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The Virtues of Mediation: Milton's Ludlow *Maske*

Namratha Rao

This essay, partly by way of Milton's Spenserian engagements, argues that *A Maske* is neither a celebration of resolve, nor a univocal assertion of exceptional virtue that facilitates some fusion of pleasure and virtue, but is instead a risky exploration of the mediacy of virtue and the virtues of mediation, however much they fail to satisfy. Several kinds of mediation texture *A Maske*: mediation as the middle ground between disparate things, mediation as intervention in conflict, mediation as the making sensuous of ideas or putting into medium, and, above all, mediation as the material and social process that takes place in and through opposites that both require and condition one another. Consequently, Milton exploits rather than forecloses the dialectical promise of the masque form and leaves open, but not unanswered, the difficult questions of immediacy and transcendence. Drawing on the writings of T. W. Adorno, this essay suggests that mediation—and his related concept, 'constellation'—afford supple and illuminating ways with which to think through the contradictions of Milton's poetic-philosophical thought. It offers new interpretations of cruxes in *A Maske* and shows how each of its characters entails others through a combination of fissures and resemblances. In presenting not an isolated form of virtue, but sketching instead a constellation of interrelated forms, *A Maske* reveals how—in tending to its mediations—the drear woods of the world might be made to disclose the starry threshold with which we begin and from which we are removed.

INTRODUCTION: WANDERING LABOURS

Milton fondly recollects, in 1642, whither his 'younger feet wander'd': through 'those lofty Fables and Romances' and the 'shady spaces of philosophy'—chiefly through the 'divine volumes of *Plato* and *Xenophon*'—from which he learnt of 'chastity and love […] whose charming cup is only vertue which she bears in her hand to those who are worthy'.[1] This record of his early reading points, above all, to Milton's Ludlow *Maske* in which Spenserian and Platonic dynamics conspire and clash.[2] The gusto for chivalry, chastity and love, offers obvious thematic connections to *The Faerie Queene*; the description of his efforts as a kind of 'wandering' forms a subtler link, both mimetic and hermeneutic. To wander, related variously as 'to walk' (Dutch *wandelen*),

[1] Milton, 'An Apology Against a Pamphlet (1642)', in Don M. Wolfe et al., (eds), *Complete Prose Works of John Milton* (New Haven, CT, 1953–1982), I.890–92. (All subsequent quotations are from this edition, henceforth *CPW*).
[2] James Holly Hanford argued decades ago that the 'outcome of these elevated yet fervid imaginings is *A Maske*, in which the correlative influences of Spenserian, Platonic and Apocalyptic allegory are clearly to be traced'. Hanford, *A Milton Handbook* (New York, NY, 1946), 370–71.

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'to change' (Middle Dutch *wandelen*, Old and Middle German *wantalôn, wantelen*, Old English *wandlung*), 'to turn' (Old German *wend*) and 'to deviate, to hesitate' (Old English *wandian*), is a central Spenserian fixation bequeathed to Milton, the movement that both expresses and answers what Comus calls 'the unexempt condition' of fallen life.[3] Wandering thus occurs at the level of representation and is equally solicited as interpretive labour, both from characters in poems and by readers of poems.

Milton's reminiscence offers further illumination through the ambivalence of what he learns. On the one hand, the 'charming cup' of chastity and love might already contain virtue alone, available to those who are worthy enough to find it ('only vertue which she bears in her hand'). Wandering in this instance is initially required but ultimately undesirable and expendable—the true path and virtue precede it and are thus to be discovered. On the other hand, the 'charming cup' might only be obtainable as virtue by those whose wanderings are worthy enough to make it so ('only vertue […] to those who are worthy'). Wandering in this instance is constitutive of path and virtue, both of which are not ontologically given and so already discoverable, but instead processual and producible, to be anticipated and formed. It involves movement and hesitancy, twists and changes, as its etymons suggest. This second kind of indispensable wandering—driven both by frustration and hope, moving between convention, expectation, speculation and trial, participant in that which it seeks—is of principal interest to my analysis of Milton's *Maske* and its relation to Spenser. In romance, wandering (*errare*) is a trope and convention; as a figure for thinking in the way that I propose, it also agitates between the contradictions that conventional notions are wont to conceal and solidify.[4]

To delineate the workings of wandering in *A Maske*, its link to virtue, and its entanglement with *The Faerie Queene*, I draw on two concepts from the writings of T. W. Adorno, 'mediation' and 'constellation'. As Steven Helmling contends, crucial concepts such as these tend to appear in Adorno's work as 'characters differing according to circumstance and context'; mediation, for example, can be a means *and* target of critique, but cannot be evaded.[5] The conflictual functioning of terms can be vexing in critical prose, but affords particularly supple ways into allegorical artworks whose characters are also conceptual. The poetry of Spenser and Milton makes concrete the predicaments of abstraction, of Platonic forms, of the relation between transcendence and immanence, and of concept formation itself. It does so by a kind of 'putting into medium' or making sensuous of ideas in order to make sense of them.[6] This is one kind of mediation, the formal mediation of the work of art. Other sorts are operable, too, including, for example, mediation as the mean or middle ground hypostasized between disparate things, or mediation as a kind of intervention in conflict; both these types aim clearly at resolution. The fourth kind—most significant to Adorno's thought and to my argument—is Hegelian, and likewise describes the relationship between contradictory poles. As Adorno writes:

> In order to be thought, and to exist, each [pole] inherently requires the other that Kant opposed to it. Hence for Hegel mediation is never a middle element between extremes […] instead, mediation takes place in and through the extremes, in the extremes themselves. That is the radical aspect of Hegel, which is incompatible with any advocacy of moderation.[7]

[3] Milton, 'A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle, 1634 [Comus]', in John Carey (ed.), *The Complete Shorter Poems* (London, 2013), l.685. All quotations from *A Maske* and shorter poems are from this edition.
[4] On romance error see Patricia Parker, *Inescapable Romance: Studies in the Poetics of a Mode* (Princeton, NJ, 1979).
[5] Steven Helming, *Adorno's Poetics of Critique* (New York, NY, 2009), 132.
[6] 'Putting-into-medium' is one useful definition offered by Anna Kornbluh in her illuminating essay on mediation in the writings of Raymond Williams. Kornbluh, 'Mediation Metabolized', in Paul Stasi (ed.), *Raymond Williams at 100* (Lanham, 2021), 1–20, 2.
[7] T. W. Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, tr. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA, 1993), 8–9.

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Mediation is more an activity than entity and describes the reciprocally constitutive relationship between opposites that require and condition one another. As Adorno explains, the relation between extremities is neither one of absolute independence nor identity, but mutual dependence. In this account, mediation functions not to resolve or harmonize, but is more like dialectical awareness—thinking labours to trace the mutual construction between extremities and, therefore, the necessary rift within seemingly unified concepts.

'Constellation', a related term, is a critical device for drawing disjuncta into particular arrangements and kindling and dramatizing the mediations between them. Again, the purpose is not to reconcile but rather to elicit and express the interaction between constellated materials.[8] The stars have long been our guides but also, as Milton reminds us, keep a 'wandring course' (8.126).[9] Constellation, as its name implies, intends a restless stasis that allows one to construct a concept without effacing or congealing the labour and relations required to produce it. Wandering, I suggest, comes to figure and facilitate mediation in *A Maske*, and to solicit 'constellation' in Adorno's sense rather than usually assumed forms of syntheses. Attention to mediation counters prevailing interpretations of *A Maske*'s sharply oppositional form and meaning. Moreover, the style of relation between contraries that mediation describes fittingly echoes the animating strife that Miltonic virtue entails.

As has long been recognized, opposition is vital to Milton's understanding of virtue, made known through struggle. Good and evil in his accounts are obviously not the same, yet nor are they separate. As an early entry (engaging Lactantius on the problem of evil) in Milton's commonplace book suggests, they mediate one another:

> Cur p*er*mittit deus malum? ut ratio virtuti constare possit. virtus enim malo arguit*ur*, illustrat*ur*, exercet*ur* quemadmodu*m* disserit Lactantius l. 5. c. 7. ut haberet ratio et prudentia in quo se exerceret, eligendo bona, fugiendo mala. lactan. de ira dei. c. 13. quamvis et hæc non satisfaciunt.
>
> (Why does God permit evil? 'So that reason may correspond to virtue.' For virtue is made known, is illustrated, and is exercised by evil, as Lactantius argues [in *Divine Instructions*,] book 5, chapter 7, that reason and prudence might have something by which they may discipline themselves in choosing good things and fleeing evil things. Lactantius, *On the Anger of God*, chapter 13—however much these arguments fail to satisfy).[10]

Milton's comment, '*quamvis et haec non satisfaciunt*', preserves slight hesitation, a brief recoil from his excerpted wisdom that acknowledges its astonishing implication. If virtue is not just cast into relief, but *exercised*—put into motion, into *actuality*, according to Aristotle—by evil, how then does it flee evil for good and remain more than merely potential virtue?

We might reflect this moment of uncertainty (*c*.1639) onto the central philosophic-dramatic problem of *A Maske*: the question of why, after glaring displays of moral superiority, the Lady cannot flee her captor, Comus. Or, indeed, the question of why, in keeping with generic precedent established by the 1630s, Comus does not simply disappear at the Lady's stirring account of her 'sun-clad' power, especially as he acknowledges in a fearful aside its efficacy (781). Stephen Orgel is representative in his assertions that 'the masque is always about the resolution of discord, and antithesis' and that the worlds of the revels and the antimasque are mutually exclusive.[11] In the masque, virtue's victory has more to do with *enargeia*, with contrast and clarity,

[8] See Helmling, *Adorno's Poetics*, 111.
[9] Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Alastair Fowler (London, 2013). All quotations from *PL* refer to this edition.
[10] Milton, *Manuscript Writings*, ed. William Poole, *The Complete Works of John Milton*, vol. 11 (Oxford, 2020), 113–14.
[11] Stephen Orgel, '"To Make Boards to Speak": Inigo Jones's Stage and the Jonsonian Masque', *Renaissance Drama*, 1 (1968), 121–52, 121–4.

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than with *energeia*, or change and conflict. Yet, even as the Lady strives to objectify virtue, what *A Maske* terms 'Chastity', in its pristine abstractness, she is returned to experience, to the context of its mediations; and even as Comus struggles to flatten virtue into mere experience, he is pierced by it. Neither can eliminate the other and attempts to do so will cost both.

A Maske is thus not (or not only) a 'celebration of besieged firmness', or a 'relatively naiöve, uncomplicated, and univocal [assertion] of preternatural virtue'.[12] It is neither an exaltation of singularity, nor an illustration of progressive resolution, but is instead a risky exploration of the mediacy of virtue and the virtues of the mediation, however much they fail to satisfy. Consequently, the fortunes of immediacy, transcendence and singularity become some of the work's most difficult questions as each pole is shown to be precariously reliant on its traditional antithesis. David Lindley once observed that 'the masque does not debate but asserts, for all that its form appears to offer dialectical possibility'; Milton attends to and exploits just such possibility.[13] It is instructive that some scholars have recently made cases for *A Maske*'s likeness to contemporary occasional entertainments, while a great many others have asserted its difference from them, with T. S. Eliot going so far as to declare it 'the death of the masque'.[14] In the awareness of one side is the shadow of the loss of the other; such is the intensity of self-reflection to which Milton subjects his work.

MILTON AND SPENSER

Milton's masque is the primary object of this essay. It does not summon Spenser as a point of comparison at every turn, nor argue that he eclipses other precedents, but suggests that Milton's engagement with his poetry and poetic techniques might be taken as a further layer of mediation in *A Maske*. This essay, in other words, constellates the two poets in the service of interpretation and is thus in tune with scholarship on Milton that critiques emphases on his own singularity and self-enclosure.[15] A conspicuous similarity between the two poets is the appearance of wandering as positive and productive action. Spenser's *Elfe* is 'wandring through the world with wearie feet' when he finds his mate, *Fay*, and they found faery-kind: wandering facilitates relation and generates Spenserian poetry. *The Faerie Queene* manifests both 'wandring woods' and 'wandring in woods'—interpretive action that answers its object in needing, partly, to mimic it—and warns of the anaesthetic and amnesiac properties of the Bower of Bliss that makes '[t]he wearie Traveiler, wandring that way' forget his pain, and fleetingly elude the formative pains of the quest.[16] In *Paradise Lost*, Satan makes, with deadly intent and tragic consequences, 'intricate seem straight' (9.632).[17] The line is revelatory in how it beckons and banishes wandering, expressing both the serpent's rapid, twisting motion—a kind of mechanical wander—as well as (deceptive) promises of immediacy. It implies not that wandering is necessarily right but that sidestepping it (or pretending to) is generally wrong. And wandering is not just the poem's way,

[12] David Carroll Simon, *Light without Heat: The Observational Mood from Bacon to Milton* (Ithaca, NY, 2018), 196; Stephen M. Fallon, *Milton's Peculiar Grace: Self-Representation and Authority* (Ithaca, NY, 2007), xii.

[13] 'Introduction', *The Court Masque*, ed. David Lindley (Manchester, 1984), 4.

[14] Nicholas McDowell, *Poet of Revolution: The Making of John Milton* (Princeton, NJ, 2020), 220–21 follows A. B. Coiro, 'Anonymous Milton, or "A Maske" Masked', *ELH*, 71 (2004), 609–29. See Barbara Lewalski, *The Life of John Milton: A Critical Biography* (Oxford, 2000), 76; see also T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (New York, NY, 1950), 139, Joseph M. Ortiz, '"The Reforming of Reformation": Theatrical, Ovidian, and Musical Figuration in Milton's *Mask*', *Milton Studies*, 44 (2005), 84–110, and Don Cameron Allen who saw in *A Maske* an 'attempted reconciliation of opposites' that ends in 'confusion' in *The Harmonious Vision: Studies in Milton's Poetry* (Baltimore, MD, 1970), 24.

[15] I am indebted to Maggie Kilgour's reminder that the work is deeply conversational, even as it bears a protagonist who prizes autonomy. M. Kilgour, '*Comus*'s Wood of Allusion', *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 61 (1992), 316–33. See Colin Burrow, *Milton's Singularity* (2008) for a nuanced account of Milton's relationship to singularity: <https://www.christs.cam.ac.uk/miltons-singularity> accessed 5 Dec 2022.

[16] Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A. C. Hamilton (Harlow, 2007), II.x.71, I.i.13, I.ii.9, II.v.30. All quotations from *FQ* are from this edition.

[17] This serpentine straightening is a horrid parody of Milton's ambitions (that wander into song and speculation) to 'justify' the ways of God to men.

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but also its conclusion: Milton's first couple must, 'with wandring steps and slow', make their mutually 'solitary way' out of Eden and into the world (12.648–9).[18]

Wandering may be lonely, vain, frightening and tedious, but it is also curious and hopeful, fundamental to forging relation, and it abounds in Milton's only masque. The Prologue names the 'forlorn and wandering passenger' of the woods (39); the Lady, alone, imagines that her brothers have 'engaged their wand'ring steps too far' (192); the Second Brother in turn laments 'where may she wander now' (350); Comus wishes to entice every 'thirsty wanderer' with his cup (523) and, finally, the Epilogue reveals that after 'wandring labours long', Psyche becomes Cupid's eternal bride (1005). What is more, *A Maske* structurally incorporates the unpredictability and bidirectionality that wandering entails. Both antagonist and protagonist summon goddesses who fail to arrive; debates over the strength of Chastity and the nature of Nature suffer awkward interruptions; when at last we expect resolution we are met with a bungled attempt at rescue. The 'drear woods', in which the work opens and its trial unfolds, provide a knotted middle that makes all who traverse it wanderers, denied a fixed course, deprived of immediate release and pressed into various forms of relation.

A Maske has bred a dizzying array of responses attentive to similarities and differences to *The Faerie Queene*, debating both the texture of Milton's work and the character of his 'Spenserianism'. Examples include the relative narrowness and capaciousness of their versions of 'chastity', comparative treatments of sin, will and gender, their use of projective psychological allegory, their 'Protestant' poetics and visionary sensibilities.[19] In contrast, my contention is that *A Maske*'s ingrained relation to Spenserian invention is above all in the reciprocity of opposites, the ensuing significance of mediation and the uncertain promise of reconciliation, wherein pairs such as singular and social become as important as the more common partners of thinking and feeling, and ideas and matter. Spenserian allegory is often described as a form of epistemological (and metaphysical and political) violence, denoting the way in which its concepts forget or obscure their own production through and dependence on material particulars. Some focus on allegory's ruthless urge to abstract clarity while others emphasize the escape from allegory's maw of particularity in various guises ('ordinariness', pleasure, romance errancy).[20] Both these approaches are compelling, but limited (and indeed mirror one another), because they fail to fully attend to the contradictory core of Spenserian allegory: what is typically read as an antinomic relation between abstract and particular is frequently a dialectic.

The Faerie Queene discloses this tension repeatedly, but an especially luminous instance at its centre is the arbour in the Gardens of Adonis, formed 'of the trees owne inclination'. It is both thickly *material*, comprising abundant vegetal growth ('ranke braunches' and attendant vines) and inescapably *conceived*—'made', '[knitted]' and 'fashiond' (III.vi.44). 'Inclination' names an inward tug and outward slant, both creating and created, as the trees wander between the material and the abstract, or arbour. Like the unfinished statues of Michelangelo or the monstrous figures of Bomarzo, partly emergent from stone, each mediates the other and we might glimpse, in this instance of densely self-reflective *poiesis*, a possible solidarity, a possible recognition of the

[18] Andrew Wadoski, 'Milton's Spenser: Eden and the Work of Poetry', *Studies in English Literature*, 55 (2015), 175–96 shows that Milton renders the wandering of Spenserian romance as 'fallen toil' in *PL* (193), but contends that early responses to Spenser 'are far removed from these worldly concerns' (184).

[19] See, for example, Christopher Kendrick, 'Milton and Sexuality: A Symptomatic Reading of Comus', in Mary Nyquist, Margaret W. Ferguson (eds), *Re-Membering Milton: Essays on the Texts and Traditions* (New York, NY, 1987), 43–73; Deborah Shuger, '"Gums of glutenous heat" and the Stream of Consciousness: The Theology of Milton's Maske', *Representations*, 60 (1997), 1–21; Leah Marcus, 'John Milton's *Comus*', *A Companion to Milton*, ed. Thomas N. Corns (Oxford, 2003), Blackwell Reference Online, unpaginated; John McMichaels, 'The Lady Rises: Stoicism and Spenser in Milton's *Comus*', *Renaissance Papers* (1998), 151–63; McDowell, *Poet of Revolution*, 236.

[20] See e.g., Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca, NY, 1964); Gordon Teskey, *Allegory and Violence* (Ithaca, NY, 1996); Steven Knapp, *Personification and the Sublime: Milton to Coleridge* (Cambridge, MA, 1985); Jeff Dolven, *Scenes of Instruction in Renaissance Romance* (Chicago, IL, 2007); Joe Moshenska, 'Why Can't Spenserians Stop Talking About Hegel? A Response to Gordon Teskey', *Spenser Review*, 44 (2014); Kenneth Borris, *Visionary Spenser and the Poetics of Early Modern Platonism* (Oxford, 2017).

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contradictory implicatedness of matter and idea that does not lapse into unity and is borne by the labour of thinking. No abstracting knight appears and we, too, are stayed from falsely resolving the arbour that expresses and solicits a kinetic concept in exhibiting its own relations of production. Many of Spenser's earthly paradises are troublingly nostalgic, but the arbour crystallizes the utopic potential of the Garden of Adonis—that we might imagine contraries, or differences more broadly, in dynamic, companionable relation to one another; that there are alternatives to either antagonism or sameness.[21]

A Maske's concern with the connection between the ideal and material is often discussed in terms of Milton's youthful Platonism, which scholars tend to treat as an importation of generally agreed-upon Platonic tendencies. J. B. Savage, for example, relied on the *Phaedo* to propose a dualist framework in which we must extract truth from fiction and wisdom from body, while Sears Jayne emphasized a more Ficinian bent, conflated entirely with Milton's debt to Spenser. Though only the former suggests ontological dualism, both approaches are axiologically or morally dualist, equating matter with evil and spirit with good in predetermined agreement. More recently, Nicholas McDowell describes *A Maske* as modelling a 'Neoplatonic soteriology' (linked to Milton's 'personal soteriology of virtue') that similarly prioritizes ascent: individual reason and abstinence as a path to spiritual transformation.[22] The cost of these interpretations, which have the advantage of expressing Milton's fixation with singularity, is the spectacularly predictable operation and outcome of virtue, divesting *A Maske* of its wandering quality and peculiar mixture of yearning, precarity and risk. Reading Milton's Platonism via Spenserian allegory reveals that neither poet merely reissues assumed Platonic conventions and hierarchies. Rather, they critically re-present them in ways that engage tensions already present in Plato, for example, in the contradictory co-dependence of universal and particular (increasingly apparent in later dialogues), or the perilously social nature of singularity. As Spenser's Garden of Adonis implies, his poetic metaphysics might include but is not quite reducible to lapsarian instantiations of Platonic forms or dragging celestial abstractions down to earth. His poetry also shows how such forms are never without the material in the first place, never simply themselves, but conceived and produced with and against what exists, and cast from earth to empyrean and back again: forms as and in formation. In this light, Milton, too, does not present individual characters as sequestered forms or adequate 'models for imitation', despite Tasso's famous appeal to poets to leave untroubled the relation between outward manifestations and universal truth so that readers' minds might directly replicate the literary patterns—temperance, prudence, justice etc.—they encounter.[23] His mode of instruction eschews such automaticity and asks that we participate in the labour of construction, understanding characters in fluctuating relation to one another. One cannot 'bee a true Poem' (as Milton recommends), if confined to reproducing isolated figures, particularly when humankind has been given 'minds that can wander beyond all limit' (*CPW* I:890, II:527).

A Maske is thus concerned both with testing ideals in the world and with tracing their making and unmaking. The strange decision to craft for a 15-year-old girl a role that obdurately (and, thus, rebelliously) insists on abstinence implies greater interest in testing the absolute iconicity of virtue in the world than in a particular experience of gender. As Brooke Conti argues, the femininity of Milton's extraordinary virgins (cf. *Il Pensoroso* and 'Sonnet 9') 'functions as a sign of

[21] See Namratha Rao, 'Ground-Plots of Invention: Poetics of the Material and Difficult Thinking in Spenser's Gardens', *English Literary Renaissance*, 53 (2023), 218–49. On art in symbiosis with nature in the gardens of Bomarzo, see Michel Jeanneret, *Perpetual Motion*, tr. Nidra Poller (Baltimore, MD, 2001), 122–6.

[22] Sears Jayne, 'The Subject of Milton's Ludlow Mask', *PMLA*, 74 (1959), 533–43, 533–4; J. B. Savage, '*Comus* and its Traditions', *English Literary Renaissance*, 5 (1975), 58–81; McDowell, *Poet of Revolution*, 329, 335.

[23] Tasso, 'Allegory of the Poem' in *Jerusalem Delivered: Gerusalemme liberata*, tr. Anthony Esolen (Baltimore, MD, 2000), 515–16 and *Discourses on the Heroic Poem*, tr. Mariella Cavalchini (Oxford, 1973), 171. Fallon and William Shullenberger, for example, see the Lady as such a pattern for imitation, in 'Milton and Literary Virtue', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 42 (2012), 181–200, 196, and *Lady in the Labyrinth: Milton's Comus As Initiation* (Madison, WI, 2008), 170, respectively.

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idealized difference'. It is significant, in other words, 'that they are not women but *ladies*', a title habitually granted to allegorical personifications.[24] Milton wrote in his 'Apology' of the valuable permeability between poetic models and lives, of the wish to incarnate such 'composition[s], and pattern[s]' (*CPW* I:890). In *A Maske*, such a pattern is introduced into life in the form of a young girl ostensibly playing herself. Yet the test we witness is not only to do with the character's capacity for fixity, but also to do with the character of uncompromising fixity in the world that is. Milton suggests, gradually, that the Lady cannot, in an effort to embody absolute virtue, be within but removed from the world and its inhabitants. In this regard, his explication of a virtuous person-as-poem as a *composition* is significant. What is composed is neither single nor fixed, but relational and arranged, open to being recomposed, deformed, disputed and reconstituted: in its mediations, *A Maske* is as much about virtue's composedness as it is about virtue's resolve.

In what follows, I analyse central scenes in *A Maske* in order to demonstrate the manifold importance of mediation—rather than mere opposition, correlation, conquest, or resolution—and the consequent rewards of attending to characters in constellations. In every case, wandering between contingent possibilities emerges as necessary, not the self-fed and self-consumed 'eternal restless change' of evil (which, being absolute, is not really change at all), but an open response to temporal mutability in which 'reason is but choosing'—experimental, uncertain, present continuous—precisely because there are numerous paths of significance (595; *CPW* II:527). I begin by examining *A Maske*'s amended opening lines, suggesting that the revisions show Milton considering a more difficult medial principle for his art than the middle ground, or certain resolution in a closed dialectic. In subsequent sections, I study the Lady's enraptured vision of the Virtues and the potential effects of her extraordinary voice. While both sight and song represent aspects of her singularity and capacity for transcendence, the former invites an illusory, individual escape from experience—pure immediacy—and the latter gives materialism a metaphysical twist, collective transcendence within and against the world that is. Building on the vital reciprocity of contraries established in the opening scene, *A Maske* asks whether or not the two approaches might coincide to answer a world both inherited and capable of being reformed. In concluding, I trace echoes between principal characters, or character constellations, before pausing over the singularly social Sabrina, an example of character as constellation. Neither yielding a victory for either sensuous experience or abstract virtue, nor supplying a divine compromise, Sabrina affords augmenting irresolution. The contact between the riverine nymph and the Lady reveals that the concept of virtue or 'Chastity' is neither immutable nor circumscribable by any character but must be critiqued, renewed and further unfolded in relations formed through time.

BRIGHT SHAPES IN DIM SPOTS

The masque opens with the Attendant Spirit's descent into a wild wood, which marks the movement between two different worlds, both of which he goes on to describe. His mansion lies 'before the starry threshold of Jove's court […] where those immortal shapes | Of bright aerial spirits live ensphered | In regions mild of calm and serene air'. He dwells, so he tells us, 'above the smoke and stir of this dim spot', the earth, the 'pinfold' to which humankind is 'confined and pestered' (1–7). The Spirit's spatial language affirms the closeness of his home to the celestial court and its remoteness from earth: it is *above* our world, but *before*, rather than below, Jove's. Humanity, of 'frail, and feverish being' is subject to 'mortal change', both death and mutability as conditions of mortal life. The immortal shapes, in contrast, seem something like geometric

[24] Brooke Conti, 'Milton's Ladies', *Studies in Philology*, 118 (2021), 742–64, 763. On gender, see Kathryn Schwarz, 'Chastity, Married and Militant: Cavendish's Romance, Milton's Masque', *PMLA*, 118 (2003), 270–85 on chastity's fissured status as 'iconic absolute and social compromise' (275). Cf. Donne's 'First Anniversary': 'She, of whom th'ancients seemed to prophesy | When they called virtues by the name of *she*'.

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abstractions, cut loose from time. So far, so antithetical. One variant, the Trinity manuscript inserts and later erases, between these two worlds, a third: 'amidst the Hesperian gardens, ON WHOSE BANKS | Bedewed with nectar and celestial songs | Eternal roses GROW, and hyacinth | And fruits of golden rind'.[25] This deletion, observed C. S. Lewis nearly a century ago, is crucial, for the 'intrusion of an *intermediate realm*, as serene as the air and as warmly inviting as the earth' ruins the effect of the masterly juxtaposition established in the passage of a single verse. As true reconciliation according to Lewis arrives at the masque's end, we must commence with contrast: for now, '*nothing that blurs the distinction* between the region of the Spirit and the region of Comus must be admitted'. The third realm, which is 'mere decoration' in this opening speech, is only recalled 'into significant life' at the close.[26] Leaving aside that the region of Comus is equally the region of the Lady and Sabrina, and that the smoky earth does not sound particularly inviting, Lewis's point is something like this: the Hesperian garden provides a third realm that combines in some form the earthly and airy (weighted, seemingly, towards the tranquillity of the latter) and thus synthesizes the originally separate poles. But this middle ground between the first two regions has yet to be earned; it is only after various trials that it can meaningfully reappear as a crystallization of the achieved reconciliation between abstract virtue and worldly experience.

A Maske, I argue in contrast, does not accomplish such a resolution, and cannot therefore justly convey it through some third entity. Indeed, when the Hesperian garden resurfaces, it is not as a terminal synthesis, but a stage in heavenly ascent, superseded by another paradise in which further labours remain: the labours of childbirth, for Psyche's twins are yet unborn and will provide a new pair with a new relation to be worked out. Lewis was right to remark on the significance of Milton removing the 'intermediate realm', or middle ground, but not for the reason implied, that is, to maintain a crisply dualist separation between the two opening spaces. Milton's excision emphasizes instead that the mythic garden is unnecessary to the interaction of the extremes; they exhibit already an antipodal intimacy as each pole requires the other. He suggests, consequently, that the relation between opposites cannot be satisfactorily resolved by recourse to a third middle element. It is not some hypostasized intermediate thing, but 'intermediate' as intransitive verb, the process of mediation that takes place in and through the opposites—as Adorno read Hegel—that Milton turns to.[27] Neither moderation, nor compromise, he shows us how extremities require and inform one another; the middle ground gives way to a more radical medial possibility. Aerial spirits live 'ensphered' and frail men live penned in a 'pinfold'; serene air gives way to 'rank vapours', more a difference of degree than kind (17). As early as 1634, we feel something of the delicate hesitancy of Raphael's later question in *Paradise Lost:* 'what if the earth | Be but the shadow of heaven', which also implies, 'what if not?' (5.574–5). What if not separate and correlative but intransparent and interactive, shadows that warp and change as much as they mimic? These questions persist as the Attendant Spirit describes the fate of true servants of virtue, placed amongst 'enthron'd gods on seats' in the 'palace of eternity', and we later witness the Lady seated fast in Comus' stately palace on earth. The Spirit's claim that 'some there be that by due steps aspire' to this glorious future is commonly interpreted as an account of *anabasis*, or ascent, but it equally suggests the earthly wandering that constitutes *A Maske*.

Noël Sugimura writes that the Spirit's opening lines 'effectively reduce our world' to that of Plato's Cave, or the illusory earth in the *Phaedo*.[28] Perhaps, and yet this should not imply separation. The return to the Cave, we remember, is essential, just as in the *Phaedo*, the two earths

[25] See Carey, *Shorter Poems*, n.4–5.
[26] C. S. Lewis, 'A Note on *Comus*', *Review of English Studies*, 8 (1932), 170–76, 175 (emphasis added). This is revealingly also how Lewis read *FQ* (and seemingly how he read Hegel): see *The Allegory of Love: A Study in the Medieval Tradition* (Cambridge, 2013), 447.
[27] 'Intermediate' occurred as adjective, noun and intransitive verb in the first half of the seventeenth century. See *OED*: 'intermediate, *v.*' and 'intermediate, *adj.* and *n.*'
[28] Noël Sugimura, *Matter of Glorious Trial* (New Haven, CT, 2009), 90.

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are compared to the surface and depths of the sea—positional extremities but nevertheless co-reliant.[29] However little the briny hollows of the false earth might be in comparison to the upper world, the surface is nothing without the sediment. I have suggested how Spenserian allegory is structured by this mutual dependence and Milton's *De idea Platonica* (1628), too, provides an early example of his appreciation of Platonic contradiction, of the Republic produced by what it expels: the poet (see 35–9: '[…] *Iam iam poetas urbis exules tuae* | *Revocabis, ipse fabulator maximus,* | *Aut institutor ipse migrabis foras*'). *A Maske* explicitly suffers such contradiction in demanding the Attendant Spirit's repeated decline into this 'sin-worn mould', both earth and flesh (17; see 78–9). The Spirit is both an external presenter and an actor within the masque; this does not make him, as some argue, a spokesperson for the deceptions of mortality so much as an expression of transcendence conditioned by immanence.[30] The mere fact of the Spirit's appearance, as necessitated by dramatic form, should not be taken for transcendent immediacy but another kind of mediation—a sensuous rendering, or putting into medium. Indeed, *A Maske* specifically abjures the spiritual-spatial determinism we might expect. The entry of more-than-human-virtue into the world is not imagined solely in terms of celestial descent; at the work's conclusion, Sabrina must rise to the woods from the watery depths of the Severn, implying both a reliance on the material, or the *Phaedo*'s illusory earth, as well as the need for soaring *and* falling motions. Wandering permeates virtue whose right movements cannot be prescribed in advance.

A Maske cannot furnish us with a recipe for virtue—only with possible 'ingredients', as Milton would write in *Areopagitica*—precisely because it shows us that virtue is contingent, produced and altered through time, and understood according to its mediations. The Attendant Spirit and Sabrina respectively stoop and ascend to the woods but return to their otherworldly communities; neither is entirely exhausted in these efforts, and neither is able exclusively to clarify the shape of virtue. Yet together—for it is the airy spirit that turns to the watery nymph—they enhance it and assist in making virtue more intelligible. Their arrivals and actions help us see in dim spots the possibilities for bright shapes, to see that neither stands without the other, making both vulnerable to the other. Well before he composed his great epic, Milton was working out in *A Maske* that no middle flight would be fit for his song. The horizontal wandering through earthly woods by which virtue is formed is propelled in part by vertical reversions as each extreme reaches for the other.

SINGULARITY AND THE VISION OF THE FORMS

Following the activity of mediation perceptible in *A Maske*'s Prologue, I turn to its protagonist, the Lady, who is commonly conflated with Milton (isolated in their virtue and virtuosity from the world) and in whom Milton tests the allied dilemmas of immediacy, transcendence and singularity.[31] The Lady's vision of the virtues and her stirring voice both mark her as exceptional, though each offers a distinct promise of transcendence. The first—her vision—attempts to realize singular immediacy in escaping worldly wandering and, I argue, is shown to be deceptive and disastrous on its own. The very presence of the virtues is double-edged: they set the Lady apart and cue at the same time a critique of unreflective idealism. The second—her voice—suggests how the singularity implied by her vision might be productively expressed as a kind of common transcendence that operates with and against experience. An unexpected Spenserian itinerant, the knight of Holiness, provides a precedent for the notion that transcendence is authenticated in the *return* to experience: wandering turns away from itself and back again.

[29] See *Plato*, vol. 1, tr. H. N. Fowler (Cambridge, MA, 1996), 109c–e.
[30] Savage, '*Comus* and its Traditions', 68.
[31] E.g., Fallon, *Milton's Peculiar Grace*, 62–4; William Kerrigan, *The Sacred Complex: On the Psychogenesis of Paradise Lost* (Cambridge, MA, 1983), 42–4.

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Shortly after the Prologue and our introduction to Comus, we discover the Lady alone in the 'blind mazes' of the wood, where various questions cluster to form 'the labour of [her] thoughts' (180; 191): Where are her brothers? Why does Night conceal its starlight? Why does she find 'but single darkness' where she was sure she heard mirth? (190–203). This searching mental activity is important because it indicates explicitly the distance of her thoughts from reality; thinking and interpretation allow the subject to mediate objects and environs necessarily external to them. Yet no sooner does she question, 'What might this be?' (204), than she replaces the labour of her thoughts with steely certainty and ostensibly immediate, sensible knowledge. Thought settles into spectacle, or sheer vision:

> These thoughts may startle well, but not astound
> The virtuous mind, that ever walks attended
> By a strong siding champion Conscience […]
> O welcome pure-eyed Faith, white-handed Hope,
> Thou hovering angel girt with golden wings,
> And thou unblemished form of Chastity,
> I see ye visibly, and now believe
> That he, the Supreme Good, t'whom all things ill
> Are but as slavish officers of vengeance,
> Would send a glistering guardian if need were
> To keep my life and honour unassailed. (209–19)

The Lady is no longer a particular, embodied 'wand'ring passenger', but the universal 'virtuous mind'. In 'walking', rather than 'wandering', she activates only forward progression (*wandelen*), stripping the verb, 'to wander', of its uncertain deviancies. She is met not with a companion, as Milton lent Guyon in his famous mis-recollection of Spenser in *Areopagitica* (*CPW* II:516: 'with his Palmer') but by an abstract 'champion', barely divisible from the mind on which it attends. In brief, the Lady poses as discrete and self-identical as she prepares to greet the Forms, similarly regarded as single, immutable and eternal. In greeting Faith, Hope and Chastity and professing to see them visibly the Lady seems not merely ravished by the sight of reified Forms, as scholars have remarked, but rendered on a par with them.[32] She welcomes them as if as equals. Her use of apostrophe suggests that the relation between them is not one of participation, which, as shown in the *aporiai* of the *Parmenides* (130a–135d) and later in the *Philebus* (15b–c), is a dilemma that can threaten the unity and universality of the Forms. Here, the Lady preserves Formal integrity in suggesting that she, too, has entered their imperishable sphere.

This spectacular moment intensifies with additional lines found in the Trinity manuscript: 'I see ye visibly *and while I see ye | This dusky hollow is a paradise | And heaven gates o'er my head*'. In a flash of *theoria*, or rational vision, the Lady can sensibly apprehend metaphysical reality, the pure earth alone. Put another way, what appears to her coincides with what is, annihilating the distance between thought and reality. This second mention of paradise—which Lewis does not discuss—affords not an intermediate realm, but effects instead a partition between the Lady and the dim wood. Although she remains within it and oddly within time ('*while I see ye*'), she has also escaped it. Heaven breaking overhead confirms that the Lady's *apostrophe*, or 'turning away', announces her abstractness, drawing her away (*ab* + *tractio*) from the mutable world. As with Spenser's Guyon, whose 'goodly frame of Temperance' is said to 'rise' or abstract itself from the world (even to the point of destroying it), the desire for absolute unity and integrity makes an adversary of time, decay and generation (II.xii.1).

[32] E.g., Sugimura, *Matter*, 90 citing John Leonard's note to l.214 in his edition of *The Complete Poems* (London, 1998).

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Significantly, however, Plato's originary account of *theoria* in the *Republic* does not restrict itself to the contemplation of Forms—it involves a protracted journey followed by perilous re-entry into the world, both through dialectic, in order to witness and communicate new ideas. Intellectual sight, or contemplation, is 'nested in a larger context which is both social and political': *theoria* does not rid itself of *praxis*.[33] *The Faerie Queene* finely illustrates how experience and worldly obligation might be folded into speculation. In the Legend of Holiness, the Redcrosse Knight discovers Contemplation not in an isolated burst, but stepwise, after gruelling lessons with mentors in the house of Holiness. His transcendent vision of the heavenly city, though seemingly instant and otherworldly, is astonishingly pierced by the earthly: 'he *might* see', we are told, 'blessed Angels to and fro descend | From highest heuen […] As commonly as friend does with friend' (I.x.56). The subjunctive enters this moment of near immediacy, marking the spectacle as ontologically negative—*possible* rather than actual—and the indeterminate angels are mediated by comparison to the familiarity of earthly friendship. It is contact with the world, in other words, that lures them into appearing at all. This vision, mediately immediate, is dazzling, and the knight longs to remain:

> O let me not (quoth he) then turne again
> Backe to the world, whose ioyes so fruitlesse are' (I.x.63).

Yet the line bends and turn he must, for *theoria* involves this 'turne again', both a turning *away* from the world and into what it makes possible, and a turning *to* the world once more. The knight returns to the poem, to his beloved Una, and to the world plagued by the old dragon, and the distance between vision and reality proves crucial to reformative action. There are three main things to notice here: (1) the vision follows wandering trials and painful instruction; (2) the vision transcends in touch with the world; (3) the vision invites a return to the world. Redcrosse's closing lesson before his vision on the mount is in 'charitee' (the term's only appearance in Book I), and it is remarkable that this is the virtue conspicuously missing from the Lady's hypostasized trio in *A Maske*: Faith, Hope, *Chastity*.

The replacement of the expected Charity sounds alarms. If charity is a part of what facilitates the Redcrosse knight's companionable transcendence, its absence renders the Lady's vision somewhat suspect, particularly in terms of her swift dismissal of questions, uncertainties and the labour of thinking with which she began. St Paul cautions in 1 Cor. 8:1 that 'knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth', a warning we know that Milton dwells on in later writings, as in the second edition of the *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (1644) which vividly disparages the 'glib and easie' method of Custom, 'in some manner like to that vision of *Ezekiel*'. When removed from charity, swiftly hypostasized knowledge only 'puffs up unhealthily' (*CPW* II:222–3). The difference established between the single immediacy of knowledge that puffs up and the communal mediatedness of charity that edifies is instructive and calls into question the Lady's sudden access to transcendence. Of course, the labour of thinking must necessarily involve both proceeding step-by-step, or wandering, as well as a kind of leap in thought in order to be generative and do more than repeat what is already known. Yet, in this case, the Lady's mental movement is all flight. The 'dusky *hollow*' that she disowns and in which she stands, awkwardly reminiscent of the puffy corpus of custom's counterfeit knowledge, threatens the integrity of her own vision. Indeed, it is precisely through her reliance on customary wisdom, familiar from *The Faerie Queene*, that the Lady is taken in by Comus: the assumption that 'honest-offered courtesy' is sooner found in 'lowly' shepherds than in princes (321–5). In *Areopagitica*, Milton would remind us that where there is desire to learn, 'there of necessity will be much arguing, much writing, many opinions'. This, he wrote, is 'but knowledge in the making'—communal, mediated,

[33] A. W. Nightingale, *Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy* (Cambridge, 2004), 5.

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composed—and so there remains some wariness with *A Maske*'s portrayal of knowledge being there for the taking (*CPW* II:554).

While the absence of the Form of Charity interrogates the Lady's method of knowing, the presence of the Form of Hope queries the existence of the Forms at all, and so, too, the validity of the Lady's vision. As with fear, hope is an affect attendant on worldly wandering (neither having quite arrived), and dwells precisely in uncertain expectancy, in the fluctuations between fulfilment and failure. Hope is future-oriented: imaginative, wishful, and speculative. Consequently, the Lady's *materialization* of Hope becomes at the same time a diminishment of hope as she attributes, with certainty, the future to the present. Self-identity breaks down. Hope is not uniform, but the Forms categorically are, and in being granted such perpetual being Hope ceases to be hopeful (cf. Rom 8:24: 'hope that is seen is not hope').[34] The contradiction produced by the immutable Form of temporal, wandering Hope could suggest that the Lady's vision represents a confusion of possibility with actuality, which makes it, in effect, a kind of idolatry.

It might be objected that the Form first met with, Faith (*fides*), conflated with total confidence (*fiducia*), has encompassed Hope, and imparted unto it its firmness. There is a precedent for a kind of assured hope as an effect of faith in Milton's *De doctrina Christiana* (*CPW* VI:472–6), and in *A Maske* the Elder Brother, too, will affirm his '[inclination] to hope, rather than fear' with regard to his sister's state (411). Calvin's *Institutes*, as well, delineate a considerably secure Hope, and yet, hope remains an *attendant* of faith, a necessary supplement that might both restrain and revive faith, rather than the very same thing (3.2.42). In the Lady's view, Hope is a Form with wings, which might express its ontological suspension, hovering between paradise and hollow rather than having arrived. If this is the case, it radically suggests that the vision is not detached from but instead produced by the hope of the Lady's worldly wandering.

THE SOCIAL POSSIBILITIES OF SONG

The Lady's vision should for reasons examined above give us pause, and yet, we cannot deny that she is also fundamentally right: the Attendant Spirit has been dispatched for the children's defence, and Sabrina does save her. The vision raises the problem of being at the same time an illusion of and so obstacle to transcendence, as well as a mark of the possibility for transcendence. In other words, it could be taken for an escape from earthly life into a *new world*, or for a glimmer of what a *transformed world might be like*, if returned to and wrought through wandering attempt. This difference is further clarified in how *A Maske* recognizes the Lady's goodness in her song, which succeeds her vision and takes place in the mutable realm of the woods. The astonishment of her listeners, namely the Attendant Spirit and Comus, authenticates the trace of true virtue—both goodness and power. Perhaps this is the 'sudden adoration', in the words of her Elder Brother, with which true Chastity is met (451). The Attendant Spirit, in shepherd's guise, relates how barbarous dissonance in the woods gave way to 'a soft and solemn-breathing sound' that 'rose like a steam of rich distilled perfumes, | And stole upon the air' (554–6). The clamour of Comus' band and the rank vapours of the earth yield, at least for a moment, to paradisal, synesthetic sound; her music holds to its resolution and makes the air itself an air.[35] The Spirit is made, at the Lady's voice, 'all ear', and her ability to share something of a transformed world from within and with this world, is extraordinary.

The daemon sent from the airy sphere to secure the Lady's safe passage is himself transported, and this unwitting reciprocity hints at what the Lady might help realize. *A Maske* acknowledges

[34] The presence of Hope makes explicit the vulnerability of the claim to absolute unity as shown in the *Parmenides*. See Alexander Nehamas on participation and hints of the concept of predication, 'The Academy at Work: The Target of Dialectic in Plato's *Parmenides*', in Victor Caston (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, vol. 57 (Oxford, 2020), 121–52.

[35] I have in mind William Empson's fine remark on vernal airs being 'as enlivening as an air' in Milton's Eden. See *Some Versions of Pastoral* (London, 1935), 157.

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not only her power to project other worlds that press upon extant reality, but her potential jointly to construct a community in and through doing so. The Lady's vision of the Forms entails a turning away, and so imagines a different situation for herself alone while the given world remains the same. In contrast, her song to the intermediary, Echo, who does not answer or materialize except in the shape of the resonant responses of other characters, facilitates a drawing into, and so hints at the prospect of a changed world through a collective project of reparation. The Lady appears to afford at this point two possibilities, and the arduous, even awkward, veering between them forms a part of the wandering that *A Maske* commands. And yet, we might remember that in 'A fair infant', 'sage white-robed Truth' and others 'of that heavenly brood' are fleetingly imagined to have come into the world to 'do some good' (54–6). Perhaps the Lady's vision—like the Redcrosse knight's—encloses similar promise, of transcendence mounted from within and returned to the world and its inhabitants. This would not flatten her vision into identity with song, so much as it would make them complementary rather than contrastive possibilities. Remarkably, it is only the constellation of multiple responses to the Lady's song—speculated by a brother, suffered by Comus, and reported by the Spirit—that discovers her singular and social potential, reimagines her fantasist vision and enlarges the contours of 'virtue'.

Milton's commonplace book shows a corresponding double tending. He observes that the good man 'in some sense seems to surpass even the angels, and that because he, wrapped in a feeble and mortal body, wrestling always with his desires, nevertheless aspires to live his life like those in heaven': there is surely something of the Lady in this optimistic claim.[36] And yet, it is significant that Milton amends his source, Chrysostom, who more strongly submits in his *Homily on Genesis* that people 'can walk on earth as though coursing across heaven' and admits cases 'when people prove, despite entanglement with a mortal body, to live the same life as those supernal powers'.[37] On the one hand, the possibility of 'surpassing' angels intensifies the aspiration of the original; on the other, the expectant but unfulfilled yearning of 'nevertheless aspires' softens its attainment. Further on in the manuscript, Milton paraphrases Machiavelli on the best of humankind: 'most praiseworthy of all are they among mortals who inspire the minds of men with true religion'.[38] Not only those who aspire to live on earth as those in heaven, but those, too, who *inspire* in others such aspirations. This latter claim has been neglected in Milton's Lady but is essential. The theme and thread of solitary virtue that turns itself to spirit or reaps singular reward ('which if heaven gave it may be termed her own' 418), has garnered much of *A Maske*'s critical commentary, and yet, it is the overlooked quality of twofold promise that makes the Lady remarkable.[39]

It is generally accepted that in *A Maske* Milton 'concerns himself less with the good community than the good soul'.[40] I hope to have shown, however, that the good soul is affirmed both by being apart from society and in being a part, *in potentia*, of new communities it might help shape. The question of the link between singular and social, transcendent and immanent, is among *A Maske*'s central provocations. The Lady's vision both reveals how these categories deride one another and kindles the possibility that they might exist in sustaining, rather than antagonistic relation to the other. The Lady's song helps unseal potential, though not proof, for her vision of the (not quite) theological Forms to express a more charitable orientation to the world. Perhaps this is why Charity fails to harden into a Form; it is instead a possible way of mediating between the flash of vision and worldly wandering, of communicating vision within and through the world. The Lady's vision is thus not to be dismissed for Charity's absence but

[36] Poole, *Manuscript Writings*, 115.
[37] See Poole, *Manuscript Writings*, 115 n.4. See also Chrysostom, *Opera*, ed. Fronto Ducæus, 6 vols (Paris, 1621–4), 2. 123–4 and Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis 1–17*, tr. Robert C. Hill (New York, NY, 1986), 167.
[38] Poole, *Manuscript Writings*, 258; see n.385.
[39] McDowell's *Poet of Revolution* is a recent example of commentary that centres on singularity.
[40] W. A. Oram, 'The Invocation of Sabrina', *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900*, 24 (1984), 121–39, 124.

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shown to be yet unrealized. As with the arguments of Plato's Parmenides, the critique of the vision of Forms that *A Maske* enables is at the same time a commitment to that vision.

The Lady's sticky predicament and her ensuing silence for the final 224 lines of *A Maske* is a notorious textual crux that can be re-read in light of her ambivalent vision.[41] Later on, when in 'stony fetters fixed' in Comus's lair, the Lady has obviously departed the realm of the Forms; her bonds imply that she has suffered a *katabasis* and returned to the shadowy world.[42] Her initial disputation with Comus corresponds to Plato's suggestion in the *Republic* that the soul which has witnessed the Forms must return to communicate knowledge of them, to teach others. Indeed, the Lady's words are thrilling and make the enchanter tremble as would the presence of a god, though he dissemblingly dismisses her. His vivid aside, '[s]he fables not' discloses the Lady's pedagogic possibility and betrays the hope for community—sight into song (799). But the revelation arrives too late, for she has already cast him as unfit to be convinced, doomed to remain, from her position, an example of evil. In refusing any longer to imagine Comus from the point of view of redemption, the Lady neglects her transformative potential. As when she hastily abandoned the 'labour of [her] thoughts' and leapt into vision, so too here does she desert the wandering demands of dialectic and detach herself from the world once more. Comus, committed to his temptation ('[t]his is mere moral babble', 806), has yet to give up; we cannot be sure of what might have ensued had not the Brothers blundered in.

Scholars often remark on the Lady's failure in this scene to acknowledge her own embodiment—as was the case in her vision—which is reinforced by her eventual silence and motionlessness. It is as if she senses, abruptly, the precariousness of her re-entry into the dusky woods after her visionary experience and attempts to retreat from dramatic and virtuous action to the realm of ideas. She becomes, in other words, purely *potential* virtue, what Aristotle unforgettably compares in *Metaphysics* Z to the state of sleep in relation to wakefulness, or to unformed matter. The Lady's attempt to be as a Form in the ideal realm while in fact embedded in the world of the woods, reverts ironically to Form's antithesis. Virtue has clotted and solidified in the person of the Lady, not because of some illicit desire, but because of its refusal of further *exercise*, as Milton wrote in the passage from his commonplace book (cited above) in which he modifies Lactantius. Consequently, the Lady's fixity signals both her possession of and alienation from virtue.

CONCLUSION: CHARACTER AND CONSTELLATION

The foregoing sections focused on the Lady and opened and closed with bids for singularity, withdrawals from wandering experience that emphasize her separateness. Yet even as it bestows on her a special significance, *A Maske* insists on common capacities shared by its characters. These are hinted at in its soundscape. We learn that the Lady's ear is 'true' when she rightly tracks 'the sound | Of riot, and ill-managed merriment' to its source (169–71). Yet the Spirit, too, correctly identifies Comus' 'tread | Of hateful steps' (91–2), and Comus, more unexpectedly, can distinguish 'some virgin' from 'chaste footing near about' (145–8). All are discerning listeners and each equally produces astonishing sound. The Lady explicitly casts herself as Orphic in threatening her captor, and the Attendant Spirit asserts that his 'song | Well knows to still the wild winds' (86–7). Meanwhile, Comus' insistence on trying the Lady 'yet more strongly', even as she moves him, implies a kind of equivalent power (805). Katherine Larson's observation, that the Lady's and Comus's songs are of all most akin in their chromatic colouring and

[41] Critical responses to the famed 'gums of glutinous heat' are many and varied: see e.g., Shuger, "'Gums of glutenous heat"'; John Leonard, 'Saying "No" to Freud: Milton's *A Mask* and Sexual Assault', *Milton Quarterly*, 25 (1991), 129–40; James Broaddus, "'Gums of Glutinous Heat" in Milton's *Maske* and Spenser's *Faerie Queene*', *Milton Quarterly*, 37 (2003), 205–15.

[42] See Plato, *Republic*, tr. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis, IN, 2004), 516e.

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dissonant intervals, intensifies the oppositional proximity.[43] Yet, Orpheus, their shared mythic original, is known not only for his winning strains, but also for his incompletions: in *L'Allegro*'s words, Eurydice is but 'half regain'd'. The echoes and oppositions between character attest to a distributed power that can be turned to diverse, even confrontational, uses, but that might equally be oriented towards collective effort.

Sabrina, typically seen as *A Maske*'s 'answer' or resolution, enfolds unlike traits from other individuals and is the work's most singularly social character.[44] She is, like the Spirit, an otherworldly mediator, rising up to the woods as he descends; like the Lady, a 'virgin pure' and patron of chastity; like Comus, a speaker of iambic quadrimeter and connected to Circe, wherein both women are daughters of the ocean, found among sirens and associated with mixing.[45] Her combinatorial structure does not melt these dissimilarities into indistinction, but asks that we imagine the mediations between them. The capacity to gather and draw unlike things together makes Sabrina *concrete* (*concrētus*), a quality reiterated in her startling metamorphosis that recalls the similar healing of Marinell in Spenser's Legend of Chastity (III.iv.40).[46] Marinell, himself already chaste, is wounded by the knight of Chastity and pressed, by the tenderness, balm and heavenly nectar of sea-nymphs, into learning to love. Milton, too, makes Sabrina's 'guiltless' maidenhood the focus of her human life and shows, only after her nymph-led change, her charity and love, resonant in those folk who 'carol her goodness' (848).

The sensuous process of her change—'nectared', strewn and 'through the porch and inlet of each sense | Dropped in ambrosial oils' (837–40)—emphasizes an immanent transformation. Traces of her humanity drift into deified form as she is said to 'retain' her maiden gentleness and radiate it into her georgic communities of stream and meadow (841). Moreover, Sabrina's method of healing, 'with precious vialed liquors', recalls her own quickening into immortality, as if she endeavours to communicate something of her transformation in the earthly encounters that succeed it (846). Her self-sacrifice and revival differ from the Lady's vision in tactility, and in reciprocity, too; we never do learn whether the Forms could see or hear the Lady in turn. Even so, Sabrina's reported transformation provides a model for immanent transcendence that is social rather than solitary. It is not incidental that Sabrina, whether in reputation, entrance or exit, is always described as part of a community. Unlike the 'unblemished' Form of Chastity in the Lady's vision, Sabrina is composite and communal, mediated and mediating. She is both a dazzling point in *A Maske*'s pattern of 'chastity', and herself an example of character as constellation.

Milton's literary reanimation of Sabrina replicates in technique the ethos of her change. The Attendant Spirit learns of Sabrina from Meliboeus (821), alluding to both Spenserian and georgic poetic power. Yet Sabrina in Spenser's poem is lonely and short-lived, hardly a wanderer. Of illegitimate birth and 'innocent of all', she is known rather for her guiltless death than for virtuous action, thus following Galfridian convention.[47] Milton equally accentuates her chastity in life (and uniquely elides her unlawful conception), but makes her death a deliberate and communal act—she 'commends' or commits herself to a river that seems at first to frustrate her flight but becomes, with the help of water deities, a way of renewing her life and amplifying her capacity to love. In this she is self-wounding, combining the roles of Britomart and Marinell in her expansion of a passing, but familiar literary figure. Milton's description of Sabrina's metamorphosis

[43] Katherine Larson, '"Blest Pair of *Sirens* … Voice and Verse": Milton's Rhetoric of Song', *Milton Studies*, 24 (2013), 81–107, 97–8.

[44] Oram, 'Invocation', 123.

[45] Natale Conti, *Mythologiae*, tr. John Mulryan and Steven Brown, 2 vols (Tempe, AZ, 2006), 2.474. See Sarah van der Laan, 'Circean transformation and the poetics of Milton's Masque', *The Seventeenth Century*, 31 (2016), 139–60 on Circean transformation.

[46] Milton's use of the adjective 'finny' in Comus' song (115), from *FQ* III.iv, suggests his familiarity with Marinell's transformation.

[47] See Philip Schwyzer, 'Purity and Danger on the West Bank of the Severn: The Cultural Geography of A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle, 1634', *Representations*, 60 (1997), 22–48.

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comes to echo, therefore, the shift in both individual power and social commitment perceptible in his inventive development of her character. More broadly speaking, *A Maske*'s partially reparative twist through Sabrina is not restricted to enhanced Spenserianism but is also recognizably georgic in positing a model of labour that is communal and unfinished: Comus escapes, the Lady's silence persists, and Sabrina and the Spirit will likely return to the woods again.[48] Discrete poetic allusion opens out into shared generic convention, unfrozen and enlivened in the 'cross-flowing' person of Sabrina (832).

It would be a misstep, however, to take Sabrina for *A Maske*'s solution. She is not a conduit of Christian grace or Platonic ecstasy as scholars once suggested in influential essays, yet neither is she a simple manifestation of redeemed sensuality, or 'nature'.[49] Touch is surely important to her rescue, and she moves in some respects from the harder temptation of 'trial', or test, to the gentler temptation of 'to handle', 'touch' or 'feel' (*temptāre*), evoking the place of both resistance and reciprocation in negotiating temptation. But Sabrina's curiously immaterial, 'printless feet' are as significant as her 'powerful hand' (896, 902). Apart from evoking a piece of that magic which Prospero abjures in *The Tempest* and reversing the effect of the faerie queene of Arthur's dream—who leaves 'nought by pressed gras' (I.ix.16)—her 'printless feet' combine the airiness and earthliness of flight and wandering. Sabrina's self-ascribed motion, 'thus I set my printless feet', suggests both her commitment to the ongoing mediation of vertical and horizontal axes, as well as the vitality of this continual mediation to her virtuous efficacy. Consequently, Sabrina does not just remind the Lady of the body she rejects in her debate with Comus, any more than she simply unspells 'Chastity' from the clutches of the enchanter.

In *The Faerie Queene*, Britomart's Chastity violently contests and augments Marinell's more dogmatic version of it; between the two knights, the concept must critique and renovate itself. Here, Sabrina, too, must salvage the Lady's manifestation of Chastity, but she does so with love rather than antagonism. Her care enlarges and invigorates the concept, releasing it from the static descriptions offered by the brothers and the Lady herself. She thus sets the concept in motion and demonstrates that the life of 'chastity' has more to offer than the ontological chastity—immutability and eternity—of Forms. This is less to say that Sabrina, as concrete immediacy, confronts and melts rigid abstraction, but rather to suggest that her touch reawakens the Lady to her own power, congealed upon the stony seat. And, yet, unlike in the case of Sabrina's riverine transformation, we have no assurance that the Lady has welcomed or indeed suffered any change at all. Sabrina fails, therefore, to be *A Maske*'s solution in two ways: (1) she activates potential within the Lady, rather than acting upon her alone; (2) she leaves one profoundly uncertain as to the measure of her success—how far has the Lady changed?

As Katherine Schwarz observes, the Lady is not shown to be subject to compromise but is rescued in 'full obduracy'.[50] This opacity, which complicates rather than completes the dramatic action, is crucial: the Lady, it would seem, remains *abstract*, dragged hurriedly and mutely away, and Sabrina, while herself *concrete*, does not achieve complete synthesis. Sabrina's insufficiency must be met by the concluding dance that both imparts ritual harmony and enshrines the Lady's shattering silence. This silence at the heart of a work whose transformative power is song inscribes the absence of a progressive and closed dialectic in *A Maske*. Its effect is more like the pendulation of open and undecided struggle, with all the tensions and reversions that entails. Even Lewis's gorgeous 'intermediate realm', resurfaced at the close, cannot provide a surrogate solution in the sense of a middle ground. The Attendant Spirit, winging through the wide 'fields of the sky', from which he will 'suck the liquid air' (978–9), seems to offer us the inverse

[48] See Anthony Low, *The Georgic Revolution* (Princeton, NJ, 1985), 39–40.
[49] See A. S. P. Woodhouse, 'The Argument of Milton's *Comus*', *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 11 (1941), 46–71; Jayne, 'Subject'; Oram, 'Invocation', ingeniously synthesizes the two arguments.
[50] Schwarz, 'Chastity, Married and Militant', 275.

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of Sabrina's printless feet, an imprint of flight. Jubilant, he wrings from the skies versions of the earthly woods and river as he makes his way up, marking, in bright shapes, the knowledge of dim spots to which he will return.

Not one of *A Maske*'s characters, consequently, is sufficient in themselves. Each invokes and produces the other through their fissures and resemblances, as individual limitedness breeds multiplication rather than reduction. As Adorno would write of concepts, 'the determinable flaw' in each 'makes it necessary to cite others'.[51] The dealings between Milton's characters result in rearrangement, rather than total resolution, and they fan out, star-like, into patterns from which we must interpret.[52] *A Maske*, in the footsteps of *The Faerie Queene*, makes us wander in order to construct the lineaments of virtue, not to capture it. *A Maske* squarely fails to arrest virtue, or 'chastity'; indeed, its liberation from capture supplies the main plot. Rather than singly conceptualizing virtue, Milton's work facilitates the creation of character 'constellations' in which every element is articulated through its configuration and mediations with others. In Adorno's account, 'Constellation is not system. Everything does not become resolved […] does not come out even'. And yet, each element or moment sheds light on the other, and the configuration is both 'more, and other', than the 'quintessence' of its elements.[53] It is, therefore, in this wandering way, in tending to its mediations, that the drear woods of the world might be made to disclose the 'starry threshold' with which we begin and from which we are removed.

University of York, UK

[51] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, tr. E. B. Ashton (London, 2007), 53.

[52] See 'Coelum Britannicum: A Masque', *The Poems of Thomas Carew*, ed. Rhodes Dunlap (Oxford, 1949). The producibility and interpretability of constellations I describe recalls the crowded and contestable firmament of Carew's *Coelum Britannicum* (1634), likely performed in the same year as *A Maske* and including among its number the two sons of the Earl of Bridgewater. In that more polarizing masque (both grotesquely absolutist and revolutionarily artificial), heaven is not only 'broke loose' (378), but also re-makeable, though 'constellation' is something like enthronement. Nevertheless, ostensibly eternal patterns can be 'disbanded' (214), 'unrivited', and reduced to their 'primitive opacity' (282–4); the material startlingly appears to precede the metaphysical as shapes of all kinds compete for stellification. In this light, Comus and his rout are as the stars recalled to earth. *Coelum*'s reversions and rivalries might be generatively compared to those of *A Maske*, though I do not have room to pursue them here.

[53] Adorno, *Hegel*, 109.

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