1956

Milton's Doctrine of Chastity: An Interpretation of Comus

Philip C. Rule
Loyola University Chicago

Recommended Citation
http://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_theses/1242

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses and Dissertations at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master’s Theses by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact ecommons@luc.edu.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.
Copyright © 1956 Philip C. Rule
MILTON'S DOCTRINE OF CHASTITY: AN
INTERPRETATION OF COMUS

by
PHILIP C. RULE, S.J.

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS IN LOYOLA
UNIVERSITY
APRIL
1956
VITA AUCTORIS

Philip Charles Rule, S.J. was born at Cleveland, Ohio, February 4, 1931.

He was graduated from Saint Ignatius High School, Cleveland, Ohio, in June, 1949. Upon graduation, 1949, he entered the Society of Jesus at Milford, Ohio, where he spent the next four years. During this time he also took courses at Xavier University, Cincinnati, Ohio. In September of 1953, he began his three-year course in philosophy at West Baden College, West Baden Springs, Indiana, and enrolled in Loyola University, Chicago, Illinois, where he was graduated the following June with the degree of Bachelor of Arts. He began his graduate studies at Loyola University in September, 1954.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. INTRODUCTION.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The importance of historical criticism—the purpose of the thesis—opinions of various commentators—method to be followed—importance of the problem.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. THE PLATONIC INFLUENCE.</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. FACING THE DILEMMA.</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henrietta Maria and the Platonic love school—court drama—court ethics—Puritan attacks on court life and morality—Puritan views on marriage and celibacy—Milton’s problem in writing <em>Comus</em>.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. WHAT NEVER YET WAS HEARD.</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Originality of Milton’s theme—difficulty in tracing his sources—some important influences; Feake—Erycius Puteanus—Spenser—opinion of A.S.P. Woodhouse—originality of Milton’s Platonism.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. AN EXPLICATION OF THE MASQUE.</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. CONCLUDING REMARKS.</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII. BIBLIOGRAPHY.</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A broad and accurate knowledge of history is one of the most valuable tools at the literary critic's disposal. Some works of literature when studied in themselves appear to be cloaked in obscurity; and, at times, seem to defy a favorable interpretation. But these same works, when studied in the light of their historical and intellectual context, shine forth with a new clarity and unity of meaning. The historical method of criticism, when rightly employed, can open new vistas of literary appreciation that have hitherto gone unexplored. The success of the historical method depends on a prudently formulated hypothesis which is subjected to experimental verification by a careful analysis of the text. It is more than a mere corrective, for it helps to bridge the gap between the writer and his audience of a later age.¹

At times, the study of a poem or prose work which is entirely confined to textual analysis will prove quite barren. And yet some critics maintain that the intrinsic merit of a

Poem must lie within the poem itself and recourse to outside sources is an indirect admission that the poem is lacking in universal appeal because it is not immediately intelligible to people of all ages. Such an opinion, however, is fast losing favor. A perusal of a few of the fine articles which have appeared in some of the English literary journals during the past fifty years will yield proof enough of the invaluable role historical criticism plays in the interpretation of literature.

To understand a poem completely it will not suffice, often enough, to study the text without any knowledge of the poet's social and intellectual milieu. Although we may catch some of the beauty of the poetic form, we are likely to miss the poet's message which is so intimately bound up with that poetic form. It must be remembered that

willing response... to the poet's suggestion is not by itself enough. Everybody is familiar with the common criterion for judging the adequacy of a work of popular art: that it should be self-sufficient, should contain within itself whatever is necessary for comprehending it. On the level of ideas, however, this test cannot be very strictly applied. Often one must look outside the poem for what may be called the intellectual frame of reference, common to the poet and his contemporary readers, but lost to a later age.²

Again, mere historical facts are nothing in themselves. They must be sifted and evaluated by the prudent

---

critic, skilled in human experience, who will apply them to the poem. Hence, it is quite evident that both methods—a careful textual analysis and a study of the historical setting—are necessary for a full and adequate understanding of a poem, especially a poem which is farther away from the reader in its historical context.

The purpose of this thesis is to present an adequate interpretation of Milton's *Comus* by employing just such a blend of historical study and, if you will, *explication de texte*. A great deal of interest has been manifested in *Comus* during the last fifty years. The bibliography of twentieth-century writing on this single poem constitutes in itself a sizable amount of Miltonic scholarship, and surpasses by far the writings of the previous two hundred years on the same subject. This interest has focused for the most part on the theme of the poem. Critics, in turn, have each asked, What is Milton saying or trying to say in *Comus*?

A possible explanation of such renewed interest in the poem may well be due to the subtle Freudian influence in all walks of life during the twentieth century. *Comus*, all admit, deals with the idea of chastity. And since many critics find

---

3 The bibliography at the end of this thesis represents only a third or more of the material written on *Comus*. Other books and articles dealing with different aspects of the poem are not, of course, included in the present bibliography.
a certain fascination in discovering an underlying current of sexual drive in an artist's life and works, it is not unlikely that this technique of interpreting the meaning of a man's writings in the light of his "sex" life should have found its way into the more sober realm of Miltonic scholarship.

Such an approach, good in itself, can be exaggerated. Although the sex-drive can be a great stimulus to artistic genius, it is not the sole explanation. Denis Saurat, for example, has a fine treatment of Milton's concern for chastity; but at times he over-emphasizes the importance of that virtue in the poet's life. If properly handled, however, the knowledge of a man's views on sex can be helpful in arriving at an understanding of his writings, especially those in which there is explicit reference to sex in one form or another.

Although most of the critics will agree that chastity is the principal theme of the poem, they differ widely in their final verdict as to whether the poem contains a complete unity of thought and action. A.S.P. Woodhouse in his excellent article concentrates on what he believes to be a nature and

---

4 An excellent treatment of this question can be found in J.A. Garraty's "The Interrelations of Psychology and Biography," Psychological Bulletin, LI, Nov., 1954, 569-580.

grace theme, and interprets the poem in the light of seventeenth-century theology. He fails, however, to offer an adequate and completely satisfying interpretation of the poem, even though he does achieve a partial solution. For, as he himself admits, his hypothesis leaves many threads untied.

Don Cameron Allen has even less hope that the poem can be adequately interpreted. He calls the poem an "artistic compromise," because the poetic form and the poet's meaning are never harmoniously fused. This may, when all is said and done, be the case; but it is a difficult solution to accept, especially when one considers Milton's artistic genius and intellectual acumen at the age of twenty-six. *Arcades* which he probably wrote the preceding year is a polished piece of poetry despite its brevity and is in keeping with the tradition of the English masque. It would hardly seem possible, then, that the poet's second attempt at writing a masque should be such a dismal failure, because the modern critics detect an apparent lack of unity in its theme.

Other scholars, such as E.M.W. Tillyard, have only treated the poem in passing; and have in turn offered no satisfactory solution. They all admire the various aspects of the

---


poem and praise its lyric charm, but none of them feels that Milton has succeeded in portraying one central idea, in the light of which the whole poem can be interpreted. These writers may be correct. But in the case of a poet of Milton's stature, it seems only fair to give the poet the benefit of the doubt, and continue to look for an adequate interpretation. Such an approach involves of course "an assumption, frequently rejected as hampering scholarly ingenuity, that a great poet is a conscious artist and knows what he is about."

The purpose of this thesis can now be briefly stated: it is, to offer an adequate interpretation of the poem which will consistently explain the theme, imagery, and characters. Having considered the problem of the poem and the wealth of matter that has been written about it, it seems some solution may be found in a careful study and synthesis of the books and articles which have considered more in detail the historical and intellectual context of Milton's early years. Such a study, the writer believes, has revealed a highly probable and convincing solution.

If the poem be studied in the light of its intellectual and literary background, the means to an adequate solution readily present themselves. Even a cursory reading of the poem reveals Milton's indebtedness to Platonism. Some know-

ledge of the seventeenth-century social scene will call to mind at once the bitter conflict between the Puritans and the system of Platonic love in vogue at the court of Charles I. Lastly, an acquaintance with the literature of the age will reveal many literary parallels and show the influence, or lack of influence, which the poet's literary heritage exercised on his own muse.

In the light of these three factors the following interpretation can be offered: It seems valid to say that Milton is giving a personal defense of chastity in Comus. The virtue which he seems to be defending is positive rather than negative, that is, the emphasis is placed not so much on abnegation as it is on dedication.

During the years spent at his father's estate at Horton, Milton gave himself almost entirely to intellectual pursuits in an effort to prepare himself for the great calling which he felt was his as early as his Cambridge days. Among the works which influenced him greatly were the dialogues of Plato. Here he found the Platonic doctrine of Eros which seemingly gave him the answer to the problem of chastity and his desire to become a great poet, a high priest of the beautiful. For to achieve this goal Milton seemed to believe that he must

---

renounce the flesh which holds back the soul in the soul's pursuit of the heavenly vision. Here was a doctrine propounded by Plato almost two thousand years before.

But in presenting a defense of the doctrine of Eros, Milton would have to be careful that he did not identify himself with the false Platonists at the court, against whom the Puritan divines were hurling their oratorical fulminations. In answer to the court people Milton would have to present a doctrine of temperance, which we do in fact find in the poem. But he would also have to handle a difficulty which would arise among his Puritan audience. Although the Puritans were staunch defenders of temperance, they set a high value on marriage and conjugal union. Celibacy was branded as popish, something to be embraced only by those who were physically and psychologically disposed for it. Against such an opinion Milton would have to offer a defense of the "sage and serious doctrine of Virginity." He would have to show, at least implicitly, the value and necessity of chastity for one who is seeking a knowledge of the good and beautiful. He would have to give more than an apology for chastity, he would have to give a


11 M.M. Knappen, Tudor Puritanism, Chicago, 1939, 452.
eulogy.

It does not seem too broad a conjecture to say that the young poet was naturally attracted by the Platonic doctrine of love, and that he even attributed magical and mystical power to the virtue of chastity. Plato's doctrine readily admits of such an interpretation, and the Platonism of the seventeenth century was vague and general enough to harbor under its aegis various mystical and magical notions.12

The writer believes, then, that a full and satisfactory interpretation of the poem can be had by interpreting the poem in the light of its philosophical argument. That this argument is not entirely philosophical and bereft of all theological implications is taken for granted. One cannot hope to tie the various thoughts of the poem into neatly wrapped packages and consider them apart from the whole. Milton was a Christian, and when he speaks of Jove, one knows that ultimately he means God. But that the theme of the masque is predominantly non-religious seems to be a solid hypothesis.

John Arthos of the University of Michigan has recently published an essay in which he seems to have arrived at conclusions similar to those presented in this thesis. His book gives an interesting and somewhat different treatment of this topic, and serves as a confirmation of the ideas presented here.

In treating of Woodhouse's explanation of the masque Arthos comments:

To me Platonic and Neo-Platonic illustrations seem to provide a self-consistent and comprehensive interpretation of the thought of the Mask, and I can find no detail in the thought that requires a special interpretation, and in particular no reference to an idea of grace to be explained only by seventeenth-century theology.\textsuperscript{13}

So much for the general outline, and now to consider in particular the three major sources that may have influenced the writing of Comus. Any attempt, however, to unravel the various trains of thought in the poet's work is doomed to a certain amount of failure. When one considers Milton's intellectual gifts and the prodigious wealth of learning he had amassed, it can only be said of the men and ideas that influenced him that their number is legion. Only a careful study can draw the reader closer to the real meaning of the masque.

\textsuperscript{13} John Arthos, \textit{On a Mask Presented at Ludlow Castle}, Ann Arbor, 1954, 71.
CHAPTER II

THE PLATONIC INFLUENCE

"How little the commentators of Milton have availed
themselves of Plato, Milton's darling!" wrote Samuel Taylor
Coleridge to a friend.¹ The wisdom of his statement is made
manifest by the numerous allusions to Platonism in Milton's
poetry and the explicit references to Plato in many of his
prose works. This is not to be wondered at, for Milton was
a product of the seventeenth century, a century which witnessed
the new growth of Platonism in England.

Platonism has ever played an important role in the
turbulent ebb and flow of western literary and intellectual
thought. But few centuries have shown such a marked interest
in Platonic doctrine as the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries
on the continent and the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries
in England.² At the dawn of the Italian Renaissance a new in-
terest in Plato sprang up--it had never really died out--and
the result was the founding of Platonic academies in Italy.

¹ Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, edited by E.H.
Coleridge, Vol. I, Cambridge, 1895, Letter cxxx, Sept. 10,
1802 (to W. Sotheby), 495.

² Paul Shorey, Platonism Ancient and Modern, Berkeley,
1938, 175-239.
and France. In the second half of the fifteenth century, for example, almost all the educated of Florence came under the intellectual influence of Marsilio Ficino's academy. The tremendous impact of the new Platonism was felt in England through the writings of humanists like Colet, More, and Fisher, and later through the writings of the Cambridge Platonists. And, of course, most of the French and Italian works were available to the learned Englishman of the day.

This interest in Platonism was intellectual, religious, and cultural. Philosophers sought in Plato's writings an universal synthesis of reality. Among the religious leaders of the Cambridge school we find an "intermingling of the holy and the profane", of the Christian and the heathen."4 In the court of Charles I a cult of Platonic love was the outcome of the contemporary interest in Plato. The doctrine of Eros is one of the most frequently misunderstood of Platonic doctrines. "Platonic love" has become a cliché, and in the mind of most people such a notion of love is "either too nice to be Platonic, or too Platonic to be nice."5 This is regrettable for the


insinuation is far from anything Plato himself would have meant by Love or Eros as he called it.

The Platonic love in vogue at the royal court was introduced by the French bride of Charles I, Henrietta Maria. The queen was bored and disgusted with the boorish ways of the English in general, and in particular with those of the court people. She found a suitable corrective for this lack of refinement in the attractive but artificial atmosphere of masques and games which dealt with the theme of Platonic love. We shall return to this point later on.

Despite the false notions of Platonism, there were men like the Cambridge Platonists who manifested a sincere interest in Plato. Many of these philosophers and theologians were deeply religious men who found in Platonism the belief that "the soul is a winged creature whose proper home is not the flats and mists of earth, but the pure and open heavens; is not the perishable things of sense but the eternal truths, the unfading hopes and ideals of a divinely nurtured life."7

But much of the Platonism of the seventeenth century was a hodgepodge of doctrines and beliefs, of which only a few

6 Comus, 3-6. This and all subsequent references to Milton's poems are taken from The Student's Milton, edited by Frank Allen Patterson, Revised Edition, New York, 1945.

can be labeled as genuinely Platonic. Mysticism, magic, veiled immorality, and just plain star-gazing were all nestled under the protective mantle of Plato's seemingly all-embracing philosophy.

This then was the intellectual milieu in which the young John Milton was educated. He attended Cambridge where the very men just mentioned were expounding their doctrines. Moreover, he must have come in contact with the writings of the French and Italian Platonists for Milton devoted much time to the reading of Latin and Greek while he was at Horton. The eager poet doubtlessly heard about, if he did not read, works such as Ficino's *In Convivium Platonis De Amore Commentarii*, Pico Della Mirandola's *Cansone dell' Amor Divino*, and Leone Ebreo's *Dialoghi di Amore*.

Milton, who was by nature an idealist, would find in Platonism "a way to select and arrange whatever aspects of the flux of things would fall into harmony with his own aspirations." He found in Platonism, it can well be imagined, that essentially spiritual view of life which turns with a somewhat scornful eye from the things of earth. But he also would find a channel into which he could direct his artistic genius. That he has a profound depth of feeling and understanding can be denied by no one who has read his poetry. Yet there are marked

---

traces of the Puritan and the moralist fighting for the ascendancy in his soul. And the Puritan in him finally seems to have won the fray, even after his poetic genius had reached its peak.

During his early years Milton was probably more influenced by the conventional notions of Platonism than by the true doctrine of Plato. But he soon weaned himself away from these earlier influences and penetrated to the true Plato, although he himself would have had to acknowledge that the Renaissance writers did introduce him to Plato. For this Milton was indebted to them, but their influence goes little further. The proof lies in the fact that Milton resurrected many themes and ideas not even mentioned by these men. Herbert Agar believes that this is typically in keeping with Milton's spirit to return to Plato's own writings and to disregard the prevalent authority and tradition.9

The Platonic doctrine that is of particular interest here is the doctrine of Eros or love. By the time Milton wrote Comus there seems to be good evidence that he had penetrated to the real meaning of the doctrine of love as Plato meant it to be understood. For "Plato as everyone knows vir-

---

9 Herbert Agar, Milton and Plato, Princeton, 1928, 30-32.
tually identified philosophy and Eros."\textsuperscript{10} This thought must have appealed to Milton, for in such a tradition, poetry and philosophy are closely united in spite of Plato's own repudiation of the poets. The dialect of love in Plato was a way of life, a metaphysics by which the philosopher, the \textit{lover of wisdom}, made his way to the one and the good. It was never intended to be a mask for the carnal practices which some have accused it of fostering. "Sex" had little room in Plato's ascent to eternal realms.\textsuperscript{11}

It will be well at the start to understand just what is meant by the doctrine of Eros in Plato. The following quotation summarizes quite well the salient elements of the doctrine as Plato really intended it to be understood and as Milton seems to have grasped it:

An important phase of Plato's psychology is the doctrine of Eros. Just as sense perception awakens the soul to the remembrance of pure ideas, of truths apprehended in a preexistent state, so the perception of sensuous beauty, which excites sense love, also revives in the soul the memory of ideal beauty contemplated in its former existence. These recollections of truth and beauty inspire a yearning for the higher life associated with the world of pure ideas. Thus sensuous love and the yearning for the beautiful and the good derive from one and the same basic impulse. The sensuous impulse which seeks the continued


\textsuperscript{11} Cf. G.M.A. Grube, \textit{Plato's Thought}, London, 1935. "Plato certainly deprecated intercourse between men, and forbids it explicitly. . . . He did not look with favor on heterosexuality either; what he disliked was sexual relations of any kind." 89 note.
existence of the species is, in its higher manifestation the craving for fame, the urge to create science, art, and human institutions. In yearning for the eternal values, the soul yearns for immortality. Indeed, these impulses are construed as evidence of the immortality of the soul, for what the soul passionately aspires to, must be obtainable.12

Such is the doctrine as presented in the Lysis, Phaedrus, and the Symposium. There is little reason to doubt that Milton read these three dialogues during his years of intense study at Horton from 1632 to 1638, and that by careful study he penetrated to the essence of the doctrine of Eros. But before looking at some of the Platonic elements in Milton's early poetry and other writings, it will be well to recall briefly how one great mind influences another. It is not a matter of tracing isolated passages or cataloguing explicit references. The real influence of Plato upon Milton is to be found in the underlying spirit which permeates the poet's thought and writing. In seeking to find the Platonic influence we must remember that "the spirit of the whole is more likely to remain with him than a series of excerpts."13

In the early poems the references to Platonic thought are rather conventional, but as the problem of chastity and of love comes to the fore in Milton's life we find the doctrine of


Bros take on a richer meaning and prominence, so that by the time he wrote Comus, and especially by the time of the 1637 revision, he seems to have adhered entirely to this idea. In the poem, "On the Death of a Fair Infant Dying of a Cough (1625)" Milton muses in typical Platonic fashion about the immortality of the soul:

Could Heav'n for pittie thee so strictly doom?  
Oh not for something in thy face did shine  
Above mortalitie that shew'd thou wast divine.

Tell me bright spirit where e'er thou hoverest  
Whether above that high first-moving sphere  
Or in the Elisian fields (if such here were.)

Similar passages are to be found in Lycidas (1637) and Il Penseroso (1631-1633).

The poem, "De Idea Platonica Quemadmodum Aristoteles Intellexit (1628)," is an obvious example of the Platonic influence. But even in less obvious passages we find the basic Platonic notions. In the Italian poem, "Diodati, E Te'l Diro," Milton speaks of "ma sotto nova idea/ Pellegrina bellezza che'l cuor bea." Milton is using the word "idea" in its Platonic sense here. The young lady mentioned in the poem is, as it were, the form of beauty itself.

In the ode, "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity (1629)," we find a significant reference to the doctrine of love which, while it was also a frequent Renaissance allusion, seems

---

15 Lines 6-7.
to play a major role in Milton's turning toward the doctrine of love which was the formula by which the soul was prepared to behold the celestial vision. Milton seems to speak of this vision when he says:

Ring out ye Crystall spheres,
Once bless our human ears,
   (if ye have the power to touch our senses so)
And let your silver chime
Move in melodious time.16

This mention of the celestial spheres anticipates the doctrine which Milton develops more fully in "At a Solemn Musick (1632)."
In the latter poem Milton speaks of "those just spirits that wear victorious palms" who are able to hear the celestial music.
The poet prays:

That we on Earth with undiscording voice
May rightly answer that melodious noise;
As once we did, till disproportion'd sin
Jarr'd against natures chime, and with harsh din
Broke the fair musick that all creatures made
To their great Lord 17

Commenting on these lines Tillyard says:

Milton had supposed that a heart of snowy purity could hear the music of the Spheres, but his music is no other than the song sung by the one hundred and forty-four thousand men in heaven, and chastity was the condition of their learning it. It follows then that chastity is the magic means of hearing planetary music likewise, the means of supernatural powers in this life.18

16 Lines 125-129.
17 Lines 17-22.
During the years at Horton Milton lived a life of rigid self-discipline. He had chosen celibacy for the time being in order that he might devote all his forces to the pursuit of learning. It was during these years that he must have resolved to devote himself to his calling as a serious poet, although his dream was not to materialize fully until after the Puritan Rebellion. Hanford points out that as far back as 1629 there are intimations of his desire to produce something more serious and lasting than amatory lyrics.19

At first this notion of chastity was probably quite negative. He was too busy to marry, and fornication, of course, was something sinful.20 But such a notion of chastity could not long satisfy a young man of Milton's vitality and idealistic yearnings. What could be more logical, then, than to find in Plato's doctrine of Eros an answer to his problem. All this of course would come to him gradually, even as we find gradually increasing references to it in his poetry.

If he would penetrate to a knowledge of goodness and beauty, then his heart and soul must be prepared—he must be attuned to the harmonious music of the heavenly spheres. Be-


20 E.M.W. Tillyard, Milton, 381.
cause of his own strict view of chastity and his desire to remain free from the ties of marriage in order to devote himself fully to study, it seems likely that he tended to identify chastity with virginity. Chastity of itself does not mean the same thing as virginity, for even a married person must remain chaste according to his or her state. But in Comus there is little ground for making any distinction between the two virtues.21

In a famous passage from the Apology Milton himself tells us how he suffered a change of heart and turned from the lighter to the more serious business of life, and in so doing found the rich meaning of Plato’s thought:

Thus from the Laureat fraternity of Poets, riper years, and the ceaseless round of study and reading led me to the shady spaces of philosophy, but chiefly to the divine volumes of Plato and his equal Xenophon. Where if I should tell ye what I learnt, of chastity and love, I mean that which is truly so, whose charming cup is only virtue which she bares in her hand to those who are worthy. The rest are cheated with a thick intoxicating potion which a certain Sorceresse the abuser of loves name carries about; and how the first and chiefeft office of love, begins and ends in the soul, producing those happy twins of her divine generation, knowledge and vertue, with such abstracted sublimities as these, it might be worth your listening, Readers. . .22

21 Arthur Barker, The Puritan Dilemma, 64.

Hanford says that Milton is referring to his years at Horton in this passage, and that it in no way conflicts with his later views on marriage.23

In a letter to Charles Diodati in 1637, while Milton was still at Horton, the poet again manifest his new understanding of Plato:

For though I do not know what else God may have decreed for me, this certainly is true; He has instilled into me, if into anyone, a vehement love of the beautiful. Not so diligently is Ceres, according to the Fables, said to have sought her daughter Proserpina, as I seek for this idea of the beautiful, as if for some glorious image, throughout all the shapes and forms of things ("for many are the shapes of things divine"); day and night I search and follow its lead eagerly as if by certain clear traces. Whence it happens that if I find anywhere one who, despising the warped judgment of the public, dares to feel and speak and be that which the greatest wisdom throughout all ages has taught to the best, I shall cling to him immediately from a kind of necessity.24

In another and yet more revealing letter to a friend Milton defends his way of life at Horton. From Milton's reply it would seem that his friend had asked him why he did not make a choice between marriage or the ministry. The poet says that his decision to remain in seclusion is not due to too much love of learning or to any natural proneness to celibacy. No, the real reason is that he is preparing himself for immortal fame and he must make a sacrifice, must consecrate himself to his

24 Prose Works, Letter 8, 326-327.
work. And it would seem that he found some hidden strength to aid him in his quest for knowledge. For neither the desire for marriage nor the possibility of immediate acclaim can deter him from his goal. He ends his brief defense thus:

Lastly this Love of Learning as it is a pursuit of something good, it would sooner follow the more excellent and supreme good known and presented and so be quickly diverted from the empty and fantastick chase of shadows and notions to the solid good flowing from due and tymely obedience to that command in the gospel set out by the terrible seasing of him who hid his talent. 25

From what has been said and from the letters just quoted, it can be legitimately concluded that Milton was well acquainted with Plato's doctrine of Eros by the time he wrote Comus in 1634. Irene Samuel, however, does not believe that Milton had broken with conventional Platonism when he wrote the masque. She agrees quite readily that by 1637 Milton was under the influence of the doctrine of Eros and had evolved a similar theory to suit his own needs. She admits that "if this doctrine were simply the arming of the heart against Cupid's shafts, we might suppose that the experience had preceded and even prompted the writing of Comus, where we could find fully expressed the new understanding." 26 She apparently attributes


26 Irene Samuel, "Milton's References to Plato and Socrates," SP, XLI, 1944, 55. She says that Milton was probably very familiar with the dialogues even during his university days.
the passage in the *Apology* to a later date than the Horton period.

By way of conclusion we can offer a few observations on this opinion. First of all, the passage in the *Apology* cannot be definitely assigned to any particular year. Relying on Hanford's view and the evidence presented here it seems safer and more satisfactory to say that Milton had worked out his doctrine on chastity early in the Horton period so that by 1634 he was ready to expound it when the occasion offered itself. The addition made in 1637 clarifies but does not make any essential changes in the original meaning of the masque. When Miss Samuel says that *Comus* does not manifest a Platonic doctrine which has been worked out completely, she seems to omit an important point.

Milton himself, it must be remembered, made important changes in the text of *Comus* before it was published. There are six texts including the Bridgewater MS. C.S. Lewis in a careful study of the manuscripts points out the changes Milton introduced between 1634 and 1645.27 The additions and substitutions are, significantly, not in the dramatic but the ethical direction. The major changes had been made by 1637, so that it seems likely that he had evolved his doctrine of love some-

---

time before that date, even though he did not incorporate it wholly into the 1634 version of the masque. The development of a man's ideas does not take place overnight. It is a slow process of organic growth which is the result of months and even years of reflective thought. But, it can be added, that even though the original text of Comus contains the essential notions of the doctrine as shall be shown later on, the additions made between 1634 and 1637 show that Milton held the doctrine with greater confidence and clarity of mind as the years passed.

Such then was the influence of Platonism on the young poet during the years at Horton. Possessed with a great desire to study and prepare himself for his calling, he found a need for some philosophy of life that would strengthen him in his choice and give him a valid argument with which he could defend his choice against the queries of relatives and friends who were urging him to consider marriage and an active life. Chastity became for him more than a negative virtue. As was shown, Milton seems to identify chastity with virginity making a positive virtue of it. If he would attain his goal, he must consecrate himself, set himself aside for this holy task of striving for the knowledge of the good and the beautiful. In his youthful enthusiasm he may even, for a time, have intended celibacy for life.28

As will be seen in the interpretation of *Comus*, Milton made a mistake which is characteristic of his "darling," Plato. He merged the moral and intellectual virtues because of the implied identification of the moral and intellectual order in Plato's philosophy. Plato had said that no man who knows the good can fail to choose it, for knowledge is virtue.29

In the Platonic doctrine of Eros Milton found the perfect model on which to pattern his own intellectual and moral life; and we can see now why Milton substituted love for knowledge as the mainspring of human joy, and how the theory of love which he learned from Plato led him to go beyond the Platonic scale of values. Since love is the moving impulse, without which man rests content in his limited self, it becomes the source of every good, as it is the power which moves man to reach for the good that is not in him. And reason being the faculty that recognizes good, love is rational, beginning in the soul and desiring what will perfect it. This much Milton could learn from Diotima and Socrates: knowledge is the effect of love in action.30

But Milton and the Cambridge Platonists were not the only people interested in Plato's philosophy. In order to round out the setting in which *Comus* was written it will now be

29 Socrates offers this as part of his defense in the *Apology*, that he went around trying to get others to know the good and do it. This notion of virtue is quite in keeping with the "sage and serious doctrine of virginity" which is the theme of *Comus*. Virtue has a hidden power which is intrinsic to it. The man who knows the value of virginity will be chaste and will not be shaken from his ivory tower. Such a belief, as sad experience witnesses, is morally unsound.

necessary to consider a less sincere but no less interesting interpretation of Plato's doctrine of Eros.
CHAPTER III

FACING THE DILEMMA

Leaving Milton for the time being sequestered in the peaceful atmosphere of Horton, let us turn to another and more lively setting. The people upon whom we are now focusing our attention also manifested a great interest in the doctrine of Platonic love. But Platonic love as the young Milton understood it, and as it was interpreted by the men and women at the court of Charles I was as different as day from night. The latter was a cult of love which Plato would never have claimed to have fostered.¹

In an attempt to refine the boorish and uncouth manners of the English court, Henrietta Maria had introduced a system of Platonic love which she brought with her from her native France. The young bride of Charles I had been raised as a précieuse in an atmosphere of exaggerated refinement and artificiality. In 1615, when Henrietta Maria was but six years old, the Marquise of Rambouillet established her celebrated salon in direct protest against the crude speech and conduct at the French court, comparable to that of the contemporary

¹ G.F. Sensabaugh, "Platonic Love and the Puritan Rebellion," SP, XXXVII, July, 1940, 57.
court of James the First.\textsuperscript{2} 

It is easy to see that a woman of such delicacy and refinement as Henrietta Maria could not endure the grossness which the court of Charles I inherited from James I. Soon after the young queen's arrival in England the system was flourishing. Of course it met with the ready approval of the courtiers, and of Charles who was a rather sentimental fellow with "a romantic passion for women in general and for his French wife in particular."\textsuperscript{3} Needless to say, this coterie of lovers had to face the severe censure of the Puritan divines who railed against these unorthodox rites and beliefs.

Although this new school of Platonic love should not be confused with the courtly love of the previous centuries in England and France, it manifested many similarities and employed a rhetorical jargon which was not unlike the old courtly love terminology. The ladies and gentlemen of the court spent endless hours in trifling debates over the nature of love and took great pleasure in foppish court compliments. The men called the ladies "saints" and extolled their beauty, chastity, and love. "They gravely discussed the pure state of their souls, their un tarnished minds, and the immortality of such

\textsuperscript{2} Jefferson B. Fletcher, \textit{The Religion of Beauty} etc., 172.

\textsuperscript{3} Ibid., 167.
as theirs."4

Masking their dubious morals under Plato's doctrine of love, they developed a system of ethics and casuistry which was often self-contradictory. Sensabaugh gives a concise enumeration of their beliefs as gathered from some of the court plays and daily discussions: (1) Beauty and goodness are one and the same thing; (2) Beautiful women command worship; (3) Love for beautiful women is chaste and pure; (4) Such love is divine and all-powerful.5

This transcendence of beauty allows a neat bit of casuistry. For a woman was beautiful and all-good and consequently whatever she did was good. There was no room for sin in such a system as this. As a result the courtiers tended to place a halo around mental adultery and incest, and to build a false idealization of love. The rules of the court love coterie became more sacrosanct than the dictates of morality:

The concept that Platonic lovers are released from social responsibility is the most curious and slippery of all the ideas springing from the glorification of beauty and love. The ethics of the cult moved around this central point; to sin is to break the laws of the cult, not of convention.6

4 G.F. Sensabaugh, "The Milieu of Comus," SP, XLI, April, 1944, 240.

5 Ibid., 240.

Plato's doctrine, it must be admitted, tends to this wide interpretation because of its ambiguous language. And, while Plato meant earthly love to be a mere stepping stone to that heavenly Aphrodite, experience has born out the fact that many followers of Plato are stranded on the stepping stone, either by design or weakness. In William Cartwright's *The Royall Slave* the cuckold husband of Atossa can find no moral defection in his wife's marital infidelity:

Thou art still vertuous my Atossa, still
Transparent as thy Crystall, but more spotlesse.
Fools that we are, to thinke the Eye of Love
Must always looke on us. The Vine that climbs
By conjugal embracements 'bout the Elme,
May with a ring or two perhaps encircle
Some neighboring bough, and yet this twining prove
But the Offence, the Charity of Love. 7

Another fair damsel in the same play takes a more sober and realistic outlook on the love cult; and when she recognizes the intentions of several of her lovers who are trying to win her according to the rules of love, she cries out to her rescuer:

What they stile Love-Sport only, and misname
An arguing out of Plato, would have prov'd
A true and down-right Shape, if that your presence
Had not become our rescue. 8

---

8 Ibid., 242.
By 1634 this system of love had firmly established itself in the court. Even the king and queen occasionally took part in the court masques, which, of course, dealt largely with Platonic love. There were usually two royal masques during the year; the king would present a masque in honor of the queen on Twelfth Night, and the queen would return the compliment on Shrove Tuesday. These masques were full of arguments and debates similar to those which were held daily in the court to while away the idle hours. As the Puritan ire grew to a greater intensity, the masques began to mirror the conflict between the court and the religious leaders of the day.

There is good evidence, too, which suggests that some of the courtiers and ladies actually practiced this system of ethics. Contemporary writers record illegitimate births and other Suetonian tidbits gleaned from an intimate knowledge of court life. This, of course, served to kindle even more the righteous wrath of the Puritans. It would be bad enough to make a plaything of the love cult, but to put it into practice was the height of royal corruption and popish degeneracy.

---


The behavior at the court was a living contradiction of everything the Puritans held dear and sacred. The divines mounted their pulpits and began to cast their oratorical darts in the direction of the enemy camp. Warnings and pleas were made to the congregations to keep themselves far away from this false and unnatural morality. If the courtiers went to one extreme, the divines certainly went to the other in painting the transitory nature of earthly beauty in repulsive, albeit forceful language. Sermon after sermon was delivered and then published bearing such ominous titles as: The Christian Conflict: A Treatise Shewing the Difficulties and Duties of this Conflict, With Armour, and Special Graces to be Exercised by Soldiers; or, A Warning to Come Out of Babylon; or, The Arraignment of the Whole Creature at the Barre of Religion, Reason, and Experience; or, The Honor of Chastity: A Sermon Made and Preached.

It is easy to see why the Puritans attacked the theatre so bitterly and eventually closed it down after the Rebellion. For the player, never respected, became as early as 1630 the symbol of evil and hypocrisy. The royal court like the papal court in Rome was the "Scarlet Woman," the "whore of Babylon," who openly fostered the blatant sinfulness of the theatre. The Puritans went so far as to demand the departure of the queen and her group which was both Catholic and sinful.

12 Ibid., 465-469, passim.
because they seduced the king and thereby committed high treason. 13

One must consider briefly the ideals which the Puritans cherished in order to understand fully their hatred for court manners and morals. The Puritans had their own views on marriage, the place of woman, and celibacy, which if they were not altogether free from rigorism were nevertheless superior to the ideals of the court people.

There was a great abundance of sermons preached on the value and meaning of marriage; and although the Puritans rebuked the promiscuity of the court, they tenaciously affirmed the obligations, rights, and bliss of connubial union. 14 The divines considered the false standards of marriage even worse than occasional "tricks of the flesh." They attacked the queen's love coterie because it belittled marriage and raised woman far above her due station. 15

In the court, because of the ideal of female beauty of both body and soul, the woman was raised to an exalted position, as was already shown, and achieved more independence and

13 Ibid., 475.

14 William Haller, and Malleville Haller, "The Puritan Art of Love," 241. This article gives an excellent presentation of the Puritan views on marriage and celibacy.

dignity than the women in domesticated Puritan society. According to the divines a woman’s place was in the home, and it was her duty to submit and obey. Perhaps the courtiers dwelling in the pomp and luxury of court life could afford to indulge in that "higher love...which rests in passionless contemplation of womanly beauty."16 For the practical minded Puritan, however, a woman was meant to keep house, sew, cook, bear his children, and be his life-long partner in wedded bliss.

Flowing quite naturally from the Puritan views on marriage and their natural dislike for anything popish, was the attitude toward celibacy. Celibacy was a gift, and even for those who were blessed with continence, it was "not more holy than matrimony but more free from trouble."17 Hence anyone who was not devoting his life to the service of the gospel and did not feel that he was gifted with continence was expected to marry and fulfill the offices of marriage. This of course meant that marriage was the only course for women, men alone being left free to choose between a married or a single state. Even many of the divines were married men with large families. Saint Paul said that it was better to marry than to burn and hence the Puritans believed that marriage was divinely

16 J.B. Fletcher, The Religion of Beauty etc., 19.
ordained, "not for the pure enjoyment of mankind, however, but only as a remedy for lust." 

There was no concept of celibacy as it is understood by the Catholic Church. True, one would be presuming if he were to try to live a life of continence without the physical disposition or spiritual motive for it. But this does not imply that those who do choose a life of celibacy, say in the case of a consecrated religious, do so merely because they are "built" for such a life. Under the inspiration of a higher calling—and we have examples even in the purely natural order—a person can live a celibate life despite the pangs of the flesh. The point to be made is that Milton's desire for a celibate life could hardly have been in accord with his Puritan upbringing, and one must look elsewhere for his source of inspiration.

This chapter has shown the conflict between the morality and manners of the royal court and the Puritan ideals. How will this knowledge of the seventeenth-century social scene help the reader in understanding Comus? First of all, we have seen the social life of the times, and it is highly probable that Milton was keenly aware of this situation. Certainly a poet who later chastized the "blind mouths" of the

18 M.M. Knappen, Tudor Puritanism, 301.
corrupt clergy was conscious of this even more glaring conflict. Although Milton was comparatively secluded from society at Horton, he was by no means a hermit. He made trips to London and to the local book sellers where he probably bought and read many contemporary works of literature. Even if he did not read these plays and sermons, he would have at least heard of them.

Milton would have felt a great distaste for the morals of the love cult. He was by nature a very chaste and temperate man; and he, more than others, would appreciate the abuse of Plato's doctrine of love. In fact, "the theme of chastity was dear to his heart and he yearned to preach it,"19 But until 1634 no occasion seems to have offered itself. He knew that his message would fall on deaf ears if he gave it to the public, especially the court people sunk in that gross brutishness which made it impossible to hear the harmony of the celestial spheres; and even the upright Puritans would prove a hostile audience because of their views on marriage and celibacy.

As was seen in Chapter Two, some of his friends and relatives were beginning to wonder why he had chosen to close himself off from the world; and Milton may have well felt the need to present some defense of his way of life. Again, the

occasion which did finally offer itself, a masque to be presented at Ludlow Castle in honor of the Earl of Bridgewater and his family, was a fine opportunity to expound the doctrine to the people who most needed it, the youths and maidens of the fashionable society, who would themselves be instrumental in spreading the doctrine to other circles.  

Sensabaugh's terse summary of the picture bears quotation:

Thus during the first part of Milton's Horton vacation, issues of marriage and love received public attention through plays, sermons, and pamphlets; and the question which seemed most important centered on compliment, beauty in woman, and the status of marriage. Such a background appears peculiarly significant in view of the fact that at this very time Milton himself pondered marriage and the celibate life. His Puritan inheritance asked that he marry, but his dedication of time to serious study demanded that he forego the joys of conjugal life. He needed mightily an ideal which would support this un-Puritan step. Hence, as he read deeply in Plato and the scriptures, he grasped at the notion that those who held themselves untainted by woman developed powers unknown and incomprehensible to libertines or to those enjoying the connubial state; and so he set out to crystallize in Comus the sage and serious doctrine of virginity.  

Thus far we have seen the intellectual and social context in which Comus was written. Now we must turn to a brief study of the literature of the age to evaluate its influence on the masque.

20 Ibid., 81.
CHAPTER IV

WHAT NEVER YET WAS HEARD

The Attendant Spirit of Comus stood before an expectant audience at Ludlow Castle on Michaelmas Night in 1634 and told them that they were about to hear

What never yet was heard in Tale or Song
From old or modern bard in Hall, or Bower.1

Merritt Y. Hughes says that many romances and masques open with such a boast.2 For this reason he and many other commentators see little significance in the words of the Attendant Spirit. But a study of the sources which may have influenced the writing of Comus would seem to verify this boast.

Although there are striking similarities between Comus and the works of many of Milton's predecessors and contemporaries, none of these works can be said to have exerted a unique influence on the poem. We do indeed find the Circe myth in other writings and we can find Comus also, but not a Comus who bears the special significance attached to him by Milton. Other writers have treated of chastity, vice and virtue, and

1 Lines 44-45.
the like; but none of them have woven into their works the philosophical and ascetical doctrine that is found in *Comus*.

But a quick glance at the works from which Milton may—or may not—have drawn the material for his plot can, in some way, help us to understand better the meaning of the masque. By seeing what significance other writers attached to the Circe myth and Comus's band of revelers it will be possible to determine whether Milton was attempting to say the same thing, or whether he had ideas of his own which are not to be found in previous works. If the latter is true, then we must look elsewhere to find the man or men who influenced him. As was intimated in the previous chapters, the solution will ultimately be found in considering the influence of Platonism on the young poet. 3

Any study of Milton's sources, however, is rendered rather difficult by the broad learning and synthetic mind of the young poet. Spenser, Marlowe, and Shakespeare despite their highly individual styles, at times reflect the tone of some particular source. This is not so in Milton's verse. For "[w]herever Milton gets his material the result except in a few early pieces is simply John Milton." 4

Since his sources were so many and were so master-

---

3 Cf. Chapter Two.

fully integrated into his own pattern of thought and expression we can only consider here the more obvious and accepted sources. It would only be by the way of digression that we could tarry with such interesting parallels to Comus as Marlowe's Hero and Leander and Shakespeare's Venus and Adonis, Shakespeare's A Midsummer-Night's Dream, Fletcher's Faithful Shepherdess, and many others too numerous to mention.

The Circe myth itself goes back to Homer (Odyssey, Book X) and has always symbolized the degradation and enslavement brought about by lust and sensual indulgence. The figure of Comus is of a much later vintage. In Jonson's Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue, Comus appears as a glutton. But even here the resemblance does not go much further. When one considers the character of Comus as it is found in Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue and then as it appears in Milton's Comus with the latter's departure from much that was traditional in the court masque, it is hard to place these two works in the same category.

An obvious parallel, and one which no doubt was the immediate source of Milton's plot, is George Peele's Old Wives


6 John Arthos, On a Mask etc., 9-14.

7 Enid Welsford, The Court Masque, 316.
Tale. In this story two brothers go in search of their young sister, Delia, who has fallen into the clutches of an enchant-er. He gives her a magic potion and then attempts to seduce her. The brothers who come to the rescue also fall under the magic spell and after sundry unrelated episodes all three are finally released when the enchanter's glass is broken by the wife of an old man who earlier failed in an attempt to aid the two brothers.

One work alone represents the character of Comus in such a way that there can be little doubt that Milton read it. R.H. Singleton says that it is highly probable that in the Spring of 1634 Milton picked up a copy of *Comus*, a neo-Latin play written by one Erycius Puteanus (Hendrick Van der Putten). There are remarkable resemblances between the two works and it seems quite likely that Milton delineated the character of the post-classical god according to the lines of the Comus of Puteanus. This theory takes on even greater probability when we learn that in the Comus of Erycius Puteanus the god is depicted for the first time as a seducer.8

There is little variation either in external form or spirit between the invitational ode spoken by the two Comuses. Part of Puteanus' ode reads in translation:

Let him learn to make rich mouth
With delicate honey,
To endow his heart
With the moist delight of mellow wine:
Let him learn to beat the ground
With languorous step
Here one may bind around his head
A charming garland of dewy roses. 9

Milton's Comus says:

Meanwhile welcome joy and feast
Midnight shouts and revelry,
Tipsy Dance and Jollity
Braid your lock with rosy twine
Com, knit hands, and beat the ground,
In a light fantastick round. 10

Although the works are extremely similar, Milton has added something that is not in Puteanunus. Both men consider voluptuousness and sensuality by depicting a seducer who tempts young people to a life of pleasure and indulgence.11 But while Puteanunus' argument is entirely negative, Milton, contrary to the opinion of some critics, preaches a positive doctrine.

Spenser, of course, must always be mentioned when reference is made to Milton's literary sources. There is little difficulty in showing that Milton must have drawn some parts of his plot from the Faerie Queene, but a real problem arises

9 Ibid., quoting Puteanunus pp. 47-50, 955. The translation is evidently Singleton's, for he says that the original text was never translated into English, 950.

10 Lines 102-105, 143-144.

when we try to determine to what extent Spenser influenced the spirit and meaning of Comus. Both men were greatly influenced by Platonism, but, as we shall attempt to show, Milton’s Platonic doctrine at the time when he wrote Comus was radically different from key ideas in the Faerie Queene.\textsuperscript{12}

One of the major sources of Spenserian influence is found in the second book of the Faerie Queene, the Legend of Sir Guyon or Temperance. It is not difficult to see the parallel between Acrasia and the Bower of Bliss and Comus and his band of revelers in the enchanted palace. A.S.P. Woodhouse shows the significance of these parallels and points out that even the spirit of the two works is quite similar.\textsuperscript{13} Woodhouse says that both Milton and Spenser consider temperance in the order of nature, i.e., not on a religious or supernatural level.

It is difficult, however, to show that Spenser’s treatment of chastity had any real effect on Comus. In book three of the Faerie Queene Spenser also goes beyond the mere notion of temperance to the loftier theme of chastity. But the important thing about the doctrine of chastity in the two works is not their similarity but their striking dissimilarity.

Spenser’s chastity is one that is common to all men


\textsuperscript{13} A.S.P. Woodhouse, "The Argument of Comus," 55.
and women. For even married people must remain chaste accordant to their state in life. Whereas Milton's doctrine of chastity culminates in a doctrine of virginity, Spenser's doctrine of chastity is propounded with the idea in mind that it will eventually culminate in wedded love. Woodhouse explains that

Spenser's knight of chastity, the warrior maiden Britomart, is virginal, but by no means vowed to virginity: on the contrary, she is vowed to the love of one good man. . . . I am far from denying the influence of Christianity on Spenser's treatment of chastity; what he presents is in one aspect a Christian ideal of marriage, or of chastity culminating in marriage, and it is idle to try to approximate an ideal of chastity culminating in virginity. In Comus chastity is never, even by implication, viewed in connection with the wedded love which Milton was later to hail. It is here that Comus stands at its greatest difference from Paradise Lost, and at a distance almost as great from Book 3 of the Faerie Queene.14

How, then, did Milton go on to develop his own particular doctrine of chastity, a doctrine culminating in a sort of "consecrated" virginity? None of the other works considered even hint at such a doctrine, and as we have seen, Spenser presents a doctrine which is toto caelo different from Milton's.15 Again, the solution can only be found in an understanding of the influence of Plato's dialogues on Milton at the time when

14 Ibid., 59 passim.

15 For an excellent treatment of the radical difference between Miltonic and Spenserian Platonism, see J.S. Harrison's Platonism in English Poetry of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries, New York, 1903; especially 21-27; 40-47; 50-64.
he wrote Comus.

Woodhouse, however, offers a different solution to the problem. After showing that Milton's doctrine of chastity could not have come from Spenser he goes on to say that Milton's doctrine of chastity or virginity was developed under the influence of Christian thought. Woodhouse believes

[That Milton, at the time of writing Comus, set a marked value on the Christian conception of virginity. . . . . . . so marked a value that he was willing to regard it as the highest culmination of chastity and to use it as the symbol of chastity in the order of grace—as the highest culmination and symbol, but as the Apology. . . makes clear, not as co-extensive with the Christian teaching on chastity.]

This opinion labors under certain difficulties, however, which make it hard to accept. It would be false to deny all Christian influence in Comus, but the poem itself seems to disregard any religious motivation. No one would deny that the poem was written in a Christian context, for it is one thing to reject all religious truths and another to leave them out of consideration. There is more than a grain of truth in Saurat's observation: "There is little that is Christian about Comus."17

There is no need to differ entirely with Woodhouse, but some observations should be made. First of all, his pre-

vious statement about the Christian conception of virginity in Comus is gratuitously asserted. It seems, rather, that the apparent disunity of thought and marked absence of much Christian terminology which "forces us to read between the lines of Comus" seem to favor a non-Christian interpretation of the masque. Further, we must remember that the Christianity of Milton's day was strongly influenced by Puritan ideals; and virginity and celibacy were not numbered among those ideals.

One cannot deny that Milton's thought was in a state of flux when he wrote Comus, for as the years went on his views were modified until in Paradise Lost we find him extolling the virtues of the married state. During his early career it is safe to presume that the Platonic element—at least with regard to sex—was more prominent than in later years. Comus certainly seems to bear out this supposition.

Too much in Comus—the imagery, choice of words, and especially the thought content—militates against an interpretation in the light of Christian theology. The virginity inspired by Comus is intellectual rather than devotional, natural rather than supernatural.

The key to the meaning of Comus lies in an understanding of Milton's interpretation of Plato. Certainly Milton

19 Cf. Chapter Three.
Christianized Plato enough to make God in some vague way the One and Beautiful. But always for Milton love of beauty is the conscious activity of a contemplative mind rather than the pouring out of the soul's passion in reverent adoration. . . . Beauty is an idea to be known in the soul by him who seeks for it among the beautiful objects of the world of sense; its pursuit is an intellectual quest of a philosophic mind. 20

Don Cameron Allen in a most unsympathetic treatment of *Comus* voices a common opinion when he says there is no compromise or even integration of the meaning of the poem. 21 He concludes that Milton failed on both scores: both the artistic unity and the moral doctrine are lacking. If one tries to fuse nature and grace in *Comus* there is bound to be a difficulty in presenting a unified interpretation of the poem. And it is precisely for this reason that it seems better to interpret the poem in the light of natural ethics and Milton's unique view on celibacy and virginity.

The preceding chapters of this thesis have presented ample evidence that Milton felt strongly about this doctrine of chastity during his early years. And this doctrine contains much that is Platonic both in name and spirit. Why then should he not attempt to explain this doctrine when the favorable opportunity presented itself?

From the matter presented here it is obvious that no

one could deny Woodhouse's interpretation of the poem, and any attempt to do so would be foolish. Woodhouse has written an excellent treatment of the poem that would be hard to surpass, but his assertion that Milton has conceived his notion of virginity as being the culmination of chastity in the order of grace seems unnecessary and not too well verified.\(^{22}\)

It seems more likely, in view of the Platonism of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, that Milton was attempting to give a rational foundation for chastity and virginity. Since there is no explicit mention of religious experience in Comus, and since, on the other hand, frequent allusions to the innate power of virginity are made, the poem may be an example of ratio quaerens intellectum. For one of the greatest effects of Renaissance Platonism on Christian thought was the introduction of an excessive amount of rationalism.

Be that as it may, Comus does lend itself to an adequate and satisfying interpretation if we take it to be Milton's defense of chastity, a sort of Platonized virginity. And if the historical context seems to favor such an interpretation one can ask for nothing more. Before proceeding to the interpretation of the poem, the main points of the previous chapters can be briefly summarized.

---

\(^{22}\) Tillyard says Woodhouse interprets the closing lines of the poem too strictly according to the grace theme. He says Milton is merely stressing the freedom which virtue itself gives. "The Action of Comus," PLS, XXVIII, 36.
A study of the intellectual context in which *Comus* was written revealed the strong Platonic influence on the young Milton, and the poet's own natural propensity for a life of study and celibacy. Because his friends and relatives were urging him to choose a profession and get married, he needed some way to defend his choice of remaining in the cloistered atmosphere of Horton.

But two factors in the contemporary social scene would have rendered his presentation somewhat difficult. He had to take care in propounding his own doctrine of Platonic love lest he become identified with the court Platonists and their love coteries. This difficulty is avoided by showing the need for continence and temperance. The second difficulty, the Puritan disapproval of celibacy and virginity, necessitated a convincing and enthusiastic defense of that virtue in its own right.

None of Milton's predecessors attempted any such defense of chastity. And while he borrowed elements of his plot from various writers, only in Plato would he have found a doctrine that germinated his own peculiar ideas on the subject. For in the Platonic scheme, celibacy was a part of that natural asceticism which found little room for sexual love, be it good, bad, or indifferent. True, sense objects were meant to be springboards to the higher realms of truth and beauty, but alas, only springboards to be eschewed when the soul was able
to take flight and ascend to high mountain peaks of contemplation.23

Christianity is ever in the background of Comus, compelling Milton, especially in his use of allusions, to bridge somewhat the gap between philosophy and revelation. The theological doctrine of grace is present, but inactive; and it never really plays a significant role in the poem. The philosophical quest of beauty—both intellectual and moral (Milton tends to indentify the two as Plato did)—and the preparation required for this noble task constitute the theme of Comus.

Virginity was not an end in itself for Milton, it was rather a means of preparing himself, a necessary price to be paid in order to achieve his much desired goal. In the concept of virginity are contained two ideas, dedication and sacrifice. There is a dedication to a higher cause, a focusing of the mind and heart on a prize that could only be won at the sacrifice of the pleasures of the flesh. The young poet had found a goal worthy of all his effort and interest. For Milton was so sensitive to the power of beauty "that nothing could come between it and the soul. To Milton beauty wore an invisible grace, before which all must give way."24

23 J.S. Harrison, Platonism in English Poetry, 50.
24 Ibid., 64.
CHAPTER V

AN EXPLICATION OF THE MASQUE

With the opening lines of the Attendant Spirit's introduction Milton sweeps us up into the celestial realms and evokes a mood of solemnity and grandeur which pervades the entire masque. And although the listener knows in the back of his mind that Jove is really the God of the Christian dispensation, it is not difficult to slip into the Platonic and almost pagan spirit of the Spirit's greeting:

Before the starry threshold of Jove's Court
My mansion is, where those immortal shapes
Of bright aereal Spirits live insphear'd
In Regions milde of calm and serene Ayr,
Above the smoak and stirr of this dim spot,
Which men call Earth, and with low-thoughted care
Confin'd, and pester'd in this pin-fold here,
Strive to keep up a frail, and Feaverish being
Unmindfull of the crown that Vertue gives
After this mortal change, to her True Servants
Amongst the enthron'd gods on Sainted seats.  

The Attendant Spirit says he comes from a spirit world, a world where the soul is free from oppressive and confining cares of this material world of the senses. "Immortal shapes" and "insphear'd" are reminiscent of the Platonic

---

1 Cf., for example, "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity."

2 Lines 1-11.
world of the spirit, that vague and unnamed realm where the soul goes after it has been released from its imprisonment in the body. The reference to the world of Ideas (immortal shapes) which are insphered in the upper regions is quite Platonic; "insphear'd" seems to express the order and harmonious existence of the Ideas in the true and perfect world.3

Milton calls the earth a "pin-fold." Plato also speaks of the earth as a hollow place of confinement. He calls it τὰ κοῖνα, a word which is aptly rendered by the English "pin-fold."4 The image is that of brute animals huddled in a pound or keep.

A further element of Platonic doctrine is the forgetfulness of the embodied souls that grope through their earthly existence. According to Plato's theory of knowledge learning was the process of remembering all that was forgotten when the soul was made to enter the body. Because of the sensual and degrading nature of the body the soul tends to be "unmindful" of those things which are important for its own good.


4 "That which we call the earth is only one of the many hollows wherein collect the mists and waters and the thick lower air; but the true earth is above, and in a finer and subtler element," Phaedo, 109B. All the quotations from Plato are taken from The Dialogues of Plato, translated by B. Jowett, 4 Vols., fourth edition (revised), Oxford, 1953.
The first hint of Christian doctrine is given when the Attendant Spirit mentions the "Sainted seats" which Saint John describes. But the phrase also allows a definitely Platonic interpretation; and it is not impossible that Milton, in an attempt to Christianize Plato is referring to Plato's own idea of the afterlife.

The emphasis which Milton places on virtue is worth noting. It is virtue itself which gives the crown of glory after death ("mortal change"). Much of the meaning of Comus depends on the understanding of what Milton refers to each time he uses "virtue." The sense here seems to be more Platonic than Christian, for although virtue is of prime necessity for man's moral rectitude, it is God who gives the crown of glory, according to the merits won by virtuous living. For Plato, however, virtue itself (\(\alpha\rho\varepsilon\gamma\nu\)) was an inner power which enabled the soul to transcend the shadows and images of earthly existence. It was a "divine instinct" which inspired men to noble words and deeds.

But why has the Attendant Spirit troubled himself to

5 Rev. iv, 4.

6 Speaking of the souls after their release from the body Plato says: "And if the inhabitants dwell on the shore of the sea of the air, others in islets of the blest, and they hold converse with the gods, and behold the sun, moon and stars as they truly are, and their other blessedness is of a piece with this." Phaedo, illA.

7 Meno, 99-110
come down to this valley of mists and darkness? Because he knows that there are some who are not unmindful of virtue's crown:

Yet som there be that by due steps aspire
To lay their just hands on that Golden Key
That ope's 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. 8

In the Cambridge manuscript the Attendant Spirit is called a "daemon." According to Plato the Sá'novés were inferior gods who guided and directed the lives of men on earth. Socrates had his daemon which in the context of the Apology seems to have been the voice of his conscience. The Attendant Spirit plays a role similar to Socrates' daemon. He possesses no magical powers, but he is always on hand to give just the right advice.

Would it be reading too much into the lines just quoted to say that Milton speaks through the Attendant Spirit? Milton has come from the seclusion of Horton to present to his audience a message of deep significance to those who aspire by due step to follow the path of virtue. As was shown earlier Milton had good reason to expound his doctrine at this time, and the words of the Attendant Spirit seem to breathe Milton's own state of mind. He had found the Golden Key and

8 Lines 12-17.
in the course of the evening's entertainment he is going to share his treasure with the audience. For them alone, far from the influence of London and the court, is his message meant, not for the deaf ears of the intemperate and incontinent throngs of lords and ladies who immerse themselves in false pleasures. The very tone of lines 16-17 betrays the subtle pride and moral self-righteousness which is so noticeable in the poet's life.

In these lines it becomes clear that Milton is consciously presenting an argument which is the central theme of the poem. The "Golden Key" is the doctrine of virginity. The Attendant Spirit has come to help three children lost in a dark forest. In leading the children to their parents safely, the Spirit and the other characters of the masque will reveal Milton's message. The tone of the masque has been set. The theme is serious, and, contrary to the usual masque form, didactic. It would be hard to imagine the serious and practical-minded Milton doing otherwise.⁹

After announcing his purpose, the Attendant Spirit goes on to set the scene for the coming adventure. "A Noble Peer of mickle trust and power" has just been appointed as Lord President of Wales and the bordering counties. His fair offspring, a daughter and two sons, are coming to the new

---

estate. But their way lies through the "perplext path" of these dreary woods. Accordingly, the Attendant Spirit has been sent by Jove to guide the children on their way.

The real cause of danger is soon revealed in the person of Comus. Milton spoke the truth when he said his tale never yet was heard or sung, for Comus's genealogy is the poet's own concoction. The Circe myth had long symbolized lust and sensual indulgence; but by introducing Bacchus Milton adds a new ingredient to an old recipe. Since Comus is the offspring of Circe and Bacchus, he symbolizes not only lustfulness but also the spirit of revelry and drunkenness. Yet he takes after his mother for the most part.10 But how has Comus, a Grecian deity, come to be in the forests of Wales? Has he come from afar? Yes, he has come from Spain and France where he had spent the time of his youth "Roving the Celtick and Iberian fields."11

The Platonic love in vogue at the royal court had its origins in Spain and France. The French queen, Henrietta Maria, herself had brought the coterie along with her to England.12 Comus, then, represents in spirit and action the royal court and its way of life. The Attendant Spirit tells

---

10 Line 57.
11 Line 60.
12 Cf. Chapter Three.
in typically Platonic fashion how the soul is enslaved in the body which gives in to sensual desires. This idea is represented symbolically in the disfigurement which the magic liquor works in the divine character of the soul and this disfigurement is visible in the countenance. 13

Comus next appears with a charming rod in one hand and his glass in the other. Around him throng a riotous crowd of followers with the heads of monsters and the bodies of men and women. These are the intemperate ones whom Comus has enchanted and subjected to his magic power. Comus begins with a typical masque song. He salutes the evening star, the symbol of oncoming night and darkness.

He invites his band to join in "Midnight shouts and revelry." Comus represents the spirit of the court and possibly he is chiding the rigorism and rebukes of the Puritans when he says:

Rigor now is gone to bed,  
And Advice with scrupulous head,  
Strict Age, and sower Severity,  
With their grave Saws in slumber ly. 14

This interpretation takes on fuller significance as Comus adds that this revelry is justified because:

We that are of purer fire,  
Imitate the Starry Quire  
Who in their nightly watchfull Sphears,  

13 Lines 68-77.  
14 Lines 107-110.
Lead in swift round the Months and Years.\textsuperscript{15}

Already Comus begins to apply the casuistry that was characteristic of many of the court masques and plays. By saying that he and his band are made of that "purer fire" Comus is trying to divinize his actions by having recourse to a bogus Platonism.\textsuperscript{16}

But his casuistry is not too convincing, for he is forced to admit that his deeds are only performed beneath the protective pall of night:

\begin{quote}
Tis onely day-light that makes Sin,
Which these dun shades will ne're report.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

This invocation of Cotyttto relates the revelries of Comus and his band to obscene rites and midnight orgies which were held in the goddess' honor.\textsuperscript{18} If Milton is here referring to the conduct at the court, he is using strong words to express his feelings. The picture is one of vice, unnatural practices, and moral corruption.

Comus's song is interrupted by the entrance of The Lady. By his magic power he perceives that she who approaches is a virgin. And he boasts that he shall soon overcome her

\textsuperscript{15} Lines 111-114.
\textsuperscript{16} Cf. \textit{Timaeus}, 40.
\textsuperscript{17} Lines 126-127.
\textsuperscript{18} Lines 129 \textit{et seq.}
will by guile and deceit. He casts a magic spell in the air to deceive her bodily eyes. To blind the eyes of her soul he proposes his specious reasoning:

I under fair pretence of friendly ends,
And well plac't words of glozing courtesie,
Baited with reasons not unpleasible,
Wind me into the easie-hearted man,
And hug him into snares.

Here again is an obvious reference to the court in the phrase "glozing courtesie." By courtesy is meant the code of courtly manners and noblesse obligé. But by contemporary implication courtesy was associated with the Platonic love cult.

The Lady enters and reveals her predicament in a soliloquy. She has been separated from her two brothers who left her to go in search of berries for her to eat. And now as she wanders alone in the dark forest her mind is troubled with forbodings and hallucinations which are the effect of Comus's witchery. She is frightened by the sound of the midnight revelers she has just now heard and cries:

A thousand fantasies
Begin to throng into my memory
Of calling shapes, and beckning shadows dire,
And airy tongues, that syllable mens names
On Sands and Shoars, and desert Wildernesess.

But for the virtuous mind "that ever walks attended/

19 Lines 160-164.
20 Lines 204-208.
By a strong siding champion Conscience (210-211)" there is no cause to fear. At this point in the poem the theme becomes quite clear and the Platonic character of Milton’s doctrine is strongly emphasized. For conscience is virtue’s champion just as it was for Plato.

The Lady then salutes Faith, Hope, and Chastity. Even the seventeenth-century listener must have been startled by this unorthodox substitution of Chastity for Charity in the trio of the Theological Virtues. Surely such an obvious change as this can leave little room for doubt concerning the central theme of the poem. The Lady dismisses Faith and Hope with a brief salutation, but to Chastity she says most eloquently:

And thou unblemish’t form of Chastity,
I see ye visibly and now beleev
That he, 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 unassail’d. 21

Merritt Y. Hughes, commenting on this passage, says that Milton put Chastity in the place of the third Theological Virtue of Charity because "he thought of that virtue in Platonic terms, as the love of the Supreme Good which chastens all inferior passions." 22

22 Merritt Y. Hughes, Paradise Regained etc., 231, note.
A further element of Platonism is manifested in the **visible form** of chastity. The very form of chastity, that power or virtue which enables one to strive toward beauty itself, is revealed to the virtuous mind of The Lady. But who is this "glistring guardian (218)" who would be sent if need were? It may well be the Attendant Spirit, for "glistring" well describes one garbed in "pure Ambrosial weeds (16)" and "sky robes spun out of Iris Woff (83)." And has the Spirit not already declared that:

>When any favored of high Jove,  
>Chances to passe through this adventrous glade,  
>Swift as the sparkle of a glancing Star,  
>I shoot from Heav'n to give him safe convoy,  
>As now I do... .

It is the voice of conscience and the inner power of chastity that will preserve The Lady from harm. Reassured by this fact she breaks forth into a song in honor of sweet Echo, asking the nymph to help her find her two brothers. The song serves as a point of rest after The Lady's serious pondering and makes a smooth transition to Comus's next lines.

The enchanter is astonished at the beauty and the hidden power of this Lady and asks himself:

>Can any mortal mixture of Earths mould

---

23 In the *Phaedrus*, 254, Plato describes the vision of Beauty and the myth of the charioteer who beholds the visible form of Beauty itself.

24 Lines 78-81.
Breath such divine enchanting ravishment?
Sure something holy lodges in her brest,
And with these raptures moves the vocal air
To testify his hidd’n residence.  

He determines that The Lady shall be his queen, that
he shall subject to his magic power this fair beauty. Dis-
guised as a shepherd he approaches and greets her with exces-
sive praise. The Lady, however, is the picture of modesty and
self-containment. Her only request is that he help her find
her brothers.

By introducing alternating lines of question and
answer, known as stichomythia, a device which gives curious
excitement to this encounter between Beauty and the Beast, Mil-
ton sets the mood for the debate which is to follow.

Comus begins to reveal the full wickedness of his
character. He is obviously lying to the Lady when he tells her
where her brothers are, for he has made no mention of them be-
fore this; and his real purpose is to lead her off to his en-
chanted palace. His line convinces The Lady and one wonders
where her "glistening guardian" is as she says trustingly:

Shepherd, I take thy word,
And trust thy honest offer'd courtesie,
Which oft is sooner found in lowly sheds
With smoaky rafters, than in tapestry Halls
And Courts of Princes, where it first was nam'd
And yet is most pretended.  

26 Lines 320-325.
But she is not yet in real danger, for her virtue is an interior power which has not yet been challenged. She prays that Providence will make her strength equal to any trial that may come.

The allusion to court life in these lines is again obvious. In the poet's mind the false courtesy of the court is only a facade which hides the intemperate conduct of the lords and ladies. Courtesy which should signify noble and gracious conduct is now synonymous with immoral practices and deceitful casuistry.

The scene changes now to the two brothers who are in another part of the forest looking for their sister. The Elder Brother asks the moon and the stars to give forth their light to dissipate the darkness and chaos of the forest. The two brothers appear to be just as lost as their sister. The Second Brother also asks for some light or sound to guide their wandering steps, and reveals his fear for their sister's safety. He speculates as to her whereabouts:

What if in wild amazement, and affright,
Or while we speak, within the direfull grasp
Of Savage hunger, or of Savage heat? 27

He is the more realistic of the two, and less trustful of the inner power of this mortal clay. In the last line he hints that his fear is for his sister's virginity.

27 Lines 355-357.
The Elder Brother rebukes his unfounded anxiety and expresses his own confidence in his sister's virtue:

I do not think my sister so to seek,
Or so unprincipl'd in virtues book
And the sweet peace that goodness boosoms ever,
As that the single want of light and noise
(Not being in danger, and I trust she is not)
Could stir the constant mood of her calm thoughts,
And put them into mis-becoming plight. 28

The Elder Brother goes on to explain the self-sufficiency of virtue. He begins to expound the doctrine of chastity which is not distinguished from virginity in the context of the masque, because as we have already seen and will see Milton is not speaking of premarital chastity that will end in marriage, but of a chastity which is akin to celibacy and which will culminate in a dedicated life of virginity. The Elder Brother says he has no fear for his sister's safety either physical or moral because:

Vertue could see to do what vertue would
By her own radiant light, though Sun and Moon
Were in the flat Sea sunk, And Wisdoms self
Oft seeks to sweet retired Solitude,
Where with her best nurse Contemplation
She plumes her feathers, and lets grow her wings
That in the various bussle of resort
Were all to-ruffl'd, and sometimes impair'd. 29

Again Milton makes the same error Plato did in identifying virtue and wisdom. For "Wisdoms self" is nothing other than temperance. Temperance is opposed to folly, and as was seen,

28 Lines 365-371. "to seek" means to lack.
is founded on self-knowledge and guides the soul in the choices and decisions it must make.\textsuperscript{30} Since virtue is knowledge or wisdom, then it is easy to see that man does not fall through weakness, but through ignorance.

The soul is ever in the quest of the Good and the Beautiful and when the perception of the soul is impaired and dulled by contact with the world then the soul retires into its inner solitude to contemplate beauty itself and to reset its bearings.

The Second Brother agrees with the wisdom of his brother's words, giving them a Christian interpretation; but he is still doubtful and says that not everyone observes the temperate pursuit of beauty. The Lady may be a paragon of virtue, but even beauty sometimes needs a powerful guard

To save her blossoms, and to defend her fruit
From the rash hand of bold Incontinence.\textsuperscript{31}

He admits the theoretical value of the Elder Brother's sage words, but cannot be convinced of their practical value. The Second Brother certainly expresses the attitude of the ordinary reader and of the audience beholding the masque. He is in a sense the doubtful person whom Milton

\textsuperscript{30} Cf. Charmides, 165-71; Symposium, 209A. In the Protagoras, 333, Socrates says: "then temperance and wisdom are one; just as before justice andholiness appear to us to be nearly the same."

\textsuperscript{31} Lines 395-396.
is trying to convince. The Elder Brother's words may sound very eloquent, but they cannot gloss over the fact that virtue is of little use against violence.

The Elder Brother partially agrees with this objection, but goes on to remind his younger brother that the Lady's virtue and temperance are not her only means of defense. The Lady has a hidden strength which the younger brother has forgotten. The Second Brother asks if this be heaven's grace. From what follows it is difficult to see how grace can be seriously considered an important factor in the poem. The Elder Brother's words make it clear that grace is not excluded; nor on the other hand of singular importance. In fact, it is not completely proved that his hidden power is a gift from heaven. The hidden strength is something other than grace, for the Elder Brother tells of the wonderous power of chastity when he says:

I mean that too, but yet a hidden strength
Which if Heav'n gave it, may be termed her own;
'Tis chastity, my brother, chastity:
She that has that, is clad in compleat steel,
And like a quiver'd Nymph with Arrows keen
May trace huge Forests and unharbour'd Heaths,
Infamous Hills and sandy perilous wildes,
Where through the sacred rays of Chastity,
No savage fierce, Bandite, or mountaneer
Will dare to soyle her Virgin purity.32

Again Milton has indicated the self-sufficiency of chastity.

As yet there has been no distinction made between

32 Lines 417-426
temperance, chastity, and virginity. The discussion, so far as it has been concerned with the strength of virtue, has been general. This lengthy explication of the nature of chastity gives the poet the chance to explain part of his doctrine of chastity and it also serves to heighten the dramatic suspense. For while the two brothers are discussing the virtues in theory, the reader has not forgotten the Lady's very real plight.

But the Elder Brother is not through yet. If his younger brother is still unmoved, let the wisdom of ancient Greece testify to the strength of chastity. Plato, especially as he was interpreted by the Renaissance Platonists, was the most prominent advocate of chastity in the "old Schools of Greece (438)." The Christian element, however, is not entirely omitted. For saintly chastity is so dear to heaven that a throng of angels swarm around the chaste soul to preserve it from all contagion and lust which assail it from all sides. But no sooner is reference made to heavenly power, than the Elder Brother expounds a thoroughly Platonic doctrine. For these "angels" do more than protect the soul. They escort the soul to a higher realm and

...in clear dream, and solemn vision
Tell her of things that no gross ear can hear,
Till oft convers with heav'nly habitants
Begin to cast a beam on th'outward shape,
The unpolluted temple of the mind,

33 Cf. lines 425, 427, 437, etc.
And turns by degrees to the soul's essence,
Till all be made immortal.  

There is a striking resemblance both in spirit and
external form between lines 456-475 of Comus and a passage in
Plato's Phaedo. Milton describes the effects of lust and in-
temperance upon the soul. Instead of the "outward shape," i.e.,
the body, being transformed "by degrees to the soul's essence,"
the soul, on the contrary

grows clotted by contagion,
Imbodies, and imbrutes, till she quite loose
The divine property of her first being.

In these lines Milton reveals the true value of
chastity as a means of hearing those things "that no gross ear
can hear." Intemperance robs the soul of its spiritual and
intellectual vision. The gain or loss merited by virtue is
always spoken of in terms of beauty and ugliness, not attain-
ment of heaven or the punishment of hell. The Elder Brother's
defense of chastity and vigorous rejection of incontinence

34 Lines 456-462.

35 "But the soul which has been polluted and is im-
pure at the time of her departure, and is the companion and ser-
vant of the body always, and is in love with and bewitched by
the body and by the desires and pleasures of the body, until she
is led to believe that the truth only exists in a bodily form,
which a man may touch and see, and drink and eat, and use for
the purposes of his lust--the soul, I mean, accustomed to hate
and fear and avoid that which to the bodily eye is dark and
invisible, but is the object of the mind and can be attained by
philosophy. . ." 81B.

36 Lines 466-468
have a deep effect on the Younger Brother who exclaims:

How Charming is divine Philosophy!
Not harsh, and crabbed as dull fools suppose,
But musical as is Apollo's lute,
And a perpetual feast of nectar'd sweets,
Where no crude surfet reigns.37

The tribute, be it noted, is to philosophy not to
grace, theology, or any supernatural power. The Younger Bro­
ther is expressing the idea of philosophy found in the Phaedo.38
The specific embodiment of Platonic thought appearing in the
above mentioned passage is striking. As Hanford points out
Milton has taken pains to simulate the tone and style of a
Platonic myth, and his moralizing is not unlike that of Plato.39
Even the Stoic concept of virtue seems to be rejected in the
repudiation of "harsh, and crabbed" doctrines.

The eulogy on philosophy is interrupted by the ap­
pearance of the Attendant Spirit again, now disguised as a
shepherd. He tells the brothers what has happened to their
sister. Since he himself has done nothing to free her from
Comus we are led to the conclusion that he has no hidden
power or magic of his own, but can only offer helpful advice.

The Younger Brother upon hearing his sister's plight

37 Lines 475-479.
38 Phaedo, 82A-84B.
repents his momentary trust in the efficacy of chastity's hidden power:

O night and shades,
How are ye join'd with hell in triple knot
Against th'unarmed weakness of one Virgin
Alone, and helpless! Is this the confidence
You gave me Brother?40

The Elder Brother is unmoved, nor will he unsay a period of what he has defended. For "Vertue may be assail'd, but never hurt (587)." The Lady's hidden strength will not fail her; and heaven willing, he and his brother will hurry to her rescue. But the Attendant Spirit warns them that swords are useless against Comus's "hellish charms." Mere mortal power is no match for the magic of this fiend.

The Attendant Spirit gives them a rare magic herb, the significance of which has caused much scholarly ink to be spilt. Haemony simply represents the virtue of temperance, and this is made quite obvious from the context of the poem and from the traditional meaning of "moly." Edward Le Comte attempts to relate haemony to the Blood of Christ,41 but the appropriateness of this interpretation rests on the presence of Christian elements in the poem.

But again, it seems better to take the word in a non-

---

40 Lines 579-583.

Christian sense. Haemony can quite easily stand for the "old Schools of Greece (438)," which in turn are a symbol of natural reason. Moly was the herb given to Ulysses by Hermes to fend off Circe's charms. Since Circe stands for intemperance, moly, quite logically, is a remedy for intemperance, to wit, the virtue of temperance.

According to the accepted tradition moly symbolized temperance. In *Elegy I, 87-88*, for example, Milton states that moly is his antedote against the Circean charms of the city: "Et vitare procul malefidae infamia Circes/ Atria, divini Molyos usus ope." Merritt Y. Hughes says that by using the word haemony instead of moly Milton "suggested Socrates' story (in Plato's *Charmides*, 157) of the charm of a Thracian physician who wrought magical cures because he understood that the body's health depended on the soul."42

The word 'haemony' as such seldom appears in the poetry of this period. The only other place this author could find the word used with the same spelling is in Spenser's *Astrophel*, line 3, where it definitely refers to Thrace. It occurs frequently in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as haemonia, again referring to Thrace. According to seventeenth-century mythology Thrace was the region from which came magic and mystical powers, just as Arcadia was the homeland of artless virtue.

42 Merritt Y. Hughes, *Paradise Regained* etc., 251.
R.M. Adams makes an observation which seems to have escaped the notice of the other critics, Woodhouse in particular, who would seem to prefer Le Comte's interpretation. Adams remarks:

The audience would scarcely have been edified by this thought, particularly the clerical members of it; nor does it conform in the least with Milton's convictions as expressed elsewhere. One does not offhandedly tell the members of a Christian commonwealth that grace is unknown to them, that they trample it underfoot. But a magic symbol of temperance, having its origin and power in earthly elements and implying a contrast between Arcadian virtue and modern grossness, would suffer no such disabilities.43

Armed with the virtue of temperance the Attendant Spirit himself was able to draw near to Comus and his band without falling victim to the spell of their lustful enticements. He gives the herb to the two brothers to protect them also. Some commentators say that Milton must have nodded here. For, in the climax of the drama haemony fails to release the sister from the enchanter's spell. This is to misunderstand the significance of the herb. The efficacy of haemony lies in its ability to protect the possessor from sensual and immoderate pleasures, and also to enable him to see through the shallow deceits and guile of false reasoning.44 Something more than temperance—chastity or virginity—is needed to free the fair

44 Lines 644-649.
virgin. Haemony fulfills its purpose in enabling the two brothers to pass through Comus's band of revelers unharmed. The analogy to the intemperance of the court life and the virtue of temperance need not be enlarged upon again.

Armed with their swords and the protective power of haemony the two brothers and the Attendant Spirit go to the rescue. The scene changes once more and Comus is seen with The Lady in a stately palace. The Lady is sitting in an enchanted chair. In this scene is enacted a debate which was and is a familiar theme in English literature. It is the age-old conflict between virtue and the specious reasoning of vice. Comus's argument is, in a nutshell: "Gather ye rose buds while ye may."

Comus first tempts the Lady to indulge in the delightful food before her. In rich and sensuous imagery Milton describes the physical pleasures that Comus offers for the taking. This is Comus's praise of intemperance, and though he speaks of pleasure in general, one can easily detect the allusion to venereal delight which becomes evident when he asks rather rhetically:

Why should you be so cruel to yourself,

---

45 For an interesting treatment of this point see F.B. Brusser, "Comus and the Rose Song," SP, XLIV, Oct., 1947, 626-644; and also, J.V. Cunningham, "Logic and Lyric," MP, LI, Aug., 1953, 33-41.
And to those dainty limbs which nature lent
For gentle usage, and soft delicacy. 40

But the hidden power of chastity manifests itself,
for the Lady aided by temperance sees through the wily de-
ceits of the enchanter. 47 Just as Comus has praised intem-
perance, so The Lady praises temperance. Applying a bit of
logic herself she replies:

None
But such as are good men can give good things,
And that which is not good, is not delicious
To a well-govern'd and wise appetite. 48

Thus The Lady refutes Comus's argument (668-689) by replying
simply that mere physical gratification can give no real
pleasure. For real pleasure comes from the enjoyment of the
moral quality of goodness.

Comus interprets her words as being those of the
"budge doctors of the Stoic fur (706)." The Lady never does
retaliate on this point, but from Milton's own attitude both
toward scholasticism and toward Stoicism it can be inferred
that Comus's words bear unpleasant connotations. Merritt Y.
Hughes shows that in Paradise Regained Milton does not make
Christ condemn Socrates, whereas he does condemn the abuse and
degradation of Stoicism. It appears then that Milton's doc-

46 Lines 678-680.
47 Cf. infra, 67.
48 Lines 701-704.
trine of temperance is one that by no means praises "lean and sallow Abstinence." 49

Comus again takes up the argument, this time applying his casuistry to the prodigality of nature. The Platonic plays of the royal court abounded in such language and reasoning. So similar in fact are Comus's words to some of the plays that there is good ground for conjecturing that Milton intended Comus to represent the false reasoning of the courtiers. And through The Lady's reply, "it becomes evident that Comus's argument is casuistry and that through such reasoning Comus makes himself unworthy of understanding the true doctrine of Platonic love." 50

Comus tells The Lady that the world would soon be inundated and encumbered by the bounteous gifts of the Maker if everyone indulged in a "fit of temperance." Truly this would be no way to thank a great giver--to refuse his gifts. Carpe diem, he warns her, lest her beauty fade before she can enjoy it:

List Lady be not coy, and be not cossen'd
With that same vaunted name Virginity,
Beauty is nature's coyn, must not be hoorded,
But must be currant, and the good thereof
Consists in mutual partak'n bliss,
Unsavoury in th'injoyment of it self
If you let slip time, like a neglected rose
It withers on the stalk with languish't head. 51

49 Merritt Y. Hughes, Paradise Regained etc., 412.
51 Lines 736-743. Compare these lines with Marvell's "To his coy mistress."
The allusion to Platonic love casuistry becomes more explicit in the next few lines. Stressing the reverence due to beauty, Comus asserts:

Beauty is nature's brag, and must be shown
In courts, at feasts, and high solemnities
Where most may wonder at the workmanship. 52

Comus has expounded his credo; beauty is ours to enjoy. He has stated his argument and awaits the Lady's reply. Embodied in Comus's speech is a typical example of Platonic love as it was never meant to be expounded. False compliments, specious arguments, and poorly conceived reverence for physical beauty are all found in the enchanter's doctrine which he spells out with cunning and persuasive rhetoric. Milton's audience could hardly hear Comus's words without associating them with the false compliment of the court. For court drama raised this type of dissimulation to its highest peak. 53

Milton has not yet settled the issue with intemperance. The Lady has already refuted Comus on the point of gross physical pleasures (701-705). Now she must show that nature's abundance and fertility are meant to be used sparingly and are not for man's unlimited use. She calls Comus an impostor, berating him for his blatant misrepresentation of "innocent nature" with his "Obtruding false rules pranckt in

52 Lines 744-746.
53 G.F. Sensabaugh, "Platonic Love etc.," 464.
reasons garb (758)."

One can sense Milton's moralizing brooding over these lines of The Lady. Although the temperance she proposes is not "a lean and sallow" one, it is a "spare Temperance (766)" which should teach a man to obey the sober laws of nature. The Lady emphasizes the point by showing the sad results of intemperance. She shows how temperance can assure an equal distribution of nature's bounty, for

If every just man that now pines with want
Had but a moderate and befitting share
Of that which lewdly-pamper'd Luxury
Now heaps upon som few with vast excess,
Natures full blessings would be well dispenc't
In unsuperfluous even proportion,
And she no whit encomber'd with her store,
And then the giver would be thank't. 54

Milton has settled the score with the court Platonists. He has shown the evil results of intemperance and incontinence, and has proved the true beauty of temperance. The ethics of court Platonism have been refuted, and one thing more remains to be explained. Earlier in the poem the Elder Brother began to explain the sage and serious doctrine of Virginity, but his discourse was interrupted by the arrival of the Attendant Spirit.

Now that The Lady has defended temperance against Comus we might expect her to finish expounding the doctrine which her brother began. But she tells in her own words

---

54 Lines 767-774.
why she will say no more. In tempting The Lady Comus urged her to intemperance in general, but his chief object was to steal her maidenhood. The Lady perceived Comus's true intent, and, having defended temperance, says that it would be useless to expound the doctrine of chastity to him. The complete caesural break in line 779 is significant. For by this emphatic break in the rhythm Milton is stressing the distinction between the virtue of temperance and that of chastity. The Lady stops and asks herself:

Shall I go on?
Or have I said anough? To him that dares
Arm his profane tongue with contemptuous words
Against the Sun-clad power of Chastity
Pain would I somthing say, yet to what end?  

Comus's perception is dulled by his lustful and intemperate living. The Lady tells him:

Thou hast nor Eare, nor Soul to apprehend
The sublime notion, and high mystery
That must be utter'd to unfold the sage
And serious doctrine of Virginity.  

And so, as long as she remains in his evil presence she will not speak about chastity. For that we must wait for the epilogue, and it will then be the Attendant Spirit who reveals some of the sublime notions and higher mysteries of chastity. In these lines Milton has shown the court people with their

55 Lines 778-782.
56 Lines 783-786.
twisted understanding of Plato's doctrine could never hope to fathom the true Platonic love. Milton will save that for the time when Comus and his band are gone and only those mortals whose "ears be true (996)" remain.

It is significant to note that the whole passage from 779 to 806 appears for the first time in the 1637 version. This is the most important single addition to Comus and without it the tone of the masque would be somewhat different. Sixteen hundred and thirty-seven was the very year in which Milton wrote to Diodati telling his friend of his new insight into Plato's doctrine. This would seem to verify the assertion that the 1637 version was meant to convey even more explicitly and accurately an ordered presentation of Milton's own doctrine of Platonic love. As C.S. Lewis points out, the alteration is not in the dramatic but the ethical direction.57

Frightened by the Lady's "superior power (800)," Comus casts aside his ineffective arguments and tries to make her drink his enchanted liquid which will "bath the drooping spirits in delight (811)." Still another possible allusion to the court love cult is made when Comus berates The Lady for her "moral babble" which is directly against the "canon laws of our foundation (807)."

Before he can touch the glass to her lips, the two

brothers rush in and in the excitement that ensues Comus escapes with his band of followers leaving The Lady unharmed but unable to rise from the enchanted chair where Comus has fettered her with a magic spell.

The Attendant Spirit and the Brothers are powerless to free The Lady because Comus has fled, and gone with him is the magic rod without which the magic spell cannot be broken. At this point Sabrina is introduced into the story. She is a young water sprite who has perplexed many commentators both with regard to her genealogy and her significance in the masque. What is it that she symbolizes and wherein lies her power to annul the enchanter's magic spell?

The Sabrina myth is recorded in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, and Spenser uses it in the *Faerie Queene*. Sabrina was the Roman name given to the river Severn into which the young maiden leapt to escape her jealous step-mother. Since a tributary of the Severn ran by Ludlow Castle, Milton could easily introduce the gentle nymph as a bit of local color. Because she was acknowledged to be a symbol of purity and a favorite figure of local Welsh tradition she would be quite at home in an entertainment in honor of the new Lord President of Wales.

---

58 Book II, Canto x.

59 Merritt Y. Hughes, *Paradise Regained* etc., 260
Mr. Blenner-Hasset, however, poses the objection that Milton's Sabrina is a "somewhat unusual example of symbolic incongruity which seems to have escaped special attention." Milton knew that according to the historical data Sabrina was the illegitimate offspring of Locrine. How then could Milton make her a symbol of purity and virginity?

First of all, the Sabrina myth, as has been said, is a Welsh story, and as such would be known and readily accepted by the audience. Milton highlights the nymph's virginity and ignores the less desirable historical aspects of the story. This is achieved by emphasizing her innocence by means of epithets expressing new qualities: a virgin pure, guiltless damsel, fair innocence, maiden gentleness, etc. Milton refers to Gwendoline as her "step-dam" a word which bears connotations of cruelty especially to anyone familiar with the folklore of the cruel step-mother. He also stresses the respectability of her political ancestry, for she is descended from Brutus and is "Sprung of old Anchises line (922)."

This artistic trick reveals an interesting insight into the process of poetic re-creation. Milton has by no means warped the original story of Sabrina, but he has given it a significance which it did not previously possess. With careful

---

adaptation Milton has introduced a very appropriate figure into the context of the masque. 61

What, then, is Sabrina's purpose in the story? Her role is twofold. First, she adds a touch of local color to the masque, which was, it must be remembered, an occasional piece. What could be more fitting than to summon up the goddess of a nearby river to break the magic spell of Comus? But Sabrina symbolizes something greater than the tradition of Wales. For she alone, a virgin,

\[ \text{can unlock} \]

The clasping charm, and thaw the numbing spell,
If she be right invok't in warbled Song,
For maid'nhood she loves, and will be swift
To aid a Virgin, such as was she her self
In hard besetting need. 62

Since this power is reserved for her virgin hands, and since she arrives at such a crucial point in the masque, it does not seem unlikely or too far-fetched that she is Milton's tribute to virginity. She represents in some vague way the hidden strength of chastity, for it is her favorite office "To help ensnared chastity (908)." And it is the power of her "chaste palms moist and cold (917)" which dissolve the "gumms of glu-

---

61 Ibid., 317. A less happy interpretation of Sabrina's significance is offered by Clara Stevens. She says, "Sabrina can be none other than the spirit of genius of the English people. So interpreted she adds a pertinence to the abstract theme of the triumph of virtue that gives the poem a pulsating vitality deeply instinct with its immediate time." "Milton's Nymph, Sabrina," EJ, XVII, Sept., 1926, 574.

62 Lines 851-856.
This glutinous heat refers to sensual lust and again expresses the Platonic attitude toward the degrading effect of physical pleasure. Thus it is within the power of chastity to free the soul from the ties and gravitating pull of the flesh which prevents it from ascending to a contemplation of truth and beauty.

Once The Lady is freed from the spell the Attendant Spirit guides the three children to their mother and father. He tells the parents and the audience of the children's victory "O're sensual Folly, and Intemperance (974)," reiterating part of the moral scheme of the masque. But temperance is not all the masque has dealt with. It is in the epilogue that we find the final explanation of the doctrine of virginity.

As the dances end, the Spirit speaks his epilogue to the listeners. He will return now to his vaguely located home from whence he came to aid The Lady in distress. All the persons and places alluded to are pagan and refer in general to Greek mythology and culture which may again be taken as a reference to Greek philosophy and the power of unaided reason.

63 See Robert Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy, Part 3, Sec. 2, Mem. 2, Subs. 5: "How many Proserpinas, with those catchpoles, doth Pluto take? There are the sleepy rods with which their souls touched descend to hell; this the glue or lime with which the wings of the mind once taken cannot fly away." Burton is quoting one Aegidius Maserius and gives the Latin in a note: "Hae sane sunt virgae soperiferae quibus contactae animae ad orcum descendunt; hoc gluten quo compactae mentium alae evolare nequeunt." London, 1881, 547.
Milton made some significant changes in the epilogue which merit careful consideration. Lines 974-995 of the 1637 version originally appeared after line 6 of the prologue in the Bridgewater MS. Why did Milton transpose these lines from the beginning to the end of the masque? As C.S. Lewis observes, the transfer of these lines can be justified on a purely artistic basis. The first six lines of the masque are a masterful presentation of the passage from "the cold, tingling, almost unbreatheable region of the aerial spirits to the smoke and stir of this dim spot." The effectiveness of this poetic imagery would have been ruined by the intrusion of an intermediate realm "as serene as the air and as warmly inviting as the earth." But a far more important reason can be found for the transposition of these lines in the clarity and care with which Milton expounds the doctrine of chastity in the 1637 version. For the poet "with his Platonic stair of earthly and heavenly love, has found the real philosophical intermediary and, with it, the real use for the hesperian imagery." In these lines, as they originally appeared in the prologue, Milton describes that privileged celestial vision which

---

64 C.S. Lewis, "A Note on Comus," 175.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
should be shown only to those who have passed the "hard assays (971)" and made the necessary renunciation of the flesh.

But it is easy to see that these lines were logically misplaced. The vision should be withheld until the end of the masque where they would blend perfectly with the rest of the celestial vision the poet reveals. Since the lines were essentially good, Milton merely revised them a bit and put them in the epilogue. The Lady has proved her virtue and now she—and the audience—are worthy to behold the heavenly vision.

Brooks and Hardy point out the importance of further changes Milton made in the original passage before inserting it in the epilogue. They observe that "in transposing the passage he removed his gardens from the too actual-seeming 'Isle, 'up(to) the broad field of the sky,' thereby emphasizing the visionary quality of the scene.67

Another significant insertion in the 1637 version of the masque is lines 996-1011. Herein is contained a further explanation of the doctrine of chastity which the Elder Brother began to explain in lines 417-475. He spoke of the "hidden strength" of chastity. In what does this strength consist? The brother said nothing "Hath hurtful power o're true vir-

ginity (436)." And he hinted at another power that is bestowed

---

67 Cleanth Brooks and J.E. Hardy, Poems of Mr. John Milton, 62, note. The deleted lines can be found in The Student's Milton, "Notes on the Poetry," 61.
on the chaste person. For the virgin can "hear things that no gross ear can hear (456);" and, by degrees the body itself is turned into the soul's essence.

In the closing lines of the epilogue Milton imparts those sublime mysteries of love to those who are mindful of the crown virtue gives after death. The Attendant Spirit interrupts his description of his home and says in an aside to the audience:

(List mortals, if your ears be true) Beds of Hyacinth, and roses Where young Adonis oft repose, Waxing well in his deep wound In slumber soft, and on the ground Sadly sits th' Assyrian Queen; But far above in spangled sheen Celestial Cupid her fam'd son advanc'd Holds his dear Psyche sweet entranc'd After her wandring labours long, Till free consent the gods among Make her his eternal Bride, And from her unspotted side Two blissful twins are to be born Youth and Joy; so Jove hath sworn.68

The unity and integrity of the theme of the masque depend upon an understanding of these lines. Either these lines contain the final expression of Milton's version of Platonic love, or they are to be given some Christian interpretation. If the Christian interpretation is favored, it must be concluded that Milton did not attain his desired moral and artistic unity. He would seem to have made a feeble and futile

68 Lines 996-1010.
compromise between the realms of nature and grace.

A careful analysis of the epilogue reveals much that is Platonic and little that is Christian with the exception of a few conventional phrases that one is likely to find in the verse of any poet of Western civilization, and which can be interpreted either in a natural or supernatural sense.

We must not take the epilogue too literally, nor is it to be taken as an allegory, for the elements do not lend themselves to the intricate pattern of an allegory. It is, on the contrary, a symbol of the lofty realms of truth and beauty to which the young poet aspired. The imagery and adjectives used are certainly not Christian in concept, and Milton seems to be at pains to exclude anything that is Christian. In line 995, for example, he successively changed 'manna' and 'Sabaeans' for the strictly pagan 'Elysian dew.'

Does this mean that beneath a shell of Christianity Milton was really a rationalistic old pagan? Hardly. But this part of the epilogue does seem to be a poetic attempt at expressing the natural realm of philosophy as opposed to the supernatural realm of revealed religion.

The Garden of Adonis is the realm of married love in the celestial world, and Venus and Adonis are the pattern of earthly love or physical love. Venus is the "Earthly

Aphrodite" of whom Plato speaks. There is pleasure involved in physical love, but there is also sorrow and imperfection. This is why Adonis bears his never healing wound, and Venus, the Assyrian Queen "sadly sits." Milton does not condemn marital love in these lines, but he does seem to express mild disparagement and brushes it aside for something greater. His views on marriage will change; but Comus was revised in 1637, a time when Milton was not yet ready for marriage, but was enamoured with the quest for intellectual goals.

What is this thing which is greater than physical love? It is the contemplation of beauty as only the poet or philosopher (not to mention the saint) can contemplate and interpret beauty and truth. Just as Venus and Adonis symbolize physical love, so on a higher level in the celestial world Cupid and Psyche are the pattern of 'divine' or higher love. Cupid is the god of love. In Greek he is called Eros, and according to Plato love engenders beauty and sends it throughout the universe thus ordering the chaos and setting the framework for the dialectic of love whereby the soul can be drawn upward to the true world. For all earthly love is essentially imperfect and the soul ever yearns for its perfect complement. Hence Cupid can quite easily be said to represent love itself or beauty itself. Psyche is nothing more than the Greek word for the soul.

Here then in this vague higher realm is laid the
pattern of a love or contemplation which the soul achieves
"After her wandring labours long (1005)." And from this con-
templative union between the soul and beauty is born Youth and
Joy. By substituting Youth and Joy for the single offspring
mentioned by Spenser, namely, Pleasure, Milton makes an even
more precise distinction between physical love and the love of
which he speaks. 70

Pleasure, like so many words, is an analogous term;
and its first meaning signifies the delight or satisfaction
achieved in the proper function of one's physical faculties.
Joy, or gaudium, expresses a spiritual well-being or delight.
A man with Milton's command of words and training in scholastic
philosophy would certainly be conscious of this distinction.
Pleasure is the reward of physical love whereas this higher
intellectual love gives birth to Youth and Joy. Youth is in-
cluded because the soul is free from the cumbersome ties of
the flesh, and as a spiritual being is outside the limits of
time.

It would be a gross misrepresentation of these lines
to say that Cupid is Christ. Even the seventeenth-century
listener, familiar with the conventional fusion of Christian
tradition and pagan mythology, would be somewhat shocked by the
suggestion of intercourse between Christ and the soul. That

would be carrying the symbol too far. One might raise by way of objection the *Canticle of Canticles* as an example of physical love symbolizing the most sublime concept of spiritual love, but it would hardly be coherent to drop a single Christian allusion into the consistently non-Christian context of the passage. Furthermore, the *Canticle of Canticles* speaks primarily of the union between Christ and the Church, and there is no explicit reference to intercourse despite the thoroughly sensuous imagery. And it seems a bit unlikely that Milton would presume the inspired boldness of the Holy Writer.

But Cupid quite well fills the role of Plato’s Eros, the noblest and fairest of the gods who because of his elegance and tenderness lives only in flowery and perfumed places. Eros is the god who inspires the poets, statesmen, and philosophers. He is the one who inspires noble deeds and lofty thoughts.71

Such, then, is the message Milton has conveyed to his audience. And as the Attendant Spirit takes his leave he bids those who would follow him to:

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. 72

This last passage offers little difficulty, for the

71 *Symposium*, 195A.
72 Lines 1018–1022.
first three lines are consonant with the doctrine of chastity. And the concluding two lines do not necessitate any reference to heavenly grace. From the whole context of the masque and from an understanding of Milton's notion of an "active, way-faring, warfaring"73 virtue, these lines can quite legitimately be taken to mean "God helps those who help themselves."

Again, Milton is not denying the reality of grace, but he simply makes no explicit reference to it. If we can rely on the exactness of his grammar, he seems to be saying that virtue is not feeble. "If Virtue feeble were" is a contrary-to-fact conditional clause. Therefore, even though heaven would stoop to (help) her, virtue has no need of heaven's help.74

74 Ibid., 25.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The contemporary literary war being waged by the "new critics" and the advocates of historical criticism is really nothing more than a battle of words. When all is said and done, the solution to a valid theory of literary criticism will be found in the middle ground which lies between the extremes of these two schools of critical thought.

The careful verbal and textual analysis advocated by the new schools of criticism is a common sense 'must' if a reader ever hopes to come to terms with the poet or novelist. Yet the "new critics" are among the first to admit that part of the process of coming to terms with the author depends on the critic's knowledge of the author's age and the meaning of words as they were used at that time.

There is danger of excess in using either of these two methods of critical study. Unless one is careful he may lose himself in a morass of historical data without ever applying his findings to a study of the poem or novel, which after all should be the primary interest of a literary critic. Again, if one were to exclude everything but a dogged analysis of the text he may completely misinterpret the work under consideration. Examples of this latter error are the frequent attempts
to interpret thoroughly Christian authors, such as Shakespeare, in the light of Nietzschean philosophy.

It has been the intent in this thesis to fuse these two methods of criticism. The early chapters were devoted to a study of the historical setting of the poem, and the last chapter was devoted to a careful textual analysis. From the matter presented in the historical study a hypothesis was drawn: Milton was trying to expound a doctrine of chastity in *Comus*. The analysis of the poem itself seems to verify this hypothesis.

Did Milton sincerely believe in his doctrine? Since it is impossible to read his mind, we must draw our conclusions from the poem itself. The tone and clarity of expression seem to imply a good deal of careful thought and organization. The poem certainly surpasses the quality of the usual occasional poem. And yet, Milton's views did change, for in 1642, he married Mary Powell. But the fact that a man, especially a young man, changes his mind does not in any way vitiate the sincerity of his previous position.

Despite the dogmaticism of critics like F.R. Leavis and despite Milton's own proud, petulant, but undeniably dynamic personality, he has in a true sense achieved his desire to rise above the "smoak and stir of this dim spot/ Which men call earth." For high on the peaks of English literature Milton sits
with Chaucer and Shakespeare to form that triumvirate of poets which will probably never be surpassed in the English language. Truly "som gentle Muse/ With lucky words" did favor Milton's "destin'd Urn."
BIBLIOGRAPHY

I. PRIMARY SOURCES


II. SECONDARY SOURCES

A. BOOKS

Agar, Herbert, Milton and Plato, Princeton, 1928.


Arthos, John, On a Mask Presented at Ludlow-Castle, Ann Arbor, 1954.


B. ARTICLES


Cory, Herbert E., "Spenser, the School of the Fletchers, and Milton," University of California Publications in Modern Philology, II, 1912.


Hanford, James Holly, "The Temptation Motive in Milton," SP, XV, 1918.


Lockwood, Laura, "Milton's Corrections to the Minor Poems," MLN, XXV, 1910, 201-205.


Samuel, Irene, "Milton's References to Plato and Socrates," SP, XLI, April, 1944, 50-64.


Sensabaugh, G.F., "Milieu of Comus," SP, XLI, April, 1944, 238-249.


A.M.D.G.
The thesis submitted by Philip C. Rule, S.J. has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

April 20, 1957  
Frederick P. Marion, S.J.
Signature of Adviser