

AN ACCOUNT OF THE PRODUCTION OF MILTON'S COMUS

AT SOUTHWEST TEXAS

TEACHERS COLLEGE

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THESIS

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By

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PREFACE

This thesis is an account of a production of Milton's Comus for the annual water pageant at the Southwest Texas Teachers College on July 31, 1942, of which the author served as general director. The adaptability of the poem for such a purpose was suggested and confirmed by a study of Milton's poetry under the guidance of Dr. L. N. Wright. The production was made possible by the ready cooperation of the departments of English, speech, dramatics, art, music, and physical education. To the directors of these departments, to the students participating, and particularly to Dr. Wright, Dr. Hugh F. Seabury, and to Mr. Don Streeter the author gratefully acknowledges much valuable assistance.

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CHAPTER I

NOTES ON STAGE HISTORY, AND LITERARY SOURCES
AND CRITICISMS OF COMUS

The masque of Comus, written by John Milton, was presented for the first time at Ludlow Castle on September 29, 1634, as a part of the celebration attending the inauguration of the Earl of Bridgewater as Lord President of Wales. Charles I had appointed the Earl of Bridgewater to this position in 1631, but he did not assume his duties immediately and it was not until 1634 that he and his family arrived at Ludlow, the official seat of the Lord President of Wales. The celebrations attending his inauguration extended through the greater part of that year, and it was customary that masques be presented during such celebrations.

Harry Lawes, who was at this time the music master of the Bridgewater family, composed the music for Comus and was in general charge of the production. Lawes was a musician of some note, having the distinction of introducing the new Italian style of music into England, and it was natural that he should contribute a musical score to the celebration. It is supposed that he was responsible for asking Milton to contribute the poem, although Milton probably had had some previous connection with the Bridgewater family, since he had written Arcades, either the same year or the year before, as a part of a masque performed in honor of the Countess Dowager of Derby, who was

the mother of the Countess of Bridgewater.

Only a few details concerning the original production are known. The cast of characters tells us that "the chief persons which presented" (sic) were the Earl of Bridgewater's three children. Lady Alice Egerton, who was only fourteen years old, took the part of the Lady, and her younger brothers, Sir Thomas Egerton and Lord Brackley, played the parts of the two brothers. Tradition has it that the idea in Comus of the lady lost from her brothers in a wood was derived from an actual experience of these children, but critics prefer to believe that the story originated after the production of Comus and was derived from it. The part of Thyrsis was played by Harry Lawes himself, but there is no record telling us the names of the actors who took the parts of Comus and Sabrina. Perhaps these parts were played by professional actors since they required a good actor for one and a good singer for the other. The more difficult roles were often given to actors hired for the occasion in other masques of the period.

Comus was performed in the Council or Banquet Hall of Ludlow Castle, an imposing building which dated back to the Norman Conquest as a strong hold on the Welsh border, and in which, eighteen years before, Charles I had been installed as Prince of Wales. There is no account of the staging of this first presentation, but it no doubt followed the general style of production of all the masques of that period. The seating arrangement of the hall was probably patterned after that at Whitehall Palace where masques were presented for the king

and his court. There the stage, which had a rise of six feet in front and seven feet in the rear, was placed at one end of the richly decorated hall, and the king was seated on a platform called the "state". This "state" was placed directly in front of the stage at the point where the perspective scenery could be viewed for the best illusion. The rest of the guests occupied tiers of seats which formed a horse-shoe around the "state". None of these seats were reserved but the guests were seated according to their rank, the foremost being placed in the first two or three rows at the center and those of lesser importance taking the seats from which the stage was viewed at a less desirable angle. Some similar plan must have been used at Ludlow with the Bridgewater family in the place of honor.

As for the stage setting itself we can only surmise. Nicoll, in The Development of the Theatre¹ lists four types of scenery used in the production of masques during this period. First was the Hotel Bourgogne simultaneous scene which placed on the stage at one time as many localities as the action required. This type, however, was passing out of favor and was rarely used. Second, the triangular machine or scaena versilis might be used. This type, consisting of triangular shaped wings which could be shifted to reveal the different sides, was in favor but it required fairly elaborate machinery to operate it. The two-sided and stationary flats with

1. Nicoll, Allardyce, The Development of the Theatre, pages 127-130.

movable shutters at the back was another possibility, or perhaps the newer idea of a completely movable series of flats and shutters might have been used. Nicoll believes that the third type was more likely to have been used. He says:

We may rest assured, however, that only the older and tried forms were utilized when a young poet, John Milton, brought forth a masque called Comus at Ludlow Castle on September 29, 1634. Maybe there, in the great hall of the castle only back shutters were used; if more was attempted Serlian side wings would have been all that might be required. That there was a curtain may be surmised from the fact that the scene was a discovery--"a wild wood". Next came "a stately Palace, set out with all manner of deliciousness", the change being effected, apparently, to the accompaniment of "softe musicke". A third (and final) set presented a view of "Ludlow towne and the President's castle" in conception no doubt inspired by prospectives at Whitehall of London's houses.

The Serlian wings mentioned here were typical stage pieces of the time, composed of two frames, one of which was rectangular and placed parallel to the stage front, and the other, with lower and upper edges cut to fit the raked floor, set to accord with the perspective lines. The second frame was attached to the first so that it lay along a line drawn to the vanishing point.

All lighting of the time was done by candles and lamps. The usual practice was to light the hall with candles which, since they could not be easily extinguished, were allowed to

burn during the performance. Lanterns were used to illuminate the stage proper. These lanterns had small glass bowls which were sometimes filled with colored liquid and placed before other lamps to vary the color of the light. The stage must have appeared very dim to the spectators at Ludlow because of the poor light and also because the stage was no doubt viewed through a veil of smoke.

Some masques, although they were written for a specific occasion, were repeated several times and some even found their way into the professional theatre during the next century. There is evidence that Comus was one which was revived during the eighteenth century at Covent Garden and Drury Lane, the two Royal Theatres. It had undergone some changes, however, and was used as an afterpiece following the main attraction. The 1777 acting edition contains this explanatory note:

As this most excellent performance is now mutilated and reduced to an afterpiece we have thought proper to inform our Readers what Lines are omitted by placing an inverted (') before each.

The acting version used during most of the eighteenth century was prepared by John Dalton, who was at that time tutor to Lord Beauchamp, only son of the Earl of Hertford.

Through the "judicious insertion of several songs and passages" taken from other poems of Milton, and by the addition of several songs of his own, which have been pronounced by H. J. Todd to have been "written with much elegance and taste", he produced in 1738 a work which, when set to the delicious melodies of Dr. Arne, kept it's place on the stage for many years.³

3. Dictionary of National Biography, Vol. V, p. 427.

It was finally replaced in 1773 by a version prepared by George Colman the elder, who was then the manager of Covent Garden.

Several major changes were made when Comus was adapted to the professional stage. A second attendant spirit was added, the last scene was omitted, a pastoral nymph, several bacchanals, and the character of Euphrosyne, who was introduced with some lines borrowed from "L'Allegro", were added and songs and speeches were provided for these additional characters. For these later presentations a new musical score was written by Dr. Arne.

Thaler⁴ in his book Shakespeare to Sheridan records performances of Comus at Covent Garden in 1780, when a young "person of quality" made his first bow on any stage in the part of a Bacchanal, and in 1785, when an unknown "young Lady" played the parts of Sabrina and the Pastoral Nymph.

Dr. Johnson records that a benefit performance of Comus was played on April 5, 1750 at Drury Lane for Milton's granddaughter Elizabeth. For this performance Johnson wrote a prologue which David Garrick spoke in which he praised Milton, deplored Elizabeth's poverty, and ended by saying

Thus, graced with humble virtue's native charms,
Her grandsire leaves her in Britannia's arms;
Secure with peace, with competence to dwell,
While tutelary nations guard her cell.
Yours is the charge, ye fair, ye wise, ye brave,
'Tis yours to crown desert--beyond the grave.⁵

4. Thaler, Alwin, Shakespeare to Sheridan, p. 193

5. Works of Samuel Johnson (Connoisseur's Edition),
Vol. VI.

In September of 1934 Comus was once again played during a tercentenary celebration. One of these performances occurred in the outer courtyard of Ludlow Castle and another was given in the Open Air Theatre in the Botannical Gardens in London. Such is the brief history of the performances of Comus on the English stage.

An equally brief glance into its literary history will suffice for the purposes of the present study.

Milton, in writing Comus, drew ideas from several sources. The story of Circe comes from Homer's "Odessey" Book X. Milton makes Comus the son of Circe and Bacchus. The word comus is a Greek word meaning revel or carousal. It had been used previously as a character name in drama. Ben Jonson in his masque called Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue (1618) introduced a character called Comus. This Comus is a glutton who is brought on stage with these words:

Room! room! make room for the Bouncing Belly
First father of sauce and deviser of jelly,
Prime master of arts, and the giver of wit
That found out the excellent engine, the spit.⁶

A Latin play entitled Comus, sive Phagesiposia Cimmeria: Somnium by Erycius Puteanus, a Dutchman whose real name was Hendrik van der Putten, also contained a character named Comus, who in this play, represented a more refined sensuality. Milton, although he was certainly familiar with these earlier characterizations of Comus, is not obviously imitative of either.

6. Cambridge History of Literature, Vol. VI, p. 406.

The idea of the power of chastity was presented in The Faithful Shepherdess (1634) by John Fletcher. In George Peele's Old Wives' Tale two brothers hunt a lost sister who is under the influence of an enchanter.

The masque as a literary type is considered by most critics to have reached its peak in Comus. Macauley in his Essay on Milton says:

It is certainly the noblest performance of the kind which exists in any language.⁷

Modern critics also have praised it. Courthope in A History of English Poetry makes this statement concerning Comus:

In this masque pastoralism takes the highest and most perfect dramatic form it is capable of assuming.⁸

A few dissenting voices have been raised, however, notable among them that of Samuel Johnson who says:

A work more truly poetical is rarely found; allusions, images, and descriptive epithets embellish almost every period with lavish decoration. As a series of lines, therefore, it may be considered as worthy of all the admiration with which the votaries have received it. As a drama it is deficient.⁹

He supports his criticism by pointing out that the actions of the two brothers are not probable nor reasonable, that Thyrsis' opening speech, which is addressed to the audience, is against dramatic representation, that all the

7. Macauley, Thomas Babington, Essay on Milton (edited by A. P. Walker), p. 19.

8. Courthope, W. J., A History of English Poetry, Vol. III, p. 390.

9. Johnson, Samuel, Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets, Vol. I, page 230, 231.

speeches are too long to be effective dialogue and are therefore tedious. Only the second scene between Comus and the Lady meets his approval. It is, in his opinion, the most animated and affecting scene of the drama. Johnson sums up his criticism by saying:

It is drama in the epic style, inelegantly splendid and tediously instructive.¹⁰

In criticising Comus for its lack of dramatic qualities Johnson was perhaps unjust in view of the essential nature of the masque form. Brooke in his biography of Milton answers these accusations of Johnson's.

...in condemning it as a drama, he is carried beyond good sense to lose sight of its beauty as a poem. Moreover his arrows do not hit the target. Comus is not a regular drama, but a masque, and a masque obeys laws distinct from those of the regular drama. The masque depends for success not only on the poetry, which here is splendid, but also and chiefly on its occasion, and away from the occasion its dramatic fitness cannot be judged.¹¹

It is Macauley's opinion that the masque form was essentially lyrical and that it was dramatic only in semblance. He praises Milton in that he has not

attempted a fruitless struggle against a defect inherent in the nature of that species of composition; and he has therefore succeeded, whenever success was not impossible.¹²

The masque, which is to be responsible for the dramatic defects of Comus, was a purely aristocratic form made up of

10. Johnson, Samuel, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 233.

11. Milton, John, L'Allegro, Il Penseroso, Comus, and Lycidas, (edited by Huntington, Tuely Francis), pp. XXIX, XXX.

12. Macauley, Thomas Babington, op. cit., pp. 19, 20.

a lyric, scenic, and dramatic framework for a ball. In its original form it consisted, in variable proportions, of speech, dance, and song, and its essential and invariable feature was a group of dancers called masquers who descended from the stage to dance with members of the audience. These early masques, in their simplest form, followed this pattern: a group of men and women disguised in some manner arrive in some setting which corresponds to their dress, there is some explanation of the disguise and setting before the main dance of the masquers, the masquers then dance with the spectators and exit. Later, the masque came to mean any revel, masking, or disguising. By the seventeenth century more emphasis was placed upon the spoken lines, but always the drama was overshadowed by the pageantry. The masque was an appeal of the moment to the eye and ear. However, many texts have survived because of their literary merits.

The intellectual power of the new dramatic art came to the rescue and infused into the Elizabethan masque a literary element which has been a preservative against decay.¹³

The masque form was a kind of court entertainment which came out of Italy and was introduced into the court of Henry VIII as a choice novelty. There is evidence, however, that this was only a new adaptation of the older pageants which had been found in England and on the continent several centuries before. The dancing had gone out of these revols in England

13. Cambridge History of Literature, Vol. VI, p. 371.

but had been kept in Italy. Thus the masque on its return was thought to be new. Chambers in The Elizabethan Stage says that the masque came back to England under the "rather unjustifiable colour of a novelty."¹⁴

The renewed interest in this form after its re-introduction during the reign of Henry VIII was kept alive through the seventeenth century. Masques became the most fashionable of the court entertainments and no "occasion" was complete without one. By the sixteenth century practically every court had either a permanent hall-theatre where these spectacles were produced, or a ball room which could be used for this purpose. In 1581 the first Banqueting House was built for Elizabeth in England. It was later destroyed by fire and a new one, designed by Inigo Jones, was built in 1622. Nearly two hundred and fifty masques were presented between 1588 and 1603. Masques were also frequently presented along coronation and procession routes, and many of them were used as entertainment during or after a royal banquet.

The production of these masques was lavish and costly even though they were intended for one performance only and were to be viewed by a select group of guests. James I, not the most extravagant of monarchs by any means, allocated 4,000 pounds for one production in 1618. This sum represents about 40,000 pounds in current monetary value. In 1633 the Inns of Courts spent 21,000 pounds on a masque, which would now be equivalent to about 200,000 pounds. Some idea of the richness of the costumes may be gained from an account

14. Chambers, E. K., The Elizabethan Stage, Vol. I, p. 152.

presented by a Mr. Henshawe, her Majesty's silkman, for the goods used by the ladies in one masque. Nicoll finds that:

These fourteen ladies, among whom was a queen, required no less than 2142 ounces of silk, amounting to 780 yards apiece. In all there were 2010 yards of "gold spangled bone Lace", 5270 yards of "gold spangled Loom Lace", 658 yards of "silver spangled bone Lace", and 2982 yards of "silver spangled Loom Lace", the total cost of these items alone coming to over 1071 pounds, at least according to the computation of worthy Mr. Henshawe.¹⁵

The stage effects were equally elaborate. Much delight was taken in surprise effects obtained by the use of stage machines and trapped areas. Many stage sets included movable clouds, which were controlled by machines, and which sometimes were used to bring characters down to the stage. Rocks were made to open and reveal other scenes, waves flowed across the stage, water spouted from fountains, and other scenic marvels calculated to arouse admiring wonder in the spectators were devised. The greatest of the scene designers was Inigo Jones (1573-1652) who introduced the proscenium arch into England. It was he who, for many years, executed the scenery for Ben Jonson's texts, and these were the most popular of all the masques. Jonson, later on, came to feel that his dramas were completely over shadowed by the scenery. "Painting and carpentry", he said, "are the soul of Masque."¹⁶ Certainly the scene designer was held in the same regard as

15. Nicoll, Allardyce, *op. cit.*, pp. 170, 171.

16. Chambers, E. K., *The Elizabethan Stage*, Vol. I, p. 180.

the poet--at least they were paid the same amount for their inventions on one occasion. For Love Freed From Ignorance Jonson and Jones received 40 pounds apiece, the total cost of the whole production being 710 pounds.

The masque form played a significant part in the history of drama. The triumphal age of the masque has passed but it is still remembered.

The candles and lamps are gone from Whitehall, and the masquing entertainment is a thing of the distant and colourful past; but the theatre, with its long memory and sense of tradition, has never quite forgotten the days when a king in state, surrounded by his courtiers, sat in dignified isolation to hear Ben Jonson's words and watch the scenic marvels created by Inigo Jones. "Thus", says Whitelocke, "was this earthly pomp and glory, if not vanity, soon passed over and gone, as if it had never been", yet the air still trembles with the echoes of Sabrina's song and the coarse laughter of Comus, nor has the theatre of another age been able quite to forget the canvas oceans and the flimsy forests of this vanished stage.¹⁷

17. Nicoll, Allardye, op. cit., p. 314.

CHAPTER II

ADAPTATION AND PRESENTATION

It has been the custom at the Southwest Texas Teachers College to present some form of dramatic entertainment as a part of the water pageant produced each summer at Riverside, the college recreation park. This pageant provides an opportunity for correlating the activities of the various departments of the college specializing in the arts. The production of a drama in the masque form offers great possibilities for such correlation, since the masque includes, in its essential nature, the arts of speech, pantomime, dancing, and music. Comus has long been acclaimed as one of the finest texts for such a production, and it adapts itself especially well to an outdoor performance in such a setting as Riverside affords. There is a natural relationship between the masque and the pastoral, and where Inigo Jones was forced to invent ingenious arrangements of tree, river, and sky, nature has provided all that could be desired for the staging of the pastoral masque at San Marcos. It was entirely fitting, then, that the masque of Comus should be rescued from the oblivion into which it had fallen, and presented at the Southwest Texas Teachers College on July 31, 1942.

The staging of Comus in an outdoor setting was the major problem in production; the adaptation of Milton's poetry to the time limit imposed by the situation and to the taste of a modern audience was the corollary problem. Since it is

customary to include demonstrations of water sports in the pageant the time allotted to the dramatic portion of the program was only one hour. For this reason it was necessary to reduce the over-all length of the poem by approximately one-half. Because a modern audience, nurtured by moving pictures and radio drama, is impatient of long speeches and philosophical arguments, portions of the poem which did not contribute directly to the action were cut out. However, since lack of action is inherent in the masque form and since the lines are of such real worth and beauty, as much of the poetry was retained as the time limit permitted. No other change was necessary to the play proper, though the prologue used at Covent Garden and Drury Lane and published in the acting edition of 1738 was used. The three dances, a court dance, a country dance, and the eccentric dance of Comus' rout, called for in the original script were unchanged. Two songs were retained with their musical settings and parts of other songs were included in the spoken dialogue. A comparison of the script included in the appendix with the poem in Milton's Works will reveal the exact changes.

Riverside, the setting for the production, has the physical aspects of an amphitheater with the river dividing the island stage from the spectators on the opposite bank. The concrete slab, large enough for dancing and skating, forms a stage floor adaptable to any size production. The distance of the stage from the audience made it impossible for the voices of the actors to be heard and determined the

necessity for producing the action in pantomime and providing microphones back-stage for the speaking voices.

Stage Set. The stage set was necessarily simple in design, no attempt being made at descriptive scenery. Although the action of Comus is laid in three localities, a faithful reproduction of these effects was not feasible, and the loss in total playing time involved in elaborate scene changes would not have been justified. Because the setting was used to represent all three localities it was made as abstract as possible by the use of neutral color. The set consisted of a back wall of flats sixteen feet long and eight feet high. The side wings were made of rushes and moss held by wires in a framework. The only pieces of stage furniture used were two platforms, one of which was one foot high, five feet wide, and seven feet long, and the other was one foot high, three feet wide, and five feet long. The smaller platform was placed on top of the larger. For the first scene both platforms were covered with moss. For the second scene the smaller platform was uncovered and a chair placed on it. The smaller platform was removed for the third scene leaving the larger one revealed. Two chairs were used on this platform for the final scene.

Lighting. The lighting was as unelaborate as the set. Only general illumination was attempted, no special lighting of the various stage areas was employed. The light was obtained from a row of strip lights with the color frames removed which was placed in the footlight position at the front of the stage.

Pantomime and Reading. The pantomime was interpreted in a broad fashion because the distance of the audience from the stage made this necessary for the action to carry across, and also because it is more in keeping with the actual style of acting used during the period of Comus. An attempt was made to overcome the static quality of the drama by introducing as much bodily action as was consistent with the dialogue. Facial expression was rendered practically negligible by the distance factor. Students and teachers from the speech and English departments formed the pantomime and reading casts. Special attention was paid to the reading of the poetry and as much variety and animation as possible was introduced into the rendition.

Masks. Students in the art department made the animal masks used in the eccentric dance, the masks representing, as Milton advises, "wolf, or bear, or ounce, or tiger, hog, or bearded goat". Pictures of the masks will be found in the appendix.

Music. The two songs which were retained with their original settings were the Echo song sung by the Lady and Thyrsis' invocation to Sabrina. The original music by Harry Lawes was adapted for an orchestral accompaniment by R. L. Brantley, a student in the music department. Mr. Brantley also sang the song of Thyris and Miss Emalu Alexander sang the Echo song accompanied by the college orchestra. When the originally scheduled performance of Comus was postponed on account of rain, this music was recorded and the record

used in the final production. Incidental recorded music was played before the performance began, selections being made from the library of the music department. Mendelssohn's Midsummer Night's Dream music, the ballet music from Rosamunde by Schubert, the musical setting for Ben Jonson's Drink To Me Only With Thine Eyes, Mozart's Magic Flute Overture and Handel's Gavotte were found to be in keeping. The orchestration, the Harry Lawes' scores, and the recording by the orchestra and soloists are on file.

Dances. The dances were created by members of the faculty and students of the women's physical education department. Original choreography was developed for all three dances, the country dance and the court dance following the seventeenth century pattern and the masked dance employing the techniques of the modern eccentric dance. This dance was featured as the part of the play in which the wearing of masks bore out the traditional masquerade or dissembling peculiar to the masque form.

Costume. The costumes, adhering as closely as possible to the age of the production, were borrowed from the College Theater. For the Lady the full skirt, square neck, and stomacher; for the brothers, velvet breeches, lace-trimmed coats, and swords approximated the costume of the period. The court dances were dressed in similar costumes, and Lord and Lady Bridgewater appeared in somewhat more elaborate clothes of the same type. The country dancers wore full skirts of bright colors with black bodices, the boys in knee length green breeches with black and silver jackets.

The costumes for the eccentric dance were short black or silver skirts with contrasting jackets. Special costuming was required for Comus, Thyrsis, and Sabrina. Comus wore a belted tunic of green and silver. His wig was of blonde curls wreathed with ivy. He carried a silver wand and wine goblet. Thyrsis as the Attendant Spirit wore a robe of metallic cloth of gold and silver. Both Comus and Thyrsis wore tunics for their shepherd disguises, Comus in purple and Thyrsis in brown. Sabrina's costume was conditioned by the fact that she made her entrance from the river. She appeared in a green bathing suit decorated with sequins. She wore white flowers in her long unbound hair. All of the characters were either sandalled or bare foot. Bathing suits were foundation garments and costume detail was simplified or omitted wherever possible.

The dance, music, art, and speech contributions were worked out in detail in the respective departments from specifications furnished by the director. Therefore it was necessary only to fit them into the total production.

Problems and Suggestions. An outdoor presentation always entails certain risks of weather conditions. The performance of Comus was postponed from the original date of its production because continued rain made it impossible for Riverside to be used. If Comus had been produced at that time it would have been possible for the college orchestra to play both the incidental music before the production and the accompaniments for the dances and songs. This would have been a distinct asset to the performance.

The river-side setting made it desirable to interpret Milton's water nymph as literally as possible. Although strict conformity to the age of the production was sacrificed for the point of having Sabrina actually emerge from the water, a more fitting costume could possibly be devised of water-resisting material, or a more elaborate entrance for Sabrina together with a train of water nymphs might be arranged in a boat or raft.

Spot lights would have dramatized Sabrina's entrance, and a variation of light, both as to amount and color, would have enhanced the illusion. The mood of the scene in Comus' palace might have been suggested by appropriate lighting.

Audience reactions after the production suggest that a presentation of the pantomime cast in person with the speaking voices for each as an introduction would have facilitated a better understanding of the action. As it was, a reading of the argument of the story helped to interpret the situation to the audience. The prologue, spoken by the Lady in true seventeenth century fashion, was used to establish audience contact.

Perhaps the most frequently heard comment on the performance was in praise of the speaking voices. Whatever doubtful value the masque form may have for the modern theater is amply compensated for by a sympathetic rendering of Milton's poetry.

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