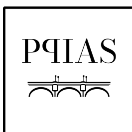

Voluntarism and the Self in Medieval Literature

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ABSTRACT

The voluntarist movement in later medieval philosophy accentuates the role of the will in human agency. A robust account of human freedom is tied to the indeterminacy of the will, and our character as moral agents is articulated in terms of the will's free choices. These philosophical developments are often said to manifest themselves in various works of fourteenth-century English literature. Here I explore what exactly voluntarism is and how it appears in the work of Geoffrey Chaucer and William Langland.

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Introduction

It is often suspected, of various works of fourteenth-century English literature, that they show the influence of philosophical voluntarism in the heightened significance they give to the will and its affective operations. This is a tempting thought to have with regard to

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Geoffrey Chaucer, who was dubbed by a contemporary "the noble philosophical poet" (Windeatt, 2023, pp. 379-380). It is an even more tempting thought to have with regard to *Piers Plowman*, both because of William Langland's explicit engagement with philosophy and theology, and because of Langland's choice to make Will his central character.

An obstacle to such claims, however, is that no one has ever produced a clear and systematic account of what the voluntarist movement was. I hope to do that in detail elsewhere, but here I will attempt something more modest: to distinguish between a few claims that might be associated with voluntarism, and to consider some signs of their presence within Chaucer and Langland*.* A clear understanding of the philosophical character of voluntarism, and its implications for human nature, makes for a compelling case that we should understand these poets as imbuing various abstract philosophical thesis about the primacy of will with concrete meaning, set within the context of ordinary life.

Some Varieties of Voluntarism

A rough start at delimiting the scope of voluntarism might distinguish between claims made about the human will, claims made about the divine will, and claims made about the popular will. The last of these three concerns the grounds of political authority, and voluntarism is sometimes associated with fourteenth-century political theorists who stress the role of popular consent in establishing political legitimacy. Here the leading figures are Marsilius of Padua and William of Ockham.[1] The second of these three broad categories concerns various ways in which God's will might impinge upon human affairs. Of course, the presence of God in our daily lives is taken for granted throughout the Middle Ages. But views that put great weight on the radical freedom of God's will are often associated with voluntarism. An interesting feature of these views is that they are prone to have destabilizing implications, calling into question our ability to understand the world around us and our place within it. A well-known example of this sort is the claim of John Duns Scotus (1265/6-1308) that most of the laws of the

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Decalogue obtain only contingently-that God could have made it the case, for instance, that theft is not wrong (Scotus, 2017, pp. 248-258).

Here I will set aside these two broad categories and focus on the first and most prominent form of voluntarism, concerning the human will. It would be very difficult to give an exhaustive account of the many distinct forms of voluntarism that might be identified here, but some rough distinctions can be drawn. First, and most generally, voluntarists are united by their opposition to any form of causal determinism of the will, of the sort found within Stoicism and Arabic Aristotelianism, according to which our choices are necessitated by the course of past events (Bobzien, 2001; Belo, 2007). Closely tied to this philosophical thesis is a theological thesis, that God's providence necessitates all of our choices. This kind of necessity is explicitly found among some medieval authors, most prominently in Thomas Bradwardine, who argues that everything that happens, including every act of every human will, is necessitated by God's eternal volition (Bradwardine,1618).[2] On its face, this seems incompatible with human freedom and moral responsibility, and so a characteristic challenge faced by many voluntarists is to find a way of squaring God's eternal foreknowledge and providence with robust human freedom (Normore, 1982). These issues interact with a third aspect of voluntarism, which is its sympathy for something in the vicinity of Pelagianism with respect to the doctrine of grace. Although it is settled doctrine that grace is both required for salvation and freely given by God, voluntarists tend to be broadly sympathetic to the idea that human beings have some capacity to do the good independently of receiving grace (Oberman, 1962).

The voluntarists sought to make headway on these large theological questions by offering a transformed conception of human nature, one on which the will supplants intellect as the defining feature of our nature. We can understand this transformation as coming in four stages. The first stage, which I will call *anti-intellectualism*, argues against yet another sort of determinism: the will's being determined in its choices by the judgment of intellect. On views of this sort, which were widely held by scholastic authors, the will must choose that which the intellect judges to be the best course of action. Resistance to this sort of determinism takes various forms, as we will see, and is perhaps the most distinctive characteristic of medieval voluntarism. A second stage, building on the first, undermines the ancient consensus that all of our voluntary choices

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are made for the sake of happiness. According to some voluntarists, the will is free to choose for or against its own happiness. Moreover, according to these authors, it is essential both to our freedom and to our moral worth that we do choose against happiness, and instead we choose to embrace justice. This leads directly to a third sort of commitment, one that is less familiar but yet critical to an appreciation of voluntarism's broader cultural influence. This is the idea of the will as the primary locus of *selfhood*, which is to say that who we are as individuals is defined, first and foremost, by the character of our wills. This is an idea that goes back, as we will see, to the origins of Christianity, but it takes on new prominence in the fourteenth century. And that idea in turn leads to a fourth member of this set, which is that the will is the primary locus of *moral worth*, in the sense that our being virtuous or vicious, praiseworthy or blameworthy, depends on the internal state of our will rather than on what we do in the world.

To understand the lines that run between the four forms of voluntarism just described we might start with the most well-known version of intellectualism, that of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). Aquinas's contemporary critics, of whom there were many, often depicted his views in crude caricature, as if the will were simply a rubber stamp endorsing the judgments of intellect. In fact he offers a very complex and nuanced account of the relation between will and intellect, and scholars continue to dispute the extent to which it can aptly be regarded as intellectualist rather than voluntarist.[3] But it is clear at a minimum that Aquinas believes the will has a determinate teleological orientation toward the good: in other words, that all its choices are made under the guise of the good:

> "The will naturally tends towards its ultimate end: for every human being naturally wills happiness. And this natural willing is the cause of all other willings, since whatever a human being wills, he wills for the sake of an end." (Aquinas, 1950-53, 1a 60.2c).

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This quickly points in the direction of intellectualism, for several reasons. First, it is the intellect, through practical reasoning, that decides on the best course to pursue in order to obtain a certain end. This is indeed one of the paradigmatic tasks of intellect, and so it would be bizarre to suppose that the will would be responsible for reasoning about which means to take to achieve a certain end. Second, the role given to the will, in this passage, is to want the end, and not just any end, but our ultimate end, happiness. To be sure, it is important to human nature that the will gives us this fixed inclination toward happiness. Indeed, the passage just quoted says that it is in virtue of willing this that we will everything else we will. But although the will is undoubtedly important inasmuch as it supplies this inclination toward our own happiness, it is not clear that it plays an interesting agential role. For this tendency toward the good is something that it wills "naturally," and so determinately. Hence the will's role in our lives is surprisingly fixed, and tends to be overshadowed in Aquinas's thinking by the role of intellect in determining which courses of action will best promote our own happiness.

To avoid falling into crude caricature, it should be said that Aquinas's position becomes quickly more complex when one considers the story's temporal dimension. For although the will must follow the ultimate judgment of intellect, it is not just the passive recipient of the intellect's dictates. Instead, the lines of causal influence run in both directions. For what may seem best is for the intellect to continue deliberating, or to deliberate about something different, and it is the will that issues such commands. This does not ultimately mean that the will is in charge, however, because the will's command is itself a product of a prior intellectual judgment, which may itself be the product of a voluntary choice to deliberate. The process runs back and forth, over the entire course of an agent's life. Moreover, over the course of a life, both will and intellect acquire various dispositions-virtues and vices-and these shape the ways in which the two faculties behave. Inasmuch as two of the most important moral virtues, justice and charity, are virtues of the will (Aquinas, 1950-53, 1a2ae 56.6), it can hardly be said that the will plays a secondary role in Aquinas's thinking. But even if that makes it somewhat misleading to characterize his ultimate position as intellectualist, it is certainly not the case that his account of human nature *privileges* the will as opposed to intellect. And what's distinctive of the voluntarist movement is precisely that it does in various ways privilege the will over and above other aspects of human nature.

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We can see this sort of privilege at work very clearly in Scotus's rejection of a view along the lines of Aquinas's. Against the idea that everything we choose is connected to our own happiness, Scotus distinguishes between two innate inclinations within our will, one for our own advantage and another for justice: "The innate affection for justice is our inborn freedom, in virtue of which one can will something good that is not ordered to oneself." (Scotus, 1950-2013, n.110) . As Scotus here indicates, it is this "affection for justice" that makes us free, securing us the ability to will or not-will anything whatsoever, no matter how directly tied it is to our own happiness. And so Scotus claims in general that "when it comes to any object, I do not necessarily choose either to will or to will-against." (Scotus, 1639, XI.2:913a; tr. Williams, 2023, p.36). A generation later, William of Ockham (1287-1347) goes even further. Whereas Aquinas holds that the will's teleological orientation toward its ultimate end is, as it were, hard-wired, Ockham flatly denies this, writing that "the will is not naturally inclined to its ultimate end" (Scotus, 1967--89, I:507).[4] The implication of this claim is that although happiness in heaven with God is our ultimate end, the will has the capacity to reject that end, which is a claim that Ockham explicitly endorses, remarking elsewhere that "even with the intellect's judging that this is the ultimate end, the will can will-against that end" (Scotus, 1967--1989, VII:350). In effect, the will can will to be unhappy. This in turn has ramifications for everything that the will chooses, because if it can reject its ultimate end then it can reject *anything* that the intellect might propose, given that the intellect's practical judgments have force only on the assumption that the agent desires a certain end. This, too, is something that Ockham explicitly avows, saying that "the will can be moved against the judgment of reason." (Scotus, 1967-1989, VII:354, VII:357-58).

We might say that, for both Scotus and Ockham, the will is a much more interesting faculty than it is for Aquinas. Although Aquinas's will plays an ineliminable causal role in his theory of action, and serves as the subject for the most important moral virtues, its role is limited by its natural inclination for happiness in a way that the will for Scotus and Ockham is not. Whether or not this gives their wills greater *freedom* is a question that has been long debated and need not be taken up here. But their anti-intellectualism plainly gives the will itself a more important role to play in human action, by making the will's autonomous choice the critical deciding factor. The point has to be articulated with some care. The point has to be articulated with some care.

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After all, even for the most intellectualist of scholastic authors, it is the endorsement of will (*voluntas*) that defines the scope of *voluntary action*, and hence the scope of moral responsibility[5]. What's different for voluntarists like Scotus Ockham is that the explanation for why the will chooses one thing or another rests ultimately with the will itself. The will's choices are, to be sure, influenced by the judgment of intellect and by the various virtues and vices we accumulate over time. Moreover, the voluntarists agree that the will *ought* to follow reason, assuming that it is right reason, and *ought* to act in accord with our moral dispositions, assuming they are *virtuous* dispositions. But whereas Aquinas (1954, I.16) can write that "it is by virtue that we live well.", the voluntarists treat the will as the decisive locus of our agency where our status as moral agents is ultimately determined.

Determinism in Troilus and Criseyde

To begin to consider these philosophical problems in a wider social context we might first look at Chaucer's (1987) epic mid-career poem, *Troilus and Criseyde*. The story is based upon Boccaccio's version of a tragic love affair set in ancient Troy, but Chaucer adds to this source material a complex philosophical frame. He wrote the poem in the 1380s, not long after making a carefully literal English translation of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*. Although utterly different in their narrative setting-the one features an aging philosopher sentenced to death, the other a young lovestruck warrior-the two works share a similar thematic focus: the pursuit of happiness, the vicissitudes of fortune, and the seeming inevitability of divine destiny.

The essential plotline of *Troilus and Criseyde* can be conveyed quickly. Troilus, the king's son, falls in love with Criseyde and, with the help of his friend Pandarus, after much unhappy suffering, manages to begin a love affair with her. They are happy until Criseyde is forced to leave Troy as part of a prisoner exchange with the Greeks. She promises to return but she does not, instead giving her love to the Greek warrior Diomede. Troilus, miserable once again, soon dies in battle.

From the poem's terse opening lines Chaucer makes clear that what fundamentally drives the action is the quest for happiness, and in particular Troilus's progress "Fro wo

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to wele [wellbeing], and after out of joie" (I.3)[6]. Having described the woe of unrequited love in the first two books, the proem to Book III then announces its need to "tell anonright the gladnesse / Of Troilus ... / To which gladnesse, who nede hath, God hym brynge" (III.47--49). The start of Book V then describes Troilus's state of mind at the pivotal moment when he must escort Criseyde from Troy to the Greek camp:

> "This Troilus, withouten reed or loore, *without plan or direction*
>
> As man that hath his joies ek forlore,
>
> Was waytyng on his lady evere more
>
> As she that was the sothfast crop and more *the true leaf and root*
>
> Of al his lust or joies heretofore.
>
> But Troilus, now far-wel al thi joie,
>
> For shaltow nevere sen hire eft in Troie!" (V.22--28)

Chaucer uses "joy" three times here to stress what it is that Troilus is losing, and at the same time he intensifies the poem's A-B-A-B-B-C-C rhyming scheme so as to heighten the significance of the moment: A-A-A-A-A, and then B-B: Troilus will never be happy again.

The poem takes for granted the philosophers' consensus that everyone seeks happiness. What the poem presses us to consider is just what such happiness consists in. In the passage just quoted, we are told that Troilus had fixated on Criseyde as the ultimate end of all his desires: she was "crop and more [root] of all his lust or joies." Up until the very end of the poem his single-minded focus gets taken for granted as just the sort of thing one should expect a noble young warrior to do, and our hero's successes in this domain are uncritically described as bringing him the most perfect sort of happiness. The narrator, indeed, struggles throughout Book III to convey the extent of their happiness:

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"Of hire delit or joies oon the leeste *hire : their | oon : any of*

Were impossible to my wit to seye; (III.1310--11)

And lat hem in this heavene blisse dwell *him : them*

That is so heigh that al ne kan I tell." (III.1322--23)

These are reports only of their first night together. With subsequent meetings their happiness increases exponentially: "For if it erst was wel, tho [then] was it bet /A thousand fold; ... / Ago [gone] was every sorwe and every feere" (III.1683-85).

If we take the narrator at their word, our heroes achieve at this midpoint of the poem the very summit of happiness (Windeatt, 2023, pp.195--201). But part of what makes the poem so challenging to interpret is that the narrator's word clearly is not to be taken at face value. Theirs is, indeed, the most unsophisticated voice in the entire poem, consistingly offering a naïve construal of the events taking place. From the perspective of Boethius or of any philosophical tradition, joy of the sort that the narrator finds so transcendent should not be the ultimate end of any human life. And lest one thinks that the narrator might be tacitly distinguishing between joy and true happiness, we are explicitly told that what Troilus and Criseyde have is better than the "felicite" of the philosophers:

"Felicite, which that thise clerkes wise *clerkes : scholars*

Comenden so, ne may nought here suffise;

This joie may nought writen be with inke;

This passeth al that herte may bythynke." (III.1691--94)

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Chaucer has a wide repertoire of words that he can use to talk with some nuance about the different kinds of happiness: he tends to use 'bliss' and 'glad' and 'joy' for immediate feelings of pleasure, and can use 'felicite' and 'selynesse' for the all-encompassing well-being of a good life[7]. Such a distinction between momentary pleasure and overall happiness lies at the very core of the *Consolation of Philosophy* and premodern ethics more generally. But the narrator of *Troilus and Criseyde* has no use for such niceties. The worry that the poem's heroes might be pursuing the wrong sort of happiness is quite alien to the narrator's frame of reference.

Closely linked to the what-is-it question of happiness lies the question of why happiness is so fleeting in this life. This *is* a concern the narrator takes seriously, and which they frame in terms of the vicissitudes of fortune. At a crucial moment in Pandarus's scheme to get Troilus into bed with Criseyde the narrator gestures toward its power:

> "But O Fortune, executrice of wierdes, *wierdes : fate*
>
> O influences of thise hevenes hye!
>
> Soth is, that under God ye ben oure hierdes *hierdes : shepherds*
>
> Though to us bestes ben the causez wrie." (III.617-20) *wry : concealed*

The narrative abounds with other such references to fortune, often personified as a goddess. The characters themselves likewise dwell on the role of fortune, but display markedly different attitudes. Troilus's attitude, from the start, is one of despair. Even before he has made any effort to pursue a relationship with Criseyde he is convinced that "Fortune is my foe" (I.837), and when he receives the devastating news that Criseyde is to be sent to the Greeks he devotes an eleven-stanza apostrophe to Fortune and the various other forces oppressing him, calling on Fortune to kill him rather than continue to torment him (IV.260--336). Confronted with the same events, other characters react quite differently. Pandarus's advice to both Troilus and Criseyde is to take advantage of fortune as best they can: the trick is to be ready when the wheel of fortune turns in their direction. Criseyde's attitude is more complex. Chaucer ascribes to

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her a dense 24-line argument, closely paraphrasing a passage from the *Consolation of Philosophy*, which draws on the inevitably transitory character of earthly pleasure to conclude that "ther is no verray weele [true wellbeing] in this world heere" (III.836)[8]. Whereas Pandarus wants the lovers to play to win the game of fortune, and Troilus despairs of winning even from the start, Criseyde sees no path other than to make the best of things. In her final private conversation with Troilus, as she brings to its conclusion her elaborate case for why Troilus should let her go to the Greeks and await her return, she urges Troilus to take control over fortune by embracing the virtue of patience:

> "Thus maketh vertu of necessite
>
> By pacience, and thynk that lord is he
>
> Of Fortune ay that naught wole of hire recche, *who will always think nothing of her*
>
> And she ne daunteth no wight but a wretch." (IV.1586--89) *wight : person*

To become "lord of fortune" is precisely to take the sort of control over fortune that is the hallmark of a free agent-the lordship described in Latin as *dominium*. And Criseyde's advice to Troilus is quite apt, inasmuch as the standard medieval understanding of patience is that it is the disposition to react to adversity through reason rather than despair[9]. For Troilus, who spends much of the poem moaning in his bed, this is excellent advice.

But although Criseyde consistently displays at least as much insight as any other character-so much so that Chaucer gives her a speech taken straight from Boethius-her position on fortune is not in fact *Boethius's* position. Criseyde is reciting what Boethius's character in the *Consolation* thinks about fortune in the early stages of the poem, but this reflects only the prisoner's confused state of mind, precisely the condition that Lady Philosophy has descended to straighten out. Philosophy insists on a point that none of the pagan characters in *Troilus* clearly recognize: that what we call fortune is

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not random happenstance but instead God's deliberate and rational plan. In the words of Chaucer's translation, "the governance of the werld ... nis nat subgit ne underput to the folye of thise happes aventurous, but to the resoun of God." (Chaucer, 1987, *Consolation* Ipr6, lines 89--92). The point is not to deny that there is such a thing as fortune, but instead to understand it as an epistemic category: we regard events as due to fortune when our efforts toward a certain end are influenced by a sequence of causes we are not expecting[10]. Chaucer himself traces this same sort of progression of ideas in his short poem "Fortune," which begins by describing fortune as "Withouten ordre or wys discrecioun" (line 3) and then defiantly vows to defy it along the lines that Criseyde urges for Troilus: by securing a "maystrye" and "suffisaunce" over himself (lines 14-15). Ultimately, though, the poem arrives at a Boethian perspective on the nature of fortune: "th'execucion of the [divine] majestee ... That same thing "Fortune" clepen ye" (lines 65, 67). When fortune is understood in this way it becomes possible to be more than merely patient with respect to the turning wheel of fortune, and instead to embrace fortune in all of its variation. From this vantage point, as Lady Philosophy puts it, "all fortune is good" (Chaucer, 1987, IVpr7).

This higher perspective affords one of the great consolations of philosophy, but it is a consolation that no one in *Troilus* is in a position to grasp. Although the narrator does acknowledge in passing, toward the end of the poem, that fortune arises through divine providence (V.1541-44), there is no accompanying insight into the implications of this remark. When Criseyde, as above, counsels Troilus to think nothing of fortune, or when, more dimly, the narrator remarks that "In ech estat is litel hertes reste; God leve [grant] us for to take it for the beste!" (V.1749-50), the characters seek a consolation that they do not have the intellectual resources to achieve. Their pagan, inchoate philosphical musings leave them confused about the relationship between happiness, fortune, and God, and this ensures that none of them are able to flourish in their present lives. Criseyde is not wrong when she runs through the Boethian reasoning for the conclusion that "ther is no verray weele in this world heere" (as above), but she has only part of the story. She suffers from an old conflation rooted in language itself, according which to to be happy just is to be fortunate. In Middle English, for instance, although 'selynesse' serves as an abstract noun for the philosophers' idea of happines, to be 'sely' can mean not just happy but also lucky or blessed (among many other things). As for 'happiness' itself, that abstract noun never appears in Chaucer, while 'hap' and 'happy'

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always refer to fortune and good luck[11]. Language here reflects the common assumption that happiness and fortune are inextricably entangled. To achieve a genuinely Boethian perspective on these matters requires that they be untangled.

Just as there is no voice in the poem capable of distinguishing between happiness and fortune, so there is no one who understands the relationship between fortune and destiny. This is so even though the whole poem is soaked in the language of fate. The narrator regularly treats everything that happens as foredestined, and crucial plot developments turn on Calchas-Criseyde's father-being supposedly able to foresee the future[12]. Criseyde herself blames her situation on the "corsed constellacioun" in which she was born (IV.745). And Troilus in particular regards the whole situation as predetermined: "thow most loven thorugh thi destine" (I.520) he tells himself right from the start of his obsession with Criseyde. When it begins to seem clear that fortune is against him, "he was so fallen in despeir" as to conclude that "al that comth, comth by necessitee: Thus to ben lorn [forelorn], it is my destinee" (IV.954, 958--59). There follows a remarkably dense and intrusive philosophical discussion of divine foreknowledge, running for over 100 lines and closely paraphrasing the argumentative core of the prisoner's case in the *Consolation* for why God's foreknowledge entails necessity[13]. In the context of the *Consolation* this serves as just another mark of the prisoner's intellectual confusion, the last of a sequence that includes the speech Chaucer had given to Criseyde in Book III. The argument itself is not particularly remarkable-Boethius has Lady Philosophy describe it as an "olde questioun" (Vpr4)-but what makes the *Consolation* a remarkable work of philosophy is the reply to this argument that Lady Philosophy makes over the work's final chapters. In the context of Chaucer's poem what makes Troilus's speech remarkable is that his cry for help meets with no response and so serves only to reinforce the poem's pervasive fatalism. Chaucer, our "noble philosophical poet", seems to insert 100 lines of Boethius into his poem only to make a case for the old and familiar heresy that "al that comth, comth by necessitee" (as above)[14].

What are we to make of all this? Perhaps the first thing to say is that the poem is, in a wonderful way, open with respect to these sorts of philosophical questions, bringing them into salience without decisively settling them[15]. A related observation is that the poem invites two kinds of readings, internal and external. By an internal reading I mean

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one that situates itself within the perspective of the narrator and characters, entering into their values and worldviews. But even while the rich complexities of the poem draw the reader into such a perspective, Chaucer at the same time works to pull the reader back. Explicitly, he does so through a complex sequence of concluding stanzas that, as we will see, introduce various external sensibilities into the story. Implicitly, he does so by invoking fragments of Boethian ideas, thereby inviting the reader to complete the characters' inchoate philosophical thoughts.

From an internal perspective, the poem is most naturally read as embracing a hard determinism that leaves no room for freedom. If, on the other hand, one takes into account the larger Boethian context, then the characters' fatalistic outlook looks intellectually incomplete. Boethius has Lady Philosophy tell us that all rational beings have freedom of choice, in virtue of their ability to judge what ought to be done and to convert those judgments into desire and action. And we might then notice that Chaucer puts considerable weight on the rational deliberations of his characters. They are not simply responding in brute fashion to their various desires but working through, in painstaking detail, what would be most rational to do given their complex situations[16]. So even if they do not perceive themselves to be free, one does not have to step very far outside a strictly internal reading of the poem to find reasons why we should regard them as possessed of freewill. Does this mean that these characters have the undetermined sort of freedom that is characteristic of voluntarism? In this respect the most marked influence of voluntarism is not on Chaucer himself but on his modern readers, who have been so influenced themselves by the long legacy of voluntarism that they simply assume a free choice cannot be causally necessitated[17]. Whether or not Chaucer held that view is an open question, but if we read into the poem a Boethian worldview then the poem's sensibilities would be better described as compatibilist: its protagonists are free even though their decisions are determined by the causal forces that run through all of nature. On Boethius's intellectualist approach we are free just because of our capacity for efficacious practical reasoning-that is, because our the causal sequence that culminates in our action runs *through us* in the right sort of way.

Troilus and Criseyde engages with voluntarism more directly when it raises questions about the motives of its characters. One of the central questions of Book IV is whether Troilus should follow his reason or his will. That theme is announced near the start:

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"Love hym made al prest to don hire byde, *prest : ready*

And rather dyen than she [Criseyde] sholde go;

But Resoun seyde hym, on that other syde,

"Withouten assent of hire ne do nat so,

Lest for thi werk she wolde be thy fo... .". (IV.162-6)

This struggle within Troilus between love and reason continues over many stanzes. He reiterates that "Thus am I with desir and reson twight [pulled]" (IV.572). Meanwhile, Pandarus pulls in the direction of his desires, "Devyne [deliberate] nat in resoun ay so depe" (IV.589), whereas Criseyde urges him to "sle [slay] with resoun al this hete [heat]" (IV.1583) and admires "that youre resoun bridlede youre delit" (IV.1678). The voluntarists, like all their contemporaries, think that our desires should be subject to right reason. But part of what makes Troilus's inner state in Book IV so interesting is that it is not clear what he ought to do, because it is not clear whether *rightness* in his situation lies with his reason or with his desires. Rightness, in the practical domain, is a matter of which course of action can be rationally expected to achieve the agent's end. And that in turn brings us back to the poem's ultimate concern: what *is* the final end at which the characters should be aiming? In the medieval context, this is to ask about the nature of happiness, a topic that, as we have seen, lies at the core of the debate over voluntarism.

A strictly internal reading of the poem yields the material for a rich discussion of the characters' pursuit of happiness. Do Troilus's moral virtues-most notably his bravery and his justice toward Criseyde-appropriately guide his pursuit of Criseyde's love? Do his apparent spiritual vices-his despair, his *acedia*-doom that pursuit?[18] Are these to be understood as failings specifically of his will, even while his reason continues to churn out arguments on all sides? Similarly interesting questions arise for Criseyde. At the pivotal moment in Book V where her deliberations about whether to return to Troy come to a head, she remarks that "Felicity clepe I my suffisance" (V.756)-that is,

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happiness is enough for her. Is this precisely why she betrays Troilus: that she pursues happiness when she should instead be bound by considerations of justice toward him? And what of her apparent lack of the cardinal virtues: are these failings on the part of her will?[19] Whereas Troilus is afflicted with a despair over his supposed *predestiny*, Criseyde becomes increasingly preoccupied with her future destiny:

> "Allas, of me, unto the worldes ende,
>
> Shal neyther ben ywriten nor ysonge
>
> No good word...". (V.1058--60)

This forward-looking concern has respectable credentials in the Aristotelian idea that happiness is hostage to the legacy one leaves behind after one's death[20]. But to the voluntarists these sorts of vain preoccupations might seem to exemplify why happiness should not be our ultimate end.

On an internal reading, the poem leaves such questions open. For the reader who takes an external perspective, however, questions such as these may quickly be settled or even cease to be meaningful questions. Consider, for instance, that when Boethius has Lady Philosophy assure the prisoner that there is freewill, she immediately goes on to add that not all human freedom is equal. On Chaucer's translation, those are least free who "cast awey hir eyghen fro the lyght of the sovereyn sothfastnesse to lowe thingis and derke." (Chaucer, 1987, Vpr2). This downward turn, to things low and dark, might be thought to describe precisely what happens from the moment when Troilus first casts his eyes on Criseyde. And this reading is encouraged by a series of stanzas, affixed to the end of the poem, which introduce a Christian sensibility, counseling readers to turn their love to Christ: "And syn he best to love is, and most meke, What nedeth feynede [untrue] loves for to seke?" (V.1848-49). Read in light of these passages, the love story we have been told may seem to rest on a fundamental mistake about what really matters in life. If what we should ultimately do is set aside our untrue earthly loves for the love of Christ then why should we care about the subtle psychological details of Troilus's

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love and Criseyde's betrayal? From the start the whole story looks to be misguided, leaf and root.

In effect, to read the poem from this moralizing Christian perspective is to cancel it. To be sure, it is a perspective not easily dismissed, both in light of the stanzas that conclude the poem and given that Chaucer himself, in the retractation that concludes the *Canterbury Tales*, does specifically issue such a cancellation when he claims to "revoke ... the book of Troilus" (X.1084-85)[21]. Even so, to take this perspective seriously is to undermine the poem itself. For by calling into question the ultimate ends of every character, the moralizing Christian reading drains the poem of all living force, uprooting the complex social and psychological tale that Chaucer has taken such pains to construct. Although *Troilus and Criseyde* can flourish within a deterministic framework, it cannot survive losing the ultimate motives from which all of the characters' actions spring.

One can however, acknowledge the external Christian-Boethian context of the poem without depriving it of all life. One way to do this-there are no doubt others-is to provide the poem a philosophical framework that acknowledges God as the ultimate end without rejecting the sort of earthly love that Troilus and Criseyde exemplify. There is nothing remotely incoherent about such a position. To treat God as our ultimate end-to love God with all our heart and soul- does not preclude loving other things as well. Rather than cancel their love affair, this playful philosophical reading of the poem embraces a *both*-and attitude: love God with all your heart and love Criseyde too. There are signs of this world-embracing attitude within the *Consolation of Philosophy*, for instance in Lady Philosophy's recitation of Fortune's perspective:

> "I pleye continuely. I torne the whirlynge wheel with the turnynge sercle; I am glad to chaungen the loweste to the heyeste, and the heyeste to the loweste. Worth up [ascend] yif thow wolt, so it be by this lawe, that thow ne holde nat that I do the wroong, though thow descende adown whan the resoun of my pley axeth it." (Consol., IIpr2)[22].

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Rise up on the wheel of fortune if you want! On this approach to the poem, there is nothing wrong with playing at earthly, carnal love, so long as one understands that it will not last, and that its failing to last is all part of the divine plan. The tragedy of the poem is that neither Troilus nor Criseyde is able to grasp that higher perspective. Troilus invests too much into his fleeting love, making Criseyde into "the sothfast crop and more /Of al his lust or joies heretofore" (V.25-26, as above). Criseyde's love is more flexible but leaves her similarly hostage to fortune.

The poem hints at the availability of this playful reading with just a single carefully chosen word. It comes at the end of the poem when we are told that Troilus, after his death, ascends to the "eighth sphere"-the farthest reach of the heavens, where a god might conventionally be thought to dwell. The poem is careful to add that Troilus does not stay there long. But before he is assigned to his permanent resting place, Chaucer gives him a moment of insight into the Boethian perspective on eternity, furnishing him a clear view ("ful avysement") of the cosmos and all that happens within it. What, at this crucial insight of moment, does Troilus discover? First he

> "... fully gan despise *gan : began to*
>
> This wrecched world, and held al vanite
>
> To respect of the pleyn felicite
>
> That is in hevene above...". (V.1816--19).

"Despise", to modern ears, sounds exactly in tune with the moralizing reading, but the core sense of the term in Middle English is weaker: it means simply to look down on, to have a low opinion of. This is consistent with the playful Christian reading: one should should put a low value on fleeting earthly pleasures, and recognize them as "al vanite" in comparison to the complete happiness of the life to come. But still one may play. And so it is, crucially, that what Troilus does at this point is to *laugh*: "And in hymself he lough right at the wo / Of hem that wepten for his deth so faste" (V.1821-22). On the moralizing reading this laughter will be a contemptuous sneer. But it is

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possible to understand it instead as a playful smile, matching the laughter of Fortune that began Book IV. Let them enjoy their time on the wheel if they can, we can suppose the raptured Troilus to be thinking to himself-the type not so much of a scolding St. Paul and more of a laughing Zarathustra.

Whereas the moralizing Christian reading closes down the open spaces of *Troilus and Criseyde*, the poem itself takes account of how literary works refuse to stay within the spaces their readers allow. "Go litel bok" Chaucer urges his poem at the end (V.1786), reflecting on his own mortality and worrying for his future reputation in just the way Criseyde had. Don't "myswrite" or "mysmetre" my poem (V.1795-96). He then charges his friends, "moral Gower" and "philosophical Strode", to "correcte" the poem where necesssary (V.1856-58)-not, I take it, by way of fixing misspellings but by ensuring that it be received in ways that are morally and philosophically appropriate. The real risk in putting literature into the world is the risk of misinterpretation. And this is a risk because if voluntarism holds true anywhere it holds for the interpretive choices of readers. Gower and Strode are now long dead, but the task of looking after Chaucer's little book remains.

The Will as Locus of the Self

Given an anti-intellectualism that attributes a heightened role to the will, it becomes natural for the voluntarists to give the will a larger share in what we think of as our self. After all, our conception of self is largely shaped by the voluntary choices we make. So if it is the will itself-not the intellect, nor our passions or dispositions-that ultimately explains what we do, then the will accordingly should become of larger importance to our conception of our self.

This is not an idea that could have taken hold in classical antiquity, given that the concept of the will arguably does not even exist in antiquity, and certainly does not exist in anything like a voluntaristic form[23]. But we can find associations between the will and the self in early Christian authors, even as early as St. Paul. Consider this famous passage from his Letter to the Romans:

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"For that which I do, I do not understand. For I do not do the good that I will (θέλω; *volo*), but the evil that I hate, that I do. If then I do that which I will against, I consent to the law, that it is good. *So then it is not I who do it*, but the sin that dwells within me. For I know that the good does not dwell within me, that is, within my flesh. For to will the good is present to me, but to achieve the good, that I do not find. For I do not do the good that I will, but the evil that I will against, this I do. *But if I do that which I will against, then it is not I who do it*, but the sin that dwells within me. Therefore I find a law, that while I am willing to do good, evil is present to me. For, with respect to the interior person, I am delighted with the law of God. But I see another law in my limbs, fighting against the law of my mind and imprisoning me in the law of sin that is in my limbs"[24].

The passage concerns actions that are, in some sense, unwilled. Paul describes himself as doing things that he hates (*odi*) and wills against (*nolo*). In cases like this, it is natural to say that the act is beyond one's control, or not one's responsibility. But twice, in the italicized passages, Paul makes an inference that goes much farther: If I act unwillingly, he says, then "it is not I who does it, but the sin that dwells within me" (7:17, 7:20). This is to say not just that my unwilled actions are not voluntary, but further that they are not my actions at all. In turn, that suggests that Paul strongly associates the self with its acts of willing. To be sure, he also speaks here of the "interior person" and the "law of my mind", expressions that also seem to be associated with the "I" that is the self. And in contrast he points to the "flesh" and the "limbs" that lie outside the interior person. But even if the self is not wholly determined by the will, he at any rate seems to think that acts of will are the primary determinant of what I do and so, accordingly, of who I am.

From a philosophical point of view, this famous text is quite perplexing[25]. At first glance, it might seem to subscribe to the sort of Platonic or Cartesian dualism that identifies the self with the soul, and so consequently treats the body as something outside of the self. But whether or not Paul might accept such a thesis, he is not strictly

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committed to it here. Instead, he wishes only to disassociate certain actions from himself: those actions that he has not willed. When we focus on this claim, the obvious question becomes what sort of actions he is referring to. The answer that immediately suggests itself is that Paul is describing what philosophers today call weakness of will, where, roughly, we know that it would be best to do one thing, and yet we find ourselves doing something else (Davidson, 1980). Yet, on reflection, this is extremely problematic as a reading of the passage, for multiple reasons. For one thing, it seems that *Saint* Paul should not himself be subject to this rather grievous form of sin. For another, it seems that such acts *are* sins, and so ought not to be dismissed by Paul as acts that are not his own. And this is so because, finally, it seems that such actions are willed by the agent. When I stay up too late, streaming yet another hour of television, this is something that I *will* to do, which is precisely why I am aptly described as suffering from weakness of will.

The commentary tradition on this passage, aware of these difficulties with the obvious reading, has proposed another possibility: that Paul is talking not about weakness of will, but rather about purely sensual impulses that are not willed because they are not *acted on* at all[26]. This would include the sort of fleeting yearnings, impulses, and mental images that even a saint cannot help but have, which arise in any human being, simply as a result of being human (or, in strict theological terms, they arise as a result of our living under the punishment of original sin). These are the so-called venial sins, which one might well judge to be beyond one's voluntary control, and so one's responsibility only in a considerably diminished sense. Even on this interpretation, it remains somewhat startling that Paul wants to treat such "doings" (ὃ κατεργάζομαι; *quod operor*) not just as involuntary, but as not being *his* doings at all. But here we can see clearly in just what sense this passage subscribes to the will as the primary locus of selfhood. It is not that the passage is committed to a dualism on which Paul just is his will, or his mind. Rather, the scope of Paul's will is what marks off the scope of activities that Paul is willing to endorse as his own. As his will goes, so he goes, and if it happens that his body goes in a different direction, then that is not something Paul takes himself to be responsible for, even granted that his body is a part of him[27].

Once we associate the self so tightly with the will, it becomes natural to take one more step, and to see the will as the primary locus of moral worth. This is not to make the

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commonplace assertion that actions are morally evaluable only when they are endorsed by the will-that is, only when those actions are voluntary. It is to say, instead, that moral goodness applies, first and foremost, not to our external actions, nor to our rational deliberations or to our acquired habits, but rather to the will's choices. This is not a claim that Paul shows any signs of commitment to, but it becomes explicit among various later moral theorists. Most famously, Immanuel Kant begins the *Groundwork* with these ringing words: "It is impossible to conceive of anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be taken as good without qualification, except a *good will.*" (Kant, 1998, p. 9). This sort of thought is completely alien to Aquinas, for whom *everything* that exists is good, just insofar as it has existence (Aquinas, 1950-53, 1a 5.3). And even with regard to the narrow domain of moral goodness, Aquinas locates it no more on the intellectual side than on the volitional side, and associates it more with the virtues than with the faculty of will itself.

Among medieval philosophers, Peter Abelard (1079-1142) is very clear about locating moral worth at the place where we consent or form an intention to act, rather than at the action itself, or at our acquired dispositions toward action. As Abelard writes: "A person's intention is called good in itself, but his deed is not called good from itself, but rather because it proceeds from a good intention." (Abelard, 1995, n. 91, n. 106). This view gets taken up by the voluntarist movement of the fourteenth century. Ockham, for instance, holds that the only necessarily virtuous human act is an act of the will (William of Ockham, 1991). The more one accentuates the autonomous role of the will in decision making, and its preeminent place in moral agency, the more natural it becomes to think of the will as the primary locus of moral worth. Our various other features as human beings determine much of who we are: whether we are healthy and athletic, bold or shy, wise or witless. But on this voluntarist picture our goodness as moral agents is a product, first and foremost, of our will and the choices it makes. One finds this sort of position articulated very vividly in Peter John Olivi (1247/8-1298), one of the forerunners of the voluntarist movement, who writes that "nothing beneath God is as beloved and as dear to us as the freedom and power of our own will. For this is a thing we value infinitely, we value it more than all the things that God could make, which are infinite, and more than anything that is in us." (Emmen, 1966, p. 98).

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The Clerk's Tale

Another place to look for signs of the preeminent role of the will in human agency is the Clerk's Tale from the *Canterbury Tales* (see Correale & Hamel, 2002). That story, of Griselda's obedience in the face of the trials to which her husband Walter subjects her, was one of the most popular of medieval tales. It first appears in writing in Italian at the end of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, then in Petrarch's Latin version of 1373, and from there quickly into French and into Chaucer's Middle English. This poem remains one of the most discussed of Chaucer's tales. Critics have been fascinated by the complex relationship of Chaucer's text to his source material and by the various levels of meaning that the story both offers and resists. At the same time readers have tended to find the story morally repulsive from nearly every available perspective[28].

The Clerk's Tale describes a series of trials that a powerful Piedmontese marquis, Walter, inflicts on his young wife, Griselda, whom he had lifted from obscure poverty. First, he seizes one of their two children, then the other, leaving her to believe that both have been put to death. Ultimately, on the grounds that he means to take a new wife, he expels her from his palace, leaving her to return to her childhood home possessed of nothing but a thin undergarment. Finally, he invites her back as a chambermaid to help prepare the palace for the new wedding. Walter's motive, throughout, is simply this:

> "This markys in his herte longeth so
>
> To tempte his wyf, hir sadnesse for to knowe, *sadnesse : constancy*
>
> That he ne myghte out of his herte throwe
>
> This merveillous desir his wyf t'assaye". (451-54) *t'assaye : to test*

Griselda patiently accepts all of these trials, adhering to her initial pledge to "... nevere willyngly, In werk ne thoght, ... yow disobeye" (362-63). When Walter sees that she is committed to this pledge no matter what suffering he inflicts on her, he restores her to

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his side, along with the children she has been parted from for years, and thereafter they live "ful many a yeer in heigh prosperitee" (1128).

On its face, everything about the story is horrific. Walter, obsessed by his years-long program of trials, subjects Griselda to the most appalling suffering, which Chaucer depicts in vivid and wrenching detail. Griselda, having sworn to obey, feels duty bound to accept these horrors without resisting in the slightest or displaying even a fleeting change in emotion:

> "He [Walter] waiteth if by word or contenance
>
> That she to hym was changed of corage, *of corage : in affection*
>
> But nevere koude he fynde variance." (708-10)

Griselda's weirdly preternatural outward complacency, described in detail after each of Walter's appalling trials, makes the horror of the tale even greater. And the overall dissonance is magnified by the way that the narrator (the clerk), even while he registers that Walter's behavior is "nedelees," "yvele" and "wikke" (455, 460, 785), unstintingly praises Griselda throughout as the "flour of wyfly pacience" (919).

For medieval and modern readers alike, these repellant features of the poem make it natural to look for some further meaning, and one hardly needs to scratch at the surface to see what that might be. The story, at least in rough outline, offers a perfect parable of a Christian life on the moral stage, patiently suffering life's adversities while all the time persisting in one's love of God. We grow up, we marry, we have children; we suddenly lose a child who had been in perfect health, and then we suddenly lose another. We die, we return home in a burial shroud, and then we are resurrected in a joyous reunion with God and our departed love ones. No medieval reader could miss the way that Griselda pledges herself to Walter in just the way that Christians are meant to pledge themselves to God. Beyond her initial and often repeated vow to conform her will to his, she makes Walter into the supreme object of her love:

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"Ne nevere, for no wele ne no wo, *wele : happiness | wo: woe*

Ne shal the goost withinne myn herte stente *goost : spirit | stente : cease*

To love yow best with al my trewe entente." (971-73)

If we read the story as a parable of a Christian's life on earth, such a vow makes perfect sense, as does the story's joyous conclusion, in which all is forgiven, and Griselda rejoices in having received from Walter her heart's desire:

"Grauntmercy, lord, God thanke it yow," quod she,

"That ye han saved me my children deere!

Now rekke I nevere to been deed right heere; *not at all concerned about dying*

Sith I stonde in youre love and in youre grace,

No fors of deeth, ne whan my spirit pace!" (1088-92) *pace : may pass away*

This sounds a lot like a description of heavenly beatitude, in which one's presence before God's love is secured, and all fear for the future has been dispelled. What has brought Griselda to this state, needless to say, is her perfect patience and obedience.

One could tell the story in such a way that it bears this spiritual reading, Indeed, Petrarch tells us that this is precisely how he means the story to be understood, and the clerk acknowledges that this was Petrarch's intent:

"And herkneth what this auctour seith therfoore. *this auctour : Petrarch*

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This storie is seyd nat for that wyves sholde

Folwen Grisilde as in humylitee,

For it were inportable, though they wolde, *inportable : intolerable*

But for that every wight, in his degree,

Sholde be constant in adversitee

As was Grisilde; therfore Petrak writeth

This storie, which with heigh stile he enditeth. *enditeth : composes*

For sith a womman was so pacient

Unto a mortal man, wel moore us oghte

Receyven al in gree that God us sent; *in gree : with a good will*

For greet skile is he preeve that he wroghte". (1142-52) *it is very reasonable that God test what he made*

Petrarch's version admits of this sort of spiritual reading, because it systematically elevates the virtues of Walter and makes excuses for his excesses. Chaucer's Walter, in contrast, is so plainly flawed as to preclude Petrarch's spiritual reading from the start. As in Boccaccio's original tale, Chaucer's Walter can be nothing other than a bad and tyrannical husband. No wonder, then, that the clerk is careful to tell us twice, in the above lines, that it is *Petrarch* who thinks the story should be taken as a parable for our relationship to God. As for the clerk's own feelings, those are perhaps revealed in the envoy that comes at the end of the tale, which runs in part:

"O noble wyves, ful of heigh prudence,

Lat noon humylitee youre tonge naille,

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Ne lat no clerk have cause or diligence *diligence : zeal*

To write of yow a storie of swich mervaille" (1183-86)

With this mocking song the Clerk's Tale comes to an end, leaving us completely in the dark about what, if anything, we were to learn from the story of Griselda and Walter[29].

My own suggestion is that we can profitably treat the story as a case study in how to think about will and freedom. The clerk-whom the general prologue tells us is an Oxford philosopher-offers us a clash between two rival modes of moral agency. On the one hand we have Walter, who is obsessively concerned with preserving his freedom to do whatever he wants[30]. Chaucer highlights, over and over, that Walter is a man whose wants are shaped by desires that are *subrational* rather than the rationally endorsed desires of rational appetite. So, when we first meet him, he is described as fair and strong and young, and full of honor and courtesy, and "discreet ynough" to govern his country. But then Chaucer immediately adds that his character admits of one great flaw:

"I blame hym thus: that he considered noght

In tyme comynge what myghte hym bityde, *bityde : happen to him*

But on his lust present was al his thoght, *lust present : present desire*

As for to hauke and hunte on every syde." (78-81)

Reminders of Walter's single-minded focus on his improvident present desires run all through the poem, typically expressed in the language of lust, delight, and pleasure---the sub-rational desires that shape Walter's existence. At the birth of his daughter we are told that Walter suddenly fell under the grip of a "mervellous desire" to test his wife that he was unable to resist: "that he ne myghte out of his herte throwe" (453). And when Chaucer announces the second temptation---the removal of their son---he makes it clear that it the product of nothing more than another passing desire:

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"Whan it was two yeer old, and fro the brest

Departed of his norice, on a day *norice : nurse*

This markys caughte yet another lest *lest : lust*

To tempte his wyf yet ofter, if he may." (617-20) *ofter : again*

Lusts come and go for the marquis, and when they come he ratifies them as his will, without having any capacity or seemingly any desire to resist them. It is precisely here where Walter locates his freedom. He tells his subjects that he has been reluctant to marry because":

"I me rejoysed of my liberte,

That seelde tyme is founde in marriage;

There I was free, I moot been in servage." There : Whereas | moot : must [now]

(145-47).

The community spokesman-perhaps knowing Walter better than he knows himself- had assured him that the yoke of marriage is a yoke of "of soverayntetee, noght of servyse" (114). Walter, however, does not believe it, eventually replying that "I shal forgoon my libertee / At youre requeste" (171--72).

Walter's conception of freedom is that of the ancient common formula, on which to be free is to be able to do what one wants to do. For Walter, the wants at issue are whatever passing fancies happen to come his way. It is his worries over losing his freedom that shape the wedding vow to which he asks Griselda to swear:

"I seye this: be ye redy with good herte [to submit]

To al my lust, and that I frely may,

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As me best thynketh, do yow laughe or smerte, *smerte : feel pain*

And nevere ye to grucche it, nyght ne day?

And eek whan I sey ye, ne sey nat nay,

Neither by word ne frownyng contenance?

Swere this, and heere I swere oure alliance." (351-57)

Walter wants Griselda to submit to "al my lust" not because he wants her to exemplify wifely virtue, but rather because he wants to be free to act on his desires. The reference to what he "thinks best" implies that it makes no difference whether those desires are a product of right reason. What matters is simply that they are his thoughts and his desires.

On the other hand, we have Griselda. Whereas Walter is all sub-rational lust, Griselda is all rational appetite-she is all will, in the voluntarists' sense of an agential will that freely chooses to follow right reason. We first meet her as a young woman-perhaps still a girl-possessed of the various conventional virtues of the poor: industry, frugality, filial piety. The contrast with Walter is striking because she grew up poor: "no likerous lust was thurgh hire herte yronne" (214), and, in contrast to Walter's self-absorption, she looks after her elderly father, Janicula "in greet reverence and charitee" (221). Whereas Walter pursues whatever catches his fancy, Griselda is described as having "rype and sad corage" (220)- a mature and steadfast temperament. None of this quite prepares us, though, for her first extended speech in the poem, when she responds to Walter's above-quoted demand that she subjects herself to all his desires:

"Wondrynge upon this word, quakynge for drede,

She seyde, "Lord, undigne and unworthy *undigne : unsuitable*

Am I to thilke honour that ye me beede, *beede : offer*

But as ye wole youreself, right so wol I.

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> And heere I swere that nevere willyngly,
>
> In werk ne thoght, I nyl yow disobeye,
>
> For to be deed, though me were looth to deye." *For to be deed : Even to the point of death.*
>
> (358-64).

Walter's behavior is quite bad: he has presented himself to Griselda and Janicula out of the blue, with a large palace retinue behind him, and he is demanding that she immediately swear an oath of marriage without even a moment to reflect, let alone offering her the opportunity to get to know the marquis. He displays his characteristic impetuosity when he explains to Janicula that the wedding must happen *right now* because "I neither may ne kan / Lenger the plesance of myn herte hyde" (304-5): it "may" not wait because he has vowed to the people to get married on this day, and it "kan" not wait because he is incapable of resisting whatever brings his heart pleasure. No wonder, then, that Griselda is shaking in fear. But the substance of her speech is astonishingly eloquent and confident, immediately dispelling the obvious worries about whether her response is coerced. As the story continues, and she recommits herself to these principles with every new trial, we are left with no doubt that Griselda's vow, from the start, reflects her precise understanding of what her duties to Walter should be.

A close look at the nature of her vow highlights the huge gap between Walter and Griselda. What Walter wants, in keeping with his conception of freedom, is to be unconstrained to pursue his desires. His only demand, therefore (at 351-57 above), is that she stays out of his way-so that he can live in peace, as the poem often puts it-which he takes to require only that she never complain outwardly "neither by word ne frownying contenance" (356) to anything that he might do. This by itself is already a characteristically foolish demand, especially given that Walter is ostensibly marrying her because of her virtue. An essential component in virtue, after all, is prudence, or practical wisdom, a quality that the poem goes on to attest to Griselda's having in great abundance[31]. So if Walter had even the slightest prudence himself, he would welcome

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Griselda's counsel. All Walter wants, however, is that Griselda has the virtues of a loyal dog; he has not the slightest regard for what might be going on in Griselda's mind.

Remarkably, however-and in marked contrast to Chaucer various sources for the story-Griselda reconfigures the proffered oath, turning his demeaning demand for dumb servitude into what she regards as a noble invitation to unite their minds as one. So, rather than simply submit to blank outward conformity, she vows to conform herself inwardly too:

> "But as ye wole youreself, right so wol I.
>
> And heere I swere that nevere willyngly,
>
> In werk ne thoght, I nyl yow disobeye." (361-63, as above).

With this Griselda goes far beyond what Walter wanted, offering him the conformity of her mind, both will and thought, a stance she adheres to throughout the poem. She ascends, in so doing, from Walter sub-rational desires to the level of reason, replacing his crude demand that she submits "to al my lust" with her vow of conformity at the level of will, rational appetite. Walter, seemingly startled by this fierce assertion of her inner mind, can think only to remark "This is ynogh, Grisilde myn" (365)[32].

The result is a troubled union of two minds: "of hem two / Thre nas but o wyl" (715--16), as the poem later puts it. Yet it is of course not a union of equals, but more like the instantiation in marriage of a debate between body and soul, where the body, Walter, holds executive authority. His strategy for exercising that authority, throughout the poem, in every context, is to count on others to conform their wills to his out of either love or fear. To his obedient subjects, we are told at the start, he is "biloved and drad" (69); to Griselda's father his only argument for his worthiness as husband is this confident assertion:

> "Thou lovest me, I woot it wel certeyn, *woot : know*

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And art my feithful lige man ybore, *ybore : born*

And al that liketh me, I dar wel seyn

It liketh thee...". (309-12).

To the bewildered crowd outside the hut, wondering about Walter's detour into the depths of poverty on the day of his wedding, he emerges to offer only these three lines:

"This is my wyf," quod he, "That standeth heere.

"Honoureth hire and loveth hire, I preye,

Whoso me loveth; ther is namoore to seye." (369-71)

Walter never has anything more than this to say about why people should conform their wills to his. He does not traffic in reasons or even rhetoric, but simply expects to be loved and followed. His only backup strategy is to instill fear. Thus, we are told of the child-snatching sergeant that "the lord knew wel that he hym loved and dradde" (523), and we get the barest taste of that latter strategy in Walter's passing threat to cut off his head should the sergeant disclose his true mission (586-87). For Griselda's part, her submission is so absolute that her subjection to a regime of dread need never be contemplated. Yet a moment's reflection makes it obvious that this is where the story would have to go if she had made other decisions. The clerk blithely and salaciously remarks:

"O nedelees was she tempted in assay!

But wedded men ne knowe no mesure,

Whan that they fynde a pacient creature." (621-23)

Left unsaid is what wedded men do with creatures who are not patient.

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Griselda's life is shaped by a will that conforms itself to reason. This is not to say that she has no sub-rational desires of her own. Although we are kept at some distance from her exact state of mind, the pathos of her two farewells to her children leave us in no doubt that she is suffering tremendously. And when she twice faints upon being reunited with her children, we see the bodily expression of those passions at the moment when she can finally relax her will's iron control[33]. But although she has feelings of her own, and never vowed otherwise, she neither reveals them nor endorses them with her will. In this she is the perfect mirror-image of Walter, conforming precisely to his will but in inverse fashion, so that while his will is shaped by his desire, hers is shaped by her reason's judgment that she ought to adhere to his will and so ultimately to his desires. Her most remarkable statement of this commitment stretches over three-plus stanzas after she loses her son, and it is worth studying in some detail:

"I have," quod she, "seyd thus, and evere shal:

I wol no thyng, ne nyl no thyng, certayn,

But as yow list. Naught greveth me at al,

But as you desire. It does not grieve me

Though that my doughter and my sone be slayn ---

At youre comandement, this is to sayn.

I have noght had no part of children tweyne

But first siknesse, and after, wo and peyne." (645-51)

In this first stanza she reiterates the core of her original vow to conform her will to his, here expressed without the pretense that it is really his rational appetite in charge: in truth, she wills and nills according to his lusts. At this point, however, the vow requires her to tell the first of many lies to come: that she is not grieved by the loss of her children and that they never meant anything to her. We know this to be untrue and six

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stanzas later it becomes clear that Walter does too, when he wonders about her remark and reminds himself that he knows for certain that she loved her children (689--90). Griselda's speech continues:

> "Ye been oure lord; dooth with youre owene thyng
>
> Right as yow list; axeth no reed at me. list : desire | *axeth no reed at : ask no advice from*
>
> For as I lefte at hoom al my clothyng,
>
> Whan I first cam to yow, right so," quod she,
>
> "Lefte I my wyl and al my libertee,
>
> And took youre clothyng; wherfore I yow preye,
>
> Dooth youre plesaunce; I wol youre lust obeye." (652-58)

Here she registers the implications of the original deal. Walter from the start has made no pretense of being interested in anything other his "owene thyng". Although we have been told that Griselda is skilled in promoting the "common profit" (431), Walter's only concern is his personal benefit, as determined by his desires. Accordingly, he does not want her advice and she has pledged never to give it. Again, however, as in the previous stanza, this leaves her in moral trouble: she has surrendered "al my libertee", a detail that is not present in Chaucer's sources and that is of the utmost importance since it would entail that she is incapable of moral responsibility. But still she remains steadfast, committed to willing what he lusts after so that he can have his pleasures [34].

At this point, as if she cannot quite resist escalating the situation still further, she brings her speech to a chilling conclusion:

> "And certes, if I hadde prescience *prescience : foreknowledge*

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> Youre wyl to knowe, er ye youre lust me tolde,
>
> I wolde it doon withouten necligence;
>
> But now I woot youre lust, and what ye wolde, *woot : know | ye wolde : you willed*
>
> Al youre plesance ferme and stable I holde;
>
> For wiste I that my deeth wolde do yow ese, *wiste I : if I knew*
>
> Right gladly wolde I dyen, yow to plese.
>
> "Deth may noght make no comparisoun
>
> Unto youre love." (659-67).

In marked contrast to Walter's concern only for his present lust (80, as above), Griselda here shows providential concern for Walter's desires even before they fall upon him. Always the eager student, Griselda's efforts in this regard can only be fruitless, since in contrast to a rational agent whose will is often foreseeable, Walter's "lust" comes onto him in ways that admit of no rational forecast. The best she can do, then, is conform herself once he chooses to reveal his will. That unconditional readiness is rendered shockingly vivid in the final four lines, where the full depth of her moral trouble is revealed. She is willing, she says here, to commit one of the worst of all sins, sacrificing her own life for the sake of Walter's pleasure.

How did things go so horribly wrong for Griselda? Critics have often supposed that she feels morally bound to obey Walter because of the oath she swore and her general obediential duty as wife. This, however, would be such an obviously faulty basis for her commitment as to be scarcely reconcilable with her supposed maturity and wisdom. As critics often observe, medieval moral theorists make it expressly clear that neither oaths nor obediential relationships are absolute. Where such commitments clash with morality, it is the oath or the obedience that must give way[35]. Our Oxford clerk certainly would have been keenly aware of this basic moral teaching, and indeed he tells us as much in the prologue to the tale when he agrees to show "obeisance" to the host's request "as fer

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as resoun axeth" (24-25), a qualification that would seem oddly pedantic if not for the tale he proceeds to tell.

But if it is not the duty of obedience that motivates Griselda then it is hard to see what other reason she might have. If we think of her as Walter does, as scarcely a person at all, then the question does not arise, and certainly Walter himself does not stop to consider why it is that he should be so beloved. But since the clerk takes such pains to stress that Griselda, unlike Walter, is a rational agent, it seems that it is to reason that we must look. It is clear enough, after all, that she is not motivated by desire, whether that be for wealth, status, or power. Nor, as noted already, is there any suggestion-at least once she gets past that first moment of "quakynge for drede" (358)-that Griselda is motivated by fear. And yet the tale offers us nothing at all, beyond that initial oath, that might explain her subsequent persistence. One possibility would be that she has faith in the rightness of Walter's will, and indeed the poem adverts three times to Griselda's faith[36]. But is hard to believe that this is literally a faith in Walter's judgment, if that means that she believes with certainty Walter's claims to know what is best. After all, his explanations for why the children must be taken away-having to do with Griselda's unpopularity among the people-are transparently lies, and anyway it hardly takes great wisdom to see that right reason could not conceivably justify killing the children[37]. Moreover, what Griselda says, repeatedly, is not that she conforms her will to Walter's because she is certain of the rightness of what he wants. Instead, her motive is simply that she loves him.

That it is love that ultimately motivates Griselda's obedience is a theme that only slowly emerges in her successive speeches. It appears not at all in her initial vow, but gets hinted at in her response to the loss of her daughter: "Ne I desire no thyng for to have, / Ne drede for to leese [lose], save oonly yee" (507-8). This reorientation of her desires, so that Walter becomes her final end, already goes well beyond the terms of her initial vow. It explains why she allows her once venerated father to continue living in poverty, why she willingly parts with her children, and why the most difficult in the escalating series of trials is the one that requires her to abandon Walter himself [38]. Subsequent speeches make this transformation steadily more vivid. Her final words at the loss of her son, when she offers to sacrifice her own life, are that "Deth may noght make no comparisoun / Unto youre love." (666-67, as above). Here she does not mean Walter's

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love for her, which the poem leaves in considerable doubt, but her love for Walter [39] Since he is her only ultimate desire, everything else can be sacrificed for the sake of that. All of this becomes completely explicit on her final test, when she replies

> "Nat oonly, lord, that I am glad," quod she,
>
> "To doon youre lust, but I desire also
>
> Yow for to serve and plese in my degree
>
> Withouten feyntyng, and shal everemo; *feyntyng : flagging*
>
> Ne nevere, for no wele ne no wo, *wele : happiness* | *wo : woe*
>
> Ne shal the goost withinne myn herte stente *goost : spirit* | *stente : cease*
>
> To love yow best with al my trewe entente." (967-73).

Here, as even the humblest of the clerk's companions on the pilgrimage would recognize, Griselda pledges to give to Walter that which should be given only to God. The very definition of charity-the prime theological virtue and the sum of a Christian's aspirations while on the moral stage-is to love God above all else, in such a way that all other things are loved only for the sake of God[40]. In a different context, it would be only fair to read the scope of Griselda's remark as tacitly restricted: that among everything in the created realm, she loves Walter best of all. And certainly, she has proved by this point that that is so. But she has also made it explicitly clear, both in previous promises and in her actions themselves, that she is willing to ignore that most clearcut of God's laws-thou shalt not kill-in order to conform herself to what Walter wants. In putting Walter's will before God's, she puts on vivid display the badness of her own will, fulfilling to the letter the sin of idolatry as described in the Parson's Tale: "Certes, be it wyf, be it child, or any worldly thyng that he loveth beforn God, it is his mawmet [idol], and he is an ydolastre" (X:860).

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Ultimately, then, the Clerk's Tale is a tale of lust and love. Walter is the exemplar of a life dominated by sub-rational desire. He is too careless, too wanton in the philosophical sense, to be considered a villain[41]. The clerk seems to regard him not as a moral monster, but as an ordinary case of what happens when a foolish man is given absolute power. If his case seems extraordinary that is simply because he fell into a bizarre obsession: "this merveillous desir his wyf t'assaye" (454). Griselda, in turn, is the tale's tragic voluntarist heroine. She offers us a model of what it looks like to put one's life under the control of rational appetite, but the tragedy of her case is the disordered nature of her love. In that first fateful village encounter, her will imprinted on Walter in such a way as to leave no room for any more worthy object. That leaves her rationally defenseless against Walter's tortures, because the only thing that practical reasoning can do is show someone how best to achieve their ultimate end. When she decides that her only end is Walter's pleasure, she is sunk. In all of this she manifests the voluntarists' conviction that what matters most to our lives is what goes on within our will. If we think of Augustine's famous image: "My weight is my love, by it I am carried, wherever I am carried", then we can say that Griselda's love nearly drowned her[42].

Superficially, the Clerk's Tale is not a tragedy at all. It ends, after all, sort of, with a wedding. But if we do not see Griselda as a tragic figure then this is only because we tend to give too much weight to moral luck. We let our moral judgments about a case be dictated by how things come out in the end, even if it was a matter of sheer dumb luck that they came out that way. The voluntarists are the steadfast opponents of letting moral luck infiltrate our judgments of moral responsibility. What makes Griselda's decision wrong, from the voluntarist perspective, is that she made a series of decisions that flagrantly violated right reason given the information available to her. Relative to what she knew, she is lucky that her children survived. Griselda is, therefore, no moral exemplar, as the clerk makes abundantly clear in the concluding envoy that mockingly comments on Petrarch's sober moralistic tale. Griselda is, however, eminently responsible for her behavior. For even if she deems herself to have surrendered "my wyl and al my libertee" (656, as above), in fact she is an exemplar of voluntaristic freedom: she makes up her own mind about the end she seeks to pursue, and steadfastly adheres to that end through the greatest adversity. Walter, in contrast, is not at all free. Although the whole point of his testing Griselda is to reassure himself that he retains the freedom he possessed when the story began, in fact-from a voluntaristic perspective-Walter was

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never free at all. What Walter has is merely the common freedom to do what he wants, and for the voluntarists that is no freedom at all. Without the freedom to control those wants-something we are told over and over that Walter utterly lacks-he is not at all free and barely even counts as a person. It is Griselda, instead, who emerges heroically from the poem as a person in full bloom. The tragedy is that she exercises that personhood toward the wrong end.

Higher and Lower Will

To form a clearer idea of the growing role of the will in later medieval culture it will be helpful to look briefly at how the terms "will" and "*voluntas*" are ordinarily deployed in medieval texts. For a modern reader, the voluntarist association of the will with the self and with moral worth looks perfectly natural. We commonly express judgments about personal agency in terms of our having "free will" or being "weak willed". Our tendency to elevate the role of will in these ways is a mark of the modern influence of voluntarism, but in the Middle Ages this influence had not yet so thoroughly taken hold. Medieval authors writing philosophy in Latin speak ordinarily not of free will (*libera voluntas*) but of free judgment (*liberum arbitrium*) and speak of *incontinentia* rather than weakness of will. Exactly how the will might be involved in these phenomena was an open question, and this was the very territory in dispute between intellectualists and voluntarists.

For both parties to this philosophical dispute, *voluntas* refers uncontroversially to rational appetite, the soul's higher desire for its ultimate good and for whatever means are judged conducive to that good. On this Aristotelian picture, the will is and must be involved in every deliberate human act. Yet, there is a tendency among philosophers, before the fourteenth century, to treat the will as merely one among various aspects of human agency. Where questions of freedom arise, the earlier medieval Latin tradition-most notably, in Augustine and Anselm-focuses its attention on *liberum arbitrium*, thereby associating freedom with *judgment* rather than *volition*. By the later fourteenth century, as a result of the voluntarist movement, the situation has permanently changed. In Chaucer's translation of Boethius, *liberum arbitrium* becomes will (e.g., at Vpr2).

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And in *Piers Plowman*, as we will see, the dreamer just is Will, and when Liberum Arbitrium makes an appearance in the poem (briefly in B.XVI and more extensively in C.XVII and C.XIX) it is as something exterior to Will's own agency: not by any means because freedom is marginal to the poem's interests, but because Liberum Arbitrium has come to embody just another of the institutionalized authorities that come and go throughout the poem.

In Middle English texts, the place of the will is often even more marginal than it is within philosophy, lacking any association with rational deliberation. Characteristically, instead, "will" refers to the lower human appetites that work against reason rather than in collaboration with it. We have seen this already in the Clerk's Tale's depiction of Walter's sub-rational lusts. It appears as well in the popular opposition between wit and will, a trope that appears over and over in Middle English literature. In *Sawles Warde*, for instance, from around the start of the thirteenth century, the allegory gets set out at the very start:

> "This hus the ure Lauerd speketh of is seolf the mon. Inwith, the monnes wit i this hus is the huse lauerd, ant te fulitohe wif mei beon wil ihaten, thet, ga the hus efter hire, ha diht hit al to wundre bute Wit ase lauerd chasti hire the betere ant bineome hire muchel of thet ha walde. Ant tah walde al thet hird folhin hire overal yef Wit ne forbude ham, for alle hit beoth untohene ant rechelese hinen bute yef he ham rihte.
>
> [This house which our Lord speaks of is man himself. Inside, the man's wit in this house is the lord of the house, and the unruly wife can be called Will who, if the house follows her, brings it all to ruin unless Wit as lord restrains her better and takes away from her much of what she wills. And yet still all that household would follow her in everything if Wit did not forbid them, because all are unruly and reckless servants unless he corrects them]" (Huber and Robertson, 2016)[43].

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The terms of the allegory would not necessarily preclude the sort of collaborative relationship between intellect and will that one finds within Aristotelian philosophy, but as marriage is in fact understood here, the relationship is strictly hierarchical. It is Wit who should rule and restrain, and if Will were to get her way, the result would be ruin: "ha diht hit al to wundre." This is not to say that Will plays a subsidiary role in *Sawles Warde*. The wife in many respects lies at the center of the dramatic narrative, and female readers might have been expected to identify particularly with her (Robertson, 1990). Still, Will can scarcely be considered the protagonist, for when the narrative finally resolves itself, the outcome is a one-sided silencing of Will in favor of Wit's authority:

> "Nu is Wil thet husewif al stille-thet er wes so willesful-al ituht efter Wittes wissunge, thet is husebonde. Ant al thet hird halt him stille, thet wes iwunet to beon fulitohen ant don efter Wil, hare lefdi, ant nawt efter Wit.
>
> [Now Will that housewife is entirely silent-who before was so willful-fully guided according to the instruction of Wit, who is husband. And all that household holds itself still, that was accustomed to be unruly and follow Will, their lady, and not Wit" (Robertson, 1990)[44].

Nearly two centuries later, John Gower offers much the same picture of the relationship between wit and will, in his account of Diogenes' advice to Alexander:

> "This is the sothe thing:
>
> Sith I ferst resoun understod,
>
> And knew what thing was evel and good,
>
> The will which of my bodi moeveth,
>
> Whos werkes that the god reproeveth,

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I have restreigned everemore, ...

Will is my man and my servant,

And evere hath ben and evere schal.

And thi will is thi principal,

And hath the lordschipe of thi witt" (Gower, 2013, pp.1270-83)

Here the will is so far from being associated with the self that it is properly cast in the role of Diogenes' "man and my servant". King Alexander's fault is precisely that he allows his will to be the "principal" part within him, and to have "lordschipe" over his wit. That in Gower the will is now masculine perhaps implies that these lower appetites are not the privileged domain of either gender. But that the will is so readily gendered at all signals just how natural it is to think of the will as the locus of selfhood.

Semantically, the noun "will" in Middle English is ambiguous between these two senses: will as higher appetite, allied to reason and responsible for all deliberate action, and will as lower desire, inevitably in conflict with reason and so appropriately restrained if not silenced altogether. We have seen instances of the latter usage, but it is also easy to find Middle English uses of "will" in the philosopher's sense[45]. When the will is so understood, it becomes possible to give it the sort of elevated status associated with the voluntarists. Walter Hilton (ca. 1343-1396), for instance, urges us to abandon our selfish "proper will" in favor of a "common will" that adheres to the will of God. "þis comen wille is sothefastly called þe maste precious offerande & þe maste dere presande þat may be gyfen un-to-god; and þarefor it is callyd erthely heuen, for qwy it herbers god. It is goddis tempill, it is þe chosen chambyr of Ihesu, it is þe hamely howse of þe haly gaste." (Hilton, 1895-1896, p.173). Evidently a will of this sort is not to be silenced or ruled over but is instead the crowning achievement of a human life.

In keeping with the ambiguous character of the Middle English word, one sometimes finds William Langland referring to will as a lower desire meant to be suppressed. In Truth's castle, for instance, as described by Piers: "all the wallis ben of witte to holden wille oute" (B.V.587)[46]. The poem's hero, however, Will the dreamer, is not meant to be

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held out of the castle-and this not despite his name, but because of it, inasmuch as a will, for Langland, is precisely that within a human being that has a chance of meriting entrance within those walls. Let us know turn to look more closely, then, at how the will works within Langland's poem.

Will's Journey in Piers Plowman

William Langland's (2006) long alliterative poem is the supreme medieval attempt to imbue an abstract philosophical thesis about the primacy of will with concrete meaning, set within the context of ordinary life. The human search for Truth, as Langland conceives of it, is not chiefly an intellectual journey but rather a volitional one. The obvious indication that Piers Plowman is written from within a voluntaristic conception of the human self is its identification of the dreamer as Will. This choice of names - always "Will" and never "William"- centers the larger psychological frame of the poem, as we will see. It is Will, in Nicolette Zeeman's vivid phrase, who is the "single, holistic protagonist, the narrator and motive force of the whole text" (Zeeman, 2006, p.66). So, although the extent of Langland's familiarity with the philosophical ideas of his era is a matter of conjecture, it is hard to resist the thought that he is writing under the influence of the fourteenth-century voluntarist movement[47].

If the identification of the dreamer as Will is more than mere authorial signature, if it has the sort of conceptual implications that I am claiming, then we would expect there to be consequences throughout the poem. Indeed, the voluntarist's conception of human agency frames the entire narrative. A useful overview of Langland's (2006) conception of the relationship between will and agency appears in a metaphor at B.VIII.41-56:

"The bote is likned to the body that brutel is of kynde *brutel : brittle*

That thorugh the fende and thi flesh and the false worlde *fende : Fiend*

Synneth the sad man sevene sythes a day *sad : steadfast* | *sythes : times*

Ac dedly synne doth he nought; for Do-Well hym helpeth,

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That is charité the champioun, chief help ayein synne.

For he strengtheth the to stone and stereth thi soule *stone : stand* | *stereth : steers*

That thowgh thi body bow as bote doth in the water, *bow : turns about* | *bote : boat*

Ay is thi soule sauf but thiself wole *but ... : unless you yourself will*

Folwe thi fleshes wille and the Fendes after, *after : as well*

And do a dedly synne and drenche so thiselve.

God wole suffer wel thi sleuthe yif thiself lyketh, *sleuthe : sloth*

For he yaf the to Yeres-yyve to yeme wel thiselve,

For he gave you a New Year's gift to guide yourself

Witte a fre wille, to every wyghte a porcioun, *Witte a : Wit and*

To fleghyng foules, to fissches, and to bestes, *fleghyng : flying*

. Ac man hath moste therof and moste is to blame,

But if he worche wel therwith as Do-Wel hym techeth" *But if : Unless*

(B.VIII.41-56).

This picture accords quite precisely with the standard medieval reading of Romans 7. Our brittle body sins constantly -"sevene sythes a day," invoking Proverbs 24:16- but these are mere venial sins, consistent with a meritorious life, and so "thi soule saufe but thiself wole / Folwe thi fleshes wille...". Here from one line to the next we get the two senses of will that are described above: the higher will that controls the soul's destiny, set in opposition to the lower will of the flesh that should be silenced as much as possible. The self is not identified with the will, or even with the soul, no more than it is in Romans 7. But the responsibility for the whole human self -boat and passenger-

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rests with the will's choices, and whether it can escape the sort of "dedly synne" that threatens an eternal drenching.

To be sure, this is the account of the friar, one of the less reliable voices in the poem. But the friar's unreliability is a product of his volitional failings; he is not wrong in what he says, but in how he conducts himself. In general, indeed, the poem's voluntaristic inclinations are signaled by the relative ease with which the various speakers are able to offer intellectually adequate responses to Will's persistent questions. From the very first passus, Will receives perfectly correct answers, as when Holy Church tells him (B.I.142-44) that:

> "It is a kynde knowing that kenneth in thine herte *kenneth : teaches/guides*
>
> For to lovye thi Lorde lever than thiselve, *lever : more dearly*
>
> No dedly synne to do dey though thow shodest". *dey : die*
>
> (B.I.142-44).

There is nothing wrong with this advice; it is in fact the same advice on which the friar is elaborating. Will, however, makes the same response to both Holy Church and the friar, protesting that he has "no kynde knowing" of what they are saying (B.I.138, B.VIII.57). This pattern, repeated throughout the poem, is liable to produce in the reader the very response offered by Holy Church: "Thow doted daffe," quod she, "dulle arne thi wittes" (B.I.140)[48]. But it is this mocking outburst that leads Holy Church to offer the three-line doctrinal summary just quoted, which provides its own answer to the charge of dull-wittedness: the problem is not with Will's wits, but with the affective or volitional aspect of his character, inasmuch as the knowledge he lacks is something that "kenneth in thine herte". It is, therefore, quite appropriate that Langland sets his Will on this journey to find Truth.

Still, a will is not a whole soul, let alone a whole person, and in particular a will cannot function without an intellect to advise it. Hence the friar remarks that the gift we

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have been given is both wit and free will, both of which we must "worche wel therwith" (lines 53, 56). The journey Will takes is predicated on his very existence as a witless Will, a description that is no insult to him inasmuch as the will by its very nature relies on other faculties for its information. So it is that, over the course of the poem, we hear from Conscience, Reason, Thought, Wit, Ymaginatif, Anima, and more. Langland's complex use of allegory makes these characters more than mere philosophical abstractions, or characters in costume, because the allegory allows the poem to work simultaneously on multiple levels, situating Will within a larger community even while locating the will within an individual psychology[49]. That we can understand Will in both ways, as both a part of the soul and as a protagonist embarked on a journey in the world, is a consequence of the poem's voluntarism, and more specifically its valorization of the will as the primary locus of selfhood and moral worth. Accordingly, Conscience reacts to the friar's gluttonous behavior at dinner not by objecting to the content of anything the friar had said, but rather by affirming the matchless value of a true will:

> "Ac the wille of the wye and the wille of folke here *the wye : that person, Patience*
>
> Hath moeved my mode to mourne for my sinnes.
>
> The good wille of a wighte was nevre bought to the fulle,
>
> For there nys no tresore therto---to a trewe wille". (B.XIII.190-93)

This serves to reprimand the friar on one level, but on another level, it simply reaffirms what the friar had earlier taught through the metaphor of the brittle boat: what is all-important in a human life is the quality of a person's will.

Given that a will requires information from outside -that his journey is an exercise in what Elizabeth Robertson (2020) refers to as "soul-making"- it should be no surprise that Will's journey consists largely in consulting with various authorities, personified. For anyone seeking to make strict philosophical sense out of these dreams, it can look

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disconcerting that both Conscience and Holy Church are treated as personifications; that personification sometimes extends to parts of the self (part of Will?), whereas at other times it lies wholly outside Will. But the complex logic of Langland's allegorical scheme indicates just how seriously Langland takes the voluntaristic conception of the will as the primary locus of personal agency. From that point of view, the teachings of Church and of conscience are on a par, both effectively external sources of information between which the will must navigate as best it can. Accordingly, Conscience can aptly be described as a book, and indeed the only book one needs (B.XV.534). And when Conscience announces his intention at the end of the poem to "bicome a pilgryme" in search of Piers (B.XX.380), and so seemingly to leave Will behind, we should not be surprised. Even parts of our very soul may go silent for stretches of a time, leaving the will to make decisions as best it can[50]. The multiplicity of levels on which the text works reflects the human epistemic situation, and the tangled mix of information we receive from within and without[51].

Conceived of philosophically, a will needs guidance, and, within the literary context of a dream vision, one would expect Will to have a guide. Part of what makes Piers Plowman so disorienting, then, is Will's difficulty in finding a guide who is adequate. I have already suggested that the failure of these would-be guides arises not from any intellectual failing. Where then does the problem lie? That is not at all an easy question to answer, because the poem is very far from explaining itself in this regard-as if not only Will but also William himself finds the question deeply inscrutable. Why indeed does any of us find it so difficult to do well, let alone better or best?

Just above, we saw Conscience suggest that truth lies in the will (B.XIII.193). Might it be, then, that Will's search for Truth is at least in part an inward search? That would in turn explain why Will keeps failing to get from others the answer he is looking for. I say "in part" because the Truth, capitalized, is of course God. But Will's lifelong journey to find God is mediated by the search for the proper sort of love of God, which is what his would-be guides keep telling him he requires, all the way to the end of the poem: "Conseille me, Kynde" quod I. "What crafte is best to lerne?" / "Lerne to loue," quod Kynde, "and leue alle othre" (B.XX.209-10). Love is an act of the will, and the search for the right sort of stable loving disposition is a search for charity, which is a virtue of the will. If this is what Will is after, then he scarcely needs to travel far, because what

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he requires is something only he can supply[52]. Will's quest for Do-Well likewise has this sort of inwardly directed aspect, once we understand it through the voluntaristic perspective identified above, according to which right action is first and foremost the action of the will itself, rather than any sort of physical activity in the world. Will himself is perhaps confused, as wills so often are, even about what kind of thing Do-Well is, but the poet's way of handling analogous adverbial constructions is illuminating. Wit's castle in Passus IX contains not just Do-Well, Do-Better, and Do-Best, but also the five fair sons of Sir Inwit:

> "Sire Se-Wel, and Say-Wel, and Here-Wel the hende,
>
> Sire Worche-Wel-Wyth-Thine Hande, a wighte man of strengthe,
>
> And Sire Godfrey Go-Wel, gret lordes alle". (B.IX.20-22)

This allegorical construction of a human person locates these various adverbial perfections *within* the castle, as faculties or virtues. But if seeing well, saying well, and hearing well are all perfections of a human being, then we should expect *doing well* to be understood in the same way, and of course we should expect it to be a virtue of the will. Will's search for Do-Well, then, is a search for something he can find only within himself.

To put the focus on will in this way, as the locus of selfhood and moral agency, is not to treat the will as alone in the world. Langland is of course not a solipsist, nor does he think that a human being is just a will. Hence it is quite proper for Will to set out on an intellectual journey, and to ask for help from everyone he meets. As I read the poem, we are not meant to conclude that Will's quest for understanding is hopeless or even misguided[53]. Although *we* are in a position to see that the answers Will is looking for lie within him, that does not make *his* task any easier. He is, indeed, going about his journey in the only way that a will in the world can: by attempting to make common cause with others, and by seeking in good faith to understand the things that are, for now, only dimly lit.

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Footnotes

1 : On Marsilius, see Nederman (1995); for Ockham, see McGrade (1974).↩

2 : See Bradwardine (1618) in I.3, II.20, III.1-2, III.50.↩

3 : I offer an intellectualist reading in Pasnau (2002, ch.7). For a sophisticated recent attempt to understand his view in a more voluntaristic light, see Hoffmann and Michon (2017).↩

4 : Unless otherwise noted, the works of Ockham that I discuss are not currently available in English translation. For a more extensive discussion of his conception of will, see Adams (1999).↩

5 : The most comprehensive inventory of the intellectualist (and voluntarist) movement through the thirteenth century is the first volume of Lottin (1942--60).↩

6 : All references and quotations are from the Riverside Chaucer (1987), although I have often benefited from consulting Windeatt's edition of the text. For happiness as the poem's focal concept see Mann (2002, p.165): "the central subject of this poem is the loss of happiness."↩

7 : Chaucer's Boethius uses 'welefulnesse' to translate felicitas (e.g., IIpr1 and IIIpr1) and 'blisfulnesse' to translate beatitudo (e.g., IIIpr1). But neither of these terms are is in Troilus or, indeed, anywhere in the corpus outside of his Consolation translation. In Troilus Chaucer prefers 'selynesse' and 'felicitee,' e.g. at III.813--14: "wordly selynesse, / Which clerkes callen fals felicitee."↩

8 : Compare Troilus III.813--36 with Consolation IIpr4, lines 150--62 in Chaucer's translation. "Verray weele" (III.836) contrasts with "worldly selynesse, / Which clerkes callen fals felicitee" at the start of Criseyde's speech (III.813--14), but all three of these terms for happiness self-consciously pick out the technical philosophers' conception rather than the passing "joy" or "bliss" or "gladness" that the poem usually speaks of. Indeed, this is the only passage in Chaucer's entirely corpus where 'selynesse' appears.↩

9 : See, e.g., Thomas Aquinas, Summa theol. 2a2ae 136.1c, who appeals to Augustine.↩

10 : See Consol. Vpr1: "Now mai I thus diffinysshen hap: hap is an unwar betydinge of causes assembled in thingis that ben doon for som oothir thing" (lines 89--92). "Licet igitur definire casum esse inopinatum ex confluentibus causis in his quae ob aliquid geruntur eventum." The Latin equates casus and fortuitum, which Chaucer renders as "hap or elles aventure of fortune" (line 58). This conception of fortune (or chance or luck: τύχη, casus, hap) goes back to Aristotle (Physics II.6), as Boethius explicitly says.↩

11 : The poem speaks of luck in terms of 'hap' (I.896); 'happy' (II.621, II.1382); 'unhap' (I.552, II.456); 'unhappyly' (I.666). The OED dates the first occurrence of 'happiness' to 1473. The narrator

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speaks of "sely Troius" (I.871, II.683) and also "sely womman" (V.1093), said of Criseyde, but also of "Troilus unsely aventure" (I.35). The range of meanings for 'sely' is so wide that it encompasses being lucky, blessed, worthy, happy, and simplemindedly good, and also being unhappy and unfortunate. The linguistic link between happiness and luck goes back to antiquity. Both the Greek εὐδαιμονία and the Latin felicitas bear the primary meaning of lucky or fortunate. Aristotle, reporting common sentiment, remarks that "good fortune (εὐτυχία) is thought to be the same, or nearly the same, as happiness (εὐδαιμονία)" (Phys. II.6, 197b4).↩

12 : For the narrator see esp. V.1-2: "Aprochen gan the fatal destyne / That Joves hath in disposicioun." Calchas claims to foreknow the fall of Troy through the word of Apollo, the casting of lots, and the study of astrology (I.64--84; IV.113--19).↩

13 : Chaucer's paraphrase runs from IV.974 through IV.1078, and corresponds with lines 8--99 of his translation of Consolation Vpr3 (Boethius 1973, p. 395 line 6 to p. 399 line 56). Where Boethius speaks of fatum, Chaucer, both here and in his translation, regularly speaks of "destinee," which makes for a usefully direct linguistic tie to the problem of God's "predestyne."↩

14 : On the theologically unacceptable character of Troilus's position see Minnis (1982, pp. 95--96).↩

15 : Here I am indebted to Windeatt (2023): "...an effect of openness which invites any reader to participate in the debate" (p. 229). See also Benson (1990,p. 149): "Chaucer is a poet not a philosopher, and he uses pieces of the Consolation in unexpected ways to ask questions rather than to provide answers."↩

16 : Prominent examples of practical reasoning in the poem come at II.757, V.36, V.382, V.687, V.1065. For Boethius's account of freedom of choice see Consol. Vpr2.↩

17 : Readers of the poem who find it committed to freewill include Patch (1961), Benson (1990) ch. 7, Minnis (1982, pp. 70--73), and Windeatt (2023, p. 283). For deterministic reading see, e.g., Curry (1961) and Berryman (1967). Critics on both sides tend to have internalized the voluntaristic position that freewill is possible only for agents who can somehow break free from the causal chains of nature and that agents whose actions are circumscribed by those chains are not really acting at all. Thus Berryman (1967, p.3) speaks of "the self-deception shared by all of the characters as well as the narrator in their vain attempts to avoid the inevitable outcome of the story"---as if the only rational behavior in a deterministic world is to stay in bed and wait for the inevitable to happen.↩

18 : Troilus's is a textbook case of acedia, as characterized in the common biblical gloss as "a listlessness of mind that neglects to undertake good things" (as quoted in Aquinas, Summa theol. 2a2ae 35.1). Despair is one of the "children" of acedia: it is a lack of hope resulting from the belief that some good is impossible to achieve (Aquinas, Summa theol. 2a2ae 20.1, 35.4 obj. 2 & ad 2). Strictly, these are both theological vices, and in that case, they concern the ultimate good of God. An internal reading of the poem transposes these vices onto Troilus's attitude toward Criseyde.↩

19 : We are told explicitly that Criseyde is deficient with regard to courage (II.450, V.825) and prudence (V.744--45). As for her injustice (toward Troilus) and her (sexual) intemperance, readers must judge for themselves. On the traditional understanding of the cardinal virtues they stand or fall together as a unity: one has either all of them or none of them (see Aristotle, Nic. Ethics VI.13). For the voluntaristic thesis that all the moral virtues are virtues of the will see Kent (1995).↩

20 : See Nic. Ethics I.10, 1100a18--21: "both evil and good are thought to exist for someone who is dead, as much as for one who is alive but not aware of them; e.g. honors and dishonors and the good or bad fortunes of children and in general of descendants." Consol. Ipr4 shows the prisoner worrying

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about his reputation. That women in particular should be concerned for their reputation is an imperative within the medieval conventions of courtly love (see Dodd 1961, pp. 5--6).↩

21 : For a prominent example of this sort of moralizing Christian reading see Robertson (1961). Donaldson (1975, p.1144) has this sort of perspective in mind when he nicely remarks: "Some readers are apt to feel, however, that the poet's final statement cancels all the human values which his own loving treatment has made real; that he is, in effect, saying either that he ought not to have written the poem or that the reader ought not to have read it."↩

22 : Consol. IIpr2: "Haec nostra vis est, hunc continuum ludum ludimus; rotam volubili orbe versamus, infima summis summa infimis mutare gaudemus. Ascende si placet, sed ea lege ne utique cum ludicri mei ratio poscet, descendere iniuriam putes."↩

23 : Dihle (1982) locates the origins of will in early Christianity; Frede (2011) points to late Stoic thought.↩

24 : Romans 7:15-23. The Vulgate text reads as follows: "Quod enim operor non intelligo: non enim quod volo (θέλω) bonum hoc ago, sed quod odi malum illud facio. Si autem quod nolo illud facio, consentio legi, quoniam bona (καλός) est. Nunc autem iam non ego operor illud, sed quod habitat in me peccatum. Scio enim quia non habitat in me, hoc est in carne mea, bonum. Nam velle adiacet mihi: perficere autem bonum non invenio. Non enim quod volo bonum, hoc facio: sed quod nolo malum, hoc ago. Si autem quod nolo illud facio, iam non ego operor illud, sed quod habitat in me peccatum. Invenio igitur legem volenti mihi facere bonum quoniam mihi malum adiacet. Condelector enim legi Dei secundum interiorem hominem. Video autem aliam legem in membris meis, repugnantem legi mentis meae, et captivantem me in lege peccati, quae est in membris meis."↩

25 : For a good example of the perplexity that has been generated, see Matthews (1984). For a response, see Kretzmann (1988). Kretzmann in turn draws on Thomas Aquinas's commentary on Romans 7 (Thomas Aquinas 1929).↩

26 : See Aquinas, Summa Theol. (1a 83.1 ad 1), and, at greater length, his commentary on Romans. For Augustine, see Sermones ad populum (154.3).↩

27 : I follow the edition of The Riverside Chaucer, where the Clerk's Tale appears at the start of fragment IV. Petrarch's version is found in Epistolae Seniles XVII.3; I follow Thomas Ferrell's Latin--English edition as printed in Correale and Hamel (2002), I:108--29. That work also contains the text and translation of an anonymous French version that was also among Chaucer's sources. It is unclear whether he knew Boccaccio's original, but his connections with Italy make that not implausible.↩

28 : It is a commonplace among recent critics to observe that the Clerk's Tale is problematic both as a parable and as a moral exemplum for wives. The most influential statement of that case remains Salter (1962), who concludes that the tale is a failure. Much of the critical literature in the sixty years since Salter's essay has attempted to find some strategy for rescuing the poem from that despairing verdict. For a good sense of the ongoing puzzlement over the tale as a moral exemplar see Mitchell (2005). For a vigorous attempt to defend Griselda as a moral exemplar see Morse (1985).↩

29 : Petrarch's Walter describes himself as "the freest man I have known" (104), a line that Petrarch seems to accept uncritically, but that Chaucer simply omits.↩

30 : Griselda's exceptional produce, or wisdom, is particularly attested at 428--34 and 1016--22. Even the sergeant who takes her babies recognizes it (528). As for Walter, the poem cautiously remarks that "the peple hym heelde / A prudent man" (426--27) because of his discovering Griselda's virtue amidst

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her poverty, but then offers a foreboding caution, not present in Chaucer's sources, that "that is seyn ful seelde" (very seldom seen).↩

31 : Petrarch's version of this scene (150--61) is different in crucial ways: it ennobles Walter by having him frame his demand in terms of :his will (voluntas); it suggests his concern for her inner mental life in his asking whether she is ready to swear with a willing spirit (volenti animo); and it diminishes Griselda's response by restricting it to a pledge not to act or think otherwise than what Walter wants, omitting the crucial idea of a union of wills. And since Petrarch's Griselda has given Walter exactly what he wanted, his response "satis est" comes off as a dry acknowledgment that she has met his expectations. The anonymous French translation adheres closely with Petrarch on all these details (109--124).↩

32 : The question of Griselda's underlying emotional state is explored in detail in Bugbee (2019, pp. 41--79). But the otherwise illuminating discussion suffers from a failure to distinguish between the conformity Griselda vows at the level of rational appetite (will) and the sorrow she permits herself subrationally.↩

33 : This inverted mirroring of Walter's lusts onto Griselda's will is completely missing from Petrarch and the anonymous French version, both of which speak throughout this speech of a conformity at the level of will (voluntas, voulenté). The pains that Chaucer takes to drive home the inversion is quite striking on close inspection. The word 'lust' in its various noun and verbal forms is associated 21 times with Walter, whereas a connection with Griselda comes only twice: once negatively, when she is said to have "no likerous lust" (214, as quoted earlier), and once when the clerk tells us that "as Walter leste, / The same lust was hire plesance also" (716--17), which does not quite ascribe these lusts to her. That passage, as it happens, is the only place that Griselda is characterized as having "plesance" a term that is associated seven times with Walter.↩

34 : Critics often take for granted that Griselda's initial vow is what motivate her ongoing obedience to Walter (see Mann 2002, p.114; and, Finnegan, 1994). For a brief account of the scholastic attitude toward oaths that clash with other moral commitments see Aquinas: Summa Theol. (2a2ae 89.7). Scotus's Ordinatio (III.39) offers a much more searching discussion of the issues. For further references see Finnegan (1994). The ecclesiastical Latin term for the sort of oath one swears before God in marriage is iuramentum, and periurium is the term for the breaking of such an oath.↩

35 : See lines 343, 1053, and 866, where she characterizes herself as having brought from her father's house "noght elles ... but feith, and nakednesse, and maydenhede." Petrarch invokes faith at the very start of his version, entitling it a tale of "remarkable wifely obedience and faith."↩

36 : Readers who might have lost sight of the transparent falseness of Walter's conduct get a reality check when Griselda is finally expelled from the palace and sent back to her father. Janicula, we then learn, "was evere in suspect of hir mariage" (905). Could Griselda have been so much more foolish than that?↩

37 : Once Griselda leaves home for the palace, her father drops out of the poem, until she is cast out and falls back into his arms. Then, once the final test has concluded and all has been revealed, we are told that Janicula is finally allowed to live in the palace (1133). Petrarch, characteristically, makes an excuse for Walter's having taken so long to allow this (391--93), an excuse that Chaucer omits. Neither offers any excuse for Griselda's having abandoned her father.↩

38 : Strikingly, both Petrarch (256) and the anonymous French version (241) render this line as "to our love," but Chaucer's poem hardly takes such mutuality for granted. I can find only one place where Walter expresses his love for her: "and though to me that ye be lief and deere" (479), and this comes as he prepares her to lose her daughter. Griselda herself invokes his love for her only so as to describe its waning (857) and then in celebration of its final renewal (1091). There are at least ten places where the poem speaks of his being loved, by Griselda and others. Characteristically, when Walter reassures himself that Griselda does love her children, he puts the thought to himself in the

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only way he can find tolerable: "But wel he knew that next hymnself, certayn, / She loved hir children best in every wyse" (694--95). Georgianna (1995, p.805) registers that love is Griselda's motive, remarking that "the only motive Griselda ever offers for her assent is love, which is less an explanation than a synonym for her assent". I hope that my account of the poem makes clear how her vow of love is, in the medieval context, a very rich explanation.↩

39 : A medieval Christian audience would immediately recognize that Griselda's speech is a distorted echo of what is arguably the most important line in the entire Bible, Mattthew 22:37, where Jesus explains, reciting Deuteronomy 6:5, that "the first and greatest commandment" of religious law is "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." For the connection to charity see, e.g., Scotus, Ordinatio III.27 (tr. 2017), which offers a systematic argument for why it is the supernaturally infused virtue of charity that inclines us to love God in this way.↩

40 : A wanton, in the sense made philosophically famous by Frankfurt (1971), is someone who has various first-order desires for things in the world but lacks the second-order ability to choose among those desires, and so drifts along in life from one desire to another. Such beings, Frankfurt argues, do not count as persons and lack freedom of will.↩

41 : Confessions XIII.9.10. I am not the first to stress Griselda's emergence in the poem as a rational agent characterized by the force of her will. My thinking about the poem has been particularly influenced throughout by work in progress of Elizabeth Robertson. A notable earlier example is Kirk (1990, p.117), who remarks that "what preserves Griselda's identity is nothing more or less than the intense, even excessive voluntariness of her promise". At the same time, the paradoxical character of voluntaristic obedience makes it easy to reach the seemingly contradictory conclusion that the Clerk's Tale, in John McCall's words, describes "the supernatural death of the will" (1966, p.264).↩

42 : Sawles Warde par. 3, following a revised version of the edition and translation in Huber and Robertson (2016).↩

43 : Sawles Warde par. 48. For a discussion of other examples of the conflict between Wit and Will, see Dickins (1937).↩

44 : This is immediately apparent from the quotations offered in support of the first sense of 'wil (le' offered in the online Middle English Dictionary (2024). Of course, the noun 'will' has more than two senses in Middle English, just as it does today. The Oxford English Dictionary offers 23 distinct senses, and the Middle English Dictionary offers 12, and does not even separate out into different entries the senses I am distinguishing here, despite their fundamental difference.↩

45 : References to Piers Plowman are to William Langland (2006). See also B.XI.45: "That witte shal torne to wrecchednesse, for wille to have his lyking!" Ralph Hanna remarks, of B.V.587/C.VII.234, that "Piers's language at this point deliberately excludes the dreamer" (Penn Commentary, II:200). But this ignores the clear equivocity of 'wille,' which here denotes a psychological feature set in essential opposition to wit, to be excluded from the castle as a matter of principle. This cannot be the sort of will with which the dreamer is identified.↩

46 : Distinguished examples, with regard to Piers Plowman in particular, include Zeeman (2006), Coleman (1981), Simpson (1986a), and E. Robertson (2020). For a skeptical response, see Aers (2009).↩

47 : See the nuanced discussion of Will as fool in Carruthers (1973, p.5) as well as the sweeping account in Aers (2015, p.126) of the significance of locating Will among the fools, arrayed against the institutions of power.↩

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48 : On the complexities of allegory in Langland, see Mann (2010). For the case of the soul's faculties in particular, see Raskolnikov (2009), ch. 5.↩

49 : Here I am indebted to conversation with Kate Crassons and Beth Robertson.↩

50 : That we acquire information from the senses, and from intellectual abstraction therefrom, is a commonplace within the Aristotelian tradition. The role of external authority is stressed in particular by Augustine, famously at De trinitate XV.12.21: "Let it be far from us to deny that we know what we have learned from the testimony of others".↩

51 : My thoughts here have benefited substantially from remarks in Simpson (2007, p.163): "If Will has never seen charity ..., this is surely because he is himself, as the will, the locus of charity; to look for charity 'bifore' or 'bihynde' is simply to miss the obvious by looking in front of one's nose."↩

52 : Here I agree with Aers (2009, p.56): "there is no warrant for those readings of Piers Plowman that assert a movement in the poem setting aside ratiocination and argument." At the same time, the poem's voluntarism creates a certain tension in this commitment to rational inquiry, as is beautifully captured in Simpson (2007), who speaks of "a deep uncertainty about the value of learning in the poem" (61).↩

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