

William Shullenberger. *Lady in the Labyrinth: Milton's Comus as Initiation*. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008. 361 pp. \$65.00. Review by MITCHELL M. HARRIS, AUGUSTANA COLLEGE (SIOUX FALLS).

When I was an undergraduate student, Milton's *A Maske Presented at Ludlow Castle*, or *Comus*, felt like a bothersome obstacle standing between us students and the poet's great epic. It was something we *had* to read but did not necessarily *want* to read, and this sentiment never really disappeared during my graduate school years. In my mind, Milton was not merely a writer of epic. He himself was epic. To read his earlier works and short poems was, then, to shatter the illusion and mystique of the epic Milton. And this was the last thing my fawning mind wanted to do. Now, having had the opportunity to teach Milton courses of my own, I find myself uniquely attracted to *Comus* in ways I never could have anticipated even a few years ago. No longer does the *Maske* feel like an obstacle to the epic Milton, but rather an intimate invitation to him. In *Comus* one sees the younger poet fleshing out his dialogues, a feature that is prominent and essential to his "great works." One also encounters, to borrow from Julia Walker, Milton's "idea of woman," as well as scenes of temptation and defiant acts of violence and heroism. There is, then, in *Comus* all the features of the "great works," which makes it all the more surprising that it has been over twenty-five years since the last major book-length study on *Comus*, Maryann Cale McGuire's *Milton's Puritan Masque* (1983), was published—that is, at least until William Shullenberger recently entered the stage with his delightful and compelling *Lady in the Labyrinth: Milton's Comus as Initiation*.

In *Lady in the Labyrinth*, Shullenberger begins with a simple, yet often overlooked, insight regarding *Comus*, thus establishing its unique distance from the typical court mask of the Tudor and Stuart reigns. *Comus*, he reminds us, "is not only representational, but performative" (15). In its representational function, it celebrates the Earl of Bridgewater's "ceremonial accession to the seat of a political and judicial authority already invested in him" (15). In its performative function, however, it "makes his daughter something she wasn't before the *Maske's* performance" (15). Thus, *Comus* "ritually accomplishes" the "pas-

sage from girlhood into womanhood” for a specific young woman, Alice Egerton, the Earl’s fifteen-year-old daughter, who played the role of “The Lady” at its Ludlow performance in September of 1634.

While Shullenberger never explicitly seeks to get caught up in the historical, material, and biographical minutiae of Milton, the Egerton family, or their milieu, the lived reality of Alice Egerton is never far from his mind. In fact, her rite of initiation acts as the motivating force behind the entire monograph. As Shullenberger puts it, in “initiating Alice,” Milton’s *Maske* “reconfigures the cultural image and idea of womanhood that she incarnates and reconfigures mythical and psychological templates for this vital cultural formation” (16-17). And it is these very images, ideas, and templates that he wants to follow to their farthest ends. Thus, *The Lady and the Labyrinth* never establishes a performative agenda of its own. It never asserts a unified narrative, because such a narrative could potentially prohibit its author from asking the very questions he wants to ask. He therefore executes an “investigatory criticism,” one that “enters the text with more questions than conclusions and lets the drift of the question determine the movement of a claim” (33). As Shullenberger himself confesses, even as *The Lady in the Labyrinth* “pushes toward thematic coherence”—“something of strange constancy”—it entertains “multiple points of entry” (33). Indeed, this is, I would argue, one of its greatest strengths, the very essence of what makes the book such a compelling read.

Chapter one, “‘Growing a Girl’: The Masque of Passage,” examines what Shullenberger identifies as *Comus*’s two ritual paradigms—“time-honored rites of passage for girls” and “the masques that staged and celebrated monarchic power and aristocratic virtue in Stuart England” (35). Ultimately, he argues that Milton takes a (re)visionary stand in such arenas: aristocratic virtue is explicitly called into question and virtue itself is feminized. Chapter two, “Singing Master of the Soul: The Attendant Spirit,” turns to the complex role of the Attendant Spirit, who he views as the initiatory rite’s master of ceremonies. The third chapter, “Tragedy in Translation,” investigates what one could term the textual nature of the Lady’s opening soliloquy, demonstrating its expressed distance from the genre of the court masque, which never establishes something as dramatically rich as the Lady’s self-recognition process. Chapter four, “Double

Trouble: Comus and His Bloodlines,” argues for the bipolarity of Comus’s character. As the son of Bacchus and Circe, Comus forces the Lady to confront both a Dionysian threat and a “perhaps more subtle threat of regression and dissolution” in Circe, while establishing her own subjectivity (39). “Girl Power: The Profession of Virginity,” the fifth chapter, is perhaps one of the most compelling chapters one encounters. As Shullenberger explains it in his introduction, he argues that the Lady translates “medieval notions of magical celibacy as a fugitive and cloistered virtue into a reformation exercise of chastity as virginity’s being toward the world, an activist virtue engaged in critical argument, self-transcendence, and world transformation” (39). Chapter six, “Milton’s Lady and Lady Milton,” turns to the oft-noted connection between “the Lady” and the university student who was Milton: “the Lady” of Christ’s College. Shullenberger declares here that chastity becomes “the gender crossroad where Milton discovers and exercises his own prophetic speech” (203). The final chapters, “Girl, Interrupted and Changing Woman” and “Homecoming Queen,” focus upon the “puzzling focal points of stasis and silence” that we see embedded in the role of the Lady in the final moments of *Comus* (41).

The Lady in the Labyrinth is a long-awaited and, I would argue, much-needed addition within the realm of Milton studies. No text is without its faults, and I am sure that some of its chapters will elicit strong reactions from its readers. In particular, I believe some will be resistant to the arguments Shullenberger makes in the closing chapters. I myself remain somewhat ambivalent about his claims here. On the one hand, Shullenberger offers a fresh alternative to the feminist narrative that condemns Milton’s silencing of the Lady at the end of *Comus*. On the other hand, the assertion that ritualistic initiatory rites are being played out often appears too universalist in its reach—too detached from the historical particulars of seventeenth-century England. Despite such ambivalent feelings about a couple chapters, I think most readers of *The Lady in the Labyrinth* will find it agreeable when I suggest that Shullenberger brings something fresh and compelling to the table. He has, indeed, helped me think through many of the reasons why it is that I now am so deeply fond of Milton’s *Maske* and why I am so deeply grateful that my professors never excised it from

their syllabi. If, as I believe, *Comus* is an invitation to the epic poet, then Shullenberger may be even more adamant. For him, the epic poet is already there, in the text of *Comus*, and *The Lady in the Labyrinth* does all it can—and all it should—to reveal this to its readers.

Margaret Olofson Thickstun. *Milton's Paradise Lost: Moral Education*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007. xiv + 184 pp. \$65.00. Review by JAMES EGAN, THE UNIVERSITY OF AKRON.

Thickstun notes that her discussions of *Paradise Lost* are “influenced as much by contemporary research in psychology and moral development as they are by current Milton scholarship” (ix), and she makes ample use of the work of Perry, Fowler, Noddings, McCullough, and others. Considered as literary criticism, *Milton's Paradise Lost* reads the epic as a text concerned with the “moral and psychological education of young people,” by which Thickstun means many of the poem’s major characters. This emphasis aligns her argument with post-1990s exploration of Milton’s pedagogy and the ways and means of the educational processes he dramatizes. Thickstun defends her emphasis on the literary study of moral questions as a means of not only heightening the emotional involvement necessary for contemporary readers to engage fully with *Paradise Lost*, but also as an antidote to what she considers the self-referential, abstract preoccupations of postmodern pedagogy. From this conceptual vantage point, she makes regular observations about the teachability of episodes and characterizations in the poem. Representative of Thickstun’s overall position are the chapters on God the Father, Satan, Adam, and Eve.

God, she argues, is better understood by the metaphor of parenthood than by the traditional metaphors of kingship or military precedence. God presents Himself in Scripture as a “loving, jealous, occasionally angry, feeling father” (23), and Milton’s construction of Him stresses the parental qualities of emotional investment, selflessness, and self-restraint. Thickstun valuably contextualizes Milton’s portrait of God in terms of contemporary Puritan ideas of fathering; in the process she frees the historical identity of Puritan fatherhood from stereotypical oversimplifications of it. Milton’s God considers