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978-0-521-83063-8 - Domesticity and Dissent in the Seventeenth Century: English Women Writers and the Public Sphere

Katharine Gillespie

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: Sabrina versus the state*

this I hold firm,  
Vertue may be assail'd, but never hurt,  
Surpriz'd by unjust force, but not enthralled

John Milton, *Comus*

## THE ADVENTURES OF THE POSSESSIVE SELF

In the anonymously published 1637 version of *A Maske Presented at Ludlow Castle*, Milton narrates the “birth” of the possessive individual.<sup>1</sup> Liberally paraphrased, the story goes something like this:

The Lady could take it no longer. She had been so determined to remain silent while Comus, the seductive Cavalier, plied her virgin ears with seductive sweet talk and such “false rules pranckt in reasons garb” (157) as the sophisticated notion that virginity was fool’s gold. True “good,” he had cooed, “Consists in mutual and partak’n bliss,” and then he had punned naughtily: “Beauty is natures coyn,” therefore, it “must not be hoorded” but spent, if you know what I mean, if it wants to “be currant” (156).

But the Lady knew what he meant and so, betraying the mark of a true “democratic personality” – one who is compelled to speak even when it is not altogether convenient to do so – she unlocks her lips and lets her tongue fly: “It doesn’t matter how much you “wave” your “wand” around, you can never “touch the freedom of my mind” (153).<sup>2</sup> And anyway, I know what “good” means – “Should I go on? Should I say more” – well then, if you need for me to explain “the sage and serious doctrine of Virginity” to you then think again because you’re not “fit to hear thyself convinc’t” (158). And were I to even try, you’d be sorry because the “uncontroled worth” of my “pure cause” would work my “spirits” up into such a lather that the earth itself would shake until “all your magick structures rear’d so high, Were shatter’d into heaps o’re your false head” (158–159).

Comus was shocked. He hadn’t even gotten to hear what the “sage and serious doctrine of Virginity” was! She’d found him unworthy of the very effort of explaining it, although her threat to do so was so forceful that it alone gave him

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the feeling that a “cold shuddring dew” had “dip[ped]” him “all o’r” (159). Still, while she’d unclasped her purse, the “coin” she’d “spent” was not quite what he’d had in mind and so he tried her again, but from a different angle. Come now, he retorted, “This is meer moral babble, and direct / Against the canon laws of our foundation” (159). Just take a sip o’ this and you’ll feel better.

Does she swallow his concoction? We never know because, at that moment, her brothers rushed in, toting a couple of swords. He’d had his fun, now it was time for the girl to go home.

So what was that “doctrine of virginity” anyway? As they were searching for their sister in the woods outside their estate, fearful that she would succumb to the charms of her wily seducer before they could recover her, the elder brother reassuringly explained it to the younger one thusly: Even if sister does, shall we say, sip the guy’s sauce, she’ll still be a virgin. For one thing the Attendant Spirit has given us this St. John’s wort to give to her, a cleansing herb capable of undoing any, shall we say, damage, and for another, “true virginity” is that which “may be term’d her own,” and it allows its bearer to “pass on” through dangers “with unblench’t’d majesty” (142). In fact, he rhapsodized, “So dear to Heav’n is Sainly chastity / That when a soul is found sincerely so, / A thousand liveried Angels lacky her, / Driving far off each thing of sin and guilt, / And in cleer dream, and solemn vision / Tell her of things that no gross ear can hear, / Till oft convers with heav’nly habitants / Begin to cast a beam on th’ outward shape, / The unpolluted temple of the mind, / And turns it by degrees to the souls essence, / Till all be made immortal” (144).

Oh okay, said little brother, now I (think I) get it.

And so do we. True or “sainly” virginity is not simply an unbroken hymen, rather it is a “divine property” one holds in one’s “first self,” regardless of who or what crosses its ultimately inviolable boundaries (144). It is not something that someone can “take” from someone else (although it does appear that one can give it away or “alienate” it through a desire all one’s own) because one acquires it directly from heaven, through “visions” and “dreams” that one alone can see and hear. Whether or not one’s body is chaste, one can always listen to the angels speaking within the “unpolluted temple of the mind,” the seat of one’s true immortal essence. One need not heed the call to become Comus’s “Queen,” rather, because of the entitlement that the individual holds by way of the soul, one already walks in an autonomous state of “unblench’t’d majesty.” The doctrine of virginity is, in short, the enunciation of a baseline “self” which one defines and possesses in defiance of all attempts by others to describe, prescribe, and circumscribe it on *their* terms. What is more, the very act of articulating the doctrine is a sign of its efficacy – one may “have intercourse” with public authority because one’s self ultimately and already resides beyond any other’s jurisdiction; the fact that one is speaking the doctrine is a sign that its mandate is

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already in place. (Still, sister had loosened her lips and may have exchanged some fluids with the slickster. So, just to be safe, before taking her home, her brothers rushed her off to the Severn to have her scrubbed – scraped? – clean of the “charmed band” that her vile enchanter had placed around her. It was worth the effort. Their servants, the Attendant Spirit and Sabrina, did the work and the procedure was finished before you could finish humming “By the rushy-fringed bank.” The Lady was home and dancing in no time.)

And so, amidst the dews and drops of ambrosial oils from the servants’ laboring ministrations, the Lady was returned to the spirit voices who were the original source of her purity; she was reintroduced to the world, her “grace” intact, and the liberal notion of the iconoclastic possessive or sovereign self – “her grace” – was reborn along with her. One could almost hear the “magical structures” of patriarchalism beginning to shatter, even as the Lady was escorted right back to her “father’s residence.”

## THE LADY AND THE BAPTISTS

This is, of course, a much different ur-story of the possessive self’s inscription than the usual one that positions Locke as “father” of the “bourgeois” idea that “no man can be subjected to the political power of another without his own consent.”<sup>3</sup> For one thing, because this concept emerges in Milton’s story from the need to argue that one possesses something “pure” and inalienable, no matter how “interpenetrated” one might be by the nefarious designs of others, Milton ironically identifies the already enclosed and premarital but imminently penetrable “lady,” not the “man,” as the emblematic possessive self.<sup>4</sup> For another, because, I suggest, the story continues beyond the parameters of Milton’s text, it does not, contrary to appearances, position Milton as the newly triumphant patriarch of the idea that “the pre-eminent and supreme authority . . . is the authority of the Spirit, which is internal, and the individual possession of each man.”<sup>5</sup> Instead it travels on to include actual events that, I contend, form an oblique but imaginable backdrop to Milton’s fictional scene. I refer not to the increasingly controversial and Puritan-incensing revelries that traditionally accompanied Michaelmas – the time of year at which the masque was set and the official enforcement of which it purports to critique.<sup>6</sup> Nor do I mean the sex scandals that surrounded the extended clan of John Egerton, the Earl of Bridgewater, the inhabitants of the castle of Ludlow for whom this entertainment was written and by and for whom it was performed in 1634.<sup>7</sup> Rather, I gesture towards 1633, the year when Egerton kinswoman, Lady

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Eleanor Davies, published yet another of her many infamous visions (this a particularly haunting, skull-filled one foretelling the death of Charles I), petitioned against the appointment of Archbishop Laud, and was called before the High Commission, who ordered the burning of her books and her imprisonment in the Gatehouse at Westminster.<sup>8</sup> As a woman who was literally placed in bondage by her interrogating Comus for believing that the true “fifth” monarch was Christ and that it was she, not Laud, who “sang” on his behalf, Davies forms one viable prototype for Milton’s Lady.

And yet the set of “Fifth Monarchist” ideas to which Lady Eleanor “fell prey” points towards another important source for Milton’s story about the true subject of sovereignty, a source that can be found in the clandestine meetings of outlawed separatist and semiseparatist churches who, throughout the first half or so of the seventeenth century, plied their trade in such “private” places as riversides, fields, barns, taverns, and homes.<sup>9</sup> For the “Anabaptists” among them, water was crucial to the eponymous and controversial rituals of “rebaptizing” those who had, “against their will,” been baptized as infants.<sup>10</sup> At these Jack-and-Joan-the-Baptist gatherings, self-styled everyman and everywoman ministers and healers – real-life Attendant Spirits and Sabinas – contravened the baptismal “scripts” issued by the Book of Common Prayer and perpetuated their own “extemporaneous” antirituals throughout the decades during and after which Milton penned *A Maske Presented at Ludlow Castle* in Buckinghamshire (itself an old Lollard haunt and site of a rising tide of Baptism).<sup>11</sup> And within these groups, a popular notion of self-sovereignty was practiced and preached as a philosophical foundation for the “Protestant tradition of voluntarism in the organization of church membership” which became one of the “interdependent influences on [Locke’s] liberal use of consent theory”: all individuals, including women and servants, could choose to be rebaptized (and to rebaptize others in turn) by virtue of the majestic Spirit that each person owned by virtue of the grace bestowed upon them by the one true king, the fifth and last monarch, Christ.<sup>12</sup> As the 1641 Baptist creed stated:

Those that have this pretious faith wrought in them by the Spirit, can never finally nor totally fall away; and though many stormes and floods do arise and beat against them, yet they shall never be able to take them off that foundation and rock which by faith they are fastened upon, but shall be kept by the power of God to salvation where they shall enjoy their purchased possession . . .<sup>13</sup>

These real-life Anabaptist rituals can be said to coincide with, inform, and ultimately supercede the subversive religious politics of Milton’s own “reformed maske.”<sup>14</sup> In 1632, just a couple of years before Milton staged

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*Comus*, the independent Jacob Church, a “complete church in itself, offering the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper to all members and baptism to those who wished it” – was uncovered and arrested.<sup>15</sup> The High Church and its officials, as well as more moderate Puritans of the day, were mortified at the inroads that this and other “conventicles” were making into their parish populations, especially their female affiliates, who would go on to comprise the bulk of private church membership.<sup>16</sup> Under Archbishop Laud’s increasingly restrictive insistence upon uniformity, opposition stiffened against such “dangerous men” who formed a “scattered company sown in all the city” of London and an increasing number of other “different places.”<sup>17</sup> As Patricia Crawford argues, the crackdown on such groups in 1632 illustrates the degree to which “sexuality, female insubordination and separatism were associated in the bishops’ minds,” as English society began to fear that more and more of its young women had succumbed to the enchanting wiles of those it viewed more as “mechanic” *Comuses* than *Attendant Spirits*.<sup>18</sup> At one point in the High Commission’s proceedings against the Jacob church, Laud asked one of the group’s ministers, John Lathrop, “how manie women sate crosse legged upon ye bedd, whilst you sat on one side & preached & prayed most devoutlie?” While, Lathrop denied that his female listeners were “such women,” his sister congregants were arrested along with him.<sup>19</sup> Whereas the subversion represented by this group was, in this scenario, “contained,” gathered churches gathered more momentum and bad press as the thirties and forties wore on.<sup>20</sup> Echoing Bishop Laud, indignant Presbyterians such as Thomas Edwards lodged universal complaints against separatist churches that were in large part based on the fact that their “lusty young” separatist ministers “traded chiefly with young women and young maids.”<sup>21</sup> It is possible, then, to say that some of the most compelling drama of the age lay even further outside the Whitehall theatre than did the Earl of Bridgewater’s Ludlow Castle. While Milton may have transferred the “ideal masque world” and its intrinsic project of religious “reformation” away from the stage-managed gambols of Charles I and his heavenly consort, Henrietta Maria, and on to the perilous pilgrimages of the Protestant elite, self-baptizing sectarians from the lower and middle orders widened this “disjunction” even further by assuming for themselves the elite aristocratic, religio-mythological, and “sovereign” roles of Heroic Virtue and Divine Grace.<sup>22</sup>

To be sure, Milton provides a devilishly ironic twist upon the heated debate that English society was just beginning to wage over the “new kind of talking Trade” being conducted within separatist groups.<sup>23</sup> His “anti-Laudian” script in part honors Egerton’s resistance to Laud’s policies by

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surrounding Comus and his midnight crew with the trappings not of radical sectarianism but of aristocratic (and latent Catholic) Anglicanism: the “treasonous offer” of the idolatrous Communion “cup” from which the Lady was to drink for her salvation; Comus’s gallant invitation to escort her to courts, feasts, and other “high solemnities”; and the nervous defence of the “canon law” in the face of the Lady’s disturbing disquisition of the individualist doctrine of unassailable self-possession and undivided loyalty to God alone.<sup>24</sup> In Milton’s waggish equivalence (if not outright reversal), the “true apostles” might just as well be found alongside the “rushy-fringed banks” of the rivers and other nondescript places where an autonomous band of shepherds and their female helpmates “dipped” men and women alike in the cathartic dews of self-possession and choice, while it is the palace-bound “high priest,” Comus, who is preaching in the proverbial wilderness.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, *Comus* arguably displays Milton’s earlier, still moderate interest in resubmitting the liberated Lady to “a church government of Presbyters and Deacons.”<sup>26</sup> True to masque form, Milton brings it all back “home” as a sign that male guardianship and domestic order have been restored.<sup>27</sup> As a procession, *Comus* climaxes with the reentry of the Lady, played by the earl’s daughter, Alice, back “into [her father’s] House.”<sup>28</sup> While she was innately “pure,” Milton hedges, that extra bit of cleansing and that hustled retreat back to the castle certainly couldn’t hurt.

Within separatist circles, however, the “Ladies” who actually underwent Sabrina’s dis severing cure are, as often as not, on record for refusing to cap off their own personal progresses with a return to the official venues of English patriarchy, either literally or figuratively, and for instead remaining committed to the private church with which they had affiliated and/or to its root Pauline ideal that God’s grace endowed them with reason as a property of the soul that they alone could “alienate” to consume a church of their own.<sup>29</sup> Thus, for every story such as the one recounted in *The Brownist Haeresies Confuted* (London, 1641) wherein the unnamed author describes how a young “gentlewoman,” Sarah Miller, had to be saved by a “reverend Divine” and friend of her father after being seduced and impregnated by the charismatic crown-offering “Comus” of a nearby Brownist church, there is an account such as Thomas Edwards’s which concedes the fact that these self-styled Attendant Spirits had managed to attract many “young maids, Citizens daughter, about one and two a clock in the morning, tempting them out of their fathers’ houses at midnight to be baptized, the parents asleep and knowing nothing.”<sup>30</sup> The pastoral ideal of marriage, which was to end every social plot with the virginal woman’s rupturing submission and

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reconignment to the dictates of her father, brother, and husband, was both reified and frustrated through the separatist displacement of “marriage” on to the eternally “chaste” and enclosed relationship that every individual enjoyed with God as a self-sufficient “couple” of one.<sup>31</sup>

In fact, it was women’s exercise of the prerogative of religious choice that they derived from this subversive appropriation of the cultural logic of “the thematics of pastoral eroticism” that amped up the volume on the iconoclastic rumblings that reverberated throughout England during the years of rising religious dissent, as patriarchy’s “magical structures” clashed with “popular sovereignty.”<sup>32</sup> Through pulpit and pen, the established clergy and other detractors tried to allay what Sharon Achinstein has identified as the old *charivari* fear that women had somehow gotten “on top” – embodied in this case in the possibility that women were capable of plotting their own paradises – by warning these would-be Eves that they had once again succumbed to self-destructive delusions of grandeur: those Attendant Spirits who promised salvation were in actuality Comus-like, sexually predacious “wolves in sheep’s clothing” who had only salvation in mind.<sup>33</sup> As Edward Harris maintained:

In the County of Monmouth in Wales, in divers parts a number of Non-conformists being assembled together, not regarding in what place they meet, whether in field, garden, orchard, barne, kitchen, or high waies, being (as they teach) available to their devotion as the Church: where by their doctrine they perswade their auditory to contemne the prayers of the Church, and the Preachers of the Gospell; also avowing their own zealous prayers to have such power with God, as that they dare challenge him *ex tempore*. By which lewd persuasion for theirs they have drawne diverse honest mens wives in the night times to frequent their Assembles, and to become of most loose and wicked conversation, and likewise many chaste Virgins to become harlots, and the mothers of bastards; holding it no sinne for a brother to lye with a brothers wife; as also a virgin gotten with childe by a brother not to be the worse, but by another, then by the wicked, and so consequently a sinne.<sup>34</sup>

To further spin the idea that this was a sexual rather than an intellectual seduction, Daniel Featley concluded, “the resort of great multitudes of men and women together in the evening, and going naked into rivers, there to be plunged and Dipt, cannot be done without scandall, especially where the State giveth no allowance to any such practice, nor appointed any order to prevent such fowl abuses as are likely at such disorderly meetings to be committed.”<sup>35</sup>

Fathers all across the kingdom could relate as more and more young women became nonfictional “usurers’ daughters” who borrowed against their property-in-self for the purpose of circulating their choice-based



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coinage *outside* the regulated parameters of the established church and the patriarchal home.<sup>36</sup> If it could happen to Lord Audley's daughter, Lady Eleanor, then it could happen to anybody. After all, these daughters reasoned, this "resort" was not the "state's" possession to "allow" or "order" and it was their souls, not their sex, for which they were loved. In 1645 there came the case of Mr. Robert Poole, a good citizen who quite literally lost his own daughter, Elizabeth, to a Baptist "jugler" – a low-born mechanic named William Kiffin who dared to call himself a minister.<sup>37</sup> After his entire household ran off to join Kiffin's congregation, Poole confronted this Comus and demanded an explanation. However, when asked "what warrant of the Word of God" he used to justify separating from the established church and forming new churches in which "sillie seduced Servants, Children, or People" were inducted into the "Anabaptisticall way," Kiffin replied as an Attendant Spirit, offering to cure the agitated father's "indigestion" of separatist principles with some of his trademark "ambrosial" ministrations and "adjuring verses":

I see our separated Congregations sticks very hard upon your stomach, therefore as I laboured to help you to digest our separation, so I hope I shall give you something from the Word of Truth, that may remove your imbitternese of Spirit against our Congregations: and first know this, that that infinite Love which hath redeemed a people to God, out of all Nations, tongues, and kindred, hath also made them Kings and Priests unto God, to reigne with him in his spirituall kingdom here on earth, Rev. 9,10 . . .<sup>38</sup>

In other words, alarmist warnings to the contrary, women and servants may have actually been attracted to the likes of Kiffin because he recognized them as equals, as prepossessing kings and priests – fathers even of a sort – in and of themselves. For the relatively disenfranchised, this was an irresistible call "home" to sovereign or possessive personhood, a courtship of the mind as much as if not more than the body.

## SABRINA SPEAKS

Because of this, the tale of the birth of the possessive self, as well as other foundational concepts within liberal political philosophy, does not end with Kiffin or his fellow persuasionists. Instead, the plot moves on to comprehend the voices of actual separatist women, including Elizabeth Poole. One of the most scandalous features to emerge from the growing religious Independency movement was that many of its female constituents used a doctrine of virginity as a license to travel beyond the role of worshipful



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attende, to take their own turns upon the makeshift pulpits that private congregations reportedly fashioned out of wash tubs, hayracks, and beer barrels.<sup>39</sup> As John Vicars lamented in *The Schismatick Sifted*, it was not only “saucie boyes” and “bold, botching taylors” but also “bold impudent huswives” who were taking it upon themselves to “prate an hour or more.”<sup>40</sup> And as the anonymous author of *A Spirit Moving in the Women Preachers* contended, they were able to do this because the level of “insinuation” achieved by the “holy brothers” of “the separation” “with this Female Sex”

hath so prevailed with this poore ignorant sort of Creatures, that puffed up with pride, divers of them have lately advanced themselves with vain-glorious arrogance, to preach in mixt Congregations of men and women, in an insolent way of usurping authority over men, and assuming a calling unwarranted by the word of God for women to use: yet all under colour, that *they act as the Spirit moves them* . . .<sup>41</sup>

As Keith Thomas has documented, some three hundred female sectarian preachers and prophetesses were so moved from the 1630s through the 1670s, many of whom recorded their words through the virtual pulpit of print.<sup>42</sup> Publications by women attained a new high during these middle decades of the seventeenth century, due in no small measure to the prose genres published by female sectarians.<sup>43</sup>

In 1644, for example, one Sarah Jones published a “sermon” called *To Sions Lovers*.<sup>44</sup> Apparently a young girl (her cover quotes, “out of the mouthes of babes, *Jehovah* shall have praise”), Jones figures her text as a curative “golden egge to avoid infection” and structures it around a strategic collection of Scriptures that defend “shee preachers,” “baptism,” and the “doctrine of laying on of hands” (B2–B3). In her dedication, she plays the Lady to Dr. William Gouge’s Comus, identifying him as an ordained minister (and a friend of her late father), who, to her way of thinking, had too long preached “the Doctrine of Repentance from dead workes” instead of relinquishing his “Eldership” to “the spouse of Christ,” the Independent church or “Assemblee of the Saints” which have a “right” to “appoint” for themselves those who shall effect the cure (A2). Writing literally from outside the bounds of her dead father’s house, Jones insists that she alone is the “father” of her own text, this “naked child without Scholasticke phrases, or School learning to dresse it and garnish it” (A2).

As did the example of Lady Eleanor, Jones’s text showcases the century’s newfangled logic: because Sabrina was a female “instrument of divine grace” and an “embodiment of the transformative power of song and poetry,” then a free-spirited lady could sing for herself.<sup>45</sup> Even if she was forced to enact Revelation’s captivity narrative of the woman in the wilderness

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(that is, to attend her assigned parish church and drink from Comus's communion cup), this unmoved mover did not need to be led home by another.<sup>46</sup> As the natural "source" of "truth," why would she need an Attendant Spirit's intervention into purifying something – her innately majestic ladyness – that was already, inherently, pure?<sup>47</sup> As a "goddess," was she not always and already "at home" in the house of God her father and husband, the ultimate Attendant Spirit whose spirit voice called her to move and purify others on his behalf?<sup>48</sup> As the Attendant Spirit says, "Goddess dear, / We implore thy powerful hand" (164). As Sabrina replies, "Shepherd 'tis my office best / To help insnared chastity; Brightest Lady look on me, / Thus I sprinkle on thy brest / Drops that from my fountain pure, / I have kept of pretious cure" (164).

As I shall show, there was a virtual living theatre of "Shepherd/Sabrina" dyads at work in the history of the separatist churches: Samuel Chidley and Katherine Chidley, Hugh Peter and Anna Trapnel, William Kiffin and Elizabeth Poole, Henry Jessey and Sarah Wight. In many of these cases, the men, playing out their deeply embedded mythological heritage as Orphic language-bearing Attendant Spirits, conjured up their goddesses to sing by serving as their amanuenses and penning their stories.<sup>49</sup> However, it also appears to have been a kind of Miltonic fantasy on the part of sectarian male preachers that they could command their watery muses when they wanted while counting upon them to lie dormant when they were of no apparent use, just as the Attendant Spirit did with Sabrina (and as Milton did with the sectarians whose power he invoked in his own battles against the tyrannical crown and then later decried when they dissented from his Protectorate as well: "Back Shepherds, back, anough your play" [167]). In practice, the "fixed" and "crypto-Catholic" logic of possessive individualism, with its ascetic emphasis upon enclosure and purity, provided even nonelite sectarian women with the mercurial wherewithal to speak through their own volition – and speak out they did against Presbyterian ministers, judges, members of Parliament, kings, and even their own ministers, who did not always anticipate the degree to which their "creatures" would apply the servant's "office" of securing imperiled liberties to "offices" of all sorts.<sup>50</sup>

As Lois Schwoerer has argued, "a growing number" of these "middle- and lower middle-class women in England" parlayed their self-sovereignty into a platform from which to "meddle with State Affairs."<sup>51</sup> Broadly speaking, sectarian women writers participated in the movement for religious toleration that was advanced by various separatist groups seeking protection for their unorthodox and illegal religious practices.<sup>52</sup> Separatist women were particularly concerned with envisioning a toleration settlement that would