

John Milton's *Comus*

Leah S. Marcus

If poetic offspring can be said to possess gender, then John Milton's *A Masque presented at Ludlow Castle*, more frequently (if erroneously) known as *Comus*, is a daughter who has traditionally been prized for her delicacy and beauty. The first published version (1637) featured a letter dedicatory from Henry Lawes, the court musician who had arranged and participated in its 1634 performance at Ludlow Castle, to John Egerton, who had played the part of the Elder Brother on that occasion, describing the masque as not openly acknowledged by its author, yet 'a legitimate offspring, so lovely, and so much desired' as to have tired Lawes's pen in making copies – hence his decision to bring it into print (Milton 1957: 86). The second published version (in Milton's 1645 *Poems*) includes a letter from Sir Henry Wotton to Milton praising the masque as 'a dainty piece of entertainment' perused by Wotton with 'singular delight': 'Wherein I should much commend the Tragical part if the Lyrical did not ravish me with a certain Doric delicacy in your Songs and Odes, whereunto I must plainly confess to have seen yet nothing parallel in our Language' (cited from Milton 1937: 216–17).

This much-desired Miltonic daughter was not only dainty and lovely, but also chaste: much twentieth-century critical discussion centred on the poem's celebration of the twin virtues of virginity and chastity, and its exploration of the relationship between them. Featuring as its chief protagonist a Lady lost in a wild wood and made captive by a lascivious enchanter, the masque is Milton's only major work to centre on a woman's experience, and the only one in which the poet seems to have identified unabashedly with that experience. There are many important connections between the Lady's emphasis on chastity and virginity and Milton's own. He had, we will recall, been known during his Cambridge years as 'the Lady of Christ's', and from that period onward was sedulous in defending himself against the least suspicion of sexual licence. In 'Elegy VI' to his boyhood friend Charles Diodati (1629) he had argued that one who would be a poet must live a life 'chaste and free from crime', itself a true poem. He expressed the same sentiment even more vigorously in the self-justificatory

passages of *An Apology for Smectymnuus* (1642). The gender implications of Milton's unusual emphasis on male chastity would merit further study, but for our purposes here it suffices to note that, like most middle- or upper-class women of his period, he tied the possession of chastity to the proper exercise of his life's vocation – in their case marriage, in his, poetry.

The form of Milton's masque, furthermore, allied it with literary forms that were particularly associated with women during the period. The *Masque's* deep immersion in motifs from pastoral and romance may well have lent it a feminized aura in the perceptions of a contemporary audience. Delicate pastorals were the particular speciality of Queen Henrietta Maria and her court; indeed, the year before Milton's masque the Queen had been attacked – at least by implication – in William Prynne's *Histrion-Mastix* as a 'notorious whore' for her acting in pastorals at court. The genre of romance was even more strongly associated with women: well before and far beyond *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* and Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, whose primary dedicatee had been Queen Elizabeth I, romances were considered particularly attractive to, and appropriate for, female audiences. Milton's masque has particularly deep and strong affinities with *The Faerie Queene* and, like Spenser, Milton was willing, at least in this one instance, to 'maken memorie' of a woman's 'braue gestes and prowesse martiall' (*Faerie Queene* III. ii. 1, lines 4–5), even if the 'gestes' and 'prowesse' of Milton's Lady are a matter of courage and forbearance, clad in the 'complete steel' of chastity, rather than the more actively militaristic adventures of Spenser's heroine Britomart. What happens if we take seriously the masque's apparent status as the 'daughter' in Milton's canon, as a poem particularly attentive to women?

The occasion of Milton's masque was an important one: it was, according to its 1637 title page, 'Presented at Ludlow Castle 1634: on Michaelmas Night, before the Right Honourable John, Earl of Bridgewater, Viscount Brackley, Lord President of Wales, and One of His Majesty's Most Honourable Privy Council'. Michaelmas was traditionally the date on which newly elected or appointed officials took office, and this particular Michaelmas was the night of the Earl of Bridgewater's formal installation as Lord Lieutenant of Wales and the border counties, though he had been performing many of the functions of the office since 1631. We are not certain how Milton got the commission to write the entertainment for this occasion – most likely through Henry Lawes. But it seems almost certain that he knew the date of the masque's projected performance, for at several points he employs subjects particularly associated with the date of Bridgewater's installation, the Feast of St Michael and All Angels, 29 September. As the archangel Michael was imagined as a special guardian over human affairs; so Milton supplies an 'Attendant Spirit', performed by Henry Lawes, and appearing in the guise of a shepherd, Thyrsis, to guide the Lady and her two brothers (performed by the Earl of Bridgewater's youngest children: Alice, aged fifteen, John, aged eleven, and Thomas, aged nine) to the very celebration taking place that night at Ludlow. There are a number of liturgical echoes between the masque and the lessons proper for the holiday (see Taaffe 1968–9; Hassel 1979: 157–61; Marcus 1986: 201–3). One of the features of Michaelmas, which marked the beginning of the

autumn law term, was a period of 'misrule' during which legal and other governmental hierarchies were briefly flouted and turned upside down; Kidderminster, for example, which was a scant thirty miles from Ludlow, celebrated a 'lawless hour' in honour of the holiday. This festive misrule is arguably reflected in the masque through the person of Comus, the foul enchanter who dances a 'wavering morris' (line 116) and carouses in the dark forest outside Ludlow with his cohort of humans made beasts as a result of his powerful magic. As President of the Council of Wales and Lord Lieutenant of Wales and the counties on the Welsh border, Bridgewater was King Charles I's regional deputy and surrogate; he was charged with keeping order and presiding over the Council, an important court of law that had been granted special jurisdiction over 'unlawful games', adultery and other sexual offences. So it was particularly appropriate for a masque celebrating Bridgewater's installation to show his children in victory over the local intemperance of Comus and his crew. On the level of its public occasion, Milton's masque shows the Earl's children struggling and finally triumphing over 'sensual Folly, and Intemperance' – that is, displaying just the mental strength and equipoise that would be required of those who would sit in judgement in the Council of Wales over the vices of others.

As has been frequently noted of late, however, the masque's theme of victory over unchastity may have held a more personal meaning for the Earl of Bridgewater and his family, and here we return to the question of the poem's particular attention to women. As early as 1960, Milton scholars began to notice a curiously expiatory quality in *A Masque presented at Ludlow Castle*: David Wilkinson interpreted the performance as enacting a communal, family 'escape from pollution'. But why, apart from the matter of the Earl's prominent judicial position, would *this* particular family have been interested in expiatory ritual? In 1971 Barbara Breasted set the world of Miltonists abuzz by providing an answer in her 'Comus and the Castlehaven Scandal', which argued that Milton's artistic choices, and even some of the likely cuts for performance, were deeply influenced by a family scandal of three years before. In 1631 the Countess of Bridgewater's brother-in-law, Mervin Touchet, second Earl of Castlehaven, was beheaded for the crimes of rape and sodomy. It was extremely rare for a peer of the realm to be executed for sexual offences, but Castlehaven's were particularly notorious. He was alleged to have regularly committed sodomy on his male servants, and to have helped one of them rape his own wife, Anne Stanley Brydges, Lady Chandos, eldest of three daughters of the fifth Earl of Derby and his wife Alice, the Dowager Countess of Derby in whose honour Milton had written his brief entertainment *Arcades*, probably in 1631 or 1632. One of the rape victims in the Castlehaven scandal had therefore been the Countess of Bridgewater's own sister.

Nor had Castlehaven's crimes stopped with his sodomy and alleged encouragement of the rape of his wife. According to the trial testimony, he was also responsible for the pollution of his daughter-in-law Elizabeth Brydges, who was married to his son and heir Lord Audley and living in the same house, and who was fifteen years old at the time of Castlehaven's trial – the same age as her cousin Alice Egerton at the time of the performance of Milton's *Masque* at Ludlow. The Earl of Castlehaven was alleged to

have encouraged his most highly favoured servant to have a protracted affair with his own daughter-in-law Elizabeth in hopes of producing baseborn offspring that he intended to make his heirs in place of his estranged son, Lord Audley.

The Earl of Castlehaven steadfastly denied most of the charges against him, and at least some of them may indeed have been manufactured by Audley, who stood to inherit at least some of his father's lands upon the latter's execution. But the reputations of both Lady Castlehaven, the Countess of Bridgewater's sister, and her daughter Elizabeth, Alice's cousin and the Countess's niece, were irredeemably besmirched by the trial and its attendant notoriety. The Castlehaven scandal in all of its lurid seaminess was the talk of the nation during 1631 and for several years thereafter. Indeed, the Dowager Countess of Derby refused to allow either her ruined daughter or her ruined grand-daughter to enter her house until they had been pardoned by the King. The Earl of Bridgewater and his family were not directly implicated in the scandal, but they were certainly caught up in its aftermath, and the records show that Bridgewater offered material support for his wife's sister. Indeed, as Breasted argues (1971: 222 n. 18), it is possible that Bridgewater's formal installation as President of the Council of Wales was delayed at least in part as a result of the Castlehaven affair, which was such a prolonged nightmare for his family. It would be impossible to overestimate the public knowledge of the affair: Milton certainly knew of it, and so, we may be sure, did the audience of the *Masque* at Ludlow, which included court and town officials as well as members of the family. In taking on the subject of chastity in an entertainment for a family that had so recently been clouded by public shame, Milton was taking on a topic of enormous contemporary interest, and requiring the utmost tact.

The masque as performed on Michaelmas Night 1634 was not precisely the masque as Milton had written it, and he would make further revisions before its publication in 1637. In particular, some of Comus's and the Lady's lines alluding most directly to sexual jeopardy were apparently excised from the performance text as represented in the formal presentation copy, the 'Bridgewater manuscript' given to the family after the event. Almost half of the Lady's first speech is missing from the Bridgewater manuscript, including a passage which welcomes 'pure-eyed Faith, white-handed Hope . . . / And thou unblemished form of Chastity' and expresses the belief that God 'Would send a glistering guardian if need were / To keep my life and honour unassailed' (lines 212–19). Barbara Breasted has argued that this passage was cut by Henry Lawes and/or Milton because they thought it 'indecorous to require a young unmarried noblewoman to talk in public about sex and chastity, particularly when her cousin's loss of honour was probably still one of the most scandalous stories in England' (1971: 207). Similarly, later on in the exchange between Comus and the Lady, her lines referring to the ease with which Comus has deceived her were cut:

Hast thou betrayed my credulous innocence
With vized falsehood, and base forgery,

And wouldst thou seek again to trap me here
 With liquorish baits fit to ensnare a brute?

(lines 696–9)

Also cut were the most explicitly sexual lines of Comus's response – those referring to 'that same vaunted name virginity' and urging the Lady to sexual indulgence in the usual terms of *carpe diem* poetry: 'If you let slip time, like a neglected rose / It withers on the stalk with languished head. / Beauty is Nature's brag, and must be shown . . . ' (lines 737–44).

Of course, there were good dramatic reasons for cutting some of the masque's longer speeches. Many more recent audiences of performances of Milton's masque have no doubt wished for greater brevity as well. But Breasted is surely right to see the masque's relationship with the Castlehaven scandal as one reason for the excision of these particular lines. Milton or Lawes, or perhaps a member of the Egerton family, wanted the more explicitly sexual references toned down, not in the vain hope of rendering invisible any connection between the masque and the family's recent ordeal, but rather out of a recognition that too open reference to the ordeal would come across as strident and overdone. But they evidently did not see any reason for cutting some of the most sexually disturbing lines of the masque. After the Lady's verbal sparring with the enchanter, he proffers his cup in an apparent attempt to force her to drink, but is interrupted by the entrance of the Lady's two brothers, who 'wrest his glass out of his hand, and break it against the ground' (CSP: 222). But the rescue is incomplete because their sister is still immanacled, 'In stony fetters fixed, and motionless' in a chair that her saviour Sabrina later describes as a 'marble venomed seat / Smear'd with gums of glutinous heat' (lines 818, 915–17).

Milton scholars have had a field day attempting to discover just what Milton meant by this peculiarly disgusting, vaguely sexualized chair in which the Lady is physically imprisoned, despite what she referred to earlier as the unassailable 'freedom of my mind' (line 663). Surely, on the level of topical interpretation we have been considering, the Lady's predicament recalls that of innocent victims of sexual violation – knowing their own guiltlessness and 'free' in their minds, yet besmirched and immobilized by the seamy glue of public sexual innuendo. Unlike her ruined aunt and cousin, the Lady is pure in body as well as mind, yet even that purity does not allow her to escape unscathed. Indeed, her predicament – mental freedom and denial, but some measure of physical jeopardy – links her with victims of rape: not only with her aunt and cousin, but also with a specific fourteen-year-old rape victim for whom her father had spent many hours during the previous years striving to achieve justice (Marcus 1983). The Lady's brothers had debated the power of virginity at considerable length before discovering her predicament, the Elder Brother contending for the radiant power of her virtue, and the Younger Brother fearing her helplessness in the dark wood at night. Both brothers are right. The sorcerer has not 'touched her mind', but her body is no longer under her own power. She requires the aid of Sabrina, a mythographic figure associated with the river Severn in Wales who, according to the

standard accounts, was also an innocent victim-by-association of family sexual crimes: the product of a rape, thrown into the river to drown and instead transformed to a healing goddess. (Indeed, rape was a very common problem in the Welsh border country through which the Lady and her brothers are imagined as passing in the masque.)

Through the imprisonment of the Lady, Milton's masque offers an important, healing message about human powerlessness and the possibility of redemption and renewal. The fact that the Lady is released by another woman is also significant, suggesting the healing power of networks of women like the extended family of the powerful and imperious Dowager Countess of Derby, her daughters and her numerous grand-daughters, especially those in the Bridgewater household, seven of whom were already married by the time of the masque's performance. Milton's Lady, her mother and her sisters had their own strongly Protestant religious culture within the Bridgewater household, and I shall have more to say about that later on. Because of its portrayal of survival and transcendence of sexual innuendo, Milton's masque surely carried a powerfully resonant message for the women in the Bridgewater family.

After the appearance of Breasted's work on the Castlehaven scandal, a number of critics took a position made clear in John Creaser's representative title, 'Milton's *Comus*: The Irrelevance of the Castlehaven Scandal' (1984): namely, that the Castlehaven material could safely be set aside on grounds that Milton probably did not intend the connections, that the Bridgewater family would certainly not wish to have been reminded of their painful recent past, and that such bothersome specificities do not, in any case, enrich our understanding of Milton's work. In the words of Cedric Brown, 'To centre on the generally instructive idea of the *komos*, which is also to see the particular relevance of chastity, gives us one way, too, in which we can escape too specific a topical reference to the infamous Castlehaven scandal' (1985: 4). These critical attempts to evade the scandal's relation to Milton's masque have not proved generally persuasive, since the matter remains an important subject in scholarly discussion and even more in teaching of the *Masque*. In fact, they represent special pleading. On some deep level, by brushing the scandal aside these critics wish to preserve the chastity of Milton's poetic 'daughter' and, by extension, the poet's power to control the afterlife of his creative offspring. But authorial and patriarchal values cannot always be transmitted with such pristine intactness, as Milton himself well knew. Much of the power of his treatment of chastity in the Ludlow masque comes from the recognition that chastity is actually a very complicated layering of ideals and one that is on some levels, for all its steel-clad power, quite vulnerable, especially in the lives of women.

Of course Creaser and Brown are right to insist that Milton's masque is about much more than the Castlehaven scandal alone. Once we broaden our range of vision to include a wider seventeenth-century debate on the meaning of chastity within a climate of official tolerance for sports, holiday observances and various forms of artistic 'licence', we can identify myriad ways in which the masque's treatment of

the strength and fragility of chastity resonate with a national debate. Milton's *Masque* is an astonishingly rich showcase of music, dance, poetry, and masquing disguise and ceremony, but it questions the value of all of its component arts in a way that is ingenious and original. As has frequently been noted, the *Masque* contributes to the national controversy surrounding the Book of Sports, first issued by James I in 1618 and re-issued by Charles I in 1633. The Book of Sports attempted to negotiate between strict puritan sabbatarianism and judicial attempts to restrain Sunday and holiday pastimes on the one hand, and Catholic and ceremonial Anglican love of ritualism and old pastimes – like 'good cheer' at Christmas, morris dancing and maygames, and festive church wakes – on the other hand. The Book of Sports carefully defined the circumstances under which Sunday and holiday festivities should be lawful within the English church. Opponents of the Book pointed out, among many other arguments, that the practice of old customs like going into the woods a-maying was scarcely an innocent pastime. For example, they asserted a connection between the practice of maying customs and a rise nine months later in the rates of bastard births. In 1633 and the ensuing years, attempts to enforce tolerance for what was derisively known in hostile circles as the 'dancing book' encountered fierce opposition. Dancing, festivity and even masquing itself became strongly politicized activities.

Milton's Ludlow entertainment, composed only a year after Charles I's re-issue of the Book of Sports, bears some resemblance to Ben Jonson's *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue*, which had been performed at court on Epiphany 1618, in honour of James I's first publication of the Book of Sports. Jonson's masque was not yet in print, but Milton could have encountered it in manuscript or through contemporary descriptions. Like Milton's, Jonson's masque is poised between competing varieties of pleasure; and, like Milton's, it features an 'antimasque' of Comus. Jonson's Comus, however, is a much cruder fellow than Milton's: he enters at the masque's very beginning and offers his boisterous delights in a 'Hymn' that begins like a typical mummers' play: 'Room, room, make room for the bouncing belly' (Orgel and Strong 1973, 1: 285). Jonson figures the reconciliation of pleasure and virtue through a series of tests of Hercules, who on one level represents James I in his 'mortal body' as a fallible human leader, who has to vanquish first excess (in the person of Comus) and then dearth (a menacing throng of mean-spirited and seditious pygmies), in order to discover virtue. But given Hercules's well-known mythic status, the outcome of his struggles is fairly predictable; similarly, the later parts of the masque are suffused with another, more transcendent representation of royal reforming energies in the form of Hesperus, a force of nature rather than a person, who gives an aura of relentless inevitability to the masquers' choice of virtue.

Milton's masque, by contrast, is open-ended. Despite the Earl of Bridgewater's close ties to the court, there is no figure within the masque that can be reliably identified with a Stuart monarch. The Earl himself is introduced by the Attendant Spirit as 'A noble peer of mickle trust, and power' who bears a 'new-entrusted sceptre' over an 'old, and haughty nation proud in arms' (lines 31–6), but Milton is remark-

ably reticent about who has entrusted Bridgewater with this 'sceptre' (see Marcus 1986: 179–87). The saving magic of the masque comes not from the Earl or from the distant monarch, but from Sabrina, an indigenous figure associated with the Welsh landscape rather than with court or king. Milton's masque is cartographic in the same sense as Michael Drayton's *Poly-Olbion* and other seventeenth-century treatments of the British landscape that marginalize royal authority by charting the land as a network of competing local affiliations rather than as spokes radiating out from a central hub of power and influence (see Helgerson 1992: 105–47). The Earl of Bridgewater is celebrated as an independent locus of authority, not as an agent of royal power.

Moreover, the placement of Milton's *Comus*, so much more refined and aristocratic than Jonson's, is interesting. The enchanter does not appear 'up front' at the beginning of the masque, as would be expected of the typical courtly antimasque, where vice can be readily and safely identified. Instead, he is enfolded deep within a 'drear wood', and within a series of lies and disguises that are impenetrable even to the virtuous except through sad experience. Unlike Jonson's Hercules, Milton's Lady is not readily legible as a mythic figure, though she has frequently been likened to Spenser's Una from *The Faerie Queene* and to the Woman in the Wilderness in the Book of Revelation (see Scoufos 1974). The Lady plays herself, Alice Egerton, and stands in for every virtuous woman who has ever been thrown into a situation for which nothing in her past could prepare her. By comparison with Jonson's production and most other court masques, Milton's masque is frighteningly devoid of markers by which virtuous conduct can be measured collectively and defined in advance. Even Thyrsis, its guardian angel figure, has to improvise and take risks to get things to come out right for his charges. *Comus*'s long lyrical passages and debates, its uncharacteristic emphasis on dramatic tension and narrative, break through the usual masque's sense of closure and mastery into a more strenuous moral space that requires constant individual vigilance and careful judgement of every human encounter.

If masquing seems a rather difficult pursuit in *Comus*, this may be in part because the choice whether or not to be a masquer was an active issue within the Egerton family. It is well known that each of the three children who performed in *Comus* had previously danced in masques at court, but it is perhaps less well known that one of Alice Egerton's sisters had refused to participate in court masques, and another sister had wished she had the courage to refuse. The Countess and her daughters appear to have had strong affiliations with contemporary puritanism, while the Earl and at least the elder son were more orthodox, though probably anti-Arminian and anti-Laudian. The heir, John Egerton, was a strong royalist and Church of England man during the English Civil War, writing in his copy of Milton's *Pro Populo Anglicano Defensio* 'Liber igni, Author furcâ, dignissimi' ('The book is most deserving of burning, the author of the gallows'); several of his sisters, on the other hand, ended up as nonconformists (Marcus 1986: 173; see also Collinges 1669). Many of the differing opinions in the Book of Sports controversy existed within the Earl's own family, and Milton's

challenge was to create an entertainment that could accommodate and challenge their diverse opinions about the moral valuation of the cornucopia of arts and pastimes incorporated within it.

Milton's masque not only reworks elements of *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue*; it also incorporates echoes of more recent masques in which family members had participated, and interestingly enough, some of the clearest echoes of these entertainments are embedded in the language of the necromancer Comus. Like the court masque, his realm is of the night and the wee hours of the morning. His beckoning of his followers to nocturnal delights strongly recollects the invitations to dancing and revelry in the Stuart court masque. So does his later use of the *carpe diem* motif to cajole his audience to be receptive to his enchantments, though those lines were cut from the actual performance at Ludlow. More tellingly, his speech welcoming revelry and likening the masquers to stars in the heavens recalls two masques in which members of the Egerton family had recently danced. Comus banishes 'Strict Age, and sour Severity' (line 109), and sets up a typically Stuart dichotomy between lesser mortals and the high-minded masquers themselves:

We that are of purer fire
 Imitate the starry quire,
 Who in their nightly watchful spheres,
 Lead in swift round the months and years.
(lines 111–14)

Similarly, in Aurelian Townshend's *Tempe Restored* (1632), Alice Egerton had played the part of one of the 'influences of the stars' who presaged the appearance of the main masquers, all of whom descended from the heavens in imitation of astral bodies. Townshend's masque also features Comus's mother Circe, along with her brutish crew of victims, in his antimasque. Milton's Comus is Circe's immediate offspring, but in Milton's masque it is Comus, the antimasque figure, who takes on the astral imagery (Orgel and Strong 1973, 2: 479–83).

Comus's self-descriptive reference to 'purer fire' also comes from a recent Caroline masque, Thomas Carew's extravaganza *Coelum Britannicum*, enacted in February 1634, less than a year before Milton's masque. In *Coelum Britannicum* Thomas and John Egerton had played the role of torchbearers to main masquers clad with 'purer fire' tempered by Jove (Charles I) to fit them for their roles in the heavens as 'new stars' (Orgel and Strong 1973, 2: 567–80; quotation from p. 578). The reference suggests a strange congruence between the Egertons as torchbearers in Carew's masque, and the beasts attendant upon Milton's Comus, the attendants in both cases partaking of their masters' 'purer fire'. Comus's invitation to revelry in Milton's version has just enough echoes of recent Caroline entertainments to suggest a strong affinity between his tipsy, decadent and finally menacing solemnities and the masquing ideology of the court. Initially disguised as a simple shepherd, he eventually reveals himself as a libertine courtier and proponent of Charles I's Book of Sports,

inviting all comers to seemingly innocent games – a 'waving morris', and 'merry wakes and pastimes' (lines 116, 121) – that modulate almost imperceptibly into sexual seduction and spiritual death.

Given Milton's care in associating courtly entertainment with dangerous revelry, we might suppose that he would stand unequivocally behind the Lady's scornful rejection of Comus's blandishments, and indeed, in successive revisions of the text the poet gradually strengthened and extended her arguments against Comus's case in favour of epicurean indulgence. Comus contends for revelry with an argument with subterranean connections to the biblical parable of the talents – a text to which Milton returned again and again over the years. Natural abundance, the enchanter contends, was granted for human enjoyment, and failure to 'spend' and use what was offered so freely would represent a churlish denial of divine praise: '[I]f all the world / Should in a pet of temperance feed on pulse, / Drink the clear stream, and nothing wear but frieze, / The all-giver would be unthanked, would be unpraised' (lines 719–22). To this clever defence of conspicuous consumption, the Lady responds with a proto-ecological, and even proto-communist, argument: Nature, 'good cater-ess', does not want her children to be 'riotous / With her abundance' but rather favours 'spare temperance' through her 'sober laws':

If every just man that now pines with want
Had but a moderate and beseeming share
Of that which lewdly-pampered Luxury
Now heaps upon some few with vast excess,
Nature's full blessings would be well-dispensed
In unsuperfluous even proportion,
And she no whit encumbered with her store,
And then the giver would be better thanked,
His praise due paid,

(lines 762–75)

This is good, sober puritan doctrine of the type that might well have appealed to the more precise among the Egerton women; but it is not necessarily the masque's final word.

To us in the early twenty-first century, an argument based on a sense of the relative scarcity of natural resources is compelling, and it has at least some effect on Comus, who claims to 'fear / Her words set off by some superior power' (lines 799–800). Yet the Lady's powerful rhetoric cannot keep her free from the more powerful rod of the enchanter. If Comus's arguments had implicated the culture of the Stuart court masque in the rites of Hecate, the Lady's replies leave her immobilized and immanacled – incapable of the active energy against vice that led her to spar with Comus in the first place. The purpose of the debate is not to show good in triumph against evil, but to demonstrate the complexity of the problem – as it was disputed, no doubt, within the Bridgewater household, and at length in the nation at large: advocates of

the Book of Sports pleaded for the essential innocence of traditional pastimes and for the 'freedom to be merry'; opponents felt obliged to oppose the 'freedom' and the merriment in order to preserve their innocence; neither position was altogether satisfactory. How could one be free and still chaste?

As I suggested initially, Milton identifies strongly with the Lady, and her dilemma was his as well. In his early works, we frequently find him awkwardly poised between a desire to experience life's pleasures and a fear of self-pollution. On a psychological level, the immobility of the Lady in the enchanter's chair can be seen as representing a psychological stalemating that Milton himself sometimes felt. As a remedy, the Attendant Spirit suggests Haemony (line 637), a mysteriously allegorical herb whose meaning has puzzled critics and led to many ingenious and notorious interpretations. It has been claimed to represent 'Platonic philosophy', or Christian grace, or temperance, or Christian knowledge, or the blood of Christ, or skill-combined-with-truth, or the holy scripture – to mention only some of the possibilities (see Woodhouse and Bush 1972c: 932–8; Brown 1985: 104–15). In the Ludlow performance of the masque, the seemingly allegorical lines describing Haemony's transformed appearance 'in another country' from 'small unsightly root' to 'a bright golden flower' were cut, so that, as Brown has complained, 'the audience seems to have been taken straight from the darkish, prickly leaves to the name Haemony' (1985: 113). If ever there was a crux to demonstrate that no single interpretation will ever satisfy everyone, the meaning of Haemony is that crux. My own inclination is to think botanically rather than allegorically, and the closest botanical match to Milton's Haemony is, as Charlotte Otten has shown, hypericum or andros-aimon (haemony), a plant now found on every pharmacist's shelves and called St John's Wort. In Milton's time, hypericum was strongly associated with the sun and gathered on Midsummer Eve, the Feast of St John the Baptist. Fittingly, since it had connections with light and regeneration, it was believed to have special powers over the demonic: 'a plant whose botanical features, stamped with the signature of the sun, enabled it to quell the forces of darkness; whose efficacy as a device able to detect sorcerers and thereby protect a virgin's chastity was universally acknowledged; and whose potency as a demonifuge was established from antiquity by herbalists and theologians and attested to by Milton's collaborator Henry Lawes', who had used the plant more than once against demons (Otten 1975: 95). In our own culture, the demon of depression has replaced the Satanic hordes, and hypericum is a widely used and frequently effective remedy against depression. Was it used against 'melancholy' in the seventeenth century? Did Milton try it himself? Would it be utterly irresponsible to suggest that he, and perhaps others, employed the plant against the debilitating and imprisoning effects of too much study or too much self-denial? He had recently written a complaint about the effects of too much solitary devotion to learning, by which 'a man cutts himselfe off from all action & becomes the most helplesse, pusilanimous & unweapon'd creature... either to defend & be usefull to his friends, or to offend his enemies' (CPW I: 319; see also Norbrook 1984a: 256). Hypericum's strong associations with the sun (which for many people also acts as an antidepressant) and with the banishing

of the demons of darkness makes all of these speculations about Milton's interest in haemony highly attractive, if incapable of proof.

Significantly, in the masque the two brothers employ Haemony successfully to break the enchanter's cup and disperse its contents harmlessly on the ground. The herb at least temporarily defeats Comus's ability to recruit more humans to his beastly crew by appealing to their 'fond intemperate thirst' (line 67); but intemperate thirst was never the Lady's problem. Nor, so far as we know, was it Milton's. And so we have circled back to the saving power of Sabrina, this time in a wider context that includes the tarnish on the Bridgewater family as a result of the Castlehaven scandal, but also the problem of sexual vulnerability more generally and the reconciliation of chastity and freedom. On this broader level, the Lady's imprisonment seems to relate to the repression of desire: her strenuous efforts to preserve her chastity against a powerful – and courtly – enchanter leave her immobilized and empty, unable to extricate herself under her own power. Almost as much ink has been spilt in an effort to determine Sabrina's allegorical significance as in the decoding of Haemony. Here, as in discussing the herb, I am less interested in the abstract principles with which she can be associated – though she surely functions as a bearer of divine grace – and more interested in articulating what she brings to the Lady's situation. With the invocation of Sabrina, an intense poetic lyricism combined with playfulness and festivity enter the masque for the first time in an innocuous form. Sabrina is in many ways the counterpart of Comus: as he carried a soothing cup, she carries vials of healing liquors; she, like him, is associated with music and dancing, surrounded by lovely, dancing 'Nymphs' by night, and grateful shepherds by day, who 'at their festivals / Carol her goodness loud in rustic lays, / And throw sweet garland wreaths into her stream' (lines 847–9). With the invocation of Sabrina, all of the beauty and arts that appeared to have been contaminated in their essence by Comus and his courtly crew flood back into the masque in a new, wholesome setting that re-invents them and presents them to the Lady and her brothers as utterly fresh and uncorrupted. Comus is still at loose somewhere in the forest: his foul blandishments can still ensnare other hapless travellers. But the children are released from his power, and can proceed to the court of their parents at Ludlow, and participate without fear of taint – and to whatever degree each finds individually acceptable – in the dancing and festivities surrounding the Earl's installation.

As we have already noted, Milton's masque has many Spenserian echoes, and those become particularly rich and evocative in the entertainment's final scenes: the drowning Sabrina's revival in 'aged Nereus' hall' (line 834), and his attendant daughters the Nereides (*Faerie Queene* III. iv. 34–44); the references in the masque's epilogue to the Hesperian gardens, to the dancing graces, and to Venus and Adonis paired with Cupid and Psyche, as in Spenser's Garden of Adonis (*Faerie Queene* III. vi. 29–50), where their erotic joy in each other is rendered perpetual, the source of Adonis's astonishing creativity as the 'Father of all formes' and also of enduring '*Pleasure*, the daughter of *Cupid* and *Psyche* late'. These final segments of the masque are also particularly evocative of the writings of the so-called seventeenth-century Spenserians like

Drayton, who told the story of Sabrina 'in her imperial Chair' of shining crystal in his *Poly-Olbion*, and William Browne, who provided a pattern for the Attendant Spirit's blessing of Sabrina's stream in *Britannia's Pastorals* (see notes to Milton 1937, pp. 264, 266). As David Norbrook has pointed out, poets writing in Spenser's highly wrought allegorical and apocalyptic Elizabethan style under the Stuart monarchs tended to look back upon the reign of Elizabeth as a time of appropriate militancy against Catholicism and against 'lukewarmness' within the English church. In terms of seventeenth-century policy, the Spenserians tended to be alienated from the mainstream of court culture, and to identify with the 'hotter sorts of Protestants' who deplored the nation's dominant policy of pacifism *vis-à-vis* threats to reformed religion at home and abroad (Norbrook 1984a: 195–266). By reviving the Spenserian mode so effectively in *Comus*, Milton aligned the Earl of Bridgewater and his family with this literary current of estrangement from the dominant trend of Caroline politics and courtly culture. As we have seen, the alignment worked particularly well in terms of the reforming allegiances of women in the family; indeed, the aged Dowager Countess of Derby, its matriarch, was a surviving remnant of the heroic Elizabethan age of Protestant militancy.

Many critics have seen particularly strong echoes of Spenser in the final lines of the masque, where the Attendant Spirit counsels his auditory,

Mortals that would follow me,
Love Virtue, she alone is free,
She can teach ye how to climb
Higher than the sphery chime;
Or if Virtue feeble were,
Heaven itself would stoop to her.

(lines 1017–22)

Spenser expresses a similar sentiment in Book III of *The Faerie Queene*, after Florimel's rescue from the lustful fisherman:

See how the heauens of voluntary grace,
And soueraine fauour towards chastity,
Doe succour send to her distressed cace:
So much high God doth innocence embrace.

(III. viii. 29, lines 2–5)

By ending his masque on a strongly Spenserian note, Milton underlines the strongly Spenserian quality of his work, and its emphasis in common with the earlier poet on militancy in defence of truth and chastity. But Milton's conclusion, as we might suspect, takes on particular resonance in light of the specific controversies over chastity that fermented during his own time – most especially the Castlehaven scandal, and the polarization of opinion that surrounded Charles I's republication of the Book of Sports, by which elements of the court and conservative Anglicans sought

to promote traditional holiday sports and pastimes on grounds that the people deserved the 'freedom to be merry'. The conclusion of the Ludlow masque turns the formulation around: 'Love Virtue, she alone is free,' and when virtue is loved, freedom will follow, though not, perhaps, without the aid of heaven.

As I have been arguing throughout, Milton's masque has a special status among his works because of its attention to, and sympathy for, women. At a time when mainstream puritan opinion tended to be highly patriarchal, Milton's entertainment espouses a freer and more aristocratic sense of women's enablement and potential cultural impact. At a time when most imaginative literature still promulgated the ethos that a violated or sexually compromised woman had to commit suicide in order to prove her chastity, Milton shows a woman in some of the same jeopardy being healed and restored to her family through the ministrations of another woman. Shortly after William Prynne had been punished for calling women actors 'notorious whores', Milton places an aristocratic woman at the centre of an important dramatic and political event. Indeed, the masque's many intimations of alliance between the Lady lost in the drear woods, Spenser's Una representing true faith or the true church, and Revelation's Woman in the Wilderness place Milton's Lady in the position of spokeswoman for a cause well beyond her own chastity. She speaks for a militant Protestantism that is not content to rest with half measures, and that will, the poet suggests, carry forward into the next generation the strenuous values inherited from the Dowager Countess of Derby and the tradition she represented. Indeed, the Lady's particular emphasis on virginity represents an interesting link with the Virgin Queen Elizabeth: reformers who were alienated from court values and policy during the early Stuart era often invoked the image of the dead queen as a silent rebuke to the present, and there may be elements of that idealization in Milton's portrayal of the virgin Lady. However we choose to interpret its specific resonances, it is clear that Milton's masque represented a tribute to the Earl of Bridgewater, but also a perhaps even warmer tribute to the zeal and virtue of women in the Bridgewater family. At a time when they were still recovering from the seamy revelations of the Castlehaven scandal, Milton reaffirmed their spiritual strength through his portrayal of the Lady, and forged a strong imaginative alliance between their 'reformed' spirituality and his own hopes for the nation's future.

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