

perfection. It possesses an elevation, a purity, a sort of severity of sentiment which no one in that age could have given but Milton." It has been supposed, with a good deal of plausibility, that *Comus* has a purpose aside from the ostensible one—that it is intended to allegorize the Romanizing tendencies of the Prelacy. One can readily understand how Milton, whose life purpose was Poetry, and whom Duty had not yet called forth from "the quiet air of delightful studies" to the defence of Liberty, should have chosen at this period a poetical allegory for the expression of his feelings. But in the author of *Comus* and *Arcades*, of the lines *On Shakespeare* and the *Song on May Morning*, we see Milton as yet removed in sympathy from the stern Puritans, to whom plays and play actors were an abomination, and the games round the May-pole an unholy thing. *Comus*, in particular, is a poetical protest against the bigotry of the extremists, of whom Prynne's *Histriomastix* was the natural outcome. In *Lycidas*, however, we have the first unmistakable indication that Milton, the poet, was alive to the signs of the time; "we hear the first note of the trumpet which was to be to the English throne and church as were those blown before the walls of Jericho:"¹

"The hungry sheep² look up, and are not fed,
But, swollen with wind and the rank mist³ they draw,
Rot inwardly, and foul contagion spread;
Besides what the grim wolf⁴ with privy paw
Daily devours apace, and nothing said.
But that two-handed engine at the door
Stands ready to smite once, and smite no more."—*Ls.* 125-131.

¹ BROWNE. ² The English People. ³ *Wind* and *rank mist* refer to the "windy" and unwholesome misleading doctrines of the Clergy.

⁴ (a) By some, *grim wolf* is taken to mean Laud, in which case *devours apace* refers to the religious persecutions of the time; *nothing said*, to the patient endurance of the people, and *two-handed engine*, to Laud's downfall; *privy paw* (= secret abduction) having apparently no point (for Laud and the High Commission Court were anything but secret in their acts), unless it refers to the secrecy of the meetings. This explanation is very improbable, for *Lycidas* was written about 1637, and Laud was executed 1645. (b) By others, *grim wolf* is, with more plausibility, supposed to refer to the Romanizing influences of the time, acting secretly (*privy paw*) and unchecked by the Court and Prelacy (*nothing said*), with which Milton may or may not have identified Laud; the *two-handed engine*—a metaphor based on the common simile of "the axe laid to the root of the tree"—being the hoped for reformation in the religious corruptions of the day, or the influence of the Scriptures—old and new—(*two-handed*)—on which Milton fully relied. Masson supposes a possible reference to the two houses of Parliament that were to deliver England. Which Milton meant is immaterial, so far as the statement above is concerned.