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John MILTON

COMUS, or A Maske
at Ludlow Castle

Textes réunis par
Armand HIMY

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John Milton

**COMUS, or A Maske
at Ludlow Castle**

**Colloque tenu le 12 janvier 1990
à l'Université de Paris X Nanterre**

*Participants : Marie-Dominique Garnier, Armand Himy, Roger Lejosne,
Margaret Llasera, Jean Pironon, Claudine Raynaud.*

Textes réunis par Armand Himy

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A BRIEF LIFE OF JOHN MILTON

Roger Lejosne

John Milton was born in London on December 9th, 1608. The elder son of a successful scrivener and money-lender, he had an elder sister Anne and a younger brother Christopher. His father had artistic tastes (he was a fairly well-known amateur composer) and seems to have sensed early that young John was particularly gifted. The boy was given the best education available. He went to the best school in London, St Paul's, had private tutors at home, and in 1625 matriculated at Christ's College, Cambridge. He received his B.A. degree in 1629, his M.A. in 1632. Some of his university exercises have survived (Milton himself had them published in 1674). They show him to have been dissatisfied with the university curriculum, and especially with the scholastic philosophy that was its basis. The young Milton appears to have been a Renaissance humanist, an enthusiast of learning, a Platonist with Baconian leanings, who would have liked the University to teach more history and natural science.

In the meantime, he had begun to write poetry, both in Latin and in English - and even in Italian (six sonnets and one *canzone*). His first really important English poem, *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*, was written in 1629. The companion poems *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* were probably composed in the early 1630s.

A young University graduate with Milton's social and intellectual background was then expected to take holy orders, and no doubt his family **did** expect him to do so. He didn't. The date of his final decision is not known, but his reasons are. He later said that he had refused to *subscribe slave* in a church governed by prelates - notably by Archbishop Laud. Another obvious reason was that he meant to devote his time to preparing himself for the writing of great poetry. He seems to have always known that he had it in him to become a major poet. His father agreed to provide for his needs.

Milton left the University in 1632 and retired first to Hammersmith, then to Horton, another village near Windsor. He proceeded to accumulate the learning Cambridge had not provided, mostly in history, literature and philosophy ancient and modern, with also some mathematics and music (he had inherited from his father a lifelong passion for music). He thus made himself one of the most learned men of his age.

During this period, he also wrote some poetry. *Comus*, a *masque* written and played in 1634, contrasts by its deep moral seriousness with the common run of Court *masques*; it has been said to be *his first dramatizing of this great theme, the conflict of good and evil*. In November 1637, Milton wrote *Lycidas*, a pastoral elegy on the death of one of his Cambridge fellow-students, Edward King. *Lycidas* is regarded as one of the greatest short poems in the English language, in which Milton shows un-rivalled mastery of his medium, and deep commitment both to his art and religion.

In May 1638 Milton left England and went for a visit to Italy. He stayed chiefly in Florence, Rome and Naples, where he was cordially welcomed by the men of letters and their *academies*. No doubt this brilliant young Englishman who could speak fluent Latin and Italian and write good poetry in both languages was something of a curiosity and was accordingly lionized. For the rest of his life, Milton was to keep happy memories of his Italian tour, in spite of the fact that Italy was the centre of one of the things he hated most - the Roman Catholic Church.

He returned to England in July 1639 and settled in a house in London, where he took in pupils - his first were his nephews Edward and John Phillips. His best friend Charles Diodati had died the previous year and became the subject of another pastoral elegy, but in Latin this time, *Epitaphium Damonis* - Milton's last and best Latin poem.

During the next twenty years, Milton was to write very little poetry: only a handful of sonnets. He had hastened back to England sooner than expected because he had heard of political and religious trouble at home, and especially in Scotland, where Archbishop Laud's attempt to impose his Anglican liturgy on the Kirk led to a national rising known as the First Bishops' War in March 1639. The Second Bishops' War in June-September 1640 led to the convening of a

Parliament in November (later know as the Long Parliament).

In the first few months of the Revolution Milton only watched the development of events. Already in *Lycidas* had firmly taken sides with the Puritans, and he soon felt it his duty to enter the fray. He did so in May 1641 with his first *antiprelatical* pamphlet, *Of Reformation touching Church-Discipline in England*. This was followed by four other tracts published in 1641-42, all attacking the Laudian Church and advocating the Presbyterian discipline, in the hope of a new Reformation.

Milton got married in July 1642. It was a very hurried affair, and a rather unfortunate one. He was past 33, his wife Mary Powell was not yet 17. She came from a royalist family, had little education and no intellectual or artistic interests. After a month she went to visit her family near Oxford - and refused to come back. This was a dreadful shock to Milton, who had a very elevated ideal of marriage as the union of two souls. He had made a tragic mistake, and there was no remedy, since divorce was not admitted by the laws of England.

Milton's first divorce tract, *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, was published in August 1643. An enlarged edition followed in February 1644, and three more tracts appeared in August 1644 and March 1645. In these pamphlets, with a great array of Biblical learning, Milton advocated divorce for mere incompatibility, on the grounds that a loveless marriage was no true marriage, and an offence to human dignity. They brought him instant notoriety, but of a kind he did not relish: his former Presbyterian friends denounced him as a profligate libertine who advocated *divorce at pleasure* and meant to marry at least a dozen wives in succession. This was his first experience of Presbyterian intolerance and narrow-mindedness, and led to his break with them.

Two other pamphlets published in 1644 are, the one entirely foreign to the divorce controversy, the other only indirectly related to it. The first is a short tractate *Of Education* in which Milton proposed a very elaborate curriculum for the education of young gentlemen, in the spirit of the Renaissance and in some measure of Bacon. The second is the famous *Areopagitica, a Speech ... For the Liberty of Unlicenc'd Printing*, deservedly the best known of Milton's prose works, both for its style and substance.

Mary came back to her husband in 1645. She was to die in 1652 after giving him three daughters. Between 1645 and 1649 Milton published nothing except a volume of his early poems in 1645. He probably wrote some works that were to be published much later, like his Latin grammar and his *History of Britain*, and a few sonnets. He certainly began work on his theological treatise; in those years he seems to have lost much of his former faith in the revolutionary capacities of Parliament and more generally of his compatriots.

His hopes were revived by Pride's Purge on December 6th, 1648, and still more by the trial and execution of the king. Within two weeks of the latter event, a new Miltonic pamphlet was in the bookstalls, *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, an impassioned vindication of the right of peoples to depose, try and execute their tyrants, in which Milton upheld the doctrine of the social contract and the principle of popular sovereignty. He was now a republican. A month later, he was invited to become secretary for foreign languages to the Council of State which now governed the *Commonwealth and Free State* of England. Milton was to remain faithful to the Commonwealth and later to Cromwell until the latter's death in September 1658. Apart from his duties as a sort of civil servant, he was expected to continue his defence of the cause in the pamphlet war.

He thus wrote *Eikonoklastes* (Oct. 1649) in answer to the royalist *Eikon Basilike*, and reached European fame in his Latin controversy with Claude Saumaise (Claudius Salmasius), an eminent French Protestant scholar who had undertaken to defend the royal cause against the English regicides.

But Milton's eyesight was fast failing. He had had trouble with his eyes for years. He became completely blind in the winter 1651-52. His activities on the Council of State were somewhat reduced, but he continued to write (or rather to dictate) Latin pamphlets on behalf of the English Revolution until 1655.

He married again in 1656, one Katherine Woodcock. Milton's last and most moving sonnet was probably inspired by her death in 1658. (Some critics think that the inspirer of this sonnet was Mary Powell.)

Two English tracts on church and state were published in 1659. *A Treatise of Civil Power* argued against compulsion in matters of religion,

and consequently in favour of a wide toleration from which only Roman Catholics were excluded. *The Likeliest Means to Remove Hirelings out of the Church* demanded the suppression of tithes.

The Commonwealth was now fast disintegrating. The Monarchy was restored in May 1660, in the person of Charles II. Milton was the last and most courageous defender in print of the Republic. His last political pamphlet, *The Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth*, had run through two editions in March and April. In this tract, the blind man defiantly nailed his colours to the republican mast.

The most notorious defender of the regicides very narrowly escaped punishment in 1660. He went into hiding for some time, was arrested, and eventually released, probably through the intercession of fellow writers such as Andrew Marvell and Sir William Davenant. It may have been thought that the blind man was now harmless.

The remaining years of Milton's life were spent on the whole peacefully, though in much reduced circumstances (he had lost most of his savings and resources at the Restoration). He married his third wife, Elizabeth Minshull, in 1663. She was to survive him and die at the ripe old age of 88 in 1727. The most important events of his last years were the writing and publication of poems - and a few prose works.

He had probably begun work on his *De Doctrina Christiana* in the late 1640s. This treatise, which is important for an understanding of the theological framework of *Paradise Lost*, must have stood complete by 1663-64, but was far too heretical to be published. The manuscript was rediscovered only in 1824 and printed the next year.

Milton had also begun *Paradise Lost* in the years preceding the Restoration, but most of it must have been written after 1660. Its first version in ten Books was published in 1667, the second, slightly revised, and in twelve Books, in 1674.

After *Paradise Lost*, Milton wrote *Paradise Regained*, a much shorter epic in four Books, dealing with Christ's temptation in the wilderness, and *Samson Agonistes*, a Biblical drama in the pattern of a Greek tragedy. Some few critics have contended that *Samson Agonistes* must have been written much earlier, perhaps in the 1640s, with no very decisive arguments. Be that as it may, *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes* were published together in a single volume in 1671.

Among Milton's prose publications after the Restoration one may mention a Latin grammar (1669), the *History of Britain* (1670) and a handbook of logic (1671) - all three almost certainly written much earlier. A book of family letters and university exercises went into print in 1674.

Curiously enough, Milton returned to pamphleteering in 1673 - presumably just to show that he had not lost interest in political and religious affairs. *Of True Religion* was a short tract in which Milton pleaded for toleration among all Protestants. It contained some echoes of *Areopagitica*.

In his last years, Milton had been much plagued with the gout. He died in his house in London on November 8th, 1674.

Comus, un masque écrit par Milton en 1634, à l'âge de 26 ans, publié en 1637, et dans sa version définitive en 1645, reste une oeuvre peu connue en France. Le masque est un genre littéraire qui a eu son heure de gloire à la Cour d'Angleterre, essentiellement au début du XVII^{ème} siècle, du fait d'une collaboration entre Ben Jonson et l'architecte et décorateur Inigo Jones. Avec *Comus*, l'oeuvre résulte de la collaboration de Milton et d'un compositeur, Henry Lawes.

Les critiques se sont intéressés à Milton, surtout depuis l'après-guerre. En France, l'ouvrage de Jacques Blondel, *Le Comus de Milton, masque neptunien*, PUF, 1950, accompagné d'une traduction, est bien connu. Plus récemment, des critiques anglais ou américains, et un numéro spécial du *Milton Quarterly*, ont attiré à nouveau l'attention sur cette production où l'on reconnaît sans difficulté la griffe du maître.

Les articles réunis ici, actes du colloque qui s'est tenu à l'Université de Paris X, le 12 janvier 1990, font le point sur les travaux récents et, soit en anglais, soit en français, proposent quelques thèmes de réflexion qui n'ont peut-être pas encore retenu l'attention de la sagacité de la critique.

Accompagnés d'une biographie, d'une bibliographie, et d'une revue de quelques travaux récents, nous pensons que les Actes de ce colloque peuvent être utiles au public qui s'intéresse à Milton.

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