SPECTROSCOPIC OBSERVATIONS OF THE MASS DONOR STAR IN SS 433

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ABSTRACT

The microquasar SS 433 is an interacting massive binary consisting of an evolved mass donor and a compact companion that ejects relativistic jets. The mass donor was previously identified through spectroscopic observations of absorption lines in the blue part of the spectrum that showed Doppler shifts associated with orbital motion and strength variations related to the orbital modulation of the star-to-disk flux ratio and to disk obscuration. However, subsequent observations revealed other absorption features that lacked these properties and that were probably formed in the disk gas outflow. We present follow-up observations of SS 433 at orbital and precession phases identical to those from several previous studies, with the goals of confirming the detection of the mass donor spectrum and providing more reliable masses for the two system components. We show that the absorption features present as well as those previously observed almost certainly belong to the mass donor star, and find revised masses of $12.3 \pm 3.3$ and $4.3 \pm 0.8 \, M_\odot$ for the mass donor and compact object, respectively.

Subject headings: stars: individual (HD 9233, SS 433, V1343 Aquilae) — stars: winds, outflows — supergiants — X-rays: binaries

1. INTRODUCTION

The unique system SS 433 is an X-ray binary star that falls in the class of microquasars (Fabrika 2004). The system exhibits relativistic jets originating from a compact object surrounded by an accretion disk. The companion star in the system contributes only a small fraction of the total light and is thus difficult to detect. Because the accretion disk and its wind are the dominant source of light in the system, reasonable measurements have been made of the radial velocity amplitude of the compact object (e.g., Fabrika & Bychkova 1990; Gies et al. 2002b). Models of the precessing jets and eclipses have also provided a very accurate system inclination (78.8°; Margon & Anderson 1989). Therefore, identifying the mass donor and accurately determining its radial velocity amplitude will lead to direct kinematical masses for both components.

The first potential observations of the mass donor star were reported by Gies et al. (2002a), with additional observations published later by Cherepashchuk et al. (2005). These studies detected faint absorption lines present in blue spectra of SS 433 that exhibited the Doppler shifts expected for the donor star. Finding these lines is difficult, not only due to the small relative flux contribution of the mass donor star but also to the active emission spectrum from the accretion disk, jets, and strong disk wind in the system. The most convincing observations to date of the mass donor spectrum were obtained by Hillwig et al. (2004). Their spectra suggested that the donor star has a spectral classification of A3–7 I, and their radial velocity measurements led to component masses of $M_\odot = 10.9 \pm 3.1 \, M_\odot$ and $M_K = 2.9 \pm 0.7 \, M_\odot$ (where the subscripts p and X represent the optical companion star O and the X-ray–emitting compact object X).

This identification of the mass donor star was challenged by Charles et al. (2004) Barnes et al. (2006), and Clark et al. (2007). These authors present spectra of SS 433 that show features found in an A-type supergiant but that do not follow a coherent orbital radial velocity curve. Their observations show a larger scatter, were performed over a greater variety of orbital and precessional phases, and have a much lower average velocity than those presented by Hillwig et al. (2004). Barnes et al. (2006) and Clark et al. (2007) suggest that these A-type supergiant absorption lines arise in an accretion-driven outflow. Thus, their work demonstrates that not all the absorption features in the spectrum of SS 433 form in the photosphere of the mass donor star.

Some of the differences between these investigations are due to the timing of the observations and the inherent time variability of the spectrum. Given the relative faintness of the mass donor star, compared to the super-Eddington disk in the system, Hillwig et al. (2004) planned observations for orbital phases when the disk is partially eclipsed and for precessional phases when the donor star appears above the disk plane at orbital inferior conjunction. This strategy maximizes the opportunity to reduce the glare of the disk and avoid obscuration by the extensive disk gas. On the other hand, Barnes et al. (2006) made observations at a variety of other orbital and precessional phases and made plausibility arguments that the donor star spectrum might appear at some of these (but was not in fact detected).

Given the need to resolve the differing interpretations in the papers of Hillwig et al. (2004) and Barnes et al. (2006), we undertook follow-up observations to repeat the observations of Hillwig et al. (2004). If the absorption features identified do originate in a disk outflow, then the highly variable nature of the outflow in SS 433 suggests that repeat observations will show significant scatter from prior observations, if in fact the absorption features are still present. However, if the absorption lines originate from the mass donor star, then the highly stable and periodic nature of the orbit should produce observations consistent with the data of Hillwig et al. (2004).
2. OBSERVATIONS AND REDUCTIONS

Observations were acquired with Gemini Multi-Object Spectrograph (GMOS) on the Gemini North Telescope on UT 2006 June 7–13. The resulting spectra cover the wavelength range 3767–5227 Å with a dispersion of 0.235 Å pixel$^{-1}$ and resolution $R(\lambda/\Delta \lambda) = 9580$. Observations were made for approximately 4 hr each night, and all the individual spectra from each night were co-added to improve the signal-to-noise ratio. The co-added spectra were shifted to a heliocentric frame and continuum-normalized by fitting regions free of strong emission lines.

The observations were timed to correspond to mideclipse and greatest disk opening angle, as with the data from Hillwig et al. (2004). The spectra cover an orbital phase $0.85 \leq \phi \leq 0.32$ and a precessional phase $0.02 \leq \psi \leq 0.06$, according to the orbital ephemeris of Goranskii et al. (1998),

$$\text{HJD} 2,450,023.62 + 13.08211E,$$

and, for disk precession, the model ephemeris of Gies et al. (2002b)

$$\text{HJD} 2,451,458.12 + 162.15E.$$

The orbital phase coverage overlaps with and extends that of Hillwig et al. (2004).

3. SPECTRAL APPEARANCE AND RADIAL VELOCITY ANALYSIS

The resulting spectra from seven consecutive nights around mideclipse show the expected broad “stationary” emission lines. The brightest emission lines of hydrogen and helium all showed strong P Cygni absorption components every night, except on the fourth and last nights of the run. The H$\beta$ jet line was present but weak.

The new series of spectra appear to show considerably more emission contamination in the range 4500–4625 Å than seen at the time of the investigation by Hillwig et al. (2004) (see Fig. 1, left panel), and consequently, it was not possible to measure unambiguously the same set of absorption lines they analyzed. The only line that may not be affected by emission is the line near 4563 Å. The line is clearly visible in the spec- tra obtained on the first six nights. This was especially helpful near 4762 and 4780 Å, where interstellar absorption features appear in this older spectrum.

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The resulting, interstellar-subtracted, phase-shifted, and normalized spectra of SS 433 in the wavelength region described above are shown in Figure 1, along with a spectrum of an A-type supergiant, HD 9233 (A4 Iab) obtained with Gemini Multi-Object Spectrograph (GMOS) at Gemini North in 2006 June, along with the HET spectrum of the A4 Iab star HD 9233 (bottom) that was smoothed and scaled to match the SS 433 spectra (see text). Spectra have been phase-shifted to the heliocentric rest frame and offset for clarity. The corresponding orbital phase for each spectrum is shown on the right side of the plot. Also shown is the mideclipse spectrum from Hillwig et al. (2004) (top, see text for details). Left panel: Our mideclipse spectrum (bottom), along with the mideclipse spectrum of Hillwig et al. (2004) for comparison. Scaling is identical in all three panels.

![Fig. 1.—Middle and right panels: SS 433 spectra obtained with GMOS at Gemini North in 2006 June, along with the HET spectrum of the A4 Iab star HD 9233 (bottom) that was smoothed and scaled to match the SS 433 spectra (see text). Spectra have been phase-shifted to the heliocentric rest frame and offset for clarity. The corresponding orbital phase for each spectrum is shown on the right side of the plot. Also shown is the mideclipse spectrum from Hillwig et al. (2004) (top, see text for details). Left panel: Our mideclipse spectrum (bottom), along with the mideclipse spectrum of Hillwig et al. (2004) for comparison. Scaling is identical in all three panels.](image)
TABLE 1

| Date (HJD - 2,450,000) | $V_r$ (km s$^{-1}$) | $\sigma(V_r)$ (km s$^{-1}$) |
|------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------|
| 3893.99                | 0.022               | 0.852                     |
| 3895.04                | 0.029               | 0.932                     |
| 3895.96                | 0.034               | 0.003                     |
| 3897.02                | 0.041               | 0.159                     |
| 3898.01                | 0.047               | 0.237                     |
| 3900.03                | 0.060               | 0.314                     |

Fig. 2.—Phase-folded radial velocity curve for the absorption spectrum in SS 433. Shown are the Gemini North data from 2006 June (filled circles) and the data from Hillwig et al. (2004) (open squares). The dashed lines show the $\pm 2 \sigma$ semiamplitude solutions relative to the calculated best fit.

Fig. 3.—Normalized CCF amplitude vs. orbital phase curve for the SS 433 absorption spectrum. Shown are results from the Gemini North data (2006 June; filled circles), the Hillwig et al. (2004) data (open squares), and the prediction (solid line) for a constant flux photospheric spectrum diluted by variable flux from the accretion disk (according to the mean $B$-band light curve).

this line might be consistently offset from the full-sample CCF values, and thus result in offsets of the night five and night six radial velocity values, a CCF fitting of all six spectra was run using just this line. The resulting radial velocity and CCF amplitude results for nights 1–6 were well within the individual error ranges of the CCF fits using the full wavelength range with no apparent systematic differences. Thus, the Fe $\text{i} \lambda 4957$ line appears to be a good indicator of the mass donor motion. The night five and night six radial velocity errors are larger, reflecting the dominance of one line in the CCF fitting.

The absorption lines shown in Figure 1 appear to be strongest near mideclipse (phase 0.0) when the flux dilution from the disk light is minimized. This variation in strength is represented in Figure 3 by the relative CCF amplitudes for the 2006 June Gemini North data, along with those from Hillwig et al. (2004). The solid line in this figure shows the predicted variation in strength for a constant flux component that is diluted by the phase-variable flux contribution from the disk. This function was derived from the schematic $B$-band light curve of Goranskii et al. (1997, 1998) as described in Hillwig et al. (2004). Since the disk flux varies stochastically, the actual eclipse light curve during the time of the 2006 June observations may have differed from this prediction. Nevertheless, it appears that the absorption lines did strengthen and weaken as expected during this eclipse.

4. DISCUSSION

Hillwig et al. (2004) discuss three criteria that must be met if the absorption-line pattern is to be reliably associated with the supergiant: (1) The radial velocity variation with orbital phase should appear with the ascending branch centered at orbital phase 0.0 (i.e., at inferior conjunction at the time of the optical and X-ray mideclipse). Furthermore, the systemic velocity should be approximately the same as that of the nebula ($+56$ to $+75$ km s$^{-1}$; Boumis et al. 2007; Lockman et al. 2007). The new radial velocity data (Fig. 2) agree with these predictions and with the earlier radial velocity measurements. (2) The absorption-line depths will usually be weak and modulated in strength by the orbital curve and precessional phase. The observed spectrum is a composite of disk and stellar light, so that the stellar lines will always be diluted by the continuum flux from the disk. Furthermore, the accretion disk is probably optically thick and vertically extended, so the supergiant will often be hidden when the star is behind the disk plane from our line of sight. The new spectra show the same variation in absorption-line strength (Fig. 3) as found previously by Hillwig et al. (2004), consistent with our expectations for the varying supergiant-to-disk flux ratio. (3) The presence of a super-Eddington disk in SS 433 implies that the system is undergoing rapid mass transfer from an evolved and Roche lobe–filling mass donor. The fact that the absorption-line spectrum resembles that of an A-type supergiant with a projected rotational
near mideclipse and precessional phase zero is that of the mass donor star. On the other hand, the behavior of an absorption component associated with a disk or disk wind will be highly time-variable, and we suspect that the kind of absorption features described by Barnes et al. (2006) and Clark et al. (2007) do originate in a disk outflow, as they propose. The variable radial velocity of HD 9233 also means that the data from Barnes et al. (2006) may have a velocity offset. Because they used one spectrum to velocity-shift their data, the relative velocities should be correct, so that the very large scatter in their data and the phase offset between their data and that of Hillwig et al. (2004) would remain. Any velocity offset would depend on the heliocentric velocity of HD 9233 in the Barnes et al. (2006) spectrum relative to the $-34 \pm 2$ km s$^{-1}$ from Hillwig et al. (2004).

The radial velocity curve also provides us with the opportunity to revise the kinematical mass calculations for each component. The best-fit radial velocity curve for the combined sets of data shown in Figure 2 gives a semiamplitude for the mass donor star of $K_\odot = 58.2 \pm 3.1$ km s$^{-1}$ and a systemic velocity of $\gamma = 73 \pm 2$ km s$^{-1}$. Adopting a compact object semiamplitude of $K_X = 168 \pm 18$ km s$^{-1}$ (see Hillwig et al. 2004) and a system inclination of 78.8° (Margon & Anderson 1989) gives component masses of $M_1 = 12.3 \pm 3.3 M_\odot$ and $M_X = 4.3 \pm 0.8 M_\odot$. The larger revised mass for the compact object establishes it much more firmly as a black hole candidate. The derived mass ratio $M_1/M_X = 0.35$ is consistent with limits from the optical (Antokhina & Cherepashchuk 1987) and X-ray (Antokhina et al. 1992; Filippova et al. 2006) light curves.

We caution that our adopted value of $K_X$ is not conclusive and that the systemic velocity, $\gamma$, is significantly different from the surrounding nebulosity and absorption features. Hillwig et al. (2004) provide a discussion of these issues and why the value used here should be appropriate.

We caution that our estimate of $K_\odot$ may differ from the actual geometric value if the inner hemisphere of the A-type supergiant is significantly heated by flux from the disk (Cherepashchuk et al. 2005). The amount of irradiation present is very uncertain, since the disk vertical extensions may be sufficient to block most of the high-energy radiation from the central accretion zone from reaching the facing hemisphere of the supergiant. Furthermore, the effects of such heating on line formation are complicated. For example, a hotter, brighter inner hemisphere will have a center of light that is shifted toward the companion (so that the measured radial velocity shifts would be less than they actually are). On the other hand, if the temperature is high enough in the irradiated hemisphere to shift the plasma to higher ionization stages or to reduce the temperature gradient in the atmosphere, then the lines we observe would be weaker or absent in the surface elements of the inner hemisphere (shifting the measured radial velocities to larger than they actually are). The clues from the available spectra suggest that irradiation probably plays a minor role, since the decline in CCF strength following mideclipse follows approximately the expected curve for flux dilution alone (Fig. 3). However, the absorption lines do weaken and disappear in the final spectrum obtained near orbital quadrature phase, and this behavior may be due to some contribution of irradiation or the disappearance of the supergiant behind an optically thick accretion disk. If irradiation of the inner hemisphere were to change the ionization stage, however, then, at quadrature, the absorption lines would be visible from only half of the projected stellar surface, which means that the line strengths should be no greater than half that predicted by the eclipse model in Figure 3 (solid line).

5. CONCLUSIONS

We have shown that the behavior of the A-type supergiant absorption spectrum observed in SS 433 during eclipse and near precessional phase zero is repeatable. This suggests that the origin of the spectrum is a consistent, well-behaved source. We suggest that the source is the mass donor star in the system, rather than the disk or a disk wind. It is interesting that SS 433 would show spectra from both the mass donor star and the disk/disk wind that are so similar to one another. However, the appearance of such absorption might be anticipated if the disk outflow material is clumpy and has a temperature in the line-forming region comparable to that of the supergiant.

The radial velocity curve resulting from observations of the mass donor star then allow for calculations of the kinematical masses of the two components. We find masses of $M_1 = 12.3 \pm 3.3 M_\odot$ and $M_X = 4.3 \pm 0.8 M_\odot$ for the mass donor and compact object. It is possible that the inner hemisphere of the mass donor is irradiated, resulting in lower masses for both components and potentially reducing the compact object mass to below the neutron star limit. The behavior of the CCF amplitude suggests that a strong irradiation effect is not present in our data. If this is the case, then the compact object in SS 433 can be firmly identified as a black hole candidate.

We thank the staff of the Gemini North Observatory for their help in obtaining the GMOS spectra described here. This material is based on work supported by the National Science Foundation under grant AST-0606861 (T. C. H.). Institutional support has been provided from the GSU College of Arts and Sciences and from the Research Program Enhancement fund of the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia, through the GSU Office of the Vice President for Research (D. R. G.). We gratefully acknowledge all of this support.

Facilities: Gemini:Gillett(GMOS), HET(MRS)

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