Title: Illustration 1 to Milton's "Comus": Comus and His Revellers
Date: ca. 1801
Basic Detail Report

Primary Maker: William Blake
Medium: pen and watercolor

Description: The design incorporates images from at least three different passages in the poem: the opening speech of the attendant Spirit (1-91), the stage directions following line 91 that introduce Comus and his debauched retinue, and the entry and first speech of the Lady (170-229). The representation of the attendant Spirit, placed upper left "Before the starry threshold of Jove's Court" (1), may be indebted both to the brief description of his "sky robes" (83) and to Milton's later personification of Hope as a "hov'ring Angel girt with golden wings" (214). The attendant Spirit describes the setting - a "drear Wood" with "shady brows" (37-38) - and the habits of Comus and his band of revelers who, although human, have become brutish, as their animal faces reveal. They are pictured, left to right, according to the attendant Spirit's description: a "hog" (71), a "Wolf" (70), and an "Ounce" (i.e., a lynx, 71). The right arm and hand of a fourth victim of Comus' spells emerge from behind the large tree trunk along the right margin. The upraised and overlapping arms of the troupe, similar in general pattern to Blake's representation of the personified Morning Stars in his Job designs, [1] evoke Comus' later descriptions of their "Tipsy dance" and "wavering Morris move" (104, 116). Comus, a naked and rather fleshy youth, strides in front of the group. None of these figures, however, actually appears in the masque until the conclusion of the attendant Spirit's opening speech, at which point he becomes "viewless" (92). The stage direction introduces Comus' "Charming Rod," pictured in his right hand, the "Torches," and the "Glass," placed in Comus' hand in the text but given by Blake to the monster farthest to the left. The stage direction indicates that the group includes both "Men and Women." In the design, at least the holder of the glass, and perhaps also the lynx-headed creature, seem to have female bodies. The Lady, pictured lower right before tentacle-like roots, does not enter the masque until some seventy-six lines later, after Comus and the monsters have left the stage. Her appearance and demeanor throughout the illustrations, and her role as a passive center of considerable activity, recall the virginal heroine of Blake's The Book of Thel (1789), an illuminated poem which may have been influenced by Comus. [2] By combining figures and details from three parts of the masque, Blake introduces us to the three main antagonists in the poem, each representing a different state of organic and spiritual existence: the angelic, the beastly, and the human. This type of "epitome" design had been used for frontispieces or first illustrations in books since the early Renaissance, but had become less fashionable by Blake's time. Yet this traditional technique gave Blake a way of visualizing the psychological implications of Milton's poem. By placing the pensive and troubled Lady in the lower right corner and arraying Comus and his band above her head, Blake suggests that they are among the "thousand fantasies" and "calling shapes and beck'ning shadows dire" (205, 207) conjured up by the Lady's imagination in response to her "misbecoming plight" (372) and the revelry she hears but cannot see (170-81). The presence of the attendant Spirit violates the
literal sequence of events, but emphasizes his omniscience and continual guardianship over the Lady. In the Boston version, there are four beasts, each holding a torch, including humans (left to right) with the head of a hog, wolf or dog (wearing a collar), bull, and bird (see 000.24). Neither of the last two is named in the text. Comus, with right food forward, is dressed and slippered, holds his glass (as in the stage directions), and stands between the first and second monsters from the right. Only a small part of the tree trunk on the right margin is pictured, but the hillock behind the Lady has been enlarged and roughly formed into the quarter section of a circle. She turns to her left with hands extended, palms outward, in a gesture suggesting fright or protest. The attendant Spirit has been replaced by additional stars in the upper left sky. The upper outline of the tree foliage extends well above the heads of the first three revelers from the left. Notes 1. First executed as a watercolor, ca. 1805-1805, for Thomas Butts (Pierpoint Morgan Library; Butlin 1981, No. 550.14). See also the second illustration to Milton's "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" (Part I, section A, No. d.2) and note 47 thereto. 2. S. Foster Damon, A Blake Dictionary (Providence, Rhode Island: Brown Univ. Press, 1965), 52, states that "The Book of Thel is best understood as a rewriting of Milton's Comus."

Dimensions: 8 1/2 x 7 1/8 in. (21.6 x 18.1 cm.) mount: 21 15/16 x 17 7/8 in. (55.7 x 45.4 cm.)