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14 May 2020

Version of attached file:

Published Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Brljak, Vladimir (2020) 'Volition's Face : Personification and the Will in Renaissance Literature by Andrew Escobedo. Notre Dame, IN : University of Notre Dame Press, 2017. ISBN 9780268101664.', Modern philology., 117 (3). E173-E180.

Further information on publisher's website:

https://doi.org/10.1086/707144

Publisher's copyright statement:

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Additional information:

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BOOK REVIEW

Volition's Face: Personification and the Will in Renaissance Literature. Andrew Escobedo. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017. Pp. ix+326.

The concept of personification can seem almost self-explanatory. Personification personifies. To be sure, it can do so in a number of ways. "When lust hath conceived," Milton read in the Epistle of James, "it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death."[1] Here personification occurs at the level of metaphor, whereas in *Paradise Lost* this metaphor is expanded into full-scale literary narrative in which an anthropomorphic being, Sin, gives birth to another anthropomorphic being, Death. Yet while the difference in effect is considerable, it is ultimately one of degree rather than kind. At either end of the spectrum, and various points in between, personification personifies: it represents the inanimate in terms of the animate, and especially, the nonhuman in terms of the human.

However straightforward it may seem, defining personification in this way has enormous implications for how we approach personification-based art and how we situate this art in history. If Milton's Sin and Death are merely abstractions represented in human or quasi-human form—and if, consequently, we are not to read them so much as read through them, peeling away the primary to get to the secondary meaning—then this mode of representation is rightly classed as a form of allegory, and we are justified in speaking, as we now do, of "allegorical personifications" and "personification allegory." And if so, then this also entails a particular view of the long history of the subject, especially with respect to the turn against personification and/or allegory in modern aesthetics. Addison's generation seems

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[1] James 1:15 (KJV).

Modern Philology, volume 117, number 3. Published online November 27, 2019
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to have been the tipping point here, the first to fully articulate the feeling that "the Mystick Tale, that pleas'd of Yore, / Can Charm an understanding Age no more"[2]—yet Addison did not believe his understanding of this type of literature to be any different than Spenser's. The literary historian's task in accounting for this radical change in taste is still formidable, but at least it remains a change in taste—in the aesthetic value assigned to the mode—rather than in the fundamental conception of what personification and/or allegory are.

According to a competing cluster of theories, however, none of the above is true—or at least none of it is true of premodern personification, which is where the bulk of the interest in the subject lies. When we read works composed in the classic age of personification-based literature, from Prudentius's *Psychomachia* in the fifth to Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* in the seventeenth century, we are wrong to assume that their authors drew the same categorical distinction between an abstract concept and its representation in human form, and saw themselves as merely expressing the former by way of the latter. They had a very different understanding of the world and the self, and to them such figures were much more than mere representations. Although not as widespread, this is by no means a novel view. This year marks the centennial of Huizinga's *Autumn of the Middle Ages*, where we read: "When we encounter the names Bel-Accueil, Doulce Mercy, Humble Requeste, it is only with difficulty that we think of something tangible. But for the people of the time they were realities clothed in living form and imbued with passion. They are perfectly comparable to Roman divinities that were also derived from abstractions, such as Pavor, Pallor, and Concordia, etc."[3] If Huizinga and like-minded scholars are right, then to view such figures as personified abstractions is to misread them on a fundamental level, and the turn against personification in modern aesthetics involves much more than mere taste. Indeed, on this model, the very term *personification* is a misnomer, and its appearance in the eighteenth century, as well as its modern association with allegory, are both symptoms of a profound change in mentality that has severed us from the premodern imagination and rendered its products incomprehensible to us except through elaborate efforts of historicist reconstruction.

Andrew Escobedo's *Volition's Face* is a major contribution to this latter theory of personification in general and to the "daemonic" theory of personification in particular: the theory that premodern personifications are descendants of the daemons and comparable entities—demigods, genii, powers—of Greco-Roman antiquity and occupy a similar place in the literature and art of premodern Christendom. Escobedo accepts this view in the main while carefully distinguishing his position from "two touchstone studies" of the subject (47–55), Angus Fletcher's *Allegory: Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (1964) and Gordon Teskey's *Allegory and Violence* (1996). Fletcher's *Allegory* is the classic statement of the "daemonic" theory, yet his psychoanalytically inflected reading only reaffirms the modern distaste for the mode: although "daemonic," Fletcher's personifications continue to be judged against modern standards of literary character, and thus continue to be seen as failed—possessed, deranged, monstrous—persons. By contrast, Teskey discards the "daemonic" theory yet highlights in the process a fundamental historical problem with this theory: if personification is an expression of "daemonism," and if we also know that "daemonism" thrived in classical antiquity, then why does sustained use of personification in European literature fail to emerge until Prudentius?

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[2] Joseph Addison, "An Account of the Greatest English Poets," in *The Annual Miscellany for the Year 1694* [. . .] (London, 1694), sig. X8r.

[3] Johan Huizinga, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* [1919], trans. Rodney J. Payton and Ulrich Mammitzsch (University of Chicago Press, 1996), 244.

In its broadest outline, *Volition's Face* is an attempt to provide a theory of personification that remains "daemonic" while successfully meeting both these challenges. The solution, Escobedo argues, resides in the faculty of the will. The sustained use of personification encountered in European literature from Prudentius to Bunyan is not merely an expression of "daemonism"—it is an expression of a particular kind of "daemonism" characteristic of premodern Christianity, distinguished by its peculiar conception of the faculty of the will. "Medieval and Renaissance Christian writers, unlike ancient writers, often held that the will enjoyed independence from reason and moral character; yet, in contrast to modern commentators, these writers did not possess a notion of autonomous ego or deep self to posit as the source of the will. Hence, the postclassical will was free (the other faculties of human psychology did not determine it) but was potentially hard to account for (*what* exactly did determine it?)" (57–58). Or as Augustine puts it in *De libero arbitrio*, cited by Escobedo as an early expression of this view, "what cause of the will could there be, except the will itself? It is either the will itself, and it is not possible to go back to the root of the will; or else it is not the will, and there is no sin" (67). Personification is the natural expression of this paradoxical status of the premodern Christian will, reconfiguring the classical experience of "daemonic" or "transactional" selfhood in terms of the Christian doctrine of original sin: "the literary equivalent of a model of will in which volitional acts enjoy a partial freedom (or suffer a partial deviation) from the causation of other psychological activity" (75).

So construed, Escobedo's postclassical-premodern personifications remain Fletcherian in their "daemonism," yet the modern prejudice that charges them with "flat character, psychological compulsion, or tropological stasis" (7) can now be explained as an anachronistic misreading of a phenomenon grounded in notions of psychology and agency alien to the modern mind. At the same time, Escobedo's account also purports to solve the problem flagged by Teskey, with the reign of the premodern Christian will "roughly match[ing] the duration of the flourishing of literary prosopopoeia" (13). The theory is interesting, internally coherent, and not entirely without precedent. Escobedo does not devote much attention to another classic study, C. S. Lewis's *Allegory of Love*, but readers of that book will find themselves in familiar territory, recalling that Lewis also attributes the rise of personification allegory to authors of the first century CE, pagan and Christian alike, becoming "vividly aware, as the Greeks had not been, of the divided will."[4] However, this precedent is not to be overemphasized, and *Volition's Face* deserves full credit as the first sustained attempt at a will-based theory of the subject.

This focus on the will is the book's central innovation, elaborated at length in chapters 1–2. The remaining four chapters then bring these perspectives to bear on close readings of a selection of English works of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a period that Escobedo finds of particular interest in the history of the subject for two reasons: first, because "Renaissance scholars, unlike medievalists, need to account for personification under the shadow of Hamlet, Cleopatra, Quixote, Satan, and Eve," and explain not only its continued presence in this period but also "what kind of relationship . . . Renaissance writers and readers understand personified figures to have with other types of literary character"; and second, because this is the period in which "the will runs into various kinds of trouble," faced with developments in Protestant theology, the growing skepticism toward faculty psychology, and "a newly robust discourse about ancient daemons, cultivated especially by Renaissance Platonism" (9). These further considerations, along with the overall thesis, inform the discussions in chapters 3–6, each focusing on a particular personification—Conscience, Despair, Love, and Sin—and each additionally animated by a revisionary impulse, countering the views of previous critics who found this mode of representation "to constrain the agency and vitality of the characters involved" (6).

Chapter 3 explores the role of Conscience in sixteenth-century English drama, including Nathaniel Woods's *Conflict of Conscience* (1581): far from reflecting their psychological and dramatic crudity, the personification of Conscience appears in these works precisely as an expression of the complex psychological states experienced by the plays' protagonists, especially in Protestant works, where these are further exacerbated by the pressures of predestinarian theology. Chapter 4 continues along similar lines, looking at

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[4] C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (1936; repr., London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 60.

Despair in Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (1590, 1596) and Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (ca. 1592): oscillating between self-consuming stasis and Vice-like mischief—or else, as in *Faustus*, conspicuous in its absence—the personification of Despair alternately reflects the "majority" and "minority reports" on the question of despair in Protestant theology. Chapter 5 returns to *The Faerie Queene*, this time as "the prosopopoetic culmination in Renaissance literature" of the Platonic figure of Love, as it evolved from the foundational etiological myth of the *Symposium* to Spenser's day: the seemingly inconsistent behavior of Spenser's Cupid, who "practices sadistic cruelty but also wantons in playful harmony," draws on this tradition, which "willingly tolerated an ambiguity between Love as a personification and Love as a literal daemon" and was thus uniquely suited to express "both the pleasure and the pain of Eros" (173, 175, 179, 184).

Chapter 6 takes on the venerable crux of Milton's Sin. While personification of Sin works as a static emblem, "detailing Sin's prosopopoetic genealogy can quickly run into complications" (210). "When lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin"—but if lust is itself "a *kind* of sin, then lust is giving birth to the general condition that must precede it," resulting in an impasse that foregrounds the fundamental concern in Christian theology with the origin of sin and the question of free will. "The language of causation can never succeed in accounting for free will," yet it is precisely such language that personification inevitably slips into: "*Why* does the angel choose to sin? . . . Outside of narrative, it may be possible to think of choices as freestanding, instantaneous events. . . . But within narrative, events impinge on one another, encouraging us to understand an action in terms of those that precede it" (224). Finally, a brief epilogue relates the concept of personification developed in the book—notably, one that "rejects the notions of the autonomous will and novelistic character as relevant criteria in the premodern milieu"—to "recent critical projects such as ecocriticism, biopolitics, actor-network theory, or object-oriented ontology, all of which have been associated with the phenomenon of posthumanism." Escobedo finds this relationship to be one of suggestive, if ultimately limited, reciprocity: "premodern prosopopoeia anticipate posthumanist agency," while posthumanist theory in turn devotes considerable attention to personification, "often see[ing] the trope as openly flaunting the strict divide between the human and nonhuman" (247).

Scholars interested in particular authors and works discussed in these chapters should find them worth reading regardless of what they make of Escobedo's larger argument about the long history of the subject. Scholars interested specifically in this larger argument, however, will also want to consider some potential gaps and inconsistencies. One question, for example, is that of how the book's account of premodern literary personification squares with statements on the subject by premodern authors themselves.

As Escobedo acknowledges, such statements are very rare, but what about the few that do exist, such as chapter 25 of Dante's *Vita nuova*, where the narrator pauses to address such readers as "could be puzzled at my speaking of Love as if it were a thing in itself, as if it were not only an intellectual substance, but also a bodily substance"?[5] Dante's narrator immediately concedes that "This is patently false, for Love does not exist in itself as a substance, but is an accident in a substance," yet still proceeds to defend personification, so construed, on the grounds of poetic license and classical precedent. Furthermore, this defense presumes that personification involves a categorical distinction between an object and its representation in personified form (it "addresse[s] inanimate objects . . . as if these objects had sense and reason" and does so "not only with real things but also unreal things"), and that personification is therefore a form of allegory (to "strip [a] poem of such dress" is "to reveal its true meaning"). Here, then, is a premodern Christian author drawing precisely such distinctions as his transactional mind should be either incapable of or uninterested in making, and espousing a view of personification that, beneath its Aristotelian surface, seems curiously resonant with the modern understanding of the subject. Given its direct and potentially problematic significance for Escobedo's thesis, one would expect Dante's passage to be discussed in some detail here—especially as much is made of theoretical treatments of personification in the rhetorical tradition (e.g., 15–18)—yet only a passing reference appears, significantly misrepresenting Dante's position (35–36).

There are further instances where Escobedo fails to fully engage with evidence that potentially complicates or contradicts his thesis. Readers familiar with these discussions will have already thought of a story that fascinated sixteenth- and seventeenth-century readers, best known now as that of Spenser's Malbecco, who "Forgot he was a man, and *Gelosy* is hight."[6] How does this story, presenting personification as a monstrous degradation of personhood, relate to the book's claims that "the dichotomy between real person and artificial trope did not dominate the sensibilities of premodern readers" (42) and that the "felt distance between a personification and a psychologically mimetic character" (48) is largely a modern, post-1700 development? Escobedo's argument here—that "Malbecco does not lose his humanity by becoming a personification. He loses his humanity by becoming a personification of *jealousy*" (14)—seems like an evasion rather than an explanation. Or what about the remarkably rapid decline of personifications in the English drama of the final quarter of the sixteenth century? In the 1570s, personified abstractions still comprise a considerable portion of characters in the English noncycle drama as in the earlier part of the century; by the 1590s, they have almost vanished, even as they continue to figure prominently in other types of dramatic and semidramatic performances such as masques. Why did this happen, and crucially, in terms of the book's thesis, how did it happen so quickly, within decades or even years? Escobedo is perfectly right to note that *Faustus* retains much of the deeper structure of the earlier dramatic morals: that "The tug-of-war for the sinner's soul, traditionally given to characters like Mercy and Despair, or Spirit and Sensual Suggestion, here occurs between a good angel and a bad angel," or that the Old Man "resembles a personification of Admonition or Mercy" (157–58). The fact remains, however, that the only personifications to be found in Marlowe's play are the Seven Deadly Sins, which, moreover, are merely devils assuming these forms for the purpose of a brief "pastime" and "show." To simply assert, in the face of all this, that Marlowe's play "does not so much leave out prosopopoeia as give us prosopopoeia with a difference," and describe its characters as "not-quite-personifications who nonetheless carry out traditional prosopopoetic functions" (159), is to beg the question.

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[5] *Dante's "Vita nuova": A Translation and an Essay*, trans. Mark Musa (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), 54–56.

[6] Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A. C. Hamilton, with Hiroshi Yamashita and Toshiyuki Suzuki, 2nd ed., rev. (Harlow: Pearson, 2007), 3.10.60.

These evasions point to a more fundamental problem, which is by no means specific to Escobedo's work. *Volition's Face* is only the latest in a long list of attempts to define personification and/or allegory as an expression of some underlying cultural or metaphysical category: realism, daemonism, enchantment, celestial hierarchy, book of nature, transactional self, baroque melancholy, or postmodern autoreferentiality, among others. However persuasive they may seem, all such definitions crumble when faced with the evidence, showing that these modes of literary and artistic expression are practiced before and/or after the chosen category exerts its influence, and conversely, that even at the height of this influence, other types of literature and art are still produced. Furthermore, if personification and/or allegory reflect some deeply rooted understanding of the inner or the outside world, then we should expect any significant developments in their history to be gradual and uniformly, or at least very widely, attested. If, however, the shifts we encounter in the record are sudden and uneven, then our theory should be reevaluated and, in all probability, discarded. That said, there is clearly something to such theories, including Escobedo's, but the way forward is in pursuing them in weak rather than strong forms. Attempting to define personification and/or allegory in such terms seems doomed to failure, but once we turn from the narrow task of definition to broader questions of why personification and allegory assume particular forms or enjoy particular popularity in this or that historical period, then such categories do seem to hold considerable explanatory power. Accordingly, in providing us with a theory of personification as an expression of the premodern Christian will, *Volition's Face* falls short of its stated aim of "decipher[ing] literary personification's genetic code" (12), but it still makes a valuable contribution to the scholarship tackling some of the most important and difficult problems in European literary history.

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