

John Milton's *Comus: A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle: Shakespeare's Globe, London*



Milton has been getting a fresh burst of attention in London these days. The Royal Shakespeare Company has been putting on a sold-out version of *Comus*, the first of Milton's major works, at the indoor theatre named after Sam Wannamaker. The play is, in fact, a masque, which is an allegorical or pastoral drama with music, as a precursor to opera. The director of this intensely enjoyable production is Lucy Bailey, who has long been involved with music theatre, but who first made her name at the Globe in her gruesome and powerful *Titus Andronicus*. It was Emma Rice, in her first (and now, we learn, last) season as Artistic Director, who invited Bailey to return to the Globe, but it was Bailey herself who wanted to do Milton. The candle-lit setting of the Wannamaker is especially apt for Milton's masque, most of which takes place in "a wild wood" at night. The program notes even contain a long entry on Oliver Fenwick as the "Candle Consultant," although a doubled flash of electric light cuts across the mood on the lines "Was I deceived or did a sable cloud/ Turn forth her silver lining on the night?/ I did not err, there does a sable cloud/ Turn forth her silver lining on the night,/ And casts a gleam over this tufted grove..." (221-5). The theatre itself was decorated with variously grotesque heads or masks, perhaps making a complex pun with the genre of the piece, but the effect certainly added an allure to the partly sinister, partly comic monsters who cavort on the stage.



A View of the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse. Photo Courtesy: Peter Le May.

This production encloses Milton's original within a clever frame story designed to introduce the masque, and indeed the very idea of a masque, to a contemporary London audience. Written by the well-known writer of comedy Patrick Barclay, it pretends to be the final dress rehearsal, just minutes before the audience arrives for the performance, and the situation gets turned on its head with the sudden refusal of Lady Alice Egerton, the obstinate fifteen-year old daughter of the house (Emma Curtis), to perform at all, or "ever," as she insists, to the consternation of everyone involved. She gives no reason, nor does she seem to understand herself, but she is clearly a girl who is used to having her own way, who is simultaneously a rebellious teenager. Her younger brothers, also the Earl's children, who are due to perform with her, try to persuade her, as does the hapless Henry Lawes, the musician and director of the masque who doubles as the Attendant Spirit (a hilarious Philip Cumbus, who delivers a great deal of unexpected humour from Milton's text as well as from Barclay's, not to mention, his own, wry asides). The boys also tease her for having a crush on the stable boy who (it is soon discovered) is to play Comus himself. The suspense is drawn out briefly until her father, in whose honour the masque is being produced, steps in — at first appealing to her better nature, and then simply ordering her to perform — "You will do as you are told. Is that clear?" A pause, before she says quietly, "Yes," and the masque itself is set to begin.

Milton's original title is *A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle*, which gives simply the location on the

Welsh border, where on the night of Michaelmas, in September 29, 1634, John Egerton, Earl of Bridgewater was being officially and ceremonially installed as the President of the Council of Wales and Lord Lieutenant of Wales and the Marches. The work soon became known as *Comus*, after the central character – a sorcerer who lives in the woods, attended by his variously attired “monstrous rout”, and described as the son of Bacchus and Circe. In this production, having made his patriarchal point, Egerton (Andrew Bridgmont) takes his seat along the lower gallery and prepares rather pompously to watch the show, as the cast performs a harmless little dance. But soon, there comes a loud and spectacular crash – Egerton’s chair tips him forward and he falls down into the pit below the stage. Subsequently, much dry ice floats up along with an eerie, greenish light. Dreadful, scary things can now happen. Comus leads his “rout of monsters” in dance (“What hath night to do with sleep?”) and orders them to “beat the ground, In a light fantastic round.” Having been separated from her brothers during the night as they were all making their way through these sinister woods to Ludlow, the Lady sings in hopes that they can hear her. It is Comus, however, who hears her, and declares that “such sober certainty of waking bliss,/ I never heard till now.” Disguised as a villager, he persuades her to come with him to look for them, and takes her offstage for safety to his “low/ But loyal cottage.”

The boys meanwhile engage in a longish dialogue about chastity, fearful of what might befall their absent sister. In this production, their rather flat, undramatic speeches are enlivened by the monstrous inhabitants of the woods who molest the boys even though they cannot see them. The audience laugh as one boy tells the other to “be not over-exquisite,” but listens also as he explains that “he that hides a dark soul and foul thoughts/ Benighted walks under the midday sun.” After the jokey beginning, there is an uneasy quiet in the theatre as the Elder Brother (Rob Callendar) delivers his speech about the hidden strengths of chastity and virginity. Doing their best to avoid their mysterious assailants, the boys finally manage to escape. They are helped in all this by the Attendant Spirit, who has been presiding over the action since he descended, comically, from the heavens after the crash. Taking the form of the family’s shepherd, Thyrsis, he offers them as protection the magic herb haemony, and tells them how to find their sister. Rather clueless, they soon forget that they are holding this special plant, and so Thyrsis has to insist impatiently and with comic stress that they “use the root.”



The Two Younger Brothers in John Milton's *Comus*, directed by Lucy Bailey, 2016. Photo Courtesy:

Shakespeare's Globe, London.

Then, Comus and the Lady reappear for the great central confrontation, in which the Lady is made to sit in a magical chair brought on the stage by the monster chorus, which remains “smeared with gums of glutinous heat.” She is stuck there, and must hear and then reply to Comus’s blandishments and threats. Comus holds a necromancer’s wand, pointing it at the space that has opened between her legs as her dress was pulled above her knees. He also offers a drink from his magic cup. But the Lady refuses, “Fool do not boast,/ Thou canst not touch the freedom of my mind/ With all thy charms” (662-64). He denounces “the lean and sallow abstinence” and praises the Lady’s looks, “Beauty is Nature’s brag.” Comus’s speech is clearly influenced by Shakespeare, and the young actor (Danny Lee Wynter) puts on his best imitation of what we may expect to hear from Globe training. The language is magnificently anti-puritan and thrilling.

Wherefore did Nature pour her bounties forth,

With such a full and unwithdrawing hand,

Covering the earth with odours, fruits and flocks,

Thronging the seas with spawn innumerable,

But all to please, and sate the curious taste?

If we do not make the best use we can of the natural world God has given us, he goes on,

we should serve him as a grudging master,

As a penurious niggard of his wealth,

And live like Nature’s bastards, not her sons,

Who would be quite surcharg’d with her own weight,

And strangl’d with her waste fertility;

Th’ earth cumber’d, and the wing’d air dark’t with plumes (725-30).

The marvellous rhythms are Shakespearean, but the theme has reached beyond and behind Shakespeare, behind to the world of fairy lore that he exploited in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, with its added layer of classical myth, and beyond to the conflicts that were beginning to define the new, capitalist world.

The Lady, who is one of the few characters in Milton to resist temptation, replies with increasing heat in an argument that becomes a defence of a puritan socialism, a covert sermon about conspicuous expenditure in big houses like the one where the masque is supposedly being performed. Nature has

enough for everyone if not exploited by the rich.

If every just man that now pines with want

Had but a moderate and beseeming share

Of that which lewdly-pampered Luxury

Now heaps upon some few with vast excess,

Nature's full blessings would be well dispensed

In unsuperfluous even proportion (767-73).



A Scene featuring the Lady from John Milton's *Comus*, directed by Lucy Bailey, 2016. Photo Courtesy: Shakespeare's Globe, London.

The younger brothers soon rush in to rescue her, and Comus escapes. But the Lady has need of a higher power to be rescued from her frozen posture. Sabrina, who embodies the nearby River Severn (and so celebrates the border country over which Bridgewater now presides), has to intervene. In this production, she is played by a black actress (Natasha Magigi), who, violating the color-blind norm, becomes an unmistakable African medium, channelling and possessed by the higher power. There is music to accompany her, but she also represents the power of poetry to “unlock/ The clasping charm and thaw the numbing spell” (851-2).

Though the world of the masque seems ethereal or other-worldly, its vocabulary and rhythms frequently evoking *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, there is, in fact, much in the original context that bears deeply serious implications, not all of which are exploited by this production. The Egerton children, Alice in

particular, had in the times right before the performance of the masque, complained of demonic possession, and had been treated with protective amulets and St. John's wort. In a sense, therefore, the masque replays her cure. The Earl himself, in his capacity as a judge, had recently given an extremely fair-minded ruling in the long-drawn out case of the rape of a fourteen-year-old girl, Margery Evans, by a powerful local official. This may have been in the minds of those present on this big occasion, more especially as Michaelmas was a holiday that is associated with public administration and justice. In church, the lessons for the day from Ecclesiasticus 38 to 44 are about greatness ("Let us now praise famous men"), about sitting on the judges' seat, and the wisdom of ancient prophecies. The gospel for the day, from Matthew 18, denounces the man who offends against children, "It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea."

There was another related reason why the subject of this masque was extremely risky and needed to be handled with great delicacy. Patrick Barclay's frame play makes this explicit. The elder brother tells his younger sibling the story of a family scandal, and the Earl comments ironically how glad he is that the boy has brought this up. An extraordinary sexual scandal had recently afflicted the family of the Dowager Countess's eldest daughter Anne (sister of Frances, Bridgewater's wife, who was, therefore, the boys' aunt). Her husband, the infamous Earl of Castlehaven, had had his servants frequently rape both his wife and his step-daughter, who was married to his own son. He was also accused of sodomy. He had been executed in May, 1631. One reason for the choice of subject for the masque may have been to insist on the chastity, and so, the marriageability of the young Lady Alice. So, Milton had to be careful not to insult his Ludlow hosts, and especially not the young virgin playing the Lady. In particular, he had to avoid having the references to rape and chastity seem ironic. Bridgewater, an upright judge, and now Lord President of Wales, was, after all, no Castlehaven.

The intensity of her commitment to chastity makes the Lady of *Comus* unnervingly like the "Lady of Christ's" — as Milton had been called as a student at Cambridge. But, it also implies an equally strong need to struggle with its opposite. The Elder Brother evokes that contradictory state of the soul in a speech with a remarkable profusion of liquid *l* sounds:

When lust

By unchaste looks, loose gestures, and foul talk,

But most by lewd and lavish act of sin,

Lets in defilement to the inward parts,

The soul grows clotted by contagion,

Imbodies and imbrutes, till she quite lose

The divine property of her first being (463-69).

To which the Second Brother (Theo Cowan) replies with a line that usually raises a laugh in the theatre, as it did this time: "How charming is divine Philosophy" (476).

When the text of the masque was published in late autumn 1637, Milton added, or reinstated, a long and passionate speech for the Lady in praise of “the sun-clad power of Chastity” (782) and “the sage/ And serious doctrine of Virginitie” (786-7), as well as Comus’s response, “She fables not, I feel and I do fear/ Her words set off by some superior power” (800-1). In this production, his words are shifted forward and became one of Comus’s earliest responses to the Lady. The masque’s concluding lines, spoken by the Attendant Spirit, sum up the moral lesson.

Mortals that would follow me,

Love vertue, she alone is free,

She can teach ye how to clime

Higher than the Spheary chime;

Or if Vertue feeble were,

Heav’n itself would stoop to her.

Virtue, therefore, can teach you to climb above the music of the spheres to heaven – a sentiment that is reminiscent of the last two lines Milton wrote in the guest book of Count Camillo Cerdogni, when he was visiting relatives of Charles Diodati in Geneva, 10 June, 1639. The association of freedom and virtue became a dominant theme in Milton’s writings.

Henry Lawes’s music survives for five songs from the masque in two manuscripts in the British Library. Handel also composed music for three songs and a trio as part of a private arrangement of the masque first performed in June 1745 at Ludlow Castle. But in this Globe version, the extra music was by Paul James, a well-known English musician who writes for the television and the radio as well as the theatre.

The production concludes with a serious return to the frame drama – the Earl asks his children what they have learned from performing in this masque. The two young, still foppish brothers respond briefly that they have learned to pay attention to and obey their father. But the Lady, to their joint consternation, defies him, and insists that she has learned what her mother had always told her, to go her own way and be her own woman. That finally is the larger doctrine of chastity conveyed by the masque – that it will be tested certainly, but we must rise above the lesser and more worldly doctrines, and the predatory enchantments that are being peddled around us. It clearly had an obvious appeal for Lucy Bailey. She says in the program notes that chastity means something like integrity. The Lady’s argument for control over her life and for freedom of the mind is as relevant as ever for women.

Some strict Miltonists may object to the several instances of comic byplay in this production, as when the Attendant Spirit asks the audience “Who knows not Circe?”, pauses for a reply, and adds, “I thought so.” He also adjusts his costume to unhitch “my sky robes” from the wires that lowers him to the stage, and later, going up again, says, “now my task is smoothly done, I can fly,” pauses as the mechanism freezes momentarily (so, not so smooth), and repeats “I can fly... or I can run,” which are lines actually found in Milton’s text (1012-3). Bailey, with the designer Bill Dudley, uses or introduces such moments, as she says in the program notes, to “unlock” the masque’s “chaotic anarchic humour.” It was well done, and

indeed much of that humour may always have been there, waiting to be revealed in the theatre.

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