

Comus Downgraded

A dramatic poem.

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A reworking of Milton's *Comus* with some Shelley stirred into the mix.

[*A wild wood. ATTENDANT SPIRIT enters.*]

Greetings! I am the sovereign spirit
 Of something in particular, yet, steeped
 Full to my deepest neuronal chamber
 With pharmacological admixture—
 Valium, codeine, and green weed besides
 (Which, mind you, grows freely from nature's grace)—
 Dazed I wander through this mazy forest
 Seeking to remember the present task
 For which I have come, enthusiastic
 As I was. Just mere eyeblinks earlier,
 Reposed upon a soporific cloud,
 My senses soothed with temperate pleasures
 Of downy rest, blue undisturbed Heavens,
 And, yes, my drowsy blend of narcotics,
 I drifted aimless of time growing ripe
 And fulsome with dangerous precedent.
 Ah yes, it comes back to me, I'm a sprite
 That protects the virtuous and the chaste,
 Those maidens who proceed with dainty step
 Through mankind's unfathomable puzzle
 Of falsehood, deceit, and so on and so forth.
 (Everyone knows how insane the world is,
 It would bore me to list its many ills
 In magnitudinous Miltonic manner
 And we can all do without bumper thoughts.)
 Anyway, where was I? Oh yes. While
 Relaxed upon the pillowy outlay
 Of a snow-white cloud gliding solemnly
 Through an immaculate summer sunlight,
 Some bird or other, a bluebird I think
 It was, fluttered up in haste beside me
 And began to melodize in my ear.
 Blessed as I am with the art to understand

The liquid flutings from the throats of birds,
 I learned from this busybody bluebird
 That a maiden of dazzling aspect
 Has lost her way amid this dim forest,
 Unaware that her hesitant footsteps
 Lead her ever closer to a dreaded
 Meeting with a perverse woodland demon,
 Who, no doubt (this demon's insatiable),
 Will seek to subvert the Lady's virtue,
 Not only to satisfy his own pleasures,
 But also merely to flex his dark arts
 Of seduction, and perhaps to promote
 A new publication of his on the subject.

Therefore must I compose myself forthwith
 If the fair maiden is to be rescued
 From that foul monster lurking among us
 In this confusion of leafy branches,
 Perhaps, as I speak, peering hatefully
 With black eyes out through a thicket at her,
 Who wanders ever closer to his wiles.
 If I save this lovely human female,
 Maybe to me she'll lavish her treasure
 Of sweet-natured attention and patience?
 No, it's unseemly to think like that.
 As an Attendant Spirit, I am moved
 By no ulterior motive, but seek
 The triumph of the good for its own sake.

Let me take a moment to rest my head
 Beside this brook whose crystal flood babbles
 Sonorously over its bed of pebbles;
 I'll splash this flood upon my face, and drink
 Deeply to revive me, so I can think
 Clearly again, the better to fulfil my task.

[*SPIRIT withdraws.*]

[*COMUS enters, with revellers.*]

COMUS. Come, night, spread out your cloak of dark
 Across this woodland wide and deep,
 All the better to hide our lark
 While the virtuous lay in sleep!
 Who brought the beer? Who brought the spliffs?
 All's invited except the stiffs!
 I, the one and only Comus,
 The God of Party Animals,
 Sole antithesis of troubles,
 Shall blaze our headlong way to bliss!

(Interested in my parents?
Find it all in Milton's opus.)

Look, you'all! Dusk proceeds apace,
The sun intends to hide its face
From revels erotic and wild.
Careful or you'll make a child,
You two, take it slow, night is long
And I have but begun my song.
Uncork those bottles of wine,
Fountains of toxic pleasures fine;
I feel my blood begin to rise
As delights I start to devise:
We'll lose ourselves in revelry,
Shirk all responsibility,
Responsive but to bodily
Stimulations entirely;
Morbid cares we'll chase away
Hotly, couples tirelessly
Germinating in the moonlight,
Far from the common, out of sight
Of the staid, hidden from the meek.
Yup, if it's perversions you seek
You're welcome to join our brigade
Of roving pervs where every game is played!

[*They dance.*]

SONG OF COMUS

These rarest flowers garlanding my head
Drip fine hallucinogenic syrups
Which, with my beady perspiration mixed,
Trickle down in rivulets
Along my temples to infuse my eyes,
The porous entry of the LSD
Into my nervous system. Now I see
A panorama of fantastic sights
Widening my beamy eyes prodigiously!

THE DRUNKEN REVELLERS' IRREGULAR ODE TO COMUS

Awesome! It's Comus
 Throbbing among us,
 You're smouldering, you're thrumming with passion!
 This covert of trees
 Reverbs with the echoes
 Of many a corporal commotion,
 While over it all and throughout,
 Robustly Comus urges on our sweaty sport,
 Mingling his jocular tones
 With the sundry amorous moans
 Of naked lovers shedding active heat.
 Blissfully Comus greases this jollity,
 Virtuoso of peculiar iniquity.

COMUS. Shh, quiet! Zip it for the nonce!—
 Hey everyone, make yourselves scarce
 Double-quick, for I hear the course
 Of prim footsteps wending this way.
 I recognize such touching sounds:
 A girl, who in the dying day
 Has lost her way amid these grounds.
 Goons! Huddle behind those trees there!
 Our group could cause her quite a scare,
 And, affrighted, she'd flee the scene
 Which would my growing plans confound,
 Which I'll convey to you unbound:
 I seek to drink the nectar at her core
 And go at it until I'm parched and sore!
 This my dark plan shall come to pass.
 Now hide myself, here comes the lass!

[*Everyone hides in the trees, COMUS among them.*]

[*The MAIDEN enters, in a reverie.*]

Ay, this mysterious place
 As light starts to drop
 Grows ever more ominous
 Every passing step,
 The world becoming darkness
 From bottom to top!
 The wood concealing horrors
 Many fathoms deep,
 The stars a million loopholes

Through which perverts peep,
 Now's the time when goblin things
 Are stirring from sleep,
 Ravenous with appetites
 For girls' souls to reap!
 Ha! These vile imaginings
 I must promptly stop! . . .
 What stalks through the wilderness
 Intending to trip
 Up my forward way in snares,
 My one life to keep?
 I must hold a readiness
 To run or to leap
 In case one of these creatures
 Needs to be given the slip!

[*The MAIDEN walks on.*]

Curious! This forest, which in daylight
 Hosts rustic sights which please the eye, arcades
 Of aged trees sheltering wildflowers
 Of every shape and color underfoot,
 In darkness broods menacing and hateful,
 Its deep-black shadows wicked with peril.
 I better keep myself on red alert. . . .
 Leaves reflecting moonbeams have guided me
 Like a thousand tiny torches onward
 Into this bower where lately voices
 Came forth, sounding like a bustling party.
 But now there's no one here that I can see,
 Just a barren place in austere moonlight.
 Alone I wonder what I am to do.

[*She contemplates.*]

The stillness undergoes a subtle change.
 Now comes the gentlest breeze, like one's last breath
 Before subsiding into deepest sleep.
 Hear the faint whisper of the jostled trees.

VOICES OF TREES

Take care, fair girl! Take cover!
 Evil stalks this dusky ground!
 If you're to discover
 That violent lover
 Named Comus, it's over
 For you! Try not to be found!

These woodsy sounds are teasing on my senses,
 Serene untranslatable impressions
 Of the nocturnal atmosphere moaning,
 Vaguely evocative of churchly airs.

VOICE OF BREEZE

Adorable girl, be clever!
 If he wraps you in words
 And then in his arms
 You'll be lost to the daylight forever!
 Goodbye, girl, goodbye!
 We're called back to the sky!
 Fly, girl, fly!

Still comes this feeling of eerie warning
 But I'm unable to grasp its meaning.
 All is quiet now, the breeze has passed through.
 Alone I stand, wondering what to do.

[*The MAIDEN looks around.*]

Hm. Benighted in this overgrown strife,
 I feel my spirits sink, a frowning mood
 Overfills my eyes with unfallen tears,
 A sadness cloaks me in a robe of lead
 I can't cast off. These melancholy sighs
 I let out grudgingly, like a flower
 Giving up its final scents to the air
 Before wilting earthward, withered and sere.
 Being lost here now seems a quintessence
 And summation of the days of my life,
 Where every forward step has led nowhere
 Fruitful; my life's been a life of false starts,
 On which this perplexing wood lays the stress;
 This tangled woodland, my mirror image.
 What has happened? I've lost the way back home.
 Seeking a short cut, overcome by gloom

I have become, and in more ways than one.

Okay, I'm dramatizing shamelessly.
I'm only a teenage girl after all,
And I can't help feeling emotional,
Overly so. This sensitivity
Comes to a young woman naturally.

The truth is that I've always been lonely.
Waiting for one to sweep me off my feet
Has persisted aching endlessly;
All the boys I've met, none have had the wit
Or grace of the dream man inside my head,
So from their many disappointments fled,
I have remained alone for too much time,
Pining away for the man of my dream
And his achy dreamy intensity,
For whom I'd yield myself entirely
And do anything to make him happy!

I've been totally chaste, but that's in spite
Of myself and the desires I fight
Inside me. Oh to meet the charming man
That haunts my dreams, that genial vision:
Everything I could ever want, in one!

Listen to me! I really should focus
On this creepy place, its shadows seem full
Of obscure incident, dimly seen changes
In the dark suggesting intentional
Movement of creatures lurking stealthily.
Is that rustling? Snapping of twigs? Ay, me!
A song I'll sing to blot out these strange sounds.

SONG

Silver moonlight shining bright,
Through this wood so dark and dreary,
Guide me right with proper step to safety!

This spiderwork of troublesome branches
Gives me fright and leaves me weary
With terrible thought of unwholesome imagery
That makes my mind a second haunt
Contending with this horrid place!

How my beating heart does race!
What sound was that? What face?
My breath catches—my song breaks—
My eyes play tricks with grim imagining.

[*COMUS peeps out through the trees.*]

COMUS. Who is that voice whose melodious air
 Causes unprecedented softening
 In my breast? She comes! Never has so fair
 A face given voice to such lovely songs!
 Comus! Get a hold of yourself! These wrongs
 Of awe and empathy portend to halt
 Your horrid schemes prematurely. What a fault
 That would be, if I fell in love with her!
 As if! To give up on the crazy stir
 Of carnal sensations for their own sake,
 To adore this woman and to forsake
 All others for her exclusive favor?
 I know what all that means: crushing boredom!
 Every new day I need a new flavor,
 For familiarity leaves me numb.
 Better to sport ourselves in sensual
 Excitation lacking emotional
 Ties of any kind, till sated we be
 Of each other's flesh and move on promptly
 To another transitory pleasure.
 Pleasures are best when they are being born,
 New lusts save me from feeling old and worn.
 Love is for the unimaginative,
 The sedentary. Going from woman
 To woman keeps me eternally young!
 Comus! Expunge all trace of that song
 That momentarily enthralled your nerve;
 Fill again with rigid strength of purpose
 And overtake the girl for your pleasure!

[*The MAIDEN approaches closer unawares.*]

COMUS. Now's occasion to pounce upon my prey.
 I'll spread abroad this fairy dust to fool
 Her eye with erroneous vision, best
 For my boring plans of debauchery.
 Her sight dazzled thus with the sprinklings
 Of this mysterious agent, she'll see
 Me gladly as an innocent fellow
 Clad in a university sweatshirt
 And sneakers, the better to gain her trust.

MAIDEN. What's that form which breaks out into plain sight,
 That makes my heart begin to beat with fright?

COMUS. Hail, lady! Are you lost as well as I?

MAIDEN. I am, in truth. I've lost the forward way
 Homeward, and stagnate here in this dark place;
 Gladdened am I to discover you here,
 For maybe you can help regain the road
 Back to my beloved suburbia?

COMUS. Indeed I can, my lady. These forest
 Brakes and dells and errant pathways I know
 Well, for I often stray here to contemplate
 Higher things like art and philosophy,
 Which solitude and silence befit best.

MAIDEN. Hm. This fellow seems a sensitive sort.
 But why must you linger amidst the night?
 Surely you can't read in this somber light.

COMUS. I fell asleep upon my many books,
 And, awaking to the blinding darkness,
 My body began to quail and quiver,
 And only now, before your lovely sight,
 Do I begin to feel myself again.

MAIDEN. Truly you can lead us from this bower
 Of entangling weeds and shadows dire?
 I celebrate our meeting! Providence
 Has brought us together to brave this place,
 Where singly we might fall to aimless bother.

COMUS. Come then, my forest queen, and as I lead
 Us surely through this wood so menacing,
 I'll speak of lofty subjects enchanting
 To a virtuous lady of good sense:
 Art of pleasing imagery, reflections
 On the moral instruction imparted
 By the poets of highest intention;
 The films of Stanley Kubrick, Schnittke's
 Visionary symphonies, sweet Keats's
 Odes that lave the aural sense like honey;
 All the ornaments to intelligence
 That finest artists fashioned from their hearts;
 I'll speak of the meaning of life revealed
 To me after years of meditation;
 And as my voluble speech rolls, charming
 Your ears with innumerable grace notes,
 You'll come to feel amorous affection
 Suffusing your native admiration
 And before you know it, you'll have fallen in love.

MAIDEN. Mercy! The darkness thickens, a cloud glides
 Over the moon and stalls unwithdrawing;
 See the silvery fringe the smothered moon

Paints upon the edging of its glum shroud.
 The night turns doubly baleful now.
 I'd welcome an escort through this neighborhood
 Of interwoven branches and thorny shrubs.
 (Truly now he has a puzzling way,
 But his handsome amiable aspect
 Outweighs a suspicion, for now at least.)
 Let us together find the proper route
 Out of this place. I shall come with you.

COMUS. The pleasure is mine, my lady, all mine.
 (So now my plans move toward supremacy!
 This double darkness aids my sorcery;
 With my artful style I'll pick the lock
 Of her full metal jacket of chastity!)

[*Together the two advance further into the wood.*]

SONG OF THE SQUIRRELS

We're only little squirrels
 Sleeping meekly in our dens,
 Our little nutty troubles
 No match for humans'.

Commonly we scamper round
 Drawing little notice;
 But when humans make a sound
 We seize up and freeze.

Stirred awake, we lift our heads,
 Our bushy tails uncurl;
 Peering out with beady eyes
 Through our tree-trunk hole

We see a beautiful girl
 Hand in hand treading our way,
 Joined unawares to the churl
 Comus! Well-a-day!

The looks, the nods, the smiles
 She gives reveal attentive
 Pleasure at his well-placed words;
 Does she want to live?

Scamper to help her we must!
 This lovely girl's endangered!
 Virtue's attendant spirit
 Must not yet have heard!

Quickly shall our little feet
 Cross woodland distances vast,
 Seeking her hero to meet,
 If her honor's to last!

[*Squirrels rush away.*]

ECHO OF THE MAIDEN'S PARENTS
(from far away)

Blow, wind, blow,
 Echo of our racing thoughts
 That will not cease
 Of our daughter who's not at home!

Blow, wind, blow,
 Keep rattling the windows
 And bring no peace
 Until our daughter finds her way back home!

[*The MAIDEN struggling with COMUS.*]

MAIDEN. Ay, trouble reveals its authentic face
 Beneath its mask of tricky courtesy!
 My strength flags, I fail, but wrestle I must
 This assertive demon still! Who shall save
 Me from his importuning hands? His grip
 Burns, I struggle but to no avail,
 Every moment I weaken in his grasp!

COMUS. And now she is mine, at least for a time!
 What? What comes to disturb this perfect crime?

[*BUTTERFLY enters.*]

COMUS. What is this butterfly which befuddles
 My uproarious ambition to take
 My pleasure in a violent embrace?

It dazzles my eyes, my hands fall away
 From this lady's voluptuous contours
 To swat at the air aimlessly, missing
 It while it weaves airily round my head!
 This toy maddens me, the wind from its wings
 Ruffles my hair, spoiling my good looks!
 Its busy outspread wings are hued with peach
 And plum, tones of summer's elysium
 Of peaceful days, yet this creature's antic
 Flight is nothing calm, but leaves me frantic.
 Who needs such hassle? I should have been born
 Honest, a girl's love to rightfully earn!

[*BUTTERFLY transforms into ATTENDANT SPIRIT.*]

SPIRIT. Surprise! Your startled eyes do not deceive,
 It's I, your tardy spirit, here to save
 You at the last moment, no time to spare,
 Thank all the squirrels for leading me here!
 Comus, your foul adventures are done;
 Your hang-dog look reveals it's I who's won.

COMUS. I'm out of here. Who needs this pointless strife?
 I'll off to go rethink my complex life.

[*COMUS exits, dejected.*]

MAIDEN. Fortunate spirit, savior of my right,
 You dazzle me uncommonly. A light
 Shines forth from your ethereal garments,
 A texture of misty dulcet colors
 Like a rainbow unwoven then woven
 Again into a T-shirt and trousers.

SPIRIT. It's a little something from my own hands,
 Sort of out of place in these low-brow lands;
 Attire better suited to blue skies
 And white clouds where I spend much time in dreams.
 Yet, when I'm required below, I arc
 Down like a shooting star and get to work.

Indeed, I better convey a moral.
 You can't trust every charming man you meet!
 It's easy for a young woman to misread
 The signals, for the man manipulates
 Them and her for his own lewd, crude motives.
 A man's smiling cheer can hide a knavish heart.
 Not in all cases, I'm pleased to impart.

Most men are upright and admirable
When it comes to love, or try to be.
Simply be wary of too-easy charm.

 This dark frolic is blessedly over,
Yet do keep this purposefully in mind
To instruct your behavior in future.

MAIDEN. I shall, dear Spirit! Bless you for your help!
Alone I would have faltered in his grip.
Although my virtue's well up to the test,
The brute would've overmastered me through might.

 See now! A wind passes through, as if stirred
By earthbound cries, and the moon unconcealed
Sheds silvery rays in unceasing flow,
Distinguishing a forward way I know.

 Escort me home where I may be at rest!
Dear parents and cheerful shelter are best
To lull my rattled nerves. And when I dream,
Tucked comfortably in my bedsheets warm
And cozy, blissful in security,
It's you I'll greet with tender amity.

[*End.*]