

# Dante and Aristotle on Voluntary and Involuntary Action

*Nicomachean Ethics 3.1 in Inferno 5 and Paradiso 3–5*

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## ABSTRACT

Nicomachean Ethics 3.1 is a text of great significance for Dante's meditation on the will. Aristotle offers two examples of involuntary action in Nicomachean Ethics 3.1; the first surfaces in *Inferno* 5 and the second in *Paradiso* 3. In *Inferno* 5, Dante uses Aristotle's first example of involuntary action (a wind that carries us against our will), imposing it onto a context, the pursuit of carnal pleasure, in which the action was not in fact involuntary, but was willfully experienced as such. In *Paradiso* 3–5, Dante uses Aristotle's second example of involuntary action (powerful men who carry us off against our will), importing it into a context in which violence occurs, but the victims of violence are nonetheless held to have behaved voluntarily. Dante thus disrupts the Aristotelian analysis, revealing the fault line between Aristotle on voluntary and involuntary action and the Christian doctrine of free will.

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THIS ESSAY ADDRESSES ARISTOTLE'S ROLE IN SHAPING DANTE'S THOUGHT on voluntary and involuntary action, or — in more Dantean phrasing — on free will versus determinism. My point of departure is an observation of many years ago, when I suggested that, in forging the contrapasso of hell's circle of lust, Dante draws on *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1 and on one of Aristotle's examples of involuntary action.<sup>1</sup> The philosopher offers two examples of involuntary action in *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1: "e.g. if he were to be carried somewhere by a wind, or by men who had him in their power"

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1. See BAROLINI [1998] 2006a, 74: "In a passage that has not, to my knowledge, been brought to bear on *Inferno* 5, Aristotle illustrates compulsion by offering precisely the example of a person being carried by a wind". Citations are to BAROLINI 2006a. I wish here to record my gratitude to Matteo Pace and Wayne Storey, particularly helpful and insightful interlocutors as I worked on this essay.

(EN 3.1.1110a3–4).<sup>2</sup> In this essay I explore both, moving from Aristotle's two examples of involuntary action to an analysis of *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1 as a Dantean intertext: an intertext that is kept in check in *Paradiso* 4, and yet is always foundational to Dante's meditation on free will, as first manifested in *Inferno* 5. According to the thesis here put forth, the presence of Aristotle on compulsive force in *Inferno* 5 connects to the *Commedia's* great meditation on the will and compulsion in *Paradiso* 3–5, where not coincidentally we find the second of Aristotle's two examples of involuntary action from *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1.<sup>3</sup>

This essay does not explore the scholastic overlay onto Aristotle, which in my view is best added to the analysis subsequently, as a next textual and chronological layer.<sup>4</sup> The focus is instead kept steadily on understanding how Dante uses the *maestro di color che sanno*, and specifically how he deploys *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1. My starting conceit is to emphasize the importance for Dante of Aristotle's two succinct examples of involuntary action from *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1. The rationale for this hermeneutic move is straightforward and goes back to the observation noted above: Dante himself gives significance to these examples, invoking both in the *Commedia* and using them to frame a discussion of the will that spans *Inferno* 5 and *Paradiso* 3–5.

Aristotle's two laconic examples of involuntary action from *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1 inspire rather different responses from Dante. Simply put: Dante adapts the first example, where Aristotle posits as external agent of coercion a meteorological force, and he also adapts, but in more circumspect fashion, the second example, where Aristotle posits as external agents

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2. The translation cited is Ross 1980, revised 2009. I reference passages, both in Latin and in English translation, from Aristotle's *Ethica Nicomachea* (*Nicomachean Ethics*) as *EN* rather than *NE*.

3. An earlier version of this essay, focusing on Aristotle's first example, was published in Italian in the proceedings of the centennial conference of the Accademia dei Lincei: see BAROLINI 2022b.

4. In my view the most significant commonality between Aquinas and Dante, with respect to *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1, is their Aristotelian understanding of appetite or desire. Aquinas' Aristotelian clarity regarding the voluntary and intrinsic nature of concupiscence may well have informed Dante's decision to use Aristotle's wind of compulsion in *Inferno* 5, as a means of signifying the sinners' insistence that their lustful desires were compulsory and led them to involuntary action. See *Summa Theologiae* 1a2ae.6.7, on whether concupiscence causes involuntariness. On the human choices offered as examples by Aquinas and Dante, see note 29.

of coercion other human beings. In *Inferno* 5 Dante preserves and adapts Aristotle's wind and, while he necessarily transposes a key feature, turning a meteorological wind into a metaphysical wind, he does so in order to make Aristotle's point effective in an eschatological context. Dante offers a more disruptive response to Aristotle's example of violent men who are capable of applying sufficient coercion to compel involuntary action, perhaps indicating that for him no violence of this sort is sufficient to merit classification as a cause of involuntary action.

Although the two examples provoke different responses, their presence in the *Commedia* serves an identical purpose. In both cases Dante uses Aristotle in order to emphasize the importance of free will.

In the third book of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle discusses the conditions of voluntary agency, arriving at definitions of voluntary and involuntary actions, conceived as actions that are worthy of praise, blame, pardon, or pity.<sup>5</sup> Having announced the thesis that involuntary actions "take place by force or by reason of ignorance" (*EN* 3.1.1110a1), chapter 1 of Book 3 of *Nicomachean Ethics* begins with the analysis of the first condition: force. In what does an involuntary action that occurs through force — synonyms used by the translators are compulsion, constraint, coercion, duress, and violence — consist?<sup>6</sup> An involuntary action that occurs through force requires that the beginning of the action, the "moving principle", be outside the moved object, "being a principle in

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5. Ross 2009: "Since virtue is concerned with passions and actions, and on voluntary ones praise and blame are bestowed, on those that are involuntary pardon, and sometimes also pity, to distinguish the voluntary and the involuntary is presumably necessary for those who are studying the nature of virtue" (*EN* 3.1.1109b30–35). I cite the translation of David Ross because it tracks the traditional nomenclature of "voluntary" and "involuntary" with which Dante was familiar from Latin. The translation in ROWE–BROADIE 2002 has substituted for "involuntary" the term "counter-voluntary", a decision that takes us too far from the Latin that Dante read and internalized, which uses *voluntarium* and *involuntarium*. Here is the opening of *Ethica Nicomachea* 3.1 in William of Moerbeke's revision of Robert Grosseteste's translation: "Virtute itaque et circa passiones et operationes existente, et in voluntariis quidem laudibus et vituperiis factis, in involuntariis autem venia, quandoque autem et misericordia, voluntarium et involuntarium necessarium forsitan determinare de virtute intendentibus" (GROSSETESTE 2016, cited hereafter according to the standard divisions of the Latinized *Ethica Nicomachea*; here *EN* 3.1.1109b30).

6. Ross 1980 uses "compulsion" in the heading of *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1, whereas the subsequent Ross 2009 uses "force". The Latin translation uses "violentum".

which nothing is contributed by the person who acts — or, rather, is acted upon” (EN 3.1110a2–3). At this point Aristotle offers his two examples of coerced action. Here is the entire passage:

These things, then, are thought involuntary, which take place by force or by reason of ignorance; and that is forced of which the moving principle is outside, being a principle in which nothing is contributed by the person who acts — or, rather, is acted upon, e.g. if he were to be carried somewhere by a wind, or by men who had him in their power.

(EN 3.1.1109b35–1110a4)

Evidence of Dante’s great attention to the above passage is his verbatim citation of Aristotle’s definition of force in *Paradiso* 4, verses 73–74. The Latin — “Violentum autem est cuius principium extra, tale existens in quo nil confert operans vel patiens” (that is forced of which the moving principle is outside, being a principle in which nothing is contributed by the person who acts or, rather, is acted upon [EN 3.1.1110a2–4]) — is rendered by Dante thus: “Se violenza è quando quel che pate / niente conferisce a quel che sforza” (If violence means that the one who suffers / has not abetted force in any way [Par. 4.73–74]).<sup>7</sup> More broadly, each of the two examples of compulsion offered by the philosopher in *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1 finds a location in the *Commedia*. Aristotle’s example of a man being involuntarily “carried somewhere by a wind” becomes the infernal windstorm that batters Francesca and the other lustful in the fifth canto of *Inferno*, while the example of a man being involuntarily carried off “by men

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7. VANNI ROVIGHI 1971, 77 notes that these verses are a verbatim translation of the definition of violence from the *Ethics*: “Qui Dante espone la dottrina del volontario e l’involontario del terzo libro dell’*Ethica Nicomachea*, da cui riprende quasi ad verbum la definizione del violento. Dice infatti la traduzione medievale: ‘Violentum est cuius principium extra, tale existens in quo nihil confert (conferisce) operans vel patiens (pate)’ (*Ethic.* III, cap. 1)”; so too CHIAVACCI LEONARDI 1997, 116 *ad loc.*: “Nella soluzione di questo dubbio Dante si rifà ai concetti definiti nell’*Etica Nicomachea*, al cap. III, da cui i vv. 73–4 sono tradotti alla lettera, con gli stessi termini: l’atto violento, dice infatti Aristotele, è quello ‘in quo nihil confert operans vel patiens’ (‘nel quale colui che agisce e colui che subisce non sono in nessun modo concordi’), termini ripresi e spiegati da Tommaso nel commento all’*Ethica* e in *S.T.* Ia IIae, q. 6 aa. 4–6”. Passages from Dante’s *Commedia* are cited from PETROCCHI 1966–1967. For the translation of the *Commedia*’s longer passages I cite MANDELBAUM 1980–1982. Occasionally I alter his translation to highlight the literal meaning.

who had him in their power” resonates in the story of violence narrated by Piccarda Donati in *Paradiso* 3 and analyzed using Aristotle in *Paradiso* 4. These Aristotelian examples are key signposts with respect to the presence of the philosopher’s analysis of voluntary and involuntary action within the *Commedia*.

Let us begin with Aristotle’s first example of involuntary action, in which the moving principle that is outside and that compels without any contribution from the person who is acted upon is meteorological: a wind. The intertextual presence of the wind from *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1 in *Inferno* 5 reinforces Dante’s definition of carnal sinners, labeled those who “subjugate reason to desire” (“che la ragion sommettono al talento” [*Inf.* 5.39]): this definition of lustful behavior engages directly with the concepts of voluntary and involuntary action, and also with the ideology of courtly love that features so prominently in Francesca’s discourse on love as a compulsive force — a force that compels humans to set aside their reason and to submit to passion. Dante debunks the ideology of courtly love as a system of thought by indirection in *Inferno* 5, given that its proponent is a carnal sinner. He returns to this error in *Purgatorio* 18, where he clarifies that desire is not compulsory (a point emphasized by Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1 and, following Aristotle, by Aquinas). Love, he tells us, is the inclination of the soul toward the internalized image of an object of desire; because humans possess free will, we have the ability to refuse our consent to such objects, when they appear at our “threshold of assent”: “innata v’è la virtù che consiglia, / e de l’assenso de’ tener la soglia” (there is in you, inborn, the power that counsels, keeper of the threshold of your assent [*Purg.* 18.62–63]).<sup>8</sup>

There are, as Dante well knew, no literary materials that are more suited to raising the issue of love as a compulsive force, and thus to foregrounding the ethical issues of *Inferno* 5, than the courtly lyric. As a young poet, Dante was continuously exposed to the idea of love as compulsory, for the idea was a staple of the lyric tradition. We can see the imprint that this idea leaves on him at the beginning of his lyric career, in the sonnet *Savere e cortesia* that Dante Alighieri addresses to Dante da Maiano. Writing the sonnet about a decade before the *Vita Nuova*, in the early 1280s, Alighieri

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8. Dante here treats consent as entirely internal, as a function of the will, rather than in law. On the importance of verbal expression with respect to consent in the law, see DELMOLINO. Based on this standard, it is evident that Dante treats Piccarda’s and Costanza’s behavior in *Paradiso* 4 as a matter of will and not of law.

faces the topic of compulsion in love and embraces a deterministic position that accords with the ideology of courtly love. He declares that there is no force that can impede love, “for nothing has the power to take him on”: “ché nulla cosa gli è incontro possente” (*Savere e cortesia*, v. 13).<sup>9</sup> In this context consent is neither given nor required. Translated into the language of the *Ethics*, which the young poet had not yet encountered, to state that love is a force that cannot be impeded means that love — like Aristotle’s wind in *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1 — is an external force that produces involuntary action.

Moving to the final phase of Dante’s lyric production, we find more instances of a deterministic conception of love as compulsive force. One example will suffice: the post-exile sonnet *Io sono stato con Amore insieme*, the sonnet that accompanies Dante’s third Epistle (circa 1303–1306). In *Io sono stato* Dante declares that, in Love’s presence, free will has never been free: “Però nel cerchio della sua palestra / libero albitrio già mai non fu franco” (Thus within his arena’s bounds, free will was never free [*Io sono stato*, vv. 9–10]).<sup>10</sup> This is an exceptionally strong declaration: in Love’s presence, Dante states, free will is not free. In effect, then, in Love’s presence, there is no free will. We note how the personification of Love, a rhetorical move that is so prevalent in the love lyric of the period as to become effectively invisible, results in the rhetorical creation of an “agent” who is not the poem’s “I”, thus further muddying the clarity of the moral issues involved.

Of even greater interest to us than the sonnet *Io sono stato* is Dante’s third Epistle, to which he bound the sonnet. The letter includes an explicit reference to the accompanying poem, “sermo caliopeus inferius” (poetical discourse attached below [Epistle 3.4; in BAGLIO 2016]). Here we see that Dante does not shy away from formulating in philosophical terms the problem of involuntary action that occurs in an erotic context. He formulates the issue as a *quaestio* about the mutability of the soul with respect to passion: “utrum de passione in passionem possit anima transformari” (whether the soul can move from passion to passion [Epistle 3.2]).<sup>11</sup> He then proceeds to treat the issue not only in generically philosophical terms,

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9. The text is from DE ROBERTIS 2005. The translation is Richard Lansing’s, from BAROLINI 2014. For a discussion of compulsion in *Savere e cortesia*, see BAROLINI 2014, 55–57.

10. For the text, see DE ROBERTIS 2005. The translation is from FOSTER and BOYDE 1967.

11. BAGLIO 2016, 83 translates the passage: “sul problema se l’anima possa trasformarsi passando da una passione a un’altra passione”, and glosses: “il

but in specifically Aristotelian ones. However, the text that Dante cites here is not *Nicomachean Ethics* but the treatise on natural philosophy, *De Generatione et Corruptione: On Generation and Corruption*, also known as *On Coming to Be and Passing Away*. An anomalous choice for a discussion of love, this text offers Dante a way to inscribe mutability in love into the existential reality of mutability in life, into the coming to be and passing away that governs all earthly experience, rather than into a moral discussion of constancy versus errancy.<sup>12</sup>

Supported by Aristotle's *De Generatione et Corruptione*, Dante is able to respond in an affirmative manner to the question he has posed: yes, the soul can "be transformed", it can change, it can move from one passion to another. Just as all things that are born pass away and die, and "the corruption of one thing is the begetting of another", so a passion for one object is born and then dies, yielding to a new passion for a different object: "amorem huius posse torpescere atque denique interire, nec non huius, quod corruptio unius generatio sit alterius, in anima reformari" (love for one object may languish and finally die away, and — inasmuch as the corruption of one thing is the begetting of another — love for a second may take shape in the soul [Epistle 3.4; trans. TOYNBEE 1966]).<sup>13</sup>

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termine è utilizzato secondo la dottrina aristotelica a indicare una qualità in grado di produrre alterazione".

12. For the importance of the moral discussion that Dante is here reframing, see BAROLINI 2021, "Errancy: A Brief History of Dante's *Ferm voler*". For Dante's use of *De Generatione et Corruptione* to achieve a "scientific" and non-judgmental approach toward inconstancy in the third Epistle, in comparison to *Convivio* 2.8, and for a framing of Dante's ideological slippages in a non-linear taxonomy that categorizes texts as more "scientific" and philosophical (e.g. Epistle 3) versus more judgmental and moralistic (e.g. *Convivio*), see BAROLINI 2022a, "Dante and Cecco d'Ascoli on Love and Compulsion: The Epistle to Cino, *Io sono stato*, the Third Heaven", 243–65: "*Convivio* 2.8 is calibrated very differently from *Epistola* 3, with respect to the degree of its ideological commitment to Aristotle's natural philosophy. In the Epistle to Cino, as in *Io sono stato*, there is no defensive shading of the citation of *De Generatione et Corruptione*" (253).
13. Baglio cites the following passage from the *De Generatione et Corruptione* as Dante's source for the above: "quocirca propter huius corruptionem alterius esse generationem et huius generationem alterius esse corruptionem inquietam necesse est esse transmutationem" (Is it, then, because the corruption of one thing is the generation of another and the generation of one thing is the corruption of another, that the change is necessarily unceasing? [De Gen. 1.3.318a24–25]).

By discussing the possibility of yielding to a new love not in love poetry but in the more serious medium of a Latin prose epistle, and by citing Aristotle as a relevant authority, Dante explicitly confers philosophical dignity on the question of compulsion in love and indicates that it cannot be separated from the larger question of involuntary and voluntary action. Later, in *Inferno* 5, he demolishes the cultural and ideological assumptions that sequester the omnipotent Love of medieval lyric production, a context in which the idea of compulsion in love is so commonplace as to seem almost banal, from the broader philosophical investigation of involuntary action, where the idea of compulsion — lack of consent — is never banal. It is worth noting that the contemporary philosopher Cecco d'Ascoli (1257–1327) was not averse to attacking Dante's love poetry on philosophical grounds, condemning what he considered its deterministic views. Cecco d'Ascoli, who also accuses Dante of harboring deterministic views in the *Commedia*, does not erect a barrier between love poetry and the deterministic positions that are implicit in it, as instead our critical tradition has done.<sup>14</sup>

For example, in his philosophical work *Acerba*, Cecco d'Ascoli cites with disdain the fatalism of the concluding verses of *Io sono stato*, the sonnet that Dante attaches to his third Epistle.<sup>15</sup> These are the verses in which Dante affirms the inevitability of a new passion, referred to as the “new

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14. “In his long philosophical poem, *Acerba*, Cecco indicts Dante for deterministic belief and treats determinism in the erotic sphere as no less pernicious than determinism in the social sphere. By disagreeing with the philosophical positions expressed by Dante in vernacular poetry, Cecco dignifies Dante's lyrics as vehicles of philosophical positions. He shows that Dante's love poetry is not out of bounds for philosophical dispute” (BAROLINI 2022a, 243).

15. In *Acerba* 3.1.1977–82 Cecco d'Ascoli deliberately echoes verses 12–14 of Dante's *Io sono stato* and the sonnet's imagery of Love pricking the lover's flank with new spurs, “novi speroni” (ed. ALBERTAZZI 2016):

“I sono con Amore stato in seme”:  
 qui puose Danti co' novi speroni  
 sentir può al fianco con la nuova speme.  
 Contra tal detto io dico quel ch'io sento,  
 formando filosofiche ragioni;  
 se Dante poi le solve, io son contento.

“I sono con Amore stato in seme”: Here Dante affirms that one can feel new spurs that prick one's flank with new hope. Against such a statement I say what I think, making philosophical arguments. If Dante can then solve them, I will be content. (my translation)



spurs” (“nuovi spron”) of Love: “Ben può co· nuovi spron punger lo fianco; / e qual che sia ’l piacer ch’ora n’adestra, / seguitar si convien, se l’altro è stanco” (Love can indeed prick the flank with new spurs; and whatever the attraction may be that is now leading us, follow we must, if the other is outworn [*Io sono stato*, 12–14]).<sup>16</sup> Here the language of *Io sono stato* is directly tied to the language of Epistle 3: “se l’altro è stanco” in the last verse of the sonnet becomes *torpescere* in the Epistle. The third Epistle’s explanation that a passion may “languish [*torpescere*] and finally die away” so that “a second may take shape in the soul” is crafted in the language of Aristotle’s *De Generatione et Corruptione*: “quod corruptio unius generatio sit alterius” — “inasmuch as the corruption of one thing is the begetting of another”. Aristotle on coming to be and passing away is thus intertwined, in the final tercet of Dante’s sonnet *Io sono stato*, with the old lyric *topos* of Love as the rider of the human steed, as an external force that compels the lover to involuntary action, spurring the lover/horse to follow a new passion, if the old one is worn out: “se l’altro è stanco” (*Io sono stato*, 14).

Against this background of love and compulsion, of eros and determinism, let us now return to *Inferno* 5, where Dante, in order to reject the idea of love as an irresistible force, features a sinner who claims, in the language of courtly love, that love is a force that cannot be resisted: “Amor, ch’al cor gentil ratto s’apprende [. . .] Amor, ch’a nullo amato amar perdona” (Love, that can quickly seize the gentle heart [. . .] Love, that releases no beloved from loving [*Inf.* 5.100, 103]). As we saw previously, the wind of *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1 is an example of a force that is compulsory, defined as follows: “that is forced of which the moving principle is outside, being a principle in which nothing is contributed by the person who acts — or, rather, is acted upon” (*EN* 1110a2–4). Dante’s wind, the wind of *Inferno* 5, serves to conjure but also to profoundly modify the wind of *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1. Aristotle’s wind is a meteorological wind: it is a real, material, external force against which we humans do not have the physical capacity to resist. It is an external force of which we can literally and accurately say, in the above-cited words of Dante Alighieri to Dante da Maiano, that nothing is powerful against it: “nulla cosa gli è incontro possente” (*Savere e cortesia*, 13). With respect to such a wind, irresistible force is indeed possible, and consent is clearly not an issue. What is not true about desire, whose force is not irresistible and to which the will must consent, as *Purgatorio* 18 declares, is instead incontrovertibly true with respect to the wind of *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1.

16. DE ROBERTIS 2005, 500 glosses: “co· nuovi spron: ossia per un nuovo oggetto”.

So, what does Dante achieve by evoking Aristotle's wind in *Inferno* 5? He engages a rigorous Aristotelian analysis of voluntary and involuntary action and, building on that analysis, he indicates that the carnal sinners of the circle of lust justified their carnal passions *by conceiving them as involuntary actions*.

Dante's lustful classify love, incorrectly, as a compulsive force, a force that they cannot control and over which they have no dominion. As Dante had already noted in his earlier moral canzone *Doglia mi reca*, such people do not know what love is. They misclassify love and even misname it, for they dignify bestial appetite with the name of love: "chiamando amore appetito di fera" (calling bestial appetite [by the name] love [*Doglia mi reca*, 143]).<sup>17</sup> If we bear in mind that (1) Aristotle's wind is one of the philosopher's two examples of involuntary action, action that is compelled by an external force, and if we consider (2) what it means that Dante defines the carnal sinners as those who (voluntarily) subordinated reason to desire, thus imagining desire as an external force that can compel reason, and if we then add (3) the ways in which Dante builds courtly love and its codification of erotic compulsion into his analysis of lust — if we bear in mind all the above, we can formulate as follows: Dante's analysis of lust features a state of mind wherein voluntary action is conceived of and treated as involuntary action.

In other words, Aristotle's wind of compulsion serves in *Inferno* 5 as a means of signifying the sinners' insistence that their lustful desires were compulsory and led them to involuntary action.

When Aristotle invokes the example of a wind in his discussion of involuntary action, he indicates the existence of real and material external agents that create real and material force and, therefore, real — and not invented — involuntary action. The sinners of Dante's circle of lust instead conceived of their desire *as though it were* an external force, as though (like love in Dante's sonnet to Dante da Maiano) their passions were an overwhelming external force that nothing is powerful enough to resist. Consequently, according to the logic of the *contrappasso*, the torment assigned to them is a raging wind that evokes the wind of Aristotle's *Nicomachean*

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17. For a discussion of *Doglia mi reca* in this context, see BAROLINI [1998] 2006a, 91–97), which considers Dante's engagement with erotic compulsion in his lyric poetry. "Errancy" (BAROLINI 2021) looks systematically across Dante's *oeuvre*, showing the non-linear trajectory whereby, even after the moral correction of *Doglia mi reca*, *Epistola* 4 claims that "terrifying and imperious love held me" and "fettered my free will" (*Epistle* 4.2, 4; trans. TOYNBEE 1966).

*Ethics* 3.1 but that is categorically not the philosopher's meteorological and material wind. The lexicon of *Inferno* 5 includes meteorological words — “tempesta” (29), “venti” (30) and “bufera” (30) — but the adjective that modifies “bufera” is “infernal”. The adjective “infernal” signals that Dante's *bufera* is not meteorological or material, but metaphysical and divine, governed by the eschatological laws of providence as Dante imagines them:

Io venni in loco d'ogne luce muto,  
che mugghia come fa mar per **tempesta**,  
se da contrari **venti** è combattuto.  
La **bufera** infernal, che mai non resta,  
mena li spirti con la sua rapina:  
voltando e percotendo li molesta.  
(*Inf.* 5.28–33 [my emphasis])

I reached a place where every light is muted,  
which bellows like the sea beneath a tempest,  
when it is battered by opposing winds.  
The hellish hurricane, which never rests,  
drives on the spirits with its violence:  
wheeling and pounding, it harasses them.

Through his deployment of an “infernal windstorm”, Dante accomplishes an analysis of human psychology in two steps. First, he considers how it happens that we humans are given to imagining forces external to ourselves, forces to which we assign the responsibility for our internal moral weaknesses, and how we then work to codify these invented external forces into actual laws that can compel our action (as in the codification of the so-called laws of courtly love). Second, Dante transfers this ethical analysis to the afterworld, in order to forge the post-mortem status of those souls who consented to allow a purely internal force, one that they imagined and projected as an external force, to dominate their reason.

As we know without the help of Aristotle, but can now profitably map onto Aristotle, the divine windstorm of *Inferno* 5 is the external representation of the erotic passions that a given individual, in mortal life, did not seek to dominate with reason. Translating this set of conditions into Aristotelian terms, we can say that the infernal windstorm is the manifestation of an internal force that Dante's lustful preferred — because of moral weakness — to define as an external force. That which during the lives of the carnal sinners was not a true external principle has become

a true external principle in death: the hurricane of their desire, which in life was internal and had no real existence as an external force, and consequently no real power to compel a creature endowed with free will, has become the eschatological hurricane that powerfully flings about the carnal sinners for all eternity after death.

Dante has knowingly transposed Aristotle's wind.<sup>18</sup> He has moved it from a context in *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1 in which it is the explicit example of an external agent that cannot be resisted to a context in which the carnal sinners justified their submission to a not-at-all external agent — their desire — by classifying that desire as an external agent. Now the non-external agent that these sinners self-indulgently classified as an external agent is fashioned by divine justice into the specifically designed eschatological torment (“così fatto tormento”) of the lustful: “Intesi ch’a così fatto tormento / enno dannati i peccator carnali, / che la ragion sommettono al talento” (I learned that those who undergo this torment / are damned because they sinned within the flesh, / subjecting reason to the rule of lust [*Inf.* 5.37–39]).

In *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1, Aristotle lays out the very analysis that Dante will use in his consideration of carnal sinners. While these passages do not figure in scholarship on *Inferno* 5, they certainly inform Aquinas' discussion of whether concupiscence causes involuntariness (see *ST* 1a2ae.6.7 and note 4 above). For Aristotle effectively foresees the possibility of a person who, transported by intemperate passion, then declares that the resulting action was involuntary. In a remarkably trenchant analysis, the philosopher observes that we are never compelled by those things that give us pleasure. He explains that it is not possible to affirm that pleasing things are capable of forcing us, as though they were external forces, because if that were the case everything we do would be forced: “But if someone were to say that pleasant and noble objects have a forcing power, compelling us from without, all acts would be for him forced; for it is for these objects that all men do everything they do” (*EN* 3.1.1110b9–11). Aristotle continues by observing that it is absurd to make external circumstances responsible for that which we do with pleasure: “And those who act by force and unwillingly act with pain, but those who do acts for their pleasantness or

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18. Dante appropriates Aristotle's wind of compulsion again, in *Inferno* 9's magnificent simile comparing the angelic messenger to a mighty wind (*Inf.* 9.64–72). The angel-wind scatters the recalcitrant devils and opens the gate of Dis. While this simile of an Aristotelian wind that cannot be resisted is eschatological and Christian, it is otherwise not transposed with respect to *NE* 3.1, for the angel is precisely an external force that compels genuinely involuntary action.

nobility do them with pleasure; it is absurd to make external circumstances responsible, and not oneself, as being easily caught by such attractions, and to make oneself responsible for noble acts but the pleasant objects responsible for base acts" (EN 3.1.1110b13–15).

Toward the end of chapter 1 of Book 3, Aristotle lays out what will become the core of Dante's analysis in *Inferno* 5 (and of Aquinas' discussion of concupiscence in *ST* 1a2ae.6.7) when he observes that "acts done by reason of anger or appetite are not rightly called involuntary" (EN 3.1.1111a24–25). And, in concluding chapter 1, Aristotle makes that point again, even more bracingly. He stipulates that irrational passions are as human as reasonable actions and cannot on that basis be disavowed as involuntary: "the irrational passions are thought not less human than reason is, and therefore also the actions which proceed from anger or appetite are the man's actions. It would be odd, then, to treat them as involuntary" (EN 3.1.1111b1–3). With these assertions the philosopher nullifies everything that will be, in the distant future, the ideological foundation of courtly love. Aristotle's wind of *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1 dismantles Love's arena, where free will was never free: "Però nel cerchio della sua palestra / libero albitrio già mai non fu franco" (*Io sono stato*, 9–10). And Dante, sustained by a rigorous ethical analysis of voluntary and involuntary action from pagan antiquity, begins the poetic journey of the *Commedia* "come persona franca" — as a free person (*Inf.* 2.132).



We turn now to the second of Aristotle's two examples of involuntary action in *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1, that of a person who is "carried somewhere by men who had him in their power". So doing, we turn from Francesca da Rimini to Piccarda Donati. Although commentaries on *Paradiso* 3–4 are well versed in the presence of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1 in canto 4, Patrick Boyde in *Perception and Passion in Dante's "Comedy"* is the only commentator on the episode of Piccarda Donati who, to my knowledge, specifically notes a connection between her story of forced abduction from a convent and Aristotle's second example of involuntary action. Boyde writes that the example of being carried somewhere by powerful men "could hardly be more pertinent" to Piccarda's story, and he is right.<sup>19</sup>

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19. BOYDE 1993, 198 introduces Piccarda by noting: "Incredibly enough, the challenge posed to Christian justice by the misfortunes of an obscure Florentine nun will be met and turned aside with the aid of concepts, arguments,

Building on Boyde's insight, I ask why Dante invokes Aristotle's second example of involuntary — blame-free — action, only to move subsequently to an analysis of Piccarda and Costanza that considers them blameworthy.

In *Paradiso* 3 the pilgrim learns from Piccarda Donati that the lowest rung of paradise, the heaven of the moon, is the celestial home of those who on earth were neglectful of their vows. This information triggers the paradoxical revelation that all the blessed are together in the empyrean and yet at the same time are hierarchically distributed, according to their differential experience of beatitude: “per sentir più e men l'eterno spiro” (some feel the eternal spirit more, some less [*Par.* 4.36]).<sup>20</sup> Dante's embrace of paradox throughout *Paradiso* results in a narrative texture that willfully sharpens the two horns of a given dilemma to their maximum and then frequently uses *solutio distinctiva* to import a “resolution”, as he does in the heaven of the moon and repeatedly thereafter.<sup>21</sup> Moving from the plot point whereby the lowest heaven in his paradise is used to designate souls who in life displayed some degree of failure of the will, Dante unleashes a sustained meditation on the ethics of voluntary and involuntary action. This meditation culminates in a discussion of the commutability of religious vows in *Paradiso* 5, a discussion that includes what I will call a Dantean analysis of the ethics of consent.<sup>22</sup> The issue of the commutability of vows is founded in the belief that free will once freely renounced cannot be revoked. As Boyde aptly comments with respect to the vows discussed in *Paradiso* 5, “there is no ‘admixture of compulsion’” in the making of a

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distinctions and examples which all derive from the analysis of voluntary and involuntary actions given by Aristotle”. Boyde does not note the link between *Inferno* 5 and Aristotle's other example of involuntary action.

20. BAROLINI 1992, 166–93; on *Paradiso* 3–4, see 182–89.

21. On this technique in general, and on the contradiction first created and then resolved between Piccarda and Beatrice in *Paradiso* 4 in particular, see BAROLINI [2018] 2022a, “Dante Squares the Circle: Textual and Philosophical Affinities of *Monarchia* and *Paradiso* (*Solutio Distinctiva* in *Mon.* 3.4.17 and *Par.* 4.94–114)”, 137–61: “Dante-narrator has carefully crafted an impasse between Beatrice and Piccarda. As the narrative denouement of the discussion on will of *Paradiso* 3–4, he creates a logical contradiction that pits the two Florentine ladies against each other. We can have no doubt regarding the structural importance of this impasse within the narrative arc of *Paradiso* 4, for Beatrice presents it in verses 91 to 93 as an obstacle that the pilgrim cannot resolve on his own” (153). Citations are from BAROLINI 2022a.

22. Sustained discussion of the ethics of consent as treated in *Paradiso* 5 must await a further treatment of this topic.

religious vow: “Making a vow is not an *operatio mixta*. Renunciation of freedom is a free act of the will” (1993, 204).

Boyde’s point that “there is no ‘admixture of compulsion’” in a freely given vow is also an accurate reminder that Aristotle is still present in *Paradiso* 5, where the intensely religious and biblical framing of the discussion of religious vows may make the *materia* seem quite distant from the Aristotelian treatment of voluntary and involuntary action in *Paradiso* 4. But such is not the case. As an investigation of the ethics of consent, the *materia* of *Paradiso* 5 is the legitimate continuation of the Aristotelian discussion of voluntary and involuntary action in *Paradiso* 4, which Dante concludes by bringing in the crucial issue of consent: “Voglia assoluta non consente al danno; / ma consentevi in tanto in quanto teme” (Absolute will does not consent to wrong; / but it consents to it in as much as it fears [Par. 4.109–10]).<sup>23</sup> The back-to-back occurrences of *consentire* in the above two verses of *Paradiso* 4 look forward to the double use of *consentire* in one verse of *Paradiso* 5, where the contractual nature of a vow is emphatically underlined by the repeated verb: “l’alto valor del voto, s’è sì fatto / che Dio consenta quando tu consenti” (the high worth of a vow, if it is so done that God consents when you consent [Par. 5.27]). *Consentire* is not a common verb in the *Commedia* or in Dante’s writing: of the eight occurrences of the verb *consentire* in the *Commedia*, four appear in *Paradiso* 4 and 5.<sup>24</sup>

Picking up from Boyde’s “Making a vow is not an *operatio mixta*” cited above, we come now to the category of mixed actions (*operatio mixta*) as

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23. Dante’s treatment of consent in *Paradiso* 4 as entirely internal rather than expressed verbally and externally, makes it a function of the will, not of law, as I observed in note 8 above. Here Dante elaborates his internal analysis, adding the concepts of absolute and conditioned will. The abductions of Piccarda and Costanza, ripe for treatment as a legal matter, do not provoke that response from Dante, who in *Paradiso* 4 does not take the opportunity to frame the issue of consent legally.

24. *Consentire* appears in the sonnet *Gentil pensiero*, located in Dante’s *Vita Nuova* 38 (Barbi’s 1907 numbering), where it is the fourth of the five sonnets in the *donna gentile* sequence. In what is plausibly Dante’s first use of *consentire*, the young poet narrates an experience of compulsion in love; a noble thought comes to him and “talks of love with such great tenderness / that it compels the heart to yield consent”: “ragiona d’amor sì dolcemente, / che face consentir lo core in lui” (*Gentil pensiero*, vv. 3–4; the translation is by Richard Lansing, from BAROLINI 2014). The other early use of *consentire* belongs to *Per quella via*, a sonnet that also describes conflict between two loves and that is contemporary with the *Vita Nuova*.

discussed in *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1. This is the category to which Dante, somewhat surprisingly, assigns the behavior of Piccarda and Costanza. To understand mixed action and how Dante uses the category of mixed action in *Paradiso* 4, let us return to the diegesis of the canti of the heaven of the moon. In *Paradiso* 3 Piccarda recounts the violence inflicted on her by men who kidnapped her from the cloister in order to use her as a pawn in dynastic politics. In a model instance of Dante sharpening the horns of his manufactured dilemma (a sharpening to which the gender of the protagonists lends an additional edge), the pilgrim subsequently wonders, in *Paradiso* 4, why the violence done to Piccarda does not excuse her from the charge of having neglected her vows. Why, he asks, should there be any decrease in merit for one whose good will persists but who is thwarted by the violence of others: “Se ’l buon voler dura, / la violenza altrui per qual ragione / di meritar mi scema la misura?” (If my will to good persists, / why should the violence of others cause / the measure of my merit to be less? [*Par.* 4.19–21]). Why indeed? The short answer is that the violence done to Piccarda decreases her merit because Dante has classified her behavior not as an example of involuntary action, but rather as an example of mixed action.

In Beatrice’s reply to the pilgrim’s query, Piccarda’s actions are characterized according to the definition of Aristotle’s category of mixed actions, so called because they are a mixture of involuntary and voluntary. The key point for us is this: although carried out under the pressure of threats and violence, mixed actions are ultimately classified as “more like voluntary actions”, because they are chosen to avoid greater evils. Here is Aristotle’s explanation:

But with regard to the things that are done from fear of greater evils or for some noble object (e.g., if a tyrant were to order one to do something base, having one’s parents and children in his power, and if one did the action they were to be saved, but otherwise would be put to death), it may be debated whether such actions are involuntary or voluntary. Something of the sort happens also with regard to the throwing of goods overboard in a storm; for in the abstract no one throws goods away voluntarily, but on condition of its securing the safety of himself and his crew any sensible man does so. Such actions, then, are mixed, but are more like voluntary actions, for they are worthy of choice at the time when they are done, and the end of an action is relative to the occasion.

(*EN* 3.1.1110a4–14)



The complexity of the issue of mixed actions, situated between voluntary and involuntary but “more like voluntary”, is attested by commentaries on the *Ethics*, which tend to intervene with a gloss, and by interest in Aristotle’s examples of mixed action: the example of a tyrant using loved ones as leverage to extort base action and the example of throwing goods overboard in a storm in order to save the ship’s crew are very popular in discussions of this chapter.<sup>25</sup> Dante, interestingly, does not engage with Aristotle’s well-known examples of mixed action, but instead draws on Aristotle’s less cited examples of involuntary action.

Dante unfolds his classification of Piccarda’s and Costanza’s actions as mixed, and hence more akin to voluntary, in increments as *Paradiso* 4 proceeds, clarifying as he goes. He begins with the Aristotelian definition of violence and its negative implications for the conduct of Piccarda and Costanza in verses 73–75, and then details and criticizes their conduct in verses 82–87; I will return to both these passages. Later, in verses 100–02, Dante engages the Aristotelian doctrine of mixed action quite explicitly, explaining that many times people have, against their desire, done what they should not have done, and that they did so in order to “flee harm”, that is to avoid a worse outcome: “Molte fiato già, frate, addivenne / che, per fuggir periglio, contra grato / si fé di quel che far non si convenne” (Before this — brother — it has often happened / that, to flee menace, men unwillingly / did what should not be done [*Par.* 4.100–02]). Finally, as a way of introducing the scholastic distinction between absolute and conditioned will, Dante comes to the mixing of the will to do right with the pressure to do wrong. When force and will are mixed, there is a voluntary component despite the existence of force and as a result the offense cannot be excused: “la forza al voler si mischia, e fanno / sì che scusar non si posson l’offense” (force is mixed to will, so that the offenses cannot be excused [*Par.* 4.107–08]). These verses are followed by a further emphasis on the voluntary status of mixed action, and thus by a further sharpening of the dialectical dilemma that has been manufactured, in the explanation that in the case of mixed action the conditioned will consents, but not the absolute will: “Voglia assoluta non consente al danno; / ma consentevi in tanto in quanto teme, / se si ritrae, cadere in più affanno” (Absolute will does not concur

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25. See Ross 2009, 218: Brown comments: “Aristotle rightly insists on his initial, narrow definition of forced actions. Actions that are thought of as forced or compelled, but which really are chosen to avoid a worse alternative, must be considered in their actual circumstances, hence they are voluntary”.

in wrong; / but the contingent will, through fear that its / resistance might bring greater harm, consents [Par. 4.108–10]).

Despite the explicit citations of Aristotle, always noted by commentaries, there are great divergences between *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1 and *Paradiso* 4, not noted but also important. The presentation of historical characters in *Paradiso* 4, of real people like Piccarda Donati and Empress Costanza, is in itself a first clear indicator of what will be significant Dantean aberrations with respect to *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1. The inclusion of historical characters who possess real lives, lives whose parameters are known to the poet and — in the case of the Empress — also somewhat to his readers, dictates a narrative that is more detailed than the philosopher's. Aristotle offers no historical characters who, as per the philosopher's stated introductory reason for investigating voluntary and involuntary action, were either to be praised, blamed, pardoned, or pitied.<sup>26</sup>

The only human example that Aristotle discusses at length in this chapter is that of mythological Alcmaeon:<sup>27</sup> the negative example of a character who was not able to resist a perceived constraint and who therefore acted when it would have been better not to act. Discussing actions that should remain involuntary at all costs, actions that “we cannot be compelled to do, but ought rather to face death after the most fearful sufferings” (*EN* 3.1.1110a26–27), Aristotle writes of Alcmaeon that “the things that ‘compelled’ Euripides’ Alcmaeon to slay his mother seem absurd” (*EN* 3.1.1110a29). Dante reprises the example of Alcmaeon in *Paradiso* 4, where he inserts him following the claim that, to avoid wrong choices, worse ones are sometimes made: “come Almeone, che, di ciò pregato / dal padre suo, la propria madre spense, / per non perder pietà si fé spietato” (so did Alcmaeon, / to meet the wishes of his father, kill his mother — / not to fail in filial piety, he acted impiously [Par. 4.103–5]).<sup>28</sup> *Paradiso* 5

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26. “Since virtue is concerned with passions and actions, and on voluntary ones praise and blame are bestowed, on those that are involuntary pardon, and sometimes also pity, to distinguish the voluntary and the involuntary is presumably necessary for those who are studying the nature of virtue” (*EN* 3.1.1109b30–35).

27. Later in chapter 1 there is also a glancing reference to mythological Merope, an example of ignorance: “Again, one might think one’s son was an enemy, as Merope did” (*EN* 3.1.1111a.13).

28. Alcmaeon is mentioned by Dante also in *Purgatorio* 12.49–51, where Alcmaeon’s mother, Eriphyle, is among the examples of pride; see PERTILE 1995. Interestingly, Eriphyle is not named, while Alcmaeon is, giving me the impression that even

boasts two more examples of men who carry out perverse vows calqued on the behavior of Aristotle's Alcmaeon: the Hebrew judge Jephthah and the pagan Agamemnon (*Par.* 5.64–72). Dante's analysis of the ethics of consent with respect to the commutability of religious vows, an analysis whose explicit frames of reference are biblical and theological, thus factors in moral issues that derive from Aristotle.

The shift to the biblical and theological in *Paradiso* 5 is signaled by the immediate prominence given to the affirmation of free will as God's greatest gift to mankind: "Lo maggior don che Dio per sua larghezza / fesse creando [. . .] / fu de la volontà la libertate" (The greatest gift the magnanimity / of God, as He created, gave [. . .] / was the freedom of the will [*Par.* 5.19–20, 22]). This characterization of free will is anticipated, as we shall see, by verse 76 of *Paradiso* 4, "volontà, se non vuol, non s'ammorza" (for will, if it resists, is never spent), a verse that Chiavacci Leonardi (1997, 116) heralds in her commentary as a great hymn to free will: "prorompe qui il grande inno alla libera volontà dell'uomo, centro portante di tutto il mondo morale dantesco e ispiratore di tante tra le sue più alte e commosse pagine di poesia" (here erupts the great hymn to man's free will, the load-bearing center of Dante's whole moral universe and the inspiration of many of his highest and most emotional pages of poetry). We shall return to verse 76 of *Paradiso* 4: it is a verse that does not belong to the Aristotelian analysis in which it is situated, and its impact on that analysis is, I suggest, both destabilizing and illuminating.

Continuing our comparison of *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1 and *Paradiso* 4, another important point of divergence between Aristotle and Dante, which should be given more weight in discussions of *Paradiso* 4, is that Aristotle furnishes no names of persons, historical or mythological, who were able to resist violence absolutely and without qualification. Dante alters the analysis significantly in this regard, giving examples not only of those who make egregious moral errors (Alcmaeon) and those who make lesser moral errors (two nuns who were unable to maintain their vows, Piccarda and Costanza), but also of those who are capable of absolute heroism, in one case of resistance unto death. To Aristotle's analysis, Dante adds two examples of men whom he describes as having absolutely and heroically resisted violence: one is the Christian martyr Saint Lawrence and the other is the Roman youth Gaius Mucius Scaevola, famous for the bravery

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here the poet's interest seems centered on Alcmaeon's unwarranted killing of his mother.

that led him to burn off his own hand.<sup>29</sup> The result is a non-flattering contrast between two male heroes who possessed “volere intero” (whole will [82]) and “salda voglia” (firm will [87]), and two non-heroic females, whose wills were not so whole or so firm:

Se fosse stato lor volere intero,  
 come tenne Lorenzo in su la grada,  
 e fece Muzio a la sua man severo,  
 così l'avria ripinte per la strada  
 ond'eran tratte, come fuoro sciolte;  
 ma così salda voglia è troppo rada.  
 (Par. 4.82–87)

Had their will been as whole as that which held  
 Lawrence fast to the grate and that which made  
 of Mucius one who judged his own hand, then  
 once freed, it would have pushed them back on  
 the road along which they had been dragged;  
 but all too seldom is a will is so intact.

Here Dante's vivid conditional contrary-to-fact evocation of how Piccarda and Costanza should have behaved, “if their will had been whole”, spreads a patina of blame over the two nuns. In the very moment in which they were physically freed from the violence of their persecutors, Dante tells us, they should have immediately resisted, turning back toward the cloister from which they had just been forcibly removed. Dante also stipulates that they could have returned to the cloister: “possendo rifuggir nel santo loco” (being able to flee back to the holy place [Par. 4.81]). But the nuns did not do what they could have done; they did not return to the cloister. Drawing on Aristotle's doctrine of violence as force to which the victim contributes nothing, Dante now explicitly clarifies that the two nuns enable the violence done to them: “Per che, s'ella si piega assai o poco, / segue la forza; e così queste fero / possendo rifuggir nel santo loco” (So that,

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29. GIANNANTONIO 1980, 17 notes: “il riferimento al martire Lorenzo era già nel commento di Tommaso all'*Etica Nicomachea*”. I will add that Aquinas refers to Saint Lawrence à propos Aristotle's example of Alcmaeon, offering the martyr as someone who accepted the cruelest death rather than do what should never be done, thus as a counter-Alcmaeon (see §395). Dante offers a far more elaborate and balanced and complex set of examples.

when will has yielded much or little, / it has abetted force — as these souls did: / they could have fled back to their holy shelter [Par. 4.79–81]).

We need here to briefly pause our analysis to consider the discomfort caused by Dante's use of two female characters to make his point about complicity with violence and weakness of will. I sympathize with Pierson's view that "The doctrine of free will becomes extremely problematic in view of a situation like Piccarda's" (2019, 73). However, discomfort with the gendered components of Dante's pointed dialectic in *Paradiso* 3–4 (not equivocal or confused, as per Pierson's essay, but pointed and deliberate)<sup>30</sup> does not derogate from my stated conviction that his portrayals of Piccarda and Costanza, like his portrayals of Francesca and Pia, were advanced for their time in highlighting the social and legal plight of women and in assigning agency to women; also, perhaps most importantly, Dante acted as the historian of record for abused women otherwise consigned to historical oblivion (BAROLINI 2000 and 2006b). Moreover, Dante's consideration of the issue of the nuns' inconstancy with respect to the execution of their vows must be placed in the context of the *longue durée* of Dante's thinking on constancy versus errancy, a meditation that is grounded in the poet's thinking about himself and his own "amorosa erranza" and that begins with the episode of the *donna gentile* in the *Vita Nuova*. This foundational moment is developed by Dante in complex ways across many texts and features a culminating gender reversal of the ancient *topos* of female inconstancy: the character who is most strongly chastised for fickle and inconstant behavior in the *Commedia* is a man, Dante himself, not a woman.<sup>31</sup>

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30. For the reading that Dante's dialectic in *Paradiso* 3–4 is pointed and deliberate, as it is throughout *Paradiso*, the better to import *solutio distinctiva* as a "resolution", see my discussion in "Dante Squares the Circle: Textual and Philosophical Affinities of *Monarchia* and *Paradiso* (*Solutio Distinctiva* in *Mon.* 3.4.17 and *Par.* 4.94–114)": "The manufactured nature of this new *dubbio* underscores the importance of the issue at stake for Dante. He seeks to dramatize the ways in which committed argument can lead to genuine social crisis, in that one or the other of those debating risks being labeled a liar. He further dramatizes the resolution of such an impasse through the application of a method that can mitigate the crisis, allowing one to be 'mitior' toward one's opponent by not revealing her to be a liar: *solutio distinctiva*" ([2018] 2022a, 153).

31. I refer to Beatrice's reprimands of Dante in *Purgatorio* 30–31. In the same way that Dante breaks down the ideological barriers between love as a compulsive force and the philosophical idea of involuntary action, so he treats constancy in love as a philosophical and ethical issue, as we see in *Epistola* 3 and the

In the conditional contrary-to-fact conjuring of two nuns endowed with absolute will such that, upon being released from their captors, their wills would have immediately pushed them back down the very road on which they had previously been forcibly carried off, Dante has begun his operation of diverging from Aristotle. It is theoretically possible that Dante intends us to see two distinct stages of the nuns' behavior, moving from involuntary action to mixed action. According to such a theory, first is the moment of their involuntary abduction, subsequently followed by the many moments in which they chose not to attempt to return to the cloister. Because their wills are conditioned by fear to stay away, fear that causes them to waver when faced with the dangerous return, the two nuns are now engaging in mixed action. My point is not to deny the possibility of the above scenario, but to note that it is disconcerting to arrive at a discussion of mixed action, in Aristotle's definition "more like voluntary actions", by way of an event, abduction, that is consistent with one of Aristotle's two examples of involuntary action.

Rather than accepting as unproblematic the categorization of the nuns' behavior as examples of mixed action, we should acknowledge that Dante has chosen an example — that of two abducted but blameworthy nuns — that pushes his thinking to the extreme. The moral cost of Dante's decision clearly weighs on readers of *Paradiso* 3, and is visible in the commentary of Chiavacci Leonardi, who reports the challenges of past readers.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, Dante's decision to use victims of abduction to make his case about blameworthy mixed action inevitably casts doubt on the very category of blame-free involuntary action, by suggesting that it will always (at least when the external force is applied by human beings, with whom one can negotiate) devolve into mixed action.

Most of all, Dante's discussion of the behavior of the two nuns is irretrievably non-Aristotelian in tone. In his discussion of forced action Aristotle does not offer examples of historical women who were unable to behave heroically, embroidered with vividly realistic descriptions of what they could have done instead of what they did do. In his discussion of forced action Aristotle does not further sharpen a critique of historical

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*Commedia*. See "Errancy", BAROLINI 2021, for a fuller account of Dante's "amorosa erranza" (the phrase, with the hapax "erranza", is from the *Vita Nuova* sonnet *Tutti li miei penser parlan d'Amore*).

32. See CHIAVACCI LEONARDI 1997, 116, *ad loc.*: "come furono sciolte: non appena furono fisicamente libere dalla violenza. Molti qui si domandano: ma quando e come lo furono? se erano sposate, come potevano lasciare i mariti? e Costanza, una volta vedova, come avrebbe lasciato il figlioletto di tre anni?"

women by also offering counter-examples of historical men who, by contrast, were able to behave heroically. Finally, in his discussion of forced action Aristotle does not include a full-throated proclamation regarding free will, like the one expressed in *Paradiso* 4.76.

To appreciate fully the destabilizing effect of the introduction of free will into Dante's analysis, we will look more closely at the passage in *Paradiso* 4 that begins with the definition of force. As previously noted, Dante's definition of force — *violentum* — is taken word for word from *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1, where the definition is buttressed by the two examples of involuntary action:

Violentum autem est cuius principium extra, tale existens in quo nil confert operans vel paciens; puta si spiritus tulerit alicubi vel homines domini existentes.

(EN 3.1.1110a)

that is forced of which the moving principle is outside, being a principle in which nothing is contributed by the person who acts — or, rather, is acted upon, e.g., if he were to be carried somewhere by a wind, or by men who had him in their power.

In verses 73–74 of *Paradiso* 4 Dante cites this very passage, stating that violence occurs when the one who suffers — the victim in today's language — contributes nothing to the one who uses force: “Se violenza è quando quel che pate / niente conferisce a quel che sforza” (If violence means that the one who suffers / has not abetted force in any way [*Par.* 4.73–74]). As we can see, the Latin sentence from *Nicomachean Ethics* cited above moves very precisely from the definition of violence to the two examples of involuntary action. In sharp contrast, Dante's sentence moves from the definition of violence to the fact of the two nuns' blameworthiness:

Se violenza è quando quel che pate  
niente conferisce a quel che sforza,  
non fuor quest'alme per essa scusate  
(*Par.* 4.73–75)

If violence means that the one who suffers  
has not abetted force in any way,  
then there is no excuse these souls can claim

Immediately following the statement that violence occurs when “the one who suffers / has not abetted force in any way”, in the exact location where the Latin moves to the two examples of involuntary action, Dante veers the other way, stating that Piccarda and Costanza are not to be excused: “non fuor quest’alme per essa scusate” (75). Why? The explanation for verse 75, which affirms the culpability of the two nuns, is verse 76, the textually unexpected and riveting assertion that will cannot be extinguished unless it wills to be extinguished. Verse 76 communicates that Piccarda and Costanza are culpable because human beings possess heroic will, which is capable of absolute resistance. Like a flame that will always rise, no matter how many times violence attempts to push it down, such will cannot be stamped out:

Se violenza è quando quel che pate  
 niente conferisce a quel che sforza,  
 non fuor quest’alme per essa scusate:  
 ché volontà, se non vuol, non s’ammorza,  
 ma fa come natura face in foco,  
 se mille volte violenza il torza.  
 (Par. 4.73–78)

If violence means that the one who suffers  
 has not abetted force in any way,  
 then there is no excuse these souls can claim:  
 for will, if it resists, is never spent,  
 but acts as nature acts when fire ascends,  
 though force — a thousand times — tries to compel.

There is nothing in *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1, the source text for verses 73–74 of the above citation, that is comparable to verse 76, in which Dante states that a will that does not want to be conquered can always prevail.<sup>33</sup> In *Paradiso* 4 Dante has appropriated the definition of violence from *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1 (a definition that he underscores with his lexicon: of the *Commedia*’s five uses of “violenza”, three are in this canto) and recontextualized it in order to promote an absolute will that, he tells

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33. The closest hint of such a statement is Aristotle’s comment on Alcmaeon, where the philosopher tells us that there are actions that “we cannot be compelled to do, but ought rather to face death after the most fearful sufferings” (*EN* 3.1.1110a26–27).



us, is capable of never giving consent: “Voglia assoluta non consente al danno” (Absolute will does not consent to wrong [*Par.* 4.109]). Thus, in Chiavacci Leonardi’s paraphrase of the examples of violence in *Paradiso* 4, the victim always contributes in some degree to the violence done to her, unless the victim dies resisting: “Come si vedrà dagli esempi subito portati, vera vittima della violenza è colui che si lascia uccidere pur di non cedere ad essa” (As we shall see in the examples that immediately follow, the true victim of violence is he who allows himself to be killed rather than yield to it).<sup>34</sup>

In *Paradiso* 4 Dante both appropriates from the master and simultaneously distances himself from him. On the issue of free will Dante takes a heroic stance that is not Aristotle’s. He reaches the strongest affirmation of his non-Aristotelian position in verse 76 — “ché volontà, se non vuol, non s’ammorza” — immediately after conducting what until this point is a fully Aristotelian analysis of violence. Two blessed souls, Piccarda and Costanza, are deserving of their “lesser” status in paradise because they did not resist violence absolutely. One wonders: Is there in fact such a category as authentically involuntary action for Dante? Verse 76 seems to come quite close to disputing the very possibility of a completely external force, at least as deployed by a fellow human being.

Dante presents the two nuns as historical exemplars of human frailty in contrast to heroic constancy. Not content with noting that Piccarda and Costanza did not display absolute will, Dante inserts two examples of absolute will, thus showing us that absolute will exists in humans. At the same time, let us be clear: Dante is also showing us that the assertion of absolute will is not required for salvation. The inability of Piccarda and Costanza to confront violence with absolute will does not preclude their eternal blessedness in paradise. The two women may not have been capable of heroic choices, like Saint Lawrence and Gaius Mucius Scaevola, but neither did they make perverse inhuman choices, like Alcmaeon, Jephthah, and Agamemnon. It may be, and here we come back to the gender issue, that Dante views these women, who are implicitly compared to both the

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34. CHIAVACCI LEONARDI, 1997, 116, *ad loc.* Chiavacci Leonardi’s statement is imprecise with respect to Dante’s two examples: unlike Saint Lawrence, who is martyred at the hands of the prefect of Rome, Gaius Mucius Scaevola was not killed by Lars Porsena. In other words, the two examples of absolute will that are offered by Dante do not have identical outcomes: Saint Lawrence is martyred, Gaius Mucius Scaevola does not die, and so we must nuance Chiavacci Leonardi’s claim that the only true guarantee that an action is involuntary is the death of the victim.

perfect and imperfect sets of men, as the most persuasive rendering of an in-between set, a human set: they are at once fully human, with human frailties, and fully saved.

Dante often uses Aristotle in ways that add nuance and flexibility to his positions. In *Paradiso* 4, instead, his deviations from Aristotle suggest that the Christian doctrine of free will — “the greatest gift that God in his magnanimity made when he created mankind” (*Par.* 5.19–20) — requires him to take a more inflexible stance than that of the *maestro*, one that is summed up in “volontà, se non vuol, non s’ammorza” (*Par.* 4.76). This verse creates a framework for thinking about Dante’s effort to destabilize the Aristotelian analysis, via his importation of non-Aristotelian features.

In her gloss on “volontà, se non vuol, non s’ammorza”, Chiavacci Leonardi cites a passage (previously cited by GIANNANTONIO 1980) from Saint Anselm, *De Libertate Arbitrii*, chapter 5: “No temptation compels one to sin against his will”. In the 2000 Hopkins and Richardson translation the passage reads:

No one deserts this uprightness except by willing to. So if “against one’s will” means “unwillingly,” then no one deserts uprightness against his will. For a man can be bound against his will, because he can be bound when he is unwilling to be bound; a man can be tortured against his will, because he can be tortured when he is unwilling to be tortured; a man can be killed against his will, because he can be killed when he is unwilling to be killed. But a man cannot will against his will, because he cannot will if he is unwilling to will. For everyone-who-wills wills that he will.

(199)

These words, as both Giannantonio and Chiavacci Leonardi note, were written before Aristotle was known in the West. The annotation is on point: “volontà, se non vuol, non s’ammorza” is a line that fits poorly with Aristotle. By assigning blameworthiness to the abducted nuns right after inscribing the Aristotelian definition of violence into his text, and then bursting out with his great proclamation about a will that will always prevail, Dante reveals a fault line between the teachings of the pagan philosopher on voluntary and involuntary action and his ardent Christian convictions regarding free will.

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