough to invoke divine assistance and ensure the triumph of good over evil.

### Rejection of Misogyny

The overall conclusion of this study is that the conventional views of Milton as a misogynist are not supported. Eve, a figure in *Paradise Lost*, has often been used to represent the female sex, which means, according to these critics, weakness, fallibility, and easy prey to sin. This definition does not sum up all of Milton's female characterizations. We may now see in Eve a more qualified conception of femininity when juxtaposed with The Lady of *Comus*, who is strong, pure, and resilient. Since The Lady represents a firm stand and moral strength, as contrasted with the supposedly weak elements in Eve, we can assume that Milton realized and appreciated female virtue and integrity.

In this, there is a stark contrast between The Lady of *Comus* and Eve of *Paradise Lost*, revealing the many folds in Milton's feelings toward the female gender. This range, from vulnerability to unwavering virtue, which the female characters portray makes them multifaceted rather than flat. It

is in this duality that the reductionist label of misogyny, often attached to him, becomes a problem. It opens up the possibility that Milton's characterization of women is founded upon a deeper and more intricate understanding of their roles and capabilities. Considering the two characters together, one is better able to appreciate the range of Milton's female characterizations and thus recognize that his views on women were more sophisticated and varied than critics have traditionally allowed.

### Gender Norms Subversion

In *Comus*, Milton challenges contemporary gender norms by creating a female character in the vanguard of virtue and resilience. Typically, during the 17th century, role modeling relegated women to passive, subservient positions in society who would need protection and guiding influences from their males. However, Milton's Lady is in radical contrast to this. Moreover, she is not only the center of the narrative but also embodies the most elevated and noble moral and intellectual values. Her undeviating commitment to chastity and virtue, unbending before the seductive and corrupting Comus, serves as the backbone of an independent woman who can govern herself. Such a portrait breaks all traditional molds of gender expectations held in the age of Milton, as it is customarily men who become emblems of virtues, not women, who act in a supporting role.

The Lady triumphs over Comus's temptations all by herself, without any help from physical strength or male intervention. Milton displays her intellectual and moral fortitude as enough to endure Comus's deceptions, thereby raising her above the level of the male characters who try to rescue her. Such inversion of gender roles not only depicts The Lady's superiority in virtue. It also serves as a critique of the social assumption that women need men's protection to guard their moral integrity. Placing at the center a female character representing strength both in virtue and in intelligence, Milton was embarking on a different perspective that enables women to

break through the stereotypical images of them in *Comus*.

### Moral Superiority

The Lady's victory over the seductions of Comus is thus a strong vindication of female morality and their strength in defending virtue against corrupting influences. In this story, modern notions of women as intrinsically weak are questioned. Instead, women have an innate strength and resilience in guarding their integrity when tempted or tested. The Lady's resolve is not merely a question of personal triumph; it is a sweeping statement on the moral capacities of women, thus undermining patriarchal assumptions that place women as perennially vulnerable or morally weak. The fact that she withstood Comus's enchantments and remained true to her virtues revealed an inner strength of moral character against a cultural mythology in which women are frail.

Finally, The Lady's victory in *Comus* works as an allegorical critique of the social standards that would deflate the moral agency of women. Portraying The Lady as a paragon of virtue becomes a means through which to challenge the gendered stereotypes laid on women: passivity and susceptibility to moral bondage. The triumph of The Lady, instead, underscores women's capacity for moral ideals and enactment of those ideals to redefine the parameters of excellence in morals. In portraying a female character who successfully upholds her chastity and virtue against the most imposing opposition, Milton not only succeeds in elevating women in moral stature but also questions structures of patriarchy that underestimate their ethical strength. This portrayal enables a reconsideration of gendered dynamics and acts as an argument for women's native moral capacities.

### Discussion

In Milton's *Comus*, there is an interplay between conformity with the masque's conventions and departures from its tradition, embracing both tradition and innovation. The masque, typical entertainment of the 17th century, was enlisted in the praise of aristocratic values; it typically had

themes focused on order and harmony. What Milton did, while using the structure and grandeur of the masque, is charge it with deeper moral and philosophical questions. This is a strategy that not only underlines his fineness as a performer in the genre but places *Comus* at an incomparably close distance from the superficiality that characterized masque performances. With this, Milton would have drawn his audience into thinking about virtue and vice, that is to say, beyond the superficiality of its aspect to thought-provoking reflection.

One important element of *Comus* is the characterization of The Lady as a bastion of virtue and strength in a world steeped in misogyny. While women in most masques are normally just passive or ornamental characters, The Lady here is proactive and resolute. It is through this resolution and the unclouded moral clarity in her character that she manages to stand against Comus, the enchanter. It is a characterization that subverts contemporary expectations and norms regarding the roles and capabilities of women and makes her a heroically intellectual and ethically strong heroine. That Milton focuses his story on such a protagonist stands as strong social commentary: a woman might stand forth as a paragon of virtue, against the misogynistic attitudes prevalent in his time.

That Comus is vanquished by The Lady is crucial to underscore Milton's approach toward gender and virtue. It allowed him to reinforce not only the moral superiority of The Lady but also to indicate that women are by no means weak or easily corrupted. This victory is thus a testament to the inner strength and virtue of The Lady, something that in this poem can be portrayed as inviolable and transcendent. In doing so, Milton offers a counter-narrative to the prevalent misogynistic discourse that proposes that true virtue is not bounded by gender. This invites the reader to examine conventional associations with virtue and strength, further acknowledging that both can be embodied in women.

More to the point, the meaning of *Comus* by Milton is embedded within a broader web of thematic and historical contexts. Any charge of

misogyny against Milton cannot be made in isolation of the contemporary social context that he engaged with or opposed. Indeed, prejudices reflecting patriarchal conventions of his time are found in some of his writings, but through his perceptions of female virtue and will, in other works like *Comus*, he reveals a progressive bent. When situated within a broader framework of Milton's oeuvre and the historical milieu, *Comus* works out to be an elaborate exploration of virtue, gender, and power. Such a perspective would offer a more holistic grasp of Milton's work, acknowledging its complex nature and what it contributed to building and adding to the discourse regarding gender and morality when faced with Comus, with his temptations and moral corruption.

#### **Implications for Milton Scholarship**

Our reading of Milton's *Comus* revealed important implications for Milton scholarship, especially regarding his representation of women. It invites a reconsideration of the entire Miltonic corpus in terms of his depiction of female characters. In *Comus*, The Lady, who comes across as the epitome of chastity and moral fortitude, finds herself contesting the conventional decorum attributed to her gender and showing a complex perception of women's virtue and agency. It is precisely this complexity that makes these early works important in their own right for understanding how Milton's sense of gender would eventually be defined. This perspective will explain how his views of women grew and found their way into his later works, such as *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*.

Scholarship will benefit from a much finer-grained analysis of the dynamic interplay between Milton's personal history and his socio-political setting as regards his feminine characterizations. The influence on his writings of Milton's relationships with women, including his three wives and often troubled interactions with daughters, can hardly be denied. The turbulent politics of the time and fluctuating conventions and ideologies regarding gender and authority must have left their imprint on his concept of female virtue and power.

It is through a study of these factors that one can bring out the subtle dimensions in the female characters portrayed by Milton and their proper placement within the Miltonic canon. It is an approach that highlights the place of Milton's early works in any comprehensive assessment of his attitudes toward gender and that offers a more nuanced, historically informed interpretation of his literary legacy.

### References

- Adams, R. M. (1953). Reading *Comus*. *Modern Philology*, 51(1), 18-32. Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/434894>
- Beer, A. (2008). *Milton: Poet, pamphleteer & patriot*. Bloomsbury.
- Coiro, A. B. (2009). "A thousand fantasies": The Lady and the maske. In N. McDowell & N. Smith (Eds), *The Oxford handbook of Milton* (pp. 89-111). Oxford University Press.
- Lewalski, B. K. (2003). *The life of John Milton* (rev. ed.). Blackwell.
- Milton, J. (2008). *A masque of the same author presented at Ludlow Castle, 1634*. In S. Orgel & J. Goldberg (Eds.), *John Milton: The major works* (pp. 44-71). Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1634)
- Orgel, S. (2003). The case for *Comus*. *Representations*, 81(1), 31-45. Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/rep.2003.81.1.31>