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Comus, Cloud, and Thel’s “Unacted Desires”

by ANNETTE S. LEVITT

The Book of Thel is generally acknowledged as the simplest of William Blake’s Prophetic Books. This simplicity extends from its overall (if not complete) clarity of meaning, to the very texture of the poem, with its pastoral setting, delicate imagery, and brief dialogues. This is the simplicity of the fairy tale; as Northrop Frye puts it, Thel’s “is a world of dissolving and arbitrary fantasy, a looking-glass world of talking flowers.” The atmosphere is indeed one of make-believe, with a talking lily, cloud, and clod of clay, and a weeping worm, all floating delicately about among sheep and grass, or nestled in a flower’s leaf, and conversing with a real young girl come for a visit—not unlike Alice gone underground. If we extend the fairy tale analogy further, we must also include the traditional element of danger and the fortuitous escape from danger, for these, too, play a part in The Book of Thel. It will be the purpose of this paper to clarify that element of danger, to establish the Cloud’s role at its center and Thel’s response to it, by means of a comparison with John Milton’s Comus or, as he actually titled it, A Maske Presented at Ludlow Castle.

Like The Book of Thel, Milton’s masque has also been seen as a fairy tale; Marjorie Nicholson for one refers to it thus half a dozen times in twenty pages. Its simple plot is even closer than that of Thel to the pattern of the fairy tale: the maiden lost in the dark woods, confronted by an evil sorcerer, saved in the nick of time by her stalwart (if rather young) brothers, with the aid of some white magic provided by an attendant spirit and a water nymph.

But Milton’s purpose, in writing Comus, combines didacticism with entertainment. Thus, in addition to fulfilling the masque’s “basic function . . . to contribute meaning and beauty to noble persons, noble places, noble occasions” (this case offering compliment to the family of the Earl of Bridgewater), Milton was writing an encomium to virginity.

Blake knew Milton’s work well and admired it greatly, although he often differed with the earlier poet philosophically, as his later poem, Milton, reveals. On the question of virginity, the focal point of Blake’s

poem, also, their views are antithetical. Indeed, their differences on the subject lead Mark Schorer to describe *The Book of Thel* as “a kind of rewriting of *Comus* (a beautiful inversion, really, when one considers their opposing attitudes toward chastity).” And Rodger L. Tarr elaborates, “What makes *The Book of Thel* all the more interesting, then, is Blake’s inherent denial of Milton’s belief in the divinity of virginity, and his counterargument that generative copulation is the key both to wisdom and to love.”

Both works focus on an adolescent girl confronted with the possible loss of her virginity; each young protagonist rejects this possibility and ultimately eludes entrapment. (One may not consider Thel trapped at all; unlike Milton’s “Lady,” who at one point is enchanted to Comus’ magic chair, Thel’s movements are at all times “unhindered”; she does feel herself in danger, however, as I will demonstrate.) But where Milton regards his young protagonist as entirely admirable for her strength of mind, Blake considers Thel to be in error for rejecting the necessary move from the world of Innocence to that of Experience. Indeed, in this inversion of Milton’s intention, Blake’s work comes closer to the typical masque celebration of fertility than does *Comus*, a “work which centers, seemingly, on the denial of impulse, when typically in the Renaissance such works involve, in some fashion or other, release from restraint.”

*Thel* shares with *Comus* certain characteristics of the masque: since there is minimal intrusion by a narrator and since most of its lines are dialogue, it is relatively easy to think of Blake’s poem in the quasi-dramatic mode of the masque. The action of the poem is simple, its duration limited (masque requirements which *Comus* has been said to ignore). Both *Comus* and *Thel* convey very effectively the sense of a pastoral setting. Indeed, Enid Welsford tells us that Milton does so so well “that many have been deceived into supposing that it was intended for out-of-door

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5. “‘The Eagle’ Versus ‘The Mole’: The Wisdom of Virginity in *Comus* and *The Book of Thel*,” *Blake Studies*, III, No. 2 (Spring 1971), 187–94. Tarr stresses the philosophical differences between Milton and Blake in *Comus* and *Thel*.


7. Barber, p. 188.
performance . . . ;" and Thel is replete with pastoral imagery, including butterflies, sheep, grass, cows, dew, and doves. Dance is at the heart of the masque, although again Comus is not typical: according to Welsford, "It is possible to read Comus and hardly realize that there are dances; it is possible to act Comus without introducing any dances at all . . . ." There is, however, the boisterous rout of Comus and his crew. Similarly, while there is no true dance in Thel, the ephemeral appearance and disappearance of the Lilly and the Cloud convey the grace and lightness of dance movement. What is more, the "silver shrine" in which the Lilly sits, as well as the "airy throne" on which the Cloud reclines, are reminiscent of the stage machinery of the masque. This allusion seems particularly appropriate in Blake's description of the Cloud "descending" and "sailing on."

Some Milton critics feel that Milton's so-called "masque" is far removed from the conventions of that mode; Don Cameron Allen, for example, argues that in contrast with the masque of Jonson or Daniel, "its plot, though not exactly more elaborate, is more tense; its theme is more serious; it is totally wanting in humorosity; and its emphasis is more on dramatic crisis than on spectacle, dance, costume, or even singing." Enid Welsford expands on this point: "in Comus the essential moment is not the presentation of the young people to their parents, but it is the steadfast refusal of the Lady to partake of the enchanted cup . . . the Court masque is a dramatised dance, Comus is a dramatised debate." One may disagree with Allen's criticisms or Welsford's interpretation, and agree instead with John G. Demaray that Comus is closer to the masque tradition of its time than these critics realize. For our purposes, however, the sense of tension, of dramatic focus attached to the so-called debate between Comus and the Lady is important insofar as that dialogue provides a model for an analogous "debate"—one quite different in tone and intention—at the center of The Book of Thel.

In both works the important dialogue appears within the context of a journey, archetypally associated with initiation, or movement into adulthood. The Lady moves from darkness to light, Thel, in contrast, from light toward darkness. As C. L. Barber describes the action of Comus: "At Ludlow the journey becomes central. One side of our interest is centered in the trial of the Lady in her passage through a Spenserian dark

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12. The argument has been raging at least since 1780, when Dr. Johnson, analyzing it as drama, found Comus "deficient," Lives of the Poets [Oxford, 1905], I, 168 and Thomas Warton responded, "We must not read Milton with an eye to the stage, or with the expectation of dramatic propriety." Poems upon Several Occasions by John Milton, ed. Thomas Warton [London, 1785], p. 262.) Some sense of the debate which developed over the years may be found in Demaray, Milton and the Masque Tradition (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), pp. 1–9.
Thel, on the other hand, after appearing initially with her sisters and “their sunny flocks,” seeks “the secret air,” or darkness. Nancy Bogen explains: “In the Old Testament, secret is frequently found with place and associated with darkness and sometimes danger. . . .” Thel’s search for the “secret” or “hidden” air, can, ironically, be understood as wisdom, just at the Lady’s search for a way out of the dark forest is a search for light, traditionally associated with wisdom. (On another level of meaning, since light to Milton also connotes reason and order, and since Blake opposes such limitations, he understandably might direct his protagonist away from “the light” in a poem intended as an inversion of Milton’s masque.) While the Lady completes her journey, Thel does not. Her inability to accept the wisdom she is offered, to complete the transition from Innocence to Experience, comes in part from the childishness of her mentality and her preference for a fairy tale world. She “sought the secret air,” not realizing that secrets are not always playful or frivolous.

In Thel’s childish view of the world, flowers and clouds can speak, and all is sweetness and light—except for the nagging feeling that she, like the other creatures of nature, has no permanence. “Like a reflection in a glass, like shadows in the water,” she will “fade away” (1:9, 3). Thus Thel seeks the “secret air”—some answer to the mystery of life and death. That answer is what she gets, and rejects, because it is not the fairy tale ending—“and she lived happily ever after.” The answer—offered variously by Lilly, Cloud, Clod of Clay, and finally by Thel herself, as she is projected imaginatively into the world of Experience—requires the giving of one’s self, spiritually and physically. Each response implies a death, literal or figurative, as prelude to life, eternal or temporal.

The Lady’s quest is much simpler. She wants to get out of the dark forest; she wants to be back with her protecting brothers. But she, too, is confronted by some facts of life. Lost and alone in the dark woods, the Lady is accosted by Comus, in the guise of a harmless and, indeed, helpful shepherd—a pastoral figure the Lady would naturally trust. Imposing on this trust, Comus lures her to his palace, where he traps her into his enchanted chair and attempts to seduce her verbally into an acceptance of his sensual way of life.

The various arguments as to the winner of the ensuing debate (and the possibility that there is no winner) need not concern us here. Milton’s purpose is didactic, not persuasive; the conclusion is foregone that since the Lady is equated with Virtue and Comus with Vice, the Lady’s position is the correct one. We should note, however, the subject and theme of Comus’ argument: it is the plenitude of nature which he describes, an

15. Quotations from Blake’s text are from The Poetry and Prose of William Blake, ed. D. V. Erdman (New York, 1970). Citations include plate and line numbers.
excessive fulness which requires our use. If we do not use it, he insists, we ignore its very reason for existence; we are sacrilegious; and, finally, we set the very universe in disorder and ourselves become immune to its glory, if we do not make use of nature's abundance:

Wherefore did Nature pour her bounties forth,  
With such a full and unwithering hand,  
Covering the earth with odours, fruits, and flocks,  
Thronging the Seas with spawn innumerable,  
But all to please, and sate the curious taste?

... if all the world
Should in a pet of temperance feed on Pulse,  
Drink the clear stream, and nothing wear but Freize,  
Th'all-giver would be unthank't, would be unprais'd,

[Nature would be] strangl'd with her waste fertility;  
Th'earth cumber'd, and the wing'd air dark't with plumes,  
The herds would over-multitude their Lords,  
The Sea o'erfraught would swell, and the unsought diamonds
Would so emblaze the forhead of the Deep,  
And so bestudd with Stars, that they below
Would grow inur'd to light, and com at last  
To gaze upon the Sun with shameless brows. (710–14; 720–23; 729–36)16

The Lady answers Comus' rather hyperbolic argument for man's exploitation of nature with more logic, if less lushness of imagery, than he offers, "asserting," as John Demaray summarizes her speech, "that nature has actual but not excessive abundance and that temperance is required if that abundance is to be justly distributed among men."17

"Impostor," she proclaims,

... do not charge most innocent nature,  
As if she would her children should be riotous  
With her abundance, she good cateress  
Means her provision only to the good  
That live according to her sober laws,  
And holy dictate of spare Temperance:  
If every just man that now pines with want  
Had but a moderate and befitting share  
Of that which lewdly-pamper'd Luxury  
Now heaps upon som few with vast excess,  
Natures full blessings would be well dispenc't  
In unsuperfluous eaven proportion,  
And she no whit encomber'd with her store,  
And then the giver would be better thank't,  
His praise due paid, for swinish gluttony  
Ne'er looks to Heav'n amidst his gorgeous feast,  
But with besotted base ingratitude  
Cramms, and blasphemes his feeder. (762–79)

Point for point she has answered Comus’ doctrine of use, imposing, amidst her refutations, the Christian doctrine of temperance. But Comus’ argument for the use of nature in general is merely the background for his more specific seduction: as man should use nature, he contends, so shall he use human nature, the beauty of the female body. Comus’ attacks on the Lady’s virginity both precede and follow his lines on general nature, subtly shifting these more pointed arguments into the larger, presumably more acceptable one. He first asks, somewhat disingenuously,

Why should you be so cruel to your self,
And to those dainty limbs which nature lent
For gentle usage, and soft delicacy? (679–81)

Somewhat later, concluding his argument for the use of nature, he speaks more directly:

List Lady be not coy, and be not cosen’d
With that same vaunted name Virginity,
Beauty is natures coyn, must not be hoorded,
But must be currant, and the good thereof
Consists in mutual and partak’n bliss. . . . (737–41)

He speaks of her lips, her eyes and hair, and urges: “There was another meaning to these gifts,/ Think what, and be adviz’d, you are but young yet” (754–55).

On the specific issue of virginity, the Lady now offers not well-reasoned argument, but abstract verbiage attacking Comus’ sub-human perceptions, and merely describes the likely impact of the argument which she could offer. The many Christian allusions in her speech, in contrast to the pagan bestiality of Comus, convey Milton’s certainty that she is right—that this cause need not be argued, but merely stated:

. . . To him that dares
Arm his profane tongue with contemptuous words
Against the Sun-clad power of Chastity,
Fain would I somthing say, yet to what end?
Thou hast nor Eare, nor Soul to apprehend
The sublime notion, and high mystery
That must be utter’d to unfold the sage
And serious doctrine of Virginity,
. . . . . . . . . . . . . .
Thou art not fit to hear thy self convinc’t;
Yet should I try, the uncontrou’ed worth
Of this pure cause would kindle my rapt spirits
To such a flame of sacred vehemence,
That dumb things would be mov’d to sympathize,
And the brute Earth would lend her nerves, and shake,
Till all thy magick structures rear’d so high,
Were shatter’d into heaps o’re thy false head. (780–87; 792–99)

Despite his bestial state, Comus is able to respond:

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She fables not, I feel that I do fear
Her words set off by some superior power;
And though not mortal, yet a cold shuddring dew
Dips me all o'er, as when the wrath of Jove
Speaks thunder... (800-04)

J. B. Broadbent comments: "The Lady's second argument does not appeal to discursive reason, but [to] intuition, or conscience. She does not sufficiently realise in poetry 'The sublime notion, and high mystery' of vir¬
ginity to justify Comus' fearful reaction; but we have seen enough of the theories of harmony and the soul to realise what is intended here without our being guilty of the 'intentional fallacy': the intention is apparent in the masque as a whole. . . ."18 We recognize that the "debate" is more ritual than conflict, and less a dialogue "between individual persons [than] between opposing spiritual states," as Alan Rudrum explains.19 And, adds Demaray, "Since the spiritual state of the Lady is generally 'fixed,' she is never placed in serious spiritual danger either by Comus' arguments or by his temptations."20

Despite the frightening situation she is in, the Lady's spiritual armor protects her, and she is never truly in danger from Comus. Indeed, one might say that in confronting Comus she actually proves herself, passing through the initiation rite begun when she first finds herself alone in the forest. But this is perhaps to read in characterization and change where Milton, in the tradition of the masque, presumably intended none. Blake, however, is concerned with both character and change—a process which his protagonist refuses to endure. Thel refuses to complete her journey from Innocence to Experience out of fear—a fear which arises primarily in response to the speech of the Cloud, Blake's counterpart to Comus. But where Comus speaks against Milton's views, the Cloud speaks for Blake. It is Thel's error to see the duplicity of Comus in the honest Cloud.

Blake's questing virgin is lost spiritually, not physically, as is the Lady. Dissatisfied with her perception of life's transitory nature, she voluntarily leaves her home in the vales of Har, her sisters with their sunny flocks, to seek the secret air, the meaning of life. Her search involves her in a dialogue which offers both parallels to and inversions of that seen in Comus.

In The Book of Thel Blake's parallels to Comus' arguments are divided among Lilly, Cloud, and Clod of Clay, as they offer answers to Thel's laments on the transitory quality of life. The speeches of Lilly and Clay do not have direct sexual implications, but that of the Cloud does; his speech takes the central position in the dialogue, set as it is between the lines of Lilly and Clay. This "framing" of the central issue inverts the structure of Comus' speech, in which the short seduction passages are presented as if

20. Demaray, p. 89.
they are mere frame for the major speech on general nature. There is a similar, crucial inversion in meaning. While both works deal with nature and sex, Comus' approach is exploitative: woman, he argues, like all of nature, was made to be used. Blake inverts the direction of Comus' argument, urging not our use of nature, but the giving of self by all parts of nature—Lilly, Cloud, Clay, and Thel herself. The distinction between the two views is as sharp as that between rape and selfless love.

Thel's sense of her own impermanence permits her to perceive a similar limitation in her fellow creatures; she fails, however, to see a parallel in herself with their giving qualities—qualities which she praises enthusiastically, as in her speech to the Lilly:

... O thou little virgin of the peaceful valley.
Giving to those that cannot crave, the voiceless, the o'ertired.
Thy breath doth nourish the innocent lamb, he smells thy milky garments,
He crops thy flowers, while thou sittest smiling in his face,
Wiping his mild and meekin mouth from all contagious taints.
Thy wine doth purify the golden honey, thy perfume,
Which thou dost scatter on every little blade of grass that springs
Revives the milked cow, & tames the fire-breathing steed. (2:3–10)

The Lilly and the Clod of Clay recognize an immortality that Thel has overlooked, as we see in the Lilly's description of her ultimate fate, to "be clothed in light, and fed with morning manna: Till summers heat melts [her] beside the fountains and the springs/ To flourish in eternal vales ..." (1:23–25). The Clod of Clay reveals a similarly giving nature in her generosity to the worm: "She bow'd over the weeping infant, and her life exhal'd/ In milky fondness ..." (4:8–9). She, too, simply accepts the resulting eternality, "a crown that none can take away/ But how this is sweet maid, I know not, and I cannot know,/ I ponder, and I cannot ponder; yet I live and love" (5:4–6).

Between Thel's interviews with Lilly and Clay comes that with the Cloud. Thel has previously compared herself to clouds—"a parting cloud" and a "faint cloud"—in order to stress her impermanence. She tells the Cloud himself, "The! is like to Thee" (3: 3). Yet only fourteen lines later, after the Cloud's first speech to her, Thel is quick to respond, "I fear that I am not like thee ..." (3:17). This is the first outright rejection which Thel offers, and it is important not only in terms of the words and concepts which she rejects, but also in respect to the personality and connotations of the Cloud, the most important catalyst in Thel's rejection of Experience.

The Cloud is a much more important figure in this poem than is usually recognized. He is distinguished from the other creatures metrically,21

21. Alicia Ostriker, in Vision and Verse in William Blake (Wisconsin, 1965), p. 153, notes: "Blake does not metrically differentiate the speeches of advising lily, cloud, and clod of clay from Thel's except that the cloud, sole masculine voice of the poem, speaks with somewhat fuller accenting and more pauses." The worm, which weeps, but does not speak, is seen by Harold Bloom, in Blake's Apocalypse (New York, 1963), p. 57, as "the phallic emblem of the generative world ..." Clearly, Thel does not see it thus.

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through his appearance, and by his attitude toward Thel. While Lilly and Clay are presented as "humble" and "modest," the Cloud appears in regal images: he "glitters in the morning sky" and "scatters [his] bright beauty thro the humid air" (2:14, 15); he "shew'd his golden head & his bright form emerg'd, Hovering and glittering on the air before the face of Thel" (3:5–6). His royal bearing is enhanced by the fact that he reclines on an "airy throne." In contrast, while the females include references to royalty in their address to Thel, the Cloud calls her only "virgin"—this on their first encounter; a bit later he names her "Virgin of the Skies." When calling the worm to speak with Thel, Cloud refers to her as "thy pensive queen," as if to make the point that while she may be a royal figure to the others, she is to him solely a virgin. The Cloud's view of Thel is validated objectively in the poem, for while she is described initially as a "lovely laid" and "The daughter of beauty," we last see her as "The Virgin"—the word capitalized as her final and permanent title—as she flees from the world of Experience.

That flight—or escape, to renew the fairy tale analogy—is precipitated almost entirely by the speech of the Cloud, who is as much the element of danger to Thel as Comus potentially is to the Lady:

O virgin know'st thou not, our steeds drink of the golden springs
Where Luvah doth renew his horses: Look'st thou on my youth,
And fearest thou because I vanish and am seen no more.
Nothing remains; O maid I tell thee, when I pass away,
It is to tenfold life, to love, to peace, and raptures holy;
Unseen descending, weigh my light wings upon balmy flowers;
And court the fair eyed dew, to take me to her shining tent;
The weeping virgin, trembling kneels before the risen sun,
Till we arise link'd in a golden band, and never part;
But walk united, bearing food to all our tender flowers... (3:7–16)

Clearly, the last lines describe sexual intercourse and are appropriate to the Cloud, since he is seen in Blake as "the male principle, the fructifier." And since he describes the dew whom he courts as a "weeping virgin," it is likely that Thel suddenly sees parallels with herself being proposed. Fear of such a comparison, of seeing herself in a similar position, may be the reason that in her response she ignores all of the Cloud's speech except the last phrase, "bearing food to all our tender flowers," when she says,

Dost thou O little Cloud? I fear that I am not like thee;
For I walk through the vales of Har. and smell the sweetest flowers;
But I feed not the warbling birds. they fly and seek their food;
But Thel delights in these no more because I fade away,
And all shall say, without a use this shining woman liv'd,
Or did she only live, to be at death the food of worms. (3:17-23)

In her rejection of the Cloud Thel does not allude at all to Luvah, steeds,
tenfold life or raptures holy; and certainly there is no mention of the fair eyed dew and her union with the Cloud. One almost feels that Thel cannot bring herself to discuss such subjects, that she has matched at the one area safe for discussion by a virgin. Certainly, however, her “I am not like thee” implies more than her not “bearing food to . . . tender flowers.”

Equally important to our understanding of Thel’s abrupt dismissal of the Cloud and her subsequent rejection of Experience are the first two lines of Cloud’s speech: “O virgin know’st thou not. our steeds drink of the golden springs/ Where Luvah doth renew his horses. . . .”23 Since Luvah is the Zoa representing passion in Blake and since the horse traditionally bears similar connotations, the Cloud doubly reinforces a sexual context before going on to the more delicate description of his union with the dew.

In one short speech the Cloud has infused the poem with multiple levels of sexuality. Thel could accept his wisdom and identify with the dew; she chooses, however, not to understand, and, indeed, is so flustered that she can only reject any similarities formerly expressed between herself and the Cloud. The Cloud has become as dangerous to Thel as Comus might seem to the Lady, and her rejection of his wisdom comes as no surprise; she has prepared us in her earlier line to the Lilly, whose “perfume,” according to Thel, “tames the fire-breathing steed” (2:10). To Thel, passion is to be quenched, not enjoyed.

Thus Thel is shocked beyond recovery when she herself, projected imaginatively into Experience, in the last scene of the poem, seems to be rejecting restraints on sex. Having entered the earth at Clay’s invitation, Thel sees the world of Experience, presented in harsh, ugly imagery, as her fears would certainly distort it, and hears her own voice, attacking at first the distortions of the other senses; finally—as Blake inevitably substitutes sex for the sense of touch—she hears her voice ask: “Why a tender curb upon the youthful burning boy!/ Why a little curtain of flesh on the bed of our desire?” (6:19–20). The Thel of fairy tale innocence cannot deal with such attitudes—especially in herself. The Thel who has sought the secret air ultimately rejects it; the danger seems too great, and she must escape.

23. This is Blake’s first mention of Luvah, who next appears in The Four Zoas. It is conceivable that Blake already had in mind some of the developments of The Four Zoas, for a number of interesting parallels can be seen between the imagery of that poem and Thel. Luvah’s Female Emanation is Vala, equated with nature and “natural beauty” (Damon, Dictionary, p. 255), whereas Thel is described variously as “beauty of the vales of Har” and “The daughter of beauty”; Damon also proposes that “Luvah in his cloud addressing Vala suggests Thel and her cloud . . .” (Dictionary, p. 430). In The Four Zoas Luvah describes the various metamorphoses that Vala has gone through, appearing first as earthworm, then as serpent, then dragon, and finally as “a little weeping Infant a span long . . .” (FZ 27:2). Each of these images appears in Thel; indeed, the illustration to plate four shows the worm as infant, so that through the conjunction of text and picture something of a metamorphosis may be said to occur on the page itself. (Similarly, the serpent of plate six seems to have the head of a dragon, especially in Copy III, in which three horns have been added. See Bogen, p. 48.) The “span” of Luvah’s description is an interesting usage: customarily thought of as the distance from the tip of the thumb to the tip of the little finger, or about nine inches, it also figures in the Geometrae of Linnaeus (1707–1778), who mentions the “Span-worm.” Blake thus may have known the term and used this particular measure to further link infant and worm. If these images convey the sense that Blake did indeed have Vala in mind when writing Thel, he may well have been setting up another female model, like the dew, for Thel to emulate.
The lines describing Thel's escape are the last in *The Book of Thel*: "The Virgin started from her seat, & with a shriek./ Fled back unhinderd till she came into the vales of Har" (6:21–22). Separated from Thel's questions on the senses, they are immediately adjacent to the illustration of a serpent ridden by three joyous children. This juxtaposition of sexuality and childish delight is generally recognized as Organized Innocence, the state which Thel will never reach, since one cannot make the leap from Innocence to Organized Innocence without first going through Experience. The significance of the combined verse and illustration is clear: back in "the vales of Har" Thel can retain her childishness, her inaccurate, fairy tale view of the world. She rejects the serpent, the potential sexuality in herself. Without the serpent the picture represents simple innocence; but the integrated human contains both innocence and sexuality. Thel is ultimately an incomplete human being, at home only in the pages of a fairy tale.

The final inverted parallels with *Comus* amplify this issue: in *Comus* the Lady's ultimate salvation comes from Sabrina, water nymph, local deity, but most importantly, a virgin like the Lady, whose virtue has similarly been threatened, and who similarly escaped unharmed. As the attendant spirit tells us of Sabrina, "maid'nhood she loves" (855). She herself says, "'tis my office best/ to help ensnared chastity" (908–909)—and John Demaray adds, "to aid in reestablishing order."24 In contrast, the last creature to guide Thel is "the matron Gay," clearly a maternal figure (she exhales her life "in milky fondness" for the worm), who leads Thel through the gates of imagination into the world of Experience, certainly not the abode of order or virginity. Blake's inversion of Milton's goal seems quite clear in this choice of final guide and in the direction of the guidance offered.

Then there is the matter of the journey undertaken in each work, and the completion of such a journey. At the end of *Comus* the Lady has reached her destination, her parents' home, and, in keeping with the masque tradition, is united with her society in a spirit of celebration, so that equilibrium is achieved. In contrast, Thel's final action is one of rejection; she rejects the society she has been involved with and rejects as well the society her creator leads her towards. She, too, may be rejoining her family—but in Har—a state of suspended animation and extended innocence, an unreal world which is the antithesis of life and celebration.

*The Book of Thel* is not much closer to true drama than is *Comus*, and it seems unlikely that a fragile creature who converses with clouds and flowers should be more credible than an adolescent with human companions and a partially human antagonist. But Milton's characters are antagonists in the most limited sense of the word—they are impersonal contenders in a weighted argument. Milton speaks for virginity and stasis: the Lady speaks her lines with cool certainty—and no emotion.

24. Demaray, p. 90.
Thel, in comparison, is never certain. Blake’s form and his theme enable him to convey a far greater psychological tension, that of the “virginity that wishes but acts not.” Thel may be vain (as the attractiveness of her similes indicates); she may be a bit slow in understanding; but her fear is real: the gap between the childish romanticizing of life in nature and the actualization of sexual desire is great. Thel is shocked by what she sees in Experience, shocked still more by what she hears. It is the Clay who leads her into the pit of Experience, but the Cloud who reveals its ultimate connection with Thel herself. The Cloud’s dense, richly packed speech puts into a vividly sexual context the message of Lilly and Clay. It is a message not intended to frighten, but Thel is not mature enough to know that “Energy is Eternal Delight.” To her, the Cloud might just as well have been a bestial magician in a fairy tale.

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