

JOSEPH WRIGHT OF DERBY'S *THE LADY IN MILTON'S COMUS*

by

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CHAPTER I

LEADING UP TO MR. WRIGHT'S EXHIBITION OF 1785

Wright wrote a letter to his friend William Haley in April 1784 in which he mentioned the near completion of a companion to his *Indian Widow*:

...I am engaged with Margaret and William for which I have done, I hope it will prove a chilling picture, I have arrived at an unpleasant colouring, which will be well contrasted by the Corinthian Maid & Penelope, between which I intend it to hang in my Exhibition[.] I have also nearly finished a Companion to the Indian Widow, the burst of light in which picture, suggested to Mrs. Beridge those lines from Comus: 'Was I deceived? or did a sable Cloud/ Turn forth her Silver lining on the Night &c.' I never painted a picture so universally liked...¹



In 1785, after several years of being at odds with the Royal Academy, Joseph Wright of Derby (1734-1797) showed *The Lady in Milton's Comus* (Figure 1) along with twenty-four other works in a solo exhibition at Mr. Robins's Rooms (late Langford's), No. 9, under the

Figure 1. *The Lady in Milton's Comus*, 1785, Egerton, 128.

¹ Benedict Nicolson, *Joseph Wright of Derby Painter of Light*, 2 vols. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1968), 148. The letter comes from the Inglefield MSS.

Great Piazza, Covent Garden in London, England. Among these works were several pendants, and two of these sets were of virtuous women. One set included figures placed in sublime outdoor settings: *The Lady in Milton's Comus* (1785, Walker Art Gallery Liverpool) and *The Widow of an Indian Chief watching the Arms of her deceased Husband* (Figure 2, 1785, Derby Museum and Art Gallery). A second set consisted of *Penelope Unravelling her Web, by Lamp-Light* (Figure 3, 1785, J. Paul Getty Museum) and *The Corinthian Maid* (Figure 4, 1782-1785, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.). Not only were the subjects in these two paintings classical, they were also connected by interior architectural settings that displayed tools of industry. As a group,



Figure 2. *The Indian Widow*, 1785, Egerton, 129.

loss or separation. Moreover, each of the subjects is taken from a literary source, and all of the women exhibit a virtuous or heroic stance in confronting their plights. The idea for *The Lady in Milton's Comus* came from John Milton's mask of 1634 in which a young woman becomes lost in a forest, is abducted by the lecherous creature Comus, and must preserve her chastity in order to survive her ordeal. *The Indian Widow* came from a

these four paintings celebrate the virtuous actions of the women depicted within them.

These four works are related to one another in a variety of ways. All represent scenes of unfortunate circumstances, and the women in them are connected by the idea of

passage in James Adair's *The History of the American Indians* (1775) that describes the watch that a widow would sit after the death of her husband.

The other two paintings however come from much older sources dating to Classical times. The idea for *Penelope Unravelling her Web, by Lamp-Light* originally



Figure 3. *Penelope Unravelling Her Web, by Lamp-Light*, 1785, Egerton 131.

she could not marry them until she had finished weaving a shroud for her dead father-in-law Laertes. During the day she wove, and during the night she unraveled her work. She continued this method until Ulysses returned and killed the suitors. The story of the Corinthian Maid has its roots in both Pliny and Athenagoras. It was eventually collected in Diderot's *Encyclopédie* and other literary works. The source that most influenced Wright came from his friend William Hayley's poem *An Essay on Painting*, published in 1778.²

The source for *The Corinthian Maid* comes from the classical story of Dibutades' creation of portraiture inspired by her love for her companion. Knowing that he would

² Judy Egerton, *Wright of Derby* (London: Tate Gallery Publications, 1990), 135.

came from Homer's *Odyssey*. Wright's source was Alexander Pope's 1725-1726 translation of the story. In the story, Penelope, the wife of Ulysses, was left at home with their son Telemachus. While Ulysses was gone for ten years, Penelope had to fend off a string of suitors. To do this she told them that

have to leave, she traced his outline, cast by lamplight, on the wall behind him. Her potter father later added clay and baked it, leaving her with an image of her beloved that could comfort her in his absence.

The most dramatic of these four paintings is *The Lady in Milton's Comus*. While



4. *The Corinthian Maid*, c.1782-5, Egerton, 133.

the women depicted in the other three works are seated in a quiet and collected manner, the woman featured in *The Lady in Milton's Comus* is the opposite of calm and collected. She has just burst out of the forest into a small moonlit clearing. She raises her hands toward the sky in a gesture indicating a

panicked frenzy. This painting, which, as mentioned above, looks to British author John Milton (1608-1674) for inspiration, will be closely examined in this thesis. The major focus of this thesis will be an examination of both Wright's painting and the literary and social influences on it during the late eighteenth-century. Several questions will be considered. How does this work embody Wright's oeuvre in spirit and style? What role did literary influence play upon Wright's career? Why did he pair this painting with *The Widow of an Indian Chief watching the Arms of her deceased Husband*, and for that matter, what does the larger grouping of all four of the virtuous women tell us? How can we learn more about the culture of the time by attempting to view these works through the eyes of Wright's audience and by examining their subsequent reception?

While Wright's exhibition was not a major success in his career and did not add significantly to his fame, it can be seen as the apex of his artistic achievement and a demonstration of his wide-ranging interests. During his career, Wright painted portraits, conversation pieces, landscapes, narratives, moonlights and candlelights. He chose subjects ranging from scientific enquiry and enlightenment values to natural phenomena and sublime forces in nature. Wright was fascinated by the world around him and was an avid reader. Wright's painting of *The Lady in Milton's Comus* serves as shining example of these interests and can be seen as an exemplar of his oeuvre. Before exploring these topics in more depth, we will first turn to a brief look at his life and the events that led up to his exhibition and the creation of this painting. The remainder of this chapter will focus on Wright's career and his 1785 exhibition. In the second chapter, a closer look will be taken at the painting itself and its relation to Milton. The third chapter will discuss the literary influences and social institutions of Wright's time that informed his work. The fourth chapter will tie these themes together and explore the legacy of Wright's painting as well as taking a brief look at the subsequent popularity of *Comus* in the nineteenth-century.

Joseph Wright of Derby³ was born at No. 28 Irongate in Derby, England on September 3, 1734 to Hannah Brookes and attorney and town clerk of Derby, John

³ He is referred to as Wright of Derby for two reasons. The addition of Wright to his title distinguished him from at least two other Joseph Wrights practicing art at the time and calls attention to the fact that he later settled in his native town as opposed to the more cosmopolitan London. This latter point would ultimately tarnish his reputation as a serious metropolitan artist and categorize him as a provincial painter. See Nicolson, *Joseph Wright of Derby Painter of Light*, 1.

"Equity" Wright.⁴ While his oldest brother John continued the family law practice, and his elder brother Richard became a physician, Joseph exhibited an artistic capability at a young age.⁵

In 1751, at the age of seventeen, Joseph Wright was sent to London to study portraiture under Thomas Hudson (1701-1779) for a period of two years.⁶ Hudson was a successful portrait painter during the first half of the eighteenth century, but has been characterized by Ellis Waterhouse as the last of the "conscienceless artists" and is best remembered for being Joshua Reynolds's (1723-1792) instructor from 1740-1743.⁷ However, during his lifetime, he was well respected, and Stephen Daniels notes that the apprenticeship under Hudson was among the costliest in London in those days.⁸ Further, his style of painting was not atypical for that time period, and is more a reflection of the restrictive tastes of the aristocracy.⁹

⁴ Stephen Daniels, *Joseph Wright* (London: Tate Gallery Publishing Ltd., 1999), 9.

⁵ Daniels, *Joseph Wright*, 9.

⁶ Nicolson notes that Hudson was likely selected because he had also been Joshua Reynolds's teacher. See Nicolson, *Joseph Wright of Derby Painter of Light*, 2.

⁷ Waterhouse criticizes him for executing very little of the actual work of painting himself, instead delegating these chores to members of his studio and taking more pride in the drapery and embroidery than in the sitters. See Ellis Waterhouse, *Painting in Britain: 1530-1790* (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), 200-201. While his pupils and the new generation of artists elevated portraiture and imbued their sitters with a more humanizing vibrancy, warmth, and feeling, Hudson has sometimes been criticized for maintaining well-tried formulas. See Andrew Wilton, *Five Centuries of British Painting: From Holbein to Hodgkin* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2001), 74.

⁸ Daniels, *Joseph Wright*, 9.

⁹ During the mid-century, many artists had become frustrated with the daily grind of painting wealthy sitters and were eager for a change. Hogarth was an early proponent of a more imaginative direction for art, and Gainsborough and Reynolds were among the pioneers in providing portraiture with greater depth and meaning. See Andrew Graham-Dixon, *A History of British Art* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 104.

After his training under Hudson, Wright returned to Derby in 1753, where he set about painting portraits of locals, family, and friends. The only known patron from this period is the Curzon family of Kedleston. Not happy with the progress of his career he returned to Hudson's studio for another fifteen months of training from 1756-1757.

During this second stay with Hudson, Wright met and befriended his lifelong friend John Hamilton Mortimer (1740-1779). Mortimer later served as both vice-president (1770) and president (1774) of the Society of Artists and encouraged an emphasis on Anglo-Saxon based historical painting as opposed to that of classical Greece and Rome. Like Wright, Mortimer is remembered as a pioneer of romantic literary subjects. He is best known for his engravings of Shakespearean figures, Banditti, and monstrous imaginative figures. Additionally, Mortimer, along with Fuseli, was among the first to use a subject from Spenser to create a romantic history painting.¹⁰ He was eventually admitted into the Royal Academy just before his early death in 1779. During his lifetime he was always a good and encouraging friend to Wright.

After Wright's further training under Hudson, he again returned to Derby where he began his career as a portrait painter. By 1760, Wright was sure enough of his skill that he ventured on a visit of nearby Midland towns including Retford, Lincoln, Newark, Boston, Thorne, and Doncaster, painting several portraits along the way.¹¹ During the 1760's, Wright joined a group called the Howdalian Society, an organization designed to

¹⁰ Waterhouse, *Painting in Britain*, 290.

¹¹ Nicolson, *Joseph Wright of Derby Painter of Light*, 2.

bring together intelligent men interested in the fine arts and music.¹² Mortimer served as the president of the club, and members including the Welsh landscape painter Thomas Jones, Joseph Wilton, John Ireland, and Henry Fuseli met regularly at Munday's Coffeehouse on Maiden Lane to exchange ideas.¹³ It is also during this period that Wright began experimenting with night pieces and genre scenes with figures examining objects such as scientific equipment, classical sculpture, and iron forges.¹⁴ These pieces demonstrate his interest in man's thoughtfulness in relation to the developments of the Industrial Revolution as well as in enlightened sensibility. Rather than simply painting portraits on his canvases, Wright captured more than just the surface level of life. He painted humanity's deep-rooted interest in discovery as well as their wide range of emotions. These first pieces began to hold up a mirror to the public sphere, incorporating Shaftesburian ideas which had recently been reworked by George Turnbull in his *Treatise on Ancient Painting*. They began his progression towards more serious works exploring literature and history, but it is his dramatic handling of light for which he is best known today.

In 1765 he exhibited for the first time with the Society of Artists, a group with which he would participate every year until 1776. At that point in time, the Society of

¹² Nicolson, *Joseph Wright of Derby Painter of Light*, 2.

¹³ Peter Tomory, *The Life and Art of Henry Fuseli* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972), 23-24. Tomory notes Mortimer's *Caricature Painting* that dates roughly to 1765-1770 as evidence for the inclusion of Fuseli. In the *Memoirs of Thomas Jones*, Walpole Society, XXXII, 1946-48, it is stated that the group was named after Captain Howdall of the Artillery, who was a supporter of the arts and regularly met with the gentlemen before being assigned to Minorca. However, Martin Myrone, citing Sunderland, states that these men met at Feather's Tavern. See Martin Myrone, *Bodybuilding: Reforming Masculinities in British Art 1750-1810* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 128.

¹⁴ Daniels, *Joseph Wright*, 9.

Artists was the only real venue for artists interested in gaining public attention. However, this changed in 1768 when the Royal Academy was founded, and a large number of artists switched over to the new venue, leaving behind only the most steadfast. Wright was among this latter group, along with his friends George Stubbs (1724-1806), John Mortimer and George Romney (1734-1802), all of whom remained with the Society of Artists until the mid-1770's before themselves showing with the Royal Academy.¹⁵

While Wright was able to make a name for himself outside of Derby by exhibiting at such venues as the Society of Artists and the Royal Academy, his fame was greatly aided by the reproduction of many of his works in mezzotint by top printmakers of the day. These were circulated internationally, and, as they were relatively inexpensive, he was able to expand his audience. Additionally, since Wright chose to have reproduced mainly those works that he exhibited, he actively selected the works that would gain him fame and be discussed by the art world. During the period before photography, large volumes of prints were collected, and, as Egerton notes, it is quite telling that a German scholar, Michael Huber, writing in 1794 on British artists, clearly ranks Wright among the leading history painters of the day, based solely on his collection of prints.¹⁶ Not surprisingly, the first two works that Wright had reproduced were his groundbreaking and popular *A Philosopher giving that Lecture on the Orrery* (1766) and *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump* (1768).

¹⁵ Nicolson, *Joseph Wright of Derby Painter of Light*, 2 vols. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1968), 3.

¹⁶ Egerton, *Wright of Derby*, 25.

These moralizing works demonstrate that Wright had an early interest in artwork that was more than just aesthetically pleasing. When viewers looked upon these images, they were meant to be informed about their own position in the world. This in turn allowed them to contemplate and question themselves morally and ethically, and by doing so, hopefully improve themselves and society. David Solkin notes that these paintings are directly related to the cultural currents of Britain in that they represent, in elaborate and complicated compositions, the public sphere of the eighteenth-century.¹⁷ Additionally, it should be noted, that these paintings were expressly produced for this same audience. In these works, rather than providing viewers with a heroic protagonist, Wright presents them with polite society and their actions. This thread will be taken up in greater detail in the following chapters.

While London was the major center of artistic activity, other provincial centers, encouraged by the successful founding of the Royal Academy, began to develop. One of these was in Liverpool, where Wright's friend Peter Perez Burdett served as the first president of the Liverpool Society of Artists. This organization lasted only briefly, as did the Liverpool art scene during that period. Wright had friends and colleagues in Liverpool, and when Burdett encouraged Wright to relocate there in 1768, he did so.¹⁸ In Liverpool Wright was highly successful as a portrait painter and in 1770 he and John

¹⁷ David Solkin, *Painting for Money* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 227-228.

¹⁸ Nicolson, *Joseph Wright of Derby Painter of Light*, 3.

Mortimer were jointly commissioned to decorate a room at Radburne Hall for Colonel Pole, his most important commission up to that point.¹⁹

In July of 1773 Wright married Anne Swift (1749-1790), and in October the two set sail for the continent and Rome where they would spend the next couple of years. There he likely encountered Fuseli along with several other British painters at the English Coffee House in the Piazza di Spagna. In this environment of renewed interest in classical antiquity, a reformist approach to art developed that celebrated the heroic and virtuous subjects from Greco-Roman history and mythology. The artists reworked the classical, using new form and new content to create high-minded and serious subjects. One of the influential forces of this artistic shift was Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768), who moved to Rome in 1755, and espoused his enthusiasm for ancient art in three volumes that celebrated the simple and noble beauty of Greek classical art.²⁰ In combination with the changes taking place back in London, namely the creation of venues at which artists could show their own work and the new impetus to take subjects from British history and literature, the men active in Rome at the time encouraged each other to move forward.²¹ While in Rome, Wright studied the great Renaissance masters

¹⁹ Nicolson, *Joseph Wright of Derby Painter of Light*, 4.

²⁰ Winckelmann became one of the most knowledgeable art historians of the eighteenth-century on ancient art. His book, *History of Ancient Art* (1764) was quite influential in the rise of Neoclassicism. He championed Greek art and encouraged artists to imitate the forms while making it their own. Anton Raphael Mengs (1728-1779), Winckelmann's lover, was instrumental in spreading Winckelmann's ideas across Europe. Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825) as well as Robert Adam (1728-1792) were also influential in spreading and popularizing the Neoclassical spirit. In England, Josiah Wedgwood reproduced neoclassical imagery on porcelain at his Etruria factory. See Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Discoverers* (New York: Random House, 1983), 587.

²¹ Nancy L. Pressly, *The Fuseli Circle in Rome: Early Romantic Art of the 1770s* (New Haven: Yale Center for British Art, 1979), vi-vii.

and the antique while visiting the Capitoline museum, Trastevere, the Vatican, Palazzo Barberini, and the French Academy. During his stay Wright was greatly impressed by the antique as well as the developing Neoclassical style of his fellow artists. He filled several sketchbooks with drawings of antique subjects, and it is these sketches that he would later call upon for several of his more classically styled paintings during the 1780's.²² His 1785 painting *The Lady in Milton's Comus* demonstrates a hybrid of classicism, sensibility, and the sublime.²³

The first indication that Wright's style was moving in a new direction can be seen in his painting of *The Captive* (1774) from Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey*.²⁴ This painting betrays the immediate influence that Italy had on Wright. Wright's figure is reserved and frozen, and line locks the composition in place. Here too, the architecture and background maintain a careful and thoughtful dialogue with the figure in the foreground. However, classicism was not the only influence Wright felt during this period. Wright would go on to paint other subjects from Sterne later in his career. From this it is possible to see where Wright's interest in the sentimental and in sensibility began to develop.

²² One such example can be seen in *The Corinthian Maid*. The figure of the sleeping youth is taken from his 1774 sketch of *Endymion*, an antique relief that he had seen in the Capitoline Museum. See Nicolson, *Joseph Wright of Derby Painter of Light*, 65.

²³ Nicolson also notes, as most viewers of Wright's work might, that Wright, "like all his contemporaries Wright instinctively matched style to subject-matter; selecting classical forms for classical subjects as in the *Origin of Painting* [The Corinthian Maid]; Gothic forms for Gothic poems, as in *William and Margaret*; classicism tempered by melancholy for ballads, Milton and the contemporary literature of sensibility, as in *Edwin, Maria and Comus...*" See Nicolson, *Joseph Wright of Derby Painter of Light*, 65.

²⁴ From a letter written on August 10, 1774 by Father Thorpe to Lord Arundell, it is known that Wright was working on a painting of *The Captive*. See Nicolson, *Joseph Wright of Derby Painter of Light*, 7-8.

In the fall of 1775, Wright decided to establish himself in Bath, but once there he met with little commercial success. He had arrived shortly after Gainsborough's departure and found it hard to rival the more flattering portraiture of his predecessor. Nor did Wright possess the social graces necessary to cultivate a clientele among the genteel society there. As Daniels notes, Bath was a place where "interest in Enlightenment values of enquiry and industriousness were at best marginal."²⁵ Wright returned to Derby for the summer of 1776, at which time his first son was born and his friendship with William Haley began. He then returned to Bath for one more year during which time he suffered from rheumatism.²⁶

Wright returned to Derby for good on June 13, 1777. From this point on he broadened his oeuvre by painting landscapes, scenes from literature and mythology, and portraits of influential people from the Midlands. The move proved to be successful for Wright personally as well as financially. He was surrounded by family and friends and had enough patronage to live comfortably.

While life was good for Wright in his hometown, London remained the epicenter of the British art world, and he regularly traveled to London to show with both the Society of Artists and the Royal Academy to solidify both his regional identity and international reputations.²⁷ From 1778 to 1782 Wright exhibited at the Royal Academy annually. As a result he qualified for Associate Membership. In 1781 when a vote was

²⁵ Daniels, *Joseph Wright*, 10.

²⁶ Nicolson, *Joseph Wright of Derby Painter of Light*, 13.

²⁷ Daniels, *Joseph Wright*, 10.

cast, Wright received fourteen votes towards being elected as a full member while his closest competitor received only two.²⁸ For an unknown reason, Wright did not acknowledge receiving notification of his election from the secretary until two months later. After that point, an altercation developed between Wright and the Academy, and in February of 1783, he lost membership to a minor artist named Edmund Garvey. After enameller George Moser's death in 1783, Wright was given full membership in 1784. However, he declined the position and had his name struck out of the list of Associates.²⁹ While it is known that Wright had some sort of misunderstanding with the Royal Academy, the exact nature of the problem is open for debate. What is known is that due to this misunderstanding, Wright was prompted to hold an exhibition of his own in 1785 in Robins's Rooms.³⁰

During his life, Wright made friends with many other men also interested in exchanging ideas and concerns of enlightenment culture. Early in his career he established a rapport with the Derby clockmaker and geologist John Whitehurst. He also befriended the mapmaker and engraver Peter Perez Burdett during this time. Wright himself was never a member of the fraternal Lunar Society comprised of philosophers

²⁸ Nicolson, *Joseph Wright of Derby Painter of Light*, 14.

²⁹ Nicolson, *Joseph Wright of Derby Painter of Light*, 14.

³⁰ Nicolson mentions that Wright had complained on more than one occasion of the Royal Academy hanging his paintings in rather poor locations. In a letter to William Haley dated to April of 1784, Wright writes: "I felt much satisfaction in reading your letter to Mr. Long respecting my rejecting or accepting being an Academician. If the balance hung in equilibrium before, when I knew your sentiments up flew the Beam, & I refuse the honor, if it is one. I felt no inclination to become a member of a Society from whom I had repeatedly received the most humiliating treatment, the most flagrant abuse, & from which being an Academician would not have protected me, from 'Envy, Hatred, and Malice Etc...'. See Nicolson, *Joseph Wright of Derby Painter of Light*, 14.

and scientists, but many of his friends were, including Erasmus Darwin and Josiah Wedgwood. Stephen Daniels suggests that Wright may have been a member of the Freemasons, as were his friends Wedgwood, Burdett, Darwin, and Whitehurst.³¹ The poet William Haley provided encouragement and advice throughout the second half of Wright's career. All of these men continually invigorated Wright intellectually and helped to stimulate his own investigations into the world. His circle of friends also frequently provided advice concerning Wright's paintings, and of these friends it was Haley who had the biggest impact.

We will now return to the exhibition of 1785. Wright's 1785 exhibition has neither been described as an overwhelming success nor a failure. Apparently another artist, George Carter, also had a one-man show occurring slightly earlier in the season. Nicolson suggests that Carter had heard about Wright's intentions for a solo-exhibition and was able to beat him to it, knocking some of the steam out of Wright's later show. What little is known of the 1785 exhibition comes from the following two contemporary sources. An account from the *Public Advertiser* dating to June 1, 1785 describes the two shows as follows: "Carter, as he justly deserves, and Wright of Derby as he very justly does not deserve, except for his caprice and spleen (for Wright is a very fine painter) both are losers on their experiments of separate exhibitions."³² The second source comes from the diary of Syllas Neville and dates to May 4, 1785:

Saw Wright of Derby's Exhibition, who on account of some dispute has this year

³¹ Daniels, *Joseph Wright*, 10.

³² Nicolson, *Joseph Wright of Derby Painter of Light*, 16.

separated himself from the R. Academy. Here we have some pictures of great merit in the peculiar stile of his pencil – moon lights, storms of thunder & lightning, different effects of fire. The Exhibition of the R. Academy has but few pictures of great merit this year – indeed I did not stay long, the crowd of company & heat of the rooms made it into a Calcutta business.³³

It appears that while Wright was a well respected painter, and those that were present for his exhibition had a positive response to it, not many were drawn to it. One must keep in mind that the exhibitions that took place at the Royal Academy as well as the Society of Artists were a relatively new concept in London, and it was an even rarer circumstance for an artist to hold an independent exhibition.

However unsuccessful his exhibition was, his painting of *The Lady in Milton's Comus* was anything but that. Along with fourteen other paintings of the twenty-five shown in Wright's exhibition, *The Lady in Milton's Comus* was already sold. Josiah Wedgwood purchased this work along with *Penelope Unravelling her Web, by Lamp-Light* and *The Corinthian Maid*.³⁴ It is strange, however, that he did not also purchase the *Indian Widow* since it was meant to be the companion piece to *Comus*. Nicolson states that there is no record indicating that Josiah Wedgwood also sought to obtain the *Indian Widow*. He notes the similarity between the figures in these two paintings and the figures done in relief on Wedgwood plaques and finds it odd that Wedgwood was not interested in the companion, as the two paintings, much like the juxtaposition between the paintings of Penelope and the Corinthian Maid, possessed similar light and shade, similar gestures,

³³ Basil Cozens-Hardy, ed., *The Diary of Sylls Neville 1767-1788*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), 326-7.

³⁴ Wedgwood paid 80 gns for *Comus*, and 100 gns for the pair of *Penelope* and *The Corinthian Maid*. He also purchased a self-portrait for 16 gns. Wright's largest and costliest work, the *View of Gibraltar*, also appeared in this show. It was pre-sold to John Milnes of Wakefield for a price of £420 Pounds.

similar subject matter (in this case, the virtuous woman put into an awful predicament by no fault of her own), and a similar artificial placement into a lonely setting.³⁵

Before proceeding to a discussion of literary and cultural influences that informed Wright's work, I will now turn to a close examination of *The Lady in Milton's Comus* and its position within Wright's body of work.

³⁵ Nicolson, *Joseph Wright of Derby Painter of Light*, 149.

CHAPTER II

THE LADY IN MILTON'S COMUS

In the first half of this chapter a close look at *The Lady in Milton's Comus* will be taken. The work will first be examined by itself and then as a companion piece. It will also be seen in relation to a few of Wright's other paintings as far as moonlight and landscape are concerned. The discussion will then turn to the painting's relation to Milton. The following chapter on literary and cultural influences will be clearer after first taking some time to better know the painting

Wright's painting illustrates for the viewer what previously had existed only in words. In the lower-left corner of the composition, a woman wearing a full-length white chemise-type dress, resembling something of a cross between a classical-style and a contemporary dress, belted high on the waist with a sash, is depicted emerging from a dark forest into a relatively open clearing. Her shawl has fallen down around her lower body and wraps over her right leg before resting upon the ground. She is leaning forward, and her knees are both bent, indicating that she has been struggling in the darkness to make her way through the woods. Overall, her body forms an s-curve, and this pose, in combination with the energetic folds of her dress, suggests the urgency of her situation. Her arms are opened and extend forward in a gesture that pleads for divine aid. Her right arm is angled down toward the earth, while her left is angled towards the

heavens. Her head is tilted upwards and her gaze is aimed at the clouds parting in the distance and upon the moonlight emanating from them.

A grove of trees and branches rise up behind and above her and cast the surrounding areas into darkness. The largest tree directly behind her raises its branches in a pose similar to that of her arms, and thus connects the image of the woman with the background that she is painted into. In front of her, the clearing is slightly illuminated by moonlight that is breaking through a very cloudy night sky. Just a small, rounded silvery-white fragment of the moon glows as it rests on the top of dark cloud. At the right edge of the clearing a short embankment meets a stream. The stream, in turn flows into the distance and joins a larger body of water, most likely the ocean.³⁶

As we know from Wright's letter, *The Lady in Milton's Comus* was made as a companion for *The Widow of an Indian Chief watching the Arms of her deceased Husband*,³⁷ and the relationship to that painting must be considered. *The Lady in Milton's Comus* was meant to be hung to the left of the *Indian Widow*. When the two pieces are viewed together, one can see the continuity between the two. The seascape and cloudy sky that are visible in the background of *The Lady in Milton's Comus* continue through space and resume in the left distance of *The Indian Widow* creating a bridge between the two paintings. While the sea appears calm in *The Lady in Milton's Comus*, it is quite turbulent in *The Indian Widow*, giving the viewer the feel that they are observing two

³⁶ The "Atlantick stream" is mentioned in line 97. See Roy Flannagan, ed., *The Riverside Milton*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998), 128.

³⁷ Oil on canvas, 40 x 50 in (101.6 x 127 cm), Derby Art Gallery. The work is almost exactly the same size as its companion as well as *Penelope Unravelling her Web, by Lamp-light* (40 x 50 in) and *The Corinthian Maid* (41 7/8 x 51 3/4 in). It is commonly referred to as *The Indian Widow*.

women separated by an ocean but united by a common theme of loss. Above the waves in *The Indian Widow*, a storm is raging, lightning strikes, and the clouds swirl in a vortex that echoes the swirling clouds and smoke of many of Wright's scenes of erupting volcanoes. In fact, Wright has placed a smoking volcano in the far distance of the right side of his painting, although in comparison to his other scenes of erupting, molten-lava spewing monstrosities, this one is quite tame. Though this scene is meant to occur in the daytime, the storm greatly darkens the sky and the head of the Widow blocks the light source. A light-yellowish glow in the background shifts to a pinkish color and finally to a dark grey. In total, the forces of nature combine together to create a quite sublime setting.

The opening of the clouds echoes the similar device in *The Lady in Milton's Comus* but then amplifies the intensity greatly, creating a piece that prefigures the future work of Turner. This opening provides a frame that surrounds the figure of the Widow. She sits near the base of a ceremonial mourning war-pole that holds the accoutrements of her deceased husband. It was her duty to sit a watch during daytime throughout the first moon following the death of her husband. During this time she was not allowed any company.³⁸ She is placed in a position that creates a parenthesis to the figure of the Lady in *Comus*, and the two women face each other. Though she is seated, her body is curved in a similar manner to the Lady, and like the Lady, her arm closest to the foreground is angled diagonally downwards toward the ground. Her right arm is raised up, and she leans her head against it in a pose of despair, but also of physical stress. Like the pose of

³⁸ Egerton, *Wright of Derby*, 130.

the Lady, the Widow's pose expresses to the viewer the awful situation in which she is placed, and pleads for sympathetic understanding. Wright must have been hard-pressed to discover the appropriate garb for his mourning Native-American widow, and instead turned to the "well-worn neo-classical draperies which served in art in his day for any distressed female figure."³⁹

Wright frequently painted companion pieces. In addition to the two works just discussed, he also included in his 1785 exhibition *Penelope Unravelling her Web, by Lamp-Light* and *The Corinthian Maid*. As a group these four paintings all celebrate virtuous women. Three other sets of companions were also included in the exhibition. These are the pairings of *Hero and Leander* with *Drowning of Leander*; *A distant View of Vesuvius from the shore of Posilipo* with *The Companion, in the gulf of Salerno*; *A View of Dovedale, morning* with *A View of Dovedale, evening*.

In addition to the connections already mentioned, the two pieces are unified in other ways as well. Both figures are framed by a large tree just behind them. This area is also relatively darker than the rest of the composition and serves as an anchor that keeps the eye from leaving the outer edge of either work. Both compositions are built up on a diagonal. In *The Lady in Milton's Comus* this diagonal begins in the top left corner and slopes down towards the lower right. The situation is reversed in *The Indian Widow* so that the diagonal meets in the lower corner closest to the other painting. This causes the viewer to create a visual connection between the two pieces.

³⁹ Benedict Nicolson, "Two Companion Pieces by Wright of Derby," *Burlington Magazine* 708 (1962): 113-117.

It is possible that another painting hung between these two. We know from Wright's April 1784 letter to William Haley, for instance, that he intended to hang *Margaret and William* between *Penelope* and *The Corinthian Maid*. Whether that was the situation for this pair or not is hard to say, for if we follow the ordering in the Exhibition catalog, this would not be the case, but rather, the paintings would have hung side by side.

Many of Wright's paintings are night scenes in which moonlight is either a major feature or serves as a strong secondary feature. Judy Egerton comments that:

Wright's 'Lady' of course shares her scene with moonlight; and it was probably moonlight rather than the Lady which inspired it. Wright's representation of moonlight here is subtle and poetic, lacking all the histrionic effects of such earlier moonlit scenes as the Detroit *Matlock High Tor* [ca. 1777-1779] or the *Virgil's Tomb* of 1782. As Wright remarked to his friend and patron Daniel Daulby in a letter of 25 March 1786 (Derby Public Library), 'Moonlight pictures require a good light but not a glaring one'.⁴⁰

Egerton's assessment is accurate in part. The light emanating from a bright full-moon in *Matlock High Tor* (Figure 5), which was also shown in Wright's 1785 exhibition, casts itself vibrantly down upon the cliff-face, lake, stream, and forest below bathing all in a pale light. The subject of this work at first appears



Figure 5. *Matlock High Tor*, 1777-9, Nicolson, 132.

⁴⁰ Egerton mentions *Matlock High Tor*, but gives the figure number for *Matlock Tor, Moonlight*. See Egerton, *Wright of Derby*, 128.

to be the effect of light, a topic Wright that fascinated Wright throughout his life. In another work depicting the same site from a different point of view, *Matlock Tor, Moonlight* (Figure 6, ca. 1777-1780) the landscape is also completely illuminated by the moon, making the subject of the painting the moonlight itself. However tempting it is to just chalk Wright's nocturnal paintings up as studies in moonlight, further investigation demonstrates that this was not the only force operating on Wright. Prior to its 1785 publication, William Gilpin's *Observations Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty* had passed through many hands in manuscript form.⁴¹ Gilpin's work recounted his travels through the Lake District, the Peak District, and the Derwent and Dove valleys. As he traveled through each of these regions he evaluated their scenery. He described the vale of Matlock as, "a romantic and most delightful scene, in which the ideas of sublimity and beauty are blended in a high degree," and Matlock Tor, as the "most magnificent rock, decorated with wood, and stained with various hues, yellow, green, and grey...It is impossible to view such scenes without feeling the imagination take fire."⁴² Even if

⁴¹ Gilpin's definition of picturesque varied as his career progressed. In its earliest usage it simply implied that which is suited to pictorial representation or is expressive of that peculiar kind of beauty, which is agreeable in a picture. However, beginning around 1782, Gilpin also came to include and popularize the picturesque of roughness and intricacy. This latter addition may remind readers of certain features of the sublime, and it is no surprise that the definition of both philosophical terms was widely discussed by aestheticians, gardeners, and painters during the latter half of the eighteenth-century. See Walter John Hipple, Jr., *The Beautiful, The Sublime, & The Picturesque in Eighteenth-Century British Aesthetic Theory*, (Carbondale: The Southern Illinois University Press, 1957), 192-3. Hipple's book is an excellent source for further reading on the picturesque and those key figures associated with it such as: William Gilpin, Sir Uvedale Price, Humphrey Repton, and Richard Payne Knight.

⁴² Quoted from Gilpin in Daniels, *Joseph Wright*, 68-70.

Wright himself had not read a version of Gilpin's work, it is likely that he would have had its ideas or those of Price, Repton, and Knight disseminated to him through his educated circle of friends. Christopher Hussey explains the picturesque in relation to the eighteenth-century artist and viewer as, "a long phase in the aesthetic relation of man to nature," in which, "poetry, painting, gardening, architecture, and the art of travel may be



Figure 6. *Matlock Tor, Moonlight*, 1777-1780, Nicolson, 135.

said to have been fused into the single 'art of landscape.'⁴³ He further points out that the picturesque phase of art marked a transitional period between classicism and romanticism, between reason and imagination.⁴⁴ This is also a good way to view many of Wright's paintings that so often share elements of both.

Beyond the aesthetic, Wright's friend the Reverend Thomas Gisborne saw a connection between nature and society. He championed forest scenery for its natural beauty and social order and felt that government and society should model itself on such ideas. His thoughts and writings proved influential to his friend Wright as well as both Price and Gilpin.⁴⁵

In addition to the ideas of the picturesque landscape that pervaded the times, the area around Derbyshire was home to a great deal of scientific investigation. Wright's

⁴³ Christopher Hussey, *The Picturesque: Studies in a Point of View*, (London: Putnam, 1927), 4-5.

⁴⁴ Hussey, *The Picturesque: Studies in a Point of View*, 4-5.

⁴⁵ Daniels, *Joseph Wright*, 72.

friend John Whitehurst conducted many geological studies of the earth relating to earthquake and volcanic activity.⁴⁶ Also, Daniels notes that Wright included in his paintings signs of industry and progress including: mines, carts, and mineral deposits.⁴⁷ Wright would reasonably have been proud that his home was a site of scientific investigation and enlightenment as well as industrial progress. It is not unreasonable

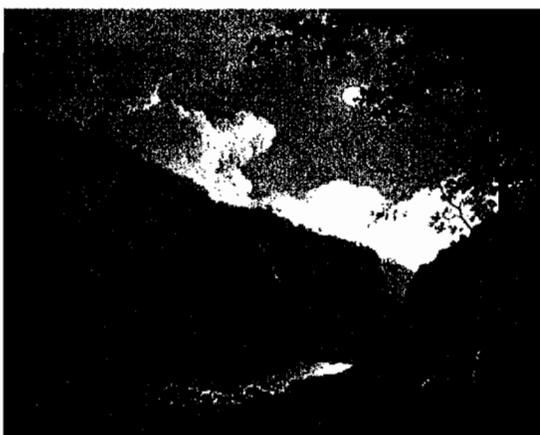


Figure 7. *Dovedale by Moonlight*, 1785, Egerton, 181.

then, to suggest that his works were not just simply studies of the landscape and nighttime lighting, but also a reflection of his developing world.

Another piece, *Dovedale by Moonlight* (Figure 7, 1785), was also shown in Wright's exhibition. Like *The Lady in Milton's Comus*, *Dovedale by Moonlight* was

also a companion painting, and it was also paired with a daylight scene. Again the landscape features in the painting are revealed by the moonlight, but not nearly to the extent of the pieces discussed above. Wright also managed to position a tree on the right side of the painting in a way that allowed the branches of it to cross the path of the moon, thus establishing a contrast between light and dark. This strategy was greatly improved upon for his *Comus*, in which a higher degree of contrast exists and an almost absolute black and white can be found within the work. While the sky in *Dovedale* glows with a

⁴⁶ Daniels, *Joseph Wright*, 67.

⁴⁷ Daniels, *Joseph Wright*, 70.

greenish tint, that in *The Lady in Milton's Comus* is a silvery shade of white. The trees in *Comus* appear much more naturally positioned and are believable, while those in *Dovedale* hint at artifice. The large tree in *Dovedale* appears to be placed for the sake of compositional unity. Conversely, Egerton sees a lack of picturesque adherence in *Dovedale* and says that Wright painted what he saw; an unconventional move of realism.⁴⁸ Nicolson notes Wright's patron Edmund Mundy's interest in *Dovedale* for its Gothic appeal.⁴⁹ As with many of Wright's works, it is not easy to classify either of these paintings as one thing or another; they are hybrids.



Figure 8. *Virgil's Tomb*, 1782, Nicolson, 147.

one must not forget that the original concept for the painting had been an exploration of the story of Silius Italicus, the eccentric poet who annually celebrated Virgil's birthday.

It is known that Wright produced another version in 1783 for his friend Haley, and it is

⁴⁸ Egerton, *Wright of Derby*, 181. I suggest that without actually seeing the site in its original condition, it is hard to determine how picturesque or realistic the scene actually is.

⁴⁹ Nicolson, *Joseph Wright of Derby Painter of Light*, 97. The gothic will be examined in chapter 3.

⁵⁰ Wright painted several versions of this subject. His 1782 version was his third, and for this painting he removed the figure of Silius Italicus from the tomb that can be seen in the earlier 1779 version.

⁵¹ Nicolson, *Joseph Wright of Derby Painter of Light*, 83.

In the *Virgil's Tomb* (Figure 8) of 1782, moonlight is a dominant element.⁵⁰ Moonlight filters down through the back of the tomb and reflects off of the walls in what Nicolson feels is a "stagy" manner.⁵¹ Indeed the lighting was especially bent to Wright's will to create a grand illusion, but

believed that this is the same painting that he showed in his 1785 exhibition.⁵² It is only possible to speculate on its appearance, but none-the-less, it provided the viewer with yet another moonlight work to see.

In all of the above mentioned works, moonlight played a large part, while subtle underpinnings such as landscape features, monumental stones, or a tomb existed in secondary capacity. While the scene itself was interesting to the viewer, the treatment of



Figure 9. *An Iron Forge Viewed from Without, 1773*, Egerton, 103.

light was actually the more impressive feature. In *The Lady in Milton's Comus*, the opposite is true, and moonlight can be seen as a secondary participant in the drama. This is not to say however that light is not important in either *The Lady in Milton's Comus* or in *The Indian Widow*. While the Lady remains the star of the show, the silvery light heightens her expressive nature. In *The Indian Widow* light is also important. The position of her head blocks out the sun, and as a result of the swirling opening in the clouds, the viewer is presented with a sitter whose head is surrounded by a halo of light.

The moonlight in *The Lady in Milton's Comus* relates more closely to that seen in some of Wright's earlier works. For example, in *An Iron Forge viewed from without* (Figure 9, 1773), moonlight takes the back seat to the glowing forge in the foreground.

⁵² Nicolson, *Joseph Wright of Derby Painter of Light*, 142.

However, the night sky in this painting becomes a second focal point in the composition, much as it does in *The Lady in Milton's Comus*. In comparing these two works one finds similarities in the night sky. As the clouds part above, a silvery moon reveals itself in part, allowing light to illuminate the earth below without overwhelming the composition with its radiance. Also similar to the composition of *The Lady in Milton's Comus*, Wright used the strategy of positioning the moon diagonally across from the primary focal point, allowing the viewer's eye to move across the picture plane. This set of paintings also provides another juxtaposition of night and day in a similar manner to the two views of Dovedale.

Another picture of 1773, *The Earthstopper on the Banks of the Derwent*, operates



Figure 10. *The Earthstopper on the Banks of the Derwent*, Egerton, 105.

in a similar manner to that of *Comus*. In this work a man is positioned in front of a grove of trees near the edge of a river. Above and behind the trees is the moon, only shown in part, and contrasted against the dark foliage. The clouds in the background have parted to allow the nocturnal eye to reveal itself and cast its

light down upon the moving water. Unlike the composition of *The Lady in Milton's Comus*, this painting is not as well balanced. In *The Earthstopper* the moon is positioned almost in the dead-center of the top of the composition, and is unevenly anchored by the lantern at the bottom right of the painting. As a result, a greater weight is placed on the

right side of the composition that is not equally balanced by the foliage or the reflected light on the water that occupies the left side.

While similar in some aspects to *The Lady in Milton's Comus* as far as lighting is concerned, both *An Iron Forge viewed from without* and *The Earthstopper on the Banks of the Derwent*, cannot compete with the level of refinement found in Wright's later painting. The rendering of the figure and all of the objects in *The Lady in Milton's Comus* is much sharper, and the modeling much smoother. The clouds in *The Lady in Milton's Comus* are also much more realistic, and while the sky in both of the earlier works has a bluish cast to it, Wright has stripped his palette down for the later work. The sky shifts from white to a dark gray with a range of modulation in between.

What really separates these earlier works from Wright's *The Lady in Milton's Comus* is the dramatic content and the combination of Neoclassicism and the Romantic. The genre scenes of the 1770's are interesting to the viewer, but the narrative of the 1785 painting is meant to move the viewer and trigger an emotional response while providing a strong example of virtue.

Now that we have examined *The Lady in Milton's Comus* closely from a stylistic point of view, we will now turn our attention to the role that Milton's writing played during the eighteenth century in relation to painting. In the catalog accompanying Wright's exhibition, prepared by his friend William Hayley and other poets, *The Lady in Milton's Comus* is the first entry. It is followed by a passage quoted from Milton's

pastoral drama titled *A Mask Presented at Ludlow Castle, 1634*, commonly referred to as *Comus*.⁵³ The lines are spoken by the Lady:

Was I deceiv'd, or did a sable cloud
Turn forth her silver lining on the night?
I did not err, there does a sable cloud
Turn forth her silver lining on the night,
And casts a gleam over this tufted grove.⁵⁴

Wright frequently sought advice concerning literary subjects from his friends. He corresponded with his family friend Mrs. Beridge on the topic of *The Lady in Milton's Comus*.⁵⁵ What role she played is not entirely understood. In his letter, he noted that the moonlight breaking through the clouds suggested to Mrs. Beridge the same passage that he later quoted in his exhibition catalog. What is not clear is whether Mrs. Beridge suggested a moonlight companion for the Indian Widow in which a scene from *Comus* would be depicted, or whether, upon viewing the nearly completed work, she was reminded of the specific passage from *Comus*. Judy Egerton suggests that Wright had

⁵³ Pointon notes that it was a highly common practice for artists during the second half of the eighteenth-century to append long passages of poetry to the titles of their works to better relate the narrative to their audience. See Marcia Pointon, *Milton and English Art*, (Great Britain: Manchester University Press, 1970), xxxiii. At this point, I must note that Marcia Pointon's work will be relied upon heavily in assessing the artistic situation during the eighteenth-century. At this time, I know of no other source that discusses prints and painting relating to Milton to such an extent as Pointon has compiled. Three other works are known to me that discuss Milton's influence though they are concerned mainly with poetry and literature. They are as follows: John T. Shawcross, *John Milton and Influence*, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1991); Albert C. Labriola and Edward Sichi Jr., Eds., *Milton's Legacy in the Arts*, (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988); Ronald Paulson, *Book and Painting: Shakespeare, Milton and the Bible: Literary Texts and the Emergence of English Painting*, (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1982).

⁵⁴ Bemrose reproduces the original 1785 catalog printed by J. Barker, Russell-Court, Drury-Lane. See William Bemrose, *The Life and Works of Joseph Wright, A.R.A., Commonly Called "Wright of Derby,"* (London: Bemrose and Sons, 1885), 18. This passage also can be found in Flannagan, ed., *The Riverside Milton*, 133.

⁵⁵ Wright was a friend of both Dr. John and Mrs. Beridge. They were married in 1766, and she was the daughter of George Buckston. Dr. Beridge was a Derby physician. Wright painted two little portraits of them in 1776, but these have been lost. See Nicolson, *Joseph Wright of Derby Painter of Light*, 141-2.

developed the idea for the painting on his own, but requested Mrs. Beridge's assistance in choosing a proper passage from *Comus* that would suit the work.⁵⁶

Regardless, the subject is taken from John Milton's (1608-1674) *A Mask Presented at Ludlow Castle, 1634*. Milton wrote extensively on religious and political themes, drawing on his knowledge of Virgil, Homer, and the Bible. Today his works are well known, but he was also very well received during his own lifetime and during the first half of the eighteenth-century. Indicating his popularity, Stephen B. Dobranski notes that only sixty years after his death, eight biographies had already been written about Milton.⁵⁷ Milton is perhaps best known for three of his long poems: *Paradise Lost* (1667, ten books; 1674, twelve books), *Paradise Regain'd* (1671), and *Samson Agonistes* (1671). However, it is his shorter poem and masque *Comus* that is of interest here.⁵⁸

On Michaelmas Night, September 29, 1634, *Comus* was performed as a masque in honor of John Egerton's (Earl of Bridgewater and Lord President of Wales and the Marches) being installed at Ludlow Castle, which is located on the border of Wales and

⁵⁶ Egerton, *Wright of Derby*, 127.

⁵⁷ Stephen B. Dobranski, "Milton's Social Life," in *The Cambridge Companion to Milton*, 2nd ed., ed. Dennis Danielson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 1.

⁵⁸ Masques were a product of the Jacobean and Caroline courts and developed up to the English Civil War. A masque was more than just its author's poem. It also incorporated theatrical elements of stage design and dance, and extensive collaboration would have been required to create a successful masque. These events were normally held after Christmas during the festive season or on other important occasions. Generally, masques involved younger members of the court. These masquers impersonated symbolic figures such as "chaste goddesses" or "martial heroes" depending on the intended honoree's gender. Normally a masque was performed in front of a monarch or other such dignitary, and mythologized the court to promote some noble philosophy. The performance would begin on a stage and alternate with disorderly and chaotic anti-masques, which emphasized the harmony of the main action. The masque would also include a series of dances, gradually incorporating more and more of the audience, eventually turning the evening into a ball. See Cedric Brown, "Milton's Ludlow Masque," in *The Cambridge Companion to Milton*, 2nd ed., ed. Dennis Danielson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 25-7.

England.⁵⁹ The masque of *Comus* performed at Ludlow Castle was nowhere near as grand an affair as those that would have been performed for more important dignitaries. The hall in which the masque was performed measured only sixty feet by thirty feet, and Milton had very little in the way of stage scenery or mechanical devices. The technical achievement of the night was when the river-goddess Sabrina rose through the stage in her chariot. The group of masquers was quite small as well and was comprised of the Egerton children including: Lady Alice Egerton (age 15); John, Lord Brackley (age 11); and Thomas (age 9). They played themselves as opposed to the more traditional roles of gods and goddesses. Another name that survives the record is Henry Lawes. He was the court musician and singing teacher for young Alice. Additionally he acted the part of the Attendant Spirit in the masque. Cedric Brown notes that the stripped-down provincial masque was necessary considering Milton's limited resources, and he points to Milton's text describing the moral perils of overly lavish affairs, which seems to be a convenient out for Milton.⁶⁰

As mentioned, masques marked special and important occasions. This masque, while humble, was no different. A state occasion that signaled the arrival of a new magistrate and governor is the first and foremost reason for the masque. The theme of travel as performed by the children mimics the real life travel that the family had recently experienced while touring their new domain. Also, Michaelmas was traditionally

⁵⁹ While John Egerton was actually nominated to the post in 1631, it was not until July of 1634 that he and his family arrived at their new home.

⁶⁰ Cedric Brown notes that the stripped down provincial masque was necessary considering Milton's limited resources, and he points to Milton's text describing the moral perils of overly lavish affairs, which seems to be a convenient out for Milton. See Brown, "Milton's Ludlow Masque," 26-7.

associated with a change in government as well as a time that celebrated angels. The Attendant Spirit serves this function. Additionally, to quote Brown:

At the same time, the masque's focus is on the people and region to which the family has come, 'An old, and haughty nation proud in arms', says Milton's text (33) in Neo-Virgilian fashion. So we are dealing with matters of good governance and heroic spirit in a place of heroic associations. The masque is to define ideals of personal and national governance.⁶¹

Finally, Brown states that the masque dealt with youth and education. Overall, the entire masque was atypical in its realization, and Milton specially adapted his poem to fit the performance. He had previously arranged an even simpler affair two years earlier for the Egerton's children called *Arcades*. Much like *Comus* the story was one of a journey in which trials and temptations exercised the children's virtue. When *Comus* was later published as a poetic work in 1637, Milton restored the text to its original format.⁶²

Wright took his subject from Milton's *Comus*, and recreated in a pictorial format the passage he quoted. While a few sporadic scenes from *Comus* appeared in the eighteenth century, prior to Wright, nobody had depicted the same theme. However, this should not lead one to suspect that *Comus* was not well received during the same period. R.D. Havens has researched the number of editions of the various English poets works in the eighteenth-century and discovered that *Comus* was reproduced in its original form, three times. It also appeared in stage adaptations over thirty times. By comparison, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* was only published thirteen times in the same period.⁶³

⁶¹ Brown, "Milton's Ludlow Masque," 28.

⁶² Brown, "Milton's Ludlow Masque," 29.

⁶³ Pointon, *Milton and English Art*, xxxvi.

Comus and his lot were the epitome of debauchery. Milton created the character of Comus, and explained that he was the progeny of Bacchus and Circe. Once grown, Comus took to the shade of the forest and assailed unlucky travelers. Comus especially preferred virgins.⁶⁴ He would pretend to come to their aid and offer them a drink of his "orient liquor."⁶⁵ Those that drank his "potion" would lose the human appearance of their face, and have it replaced with the features of the "wolf, bear, ounce, tiger, hog, or bearded goat" while retaining the normal features of the rest of their bodies.⁶⁶ Once the transformation or metamorphosis occurred, the people would forget their former lives and relish their new found life of sensual pleasure.⁶⁷

At the point in *Comus* to which Wright's painting refers, the Lady is slightly comforted by the break in darkness by the moonlight.⁶⁸ The Lady and her brothers become lost in the "tangl'd wood."⁶⁹ After some time of trying to find their way, the Lady becomes weary, and after depositing her beneath a pine tree, her brothers go in search of "berries, or such cooling fruit" for her.⁷⁰ In the process they become separated from her. As she walks along on her own, she hears in the distance the sound of

⁶⁴ Flannagan, ed., *The Riverside Milton*, 130.

⁶⁵ Flannagan, ed., *The Riverside Milton*, 126.

⁶⁶ Flannagan, ed., *The Riverside Milton*, 126.

⁶⁷ Flannagan, ed., *The Riverside Milton*, 127.

⁶⁸ The cast of *Comus* as mentioned earlier is relatively small and names are limited. The main character is simply referred to as The Lady.

⁶⁹ Flannagan, ed., *The Riverside Milton*, 131.

⁷⁰ Flannagan, ed., *The Riverside Milton*, 132.

merriment coming from what she believes to be some "late Wassailers" in the distance.⁷¹ In the darkness her mind plays tricks on her and she begins to see shapes that may or may not be there.

She remains courageous in spite of her situation and maintains a "vertuous mind that ever walks attended by a strong siding champion conscience."⁷² At this point the reader is reminded of her "pure ey'd faith" and "umblemish't form of chastity," and the Lady believes that she will be protected by the almighty so long as she maintains her faith.⁷³ As she is thinking these thoughts and hoping for aid, the clouds break and moonlight shines down upon her. This is the part of the poem that Wright depicts in his painting. Her spirits are "enliv'nd" by the moonlight, and she then feels compelled to sing a song that she thinks will gain the attention of her brothers.⁷⁴

Unfortunately for her, Comus hears her voice first and finds her.⁷⁵ Comus abducts her and attempts to seduce her, but to no avail. Eventually her brothers, aided by Sabrina, the virgin daughter of Lochrine, are able to rescue the Lady from Comus and his rabble. As with *Penelope*, the moral of the episode is that chastity prevailed over the obstacles and challenges that were placed before the Lady. The Lady's chastity gave her

⁷¹ Flannagan, ed., *The Riverside Milton*, 131.

⁷² Flannagan, ed., *The Riverside Milton*, 132.

⁷³ Flannagan, ed., *The Riverside Milton*, 132-3.

⁷⁴ Flannagan, ed., *The Riverside Milton*, 133.

⁷⁵ Flannagan, ed., *The Riverside Milton*, 134.

'a hidden strength.'⁷⁶ As the elder brother says in the poem, 'Virtue may be assail'd' but never hurt'."⁷⁷

While Wright was not the first to take a subject from Milton, it was certainly an infrequent act during the first half of the eighteenth-century. The history of Miltonic art began slowly and really dates to 1688. It was in that year that the first illustrated edition of *Paradise Lost* was published by Jacob Tonson (1656-1736) with most of the illustrations done by John Baptist Medina. In 1720, Tonson published Milton's *Works*, and this volume was illustrated by Louis Cheron.⁷⁸

Not surprisingly, most of the illustrations from this period belong to *Paradise Lost*. Between 1724 and 1764, most of the illustrations of Miltonic subjects were rendered by those in the circle of Hogarth. It was during this period that artists first began to shake off the "tyranny of the Old Masters" in favor of modern art.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Flannagan, ed., *The Riverside Milton*, 142.

⁷⁷ Flannagan, ed., *The Riverside Milton*, 149.

⁷⁸ Interestingly Cheron, with the aid of Vanderbank, founded St. Martin's Lane Academy where Hogarth later studied. Additionally, Cheron twice won the Prix de Rome for Miltonic subjects: *The Expulsion* and *Adam and Eve's Punishment*. See Pointon, *Milton and English Art*, 2.

⁷⁹ Pointon, *Milton and English Art*, 37.

Hogarth and his friends were a mix of artists and authors that worked closely with one another making moralist-realist works.⁸⁰ Around this time, writers such as Shaftesbury, Dryden and Pope were championing the enlightenment ideals of man reflecting on man and striving for excellence. The ideas of self-advancement and improvement were also demonstrated in the writing of Voltaire, Rousseau and Diderot.

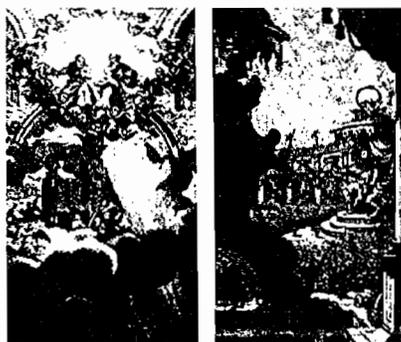


Figure 11. *The Council in Heaven* (left) *The Council in Hell* (right), 1724, Pointon, 44.

A concern with social problems and living conditions began to crop up, and it was during this period too, that a middle class of patronage began to develop that allowed these young artists to explore such themes.⁸¹

Hogarth had great success with his prints that put on public display the ills of the world at that time. Another

factor that increased the popularity of Milton during the eighteenth century was the rise to power of the Whigs. Prior to this rise, many had derisively called Milton a Puritan and Cromwellian. A return to high minded morals was just the catalyst that Milton's writings needed, and by the 1730's his popularity was at an all time high.⁸²

⁸⁰ Hogarth's main group of associates included Roubiliac, Hayman, Fielding, Garrick, Gainsborough, William Collins, and James Paine. This group regularly frequented Slaughter's Coffee House where they exchanged ideas. Pointon notes that Jonathan Richardson frequently read extracts from his *Life and Explanatory Notes on Milton* (1734) to the regulars at Slaughter's. See Pointon, *Milton and English Art*, 42.

⁸¹ Taking these ideas quite literally, Hogarth for example, released a series of engravings entitled *The Four Stages of Cruelty* that visually supported his friend Fielding's campaign against murder and robbery. Fielding was a justice of the peace and highly involved with law reform, while Hogarth was a founder and supporter of the London Foundling Hospital. See Pointon, *Milton and English Art*, 38-9.

⁸² Pointon, *Milton and English Art*, 39.

Additionally this period saw the rise of literary painting, as these young artists championed the modern poets. French rococo infiltrated England to a small degree with the arrival of Hubert Gravelot, a close associate of Hogarth. A taste for 'fancy' developed in this period, and the first appearances of Chinoiserie and decorative Gothic features date to this period.⁸³ Hogarth and his circle believed strongly in the promotion of native art, and Hogarth early on championed a national school of



Figure 12.
Euphrosyne Leads the Poet, 1749, Pointon, 40.

painting.⁸⁴ As early as 1724 he engraved two subjects from *Paradise Lost: The Council in Heaven* and *The Council in Hell* (Figure 11). His contemporary Francis Hayman provided an illustration to *L'Allegro* (1749) titled *Euphrosyne Leads the Poet* (Figure 12) which demonstrates the combination of a British subject with the influence of rococo. A major project on which Hogarth and his friends worked was the decoration of the Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens, a popular site of London entertainment during the mid-eighteenth-century. The gardens included a full-length statue of Milton himself seated on a rock posed as if he was listening to music, much as his character in *Il Penseroso* might have. There was also a Temple of Comus on the site, which together with the decorations, transformed the gardens into an English

⁸³ The idea of the fancy picture owes greatly to Watteau's visit to England in 1720. The subjects of his paintings often were of *fêtes galantes* (courtly and flirtatious picnics). The idea caught on, and a new strain of painting developed in England in response that mixed levity of mood, frivolity, and pleasure into themes that did not carry the high-minded morality of more serious painting. These pieces were generally small in format and often of "young women in domestic settings or allegories of the senses." See Wilton, *Five Centuries of British Painting: From Holbein to Hodgkin*, 64.

⁸⁴ Andrew Wilton, *Five Centuries of British Painting: From Holbein to Hodgkin*, 67-8.

rococo faerie land. During these years, theatre was popular in London as well, and an abridged version of *Comus* with extra songs became one of the most popular performances of the century.⁸⁵

It seems one of the earliest, if not the earliest illustration to *Comus* was created by Francis Hayman probably around 1749. In his engraving *The Brothers Attack Comus* (Figure 13) Hayman chose to illustrate the moment when the Lady's brothers break into Comus' palace to rescue her. Perhaps owing to the many performances of *Comus*, or to his own theatrical background, Hayman's piece looks quite staged.⁸⁶ By comparison, Wright's treatment of the subject is more naturalistic. Hayman mainly depicted scenes from *Paradise Lost*, but one rare exception comes in the form of his engraving for *Il Penseroso*. In his engraving *The Poet by the Pool* (Figure 14, 1750-1753), he explores the concept of poetic melancholy, an idea that became very popular during the eighteenth century.⁸⁷ Milton's *Il Penseroso* was considered to possess positive spiritual and poetic value. This piece foreshadowed the Romantic tendency towards the melancholic scene and included symbols such as a shrouded figure, the moon, an owl, a still pool, and moss-covered crumbling masonry.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Pointon, *Milton and English Art*, 46-7.

⁸⁶ Pointon, *Milton and English Art*, 48.

⁸⁷ Melancholy was a mood that was associated with death and also poetic self-awareness.

⁸⁸ Pointon, *Milton and English Art*, 57.

As artists read Milton, each was able to pick and choose passages and episodes from his oeuvre that suited his particular artistic interests. Marcia Pointon describes two



Figure 13. *The Brothers Attack Comus, 1749,* Pointon, 49.

main strains of interest in Milton's poetry that surfaced roughly between the years leading up to the establishment of the Royal Academy in 1769 and the end of the French Revolution in 1800.⁸⁹ The first strain reflected a continued interest in subjects that lent themselves to the smoothly curving lines and the decorative elements associated with Rococo. This was combined with the Neoclassical-style figure that was being espoused by the Academy, lyrical qualities found in Picturesque theory (specifically, the elegant), and sentiment. In opposition to these concerns, another strain was more interested in themes that were demonstrative of the Sublime. This variety incorporated the heroic ideals of Neoclassicism and combined them with the darker, more melodramatic and emotionally charged elements that would later characterize Romantic art. Pointon notes that numerous pieces from this time share the qualities of sentiment and sublimity.

As mentioned earlier, Wright's friend John Hamilton Mortimer was a pioneering figure in British narrative art. In the period between 1769 and 1800, he was the first to create illustrations based upon Milton's poetry (1777). These four works were included

⁸⁹ Pointon, *Milton and English Art*, 62-3.

in Bell's *Poets of Great Britain* (1776-1782). While one generally associates Mortimer's name with sketches of banditti or monsters, the illustrations that he provided for Bell were quite tame in comparison and had much more in common with Arcadian or pastoral



Figure 14. *The Poet by the Pool*, 1750-1753, Pointon, 49.

modes of painting. Alexander Runciman took his landscape from *L'Allegro* and provided a rustic treatment, while the engraver Robert Smirke employed a rococo style to his figures from the same work. In 1786, Smirke exhibited *The Lady and Sabrina* at the Royal Academy.⁹⁰ One must wonder if Wright's painting from the previous year inspired him to take up such a similar subject.

Milton's writings were also influential on many of those who are associated with the roots of the Romantic movement, and it is with this group that the second strain of interest in Milton can be seen. For instance, the writers of the German and Swiss *Sturm und Drang* were among the first to discuss the wildness, passion, and sublime elements⁹¹ that could be found within the writings of Milton and Shakespeare. Fuseli, Barry, Mortimer, Romney, and Blake all took interest in these authors and began painting subjects taken from their works. Pointon notes that while these artists were undoubtedly exploring the ideas from

⁹⁰ Pointon, *Milton and English Art*, 64-70.

⁹¹ Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* was published in 1757 and was responsible for laying out the major characteristics of the sublime. "The sublime is inspired by terror and fear and is characterized by obscurity, power, greatness of dimension, vastness of extent, infinity, magnificence. It involves also loudness of sound, darkness and gloominess of colour." See Pointon, *Milton and English Art*, 92.

their literary sources more imaginatively, all but Blake regarded themselves as members of the long-standing academic neo-classical tradition.⁹² Fuseli not only exhibited wholeheartedly at the Royal Academy, but was a strong proponent of neo-classical dogma, and in fact translated Winckelmann.

While labeling these artists can be quite complicated, ascertaining the growing popularity of Miltonic subjects is not. Pointon suggests that artists took up Miltonic subjects because they offered a middle ground between ancient art and the modern. While the subject matter met the demands of classicism, Milton's texts offered a wider range of interpretation for the artist illustrating the scenes.⁹³ In addition to showing at the Royal Academy, Fuseli also showed his work at the Milton Gallery, a venue at which he raised money by charging admission.⁹⁴ James Barry, George Romney, and William Blake were all interested in Milton and took many of their subjects from *Paradise Lost*, *L'Allegro*, and *Il Penseroso*.

Returning then to Wright's painting of 1785, one must consider the choice of a subject from *Comus*. Pointon classifies Wright's painting in the category of sentiment and pathos, echoing Nicolson's thoughts on the matter.⁹⁵ She raises an interesting point

⁹² Pointon, *Milton and English Art*, xxv.

⁹³ Pointon, *Milton and English Art*, xxvi.

⁹⁴ In 1786 John Boydell opened his Shakespeare Gallery, a venue which Fuseli produced several works. Following this entrepreneurial logic, Fuseli opened a Milton Gallery in 1790. The idea in both instances was two-fold. These galleries promoted nationalism (native art based on native literature) and reflected, "an ideal of a diversified and libertarian national genius sustained by democratic political principles." Theoretically, pursuing such subject matter broke with a more conservative European tradition, and supporting these artists would be seen as a patriotic act. It was also clever marketing. See Martin Myrone, *Henry Fuseli*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 60.

⁹⁵ Pointon, *Milton and English Art*, 73.

in that she states that these qualities are not necessarily observed by the viewer if they only see *The Lady in Milton's Comus* and have no knowledge of *The Indian Widow*. She feels that it is the pairing that essentially makes these qualities apparent.⁹⁶ Judy Egerton, on the other hand, argues that these women are not as pathetic and helpless as they have been made out to be. She instead feels that, while they have found themselves in rather unfortunate circumstances, the women are taking matters into their own hands and dealing with their situations as best as possible.⁹⁷ In fact, the painting demonstrates a multiplicity of influences on its own, and, in combination with the *Indian Widow*, is open for an even greater range of meanings. We will next turn to a closer look at some of the ideas that were circulating during the eighteenth century that would have had an impact upon Wright's career.

⁹⁶ Pointon, *Milton and English Art*, 73.

⁹⁷ Egerton, *Wright of Derby*, 130.

CHAPTER III
ART THEORIES AND LITERATURE

Having examined *The Lady in Milton's Comus* from a stylistic point of view as well as relating it to its Miltonic source, we must now take into account some of the other influences with which Wright came into contact as an artist. *The Lady in Milton's Comus* is a painting of a woman breaking out of the forest into a moonlit clearing. She has lost the company of her two brothers and hears ominous sounds in the distance that she knows cannot be good. She is terrified.

Wright began his career as a portrait painter, and occasionally he painted conversation pieces. How then did he create a painting such as *The Lady in Milton's Comus*? This painting incorporates a wide variety of influences that were in circulation during the eighteenth century amongst artists and writers. Some of Wright's earliest pieces to depart from commissioned portraiture demonstrate knowledge of gothic motifs that he would have been familiar with from literature. Gothic writers used dark and scary locations for their stories and chose subject matter that explored sadness, terror, and the supernatural to open up their readers to feeling and emotion.

While a taste for the gothic is visible in Wright's work before and during the early 1770's, a combination of the sublime, moral philosophy, and sensibility characterized the new direction his work took during the latter half of the decade. The sublime also depended on a strong emotional reaction, and those employing the strategies of the

sublime felt that this reaction in their reader or viewer was to be highly valued. Sensibility too encouraged feeling and consideration of others. These ideas all shared an emotional quality and were intended to invoke an emotional response from the viewer as well as a reflection upon one's place in the world. This amalgam of influences established a precedent for Wright's pieces of the 1780's while simultaneously placing him among the first to utilize contemporary literature as an inspiration for subject pieces.⁹⁸

In order to understand how Wright arrived at *The Lady in Milton's Comus* in 1785, one must first look at the ideas and works leading up to that point. A pattern of melancholy, harsh-circumstances, and sadness began to characterize many of Wright's works during the late 1770's and early 1780's. Milton's *Comus* easily fits into this mold. It should again be noted that around 1785 a wide range of artistic influences were circulating in the British art world. Neoclassical, gothic, and proto-romantic strains of painting were all occurring simultaneously, and Wright was able to produce paintings that combined elements of each. It should also be noted that while some paintings can be firmly established as neoclassical or romantic, many paintings overlap and borrow from more than one mode. Additionally these styles do not always have steadfast criteria, but are only convenient terms to help art-historians discuss art. Wright chose the style that best suited his subject, often combining them, and by doing so was able to express his theme more clearly. Nicolson sees a Romantic-Classicism in Wright's paintings of *The*

⁹⁸ Nicolson notes that John Runciman had painted *King Lear in a Storm* in 1767, effectively predating Wright's first subject pieces. See Nicolson, *Joseph Wright of Derby Painter of Light*, 150.

Lady in Milton's Comus and *The Indian Widow*.⁹⁹ Wright in fact, maintained a hybrid position that always bordered between the two and felt the influence of several artistic traditions. Looking at either painting, the viewer will see figures that look quite neoclassical, yet these same figures are set in landscapes that are anything but. A viewer looking upon *The Indian Widow*, would likely call the work romantic based solely on the landscape setting. In contrast, the paintings of *Penelope Unravelling her Web* and *The Corinthian Maid* are much more classical. In fact *The Corinthian Maid* is probably the most classical subject Wright painted.

Up until the middle years of the eighteenth century, the terms "gothic" or "medieval" generally carried a negative connotation. Historically the term "gothic" was developed during the seventeenth century and was used to refer to art and architecture dating to the fall of the Roman Empire through the beginnings of the Renaissance. The general consensus was that the art and architecture of that transitional period was inferior to ancient and Renaissance counterparts. Stylistically, the term gothic also referred to art of the early Renaissance and Northern European art that did not conform to the classical ideals associated with the direction taken by the Italian school. During the eighteenth century, and even more so during the nineteenth century, an interest in the decorative and architectural components of the gothic resurfaced in what has been called the gothic revival. The term gothic is also associated with a renewed interest in British literature

⁹⁹ By this Nicolson means that elements from both styles are being used simultaneously. See Nicolson, *Joseph Wright of Derby Painter of Light*, 65.

and ballads.¹⁰⁰ It is this aspect of the gothic that relates to the ideas of the sublime that were also developing during the eighteenth century. The combination of both of these highly emotive trends were influential on Wright.

A new appreciation for the Gothic began to develop as antiquarian studies began to gain currency in Britain and architectural elements such as the pointed arch and tracery sporadically began to show up. This process had begun with William Camden (1551-1623) and John Aubrey (1626-1697), who were among the first to begin compiling fragments of the literary past that they associated with what they believed was a native tradition of literature. They gathered ballads and broadsides printed in Old English script (also called Gothic). Samuel Pepys and Joseph Addison were also among the first collectors and compilers. In 1765, Thomas Percy (1729-1811) edited a large volume of poetry titled *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*.¹⁰¹ Classical studies were given primary status by the educated aristocracy during this period. The secondary avenue of thought found within antiquarianism was in many ways contrary to that system. Additionally, around this period, a literate middle class and a new reading public was on the rise. This group held no allegiance to classicism.¹⁰² Further, as ideas of national identity developed, the British, incorrectly, came to believe that the Gothic style had originated in Britain and

¹⁰⁰ During the Georgian period in England a new interest in melancholy, horror, gloom, and decay developed. "The Gothic Revival began as a literary movement" that "reveled in the exalted psychological states of Shakespeare's characters, the love of the fantastic and the supernatural in Edmund Spenser and, later, the morbid graveyard poetry of Thomas Gray." "All these themes, which stood in opposition to the classical values of clarity and orderliness, came to be associated with the crumbling Gothic landscape of England. See Michael J. Lewis, *The Gothic Revival*, (London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 2002), 13.

¹⁰¹ Chris Brooks, *The Gothic Revival*, (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1999), 108-9.

¹⁰² Brooks, *The Gothic Revival*, 109.

began to adopt it as their own style. As Brooks notes, they also associated it with the then "perceived Saxon/medieval origins of the British Constitution and the idea of native liberties, while the classical style represented the paganism and oppressive tyranny of the ancient Greek and Roman civilizations."¹⁰³

As medieval literature began to be valued, opinion and theory was modified to incorporate the perceived British tradition. Gothic architectural forms that were seen to deviate from and violate the rules of Grecian aesthetics came to be seen as liberated forms. This carried over to gothic literature as well. It was perceived as freer and more imaginative as compared to classical literature that was more concerned with reason. Richard Hurd (*Letters on Chivalry and Romance*, 1762) found a distinctive genius in gothic romance that he felt was born of nature and not of culture. He identified Edmund Spenser, William Shakespeare, and John Milton as the gothic trinity.¹⁰⁴

Working alongside the legitimate antiquarians, were the forgers James Macpherson (*Fingal*, 1762; *Temora*, 1763; *The Works of Ossian*, 1765) and Thomas Chatterton, who created elaborate mythologies and histories of the British past. While their works were eventually denounced as counterfeit, they helped promote a cultural genesis separate and incongruous to neoclassical rationality and logic. As a more nationalistic attitude developed in Britain, the idea that Britain had its own literary roots not associated with ancient Greece and Rome was a welcome thought.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Robin Hamlyn and Michael Phillips, *William Blake*, 32-3.

¹⁰⁴ Brooks, *The Gothic Revival*, 109-10.

¹⁰⁵ Lewis, *The Gothic Revival*, 17.

Writing and thoughts on this subject explored a darker, more mysterious and unfixd past that could not be unraveled by Enlightenment ideals. An interest in more abstract thought, the supernatural, and in human emotion provided alternatives to the hegemony of classicism. Gothic writers were interested in exploring the horrifying side of nature, dark and dreadful places, and crumbling ruins. They combined these settings with the mental and emotional turmoil of the human spirit, and they investigated horror as a source of delight and beauty.¹⁰⁶ The so-called Graveyard School of poets including Thomas Parnell (*Night-piece on Death*, 1722), Robert Blair (*The Grave*, 1743), Edward Young (*Night Thoughts*, 1749-51), and Thomas Gray (*Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* 1751), helped to popularize ideas that they associated with the Gothic ruins and churches: melancholy, superstition, mystery, and chivalry.¹⁰⁷ All sorts of dark imagery accompanied their writing including: moldering tombs, ivy-covered towers, owls, spooky churchyards, and eerie landscapes. The following lines belonging to Thomas Gray describe the mock ruins constructed by Lord Holland in Kent:

Here mouldering fanes and battlements arise,
Turrets and arches nodding to their fall,
Unpeopled monasteries delude our eyes,
And mimic desolation covers all.¹⁰⁸

This example demonstrates the pairing of architecture and writing. Indeed this form of writing was quite popular, and Macaulay notes that Gothic writing was so popular during

¹⁰⁶ Terence Davis, *The Gothick Taste*, (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1975), 16.

¹⁰⁷ Davis, *The Gothick Taste*, 17-18.

¹⁰⁸ Davis, *The Gothick Taste*, 17.

the eighteenth century that during the last thirty years of the century "almost every issue of *The Gentlemen's Magazine* contained at least one gloomy and awful poem."¹⁰⁹

These poets felt that this Gothic imagery contained a strong emotional quality for their readers. By using darker, more terrifying imagery, they could tap into human emotions. Additionally, many felt that the Gothic provided spiritual authenticity. The emotional condition of melancholia was the key focus of these writers, and it was often associated with ruins and the imagery described above. Theoretically when contemplating such visual or literary stimuli, the viewer would reflect upon the brevity of life and "universal transience."¹¹⁰ Chris Brooks connects these ideas with class superiority:

A sentimental overview of mortality, a pious sense of the vanity of human wishes, gave piquancy to the knowledge that one belonged to the class that owned, built or visited ruins, and had the leisure necessary for their proper contemplation. Heightened sensibility, a readiness to shudder at the grave or sigh amid the ruin, became an aspect of class superiority – as natural as the property ownership from which power sprang.¹¹¹

Class notions aside, Brooks sums up the emotional motivations for portraying such scenes either in text or image.

Wright's forays into Gothic subjects are evident in pieces such as *The Alchymist* (exhibited at the Society of Artists, 1771),¹¹² *Miravan Breaking Open the Tomb of his*

¹⁰⁹ James Macaulay, *The Gothic Revival: 1745-1845*, (London: Blackie and Son Limited, 1975), 16.

¹¹⁰ Brooks, *The Gothic Revival*, 111.

¹¹¹ Brooks, *The Gothic Revival*, 111-12.

¹¹² The full title of this painting is *The Alchymist, in Search of the Philosopher's Stone, Discovers Phosphorus, and prays for the successful Conclusion of his operation as was the custom of the Ancient Chymical Astrologers*.

Ancestors (exhibited at the Society of Artists, 1772), and *The Old Man and Death* (exhibited at the Society of Artists in 1774). One of Wright's earliest paintings to visually explore gothic emotion is *The Alchymist* (Figure 15), exhibited at the Society of Artists in 1771. Wright has chosen a gothic setting: an interior of some tower or castle complete with pointed arches and windows in which an aged alchemist has established a laboratory.¹¹³ Wright has heightened the drama by making the setting very dark. The



Figure 15. *The Alchymist*, 1771, Egerton, 85.

only light sources are a small flame in the background, a rather dull full moon peaking through a pointed window, and light produced from a chemical reaction that is occurring in front of the alchemist.¹¹⁴ The painting depicts an alchemist's attempt to create the philosopher's stone, a legendary stone that had the power to transmute base metal into gold. One must imagine the sense of awe and wonder at the power of nature the alchemist is feeling as the reaction takes place. While the possibility of creating the philosopher's stone would be very exciting, the possibility of failure would be agonizing. What of the unknown result of the reaction? Could it be explosive? The

¹¹³ On display here are the trappings of scientific inquiry. The carefully constructed laboratory likely owes much to a translation by James Keir from the French of M. Macquer's *Elements of the Theory and Practice of Chymistry* published in 1771. See Nicolson, *Joseph Wright of Derby Painter of Light*, 119.

¹¹⁴ As the subject suggests, the alchemist is on the verge of discovering phosphorus. Klingender argues that the purpose of the painting is to commemorate the birth of modern science, and relates it to the work of Robert Boyle (1627-91) whose own work, which eventually leads into chemistry, was sparked by the discovery of phosphorus. For a fuller discussion on the scientific aspects of this painting, see Egerton, *Wright of Derby*, 85.

alchemist must have felt excited and yet terrified at the same time. Wright was an avid reader, and loved discussing the latest ideas of the day with his circle of friends.¹¹⁵ It seems fitting that Wright, who himself was described by many as a melancholy man, has chosen to use a gothic setting, which must surely be a reflection of his exposure to the literature of the period.¹¹⁶



Figure 16. *Miravan Breaking Open the Tomb of His Ancestors*, 1772, Egerton, 93.

In *Miravan* (Figure 16) Wright has painted a scene of a young nobleman of Jezra, turning away in disgust from a tomb that has just been opened by his servants.¹¹⁷ The viewer sees in the shadowy painting an ancient edifice that seems to be in ruins, housing the tomb. The viewer is only given a small section of the total space, and as the classical-looking arch in the background vaults upwards, one is reminded of Burke's

¹¹⁵ This passage from Daniels sheds some light on Wright's reading habits: "As well as modern works, newly published novels and poems, newspaper reports, travel literature, peep-show transparencies, educational treatises, moral tracts, essays in political economy and scientific diagrams, Wright drew on an older tradition of hermetic knowledge in sixteenth and seventeenth century images and texts. The appearance and meaning of Wright's paintings were shaped both by illusionistic forms of commercial entertainment and by mysterious cabalistic texts. The light of pure reason was but one of the sources of illumination in Wright's art." See Daniels, *Joseph Wright*, 10-11.

¹¹⁶ The Wright family traces Joseph's lifelong illness and suffering to his overexertion during his studies at the Sistine Chapel in 1774 in which he had continually laid on his back while copying the figures on the ceiling. See Nicolson, 9-10. He was never described as robust – more likely a hypochondriac with some actual illnesses. He complained of rheumatism, a liver complaint, dropsy, etc. Oftentimes when situations of a stressful nature arose, Wright would fall ill for several months at a time. As a result of continued illness, Wright was often cantankerous and melancholy, but at the same time was a very kind and loving man to his friends and family. See Nicolson, *Joseph Wright of Derby Painter of Light*, 15-22.

¹¹⁷ When this painting was shown at the Society of Artists in 1772, it was titled *An history, Miravan, a young nobleman of Ingria, breaking open the tomb of his ancestors in search of wealth*. Wright's Jezra was misspelled as Ingria. See Egerton, *Wright of Derby*, 93.

vastness. The space seems to be enormous and overpowering. Outside, dreary moonlight shines, and inside the scene is lit by an oil lamp that is turned away from the viewer. This light illuminates the grisly scene of the cracked-open tomb. Both the moonlight as well as the lamplight creates an eerie mood and a sense of drama in the painting. Through the ruined side wall of the tomb, the viewer is greeted with the skeletal remains of Miravan's ancestor. According to the story, which is taken from an unknown source, Miravan had been visiting the tombs of his ancestors when he noticed a tablet inscribed with a message describing immense wealth within.¹¹⁸ He ordered his servants to break in, only to discover bones and ashes. Inside is another message:

Here would have dwelt eternal repose a treasure that Croesus never possessed which thou hast driven hence being excited by an insatiable love of Gold, to disturb the sacred remains of thy progenitor. Had not thy reason been deluded by a false fancy she would have told thee that the grave contains nothing but dust and ashes.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ One possible source is Herodotus. "The same tale is told of Darius, son of Hispapes, opening the tomb of Nicotris, Queen of Babylon, who gave orders that her tomb should bear the inscription to the effect that incalculable treasures were to be found there, of which advantage should only be taken in case of dire necessity." Inside the tomb a similar message as Wright recreates is discovered. Nicolson points to two other similar depictions: one a bronze plaque dating to the late 16th century, and the other, a painting by Le Sueur at the Hermitage of which prints were made and circulated. He suggests that the moral lesson of all of these pieces was popular during the eighteenth century. See Nicolson, *Joseph Wright of Derby Painter of Light*, 53-4. Additionally, Waterhouse says of *Miravan*, "It is rare in England to find a painter so closely in line with contemporary trends in literature and fashionable artifacts." He also calls it Wright's "first romantic history." See Waterhouse, *Painting in Britain*, 286.

¹¹⁹ Egerton, *Wright of Derby*, 94.

So here the moral is that greed is bad, and that the greedy will be punished in the end. Wright's paintings often have multiple layers and influences, and characteristically, this painting does not follow the gothic formula completely. While it borrows such elements as horror, death, and the macabre from the gothic and uses such props as a tomb, a skeleton, and the moon in a cloudy night sky, the painting also has elements that



Figure 17. *The Old Man and Death*, 1774, Egerton, 83.

appear to be classical such as the tomb and the arch above it, as well as the figure of Miravan. Rather than a musty old ruinous castle, it is set in an exotic location with appropriate costumes for its participants. The subject explores the horrific idea of facing death, or in this case, not facing death. The abject terror of defiling a tomb and finding skeletal remains instead of treasure during the midnight hour readily entices the viewer to contemplate the transience of life, greed, and the guilt and horror that would result from such an activity. One would hope the viewer, upon contemplating the horrible image depicted in the painting, would not make the same mistakes.

Yet another scene that explores extreme human emotion is Wright's *The Old Man and Death* (Figure 17). Here the viewer is shown a rather horrifying and macabre scene that takes place in a painterly landscape setting combined with overgrown gothic ruins. In this piece Wright presents his audience with not just an inanimate skeleton that

represents the abstract idea of death, but an actual walking skeletal version of Death himself approaching a cowering old man. Rather than a history painting, this piece is allegorical. The old man has been traveling for some time and is exhausted from carrying his load. Tired of his burden he asks Death to free him from his misery. However, when Death appears, the man has second thoughts and pretends that he is only seeking aid with his bundle. He falls backwards onto a rock which he appears to be trying to climb over while focusing on the skeleton approaching him. He raises his left arm and hand in a pose that attempts to ward off the figure of Death that comes closer by the moment. His eyes are open wide with terror as he regrets his earlier words. Here the choice to suffer is apparently preferable to dying. The feeling of despair would have resonated with Wright's audience, and exploring the idea of death certainly fit with the contemporary literature as describe earlier.

The scene is made even more horrifying, though, by depicting it in broad daylight. While such a scene would usually be associated with nighttime and darkness, here Death appears in the middle of a perfectly calm and clear day, reminding the viewer that Death can come anytime. Wright has taken his subject from an old literary source but used a setting that belongs to his world, and his figure is clothed in contemporary dress.

According to Rosenblum, the story most likely comes from a 1761 edition of *Select Fables of Esop and other Fabulists*.¹²⁰ The model for Wright's skeleton is taken from Bernhard Siegfried Albinus's 1749 edition of *Tables of the Skeleton and Muscles of the*

¹²⁰ Egerton, *Wright of Derby*, 84. Nicolson (56), alternatively, feels that a more suitable source for this subject is the Dutch artist Marcus Gheeraerts 1567 edition of Aesop. Another possibility is La Fontaine's later rendering of the same fable. Both versions were widely available during the eighteenth century. See Egerton, 83-4.

Human Body.¹²¹ This piece provides a good example of Wright's interest in the gothic as well as allowing him to demonstrate his fascination with science, and here particularly, with anatomy. While exploring such an emotional subject, Wright still anchors himself to reality and fact by incorporating such a realistic skeleton.

Another aesthetic theory that deals with human emotion is the sublime. The ideas of terror and horror found a place with the sublime that Burke promoted. The discussion of the sublime as it applies to the eighteenth century begins with John Dennis and Lord Shaftesbury who had both published comments regarding their travels in the Alps. Both had noticed the visual beauty of the mountains, the infiniteness of space, as well as the horrors of nature. They encountered pleasure and repulsion. Joseph Addison furthered the discussion with his essays that appeared in *The Spectator* (1712) and later in another essay titled *Pleasures of the Imagination*. Addison proposed that the sublime has to do with visual perception of objects, and he identifies three pleasures of the imagination: the great, the uncommon, and the beautiful. Here great can stand in for the sublime, and a separation between it and beauty becomes evident. This notion would be widely discussed and debated during the eighteenth century as aesthetic theory was further investigated.¹²²

Edmund Burke's 1757 *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* furthered the discussion of the sublime greatly. The powerful and

¹²¹ Egerton, *Wright of Derby*, 84. Egerton notes that Mortimer owned a copy of this book, and that Stubbs also used this book.

¹²² Hipple, Jr., *The Beautiful, The Sublime, & The Picturesque in Eighteenth-Century British Aesthetic Theory*, 13-16.

magnificent forces of nature were examined thoroughly by Burke and divided into many categories. Most of them pertain to the human experience of natural phenomena through the five senses as well as psychological responses to external stimuli. He, like Addison before him, defined the sublime as different from beauty. The sublime evoked intense emotions through vastness. Vastness, in turn, inspires awe. The sublime was superhuman, irregular, vast, and obscure. While Burke contrasted beauty and the sublime, he felt that psychological states determined our awareness of both. Things that are beautiful are things that we desire, whereas the sublime is life-threatening and therefore terrifying. He felt that anything that caused or was related to terror was a source of the sublime, and in turn was capable of producing "the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling."¹²³ Interestingly, the sublime has the ability to both cause horror as well as pleasure, since the viewer realizes that the perception is an imitation as opposed to reality.¹²⁴ So it is possible for fear and attraction to occur simultaneously. As applied to painting, this makes complete sense. As viewers, we may look upon a painting and perceive the terrifying subject matter of the work and enjoy the painting at the same time, as we are quite safe in the gallery.¹²⁵

¹²³ Wilton, *Five Centuries of British Painting: From Holbein to Hodgkin*, 78.

¹²⁴ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, (Menston, England: The Scholar Press Limited, 1970), 75.

¹²⁵ Vaughan elaborates, "Burke's theory was vital to the Romantics both because it emphasized the suggestive quality of art and because it gave a new importance to the disturbing. The artist who concentrated on this now was not simply engineering a Baroque thrill; he had become an explorer. For Burke's notion of the Sublime emphasized that man was disconcerted primarily by that which lay beyond his control or comprehension. Ultimately repulsion could become a new means of intimating the Ideal which, for the Romantics, was always unknowable. Shelly, for example, declared that 'sorrow, terror, anguish, despair itself, are often the chosen expression of an approximation to the higher good.'" See William Vaughan, *Romanticism and Art*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 2003), 33.

Looking back briefly at the painting of *Miravan* for example, one will see elements of Burke's sublime. From the safe position of the viewer, one is confronted with a tomb in a vast space. This tomb has been entered at night and is seen in a flickering and weak light in contrast to the darkness surrounding all. The mood is oppressive and the appearance of the skeletal remains pushes the atmosphere into an even more terrifying place. This is a place that a viewer can enjoy from the safety of their imagination, but would never want to be present at in reality. While the viewer is attracted to the disturbing scene, they are simultaneously repulsed.

Wright's interest in the gothic and the sublime come to the surface in *The Lady in Milton's Comus* as well. The emotional content of the painting is strong, and the ideas of terror and obscurity are clearly visible. On terror, Burke states the following:

No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear. For fear being an apprehension of pain or death, it operates in a manner that resembles actual pain. Whatever therefore is terrible, with regard to sight, is sublime too, whether this cause of terror, be endued with greatness of dimensions or not; for it is impossible to look on any thing as trifling, or contemptible, that may be dangerous...¹²⁶

Returning to the point in *Comus* from which Wright took his subject, one will recall that the Lady is separated from her brothers and lost in the forest during the late hours of night. As the woman breaks into the clearing, one may think of Burke's passage above concerning the mind playing tricks on the individual. In fact, at that point in *Comus*, the

¹²⁶ Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla, eds., *The sublime: a reader in British eighteenth-century aesthetic theory*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 133.

woman had been, "calling shapes and beckoning shadows dire."¹²⁷ Burke's comments on obscurity apply here as well:

To make anything terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary. When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes. Every one will be sensible of this, who considers how greatly night adds to our dread, in all cases of danger, and how much the notions of ghosts and goblins, of which none can form clear ideas, affect minds, which give credit to the popular tales concerning such sorts of beings...¹²⁸

Nighttime heightens the drama. It is not a surprise that she imagines she is seeing things. Alone in the dark, the mind tries to find patterns and make sense of whatever information is available. Related to obscurity and the night is darkness, which Burke felt caused pain based on optical strain. He felt that a sustained period of exposure to darkness would cause pain, and provides as an example the effects of bad weather causing a state of melancholy.¹²⁹ Whatever dark imaginings go on in the mind are worsened by the discomfort of darkness. While readers of *Comus* could likely imagine what the young woman was going through, Wright captures the terror that surely would have been present in his subject in a pictorial format. In his painting the Lady has just broken through the forest into the clearing. She appears frantic and terrified. Her arms are raised up in desperation. What little relief she momentarily obtains from the moonlight is quickly dashed away by the immensity of the forest that she is in. She may very well die in these woods. The viewer is forced to contemplate such ideas as fear and death.

¹²⁷ Flannagan, ed., *The Riverside Milton*, 132.

¹²⁸ Ashfield, *The sublime*, 133.

¹²⁹ Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, 278-281.

Another item worth mentioning is the landscape setting of the painting. A great deal of painting having to do with the sublime explores wildness and uncontrollable forces in nature. Landscape painting, such as that of Salvator Rosa, was a popular form for expressing these ideas. In *The Lady in Milton's Comus* the woman's situation is made much more desperate because she is located in a wild landscape. There is no trace of civilization in the painting and the woman is surrounded by a vast forest. She is on her own for the moment, and the only sounds she can hear are not friendly. The landscape found in the *Indian Widow* takes the sublime even further. The scene presents the viewer with all manner of natural forces. In the background a volcano is erupting. The sky is a swirling vortex of ominous clouds that are quickly blacking out the sun. A storm is brewing and lightning is striking in the distance. Below her the ocean is tumultuous, and waves are crashing. Braving these elements, the woman must sit a watch as part of the mourning ritual she observes for her deceased husband. As if the devastation of losing her husband is not enough she must also somehow survive the forces of nature. As in *The Lady in Milton's Comus*, the dramatic landscape can be seen as a parallel of the inner turmoil that the widow is going through.

While Wright sometimes chose to explore human emotion through death and melancholia, most of his paintings were not nearly as grim as *Miravan Breaking Open the Tomb of his Ancestors* or *The Old Man and Death*. Another lens through which one can examine Wright's interest in human emotion is that of moral philosophy. Wright was interested in the sciences and had explored this theme earlier in one of his most famous paintings: *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump* (1768). While this painting's theme

is scientific, its subject is depicted with an emphasis on exploring a range of human emotions and moral philosophy. Wright's painting is aesthetically pleasing, but it also goes beyond this. It is a painting depicting a group of people observing a scientific experiment, but it is also a painting depicting a group of people that are inquisitive and curious about the world surrounding them, about human response to life and death, and



Figure 18. *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump*, 1768, Egerton, 58.

must consider one's responsibilities as a member of society. The dress and posture of the subjects within the picture also reflects the class of citizen that would be viewing such a painting and observing such an experiment.

In Wright's painting, a mixed group of men, women, and children gather around in a dark room to witness the experiment. The air pump experiment was designed to demonstrate the effects on living things of the deprivation of air. Normally the experiment would have used a bladder or 'lungs-glass' rather than an animal. James Ferguson considered the use of a living creature to be "too shocking to any spectator who

about love. As a whole, the painting displays a range of human emotions, and when confronted by such a scene, the viewer is forced to ponder and reflect upon what essentially makes us human. By doing so, one also

has the least degree of Humanity."¹³⁰ Wright however, has placed a white cockatoo in the top portion of the air pump to heighten the dramatic effect of the scene and to provoke a greater emotional response from his subjects and from his viewers. As the experiment is in progress, two young girls are terrified by the eminent demise of the bird. One covers her eyes, while both are comforted by an older gentleman. The younger of the two girls raises her eyebrows auspiciously indicating that she is quite concerned for the wellbeing of the bird, however, she continues to watch as she is fascinated by the experiment. Ellis Waterhouse describes the scene as being "natural and true" and possessing "a great variety of tender human feeling."¹³¹

Here Wright captures human emotion. The children are disturbed by the senseless killing of the bird and feel sympathetic. Though they don't necessarily know why it is wrong, they do know that it is wrong, and feel terrible. The older man sees their pain, and he attempts to comfort them. At the same time he is trying to meet their emotional needs, he is explaining to them, in his most rational and logical manner, what is occurring. Here perhaps is a true juxtaposition of the human spirit – on the one hand, logical and rational; on the other, feeling and emotional. Just left of center, a scholar explains the experiment to the group, and one senses the joy he feels in sharing knowledge. He is not looking at anyone in the painting, but gazes outwards. Is he connecting with the viewer and explaining the experiment to us? While others in the painting reflect on the scientific aspects of the piece, a young man and woman to the left

¹³⁰ Egerton, *Wright of Derby*, 60.

¹³¹ Waterhouse, *Painting in Britain 1530-1790*, 286.

of the table are apparently distracted from the experiment by each other. They are experiencing the feelings of love as they gaze into each other's eyes longingly.

When viewers looked upon an image such as this, they were meant to be informed about their own position in the world. This in turn allowed them to contemplate and question themselves morally and ethically, and by doing so, would hopefully improve themselves and society. *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump* illustrates these concerns quite clearly. David Solkin notes that this type of painting is directly related to the cultural currents of Britain at that time in that it represents, in an elaborate and complicated composition, the public sphere of the eighteenth century.¹³² Additionally, it should be noted that these paintings were expressly produced for the same audience that is depicted within the paintings. In these works, rather than providing the viewer with a heroic protagonist, Wright instead presents his audience with the actions of polite society.

As David Solkin illustrates, the concept of instructing the viewers to know themselves would have been familiar to Wright. George Turnbull's *Treatise on Ancient Painting* (1740) modified the ideas made popular by Shaftesbury who had himself borrowed from Aristotle's *Poetics*. While Shaftesbury felt that the highest duty of the plastic arts was to "promote knowledge of the species, of our own species, of ourselves," Turnbull following Lockean tenets, proposed that painting had the ability to combine both moral and natural philosophy in order to advance human understanding.¹³³

¹³² Solkin, *Painting for Money*, 227-228.

¹³³ Solkin, *Painting for Money*, 228-9. Solkin spends a chapter of his book elaborating on these ideas.

The Lady in Milton's Comus also has moral content. In the story the woman will come to no harm so long as she stays pure and maintains her chastity. As the brothers are walking in the forest looking for her, they reassure each other that she will be all right until they find her because she is pure. Because she is free from impure thoughts and actions, and has maintained her chastity she is able to remain unharmed by Comus and his band of miscreants. Beastly as they are, they know better than to harm such an innocent. Wright's viewers would have recognized the virtue of the Lady and be sympathetic to her distressing situation.

In addition to the ideas mentioned above, sensibility was another concept that became popular in Britain during the second half of the eighteenth century. While sensibility is often thought to be a very English idea, the writings of French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau were actually influential in its development. He felt that nature was to be highly valued for its "unspoiled innocence" and "simplicity." These ideas "awoke a desire" in people "for the simple life accompanied by emotional expressiveness and openness."¹³⁴

David Hume and Adam Smith were amongst the proponents of sensibility. These men and the other members of the Scottish Enlightenment in Edinburgh felt that they were living at the height of civilization and noted the refinements of all parts of

¹³⁴ Ann Bermingham, "Gainsborough's *Cottage Door*. Sensation and Sensibility," in *Sensation and Sensibility: Viewing Gainsborough's Cottage Door*, ed. Ann Bermingham (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 9.

human life towards perfection.¹³⁵ Ann Bermingham describes sensibility as "an intensified awareness of another's feelings and an ability to enter into them."¹³⁶ Lord Kames (*Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion, In Two Parts*, 1751) states, "Nature, which has designed us for society, has connected us together by a participation in the joys and miseries of our fellow creatures."¹³⁷

A follower of sensibility would theoretically be able to "further sensitize" their consciousness "in order to be more acutely responsive to signals from the outside environment and from inside the body."¹³⁸ By being able to relate to other people and have a concern for them, one begins to have a sense of what is right and wrong, and can begin to live one's life in a correct manner. Sympathy and empathy for other people as well as for nature was promoted. Adam Smith proposed in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, "How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it."¹³⁹ Despite reason and logic, humans are capable of acting for no other reason than for making others feel good. In its most extreme application one might expect

¹³⁵ G.J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 132. Other important members of this group include: Henry MacKenzie, Lord Kames, David Fordyce, and William Cullen.

¹³⁶ Bermingham, "Gainsborough's *Cottage Door*. Sensation and Sensibility," 8.

¹³⁷ Bermingham, "Gainsborough's *Cottage Door*. Sensation and Sensibility," 8.

¹³⁸ Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, xvii.

¹³⁹ Bermingham, "Gainsborough's *Cottage Door*. Sensation and Sensibility," 8.

people emulating popular sentimental novels to adopt the melodramatic acts of fainting and weeping to accompany particularly moving experiences.

At the height of sensibility, the cultivated members of society felt that possessing a sensitive character was integral to polite society, and that it was this characteristic that made moderns superior to the ancient Greeks and Romans. Men were expected to consider the feelings of others, and at the time, Knox argued, women benefited from better treatment as men began to assume a milder manner and believed that women were already "creatures of sensibility," and as such, "were to be socially valued."¹⁴⁰ However, it was not long before feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft pointed out that the ideas of sensibility were actually "keeping women in a weak and infantile state."¹⁴¹ The discrepancy in the treatment of men and women caused by sensibility stems partly from the inaccurate belief that women's nerves were not as strong as men's, and that women had a harder time controlling their nerves.¹⁴² By the end of the eighteenth-century, politicians were also criticizing sensibility "for leaving the body politic vulnerable to French ideas of liberty, equality, and fraternity."¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ Bermingham, "Gainsborough's *Cottage Door*. Sensation and Sensibility," 9.

¹⁴¹ As a champion of women's rights, Wollstonecraft quite correctly pointed out that this attitude caused men to treat women as inferiors, not as equals. Bermingham, "Gainsborough's *Cottage Door*. Sensation and Sensibility," 9. She also argued that women, "were acculturated to an exaggerated identification with sensibility" which caused them to have "weak and wretched minds and bodies." See Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, 1-2. I must note here, that while this topic is of great interest, it is not within the scope of this thesis to discuss at great length.

¹⁴² Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, xvii-xviii.

¹⁴³ Bermingham, "Gainsborough's *Cottage Door*. Sensation and Sensibility," 9.

The popularity of novels rose during the eighteenth century and sentimental novels helped spread the ideas of sensibility. One work that greatly helped to circulate the ideas of the cult of sensibility during this time was Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey* (1768). Wright's taste for sensibility seems to have developed during his travels across Europe to Rome around 1773. It is known that he was reading Sterne's book

during his trip, and as mentioned in chapter

one, was working on a painting titled *The Captive*, from Sterne in 1774. This piece, along with its 1777 companion *Maria*

(Figure 19), demonstrates one of Wright's early forays into the sentimental subject piece. Wright was attracted to the dramatic

and emotional qualities in such contemporary



Figure 19. *Maria*, from Sterne, 1777, Egerton, 107.

writing and eagerly adapted favorite passages or characters into pictorial form.

In *A Sentimental Journey*, the main character Parson Yorick travels to Paris without a passport. At a certain point, the Lieutenant de Police calls on him in his hotel and threatens him with incarceration. In fact, there is little chance that Yorick will be put away, but the idea weighs heavily on his mind to the point that he can think of little else besides being a captive. He holes himself up in his hotel room and lets his imagination run rampant:

I took a single captive, and having first shut him up in his dungeon, I then look'd through the twilight of his grated door to take his picture.

I beheld his body half wasted away with long expectation and confinement and felt what kind of sickness of heart it was which arises from hope deferr'd. Upon looking nearer I saw him pale and feverish: in thirty years the western breeze had not once fann'd his blood – he had seen no sun, nor moon, in all that time – nor had the voice of friend or kinsman breathed through his lattice...

He was sitting upon the ground upon little straw, in the furthest corner of his dungeon, which was alternatively his chair and bed: a little calendar of small sticks were laid at the head, notch'd all over with the dismal days and nights he had passed there – he had one of these little sticks in his hand, and with a rusty nail he was etching another day of misery to add to the heap. As I darkened the little light he had, he lifted up a hopeless eye towards the door, then cast it down – shook his head and went on with his work of affliction. I heard his chains upon his legs, as he turn'd his body to lay his little stick upon the bundle – He gave a deep sigh – I saw the iron enter into his soul – I burst into tears – I could not sustain the picture of confinement which my fancy had drawn.¹⁴⁴

In *The Captive*, from *Sterne* (Figure 20), Wright chose to depict a prison scene



Figure 20. *The Captive*, from *Sterne*, 1774, Egerton, 108.

from the book, reminiscent of a painting he had done of the crusader Guy de Lusignan, who had been imprisoned by the Saracens. Wright's painting shows a malnourished, aged man sitting in a ruinous and desolate prison cell upon a pile of straw. There is very little detail in the cell, and the only hint of the outside world comes from an iron-barred window in the left ceiling. It is too high and too overgrown for the prisoner to see out of it. Even if it was not, he likely could not as he is shackled to the wall. The man slumps over upon himself in great despair as if he is waiting for nothing more than death to free him.

¹⁴⁴ Ian Jack and Tim Parnell, eds., *Laurence Sterne: A Sentimental Journey and Other Writings* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003), 61.

Wright's portrayal of the captive fits closely with Sterne's text, but eliminates the detail of the figure etching into the stick. Effectively, Wright changes the captive man from a figure that is still actively, even if only to the barest degree, hoping for eventual freedom and converts him into a more resigned man who has accepted his fate, "the desolation of infinite solitary confinement."¹⁴⁵ Wright's portrayal of the captive is so pathetic and miserable that viewer's would look at this image and feel deep sympathy for the figure, and hopefully by doing so become a better people themselves, perhaps viewing others in society with a new perspective.

While the story of Yorick's imaginings of deprived liberty and the internal mental struggles of such a perception provided an intense psychological subject for *The Captive*, Wright's later companion painting of *Maria* (1777) was much more effective in tugging at the viewer's heartstrings. Maria, another character found in *A Sentimental Journey*, originally appeared in Sterne's earlier work *Tristram Shandy* (1759-1767). She appears in the earlier story as a very troubled figure encountered by Shandy after he hears her playing melancholy and tender cadences on her pipes. The reader learns that she has been deserted by her lover, that her father has recently died, and she may now be losing her senses as well.¹⁴⁶ In *A Sentimental Journey*, the inspiration for both of Wright's treatments of the subject, Maria is visited again, this time by Parson Yorick, who does not physically appear in the picture, but must be played by the viewer.

¹⁴⁵ Egerton, *Wright of Derby*, 110.

¹⁴⁶ Egerton, *Wright of Derby*, 106.

At a little opening in the road leading to a thicket, Yorick discovered poor Maria sitting under a poplar – she was sitting with her elbow in her lap, and her head leaning on one side within her hand – a small brook ran at the foot of the tree...

...Her goat had been as faithless as her lover; and she had got a little dog in lieu of him, which she had kept tied by a string to her girdle; as I look'd at her dog, she drew him towards her with the string. – 'Thou shalt not leave me Sylvio,' said she. I look'd in Maria's eyes, and saw she was thinking more of her father than of her lover or her little goat; for as she utter'd them the tears trickled down her cheeks...¹⁴⁷

As the reader will see, Wright remained faithful to Sterne's description. While comforting Maria, Yorick begins to cry profusely himself. He is so moved by the experience that he comes to the conclusion:

I am positive I have a soul; nor can all the books with which materialists have pester'd the world ever convince me of the contrary.¹⁴⁸

The painting of *Maria* is indeed pitiful. Without even knowing the story, the viewer would immediately recognize the woman as heartbroken. Maria sits beneath a tree slumped over. She rests her left arm on her knee and props up her head with her left hand. She looks off into space at nothing in particular, simply reflecting on her own misery. Someone has hurt her deeply, and one can almost hear her sighing as one look's at the canvas. As Egerton notes, the elegant figures in both it and *The Captive* evoke pity from the viewer, an artistic motive perfectly in line with those spectators familiar with sensibility.¹⁴⁹ Here too, one sees the influence of classicism that Wright was exposed to

¹⁴⁷ Jack and Parnell, eds., *Laurence Sterne: A Sentimental Journey and Other Writings*, 95.

¹⁴⁸ Jack and Parnell, eds., *Laurence Sterne: A Sentimental Journey and Other Writings*, 95.

¹⁴⁹ Additionally, the specific character of Maria was quite popular, and no fewer than twenty versions of the subject were exhibited or engraved between 1777 and 1819. "The most popular was Angelica Kauffmann's *Maria*, of which there were various engravings. Gordon quotes Joseph Moser's report that the Kauffmann

during his time in Italy. The figure of Maria is delicate and careful attention to her outline is apparent. The drapery of her dress is rendered in elaborate detail similar to many of the subjects he would paint during the 1780s.

The dynamic between these two paintings prefigures the pairing of *The Lady in Milton's Comus* and the *Indian Widow* by several years. Wright created several sets of pendant pieces in his career, and they consistently heightened whatever effect he was trying to achieve. Like the later paintings, the figures in *Maria* and *The Captive* face each other in bent-over languid positions. The figures all share an infinite sadness or melancholy. Their postures indicate their plight and the acceptance of their fate. Of the group, only the Lady from *The Lady in Milton's Comus* possesses the slightest amount of optimism. Here, as with the other paintings, Wright has taken care to balance the works compositionally and tonally so that they are able to maintain a dialogue with each other. In both paintings the subjects are seated hunched over not really focusing on anything at all. While Maria has her head propped on her hand, the Captive rests his hands on his lap. Both sit with their legs stretched out, and when viewed together, their postures are semi-symmetrical. Additionally the lighting is even in both paintings and the palette is restricted to earth tones. Because both subjects are so sad, they serve to heighten the sensation of their corresponding pendant.

design was 'transferred to a variety of articles of all sorts and sizes, from a watch-case to a tea-waiter.'" See Egerton, *Wright of Derby*, 106-107.

Nicolson notes the relationship between *The Lady in Milton's Comus* and the *Indian Widow* and Wright's second version of *Maria* from 1781. The later painting of



Figure 21. *Maria, from Sterne, a Companion to the Picture of Edwin*, 1781, Egerton, 115.

Maria, from Sterne, a Companion to the Picture of

Edwin (Figure 21) is also a painting of a sad woman, a

theme that would have been inspired by the then

current literary trend of sensibility. For this

companion piece, Wright amplified the sadness of the

young woman and increased her elegance. Wright

filled much more of his canvas with the figure of

Maria, just as he had done with the painting of Edwin

three years earlier. The viewer focuses much more on

this central figure and less on the secondary details or

landscape. This has the result of making the viewer

much more aware of the sadness expressed by both figures. Again, as with the previous

pair of paintings, the figures' slumped over postures in combination with their distant

gazes indicate their melancholy state. Wright also made Maria appear a few years

younger so that she would be more of a match for the youthful Edwin. The two figures

face each other in seated bent-leg positions. Both rest their head on a hand while leaning

forward, and both hold a pipe or recorder, a symbol of the melancholic music that both

were known to play.¹⁵⁰ Edwin's posture is reflected by Maria's, and the dark area behind

¹⁵⁰ Sadly, much like the pairing of *Comus* and *Indian Widow*, the paintings of *Edwin* and *Maria* were never shown together as Wright had intended. John Milnes purchased *Edwin* but not *Maria*. See Egerton, *Wright of Derby*, 115.

each of their backs keeps the viewer eye from wandering away, keeping them focused on the melancholy figures.



Figure 22. Edwin, from Dr. Beattie's *Minstrel*, 1777-8, Egerton, 114.

wanders the countryside spending his time exploring "deep untrodden groves" and contemplating and responding to the sublime state of nature:

... Whate'er of beautiful, or new Sublime, or dreadful, in earth, sea, or sky
By chance, or search, was offered to his view,
He scanned with curious and romantic eye... (stanza LVIII)¹⁵¹

He is very much a solitary figure and prone to be quite a melancholic youth.

Egerton points to stanza XXII as a useful descriptor of Edwin's disposition:

Even sad vicissitude amused his soul:
And if a sigh would sometimes intervene
And down his cheek a tear of pity roll
A sigh, a tear, so sweet he wished not to control...¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ Egerton, *Wright of Derby*, 113.

¹⁵² Egerton, *Wright of Derby*, 113.

Again Wright has stayed faithful to Beattie's text.

Wright's Roman sketchbook reveals the early sources for the pose of Edwin. This pose is reversed for Maria. It seems that he evolved his figure to reveal its most contemplative and melancholic state over a period of about four years. One of the earlier drawings depicts a boy sleeping while sitting and resting his head on an unknown object. The other shows a boy resting his arms on his knee that is itself resting on a short wall.¹⁵³ His final version of *Edwin* combines the best features of these two drawings with a 1777 pencil drawing of Thomas Haden to produce a very melancholy boy.¹⁵⁴ The figures of Edwin and Maria are seated in a relaxed manner, slumped over on an arm propped up on a crossed leg. He also painted his figures in pale and drab colors while placing them into low-light backgrounds that heighten the gloom of the pieces.

These techniques would reappear and be refined even further with the pairing of the *The Lady in Milton's Comus* and the *Indian Widow*. The figure in the *Indian Widow* is posed exactly the same way as *Maria, from Sterne, a Companion to the Picture of Edwin*, while *The Lady in Milton's Comus* pushes the desperation of the figure even further. While the Lady is frozen in place on the surface of the canvas, the viewer cannot help but detect the nervous energy bound up in her figure. The woman is posed in such a manner that could she move, she could only bound forward. Her right foot is already leaving the ground and her knees are bent in a manner indicating motion. All of the lines

¹⁵³ Nicolson does not identify the sources for the sketches, but merely suggests they are sketched from the antique. For images found in the Roman sketchbook, see Nicolson, *Joseph Wright of Derby Painter of Light*, 63.

¹⁵⁴ Haden was a Derbyshire boy of about 16 or 17 who later became a surgeon. See Nicolson, *Joseph Wright of Derby Painter of Light*, 62-3.

of her drapery serve to increase the perception of frozen energy. While the viewer might recall the lines from *Comus* indicating the Lady's uplifted spirits at the moment during which she arrives at a clearing and is greeted by the silvery moon, Wright's portrayal of her does not suggest this. The woman looks more desperate than uplifted. Her body language indicates that she is not only scared but terrified, and her upward glance toward the break in the clouds is more suggestive of panic than it is of hope. A sentimental viewer would be able to recognize the woman's predicament and feel sympathy for her. Having now explored several influential factors upon Wright's career it is possible to say that none of these elements are solely responsible for the manner in which he painted *The Lady in Milton's Comus*. It is also possible to say that all of these factors contributed to his depiction of the Lady. Wright was flexible when it came to painting and chose a style, or several styles and ideas that would best suit whatever subject he was painting. This should not come as a surprise since the eighteenth century was a melting pot of many philosophical, literary, and artistic ideas.

CHAPTER IV
THE LADY'S LEGACY

Before concluding the story of Wright's painting *The Lady in Milton's Comus*, one more influence must be mentioned, that of Wright's friends. Wright was familiar with the ideas of sentimentality and would have discussed them at length with his friend William Hayley (1745-1820), a poet belonging to the sensibility cult, who often provided him with advice and ideas for paintings.¹⁵⁵ Hayley had given him the idea for *William and Margaret* (Figure 23, also exhibited in the 1785 exhibition). This story came from



Figure 23. *William and Margaret*, 1784-5, Nicolson, vol. 2, 152.

Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry, consisting of Old Heroic Ballads, Songs, and of Pieces of our earlier Poets - Chiefly of the Lyric Kind* (1765) in which "a Juliet-Comus-Maria-like maiden who had died of love for William because he had forsaken her and pledged himself to another" appears in the departed lover's

¹⁵⁵ Hayley had been a friend of the Beridges, and in 1776 when he visited them at Derby, he met Wright. The two quickly became good friends. It was during this visit that Wright painted both Hayley and his wife. In 1783 Wright gave Hayley a painting of *Virgil's Tomb* and in the same year Hayley (a poet) printed and distributed his Ode to Wright. Wright greatly valued Hayley's friendship and his advice and the two corresponded and visited with each other frequently. See Nicolson, *Joseph Wright of Derby Painter of Light*, 141-2.

bedroom and chastises him for his wrongdoing. The following day, William goes to Maria's grave, and upon touching his cheek to it, he dies.¹⁵⁶ As the story was gothic in nature, Wright did not fail to include gothic details such as pointed-arch windows with a view of a moonlit sky and gothic spires in the background. His figures on the other hand, seem to be a hybrid. They have classical faces and drapery, yet they have long sinuous bodies. Overall, the painting cannot compete with the refinement and skill shown in his other subject pieces of the period. The lighting is not as well handled, and the details of the room are not as finished as in his other works.

Hayley also played a crucial role in encouraging Wright to paint the *The Corinthian Maid*, *Penelope Unravelling her Web, by Lamp-Light*; *The Indian Widow*; and *Hero and Leander*. Josiah Wedgwood and Wright had discussed a commission for a painting in 1778. Wedgwood wanted something that related to his industry of pottery, and proposed *The Corinthian Maid*. In characteristic fashion, Wright stewed on the idea for a couple of years before beginning the painting, and then while working on it, he continually corresponded with Haley and asked his advice on the details of the scene. Haley proposed in 1783 that Wright also paint companions to *The Corinthian Maid*. His first suggestion was *Penelope Unravelling her Web, by Lamp-Light*. In the same year he also proposed Wright paint *The Indian Widow*, and *Hero and Leander*. Wright liked all of the suggestions and immediately got to work on them. All through the process, Hayley continued to help with the details of the scenes. As noted earlier, the only

¹⁵⁶ Nicolson, *Joseph Wright of Derby Painter of Light*, 152.

painting of our four virtuous women with which Hayley didn't assist with was *Comus*; Mrs. Beridge instead had that honor.

After considering the many influences Wright had upon his work, one must understand *The Lady in Milton's Comus* to be a multi-faceted painting. Stylistically, the painting combines Wright's love of dramatic lighting, in this case moonlight, with a landscape setting. His figure is neoclassical in style, yet his setting is not. Viewed in relationship to its companion, *The Indian Widow*, several ideas surface. One is the feeling of melancholy or sadness. As we have seen, this idea was developed both by the Gothic school and by the cult of sensibility. The two are not necessarily mutually exclusive either. The idea of emotion or sentiment invoked by a painting is shared by both. When viewed with its companion, the idea of the sublime may also be introduced to the viewer's mind, and though these paintings are not a part of Romanticism proper, they definitely share elements with that movement.

In combination with *Penelope* and *The Corinthian Maid* the situation becomes even more complicated. Both of these latter works inadvertently reference industry and invention. All four of the women display virtue as well. Wright was interested in moral philosophy as well as scientific enquiry, and this comes as no surprise as he himself was a member of the Howdalian Society and likely a Free Mason as well. Many of his friends were members of the Lunar Society, and in all of these circles, he would have been exposed to the latest debates and discussions of enlightenment thought. Wright was an avid reader, and his friends Mortimer and Haley often encouraged him to explore subjects from literature. As venues such as the Society of Artists, the Royal Academy, Fuseli's

Milton Gallery, and Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery appeared during the second half of the eighteenth-century, more opportunities opened up for artists to explore a wider range of subjects. It was also during this period that a movement began to uphold native traditions as worthy subjects for art, and Milton and Shakespeare were both quite popular. It was in this matrix that Wright was able to paint *The Lady in Milton's Comus*.

The painting can also be seen as the embodiment of Wright's career and as a key work in his 1785 exhibition, which in hindsight was really a retrospective of his career. *The Lady in Milton's Comus* offers the viewer a glimpse of many of Wright's interests including a study of moonlight, a landscape, and a literary subject. It also borrows elements from the sublime and gothic as well as being a sentimental subject. The setting and theme of the painting incorporates these ideas, while the figure of the Lady is clearly inspired by neoclassicism. This hybridity is characteristic of Wright's oeuvre, and allowed him to pursue a wide range of interests.

What happened after the exhibition? On June 26, 1785, Wright sent a letter to Josiah Wedgwood that recorded the transaction between the two of them involving the four paintings Wedgwood had reserved from the exhibition:

Mr. Smith had the picture of the Lady in Comus previous to my exhibition to make a print from, and the plate is in good forwardness, so that if Mr. Wedgwood can spare the picture now or at some future time to compleat the plate from [,] Mr. Smith will be much obliged to him – and I wish Mr. Wedgwood would recommend to him to take pains with it and do the principal parts of it himself.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁷ Nicolson, "Two Companion Pieces by Wright of Derby," 113-17.

From this letter, one discovers that Wright felt confident enough in this work to immediately have an engraving done of it. He is referring to John Raphael Smith, who was also responsible for several other engravings of Wright's work including *The Indian Widow*. Smith took several years to finish the job, however, and the first edition of the print did not appear until February 30, 1789. In another letter from Wright to Wedgwood dated to January 22, 1789, Wright apologized for the length of time that the painting had to remain in the care of Smith. Four states of the engraving are known. The first two were rendered by Smith himself, and a workshop assistant did the third in 1802. Thomas Palser republished the print on March 2, 1812.

As mentioned earlier, Francis Hayman had taken a scene from *Comus* in 1749, and a year after Wright's painting, Smirke painted the Lady once again. It appears that Wright was the first to choose the scene that he did, and also that his piece was a catalyst for popularizing the Lady from *Comus* as a subject. It became one of the most popular Miltonic subjects of the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁵⁸ In 1788 Thomas Macklin opened the Poet's Gallery in Fleet Street, and in 1789 a Mr. Martin exhibited *Comus Tempting the Lady* at that venue. Conrad Metz exhibited *The Lady in Comus* at the Royal Academy in 1791.¹⁵⁹ Also in 1791, E. F. Burney provided the frontispiece to *Comus* in Bell's British Theatre series.¹⁶⁰ In 1794, Boydell employed Richard Westall to illustrate his edition of Milton's *Poetical Works*. One of the illustrations included in that volume is *Sabrina*

¹⁵⁸ Pointon, *Milton and English Art*, 73.

¹⁵⁹ Pointon, *Milton and English Art*, 73. Pointon suspects that Mr. Martin is Elias Martin. Unfortunately no trace of either of these works exists.

¹⁶⁰ Pointon, *Milton and English Art*, 88.

Frees the Lady.¹⁶¹ The woman in this scene shares the neo-classical face found in Wright's treatment. William Blake did two sets of six watercolor illustrations for Comus around 1801. These include: *The Brothers Overcome Comus*, *The Attendant Spirit with the Two Brothers*, *The Brothers under the Vine*, *Comus with his Revellers*, and *Sabrina Freeing the Lady*.¹⁶²

Francis Danby's *Disappointed Love* of 1821 may have been inspired by Wright's painting. It depicts a woman hunched over in despair on the edge of a pool of water. The scene takes place at nighttime and the young woman wears a white dress, altogether looking rather neo-classical in attitude. Adams points out that these were all common elements of Sentimental illustration during the 1790's.¹⁶³

Henry Howard (b. 1769) exhibited twenty-four mythologically related subjects taken from Milton's works. At least two of these subjects were taken from Comus: *The Gardens of Hesperus* and *Sabrina*.¹⁶⁴ William Hilton exhibited *Comus with the Lady in the Enchanted Chair* at the Royal Academy in 1823. In a folder housed at the British Museum, are several drawings that may also have been related to *Comus*.¹⁶⁵ William

¹⁶¹ Pointon, *Milton and English Art*, 120.

¹⁶² Pointon, *Milton and English Art*, 139. There is one set in the Huntington Library and Art Gallery, San Marino, California and another in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

¹⁶³ Eric Adams, *Francis Danby: Varieties of Poetic Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 19.

¹⁶⁴ Pointon, *Milton and English Art*, 200. These works were exhibited at the Royal Academy and the British Institution between 1795 and 1846.

¹⁶⁵ Pointon, *Milton and English Art*, 203.

Etty painted a few scenes from *Comus* during the 1830s and 1840s.¹⁶⁶ He also was chosen in 1841 to judge a competition established to choose artists to paint multiple scenes at the new Houses of Parliament. Prior to this project though, artists were commissioned to paint lunette scenes in the Buckingham Palace Garden Pavilion (taken down in 1928). In the central room of the pavilion the theme was *Comus*. Etty was commissioned to paint a fresco here but was unsuccessful. It was replaced with William Dyce's *The Bridgewater Family Re-united* and Charles Eastlake, Edwin Landseer, C.R. Leslie, Daniel Maclise, Sir William Ross, Clarkson Stanfield, and Thomas Uwins were commissioned to paint the other seven lunettes.¹⁶⁷

Since 1785, *The Lady in Milton's Comus* has been exhibited at the Liverpool Art Club in 1881, at Derby in 1934, at the Tate in 1959, the Royal Academy in 1962, and in 1990 at the Tate Gallery, London, the Grand Palais, Paris, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Today it resides at the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool.

Throughout his life Wright continually experimented with various genres of painting and continually explored a variety of lighting effects and modifications to brushwork and selection of pigments to improve upon his style. His themes and topics

¹⁶⁶ Pointon, *Milton and English Art*, xxvi. 'The Gardens of Hesperus' from the end of *Comus* was one of them.

¹⁶⁷ Pointon, *Milton and English Art*, 208-217. During the twentieth century: 1906 Jessie M. King provided Illustrations to *Comus* published in Photogravure; 1921 *Comus* published by Doubleday Page with illustrations by Arthur Rackham; *Comus* illustrated by Edmund Dulac (1920s-1930s?); 1937 Nonesuch published *Comus* with colored lino-cuts by Mildred Farrar. 245-246.

varied widely and reflected his personal interests in a multiplicity of ideas and current intellectual trends.¹⁶⁸

The span of Wright's career took him from a period in the 1760's when England experienced a general optimism about enlightened culture and its possibilities through the American Revolution and up to the 1790's when France, a country espousing Enlightenment ideals was going through the French Revolution. Joseph Wright died on August 29, 1797. During his lifetime, the modern world was taking shape, and Wright's artwork did not escape this matrix. His work is infused with an exploration of ideas, knowledge, polite society and provincial values.

¹⁶⁸ Daniels, *Joseph Wright*, 10-11.

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