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Author

Frost, Elisabeth A.

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The Didactic *Comus*: Henry Lawes and the Trial of Virtue

The Jacobean and Caroline court masque traditionally incorporated some moral message into the grandeur of its spectacle, but only as part of its elaborately conceived compliment. Both Jonson's *Vision of Delight* and Carew's *Coelum Britannicum* describe the restoration of order over disorder, virtue over intemperance, and a fixed hierarchy over the anarchic forces of nature. Like these masques, Milton's *Comus* was written for a specific historical occasion—the gathering of the Egerton family at Ludlow Castle, where the earl of Bridgewater had in 1633 become president of the council in the Marches of Wales.¹ *Comus*'s traditional evocation of the restoration of order over disorder thus served an appropriate allegorical function, for Bridgewater's commission specified as part of his duty the keeping of order along the the unruly Welsh border.² Despite this similarity, however, *Comus* boasts few direct compliments to Bridgewater; as J. B. Leishman notes, compliments are reduced to the barest, most "incidental" gestures,³ as in the Spirit's introduction of the action, where Bridgewater is described simply as "a noble Peer of mickle trust and power"⁴—unextravagant praise when compared with the elaborate spectacle of compliment that appears in *Coelum Britannicum*, or with the direct lines of homage in *Oberon*. And while other masques lead up to a dramatic "unveiling" of the masquers themselves, the noble participants whose dances mark the climax of the entertainment, *Comus* has no such climax, as Leishman points out. Instead, *Comus* employs the noble participants not as mere masqued dancers but as actors in the production, a function usually reserved for professionals. In other masques, the masquers remain mute objects of admiration; in *Comus*, the three Bridgewater children, aged fifteen, eleven, and nine,⁵ participate in the unfolding of the plot. Such crucial changes, along with the diminished use of compliment, reveal that Milton and Lawes, as collaborators, devised a different

function for both the masquers and the masque. Instead of praising a patron, they conducted a moral lesson, in the form of the drama itself, to the young participants.

The most apparent moral lesson enacted, occupying the entire first section of the masque, is the importance of trial as a test of virtue. As in *Areopagitica*, the first part of *Comus* asserts that "our faith and knowledge thrives [sic] by exercise,"⁶ and, furthermore, that without knowledge of evil, without trial and the possibility of failure, there can be no true virtue. *Comus*, like Milton's later political tract, is based on the power of reason to conquer evil, the necessity of trial in affirming virtue, and the reliance on will as a means of understanding the nature of temptation. His masque is thus a dramatization of the conviction that "that which purifies us is trial."⁷

Yet despite the education so clearly conducted, the structure of the masque raises questions. In light of the focus on reason as the champion of virtue, the recourse to magic spells and mystical symbols as the ultimate means of defending virtue from violation hardly seems in keeping with the masque's didactic theme. Even the structure can be divided into two distinct parts. The first is devoted almost entirely to a discussion of virtue and its relation to choice, reason, and trial, while the second, beginning with the invocation of Sabrina, involves magic and spells, focusing on song, dance, and lyric verse. Despite the absence of an unveiling, the masque seems to turn away from the abstract notions of intellectual debate and the power of reason in favor of lyric entertainment.

Leishman suggests that Milton "characteristically only allowed the masque proper to begin after he had first secured an uninterrupted recital of his poem,"⁸ implying that Milton, against his own inclination, was obliged to include the songs and dances that were traditionally the *raison d'être* of the masque performance.⁹ Yet even though Milton was not solely responsible for the production and planning of *Comus*, the elements of song and dance included in the spectacle do not diminish or compete with his text. In fact, Lawes himself is the key figure throughout both the history of *Comus* and the text; in his role as Attendant Spirit, Lawes becomes the connective figure between the two parts of the poem, orchestrating the whole. As the source of the action, Lawes bridges the gap between text and spectacle and enacts the second crucial lesson of the masque—that not merely reason but the equally "divine" powers of poetry and song are essential to the masquers' resistance of temptation and preservation of virtue.¹⁰

The collaboration between Milton and Lawes seems to have been more peaceful than that of Jonson and Inigo Jones; Lawes himself probably gave Milton the job of writing the masque, and, as Willa Evans suggests, Milton may have been more dependent on him than is usually acknowledged. Milton's only previous text for a masque outside of Cambridge had been *Arcades*, a much less elaborate piece than *Comus*. Young and relatively inexperienced with such entertainments, the twenty-six-year-old poet may have been supervised closely by the older Lawes, who had recently been involved in the extravagant *Coelum Britannicum*, in which the Bridgewater children had also participated. He was now regarded as one of the most versatile musicians at court; he might well have hoped to replicate as closely as possible the elaborate staging and devices of court masques—to model this masque on its forebears, as Bridgewater probably would have desired.¹¹ Hence the two-part structure of the masque, and its festive conclusion with the nobles' dance.

As tutor to the Bridgewater children, however, Lawes plays a far more significant role than mere producer of the entertainment: appropriately, he takes on the role of instructor. Cedric Brown notes that his voice is "the didactic medium for the poet";¹² he transmits divine instruction to both the audience and the masquers. Like the figure of Mercury, Lawes also acts as presenter of the song and dance;¹³ his double function as teacher and, literally, orchestrator, links the two discrete parts of the masque and completes the moral lesson. Through Lawes we can resolve the apparent contradiction in structure: the first section emphasizes the role of reason in defending virtue; the second presents the refinement of the arts as an equally necessary component of the Bridgewater children's education. The young masquers thus receive a dual lesson, while also displaying the skills learned from Lawes's training—that not only logic and reason, but the finer, "magical" arts of poetry and song are required elements of their knowledge and experience, and their triumph over intemperance and passion.¹⁴

From the very opening of the masque, Lawes is the source of instruction. As the theatrical master of ceremonies of the occasion,¹⁵ Lawes frames the poem as a whole, introducing and concluding the action. Referring to his current errand as a "task," the Attendant Spirit is the first to describe his commission. He does so in terms of his young charges:

And here their tender age might suffer peril,
But that by quick command from Sovran *Jove*
I was dispatcht for their defense and guard. . . . (40-42)

Possibly alluding to Bridgewater in the guise of Jove, this passage directs us toward Lawes as both the spiritual guardian of "their tender age" and the primary figure of instruction in their intellectual lives; as their "guardian," he is thus sanctioned by the higher authority in whose stead he serves, entrusted with their welfare. If Jove is a figure for Bridgewater, then the "quick command" Lawes follows attests not only to Bridgewater's authority, but also to the high esteem in which the earl holds him, as Jove holds *his* divine servants. Thus this description of Lawes's role in the masque (and, implicitly, in the Bridgewater household) serves as a subtle compliment to both parties.

Instruction also comes in the form of self-praise. After informing the spectators of his charge, Lawes actually takes on the impersonation of himself:

. . . I must put off
 These my sky robes spun out of *Iris*' Woof
 And take the Weeds and likeness of a Swain
 That to the service of this house belongs,
 Who with his soft Pipe and smooth-dittied Song
 Well knows to still the wild winds when they roar,
 And hush the waving Woods. . . . (82-88)

The Spirit and Comus are the only two characters who wield this power of transforming themselves to attempt their opposite ends. In the case of the Spirit, this temporary disguise permits Lawes to praise himself. The self-reflection, however, produces more than an amusing irony; it indicates the direction *Comus* will take. Lawes and Milton clearly planned to compliment not merely Bridgewater as a patron, but the tutor himself; in the didactic movement of the poem, knowledge and the power of "smooth-dittied song" are themselves subjects of homage, and Lawes the instrument of their dissemination. Thus Lawes, descending from the sanctity of Jove's court, ushers in the centrality of his own role in the masque.¹⁶

In the sections preceding the invocation of Sabrina, however, the central focus is not on Lawes but on the masquers. Throughout this first part of the poem, reason is at odds with the forces striving to depose it—perverse sophistry and sensuality. Reason governs the structure of the action, which centers on argument, dialogue, and debate. As Leishman points out, *Comus*, especially in this part of the masque, could be described as a "semi-dramatic poetical debate on a moral theme."¹⁷ The Spirit appears as that figure whose superior knowledge guides the young

people through this moral trial. After recounting the histories of the various participants—himself, *Comus*, and the Lady—he serves as a bridge between spectators and masquers, furnished with both the omniscience of a divine observer and the means to participate in the unfolding drama. And yet his role in the conflicts is minimal; both the two brothers, and the Lady and *Comus*, present us with debates from which Lawes remains conspicuously absent. The two pairs of debaters, serving as dramatic parallels to each other, demonstrate how the skills of argument, presumably taught by Lawes, can be put to the test; the Spirit's retreat from view corresponds to the moments of trial throughout the masque—the Lady's first encounter with *Comus*, the temptation scene, and the brothers' attempt to rescue her. The debaters thus reveal his teaching in action.

In the first of the confrontations, the two brothers, quite on their own, describe the necessarily unresolved interpretation of the nature of virtue; the Lady and *Comus*, equally removed from the Spirit's aid, demonstrate the confrontation between this virtue and sophistry. The brothers represent the gift of reason, bolstered by Lawes's teaching; *Comus* represents the dangers of reason, its transmutation into the logic and false philosophy of the fallen. One discussion is reminiscent of Platonic debate, the other of Caroline indulgence. Despite Lawes's secondary role, his tutelage is evident, for the exchanges reflect those of an academic exercise; the structure of these debates replicates those undergone by Milton and his peers at Cambridge as part of their own academic training.¹⁸ Reminding us of the didactic purpose of the masque, these scenes display the children's learning, and, as Brown suggests, offer a recognition of the education they were receiving¹⁹—through Lawes himself.

In the brothers' debate, this education emerges through both strengths and weaknesses: both brothers are presented as partially right.²⁰ The Elder hails the inner light as an indomitable force, asserting that "virtue could see to do what virtue would / By her own radiant light, though Sun and Moon / Were in the flat Sea sunk" (373–375). According to the Elder's deeply Puritan philosophy, the powers of light and darkness surface from within:

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. (381–385)

The Elder thus unknowingly labels the forces of faith and virtue at strife with "foulness" between the Lady and her adversary: Comus, like Satan in *Paradise Lost*, cultivates hell within himself, while the Lady "has a hidden strength" (415), her chastity. Thus, as the Elder Brother sees it, the Lady's own "bright day" will save her from violation, just as the clear sight and clear thinking symbolized in the stars and moon he invokes can "disinherit *Chaos*, which reigns here / In double night of darkness and of shades" (334-335).

In contrast to the Elder's faith in the inner light and its powers of preservation, the Younger invokes reason in a more literal-minded manner, questioning faith itself, pragmatically suggesting that they anticipate the worst:

You may as well spread out the unsunn'd heaps
Of Miser's treasure by an outlaw's den,
And tell me it is safe, as bid me hope
Danger will wink an Opportunity. . . . (398-401)

He would avoid confrontation, rather than risk ruin. Unlike his brother, who employs complex figurative language and sinuous syntax, he proffers a simpler thought in simpler language; similarly, his governing rule is caution, whereas the Elder's is optimism. Hearing from the Spirit of the Lady's abduction, the Younger is rightly anxious, in contrast to his brother: "Is this the confidence / You gave me, Brother?" (583-584), implying that the other has been foolishly optimistic. He harbors alarm as his best defense, and his alarm seems justified.

Informed by the Spirit's relation of Comus's powers, the Elder Brother, in his rebuttal to the Younger's accusation, gives an important response, touching on the single most compelling theme of the masque—the notion of a practical trial of virtue:

Virtue may be assail'd but never hurt,
Surpris'd by unjust force but not enthrall'd,
Yea even that which mischief meant most harm
Shall in the happy trial prove most glory. (589-592)

For the Elder Brother, virtue continually asserts its hegemony over the inferior realm of passion; evil is a sensual and reactive force, whereas goodness stands unchanged and unchanging. Yet according to this formulation, virtue hardly seems to need defending. This brother seems certain of the outcome of the trial: evil, caught in "eternal restless change," will

ultimately give in to the causal forces of nature that act upon it, until it "shall back recoil," be "[g]ather'd like scum, and settl'd to itself." Finally conquered by its own excess, by gluttony and pleasure, it will be "[s]elf-fed and self-consum'd." This brother's confidence is extreme, compared with the other's crisis of worry—yet both have valid arguments. Between these two, the very basis of what is reasonable to believe or fear is actively explored.

The outcome of this disagreement is achieved only through the action of the masque itself, just as Lawes's identity as a shepherd of truly heavenly souls must wait to be revealed until the trial is over. In such contrasting passages, in which Lawes informs and steers the action, the moral exercise takes place not so much in the defeat of one by the other as in the very divergence of opinion. Lawes's teaching, imperfectly reflected in his pupils' thought, is thus applied to the "perplex't paths of this drear Wood" (37), through which the tutor will lead them. Both young men are granted a partial victory; the disagreement tactfully serves as a compliment to all involved—to Bridgewater, in the display of his sons' learning; to the sons for their cleverness; and to Lawes as the source of their knowledge. The two brothers present two views that must ultimately be unified: both faith and questioning are required, and each lacks some refinement, some knowledge within Lawes's scope, still to be attained.²¹

In the debate between the Lady and Comus, which parallels that of the two brothers in its didactic intent, reason does battle with its perverted incarnation—sophistry. This confrontation involves not the ideal exchange between two male friends (two brothers), but rather a man's exhortations to a virtuous woman. Representing a very real danger to a girl of marriageable age and noble birth, the sinful Comus assumes the figure of the Caroline rake. Leishman notes that the arguments "in favour of fruition and enjoyment of the present hour" are reminiscent of earlier sixteenth- and seventeenth-century lyric poetry on the same theme;²² specifically, Comus uses the structure of argumentation employed in cavalier lyrics for the sake of seduction. His mode of discourse echoes that of the Platonic debate between the two brothers; their ideal arguments on the means of defending virtue are recast into an attempt to violate that virtue. The Lady nonetheless bears out the Elder's prediction: armed with reason, and the inner light of chastity, the Lady remains steadfast against Comus's tangle of false reasoning, demonstrating the victory of innocence in the face of bold seduction.²³

Comus's false doctrine ("the canon laws of our foundation" [807]) is

noteworthy both for its eloquence and for its faulty logic. The coupling of these two characteristics, prefiguring Milton's tragic Satan, stands as a lesson in itself: only because the Lady remains pure in body and spirit, and carries her strength within herself, can she resist the seductive power of false reasoning. One is again reminded of Milton's premise for the *Areopagitica*: citing Paul, Milton assures us that " 'To the pure, all things are pure' . . . knowledge cannot defile . . . if the will and conscience be not defiled."²⁴ But the lady demonstrates her purity not merely through her will to resist but through her essence, her defining trait of chastity that grants her the ability to despise indulgence, to unite purity with temperance: "Fool, do not boast, / Thou canst not touch the freedom of my mind . . ." (662-663). Her autonomy permits her at least a momentary victory over Comus's elaborate sophistry, for she recognizes the falsity of his lover's plaints:

Why should you be so cruel to yourself,
And to those dainty limbs which nature lent
For gentle usage and soft delicacy? (679-681)²⁵

Here Comus perverts the notion of nature to suit his own ends, emphasizing pleasure in "those dainty limbs," according to his own desires. The Lady responds with cogent logic ("I would not taste thy treasonous offer; none / But such as are good men can give good things"), pinpointing his imposture. Her certainty of self, reflected in her mastery of reason, triumphs over his loss of self to his consuming passion and demonstrates a "lesson" well learned. As E. M. W. Tillyard argues, this exchange is "modelled on the form of the university prolusion or disputation," the Lady and Comus becoming the central "disputants" in a model academic debate.²⁶

Comus's manipulation of reason to his own ends is further demonstrated in a richly descriptive logical fallacy, which the Lady recognizes and refutes. Like a true cavalier poet, Comus presents a "carpe diem" argument against the fleeting nature of time: "If you let slip time, like a neglected rose / It withers on the stalk with languish't head" (743-744). Along with these "false rules pranked in reason's garb" (759), he posits the logical fallacy that only the extremes of "shallow abstinence" or "waste fertility" are within the Lady's means: in order to counteract the overabundance of nature, Comus argues, we must indulge: "Wherefore did Nature pour her bounties forth / . . . But all to please and sate the curious taste?" (710, 714). The Lady responds by reminding him that there exists a mean between indulgence and abstinence:

If every just man that now pines with want
 Had but a moderate and beseeeming share
 Of that which lewdly-pamper'd Luxury
 Now heaps upon some few with vast excess,
 Nature's full blessings would be well dispens't
 In unsuperfluous even proportion. (768-773)

Neither stoic abstinence nor indulgence need define our actions; the Aristotelian mean of temperance, "unsuperfluous even proportion," is the middle course we should pursue. The logical fallacy here resolved pays tribute to the Lady's resourceful power of reason and is a true "trial," or examination, of her most important faculty: the cultivation of modesty and temperance. Her espousal of moderation even functions as a model for the spectators themselves, a moral chiding against "lewdly-pamper'd Luxury," tempered by the fact that a nobleman's daughter voices it.

The emphasis on reason in both this latter debate and the exchange between the two brothers would lead us to expect a resolution, on a grand rhetorical scale, concerning virtue crowned by rational thought. This second confrontation concludes, however, with the brothers' climactic entrance (they "rush in with Swords drawn"); ironically, it releases hardly any dramatic tension, because the Lady's intellectual victory is already convincing. Given both her virtue and her mastery of argument, the brothers' heroism (mismanaged as it is, since the enchanter himself escapes) seems oddly superfluous. In fact, the turn the masque now takes—with the arrival of the brothers, the invocation by the Spirit, and the ascent of Sabrina—sets up a completely different tone and intention, which continue until the masque ends. The reliance on magic spells and incantations to release the Lady from Comus's power reflects a different, yet basic didactic concern. Robert M. Adams notes that Milton makes use of haemony, that "unsightly root" whose divine effect is "Unknown, and like esteem'd," in order to balance black magic with white,²⁷ while, among numerous commentators on the mysterious haemony, Brown sees the magical root as a figure for the word of God, proffered by Lawes in a pastoral role.²⁸ Yet the Spirit's counterdrug, his invocation, and the goddess's ritualistic ceremony all serve a more complex function: to illustrate the limitations of the same "reason" that dominated the first section of the masque, and to complement it with the "magical" powers of the musical and literary arts.

In accordance with this shift, Lawes returns to the prominence he enjoyed at the beginning of the masque ceremony. Now, instead of stepping back from the trial as the masquers actively pursue their own path,

the Spirit takes charge of the action by invoking Sabrina's assistance to free the Lady, ushering in the dance and song of the revels, and finally serving once again as the children's "faithful guide" (944), this time to the destination of their "Father's residence." As Brown notes, in the Bridgewater manuscript—the "acting" version—the two brothers participate with Lawes in the invocation,²⁹ allowing the Egerton boys to show off the musical skills they would have learned from their teacher. Christopher Grose points out that in this joining of roles, Milton allows for the conflation of "the human group with the demonic or spiritual level," to demonstrate the success of Lawes's tutelage.³⁰ The children therefore attest to Lawes's influence both within and outside the fiction of the masque. By contrast, throughout this celebratory conclusion, the Lady herself is a passive object of attention; of the 209 lines remaining in the 1645 published version of the masque (interrupted, of course, by the dances themselves), the Spirit speaks 181, and the remaining few are given to Sabrina as the feminine figure who releases the Lady from her "stony fetters" (819). This reveals both the limits of the Lady's reasoning powers, and, at the same time, the potency of the Spirit in conjuring her to do the job. In fact, in both Milton's Trinity manuscript and the 1637 version—which was probably published at Lawes's instigation—once the Egerton boys stage their rescue attempt, they neither speak nor act until they exit; in sharp contrast to the earlier parts of the drama, they retreat to the background as Lawes steps forward to manage the unfolding spectacle and utter the crucial summary lines. Similarly, in all but the Bridgewater manuscript, Lawes alone addresses the Lady when she rises from her chair,³¹ drawing attention to his success in liberating their sister, as in instructing her brothers. The focus clearly shifts to Lawes's role as the action concludes and the song begins, even as, in the acted version of the masque, what role the brothers do take serves mainly to compliment Lawes himself.

This change in the tutor's function in the action explains the thematic movement from debate to lyric song and verse. As Brown notes, Lawes bears throughout the "otherworldly burden of instruction, an expression of vocation in the poet, as well as much of the entertainment."³² In this section, then, the mode of "instruction" undergoes a transformation from rational to artistic, and the compliment—implicitly directed to Lawes himself through his charges—is altered to focus not on intellectual exchange but on musical prowess. Most significant is the invocatory power of song itself, with its command (to "*Listen and save*" [866]) that is, in fact, obeyed.³³

As the all-important minister of knowledge in *Comus*, Lawes is now seen in his element for the first time in the masque—not merely as teacher but also as musician. As Brown notes, this final section is “rich in song, more, apparently, than has survived”; in fact, “spectacle, song and ritualistic verse comprise the whole masque-like episode.”³⁴ Of the five songs included in the masque as a whole, Lawes sang four, comprising his single greatest contribution to the performance;³⁵ in this finale, then, he at last becomes not merely the source of action but its subject. Through Lawes, we can see these songs, as well as the “magic” of Sabrina’s baptismal ceremony and powerful incantatory verse, not as a force somehow contradictory to the exposition of reason that precedes, but as its philosophical complement. Milton’s indebtedness to Platonic philosophy in this text comprises only one educational tool, and reason is only one resource from which the young masquers draw; the masque demonstrates that the defense of virtue cannot be accomplished by reason alone. A different aspect of Lawes’s tutelage is now evoked—the bounteous powers inherent in the arts of poetry and song, the “magic” that frees the Lady at last from Comus’s grasp.³⁶

The arts, in fact, are both the redemptive agent of the Lady’s release and the means of celebrating it, achieving not divisiveness but unity in the structure of the masque. The predominant rhyme scheme, for example, shifts from blank verse, most frequently used in dramatic poems, to rhymed tetrameter, associated more closely with lyric verse; thus the tetrameter of Comus’s “cavalier” lyric in his first speech (“Meanwhile welcome Joy and Feast, / Midnight shout and revelry” [103]) receives its answer in the purified lyric voice found in Lawes and the goddess Sabrina. Comus’s antic “Measure,” the antimasque serving as a foil to the true masque that follows, finds its superior counterpart as well in the final noble dance and music, which Lawes composed. Finally, as Brown notes, the displays of magic attest to the redemptive power of poetry,³⁷ in liberating the Lady through the potency both of Lawes’s invocation and Sabrina’s successful conjuring verse. Thus the demonstration complements the earlier reliance on rational thought, dialogue, and debate.

The lesson that Milton and Lawes strive to teach Lawes’s young charges resides in this “triumph in victorious dance / O’er sensual Folly and Intemperance” (974–975). As the orchestrator of this final triumphant dance, Lawes is permitted the means of extolling Platonic virtue in contrast to its base perversion seen in Comus’s temptations; as the bringer of order to this allegorical universe, he asserts through song the mystical power of virtuous love. In the figure of Sabrina, Lawes and Milton

demonstrate the virtues of both poetry and music, establishing them as the necessary counterpart to logical debate, a supreme force through which goodness vanquishes evil. This final scene also elaborates upon the several compliments paid to Lawes throughout the poem (as when the Elder Brother identifies him as the one "Whose artful strains have oft delay'd / The huddling brook to hear his madrigal, / And sweeten'd every musk rose of the dale . . ." [494-496]). Here, Sabrina's verse has the power to free the Lady: "she can unlock / The clasping charm and thaw the numbing spell" (852-853), but only "If she be right invok't in warbled Song" (854); that is, if the Spirit himself, through his ingenious lyrics, can conjure her to appear. Lawes will "add the power of some adjuring verse" (858), which will effect her ascent from "the rusty-fringed bank" (890). The healing art inherent in music is evoked in the refrain of the invocation, where redemption is associated with the response elicited through song: "Listen for dear honor's sake / . . . Listen and save" (864, 866). Sabrina's song, similarly, is a celebration of healing lyricism, rich in close rhyme and sensual imagery:

Whilst from off the waters fleet
Thus I set my printless feet
O'er the Cowslip's Velvet head,
That bends not as I tread. (896-899)

Her song, as the magical counterpart to Comus's "blear illusion," uses sensual imagery to exercise the chaste imagination, not to dull the senses into a state of false complacency. Her touch, light as her music, evokes virtue and purity even in its tactile nature: her "chaste palms" are "moist and cold" (918), able to cool the "glutenous heat" of Comus's spell.

Lawes himself, in the guise of the Spirit, is equally the source of music and learning in this culminating lesson of the masque, both providing the history and whereabouts of Sabrina and "composing" and performing the necessary magic. He alone is granted the final honor of presenting the virtuous children to their father and mother, complimenting both the parents and the young masquers. This last song before the epilogue suggests the artful combination of poetry not with the "cavalier" wiles of seduction, but with the narrative of virtue that the masque represents: "Heav'n hath timely tri'd their youth, / Their faith, their patience, and their truth" (970-971), and, the Spirit implies, they have passed with "royal" colors. Like this verse, the final lines of the epilogue resonate as a compliment to Lawes and to the family, as he asserts that his own teaching of both

reason and the finer arts of music and song constitutes the path to virtue: "Mortals that would follow me, / Love virtue, she alone is free" (1018-1019). He then concludes, in a plainsong that emphasizes the solemnity of this final thought: "Or if Virtue feeble were, / Heav'n itself would stoop to her" (1022-1023).³⁸ His last words recapitulate his essential role of intervention in an earthly trial through which divine instruction serves the ends of virtue. The masque ends, therefore, not with the melancholy notion of the fleetingness of time, common to many other masques, but on a note of jubilation;³⁹ through the role of Henry Lawes, *Comus* brings to light not the praise of a single individual, but a model of virtue to be followed regardless of time or circumstance. In Lawes's last words—his framing of the entire display—the didactic is ever foremost: virtue, through reason, trial, and the redemptive powers of poetry and song, will triumph over passion, even as the Spirit, his task "smoothly done" (1012), will return "to the green earth's end."

Elisabeth A. Frost

Elisabeth A. Frost is a doctoral student in the English Department at the University of California, Los Angeles, and is writing her dissertation on experimental women poets in America. Her article "Revisions of Romanticism in 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction'" appeared in *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, Spring 1991.

NOTES

1. Christopher Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution* (London: Faber & Faber, 1977), 43.

2. Willa McClung Evans, *Henry Lawes: Musician and Friend of Poets* (London: Oxford University Press, 1941), 91.

3. J. B. Leishman, *Milton's Minor Poems* (London: Hutchinson & Company Ltd., 1969), 189.

4. John Milton, "A Mask," in *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1957), line 31. Future references to line numbers will appear parenthetically in the text.

5. Evans (n. 2 above), 92-93.

6. John Milton, *Areopagitica*, in *Complete Poems and Major Prose* (n. 4 above), 739.

7. John Milton, *Areopagitica*, 728. For recent criticism on "instruction" in *Comus*, see Maryann Cale McGuire, *Milton's Puritan Masque* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1983). McGuire emphasizes Milton's appropriation of the masque as a royalist form. Milton is "not simply ridiculing the aesthetic conventions of the court masque, but also attacking on moral, theological, and political grounds the form's underlying habits of thought" (41). McGuire argues throughout that Milton "[made] his entertainments lessons in virtuous living" (47). Similarly, in *The Transcendental Masque: An Essay on Milton's "Comus"* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press), 971, Angus Fletcher argues that *Comus* presents "a drama of initiation" for the Lady and her brothers, during which "they have to pass through error, in order to come home to their parents" (163). John Creaser combines the issues of Milton's breach of generic expectations and the masque's virtuous instruction in his article "'The present aid of this occasion': The Setting of *Comus*," in *The Court Masque*, ed. David Lindley (London: Manchester University Press, 1984), 111-134. According to Creaser, "the action tests, and proves wanting, the masque-like expectations of the elder children" (125). See also Leah S. Marcus, *The Politics of Mirth: Jonson, Herrick, Milton, Marvell, and the Defense of Old Holiday Pastimes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), for her argument, parallel to McGuire's, that *Comus* was designed "to encourage the Earl in his resistance to [Archbishop] Laud and the central ecclesiastical authority"; according to Marcus, "the masque turns Anglican ritual against Anglican establishment, symbolically freeing the church from the powerful influence of Laud" (177).

8. Leishman (n. 3 above), 192.

9. Several critics have pointed out that, as McGuire (n. 7 above) puts it, "Milton denied dance its usual function in the masque"—that of signaling "the moral, social, and aesthetic superiority that the upper-class masquers claimed for themselves." Instead, in *Comus*, "dance [is] an expression of virtue" (116). Cf. William A. Sessions, "Milton and the Dance," in *Milton's Legacy in the Arts*, ed.

Albert C. Labriola and Edward Sichi, Jr. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988), 181–203. Transforming traditional principles of dance, Milton creates an image of “temperance as dance” (188), through which “the dance is at the very heart of [the masque’s] theatrical, literary, aesthetic and spiritual experience” (192).

10. Cf. Franklin R. Baruch, “Milton’s *Comus*: Skill, Virtue, and Henry Lawes,” *Milton Studies* 5 (1973): 289–308. Baruch points out that, as “part of an age-old story of learning and growth,” the children implicitly participate in the masque’s compliment to Lawes, who “could appropriately be made to represent the combination of virtue and skill so familiar to the age” (291). Milton’s project is thus a “fusion of masquing compliment and appropriate lesson” (294). Baruch emphasizes the compliment paid to Lawes as a “supernatural” agent in the masque and a figure of virtue and skill, without addressing the distinctly two-part structure of the masque’s lesson.

11. Evans (n. 2 above), 90–91.

12. Cedric C. Brown, *John Milton’s Aristocratic Entertainments* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 104.

13. *Ibid.*, 112.

14. There is also a parallel in Milton’s later work that illuminates the role of Henry Lawes in *Comus*, as well as Milton’s own conception of instruction. In the *Apology for Smectymnuus* of 1642, in a passage of defense of his own character against calumny, Milton traces his education in and admiration of Platonic philosophy in language that is remarkably reminiscent of *Comus* and the lurking presence of Circe: “Riper years . . . led me to the . . . divine volumes of Plato [in which] I learnt of chastity and love . . . whose charming cup is only virtue, which she bears in her hand to those who are worthy (the rest are cheated with a thick intoxicating potion which a certain sorceress, the abuser of love’s name, carries about), [for] the first and chiefest office of love begins and ends in the soul, producing those happy twins of her divine generation, knowledge and virtue” (*Complete Poems and Major Prose* [n. 4 above], 694).

The figure of Circe, like her son in *Comus*, offers a perversion of the true way, the “charming cup” of virtue. In this text the young Milton, like the inexperienced masquers at Ludlow, must discern the nature of that “thick intoxicating potion” urged by Circe and turn instead to “chastity and love,” just as the Lady must turn from *Comus* and follow the instruction of the Spirit’s epilogue. In the world of *Comus*, Lawes himself, the figure of a divine Spirit descended from Jove’s court, promises to the “worthy” the “divine volumes” of his own learning, just as once Plato supplied the young Milton with the key to “knowledge and virtue.”

15. See Robert Martin Adams, *Ikon: John Milton and the Modern Critics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1955), 24.

16. See Baruch (n. 10 above): “The features of the masque are made to compliment Lawes. In addition, Milton uses Lawes’s actual and masquing roles as the teacher of the Egerton children in order to provide all three offspring . . . with thematically and aesthetically important roles” (290). Whether Milton was primar-

ily responsible for Lawes's centrality, or whether Lawes crafted his own role in the masque, he is clearly taking on the "task" of self-representation—just as, at the close of the plot, the actual location of Ludlow enters into the fiction of the masque.

17. Leishman (n. 3 above), 209.

18. Hill (n. 1 above), 46.

19. Brown (n. 12 above), 35.

20. Or, as Angus Fletcher (n. 7 above) says, "neither is 'redeemed' in virtues, since neither can see beyond the narrow confines of oversimplified theories about the true way" (170).

21. See Creaser (n. 7 above), who points out that there is "implicit criticism of some of the elder children's exalted conception of virtue," as well as "explicit criticism of the brothers," who allow Comus to escape. Creaser explains their failure in terms of Milton's plot, which "represents their initiation into the labyrinth of the spiritual life" (126). As Baruch argues (n. 10 above), the brothers' botched rescue shows "how poorly they have learned their lesson from their instructor," but demonstrates, nonetheless, that "they are learning through experience" (303).

22. Leishman (n. 3 above), 228.

23. See Barbara Breasted's exploration of the earl of Castlehaven's sexual crimes in "Comus and the Castlehaven Scandal," *Milton Studies* 3 (1971): 201–224. Comus may "have been intended to help repair the reputation of the entire family by making the last unmarried Egerton daughter act out her resistance to dangerous sexual temptation" (202). The didactic nature of the masque would then take on a larger political purpose, as well as an even more compelling personal one. See also, however, John Creaser's response: "Milton's *Comus*: The Irrelevance of the Castlehaven Scandal," *Milton Quarterly* 21 (1987): 24–34.

24. Milton, *Areopagitica*, 727.

25. This and several other passages later cited are drawn from the 1645 published edition, on which most modern editions are based; several such passages, which appear in Milton's early Trinity manuscript, and then reappear in the 1637 published edition, were apparently cut for the Ludlow performance, which most critics believe the Bridgewater manuscript represents most closely. Brown argues that cuts were made in the Bridgewater manuscript for reasons of both tact and practicality. Of the cuts in the Lady's speech on chastity, Brown (n. 12 above) suggests that "Perhaps the combination of explicitly religious language with erotic suggestiveness was the problem" (83). He also points out that alterations to the epilogue seemed designed to render Lawes, and his skills, more prominent (146). Additional arguments have been offered by E. M. W. Tillyard in "The Action of *Comus*," in *A Maske at Ludlow: Essays on Milton's "Comus"*, ed. John S. Diekhoff (Cleveland: The Press of Case Western University, 1968). In the case of this particular passage, cuts may have been made from the Lady's speech to lend it a greater delicacy requisite for public performance without altering the basic thrust of the passage; furthermore, these speeches are among the longest in the poem, and shortening them may have facilitated Alice Egerton's mastery of her part. See

John Milton, *A Maske: The Earlier Versions*, ed. S. E. Spratt (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973) for the texts of the Trinity, Bridgewater, and 1637 manuscripts.

26. Tillyard (n. 25 above), 47. See also James Andrew Clark, "Milton Naturans, Milton Naturatus: The Debate over Nature in *A Mask Presented at Ludlow*," *Milton Studies* 20 (1984): 3-27, for Clark's argument that Milton presents two conflicting conceptions of nature in the Lady and Comus, ultimately reconciling them in the figure of Sabrina.

27. Adams (n. 15 above), 18.

28. Brown (n. 12 above), 105.

29. *Ibid.*, 118. See Spratt's text (n. 25 above) for the variations among the Trinity, Bridgewater, and 1637 versions.

30. Christopher Grose, *Milton and the Sense of Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 58.

31. Brown (n. 12 above), 115.

32. *Ibid.*, 114.

33. Two pragmatic explanations may also be involved in the distinctly binary structure that emerges in the masque. One is musical: Evans (n. 2 above) notes that Lawes may have learned that both Alice Egerton and the woman playing Sabrina could sing less competently than he had hoped, and therefore decided to write music only for a very few of their lines. Thus this last section would of necessity be dominated to Lawes himself (93-94). Second, the existence of Sabrina's role can be explained on structural grounds: the problem may have been one of tact, for the masque could hardly portray the Lady's virtue as being completely dependent on Heaven's assistance, yet her complete self-sufficiency would have entailed eliminating the role of the Attendant Spirit altogether, which would hardly have suited Henry Lawes. The solution devised was to demonstrate that virtue, possessing its own defensive powers, also enjoys the protection of heaven (Adams [n. 15 above], 9-10). Yet the thematic impact remains clear, as does the central role of Lawes himself in indicating the necessity of both reason and invocatory song in preserving the virtuous soul.

34. Brown (n. 12 above), 119.

35. Evans (n. 2 above), 97.

36. Cf. McGuire (n. 7 above): "Milton did not devalue the contributions of the nonliterary arts or use poetry to substitute for nonliterary effects. Rather his masque reveals a deliberate and consistent effort to modify and control the contributions of the extraliterary arts" (105). I would argue, to the contrary, that Milton—and Lawes—underlined the complementary nature of the poetic and non-literary arts, in opposition to the limitations of reason.

37. Brown (n. 12 above), 5.

38. Evans (n. 2 above), 106.

39. Enid Welsford, *The Court Masque: A Study in the Relationship Between Poetry and the Revels* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1927), 274.