“A Quick Immortal Change”:

Milton’s Metamorphosed Virtue in *A Maske Presented at Ludlow Castle,* 1634

Arlo Hall

Submitted to the English Department of

Middle Tennessee State University

August 2015

Director: Dr. Philip Edward Phillips

Second Reader: Dr. Tom Strawman

Chair: Dr. Maria Bachman

I dedicate this research to my daughter, Sydha Sabrina.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Philip Phillips for his unwavering support as my director and mentor, and for the care and guidance he has provided throughout my graduate degree. I would also like to thank Dr. Tom Strawman for serving as second reader and for his continued support.

ABSTRACT

Milton's *A Maske Presented at Ludlow Castle*, 1634 presents a young poet agonistically seeking balance between his classical poetic influences—particularly Ovid—and his Christian poetic purpose. The text presents Milton's syncretism at a formative stage of development as he actively responds to the Medieval allegorical tradition of reading classical characters as Christian types. Endowing his pagan characters with grand classical and historical lineages, Milton engages in his own acts of poetic metamorphoses through his appropriations of antiquity. Disparate functions of Ovidian allusion suggest a psychic tension within the authorial persona and advance two Miltonic ideals: the virtuous poet and the poetry of virtue. In the "Lady" Alice, Milton constructs an Ovidian *vates*, or poet-priest, his virtuous poet who seeks a slutary relation to poetic influence and who, in her rhetoric, presents Milton's metamorphosed virtue. In Sabrina, a Spenserian and Ovidian character, Milton baptismally initiates Alice into the world of syncretic Christian verse, the poetry of virtue.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: 1

Chapter I:
"A Right Warbl'd Song": 11
Milton's Ovidian *Vates* At Ludlow

"But to My Task" 14

"Eternal Restless Change" 17

"All Heav'n's Harmonies" 20

Chapter II: 31
Trial by "Purer Fire":
Alice's "Rhetorick" of Miltonic Virtue

"To Testify to His Hidd'n Residence" 32

Chapter III:
"Thrice Upon Thy Rubied Lip": 48
Virtuous (Dis)Enchantment at Ludlow

"Her Active Feet as Clinging Roots" 55

"Till All Be Made Immortal": Metamorphic Deification 59

Epilogue:
"No General Dominion":
Milton's Emulation and Audacity 66

INTRODUCTION

When Satan speaks in Book I of *Paradise Lost* of the "Fierce contention" of the "Innumerable force of Spirits arm'd," the power of his eloquent oration stands in evocative contrast to the ignoble nature of his drive to exact vengeance on a just God.[1] The elevated language that Satan employs in his subversive oratory effects both Satan's captive crowd of demons and Milton's captive audience alike. Satan's invocation of the "unconquerable will / And study of revenge," by which he deems himself to be endowed with the "courage never to submit or yield," is rousing by the standards of all eras of English literature, and the epic speeches of Vergil and Homer from which the oration borrows are an inherent element of the experience of reading *Paradise Lost*.[2] Finally, when the arch-fiend argues that the "mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n," even the most upright of readers experience the temptation that Adam and Eve experience: to believe Satan's statement as genuinely true of his persona.[3] The mature Milton who penned *Paradise Lost* rests comfortably and gracefully in poetic ambiguity. As such, his use of his epic sources represents an inversion of antiquity. As Satan's eloquence serves his own perverse desire for

---

[1] John Milton, *Paradise Lost,* in *Milton's Poetry and Major Prose,* ed. Merritt Hughes (New York: Hackett, 2003), 173-470, Book I, 101-2. Hereafter, *PL.*

[2] *PL* I.106-8.

[3] *PL* I.255.

vengeance, the nobility of his speech is rendered ironic given readers' prior knowledge of his evil nature and desires.

Through imitating and transforming the literature he himself read, Milton was both a master of the classics and the strongest synthesizer of disparate literatures in Engish verse. As a reviser and syncretizer of classical mythology for Christian poetry, Milton's poetic works effect an apparently intentional and remarkably powerful ambiguity. This ambiguity is exemplified by the delicate balance struck in *Paradise Lost* between the inherent evil and illogic of Satan and the degree to which his early charisma as a martial leader proves successful in presenting temptation, not only for Adam and Eve, but also for Milton's readers.

It is difficult to create a narrative following the process of poetic development that led Milton to the poetic forms of *Paradise Lost*. This is not because he does not provide enough textual evidence and writing about his own poetry to inform scholars of his thinking, but because Milton's own process of development is so marked by his ambitious, broad, and powerful intellect. Interested in languages, cosmology, religion, politics, history, myth, science and art, Milton was indeed a true "Renaissance man." That is, he was as intellectually voracious as he was, in other arenas, personally restrained. There is no lack of *evidence* for his poetic development, but the process of attempting to understand his thinking in even a small, relatively isolated period of his biography involves tracing the expansive movement of poetic genius.

A poet whose vocational interests were informed largely by his early education in the classics, Milton's use of his Greek and Roman sources is essential to the study of Milton's poetry. As Harold Bloom notes in *The Anxiety of Influence,* "poetic history" is

"indistinguishable from poetic influence, since strong poets make that history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves." [4]
Milton's struggle between poetic source and poetic purpose is perhaps clearest in *Paradise Lost*, in which his syncretic voice finds its surest footing. Indeed, his employment of pagan poetry in the service of Christian poetry, on one level, parallels Satan's use of the language of the epic martial hero in the service of evil. An ambiguous balance between influence and purpose defines Milton's syncretic mode, especially in early works like *A Maske*. Milton's syncretic approach to his sources—and the degree to which he transforms and metamorphoses the literature from which he draws inspiration—developed throughout his career, and it was often defined by psychic ambiguities within the poet himself. This internal disunity reflects the English cultural conflict between classical literature and Christianity, which thrust Milton into the role of negotiating two strong forces within his own poetic mind. The "return to allegory" of 16th-century neoclassical literature was "considered as a moral antitode to mythology."[5] Thus, allegorical readings of classic sources provided, for Milton, a means of negotiating oppositional poetic concerns.

---

[4] Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 5.

[5] Jean Seznec, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods: The Mythological Tradition and Its Place in Renaissance Humanism and Art,* trans. by Barbara F. Sessions (New York: Pantheon Books, 1940), 269.

Milton's maske presents the three youngest children of John Egerton as they become lost and separated in a "drear wood."[6] It was performed at his instatement as Earl of Bridgewater on Michaelmas Eve at Ludlow Castle, located on the border between Wales and England in Shropshire, England. Alice, although endowed with a relatively Miltonic soundness of mind and skill at rhetoric, is also endowed with Milton's sensitivity to Ovidian verse. She succumbs early in the maske to deception and capture by Comus, the semi-divine offspring of Bacchus, the Roman god of wine and revelry, and Circe, queen of the Aeolian Isle and Odysseus' deceiver in Homer's *Odyssey*. Comus, enamored with Lady Alice, attempts to threaten her virginity but is rendered ineffective to do little more than trap Lady Alice in her seat. Her eleven-and nine -year-old brothers encounter another semi-divine character, the Attendant Spirit in the guise of Thyrsis, played by Henry Lawes, the Egerton's tutor and the composer of the piece's songs. The brothers and Attendant Spirit find Comus' palace. After a failed rescue attempt, the Spirit calls in Sabrina, a local Welsh deity and martyr for chastity, who frees Lady Alice and allows the maske to be transform into into revelry.

Perhaps Milton's poetic mode is so ambiguous within the maske because it represented for him an isolated poetic moment, an opportunity to exorcise his poetic anxieties. Performed only once, in 1634, the maske was not revised and published for a poetic audience until 1637. Whether he consciously saw the maske as an opportunity to experiment with his syncretism, the young poet certainly did so. His use of Ovid, in particular, is defined by nouveau means of poetic appropriation or "misreading," as

---

[6] *A Maske*, 37.

Bloom terms it. The clear dichotomy between source and purpose present in *Paradise Lost* had not taken full shape in Milton's mind by 1634, as his use of Ovidian allusion in 1634 evinces a poet struggling to define his relation to his craft. However, as Bloom notes, "influence anxieties are embedded in the agonistic basis of all imaginative literature."[7] Thus, the strength of Milton's verse in *A Maske*, according to Bloom's hypothesis, is in fact dependent to the degree to which it illustrates a poet in the process of negotiating between as yet unresolved impulses in his own being.

Milton alludes to the work of many poets within *A Maske,* but the metamorphic quality of his syncretism—and the emphasis on acts of metamorphoses within the text—suggests that the specter of Ovid's influence was a dominating motivation for Milton, consciously and perhaps unconsciously in the maske. The anxious and "agonistic" nature of Milton's syncretic development is evident in his own attempt at metamorphosing *The Metamorphoses.*[8] Ovid's account of Roman myth is termed a "contrast epic" by Northrop Frye because of Ovid's empathetic approach to the myths he adapts within it.[9] As such, Milton's use of Ovid's work can in turn serve to illustrate truths about the development

---

[7] Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence,* xxiv.

[8] Publius Ovidius Naso, *The Metamorphoses,* trans. Rolfe Humphries (Indiana University Press, 1955).

[9] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton University Press, 1957), 54, quoted in Richard J. Durocher, *Milton and Ovid* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 11; Frye applies the term specifically to Ovid's epic, *The Metamorphoses*.

of Milton's syncretic method as a means of resolving the issue of the proper use of sources for the Christian poet.

In between completing his M.A. degree at Christ's College, Cambridge, and the beginning of a full-fledged poetic career, Milton's thoughts were focused on issues of vocation and the virtuous uses of poetry. The young man, living with his father and yet unsure of his own literary success, wrote an occasional maske set on the eve of Michaelmas, the holiday of Michael and all angels. The maske was likely motivated at least partially by a desire to attract patronage.[10] His radical approach to the genre of the maske, however, calls this possibility into question. Had Milton wanted primarily to gain the continued financial support of the Egerton family, it seems unlikely that he would have taken so many poetic risks at Ludlow. Although Milton's mind was focused on issues of vocation, the practicality of finding steady income through poetry is less apparent in the text than his efforts to mediate his Christian purpose and classical poetic training. Whether he desired a patron or not when he wrote *A Maske*, he received no further commissions from the Egerton family.

The maske, however, continues to provoke critical debate. It provides scholars with a rich and unique example of Milton's remarkable verse. In the process of seeking the most useful scholarship for my study of Ovidian allusion in Milton's maske, I have found the most sensitive readers of the poet to prove invaluable. Barbara Lewalski's critical biography presents a poet in the process of defining his own vocation and

---

[10] Barbara K. Lewalski, *The Life of John Milton*: *A Critical Biography* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 53-87.

provides a resource for general biographical information. Harold Bloom informs my theoretical approach to Milton's vocational and literary anxieties during the writing of the maske. Daniel Shore presents a working definition of Milton's syncretism as constructively rhetorical in its preservation of classicism.[11] Jean Seznec provides, in his classic study of the appropriation of mythology by Renaissance Europe, a historical background of syncretic writing before and during Milton's life. Philip Edward Phillips provides a study of Milton's syncretic muse and, in his reading of Milton's invocations, offers a narrative of the poetic negotiation in which Milton was deeply engaged during the drafting and later revision in 1637 of *A Maske,* as well as suggesting the subject of virtue as Milton's direct object of celebration in the work.[12] William Miller provides a full-length study of mythology in *A Maske*, suggesting multiple levels of meaning to Milton's adaptation of classical myth for a Christian allegory.[13] Richard J. Durocher[14] and Maggie Kilgour, [15] in their respective studies, present two different ways of seeing Milton's relationship to and interpretation of Ovid, as well as suggest models for Milton's

---

[11] Daniel Shore, "Why Milton is not an Iconoclast," *PMLA* 127, no. 1 (2012): 26.

[12] Philip Edward Phillips, *John Milton's Epic Invocations: Converting the Muse* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), iv-vii.

[13] Wiliam S. Miller, *The Mythology of Milton's Comus*, (New York: Garland, 1988).

[14] Richard J. Durocher, *Milton and Ovid*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

[15] Maggie Kilgour, *Milton and the Metamorphoses of Ovid* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

view of the poetic tradition. Elizabeth Bellamy traces a literary etymology of chastity and suggests the omnipresence of Spenser's influence on Milton and his interpretations of classicism, as well as providing a reading of Milton as literary interventionist.[16] Peter Bevington and David Holbrook describe the court maske as the scene of the negotiation and display of courtly power and place Milton in a culture war regarding the proper uses of theater and outdoor entertainment.[17] Nancy Lindheim provides a reading of Milton's conflation of the pastoral and maske genres, arguing that the overall themes of the pastoral and of Milton's maske are care and the root *caritas* from which "charity," and "care" and "chastity" are derived.[18] Laurence Lerner provides a broader theoretical framework for Milton's use of the pastoral in *The Uses of Nostalgia*.[19] Finally, Timothy Burbery reads Milton as a poet with strong dramatic inclinations and suggests a corollary between Shakespeare and the glozing speeches of Comus.[20]

---

[16] Elizabeth J. Bellamy, "Waiting for Hymen: Literary History as 'Symptom' in Spenser and Milton," *English Language History* 64, no. 2 (1997), 391-414.

[17] David Bevington and Peter Holbrook, *The Politics of the Stuart Court Masque*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[18] Nancy Lindheim. "Pastoral and Masque at Ludlow," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 67, no. 3 (1998): 639-65.

[19] Laurence Lerner, *The Uses of Nostalgia: Studies in Pastoral Poetry ,* (New York: Shocken Books, 1972).

[20] Timothy Burberry, *Milton the Dramatist*, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2007).

This study begins by addressing the question of what readers should make of the widely disparate uses of Ovidian imagery that pervade *A Maske*. I suggest, in Chapter One, that the poet's use of Ovid in *A Maske* suggests Milton's developing view of the ideal of virtuous poetry in 1634. Milton presents a model of virtuous poetry that is largely Ovidian,liberally metamorphosing Ovid as well as his other sources. The transformative quality of the poet's approach to his sources within the text presents a view of poetry unique to Milton at a unique stage of his poetic development, as well as sketches multiple models of virtuous poetry and poet of virtue. The pastoral Attendant Spirit, in the guise of Thyrsis, represents a vocational poet of the classical world. Comus embodies the poetry of self-interest and vice, his Ovidian words of temptation suggesting a skewed and reduced perspective. Lady Alice represents the young, virtuous poet caught in the "anxiety of influence," seeking a new means of relating to her poetic sources within Milton's poetic maske-world. In her, Milton tests the ideal of the Ovidian *vates* or poet-priest.

Chapter two explores Milton's metamorphosis of virtue as it is represented in his model of virtuous poetry. Aligning poetic virtue with the rhetoric of virtue in the maske, in which poetry creates the physical world as well as the literary one, the chapter theorizes the inherent validity of Alice's professed morality and her performance of it, suggesting a distinctly gendered virtue whose rhetoric is not unlike that of Milton's Satan in style but whose purpose is virtuous. Furthering my meta-poetic reading, I explore the figure of the Ovidian *vates,* as well as investigating the nature of virtue as exemplified by Alice and her rhetoric of virtue.

The final chapter of this study focuses on the enigmatic character of the rescuer Sabrina, arguing that she represents a type of poetic salvation for Lady Alice. By providing the primary sustained elements of harmony within the text, resolving Milton's plot and saving the Alice from the clutches of Comus, Sabrina provides Lady Alice with a virtuous poetic influence. As an Ovidian and Spenserian character, she initiates Alice into the world of virtuous, syncretic poetry and provides a resolution to the "agonistic" process of Milton's negotiation with Ovid in *A Maske.*

Finally, the epilogue examines the implications of Milton's emulative technique of negotiating his relationship to his sources and the audacity it sometimes appears to suggest in him. In emulating the poets to which he alludes in his own text, Milton digests and appropriates his Greek and Roman sources in nouveau and bold ways, suggesting that the act of reading Milton may in fact be improved by an effort to imitate him boldly, which I have attempted to do by writing my own Miltonic maske that attempts to encapsulate and modernize as much of Milton's text as possible. The experiment has produced a product as different from Milton's text as his is from Ovid's. Although by my own admission it is nowhere near as masterfully written as Milton's maske, my effort at Miltonic metamorphoses*,* entitled *The Maske of Muted Light,* has allowed me unique insights into the process of writing such a piece.

CHAPTER I:

"A Right Warbl'd Song":

Milton's Ovidian *Vates* at Ludlow

> Above all things the air, lighter than earth,
>
> Lighter than water, heavier than fire,
>
> Towers and spreads; there mist and clouds assemble,
>
> And fearful thunder and lightning and cold winds,
>
> But these, by the Creator's order, held
>
> No general dominion; even as it is,
>
> These brothers brawl and quarrel; though each one
>
> Has his quarter, still, they come near tearing
>
> The universe apart.
>
> (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.53-61)

Ovid's creation story has a meta-poetic quality, especially given the radical act of poetic metamorphoses for which it serves as introduction. As it describes the physical incarnation of the universe, it also intimates the poetic incarnation of Ovid's epic. In the images of creation in *Metamorphoses*, book 1, Ovid presents "the Creator" as a force of order that gives shape to the forces of the universe, dividing and allocating dominion. "No general dominion" is held by any one element, however, and the forces of the universe remain in tenuous balance with one another as the structure of Ovid's universe threatens to destroy itself. Although Jove later seizes control of lightning and of the other Roman gods, his position of power is, by the very nature of the universe as Ovid has described, impermanent.

The balance upon which all creation is founded, according to Ovid, is always subject to violent change; thus, existence is an inherently volatile endeavor. Ovid presents his "Creator," then, in very different terms than Milton later presented the Christian God in his own epic. Unlike Milton's God, whose existence far predates humanity and whose authority is so unshakeable that to rebel against him is an act of existential futility, Ovid's "Creator" is a reviser, a bringer of order to existing material. Ovid presents his creator as an agent of metamorphosis. The "Creator" *transforms* the base materials of existence much as Publius Ovidius Naso poetically transformed Roman and Greek mythology and the epics of Homer and Vergil in his own epic work—and much as Milton would metamorphose Ovid's epic, transforming the stories and language of *Metamorphoses* for his own Christian and poetic purpose. Ovid's creation connects the act of writing poetry with the basic and first act of creation, the poet playing the role of reviser and interpreter, an organizer of existing, if chaotic, material.

This model of poetic creation bears telling resemblance to Milton's own view of his vocation. As a reviser and syncretizer of classical mythology for Christian poetry, Milton recurrently struck an ambiguous balance in his use of classical and pagan poetic characters, no single force holding "general dominion." In his early poems, in which the poet experimented with his own syncretic authorial voice, the tenuous balance between poetic tradition and poetic vocation threatens to destroy Milton's poetic universe much as the elements of Ovid's poetic universe threaten it.

Milton's early relationship to Ovid was characterized by a poetic empathy, perhaps because of Ovid's inherently empathetic approach to his mythological appropriations and perhaps because of Milton's appreciation for Ovid's verse.

Milton's education had involved translating and studying Ovid heavily. St. Paul's School, where Milton was a student from the age of twelve until he entered Christ's College, Cambridge, maintained a humanistic emphasis on "pure Latin and Greek models for reading, writing, and speaking."[1] Milton's "regular curriculum of studies" at St. Paul's school certainly included multiple works by Ovid, in particular, *The Metamorphoses.*[2] Milton continued his study of Ovid and his immersion in the classics even after Cambridge. Reflected in the books he purchased at his father's house in Hammersmith—directly after graduating from Christ's College, Cambridge—Milton's "classical program" further reinforced his classically based education.[3] The poet states that his reading was "entirely" comprised of Greek and Latin literature during this time—the period of Milton's life in which he finished and staged the Ludlow maske.[4]

Both in its characters' interactions with one another and by Milton's playful appropriation of Ovid within it, *A Maske* is characterized by displays of "poetic empathy"—a complex textual connection between a poet and his or her poetic models. In his displays of poetic empathy within the maske, Milton explores and "tests" the virtue of the Ovidian *Vates*, or divinely inspired poet-priest. Indeed, Milton's chosen role of poet-priest may have been caused by Ovid's own influence. Philip Edward Phillips notes that,

---

[1] Lewalski, *The Life of John Milton*, 9.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid., 10.

[4] Ibid., 56.

in *Elegy VI,* Milton alludes to Ovid's own model of the *vates* as "sacred to the gods and receptive to their divine inspiration."[5]

"But to My Task"

In 1634, Milton's plans to enter the clergy after graduating from Christ's College, Cambridge, had been rendered all but impossible by the rise of Laudianism within the Anglican Church. As Barbara Lewalski notes in her critical biography of Milton, Laud had "accelerated the process of recasting the church in a high church mold, leading it, many feared, ever closer to Rome."[6] The archbishop had begun to require strict adherence to the *Book of Common Prayer* and had begun the process of eliminating preaching from worship, as well as appointing Arminian bishops to "rigorously repress" Puritan efforts to reform church ritual and government.[7] Milton's plans to enter the clergy were all but rendered impossible by these changes because his Puritan and increasingly idiosyncratic religious views did not align with the Laudian church.

The poet focused largely on issues of vocation during the years he spent at his father's estate in Horton after leaving school. The idea of a young man making a living as a poet was just as implausible in the Renaissance as it now is, so Milton likely would have needed a patron to pursue his epic ambitions. The question of his own future vocation and the possibility of sustained patronage may have led the young Milton to take

---

[5] Phillips, *Converting the Muse,* 8-9.

[6] Lewalski, *The Life of John Milton*, 55.

[7] Ibid.

a commission from Earl Egerton of Bridgewater, the Right Honorable John, to write a maske in his honor.[8] The occasion was his installment on land that borders England and Wales. The actors were to be his three youngest children: Alice, at fifteen the eldest; John, Viscount Brackley, eleven; and Thomas, nine years of age.

By 1634, Milton was ready to begin establishing himself as a poet in the Renaissance sense of the term. According to William S. Miller, "By 1634, Milton felt ready to assume his public role," confident to "emerge from his preparatory study equipped with understanding and a universal insight."[9] Having written the words for an outdoor entertainment that was staged successfully for the same family, a work entitled *Arcades*, Milton took his second commission as an opportunity to experiment artistically.[10] Concerned with negotiating twin allegiances to the classical pagan literature upon which he was raised and the Christian vocational poetry he felt compelled to write, the young poet explores a distinct vocational model in *A Maske Presented at Ludlow Castle,* 1634,: the Ovidian *vates.*

However, Milton's use of Ovidian allusion is the most pronounced in the speeches of Comus, the tempter character central to the work. This implies, among other things that, by 1634, Milton may have at least partially planned to relegate the pagan poetry of Publius Ovidius Naso to the speech of Comus and his perverse rout. However,

---

[8]Ibid., 80.

[9] William S. Miller, *The Mythology of Milton's* Comus (New York: Garland, 1988), 77.

[10] Ibid., 39.

Ovidian metaphor is not to be found merely in the rich speech of Comus within *A Maske*; Ovid's influence on Milton can also be seen in the poetic imagination of Milton's chaste "Lady," Alice Egerton. Moreover, Ovidian metaphor and language are so centrally featured and used with such variation in Milton's text that the classical poet's presence must be seen as directly connected of the problem central to the text: the fate of a young poetess and, perhaps in Milton's eyes, of poetry itself.

In the dichotomous web of poetic viewpoints *A Maske* creates, the young Milton advances his vision of the syncretic *vates* using the method of metaphorical self-purification he would later present in *Areopagitica*: "that which purifies us is trial, and trial is by what is contrary."[11] Thus, the plot of *A Maske* is made up of a series of poetic confrontations between antithetical models of poetry. The conflicts between characters in Milton's allegory are resolved through the poetry of the characters' speeches, both in the poetic language and in allusions to the classical poetic fraternity to which Milton aspired to belong. Mostly structured around a poetic style of debate or competition, each encounter between the characters within *A Maske* allows Milton's characters to express a particular brand of poetic thinking.

---

[11] John Milton, "Areopagitica," *Milton's Poetry and Major Prose,* ed. Merritt Hughes (New York: Hackett, 2003), 86-113, 170-76.

"Eternal Restless Change"

Air without light, Substance forever changing,

Forever at war: within a single body.

(Ovid, *The Metamorphoses* 1.16-17)

Milton, endowed early with a prodigious tolerance for with the often ambiguous nature of poetic and religious discourse, seems to have admired Ovid's epic work for the subtle generosity Ovid afforded his mythological characters and for the degree of empathy with which Ovid presents both his mortal and immortal characters. Northrop Frye terms *The Metamorphosis* a "contrast epic" in that it embraces a multiplicity of narratives and subjects; moreover, the epic focuses universal elements of change and tragedy within the dynastic themes of Homer and Virgil rather than on martial opposition and national identity.[12] DuRocher further argues that Milton himself, with the drafting of *Paradise Lost* some two decades after the drafting of *A Maske*, is the only poet after Ovid to write a "contrast epic" successfully. The Renaissance poet's own epic does, indeed, rely and improvise heavily on *The Metamorphoses*. In the text of *A Maske*, Milton metamorphoses Ovid's account of classical myth and demonstrates a hyper-poetic engagement with Ovid. Milton's relationship to Ovid in 1634 was defined by the disparity between the Puritan virtue Milton sought to glorify and the classical poetry upon which his literary education was founded. In his early career, Milton struggled to negotiate between allegorical readings of Ovid, which identified the characters of *The*

[12]Durocher, *Milton and Ovid,* 11.

Metamorphoses as various Christian *types* and read the epic through the lens of medieval Christianity, and a poetic allegiance to the classics and Ovid in particular.[13]

The medieval allegorical tradition inherently reduced Ovid's work in its act of appropriation. As Seznec notes in *The Survival of the Pagan Gods,* Ovid had been less immediately successful than the generally starker and more serious-minded Vergil. Many interpretations of Ovid's verse by practitioners of the medieval and early Renaissance "moral tradition" of literature appear to have removed Ovid so far from the world in which he wrote that the text bears little or none of its original meaning. For instance, a set of extracts from *The Metamorphoses*, interpreted for the reading pleasure and edification of nuns, actually represented the Roman gods and goddesses as monks and nuns, their marriages "the meetings of monks and nuns."[14] Although allegorists did not *misunderstand* Ovid, they certainly placed greater value on the external ideology to which their criticism was in service than on the inherent qualities of classical verse.[15] Milton's reading of Ovid was more complex than the allegorical tradition in which he was educated—a tradition that, by its very nature, reduced the work of Ovid. In the development of syncretic Christian verse, Milton represents the clearest expression of conflict between a poet's view of his tradition and his role as a Christian bard.[16]

---

[13] Ibid., 10.

[14] Seznec, *The Survival of the Pagan,* 266.

[15] Ibid., 22.

[16] Phillips, *Converting the Muse,* 14.

The young Milton's effort to fulfill his perceived responsibilities, both to his Christian purpose as well as Ovidian source material, manifests itself in the Ludlow maske as an exploration of the possibility of metamorphosing Ovid, the original metamorphic poet. As Bloom contends in *The Anxiety of Influence*, "the poet is condemned to learn his profoundest yearnings through an awareness of *other selves*. The poem is within him, yet he experiences the shame and splendor of being *found by* other poems—great poems—outside him."[17] For Milton in the early 1630s, during which he appears to have drafted the majority of *A Maske,* the poet's role is the roughly same as Ovid's "Creator": to organize or reorganize the existing material of the past into an orderly form by striking a careful balance between the elements of creation. The act of syncretism is a reforming of existing material for a present purpose, and *A Maske* was a "working effort at discovering another persuasive method… designed to celebrate and protect its audience's virtues."[18] The primary function of the maske genre—in its celebration of virtue and power—is to construct, through "synthetic habits of mind," nouveau, "broad… compound meanings," and that this is exactly how Milton approached the task of writing his maske.[19] He experimented with potential uses of his sources and especially with his uses of Ovid. The maske is "nouveau" in its very foundation, as a maske with pastoral elements that ultimately espouses a type of a Christian virtue.

---

[17] Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence,* 26.

[18] Miller, *The Mythology of Milton's* Comus, 82.

[19] Ibid., 39.

A Maske's debt of influence to *The Metamorphoses,* in particular, evinces a self-conscious poet in the midst of exploring his relationship to his classical models, negotiating models of Ovidianism in his chosen role as Christian poet. A refined poetic sensitivity, or empathy, to Ovid indicates that Milton, in the process of imagining himself as a poet-priest, or *vates,* was perhaps conscious of his search for a Christian use of Ovid superior to the medieval one he had inherited. In conceiving the dual roles of poet and minister, both replete with incongruous prerogatives, Milton's syncretic effort was recursive, evolving over his career.[20]

In this negotiation, Milton displays what I term "poetic empathy," or the poet's susceptibility to an earlier poet's verse in the act of reading or hearing *and* subsequent act of careful, purposeful, deferential appropriation. Although *A Maske* is replete with references to a variety of sources, his use of Ovid within the work displays a distinctly deliberate example of poetic empathy. Put plainly, Milton clearly *felt* something when he read Ovid, and in metamorphosing Ovid throughout the maske, he appropriated his model with deference and without sacrificing poetic utility. The metamorphic act of syncretism was, for Milton and Ovid, based in an act of empathy for the characters and verse of previous poets.

"All Heav'n's Harmonies"

The text of *A Maske* is largely concerned with the subject of poetry itself and presents through opposition a model of poetry—its proper uses and influences—and a

[20] Phillips, *Converting the Muse,* 14.

model of the virtuous poet. John Milton is not represented by any one character in the text; however, there are also no characters with whom Milton does not share at least one significant parallel. Rather, multiple characters represent Miltonic modes of expression. The central confrontation—between Comus and the Lady—cannot be resolved without the external aid of Sabrina and the continued poetic efforts of the Attendant Spirit and the Egerton brothers. The maske warns of an earlier, underlying poetic confrontation, however, between the Attendant Spirit and Comus. Both enjoy primarily classical etymologies. Moreover, these characters are both connected to poetry. That Milton casts the Attendant Spirit in the role of poet can be supported by three of his central attributes: he is called upon by a higher power to serve in seclusion at "Jove's Forecourt," he is connected to the humanistic philosophy in which Milton actively trained himself to be an expert, and he possesses an identity that is chameleon and fluid in nature.[21] The glozing Comus, on the other hand, is most clearly connected to the language of William Shakespeare and Ovid, perhaps the two poets most likely to exert a considerably tempting influence on the young Christian bard, even despite the pagan world in which Ovid wrote and from which Shakespeare drew so many of his plots, characters and poetic images.

In contrast to Comus, the Attendant Spirit connects the maske to the empathetic world of pastoral poetry. A messenger and guardian, the Spirit watches over the island home of Comus, son of Bacchus and Circe.[22] In delivering the maske's formal Prologue and introducing the characters to the masque's audience, the Spirit can be read as some

---

[21] Miller, *The Mythology of Milton's* Comus, 122.

[22] *A Maske,* 1-4.

level of poet; as Mercury's messenger, the character serves as spokesperson for the most powerful Roman god.[23] William S. Miller, in his mythological study of *A Maske*, deftly identifies the Attendant Spirit as performing the essential role of the poet by delivering the Prologue and providing frequent exposition.[24] The character is connected to vocation and vocational uses of poetry, "dispatch't" "from sovran *Jove*" for the protection of the Egerton children; the character's incarnation as Thyrsis, one of Vergil's shepherds in the *Eclogues*, connects the Spirit to perhaps the most readily Christianized classical symbol: the pastoral shepherd.

Comus represents a purposeful misappropriation, or "misreading," of Ovidian poetry and appears as a perverse form of Ovid within the maske. Comus' argument that Alice denies nature displays a misreading of the Ovidian creation story, in which the desire for "ore" and rare metals marks the beginning of barbarism on Earth.[25] When Comus refers to Ovid's Creation story, he indicates that he is a bad reader of Ovid and, although perhaps talented, ultimately presents a negative, mangled version of Ovid. His poetry is founded on faulty reading, so the model of poetry he espouses is inherently flawed.

Comus employs a flawed poetry in his deceptive use of the pastoral, as well. The motif of "care" manifests itself in the Attendant Spirit, the maske's most overtly pastoral character, who assures the maske's audience of a universe that cares and facilitates the

---

[23] Ibid., lines 41-42.

[24] Miller, *The Mythology of Milton's* Comus, 135.

[25] Durocher, *Milton and Ovid*, 54.

human-divine interactions that make up that care.[26] Moreover, his pastoral representation is in line with the Spirit's role as a caretaker and as protector of the Egerton boys.[27] The shepherd Thyrsis is *incarnated* in the Attendant Spirit. In Comus, the pastoral manifests as a disguise and part of a ploy to gain the trust of Lady Alice. The Spirit and Comus enjoy an apparently recurrent, episodic relationship, which readers are left to assume goes on indefinitely in the doubly poetic maske/pastoral world of *A Maske*, the Spirit being dispatched any time a traveler is endangered in Comus's woods. The eternal, or perhaps *timeless*, nature of the Attendant Spirit and Comus's interaction is indicative of the poetic conflict between virtuous and self-serving uses of poetic influence in which Milton is engaging, a conflict which, for Milton, had existed, and would continue to exist, in relative perpetuity. This underlying conflict intimates a meta-poetic subtext regarding the uses of poetry and poetic speech.

Comus' meeting with the Lady Alice Egerton, the central poetic encounter of *A Maske,* causes the primary conflict of the narrative—Alice's capture by Comus. This encounter coincides with the text's first set of major allusions to Ovid. The interaction begins with mirrored acts of seeing and listening. The Lady, lost en route to her father's new Ludlow Estate and separated from her brothers, seeks the source of the "Riot and ill-manag'd Merriment" that "praise the bounteous Pan" and "thank the gods amiss": "This

---

[26] Lindheim, "Pastoral and Masque at Ludlow," 639-665.

[27] The question of precisely *what* the Egerton boys need be protected *from* is unclear; although Comus does not appear to be above victimizing males, the Spirit and the boys appear to understand that Comus is more interested in Alice.

way the noise was, if mine ear be true, my best guide now."[28] In this passage, she acknowledges the limitations of her senses and what they can tell her about the world but ultimately resolves that what she hears is all she can logically base her actions on at the moment, faulty or not. Whether her "ears be true" or not, following what she hears is her only option in the total darkness of Milton's maske-world. The sound of Comus and his crew does more than direct Lady Alice toward the only other living creatures around her in this "drear wood," however; the sound sends her into a bout of intense poetic connection:

> A thousand fantasies… throng into my memory,
> Of calling shapes and beck'ning shadows dire,
> And airy tongues that syllable men's names
> On Sands and Shores and desert Wildernesses.
>
> (205-09)

Alice's imagination of Comus both recreates and maintains the essential spirit of the tempter and his rout, but what is most curious is the visceral nature of Lady Alice's response. In utter darkness, her reimagining of the "riotous" bunch through the "fantasies" of "calling shapes" and "beck'ning shadows" suggests a powerful temptation. That temptation, however, is based on an act of hearing and imagining. Lady Alice, through her act of listening, experiences an exponentially more dramatic representation of Comus than exists. This passage suggests something about Alice: that she is a talented

---

[28] *A Maske,* 86-113, 170-76.

interpreter of what she hears. The Lady's imagination amplifies and transforms the power of Comus's rout as they "thank the gods amiss."[29]

As an interpreter, she endows the subject of her interpretation with a magnified effect. However, in her encounter she also maintains her critical faculties, verbalizing from the outset that the image in her mind is not merely *a* fantasy, but in fact "A thousand fantasies."[30] Milton's own early poetry tends toward the same magnification and grand treatment of other poets, so it is not hard to understand why Milton affects such a complex stalemate between Comus and Alice. In her Christian interpretation, or "reading," of Comus's pagan songs, Lady Alice's song implicitly suggests that the power of pagan song—and by association, poetry—are rendered *most* effective when interpreted and transformed by the imagination of a chaste, Christian poet. The Lady's reaction to the sound of Comus's rout conjures the metamorphic relationship Milton enjoyed with Ovid at the time, and, indeed, the Lady's song to Echo suggests further connections between Alice and the *Vates*:

> Sweet Queen of Parley, Daughter of the Sphere,
> So mayst thou be translated to the skies,
> And give resounding grace to all Heav'n's Harmonies.
>
> (241-43)

The Lady's song describes the act of apotheosis and the Platonic concept of the music of the spheres, both of which would occupy Milton himself throughout his career. These

---

[29] *A Mask* 177.

[30] *A Maske* 205.

Miltonic themes would find their fullest realizations in his poetry in the as yet unpublished elegy *Lycidas* as well as the much later publication of *Paradise Lost*, two of the poet's most celebrated works. The references suggest that Lady Alice is not only a type of poet but that her poetic interests may in fact *echo* Milton's professional ambitions. As Kilgour notes, "The Lady's rhetoric is backed up by her choice and use of Ovidian references."[31] The entire song is essentially an invocation to Echo, identifying Alice as the performer of a third classically poetic act.

Alice's song to Echo, and within it the identification of Alice with the silenced nymph and of her brothers with Narcissus, accomplishes more than to simply affect the isolation of Ovid's Echo. Milton, in Lady Alice's song, not only employs Ovid's Echo but in fact acknowledges and metamorphoses Ovid's account. Alice—or Milton, through Alice—transforms Ovid, more closely connected to the act of transformation than any other classical poet, in order to evoke a Christianized Platonic image. She represents here the model of Ovidian *vates* most closely similar to Milton's own love of Ovid—an admiration mediated by Milton's Christian poetic purpose.

The Platonic conception that the heavens actually make audible music when aligned—and when heard by the right listener—is conflated with the Christian image of "resounding grace."[32] In combination with the Ovidian reference to Echo and Narcissus, Alice's song to Echo marks a complex syncretism as well as some of the most sensuous verse of the maske. The curious association of Alice with Echo and her brothers with

---

[31] Kilgour, *Milton and the Metamorphoses of Ovid*, 158.

[32] *A Maske,* 243.

Narcissus associates Alice's first poetic effort within the maske with Ovid. In a particularly Miltonic invocation, Ovid's Echo and Narcissus story is reversed. Unlike the myth, in which Echo seeks out Narcissus, the brothers are in fact searching for Alice at this time in the narrative. Alice's song demonstrates a crucial way in which Alice enjoys a more empowered position than Ovid's nymph, as Alice indeed has a voice—one Milton closely modeled after his own.

Lady Alice's similarities to Milton have been noted by numerous critics, including recently by Maggie Kilgour, who asserts, "The name of 'The Lady' has made it hard not to identify the heroine with Milton himself, known at school as 'the Lady of Christ's.'"[33] Milton's view of the vocation of poetry as well as chastity are unified—in Kilgour's reading the maske—within Alice, the practitioner of a distinctly Miltonic chaste rhetoric.[34] Alice's poetic speech and impeccable logic throughout the maske indicate that she is intended to be taken seriously by her audience despite her age and gender. Her song is a meta-poetic moment in which Alice's character is, we can assume, not only speaking in verse but *consciously* doing so. The song is, in fact, a syncretic invocation, and it aligns her with a distinct type of poetry: the poetry, and poetic subjects, of the *vates* Milton is constructing with her character and the maske.

Her song does not go unheard; rather, it is heard by Comus, upon whom the song's beauty is not, apparently, wasted:

Can any mortal mixture of Earth's mold

---

[33] Kilgour, *Milton and the Metamorphoses of Ovid,* 162.

[34] *A Maske,* 159.

> Breathe such Divine enchanting ravishment?
>
> Sure something holy lodges in that breast,
>
> And with these raptures moves the vocal air
>
> To testify his hidd'n residence. (245-50)

Comus appears *genuinely* moved by Alice's song. He reflects privately at this point, and his reflection is made up of startlingly Christian references. The "Divine," "holy" quality of Alice's song represents a "rapture" of "vocal air," or song, culminating in a "testa[ment]" to, it seems, a Christianized Jove. At this point in the text, Comus appears almost sympathetic, leading the reader to experience the momentary lack of clarity that Alice herself experiences when she first encounters Comus. This act of reader-temptation foreshadows the much more prolonged temptation experienced by readers of *Paradise Lost*, which Stanley Fish argues was intended to implicate readers in the act of Original Sin, allowing them to connect with "Adam's troubled clarity" and to experience the temptation felt by Adam and Eve throughout the text.[35] Going on to associate himself with Ovid's grotesquely metamorphosed Scylla, Comus implies that his evil is perpetually self-defeating and self-consuming. Furthermore, Comus' appreciation of Lady Alice's beauty foreshadows Satan's later reaction to Eve's beauty. Although Comus may not be likely to tempt the Lady Alice as he claims to wish, his character's lyric speeches are marked by the degree to which they embody the satanic "counterhero" found in *Paradise Lost*, whose evil is cyclical and whose hell is within his own psyche.

---

[35] Stanley Fish, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in* Paradise Lost*,* 2nd ed. (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 1.

Ovidian metamorphosis "supplements" this lack of danger by suggesting the possibility of the degradation of the human soul.

Comus implies, then, a perverse reading of Ovid and represents one of the dichotomous models of poetry presented within the text.[36] Richard J. Durocher argues, that Milton uses the Scylla myth to "supplement" the degree to which Comus's efforts to tempt Lady Alice appear to have little or no likelihood of succeeding; the Ovidian myth alludes to an Ovidian concept, verbalized later by the Elder Brother in the brothers' debate, that individuals may cause themselves to metamorphose in a "degenerat[ive]" fashion, descending into a pattern of evil, "Self-fed, and self-consum'd." This Ovidian model of cyclical evil, fully realized in the Satan of *Paradise Lost*, is defined by its existence in an "eternal restless change" remarkably similar to the as yet unorganized matter of Ovid's universe.[37] The evil of Comus and his poetry, then, is not a product of its pagan substance; rather, it is the pagan *application* of pagan poetry—particularly of Ovid—that determines its value for the young *vates*.

The Scylla allusion is used again—this time for the reverse effect—in the character of Sabrina and her eternal, watery home, the River Severn. The flexibility with which Milton employs Ovidian allusion throughout the maske is never as clear as in his two uses of Scylla, first to describe a tempter's psychological hell and again to inform the maske's ultimate heroine, a virginal "protectress of chastity."[38] Lewalski identifies the

---

[36] Durocher, *Milton and Ovid*, 10.

[37] Ibid., 95-96.

[38] Ibid., 57.

Spenserian character Sabrina as a model of poet within Milton's text: "She is the good poet whose elegant songs and rituals free the Lady from the spells of the bad poet, Comus, and confirm her in her own arts of song."[39] Although Sabrina's character is largely derived from Spenser's use of her in *The Fairie Queene*, Milton draws on the Scylla myth to suggest Sabrina's status as a victimized, metamorphosed young woman. The grace she provides, if "right invok't in warbled Song," is a Christian grace.[40] Her role within the maske is further developed in the final chapter of my study. Her successful invocation represents the successful verse of the vocational poetry of the Attendant Spirit and frees the Lady Alice from the grip of Comus both literally and poetically. The "right" poetry of the Spirit's "warbled Song" saves Lady Alice from the wrong Ovid, as well as suggesting the ultimate reward for the Ovidian *vates*: poetic and spiritual salvation.

---

[39] Lewalski, *The Life of John Milton*, 80-81.

[40] *A Maske,* 853.

CHAPTER II:

Trial by "Purer Fire":

Alice's "Rhetorick" of Miltonic Virtue

Maskes were designed to celebrate their subjects, members of either English royalty or aristocracy, as powerful and admirable in their uses of power. The entertainments featured the transformation of the grotesque mockery of monarchical or aristocratic authority into flattery of that authority by making physical monarchical power through courtly spectacle. Although the exact subject of Milton's *A Maske* has been discussed thoroughly by critics, there is little doubt that it has something to do with the virtue of chastity or with the idea of virtue and what it means to be virtuous. Don Cameron Allen makes a compelling case for the subject of Alice's virtue as the overt recipient of flattery at Ludlow, and it is that same virtue which is the subject of this study; however, Don Cameron Allen also convincingly argues for the grace attributed to the Welsh deity Sabrina, a martyr for chastity, as Milton's overt subject of flattery.[1] As a Spenserian character, Sabrina "figures the power of true poetry to counter unruly sensuality and debased rhetoric. She is the good poet whose elegant songs and rituals free the lady from the spells of the bad poet, Comus, and confirms her in her own arts of song."[2] Sabrina's entrance into Milton's poetic maske-world is the focus of the final chapter in this study of the development of Milton's poetry at the time of the maske—a

---

[1] Don Cameron Allen, *The Harmonious Vision: Studies in Milton's Poetry* (Octagon Press, Limited, 1979), 58.

[2] Lewalski, *The Life of John Milton*, 80-81.

process ultimately resulting in the refined, masterful brand of syncretism Milton employs in his epic some twenty years later.

Alice and Sabrina, the maske's only female characters, enjoy a uniquely constructed virtue within Milton's text. In 1634, the young poet experimented liberally with his syncretic treatments of classical and pagan characters, demonstrating an effort, conscious or unconscious, to negotiate between disparate and often opposed poetic allegiances. The priorities of the Christian vocational poet conflicted with Milton's deference to the classical poetic fraternity of Ovid, Homer and Vergil, whom he was deeply ambitious to join in the ranks of epic literature. In his maske, Milton constructs a syncretic model of virtue that is strengthened by his unique Puritan rhetoric and elucidated and enriched by classical poetry and philosophy. It is this rhetoric that empowers Alice's chastity, through the virtue of right poetry, and that protects her by demystifying Comus' intentions and abilities. Milton's maske was a poetic effort at redefinition—the redefinition of virtue. In the character of Alice, Milton constructs and displays rhetorically the syncretic virtue he makes physical in the actions of Sabrina.

"To Testify to His Hidd'n Residence"

Throughout his career, and especially in early poems, Milton takes an imperialistic approach to syncretism, retaining *as much* meaning as he can from classical inspiration without compromising the Christian mission to which he had already devoted his life. As Shore notes in his reading of "An Ode to the Morn of Christ's Nativity," the poet incorporates pagan and classical models into his Christian vision and even bases his poem on pre-Christian pastoralism, organizing the pagan world into a Christian order.

The clear association of this poem with Milton's own nativity is even more telling in this context, for the birth of Christ actually marked the historical event necessitating Milton's syncretism, fusing his entrance to poetry with Christianity's entrance to the Western world. Harold Bloom suggests that all serious poetry is motivated by a poet's relationship to earlier poetry, arguing that, in "strong poems… the dead may or may not return, but their voices come alive."[3] The act of poetic appropriation is more complex than imitation; the anxiety of the later poet is manifested in his or her poetry, and the "strong poem" is, for Bloom, the "achieved anxiety" of a "gifted successor" in appropriating a "powerful forerunner."[4] For Milton in 1634, Ovid was certainly a "powerful forerunner" whose influence—and the anxiety caused by that influence—is manifested in the syncretic virtue presented at Ludlow Castle.

Milton strove to balance an intense sense of Christian, vocational responsibility and his intimate understanding of—and love for—the classical literature and fraternity of poets with whom he intended to engage through verse. He became the greatest literary syncretizer of the English language through his sensitivity to this balance. The syncretism the poet achieved was constructive and even caring in its treatment of classicism and various pagan mythologies. Milton's use of classical models in his construction of poetic meaning creates a remarkable poetic tension as the poetic voice delicately and carefully leads readers through dichotomous and competing paradigms, negotiating them only with the logic and grace of Milton's own poetry.

---

[3] Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence,* xxii-xxiii.

[4] Ibid.

In the midst of struggling with his own syncretic method and deeply affected by a culture whose Christian future was increasingly in conflict with its pagan past, Milton writes, in *A Maske*, what Lerner aptly describes as "the most eloquent admission" of the "heavy" "cultural price" of Christendom.[5] Arguing that the basic mode of the pastoral is "nostalgia," Lerner notes that, "Certainly, the poetry of nostalgia is like mourning."[6] Perhaps Milton's maske is so beautiful because it is, at its core, a means of mourning the slow loss of pagan poetry by the English people; however, the mere fact that *A Maske* is studied today indicates a degree to which the poem also serves to preserve pagan verse.

The virtue Milton designs in *A Maske* is a virtue founded on poetic truth, and his treatment of Alice and her virtue is bound up in the issue of what it means to write poetry and with his views of the responsibilities of the poet. The maske is rife with models of the poet and uses of poetry, and within it the young poet both "stretche[s] himself artistically" and explores the possible social uses of his own poetry.[7] Endowing Alice with a rhetorical strength second only to his own and the Satan he would later write in *Paradise Lost*, Milton presents a sensuous young poet in the fifteen-year old aristocrat. As Miller notes, the distinction between the respective logic of Milton's Satan and of Alice and Milton himself is related to his view of "true learning," which Milton saw as a "resistance to the satanic urge to give up one's own critical faculties."[8]

---

[5] Lerner, *The Uses of Nostalgia*, 180.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Miller, *The Mythology of Milton's Comus*, 39.

[8] Ibid.

Throughout the 1700s, English culture shifted away from the "pagan pastimes" that remained from the nation's pagan founding and mythological past. Acutely affected by this ideological gap, Milton attempted to satisfy Puritanism syncretically, engaging in a "long struggle between the deepest elements of his being."[9] *A Maske* enacts the cultural change that came over England in the seventeenth century."[10] "Since the culture of Christendom was permeated with a pagan mythology that came to it from the ancient world, the problem of what to do about paganism was the problem of what to do about antiquity. There were two solutions, syncretist and Puritan."[11] Syncretists continued in the allegorical tradition in which classical figures were seen to "prefigure" Christian ones; to them the classics, although denied the "benefit of revelation," "did through the light of nature find out a good deal of truth."[12] William Miller notes the Renaissance view of the office of poet as "civilizer of society" and "edifier" of its people—a "public instructor," "forming" its audience's attitudes and understandings.[13] The issue of understanding is key to this role, as the Renaissance poet's duty is to "understand" and share the "universal insight" he has gained from the ancient and pagan literature he reads, adapts and transforms.[14]

---

[9]Lerner, *The Uses of Nostalgia,*164.

[10] Ibid., 177.

[11] Ibid., 163.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Miller, *The Mythology of Milton's* Comus, 68-75.

[14] Ibid., 77

The commissioning of the Ludlow maske granted Milton an arena in which to perform a syncretically edifying role as poet. In the immediate sense of Milton's role at Ludlow Castle, Milton's role as poet is to concern himself with the proper education of the Egerton children. The text broadly flatters the Egerton family by highlighting the virtue of its youngest three children, their education, and, by extension, the Earl of Bridgewater. Connecting the Egerton family to the concept of a "greater virtue," Milton's construction of an edifying syncretism is dependent on the generic synthesis of the maske and pastoral.[15] The Carolinian maske form Milton undertakes here to reform was, throughout its existence, a "quintessentially mythological genre."[16] Thus, the generic revision Milton undertook within the maske was inherently mythological and syncretic in its foundation. As Nancy Lindheim notes in "Pastoral and Masque at Ludlow," the pastoral genre is largely focused on the concept of "care" or the Latin "*caritas,*" the etymological root of both "charity" and "chastity."[17] The shepherds and living creatures that inhabit a poet's pastoral world display sympathetic care for one another in the indirect allusion characteristic of the pastoral.

The highly developed and flexible genre of the maske, which served to provide an opportunity for young aristocrats to practice exerting their courtly power, was

---

[15] *A Maske*.

[16] Miller, *The Mythology of Milton's Comus,* 17.

[17] David Bevington and Peter Holbrook, Introduction to *The Politics of the Stuart Court Masque*, 1-5.

[17] Lindheim, "Pastoral and Masque at Ludlow," 5.

refashioned by Milton's use of the pastoral theme of care; this theme manifests itself most clearly in the Attendant Spirit, whom Miller notes performs most of the role of the poet in the text and whose Prologue more or less guarantees a just and godly world. Milton's "synthetic habit" and unfailingly critical mind facilitate the creation of an ideal scene for the Egerton children's education in poetic virtue, a pastoral world of care whose resident poet can assure the safe passage of the siblings as they undergo edifying poetic trial.

This syncretism largely takes the form of literary revision. As Elizabeth Bellamy has noted, Milton attempts in the maske to redefine chastity as an *episteme*—or self-validating idea.[18] Providing a partial literary etymology for the virtue, Bellamy suggests that Milton actively reverses a tradition of passive chastity in Ovid and Spenser, creating in Sabrina a feminized savior figure—and creating in Alice an empowering rhetoric of chastity.[19] He redefines chastity and the virtue of chastity as poetic, rather than physical, and demonstrates this virtue in the poetic sensuality of Alice's speech and Sabrina's later actions. In Alice, Milton presents a self-reliant virtue of poetic chastity, one that can be relied upon under duress—a virtue that can be aided only by a similarly chaste poet.

The actual nature and validity of Milton's transformed virtue is the subject of much debate within the maske, and in particular the question of what actual powers virtue has to to protect the Lady from harm. In an early conversation between the Egerton brothers, the elder brother suggests that Alice is protected physically by her chaste status:

---

[18] Bellamy, "Waiting for Hymen," 392.

[19] Ibid.

No swart Faery of the mine,

Hath hurtful power o'er true virginity.

Do ye believe me yet, or shall I call

Antiquity from the old Schools of *Greece.*

(436-39)

This strikingly optimistic view of chastity and chaste virtue is exactly what the younger brother calls it in his reply: "charming."[20] As Lerner notes, chastity is a moral concept for Alice; for the Elder Brother, it is magical.[21] The Elder Brother's view of chastity as self-protecting is as impractical in the text as readers tend to find it today, as the Lady's chastity is only retained by her chaste rhetoric—and by Comus' explicit desire not to *rape* the Lady but to *tempt* her to submit to Comus' wanton sensuality. Given an assailant whose intentions did not depend on the Lady choosing to sin, the Elder Brothers' definition of the virtue of chastity and its powers would be as dangerous as the brothers' decision to leave their tired sister in order to pick "berries, or such cooling fruit"—a decision that results in a long separation from their sister, time enough for her to be abducted and accosted by a magical tempter.[22] Milton's reference to ancient models of chastity in the Elder Brother's speech gently discredits his concept that chastity can physically protect a truly virtuous person. Milton's text is replete with examples from classicism; they serve, however, not as validations of the safety of chastity, but in fact as

---

[20] *A Maske,* 475.

[21] Lerner, *The Uses of Nostalgia,* 169.

[22] *A Mask*e,185.

warnings of the dangers of it. Sabrina, the text's most prominent example of a chaste woman, was, according to Milton's version of the myth, forced to martyr herself in the name of her virtue. The Elder Brother, in his misreading of Ovidian myth, has erred poetically—and in the allegorical world of the maske, the poetic and the practical are one and the same.

In the model of virtue presented by the Attendant Spirit in the Prologue, chastity stands to grant Alice and all its "true servants" a crown and a key to heaven.[23] However, before the maske's syncretic virtue can be presented (in the form of its feminine characters,) two inchoate models of virtue appear. The word "virtue" appears twice before the measure of Milton's maske, in two competing definitions. Both definitions are provided by male characters of syncretic mythological origin, and both definitions are later mirrored by one of the brothers during their debate about the relative merits of chastity and virtue in general. In the opening speech, the Spirit presents a definition of virtue echoed by that of the Elder Brother later on, describing a "Virtue" that entitles its performer to a "crown," provided that the performer of virtue is "true."[24] Virtue is sufficient to guarantee entrance to heaven, but the Attendant Spirit's focus on the delayed reality of Christian eternity lacks the poetic vitality of the virtue Milton later introduces with Alice. Moreover, the Spirit's definition, by its mere existence, calls into question

---

[23] *A Maske,* 330-40.

[24] *A Maske,* 9, 10

the truth of the Elder Brother's later definition of a virtue that "no evil thing that walks by night / In fog ore fire…. hath Hurtful power o'er."[25]

Although the Elder Brother presents, in earthly terms, the virtue that the Attendant Spirit had defined in heavenly and Platonically metaphysical terms, readers and viewers alike must wonder why the promise of earthly protection for the chaste would need to be prefaced with a promise of eternal life after death. We are told by the Spirit of a virtue that guarantees eternal life after death as well as one that is capable of physically protecting its bearer, and the audience of the maske would have been likely to find more truth in the Younger Brother's reply, which presents serious doubts about the physical power of virginity to protect anything other than its bearer's soul. This first model of virtue presents the concept as remarkably powerful but overshoots the mark and paints the picture of a magical, superhuman chastity rather than the sound logic and chaste poetic thinking of both Milton and Alice. Milton suggests here the Christian view of chastity he hopes to inform and improve syncretically, a chaste virtue that vindicates its claims with rhetorical strength and poetic distinction.

A second inchoate definition of virtue in the maske occurs with our introduction to the character of Comus. When Comus refers to the "virtue of [his] magic dust," he uses "virtue" to denote strength—in particular, the strength to dominate.[26] The "magic dust" will cause Lady Alice to see him as a shepherd rather than an arch-reveler, thus connecting the idea of knowledge and ways of knowing to the concept of virtue. The

---

[25] *A Maske,* 432-434.

[26] *A Maske,* 170-76.

word is used, in this second context, as a direct synonym for "power," and, in the context of Milton's narrative, Comus refers to the power to dominate through deceiving and threatens Lady Alice poetically with his influence.

It is not surprising, then, that Lady Alice is poetically threatened by Circe's offspring. As the locus of syncretic virtue in Milton's maske, Lady Alice's interactions with classical literature are poetically sensuous. Sabrina's reference to Lady Alice's "rubied lip" at the moment of Alice's rescue suggests Circe's "Vermeil-tinctured lips" in the *Odyssey*, as well as signals a distinct literary revision. Unlike his mother Circe, whose intentions are relatively logical in Homer's epic, Comus' actual plans with the captured Alice conflict actively with one another. Circe's desire to transform Odysseus into swine, her trickery when he thwarts her attempts with the magic herb Moly; her subsequent seduction of Odysseus serves to illustrate the tragic hero's *virtu* and illustrate his fatal flaw—hubris. Circe then functions in the narrative as a means of punishing Odysseus for this flaw—as well as, perhaps, for the immediacy with which the classical hero sets aside his distrust for Circe and grief for his presumably hopeless crew when offered the opportunity to bed her and for violating his "married chastity" and chaste self-restraint Milton champions within the maske.

Comus suggests the limitations of unmediated classical virtue relatively early:

> We that are of Purer Fire,
>
> Imitate the Starry Quire,
>
> Who in their nightly watchful spheres,
>
> Lead in swift round the months and years.
>
> (111-14)

The imitative quality of Comus and his rout indicates a sense in which his virtue of domination is inadequate, both in the maske world Milton creates and in the Renaissance culture out of which which he created it; indeed Comus' specific motivations to dominate are confused and ultimately powerless, as it is a *Christian* world Milton is designing with *A Maske.* Comus threatens Alice interchangeably with transmogrification and loss of chastity, seemingly unaware of the contradictory nature of his desires. As has been noted, the tempter wants—with seemingly equal levels of motivation—to make Alice his "queen"[27] *and* to transform her into a member of his monstrous rout and thus destroy her beauty.[28] In this, he is more like a tortured, Caliban-esque beast-deity than a powerful and controlling demigod like his parents. Comus' motivations are not only contradictory—they are tragic when viewed in terms of his character. The tempter is thus betrayed by a faith in classically handed down values rendered rhetorically ineffective in Milton's Christianized, modern world. Milton, using the classical logic in which he was trained in with which he designs his syncretic vision of Christianity, has defined the models of virtue that he intends to revise with Alice's syncretic virtue.

Milton designs, in Alice's virtue, a power he deems worthy of celebrating—a model of virtue whose construction is syncretic but which is expressed, often problematically, through syncretic poetry—the power of virtue. In order to connect Christian virtue to tangible power, Milton presents a rhetorical virtue that actively aids Alice within the maske-world Milton has created. In the Lady Alice, Milton presents a

---

[27] *A Maske,* 430-433.

[28] Burbery, *Milton the Dramatist*, xii.

rhetorical ability second in English verse only to Milton's own Satan from *Paradise Lost*, and to Milton himself: a rhetoric of chastity which, although grand, classical, and evocative of the Satan of *Paradise Lost* in its efficacy*,* derives its strength in the display of a broadened chastity, a chastity of the mind and soul. The young Milton was in the process of developing his own rhetoric of subversion as he drafted *A Maske*. William Miller, in his study of Milton's use of mythology in *A Maske*, argues that the text is a working effort at "discovering another persuasive method," one predicated on classical and mythological adaptation, in order to "moralize the realm."[29] The "Lady" of Milton's maske is an echo of Milton's own nickname at Cambridge, the "Lady of Christ's College," and Alice's own rhetoric is strengthened by its similarities to the rhetoric of young Milton himself. Although reading Alice exclusively *as* Milton would be a grand oversimplification, the unique rhetoric with which Lady Alice defends herself from Comus necessitates exploring the comparison between Alice and Milton.

The virtue with which Milton endows Lady Alice is syncretic and transformative of its sources in its basic construction. In *A Maske*, Milton defends chastity with the rhetoric of virtue that defends and justifies itself. As Bellamy has noted, Milton creates in the Lady's chastity an *episteme* or self-validating idea. She is chaste because she was chaste; she will be chaste because she has been. Alice's soundness of mind affirms her in her own chastity of mind, a poetic and spiritual chastity that is physical but by no means limited to the physical. The chastity Alice possesses is not only Miltonic in construction but is indeed a syncretic metamorphoses of the Ovidian model of evil as "Self-fed, and

---

[29] Miller, *The Mythology of Milton's* Comus, 82.

self-consum'd."[30] Alice enjoys the rewards of chastity just as Comus enjoys a cyclical hell of the mind, reversing and making positive the model of evil Milton would later apply to his most famous character, the Satan of *Paradise Lost*. Indeed, the Elder Brother suggests a dichotomous view of both virtue and evil as cyclical:

> He that has light within his own clear breast,
> May sit I'th' center, and enjoy bright day,
> But he that hides a dark soul and foul thoughts
> Benighted walks under the midday Sun;
> Himself is his own dungeon.
>
> (380-85)

It is not surprising that Alice might be suggestive of Milton's later Satan, as her character bears the voice most often compared to Milton's own—with the exception of the rousing, revolutionary rhetoric of Satan. Both characters, although motivated differently, enjoy, to a large degree, the power of Milton's own voice or a voice very close to his.

Alice's unshakeable sense of logic and her own critical abilities beg comparison with Milton's own uncompromisingly thorough process of experiencing the world of literature. In the pastoral world of the maske, Alice inhabits a doubly allegorical-poetic world of Ovidian temptation. Within this world of allusion, Alice's "critical faculties" are inherently poetic and connected to her ability to locate the source of poetic truth. Alice trusts internal knowledge more than external sensory experience.

> This way now, if mine ear be true,

---

[30] *A Maske,* 595-96.

My best guide now. Methought it was the sound

Of riot and ill-managed merriment

…yet O where else

Shall I inform my unacquainted feet

In the blind mazes of this tangled wood?[31]

Alice's distrust of physical truth suggests her acceptance of the Platonic doctrine of rejecting the body in favor of the truth of the soul, as well as with the hierarchy of the soul. She questions the sounds made by Comus and his rout because Milton has endowed her with the poetic logic of internal truth. Alice's reason is dominant over her passions and appetite in the Neoplatonic hierarchy of the soul; however, because her reason is by nature a poetic reason, it is directly tied to a distinctly internal experience of passion.

Perhaps this poetic urge to seek and trust internal truth over external experience explains why, when Lady Alice finally meets Comus, she appears to deviate from her previous logic, allowing herself to believe what she *sees* over and beyond what reason may dictate. She neglects to question Comus as she does other sensory input. Lerner argues that Alice's virtue is incongruous with her experience of syncretic verse, and that "the deepest paradox of Comus is that the moral rejects the poetry."[32] Alice's experience of verse, however, indicates that, even as a chaste poet she is *still* a poet—one whose reception of beautiful verse is capable of thrusting her into an emotional state:

A thousand fantasies

Begin to throng into my memory

[31] *A Maske,* 170-76.

[32] Lerner, *The Uses of Nostalgia*, 68.

> Of calling shapes, and beck'ning shadows dire,
>
> And airy tongues that syllable men's names
>
> On sands and shores and desert wildernesses.[33]

In these lines, Alice describes the visceral internal world of the poet's mind and lends a clue to the nature of syncretic virtue and its relationship to poetry. Because Lady Alice is inexperienced and young, both in reality and as a model of the poetic search for truth, she must temper her understanding of the world by experiencing it. However, the intense nature of her fantasy indicates, perhaps, the violent nature of the poetic mind for Milton, a result of the syncretic balance between classical sensuality and Christian temperance. The sensuality of "airy tongues that syllable men's names" suggests the real temptation Alice experiences at this moment, a temptation to abandon her "critical faculties" and, as Milton's rout, to "make one blot of all the air," accepting a sensual and physical reality. It is her choice not to do so but instead to seek poetic balance that defines the "virtuous mind, that ever walks attended" by "Conscience," in this instance a poetic conscience in its visceral physicality.[34] Yet again, Alice experiences, with far more excitement than she displays during even her own capture, a poetic vision of the syncretic poet's true yardstick for the writing of virtuous poetry and the furthering of virtue: the internal instinct "Chastity" fused with "Conscience" as an angel, willing to send a "glist'ring guardian" for the protection of Alice's "Honor."

---

[33] *A Maske,* 206-09.

[34] *A Maske,* 217-229.

Although this scene is replete with Platonic and biblical implication, it is the sensuous intensity with which Alice experiences this vision that is most telling in examining Milton's metamorphosed virtue. The emotions Alice displays here are not the expected emotions of a lost girl—fear, uncertainty—but instead the intense poetic "insight" for which Milton found himself responsible for producing. Alice is not only convinced of the visages and their bearing on her understanding of her immediate surroundings, but she is also assured by them; her poetic imagination produces first an image of the possible temptations and threats in her path and then reassures her of her own syncretic ability to distinguish—as well as of the safety guaranteed by the "critical faculties" of the chaste poet.

CHAPTER III:

"Thrice Upon Thy Rubied Lip":

Virtuous (*Dis*)Enchantment at Ludlow

Milton's use of the Sabrina myth in *A Maske Presented at Ludlow Castle,* 1634, concludes Milton's attempt to define the elevated virtue with which the Renaissance maske is generally occupied. The Welsh deity further serves to shed light on the young Milton's ideas about the role of poetry and the ideal of the virtuous poet. The character of Sabrina is rescued and deified by classical water deities within Milton's improvisation on the mythical character. She takes part and actively intercedes in a literary tradition of representing chastity as stationary, an eternal "moniment," as Spenser writes of Sabrina in book three of *The Faerie Queene*.[1] Spenser suggests in his treatment of Sabrina that chastity cannot be retained in an active, healthy life. Within Milton's text, however, chastity and the greater virtue of which it is symbolic according to ASP Woodhouse, enjoy a transformative power that is embodied in Sabrina. Her mythological and poetic origins—and the divinity they affect—subsume the elements of flattery inherent to the conservative, courtly genre as Sabrina emblemizes the virtue celebrated by Milton's text.

Sabrina's invocation by the Attendant spirit, her arrival and song, and her rescue of "the Lady" from Comus' lair occur late in the text of *A Maske.* Her character is, however, alluded to in numerous ways throughout earlier passages, in both Christian and classically mythological images. When Lady Alice refers to the "pure-ey'd . . . hov'ring Angel . . . with golden wings," she describes a visage of "unblemish't . . . Chastity" as an

---

[1] Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 3.165.

angel of hope. Alice's reference to "the Supreme Good" as the source of her guardian angel signifies a Platonic conception of the Christian god. When that angel becomes "visibl[e]" to Alice, the overtly Christianized the "Platonic conception of the ideal of a virtue" has, within the text, become "so distinct to the mind that it can be seen."[2] The physical nature of virtue is further presented in Milton's use of the character of Sabrina as an earthly agent of divine, Christian virtue. The passage was committed to verse with a lush poetic technique that is at once deferential to the masters of ancient poetry—in particular, Ovid—and also imbued with unique and creative appropriations of Ovid, Homer and Vergil. The narrative logic of Milton's insertion of his own idiosyncratic adaptation of the British mythological character of Sabrina into his maske, however, presents a problematic (and distinctly Miltonic) ambiguity just at the moment that Milton overtly attempts to foster harmony and closure within his text. Balance is *struck* within Milton's text, and not by Sabrina's virtue, but by virtue of Milton's own poetic decree; in another sense, the resolution of Milton's narrative, through the intervention of the nymph Sabrina, is founded not on *narrative* unity but upon a *poetic* accord (and perhaps *meta-poetic* accord). Thus, any claims to unity one can make of the maske rests on the strength of its poetry as a harmonizing force, a force among and against the "barbarous dissonance" that creates the dichotomous structure of the maske's pastoral, allegorical world.[3]

---

[2] *A Maske,* 213-15.

[3] Ibid., 550.

The relationship between Lady Alice and Sabrina mirrors, in many ways, the relationship of a two poets. One is older and to no small degree bound by origins in antiquity, defined by the pagan world as seen by Christianized eyes. The younger poet experiences the benefit and burden of appropriating a poetic forbearer. Sabrina, the first character in the maske who appears after being invoked, thus introduces harmony to Milton's text as she rescues Lady Alice by sprinkling "drops" of "precious cure" upon her lips and finger tips in a ceremony that loosely resembles a purification rite or a Christian baptism.[4] The nymph, endowed with a song of virtue to harmonize her poetic landscape, frees Lady Alice from the influence of Comus and his base, sophistic temptation through the poetic power of an early poet over a later one. The distinctly sensual—yet suggestively baptismal—act by which Sabrina saves Lady Alice form Comus' enchanting spell, when read as an interaction between poets, presents the ideal vocational initiation for Alice, Milton's young Ovidian *vates*.

The plot of the text centers on the three children of the newly installed Earl of Bridgewater as they make their way through a dark wood to meet their father at Ludlow Castle, his new estate. En route, the siblings are separated, and the eldest child Alice, fifteen years of age at the time of the piece's performance, is approached by a broadly satanic figure—the mythological son of Circe and Bacchus—named Comus (based on the Greek word Komos for "revelry" or "band of revelers"). The character attempts to compel "The Lady" Alice to forsake her virtue and engage in the revelry for which the character of Comus is named. After a failed rescue attempt by the Attendant Spirit and

[4] Ibid., 912-13.

the Egerton brothers, Sabrina rescues the Lady.

Sabrina's intervention is unique within Milton's text in that it alone provides resolution and harmony. As William Oram notes in *The Invocation of Sabrina*, the majority of the text "stresses its uncertainties formally by" affecting "an avoidance of closure," a quality which is specifically dramatic in the genre of the masque, conventionally defined by the closure created when jest at the expense of a lord or lady transforms itself into flattery.[5] However, in Milton's text, invocations are more likely to be interrupted and thus abandoned than to be answered. Sabrina is partly defined by her antonym, Cottyto. The invocation by Comus of his compatriot, the "Goddess of Nocturnal sport," alludes to a counter mythology—the Roman orgies for which Juvenal condemned the Thracian goddess.[6] The scene provides a sort of antonym for Sabrina which further defines her character, in particular because Cottyto does not arrive upon being invoked, and this leaves the reader unsettled and pensive. Although Comus begins to invoke the "Dark-Veiled Cottyto, to whom the secret flame / Of midnight torches burns," his soliloquy is interrupted by the presence of Alice in the woods. Denoted by the "different pace of some chaste footing," her arrival begins the "measure" of Milton's maske.

Sabrina's uninterrupted, fulfilled invocation restores harmony, a harmony not present even before Comus's unfinished invocation to Cottyto. Sabrina thus provides

---

[5] William A. Oram, "The Invocation of Sabrina," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 24, no 1, (1987): 626.

[6] *A Maske,* 128.

something akin to the “cooling fruit” of resolution for readers of Milton’s masque as defined by the fire imagery of Cottyto and Comus, those “Imitators of the Starrie Quire” who are of “purer fire,” as Comus characterizes himself and his cohorts.[7] Sabrina’s “cooling” quality—reinforced by the constant water imagery surrounding her—is Milton’s attempt to impose harmony on his narrative by being the only invoked spirit to appear and by freeing the Lady Alice.[8] Her ability to resolve Milton’s plot becomes the first instance of unity within a text defined largely by disunity. The nature of Milton’s attempt at creating unity is syncretic, and it is the syncretic ambiguity affected that renders Sabrina’s character both problematic as a narrative and beautiful as a poem.

Milton’s treatment of classical and pagan characters has long been a subject of scholarly debate. Many critics take Milton at his word in the prose tract *Eikonoklastes*, in which he casts himself as a rhetorical warrior, destroying icons with his pen. Not all skeptical critics who cast Milton as an iconoclast take such a radical approach, however; in fact, these critics can be among the most sensitive readers of Milton. Describing iconoclasm as a “creative means of affecting the historical process,” David Lowenstein suggested in 1989 that there may be a productive nature to the process of destroying idols through writing, and others have agreed that the poet’s supposed iconoclasm as constructive in nature to great effect. Characterizations of Milton as syncretic rather than iconoclastic, however, have become more and more common in the last twenty years, and in 2013, Daniel Shore provided an invaluable critical revision of Milton's treatment of

---

[7] Ibid., 140.

[8] Ibid.,186.

classical and pagan images.[9] The mature Milton of Paradise Lost syncretically reconstructs classical and pagan idols, endowing them with Christian purposes. The young Milton, concedes Shore, was inundated with Renaissance iconoclasm and was himself more iconoclastic in early schoolboy writings. However, by the time the poet was publishing for a European audience in the 1630s, Milton had developed a more nuanced approach to idolatry than destruction: instead he "seeks to capture and preserve [idols]… investing them with poetic care" as he reconstructs them into "instruments of their own disenchantment."[10] Analyzing "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" through the lens of Max Weber's concept of "disenchantment," Shore argues that, in the ode, the infant Christ—rather than defeating his pagan enemies through sheer force—"disenchant[s]" the pagan world, robbing idols of their "spirit, value, and power."[11] Milton, asserts Shore, casts himself as an iconoclast for a rhetorical purpose and in a specific political context within the tract and in fact operates differently in other contexts, mostly approaching classical characters with poetic sensitivity: "Where there is an Iconoclast, there is an idol to be broken."[12] Milton's syncretism is a breaking down and a building back up of classical characters; his purpose is both to enchant and to enact

---

[9] Shore writes most directly in response to David Lowenstein's claim that Milton was indeed an "iconoclast or breaker of idols" in his article, "'Casting Down Imaginations'": Milton as Iconoclast," *Criticism* 31, no. 3, (1989): 253-70.

[10] Daniel Shore, "Why Milton Is Not an Iconoclast," 23.

[11] Ibid., 24.

[12] Ibid., 26.

transformation. He deconstructs and "disenchants" pagan idols only to reconstruct and re-enchant them in the service of Christian poetry.[13]

An understanding of the structure and literary position of Milton's maske—and of Sabrina's importance within it—requires a study of his immediate Renaissance context, defined by Neoplatonism and neoclassicism. Both A.S.P. Woodhouse and Sears Jayne connect the plot of Milton's text to a Neoplatonic, tripartite structure for human life, in which earth represents a middle-period of life; within this structure, popular in Milton's Renaissance context, humans cannot remember their more perfect origins, nor can they imagine their eventual return to this state.[14] Jayne goes on to argue, however, that Milton specifically connected Sabrina to Neoplatonist Poliziano's conception of the "Mens," the thinking, logical, and most noble element of the soul, as that "immaterial," "immortal" higher element of the soul that remembers heaven as its "true home" and guides the body in its return ascent. Jayne suggests that Milton's "primary motive" in choosing Sabrina was to find an appropriate local deity to represent this part of the Neoplatonic view of the

---

[13] Ibid.

[14] A.S.P. Woodhouse and Douglas Bush, "Comus and the Masque," in *A Variorum Commentary on the Poems of John Milton, Vol. II: The Minor English Poems,* 740-55, (New York: Routledge, 1972), 750.

soul, one whose local nature and "immateriality" and "immortality" make this act possible.[15]

"Her Active Feet as Clinging Roots"

Milton's neoclassical context is most usefully defined by Stella Revard in *Milton and the Tangles of Naerea's Hair,* a study of Milton's 1645 poems that focuses on Milton's neoclassical contemporaries as the immediate context of his own poetry as well as the classical poetry they reinterpret. Revard connects Sabrina to the "blue-hair'd deities" and classical water nymphs of Ovid, Vergil and Homer, and argues convincingly for Sabrina's connection to imperiled chastity by defining her as a "classical[ly] credential[ed]" deity whose historical and literary lineage qualify her divine appearance in Milton's narrative.[16] As a character in Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, Sabrina's lineage and death, recorded in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *The History of the Britons,* are rendered to verse:

> The faire Sabrina almost dead with feare,
>
> She there attached, farre from all the succoure;
>
> The one she slew in that impatient stoure
>
> But the sad virgin innocent of all,

---

[15] Sears Jayne, "The Subject of Milton's Ludlow *Mask*," In *A Mask at Ludlow:* Essays on Milton's Comus, ed. John S. Diekhoff, 167-87. (Cleveland: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1968), 538.

[16] Stella Revard, *Milton and the Tangles of Neaera's Hair: The Making of the 1645 Poems* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1997).

Adowne the rolling riuer she did poure,

Which of her name now Seuern men do call;

…

Vntill that Brutus anciently deriu'd

From Royall stocke of old Assaracs line,

Driuen by fatall error, her arriu'd,

And them of their uniust possession depriu'd

(Cantos II, Stanza 19)

Revard's connection of Sabrina to Daphne and Cyrene in particular sheds light on the choices that went into Milton's (re) construction of Sabrina. Both of the deities are pursued by Apollo, and both are classical examples of threatened chastity. Daphne is famously transformed into a tree, her chastity forever preserved but her life extinguished:

…a thin bark closed around her gentle bosom,

And her hair became as moving leaves;

Her arms were changed to waving branches,

And her active feet as clinging roots were fastened to the ground.

(Ovid, *Metamorphoses,* 548-53)

Revard relates Sabrina to these and other examples of chastity under duress, successfully presenting Milton's radicalized chastity as new, a literary reversal.

Advancing the argument that Milton intentionally reverses literary representations of chastity, Elizabeth Bellamy contends that Milton's use of Sabrina is "symptomatic" of

a "latent" Spenserian model, "repressed" and revised in the mask.[17] Isolating the Lady's "'stasis'" in Comus's palace as a type of climax, Bellamy suggests that Milton's reversal of Spenser's immobilized chastity presents, "through literary history . . . a distinctly feminine . . . agent of rescue."[18] Combining semiotics, psychoanalysis and feminist criticism, Bellamy contends that, "as a narrative solution, Sabrina herself is a kind of symptomatic . . . Spenserian repetition."[19] As both Woodhouse and Bellamy note, Milton's Sabrina, however, is more empowered in Milton's incarnation of her than in Spenser's. The subject of imperiled chastity is addressed from a rhetorical standpoint by William Shullenberger, who suggests that any rhetorical skill Lady Alice displays within Milton's text is endowed with political strength by virtue of Alice Egerton's physical chastity, which Milton prominently displays more than perhaps any other physical symbol within his maske.[20] Shullenberger further argues that Sabrina's introduction to the plot initiates Alice into the "active life of chaste female desire."[21] Connecting Alice's power to silence, an "unspoken" but palpable knowledge of her own chastity and therefore her own sexuality, Shullenberger argues that the "rhetorical" power of virginity

---

[17] Bellamy, "Waiting for Hymen," 392.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

[20] William Schullenberger, "The Profession of Virginity in *A Mask Presented at Ludlow Castle,*" in *Milton and Gender*, ed. Catherine Gimelli Martin, 77-93. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 83.

[21] Ibid.

is the source of an "activist," expressive, world-challenging magic under the guise of which virginity is radicalized. Approaching the subject of radical chastity from an explicitly dramatic perspective, Brendan Prawdzik has recently argued that the maske presents "staged" virginity influenced Milton's portrayal of the Lady as at once empowered and imperiled (817).

This juxtaposition of rhetorical power and physical peril underpins the nature of gender subversion in Milton's maske. The passive savior that Milton constructs in Sabrina is the embodiment of the gendered power created in the maske, specifically in her narrative function and mythological foundations. Sabrina's construction is syncretic, and although Shore's analysis of Milton's works provides insight, it is broad and focused on multiple Miltonic texts. Thus, a narrower focus is warranted in studying Sabrina's syncretic nature, which is is composed of numerous cultural sources for the purposes of elevating her power to the level of divinity. The grandest effect of this within the text is the transformation of chastity from passive to active, and the subsequent redefining of virtue and what it means to be virtuous. Virtue is associated with power early in the text. When Comus first refers to the "virtue" of the "magic dust" with which he disguises his identity when with Lady Alice, he is associating virtue with power and agency.[22] In particular, he refers to a power over Lady Alice's perception of him. Although readers may perceive Comus' definition as a mere bastardization of virtue, he in fact refers to the same conception of virtue that conventional maskes celebrate—the power to control what

[22] *A Maske,* 165.

is known, whether it be by "magic dust" or the commissioning of self-flattering entertainment.

"Till All Be Made Immortal": Metamorphic Deification

The role Sabrina plays is both slight—as she only appears in the last few pages of Milton's maske—and significant, for she resolves the plot of Milton's text. Understanding Sabrina's role in *A Maske* necessitates an examination of what Milton saw as the transformative power of chastity. Milton distinguishes between physical virginity and the greater virtue of chastity. While Alice presents a rhetorically empowered chastity, Sabrina presents an allegorically empowered chastity. The power of chastity to immortalize those who practice it is suggested early by the Elder Brother:

> So dear to Heav'n is Saintly chastity,
> That when a soul is found sincerely so,
> A thousand liveried angels lackey her,
> Driving off each thing of sin and guilt,
> And in clear dream and solemn vision
> Tell her of things that no gross ear can hear
> Till oft converse with heav'nly habitants
> Begin to cast a beam on th'outward shape,
> The unpolluted temple of the mind,
> And turns it by degrees to the soul's essence,
> Till all be made immortal: but when lust
> By unchaste looks, loose gestures, and foul talk,

> But most by lewd and lavish act of sin
>
> Lets in defilement to the inward parts,
>
> The soul grows clotted by contagion,
>
> Imbodies and imbrutes, till she quite lose
>
> The divine property of her first being.
>
> (453-69)

The Elder Brother describes a Christian and Platonic dichotomy in which a Christian "Heav'n" prizes "Saintly chastity" to such a degree that it provides divine, physical protection for the chaste, until the object of chastity is allowed to hear "things no gross ear can hear" and the "unpolluted temple of the mind" is metamorphosed into an "immortal" model of poetry, one fit to witness "things no gross ear can hear." Beginning with Christian imagery, the Elder Brother's speech ends with the Platonic image of the object of chastity's "first being" and its "divine property" and, in his final few lines, presents a Platonic conception of the human soul. The word "imbodies," in its negative connotation of loss of "divine property," suggests that the divinity afforded to the chaste is in fact a physical divinity, contained in the human body. It is fair to assume that the elevation of the "soul's essence" described in the first half of the passage is also a bodily virtue and that it is the body that is transformed and made "immortal."

The character of Sabrina, a chaste poet in her own right, has been through a similarly transformative process according to Milton. In Milton's reprisal of the Sabrina myth, the character chooses martyrdom over the loss of her chastity, able to avoid the trappings of "a degenerate and degraded state" that would have ensued had she forsaken

her chastity.[23] However, it is not the Platonic process that the Elder Brother describes that immortalizes her; rather, she is deified through the power of mythological syncretism:

> There is a gentle Nymph not far from hence,
> That with moist curb sways the smooth Severn stream,
> *Sabrina* is her name, a Virgin pure;
> Whilom she was the daughter of *Locrine,*
> That had the Scepter from has father *Brute*.
> She, guiltless damsel, flying the mad pursuit
> Of her enraged stepdam *Guendolen*,
> Commended her fair innocence to the flood
> That stay'd her flight with his cross-flowing course.
> (824-33)

In the first half of the Attendant Spirit's introduction to Sabrina, Milton invokes the power of Sabrina's historical position in British myth by connecting her lineage to Brute, legendary founder of Britain. In the next section, the Spirit suggests a mythological counterpart to the Christian/Platonic conception of deification presented by the Elder Brother:

> The water Nymphs that in the bottom play'd,
> Held up their pearled wrists and took her in,
> Bearing her straight to aged *Nereus'* Hall,
> Who piteous of her woes, rear'd her lank head,

[23] *A Maske,* 457.

> And gave her to his daughters to imbathe
> In nectar'd lavers strew'd with Astrophel,
> And through the porch and inlet of each sense
> Dropt in Ambrosial Oils till she reviv'd
> And underwent a quick immortal change,
> Made Goddess of the River;
>
> (834-44)

The deification Sabrina enjoys is ultimately poetic. The mythological nature of Sabrina's "quick immortal change," facilitated by the "blue-hair'd deities" of "Nereus" endows Sabrina with an immortality guaranteed by syncretic poetry—the characters and images of Ovid applied to Christian and national poetic purposes. Milton fuses national, Christian, Platonic, and mythological images in Sabrina, empowering the nymph through ambitious syncretism. Sabrina's origins in Greek mythology, via the intermediary of Elizabethan literature, serve to identify the deity with imperiled women, a connection which renders her ideal to rescue Lady Alice from the ensnarer of her chastity. Stella Revard notes that Sabrina's character is granted "proper classical credentials" when Milton ties her overtly to Nereus, Neptune, and Oceanus.[24] These credentials would empower Sabrina, ultimately a representative of Christianity in Milton's text, with the qualifications necessary to be taken seriously in the classically obsessed Renaissance in which Milton wrote. Of Sabrina's extensive classical genealogy, it is from a comparison with Cyrene, unnamed in Milton's text but recognized by both John Arthos and Stella

---

[24] *A Maske,* 870-72

Revard as an important model for Sabrina, that the maske's most heroic character can be most clearly illuminated.[25] One of Artemis' virgins, Cyrene is particularly germane to a discussion of the Lady and Sabrina because, in Pindar's Pythian 9, she appears as a nymph pursued aggressively by Apollo just as the Lady and Sabrina must defend themselves against unwanted advances. Cyrene eventually succumbs to Apollo's wooing and becomes his consort.[26] As Bellamy notes, personifications of chastity take part in a literary tradition which begins with Ovid and involve the consistent representation of the preservation of chastity in a female who has been made stationary and immobile and often transformed into some part of the natural world.[27] Milton's choice to intervene in the literary tradition, a tradition of preserving chastity through the immobility of feminine characters, marks one the most significant reversals of convention in the text.

Milton's personification of chastity in the form of Sabrina remains mobile, and in so doing, she enjoys a unique agency that is not afforded her Spenserian counterpart, who is permanently fixed in the state of a "stony" "monument." Chastity is preserved in immobility consistently in *The Fairie Queene*, which also features an incarnation of the Sabrina character. Milton's Sabrina is, narratively, the most or one of the two most powerful characters in the maske, as her powers of chastity are the only force capable of freeing the Lady from Comus. Thus, chastity becomes performative in Milton's text. Perhaps the clearest example of Sabrina's metamorphoses of virtue is in her baptismal

---

[25] Revard, *Milton and the Tangles,* 131.

[26] Ibid., 131.

[27] Bellamy, "Waiting for Hymen," 406.

rescue of Lady Alice and its effect of freeing Alice her from the chair in which she has been trapped:

> Thus I sprinkle on thy breast
> Drops that from my fountain pure
> I have kept of precious cure;
> Thrice upon thy finger's tip,
> Thrice upon thy rubie'd lip
>
> (911-15)

This baptismal act, as Woodhouse has noted, both frees the lady and elevates Sabrina enough to allow *A Maske* to subsume the courtly subject matter conventional within the genre. The sensual nature of her "rubie'd lip" and the Ovidian and Spenserian source of Milton's Sabrina suggest a salvation that is less religious than poetic, Sabrina initiating the "Lady"—and by implication, Milton—into the world of syncretic, Christian poetry. As the "other means" of which the Attendant Spirit speaks, she represents the path of syncretism and allegorical readings of Ovid and of Milton's other prechristian sources.

By creating in Sabrina a feminine character infused with syncretism—founded on syncretism—Milton suggests a way in which those classical symbols who may not present "icons" could potentially be incorporated into the fold of Milton's own distinctly unique brand of Puritanism. He further comments on—and takes part in—the ongoing syncretic project concerning Christianity and classical thought, a project that defined the Renaissance paradigm. In striving for deeper engagement in his relationship to classicism than the iconoclastic model offered by much contemporaneous poetry or the allegorical model, Milton connects and enriches both the classical and Judeo-Christian mythology

with which he engages. Milton presents in Sabrina a feminized virtue for the Christian world, distinct from the classical virtue of masculine strength, virulence and martial prowess but endowed with agency and what Revard calls the "power of the feminine."[28] It is this gendered "power," affected by the poet's distinct syncretism, which Milton posits with Sabrina: the power of syncretic poetry.

[28] Revard, *Milton and the Tangles,* 129.

EPILOGUE

"No General Dominion":

Milton's Emulation and Audacity

One of the formative—and deeply painful—ironies of Milton's early career is seated in the dichotomy between his poetic past and future. His intense allegiance to his education in pagan, classical poetry, conflicted continuously with his faith in the literal truth of the eschatological depictions in Revelation. In 1634, Milton came to see it as his vocational role to versify Christian history in *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*. In *Paradise Lost,* he gives particular focus to the stories of creation in Genesis, enriching the sparse Biblical passage with numerous classical and epic tropes. The poet alludes to the Ovidian myth of Narcissus in the story of Eve's discovery of her reflection in an Edenic pool.[1] He merges the speech of the epic martial hero with the vindictive and perverse desires of Satan, endowing him with the elevated rhetoric of subversion. In the remarkable speech of the chaste Lady Alice lies the germ of Satan's heroic, epic voice, empowered in *Paradise Lost* with a lofty, classically informed rhetoric. Of any of Milton's earlier poems, the maske, in many ways, is the closest to Milton's later epic works, both structurally and syntactically. The Ludlow maske provided Milton an opportunity to begin testing nouveau methods of negotiating poetic anxieties, methods that would arrive at their fruition over twenty years later, with the publication of *Paradise Lost.*

---

[1] *PL*, I.455-65.

One such anxiety relates to the apocalypse—although it is not the end of time that concerns Milton, but rather his poetic vocation in respect to the apocalyptic visions of the book of Revelation. Milton spends a significant amount of time after Book nine of his epic exploring and expounding upon the apocalyptic merging of Heaven and Earth described in the final book of the New Testament. Lewalski notes in “Milton and the Millennium” that, in the seventeenth century, “the word ‘millennium’ referred almost exclusively to John’s vision of saints who ‘lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years,’” and that Milton not only believed in but relied publicly, within his anti-monarchical prose, on this belief: “The projected downfall of all tyrants at the millennium offered support to [Milton’s] arguments.”[2] Milton’s conception of the Christian timeline, as well as of poetry, appears to have begun having something to do with classical Greek and Roman myth; however, the poetry he represents it in the final books of his epic presents the tenuous balance between pagan classicism and Renaissance Christianity as it falls into a type of “general dominion,” that of a starkly biblical reckoning.

Milton’s concept of the Christian timeline, represented in both poetry and prose works throughout his career, reflects a Christian theology but a modified one that is comprised of a vocabulary of classical poetic imagery and characters. Merging explicitly Christian purpose with images, conventions, tropes and generic structures derived from the classical poetic fraternity of Ovid, Homer and Vergil, Milton’s poetic motivation and poetic lineage form, at best, a tenuous balance in *A Maske*. It is not until *Paradise Lost*

---

[2] Barbara K. Lewalski, “Milton and the Millennium” in *Milton and the Ends of Time* ed. Juliet Cummins, 13-29 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 15.

that the elegance of Milton's syncretic approach is fully realized. Even in his epic, the ambiguity of Satan's ironic eloquence is so palpable as to lead William Blake, later, to claim famously that Satan *is* the hero of what Durocher calls Milton's "contrast epic."[34] As an epic that presents two oppositional factions, both in relatively sympathetic lights, *Paradise Lost* educates its readers by luring them into Adam and Eve's sinful state through Satan's charismatic guile.

A Maske displays and celebrates the poetic education of the aristocratic young Egertons. On a vocational level, the work provided Milton with the opportunity to test some of the poetic forms of his later career. As the text displays Alice's poetic initiation by the heroine Sabrina, Milton himself appears to have begun initiating himself into the world of virtuous poetry. As such, the text is defined by the audacity of Milton's experimentation. Milton, in his efforts at syncretism in *A Maske*, displays the pain of a distinct poetic coming-of-age experience. His relationship to poetic history is colored by the sensuality of pagan verse, whereas his view of his future is defined by his sense of Christian poetic vocation. Milton, the poet who in his middle age produced what is undoubtedly the grandest of all biblical Epics in English literature, found his view of poetry to be absolutely enmeshed with the Greek and Roman classical writers whom he

---

[3] Durocher, *Milton and Ovid,* 11. Durocher applies Northrop Frye's term describing Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to Milton's epic. The defining feature of Frye's definition is the degree to which rival parties are presented sympathetically, leading the audience to identify, for instance, with both Satan and Adam and Eve in *PL*.

studied in his early life, a dichotomy that produces an ironic tension throughout Milton's career.

As Milton's longest early major work and only other semi-dramatic work before *Samson Agonistes,* published near the end of his poetic career, the maske in many ways suggests the beginnings of Milton's grand and unique epic poetic voice by experimenting with language both on the levels of its structure and its diction. In *Milton's Language*, Thomas Corns suggests a dichotomy between the lush verse and epic structure of *A Maske*, acknowledging that "syntactically, *Comus* in most respects shows more affinities with the epics and with *Samson Agonistes* than with his other poetry,."[5] Corns insists that "[w]e may reasonably conclude that it is characterized by kinds of lexical inventiveness which contrast with some of his other writing and emerge starkly in juxtaposition with his other quasi-dramatic poem, *Samson Agonistes*."[6] Struggling between the conscious and unconscious knowledge that he would have to distance himself from the lush pagan poetic world he so loved and the deep sense of poetic empathy he felt toward Ovid, Homer, and Vergil, Milton tests the waters of innovation. The varieties of poetic appropriation that define *A Maske*, however, often prove problematic for readers. In particular, appropriations of Ovid, as well as allusions to Spenserian and Shakespearean uses of Ovid suggest a poet in the throws of psychic tension.

Milton's reaction to this psychic tension is syncretic, connected to acts of emulation that give way to transformation. His method of emulation and metamorphoses

---

[5] Ibid.,118.

[6] Ibid., 50.

displays a poetic exuberance for taking risks and suggests a level of poetic audacity that further complicate an already dense text. Milton attempts to poetically appropriate Ovid in the speech of both Lady Alice and Comus. He further draws from the Ovidian account of Roman myth in his construction of Sabrina's classical lineage. The remarkably inventive variety of imitative and adaptive methods with which Milton experiments in *A Maske* forces readers to question his emulative audacity and the degree to which it enriches Milton's verse in the maske. Milton's use of Ovid at Ludlow afforded him a unique opportunity to refine his syncretic practice; however, the daring of a young, not yet established English poet to take a commission for a genteel aristocratic family celebration and transform it into a meta-poetic affair is, frankly, astounding—and astoundingly beautiful.

The glee with which the young poet neologizes, syncretizes, and metamorphoses the poetic material available to him begs the question of how Milton would have reacted to *A Maske* had the work been penned by another poet. The clear answer, it seems, is that he would have engaged the text and quickly set to work on emulating and transforming its language, imagery and structure; for Milton, the act of metamorphosing other poets is not founded in hubris but is, in fact, a sign of Milton's deep admiration and appreciation for his literary forebears. For this reason, Milton's metamorphoses of Ovid within *A Maske* should be seen not as the *reversal* of Ovid, but in fact as the continuation of Ovid's own poetic mode of adapting and reforming existing myth in his epic.

Ovid's creation story, as an allegorical description of the creative process, invites readers—indeed, invited Milton—to metamorphose it:

These brothers brawl and quarrel, though each one

Has his quarter, still, they come near tearing

The universe apart.

(I.158-61)

Milton, a fond and careful reader of Ovid, likely would have identified this passage as a depiction of the process of artistic creation, and perceived the implicit call to later poets to revise and reform Ovid's myths. In his appropriation of Ovid, Milton suggests that readers and poets may do the same with his poetry in the Ludlow maske. The choice to engage Ovid on his own terms reflects Milton's empathetic reading and admiration for Ovidian verse. However, to emulate Ovid means to metamorphose Ovid; thus, an empathetic reading of *The Metamorphoses,* for Milton, means transformation.

❈ ❈ ❈

As an appreciator of Milton and student of *A Maske*, I began to think I should consider reading Milton the way *he* might. Thus, the most *Miltonic* method of reading Milton's maske, it seemed, must involve an act of critical adaptation of one's own. Thus, with my concept of Milton's engagement with Ovid, and with the audacity of the project in mind, I attempted to write a Miltonic, maske-like text for performance among Milton and Renaissance scholars. My goal was not to attract patronage, but to attempt to engage with Milton and his influences the way he engaged, as a twenty-six year old poet, with the poetic tradition.

My goals were both critical and experiential. The ultimate aim of the project was to shed light on some elements of Milton's psychic and poetic development as he engaged his most formative poetic influences and, indeed, revised his adaptive method of relating to them. My hope was that, in this way, I could learn something about Milton,

contribute something to the community of MTSU and its court—the English Department. The piece was read for and by members of MTSU's English Department on 29 September, 2014, at MTSU's Foundation House. The date marked the 380th anniversary of Milton's Ludlow performance on Michaelmas night in 1634. The performance of my text, titled *The Maske of Muted Light*,[7] incorporated original music in the southern genres of folk, bluegrass and southern-rock.

Much the MTSU maske's debt to the Ludlow maske is from direct allusions to, or imitations of, Milton's language, ideas, and structure. However, through recursive drafting, my relationship to my inspiration has changed much like Milton's to his, as have the textual elements of my project reflecting them. Milton's Ovidian allusions comprise a complex poetic interchange, Milton sometimes appearing to read Ovid directly and, at other times, to read Ovid *through* Spenser or Shakespeare's earlier adaptations of the Roman poet. As such, I have experimented liberally with my use of poetic source, incorporating elements of both Milton and his sources into my own text.

The plot of my effort at Miltonic appropriation is based on the plot of *A Maske*. The process of devising it offered a unique context with which to consider Milton's plot. As Milton's story begins with three children, separated in the woods near Ludlow Castle, I began mine with three children, separated on their way to one of the "dens of revelry"[8] surrounding Middle Tennessee State University in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. En route to

---

[7] *The Maske of Muted Light*, by Arlo Hall, directed by Beth Casey, Middle Tennesee State University Foundation House, Murfreesboro, TN, September 29, 2014.

[8] Ibid., 9.

a rock and roll show, a young girl, “Lady Charity,”[9] is followed by her younger brother and a jealous admirer as she travels to her own object of admiration, a musician and arch-reveler named “Michael Sircy Comus.” Waylaid by storm and car trouble, the Lady’s younger brother and his pining companion are rescued by my iteration of the Attendant Spirit, a gentle neighborhood man and MTSU professor. Together, they perform their own failed attempt at rescuing the Lady Charity. The focus of this maske is on the sexual politics and overall culture of the MTSU population, a culture rendered perhaps most clearly by the yearly increase in alerts of sexual assault on or around campus.

The challenges of adapting Milton’s plot have been numerous. They are, however, perhaps no more numerous than the challenges Milton faced when presenting his maske celebrating chastity. Most of my changes in plotting have to do with the interactions between the Lady and Comus, and have been necessitated because Milton’s maske was designed, at least in the eyes of most Miltonists, for the page. In *A Maske,* Milton presents a rhetorically gifted teenage girl who, in many ways, stands for Milton. Lost in a dark wood—but aided by an eloquence second only to Milton himself and perhaps the Satan he would later write—Lady Alice speaks complex Puritan theology compounded with Platonic logic. To her, the internal world speaks more truth than the external world of senses. She provides, among other things, a model for the young and inexperienced

[9] I am indebted to Nancy Lindheim for the idea to name my protagonist “Charity.” Her article on the pastoral elements of *A Maske* suggested a connection between Milton’s theme of chastity and mine of charity, or the call to perform edifying work.

poet. In my treatment of her character, I have attempted to base her on myself to roughly the same degree Milton appears to have. I also changed her age from fifteen to eighteen because, in the Renaissance, fifteen was a marriable age. The importance of her age, at least for my reading, is that it enables her presentation as socially vital in her burgeoning sexuality.

Interested in recreating in myself the psychic tensions I perceive in the Milton, I consciously designed the project to cause poetic anxiety and to force me into the type of complex study of classicism in which Milton was engaged during the writing of the maske—or at least simulate the intensity of study. My poetic skills are far beneath those of Milton's, so the purpose of this work was to inform my critical view of Milton's text. I hoped to learn something about Milton and poetic engagement from the process of becoming overwhelmed with Milton's maske, and the concepts within it, in order to recreate Milton's own poetic anxieties at the time.[10] The goal of this was to foster empathy in my own reading of both Milton and any writer who strives agonistically, forcing the best out of oneself as the Renaissance poet appears to have done.

This attempt of my own at Miltonic audacity has radically metamorphosed my scholarly perspective on Milton. In attempting to adapt Milton by following the method I have found in studying Milton's own treatment of Ovid within the maske, my critical view has shifted drastically as I find myself more and more compelled by the thoughts and anxieties of his idiosyncratic poetic genius. The process has initiated a continuous evolution of my own engagement with the verse of Milton, as well as enriching my

---

[10] Ibid.

overall appreciation of poetry. Clearly, it is audacious to adapt Milton; Milton, however, was audacious in his poetic affections. It is this quality for which I read Milton—for the nerve of a young poet to transform a family celebration into a meta-poetic affair for the ages. Perhaps the grandest effect of Milton's adaptation of Ovid's model for the 1634 maske, however, is the poetic mode with which he began to experiment within it—a mode that ultimately allowed Milton to adapt and metamorphose Biblical history in *Paradise Lost*.

Bibliography

Primary Works:

Milton, John. "A Mask (Comus)." In *Milton's Poetry and Major Prose.* Edited by Merritt Hughes, 86-113. New York: Hackett, 2003.

———. "Areopagitica." In *Milton's Poetry and Major Prose,* Edited by Merritt Hughes, 716-749. New York: Hackett, 2003.

———. *Paradise Lost.* In *Milton's Poetry and Major Prose.* Edited by Merritt Hughes, 173-470. New York: Hackett, 2003.

Ovid. *The Metamorphoses*. Translated by Rolfe Humphries. Indiana University Press, 1955.

Spenser, Edmund. *The Faerie Queene.* New York: Penguin, 2006.

Secondary Works:

Allen, Don Cameron. *The Harmonious Vision*: *Studies in Milton's Poetry*. New York: Octagon Press, Limited, 1979.

Bevington, David and Peter Holbrook. *The Politics of the Stuart Court Masque*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Bellamy, Elizabeth J. "Waiting for Hymen: Literary History as 'Symptom' in Spenser and Milton." *English Language History* 64, no. 2 (1997): 391-414.

Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967.

Burberry, Timothy. *Milton the Dramatist*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2007.

DuRocher, Richard J. *Milton and Ovid.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985.

Fish, Stanley. *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost*. 2nd ed. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1997.

Hall, Arlo. *The Maske of Muted Light*. Directed by Beth Casey. The Middle Tennesee State University Foundation House, Murfreesboro, TN, September 29, 2014.

Jayne, Sears. "The Subject of Milton's Ludlow *Mask*." In *A Maske at Ludlow: Essays on Milton's Comus.* Edited by John S. Diekhoff, 167-87. Cleveland: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1968.

Kilgour, Maggie. *Milton and the Metamorphoses of Ovid.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Lerner, Laurence. *The Uses of Nostalgia: Studies in Pastoral Poetry*. New York: Shocken Books, 1972.

Lewalski, Barbara K. *The Life of John Milton*: *A Critical Biography*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000.

———. "Milton and the Millennium." In *Milton and the Ends of Time,* Edited by Juliet Cummins, 13-29. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Lindheim, Nancy. "Pastoral and Masque at Ludlow." *University of Toronto Quarterly* 67.3 (1998): 639-65.

Lowenstein, David. "'Casting Down Imaginations': Milton as Iconoclast." *Criticism* 31.3 (1989): 253-270. Web. 10 Nov. 2013.

Oram, William A. "The Invocation of Sabrina." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 24.1, 1987.

Miller, William S. *The Mythology of Milton's* Comus. New York: Garland, 1988. Print.

Phillips, Philip Edward. *John Milton's Epic Invocations: Converting the Muse.* New York: Peter Lang, 2000.

Revard, Stella. *Milton and the Tangles of Neaera's Hair: The Making of the 1645 Poems*. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1997.

Samuel, Irene. *Plato and Milton.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1947 .

Seznec, Jean. *The Survival of the Pagan Gods: The Mythological Tradition and Its Place in Renaissance Humanism and Art.* Translated by Barbara F. Sessions. New York: Pantheon Books, 1940.

Shore, Daniel. "Why Milton Is Not an Iconoclast." *PMLA* 127, no. 1 (2012): 22-37.

Schullenberger, William. "The Profession of Virginity in *A Maske Presented at Ludlow Castle*." In *Milton and Gender*, Edited by Catherine Gimelli Martin. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. 77-93.

Woodhouse, ASP and Douglas Bush. "Comus and the Masque." *A Variorum Commentary on the Poems of John Milton, Vol. II: The Minor English Poems,* 740-55. New York: Routledge, 1972.