

He Hath No Power O'er True Virginity:
Asexuality and Power in Milton's *Comus*

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Introduction

Like so many of John Milton's early works, his masque *Comus* (1634, first published as *A Masque of the same Author Presented at Ludlow Castle*) is as thought-provoking as it is strange. The masque concerns a Lady and her two brothers who lose their way in the woods and are threatened by Comus, the son of Bacchus (the Roman god of wine and fertility) and Circe (the sorceress famous for changing Odysseus' men into swine). Following in his father's footsteps, Comus encourages his followers to pursue feasting, imbibing, and especially copulating as a way of obtaining and maintaining power. This construction of power that relies on gluttony and sexuality becomes apparent when viewing Comus alongside the other characters in the masque who either passively support sex or actively oppose it.¹ Following in his mother's footsteps, Comus uses trickery and sorcery to reach his goals. Yet no amount of conniving or convincing can sway the Lady to participate in these activities. She seems not only uninterested in but entirely unconcerned with sex, suggesting it is not that she feels but chooses to resist desire.² She does not desire at all. This indifference to Comus's proposition echoes the definition of asexuality, someone who "does not experience sexual attraction—they are not drawn to people sexually and do not desire to act upon

¹ The Lady's two brothers and the Attendant Spirit (a heavenly champion of virginity) exhibit passive support for sex. They spend most of the masque discussing sexuality and chastity. None of them argue that sex is inherently bad, although they do think that Comus's version of sex (which is performed as often as you like and with whomever you like) is to be avoided. In this way, they do support sex (especially marital sex), but they do not actively pander it the way Comus does. The Lady and Sabrina (an immortal virgin), on the other hand, both actively oppose sex through their indifference to it.

² When he proposes that the Lady should participate in sexual activities, Comus does not insist that it should be with him: "List Lady be not coy, and be not cozened / With that same vaunted name virginity, / Beauty is Nature's coin, must not be hoarded, / But must be current, and the good thereof / Consists in mutual and partaken bliss" (John Milton, *A Masque of the same Author Presented at Ludlow Castle*, in *John Milton: The Major Works Including Paradise Lost*, ed. Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg, 44-71 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), lines 737-741). He offers her the opportunity to participate in "mutual and partaken bliss" with whomever she likes. If he had instead offered himself as a partner, her refusal might imply her indifference to him. Yet he proposes that she would simply enjoy sex. When the Lady refuses his offer, then, she is refusing the concept of sex itself rather than the idea of sex with him. Also, note that from this point forward, the masque will be cited parenthetically in the text by line number.

attraction to others in a sexual way.”³ Early moderns recognized asexuality as a distinct sexual type, even if they did not have a precise word for it.⁴ In “Protestantism, Marriage and Asexuality in Shakespeare,” Melissa E. Sanchez notes that early moderns used many terms—including ones with different connotations in our lexicon, such as “celibacy,” “virginity,” or even “*true* virginity”—to refer to asexuality, but that their “very precise definition of virginity as the miraculous *lack* of desire, rather than the willed *suppression* of desire” mimics our modern definition of asexuality.⁵

Even today, asexuality is an understudied and underappreciated topic. Ela Przybylo and Danielle Cooper write that “asexuality is almost entirely absent in queer, feminist, and critical sexuality studies,” despite the fact that these avenues of research and scholarship most closely share the challenges that asexuality studies experiences.⁶ Even less scholarship has been devoted to asexuality in early modern literature, perhaps because it has long been believed that to be asexual, “a figure or character (whether fictitious or actual) must embody a complete and unshifting dislike or disinterest in sex,” something that can be hard to determine unconditionally, especially in texts from

³ AVEN, “Overview,” *Asexual Visibility and Education Network*, accessed 8 May 2021, <https://www.asexuality.org/?q=overview.html>. Note that the opposite of “asexual” is “allosexual,” someone who does experience sexual attraction. Also note that even if someone is asexual, that does not mean that they do not desire a romantic connection with others. The relationship between sex and romance is actually quite new, originating with Romanticism in the eighteenth century, according to philosopher and author Alain de Botton (Alain De Botton, “Why Romantics are Ruining Love,” 23 May 2016, Google Zeitgeist, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R2v8TywXjLA&ab_channel=GoogleZeitgeist). Therefore, in early modern perception, one need not feel sexually attracted to their romantic partner or romantically attracted to their sexual partner.

⁴ Melissa E. Sanchez, “Protestantism, Marriage and Asexuality in Shakespeare,” in *Shakespeare / Sex*, ed. Jennifer Drouin, 98-122 (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020), 104, 106.

⁵ Sanchez, “Protestantism, Marriage and Asexuality,” 118, 113, emphasis in original. Milton himself uses many different terms to refer to the Lady’s and Sabrina’s asexuality: the Elder Brother suggests that “no goblin, or swart fairy of the mine, / Hath hurtful power o’er true virginity” (436-437), that “so dear to heaven is saintly chastity” (453), and that “no savage fierce, bandit, or mountaineer / Will dare to soil her *virgin purity*” (426-427), while the Attendant Spirit calls upon Sabrina to “undo the charmed band / Of true virgin here distressed” (905-906).

⁶ Ela Przybylo and Danielle Cooper, “Asexual Resonances: Tracing a Queerly Asexual Archive,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 20, no. 3 (2014): 297-318, 298. Przybylo and Cooper propose that “those stories and historical figures embraced by queer readings and queer histories have, more than likely, untold stories of asexuality that have never been explored because of a culturally motivated, as well as feminist and queer, disinterest in asexuality” (Przybylo and Cooper, 299). By exploring these stories and historical figures, we can be introduced to an entirely new area of research.

historical periods that used different terms to describe (a)sexuality.⁷ However, by searching for “resonances” of asexuality, such as the Lady’s indifference to sex rather than an active choice to abstain from it, we can broaden what “counts” as asexuality and can create “space for unorthodox and unpredictable understandings and manifestations of asexuality.”⁸ This method relies on the idea that whenever we discuss sexuality, we are also discussing asexuality, which becomes especially apparent in a text like *Comus* that focuses so much on sex and chastity.⁹

While there are many different power stakes in *Comus*, the contest between Comus and the Lady exemplifies her asexuality more than any other. Comus both builds power from and controls desire and those who desire. Because of her asexuality, the Lady is not drawn to the activities Comus offers, such as feasting, imbibing, and copulating. In this way, she does not empower him and he cannot influence her. Because she resists and disrupts his power, the balance of power between them shifts. Yet she can only resist him. She cannot overcome him. Because of this, she needs the help of Sabrina, the immortal virgin who appears for only thirty lines at the end of the masque but who alone manages to undo Comus’s spells and release the Lady from the sorcerer’s enchanted chair. Since Sabrina protects maidenhood and represents an immortal asexual existence, Comus’s power does not influence her, just as it does not affect the Lady. Yet, because of her divine status, she can do what the Lady cannot by disempowering Comus.

When considering the shift in power rather than the strength of power, however, Sabrina is not quite as dynamic a character as the Lady. She begins the masque with the same amount of power with which she ends it. The same is true for the Lady’s brothers and the Attendant Spirit, a heavenly guardian of chastity who is incapable of protecting the Lady or influencing her path. The brothers

⁷ Przybylo and Cooper, 301. In fact, Sanchez notes that asexuality used to be “a prominent sexual category in the past that has all but disappeared from present discourse” (Sanchez, “Protestantism, Marriage and Asexuality,” 106).

⁸ Przybylo and Cooper, 298.

⁹ Przybylo and Cooper, 303.

and the Attendant Spirit seem entirely out of their depth, unable to hold their own in a power contest that relies on sexual desire or indifference. None of these characters exhibit a shift in power, unlike Comus and the Lady. The longer they are together, the more power he loses and she gains. Through her asexuality and her empowered rhetoric, the Lady begins to show traits similar to Sabrina. This suggests that she has the potential to grow in strength, perhaps even to reach the immortal virgin's level of power in the future. The Lady ends the masque with more authority than with which she began it. In this way, the true contest is between Comus and the Lady, and even though she cannot save herself from his sorcery, she is *Comus's* true hero since she shows the most growth.

Conquering Comus's Chair: Disempowerment and Indifference

Comus stages the conflict between two different notions of power: Comus's of sex and the Lady's of asexuality. Drawing on the skills of his parents, Comus creates a community in which desire—for food, drink, excitement, and especially for sex—is fostered. He also provides the objects of this desire, the food and alcohol and sexual partners that will quench the desire—or will give the first taste of something more enticing, creating another, stronger desire. He produces a market for that of which he is the only provider, leaving him completely in control. The more his followers desire, the more likely they are to partake. The more they partake, the more powerful he becomes.¹⁰ With more power, he can reach further, he can find more followers to desire, partake, and empower him. Desire is his engine. This engine can only be disrupted by the lack of that desire which leads to

¹⁰ Like a king or a god who becomes stronger and more influential when celebrated by more subjects, Comus gains power from a larger following of revelers, especially when those revelers participate in the activities he fosters. When he spies the Lady, he muses, "I shall ere long / Be well stocked with as fair a herd as grazed / About my mother Circe. Thus I hurl / My dazzling spells into the spongy air, / Of power to cheat the eye with blear illusion, / And give it false presentments, lest the place / And my quaint habits breed astonishment, / And put the damsel to suspicious flight, / Which must not be, for that's against my course" (151-159). Like his mother, he "stocks" followers like someone might stock provisions (and provides a pun on "livestock" while he is at it).

feasting, imbibing, and copulating.¹¹ Therefore, the Lady's and Sabrina's very existence breaks Comus's cycle. No matter how hard he tries, he will be unable to talk them into desiring the wares he peddles. If they do not feel the desire he touts, they will not choose to participate, and his strength will stagnate. In the case of Sabrina, this indifference is strong enough to completely shatter Comus's cycle, leaving him momentarily powerless—and freeing the Lady from his magical chair.

Comus champions all forms of desire, not only heterosexual intercourse, but also homosexual, bestial, and BDSM (bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, sadism and masochism) pleasures.¹² In fact, his heterosexual desire is the hardest to prove textually. Other than his interest in trapping the Lady—he plans to “speak to her / And she shall be [his] queen”—his propositions to her are for sex in general instead of sex with him specifically (264-265). He likewise is never directly described as enjoying the bestial sport he encourages in his followers who “all their friends, and native home forget / To roll with pleasure in a sensual sty” (75-76). They have been turned into animals and live lasciviously and, presumably, by mixing species in their sexual acts. Comus does exhibit pleasure when he describes seeing both the Lady and her brothers, however, a depiction that becomes overtly sexual and suggests a discomfoting level of violence and bondage. He finds the boys “under a green mantling vine / That crawls along the side of yon small hill, / Plucking ripe clusters from the tender shoots” (294-296). The brothers have been enveloped by vines, woven into the wilderness like how Adam and Eve “marry” vines in *Paradise Lost* (1667).¹³

¹¹ It would not be enough to merely refuse to partake since Comus's power relies just as much on the first stage (desiring) as it does on the second (partaking). To truly disrupt his cycle of power, someone must not feel a drive to accept what he peddles.

¹² Despite Comus's negative qualities, he does provide a perfect case study for non-procreative and non-heterosexual practices: “Given that procreative heterosex has been so effectively normalized, it is unsurprising and appropriate that queer and feminist scholars have focused on affirming the ethical and political value of practices that refuse the injunction to ‘bring forth fruit and multiply’—most prominently, same-sex desire and attachment but also celibacy, masturbation, BDSM, prostitution and pornography” (Melissa E. Sanchez, “Antisocial Procreation in *Measure for Measure*,” in *Queer Shakespeare: Desire and Sexuality*, ed. Goran Stanivukovic, 263-294 (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 263).

¹³ In Eden, Adam and Eve “led the vine / to wed her elm; she spoused about him twines / Her marriageable arms, and with her brings / Her dower the adopted clusters, to adorn / His baren leaves” (John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, in *John Milton: The Major Works Including Paradise Lost*, ed. by Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg, 355-618 (Oxford: Oxford

This marriage of “tender shoots” and young boys suggests that the Lady’s brothers are also ripe for plucking by the lascivious Comus. By “plucking ripe clusters from the tender shoots,” Comus would commit a violence reminiscent of a rape since “pluck” can be defined as “to take possession by a sudden action.”¹⁴ “Pluck” may also suggest a rhyming insinuation to “fuck.” When he sees the boys, Comus “was awestruck, / And as [he] passed, [he] worshipped” (301-302). Even if Comus celebrates different forms of desire, his own desire comes most often from bondage and rape. This preference fits his character since this form of sexual pleasure comes just as much from the inherent power play as it does through the pursuit of sex.

Comus gleans as much pleasure from the prospect of using someone else’s power as he does from forcing someone into submission. Overpowering the powerful is a rush all on its own. He is drawn to the Lady because of the bondage her voice implies, and he uses language of assault when he hears the Lady’s song:

Can any mortal mixture of earth’s mould
Breathe such divine enchanting ravishment?
Sure something holy lodges in that breast,
And with these raptures moves the vocal air
To testify his hidden residence[.] (244-248)

Her voice ravishes and raptures him, and he is aroused by this violence. He likens her song to that of his mother Circe and to the sirens, classical women who tempt men to their demise (254-257). Only after he draws this connection does he decide that “she shall be [his] queen” (265). He is aroused by her ravishing song and desires to keep her by his side forever, not as another of his

University Press, 2008), lines 5.215-219). This coupling of plants shares language with the brothers’ description of “plucking ripe clusters from the tender shoots.” Note the use of “clusters” in both citations.

¹⁴ “Rape” means to “take or seize (something) by force.” Unless otherwise noted, all references to word definitions and etymologies come from the *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, www.oed.org.

bestial orgiasts but as his partner, his queen. Perhaps he wants to read her as someone like him, someone who gains power from arousing and controlling desire. Perhaps he wants to use her siren song to tempt other misled travelers into his band. Perhaps he wants to harness her song and the sexual violence it provides.

Comus's power comes from his magical cup. When his victims drink from it, they are transformed into beasts who have sex and feed Comus's strength. In this way, it symbolizes his sexualized power. Although the Lady and Sabrina do not have a cup of their own in *Comus*, there is a cup of asexuality. Milton writes about this metaphorical "charming cup" eight years later when he pens *An Apology for Smectymnuus* (1642):

I should tell ye what I learnt of chastity and love, I mean that which is truly so, 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—and how the first and chiefest office of love begins and ends in the soul, producing those happy twins of her divine generation, knowledge and virtue[.]¹⁵

The "sorceress" refers to Circe, Comus's mother who also tempts victims with an "intoxicating potion." Circe and Comus "cheat" people with their potion, enticing them to choose carnal pleasures over chastity. They trick people into falling into sin. In Comus's case, he also tricks people into further empowering him. When considering the early modern Protestant belief that anyone who feels sexual desire will eventually succumb to it, we know that these victims will fall—and many will fall.¹⁶ Only those who do not feel sexual desire will drink from the "charming cup" of virtue meant

¹⁵ John Milton, *An Apology to Smectymnuus*, in *John Milton: The Major Works Including Paradise Lost*, ed. Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg, 173-182 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 181.

¹⁶ Sanchez, "Protestantism, Marriage and Asexuality," 105. Protestant early moderns maintained that (almost) everyone suffers from sexual desire, so everyone can be separated into three categories: "prideful and hypocritical" monks, nuns, and priests who falsely claim that they can withstand the desire; married people who "publicly acknowledge their susceptibility to sexual arousal," who are often seen as superior to the previous group because of this admission and their avoidance of pride and hypocrisy; and the unique and celebrated "true" virgins (or, asexual people) who feel no sexual drive at all (Sanchez, "Protestantism, Marriage and Asexuality," 105). This final category is exceedingly rare and

for those who are “worthy.” Therefore, asexual people alone are truly worthy of the “chiefest office.” They contain the divine twins of knowledge and, especially, virtue. Like the Lady and like Sabrina, they will be strong enough to refuse the “intoxicating potion” and to stand up to Comus and his mother.

Because they are worthy of this “chiefest office,” asexual people in early modern perceptions are raised to an almost divine level. Sabrina has gone one step further. Sanchez harkens to Matthew 19.12 in the Geneva Bible for a contemporary biblical reference to asexuality: “For there are some eunuchs, which were so born of *their* mother’s belly; and there be some eunuchs, which be gelded by men; and there be some eunuchs, which have gelded themselves for the kingdom of heaven. He that is able to receive *this*, let him receive it.”¹⁷ She also examines the Geneva Bible’s gloss to this verse, which explains that “this gift is not commune for all men, but is very rare, and given to few.”¹⁸ In *The Estate of Marriage*, Martin Luther also discusses this phenomenon, writing that “such persons [these eunuchs for heaven] are rare, not one in a thousand, for they are a special miracle of God.”¹⁹ In Milton’s England, asexuality is a sexual minority whose lack of sexual desire is heaven-sent, an intrinsic part of themselves rather than a conscious decision to ignore sexual attraction as an act of self-restraint, like with abstinence or celibacy. Because of its divine origin, asexuality comes with heavenly power and privilege: “So dear to heaven is saintly chastity, / That when a soul is found sincerely so, / A thousand liveried angels lacky her” (453-455). The strength of the Lady’s asexuality is recognized by heaven and allows her to be hierarchically higher than angels (since they “lacky her”).²⁰ As Brooke Conti writes, virgins (even those who are not asexual) gain a special place in

special, situated above both other groups, as the Geneva Bible and Martin Luther both purport (Matthew 19.12, in the Geneva Bible (London: R.F.H., 1614); Martin Luther, *The Estate of Marriage*, in *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, 2nd ed., ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 150).

¹⁷ Sanchez, “Protestantism, Marriage and Asexuality,” 106; Geneva Bible.

¹⁸ Geneva Bible.

¹⁹ Luther, 150.

²⁰ In the cosmological hierarchy that Milton creates in *Paradise Lost*, the only beings higher than angels are God and the Son, which means that asexual people have reached an almost divine level. Yet the Geneva Bible and Luther both assert

heaven once they die, possibly even being raised to the “state of the angels.”²¹ At death, asexual people can only be lifted higher. The deceased and divine Sabrina has reached this pinnacle. She has become something else, not an angel, but a goddess with “powers greater than anyone else in the poem,” greater even than Comus.²²

Because of this power stemming from her asexuality, Sabrina alone can rescue the Lady from Comus’s chair. Scholars have long been confounded by the Lady’s inability to rise from this chair without Sabrina’s help, despite her dedication to chastity (and, thus, the resistance to Comus’s temptations). However, when considering the Lady’s asexuality and the two different types of power at play in this masque, an explanation becomes clear. The chair is an extension of Comus. It imprisons the Lady while Comus tries to convince her to have sex. Although it initially seems like the location for a sexual encounter, it becomes the stage upon which the contest between Comus and the Lady, between sexuality and asexuality, plays out—and where asexuality eventually wins. The Lady has been trapped in the seat which has been “smeared with gums of glutinous heat” (917). Heat was viewed as a masculine trait in early modern humoral theories, so “gums of glutinous heat” suggests masculine bodily fluids such as semen. This fluid associated with sexual intercourse has trapped the Lady and will not release her. In fact, only Comus’s charming-rod can free her: “ye should have snatched his wand / And bound him fast; without his rod reversed, / And backward

that this asexuality is very rare and quite special. When considering *Paradise Lost*, Adam and Eve fall into early modern Protestants’ second category (those who feel sexual desire and pursue it) since we see them having sex many times in Eden (both before and after their fall). In both the Protestants’ and Milton’s hierarchies, Adam and Eve would be below asexual people. However, where does that leave the angels? Milton emphasizes that angel sex is pure: “Whatever pure thou in the body enjoy’st / (And pure thou wert created) we enjoy / In eminence, and obstacle find none / Of membrane, joint, or limb, exclusive bars: / Easier than air with air, if spirits embrace, / Total they mix, union of pure with pure / Desiring” (Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 8.622-628). Is asexuality hierarchically higher than this pure coupling that Milton champions? Perhaps Milton changed his impression of sexual hierarchies in the thirty years between *Comus* and *Paradise Lost* or perhaps the type of pure intercourse in which the angels participate is so entirely different from the sex we have on earth that it does not count as part of this tripart system. Perhaps angels do not feel desire the way we do (for instance, physically) so are neither allosexual nor asexual.

²¹ Brooke Conti, “Milton, Jerome, and Apocalyptic Virginity,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 72, no. 1 (2019): 194-230, 200. The Attendant Spirit references this belief when he describes “the crown that virtue gives / After this mortal change” (9-10).

²² Conti, 216.

mutters of dissevering power, / We cannot free the Lady” (115-118). Since so much of Comus’s character relies on sexualizing his surroundings, his charming-rod takes on phallic symbolism. The Attendant Spirit warns that “he with his bare wand can unthread thy joints, / And crumble all thy sinews,” creating a physical release reminiscent of an orgasm (614-615). Likewise, Comus claims that “if I but wave this wand, / Your nerves are all chained up in alabaster,” a muscle stiffening that implies a penile or clitoral erection (659-660). His charming-rod inspires sexual pleasure and it alone can release the Lady from the “gums of glutinous heat” that keep her trapped in Comus’s lair. Only by “reversing” the charming-rod can she be set free. Because his wand carries phallic symbolism, this reversal could imply the flaccidity of the phallic because of the loss of arousal or after an ejaculation, after the physical and sexual release the rod provides.

The reversal of Comus’s charming-rod could simulate the flaccidity of the phallus through the loss of arousal. Comus panders sex as a form of violence, of capture. He envisions raping the brothers and imprisoning the Lady so she will remain by his side forever. He does trap her in his magical chair, after all. He gains followers by trapping them in their animalistic forms, in their own sexual desire. When they act upon this desire, they feed his power. Therefore, when the Lady refuses to pursue sexual desire, she threatens this cycle. This indifference might be enough to overcome the violence and imprisonment of Comus’s power. If that is the case, the phallus’s flaccidity would be caused by the loss of arousal due to Comus’s disempowerment, from losing the object of his violence- and bondage-motivated desire. Yet without the charming-rod to free the Lady, without the wand that holds Comus’s power, the Lady’s allies need to find a different way to disempower Comus. They turn to Sabrina who, like the Lady, serves as Comus’s foil. If anything, Sabrina and Comus are even more dissimilar than the Lady and Comus. While Comus is the immortal personification of an overabundance of desire, Sabrina is the immortal personification of a complete lack of desire. Since Comus gains power from sexual intercourse, he would be weak in Sabrina’s

presence. They are oil and water, unable to survive in the same place at the same time. They are so dissimilar that, with Comus removed, Sabrina can easily overpower him, negating the “gums of glutinous heat” on the chair and freeing the Lady.

If the chair instead requires that the phallic become flaccid from an ejaculation, without the charming-rod accessible, this orgasm must come from another source: from the chair’s prisoner, from the Lady herself. Yet she cannot free herself because she will not reach a sexual climax. Why then does the Attendant Spirit seek help from Sabrina, another figure who will not orgasm? By reading her as also asexual, the answer becomes clear—and her presence suggests a new (and, this time, spiritual) pinnacle toward which the Lady can strive. Sabrina is not the Lady’s protector. She is a superior manifestation of the Lady’s power. Like the Lady, Sabrina is a “virgin pure,” a purity that could not be tainted even by marital intercourse since Sabrina died young (826). Yet she was once mortal, on the same level as the Lady, a level which the Geneva Bible and Luther both suggest is higher than most—but not nearly as high as Sabrina has now risen.²³ She has gained immortality and with it a strength that she employs to free the Lady from Comus’s chair (841). And this action seems so simple, just requiring a few “drops from [her] fountain pure,” especially compared to the orgasmic freedom that Comus’s system entails (912).²⁴ Sabrina’s divinity easily overpowers Comus’s chair that relies so heavily on the requirement of fleshly pleasures because she has immortalized her indifference to sexual desire. Her asexuality can completely negate any need for a carnal drive. This new level of asexuality also suggests that the Lady too could reach a divine status when she dies.

Guardian Angels: Static Power and Freewill

²³ Geneva Bible; Luther, 150.

²⁴ Note the similarity between the language used to describe Sabrina (“virgin pure”) and her freeing power (“fountain pure”). This parallel (and slant rhyme) implies a correlation between Sabrina as a person and Sabrina as a source of power. That point of overlap is her asexuality.

While *Comus* stages the conflict of power between Comus and the Lady, it also depicts the static power of the brothers and the Attendant Spirit. The brothers worry about their sister's virginity and security, but they are unable to rescue her. These young men are nothing like the strapping heroes from early modern tales who rescue their damsels in distress. In fact, when compared with the other characters in this play, they are powerless. Even the Attendant Spirit, a type of guardian angel, has no power to protect the Lady. He cannot stop Comus from taking the Lady and he cannot stop him from escaping. He cannot free the Lady from the chair and must call on Sabrina for help. Despite being a heavenly protector, he seems as powerless as the Lady's brothers, perhaps even more than them since they at least take up weapons against the sorcerer. Despite these inconsistencies, neither the Attendant Spirit nor the brothers seem concerned by their lack of power, other than for the danger their inability to protect the Lady might pose to her wellbeing, especially with the risk of rape. Yet even this risk does not make them concerned for her chastity since early moderns believed that the loss of virginity was due entirely to freewill and would not be the spoils of rape. Because of this, the brothers and the Attendant Spirit are confident that the Lady's virginity will be safeguarded because of her own power, because of her asexuality.

The Attendant Spirit serves as a guardian angel for virgins, ensuring they choose the proper path to retain their chastity, especially against threats like Comus (15). Yet he seems incapable of protecting the Lady. She ends up trapped in Comus's chair and he must search for help from Sabrina rather than rescuing her himself. Why does his power not seem to work on the Lady? He cannot protect her because he has not come to earth to safeguard her chastity. Because of her indifference to sexual intercourse, she does not need his protection. His prologue focuses on the dangers Comus presents to everyone in general, rather than to the Lady in particular. Indeed, he spies on Comus's festivities rather than searching the forest for the lost and alone Lady. Only when he hears singing and he "did perceive it was the voice / Of my most honoured lady" does he turn

his attention to her (555-560, 563-564). Even the appellation he uses, “my most honoured lady,” implies that he respects and celebrates the Lady almost subserviently, in the same way the Elder Brother describes how “when a soul is found sincerely [chaste], / A thousand liveried angels lacky her” (454-455). Because of her asexuality, the Lady has “liveried angels” rather than guardians like the Attendant Spirit looking after her. The Attendant Spirit is unwilling or unable to help her when Comus tricks her into following him. All he does is find her brothers. Even when they storm Comus’s lair, he leaves the fighting to them, and he cannot free the Lady from Comus’s chair. Because of the Lady’s asexuality, her inherent “true” virginity that sets her apart from other virgins, he has no jurisdiction—and, really, no need—to influence her path.

When the Attendant Spirit convinces the Lady’s brothers that they need to come to her rescue, he forewarns the risk of rape, the only threat they might be able to influence since, according to early modern perceptions, her asexuality protects her virginity. He insists that they must “secure the Lady from surprisal,” from the risk of a “sudden attack or capture,” an act that portends rape (618). The danger to the Lady would come not from a slip in her own resolve, he believes, but from an outside, violent force. He bemoans the “poor hapless nightingale” who has fallen into Comus’s “deadly snare” (566, 567). Early modern audiences would be unable to ignore the reference to Philomela, a classical figure who is brutally raped by her brother-in-law before he cuts out her tongue so she cannot betray his crime. The Olympian gods take pity on her and transform her into a nightingale, and she is said to nightly sing the story of her rape. By connecting the Lady to Philomela, the Attendant Spirit suggests that she risks rape, but he does not consider that she might choose to give into Comus’s promises of sexual pleasures on her own.²⁵

²⁵ As Katherine R. Kellett points out, the Lady also references the story of Philomela (and of Echo, another disempowered and abused classical female figure) in her first soliloquy, yet she never expresses any fear of rape herself (Katherine R. Kellett, “The Lady’s Voice: Poetic Collaboration in Milton’s Mask,” *Milton Studies* 50 (2009): 1-19, 5-6). Lynn Enterline suggests that these classical heroines often serve as references for early modern poets as they try to tackle “vexing poetic, rhetorical, and political problems” or in texts that “associate rhetoric’s techniques and emotional force with bodily violation” (Lynn Enterline, “Rhetoric and Gender in British Literature,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Rhetorical*

The Attendant Spirit, the brothers, and Comus all believe that the Lady will only truly lose her virginity if she *chooses* to lose it, if she *chooses* to have sex. Kathryn Schwarz puts it best: *Comus* presents chastity “as a potentially perverse strategy of sexual management that attributes virtue to feminine will.”²⁶ Even if she is raped, the Lady will remain a virgin in their eyes—and “safe” from Comus, allowing them to not fear their powerlessness. Milton’s characters were not alone in this belief. Richard Brathwaite, an early modern author of conduct books, claimed of rape that “as the Act was farre from her consent, so it was free from sinne, which is ever accompanied with consent. For whatsoever is forced, is from the *Will* estranged; without which, sinne cannot properly be said to be committed.”²⁷ Sin is in the intention. Without the intent to have sex, a woman maintains her chastity, despite being the victim of rape. To prove his point that the Lady’s indifference will safeguard her chastity, the Elder Brother refers to Medusa as an “unconquered virgin,” despite the fact that Medusa was raped by Poseidon in Athena’s temple, the act which led the goddess to curse the Gorgon with serpentine hair and a petrifying gaze (448). Even if Comus rapes the Lady, the brothers believe that she will remain a virgin. Comus seems to agree with this theory. Even though he has trapped her, confining her in a magical chair, he tries to talk her into choosing to abandon her chastity rather than taking it from her by force.²⁸ If this choice is required, the Lady will never truly

Studies, ed. Michael J. MacDonald, 489-504 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017): 497-498, 499). Strangely, the Lady uses them as figures of strength rather than as portents of violence.

²⁶ Kathryn Schwarz, “Chastity, Militant and Married: Cavendish’s Romance, Milton’s Masque,” *PMLA* 118, no. 2 (2003): 270-285, 272.

²⁷ Richard Brathwaite, *Ar’t asleepe Husband? A Boulster Lecture; Stored With all variety of witty jeasts, merry Tales, and other pleasant passages; Extracted, From the choicest flowers of Philosophy, Poesy, antient and moderne History* (London: printed by R. Bishop, for R. B. or his Assignes, 1640), 11. In this disconcerting and problematic conduct book, Brathwaite also claims that the victim of rape enjoys her sexual encounter even if she did not choose to participate in it. Also note the word “will” in Brathwaite’s piece. “Will” itself implies the threat of succumbing to sexual desire. Not only is it the “inclination to do something,” but it is also a “carnal desire or appetite”—or even a penis (for instance, in Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 135” where “Whoever hath her wish, thou hast thy Will, / And Will to boot, and Will in overplus” (William Shakespeare, “Sonnet 135,” in *Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, ed. Barbara Mowat and Paul Werstine, 277 (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2004), lines 1-2), or even our modern slang, “willy”).

²⁸ When Comus realizes that he will not be able to convince her into choosing sex, he decides to rape her, as the Attendant Spirit has feared: he reaches for his magical cup which turns his victims into beasts of sensual pleasure and says, “[T]his will cure all straight, one sip of this / Will bathe the drooping spirits in delight / Beyond the bliss of dreams. Be wise, and taste” (811-813). Fortunately, he does not have the opportunity to follow through on this threat.

lose her virginity. She does not feel sexual desire so will not decide to participate in sexual intercourse. Therefore, Comus's power will not work on her and she will remain virtuous in early modern perceptions of chastity, allowing the brothers and the Attendant Spirit to trust that their lack of power will not negatively affect the outcome of the masque's encounters.

Speaking for Herself: Asexual Rhetoric and Empowerment

While the Lady cannot compete with Comus's strength and needs Sabrina to free her from the chair, she is not powerless. She certainly has more power than her brothers and the Attendant Spirit, and she has the potential to transform into a figure as powerful as Sabrina. This potential appears in her rhetoric, both in what she does say and in what she does not. She is as uninterested in discussing sexual acts as she is in participating in them. When she cannot avoid the topic any longer, she so eloquently and so entirely debunks Comus's arguments that it leaves him speechless and disempowered in a similar manner to how Sabrina overcomes his magical chair. This intrinsic indifference and overpowering rhetoric keeps the Lady safe while also raising her in *Comus's* power hierarchy, providing her with the growth that establishes her as the masque's hero.

The Lady's indifference extends beyond merely participating in the bodily acts that Comus peddles, but to discussing them entirely. This silence is yet another disruption of Comus's cycle of power since she does not give precedence to his source of strength. Her asexualized silence becomes especially poignant in a masque, in a spoken artform. If she refuses to speak about sex, she changes the course of the masque's plot, especially since without her the other characters will not stop talking about it. The Attendant Spirit, Comus, and both brothers turn their attention to sexuality almost immediately after coming onstage. The Attendant Spirit brings up chastity in his first sentence before introducing Comus and the threat he poses to virgins (and, honestly, to everyone

else).²⁹ Comus waits until his second sentence before turning to bawdy pleasure and barely stops talking about it for the rest of masque.³⁰ The Elder Brother manages to get through his first round of dialogue without mentioning sex, but he seems perfectly willing to dive straight into the topic once the Second Brother references it.³¹ However, the Lady does not speak about sexuality or even chastity until someone else brings it up to her, and not until well into the masque.³² By abstaining from discussing sex, she refuses to play into Comus's power games. His strength comes not only from physical pleasure, but also verbal pleasure. He becomes interested in the Lady because of her singing, after all. He wants her before he ever sees her, entirely because of her voice. Therefore, her linguistic indifference upsets his cycle of power just as much as her physical indifference. Her silence becomes even more potent when we consider that the Lady's virginity is controlled by her will rather than by the physical act of sex. If she does not desire and does not choose to participate in sex, she will not lose her virginity and instead Comus will lose some power. If she does not participate in even talking about sex, where can Comus go from there?

Even though she is constrained in the chair, a victim to whatever crimes Comus chooses to enact upon her, the Lady has more verbal authority than he does when she finally speaks. She even goes so far as to talk down to him: "I had not thought to have unlocked my lips / In this unhallowed air, but that this juggler / Would think to charm my judgement" and "Shall I go on? / Or have I said enough?" and "Thou art not fit to hear thyself convinced" (756-758, 779-780, 792). When viewed beside her brothers' anxiety over her disappearance or the Attendant Spirit's horror at

²⁹ The Attendant Spirit introduces himself as a "bright aerial spirit" from the heavens who "strive[s] to keep up a frail, and feverish being / Unmindful of the crown that virtue gives / After this mortal change" (3, 8-10). His purpose is to protect chastity.

³⁰ Comus commands his followers (and his audience) to "welcome joy, and feast, / Midnight shout, and revelry, / tipsy dance, and jollity," all raucous pleasures that accompany his Bacchian revels and late-night orgies (102-104).

³¹ The Second Brother exclaims, "O that hapless virgin our lost sister," which begins the brothers' long discussion of her chastity (350).

³² Only when Comus references the bliss of fleshly pleasure does the Lady address sexuality directly, but she seems uninterested in the topic. She is more invested in debunking the naivety of Comus's view on pleasure and his supposition that he can "charm" her into having sex than she is in discussing sexuality (664, 758).

what violence he imagines Comus might enact upon her, the Lady never loses her cool, never seems nervous. This bravery sets her apart from her male allies and, indeed, many female heroines in early modern literature. She has a voice, and she is not afraid to use it. Her interaction with Comus “allows the Lady's articulation of her virginity to develop from tenuous suggestions in the beginning of the masque to a rhetorical tour de force.”³³ She borrows strength from and lends strength to the communication of her asexuality which is especially striking in the face of Comus's sexualized language. Comus's presence gives her language power since, as Katherine R. Kellett writes, “the Lady's identity is deeply embedded in the verbal interactions with the figure who threatens—and in the process helps to constitute—her pure, singular, and virginal presence.”³⁴ She discovers her power entirely because he forces her to articulate her asexuality. Without meaning to, Comus creates a space for the Lady to both empower and gain power from her asexuality—all through her rhetoric.³⁵

Some scholars, including Kellett, have identified the Lady's hesitancy to unlock her lips as a paradoxically sexual act since we can easily draw a connection between lips and labia.³⁶ However, an exploration of the language that the Lady uses once she does begin to speak implies not a sexualized but an asexualized rhetoric. This dichotomy becomes particularly apparent when her language is viewed alongside Comus's. His rhetoric, especially when he tries to convince the Lady to pursue sexual acts, is pregnant with flowery descriptions and allusions to gluttonous pleasures, most often

³³ Kellett, 9.

³⁴ Kellett, 7.

³⁵ Milton casts asexuality as the apogee of chastity and, in *Comus*, he suggests that this privilege comes with another perk: a direct communication connection with heaven. The Elder Brother insists that asexuality is “so dear to heaven” that angels “in clear dream, and solemn vision / Tell her [the asexual Lady] of things that no gross ear can hear” (453, 457-458). The power of the Lady's asexual rhetoric goes both ways, out from her mouth and in through her ear. As Conti writes, we see “in Milton's early poems a complex mythology that links celibacy to prophecy” and to poetry (Conti, 194, 200). Milton will get his own dreams and visions from heaven when he becomes blind, providing him with the privilege of penning *Paradise Lost*.

³⁶ Kellett, 9. Julie H. Kim also notes this phenomenon when she writes, “the Lady presents a picture, of a seventeenth-century nobleman's worst nightmare: a female relative away from home who opens her mouth and puts her chastity in peril” (Julie H. Kim, “The Lady' Unladylike Struggle: Redefining Patriarchal Boundaries in Milton's *Comus*,” *Milton Studies* 35 (1997): 1-20, 16).

when he discusses sex outright. Instead of simply saying “desire,” he describes how “fresh blood grows lively” or how his cup holds a “cordial julep here / That flames, and dances in his crystal bounds / With spirits of balm, and fragrant syrups mixed” and which encourages the imbiber to pursue fleshly pleasures (670, 672-674). When the Lady refuses the sexual freedom he promotes, he questions, “Why should you be so cruel to yourself, / And to those dainty limbs which Nature lent for gentle usage, and soft delicacy?” (679-681). Nature, he argues, liberally covers “the earth with odours, fruits, and flocks / Thronging the seas with spawn innumerable, / But all to please, and sate the curious taste,” pleasures meant for us to enjoy (712-714). His language is rich with deep vowels (“blood grows,” “cordial julep,” “fragrant syrups,” “odours, fruits, and flocks thronging the seas”) that suggest the open and unfiltered noises of sexual pleasure, what sound like moans, gasps, and ecphoneses. These moments stand in contrast to the short, sharp sound of consonants.³⁷ His words are practically orgasmic. He paints a vivid world of treasures to feed our desires, to give us pleasure. Every word elicits the desire to eat, drink, and have sex. He is a salesman for desire.

Comus shares his sexualized language with Milton’s other great tempter, Satan, a comparison that creates even more of a rift between his rhetoric and the Lady’s. Even more striking is the transition Eve’s language undertakes after she eats the forbidden fruit, away from the careful rhetoric of the Lady and toward the sexualized language of Comus and Satan. In Book IX of *Paradise Lost*, Satan convinces Eve to eat the forbidden fruit by employing similar language of gluttony, sex, and power to Comus, using words and phrases like “ravishment,” “savoury odour,” “sharp desire,” “desire / Longing and envying,” you “who shouldst be seen / A goddess among gods, adored and served / By angels numberless,” and “ye should be as gods.”³⁸ Satan even comes to Eve in the guise

³⁷ In the English language, anger and derision (common turn offs) comes across better through consonants than they do through vowels. Think about the most common curses: the pop of the “K” in “fuck,” the “T” in “shit,” or the “P” in “crap.” Compare these to the deep vowels and soft consonants of all three words in the sentence “I love you,” which is most often spoken with gentle emotion (a turn on).

³⁸ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 9.541, 9.579, 9.584, 9.592-593, 9.547-548, 9.710.

of a snake “erect” in a not-so-subtle allusion to sexual arousal.³⁹ He employs language of sexual pleasure and power to convince Eve to eat, much like Comus uses the same to encourage the Lady to drink. And Eve falls for it. Satan’s words quite literally “impregnated” her, and her own language shifts to accommodate the sexual power at play.⁴⁰ While Satan flatters her by suggesting that “ye should be as gods,” Eve turns the same adulation upon the forbidden fruit: “Great are thy virtues, doubtless, best of fruits / Though kept from man, and worthy to be admired, / Whose taste, too long forborne, at first assay / Gave elocution to the mute.”⁴¹ When she succumbs to Satan’s temptation, her own language changes to compensate.

The Lady, on the other hand, does not succumb to temptation and her language remains straightforward in both theme and style. In this way, she mirrors the Son in *Paradise Regained* (1671) whose style is “didactic and plain.”⁴² The Lady spends more time debunking Comus’s views on sex in a way that mimics the Son’s “careful, concise, and stern rebuttals of Satan’s arguments [which] often make him sound like a teacher admonishing and instructing a willfully mischievous student” than she spends discussing gluttony and sex.⁴³ Even when she does, her rhetoric holds none of the pleasure of Comus’s, Satan’s, or Eve’s: “for swinish gluttony / Ne’er looks to heaven amidst his gorgeous feast, / But with besotted base ingratitude / Crams, and blasphemes his feeder” (776-779). She is very eloquent, of course, but she uses none of the flowery, power-fueled language of her antagonist. Her rhetoric is not dripping with inuendoes and she presents her arguments without superfluties. Even when she becomes impassioned, her language remains asexualized:

³⁹ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 9.501.

⁴⁰ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 9.737.

⁴¹ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 9.745-748.

⁴² Henry J. Laskowsky, “A Pinnacle of the Sublime: Christ’s Victory of Style in ‘Paradise Regained,’” *Milton Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (1981): 10-13, 10. Feisal G. Mohamed insists that this “plainness is of course central to *Paradise Regained*,” but that it also appears in *Comus* (Feisal G. Mohamed, “Not but by the Spirit understood: Milton’s Plain Style and Present-Day Messianism,” in *Milton and the Post-Secular Present: Ethics, Politics, Terrorism*, 19-42 (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 23). He writes that “this seems for Milton a long-standing model of resistance to temptation, equally discernable in the Lady’s steadfastly moral, if also sententious, handling of Comus” (Mohamed, 23).

⁴³ Laskowsky, 10.

To him that dares
Arm his profane tongue with contemptuous words
Against the sun-clad power of chastity;
Fain would I something say, yet to what end?
Thou has nor ear, nor soul to apprehend
The sublime notion, and high mystery
That must be uttered to unfold the sage
And serious doctrine of virginity[.] (780-787)⁴⁴

She uses few metaphors and her adjectives are sharp, often disyllabic: “profane,” “sun-clad,” “sublime,” “sage and serious.” The repetition of the “S” sibilant suggests the hissing of snakes (early moderns’ form of our “boo”) as if the Lady is jeering Comus off the stage. Her sharp sibilants also stand as foils to Comus’s long, orgasmic vowels. As Feisal G. Mohamed writes, “the force of [the Lady’s] locution derives from its expression of truth, rather than any stimulation of passion—as opposed to the temptingly infectious energy of Comus’s brisk couplets.”⁴⁵ She is to-the-point and unforgiving, and she does not fall into the trap of too many allusions. Unlike Comus, unlike Satan (and, if I dare, unlike Milton himself), the Lady does not get lost in her own words. Even if she does unlock her lips, she sticks to the point—a point that overwhelms Comus.

The Lady’s dialogue does more to overcome Comus than the actions of her brothers and the Attendant Spirit combined. More than that, it momentarily raises to her a supernatural height, providing her with power similar to Sabrina’s. After she verbally beats him to the ground, Comus struggles to regain his power. Arguably, he never does. In Schwarz’s words, “Milton’s Lady articulates her virtue so strongly that Comus shakes where he stands.”⁴⁶ Her language leaves him

⁴⁴ Interestingly, Milton added this part of the Lady’s speech after the initial performance.

⁴⁵ Mohamed, 23.

⁴⁶ Schwarz, 272.

reeling and he admits, “I feel that I do fear / Her words set off by some superior power; / And though not mortal, yet a cold shuddering dew / Dips me all o’er” (800-803). This “superior power” hints at the heavenly authority afforded her due to her asexuality (recall that angels “lackey” her) and it shares qualities with Sabrina’s power, the same power she uses to free the Lady from Comus’s chair. The Lady’s “cold shuddering dew” that overwhelms Comus is humorally feminine, the opposite of his masculine “gums of glutinous heat” (916). When Sabrina rescues the Lady, she employs her “chaste palms moist and cold” to counteract the “gums,” attributes that are also humorally feminine (917). Although the Lady’s rhetoric, her “cold shuddering dew,” is not potent enough to free herself from the chair, like Sabrina’s power it does unsettle and overpower Comus—perhaps enough to leave him weak to the brothers’ assault, leading to his flight and eventual disempowering.

Conclusion

Other than providing a lens through which the Lady gains authority over her captor and, indeed, the other characters in the masque, what else can be gained by reading her asexually? Probably unsurprisingly, the “perpetually virgin woman” threatened the social and sexual economy of early modern England.⁴⁷ Not only would the Lady’s asexuality pose a threat to the marital and social world, but also to the patriarchal system. According to Theodora A. Jankowski, and to Marilyn Frye before her, virginal women in the early modern period “consistently resist[ed] their culture’s positioning of them as ‘dominated’ and [tried] to construct their lives in opposition to patriarchal social systems,” and they were “sexually and hence socially [their] own person.”⁴⁸ An asexual reading

⁴⁷ Theodora A. Jankowski, “Pure Resistance: Queer(y)ing Virginitly in William Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* and Margaret Cavendish’s *The Convent of Pleasure*,” *Shakespeare Studies* 26 (1998): 218-255, 220.

⁴⁸ Jankowski, 221; Marilyn Frye, “Willful Virgin or Do You Have to be a Lesbian to be a Feminist?” in *Willful Virgin: Essays in Feminism, 1976-1991*, 124-137 (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1992), 133.

of *Comus* allows the Lady to become her own person and to resist the patriarchal and heteronormative system at work in early modern England. It provides this contested character with more agency and strength in the face of Comus's temptations since she shows her indifference to his charms.

Milton connects asexuality with positive power (rather than Comus's sexualized power that is only used for self-aggrandizing and self-promoting), so reading *Comus* asexually implies that Sabrina is the epitome of goodness and strength. Sabrina does have "powers greater than anyone else in the poem," after all.⁴⁹ Yet according to the Attendant Spirit, her power precedes the masque's start:

she can unlock
The clasping charm and thaw the numbing spell,
If she be right invoked in warbled song,
For maidenhood she loves, and will be swift
To aid a virgin such as herself
In hard-besetting need[.] (852-857)

Perhaps she has not faced Comus directly, perhaps she has not previously freed someone from his chair, but she has "unlocked" prisons and "thaw[ed]" spells, and she has been doing exactly that for longer than the length of the masque's events. Like the Attendant Spirit and the Lady's brothers, Sabrina begins and ends *Comus* with the same amount of power. She could free prisoners from magical bondage just as easily before the story's start as she can at its close. She comes to virgins' aid when summoned by a "warbled song." Although songs have had a long history in both classical and early modern literature—many early modern masques and plays ended with a song, including this one—Milton's readers must not forget the classical source material from which he drew the

⁴⁹ Conti, 216.

inspiration for his characters. In the *Odyssey*, Comus's mother, Circe, sings so beautifully that she draws unsuspecting sailors to her shores. Her song is a trap, a prison. Yet in this instance, victims of magical traps, of her son's traps, need only sing loudly and prettily enough to summon their rescuer. And Sabrina is not the only character to draw power from words and voices. Through her rhetoric that creates the same effect in Comus as Sabrina's magic, the Lady grows closer to Sabrina's divine level of asexuality. Sabrina must be "right invoked in warbled song" and the Lady begins singing her own song almost immediately after taking to the stage. Kellett identifies a sisterhood between the Lady and Sabrina through their voices, noting that "the Attendant Spirit's repeated request to Sabrina that she 'Listen and save' (866, 889) suggests that Sabrina is in communion with the Lady rather than in control of her."⁵⁰ In a way, Milton's readers are also in communion with the Lady. This text is itself a type of "warbled song" that summons to our side a defender of maidenhood, of our ability to choose when or even if we have sex.

When we read the Lady asexually, we begin to see how her indifference to sex shifts the power structure of the masque. She will never choose to succumb to Comus's temptations because she is not aroused by the sexual freedoms he offers, and this security means that the Attendant Spirit and her brothers do not have to fear about her falling into sin of her own accord—which is a blessing for them since none of the three has the power to save or influence her. The Lady protects herself through her indifference, the first step toward breaking Comus's cycle of power. Some scholars have recognized this apathy but attribute it more to the Lady's attempt to desexualize herself as a means of escape from Comus's proposition.⁵¹ However, reading her asexually strengthens this indifference. The second and perhaps most important assault on Comus's power is

⁵⁰ Kellett, 11.

⁵¹ For example, see Kim's "The Lady's Unladylike Struggle": "In opposition to both Comus (who wants to encroach on her wealth) and her brothers (who guard her wealth from the subordinate classes), the Lady, in a radical move, advocates economic equality and attempts to escape commodification of women by removing herself from the 'traffic in women' by desexualizing herself" (Kim, 13).

through her rhetoric, which shakes Comus to his core. While other scholars have identified the Lady's words as the source of her power since she proves that she will not succumb to Comus's offers for sexual bliss, her rhetoric is also important for its promise of divine asexuality and for how it weakens Comus.⁵² Reading the Lady asexually also explains her inability to escape Comus's chair since it requires either a loss of arousal or an orgasmic action to release her. Sabrina accomplishes both, the first through her immortal refusal to participate in sexual acts, to feed Comus's power. Although the Lady presents the same complication to Comus's cycle, Sabrina's divine level of asexuality is stronger, strong enough to disrupt the cycle entirely. Sabrina simulates an orgasmic action through a spiritual pinnacle originating from her divine asexuality, something to which the Lady can aspire so long as she does not have sex. But can the Lady remain chaste in a world that relies so heavily on marriage?

Despite the focus on the Lady's virginity throughout this masque, there is never any talk of protecting her chastity as a means of saving her for marriage. Even in the conclusion of the masque when the Lady and her brothers return home, they sing and dance for their parents without the implication that the Lady needs to prove her chastity so that she will remain untarnished for a profitable marriage. By ignoring the possibility of marriage, *Comus* disregards the usual narrative arc for female characters in early modern literature: "The 'traditional' young virgin character [...] spends virtually all of her play searching for a husband and ends definitely married or definitely about to be."⁵³ The Lady does not spend the masque searching for a husband and she does not end the masque married or even close to being married. The possibility of a husband is never mentioned. This means she does not need to save her chastity for marriage and childbearing. She has virtue for

⁵² For example, see Kellett's "The Lady's Voice": "Although Comus is surely not the kind of inspiration that the Lady seeks in her invocations, his dialogue with the Lady produces a collaboration—a dialectical tension—in which full poetic authority can be achieved only through exchange. Despite her physical incapacity, her poetic voice actually diminishes the power of Comus's threat and enhances her own rhetorical skill" (Kellett, 8).

⁵³ Jankowski, 224.

virtue's sake alone. Her virginity remains her own and, because of it, she remains sexually and socially her own—and both are “protected” by her indifference toward sexual pleasure, by her asexuality.

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