Chaste Bodies and Poisonous Desires in Milton's *Mask*

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RAVING AT CLUB COMUS

Milton's *Mask* (1634) has long been acknowledged by critics as an argument that virginity may serve women as a protective shield from the dangers of seduction. But just as the characters use disguises to make themselves more appealing to their audiences, so too does the masque conceal a more troubling, yet nonetheless alluring, portrayal of desire's intimate and material workings in seventeenth-century England. At the Seventh International Milton Symposium (2002), Tour de Force UK Limited and the Beaufort Troupe performed a rendition of *A Mask* set in the Carolina Low Country.¹ The drama delightfully engaged the sensual underpinnings of the story and brought them into contemporary context, highlighting the ubiquity of desire and its relationship to power and dominance.

This production demonstrated that the masque's happy ending and glorification of virtue are haunted by the specter of an erotic desire that cannot be so easily dismissed. This point is not merely a contemporary one, however. The text's thematic and performative complexity demands further critical consideration of the ways in which bodies become political sites for the exchange of sexual desires and not simply voices of morality. Milton's *Mask*, often read as a paean to the power of chastity, still has something to teach us about the necessity of desire.

In the production, the representation of Comus and his crew illustrated *A Mask*'s potential to stage alternative desires and sexualities. Comus's world was constructed as a rave—that is,

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an infamous all-night, urban dance party. Often kept secret and attended by invitation only, raves produce a dark, throbbing sensuality based on pounding techno music, closely packed and intertwined bodies, and shadowy rooms lit by colored spotlights and glow-in-the-dark sticks twirled by the dancers. These gatherings are also notorious for the mood-enhancing drugs bought and sold there. Ecstasy bonds the participants in a euphoric suspension of reality that, while allegedly pleasurable, is potentially dangerous to both body and mind. Invoking the rave setting for this production convincingly expressed the transgression of Comus's invitation to the Lady to taste of his poisoned cup amidst the dark music and pulsing dance of his followers.

The program cast Comus as a "a lounge lizard from the degenerate club scene." He did not appear to be a stereotypical lizard, however: wearing a tight, black vinyl suit, sporting elf locks on his head, and swirling his dark, scarlet-lined trench coat, Comus strutted and slithered around the stage with his knobby, three-foot-long wand. His costume evoked the gothic style of dress often seen at raves, a style supported by the figuration of his wand as a giant green glow-stick. His mixed-gender Crewe of followers dressed even more sinisterly, in silver, scarlet, and black vinyl miniskirts and spandex shorts, revealing sequined halter and tank tops, and, for many, leather masks of the style worn by executioners or sadistic dominatrixes. They waved their arms, rolled upon the floor, and crawled against the walls and each other, setting a dark, sexual tone whenever they were onstage.

Alternately, the actor playing the Attendant Spirit wore a tight, black T-shirt and orange flightsuit and arrived on the scene via rainbow-striped parachute. Given the flamboyance of the suit and chute as well as the tightness of the black shirt, one could not help wondering whether this clothing was meant not only to suggest his clean-cut mentorship of the two younger men but also to lend a possibly homoerotic and campy dimension to the character. The Bridgewater brothers, on the other hand, donned conservative khaki slacks and button-down shirts with tied sweaters across their shoulders. The Lady wore sensible shoes and a floral, strapless, knee-length dress; this garb clearly registered her purity and chastity. However, she also wore a scarlet shawl over her shoulders, knotted at the breast. While modestly covering her bare skin, the scarlet aligned her with the dark, sensual, and sexually charged Crewe and also suggested latent sexual desires more visibly associated with Comus himself. The contrast between the "vicious" and "virtuous" characters was provocative
in its invocation of aberrant and normative social groups and sexualities. The costuming placed the Lady at the juncture of these two groups, figuring her as a battleground between desire and its containment.

The music, too, worked to establish this dichotomy. The \textit{Mask}'s theme song played in bits throughout the production; however, it had several variations to clue the audience into the characterizations. When Comus and the Crewe were onstage, the beat was fast and pulsing like the techno music often played on the urban club scene. In fact, immediately before the Lady encountered Comus in the woods, the Crewe held their own devilish dance, stomping, crawling, and running to ominous, synthesized organ song, wolf howls, and a driving bass line. Meanwhile, Comus pointed his long wand at each of them in turn, directing their movements and demonstrating his power. When the brothers and Lady were onstage, the beat diminished and the banjos and fiddles of the Carolina Low Country held sway. This musical association played up the notion of Comus as an experienced drug dealer and orgiastic rave master and the Lady and her brothers as rather bland, conservative, and naive young adults.

As the masque progressed, however, this opposition was blurred. In the seduction scene in Comus's lair, the Lady sat on a throne lit up in blue amidst a darkened stage. A hoop strung with ribbons lowered over the Lady and the throne, illuminating her captivity. Ribbons seem whimsical and flimsy, not serious tools of imprisonment. Or are they? The ribbons playfully suggested an erotic game or sadomasochistic bondage between Comus and the Lady, symbolic fetters more than unbreakable ones. In such a relationship, it would remain up to the Lady, as the submissive, to give her signal for the "game" to stop. And yet in this \textit{Mask}, the Lady seemed neither to recognize the game nor to decide to make it stop. Did her chastity really protect her? Did she really want to preserve it? Or was there something truly attractive about Comus's offer?

Her appearance during this scene also raised the question of her potential complicity in the rave culture: she no longer wore the shawl, and her chest heaved sensuously as she struggled in the throne. Two of the Crewe suggestively stroked her face and throat before slinking off. Comus circled the throne as his followers writhed on the floor and walls. He constantly clutched his large wand, while passing the poisoned cup amid the revelers, who, incidentally, formed same- and opposite-sex combinations. Desire, like a sensual poison, seemed to flow among the partici-
pants, beckoning the Lady to join them. A slower techno "trance" beat played in the dark background as the Lady and the belly god traded words.

At the climax, when Comus invited her to "Be wise, and taste" of the poisoned cup, the stage lights went up, and the brothers rushed in for the rescue. As Comus stood, looking frankly surprised yet not afraid, the brothers drew pocketknives against the three-foot wand. This spurred some laughter in the audience. If this was a size competition, Comus was unquestionably the victor! And perhaps that was the whole point. As the brothers circled and one took the poisoned vial, Comus raised his arms and brandished his wand, continuing the male competitive posturing. Soon after, the Crewe and their leader ran offstage, and the room darkened again except for a spotlight on the throne. The infuriated Attendant Spirit ranted at them for their incompetence, pointing out that the Lady was still stuck where she sat. The helpless trio needed to call upon Sabrina, the river nymph.

Once Sabrina had freed the Lady with her magical song, the Spirit and the brothers took their charge home to Ludlow. The castle occupants welcomed them home with whoops of praise, hugs, and music. Attendants performed a celebratory dance of paired partners, which turned into a ring dance around the Lady and her brothers who held hands in the center. The Spirit, seeing them safely ensconced, took his leave. Then the group of dancers came into the center, hands upraised in a cheer. The lights faded to a red glow, the song developed more sinister tones, and the pattern of the dance became more sinuous and bestial. As the sibling trio kept dancing, unaware, the now-circling castle attendants stripped off their golf shirts and jersey-knit dresses to reveal the dark garb of Comus's Crewe. They cavorted, crawled, stamped, and waved their arms and legs, closing in around the trio. The music and dance took on the resonances of a tribal sacrifice. Terrified, the brothers tried to shield their sister, covered by a red spotlight. When the music began to throb, Comus walked in to the side of the stage with three Crewe members, who were on their knees tethered with collars and leashes. Waving his wand, he held the beasts as they pawed and reached for the brothers and Lady at the center of the circle.

Desire had come to claim its due of the siblings. Even the castle held no safety. As the music reached a final crescendo, the lights cut except for a white spotlight on the Lady, upheld in her brothers' arms. The image may have implied that the Lady "just said No" to Comus and that this act marked the final victory
of virtue. But after seeing the easy transformation from order to disorder, from faithful attendants to lapping, hungry slaves, from safety to danger, one wondered what Comus and his Crewe were doing in the dark. His very existence and return to recapture the brothers and Lady on their own turf eroded any previous sense of celebration or success. This Mask went further than Milton’s, speaking the unspeakable. In this battle, Comus could be the victor; desire had “outwitted, outplayed, and outlasted” the challenge of containment.²

DEVIANT DESIRE, DEVIANT HISTORY

While rave culture provided a provocative setting for the USC production of A Mask, it also raised the curtain on the problem of history and the ahistorical. The show invited early-twenty-first-century audiences to consider whether a queer approach to the drama is more than an interesting theatrical interpretation. Does it in some sense ring true historically? Does it productively change our way of reading the masque? My answer to both of these questions is yes. In Closet Devotions, Richard Rambuss explains how asking such questions of early modern texts can yield fascinating results. “At once a historicist and an unrepentant presentist,” he says of himself, “I look . . . to theorize devotional desire and to map the expressive forms it has both taken and may take in relation to bodies, affects, and erotics, the homoerotic no less than the heteroerotic.” While raves may not have existed in the seventeenth century, another popular form of group dance and spectacle did: the masque. Reading the patterns of poisonous, deviant desire in Milton’s Mask allows us, as audience members and critics, to think more openly about the range of representative possibilities for early modern eroticism. This drama does not simply describe the dichotomy between chastity and licentiousness; it embodies the numerous ways desire can affect individuals and the shaping of sociopolitical discourse.

In fact, an early modern context of “queer” eroticism exists for the masque. Henry Peacham’s emblem “Crimina gravissima” in his 1612 book of heraldic devices, Minerva Britannia, displays the powerful iconographic ties between Circe’s tools of the wand and poisoned cup and the notion of aberrant sexual desire.⁴ I want to suggest that although this emblem does not explicitly mention Comus by name, there are significant thematic parallels between the emblem and the masque that reinforce the cultural import of a queer reading of desire in the drama. A Mask con-
structs a power struggle between the Bridgewater boys and the lascivious belly god, and that competition is played out through erotic expressions, both verbal and physical, among Comus, the boys, and the Lady. Thus, examining the structure and stakes of desire seems to me the most persuasive way of understanding not only the implications of the masque’s ending but also the sensual nature of its language and plot.

The emblem begins by depicting and describing its central figure Ganimede and his “criminality”:

VPON a Cock, heere Ganimede doth sit,  
Who erst rode mounted on IOVES Eagles back,  
One hand holds Circes wand, and joind with it,  
A cup top-fil’d with poison, deadly black:  
The other Meddals, of base metals wrought,  
With sundry moneyes, counterfeit and nought.⁵

Ganimede is the classical sodomite who has fallen from Jove’s affections (indicated by the Eagle) and rides upon a Cock, which we are told connotes “vile incest” (line 10). Circe’s wand and poisoned cup, which Comus inherits and uses in A Mask, here represent “Witchcraft, and murder” (line 11). The base medals and money are “false coine” (line 12). The coins of deception and greed are juxtaposed with the gendered devices of sorcery (poisoned cup) and murder (the wand/sword/phallus). These items are all united by the figure of Ganimede, as he clutches them in each of his two hands. The head of the Cock on which he rides astride thrusts up between his legs, further, and quite graphically, emphasizing the sexual nature of the boy’s transgression. Interestingly, Ganimede, known as Jove’s youthful cupbearer and lover, now carries Circe’s poisoned chalice. Sanctioned homoerotic desire itself has been perverted, and her cup figures the poisoning of that relationship and Ganimede’s effeminacy. In addition, the wealth that may have once bespoken the bounty of favoritism now connotes only deception and gloss without substance.⁶

For Peacham, the stakes of Ganimede’s, or “the foule Sodomitan[’s],” grave crime are simple: he should be punished severely by law in accordance with proper justice (line 9). The Latin marginalia on the emblem express these significant concerns over sodomy and its potential effects on the execution of justice:

Ista a te puniantur (ō Rex) ne tu pro illis puniaris. Ciprian.  
[Let those be punished by you (Oh King), so that you may
not be punished in place of them. Cyprian.]
O fuge te tenerae puerorum credere turbae, Nam causam
iniusti semper amoris habent. Tibullus.
[Oh flee from believing the throng of young boys, for they
always have a reason for unjust love. Tibullus.]7

The King is called upon to punish sodomitical offenders lest
he be punished, and he is encouraged to discount “the throng
of young boys”—his favorites or suppliants—because they may
deceive him with flattery, using “unjust love” for personal gain.
The emblem establishes sodomitical desire as disorderly, deceit-
ful, dangerous to reputation, and essentially seditious. It is more
than a personal threat; it is a threat to social order.

Applied to Milton’s Mask, this model explains why a reading
of desire has such important political implications. The associa-
tion of Circe’s tools with both genders argues for a more open,
fluid, and poisonous definition of desire as universally corruptive,
manipulative, and even deadly. Desire is constructed as both
economic and sexual; the emblem makes clear the connection
between false monetary currency, enchantment, and sodomy.8
Peacham’s “Crimina gravissima” provides another important way
of understanding A Mask in a queer context. Comus, as the god of
the lower strata, the belly, is base and sensual, like the medals,
like poisoning sorcerers, like murderers, and like sodomites. How
can we not focus on his desire for the boys and the social effects
of their homosocial competition for the Lady?9

A Mask, first presented in 1634 and later printed in 1637,
1645, and 1673, was an occasional entertainment crafted for the
Earl of Bridgewater’s appointment as Lord President of Wales and
the Marches. Three of the earl’s children—his daughter, Lady Alice
(then about fifteen years old), and his two sons, Lord John Brackly
and Master Thomas Egerton—took part in the performance as
the Lady and her two brothers. Contemporaries and critics alike
therefore have seen Milton’s production as a celebratory piece,
one that venerates the virtuous family and casts Lady Alice in
a favorable light for marriage. More recently, however, scholars
have asked whether the masque might be read as a radical and
politically pointed commentary on the issues of chastity and
transgressive desire.

Given its historical context, we might expect A Mask to avoid or
subdue explicit treatment of sexuality. However, sexual desire, as
embodied in the figure of Comus, takes center stage and remains
largely uncontained at the end. While the children are held up as
models of virtue tested by their ordeal in the woods, Comus still possesses his wand and is free to tempt again. We also should recognize that a number of erotic references are made not only to the Lady and Comus but also to Comus and the brothers. Milton's *Mask* presents an inherently queer vision of desire that, while acknowledging the social forces that attempt to order and constrain its influence, ultimately challenges and defeats them.¹⁰

Ross Leasure's provocative essay "Milton's Queer Choice: Comus at Castlehaven" articulates several of these homoerotic moments. He frames them in terms of classical sources on which Milton may have drawn for his crafting of Comus's character. In particular, he discusses the ways the portrayal of an androgynous, sexually transgressive Comus figure suggests more conclusively *A Mask*'s ties to Mervin Touchet and the 1631 Castlehaven case. Using this contemporary legal case as a cultural context, Leasure concludes that the sexual excess and aberrant desires personified by Comus make it "possible to read the deity as a sexual threat not only to the Lady, but also to the two boys who attempt her rescue, her brothers."¹¹ While I agree with Leasure's assertions, I focus rather on the uncontrollable proliferation of desire as the "queering" force at work. I also want to suggest that this consideration not only lends credence to historicizing *A Mask* in light of Castlehaven but also changes our standard victorious-virtue interpretation of the ending.

Several critical studies have examined Milton's masque in its cultural moment, importantly grounding any analysis of deviant sexuality and transgressive desire in history. As Barbara Breasted shows in her influential article on the Castlehaven scandal, *A Mask* appears to reinstate and validate the honor of the Bridgewaters and specifically, their female relatives.¹² In brief, the earl's wife's sister, Anne, married Mervyn Touchet, the second earl of Castlehaven. It was not long before she realized her misfortune, however, for her new husband had his servants rape and engage her in orgies against her will, married her daughter to her stepson without their consent, sodomized his male servants, and generally terrorized the household. Upon his son's coming of age, Castlehaven was brought to court for these assaults, tried, convicted, and sentenced to death by hanging, which Charles I later commuted to beheading—the gentleman's execution. Breasted and others have generally accepted that the masque must have at least been understood by its audience in the shadow of these concerns about rampant sexuality and female virtue, if not indeed crafted in response to the case.¹³
Leah Marcus's work also has valuably contributed to our understanding of the masque in terms of early modern social and political issues. She reads *A Mask*’s presentation of sexual assault as a parallel to the 1631 Margery Evans rape case and in light of the Earl of Bridgewater and Council of Wales' juridical dealings during this time. Evans, a fourteen-year-old serving maid, was allegedly raped, robbed, and abandoned by a local gentleman. With the help of her literate aunt, she appealed for justice to Charles I, who delegated the case to the Earl of Bridgewater for consideration. Unfortunately, Bridgewater’s attempts to aid her were unsuccessful, and the Council of Wales largely dismissed the case, letting the gentleman go free.

Marcus finds striking similarities between *A Mask* and the Evans case, arguing that the masque’s presentation to the dignitaries of Wales acted as a reprimand to reconsider the judgments of assault trials. Noting Stanley Fish’s description of the drama’s structure of “doubles and double perceptions,” she states that “[i]t forces us, in other words, to become good judges of equivocal evidence like that produced in a trial of law... In the masque, the Lady and her brothers are ‘on trial’ in the sense that their judgment, virtue, and powers of discrimination are tested by a series of equivocal events. They are also ‘tried’ in that they are confronted with the limitations of their own perceptions and powers.”14 The *Mask* addresses questions about the source, premises, and nature of judgment, especially regarding sexual misconduct. The audience witnesses the verdict and is invited to question its contours and limits through the somewhat open-ended conclusion.

What these legal cases and contextualized criticisms foreground is the material significance of chaste female bodies and the dangers of excessive desire—both heteroerotic and homoerotic. The politics that *A Mask* embodies encompasses the national, the local, the public, and the domestic and is mapped across the characters’ bodies through poisonous sexuality. Much of the criticism on the play’s representation of desire and sexuality has centered on the relationship of Comus and the Lady, de-emphasizing the role of the Lady’s two brothers.15 Rosemary Karmelich Mundhenk, for example, argues that “[t]o the extent that *Comus* is a dramatic work, dealing with the triumph of virtue over evil, the two Brothers are not essential to the plot. In the action itself they do not have a necessary role.”16 While it is true that the brothers’ efforts to save their sister are only marginally successful, I contend that their roles are absolutely crucial to the masque’s moral and political arguments. It is precisely the brothers’ failure to save her on their own that marks their importance to the drama.
Marcus suggests that "[i]n freeing their sister from the threat posed by Comus, the brothers are acting for their father—performing the type of duty delegated to the Council in the Marches of Wales." 17 While Marcus is more concerned with the brothers' role in the juridical aspects of Milton's work, she rightly points out their position as guardians. Since women were often under the authority of a male relative (be it a father, a brother, a husband, or an extended family member), the brothers stand in as the representative "lords" for their sister while in the woods. They are charged with the task of protecting her virtue and name, however inexperienced or incapable they may be.

The Lady's body thus becomes a crucial signifier in systems of exchange between men. As Julie H. Kim comments, "The brothers guarding the Lady's beauty and virginity as treasure, Comus advocating the circulation of her sexuality, and the Lady herself strenuously redefining and adjusting Comus's faulty economic discourses all deliberate on this issue. Ultimately, despite the Lady's vigorous protests—usually in debates with Comus—she cannot eradicate the notion that female sexuality is a commodity to be hoarded, borrowed, exchanged, stolen, or spent by men." 18 The Lady is both resistant in her attempts to establish independence and voice her ideas, and traditional in her silence in the face of authority and acquiescence to male control. According to Kim, Milton makes a move to acknowledge women's independent thinking but contains that thinking within the acceptable discourse of female chastity, finally reinscribing the Lady within the patriarchal system. 19

While Kim's work is persuasive in its elucidation of A Mask's use of the female body, I again want to emphasize the centrality of the male figures in the relationship as well as the role that desire plays in linking them. Kim's invocation of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's erotic triangle seems to privilege the issue of sexuality only in terms of its economic connections. While we should not neglect this consideration, I assert that in the masque Milton privileges the representation of erotic desire—the "structure . . . the affective or social force, the glue . . . that shapes an important relationship." 20 This "relationship" is actually several: between Comus and the Lady, between Comus and the brothers, and between the Lady and her brothers. In this erotic triangle, the brothers serve as a unit representing the Bridgewater wish to control access to the Lady's chastity. The central struggle is between Comus and this Bridgewater male contingent with their desires translating through the objectified, yet resistant, body of the Lady. Critics' dis-
cussion of the desire/chastity tension exclusively between Comus and the Lady seems limited in its appreciation of Milton's nexus of competing forces in A Mask. For as Sedgwick notes, the erotic triangle serves as a "sensitive register precisely for delineating relationships of power and meaning, and for making graphically intelligible the play of desire and identification by which individuals negotiate with their societies for empowerment."21

While I do not believe that A Mask endorses unchecked eroticism, I do think that it allows for a more liberal reading of desire's appeal and power than its historical context might dictate. Especially in light of the Evans and Castlehaven cases, it is unlikely that the drama would validate its antagonist's promotion of erotic disorder. Yet, Comus, like Satan in Paradise Lost (1674), stands as a persuasive rhetorician of a potentially attractive cause.22 His freedom at the end of the masque suggests that rather than eradicating eroticism, the important issue for the audience is recognizing and establishing a balance between chastity and desire, thereby negotiating emotional and social dangers through individual judgment and choice.

CHASTE BODIES, POISONOUS DESIRES

A Mask stands as a rich literary artifact, a representation of the multiple ways desire may have been culturally imagined. That sexual desire was thought dangerous in many respects is nothing new; how individuals in a society sought to represent it, construct it, manage it, and contain it, however, remain intriguing issues. But where, in fact, do desires reside? Are they interior, personal drives or exterior in nature? Does desire have borders? Milton’s masque complicates these notions as it moves from bodily and geographical distinctions to those of the mind and soul.

To begin, A Mask blatantly associates particular locations with vice and virtue: the “wilde Wood” and Comus’s palace are dangerous, while Heaven and Ludlow Castle are safe (first stage direction). Or are they? Comus’s Palace and Ludlow are both courts of a sort. And according to the Lady, “honest offer’d courtesie” is more often

found in lowly sheds
With smoaky rafters, then in tapstry Halls
And Courts of Princes, where it first was nam’d,
And yet is most pretended.23
While the masque makes a clear distinction between the unholy carnality of Comus's palace and the safe, ordered space offered by Ludlow, the definition of courts as false and woods as true is always suspect for the audience. In fact, both courtly civilization and pastoral/woodland nature are constructed as dangerous, full of crafty deceit and sensuality.

I will not be explicating fully the extent to which the pastoral becomes a generically ideal space for the playing out of alternative desires; however, I would like to acknowledge its complicated presence in A Mask. As Gregory W. Bredbeck points out, "Milton locates it [temptation] within a tradition of efforts to impose a sexually normative, specified framework on the sexually disruptive genre of the Renaissance pastoral."24 Since Comus and the Attendant Spirit take the shape of shepherds in their interactions with the children and because nature seems entirely sensual in its portrayal, we cannot ignore the ripeness of this environment for the play of desires that the masque describes. Milton may be trying to contain this play by setting it within an imaginative pastoral space, yet "[t]he pastoral makes the evil of Comus more visible, and perhaps more easily avoided, but hardly eradicates it."25 Despite critical efforts to prove A Mask a heteronormative reinstatement of chaste female virtue and patriarchal authority, the drama itself allows for a much more fluid consideration of desire and sexuality.

A Mask begins in the woods that, however natural, contain lurking threats—the largest of which is Comus himself. As the belly god born of Circe and Bacchus, he bears both his mother’s poisoned cup and the ultimate totem of masculine potency, a wand. As Leasure and others have shown, Comus is immediately imbued with the symbols of erotic desire and sexuality, and he is, by birth, heir to a legacy of sorcery and orgiastic worship. Beneath the trees, Comus and his crew of beast-creatures dance, drink, and make merry, waiting for unsuspecting strangers to fall prey to their clutches.

Perhaps it is no surprise then that when the Lady enters the forest, Comus immediately detects her presence, defined emphatically by her chastity: "Break off, break off, I feel the different pace, / Of som chast footing neer about this ground" (lines 145–6). Once his virgin radar is triggered, he is wily enough to hide his fellows and use his magic to transform his potentially fearsome appearance into the innocuous form of a shepherd. Interestingly, the sorcerer appropriates the word "verte" in his description of his plan to accost her:
I under fair pretence of friendly ends,
And well plac't words of glozing courtesie
Baited with reasons not unpleasable
Wind me into the easie-hearted man,
And hugg him into snares. When once her eye
Hath met the vertue of this Magick dust,
I shall appear som harmles Villager.

(lines 160–6)

Here Comus constructs "vertue" as a magical power used for deceptive, seductive purposes, turning the moral definition on its head. Virtue is now part of the terminology of power and sexuality, that is, the woman's virginity and his desire to corrupt it. He makes clear from the start that his intentions for the Lady are sexually charged. He supposes she is "easie-hearted" like the rest of humanity and proposes to "wind" himself into her and caress her into his trap. Comus's spell threatens to bind the Lady and allow him to seduce her. Curiously, though, the pronouns here are masculine, perhaps indicating that his wish to entrap her also extends to others, female or male. While directed at the Lady at this particular moment, Comus's desire is universalized and is not organized as gendered object-choice. 

The Lady remains wary of the dangers of the wood, an admitted noisy and strange place where she has become lost from her brothers. This is where

A thousand fantasies
Begin to throng into [her] memory
Of calling shapes, and beckning shadows dire,
And airy tongues, that syllable mens names.

(lines 205–8)

The dark spirits call her and threaten to lead her away, but she claims that "[t]he vertuous mind" and Conscience will prevent her from befalling danger (line 211). But is the danger here really virtue itself instead of its absence? If she were truly in trouble, she argues, God would send a guard "To keep [her] life and honour unassail'd" (line 220). The guide who comes to her most immediately, however, is Comus. The heavenly Attendant Spirit, one of her supposed guardians, is off with her brothers trying to figure out her whereabouts. This situation poses the intriguing possibility that Comus actually teaches her a lesson; he "rescues" her from becoming too virtuous and idealistic. In other words, desire
makes us human, and by denying it, we are less so. While Comus takes sensual and sexual desire to an extreme, and there is little doubt he would seduce her if he could, the test of her virtue may be less that she deny all feelings and maintain unblemished notions of virginity and more that she learn to temper the passions she feels and those others feel toward her.

As Comus approaches the Lady, he hears her singing and finds himself enthralled:

Can any mortal mixture of Earths mould
Breath such Divine enchanting ravishment?
Sure something holy lodges in that brest,
And with these raptures moves the vocal air
To testifie his hidd'n residence.

(lines 244–8)

Comus again employs erotic language to describe the Lady; only this time it is he who is ravished. He plays on the double meanings of "ravishment" and "raptures" as divine possession and sexual conquest. Her song passionately moves him, and he locates that heavenly purity in her breast. While the choice of "brest" may simply mean her chest or heart, the image suggestively constructs the Lady as a sexualized being and the object of Comus's desire. Her virtue, in effect, "rapes" him, but it is a pleasurable rather than painful experience. As Debora K. Shuger cogently notes, "in both Renaissance and modern usage, when a woman says she has been ravished, she means that she has been sexually assaulted; if a man makes the same claim, he means that he has been sexually aroused." Milton's seemingly contradictory language of seduction and sexual desire thus plays two ways: in terms of female conquest and male potency. In either case, men stand in a privileged position with the woman's body used as a channel for masculine desires. Comus's ravishment proves that he is a creature of passion.

Perhaps curiously, Comus compares the Lady's holy song to that of his mother and the three Sirens. Amidst flower-gathering nymphs, Circe and her companions would sing, "Culling their Potent hearbs, and balefull drugs" (line 255). The image at first seems comforting and healing, one of parallel beneficence; however, Circe's singing "would take the prison'd soul, / And lap it in Elysium" (lines 256–7). Luued into a deathlike trance, her listeners were transformed into beasts. Her herbs were commingled into poisonous potions, mixed in a cup, and offered to her victims in
order to effect the change. Comus views the Lady as performing a similar seductive poisoning of his sensibilities. Virtue becomes a "pleasing poison" that enflames his desires (line 526).

After hearing her song, he states that he'll "speak to her / And she shall be [his] Queen" (lines 264–5). Even while he acknowledges that she is touched by the heavens, a "forren wonder" not produced by the natural forces of the forest, he claims dominion over her (line 265). As Roy Flannagan points out in his edition of A Mask, the audience most likely would have been horrified by Comus's proposal that the Lady be his bride; the magician had no "natural" or social right to unite with a devout noblewoman. Comus's invocation of "Queen" might also resonate as "quean" or "whore," according to the popular contemporary definition. This language reinforces the Lady's acknowledged material value in the sexual economy between her brothers and the sorcerer. Comus doesn't merely want to capture the Lady. He wants to possess her, sexually and otherwise. By naming her a whore, he rhetorically lowers her in social rank. He not only claims access to her body and therefore usurps the brothers' legal authority over their sister but also destabilizes the public order. Comus believes that his words have tangible power in the world. But do they have power over the Lady and her brothers? Is his desire for conquest a match for the "compleat steel" of her chastity (line 421)? Can the trio withstand his desires and their own? And more importantly, should they?

Comus takes on the guise of an innocent, well-meaning shepherd to try to lure the Lady to his lair. He proceeds in his seduction by asking a series of questions to ascertain the reason she is lost in the forest, but they pointedly undercut the authority of her brothers into whose care she has been entrusted. Noting her dismay at being lost in "Dim darknes, and this leavy Labyrinth" (line 278), he asks the reason her brothers left her side: "By falshood, or discourtesie, or why?" (line 281). He continues his manipulations by suggesting they were remiss in leaving her unguarded and quickly covering his accusations with the proposition that perhaps they were simply delayed by the darkness of night. Comus's rhetoric clearly positions him in competition with the brothers, but he carefully avoids blaming them in order to disguise his motives. The Lady seems fairly at ease despite his insinuations of failed masculine protection on behalf of her brothers.

His argument then takes a turn toward praising the two young men in order to gain her confidence that they might be near and that he can "protect" her in the meantime. He inquires, "Were they
of manly prime, or youthful bloom?" (line 289). Once he gains this information from her, he proceeds to reassure her:

I saw them under a green mantling vine
That crawls along the side of yon small hill,
Plucking ripe clusters from the tender shoots.

(lines 294–6)

The image Comus paints of the two brothers appears to be one of natural, youthful innocence. However, Comus, as the son of Bacchus, is associated with the vine, and this scene finds the boys engaged in a potentially sexually assertive act: *plucking* clusters from *tender* shoots. The vine winds above them, crawling sinuously as they harvest its bounty. This scene representatively delights in the boys' growing manhood and Comus's patronage of their development as sensual, sexual beings. The sorcerer's desire crosses over from the Lady to them as his continued description indicates:

Their port was more then human, as they stood;
I took it for a faëry vision
Of som gay creatures of the element
That in the coulours of the Rainbow live . . .
I was aw-strook,
And as I past, I worship; if those you seek
It were a journey like the path to Heav'n,
To help you find them.

(lines 297–304)

Comus does not simply admire their looks; he sees them—as he did the Lady—as fantastic images that he worships. As he comments, helping her find them would be a divine pleasure. Comus is not of Heaven, so his repeated appropriation of the religious discourse is particularly transgressive, perhaps challenging the virtuous order or establishing his own alternate religious hierarchy—the religion of desire. Comus worships at this altar and either supposes that the Lady is likely to be, by human nature, open to hearing his sermon, or he may believe that he can convert her. His drive for the brothers is channeled through his pursuit of the Lady. The erotic triangle is realized in this scene, where economic, spiritual, and sexual desires play fluidly through heteroerotic and homoerotic bonds between the characters. Comus's
desire knows no bounds; in fact, he embodies desire. And as the brothers realize, that is the reason he is so dangerous.

While Comus is talking with the Lady, the young men worry over her fate in a separate part of the woods (lines 350–5). The boys imagine the “haples virgin our lost sister” alone and cold in the wilderness (line 350). The younger brother wonders,

What if in wild amazement, and affright,
Or while we speak within the direfull grasp
Of Savage hunger, or of Savage heat?

(lines 356–8)

In fact, the Lady is in the presence of a “Savage heat” of sorts: Comus’s lusty clutches. The older brother reassures him that their sister has a “hidden strength,” chastity, which “clad[s] [her] in compleat steel” (lines 418, 420). He compares the Lady with Diana and Minerva, whose virtues protected and armed them against adversity. He also notes that nothing has power over true virginity and that she is protected by angels as well. The only danger is her own desire:

but when lust
By unchaste looks, loose gestures, and foul talk,
But most by leud and lavish act of sin,
Lets in defilement to the inward parts,
The soul grows clotted by contagion,
Imbodies, and imbrutes, till she quite loose
The divine property of her first being.

(lines 463–9)

“[C]arnal sensuality” will only lead “[t]o a degenerate and degraded state” (lines 474–5). Lust is a threat not only to her own moral integrity but also, by extension, their family’s and perhaps even England’s. It is this poisonous pleasure with which Comus plans on tempting the Lady. His chalice of spelled wine weakens the will of its drinkers, and the ingestion of its contents poisons purity and godliness. The brothers’ words foreshadow the masque’s climax and also admit the physical danger of ravishment by an outside masculine force defiling their sister’s “inward parts.”

The Attendant Spirit confirms their worries, telling them that Comus is
Deep skill'd in all his mothers witcheries,
And here to every thirsty wanderer,
By sly enticement gives his baneful cup,
With many murmurs mixt, whose pleasing poison
The visage quite transforms of him that drinks,
And the inglorious likenes of a beast
Fixes instead, unmoulding reasons mintage
Character'd in the face.

(lines 523–30)

The spirit also warns of the sorcerer's "bare wand" that "can unthred thy joynts, / And crumble all thy sinews" (lines 614–5). While scholars have debated the significance of Comus's accoutrements, most agree upon the phallic-like quality of the wand and the feminine association of the cup. In this way, the magical tools mark the belly god's potential androgyny, especially with respect to his sensual and sexual nature. As the Attendant Spirit comments, Comus approaches every thirsty wanderer, male or female. Recalling the passages in which he fantasizes about "wind[ing]" into his victims and describes his erotic impulses toward both the Lady and her brothers, we may better understand his power. His potency and gender-bending nature are dangerous because they transform individuals into beasts, eroding the rational soul and crossing the boundaries of sanctioned sexual behavior. The masque suggests that this is potentially both a figurative transformation—a product of fantasy, hence safe to the audience—and a literal one—an awakening of powerful lust and carnality. It illustrates the horrific results of succumbing to the desires of others and, worse, of one's self.

Perhaps the most famous and controversial scene in A Mask is that of the temptation, where Comus captures the Lady and tries to make her drink of his cup. Set in his extravagant palace, which is decked with food delicacies and littered with his bestial followers, the audience finds the Lady bound to an "inchantment Chair" from which she cannot move (stage direction, p. 153). Comus threatens to wave his wand and freeze her movements yet more, but she is not swayed to drink:

Fool do not boast,
Thou canst not touch the freedom of my minde
With all thy charms, although this corporal rinde
Thou haste immanacl'd, while Heav'n sees good.

(lines 662–5)
The Lady believes that through owning her thoughts she will preserve the chaste integrity of her body. Comus counters her with the argument that his potion will "restore all soon," bringing her to a fuller pleasure in life (line 690). The sexual undertones of their pointed repartee cannot be denied, as they competitively debate the merits and disadvantages of appetite and abstinence, earthly and spiritual beauty, and pleasure and temperance.

The masque reaches its climax as Comus proclaims,

Com, no more,
This is meer moral babble, and direct
Against the canon laws of our foundation.
........................................
Be wise, and taste.

(lines 806–13)

Comus orders her to "b[e] wise, and taste." He advocates an alternative set of morals and virtues as well as a separate system of justice. Invoking a different set of laws—carnal laws—than those governing the world in which the Lady invests, Comus bids her to drink. At that moment, the brothers rush in, knock the cup from his hand, and chase the sorcerer and his bestial band from the hall. The Attendant Spirit enters right after the brothers only to chide them for their execution of the rescue:

What, have you let the false enchanter scape?
O ye mistook, ye should have snatcht his wand
And bound him fast; without his rod revers't,
And backward mutters of dissevering power,
We cannot free the Lady that sits here
In stony fetters fixt, and motionless.

(lines 814–9)

The brothers fail to overcome the magical powers of the sorcerer; as a result, Comus and his paralyzing wand/phallus still roam the countryside, ready to ensnare another victim. The masque may concentrate on the Lady's immobility, but the fact that Comus's sexual potency and predatory desire have not been contained challenges the authority of the rescuers. It suggests that Comus is in some sense more powerful than they, or at least resistant to their control. Notably, after Comus's banishment the Lady is silent until she is completely freed by Sabrina, the river nymph called to her rescue.
Jean E. Graham explains that the Lady’s silences, chosen and commanded, and Comus’s “noise” structure the argument over the importance of chastity at the end of the Mask: “[T]he masque concludes with the justified silence of the righteous and powerful Egerton family [and Jove, whom they serve], the virtuous silence of the chaste Lady, and the effeminate silence of the defeated Comus.”32 Is Comus really effeminized by this final act though? Assuredly, he has been chased off, and his poisoned cup has been destroyed. However, his masculine wand remains intact, and there is no indication in the masque that he is completely ruined. Further, the earthly masculine powers symbolized by the brothers and the heavenly Attendant Spirit are nearly helpless to save the Lady. They must call upon a pagan nymph-goddess sympathetic to virgins to come to her aid. Graham’s conclusion, similar to that of other critics, seems perhaps too quick in its dismissal of these circumstances.

As the myth goes, Sabrina, who eventually frees the Lady from the chair, was turned into a river goddess of the Severn. Fleeing an abusive stepmother who wanted her dead, she was accepted by Nereus to guard the waters. The Attendant Spirit, remembering that “maid’nhood she loves, and will be swift / To aid a Virgin,” sings to Sabrina to awaken her and beg her assistance (lines 855–6). Here, divine magic counters the carnal magic of Comus. When the nymph answers the Spirit’s call, she performs a ritual on the Lady’s body to free her:

Shepherd ’tis my office best
To help insnaired chastity;
Brightest Lady look on me,
Thus I sprinkle on thy brest
Drops that from my fountain pure,
I have kept of pretious cure,
Thrice upon thy fingers tip,
Thrice upon thy rubied lip,
Next this marble venom’d seat
Smear’d with gums of gluteneous heat
I touch with chaste palms moist and cold,
Now the spell hath lost his hold.

(lines 908–19)

Sabrina’s cold shower baptism of the Lady allows her to rise from the gooey seat and leave with the Attendant Spirit and her brothers. Interestingly, this ritual cleanses the girl’s hands, lips,
and seat—the surfaces "contaminated" with Comus's influence. The hands and seat are the points of physical contact as well as signs of rule (via the royal touch and the throne), but the mouth may signify the sexualized orifice through which corruptive words have been exchanged as well as the silence that has been imposed or chosen. The Lady is now free to speak and move, symbolically and effectually liberated from Comus's desires and power.

The meaning of the mysterious "gumms of glutinous heat" remains debatable, although the substance has been described as anything from birdlime to semen to actual mouth gums.30 I offer that the "gumms" might be read as the poisonous desire Comus possesses. The Lady requires the touch of "chaste palms moist and cold" to temper the "Savage heat" the brothers feared before. Margaret Hoffman Kale states that during this scene, "Sabrina is able to free the Lady and heal her senses and her nervous system, and the Lady rises from her chair of her own free will, given to her by God through her reasoning powers. In demonstrating the mind as causing the motion of the body through divine grace, rather than the autonomous movement represented by Comus, Milton dramatized the basic relation between soul and body as it was understood by the Renaissance neoplatonists and Christians."34

I remain skeptical about the Lady's rise of her own free will, since it is only after she gets help and is purified that she can even attempt to move. Rather, the scene seems more like a battle of passions wherein touch and language figure the desires moving on and in the Lady's body. While certainly the masque capitalizes on her speeches about virginity and chastity as divine grace and her will being unbendable to Comus's, in the end it is an outside force, Sabrina, who breaks his hold and leads the Lady to freedom. The heavenly Attendant Spirit has no direct power to save her, nor do the brothers. The Lady herself cannot move or speak, although whether this is by choice or compulsion is not entirely clear. Even the Attendant Spirit questions their safety at the end:

Com Lady while Heaven lends us grace,  
Let us fly this cursed place,  
Lest the Sorcerer us intice  
With som other new device.  
Not a waste, or needless sound  
Till we com to holier ground.  

(lines 938–43)
Not even Heaven’s guardian can stand against the carnal demigod, and the Spirit urges them to hurry before Comus and his band return. Only on “holier” ground, such as Ludlow Castle to which they are headed, can they avoid seduction and capture.

Perhaps, ironically, the Spirit revises the temptation narrative and presents the children to their parents as if Comus were no more a danger. He constructs a story in which there was no failure on their part and presents it in a song:

Here behold so goodly grown
Three fair branches of your own,
Heav’n hath timely tri’d their youth,
Their faith, their patience, and their truth.
And sent them here through hard assays
With a crown of deathless Praise,
To triumph in victorious dance
O’re sensual Folly, and Intemperance.

(lines 968–75)

The children would seem to have passed the test of earthly sexual temptation: the Lady refuses to succumb to lust or to accept Comus’s cant, while the brothers aid their sister in adversity. This “triumph” appears complete to the assembled Ludlow audience in the masque, yet we know that the actual courtiers witnessed all the events that came before and, thus, are knowledgeable of the “hard assays” the “goodly” characters faced. But whether the children and virtue really triumphed seems shaky at best.

Many critics have argued that the ending tries to reinstate the safe, chaste, obedient model of female behavior, while preserving the authoritative power of the Bridgewaters. However, Comus is still at large, and desire continues to circulate. His desire paralyzed one victim and evaded three others. It took another supernatural force to undo the damage he had done, and even then, fear of his influence remains in the godliest of representatives. Location is the only factor that has changed between the two scenes, and perhaps that is the key. For within the jurisdiction of the earl’s domain, there is perceived safety. Comus’s reach does not seem to extend there, where bodies are ruled by patriarchal order.

Northrop Frye’s statement that “the basis of the human spirit is the physical body, and the body is the battleground of the spirit” seems particularly relevant here.35 For the battle over virtue that occurs between Comus and the brothers (as symbols of Bridgewater authority) maps onto the Lady’s physical and mental form. The
brothers’ and the Attendant Spirit’s powers are severely curtailed while they are in the woods, in nature. The world’s sensuality and Comus’s sexuality are on some level unconquerable. The solution and “triumph” for the children, it seems, is to know how to avoid the metaphorical “woods” of illicit desire and to choose their companions carefully. And yet, the masque alternately suggests and the Castlehaven scandal proves that no place is safe wherein desire exists. Temptation is always a threat. It is up to individual governance and the laws that preserve justice to keep everything and everyone safe and contained.

Appearances are deceiving, and A Mask and much criticism about it seem to embody the illusion that desire—with all its sensuous richness—is neatly containable and classifiable. As Bredbeck concludes however, “[h]omoeroticism here becomes a means of making the text speak otherwise and of signaling distances separating text, intention, and tradition.” Comus’s androgynous sexuality and multiple objects of attraction argue for a more fluid consideration of desire’s role in Milton’s work. While the Attendant Spirit’s raving attempts to uphold a triumphant, virtuous ending, Comus’s club remains, luring in thirsty travelers with a transgressive beat.

NOTES

I would like to thank Vincent Lankewish for his invaluable comments on and conversations with me about this essay throughout its development.


[2] I borrow this phrase from the popular CBS television show, Survivor.


[5] Peacham, p. 48, lines 1–6. All instances of the long s have been silently emended. Subsequent references to Peacham’s emblem will be to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text by line number.


[7] I would like to thank Annika Farber for her translation of these lines.


9 I do not mean by this statement that the Lady has no agency. But since she at least initially relies on men for protection and rescue, I argue that we also should draw our attention to the other, male-desiring relationships. Doing so illuminates the subversive potential of the masque’s ending and helps explain the Lady’s odd release from the gummy seat and Comus’s escape from justice.

10 I use the term “queer” here to denote a more open and varied definition of desire with attachment to both same- and opposite-sex relationships.


13 For a persuasive account of the Castlehaven scandal and its popular reception, see Cynthia Herrup, A House in Gross Disorder: Sex, Law, and the 2d Earl of Castlehaven (New York and Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999). John Creaser challenges Breasted’s argument in “Milton’s Comus: The Irrelevance of the Castlehaven Scandal,” MiltonQ 21, 4 (December 1987): 24–34. He argues that concerns about chastity were common during the seventeenth century, thus unremarkable as a theme here. I side with Breasted, Leah Marcus, and Leasure in their contention that Milton’s perspective must have been shaded by the scandal, given widespread popular knowledge of this affair and the Bridgewater family’s ties to Castlehaven.


15 Leasure’s article is a notable exception to this. He persuasively suggests that the brothers’ roles should be considered in light of Comus’s androgyny and open sexuality.


19 Kim, p. 3. Peter Stallybrass’s argument about the guarding of female sexuality in patriarchal societies also informs this reading. He suggests that women’s bodies “could become the emblem of the perfect and impermeable container, and hence a map of the integrity of the state” (Stallybrass, “Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed,” in Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe, ed. Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy J. Vickers [Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986], pp. 123–42. 129). In this way, the Lady’s seduction, entrapment, and vocal responses register as very material concerns for seventeenth-century culture, not only as an individual case of transgression, but also as a representation of social, even national, corruption.

21 Sedgwick, p. 27.

22 In thinking about Comus’s appeal and power, we might consider the critical model set by some Romantics, wherein Satan is a heroic figure in *Paradise Lost*. See Joseph Anthony Wittreich Jr., *The Romantics on Milton: Formal Essays and Critical Asides* (Cleveland and London: Press of Case Western Reserve Univ., 1970).


25 Ibid.

26 Leasure reads this passage as an expression of Comus’s “attraction” he feels toward the masculine, marking a tantalizing “what if” he had encountered the brothers first instead of the Lady (p. 76). While this is certainly plausible, I think the use of masculine pronouns here gestures toward his attraction to humanity in general. He moves from the universal to the specific, illustrating his feelings toward all people and the Lady in particular.


29 Flannagan, p. 135n172.


31 Again, we see a parallel to the Serpent’s temptation of Eve in *Paradise Lost*, when it bids her taste of the apple that leads to the Fall.


34 Kale, p. 90.


36 Bredbeck, p. 268.
ently becomes "real," but also asks whether narrative descriptions can create "the illusion of the natural sign." Shakespeare presents ekphrasis as a trope that is both seductively real and a sophisticated confidence trick, a trope that appears to have taken in both Shakespeare's characters and some of his critics.

**Daryl W. Palmer**, Metropolitan Resurrection in Anthony Munday's Lord Mayor's Shows

In early modern London, metropolitan ambition, grounded as it was in merchandise, did not mesh easily with ancient Christian notions of salvation. Lancelot Andrewes announces a Jacobean rapprochement by recasting resurrection in commercial terms. Anthony Munday's Lord Mayor's shows *Chruso-thriambos: The Triumphs of Golde* (1611) and *Chrysanaleia: The Golden Fishing, Or Honour of Fishmongers* (1616) refine this emergent notion. In these pageants, blaring trumpets summon forth long-dead mayors who preside over a series of dazzling substitutions that culminate in a noisy marriage of commerce and Christianity, metropoli and theodicy.

**Marie Rutkoski**, Breaching the Boy in Marlowe's *Edward II*

"Breaching the Boy in Marlowe's *Edward II*" focuses attention on an overlooked figure of the play, Prince Edward. Arguing that the boy is drawn into the homoerotic and sodomitical discourse so prevalent in *Edward II*, and is sexualized without being a sexual object of desire, this paper presents his sexualization as a strategy with a purpose rather than as an end in itself. This strategy destabilizes the idea that Prince Edward, when he gains control as king at the play's close, really offers any solutions to the problems Marlowe poses.

**Catherine Thomas**, Chaste Bodies and Poisonous Desires in Milton's *Mask*

Milton's *Mask* has traditionally been understood as an argument about chastity's protective force against seductive powers. But the masque conceals a more troubling portrayal of desire in seventeenth-century England. Through a reading of the Seventh International Milton Symposium's production of *A Mask* and Henry Peacham's 1612 emblem "Crimina gravissima," this essay demonstrates that considering Comus's sexual alterity and the drama's queer proliferation of desire not only lends credence...
to historicizing the text in light of the Castlehaven scandal but also challenges the standard victorious-virtue interpretation of the ending.

**Brian Walsh**, Performing Historicity in Dekker’s *The Shoemaker’s Holiday*

This essay considers Thomas Dekker’s *The Shoemaker’s Holiday* as a history play rather than as a comedy, and so seeks to situate it among other works from the late-Elizabethan area that focus on the lives and actions of what can be broadly termed the “middling sort.” I argue that the part of the play devoted to the rise of Simon Eyre to the office of Lord Mayor of London seeks to historicize the city and its citizens, a narrative effect that is reinforced through the physical dynamics of performing London history on the edges of London itself.