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“Do What Thou Wilt”: *The History of a Precept*

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Aleister Crowley is the most notoriously transgressive figure in modern Western esotericism, and his best known precept is “Do what thou wilt”. This article seeks to elucidate the place of Crowley’s precept in the history of esotericism and transgression. More specifically, it seeks to make two points. First, it shows, through an investigation of its sources and influences, that the precept had highly transgressive overtones in the period when Crowley adopted and popularised it. These overtones extended to sexual excess, religious deviancy and fascist politics. Second, it argues that the precept was repurposed in a major way in the latter part of the twentieth century. The precept became domesticated, as the founders of the Wicca movement subsumed it into their own ethical maxim, the “Wiccan Rede”. This development serves as an example of how some of the more transgressive and problematic elements of the Western esoteric tradition have come to be softened and obscured in contemporary mass-market, suburban forms of practice such as Wicca.

1. Crowley and the precept: Background

Aleister Crowley, born Edward Alexander Crowley (1875-1947), was the best known and most controversial occultist in twentieth-century Britain. His principal legacy was the magico-religious system known as Thelema – the name being taken from *theléma*, the ancient Greek word for “will”. The Thelemic philosophy is summed up by the precept “Do what thou wilt”, which is taken from the scriptural text *The Book of the Law* or *Liber AL vel Legis* (1904):

Who calls us Thelemites will do no wrong, if he look but close into the word ... Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law.

The precept came to be combined with another phrase from the same section of the book: “Love is the law, love under will”.¹ Crowley taught his followers to use the two phrases as two halves of a greeting: “Do what

1 Aleister Crowley, *The Book of the Law: Liber AL vel Legis*, York Beach: Red Wheel/Weiser 2004, 1.40, 1.57; see also 3.60.

thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law” / “Love is the law, love under will”. Together, the phrases make up the so-called “Law of Thelema”.

What was the precept supposed to mean? When Crowley himself sought to interpret it – for example, in *Liber II: The Message of the Master Therion* (1919) – he insisted that it was not an invitation to self-indulgence, but rather an injunction to align oneself with a transcendent cosmic order.² If all human beings executed their “True Will”, conflicts between them would disappear. There is not much that is transgressive here; but Crowley was not necessarily a man who could be trusted to explain the full implications of his ideas.

Later commentators have fallen into broadly two camps in their handling of the precept. Crowley’s more sympathetic interpreters have adopted his benign reading of it. His former secretary Israel Regardie insisted that it was not an excuse for moral misbehaviour: it was rooted in notions of individualism and self-discipline.³ The scholar of esotericism Egil Asprem has likewise emphasised the importance of self-discipline, rather than self-indulgence, in following one’s True Will; as well as the role of the precept as a call to freedom in the context of a philosophy of “radical individualism”.⁴

Several of Crowley’s biographers have also emphasised the individualistic, libertarian aspect of the precept. The paranormal researcher Colin Wilson saw the precept as rooted in a belief in human free will.⁵ Richard Kaczynski has written in his exhaustively detailed biography of Crowley that it “exhorts Thelemites to celebrate their individuality (and the individuality of others)”.⁶ For Lawrence Sutin, one’s True Will is a “purified state” rather than a state of licentiousness.⁷ The prolific writer Tobias Churton likewise seems to favour interpreting the precept as enjoining self-discipline, and affirms that it requires “[n]oninterference in the true will of others”. He also expressly rejects the idea that it is a recipe for an aristocratic or fascistic world-view.⁸ Martin Booth both rejects the hedonistic reading of the precept and goes so far as to claim that the notion of

2 Aleister Crowley, “Liber II: The Message of the Master Therion”, *The Equinox* 3/1, 1919, 39-42.

3 Israel Regardie, *The Eye in the Triangle: An Interpretation of Aleister Crowley*, Las Vegas: Falcon 1986, 489-493.

4 Egil Asprem, *Arguing with Angels: Enochian Magic and Modern Occulture*, Albany: SUNY Press 2012, 88.

5 Colin Wilson, *Aleister Crowley: The Nature of the Beast*, London: Aquarian 1987, 164-166.

6 Richard Kaczynski, *Perdurabo: The Life of Aleister Crowley*, Berkeley: North Atlantic 2010 (1st ed. 2002), 560.

7 Lawrence Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt*, New York: St Martin’s 2000, 127.

8 Tobias Churton, *Aleister Crowley: The Beast in Berlin*, Rochester: Inner Traditions 2014, 9, 361-362; id., *Aleister Crowley in America* [ebook], Rochester: Inner Traditions 2017, Chapter 36.

achieving one’s individual potential that is embodied in it “eventually became governmental policy” in the British Education Act 1944.⁹

Other writers, however, have suspected that this is not the whole story. Criticisms of the precept are nothing new: they go back to Crowley’s own lifetime. The following barbed passage appears in James Branch Cabell’s novel *Jurgen* (1919), in the context of a parody of Crowley’s Gnostic Mass:

Anaitis answered: “There is no law in Cocaigne save, Do that which seems good to you.”

Then said the naked children: “Perhaps it is the law, but certainly it is not justice.”¹⁰

More recently, the scholar of esotericism Marco Pasi has argued that the precept “could be easily seen as compatible with a totalitarian ideology”.¹¹ The popular writer Gary Lachman has likewise pointed to the authoritarianism inherent in it.¹² This darker interpretation seems to be consonant with comments by Crowley to the effect that the precept does not allow “any amount of looseness”, as the “scope of possible wills for any man is limited by his race, caste, &c”.¹³

From the outset, then, we may have a suspicion that the precept was not a simple proclamation of liberal individualism. It was something potentially troubling, even dangerous. This article will seek to excavate the precept’s origins in an attempt to elucidate this point further.

2. Possible sources of the precept

2.1 The Bible

How far back in history can we trace the sources of the precept and the philosophy that it represented? As noted, *theléma* is a genuine ancient Greek word, but it rarely appears in classical literature (and, when it does,

9 Martin Booth, *A Magick Life: The Biography of Aleister Crowley*, London: Hodder and Stoughton 2000, 186-187.

10 James Branch Cabell, *Jurgen*, London: John Lane 1923, 135.

11 Marco Pasi, *Aleister Crowley and the Temptation of Politics*, Abingdon: Routledge 2014, 49. Cf. I. Regardie, *The Eye in the Triangle...*, 501.

12 Gary Lachman, *Aleister Crowley: Magick, Rock and Roll, and the Wickedest Man in the World*, New York: Tarcher 2014, 115.

13 See Tobias Churton, *Aleister Crowley: The Biography*, London: Watkins 2011, 271.

it has a meaning closer to “desire” than “will”).¹⁴ A being called *Thelema* appears as a spiritual entity in Gnosticism, but not very prominently.¹⁵

By contrast, the word is rather common in the Septuagint and the New Testament. The Biblical texts offer several plausible sources of inspiration for the precept:

Thy kingdom come, thy will (*theléma*) be done in earth, as it is in heaven.

Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will (*theléma*), but thine, be done.

But if any man think that he behaveth himself uncomely toward his virgin, if she pass the flower of her age, and need so require, let him do what he will (*ho thelei poieitó*), he sinneth not: let them marry.¹⁶

The first two of these passages are attributed to Jesus; the third is from a letter of St Paul. Any or all of them could have influenced either Crowley – who was raised as a fundamentalist Christian and could read Greek – or the other potential sources of his precept whom we are about to survey. The passages would also have been well known to the more-or-less Christian Britons of the early twentieth century to whom Crowley preached his ideas. It is likely that Crowley knew that he was breaking a taboo by advocating not resignation to God’s will but cultivation of one’s own. He may also have been aware of the sexual connotations of doing one’s will that underlie the quotation from St Paul.

2.2 St Augustine

In his 1926 essay “The Antecedents of Thelema”, the only sources whom Crowley explicitly accepted as having influenced the precept were St Augustine of Hippo and François Rabelais.¹⁷ Augustine famously used

14 On the word in classical literature and the New Testament, see Per Nykrog, “Thélème, Panurge et la Dive Bouteille”, *Revue d’histoire littéraire de la France* 65, 1965, 385-397: 385-391. Nykrog was seeking to trace the sources of Rabelais’ version of the precept. See also, for contrary views to Nykrog’s, Max Gauna, *The Rabelaisian Mythologies*, Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press 1996, 90-91, and Edwin M. Duval, *The Design of Rabelais’s Tiers Livre de Pantagruel*, Geneva: Droz 1997, 174, n. 23.

15 See e.g. Roelof van den Broek, *Studies in Gnosticism and Alexandrian Christianity*, Leiden: Brill 1996, 57-58.

16 *Matthew* 6.10 (see also *Luke* 11.2); *Luke* 22.42; *1 Corinthians* 7.36. The translations are from the “King James Version” (*The Holy Bible*, London: Robert Barker 1611), the standard historical edition of the Bible for British Protestants, with which Crowley would have been intimately familiar.

17 Aleister Crowley, “The Antecedents of Thelema” [online], *Thelema Lodge Calendar*, November 1993, <<http://www.billheidrick.com/tlc1993/tlc1193.htm>>, [24 May 2019].

the phrase, “Love, and do what thou wilt (*Dilige, et quod vis fac*)” in a sermon delivered in 407 CE.¹⁸ Scholars have emphasised the historical setting of this sermon in the context of the Donatist controversy: the saint was using a rhetorical appeal to love to legitimise state persecution of heretics.¹⁹ Nevertheless, his phrase had already come to be seen as a generic moral aphorism by the Middle Ages.²⁰ Crowley may therefore be forgiven for interpreting it, as he did, in an ahistorical way: if one is filled with love, one cannot go far wrong.

Augustine must, then, be counted as one source for Crowley’s precept. But it is unlikely that the Bishop of Hippo was the *main* inspiration behind it. There are other sources that are bound to have been much more influential.

2.3 François Rabelais

The standard assumption – which, as we have intimated, was encouraged by Crowley himself – is that the precept was inspired by the work of the French writer François Rabelais (1494-1553).

Rabelais’ five novel saga *Gargantua et Pantagruel* appeared between c. 1532 and 1564. The work has become famous in European literature as a catalogue of fantasy and excess, in which grotesque, scatological and sexual elements are mixed with satire of contemporary society. The second novel in the series describes the *Abbaye de Thélème*, an institution founded by Friar Jean des Entommeures, under the patronage of the giant Gargantua, on the banks of the River Loire. The Abbey is described as a luxurious place reserved for youths of good character. In contrast with the Catholic monastic vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, the youths take vows to get married, to be rich and to be free. Various classes of person are excluded from the institution, including thieves, bigots, money-lenders and lawyers.

Crowley also briefly mentioned Augustine in connection with the precept in *The Equinox of the Gods*, Leeds: Celephaïs 2004, 136.

18 Augustine, *In Epistulam Ioannis ad Parthos*, 7.8.

19 See e.g. Robert Dodaro, “Loose Canons: Augustine and Derrida on Their Selves”, in: John D. Caputo – Michael J. Scanlon (eds.), *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1999, 79-111: 96; Frederick H. Russell, “Persuading the Donatists: Augustine’s Coercion by Words”, in: William E. Klingshirn – Mark Vessey (eds.), *The Limits of Ancient Christianity: Essays on Late Antique Thought and Culture in Honor of R. A. Markus*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan 1999, 115-138: 126; Serge Lancel, *Saint Augustine*, London: SCM 2002, 293; Lenka Karfiková, *Grace and the Will according to Augustine*, Leiden: Brill 2012, 115, n. 82.

20 See e.g. István P. Bejczy, *The Cardinal Virtues in the Middle Ages*, Leiden: Brill 2011, 70.

Rather than being governed by a monastic rule, the inhabitants of the Abbey rule themselves. The following famous description appears in Chapter 57:

All their life was spent not in laws, statutes, or rules, but according to their own free will and pleasure. They rose out of their beds when they thought good: they did eat, drink, labour, sleep, when they had a mind to it, and were disposed for it ... In all their rule, and strictest tie of their order, there was but this one clause to be observed:

DO WHAT THOU WILT,

because men that are free, well-born, well-bred, and conversant in honest companies, have naturally an instinct and spur that prompteth them unto virtuous actions, and withdraws them from vice, which is called honour.²¹

Interpretations of Rabelais' conception of the Abbey have differed.²² At first sight, it looks like a parable of the basic goodness of human nature: one which recalls the later ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who was an admirer of Rabelais. Yet a number of commentators have noted that Rabelais' fantasy has something of an aristocratic character, with influence from the Renaissance courtier Baldassare Castiglione. The message is perhaps that "the moral and intellectual élite can do what they will to do ... because their will coincides with God's will".²³ Such a reading is broadly consistent both with Crowley's élitism and with his view that the precept implies alignment with a divine order. Another reading holds that Rabelais' vision is that each individual must voluntarily "give up their underlying freedom" in the interests of "a more general will".²⁴ This recalls both the darker side of Rousseau and the interpretation of Crowley's

21 "Toute leur vie estoit employée, non par lois, statutz ou reigles, mais selon leur vouloir et franc arbitre. Se levoient du lict quand bon leur sembloit, beuvoient, mangeoient, travailloient, dormoient quand le désir leur venoit. Nul ne les esveilleoit, nul ne les parforçoit ny à boire, ny à manger, ni à faire chose aultre quelconque. Ainsi l'avoit estably Gargantua. En leur reigle n'estoit que ceste clause: FAIS CE QUE VOULDRAS, parce que gens libères, bien nés, bien instruits, conversans en compaignies honnestes, ont par nature un instinct et aiguillon qui tousjours les pousse à faicts vertueux, et retire de vice: lequel ilz nommoient honneur" (François Rabelais, *Gargantua – Pantagruel*, Paris: Garnier Frères n.d., 105). The English translation is the classic version by Sir Thomas Urquhart and Peter Antony Motteux (François Rabelais, *The Inestimable Life of the Great Gargantua, Father of Pantagruel*, London: Gibbings and Company 1897, 322).

22 See e.g. Ullrich Langer, "Liberté chrétienne et liberté stoïcienne: L'abbaye de Thélème", in: Alexandre Tarrête (ed.), *Stoïcisme et christianisme à la Renaissance*, Paris: École Normale Supérieure 2006, 59-70.

23 Barbara C. Bowen, *Enter Rabelais, Laughing*, Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press 1998, 78.

24 Michael Randall, *The Gargantuan Polity: On the Individual and the Community in the French Renaissance*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press 2008, 181.

ideology as implicitly totalitarian. Yet, in the final analysis, comparisons of Rabelais’ ideas with Crowley’s are unsatisfying. There are more differences than similarities. The Frenchman’s description of the *Abbaye de Thélème* fits badly with the “Great Beast”’s known ideas and interests.

This conclusion may at first sight seem surprising. Rabelais was an established member of the European literary canon in which Crowley was educated, and Crowley referred to him in his writings repeatedly and with apparent familiarity.²⁵ More specifically, in “The Antecedents of Thelema”, Crowley compared several particular features of Rabelais’ Abbey with the teachings of Thelema and *The Book of the Law*:

There are to be no walls to the Abbey. To him, as to us, “The word of Sin is Restriction” (AL I,41) ...

Rabelais insists on the members of his Abbey being physically fit, so too the Book of the Law: “Wisdom says: be strong!” (II,70) and similar passages.

There is to be no separation of the sexes, and no artificial restrictions upon Love. The Book of the Law is even more explicit upon this most fundamental social principle; see I,12-13; I,41; I,51-53; II,24; II,52.

With all this we find no suggestion of any communistic theories; they are in fact specifically disowned. The ethics of the Aeon of Horus [i.e. the new age that Crowley supposedly heralded] are equally individualistic. “Ye shall gather goods and store of women and spices; ye shall wear rich jewels” etc. (I,61). “Ye shall see them at rule, at victorious armies, at all the joy” (II,24). See also: II,18; II,21; II,58, etc.

... There is no place in the Abbey imagined by Rabelais, and to be realized by the Master Therion, for those parasites of society who feed upon the troubles caused by Restriction: officials, lawyers, financiers, and the like ...

Thus ends Rabelais his account of the qualifications of admission to his Abbey: that the postulant should be filled with the spirit of Nobility, of Truth, and of Beauty. With this idea the Book of the Law is so penetrated that quotation would overwhelm.²⁶

It is suggested that these alleged points of similarity are in fact weak and diffuse – and, indeed, one has the sense that Crowley may have been aware of this. Nevertheless, even if one accepts them all, a serious problem remains.

If one reads the account of the Abbey in its original context, it is fairly clear that it is “more an educational Utopia than a monastery”.²⁷ It essentially has to do with the education of the young. Rabelais states expressly that only children and adolescents are admitted: girls between the ages of 10 and 15 and boys between the ages of 12 and 18. Unlike in a real mon-

25 See TSG [Bill Heidrick], “From the Outbasket” [online], *Thelema Lodge Calendar*, January 1995, <<http://www.billheidrick.com/tlc1995/tlc0195.htm#fob>>, [24 May 2019].

26 A. Crowley, “The Antecedents...”, III. The references in the quotation are Crowley’s and relate to the *Book of the Law*.

27 George Mallery Masters, *Rabelasian Dialectic and the Platonic-Hermetic Tradition*, Albany: SUNY Press 1969, 22.

astery or convent, there is no requirement for them to stay there in the long term: indeed, Rabelais indicates that they will still be under their parents' authority when they leave. They are permitted, or indeed required, to get married. It would seem that they are then supposed to leave the Abbey and live out their adult lives elsewhere.

The problem here is that Aleister Crowley had no interest whatever in the education of children or their preparation for marriage. On any interpretation, the Law of Thelema had nothing to do with *that*. This basic difference between the two men's agendas suggests that Rabelais was not Crowley's main source for the precept. Of course, it is quite possible that Crowley may have taken the phrase in question from Rabelais without also taking its contextual meaning. But this possibility is undermined by the fact that Crowley also had access to a series of other plausible sources for the precept which were much closer to his own transgressive ideas. We will now proceed to examine these sources. They were less widely known than Rabelais, to be sure, but in each case Crowley can be shown either to have been aware of them or to have had interests connected with them. It is very likely that the precept came to Crowley through the mediation of these sources as well as from Rabelais. In addition, it is worth noting that the sources in question would have been known to at least some of Crowley's original audience. To that extent, they would have shaped what the precept *meant* when it was first coined and used.

2.4 John Dee and Edward Kelley

There is a passage which recalls the precept in the body of angelic communications that are said to have been received by the Elizabethan occultist Dr John Dee (1527-1608) through the intermediacy of his scryer Sir Edward Kelley (1555-1597). Dee was apparently given the following message from God by an angel:

Behold you are become free. Do that which most pleaseth you. For behold, your own reason riseth up against my wisdom.

Not content you are to be heirs, but you would be Lords, yea Gods, yea the Judges of the heavens. Wherefore do even as you list, but if you forsake the way taught you from above, behold, evil shall enter into your senses and abomination shall dwell before your eyes, as a recompense unto such as you have done wrong unto. And your wives and children shall be carried away before your face.²⁸

The context of this rather striking revelation was the notorious incident in which Dee and Kelley were induced – or, perhaps more accurately,

28 For the text, see Gerald Suster (ed.), *John Dee*, Berkeley: North Atlantic Books 2003, 83-84.

Kelley deceived Dee – into engaging in wife-swapping. Not the least disturbing part of the episode was the fact that the men’s alleged spirit guide, a young girl named Madimi, delivered the communication quoted above stark naked.²⁹

Crowley thought that he was the reincarnation of Edward Kelley.³⁰ He also referred specifically to Kelley as a prophet of the Law of Thelema in Chapter 8 of *The Equinox of the Gods* (1936). Crowley was not uninterested in the idea of sexual antinomianism, and it is entirely plausible that he was influenced by the passage above. If so, it links him directly with one of the more sensational and unsavoury incidents in Kelley’s colourful career.

2.5 Francis Dashwood

The British politician Sir Francis Dashwood (1708-1781) had the phrase “*Fay ce que voudras*” (usually reported in secondary sources as *voudras*) written over the entrance of Medmenham Abbey. This was a former Cistercian abbey in the English countryside which Dashwood repurposed as a different kind of institution. Medmenham served as a meeting place for one of the notorious eighteenth-century hellfire clubs: the “Order of the Friars of St. Francis of Wycombe” (also known by several other names, including “the Monks of Medmenham”). The group was associated with sexual and alcoholic libertinism, accompanied by trappings that blended Christian, pagan and Satanic motifs.³¹

Dashwood was an admirer of Rabelais, and it has been suggested that he was also seeking to echo St Augustine.³² It is sometimes claimed, in both popular and scholarly writings, that Crowley took the precept directly from Dashwood.³³ Massimo Introvigne is sceptical about this, commenting that “there is no evidence that Crowley was particularly interested

29 See further Michael Martin, *Literature and the Encounter with God in Post-Reformation England*, London: Routledge 2016, 40-41.

30 See R. Kaczynski, *Perdurabo...*, 330.

31 See generally e.g. Geoffrey Ashe, *Do What You Will*, London: W. H. Allen 1974, 119-132; Richard Wheeler, “‘Pro Magna Charta’ or ‘Fay ce que Voudras’: Political and Moral Precedents for the Gardens of Sir Francis Dashwood at West Wycombe”, *New Arcadian Journal* 49/50, 2000, 26-61; John Sainsbury, *John Wilkes: The Lives of a Libertine*, Aldershot: Ashgate 2006, 109-111, suggesting that the club might not have been as hedonistic as one might assume, and Suzanne L. Barnett, *Romantic Paganism*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan 2017, 44-53.

32 Bruce Redford, *Dilettanti: The Antic and the Antique in Eighteenth-Century England*, Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty 2008, 33-35.

33 See R. Gary Patterson, *Take a Walk on the Dark Side: Rock and Roll Myths, Legends, and Curses*, New York: Fireside 2004, 62; Ruben van Luijk, *Children of Lucifer*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2016, 294-343; David Conway, *Algol Asylum*, n.p.: Radical Robot Books 2018, 45-46.

in Dashwood”.³⁴ But Dashwood’s group was certainly known and talked about in British culture during his lifetime.³⁵ It must be unlikely that the “friars” activities never entered into Crowley’s mind – or those of his followers and critics – in connection with the precept. The memory of Dashwood would inevitably have given the precept a transgressive cast, with implications of diabolism, intoxication and sexual excess.

2.6 William Blake

The English mystical writer and artist William Blake (1757-1827) wrote the following fragment of verse, which went unpublished during his lifetime:

Do what you will this Lifes a Fiction
And is made up of Contradiction.³⁶

Crowley was familiar with Blake’s works, and this particular quotation was sufficiently well known in the twentieth century to inspire Aldous Huxley to publish an anthology of essays under the title *Do What You Will* (1928). The sentiment certainly fits with Crowley’s ideas: it has been said that the lines express the “belief that the moralizing lore of good and evil by which human beings were taught to live was essentially mistaken”.³⁷ This is a rather different sort of antinomianism to that of Edward Kelley and Francis Dashwood. Nevertheless, we have here another plausible candidate for a source that would have encouraged Crowley and others to view his precept as an injunction to moral transgression.

2.7 Éliphas Lévi

Éliphas Lévi (1810-1875) was the godfather of the nineteenth-century magical revival. He revered Rabelais, but – perhaps surprisingly – he seems never to have quoted the precept from the *Abbaye de Thélème*. What we can say, however, is that Lévi’s magical theories attributed considerable significance to the will of the individual. Lévi taught that the *magus*

34 Massimo Introvigne, *Satanism: A Social History*, Leiden: Brill 2016, 55.

35 The Google Ngram Viewer shows how the phrase “Monks of Medmenham” rose in popularity in texts in British English from the 1850s to the 1920s. It then fell back but revived to another peak in the 1940s.

36 The fragment appears on page 98 of Blake’s unpublished “Notebook”. It has been published in editions of Blake’s works as *Gnostic Verses*, 23 and *The Everlasting Gospel*, fragment j. It may be found in e.g. Geoffrey Keynes (ed.), *The Note-book of William Blake*, London: Nonesuch 1935, 140.

37 John Beer, *William Blake: A Literary Life*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2005, 187.

must develop a will that is strong, free and rational. Quotes like the following could be multiplied:

To be isolated from the Astral Light it is not enough to envelop one’s self in a woolen fabric ... we must have quitted the world of passions and be assured of perseverance in the spontaneous operations of an inflexible will.

Occult medicine is simply the exercise of the will applied to the very source of life, to that Astral Light the existence of which is a fact ...

When you have conquered the genius of fear by the growing force of your will, you shall know that dogmas are the sacred adornments of truth unknown to the vulgar ...³⁸

Lévi was not being original here. The strand of esoteric thought that attributes importance to the will went back, via Mesmerism, at least as far as Paracelsus (“Do not treat this as a joke, you doctors: you do not know the least part of the power of the will”).³⁹ But Crowley is likely to have borrowed the idea through the mediation of Lévi. Not only was Lévi a giant of the esoteric revival: Crowley’s personal attachment to him was particularly strong. As with Edward Kelley, he believed that he was the living reincarnation of the man.⁴⁰

2.8 Walter Besant and James Rice

Sir Walter Besant (1836-1901) was a British scholar and man of letters. He was also the brother-in-law of Annie Besant, the well-known esotericist, who brought Co-Masonry to England and became the President of the Theosophical Society. In addition, he was a Freemason, and one of the founders of Quatuor Coronati, the prestigious Masonic research lodge. James Rice (1843-1882) was the proprietor of the literary magazine *Once a Week*. Working together as a duo, Besant and Rice were the “coauthors of a series of popular novels that Rice conceptualized and Besant largely wrote”.⁴¹ One of those novels was *The Monks of Thelema* (1878).

The Monks of Thelema describes an abbey situated in rural England which uses the precept in the form “*Fay ce que voudras*”. The debt to Rabelais is openly acknowledged, although in spirit the book is closer to

38 Éliphas Lévi, *Transcendental Magic*, London: Rider 1896, 96, 223, 504.

39 “Und lassend euch das kein schertz sein ihr Artzet: ihr wissendt die Krafft des Willens nit den minsten theyl” (*Paramirum* I, 4.8).

40 See Christopher McIntosh, *Eliphas Lévi and the French Occult Revival*, Albany: SUNY Press 2011, 226-227.

41 Angela Kingston, *Oscar Wilde as a Character in Victorian Fiction*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2008, 22.

Jane Austen.⁴² Its Victorian manners are quite different from the fantasies of *Gargantua et Pantagruel*. It may be read as a satire on the contemporary Aesthetic movement and half-baked ideas about social reform. It is not so much concerned with making philosophical claims about the will as it is with poking fun at a group of privileged, self-indulgent young men and women – and the Abbey’s residents *are* grown men and women, even though they behave like children. In line with their reading of Rabelais, they allow only single people to join, and individuals must leave when they marry.

The Abbey has some curious features which link it to the world of ideas from which Crowley and other contemporary Neo-Pagans emerged. One of the residents, Desdemona, is referred to as a “witch”, and she at least pretends to be skilled in palm-reading and cartomancy. There is a significant passage which refers to the romantic Neo-Pagan worship of nature in connection with a character named Paul Rondelet (a parody of Oscar Wilde):

He was an Agnostic by profession ... But, in reality, he was a New Pagan. It was, indeed, a delightful thing to sit with the select few, the profane vulgar not being admitted, to feel that one possessed the real secret of the Dionysiac myth; to bring to one’s bosom the whole truth about Demeter; to know, in a manner only understood by priests and the initiated of old, the divine Aphrodite and the many-breasted Diana; to recognise, almost in secret conclave, that all these, with Isis and Horus, Samson and many others, meant nothing but the worship of the Sun and the Year in its seasons: so that, to those who rightly read the myths, all religion means nothing but the worship of summer and winter, the awaking and the sleep of life, so that there is really no reason at all, according to the New Pagan, why we should not return to the kindly, genial, and beneficent old Gods.⁴³

The link between the Aesthetic and Decadent movements in the arts on the one hand, and the esoteric and Neo-Pagan revival on the other, has been made elsewhere.⁴⁴ Oscar Wilde was one figure who crossed between

42 Besant had a particular interest in Rabelais. He wrote a book on him in which he discussed the *Abbaye de Thélème* (Walter Besant, *Rabelais*, Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons 1879, 71-77). He also published a book of translations from his works (id., *Readings in Rabelais*, Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons 1883).

43 Walter Besant – James Rice, *The Monks of Thelema* II, London: Chatto and Windus 1878, 262-263.

44 See e.g. Jennifer Rachel Hallett, *Paganism in England 1885-1914* [Ph.D. thesis, online], <<https://research-information.bristol.ac.uk/files/34501523/435432.pdf>>, Bristol: University of Bristol 2006, 122-179; Kelly Anne Reid, “The Love Which Dare Not Speak Its Name: An Examination of Pagan Symbolism and Morality in *Fin de siècle* Decadent Fiction”, *The Pomegranate* 10, 2008, 130-141; Graham John Wheeler “Discourses of Paganism in the British and Irish Press during the Early Pagan Revival”, *The Pomegranate* 19, 2017, 5-24.

the two worlds; and so was Aleister Crowley, who started his career as a would-be Decadent poet.

As we have noted, Besant and Rice’s books were a popular success. Many more Britons of the time will have formed their ideas about “Do what thou wilt” from reading the two men’s comic novel on the subject than from wading through Rabelais’ *magnum opus*. They would accordingly have learnt to associate the precept with young upper-class adults with Aesthetic and Neo-Pagan leanings. It is likely that Crowley fell into this camp; and it is near-certain that others who encountered his teachings did so.

2.9 A Christian hymn

The Christian poet Frances Ridley Havergal (1836-1879) wrote a piece entitled “What Thou Wilt”, in which God is enjoined in the opening line: “Do what Thou wilt”. The sentiment is no doubt based on the quotations attributed to Jesus in the New Testament that we considered earlier. The opening stanza of the poem runs:

Do what Thou wilt! Yes, only do
 What seemeth good to Thee:
 Thou art so loving, wise, and true,
 It must be best for me.

This text was in use as a hymn at least as early as 1881, when the six-year-old Crowley was being indoctrinated as a fundamentalist Protestant.⁴⁵ He certainly remembered Havergal in his adult life: in Chapter XV of *Magick without Tears*, he mockingly attributed an obscene quotation to one “Frances Ridley Ravergal”.⁴⁶ This raises the intriguing prospect that the phrase “Do what thou wilt” was dinned into his mind as a child from this blamelessly pious source.

2.10 The MacGregor motto

By 1899, Crowley was using notepaper which incorporated the motto “E’en Do and Spare Not”. This has been described by Tobias Churton as “a preemptive corollary” of the precept.⁴⁷ Crowley was going through something of a Scottish phase at the time. He had purchased Boleskine

⁴⁵ It appears in *Hymns for the Service of the King*, London: John F. Shaw and Co. 1881, 302.

⁴⁶ Aleister Crowley, *Magick without Tears* [online], <<https://hermetic.com/crowley/magick-without-tears/index>>, [24 May 2019], Chapter XV.

⁴⁷ T. Churton, *Aleister Crowley in America...*, Chapter 1.

House in the Scottish Highlands, and he was calling himself Aleister MacGregor.

“E’en Do and Spare Not” was a motto used by the MacGregor clan. Crowley may have picked it up from the Golden Dawn luminary Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers, who also posed as a descendant of the MacGregors. Equally, the motto was freely discoverable in standard British reference works on the landed gentry such as *Burke’s*. It is possible that the motto played some role in shaping the precept, although the resemblance between the two phrases is rather unspecific.

2.11 King Pausole

We now move back to the world of prose fiction. Our next source for the precept is the 1901 novel *Les aventures du roi Pausole* (*The Adventures of King Pausole*) by Pierre Louÿs (1870-1925), a French writer of libertarian views.⁴⁸

In Louÿs’ novel, King Pausole (*pausolé*, “rest” in ancient Greek) is the monarch of the fictional kingdom of Tryphême. In the opening chapter of the work, Louÿs explains that Pausole has cut the kingdom’s code of laws down to two articles:

CODE OF TRYPHÊME

- I. – Thou shalt not harm thy neighbour.
- II. – This being understood, do what thou wilt.⁴⁹

The novel exhibits influences from several different sources. Louÿs was deliberately writing in imitation of eighteenth-century French novels; and Article I of the Code echoes the teachings of Jesus. More importantly for our purposes, Article II is clearly based on Rabelais.⁵⁰ Even the name of Tryphême resembles the *Abbaye de Thélème* (it comes from the Greek *tryphé*, meaning “softness” or “laxity”).

Unlike Besant and Rice’s novel, Louÿs’ work is sensual and erotic. It is pervaded by sexual libertinism of a kind that was patently written by a man for other men. King Pausole has a harem of 366 wives – one for each day of the year, including leap years (it is ruled over by a Calvinist clergyman

48 See generally David J. Niederauer, *Pierre Louÿs: His Life and Art*, n.p.: Canadian Federation for the Humanities 1981, 171-176.

49 “CODE DE TRYPHÊME

I. – *Ne nuis pas à ton voisin.*

II. – *Ceci bien compris, fais ce qu’il te plaît*” (Pierre Louÿs, *Les aventures du roi Pausole*, Paris: Fasquelle n.d., 4).

50 See e.g. Verdun-Louis Saulnier, “Divers échos de Rabelais au XXe siècle”, *Études rabelaisiennes* 6, 1965, 73-88: 77, and D. J. Niederauer, *Pierre Louÿs...*, 172.

called Taxis, who seems to be a pastiche of Louÿs' real-life enemies). He encourages his young subjects, male and female, to go about unclothed, although as a libertarian he refuses to make this compulsory. The King's openness to sexual liberation ends with his teenage daughter Aline, and the moral of the story consists of his recognition of this blind-spot; in the meantime, the action is driven by Aline running away from home with a lesbian dancer called Mirabelle. Interestingly, the King practises several religions. He worships Demeter and Persephone, while also hoping, as a Catholic, to be canonised as a saint after his death.

Roi Pausole was in circulation at the precise time that Crowley produced *The Book of the Law*. Louÿs was a popular writer, and the novel was not obscure or inaccessible. It first appeared as a serial in *Le Journal*, the most widely read paper in France, between March and May 1900; and it was published in book form in June 1901. It had sufficient mass appeal to be turned into a film and an opera, and Claude Debussy planned to produce a symphonic suite based on it. The novel does not seem to have been translated into English until 1919, but this would not have been an obstacle to Crowley or other educated Britons of his generation. Moreover, Louÿs' links with turn-of-the-century Decadent culture made him a particularly appropriate source for Crowley. The probability is that he was a significant influence on the formulation and reception of the precept.

2.12 Friedrich Nietzsche

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) has not been given the attention that he deserves as a potential source for Crowley's precept. This is surprising. If an educated European in the first half of the twentieth century – that is, during the period of Crowley's adult life – had been confronted with a precept exalting the idea of “will”, he would not have been able to avoid thinking of Nietzsche. From the 1930s onwards, he would probably also have thought of the Nazis. Even if Crowley himself did not immediately make such connections when he published *The Book of the Law* in 1904, he could not have remained in a state of ignorance about them; and the same is true of those around him who were exposed to his ideas.

Nietzsche seems originally to have encountered the notion of the will in the works of Schopenhauer. He took up and pursued the concept in his own writings – most famously, in the form of the “will to power” (*Wille zur Macht*). It is not difficult to collect quotations from him on the subject:

Only where there is life is there also will: not will to life but – thus I teach you – will to power!

[Herbert Spencer's philosophy], however, fails to realise the real essence of life, its will to power.

A living thing seeks above all to DISCHARGE its strength – life itself is WILL TO POWER ...

[T]he will to power ... is just the will to live.⁵¹

Nietzsche contemplated publishing a book entitled *The Will to Power*, and a well-known posthumous work with that title was indeed brought out in 1901 (second edition 1906) by his sister and a team of editors.

This is not the place to resolve technical questions relating to the precise function and status that the will to power had in Nietzsche's worldview.⁵² It can be seen variously as a characteristic of human beings; of the natural organic world; or, metaphysically, of the universe in general. Such questions are made more difficult by the fact that they intersect with a separate but related debate concerning the distinction between the works that Nietzsche published in his own lifetime and those which remained unpublished until after his mental breakdown in 1889 and his death in 1900. What Nietzsche was actually trying to say, however, is less important for our purposes than what Crowley and his audience are likely to have thought that he meant.

As indicated above, Crowley's debt to Nietzsche in relation to the precept is not often acknowledged.⁵³ Yet it is undeniably clear that Crowley was an admirer of the German philosopher. He made him a saint in his Gnostic Catholic Church and quoted him repeatedly in his writings. Crowley's "slave gods" are an obvious echo of Nietzsche's "slave morality", and the notion manifests the same antipathy towards the Abraham religions. Nietzsche was, like Crowley, profoundly hostile to the conven-

51 These quotations come, respectively, from *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 34; *On the Genealogy of Morals*, II-12; *Beyond Good and Evil*, 9, and *The Gay Science*, V-349.

52 See further e.g. Linda L. Williams, "Will to Power in Nietzsche's Published Works and the *Nachlass*", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 57/3, 1996, 447-463, tracing references to the will to power in Nietzsche's works and commenting on earlier academic engagement with them. For a more recent treatment of Nietzsche's thought in this area, see Ivan Soll, "Nietzsche Disempowered: Reading the Will to Power out of Nietzsche's Philosophy", *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 46, 2015, 425-450. On Nietzsche's ideas about the will more generally, see e.g. Ken Gemes – Christopher Janaway, "Nietzsche on Free Will, Autonomy and the Sovereign Individual", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 80, 2006, 321-357, and Brian Leiter, "Nietzsche's Theory of the Will", *Philosophers' Imprint* 7, 2007, 1-15.

53 Indeed, one of Crowley's biographers expressly denies that the debt exists: see L. Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt...*, 126. See also G. Lachman, *Aleister Crowley...*, 115. For an exception, see David Livingstone, *Transhumanism: The History of a Dangerous Idea*, n.p.: Sabilillah 2015, 70, where the precept is described as containing "the seeds of a fascist occult ideology".

tional morality of his time, whether Abrahamic or secular-liberal. His ethics were fundamentally inegalitarian, being aimed at the flourishing of “higher men” (or the *Übermensch*, to use the well-known term from *Thus Spake Zarathustra*), a concept which was rooted in the idea of the self-sufficient, self-regarding romantic hero. This is all quite Crowleyan.

In his *Confessions*, Crowley expressly associated Nietzsche with his ideas about individuals doing their will:

The main ethical principle is that each human being has his own definite object in life. He has every right to fulfil this purpose, and none to do anything else ... We have thus made a clean sweep of all the rough and ready codes of convention which have characterized past civilizations ... Their authority rested on definitions of right and wrong which were untenable. As soon as Nietzsche and others demonstrated that fact, they lost their validity.

Elsewhere in the same work, Crowley compared Nietzsche to an avatar of Thoth. Likewise, in *Magick without Tears* he called him “one of our prophets”.⁵⁴

It must be acknowledged that Nietzsche’s ideas do not correspond neatly with those of Thelema. Nietzsche had no interest in the esoteric metaphysics to which Crowley ended up devoting his life. When Nietzsche wrote about will, he had no conception of Crowley’s theories about the supposed cosmic harmony of people’s True Wills. Yet whether or not Nietzsche would have agreed with Crowley is beside the point. The point is that Crowley’s precept plugged directly into some of the best known and darkest ideas of his age. Nietzsche was a transgressive figure in a more troubling sense than the likes of Francis Dashwood or “Paul Rondelet”.

Some academic philosophers would view this characterisation as unfair. It has been questioned whether a straight line can be drawn from Nietzsche’s theories to the fascist project of organised sadism and racist terror. There have been those, like Walter Kaufmann, who have insisted that Nietzsche has been misunderstood. The will to power can be interpreted as being about *self*-mastery – one recalls here the interpretation of Crowley’s precept as an injunction to self-discipline – or as being a more or less benign celebration of human growth and achievement. This is all a matter of controversy.⁵⁵ Yet the inescapable fact is that Nietzsche has been

54 See John Symonds – Kenneth Grant (eds.), *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley*, New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux 1970, 847-848, 745, and A. Crowley, *Magick without Tears...*, Chapter XLVIII.

55 See e.g. Walter Kaufmann, “Editor’s Introduction”, in: Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, New York: Random House 1967, xiii-xxiii. For an unsympathetic response to Nietzsche’s attempted rehabilitation, see e.g. Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1999,

understood as a prophet of Nazism, not least by the Nazis themselves. Hitler became preoccupied with the notion of “will” to the extent of personally choosing it for the title of Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph des Willens*. Fairly or otherwise, Nietzsche’s reputation in the rest of the world suffered accordingly. This cannot have failed to affect the connotations of the precept for Crowley and his audience.

3. The precept evolves: The Wiccan Rede

The Wiccan Rede is the principal ethical maxim of the tradition of Neopagan witchcraft known as Wicca. It runs as follows: “An it harm none, do what ye will.”⁵⁶ (*An* is an archaic term meaning “if”: it is sometimes misunderstood as an abbreviation for “and”.) Not all Wiccans follow the Rede, but it has wide enough currency to merit being called “the best known Wiccan aphorism in existence”.⁵⁷ The Rede is, of course, transparently similar to Crowley’s precept and the Law of Thelema.⁵⁸ It expresses the concept of doing one’s will; and it then qualifies this, albeit by reference not to love but to the potential harm to other people.

The Wiccan founder Gerald Gardner was familiar enough with Crowley and Thelema.⁵⁹ He had several personal meetings with Crowley in 1947, and for a while he made plans to revive the Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO), one of Crowley’s magical orders. When he published his second novel, *High Magic’s Aid*, in 1949, he used his OTO name, “Scire”, as a *nom de plume*. More specifically, it is quite certain that Gardner was familiar with the precept. It appeared in an OTO charter which he (probably) wrote in the 1940s, and also in an early version of the Wiccan sacred text, the Book of Shadows, which has become known as “Text A”.⁶⁰

101-120. See also Erik Parens, “From Philosophy to Politics: On Nietzsche’s Ironic Metaphysics of Will to Power”, *Man and World* 24, 1991, 169-180.

56 For variant formulations, see Ethan Doyle White, “‘An’ it Harm None, Do What Ye Will’: A Historical Analysis of the Wiccan Rede”, *Magic, Ritual and Witchcraft* 10, 2015, 142-171: 142. White’s article is a very useful inquiry into the history of the Rede. See also in the same vein John J. Coughlin, *Ethics and the Craft*, New York: Waning Moon 2015, esp. 53-80.

57 E. D. White, “‘An’ it Harm None...”, 171.

58 For previous writers who have made this point, see *ibid.*, 161.

59 See in general Ronald Hutton, “Crowley and Wicca”, in: Henrik Bogdan – Martin P. Starr (eds.), *Aleister Crowley and Western Esotericism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2012, 285-306.

60 See E. D. White, “‘An’ it Harm None...”, 161-162.

It has long been known that Gardner plagiarised Crowley’s written works when creating the foundational texts of Wicca.⁶¹ But – leaving aside the single reference in “Text A” – the interesting thing is that Gardner did *not* simply appropriate the Law of Thelema as a means of giving some philosophical fibre to his nascent religious movement. Indeed, Ronald Hutton has noticed a significant feature of Gardner’s borrowings from Crowley: he was happy to plagiarise rhetorical and poetic passages from Crowley’s writings for ritual use, but he showed less interest in borrowing the man’s substantive doctrines.⁶² This approach may well have resulted from a sheer lack of interest in that aspect of Crowley’s work on Gardner’s part; but it was practically convenient too. Thelema was not popular in 1950s England. John Symonds’ slashing biography *The Great Beast* came out in 1951, at precisely the time when Gardner was in the process of unveiling Wicca to the world. The negative associations of Crowley and his precept extended, in the eyes of “respectable” public opinion, to unbridled sexuality, fascism and devil-worship.⁶³ Gerald Gardner was the sort of man who could probably live with the first of these, but there is no indication that he was eager to burden himself with the others.

Gardner’s protégée Doreen Valiente, whom he met in 1952, likewise had some nervousness about associating Wicca with an individual whom the press had dubbed “the wickedest man in the world”. She objected to the “Crowleyanity” in Gardner’s early rituals, and as a result she ended up rewriting much of the relevant material in the period 1954-1957.⁶⁴ Perhaps surprisingly, the Rede had not yet been formulated by this time; but then Gardner does not seem to have been very interested in equipping his new religion with a moral theology. The most that we can say is that, in the years around the birth of Wicca, scattered and generic passages can be found in Gardner’s writings which are consistent with the “harm none” part of the Rede. Worthy of particular mention is a curious document which Gardner produced in 1957, known as the “Ardenes” or “Old Laws”. This lays down “harm none” as a rule for witches; but the rule is framed as a means of avoiding trouble with the Christian authorities rather than as an ethical principle.⁶⁵

61 See e.g. Roger Dearnaley, “The Influence of Aleister Crowley upon ‘Ye Bok of ye Art Magical’” [online], <<http://geraldgardner.com/dearnaley.php>>, 2002 [24 May 2019], and R. Hutton, “Crowley and Wicca...”.

62 See R. Hutton, “Crowley and Wicca...”.

63 See e.g. R. van Luijk, *Children of Lucifer...*, 318, on how the popular novelist Dennis Wheatley linked the precept with Satanism.

64 See e.g. Nevill Drury, “The Modern Magical Revival”, in: Murphy Pizza – James R. Lewis (eds.), *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*, Leiden: Brill 2009, 13-80: 59.

65 See further E. D. White, “‘An’ it Harm None...”, 148-151, 156.

For something resembling a precursor of the Rede, we have to go to Gardner's 1959 book *The Meaning of Witchcraft*:

[Witches] are inclined to the morality of the legendary Good King Pausol, "Do what you like so long as you harm no one" ... This involves every magical action being discussed first, to see that it can do no damage, and this induces a habit of mind to consider well the results of one's actions, especially upon others. This, you may say, is elementary Christianity. Of course it is; it is also elementary Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, and Judaism, to name only a few.⁶⁶

This passage avoids mentioning Crowley's precept, discussion of which is reserved for elsewhere in the book. In fact, the book is quite lenient towards Crowley, defending him against the charge of Satanism; but there is a sardonic comment to the effect that Crowley's followers had discovered that his precept really meant, "Do what Aleister Crowley wills shall be the whole of the law".⁶⁷ It is not clear precisely who is speaking in these passages, as it is believed that *The Meaning of Witchcraft* was written primarily by Doreen Valiente. It does, however, seem more likely that a piece of male-gaze erotica like Louÿs' novel would be cited by Gardner than by Valiente.⁶⁸

Nevertheless, it is probably Valiente who should be credited with formulating the Rede. Its first recorded appearance came in a speech which she delivered on 3 October 1964 at a dinner organised by the Witchcraft Research Association. She was quoted as saying:

Eight words the Wiccan Rede fulfil:
An' it harm none, do what ye will.⁶⁹

The Rede subsequently began to appear in publications by popular writers such as Hans Holzer. The prominent American witch Lady Gwen Thompson combined it with some seemingly authentic older folklore to create a 26-line poem called the "Rede of the Wicca", which was published in 1974-1975.⁷⁰ Back in England, Valiente incorporated the Rede into a poem of 16 stanzas entitled "The Witches' Creed". The last stanza runs as follows:

An Do What You Will be the challenge,
So be it in Love that harms none,
For this is the only commandment,

66 Gerald Gardner, *The Meaning of Witchcraft*, Boston, MA: Weiser 2004, 108.

67 *Ibid.*, 167.

68 *Contra*: E. D. White, "'An' it Harm None...'", 154.

69 [Anon.], "Fifty at 'Pentagram' Dinner", *Pentagram* 2, November 1964, 5-7: 7.

70 See esp. Robert Mathiesen – Theitic, *The Rede of the Wicca*, Providence: Olympian 2005.

By Magick of old, be it done.⁷¹

The mention of “Love” here brings the saying closer to Crowley’s precept (as does the spelling of “Magick” with a “k”).

Valiente was prepared to acknowledge the Rede’s similarity to the precept, but in an interestingly qualified way. Her discussion of Crowley in her book *Witchcraft for Tomorrow* (1978) is ambivalent: she criticises him for being sexist and dictatorial, and she repeats the “Do what Aleister Crowley wills” jibe; but she does not place him under a general condemnation. In fact, she seeks to rehabilitate the precept, using two distinct strategies. First, she repeats Crowley’s own claim that everyone following their True Will would remove conflict from the world. Second, she situates the precept in a much older spiritual tradition. In place of the true line of succession – comprising the likes of King Pausole, Nietzsche, Francis Dashwood and Edward Kelley – she makes reference to St Augustine, the pagans of the ancient Mediterranean, and Hindu philosophy:

... [Crowley’s precept] is by no means new, and was not invented by him. Long ago, Saint Augustine said, “Love and do what you will”. The initiate of ancient Egypt declared: “There is no part of me that is not of the gods”. The pagan Greeks originated the saying: “To the pure all things are pure”. The implication is that when one has reached a high state of spiritual development and evolution one has passed beyond the comparatively petty rules of religion and society at some particular time and place, and may indeed do what one wills, because one’s true will is then knowable, and must of its own nature be right. The Upanishads or sacred scriptures of ancient India tell us that the knower of Brahma is beyond both good and evil.⁷²

4. The Rede and the domestication of Neo-Paganism

The most striking thing about the Rede is that it is something of a truism. Gardner conceded this in his comment about it being “elementary Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, and Judaism”. In the realm of secular philosophy, it is difficult to distinguish it from the classical liberal “harm principle” of John Stuart Mill. Mill wrote the following famous words in his seminal work *On Liberty* (1859):

That principle is, that the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.⁷³

71 Doreen Valiente, *Witchcraft for Tomorrow*, London: Robert Hale 1978, 72.

72 *Ibid.*, 44. She essayed a similar approach in Doreen Valiente, *An ABC of Witchcraft*, London: Robert Hale 1973, 36.

73 John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, New York: Liberal Arts Press 1956, 13.

This kind of harm-based liberal morality is essentially unremarkable in the modern Western world (even if the liberal tradition does appear to be under increasing threat). One commentator has concluded that Gardner's attempt to explain witches' ethics in *The Meaning of Witchcraft* was "more indicative of reasonably law-abiding people living in England in the early- to mid-twentieth century, than of any pronounced ideological position".⁷⁴ We might say that the Wiccan Rede is something approaching a statement of the obvious.

Having an ethical principle that people regard as a statement of the obvious is a major asset for a new religion that wishes to make its way in the world. Gardner seems to have wanted his new religion to be a popular, widespread success. He was willing to make compromises that Crowley was not. It worked – and the price was that his religion had to be, or to become, something that was less threatening to mainstream culture than Thelema.

It is likely that social class comes into this. Aleister Crowley was a member of an identifiable species of wealthy or blue-blooded occultist, in the mould of John Dee, Elias Ashmole, Madame Blavatsky, Annie Horniman and Dion Fortune. Gerald Gardner came from more or less the same social *milieu*; but a number of the people around him can be described as being further removed from the élite of British society, including Doreen Valiente, Edith Woodford-Grimes, Jack Bracelin, and Patricia and Arnold Crowther. I argue elsewhere that the witchcraft revival in Britain seems to have started among middle-class students at Oxford University.⁷⁵ A man like Crowley could, literally, do more or less what he willed. Something similar is doubtless true of members of genuinely marginal groups in society who have nothing to lose. But middle-class converts *have* got something to lose, in the form of social status and respectability, as part of the price for satisfying their unconventional spiritual inclinations.

In the decades since Crowley's death, Wicca and other esoteric traditions have become increasingly mainstream. The evidence is that they have made particular inroads into the white-collar suburban classes, although not necessarily the truly wealthy.⁷⁶ In the 1980s, Tanya Luhrmann's

74 Jon Hanna, *What Thou Wilt: Traditional and Innovative Trends in Post-Gardnerian Witchcraft*, Cathair na Mart: Evertype 2010, 31.

75 Graham John Wheeler, "An Esbat among the Quads", forthcoming in *The Pomegranate*.

76 To be fair, this is not an uncontroversial statement. See Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, London: Penguin 42006 (1st ed. 1979), 34: "I am not comfortable with the 'radical' analysis that says that the recent rise of occult groups is a white middle-class phenomenon. It is too simple, although many of those I subsequently met did fall into this category."

research in England found that magical “practitioners are on the whole middle class urbanites”, although “they tended to be lower middle or middle rather than upper middle”.⁷⁷ A decade later, Ronald Hutton observed that “modern pagan witches in Britain are drawn overwhelmingly from the upper levels of the working class and the lower levels of the middle one”.⁷⁸

We can put some figures around these claims. Participation in tertiary education is as good a metric of “respectable” social status as any: in part, because university and college degrees tend to be acquired by those with financial resources and middle-class ideas about education; and in part, because they tend to lead to occupations with higher pay and status. Several attempts have been made over the last few decades to survey the educational level of Wiccans and other Neo-Pagans. The surveys were conducted in different places and at different times, but the results consistently show figures for tertiary education that are much higher than average.

Source	Under-graduate degrees (%)	Graduate degrees (%)	Total with degrees (%)
Kirkpatrick et al. (1986) ⁷⁹	28 / 20	38 / 15	66 / 35
Orion (1995) ⁸⁰	36.3	28.1	64.4
Berger (1999) ⁸¹	65.4	16.1	81.5
Jorgensen and Russell (1999) ⁸²	26.7	18.8	45.5
Reece (2017) ⁸³	39.1 / 44.6	14.8 / 23.2	53.9 / 67.8
Cragle (2017) ⁸⁴	41	13	54

77 Tanya M. Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch’s Craft*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1989, 29.

78 Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999, 401.

79 R. George Kirkpatrick – Rich Rainey – Kathryn Rubi, “An Empirical Study of Wiccan Religion in Postindustrial Society”, *Free Inquiry in Creative Sociology* 14, 1986, 33-38: 34. The first number refers to Wiccans, the second to other Neo-Pagans.

80 Loretta Orion, *Never Again the Burning Times*, Prospect Heights: Waveland 1995, 67.

81 Helen A. Berger, *A Community of Witches*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press 1999, 8-9. The figures come from a “Pagan Census” carried out with Andras Corban Arthen.

82 Danny L. Jorgensen – Scott E. Russell, “American Neopaganism: The Participants’ Social Identities”, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 38, 1999, 325-338.

83 Gwendolyn Reece, “Pagan Leaders and Clergy: A Quantitative Exploration”, *The Pomegranate* 19, 2017, 25-46: 31. The second figure refers specifically to leaders in the community.

84 Joshua Marcus Cragle, “Contemporary Germanic/Norse Paganism and Recent Survey Data”, *The Pomegranate* 19, 2017, 77-116: 91. Cragle’s work, as the title suggests, deals specifically with Germanic-Norse Pagans.

Roughly a third of European and American adults have degrees;⁸⁵ so the figures in the table above tell us something significant about modern Pagans. They are not wealthy business heirs like Crowley; but they do belong to social demographics which have a certain stake and status in society. They will also have undergone a long process of socialisation, as well as education, in their years at school, college and university. This is a group of people who may have atypical religious leanings, but they are unlikely to be receptive to phenomena that look like Nietzschean proto-fascism or radically antinomian morality.

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It should be clear by now that Crowley's precept had a range of potential sources, including a number which were transgressive in character; and that these sources would have influenced both Crowley's formulation of the precept and the attitude with which it was received by his audience. After Crowley's death, the precept came to be adopted by the early Wicca movement and refashioned into the Wiccan Rede. As a result, it has turned into a more or less unthreatening truism: an essentially uncontroversial statement of classical liberal ethics. This in turn reflects the mainstreaming that esoteric religion experienced in the late twentieth century, as it moved from the Crowleyan periphery to something approaching suburban respectability.

85 See e.g. "Educational Attainment Statistics" [online], in: *Eurostat: Statistics Explained*, <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Educational_attainment_statistics>, June 2017 [24 May 2019], for the European Union, and Camille L. Ryan – Kurt Bauman, "Educational Attainment in the United States: 2015" [online], in: *United States Census Bureau*, <<https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2016/demo/p20-578.pdf>>, March 2016 [24 May 2019], for the USA.



SUMMARY

“Do What Thou Wilt”: The History of a Precept

Aleister Crowley is the most notoriously transgressive figure in modern Western esotericism, and his best known precept is “Do what thou wilt”. This article seeks to elucidate the place of Crowley’s precept in the history of esotericism and transgression. More specifically, it seeks to make two points. First, it shows, through an investigation of its sources and influences, that the precept had highly transgressive overtones in the period when Crowley adopted and popularised it. These overtones extended to sexual excess, religious deviancy and fascist politics. Second, it argues that the precept was repurposed in a major way in the latter part of the twentieth century. The precept became domesticated, as the founders of the Wicca movement subsumed it into their own ethical maxim, the “Wiccan Rede”. This development serves as an example of how some of the more transgressive and problematic elements of the Western esoteric tradition have come to be softened and obscured in contemporary mass-market, suburban forms of practice such as Wicca.

Keywords: Aleister Crowley; esotericism; occultism; occult revival; Western esotericism; Wicca.

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