



**Escobedo, Andrew. Volition's Face: Personification and the Will  
in Renaissance Literature**

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This has been a long-awaited book for many interested in Gomes Eanes. It will surely go a long way towards establishing the Portuguese religious reformer and spiritual leader as a figure to be known and studied by a much wider readership.

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**Escobedo, Andrew.**

***Volition's Face: Personification and the Will in Renaissance Literature.***

Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017. Pp. xii, 326. ISBN 978-0-268-10167-1 (paperback) \$40.

Personification has been used in recent studies of the relationship between subjecthood and objecthood as a figurative instance of ways in which human agents can be de-personed. By limiting the full scope of human action to a single characteristic, some contemporary critics suggest that as a figure, personification offers an outmoded understanding of being that implicitly insists that a circumscribed behavioural capacity cannot amount to full personhood. As Andrew Escobedo asserts in *Volition's Face*, however, this need not be the case. If we consider premodern understandings of personification, we will encounter models of the figure that indicate precisely the opposite inclination. For writers of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance (a term that Escobedo uses deliberately instead of “early modern period”), personification signalled a distinct channelling or effusion of energy, that in turn conveyed a kind of animism. Specifically, Escobedo argues, the movement of this energy should be understood as an expression of different aspects of the human will, an important element of the premodern self but not coterminous with it. The premodern self is made intelligible as the will interacts with different psychological capacities—such as reason—as well as with sources external to the individual agent. In medieval and Renaissance writing, personification is particularly valuable as a means toward representing the interactive—or, to use Escobedo’s term, “transactional”—property of the will, as it figures ideas or modes of being as they become modes of action.

Escobedo does not deny that Renaissance humanism and the Reformation both posed important problems for medieval understandings of the operation and obligations of the will. However, as he asserts in the first two programmatic chapters of the book, the notion of the will as an independent faculty within the psychology of the individual remained essentially consistent through the seventeenth century. Moreover, both medieval and Renaissance writers maintained a sense of the will as a crucial part of human psychology, but one that stood partly outside it, in a sense, and it is this double aspect of the will in which premodern personifications are so fully interested. This interest is evident especially in the personification of conscience, an element of the self long understood to be both internal and external to it. Moral interludes written prior to the Reformation tend to emphasize the role of conscience as a catalyst for the repentance of the protagonist; it is in effect a part of the remorseful and penitent will. Later morality drama does not share the same assumptions about the capacity of the will or conscience to urge the self toward a penitential disposition, yet this does not mean that there is no role for them to play. Drawing on Luther and Calvin as well as William Perkins, Escobedo demonstrates the centrality of repentance to Reformation theology and the complex nature of the status of the will in the movement toward repentance. While repentance is itself the work of grace, it coincides also with an awareness—figured through conscience and the will—of the will's hopeless depravity. Moved in this way, the will longs for the desire to repent in an efficacious way, and assents to the change wrought in the spirit by the infusion of grace. Escobedo is here able to show both the continuities in medieval and Renaissance thinking about the psychological status of conscience and the will and the ongoing utility of personification as a literary tool for examining these elements of the self.

Other personifications demonstrate similarly flexible representative and interpretive capabilities. Marlowe and Spenser, in their treatments of despair, make use of what is formally the same figure found in multiple pre-Reformation moral interludes. Yet unlike the version of Despair found in Skelton's *Magnyfycence*, Mephistopheles in *Faustus* and Despair in *The Faerie Queene* perform despair just as they project it. The reason for this, Escobedo suggests, derives from ongoing debates in post-Reformation thought on the psychological and emotional function of despair. Whereas despair is for *Magnyfycence* a transitory state that will ultimately relinquish its hold on him,

for some Reformed thinkers it is a more constant presence, one that may in fact both supplement and conflict with the inclinations of conscience toward repentance. Personification can also be helpful in tracing the shape of different discourses over even longer stretches of time. Using Prudentius and Milton, Escobedo shows how personification could be deployed to consider the difficult question of the origin of angelic sin. The problem these writers confront is similar to that posed by the will as the product of a chain of causation: if the chain is extended far enough, we are faced with the unacceptable possibility that God is the source of sin. For Prudentius, this can be addressed by using personification to represent sin as a self-created rupture from the existing moral dispensation. For Milton, the problem is too fraught to admit of a single response, and so the personification of sin in book 2 of *Paradise Lost* serves to set a narrative limit to the representation of sin that is then complemented by Raphael's more literal or verisimilar retelling in book 5.

The chapter on personifications of love is less well-integrated thematically, though it offers a strong and insightful reading of Spenser's deployment of this personification that links *The Faerie Queene* more specifically to traditions of Platonic philosophical commentary than to traditions of Renaissance poetry. *Volition's Face* provides an extremely valuable perspective on the relationship between literature and religious and philosophical thinking about the will in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and makes timely and helpful interventions into several ongoing critical conversations: about the relationship between humans and nonhumans, about the status of repentance in Reformation theology, and about the intellectual continuities linking medieval and Renaissance writing, to name a few. This is a remarkable book, and we are very fortunate to have it.

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