

THE HEROINE SABRINA: DISMANTLING BINARIES IN *A MASQUE PRESENTED AT*
LUDLOW CASTLE

A Paper
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty
of the
North Dakota State University
of Agriculture and Applied Science

By
Taija Kae Noel

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

Major Department:
English

April 2018

Fargo, North Dakota

North Dakota State University
Graduate School

Title

The Heroine Sabrina: Dismantling Binaries in *A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle*

By

Taija Kae Noel

The Supervisory Committee certifies that this *disquisition* complies with North Dakota State University's regulations and meets the accepted standards for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE:

Alison Graham-Bertolini

Chair

Emily Wicktor

Stephen Hamrick

Approved:

4/5/2018

Date

Elizabeth Birmingham

Department Chair

ABSTRACT

Sabrina, the heroine of *A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle*, is an exemplar of ethical, intellectual, and magical power. Although scholarship has focused on male characters in the masque, I argue that this story is about women who work in alliance, fight for autonomy over their own bodies, rebuke cultural expectations, and claim their identities. Sabrina rescues the Lady from the male villain Comus. She utilizes her intellectual and ethical agency to judge the Lady worthy, then uses her magical powers to undo Comus' spell. Scholarship overlooks Sabrina's distinct power in *A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle*, but scholarship must evolve. Milton's exceptional masque undermines prominent patriarchal values of the 17th century. While these male-centric values attempt to obscure female characters into supporting roles, Milton's characterization of Sabrina is in stark juxtaposition. Sabrina, and powerful female characters like her, have been in Milton's texts all along and demand our analysis.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks to Dr. Alison Graham-Bertolini, the chair of my committee, for her caring, funny, and honest guidance, her detailed suggestions, and her inspiring passion for my success. I would also like to thank Dr. Emily Wicktor for her enthusiasm and advice navigating Cixous, feminist theory, liminal spaces, and new spaces. Thank you to Dr. Stephen Hamrick for supporting and guiding me through my undergraduate career and master's disquisition, and for introducing me to John Milton and *A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle*. Thanks to Michele Sherman for answering my many, many questions and much more. Finally, I would like to thank those who listened, advised, and encouraged me throughout this project. This paper would not have been possible without all of you, and I am very grateful.

DEDICATION

For my family, the powerful women in my life, and the powerful women I haven't met yet.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
DEDICATION.....	v
INTRODUCTION.....	1
HISTORICAL CONTEXT.....	7
ARGUMENT.....	12
CONCLUSION.....	36
REFERENCES.....	38

INTRODUCTION

John Milton's masque, *A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle* (1634), is the subject of substantial scholarship, largely because the unique genre of the piece as well as the inclusion of characters who deviate from well-known early modern tropes have encouraged critical attention. Dominant scholarship refers to the masque colloquially as *Comus*. However, as I will argue, *A Masque* is distinctly not about Comus, and the male-centric labeling of a text that centers on powerful women enacts the patriarchal constraints I seek to dismantle. Therefore, I will refer to the text as *A Masque* in this paper. Masques are akin to plays, but unlike plays, are always commissioned to be written for a particular occasion. The primary actors are typically the children of nobility present for the performance, rather than a professional troupe, and a masque's singular performance is generally written with the audience and occasion in mind.

Additionally, most masques were not published because they were only performed once, and therefore not available directly for scholarly analysis. Milton's decision to publish his masque gives modern scholarship access to a genre not generally accessible. I will address the publication's analytical significance later in this essay. Beyond its availability, the masque also includes a unique cast of unusual and somewhat mysterious characters that encourage scholarship to reanalyze them as scholarship evolves.

Sabrina's character is unique to *A Masque*, however, the mythology around her character has been connected to various classical goddesses. The Attendant Spirit describes Sabrina as both a nymph and goddess and asserts that she is the only one powerful enough to free the Lady. The Attendant Spirit sings a particular song to ask for Sabrina's help, asserting that Sabrina must judge both the Lady and the Attendant Spirit's song worthy. Sabrina acquiesces, makes her judgment, rescues the Lady, and the masque comes to a close with all well again. Sabrina's

dialogue within the masque is brief at a mere 26 lines; however, her role is pivotal to the plot because the story's conflict could not be resolved without her. *A Masque* posits a powerful goddess with the intellectual and ethical capacity to judge worthiness, as well as with the magical power to enact the ends of that judgement. Despite the brevity of her direct dialogue, her multifaceted agency is discussed at length by the Attendant Spirit, and she serves as the plot catalyst. The masque does not exist without Sabrina.

A Masque tells the story of a noble lady who becomes lost in the woods. The Lady is captured by a villainous magician, paralyzed, and subjected to his devious rhetorical persuasion in an attempt to convince her to give up her chastity. Comus' rhetoric utilizes poetic language, but this language conceals misleading logical arguments. The Lady's brothers and a mysterious Attendant Spirit, attempt to free her without success, and in distress, ask the goddess Sabrina for help. The brothers encounter the Attendant Spirit in the woods while searching for the Lady. The Attendant Spirit is described as an unusual and perhaps sage shepherd that has knowledge about the Lady's whereabouts and the magician Comus' intent. He offers to assist the brothers in their search, then calls on Sabrina when Comus' magic is beyond his power to combat.

Sabrina's characterization demonstrates coupled intellectual and ethical power and aligns with Milton's prized philosophy of Neoplatonism. Neoplatonism is a spinoff of classical Platonic philosophy. This philosophy argues for temperance, moderation between physical and intellectual pleasures. Milton argues that pursuit of knowledge and intellectual development brought people nearer to God, a metaphorical movement up the Neoplatonic ladder. It does not reject physical enjoyment, but rather advocates for the priority of intellectual development. Neoplatonic themes appear frequently in Milton's texts, and some scholars argue that Milton features it most prominently in *A Masque* (Clay 173). Milton was an author and poet by trade,

and heavily utilized his work to advance his philosophical, religious, and political beliefs. Although his texts were poetic and narrative, they were also tools to persuade his audience to adopt his progressive positions on social issues of the era.

Neoplatonism is both intellectual and religious in nature; the philosophy's primary value is the pursuit of both heightened knowledge and intellect, a transformative process, or "ladder," that brings an individual closer to God. To engage with that ladder, an individual must not only pursue knowledge, but have their virtue and intellect tested rhetorically, and be able to pass that test. Virtue is the focal point of the Lady and Comus' rhetorical skirmish, and the Lady's intellectual ability allows her to prove her virtue through her rhetorical defeat of Comus. Despite the Lady's rhetorical victory, she remains paralyzed, and requires Sabrina's help to gain freedom.

I argue that Sabrina embodies Milton's Neoplatonic characterization, an argument that has not been made to date by Milton scholars, because Sabrina demonstrates both intellectual agency and ethical worthiness. First, Sabrina has the intellectual power to recognize Comus' trickery, and additionally, she possesses the divine powers necessary to set The Lady free. Thus, as I will demonstrate, her powers of ethical and intellectual judgement coupled with divine magical power establish her Neoplatonic characterization. Empowered representations of women are notable in starkly patriarchal early modern England, and Sabrina is no exception. I argue, too, that Milton's inclusion of Neoplatonic virtues personified in a female character is significant for the era and is a progressive depiction of female power.

Milton is notoriously an intellectual elitist, therefore his focus on female logic and intellect within the masque should be noted. Clara Steven's article, "Milton's Nymph: Sabrina," analyzes Sabrina's symbolism within the masque. Stevens argues that Sabrina represents the

natural “English genius” of the English people. I argue that if Sabrina, a woman, is the representation of this powerful trope, it reverses the gender expectations set forth in patriarchal Early Modern England. Female in this era is traditionally painted as delicate and intellectually feeble; Sabrina’s representation rejects that depiction. If Sabrina represents “English genius,” she represents one of the most powerful values in early modern England. This representation moves beyond rejection of patriarchal characterization, Sabrina’s representation of female is entirely refashioned.

Using a feminist and new historicist theoretical framework, I argue that Sabrina is a powerful representation of a Neoplatonic woman by analyzing her characterization and placing it within the historical and political context of Milton’s era. The application of feminist theory to *A Masque* reveals the serious gaps in Sabrina’s depiction and its juxtaposition to early modern cultural expectations for women. William A. Orum’s article, “The Invocation of Sabrina,” argues that Sabrina represents “Truth.” Orum analyzes Sabrina’s characterization through the historicist lens of Milton’s Neoplatonic values. Orum suggests that Sabrina’s appearance demonstrates that the Lady has passed a test in gaining knowledge to move closer to truth, but that Sabrina embodies completed understanding. Orum’s argument is useful but leaves room for expansion. Sabrina’s role as judge is key. If Sabrina embodies complete understanding, and Neoplatonic philosophy crowns knowledge and intellectual ability as the highest goal, then Sabrina is the embodiment of not only truth, but also the Neoplatonic power. Feminist theory works to uncover the vast array of powerful female characters canon texts have to offer. Sabrina is such a

character, but scholarship¹ misses her critical significance. My application of new historicism will situate Milton's work within his era, analyzing aspects of both his alignment with, and juxtaposition to, his contemporaries. I will examine Milton's deviation from standardized cultural norms and present these as evidence for reading Sabrina as a powerful heroine.

Not only has no one to date argued for and demonstrated that Sabrina is an example of Milton's Neoplatonic philosophy, but the dominant criticism mostly ignores Sabrina's character as portrayed in the masque, leaving a notable gap in feminist scholarship². What makes Sabrina's empowered characterization remarkable is that in this patriarchal early modern era, the Neoplatonic woman trope was virtually nonexistent. Neoplatonism focuses on intellectual ability and ethics. Logic, and the intellectual ability required for it, were largely deemed to be masculine traits and pursuits. Sherry B. Ortner's article (1974), "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" tangles with the ways in which the cultural symbolism of gender seeks to further oppress women.

Ortner argues that this symbolism is ultimately a cultural construct with no foothold in reality and that the retelling of this faulty narrative across time and cultures repeats the subjugation of women. Ortner contends: "This is to say, not that biological facts are irrelevant, or that men and women are not different, but that these facts and differences only take on significance of superior/inferior within the framework of culturally defined value systems" (Ortner 71). I argue that by pairing the powerful goddess Sabrina as the judge of intellectual and

¹ Nicholas Roe's article, "Wordsworth, Milton, and the Politics of Poetic Influence" (1989), analyzes revolutionary themes within Milton's body of work. Roe contends that Milton was culturally personified as a "republican hero," and that Sabrina and all of Milton's characters are exclusively designed to further the English republic.

² Joad Raymond's article, "Complications of Interest: Milton, Scotland, Ireland, and National Identity in 1649" (2004), analyzes Milton's rebellious political tracts and their influence on his creative work. Raymond asserts that Milton considers himself foremost a public servant of England, and that all of Milton's texts, including his creative texts, lend themselves to that role.

ethical standing with the ultimately powerless male Attendant Spirit, the presupposed inherent maleness of intellect and culture is dismantled. The gender role reversal rejects the patriarchal cornerstone of logic posited by Milton's contemporary Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophers. This empowered female representation in *A Masque* redefines the perceived Neoplatonic power of women in the early modern era through Sabrina's heroism.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The social status of women during Milton's lifetime (1608-1674) in early modern England was complex. Although popular culture was still deeply patriarchal, there was some social movement to further women's educations insofar as they could become godlier and better "helpers" to their husbands (Ostovich and Sauer 58). This movement leaned on Christian biblical evidence of the principle of marriage to further its argument. Women's roles were posited by the church as supporting roles, but this supposition was leveraged by some individuals and social groups, such as the Humanists, to expand on the many ways in which an educated woman could perform her supportive role more effectively and efficiently via that education (Ostovich and Sauer). These thinkers transformed their arguments into published texts, such as Jane Anger's *Jane Anger Her Protection for Women* (1589), I.G.'s *An Apologie for Women-Kinde* (1605), Anna Maria Van Schurman's *The Learned Maid; or, Whether a Maid may be a Scholar* (1659), and Bathsua Makin's *An Essay to Revive the Antient Education of Gentlewomen* (1673) to sway public opinion (Ostovich and Sauer (57-59).

Traditional patriarchal gender roles were thus very much alive during this time period, and burgeoning, though still scattered, voices of dissent did not independently topple the hierarchical social order. Catherine Gimelli Martin's chapter "Milton's Spenserian Masque" in *Milton Among the Puritans* (2010), discusses the prominent Humanist themes in Milton's masque. Martin addresses Milton's political and ethical goals for the text, arguing: "long before he became an ecclesiastical reformer Milton was already intent on reforming poetry...it thus employs a morally instructive version of the visual effects, stage machinery, and exotic fairyland scenes common to other masques" (Martin 143). However, those dissenting reformative voices created a written record of dissent against some of the presupposed confines of gender roles and

suggest that the intellectual agency of women was not entirely dismissed. John Milton's characterization of Sabrina is very much in conversation with other reformatory voices of the era.

Milton was born in London in 1608 to a successful scribe, who did well enough to afford him private tutoring, followed by a private grammar school, and eventually sent him to university at Cambridge (Lewalski 3). Milton disapproved of the curriculum at Cambridge, believing it to be flawed and not intellectually rigorous enough, and following an argument with one of his teachers, was expelled (Lewalski 33). A year later, Milton would return, under a new tutor, to finish his M.A. in 1632. After his graduation, Milton continued to study independently for years, while beginning a career for himself as a writer and poet. In 1634, at the age of 26, only two years into his professional literary career, he was commissioned to write *A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle* for the Earl of Bridgewater.

A masque, unlike a play, is written for a particular occasion; in this case, to celebrate the Earl of Bridgewater's appointment as Lord President of Wales during the Michaelmas celebrations. A masque is typically a singular performance and uses members of the nobility rather than professionally trained actors for all the major parts. Masques, as singular performances, are not generally published. Analysis of an unpublished masque would be primarily relegated to line memory and experiential interpretation, there would be no direct text to reference. However, Milton's *A Masque* was published, first anonymously in 1637, then with authorial credit in a collection of his poems in 1645. Milton's first publication of the masque was encouraged by his colleague, Henry Lawes, who wrote the music for it and oversaw the first publication.

Milton was initially hesitant to publish the masque and included a strange verse before the opening of the anonymous published version that suggests he was not proud of the work.

However, for reasons unknown, Milton's opinion of the text changed drastically over the next eight years, and he continued to revise and take authorial credit for the text for the rest of his life. There is only speculation available as to why Milton chose to publish his masque, but Milton highly valued the study of written texts and it could be inferred that the publication established a permanence and availability of analysis to the work that leaving it unpublished could not. Additionally, Milton was an elitist, and was notorious for having a great deal of pride in his work. Publication of the masque allowed it to gain far more notoriety than he would have received for a singular performance.

It is notable that the masque was placed as the final entry in Milton's collection of poetry and included its own title page. The placement and addition of a title page suggests an intended emphasis on the piece, and that Milton encouraged his audience to focus more closely on that text than the others. Additionally, as I will argue later in this essay, the placement of the masque after the collection of poetry suggests that it was intended to be read last, specifically after reading the poetry. This suggests that the poetry serves as a lens for better analyzing the masque. The texts are interwoven in linear fashion, not wholly independent pieces.

There is speculation among critics that the Earl, Sir John Egerton, married to Francis Egerton, commissioned the masque in part in response to a recent legal scandal in his wife's family (Kerrigan 63). Francis' older sister, Lady Ann Stanley, her stepdaughter, and her servants were the victims of extreme sexual abuse at the hands of her husband, Mervin Touchet, the second Earl of Castlehaven. Touchet was tried, found guilty, and executed. Additionally, the infamous rape of a female servant, Margery Evans, in Ludlow forest in 1631, followed by Evans' repeated victimization through the legal system before Egerton eventually intervened, may have encouraged both commissioner and author to use the masque to address chastity, temperance,

and justice. This was to set the stage for Egerton's new leadership role and his expectations for the community. The masque was commissioned three years after Egerton's appointment, suggesting there may have been multiple causes for the commission: it did celebrate the Earl's appointment, but it also showcased the serious plague of rape and sexual assault in the county. By positing clear heroes and villains in a battle for a woman's autonomy over her sexuality, the masque preemptively undermines the faulty logic of would-be attackers.

Published scholarship on the masque primarily focuses on the brothers and Attendant Spirit despite the prominent roles of female heroines. Robert Martin Adams' prominent and oft-cited article, "*Reading Comus*" (1953), claims to offer a comprehensive analysis of the entire masque, but spends almost the entire time on haemony, a plant. Adams concludes Sabrina cannot represent grace, but does not suggest an alternative depiction, asserting that Sabrina's character is too mysterious, and her representation too unclear to analyze. Adams focuses his analysis elsewhere in the masque and is not alone. Scholarship on Sabrina is infrequent, and what exists typically notes in passing that Sabrina is a female representation of nature or nation.

John Luke Rodrigue's 2017 article, "National Allegory in '*Comus*,'" analyzes the masque as Milton's allegorical call to English nationality. Milton was politically active and wrote during a time of political turmoil in England. The existing monarchy was at odds with the burgeoning rebellion for a republic, and Milton situated himself firmly on the side of the republic, as evidenced by his political tracts³. A touchstone of this political movement was English patriotism or nationality. This touchstone sought to revisit the remembered splendor of the historical and cultural successes of England through a call to heightened patriotism.

³ *Of Reformation* (1641), *The Doctrine of Discipline and Divorce* (1643), *Aeropagitica* (1644), *Eikonoklastes* (1649).

Rodrigue's analysis spends a great deal of analysis on the masque's villain, Comus; meanwhile, analysis of Sabrina is relegated to a paragraph, and defines Sabrina exclusively as a symbol of "ancient virtue" (Rodrigue 74). While this is a justifiable interpretation, it is limited in scope because it does not address her intellectual ability as judge, her divine magical power used to free the Lady, or her role as plot catalyst. Reducing Sabrina's prominence in the masque exclusively to a symbol of virtue dismisses her power and reinforces a patriarchal reading of the text. This dismissal of Sabrina reinforces patriarchal early modern stereotypes that seek to define women as unintelligent and fragile. Although the early modern period does indeed evoke the patriarchy, women, and female characters within literature, exist and demand analysis, and in turn representation in scholarship.

ARGUMENT

The publication of Milton's masque creates unique opportunities to analyze the primary text, rather than secondhand accounts of the performance. Publication of Milton's occasional text subverts genre expectations by supplementing the performance with the written text. The masque remains a masque. It cannot be examined as a published play because it still aligns with the genre expectations for a singular performance, although those circumstances must be taken into account. The publication is significant, because it indicates Milton did not only intend it to be experienced within the moment of its performance, but to also be read and analyzed as a text. This form speaks to the content; the form of the masque subverts genre expectations, which suggests that the content will subvert expectations as well.

Some scholars⁴ argue that certain choices in the masque, such as the prominence of female agency, are exclusively caused by the casting. All major characters were played by aristocratic children, and these scholars claim that Milton did not want to offend his patron. They argue that the apparent subversion of genre and character trope expectations result from acts of flattery rather than a carefully chosen literary statement. Such arguments are reasonable but do not address the genre subversions that took place when Milton chose to publish the masque. Milton subverted genre conventions by publishing the masque, suggesting that other genre and character trope subversions were equally intentional.

A published text is a wholly different being than a singular masque performance. The message of a traditional masque can only be directly sent to the audience that was present, while

⁴ Rebekah Greene's article, "Milton's *Comus*," situates Sabrina within the historical milieu of the masque's singular performance. Milton wrote *Comus* to be performed for the Earl of Bridgewater, John Egerton. Greene argues that the historical setting of Milton's masque situates Sabrina's characterization as savior. Greene contends that Sabrina's characterization parallels with both the Earl and his daughter.

everyone outside the immediate audience receives their information second hand, including the misinterpretations, misremembrances, and mistakes that go with it. A published text can be contextualized within its era and cultural mores, but as long as the text survives, it remains available for direct analysis by scholars – a text has staying power over time. Milton disrupted genre convention, which speaks to his career-long pattern of genre and cultural expectation disruptions, and an intention for the text to be analyzed beyond its performative moment – it must also be read as a text. *A Masque* is a performative text, and my analysis will include examination of both elements of the piece.

Sabrina is not the only female character Milton positions to subvert gender binaries. *Paradise Lost* examines the Christian fall of both Satan and humanity and Milton's characterization of Eve rejects the patriarchal stereotypes of Eve prevalent in his era: Rather than portraying her as ignorant, manipulative, controlled by her body, and/or solely responsible for the fall of humankind, Milton characterizes her through her ability to reason, through an internal and spiritual focus, and most importantly, through vast love and self-sacrifice. Through this personification, Milton represents Eve as a human Christ figure.

Towards the end of the epic, Eve sacrifices herself to suffer alone with the full responsibility for the fall of humankind, she is positioned as brave and martyr-like. Eve addresses Adam, saying: "The sentence from thy head removed may light on me, sole cause to thee of all this woe" (X, ll.934). A "sentence" is a punishment for a crime, by taking the punishment and responsibility for the crime, I argue that Eve, like Christ, chooses to suffer punishment so that the rest of humankind (only Adam at this time) can be saved. Eve describes the punishment as a "sentence" when it is on Adam's head, but as "light" on herself. Rather than describe it as the curse or burden her suffering *should* be, she defines the action as "light on me."

“Light” is not only a verb, but also a noun for brightness. In this metaphorical scene, her sacrifice to punishment for Adam’s sake then becomes a metaphysical light or brightness on her. As God and Christ are described as infinite love, but also infinite brightness, her coupled love and self-sacrifice shine on her with literal internal light and characterize her as a mortal Christ figure.

The last dialogue in *Paradise Lost* comes from Eve: “Such favor I unworthy am vouchsafed, by me the promised seed shall all restore” (XII, ll.622). Eve is the mother of all humankind, and therefore also the mother of Christ. It is through her suffering outside of Eden – the pain of giving birth - that Christ, “the promised seed” comes to earth. She will suffer and martyr herself through childbirth, subservience to Adam, and acceptance of the full guilt of the Fall to one day restore humanity’s connection to God. I argue that this sacrifice is parallel to Christ on Earth, characterizing Eve as a Christ figure. Milton rejects the patriarchal stereotype of Eve as the sole cause of the Fall. Instead she is characterized as a Christ figure: intellectually and spiritually focused, self-sacrificing and most importantly, as the mortal example of infinite love. Through this precedent, Milton also rejects the standard basis for the characterization of women: controlled by their bodies, imbruted and frail. As descendants of Eve, instead women embody the strength of an ancestor armed with reason, ultimate internal strength in the external weakness of martyrdom, and infinite love.

Milton demonstrates a pattern of creating complex female characters at odds with the patriarchal cultural mores for women in the 17th century. Sabrina’s characterization is an enigma for the time period in which she was written. Her characterization is rife with otherness, and that otherness creates challenges for analysis; she cannot be defined by traditional early modern tropes because she is not one. We have difficulty conceiving of that which is powerful within its otherness, we identify power through imitation of the symbols and signals of power. Helene

Cixous' "The Laugh of the Medusa," argues that women need not imitate men to be valid, but rather, their own identity and particular mores as writers establishes their own validity via unique experiential knowledge and perspective.

Cixous contends that women must write themselves, and in so doing embrace their identities. Although *A Masque* is written by a man writing women, it accomplishes the empowerment of female identity Cixous posits. The text rejects male-centric identity valuation, the women in the text draw their power from themselves and other women, not from men. In tandem, Sabrina's influence need not imitate or serve male forms to be valid. Both nymph and goddess, with worldly presence and otherworldly powers, Sabrina's is not limited by Comus' physical restraints like the brothers and Attendant Spirit. Her intellectual ability is also not challenged by Comus' rhetorical trickery like the Lady. Cixous argues against psychoanalytic theory's assertions of women's innate "lack," (Cixous), and Sabrina's characterization personifies this argument. Sabrina, as ethical and intellectual judge, and a powerful goddess, the most formidable character in the masque, is the completed embodiment of power and knowledge.

Sabrina's critical analysis in scholarship is limited because it measures her against existing patriarchal tropes⁵ rather than analyzing her identity outside of gender performativity constructs. Sabrina is not human, but she does take a human-like form in the text. She is female, an enactor of powerful change, and a passer of judgement. Her characterization could be simplified as a female representation of the male-dominated Neoplatonic hero, or a mimicry of male intellect. However, Neoplatonism itself is not a gendered philosophy. It does not identify

⁵ *Romeo and Juliet* 1.1. Romeo uses nature metaphors to describe Rosaline, this close focus on her external beauty while dismissing her internal personhood is typical of patriarchal tropes for women.

intellectual value via cultural gender binaries, but rather identifies intellectual value via studious internal growth, an internal transformation during the move up the Neoplatonic ladder. Further, such a simplification would do her characterization injustice. The false dichotomy of male and female cultural expectations could redefine Sabrina as an otherworldly female with male intellect because these gender roles posit essentialism, and essentialism rejects identity outside the confines of gender roles. Neither does Sabrina exist on a gender spectrum, for the ends of this spectrum use false logic to posit their performativity spaces. Rather, Sabrina is particularly female, particularly completed knowledge, and particularly completed power. Sabrina occupies a new space outside the constraints of these tropes, her femaleness is part and parcel to her power, it does not undermine or limit it.

Women, such as Sabrina, who subvert gender roles are at risk of being accused of masculine mimicry. Cixous argues that many women are encouraged to mimic men to obtain power because have historically held the majority of this power. She posits that this is problematic because it presumes that women are not innately capable, and that women do not need to mimic male speech and power structures to obtain and maintain agency. I argue that accusations of male mimicry seek to undermine women's power by trapping women within false gender binaries. Essentialism asserts that both individuals and "things have a set of characteristics that make them what they are, and that the task of science and philosophy is their discovery and expression; the doctrine that essence is prior to existence" (dictionary). It is essentialism that seeks to undermine spectrums of identity by defining them within transient cultural confines. Essentialism is problematic. Gender and gender roles are cultural constructions; they exist only in our collective imaginations.

Feminist literary theorists Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* argues that canon texts attempt to establish a literary paternity, to create male ownership over texts and scholarship. Gilbert and Gubar contend that women must dismiss false gender binaries. "A woman writer must examine, assimilate, and transcend the extreme images of "angel" and "monster" which male authors have generated for her...In other words, we must "kill" the "angel in the house" (Gilbert and Gubar 17). They assert that "angels" maintain prescribed gender roles, while "monsters" demolish them, and are therefore perceived as monstrous. Women and female characters that display culturally "male" traits can be accused of monstrous mimicry. Assumptions of male mimicry in reference to a female character with clear intellectual ability miss the mark. Gilbert and Gubar argue that women must create an identity outside these cultural binaries. "Defining poetry as a mirror held up to nature, the mimetic aesthetic that begins with Aristotle and descends through Sidney, Shakespeare, and Johnson implies that the poet, like a lesser God, has made or engendered an alternative mirror-universe in which he actually seems to enclose or trap shadows of reality" (Gilbert and Gubar 5). Sabrina bridges the gap between the false dichotomies of female and male gender roles by existing in a new space that neither maintains nor mimics. Sabrina is both.

Sabrina bridges this gap in a variety of ways in *A Masque*. Women, both in literature and life, are traditionally associated with nature, while men are associated with culture. Similarly, women are associated with the body, while men are associated with the mind. Ortner argues that this cultural symbolism has problematic effects: "Women are being identified or symbolically associated with nature, as opposed to men, who are identified with culture. Since it is always culture's project to subsume and transcend nature, if women were considered part of nature, then

culture would find it “natural” to subordinate, not to say oppress, them” (Ortner 73). Tropes that exclusively align women with nature create a system of oppression. I argue that Sabrina subverts this symbolic oppression by existing in a new space, she symbolizes both nature and culture in tandem.

While this premise may appear to posit different but equal roles, these associations exist only on a hierarchical scale. Nature, though frequently a topic of poetic convention, particularly in early modern England, sits far lower on the social hierarchy than culture. Nature is associated with women, beauty, and wildness. Conversely, culture is associated with men, civilization, and reason, the crowning accomplishment of modern society. This premise is quite antithetical to modern scholarly understandings of gender and gender roles, but these tropes indicate the ways in which Sabrina’s characterization subverts patriarchal expectations by subverting gender-associated tropes; Sabrina is associated with both nature and culture as nymph, goddess, judge, and heroine.

Sabrina’s bothness, her occupation of a new space through simultaneous nature and culture symbolism, does not only subvert faulty binaries, but entirely dismantles them. Her simultaneous existence in both ends of gender binaries disassembles them because if Sabrina can be both, the binary is a fiction. By dismantling the cultural construct of gender roles, she embodies what Neoplatonic female power really is. It is a power that is not constrained by angels and monsters, nature and culture; it is a female power that overpowers binaries.

Notably, the Attendant Spirit’s song weaves nature and culture tropes together as he sings of Sabrina, evidencing her character’s subversion of patriarchal gender tropes:

Listen for dear honor’s sake,
Goddess of the silver lake,

Listen and save (ll. 864).

Sabrina's duality arises here in that she is not exclusively relegated to nature. The Attendant Spirit identifies her representation of, and ties to, culture, during his song asking for her help. "Listen for dear honor's sake" (ll. 864). When the Attendant Spirit asks Sabrina to "listen," his word choice offers multiple implications. The literal meaning of listen is to hear, and indeed the Attendant Spirit has cause to ask that Sabrina hear his song; if she does not hear it, she cannot appear. However, listen has a slightly different implication than hear, it suggests a request to weigh the value of his argument. "Listen" requests greater attention than "hear," it asks for closer attention to the words being spoken. Asking for close attention is logical, the Attendant Spirit had already established prior to his song that Sabrina would not appear if either she was called incorrectly, or she judged the Lady unworthy of help. By asking Sabrina to listen, the Attendant Spirit dually asks for judgement. He asks her to pay close attentiveness to both his song and the Lady's characterization; he asks for attentive judgement.

The Attendant Spirit elaborates on the first word of his request by offering causation. The call to "listen" is followed by "for;" the Attendant Spirit expands the cause in his plea beyond the immediate. In the immediacy, the Lady needs help because she is trapped, but more broadly, the Lady needs help because she is trapped by a magician who seeks to undermine her ethics. The Lady's ethics magnify beyond the significance of a single individual in this line; in tandem with the stake of the Lady's honor is the stake of honor as an abstract cultural value. This concept is emphasized through the addition of "dear" before "honour." "Dear" suggests the importance of the abstract concept of honor to the Attendant Spirit, but it also suggests that honor is already presupposed to be "dear" to Sabrina as well. This presupposition is well founded; Sabrina's role

as judge of the Lady's ethical value presumes existing perfected ethics in Sabrina. Sabrina cannot judge the Lady's morality if she is not already an expert on the quality.

Sabrina's expertise on ethics does more than demonstrate an empowered characterization for the goddess. This line also subverts the false dichotomy of patriarchal gender binaries by aligning Sabrina with culture. This line subverts that trope by associating Sabrina with both culture and nature. Honor is a cultural construct, it does not exist in nature. It is a socially constructed abstract premise of perceived value based on particular relative cultural mores across area and era. This line asserts that not only is Sabrina both the expert on, and judge of honor, delineating intellect and ethics, but she is also the expert on an abstract cultural construct – a male dominated association. This association undermines traditional patriarchal gender roles by complicating binaries in expectations, and further establishes Sabrina's vast agency.

In addition to the Attendant Spirit's statements, Sabrina takes ownership of her identity by delineating her association with culture. Sabrina speaks for herself in this stanza, taking ownership of her own characterization and power and declaring it:

Shepherd 'tis my office best
To help ensnared chastity;
Brightest Lady look on me (ll.908).

Sabrina recognizes the Attendant Spirit as a "shepherd." The term is appropriate. While the literal definition of a shepherd is one who herds sheep, it also identifies one who serves as a guide to others. The Attendant Spirit does guide the brothers to the Lady, then to Sabrina, tending to them much like a flock. Additionally, there are religious undertones to the word shepherd. Milton was a Protestant, and shepherds frequently appear in the Christian bible. Shepherds additionally are symbolic of individuals that lead less powerful or intellectually able

“sheep” down the correct path to move closer to God. However, the Attendant Spirit leads his “sheep” to Sabrina. Sabrina is not a stand in for the Christian God, but the reference to the Attendant Spirit as a shepherd suggests that Sabrina is closer to God because she is the divine being the shepherd Attendant Spirit is leading his sheep to. Positing Sabrina as both a goddess and judge of ethics establishes her divinity. If Sabrina is where a spiritual shepherd leads his flock, then she also operates as a religious leader in that moment, her ability to judge the ethics of others aligns with this. Although religion was an area of culture women were welcomed into, they were not generally welcomed as religious leaders (Ostovich and Sauer 58). The leadership and ethical judgement required for the task of religious leader was typically relegated to the male realm of culture. By establishing ties between herself and religious leadership, Sabrina takes ownership of her otherness in the new space of both nature and culture, and female and male gender roles; she continues to dismantle the binary.

Sabrina continues characterizing her identity by taking ownership over her powerful roles. Her assertion, “‘tis my office best,” or “it is my office best,” creates a sense of ownership in identity. “Tis” or “it is” is a statement, she has no uncertainty about her skills, role, or ability. “It is” is followed up with “my;” “my” is possessive and indicates ownership. By utilizing the assertive preface of “it is my,” Sabrina delineates ownership over her office, her position or occupation, and by extension, delineates ownership over her identity as a judge of ethics and powerful goddess with the magical ability to free the Lady. In addition, “office” further establishes ties between Sabrina and the traditionally male dominated association of culture. An office is an occupation, occupations exist exclusively within the realm of culture. Sabrina’s use of “office” further subverts gender binaries because offices were largely held by men; women could help their husbands, but not hold offices independently. Their statuses were primarily

relegated to the home, while an office, or position, takes place outside the home. However, Sabrina identifies her position as “my office,” that ownership indicates that she, a woman, holds that office, a position outside the home, independently, and therefore undermines the patriarchal gender roles that attempt to confine women to the roles of helper.

Sabrina additionally establishes her standing within her position. She asserts, “tis my office best,” indicating her power twofold. “Best” indicates a hierarchy in her skills; she has many offices, or positions, but her greatest skill lies in heroism. Her “office best” is to “help ensnared chastity,” which in this case, is to free the Lady from Comus’ magical paralysis spell. She rescues the Lady, engaging in heroism, after judging the Lady, engaging in ethical judgement. The task she has set before herself is what she does “best.” The hierarchical connotations of best also indicate comparison with outside sources.

Indeed, the brothers and Attendant Spirit are powerless to help the Lady, therefore Sabrina accomplishes the role of judge and heroine “best.” This comparison is significant, because it posits Sabrina’s position and ability in direct contrast with the characters of the Attendant Spirit and brothers, who are male. Hierarchically, Sabrina, a female, is then positioned above three male characters, via her capability and office. The term “best” then delineates Sabrina’s ownership of her empowered characterization, one that undermines patriarchal mores. Patriarchal mores seek to undermine women’s power, but they additionally establish cultural expectations for women to undermine their own. She is not modest or dismissive of her own capability, she takes ownership of and declares it, further complicating and undermining traditional gender expectations. It is Sabrina, not the male characters, who exhibits the highest mode of power.

After Sabrina has asserted her identity, she specifies that her office is “to help ensnared chastity.” Her office is “to help,” and in this case to rescue, the Lady. As I have established, the heroism involved in helping the Lady asserts Sabrina’s capability and subverts gender binaries. However, helping “ensnared chastity,” particularly, adds another layer of ability by creating an alliance of women. Sabrina protects the Lady’s body, women are protecting women in the story. This alliance of women undermines male-centric stories so prominent in patriarchal culture. Cixous asserts: “men have committed the greatest crime against women. Insidiously, violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves” (Cixous 878). Sabrina and the Lady’s relationship deconstructs the pitting of women against women. They do not “mobilize their immense strength against themselves,” but mobilize that immense strength in partnership against a common enemy, Comus. Sabrina and the Lady reject the construct of woman against woman by working together. This alliance of women and the recognition of it in scholarship posits a new story: of powerful women using their power to empower each other.

As I discussed, sexual misconduct was a major issue in the county when Milton was commissioned by the Earl of Bridgewater to produce the masque. The issue had pervaded into both the Earl’s own extended family and the common people in the county. Fault, particularly in early modern England, frequently fell to women (Kerrigan 70). Not only did sexual assault destroy women’s cultural power because it clashed with expectations of female virtue, but the crime was difficult to prove, and rapists rarely encountered legal action, so women frequently had no vindication for their suffering.

A Masque centers on an attempted rape. Comus first attempts to persuade the Lady with false reason, then physically imprisons her. Although he does not physically force himself on

her, he intends to keep her imprisoned until she agrees to have sex with him. If Sabrina had not appeared, the Lady's choices would have been to waste away on a stone chair or agree to Comus' demands. This coercion constitutes attempted rape, albeit perhaps a more palatable one for Milton's audience. The framing of this attempted rape is critical both to the characterization of Sabrina and to the characterization of sexual assault.

The Lady's chastity is described as "ensnared." To ensnare is to trap and can apply to both literal and figurative traps; Comus first weaves a web of false logic in an attempt to trick the Lady, and when this fails, he uses magic to bind her wrists to a stone chair. Comus tries to ensnare her chastity, to literally capture the Lady's ownership over her own sexuality. Comus and his actions exemplify one of the many problematic aspects of rape culture: it objectifies women and their sexuality as objects that can be possessed.

Comus does not only physically confine the Lady, but also attempts to undermine her ownership of her own body by using coercion to sexually exploit her. If chastity is an item that can be possessed, it can be possessed only by the Lady and her physical autonomy. Sabrina literally fights back against the faulty rhetoric of rape culture by subverting Comus' coercion attempts and restoring the Lady's ownership over her own body. Comus has attempted to steal, or "ensnare," her physical autonomy by attempting to steal her chastity. Although justice is largely served in the masque, and the Lady is freed, the theme speaks to the larger historical context of an important social issue in the moment of the masque's commission. The masque establishes ethical guidelines, asserting a woman's right to autonomy over her own body, and this assertion establishes Sabrina's role both as ethical judge and as the catalyst for justice in a battle against rape culture. The masque has several didactic elements, but the undermining of

rape culture at the hands of a female goddess subverts both gender expectations and the presuppositions around rape culture itself.

After Sabrina establishes her identity and office, she states, “brightest lady, look on me.” Sabrina describes the Lady as “brightest lady,” which, on its surface, has associations with external beauty. It would not be off the mark to use this interpretation, as the Lady has already been described as physically beautiful in the masque, but Milton’s assertions in his twin poems, which establish a lens for reading his other work through Neoplatonic philosophy, would require more.

Bright and dark tropes are frequently posited in literature as symbolic of good and evil, and the early modern era was no exception. The Lady has passed Sabrina’s test of ethics by denying Comus, and therefore her ethics are judged to be sound. “Bright” also means intelligent, and the Lady has demonstrated intelligence by rejecting Comus. Milton’s Neoplatonism asserts that the internal growth of one’s intellect brings one closer to God and is therefore transformative in nature. The Lady’s intellectual ability was not honed enough in the beginning of the masque to fully escape Comus. Her logical and ethical agency was tested throughout the masque, and ultimately, when judged and found worthy, transformed. Sabrina identifies and validates that transformation by referring to her as “brightest lady.” The Lady has become “brightest Lady” through this transformative process, she is intellectually brighter, and this intellectual brightness has moved her closer to God. The Lady has endured a hardship, experienced internal growth in the process, and once she is freed, transformed. Sabrina remains the catalyst, however. The Lady is not identified as “brightest lady” until Sabrina begins her incantation. Sabrina, judge goddess, and perfected ethical and intellectual power personified, completes the transformation.

Sabrina's final phrase of the quote, "look on me," also demonstrates that The Lady has been transformed, intellectually and ethically, and that she has therefore grown closer to God. Comus' deceitful rhetoric throughout the masque, in addition to his grotesquely transformed followers, repeatedly attempt to obscure truth. As the Lady has transformed, she has grown closer to truth, her eyes have become unobscured by Comus' wily rhetoric, and in tandem her physical body will be unobscured by Comus' conniving magic, she can truly "look" now and see truth. Presumably, telling the Lady to look at her is part of Sabrina's incantation, but it is notable that she begins it this way because it further demonstrates Sabrina's ethical and intellectual power. Sabrina, who is completed ethics and completed knowledge, is also therefore truth personified. Truth is completed knowledge, and Sabrina has established her possession of this through her role as judge; asking the Lady to "look on me" makes sense. The Lady is now "brightest," and can see Sabrina and the truth she represents.

Sabrina's characterization acts as a foil to the masque's villain, Comus. Comus' internal and external selves are skewed, they contradict, rather than work in tandem. Comus acts as the foil to Sabrina, in every way she is wholeness, completed intellectual ability and ethics, Comus is intellectually and ethically deformed. These contrasting characters are ultimately put at direct odds, and Sabrina wins. A female heroine is notable for a 17th century text, but Sabrina's characterization as foil to Comus moves beyond this. Sabrina's personification of cultural values is starkly superior to Comus', and this empowers Sabrina and reverses social gender hierarchies.

It is important to note that in this analysis that Milton was a Puritan, and masques were not deemed morally acceptable by the Puritans (Gimelli 141). There are several rationales for this, one element that there was no space for magic and myth in Puritan Christianity. It undermined devotion to the Christian God by positing Pagan storytelling. This juxtaposition

between Milton's religion and the masque he produced has left scholars with many questions. So how and why does Milton deal with magic? Milton creates a foil between Sabrina and Comus. Sabrina is a goddess, and has magic, but her transformation into a goddess was earned through ethical worthiness: "She guiltless damsel, flying the mad pursuit...And underwent a quick immortal change, made goddess of the river" (ll. 829). Her ethical worthiness transformed her into a goddess. Milton was a Puritan, but also a Neoplatonist. Neoplatonism posits internal transformation to grow closer to God, and Sabrina personifies this transformation. She has magic, but it is divine, and divinely earned, magic.

Sabrina's divine magic contrasts with Comus. The Attendant Spirit identifies Comus to the brothers: "that damned wizard hid in sly disguise" (ll.83). While Sabrina is a goddess, Comus is named a wizard; a goddess is inherently divine, a wizard is merely an individual that practices magic. A wizard's magic does not focus on internal transformation, divinity, or ethics, it is a pragmatic skill without the required internal accomplishments. "Damned wizard" emphasizes this point. Although "damned" may convey frustration, it also conveys religious damnation. Comus' ethics are such that he is condemned to an eternal punishment. The placement of these words, damned immediately before wizard, suggests that this damnation is correlated to the kind of magic Comus practices. Comus' magic is weaker than Sabrina's, she is able to overcome his magical restraints to free the Lady; but it is also less real. Comus uses illusion to disguise himself as a villager to the Lady:

When once her eye

Hath met the virtue of this magic dust,

I shall appear some harmless villager (ll. 164)

Comus' magic focuses on illusion. He uses magic dust to literally obscure the Lady's vision. He later uses deceptive rhetoric to attempt to confuse her, and when all fails, uses his magic to bind her to a chair. This too, however, is deceptive. He posits a false dichotomy: she can offer up ownership of her own body or stay trapped in the chair to die. However, Sabrina dismantles this dichotomy by undoing his magic. Milton addresses magic in the masque, but he does not address all magic equally, and this distinction further demonstrates Sabrina and Comus as foil.

Milton crafts a careful, layered personification of Comus' followers, foreshadowing the personification of Comus himself. "The express resemblance of the gods, is changed into some brutish form of wolf, or bear..." (ll. 70). "Express" in this line is synonymous with exquisite. Milton blends the lore of pagan gods with an overarching ambiance of Christianity. Milton makes no special point by identifying that humans are made in the Christian god's image, but the term "express" adds depth to the assertion. Milton begins the critical juxtaposition of good and evil with the description of humankind's natural state.

In this natural state, humans carry "express resemblance," suggesting natural beauty externally, but alluding to natural internal beauty as well. Milton's audience would have been well versed in the implications of external appearance matching internal appearance and would have taken these assumptions for granted (Martin 142). With this in mind, Comus' followers begin in perfect natural balance, as they were intended to be. However, after their meeting with Comus, and subsequent existence as his followers, they "change." It is imperative to note that despite Milton's documented affection for the word "transform," this is not the word he uses. "Transform" is Latinate in origin, and for theatrical purposes refers to "miraculous change." These facts would suggest Milton had a prime opportunity to use his preferred nomenclature, but instead he uses "change." "Change," with its single syllable and harsh sound, is far more abrupt

than poetic, and certainly more English than Latinate in sound. Milton was a notorious elitist, and Latin was a sign of education during the Renaissance era. This combined with his demonstrated preference for a Latinate vernacular suggests a very poignant purpose in his use of “change.”

Furthermore, unlike the miraculous implication of “transform,” “change” does not carry any implication with it of what kind of change it is. This lack of implication built into the term “change,” leaves Milton open to describe a different kind of change than the one “transform” would imply. “Some brutish form,” is a loaded phrase. “Some” implies Milton’s lack of ability to narrowly define the exact monsters Comus’ followers represent. It is a term filled with, and reliant on, abstraction. It can be neither specifically accounted for nor understood. The followers’ changed lack of humanity defies full comprehension.

“Brutish” is a prominent return for Milton to his jargon. Throughout much of his work, Milton employs his self-created term “imbruted.” In tandem with his Neoplatonic philosophy, Milton defines the descent from intellectual ability beyond lowliness in humanity. The term imbruted draws on “brute” as its core. By definition, brute is a nonhuman form, or beast. A beast is other than animal in nature; in Milton’s view, animals were created to exist without higher intellectual faculties, humans were not. Imbruted implies an unnatural state of change from human form.

Milton’s Neoplatonic philosophy defines the physical engagement with the world as less than intellectual engagement. “Brutish form of wolf” suggests that in deviating from the purpose for their existence, Comus’ followers are less than a wolf, because they have disregarded their nature. This stark personification of Comus’ followers lends itself to the personification of Comus himself. By staging this display early, Milton conveys to his audience that Comus is

more than a villain, he is an unnatural villain that changes those influenced by him in unnatural ways. This personification acts as a foil to Sabrina and emphasizes the Lady's intellectual ability.

Throughout the text, Comus presents the Lady with a series of statements embedded with deceptive logic but portrayed at first appearance as reasonable. Unlike the brutes who have fallen for Comus' tricks, the Lady retains her discernment through intellect. She has the reversed effect in speech of Comus' imbruting. What is clear, Comus shrouds, but what is shrouded, the Lady unveils and accurately identifies with her reason. "This juggler would think to charm my judgement, as mine eyes, obtruding false rules pranked with reason's garb," (ll. 757). The Lady recognizes Comus' false logic, unveils the core of his speech, and rejects it. She identifies him as a "juggler," a synonym for wizard, but also a jester or a trickster. The trickster connotation asserts that the Lady understands deceptiveness and aligns with the contrast of "false rules" internally "pranked with reason's garb" externally. The connotation of jester asserts Comus' weakness. He can create illusions, or tricks, but they serve primarily as entertainment, much like jesters. Comus, and his magic, are illusionary in nature.

By requiring that the Lady pass a test of virtue and intellectual ability, a test that demonstrates the Lady has engaged with the Neoplatonic ladder, Sabrina becomes judge. It is within her power to save or choose not to save the Lady. When the Attendant Spirit calls on Sabrina to appear and rescue the Lady, he phrases his words carefully:

And, as the old swain said, she can unlock
The clasping charm, and thaw the numbing spell,
If she be right invoked in warbled song (ll. 852).

The Attendant Spirit asserts, "if she be right invoked." This line layers Sabrina's characterization as judge. Sabrina is judging not only the Lady's virtue, but also the Attendant

Spirit's invocation. Sabrina cannot merely be invoked, she must "be right invoked." Without the proper invocation, Sabrina will choose not to appear. The Attendant Spirit broadens his identification of Sabrina as judge by citing her magical power. Sabrina can "unlock the clasping charm, and thaw the numbing spell." The Attendant Spirit's description of her is rooted in both nature and culture. Both charm and spell are magical in essence, but her ability to overcome them is described as "unlock" and "thaw." A lock is a human invention, and falls within the realm of culture, while to thaw, as with spring, is a natural occurrence. Although Sabrina is personified as a magical goddess, the duality of her power within both culture and nature characterize her agency through mastery of the Neoplatonic ladder; she is both knowledge, and judge of knowledge.

After Sabrina first appears to the group, she sings a greeting to the Attendant Spirit:

Thus I set my printless feet
O'er the cowslip's velvet head,
That bends not as I tread,
Gentle swain, at thy request

I am here (ll. 897)

Milton's posit of Sabrina's "printless feet" highlights her otherness. She is characterized in a new space through gender disruptions, but also through her human-like form coupled with magical powers. She has feet, and she walks like a human, but they don't leave behind the footprints that a human would leave behind. This point is emphasized with the lines: "o'er the cowslip's velvet head, that bends not as I tread. Not only does she not leave footprints behind her, but her steps are so light or perhaps entirely weightless, that she does not even bend the tops of flowers as she steps on them. Her magical ability gives her a lightness that is akin to floating

or flying. However, she still maintains her human connection because she does not entirely float as she moves, but “treads.” She still engages in the human motion of walking, even as she rejects the damage human steps leave behind them. Sabrina subverts the binaries of human and nonhuman, while subverting the binaries of female and male. Sabrina owns the the new space between binaries, and this continuously calls those binaries into question.

The end of Sabrina’s address to the Attendant Spirit undermines the patriarchal hierarchies of male and female. Sabrina refers to the Attendant Spirit as “gentle swain.” A “swain” refers to a young suitor or a country youth. The Attendant Spirit’s age is not otherwise referenced in the text, but referring to him with a term associated with youth creates alternative connotations. Youth suggests naiveté and inexperience, a lack of authority, and a lack of power. Although the Attendant Spirit has established his experience by comparison to the brothers, Sabrina’s word choice in this line delineates that the Attendant Spirit represents youth in contrast to her. Sabrina expands on this premise with the phrase “at thy request.” A request is a question, not a command, Sabrina has authority over the Attendant Spirit, he has no authority to command her presence. This stanza supports Sabrina’s subversion cultural gender hierarchies, she is the most powerful character in the scene.

The Attendant Spirit asserts both his own and the brothers’ limited abilities. When the trio is incapable of freeing the Lady from Comus’ spell, the Attendant Spirit defers to Sabrina:

We cannot free the Lady that sits here
In stony fetters fixed, and motionless;
Yet stay, be not disturbed, now I bethink me,
Some other means I have which may be used (ll. 818).

The Attendant Spirit's line, "be not disturbed" instills confidence in the brothers, the Attendant Spirit has enough faith in Sabrina's agency as heroine and accuracy as judge that he assures the brothers they do not need to be distressed at their sister's very distressing paralyzed state. The Attendant Spirit again notes his own limitations by referencing "some other means I have." His personal means have been exhausted when he states, "we cannot free the Lady." He recognizes that the only means he has available to him is his knowledge of the song to call Sabrina. The Attendant Spirit stresses that his most powerful means is a song that calls on the help of another.

The Attendant Spirit's call to Sabrina also suggests her role as judge:

Listen for dear honor's sake,
Goddess of the silver lake,
Listen and save (ll. 864).

His call to Sabrina twice requests that she listen. The repetition of the word "listen" suggests that the word is significant and draws the reader's attention. The Attendant Spirit asks Sabrina to "listen for dear honor's sake." He justifies his request with the ethical element of honor. "Honor" offers a dual meaning. Honor frequently referred to chastity during the Early Modern Period, and this definition fits, but honor also suggests temperance and justice in the legal system. A just judge is motivated by making ethically sound decisions, these just decisions make that judge honorable. A judge both embodies and pursues honor. The Attendant Spirit's use of the term "honor" to call to Sabrina suggests he knows she values honor. The second repetition of "listen" asks Sabrina to "save." "Save" establishes Sabrina's strength, she has the power to rescue or abandon the Lady based on her own judgement. This line reinforces Sabrina's role as judge, but also fortifies her role as heroine. Sabrina is not only rescuer, but the only character with the ability to be rescuer.

After Sabrina appears, the Attendant Spirit again references Sabrina's power:

We implore thy powerful hand

To undo this charmed band

Of true virgin here distressed (ll. 903).

Although Sabrina has already appeared, the Attendant Spirit continues his request for aid. Her appearance alone will not save the Lady, she must choose, or judge, to save the Lady. The Attendant Spirit's continued request acknowledges Sabrina's role as judge and heroine, her help is not obligatory. The term "implore" is significant. "Implore" is defined as "to beg urgently or piteously," the Attendant Spirit does not simply ask for Sabrina's help, he begs. Begging establishes Sabrina's superior hierarchical rank, and clarifies that Sabrina is not obligated to save the Lady but can only be "implored."

Both the Lady and the Attendant Spirit are at the mercy of Sabrina's judgement to help them. The Attendant Spirit implores Sabrina's "powerful hand." Although the phrase implies he is imploring her powerful magic, by referencing her hand, the Attendant Spirit more closely associates her magic, and by extension power, with her being. Her hand is physically attached to her, it is not something she has been given, it is part of who she is. Powerful then, extends beyond a description of her hand to a description of her essence. Sabrina does not just possess power, she embodies power. Her roles as heroine and judge of the masque are the result of that essence of power.

Sabrina's characterization as judge is further evidenced in the last line of the Attendant Spirit's quote. He identifies the Lady as a "true virgin." Although the masque establishes the Lady's chastity, the Attendant Spirit adds an additional description to her identity with the adjective "true." Sabrina is judge, and the Attendant Spirit has asserted that there is a variation in

chastity with the term “true.” Milton’s texts frequently rhetorically analyze ethics, and his Neoplatonic philosophy asserts that true morality cannot exist without testing that morality. The Lady’s chastity had little value until it was challenged by Comus, only when she overcame Comus’ rhetorical challenges to her chastity did she truly become chaste, or a virgin. “True” also refers to loyalty. The Lady demonstrated loyalty to her ethics throughout Comus’ coercion. Despite the misfortune of the Lady’s experience, the success of that experience moved her up the Neoplatonic ladder of reason. The Attendant Spirit offers this achievement as evidence to the judge Sabrina; the Lady deserves help not because she is a virgin, but because she is a “true” virgin. As judge, part of Sabrina’s role is to discern truth and pass judgement. Sabrina has judged the Attendant Spirit’s words to be accurate when she chooses to rescue the Lady and take on the role of heroine.

CONCLUSION

John Milton's acclaimed masque, *A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle*, complicates 17th century patriarchal gender roles for women by characterizing the goddess Sabrina as an empowered female judge and heroine imbued with cultural, intellectual, and magical power. However, prominent scholarship about the masque frequently dismisses her ability, reserving analysis for less integral characters. The dismissal of powerful female characters in Milton's texts reinforces patriarchal stereotypes both within the Early Modern and present era. Feminist scholarship works to excavate female characters in canon, revealing the integral roles they play within literature, and by extension, society.

A Masque highlights empowered women, women's ownership over their own bodies, and undermines early modern rape culture. This powerful canonical text subverts deeply embedded gender stereotypes that undermine women's agency. I argue that pressing for fuller analysis of these critical female characters creates more opportunity in scholarship, empowers women, and combats traditional cultural gender roles. Sabrina functions as plot catalyst, sage judge, and powerful heroine, yet scholarship about Sabrina dismisses her multilayered ability. The dismissal of prominent female characters such as Sabrina in canon texts misses the mark.

Feminist theory illuminates female characters and our understanding of them, it offers an opportunity to revisit and challenge previously held notions of women's roles in literature and society. Sabrina is frequently dismissed in scholarship, because even when we identify female power, we still police it within the binaries of female expectations; this creates the presupposition that Sabrina is an early modern female character, therefore her power must be limited. This isn't the case. Limited expectations for female characters in Milton's and other early modern texts create an artificial lens over analysis. They obstruct the true close reading that

would illuminate the multifaceted power of women in many early modern canon texts. As scholars, we must seek to uncover the many spaces women in literature occupy; their stories matter. This uncovering is both useful and applicable to *A Masque*, but it also creates opportunity throughout Milton and other early modern scholarship. These characters are there, but their analysis must be pursued.

Sabrina disrupts the binaries of gender expectations by existing in a new space that neither imitates traditionally male cultural mores nor is confined to female cultural mores. Sabrina is strongly associated with nature and culture, abstract and concrete, body and mind. Sabrina bridges the gap between these false binaries of gender construction by owning her identity in this space. In doing so, she overcomes the gendering of ungendered concepts. Early modern England was indeed patriarchal, but this does not mean that women in the era and literature were wholly without power or significance. Milton's masque addresses the important issues of women's autonomy with a female heroine and exemplar of ethical and intellectual prowess, Sabrina.

This story is not about men. This story is about women working in alliance, fighting for autonomy over their own bodies, rebuking cultural expectations, and claiming their identities. Milton's exceptional masque undermines prominent patriarchal values of the 17th century. While these male-centric values attempt to obscure female characters into supporting roles, Milton's characterization of Sabrina is in stark juxtaposition. Scholarship overlooks Sabrina's distinct power in *A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle*. Scholarship must evolve. Sabrina, and powerful female characters like her, have been in Milton's texts all along. They demand our analysis.

REFERENCES

Primary Sources

- Milton, John. "A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle." *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton*, Edited by William Kerrigan, et al, The Modern Library, 2007, pp. 61-98.
- Milton, John. "Il Penseroso." *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton*, Edited by William Kerrigan, et al, The Modern Library, 2007, pp. 46-51.
- Milton, John. "L'Allegro." *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton*, Edited by William Kerrigan, et al, The Modern Library, 2007, pp. 41-45.
- Milton, John. "Paradise Lost." *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton*, Edited by William Kerrigan, et al, The Modern Library, 2007, pp. 283-630.
- Shakespeare, William. "The Most Excellent and Lamentable Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet." *The Norton Anthology*, Edited by Stephen Greenblatt, et al, W.W Norton, 2008, pp. 897-972.

Theoretical Sources

- Cixous, Hélène, et al. "The Laugh of the Medusa." *Signs*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1976, pp. 875–893. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3173239.
- Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. 2nd ed., Yale University Press, 1980.
- Ortner, Sherry B. "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" *Feminist Studies*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1972, pp. 5–31. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3177638.

Secondary Sources

- Adams, Robert Martin. "Reading 'Comus.'" *Modern Philology*, vol. 51, no. 1, 1953, pp. 18–32. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/434894.
- Daniel, Clay. "Milton's Neo-Platonic Angel?" *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 44, no. 1, 2004, pp. 173–188. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3844664.
- Greene, Rebekah. "Milton's Comus." *Explicator*, vol. 64, no. 4, Summer 2006, pp. 210-212. *Academic Search Premier*, ezproxy.lib.ndsu.nodak.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=22350973&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

- Lewalski, Barbara K. *The Life of John Milton*. Blackwell Publishing, 2000.
- Martin, Catherine Gimelli. *Milton Among the Puritans: The Case for Historical Revisionism*. Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2010.
- Oram, William A. "The Invocation of Sabrina." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 24, no. 1, 1984, pp. 121–139. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/450353.
- Ostovich, Helen and Elizabeth Sauer. "The Status of Women." *Reading Early Modern Women*, Edited by Helen Ostovich and Elizabeth Sauer, Routledge, 2004, pp. 55-61.
- Raymond, Joad. "Complications of Interest: Milton, Scotland, Ireland, and National Identity in 1649." *The Review of English Studies*, vol. 55, no. 220, 2004, pp. 315–345, *New Series*, *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3661302.
- Rodrigue, John Luke. "The Profits of Patriotism: National Allegory in *Comus* (1738)." *The Modern Language Review*, vol. 112, no. 1, 2017, pp. 54–81. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5699/modelangrevi.112.1.0054.
- Roe, Nicholas. "Wordsworth, Milton, and the Politics of Poetic Influence." *The Yearbook of English Studies*, vol. 19, 1989, pp. 112–126. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3508045.
- Stevens, Clara. "Milton's Nymph: Sabrina." *The English Journal*, vol. 17, no. 7, 1928, pp. 571–575. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/803836.