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"An Equal Poise of Hope and Fear": A Fraternal Harmony of Extremes

Jay Russell Curlin

Yet where an equal poise of hope and fear
Does arbitrate the event, my nature is
That I incline to hope, rather than fear,
And gladly banish squint suspicion. (409–12)

Since Enid Welsford declared in 1927 that "*Comus* is a dramatized debate" that one can read or act "and hardly realize that there are dances,"[1] modern scholarship has done much to bring the music back to the masque. Especially since John Demaray's detailed study of the genre in 1968, *Milton and the Masque Tradition*, contemporary discussions of the masque have shifted from its subject to its genre and the purpose for which it was written. One thinks of Angus Fletcher's *The Transcendental Masque*, where the focus is on magic symbolism and musical iconography, of Barbara Traister's *Heavenly Necromancers*, which places Comus and the Attendant Spirit in the tradition of the magician in Renaissance drama, or even of Maryann Cale McGuire's *Milton's Puritan Masque*, where the emphasis is on the tension presumably inherent in the paradox of a courtly masque that is nonetheless "Puritan" in content and authorship.[2]

An unfortunate consequence of this otherwise healthy shift in focus is that questions of genre have come to overwhelm the actual *subject* of the masque, to the extent that the reader of today, to reverse Welsford's claim, could read or act *Comus* and hardly realize that there is a debate. While some have noted the importance of disputation in the masque, others have gone so far as to say that the central conflict is not between Comus and the Lady; rather than being "about" chastity or temptation, the masque is a drama of warring magicians, of the overthrow of Comus by the Attendant Spirit and Sabrina.[3] Scholars more interested in what the Lady and her brothers have to say have nonetheless failed to observe the form of their argument. In his seminal essay, "The Argument of Milton's *Comus*," A. S. P. Woodhouse discussed the Elder Brother's speeches as a single

developed train of thought and ignored altogether the Second Brother's refutation, which effects a radical shift in focus in the other's argument.[4] E. M. W. Tillyard thought *Comus* a confused mixture of "poetical experiments,"[5] and Don Cameron Allen considered the entire masque "Milton's ill success" and "an attempted reconciliation of opposites that failed."[6]

Allen considered all attempts to explain *Comus* since 1780 "answers to Dr. Johnson," who declared the masque "deficient" as a drama, its dialogue composed of "declamations deliberately composed and formally repeated, on a moral question."[7] It is from this point that I too would like to redirect attention; for no matter what its other qualities or deficiencies as a masque may be, *Comus* is at the core "declamations deliberately composed and formally repeated." As Johnson recognized, the matter of the work is chiefly indebted to formal orations and disputations, the sort Milton had learned at St. Paul's and Cambridge. In his 1791 edition of Milton, Thomas Warton declared *Comus* "a suite of Speeches."[8] For Johnson, this fact constituted a "deficiency," a dramatic failure; but I would argue that this fusion of academic declamation with drama is, rather, further evidence of Milton's success in experimenting with literary form. In commenting on Milton's modification of genre, Northrop Frye remarked that "In listening to the Kyrie of the Bach B Minor Mass we feel what amazing things the fugue can do; in listening to the finale of Beethoven's Opus 106, we feel what amazing things can be done with the fugue. This latter is the feeling we have about *Comus* as a masque, when we come to it from Jonson or Campion. . . . Milton, like Beethoven, is continually exploring the boundaries of his art, getting more experimental and radical as he goes on."[9]

The two debates in *Comus* show something of this experimentation. Only one is immediately recognizable as a disputation, and it displays both the problems and the virtues of the tradition. The other, a friendly "disagreement" between brothers, is a vision of what disputation could be.

In the polemical exchanges, involving Comus and the Lady in Milton's masque, we find the traditional structure of university disputations. In the "gay rhetoric" (789) and "dazzling fence" (790) of Comus's orations, Milton exposes the "false rules . . . in reason's garb" (758) that he has attacked throughout his *Prolusiones Oratoriae*, most specifically in Prolusion 3, "Against Scholastic Philosophy." Although Comus's oration is eloquent and structurally flawless, the technique only barely conceals dangerously fallacious reasoning, and Milton uses the Lady's refutations to show that disputation can also unclothe "reason's garb" and confute error.

The debate between the Elder and Second Brothers, "an introduction to the main dispute,"[10] is of a much different nature. In this very private dispute, Milton shows a much less formal version of what disputation can be when its purpose is other than that of the endless bickering he had found so unproductive at Cambridge. Since the "disputants" are not obliged to

hold tenaciously to a proposition, not only do they listen to each other's argument, but each is obviously swayed by what the other has to say. They are both naive to some degree, and each is irrational in his own way. Together, however, they manage to reach the conclusion at which their older sister has already arrived: "Virtue may be assailed, but never hurt" (588). Unlike disputants trying to annihilate each other's argument, the two brothers work far more in harmony in a mutual quest for truth; each is influenced and aided by the other's opinion. Their debate therefore ends with their having reached the same conclusion and seems in retrospect to be more like discussion than disputation. The Second Brother concludes their debate by remarking "How charming is divine philosophy!" thus giving a name to this very different form of disputation (475).

The debate of the two brothers, the first that occurs within *Comus*, has been generally treated as a single train of thought, rather than as a dialogue occurring between two speakers of completely opposite natures and viewpoints. The tendency to regard the arguments as one is understandable, however, because there is very little contesting of individual points within the debate. The two are brothers, after all, and one would have to go far to find more "fraternal" disputants. Each is in some degree swayed by the other's remarks, so that what would seem to be rebuttal is more an acceptance and redirection of points made. The Elder Brother is the idealistic optimist who worries too little about his sister's safety, the Second Brother the practical pessimist who worries too much.[11] Together, their separate temperaments complement each other and temper their irrational extremes.

From the point at which the two brothers make their first entrance, their debate is clearly of a much different nature from the public disputations of which the *Prolusiones Oratoriae* speak. The most basic difference sets the tone of the dispute and has much to do with its structure: they are alone. The academic disputations of Milton's university days were very much public performances, and both *defens* and *opponens* were concerned exclusively with an audience outside the arena of their contest. In none of the prolusions does Milton ever address his opponent in the second person, and he frequently addresses the audience to whom his oration is directed. Certainly no literary form would better suit such accommodation of the audience than the masque, the intimate staging of which places the action in the very midst of the audience and often calls for audience participation in its spectacles and for masquers and audience to join in dancing at the conclusion. And of course there was much of this element of the masque involved in the initial occasion of *Comus*, when the principal characters were the children and the music teacher of the family for whom it was performed. When the Egerton children were presented to their parents in the midst of the Attendant Spirit's song at the conclusion of the action, the audience was clearly being drawn into the action; however, no such aware-

ness of the audience appears in this first debate. The brothers are disputing with, and actively attempting to persuade, only each other.

Their solitude is underscored by the combined exordium to their debate, in which the Elder Brother's call for light and the Second Brother's call for sound show them to be enveloped in darkness and silence. The traditional exordium attempted to capture the attention and sympathy of the audience and occasionally to invoke an agent of inspiration. In the exordium to Prolusion 6, for example, Milton combines flattery with invocation in saying that his listeners are incarnations of the Muses and that they therefore provide all the inspiration he needs. The two brothers similarly appeal to Nature to provide both illumination and sound, the physical parallels of the inspiration and the eloquence that the orator requests in the standard exordium. Later in the debate, the Elder Brother makes the connection between illumination and spiritual enlightenment all the stronger in his claim that "He that has light within his own clear breast / May sit i' the centre, and enjoy bright day" (380–81).

This exordium is also our first indication of the harmony that exists between the two disputants. Technically, each addresses a different audience: the Elder Brother addresses the stars and moon, while the Second calls on the more abstract spirit of sound. Indeed, since the Second Brother does not actually name his audience, his request resembles prayer: "might we but hear" (342). Yet the two requests are so tightly connected that they could have easily passed for a single two-part exordium had Milton not assigned each portion to a different speaker:

> *Eld. Bro.* Unmuffle ye faint stars, and thou fair moon
> That wont'st to love the traveller's benison,
> Stoop thy pale visage through an amber cloud,
> And disinherit Chaos, that reigns here
> In double night of darkness, and of shades;
> Or if your influence be quite dammed up
> With black usurping mists, some gentle taper
> Though a rush-candle from the wicker hole
> Of some clay habitation visit us
> With thy long levelled rule of streaming light,
> And thou shalt be our star of Arcady,
> Or Tyrian Cynosure.
>
> *Sec. Bro.* Or if our eyes
> Be barred that happiness, might we but hear
> The folded flocks penned in their wattled cotes,
> Or sound of pastoral reed with oaten stops,
> Or whistle from the lodge, or village cock

> Count the night-watches to his feathery dames,
> 'Twould be some solace yet some little cheering
> In this close dungeon of innumerous boughs.
>
> (330–48)

This "double exordium" is very much one in spirit, for each requests relief from "this close dungeon of innumerous boughs," and the Second Brother's continuation of the thought simply supports the first request by asking for a subordinate favor if the first cannot be granted. He even echoes his brother's request with his opening clause, "Or if our eyes / Be barred that happiness."

The exordiums are also tightly connected in form, being fused in a single iambic line. When we contract "Tyrian" with the synaeresis typical of Milton,[12] we find that the Elder Brother concludes his exordium with the first three iambic feet of line 341: "Or Tyrian Cynosure." The Second Brother concludes the line with the iambic fourth and fifth feet: "Or if our eyes." The pause is no longer than any natural caesura. Indeed, in both the Trinity and the Bridgewater manuscript versions of the masque and the first edition of 1637, the line is unbroken, and "2 bro" is merely inserted in the space following "Cynosure": "or Tirian Cynosure: **2 bro:** or if o'eyes."[13] From neither the meter nor the contextual turn could one expect a change in speaker were it not for the stage direction. As we shall see, such metrical and contextual fusion is characteristic of this debate; in only one instance is the change in speaker effected with separate lines.[14] The technique occurs only twice in the debate between Comus and the Lady, where it achieves a much different effect. With the brothers, the fusion always supports agreement and seems far more dialogic than polemical. When the Lady completes a line begun by Comus, it is either to interrupt or contradict.

As complementary as the two exordiums are, it is significant that Milton assigns the first to the Elder Brother. The central theme of the Elder Brother's remarks is the presence of a spiritual illumination, a "radiant light" that enables the virtuous to "enjoy bright day" even if the "sun and moon / Were in the flat sea sunk" (373–81). He claims by contrast that "he that hides a dark soul, and foul thoughts / Benighted walks under the midday sun" (382–83). It is therefore consistent that his first thought would be to dispel the "double night of darkness" that obstructs his physical vision, though the optimism and resoluteness of his subsequent remarks show that he does not share his younger brother's fear of the dark. In similar fashion, the Second Brother requests sound because he needs to *hear*—not the noise of "folded flocks" or "pastoral reed" but the instruction of his Elder Brother, which gives him far more of the "solace" he requests in line 347. Though he plays an active part in the debate, it is in the subordinate role of the attentive *listener* whose questions and objections lead the "teacher" to new insights.

The description of the enveloping darkness and silence initiates the debate; for the Second Brother knows that if such a "double night of darkness" is frightening to him and his brother, how much more so it must be for their sister, who is even more alone than they. After his plaintive call for "some solace" in "this close dungeon," the Second Brother nervously considers the possible fate of their sister, whom he assumes to be in danger. We know in fact that she *is*, for we have just seen her led away by the disguised Comus as the result of a strange academic naïveté: being worldly enough to know that "courtesy ... is sooner found in lowly sheds ... than in tap'stry halls / And courts of princes, where it first was named, / And yet is most pretended" (322–25), she nonetheless moves to the ingenuous assumption that a shepherd must therefore be trustworthy. It is the same type of one-sided reasoning with which the Elder Brother first dismisses his brother's fears for her safety.

To the Second Brother's concerns for his sister's fate, the Elder Brother gives three reasons to "be not over-exquisite / To cast the fashion of uncertain evils" (358–59). The advice is good enough in itself for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that over-anxious pessimism that assumes the worst paints no truer a picture than unrealistic optimism. But the three propositions of the Elder Brother's opening argument are neither the best of reasons nor at all applicable to the situation of the Lady's danger. They have the ring of a clichéd general admonition against pessimism, with no thought of whether the formulaic response truly fits the present case. William Kerrigan maintains that every contention of the Elder Brother is "validated by the subsequent action of the masque,"[15] but Milton shows him to be much more naive than such a reading suggests. With the help of this dialogue with his brother, he comes close to the central truths argued in the masque, but he begins the debate as hardly the "privileged interpreter" Kerrigan has claimed him to be.[16]

First Proposition

> Peace brother, be not over-exquisite
> To cast the fashion of uncertain evils;
> For grant they be so, while they rest unknown,
> What need a man forestall his date of grief,
> And run to meet what he would most avoid?
>
> (358–62)

In addition to being hardly helpful to the Lady's case, the comfort the Elder Brother first offers his brother is something of a red herring as an argument. To begin with, the dangers listed by the younger brother are by no means the inevitable doom suggested by "date of grief." While the

younger brother wants to speed his sister's rescue, the other seemingly wishes to delay it for fear of its being necessary.

Robert Frost stated something of the same argument in "The Bearer of Evil Tidings," but with greater logic:

> As for his evil tidings,
> Belshazzar's overthrow,
> Why hurry to tell Belshazzar
> What soon enough he would know?[17]

Since the fate of Belshazzar is already sealed, there is little point in spoiling what little time he has left. But the case is much different with the fears that the Second Brother has mentioned; he has stated no irreversible fate:

> Perhaps some cold bank is her bolster now
> Or 'gainst the rugged bark of some broad elm
> Leans her unpillowed head fraught with sad fears,
> What if in wild amazement, and affright,
> Or while we speak within the direful grasp
> Of savage hunger, or of savage heat?
>
> (352–57)

If the Lady is indeed cold, frightened, and alone, her rescuers should certainly make whatever haste they can; if in actual danger, the greater should be their speed. It is very poor advice indeed, then, to remind the younger brother that the wise man does not "run to meet what he would most avoid."

Second Proposition

> Or if they be but false alarms of fear,
> How bitter is such self-delusion!
>
> (363–64)

The strange implication in the Elder Brother's second proposition is that the younger brother would be much happier for his fears to be true than to find his sister safe and sound. Of course, the Elder Brother is hardly so coldhearted as this sounds; he is merely giving an academic response to irrational pessimism, though without giving much thought to how well reasoned that pessimism is. His argument is in considerable need of refinement, which he will achieve in answering his brother's objections.

The Elder Brother shows his initial equanimity to be, in fact, less logical than his brother's anxiety. Simply dismissing the possibility of his sister's being in danger "(Not being in danger, as I trust she is not)" (369), he

reduces her situation to "the single want of light and noise" (368–69). However "over-exquisite" the Second Brother has been in his description of possible evils, he has certainly remained within the realm of possibility: it *is* cold in the forest, especially in this "double night of darkness," and there is the possibility of attack from both man and beast. Against these very real possibilities, the Elder Brother's claim that her only inconveniences are the dark and the silence is surprisingly reductive, especially since the reader knows that she has just been led off by Comus.

Having reduced the possibility of danger to a safe darkness, the Elder Brother moves to his third proposition, an ethical claim that largely circumvents rational debate:

Third Proposition

> Virtue could see to do what Virtue would
> By her own radiant light, though sun and moon
> Were in the flat sea sunk. And Wisdom's self
> Oft seeks to sweet retired solitude,
> Where with her best nurse Contemplation
> She plumes her feathers, and lets grow her wings
> That in the various bustle of resort
> Were all to-ruffled, and sometimes impaired.
> He that has light within his own clear breast
> May sit i' the centre, and enjoy bright day,
> But he that hides a dark soul, and foul thoughts
> Benighted walks under the midday sun;
> Himself is his own dungeon.
>
> (372–84)

Milton's readers have found such praise of "sweet retired solitude" before, most notably in "Il Penseroso." The important questions here are whether that solitude has been elected and whether it is an adequate parallel to the situation of a woman lost in the woods. The Elder Brother claims that "Wisdom's self / Oft seeks to sweet retired solitude," thus suggesting that the lost sister has purposefully removed herself to something like the "peaceful hermitage" (168) of "Il Penseroso." The result of such reasoning is that the Elder Brother has moved from dismissing any possible danger to suggesting that being lost in the woods is actually preferable to the "bustle of resort" which the Lady would find were she still in her brother's company.

As peculiar as such reasoning may appear upon examination, it appears persuasive enough to the Second Brother, who not only lets pass the reductive and irrelevant first two propositions but actually concedes the truth of the third:

'Tis most true
That musing Meditation most affects
The pensive secrecy of desert cell.

(384–86)

As with his first response, the Second Brother completes the closing line of his brother's oration and continues his theme, voicing his agreement all the more emphatically with the spondaic "most true." The metrical fusion is also tighter than in the first example we noted; for, in addition to completing the line, the response actually shares the split pyrrhic fourth position, in which the caesura is hardly long enough to change speakers:

Himself | is his | own dun | **geon.** ‖ **'Tis** | most true.

The Second Brother's response and his agreement are immediate. If he has not forgotten his earlier fears for his sister's woodsy discomforts, he has been strangely swayed by the argument that one should not run to meet what one does not want to see.

Were this his only response—immediate agreement with his "opponent's" argument—we could hardly regard the scene as a debate. But he goes on to qualify his agreement with the demur that, while the gray-haired hermit usually associated with Meditation has nothing to tempt the villain, the meditating female is too lovely to pass up:

But Beauty like the fair Hesperian tree
Laden with blooming gold, had need the guard
Of dragon-watch with unenchanted eye,
To save her blossoms, and defend her fruit
From the rash hand of bold Incontinence.

(392–96)

The Second Brother appears to have missed the point entirely. The idealistic Elder Brother has been addressing only the question of darkness, claiming that the sister's inner virtue provides all the illumination she needs, while the Second Brother's thoughts are still on the question of safety. Associating his brother's remarks on meditation very literally with aged hermits, he assumes that the security of Virtue and Wisdom lies only in the poverty of those who have it—after all, who could possibly wish to rob an old man with just a few books, some beads, and a maple dish?

'Tis most true
That musing Meditation most affects
The pensive secrecy of desert cell,
Far from the cheerful haunt of men, and herds,

> And sits as safe as in a senate-house,
> For who would rob a hermit of his weeds,
> His few books, or his beads, or maple dish,
> Or do his grey hairs any violence?
>
> (384–91)

To his brother's idealism, the Second Brother presents an almost humorous practicality: if the brigand gives a wide berth to the saintly hermit, it has nothing to do with any quality inherent in him. He simply has nothing a villain would want.

The Elder Brother then makes no attempt to correct this misunderstanding of his metaphor. Instead, he is obviously moved by his brother's argument that

> You may as well spread out the unsunned heaps
> Of miser's treasure by an outlaw's den,
> And tell me it is safe, as bid me hope
> Danger will wink on opportunity,
> And let a single helpless maiden pass
> Uninjured in this wild surrounding waste.
>
> (397–402)

His agreement with this refutation is as swift as the Second Brother's agreement with his first argument, and it also completes the fourth foot of the regularly iambic line:

> of our | unown | ed sis | **ter.** ‖ **I** | do not [brother].[18]

The Elder Brother reverses his earlier dismissal of the dangers and more or less throws in the towel on the question of danger:

> I do not, brother,
> Infer, as if I thought my sister's state
> Secure without all doubt, or controversy.
>
> (406–8)

As if to apologize for being overly cavalier in his first response, the Elder Brother admits to being an optimist by nature:

> Yet where an equal poise of hope and fear
> Does arbitrate the event, my nature is
> That I incline to hope, rather than fear,
> And gladly banish squint suspicion.
>
> (409–12)

As we have seen, this is hardly the substance of his first response; it directly contradicts his flat claim" (Not being in danger, as I trust she is not)." Yet it does help to explain the seeming offhandedness with which he has dismissed his brother's fears: he is not so much callous as irrationally optimistic. He has warned his brother against an irrational pessimism that is "overexquisite / To cast the fashion of uncertain evils" but has shown himself to be equally extreme in the natural optimism that he now confesses.

Having made this admission, the Elder Brother shifts his argument to address the element of danger that he has previously dismissed. He reminds his brother of the "hidden strength" of their sister, which will serve as the theme of the masque:

> My sister is not so defenceless left
> As you imagine, she has a hidden strength
> Which you remember not.
> *Sec. Bro.* What hidden strength,
> Unless the strength of heaven, if you mean that?
> *Eld. Bro.* I mean that too, but yet a hidden strength
> Which if heaven gave it, may be termed her own:
> 'Tis chastity, my brother, chastity.
>
> (413–19)

This reversal of his earlier position, though no less optimistic in nature, reveals the degree to which the opposing opinion has influenced the progression of the debate. The Second Brother has insisted on the danger that their sister is in, and the Elder Brother has conceded the point, while giving his consistent optimism a new channel.

With this shift in his argument, the Elder Brother not only faces his brother's fears head on but actually adds to the list of dangers. The worst the Second Brother has imagined of natural ills has been "chill dew" and "rude burs and thistles" (351), but the Elder now imagines their sister weathering "huge forests, and unharboured heaths, / Infamous hills, and sandy perilous wilds" (422–23). To the more ominous danger posed by man, the nervous younger brother has been unable to put a face and has had to resort to such vague abstractions as "savage hunger" (357) and "bold Incontinence" (396), but the Elder Brother fleshes out these abstractions as "savage fierce, bandit, or mountaineer" (425). Nor does he stop there. Coming much closer to the truth of the matter with the magical Comus, the Elder Brother catalogues the possible supernatural dangers:

> Some say no evil thing that walks by night
> In fog, or fire, by lake, or moorish fen,
> Blue meagre hag, or stubborn unlaid ghost,
> That breaks his magic chains at curfew time,

> No goblin, or swart faëry of the mine,
> Hath hurtful power o'er true virginity.
>
> (431–36)

This final claim is, of course, the point of the Elder Brother's "worst-case scenario": no matter what the danger, whether natural or supernatural, their sister is sufficiently protected by the "complete steel" (420) of her chastity. Having given name to his brother's less articulate fears, the Elder Brother shows that their sister's means of protection is much more formidable than the dangers he has described. It had enabled the "huntress Dian" (440) to tame beasts and "set at nought / The frivolous bolt of Cupid" (443–44), and armed with her Gorgon-headed shield, Minerva had "freezed her foes to congealed stone" with her "rigid looks of chaste austerity" (448–49).[19]

Far more convincing than these non-Christian allusions to antiquity is the Elder Brother's subsequent claim for "saintly chastity" (452) that "A thousand liveried angels lackey her, / Driving far off each thing of sin and guilt" (454–55). While this may seem the most outrageous of Milton's claims to the supernatural protection of chastity, it is in fact the most theologically orthodox. Describing the person who makes the Lord his "habitation," the psalmist writes: "For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways. They shall bear thee up in their hands, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone" (91.11–12).[20] We know from the Attendant Spirit's introduction that the Lady is indeed among those who "by due steps aspire / To lay their just hands on that golden key / That opes the palace of eternity" (12–14) and is therefore due such divine protection as promised in Psalms. The Attendant Spirit has been dispatched for that very purpose: "by quick command from sovran Jove / I was dispatched for their defence, and guard" (41–42). And when we first find the Lady lost in the woods, she invokes her qualities of Conscience, Faith, Hope, and Chastity as separate entities that she can see "visibly" (214) and that are as a "hovering angel girt with golden wings" (213). An even more explicit reference to her angelic protection is the Lady's claim that God "Would send a glistering guardian if need were / To keep my life and honour unassailed" (218–19). Stressing the Renaissance Platonism of the masque, Sears Jayne argues that we should think of the Attendant Spirit "not as an angel from St. Peter's heaven, but as a Platonic airy spirit," but the frequent references to biblical angels and the Attendant Spirit's own description of his commission are quite explicit.[21]

Associating such angelic aid with his sister's chastity is a considerable remove from the Elder Brother's earlier claim of chastity's self-protection. When the only danger he acknowledged was darkness and solitude, the Elder Brother spoke of internal illumination and the joys of meditation. Granting his brother's claim of a far more tangible danger compels him to

use a more convincing optimism: not only is their sister not truly alone, but she is surrounded by guardian angels who both protect and rarefy her:

> Till oft converse with heavenly habitants
> Begin to cast a beam on the outward shape,
> The unpolluted temple of the mind,
> And turns it by degrees to the soul's essence,
> Till all be made immortal.
>
> (458–62)

In one respect, the argument has come full circle, having returned to the Elder Brother's initial claim of the type of invulnerable perfection at which their sister had already arrived. When his description of her "radiant light" (373) has failed to convince, he describes the external forces that have nurtured that light. If the Second Brother concedes the truth of their sister's unusual perfection, he must also acknowledge its source: "oft converse with heavenly habitants." And if he grants this, he must also admit that their sister is hardly in any danger since she is neither unprotected nor alone. Despite such emphasis on heavenly aid, Maryann McGuire has stated that the Elder Brother "makes a significant advance when he admits the limitations of human powers" *only* after the Attendant Spirit has "enlightened" him and he prays, "And some good angel bear a shield before us" (657). If he is overly optimistic by nature, his optimism is grounded on the faith in a "thousand liveried angels," and the Attendant Spirit has done nothing to alter that.[22]

Far from presenting a rebuttal, the Second Brother totally submits to his brother's argument, coming just short of applauding the victor of the debate:

> How charming is divine philosophy!
> Not harsh, and crabbed as dull fools suppose,
> But musical as is Apollo's lute,
> And a perpetual feast of nectared sweets,
> Where no crude surfeit reigns.
>
> (475–79)

If we hear in this an echo of Milton's attack against scholastic philosophy and the "pretty disputations of sour old men" in his third prolusion,[23] we should note that Milton is making a very definite distinction between scholastic and "divine" philosophy here and suggesting that the two are often confused. Scholastic philosophy, according to the third prolusion, *is* "harsh, and crabbed" and the stuff of "dull fools." Divine philosophy is another thing altogether, and Milton has just given us an example of it with this first, very undisputatious debate. In its suppression of the "zeal of contra-

diction" and its subordination of human reason to religious faith, this form of "divine philosophy" largely answers Francis Bacon's call to Cambridge for a greater fusion of faith and reason: "Surely the grace of the divine light will attend and shine upon you, if humbling and submitting Philosophy to Religion you make a legitimate and dexterous use of the keys of the senses; and putting away all zeal of contradiction."[24]

Angus Fletcher has called this first debate "ineffectual,"[25] and Barbara Traister has pronounced it a "fruitless" debate that gets the brothers nowhere until the Attendant Spirit shows up for their "enlightenment,"[26] while both Cedric Brown[27] and John Creaser have suggested more mildly that this debate chiefly shows the operation of juvenile reason, an "enchanting" instance of "idealistic eagerness" but unrealistic expectations.[28] I would argue, however, that the debate is far more successful than these readings suggest. The resolution is reached before the Attendant Spirit arrives, and he adds nothing to the brothers' conclusions. Indeed, when his information shows the Lady to be in definite danger and the Second Brother lapses into his former despair, the Elder Brother declares emphatically that this "enlightenment" has not changed a thing. The development of their debate has led them to imagine the greatest evils possible and, for the Elder Brother at least, to enforce a bedrock faith in divine protection. To hear their worst fears realized, then, is to learn nothing the Elder Brother has not already imagined and for which he has not already provided an answer: "this I hold firm, / Virtue may be assailed, but never hurt" (587–88). If this sounds overly naive, it is certainly confirmed in the crisis to follow.

Notes

John Milton, *Comus*, in *Complete Shorter Poems*, ed. John Carey (London: Longman, 1971). All references to *Comus* and "Il Penseroso" are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.

1. Enid Welsford, *The Court Masque* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927), 317–18.

2. John Demaray, *Milton and the Masque Tradition: The Early Poems, "Arcades," and "Comus"* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968); Angus Fletcher, *The Transcendental Masque* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971); Barbara Traister, *Heavenly Necromancers: The Magician in English Renaissance Drama* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1984); Maryann Cale McGuire, *Milton's Puritan Masque* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1983).

3. The latter view has been espoused by A. Fletcher, *Transcendental Masque*, and Traister, *Heavenly Necromancers*. I would agree, however, with Harris Fletcher that the "disputing between the two forces constitutes the main action of the poem" (*The Intellectual Development of John Milton*, 2 vols. [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956], 2:269). Christopher Hill has also connected *Comus* chiefly with the academic disputations of Milton's youth: "*Comus* is a dramatic dialogue, recalling

debates in which Milton was accustomed to take part at Cambridge" (*Milton and the English Revolution* [New York: Viking, 1977], 46).

4. A. S. P. Woodhouse, "The Argument of Milton's *Comus*," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 11 (1941): 46–71.

5. E. M. W. Tillyard, *Milton*, rev. ed. (London: Chatto and Windus, 1966), 58–66.

6. Don Cameron Allen, "The Higher Compromise: 'On the Morning of Christ's Nativity' and a Mask," in *The Harmonious Vision: Studies in Milton's Poetry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1954), 24.

7. Samuel Johnson, "Milton," in *Lives of the English Poets*, cited in Allen, *Harmonious Vision*, 63.

8. Cited in A. Fletcher, *Transcendental Masque*, 150.

9. Northrop Frye, *The Return of Eden: Five Essays on Milton's Epics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), 90, 92.

10. H. Fletcher, *Intellectual Development*, 2:269.

11. In commenting on what he considers an "ineffectual but charming debate" between the two brothers, Angus Fletcher has claimed that "the Elder Brother, who philosophizes skeptically, is a champion of faith, the younger a champion of hope" (170), but surely the reverse is true. In soothing the Second Brother's pessimistic fears, in which there is not a single ray of hope, the Elder Brother is not skeptical in the least. His argument *is* based on faith, but this makes him endlessly hopeful: "my nature is / That I incline to hope, rather than fear" (410–11).

12. In standard handbooks on prosody, for the "y-glide" contraction of synaeresis, which keeps a Miltonic line decasyllabic by combining two vowels to create a single diphthong, an example cited almost invariably is *disobed-yence* from the first line of *Paradise Lost:* "Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit . . ." (John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Alastair Fowler [London: Longman, 1971]. All references to *Paradise Lost* are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text). See, for example, Paul Fussell, *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*, rev. ed. (New York: Random House, 1979), 26.

13. Line 343 in the Bridgewater manuscript, printed in *A Maske: The Earlier Versions*, ed. S. E. Sprott (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), 91.

14. In 415–16, the Second Brother interrupts the Elder Brother's speech to ask him what "hidden strength" he is speaking of:

> *Sec. Bro.* What hidden strength,
> Unless the strength of heaven, if you mean that?
> *Eld. Bro.* I mean that too, but yet a hidden strength
> Which if heaven gave it, may be termed her own.
>
> (415–18)

This is the only time within the debate in which a speaker closes a line before the other begins. Yet even here the dialogue is nicely connected by the interrogatory nature of the Second Brother's interruption. The question breaks into the Elder Brother's oration in the middle of a line, and the answer completes the fusion.

15. William Kerrigan, *The Sacred Complex: On the Psychogenesis of "Paradise Lost"* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 42.

16. Ibid.

17. Robert Frost, "The Bearer of Evil Tidings," in *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964), 313, lines 41–44.

18. I have bracketed the vocative as hypermetrical to what is otherwise a pure iambic pentameter. This is the only instance known to me in Milton's poetic dialogues in which the vocative is not incorporated into the decasyllabic line. However, James Anderson Winn suggested to me on March 25, 1993, that a staging of *Comus* could easily render the lines as "contrapuntal": if the Elder Brother's entrance is perceived as an interruption of the Second Brother's speech, the first foot of the interruption could be read simultaneously with the closing syllable of the Second Brother's speech and thus preserve the pentameter line:

of our | unown | ed sis | ter. |
| I do | not
brother.

19. Milton's interpretation of the symbolic value of the Gorgon shield is a creative modification of contemporary interpretations of Homer: "She wore the gorgon's head on her breast, because no one can turn his eyes against the light of the sun or against wisdom and remain unharmed" (Conti, cited in Carey, ed., *Complete Shorter Poems,* 198 n. 447). Though this passage has no direct connection to chastity, Milton has described the virtue earlier in the *Comus* debate in much the same terms: "Virtue could see to do what Virtue would / By her own radiant light" (372–73).

20. All biblical references are to the King James Version.

21. Sears Jayne, "The Subject of Milton's Ludlow *Mask*," in *Milton: Modern Essays in Criticism,* ed. Arthur E. Barker (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 88–111. For other biblical sources of "a thousand liveried angels," compare Psalms 68.17: "The chariots of God are twenty thousand, even thousands of angels," and Zechariah 1.10: "These are they whom the Lord hath sent to walk to and fro through the earth." Consider also Adam's promise to Eve in book 4 of *Paradise Lost,* a promise confirmed by what we see of Gabriel and his legions searching Eden for Satan: "Millions of spiritual creatures walk the earth / Unseen, both when we wake, and when we sleep" (677–78).

22. McGuire, *Milton's Puritan Masque,* 152.

23. John Milton, *Complete Prose Works of John Milton,* 8 vols., ed. Don M. Wolfe et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953–82), 1:241.

24. Cited in John Milton, *Milton: Private Correspondence and Academic Exercises,* ed. E. M. W. Tillyard, trans. Phyllis B. Tillyard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932), xx.

25. A. Fletcher, *Transcendental Masque,* 170.

26. Traister, *Heavenly Necromancers,* 172.

27. Cedric Brown, *John Milton's Aristocratic Entertainment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 95.

28. John Creaser, "'The Present Aid of This Occasion': The Setting of *Comus,*" in *The Court Masque,* ed. David Lindley (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 132.