

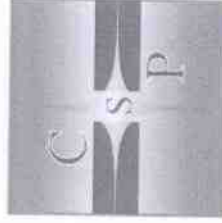
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Cover image: María Arizti studied graphic design and teacher training in Zaragoza. She currently teaches at a primary school and is an amateur publicity material designer.

On the Turn The Ethics of Fiction in Contemporary Narrative in English

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NEW VOCABULARY OF ATTENTION: THE AESTHETICS OF ETHICS IN STYRON'S *SOPHIE'S CHOICE*

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It seems to me it was the greatest pity in the world, when philosophy and fiction got split. They used to be one, right from the days of myth. Then they went and parted, like a nagging married couple [...] so the novel went sloppy, and philosophy went abstract-dry.¹

Philosophy and literature have exhibited unique relationships throughout history. Like a "nagging married couple" they were bound together at times and broke up at others. During the first half of the twentieth century, with the growth of analytic philosophy on the one hand and the rise of formalist-aesthetic schools in literary criticism on the other, the split between philosophy and literature appeared deeper than ever. Yet half a century later, the picture has changed: the search for a better understanding of the human condition within philosophy, and the acknowledgment of literature's role in shaping beliefs and identities, led scholars to realize that philosophy needs literature and literature needs philosophy.

The "turn towards the ethical," or "the turn to the literary within ethics," as Parker calls it,² has contributed greatly to bringing together moral philosophy and literature.³ Literary works present characters, whose

lives, choices and feelings make up their "substance of living."⁴ Reading about other peoples' lives poses classical philosophical questions, such as "what are my obligations to others," "how to handle conflicts," "what is virtue," and "how one should live." The literary text, by its effective design, draws our attention to these core questions, and thus, as Murdoch suggested, enriches and deepens our moral concepts.⁵

Many agree that ethics and literature are inextricably linked. It is arguable, however, whether they are identical. Nussbaum argues that not only does the literary text have an ethical dimension, but that it can also be seen as a text of moral philosophy:

insofar as the goal of moral philosophy is to give us understanding of the human good through a scrutiny of alternative conceptions of the good, this text [James' *The Golden Bowl*] and others like it would then appear to be *important parts* of this philosophy.⁶

However, the "turn to the literary within ethics" stemmed from the very nature of philosophical arguments, which cannot reflect moral life in its broadest sense. As Adamson says, "Philosophy's 'need' of literature hinges on the *differences* between the two modes."⁷ Moreover, referring to literature as a text of moral philosophy creates the false image, described by Snow,⁸ of moral philosophy as preeminent but deficient, and thus of literature as "the hand maiden of philosophy."

Murdoch believed that "we need a new vocabulary of attention,"⁹ suggesting that literature can help us regain moral concepts by immersing us in a new kind of learning and recognition. By realizing the difference between the language of ethics and the language of literature, and following Adamson's concept of the two models of moral attention,¹⁰ I would like to give an account of literature's specific nature as a model of moral exploration.

In the following, therefore, I aim to study the representation of moral problems in literature. My goal is to reveal the nature of literature both as a medium of moral investigation, and as an aesthetic object. My discussion will offer an approach towards the practice of ethical criticism by

⁴ Schwartz, "The Ethics of Reading," 218. See also: "A Humanistic Ethics of Reading," 3-15.

⁵ Murdoch, 49.

⁶ Nussbaum, "Flawed Crystals," 44, Italics added.

⁷ Adamson, 85.

⁸ Snow, 76.

⁹ Murdoch, 49.

¹⁰ Adamson, 92-93.

¹ Lawrence, 117.

² Parker, 14.

³ The turn towards the ethical, or "ethical criticism," has been shaped in the US during the last two decades by the works of Nussbaum, Diamond, Booth, Altieri, Goldberg, Harpham, McGinn, Kriteger, Schwartz among others, often utilizing ideas of Murdoch, Williams, MacIntyre and Rorty.

proposing three rhetorical elements that build the vocabulary of literary texts in their intersection with moral philosophy.

Introduction

Rhetoric and poetics, like ethics and aesthetics, are bound together in every literary work. Modern literary criticism acknowledged the relations between rhetoric and poetics even as it distinguished between them, suggesting that rhetoric is concerned with the symbolic function of inducement and persuasion,¹¹ while poetics is concerned with the neutral function of the symbols, designed to serve aesthetics.¹² Viewing literature as a medium of communication, I follow Fisher's view of rhetoric interpretation as related to the audience response: "Poetic discourse is rhetorical when it advances a lesson or moral."¹³ In many if not in all cases, therefore, poetic and aesthetic devices are in fact rhetorical elements in the construction of the meaning of a text. Specifically, a literary text that presents a moral problem would attempt to draw awareness to certain moral issues. It is unlikely that these texts would not bear any ethical agenda, be it a targeted protest or a blurred call for tolerance. Hence, the question of rhetorical elements in moral stories deals with the power of the aesthetic construction of the text to promote an ethical reading.

In the following, I will present three major rhetorical elements which appear in stories and novels that present moral dilemmas. These elements, *Multiple Narratives*, *Dissonance*, and a *Fatal Act*, operate as key units in the structure of texts, empowering the representation of the subject and absorbing the reader into the inquiry. By reading and analyzing Styron's *Sophie's Choice*, I plan to introduce the rhetorical power of moral inquiries within literature thereby illuminating specific moral theories, and focusing on the text's aesthetic quality.

¹¹ According to Burke's point of view, "rhetoric is a performance enacting identification and division: A rhetorical performance (act) involves someone (agent) using symbolic means (agency) within a context (scene) to achieve some end (purpose)." See Goodwin, 177.

¹² Burke, 196. Burke claims that he is much more interested in examining the Poetics and the Rhetoric, than to draw a strict line between the two, since "the full history of the subject had necessarily kept such distinction forever on the move" (307).

¹³ Fisher, 161.

A. Multiple Narratives

Moral inquiry can be encouraged by multiple narratives, as they allow the co-existence of different view points. A narrative line is a single set of events, built in a linear and causal structure. The minimal narrative is a story that contains a description of a single temporal event. Multiple narratives create an opportunity for the analysis of distinct perspectives. By using a number of parallel or contrasting narratives, building multiple viewpoints, and presenting elements in new relations,¹⁴ the text can present an examination of the events, various possibilities for handling the situation, and different interpretations of its moral position. Multiple narratives not only present different interpretations of the issue, but also construct different ethical verdicts. Current criticism of literature and the law provides clear evidence that narratives contain a manipulative¹⁵ aspect, in that they can present matters from a certain point of view which leads to respective judgments.¹⁶ Since "Every narration visibly represses another narration, the narration it leaves out, an alternative construction of signs," as Nash puts it,¹⁷ the presentation of various narratives enables an in-depth discussion of the moral issue.

Styron's *Sophie's Choice* can serve as a good example for articulating the effect of multiple narratives over the representation of a moral problem. The novel presents an interesting web of narratives, which can exemplify their power in representing moral problems. Analogies, conflicts and variations of life narratives in this novel emphasize points of moral decisions, enabling the reader to confront them.

On one level, *Sophie's Choice* is about Stingo, his attempt to become a writer in 1947, and his meeting with Sophie and her friend Nathan. On the other level, the novel is about Sophie and her life story. Sophie is a Polish girl who ended up in Auschwitz during World War II, and had to make the most terrible choice a human being can make. At the "selection" in Auschwitz she had to choose between her children, Eva and Jan; the one not picked will be murdered by the Nazis. Stingo meets Sophie and her

¹⁴ "Art is capable of theoretic enlightenment in that it presents general elements in new relation" (Zink, 269).

¹⁵ Some would even say coercive. See Harpham, 165.

¹⁶ Brooks claims that "Storytelling is a moral chameleon, capable of promoting the worse as well as the better cause every bit as much as legal sophistry [...]. It is not to be sure, morally neutral, for it always seeks to induce a point of view" (Brooks, 16); See also Almog, 41; Weisberg, 67, 75; and Jackson, 40.

¹⁷ Nash, 211.

friend Nathan in Brooklyn, and finds himself listening to Sophie's confession.

Ross argues that "the novel is itself a narrative born from the seemingly incompatible coupling of Sophie's and Stingo's life-histories."¹⁸ And indeed, Stingo's narrative differs from Sophie's in almost every aspect. The first is located in the United States and the second in Europe; the first tells about a young man who is taking his first steps in life, attempting to get laid and write a novel, while the second tells a story of a mature woman who sees herself at the last stages of her life, after undergoing a terrible experience; the first story has a comic inclination, playful and wicked, while the second is tragic.¹⁹ Yet the combination of these two narratives empowers them, by setting up a direct confrontation on the one hand, and creating analogies between them on the other.

The alternation between the two stories emphasizes the horror by using the concept of "transfer,"²⁰ which creates a sharp contrast between Brooklyn and Auschwitz. Stingo brings his own life into Sophie's confession, when he tries to recall what he was doing on April 1st 1943, the day Sophie arrived in Auschwitz. He realizes that he was gorging himself on bananas, trying to make himself heavy enough for the Marines. Obviously his "plight" looks ironic when contrasted with Sophie's horrors, and the acknowledgement of life outside Auschwitz emphasizes the awfulness of her experience.

Although Stingo and Sophie come from a different background, there are similarities between their stories: both are non-Jews living in a Jewish community, and both suffer from a kind of "collective guilt."²¹ They share the guilt over the genocidal past of their countries: Poland's Anti-Semitism and the American South's tragic history of racism.²² Stingo feels uncomfortable regarding his inherited fortune: His grandfather made the money by selling the slave Artiste, and now it allows Stingo to pursue his writing career. Sophie feels ashamed of her father's Anti-Semitism, and realizes that she herself easily put aside the plight of the Jewish People in order to save her own life.

In addition to the construction of the two main narratives and the relationships between them, there is also Sophie's story which is also neither linear nor singular. Sophie talks about herself in a fragmentary way, narrating episodes from her life and revealing memories and insights. She tells lies and hides major facts. At the beginning of her acquaintance with the narrator, when she talks about her memories, she describes Cracow, her parents and her childhood through rose-tinted glasses. She draws a picture of an intellectual, pacifist and pluralist house. But during the novel she revises this story, eventually presenting her father not only as an authoritarian person who treated his wife and daughter sternly, but also as extremely Anti-Semitic, the author of pamphlets (which she helped to type and distribute) advocating the annihilation of the Jews. She feels grief and guilt about the nature of her relationship with her father. Eventually Sophie recognizes that she hated her father. While in Auschwitz, she has a vision of the execution of her father, and realizes that she and her children are doomed by this very vision.

Another part of her story, which she prefers to repress, is her refusal to help Wanda and the resistance movement during the war, out of fear for her children. Moreover, she had not felt any empathy towards the plight of the Jewish people, thinking that as long as the Jews were the targets, she and her children were safe.²³ And finally she hides, until the end of her confession, the fact that she used to have two children, only then recounting the story of her terrible choice.

Sophie's story contains varied narratives, structured as a continual revision. As Law points out, "the need for continual revision is partly a result of Sophie's reticence about things, and partly of her active duplicity."²⁴ She plays a game: she hides and reveals, tells the event in one way and then revises it and recounts it in a different way.

Clearly Sophie feels terribly guilty about her naive, passive character, and about her egoism: "I was a terrible coward, that I was filthy *collaboratrice*, that I done everything that was bad just to save myself" (455). In revealing her past, she tries to adopt alternative stories whenever she reaches a point of crucial moral decision. To use McGinley's term, Sophie constructs a web of "cover stories"²⁵ as a self-defense mechanism

²³ Although it seems that Sophie feels guilty about her attitude toward Jews, and her clear objection to her father, what she thinks about Jews is not definitive. After her fight with Nathan, she said clearly that she hated Jews, and again changed her story, saying that: "everything I told you about Cracow was a lie. All my childhood, all my life I really hated Jews" (353).

²⁴ Law, 139.

²⁵ McGinley, 20-22.

¹⁸ In Herion-Sarafidis, 104. See also Cologne-Brookes, 156-201.

¹⁹ Tutt, 258-259.

²⁰ Crane, 9-39.

²¹ See Durham, 71.

²² Stingo also makes a parallel between Poland and the American South regarding what he calls "penury and defeat" (247): it is a poverty-ridden, agrarian and feudal society, with religious hegemony and domination over women. All quotations from the novel refer to the following edition: William Styron, *Sophie's Choice*. New York: Random House, 1979.

whenever she fears that her own life story lacks legitimacy. She tends to lie in order to present problematic events in a manner she believes can be accepted by her listeners. The revisions in her story can therefore be described as an unfolding of cover stories, which are peeled away until the bare "truth" is uncovered.

Sophie's Choice creates multiple narratives with a tension between them, which according to Sirlin, "reveals an ability to view the world from many perspectives."²⁶ Not only does the novel introduce two incompatible narratives, Stingo's and Sophie's, but it also presents additional competing narratives within Sophie's deceptive personal confessions. This double dynamic emphasizes the ethical concerns of the novel, thus contributing to its moral depth.

B. Dissonance

Literature does not by its existence alone resolve the moral conflicts of life. It is perhaps more interested in representing conflict than in resolving it.²⁷

Moral problems reflect a collision between practical plans, life choices, types of arguments and incompatible interests. "Dissonance" as an aesthetic category represents a series of conflicts of varying types. It can express, for example, conflicts between representations and expressions of events, various possible solutions and differing conclusions.

The more unsettled and unbreakable the dissonance within a literary work, the greater its effect on the reader. Statman makes a distinction between conflict and dilemma. Unlike conflict, which consists of a collision among several possible courses of action, a dilemma is a state in which a person "is helpless in the face of the need to make a choice."²⁸ A dilemma is an acute kind of conflict, with attendant feelings of impotence and confusion. Literary dissonance operates in an analogous manner, as it can present the conflict to the readers, but also *transfer* the feeling of helplessness to the readers *themselves*.²⁹ A number of different aesthetic means make readers ill-at-ease. These means serve to maintain the two conflicting views and stress the competition, dialogue, and tension between them, without offering a resolution. As in irony, the fantastic, and

²⁶ Sirlin, 94.

²⁷ Siebers, 159.

²⁸ Statman, 14-18.

²⁹ This observation correlates with Currie's terms "primary imagining" and "secondary imagining"—the first is imagining about the story, and the second is putting oneself, in imagination, in the character's position. See Currie, 256.

the grotesque, the effect of dissonance disappears as soon as we choose one point of view,³⁰ or to use Wind's dramatic phrase, "Art lives in this realm of ambiguity and suspense, and it is art only as long as the ambiguity is sustained."³¹ Thus the readers should have the "negative capability" of being able to remain in a state of uncertainty, without feeling a compelling need for quick resolution.³²

Dissonances play a major role in *Sophie's Choice*, and are constructed on various levels. As Harold Bloom suggested, they raise a process of growing uncertainty in the readers: "Styron [...] gives the reader an insurmountable difficulty, since Sophie, Nathan and Stingo become less sympathetic as the novel proceeds."³³

Sophie's Choice is narrated by a double voice: the first belongs to Stingo, and is self centered and immature. He is the one who dreams about Sophie as his wife in his home in the country, projecting his American vision of the happy family onto her. The second belongs to the implied narrator who is often identified with Styron himself, and raises questions about Stingo's voice, offers a retrospective outlook and supplies the broad scholarly information on the Holocaust.³⁴ As Law phrases it,

because the mature narrator does not share with the reader the benefits of his own hindsight, but withholds information and silently encourages false or incomplete appraisals, the reader is left equally at sea—therefore sharing with Stingo multiple experiences of disquieting misapprehension, revision, and reinterpretation.³⁵

Stingo and the mature narrator compete with each other in creating a disorientation of space and time, and elaborating on the unbridgeable gap between Stingo's and Sophie's lives.

Yet dissonances and incompatibility are shown in other levels of the novel, where, to use Cologne-Brookes' phrase, there are "Schizophrenic themes in which not just words and views clash but also worlds."³⁶ Clearly the direct reference to schizophrenia is aimed at Nathan who is, in fact, a paranoid schizophrenic. His unpredictable behavior, at the beginning of

³⁰ Handwerk, 1-7; Todorov, 25; and Thomson, 7.

³¹ Wind, 25.

³² Tsur, 144-145 and Adamson, 101-102.

³³ Bloom, 2.

³⁴ Law, 134; Cologne-Brookes, 164.

In this way, the voice of the mature narrator subverts Stingo's chauvinist and childish perception, and criticizes his inappropriate views and reactions to Sophie's story. See also Heath, 73-90.

³⁶ Cologne-Brookes, 158

the novel, hides the fact that he has never been to Harvard or worked as a research biologist about to discover cures for diseases. He is an American-born Jew who lies about everything, announcing great discoveries while in fact being an alcoholic and drug addict. Alongside the deceptive nature of Sophie's confession, Nathan's clinical malady and the role of Stingo as a listener create dissonance and paradoxical experience. Like Sophie and Nathan's relationship, and through the symbolic meaning of their costume games, this "split book"³⁷ leads the reader to emotional and cognitive disorientation—no one, neither the characters nor the narrators in the work are trustworthy, and every story, event, or recalled experience conceals another.

C. The Fatal Act

Literature is more about the failures of moral philosophy than about its successes.³⁸

Literary works dealing with moral problems contain "Fatal Acts"—substantive moral failures—which stimulate moral investigation and shape the ethical verdict. A fatal act can describe the consequence of a moral decision, but can also be posited as an extremely difficult starting point. The term "fatal act" actually refers to a tragedy which is expressed in the "tragic error," an act that is *beyond remedy*.³⁹ The Aristotelian fatal act is a turning point of the composition—it changes the hero's fate (turning, for example, success to failure) and draws the reader or spectator's attention to the ethical investigation. Why is it at all necessary to describe fatal acts in order to discuss moral issues? Fishlov presents the "radical idea that literature is, *ipso definito*, at odds with the positive ethical stance, i.e., that every work of art which tries to justify the way of God finds itself with Satan's party."⁴⁰ However, from an ethical point of view, the answer lies "in the ethical triangle model, since the happy mean is defined, and evaluated, as a "negative" symbol, a void between the two extremes."⁴¹ In

³⁷ Styron himself has called the novel a "split book" (160).

³⁸ Siebers, 160.

³⁹ Aristotle, chapter 14, 53b35. The term "Fatal Act" is derived from the word "anekeston" which literally translates as "incurable." The Greek word is built of "a" that means "unable" and the verb "akeo" which means "to be healed." Sophocles used it to mean "damaging beyond remedy." I would like to thank Sarah Smart for this clarification.

⁴⁰ Fishlov, 57.

⁴¹ Fishlov, 58.

the light of Aristotle's account of virtue as a mean between wrong extremes, defining the "right" requires, therefore, the presentation of the "wrong."

From a rhetorical point of view, fatal acts have the power to create a dramatic effect. Spivack (as part of his historical study on the characters of Shakespeare) claims that whereas the presentation of moral actions can appear to be didactic, the violations of morality are those which intensify the drama.⁴² "Fatal acts" can affect the reader in an experiential-emotional way. A terrible moral failure can prove to be the composition's climactic moment, combining shock, sadness, and tragedy.

I would like to return to *Sophie's Choice* for a final moral journey, aimed at understanding and finding the moral consequences of her choice, and searching for the kernel of its fatality.

The inclination toward fatal acts already arises at the beginning of the novel. In his attempt to write a novel, Stingo is looking for "Tragedy." He feels that the death of his classmate, Maria Hunt, can be an inspiration for a novel, since "most writers become sooner or later the exploiters of the tragedy of others" (111). However, through Sophie's confession, the meaning of *fatal acts* acquires an importance beyond this episode. The Nazi regime was responsible for terrible acts and inhuman crimes, and clearly Sophie's choice itself operates as a classic *fatal act*—an event which causes pity and shock and illuminates the ultimate moral dilemma in which all options are bad. Sophie had to actively condemn one of her children to death, or by refusing to choose, she would have sent both of them to die.

"What does Sophie's choice reveal about her?" asks Herion-Sarafidis, who examines the decision to condemn her daughter to death:

Was the little girl less loved because she was a girl? Are there reverberations in Sophie's choice of her own lack of self-esteem; was it an inevitable reflection of the treatment she herself had received as a child, an acting out of the relationship between herself and her father? Is this the ultimate root of her feelings and guilt?⁴³

Indeed, Herion-Sarafidis sees the choice in the light of Sophie's entire life, as a metonymy for her self-perception and for her education. In this

⁴² Spivack, 121-135. Spivack points out that in the process by which drama developed out of morality plays the character of the villain gained in prestige. Whereas the positive characters were played by the preachers the villains were played by good actors.

⁴³ Herion-Sarafidis, 101.

respect, many critics point to Sophie's passive character, and to her submission to the men in her life, be they her father, husband, Nathan and even Höss and Niemand in the Nazi camps.

All her life, Sophie tried to avoid making tough choices.⁴⁴ She had to choose whether to help her father by typing and distributing his pamphlets, but she did not choose, she only obeyed him. She had to choose whether to help the Resistance group during the war, but refused to do so for fear of endangering her children, claiming she wanted to be as neutral as possible. Sophie did not want to make choices that could lead to risky consequences. She did not want to fight for any principle or ideology, and saw herself as "on the sidelines." But suddenly she is plunged into the Auschwitz "selection," and has to make a choice. This choice is undoubtedly the most terrible act of the novel. The decision is cruel and inhuman: firstly, because one cannot find any justification for killing one of her children and saving the other; secondly, because in the act of recovering the memory, we discover that the decision had no actual meaning. People can bear terrible choices with the knowledge that they control their lives, and if she had managed to save one of her children, she could probably live with the memory of this terrible choice. But in this instance *there was no choice*, because it was quite probable that both of her children would die regardless of her decision. Sophie loses both Eva and Jan at this same moment (she only knows that Eva is going to be killed right away and that Jan is going to be in the children's camp. She never actually sees either of them again). It is ironic that Dr Niemand presents her right to choose as a "Privilege." She correctly understands, when describing the event that the purpose of this "game" was to make her feel guilty for the rest of her life. This is a wound that would never heal.

Sophie unveils this terrible scene at the end of the novel, just before she returns to Nathan to die with him. Nathan is clearly her savior but also her destroyer, like her father before him and even like Höss, who offers her reasonable living conditions in the camp but clearly ruins her. It might be that in returning to Nathan she again does not choose, but follows her mental structure of continuing to be subservient to the dominant man in her life at that moment. If this is the case, then Sophie not only does not choose but also does not develop at all throughout the novel, a conclusion that I do not wish to accept.

Sophie's confession is woven within the entire novel. Her life story ends not with the last chronological event but with her big secret—the selection scene. Sophie continues to live after sending her daughter to

death, and even after she realized that her son is lost too—she came to the US and even found a new love. But, in fact, as she presents it, the reason Sophie continues to live is to tell her story. In Brookline she is able, for the first time, to recall the events and to try to understand her actions. In telling her story she investigates her life and her moral identity, and eventually decides to make the terrible choice again—this time sending herself to death.

Sophie undergoes a process of self-examination, in which she asks herself how she should live without posing one "domain of moral value."⁴⁵ Sophie did have a concept of a way of living, although it is not articulated in any formal way—she wants to stay alive and she wants to be a good mother, to protect her children. For these values she is willing to betray her beliefs and her friends. That is why she does not help the Resistance group during the war, why she is willing to sleep with Höss and present herself as an Anti-Semite. Sophie would do anything to protect her children. Should she have acted differently?

The great disaster of her life is when she discovers that her choices and decisions, her entire way of life, are powerless to change her destiny. It seems that her refusal to make any moral decision, in order to protect her life and the lives of her children, did not help her at all. Although she declined to help the Resistance movement out of fear for her children, she was arrested—while trying to smuggle food for her dying mother—together with members of the Resistance, and received a similar punishment. She presents herself as an enthusiastic Anti-Semite in order to help her son, but eventually this is no help at all. In this way, throughout her life her actions and decisions become meaningless.

Mayers argues that Sophie "is not a moral agent, choosing herself among a range of options and by this means defining her character [...]; it is meaningless to speak about 'choice' in this context."⁴⁶ Indeed, it is unreasonable to argue that Sophie had responsibility for her selection, since almost none of it was within her control. However, to use Nagel's concept of "moral luck," it appears that usually "[a] significant aspect of what someone does depends on factors beyond his control," and still we continue to talk about responsibility and morality.⁴⁷ Nagel presents four types of moral luck, among them luck in one's circumstances, defined through "the things we are called upon to do, the moral tests we face, largely determined by factors beyond our control."⁴⁸ Sophie has had

⁴⁵ Nussbaum, 25.

⁴⁶ Myers, 512.

⁴⁷ Nagel, 26. See also Williams.

⁴⁸ Nagel, 33.

⁴⁴ See Cologne-Brookes, 180-181.

