Literator - Journal of Literary Criticism, Comparative Linguistics and Literary Studies
ISSN: (Online) 2219-8237, (Print) 0258-2279

The lady 'immanacled': Prisons of body and soul in Milton's *Comus*

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Dates:
Received: 23 Oct. 2025
Accepted: 23 Mar. 2026
Published: 29 May 2026

How to cite this article:
Ringwood, F.M. & Addison, C.A., 2026, 'The lady 'immanacled': Prisons of body and soul in Milton's *Comus*', *Literator* 47(1), a2234. https://doi.org/10.4102/lit.v47i1.2234

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John Milton's 1634 *Comus* reworks the Boethian 'body as prison of the soul (or mind)' motif by using it to explore new possibilities within an established philosophical tradition. In the masque, the virginal body of the Lady becomes a prison of itself, while her soul (or mind) initially remains free. After interacting defiantly with Comus, the Lady's mind also becomes entrapped, partly through apprehension of its own heroic virtue. Milton introduces an unusual gendering of the soul-body dichotomy in this masque: he associates the soul primarily with the female human protagonist, while the masculine demi-god Comus represents the body. Once the Lady is spellbound in Comus' chair, her two brothers and a male Attendant Spirit attempt to rescue her, but she can be delivered from her immobility only by a female presence. The intervention of the nymph Sabrina eventually releases the Lady from her state of frozen virginity – a condition that is both admirable and transgressive within early modern constructions of feminine decorum. This article takes up a feminist perspective in tracing the Boethian variations developed in *Comus* and situates the masque within the transitional phase of Milton's early intellectual development.

Contribution: This article on the seventeenth-century author, John Milton's mask, *Comus*, contributes to the journal *Literator's* focus on the study of literature.

Keywords: Milton; *Comus*; Boethius; prisons; body; soul; mind.

John Milton's *Comus*, first performed in 1634 and revised and published in 1637 as *A Mask*, offers significant variations on the Boethian 'body as prison of the soul (or mind)' motif. While Boethius' male prisoner is saved or, at least, consoled, by a female Lady Philosophy, Milton conceives both prisoner and liberator as female. In *Comus,* the Lady is the imprisoned protagonist; and, although male characters attempt to rescue her, she must be saved by the female river-nymph, Sabrina. The malign spell of Comus causes the Lady's virginal body to become a prison of itself, while her soul (or mind; a combination which Milton calls the 'Psyche' in *Areopagitica* [Milton 2003:728]) at first remains free. Though her 'corporal rind' is 'immanacled', her mind is intact and unassailable (Milton 2003:ll. 663–665). Later, her mind also becomes entrapped, 'In stony fetters fixed and motionless' (Milton 2003:l. 819), partly due to its heroic resistance to seduction and sin. In this masque, not only the primacy of female characters but also the gendering of the soul-body dichotomy are unusual for Milton. Throughout the text, the soul is associated with the female protagonist, while masculine Comus represents the body. The female liberator, Sabrina, uses physical touch instead of Boethius' cerebral philosophy to release the Lady's 'ensnaréd Chastity' (Milton 2003:l. 909), not so much from her male captor as from herself. This discussion takes a feminist perspective on Milton and on his representation of Boethian mental and physical prisons in *Comus*.

An essential dualism between body and soul is very ancient and widespread in human thought. Figuring the body as a prison of the soul dates, in the West, at least, to Plato (1999:35). A dualism of this type suited the Medieval Church, which envisaged material existence as a mere vale of tears, during whose trials the body was important only insofar as its actions contributed to the soul's afterlife in heaven, purgatory or hell. This binary of soul and body is, of course, a Manichaean opposition, with soul in the morally superior position. Manichaean binaries feature in colonial discourse (Janmahomed 1985:82) and in traditional models of gender. It should not seem surprising, in a patriarchal society which values men over women and soul or mind over body, that the soul-body binary be connected to the male-female binary. In 1949, Simone de Beauvoir specifically identified the relation of man to woman as 'Subject' to 'Other' (de Beauvoir 1972:26). More recently, Judith Butler has observed that the 'abstract masculine epistemological subject' decried by de Beauvoir predictably combines both masculinity and the mind, whereas the feminine is relegated

'along magical relations of reciprocity' to mere physicality. The 'incorporeal' nature of the male 'subject', she claims, renders it capable of 'radical freedom', while the 'female sex' is permanently 'restricted to its body' (Butler 1990:16).

In her 1990 book, *Sexual Personae*, Camille Paglia expands this male-female binary into a cosmic Nietzschean opposition between the Apollonian and the Dionysian. Paglia's Apollonian is essentially male, whereas the Dionysian, which is fundamental to nature, is female. Reason and order, including all the arts and sciences, result from Apollonian male anxiety and disgust at the Dionysian, 'chthonian' powers of nature and their thick, swampy fluidity, with which woman is cognate. However, in the long run, the old imprisonment relentlessly subverts all aspirations of Apollonian mankind: 'Mind is a captive of the body' (Paglia 1990:12–17). For Paglia, the negative element of the Manichaean opposition is clearly stronger and more fundamental than the positive.

A religious perspective would reverse Paglia's imbalance of power, as in Plato's original formulation. In the doctrine of most religions, the soul is immortal, unlike the body, which is subject to death. The soul will, in other words, transcend its imprisonment and all other agonies and indignities that it might experience via its association with the body. This inequality was evident to most western thinkers during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, owing mainly to the influence of Christianity.

One of the most significant proponents of the soul-body opposition throughout this period was the Neoplatonic philosopher Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius. Boethius remained influential for centuries in the English literary tradition (Lewis 1964:75), not least because of the popularity of Geoffrey Chaucer's fourteenth-century translation of his *De consolatione philosophiae* [*The Consolation of Philosophy*]. Writing his *Consolation* in a Roman prison in the sixth-century, Boethius generalises the human soul as occupying just such a prison in its body. In this work, he does not deal directly with the Christian faith, but relies on his interpretation of Greek ethical thought as deeply related to Christian teachings. What he reveals is that the soul's escape from the bondage of the body is offered only by true philosophy, which can teach the soul that it possesses the utmost freedom not from any material situation but in contemplation of the divine mind ['*in mentis diuinea speculatione*']. Although Boethius personifies philosophy as a Lady, he also tells the story of the female deity Circe to demonstrate the superiority of mind over body. Circe, who is associated with the body and its desires, uses her enchanted cup ['*tacta carmine pocula*'] and her magical hand ['*herbipotens manus*'] to transform Ulysses' oarsmen ['*remiges*'] into lower animals. However, though the body may be lost ['*corpore perditis*'], Circe is unable to harm the steadfast mind ['*mens stabilis*'] of any of these men (Boethius 1823:376, 330–331). As Ann Astell puts it, 'The bestial bodies she [Circe] intends as prisons only serve to disclose the hidden citadel of unconquered spiritual strength' (Astell 1994:63). Thus, despite the power of Lady Philosophy, gender is somewhat ambiguous in this text.

In writing *Comus*, as E.H. Dye argues, Milton was certainly influenced by Boethius, though Milton presents female power much less ambiguously in the gender dynamics of his text. Perhaps inevitably, a bold and independent thinker such as the young Milton would, in seeking an explanation of the forces that govern human lives beyond free will, have been drawn naturally to the *Consolation*. Reading about Boethius' plight as a gifted intellectual unfairly imprisoned probably stirred Milton to feel, as his enslaved Samson would do later, the 'rousing motions' of his vocation (Milton 2003: *Samson Agonistes*, l. 1382). Dye (1985:4) points out that Milton would have encountered Boethius even as a boy at St. Paul's School, and that he must have been familiar with both the original Latin and Chaucer's Middle English translation, *Boece*.

The dilemma of the imprisoned Boethius in the *Consolation* would have graphically posed for Milton the basic questions about the nature and relationship of body and soul. Stephen Fallon regards *Comus* as containing the 'seeds of the change' that would engender Milton's philosophical shift from an 'early dualism' to the monism that he sees as informing Milton's mature work. Fallon shows how *Comus* functions as an intermediate text, displaying an 'intuition of the spiritualization of the body [and] the materialization of the soul'. This intuition represents a movement away from the Platonic dualism of material body and incorporeal soul towards the substantial continuum from solid object to spirit which was to comprise the poet's 'animist monism' in such later works as *Paradise Lost* (Fallon 2018:81–83).

As a model for framing the beginnings of his own unique ontology, Boethius must have appealed to the young Milton at least partly because of his historical distance. Contemporary theological ideologies such as Arminianism (associated with the Anglicanism of Archbishop Laud) and Calvinistic puritanism were becoming more and more polarised as England approached its civil war in the early 1640s. That Milton retained an independent path in this heated contest of ideas is proved, according to Debora Shuger (2012:137–138), by the fact that two influential twenty-first-century biographies of the poet respectively claim that he espoused the two opposite sides of the debate. In 2000, Barbara Lewalski used the terms 'radical' and 'reformist' for Milton's religious and aesthetic positions, referring to him (together with Oliver Cromwell) as a 'Puritan' (Lewalski 2000:xiii, 339). In contrast, Gordon Campbell and Thomas Corns (2008:84) in 2008 ascribed to him 'Laudian Arminianism and Laudian style'. But Milton, as Shuger (2012:146) points out, refused 'to take sides in the various controversies of the moment', being moved mainly by his own 'classicizing humanism', which would have found a more beneficial influence in Boethius than in any contemporary writer.

Milton's concern with Boethian questions is reflected by the constantly shifting counterpoint of freedom and imprisonment presented in *Comus*, in the iconic scenes enacted dramatically as well as in the more abstract imagery. Even the opposition of light and darkness is subordinate to the freedom-imprisonment motif. In this drama of young siblings lost in the wild wood while journeying to their father's bright castle 'that fronts the falling sun' (Milton 2003:l. 30), the dark forest represents captivity and restriction of movement. The Lady complains of 'the blind mazes of this tangled wood' (Milton 2003:l. 181) and accuses Night of 'clos[ing] up the stars' (Milton 2003:l. 197); the Elder Brother describes these stars as 'muffled' and the moon's 'influence' as 'quite dammed up' (Milton 2003:ll. 331–336); and the Second Brother goes as far as calling the forest a 'close dungeon of innumerous boughs' (Milton 2003:l. 349).

But the wood, which imprisons the body by blinding and confusing the senses, is, according to the Elder Brother, unable to imprison the soul:

> He that has light within his own clear breast
> May sit i' th' center and enjoy bright day,
> But he that hides a dark soul and foul thoughts
> Benighted walks under the mid-day sun;
> Himself is his own dungeon. (Milton 2003:ll. 381–385)

The Elder Brother sees the virtuous soul as generating its own light in a metaphor which equates light with a moral understanding that brings freedom to the mind, independent of the material conditions of the body. His Boethian vision of a person becoming 'his own dungeon' foreshadows Milton's agonised Samson crying out at the bodily prison of blindness: 'Myself my Sepulchre, a moving Grave', (Milton 2003:*Samson Agonistes*, l. 102) as well as Satan's realisation that hell is not a place but an imprisonment of the mind: 'Which way I fly is hell; myself am hell' (*Paradise Lost*, Bk. 4, l. 75).

John Demaray, in his analysis of the iconography of *Comus*, demonstrates how unexpectedly the freedom-imprisonment binary relates to the stasis-motion opposition. He points out that seventeenth-century English masques always consist of 'a choreography of static repose or "discovery", of virtuous "pacing" forward, of festive release into the revels'. Milton, of course, uses the Lady's eventual release from the 'static repose' of her spellbound state to indicate a 'sense of escape from confinement, a movement forward and outward into a spacious social realm'. However, the masque element that he handles most expressively is not this 'festive release' into motion, but what Demaray (1987:60–62) terms the 'moment of stasis', when the Lady is immobilised.

The 'moment of stasis' enacts the Boethian paradox: when the Lady is most constrained, held stock-still in Comus' magic chair, she is able to assert the radical 'freedom of [her] mind':

> Fool do not boast,
> Thou canst not touch the freedom of my mind
> With all thy charms, although this corporal rind
> Thou haste immanacled, while Heav'n sees good. (Milton 2003:ll. 664–667)

The Lady reduces her seated body here to the mere 'rind' or inanimate shell of her 'mind', which is untouchable by Comus's spell. The spell is represented by a dense and unyielding image of chains, which not only 'touch' but are intricately wound around the body ('immanacled'). This 'corporal' body is also figured as harder, at least at the surface ('rind'), than a real human body in the literal world. But these unyielding solid substances cannot enchain 'freedom', because it is abstract, intangible. This absolute binary between rigid solidity and immateriality is what Fallon (2018:81–83) identifies as the 'dualism' of Milton's early thought, contrasting notably with the softness and fluidity with which the Lady's rescuer Sabrina later resolves her harsh oppositions in this transitional text.

In the chair of Comus, the immobilised Lady embodies the Boethian '*topos* of the inward freedom of the mind' (Demaray 1987:61); nevertheless, she faces dangers that do not threaten Boethius in his prison. This masque uniquely – for Milton and for the 'body as prison' motif – features a woman as its protagonist, a virginal woman to whom violation of the body is a worse risk than its imprisonment (Marcus 2003:232). And yet, as Jeanie Grant Moore (2002:9) points out, the Lady possesses both 'virtue' and the 'power of reasoning' , attributes typically ascribed to men at this time (Baker 2010:448; Foyster 1996:215; Gibson 1989:16). Milton thus disrupts the conventional Manichaean opposition by creating a Lady who, though fully embodied, represents the virtuous mind, while his masculine Comus, son of Circe and Bacchus, speaks for the body and its desires.

The focus on female gender in this masque makes the virginity of the Lady's body a central complication of the plot. Partly because of the ancient cult of the Virgin Mary, female virginity has traditionally been admired in the Catholic Church, making the state potentially problematic for a Protestant writer such as Milton. He was later to assert in *Areopagitica*:

> I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered Vertue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race, where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat. (Milton 2003:728)

Milton uses the word 'cloistered' to associate false 'Vertue' and the monastic tradition with a walled imprisonment that makes an impossibility of strenuous moral exercise. But Protestants of Milton's time did value chastity, a virtue distinguished from the Catholic exemplar by being ideally expressed in the state of faithful marriage (Halpern 1986: 92–93). Before marriage, Protestants would require sexual abstinence, making the youthful Lady's virginity indeed admirable – a sign of her chastity – at least so far (Bellamy 1997:391–414, 395). However, permanent virginity would not be valued in a highborn young woman such as Alice Egerton who played, as herself, the Lady in the original production of Milton's masque. For her, to remain a virgin would be widely regarded as the 'waste fertility' (Milton 2003:l. 729) of which Comus complains. A woman's virginity is a closure of the

body that can be read as a circumscription not only of the body's 'fertility' but also of the mind. It is, in fact, one of several types of enclosure that have been imposed specifically on women throughout history.

Peter Stallybrass (1986:320), using Mikhail Bakhtin's (1968:26) distinction between 'the grotesque body and the classical body' in Rabelais, identifies woman's body with the grotesque. His argument resembles Paglia's gendering of the Apollonian-Dionysian opposition, for he sees the classically 'finished and completed' male physique as representing 'a closed individuality that does not merge with other bodies or with the world'. The female body, in contrast, is 'open to the outside world' via three orifices, the mouth, the vagina and the house door (Stallybrass 1986:124–26).

In Milton's masque, the reversal of this male-female opposition makes male Comus the character most open to the outside world. Specifically exhorting them to throw off the traces of 'Age' and 'Severity' (Milton 2003:l. 109), he leads his rabble of anti-masquers in outdoor revels that clearly overstep the limits of current morality. He expresses appreciation of the 'bounties' of Nature (Milton 2003:l. 710), which he sees as liberally provided for consumption, and he is portrayed as a seducer, offering in a cup that surely represents the pleasures that he habitually relishes 'delight/ Beyond the bliss of dreams' (Milton 2003:ll. 812–813). His openness and lack of control identify Comus as Dionysian, as opposed to the Apollonian, moral, controlled, closed Lady.

Nevertheless, the Lady's closure is not absolute and is, in some ways, ambiguous. Stallybrass (1986:124) claims that because Renaissance women were legally the property of men and that because their 'grotesque' bodies posed potential threats to men's integrity, male 'surveillance of women' focused on keeping closed all three openings to female liberty, 'the mouth, chastity, the threshold of the house'. With all of these shut, a woman could be regarded as enclosed in a threefold prison. But the Lady's mainly self-enforced prison is more complex than this.

The requirement, for example, that a woman stay indoors is not relevant to her, presumably because Milton himself was opposed to a 'cloistered' isolation from the 'heat and dust' of temptation. In any case, the Lady's venture beyond the house door is not a movement outward, but a *nostos*, a journey homeward, for perforce her father's house has shifted position. As the Attendant Spirit tells the audience, the Lady and her brothers 'Are coming to attend their father's state / And new-entrusted sceptre' (Milton 2003:ll. 35–36). This was, in reality, the Earl of Bridgewater's installation at Ludlow Castle as Lord Lieutenant of Wales, to which Milton's masque contributed as part of the celebrations.

While her opening of the house door has occurred before this text begins, the Lady does take cognisance of the patriarchal requirements for closure of the other entrances to a woman's selfhood. Both silence and chastity are important to her. However, though her body remains hermetically sealed at one end, she opens it at the other – the mouth – to defend virtue, at the risk of pollution. She says to Comus: 'I had not thought to have unlocked my lips/In this unhallowed air' (Milton 2003:ll. 756–757), suggesting not that her lips are locked from without in order to make her mind a prisoner within, but that she, the keeper of the key, has locked them willingly from inside. This secure closure of the mouth may be a protective measure, for to consent to a conversation with a possible seducer is to put oneself in danger; but it is also a setting apart of the self, making claim to that classical 'closed individuality' that Stallybrass (1986:125) assigns to masculinity. Men may desire to curb the grotesque fluidity of feminine nature, but a woman who truly aspires to Apollonian self-containment may disturb the masculine hierarchy.

Whether the body is figured as a prison of the mind or the mind as a prison of the body, the image renders one of these entities as enclosing, or outside, the other. *Comus* presents both possibilities, often with confusing ambiguity, and at times, the enclosure is not a prison at all. When the Lady talks about 'unlock[ing her] lips' (in the act of doing so), she characterises the body as container of the soul, though more in the guise of a temple than a prison, for its 'air' is, by implication, 'hallowed'. Later in the same speech, she implies that her would-be seducer's words 'Arm his profane tongue' for battle 'Against the sun-clad power of Chastity' (Milton 2003:ll. 781–782). This image shows her mind's virtue, 'Chastity', no longer locked up inside her body, but on the outside, engaging in combat for the body's purity.

The Lady's two brothers ring similar changes on this ambiguity. The Second Brother sees the necessity of a fierce physical protection of the body of 'Beauty' which, secluded in a 'Hesperian' garden, must 'need the guard/Of dragon-watch' against 'the rash hand of bold incontinence' (Milton 2003:ll. 393–397). But, in reply, the Elder Brother unwittingly echoes his sister in figuring the virgin's virtue as a knightly champion, armed and armoured with:

> a hidden strength,
> Which, if Heaven gave it, may be termed her own.
> 'Tis chastity, my brother, chastity:
> She that has that is clad in cómplete steel,
> And, like a quivered nymph with arrows keen,
> May trace huge forests, and unharboured heaths. (Milton 2003:ll. 418–423)

The 'cómplete steel' that encases the chaste woman should not be a prison even though it sheathes her entirely. It is a moral armour that ought to allow her more, not less, freedom, both of the body that may 'trace huge forests' without harm and of the mind whose 'hidden strength' keeps itself immune to every 'evil thing' that might wield 'hurtful power' against it (Milton 2003:ll. 432, 437). However, what the Brothers do not foresee in their concern for their sister's safety is the possibility that the Lady's

mind may become too strongly 'clad' in the 'steel' of her virtue. Anything protected and guarded too persistently may inadvertently be imprisoned.

The two images of warrior women that the Elder Brother offers, the female knight in armour and the bow-and-arrow wielding 'quivered nymph', were already popular figures in literature and folklore by Milton's time. Britomart and Belphoebe in Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* were recent English examples of the two types of virgin warriors. Paglia (1990:179–182) sees this kind of female Spenserian figure, whom she calls the 'Apollonian androgyne', as opting out of the 'dank clingy liquidity' of women's Dionysian nature. 'Chastity', she claims, 'is always a triumph of Apollo over Dionysus'. Spenser was, of course, an important influence on Milton, and his Apollonian women characters are precursors of Milton's forthright Lady (Broaddus 2003:20).

If the Apollonian Lady reverses the normal gender of things, so does Comus, who associates himself with the whelming Dionysian. His longest speech is in praise of Nature (Milton 2003:ll. 706–755); he uses a viscous organic substance to attach the Lady to her seat; and his father Bacchus is the Roman version of Dionysus. While the Lady is hard and pure and spiritual, he is an incontinent lover of Nature's prodigality. As a slippery shape-shifter, he may himself be immortal, but he is deeply invested in the human body, that soft 'mortal mixture of earth's mould' (Milton 2003:l. 244).

Refusing to accept a silenced or 'cloistered' virtue, the Lady 'unlock[s] her lips' and 'sallies out and sees her adversary'. She has been tricked into entering Comus' palace and bound to his chair by enchantment, yet she speaks up fearlessly because she 'hate[s] when vice can bolt her arguments, and virtue has no tongue to check her pride' (Milton 2003:ll. 760–761). In defence of 'virtue', she feels obliged to unsheathe the weapon of her own 'tongue'. While women have been traditionally censured for use of the 'tongue', here it is her sword of righteousness. She is an unmistakeable moral warrior, armed and puissant.

But, by opening her mouth, she removes one of the boundaries separating herself and others, thus approaching Bakhtin's grotesque and enabling the ingress of the 'unhallowed air' (Milton 2003:l. 757) of Comus' palace into the temple of her body. Ironically, the specific 'virtue' which she uses her open mouth to defend most emphatically is 'Chastity' in the form of 'Virginity', the righteousness of the closed body. She praises this virtue as 'sublime', 'high', 'sage and serious', but she refuses to offer her full argument in its favour because she deems her audience, Comus, as 'not fit to hear [him]self convinced' (Milton 2003:ll. 779–792). She speaks conditionally of the effect that such an argument, resembling Orpheus' songs, would evince, if her audience were more 'fit':

> Yet, should I try, the uncontrollèd worth
> Of this pure cause would kindle my rapt spirits
> To such a flame of sacred vehemence
> That dumb things would be moved to sympathize,
> And the brute Earth would lend her nerves, and shake,
> Till all thy magic structures, reared so high,
> Were shattered into heaps o'er thy false head. (ll. 793–799)

This vision of extremity is surely a type of *hubris*. For a woman to lay claim to such power of inspiration is extraordinary, even in defence of a conventional virtue. Moreover, the Lady's strenuous arguments are not all in support of conventional values. In opposition to Comus' claims that Nature's abundance should be used luxuriously, she has earlier replied with a boldly transgressive socialist argument (Marcus 2003:241), which anticipates those of the Levellers and Diggers in the 1640s, asserting that the 'few' should not live in decadent extravagance but that Nature's store should be shared (Milton 2003:ll. 762–779). She reveals herself in these speeches as a threat to the political, social and hierarchical *status quo*; her belief in chastity and temperance may, in fact, be so severe that it threatens to topple the social order.

The Lady's speculation about her 'flame of vehemence' also operates as a direct threat to Comus, which actually takes effect, for he believes her, expressing fear that she is protected by 'some superior power' (Milton 2003:l. 801). However, her utterance remains, as a speech act, a mere boast, for she does not actually 'try' to persuade him and the fiery 'kindl[ing]' of her own 'rapt spirits' is entirely hypothetical. Boasting is definitely a form of unnecessary speech that oversteps any rules of restraint, especially those specifying what may or may not issue from a woman's mouth. Despite her belief in temperance and other restraining virtues, the Lady is, in fact, intemperate. In defence of her own self-containment, Milton's Lady ironically overreaches the bounds of female decorum.

The Lady is also deficient in one of the virtues that Milton's Christianity required him to revere. Earlier, even before encountering Comus, she has invoked several personified virtues to aid her in her perplexed wandering. Beginning with the 'strong siding champion, Conscience', she continues:

> O welcome, pure-eyed Faith, white-handed Hope,
> Thou hovering angel girt with golden wings,
> And thou unblemished form of Chastity! (Milton 2003:ll. 213–215)

Nowhere in Christian theology is Chastity placed so high. The Lady substitutes it for Charity, or *agape*, the highest form of love, the greatest of Christian virtues. The verbal similarities between the two words, 'chastity' and 'charity', almost allow her to get away with a blasphemous misreading of St. Paul's pronouncements on Faith, Hope and Charity in 1 Corinthians 13 (see Kendrick 1987:43–73; Kerrigan 1883:53; McGrath 2020:54, 63–68). Significantly, Charity is not only the most important, but it is also the least self-observing of these virtues, directing the mind or soul outside itself towards the welfare of others.

Despite all that Stephen Orgel (2003:36–37), in his 'Case for Comus', can find in Comus' favour – that he is given 'some of the best poetry in the masque', that he is a 'remarkably appreciative audience', that he is himself a 'victim, seduced and ravished'– Comus is in fact the villain of the piece, and the Lady his prospective victim. Only a truly Blakean reader could find the author entirely of Comus' party, with or without knowing it (Blake 1972:150). Comus deceives the Lady by disguising himself as a simple shepherd, and then casts a spell over her, with the intention of seducing, perhaps even raping, her (Lewalski 2000:63). Nevertheless, as is typical in an encounter with Milton, the reader is troubled by moral ambiguities and complexities. John Leonard (1991:134) sees in the Lady's declaration that only 'good men can give good things' (Milton 2003:l. 703), a hint that she would accept certain 'good things' from some worthy man in a future conjugal relation. However, at least until Sabrina's intervention, the Lady appears almost as prudish as the 'sour Severity' that Comus imagines antagonised by his anti-masquers' 'joy and feast' (Milton 2003:ll. 109, 102). Her response to Comus' eulogy on Nature's generosity is not quite the 'lean and sallow Abstinence' that he accuses of ungratefulness, but it is prim and unappreciative nonetheless. She does not respond to his sensory revelling in the 'bounties' of 'odors, fruits and flocks' and 'Thronging … seas', but offers instead a portrait of a much less generous Nature, a thrifty 'cateress' who allocates her provisions parsimoniously, and 'only to the good' (Milton 2003:ll. 709–765).

If the Lady opens too far in boasting of what she might say, she does so as well in her criticism of Comus and his followers. She decries the 'few' who 'with vast excess' live in 'lewdly pampered luxury', making the assumption that Comus and his bewitched, animal-headed followers belong to this entitled upper class. Her complaints about overindulgence and intemperance probably express the libertarian poet's own feelings; and yet, ironically, she herself belongs to the aristocratic class. The morality of her position is further compromised by the fact that her socialist plan for the distribution of wealth extends only to the '*just* man that now pines with want'. Charity does not ask whether the needy are 'just' or not before offering succour. As Hamlet puts it: 'Use every man after his desert, and who should scape whipping?' (Act 1, Scene 2, ll. 520–521). The Lady's omission of this crucial virtue from her earlier invocation was not a mere oversight; she really seems to lack the quality of loving-kindness, or generosity for its own sake (Milton 2003:ll. 768–771). It is thus not surprising that, when her brothers put Comus and his rabble to flight, she remains spellbound. In fact, she is more constrained than ever, for now she is unable even to speak. Having gone too far in her defence of virginity, temperance and other curtailing and inhibiting principles, she finds her mind imprisoned as well as her body.

No masculine element can save her at this point. Only when the Attendant Spirit invokes the help of Sabrina is the situation altered. A nymph who was once a mortal virgin like the Lady, Sabrina has become goddess of the River Severn. Unlike the Lady, she does not skimp on the virtue of Charity, for she was deified because of the loving pity of other aquatic gods after she drowned herself. She is described in terms of soft and fluid imagery that figures her as a kind of solvent or mollifier of the harsh dualistic elements of the Lady's situation. The Attendant Spirit describes her as 'gentle' and 'pure'; her restrained influence 'sways the smooth Severn stream'; she possesses 'brimmed waves', pretty rills' and 'billows' of 'molten crystal' that 'roll ashore' (Milton 2003:ll. 824–932). Her interaction with local humans involves 'Helping', 'heal[ing]' and undoing the mischief that the 'shrewd meddling elf' wreaks upon them and their flocks (Milton 2003:ll. 845–847). While the warlike, confrontational Brothers and the male Attendant Spirit are unable to liberate the Lady, this virginal female spirit is empowered to do so because she offers an example of femininity that is not 'locked in'. Sabrina's mind, like the body of her river, flows outward and onward and is capable of permeating the Other and carrying it with her on her ever-moving stream. The 'precious vialed liquors' (Milton 2003:l. 847) that she freely provides are benevolent and restorative. As the Attendant Spirit rightly surmises, her power can 'unlock/The clasping charm and thaw the numbing spell' (Milton 2003:ll. 852–853) that holds the Lady captive. This is because Sabrina offers a model of female responsiveness that, if followed, can free the Lady's mind from its antagonistic prison. The word 'thaw' suggests a benevolent softening of sexual frigidity. The Lady's body as well as her mind must be freed from its captivity if she is to rejoin the Protestant society of which her family is so important a part. She should not remain closed off to positive associations of sexuality and love or continue, in the role of a warlike virgin, to threaten the institutions of patriarchy.

Sabrina's freeing of the Lady develops the notion of the temperate liquid, defrosting that which is frozen:

> Shepherd, 'tis my office best
> To help ensnaréd chastity.
> Brightest Lady, look on me.
> Thus I sprinkle on thy breast
> Drops that from my fountain pure
> I have kept of precious cure;
> Thrice upon thy finger's tip,
> Thrice upon thy rubied lip:
> Next this marble venomed seat,
> Smeared with gums of glutinous heat,
> I touch with chaste palms moist and cold.
> Now the spell hath lost his hold;
> And I must haste ere morning hour
> To wait in Amphitrite's bower. (Milton 2003:ll. 908–921)

The 'finger', the 'lip' and what is in contact with the 'seat' are all potentially sexual body parts. Much has been written about the 'gums of glutinous heat' that have up to this point fastened the Lady to Comus' chair (for a summary, see Gillum, 2010:49). Suffice it to note here that, however erotic these 'gums' provided by Dionysian Comus may be in their viscous liquidity, they have so far simply stuck the Lady

hard and fast. Her fixed immobility appears to concretise as uncrossable the boundaries between body and soul, virtue and tenderness. It takes Sabrina's 'chaste palms moist and cold' to loosen this solid glue, thereby imparting to matter a diaphanous softness that brings it closer to spirit, foreshadowing what Fallon (2018:1, 81–83) calls the 'animist monism' of Milton's greatest work. Sabrina's 'palms' are not frozen – their moisture is clearly capable of melting what has solidified – but they are 'cold' in contrast to lascivious 'heat', associated earlier with 'savage' masculinity (Milton 2003:l. 358). She is able to cool Comus' chair and loosen the 'hold' of his magic without engaging with him. Although she is herself a virgin, Sabrina represents that other kind of chastity to be found within marriage, a physical responsiveness that resembles the innocent prelapsarian sexuality of Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost*. Significantly, 'Amphitrite' was a goddess who originally prided herself on virginity, but changed her type of chastity after marrying Poseidon, the sea god.

In this way, Sabrina's benevolent, essentially female power is able to free the Lady's body from the paralysis imposed on it not just by Comus and his magic but also by her own mind. In a Boethian scenario, the initial imprisonment of her body makes her mind much freer than it was when she was at physical liberty to wander in the dark wood. But while her body is spellbound in Comus' chair, her mind becomes too fixed in its warlike defence of its own independence and of her body's impenetrable purity. This causes the Lady to become, for a short period, totally immobilised, body and mind. Unlike Boethius, the Lady does not need the assistance of Philosophy to liberate her, for she understands the ethics of her situation only too well; what she requires is the softening and humanising influence of quite a different female presence. The demi-goddess Sabrina, whose concern is not just for the soul, is able to release both the Lady's mind and her body from their captivity. Under the ministrations of Sabrina, the Lady's hard, resistant virginity dissolves into a gentler, more sympathetic kind of chastity, potentially readying her for married life. The Attendant Spirit's final allusion to marriage uses the example of Cupid and Psyche (Milton 2003:ll. 1004–1005), suggesting that body and soul may be freely united in the ideal matrimonial state.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

CRediT authorship contribution

Frances M. Ringwood: Conceptualisation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Catherine A. Addison: Conceptualisation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Both authors wrote and reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for its integrity.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Zululand's Research Ethics Committee (No. UZREC 171110-030 PGD 2020/07).

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. They do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's content.

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