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AS THE LADY of A Maske Presented at Ludlow Castle (1634) rejects the blandishments of the sorcerer Comus, she interrupts her disputation to remark on his unworthiness to hear her words, apparently condemning her own rhetoric in the process. "I had not thought to have unlockt my lips / In this unhallow'd air" (756-57), she complains, and several lines later:

Thou hast nor Ear nor Soul to apprehend

The sublime notion and high mystery

That must be utter'd to unfold the sage

And serious doctrine of Virginity,

And thou art worthy that thou shouldst not know

More happiness than this thy present lot.

Enjoy your dear Wit and gay Rhetoric

That hath so well been taught her dazzling fence,

Thou art not fit to hear thyself convinc't.

(784-92)¹.

Catherine Belsey theorizes that this passage serves as an apology or explanation "of what might otherwise appear a quite unfeminine eloquence."²In fact, "gay Rhetoric" was more than simply "quite unfeminine"; numerous conduct manuals and other publications of the early modern period explicitly connected speech with sexual promiscuity, and silence with chastity. This formula has been explored in numerous studies since Suzanne Hull's pioneering work *Chaste, Silent, and Obedient* (1982), but rarely in depth or with reference to Milton.³My aims, in fact, are to explore both the complex implications of silence in Milton's masque, and the parallel belief that a woman who listened to male transgressive speech was also sometimes presumed unchaste, while "innocent" ears such as those of the Lady in Maske were considered another proof of sexual innocence. Through the Lady's assertions of silence and deafness, she proclaims her purity and her submission to true authority, from which she derives access to wisdom and strength. However, she is neither truly silent (speaking to clarify her opposition to Comus) nor truly deaf (hearing Comus's arguments sufficiently to refute

1. Quotations of Milton's prose and poetry are from John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York, 1957).

2. Catherine Belsey, *John Milton: Language, Gender, Power* (New York, 1988), p. 49.

3. See, for instance, Elaine V. Beilin, *Redeeming Eve: Women Writers of the English Renaissance* (Princeton, 1987), p. 8; Margaret W. Ferguson, "A Room Not Their Own: Renaissance Women as Readers and Writers," in *The Comparative Perspective on Literature*, ed. Clayton Koelb and Susan Noakes (Ithaca, 1988), pp. 93-116; Suzanne W. Hull, *Chaste, Silent, and Obedient: English Books for Women, 1475-1640* (San Marino, 1982); Ann Rosalind Jones, *The Currency of Eros: Women's Love Lyric in Europe, 1540-1621* (Bloomington, 1990), pp. 1-18; Peter Stallybrass, "Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed," in *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourse of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy J. Vickers (Chicago, 1987), p. 127; and Joy Wiltenburg, *Disorderly Women and Female Power in the Street Literature of Early Modern England and Germany* (Charlottesville, 1992), pp. 155-56.

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them); Milton attempts to resolve the contradiction between supposed silence and actual speech by implying a close relationship not only between silence and eloquence, but between silence and music. Another complication is the Lady's actual silence after her rescue, which may indicate a young woman's respect for valid patriarchal authority; however, her brothers also lapse into silence, and like the Lady are subordinated to their parents. Comus's final silence, in contrast to the children's, indicates neither chastity nor respect. Rather, as the appropriate penalty for female promiscuity and transgressive speech, his silence reverses gender roles while confirming the conventional equation of rhetoric with illicit female sexuality.

Gendered stereotypes about speech, hearing, and chastity were an inescapable part of Milton's culture, resonating in such proverbs as "discreet women have neither ears nor eyes."⁴ Whatever Milton's opinion of these sentiments, the apology he wrote for the Lady demonstrates his awareness that they would color the reception of Maske. Likewise, the poet would have been aware that those who generally adhered to these principles might differ in their acknowledgement of exceptions, recalling the controversy over the gender of their late monarch. Elizabeth's self-presentation as the Virgin Queen necessarily omitted two-thirds of the formula for virtuous womanhood: chaste, silent, and obedient. In writing a speaking part for a gentlewoman, Milton proposes such an exception, which leads him to balance throughout the masque various oppositions, chiefly in the Lady. Like Elizabeth, he exploits the positive connotations of virginity, while complicating the simplistic conflation of chastity with silence and deafness, and of silence with obedience.

The Lady's apparent unwillingness to speak serves as an essential demonstration of her maidenhood in a society that tended to equate female speech with sexual activity. The stereotype of the loose and loose-talking woman perhaps derives from the harlot of Proverbs, "talkative and wandering, not bearing to be quiet, not able to abide still at home" (Prov. vii, 10-11).⁵ The garrulous whore and her opposite, the silent and chaste woman, appear in numerous early modern publications. For instance, Barnabe Rich wrote in *The excellencie of good women* (1613) that "a good woman keeps silence" while "a Harlot is full of words."⁶ In the ballad of *The Discontented Married Man*, a bawdy complaint about the wife is that "she cannot keep her lips

together."⁷The chorus of Elizabeth Cary's play *The Tragedy of Mariam the Fair, Queen of Jewry* (1613) criticizes Mariam for speaking her thoughts "more than to her lord alone" for in so doing, "though most chaste, she doth her glory blot, / And wounds her honour, though she kills it not."⁸Not all such "extradomestic speech" might injure a woman's chastity "as much as adulterous action would," as Barry Weller and Margaret Ferguson claim in their

4. N.H. Keeble, ed., *The Cultural Identity of Seventeenth-Century Woman: A Reader* (London and New York, 1994), p. 76.

5. Vulgate, trans. by Alcuin Blamires, in *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts*, ed. Alcuin Blamires (Oxford, 1992), p. 33; of. Marbod of Rennes, *Liber Decem Capitulum*, 12th century, quoted in Blamires, p. 101. Subsequent biblical references are to the Authorized Version, and are incorporated into the text.

6. Linda Woodbridge, *Women and the English Renaissance: Literature and the Nature of Womankind, 1540-1620* (Urbana and Chicago, 1984), p. 77.

7. Anthony Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination in England 1500-1800* (New Haven and London, 1995), p. 12.

8. Elizabeth Cary, *The Tragedy of Mariam the Fair, Queen of Jewry*, ed. Barry Weller and Margaret Ferguson (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1994), Act III, 229-32.

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introduction to Cary's work.⁹Nevertheless, the Lady's "extradomestic" situation resembles Mariam's in that she converses with a male character who lacks legitimate authority over her sexuality, and in that the audience might indeed perceive as transgressive any willing disclosure of her thoughts under the circumstances. Even the laudable goal of teaching Comus the "sage and serious doctrine of Virginity" would not excuse the Lady's speech, since it was considered unseemly for women to teach men. The biblical injunctions against such speech are well known--for instance, "Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence" (1 Tim. 2:11-12; cf. 1 Cor. 14:34-35)--and although variously interpreted in recent years, relatively unambiguous in the seventeenth century. As a topic for female discourse, chastity might be perceived as particularly unsuitable, even as a contradiction in terms, considering (for instance) the 1391 court case which declared that even a virtuous woman must not teach men because her voice alone would certainly "inflame her hearers to lechery."¹⁰

Despite her repeated apologies for speaking, the Lady continues to speak. This apparent inconsistency is so disturbing that some critics have taken her at her word and located silence in the middle of her debate; for instance, Robert Entzminger declares, "Inclined at first not to speak at all, she breaks her silence with a refutation of Comus's lies."¹¹Yet the Lady's flow of words provides no silence to break. Others note the contradiction between the Lady's speech and her

praise of silence, but deplore the Lady's apparent garrulity: Gale Carrithers and James Hardy lament, "Alas, she has said ... quite enough ... and had much better not 'unlockt' ... her lips further 'In this unhallow'd air.'" [12](#).

In fact, the situation in which Milton has placed the Lady requires speech to sustain virtue, setting chastity and silence in opposition. If silence represents listening in obedience as well as chastity, to remain silent in the face of Comus's arguments might be misconstrued as acquiescence to his philosophies, as the silence of consent. The Lady's apologies for speaking not only demonstrate her maidenly reticence but transfer the blame for her transgression to the sorcerer, who has metaphorically raped her by forcing open her virgin mouth. By his verbal attack on her virtue, Comus has forfeited any masculine fight to be heard in silence and transformed what initially appears as female transgression into that virtue that has a "tongue to check [the] pride" of vice (761). As Katherine Eisaman Maus notes, "what seems like capitulation turns out to be resistance: the Lady unlocks her lips in order to refute Comus's argument, not to drink his potion or allow him any other kind of access." [13](#). Her speech can be perceived not merely as chaste, but as divinely inspired, since according to the Bible, there are times when

9. Weller and Ferguson, p. 36; cf. Margaret Ferguson, "Running On with Almost Public Voice: The Case of 'E.C.,'" in *Tradition and the Talents of Women*, ed. Florence Howe (Urbana, Ill., 1991), p. 52.

10. Blamires, pp. 252, 255.

11. Robert L. Entzminger, *Divine Word: Milton and the Redemption of Language* (Pittsburgh, 1985), p. 98.

12. Gale H. Carrithers Jr. and James D. Hardy Jr., *Milton and the Hermeneutic Jonson* (Baton Rouge and London, 1994), p. 169.

13. Katharine Eisaman Maus, *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance* (Chicago, 1995), p. 206.

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silence is inappropriate or even disobedient to God. Jeremiah and Timothy are commanded to break silence, and the psalmist who attempted to keep silent was unable: "I was dumb with silence, I held my peace, even from good; and my sorrow was stirred" (Ps. 39:2). The Lady's verbal resistance to Comus operates simultaneously as obedience to God, for as Entzminger has so eloquently argued, her superior words are in themselves proof that the Lady participates in the Word of God, the source of true eloquence. [14](#). The "superior power" that Comus senses behind her words is the same power that "speaks" in Jove's thunder.

Yet in authorizing the Lady to speak against Comus, Milton does not exactly validate the notion that a woman's primary allegiance lay with God rather than man, a view that Ferguson

implies in citing the Lady's response "to her would-be king and seducer" as an example of a woman speaking in dissent to male authority because she heeds divine authority:

Articulated by Catholic and Protestant writers, male and female, such statements clearly drive a wedge into the apparently hegemonic social rule linking female chastity with silence and obedience. The dissenting female voice, historical or fictional, invokes religious principles to redefine chastity in a way that dissociates it from obedience to (certain) figures of male authority.¹⁵

Although male, Comus is not human but the son of a pagan deity and a witch. We cannot be sure that Milton or his contemporaries would extrapolate from Comus to support actual instances of female dissent from male authority. The most that can be said about the Lady's resistance to him is that even women may dissent from evil offered by nonhuman figures, just as Eve was created with the capability of rejecting Satan's words.

Many critics (most recently, David Gay) overlook the gendering of speech and silence and argue that the Lady's employment of "plain speech" allies her and Milton with the antirhetorical strand of Puritanism.¹⁶ Certainly the Lady's apparent denunciation of rhetoric bears a superficial resemblance to similar admonitions by the champions of plain speech and others who urged the avoidance of deceitful "ornaments" and other rhetorical tricks. According to Puttenham (1569), for example, figures are "in a sorte abuses or rather trespasses in speach, because they passe the ordinary limits of common utterance, and be occupied of purpose to deceiue the care and also the minde, drawing it from plainnesse and simplicitie to a certaine doublenesse."¹⁷ However, although it is true that the enchanter uses one particularly duplicitous figure that the Lady avoids--*traductio*, the pun, in "It is for homely features to keep home" (748)--their rhetoric, otherwise, is quite similar.¹⁸ The Lady's use of rhetorical devices proves that her parents have

14. Entzminger, p. 804.

15. Ferguson, "Running," pp. 54-55.

16. David Gay, "Rapt Spirits': 2 Corinthians 12.2-5 and the Language of Milton's Comus," *MQ* 29 (1995), 76-86.

17. George [Richard?] Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, ed. Gladys Doidge Willcock and Alice Walker (Cambridge, England, 1936, 1970), p. 154.

18. Jean E. Graham, "Creation and Chaos: Linguistic 'Ordering' in John Milton's *Mask*, *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes*" (Ph.D. diss., Case Western Reserve Univ. 1989), pp. 39-77.

educated her according to her class and claim to virtue, that like her brothers she has been "nurs't in Princely lore" (34).

The Lady's seeming praise of silence is itself a rhetorical device: *preteritio*, an ironic refusal to speak. Henry Peacham described this figure in *The Garden of Eloquence* (1577): "when we faine and make as though we would say nothing in some matter, when notwithstanding we speake most of al, or when we say something, in saying we will not say it."¹⁹ In 1566, Susenbrotus defined it as "when we pretend to pass over something, not to know it or not to wish to say it when it is something we wish above all to say, or when we say in passing what we deny we want to say at all."²⁰ According to Lee Sonnino, *preteritio* was noted or described by rhetoricians from Cicero and Quintilian through Richard Sherry and Abraham Fraunce.²¹ Puttenham, who calls the figure "*paralepsis*, or the *passager*," describes it as particularly suited to female speech: "it is also when we will not seeme to know a thing, and yet we know it well inough, and may be likened to the maner of women, who as the comon saying is, will say nay and take it."²² That is, the use of the figure is sly and coy, implying a pretended ignorance. Other names for the figure seem particularly apt descriptions of women's speech as perceived in the early modern period: *occultatio*, indicating the darkly mysterious nature of female sexuality; and *negatio*, implying women's (false) denial of sexual access to men: women "will say nay and take it." The Lady's assertions of silence are problematic, because in a sense they are deceptive: she does indeed speak. We are inclined to interpret the Lady as virtuous, in compliment to the masquing Lady Alice Egerton and her father the Earl of Bridgewater, patron of *Maske*. Moreover, Puttenham for one would have excused her figurative language as a poetic defense of righteousness: "because our maker or Poet is appointed ... for a pleader ... of pleasant & louely causes and nothing perillous ... [figures] are not in truth to be accompted vices but for vertues in the poetical science very commendable."²³ Nevertheless, female virtue (unlike the righteousness of forthright male heroes such as Abdiel) seems to require lying, thereby throwing into question the idea of a virtuous woman.

The masque attempts to bring coherence to the paradox of a silent yet vocal Lady by implying that silence is the basis of her eloquence and song. John Hollander rightly asserts that the Lady's song is in part a hymn to Echo as the "Sweet Queen of Parley": that is, the one who governs all discourse.²⁴ Hollander fails to note, however, that in *Maske* song is connected with silence. While the Attendant Spirit silences storms with his music (86-87), the Lady's strains to Echo "float upon the wings / Of silence" (249-50). *Comus* probably means that all auditors fall silent to hear the Lady's beautiful voice, but the auditors are unspecified, and "silence" is presented as a noun rather

19. Henry Peacham, *The Garden of Eloquence Conteyning the Figures of Grammer and Rhetorick*, ed. R. C. Alston (Menston, England, 1971), p. 89.

20. Lee A. Sonnino, *A Handbook to Sixteenth-Century Rhetoric* (London, 1968), p. 135.

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 135-36.

22. Puttenham, p. 232.

23. Puttenham, p. 155.

24. John Hollander, "Milton's Renewed Song," in *Milton: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. Arthur E. Barker (London, 1965), pp. 47-48. Originally published in John Hollander, *The Untuning of the Sky* (Princeton, 1961).

than as the action of falling silent. The image Comus provides is one of the Lady depending on silence, an entity apparently independent of other people, for the strength of her song. This tendency to personification becomes personification per se in the comments of the Attendant Spirit, who tells the brothers that he heard the Lady's song emerge from "an unusual stop of silence" which "[g]ave respite" from the "barbarous dissonance" of Comus's rout (552-53, 550):

[The song] stole upon the Air, that even Silence

Was took ere she was ware, and wish't she might

Deny her nature, and be never more,

Still to be so displac't.

(557-60)

Silence is similarly personified in *Paradise Lost*, when "Silence was pleas'd" to submit to "the wakeful Nightingale" who "all night long her amorous descant sang" (IV, 602-04; cf. V, 39-40 and "Il Penseroso," 55-58). In the masque, Silence submits to the song of the Lady with similar pleasure; while the unintelligible clamor of Comus's creatures assaults silence, intelligible song and speech rely on and complement silence as well as break it. In a fascinating consideration of deafness as "critical modality," Lennard Davis notes, "Silence ... is between words, and in some sense, it accounts for meaning; it frames articulation. On an auditory level, each utterance erupts from silence."²⁵ Milton's words to the Neapolitan singer Leonora would be equally appropriate for the Lady, as they join song, silence, and divine authority in the same way: "If God is all things and permeates all things, in you alone he speaks and possesses all His other creatures in silence" ("Ad Leonoram" 9-10). Milton thus defends the Lady's rhetoric by drawing on the positive connotations of song and silence; this defense is especially necessary because the rhetorician is a woman. Furthermore, silence is consciously gendered in the masque as it is nowhere else in Milton, with the only instance of silence personified as female: "took ere she was ware," "wish't she might / Deny her nature," in contrast to the non-gender-specific personification of "Silence was pleas'd." This gendering of silence underscores the connection between silence and the virtuous female speaker.

In addition to a chaste tongue, the Lady claims chaste ears as a defense against Comus's false rhetoric, a defense that is similarly problematic. She asserts a willful deafness in her first words to him, seemingly to deflate his confidence in his rhetorical skills: "Nay gentle Shepherd, ill is lost that praise / That is addrest to unattending Ears" (271-72). The Lady possesses the ability to understand and judge the virtue of words, and the will to shield her mind from unvirtuous words as soon as she recognizes them, just as Eve escapes pollution from Satan's dream, according to

Adam: "Evil into the

25. Lennard J. Davis, "Deafness and Insight: The Deafened Moment as a Critical Modality," CE 57 (1995), 893.

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mind of God or Man / May come and go, so unapprov'd, and leave / No spot or blame behind" (Paradise Lost V, 117-19). The Lady's chaste ears represent a voluntary self-preservation, a decision to withhold approval from what she has physically heard, "a form of cutting off the body from the flow of narrative."²⁶ Moreover, her deafness enforces a negative silence on Comus: he is silent relative to her, because she chooses not to hear his deceitful words. The Lady's auricular virginity differs radically from the deafness of Comus, who has "nor Ear nor Soul to apprehend" the Lady's virtue (784). As Donald Friedman argues, Comus's ear "is true in a limited sense, but not in the way that is vital in the masque, the way that unites perception and reason so that the true ear matches the truth of the word it hears."²⁷ His deafness is as spiritual as that of Israel's leaders, who "persisted deaf" to God's purposes in *Samson Agonistes* (249). The Lady's refusal to listen to temptation is appropriate to her moral innocence; she thereby avoids even the appearance of compromise. She is a "Good Woman," one whose ears shield her virtue, according to the definition of Sir Thomas Overbury in *A Wife* (1614): "Dishonesty never comes nearer than her ears, and then wonder stops it out, and saves virtue the labour." The "unchaste woman," in contrast, "delights to hear the vain words of men," according to Dorothy Leigh in *The Mothers Blessing* (1616).²⁸ Frequently, chaste ears and chaste tongues were described as operating in unison. For instance, in *The Ladies Calling* (1673), Richard Allestree would claim that "she who listens to any wanton discourse has violated her ears, she that speaks any, her tongue."²⁹ A good woman could boast as would Elizabeth Major in *Honey on the Rod* (1656), "myself I'll silence, since tongue nor ear / Of a chaste soul can [sin] describe, nor hear."³⁰ Milton anticipates Major's pairing of chaste tongue and chaste ear in his portrayal of the Lady, and undermines both components of the truism.

Like the trope of *preteritio*, the Lady's claim of "unattending Ears" is deceitful, for she must hear and understand Comus's words in order to reject them. To selectively shut out unvirtuous speech requires a less-than-innocent knowledge both of what is being said and of what is unvirtuous. To paraphrase Puttenham's description of *preteritio*, the Lady seems not to know a thing, and yet knows it well enough. If she did not in fact hear Comus, the Attendant Spirit would be unable to claim that the Lady's faith and truth have been "tri'd" with "hard assays" (970, 972). Moreover, she must comprehend Comus's philosophies in order to refute them. Without fully clearing her of the suspicion of hypocrisy, the Lady's refutation proves that her ear is true, that she listens to a higher authority, as Friedman argues.³¹ The Lady's claim of silence supports the idea that she listens to internalized divine wisdom rather than to Comus, as silence provides and represents access to God's words elsewhere in Milton's writing. In *Paradise Lost*, for instance, Adam

26. Davis, p. 889.

27. Donald M. Friedman, "Comus and the Truth of the Ear," in "The Muses Common-Weale": Poetry and Politics in the Seventeenth Century, ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia, 1988), p. 130; cf. John G. Demaray, Milton and the Masque Tradition: The Early Poems, "Arcades," and Comus (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), p. 132.

28. Keeble, pp. 8, 99. Othello's wooing of Desdemona, in the play by Shakespeare, demonstrates the danger inherent in women listening to men.

29. Angeline Goteau, *The Whole Duty of a Woman: Female Writers in Seventeenth-Century England* (Garden City, N.Y., 1985), p. 44.

30. Elaine Hobby, *Virtue of Necessity: English Women's Writing 1649-88* (London, 1988), p. 65.

31. Friedman, p. 130.

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discloses to Raphael his intention of listening to "the full relation" of the archangel's tale, since it is "worthy of Sacred silence to be heard" (V, 556-57). Human silence before God is scriptural: "But the Lord is in his holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before him," commands the prophet Habakkuk (Hab. 2:20; cf. Isa. 41:1; Zech. 2:13). As Davis asserts, "Silence is the strongest enforced form of the Name of the Father because silence represents the space that permits the Name of the Father only and no other name. The response to God is reverential silence."[32](#).

From the chaste ears that the Lady turns toward Comus and her silent attentiveness to the wisdom of God, she also derives the strength to resist the ungodly. Likewise, for Milton's Samson, silence means keeping God's secrets, "the sacred trust of silence" (*Samson Agonistes* 428), and therefore maintaining access to God's power: "my fort of silence" (236). For the unfallen angels advancing to war in Heaven, silence is similarly military, although aggressive rather than defensive: "mov'd on / In silence thir bright legions" (*Paradise Lost* VI, 64-65). While in these instances Milton's strong, silent characters are masculine, at least one conduct manual, the anonymous *Gentlewoman's Companion*, seems to support his portrayal of female power through silence: "Silence in a Woman is a moving-rhetorick, winning most, when in words it woeth least."[33](#) Not only is silence here described as peculiarly suited to women, but it is also framed as a rhetorical weapon, a strategy for winning.

Although silence as a rhetorical strategy may be seen as a strength, the Lady's silence at the end of the debate is quite different, particularly since it is unclear whether this silence is voluntary or imposed upon her. The Lady's silence occurs nearly simultaneously with that of Comus, who vows to "dissemble, / And try her yet more strongly" (805-06), although he is apparently unable to produce stronger arguments. The dash following "Be wise, and taste" (813)

suggests physical force rather than rhetoric, a suggestion confirmed by the physicality of the brothers' response, as described in the stage directions after the dash: "The Brothers rush in with Swords drawn, wrest his Glass out of his hand, and break it against the ground." Comus must have moved his glass nearer to the Lady's lips as he urged her to "taste," and his reliance on physical power concedes his defeat in oratory.

The Lady's silence may in part indicate her shock at such an assault. More to the point, it would be logical for her to shut her mouth firmly at the approach of the glass. In so doing, she would be making the only physical response left to her, since her body is frozen in Comus's chair. As long as the debate was verbal, the Lady was able to contend verbally, but her superior eloquence would avail her nothing against any form of physical persuasion. Whether Comus's assault can be called attempted rape is not relevant to this argument: Comus is offering to use physical force against an immobile person.

32. Davis, p. 888.

33. Elaine Hobby, "A Woman's Best Setting Out Is Silence: The Writings of Hannah Wolley," in *Culture and Society in the Stuart Restoration: Literature, Drama, History*, ed. Gerald MacLean (Cambridge, England, 1995), p. 186.

Certainly his glass conveys sexual connotations; the situation has implied sexuality from the start. As Michael Lieb argues, "the context of the Lady's immobilization and the language through which it is described are clearly sexual and indeed violent in orientation."³⁴ The sexual violence of the masque is in part developed by allusion to Sabrina and to Philomel, the latter being the "love-lorn Nightingale" (234), as Margaret Thickstun points out.³⁵ Both Sabrina and Philomel relied on supernatural intervention when threatened with rape, although in both these examples the physical violence is more explicit than in the case of the Lady (according to both Spenser and Geoffrey of Monmouth, Sabrina was murdered; Philomel was raped by Tereus, who afterward cut out her tongue) and the supernatural intervention produced lasting physical transformation: Sabrina into the "Goddess of the silver lake" (865) and Philomel into a nightingale.³⁶ Like the Lady, Sabrina and Philomel possess beautiful singing voices; and much as the Lady's song attracted the attention of Comus, so too Philomel's voice attracted Tereus.³⁷ Thus, female song prompts illicit male sexuality in a way that validates female chastity, the opposite of the fourteenth-century verdict cited earlier, which blamed the virtuous woman's voice for male lust.

Among Milton critics, William Kerrigan recognizes a parallel between the Lady's silence and her chastity, commenting that "her doctrine of virginity remains undivulged, itself virginal, as if speech this intimate would be equivalent to the sexuality her virtue forbids--the exhibition of the self to the other."³⁸ Yet Kerrigan's evaluation of the Lady's chaste silence, which for him throws

into question the strength of her virtue, arises from his faulty assumption that chastity and silence are defined the same for the Lady as they are for Comus. As John Leonard points out, Kerrigan "assumes that the exchange between Comus and the Lady takes place in a neutral space where captor and captive are equally free to speak about the Lady's choices. No such neutral space exists. The Lady's speech is limited as Comus's is not."³⁹The early modern equation between female silence and chastity meant that her speech would inevitably be interpreted differently from his. Frances Sendbuehler argues that "silence must be as heavily gendered as is voice in the use of language; the implication being that silence and speech can have a different weight, meaning or value depending on whether it is a woman or a man who is speaking or silent."⁴⁰In *A Preparative to Marriage* (1591), for example, Henry Smith provided gender-specific advice on choosing a "fit and godly" spouse by his or her speech. For a woman, Smith amended "speech": "or rather, her silence, for the ornament of a woman is silence: and therefore the law was given to the man (to Adam first, and to Moses after) rather than to the woman, to show that he should be the teacher, and she the hearer."⁴¹Furthermore, while the sexual double standard required absolutely

34. Michael Lieb, *Milton and the Culture of Violence* (Ithaca and London, 1994), p. 104.

35. Margaret Olofson Thickstun, *Fictions of the Feminine: Puritan Doctrine and the Representation of Women* (Ithaca, 1988), p. 51.

36. Re. Sabrina, see Hughes's footnote for lines 826-32, p. 109.

37. Davis, p. 895.

38. William Kerrigan, *The Sacred Complex: On the Psychogenesis of Paradise Lost* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1983), p. 30.

39. John Leonard, "Saying 'No' to Freud: Milton's A Maske and Sexual Assault," *MQ* 25 (1991), 130-31. See also William Kerrigan, "The Politically Correct Comus: A Reply to John Leonard," *MQ* 27 (1993), 149-55.

40. Frances Sendbuehler, "Silence as Discourse in Paradise Lost" (paper presented at GEMCS Conference, Rochester, Nov. 5, 1994), http://www.urich.edu/~sim_jcreamer/silence.html.

41. Keeble, p. 147.

unquestioned chastity from the Lady, sexual activity on the part of Comus might have been accepted if it were not for the emphatically "unnatural," subversive, and violent character of his sexuality.

The Lady remains speechless even after her release from Comus's bonds, and indeed to the end of the masque. One possible interpretation is that she maintains silence from respect for genuine authority, which was absent during her scene with Comus, and which is present for the remainder of the masque. As the messenger of Jove, the Spirit represents valid male authority. He is accompanied by her brothers, who, although younger than she, are male--and the elder, Lord Brackley, is Bridgewater's heir apparent. Then the Spirit summons Sabrina, an older woman, so that truly the Lady is in the presence of both men and "matrons, to whom she owes a civil reverence," as Richard Brathwait advised in 1631, citing Ecclesiasticus:

"Thou that art young, speak, if need be, and yet scarcely when thou art twice asked. Comprehend much in few words; in many be as one that is ignorant; be as one that understandeth, and yet hold thy tongue." *Eclus.* [32:7-8] The direction is general, but to none more consequently useful than to young ones, whose bashful silence is an ornament to their sex....It suits not her honour for a young woman to be prolocuter; but especially when either men are in presence or ancient matrons, to whom she owes a civil reverence, it will become her to tip her tongue with silence.⁴²

Not only is the Lady a woman, but clearly a young woman both in her praise of virginity and in her original portrayal by fifteen-year-old Lady Alice. The attitude of silence before godly wisdom was considered especially necessary for the young, and one conduit of such wisdom would be elders such as the Spirit and Sabrina. In the Bible, Elihu allows the older "comforters" of Job to speak first, declaring, "I am young, and ye are very old; wherefore I was afraid, and durst not show you mine opinion. I said, Days should speak, and multitude of years should teach wisdom" (Job 32:6-7; cf. Jer. 1:6; 1 Tim. 4:11-12). Like Elihu, the Lady was inspired to speak when "multitude of years," in the person of Comus, failed to teach wisdom. In the presence of the Spirit and Sabrina, she reverts to the preferred behavior for young women. Although older than the Lady, Sabrina also demonstrates her female virtue by neither speaking nor even entering the presence of the Attendant Spirit until entreated by him.

Mary Loeffelholz connects the Lady's silence with Milton's control over the "female maternal body" (that is, Sabrina's) in the masque, which, "once produced, can be made to disappear at Milton's will, and the Lady herself, given temporary control of her body, loses her power of speech." The masque's end restores the Lady to her proper place, "a place in which she can be silent and safe, her father's house."⁴³ Likewise, Kathleen Wall argues that

42. Keeble, pp. 100-101.

43. Mary Loeffelholz, "Two Masques of Ceres and Proserpine: Comus and The Tempest," in *Re-membering Milton: Essays on the Texts and Traditions*, ed. Mary Nyquist and Margaret W. Ferguson (New York and London, 1987), p. 34-35.

the Lady's silence is evidence that "her strength is ... not much use to her in the patriarchal

world."⁴⁴ But silence is more complicated than these critics imply, representing both loss of power and access to divine strength, obedience and dissent. In addition to its connection with godly wisdom and power, the Lady's silence signals a strength that she derives from her earthly father. All her actions and words unfold in the presence of the Earl of Bridgewater, a silent yet visible observer of the masque that he commissioned to celebrate his new position as Lord President of Wales. Louise Simons argues that Lady Alice's parents embody "silence and power resid[ing] together."⁴⁵ With her father looking on, representing in his person the political and economic power behind the masque, the Lady was unquestionably authorized to speak.⁴⁶ The Lady's temporary right to speak is revoked at the end of the masque, but that she spoke at all was highly unusual--perhaps unprecedented--for an aristocratic masquer. That she is deprived of speech as she dances before silent parents recalls her connection with their power, even as it minimizes her own power in comparison with theirs. While John Rogers argues that the Lady is silenced because her "superior power" seems superior even to her father's, they were never truly her words: Milton wrote them and her father paid for them.⁴⁷ The situation contains yet another unresolved contradiction: the Lady's empowerment is a precedent for granting authority to women, and at the same time she is merely a mouthpiece for the hierarchy. Even Balaam's ass was granted the power of speech to speak against that prophet's transgressive behavior ("Am not I thine ass, upon which thou hast ridden ever since I was thine unto this day?"), and Jesus claims for his Father the power to give speech to rocks, so that giving speech to what is ordinarily mute compliments the one who empowers rather than the empowered (Num. 22; Luke 19:37-40).

Furthermore, any gender-based interpretation of the Lady's final silence is problematized by the silence of her brothers. Cedric Brown observes that "once the boys have failed to complete the rescue of their sister, they neither speak nor act again, until they are conducted from the stage." While "the Lady's silence is understandable, expressive of her helpless bondage," Brown continues, an unknown censor, "conscious of social decorum, was perturbed by the silence and subordination of the boys." This unidentified person was presumably responsible for the transferral of some of the Attendant Spirit's lines to the boys in the Bridgewater manuscript, in which the young heir leads Lady Alice from Comus's wood, saying, "Come sister while heav'n lends us grace."⁴⁸ It appears that this censor desired to preserve the distinctions of gender more than Milton, whose published version of the masque emphasizes the hierarchy of parent and child, with the Spirit turning from the young masquers to their parents:

44. Kathleen Wall, "A Mask Presented at Ludlow Castle: The Armor of Logos," in *Milton and the Idea of Woman*, ed. Julia M. Walker (Urbana and Chicago, 1988), p. 60.

45. Louise Simons, "'And Heaven Gates Ore My Head': Death as Threshold in Milton's Masque," in *Milton Studies XXIII*, ed. James D. Simmonds (Pittsburgh, 1988), p. 83.

46. "Women were silent because the right to speak had to be granted by authority," writes Danielle Régner-Bohler in "Literary and Mystical Voices," in *A History of Women in the West*, ed. Georges Duby and Michelle Perrot, vol. 2, *Silences of the Middle Ages*, ed. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), p. 449; cf. Fletcher, p. 12.

47. John Rogers, "The Enclosure of Virginitie: The Poetics of Sexual Abstinence in the English Revolution," in *Enclosure Acts: Sexuality, Property, and Culture in Early Modern England*, ed. Richard Burt and John Michael Archer (Ithaca and New York, 1994), p. 231.

48. Cedric C. Brown, *John Milton's Aristocratic Entertainments* (Cambridge, England, 1985), p. 116. John Dalton's 1738 *Comus* not only added the brothers' commentary on the Lady's freedom but also a temptation scene for the brothers. See the comparison chart in Don-John Dugas, "'Such Heav'n-taught Numbers should be more than read': *Comus* and Milton's Reputation in Mid-Eighteenth-Century England," in *Milton Studies XXXIV*, ed. Albert C. Labriola (Pittsburgh, 1997), pp. 142-43.

p.11

Noble Lord, and Lady bright,

I have brought ye new delight,

Here behold so goodly grown

Three fair branches of your own.

Heav'n hath timely tri'd their youth,

Their faith, their patience, and their truth,

And sent them here through hard assays

With a crown of deathless Praise,

To triumph in victorious dance

O'er sensual Folly and Intemperance.

(966-75)

While the children's silence in itself does not necessarily indicate subordination, the Spirit's song imposes a hierarchical reading of the situation. The passage describes all three children in relation to their parents and dehumanizes them as "branches"; the allusion to Christ's words "I am the vine, ye are the branches" places the parents in the role of Christ to their children, and reminds the audience that the virtue of the children is dependent on parental authority, since "the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine" (John 15:4-5).⁴⁹ The connections between silence and power become even more apparent with this Messianic analogy; like the Son seated next to his Father, unseen and unheard by mortals, the Earl of Bridgewater and his wife are enthroned in silent observation of the masque. Like God, the Egerton parents have the power to appoint a spokesperson, and while Jove sends the Attendant Spirit, the Earl and his wife send forth their children to testify to the Egerton family's virtue. Similarly, Milton's sonnet to Lady Margaret Ley celebrates not her own but her father's "noble virtues" visible in her through her words: "methinks I see him living yet; / So well your words his noble virtues praise / That all both judge you to relate them true / And to possess them, Honor'd Margaret" (11-14). When

considering Ferguson's claim that the Lady's speech represents female dissent, it is important to note that Lady Alice represents a ruling family, a daughter of the Lord President of Wales defending her chastity against a "would-be king and seducer" played by an unnamed (and thus certainly not aristocratic) actor.⁵⁰ As Carole Levin argues with reference to rumors that Elizabeth I was not in fact a virgin queen, "corruption to the body of the monarch would reflect the corrupting of the whole realm, the body politic."⁵¹ Although to a lesser extent, any hint of unchastity on the part of Lady Alice would similarly harm the presidency of her father.

Simons is partially accurate in seeing a contrast between the silent authority of the Father and the rhetorical failure of Comus, but her assertion that "the greater the verbal influence, the lesser the actual influence" is an oversimplification.⁵² Not only does the Lady produce authorized rhetoric, in

49. Jean E. Graham, "'To Attend Their Father's State': Masque Discourse and Family Politics," unpublished essay.

50. Ferguson, "Running," p. 54.

51. Carole Levin, "The Heart and Stomach of a King": Elizabeth I and the Politics of Sex and Power (Philadelphia, 1994), p. 76.

52. Simons, pp. 81-82.

contrast to the putative authority of Comus's words, but the sorcerer ends in a silence that is unambiguously lacking in influence. The Spirit characterizes the children's silent final dance simultaneously as subordination to parental authority and as victory over sin. In contrast, he represents Comus--both silent and absent--as one marked by "sensual Folly and Intemperance." Banished from the stage, Comus may still possess his wand, but the Spirit is granted the final and thus authoritative word on the sorcerer. Comus's silence indicates not an attitude of willingness to learn from God or other valid authority, but his own defeated folly and shamed intemperance. So Psalms curses the verbally deceitful with silence: "let the wicked be ashamed, and let them be silent in the grave. Let the lying lips be put to silence; which speak grievous things proudly and contemptuously against the righteous" (31:17b-18; cf. 1 Pet. 2:15b). In Milton's later writings, a sinful character's silence indicates defeat. In *Paradise Lost*, for instance, the fallen angels lie in "horrid silence" (I, 83) and react to the proposed mission to earth with dismay, sitting "mute, / Pondering the danger with deep thoughts" (II, 420-21; cf. II, 430-31; VI, 381-85). Adam and Eve after their fall are similarly "destitute and bare / Of all thir virtue: silent, and in face / Confounded long they sat, as struck'n mute" (IX, 1062-64). In *Paradise Regained*, the narrator declares that Satan's vain attempts on Christ's virtue are all "to shameful silence brought" (IV, 22).

In addition to marking the defeat of evil, enforced silence bore a gendered meaning in the early modern period. If garrulity was a sign of female promiscuity, then losing one's speech was an appropriate penalty for women who trespassed sexually. For instance, Thomas Bentley envisioned the adulterous woman: "the tongue doth not his office; the throat is dammed up; all the senses and instruments are polluted with iniquity."⁵³ Comus's mother, Circe, represented not only seduction and sorcery but sophistry, according to Wayne Rebhorn, because of her legendary ability to deceive and transform the auditor.⁵⁴ The masque makes no direct connection between Circe and the antirhetorical tradition; however, in his prologue "Against Scholastic Philosophy," Milton represented rhetoric negatively as a seductive woman, suggesting his awareness of the convention: "Rhetoric ... ensnares men's minds and ... sweetly lures them with her chains" (605). That Comus is given the penalty of a loose woman is appropriate, for when the Attendant Spirit introduces Comus, it is as the son of his mother:

This Nymph that gaz'd upon [Bacchus's] clust'ring locks,
With Ivy berries wreath'd, and his blithe youth,
Had by him, ere he parted thence, a Son
Much like his Father, but his Mother more,
Whom therefore she brought up, and Comus named.

(54-58)

⁵³. Fletcher, p. 13, citing Laura Gowing, "Women, Sex and Honour: The London Church Courts 1572-1640" (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of London, 1993).

⁵⁴. Wayne A. Rebhorn, *The Emperor of Men's Minds: Literature and the Renaissance Discourse of Rhetoric* (Ithaca and London, 1995), p. 137.

The foregoing passage gives Circe the responsibility for rearing and naming Comus, Bacchus only for parting thence, while emphasizing Comus's dependence upon and resemblance to "his Father, but his Mother more." The Spirit describes Comus to the brothers in a way that again subordinates him first to the Wood in whose "navel" he dwells, fetus-like, and then to his parents:

Within the navel of this hideous Wood,
Immur'd in cypress shades, a Sorcerer dwells,

Of Bacchus and of Circe born, great Comus,

Deep skill'd in all his mother's witcheries.

(520-23)

The Attendant Spirit once more emphasizes Comus's debt to the mother whose "witcheries" he imitates, and which perhaps include the verbal witcheries of spells and deceitful rhetoric. While the Lady's reliance on paternal power is equated with virtue, for a man to inherit power from his mother was not accepted. Rebhorn argues that while defenders of rhetoric characterized it in masculine terms as "a kind of phallic aggression," critics attacked rhetoric as "feminine, effeminate, and even homosexual."⁵⁵ The feminization of Comus by associating him so closely with Circe further undermines his claim to power, since as Rebecca Bushnell demonstrates, tyrants were often discredited by portraying them as effeminate.⁵⁶ Milton has split the female image between the Lady and Comus, the chaste and silent speaker versus the impure and unnatural speaker, as between Mary (Ave) and Eve (Eva).

Thus the masque concludes with the justified silence of the righteous and powerful Egerton family (and Jove, whom they serve), the virtuous silence of the chaste Lady, and the effeminate silence of the defeated Comus. Milton's masque claims for the Lady a silent tongue and "unattending" ears in order that she (and through her, the patron of the masque) benefit from the positive associations of chastity, obedience to God, adherence to familial and social hierarchies, and dissent from everything Comus represents. At the same time, the Lady is necessarily represented as listening to judge what is worthy of her hearing, and speaking not only to claim silence but also to ensure the favorable interpretation of her speech, deafness, and silence. Despite the alliance of rhetoric and silence with song, both silence and deafness can be interpreted as duplicitous. Silence especially is ambiguous: even allowing for the variations in definition based on gender, age, and social position, a silent person is still an unreadable person. How did Lady Alice understand the words she memorized, and to what extent did she agree with them? From her perspective, was silence consent or dissent? As Maus commented on the question of rape and virtue, "At the end of the masque, Milton does not so much resolve as simply terminate the skeptical dilemma. He

⁵⁵. Ibid., p. 16.

⁵⁶. Rebecca Bushnell, *Tragedies of Tyrants: Political Thought and Theater in the English Renaissance* (Ithaca, 1990), pp. 63-69.

brings the Lady home to her parents intact, subduing the threat of her inward

unknowability."[57](#).Just as Milton's words endure, so also does the ambiguous silence of the Lady.

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57. Maus, p. 209.