"Perplex't Paths": Youth and Authority in Milton's Mask*

by BLAINE GRETEMAN

This essay argues that John Milton's A Mask Presented at Ludlow Castle *(1634) is influenced by early modern concepts of childhood in a way that critics have not recognized. Childhood was a problematic concept in contemporary religious, pedagogical, and legal discourses. Children were depicted as models of submission, but prone to impetuous indiscretion, and their path to adult agency was strewn with pitfalls, especially in the liminal period of youth.* A Mask *engages with and transforms these discourses. It rejects the political quietism routinely associated with childhood and shows that the child's unique sensitivity may offer a route to a particularly powerful kind of voice.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Until fairly recently, literary critics have worked within a historical paradigm that claimed that childhood wasn't discovered until relatively late in the seventeenth century.[1] Perhaps this is why childhood has not been much discussed in the writing of John Milton (1608–74), including his *Mask Presented at Ludlow Castle*, commonly called *Comus*, which is explicitly about three children who get lost in the woods on their way to their father's house. But it is worth examining the *Mask*'s dramatic confrontation specifically in terms of childhood and youth, because here, as much as in its formal and religious radicalism, the work generates its dramatic interest and points most profitably toward Milton's later career.[2] Perhaps even more importantly, approaching the *Mask* in this way both demonstrates the bedeviled status of childhood in early modern English

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[1]See King for an excellent account of past and present historical studies of childhood.

[2]As the emphasis on Milton's later career implies, this study of the *Mask* — and the text used — follow a fairly traditional textual-authorial pattern. In other words, the base text is the one that Milton revised for his 1645 poems, not the performance that is generally believed to be more accurately preserved in the Bridgewater Manuscript and in the 1637 edition printed by Henry Lawes without Milton's name. Significant variations will, however, be noted where they occur, especially when they are relevant to the performance of the *Mask* by the children of the Earle of Bridgewater, John Egerton. For a very different approach that demonstrates the possibilities of reading the *Mask* more exclusively as a collaborative, nonauthorial text, see Coiro.

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culture and shows why this status became a focal point for discussions of agency and authority. As the literary, legal, and educational discourses all made clear, childhood presented a dilemma with very adult implications, especially in the liminal period of youth: how could the young shed their ignorance without shedding their innocence? Milton engages this question in the *Mask* by implying, rather surprisingly, that youth's peculiar poetic receptivity — the ability to enter a charming, if dangerous, world without being corrupted by it — offers a potential route to a powerful kind of adult voice.

The claim that the *Mask*'s true radicalism derives from its treatment of childhood requires explanation, because scholars have become accustomed to the idea that Milton's big innovation in the work is writing a reformed, or chastened, Puritan masque.[3] There is obviously some truth to this idea. Most masques lack a real sense of trial or dramatic engagement, at least if we consider productions like Jonson's *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue* or Inigo Jones's Carolinian extravaganzas to be norms of the genre. They are vehicles for flattery that present threats in the form of antimasques, which are then dispelled by the mere glance of a king or queen representing ideal, Neoplatonic virtues.[4] By contrast, in Milton's *Mask* the evil figure Comus promptly captures the virtuous aristocratic protagonist and binds her to a chair with troubling "gumms of glutenous heat," where she remains, stuck, after her brothers botch the rescue operation.[5] Far from embodying powerful Neoplatonic virtues, they finally need divine assistance to set her free. By the end, they've been through a genuine trial, "hard assays" as the Attendant Spirit puts it, and Milton has replaced what Victoria Kahn calls the "Neoplatonic rhetoric" of earlier masques with a kind of Protestant balancing act between works and grace.[6]

It is a mistake, however, to read too much specifically theological radicalism into this formal revision, as we can see by turning to the Gospel reading for Michaelmas, the day the *Mask* was first performed.[7] The Gospel

[3]See Norbrook, 1984a, 235–85; Norbrook, 1984b; Brown, 1985, 23; Oritz.

[4]For example, in Jonson's *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue* Hercules, the figure for King James, simply commands the belly god Comus and his rout to vanish, and they disappear: Jonson, 1941b, 485. Likewise, in *Coelum Britannicum*, in which the Egerton children had recently danced before their performance in Milton's *Mask*, the king and queen offer a pattern of virtue and majesty that causes even "immortall bosomes" to "burn with emulous fires," so that Jove and Juno decide to mend their wicked ways in a series of antimasques that purges the heavens of beastly influences: Carew, 212.

[5]Milton, 1998, 164 (*Mask*, line 916).

[6]Ibid., 167 (972); Kahn, 196–97.

[7]For the relation of *A Mask* to the liturgical occasion of Michaelmas, see Brown, 1985, 38–40; Hunter.

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for the day was Matthew 18:1–10, in which Christ instructs his disciples to "become as little children" to "enter into the kingdom of heaven," warning that "whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea."[8] It may be going too far to argue that Milton's masque was specifically inspired by this liturgical moment, but the Gospel is clearly relevant to the *Mask*'s action, where children take the leading roles and where they are indeed offended grievously. Accordingly, we might get a good idea of the *Mask*'s religious and political orthodoxy by seeing how it relates to conventional explications of this scripture.

The gold standard for such a reading is John Boys (1571–1625), the Dean of Canterbury from 1619 until his death in 1625, whose systematic eleven-volume exploration of the church's lectionary was popular enough to require twelve reissues between 1610 and 1616. With William Laud (1573–1645) in the ascendant throughout the early 1630s, Boys's ardent Calvinistic predestinarianism may have looked a bit less orthodox by the time Milton wrote *A Masque* in 1634, but it was anything but radical. It is, in short, quite close to middle-of-the-road theological thinking in the schismatic world of seventeenth-century England.

In his explication of the Gospel for Michaelmas, Boys deals with the injunction to "become as little children" by first listing all the ways in which we should not be like children, rehashing much of the conception of childhood familiar from classical and scholastic sources like Bartholomaeus Anglicus (ca. 1203–72). Children, for example, are known for "eating dirt and paddling in the mire."[9] Because children are "ignorant," "inconstant," and controlled by an appetite for play and pleasure, the "child plaies with the light of the candle till his fingers be burnt" and "doth esteem an apple more then his fathers inheritance."[10] Finally, after listing all the dangers of being like children, Boys gets around to what Christ meant when he told his disciples to emulate them: purity and humility. Children are "chast in body, pure in mind" and "they stand not reasoning what manner of thing it is that their father commands, but instantly they follow his will and word as their rule to work by."[11] Boys emphasizes the desirability of passivity and obedience for several more pages, driving home the conservative message that if men heeded Christ's injunction there would be fewer "*state-criticks*" who

[8]Translation is the Geneva version, as found in contemporary editions of the *Book of Common Prayer*.

[9]Boys, 3:109.

[10]Ibid., 110.

[11]Ibid., 110–11.

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"speake ill of such as are in authority."[12] For Boys, as for the Neoplatonists and conservative churchmen described by Leah Marcus, the child is "a rich and complex symbol, not only for humility and anti-intellectualism, but for a whole range of values associated with an England of the past and rapidly disappearing."[13] It is a viewpoint Marcus finds sharply different than that of "forward-looking" radical Protestants and "Puritanism."[14]

Despite its conservative political application, however, Boys's theology doesn't necessarily preclude human action. His final word on the relationship between childlike passivity and grace could be a gloss on the action of *Comus* itself: "the good which a man doth, is both the work of God, and the work of man; of God in being author in giving grace, of man in being actor in using grace."[15] This is essentially the interaction between "hard assays" and grace that we see in Milton's masque. For example, when Barbara K. Lewalski calls the work "in every respect a reformed masque, a generic tour de force," she is describing both her claim that Milton's masque dispenses with elaborate stage machinery — which may have been impractical for a private entertainment anyway — and that its principle character is "unable to attain salvation by her own merits" and so must receive help from Sabrina, the "agent for the divine grace necessary to counter these effects."[16] Since A. S. P. Woodhouse declared in 1942 that the "argument" of the *Mask* was the manifestation of this doctrine of grace, represented by Sabrina, over and against nature, critics have debated which characters represent grace and how specifically it acts in the world.[17] But in no case have they concluded that grace in Milton's *Mask* acts in a fundamentally different way than Boys described its action in the world.

In other words, the way *Comus* allegorizes a doctrine of works and grace may be an interesting departure from typical masques, but it is not necessarily radical or uniquely Miltonic.[18] What is more radical and Miltonic, in both the poetic and political sense, is the way the work embraces Boys's

[12]Ibid., 114.

[13]Marcus, 1978, 41.

[14]Ibid., 75.

[15]Boys, 3:113.

[16]Lewalski, 314.

[17]Woodhouse, 46. See Brown, 1985, 122–23, for an argument, *contra* Woodhouse, that manifestations of grace and providence permeate the *Mask* — in the form of Haemony or the Attendant Spirit himself, for example — and that they are not in a hierarchical relationship.

[18]For a useful counter to assumptions of the *Mask*'s Puritan radicalism — although one that defines Puritanism narrowly as essentially predestinarian and anti-aesthetic — see Martin.

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notions of grace and works while rejecting his orthodox quietism. And to see how Milton succeeds at this we need to turn not to the *Mask*'s theology but to its children, who negotiate in dialogue and song Milton's long-standing anxiety about how unripe youth actualizes adult will and prophetic voice. Rather than falling easily into either the camp of backward-looking pro-childishness or forward-looking anti-childishness that Marcus describes, Milton's *Mask* explores the uneasy transition from childhood to adult responsibility as the locus of tremendous creative and spiritual power.

2. The Children of Comus

Although the *Mask*'s protagonist is called "the Lady" (Milton's own nickname at Cambridge), she is introduced less grandly as one of three children lost in the woods. The roles were originally written for and performed by Alice Egerton and her brothers, a girl of fifteen and two boys of decidedly "youthful bloom" at ages eleven and nine.[19] As Roy Flannagan explains, "though young by modern standards, Lady Alice was at fifteen a marriageable adult."[20] But this is not quite accurate. Though she was of marriageable age, she was less than a full adult in the eyes of the law and society, and marriageable only with her father's permission. According to the sixteenth-century statute in place at the time, it was illegal for any person to carry away or "by secret Letters, Messages, or otherwise [to] contract Matrimony" with a girl under age sixteen without the knowledge of her father or guardian.[21] Doing so would not only incur a five-year jail sentence for the seducer (if he were over age fourteen), but would also provoke a sort of legal death for the girl, who would instantly lose her inheritance: "If any Woman Child or Maiden, being above the age of twelve Years, and under the age of sixteen Years, do at any time consent or agree to such Person . . . then the next of Kin of the same Woman Child or Maid, to whom the inheritance should descend, return or come, after the Decease of the same Woman Child and Maid, shall from the time of such Assent and Agreement have, hold, and enjoy all such Lands, Tenements, and Hereditaments."[22]

As William Blackstone (1723–80) later claimed, this appears to have been a preventative measure, since it was held that "stolen marriages, under the age of sixteen, were usually upon mercenary views," but it also reflects the ambiguous legal status of the woman child who, between the ages of

[19]Milton, 1998, 136 (*Mask*, 289).

[20]Milton, 1998, 111 (editor Roy Flannagan's introduction).

[21]*Statutes at large*, 2:499–500 (regnal year 4–5 Philip and Mary, chap. 8).

[22]Ibid., 500 (regnal year 4–5 Philip and Mary, chap. 8).

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twelve and sixteen, was just old enough to dispossess herself but not old enough to bestow herself.[23] Before twelve, after all, her consent would simply not be considered a possibility: the marriage would be void and the seducer would be imprisoned, his act equivalent in the law's eyes to abduction by force. It is the woman child's peculiar ability to exercise a will that is not quite her own that causes the problem and implicates her in the crime.

Likewise, at fifteen a woman child's own "defilement might be by her consent," as the judge and legal writer Matthew Hale (1609–76) puts it, so that a rape charge was not automatic in the event of an allegation of sexual attack.[24] Indeed, such allegations were regularly scrutinized for signs of the woman child's willing transgression. In contrast, before the age of ten or twelve consent or nonconsent was irrelevant, and a felony rape conviction would automatically be triggered by evidence of sexual relations. (According to Hale, the years between ten and twelve were ambiguous, since an Elizabethan statute evidently gave female children the ability to consent to sex at age eleven, one year before the common law recognized such an ability.)[25] Strikingly, such legal ambiguity was not limited to the woman child, but was shared by her male counterparts between the ages of four and (at least) twenty-one — a peculiarly low age for adult status according to English legal scholars, who regularly claimed the civil law placed that status at twenty-five or thirty.[26]

For example, according to the authoritative account of the common law written by John Perkins (d. 1545), "an infant of the age of four may make a will, and it shall be good."[27] But for the prominent legal theorist Sir Edward Coke (1542–1634) the age an infant had a will, and so could make one, was eighteen years.[28] It was all rather vague, as Coke notes, since "the full age of male and female according to Common Speech is said the Age of 21 years. And the Age of Discretion is called the age of 14 years."[29] On any given issue and in any given case involving an infant under the age of twenty-one, the ability to choose could apparently outstrip the ability to make choices fully motivated and rational.

[23]Blackstone, 210 (bk. 4, chap. 15).

[24]Hale, 1:660.

[25]Ibid., 631. For the Elizabethan statute, see *Statutes at large*, 2:604 (regnal year 18 Elizabeth, chap. 7).

[26]Hale, 1:17.

[27]J. Perkins, sig. K2r. Perkins's *Treatise* was originally published in law French in 1528 under the Latin title *Perutilis tractatus magistri Johannis Parkins interioris Templi socii*. The first English editions of *Perkins' Profitable Book*, as it was known by generations of law students, were circulating by the mid-sixteenth century.

[28]Coke, fol. 89v (bk. 2, pt. 124).

[29]Ibid., fol. 79r (2.104).

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William Perkins's *Christian Oeconomy* shows that if the Common Law delayed for a long while the expectations of full adult will, "the court of conscience," like Continental civil law, could delay that expectation even further.[30] Perkins, often labeled a moderate Puritan but perhaps better understood as one of the period's bestselling theological authors and voices for a unified church, never allows that marriages made "without the free and advised consent of Parents" are more than "mere nullities."[31] In short, no amount of achievement or do-gooding could absolutely rid a young man or woman of the status of infancy before at least the age of twenty-one, and even longer in cases where the will of a child or apprentice came into conflict with that of a parent or a master.

An evil act, however, could do the job instantly. The doctrine here was "malitia supplet aetatem," malice supplies the age, a principle first cited in English common law in 1338.[32] Specifically, the dictum emerged as the solution to one of the first tests of legal responsibility in English law, the knowledge-of-good-and-evil test that crossed over into the common law from theological treatments of Genesis.[33] "An infant of ten years of age killed his companion and concealed him," according to the year book's account of the trial, "and [the judge] caused him to be hung, because by concealment he showed that he knew how to distinguish between good and evil. And so malice supplies the age."[34] Thus wrongdoing — specifically the attempt, like Adam, to conceal the crime — could thus supersede conventions and uncertainties about when childhood ended. In this sense, mankind's Fall gets reiterated with each generation, and it is precisely this Fall that enters one into full adult society. Power, will, and the ability to take an oath and speak words that bound came much more certainly from involvement with sin than from an extended spring of innocence. To be innocent was of course preferable to being guilty, but it was also, as the *OED* has it since the sixteenth century, to be "deficient in intelligence or sense," to lack the ability to speak or act with purpose.[35] A woman child, like her male counterpart, found herself in a kind of double bind: while being innocent was a kind of absence, discovering agency and will often meant revealing another kind of deficiency, an inheritance of sin. Even with the good and evil test, the

[30]W. Perkins, 5.

[31]Ibid. See also ibid., 147–49, where Perkins argues for parental consent even in the case of second marriages of adult children.

[32]*Year Books*, 626 (regnal year 11–12 Edward 3).

[33]See Platt and Diamond, 1233–35.

[34]*Year Books*, 626 (regnal year 11–12 Edward 3).

[35]*OED*, "innocent," adj., 3b.

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question of when adult responsibility began was thorny, a place where rules about absolute justice and responsibility seem not to apply.

This was the uncomfortable status of the child's agency in the overlapping legal and theological discourses of early modern England, and it is the challenge facing the three lost siblings in Milton's *Mask*. They are initially identified, not by their own will or actions, but in relation to their father, a "noble Peer of mickle trust, and power."[36] The description of the education given to this peer's "fair offspring" emphasizes their youth and early development: they are "nurs't in Princely lore," a phrase that both implies their early instruction in the courtly arts and recalls traditional injunctions to begin forming noble children by nursing them at their noble mother's breast, or at least avoiding the transmission of negative traits by debauched nursemaids.[37] These are, in other words, babes in the wood, suddenly cut off from the tutelage that has directed their every move. And without this direction, explains the Attendant Spirit, who was played by their real-life tutor Henry Lawes (1596–1662), they are cast into an abyss:

> their way
> Lies through the perplex't paths of this drear Wood,
> The nodding horror of whose shady brows
> Threats the forlorn and wandring Passinger.[38]

This depiction of the woods has a particular occasional significance, as Stephen Orgel points out: the masque celebrated the ascension of John Egerton (1579–1649) to the position of Lord President of Wales, a representative of civilized rule at a time when the English generally considered Wales "wild and uncivilized."[39] But the "horror" of the place clearly transcends anything even the untamed Welsh countryside has to offer, and it is not, ultimately, the powerful peer who confronts this horror, but his children: despite all the attention critics have given to the relationship between the *Mask* and Egerton's sociopolitical position, the threat of these perplexed paths is not to law or order, but to "their tender age."[40]

[36]Milton, 1998, 129 (*Mask*, 125).
[37]Ibid., 125 (34).
[38]Ibid., 125 (36–39)
[39]Orgel, 32.
[40]Milton, 1998, 125 (*Mask*, 40). See Shullenberger, 2001, 34, for a description of the wood as a "liminal zone" created to test liminal characters. Shullenberger's psychosexual reading is generative, although his idea of the wood's "overdetermined" symbolic role in the Lady's "initiatory rite" into adulthood seems to me to underestimate the ambiguity of this transformation in the period. For the connections between *A Mask* and Egerton's position, see Brown, 1987; Sensabaugh.

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J. C. Maxwell suggests that the description of the wood and its hopelessly tangled paths echoes *Aeneid* 9.391–92, and I would add that the allusion to youth in peril is more significant than the verbal similarity.[41] Virgil's lines also describe an unbearded youth, Euryalus, who strays into the woods and is abducted in his bloom.[42] But Virgil's youth, unlike Milton's, does not survive the foray along his "perplexed path" into the "deceptive woods."[43] And this highlights that Milton's three lost children ultimately face a different kind of threat than Virgil's, risking not their lives, but their humanity itself, in the forest, where they encounter the scion of Circe and Bacchus, who "Excells his Mother at her mighty Art."[44] If any weary traveler drinks Comus's potion "their human count'nance, / Th' express resemblance of the gods, is chang'd / Into som brutish form of Woolf, or Bear, / Or Ounce, or Tiger, Hog, or bearded Goat."[45] The change is so perfect, in fact, so pleasurable, that the victims who while away their lives in Comus's "sensual stie" never realize that they have forgotten their homes, their families, and the spark of divinity that made them human.[46]

3. Childhood and Circean Transformations

This is rather bad luck for the children of Milton's *Mask*, because youth's vulnerability to such enchantments was a long-established fact. Joseph Glanvill (1636–80) of the Royal Society even attempted a scientific explanation for why "Witches are most powerful upon Children and timerous Persons, *viz.* because their Spirits and Imaginations being weak and passive, are not able to resist the fatal Influence."[47] Comus's "orient liquor in a Crystal Glasse, / To quench the drouth of *Phoebus*" also allures on aesthetic, physical, and emotional levels in a way that is particularly dangerous to youth.[48] The "intemperate thirst" it quenches may be "fond," but it was also thought to be a defining trait of every child, as John Boys highlights when he notes that a child governed by such natural appetites would trade an inheritance for an apple.[49] The child responded naturally to such stimulus,

[41]Maxwell, 364.
[42]Virgil, 208 (*Aeneid* bk. 5, line 295): "viridique iuventa."
[43]Ibid., 318 (*Aeneid* 9.391–92): "perplexum iter," "fallacis silvae."
[44]Milton, 1998, 126 (*Mask*, 63).
[45]Ibid., 126 (68–71).
[46]Ibid., 126 (77).
[47]Glanvill, 15–16.
[48]Milton, 1998, 126 (*Mask*, 65–66).
[49]Ibid., 126 (67); Boys, 3:110.

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which is why educators from Vives to Comenius proposed that learning should progress from the sensible to the intellectual, an argument Milton took up himself in *Of Education*: “because our understanding cannot in this body found it selfe but on sensible things, nor arrive so cleerly to the knowledge of God and things invisible, as by orderly conning over the visible and inferior creature, the same method is necessarily to be follow’d in all discreet teaching.”[50]

Comus offers liquor, not learning, but through his mother Circe he has a well-established ancestry in the humanistic pedagogical discourse. In *De pueris*, for example, Desiderius Erasmus (1466/69–1536) describes abusive, incompetent schoolmasters as Circe figures capable of turning children into beasts. He argues that Circe’s ability to encase “human souls within bestial bodies” is not merely a fiction, since even Augustine believed that men could be transformed into werewolves.[51] He then turns the tables on parents who allow schoolmasters to instill “beastly” qualities like anger and drunkenness in their children: “If there was a Thessalian witch who had the power and desire to transform your son into a swine or a wolf,” he then asks, “would you think that any punishment could be too severe for her?”[52] Beating and harsh treatment, Erasmus argues repeatedly, are treatments fit for beasts and can only produce beastly behavior.

For Erasmus and for many of his English followers, the imaginative world of literature was the obvious antidote to Circe figures who were distinctly uncharming. To engage the human meant engaging human emotions through the gentle discipline of passionate play, to bring children up in a “louing and gentle manner,” as the Puritan schoolmaster John Brinsley (1581–1624) put it, “as it were in playing.”[53] The key was to find something that had a powerful effect on the child’s imagination, and it was this effort that made poetry and drama so central to the humanist program. These literary forms had been associated with childishness at least since Aristotle claimed that “the beginnings of poetry in general” could be traced to the child’s “instinctive” imitation.[54] As Michael Witmore argues, such notions underpin the view of the child in Renaissance England as a figure of

[50]Milton, 1953–82, 2:368–69.

[51]Erasmus, 493: “animus humanus in corpore bestiae.”

[52]Ibid., 494: “Si qua Thessala mulier esset, qua malis artibus posset & conaretur filium tuum in suem aut lupum vertere, none putares nullum supplicium fatis dignum illius scelere?”

[53]Brinsley, 26, 12.

[54]Aristotle, 47 (*Poetics* 1448b).

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pure mimesis with "a prodigious capacity for deep absorption in imagined worlds."[55]

But there was a flipside to the child's poetic receptivity, and this too had a long heritage. Plato's concerns about poetry, after all, center on the notion that "imitations, if they are practiced continually from youth onwards, become established as habits and nature," and that this makes the poet, an "imitator of phantoms," particularly dangerous to the young.[56] This vulnerability created a problem for humanist educators: play and pleasure were needed to engage the child, but this always had the potential to develop into what headmaster Richard Mulcaster (1532–1611) described as an uncontrollable "poeticall furie," or worse.[57]

Accordingly, even as they promoted literary engagement, humanist educators like Roger Ascham (1514/15–68) made it clear that Circean transformation derives from the mimetic nature of childhood itself, and that simply removing the threat of beating won't remove the threat of bestial devolution. The school must be the house of "playe and pleasure," Ascham agrees, but pleasure without learning is dangerous: "[If the child] glutte himself with vainity, or walter in filthiness like a Swyne, al learnyng, all goodnes, is sone forgotten: than, quicklie shall he becum a dull Asse, to understand either learnyng or honestie: and yet shall he be as sutle as a Foxe, in breedyng of mischief, in bringyng in misorder . . . . [P]ride in them selves, contempt of others, [is] the very badge of all those that serve in *Circes* Court."[58] As he confronts the tendency of children to roll in a sensual sty, Ascham shifts dramatically away from the depiction of learning as sweet and pleasurable to emphasize that learning, like the Circean antidote moly, is difficult to swallow: "The true medicine against the inchantmentes of *Circes*, the vanitie of licencious pleasure, the inticementes of all sinne, is, in *Homere*, the herbe *Moly*, with the blacke roote, and white flooer, sower at the first, but sweete in the end: which *Hesiodus* termeth the study of virtue."[59] On the one hand, the child must be nurtured and engaged; on the other, it must be controlled to avoid its turning into something monstrous. As Erica Fudge explains, the line between human and beast was not a firm one during the early modern period, and not only Ascham but also

[55]Witmore, 6. For more on the connection between children and fiction, see ibid., 20–57.

[56]Plato, 74 (*Republic* 395c), 283 (601a).

[57]Mulcaster, 270.

[58]Ascham, 176, 272.

[59]Ibid., 227.

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luminaries as diverse as Comenius, Vives, and Mulcaster agreed that the human was not just born, but had to be made.[60]

Milton shows how complicated this construction could be in *Elegia prima*, which in this regard is an important precursor of the *Mask.* In the elegy — a verse letter to Charles Diodati — he embraces the delights of theatrical play to distinguish his tender sensibilities from those of his "unfeeling" Cambridge tutor.[61] This passage has been the center of much debate over whether Milton had actually come into conflict with his tutor — whether he had been disciplined, or even whipped and rusticated — but he could just as well be reenacting one of the many Erasmian anecdotes in which the tender student recoils from the "threats" of a harsh pedagogue and discovers true learning in the embrace of literature and drama, which "ravish [him] completely."[62]

All seems well; this is precisely the result that Erasmus recommended. At its very end, however, the elegy takes a puzzling turn. Circe enters the poem in the final six lines, in a version of the metaphor more akin to Ascham's than Erasmus's, and the youth renounces his apparently ideal education as he resolves to return to the "barren fields" of Cambridge: "But I, while the blind boy's indulgence allows it, am preparing to quickly flee these fortunate city walls, to escape the infamous halls of deceptive Circe, with the aid of divine moly."[63] The lines imply that Milton has been enjoying his education a little too much and transforming, perhaps without fully realizing it, into something less than human. The youth's very positive sensitivity — whether to the beauty that strikes him "senseless," the books that master him, or the drama that moves him to tears — also puts him at some undefined risk.[64] It will take divine aid to escape: that of the plant moly, which will reappear in Milton's *Mask.* But what kind of escape is this? The deceptive halls of Circe, Milton's own wanderings through a labyrinthine program of independent study, will merely be replaced by the halls of

[60]Fudge, 70–71. See also Wiseman, 50–70.

[61]Milton, 1998, 180 (*Elegia prima*, 15): "duri."

[62]Ibid. (15, 26): "minas," "totum rapiunt." For some particularly vivid examples of the anecdotes that led Erasmus to call traditional schoolhouses "houses of torture" ("carnificinam"), see Erasmus, 504–06. For the hypothesis that Milton had been temporarily expelled because of a clash with his tutor, William Chapell, see Miller. For an alternative view see French, 1:106. On the almost certainly apocryphal story that Milton was "whipt" by Chappell, see Sherbo.

[63]Milton, 1998, 180 (*Elegia prima*, 13, 85–88): "Ast ego, dum pueri sinit indulgentia caeci, / Moenia quam subito linquere fausta paro; / Et vitare procul malefidae infamia Circes /Atria, divini Molyos usus ope."

[64]Milton, 1998, 180 (*Elegia Prima*, 53): "stupui."

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Cambridge, which Milton derides in the third prolusion for being dominated by other deceptions, such as the scholastics' "useless and barren controversies," a "workshop of tricks and fallacies."[65]

The Circean temptations may have threatened the youth's humanity, but they also put him in touch with divinity in a way that the barren university curriculum did not. In other words, it is precisely his wandering through the Circean halls of poesy that makes him eligible for divine moly, that allows him to know it even exists, even if the herb's rather unsatisfactory effect in *Elegia prima* is to transport him from danger to dullness.[66] In the *Mask*, Milton ultimately embraces the conclusion he could not quite reach in *Elegia Prima*: escape is not a salvation from this wandering, but a result of it. In fact, by the time he wrote his *Apology Against a Pamphlet* eight years later, Milton had embraced this idea as part of his own poetic trajectory, describing how his "younger feet wander'd" into realms of erotic and romantic poetry, but "that even those books which to many others have bin the fuell of wantonnesse and loose living, I cannot thinke how unless by divine indulgence prov'd to me so many incitements . . . to the love and stedfast observation of that vertue which abhorres the society of Bordello's."[67] Likewise, for the children of *Comus*, the Circean allurement of the shadowy poetic world helps create the will and authenticate youth's Orphic voice.

4. Learning to Sing: Echo and Translation

Milton places the idea of Orphic song front and center in the *Mask*, using it in both familiar and surprising iterations. In the first scene, for example, the Attendant Spirit adopts the guise of a shepherd with the ability to "still the wilde winds when they roar, / And hush the waving Woods," which J. Andrew Hubbell claims sets up a "typological relationship" between Orpheus and the Attendant Spirit.[68] This may be so, but the association of Orpheus with various pastoral figures was also fairly conventional.[69] More surprising and original, and ultimately more meaningful, is Milton's association of the mythic bard with the Lady: a lost child with no poetic

[65]Milton, 1953–82, 1:244.

[66]See also Turner, 456–57. To employ Turner's terminology uses in his discussion of Milton's erotic education, Circean allurement offers a kind of *urbanitas* and *festivas* that contrast markedly with the barren fields of Cambridge, which are by definition *rusticus.*

[67]Milton, 1953, 891.

[68]Milton, 1998, 127 (*Mask*, 87–88); Hubbell, 204.

[69]See Vacari.

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vocation, but one who develops a powerful voice in the course of the masque.

Like most major figures in Milton's poetry, Orpheus has been much discussed.[70] From early poems such as *Il Penseroso* and *Lycidas* to the later *Paradise Lost*, Milton invoked the "Thracian bard" as both an aspirational and a cautionary figure.[71] Orpheus controls the world and he is able to suspend even the torments of hell; he is, however, torn apart by the Thracian women, who are moved to fury by his decision to forsake women and devote himself to singing of young boys.[72] He is, then, not incidentally connected with youth, since these songs celebrating juvenescence are among Orpheus's primary poetic achievements in the *Metamorphoses*. Indeed, while Orpheus is not himself young in Ovid's work, Milton often writes about him as if he were, as in *Lycidas*, where the narrator parallels the death of this "inchanting son" with the premature demise of Edward King.[73] In short, Orpheus is a figure for the power of the vatic voice and its charms, and for the risks incurred by the poet who lays claim to it, transforming the raw material of youth into world-shaking speech. In Milton's poetry and prose, this voice has a particularly rarefied function as the place where poetry and prophecy meet, where eloquence becomes the mark, not only of poetic achievement, but also of the inspired figure, such as Ezekiel, whose words could turn a desert full of bones into a vast army of breathing men.[74]

The Attendant Spirit makes the analogy between the Lady and Orpheus when she first wanders onto the stage, lost and alone, and sings a song that he says "might create a soul / Under the ribs of Death."[75] This ex nihilo creation, which changes Death himself into something vital, recalls Orpheus's triumph in Hades, where his beautiful song procures the release of his wife, Eurydice, by moving Pluto to tears. Likewise, even Comus agrees that the Lady's song exhibits something more than human power, and the

[70]Milton famously invokes the figure of Orpheus in *Lycidas*, *Paradise Lost*, and *L'Allegro*, leading Bloom, xv, to call "the fate of Orpheus a recurrent anxiety"; and Fowler, 159, n. 32, to say that the myth "focused some of [Milton's] deepest fears." See Milton, 1998, 102 (*Lycidas*, lines 58–63), 538 (*Paradise Lost*, bk. 7, lines 32–38), 71 (*L'Allegro*, line 145). See also Davidson; Fish, 295–300; Lieb, 59–80.

[71]Milton, 1998, 382 (*Paradise Lost*, 2.34).

[72]Ovid, 288 (*Metamorphoses* 10.152–53): "puerosque canamus / dilectos superis." In his contemporary edition, George Sandys (1578–1644) translates the lines as "to lovely boyes / Belov'd of Gods, turne we our softer layes": Sandys, 340.

[73]Milton, 1998, 102 (*Lycidas*, 59).

[74]Ezekiel 37:1–10.

[75]Milton, 1998, 149 (*Mask*, 561–62).

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would-be ravisher himself claims to experience "ravishment" at the sound.[76] Indeed, her song is unlike anything else in the masque: on the most basic level, it is more structurally complex than other songs in the work, incorporating a greater number of verse forms, including the masque's only Alexandrine, "And give resounding grace to all Heav'ns Harmonies."[77] But while the song is the first and most overt association of the Lady's vocal power with Orpheus, it is not an isolated one. The trope runs throughout the *Mask*, and when Comus later holds the Lady captive it underpins her claim that her words defending chastity would have tangible effect:

dumb things would be mov'd to sympathize,
And the brute Earth would lend her nerves and shake,
Till all thy magick structures rear'd so high
Were shatter'd into heaps o're thy false head.[78]

Whether she actually has this power is a question for debate, and one we'll return to. Regardless, it is intriguing and surprising that she can claim this power and even convince others of her abilities, when her only experiences thus far are loss, darkness, and captivity. After all, while the Lady's chastity and innocence, as well as her humble reliance on grace, fit precisely into the dominant concept of childhood that underpins John Boys's Michaelmas commentary, her ability to speak with authority does not: one key way we should emulate children, according to Boys, is to "studie to be quiet."[79] If we are offended we "may complain to the Church our Mother," who alone has the authority to speak for us and seek redress for our wrongs.[80] Reserve was even more expected of the female child than of her male counterpart. While humanist prodigies like the Lady's brothers were expected to perfect the arts of eloquence, even the most enlightened educational handbooks for young women tended to view female literacy as a tool for cultivating decidedly quiet virtues.[81] The female child's goal was conversation rather than oratory, and while she might be an exemplary student of virtue, she was hardly expected to become its public advocate.[82]

The youth's superior receptivity to grace, then, is only one part of the story. The other part, the explanation of how the Lady develops her voice,

[76]Ibid., 134 (249).
[77]Ibid. (243).
[78]Ibid., 159 (796–99).
[79]Boys, 3:114.
[80]Ibid., 112.
[81]See Smith, 16–27.
[82]For a contemporary proponent of the idea that educated ladies "afford great pleasure in their Conversation to others," see Codrington, 2.

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must be found in her encounters with shadow and danger, and in youth's characteristic receptivity to the poetic forms that danger takes in this masque. The Lady's song is the first clear evidence that, as Comus puts it, "somthing holy lodges in that brest," and it is worth regarding in some detail:

Sweet Echo, sweetest Nymph that liv'st unseen
Within thy airy shell
By slow Meander's margent green,
And in the violet-imbroider'd vale
Where the love-lorn Nightingale
Nightly to thee her sad Song mourneth well.
Canst thou not tell me of a gentle Pair
That likest thy Narcissus are?
O if thou have
Hid them in som flowry Cave,
Tell me but where
Sweet Queen of Parly, Daughter of the Sphear,
So maist thou be translated to the skies,
And give resounding grace to all Heav'ns Harmonies.[83]

The oddities of this song have often been noted. For example, the Lady's choice of mythological allusions does not immediately inspire confidence. As Shullenberger puts it, Echo is "cursed by the goddess [Juno], dispossessed of an originating, self-generating voice, wasted by a love she cannot express," and ultimately dies, "withering into a voice of pure reflexivity."[84] The Lady also doesn't do her brothers any favors by associating them with Echo's love, Narcissus, who famously succumbs to his own "pure reflexivity," pining away with an inexpressible love for his own image. If they are, cleverly, the beautiful images of one another, they are also both merely images, a pair of mirrors reflecting one another in a kind of infinite regress. For Milton's contemporary George Sandys (1578–1644) in his gloss on Ovid's version of the episode, this is the consummate image of "youth, that is, the soul of a rash and ignorant man, [who] beholds not his owne face, nor considers of his proper essence or virtue, but pursues his shadow in the fountaine."[85] If the imagery is forbidding, then, it may also be

[83]Milton, 1998, 134 (*Mask*, 246); ibid., 133–34 (230–43).

[84]Shullenberger, 2003b, 405. Other critics who have examined the function and nature of the Echo and Narcissus myths in the song and *Mask* are Barber; Simons; Fletcher, 198–202.

[85]Sandys, 106. Ibid. also describes Echo and Narcissus as versions of one another and as the kind of *mise-en-abyme* one sees when mirrors are held up to one another: "the image of the voice so often rendered, is as that of the face reflected from one glasse to another; melting by degrees, and euery reflection more weake and shady then the former."

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quite appropriate to the plight of three lost children attempting to exercise personal agency for the first time.

But this still doesn't explain how the Lady achieves the ravishing power of her haunting voice. A key to this question may lie in another oddity of the song that Orgel notes: the "baffling" lack of an answering echo.[86] We might expect such an answer to the Lady's plaint, since it was typical of the familiar genre of seventeenth-century echo songs and poems. For example, a song in Jonson's masque *Pan's Anniversary* invokes Echo this way:

Echo, the truest oracle on ground,
Though nothing but a sound
(Echo: Though nothing but a sound)
Belov'd of Pan, the valleyes Queen
(Echo: The valleyes Queen)
And often heard, though never seene
(Echo: Though never seene).[87]

Sometimes the echo even provided instruction, as in Herbert's poem "Heaven," where Echo responds to the query "what is the supreme delight?" by answering "Light."[88] But neither Milton's text nor Lawes's setting of the song includes any echo — no comforting return of "resounding grace to all Heav'ns Harmonies," or, as Lawes's manuscript has the line, "hold a Counterpointe to all heav'ns harmonies."[89] According to Orgel, the lack of an answering echo emphasizes "that the Lady has *only* herself to rely on," that she is in fact surrounded by multiple versions of the self — in other words, solipsism.[90] By the same token, Comus and the Attendant Spirit are versions of one another, Sabrina is a version of the Lady, and "freedom is the mirror image of bondage."[91] There is something to this, though freedom is never quite as simple as a mirror image of anything in Milton. The intermixture of freedom and bondage, good and evil, is always more complex than the neat opposition and separation that a mirror image implies, since, as Milton later notes of sin and virtue in *Areopagitica*, "the matter of them both is the same."[92]

And so, to the various mirrorings and echoes that Orgel and others have cited in the Lady's song and in the masque's mythic structures, we could add

[86]Orgel, 40.
[87]Jonson, 1941a, 536 (*Pan's Anniversary*, lines 220–26).
[88]Herbert, 178 ("Heaven," lines 12–13).
[89]See Foss, 241–50.
[90]Orgel, 40–41, emphasis in the original.
[91]Ibid.
[92]Milton, 1953–82, 2:527.

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that her song is itself an echo of Comus’s own auditory presence, but with a unique, productive power.[93] It has often been noted that Comus, with his superior “command of metaphor and poetic language,” gives us some of the most evocative poetry in the masque.[94] Even more than his mother, Comus locates himself in a world of poetry and allusion that is much like the shadowy realm of ideas that evidently enchanted the young Milton. His opening recitative, for example, builds to a wild dance as he shifts from stately, seductive imagery in iambic pentameter to a quickening, Puckish tetrameter, to the seven-syllable line (catalectic trochaic tetrameter) that reappears in every subsequent lyric in the *Mask*:

> The Sounds, and Seas with all their finny drove
> Now to the Moon in wavering Morrice move,
> And on the Tawny Sands and Shelves,
> Trip the pert Fairies and the dapper Elves;
> By dimpled Brook, and Fountain Brim,
> The Wood-Nymphs deckt with Daisies trim,
> Their merry wakes and pastimes keep:
> What hath night to do with sleep?[95]

Leah Marcus insightfully demonstrates that these “merry wakes and pastimes” have political implications as a critique of Caroline court culture.[96] But to argue that the primary effect of lines like these is critique, or that the primary expected response of reader or audience is to place them on the “opposite pole” from virtue, as Stanley Fish does, is a bit perverse.[97] Certainly Milton leaves little doubt that Comus and his crew are not nice: the passage later invokes the orgiastic fertility goddess Cotytto and the witch Hecate, and in the Trinity Manuscript Milton describes the following dance as a “wild rude & wanton antick.”[98] But just as the antic is disorder shaped as a pleasing artistic effect, the images of the “finny drove,” and all nature, moving in harmony with the moon are also profoundly beautiful, a version of the animating power of chastity (through the allusion to Diana) that the Lady will later make her own.

[93]For other explorations of the idea of mirroring and echo as part of *A Mask*’s deeper structure see Simons, 59; Hollander, 59–60; and Goldberg, 133–38.

[94]See Orgel, 36; see also Disalvo, 120.

[95]Milton, 1998, 128–29 (*Mask*, 115–22).

[96]Marcus, 1986, 189.

[97]Fish, 157.

[98]Milton, 1899, fol. 12. This is also the description in the Bridgewater Manuscript: see Milton, 1968, 214 (*Bridgewater* line 165).

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The Lady's song is prompted directly by this poetry. She stumbles onto the stage by following the sound: "this way the noise was, if mine ear be true, / My best guide now, me thought it was the sound / Of Riot, and ill manag'd Merriment."[99] She says she would be "loath" to meet the insolent "Wassailers" who made the noise, but she still seeks it out.[100] Why? She says that she is pressed by necessity, looking for directions and nothing more. But this search exposes her to a world of fantasy, "calling shapes, and beckning shadows dire, / And airy tongues, that syllable mens names / On Sands, and Shoars, and desert Wildernesses," and it is only when she has entered this realm of imagination that she claims to see Chastity "visibly" and begins to sing.[101] In the likely performance version, though not in the later printed texts, the Lady ends her song with the vision of Echo holding "a Counterpointe to all heav'ns harmonies."[102] But her route to this heavenly image is through holding a counterpoint to Comus's harmonies.

As it developed in the Renaissance, the art of counterpoint typically involved two voices or melodies moving according to distinct rhythms yet forming a harmonic whole, and in both its imagistic and metrical echoes the Lady's song counterpoints Comus's recitative in this way.[103] Her imagery — a sweet nymph, flowery caves and valleys, the brim of a languid stream — harmonizes with Comus's own vision of pert fairies, dimpled brooks, and flower-bedecked nymphs. She also echoes his use of tetrameter and the seven-syllable line, his ability, which has been unique in the masque until now, to use these shifting verse forms, through the medium of her voice, to create tangible effects.

But here she also goes beyond echo. For where the pace of Comus's verse quickens as he builds to a crescendo of orgiastic dance, hers spreads out and slows down, shifting in the final lines of her song into iambic pentameter and the Alexandrine — the work's longest line — that resounds with the harmonies of heaven. Comus notes the calming effect, "at every fall smoothing the Raven doune / Of darkness till it smil'd," and says it is unlike anything he has ever heard.[104] In this sense, the Lady's song reenacts something of the process of humanist education (at least Milton's version of

[99]Milton, 1998, 131 (*Mask*, 170–72).

[100]Ibid. (176).

[101]Ibid., 132 (207–09).

[102]Milton, 1968, 217 (*Bridgewater*, 230).

[103]For the historical development of counterpoint in Europe, see Lowinsky; for visual representations of the technique and their relationship to Renaissance musical theory, see Judd, 41–50.

[104]Milton, 1998, 134 (*Mask*, 251).

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it), which promised to unleash a powerful personal voice by using even materials of questionable morality to engage the child's passionate nature.[105] This is related to the idea that what "purifies us is triall, and triall is by what is contrary," Milton's famous pronouncement from *Areopagitica* that is often used to describe how this masque differs from others in the genre.[106] But it is not quite the same thing as the outright clash between good and evil that this is sometimes made to imply, because while Comus is clearly the bad guy to be shunned, he is not just "what is contrary."[107] Something in the Lady responds to him. And just as she hopes to see the damned Echo "translated to the skies," her song and words throughout the rest of the masque attempt to translate her response to Comus into something heavenly.

As Shullenberger suggests, in her song "the Lady begins to figure out who she is by reading her own situation in relation to classical stories," and soon finds herself "at that threshold between the imaginary and symbolic orders where the imagination, if it anchors itself patiently in chastity, discovers its power to transfigure violence against the person into inviolable voice."[108] But this kind of purposive reading does not just happen. It is enabled by the Lady's passionate response to something less purposive, to being lost in the realm of riot and shadowy dreams. As it calms the night and ravishes her would-be ravisher, her song is a precursor to her development of an independent Orphic voice that may never quite be inviolable. And it is also still enough of an echo to raise the question whether Comus is in fact ravished by his own version of narcissism. The immediate impression it leaves on him, after all, is "home-felt delight," a Miltonic coinage that editors often gloss as "heartfelt" or "intimate," with a possible allusion to the Egerton family's domestic virtues.[109] More obviously, it seems to mean that the Lady's song resonates with something that was already in Comus's heart, where it hits home with surprising force. The only response the Lady receives to her echo song comes from Comus, who welcomes her with his own echo of Ferdinand's greeting of the "wonderful child" Miranda in *The*

[105]For a Lacanian account of this process, see Shullenberger, 2003a, 190–91: "The child enters the symbolic order through the mastery of language, which gives her both greater and lesser control of her world. Language mastery makes the will articulate, expansive, and specific — but at the same time makes the will's claims more modest."

[106]Milton, 1959, 515.

[107]For accounts of *A Mask* as a clash between diametrically opposed worldviews, see Fish, 157; Cox, 627; Swan, 405.

[108]Shullenberger, 2003b, 422.

[109]Milton, 1998, 135 (*Mask*, 262). See editorial glosses of *home-felt* in Orgel and Goldberg, 764, n. 51; Carey, 194, n. 261; Milton, 1998, 135, n. 171.

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Tempest: "Hail forren wonder."[110] As the intertexts mount, who echoes whom? Is it really possible to talk about resistance, will, or individual voice when the actual experience is shadows on top of shadows, echoes responding to echoes?

5. The Voice that Outstrips the Will

This kind of experience may be inevitable for a Lady who is still in the liminal childhood space between having and not having a voice and will of her own. The failure to recognize this is the largest problem with the numerous articles that relate the *Mask* to the legal case of the fourteen-year-old rape victim Margery Evans, which was carefully investigated by the *Mask*'s sponsor John Egerton, or the rape of Alice Egerton's thirteen-year-old cousin, who was a victim in the sensational Castlehaven sex scandal.[111] In both cases, a powerful man preyed upon a woman child, but gaps in the law made it difficult for her to claim justice.[112] The legal system could readily accept that female children of this age consented to their own defilement, thus exonerating their attackers, but these cases show that the system often failed to recognize the child's will, and thus credit her resistance, when this would convict her assailant. There are uncanny similarities between these cases and Milton's *Mask*, which also depicts a woman child menaced by an imbruting force. But for this very reason, scholars connecting them tend to overlook the central experience of the *Mask*, which is neither about the Earl of Bridgewater's superior legal judgment nor even, really, about sex, so much as about three children's encounters with allurement and shadow and their attempts to exercise their will in the world.[113] What makes both the Lady's situation and these legal cases problematic from an interpretive point of view is the grey area surrounding consent and childhood, and the corresponding breakdown of any authoritative frames of reference that would make violation absolutely a crime or resistance absolutely a possibility. The cases, in other words, do not necessarily look like Milton's *Mask* because of

[110]Milton, 1998, 135 (*Mask*, 265). Compare Shakespeare, 1617 (*The Tempest*, act 1, scene 2, lines 426–28): "My prime request, / Which I do last pronounce, is (O you wonder!) / If you be maid or no?" For the connections between Milton's *Mask* and *The Tempest*, see Major.

[111]For connections between *A Mask* and the Evans case, see Marcus, 1983 and 1987. For connections between *A Mask* and the Castlehaven scandal, see Breasted; Karmelich. See also Orgel, 43.

[112]See Herrup, 86.

[113]For accounts that leverage the cases to argue about gender dynamics in *A Mask*, see Halpern; Belsey, 47–49.

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influence, but because they lay bare a genuine intellectual problem of the era, one that Milton had experienced firsthand in his own path towards a poetic vocation.

After all, Lady Alice, who is delivered from Comus and handed to her father because no other fate is imaginable, is not the only one in *A Mask* with no legal will of her own: her brothers are in precisely the same position. And while their transition into married life would obviously take a different form from their sister's, their halting transition from dependency to adult agency would not necessarily differ from her experiences in the masque. Nor, for that matter, would the transition to adult agency differ tremendously for *A Mask*'s twenty-five-year-old author, who was beyond the age of consent but still living in his father's house. Just two years earlier, in Sonnet 7, Milton described himself as surprised by time and startled by the disjunction between his external appearance and internal feelings of immaturity: "How soon hath Time the suttle theef of youth, / Stoln on his wing my three and twentieth yeer!"[114] The poem is a meditation on youth's paradoxes and ambiguities, as the poet protests his unreadiness in bouts of punning virtuosity that, like his appearance, "might deceive the truth."[115] It is in this spirit that the young poet reinterprets the parable of the talents from Matthew 25:14–30 with a parable on his own talent: "Be it less, or more, or soon or slow, / It shall be still in strictest measure eev'n."[116]

Yet in *Ad Patrem*, which was written around the same time as *A Mask*, Milton was still uneasily attempting to justify his "youthful songs" to his father, taking the child's traditional role of supplication as he offered "due reverence" to the man who was funding his son's apparently interminable education.[117] During this extended educational wandering, the young poet claims to have been inspired by encounters with darkness and shadow that look strikingly like the Lady's, and he is eager to cultivate a voice with the "power to stir the profound depths of trembling Tartarus, to bind the gods of the underworld."[118] However, as the poem progresses he finds this longed-for Orphic voice not in moments of praise, but in conflict with and rebellion against the patriarch who was also a musician: "What pleasure after all will there be in music well attuned if it is empty of the human voice,

[114]Milton, 1998, 85 (Sonnet 7, lines 1–2).

[115]Ibid. (5).

[116]Ibid. (9–10).

[117]Milton, 1998, 227, 224 (*Ad Patrem*, 115, 5): "juvenilia carmina," "officium venerandi."

[118]Ibid., 224 (17, 21–22): "tremebundaque Tartara carmen / Ima ciere valet, divosque ligare profundos."

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or empty of words and their meanings, or of rhythms of speech? Such strains befit woodland choirboys, not Orpheus."[119] This is not a rejection of music, as some critics have implied: Milton's argument hinges on his ability to depict music and poetry as a unity, to draw the father into the enterprise of the son.[120] But it is a strange bit of one-upmanship in a poem that begins as a thank-you to an accomplished authority figure.[121] Activating the Orphic voice, after all, is not a zero-sum game. It requires a clash, an act of will, a violent transformation of youth's receptivity to its surroundings into the ability to control them. Music and poetry may be united, father and son may each have "one half of a god," but by the poem's end there is no question who's playing second fiddle.[122]

In the *Mask*, as in *Ad Patrem* and in the law, the youth forges a path to adult agency over very treacherous ground. Like *Ad Patrem*, *A Mask* pays homage to a father. But both works really are more interested in the dramas of the will that take place without, or even against, the father, moments when an individual must choose freedom or subjection, voice or silence, even if the governing paradigm would seem to deny them the option of choice. If the Lady's song echoes her dreamy, poetic, dangerous surroundings and their local Lord Comus, this is not really transgressive — a favorite critical term to describe any moment when Comus's power seems less than neatly contained.[123] Instead, it is a necessary result of the child's status as depicted in contemporary religious, educational, and legal discourses, and of Milton's version of humanism as an educative process with no foregone conclusion. To captivate and educate the child, divine philosophy must indeed be "charming," as the Younger Brother ironically notes in response to the Elder Brother's defense of chastity and his description of a charnel house full of dead and degraded bodies.[124] And in this sense *A Mask*'s principal charmer is no worse a tutor than the Attendant Spirit.

Indeed, what is fascinating about the Elder Brother's defense of chastity is that it is painfully, embarrassingly wrong, despite its own eloquence and charm. Like the Lady's echo song, his ability to speak powerfully seems to

[119]Ibid., 225 (50–52): "Denique quid vocis modulamen inane juvabit, / Verborum sensusque vacans, numerique loquacis? / Silvestres decet iste choros, non Orphea cantus."

[120]See Marjara.

[121]Unsurprisingly, this has elicited allegations of Milton's "Oedipal complex": see Kerrigan, 115–16.

[122]Milton, 1998, 226 (*Ad Patrem*, 66): "Dividuum Deum."

[123]See Thomas, 450; Leasure, 64.

[124]Milton, 1998, 145 (*Mask*, 476).

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outstrip his ability to speak purposively. With wonderful confidence he proclaims his sister's secret weapon:

> 'Tis chastity, my brother, chastity:
> She that has that, is clad in compleat steel,
> And like a quiver'd Nymph with Arrows keen
> May trace huge Forests, and unharbour'd Heaths,
> Infamous Hills, and sandy perilous wildes,
> Where through the sacred rayes of Chastity,
> No savage fierce, Bandite, or mountaneer
> Will dare to soyl her Virgin purity,
> Yea there, where very desolation dwels,
> By grots, and caverns shag'd with horrid shades,
> She may pass on with unblench't majesty.[125]

Yet Comus has attempted to soil her virgin purity, has captured her and led her deep into the woods. Shortly the brothers will find that rather than sauntering casually past danger she has been glued to a chair with "gums of glutenous heat," a very physical predicament that contrasts dramatically with the Elder Brother's picture of a chastity that can translate flesh itself "to the souls essence, / Till all be made immortal."[126] Ultimately, of course, the Lady's virtue emerges from her trial intact, but this requires a major revision of the Elder Brother's depiction.

If his seemingly triumphant speech leads him down the garden path, then what is the point of this schoolboy debate? For one thing, in its own echoes, allusions, and oppositions, it generates some pretty impressive poetry: the boy might not be Orpheus yet, but the language here works about as hard and productively as it does anywhere in the masque. In this brief passage, for instance, the *OED* says Milton offers the first recorded usage of three words, *quiver'd*, *unharbour'd*, and *unblench't*, and this is the first use of *ray* in a figurative sense to describe "mental and moral influences." It is truly generative language. This original voice, however, doesn't yet manifest an independent will so much as it shows the will *in vitro*, enfolded in the literary echoes that give the passage its shape. "Unharbour'd heaths," for example, is sandwiched between borrowings from Horace and Shakespeare, respectively: "trace huge Forests," according to John Carey, echoes a passage from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, while "Infamous Hills" recalls a passage from Horace's *Odes*.[127] And these aren't the only borrowings: Carey also attributes "compleat steel" and "mountaneer" to Shakespeare, while those

[125]Ibid., 142 (420–30).
[126]Ibid., 164 (916), 144 (462–63).
[127]Carey, 201, n. 422; 201, n. 423.

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caverns "shag'd" with shades are a Spenserianism.[128] As the Elder Brother continues his wild-eyed evocation of chastity's miraculous powers, he serially invokes Fletcher's *Faithful Shepherdess*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Homer, Spenser, and Plato, and records new usages for at least two more words, *Imbodies* and *damp*.[129] Of course, the allusive fabric of Milton's work is so rich and ubiquitous that this kind of structure is not unique. But this is precisely the point: the young boy, like his sister, finds his voice through a process much like the one employed by the young poet.

While the debate between the brothers locates them within the same educational process as their sister, her developing ability to speak truth to power provides the *Mask*'s real excitement. The brothers show potential, but the Lady most obviously realizes this potential as she transforms from a lost girl invoking a voiceless nymph into a firebrand. The change is apparent from the moment she opens her mouth in Comus's palace, responding to his threat to chain her nerves in alabaster or leave her "Root-bound" like Daphne: "Fool do not boast, / Thou canst not touch the freedom of my minde / With all thy charms."[130] This seems to be a case where malice supplies the age, but this is a righteous anger, a zeal that speaks with authority even as it continues to claim the "credulous innocence" of childhood.[131] As Milton explained years later in *De Doctrina Christiana*, zeal doesn't just happen: it is not merely inspiration, but just such an angry response to external stimuli, that provokes a "feeling of indignation against things which tend to the violation or contempt of religion."[132] Milton inserted the Lady's proud, disdainful retort in revision — originally in the Trinity Manuscript Comus rattles on for upwards of twenty lines while she sits mute — and this revision nicely enacts her will coming into its own, transmuting the stuff of charming echoes into self-actuating voice.

Comus continues to tempt her with "all the pleasures / That fancy can beget on youthfull thoughts," but now it is his understanding that is barren and limited.[133] He offers a rich, if tired, idea of cavalier excess, and is shocked when she returns it to him in radically altered form, as a vision of abundance for all. Indulge your "dainty limms," he says, echoing exponents

[128]Ibid., 201, n. 420; 202, n. 425; 202, n. 428.

[129]Ibid., 202, n. 431–36; 202, n. 467.

[130]Milton, 1998, 153 (*Mask*, 663–65).

[131]Ibid., 155 (697).

[132]Milton, 1934, 17:152: "indignatio adversus ea quae ad violationem aut contemptum religionis pertinent."

[133]Milton, 1998, 153 (*Mask*, 668–69).

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of *carpe diem* from Horace to Samuel Daniel and Thomas Carew.[134] Nature is made for enjoyment, indeed, demands it:

> Wherefore did Nature powre her bounties forth
> With such a full and unwithdrawing hand,
> Covering the earth with odours, fruits, and flocks,
> Thronging the Seas with spawn innumberable,
> But all to please, and sate the curious taste?
> And set to work millions of spinning Worms,
> That in their green shops weave the smooth-hair'd silk
> To deck her Sons, and that no corner might
> Be vacant of her plenty, in her own loyns
> She hutch't th' all-worshipt ore, and precious gems
> To store her children with.[135]

Time is fleeting, and nature's bounty, which is expressed in the Lady's virginity, must be consumed, exploited. For if beauty is left unconsumed "like a neglected rose / It withers on the stalk with languish't head."[136] That description of the rose, along with the rest of Comus's "List Lady be not coy" speech, is not in the Bridgewater manuscript, but the addition really does not enrich Comus's arguments so much as show how threadbare they are — and this barrenness, contrasted with his lush imagery, supplies one of the poem's supreme ironies. Years before, in Sonnet 130, Shakespeare had killed the already-hackneyed rose-as-female-beauty image, proclaiming that he saw "no such roses" in his mistress' cheeks, and when Herrick and other Cavaliers employed the trope, they nearly always did it with a wink and a nudge.[137] Comus is either too unsophisticated to employ a similar irony (which seems unlikely) or he thinks the Lady is too childish to need it.

Of course, Comus is wrong. The Lady is not about to trade her whole inheritance for an apple, as children are wont to do. She rightly understands that his proffered vision of nature here is shallow, tawdry. This is worth noting, by the way, in response to critics who view *A Mask* as "essentially static": the view espoused by Comus here is a debasement of his earlier view of nature's harmony, and he looks smaller for it, just as Satan gradually, dynamically, looks smaller throughout *Paradise Lost*.[138] Ultimately, it is hard not to think of this self-described spirit of "purer fire" as a child gone wrong himself, like those "of a more delicious and airie spirit" that Milton

[134]Ibid., 154 (*Mask*, 680).
[135]Ibid., 155 (*Mask*, 710–20).
[136]Ibid., 156 (743–44).
[137]Shakespeare, 1773 (Sonnet 130, 6).
[138]Fish, 157.

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describes in *Of Education*: trapped by a barren education, they retire "to the enjoyments of ease and luxury, living out their daies in feast and jollity."[139] And even this, Milton claims, isn't the worst fate imaginable: they could become lawyers.[140] Comus has decayed into late-stage libertinism, but he perhaps once produced visions of greater things.

In contrast, the Lady continues to echo his earlier view of natural harmony, but with an inspired sense of its connection to divine justice. "Imposter," she snaps, and utterly demolishes his idea that nature's "children should be riotous / With her abundance."[141] There is no better way to capture the newfound authority in her voice than to quote at length:

> If every just man that now pines with want
> Had but a moderate and beseeming share
> Of that which lewdly pamper'd Luxury
> Now heaps upon som few with vast excess,
> Natures full blessings would be well dispenc't
> In unsuperfluous eeven proportion,
> And she no whit encomber'd with her store,
> And then the giver would be better thank'd,
> His praise due paid, for swinish gluttony
> Ne're looks to Heav'n amidst his gorgeous feast,
> But with besotted base ingratitude
> Cramms, and blasphemes his feeder.[142]

This vehemence comes with the best authority: Plato, Aristotle, the Gospels, Calvin, and any number of other Protestant writers urge moderation in the desire for wealth. But, as Cedric Brown notes, the directness of the Lady's critique of riches remains "unique in the masque of the period."[143] No wonder, since masques including this one were paid for and commissioned by rich people, were made possible by their vast excess. This doesn't imply anything indecorous in the passage. As far as the lines imply that the girl's father is part of the solution rather than the problem, one of the benevolent elites who facilitates the meet dispensation of wealth, they offer a fine compliment. All the same, this is obviously a place where the sacred vehemence of the young Lady's words transcends her situation, where she is not just a powerless captive speaking to her captor but a voice of righteousness in the wider world. This is a critique, not just of unregulated

[139]Milton, 1998, 129 (*Mask*, 111); Milton, 1953–82, 2:376.
[140]Milton, 1953–82, 2:376.
[141]Milton, 1998, 157 (*Mask*, 762–63).
[142]Ibid., 158 (768–79).
[143]Brown, 1985, 92.

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consumption, but of the vastly different power relations that deprive everyone, at some point in their lives, of the ability to do anything but pine, like Echo, with want.

Milton clearly wanted to cultivate this effect of the voice unleashed, as he added a full twenty-eight powerful new lines to the Lady's speech between the performance and the 1637 printing. These lines, 779–806, make the Lady's claim to Orphic speech overt. "Enjoy your deer Wit, and gay Rhetorick / That hath so well been taught her dazling fence," she says, because she now has something better than the probationary fencing exercises of wit and rhetoric: she has inspiration.[144] She then rhymes that "Thou are not fit to hear thyself convinced," but gives him a taste of her powers anyway:

> Yet should I try, the uncontrouled worth
> Of this pure cause would kindle my rap't spirits
> To such a flame of sacred vehemence,
> That dumb things would be mov'd to sympathize,
> And the brute Earth would lend her nerves and shake,
> Till all thy magick structures rear'd so high,
> Were shatter'd into heaps o're thy false head.[145]

In the first performance the audience could presumably tell that the Lady spoke with a new zeal and persuasive force, but she did not identify this as the "flame of sacred vehemence" as such. Nor did she imply that she had tapped into hermetic networks of sympathy, a kind of magic that hermeticists claimed offered limitless power to those who cracked the natural world's codes and learned how to speak the pure, Adamic language.[146]

Perhaps most importantly, in the first performance Comus did not confirm these impressions by noting that "she fables not, I feel that I do fear / Her words set off by som superior power."[147] Instead, he responded only by noting the childishness of her speech: "Come, noe more / this is meere morrall babble."[148] By the time Milton finished revising, Comus was still

[144]Milton, 1998, 158 (*Mask*, 789–90).

[145]Ibid., 158–59 (792–99).

[146]See for example Agrippa, 152: "Words therefore are the fittest medium betwixt the speaker and the hearer, carrying with them not only the conception of the mind, but also the vertue of the speaker with a certain efficacy unto the hearers, and this often-times with so great a power, that often-times they change not only the hearers, but also other bodies, and things that have no life."

[147]Milton, 1998, 159 (*Mask*, 801–02).

[148]Milton, 1968, 232 (*Bridgewater*, 728–29).

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trying to dismiss her words as babble, the incessant, unwilled, parroting talk of children, but this attempt was more clearly demarcated not only as wrongheaded but craven and duplicitous. He doesn't just fear her words, he feels that he fears them. He doesn't just push the crystal glass to her lips because he is tired of arguing or because it's his only option, but because he's desperate to shut her up. Over time, Milton's revisions consistently enhanced this effect of childish simplicity giving way to authoritative speech. For example, in an earlier draft the Lady gasps "O my simplicity," when Comus tempts her, where she would later command "Hence with thy brew'd inchantments."[149] In the first version her first defense is *doli incapax*, as the law would call it, the child's standard defense of incapability; in the later version her defense stems from her very capable verbal command.

In the end, to speak of authority or agency as if the Lady achieved these things absolutely is to miss the point. Milton never lets us know for certain that the Lady has achieved the Orphic voice: she threatens to move dumb things to sympathize, but it could be a bluff or the kind of childish sentiment her Elder Brother attached to chastity. Comus feels something, but attempts to force her anyway. And there is really no way of knowing whether he could have succeeded, because "the Brothers rush in with Swords drawn, wrest his Glass out of his hand, and break it against the ground."[150] This, of course, is as much a failure as a success, since the Attendant Spirit immediately points out that they let the enchanter escape with his potent wand and left their sister captive. So the boys' education, too, leaves their capability a little wanting. They receive the magic herb Haemony, which, despite its endlessly disputed meaning, certainly offers an antidote to Circean enchantments through the transfer of knowledge, just like Ascham's description of education-as-moly. But ultimately it doesn't work "'Gainst all inchantments," as their tutor has claimed.[151]

Just as he cultivated the sense that the Lady gained an efficacious voice in his revision of her debate with Comus, Milton carefully retained the ambiguity surrounding the children's accomplishment in the final scenes. In the performance, at least, the brothers appear to have participated in Sabrina's invocation, but in his printed and manuscript versions Milton definitively gave this job to the Attendant Spirit alone: in performance the Elder Brother joined his sister and suggested continuing their journey, but in his final versions Milton has the Attendant Spirit make this suggestion,

[149]Milton, 1899, fol. 22. The passage is heavily crossed out and replaced with a pasted leaf on fol. 20.

[150]Milton, 1998, 159 (*Mask*, 814).

[151]Ibid., 152 (640).

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which, coming from an adult, really is a command. As noted earlier, the theological upshot is that human action can only do so much, and that heaven must ultimately lend us grace to complete the equation. What it means in practical, dramatic terms is that in the final scenes supernatural adults free the captive while the children watch silently.

In the final scene the Lady assumes neither the role of a prophet nor of an Orpheus, but of a marriageable daughter in her father's house, and this happens not just because she is a girl but for the same reason her brothers fail to liberate her: they have to fail because they are children. It is a frustrating conclusion in some ways, but a very true one. To achieve adult will, in art as in law, is a halting, tortuous process, one that requires making impossible decisions, stepping outside the paradigm only to fall back within it. Although heaven has "timely tri'd their youth, / Their faith, their patience, and their truth," the children are in the end still negotiating exercises set by someone else, still dancing a measured round under the watchful eye of their powerful father.[152] If this final dance reveals the limits of childhood, it also shows the potential of art. It is, as Blair Hoxby argues, "a triumph of personal conscience" expressed by the "well-tutored movements of the continent body."[153] Retracing in "victorious dance" the ground that had, only moments before, represented the tangled paths of error, the children demonstrate the possibility of achieving virtuosity within bounds, of mastering the self in a process of growing up that is never quite complete.[154]

In a sense, then, the *Mask* finds a way to admit childhood's limitations without embracing the quiescence normally associated with this state by John Boys and others. Perhaps, after all, the Orphic voice must always be prevenient, existing prior to the will, enabling the will like the prevenient grace that enables salvation. This possibility, as much as the theological idea that evil is always with us, is why Comus needs to be left loose at *A Mask*'s conclusion. For those who wish to speak with a voice that can shake the earth, the wandering in his woods, the entanglement in his charms, never really ends.

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[152]Ibid., 167 (970–71).
[153]Hoxby, 95.
[154]Milton, 1998, 167 (*Mask*, 970).

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