Milton’s Comus in Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho*

The action of *Udolpho* (1794) is nearly framed by two quotations from Milton’s 1634 dramatic poem *A Maske Presented at Ludlow Castle* (popularly known as *Comus*): before her father’s death exposes Emily St. Aubert to various adventures, she hears a mysterious music that “[r]ose, like a stream of rich distilled perfumes, / And stole upon the air” (Radcliffe 70; *Comus* 556-57); while part of the masque’s closing speech appears as the epigraph of the final chapter (670). Samuel Baker states of the first quotation that “Milton’s image is an image of incipient rape,” which is appropriate to Radcliffe, with her “signature narrative motif” of “the imperiled woman” (102-3). When applied to the entire poem, this description is accurate but incomplete unless one adds, as does Annette Wheeler Cafarelli, that *Comus* is “also a parable about the self-reliance and fortitude of women who venture outside the protection of men” (95-96). Not only is Emily the Lady of *Comus*, an “imperiled woman” who possesses “self-reliance and fortitude,” but also the novel contains multiple Comus figures who threaten or seem to threaten her. Two of these Comus figures have been identified, but not a third: the man Emily loves, Valancourt.

For Milton, the enchanter Comus is the son of Bacchus and the witch Circe; he lives in a palace in the heart of a forest, to which he lures the Lady. Binding her with his magic to a chair, Comus entices her to drink from his mother’s cup, which he has inherited; she resists what Milton depicts as an assault on her chastity, and is freed by the nymph of the Severn River after the Lady’s younger brothers interrupt Comus’s seduction attempt. Between the novel’s first and last quotations from *Comus*, the orphaned Emily has been imprisoned by Montoni (her aunt’s husband, who wishes her to marry Count Morano), then later (after Montoni has changed his mind) nearly kidnapped by Morano. Kathleen Wall compares Morano to Comus, and Montoni to the brothers when he foils the attempted kidnapping (70). Alison Milbank asserts that Montoni is Comus in his earlier attempts to convince Emily to marry Morano (149). Cafarelli
agrees, calling Montoni a “voluptuary,” and noting that his “carousals in the castle of Udolpho are prefaced by quotes describing Comus advancing with his retinue” (96). While the threat of marriage to Morano is indeed crucial to the novel, both critics refer to it only in passing, and both neglect the later parallel between Emily’s beloved Valancourt and Milton’s villain.

In the first and longest of Emily’s two temptations, Montoni holds Emily prisoner in the castle of Udolpho as Comus keeps the Lady in his palace, and the licentious Morano poses a sexual threat; references to Milton pervade this section of the novel. Immediately after Morano’s attempt to seize Emily, a disembodied voice interrupts Montoni’s conversation with his friends; the epigraph to this chapter describes “aery tongues, that syllable men’s names” (Radcliffe 272; Milton, Comus 208). Later, Emily mistakes her dying aunt for a ghost; the epigraph that begins this chapter refers to “those thick and gloomy shadows damp, / Oft seen in charnel-vaults and sepulchers” (Radcliffe 357; Comus 470-71). After his wife’s death, Montoni’s temptation of Emily takes a new form, as he wishes her to resign to him the land she has inherited from her aunt—land Emily resolves to keep for the sake of Valancourt, a younger son without property of his own. At the same time, Emily suspects that Valancourt may also be a prisoner of Montoni, as she often hears mysterious music at night. Emily is encouraged by both this music and that of peasants when she is temporarily moved to a cottage during a siege of Udolpho; Comus is the source of the epigraph to the chapter that describes both her mistaken belief in the proximity of Valancourt and her removal to the cottage. This quotation describes the song of the rooster and the “pastoral reed with oaten stops” of the shepherd, asserting that these sounds “would be some solace yet, some little cheering / In this close dungeon of innumerous boughs” (Radcliffe 389; Comus 343-49). Although Emily is outside the castle, she is closely watched while at the cottage, so that she cannot escape this pastoral prison any more than the prison of stone.
The second and thus far unremarked Miltonic temptation is Valancourt’s attempt to woo Emily while apparently given up to dissolute habits. Finally free of Montoni, Emily is indulging her melancholy by wandering in the woods of her substitute father, the Count of Villefort, when she suddenly encounters Valancourt. His unexpected appearance parallels the meeting of Comus and the Lady in Milton’s masque. The Lady happens upon Comus when she follows sounds that remind her of “loose unleter’d Hinds” engaging in “Riot and ill manag’d Merriment” (172-74). She attempts to find these revelers (Comus and his band of followers) only because she is lost and alone in the woods at night. While moving in their direction, she sings, hoping to attract the notice of her brothers, who wander elsewhere in the woods. Her song mentions the nightingale, a reference that foreshadows the sexual threat posed by Comus, as the mythological origin of that bird is the divine metamorphosis of a rape victim, Philomela. It is this song that attracts Comus’s attention and makes him resolve to make the Lady his “Queen” (265). Similarly, Emily is in the woods at night when she first sees some rustic dancers (in Radcliffe, portrayed much more positively than in Milton) and then hears a nightingale: “the nightingale beguiled the silence with ‘Liquid notes, that close the eye of day,’” a quotation from one of Milton’s sonnets (Radcliffe 501; Milton, “O Nightingale”). Finally, Emily wanders into an avenue lined by trees that are “overloaded with their own luxuriance” (501). The word “luxuriance” evokes the section of *Paradise Lost* in which Eve argues for a temporary separation from Adam (a separation that enables Satan to tempt her) on the grounds that Eden’s growth is excessive and “the work under our labour [of pruning] grows, / Luxurious by restraint” (IX.208-9). Although no form of the word “luxury” appears in *Comus*, the concept is central to Comus’s temptation, in which he argues that the Lady should indulge herself, since if all humans lived ascetic lives, Nature “would be quite surcharg’d with her own weight, / And strangl’d with her waste fertility”
In the “luxurious” avenue, Emily and Valancourt meet, but just as the Lady’s trust in Comus (who initially appears to be an honest shepherd) is undermined when he takes her to a hidden palace, Emily’s joy dissipates when Valancourt claims to be unworthy of her. Living in Paris while she has been held prisoner, Valancourt has taken to gambling and bad company, so that (like Comus and Morano) he appears to be offering Emily a “luxurious” life-style which will ruin her as it has ruined him. It is not until she has once more proven herself capable of withstanding temptation that Valancourt’s innate integrity and the true nobility of his soul are disclosed, just as the Lady is freed from Comus’s bonds after she succeeds in resisting his wiles.

Works Cited


Wall, Kathleen. *Callisto Myth from Ovid to Atwood: Initiation and Rape in Literature.*