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CHAPTER 5

‘A THOUSAND
FANTASIES’: THE
LADY AND THE
MASKE

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WHEN Milton announced himself to the world as an important writer in 1645, he put *A Maske presented at Ludlow Castle* in the middle of his authorial identity, like a hinge. On one side were most of the poems he had written to that point, beginning with the Nativity Ode and ending with ‘Lycidas’. On the other side were his Latin poems, indicating his learning and his place in the European artistic community. In the middle of the volume is the *Maske*, with its own title page and laudatory front matter, clearly marking it in the publishing conventions of the time as Milton’s dramatic work. This piece is stubbornly an oddity in a narrative of Milton as reforming prophet, a genius above his age, but it is also a central event in Milton’s career. It is not only the culmination of the poetry he had written to that point—mythological, peopled with striking characters and deeply interested in music and expressive verse forms—but also a pivotal artistic experience that influenced all of Milton’s subsequent work. *A Maske presented at Ludlow Castle* walks a fine line through dark woods—a work with suspect associations, but a work that draws out Milton’s creativity like a joyful spring. To a significant degree it is Milton’s debt to English dramatic inventiveness—including the women-centred theatrical culture of the court in the 1630s—that gives *A Maske* its multivocal and unpredictable energy.

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Yet an essay about Milton's *A Maske presented at Ludlow Castle* in sympathetic relationship to other seventeenth-century masques is an essay at odds with literary history. Retrospective narratives of Milton in the 1630s often imagine him as his later self, transported back in time, a reforming Puritan out of tune with the self-deluding fantasies of Charles's court productions. That Milton wrote in such a courtly form has thus worried critics, especially given the masque's vaguely Catholic associations under Henrietta Maria's influence. Most scholarship has therefore carefully distanced Milton's *Maske* from contemporary examples of the genre the title announces. The standard reading is that *A Maske* is the youthful work of a Puritan humanist who used his commission to correct the excesses and corrupt values of the court masque.¹ It is my contention, however, that Milton means not so much to correct as to *outdo* contemporary masques by pushing the genre's inherent tendencies to new dramatic and social limits. Crucial to Milton's overgoing of the court form is his utilization of its explosive innovation, a woman actor. Twenty-five years old when he wrote the masque and very ambitious, Milton was not only aware of but also building upon the cultural ferment that was being acted out on the court stage in the early 1630s.² While he did have strong anti-Catholic feelings, that did not preclude his attraction to the musical and literary culture of Catholic Europe. It is surely important, for example, that immediately after the stringent Puritan William Prynne condemned theatre as feminizing and women performers as 'notorious whores' in *Histriomastix* (1634) Milton wrote and subsequently published a theatrical piece with a major role for a female performer. Because we have been reluctant to see Milton as part of the 1630s, we have not fully appreciated the subtlety, power, and daring of the Lady's part.

There is no denying, however, that writing a masque was a tricky assignment. Milton's ambition was to rival Shakespeare's 'live-long monument' ('On Shakespeare', l. 8) and to be, like Spenser, a 'sage and serious' teacher (*CPW*, ii. 516). Milton also wished to excel in the cultural form most prominent in his twenties, a form that itself had influenced Shakespeare and that borrowed widely from Spenser. Indeed, *A Maske's* context in Caroline masque culture reveals not only its innovation, but

¹ Important arguments based on the idea of the masque as reformed are: Maryann Cale McGuire, *Milton's Puritan Masque* (Athens, Ga., 1983); David Norbrook, 'The Reformation of the Masque', in David Lindley (ed.) *The Court Masque* (Manchester, 1984), 94–110; Cedric C. Brown, *John Milton's Aristocratic Entertainments* (Cambridge, 1985); and Barbara Lewalski, 'Milton's *Comus* and the Politics of Masquing', in David Bevington and Peter Holbrook (eds.), *The Politics of the Stuart Court Masque* (Cambridge, 1998), 296–320. But see Heather Dubrow, 'The Masquing of Genre in *Comus*', *Milton Studies*, 44 (2005), 62–83, who argues *Comus* is only 'a draft for a reformed masque, not its polished realization' (p. 79) and my 'Anonymous Milton, or *A Maske Masked*', *English Literary History*, 71 (2004), 609–29.

² G. F. Sensabaugh ('The Milieu of *Comus*', *Studies in Philology*, 41 (1944), 238–49) does note the importance of Henrietta Maria and the cult of love and honour, but argues from an assumption that Milton would have loathed everything about the court and that everything about the court was wicked. Norbrook pays fruitful attention to other Caroline masques ('The Reformation of the Masque') as does John Demaray in *Milton and the Masque Tradition: The Early Poems, 'Arcades,' and Comus* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968).

also its conventionality.³ The work falls into two parts: a long, highly developed dramatic section and a more standard masque frame. While the frame brings the masque to an elegant but decidedly patriarchal conclusion, the body of the work is startlingly feminist. It is easy to assume that Milton's masque of chastity played out in tension with decadent lust reflects his own uniquely high-minded stance in a world of courtly dissolution. Almost the opposite is true. *A Maske* has strong affinities with Henrietta Maria's cult of chaste female power and works in a fusion of genres particularly sympathetic to elite women performers—masque and pastoral.⁴ Moreover, Milton appropriates the court's provocative innovation of using women to represent women. But *A Maske's* amalgam of court masque and English drama, of theatrical performance and dramatic poem, of idealistic beliefs and the realities of human life, and of feminism and paternalism is unstable. Even its commonly accepted title, *Comus*, is anachronistic and contradictory.⁵ In 1634 and ever after, *A Maske presented at Ludlow Castle* has proven difficult to control completely.

I

In the early seventeenth century the masque form entailed complicated scenery and stage devices, gorgeous and sometimes provocative costumes, music which in its variety marked the moods and action of the masque, dances both carnivalesque and highly ordered, and silent role-playing by powerful men and women. Ben Jonson's debate with Inigo Jones about the proper pre-eminence of the poet's words over theatrical spectacle defines central tenets of masque scholarship. In the 1630s, however, significant generic shifts amplified the kaleidoscope of sound and sight inherent in this spectacular form by adding more fully dramatic and proto-operatic elements. Elaborated antimasques proliferated, for example, influenced by the French *ballet de cour*, and music became increasing central.⁶ In the romantic, Neoplatonic atmosphere of Charles and Henrietta Maria's court, masques were borrowing from and influenced by pastoral drama, tragicomedy, and romance, often with heavily

³ For an analysis of *A Maske's* conventional elements see Peter Walls, 'Comus: The Court Masque Questioned', in John Caldwell, Edward Olleson, and Susan Wollenberg (eds.), *The Well-Enchanting Skill: Music, Poetry, and Drama in the Culture of the Renaissance* (Oxford, 1990), 107–13.

⁴ See the 'Introduction' in *Three Seventeenth-Century Plays on Women and Performance*, ed. Hero Chalmers, Julie Sanders, and Sophie Tomlinson (Manchester and New York, 2006), 1–11. Leah S. Marcus poses the question: 'What happens if we take seriously the [masque] . . . as a poem particularly attentive to women?' in 'John Milton's *Comus*', in Thomas N. Corns (ed.), *A Companion to Milton* (Oxford, 2003), 232–45.

⁵ I will refer to the work by the title Milton gave it, *A Maske presented at Ludlow Castle*. *Comus* is the title of a series of adaptations of the work made in the 18th c.

⁶ For a masterful discussion of the influence of French fashion on the English masque see Barbara Ravelhofer, *The Early Stuart Masque: Dance, Costume, and Music* (Oxford, 2006), 15–120.

Spenserian overtones. Certainly, however, the most striking development was the appearance of women as speaking actors and singers in court performances. In 1626 Henrietta Maria and her attendants acted in *Artenice*, a French pastoral. In January 1633, again to the bemusement and unease of the English, the queen and her ladies acted in an English pastoral romance written expressly for them, Walter Montague's *The Shepherd's Paradise*.⁷ History remembers William Prynne's punishment for what the court took to be his incendiary attack on the queen for performing in Montague's pastoral. But queens had had a long-standing interest in masques, and, even before Henrietta Maria, the masque was a woman's form—a gateway for public performance that could be used not only for political commentary but to recode the social roles of women.⁸

We gain a new perspective on Milton's career by considering the nature of court productions between 1629 when he wrote his first great poem, the Nativity Ode, a work itself full of the imagery and lexicon of court masques, and 1634 when he wrote his *Maske*. In fact, it is impossible fully to understand any one masque—even Milton's—without understanding the ways in which masques were in ongoing dialogue, referring to and countering each other, borrowing costumes, sets, and tropes in a coded and highly charged language of performance. In the early 1630s the literal and metaphoric role of women was a central subject of this performative conversation. Milton did not write for the queen or the court, but he seized on the court's chaste, heroic feminine ideal and developed it into his own vision of heroic Protestant chastity. In doing so, he wrestled with problems his immediate contemporaries faced as well—an increasing self-consciousness about employing classical mythology and its sexual freight, the Catholic associations of the queen's theatrical innovations, and the ramifying possibilities of women as actors.

In 1634 three gifted writers wrote revisionary masques—a poet, a playwright, and a young writer deeply drawn to drama who eventually became one of England's greatest poets. Thomas Carew, James Shirley, and John Milton each treated the masque form to varying degrees of parody, extravagant celebration, and dramatic innovation.⁹ A writer who valued decorum highly, Milton respected the contours and the conventions of a genre even as he irrevocably stamped it with his own voice. His masque is an attempt to suffuse the form with a Shakespearean playfulness and depth

⁷ For the performance of *Artenice* at Somerset House in Feb. 1626, Henrietta Maria and her French attendants played all the roles including, in a nice reversal of English theatrical practice, men in beards. See Sophie Tomlinson, 'She That Plays the King: Henrietta Maria and the Threat of the Actress in Caroline Culture', in Gordon McMullan and Jonathan Hope (eds.), *The Politics of Tragicomedy: Shakespeare and After* (London and New York, 1992), 189–207, and Karen Britland, *Drama at the Courts of Queen Henrietta Maria* (Cambridge, 2006), 35–52. On the theatrical culture of Henrietta Maria's court more generally see also Sophie Tomlinson, *Women on Stage in Stuart Drama* (Cambridge, 2005) and Erica Veevers, *Images of Love and Religion: Queen Henrietta Maria and Court Entertainments* (Cambridge, 1989).

⁸ See Clare McManus, *Women on the Renaissance Stage: Anna of Denmark and Female Masquing in the Stuart Court 1590–1619* (Manchester and New York, 2002).

⁹ Mindele Anne Treip demonstrates a number of points of connection between Carew, Shirley, and Milton's masque in 'Comus and the Stuart Masque Connection, 1632–34', *ANQ* 2/3, (1989), 83–9.

rather than to mock the form satirically. Not so Milton's contemporaries. James Shirley's *The Triumph of Peace* and Thomas Carew's *Coelum Britannicum* are outrageous amplifications of the masque that recognize its weaknesses (sycophancy, self-deluding isolation, and an over-reliance on spectacle, for example) and push these weaknesses hilariously and disturbingly into the open. On the heels of Prynne's anti-theatrical *Histriomastix*, they are more self-conscious still about the fashionable conceit of women as chaste heroines at the centre of the universe. Shirley and Carew are impatient as well with pastoral and mythological conventions, but by self-consciously using the fashionable code they can laugh with impunity. Milton scholars assume that their poet stands apart from his generation and that *A Maske* is therefore a criticism of this courtly form. It is truer to say that Milton was deeply attracted to the Caroline masque and that his version is an attempt to elevate the form in the face of contemporary deconstruction and mockery.

Milton's *Maske* has often been linked not with Caroline examples, however, but with a particular Jacobean masque, *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue* (1618), because Ben Jonson utilized Comus as its jolly drunkard antimasque figure. *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue* offers many suggestive connections with Milton's work.¹⁰ But there are pointed differences as well. In Milton's version, for example, the magic resides not in a father and his heir, but in the daughter of the house. By convention she should be a silent, allegorical ideal, but her dramatic reality as an imaginative, adventurous girl breaks through any attempt to impose a personified mask upon her. Jonson's Comus masque, on the other hand, has no woman character at all—neither a professional male actor playing a woman in the antimasque nor an aristocratic woman as a silent symbol in the triumphant masque scene.¹¹

At least as useful in understanding Milton's masque is Aurelian Townshend's revolutionary *Tempe Restored*, performed at court in 1632. Connections between Townshend's and Milton's masques have long been acknowledged.¹² Because the King's Musick was responsible for staging court masques, Milton's collaborator on the Ludlow masque, Henry Lawes, would have played a role and may have composed

¹⁰ Like *A Maske*, *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue* was, for example, meant to praise a father by extolling his offspring and to argue for high moral standards as compatible with courtly festivity. For verbal echoes, see Ben Jonson, ed. C. H. Herford, Percy Simpson, and Evelyn Simpson, 11 vols. (Oxford, 1925–63), vii. 473–92, x. 573–90. Also see Enid Welsford, *The Court Masque: A Study in the Relationship between Poetry and the Revels* (Cambridge, 1927), 307, 314–18. As useful as Jonson's Comus masque in contextualizing Milton's are the two court masques Jonson wrote for the king and queen in 1631, *Chloridia* and *Love's Triumph through Callipolis*, each dishing Platonic love with a heavy hand. Jonson also wrote two Platonic love entertainments to be presented to the royal couple at William Cavendish's residences in Midlands in 1633 and 1634. His involvement in the theatrical culture of the 1630s is further witnessed by the pastoral play he left unfinished at his death, *The Sad Shepherd, or A Tale of Robin Hood*.

¹¹ Compare Jonson's masque, commissioned by the king to honour Charles, Prince of Wales, with the assertion of female power in *Tethy's Festival*, the masque Anna of Denmark had Samuel Daniel write to celebrate Prince Henry's investiture as Prince of Wales in 1610.

¹² John Demaray argues that in many ways 'Comus' is 'a sequel to *Tempe Restored*', and the work thus figures large in his account in *Milton and the Masque Tradition*, esp. 78–96 (83). See also Sophie Tomlinson's subtle and brilliant discussion of both works in *Women on Stage in Stuart Drama*, 52–5, 71–8.

the music.¹³ Lady Katherine Egerton appeared as one of Divine Beauty's 'stars' and her younger sister, Lady Alice Egerton, as one of Harmony's fourteen 'Influences'. At Ludlow Castle two years later, when the Attendant Spirit asks 'who knows not Circe / The daughter of the Sun?' (ll. 50–1), it was a gesture to the family involvement in *Tempe Restored*. Although it is unlikely that the scenery would have been transported all the way to Wales, it has been plausibly suggested that Lawes reused *Tempe Restored*'s antimasque costumes for Comus's crew in Ludlow.¹⁴ Milton also builds on the work's conceit. The argument of *Tempe Restored* is that Circe, Comus's mother, has seduced a young man 'who awhile lived with her in all sensual delights' (l. 2).¹⁵ But she grows jealous and so makes him drink from her 'enchanted cup' and touches him with 'her golden wand', transforming him into a lion (ll. 3–4). All is eventually set right by Divine Beauty (aka Henrietta Maria), who 'vouchsafe[s] to stoop / And move to earth' (ll. 206–7). What is extraordinary about this masque is, first, that it has a much more fully developed dramatic narrative than most. And—remarkably—Circe was played by a woman, Madame Coniack. Her participation is part of the work's complexity. When Pallas, played as usual by a cross-dressed man, mocks her, Circe volleys back with a rejoinder that marks theatrical history: 'Man-maid, begone!' (l. 268).¹⁶ Circe's tartly amusing dismissal dramatically underscores the astonishing innovation of an actual woman playing a complex, speaking woman. Retrospectively, the joke is even better if, as is entirely possible, Pallas was sung by the most famous countertenor of the time, Henry Lawes, for whose androgynous voice Milton would write the role of the Attendant Spirit.¹⁷

A fully realized dramatic person, Townshend's Circe is an unusual masque character in ways beyond (although probably also because of) her actor's sex. Circe is a woman disappointed in love, a sensual seductress and a defiant queen who watches her own antimasque while enthroned in her 'sumptuous palace' (l. 92)—an

unsettling metatheatrical conceit since Henrietta Maria and Charles both participated in *Tempe Restored*. Her passionate songs are the product not of evil but of a heart tormented by love. The allegorical key that accompanied the published text makes Circe's mixed nature clear: she is 'of extraordinary beauty, and sweetness of . . . voice' and she 'signifies desire in general, the which hath power on all living creatures, and being mixed of the divine and sensible, hath diverse effects, leading some to virtue and others to vice' (ll. 303–4, 298–300). In his *Maske*, Milton splits the role of Circe: Comus, her son, inherits her cup, her wand, her herd of beast-people, and her dangerous influence. But the Lady inherits Circe's womanly strength and her voice.

John Fletcher's *The Faithful Shepherdess* is one of Milton's favourite plays and reading it can feel like a phantasmagoric encounter with Milton's *Maske*. His close verbal and structural recall of Fletcher's Jacobean play has normally been regarded as nostalgia on Milton's part. Yet *The Faithful Shepherdess* was, in fact, a central theatrical event only months before the Ludlow performance. The first production of *The Faithful Shepherdess* in 1608–9 had been a failure.¹⁸ But the queen's revival of the play in 1633 as a kind of sequel to her own controversial project, *The Shepherds Paradise*, made perfect sense when tastes had changed, and Spenserian pastoral had become compelling dramatic material. Almost every character in Milton's *Maske* has a prototype in Fletcher's pastoral.¹⁹ The play has two faithful shepherdesses, for example—one dedicated to perpetual virginity and one a virgin destined for marriage—eerily reminiscent of Sabrina and the Lady. On the other hand, *The Faithful Shepherdess* stages explicit and repeated violence against the marriageable virgin. Although Milton's taste in 1634 is typical of his cultural moment in many ways, his sexual ethics require a sublimation of the violence of Fletcher's pastoral. Overt violence against women becomes in Milton's work a topic of constant conversation. But the moment when Comus begins his menacingly physical move towards the Lady is the moment when Milton's pastoral drama pivots away from its dramatic complexity and falls back into masque spectacle.

Also performed in 1634 was James Shirley's *The Triumph of Peace*, the most extravagantly expensive masque ever staged.²⁰ Overseen by Bulstrode Whitelock

¹³ Little music survives from court masques, although it is clear that they required a great deal. Ian Spink argues that Henry Lawes is the likely composer for *Tempe Restored* (*Henry Lawes: Cavalier Songwriter* (Oxford, 2000), 52–3). In any case, Lawes would have performed in Townshend's masque. See also David Lindley, 'The Politics of Music in the Masque,' in *The Politics of the Stuart Court Masque*, 273–95.

¹⁴ See Demaray, *Milton and the Masque Tradition*, 101.

¹⁵ Aurelian Townshend, *Tempe Restored*, in *Court Masques: Jacobean and Caroline Entertainments, 1605–1640*, ed. David Lindley (Oxford, 1995), 155–65. Further reference to Townshend will be to this edition.

¹⁶ Sophie Tomlinson and Melinda Gough believe that Madame Coniack, a Frenchwoman and professional singer, played Circe. For them the compelling evidence is Thomas Randolph's extremely popular poem entitled in print 'Upon a very deformed Gentlewoman, but of a voice incomparably sweet'. The poem had an extensive manuscript life with various titles, including 'Upon the French Woman . . . that sings in masques at Court' and 'On a ffrench woeman, one of the Queenes Chapple'. They assume Mistress Shepherd, the other woman performer listed, is a professional musician as well. See Tomlinson, *Women on Stage in Stuart Drama*, 52–4 and Melinda Gough, "'Not as Myself': The Queen's Voice in *Tempe Restored*", *Modern Philology*, 101 (2003), 48–67, 52. Karen Britland disagrees, arguing that Madame Coniack was actually Elizabeth Coignet, one of Henrietta Maria's French ladies-in-waiting and that Mistress Shepherd was a child and dwarf (*Drama at the Courts*, 91–8).

¹⁷ Tomlinson remarks on the comic potential of Circe revealing 'this masculine Pallas as a fraud', an 'ambiguously gendered transvestite actor and singer' (*Women on Stage in Stuart Drama*, 57).

¹⁸ As early as 1791 Thomas Warton noted a number of parallels in his edition and in 1801 H. J. Todd even more. In the front matter of the printed edition that appeared soon after, George Chapman praised Fletcher's experiment in pastoral tragicomedy as 'both a Poeme and a play' in an attempt to explain its rejection by the vulgar who could not appreciate the 'holy lawes of homely pastorall' (*The Faithful Shepherdess: A Critical Edition*, ed. Florence Ada Kirk (New York and London, 1987), 8–9). Ben Jonson correctly predicted that Fletcher's 'murdered poem . . . shall rise / A glorified work to time' (ll. 14–15). 'To the Worthy Author M John Fletcher,' in *The Complete Poems*, ed. George Parfitt (Harmondsworth, 1975), 257.

¹⁹ Like Thomas Randolph's *Amyntas*, a pastoral play performed at court in 1631 which was also a significant source for Milton, *The Faithful Shepherdess* has many characters and intertwined plots. For Randolph, see Coiro, 'Anonymous Milton, or, A Maske Masked'.

²⁰ It cost a staggering £21,000. See Stephen Orgel and Roy Strong, *Inigo Jones: The Theatre of the Stuart Court*, 2 vols. (London, 1973), ii. 544. Bulstrode Whitlocke commissioned William Lawes, Henry's brother, and Simon Ives to write the music. Henry participated as a singer and musician. Whitlocke himself also composed some of the music. It became his signature tune and was played in his honour

(another Puritan who, like Milton, loved theatre and music), Shirley's masque was ostensibly an ingratiating apology by the Inns of Court for the insult one of its members, William Prynne of Lincoln's Inn, had inflicted on the queen and her court theatricals.²¹ Packed with characters, jokes, music, and spectacle, Shirley's masque is a wide-tracking shot of the world of Milton's young manhood. Some of its personified characters—Fancy, Jollity, Laughter—seem to walk and talk right out of Milton's 'L'Allegro' and 'Il Penseroso'. But *The Triumph of Peace* takes a self-mocking line on allegorical, mythological culture. Rather than gods and goddesses as stand-ins for kings and queens, in Shirley's citizen masque gods and goddesses are perilously close to being inhabitants of a farce. Moreover, Shirley simply blows the doors off the Banqueting House, opening the form and its privileged audience to the inhabitants of the City. *The Triumph of Peace* ended at court, but it first made the streets of London its stage and the inhabitants of London part of its antimasque repertory, audaciously framing court ritual with the ambitious, ingenious, and raucous city.²² Nevertheless, although *The Triumph of Peace* is one of the boldest and most inventive theatrical events of the early modern period, it does not touch the third rail of women actors. The queen and her ladies (and the king and his attendants, including the two Egerton boys) appear beautifully costumed and decorously silent.

Milton's collaborator on *A Maske presented at Ludlow Castle*, Henry Lawes, probably wrote the music for and certainly participated in Thomas Carew's *Coelum Britannicum* and so did the two Egerton boys, only months before their roles in Milton's masques (*Coelum Britannicum* was performed on 18 February 18 1634).²³ Carew's brilliant masque takes an edgy, self-mocking line on classical mythology and on chaste behaviour, an ironic distance that puts in perspective how deeply Milton's imagination is infused with classical myths and how sincere is his commitment to the kind of chastity Carew is ostensibly lauding. As with Townshend's *Tempe Restored*, there are a significant number of practical, verbal, and conceptual connections between Carew's masque and Milton's, but there are also fundamental differences. If we bracket Milton's *Maske* as a hybrid innovation, Carew's masque is arguably the greatest realization of the form; it is also an incisive mockery of Caroline pretensions

every time he came to the Blackfriars Theatre. See Martin Butler, *Theatre and Crisis, 1632–1642* (Cambridge, 1984), 92.

²¹ Its first performance on 3 Feb. 1634 ended at Whitehall; a great success, it was repeated ten days later at the Merchant Taylors' Hall (there were also three editions printed in 1634). Immediately after the second performance of *The Triumph of Peace* Prynne was brutally and ostentatiously punished for his alleged criticism in *Histriomastix* of Henrietta Maria and her ladies.

²² Shirley may have scripted the crowds as unintentional antimasquers, but the crowds loved *The Triumph of Peace* (Butler, *Theatre and Crisis*, 94).

²³ The Egerton boys appeared in *Coelum Britannicum* among the 'ancient heroes' 'appareled after the old British fashion'; they probably wore those costumes again in *A Maske presented at Ludlow Castle*. See Demaray, *Milton and the Masque Tradition*, 101, and Ravelhofer, *The Early Stuart Masque*, 146–7. The 'sky-ropes spun out of Iris' wool' that the Attendant Spirit takes off to disguise himself as Thyrasis may have been the same blue robes Lawes wore as a constellation in *The Triumph of Peace* and as Eternity in *Coelum Britannicum* (Willa McClung Evans, *Henry Lawes, Musician and Friend of Poets* (New York, 1941), 85–8; Spink, *Henry Lawes*, 54–5).

to honour and divinity.²⁴ Rather than moving the form towards drama, Carew emphasizes spectacle and exaggeration; he literalizes the court code to a degree that dances close to satire. Milton's masque, on the other hand, is a gorgeous unfolding of the form, an exploration of its dramatic range and a daring, if finally interrupted, exploration of women's heroism.

The conceit of *Coelum Britannicum* is that Jove is ashamed of his wanton ways after seeing the loving marriage of Charles and Henrietta Maria. The whole sky is to be depopulated of its old mythological connections and peopled instead with 'ancient' and 'modern' 'heroes of these famous isles' (ll. 806, 809).²⁵ When Comus claims 'We that are of purer fire / Imitate the starry quire' (ll. 111–12), Milton is probably glancing critically at *Coelum Britannicum*. But Milton does not come close to the acid mockery Carew himself supplies in the person of Momus, who describes himself as a combination of 'old Peter Aretine' and 'Frank Rabalais' (ll. 148, 50). From beginning to end, Momus is sarcastic about women. He is dismissive of 'the martyrdom of those strumpets', the women punished for the gods' interest in them and dismissive as well of the 'total reformation' of 'the hierarchy' of men and women where 'conjugal affection' reigns and Jove is restricted to 'religiously kissing' his wife's 'two-leaved book' (ll. 189, 234–6, 182). Like his aural twin Comus, Momus is an antimasque figure who joins the main masque and, in fact, becomes, with Mercury, its co-presenter. Inside the conventions of the court masque, then, Carew can be safely critical of the queen and her ideals. Never banished, Momus saunters off stage when he gets bored, 'and bid nobody farewell' (l. 791).

The points of intersection between *Coelum Britannicum* and *A Maske* demonstrate the difference between the sceptical courtier and the romantic humanist. Whereas Carew banishes the gods with irreverent glee, Milton clings to the enchanting stories. The Attendant Spirit cautions against making light of the warnings encoded in classical mythology:

... 'tis not vain or fabulous,
 (Though so esteemed by shallow ignorance)
 What the sage poets taught by the heavenly Muse,
 Storied of old in high immortal verse
 Of dire chimeras and enchanted isles,
 And rifted rocks whose entrance leads to hell,
 For such there be, but unbelief is blind. (512–18)

²⁴ *Coelum Britannicum* was the King's dramatic offering in return for the Queen's production of *The Faithful Shepherdess* earlier in 1634. It appeared less than two weeks after the smashing success of Shirley's *Triumph of Peace*. Orgel and Strong call it 'unquestionably the greatest of the Stuart masques, poetically superior to all but the best of Jonson, and in its range and variety utterly unique' (i. 66). Kevin Sharpe claims that it 'may be read as a literary text more satisfying perhaps than any other Stuart masque. Not only is it the longest, it speaks with many of the varied voices of literature—the dramatic as well as the poetic, the voice of question as well as statement, a tone of irony as well as celebration' (*Criticism and Compliment: The Politics of Literature in the England of Charles I* (Cambridge, 1987), 191).

²⁵ *Court Masques*, ed. Lindley, 166–93. References to *Coelum Britannicum* will be to this edition.

Milton wants the deeply resonant possibilities of Christian humanism available to him so that he can write a Caroline masque that can invoke 'the heavenly Muse' (l. 514). Carew's masque, on the other hand, strips away the delusion that a masque is anything but 'show'.²⁶ In his own fashion, Carew is arguably as socially reform-minded as Milton is in 1634. In *Coelum Britannicum*, however, Carew works in a form he mocks, perhaps even disdains. Less than a year earlier he had written to Townshend a hauntingly convoluted elegy-refusing elegy on the death of Gustavus Adolphus.²⁷ He and Townshend live in a world where 'the Masculine stile' has been conquered by 'the Queene of Beautie' and so 'Tourneyes, Masques, Theaters, better become / Our *Halcyon* dayes; what though the German Drum / Bellow for freedome and revenge, the noyse / Concernes not us, nor should divert our joyes' (ll. 71, 83, 95–8). Carew, an intelligent and accomplished poet who would generously repay more critical attention that he now receives, has an uncanny ability to shadow praise with cutting irony.

Milton, on the other hand, thought the masque genre was an appropriate vehicle to celebrate morality. He wanted to preserve the magic and idealism of the form, while deepening it into a psychological, complicatingly human drama. *A Maske presented at Ludlow Castle* is the crucial nexus of Milton's two great English influences—Spenser's pastoral romance and Shakespeare's richly human drama. And it is in real dialogue with the European Baroque culture of song, female subjecthood, and performance that flourished at the English court in the 1630s. This rich amalgam opens up into the future of Milton's work.

II

The most fascinating feature of the masque—both as an occasional theatrical piece and as a canonical poem—is the Lady. In 1634, John Milton asked an adolescent girl to play a full-scale dramatic role in front of a public audience.²⁸ The strangeness of

the Lady's part is all the more remarkable when we consider the nature of that role: a frightened, brave sister who makes a crucial mistake but who is strong and forthright when she realizes she has walked into an explicitly sexual trap. That Comus's trap places her in an unsettlingly compromised position makes Alice Egerton's dramatization of the Lady more remarkable still. Critics who believe that the Castlehaven scandal lies behind the masque argue that part of its purpose was to show Alice's staunch purity, a kind of ritual cleansing of the family taint.²⁹ On the face of it, this seems a bizarre strategy, but it is typical of the yin-yang magic of the masque genre. A 15-year-old girl can be presented as a pure commodity on the aristocratic marriage market through a courtly form designed to erase any background of disharmony. And this form had been recently feminized to a striking degree. Milton's masque is not so much a critique of court culture, then, as an appropriation and amplification. Its brilliant and teasingly autobiographical innovation, the Lady, has sisters in the cult of chaste, heroic women current at court—but she is much bolder. Perhaps this is because she also has sisters in Shakespeare's comedies and romances: *As You Like It's* Rosalind in the woods, Portia's tough-mindedness in *The Merchant of Venice*, or Miranda's innocence faced with a wider world in *The Tempest*.

To get a clearer sense of Milton's gender innovations in his masque, it helps to consider a theatrical work he had written some months earlier, the 'entertainment' for a great lady, Alice, the Countess Dowager of Derby (Alice Egerton's grandmother).³⁰ Milton's *Arcades* is deeply nostalgic for the Elizabethan world of the Countess's young womanhood. He bestows on the Countess Dowager a version of Spenserian magic, but for a prolific matriarch rather than a virgin queen. Alice sits enthroned and brightly lit, her 'sudden blaze of majesty' (l. 2) the visual centre of the work. Among the 'nymphs, and shepherds' (l. 1) who approach her while singing Milton's lovely words are a number of her offspring, almost certainly including the Egerton children. Everyone's role was conventional.³¹ The aristocratic family members sang and danced to celebrate their honoured elder. No woman spoke and sang alone (although such participation was not taboo in private family entertainments), and Alice, Countess Dowager was praised in traditional terms as 'a goddess bright', 'a rural queen' (ll. 18, 94).³² Playfully echoing Marlowe, the last song invites all involved to 'Bring your flocks, and live with us' in this new Arcadia (l. 103).

²⁶ 'A Rapture', l. 12. The speaker asserts that 'the servile rout / Of baser subjects onely, bend in vaine / To the vast Idoll', the 'Masquer' Honour (*Poems of Thomas Carew*, ed. Rhodes Dunlap (Oxford, 1949), 49, ll. 4–6). Further references to Carew's poetry will be to this edition.

²⁷ Gustavus Adolphus was killed on 6 Nov. 1632. 'In answer to an Elegiacall Letter Upon the death of the King of Sweden from Aurelian Townshend, inviting me to write on that subject' was written only months before *Coelum Britannicum*, Carew's only masque.

²⁸ The Records of Early English Drama (REED) project is radically revising our understanding of provincial drama (see Barbara Palmer, 'Early Modern Mobility: Players, Payments, and Patron', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 56 (2005), 259–308). And it is becoming clearer that aristocratic women enjoyed a much greater degree of freedom to write and participate in private dramatic productions than was formerly believed. However, the production of Milton's *Maske* at Ludlow was a state occasion. The Countess of Bridgewater is notably absent from the masque, and most of the roles would have been played by professional actors and singers. The Lady's part is therefore remarkable, pushing to its far outer limits the incipient move towards women's theatrical involvement.

²⁹ See Barbara Breasted's influential article suggesting that Bridgewater had asked Milton to write the masque as a kind of family absolution because the Countess of Bridgewater's brother-in-law had recently been tried and executed for prostituting his wife and stepdaughter, Alice Egerton's cousin ('*Comus* and the Castlehaven Scandal', *Milton Studies*, 3 (1971), 201–24).

³⁰ The work was performed at Harefield, the Countess Dowager's Middlesex estate. The date of the performance is unknown, and some scholars have argued for a date as early as 1629. More likely it was performed sometime between the summer of 1632 and the Countess Dowager's seventy-fifth birthday in May 1634. See Carey's headnote to *Arcades* in *CSF*, 161, for a summary of this scholarship.

³¹ The surviving text preserved in Milton's Trinity manuscript and published in the 1645 *Poems* is only 'Part of' the entertainment, and it is not entirely clear how the work would have been staged, how large the cast of singers and dancers was, or who exactly was meant to sing the first and last songs.

³² Based on the brief notes Milton published along with the Harefield entertainment excerpts, the first of *Arcades's* three songs seems to have been sung by the 'noble persons of her family' as they dance

The imaginative centre of *Arcades* is not, however, the Countess Dowager but the Genius of the Woods, a role almost certainly played by Henry Lawes.³³ The Genius, like Orpheus, controls the natural world in this magical place and can hear the music of the spheres through the night. Since *Arcades* is an entertainment, not a drama, there is no conflict, not even dialogue. The only plot is the movement towards the celebrated old lady. To create the conflict and ambiguity of the Ludlow masque, Milton would split the Genius into several characters. Most obviously, the Genius is an early version of the Attendant Spirit. The local Genius is also an imaginative precursor of Sabrina, who, in turn, foreshadows the climactic *deus* of Milton's 1637 pastoral elegy 'Lycidas', 'the genius of the shore' who 'shalt be good / To all that wander in that perilous flood' at the edge of the world (ll. 183–5). In *Arcades* the Genius is a spirit of the night: 'when drowsiness / Hath locked up mortal sense, then listen I / To the celestial sirens' harmony' (ll. 61–3); in *A Maske*, Milton darkens him into the nocturnal host, Comus. But the most important difference between *Arcades* and *A Maske* is that in *A Maske* Milton displaces the artist figure from the masque's gravitational centre. The silent woman towards whom *Arcades* processes is replaced by a fully involved woman who provides the dramatic conflict.

The piece performed on 29 September at Ludlow Castle would have been instantly recognizable to the sophisticated family who commissioned it. A divine messenger figure, a conventional masque character, presents it. Like the worlds of other masques, the forests, castles, and skies of Milton's piece are peopled with classical gods, such as Jove and Neptune. The antimasque has men and women with animal heads dancing in a forest. The event was as spectacular as possible without the facilities available at court: there were wonderful costumes, rigging for flying (at least Milton wrote his script in hopes that there would be), three sets, and a dramatic use of lighting. The performance ended with singing and dancing that joined audience and performers in celebration, and the children of the commissioning aristocrat were central and admirable figures. Bridgewater probably also got more than he expected, given *A Maske presented at Ludlow Castle's* formal innovations. It is important,

towards her throne. The second song is sung by the Genius of the Wood. The final song, which carefully echoes the first, may also have been sung together by the family participants. Milton's privileging of a truly English 'queen' could be a reprimand to Henrietta Maria, but it is nevertheless an argument that female power resides in a family—the basis of Henrietta Maria's own real and symbolic authority. Cedric Brown points out that the Countess Dowager's first husband was traditionally considered the King of Mann, so that her honorific as queen made particular sense (*Milton's Aristocratic Entertainments*, 15).

³³ The two major Lawes scholars, Willa McClung Evans (*Henry Lawes, Musician and Friend of Poets*, 64–6) and Ian Spink (*Henry Lawes: Cavalier Songwriter*, 56), argue that Lawes played the Genius. There is not, however, absolute proof. Demaray therefore leaves Lawes's role a 'matter of speculation' (*Milton and the Masque Tradition*, 49). Cedric Brown also demurs (*Milton's Aristocratic Entertainments*, 53–4). The circumstantial evidence that Lawes played the role of the Genius of the Woods is, however, significant. Lawes had been the Egerton family's music teacher for years, and he was involved in getting Milton the commission to write both *Arcades* and *A Maske presented at Ludlow Castle*. The role of the Genius is very similar to the role of the Attendant Spirit—a master of ceremonies who is both a musician and a family retainer. The title page of Milton's 1645 *Poems* announces that 'The Songs were set to Musick by Mr. Henry Lawes', an assertion which would include *Arcades's* three songs.

however, to be clear about the nature and extent of Milton's generic changes. For a number of years it has been argued that the work's reforming agenda is what constitutes Milton's innovation. Yet advocating moral reform in 1634 is neither startlingly original nor the sole province of Puritans. Moreover, readings that insist too strongly on Milton's morality obscure the masque's sensuousness and eroticism and oversimplify the choices left to audience and reader.³⁴ Milton's work is innovative because it pushes the masque form emphatically towards its dramatic potential, with complex characters and unresolved conflicts. To a greater degree than any previous masque, moreover, it recognizes not only the theatrical but also the readerly potential of the form.

The three verse paragraphs of the Attendant Spirit's prologue exemplify the experimental, multiform nature of *A Maske*. Each paragraph repeats the plot (the Spirit has been sent to guard those favoured by Jove from a dangerous tempter), and each uses the mythological language conventional in masques. But the three iterations are in different registers and become increasingly worldly, bodily, and dramatic. In the first lines, the story and the language tilt towards serious Protestant theology. The Spirit describes his home 'Before the starry threshold of Jove's court' where 'immortal shapes / Of bright aerial spirits live ensphered' (ll. 1–3). He puts on the 'rank vapours of this sin-worn mould' because Jove sent him to aid those—and only those—that by due steps aspire / To lay their just hands on that golden key / That opes the palace of eternity' (ll. 17, 12–14). In this more high-minded part of the Spirit's speech he promises to lead the Egerton children towards their heavenly reward 'Above the smoke and stir of this dim spot, / Which men call earth' (ll. 5–6). When the Spirit resolves 'But to my task' (l. 18) his speech shifts to more conventional masque language—gorgeous, mythological, and over the top. Neptune, it seems, is in charge of everything between Jove's heaven and the empire of 'nether Jove', the underworld (l. 20). He has generously given his 'tributary gods' 'leave to wear their sapphire crowns, / And wield their little tridents' over the islands 'That like to rich, and various gems inlay / The unadorned bosom of the deep' (ll. 24, 26–7, 22–3). All this sounds fabulously impressive but carries a generous latitude of meaning. Because twenty years of Stuart court masques had utilized such language, the masque-knowledgeable audience at Ludlow would probably have taken Neptune to be Charles by default. Considered carefully, however, the royal compliment gets hazy. Is it Charles who is the lord of all the world's oceans and islands? Or is Neptune another guise for God? At the other extreme, is the king simply one of Neptune's 'blue-haired deities' to whom he has 'quarter[ed]' 'This isle' (ll. 29, 27)? And is Charles therefore no more than an equal of Bridgewater, the 'noble peer of mickle trust, and power' (l. 31) who has this particular 'tract that fronts the falling sun . . . in his charge' (ll. 30, 32)? Because Milton uses conventional panegyric language, readers for centuries have been unclear about how to assign allegorical meaning—or even whether there is any allegorical intent.

³⁴ A notable exception is Stephen Orgel, 'The Case for Comus', *Representations*, 81 (2003), 31–45.

The Attendant Spirit then calls us to attention: 'listen why, for I will tell you now / What never yet was heard in tale or song / From old, or modern bard in ball, or bower' (ll. 43–5). So begins the Ovidian myth-making and metamorphoses at the heart of the masque. This final phase of the Attendant Spirit's prologue is playfully suggestive and erotic. We are coyly invited to imagine the sexual liaison of Circe and Bacchus and its result: 'This nymph that gazed upon his clustering locks, / With Ivy berries wreathed, and his blithe youth, / Had by him, ere he parted thence, a son' (ll. 54–6)—Comus, the masque's antihero. Now 'ripe, and frolic of his full-grown age' Comus is somewhere in 'this ominous wood', the scenic backdrop to the Attendant Spirit's prologue (ll. 59, 61). He is accompanied by his crew whom he has tricked by tempting their 'fond intemperate thirst', as the Spirit rather priggishly says, although they seem simply to have been thirsty from being in the sun (l. 67). Their 'human countenance' has been transformed 'Into some brutish form of wolf, or bear, / Or ounce, or tiger, hog, or bearded goat' (ll. 68–71). The wonderful thing is that Comus's victims, like Bottom, believe they are now more 'comely than before' and forget 'all their friends, and native home . . . To roll with pleasure in a sensual sty' (ll. 75, 76–7). The opening speech of Milton's *Maske* is, in other words, a steady progression into dramatic complexity and away from the relatively simple binaries characteristic of the antimasque–masque structure. The Attendant Spirit begins a process of disguise and metamorphosis that melts him into this Ovidian world where the line between masque and antimasque dissolves. He will drop his masquing 'sky-ropes spun out of Iris' woof' and become an actor, to all appearances 'a swain / That to the service of this house belongs' (ll. 83, 84–5).³⁵ As the Attendant Spirit disappears to change himself, Comus appears in his place with a 'smooth-dittied song' (l. 86) as accomplished in its own way as those of the singing swain the Spirit has left to become; the crew of dancing beasts in the forest was probably the same troupe that played the country dancers that bring the masque to a happy conclusion, and Lawes could have played both the Attendant Spirit and Comus. Without denying Milton's high moral standards, we can acknowledge the elements of play, doubling, and open-ended interpretative difficulty that make the work sensuous as well as chaste, suffused with a heat that Sabrina's cool hands cannot diminish.

To a degree more subtle and profound than any queen-centred masque, Milton's work balances crucially and yet uneasily on the character of the Lady. She is a virgin, destined to be a wife; Philomel and Orpheus; true sister to both the idealistically confident Elder Brother and the realistically frightened Younger Brother; reprimand to court values and indebted to the chaste female ideals fostered by court masques; a strong feminist heroine and a silent patriarchal token. Her centrality radiates out to the masque's other characters, who can be read as refractions of her. At a general level, the masque is densely populated with female allegorical figures, representing both evil and good. More specifically, Comus, the aggressive male principle, is

³⁵ These are both things Lawes would actually have worn. As a singer and in a number of masques he wore blue robes. And as a member of the King's Musick he wore the livery of a servant, like all members of a household.

explicitly feminine ('Much like his father but his mother more' (l. 57)), and he and his crew worship bacchantic female deities, Cotytto and Hecate. The virgin Sabrina, the only other woman in the play, is a redemptive but also, sadly, a deadening version of the Lady. And both the Attendant Spirit and Comus are strongly connected to the Lady through music. Even the Brothers are, in spite of their macho bravado, understood by their sister as feminized or feminine. The Lady implores Echo to tell her of 'a gentle pair / That likest thy Narcissus are' and describes to Comus how 'their unrazored lips' are 'As smooth as Hebe's' (ll. 235–6, 289). The two Egerton sons play endearingly young boy-men who are engaged in a running argument with each other about what it means to be a beautiful virgin girl in general and the character of their sister in particular. As they talk they not only reveal a great deal about themselves but also demonstrate two sides of their sister's personality. The Elder Brother is confident and idealistic, a fitting attitude for the Bridgewater heir. He refuses to dwell on imagined possibilities: 'What need a man forestall his date of grief, / And run to meet what he would most avoid?' (ll. 361–2). He relies on the classical myths of Diana and Minerva as proof of chastity's power, and he believes that nothing but actual danger 'Could stir the constant mood of [the Lady's] calm thoughts' (l. 370). Deploying the work's overarching trope of light and dark, he asserts that 'Virtue could see to do what Virtue would / By her own radiant light, though sun and moon / Were in the flat sea sunk' (ll. 372–4). About this sunny confidence the Elder Brother is only partly right. We have already met the Lady, and when she first appears on stage she is deeply frightened by dangers she imagines in the dark. She talks herself down from her fear and embraces the confident position of the Elder Brother, but, unlike the brash boy, her confidence is a struggle won, not a given.

The Younger Brother, on the other hand, is a realist and a worrier, and his nervousness about her plight is similar to his sister's first impulse. In the face of his brother's high-minded confidence in the power of virginity, the Younger Brother politely insists that a beautiful girl alone in the woods could get badly hurt. Although Milton critics normally assume the idealistic Elder Brother to be the winner in the argument with the Younger Brother, *A Maske* does not support such a simple conclusion. Indeed, the Elder Brother can look dangerously silly next to his brother's concerns. First of all, the boys should rightly feel a degree of culpability since they left their sister alone and then lost their way.³⁶ The Attendant Spirit in his guise as Thyrsis is clearly worried about the Lady's safety when he finds the two, but the Elder Brother makes no apologies and admits to no wrongdoing. Thyrsis goes into disturbing detail about the lurking Comus, 'Deep skilled in all his mother's witcheries' (l. 522). The Spirit describes his unalloyed shock and fear when he first realized the girl was alone: 'Amazed I stood, harrowed with grief and fear, / And O poor hapless nightingale thought I, / How sweet thou sing'st, how near the deadly snare!' (ll. 564–6). The Younger Brother, who had given into his big brother's lofty argument about virginity

³⁶ In his *Life of Milton* Samuel Johnson criticizes Milton's masque for its lack of human warmth, citing the long philosophical exchange between two boys who have just lost their sister. Johnson ignores, however, the considerable tension between the brothers over how upset they should be. See *Lives of the English Poets*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1905), i. 168–9.

with the (perhaps faintly mocking) line, 'How charming is divine philosophy!' (l. 475), is newly invigorated by Thyrasis's story and reprimands his brother:

O night and shades,
How are ye joined with hell in triple knot
Against the unarmed weakness of one virgin
Alone, and helpless! Is this the confidence
You gave me brother? (ll. 579–83)

Nevertheless, the Elder Brother refuses to back down: 'not a period / Shall be unsaid. . . this I hold firm, / Virtue may be assailed, but never hurt, / Surprised by unjust force, but not enthralled' (ll. 584–5, 587–9). As the masque's enigmatic prologue and epilogue suggest, however, Virtue is only unassailable if it has help from outside agents, but such assisted virtue is not what this confident boy intends. He tries to trounce his brother's uprising by claiming grandly that in the face of Virtue 'evil on itself shall back recoil, / And mix no more with goodness' (ll. 592–3). *A Maske* will prove him quite wrong. When the Brothers finally burst in to rescue the Lady they bungle the plan and allow Comus to escape. As a result, he is never captured but lurks—backstage at Ludlow Castle; in the forests of Wales; in the world.

For the Elder Brother virginity is a principle and a shining aura, but the Younger Brother frankly insists on his sister's real sexual presence. Again both Brothers articulate aspects of the Lady, for she herself struggles to understand how she can be both ideal and real, mind and body. The ways in which the Lady's humanity suffuses abstraction is Milton's most brilliant innovation in the masque form. Crucially, for example, the Lady possesses and projects an erotic imaginative power that thrums under *A Maske* and adds dramatic tension to the idea of chastity. Yet, although critics have noted her decision to move towards 'the sound / Of riot, and ill-managed merriment' (ll. 170–1) and have speculated over the reasons why she is frozen in Comus's 'enchanted chair' (stage directions after l. 657) that is 'Smeared with gums of glutinous heat' (l. 916), many critics have nevertheless found her determined chastity priggish. Such a judgement is anachronistic: the cult of chaste virtue defined the Caroline years. And a patronizing view of the Lady as a frigid naysayer ignores how complicated her position is, given the clearly sexual role she is intended to play in life. Like Maria in Marvell's 'Upon Appleton House', *A Maske's* Lady will preside one day over her own home; even Comus recognizes in her song 'such a sacred, and home-felt delight, / Such sober certainty of waking bliss' (ll. 262–3). Overcoming his brief attraction to daytime and domesticity, Comus sets out to seduce her away from her marital destiny and into courtly mores. She is too beautiful for a wifely life, he argues:

It is for homely features to keep home,
They had their name thence; course complexions
And cheeks of sorry grain will serve to ply
The sampler, and to tease the housewife's wool. (ll. 747–50)

But the Lady briskly counters with a vision of nature as a careful mother:

Imposter do not charge most innocent Nature,
As if she would her children should be riotous
With her abundance she good cateress
Means her provision only to the good. (ll. 761–4)

Comus and the Lady are arguing about two different ways of life and two different destinations—the court or home—but both are sexual.

Milton's idea of marriage would mature into the fully erotic joy of *Paradise Lost's* Eden. Already *A Maske's* marriageable virgin is both beautiful (possessed of 'vermeil-tinctured lip' and 'tresses like the morn' (ll. 751–2)) and sexual. Indeed, what trial would she undergo (and trial is at the heart of Milton's poetics) if virginity were a simple, predetermined condition? Her younger brother states the case more clearly than he may realize when he worries about her, cold and alone: 'What if in wild amazement, and affright, / Or while we speak within the direful grasp / Of savage hunger, or of savage heat?' (ll. 355–7). The Lady has no personal knowledge of savage lusts, as the brother's words momentarily suggest, but she has in her 'memory' 'a thousand fantasies', including the mythological stories that permeate the masque (ll. 205, 204). The work is flooded with personifications from classical myths and from Milton's imagination—among them, Venus, Echo, Aurora, grey-hooded Even, Cotytto and Hecate, Advice, strict Age & sour Severity, Faith, Hope & Chastity—offering the Lady a whole imaginative palate. Nevertheless, the Attendant Spirit's lushly mythological epilogue makes clear that sanctioned sexual union must be the Lady's promised end. He flies off to Hesperides where 'the spruce and jocund Spring' revels with the 'Graces, and the rosy-bosomed Hours', lines that Milton closely repeats in his description of the gorgeously sexual Eden of unfallen marriage (ll. 984–5).³⁷ The Attendant Spirit's final allusion before he says farewell is predictive. He goes where Cupid

Holds his dear Psyche sweet entranced
After her wandering labours long,
Till free consent the gods among
Make her his eternal bride,
And from her fair unspotted side
Two blissful twins are to be born,
Youth and Joy; so Jove hath sworn. (ll. 1004–10)

Like Spenser's Britomart, the Lady's chastity is the fitting prologue to marriage. Alone and frightened she had called on Echo. But Echo, a wasted virgin, was the

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The birds their choir apply; airs, vernal airs,
Breathing the smell of field and grove, attune
The trembling leaves, while universal Pan
Knit with the Graces and the Hours in dance
Led on the eternal spring. (iv. 264–8)

wrong choice and, in fact, the Lady's Echo song betrayed her to Comus and his bodily excesses. The Lady must find the middle way between loneliness and revelry. Fittingly, therefore, as Comus's true opponent, she boldly appropriates the role of Orpheus.³⁸ But what *she* dares Milton does not, at least not yet. His Lady proves the unsolved problem that fractures Milton's masque.

Music is the source of both the Attendant Spirit's and Comus's power. Like *Arcades's* Genius of the Woods, the Attendant Spirit's music can modulate the natural world; an emissary from the spheres, his 'artful strains,' have, with Orphic charms, 'oft delayed / The huddling brook to hear his madrigal, / And sweetened every musk-rose of the dale' (ll. 493–5). Comus's music, on the other hand, is the dark underside of Orphic power—orgiastic, bodily, and hypnotic. At the centre between these poles is the music of the Lady. It is appropriate, therefore, that the Lady's Echo song impels the dramatic action of the masque. In ways evocative of Circe and Harmony in *Tempe Restored*, the Lady's artful union of voice and verse sets good and evil in motion. The Attendant Spirit is listening to the music of Comus and his crew, 'barbarous dissonance' (l. 549), when 'an unusual stop of sudden silence' (l. 551) allows him to hear the Lady, whose song, like Orpheus's, has authority over nature and even over death:

a soft and solemn-breathing sound
Rose like a steam of rich distilled perfumes,
And stole upon the air, that even Silence
Was took ere she was ware, and wished she might
Deny her nature, and be never more
Still to be so displaced. I was all ear,
And took in strains that might create a soul
Under the ribs of death. (ll. 554–9)

But the Lady's terrible danger lies in the inherent vulnerability of her Orphic gift, for her voice is audible only when the 'barbarous dissonance' is stilled. Milton will remember the Lady when he writes *Paradise Lost*. At the epic's turning centre, the narrator associates himself with Orpheus and asks for protection against the very danger in which the Lady is profoundly entangled:

But drive far off the barbarous dissonance
Of Bacchus and his revellers, the race
Of that wild rout that tore the Thracian bard
In Rhodopè, where woods and rocks had ears

³⁸ Thoughtful analyses of the connection between the Lady and Orpheus include Angus Fletcher, *The Transcendental Masque: An Essay on Comus* (Ithaca and London, 1971), 198–203, Christopher Kendrick, 'Milton and Sexuality: A Symptomatic Reading of *Comus*', in Mary Nyquist and Margaret W. Ferguson (eds.), *Re-Membering Milton: Essays on Texts and Translations* (New York and London, 1988), 43–73, and William Shullenberger, 'Milton's Lady and Lady Milton: Chastity, Prophecy, and Gender in *A Maske Presented at Ludlow Castle*', in Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (eds.), *Fault Lines and Controversies in the Study of Seventeenth-Century English Literature* (Columbia, Mo., 2002), 213–14.

To rapture, till the savage clamour drowned
Both harp and voice. (vii. 32–7)

The drama of *A Maske presented at Ludlow Castle* is cancelled by critics who deny the real threat and the conflict facing the Lady. Granted great power she is also granted real temptation and formidable enemies.

When Comus hears the Echo song he recognizes her power as similar to his mother Circe's and the 'Sirens three' (l. 252). Their singing could 'take the prisoned soul, / And lap it in Elysium' using music to reverse Orpheus' life-giving power (ll. 255–6). Yet Comus understands that the Lady's song has a power that extends beyond Circean metamorphoses:

Can any mortal mixture of earth's mould
Breathe such divine enchanting ravishment?
Sure something holy lodges in that breast,
And with these raptures moves the vocal air
To testify his hidden residence;
How sweetly did they float upon the wings
Of silence, through the empty-vaulted night
At every fall smoothing the raven down
Of darkness till it smiled. (ll. 243–51)

But Comus does not understand the Lady's full complexity. There is 'something holy' (l. 245) in the Lady, but she is neither a witch nor an angel; indeed she is a 'mortal mixture of earth's mould' (l. 243). Yet critics too have a tendency to move Milton's meaning towards the ideal and divine. In this instance that might mean comparing the Lady to Milton's ecstatic 'At a Solemn Music', written some time between *Arcades* and *A Maske*, a lyric which appeals to 'Blest pair of sirens, pledges of heaven's joy, / Sphere-borne harmonious sisters, Voice, and Verse' (ll. 1–2) and the happy part of Orpheus' story:

Wed your divine sounds, and mixed power employ
Dead things with inbreathed sense able to pierce,
And to our high-raised phantasy present,
That undisturbed song of pure concert. (ll. 3–6)

Connecting 'At a Solemn Music' and its salvatory Orpheus with the Lady is only a partial comparison, however. While the Lady's music shares in the divine, it is human and secular, sung by a real girl. The Echo song the good and evil daemons hear is the inseparable concord of Milton's words, Henry Lawes's music—and Alice Egerton's performance.

In order to appreciate fully the significance of *A Maske's* singer we need to balance the heavenly allegorical creatures of 'At a Solemn Music' with Milton's other celebration of music in the 1630s. Travelling in Italy in 1638 and 1639 (he received his visa through the intercession of Henry Lawes), Milton heard Leonora Baroni sing and

wrote three Latin poems in praise of her.³⁹ Milton may never have heard Alice Egerton perform the role he wrote for her (he was probably not in Wales for the performance).⁴⁰ But when he did hear a woman's public performance, the poems he wrote in response are a tribute to Italy, to poetry and music, and to the artistry of women. The first, 'Ad Leonoram Romae canentem', demonstrates the extraordinary claims he makes:

... tua praesentem vox sonat ipsa Deum.
Aut Deus, aut vacui certe mens tertia coeli
Per tua secreto guttura serpit agens;
Serpit agens, facilisque docet mortalia corda
Sensim immortalis assuescere posse sono.
Quod si cuncta quidem Deus est, percunctaque fusus,
In te una loquitur, caetera mutus habet. (ll. 4-10)

(the sound of your voice makes it clear that God is present, or, if not God, at any rate a third mind which has left heaven and creeps warbling along, hidden within your throat. Warbling he creeps and graciously teaches mortal hearts how to grow accustomed, little by little, to immortal sound. If God is in all things, and omnipresent, nevertheless he speaks in you alone, and possesses all other creatures in silence.)⁴¹

The narrator of *Paradise Lost* famously decrees that woman exists at a remove from God: 'He for God only, she for God in him' (iv. 299). But Milton's speaker says precisely the opposite here in late 1638 or early 1639. Milton's attitudes towards women later in his career are elusive—perhaps they changed profoundly. Whatever conclusion we reach about Milton's later feminism, however, it is important to recognize the moving power he attributes to women in the 1630s. Indeed, especially considering Milton's nickname at Cambridge, many readers have connected the *Maske's* Lady with Milton himself.⁴² To make the connection between Milton and the Lady is to remember not only the work's brilliance and daring but its intense ambivalence. Once she realizes she has been tricked, the Lady deploys part of her strength to reject Comus, but she is tempted to do more, explicitly recognizing her own Orphic gift:

should I try, the uncontrolled worth
Of this pure cause would kindle my rapt spirits
To such a flame of sacred vehemence,
That dumb things would be moved to sympathize,

³⁹ Lewalski, *Life*, 75, 569.

⁴⁰ Milton was not a family servant and would not have been part of the long journey to Wales with the Egertons (for details of the Egerton family in the months before the performance see Brown, *Milton's Aristocratic Entertainments*, 26-40). Moreover, the changes made for the masque's performance seem likely to be the work of Lawes (his role, for example, is more prominent). Still, Orgel's delicious suggestion that Milton could have written the role of Comus for himself is appealing ('The Case for Comus', 38).

⁴¹ Carey's translation in *CSP*, 257-8.

⁴² See e.g. Shullenberger, 'Milton's Lady and Lady Milton', 204-26, and Paul Stevens, 'Discontinuities in Milton's Early Public Self-Representation', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 51 (1988), 260-80.

And the brute Earth would lend her nerves, and shake,
Till all thy magic structures reared so high,
Were shattered into heaps o'er thy false head. (ll. 792-8)

Against her training as a chaste and silent woman, the Lady speaks, willing—perhaps foolishly or intemperately but surely bravely—to pay the consequence:

I had not thought to have unlocked my lips
In this unhallowed air, but that this juggler
Would think to charm my judgement, as mine eyes
Obtruding false rules pranked in reason's garb. (ll. 755-8)

Milton repeatedly uses Orpheus to explore his own fears about the consequences of being a poet, and critics have connected Orpheus' fate at the hands of crazed women with Milton's misogyny. We should not forget, however, that one of his most fully realized alter egos is an Orphic woman facing down a bacchic male figure.

Nor is the Lady a passive or implicit feminist. When she speaks, she speaks in defence of women. In the poem Milton placed first in his sequence of English poetry in 1645 he himself portrayed Nature as 'guilty' because she is sexual; in the Nativity Ode, Nature uses her 'speeches fair' to woo the air:

To hide her guilty front with innocent snow,
And on her naked shame,
Pollute with sinful blame,
The saintly veil of maiden white to throw,
Confounded that her maker's eyes
Should look so near upon her foul deformities. (ll. 37, 38-44)

In the 1645 *Poems'* last English work, on the other hand, a woman speaks for herself and her kind, redeeming Nature—sexual still, but a good mother not a wanton. Whereas in the Nativity Ode the sun is a 'lusty paramour' (l. 36), in *A Maske* the Lady praises 'the sun-clad power of chastity' (l. 781), a disturbingly realistic admission that night is a dangerous time.⁴³

Onstage on 29 September 1634, the Lady spoke in darkest night lit by the light of torches held by 'a rout of monsters, headed like sundry sorts of wild beasts' (Milton's stage direction between ll. 92 and 93). Here at the masque's crisis the dramatic confrontation between Orpheus and wild bacchantes, between light and dark, virgin and wanton is left unresolved. The Lady will never speak again. Comus and his beasts escape unscathed. And Milton's masque becomes something much more conventional and respectable. One of the most recognizably genre-specific pieces of stage business in *A Maske* is Sabrina rising up from under the stage in some kind of 'sliding chariot' (l. 891).⁴⁴ Sabrina is an ideal masquing character, perfectly suited to the

⁴³ Carey notes that this line is probably also a reference to 'a woman clothed with the sun' in Rev. 12: 1.

⁴⁴ In the Trinity manuscript Milton had first written lines that made the machinery obvious:

My sliding chariot staves,
Thick set with Agat, and the azurne sheen

genre's purposes and to the formal properties of Milton's masque. Her back story is set in Wales, making her salvatory presence an apt compliment to the new Lord President.⁴⁵ She is a virgin who chose drowning over violation. As the tutelary genius of the Severn River, Sabrina is an elegant concluding reprise of the masque's opening images of water and Neptune's 'blue-haired deities' (l. 29). In many ways Sabrina is the Lady's opposed reflection, a pairing that would have been striking in performance if Sabrina was also played by a woman and all the more striking if the role was sung by a man.⁴⁶ Sabrina speaks in rhymed verse, often octosyllabic verse like Comus—the Lady in dramatic blank verse. Sabrina is dead—the Lady alive. Sabrina is mythological—the Lady a historical reality. Critics have reasonably seen Sabrina as baptismal, her touch a ritual blessing:

Thrice upon thy finger's tip,
Thrice upon thy rubied lip,
Next this marble venomed seat
Smeared with gums of glutinous heat
I touch with chaste palms moist and cold. (ll. 913–7)

And the basis of Sabrina's power is her choice of death rather than the loss of her virginity. In sharp contrast, the Lady's fundamental premiss in her argument with Comus is that purity of mind cannot be touched by the body's violation:

Fool do not boast,
Thou canst not touch the freedom of my mind
With all thy charms, although this corporal rind
Thou hast immanacled, while heaven sees good. (ll. 662–5)

Given the Lady's strong statement, Sabrina's charms, which seem to have nothing at all to do with the freedom of the Lady's mind or, indeed, with heaven, seem pretty but mechanical. Sabrina's sacramental ritual brings the masque to its conclusion with an easy solution to the Lady's dilemma. But this magical, ritualistic ending is at odds with the strong feminist body of Milton's masque. Moreover, her magical charms do not represent the future direction of Milton's artistic or intellectual work; the Lady's

Of turkis blew, & emrauld greene
that my rich wheeles inlayes.

He struck out the last of these lines and substituted: 'that in the channell straires' (see CSP, 226).

⁴⁵ Political resistance has been read into the masque's Welsh setting, albeit in sometimes contradictory ways. See e.g. Richard Halpern, 'Puritanism and Maenadism in *A Maske*', in Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy J. Vickers (eds.), *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourse of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago, 1986), 88–105; Michael Wilding, 'Milton's *A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle, 1634*: Theatre and Politics on the Border', *Milton Quarterly*, 21 (1987), 35–51; and Philip Schwyzer, 'Purity and Danger on the West Bank of the Severn: The Cultural Geography of *A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle, 1634*', *Representations*, 60 (1997), 22–48. It is important to remember, however, that Milton is not a local poet and probably had never been to Wales. He certainly takes advantage of stereotypical assumptions about the wild, magical forests of Wales. But the Welsh gestures are confined to the flattering and conventional opening and conclusion.

⁴⁶ Demaray speculated that one of Alice Egerton's older sisters sang the role (*Milton and the Masque Tradition*, 77). Brown finds this unlikely (*Milton's Aristocratic Entertainments*, 35–6).

unleashed, Orphic rhetoric does. Sabrina reverses the spell binding the Lady, but she releases her into silence. The Lady's vibrant human character, the *Maske's* greatest innovation, fades back into silent symbolism. But not before we see the future of Milton's work—a woman tempting and tempted, flawed but with power to change everything. She is not perfect, but human, not an allegory, but a dramatic character.

The Attendant Spirit's farewell to his audience toggles between religious morality and a suggestion of permissiveness:

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. (ll. 1017–22)

The queen as Divine Beauty in *Tempe Restored* had 'stoop[ed]' from the heavenly spheres to help undo the trouble caused by Comus's mother, Circe (l. 206).⁴⁷ Milton shifts the masquing stage business and vocabulary 'higher' (l. 1020), but he also tempers the praise. His Lady walks the earth, and throughout the body of the masque she faces real struggle. In the end, the Lady is rescued and silently escorted to her father. And in the very last words of the Attendant Spirit's epilogue Milton recalls the hierarchical (and faintly sexual) language of masques, closing the work with a stutter of hesitation: 'Or if Virtue feeble were, / Heaven itself would stoop to her.' Critics have assumed that this strange couplet is evidence of Milton's Christianization of the masque, but like the ending of many of Milton's works, this final subjunctive complicates rather than clarifies meaning. One way or another, the masque's reversion to a conventional *deus ex machina* (Sabrina or, if necessary, Heaven) only underscores retrospectively the boldness of Milton's most original creation in *A Maske*, a real woman acting nobly in the world. Unlike many of his contemporary male writers who palpably bristled at female dominance and mourned the loss of 'the Masculine Stile', Milton responded with powerful creative intensity to the centrality of women in Caroline theatrical culture. The actresses to come—Eve, Mary, Dalila—fully realize the dramatic complexity *A Maske* begins to probe. But their source, like so much of Milton's later work, is here in the 1630s.

⁴⁷ Brown notes this borrowing as well (*Milton's Aristocratic Entertainments*, 3).