

Melancholy and the Doctrine of Reprobation in English
Puritan Culture, 1550-1640

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Short Abstract

The thesis examines the relationship between reprobation fears and melancholic illness in puritan culture, over a period of approximately ninety years. Reprobation formed part of the Calvinist doctrine of double predestination, by which God had chosen a few for salvation (the elect), and many for destruction (the reprobate). When a person came to believe that they were reprobate, this could give rise to symptoms of fear and despair similar to those associated with melancholy (an imbalance of black bile believed to affect the brain). The thesis shows how puritans used explanations based on melancholy in order to explain how otherwise godly people came to doubt their election.

The first chapter shows how the Calvinist physician, Timothy Bright, incorporated ideas from medieval scholastic and medical texts into his *Treatise of melancholie* (1586), in order to explain how physiological causes could be at the root of reprobation fears. The second and third chapters examine the religious context in which Bright was writing. The second chapter shows puritan ambivalence about pronouncing a person to be reprobate through an examination of responses to the death of the apostate, Francesco Spiera. The third chapter shows how the Elizabethan puritan clergy developed a form of consolation for those suffering from despair of salvation based on the medieval idea that melancholy was the 'devil's bath'. The fourth and fifth chapters show the importance of physiological explanations for

despair in defending the reputations of the dying. When a godly person despaired on their death-bed, or committed suicide, this was blamed on a combination of forces external to themselves – melancholy and the devil. The final chapter shows how Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* adapted puritan ideas about despair, to be more acceptable in the context of growing resistance to the preaching of double predestination in the 1620s and 30s.

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Long Abstract

This thesis examines the relationship between reprobation fears and melancholic illness in puritan culture, from the days of the persecution of Protestants under Mary I, until the decades of rising tension between puritanism and Arminianism, just before the outbreak of the English Civil War. Reprobation formed part of the Calvinist doctrine of double predestination, by which God had chosen a few for salvation (the elect), and a large portion of the world's population for destruction (the reprobate). When a person came to believe that they were reprobate, this could give rise to symptoms of fear and despair similar to those associated with melancholic illness. Melancholy, or 'black bile', was one of the four humours in the body, which, according to Galenic theory, formed the basis of health and sickness. An imbalance of melancholy in the body could affect both the body and the mind, causing delusions and groundless fears. The thesis shows that puritan writing was important in the development of the concept of 'religious melancholy', which saw melancholic illness as the basis of a person's false perception of themselves and their relationship to God.

The first chapter examines explanations for reprobation fears found in *A treatise of melancholie* (1586), by the Calvinist Timothy Bright. It places this treatise in the context of the links made between melancholy and religious despair in medieval medical and scholastic texts, and in the context of new attitudes towards introspective

thinking about election and reprobation. The idea that the state of the soul could affect the body existed in both ancient medicine and early Christian thinking. These two strains of thought were the basis of medieval concepts of despair. Islamic treatises on melancholy from the ninth and tenth century argued, based on the Hippocratic saying that ‘Fatigue of the soul comes through the soul’s thinking’, that very religious people could become melancholy by taxing their soul through contemplating divine mysteries. These treatises were translated into Latin and became part of the canon of medical writing in Western Europe. In Christian tradition, it was believed that despair caused wasting of the body by reducing its vital heat. People of a naturally melancholic complexion were seen to be particularly prone to despair because Satan would take advantage of the weakness of their constitution to plant despairing thoughts in their minds. For this reason, a medieval proverb referred to melancholy as the ‘devil’s bath’. Whatever the causes of despair, whether physiological or spiritual, states of dejection were referred to by the medieval Church as the sins of *tristitia* or *accidia*.

These medieval texts influenced what was being written about melancholy in the sixteenth century. However, Renaissance medical texts departed from medieval scholasticism in their attempts to distinguish more clearly between sin, for which a person could be held responsible, and melancholic illness, which had physiological causes, and was morally neutral. This had implications for the Church’s teaching about sin and despair. If fear and sadness were simply products of melancholic delusion, then there was no need for the Christian to examine his conscience and repent of sin in order to be free of despair. Bright attempted in his treatise to distinguish between despair that came from a bad conscience, and melancholy. Historians have seen this as part of an attempt by English puritans to protect Calvinist

spirituality, based on repentance and sorrow for sin, from the encroachment of medical authority. However, Bright was merely including a defence against accusations of atheism that can be found in other medical texts at the time.

Bright had a more important aim than distinguishing between conscience and melancholy, which was to allay the fears of those who were afraid they might be reprobate. In achieving this aim, the Renaissance distinction between sin and melancholic delusion was useful. The medieval Church had warned lay people against attempting to discern whether they were elect or reprobate. Such questions were seen as presumptuous and dangerous. They could lead to a false sense of security about salvation, or to the other extreme of despair. Bright, however, influenced by Calvinist theology, took a different view. His medical treatise was based on old ideas about melancholy, but he was writing for a new readership – those who subscribed to the new form of piety based around seeking for signs of assurance of election. His aim was to reassure readers who had become doubtful of their election that their doubts were based on false fears caused by melancholic illness, and not an accurate reading of their spiritual estate.

The second and third chapters examine further the religious context in which Bright was writing about the relationship between melancholy and reprobation fears. In order to assess puritan reactions to the fear of reprobation, Chapter Two looks at what was written in England about the Italian apostate, Francesco Spiera, over a ninety-year period. Whereas previous historians have argued that puritans interpreted Spiera's despair, and subsequent death, solely in terms of divine retribution, and seventeenth century religious conformists in terms of melancholic illness, this chapter shows that puritan reactions were more complex than that. Calvin, himself, firmly believed that Spiera was a reprobate. However, puritans in England were ambivalent

about the question, and its pastoral implications, and departed from Continental Calvinist sources by suggesting that Spiera's perception of himself as a reprobate may have been false. The prominent Elizabethan puritan leader, William Perkins, attributed Spiera's fears to sickness, and denounced the original accounts of Spiera's despair and death as irresponsible in their approach to questions of election and reprobation.

Perkins' main concern was for the welfare of members of the godly community in England who might be experiencing similar fears about their spiritual estate. The third chapter examines this pastoral context from the 1550s until the end of the Elizabethan period. Puritan consolation literature began in the form of letters written by clergy in reply to the friends and parishioners in their care suffering from doubts about their election. This developed into treatises such as Bright's *Treatise of melancholie*, and Perkins' *Cases of conscience*. Consolation for those suffering from doubts about their salvation was seen as something that required expertise, including knowledge of both medicine and divinity. The late Elizabethan clergyman, Richard Greenham, built his reputation on his ability to offer advice to those in despair.

At first, the puritan clergy explained despair of election in terms of the temptations Satan used to trouble the elect. Later, this explanation was combined with that of melancholy. Perkins called melancholy the 'devil's bait', based on the medieval idea of the 'devil's bath'. 'Weak' Christians – conscientious members of the godly community who found themselves unable to live up to their own expectations in faith or action – were the most vulnerable to melancholy and the suggestions of the devil. Perkins also developed an explanation for reprobation terrors that fitted into a providential understanding of a person's experiences. Such fears were the result of 'temporary desertions' – a period of time in which God

removed his spirit from the elect in order to try their faith. During these periods, the elect experienced the same sense of hopelessness as the reprobate. As Perkins and Bright explained, the godly could recover from despair by recognising that their fears that they were not elect were based on the false perceptions of a melancholic mind and the lies of satanic suggestion. Ultimately, recovery was based in regaining a sense of assurance of election, not in rejecting the doctrine of double predestination.

The importance of defending assurance of election, as the source of consolation against despair, in puritan culture can be seen in the autobiographical writings of Dionys Fitzherbert. Writing at the turn of the seventeenth century, Fitzherbert was concerned that a period of distraction in which she had doubted her salvation would be seen by Catholic friends and family as evidence that Protestantism was a religion of despair. On the contrary, Fitzherbert insisted that her illness had been a form of desertion, caused partly by melancholy and partly by the suggestions of Satan, which she could not have recovered from by any other means of consolation, except by regaining assurance that she was one of the elect.

The fourth chapter demonstrates the importance of puritan explanations for reprobation fears in a particular context – defending the reputations of the dying. Making a ‘good death’ was important in early modern culture because a person who died at peace with God in their last hours in this life was seen as a true Christian who would enter Heaven in the next life. Therefore, when a person despaired of their election at this crucial time, this could be very damaging for the Protestant cause. A number of historians have looked at how English Protestants were influenced by the medieval *ars moriendi* tradition (the ‘art of dying well’). This chapter shows how that tradition was transformed in puritan writing through the inclusion of double predestination theology, and the incorporation of medical ideas into explanations for

the behaviour of the dying. The doctrine of limited atonement disrupted traditional ways of comforting the dying, which had been based on reassuring the dying person of the efficacy of Christ's atonement for sin. As the doctrine of limited atonement taught that the crucifixion atoned only for the sins of the elect, comfort for the dying in puritan death-bed literature was based upon reassuring the dying person that they were elect. Reassurance of salvation was no longer based solely on how a person behaved in their final sickness, but on the signs of election that could be observed throughout a lifetime. William Perkins, in his guide to dying well, urged by-standers not to place too much importance on the behaviour of the dying, as this could be influenced by the effects of sickness on the mind and body.

The rest of the chapter demonstrates how these ideas affected accounts of actual death-bed experiences of despair. The first is that of Thomas Peacock, a tutor at Brasenose College, and mentor to the famous seventeenth-century preacher, Robert Bolton, who died in 1611. When Bolton wrote an account of a period of despair of election that his tutor experienced in his last sickness, he interpreted it as kind of 'loving visitation', or divine mercy, like any other form of suffering sent by God to try the faith of the elect, and bring them to a deeper sense of faith. The author of an account of a similar experience of death-bed despair of election, from around the same date, wrote from quite a different point of view. This was the death of Katherine Brettergh, whose Catholic neighbours spread rumours that she had despaired on her death-bed. The authors of this account, and of a sermon preached at her funeral, acknowledged that Brettergh had doubted her election, but, influenced by Perkins' writing on the subject, blamed this on physiological causes associated with fever. Similarly, the author of an account of the despair of another puritan gentlewoman, Joan Drake, presented melancholic illness, caused by uterine disorder,

as the root of the problem. Finally, the chapter shows that the acceptance or rejection of medical explanations for despair of salvation was determined by the writer's assessment of the moral character of the dying person, and not by religious affiliation, as exemplified by the sermon on the death of a man called William Rogers, given by the conformist minister, Robert Abbot.

The fifth chapter examines further the importance of puritan explanations for despair in defending the reputations of the dying. This chapter looks at suicide – the ultimate 'bad death' – and its relationship to reprobation. There was a long tradition of Christian teaching against suicide, which regarded it as a sin worse than murder, for which the soul of the suicide was damned. Puritan writers re-interpreted self-murder as a sure sign of reprobation. However, this chapter shows that puritans did not regard all suicides as damned, based on an important distinction, as the writer of a seventeenth-century treatise on suicide, John Sym, put it, between 'self-murder' and 'self-killing'.

The suicides of prominent Protestants, such as the Judge, James Hales, who killed himself during the reign of Queen Mary, were embarrassing for the Protestant cause. They were also disturbing because they brought into question the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, by which the elect could not fall from grace and be damned. There were a number of ways in which it could be argued that the soul of a person who committed suicide was not damned. One was to suggest that the person had repented of the sin of taking their own life between the act of suicide and death. It was also possible to argue that suicide was not always immoral, but could be noble during times of persecution, such as the circumstances in which Hales had taken his own life. This was based on examples from early Church history, and on arguments from Stoic philosophy. Foxe attempted this second approach, but by the seventeenth

century, puritans had rejected Stoic arguments, as had a majority of the clergy in the Church of England. Sym also rejected the possibility of last minute repentance. However, Perkins argued that it was possible for a despairing member of the godly community to commit suicide in a ‘desertion’, and still be regarded as elect. In the seventeenth century, puritans turned to melancholy in order to explain how a member of the elect could commit suicide.

Evidence from diaries and autobiographies show that melancholy, and the temptations of the devil, were important for how puritans explained their own experiences of suicidal urges. As suicide was a sin that could only be conceived of in a reprobate mind, the godly had to find explanations for these thoughts that were external to themselves. For Dionys Fitzherbert and Nehemiah Wallington, both of whom experienced strong temptations to suicide, these explanations enabled them to maintain their self-identification as one of the elect, guaranteed to enter into Heaven, whatever the manner of their death.

The last chapter takes a fresh look at Robert Burton’s views on the relationship between melancholy and despair of salvation in his chapter on ‘religious melancholy’ in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. Historians have tended to see this chapter as the beginning of the idea of melancholy as an alternative to spiritual explanations for despair. They see this as a form of secularisation, prompted by anti-puritan sentiment. This thesis, however, emphasises the similarities between Burton’s views on the causes of despair, and those of his puritan sources. It also demonstrates the differences between Burton’s approach to the relationship between predestinarian teaching and melancholy, and the idea of the melancholic puritan as a trope, in anti-puritan discourse from the 1580s to the 1620s. The chapter places Burton’s writings on despair and double predestination in the context of growing opposition from the

government to predestinarian preaching. As a clergyman writing outside the puritan community, and at a time when discussions of the finer points of predestination theology were forbidden, Burton rejected a form of consolation based on assurance of election, as found in his puritan sources. He, therefore, turned again to Galenic medicine in order to find a cure for despair of salvation.

Prove Me Wrong

Sometimes I fear maybe I'm not chosen
You've hardened my heart like Pharaoh
That would explain why life is so hard for me

And I am sad Esau hated
Crying against what's fated
Saying Father, please, is there any left for me

Song lyrics from the album *Long Line of Leavers* (2000), by *Caedmon's Call*.
Words and music by Aaron Tate.

Caedmon's Call is a contemporary Christian band from the USA.

[<http://caedmonscall.net/song-vault/long-line-of-leavers/prove-me-wrong/>] (accessed 06/09/2011).

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Abbreviations and Conventions	p. 3
Introduction	p. 4
<i>Historiography</i>	<i>p. 9</i>
<i>Predestination</i>	<i>p. 15</i>
<i>Melancholy and the Humoral System</i>	<i>p. 26</i>
<i>Chapter Outline</i>	<i>p. 37</i>
Chapter One: Timothy Bright, Melancholy, and the Doctrine of Predestination	p. 40
<i>The Soul's Fatigue</i>	<i>p. 43</i>
<i>Tristitia and the Devil's Bath</i>	<i>p. 45</i>
<i>Atheism and Renaissance Medicine</i>	<i>p. 51</i>
<i>Predestination and Melancholy</i>	<i>p. 58</i>
<i>Conclusion</i>	<i>p. 64</i>
Chapter Two: The Despair of an Apostate: Puritan Responses to the Death of Francesco Spiera	p. 66
<i>Historiography</i>	<i>p. 67</i>
<i>The Story of Francesco Spiera</i>	<i>p. 70</i>
<i>Interpreting Spiera's Illness</i>	<i>p. 72</i>
<i>The Sin Against the Holy Ghost</i>	<i>p. 77</i>
<i>Reception in England</i>	<i>p. 80</i>
<i>Pastoral Response</i>	<i>p. 88</i>
<i>Spiera in the 1620s and 30s</i>	<i>p. 97</i>
<i>Conclusion</i>	<i>p. 101</i>
Chapter Three: 'Weak' Christians and Elizabethan Puritan Consolation	
Literature	p. 103
<i>Historiography</i>	<i>p. 106</i>
<i>Early Examples</i>	<i>p. 108</i>
<i>Elizabethan Consolation</i>	<i>p. 116</i>
<i>Richard Greenham: the Art of Consolation</i>	<i>p. 123</i>
<i>William Perkins: Temporary Desertion and the Devil's Bait</i>	<i>p. 132</i>
<i>Dionys Fitzherbert: An Autobiography of Spiritual Affliction</i>	<i>p. 137</i>
<i>Conclusion</i>	<i>p. 146</i>

Chapter Four: Despair of Election in Puritan Death-bed Narratives	p. 149
<i>Historiography</i>	<i>p. 151</i>
<i>The Ars Moriendi</i>	<i>p. 154</i>
<i>The 'Good Death' in Protestant England</i>	<i>p. 159</i>
<i>Sickness in Guides to Dying Well</i>	<i>p. 163</i>
<i>'The Grevious Visitation and Dreadfull Desertion of Mr. Peacock'</i>	<i>p. 167</i>
<i>The Religious Politics of Death</i>	<i>p. 175</i>
<i>Woman's Melancholy</i>	<i>p. 180</i>
<i>Distinguishing Between Medical and Spiritual Causes</i>	<i>p. 190</i>
<i>Conclusion</i>	<i>p. 193</i>
Chapter Five: Puritan Responses to Suicide	p. 196
<i>Historiography</i>	<i>p. 200</i>
<i>Views on Suicide and Salvation</i>	<i>p. 204</i>
<i>The Impact of Sectarian Conflict</i>	<i>p. 212</i>
<i>Elizabethan Opinions</i>	<i>p. 221</i>
<i>Finding Exceptions</i>	<i>p. 229</i>
<i>The Godly Experience of Suicide</i>	<i>p. 242</i>
<i>Nehemiah Wallington</i>	<i>p. 249</i>
<i>Conclusion</i>	<i>p. 258</i>
Chapter Six: Robert Burton and the Decline of Assuance	p. 261
<i>Melancholy in Anti-puritan Literature</i>	<i>p. 263</i>
<i>Despair in Burton's Chapter on 'Religious Melancholy'</i>	<i>p. 270</i>
<i>Burton's Cure for Fear of Damnation</i>	<i>p. 287</i>
<i>Conclusion</i>	<i>p. 289</i>
Conclusion	p. 291
Bibliography	p. 300

List of Abbreviations and Conventions

- Anatomy* R. Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. T. C. Faulkner, N. K. Kiessling and R. L. Blair (6 vols., Oxford, 1989-2000). Vols. i-iii contain the text by Burton, vols. iv-vi contain a commentary by J. B. Bamborough.
- ODNB* Oxford *Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and B. Harrison (Oxford, 2004) [<http://www.oxforddnb.com>].
- TAMO* J. Foxe, *The Unabridged Acts and Monuments Online* (Humanities Research Institute Online Publications, Sheffield, 2011) [www.johnfoxe.org]. All references are to the 1583 edition, unless otherwise stated. Pages are taken from the modern version.

A note on quotations

The original spelling and punctuation have been retained for manuscripts and printed works before 1800, except where raised letters have been silently lowered and contractions expanded. The letters ‘u’ and ‘i’ have been replaced with ‘v’ and ‘j’, where appropriate.

INTRODUCTION

Amongst the sermons of the famous eighteenth-century theologian and Anglican philosopher, Samuel Clarke, was one entitled ‘Of Religious Melancholy’. In this sermon Clarke attempted to explain why some people developed a belief that God was against them without any discernible basis in reason. For the wicked person to experience terrible pangs of conscience, and to be in fear of the wrath of God, was understandable. Their suffering was just punishment for their sins. As for the righteous, even in the midst of terrible and inexplicable illness or loss, they could still hold on to the hope of salvation. However, when a Christian who had committed no serious sin became as severely troubled in conscience as the worst sinner, and convinced that God had rejected him, his case was the most difficult to explain. This is what Clarke called ‘religious melancholy’: an apparently spiritual affliction that was actually a false state of mind. A person suffering from ‘religious melancholy’ was

by their own *Imagination* and groundless *Fears*, by *Indisposition of Body* and *Disorder of Mind*, by *False Notions of God* and of *Themselves* ... made very miserable in their own Minds. They fancy, though without sufficient reason, that *the Arrows of the Almighty are within them, the poison whereof drinketh up their Spirits; And that the Terrours of God, set themselves in array against them.*

Clarke went on to distinguish six causes of this disordered mind: a distemper in the body; a sense of failure in religious duties or zeal towards God; ‘An Apprehension of being excluded from Mercy, by some positive Decree and Fore-appointment of God’;

a fear of having committed the Sin against the Holy Ghost; guilt arising from blasphemous thoughts; and an inability to believe that past sins had been forgiven.¹

The idea that someone might believe that they were excluded from God's mercy seems an obscure form of illness to a modern mind. In the early eighteenth century, however, these cases were familiar. The 'positive Decree and Fore-appointment of God' to which Clarke referred, was the decree of reprobation by which a large proportion of the population of the world had been sentenced to an eternity in Hell before they were born. This was the negative side of the Calvinist doctrine known as double predestination, which held that the eternal destination of the saved and the damned were both determined by the immutable will of God, and not by any human action. The saved were referred to as 'the elect' and the damned 'the reprobate'. In early modern language, to be elect or reprobate was a person's 'estate'. By the time Clarke was writing, there had been many documented examples of people who had become convinced that they were amongst the reprobate. Many of them became seriously ill, refusing food, and suffering from fevers, sleeplessness and dramatic weight loss. Other symptoms included raving, blaspheming and suicide attempts.

The reasons for these symptoms remain mysterious, but early modern people attributed this condition to a range of causes, including underlying physiological disorders, divine intervention, a troubled conscience, and the interference of the devil. This thesis is an account of how fear of the eternal decree of reprobation came to be associated with melancholic illness, and how this association affected perceptions of despair and suicide in early modern England. It challenges the notion that this change in thinking about despair was driven primarily by developments in medical thinking. According to a dominant narrative of secularisation in the history of madness and

¹ S. Clarke, 'Sermon XIV: Of Religious Melancholy', in *Sermons*, 2nd edn. (10 vols., London, 1730-31), x, 311-17.

psychiatry, the intellectual and ruling elite in England began to favour physiological explanations for despair some time in the seventeenth century. These ideas drawn from medicine were used to undermine the religious worldview in which mental disorders were caused by sin and supernatural interference. On the contrary, this thesis will show that the growing acceptance that despair was, at least in part, attributable to physiological causes first developed within religious discourse about reprobation fears in the Elizabethan and early Stuart period. These were texts written by the ‘hotter’ sort of Protestants, rather than the conservative Church men who have previously been credited with promoting the notion of religious melancholy.

Rather than assuming a dichotomy between religion and science, this thesis seeks to shed light on the interaction between physiological, supernatural, psychological and providential explanations in early modern thinking about despair. It covers a period of almost one hundred years, from the first accounts of reprobation terrors found in sources from the 1550s, to the decades before the outbreak of civil war, by which time discussions of reprobation terror could be found in a wide range of texts, including diaries, biographies, works of practical theology, and medical texts. It ends by examining the work of Robert Burton, who wrote about ‘religious melancholy’ in the 1620s and 30s, when religion based on the notion of election and reprobation was becoming less acceptable in England.

The period has been chosen because it represents the years in which those who favoured a reformation of religion in England along the lines of the Calvinist Churches in continental Europe possessed the most influence over English culture and theology. This is the group that came to be known as ‘puritans’, at first as a derogatory label, but later simply as a description of a group of people who sought a form of Protestantism devoid of Catholic influences, and who held a particularly high

set of moral standards for Christian living. Although they never gained complete control over the Church of England, their writings were prolific and widely read in Elizabethan and early Stuart England, as was first demonstrated by William Haller.² This is a study of the relationship between reprobation and melancholic illness from a puritan perspective. It seeks to show how puritans understood, and responded to, cases of people who came to believe that they were predestined for Hell, and the vital contribution that they made to the concept of ‘religious melancholy’.

Although this is a thesis about religious melancholy, I avoid using the term throughout most of the chapters. This is because the term ‘religious melancholy’ did not come into use until the end of the period of study. The term was coined by Robert Burton in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, which was first published in 1621. Not only does that make it anachronistic for most of our period, but it soon developed political overtones, which means that it is not a neutral term that can be used simply as a description of a particular illness. In the latter part of the seventeenth century the term ‘religious melancholy’ was often used as a pejorative term to pathologise a form of religion that was regarded as overly passionate. This was a reductionist view of despair in comparison with the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century discussions about the complex relationship between melancholy, sin and human thought processes. People in our period tended to refer to episodes of anxiety over salvation as ‘terrors of conscience’, or ‘afflictions of conscience’. Even when melancholy was seen to play a large part in causation, afflictions of conscience were often not a shameful thing in puritan culture, but were infused with rich spiritual

² P. Collinson, ‘Antipuritanism’, in J. Coffey and P. C. H. Lim (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism* (Cambridge, 2008); W. Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism: or, The Way to the New Jerusalem as Set Forth in Pulpit and Press from Thomas Cartwright to John Lilburne and John Milton, 1570-1643* (New York, 1957).

meaning. Despair was regarded as a sanctifying experience, and those who had gone through it were seen as having a deeper form of faith.

There are a number of contexts in which puritan reactions to reprobation terrors need to be understood. During this period of influence in England, the reform movement faced a number of threats. In the early years, the attempt by the Roman Catholic Church to reassert its authority through the use of Inquisitions put the Reformation in serious jeopardy in a number of European countries. In England this manifested itself in the persecution of Protestants under the Catholic monarch Mary Tudor. After the Elizabethan settlement, which favoured Protestantism, conflicts continued between prominent reformers and what was left of England's Catholic population. In later years, the threat came from within Protestantism itself, as those within the Church of England who rejected elements of the reformers' agenda sought to denigrate and marginalise the more Calvinist sections of the Church. Against a background of hostility to Calvinist theology, puritans fought to maintain their identity as God's chosen, elect people and to combat accusations that they were a religion of despair.

Another important context is the pastoral obligations of clergymen. The key figures in developing the relationship between melancholy and despair of election were puritan clergymen within the Church of England. As well as being responsible for moral guidance and understanding of the catechisms of the Church, they were expected to provide comfort for the sick, the dying and anyone in any way troubled within the parish. Some scholars have argued that teaching the doctrine of double predestination to the laity was detrimental to the pastoral role of the parish minister.³ This was also a view expressed at the time. Whether or not this was the case, this

³ R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649*, 2nd edn. (Oxford, 1997), pp. 7, 29.

thesis will show that puritan ministers took their pastoral obligations very seriously, despite criticism of their theological standpoint. One of the things to come out of this was an interest in the relationship between spiritual despair and melancholic illness.

Historiography

This study will relate to the work of scholars from a number of overlapping fields of research. Firstly, it will interest anyone whose research lies within the interdisciplinary area of study of ‘religious melancholy’. Secondly, it will contribute to the work of historians of religion in England by providing further insight into puritanism and the culture surrounding the doctrine of double predestination. Lastly, it is a contribution to the history of medicine and health, especially the history of madness and psychiatry in England, which is still dominated by the pioneering work of Michael MacDonald and Terrence Murphy on cultural attitudes to mental illness and suicide in this period.⁴

In recent years, scholars across a number of disciplines have become interested in the link between Protestant piety and states of deep sadness and dejection in Europe in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This link has been found in pietist cultures in England, Germany and America, and its influence detected in works of European medicine, philosophy and literature. In May 2011, the first conference dedicated entirely to ‘religious melancholy’ brought together researchers from theology, sociology, and history of medicine, and experts in English and European literature, to discuss their findings. Topics included religion and melancholy in

⁴ M. MacDonald *Mystical Bedlam: Madness, Anxiety and Healing in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1991); idem and T. R. Murphy, *Sleepless Souls: Suicide in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1990).

Islamic medicine, Luther's theology of despair, pietism in Germany, puritanism in New England, and the influence of religious melancholy on eighteenth-century Romantic literature.⁵

On the English side, recent research into the early modern period has tended to focus on Burton's chapter on 'religious melancholy'; and on therapeutic languages. The intellectual historian, Angus Gowland, has investigated the context of European scholarship in which Burton fused together disparate ideas from medicine and religion into the single term, 'religious melancholy'. He argues that, at this time in Europe, the category of melancholy was expanding to incorporate under medical authority a number of discourses, including witchcraft and despair, that had previously been part of spiritual writing. Burton's chapter on 'religious melancholy' was part of that encroachment of medicine into areas of divinity.⁶

Other studies focus on attempts to relieve melancholic moods, rather than on the physiological causes. The notion of therapeutic languages is based on the idea that well-being can be attained by ordering the passions and thought processes through reasoned discourse. Therefore good counsel and written texts were the best form of medicine for a troubled mind. Jeremy Schmidt has studied the therapeutic languages of moral philosophy and theology that formed the basis of puritan works of consolation literature intended to relieve those suffering from a troubled mind. Mary Ann Lund argues that reading in sixteenth and seventeenth-century England became a form of therapy. According to her, Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* was not simply a descriptive work, but was intended to relieve his readers from melancholic suffering.

⁵ 'Religious Melancholy – An Interdisciplinary Conference', 19-20 May 2011, King's College, London, organised by Matthew Bell (King's College, London) and Jane Darcy (University College, London), link to conference description:

<http://www.kcl.ac.uk/artshums/archive/conferences/2011/relnel/index.aspx> (accessed 01/10/2012).

⁶ A. Gowland, 'The Problem of Early Modern Melancholy', *Past and Present*, 191 (2006), 77-120; idem, *The Worlds of Renaissance Melancholy* (Cambridge, 2006).

In appealing to a wide readership, it offered an alternative to the pious works of puritan consolation.⁷

What is missing from these studies is a sense of how puritanism contributed to the evolution of ‘religious melancholy’ as a concept. Puritans are presented as passive actors in the history of medicine; preoccupied with spiritual concerns, they are the sufferers and victims of religious sorrow to which innovative thinkers such as Burton respond.⁸ This thesis aims to reverse that perspective. Previous scholarship on the relationship between puritanism and religious melancholy has tended to focus on the later use of the concept in political discourse, in particular its association with ‘enthusiasm’ and all the undesirable traits that that word implied in Restoration England. Michael Heyd, basing his ideas on Foucault, has called this a type of ‘medical marginalisation of nonconformity’.⁹ However, although religious melancholy was later used against them, puritans themselves were the first to consider in any serious way how spiritual sorrow and melancholy might be linked. Rather than forming an entirely new approach to religious despair, Burton relied heavily on their ideas. The novelty of Burton lay in his creation of a new division of melancholic illness, which incorporated various forms of religious behaviour. He named this new division of melancholy ‘religious melancholy’.

⁷ J. Schmidt, *Melancholy and the Care of the Soul: Religion, Moral Philosophy and Madness in Early Modern England* (Aldershot, 2007); M. A. Lund, ‘Reading and the Cure of Despair in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*’, *Studies in Philology*, 105 (2008), 533-58; Lund, *Melancholy, Medicine and Religion in Early Modern England: Reading ‘The Anatomy of Melancholy’* (Cambridge, 2010).

⁸ J. H. Rubin, *Religious Melancholy and Protestant Experience in America* (Oxford, 1994), p. 5; Gowland, *Worlds of Renaissance Melancholy*, pp. 174-93. See also: H. Jackson, ‘Introduction to the 1932 Edition’ in Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. H. Jackson, with intro. W. H. Gass (New York, 2001), p. xxiv; MacDonald *Mystical Bedlam*, pp. 223-5; MacDonald and Murphy, *Sleepless Souls*, p. 64.

⁹ T. L. Canavan, ‘Robert Burton, Jonathan Swift, and the Tradition of Anti-Puritan Invective’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 34 (1973), 227-42; M. Heyd, ‘Robert Burton’s Sources on Enthusiasm and Melancholy: From a Medical Tradition to a Religious Controversy’, *History of European Ideas*, 5 (1984), 17-44; Heyd, *‘Be Sober and Reasonable’: The Critique of Enthusiasm in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries* (Leiden, 1995).

The study of religious melancholy overlaps with more general studies of puritanism. The importance of Calvinist theology in shaping puritan culture has long been recognised by scholars studying religion in Reformation England. Often their reflections have been fairly negative, blaming the theology of double predestination for a tendency towards self-laceration and psychosis within puritan culture. This can be seen especially in investigations by sociologists and from within English literature studies. For instance, in Julius Rubin's broad study of puritan despair in England and New England, *Religious Melancholy and the Protestant Experience in America*, he posits the thesis that suicidal feelings among these pious groups are a 'culture bound syndrome' that can be linked directly to Reformed theology. 'The Protestant Reformation built [a] prison in which believers chose to live,' he writes. The Christian in Calvinist England

languished in an iron cage, a prison of spiritual desolation. The promises of God's assurance of election and salvation remained ever outside of his grasp. Today, we marvel at how men and women could be so consumed with a conviction for sin, voluntarily embracing a spiritual regimen and internal discipline of an inner, psychological prison known as religious melancholy. How is it they as believers could succumb to the experiences of being forsaken by God, in terror before the withdrawal of divine love?¹⁰

John Stachniewski's *The Persecutory Imagination* is particularly hostile in its analysis of the effects of Calvinism on the English psyche, based on psychoanalytical reading of literature from the period. He produces evidence from sermons, diaries, autobiographies, medical treatises, anti-puritan texts, and poetry from the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, to back up his claim that puritanism was conducive to despair and suicidal tendencies. He describes Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* as 'the matrix for English cases of despair', and is dismissive of

¹⁰ Rubin, *Religious Melancholy*, pp. 3-12, 25-9.

the doctrine of assurance, which he describes as ‘supportive to the sanguine and murderous for the melancholy’.¹¹

This view of puritan culture has found its way into mainstream historical writing. In the introduction to their collection of essays on *The Culture of English Puritanism*, for instance, Christopher Durston and Jacqueline Eales assert that guilt and fear, obsessive self-scrutiny, and worrying over election were ‘a mental seam running through most of the movement’s spiritual and cultural manifestations’. The picture of evangelical English Protestants as psychologically unhinged has also entered popular culture. Christopher Sansom in his series of crime novels set in Henry VIII’s England includes a proto-puritan character, an apprentice called Adam Kite, who is driven mad by fear that he is amongst the damned. The narrator describes the boy’s vicar as one of the ‘godly men ... difficult to deal with, crude hard men who drove at you with biblical verse like a carpenter hammering in nails.’¹²

The problem with these portrayals of the puritan culture of election and damnation is that they suffer from what Thomas Dixon in his history of passions and emotions has called ‘presentism’. They look at the past through the assumptions and psychological categories of our own society, instead of in the context of contemporary understanding of despair. Dixon argues that such approaches to emotions in the past are not only anachronistic, but encourage us to accept uncritically the assumptions behind modern psychology, without considering that there are other ways of understanding human mental life.¹³ Our own society, for instance, tends to assume that guilt is always a bad thing, but in early modern society most people (not only

¹¹ J. Stachniewski, *The Persecutory Imagination: English Puritanism and the Literature of Religious Despair* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 17-61.

¹² C. Durston and J. Eales (eds.), *The Culture of English Puritanism, 1560-1700* (Basingstoke, 1996), p. 13; C. J. Sansom, *Revelation* (London, 2008), pp. 15-23.

¹³ T. Dixon, *From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 6-12.

puritans) were more likely to assume that at least some degree of guilt was a normal and necessary part of a healthy emotional and spiritual life. Another difference is that in early modern thinking there was a much stronger connection between diseases of the mind and diseases of the body than is assumed in popular understanding of psychology today. When researching sources that give us an insight into puritan psychology and emotional life, historians have tended to leave the body out completely. This is surprising considering the huge importance that contemporary writers placed on the health of the body when discussing issues of despair over salvation, as this thesis shall reveal. It analyses similar types of sources to those that formed the basis of Rubin and Stachniewski's studies of English puritan culture, but within the context of contemporary medicine. When the body is put back into the history of puritan despair, a quite different picture of puritanism emerges; one that is more self-reflective, more careful to avoid placing all the weight of blame for mental troubles onto sin, and, arguably, more humane.

Perhaps more surprisingly, English histories of madness in the early modern period also overlook the contribution that puritan writers made towards a physiological understanding of despair of salvation. Michael MacDonald depicts puritans as a reactionary group who saw all adverse human behaviour as originating in the suggestions of the devil and the inability of the individual to resist sin. This version of puritanism is in evidence in MacDonald's overview of seventeenth-century ideas about madness, and plays an even more prominent role in his history of suicide, co-written with Terrence Murphy. MacDonald attributes the increasing medicalisation of madness and suicide directly to the decline of clerical authority and the rise of the medical profession, without discussing the contributions made by puritan writers towards an understanding of the link between melancholy, troubles of

mind and suicidal behaviour. This omission has led him to posit a false dichotomy between puritan spirituality and medical materialism, and between puritan preaching (viewed as reactionary) and the ‘eclectic’ approaches of medieval and ‘Anglican’ spirituality. Again, a caricature of puritanism emerges, as solely obsessed with sin, Hell fire and Judgement.¹⁴ This study attempts to present a more rounded view of puritan teaching in which a concern for the well-being of the whole person, spiritual, physical and moral, informed puritan approaches to despair. One of the intriguing aspects of puritan preaching and writing was its ability to incorporate sections depicting dramatically the terrors of damnation alongside advice for maintaining good eating patterns. This can be seen, for instance, in the ministry of Richard Greenham, which will be examined in Chapter Three.

Predestination

Two concepts are central to this study and so require further explanation: the Calvinist theology of double predestination; and the theory of the four humours, which formed the basis of most early modern medicine and thinking about the body. Both these systems of thought provided frameworks for understanding despair. Double predestination provided a causal explanation for despair because it taught that there was a large section of the population, the reprobate, for whom there was no hope of salvation. For some people, it was also the basis of cure for despair. In countless puritan narratives and treatises in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries assurance of election was seen as the turning point at which the soul progressed from deep despair

¹⁴ MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*, pp. 217-31; MacDonald and Murphy, *Sleepless Souls*, pp. 28-41.

to true joy and peace. The humoral system, which shall be explained further in the next section, provided a competing explanation for despair. According to this ancient theory of medicine, all human behaviour, emotions and mental processes could be accounted for by the balance of fluids, known as humours, within the body.

To look first at the theological explanation for despair, double predestination refers to the belief that the decision about which course a person's life should take – whether a course leading to salvation, or a course leading to damnation – had been taken by God in eternity, and could not be altered by human endeavour. The positive side of this was the doctrine of election and the perseverance of the saints. The latter was the belief that salvation was dependent upon an irreversible decree made by God, by His own free grace, and therefore not amenable to any decision or action of man. This was based on the teaching of Paul and on passages in the Gospels in which Christ referred to those 'chosen ... out of the world'.¹⁵ Romans ix. 28-30 laid out the plan for salvation by which it was impossible for God's children to fall from grace. William Perkins called this the 'golden chaine of the causes of salvation that can never be broken'. *The golden chaine* became the title of a famous collection of Perkins' works, first published in 1591.¹⁶

The idea of positive predestination was much older than the Reformation. The official position of the Church had favoured predestination over human effort since the debates between Augustine and Pelagius. The heresy of Pelagianism was to deny the existence of Original Sin and the need for Divine grace, based on the idea that man had the potential to be virtuous by choice because of his God-given nature. By

¹⁵ Rom. xi. 5-6: 'Even so then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace. And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise, grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then it is no more of grace: otherwise work is no more work.' See also Eph. i. 4-12, 2 Tim. i. 9, Matt. xx. 23, John vi. 44, x. 28, xiii. 18, xv. 19, iii, xx. 9.

¹⁶ W. Perkins, *A golden chaine: or The description of theologie containing the order of the causes of salvation and damnation* (Cambridge, 1600), p. 678.

contrast, the Church taught that people were saved by the will and grace of God, despite their inherited tendency towards sin. More troubling was the reverse of this argument, that if God had predestined a few to be saved then it followed that He must also have predetermined the fate of the majority who would not. The Church had never been fully comfortable with the idea that God chose some people for damnation. Double predestination was officially condemned at the Synod of Quiercy in 849. In its place a concept of reprobation was developed, based on the idea of Divine foreknowledge rather than will. God willed the salvation of all, but he predestined some for damnation based on His having foreseen that they would continue in sin.¹⁷

With the Reformation, predestination took on a new significance. Having broken from Rome, Protestants in England and elsewhere in Europe needed to find some basis for salvation other than participation in the rites of the Church. Some looked to Calvinist teaching, which based salvation entirely on God's eternal decrees, and not at all on human works or rituals. This began with the writings of the theologian John Calvin. Calvin's contribution to the predestination/reprobation debate in *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536) was to dismantle the settlement based on foreknowledge. God did not will the salvation of all of His creation, but had predestined the majority of mankind for destruction based solely on His own good will and not on any action or faith of man, foreseen or otherwise. Calvin argued this both from his own reasoning and from scripture:

Indeed many ... accept election in such terms as to deny that anyone is condemned. But they do this very ignorantly and childishly, since election itself could not stand except as set over against reprobation. God is said to set apart those whom he adopts into salvation; it will be highly absurd to say that others

¹⁷ See entries on 'Predestination' and 'Pelagianism', in E. A. Livingstone (ed.), *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2nd edn. (Oxford, 2006); J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J. T. McNeill and trans. F. L. Battles (Philadelphia, 1960), pp. lvii-lix.

acquire by chance or obtain by their own effort what election alone confers on a few. Therefore, those whom God passes over, he condemns; and this he does for no other reason than that he wills to exclude them from the inheritance which he predestines for his own children.¹⁸

He used passages such as Romans ix. 11-13:

Though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad, in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of his call, it was said, 'The elder will serve the younger.' As it is written, 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.'¹⁹

Jacob and Esau were the sons of Isaac. Esau sold his birthrights to his younger brother Jacob for a bowl of pottage. In early modern English literature and sermons Esau, along with other biblical characters such as Judas and Cain, became an example of the despair of the reprobate cut off forever from the blessings of God.²⁰

Calvin himself admitted that the idea that God willed the destruction of so many was 'dreadful indeed', but he would not for that reason shy away from his conclusions. There could be no compromise where God's glory was concerned.²¹ The issue was not only theological, but a practical one of how the Church should teach predestination to its members and how individuals should consider the doctrine in relation to their own salvation. In the *Institutes* Calvin was not only arguing against the position of the Roman Catholic Church, but against his own associates, some of whom were contending that predestination should not be preached, for pastoral reasons. Calvin dismissed the argument that preachers should remain silent on the issue:

¹⁸ Calvin, *Institutes* (III.xxiii.1), p. 947.

¹⁹ Calvin, *Institutes* (III.xxii.4-6), pp. 936-40.

²⁰ Gen. xxv. 29-34; e.g. Anon., *A newe mery and wittie comedie or interlude ... treating upon the history of Jacob and Esau* (London, 1568), sig. Ai(v); A. Gilby, *A briefe treatice [sic] of election and reprobation* (London, 1575), sigs. [Bvi(v)], Diii(v); J. Dove, *A sermon preached at Paules Crosse* (London, 1597), p. 52; C. Brooke, *The ghost of Richard the Third* (London, 1614), sig. Ki(r); J. Stoughton, *The heavenly conversation and the naturall mans condition* (London, 1640), p. 64.

²¹ Calvin, *Institutes* (III.xxiii.7), p. 955.

They say that this whole discussion is dangerous for godly minds – because it hinders exhortations, because it shakes faith, because it disturbs and terrifies the heart itself – but this is nonsense! ... for those who are so cautious or fearful that they desire to bury predestination in order not to disturb weak souls – with what colour will they cloak their arrogance when they accuse God indirectly of stupid thoughtlessness ... Whoever ... heaps odium upon the doctrine of predestination openly reproaches God, as if he had unadvisedly let slip something hurtful to the church.²²

This was in opposition to Luther who regarded disputations over predestination as dangerous and ungodly.²³ However, Calvin himself was unclear about how far an individual could really know what God had destined for each person. In the same section of the *Institutes* he gave this ominous warning:

Human curiosity renders the discussion of predestination, already somewhat difficult of itself, very confusing and even dangerous. No restraints can hold it back from wandering in forbidden bypaths and thrusting upward to the heights. If allowed, it will leave no secret to God that it will not search out and unravel ... If anyone with carefree assurance breaks into this place, he will not succeed in satisfying his curiosity and he will enter a labyrinth from which he can find no exit.²⁴

While teaching assurance, therefore, Calvin left the door open to the possibility that consideration of the question of election and damnation could be dangerous.

The theology of predestination, and the debates over what should be taught to lay Christians, had a significant impact on the Protestant settlement of religion in England at the beginning of the reign of Elizabeth I, and continued to cause tension between Protestants over the following decades. There has been some debate over how far the Church of England based its doctrines on Calvinist theology. Article 17 of the 1563 Articles of Religion stated that ‘Predestination to life is the everlasting purpose of God, whereby (before the foundations of the world were laid) he hath constantly decreed, by his counsel secret to us, to deliver from curse and damnation

²² Calvin, *Institutes* (III.xxi.4), pp. 925-6.

²³ S. Snyder, ‘The Left Hand of God: Despair in Medieval and Renaissance Tradition’, *Studies in the Renaissance*, 12 (1965), p. 41.

²⁴ Calvin, *Institutes* (III.xxi.1), pp. 922-3.

those whom he hath chosen in Christ out of mankind'.²⁵ At one point it was fashionable to speak of a 'Calvinist consensus' in England during the Elizabethan period that was destabilised by a small Arminian faction that only appeared in the Stuart era. This was the view put forward by Nicholas Tyacke to challenge the idea that the Church of England had always remained aloof from continental developments along Calvinist lines. This view has been revised again by Peter White, who argues that leaders within the Church of England never agreed on the finer points of predestination, and at no time fully embraced either the opinions of Calvin or the opinions of Arminius. There was no attempt by an Arminian faction to take over the Church of England; rather, puritan pressure for further clarity over the issue of predestination in the Articles of Religion created rising tensions from the 1590s onwards.²⁶

Historians now tend to see both the notion of a 'Calvinist consensus' and the idea of two opposing parties – Arminian and puritan – as overly simplistic, as even among Calvinists there was diversity of opinion concerning predestination. Some historians now write about a Calvinist 'dissensus' – a superficial unity during the Elizabethan period and the first decades of the seventeenth century, which fell apart in the 1630s and 40s.²⁷ There were a number of areas of disagreement. One was over the theology of the atonement. A number of followers of Calvin believed in 'limited atonement' – that is, that the atonement for sins represented by Christ's crucifixion was limited to the elect and not available to the reprobate. This belief was based on passages in scriptures such as John xvii. 9, in which Christ before his death prays 'not

²⁵ Quoted in P. White, 'The Rise of Arminianism Reconsidered', *Past and Present*, 101 (1983), p. 36.

²⁶ N. Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists: The Rise of English Arminianism c. 1590-1640* (Oxford, 1987); White, 'Rise of Arminianism'.

²⁷ J. D. Moore, *English Hypothetical Universalism: John Preston and the Softening of Reformed Theology* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 224-9; M. P. Winship, 'Weak Christians, Backsliders, and Carnal Gospellers: Assurance of Salvation and the Pastoral Origins of Puritan Practical Divinity in the 1580s', *Church History*, 70 (2001), pp. 480-1.

for the world, but for them which thou hast given me'. The English delegate to the synod of Dort, however, rejected this as a belief of the Church of England:

Our church doth signify that the Promises of the Gospel do appertain to all generally to whom they are published ... This doctrine must needs be maintained; otherwise we cannot see what ground God's ministers have seriously to exhort and invite all to repentance, and believe in Christ, according to the mandate and promise of the Gospel.²⁸

The alternative teaching was 'universal grace' – that Christ's death was efficacious for everyone who was willing to repent. 'Limited atonement' had particular implications for those seeking to comfort people in despair of their salvation, which will be discussed in Chapter Four.

Another area of disagreement was whether predestination should be part of the ordinary content of sermons intended for the laity. Predestination was seen by some as dangerous because it led to presumption (sin that came from taking salvation from granted) and fractured communities. They claimed it caused people to believe that they could be saved without recourse to the sacraments or acts of piety, and that they were better than their neighbours. These feelings were well expressed in an outburst by Archbishop Richard Bancroft at the Hampton Court Conference held early in the reign of James I. Bancroft

took occasion to signify to his majesty, how very many in these days, neglecting holiness of life, presumed too much of persisting of grace, laying all their religion upon predestination, If I shall be saved, I shall be saved; which he termed a desperate doctrine, shewing it to be contrary to good divinity, and the true doctrine of predestination, wherein we should reason rather *ascendendo* than *descendendo*, thus; 'if I live in obedience to God, in love with my neighbour, I follow my vocations, &c., therefore I trust that God hath elected me, and predestined me to salvation.'²⁹

²⁸ P. White, *Predestination, Policy and Polemic: Conflict and Consensus in the English Church from the Reformation to the Civil War* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 187-92.

²⁹ White, *Predestination*, p. 145.

Therefore, the Church of England in this period can only be described as ‘Calvinist’ in a loose sense. Bishop Whitgift spoke for many when he wrote:

I reverence M. Calvin as a singular man, and worthy instrument in Christ’s Church; but I am not so wholly addicted unto him, that I will condemn other men’s judgements that in divers points agree not fully with him.³⁰

Puritans, however, defended double predestination and its teaching on the basis that God’s eternal decree of election was the only sure ground on which a Christian could have peace of mind regarding salvation. A God whose will could be altered by human actions was not fully sovereign, and a promise of salvation that was withheld from any who fell into sin was not salvation by grace alone. Puritans, therefore, placed great emphasis on attaining a sense of assurance that one was among the company of the elect.

This emphasis on assurance was the main thing that distinguished puritans from the rest of the English Church. Puritans reiterated the importance of being sure of election, rejecting the claims of their critics that expressing certainty about one’s salvation was presumptuous. This can be seen in a conversation about Heaven and Hell between two characters in Arthur Dent’s *The plaine mans path-way to heaven* (1607). Asunetus (‘an ignorant man’, the author informs us), expresses the Catholic view, which was still shared by a large number of people in England: ‘I will never beleeve, that any man can certainly know in this world, whether hee shall bee saved, or damned; but all men must hope well, and be of a good believe.’ Theologus, a Divine, disagrees:

We must goe further then hope well. We may not venture our salvation upon uncertaine hopes. As, if a man should hope it would be a faire day to morrow: but hee cannot certainly tell.

³⁰ Quoted in White, ‘Rise of Arminianism’, p. 35.

No, no. We must in this case, being of such infinite importance as it is, grow to some certainty, and full resolution.³¹

The idea that election was at once something that depended entirely on the will of God, and at the same time, something a Christians could dedicate his life to making sure of, could seem contradictory. However, Calvinists taught that if a person had been chosen by God this would be evident in a process of renewal that would take place in their lives. While good works could not achieve salvation, they were evidence of election, whereas a sinful life was the product of a reprobate mind, unenlightened by the grace of God.

Elizabethan followers of Calvin developed a number of ways of distinguishing the elect from the reprobate based on the teaching of Calvin's successor Theodore Beza. Beza directed believers to study their lives and the inner workings of their soul to discover signs of the sanctifying work of Jesus Christ that would mark them out as one of His chosen:

Nowe when Sathan putteth us in doubt of our election, we maye not searche first the resolution in the eternall counsel of god whose majesty we cannot comprehend, but on the contrarye we must beginne at the sanctification which we feele in our selves.³²

Whether or not this teaching, along with Beza's doctrine of limited atonement, was truly in line with Calvin is a controversial issue.³³ However, it was along these lines that English Calvinism developed. William Perkins' *A golden chaine* was strongly influenced by Beza's theology and inspired by a verse in 2 Peter exhorting Christians to 'make [their] election sure'.³⁴ Included in *A golden chaine* was 'A Table declaring the order of the causes of salvation and damnation', showing the paths of the elect and

³¹ A. Dent, *The plaine mans path-way to heaven wherein every man may cleerely see, whether he shall be saved or damned* (London, 1607), pp. 237-8.

³² Kendall, *English Calvinism*, p. 33.

³³ Kendall argues that it was not: Kendall, *English Calvinism*. See also debate: P. Helm, 'Calvin, English Calvinism and the Logic of Doctrinal Development', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 34 (1981), 179-85; C. Bell, 'Was Calvin a Calvinist', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 36 (1983), 535-40.

³⁴ 2 Pet. i. 10.

the reprobate from the point of God's decree before creation, to the point of eternal life or death. The reader could recognise in his own life the elect or the reprobate. R. T. Kendall refers to Perkins and those like him as 'experimental predestinarians' to distinguish them from those who subscribed to the doctrine of double predestination, but who were wary of delving too deeply into the question.³⁵ Experimental predestination was more than a theory; it was a whole way of life in which every thought and feeling could mean eternal life or death. To fully understand the implications of this theology, then, it is necessary to study the lives of those who believed in searching for signs of election, and not only at what was written at an academic level.

Experimental predestination affected a wide range of people in Elizabethan and early Stuart England. Anybody who owned a Genevan Bible could learn about predestination for themselves. Many of the editions printed in England during the last decades of the sixteenth, and the first decade of the seventeenth centuries, were bound with predestinarian catechisms. An Italian visitor to England in the 1580s reportedly said that 'the very women and shopkeepers were able to judge of predestination'.³⁶ The examples in this thesis of people who came to doubt their election tend to be from more privileged classes who were in a position to write and publish. However, fears over predestination could affect people of a much lower social station. The wood turner Nehemiah Wallington left behind many pages of his reflections on his own spiritual state. There was a case recorded in 1640 of a maid of Lady Brilliana Harley who was 'in a grievous agony of conscience and despair; she says she shall be damned'.³⁷

³⁵ Kendall, *English Calvinism*, pp. 8-9, 79-80.

³⁶ Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists*, pp. 2-3.

³⁷ Durston and Eales (eds.), *Culture of English Puritanism*, p. 11.

We can never be sure how many people were troubled by serious doubts about their election, but it is a common theme in extant diaries from the time. In December 1587, the Essex clergyman Richard Rogers wrote in his diary, ‘I was veary rarely [sic] stirred up in plenty and varietie of heavenly matter about the differences between the repro[bate] hipocr[ite] and the true Christian’. In fact, one of Rogers’ motivations for keeping a diary was in order to record evidence of his election that would provide comfort in periods when he was feeling downhearted or doubtful. Later, his method of attaining some sort of consistency and assurance in the Christian life was published as *Seven treatises containing such direction as is gathered out of the Holie Scriptures, leading and guiding to true happiness, both in this life, and in the life to come* (1603).³⁸ Such diaries and works of practical divinity have central importance in our endeavour to understand puritanism as a cultural movement, as opposed to the political movement that sought to reform English Church government along Presbyterian lines.

The development of a culture of puritanism is generally presented as a movement towards introspection and discipline of life and thought, and away from political activism.³⁹ However, few studies of puritan culture pay sufficient attention to the importance of the health of the body in puritan views of spiritual well-being. This thesis seeks to rectify that gap in the scholarship, as far as it concerns discussions of reprobation fears. It shows that, while puritans saw assurance of election as the main source of comfort for despairing persons, this assurance was partly achieved by attributing doubts over election to the false perception of a mind clouded by melancholy.

³⁸ M. M. Knappen (ed.), *Two Elizabethan Puritan Diaries by Richard Rogers and Samuel Ward* (Chicago, 1933), p. 73; R. Rogers, *Seven treatises containing such direction as is gathered out of the Holie Scriptures, leading and guiding to true happiness, both in this life, and in the life to come* (London, 1603).

³⁹ Winship, ‘Weak Christians, Backsliders, and Carnal Gospellers’, p. 463 and fn. 4.

Melancholy and the Humoral System

As already suggested, in the early modern period people did not make sharp divisions between the body and the mind, or between physical and emotional diseases. Writers did not only conceive of afflictions of conscience in theological, but also in bodily terms. An example of this can be seen in the following description from Robert Yarrow's early seventeenth-century consolatory work, *Soveraigne comforts*:

By the *effects* that come from the sorrow of sinne appearing *outwardly* in the body, we may in some sort learne how great that *griefe* and *anguish* is, that possesseth the heart *within*. For besides the plaints before set downe, he [one suffering from an afflicted conscience] oftentimes *bedeweth* his face with *teares* and weeping: the *body* also oftentimes waxeth *leane* and *wan*, *fretteth away* and *wasteth*, as pained with some grievous and consuming sicknesse.⁴⁰

The importance of the body to early modern conceptions of the self has begun to be recognised in the last decade. David Booy in his 2001 anthology of self-writing includes a section on it, exploring the ways in which the theory of the four humours affected how people interpreted their feelings and experiences.⁴¹ This is quite a different method of exploring the early modern conception of self from the psychoanalytical approach to sources represented by research such as Stachniewski's *The Persecutory Imagination*. It requires an understanding of the theory of the four humours that underpinned early modern concepts of the body and its disorders. Of particular importance to narratives of despair is the humour known as melancholy, which was another name for black bile. Melancholy is sometimes seen as

⁴⁰ R. Yarrow, *Soveraigne comforts for a troubled conscience, wherein the subtilties of satan are discovered*, 2nd edn. (London, 1619), p. 11.

⁴¹ D. Booy, *Personal Disclosures: An Anthology of Self-Writings from the Seventeenth Century* (Aldershot, 2001), pp. 221-90.

interchangeable with modern ideas about depression. The two states have many symptoms in common. However, as this is a thesis that relies heavily on understanding early modern ideas about melancholy, it is important to distinguish between the two from the beginning.

Melancholy is a far older concept than depression. It originates in the writings of natural philosophers in ancient Greece two and a half millennia ago. The Greek term μέλαινα χολή (*melaina chole*) translates into English as ‘black bile’. It was one of the four humours in the body, the others being blood, phlegm and yellow bile or choler. Black bile was believed to be concocted out of yellow bile, or out of blood, and stored in the spleen. It was cold and dry in quality – the opposite of blood, which was hot and moist – and was associated with middle age, the season of autumn and with the element earth. Μελαγχολία (*melancholao*) referred to states or diseases believed to derive from an imbalance of melancholic humour. It literally meant ‘I fill with black bile’. The term entered the English language around the fourteenth century, and by the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries ‘melancholie’, ‘melancholia’ and ‘melancholy’ were in common use as interchangeable terms referring either to black bile itself, or to melancholic illnesses. The meanings of melancholy were diverse. Robert Burton famously wrote that ‘The tower of *Babel* never yeilded such confusion of tongues, as this Chaos of Melancholy doth variety of Symptomes.’ It could refer to a mood of sadness or dejection; to the character of an introspective or creative personality – the melancholic temperament; to diseases of the brain such as epilepsy; or to states of delirium, delusion or irrational fear.⁴²

⁴² S. W. Jackson, *Melancholia and Depression: From Hippocratic Times to Modern Times* (London, 1986), pp. 4-5; N. Arikha, *Passions and Tempers: A History of the Humours* (New York, 2007), pp. 8-10; J. Radden, *The Nature of Melancholy: From Aristotle to Kristeva* (Oxford, 2000), p. 5; Burton, *Anatomy* (1.3.1.2), i, 395.

On the other hand, the term ‘depression’ did not emerge until the eighteenth century, and has been in common use as a diagnostic category only since the later part of the nineteenth century. In contrast to melancholy, its usage is fairly specific. ‘Depression’ refers to a depression of spirits – the dejection associated with melancholy – and ‘clinical depression’ to the debilitating mental illness associated with deep dejection, loss and self-loathing. Whereas melancholy had a specific somatic origin in black bile, modern medical theorists have been unable to agree on the root causes of depression, whether it is mainly a chemical imbalance in the brain, or the result of psychological trauma.⁴³

In his overview of medical texts about melancholy and depression from ancient times until the present, Stanley Jackson has found that there are significant consistencies in descriptions of the basic symptoms of melancholic and depressive disorders. Time and again a groundless sense of fear and sadness emerges as the defining characteristic of both melancholy and depression. It is this similarity that has led scholars in psychiatry and medicine to conclude that melancholy is merely an old name for the familiar state of deep dejection that we refer to as depression.

The philosopher Jennifer Radden, however, is more cautious about assuming too easy an equation between the two. She recognises four ways in which clinical depression is similar to melancholy: some combination of fear, dejection, sadness and anxiety are the common defining symptoms; these symptoms are groundless – they are unwarranted by the sufferer’s circumstances; people suffering from depression or melancholy can become self-conscious, self-centred, or oversensitive; and states of melancholy or depression have been observed to be related in some way to opposite moods of manic exaltation, restless activity and self-aggrandisement.

⁴³ Jackson, *Melancholia and Depression*, pp. 5-7; Radden, *Nature of Melancholy*, pp. 3-4, 49-51.

However, Radden also explains how melancholy was a much broader category than depression is now. Symptoms of melancholy often included delusions and hallucinations; the greater emphasis on fear as a symptom included illnesses we might now diagnose as anxiety disorders, obsessive compulsive disorders or persecutory paranoia, rather than simply depression. Melancholy also had quite different cultural associations from depression today. Especially during the Renaissance, melancholy had glamorous associations with genius and brilliance. The man of melancholic temperament was expected to excel in intellectual and creative pursuits. As these were considered masculine traits, melancholy was more commonly seen as a masculine illness, whereas by the nineteenth and twentieth centuries it had become associated with femininity and weakness. Also, melancholy lacked some associations that have become central to depression as a result of the influence of Freudian theory. Freud saw all melancholy as a type of mourning rooted in some kind of loss – often a loss of subjectivity that occurred in childhood. Freud also regarded self-critical and self-hating attitudes as a major cause and symptom in dejected states. Arguably, early modern writers did not conceive of the link between melancholy, loss and self-loathing in the same way as Freud.⁴⁴

A few of these points are worth expanding upon as they relate to this thesis. Firstly, from this brief description, the reason for the connection between melancholy and reprobation fears becomes immediately obvious. It is the same as the reason modern observers immediately think of depression when they read these accounts. Fear and sadness were the necessary accompaniments of reprobation terror: fear of impending Judgement; and despair at the seemingly irrecoverable loss of the hope of salvation. The connection between despair, melancholy and suicide, which will be

⁴⁴ J. Radden, 'Is this Dame Melancholy? Equating Today's Depression and Past Melancholia', *Philosophy, Psychiatry, and Psychology*, 10 (2003), pp. 37-41.

discussed at length in Chapter Five, should also be noted. Both despair and suicide had moral and spiritual connotations that would not be immediately familiar to the modern reader, but suicide also had a relationship to melancholy, as depressive illness does today. An example of this can be seen in a 1603 Italian engraving entitled 'Melancholicus'. The main figure in the engraving is a melancholic scholar, but behind him is a man about to throw himself into a river to represent, as the artist explained, the melancholic's 'tendency to gloom and a sense of futility and despair'.⁴⁵

The second important observation to make about the relationship between melancholy and depression is less obvious, but is no less central to understanding early modern responses to despair of salvation. Such is the influence of Freud on modern thinking that it is almost impossible to think of depressive illness without conceiving of it in terms of guilt and self-loathing. To the modern mind such things are in themselves unhealthy, but early modern people did not see guilt as an illness. The difference is a subtle, but important one. Although afflictions of conscience involved large quantities of guilt and self-recrimination, the guilt itself was not evidence of illness. What preoccupied the early modern observer was the question of causes. An imbalance of melancholy humour could cause irrational fear and sadness, but where despair and fear of Judgement resulted from a crime, there was a question over whether this should properly be regarded as an illness at all, whatever the effects on the mind and body. Sickness, they reasoned, originated in bodily disorders, and was amenable to medical intervention; but where the cause was a just sense of remorse or fear of detection, the disorder belonged properly to the realm of spiritual and moral discourse, and not to natural philosophy. In the Elizabethan and early

⁴⁵ Reproduced in Radden, *Nature of Melancholy*, p. 11.

Stuart period in particular, writers sought to resist a perceived encroachment of medicine into areas of moral and spiritual concern.

These writers were not necessarily puritan. Whereas reprobation was an issue that exercised the minds of puritans in particular, conscience was of more general concern to people in early modern England. Examples of this can be seen in literature. Ben Jonson, for instance, in the poem 'To Heaven' wrote:

Good, and great God, can I not thinke of thee,
But it must, straight, my melancholy bee?
Is it interpreted in me disease,
That, laden with my sinnes, I seeke for ease?⁴⁶

A famous example can be found in the madness that afflicts Lady Macbeth after the murder of Duncan. In the sleepwalking scene in *Macbeth* the physician who watches with the lady-in-waiting appears to have been added mainly to draw attention to his inability to offer any practical help. After listening to her recriminating speeches he concludes: 'unnatural deeds/ Do breed unnatural troubles ... More needs she the divine than the physician.' Two scenes later, an irate Macbeth demands of him:

Canst thou not minister to a mind diseas'd,
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,
Raze out the written troubles of the brain,
And with some sweet oblivious antidote
Cleanse the stuff'd bosom of that perilous stuff
Which weighs upon the heart?

To which the physician replies: 'Therein the patient/ Must minister to himself'.

Exasperated at the impotence of medicine, Macbeth cries: 'Throw physic to the dogs; I'll none of it.'⁴⁷

While moral and literary writers drew attention to medicine's inability to deal with some of the deepest aspects of the human psyche, medical discourse was

⁴⁶ B. Jonson, *The Workes of Benjamin Jonson*, ed. R. Bishop (London, 1640), p. 65.

⁴⁷ W. Shakespeare, *Macbeth. 2nd Series*, ed. Kenneth Muir (London, 1997), (Arden Shakespeare Complete Works online, *The Shakespeare Collection*) [shakespeare.galegroup.com], Act 5 Sc. 1 ll. 68-71; Act 5 Sc. 3 ll. 40-7.

expanding its explanatory power into areas which had previously been preserves of the spiritual world. Examples of this were in explanations of cases of apparent witchcraft and of apparitions. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, melancholy became part of an argument in Europe over whether the existence of spirits or diabolical interference in human life could be entirely explained away by natural causes.⁴⁸ Melancholy's association with delusion was the key to naturalising these experiences. This was caused by a type of melancholy called 'adust melancholy' or 'unnatural melancholy' rising up into the brain. Adust melancholy was another humour that had become corrupt through overheating or, in the case of blood, overcooling. Galen wrote that combustion of yellow bile 'provokes violent delirium in the presence or absence of fever, because it occupies the substance of the brain itself.' A number of factors could contribute to the creation of adust melancholy, including bad diet, immoderate passions, and physiological disorders.⁴⁹

Renaissance texts on melancholy recounted stories of the bizarre delusions that had been associated with melancholy since the days of ancient medicine. Popular ones included a young scholar who believed his nose had grown to a great length, and a baker who believed he was made of butter and would melt if he went near the oven. Other fragile objects that people believed they had turned into included a pitcher, or something made of glass. People also believed themselves to be all kinds of animals, including dogs, cats, wolves, nightingales, or cocks, and they would imitate the sound of that animal. People feared that Atlas would drop the world, or that their bellies were filled with serpents, mice or frogs. Many of these delusions revolved around the loss of body parts – an arm, a leg, or even a head. Some sufferers believed they were

⁴⁸ S. Clark, *Vanities of the Eye: Vision in Early Modern European Culture* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 212-16; Gowland, 'Problem of Early Modern Melancholy', pp. 92-6.

⁴⁹ Jackson, *Melancholia and Depression*, pp. 10-11.

dead and would not eat or drink.⁵⁰ When faced with cases of people who believed that they were damned, some observers concluded that this was another example of melancholic delusion.

These two concepts – the concept of groundless fear, and the concept of melancholic delusions – were at the heart of discussions about how to interpret and treat afflictions of conscience. Puritan ministers, like other writers in English society, resisted the idea that sorrow over sin could ever be regarded as entirely groundless. The question of reprobation, however, was a different matter. It was quite possible for a pious person to develop a groundless fear that they were reprobate. In fact, by the late Elizabethan period, some prominent puritan scholars doubted whether it was possible for anyone to experience a conscious awareness of their own reprobation. Such awareness suggested a concern over sin and salvation that should have been impossible for the reprobate. As we shall see in chapter two when we examine the case of a man called Francesco Spiera, the question of whether reprobation fears were melancholic delusions was not a question on which puritans were united.

A final aspect of early modern theories of the body that needs to be borne in mind is that strong emotions, or ‘passions’, as they were more generally called, could have a powerful effect upon the health of the body, even leading to death. A fright, for instance, could cause the body to produce an excess of black bile resulting in sickness or madness. It was therefore not a strange concept to early modern people that severe illness of both body and mind could have its roots in a problem to do with the soul. In fact, our word ‘emotion’ is derived from a term found in natural philosophy, ‘the soul’s motions’, more commonly referred to as the ‘perturbations of

⁵⁰ Jackson, *Melancholia and Depression*, pp. 87-8; Clark, *Vanities of the Eye*, p. 57.

the soul'.⁵¹ Also, what occurred in the mind – the workings of a deranged imagination – could lead to both madness and disease. The physician, Guglielmo Gratarolo, summed up why regulating passions and thoughts was necessary to remaining in good health, in a passage on 'the Accidentes and affections of the minde':

And forasmuche as there is a verye great connexion or knittinge together betwene the bodye and the mind, in so much y^t many times we see sundry & diverse great alteracions of the body (yea now and then) death to ensue, onely throughe carefull thoughtes and phantasticall immaginacions, it is very requisite and expedient that unto the conservation of the body in good health the minde shoulde be in perfecte frame and soundness. And therefore ... wee shoulde have a diligent care to our minde if wee desire to propulse and eschue maladies and diseases: whiche opinion also Galen helde ... sayinge that wee must abstaine from the intemperance and deformitie of al these passions & affections of y^e mind, Angre & sorrow[,] furiousnes and fear, envie and thought.⁵²

This close relationship between the body and the mind could lead to disagreement over what had originally caused a case of deep dejection, and, therefore, how to proceed to cure the sufferer. Where a malady was judged to have begun with some kind of disturbance of mind, good counsel from wise friends or clergymen would be expected to have more effect than the cures offered by Galenic medicine. This was why there was often disagreement over whether terrors of conscience should be referred to as cases of melancholy. Some argued that only conditions originating in a disturbance of bodily fluids could be properly regarded as melancholic illness. As it was difficult in practice to distinguish between the symptoms of melancholy and

⁵¹ D. Gentilcore, 'The Fear of Disease and the Disease of Fear', in W. Naphy and P. Roberts (eds.), *Fear in Early Modern Society* (Manchester, 1997), pp. 194-7, 199; Jackson, *Melancholia and Depression*, p. 15; Jackson, 'The Use of the Passions in Psychological Healing', *The Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, 45 (1990), p. 155.

⁵² G. Gratarolo, *A direction for the health of magistrates and studentes*, 2nd edn. (London, 1574), sig. Tiv(r-v).

an afflicted conscience, a consensus grew up in medicine and practical divinity that these cases required the expertise of both physicians and those trained in divinity.

These offered two cures that were very different from one another. As we have seen, for puritans a sense of assurance based on signs of election was central to attaining peace of mind. In Galenic medicine, the cure and prevention of melancholy, as with any other illness, was dependent upon proper regulation of the seven naturals and the six non-naturals, and upon the ancient theory of opposites. The naturals were the basic constitutional parts, the disturbance of which contributed to disease in the body. The humours were one aspect of constitution, along with the elements, the temperaments, the parts of the body, the functions, and the spirits. The non-naturals were environmental factors that affected health. One of these factors we have just looked at – the passions or perturbations of the soul. Others were air, exercise and rest, sleep and wakefulness, food and drink, and excretion and retention of superfluities. By the theory of opposites, unhealthy imbalance in body or mind was cured by the opposite of what caused it. Therefore, a disease brought on by fasting was cured by eating, and a disease brought on by over-eating was cured by fasting. Diseases of indolence were cured by exertion, and diseases caused by over-exertion cured by rest. Warming remedies were applied to ‘cold’ diseases caused by an excess of the cold humours, melancholy or phlegm, and cooling remedies were applied in ‘hot’ diseases caused by excess of the hot humours, blood or choler. The same principle was applied to regulating the passions. The aim was to disperse one strong passion by inducing another equally strong or, as Burton put it, ‘to force out one nail with another’.⁵³

⁵³ Jackson, *Melancholia and Depression*, pp. 11-12; idem, ‘Passions in Psychological Healing’, pp. 150-65.

Melancholy being a disease of a dry, cold humour, accompanied by the passions of fear and sadness, it was treated with warm, moist remedies and changes of environment intended to induce pleasant feelings. As the mind tended to be restless, strenuous mental exertion was discouraged. Blood letting and purges to regulate the humours were sometimes recommended, but generally the milder, non-intrusive approach of bringing the body back into equilibrium through regulation of the non-naturals was preferred. The aim was to moisten and warm the body. Diet was particularly important. Dry, acidic foods such as red meat, black bread, vinegar, lentils and garlic were to be avoided. Moist foods such as fish, eggs, lamb and lettuce were recommended. Broths moistened the body inwardly, warm baths moistened the body outwardly. The herb hellebore had been associated with the cure of melancholy since Hippocratic times. The importance of sleep, exercise, and rest was stressed by physicians. Alongside these measures, the patient had to be careful of becoming solitary or of allowing his imagination or thoughts to be influenced by gloomy or dissonant factors. He had to seek out peaceful surroundings, soothing music, pleasant images, and cheerful company.⁵⁴

Although puritans advised their readers and parishioners to follow some of this advice in order to avoid despair, the Galenic cure for melancholy was in some ways incompatible with spiritual consolation. Whereas puritans advised people to attain a sense of assurance of salvation, Galenic theory advised against considering deep subjects such as difficult matters of theology in times of melancholy. The implications of this difference in approach will become clearer in Chapter Six.

⁵⁴ Jackson, *Melancholia and Depression*, pp. 82, 86, 90-1; Arikha, *Passions and Tempers*, pp. 58-9.

Chapter Outline

The following chapters trace the adoption of melancholy into puritan explanations of reprobation fears. They examine the role of melancholy in advice given to those suffering from despair, and in biographical and autobiographical literature, in order to determine the extent to which melancholy was accepted as a cause of despair of election, and how this shaped puritan responses to mental illness, death-bed behaviour and suicide.

Chapter One looks at the medical background of the link between melancholy and reprobation fears. The two shared many symptoms in common, and in medical texts in Europe and England at this time, despair of salvation could sometimes be found as a symptom of melancholy. Medical writing is placed in the context of atheism and debates about materialism and the soul. The chapter will show that it was a Calvinist, Timothy Bright, who wrote in most detail about the relationship between melancholy and reprobation. Bright established the pattern of puritan writing on melancholy and cases of conscience, which first rejected a reductionist view of despair in which sin played no part, but then established that melancholy could play a significant role in unsettling a person's assurance of election.

Chapter Two develops further the historical background in which Bright was writing about reprobation fears. The subject of this chapter is the Italian apostate, Francesco Spiera, whose story became popular in England and other areas of Europe influenced by Calvinism. Spiera became convinced that he was reprobate after publicly denying the Protestant faith. By tracing the literature on Spiera published in England between 1550 and 1640, it is possible to see a shift in puritan responses to the story. Whereas early commentators rejected melancholy as an explanation for

Spiera's state of mind, by the late Elizabethan and early Stuart period melancholy was seen as playing some part in his condition.

The third chapter examines the development of a puritan literature of consolation against despair that formed the context for this shift in approach to doubts over election. Richard Greenham's pastoral ministry in the 1580s and 90s to friends and parishioners who became troubled over this issue was regarded as pioneering an effective strategy to confront the fears of those disturbed by the idea that they might be reprobate. His letters and sermons were published posthumously as a guide for those in distress. William Perkins wrote more systematically on this theme in works published around the turn of the century. Their ideas, however, bore strong resemblance to what Bright had already written in his treatise on melancholy in 1586. The autobiography of Dionys Fitzherbert reveals that these ideas were affecting how people explained actual cases of despair.

In the fourth chapter we turn to another group of sources that reveal puritan concepts of the link between melancholy and despair as they were developing in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Biographical material on illness and death contain narratives of those who believed themselves to be reprobate. These were religiously inspired accounts of the illness of friends and family members, intended to reveal a person's spiritual condition at their death. Where there was a struggle for assurance of Heaven, illness was one of the factors that could explain a less than peaceful departure from life.

The fifth chapter looks at the most perplexing question facing a puritan struggling to comprehend the causes and effects of despair – whether a person who committed suicide could be among the elect. Previous histories of suicide have tended to characterise puritan preachers as encouraging harsh attitudes towards

suicide. This chapter reassesses puritan views of suicide, examining the extent to which puritan writing exempted those suffering from melancholic illness from the eternal penalties that were generally believed to follow inevitably from the sin of suicide.

The final chapter is written from a different perspective as it examines how the link between puritanism, reprobation and despair was understood by those outside the puritan community. It looks at the significance of melancholy as a cause and consequence of puritan culture in anti-puritan writing, including satirical poetry and the stage. The majority of the chapter focuses on Robert Burton's section on despair in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. Writing in the context of political opposition to puritanism, and the attempt to suppress discussion of predestination and reprobation in the 1620s and 30s, Burton drew on many of the ideas from puritan texts written from previous decades. The chapter assesses the extent to which Burton accepted or rejected the advice for overcoming fear of damnation found in his puritan sources.

CHAPTER ONE

Timothy Bright, Melancholy and the Doctrine of Predestination

The most significant contribution to English thinking about the relationship between melancholy and despair in the sixteenth century was Timothy Bright's (1549/50-1615) *A treatise of melancholie* (1586). Bright penned the treatise while in post as chief physician at St. Bartholomew's Hospital, London. He explained in the dedication that he wrote it in English 'to the end our people, as other nations do, might acquaint them selves with some part of this kinde [of understanding in medicine and philosophy]'. The treatise was intended to be educational in more than one area. As well as containing practical information on the avoidance and cure of melancholy, it also contained philosophical discussions on the relationship between the soul, the spirit and the body. The full title was very long, promising to explain the causes of melancholy and 'the strange effects it worketh in our minds and bodies', as well as providing 'physicke cure, and spirituall consolation for such as have thereto adjoined an afflicted conscience', together with an introductory section on 'the difference between it [an afflicted conscience], and melancholie with diverse philosophicall discourses touching actions, and affections of soule, spirit, and body'. Although the treatise is not thought to have been as widely read as Burton's much more famous, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, its influence can be seen in passages from the plays of Shakespeare, especially *Hamlet*, and in sections of *The Anatomy of Melancholy* itself.

As will be seen in chapter three, Bright's ideas can also be found in puritan works of practical theology from the 1590s.¹

Historians have made much of Bright's attempt to distinguish between 'natural melancholie, and that heavy hande of God upon the afflicted conscience, tormented with remorse of sinne, & feare of his judgement'. They have attempted to relate this to puritan spirituality, and to make a distinction between Bright's understanding of a troubled conscience as something separate from natural melancholy, and Burton's later concept of 'religious melancholy'. Both Noel Brann and Angus Gowland regard Bright's distinction as foundational to Calvinist spirituality. The reliability of the conscience, Gowland argues, was 'located at the centre of puritan practical piety'. By the seventeenth century this attempt to maintain a distinction between conscience and melancholic illness had ultimately failed, they argue, as exemplified by Robert Burton's merging of melancholic illness and conscience under the single heading of 'religious melancholy'.²

In this chapter I present quite a different perspective on Bright. Focusing on the distinction between conscience and the effects of melancholy humour has caused historians to miss the central question of Bright's treatise and its significance for the development of the connection between melancholy and spiritual despair as it was understood in English discourse. Acknowledging the limitations of medicine and the existence of a soul that acted independently from the body was commonplace in works of natural philosophy at this time. However, the problem Bright was

¹ G. Keynes, *Dr. Timothie Bright 1550-1615: A Survey of His Life with a Bibliography of His Writings* (London, 1962), pp. 8, 18; P. Life, 'Bright, Timothy (1549/50-1615)', *ODNB*; T. Bright, *A treatise of melancholie containing the causes thereof, & reasons of the strange effects it worketh in our minds and bodies* (London, 1586), sig. iv(v).

² N. L. Brann, 'The Problem of Distinguishing Religious Guilt from Religious Melancholy in the English Renaissance', *Journal of the Rocky Mountain Medieval and Renaissance Association*, 1 (1980), 63-73; Gowland, *Worlds of Renaissance Melancholy*, pp. 176-7, 179-80; Bright, *A treatise of melancholie*, sig. iii(v).

addressing was specific to the context of English Calvinism in the 1580s: how could a person who had previously shown signs of being amongst the elect come to believe that they were reprobate, and could this have anything to do with melancholy?

Bright's answer was that melancholy could not affect the soul itself, but that it could affect a person's perception of the state of their soul by clouding the mind. A melancholic person could not judge correctly of their estate because they were 'blinde folded by the humour'.³

The question was new and the answer was new. However, in many ways Bright's treatise was conservative. Explanations and treatment of melancholy in medical treatises did not change radically between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.⁴ In order to explain how melancholy could be responsible for a person despairing of salvation, Bright drew on ideas from medieval scholasticism and from a tradition of thinking about melancholy that can be traced back to Islamic medicine in the tenth century. Bright's treatise differed from medieval views of melancholy in its attempt to present melancholy as an illness that needed to be treated like any other, rather than the result of sinful attitudes or behaviour. It also differed in its perspective on predestination, encouraging the Calvinist view that a Christian should seek signs of assurance of election, rather than the medieval Catholic view that contemplating God's decrees of election and reprobation was presumptuous.

³ Bright, *A treatise of melancholie*, p. 233.

⁴ Jackson, *Melancholia and Depression*, pp. 78-9.

The Soul's Fatigue

Looking at the history of the relationship between melancholy and religion in previous centuries enables us to place Bright's treatise, together with that of Burton, in context. Although Burton credited himself with being the first to write about the link between religion and melancholy, these ideas can be found in much earlier texts in the canon of medical works in Western Europe. Burton borrowed, for instance, from the work of the al-Rāzī (c.854-925/935), the ninth century alchemist and philosopher from Persia (now Iran). His famous book, *The comprehensive book of medicine*, was translated into Latin in the thirteenth century. Burton referred to this Latin version in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*:

Rhasis an Arabian, *cont. lib. 1 cap. 9* speaks of a fellow that in like case complained to him, and desired his helpe: *I asked him (saith hee) what the matter was, he replied, I am continually meditating of heaven and hell, and me thinks I see and talke with fiery spirits, smell brimstone, etc. and am so carried away with these conceipts, that I can neither eat, nor sleepe, nor goe about my busenesse.*

In the section of *The comprehensive book* that Burton was referring to, al-Rāzī was explaining that a person could become melancholy without an imbalance of black bile in the body ('when the humours are well [mixed] and do not require any medication') simply by their thinking becoming distorted. 'This is caused,' he wrote, 'by thinking about something startling.' He gave an example of a man who came to him with a complaint he thought was caused by black bile. 'I think about God, the exalted,' the man told him, 'where did He come from? And how did He create the things [that exist?]' Al-Rāzī's reply was that 'such thinking was common to all intelligent people'.⁵

⁵ Entry on 'Al-Rāzī', *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (2012); Burton, *Anatomy* (3.4.1.5), iii, 395. For the English translation of al-Rāzī I am indebted to Peter E. Pormann and Pauline Koetschet (both Warwick University), for a presentation given at King's College, London on 19 May, 2011, as part of the

While al-Rāzī is considered the greatest physician in the history of Islamic medicine, more important for the development of theories of melancholy was a tenth century Jewish physician from Baghdad called Ishaq ibn Imran (fl. early tenth century), who wrote a treatise on melancholy in which he linked the illness to philosophical and spiritual pursuits. His texts were transmitted to the West through the translations of the eleventh-century monk Constantinus Africanus.⁶ Although he did not refer to him specifically, sections of Bright's *Treatise on melancholie* seem to have been influenced by Ishaq's ideas, as shall be shown later in this chapter.

Ishaq characterised melancholy as 'an irrational, constant sadness and dejection' in which the patient became delusional so that 'horrible pictures and forms pass before their eyes'. Physical symptoms often included weight loss and sleeplessness. Ascetics, he claimed, such as philosophers who fast and stay awake all night were particularly prone to melancholy. This was because their way of life did not observe the proper rhythms of the six non-naturals, such as eating, drinking and resting. Such an unhealthy regime caused their bodies to produce vaporous black bile, which rose up into the brain confusing the reasoning faculties and 'destroying the power of apprehension'.⁷

However, melancholy, in Ishaq's view, could also be caused entirely by mental over-exertion, as al-Rāzī had claimed. Ishaq based his description of this type of melancholy partly on the ancient idea of love-melancholy, and partly on the Hippocratic saying that 'Fatigue of the soul comes from the soul's thinking'. Love-melancholy was the painful passion that arose from unrequited love or unfulfilled longing. Fatigue of the soul came about when the rational soul immersed itself too

'Religious Melancholy' conference organised by Matthew Bell (King's College, London) and Jane Darcy (University College, London). The section is taken from al-Rāzī, *The Comprehensive Book of Medicine* (23 Vols., Hyderabad, India, 1955-7), i, 68-9.

⁶ Arikha, *Passions and Tempers*, pp. 56-7.

⁷ Jackson, *Melancholia and Depression*, pp. 56-8.

deeply in any activity, whether of studying, imagining, remembering, or judging – it would become exhausted, just like the body, giving rise to melancholy. ‘There are very many holy and pious men,’ wrote Ishaq,

who become melancholy owing to their great piety and from fear of God’s anger or owing to their great longing for God until this longing masters and overpowers the soul; their whole feeling and thoughts are only of God, the contemplation of God, His greatness and the example of His perfection. They fall into melancholy as do lovers and voluptuaries, whereby the abilities of both soul and body are harmed, since one depends on the other.

A similar state would befall anyone who overexerted themselves reading philosophical books on medicine, logic, music, mathematics or the ‘theory of all things’: ‘in the consciousness of their intellectual weakness, and in their distress thereat they fall into melancholy. The reason why their soul falls sick lies in fatigue and overexertion.’⁸

***Tristitia* and the Devil’s Bath**

The ideas found in Islamic medical texts would be revived in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when printing made the Latin translations more widely available, and refashioned in a post-Reformation Christian context.⁹ However, in the intervening centuries, another tradition of thinking about melancholy developed in scholastic texts on despair, otherwise known as the sin of *tristitia*. *Tristitia* was the sin of ungodly despair – when a person despaired of divine help or salvation. It was one of the seven deadly sins, and the opposite of the virtue of hope. It was sometimes

⁸ Jackson, *Melancholia and Depression*, pp. 58-9; Arikha, *Passions and Tempers*, pp. 57, 160.

⁹ E. Savage-Smith, ‘Medicine’, in R. Rashaed (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the History of Arabic Science* (3 vols., London, 1996), iii, 913-27; D. Jacquent, ‘The Influence of Arabic Medicine in the Medieval West’, in *ibid.*, 963-84.

distinguished from ‘holy despair’, which was when a person felt remorse and loss of self-sufficiency on account of their sins. *Tristitia* could also refer to the passion of sorrow. Another important concept for understanding medieval views of melancholy is the notion of *accidia*. Like *tristitia*, *accidia* also had a number of possible connotations. In a narrow sense, it could simply mean the sin of sloth, but it could also refer more generally to a state of dejection or inertia, which modern readers might see as a kind of depression. Originally, *accidia* was a kind of malaise that overcame people in secluded religious orders when they became weary of the strict way of life and began to neglect religious duties such as prayer. In its widest definition, *accidia* could include *tristitia*, covering both states of sorrow, dejection and despair, and neglect, idleness and indolence. Some texts in the Middle Ages used the terms interchangeably to refer to any kind of low mood.¹⁰

Dante met those who had succumbed to *accidia* in the fifth circle of Hell:

Lodged in the slime they say: ‘Once we were grim
And sullen in the sweet air above, that took

A further gladness from the play of sun;
Inside us, we bore acedia’s dismal smoke.

We have this black mire now to be sullen in.’
This canticle they gargle from the craw,
Unable to speak whole words.¹¹

This highlights *accidia*’s ambiguous position as both a sin and a physiological state of over-abundance of humours in the body. Scholastic writers believed that it could be caused by an overabundance of the cold, moist phlegmatic humour, causing lethargy, or the cold, dry humour of black bile, causing despondency. It was possible to make a distinction between melancholia and *accidia* because the sadness associated with *accidia* was not accompanied by delusions or hallucinations. Nevertheless, some

¹⁰ Jackson, *Melancholia and Depression*, pp. 65-77; Snyder, ‘Left Hand of God’, pp. 20-1

¹¹ Arikha, *Passions and Tempers*, pp. 115-16.

scholars identified some cases of *accidia* as melancholy. When viewed in a medical framework, the condition tended to be approached more sympathetically and the sinfulness of the vice lessened. A text on *accidia* written in the thirteenth century distinguished between laziness, lack of devotion to God, sorrow arising from impatience or unreasonable grief, and ‘the abundance of melancholic humors, in which case it behoves the physician rather than the priest to prescribe the remedy.’¹²

However, a diagnosis of melancholy did not necessarily mean that there was no spiritual aspect. In scholastic tradition, the devil was always the first cause of despair. An old idea was that the devil attacked a person at their point of weakness. Where there was an excess of sorrow (the passion *tristitia*), this could attract a demon that would influence, or even possess, the sorrowful person, exacerbating their predicament. In an English treatise by an anonymous author entitled *Agayne Despayre*, this was rationalised in physiological terms. The devil, recognising the natural tendency of a person of melancholic ‘compleccion’ (complexion), would assail that person with temptations to despair. Much later, Burton would use the memorable phrase ‘the devil’s bath’ to describe this idea that over-abundance of melancholic humour could attract evil spirits. The term appears to be proverbial, and of medieval origin. H. Walther included the proverb ‘a melancholy head is the Devil’s bath’ in his compendium of 150,000 medieval proverbs, collected in the 1960s and 70s.¹³

Similarly, where despondency was seen to arise primarily from sin, that did not mean that there was no physical aspect. Another old idea was that sinful passions had an effect upon the body. Thomas Aquinas believed that despair undermined the vital

¹² Jackson, *Melancholia and Depression*, pp. 65-77.

¹³ Snyder, ‘Left Hand of God’, pp. 35-8; Burton, *Anatomy* (1.2.1.2), i, 193, (1.3.3.1), i, 428, (3.4.1.2), iii, 361, (2.2.3.4) 411, (2.6.3.4) 433. Bamborough includes the proverb found in H. Walther’s twentieth century compilation in his commentary on Book One of *The Anatomy of Melancholy: Anatomy*, iv, 235.

energy of the body. Another theologian, Nicholas of Lyra, argued that despair resulted in a physical weakening by causing a failure of heart, on which the external parts of the body depended for their strength. Chaucer made a similar link between despair and the decline of the body: ‘Thanne comth the synne of wordly sorwe, swich as is cleped *tristicia*, that sleeth man, as seith seint Paul./ For certes, swich sorwe werketh to the deeth of the soule and of the body also’. In medical theory, this was expressed in terms of negative passions such as fear and sadness causing the heart to constrict or contract.¹⁴

The connection of despair with bodily wasting carried on into the early modern period in both literature and medicine. Often, physical signs of what was happening in the body could be seen in the face. Robert Burton explained that the despairing person was unable to eat, drink or sleep: ‘feare takes away their content, & dries the blood, wasteth the marrow, alters their countenance’. A striking image of this is Spenser’s allegory of despair in *The Fairie Queene*:

That cursed man, low sitting on the ground,
Musing full sadly in his sullein mind;
... his face; through which his hollow eyne
Lookt deadly dull, and stared as astound;
His raw-bone cheeks through penurie and pine,
Were shronke into his jawes, as he did never dine.¹⁵

Despair was also linked to curiosity over predestination. For a person to look too deeply into God’s decrees of salvation and damnation tended to be presented in a negative light in medieval texts on despair. It was seen as evidence of a foolish curiosity, arrogance and independence of mind. A Christian should seek holiness of life through obedience to Church teaching, and not attempt to short-circuit good works and penance by putting their faith in having been elected to salvation.

¹⁴ Snyder, ‘Left Hand of God’, pp. 38-9, 53-4; Jackson, ‘Passions in Psychological Healing’, p. 160.

¹⁵ Burton, *Anatomy* (3.4.2.4), iii, 421; E. Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. T. P. Roche, Jr. (London, 1978), (bk.1.IX.35), p. 154.

Speculation over predestination risked two opposite dangers – the danger of presumption and the danger of despair. An example of this is the famous text *The Scale of Perfection*, written by the monk Walter Hilton in the fourteenth century. Hilton warned his readers not to fall into the trap of believing that they were damned based upon a prophecy or ‘ony styrynge withinne bi incastyng of the eyne’, for some ‘unkunynge’ people had fallen that way ‘into grete heavynesse, and as it were into dyspeir of savacioun’. Neither should they be too certain of their salvation, lest they continue in deadly sin ‘for to hafe truste of savacion, and in hope of that trust’. Instead, Hilton advised his readers to be confident that ‘thou art ordaynyd of oure Lord to be saaf as oon of His chosen’ based on unquestioning conformity to the faith and sacraments of ‘Holi Church’ and not on speculations based on personal feelings or utterances external to Church authority.¹⁶

All of these views of despair saw it as a sin resulting from some kind of disorder in the body or soul. There was another view of despair, however, which was more positive. Despair was seen as a temptation most often suffered by the most holy people. Periods of sorrow were necessary for the process of sanctification by which a person came to greater self-knowledge and knowledge of God. In the New Testament, Paul had distinguished between ‘godly despair’, which leads to repentance and salvation, and ‘worldly sorrow’, which leads to death (2 Corin. vii. 10). A very old text on *tristitia* from the fifth century explained that it was possible to tell the difference between godly sorrow and worldly sorrow, because those who experienced the first would be humble, obedient, patient, and forbearing, whereas those suffering the latter would be impatient, full of rancour, ineffective, and irrational. This idea of

¹⁶ W. Hilton, *The Scale of Perfection*, ed. T. H. Bestul (Kalamazoo, Michigan, 2000), pp. 53-5.

‘godly sorrow’ continued in the scholastic tradition, and was especially popular with the mystics.¹⁷

Jennifer Radden has reflected that medieval views of sin do not fit into our categories of moral responsibility and passive states of illness. Those suffering from *accidia*/melancholy were responsible for resisting the state of despondency. Sin was often written of in metaphorical terms as an affliction which needed to be cured, rather than a set of actions over which the sufferer had complete control. Confession and penance were the remedies for sin. The tradition of the pastor/confessor as ‘physician of souls’ was rooted in the idea of Christ as healer. The ‘physician of souls’ was advised to empathise as far as possible with the penitent, and to develop a sympathetic understanding of human nature.¹⁸ The idea of the clergyman as a ‘physician of souls’ persisted into the early modern period. However, Renaissance medical texts began to make a clearer distinction between melancholic illness and sinful passions. In sixteenth and seventeenth century texts, both puritan and non-puritan, we shall see a view of melancholy more familiar to the modern mind, in which a person is not held morally responsible for the effects of a bodily disorder. However, many less familiar medieval themes persisted – the ‘devil’s bath’, the devil as first cause, the wasting effects of despair upon the body, the importance of spiritual physic, and the beneficial effects of the suffering of the saints.

¹⁷ Snyder, ‘Left Hand of God’, pp. 19-23.

¹⁸ J. Radden, *Moody Minds Distempered: Essays on Melancholy and Depression* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 37-8; Jackson, *Melancholia and Depression*, pp. 69-70.

Atheism and Renaissance Medicine

During the Reformation both despair and predestination began to play a more complex part in the emotional life of a Christian. Both Luther and Calvin saw despair as a necessary part of the conversion experience in which the believer came to recognise their complete powerlessness over sin and the need to depend on God's grace for salvation. Susan Snyder has written that 'Protestantism was, in a sense, born of Christian despair – the dissatisfaction with works and rites which can never be perfect, the tormented conscience, the desire for spiritual rebirth in total dependence on God.'¹⁹ Having rejected many of the rites and rituals of the Church, Protestants looked for a new source of security when anxieties over the next life surfaced. Some found this in the teaching of predestination and the perseverance of the saints. As we saw in the introduction, puritan preachers taught that seeking signs of assurance of salvation was not a sin, but a vital aspect of true piety. Sorrow over sin continued to play an important part in puritan life in what Jeremy Schmidt calls 'a dialectic of sorrow and joy', in which puritans experienced periods of deep dejection and anxiety over salvation followed by periods of joyful assurance and hope in the efficacy of the crucifixion.²⁰

For this reason, historians have tended to see the relationship between melancholy and sorrow as an obstacle to puritan spirituality. If despair was seen as a symptom of humoral dysfunction, rather than a response in the soul as the conscience became aware of sin, then physic could undercut the necessity for repentance and conversion encouraged by puritan preachers. At first this would seem to be borne out

¹⁹ Snyder, 'Left Hand of God', p. 23.

²⁰ Schmidt, *Melancholy and the Care of the Soul*, p. 59.

by Timothy Bright's treatise. In the introduction he wrote that one of his purposes was to correct a false perception of medicine's place in curing disordered passions:

The notable fruit and successe [of medicine] hath caused some to judge more basely of the soule, then agreeth with pietie or nature, & have accompted all maner affections thereof, to be subject to the physicians hand, not considering herein any thing divine, and above the ordinarie events and naturall course of thinges.

He sought, therefore, to draw a distinction between illness caused by melancholy humour and 'the affliction of soule through conscience of sinne'. 'Their distinct natures thus compared,' he wrote

[will] bewray the error of some, and the prophanes of othersome, who either accompt the cause naturall, melancholy, or madness, or else having some farther insighte, with a Stoicall prophanes of Atheism, skoffe at that kinde of affliction, against which they themselves labour to shut up their hard heartes, & with obstinacie of stomach to beare out that whereof they tremble with horror.²¹

Bright distinguished a proper sense of guilt from the disease of melancholia on three points. Firstly, melancholy was a physiological illness caused by an excess of melancholy humour in the body. In contrast, sorrow over sin was a spiritual problem that should not properly be called an illness at all because it did not begin in the body. Feelings of dejection over sin were caused by 'the severity of Gods judgement, summoning the guilty conscience ... the sinfull soule apprehending the terror thereof, which is not momentary or for a season, but for ever and ever'. Secondly, the passions of fear and sadness were quite different in each case. The symptoms of melancholy were frequently defined as 'fear and sadness without cause', in the sense that the sufferer had no real external cause for fear or unhappiness, but only the internal disruptions of melancholy that clouded the judgement and caused delusionary

²¹ Bright, *A treatise of melancholie*, sig. iii(r), pp. 187-8.

fears.²² As has been mentioned above, conscience during this period in England was regarded as one of the ways in which God brought judgement upon a sinner. Like many of his contemporaries, Bright regarded the sufferings of conscience as the worst affliction that could befall man, but entirely justified on the basis that sinners had broken the law of God and so deserved His wrath and vengeance. Therefore guilt, in contrast to melancholy, was ‘a sorrow and feare upon cause, & that the greatest cause that worketh misery unto man’. The third major difference between a troubled conscience and melancholia concerned cure. There were many theories on how to cure melancholia, many of which Bright included in his treatise. A change of diet, procedures such as bloodletting, cordials made up of precious stones or herbs – particularly hellebore and borage – were believed to alleviate melancholia. As afflictions of conscience did not originate in the body, then none of these would have any effect in bringing about a cure: ‘Here no medicine, no purgation, no cordiall, no tryacle or balme are able to assure the afflicted soule and trembling heart, now panting under the terrors of God’.²³

Bright identified this terror of conscience with a number of biblical exemplars of the reprobate:

Of this kinde Saule was possessed, to whom the Lord sent an evill spirite to encrease the torment; and Judas the traytor, who tooke the revenge of betraying the innocent upon him selfe with his owne handes; such was the anguish that Esau felte when he found no repentance, after he had sold his birthright for a messe of pottage; and such is the estate of all defiled consciences with heinous crimes; whose harts are never free from that worme, but with deadly bite thereof are driven to dispaire.²⁴

²² Jackson, *Melancholia and Depression*, p. 15; Radden, *Moody Minds*, p. 5; A. Du Laurens, *A discourse of the preservation of sight: of melancholike diseases; of rheumes, and of old age*, trans. R. Surflet (London, 1599), p. 82.

²³ Bright, *A treatise of melancholie*, pp. 188-90, 275-7; Jackson, *Melancholia and Depression*, p. 82, 86, 90-1.

²⁴ Bright, *A treatise of melancholie*, pp. 193-4.

As explained above, Brann and Gowland interpret Bright's motivations in making this distinction in the light of Elizabethan puritan spirituality. However, I would argue that Bright's attack on atheism, and the initial chapters of *A treatise of melancholie*, which focus on the relationship between the body and the soul, are best seen as part of a general rejection of materialism and atheism in Europe at this time. 'Atheism' in this period rarely referred to an outright denial of God's existence. It most often amounted to a denial of divine intervention in human affairs, or a preference for natural over supernatural explanations for events. The Catholic writer, Thomas Fitzherbert, included in his definition of 'atheism' 'such, as denie the particular providence of God in the affaires of men'. Those accused of 'atheism' were most often reported as saying that God did not bring judgement upon people for their sins, or that he did not govern the world. Uttering such statements was punishable by law. In the 1590s there were an unusual number of prosecutions brought against individuals for atheism, including the famous case of Christopher Marlowe. Conservative members of the Church of England felt as strongly about the problem as reformers. Those who saw atheism as a serious threat to the Church of England during the Elizabethan period included Richard Hooker and the anti-Martinist author, Thomas Nashe, who wrote that 'There is no Sect now in England so scattered as Atheisme'.²⁵

However, it was not human courts that the atheists were urged to fear. It was common to view the terror of the damned as the just punishment visited upon the atheist at some point at which his conscience began to trouble him. This was often thought to be the time that death approached, awakening him to the reality of his own

²⁵ M. Hunter, 'The Problem of "Atheism" in Early Modern England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 35 (1985), pp. 136-43, 150-1.

mortality and the immortality of God. The sixteenth-century French philosopher, Montaigne, wrote about atheists:

They establish ... by the reason of their judgement, that whatsoever is reported of hell, or of after-coming paines, is but a fiction; but the occasions to make triall of it, offering it selfe, at what time age or sickenes doth sommon them to death: the [terroure] of the same, through the horroure of their future condition, doth then replenish with another kinde of beleefe.²⁶

Whilst Galenic theories of medicine were almost universally accepted, physicians were often suspected of atheism because they could be perceived to be overly dependent on the teachings of Galen, who denied the possibility that disease could result from divine intervention rather than natural law.²⁷ Connected to this was the notion of materialism, or denial of the immortality of the soul. Since the time of Aquinas, theologians had held that it was a heresy to suggest that the soul was subject to the body, and could not survive independently. Although the philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), and some members of fringe religious groups, questioned the concept of the immateriality of the soul in the seventeenth century, the majority of those engaged in natural philosophy at this time were careful to distance themselves from claims that could lead to accusations of atheism.²⁸ An example of this can be seen in another treatise on melancholy written by a contemporary of Bright, André Du Laurens (1560?-1609), and translated into English by Richard Surflet. In *A discourse of the preservation of sight ... [and] ... of melancholike diseases* he argued that illness in the body could cloud the mind causing madness without touching the soul:

I would not have thee (O Atheist whosoever thou art) hereupon to conclude, that the soule of man suffereth any thing in his essence, and thereby to become subject to corruption: it is never altered or

²⁶ Quoted in M. Hattaway, 'The Theology of Marlowe's Doctor Faustus', *Renaissance Drama*, 3 (1970), pp. 66-7.

²⁷ P. H. Kocher, 'The Idea of God in Elizabethan Medicine', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 11 (1950), pp. 3, 8-9.

²⁸ Dixon, *From Passions to Emotions*, p. 38; J. H. Brooke, *Science and Religion: Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 124-44.

changed, neither can it suffer any thing, it is his instrument that is evil affected.

He used a simile of the sun's brightness which can be eclipsed by the clouds or the moon, but its power is undiminished.²⁹ Arguing that corruptions in the body could distort the workings of the soul in the body, but not affect the soul itself, was a common method used in medical writings to ward off accusations of 'atheism'.³⁰

What is important for understanding the view of melancholy put forward by Bright and Du Laurens is not their rejection of a materialist understanding of the soul, but the distinction they attempted to make between sinful passions and melancholic illness. Where medieval scholarship had tended to regard melancholy as, at least partly, a moral failing, humanist scholarship, based on a revival of classical philosophy, tended towards an approach that saw melancholy as morally neutral.³¹ Du Laurens believed that some forms of madness were the result of giving way to sinful passions. These were disorders that resulted from an

alteration in the soule alone, the bodie standing sound and without blemish: as when a man by his malicious will becoming an apostate and revolt, defaceth the ingraven forme of the Deitie, and commeth by the filth of sinne to defile the holy temple of God, when through an unruly appetite, he suffereth himselfe to be carried in such headlong wise after his passions, either of choler, envie or gluttonie, as that he becommeth more outrageous then a lyon, more fierce than a tiger, and more filthe and contemptible then a swine.

In these cases, religious instruction was the most appropriate method of alleviating the problem: 'I goe not about to redresse this deformitie, I leave the discourse for the learned Divines'.

There was, however, a second form of madness that 'may happen unto the most religious'. This occurred

²⁹ Du Laurens, *Discourse of the preservation of sight*, p. 82.

³⁰ Kocher, 'The Idea of God', p. 5.

³¹ Radden, *Moody Minds*, pp. 6, 30.

when the bodie, which is as it were the vessell of the soule, is so greatly altered and corrupted, as that all the noblest faculties of the same, are likewise corrupted, the senses seeme all of them to wander and goe astray, every motion to be out of order, the imagination troubled, the reason foolish and rash.

As those in the second category were suffering from a terrible disease caused by melancholic humours affecting the brain, theirs was a case ‘to bee weighed of every one with a tender and charitable compassion’.³²

Bright’s fictional friend ‘M’ was an example of melancholy befalling the religious. He was not an ignorant or worldly person, but ‘a man exercised in the studie of pietie’.³³ His case, however, was particularly interesting, because it could look like purely spiritual despair. Du Laurens paid only cursory attention to this. Rationalising that melancholic people became obsessive in whichever area of life their personality bent, he wrote, somewhat dismissively, that a religious person when they became melancholy ‘will doe nothing but mumble of his beades, and you shal never finde him out of the Church’.³⁴ Bright, however, had thought about the matter more deeply and come to the conclusion that there was a connection between pursuing spiritual understanding and melancholic illness – especially contemplation of the decrees of election and reprobation. As we shall see in the following chapters, the time in which Bright was writing was a time in which the doctrine of double predestination was creating serious pastoral problems within the Protestant community. Although Bright’s was a medical treatise, it was addressed to this readership.

³² Du Laurens, *Discourse of the preservation of sight*, pp. 80-1.

³³ Bright, *A treatise of melancholie*, sig. vi(v).

³⁴ Du Laurens, *Discourse of the preservation of sight*, p. 98.

Predestination and Melancholy

With the Renaissance there came a revival of interest in the relationship between melancholy, the spiritual and the intellectual. This was most obvious in Burton's chapter on 'religious melancholy', which appeared as a subdivision of 'love-melancholy'. However, Bright's treatise also attempted to make sense of religious anxiety through the lens of accumulated wisdom on melancholy. His treatise was much more focused than Burton's would be. Whereas Burton would try to make sense of a whole range of diverse behaviour, from atheism to suicide attacks, using the idea of 'religious melancholy', Bright focused in on one question: how could a devout person come to believe that they were reprobate? He describes the experience of a fictitious friend 'M', who has come to fear that he is reprobate:

You feele (you say) the wrath of God kindled against your soule, and anguish of conscience most intolerable, and can finde (notwithstanding continuall prayers and incessaunt supplication made unto the Lord) no release, & in your owne judgement stand reprobate from Gods covenant, and voide of all hope of his inheritance, expecting the consummation of your misery and fearefull sentence of eternall condemnation.³⁵

Not everybody was sympathetic to the dilemma Bright describes here. The medieval view of meditations on predestination did not stop at the sixteenth century. A woodcut picture from Alexander Barclay's *Ship of fools* (1509), an English adaptation of Sebastian Brant's *Das Narrenschiff* (Basel, 1494), demonstrates the old view. The picture, entitled 'of predestynacion' shows the fool sitting on a lobster and leaning on a broken reed. The reed represents the doctrine of predestination that he has foolishly placed his trust in, and the lobster the backwards progress that he makes in his journey of faith. The text below the picture reads:

³⁵ Bright, *A treatise of melancholie*, p. 207.

That man that lokyth for to have a rewarde
Whiche he hath nat deservyd to obtayne
And lenyth his body upon a rede forward
Whiche for waykenes may hymn at well sustayne.

The *Ship of fools* continued to be popular for the rest of the sixteenth century.³⁶

There was, of course, a new view of predestination that emerged in the sixteenth century, as discussed in the introduction, which regarded searching for signs of election and reprobation as a pious and necessary exercise. In this view, it was the foolish who neglected to seriously consider their estate. It was with this new, pious readership that Bright was concerned. Bright was involved with the Calvinist form of religion. He had connections with the Reformed church on the Continent. Happening to be present in Paris during the St. Bartholomew Massacre, he had acquired a life-long sympathy for the Huguenot cause, and it was a well-known Huguenot refugee who published *A treatise of melancholie*. Bright was also involved in other Protestant publications, such as an abridged version of Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, and his interest in religious concerns led him to seek a second career as a clergyman after the publication of his medical treatises. However it is in the content of *A treatise of melancholie* itself that his Calvinist sympathies can be most clearly seen. He explained in the introduction that the device of writing to a friend was intended to make the treatise seem more personal to the reader. He considered 'M's predicament to be common enough that most readers could identify with his feelings and concerns: 'change the letter, and it is indifferent to whome soever standeth in need'.³⁷

Rather than chastising the reader for his sinful curiosity, as a medieval writer might have done, Bright offered to alleviate these fears about salvation through medicine:

³⁶ Woodcut picture reproduced in W. P. Holden, *Anti-puritan Satire, 1572-1642* (New Haven, 1954), p. 37; S. Brant, *The ship of fools*, trans. A. Barclay, ed. T. H. Jamieson (2 vols., Edinburgh, 1874), i, ix-xxi, 271-5.

³⁷ Life, 'Bright, Timothy'; Bright, *A treatise of melancholie*, pp. iv(r-v).

I will make plaine demonstration unto you, that you have no cause in this sorte to feare, nor have anie shadow of grounde, whereon you should resolve against your selfe upon the poynt of reprobation.³⁸

Bright's explanation for how melancholy could be at the root of these fears drew on ideas from ancient and Islamic medicine, and medieval scholasticism. He presented reprobation fears as a type of melancholy akin to scholars' melancholy or the philosopher's melancholy described by Ishaq ibn Imran. It was an illness that was much more likely to befall those of a melancholic complexion because this was the temperament most given to contemplation:

Nowe contemplations are more familiar with melancholicke persons then with other, by reason they be not so apt for action ... These are melancholiks most disposed, by reason of the evill temper of their bodies to this affliction ... by reason they are more curious & distrustfull then other complexions: which being joyned with ignorance, or a preposterous knowledge cast them into these laberinthes of spirituall sorrow, whereout very hardly are they at the length able to dispatch themselves without great mercy of God, and diligent and carefull applying of his meanes.³⁹

Like Ishaq's philosophers and 'holy and pious men', Bright's melancholics were prone to despair of salvation because of a desire to gain greater understanding. This would cause the melancholic person to constantly question his estate and 'fall into debate with him selfe'. It was during these ruminations that

curious melancholy carrieth the minde into the senses of such misteries as exceed humayne capacity, and is desirous to know more then is revealed in the word of truth: or being ignorant of that which is revealed through importunate inquirie, of a sudden falleth into that gulfe of Gods secret counselles which swalloweth up all conceit of man or angell: and measuring the trueth of such depth of misteries by the shallow modill of his owne wit, is caught & devoured of that which his presumptuous curiositie moved him to attempt to apprehend.⁴⁰

At this point it is important to point out the difference between Bright's idea of presumptuous curiosity over election, and medieval ideas. As we saw in the

³⁸ Bright, *A treatise of melancholie*, p. 209.

³⁹ Bright, *A treatise of melancholie*, p. 205.

⁴⁰ Bright, *A treatise of melancholie*, p. 199.

introduction and the first part of this chapter, the Roman Catholic Church taught that it was impossible for a person to know for sure that he was elect, and that, instead, he should hope for salvation and follow the teachings of the Church. Calvinists, however, taught that assurance of election was central to Christian faith, but this was an assurance that should be based on a life that conformed in practice to the revealed will of God in scripture. In scriptural revelation, God's plan for the elect and the reprobate could be clearly seen, as well as how to recognise the elect from the reprobate. However, the secret will of God (such as why he had chosen some and not others) had not been revealed. Therefore, many puritan sources on election and reprobation contain the apparent contradiction that a person's despair is attributed to curiosity and questioning of their estate, while, at the same time, they are exhorted to attain an assurance of their election as the ground of comfort.

However, Bright's concept of how a person could become convinced they were reprobate was more complicated than simply the exhaustion of intellect through thinking about difficult subjects. Besides curiosity, another chief way in which a person could become melancholic was through guilt. 'Conscience terrified,' wrote Bright, 'is of such nature, so beset with infinite feares and distrust, that it easily wasteth the pure spirit, congeleth the lively bloud, and striketh our nature in such sort, that it soone becommeth melancholicke.' Once the body became melancholic, that in turn could affect the mind. A case that began with a conscience troubled over genuine sin could be prolonged beyond the point at which repentance should have resulted in renewed hope by the workings of melancholy upon the mind. A process that should have been spiritually renewing could then become dangerous as despair set in.⁴¹

⁴¹ Bright, *A treatise of melancholie*, pp. 195-7.

Therefore, when an otherwise devout person came to believe that they were reprobate, this was not a realistic discernment of their estate, but a kind of delusion of the mind that tended to occur when a person already prone to melancholy considered the issue too deeply. Once melancholy gained a hold over the mind, it was the source of all kinds of fearful delusions. In the introduction I described some of the bizarre stories of melancholic delusions found in ancient texts. Bright used these stories to further his own argument that melancholy could cause someone to imagine that they were reprobate:

We may ... have faith, and not alwayes have the sensible perceaving thereof; especially our bodies (as yours presently is) being oppressed with melancholie, which alwayes urgeth terror and distrust: and deludeth us with opinion of want of that, whereof wee have no lacke ... it be so with melancholickes (as it is crediblie recorded in historie) that some have complained they have bene headlesse ... [do not] rest uppon your deluded conceites, which if you yield unto, will perswade you in the ende, that you want both head and heart also.⁴²

In addition to the physiological explanations for despair of salvation based on the canon of medical writings on melancholy, Bright also incorporated medieval ideas of demonic influence over the melancholic. Melancholy, he wrote was ‘like a weapon taken into Sathans hand’ that he used ‘to weaken our bodies with, and to terrifie our minds with vaine, & fantastickall feares, and to disturbe the whole tranquillity of our nature’. Therefore, the best way to circumvent the devil was to ignore his promptings and to treat the condition as a physiological disorder, like any other sickness. By the use of medicine and medical direction, both the body and mind could be restored.

Environmental factors were also important. Bright advised that the melancholic should avoid both strenuous mental activity and idleness. Over-exertion in studying difficult subjects, listening to sad music, sitting in the dark, or looking at horrible or strange shapes should all be avoided. They caused the mind to neglect the body,

⁴² Bright, *A treatise of melancholie*, pp. 215-6.

wasting the spirits and natural heat, thickening and drying the blood, resulting in melancholy. Similarly, too little activity caused the blood to stagnate and grow cold. Also to be avoided were foggy or misty air and heavy or dry foods. Bright gave detailed instructions on the diet of the melancholic person and the ideal situation and decoration of the house and surrounding garden in which a person would best recover. Numerous precious stones were recommended: chalcedony to ward off fear and clear the spirits; rubies to ward off fearful dreams; turquoise to comfort the spirits; jacinth gems for cheerfulness. Where all these methods failed, a 'vehement passion' could be induced such as anger, or fear of some idea or object other than that which had originally caused the melancholy – 'as one pinne is driven out with another, so the later may expel the former'.⁴³

In more extreme cases of melancholy, the help of a physician was required to dispel the humour. First a clyster was applied to cleanse the system. It contained ingredients such as violet leaves, mercury, beetroot, borage, aniseed, honey, rosemary and dill. The following day a vein was opened to let blood in order to thin the blood left in the body. Purging was another way of cleansing the body of the bad humour. After each purging, the stomach, liver and spleen should be strengthened by the external applications of ointments and the ingestion of various medicinal concoctions containing ingredients such as camomile, mint, rose water and wormwood.⁴⁴

⁴³ Bright, *A treatise of melancholie*, pp. 242-65.

⁴⁴ Bright, *A treatise of melancholie*, pp. 265-84.

Conclusion

Bright was not the first English writer in the sixteenth century to make the connection between melancholic illness, delusion and despair. Melancholy as a cause of false beliefs about salvation appeared in an English medical book written in 1547 for household use called *The breviarie of health*:

This sickenes is named the melancholy madnesse which is a sicknes full of fantasies ... and a man having this madnes, shall thinke in him selfe that thing that can never be, for some be so fantastical that they will thinke them selfe God or as good, or such lyke thinges perteyning to presumption or to desperation to be dampned, the one having this sickenes doth not go so farre the one way, but the other doth dispayre as much the other way.⁴⁵

The author then went on to explain how these fantasies came about:

The original of this infirmitie doth come of an evil melancholy humour, and of a stubberne heart, and running to farre in fantasies, or musing or studying upon thinges that his reason can not comprehend, such persons at length wil come and be very natural fooles ... and yet in theyr conceyt doe thinke them selves wyse.⁴⁶

The writer of *The breviarie of health* was an ex-Carthusian monk and physician called Andrew Boorde who had studied abroad and travelled extensively in Italy, France and Spain.⁴⁷ Although his brief description of melancholy shares some of Bright's understanding of the workings of melancholy upon the mind, he was still influenced by the scholastic tradition that tended to see curiosity as conceited and the melancholic as a fool. The significance of Bright's treatise was that it portrayed the melancholic that feared reprobation in a positive light, separating the symptoms of melancholy from the terror of conscience experienced by the atheist, or figures such as Judas or Esau, who were actually reprobate. Rather than seeing melancholic

⁴⁵ A. Boorde, *The breviarie of health, wherin doth follow, remedies, for all maner of sicknesses and diseases* (London, 1575), p. 78.

⁴⁶ Boorde, *The breviarie of health*, p. 78.

⁴⁷ E. L. Furdell, 'Boorde, Andrew (c.1490–1549)', *ODNB*.

despair as a result of sinful curiosity or passions, the melancholic was a victim of the natural fearfulness and questioning impulse of his own complexion and of the manipulations of satanic promptings. This humane approach paralleled that of Du Laurens, which sought to separate the sickness of melancholy from its association with sin and foolishness.

Bright's treatise, therefore, provided an explanation for the otherwise perplexing question of why apparently pious people became convinced that they were reprobate. A person suffering from melancholy was 'blinde folded by the humour' and could not judge correctly of their estate.⁴⁸ The conditions that created a readership for which Bright's treatise had appeal, and the ways in which Bright's ideas were used in consoling those suffering from despair of salvation, will be explored in the next chapters. Far from rejecting as atheistic the notion that despair could be induced by melancholy, as Gowland and Brann suggest, puritans recognised the usefulness of this concept both for purposes of consoling the downcast, and defending the reputations of those who succumbed to despair. In the decades following the publication of Bright's treatise in 1586, puritans would use melancholy as an explanation for reprobation fears in numerous cases. Melancholy, as Du Laurens so comfortingly stated, 'could happen unto the most religious'.

⁴⁸ Bright, *A treatise of melancholie*, p. 233.

CHAPTER TWO

The Despair of an Apostate: Puritan Responses to the Death of Francesco Spiera

Examining the link between religious despair and melancholy in academic medicine is one way of understanding the development of the concept of religious melancholy.

However, medical treatises like Bright's cannot tell us how widespread acceptance of his ideas was. This chapter and the next will examine the views about reprobation in Elizabethan England, which form the context for Bright's view of despair of salvation, as set out in *A treatise of melancholie*. To do this it is necessary to go back two decades before Bright was writing, to the 1550s, a time of deep religious division when Protestant theologians were forming their ideas about predestination. It was around this time that the first stories of people becoming convinced that they were reprobate emerged in England. As we shall see, people were confused about how to respond. It took some time before views such as Bright's would emerge.

Nowhere were divisions over the causes of despair more obvious than in responses to the case of the Italian apostate Francesco Spiera. This was a man who became infamous throughout Europe after his recantation of Protestantism, at the insistence of the Inquisition, led to his despair and death. Spiera died firmly believing himself to be reprobate, and in an agony of body and mind, unable to eat or sleep. His story, and the responses to it, give us an insight into evolving attitudes to despair of salvation in Calvinist England. They show us how teaching about reprobation altered as a response to circumstances, and how this affected the extent to which melancholy was taken into account in cases of deep doubt and dejection. It will be seen that

English commentators did not necessarily take the hard line on reprobation that Calvin took himself, when responding to actual cases.

Historiography

A number of Anglophone scholars have researched Spiera's history. Until about thirty years ago, it mainly attracted the attention of researchers in English literature studies, who were interested in the development of dramatic texts based on the story. As the major source for Nathaniel Woodes' 1581 morality play *The Conflict of Conscience*, and a possible influence on Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, the dramatic potential of Spiera's dilemma has been recognised from the sixteenth century onwards. Audiences and readers were particularly drawn to recounts of cases of conscience in the aftermath of the Marian persecutions, when memories of England's own Catholic Inquisition were fresh, and Catholicism still posed a threat to the Elizabethan settlement.¹ Michael MacDonald took up this second theme in his essay on the English reception of Francesco Spiera, 'The Fearfull Estate of Francis Spira: Narrative, Identity, and Emotion in Early Modern England' (1992), in which he shows that the dates of publication of versions of Spiera's history can be related to some kind of real or perceived threat to Protestant religion in England. These included conflict with Catholic Spain during the 1580s and 90s, the conflict between

¹ C. Wine, 'Nathaniel Wood's Conflict of Conscience', *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 50 (1935), 661-78; L. M. Oliver, 'John Foxe and *The Conflict of Conscience*', *The Review of English Studies*, 25 (1949), 1-9; L. B. Campbell, 'Doctor Faustus: A Case of Conscience', *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, 67 (1952), 219-39.

Arminianism and puritanism in the 1630s, and the repression of nonconformity in the 1680s and 90s.²

Additionally, MacDonald sees English reactions to Spiera as indicative of more personal understandings of despair that give us an insight into Protestant 'self-fashioning'. 'Self-fashioning' is the term first used by Stephen Greenblatt to describe the process by which people use narratives and images to form a sense of identity – normally an identity in relation to a source of authority, such as God or the Bible, or an alien, such as a heretic or Antichrist. MacDonald argues that English puritans saw in Spiera a dramatised version of the conflict within themselves between faith and backsliding. Readers turned the tale of desperation into a positive by coming to see the agony of feeling rejected by God as a redemptive experience necessary for salvation.³ Whereas MacDonald sees Spiera narratives as a way of constructing the self, Anne Overell is more interested in their significance in constructing the 'other'. Returning to the original Italian sources in search of the historical Francesco Spiera, she is sceptical about the reliability of the original eye-witness accounts of Spiera's death. Their purpose, she argues, was not to give an accurate account of Spiera's words and actions, but to serve as part of Calvin's propaganda campaign against 'Nicodemites' in Europe.⁴

All of these studies uncover important background for understanding the significance of Spiera's story, and why it was so popular. However, they do not address one of the most important questions that concerned people at the time: What was the nature of Spiera's illness, and how did this relate to his perception of himself as a reprobate? The stage versions of conflicts of conscience could only do justice to

² M. MacDonald, 'The Fearefull Estate of Francis Spira: Narrative, Identity, and Emotion in Early Modern England', *The Journal of British Studies*, 31 (1992), pp. 38-44.

³ MacDonald, 'Fearefull Estate', pp. 44-61.

⁴ M. A. Overell, 'The Exploitation of Francesco Spiera', *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 26 (1995), 619-37.

the psychological dimension of temptation and downfall. It was the physical dimension of Spiera's despair, as depicted in detail by Spiera's biographers, that so fascinated and horrified contemporaries. MacDonald, in his study of puritan responses, attempts to avoid the pitfalls of modern psychoanalysis through his focus on narrative and the concept of self-fashioning, but he fails to grasp that for sixteenth and seventeenth-century readers despair was not simply a painful emotion, but an experience that affected the whole body. Only at one point does he recognise the medical significance of the case. In attempting to explain why Nathaniel Bacon published a version of Spiera's story in the 1630s, he suggests that this was partly a response to anti-puritan attempts to rationalise despair as a kind of melancholic madness.⁵ Jonathan Hall Barlow, in a thesis that looks in more detail at the English reception of Spiera, takes a similar view. He argues that a section on Spiera's story in Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* is evidence of a sharp divergence between supernatural and natural explanations taking place in the seventeenth century. He does not see the medical implications of the tale as being of central importance at any point in the sixteenth or seventeenth century. Stachniewski also sees Burton's inclusion of Spiera amongst the melancholic as an example of the conflict between 'medical humanist' ways of seeing the universe and 'Calvinist' providentialism.⁶ However, the question of melancholy as it relates to Spiera was considered by contemporaries at an earlier date than the 1620s and 30s. This was a factor that had been there from the very first accounts in 1550.

⁵ MacDonald, 'Fearefull Estate', pp. 50-1.

⁶ J. H. Barlow, "'Read This That Others Read Not Thee': Francis Spira and Apostasy in the English Reformed Tradition (1618-1652)" (Saint Louis Univ. Ph.D. thesis, 2010), pp. 116-20; Stachniewski, *Persecutory Imagination*, p. 8.

The Story of Francesco Spiera

Francesco Spiera was a lawyer from a provincial town in Venice. During the 1540s he began to be influenced by Protestant ideas via the books by Erasmus, Luther and Calvin that were circulating in Venice at that time. He was denounced to the Inquisition in 1547. A rather unimpressive antihero, in some ways he was a victim of circumstances. Whereas in earlier years various ideas shared by the reformers within Italian Catholicism known as the *spirituali* had been acceptable, in the later 1540s the Catholic Church took a harder line against unorthodox views, as the fear that Protestantism would spread to Italy grew. There also appears to have been an element of personal vendetta behind Spiera's prosecution. He claimed that his accusers were motivated by malice owing to a dispute concerning the marital affairs of one of his daughters. It emerged at his trial that he had read the *Beneficio di Cristo*, the last chapters of which contained Calvinist passages on predestination. He was also accused of spreading false beliefs about purgatory. At first he denied the charges. He admitted doubts about purgatory, based on his belief in salvation by grace, but insisted that he was an obedient Catholic nonetheless. In a short time he relented and agreed to submit to the court. The sentence was not particularly harsh. It consisted of a public recantation and a fine to pay for a tabernacle for the local church. He was one of many to be disciplined by the Inquisition in Italy at that time. However, a year later, Spiera was dead from mysterious causes. Before his death, he had become so ill that his family had moved him from his home to the city of Padua, where they received help from a number of eminent physicians and theologians. It was his

sickness and death that turned a matter of little significance for the Inquisition into one of the greatest Calvinist propaganda coups of the Reformation.⁷

Spiera's death had a deep impact on some of those who visited his bedside. Pier Paolo Vergerio, an Italian bishop and papal diplomat who had been associated with the *spirituali*, was affected so deeply that he made a complete break with Rome and went into exile. He later told friends in Basel that he would never have had the courage to leave his home, friends, possessions, and his high status as bishop, if God had not 'shown him Spiera as an example of what happened to those who denied him'. Henry Scrymgeour, a Scotsman, had been acquainted with Reformers at St. Andrew's University, but his experience of seeing Spiera's decline caused him to abandon his Catholic connections and devote himself wholeheartedly to the Reformed cause. These men, along with Matteo Gribaldi, a professor of civil law in Padua and a Protestant citizen of Berne, and Sigismund Gelenius, a Polish man and friend of Erasmus and Melancthon, wrote the accounts of Spiera's death on which all later versions in Protestant Europe were based. These were published in Latin in 1550 with an introduction by Calvin. A translation of Gribaldi's version by Edward Anglionby, together with Calvin's preface, was published in England in the same year.⁸

Spiera's symptoms were described as a kind of paralysis in which he lost all use of his body, except speech. He was unable to eat or digest anything, but was continually troubled by exceptional thirst. In Gribaldi's version he was also plagued by dreams and visions of demons sticking pins into his pillow, and when a fly buzzed round his face, he saw this as a sign that Beelzebub had come to claim him. The texts also focused on his physical deterioration. One observer wrote that he became 'so spent, that hee appeared a perfect *Anatomie*; expressing to the view, nothing but

⁷ Overell, 'Exploitation of Francesco Spiera', pp. 619-25.

⁸ Overell, 'Exploitation of Francesco Spiera', pp. 627-29; A. J. Schutte, *Pier Paolo Vergerio: The Making of an Italian Reformer* (Geneva, 1977), pp. 239-44; Campbell, 'Doctor Faustus', pp. 227-9.

sinewes and bones'. Towards the end, he became suicidal, grasping a knife from a nearby table and 'looking round about him with a ghastly looke'.⁹

Most disturbing, however, was what he said about himself. He claimed that he was a reprobate, like Cain and Judas, and that he was already in Hell. He said that 'He was a reprobate from the beginnyng ... He knew hymself to be foreknowne, [not] written at any tyme, in the booke of ly[fe] that Christe neither suffered nor pra[yed] for hym: but for the elect onely, that [the] judgement of God was declared.' He told his friends, 'I knowe all grace to be taken from me. I féele my heart hardened, that I can not beleve nor hope any thing at all of the attonement and mercie of God.' All that was in his heart, he claimed, was 'hatred, cursing and blasphemie'. He believed that this had happened to him as 'an example to all the worlde, of Gods vengeaunce and juste indignation againste a reprobate man'. Those who came to visit him attempted to comfort him, reminding him of the mercies of God towards sinners, and encouraging him to see his current suffering as a trial, and not a permanent condition. He replied, 'Nay, I knowe most assuredly my refusing and reprobation and that he ... rebuking méé in his anger and furie, hath condemned my soule, harte and spirite, with perpetuall hardnesse and confusion.'¹⁰

Interpreting Spiera's Illness

Despite the large number of witnesses to Spiera's illness, exactly how and why he died remains obscure; a fact to which historians have paid little attention. Michael

⁹ Overell, 'Exploitation of Francesco Spiera', pp. 626-31; N. Bacon, *A relation of the fearefull estate of Francis Spira in the yeare, 1548* (London, 1638), pp. 124-5.

¹⁰ M. Gribaldi, *A notable and marveilous epistle ... co[n]cernyng the terrible judgement of God*, trans. E. Anglionby (Worcester, 1550), sigs. Aviii(r-v), Bii(r-v), Bv(r-v), C(v).

MacDonald says that ‘he starved to death’, Anne Overell that ‘Extreme desperation set in immediately after abjuring’ of which doctors ‘could not “cure” him’, Perez Zagorin that ‘he broke down in what was probably a hysterical illness’, A. J. Schutte merely that ‘he was struck by a mysterious illness’.¹¹ All this raises more questions than it answers. Was this primarily a psychological or physical illness? Was Spiera mad? If he was, this still does not explain why he died; people do not normally die of madness unless they commit suicide. If he starved to death, was this deliberate self-starvation, or a symptom of the mysterious illness over which he had no control? And what about the fever, insatiable thirst and the demonic visions that appear in various accounts? The confusion in the historiography reflects the confusion in the contemporary records. The confidence with which most writers expounded the providential message of Spiera’s death has obscured the fact that contemporaries actually struggled to explain what had happened to him. People disagreed not only because they had opposing political and religious agendas, but because Spiera’s case was as perplexing then as it is today.

The earliest account of Spiera’s death was given by his cousin Giacomo Nardini. Spiera had stayed at Nardini’s house in Padua when his family sent him to the city in order to receive medical help. Nardini was called to testify at the trial of Pier Paolo Vergerio, Bishop of Capodistria, who was also under investigation by the Inquisition. This was about two weeks after Spiera’s death. He described how Spiera came to believe that he was the enemy of Christ, was unable to say the Lord’s Prayer, and refused comfort from friends who tried to persuade him to seek God’s mercy. Avoiding all discussion of Spiera’s heretical views on predestination, and the impact

¹¹ MacDonald, ‘Fearefull Estate’, p. 33; Overell, ‘Exploitation of Francesco Spiera’, p. 625; P. Zagorin, *Ways of Lying: Dissimulation, Persecution and Conformity in Early Modern Europe* (London, 1990), p. 88; Schutte, *Pier Paolo Vergerio*, p. 239.

of the trial and enforced recantation, Nardini played it safe, blaming Spiera's illness on melancholic delusions brought on by stress in the pursuit of his profession as a lawyer. Possessing an overly scrupulous conscience, Spiera had convinced himself that he was guilty of cupidity and of defending clients whom he knew to be guilty – neither of which faults Nardini believed him to be guilty of. In an attempt to save his family's reputation and avoid further trouble, Nardini pleaded melancholy as the best line of defence.¹²

Another reaction can be found in a letter published in Bologna in 1550 by another Italian Protestant, Giorgio Siculo. The letter was written to his congregation in Riva del Trento, and was entitled 'An epistle of Giorgio Siculo ... against the lies of Francesco Spiera, and the false doctrine of the Protestants'. Siculo was himself in trouble with the Inquisition and would be executed for heresy the following year. However, he did not agree with the teachings of Calvin, and sought to counteract their influence in Italy. His letter was both Nicodemite and against double predestination. He stressed the importance of free will, and reassured his congregation that outward conformity to Roman Catholic religion was not the same as denying Christ, and was not a sign of reprobation. As a result of reading dangerous books, Spiera had come to believe that he was God's enemy, and had fallen into a *rabbiosa desperatione* ('desperate madness'). This should be a warning not to dabble in dangerous theology, but to trust in the saving power of Christ's sacrifice, and seek to live in conformity with God's laws. God desired the salvation of all sinners.¹³

Italian Protestants, then, were not in agreement over how to interpret what had happened to Spiera. Siculo drew entirely opposite conclusions to the accounts of

¹² Overell, 'Exploitation of Francesco Spiera', pp. 625-6; Schutte, *Pier Paolo Vergerio*, pp. 239-40.

¹³ B. Collett, *Italian Benedictine Scholars and The Reformation: The Congregation of Santa Guistina of Padua* (Oxford, 1985), pp. 221-36; Overell, 'Exploitation of Francesco Spiera', p. 631; Zagorin, *Ways of Lying*, pp. 89-90.

Spiera's death that would become famous in Calvinist Europe. One of the purposes of those Calvinist accounts was to dispel the idea that Spiera's condition could be explained away as the ravings of melancholy or madness. When describing the diabolical visions that the patient saw, Gribaldi insisted that 'he conceived not these things by a false or corrupt imagination, but even as truly as he sawe us all alive, and speaking with him'. Vergerio, keen to stress that Spiera did not appear mad to him, left out the supernatural elements altogether, and, instead, emphasised the sobriety of Spiera's speech, despite the depths of his despair. 'He was about fifty yeares old', one version explains, 'free from the violent passions of youth, and from the coldnesse of old age. Nothing came out of his mouth that was lightly or foolishly spoken, or that might discover any doting in him'. The 'coldnesse of old age' referred to the phlegmatic humour that was held responsible for deteriorating mental faculties in the elderly.¹⁴ To underline the point that this was not a humoral condition, most versions contained an account of three famous physicians from the University of Padua who were called to Spiera's bedside to try their skills. They attempted to divert the melancholy humour from the brain through the use of purges, but to no avail.¹⁵

Charges of atheism also appeared in a number of versions over the years to deter anyone from scoffing at the notion that Spiera's condition was something more than sickness of the brain. Those who rejected providential interpretations of the story were like some of Spiera's friends who 'not looking so high as the Judgement of God, laid all the blame upon his Melancholicke constitution; that overshadowing his judgment, wrought in him a kinde of madnesse'.¹⁶ In a version based on Henry Scrymgeour, published in England in 1607, the story of Spiera was used to attack

¹⁴ Arikha, *Passions and Tempers*, p. 10.

¹⁵ Gribaldi, *A notable and marvelous epistle*, sig. Biii(v); S. Goulart, *Admirable and memorable histories containing the wonders of our time*, trans. Edward Grimeston (London, 1609), p. 189; Bacon, *The fearefull estate of Francis Spira*, pp. 33-5; Overell, 'Exploitation of Francesco Spiera', pp. 626-31.

¹⁶ Bacon, *The fearefull estate of Francis Spira*, p. 32.

atheism in general, which was presented as a perverse refusal to recognise and learn from God's judgements, by explaining every occurrence in terms of natural causes:

Impietie is naturall to Men, they make not their profit of such instructions, and thinke not that it concernes them: but contrarywise impute it to any other thing, rather then to the wisdom of GOD, to feare and reverence him. Hereupon he [Spiera] made a bitter invective against a certaine Philosopher, whom hee had knowne about twenty yeares before, for that this MOROSOPHE had beene so impudent, to deliver his lessons, yea to write it, and to publish it in Print, that all the miracles that JESUS CHRIST had done upon earth, might well be done by a man, that were skilfull in the knowledge of Naturall things.¹⁷

Accusations of impiety against materialists could be very effective at this time, as we saw in Chapter One.

Rejecting the interpretation of madness, the Calvinist version of the story linked Spiera's despair and illness very directly to his decision to cooperate with the Inquisition's order that he recant. 'God from that houre,' wrote Gribaldi, 'sente into his harte a gnawing worme, and unquencheable fire, that sodainely he might be filled with error, confusion and desperation.'¹⁸ Historians have disagreed over whether the writers intended the reader to understand this judgement to be final. Barlow argues that Gribaldi's was mainly an anti-Catholic text that was intended to present the papal state as the villain and Spiera as a true Protestant, who became their victim. Overell, however, shows how an exchange of scriptural verses by the bedside was intended to demonstrate to the reader that Spiera was reprobate. The bystanders also tried a number of tests in search of signs of election, such as asking him to say the Lord's Prayer and questioning him on suicidal intentions. His inability to pray with any fervour and his attempts on his own life were bad signs.¹⁹

¹⁷ Goulart, *Admirable and memorable histories*, pp. 192-3.

¹⁸ Gribaldi, *A notable and marvelous epistle*, sig. Biii(r-v).

¹⁹ Barlow, 'That Others Read Not Thee', pp. 29-32; Overell, 'The Reformation of Death in Italy and England, circa 1550', *Renaissance and Reformation*, 23 (1999), pp. 10-11.

The Sin Against the Holy Ghost

In case anybody was unclear, John Calvin in his preface declared Spiera's apostasy and despair to be evident signs of his reprobation – 'the reprobate cease not to comit one mischief upon an other'. He compared Spiera's struggle for hope to that of 'beastes that ar[e] caught in snares'. Calvin had his reasons for taking such a harsh stance. He co-opted Spiera into the company of those he termed 'Nicodemites', with whom he was in the middle of a bitter dispute. These were Protestants in Catholic countries such as Italy and France who hid their religion in order to avoid persecution. In 1544 he published a diatribe against these people entitled *Excuse á Messeiurs les Nicodemites*, in which he compared them to the Pharisee, Nicodemus, who had come to see Jesus under cover of darkness because he was afraid to be seen by the Jewish authorities. Those actually living under Catholic rule pointed out that it was easy for him to take such an uncompromising stance from the safety of Geneva, but, unperturbed, Calvin carried on the campaign. He claimed Spiera's story as evidence of the 'earnest vengeance [God] wil [ta]ke upon those that scorne his majestie'.²⁰ Calvin also came up with a biblical justification for declaring such cases as hopeless. He argued that apostates had committed the Sin against the Holy Ghost. The notion of the unpardonable Sin against the Holy Ghost is based on Jesus' saying in Matthew xii. 31-32:

Wherefore I say unto you, All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men. And whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whoever speaketh

²⁰ D. MacCulloch, *Reformation: Europe's House Divided, 1490-1700* (London, 2003), pp. 267-8; Gribaldi, *A notable and marvellous epistle*, sig. Aiv(r); for the story of Nicodemus see John iii. 1-21, vii. 50, xix. 39.

against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come.

and on a verse in the first letter of John, 'If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it' (1 John v. 16). As early as the fifth century AD Augustine had linked this sin with apostasy. He accused his enemies, the Donatists, of this kind of stubbornness for their refusal to participate in the sacraments of the Catholic Church. However, nobody could be said to have committed this sin until after they had died. Only those who persisted in their stubborn rejection of the truth until their death were guilty of the Sin against the Holy Ghost.²¹

Augustine's ideas had given the Sin against the Holy Ghost a sharp polemical thrust, which Calvin took to more dire conclusions. Calvin dismissed the idea that the Sin against the Holy Ghost could not be committed in this life. Had not Jesus clearly stated it was in this life, not the next, that the Sin could not be forgiven? John's letter showed that there were some people living who were beyond all hope, and for those people even prayer could be abandoned. Calvin also strengthened the connection with apostasy further by identifying the Sin against the Holy Ghost with verses in Hebrews referring to backsliders in the early church.

For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gifts, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, if they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to open shame. (Hebrews vi. 4-6)

For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sin, but a certain fearful looking for judgement and fiery indignation, which shall

²¹ B. Tipson, 'A Dark Side of Seventeenth Century English Protestantism: The Sin Against the Holy Spirit', *The Harvard Theological Review*, 77 (1984), pp. 305-7.

devour the adversaries. He that despised Moses' law died without mercy under two or three witnesses: of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace? (Hebrews x. 26-9)

Calvin insisted that both the verses in Matthew and these verses in Hebrews referred to apostates.²²

As Baird Tipson argues, Calvin effectively made apostasy synonymous not only with the Sin against the Holy Ghost, but with reprobation. It was through apostasy that a person revealed themselves to be reprobate, and not in possession of true saving grace. True believers might fall in other ways, but they could never commit this most serious of sins.

For blasphemy against the Spirit is a certain sign of reprobation. Hence it follows that whoever fall into it have been given a reprobate spirit. For just as we deny that it is possible for anyone truly born again of the Spirit to cast himself into such a horrifying crime, so on the contrary we must hold that those who do fall into it never rise again. In this way God avenges contempt of His grace: He hardens the hearts of the reprobate so that they never desire to repent.

Calvin left no room for dissembling in religion, or for returning to the faith once the truth had been denied. 'There is no middle course,' he wrote, 'those who secede from the Church give themselves over to Satan'.²³

According to the speeches recorded in the various histories of his life, Spiera himself believed that he had committed the Sin against the Holy Ghost, and that his heart had been hardened so that he could not repent. Gribaldi's narrative was also constructed to imply strongly that this was the case. He wrote that from the time of Spiera's recantation 'he lost all the giftes of the holy ghost ... Christ departed from

²² Tipson, 'Dark Side of English Protestantism', pp. 309-12.

²³ J. Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke*, trans. T. H. L. Parker, ed. D. W. Torrance and T. F. Torrance (3 vols., Edinburgh, 1972), ii, 47; Calvin, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews and Second Epistle of St. Peter*, trans. W. B. Johnston, ed. D. W. Torrance and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh, 1963), p. 147.

him, and the most sweete peace of Christe. And [in] their place came death, Sathan, horr[or] feare, confusion and dispaire'.²⁴ These questions: whether Spiera was mad, whether he was reprobate, and whether he had committed the Sin against the Holy Ghost, would continue to trouble subsequent generations of Protestants. A number of those involved in the publication of the Spiera accounts, including the publisher himself, later broke with Calvin and rejected his theology of predestination. In Spiera 'the Italian Reformation had produced a muddle', writes Anne Overell.²⁵

Reception in England

In England the theological and medical implications of Spiera's despair were initially sidelined by the political threat from Catholicism. Spiera was adopted into a campaign against conformity to Roman Catholic practices in England under the reign of Mary Tudor. After medieval heresy laws were reinstated in 1555, almost 300 people were executed in England before Mary's death in 1558. This was one of the worst cases of government repression of religious belief in Europe at the time, and unprecedented in England. It left a deep impression on the English psyche. These martyrs for the English Protestant cause were immortalised in John Foxe's *Actes and monuments of these latter and perillous dayes*, popularly known as 'Foxe's Book of Martyrs'. Michael MacDonald has aptly described Spiera as the 'dark mirror of martyrdom', and this is how he first entered English consciousness.²⁶ For those facing death, he offered an example of the judgement that awaited apostates and Nicodemites, which strengthened their courage to stand firm in the faith.

²⁴ Gribaldi, *A notable and marveilous epistle*, sig. Avii(v).

²⁵ Overell, 'Exploitation of Francesco Spiera', p. 631.

²⁶ MacCulloch, *Reformation*, p. 285; MacDonald, 'Fearefull Estate', p. 38.

In 1555, the same year that he was burned at the stake at Smithfield, a treatise by the preacher John Bradford was published exhorting English Protestants to confirm Protestant doctrine in the face of persecution. There was no recovery, he warned, from the sin of denying God. An apostate's life ended badly. To illustrate his point he used the example of Lot's wife who looked back as she and her husband fled from the destruction of Sodom, and was turned into a pillar of salt. Another example was Judas Iscariot, the disciple who betrayed Jesus to the Jewish religious authorities, and later hanged himself. Lastly, there was the example of 'Fra[n]cis Spira in these our dayes'. He also wrote directly to Lord Russell, Earl of Bedford, one of the members of the Privy Council who had originally attempted to alter the succession so that the Protestant Jane Grey would inherit the throne. He implored him to 'Continue, continue, continue ... to confesse CHRIST. Be not ashamed of hym before men ... Remember Fraunces Spira. Remember that none is crowned but hee that striveth lawfully.'²⁷

As she awaited death in the Tower in London, the young Lady Jane Grey was also busy attempting to avert the reestablishment of Catholicism. She wrote a letter to her father's chaplain, Thomas Harding. Fearing that he had returned to the Catholic faith, she warned him of the vengeance that God would take 'for this so great & heynous an offence of apostasie'. 'Remember the horrible history of Julian of olde,' she wrote, 'and the lamentable case of Spira of late, whose case (me thinkes) shoulde be yet so greane in youre remembrance, that being a thing of our tyme, you should feare the lyke inconvenience seyng you are fallen into the lyke offence.' Julian was a Roman Emperor from 361-3 who became known in Christian tradition as 'the Apostate' because of his opposition to Christianity, and his promotion of paganism.

²⁷ J. Bradford, *An exhortacion to the carienge of Chrystes crosse* (Wesel[?], 1555), p. 151; Foxe, *TAMO*, p. 1659; D. A. Penny, 'Bradford, John (c.1510-1555)', *ODNB*; Gen. xix. 26; Matt. xxvi. 14-15, xxvii. 3-5.

Both Bradford's and Jane Grey's letters were later printed in Foxe's 'Book of Martyrs'.²⁸

Spiera's example was a potent weapon against apostasy because, unlike the old stories from scripture or the early Church, the event had occurred very recently and seemed to prove that God's power was still at work against the enemies of the Church. The idea that God visited temporal judgements on the apostate in the form of sickness and death can be seen in other accounts of the Marian period. Rose Throckmorton paused in her recollections of her flight to Antwerp to give an account of what happened to her brother Thomas Lok. Thomas was in business with her husband, who had already gone into exile. He was willing to leave England also, but his wife prevented him. Throckmorton (then Hickman, her first husband's name) rebuked her sister-in-law, saying 'Sister, yow stay heere for covetousnes and love of your husbands lands and goods: but I feare the Lords hand wilbe uppon yow for it.' Thomas Lok died a short time later. Throckmorton interpreted this as a judgement from God that she predicted, and suggests that the sense of guilt caused him to become ill: 'indeed, so it came to passe: for he being constreyned for feare of further trouble to fashion himself outwardly to the popish religion in some sort, was so greeved in mynde thereat, that he died shortlie after.' It was common for those who had escaped the persecution to justify their flight by pointing to the dangers and financial hardships of exile, and to the necessity of avoiding lapsing into Nicodemism.²⁹

²⁸ Foxe, *TAMO* (1563), p. 990; Entry for 'Julian', in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* (Oxford, 2000) [online at www.oxfordreference.com].

²⁹ R. Throckmorton, 'The Recollections of Rose Hickman', in M. Dowling and J. Shakespeare (eds.), 'Religion and Politics in Mid Tudor England through the Eyes of an English Protestant Woman', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, 55 (1982), p. 101; B. Lowe, 'Throckmorton, Rose', *ODNB*; J. Wright, 'Marian Exile and the Legitimacy of Flight from Persecution', *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 52 (2001), pp. 228-43.

After the Protestant settlement, English writers and preachers continued to interpret Spiera's despair and death as just punishment for his denial of the Protestant faith. He served as a warning against apostasy or backsliding, a sign of God's favouring the Protestant religion, and an example of a reprobate. John Foxe saw the hand of God in every event in history. 'The examples of such as revolted from the Gospell to Papistry, be not many,' he wrote,

but as few as they were, scarce can any be found whiche began to turne to the Pope, but the Lord began to turne from them, & to leave them to theyr ghostly enemy ... some dyed in great sorrow of conscience, some in miserable doubt of their salvation, some stricken by Gods hand, some driven to hang or drowne them selves.

He included Spiera amongst the examples of those who had been abandoned by God.³⁰ Verbal attacks on Catholics and apostates, using Spiera as an example, carried on in England for most of the sixteenth century. 'As their doctrine is wicked and idolatious [*sic*], so their lives and their deaths, are abhominable and hideous,' wrote William Charke. Walter Haddon (whose work was edited by Foxe) in his refutation of Catholic accusations that Lutheranism caused people to despair, included Spiera in his examples of 'such as have runne headlong into utter dispayre, which have gaynesayd, or withdrawen them selves from the doctrine of Luther.' Surveying the means of spiritual consolation provided by the Catholic Church, such as penance, good works and papal indulgences, Thomas Drant wrote sarcastically, 'such peace tasted Franciscus Spira of, that died in desperation.' More poignant was the suggestion of Edwin Sandys: 'Had it not beene better that these Apostataes [*sic*] had never knowen, this blessed way, than knowing it so traiterouslie and so damnablie to shrinke from it?'³¹

³⁰ Foxe, *TAMO*, (1576), p. 2030.

³¹ W. Charke, *An answeare for the time, unto that foule, and wicked Defence of the censure, that was given upon M. Charkes booke*, (London, 1583), fol. 96(v); W. Haddon, *Against Jerome Osorius Byshopp of Siluane in Portingall ... for the necessary defence of the evangelicall doctrine and veritie*

Over the next hundred years, Spiera was seen more generally as an example of the dangers of continuing in sin against the promptings of conscience. Thomas Morton in a treatise on repentance of 1597 urged his readers to consider their sins before it was too late for ‘so fearefull a thing is the wrath of God, that even one blencke of it is able to drive a sinner out of his wits, and utterlie astonish him.’ He gave the example of Spiera as ‘the very picture of that spirituall torment of a gnawing and terrifying conscience, which is prepared for the wicked in the worlde to come’. His name was placed in the company of sinners who had been cursed by God and ‘delivered up into reprobate minds’ – Cain, Esau and Judas.³²

Accounts of Spiera also appeared in judgement and wonder books – collections of tales intended to demonstrate the reality of providential intervention. These encyclopaedic works grew out of the puritan habit of keeping records of divine mercies and punishments. They were used to educate the populace – especially its younger members – in the consequences of eschewing godly living. According to Alexandra Walsham, in the simplistic scheme of the judgement genre, Spiera’s crime was doubly reprehensible. Not only had he denied God, but he had also succumbed to the devil’s promptings and given in to despair. Thomas Beard included Spiera in *The theatre of Gods judgements* in a chapter on ‘Apostatas [*sic*] and backsliders’, as a ‘most pitifull and lamentable’ example, alongside the story of Nicodemus. A longer version appeared in *Histories admirables et memorables de nostre temps*, by the Frenchman Simon Goulart, which was published in England in 1607 as *Admirable*

(London, 1581), fol. 83(r); T. Drant, *Two sermons preached the one at S. Maries Spittle ... and the other at the Court at Windsor* (London, 1570), sig. Evii(r); E. Sandys, *Sermons made by the most reverende Father in God, Edwin, Archbishop of Yorke* (London, 1585), p. 323.

³² T. Morton, *Two treatises concerning regeneration, 1. of repentance, 2. of the diet of the soule* (London, 1597), pp. 29-30; T. Rogers, *The general session containing an apologie of the most comfortable doctrine concerning the end of this world* (London, 1581), p. 77; E. Reynolds, *Three treatises of the vanity of the creature* (London, 1631), p. 261; E. Leigh, *A treatise of divinity consisting of three bookes* (London, 1646), p. 26; J. March, *Sermons preach’d on several occasions* (London, 1699), p. 12.

and memorable histories, translated by Edward Grimeston. Spiera's biography took up most of a section on 'desperate persons'. Where Beard had seen Spiera's despair in terms of judgement for apostasy, Goulart was more interested in the loss of hope of salvation that was at the heart of despair itself. He included a number of other stories of despair along with Spiera, such as the doctor of divinity at the University of Louvain who, having been embarrassed while giving a sermon before the Emperor, fell into such despair that he became certain that he was rejected by God. 'He died in this despaire,' Goulart recorded, 'neither was it possible for any friends nor Physitions to make him change his opinion.' There was also an unknown man who, while he was dying, told his friends 'I am a reprobate, a vessel of wrath and cursing, and I do alreadie feele the to[r]ments of hell'.³³

Though Spiera's death was widely regarded as a case of divine retribution, that does not mean that writers necessarily saw his illness in terms of a supernatural affliction. A more subtle interpretation of Spiera's illness was to see it as a manifestation of a conscience troubled by the knowledge it had denied God, rather than a direct visitation of God. This was to see a troubled conscience as its own punishment. 'Secretlie also the Lorde doth judge,' wrote Thomas Rogers, 'when hee toucheth the minde of man with the feeling of sinne and wickednes.'³⁴ As we saw in the Introduction, early modern people believed that strong emotions such as fear and sadness could have a dramatic effect upon the body, and, as we saw in Chapter One, there was a long tradition of seeing despair of the soul as causing the body to waste away. Rose Throckmorton suggested something like this when she indicated that her

³³ A. Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1999), p. 65-70, 86; T. Beard, *The theatre of Gods judgements wherein is represented the admirable justice of God against all notorious sinners* (London, 1642), pp. 47-8; Goulart, *Admirable and memorable histories*, pp. 185-98.

³⁴ Rogers, *Concerning the end of this world*, p. 77.

brother died because he was ‘grieved in mynde’ on account of his lapse into Nicodemism.

The Elizabethans appear to have had a particular fascination with cases of conscience. Lily Campbell has suggested that their attraction for the general public was similar to cases of abnormal psychology in the early twentieth century.³⁵ Spiera’s story was turned into a popular ballad, *A Ballad of Master FFrauncis [sic]*, which is now lost. As we have seen, it was also turned into a play by Nathaniel Woodes called *The Conflict of Conscience* (1581), in which Spiera is called Philologus. Woodes’ play has sometimes been compared to the more famous conflict of conscience play, Christopher Marlowe’s *Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*. This was based on the life of the German physician and natural philosopher, Jörg Faustus, who was rumoured to have made a pact with the devil and been spirited away to Hell.³⁶ Scholars have debated how far Marlowe was influenced by debates about predestination at Cambridge University during the time of composition, and whether Faustus’ damnation is depicted as inevitable in the play or whether there are hints that he could have repented. Kirsten Poole has suggested that one of the reasons for the success of the play was that Elizabethan Protestants could identify with Faustus’ theological anxieties over salvation and redemption.³⁷

These plays were both based on narrative versions of the tales they enact. Woodes’ play was based on Anglionby’s translation of Gribalidi and Marlowe’s was based on an English translation of the popular German tale, referred to by scholars as

³⁵ Campbell, ‘*Doctor Faustus*’, p. 224.

³⁶ MacDonald, ‘Fearefull Estate’, p. 34; Wine, ‘Wood’s Conflict of Conscience’; Campbell, ‘*Doctor Faustus*’.

³⁷ R. Ornstein, ‘Marlowe and God: The Tragic Theology of Dr. Faustus’, *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, 83 (1968), 1378-85; P. Honderick, ‘John Calvin and Doctor Faustus’, *The Modern Language Review*, 68 (1973), 1-13; K. Poole, ‘Dr. Faustus and Reformation Theology’, in G. A. Sullivan, Jr., P. Cheney and A. Hadfield (eds.), *Early Modern English Drama: a Critical Companion* (New York, 2006), pp. 96-107.

the *English Faust Book*. In translation from narrative to stage, the tales lost something of the horror of despair that the original versions communicated. In the narratives, a troubled conscience is not merely an intellectual dilemma, but a physically experienced form of terror. Although the *English Faust Book* was filled with diabolical magic, the first signs of Faustus' decline were from entirely natural causes:

Here was the first token, he was like a taken murderer or a thief,
the which findeth himself guilty in conscience before the judge
have given sentence, fearing every hour to die: for he was grieved,
and wailing spent the time, went talking to himself, wringing of his
hands, sobbing and sighing, he fell away from flesh and was lean
and kept himself close.³⁸

The German writer of the original version of the Faust tale on which the English text was based stated confidently that he published the 'history' 'as a fearful example of the Devil's deception and of his murder of body and soul, so that it might be a warning to all Christians.'³⁹ The colourful details of deteriorating emotional and bodily health, as a result of a growing conviction of guilt and fear of Judgement, both heightened the tension of the tale, and furthered the moral purpose. Elizabeth Butler argues that it was the author's ability to portray a 'vision of a despairing soul in torment' that made the tale of Faust so popular, in a way that other tales of magicians and sorcerers were not.⁴⁰

This is similar to how Spiera's case was understood. His chroniclers record that during his illness many people, from all stations of life, came to see him, either out of curiosity or a pious desire 'to benefit themselves, by such a spectacle of misery'. He was a literalised version of the emaciated allegorical figure of despair found in *The*

³⁸ C. Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus with The English Faust Book*, ed. D. Wootton (Cambridge, 2005), p. 144.

³⁹ W. Empson, *Faustus and the Censor: the English Faust Book and Marlowe's Doctor Faustus*, ed. J. H. Jones (Oxford, 1987), p. 13.

⁴⁰ Empson, *Faustus and the Censor*, p. 13; E. M. Butler, *The Fortunes of Faust* (Phoenix Mill, 1998), p. 8.

Fairie Queene. Decades later, Spiera was still thought of in visual terms when Robert Bolton stated that he ‘became a spectacle of . . . spirituall misery and woe to the whole world’.⁴¹ These judgement tales offered an alternative explanation for symptoms of fear accompanied by sickness to those found in academic treatises on melancholy. In the narratives of Faust and Spiera, both the physiological and the emotional symptoms of despair were the product of a reprobate mind racked with guilt over sin and excluded from receiving the peace of Christ that was given only to the elect.

Pastoral Response

Over the next two centuries, the Spiera narrative held a particular fascination for those tempted to despair themselves. Nehemiah Wallington, the suicidal shop owner whose life will be examined in Chapter Five, copied out the whole of Bacon’s manuscript by hand. More generally, Michael MacDonald argues that there were two main ways that people responded to Spiera. The first was the sociological reading of Spiera’s history in which his suffering served as a warning against those who might consider betraying their religious community. The second was a more personal response in which Spiera became symbolic of the despair that formed part of Protestant emotional interiority. As the perils of the 1550s became a distant memory, the narrow political reading of Spiera as an apostate and enemy to the Protestant religion began to be replaced by a tendency to identify with Spiera’s dilemma. People recognised themselves in Spiera. They empathised with his weakness, his inconsistency in faith and feeling, his fear of losing friends or livelihood, and, most of

⁴¹ Bacon, *The fearefull estate of Francis Spira*, pp. 36-7; R. Bolton, *Instructions for a right comforting afflicted consciences* (London, 1631), p. 18.

all, his inability to attain a sense of assurance that he was amongst the elect. This empathy could have a devastating effect on sensitive readers. The fifteen-year-old daughter of the New England puritan, Samuel Sewell, told her father that she ‘was afraid [she] would go to Hell, was like Spira, not Elected’. The Presbyterian Elisabeth West was unfortunate enough to read the tale at a time when she was struggling against blasphemous thoughts. She wrote that ‘it hurt me more than all the books ever I saw; O that I had never seen it! For I thought, I would make the same end’.⁴²

A particularly dramatic reaction to reading the history of Spiera was recorded by John Bunyan in *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666). Coming across Bacon’s account at a time when he was questioning his own prospects of salvation, Spiera’s story was ‘as salt, when rubbed into a fresh wound’. Spiera’s cries were ‘as knives and daggers in my soul’. It is likely that Spiera served as the inspiration for the ‘Man of Despair’ shut up in an iron cage whom Christian meets in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. When Christian asks him if there is any hope that he might get out, he replies that there is none. ‘I have grieved the Spirit,’ he says, ‘I have so hardened my heart, that I *cannot* repent.’ However, what is most striking about Bunyan’s account is not the impact that it had upon his imagination, but the effect that he described its having upon his body. As the thought occurred to him that he might be damned like Spiera, he began to experience symptoms like Spiera’s:

Then was I struck into a very great trembling, insomuch that at sometimes I could for whole days together feel my very body as well as my minde to shake and totter under the sence of the dreadful Judgement of God, that should fall on those that have sinned that most fearful and unpardonable sin. I felt also such a clogging and heat at my stomach by reason of this my terrour, that I was,

⁴² MacDonald, ‘Fearefull Estate’, pp. 44-58; E. West, *Memoirs, or spiritual exercises of Elisabeth West* (Glasgow, 1766), pp. 15-16.

especially at some times, as if my breast-bone would have split in sunder.⁴³

Here again despair is understood in early modern literature as a physical experience.

However, by the time Bunyan was writing, not all English Protestants accepted the interpretation of Spiera that taught that such symptoms of despair were products of a reprobate mind. Richard Baxter, a clergyman writing in the latter half of the seventeenth century, blamed the original authors of Spiera's history for placing too providential an interpretation on his illness. 'The reading of *Spira's* Case causeth or increaseth Melancholy in many', he wrote, 'the Ignorant Author having described a plain Melancholy, contracted by the Trouble of Sinning against Conscience, as if it were a damnable Despair of a Sound Understanding.' Samuel Richardson's heroine, Clarissa, was also unimpressed with the melodrama of damnation. When away from home, her family sent her three books: 'A Drexelius on Eternity, the good old Practice of Piety and a Francis Spira. My brother's wit I suppose. He thinks he does well to point out death and despair to me.'⁴⁴

Previous historians have seen such opinions as evidence of the growing influence of anti-puritanism and Enlightenment scepticism within the Church of England, as the seventeenth century progressed. 'The orthodox enemies of religious enthusiasm,' writes MacDonald, 'insisted that despair was not a genuine spiritual state, an emotion whose significance depended upon its religious context, but rather a symptom of mental illness, which they usually called religious melancholy.'

Stachniewski sees medical humanism as providing a possible alternative to uncompromising puritan understandings of despair. Barlow sees this as evidence of a

⁴³ J. Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, ed. R. Sharrock (Oxford, 1962), pp. 49-50; Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, ed. W. R. Owens, 2nd edn. (Oxford, 2003), p. 34 and nt. p. 296.

⁴⁴ R. Baxter, *A Christian directory or, a sum of practical theologie and cases of conscience directing Christians how to use their knowledge and faith* (London, 1673), p. 312; Richardson as quoted in Overell, 'Exploitation of Francesco Spiera', p. 637.

growing tendency in the seventeenth century towards the modern divergence of supernatural and natural explanations, with most relaters of the Spiera story resisting the sceptics.⁴⁵ These historians draw too stark a contrast between puritan views of melancholy and the views of physicians, and between sixteenth-century approaches to despair and those of the seventeenth century. These accounts also contain the implication that only non-puritan and later writers attempted to intervene to prevent readers of Spiera's history from suffering the same despair. In fact, the first suggestion that the story should be seen more in terms of illness than judgement grew out of Elizabethan pastoral concerns.

From the beginning, theologians in England were cautious about using Spiera's history to induce too great a fear of judgement. Judgement books were part of puritan culture, and often provided sermon material when the preacher required illustrations that would demonstrate the terrible consequences of sin. However, at other times godly ministers attempted to distance themselves from the simplistic providentialism behind these works. A tendency to see all calamities as a punishment for sin could be seen as worldly or a form of 'papist' superstition. The early seventeenth-century clergyman, Richard Sibbes, wrote that despair, along with other trials, was sent to the godly for the good of their soul. Therefore

we should not passe a harsh, unadvised, rigid censure upon our selves, or others, for these respects; for any great affliction or abasement in this world. The world is ready to passe their verdict presently upon a man: Oh, such a one, you see what a kinde of man he was, you see how God follows him with crosses.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ MacDonald, 'Fearefull Estate', p. 50; Stachniewski, *Persecutory Imagination*, p. 8; Barlow, 'That Others Read Not Thee', pp. 116-20.

⁴⁶ D. Harley, 'Spiritual Physic, Providence and English Medicine, 1560-1640', in O. P. Grell and A. Cunningham (eds.), *Medicine and the Reformation*, (London, 1993), p. 103; R. Sibbes, *A learned commentary or exposition: upon the first chapter of the second Epistle of S. Paul to the Corinthians* (London, 1655), p.129.

The educated clergy were able to take a more nuanced view of such matters. They were aware of the dangers surrounding the issues of reprobation and the Sin against the Holy Ghost. It was not their intention to cause any of their followers to fall into a similar despair.

One of the first theologians to address the question of Spiera's reprobation directly was Peter Martyr Vermigli. Vermigli is thought to have been one of the greatest promoters of the doctrine of double predestination, besides Calvin himself, and a key influence on early English Protestants, introducing the new Reformed theology. His thoughts on predestination were not published until 1558, but were first given in a series of lectures on Paul's epistle to the Romans delivered at Oxford University some time between 1550 and 1552. Oxford at that time was not particularly receptive to Reformed theology and Vermigli's line was defensive and methodical, aimed at refuting the objections to predestination raised by his Catholic opponents.⁴⁷ Speaking in a very different context from that in which Calvin was writing his introduction to Gribaldi's text on Spiera, Vermigli was much more cautious in condemning him. He was addressing the objection commonly raised against predestination theology, that it caused people to despair of God's mercy.

Since the number of the reprobate is the greater number, everyone (they say) might easily suspect that he is one of that number and it would come to pass that many would abhor God. We answer ... It is vain to say that many could come to suspect their reprobation, for out of Holy Scripture no one can find any effective arguments for his reprobation. Even if God sometimes reveals it by some secret judgment, it cannot be made a common rule.

How, then, did Vermigli explain the Spiera case, at the time only three or four years in the past? Vermigli came up with two possible explanations: that Spiera's illness was an exceptional case of divine intervention, which God intended as a

⁴⁷ P. M. Vermigli, *Predestination and Justification: Two Theological Loci*, trans. and ed. F. A. James (Kirksville, Missouri, 2003), pp. xxiii-xxix.

warning to others against apostasy; or that it was not by God's hand at all that Spiera came to believe that he was reprobate, but by the interference of the devil.

In our time a certain man in Italy named Francesco Spiera felt within himself that God had imposed this evil [reprobation] on him, but in my judgment this happened to induce fear in other people ... Through this man, by a singular dispensation, God wished to frighten others away from such evil and impiety. This does not happen regularly, as far as we can gather from the histories, nor can anyone discern this despair from the Holy Scripture. Perhaps God did not do this to Spiera. Perhaps, once he had renounced godliness, the devil (whose slave he was), used it to drive him to utter despair.

Vermigli insisted that the godly do not despair of themselves – at least, not for long – but continue ‘to have confidence and to hope that their names are entered in the roll of the elect’.⁴⁸

Hugh Latimer also commented on Spiera's case in a sermon on the Lord's Prayer. Coming from a different angle, he considered whether Spiera had committed the Sin against the Holy Ghost. He came to the conclusion that he had because he, along with other infamous examples, such as the Emperor Nero, had ‘contrary to that admonition of the holy ghost denied the word of god, & so finally died in desperation’. However, he went on to reassure his listeners. Following Augustine, he argued that a person could only be judged to have committed the Sin against the Holy Ghost after his death: ‘we cannot judge aforehand’, he said. The Sin consisted in resisting the promptings of the Holy Ghost to the point of death. Right up until that time, there was always the hope of repentance. ‘I wil shew you a remedy for the sin against the holy ghost,’ he concluded, ‘ask remission of sin in the name of Christ, and then I ascertain you, that you sin not against the holy ghost.’ Elsewhere he suggested that when Jesus said that the Sin against the Holy Ghost could never be forgiven, it was ‘a vehemente manner of speakinge’, by which he meant that falling away from

⁴⁸ Vermigli, *Predestination*, pp. 47-8.

the truth was a sin that was ‘seldome’ or ‘hardly forgiven. There was no sin that it was impossible for God to forgive.’⁴⁹

It was not only theologians who worried about these issues. Concern about the possible adverse effects on readers is evident in English publications of Spiera fairly early on. In 1570 a second edition of Anglionby’s translation of Gribaldi was brought out. The text was exactly the same as the 1550s edition, except for the addition of an appendix, entitled ‘A Godlye and wholesome preservative against desperation’. This was an old text that predated the death of Spiera and the political situation in which his story had become popular. It contained ‘A medicine against the feare of Helle and damnation’ and ‘A medicine against synne, vexyng and troubling our conscience’. At this point in time, the notion of medicine was being used as a metaphor for consolation for the soul against the lies of Satan. This consolatory treatise explained that the devil ‘seeketh by all meanes howe to devoure us, stirring up in our myndes many dangerous and troubellous thoughtes, concerning our election and predestination’. It listed reassuring verses in the Bible that promised salvation and mercy, and concluded that ‘they that beleeve rightly in Christe, they are predestinate to everlastyng life’.⁵⁰ The publishers appear to have added this text out of concern for sensitive readers who might fear that they would meet the same end as Spiera.

Another example of Elizabethan ambivalence about treating Spiera as a hopeless case was the two endings that Nathaniel Woodes gave to *The Conflict of Conscience*. In the first ending Spiera is reported to have hanged himself, but in the second the announcement comes at the end:

Oh joyfull newes, which I report, and bring into your eares,

⁴⁹ H. Latimer, *27 sermons preached by the right Reverende father in God ... Maister Hugh Latimer* (London, 1562), sig. Hii(r-v); idem, *A moste faithfull sermo[n] preached before the Kynges most excelle[n]te Majestye* (London, 1553), sigs. Evi(r)-Eviii(r).

⁵⁰ Anon., ‘The Godlye and wholsome preservative against desperation’, in Gribaldi, *A notable and marvelous epistle*, esp. sigs. Fviii(v), Gii(r).

Philologus, that would have hanged himself with coard,
Is nowe converted unto God, with manie bitter teares,
By godly counsell he was woon, all prayse be to the Lorde.

His death by starvation is seen as a merciful release, rather than suicide.⁵¹

By the end of the century, at least one prominent puritan leader was attempting to distance himself altogether from Calvin's judgement of Spiera's estate. William Perkins (1558-1602) was a Cambridge theologian and a clergyman in the Church of England. Patrick Collinson has called him 'the prince of puritan theologians'. He was also a popular preacher, and his works were comprehensible enough to be widely read by a general audience. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, a number of his works were published as a popular collection entitled *A golden chaine: or The description of theologie containing the order of the causes of salvation and damnation*. The 1616 edition included a 'table of the order of the causes of salvation and damnation' showing the paths of the elect and the reprobate from the point of God's decree until the point of eternal life or death. This was based on a similar chart by Theodore Beza, a significant influence on Perkins.⁵²

Perkins firmly committed himself to belief in reprobation: 'that God hardens whome he will,' he wrote, 'is confirmed and made plaine by the testimonie of Scripture concerning Pharao.' His uncompromising views on the subject would shock most Western readers today. 'If it be in the power and libertie of a man to kill an oxe or a sheepe for his use, to hunt and kill the hare and partridge for his pleasure,' he explained in an essay on predestination, 'then much more without injustice may it be in the will and libertie of the creatour [t]o refuse and forsake his creature for his glorie.' He rejected universal grace outright, insisting that saving grace was particular

⁵¹ N. Woodes, *An excellent new commedie intituled, The conflict of conscience contayninge a most lamentable example of the dolefull desperation of a miserable worldlinge* (London, 1581), sig. Iiv(r).

⁵² M. Jinkins, 'Perkins, William (1558-1602)', *ODNB*; W. Perkins, 'Table of causes of salvation and damnation', in *A golden chaine* (London, 1616).

to the elect. Therefore, attaining assurance of salvation, or a ‘certificate in the conscience’, as he referred to it, was of the utmost importance: ‘We must not content our selves to say, God is mercifull, but we must goe further, and labour for a certificate in the conscience, that we may be able to say that God is indeede mercifull to us.’ However, when it came to the question of whether it was possible to discern absolutely that a particular individual was reprobate, Perkins was very cautious. He thought that at certain times, in certain exceptional circumstances, God might reveal a person to be reprobate. In the past, God had given special insight into such matters to leaders such as the Old Testament prophets and the apostles in the New Testament. At critical times, God might give a special revelation to the whole body of the Church, such as at the time when the survival of the Church was threatened by Julian the Apostate. Ordinary people, however, had no claim to be able to pronounce another person damned, whatever the circumstances. Instead of making ungrounded accusations, Christians were to practise ‘the judgement of charitie’ by which all members of the Church were considered elect, the secret judgements of God being unknown.⁵³

It was this caution that led him to reject the commonly received interpretation of Spiera’s despair. The trouble with most accounts of Spiera was that they tended to assume that he was damned, without considering the implications. Perkins addressed the question head on. ‘It may be demanded,’ he wrote, ‘whether the common judgement given of *Francis Spira* that he is a reprobate be good or no?’ His answer was that ‘we may with better warrant say no; then any man saie, yea’. He gave two reasons for this. First of all, the witnesses who wrote the first accounts were not

⁵³ W. Perkins, *An exposition of the Symbole or Creed of the Apostles according to the tenour of the Scriptures* ([Cambridge], 1595), pp. 429, 435-6, 448-9, 454-6, 474-5. According to the Book of Exodus, when God sent the plagues on Egypt, He hardened Pharaoh’s heart so that he would not repent and free the Israelites from slavery. This was so that He might ‘multiply my signs and my wonders in the land of Egypt’: Exodus iv. 21, vii. 3.

reliable: ‘for what gifts of discerning had they,’ he demanded, ‘which came to visit him in his extremities?’ Secondly, the grounds for their ‘peremptorie judgement’ – Spiera’s own estimation of himself, and the severity of his despair – were insufficient. The first Perkins dismissed out of hand: ‘He said himselfe that he was a reprobate: that is nothing; a sicke mans judgement of himselfe is not to be regarded’. The second was also ‘a senselesse reason’. Many people despaired. Despair was the experience of the godly and the ungodly alike. Every year there were examples of men who fell into despair ‘as deeply as ever *Spira* did’, and later recovered ‘by the good helpe of the ministerie of the word’. Unless it could be proved that Spiera had despaired ‘wholly and finally’, the only proper course of action was to suspend judgement. Breaking solidarity with the previous generation of Calvinists, Perkins was highly critical of those who had recklessly condemned Spiera, placing most of the blame on those who had published the first accounts. ‘That which is written of Francis Spira, that he was a reprobate & a cast-away, was penned very inconsiderately,’ he stated, and, elsewhere, ‘they were much to blame that first published the booke’.⁵⁴

Spiera in the 1620s and 30s

As early as the last two decades of the sixteenth century, then, a prominent puritan leader was arguing that Spiera’s despair should be seen as a kind of illness that had adversely affected his judgement, rather than a hopeless case. This is an

⁵⁴ Perkins, *A golden chaine*, p. 473; idem, *Satans sophistrie answered by our Saviour Christ and in divers sermons further manifested* (London, 1604), p. 132. ‘Castaway’ was a colloquial term for a reprobate that came into use some time in the early sixteenth century – for instance, in Tyndale’s 1626 translation of the New Testament: see entry for ‘castaway, *adj.* and *n.*’, def. B(a), in *Oxford English Dictionary Online (OED)* [www.oed.com].

important point to have in mind when we turn to the most famous English version of Spiera's history, which was published in 1638. This was Nathaniel Bacon's *A relation of the fearefull estate of Francis Spira in the yeare, 1548*. It went through eleven editions before the end of the century. Bacon had composed the text some time before 1628, and a manuscript version had been in circulation for a number of years. Unable to get hold of a copy of Anglionby's translation, Bacon had gone back to the original texts published in 1550 and compiled all four versions of the story into one. This made his version much longer than any previous publications. Scholars have speculated as to why such a level of interest in Spiera was revived in the 1620s and 30s. Brian Opie considers Bacon's own political and religious views, and the circles in which he moved, to be of crucial importance. Bacon was both a Presbyterian and an anti-monarchist. As a lawyer, and later a member of Parliament during the Interregnum, he took a keen interest in the power of state governments and the rights of individual conscience. He published a number of works anonymously about the importance of individual freedom of conscience, and the difficulties faced by those who found themselves on the wrong side of corrupt state and ecclesiastical authorities. Spiera's apostasy in the face of a corrupt Inquisition was therefore of personal interest to Bacon.⁵⁵

We have already looked at the second explanation for the need for a new edition of Spiera's history. Historians such as Stachniewski and MacDonald saw Bacon's revival of an old story as a puritan reaction against Arminian sections within the Church of England who sought to undermine notions of providential intervention by the use of medical explanations. 'Although Bacon's *Fearefull Estate* was based on sources almost a century old,' writes MacDonald, 'it was paradoxically a timely book,

⁵⁵ Stachniewski, *Persecutory Imagination*, p. 37; B. Opie, 'Nathaniel Bacon and Francis Spira: the Presbyterian and the Apostate', *The Turnbull Library Record*, 18 (1985), 33-50.

and it embodies a defense against these conservative charges.’⁵⁶ By this defence, MacDonald meant Bacon’s decision to include the exchange between Spiera and the famous group of physicians from the University of Padua who attended him. This had not been included in Gribaldi’s version. The intention of this narrative section was clearly to pit the powers of medicine against the power of providential justice. Spiera laughed at the idea that physic could be at all effectual in his condition: ‘Alas poore men ... doe you think that this disease is to be cured by potions? ... it is neither potions, plaisters, nor drugs, that can help a fainting soule cast downe with sense of sinne’. The physicians too came to the conclusion that this was not a case that could be resolved through their skills:

they could not discern that his body was afflicted with any danger or distemper originally from it selfe, by reason of the over-ruling of any humour; but that this Maladie of his did arise from some grieffe, or passion of his minde, which being overburthened, did so oppresse the spirits, as they wanting free passage, stirred up many ill humours, whereof the body of man is full; & these ascending up into the braine, troubled the fancie; shadowed the seat of the judgment, and so corrupted it.⁵⁷

Spiera’s words bear a striking resemblance to what Bright had written in his *Treatise on Melancholie* concerning the futility of medical intervention in cases of terror of conscience. However, the physicians’ verdict is not as damning as it might at first appear. They believed that the illness had originated in some mental distress, but that the humours having been disturbed had now upset the mind’s ability to judge properly. This is very similar to Bright’s description of melancholic illnesses which are caused originally by sorrow over a particular sin, but then develop into delusions in which a person loses hope of their salvation altogether. In effect, Bright was trying to have it both ways by saying that melancholy was separate from terrors of

⁵⁶ MacDonald, ‘Fearefull Estate’, p. 51.

⁵⁷ Bacon, *The fearefull estate of Francis Spira*, pp. 34-6.

conscience, but that some cases of melancholy could begin with a troubled conscience. Bacon did something similar with the Spiera case. In order to impress upon the reader the grave dangers of backsliding, he included a dramatic encounter between God and Spiera, in which a voice from heaven declares ‘hence Apostate, bear with thee the sentence of thy eternall damnation’. However, in a final section in which Bacon summed up the lessons that the reader should take away from the tale, he blamed Satan for Spiera’s despair, and exhorted the reader to ignore his promptings:

take heed of Spira’s principall Errors; which were to dispute with Satan over busily in time of weaknesse: especially to reason, and conclude from present sense: to Gods past Reprobation, and future damnation: both which is hard, if possible for any man to determine in his owne, much more in other cases.⁵⁸

Bacon’s conclusions reflect the ambiguity with which Spiera’s belief that he was reprobate was received in England. His case was at once a warning of the despair that followed apostasy, and a warning not to despair. Spiera was the most well-known reprobate in early modern England, yet a number of English clergy were unsure about whether he really was a reprobate. Thus, the mid-seventeenth-century Church of Scotland minister, Samuel Rutherford, was not giving a new interpretation of the case, but spoke for previous generations of English Calvinists when he wrote:

If *F. Spira* go for a despairing Reprobate (which I dare not averre) yet when he said, he believed Christ was able to save him, but he doubted of his will; he must not be so understood, as if it were so indeed: Unbelievers know not all the mysterious turnings of lying & self deceiving unbelief.⁵⁹

This confused syntax is representative of the ‘muddle’ that this figure from the Italian Reformation presented to the Church of England. While there was no doubt that Spiera was an apostate, his self-awareness appeared to

⁵⁸ Bacon, *The fearefull estate of Francis Spira*, pp. 30, 133.

⁵⁹ S. Rutherford, *The trial & triumph of faith: or, an exposition of the history of Christs dispossessing of the daughter of the woman of Canaan* (London, 1652), p. 179.

believe his own claim that he was a reprobate. The mind of the reprobate, or unbeliever was, by definition, unenlightened concerning spiritual matters. It was for this reason that clergy such as Perkins began to look to factors other than sin and judgement to explain despair of salvation.

Conclusion

The story of Francesco Spiera has sometimes been seen as a typical example of puritan thinking. John Stachniewski argues that puritans showed such an interest in Spiera because his case appeared to justify their theology of election and reprobation.⁶⁰ Spiera was certainly the most famous person who ever questioned his election; however, his story, and the way it was first received and interpreted, was the exception and not the norm in puritan approaches to reprobation fears. It was in the particular circumstances of the 1550s, when the Catholic Inquisition posed a real threat to Calvinist Europe, that Marian Protestants were so quick to condemn Spiera as a reprobate. His example was convenient because it justified their own cause. When theologians addressed the question of whether Spiera was reprobate in a pastoral context, their tone was much more cautious than the anti-Nicodemite polemics, knowing how dangerous the concept of reprobation could be for impressionable minds. Later generations lacked the confidence with which Calvin and his followers had condemned Spiera, and a number became discomfited by the case.

⁶⁰ Stachniewski, *Persecutory Imagination*, p. 39.

The famous puritan divine, William Perkins, rejected entirely the interpretation that Spiera's despair was an example of justly deserved divine retribution, and wished that the book had never been published. In fact, he subscribed to the idea that Spiera's despair of salvation resulted entirely from sickness – an idea that other historians have ascribed to the enemies of puritanism. Perkins was writing in the last two decades of the sixteenth century, shortly after the publication of Bright's *Treatise of melancholie*. Perkins' maxim, that 'a sicke mans judgement of himselfe is not to be regarded', together with Bright's theories of how melancholy could cause delusions in which a person believed themselves to be reprobate, were to form the basis of consolation for those suffering from despair of salvation in England. These ideas developed alongside, and in intimate connection with, the idea that Satan planted lies in the mind of the elect to make them doubt their estate. It is on the notion of melancholic illness, rather than divine retribution, as the cause of despair of salvation, that the rest of this thesis will focus. This idea was much more definitive of puritan pastoral approaches to this problem than the diatribes of judgement books.

CHAPTER THREE

‘Weak’ Christians and Elizabethan Puritan Consolation Literature

The first chapter of this thesis examined spiritual despair in the context of the canon of medical literature on melancholy. This chapter seeks to demonstrate the ways in which these ideas found in medicine were incorporated into pastoral responses to despair in the sixteenth century. Spiera’s case, and the response of readers, showed that pastoral approaches were needed to the problem of loss of confidence in election. In the second chapter we saw how one of the leading puritan divines, William Perkins, rejected the prevailing view that Spiera’s despair of salvation should be seen as an example of divine judgement, and a warning to others, in favour of the view that despair was a common experience in Christian life that should be seen more in terms of an illness. His views were part of a wider movement within puritanism that was seeking to establish principles on which to minister to those in despair. This movement grew out of a response to the particular needs of Protestants who were seeking a sense of security in the absence of the forms of consolation provided by Catholic tradition. Protestants despised penance, good works and papal indulgences, and claimed that these could not provide the same comfort to the soul as could the doctrine of salvation by grace. However, this did not mean that Protestants never despaired. From as early as the 1540s, Protestants struggled to attain assurance of salvation. The two major, and connected, stumbling blocks were fear that one had committed the Sin against the Holy Ghost, and fear that one was reprobate. This problem of despair within the puritan community required explanation. The primary

ways in which this was explained by the puritan community were, first of all, the persuasions of Satan, and, later in the century, a combination of Satanic influence and melancholy.

This chapter seeks to re-establish William Haller's view of puritan pastors as successful 'physicians of the soul'. While teaching that only the elect were part of the true Church was controversial, puritan clergymen were under the same pastoral obligations towards members of their parish as the rest of the clergy in the Church of England. Article XVII of the 1559 Injunctions, issued as part of the Protestant settlement of religion, laid out the duty of all clergy:

That the vice of damnable despair be taken away, and that firm belief and steadfast hope may be surely conceived of all their parishioners being in any danger; they shall learn and always have in a readiness such comfortable places and sentences of scripture, as do set forth the mercy, benefits and goodness of almighty God towards all penitent and believing persons.¹

A useful article by Michael Winship has revealed how puritan practical divinity from the 1580s onwards is best understood in terms of a pastoral response to the problem of assurance. He argues that puritan preachers in Elizabethan England were faced with three types of response to Protestant religion in England. One group of people were those the puritans regarded as 'carnal gospellers', people who had no real interest in religion and welcomed the doctrine of salvation by grace because it appeared to free them from the demands of the Church to live a pious life. Another group of people were 'backsliders', those who had initially entered zealously into the godly life and shown signs of election, but whose religion became an outward show. It was to these two groups that the puritans directed their fiercest warnings and admonitions – the Hell fire preaching that has come to be seen as characteristic of puritan preaching. However, there was a third group, which Winship calls the 'weak' Christians. These

¹ Quoted in White, *Predestination*, p. 63.

were people who took their religion seriously, but who struggled, sometimes for long periods, with doubts about whether they were truly in the elect.² It is these people, and the puritan response to this problem, that interest us in this chapter.

‘Weak’ Christians often feared that they were amongst the backsliders, or hypocrites that had only temporary assurance. They often saw themselves as a kind of apostate. Although they had not committed a political act of apostasy by publicly denouncing the faith, as Spiera had done, they felt they had fallen away from the faith by losing enthusiasm for godly values. For this reason, they feared that they had committed the Sin against the Holy Ghost. Richard Rogers wrote that many of the godly ‘complaine, that they find much tedious heaviness, strong discouragements, and many relapses which breed doubtfulness and feare’.³ As these people tended to be the most scrupulous members of the godly community, their situation tended to evoke sympathy from puritan teachers who tried to find ways to comfort them and explain their situation. It is for this reason that the puritan clergy have been called ‘physicians of the soul’.

What has not been recognised is that the idea that Elizabethan clergymen were ‘physicians of the soul’ included a medical dimension. For early modern people, the body, the mind and the spiritual world could not be easily separated. Although clergymen were primarily concerned with the health of the soul, and physicians primarily with the health of the body, there was general agreement that, in cases of despair, the two must work together. Medical comment did not appear in puritan discussions of despair until around the 1580s, but the idea that there was a connection between the two can be traced back to ancient philosophy. Galen described disordered passions as ‘diseases of the soul’, and philosophers who advised people on

² Winship, ‘Weak Christians, Backsliders, and Carnal Gospellers’.

³ Quoted in Winship, ‘Weak Christians, Backsliders, and Carnal Gospellers’, p. 466.

how to order their lives in order to avoid unruly passions were ‘physicians of the soul’.⁴ As we saw in Chapter One, confessors in the medieval church were sometimes called ‘physicians of the soul’. In Elizabethan pastoral ministry, the link between the passions, the health of the body, and the mind again became important.

Historiography

We have already looked at most of the relevant historiography for this chapter in the Introduction. In the final chapter of his overview of early modern madness in England, *Mystical Bedlam*, Michael MacDonald compared various approaches to the treatment of psychological illness. The puritan approach was to blame all troubles on sin and an inability to resist the temptations of the devil: ‘they used traditional symbols and plain speech to convey a simple lesson: The root of all wretchedness is sin; the only cure for sin is repentance and conversion.’ The puritans’ solution was a reformation of manners based on rigorous introspection. Every thought and action had to be analysed for the presence of sin. MacDonald contrasts this self-lacerating approach to the gentler mode of comforting the afflicted offered by the clergyman and physician Richard Napier. He prescribed an eclectic mixture of comforting speeches reminding the patient of God’s mercies, formal prayer, religious exercises and traditional remedies for melancholy, such as the use of precious stones. MacDonald argues that this ‘traditional fusion of natural and supernatural beliefs about disease and misfortune’ was more successful than either the puritan approach or the medical approach that grew with the asylum system of treating the insane in the eighteenth

⁴ Jackson, ‘Passions in Psychological Healing’, p. 161.

century. He partly blames the excesses of puritan spirituality for discrediting religion in the eyes of the seventeenth century elite, causing traditional therapies to be abandoned.⁵ As we have seen, John Stachniewski, in a more detailed analysis of puritan sources, takes a similar view. Puritanism, he argues, based on Calvin's doctrine of double predestination was a self-lacerating and psychologically destructive religion. The doctrine of assurance provided no comfort to those prone to self-doubt.

It is difficult to prove whether one religious culture is more or less psychologically healthy than another. However, what this chapter does seek to show is that the puritans were much more holistic in their approach to despair than either Stachniewski or MacDonald suggest. In explaining despair, and offering consolation, puritan ministers took into account many different aspects of a person's situation – spiritual, providential, physiological and psychological. Although sin was regarded as one of the causes of dejection, melancholy and the actions of the devil were also used to explain thoughts and feelings for which the sufferer was not held responsible.

Jeremy Schmidt includes a chapter on Calvinism in his history of the relationship between melancholic illness and the cure of the soul in sixteenth and seventeenth century England. He is the first to emphasise the medical dimension of puritan teaching and preaching in England. He argues that puritan discourse was a kind of therapeutic language, like the languages of ancient moral philosophy that were intended to cure diseases by ordering the passions properly. Puritans preached about repentance because they believed that genuine repentance would relieve the soul, the body and the mind from the terrors of a tormented conscience. 'From a modern perspective,' he writes,

such spiritual purgation is likely to be seen in the same light as the physical purges and bleedings early modern physicians prescribed

⁵ MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*, pp. 217-31.

for melancholics. For their part, however, early modern spiritual physicians insisted that if the health of the soul and the body were interdependent, as Galenic medicine maintained, then the healing of religious melancholy, and indeed of melancholy in general, demanded that the soul find its rest and its health in God.⁶

Schmidt's view of the relationship between medicine and religious discourse is close to my own. However, Schmidt still sees puritan ministry as reacting to medical ideas. I argue in this chapter that puritans were instrumental in developing the concept that terrors of conscience needed to be understood in both medical and spiritual terms. By incorporating the language of medical discourse into their explanations for reprobation fears, Elizabethan puritan writers laid the foundation for the concept of 'religious melancholy' that would become prominent in seventeenth century writing.

Early Examples

Spiera's had been a special case, resulting from an act that was perceived as apostasy in a particular political context. The response to those in England who suffered similar fears that they were reprobate, or that they had committed the Sin against the Holy Ghost, was overwhelmingly positive and encouraging. A literature of consolation was developed, mainly written by members of the clergy, to aid those suffering from 'afflictions of conscience'. This began in the form of letters written in reply to those asking for advice when suffering from doubt, or feelings of despair, in the mid-sixteenth century. At this time the problem was seen as originating in a

⁶ Schmidt, *Melancholy and the Care of the Soul*, pp. 48-9.

person's spiritual life or false understanding of theology. Only later were physiological factors such as melancholy humour taken into account.

The problem of despair of salvation seems to have begun around the 1540s and 50s. Hugh Latimer, for example, came across troubled souls in the course of his ministry. As noted in Chapter Two, Latimer addressed the question of what the Sin Against the Holy Ghost consisted of in his sermons. In one of those sermons he claimed that when Christ had said that the Sin could not be forgiven, this had been 'a vehemente manner of speakinge'. This was in response to a particular man who asked Latimer for help when he became convinced that he had committed the Sin. 'Hee hadde fallen frome the truthe knowen,' wrote Latimer, 'and afterwarde fel to mockinge and scornynge of it. And thys synne it was that he thoughte to bee unforgeveable.' It took a number of days to persuade the man that the verses alluding to the Sin against the Holy Ghost did not apply to him, and that God forgave everybody who truly repented: 'I had scriptures inoughe for me (as I thoughte) but say what I coulde say, he could saye more against him self, then I coulde sai at the time to do hym good wyth all.' The man's resistance to comfort resulted in Latimer returning to his study to read all the theology he could on the Sin against the Holy Ghost in search of an answer. His search was dissatisfying and it was at this point that Latimer attempted to explain the verse away by claiming that it was 'a vehemente manner of speakinge', meaning that it was difficult to forgive, but that he did not think it was impossible where there was genuine repentance.⁷ If prominent theologians such as Latimer were somewhat at a loss to explain these verses, it is unsurprising that lay members of the Protestant community became entangled.

⁷ Latimer, *A moste faithfull semon*, sigs. [E5(r)-E6(v)].

Another example of a Protestant who was troubled over the Sin against the Holy Ghost was John Glover, who was included in John Foxe's 'Book of Martyrs'. The story of the Glover family was similar to that of many families that suffered as a result of the persecution of Protestants under Mary I. John's younger brother, Robert, was married to Hugh Latimer's niece. Latimer was a regular visitor to the Glover household, and the family supported a number of other prominent Protestant leaders, including John Bradford. Robert was arrested in 1555 and condemned to death for denying that the mass was a sacrament. John Glover died of a fever caught whilst hiding in the woods avoiding arrest and his wife, Agnes, was arrested and forced to abjure. John's body was buried in secret, but later the local bishop ordered that his body be disinterred and cast into the road, as no heretic should be buried in holy ground.⁸

In the midst of this tragic tale, Foxe paused to give an account of something that had happened in the life of John Glover during the reign of Edward VI, before the return of Catholic rule. After reading the epistle to the Hebrews, Glover convinced himself that he was a backslider and had committed the Sin against the Holy Ghost. Foxe described his experience of conversion, followed some time later by doubts about his estate like this:

Beyng first called by the light of the holy spirit to the knowledge of the gospel, and havynge received a wonderous sweet feeling of Christes heavenly kyngdom, hys mynd after that fallyng a little to some cogitation of his former affayres belonging to hys vocation, began by & by to misdoubt hymselfe.

At first these were only doubts, but soon Glover developed a fixed belief that he really had forfeited his place in heaven. The certainty that he was without hope of salvation resulted in a period of deep dejection lasting five years. This despair manifested itself

⁸ S. Wabuda, 'Glover, Robert (d. 1555)', *ODNB*; J. Foxe, *TAMO*, pp. 1738-9.

in physical and psychological symptoms that included sleeplessness, loss of appetite and dramatic weight loss, disassociation, and loss of pleasure. Foxe witnessed this himself as a child visiting the Glover household:

Being young, I remember I was once or twice with him, who partly by hys talke I perceived, and partly by myne owne eyes saw to be so worne and consumed by the space of five yeares, that neither almost any brooking of meate, quietnes of sleepe, pleasure of lyfe, yea and almost no kind of senses was left in hym.⁹

This particular story of suffering was not part of the Catholic persecution, so why did Foxe think it significant enough to include in his story of martyrdom? First of all, he saw it as an illustration of the integrity of Protestant spirituality. Foxe describes the Glovers, John especially, as exemplary Protestants who lived out their faith in their actions, their conversation, and in subduing sinful thoughts and passions. He compared them favourably to those he termed ‘tablegospellers’, who involved themselves in disputes over fine points of theology, but whose lives did not reflect the principles they claimed to espouse. Glover’s suffering showed that his faith was not something outward, designed for public show, but a genuine, felt experience of God, and a struggle to desire spiritual, rather than earthly, values. Whereas Spiera’s public apostasy and subsequent experience of judgement was shameful, Foxe depicted Glover’s despair as honourable because it revealed an unusual sensitivity to sin. He compared his suffering to the suffering of burning on the fires of martyrdom. One was a burning of the body, the other a burning of the soul. In the 1563 version of the ‘Book of Martyrs’, Foxe called Glover ‘the most blessed martyr of all’, on the grounds that suffering of the soul was worse than suffering of the body:

Though he suffred not the paynes of the outward fire, as his brother and other Martyrs did: yet if we consider what inwardly in spirit and mynd this man felt & suffred, and that of so long tyme, he may well be counted with hys brother Rob. For a Martyr ... yea, & in

⁹ Foxe, *TAMO*, p. 1733.

comparison may seem to be chronicled a double Martyr. For as the sayd Rob. was spedily dispatched with the sharpe and extreme tormentes of the fire in a short tyme, so this no lesse blessed Saint of God, what and how muche more grevous pangs, what sorrowfull tormentes, what boyling heates of the fire of hell in hys spirit inwardly he felt and sustayned, no speech outwardly is able to expresse.

Although this transformation into a type of martyrdom of the common trope that the pains of conscience were like the fires of Hell was unusual, it became common amongst Protestants in the later part of the century, and the early part of the next, to admire rather than denigrate godly people in despair, for their sensitivity.¹⁰

A second reason Foxe recorded this part of Glover's history was for the comfort of Protestant readers who might experience a similar kind of suffering. Glover's example, Foxe claimed, offered hope because Glover's recovery showed that God 'suffereth none to be tempted above hys strength'. His subsequent life also demonstrated the benefits of such suffering as he became 'lyke one placed in heaven already and dead in this world, both in word and meditation led a life altogether celestiall, abhorryng in hys mynd all prophane doyngs'.¹¹ It was on the basis of these two propositions – that despair could be a sign of integrity of faith, and that reading about others' suffering could be educational – that similar stories of despair of salvation were increasingly published, reaching a height in the first part of the seventeenth century.

Problems of election and despair seem to have been more acute amongst the Protestant martyrs and their supporters during the 1550s. Evidence of this can be found in the correspondence of the martyr John Bradford. Bradford underwent a conversion experience in 1547 when he heard Hugh Latimer preach. He studied at St. Catharine's College, Cambridge, before being given a licence to preach in London in

¹⁰ Foxe, *TAMO*, p. 1733; Foxe, *TAMO* (1563), p. 1347.

¹¹ Foxe, *TAMO*, p. 1733.

1550. His preaching career was short-lived. In 1553 he was arrested and charged with preaching seditious sermons and he conducted the rest of his ministry in prison, through writing and correspondence, until his execution in 1555.

One of the topics Bradford wrote about most was predestination. With the threat of death hanging over them, the Protestant prisoners did not always present a united front, and predestination was one of the most divisive issues, producing strong reactions on both sides. Whilst Bradford derived his views on the matter from Calvinist theology, his opponents were influenced by other strains of thought coming from the continent. The radical Henry Harte was a leading adversary of predestination, reportedly saying that ‘ther was no man so chosen that he mighte dampne hime selfe. Nether yet anye man soo reprobate [but] that he might kepe goddess Comaundements’. Bradford, a few months before his death, wrote to Harte, amongst others, urging them to ‘weigh the things wherein some controversy hath been amongst us, especially the article and doctrine of predestination’. He claimed that he did not teach predestination ‘either to seek carnality, or to set forth matter of desperation’, but what he taught was certainty of salvation and the exaltation of the power of God over the power of man. Whilst in prison, Bradford also wrote treatises such as *To a Free-Willer*, *To Certain Free-Willers* and *A Defence of Election*. The last of these was dedicated to Joyce Hales, a regular correspondent of Bradford. The manuscript was sent to Cranmer, Latimer and Ridley with a letter in which he explained that he had already shown the treatise to his fellow prisoners. For comparison, he also forwarded some writing by Henry Harte ‘whereby ye may see how Christ’s glory and grace is like to lose much light ... The effects of salvation they

so mingle with the cause, that, if it be not seen to, more hurt will come by them than ever came by the papists'.¹²

The time Bradford dedicated to defending election demonstrates the centrality of the doctrine for many of the orthodox Edwardian Protestants who resisted the Marian regime. Joyce Hales herself engaged the free-willers in debate, and Bradford, in his letter to Harte, mentioned another 'dear sister', Margery Coke, with whom the free-willers had disagreed. Thomas Freeman has observed that 'the martyrs spent nearly as much time and ink in teaching the sustainers [their followers] predestinarian doctrines as they did in exhorting them not to commit idolatry [by attending mass].' For these Protestants election was not an academic question, but one of identity and security. This was a battle for assurance in the face of persecution. Knowing you were elect provided comfort when threatened with the reality of exile and death. Doubt was a source of distress.

In the summer of 1554 Joyce Hales was struggling with fear of death and lack of assurance of election. This may have been exacerbated by the suicide of her father-in-law, the Judge James Hales, whose case will be discussed in Chapter Five, and by her husband's reluctance to go into exile to avoid the pressures to attend mass. The same year, Margery Coke wrote to Bradford concerning her 'temptations of election'. Another of Bradford's correspondents who suffered from religious despair was Mary Honeywood, one of a number of women who visited the prisons in order to provide support for the Protestant martyrs. Therefore, Bradford had to address the question of election and reprobation not simply from a viewpoint of correct theology, but from a

¹² Penny, 'Bradford, John'; J. Bradford, *The Writings of John Bradford*, ed. A. Townsend (2 vols., Cambridge, 1848-53), i, 305-7, ii, 194-8.

pastoral point of view that took into account people's emotional and psychological experiences of doubt.¹³

Bradford found a number of explanations for why the elect might come to doubt their spiritual identity. Causes were both outward and inward. Inward causes were 'infirmity and natural corruption', by which man was naturally sinful or blind to spiritual things. Outward causes were 'the devil and his instruments', which could include fellow believers teaching wrong doctrine, and scripture itself, when it was misread. Bradford cited the example of Christ's temptations in the desert, when the devil used verses from scripture in an attempt to mislead him. He wrote to Mary Honeywood, 'Satan would have you doubt of salvation. He doth all he can to prevail herein: do all you can to prevail herein against him.' He advised as a remedy ignoring the suggestions of the devil, and repentance, prayer, and meditation on the passages of scripture that promised salvation for those who depended on Christ. Bradford was ambiguous about how far doubt itself was sinful. He rebuked Joyce Hales for her impatience in desiring a feeling of certainty, and advised that feelings would follow from obedience and faith. The important thing was to ignore negative feelings and continue to hope: as he wrote to Mary Honeywood, 'Though you feel not as you would, yet doubt not'. These feelings could even be a source of hope. He advised Joyce Hales to take great comfort from the very fact of her despair. Tears over sin and a desire for a sense of security in the next world were themselves signs of godliness and election. Whilst Bradford did not elevate Joyce Hales' suffering to the same heights as Foxe did that of Glover, he did suggest that it was something that set her apart from the ordinary. 'O Joyce, my good Joyce,' he wrote, 'what a gift is this!

¹³ Bradford, *Writings*, ii, 101, 147-8, 197; T. Freeman, '“The Good Ministrye of Godley and Vertuouse Women”: The Elizabethan Martyrologists and the Female Supporters of the Marian Martyrs', *The Journal of British Studies*, 39 (January, 2000), pp. 15-17, 21-2; J. Eales, 'Honywood, Mary (1527-1620)', *ODNB*.

Many have some sight [of sin] but none this sobbing and sighing, none this seeking which you have.’¹⁴ This was to become an important principle in the comforting of despairing Christians: election was not always a felt state, and negative feelings of doubt or despair could be a greater proof of election than a complacent certainty of Heaven might be.

It was on account of these letters that William Haller has called Bradford ‘a prototype of all the physicians of the soul who would presently be undertaking the spiritual direction of more and more of Elizabeth’s subjects’. Freeman has gone further and suggested that the emotional support given by martyrs such as Bradford to women such as Joyce Hales and Margery Coke at moments of doubt was a significant factor in the failure of the freewill movement, and the survival of election as a core tenet of Elizabethan Protestantism.¹⁵ Bradford assured Joyce Hales that on the basis of election she could be ‘cocksure forever more’.¹⁶ This practical concern with reassuring believers of their elect status remained an important element of Elizabethan writing aimed at sustaining the doctrine of double predestination, and of comforting those who doubted their estate.

Elizabethan Consolation

Although Bradford did not include melancholy in his explanations for despair of salvation, his notion that causes were both inward and outward was embryonic of the puritan consolatory approach. Central to this approach was the idea that human

¹⁴ Bradford, *Writings*, ii, 100-3, 108-17, 131-3, 151-6.

¹⁵ Quoted in Penny, ‘Bradford, John’; Freeman, ‘Ministrye of Godley Women’, pp. 22-4.

¹⁶ Bradford, *Writings*, ii, p. 109. Here ‘cocksure’ was probably meant in the old sense of objective security, referring to a cock or tap used to seal liquor from escape, rather than the modern sense implying arrogance: see *OED* entry ‘cock-sure’.

thoughts and feelings were unreliable because they were susceptible to interference from the devil who took advantage of natural weaknesses. This idea was partly scriptural. In scripture, the devil had two roles: one was to tempt the Christian into sin; the other was to remind the Christian of his sin in order to tempt him into despair. The book of Revelation refers to ‘the accuser of our brethren ... which accused them before our God day and night’.¹⁷ 1 Pet. v. 8 warns, ‘Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour’. Those who suffered from melancholy were considered particularly vulnerable to Satan’s attacks because of the concept of the ‘devil’s bath’ discussed in Chapter One.

As religion became more settled, despair did not decline as a problem in Protestant England. Those who survived the Marian persecutions continued to suffer from doubts about their estate. Mary Honeywood, for instance, lived to be 93, dying in 1620. During her lifetime, she continued to experience periods of despair and seek spiritual solace. Without the immediate threat of religious persecution, religious counsellors had to look more deeply for explanations of feelings of dejection and anxiety. It was during the Elizabethan period that people first began to suggest that illness might, in some instances, be the root cause of these apparently spiritual emotional states. Simeon Foxe, the son of John Foxe, wrote that, from the age of 40, Honeywood became ‘sick of a consumption through melancholy’. At this date ‘consumption’ could be used to refer to any severe wasting of the body, which suggests symptoms similar to those of Glover, as described by Foxe. It is possible that Mrs Honeywood was suffering from an unidentified disease, but, just as John Glover’s dramatic weight loss was attributed to anxiety over election, so

¹⁷ Rev. xii. 10.

contemporaries viewed Honeywood's condition as a kind of melancholy, with both spiritual and physical causes. In a pattern that would become established for such cases in the Elizabethan and early Stuart period, she 'consulted with the gravest Divines and the best Physitians'.¹⁸

However, the spiritual was still very much at the fore as an explanation for despair. A number of contemporaries treated Honeywood's illness as a spiritual problem. Their attempts to heal her show the diversity of approaches to despair at this time. The clergyman Edward Dering wrote letters of comfort similar to those of Bradford. He attempted to persuade her to look at her situation in a more positive light by assuring her that all suffering, whether physical or spiritual, was beneficial, and a form of sharing in the suffering of Christ. As a good Calvinist, John Foxe saw assurance of salvation as the basis of comfort for the soul. A visit he paid to Honeywood became the basis of a popular story about the immutability of God's election. When Foxe offered her the conventional advice of turning to scripture for guidance and support, she is supposed to have replied impatiently, 'I have been long without comfort and can indure no longer; therefore if I must be saved, let this glasse be kept from breaking'. She picked up a venetian glass and threw it against the wall. Miraculously, it did not break. At this Foxe is reported to have replied, 'now you have His voyce from Heaven in a miracle, telling you plainely of your estate'. The story was retold to generations of Protestants as a demonstration of the faithfulness of God, even in the face of human impatience and distrust. 'The Lord that is rich in mercy,' wrote Robert Bolton, 'having stamped her with the seale of his Election was content to satisfie the languishing Soule with a miracle.'¹⁹

¹⁸ Eales, 'Honywood, Mary'; see also entry on 'consumption, *n.*, 2a' in *OED*.

¹⁹ E. Dering, *Certaine godly and verie comfortable letters, full of Christian consolation* (Middelburg, 1590), sigs. A6(r)-B4(v), C3(v)-5(r); Eales, 'Honywood, Mary'; Freeman, 'Ministrye of Godley Women', pp. 19-20; Bolton, *A right comforting afflicted consciences*, p. 5. In another version of the

A more controversial intervention was that of William Hacket, the religious fanatic hanged for treason in 1591 for declaring himself to be the returned Jesus Christ. Edward Dering and Bradford had seen the devil as the cause of despair through the suggestions that he could plant in believers' minds, but Mary Honeywood came to believe that she was actually possessed by the devil, whom Hacket claimed he could exorcise.²⁰ That a well-respected gentlewoman and supporter of orthodox Protestantism should have turned to an illiterate man widely rejected as a fraud suggests the desperation that was driving the search for explanations that would alleviate the suffering of spiritual afflictions. Honeywood had turned to various spiritual healers, presumably because she felt that medicine alone could not explain her predicament. However, despite the popularity of the story of the Venetian glass, Honeywood herself was not entirely satisfied with the theology of assurance, but sought help to be free of the demon she believed was troubling her. The miracles peddled by people like Hacket were generally rejected by the leaders of mainstream puritanism. What was needed was a form of therapy that could address all the various aspects of despair – the soul, the mind, the body, and supernatural influences.

It was in this context that Timothy Bright wrote his *Treatise of melancholie* that we examined in Chapter One. In that chapter we saw how Bright explained his theory that such fears could be the result of melancholy affecting the brain, but Bright's treatise was not simply another medical treatise on melancholy. It was also inspired by the consolatory tradition that had begun with figures such as Bradford. Bradford had written letters to real people suffering from despair. Bright's treatise was partly written in an epistolary form to his imaginary friend, 'M', who stood for all people

story, Foxe was not attempting to assure Honeywood of her salvation, but that she would recover from her illness and live to an old age. The popular version reveals the contemporary fascination with questions of election and salvation.

²⁰ A. Walsham, "'Frantick Hacket': Prophecy, Sorcery, Insanity, and the Elizabethan Puritan Movement', *The Historical Journal*, 41 (March, 1998), p. 42.

who suffered from doubts regarding their salvation. 'In your case,' he wrote, 'I also comprehend the estate of many one at this day in like sort affected and afflicted.'²¹

Bright's advice to 'M' was that his was a 'mixed state', caused partly by a troubled conscience and partly by the effects of melancholy humour on the body and mind. Alongside the medical theory, he offered spiritual advice. Taking into account the effects of melancholy, he advised 'M' to 'give over ... these melancholicke prejudices against yourselfe'.²² Another factor that might account for despair could be the character of the person in despair. Bright, like Foxe, saw doubts over salvation as something that tended to happen to the most scrupulous of Christians, rather than to the complacent person or the reprobate. At one point he wrote: 'do not men otherwise doubt of this point [of election] but upon melancholie: Yes verily: and especially such as most hunger and thirst after righteousness, and are poore in spirit, and broken in heart.' These were the 'weak' Christians that Winship refers to. According to Bright, these people were easily discouraged because their feelings of faith were not always as strong as they imagined they should be, or their actions did not live up to their sense of righteousness. Unable to live up to their own ideals, these people concluded, wrongly, that they had no real faith at all.²³ Satan also played his part in this as the agent of deceptive ideas, and false fears, which he planted in the mind of the melancholic person: 'Here the melancholie taketh advantage and Sathan prosecuteth a maine, with bending your affections to feare, doubt & distrust, stoppeth that consolation the mercy of god affordeth, & which his children are ready to minister unto you.' Bright advised the sufferer to distrust thoughts such as 'I am out of Gods

²¹ Bright, *A treatise of melancholie*, p. 241.

²² Bright, *A treatise of melancholie*, p. 212.

²³ Bright, *A treatise of melancholie*, pp. 216-7.

favour: I am reprobate from his kingdome, there remaineth no hope for me: I have no faith', and to see them as 'of the enimie and not of your selfe'.²⁴

Bright also gave advice on how to approach the theology of election and reprobation. As we saw in the introduction, Samuel Clarke, writing in the eighteenth century, blamed the theology of reprobation itself for religious despair and rejected the Calvinist view of predestination. Writing as a Calvinist in the sixteenth century, Bright did not take this approach. For him, it was not the theology itself, but a wrong perspective that dwelt too much on the decree of reprobation and not enough on the promises and signs of election, that led to despair:

For as a sworde taken at the wrong end is readie to wound the hand of the taker, & held by the handle is a fit weapon of defence; even so the doctrine of predestination being preposterously conceived, may through fault of the conceiver procure hurt; whereas of it selfe it is the most strong rocke of assurance, in all stormes of temptations that can befall unto bodie or soule.²⁵

Especially when the mind was affected by melancholy, this could lead to ungrounded fears. 'M' made the complaints common to those who believed that they were reprobate. He said that he could not believe, and therefore deserved the punishment of the unfaithful, and that he could not feel the joy of salvation, but only a sense of terror. Bright advised him not to base his conclusions too much in feelings:

we may ... have faith, and not always have the sensible perceaving thereof; especially our bodies (as yours presently is) being oppressed with melancholie, which always urgeth terror and distrust.²⁶

Instead, 'M' should reassure himself by considering evidence of the working of the Holy Spirit in his life before the period of despair set in, and to pay attention to the more objective point of view of friends who were not affected by melancholy. Bright wrote that 'the tryall of faith' (discernment of election) was not to be based solely

²⁴ Bright, *A treatise of melancholie*, pp. 205, 215-16, 235.

²⁵ Bright, *A treatise of melancholie*, p. 201.

²⁶ Bright, *A treatise of melancholie*, p. 215.

‘according as the soule feeleth in it selfe’, but, especially during times of temptation, ‘by the course and trade of life which hath passed before, and those fruites which are evident to the eye of others who can judge more sincerely then the afflicted whose understandings are somewhat altered through Sathans terrors.’²⁷ The danger of relying on feelings, and the importance of the advice and support of friends, family and clergy, was to become an important theme in cases of despair of election. We shall see this especially in the cases studied in this and the next two chapters, many of which are contained in sources written to establish that a person was a member of the godly elect when an episode of terrible despair had brought their estate into doubt.

In fact Bright, eager to reassure his readers, assured them that it was almost impossible for anyone to come to a conclusion that they were beyond a doubt reprobate. ‘There is no evident and undoubted signe of reprobation in any, while they live’. The only signs they had to go on were sins they had committed, which could always be repented of before death. While there was life, there was hope. The only exception to this was someone who had committed the Sin against the Holy Ghost, which Bright defined as ‘wilfull apostasie from God, with malitious hate against the profession of his knowen trueth’. He insisted that examples were very rare and only included the actions of notorious examples from history, such as Cain, Judas and the fourth century Roman emperor known as Julian the Apostate. The everyday falls from grace that occurred in the lives of ordinary sinners could not constitute this kind of wilful malice against God.²⁸

Although Bright’s treatise was mainly a medical treatise, his cure for despair of salvation did not rest entirely upon the traditional cures for melancholy offered by the Galenic tradition, but on the Calvinist theology of assurance of election. True comfort

²⁷ Bright, *A treatise of melancholie*, p. 224.

²⁸ Bright, *A treatise of melancholie*, p. 210.

for the soul was found in regaining a certainty of salvation. It was the centrality of this concept to puritan consolation that set the puritan approach to despair apart from all other attempts to comfort the dejected. In the final section of this chapter we will examine an actual case in which assurance was seen as the cure for madness.

However, we will first look at how Bright's ideas about the link between melancholy, the temptations of the devil, and despair of salvation, were incorporated into late Elizabethan consolation literature by two prominent figures of English puritanism – Richard Greenham and William Perkins.

Richard Greenham: the Art of Consolation

Bright's treatise shows the need felt by educated Elizabethan puritans to write about sin, dejection and despair of salvation. Some of his contemporaries were also addressing this subject in the hope of consoling those in despair. The most famous figure in the area of consolation in late Elizabethan and early Stuart puritan culture was the Reverend Richard Greenham (early 1540s – 1594). In 1655, half a century after his death, the church historian Thomas Fuller wrote that 'his master-piece was in comforting wounded consciences ... many, who came to him with weeping eyes, went from him with cheerful souls'. In 1622, the puritan clergyman Hannibal Gamon referred to him as 'that excellent Physitian of the soule'. His publisher, Henry Holland, in the preface to a collected volume of Greenham's works wrote that:

He hath a long time a settled disposition (as he trusteth) of God, to studie the cases of Conscience, to succour the perplexed in them: he

hath been so filled with compassion to the afflicted (which God wrought in his heart) as if he had been distressed with them.²⁹

The term ‘works’ can only be applied loosely to a collection of letters and sermons, reconstructed from notes that had not been intended for publication. Such was the high esteem in which Greenham was held that his publishers felt strongly that his wisdom in the area of aiding those suffering from an afflicted conscience should not be lost to future generations. The influence of his ideas is evident from diaries and inventories, and he was quoted by famous seventeenth-century divines such as Robert Bolton.³⁰

Greenham’s reputation was established through his ministry in the small rural parish of Dry Drayton, near Cambridge. There he set up a household seminary where young men were educated in the practical aspects of ministry, for which their university education had not prepared them. These students took copious notes on Greenham’s sermons, which were widely circulated. It was from these notes that Henry Holland was able to put together his first publication of Greenham’s works in 1599, five years after his death. The published works included letters, such as the one written to a friend ‘against hardnesse of heart’, and the consolatory guides ‘short rules sent ... to a gentlewoman troubled in minde’ and ‘sweet and sure signes of Election to them that are brought low’.³¹ Although some scholars have questioned whether Greenham was a Calvinist, the last of these firmly places him in the circle of those

²⁹ E. J. Carlson, ‘Greenham, Richard (early 1540s–1594)’, *ODNB*; H. Holland, ‘The preface to the reader’, in R. Greenham, *The workes of the reverend and faithfull servant of Jesus Christ M. Richard Greenham* (London, 1612), [my pagination, p. 8].

³⁰ Carlson, ‘Greenham’; K. L. Parker and E. J. Carlson (eds.), *‘Practical Divinity’: The Works and Life of Revd Richard Greenham* (Aldershot, 1998), pp. 1-8, 31-6.

³¹ Parker and Carlson, *‘Practical Divinity’*, pp. 13-24, 33-4; Greenham, *Workes*, p. 122, 859-62; idem, *Short Rules sent by Maister Richard Greenham to a Gentlewoman troubled in mind, for her direction and consolation* (London, 1612), [single sheet].

who believed seeking assurance of election was a source of comfort, rather than distress.³²

As will be seen, Greenham's ministry demonstrates the growing acceptance amongst Elizabethan puritans of the necessity of taking into account the effects of sickness when addressing questions of spiritual dejection. Compared with the consolation letters written by John Bradford in the 1550s, which contained no reference to the physical aspects of melancholy, Greenham was very concerned about the health of the body and how it affected the passions and spiritual equilibrium of the parishioners in his charge. The publication of Greenham's letters and sermons also demonstrates that, by the turn of the century, consolation was seen as a process requiring the guidance of experts. Guidance could take the form of written texts, such as that of Timothy Bright, or the treatise of William Perkins that forms the subject of the next section, or could be personal advice from a physician or local minister; but this was a problem that needed to be tackled from a basis of knowledge. There was a strong suggestion by this date that ignoring these authority figures and seeking help from ignorant friends, neighbours or charlatans like Hacket, was unlikely to be successful. 'The diet and cure of soules afflicted is a very great mysterie,' wrote Henry Holland in the preface to Greenham's works,

wherein but few have travelled to reduce that matter into any good forme of art, or to give us any good method of practise ... wanting art and good experience, we conceive the danger to be great, and often (as blind Empyrikes) cause it to be greater; for that wee rather gesse uncertainlie to applie good remedies, and speeches unto the

³² Greenham's biographers have tried to distance him from the Calvinist tradition. John Primus argued that Greenham was influenced by a number of Reformation thinkers and that he does not deal at length with predestination. Parker and Carlson similarly regard the Calvinist label as restrictive. In a recent article Leif Dixon reinstates Greenham as a 'full-blooded predestinarian' arguing that the Calvinist emphasis on a God who is in control permeates all of his teaching about sin, godly living and affliction: Parker and Carlson, *Practical Divinity*, pp. 97-126; L. Dixon, 'Richard Greenham and the Calvinist Construction of God', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 61 (2010), 729-45.

sicke, than know how to proceed by any certaine rule of art, and well grounded practise.³³

Holland's publishing activities were aimed at dispelling popular ignorance in general. These included a treatise on witchcraft intended to relieve the 'brutish ignorance' of the 'rude people' who continued to seek out 'cunning folk' in times of trouble, against the doctrines of true religion.³⁴ This was all part of the ministry of practical divinity, as practised and preached by Greenham and his followers, which was driven by their perception that 'atheism' was a serious threat to English society. That is, 'atheism' in terms of a general lack of interest or knowledge about God, his character and commandments, rather than a positive rejection of the existence of a divine being or creator (the concept of 'atheism' discussed in Chapter One). For Greenham, the ministry of conversion in England was essential. According to the recorder of his 'sayings', 'Hee thought by nature al men bee papists, heretiques, adulterers, and in al kinds sinners, until god renued them'.³⁵ This shaped his approach to understanding the relationship between melancholy and an afflicted conscience. Like Bright he was concerned that a proper sense of trouble over sin should not be confused with humoral sickness. Only those that 'feelee no godly sorrow,' he wrote, 'mocke the mourning dayes of the elect, as of them that be of a melancholy nature'. The common people were too apt to seek consolation at the bottom of an ale mug rather than in repentance and a holy life:

Some there be, who without precept and practise wilbe theyre owne Phisitions: and these, so soone as the fit commeth upon them, thinke it best to chastise and to chase awaye their sorrowe, by drinking at tavernes, by minstrelsie, in merrie companie, by purging melancholie in taking Physicke, all which may seeme to weare awaye the paine for a while, but yet after it biteth more deeply, when the burning fever of their spirits shaketh them with a second recourse: and for that before they were not truely searched, purged, seared and launced, it

³³ Holland, 'The preface to the reader', p. 8.

³⁴ C. Holmes, 'Holland, Henry (1555/6–1603)', *ODNB*.

³⁵ Parker and Carlson, '*Practical Divinity*', p. 174.

commeth to passe that the seconde relapse is more dangerous than the first.³⁶

The more godly could also approach the consolation of afflicted consciences in the wrong way. Greenham objected to the common tendency to dismiss the troubles of sensitive souls on the basis that Christ's mercy made such worries unnecessary:

many visiting afflicted consciences, cry still; Oh comfort them, oh speake joyfull things vnto them. Yea, there be some, and those of the most learned, who in such cases are full of these and such like speeches. Why are you so heavie my brother? why are you so cast downe my sister? Be of good cheere: take it not so grievously. What is there that you should feare? God is mercifull, Christ is a Saviour. These be speeches of love indeed: but they often doe the poore soules as much good herein, as if they should powre cold water into their bosomes.³⁷

The reason Greenham objected to this kind of approach was that he believed sin to be at the root of most cases of an afflicted conscience. Some degree of sorrow was therefore necessary for the sufferer to come to terms with the sin he had committed before receiving mercy. Greenham was dismissive of those who sought healing from him as though he were a wiseman or a magician 'who by pronounciation of words, make silly soules look for health'. Greenham never offered a quick fix, and that is possibly why some went away disappointed in the famous curer of souls. This sombre approach was not popular with everyone, as one sceptical woman showed when she enquired, drily, if the minister was ever cheerful himself. He replied, 'wee are often merry and sometyme wee are affraid of our mirth'.³⁸

Greenham saw an intimate connection between spiritual health and the health of the body. He argued that many cases of madness were originally caused by sin, the associated passions resulting in an unbalancing of the bodily humours: 'A great cause of madness is impatience of mynd, or else the suddain wrath of god upon a man for

³⁶ Greenham, *Workes*, p. 106, 112.

³⁷ Greenham, *Workes*, p. 106.

³⁸ Parker and Carlson, *Practical Divinity*, pp. 158, 221.

doing something against his conscience'. The human mind was highly suggestible. The fear of death and judgement, or even the fear of disease itself, could cause serious illness, even death, without a natural cause.³⁹

The same could be true of illnesses that had no immediately obvious psychological aspect. To illustrate this, Greenham told a tale from the time of the Marian persecution. Three patients approached a 'godly physition' with the same complaint – *Aque Carkis* – the retention of urine. Rather than supplying them with medicine, the physician suggested that the root cause of the illness was unconfessed sin, and accused them of attending mass. At first they attempted to refute the claim, but later they repented and were cured.⁴⁰ Like the narratives of Spiera, and Rose Hickman's account of the death of her brother, this was another illustration of the belief that the effects of a bad conscience upon the body could be its own punishment for sin.

Greenham's disapproval of the popular view that melancholy could be treated entirely as a medical condition did not, however, mean that he did not recognise the role of sickness in cases of deep dejection. Just as Greenham believed that spiritual problems could cause disease, so also he believed that problems in the body could upset spiritual well-being. Like Bright, it was not medical theories as such that he was wary of, but a reductionist view of the person that viewed sickness and sorrow entirely in terms of humoral causes. Recognising that religious discourse could also be guilty of its own form of reductionism, he was critical of those preachers who denigrated the body, and did not take into account the importance of bodily health for the health of the whole person. One of Greenham's sayings was that the body was 'a frind [*sic*] to the soule'. David Harley, in his article on puritan approaches to

³⁹ Parker and Carlson, 'Practical Divinity', p. 238; Greenham, *Workes*, p. 104.

⁴⁰ Parker and Carlson, 'Practical Divinity', p. 238.

sickness, has drawn attention to the duty to care for one's own body, and to seek medical attention when necessary, that formed part of puritan culture. For puritans, the body was a temple of the spirit, and it was a sin not to care for it, or to damage it through ascetic practices such as self-flagellation. Over-indulgence in food and drink was also seen as sinful because it was damaging to the body.⁴¹

On account of this respect for the body, Greenham sometimes included in his ministry advice based on Galenic theories of how to care for the body. For instance, on the topic of diet and fasting, he urged a middle way between immoderate eating and overly zealous fasting. The heat associated with rich meats and strong liquors such as whisky and sack could be beneficial in times of sickness, or to revive low spirits, but if used as part of an everyday diet the body would become unresponsive. On the other hand, too much fasting, he suggested, was dangerous because it inflamed choleric passions. He also took into account a person's complexion. Fasting might be useful for someone of a sanguine complexion, but endanger somebody of a melancholic complexion. He encouraged those who tended towards the overly scrupulous personality that Bright warned was susceptible to dejection, to eat meat in order to keep their strength up. Greenham encouraged people to avoid regimes that could lead to sickness because he recognised that sickness could have an effect on a person's sense of spiritual well-being. As the state of the body had an effect on emotional health, sickness could be linked to periods of dejection and anxiety. He advised a sick man, who was in fear for his soul because he felt a hardness of heart, to postpone introspection until his health improved: 'this is not so good a time to try ones hart in'.⁴²

⁴¹ Parker and Carlson, *Practical Divinity*, p. 173; Harley, 'Spiritual Physic, Providence and English Medicine', p. 102.

⁴² Paker and Carlson, *Practical Divinity*, pp. 138, 184, 191.

This view of the interconnectedness of bodily and spiritual health shaped Greenham's approach to caring for afflicted consciences. As rebalancing the body and restoring the soul were both necessary for the successful return of the patient to a state of well-being, neither the advice of the physician nor the advice of the minister should be neglected. 'If a man troubled in conscience come to a Minister, it may be he will looke all to the soule and nothing at all to the body' he wrote,

if he come to a Physition, he only considereth of the body and neglecteth the soule. For my part, I would never have the Physitions counsell severed, nor the Ministers labour neglected; because the soule and body dwelling together, it is convenient, that as the soule should be cured by the word, by prayer, by fasting, by threatning, or by comforting; so the body also should be brought into some temperature by Physicke, by purging, by dyet, by restoring, by musike, and by such like meanes.⁴³

In his own advice to those suffering from a troubled conscience Greenham combined practical medical and spiritual advice. As well as seeking pardon for sins, dejected persons 'must refresh themselves with kitching [*sic*] Physick and a thankful using of the creatures of god [ie. eating meat]'.⁴⁴ However, as God was the first cause of all trouble, whether spiritual or physical, the medical must always be seen in a spiritual context. All forms of trouble must be understood in terms of a providential plan. In 'Short Rules ... to a Gentlewoman', rule 16 reads:

Beware that you doe not often alter your judegment [*sic*] of your estate; as saying, sometimes it is Gods worke, sometimes melancholy, sometimes your weakenesse and simplicity, sometimes witchery, sometimes Sathan: for these divers thoughts will much trouble you; you may thinke melancholy to be an occasion, but no cause, and so of the rest. Therefore looke stedfastly to the hand of God, surely trusting on this, that he not onley knoweth thereof, but that whatsoever is done directly, or indirectly, by meanes or immediately; all is done and governed (by his divine providence) for your good.⁴⁵

⁴³ Greenham, *Workes*, p. 107.

⁴⁴ Greenham, *Workes*, p. 148.

⁴⁵ Greenham, *Short Rules sent ... to a Gentlewoman*.

In other words, the question of whether dejection began with a bodily complaint, the suggestions of Satan, or the sin of the sufferer, was not particularly important to Greenham. Everything happened within God's purposes. Within this scheme, the body was subordinate to the soul. Good health was not an end in itself, but a preparation of the body to be better able to meet spiritual duties such as repentance and joy in the knowledge of salvation. 'We thinke not by these ordinary meanes', he wrote, 'to smother [*sic*] or smoke out our troubles; but as purposing to use them as preparatives, whereby both our soules and bodies may be made more capable of the spirituall means to follow after.'⁴⁶

It was at this point that the spiritual and the medical combined in Greenham's explanation for despair. Like Bradford, Bright and medieval commentators before him, Greenham believed that Satan took advantage of human weaknesses. These weaknesses could include a natural tendency towards melancholy, an over-scrupulous personality, or the general human vulnerability to sin or feelings of despair over sin. Greenham saw Satan's role as accuser as central to driving people to despair of salvation by exaggerating their sins. The devil tempted people to sin

but he apparelleth himselfe in another sute when he commeth to accuse, and then of a flye he makes an Elephant; of the very smallest pricke of a pinne, a globe of the whole earth; of a molehill a mountaine: and presseth sillie soules with feares and terrors.⁴⁷

Those who suffered from an excess of melancholy were more vulnerable to the manipulations of Satan than those of other complexions. In a letter to the friend who complained of hardness of heart, Greenham suggested that the trouble was 'partly melancholy, and partly Satan worketh therewith'.⁴⁸ This combination of melancholy,

⁴⁶ Greenham, *Workes*, p. 107.

⁴⁷ Greenham, *Workes*, p. 104.

⁴⁸ Greenham, *Workes*, p. 862.

an overly-scrupulous personality, and the suggestions of Satan was at the heart of late Elizabethan and early Stuart explanations for why godly people despaired.

William Perkins: Temporary Desertion and the Devil's Bait

In Bright's treatise we have seen how consolation for an afflicted soul could be incorporated into medical discourse, and in the teaching of Richard Greenham we have seen how medicine could be incorporated into religious discourse. William Perkins, the great systematiser of puritan theology, created a synthesis of these ideas in his work *A treatise of the cases of conscience*, which attempted to explain despair in terms of all the different causal factors, including sin, the body, and the devil, and in terms that made sense within the theology of election and reprobation that taught that God had a plan for the lives of both the elect and the reprobate.

First of all, Perkins needed to account for reprobation terrors from a providential point of view. As God was the origin of all sickness and affliction, such incidences must serve some purpose in the divine plan. He made an important distinction between the distress of true believers who doubted their salvation, and the despair of the reprobate. He described this as the difference between the 'permanent desertion' of the reprobate, and the 'temporary desertion' of the elect. He defined a 'desertion' as 'an action of God forsaking his creature ... by taking away the grace and operation of his Spirit from his creature'. A person in a state of desertion had no sense of the grace of God or the consolations of the Spirit, but could have an acute sense of sin. For the reprobate, this was a permanent state because God had abandoned him eternally. Despair of the reprobate was therefore permanent; the despair of the true

believer, by contrast, was temporary. The reprobate had been rejected by God before birth; the true believer, even during the time of deepest despair and sense of alienation from God, remained a child of God, elected from the beginning of time. For the reprobate there was no hope and no remedy for despair – Christ had died only for the elect. The true believer would eventually find comfort and hope in the promise of salvation and sin forgiven found in Christ’s sacrifice on the cross.⁴⁹

In practice, the distinction was difficult to recognise. The sufferers themselves could not discern it. Perkins described the case:

A man in this desertion, can discerne no difference between himselfe and a cast-away: and the rather if with this desertion be joynd a feeling of Gods anger: for then ariseth the bitterest temptation that ever befell the poore soule of a Christian man, and that is a wrastling and strugling in spirit and conscience, not with the motions of a rebelling flesh, nor the accusations of the devill, which are oftentimes very irksome and terrible, but against the wrath of a revenging God. This hidden and spiritual temptation more tormenteth the spirit of man, than all the rackes or gibbets in the world can doe ... even Gods own servants overcarried with sorrowe may blaspheme God, and crie out that they are damned.⁵⁰

Observing this disturbing behaviour, it could be difficult for onlookers to discern the difference. However, friends, family and counsellors almost always interpreted cases of despair as temporary and urged hope. Those gathered around Spiera’s bedside are reported to have said, ‘O Spira ... you know you are in a spirituall desertion; you must therefore not beleeeve what Satan suggests’.⁵¹ As we have seen, Perkins himself came to view Spiera’s case as hopeful.

Temporary desertion explained how a member of the elect could become convinced that they had been abandoned by God. However, the blasphemous thoughts and false beliefs that were entertained by despairing minds could not be from God. They could also not originate from the mind of a true believer as ‘blasphemous

⁴⁹ Perkins, *A golden chaine*, pp. 674-84.

⁵⁰ Perkins, *A golden chaine*, pp. 680-1.

⁵¹ Bacon, *The fearefull estate of Francis Spira*, p. 75.

thoughts cannot come ordinarily from the hart of any, save of those alone, that are of reprobate mindes'. Like Bradford, Perkins explained these things as persuasions of the devil intended to drive men to despair. In *Cases of conscience*, he described how the thoughts of the devil were 'forced into the minde by violence, so as the partie cannot avoide them', and gave advice on how to recognise the difference between natural thoughts and diabolical ideas planted in the mind by satanic influence. Firstly, thoughts from the devil entered the mind suddenly, rather than as a natural part of a person's thought processes. Secondly, these thoughts affected the mind and the body in a way that natural thoughts did not. Thoughts from the devil coming into the mind 'a thousand times a day' would 'weaken the memorie, dull the senses, wearie and confound the braine'. They could also cause extreme passions of fear, sickness and fainting spells. MacDonald has argued that puritanism made people responsible for their own thoughts and actions to a greater extent than in medieval culture. However, here Perkins argued quite the opposite, insisting that godly people were not responsible for the blasphemous thoughts that the devil planted in their mind.⁵²

In Perkins' theory of despair, a melancholic person was particularly prone to these persuasions of the devil. As we saw in Chapter One, Burton has been credited with the use of the term the 'devil's bath' to describe the interaction of the devil with melancholy humour. However, Perkins before him used the term the 'devills bait', which he also based on the Latin *balneum diaboli* (although 'devil's bath' is a more literal translation). Perkins attributed this idea to an unspecified 'ancient Divine'.⁵³ He incorporated the idea of the 'devil's bath', or the 'devil's bait', into his concept of desertion: 'the Devill beeing well acquainted with the complexion and temperature of

⁵² MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*, pp. 219-20.

⁵³ W. Perkins, *The whole treatise of the cases of conscience distinguished into three bookes* (Cambridge, 1606), p. 191. In one place Burton attributed the concept of *balneum diaboli* to the German theologian and alchemist Cornelius Agrippa: *Anatomy* (1.3.3.1), i, 428.

man, by Gods just permission, conveies himselfe into this humour and worketh strange conceits.’ For instance, this was the cause, Perkins reasoned, of the rage Saul took against David, as recorded in 1 Samuel. Saul was a king of Israel who began to be troubled by an evil spirit when he lost God’s favour. David played the harp for Saul to help calm the spirit, but Saul became violently angry and threw a spear at David’s head as he played. ‘How so?’ wrote Perkins,

surely, because God in justice withdrew his spirit from him [Saul], and suffered Satan, to enter into the humour of choler, or melancholie, or both, and by this meanes caused him to offer violence to David.⁵⁴

Perkins distinguished between sin and a satanically influenced melancholy. He also distinguished between spiritual troubles and an entirely natural melancholy. ‘Many are of opinion that this sorrow for sinne is nothing else but a melancholike passion’, he wrote, ‘but in trueth the thing is farre otherwise’. He made the same distinctions between melancholy and a troubled conscience that Bright had made. Melancholic illness had a physical origin, whereas dejection over sin could happen to a person who was entirely healthy in body and mind. A melancholic person would respond well to medical intervention, but dejection of spirit required comfortable words for the soul. Terror of conscience was caused by a very real sense of the wrath and judgement of God against sinners, whereas melancholy was the result of imaginary terrors. Perkins added a fourth difference: terror resulting from the conviction of sin could come upon a person very suddenly, whereas melancholic passions took time to develop in the body.⁵⁵

Like Bright, Perkins elaborated on the ways of distinguishing between sorrow for sin and melancholic illness, only to go on to show how the two states were, in

⁵⁴ Perkins, *Cases of conscience*, pp. 191-2; 1 Sam. xvi. 23, ixx. 9-10.

⁵⁵ Perkins, *A golden chaine*, pp. 598-9.

practice, often indistinguishable. These complaints often developed simultaneously: a melancholic person could also experience a genuine sense of God's wrath against sin, and the passions of fear could cause the body to become melancholy.⁵⁶ This accounted for his caution in believing everything that a person said about themselves once they had fallen into a passion of despair. Even where sin had been committed, melancholy could alter mood and cloud judgement resulting in false apprehensions of damnation or reprobation, hence Perkins' reluctance to condemn Spiera.

Perkins rested his cure for despair on the person regaining a sense of assurance on some basis other than his own feelings. As the judgement affected by melancholy was no longer reliable, Perkins' first advice to melancholic persons was to listen to the opinion of their friends regarding whether they were saved or damned. 'The person troubled must be brought to this,' he wrote in *The cases of conscience*, 'that he will content himselfe, to be advised and ruled by the judgement of others, and cease to rest upon himselfe touching his owne estate: and by this shall he reape much quiet and contentation.' Alongside this, the patient must not expect to be healed without the help of physic.⁵⁷ These two concerns – the importance of receiving some form of medical relief, and the importance of forming a sense of assurance of election based on the counsel of good friends and spiritual advisors – formed the basis of the cure of troubled souls offered by puritans in the late Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, as will be seen in the case studies in the next section and the following chapters.

⁵⁶ Perkins, *A golden chaine*, p. 590; idem, *Cases of conscience*, pp. 198-9.

⁵⁷ Perkins, *Cases of conscience*, pp. 195-7.

Dionys Fitzherbert: An Autobiography of Spiritual Affliction

The combination of the persuasions of the devil and the imbalance of melancholy humour in the body proved to have the greatest explanatory power in cases of reprobation fear. Unlike physiological or theological explanations on their own, this combination could explain both the physical symptoms of sickness and the terrifying thoughts of damnation that tortured those who were convinced that they were damned. Over the next two chapters we will examine a number of cases of despair in which both melancholy and the devil were seen as causes, but I wish to end this chapter by looking at one of the best sources we have for gaining an insight into how the ideas found in Bright, Perkins and Greenham could be used to explain actual cases of madness. This is the autobiography and correspondence of a gentlewoman called Dionys Fitzherbert (c. 1580 – early 1640s).

Dionys Fitzherbert was a gentlewoman from Oxfordshire. A daughter of a large Protestant family, she developed a strong sense of religious devotion through an illness she suffered at the age of fourteen. From then on she followed a strict daily routine of Bible study and prayers, regarding the pastimes of other young people as ‘worldly’. This attitude created some disagreement between Dionys and her friends and family, who found her religiosity excessive, but the real source of friction was her decision a little later in life to remain single in order to devote herself to religion without the distraction of family. Her father had hoped that she would marry, but she disliked his choice of husband, and instead left the family home to serve as a lady-in-waiting in the houses of various aristocratic ladies. There followed a few restless years as Dionys moved from house to house trying to find a place to settle. This culminated in a mental breakdown at the age of 26. She wrote down the story of her

conversion, illness and recovery in 1608. The manuscript was never published, but was clearly intended to be read by friends, family and acquaintances.⁵⁸

Fitzherbert's autobiography is one of the fullest insights into the mind of the insane that we have from this period. Although spiritual autobiographies became very popular later in the seventeenth century, it is unusual to have one from this early a date. Autobiographies recording periods of severe mental imbalance tend to belong to the period of radical religion in the 1640s, 50s and 60s – for instance, the accounts of the lives of nonconformists Hannah Allen, Sarah Wight and George Trosse.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, Fitzherbert has received little attention from historians. She does not have an entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, and does not feature significantly in any of the histories of madness or despair written about this period. Despite being convinced that she was reprobate, she does not appear in Stachniewski's fairly comprehensive account of autobiographical evidence for puritan despair. Her suicidal tendencies also escaped the notice of MacDonald and Murphy, although she does appear briefly in a section on delirium in *Mystical Bedlam*, as Dionys Fitzhugh. Jeremy Schmidt also refers to her in *Melancholy and the Care of the Soul* under the erroneous name of Dionys Fitzgerald.⁶⁰

Fitzherbert would probably still be overlooked in English history, if she had not been rescued from oblivion by the dedicated work of Katharine Hodgkin who, in 2009, published a full transcript of Fitzherbert's correspondence and autobiography, together with an introduction explaining the significance of the source. 'It is an

⁵⁸ K. Hodgkin (ed.), *Women, Madness and Sin in Early Modern England: The Autobiographical Writings of Dionys Fitzherbert* (Farnham, 2010), pp. 1-24.

⁵⁹ H. Allen, *A narrative of God's gracious dealings with that choice Christian Mrs. Hannah Allen* (London, 1683); H. Jessey, *The exceeding riches of grace advanced by the spirit of grace, in an empty nothing creature, viz. Mrs. [sic] Sarah Wight* (London, 1647); G. Trosse, *The life of the Reverend Mr. Geo. Trosse, late minister of the City of Exon* (Exon, 1715).

⁶⁰ Stachniewski, *Persecutory Imagination*; MacDonald and Murphy, *Sleepless Souls*; MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*, p. 143; Schmidt, *Melancholy and the Care of the Soul*, pp. 77-8.

account of mental crisis written from the inside, however that crisis is understood,' she writes, 'Her narrative is a challenge to those who saw her as mad, explaining her affliction as an instance of spiritual suffering and spiritual trial; but at the same time it offers insights into the definition and treatment of madness in early modern England.'⁶¹ Hodgkin is interested in Fitzherbert as a woman who found her voice, and freed herself from the dehumanising stigma of madness, through the medium of spiritual autobiography. This chapter seeks to place the story of this individual woman in the context of a longer narrative of the development of a puritan approach to reprobation fears that attempted to avoid reductionist and stigmatising explanations, whether medical or religious.

Fitzherbert's illness began with a simple case of social embarrassment. While serving at the house of the Countess of Huntingdon, she did not have the money to buy a gift to present to her mistress at the New Year celebrations. She pretended to be ill to avoid turning up empty-handed, but soon her anxiety turned into real illness. She suffered from delusions and spent weeks lying in a darkened room. Believing that she would die, she gave all her clothes away. Her fears and delusions were based in anxieties about her place in her family and wider society, and her place in the scheme of salvation. She came to believe that she was 'an advesary of god', and even referred to herself as 'Antychrist'. She complained to those around her that she was 'forsaken of god ... a fire brand of hell'. She convinced herself that she had stolen a cloak that a friend, Lady Ludlow, had lent to her for travelling when she was sick. Once, when her brothers visited her, she was sure they had come to execute her and offered her neck to their sword. She had a particular fear of burning, believing that everybody who took her into their care intended to burn her. The obsession with

⁶¹ Hodgkin, *Women, Madness and Sin*, p. 1.

burning was perhaps derived from Foxe's 'Book of Martyrs', from which her imagination was affected by the story of a judgement upon a young girl called Denise, who was struck with a mysterious and deadly illness after committing blasphemy. Fitzherbert associated herself with Denise because her name was similar and because she remembered uttering similar ideas about God as a child. On account of this, she became convinced that she had committed the Sin against the Holy Ghost. Like reports of cases of those who fell into similar despair, Fitzherbert had difficulty eating, and had to be persuaded or forced. She found it difficult to pray, and could find no comfort in reading the Bible, but instead was troubled by the verses referring to the Sin against the Holy Ghost. She would often cry and considered herself worse off than those who were already damned or outcast, because she believed she had been created for destruction. The suicidal impulses that this led to will be looked at more closely in Chapter Five.⁶²

How did Dionys Fitzherbert and those around her understand this behaviour? Firstly, her condition was treated as any other potentially life-threatening illness requiring medical attention. A physician was called who administered medicine in the form of vomits intended to purge the melancholy humours from her body. At the worst period of her illness they laid live pigeons at her feet – a remedy used in treating madness intended to draw the humours away from the head. When she was less ill, her family followed the normal advice for those suffering from melancholy in encouraging her to divert her thoughts with music or work. They did not, however, ignore the spiritual dimension of her illness. While she was staying at the home of a physician and friend of the family, Dr. Carter, his wife insisted that she say the Lord's Prayer and the Creed before going to sleep each night. Her sisters argued over

⁶² Hodgkin, 'Dionys Fitzherbert and the Anatomy of Madness', in K. Chedgzoy, M. Hansen, and S. Trill (eds.), *Voicing Women: Gender and Sexuality in Early Modern Writing* (Keele, 1996), p. 70; Hodgkin, *Women, Madness and Sin*, pp. 46, 180-215.

scripture with her, denying that she had committed the Sin against the Holy Ghost and insisting that there was no sin that God could not forgive.⁶³

Fitzherbert's history is evidence that, by the turn of the century, some ministers were struggling to put into practice the 'art of consolation', as taught by Greenham and Perkins. The attempts by family and friends to reassure their patient that she had no cause to despair were undermined by a preacher who was supposed to offer her comfort: 'hering me so bitterly complaine of my sines & the neglect of my calling & vocation. It may be sayd hee y^t you were a Ipicrite & so dissembled in your former profetion.' This helpful pronouncement 'did most cruciate & eflict my soule'. With hindsight, Fitzherbert vehemently rejected this suggestion, insisting that she was a true believer. One of the reasons she gave for making this potentially embarrassing episode of her life public through writing was to comfort those who had experienced similar episodes of despair and to 'admonish and beseech all those in their behalf who doe give too rash sentence and sharpe Censure upon those w^{ch} occasionally are fallen into this distresse'. However, she was also concerned that her narrative would not hurt the reputation of this clergyman who had proved so inept in performing his duty to comfort those distressed in mind. She suggested that an otherwise respectable minister had been so horrified by her condition that his judgment had been clouded.⁶⁴ The exchange between Fitzherbert and this unknown clergyman is unusual. As we shall see in the next chapter, other narratives of despair record the success of ministers in the art of consolation. It is interesting that in the one case in which the family failed to acquire useful spiritual advice, the family were less, rather than more puritanical. The reaction of the minister does not corroborate MacDonald's claim that the non-puritan clergy were gentler in their approach to the insane.

⁶³ Hodgkin, *Women, Madness and Sin*, pp. 85, 148-9, 186-7, 192-3, 202-3, 210-15.

⁶⁴ Hodgkin, *Women, Madness and Sin*, pp. 148-9, 162-3, 166-9, 172-3.

Fitzherbert's story also gives us an insight into the reasons why Protestants struggled with questions of salvation in a post-Reformation context, and why it was so important to prove that assurance was the answer to, not the cause of, this problem. In a society in which religion was still a source of conflict and family division, proving that assurance of election, rather than the traditions of the Catholic Church, was the source of true comfort was a priority for puritans. Fitzherbert claimed that attaining assurance of salvation was the means by which her illness was cured. However, throughout her narrative she betrayed deep insecurities over the issues. Although her family were nominally Protestant, they still kept close ties with Catholic friends and family members. One readership she was particularly keen to persuade were these Catholic friends who might read her mental breakdown as evidence of the failure of Protestantism to provide solace for its adherents. 'Truly nothing grives me more,' she wrote, 'then this my fall shuld be I fere a strengthening of them in ther erores.' In a letter to her former employer, the Catholic Lady Holte, she wrote,

They [Catholic priests] will and no dout allredy have perswade you that it was my religion that draw me into thos terms of despare & miserable cas wherin you knew partly I was in ... but contrary wise; it, and god only working by it did rais me againe to that hope comfort and stat, wherein I thought it as imposible for me ever to attaine againe.

One of the themes of her narrative was the battle between Catholicism and Protestantism in the search for true comfort for a conscience troubled by sin. The extremity of her despair made her doubt whether Protestantism could really be the true religion. At one point her sins, and the fear that she had committed the Sin against the Holy Ghost, troubled her so much that she resolved to find ease for her conscience by joining a Catholic religious order, and almost sent a message to a Catholic friend to ask help from a priest. Her loyalty to Protestantism, however, and her belief that comfort could only be found in assurance of election, and not in the

rules of the Catholic Church, always prevented her from taking this step. Instead, she later incorporated these periods of doubt into the spiritual narrative that she believed eventually proved both the truth of Protestantism and her election.⁶⁵

In order for this narrative to make sense, Fitzherbert had also to reject the views of those who would reduce the causes of her distress to the effects of melancholy. She wrote in the preface that, while some were too harsh in their judgements, ‘some others also ... are too ready wth the rest to attribute ytt to melancholly or I know not what, turning of the brayne.’ Katharine Hodgkin has examined the social stigma that might lead Fitzherbert to reject this diagnosis, especially the stigma attached to melancholic women through its association with the womb. Particularly in the case of single women, the womb was seen as a source of ill health, easily corrupting the body and mind: ‘The womb lurked in wait,’ writes Hodgkin, ‘ready to sabotage the most virtuous’. This subject will be discussed further in the next chapter in relation to another gentlewoman, Joan Drake. For now, however, I would argue that Fitzherbert’s main purpose in distancing herself from melancholics was to establish the episode as part of a narrative of calling and election.⁶⁶

Like Bright and Perkins before her, Fitzherbert distinguished between the causes of melancholy and the causes of spiritual crisis. Spiritual crisis was caused by the deep feeling of loss that arose from a sense of having been abandoned by God. Fitzherbert used Perkins’ word, ‘desertion’, and compared it to mourning over the loss of the favour of a prince or a dear friend. In people who are melancholy, the body is ‘overladen wth thick and dull humours’, which ‘little and little oppresses the hart and spirritte’. In the case of desertion, ‘it first of all falls violently upon the hart and distracts the spirritte; then no marvaile if all the rest goe out of frame’. Spiritual

⁶⁵ Hodgkin, *Women, Madness and Sin*, pp. 176-7, 194-5, 212-13, 252-5; idem, ‘Dionys Fitzherbert’, p. 73.

⁶⁶ Hodgkin, *Women, Madness and Sin*, pp. 148-9; idem, ‘Dionys Fitzherbert’, p. 73.

afflictions unbalanced the workings of the body, although Fitzherbert agreed that in some cases a spiritual desertion could begin with melancholy. Their symptoms were also quite different. According to Fitzherbert, any illness caused by a disordering of humours resulted in anger and rages directed outward towards those around the patient. Those suffering from spiritual affliction could be recognised by their self-accusation, directed inward:

Their often Complaints, deepe sighes, hartly wishes to be as they have been wth their exceeding tendernes of Conscience in every respect and their humbling of them selves lower then can be imagined and innumerable the like passages doth more then distinguish their Case from all others in the Judgement of any well seeing eyes.⁶⁷

For Fitzherbert, the danger of a diagnosis of melancholy was that it failed to detect the spiritual root of the cause of the distraction, and therefore those caring for the patient would fail to engage with the sense of hopelessness and offer spiritual consolation. She acknowledged that physic was not only useful, but necessary, especially in such serious cases as her own. At the worst point of her illness, she believed that her life was saved by a doctor:

undoubtidly under god the only menes of the safty of my life in purging by his ckillfull [*sic*] postions those pestiferys humers which came of so many dedly conceits, the lest of w^hich had ben abell to kill a fare stronger constution; and the im^medent dander y^t I was in, hee him self did then testyfie.

In overcoming delusion, she urged a very practical cure: to ‘give them [the patient] all possible satisfaccon by their senses’ – that is, to allow the patient to experience reality in a way that counteracted their delusions. She gave an example of how she had helped a melancholic friend who believed she had no head nor hands by persuading her to feel for herself that she had both. In Fitzherbert’s own case, her carers persuaded her to eat by placing before her another sick person to show her that

⁶⁷ Hodgkin, *Women, Madness and Sin*, pp. 148-51.

someone in a worse state than herself was able to eat.⁶⁸ However, if the normal advice of Galenic medicine on curing melancholy was followed too closely, those in a spiritual affliction would never recover. Too often their carers prevented them from reading or from following spiritual exercises in the mistaken belief that ‘their distempered heads cannot soe well beare ytt’. As we shall see in chapter six, the rejection of medical advice to seek distraction from the question of salvation that troubled those who doubted their election was an aspect of puritanism that distinguished it from the approach that Burton would take in his own discussion of reprobation fears. One of her spiritual advisers, Dr. Chetwynd, the Dean of Bristol, agreed with her that a spiritual cure was necessary, suggesting that she might have been healed sooner had her family and advisers been quicker to realise her need for assurance of God’s love and forgiveness, and not only medicine.⁶⁹

Having dealt with the physiological side of her illness, Fitzherbert then went about establishing through her narrative the role of Satan in her affliction and the importance of assurance of election as the basis of a return to sanity. In her explanation of her illness, it was not primarily the effects of melancholy on the brain, but the lies Satan planted in the mind, that caused her deep dejection. Satan reminded her of her sins, caused her to believe that she had committed sins of which she was innocent, and convinced her that her sins were too great for forgiveness:

My soul was ever labering to be delivred from the Horrible bondage it felt, and sathan as busy to keepe me still in it ever seting my sinnes with the multitud & griveousnes of them befor me, to caus me to dispair; now shewing me, this is great then y^t was fare greater & then the maner of my fall y^t none of god children could ever example it and y^t god did punnish my sine by sine as the most ferfull of all punishments.

⁶⁸ Hodgkin, *Women, Madness and Sin*, pp. 152-3.

⁶⁹ Hodgkin, *Women, Madness and Sin*, pp. 138-9, 152-3, 186-7.

While at points in her illness she considered turning to the rituals and doctrines of Roman Catholicism for consolation, with hindsight she insisted that it was assurance of election that sustained her during the darkest periods of doubt. When tempted to despair, she would remember her former confidence in salvation:

Notwithstanding to god glory be it spoken even in the mids of all thes tentations when I acused my self of those things I nevr did, my hart for all that sathan could doe would nevr acuse me but that I did most faithfully belive what I befor profst. [professed] and so most ashuredly I did; which at last was inded the true thrid that brought me out of the laborenth whern satain had intangled me.

As the true nature of her affliction was spiritual, so it was in spiritual exercises that the signs of her recovery could be seen. As she recovered a sense of God's love and mercy, Bible reading became a joy again, she was able to pray and meditate upon the resurrection, and she went around the house singing psalms. Her advice to her readers, if they wished to avoid falling into a similar despair, was to be careful not to sin or become careless of their salvation, but 'give rather all dilygenc to make your calling & eliction shur by a continuall exercis in all godlynes & virtue for if yee do thes thinges yee shall never fall'.⁷⁰

Conclusion

Stachniewski's comment, that the doctrine of assurance was 'supportive to the sanguine and murderous for the melancholy' now seems ironic in light of the contribution puritan writers made to Elizabethan thinking about the link between melancholy and spiritual fears. The puritans developed a whole tradition of consolation based around the concept of the susceptibility of melancholic

⁷⁰ Hodgkin, *Women, Madness and Sin*, pp. 168-9, 172-3, 214-15, 220-3.

constitutions to reprobation fears. This tradition was characterised by flexibility and fluidity. The concept of the ‘weak’ Christian encompassed many different aspects of a person: their personality, overly scrupulous, idealistic and self-critical; their physical complexion, tending towards an abundance of melancholy that could affect the brain; their thought processes, made vulnerable to satanic interference by the presence of melancholy and the conscientious awareness of sin. These factors could explain how the most godly could become racked with guilt and fear, but by resisting the popular idea that the problem could be resolved entirely by medical intervention to reduce the melancholy humour, puritan explanations left room for the ministry of consolation that sought to heal the soul with assurances of election.

Scholars who assume that puritanism was harsh and uncharitable towards those prone to despair have failed to take into account the importance of reputation, both for the clergy, who were seeking to build a reputation for themselves as ‘physicians of the soul’, and for the whole Calvinist cause, which needed to defend itself and the teaching of double predestination from accusations from Catholics, and other Protestants, that it led to despair. Richard Greenham’s reputation was built on his ability to deal sensitively with troubled individuals. The clergyman who bungled his pastoral visit to Dionys Fitzherbert risked his reputation as a curer of souls. Fitzherbert herself wrote her autobiography to defend her reputation from those who might claim her religion had caused her to become mad. Throughout the whole of our period the reputation of the Calvinist form of Protestantism itself was at stake in England if its leaders failed to find a solution to the problem of despair. The next two chapters focus on the importance of reputation in two specific contexts – deathbed illness and suicide. They assess the importance of explanations based on melancholy

in defending the reputations of people within the puritan community who succumbed to despair in these circumstances.

CHAPTER FOUR

Despair of Election in Puritan Death-bed Narratives

Reprobation fears in general presented puritans with a difficult pastoral problem, but when these fears occurred in the dying, the problem became acute. Fitzherbert had been concerned that her period of mental illness might bring her religious beliefs into question, but in early modern culture an even greater test of a person's religious convictions took place on their death-bed. Of the extant accounts of despair of election, some of the most detailed describe the terrors of puritans at this time in their lives. It was at this point that a number of people became disturbed by the idea that they might be reprobate. With Heaven or Hell waiting on the other side of death, naturally the question of election and reprobation became a pressing one. People who had been convinced before that their lives showed clear signs of election became less sure as death approached. Arguably, the doctrines of double predestination and limited atonement made death a far more terrifying experience as the forgiveness of sins symbolised by the crucifix, the traditional symbol used to comfort the dying, was now viewed by some as only available to the elect. When Protestants appeared to lose confidence in salvation on their death-beds this could be used by enemies of Protestantism as evidence of the failure of the new religion. Some death-bed accounts seem to have been written in order to explain how these doubts could occur in pious people, and to prove that salvation by grace alone still remained the only true source of comfort in religion.

Making what was known as a ‘good death’ was very important for early modern people, as it had been for those living in medieval times. Despair of salvation at this crucial time could be seen as a sign that someone was not a true Christian. As Robert Bolton put it in a treatise on death in *The foure last things*, ‘the houre of death, as they say, is the houre of truth’.¹ It was therefore upsetting for friends and family if a dying person despaired. Not only that, but it could be used by enemies to tarnish the reputation of a whole religious community. Just as Protestants had used the despair and death of Francesco Spiera to further their cause against Nicodemism, Catholics too used rumours of the despair of prominent Protestants as proof of what error in religion led to. This chapter examines how Protestants responded to the problem of death-bed despair, drawing particular attention to the importance of the effects of sickness as an explanation, and placing this in the context of a puritan reinterpretation of the medieval concept of a ‘good death’.

Bright and the puritan divines who wrote about the concept of the ‘devil’s bath’, and the link between melancholy and spiritual troubles, were drawing on ideas already present in ancient and medieval thinking. When writing about death-bed despair, puritans again were not inventing something entirely new, but expanding upon a late medieval tradition known as the *ars moriendi* (‘art of dying well’). The battle against despair and sickness in the days and hours before death had been part of this tradition from the beginning. The difference between medieval views of a ‘good death’, and those put forward by puritans, lay in the emphasis placed by puritans upon the effects of sickness on the mind, and the importance of previous signs of piety as evidence of a person’s estate. In the context of death-bed illness, more than in any other discussions of despair, puritans were concerned to strike the right balance between

¹ Bolton, *Mr. Boltons last and learned worke of the foure last things, death, judgement, hell, heaven* (London, 1632), p. 41.

respecting the spiritual significance of despair, and its relationship to sin and repentance, and recognising the physiological causes that could alter a person's behaviour or perception of themselves. In these cases Perkins' view that 'a sick mans judgement of himselfe is not to be regarded' became particularly relevant, and Perkins himself expanded upon the effects that sickness could have upon the dying in his own advice about how to prepare for death.

Historiography

The majority of studies of dying in this period focus on what death meant in early modern culture. They highlight the importance of 'dying well', and its relationship to eternal salvation and the reputation of individuals and families. The seminal work on this subject is, of course, Philippe Ariès' *The Hour of Our Death*, first published in English in 1981. Approaching death in the past in the same manner as an anthropologist, Ariès invented the concept of the 'familiar death' or the 'tame death'. By creating an afterlife, and surrounding death with rituals of preparation for the world to come, Christian Europe domesticated the destructive forces of nature. Ariès compares this to the 'invisible death' of twentieth century Europe, which occurs in hospitals, hidden away from daily life and the domestic space. Like the mad, the dying in early modern and medieval society were not segregated in specially constructed spaces, but died at home surrounded by friends and relatives. As death was more public and visible than it is today, the behaviour of the dying was of much more significance. Ariès examines the various ways in which people in Western Europe over the centuries attempted to shape and influence the process of death to

provide hope for the dying and their relatives. The *ars moriendi* of the fifteenth century was part of this attempt. These were a group of vividly illustrated texts that instructed readers on how to act, and what to say, as death approached, in order to make a smooth transition to the next life.²

Sister Catherine O'Connor first documented the development of the *ars moriendi* texts in the 1940s. Despite theological changes, she saw an abundance of interest in the ideas of the *ars moriendi* carrying on into the post-Reformation period. Over the next decades, literary scholars have also taken an interest in the *ars moriendi* because of its deep impact on early modern literary culture. Nancy Lee Beaty argues that puritans laboured 'with godly zeal' to instil in their fellow countrymen 'refined and intensified medieval attitudes toward dying'. Bettie Anne Doebler has found the imagery and language of the *ars moriendi* in the works of Shakespeare and Milton, and emphasises the centrality of the theme of overcoming despair. The historian David Atkinson has written an article on English Protestant adaptations of the *ars moriendi*, in which he argues that Church of England clergy attempted to avoid discussion of theological disagreements over issues such as election and reprobation, in order to make the form available for the comfort and use of every Christian. Richard Wunderli and Gerald Broce also draw attention to the continuity between medieval and early modern views of death in England. They argue that, after the Reformation, the behaviour of a dying person in the final moment of death remained a crucial factor in determining the destination of the soul both for Protestants and Catholics.³

² P. Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. A. A. Knopf (London, 1981), esp. pp. 14-22, 28, 107-10, 559-93.

³ C. O'Connor, *The Art of Dying Well: The Development of the Ars Moriendi* (New York, 1942); N. L. Beaty, *The Craft of Dying: a Study of the Literary Tradition of the Ars Moriendi* (New Haven, 1970), p. 108; B. A. Doebler, *Rooted Sorrow: Dying in Early Modern England* (Rutherford, 1994); D. W. Atkinson, 'The English *ars moriendi*: its Protestant Transformation', *Renaissance and Reformation*, 6

Ralph Houlbrooke has made the most important contribution to our understanding of puritan attitudes to dying in his chapter on the puritan death-bed, in Durston and Eales' *The Culture of English Puritanism*. Here he examines accounts of actual deaths, rather than the literary tradition surrounding the subject. He concludes that in puritan circles reputation was the principal concern both to those dying and to those who wrote accounts of the deaths of friends and family. Claire Cross has undertaken an individual study of the account of the death of the puritan Henry Hastings, third Earl of Huntingdon. In this account she sees evidence of the influence of the Protestant advice book on dying well, Thomas Becon's *The sycke mans salve*. The main purpose of the text was to demonstrate that Huntingdon had died a good Protestant.⁴

What is missing from these studies is a sense of the importance of sickness itself in narratives of dying. Ralph Houlbrooke has looked briefly at how particular illnesses were believed to affect the behaviour of the dying in different ways.⁵ This chapter will expand upon his observations on the importance of the nature of the illness in assessing the behaviour of the dying, to show how important medical understanding was to puritan ways of accounting for death-bed behaviour.

(1982), 1-10; R. Wunderli and G. Broce, 'The Final Moment before Death in Early Modern England', *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 20 (1989), 259-75.

⁴ R. Houlbrooke, 'The Puritan Death-bed, c. 1560-1660', in C. Durston and J. Eales (eds.), *The Culture of English Puritanism* (London, 1996); M. C. Cross, 'The Third Earl of Huntingdon's Death-bed: A Calvinist Example of the *Ars Moriendi*', *Northern History*, 21 (1985), 80-107.

⁵ Houlbrooke, 'Puritan Death-bed', pp. 130-1.

The *Ars Moriendi*

In popular belief in the medieval and early modern period, in the final moments before death a spiritual battle occurred that determined the eternal destination of the soul. At this hour, demonic forces were believed to place in the mind of a dying person a reminder of their sins in order to tempt them to despair of salvation. Rituals could dispel the demons, such as sprinkling holy water on the sick person's bed, or ringing church bells. This belief was expressed in a poem by Robert Herrick in the early seventeenth century:

When the passing-bell doth tole,
And the Furies in a shole
Come to fright a parting soule;
Sweet Spirit comfort me!⁶

The *ars moriendi* tradition was constructed to advise people how to prepare themselves for this final battle, and how to behave in the last hours of life. To die well was, as the fifteenth century English *Boke of crafte of dyinge* put it, to die 'well and surely': that is, accepting the will of God, in good standing with the Church, and sure of eternal life. In the woodcut printed picture version of the *ars moriendi*, the dying man is shown in bed surrounded by demons who remind him of his sins. One says 'You have committed perjury', another, 'You have killed'. In the accompanying woodcut, the 'inspiration against despair', a number of biblical figures remind him of the mercy of God. There is the thief on the cross who repented just before he died and was received into Heaven; Mary Magdalen holding the pot of ointment that she poured over Christ's feet; and St. Peter, together with the cock that crowed as he denied Christ three times, is pictured holding the keys to the kingdom of Heaven,

⁶ R. Herrick, *The Poems of Robert Herrick*, ed. L. C. Martin (London, 1965), p. 348.

representing his forgiveness and restoration.⁷ Also central to the comfort of the despairing man in the *ars moriendi* tradition was the image of Christ himself on the cross. In the *Crafte of dyinge*, the writer directed his reader to meditate on the crucified Christ:

His heed enclyned to salve the, his mouth to kysse the, his armes I-
spred to be-clyp the, his hondis I-thrilled to yeve the, his syde
opened to love the, hys body alonge straight to yeve all hym-selfe to
the.⁸

The doctrine of double predestination complicated the relationship between dying well and entering into the next life. Alongside many other aspects of Catholic medieval piety, some of the elements of what was considered a ‘good death’ could be seen by Protestants as superstitious, or a form of attempting to obtain salvation by good works. Historians argue over how far the *ars moriendi* tradition was accepted in Calvinist countries after the Reformation. Michel Vovelle argues that, by rejecting free will, Protestantism radically altered the cultural meaning of death. The doctrine of election and reprobation taught that salvation was determined before birth, not at the point of death. Purgatory was abolished and, with it, the battle for souls on the death-bed disappeared. Wunderli and Broce reject that view. They argue that the death-bed drama remained central in Protestant spirituality until the eighteenth century. As mentioned above, Beaty also emphasises continuity between medieval and early modern ideas about death. She sees in the puritan approach to death an intensification, rather than a rejection, of the Catholic medieval tradition. With the repudiation of purgatory and prayers for the dead, the drama of the death-bed took on a new significance. There was no longer any remedy for sin after death – this was the final test.⁹

⁷ Beaty, *The Craft of Dying*, pp. 5-8; Doeblen, ‘*Rooted Sorrow*’, pp.16, 52, 54-6.

⁸ Quoted in Beaty, *The Craft of Dying*, p. 13.

⁹ Wunderli and Broce, ‘Final Moment’, esp. p. 261; Beaty, *The Craft of Dying*, p. 108-9, 154.

Puritans certainly retained a strong sense of death as a time of spiritual testing.

‘The manner of Satan ...,’ wrote Thomas Becon in *The sycke mans salve*

is, when any man is grievously sicke & like to die, straightways to com upon him at the beginning very fearefully, & to shew himselfe terrible unto him, & to cast before his eyes suche a mist: that except he taketh hede, he shall see nothing but the feareful wrath, & terrible judgement of God against sinners, again, synne, desperation, death and hel, and whatsoever maketh unto [the] utter confusion of the sickmans conscience.¹⁰

The *sycke mans salve* was written some time in the early 1550s. It was the most popular Protestant treatise on dying written in England, with multiple editions in print until the 1630s.¹¹ It showed clear influences from the *ars moriendi*, following the last hours of the dying man on his death-bed, who is given directions by a pious friend on how to respond and behave. However, it was also a vehemently anti-Catholic text, rejecting rituals and beliefs such as the last rites, purgatory and prayers for the dead. The most significant alteration to Catholic understandings of how to approach death-bed despair was the introduction of the theology of double predestination, and the rejection of the idea that even the most devout believer cannot be sure of his salvation. Becon hotly condemned the popular notion that nobody could be sure that their sins were forgiven, or know for certain that they were elect. This was a ‘wicked and dampnable’ doctrine of the ‘Papistes’ who ‘take away the certentie of salvation from any man ... [and] openeth a very path unto hell, and bringeth unto desperation’. ‘But,’ the dying man objects, ‘what if I be not of the number of those, whome God hath predestinat to be saved?’ His devout friend replies by elaborating on the signs by which a man can know that he is among the elect.¹²

David Atkinson argues that, taken as a whole, English Protestant texts attempted to avoid the controversial issue of double predestination and offered advice to the

¹⁰ T. Becon, *The sycke mans salve* (1561), pp. 349-50.

¹¹ Beaty, *The Craft of Dying*, pp. 108-10.

¹² Becon, *Sycke mans salve*, pp. 443, 456-7.

dying that was applicable to all. However, he sees in Calvinist texts like Becon's a significant strain of thinking within the Protestant church that represented a departure from the traditional mode of comfort for the dying. From the Calvinist point of view, dying well was to die sure of your election, rather than to merit eternal life by dying in a pious manner.¹³ This is one way in which puritanism was retreating from the drama of the death-bed, rather than intensifying it. The manner of somebody's death was only one piece of evidence about their standing with God. To a greater or lesser extent, puritans emphasised the importance of looking at somebody's life as a whole for evidence of their eternal destination, rather than reading too much into their last moments. They were especially suspicious of death-bed conversions. In Beaty's opinion this was a turn for the worse in the tradition of comfort for the dying. Not only had Protestantism thrown out the sacramental and ritualistic aids that the Catholic Church had offered to all, but, she conjectures, the signs given to reassure the devout of their election could only have added to the dismay of those who did not recognise in themselves the signs that they were saved. 'In sum,' she writes, 'the *Sicke Mannes Salve* necessarily fails to communicate pastoral comfort to Everyman'.¹⁴

What Atkinson and Beaty do not expand upon, but will become clear from the sources examined in this chapter, is the significance of the doctrine of limited atonement to the pattern of despair and reassurance, as depicted in puritan texts on death-bed experiences. Limited atonement was the teaching, described in the Introduction, that Christ's atonement for sin by his death and resurrection applied only to the elect, and not to the rest of humanity. R. T. Kendall has argued that limited

¹³ D. W. Atkinson, 'The English *Ars Moriendi*: its Protestant Transformation', *Renaissance and Reformation*, 6 (1982), p. 2.

¹⁴ Beaty, *The Craft of Dying*, pp. 154-6.

atonement hindered the believer from looking to Christ's death for assurance.¹⁵ As the image of Christ on the cross was central to comforting those in despair over their sins in the *ars moriendi*, the idea that the mercy for sin represented by this image was not universally available struck at the heart of the tradition. For instance, the theology of limited atonement can be seen clearly at work deflecting traditional counsel for the comfort of the dying in the accounts of Spiera's death. When his friends encouraged him to take comfort from scriptural examples of God's mercy, and to remember that God desired all sinners to be saved, he replied, 'It is true ... hee would have all that he hath elected, [t]o bee saved; he would not have damned reprobates to be saved'. He rejected the example of God's pardon of David's sin and Peter's betrayal on the same grounds. Elsewhere, he said, 'it is no matter whether my sinnes be great or small, few or many; they are such as [neither] Christ's bloud, nor Gods mercie belongs to mee'.¹⁶

In England there was by no means a consensus that belief in election necessitated belief in limited atonement. However, this chapter provides evidence of the influence of the doctrine in examples of English Protestants who, on their death-beds, rejected the notion that Christ's mercy towards sinners applied to them. These examples would seem to bear out Kendall's point about the pastoral implications of limited atonement, as well as the general consensus amongst scholars of the *ars moriendi* that Protestant teaching tended to increase anxiety around death. To put this in context, however, Ralph Houlbrooke, in his survey of puritan death-bed accounts, concluded that only a minority of puritans experienced some sort of spiritual crisis at the approach of death.¹⁷ As with all the examples in this thesis, we need to be careful not to see these texts as representative of a typical puritan psychology. Nevertheless,

¹⁵ White, *Predestination*, p. 22; Kendall, *English Calvinism*, pp. 28-32.

¹⁶ Bacon, *Fearfull estate*, pp. 41, 54, 59-60, 80; Gribaldi, *A notable and marvailous epistle*, sigs. Biiii-[vi]; for the Spiera texts in relation to the *ars moriendi* form see Overell, 'Reformation of Death in Italy', pp. 5-21.

¹⁷ Houlbrooke, 'The Puritan Death-bed', pp. 135-6.

the existence of these texts demonstrates that doubts over election at the time of death were a concern for this section of the Protestant church. It is also important to recognise, however, that these texts exist because puritans acknowledged, and responded to, the problem of reprobation fears.

The ‘Good Death’ in Protestant England

In some ways the Reformation placed greater expectations upon the dying than the late medieval period. Whereas in the past it had been enough to die a good Christian, it was now necessary to die a good Protestant, or a good Catholic. This could require quite a sophisticated grasp of theology in the final moments of life, or it could even require facing death by fire, or some other form of execution, in front of large crowds. Some managed it better than others. According to Foxe, all the Protestant martyrs died impeccably. John Bradford, and a young apprentice named John Leaf, died side by side ‘most lykest two Lambes, without any alteration of their countenance, beyng void of all feare’. This was in contrast to the Catholic, Friar Forest, who died desperately hanging on to the ladder by the stake as he saw the flames approaching.¹⁸

Puritans placed a great emphasis on prayer and faith at the time of death. Lord Huntingdon died in debt and without making a will, to the dismay of his family. However, according to his biographer, who sat reading psalms to him during his illness, he modelled ideal Protestant behaviour:

He heard with very great attention, he waighed deeply that which was read and spoken, he did full many a time lift up those gracious

¹⁸ Foxe, *TAMO*, p. 1125.

eyes and holy hands towards heaven ... especially I cannot forgett how desirously he embraced that golden chaine of the Lords election, vocation, justification and glorification.¹⁹

On the other hand, the death of William Perkins appears to have disappointed some people. Thomas Fuller wrote in his history of the lives of great Protestant divines that ‘It hath been reported that he [Perkins] dyed in the conflict of a troubled conscience’. According to Fuller, this was because he kept crying out ‘mercy, mercy’, which some bystanders interpreted to mean that he did not feel that he had God’s favour. Stachniewski claims this as ‘a stark demonstration of the inescapability of the dark shadow of puritanism’, that one of its greatest teachers despaired on his death-bed.²⁰ However, it is better seen as evidence of the expectations early modern culture placed on great men to die great deaths.

This concern for reputation was clearly in the minds of those who wrote death-bed accounts as well as, sometimes, the dying themselves. Thomas Peacock, whose death is examined later in this chapter, was recorded as saying at one point ‘What if dying thus I should be judged an Apostata? ... I desire that I be not branded with the note of a forlorne or a Reprobate’. In 1622, Mary Gunter imagined the derision of neighbours if she should say anything foolish through pain or lack of sleep: ‘This is the end of all your precise Folks’, they would say, ‘they die mad, or not themselves’. Houlbrooke has found that some puritans feared dying of diseases such as smallpox, or plague, that could bring about delirium, in case they behaved in a way that brought dishonour to themselves or their religion.²¹

Death-bed despair presented puritans with a number of problems. Firstly, one of the defining features of a ‘good death’, as we have just seen in the examples given in Foxe’s ‘Book of Martyrs’, was to suffer sickness and accept death patiently. It was a

¹⁹ Cross, ‘Huntingdon’s Death-bed’, p. 95.

²⁰ T. Fuller, *The holy state* (Cambridge, 1642), p. 91; Stachniewski, *Persecutory Imagination*, pp. 45-6.

²¹ Houlbrooke, ‘The Puritan Death-bed’, pp. 127,130; Bolton, *The last conflicts*, p. 55.

common saying in pre-Reformation sermons that those who ‘die desperately’ ‘raging, blaspheming & swearing’ were ‘hel houndes, ruffians or traitors’. Secondly, assurance of salvation as death approached was one of the signs of election outlined by Becon. This was often evidenced by willingness to hear scripture read, as with Huntingdon, but, according to Becon, ‘there is not a more evident testimony and a surer argument that that man is in the state of everlasting dampnation, which hath no mynd to hear the word of God’.²² As a person in despair was often not in a state of mind to receive comfort from scriptural passages, their behaviour thwarted expectations of a ‘good death’. Finally, disturbed behaviour by those on their death-bed could be seen as evidence of the failure of Protestant religion. Surely if a religion was true it should be able to provide consolation to the soul in its greatest hour of need?

There were a number of ways that Protestants could deal with rumours of a ‘bad death’. One was to deny it altogether and blame it on Catholic slander. Catholics were not to be trusted in these matters, Thomas Taylor insisted in a publication defending the reputation of Protestants. They were constantly spreading malicious lies about Protestant leaders – that Calvin called out the name of the devil as he died, for instance, and that Bucer denied the second coming. They could not even wait until a person was dead to spread these rumours, but had written a whole book claiming that Beza died a Catholic, and then published it while he was still alive, and able to refute it. It was Catholics, Taylor claimed, who had spread the rumour that Perkins died in despair, of ‘whose gracious and happy end my selfe was an eye-witnesse’.²³

²² Quoted in Wunderli and Broce, ‘Final Moment’, p. 267; Becon, *Sycke mans salve*, p. 452.

²³ T. Taylor, *Christs victorie over the Dragon: or satans downfall shewing the glorious conquests of our Saviour for his poore Church, against the greatest persecutors* (London, 1633), p. 574.

A second way of explaining a 'bad death' was to attribute it to sickness. This is how Fuller accounted for Perkins' manner of death. Perkins had died from a very painful attack of the stone, and in this context Fuller wrote:

'Tis true that many on lesse reason have expressed more confidence in their future happinesse, and have delivered themselves in larger speeches concerning the same. But who could expect a long oration from him, where every word was accented with pain in so sharp a disease.

Another suggestion that Fuller made was that a difficult death could actually be evidence of a person's election. This was based on the old idea that it was the saints who suffered most in this life. Fuller suggested that this might also be true at their death: 'For God sometimes seemingly leaves his Saints when they leave the world, plunging them on their death-beds in deep temptations, and casting their souls down to hell, to rebound the higher to heaven.'²⁴ Lastly, puritan accounts of the deaths of those who had shown signs of despair at some point during their final sickness emphasised any evidence that a person had overcome these struggles in the final hours before their death. By emphasising the final triumph of hope, despair could be presented as a temporary test of faith. Puritan accounts, therefore, sought to strike a balance between seeing death from a medical point of view, in which sickness was a possible cause of despair, or out-of-character behaviour, and seeing death from a spiritual point of view, in which both sickness and despair were a kind of severe mercy that made sense as part of a narrative of the soul's journey towards deeper faith. From the second point of view, the behaviour of the dying retained some of the significance it had taken on in the *ars moriendi* tradition, but its significance was modified by the first point of view, which acknowledged the possibility of sickness interfering with a person's ability to behave in accordance with expectations.

²⁴ Fuller, *Holy state*, pp. 91-2.

Sickness in Guides to Dying Well

Wunderli and Broce argue that the concept of the final moment before death as a battle for the soul first came under attack from Enlightenment sceptics in the eighteenth century. This was partly as a result of the wars of religion in the previous century. Observing that Cavaliers and regicides both produced impressive last speeches at their executions, an anonymous author challenged the idea that it was possible to tell anything useful from the last moments of somebody's life. 'Many ... take upon them to judge the Cause, as well as the Man, purely from what he says at that important Hour,' he wrote. However, he thought this was mistaken, as a dying man could have an agenda to promote a particular cause at the time of death as well as at any other time of life. Wunderli and Broce quote this author as evidence of a growing tendency to place less emphasis on the 'final hour' of death in judging a person's salvation.²⁵

Though it is plausible that the disillusionment of war had an impact on attitudes to death, as on many other aspects of religion, it is not the case that eighteenth century writers were the first to object to placing too high an importance on the words and actions of the dying. Similar ideas can be found in the writing of William Perkins in the 1590s. Perkins' guide to preparing for death, published in 1595, was entitled *A salve for a sicke man* – a clear allusion to Becon's *The sycke mans salve*. In this work he attempted to strike a balance between treating the spiritual side of death too lightly, and placing too much emphasis on a person's behaviour in their final moments.

²⁵ Quoted in Wunderli and Broce, 'Final Moment', p. 274.

Following other writers on the art of dying well, he saw death as the end of life in the body, and the beginning of a new life as the soul entered either eternal bliss or perdition. Amongst other problems in society that hindered the proper preparation for death, he bemoaned the common practice of calling immediately for a physician to visit the dying, but leaving it until the late stages of fatal illness to call on the help of a minister. He thought this showed too much concern for the body (which was unlikely to be healed anyway) and too little concern for the soul.²⁶

However, alongside this concern that the dying should receive proper spiritual counsel, Perkins was also adamant that the final hours before death were not the appropriate time for determining whether a person was bound for Heaven or Hell. Although it was a spiritual text, Perkins' treatise was, in many ways, very practical. He never lost sight of the death-bed as a sickbed. The sick should use all natural means possible to care for the body. He even included a section of advice on how to choose a physician (a bad choice could bring death even closer!).²⁷ Disease would make many demands on both the dying person and the attention of those around him, therefore delaying preparation for the next life until the onset of fatal illness was a rash way of proceeding. 'The time then is most unfit to begin a preparation,' he warned,

Because all the senses & powers of the body are occupied about the pains and troubles of the disease: and the sicke party is exercised partly in conference with the Physitian, partly with the minister about his soules health and matters of conscience, and partly with friends that come to visit.²⁸

Similarly, as the final moments before death were not an appropriate time for a sinner to begin to repent, they were also not an appropriate time to judge the estate of

²⁶ W. Perkins, *A salve for a sicke man. Or, A treatise containing the nature, differences, and kindes of death as also the right manner of dying well* (London, 1611), p. 106.

²⁷ Perkins, *A salve*, pp. 123-31.

²⁸ Perkins, *A salve*, p. 56.

a saint. He went straight to the heart of the matter that could be troubling in such cases:

Touching dispaire, it is true that not only wicked and loose persons despaire in death, but also repentant sinners, who oftentimes in their sicknesse, testifie of themselves that beeing alive and lying in their beddes, they feele themselves as it were to be in hell, and to apprehend the very pangs and torments thereof.²⁹

How could the despair of pious people be explained? His explanation was both spiritual and physiological. On the spiritual side, despair was one of God's chief instruments in bringing a person to an awareness of their need to depend on divine grace (the state of mind necessary for a 'good death'). Sometimes God directed his chosen to Heaven 'by the gates of Hell'.³⁰ On the more practical side, these periods of despair, along with other behaviour apparently not in keeping with patience, such as raving or swearing, could be the involuntary actions of the body, or confusions of the mind caused by the course of the illness: 'Ravings and blasphemings arise of melancholy and of frensies, which often happen at the end of burning fevers, the choler shooting up to the braine.'³¹

Perkins' conclusion was that a good death should not be confused with a quiet death. The behaviour of the dying person, quiet or disturbed, could often depend on the nature of the disease, rather than the state of the person's soul:

If this be true, that strange diseases, and thereupon strange behaviours in death, may befall the best man that is: wee must learne to reforme our judgements of such as lie at the point of death. The common opinion is, that if a man lie quietly and goe away like a lambe (which in some diseases, as consumptions and such like, any man may do) then he goes straight to heaven: but if the violence of the disease stirre up impatience, and cause in the partie franticke behaviours, then men use to say, there is a judgement of God serving either to discover an hypocrite, or to plague a wicked man. But the truth is otherwise; for indeed a man may die like a lamb, and yet goe to hell: and one dying in exceeding torments and strange behaviours

²⁹ Perkins, *A salve*, pp. 23-4.

³⁰ Perkins, *A salve*, pp. 24-6.

³¹ Perkins, *A salve*, p. 26.

of the body may go to heaven: & by the outward condition of any man either in life or death, we are not to judge of his estate before God.³²

Perkins' ideas were based in generally accepted views of the relationship between sickness and loss of mental faculties. As mental illness was viewed as having a somatic basis, any illness could upset the balance of the mind, as well as the body. Later, Burton would sum up medical opinion on the relationship between disease and melancholy: 'There is almost no part of the body,' he wrote, 'which being distempered, doth not cause this malady, as the brain and his parts, heart, liver, spleen, stomach, matrix or womb, pylorus, mirach, mesentery, hypochondrias, mesaraic veins'. He attributed many cases of head melancholy to 'long diseases', specifically ague (a violent fever). Here, frenzy could also be present.³³

By including medicine in his guide to dying well, Perkins added a new dimension to how the behaviour of the dying was viewed in death-bed accounts. Sickness had been present to some extent in the old spiritual drama of the death-bed. In the *Crafte of dyinge* the friends of the dying person were encouraged to pay attention to the patient's spiritual needs because, in that way, they might ease his physical suffering, or even prevent death altogether. 'Bodyly syknes' they were reminded, 'commyth of the sicknes of the soule'. What occurred in texts by Perkins and other puritan writers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was that this view was reversed, and it was sickness that was seen as a potential cause of apparently spiritual suffering in the dying, rather than spiritual trouble being the root of sickness.

The following sources show that puritans often took into account the effects that illness could have on the brain, and that this was significant in how crises over election were interpreted and presented in death-bed narratives. The effects of fever

³² Perkins, *A salve*, pp. 28-9.

³³ Burton, *Anatomy* (1.1.2.5), i, 374, 377.

and a weak body were seen to make people vulnerable to despair. However, in describing the final moment before death, puritan death-bed accounts followed the medieval pattern, relating improvement in bodily health to the health of the soul. In the final hours, lessening of the more violent or painful symptoms of illness were taken to be a sign that the spiritual crisis was over and the soul was at peace.³⁴

‘The Grevious Visitation, and Dreadfull Desertion of Mr. Peacock’

Sickness also had a particular role to play in the spiritual scheme of the *ars moriendi*. It was a test of patience, and a kind of purgatory suffered before death. Sickness reminded the dying of their sins and, through patient suffering without complaining against God, they proved their true devotion and their readiness for Heaven. Both the medieval *Crafte of dyinge* and Becon’s *Sycke mans salve* devoted a large section at the beginning to explaining the purpose behind sickness, which was to bring the sufferer closer to God. Becon referred to it as God’s ‘loving visitation’.³⁵ David Harley’s work on the providential meanings behind sickness in puritan culture is relevant here. For puritans, he explains, afflictions had a different meaning for the godly and the ungodly. Sickness and calamity were sent to punish the ungodly, but to the godly they were tokens of fatherly love sent to sanctify the soul.³⁶ In the following example of a puritan narrative of death-bed despair, we will see how puritans expanded on this idea to suggest that despair itself, as well as the physical sickness that accompanied it, could be interpreted as a ‘loving visitation’ of God. This is the account of the death of a puritan scholar named Thomas Peacock, written

³⁴ Beaty, *The Craft of Dying*, p. 27.

³⁵ Beaty, *The Craft of Dying*, p. 14; Becon, *Sycke mans salve*, sig. [A5].

³⁶ Harley, ‘Spiritual Physic, Providence and English Medicine’.

by his protégée Robert Bolton, a prominent figure in early seventeenth-century puritanism.

Thomas Peacock was a tutor in divinity and Fellow of Brasenose College, Oxford. He matriculated in 1589. J. Mordaunt Crook has described the religious temper of the college at this time as ‘theologically Calvinist, institutionally episcopalian, and presentationally evangelical’.³⁷ Peacock has received very little attention from historians and does not appear in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Schmidt mentions him only briefly as evidence of how the godly did not regard one another as immune to despair.³⁸ However, he was a significant enough figure in Elizabethan puritan circles for a full account of his death to be recorded and published decades later. Probably his greatest contribution to English puritanism was his role in Bolton’s conversion. Bolton entered Lincoln College in 1592, but soon transferred to Brasenose, where he obtained a fellowship in 1602. According to Edward Bagshaw, Bolton’s editor and biographer, Bolton was on his way to join a Jesuit seminary in Flanders, but his plans fell through. Instead, he returned to Brasenose:

where falling into the acquaintance of one Mr. Peacocke Fellow of that House, a learned and godly man, it pleased GOD by his acquaintance to frame upon his soule that admirable workmanship of his repentance and conversion to eternal life.³⁹

Bolton decided to become a minister, and in 1610 became rector of Broughton, Northamptonshire, and obtained a preaching licence. The next year Thomas Peacock died, on 4 December 1611. It shows the esteem that Bolton had for his ‘spiritual father’ that he kept notes on the manner of Peacock’s death. These were published by Bagshaw in 1646 as *The last conflicts and death of Mr Thomas Peacock*. Bolton had

³⁷ J. M. Crook, *Brasenose: The Biography of an Oxford College* (Oxford, 2008), pp. 43, 517.

³⁸ Schmidt, *Melancholy and the Care of the Soul*, pp. 67-8.

³⁹ E. Bagshaw, ‘The life and death of Mr Bolton’ in *Mr Boltons last and learned worke of the foure last things*, ed. E. Bagshaw (London, 1632), sig. [b5].

entrusted Bagshaw, a former pupil, with the publication of his papers at his death in 1631.⁴⁰ In a postscript to the reader, the printers explained that Bagshaw had delivered *The last conflicts* to the printers along with Bolton's other writings in around 1636-7. Printing had to be postponed, however, when the manuscript was originally rejected by the licenser as 'too precise for those times'.⁴¹ This was possibly because of the controversial nature of the issues of reprobation, election and limited atonement, which the text addressed.

Almost everything we know about Thomas Peacock comes from Bolton and Bagshaw's account. According to them, he was a conscientious tutor, known for the holiness of his life and generosity towards the poor. Never one to miss an opportunity for edification, he turned mealtimes with his students into a Bible lecture. His patron was Sir Robert Harley, who supported a number of prominent puritan ministers, including William Gouge and John Cotton. When Peacock fell ill, Harley had hopes for his recovery and plans for his further involvement in ministry. He sent him potable gold and a book of medical advice.⁴² However, despite Peacock's good standing in the puritan community, as death approached, he doubted his election. 'I thought,' he said to his friends 'that I had been in a good estate, but I see it now farre otherwise.' The main basis for this seems to have been a troubled conscience over the way in which he taught his students during those informal mealtime lectures. He accused himself of gluttony, pride and hypocrisy. The traditional advice given to the dying to trust in the death of Christ failed because of Peacock's commitment to limited atonement, as this dialogue demonstrates. (The italics are original and

⁴⁰ S. Wright, 'Bolton, Robert (1572-1631)', *ODNB*; P. R. N. Carter, 'Bagshaw, Edward (1589-1662)', *ODNB*.

⁴¹ R. Bolton, *The last conflicts and death of Mr Thomas Peacock*, ed. E. Bagshaw (London, 1646), sigs. D4-[D5].

⁴² Bolton, *The last conflicts*, sigs. A2[b]-A3[a], p.3, 54, 56; J. Eales, 'Harley, Sir Robert (bap. 1579, d. 1656)', *ODNB*.

represent Peacock's words, while the non-italic represents the words of advice given to him by friends):

Behold Christ himself. *Nothing to me.* God can make his death available. *He cannot.* He is omnipotent. *In me he cannot, because it stands with his purpose.* Whom God loveth once, he loveth to the end. *But he did never love me.*

The discussion at the bedside revolved around whether or not Peacock had received the grace given only to the elect. His friends insisted that he had. He insisted that he had not, and that his former life had been an outward show. '*I have no more sense of grace,*' he said, '*then these curtains, then a goose, then that block.*'⁴³ His inability to believe that he was elect thwarted the normal procedure of providing comfort to the dying by reminding them of Christ's mercy towards sinners, and required the kind of expert help that had been developed by Bright, Perkins and Greenham in the previous decades.

Peacock's friends responded to the crisis by calling on the help of the reverend John Dod. Dod was the author of *A Plaine and Familiar Exposition of the Ten Commandements*, which was essentially a handbook on godly conduct in all areas of life, including work, household, marriage and dealings with the unregenerate. For this he earned the nickname 'Decalogue Dod'. He was also known for his ability to counsel those afflicted in conscience, and was married to Richard Greenham's stepdaughter, Ann Bownd. He was to become linked with Edward Bagshaw, who acted as one of his patrons in later life. By 1611, he had been suspended from preaching and ejected from his living for refusing to subscribe to Whitgift's articles, but he still retained a large degree of support from moderates and puritans.⁴⁴ He was,

⁴³ Bolton, *The last conflicts*, pp. 3-4, 16-17, 24.

⁴⁴ J. Fielding, 'Dod, John (1550-1645)', *ODNB*.

therefore, a suitable expert for a group of puritans to call on for help in a case such as Peacocks', in which a godly person had despaired of his soul.

Dod treated Peacock as the kind of 'weak' Christian discussed in chapter three, who tended to exaggerate the seriousness of his sins. He advised him to remember God's kindness in passing over small things. He appears to have made some progress, but only temporarily. His visit was followed the next day by a relapse, and so he returned a few days later. It took another two days to persuade Peacock to believe his friends, and his own previous conviction, that he was amongst the elect. Dod then had recourse to the argument that feelings were not to be trusted, and that it was the reprobate who was careless of sin. 'You do not feel, therefore you have it not?' he reasoned, 'I know when you would have denied such an argument: if that did follow, it should fare well with the Reprobate, he hath no sense of the wrath of God, therefore he is not under it.' After another troubled night, Peacock's faith began to be restored. He died the next week, fully assured that he was elected to eternal life.⁴⁵

Another line of argument used by Dod was that all suffering, including periods of despair over salvation, were sent by God to the elect for their own good. As we have seen, David Harley emphasises the centrality of this concept to puritan views of sickness. Jeremy Schmidt also draws attention to this notion of trouble as a 'severe mercy' in his study of the puritan language of therapeutics. He explains that puritan emotional life is best understood as a 'dialectic of sorrow and joy' in which periods of deep dejection prepare the way for ecstatic experiences of God's presence.⁴⁶

What Schmidt does not draw attention to is how this pattern of despair, followed by the triumph of hope, followed the pattern of the ideal death in the medieval *ars*

⁴⁵ Bolton, *The last conflicts*, pp. 6-7, 30-46.

⁴⁶ Bolton, *The last conflicts*, p. 7; Schmidt, *Melancholy and the Care of the Soul*, p. 59.

moriendi. In the context of fierce religious controversy, puritans were able to draw on this tradition of the dying man's triumph over despair in order to present death-bed despair of election in a positive light. Whereas critics might use rumours of the despair of leading puritans such as Perkins to discredit Calvinism, Bolton's account of the death of his spiritual mentor idealised despair as a necessary precursor to a true experience of saving grace. The first part of the text dwells on Peacock's torments (agony, he says, is too weak a word to describe it). The joy he felt when his faith was restored, however, is equally beyond expression. Bolton, who focused mainly on the theological, becomes almost mystical as he describes Peacock's death as a kind of rapture.

The night following, which was Wednesday night, the Sun of Righteousness spread gracious beams at his setting, which were comfortable tokens of a glorious rising. His last swan-like song, as he uttered it, was pen'd by some as he uttered it.

...

*What great cause have I to magnify the great goodness of God, that hath humbled, nay rather exalted such a wretched miscreant of so base condition to an estate so glorious and stately! The Lord hath honour'd me with his goodness: I am sure he hath provided a glorious Kingdom for me. The joy that I feel in my heart is incredible.*⁴⁷

Peacock's friends never took seriously the possibility that he could be reprobate. Bolton was convinced that his commitment to the godly cause and his conscientious piety were more than sufficient evidence of his election. Similarly to Foxe's analysis of the Glover case, he attributed Peacock's anxiety to a tendency of tender consciences to exaggerate small sins, and therefore only further proof of his piety. He had, for instance, never seen any evidence of gluttony in Peacock's habits. Another

⁴⁷ Bolton, *The last conflicts*, pp. 61-64.

explanation was the busyness of Satan at the hour of death in tempting ‘weak’

Christians to despair:

His tender conscience was goared with the fiery darts of the Devil, pointed with the edge of sinne, and sense of Gods heavy wrath. As through a false glasse, the dazled eye of his astonished and amazed soul, could see nothing but hideously appearing sinne, and the terrible image of death and damnation.⁴⁸

However, the purpose of publishing an account of Peacock’s death was not simply to explain away a potentially embarrassing incident. Bolton and Bagshaw saw in both Peacock’s sickness (his ‘visitation’) and his agonising despair, the hand of God. They described his experience as a ‘desertion’. An earlier printed version of the manuscript was entitled ‘A narration of the grievous visitation, and dreadfull desertion of Mr Peacock, in his last sicknesse’. Bagshaw called it ‘the most bitter spirituall desertion that we shall lightly read of’.⁴⁹ As we saw in Chapter Three, the concept of a ‘desertion’ was that God could temporarily remove his spirit from a person so that they experienced the despair felt by the reprobate, who lived without the comforts of the Holy Ghost. The purpose of a desertion in the case of the elect was to bring them to a deeper awareness of sin, and a greater thankfulness for the mercy of God. Bagshaw argued that the sorrow felt by the elect over their sins during a period of desertion, was further proof of their true devotion, rather than of a lack of faith:

Though a spirituall desertion be the highest affliction that befalls Gods childe; yet it discovers in him the greatest sincerity of an upright heart; For at such a time he is so farre from hiding his sinnes, that he cares not what shame he puts upon himself, so God may have glory. For in a spirituall desertion, though the soul of a Christian be extreemly distressed, through the terrour of sinne; yet at the same time hath it a true touch of grace, though not the comforts of it.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Bolton, *The last conflicts*, pp. 4-5, 8.

⁴⁹ Bolton, *The last conflicts*, sig. A3.

⁵⁰ Bolton, *The last conflicts*, sigs. A5(v)-[A6(r)].

Bolton described this spiritual distress suffered by Peacock as a kind of purgatory. ‘You shall see him now in his purgatory,’ he wrote, ‘(not that papisticall sinne-satisfying fiction, the Popes jayle) but that hot fiery furnace wherein the Lord trieth his metall, whether it be good or reprobate’.⁵¹ As we have seen, in the medieval tradition of the *ars moriendi* the sufferings of sickness were seen as having a spiritual value similar to purgatory in trying the patience of the sufferer and bringing an awareness of sin. The puritan tradition shifted the emphasis from the suffering of the body to the suffering of the soul. In this way, those like Peacock who suffered from despair could be given spiritual credit, rather than accused of impatience or lack of faith.

This explanation of Peacock’s despair focused mainly on the spiritual. Bagshaw described it as ‘a convulsion fit in the soul’, and few details of the illness from which Peacock died were given. Perkins had suggested that the violence of the experience of desertion could mimic disease in ‘fittes after the manner of an ague’.⁵² However, a few comments in *The last conflicts* suggest that illness was perceived as playing a greater role in Peacock’s condition than merely being the cause of his death. The face was a window to the state of both the soul and the body. ‘In his countenance,’ wrote Bolton, ‘appeared evident tokens of a sorrowfull minde, born up with a weak body; his spirit was wounded, Satan had foiled him.’ John Dod advised that visitors should be restricted ‘lest his brain should be too much heated’. These men did not see any conflict between the suggestion of underlying somatic causes in Peacock’s case, and the prevailing explanation of ‘desertion’. Peacock’s troubled mind was the result of a weak body, and also a ploy of Satan. Along with the temptations of the devil, the sickness itself was incorporated into the greater workings of Providence, and

⁵¹ Bolton, *The last conflicts*, p. 14.

⁵² Perkins, *A golden chaine*, p. 681.

described as ‘his visitation’. All displayed the power of God for the purpose of bringing sinners to repentance: ‘When God cast him upon his bed of sickness,’ wrote Bagshaw, ‘and suffered Satan to winnow him, he was no more in his [Satan’s] hands then a leaf tossed to and fro with the winde.’⁵³

The Religious Politics of Death

The account of Peacock’s despair of election defended his reputation by presenting his suffering as a kind of divine mercy visited upon the godly. The following is an example of another case of despair of election in which sickness took on a more significant role. In this example sickness was seen as not only causing discomfort, but affecting the psychological state of the sufferer in a way that distorted her perception of her spiritual estate. This is the account of the death of the gentlewoman Katherine Brettergh, written around the same time as Bolton’s account of the death of Thomas Peacock. Whereas Bolton’s account relied mainly on justifying Peacock’s despair in terms of the purposes of a benign Providence, Brettergh’s biographers sought to protect her reputation from critics of Protestantism by using arguments based on medical theories of how fever could affect the brain.

Like many people who came to doubt their election, Katherine Brettergh was extremely religious. She was brought up by her elder brother, John Bruen, who imposed a strict regime of prayer seven times daily, and church twice on a Sunday, for his whole household. When she married William Brettergh in 1599, Katherine exported these habits to her new home in Lancashire, where she and her husband read

⁵³ Bolton, *The last conflicts*, sigs. A2[b], [A6a], pp. 1, 7, 46.

eight chapters of the Bible a day, and she was diligent in training her maids in similar ways. She was only 22 when she died, and had been married for only two years, but already she and her husband were embroiled in an ongoing battle with local Roman Catholics. The manner of her death became part of the dispute. In 1600 William Brettergh's attempt to apprehend recusants within his own and a neighbouring parish resulted in a full scale riot by the minority Catholic population. Other forms of retaliation included the maiming of the Bretterghs' cattle in the middle of the night. Katherine was unperturbed by these events, regarding them as the tribulations that must be endured by the godly, and encouraged her husband not to back down. It is unsurprising then, that, when it was rumoured that at her death she began to doubt her elect status, the Catholic population seized the opportunity to discredit the family's religious standing. In a sermon preached at her funeral, William Leigh complained that since her death local Catholics 'have not ceased to give it out that she died despairing, and by her comfortles end shewed that she professed a comfortles Religion'. This did not stop at rumour. The records of her death that survive appear to be part of a pamphlet war, of which the Catholic side has been lost.⁵⁴

In 1602, the sermon given by William Leigh, along with another by William Harrison, and a biography of her life and death by an anonymous author, were published as *Deaths advantage little regarded*. William Harrison's sermon identified three types of bad death: those who died 'sottishly, like blocks & idiots, having neither penitent feeling of their sins, nor comfortable assurance of salvation'; those who died 'impatiently', raging against God's correction; and those who died 'desperatly', without hope of pardon for their sins. The 'righteous' died 'most

⁵⁴ S. Hindle, 'Bruen, John (1560-1625)', *ODNB*; *ibid.*, 'Brettergh, Katherine (1579-1601)', *ODNB*; Anon., 'The holie life and Christian death, of Mistris Katherin Brettergh', in W. Harrison and W. Leigh, *Deaths advantage little regarded* (London, 1602), pp. 1-11; W. Leigh, 'The soules solace against sorrow', *ibid.*, p. 96.

comfortably', having repented of their sins, given testimony of their belief in Christ, and assured of their salvation.⁵⁵ The authors acknowledged that, at first sight, Brettergh's death did not seem to follow this pattern of patient submission and faith, which was meant to characterise a 'good death'. With much crying and wailing she doubted her election, saying that she was a hypocrite and a disgrace to religion and her family. She threw her Bible from her saying that it was not the book of life to her, but the book of death, and wished that she had never been born. She claimed she saw a fire burning near her.⁵⁶ She certainly could not be accused of showing want of feeling, but what of patience and assurance? This, the authors explained in the familiar terms of temptations of the devil, sent to try the elect. The most severe temptations to despair, they reasoned, would be experienced by the most godly, as these were the people whose faith the devil was most intent on destroying.

However, the main arguments used by Brettergh's biographer to defend her reputation were clearly influenced by Perkins' treatise on how to judge the behaviour of the dying. The writer used the occasion to attack what he saw as complacency in Catholic conceptions of a 'good death'. 'Another opinion of these sottish people,' he wrote, 'is to say: *'If a man dye like a lambe, and passe out of the world like a bird in a shell, he is certainly saved, although neither holines were in his life, nor God in his mouth; grace in heart, nor yet repentance, faith, or feeling at his death.'*⁵⁷ To die a 'good death' was not to die without a spiritual struggle, and so Brettergh's friends incorporated her doubts about her own election into the satanic temptations to despair that had been part of the *ars moriendi* tradition since the fifteenth century.

A second way that the authors explained her troubled behaviour was by reference to the kind of illness she suffered and its effects. It is interesting to note the

⁵⁵ Harrison, *Deaths advantage little regarded*, pp. 48-9.

⁵⁶ Anon., 'Holie life and Chrisitan death', pp. 12-14.

⁵⁷ Anon., 'Holie life and Christian death', sig. N1-2.

similarity between this and the descriptions of Spiera's illness. It is described as 'a hot burning Ague', in which she suffered sleeplessness and continual thirst, but without the ability to swallow much liquid.⁵⁸ However, whereas Spiera's cries of 'I burn, I burn' were interpreted in spiritual terms, as a burning fire of Hell in his conscience, those who observed Brettergh's death interpreted her troubled behaviour in medical terms, echoing what Perkins had written on the subject in *A salve for a sicke man*. 'Others beholding them which were reputed righteous, to die very stranglie,' wrote Harrison,

to rave, to blaspheme, to utter many idle and impious speeches, to be unrulie and behave themselves verie foolishlie, they begin to suspect their profession: but let them know, that these things may arise from the extremitie of their disease. For in hote fevers and burning agues, the cholera ascending into the braine, will hinder the use of their understanding; and so cause them to misbehave themselves rather like madmen then Christians . . . it is not they which doe it, but the disease which is upon them.⁵⁹

Of course, the difference between Brettergh and Spiera is expressed in the first line: those who had witnessed Spiera's death fifty years earlier had regarded him as an apostate, whereas Brettergh was 'reputed righteous' by her friends. They did not ascribe any spiritual meaning to her words, or to the images she saw of fire burning, because 'every one saw that these things proceeded of weaknes, emptiness of her head, and want of sleepe, which her disease would not afoord her'. Her biographer linked the idea of the 'devil's bath', that Satan could take advantage of a weak body to confuse the mind:

Her sicknes tooke her in the manner of *a hot burning Ague*, which made her according to the nature of such diseases, now and then to talke somewhat idly, and through the tempters subtiltie, which abused the infirmitie of her bodie to that end, as he oftentimes useth

⁵⁸ Anon., 'Holie life and Christian death', pp. 11-13.

⁵⁹ Harrison, *Death advantage*, pp. 59-60.

to do in many, from idle words, to descend into a heaue conflict,
with the infirmitie of her owne spirit.⁶⁰

In this biography, then, we can see Perkins' ideas at work in the defence of an actual case of a dying person behaving in a troubled way – specifically, to explain a person's despair of election. However, like Bolton's biography of Peacock, the shape of the narrative followed the medieval pattern of the *ars moriendi*, in which a struggle with despair was followed by an experience of peace and hope in the final period of illness, just before death. At 11 o'clock on the morning of the day before she died she asked her husband to sit beside her and read to her from scripture. At one point she interrupted him, saying 'I perceive and feele the countenance of Christ my redeemer is turned towards me, and the bright shining beames of his mercie is spread over me'. She then continued in prayer and praise for a full five hours.⁶¹ At this point the narrative shows most evidence of the influence of the *ars moriendi*. In the final hours before death the dying woman, having made her peace with God, thinks only of Heaven, and is not troubled by the thought of leaving worldly things. This peace in her soul, according to observers, brought relief from the violent illness she has been suffering from:

From that time, to her very death, which ensued the next day, the feeling of Satans temptations seemed quite to bee banished from her; so that she made no shew of them, her thoughts were not occupied with the world, husband, child, or any thing els, to our thinking; neither was her sicknes troublesome to her, as before it had beene: but as one raised from death to life, or ravished in spirit, so seemed she to us that stood by: her countenance joyfull: her tongue flowing with the praises of God: and her voyce as most heavenly musicke and melodie of peace, sounding praise, and honour, and glorie to God in a wonderfull manner.⁶²

While her biographer used medical arguments to explain Brettergh's desperate behaviour in the days before her death, he ultimately rested his proof of a 'good

⁶⁰ Anon., 'Holie life and Christian death', pp. 11, 14.

⁶¹ Anon., 'Holie life and Christian death', pp. 27-8.

⁶² Anon., 'Holie life and Christian death', p. 25.

death' on the traditional concept of a peaceful death, in which the soul's rest can be observed in the body at the final hour.

Woman's Melancholy

The importance of physiological causes in puritan explanations of reprobation fears was demonstrated in another famous account of the sickness and death of a puritan gentlewoman. This was Joan Drake, from Esher in Surrey. An account of her life and death was first published in 1647 as *Trodden down strength, by the God of strength, or, Mrs Drake revived*, with a preface by John Downham (although George Williams has suggested that the original manuscript was probably written around 1640 from notes written much earlier).⁶³ There is some uncertainty as to the author. A seventeenth-century bibliographer attributed it to a John Hart, based on the pseudonym printed on the frontispiece 'Hart On-hi', but Williams thinks it is more likely to have been written by Thomas Hooker, one of the ministers who visited Mrs Drake during her sickness.⁶⁴ Its place in puritan consolation literature, however, is unmistakable. It recorded the advice of a dozen puritan divines who attempted Drake's cure, along with thirteen concluding points of comfort against temptations to despair.

Joan Drake (née Tothill) died in 1625 after a protracted illness that lasted at least a decade. According to the author of *Trodden down strength*, her troubles first began with her marriage in 1603 to Francis Drake, gentleman of the Privy Chamber of Ordinary and heir to the family estate in Surrey. This took place against her will and

⁶³ G. H. Williams, 'Called by Thy Name, Leave Us Not: The Case of Mrs Joan Drake', *Harvard Library Bulletin*, 16 (1968), p. 288.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 278-90.

to please her parents. Her dissatisfaction was compounded when complications arising from a difficult childbirth left her tormented by chronic migraines and heartburn. It was at this time that she developed a fixated belief that she was reprobate. Her temper and behaviour became unpredictable. At times she was silent and brooding, at others careless, laughing at all that was said to her or, at others, in a rage. She refused food and was constantly watched by her family to prevent her from self-harm.⁶⁵

Drake's belief in her own reprobation followed the by-now familiar pattern. Forming the idea that her troubles were the result of having committed the Sin against the Holy Ghost, she armed herself with a great number of scriptural references to prove the hopelessness of her case, resisting all comfort and objecting to prayers for her soul. The biographer records that, whenever her family held prayers or fasts for her, she would threaten to throw herself downstairs. Like Spiera and others before her, she interpreted her feelings of despair and 'hardness of heart', as a sign of reprobation. A number of prominent clergymen became involved in her case, but she would not speak to them: 'shaking them off, as wee see a great Mastiffe to turne off many small Curses; laughing at them, and sending them away with much derision and discontent'. She compared John Dod to the caricatured schismatic, Ananias, in Ben Jonson's play *The Alchemist*, and threatened to knock him out with a bed staff if he did not cease praying for her.⁶⁶

Eventually, however, Dod, Hooker, and others, made progress, and Joan Drake died convinced that she was destined for Heaven. There are contradictory accounts as to precisely when this reversal occurred. Samuel Clarke in his biography of John Dod

⁶⁵ Ibid. pp. 115-18; Anon., *Trodden down strength, by the God of strength, or, Mrs Drake revived* (London, 1647), pp. 6-15.

⁶⁶ Anon., *Trodden down strength*, pp. 15-16, 22, 25-7, 45; A. Pritchard, 'Puritans and the Blackfriars Theatre: The Cases of Mistresses Duck and Drake', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 45 (1994), pp. 94-5.

recorded that ‘she lived divers years quieted in her heart, and being rich in good works’⁶⁷, but in *Trodden down strength* her coming to faith was represented as a dramatic death-bed ecstasy, similar to that of Katherine Brettergh. At eight o’clock on the Tuesday morning before she died, her family were disturbed by an ‘uncouth out-cry which proceeded from her ... in shew a rapture of another world’. Later Drake described this as a ‘fit of unsupportable joy and feeling ... with such violence rushing in upon me, as I could not containe my selfe’. The next day, she had herself dressed entirely in white, ‘a Bride [she said] now trimmed for Christ the Bridegroom’. She then spent her time singing psalms and hymns until the next Monday, when she died.⁶⁸ Probably both accounts present some version of the truth. The author of the 1647 account wrote that for some years her case was ‘up and down’, and that even in her worst moments she was known for acts of charity. Samuel Clarke recorded that on her death-bed she confided in God ‘that she could hardly at that time forbear singing, as formerly in child-bearing she could [not] forbear crying’.⁶⁹

One of the visitors to Joan Drake during her illness, the Scottish minister John Forbes, commented ‘that the Lord had some strange work to doe by her, but whether in mercy or judgement hee could not determine’.⁷⁰ Here he touched on the key interpretive question for those who witnessed her case. Williams has suggested that in order to refute Drake’s claims that she was amongst the reprobate, her friends and family were forced to distort the predestinarian theology on which their notions of conversion were based:

Mrs Drake for much of the last decade of her life could not but have appeared to all as an obvious member of the company of the reprobate. She not only professed herself to be of that company herself but she also by her conduct and conversation painfully

⁶⁷ Williams, ‘Called by Thy Name’, p. 120.

⁶⁸ Anon., *Trodden down strength*, pp. 138-63.

⁶⁹ Ibid. pp. 25, 126-8; Williams, ‘Called by Thy Name’, p. 120.

⁷⁰ Anon., *Trodden down strength*, p. 72.

substantiated the obvious surmise for all her sorrowing and troubled household. That there should be at least one palpable member of Satan's company in the Esher household would have been normal in any Augustinian-Calvinist-Puritan calculation that presupposed the true elect to be a minority over against the huge mass of perdition.⁷¹

This, however, is to underestimate not only how common Joan Drake's problems were within puritan communities, but how far consolation theology had developed by the 1610s and 20s, in order to be compatible with a belief in election and reprobation. There was nothing 'improvised' about the advice given to Joan Drake. It was what had been taught about reprobation and despair by puritan divines since Perkins. She was told that suffering was an experience of the elect, 'a sign of love, not of reprobation', shown to God's children to deepen their faith. The reprobate had no sense of their predicament or of sorrow for sin, rather reprobation could only be known by special revelation. Dod clinched this argument by reasoning that, as the office of the Holy Ghost was to bring comfort to God's people, it was impossible that he could reveal to someone that they were reprobate, as this could only result in despair. This was a shift from the sixteenth century theologians discussed in Chapter Two who equivocated over the possibility of a person being aware of their own reprobation, although they suggested such cases were very rare. In effect, Dod was saying that there were no circumstances in which somebody could be consciously a reprobate, and therefore without hope. Only the devil could be the source of such temptations to despair.⁷²

Schmidt has drawn attention to the importance of Drake's case as an example of what he terms 'the demonological approach to religious melancholy'. The arguments of Dod and Drake's other spiritual advisers, he argues, were used to counteract the desperate thoughts of damnation that were believed to be the source of melancholic

⁷¹ Williams, 'Called by Thy Name', pp. 126, 298.

⁷² Anon., *Trodden down strength*, pp. 52-5, 122, 172.

illness.⁷³ However, although the concept of the ‘devil’s bath’ formed part of the explanation of Drake’s case, it is also important to note the extent to which the author attributes her despair to a melancholy rooted in physiological, rather than spiritual, causes. Medical theories of melancholy allowed the narrator to present Drake’s despair and erratic temper as the result of sickness causing an imbalance of melancholy in her body, rather than a reflection of her true character or spiritual estate. Near the beginning of the narrative her biographer described her as:

having a full nimble quick Sparrow-hawke eye, of a jovial constitution, accidentally melancholy, full of love, curtesie, mercy and meeknesse, affable in conversation, with a deep and nimble quick pleasant present wit, tender hearted, free and bountifull, in nothing covetous but of grace.⁷⁴

He attributed this ‘accidental melancholy’ first of all to the circumstances of her marriage, and secondly to complications arising after the birth of her daughter:

Because in that delivery being much wronged by her Midwiffe, shee was ever after troubled with fumes and scurvie vapors mounting up unto her head, which bred in her for the most part a continuall head-ach, like unto a megrum, together with somewhat like unto a fire contually burning at her stomack, which no physick could remove, or was not Gods pleasure it should; the which drew her towards a more constant constitution of sadnesse and distemper ... a fire of discontent being kindled full of sad thoughts in her; which bred and encreased all the time she lay in of her daughter.

It was during this illness that she first formed the impression that she was reprobate, waking in the night as her mother sat by her sickbed

in a fearefull trembling and sweat, shaking exceedingly and crying out, *That now shee was a forelorne creature, being assuredly damned, without hope of mercy, without all remedy, confident that shee must needs goe unto hell.*⁷⁵

The author would have us believe that this illness brought about a radical change in personality from the cheerful and benevolent woman, described at the beginning of

⁷³ Schmidt, *Melancholy and the Care of the Soul*, pp. 64-7.

⁷⁴ Anon., *Trodden down strength*, pp. 6-7.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-14.

the narrative, to the suicidal, cantankerous personality who shook a bed staff at John Dod. After this first crisis she continued in ‘strange desperate speeches, unruly carriage, far from her former natural constitution’.⁷⁶ It is clear that the narrator regarded Drake as suffering from some kind of uterine disorder, brought about by her discontent in marriage and the birth of her child, which was an overriding factor in her psychological and physical suffering.

The previous examples in this chapter have demonstrated how the association between fever and head melancholy could provide an explanation for death-bed despair. Drake’s case demonstrates another possible source of melancholy – one which was peculiar to women. According to Burton, and his Greek sources, melancholy affected men more often than women. However, when women did become melancholic, they were ‘farre more violent and grievously troubled’.⁷⁷ This was because of the close association between melancholy and hysteria in women. When the narrative of Joan Drake’s illness is examined in the light of contemporary medical theory, it becomes evident that the author believed her to be suffering from some kind of hysterical melancholy.

The womb was widely thought of as a common source of many bodily ailments and emotional disorders in women. Hysteria, otherwise known as ‘suffocation of the mother’, originated in the dysfunction of the womb, and could affect many parts of the body, including the brain. ‘Amongst all the diseases whereunto that sex is obnoxious’, wrote Edward Jorden in his famous treatise on hysteria, published in 1603,

there is none comparable unto this which is called *The Suffocation of the mother*, either for varietie, or for strangnesse of accidents. For whatsoever straunge accident may appeare in any of the principall

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 14.

⁷⁷ Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1.1.3.2) i, 165.

functions of mans bodie, either animall, vitall, or naturall, the same is to bee seene in this disease, by reason of the communitie and consent which this part hath with the braine, heart, and liver, the principall seates of these three functions; and the easie passage which it hath unto them by the Vaines, Arteries, and Nerves.⁷⁸

According to medical theory, uterine disorders were the result of retention of seed or menstrual blood within the womb, which became corrupt, or by the rising of the womb out of its proper position within the body. They could be caused or exacerbated by excessive passions such as grief, anger or jealousy (which aggravated the womb), and by sexual frustration. It is possible that Joan Drake's biographer was hinting at this when he wrote that 'shee could not affect' to her husband. Symptoms varied between different types of uterine disorder, but could include headaches, stomach pain, painful breasts, insomnia, night terrors, dizziness, loss of appetite, or refusal of food. Hysteria in particular was associated with dark moods, accompanied by fits of laughter, as Drake was prone to.⁷⁹

Suffocation of the mother was closely associated with melancholy. Burton included a section on uterine disorders in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. He focused mainly on sexual abstinence as a cause, as in virgins, nuns and widows. However, he mentioned that this malady could occur to 'such as lie in child-bed'. From Burton we may also conjecture that Joan Drake's friends may have regarded her as vulnerable to this particular female version of melancholy because of her social station. This disease, wrote Burton, was one to which gentlewomen were particularly susceptible, because their bodies and their minds were not occupied with work. As melancholy

⁷⁸ E. Jorden, *A briefe discourse of a disease called the suffocation of the mother* (London, 1603), sig. B.

⁷⁹ Jorden, *A briefe discourse*, sigs. C-[C4]; L. Dawson, *Lovesickness and Gender in Early Modern English Literature* (Oxford, 2008), pp. 46-72; Anon., *Trodden down strength*, p. 9. Lesel Dawson helpfully distinguishes between green sickness, hysteria and uterine fury. Drake's case is best described by hysteria, but she does not fit neatly into any category. Loss of appetite and depressed spirits were most commonly associated with virginity and green sickness.

was Burton's subject, he saw despair as one of the main features arising from corrupted matter in the womb:

That fuliginous exhalation of corrupt seed, troubling the Braine, heart and minde ... from thence comes care, sorrow, & anxiety, obfuscation of spirits, agony, desperation, and the like ... or any other violent object or perturbation of minde.

Most significantly, Burton associated despair arising from uterine disorders specifically with an obdurate sense of damnation and the activity of evil spirits.

'Some thinke they see visions,' he wrote, 'conferre with spirits and divells, they shall surely be damned, are afraid of some trechery, imminent danger, and the like, they will not speake, make answere to any question, but are almost distracted, madde, or stupid for the time, and by fits.'⁸⁰

Burton did not expand on how women in childbirth could develop this type of melancholy. However, it is clear from other sources that the period immediately after childbirth was regarded as a time when the womb was particularly vulnerable. The author of *Trodden down strength* claimed that Drake was 'much abused by her midwife', whose job it was to ensure proper procedures were followed to protect the health of the womb during, and after, the trauma of childbirth. Jacques Guillemau, surgeon to the King of France, wrote a treatise on the care of women in childbirth, which was published in English in 1612. His instructions to midwives on the aftercare of women in childbirth may give us an insight into Drake's case. These included swathing the belly in a warm skin and rubbing it with a mixture of almonds, roses, and oil of saint John's wort. The purpose of this was to keep the womb in its place, 'drive down the after-purgings', and to keep out cold air. Guillemau warned that failure to follow these procedures could result in cold air entering the womb, which 'might bee a meanes to make it swell, and puffe up, and to shut the orifices of

⁸⁰ Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1.3.2.4) i, 414-8.

the veines, by which purgings should flow: the suppression whereof doth cause paines, gripings, suffocation, and ague, and many other accidents'.⁸¹

Therefore, when the author of *Trodden down strength* referred to Drake's troubles in childbirth, and subsequent physical ailments, he was alluding to established medical theory on the importance of the health of the womb for women's mental and physical wellbeing. He was relating Drake's despair and fixation on damnation directly to the bodily complications arising from the birth of her daughter.

The author used the familiar idea of the 'devil's bath' to connect Drake's spiritual crisis to her bodily weakness. At a point of deep dejection she imagined that natural disasters such as an unusually heavy snowfall occurred on her account. The author explained 'for then indeed Satan taking advantage of her melancholy temper, wrought her much woe thereby, making her thus over-charge and accuse her selfe'.⁸² Melancholy provided an explanation for why the belief in her reprobation settled so obstinately in her mind that it took ten years for spiritual physic to be effective. Dod claimed that he made slow progress 'because *the indisposition and melancholy temper of her body was such as hindered much the work, shee therewith being averse unto* [spiritual] *Physick*'.⁸³

While Schmidt refers to the mixture of physiological and spiritual factors in Drake's case, and relates it to Burton's chapter on 'Maid's Melancholy', he downplays the significance of this in the author's explanation of Drake's reprobation fears. He is more concerned with the notion that puritan divines could heal melancholy through spiritual consolation. After describing the references to melancholy he writes: 'the story, however, moves immediately on to her spiritual

⁸¹ J. Guillemeau, *Child-birth or, The happy deliverie of women* (London, 1612), pp. 101-3.

⁸² Anon., *Trodden down strength*, pp. 66-7.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

affliction'.⁸⁴ If we compare this history of Drake to, for instance, Foxe's account of John Glover in the sixteenth century, the significance of the author's decision to include these details regarding Drake's general health becomes clearer. At the point Foxe was writing there was no attempt to explain despair of salvation in terms of a natural melancholy arising from general ill health. The only context Foxe gives us for understanding the extreme symptoms of physical wasting is Glover's spiritual state. Similarly, sixteenth-century writers before Perkins did not regard disease as a relevant explanation for either Spiera's despair or his fever. Therefore, in the early seventeenth century, there is a decided shift towards searching for explanations for despair rooted in disease in puritan writings on reprobation terror.

However, while medical ideas were gaining more ground, the account of Drake's death, like the other sources in this chapter, was influenced by the *ars moriendi* expectation that a struggle with despair would be followed by a peaceful period just before death. As we saw at the beginning of this section, the two conflicting accounts of when Drake's period of despair ended suggest that the author may have conflated her death with her period of despair of salvation, in order to fit the pattern of the *ars moriendi* version of death. The description of Drake's final illness and death is in marked contrast to her previous behaviour in illness. Where before there was desperation and violence, in her last days her temper was mild and gentle, her speeches full of faith, joy and peace, and her countenance cheerful. She showed the proper signs of election in being able to sing Psalms: 'All the time shee had been ill, shee could not of all the Psalmes endure to joyn in singing of the thirty Psalmes, but

⁸⁴ Schmidt, *Melancholy and the Care of the Soul*, pp. 68-9.

that night of her selfe she cal'd for it'. She gave thanks 'with an extraordinary cheerefull aspect, full of rapt joy'.⁸⁵

Distinguishing Between Medical and Spiritual Causes

Puritans, therefore, took into account the relationship between sickness and despair, when accounting for reprobation fears, more than has been recognised in the previous literature on the relationship between puritanism and developing medical ideas about insanity. While death and sickness were seen as having spiritual significance within a providential framework, medicine was, in some cases, seen as providing better causal explanations for despair of salvation than sin or the promptings of Satan acting alone. This does not mean that medical and spiritual explanations never came into conflict, but this was a conflict that the whole Christian community struggled with, rather than a puritan concern. An account from the seventeenth century that resists medical explanations, in favour of seeing despair solely as the product of a bad conscience, was written by a member of the clergy in the Church of England who was generally hostile towards puritanism. In 1639, Robert Abbot published a sermon he had preached at the funeral of a young apothecary named William Rogers. The sermon was entitled *The young-mans warning-peece*, and it included a history of Rogers' last days. Abbot was a conformist who, by the 1630s, was in dispute with his puritan parishioners over issues

⁸⁵ Anon, *Trodden down strength*, pp. 148, 151.

such as kneeling at prayer during church services.⁸⁶ His sermon, however, shows as rigid an attitude towards sin and despair as could be displayed by any puritan.

Tension between medical and spiritual explanations tended to occur in instances like the Spiera case, in which a not very sympathetic narrator of a death was attempting to prove that the fear of Hell was based in the reality of a terrible sin committed, rather than in the false perceptions of a sick mind. This was the case with Abbot's account of William Rogers' death. Rogers was a popular man, well liked for his good temper, his knowledge of both surgery and physic, as well as his skill as an apothecary, and his generosity in dispensing medicines at low charges to anyone in need. He got on the wrong side of Abbot, however, when he began to spend too much time in the ale house and not enough time at church. In Abbot's opinion, this was a serious neglect of religious duties, which endangered the young man's soul. He confronted Rogers on a number of occasions, but when all promises to reform came to nothing he moved to have him excommunicated. This threat had the desired effect, and as the church courts were about to issue the sentence, Rogers promised to come to church the next Sunday and receive communion. That Sunday, however, he fell ill. When it became apparent in the next few days that the illness was fatal, Rogers began to regret his neglect of religious observances, and believe that he had been shut out of Heaven forever. He saw his many refusals to listen to godly counsel as putting him beyond forgiveness. He was an apostate who had rejected Christ and so Christ would reject him. To all Abbot's persuasions to look to Christ for forgiveness, he would reply '*It is too late, I must be burned in Hell*', and died repeating this conviction.⁸⁷

In his sermon at Rogers' funeral, Abbot gave an account of Rogers' despairing death as a warning to others against taking their souls too lightly. At no point in his

⁸⁶ J. Eales, 'Abbot, Robert (fl. c.1589–1652)', *ODNB*.

⁸⁷ R. Abbot, *The young-mans warning-peece* (London, 1639), pp. 2-24.

funeral sermon did Abbot suggest that Rogers was right in his insistence that he was going to Hell. Like many other authors we have looked at, he was careful to make a distinction between the despairing man's perception of himself and his actual state in the judgement of God. He was, wrote Abbot, a miserable man 'in respect of his own feeling and apprehension', but 'though we could not see that he *apprehended* CHRIST, might he not *be apprehended of* CHRIST JESUS? Though we could not perceive that he knew God (to comfort), *might he not be knowne of God?*' In spite of his despair, Rogers had in some ways died a good death, repenting of his sins, seeking forgiveness from those he had wronged and urging his friends and employees to avoid his errors in neglecting religion.⁸⁸ However, because of Abbot's disapproval of Rogers' conduct in the years before his death, the text lacked the positive conviction of certain salvation found in the narration of Peacock's death. Abbot also ruled out the possibility that sickness could have made a serious contribution to Rogers' mental suffering:

He began to discover some idle distemper in his braine, for want of sleep: for this was now the fourth day and night (as I remember) that hee had taken no rest. And had not his reason beene so vigorous, and his discourse so piercing, I should have thought want of sleepe a great cause of the whole combate. But when I consider his reason, discourse, and life, contrary to knowledge and Conscience: doubtlesse (whatsoever God hath done with [h]is soule, (and we are bound to hope the best) this example is a warning-piece shot out by the God of Heaven, to warne all Young-men with us, to signifie that it is high time for them to leave off their riotous courses, lest a worse thing come unto them.⁸⁹

Although he avoided their ominous pronouncements, Abbot, like those who wrote about the death of Spiera, saw Rogers' misery as a warning to others who were not taking their religion seriously. For this reason he downplayed the physical problems that might have been seen to be affecting Rogers' brain.

⁸⁸ Abbot, *The young-mans warning-peece*, pp. 4-5.

⁸⁹ Abbot, *The young-mans warning-peece*, pp. 22-3.

Abbot's sermon demonstrates how an author's agenda could shape perspectives on the causes of despair. Like all the other people discussed in this chapter, Rogers was very ill when he fell into despair of salvation. However, Abbot, having formed a negative opinion of the state of the young man's soul, was less inclined to attribute his despair to the effects of sickness working on the mind. It also shows the importance of a person's life as a context for how the causes of despair were judged. The puritan writers in this chapter regarded the subjects of their narratives as people who had shown signs of election. They therefore rationalised despair of salvation as delusions arising from a source other than the person's conscience – the promptings of the devil, the weakness of a brain affected by melancholy, or the two working together.

Conclusion

In death-bed experiences of despair of election observers encountered the familiar problem of confusion of causes and symptoms. In *A golden chaine* William Perkins had suggested that the violence of despair in the midst of a spiritual desertion could mimic diseases like fever. Conversely, in *A salve for a sicke man* he argued that the effects of severe fever on the body and the mind could mimic the despair of the reprobate. In Joan Drake's case, her unruly behaviour could be attributed to the effects of melancholy resulting from uterine disorder. How then were cases of apparent spiritual despair to be interpreted if the same symptoms could be produced by bodily dysfunction?

The writers of death-bed accounts responded by looking at the death in the context of the whole life of the person. It was the person's previous piety and

devotion to godliness that was evidence of election, and determined to what extent physiological causes were seen as playing a part in the case. In Perkins' pithy statement 'we must judge a man not by his death, but by his life'.⁹⁰ At the same time, writers avoided a reductionist view of death-bed experiences in which all occurrences were reduced to bodily causes. Instead, they incorporated anxiety over election into the *ars moriendi* scheme in which the dying person's piety was tested by the extremities of disease and the temptations of the devil to despair.

In some ways the puritan view of death undermined the medieval concept of the *ars moriendi*. As disease could radically alter a person's thinking and behaviour, it was not possible to assess a person's prospects of salvation based on their last days. It was necessary to take into account the signs of election that had been evident throughout a whole lifetime. However, Wunderli and Broce are right in their assessment that the concept of a 'good death' had a long lasting impact on post-Reformation culture. Despite the reservations expressed by Perkins, he still advised people of the importance of seeking spiritual advice for those on their death-bed. Those who wrote death-bed accounts still presented death as a spiritually significant moment, and took pains to demonstrate to the reader that the last hours of a person's life had been peaceful and prayerful, whatever the violence of the sickness and its effects before that moment. As in the medieval version of the *ars moriendi*, the health of the body and soul were related, as a quiet soul brought relief to the body and a peaceful death.

Ultimately, all the people in this chapter who were judged to be elect vindicated themselves by overcoming their doubts and dying a peaceful death in the end; but what of those who did not overcome despair before death? A question mark hung

⁹⁰ Perkins, *A salve*, p. 28.

over the death of the apothecary William Rogers who, from the evidence of Robert Abbot, died without resolving his conflict. It is to the question of unresolved cases that we turn in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE

Puritan Responses to Suicide

In the last chapter we saw how the approach of death could precipitate a crisis over election. This could also occur the other way around. Some people who believed themselves to be reprobate attempted to hasten death. Francesco Spiera ‘looking round about him with a ghastly looke’ snatched a knife from a nearby table intending to kill himself, but was prevented by his friends.¹ Joan Drake devised a number of plans for putting an end to her life. She hid knives up her sleeve at mealtimes, and once swallowed a great quantity of large pins. Her family took all the bolts and locks off the doors so that she could be watched constantly. The most unusual attempt she made upon her life was to send her maid to buy forty oranges. Presumably she hoped to die of dysentery, which was believed to be caused by eating too much fruit.²

For puritans who based their lives on being able to read the signs of election and damnation, the suicide, or suicide attempts, of godly persons represented the greatest challenge in both pastoral terms and in terms of defending reputations. Suicide was at odds with what some puritans claimed for the godly lifestyle. According to a longstanding Christian tradition, suicides were damned, and could not receive Christian burial. Suicide was the ultimate ‘bad death’ that destroyed the reputation of the person who took their own life, and deeply affected their surviving family. ‘To die in peace, and in a good minde they cannot, whose mindes at their last gaspe, are

¹ Bacon, *The fearefull estate of Francis Spira*, p. 124.

² Anon., *Trodden down strength*, pp. 14-15, 30-1.

perturbed, troubled and set upon a most horrible vile act of self-murder; attended upon with all horror from heaven and hell, to their everlasting confusion,' wrote the seventeenth-century Calvinist divine John Sym.³

Both sides in the Reformation exploited the propaganda value of the suicide of their opponents. Foxe saw suicide as God's instrument of justice against those who had unjustly prosecuted Protestants. 'For oftentimes,' he wrote,

suche as have bene persecutours and tormentours of Gods children, God thinketh them not worthy to suffer by man, but either reserveth them to his owne judgement, or else maketh them to be theyr owne persecutors, and theyr owne hands most commonly hangmen to theyr owne bodies.⁴

Examples of Catholics who hanged themselves included a man called Payier, the town clerk of the city of London during the reign of Henry VIII. He was involved in the burning of the Protestant James Bainham, and was so opposed to the English translation of the Bible that he said he would cut his own throat if it was ever published. A year after the death of Bainham he hanged himself for unknown reasons. Another Catholic, of the name Clarke, hanged himself in the Tower of London during the reign of Edward VI, and Richard Long, who gave evidence against Protestants during the heresy trials of Mary's reign, drowned himself after Mary's death. A later example was a young lawyer called Henry Smith who converted to Catholicism. He was found hanged in 1569.⁵

In contrast to these dire examples, Foxe asserted, confidently, that 'no man [is] able to bring forth any one example ... of any ... true Gospeller, that eyther killed himselfe, or shewed forth any signification or apperaunce of despayre'. Yet, throughout the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries a number of apparently godly

³ J. Sym, *Lifes Preservative Against Self-Killing*, ed. M. MacDonald (London, 1998), p. 310.

⁴ Foxe, *TAMO*, p. 2138.

⁵ Foxe, *TAMO* (1576), p. 1197, (1583), pp. 1079, 2125, 2129. When recounting the story of the death of Payier, Foxe refers to the martyrdom of 'Richard Bayneham', but he presumably means James Bainham, who was martyred in 1532: see C. Litzenger, 'Bainham, James', *ODNB* (2004).

people either attempted, or committed, suicide. As early as 1531 the potential connection between Protestant salvation theology and despair was dramatically demonstrated in the apparent suicide of a young man in Cambridge called John Randall. It was claimed that he was found hanged with his finger pointing towards a passage in an open Bible referring to predestination. The story was probably apocryphal, and Foxe, who was a relation of Randall, hinted that his Catholic tutor had murdered him and made the death look like suicide in order to dissuade people from reading the Bible. At the burning of Latimer and Ridley, the preacher used the example of a woman in Oxford who had hanged herself to discredit the Protestant cause. It was common for Catholic leaders during the reign of Mary to argue that the death of Protestants executed for heresy was a kind of suicide that they had wilfully sought for their own glorification, and therefore shameful. Most infamous was the suicide of the prominent judge, James Hales, whose case will be examined later in this chapter.⁶

These incidents were not only embarrassing for the Protestant cause, but they also represented a challenge to the Calvinist theology of the perseverance of the elect. As we have seen, Elizabethan puritans developed a concept of ‘temporary’ despair, which could befall the elect in times of trial. However, the elect could not despair ‘finally’, and it was difficult to argue that deliberately causing one’s own death was not a final act of desperation. ‘None doe, nor can so murder themselves,’ wrote Sym,

but unregenerated and reprobate persons ... in those that are truly adopted by God ... the power of sinne ... is, by saving grace, and the Spirits working in them, broken, and bridled; that they cannot breake out into the same so extremely, as others doe.⁷

⁶ Foxe, *TAMO* (1563), p. 546, (1583), pp. 1793, 2137.

⁷ Sym, *Lifes Preservative*, p. 292.

Faced with this perplexing problem, the puritan community had the choice of either rejecting those who had committed suicide from the circle of the elect, or finding another explanation for suicide other than God's abandonment of the reprobate.

This is a problem which scholars have largely ignored. Reasoning from general arguments and statements about suicide, without examining reactions to particular cases, historians have assumed that puritans regarded all suicides as reprobate without question. Stachniewski, for instance, quoting from a passage by Sym on the reprobate mindset that leads to suicide, comments that 'Calvinists could shield themselves with dogma from a decently human response to misery ... Suicides were generally presumed to be reprobates and their deaths were viewed as judgements of God.'⁸ The purpose of this chapter is to examine how puritans reacted to the suicide of fellow puritans, and their beliefs about the possibility of suicides being saved. Historians have tended to regard puritans as particularly harsh in their attitude towards suicide. I would argue that this has been exaggerated, and that puritans had more nuanced views on suicide than has been supposed. Understanding these views hinges on grasping the difference between definitions of 'self-murder' and our own concept of suicide. Puritans, along with the great majority of early modern society, condemned self-murder, but not all suicides were self-murderers. Sym, for instance, allowed for a number of grounds on which a person was exempt from the charge of self-murder. A key factor in determining guilt in these cases was sickness and the possibility that the suicidal person had been under the influence of melancholy.

On account of the taboo around suicide in early modern society, attitudes are more difficult to trace than for cases of melancholy or death-bed despair. However, a few comments on actual cases survive, and general concerns and questions about the

⁸ Stachniewski, *Persecutory Imagination*, p. 47.

causes of suicide and the destination of souls can be gleaned from sermons and treatises. From the early seventeenth century we have two full length treatises on suicide, although one was not published until after our period of study. We can also gain an insight into how the suicidal viewed their own situation from diaries and autobiographies. These were written by people who survived suicide attempts, or periods when the desire for death was strong, and who, with hindsight, tried to make sense of those desires. It is worth taking the time to examine these sources and their implications because suicide for early modern people lay at the heart of the question of whether despair should be viewed as a sign of reprobation or an illness. Suicide tested the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints to its limits. Could the godly commit suicide and still be regarded as one of the elect, or was this final despair excluded from the trials through which the saints could emerge still assured of their salvation?

How committed were puritans to the connection between suicide and reprobation? To answer this question, I have divided this chapter into two parts. The first part surveys the literature dealing with the question of the eternal destination of suicides, generated by the Church of England in this period. The second part examines the more personal experience of puritans who attempted, or were tempted, to commit suicide.

Historiography

The history of suicide has generally been presented as a narrative of secular, liberal values eventually triumphing over the reactionary forces of religion. Writing

in the 1930s, Henry Romilly Fedden in his history of suicide in England pitched the ‘oppressive’ attitudes of the Church in the Middle Ages and early modern period against the ‘enlightened’ views found in classical texts and the writings of seventeenth and eighteenth century intellectuals.⁹ In 1961 S. E. Sprott began his overview of the intellectual history of suicide in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with the bold statement ‘As the Humanists freed men to live, they brought them the right to die’. Sprott saw humanist intellectuals as the champions of the individual’s right to liberty, reason and self-respect, against the ecclesiastical establishment which sought to assert its own authority in the defamation of suicide. The hero of the early part of this story was John Donne, who wrote the first treatise in defence of suicide in the English language in 1608.¹⁰ This was entitled *Biathanatos*, and was published posthumously in 1647. As we shall see, this was actually a fairly limited defence.

The current history of suicide in England in the early modern period is dominated by the work of Michael MacDonald and Terrence Murphy in the 1980s and early 90s. In 1990 they published the bulk of their findings in a co-authored book called *Sleepless Souls: Suicide in Early Modern England*. Whereas previous scholars tended to focus on the intellectual elite, MacDonald and Murphy’s study included a wide range of actual cases, as well as responses to suicide in law, popular perception and clerical opinion. They came to the conclusion that the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were an ‘era of severity’ marked by stringent legal action taken against suicides and their families, and intransigent condemnation from clerical voices. They attributed this to changes in the structure of government and to the influence of puritan clergymen, like Sym, who taught that suicide was a heinous sin instigated by

⁹ R. A. Houston’s history of suicide contains a useful discussion of the historiographical trends in writing about suicide, including the influence of anti-clericalism. Houston, *Punishing the Dead? Suicide, Lordship and Community in Britain, 1500-1830* (Oxford, 2010), pp. 7-13, 285-8.

¹⁰ S. E. Sprott, *The English Debate on Suicide from Donne to Hume* (La Salle, Ill., 1961), pp. 1-28.

the devil. ‘Just as they emphasised the power of God more vehemently than medieval Catholics had,’ they wrote, ‘so the reformers stressed the potency and dangerousness of the devil.’ The situation was reversed in the eighteenth century as a result of a loss of respect for ecclesiastical authority and supernatural explanations, and the increasing influence of medical opinion that tended to see suicide as the result of melancholy. Though suicide remained outlawed, juries increasingly returned verdicts of *non compos mentis*.¹¹

The most ambitious challenge to MacDonald and Murphy’s thesis has come very recently in a book on suicide in Scotland and England by R. A. Houston. Houston rejects the notion that the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were dominated by either unusually harsh judgement of suicides or a primarily supernatural explanation for why people committed suicide. There was no ‘secularisation’ or ‘disenchantment’ of suicide during the Enlightenment because suicide had always been a mainly secular event, independent of the opinions of theologians. The judgement found in coroners’ records that someone had killed themselves ‘by the instigation of the devil’ was a legal term similar to ‘by an act of God’. Court rulings and confiscations had more to do with the practicalities of distributing property and dealing with community obligations in the event of a sudden death that often left outstanding debts. At the intellectual level, explanations for suicide were hybrid, blending law, medicine (including melancholy) and theology. There was no sudden change between the medieval period and the Reformation, or between the seventeenth century and the eighteenth. Whereas previous theses have been based on discontinuity between the present and the past, Houston finishes by emphasising continuity. It was not until 1961 that self-murder was decriminalised in Britain, and it

¹¹ MacDonald and Murphy, *Sleepless Souls*, esp. pp. 5-7, 34, and chs. 2, 4.

is still illegal to aid somebody in taking their own life. According to the law of the Church of England, the 68th canon by which a minister can deny burial to the body of someone who committed suicide is still in force.¹²

Perhaps Houston exaggerates in the other direction in order to make a point. The idea that suicide was a sin worse than murder seems strange in a modern context. However, this chapter also criticises the secularisation model of suicide history. One problem with this explanation is that there is no continuity between humanist arguments against the prevailing view that suicide was a sin and the sympathy for suicidal persons that developed in later centuries. In the period that forms the subject of this study, the humanist views that Fedden and Scott identify as the beginning of modern attitudes to suicide were very different from the medical view that MacDonald and Murphy argue came to dominate thinking about suicide. *Biathanatos* was influenced by Stoic philosophy and argued that suicide could, in some cases, be a rational, unimpassioned and even heroic decision. This was entirely the opposite from the defence of insanity that posed the argument that a suicidal person was not acting in a rational frame of mind and, therefore, could not be held responsible for his actions.

Secondly, the easy distinction that MacDonald and Murphy make between medical and religious views of suicide did not exist. As in all other discussions of despair, religious commentators took into account the possible effects of melancholy when discussing how to interpret individual cases. This could sometimes lead them to view a case more hopefully than a court. In fact, as Houston has pointed out, MacDonald and Murphy have relied too heavily on the outcome of court cases to determine early modern attitudes to suicide. The clergy could be more generous in

¹² Houston, *Punishing the Dead?*, esp. chs. 2 and 6.

their assessments of moral responsibility when determining what might become of a person's soul than courts were likely to be in determining what would become of a person's property, and a person convicted of self-murder by a court of law might not be viewed as a self-murderer by friends and family. The whole subject becomes clearer when the focus of study is shifted from the question of whether self-murder was a sin to the question of the eternal destination of the souls of suicides. This is a question that MacDonald and Murphy reduced to a footnote.¹³

Views on Suicide and Salvation

The Church had taught that self-murder was a heinous sin since the time of Augustine. Augustine wrote that men only committed suicide by the suggestion of the devil, and that the act resulted in the damnation of the soul of the person who had committed it. It was a sin that broke the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill' and the law of charity by which a man should love his neighbour and himself. Some theologians taught that suicide was worse than murder because, whereas murder only killed the body, suicide killed both the body and the soul. Thomas Aquinas taught that suicide was a sin against the law of charity and also against the law of nature by which a man's natural instinct was to self-preservation. The Reformation brought little change to this harsh view of suicide. Calvin condemned suicide in the strongest possible terms. It was 'monstrous' to violate the natural instinct for self-preservation, as well as ungodly and cowardly. Against the Stoic philosophers he argued that those who committed suicide in order to avoid ignominy showed lack of faith and fortitude.

¹³ MacDonald and Murphy, *Sleepless Souls*, p. 32 fnt. 51.

The correct Christian response was to submit to any kind of suffering or disgrace, accepting these experiences to be the will of God.¹⁴

Not only was self-murder viewed as a serious sin, it was also a crime punishable under both ecclesiastical and civil law. English canon law denying burial and normal funeral rites to suicides can be found as far back as 672. In the year 1000 this prohibition was adopted into law throughout the whole of England, with an exemption for the insane.¹⁵ Suicide was also punishable under civil law on the basis of the ancient Roman idea that a civilian who killed himself committed a crime against the state by depriving it of a citizen. Since the thirteenth century the crown had habitually confiscated the property of those found guilty of self-murder. The laws on suicide, however, made a distinction between the sane and the insane. In the case of suicide, courts could return one of two verdicts: if the person was deemed sane, he was judged to be *felo de se* (a felon of himself); but if he was deemed insane, a verdict of *non compos mentis* was returned, and he was acquitted. What was unusual about the Tudor and early Stuart era, according to MacDonald and Murphy, was the number of *felo de se* verdicts returned by courts. Between 1485 and 1660 95 per cent of those who killed themselves were convicted as *felones de se*. Only two per cent were acquitted as *non compos mentis*.¹⁶

MacDonald and Murphy attribute this high number of convictions for self-murder to the efficiency of a centralised Tudor government, and to a general intolerance of suicide in Reformation England, when compared with other periods of history.¹⁷ In reality, however, despite the high number of convictions, many early

¹⁴ A. Murray, *Suicide in the Middle Ages* (2 vols., Oxford, 1998, 2000), ii, 108-9, 229-31; J. R. Watt, 'Calvin on Suicide', *Church History*, 66 (1997), 463-76.

¹⁵ MacDonald and Murphy, *Sleepless Souls*, p. 19; Murray, *Suicide*, ii, 120-1. Watt, 'Calvin on Suicide', pp. 472-4.

¹⁶ MacDonald and Murphy, *Sleepless Souls*, pp. 15-18.

¹⁷ MacDonald and Murphy, *Sleepless Souls*, pp. 5-7, 15-16, 24-41.

modern English Protestants were equivocal on the question of whether or not persons convicted of self-murder were damned, especially when it came to determining individual cases. This ambiguity was expressed at a very personal level by the poet Robert Herrick in a poem dedicated to the memory of his father, who had committed suicide by throwing himself from a window before Robert's second birthday.

That for seven *Lusters* I did never come
To doe the *Rites* to thy Religious Tombe:
....
Forgive, forgive me; since I did not know
Whether thy bones had here their Rest or no.

Through the influence of friends, Robert's father had, in fact, been buried in holy ground, and the almoner settled for a small sum, rather than confiscating the whole property. Years later, his son hoped that his father's soul would be shown similar leniency and that he was now at peace.¹⁸

Reservations about pronouncing suicides as damned were more than coyness about speaking ill of the dead. As we have seen, suicide presented Protestants with a problem. Some of those who had been most devoted to the cause of reformation, and whose lives had appeared most religious, ended their lives by committing suicide. Could these people really be in Hell? It was not unprecedented for the most zealous Christians to kill themselves and still be revered by the Church. There were examples from the first centuries of Christianity of saints who had killed themselves for the faith or for the sake of chastity. Pelagia and her two unmarried daughters drowned themselves in a river when threatened with rape by Roman soldiers. Sophronia, when her husband gave permission for the Emperor Maxentius to sleep with her, excused herself on the pretext of preparing her body and killed herself with a sword. The virgins of Anatolia and Cappadocia threw themselves from the top of high buildings

¹⁸ Herrick, *Poems*, p. 27; T. Cain, 'Herrick, Robert (*bap.* 1591, *d.* 1674)', *ODNB*.

to escape violation. When presented with a choice between renunciation and death, Apollonia jumped on the pyre prepared for her burning. Their actions demonstrated the narrow margin between suicide and martyrdom. Famous non-Christians who killed themselves for honourable causes included Lucretia, who committed suicide after being raped by Sextus, and Cato who pulled out his own intestines rather than submit to the rule of Julius Caesar, whom he regarded as a tyrant.¹⁹

Augustine's views on suicide, that had such a great influence on Christian thinking, had been written in opposition to this idea that suicide could be an honourable option when faced with a tyrannous power intent on forcing a person to commit sinful acts. He argued that it was not necessary to commit suicide to preserve chastity because undergoing rape was not a sin if the will did not consent to the act. He also insisted that death was not true martyrdom if it was self-inflicted. This was against the Donatists who killed themselves rather than submit to prosecution or death for heresy. They claimed their willingness to die validated their cause, but Augustine compared their suicidal actions to those of the herd of swine that ran off a cliff when driven by the devil.²⁰ Although Augustine's arguments continued to be used in order to justify the harsh penalties against suicide more generally, he could not expunge the early Christian martyrs from Church history, and these examples came up again in the sixteenth and seventeenth century in the context of suicide in the midst of sectarian pressure.

Suicide in times of persecution covered a small minority of cases. In the broader picture in which suicide was regarded as a sin committed out of desperation, why was it necessarily damnable? The Church of England taught that there was no sin that could not be forgiven. What made suicide an exception? There was the old

¹⁹ Murray, *Suicide*, ii, 106, 111-12, 140-1.

²⁰ Murray, *Suicide*, ii, 106-9; Matt. ix. 28-33: Jesus cast demons out of two men into a herd of swine, which ran violently down a steep slope and drowned in the sea.

argument that the suicide died in an unrepentant state, but not everyone agreed that sudden death left no time for repentance. In his 1605 collection of English poems, Camden recorded an epitaph written by an unknown author in memory of a friend who had died in a riding accident:

My friend judge not me
Thou seest I judge not thee:
Betwixt the stirrop and the ground,
Mercy I askt, mercy I found.

Camden wrote that the author was responding to those who ‘in this judging world, judged the worse’, and that his poem was based on words attributed to Augustine, ‘*Misericordia Domini pontem et fontem*’ (‘between bridge and stream the Lord’s mercy may be found’). In this case, the context was accidental death, but the phrase ‘between the bridge and the stream’, along with ‘between the knife and the throat’, were often quoted in discussions of suicide in favour of the possibility of last minute repentance and salvation. The origin of these phrases is unclear, as the wide attribution to Augustine appears to be erroneous. Jesus’ words from Matthew’s gospel, ‘judge not, that ye be not judged’, which also seem to have inspired this poem, were also referred to, but less often.²¹ The notion of Christian ‘charity’, which in this context meant considering a person saved in the absence of absolute certainty of damnation, was important for those who sought to encourage a more sympathetic view of suicide.

The verdicts of courts were not seen by religious commentators as the last word on whether someone was considered responsible for their actions, and the categories of exempt persons found in works of practical theology were often wider than legal definitions of *non compos mentis*. Discussion of conditions under which a person was

²¹ W. Camden, ‘Certaine poemes ... rythmes, and epitaphs of the English nation in former times’, in idem, *Remaines of a greater worke, concerning Britaine* (London, 1605), p. 55; *Anatomy*, v, 74-5; Matt. vii. 1.

not regarded as guilty of self-murder were taking place simultaneously with changing conceptions of the causes of suicide within medicine, and were partly connected to these changes. Self-killing had traditionally been associated with the violent passions of frenzy. Writing in the sixteenth century, Du Laurens still shared that view: ‘We have very few examples of meere melancholike persons which have slain themselves’. He did, however, recognise the connection that can be seen in cases of reprobation terror between despair and desire for death, despite the fear of damnation: ‘they conceive of death, as a terrible thing, and notwithstanding (which is strange) they oftentimes desire it’. In the seventeenth century suicide was becoming more often associated with melancholy. In the prognostics for despair in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, Burton wrote that ‘most part these kind of persons make away themselves’. Elsewhere he attributed famous suicides from history to melancholy.²²

For religious commentators the problem of suicide and damnation was deeper than the medical problem of defining who was insane and who was not. A further problem in determining the culpability of suicides was the problem of despair itself, and the logic by which despair was a sin. The Spiera case demonstrates this well. In reactions to Spiera we can see the continuity of the medieval links between despair, suicide and the devil. This was despite the fact that it was not clear that Spiera had actually committed suicide. All accounts of his despair end before his actual death, which took place away from Padua. It could be inferred that he starved himself to death, but the way in which he died is unclear. Yet in early modern English texts his name was coupled with that of Judas and with suicide. In one version of Nathaniel Woods’ play, *The conflict of conscience*, the character based on Spiera hanged

²² M. MacDonald, ‘Introduction’, in Sym, *Lifes Preservative*, xliii-xliv; Du Laurens, *Discourse of the preservation of sight*, pp. 81, 92-3; Burton, *Melancholy* (1.4.1.1), i, 434-8, (3.1.2.5), iii, 423.

himself at the end in an echo of Judas.²³ This was because, as Alexander Murray explains at length, suicide and despair had become so linked in people's minds by the end of the medieval period that the two were almost interchangeable.²⁴

The stories of Judas and Spiera were very similar. Both had betrayed the cause they were meant to represent and both had despaired. Around both developed a story of how the devil's temptations had led them first to apostasy and then to suicide and damnation. Both became examples of reprobates, and yet this story of reprobation was a myth not entirely based on the evidence of the texts. For those who thought more deeply, these stories presented a problem. Judas and Spiera had despaired because their consciences were tortured by a realisation of sin. According to general medieval and early modern spiritual commentary, it was a trait of the godly to sorrow over sin and desire death; the ungodly loved the things of this world and feared death because it brought them to Hell. Before killing himself, Judas returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests saying 'I have sinned in betraying innocent blood'. This behaviour does not seem particularly satanic. Medieval thinkers attempted to address this problem by distinguishing between different types of despair and repentance. Judas' repentance was invalid because he did not seek God's pardon as, for instance, David did in Psalm 51. Early modern writers also attempted to distinguish between 'holy despair', which involved turning to God in repentance, and 'unholy despair', which led to suicide. The sin of despair meant very specifically to despair of God's pardon, as suicides, represented by Judas, were supposed to have done. This was considered by some an even greater sin than apostasy itself, justifying the strong condemnation of suicide. Augustine took a more legalistic approach to solving the problem, which also came up in suicide discourse. He argued that,

²³ MacDonald, 'Fearefull Estate', p. 47.

²⁴ Murray, *Suicide*, ii, ch. 10.

although Judas was guilty, it was unlawful for him to enact his own execution when his conscience condemned him. Nor was it acceptable to commit suicide to prevent further acts of sin, as in, for instance, virgins who killed themselves for fear that they would submit to sexual acts under pressure.²⁵ Nevertheless, the problem remained that those who committed suicide were often those who possessed more tender consciences than others. This sat uneasily with the view of suicide as a heinous sin deserving of damnation. The ambivalence we saw in Chapter Two over whether Spiera's despair was representative of a reprobate mind will also be seen in reactions to suicide in this period.

In his book on medieval attitudes towards suicide, Murray identifies the different connotations of the word *desperatio* and its vernacular equivalents in Europe. Despair could have the secular meaning of giving up on the possibility of a positive outcome in a given situation – an illness, for example, or a battle. It also had the religious meaning of despairing of God's mercy. This could be because of a lack of belief in God's power to forgive or a person's despair of their own ability to reform. Some commentators regarded this despair of God's help as a worse sin than any other. A third meaning was similar to the modern word 'desperado', meaning a person who was indifferent to religion or morality. It was believed that such moral indifference was based on despair of God's mercy, which was tantamount to apostasy. A person in such a state became careless of themselves, as well as others, and so was capable of acts such as suicide or murder.²⁶ It seems that some early modern commentators came to sympathise with the first and second states of despair, especially when the issue of election and reprobation caused the sensitive believer to question whether God could show them mercy. Those who regarded suicidal despair

²⁵ Murray, *Suicide*, ii, 190-1, 114, 117, 323-39, 356-68, 376-9; Snyder, 'Left Hand of God', pp. 50-1; Matt. xxvii. 2-5.

²⁶ Murray, *Suicide*, ii, 374-85.

primarily in terms of the third meaning, however, could only see it as a moral and social evil.

The Impact of Sectarian Conflict

The example of the suicide of Sir James Hales in 1554 demonstrates a number of the complicating factors surrounding suicide described above. This was a death that was returned by the courts as *felo de se*, and yet the question of whether Hales was a self-murderer was debated for decades after his death. The immediate context for these discussions was the persecution of Protestants under Mary I. The pressures of sectarian conflict were a source of mental anguish that for some Protestants ended in suicide. While writing his history of the early Tudor Church, the eighteenth century historian John Strype came across a number of Protestants who became troubled in mind because they had attended mass. In one particularly disturbing case a man jumped into the water of the port of Sea Mills, Bristol, taking a seven-year-old child with him. Both were drowned.²⁷ Hales was the most high profile of these cases, and his death received mixed responses from fellow Protestants. Some saw his suicide as a betrayal of the Protestant cause, while others sympathised with the difficult circumstances under which he had taken his own life.

Hales had been a successful lawyer under Henry VIII and Edward VI. By 1547 he had risen to become a judge and been granted a knighthood. His independence of mind and high respect for the law was first demonstrated in 1553 when he refused to cooperate with the duke of Northumberland's plans to pass the crown to Lady Jane

²⁷ J. Strype, *Ecclesiastical memorials, relating chiefly to religion* (3 vols., London, 1721), iii, 173-5. I have not been able to trace the original sources on which Strype bases these accounts.

Grey. However, he made himself equally unpopular with Mary and her supporters by upholding statutes made by Henry VIII and Edward VI against nonconformists. He directed the grand jury at the Kent assizes that these laws should not be relaxed in favour of Roman Catholics, and prosecutions against priests for saying mass were upheld. This risky course of action soon landed him in prison where he was visited by the Catholic leaders, Bishop Day and William Portman. These men sought to persuade him to reject his Protestant beliefs, and seem to have secured some kind of recantation. Foxe claimed that he was moved between different prisons and deliberately deprived of sleep in order to make him more susceptible to persuasion. Whether this was the case, the process so unsettled Hales' mind that after six months in prison he made an attempt on his own life by opening his veins with a penknife. The attempt was intercepted by his manservant. However, on his release from prison a short time afterwards, he succeeded in killing himself by lying face down in a shallow stream close to his home. The coroner recorded his death as felonious suicide.²⁸

Hales' initial suicide attempt, while still in prison, caused a very public dispute between Bishop Gardiner and the soon-to-be-martyred John Hooper. The day after the event, Gardiner announced in the Star Chamber that Hales' attempt on his life proved that Protestantism was a desperate religion that drove its followers to self-murder. Hooper replied with *A brief treatise respecting Judge Hales*. In this treatise he insisted that Hales had become suicidal after he had relented over Catholic teaching on the mass, and not before. It was therefore not his Protestant faith, but his anguish of conscience at having betrayed that faith that had brought him to despair, therefore making him vulnerable to the devil's promptings.

²⁸ J. H. Baker, 'Hales, Sir James (c.1500-1554)', *ODNB*; Foxe, *TAMO* (1563), pp. 1184-5, (1583), pp. 1556-7.

It is no marvel to see men that forsake the truth of God to be vexed with evil spirits, and many times to kill themselves. But this we may see most evidently by Mr Hales, that until such times as he consented to forsake God's truth, which of long time he had most godly professed, he never fell into this danger and into this peril, to kill himself. So that the papistical doctrine, by this man's example, is a very worm, that biteth the conscience, and never leaveth till it killeth the man that forsaketh the truth, and turneth unto lies.

Hooper warned that Protestants across England were in similar danger of causing harm to themselves because of the pressure to conform to Roman Catholic practice against their consciences.²⁹

Where did this leave Hales? At the time of writing, Hales was still alive, and Hooper hoped for his repentance and recovery. This was not to be. Hales' second, successful, suicide attempt rocked the godly community. His courage and conviction in acting independently of first Northumberland and then the Marian regime demanded respect, but he had ended his life in a manner that Hooper had seen as the work of demons and compared with the actions of Judas. Foxe wrote in his account:

The unhappy chance of this so worthy a Judge, was surely the cause of great sorrowe and grieffe unto all good men, & it gave occasion besides unto certayne Divines, to stand some thing in doubt with themselves, whether hee were reprobate, or saved, or no.³⁰

No contemporary was prepared to answer this question directly, but they responded to Hales' case in a number of ways. One was to see him as a traitor to the cause of the martyrs because he had not persevered as they had, and so, by implication, proved that he did not have saving faith. However, he could also be seen as a victim of Catholic persecution, whose mind had been unhinged by his experiences in prison, and so not responsible for his actions. A third, more controversial position, was to argue that he made a conscious, rational choice to end

²⁹ Foxe, *TAMO*, p.1557; J. Hooper, 'A brief treatise respecting Judge Hales', in C. Nevinson (ed.), *Later Writing of Bishop Hooper Together with His Letters and Other Pieces* (Cambridge, 1852), pp. 374-80.

³⁰ Foxe, *TAMO*, p.1557.

his life to avoid another situation in which he might dishonour the Protestant cause under pressure.

Besides Hooper, another of the martyrs whose opinions on the case were recorded was John Bradford. Bradford wrote to Hales on 12 April 1554, the day that he made his first suicide attempt. News that Hales seemed likely to break under pressure must have spread amongst the Protestant prisoners, because Bradford wrote to Hales despite not knowing him personally. His tone was warm and encouraging. He mentioned rumours that Hales was in poor health. He declared his ‘συμπάθειαν [sympathy] and compassion, love and affection’ towards Hales, and reassured him that his name was written in the book of life and that God, his father, would not allow a hair on his head to perish, but would give him the strength to persevere under persecution – in other words, that he was elect. The subtext of Bradford’s letter, however, was clearly the fear that Hales would not persevere. He wrote that the greatest temptation of Christians was the fear that God had forgotten them in trouble, but reminded Hales of the strength of conscience he had shown in resisting Northumberland, and that Heaven awaited those who showed similar fortitude in the midst of religious trial. The letter, however, had the opposite effect to the one that Bradford had intended. Unfortunately arriving after Hales had been visited by his examiners and made some retraction, it was read as a judgement rather than encouragement. It was claimed that on receiving the letter Hales said to the bringer, ‘It came too late’, and that night attempted to kill himself.³¹

In August 1554, after Hales’ death, Bradford sent another letter, this time addressed to Hales’ son, Humphrey, and his wife, Joyce. This was the same Joyce Hales that we came across in Chapter One as a regular correspondent of Bradford’s.

³¹ Bradford, *Writings*, ii, 85-91.

The tone of this letter was completely different from the one Bradford sent to James Hales in April. There was no mention of Hales' ill health, or expressions of sympathy for the pressures he was under. Bradford wrote only of his compassion for Humphrey and Joyce as they were affected by 'the heavy and fearful judgment of God fallen upon your father justly, for his denying of God for fear of men and love of these things which he hath left behind him unto you and others'. Although he drew back from a judgement about whether Hales was in Heaven or Hell, Bradford was in no doubt over the cause of Hales' suicide:

I need not tell you the cause of this that hath happened unto your father ... For you know well enough, that till he forsook God, gave ear to the serpent's counsel, began to mammer of the truth, and to frame himself outwardly to do that which his conscience reprov'd inwardly ... till then, I say, God did not depart and leave him to himself.

Like Judas, and like his contemporaries Francesco Spiera and Thomas Locke, Hales had betrayed that cause, and his despair and death were a punishment from God as an example to other Protestants who might be tempted to buckle under pressure.³²

This view was also expressed by the radical Protestant thinker, Christopher Goodman. In a sermon first published in Geneva in 1558 he warned that suicide and despair were a curse that befell those who betrayed true religion for the sake of worldly gain:

Goddess curse and indignation hangeth continually over the heades of such, ready to be powred downe upon them ... they shall finde no comferte, but utter dispayer with Judas, which for this worldly riches (as he did) have solde their Maister: sekinge either to hange them selves with Judas, to murther them selves with Frances Spera, to drowne them selves with Justice Hales ... that he and such like might be a perpetuall example for you and all men to feare the like or worse punishement.³³

³² Bradford, *Writings*, ii, 106-8.

³³ C. Goodman, *How superior powers ought [sic.] to be obeyd of their subjects* (Geneva, 1558), pp. 220-2.

For Goodman, Hales' high reputation amongst the Protestant community until his suicide attempt only served to underline the seriousness of the sin he had committed. God had not shown him mercy, and therefore those who had done less for the cause of the gospel should expect no less harsh punishment if they strayed.

Not all Protestants, however, regarded Hales as completely lost, and his story was preserved for future generations in Foxe's much more sympathetic account. Foxe began with high praise for Hales' life and character:

He executed his function [as judge] with such justice, fidelity, constancy and conscience, that even the lawe it selfe seemed no lesse to be printed, and written in his lyfe and doinges, then in the very volumes or papers ... To these his giftes and qualities, were lynked lyke sinceritie & hartie affection to religion and the Gospell of Christ. Whereunto he had bene by many yeares most earnestly set & addicted, shewing him selfe to be a Gospellor, no lesse by his word then dede, & no les at home than abrode.

The end of a man he so much admired troubled Foxe, and, while he could not condone the act of suicide, he nevertheless held out hope for Hales' salvation. If he had acted in frenzy while out of his wits, his case was worthy of pity, not condemnation. He could have repented in the moment before his death and been forgiven. Furthermore, Foxe listed many examples from classical texts and early Church history of worthy people who had committed suicide, such as the virgins from Antioch. If all suicides were damned, then these people would be in Hell also. Foxe concluded that, though his death was inglorious, he should not be considered reprobate: 'although we doe not accompt hym among the Martirs, yet on the other side we do not reckon him among the damned persones.'³⁴

In his sympathy with Hales, Foxe had broken the connection between the sin of suicide and damnation. Hales' case became emblematic of the problem at the heart of debates about suicide: how could a conscientious person be condemned as a self-

³⁴ Foxe, *TAMO* (1563), pp. 1182-6.

muderer? Foxe's arguments were taken up by an anonymous writer in a manuscript entitled 'whether it be dampnation for a man to kill hym selfe'. This early attempt at a defence of suicide was never published, but a copy dated 1575 has been retained in the papers of John Harrington. This manuscript has received very little attention from historians of suicide, apart from a short overview by Sprott, and a brief reference by MacDonald and Murphy, who describe it as an 'inept performance'.³⁵ However, it is an important source for understanding Elizabethan attitudes to suicide as it provides a unique insight into the kind of Stoic arguments and unorthodox scriptural interpretations that were being discussed in elite circles at a time when it was impossible to publish such ideas.

Nothing is known about the author of this manuscript, but the composition appears to be an intellectual exercise in comparing arguments for and against the position that suicide was a damnable sin. Unlike puritan writers who emphasised consistency between biblical texts, this essay demonstrated the futility of making a case for or against the damnation of suicides from scriptural passages. The form was discursive. There were three voices: the Old Testament prophet, Samuel, argued that suicides are damned; Saul, the king of Israel who committed suicide when faced with defeat by a Philistine army, argued that suicide could sometimes be justified; Solomon, believed to be the author of the wisdom books in the Old Testament, acted as arbitrator between the two points of view. Samuel reiterated the traditional scholastic arguments against suicide. Suicide was a type of murder and murder was a sin because it destroyed what had been created in the image of God. It was also a 'sin without repentance'. The last act of someone who took their own life was a sin, and, as there was no repentance after death, the suicide died in an unrepentant state and

³⁵ Sprott, *The English Debate*, pp. 15-16; MacDonald and Murphy, *Sleepless Souls*, p. 88.

must be damned. Looking specifically at the case of Saul, Samuel attempted to prove that the scriptures all pointed towards Saul's damnation. Saul had been jealous and violent. He had persecuted David, he had disobeyed God's laws and had consulted with witches and devils. God had therefore withdrawn his spirit from Saul. Suicide was the logical end to such an evil life. This was the reasoning of those who read scriptures from a predestinarian point of view. Saul was not damned because he committed suicide; rather he committed suicide because he was damned. He was rejected by God, and all the previous inglorious moments in his life were signs pointing inevitably towards his wretched end. In other words, Saul was reprobate. However, the character of Saul in the essay undermines this position by pointing out places in which it appears to be contradicted by other scriptural passages. There were both bad and good episodes in Saul's life. At the beginning of his reign he had been in God's favour. He had led the Israelite army and received the spirit of prophecy. If Saul's actions proved beyond doubt that he was cursed by God, why did David give him an honourable burial? As with the story of Judas, those attempting to prove that suicide was a sin of the damned had imposed a level of coherence on the story of Saul that did not exist in the biblical text.³⁶

The character of Saul also provided a counter-argument to the position that suicide was a 'sin without repentance'. There was always a moment of time between the act of self-slaughter and the moment of death, the manuscript argued, in which the person could repent. It could never be known whether repentance had occurred in that moment, and so it could never be assumed that someone who had committed suicide was damned. This was an argument that Foxe had used in holding out hope for Hales, but the author of this manuscript went further. Possibly influenced by reading Foxe's

³⁶ British Library, Add. MS 27632 (Harrington Papers), fos. 122(r)-24(r): 'Whether it be dampnation for a man to kill hym selfe'.

account, he had the character of Saul argue that suicide was defensible in certain political circumstances. Saul had committed suicide in order to avoid falling into the hands of the uncircumcised Philistines. Classical heroines had committed suicide to avoid being raped. Early Christians had killed themselves to avoid being raped or forced into idolatrous practices by invading armies. All circumstances and motivations had to be taken into account, including the necessity for a man to protect his country, or to avoid blaspheming God, the troubles of a wounded spirit, and different dispositions. It is here that the author introduces the suicide of Hales. He presents Hales as someone who had considered seriously the choices in front of him and commended his soul to God before committing suicide:

After this sorte dyd syr James Hales Knight directe hym self. For he went halfe a myle from his owne howse all alone ... he sate hym downe uppon his knees at the river syde ... he layde away his purse and girdle, he sate downe and prayed about an houre. People did see hym this doe, and when they saw hym put downe his head in the watere, they ranne towarde hym suppose[*i*]nge that he was washinge his handes ... This continuall prayer, and fervent supplication uppon the river bry[*me*] joined with his former honest, just, temperate, and virtuous lyfe, myght very wel seem to bewtifie this kynde of death.³⁷

This description was controversial because it presented the possibility of suicide being a ‘good death’ in which a person was at peace and prepared themselves for the next life.

The text ended, however, on a conservative note. The arbitrator, Solomon, did not condone suicide. ‘Neither do I drectly say that these did wel,’ he says, ‘bycause that all murther is damnable w[*i*]th out the mercy of god’. He argued only for charitableness in judging those who end their own lives,

not to demande why this man, or that woman did kyll them selves,
but leave all to the secret judgment of god ... rathe[*r*] enclyne to

³⁷ BL, Add. MS 27632, fo. 125(r).

th[e] [better?] part, then to the worse refering all rather [to] his mercy, and lovinge kyndenes, then to his severe judgement.³⁸

This was therefore a very ambiguous text. In some places it voiced radical opposition to the idea that suicide was a sin, but ended by arguing that reserving judgement on the eternal destination of suicides should be based on the mercy of God, and not on defence of the morality of the act itself.

Elizabethan Opinions

While the more radical opinions expressed in the Harrington manuscript might have been acceptable in fashionable circles, Elizabethan pastors continued to condemn suicide and expended a lot of ink in refuting examples from scripture and antiquity that seemed to provide lawful exceptions to the rule that suicide was a sin.

However, some were more equivocal than others about the eternal destination of those who killed themselves. In *A treatise of melancholie*, Timothy Bright included Saul and Judas among the examples of those who despaired because their consciences were afflicted with the knowledge of real sin, rather than the interference of melancholy humours. He did not state whether or not they were damned, but this does place suicides in the camp of the sinful, rather than the ill.³⁹

The conformist minister, Anthony Anderson, discussed the difference between the Christian's desire for death and the sinful act of suicide. A Christian desired death as the final release from sin, but would wait patiently for the time that God had appointed for him to die, comforted against the troubles of sin by the grace of Christ.

³⁸ BL, Add. MS 27632, fo. 125(v).

³⁹ Bright, *A treatise of melancholie*, p. 193.

The godless, however, did not desire death for the right reasons. They did not think about the next life, but only their present need for relief from the perpetual sense of shame over their sins and fear of judgement. Only ‘wicked desperate persons, in despite of God his holy lawe, and instinct of nature, soe with pernicious knyfe of perpetuall paine, bereave for a tyme, the sorrowes of thys synfull corpse’. They should consider that ‘such desperate death, is the purchase of Hel with Judas, Achitophel, king Saule, and such others’. He then considered a host of counter-examples such as Lucretia and Cato. He concluded that all of their actions were ‘damnable’ arguing that in times of persecution the right course for a Christian was to submit to suffering: ‘no cruelty, tyranny or Popish oppression is cause sufficient for us, to become with them most cruell to oure selves’.⁴⁰ The Calvinist preacher, John King, in his discussion of suicide in a sermon on Jonah preached at York in 1594, assumed that suicides killed themselves on account of a guilty conscience, and in order to avoid just punishment in this life for crimes committed. Self-murder showed a desperation that proved the suicidal person capable of the worst crimes. It was on this basis that they were punished after death and refused honourable burial. However, he wrote that ‘I will pronounce nothing rashlye. The mercy of God may come, *inter pontem & fontem*, as the proverbe is, *betweene the bridge and the brooke, inter gladium & iugulum, betweene the sworde and a mans throate*.’⁴¹

In his guide to dying, *Disce mori*, published in 1600, Christopher Sutton advised the reader that there was no need to be overly afraid of sudden death. Even for the unprepared, a right ‘motion of the heart’ towards God was faith enough to be saved. This was on the condition, however, that ‘they depart when God calleth them, which time all must tarrie’. To hasten one’s own death was cowardly, against nature, and

⁴⁰ A. Anderson, *The shield of our safetie* (London, 1581), sigs. Kii(v)-Li(v).

⁴¹ J. King, *Lectures upon Jonas delivered at Yorke in the yeare of our Lorde 1594* (Oxford, 1599), pp. 187, 189.

utterly condemned by Christianity.⁴² In another sermon on the prophet Jonah, published in the same year, the future Archbishop of Canterbury, George Abbot, spoke even more strongly against suicide. It was ‘a sin so grievous, that scant any is more hainous unto the Lord’. He repeated a Jewish teaching about suicide, that a soul could not expect to be received by God into ‘the company of good souls’ in the next life if he was found to be separated from his body before the time that God had permitted such a release. Addressing the common objection that a person could repent in the moment between the act of suicide and death, he admitted that, especially in cases of slow death such as poisoning:

Betweene the bridge and the water, betweene the knife and the dying, betweene the rocke and the ground, repentaunce may be suggested to the heart, in a moment or twinckling [sic] of an eye, but especially where poison, being taken, doth not kill upon the sudden, or where death doth not follow presently, there may be some remembrance.

However, he compared those who presumed on that mercy to people who deliberately broke their own necks to test the skill of the surgeon. ‘It is monstrous in Divinity,’ he wrote, ‘to preasse upon such iniquitie, with hope of that, wherein thou hast such threatnings to the contrary.’⁴³

In theory, then, excepting a grudging acknowledgement that repentance might occur in the moment before death, Elizabethan opinion from all sections of the Church of England would appear to regard Hell as the most likely destination for the souls of those who committed suicide; but what about in practice? Writing about the Scottish context, Robert Houston states that ‘For all their apparent rigour, Calvinists struggled as much as anyone to come to terms with suicide’. This was for both personal and political reasons. In 1570, after his wife’s apparent suicide, the Calvinist

⁴² C. Sutton, *Disce mori. Learn to die: a religious discourse, mooving every Christian man to enter into a serious remembrance of his ende* (London, 1600), pp. 286-90.

⁴³ G. Abbot, *An exposition upon the prophet Jonah* (London, 1600), pp. 125, 127, 132.

minister John Kello made a show of concern for her soul by disputing with his neighbours ‘whether it were possible that she who had putt hands on her self could be under the protectioun of God; and whether anie man might suppose, that being under so terrible tentatioun, she could once sob for God’s merceis’. As it turned out, Kello was only feigning concern for his wife’s soul; he had murdered her himself and tried to make it look like suicide. However, it shows that the possibility of mercy between the act of suicide and death was debated in Scotland as it was in England. In 1611 another case that threatened the reputation of Scottish Calvinism was the suicide of the Presbyterian minister John Chalmers. This was a long-drawn-out affair. Chalmers cut his throat, but missed the windpipe. He died six days later of his wounds. Although his death was recorded as ‘unnaturall and shamefull’, he had used the time between the act of suicide and death to obtain the pardon of fellow members of the presbytery and left a confession in which he claimed that ‘God left me for a tyme to the tentations of Sathan’, but that he was now restored to the true faith. He urged other ministers not to abandon ‘the religion presentlie professed in this land ... that undoubted truth of God, groundit upon his Word, written in the books of Old and New Testament; and ... that true worship of God, onlie acceptable to him, [which] brings salvation to man by Jesus Christ.’ There were personal reasons why Chalmers had committed suicide, but Houston explains the confessional orientation of his statements in terms of the need to protect the reputation of Presbyterianism in an area of Scotland dominated by a Catholic earl.⁴⁴

Similar religious affiliations could create reservations about pronouncing all suicides as damned in an English context. George Abbot was embarrassed when, in 1600 (the same year that his sermon on Jonah containing the condemnation of suicide

⁴⁴ Houston, *Punishing the Dead?*, pp. 301-3, 308.

was published) a prominent member of the puritan community, a wealthy merchant named William Doddington, killed himself by throwing himself from the tower of St. Sepulchre's church in London. He was brother-in-law to Francis Walsingham and intimate with leading members of government. A pamphlet or ballad concerning his death was suppressed by the privy council. Possibly this was similar in nature to those published against the Brettergh family at the time of Katherine Brettergh's death, which have also been lost. Doddington had not been suffering from any overtly spiritual crisis, but from the combination of stress and shame that was the cause of many early modern suicides.⁴⁵ He claimed in a note found on his person that he had been driven to this act by a certain John Buckley and his associates, whom he accused of perjury and slander, 'which caused [him] rather to chuse to dye w[i]th infamy, than live w[i]th infamy and torment'. The case became a matter of controversy, however, because in his note Doddington expressed hopes of salvation, writing 'O Lord forgive me this cruell fact upon myne owne body, w[hi]ch I utterly detest and most humbly pray him so cast it behind him, and that of his exceding and infinite mercy he will forgive in me w[i]th all my other synnes'.⁴⁶

The recusant priest, John Gerard, used the incident in an attempt to show that Abbot had a poor grasp of theology. Whilst in disguise, Gerard met Abbot at the house of Lady Agnes Wenman, and, over a game of cards, the subject of Doddington's suicide came up. He recorded their conversation:

'Poor fellow,' I said. 'What could have induced him to destroy his body and soul in one fell act?'

'Sir,' answered the doctor, in a learned and magisterial manner.

'Sir, it is not for us to pass judgement on any man.'

⁴⁵ MacDonald and Murphy, *Sleepless Souls*, pp. 274-89.

⁴⁶ MacDonald and Murphy, *Sleepless Souls*, pp. 66-7; G. B. Harrison, *The Elizabethan Journals* (2 vols., New York, 1965), ii, 149; J. R. Dasent (ed.), *Acts of the Privy Council of England, 1599-1600*, (46 vols., London, 1905), xxx, 289; British Library, Lansdowne MS. 99 (Burghley Papers), fos. 88(r)-89(v): 'a lamentable ejaculation of William Doddington'.

‘Quite so,’ I said. ‘It is possible, of course, that the man repented of his sin as he was still falling, *inter pontem et fontem*, as they say. But it is very unlikely. The man’s last act which we have any means of judging was a mortal sin and merited damnation.’

‘But,’ said the doctor, ‘We don’t know whether this was such a sin.’

‘Pardon me,’ I said, ‘it is not a case here of our own judgement. It is a question of God’s judgement. He forbids us under pain of hell to kill anyone, and particularly ourselves, for charity begins at home.’

The good doctor was caught. He said nothing more on the point, but he turned the subject, saying with a smile:

‘Gentlemen should not dispute on theological questions.’

‘I agree,’ I said. ‘We don’t, of course, pretend to know theology, but we should at least know the law of God.’

Gerard regarded Abbot’s reservations as a demonstration of the ignorance of Protestant ministers who ‘have no solid knowledge, but with their persuasive words of human wisdom ... lead poor souls astray.’⁴⁷ In fact, as we have seen, Elizabethan and early Stuart Protestant ministers used the same arguments as Gerard to argue that the souls of those who committed suicide were in serious danger of damnation; yet, in practice, they were reluctant to accept that those whose lives had previously shown evidence of a genuine working of grace might be beyond hope of salvation. It was disturbing to consider that the signs of election may have been misread, and that their friends might be in Hell.

The clearest expression of this kind of thinking can be found in William Perkins’ writing. Perkins wrote about suicide in three separate places. In a commentary on the epistle to the Galatians he placed suicide under the sin of self-murder, which was a sin against charity. Here his concern was to argue against the Stoic position that suicide could be heroic in times of persecution. It was an error of the Donatists, Perkins explained, in keeping with Augustine, to commit suicide to avoid sin or for fear of denying Christ. Faith, not death, was the correct response in

⁴⁷ J. Gerard, *The Hunted Priest: Autobiography of John Gerard*, trans. Philip Caraman (London, 1959), pp. 174-6.

times of trouble. In *A Cloud of Faithful Witnesses* he explained that people commit suicide because they have been abandoned by God to the powers of Satan. He wrote that suicide could be a great trouble of mind to many people because when they saw others hang or drown themselves, they became afraid that God would abandon them also and that they would end their lives in the same way. To reassure these people Perkins explained that this could only happen to the ungodly. God only abandoned those who had abandoned him first by committing some grave sin: ‘if the causes were known why men make away themselves, it would proove (generally) to be thus; because they first by some fearefull sins have forsaken God, & then he in his justice forsakes them.’⁴⁸ This would agree with Bradford’s assessment of what had happened to Hales.

Perkins, therefore, seemed to be putting forward an argument that only those forsaken by God, and therefore not the elect, could commit suicide. However, in his discussion of temporary desertion, he took a different view. As we saw in Chapter Three, temporary desertion was an experience in which the elect suffered the same sense of having been abandoned by God as the reprobate. In a desertion, the elect would believe that they were damned, but they were not to be judged so by their fellow Christians. In the cases of deathbed despair discussed in the last chapter this was fairly straightforward: the sufferers recovered their sense of God’s grace before death, demonstrating that the desertion had been only temporary; but what about cases in which a person died in despair? Perkins referred to the case of a man named Chambers from Leicester who cried out as he was dying that he was damned. ‘It is not for any to note him with the black marke of a reprobate,’ wrote Perkins, ‘for men in such cases speak not as they are, but as they feele themselves to be.’ It was at this

⁴⁸ W. Perkins, *A commentarie or exposition, upon the five first chapters of the epistle to the Galatians* (Cambridge, 1604), pp. 435-8; idem, *A cloud of faithfull witnesses, leading to the heavenly Canaan* (London, 1607), p. 459.

point that Perkins made an assertion that undermined the tradition of seeing suicide as a sin that necessarily led to damnation. Perkins took the argument that a person's life was not to be judged on the basis of a moment of despair, further. He considered the case of someone who had once shown signs of election, but who, in a state of despair, believing himself to be damned, took his own life. The same rule of hoping for the best was to be followed:

Yea, to goe further, when a professour of the gospel shall make away himselfe, though it be a fearfull case, yet stil the same opinion must be carried. First, Gods judgements are very secret. Secondly, they may repent in the very agony for any thing we know. Thirdly, none is able to comprehend the bottomlesse depth of the graces and mercies which are in Christ.⁴⁹

MacDonald and Murphy, writing about puritan attitudes to suicide, refer only to the sections of Perkins' work in which he links suicide to the work of the devil.⁵⁰

This reference in another context – that of despair and desertion – is important because it demonstrates another side of the puritan culture surrounding suicide.

Perkins' view that when one of the godly committed suicide, they might still be saved, was the logical conclusion of his commitment to the perseverance of the saints and his belief that a person should ultimately be judged by the way they had lived their life rather than the manner of their death. While puritans argued against Stoic ideas that suicide might not be a sin, in the context of the suicide of the godly, there was an attempt to argue that the person might still be saved.

Perkins, writing at the end of the sixteenth century, still relied largely on the possibility of repentance at the last moment before death, and on the argument that judgement belonged to God. However, in the early seventeenth century, puritans

⁴⁹ Perkins, *A golden chaine*, p. 681. I have been unable to trace the account of the death of Chambers to which Perkins refers.

⁵⁰ MacDonald and Murphy, *Sleepless Souls*, pp. 36, 104.

would develop further explanations for the suicide of the godly based on melancholy as a cause.

Finding Exceptions

Tensions between the Stoic and the puritan point of view on suicide became more pronounced in the early decades of the seventeenth century. At the same time, melancholy emerged more often as a factor to be taken into consideration in cases of suicide. This was partly because the causes and spiritual connotations of suicide received fuller treatment at this time than in previous years. Rather than short comments or sections in sermons and treatises on other subjects, as in the Elizabethan period, we have two treatises from this period devoted entirely to the subject of suicide: John Donne's *Biathanatos*, and John Sym's *Lifes preservative against self-killing*. Both were very different in their approach, Donne's representing the point of view of the humanist scholar, and Sym's the Calvinist position. It would be wrong, however, to regard Donne's views as entirely progressive and Sym's as purely reactionary. This section examines both points of view, drawing attention to the limitations of Donne's defence of suicide, and the level of sympathy with some cases of suicide that can be found in puritan discourse.

In 1607-8 John Donne wrote what scholars regard as the first proper defence of suicide in the English language. He named it *Biathanatos*, meaning 'to die a violent death'. Although it was not published until 1647, Donne circulated the manuscript amongst his friends at Oxford and Cambridge, and it is seen by scholars as evidence of a general interest in the controversial aspects of suicide amongst intellectuals in

Europe at the beginning of the seventeenth century.⁵¹ In the preface, Donne explained his personal reasons for writing a defence of those who committed suicide. He sometimes felt ‘such a sickly inclination’ himself and ‘often meditation of this, hath wonne me to a charitable interpretation of theyr Action, who dye so: and provok’d me alittle to watch, and exagitate theyr reasons, which pronounce so peremptory judgements uppon them’. Sickness, however, did not feature as part of the defence, which was based rather on the classical idea that suicide might be a rational decision in some circumstances. One of the harsh critics he ‘watched’ may have been John King, whose views in the 1590s on suicide were summarised earlier. Donne met King whilst a secretary to the lord keeper, Thomas Egerton, who had appointed him as his domestic chaplain. Despite their theological differences, Donne remained friends with the King family after leaving the Egerton household.⁵²

Biathanatos was the first proper defence in that it not only professed sympathy for those who committed suicide, but argued that suicide might not be a sin at all. Donne was aware of the novelty of his position. ‘Which [suicide] to be sinne every body hath so Suckd, and digested, and incorporated into the body of his Fayth and Religion,’ he wrote, ‘that now they prescribe against any Opposer; and all discourse in this point, is uppon the degrees of this Sinne, and how farre it exceeds all other. So that none brings the mettall now to the test, nor touch, but onely to the balance.’ It was not a general defence, however, but limited to a narrow set of circumstances in which the person might be said to be acting for the honour of God and for the general good. This defence might cover an example such as Hales, but was not so applicable in the example of Doddington. Donne stated that he agreed with Augustine that it was unlawful to commit suicide in order to avoid occasion for sin, or out of any

⁵¹ J. Donne, *Biathanatos*, ed. E. W. Sullivan (London, 1984), pp. ix, xvi, xxxv-xxxvi, 180-1.

⁵² Donne, *Biathanatos*, p. 29; D. Colclough, ‘Donne, John (1572–1631)’, *ODNB*; P. E. McCullough, ‘King, John (d. 1621)’, *ODNB*.

motivation that was primarily self-interested. This narrowness was indicated in the conservatively worded subtitle: ‘A declaration of that Paradoxe or Thesis, that Self-homicide is not so naturally Sinne, that it may never be otherwise’; and in the first sentence of the main body of the text: ‘As Lawiers use to call that Impossible, which is so difficult ... So Divines are accustom’d to call that Sinne, which for the most part is so ... Of such condition is this *selfe- homicide*’.⁵³

It was this level of agreement with Augustine that caused an eighteenth century writer on suicide, Richard Hey, to dismiss Donne as self-contradictory and irrelevant to the debate on suicide. This is one way of reading the sometimes confusing arguments of *Biathanatos*. However, arguing that suicide could be permissible in some circumstances seems to have been only part of Donne’s aim in writing the thesis. He was concerned with the extremity with which suicide was being denounced as a sin beyond other sins, and one that carried a sentence of damnation. His purpose, like that of the writer of the Harrington manuscript, was to promote a general charitableness of interpretation. One of his first arguments was that suicide was no greater a sin than an uncharitable attitude towards those who had committed it.⁵⁴ In this he had more in common with other sixteenth and seventeenth century writers who regarded suicide as a sin, while hoping for the salvation of the souls of suicides, than with eighteenth century radical thinkers who argued that a person was at liberty to end their own life if it was no longer beneficial.⁵⁵ The danger of Donne’s work for those who sought to uphold the prohibition on suicide was that, in arguing for greater charitableness, he went much further than any other writer in deconstructing the principal arguments by which suicide was held to be a sin.⁵⁶

⁵³ Donne, *Biathanatos*, pp. 1, 34, 77.

⁵⁴ E. W. Sullivan, ‘general introduction’ in Donne, *Biathanatos*, p. xxv; Donne, *Biathanatos*, pp. 29-30.

⁵⁵ MacDonald and Murphy, *Sleepless Souls*, pp. 156-64.

⁵⁶ Quoted in E. W. Sullivan, ‘general introduction’, in Donne, *Biathanatos*, p. xxvi.

Donne argued against the idea that suicide was always unnatural or against reason. If it was only natural to act in self-preservation, then all acts of self-denial, including fasting, were unnatural and sinful. Besides, the examples of the early Christian martyrs, and of suicide throughout history, proved that many people had chosen death over life. This was a very rational choice when the alternative was a more gruesome or shameful death at the hand of enemies. Donne also denied that scripture absolutely prohibited suicide in all circumstances. The commandment ‘thou shalt not kill’ was circumstantial. It did not apply to killing an enemy in wartime, and so it should not apply to those who killed themselves under persecution. Also, scripture did not condemn the suicide of biblical characters such as Saul and Judas. Saul was an example of one who killed himself to avoid bringing dishonour to God through being captured by the Philistines. The Jewish reading of the scripture was that Saul was in paradise. It was not clear that Judas had killed himself at all, on the basis of the two conflicting accounts of his death. Some commentators believed that, because he repented of his act of betrayal, he too was saved. The story of Judas had become like the apple in the garden of Eden – a biblical myth that was not in the text.⁵⁷

Donne began his treatise, however, by addressing directly the question of whether suicide was necessarily damnable. He argued that those who thought that it was, based their opinion on one of three false assumptions: they believed that suicide always proceeded from the sin of despair; or that it was a sign of ‘impenitableness’; or that the act itself was a sin that left no possibility for repentance. Against the first, he argued that not all kinds of despair were sinful. For a man to despair of his own efforts was not sinful, but only to despair of God’s mercy. There were many

⁵⁷ Donne, *Biathanatos*, esp. pp. 49-52, 115-17, 137-41. Genesis relates that Eve ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, which was ‘pleasant to the eyes’; it does not specifically say that the fruit was an apple: Gen. ii-iii.

examples in scripture and history of people who had committed suicide who were not motivated by a despair of God's mercy.⁵⁸

By 'impenitableness', Donne was referring to the Calvinist idea that the reprobate was not capable of repenting of his sins. Donne was sceptical about the notion that any were irredeemable in this life, an idea that he saw Calvin as the author of: 'I see not,' he wrote, 'why we should be lother to allow, that God hath made some impeccable [incapable of sinning], then impenitable'. In other words, if people denied the possibility that God had created any who were perfectly holy, Donne could not see why these people found it easier to imagine that God had created a group of people who were so evil that they could not repent. Donne regarded Calvinist ideas as dangerous. If there were any who were incapable of returning to God, these people could be known only to God. Besides this, he did not see any reason why it should be presumed that anybody who committed suicide was necessarily amongst this group of irredeemable people.⁵⁹ Lastly, Donne did not see why it should be assumed that those who committed suicide died unrepentant. In other extreme cases, such as emergency baptism of a newborn child or extreme unction delivered to the insane, the Church hoped for the best, without any evidence of sanctification. Why not extend this same charitable interpretation to the suicidal: 'to presume impenitence because you were not by, and heard it, is an usurpation'.⁶⁰ Donne, therefore, wrote *Biathanatos* partly to refute Calvinist theology of election and reprobation, and to deny that suicide was a sign of reprobation.

Donne's main concern was to defend the reputations of those who had committed suicide. He expressed his desire to

⁵⁸ Donne, *Biathanatos*, pp. 34-6.

⁵⁹ Donne, *Biathanatos*, pp. 35-6.

⁶⁰ Donne, *Biathanatos*, pp. 36-8.

rectify, and wash againe theyr fame, who religiously assuring themselves, that in some cases, when we were destitute of other meanes, we might be to our selves the stewards of Gods benefits, and the Ministers of his Mercyfull Justice, had yet, being ... Innocent within themselves, incurrd *Damnum opinionis*.

However, as can be seen from the reactions of the puritan community to the incidents of suicide discussed in this chapter, Donne was not alone in his concern about the reputations of the dead. What was controversial about his writing was that he based his argument that not all suicides were damned on Stoic philosophy, which justified suicide in some circumstances. This was quite different from the arguments discussed in the last part of this section, which based their defence of the souls of suicides on the notion that not all suicidal people were responsible for their actions, being governed not by their own will, but by some kind of passion. As we have seen, Donne regarded the idea that all suicide proceeded from despair as one of the false assumptions on which suicide had been unfairly stigmatised.

Another text in which Stoic arguments are in evidence in this period is *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. In the section on the prognostics of melancholy in Book One Burton asked whether it was lawful for a man to take his own life. He looked at the arguments for and against. On the side of suicide were the familiar examples of early Christians and ancient people whose suicide had been regarded as honourable. There were also the arguments of ancient philosophers such as Seneca, who believed that every person had a right to decide when to end his own life, and who also argued in favour of euthanasia. On the other side were the Christian arguments: suicide was worse than murder because a murderer only killed the body, but a suicide killed both the body and the soul; it was not right to commit one sin to prevent another evil. Typically, Burton spent rather longer explaining the arguments of ancient philosophers, such as Seneca, than on the orthodox Christian position, only to come to

the conclusion that such arguments were those of pagans and heretics, such as the Donatists, and so illegitimate: ‘these are false and pagan positions, profane stoical paradoxes, wicked examples; it boots not what heathen philosophers determine in this kind, they are impious, abominable, and upon a wrong ground’.⁶¹

Although Burton rejected classical arguments (or appeared to), and Donne’s treatise was too controversial to publish, it seems that Stoic ideas about suicide had some influence in the early seventeenth century. At least, this was the perception of writers who continued to condemn suicide. Those concerned about the spread of these ideas were not necessarily puritan. The physician Thomas Browne (1605-1682), a moderate man in religion, complained about the preaching of Stoic philosophy, which ‘delivered in a Pulpit, passe[s] [f]or currant Divinity: yet herein are they in extreames, that can allow a man to be his own Assassine, and so highly extol the end and suicide of Cato’. For Browne, ‘where life is more terrible than death, it is then the truest valour to dare to live’, Job being the most noble example of this in suffering calamity, sickness and despair without taking his own life.⁶² The need to refute Stoicism was felt particularly strongly by the gentleman Sir William Vaughan (c.1575–1641) in the first decade of the seventeenth century. This can be seen in his conduct book *The golden grove*. The first edition of *The golden grove*, published in 1600, contained only one short chapter declaring suicide to be unlawful. In the second edition, published in 1608, Vaughan expanded this section to sixteen chapters. He wrote that ‘many of our moderne divines’ were arguing that it was lawful to commit suicide for the purposes of avoiding some event that would bring dishonour to God. They made a distinction between this kind of death and suicide committed out

⁶¹ Burton, *Anatomy*, i, 434-8.

⁶² T. Browne, *A true and full copy of that which was most imperfectly and surreptitiously printed before under the name of Religio medici* (London, 1643), pp. 98-9. In the book of Job, Job’s wife says to him ‘Dost thou still retain thine integrity? Curse God and die’, which Browne may have been interpreting as a suggestion that he commit suicide: Job. ii. 9-10.

of impatience or cowardliness, which was a sin. Vaughan's main purpose in the greatly expanded section on suicide was to refute this 'simple and weake distinction'. 'We must not do evill,' he wrote, following Augustine's argument, 'that good may come thereof.'⁶³

The clergy also continued to condemn suicide in strong language,⁶⁴ but it was a conservative clergyman, William Willymat, who made an explicit connection between reprobation and suicide. In *Physicke to cure the most dangerous disease of desperation* he claimed that 'deadly Desperation' was characteristic of 'a reprobate minde'. The suicide of such people served a useful purpose in ridding the world of their ungodly example, and as a warning to others of the desperate end that awaited sinners. Not one to mince his words, Willymat complained elsewhere of 'brainsick, heady and mal-contented puritans' who refused to pay subsidies and customs owed to the crown. Rigid attitudes towards suicide seem to come out of a more general concern with obedience and good conduct, than a puritanical zeal to reform society.⁶⁵

Texts of the judgement book variety also presented suicide in stark terms. In his book recording judgements, *The lands mourning, for vaine swearing* (1613), Abraham Gibson told the story of a widow who plotted to swindle an orphan of her inheritance, but four days after declaring this intention she threw herself out of a window and died.⁶⁶ Thomas Beard's *Theatre of gods judgement* was full of such stories. The 'man of note and good possessions' who 'threw himselfe downe headlong from the top of a Church' may have referred to William Doddington. Beard

⁶³ W. Vaughan, *The golden grove, moralized in three bookes: a worke very necessary for all such, as would know how to governe themselves, their houses, or their countrey* (London, 1608), chs. 14 - 29, esp. ch. 20. See also, Vaughan, *The golden grove* (London, 1600), and C. Davies, 'Vaughan, Sir William (c.1575-1641)', *ODNB*.

⁶⁴ MacDonald and Murphy, *Sleepless Souls*, pp. 30-33.

⁶⁵ W. Willymat, *Physicke to cure the most dangerous disease of desperation* (London, 1605), pp. 70-1; S. Wright, 'Willymat, William (d. 1615)', *ODNB*.

⁶⁶ A. Gibson, *The lands mourning, for vaine swearing ... and of Gods fearefull judgements that attend it* (London, 1613), p. 51.

acknowledged the controversial nature of individual cases. He did not include names and places ‘least by reporting Gods judgments upon the dead, I should offend some that are alive’, but no doubt the cases were easily identifiable to contemporaries. Suicide, wrote Beard, ‘is both a crime and a judgement; a crime deserving a further judgment, even eternall damnation in hell fire; and a judgement and punishment of some notable sinnes comm[itt]ed by them before, and of an ungodly and wicked life unrepented of.’⁶⁷

Others, however, questioned whether suicides were necessarily damned. This was another question that Burton considered. His section on suicide in *The Anatomy* is further evidence of the stronger connection between melancholy and suicide that was developing in the early seventeenth century. According to Burton, the mad who were exempt from profane burial should include those ‘long melancholy, and that in extremity’. Like the writer of the Harrington manuscript, he also pointed out that David had granted Saul an honourable burial. Besides, however the person was buried, this did not determine the destination of their souls: ‘Thus of their goods and bodies we can dispose; but what shall become of their souls, God alone can tell’. In Burton’s opinion, suicide was something that anybody was capable of, under temptation (in opposition to Sym’s position, a decade later, that only the reprobate was capable of suicide), and so a person should consider the possibility that the same fate could befall themselves before being too quick to judge others.

His mercy may come inter pontem et fontem, inter gladium et jugulum, betwixt the bridge and the brook, the knife and the throat. *Quod cuiquam contigit, cuivis potest* [what happens to someone may happen to anyone]. Who knows how he may be tempted? It is his case, it may be thine ... We ought not to be so rash and rigorous in

⁶⁷ Beard, *Theatre of Gods judgements*, pp. 215-21.

our censures as some are; charity will judge and hope the best; God be merciful unto us all!⁶⁸

These writers looked for reasons to hope for the salvation of the souls of suicides that rested on arguments that did not attempt to justify suicide as a moral act. Vaughan, for instance, took a less condemnatory tone in the final chapter of his section on suicide, Chapter 29, in which he addressed the question of ‘Whether we may expressly judge of such as kill themselves?’. Here his views were more forgiving than those of many other writers. Not only did he repeat the conventional hope of repentance ‘betwixt the bridge and the brooke’, but he thought that Augustine had been too harsh in his view that suicide was a sin without repentance. Vaughan treated suicide as a sin, but a sin like any other in which the rule of Matthew 7:1, ‘judge not, that ye be not judged’, should be applied.⁶⁹

Puritan writers exhibited a tendency to be at once condemnatory and sympathetic in their approach to suicide. John Abernethy in *A Christian and heavenly treatise containing physicke for the soule*, published in 1622, described suicide as a ‘double sinne’: it was a sin against God’s justice by breaching His law, and it was a sin against His mercy by rejecting the possibility of redemption. As such it ‘leadeth damnation in chaines’. In this state, the desperate man was ‘like fish, that leape out of the seething water, into the burning fire: hee killeth both body and soule at once.’ Abernethy distinguished between holy and unholy despair. If despair was holy it would produce the right response of turning to God in repentance. Unholy desperation, on the other hand, was ‘a passion that bringeth strange perturbations to the soule’. It could be temporary, as suffered by the elect, or final, as suffered by the reprobate, or ‘those that die without all hope of comfort’. Under the effects of an

⁶⁸ Burton, *Anatomy*, i, 438.

⁶⁹ Vaughan, *The golden grove*, ch. 29.

unholy desperation a man would become violent towards himself, rather than turning to God for help. His desire to end his life was not the same as that of the elect, who wished to die in order to be with Christ, but was an impatient desire to seek relief from present troubles. This final, unholy desperation was most common in those who allowed themselves to become amenable to the suggestions of Satan. Eventually, God abandoned them to Satan, who convinced them to kill themselves. Siding with those who saw apostasy as a sign of reprobation, Abernethy included Francesco Spiera among his examples of those who had fallen into unholy desperation. Suicide was one of the punishments with which God afflicted those, such as Judas, who betrayed the Church. What distinguished this passion from the temporary despair of the elect was that there could be no cure from unholy desperation.⁷⁰

However, Abernethy did not regard all souls of suicides as damned. For instance, where the method of suicide left time for repentance, there was a possibility of salvation. More significantly, Abernethy recognised a second cause of violent desperation, besides the suggestions of Satan – the delusions of a melancholic imagination. He described the now familiar effects of melancholy:

Aduſt melancholy is the meſſenger of great deſpaire; the blackiſh fumes whereof make mens ſpirits as drunken. The mind conceiveth ſtrange illuding imaginations: ſo that albeit they were moſt free of externall calamity, yet the corrupt imagination repreſents to the heart thouſands of conceited croſſes: Imagining ſometimes that they have ſinned againſt the holy Ghoſt; that they are caſt away from God; that there are troopes of calamities coming againſt them, or preſently ſeazed upon them, and ſuch like.

Although Abernethy believed self-murder to be an action of a reprobate mind, he saw cases in which a person themselves came to believe that they were a cast-away quite differently. Such thoughts were the result of melancholic illness. As Perkins had

⁷⁰ J. Abernethy, *A Christian and heavenly treatise containing physicke for the soule* (London, 1622), pp. 367-74.

argued more generally regarding ‘bad death’, what was crucial in determining these cases was the evidence of a person’s whole life. For those suffering from melancholy, who had shown signs of election in their previous life, salvation was possible because it was not their soul that was diseased, but their body.

If any put desperate hands on themselves by the occasion of a frenzy, bodily madnesse, or melancholy: if they have given testimony before of their Regneration; in regard they doe this not so much of the minde, as of the body: we must make the best construction of it.⁷¹

A similar pattern of argument is found in John Sym’s *Lifes preservative against self-killing*. Sym was the puritan clergyman we came across at the beginning of the chapter who stated that only ‘unregenerated and reprobate persons’ could murder themselves. His book, first published in 1637, was the first full-length treatise against suicide published in English. In some ways it was a reactionary piece of writing, written to counteract strains of thinking that were more sympathetic towards suicide. He rejected, for instance, the popular idea that a person might repent between the act of suicide and the point of death. In one section he set out to prove ‘by *five* strong and undeniable *arguments*, and *reasons*’ that ‘*they all, and every of them that so murder themselves; are certainly, and infallibly damned soule and body for evermore without redemption*’. Firstly, all self-murderers must be reprobate because God would not allow the regenerate to commit such a terrible sin. Secondly, self-murder was not an ordinary sin; it was a sin against both God and nature and therefore beyond mercy. Thirdly, all examples of self-murderers in scripture were reprobate. Fourthly, self-murder was a sin without repentance because the sin itself left no time for the perpetrator to repent. Fifthly, the Church refused burial to self-murderers, and

⁷¹ Abernethy, *Christian and heavenly treatise*, pp. 370, 373-4.

therefore it was wrong to hope for the salvation of those whose souls the Church had despaired of.⁷²

However, it is important to understand that Sym's concept of 'self-murder' did not encompass all cases of suicide. 'Although all *self-murderers* are *self-killers*', he explained, 'all *self-killers* are not *self-murderers*: they are not termes convertible or recipocall' [author's italics]. Only those who were capable of making a rational decision were defined as self-murderers by Sym. This excluded young children, the mentally handicapped and those suffering from the delusions of fever or temporary insanity. An example of this was sailors suffering from calenture, a disease contracted in hot climates in which the sufferer jumped into the sea believing it to be green fields. 'It is most inhumane and unreasonable,' wrote Sym,

so ignominiously to condemne and censure persons for self-murderers; whose case deserves pittie and commiseration, for their lamentable suffering ... *Hereupon*, it necessarily followes, that the persons justly acquitted ... cannot in charity be denied ... the happinesse of salvation.⁷³

In this category, Sym included melancholic persons driven to suicide by imagined fear and sadness, and those suffering from despair of salvation, which he termed 'spiritual frenzy'. This was a state like Perkins' concept of spiritual 'desertion' in which a person fell into a state of despair

proceeding from want of all sensible feeling of grace, of the favour of God, of comfort, or hope, and from apprehension of Gods heavie displeasure, and of fearefull subjection of eternall damnation and misery: in which estate a man hath not the use of those parts of understanding and grace, which he hath in him; but is like a ship in a storme driven, without command of sailes, or rudder, to destruction.⁷⁴

These passages shed new light on the place of Sym's treatise in developing perceptions about suicide in England. MacDonald and Murphy quote Sym as an

⁷² Sym, *Lifes Preservative*, pp. 291-9.

⁷³ Sym, *Lifes Preservative*, pp. 290-2; see entry on 'calenture, n.', *OED*.

⁷⁴ Sym, *Lifes Preservative*, pp. 174, 250-1, 290-1.

example of reforming zeal upholding the harsh attitudes towards suicide in early modern England. However, Sym's crucial distinction between self-murder and suicide resulting from the fear and sadness of melancholic delusion is actually evidence that puritan attitudes in the early seventeenth century were shifting towards seeing suicidal despair as an illness, at least in some cases. This complicates both the notion of growing sympathy towards suicide as a product of secularisation, and MacDonald and Murphy's view of medicalisation as a process that developed in the eighteenth century as the elite grew more tolerant of suicide.⁷⁵ In the early seventeenth century, the non-Christian ideas that the clergy were reacting against were based in Stoic philosophy that rejected the idea that every act of self-killing was an act of passion. The kind of heroic acts of suicide that a few were arguing should not be seen as a sin were the premeditated actions of a lucid mind, not those of the mentally disturbed.⁷⁶ It is also problematic to see the developing connection between melancholy and suicide as the anti-religious views of a medical elite. Although in later centuries medical explanations might be seen as an alternative to spiritual views of despair, in this period it seems to have been the clergy themselves who were promoting the view that there was a link between melancholy and suicide.

The Godly Experience of Suicide

Melancholy was also important in how the godly interpreted their own experiences of suicidal urges. This existed alongside the idea that suicidal

⁷⁵ MacDonald and Murphy, *Sleepless Souls*, pp. 34, 88, 196-203.

⁷⁶ MacDonald and Murphy recognise the contradiction between medical and philosophical ideas for the eighteenth century, but do not comment on the significance of this for earlier periods: MacDonald and Murphy, *Sleepless Souls*, p. 199.

suggestions came from the devil. The popular notion of the devil acting on melancholic persons allowed for these two causal explanations to work in harmony. MacDonald and Murphy see the concept of the ‘devil’s bath’ as a way of further emphasising the diabolical nature of suicide and stigmatising its victims: ‘the palliating ideas of medical writers [that suicide was the product of melancholy] were simply absorbed into the religious interpretation of the crime’.⁷⁷ However, as we have seen in other chapters, the idea of the ‘devil’s bath’ was often used to excuse desperate thoughts and behaviour in the godly. This was no different in the case of suicidal urges or suicide attempts. While in some treatises and sermons these thoughts and behaviours were considered to be the products of a reprobate mind, when the godly experienced these things themselves they rationalised them as something external to their own thought processes – whether melancholy in the body, or suggestions of the devil planted in their minds. Evidence of this can be seen in puritan diaries and autobiographies.

In her diary, begun in 1638, Elizabeth Isham wrestled with the difference between a godly desire for death and suicidal inclinations. She attributed her desire for death to grief over the loss of a sister and to ‘melancolly humer’. On the anniversary of her sister’s death the idea entered into her mind that she might die on the same day of the year as her sister, and lie next to her. She came to the conclusion that this desire was sinful because her reason for wishing to die was to be with her sister rather than to be with God. ‘Thinking that selfe murther was the worst’ because it would deprive her of opportunities to improve her soul, she resolved instead to live a better life, always considering the uncertainty of life and death. She also pondered the question of whether she should ignore these thoughts and see them entirely as a

⁷⁷ MacDonald and Murphy, *Sleepless Souls*, pp. 104-5.

by-product of melancholy humour. She was averse to this notion because by wrestling with these thoughts she had come to a deeper understanding of spiritual things. '[S]ome may suppose that meditation of these things to proceede from malancoly,' she wrote, 'yet thou my God art my witness how wholesome I have them to me or how wholesome I have found the sound Doctrine of his word.'⁷⁸

In this case, Elizabeth Isham saw mildly suicidal thoughts as partly the product of melancholy, and partly a spiritually useful meditation about what was a proper Christian desire for death. However, where suicidal thoughts were stronger, puritan diarists were more likely to see the devil as the main cause. At the heart of MacDonald and Murphy's argument that puritanism hardened people's attitudes towards suicide is the assumption that attributing suicide to the promptings of the devil created revulsion and prevented people from empathising with those who killed themselves. Their framework for understanding the significance of the devil in early modern culture is borrowed from studies of witchcraft trials. Suicides were regarded as having consorted with the devil in the same way as witches. 'The conviction that self-murder was a diabolical deed,' they write, 'was what set it apart from most other crimes. Every crime could be viewed as a sin, and hence an ungodly act inspired by Satan, but only a few offences, notably self-murder and witchcraft, were regarded primarily as supernatural.'⁷⁹

The idea that the notion of the power of the devil was used primarily to stigmatise certain behaviours does not sit well with more recent research into the role of the devil in early modern English culture. Nathan Johnstone explains that in the majority of Protestant discussions of the devil it was the elect who were seen as the target of his schemes, rather than the reprobate. The reprobate was either so corrupt

⁷⁸ E. Isham, *Book of Remembrance*, fos. 33(r)-33(v), transcription from 'Constructing Elizabeth Isham' (online at Warwick University) [<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/ren/projects/isham/>].

⁷⁹ MacDonald and Murphy, *Sleepless Souls*, p. 59.

that he could not recognise that the thoughts the devil placed in his mind were evil, or else the devil had no need to tempt him because he was damned already. Records of battles with the devil were recorded as evidence of the trials of the elect.⁸⁰ We have already encountered this to some extent in accounts of deathbed experiences. Puritan leaders defended those who were rumoured to have been disturbed at the approach of death by arguing that it was the damned that the devil allowed to pass out of the world quietly ‘like lambs’.

The role of the devil as tempter of the elect had two implications for suicide. Firstly, it allowed those writing about their own thoughts and attempts at suicide to project guilt onto the devil. Secondly, it created a sense of identification with those who had succeeded in committing suicide. This was the view of Dionys Fitzherbert, who saw the battle against spiritual forces, believed to lie behind suicide attempts, as a cause to pity, rather than censure, those driven to despair. In the ‘preface to the Christian reader’ of her autobiographical account of her own suicidal despair, examined in Chapter Three, she urged:

I intreate thee whosover thou art to whome this may come to give thy Judgment sparingly and Charitably of theis distressed ones, I [Aye] Consider they strive not as the Apostle speakes against flesh and blood, but against principalities against powers, against the rulers of the darknes of this world, against spirituall wickedness in high places ... O pittie theis then seeing the whole world cannot yeld thee againe such a subject of thy Compassion.⁸¹

During her period of acute spiritual crisis, Fitzherbert attempted to kill herself with ‘any thing I could come by & take hould of’, considered hanging herself, and would sit by the edge of the river, thinking of drowning herself. This was often precipitated by thoughts of Hell and reprobation. Once, passing over a bridge that crossed a river she found that the noise of the water

⁸⁰ N. Johnstone, ‘The Protestant Devil: The Experience of Temptation in Early Modern England’, *The Journal of British Studies*, 43 (2004), 173-205.

⁸¹ Hodgkin, *Women, Madness and Sin*, p. 157.

put me into thes cogitations what a woufull stat shall I be in when I shall want one drop of water to coule my tong, beginning then most lively to aprehend the eternall torments were due to such as I thought my self to be [ie. reprobate] ... then was I temted to throw my self into the river as I pased over the bridge.

Her family watched her constantly. They also sought to dissuade her from suicide by reminding her of the eternal consequences: '[they] would be allways talking how griveos a sine it was for on to murder themselves wherby they did funder and imedenly cast themselves into that miserable stat they most of all fered.' Agreeing that Hell was the destination of suicides, Fitzherbert resolved 'yt certaine I would never kill my self, what soever became of me'.⁸²

While Fitzherbert's own suicidal inclinations came from her conviction that she was reprobate, in other places in her autobiography and letters she saw Catholics as being in the most danger of committing suicide. As suicide resulted from despair over sin, she reasoned, Catholics had no sure defence against it as they based their salvation in works and not assurance of grace. She used as an example a Protestant woman who had married into the Catholic side of the Fitzherbert family. The woman had at one point considered returning to the Protestant church, but had been dissuaded by a Jesuit priest. A short time afterwards she was found drowned in a small pond or lake, and presumed to have killed herself. For Fitzherbert this proved that Catholicism was the religion of despair. She warned the Catholics in her family that 'they shuld finde no refuge help nor comfort in ther most Iereligius religion when they came onc unto such a stat or trial'.⁸³ The Catholic religion of salvation by works ('the stinking pudels of your owne merits', she calls it in a letter to her Catholic employer, Lady Holte) could not, she believed, provide comfort when Satan reminded a

⁸² Hodgkin, *Women, Madness and Sin*, pp. 196-7, 209, 212-15, 220-1.

⁸³ Hodgkin, *Women, Madness and Sin*, pp. 144-5.

despairing person of their sins. ‘Who shall now pled for them or cleare ther understandind [sic] and concence to answeere Satans objections,’ she wrote,

Or who shall presevve them from his manyfold temp tations hee will make use to draw them to eternall perdition even to make them perhaps lay violent hand upon ther owne lives and seeing they have bene & be such uter enimies to yt swet docktren which only can redeme and comfort them in this destres who can or will defend them from Sathan even to lay his emmedent hand upon them to throw and cast them doune to everlasting distroction from whence is no redemption?⁸⁴

Given Fitzherbert’s own condition, this attempt to blame suicide on the failure of Catholic religion might seem contradictory to some. What Fitzherbert was claiming was not that the elect never fell into despair, but that they had the doctrine of grace and assurance to comfort them against the promptings of Satan to despair of salvation. However, although she believed that the doctrine of assurance was the source of hope in times of despair, she also believed that Satan was such a strong force that he could delude the elect into believing themselves to be damned and cause them to attempt suicide, as she had done herself. Where was God’s grace in this situation? Her anxiety on this topic was guessed at by a visitor from Yorkshire. Seeing her in a state of deep dejection, he told her about a relation of his, a merchant’s wife from York, who had despaired of her salvation. She became so distracted that she did not know her husband or children, and was not even aware when she gave birth to a child. Eventually, she tried to kill herself by throwing herself into a well. Having survived this incident, she became even more hopeless of salvation, saying ‘for never was it hard [heard] yt any of god children went about to make away or murder themselvfes’ (she was, perhaps, here echoing Foxe). The narrator of the story found a place in scripture (Fitzherbert did not recall where), which he claimed showed that even the elect could fall into as great a sin as suicide.

⁸⁴ Hodgkin, *Women, Madness and Sin*, pp. 236-9, 254-5.

The woman gained such comfort from this that she fully recovered. The visitor told this story to Fitzherbert to prove to her that she should not despair of anything.

Although she didn't pay much attention at the time, she found the story very comforting at a later date – presumably after her own suicide attempts.⁸⁵

Dionys Fitzherbert's writing demonstrates the ambivalence towards suicide found in puritan culture. At one level, she was committed to the popular understanding of suicide as an action prompted by Satan through which he 'cast them down to everlasting destruction from whence is no redemption?' On the other hand, some puritans, such as the visitor from Yorkshire, shared the belief that a person could commit suicide, and still be among the elect. This was based on their own experiences of friends and family members who had become suicidal. As we have seen in other sections of this chapter, puritans could respond to the question of the relationship between suicide and election in a much more sympathetic manner when responding to an actual case of suicide, or attempted suicide, from within their own community. As both Fitzherbert and the woman in the story told by the visitor from Yorkshire became suicidal because they despaired of their election, we can also see evidence of a tendency to treat these cases of despair of salvation as exempt from the general rule that suicides were damned. We saw the same tendency in Abernethy and Sym's treatment of suicide.

⁸⁵ Hodgkin, *Women, Madness and Sin*, pp. 144-5, 206-9.

Nehemiah Wallington

Probably the suicidal puritan best known to early modernists is Nehemiah Wallington, whose life and writing form the basis of Paul Seaver's investigation of puritan culture, *Wallington's World* (1985). Wallington, an artisan in the London parish of St. Leonard's, Eastcheap, had come close to killing himself no fewer than ten times before the age of 21. The means he used or considered were various, including poisoning, drowning, hanging, throwing himself into the street from a high window, and cutting his own throat. He failed partly through naivety, partly through the care of family and friends, partly through what he saw as the promptings of God, and partly through sheer luck. One time, after a family row, his brother and his father's apprentice dissuaded him from throwing himself out of a window. On another occasion, when he contemplated throwing himself from a different window, it was 'God of his great love and mercie' that persuaded him to go downstairs again. Another time, as he held a knife to his throat, the thought of the trouble it would bring to his family made him reconsider. Like Joan Drake, he also attempted death by fruit, consuming a large quantity of rotten apples. He also drank a large quantity of aniseed water. One of his first attempts was to drink a mixture of honey and sack because he had overheard a neighbour say that honey and sack was 'rank poison'. He was disappointed by the result. More surprising is how he survived swallowing a large quantity of rat poison; 'troubled in mind he may have been,' comments Seaver, 'but he must also have possessed an iron constitution'.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ D. Booy (ed.), *The Notebooks of Nehemiah Wallington, 1618-1654* (Aldershot, 2007), pp. 33-8; P. Seaver, *Wallington's World: A Puritan Artisan in Seventeenth-Century London* (London, 1985), p. 23.

Wallington himself perceived these episodes as a spiritual crisis brought about by his own sense of guilt over his sins, and by the promptings of Satan. During these troubled times he often identified himself with the reprobate. He wrote that in 1618:

About this time of yeere I went into the folkes chamber and tooke the Bibel and geathered out all the judgments of God which were threatened against the wicked and laid them to my own selfe: for I had written them out in a pice of paper as that place in Genesis 4:6, 7, 13 where the Lord asked Can [*Cain*] why his countenance was cast down.⁸⁷

Five years later he experienced similar feelings:

In May 1623 I was troubled againe for I thought I had binne a reprobate ... and goeing over the marces [marshes] alone by the riverside and looking upon the grasse my conscience tolde me my sinnes ware more in number then the speares of grasse upon the earth[.] With that Satan temted me ... and that was to leape into the river and drown myselfe[.] with that I fell out a weeping[.]⁸⁸

The suicide attempts could be deliberate and premeditated. The attempt with rat poison was carefully planned. He walked to another parish where he was a stranger so that the shop-keeper would not suspect his purposes and refuse to sell him the poison. His friends and family, however, showed only concern and care, clearly regarding him as disturbed in mind rather than wicked. His sister and the maid confiscated a knife from him while he slept. The local minister, Henry Roborough, showed considerable patience after a particularly disturbing episode in which Wallington threw away his own shoes, declaring them to be the devil, before turning on Roborough and accusing him of being a devil also. The minister took Wallington home with him to sit in his study and read a comforting passage from Corinthians while he prepared his sermon. Wallington followed him down the street with his shoe laces still untied. Another time, he became distressed over a sum of money he had stolen from his father's cashbox as a child and felt he must return it. His father only

⁸⁷ Booy, *Notebooks*, p. 33: Wallington is probably thinking in particular of Gen. iv. 13, in which Cain, after God has cursed him, says 'my punishment is greater than I can bear'.

⁸⁸ Booy, *Notebooks*, p. 38.

agreed to take the money to ease his son's mind. The picture of Wallington's family and community that comes through in this narrative is at odds with Stachniewski's claim that a punitive view of God, and resulting depression, in the puritan community was related to dysfunctional relationships between authority figures and children in this period in England, though, strangely, he uses the incident between Wallington and his father as an example.⁸⁹

The sympathy and patience of family and friends are understandable. It is difficult not to like the sensitive personality that emerges from Wallington's notebooks. His faults were: spending too much time and money on notebooks; having no head for business so that his shop never made much profit, and his apprentice stole from him; and having such an attachment to his young children that their deaths caused him to become distracted again with grief. Although his father's maid must have been a little taken aback by a lecture on the sin of adultery and the danger of lust (a strange kind of chat-up-line) he was not normally censorious, but primarily sought to educate himself before others. When, later in life, he visited others suffering from similar feelings of guilt and despair, he wrote that by giving comfort to others 'I found comfort myself'. His life did not fit with the notion that suicide was the action of a desperado or reprobate mind.⁹⁰

Wallington may have been eccentric, but he was not a lone case. His notebooks provide evidence of the familiarity of suicide to those living in London in the 1630s. In a note to his family he spoke of the 'many' who were 'overcome (through the violent temptations of Satan) to lay violent hands of themselves'. As evidence of this, he kept a record of all the suicides that he heard of that took place between 1632 and 1639. This included property owners such as the master of the Ram's Head Inn in

⁸⁹ Booy, *Notebooks*, pp. 36-40; Stachniewski, *Persecutory Imagination*, p. 99.

⁹⁰ Booy, *Notebooks*, p. 39-45, 59, 210-11; Seaver, *Wallington's World*, pp. 1-2, 26, 67-8, 86-91, 118-20.

Fenchurch Street, who hanged himself, but was found and cut down in time by neighbours. It included a number of men who drowned themselves in the Thames, a widow who hanged herself in a garret in Elbow Lane, and a woman in Blackfriars who poisoned herself. In a particularly gruesome account, another pub owner, who had got himself in trouble with the law, thrust a knife into his stomach. When his wife asked him where his knife was he replied it was in the bottom of his belly, which was where it was found after his death. Suicide couldn't be simply put down to a lack of religion: there were a good number of clergymen in the list.⁹¹

Most of these accounts were hearsay or gleaned from weekly news bills. However, others were closer to home. On a Saturday in June in 1635 his neighbour's maid hanged herself with a garter in a bed chamber of the house. Wallington saw the body hanging there himself. A few days later a case very similar to his own occurred in the next parish. In the early hours of the morning a man called Monke slit his throat and threw himself into the Thames. He was rescued by the boatmen and taken home where he cried that he was damned, that God did not hear his prayers, and begged his neighbours to kill him. A wound was found in his stomach resulting from another suicide attempt. He lay for almost a week 'crying very strangely and hideously' before he died.⁹² As well as keeping these records of contemporary suicides, Wallington copied out the whole history of Spiera's despair as related by Nathaniel Bacon (as mentioned in Chapter Two).⁹³

How did Wallington make sense of these events? In his own case, he regarded the devil as a powerful force in his life and the primary cause of all his troubled thoughts. It was the devil who suggested to him the various means of suicide that he

⁹¹ Booy, *Notebooks*, p. 94; British Library, Sloane MS. 1457 (Nehemiah Wallington, 'God's judgement on Sabbath breakers'), fos. 6(r)-8(r): 'A memoriall of those that laid violent hands one them selves'.

⁹² BL, Sloane MS. 1457, fo. 7(v).

⁹³ Seaver, *Wallington's World*, pp. 200, 202.

attempted. It was the devil who planted the thought in his mind that he should go to the next parish to obtain the rat poison. It was the power of these suggestions that brought him to the brink of despair:

I said of Sathan thoe I escap him now yet surely he will overcome me at last, and then I shall destroy myselfe ... and the longer thou livest the more sinne wilt [thou] commit and then thy punishment will be the grater and therefore destroy thyselfe now and thy puneshment will not be so grate in hell[.]

During a time when he was so distressed he could not eat, his father asked him how he did: 'With that I fell out a crying aloud: and said the Divell will not let me alone[.]'⁹⁴

Attributing suicidal urges to the devil did not exclude more mundane explanations. Wallington saw these states of mind as the result of solitariness and melancholy. He blamed the episode in which he imagined everything and everyone around him, including his shoes, to be the devil, on melancholy. He described another incident that occurred on a day when he was particularly troubled and ran home from church feeling that he could not receive communion:

I went home into my chamber shutting the doore and Knelling down on my knees I poored out my soul to God and cried unto him: to fit me for the next sacramen[t] day[.] I being then troubled in my mind and Mellincollic I did thinke verily that the Divell did apeare unto me flying about the chamber like unto a blacke crooe and saying unto me that I should goe no more and that he could make the tiles of the house folle on me presently and destroy me[.] Then I sayd unto him doe what thou canest Satan. Thou canest doe no more then my God will let thee and if thou doest kill me now: thou wilt but send me to heaven the souner[.] Thus did I walke about the chamber in a tranch [trance] talking with the Divel almost a hower and then sombodi opened the doore and I went down with them[.]⁹⁵

Johnstone has noted that it was not uncommon for Protestants to show this kind of ambivalence concerning the reality of a corporeal devil. Tales of this kind of

⁹⁴ Booy, *Notebooks*, pp. 33-7.

⁹⁵ Booy, *Notebooks*, p. 37-8.

experience might be retrospectively viewed as resulting from fancy.⁹⁶ Wallington says that he saw these things because his mind was melancholy and his trance was broken when another person interrupted his solitude. However, he seems to treat the episode as in one sense a delusion in the mind and at the same time as genuinely significant as a satanic experience. Melancholy and solitude were not alternative explanations, but situations that the devil could use to his advantage, planting lying thoughts and visions in the mind that needed to be countered with spiritual truths rather than simply brushed aside.

Wallington's advice to those who wished to avoid falling prey to the devil's suicidal suggestions was very practical. 'Let us take [heed] of melancholi and solitarines,' he wrote, 'for Sathan workes much upon such. Therefore such persons as love solitarinesse, love not their one soules.' In 1643 he visited a woman who was troubled with feeling that she did not do enough in the service of God. She fasted excessively, believing she was unworthy enough to eat, was in church for whole days and spent hours praying in the middle of the night in freezing cold weather. Wallington did his best to assure her that God did not require of anyone more than they could give and 'prayed her to take heed of weekening her body so that makes her unfit for the sarvice of God'.⁹⁷

Wallington wrote less about the eternal state of the souls of those who committed suicide. However, he was clearly aware of the issues surrounding 'bad death', the need for repentance, and the shamefulfulness of suicide. It was the thought of the reputation of his family and community that prevented him from cutting his throat with a knife:

⁹⁶ Johnstone, 'The Protestant Devil', p. 189.

⁹⁷ BL, Sloane MS. 1457, 7(r).; Booy, *Notebooks*, pp. 210-11.

God of his goodnesse cased [sic] me to consider with myselfe what a grieffe would it be to my brothers and sisters and the rest of my Christian frends and how would this open the mout[h]es of the wicked to speake elle of our profiscion [profession] for thus they would say: looke on theses puritans: see Master Wallington sonn hath killed himselfe and so I should bring a slander upon our religion.⁹⁸

It was these concerns that were the motivating factor in his choice of suicide method. Rather than looking for a quick and painless method, he wanted a slow death that would leave time for repentance and also look the least like suicide so as not to bring shame on his family. He settled on poison, the most notoriously difficult method of killing to detect. ‘This I liked best of all the rest.’ he wrote, ‘For thought I if I doe this it will make me sicke and so die confessing my sinnes and nobodie should Know how I came to be so: but that it is the hand of God I not Knowing what poyson ment.’ The argument that poisoners could not be clearly identified as self-murderers because they could have poisoned themselves accidentally seems to have been a common one. Sym exempted cases in which ‘a man kills himselfe ignorantly ... not knowing the mortall nature of the meanes, whereby he doth it. As he that eates poyson, the nature whereof he knows not.’⁹⁹

In his more lucid moments, the list of suicides that he kept was in a book recording ‘God’s judgements’. These were sudden deaths that had befallen sinners, especially Sabbath breakers and drunkards. Wallington saw them as a demonstration of God’s power to intervene in the world and a reminder of the seriousness of sin. Judgement books have often been seen as a form of ‘othering’ in which the wicked are clearly seen to receive the punishment they deserve. Wallington’s notebook cannot be read that simply. Some of the ‘judgements’ he recorded had no clear reason behind them: ‘unsearchable are his [God’s] judgments,’ he wrote in the preface, ‘and

⁹⁸ Booy, *Notebooks*, p. 35.

⁹⁹ Booy, *Notebooks*, p. 36; MacDonald and Murphy, *Sleepless Souls*, pp. 226-7; Sym, *Lifes Preservative*, p. 173.

his waies past finding out'. This is what Calvin called 'the hidden counsel of God'. It cannot be assumed, therefore, that because Wallington included suicide under his lists of judgements that he therefore believed that all who died by suicide were reprobate. 'Wallington collected stories of suicides,' wrote Seaver, 'not apparently out of morbid curiosity or a sense of superiority, but because he knew their terrible examples were a warning and a lesson particularly for himself. Suicide was a temptation to which the godly, he knew, were particularly prone.'¹⁰⁰

Surveying the disparate cases of suicide, Wallington could see no clear pattern. The first case he recorded was of the Vice Chancellor of Cambridge who hanged himself after being shamed by the King for presenting a play regarded as irreligious. The Vice Chancellor was also believed to have held back money intended for the poor during an outbreak of illness. This had a clear cause. It could be interpreted as a form of judgement for the irreligious play, and for holding back money from the poor, and also seen as a form of pride. In another case, however, a minister hanged himself 'being much troubled in mind about his insufficiency in the ministry'. This looked like a case of an over-scrupulous conscience. Then there was the man who went into a room on his own and ran himself through with a sword. He told his wife that he had not had the intention in his mind when he came into the room, and that, if he could go back, he would not have done it. He died three days later, 'very penitent'. What were the implications of this for the intentions of other suicides who died more quickly? One 'grave ancient professor [of faith] indued with many good gifts that many sought to him for comfort in their troubles' put on his Sunday best, went to his chamber and cut his own throat 'and none cane find out the cause wherefore unto this day.'

Wallington came to the conclusion that the lesson of these events was that if people

¹⁰⁰ BL, Sloane MS. 1457, fo. 3(r); Seaver, *Wallington's World*, pp. 31, 46.

‘that were wise and learned’ could succumb to the temptation to kill themselves, then this was all the more reason for ordinary Christians such as himself to watch over themselves more closely. Secondly, Christians should ‘take heede of judging’.¹⁰¹

The most intriguing hints of his thoughts about the future state of the souls of suicides are contained in a postscript to his family at the end of the notebook containing an account of the suicidal period of his life. This postscript was intended to be read by his family in the event of his death. In this postscript he addressed his own and his family’s fear that he might commit suicide:

For as much as many are overcome (through the violent temptations of Satan) to lay violent hands on themselves: and because I have many sorrows, and am weak, and sometimes I am out of the way you are fearful of me: and I cannot much blame you for it: for sometimes I am fearful of myself, for I have sometimes violent and fearful temptations of Satan.

He reassured his family that God’s grace was stronger than any power of Satan, but he did not completely rule out the possibility that he might take his own life.

Nevertheless, he expressed complete assurance of salvation, whatever the manner of his death. In keeping with the notion, discussed in the last chapter, that for the true believer the whole of life was a preparation for death, he wrote that no kind of death would be sudden to him, adding with characteristic self-deprecation, ‘although I am not so prepared for it as I should be’. Concerning his burial he wrote:

Touching my body, if I die in peace, I desire it may be honestly committed to the earth from whence it came (and to be buried in St Leonard churchyard where my three sweet children lieth) if otherwise let God dispose thereof according to his pleasure: Sure I am that whatsoever become of it here and how vile soever it be by sinne, and the infirmities thereof through sinne, yet it shall be changed and fashioned like to the glorious body of Christ Jesus himselfe according to that his power whereby he is able to subdue and will subdue all things unto himselfe (Philippians 3.21).¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ BL, Sloane MS. 1457, fos. 6(r)-8(r).

¹⁰² Booy, *Notebooks*, pp. 94-5.

In other words, he believed that he would be resurrected however he died and however his body was buried. This is an interesting example of assurance acting as the dominating factor over the general view that suicides were damned.

Conclusion

In their efforts to find explanations for the low number of *non compos mentis* verdicts, Michael MacDonald and Terrence Murphy turned to religious ideology. Their assessment of early modern society's commitment to viewing suicide as a sin was correct. Despite the sectarian pressures of the Marian persecution, those who attempted to argue with the Stoics that suicide could be an honourable or rational decision to preserve personal integrity, failed. In the context of sixteenth and seventeenth-century English orthodoxy, those who thought so could not publish their thoughts. However, MacDonald and Murphy's identification of puritanism as the origin of ideas about sin and the role of the devil has given the impression that puritan preachers were more reactionary than they actually were. A focus on the question of damnation and the distinction Sym draws between 'self-murder' and 'self-killing' gives a different picture. It would be a serious exaggeration to argue that in the 'era of severity' all suicides were regarded as reprobates. This was partly because of the association between melancholy and suicide, which was becoming stronger in the seventeenth century. However, there was more to this story than the growth of medical over religious authority. Faced with the problem of people who fell into despair because of a tender conscience and a fear that they were reprobate, elements within the Church of England itself, including the leading puritan William Perkins,

recognised that there could be no easy distinction between the godly and the ungodly based on suicide.

This corroborates the opinion of R. A. Houston, who writes (based on evidence from Scotland) that ‘committing suicide was no more a necessary sign of being a reprobate than it was an unambiguous indicator of madness, and ways of life rather than means of death were more important in determining the judgement of contemporaries and posterity’.¹⁰³ If Houston is correct in his view that *felo de se* verdicts had more to do with handling the practicalities of property and obligation within a community, than with judging the motivations of those who killed themselves, this would seem a better explanation for the high number of *felo de se* verdicts than a general inability to empathise with those who fell into despair, even to the point of suicide. As Houston argues, and as we have seen from other chapters, a person’s life, rather than the manner of their death, was crucial for many puritans in determining whether someone was elect or reprobate, even in cases of suicide. Here, again, melancholy proved useful in portraying those who succumbed to despair as victims of illness to be pitied rather than derided. Melancholy, together with the suggestions of the devil, were forces external to a person’s soul on which suicidal impulses could be blamed. Those who committed suicide in these circumstances did not fall into the category of Sym’s self-murderers, who were damned.

Examining the views of suicidal people themselves, the doctrine of double predestination appears to have had two quite different effects on the way people experienced suicidal despair. On the one hand, a person who attempted suicide might see their actions as further proof that they were reprobate, and so fall into deeper despair, as with the woman described in the tale told to Dionys Fitzherbert by the

¹⁰³ Houston, *Punishing the Dead?* p. 324.

visitor from Yorkshire. On the other hand, assurance of election was the basis of recovery. When it was suggested to the woman in Yorkshire that it was possible for the elect to fall into the sin of suicide, she recovered from her despair. Although Wallington remained uncertain throughout his life that he would not attempt suicide again, he was comforted by the certainty that he was amongst the saved, whatever the manner of his death. This idea can not be simply dismissed as the idiosyncratic views of a couple of diary writers. Perkins himself suggested that the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints should be upheld even in cases of suicide.

In light of the importance of assurance as the means of recovery from despair in puritan culture, the next chapter will examine how the relationship between melancholy and despair of salvation was affected by the growing unpopularity of that doctrine in late Elizabethan and early Stuart England.

CHAPTER SIX

Robert Burton and the Decline of Assurance

In the previous chapters we have seen how explanations based on melancholy were used to reassure the more sensitive amongst the pious, and to excuse unseemly displays of impatience in the godly, including loss of self-control, or even suicide. In all this, puritans also sought to defend themselves against their critics, whether Catholic or from within the Church of England, who attacked puritanism and the Calvinist theology on which it was based. From the 1580s, criticism from within Protestantism itself became more persistent. Critics of puritanism resisted the preaching of double predestination and the associated culture of searching for signs of election and damnation. They were sceptical about the genuineness of the piety expressed in emotional displays. The anxiety over sin and search for assurance that Foxe had regarded as the sign of true, internalised Protestantism, later sceptics saw as unhealthy self-absorption and crippling emotional excess.

Robert Burton's chapter on 'religious melancholy' has often been seen in the context of this growing hostility towards puritanism. While this view has some merit, this chapter seeks to demonstrate that it is an overly simplistic understanding of Burton's relationship to puritanism, which underestimates Burton's debt to puritan sources. When constructing the final section of the chapter on 'religious melancholy', a section entitled 'Despaire', Burton relied heavily on many of the works of puritan practical divinity that have formed the basis of this thesis.

Some anti-puritan polemic did use medical language and theory, including melancholy, to characterise puritan culture. In these texts puritan behaviour was represented as the irrational consequence of an imbalance of humour. These imbalances created an erratic form of religious behaviour that threatened sanity and social harmony. However, Burton's vision of 'religious melancholy' was only tangentially related to this textual culture of anti-puritan polemic. It is important to stress how different this use of medicine in political discourse was from how puritans incorporated medicine into their own writing. Anti-puritan writing did not address real cases and was not driven by pastoral concerns, except indirectly by weakening support for puritanism, which could rid the country of a religiosity that some regarded as harmful to parishioners. It had no concern with healing, but used melancholy as a trope when it was politically expedient to do so. As we shall see, this was a much less nuanced view of medicine than we have seen in puritan approaches. It eschewed the intricacies of the interaction of spiritual, psychological and somatic causes, found in puritan writing, in favour of a reductionist view of the relationship between melancholy and human behaviour that suggested that the latter was entirely determined by the delusions of humoral imbalance. Burton based his section on despair largely on the nuanced, puritan view, rather than the anti-puritan reductionist view of religious melancholy, and his writing had much in common with the aims of puritan consolation treatises. He sought to understand and reassure, rather than to denigrate.

The crucial difference between Burton's approach and that of his sources was not in his view of the causes of despair, but in his advice about cure. Burton shared the scepticism of many of his contemporaries about the possibility of attaining assurance of election. For this reason, Burton relied more on the advice found in

Galenic medicine on how to deal with dejection, rather than attempting to convince the reader that he was saved.

Melancholy in Anti-puritan Literature

Medicine as a form of stigmatisation or marginalisation grew up entirely separately from the therapeutic connection between melancholy and religion developed by puritan writers in the late Elizabethan period. It was part of reaction against puritan spirituality in general, and the culture of seeking signs of election and reprobation in particular. Pejorative writing about puritans, based on the idea that their behaviour was caused by out-of-balance humours, began almost four decades before Burton published his first edition of *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. If we look first at the political context of the late Elizabethan and early Stuart periods, it will be possible to compare Burton's response to the growing censorship around the issue of election and reprobation, with the more sharply polemical attacks in earlier anti-puritan writing.

Even at the height of their influence, double predestination and the related culture of experimental predestinarianism, as systematised by William Perkins, were never endorsed by the whole of the Church of England. Many continued to reject the idea of absolute reprobation, and were suspicious of any concept of double predestination that appeared to dissociate damnation from punishment for sin. As we saw in the Introduction, when controversy broke out over the subject at Cambridge University, Archbishop Whitclif intervened by writing to the Heads of the Colleges that 'the Scriptures are plain, that God by His absolute will does not hate and reject

any man, without an eye to his sin'.¹ Continental developments also affected English attitudes. The Dutch theologian, Jacobus Arminius, challenged a number of Calvinist tenets such as limited atonement and unconditional election. The Synod of Dort was convened in 1618-19 in an attempt to stop the spread of Arminian ideas across Reformed Europe, but an English delegation sent by James I found it difficult to agree on a number of points – especially limited atonement. These disagreements turned into an open dispute in the 1620s when Richard Montagu published a tract entitled *A New Gagg for an Old Goose*, accusing puritans of being factionalists who threatened the peace and unity of Protestant religion as much as the Catholics did, by their teaching of extreme doctrines such as double predestination. With the accession of Charles in 1625 and the rise of the Laudian party, Calvinists found themselves increasingly sidelined within the Church of England. Historians argue over how significant these divisions were for the outbreak of civil war in 1642.²

In particular, monarchs disliked the discussion and preaching of predestination. Elizabeth I disapproved of the Cambridge debates, saying that predestination was 'a matter tender and dangerous to weak ignorant minds'.³ As tensions mounted, later monarchs became more active in preventing such disputes from spreading. In 1622, James I issued the 'Direction to Preachers', which forbade anybody below the status of bishop or dean to 'presume to Preach in any popular auditory the deep points of Predestination, Election, Reprobation, or of the universality, Efficacy, Resistibility, or Irresistibility of God's Grace [those subjects] being fitter for the schools and universities than for simple auditories'. Four years later, Charles I issued a proclamation 'for peace and quiet in the Church of England' aimed at suppressing the

¹ Quoted in White, *Predestination*, p. 104.

² White, 'Rise of Arminianism'; N. Tyacke, 'Puritanism, Arminianism and Counter-Revolution', in C. Russell (ed.), *The Origins of the English Civil War* (London, 1973), pp. 119-43.

³ White, 'Rise of Arminianism', p. 37.

expression of Arminian and anti-Arminian opinion. In 1628 a second proclamation was prefixed to a reprinting of the Thirty-nine Articles stating that,

in relation to these both curious and unhappy differences, which have for so many hundred years, in different times and places, exercised the church of Christ, we will that all further curious search be laid aside, and these disputes shut up in Gods promises as they be generally set forth to us in the Holy Scriptures.⁴

Michael Heyd has written extensively about the ‘medical marginalisation’ of nonconformity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, after the Civil War, when nonconformist behaviour was depicted as the result of delusions caused by melancholic vapours affecting the brain.⁵ Less attention has been paid to medical elements in anti-puritan discourse before the Civil War. This can be found in the very language of anti-puritanism. Historians have noted that ‘puritan’ was only one amongst many terms of abuse used against reformers, and by no means the most popular amongst all writers. Other pejorative labels included ‘schismatics’, ‘precisians’, ‘new reformers’, ‘curious’ and ‘factious’. The polemicist, Richard Bancroft, in his various diatribes against reformers in the 1580s and 90s, hardly ever used the term ‘puritan’. Instead he called the reformers ‘those of the new humour’, which later became the term ‘humourist’. The medical implications of this term have never been fully explored. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the now obsolete term originated in the 1590s, and referred to ‘A person subject to “humours” or fancies; a fantastical or whimsical person; a faddist.’ In other words, critics of puritanism were suggesting that the puritan form of religion was merely the irrational whims and imaginings of a person whose humours were out of balance.⁶ The label

⁴ White, *Predestination*, pp. 210-11, 244-7, 250-2.

⁵ Heyd, *Be Sober and Reasonable*.

⁶ Collinson, ‘Antipuritanism’, p. 21; entry ‘humourist, humorist, *n.*’ def. 1, in *Oxford English Dictionary Online* [www.oed.com].

became popular and was often associated with melancholy. In *The trial of a Christian estate*, a sermon published in 1618, Paul Baynes warned his listeners:

wee see now that who will keepe life and power in his course, endeavouring a good conscience in all things, they must passe the pikes of evill tongues which are shaken against them. For now such heare, as if they were humourists, new-fanglists, Precisians, proud, singular, simple, melancholike persons.

Those who left behind the strict life of piety demanded by puritanism comforted their consciences with the consideration that they had ‘left nothing but meere curiositie, [and] melancholicke austeritie’. Baynes himself had suffered from Richard Bancroft’s campaign against unlicensed preaching in 1608, and so knew the consequences of anti-puritan feeling amongst the elite.⁷

The strategy of anti-puritan literature was to present puritans as unstable and peculiar in all their thinking and behaviour. Bancroft described them as ‘of a giddy disposition’. Sometimes this could become actual madness: ‘a swelling pride of their own conceits,’ he claimed, in his famous sermon preached at Paul’s Cross in 1588, ‘hath cast them into a kind of frensie’.⁸ Bancroft also accused puritans of hypocritical displays of sorrow over the sins of the Church, designed to manipulate people into following their agenda for reform:

You shall see some, that after they have fet divers great sighes and grones, will presently with great gravitie and drawing out of their words, with a heavy countenance, with casting downe their heads, and with a pittifull voice, breath out malediction, the which men do rather beleeve, bicause [*sic*] it seemeth by such their hypocritical dealing, rather to proceed of a sorrowful compassion, than of malice and hatred.⁹

⁷ P. Baynes, *The trial of a Christian estate: or a discoverie of the causes, degress, signes and differences of the apostasie both of the true christians and false* (London, 1618), pp. 15, 17 [misnumbered as p. 9]; C. S. Knighton, ‘Baynes, Paul (c. 1573-1617)’, *ODNB*.

⁸ R. Bancroft, *A sermon preached at Paule Crosse the 9. of Februarie being the first Sunday in the parliament, anno. 1588* (London, 1588), pp. 60, 65.

⁹ Bancroft, *Sermon preached at paule crosse*, p. 92.

In the following decades, Bancroft's ideas found their way into anti-puritan literature and were represented on the stage. The giddiness of melancholic delusion and hypocritical emotional display was central to the character of Ben Jonson's stage puritan, Zeal-of-the-Land Busy. Busy's zealous defence of religious principles in the play *Bartholomew Fair* (first performed in 1614) culminated in the destruction of a puppet theatre he asserted was idolatrous.¹⁰ Busy was an example of the grotesque character type found in many early seventeenth-century plays – the overindulgent, self-absorbed and censorious puritan hypocrite. Winwife laments, 'we have such a tedious life with him for his diet, and his clothes too; he breaks his buttons and cracks seams at every saying he sobs out'.¹¹ Jonson hints that the real source of Busy's emotionalism is melancholic vapours. As Busy attacks the puppet play, an onlooker observes 'Good Banbury-vapours'. The reference to Banbury could have had a double meaning. Banbury, the town that Busy comes from, was a puritan stronghold. It was also the origin of Banbury cakes, a type of spiced pastry that Bright warned could produce melancholy. Earlier in the play Jonson reveals that Busy's former profession was to bake Banbury cakes.¹² Quarlous sums up the anti-puritan caricature of puritan erratic behaviour in his description of Busy's nature: 'ever in seditious motion, and reproving for vain-glory; of a most lunatic conscience and spleen, and affects the violence of singularity in all he does'. A dysfunctional spleen was thought to be one of the sources of melancholy vapours. In 1539, Thomas Elyot, in *The Castel of Helthe*, referred to the spleen as 'the chamber of melancholy'. This idea was

¹⁰ For links between Busy's character and Bancroft's writings see J. Creaser, 'Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* and Bancroft's *Dangerous Positions*', *The Review of English Studies*, 57 (2006), 176-84; for the link between Busy, anti-puritanism and political events in Banbury, see P. Collinson, 'The Theatre Constructs Puritanism', in D. L. Smith, R. Strier and D. Bevington (eds.), *The Theatrical City: Culture, Theatre and Politics in London, 1576-1649* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 160-63.

¹¹ B. Jonson, *Bartholomew Fair*, ed. S. Gossett (Manchester and New York, 2000), p. 49; K. Poole, 'Saints Alive! Falstaff, Martin Marprelate, and the Staging of Puritanism', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 46 (1995), pp. 54, 64, 68.

¹² Jonson, *Bartholomew*, pp. 54, 186; Bright, *A treatise of melancholie*, p. 27.

still popular in 1665 when the natural philosopher, Robert Boyle, wrote of ‘Fumes of the Spleen, or Melancholy Vapours’.¹³

In Richard Corbett’s poem, ‘The distracted puritane’, the hypocritical display of emotion typical of puritan caricatures became a kind of fetishising of despair. ‘I have been in despair/ Five times a year,’ Corbett’s puritan declared, ‘And been cur’d by reading Greenham’. Having poked fun at the father of the art of consolation, the irreverent poet then went on to lampoon William Perkins and the whole edifice of seeking for signs of salvation and damnation:

I observ’d in Perkins Tables
The black Lines of Damnation:
Those crooked veines
So stuck in my braines,
That I fear’d my Reprobation.¹⁴

Richard Corbett was bishop of Oxford, a royal chaplain, and one of the most popular poets in manuscript circulation in the first half of the seventeenth century. His anti-puritan poems are evidence of the influence of these ideas amongst the political and clerical elite in the 1620s.¹⁵

Corbett’s despairing puritan is more familiar to those who have studied the real suffering of puritans in despair than Jonson’s fat and complacent Zeal-of-the-Land Busy. The introverted, obsessive puritan is a figure of pathos, seeking consolation from works of practical theology that are likely only to increase his despair. Although anti-puritan satirists tended to mock puritans for their hypocrisy, there were also complaints that teaching predestination could lead to genuine cases of illness and despair. We know this mainly from what puritans wrote themselves. In *A briefe*

¹³ Jonson, *Bartholomew*, p. 55; T. Elyot, *The castel of helthe gathered, and made by Syr Thomas Elyot knight* (London, 1539), p. 31; see entry ‘spleen, n.’ def. 1b, in *Oxford English Dictionary Online* [www.oed.com].

¹⁴ R. Corbett, *The Poems of Richard Corbett*, ed. J. A. W. Bennett and H. R. Trevor-Roper (Oxford, 1955), p. 58.

¹⁵ A. McRae, ‘Satire and Sycophancy: Richard Corbett and Early Stuart Royalism’, *The Review of English Studies*, 54 (2003), pp. 336-7, 351-3.

discourse of certaine points of religion, a dialogue published in 1582 as a guide for ordinary people to answer common religious objections, a fictional character called Atheos complained that preachers:

Be overhot and severe and preach damnation to the people.
Likewise they meddle with such matters as they need not, as election and reprobation: what should such matters be spoken of among the people, they make men worse ... But they would drive men to despair, and bring them out of belief with the fear of damnation.¹⁶

In the name of the character, Atheos, we can see again the attempt by puritans to defend themselves against attempts to close down discussions around issues of the soul, election and reprobation, by accusing their critics of atheism. Christopher Haigh has found that dislike of predestinarian preaching was one of the most common complaints of both literary and actual anti-puritans. It was seen as divisive within communities, and a source of complacency, on the one hand, and a cause of despair, on the other. Other complaints about puritan culture were, an overemphasis on listening to sermons and studying scripture, and attempts to restrict sports, games and dancing.¹⁷

The notes of the clergyman Richard Napier (1559-1634), a specialist in treating mad patients, alongside his clerical duties, revealed in his patient notes his opinion that puritan culture was responsible for the distress he encountered in some of his patients. One of his patients was Archbishop Abbot's niece; 'always praying and studying', she had become melancholy and was persuaded that she had sinned against God. Another patient, Goody Bonner, was a sermon follower. She was in despair over her sins and would 'rise at the crying of birds, saying that they cry out against her for her sins'. Napier's notes reveal his distaste for those whose mental distress he attributed to an obsessive religion. He described another patient, Robert Kays, as

¹⁶ Quoted in C. Haigh, 'The Character of an Antipuritan', *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 35 (2004), p. 673.

¹⁷ Haigh, 'Character of an Antipuritan', pp. 678-88.

‘puritanically affected by over-much studying of scripture’. Although MacDonald sees parallels between Napier’s approach to curing despair, and Burton’s, Napier’s dismissive attitudes towards introspective religion could be unhelpful for his patients. As MacDonald notes himself, Kays was very ill and died a few days later. Burton, as we shall see, was more sympathetic towards those who worried over sin and salvation.¹⁸

Despair in Burton’s Chapter on ‘Religious Melancholy’

Robert Burton was writing around the same time that Napier was practising medicine, and some historians have seen similar objections to puritanism, and its effects on the mental health of the populace, in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. Michael MacDonald wrote: ‘Alarmed by the threat posed by the Puritans, Burton declared they suffered from a mental disease, which he named “religious melancholy”, and that they spread this malady to the populace through their fiery preaching’. According to Julius Rubin, Burton used the term ‘religious melancholy’ to pathologise puritans who experienced extreme doubt about their spiritual state, and to undermine puritan preaching in the context of sectarian controversy. ‘Burton identified a new form of spiritual desolation among Puritans,’ he wrote, ‘evidenced in the charges made against them by Catholics and Anglicans during the troubled history of sectarianism and controversy in England in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries [ie. the

¹⁸ MacDonald identified 91 of Napier’s patients who were suffering from religious despair: MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*, pp. 220-1. *The Casebooks Project* at the University of Cambridge aims to have a searchable database of Napier’s notes online by the end of 2012. This will open up another line of enquiry into the link between conscience and mental illness: ‘About the Casebooks Project’, *Casebooks Project* (<http://www.magicandmedicine.hps.cam.ac.uk/about-us/the-project/>) (Accessed 2012-07-02).

charge that double predestination was a doctrine of despair]’.¹⁹ His use of the term ‘religious melancholy’ to describe this pathological state of doubt has also been seen as a secularising influence. John Stachniewski argues that, in order to discredit puritanism, Burton merged the boundaries between the spiritual and the material in a way that placed medicine in ideological opposition to religious authority. Noel Brann also argues that Burton undermined puritan religious authority: ‘Burton goes far,’ he writes, ‘towards obliterating altogether the fine line so carefully drawn between spiritual and natural afflictions by Perkins and Bright’. In this way he is seen as a precursor to the mid-seventeenth-century writers, Meric Casaubon and Henry More, who attributed the actions of extreme Protestant sects to melancholic vapours.²⁰

This focus on anti-puritanism, and the secularising influence of medicine, can give a misleading sense of the novelty of the link that Burton made between melancholy and puritan spirituality. As this chapter will show, Burton’s approach to issues of conscience, despair and melancholy was conservative. In contrast to the reductionist perspective of anti-puritan polemicists, Burton saw terrors of conscience as having a number of causes – somatic, cultural, supernatural and spiritual. Although he was critical of some elements of puritan culture, he drew heavily on the work of Bright, Greenham, Perkins and Abernethy to explain why some people fell into despair. His criticisms had more to do with the current political situation in which double predestination had been called into question, than with a new idea that puritan culture was causing, or was caused by, melancholy.²¹

Burton’s own religious background was complex. His family, like many others in England at this time, had mixed religious allegiances. A number of relations on his

¹⁹ MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*, pp. 223-4; Rubin, *Religious Melancholy*, p. 41.

²⁰ Stachniewski, *Persecutory Imagination*, pp. 226-31; Brann, ‘The Problem of Distinguishing Religious Guilt’, p. 70.

²¹ Burton, *Anatomy*, (3.4.2.6) iii, 425.

mother's side converted to Catholicism, including his uncle Arthur Faunt, a Jesuit priest and godfather to Robert's elder brother William. William had a great respect for his godfather. He also loathed puritans and embraced the Laudian programme to restore the 'beauty of holiness' by refurbishing his own chapel. Angus Gowland considers it likely that Burton's own views on religion reflect sympathy with his brother.²² Burton became a clergyman with numerous livings. He delegated all parish preaching duties to his curates to concentrate on looking after Christ Church library in Oxford. He was probably just the sort of pastorally inactive minister of whom the puritans disapproved.²³ *The Anatomy* has been described as 'unparsonic' in its tolerance and liveliness of tone. In the section on religious despair, and elsewhere in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, Burton made clear his distaste for 'precisianists'.²⁴

Evidence for Burton's anti-puritanism can be seen in a passage in the chapter in which he attacks 'thundering ministers' and predestinarian preaching:

Our indiscreet Pastors ... whilst in their ordinary sermons they speake so much of election, predestination, reprobation *ab æterno* [from the beginning of the world], subtraction of grace, preterition, voluntary permission, &c. by what signes and tokens they shall descerne and try themselves, whether they be Gods true children elect, *an sint reprobi, prædestinati* [or whether they are reprobate, (or) predestined (to damnation)], &c. with such scrupulous points, they still aggravate sinne, thunder out Gods judgements without respect ... they so rent, teare and wound mens consciences, that they are almost mad, and at their wits end.²⁵

Elsewhere he complained of

a mad giddy company of Precisians, Scismaticks, and some Hereticks, even in our owne bosomes ... that out of too much zeale,

²² Gowland, *Worlds of Renaissance Melancholy*, p. 5.

²³ J. B. Bamborough, 'Burton, Robert (1577–1640),' *ODNB*; Jackson, 'Introduction', p. xviii.

²⁴ Jackson, 'Introduction', p. xix; Burton, *Anatomy* (3.4.2.3), iii, 415.

²⁵ Burton, *Anatomy* (3.4.2.3), iii, 415; 'subtraction of grace' refers to the idea that nothing can subtract from the grace freely given to the elect, 'voluntary permission', to the idea that God willingly permits sin, 'preterition' to God's overlooking or omission of some from the elect. Voluntary permission and preterition were ways of avoiding the absoluteness of Calvin's doctrine of God's willing damnation of the reprobate: see R. A. Muller, 'Predestination', in H. J. Hillerbrand (ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation* (Oxford, 1996) [online at www.oxfordreference.com]; entry on 'preterition, n.', def. 3, OED [online at www.oed.com].

in opposition to Antichrist, humane traditions, those Romish rites and superstitions, will quite demolish all, they will admit of no ceremonies at all, no fasting dayes, no Crosse in Baptisme, kneeling at Communion ... things indifferent in themselves ... they abhorre, hate.

This ‘company of giddy-heads’ might also ‘take it upon them to define how many shall be saved, [and] who damned in a parish’.²⁶

That Burton criticised the culture of experimental predestination, while at the same time holding up prominent puritan writers as authorities on the cure of the soul, has caused some difficulty for critics in interpreting this chapter. There have been a number of explanations. Stachniewski argues that Burton was temperamentally and philosophically opposed to Calvinist spirituality, but could not disentangle himself from the grip that Calvinist predestination theology held over orthodoxy in the Church of England. It was for this reason that he turned to medical theory to undermine the culture of fear and despair that he saw around him:

The *Anatomy* registers the authority in Burton’s society of the Calvinist system of indoctrination, documenting its effects, regurgitating its language, and deferring to its leading exponents. It demonstrates the imbrication of puritan culture with the Church of England establishment in the early decades of the seventeenth century, and the difficulty of resisting the Calvinist hegemony.²⁷

Mary Ann Lund disagrees with Stachniewski. She does not see Burton’s consolatory section as expressing a genuinely Calvinist stance, but instead argues that Burton refers the reader to these authorities as a protective device to shield himself from criticism, while allowing himself the freedom to explore other possible avenues of consolation. Central to Lund’s interpretation of Burton is the idea of an ‘inclusive readership’. She compares Burton’s text to Bright’s *Treatise of melancholie* and Perkins’ *Cases of conscience*, which both assume a level of moral virtue before

²⁶ Burton, *Anatomy* (3.4.1.3) iii, 386-7.

²⁷ Stachniewski, *Persecutory Imagination*, p. 253.

offering comfort to the reader. This moral virtue was the evidence of election on which the consolation was based. Consolation was only offered to this select readership that could produce evidence of their election. Burton, on the other hand, attributed to his reader a colourful list of blasphemous thoughts before going on to hold out the possibility of hope to all his readers. At significant points he departed from orthodox Calvinism and borrowed from the Danish Lutheran Niels Hemmingius, to argue that God willed the salvation of all, and offered grace to all who were truly repentant.²⁸

Angus Gowland also regards Burton's section on despair as anti-Calvinist. He sees Burton's reference to the distinction Bright and Perkins made between terrors of conscience and melancholy as 'an insincere sop to the Calvinist theory, which was ignored in a discourse that wilfully fused melancholy and spiritual despair'. Through this pathologising of despair, Burton was able to write a polemical piece against the culture of experimental predestination, while remaining vague about his own theology of salvation. Citing references to Hemmingius and Luther, Gowland suggests that Burton's real sympathies leaned in that direction, although the current political situation made explicit alignment with Arminianism unwise. 'For all his concessions to Calvinism', Gowland concludes, 'Burton's deeper desire was to combat the psychological effects of its conception of human helplessness.'²⁹

Whereas previous scholars have downplayed the Calvinist elements in Burton, in this chapter I wish to explore the debt that Burton's chapter owed to puritan writing. All the explanations mentioned above focus on attempting to discern the theology behind Burton's views of despair, without paying much attention to the significance of his views at a cultural level. As the previous chapters have shown,

²⁸ Lund, *Melancholy, Medicine and Religion*, pp. 51-76; idem, 'Reading and the Cure of Despair'.

²⁹ Gowland, *Worlds of Renaissance Melancholy*, pp. 174-92.

there was much more to puritan experiences of despair and the art of consolation than a narrow theological debate over the finer points of predestination. Burton's comments took in the breadth of religious culture, including practices such as fasting, Sabbatarianism, the role of the devil, and care for the body, as well as theological ideas underpinning these cultural manifestations of religion.

It is important to see the anti-puritan elements of Burton's text in the context of how the political situation of the 1620s and 30s was impinging upon puritan practice and preaching. By the 1620s debate around predestination was causing serious tension within the Church of England, and across Protestant Europe more generally.

Burton usefully summarised the situation:

This furious curiosity, needlesse speculation, fruitlesse meditation about Election, reprobation, free-will, grace, such places of Scripture preposterously conceaved, torment still and crucifie the soules of too many, and set all the world together by the eares. To avoide which inconveniences, and to settle their distressed mindes, to mitigate those divine Aphorismes (though in another extreame) our late *Arminians* have revived that plausible doctrine of universall grace, which many Fathers, our late *Lutherans* and moderne Papists doe still maintaine, that we have free-will of our selves, and that Grace is common to all that will beleve.³⁰

This was then followed by a discussion of the various theological positions concerning the identity and the state of the damned, including universal grace, which he concluded by stating the position found in the Thirty-nine Articles of religion, that God's decree of election was absolute, and that the elect could not fall from grace.³¹ Similarly to his discussion of suicide (discussed in Chapter Five), Burton was able to explore a number of different positions, some heretical, by appearing to endorse the official position of the state Church. He then went on to remind the reader of a current ban on discussions of predestination: 'I might have said more of this subject,

³⁰ Burton, *Anatomy* (3.4.2.6), iii, 436.

³¹ Burton, *Anatomy* (3.4.2.6), iii, 436-8.

but forasmuch as it is a forbidden question ... to avoid factions and altercations, we that are University Divines especially, are prohibited *all curious search, to print or preach, or draw the Article aside by our own sense and Comments*'.³² Here he was referring to the royal proclamation in 1626, and the 1628 declaration, later prefixed to the 1633 edition of the Thirty-nine Articles, that forbade university members from debating any points about predestination not set out in the Articles themselves (discussed above). This included some of the questions that had troubled individuals discussed in this thesis, such as limited atonement, and whether God willed the damnation of the reprobate. Despite Stachniewski's assertion of the existence of a Calvinist hegemony in the early seventeenth century, these questions had not been settled within the Church of England.³³

It was in this context of censorship that Burton was critical of clergymen who preached about the finer points of predestination 'in their ordinary sermons'. By arguing that this could be harmful to the well-being of ordinary parishioners, he was backing up the official position. In other anti-puritan statements he took a similar line. For instance, he argued that Sabbatarians who attempted to prevent sports on a Sunday were also responsible for spreading melancholy. This was a reference to James I's *Declaration of Sports* (popularly known as the 'Book of Sports'), published in 1618, which declared certain traditional pastimes such as May-games, archery and Morris Dancing to be lawful on a Sunday, and chided certain 'precise persons' for attempting to prevent people from participating in innocent recreational activities.³⁴

³² Burton, *Anatomy* (3.4.2.6), iii, 439.

³³ Lund, *Melancholy, Medicine and Religion*, pp. 67-8.

³⁴ P. Collinson, *The Birthpangs of Protestant England: Religious and Cultural Change in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (London, 1988), pp. 137-8; A. Walsham, 'The Godly and Popular Culture', in J. Coffey and P. C. H. Lim (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism* (Cambridge, 2008), pp. 279-82.

The anti-puritan sections of Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* also need to be understood in the context of the satirical perspective of the author. Burton used the pseudonym 'Democritus Junior' after the 'laughing scholar' found in the pseudo-Hippocratic *Letter to Damagetus*. In the ancient story of the physician Hippocrates and the philosopher Democritus, Hippocrates came across the latter sitting in a garden dissecting several animals and laughing to himself. The local townspeople believed that Democritus had gone mad, but Democritus proceeded to convince Hippocrates that it was not he that was mad, but the rest of the world. Democritus had isolated himself in order to study madness and he would go down to the harbour to watch the townspeople and laugh at what he saw. Democritus laughed at the madness of the world in which men were ruled by their passions and not by reason. Likewise, Burton's argument throughout *The Anatomy of Melancholy* was that many of the world's troubles were caused by melancholic passions.³⁵ His was the detached perspective of the philosopher, not that of a preacher or politician. It was in this context that he criticised the lack of balance found in some religious circles. Pride or misdirected devotion was at the heart of many social ills. Speaking of the variety of sects, and the hypocrisy found in contemporary religion, he wrote: 'what dost thou thinke *Democritus* would have done, had he beene spectator of these things?'

Amongst these can be detected the caricature of puritan spirituality, those who

out of hypocrisie frequent Sermons, knock their brests, turn up their eyes, pretend zeale, desire reformation, and yet professed usurers, gripers, monsters of men, harpyes, divels, in their lives to expresse nothing lesse.

However, it was not only puritans and separatists that came under the philosopher's satirical gaze. Other sections of the Church of England ridiculed included 'Formalists' who 'out of feare and base flattery, like so many weathercocks turne

³⁵ Gowland, *Worlds of Renaissance Melancholy*, pp. 8-15.

round'. Here he was referring to those who conformed to whatever religious observances were customary at the time, in the hope of preferment.³⁶

To see Burton's satirical and politically astute representations of puritanism as an innovative use of medicine to marginalise one section of the Church of England does not pay sufficient attention to the philosophical genre in which Burton was writing. Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* cannot be placed in the same category as anti-puritan polemical writing, such as that of Bancroft. It was primarily a satire of human nature, rather than a political satire. Besides, the satirical sections of *The Anatomy* come at the very beginning of Book One, much earlier than the chapter on 'religious melancholy'. Burton's section on despair, which comes at the end of Book Three, is quite different in tone. As Lund rightly notes, to see this section as primarily satirical, or secularising, is a misreading of the text. Burton wrote for entertainment, but he also took seriously the interconnection between the healing role of the physician and divine that had shaped the views of Bright and Greenham before him.³⁷ Looking in more detail at the section on despair, it can be seen how much Burton was influenced by their thinking, and also how far he modified their mode of consolation.

The main sources Burton relied upon for his exploration of despair were puritan writers (especially Perkins and Abernethy), scripture, continental physicians (especially Felix Platter), and continental theologians such as Hemmingius. He began with a description of despair based on Abernethy. After distinguishing between 'holy' despair, that leads to reliance upon God, he explained that he was going to concentrate on 'unholy' despair – a violent passion arising from impatience, terror, and loss of hope in salvation, in which the sufferer could see no remedy but by suicide. Paraphrasing Abernethy, he wrote:

³⁶ Burton, *Anatomy* ('Democritus Junior to the Reader'), i, 41, iv, 73.

³⁷ Lund, *Melancholy, Medicine and Religion*, pp. 112-32.

There is a privation of joy, hope, trust, confidence, of present and future good, and in their place succeed feare, sorrow, &c. ... The heart is grieved, the conscience wounded, the minde eclipsed with black fumes, arising from those perpetual terrors.³⁸

Having begun by defining despair as a passion with both a moral and somatic dimension, he then introduced the third dimension that we have seen at work in early modern understanding of the interaction between melancholy and despair – the spirit world, in which the devil influenced the mind, and hence the well-being, of those in despair: ‘The principall agent and procurer of this mischief, is the Divell, those whom God forsakes, the Devill by his permission layes hold on’. It was in this context that Burton introduced melancholy, as a symptom or a cause of despair, but not independent of the spiritual dimension in which the devil took advantage of the melancholic person’s predisposition to despair. Here he borrowed Perkins’ analogy of black bile as the ‘devil’s bait’. ‘Black choler is a shoing horne,’ he wrote,

a bait to allure them [evil spirits], in so much that many writers make melancholy an ordinary cause, and a symptome of despaire, for that such men are most apt, by reason of their ill disposed temper, to distrust, feare, grieffe, mistake, and amplifie whatsoever they preposterously conceive, or falsely apprehend.³⁹

Although writers such as Gowland have suggested that Burton began with Abernethy and Perkins only to undermine their position later on, he continually returned to the moral and spiritual causes of despair throughout the section, privileging them over the physiological. This pattern can be seen in the next part of the discussion of despair. Having introduced the subject of melancholy, Burton went on to summarise the differences between melancholy and a troubled conscience found in Perkins and Bright: melancholy was a ‘fear without cause’, but sin was the chief cause of despair. As Gowland has pointed out, this section was rather brief. It was

³⁸ Burton, *Anatomy* (3.4.2.3), iii, 411; Abernethy, *A Christian and heavenly treatise*, pp. 367-9.

³⁹ Burton, *Anatomy* (3.4.2.3), iii, 411; Perkins, *Cases of conscience*, p. 191.

cut off by the claim that ‘melancholy alone ... may be sometimes a sufficient cause of this terror of conscience’. To prove this, Burton used examples of the mad behaviour of those who believed themselves to be forsaken by God, observed by the influential late-sixteenth-century Swiss physician Felix Platter (1536-1614). These included the case of a painter’s wife from Basle, who became distracted after the death of her son, and raved for four months that she was damned. Another was a merchant who became melancholy after discarding some grain that had gone bad. He was tormented with guilt for his oversight in not selling it sooner or giving it to the poor, and became convinced that God could not forgive him for the waste.⁴⁰

Observing these patients, Platter had attributed their behaviour to the delusional effects of melancholic madness:

Melancholy, which is named from black bile is a kind of mental alienation [*mentis alienation*] in which imagination and judgment are so perverted that without cause the victims become very sad and fearful. For they cannot adduce any certain cause of grief or fear except a trivial one or a false opinion which they have conceived as a result of disturbed apprehension.

This is the case when they persuade themselves that they are damned, abandoned by God, and are not predestined, even though they had been religious and faithful all the while and when they fear the last judgment and despair, [This] is the most common form of melancholy. In curing it I have been frequently very much impeded.⁴¹

Platter was one of the most influential teachers of medicine in his time. In 1560 he was made professor of medicine at the University of Basel, where he had taught since 1557. This description of melancholy appears in a textbook that he wrote for the instruction of physicians called *Praxeos Medicae*. His works were not translated into English until 1662, but the two works in which he classified and described cases of mental diseases were available in Latin versions published in 1602 and 1614.

⁴⁰ Burton, *Anatomy* (3.4.2.3), iii, 412-13.

⁴¹ Translation by T. F. Heffernan in O. Diethelm and T. F. Heffernan, ‘Felix Platter and Psychiatry’, *Journal of the History of Behavioural Sciences*, 1 (1965), p. 15.

Burton was therefore bringing Platter's ideas into the English language for the first time.⁴²

It was at this point in the discussion of despair that Burton began his famous critique of the puritan culture of meditation upon signs of election and reprobation, hell-fire sermons, sermon gadding and concern with matters indifferent within the Church. However, this section does not need to be read as a rejection of everything that Burton had written in the previous pages. Although the puritan writers were much more careful than Platter to avoid conflating sorrow for sin with melancholic delusion, the previous chapters have shown that puritan writers were very open to the idea that illness, the effects of black bile, and delusion could play a large part in some cases of despair and suicide. Bright described these as 'mixed' cases. Also, Burton was not critical of all aspects of puritan culture; his objections were not directed only towards one group of people, but towards any religious teaching that put too much emphasis on judgement and not enough on hope. He also criticised *A booke of Christian exercise appertaining to resolution* by the Catholic writer Robert Parsons, for being 'too tragicall'.⁴³

Most importantly, this warning against too great an emphasis on judgement was contained within a framework that continued to acknowledge the importance of sin as a root cause of many cases of despair. Immediately after his critique of contemporary preaching and teaching, Burton added a discussion of the effects of a bad conscience. 'The last and greatest cause of this malady', he wrote, 'is our owne conscience, sense of our sinnes, and Gods anger justly deserved, a guilty conscience for some foule

⁴² Diethelm and Heffernan, 'Felix Platter and Psychiatry', pp. 10-11; Burton, *Anatomy* (3.4.2.3), iii, 412, 423.

⁴³ Burton, *Anatomy* (3.4.2.4), iii, 416; R. Parsons, *The first booke of the Christian exercise appertaining to resolution*, 2nd edn. (Rouen, 1582).

offence formerly committed.’⁴⁴ As evidence of this he recounted a number of familiar examples of those who had suffered from despair, nightmares, paranoid delusions, and the haunting of evil spirits as a result of a guilty conscience over some awful crime. Along with Judas and Cain, he included Richard III, and King Kenneth of Scotland, who supposedly murdered his nephew Malcolm. This was the same story on which Shakespeare based his play *Macbeth*. The chronicler George Buchanan, whose history of Scotland was the source for Burton’s inclusion of Kenneth, wrote:

His [Kenneth’s] Mind being disquieted with the guilt of his Offence, suffered him to enjoy no sincere or solid Mirth; but in the Day, he was vexed with the Thoughts of that foul Wickedness, which did inject themselves; and in the Night, terrible Apparitions disturbed his Rest.⁴⁵

Shakespeare, Buchanan and Burton shared the same interest in the idea that the terrors of a guilty conscience could be their own punishment, and a form of indirect divine judgement, explored elsewhere in this thesis. Burton then demonstrated widely held Protestant prejudices by denouncing the Catholic system of penances, which, he argued, soothed the conscience without the proper course of sorrow for sin, followed by repentance and renewal: ‘I see no reason at all why a Papist at any time should despaire, or be troubled for his sinnes’.⁴⁶ Like Dionys Fitzherbert, he saw Catholic religion as providing a false form of consolation.

In keeping with this contemporary preoccupation with conscience, which was not restricted to puritan circles, it is not surprising that in the ‘cure’ section Burton began with the premise that ‘they take a wrong course that thinke to overcome this feral passion by sole Physicke’. On the other hand he advised that ‘they are as much out, that thinke to worke this effect by good advice alone’. As we saw in Chapter Three, this was much the same conclusion that puritan clerics had come to by the late

⁴⁴ Burton, *Anatomy* (3.4.2.3), iii, 416.

⁴⁵ Burton, *Anatomy* (3.4.2.3), iii, 417-8; G. Buchanan, *The history of Scotland* (London, 1690), p. 195.

⁴⁶ Burton, *Anatomy* (3.4.2.3), iii, 419.

Elizabethan period. Burton's advice for cure was very similar to that given by puritan writers – a mixture of physic, repentance, willingness to be guided by a well person's judgement, and hope in Christ. Burton, however, went straight to the heart of why this means of cure was resisted by those who believed themselves to be reprobate. Those in the depths of despair often experienced feelings of emotional deadness and an inability to pray, which they interpreted as a sign that they were reprobate and incapable of true repentance.⁴⁷

In his exploration of this problem, he did depart at some points from puritan discourse. It was here that he made use of Hemmingius, paraphrasing his critique of double predestinarian theology:

Many are called, but few are chosen, Mat. 20. 16. and 22. 14. with such like places of Scripture misinterpreted strike them with horror, they doubt presently whether they be of this number or no, Gods eternall decree of predestination, absolute reprobation, & such fatall tables they forme to their owne ruine, and impinge upon this rocke of despaire.⁴⁸

The reference to the 'fatall tables' was an embellishment of Burton's, which had not been in Hemmingius' original text. Burton very likely intended the reader to think of Perkins' 'Table of causes of salvation and damnation', showing the paths of the elect and the reprobate, in *The golden chaine*, and possibly also a comment made by Laud about the 'fatal opinions' of those who taught reprobation theology. This was a play on words implying both the fatalism of double predestinarian theology and the fatal results of despair.⁴⁹

In a particularly unpuritan moment, Burton urged his reader to avoid this pitfall by following the example of the Collier. In this medieval Catholic tale, the illiterate Collier was challenged by the devil to justify on what basis he could believe that he

⁴⁷ Burton, *Anatomy* (3.4.2.6), iii, 424-9.

⁴⁸ Burton, *Anatomy* (3.4.2.6), iii, 434; Bamborough identifies the passage from Hemmingius: see *Anatomy*, vi, 287-8.

⁴⁹ Stachniewski, *Persecutory Imagination*, p. 240; Perkins, *A golden chaine* (1616), p. 11.

was saved. The Collier replied that he believed as the Church believed. The devil asked him what the Church believed, to which he replied that it believed as he believed. Unable to engage the Collier in dialogue, the devil left him alone. While the Catholic Church held up the Collier as an example of the humble attitude of the faithful, simple people, which kept them safe from heresy, puritan preachers rejected the idea that people could be saved while remaining ignorant of right doctrine.⁵⁰

In other sections, however, Burton returned to the puritan sources. This was reflective of how far puritans themselves had rejected the idea that someone could desire to repent and yet be beyond repentance – in other words, that someone could be a reprobate and be aware of that fact. Burton quoted Perkins’ reassurance to those who felt themselves unable to attain a true feeling of repentance: ‘A desire to repent is repentance it selfe, though not in nature yet in God acceptance’.⁵¹ He also made use of John Downname’s *A Christian warfare* in the section on blasphemy, referring the reader to him for advice on how to overcome the fear that they may have committed the Sin Against the Holy Ghost by thinking blasphemous thoughts. This is the section that Mary Ann Lund argues that Burton added in order to make his consolatory advice more inclusive. However, Lund at times makes too sharp a distinction between the ‘puritan’ reader and the rest of the population. Puritans knew that they were as capable of slipping into unacceptable thinking as their ‘unregenerate’ neighbours, especially in a state of emotional turmoil. One of the questions Dionys Fitzherbert faced in coming to terms with her period of illness was how someone could have uttered the blasphemies that she had, and still be elect. The clergyman who visited her was so shocked to hear a Christian talk in such a way that he doubted whether she

⁵⁰ Burton, *Anatomy* (3.4.2.6), iii, 435; Stachniewski, *Persecutory Imagination*, pp. 249-50.

⁵¹ Burton, *Anatomy* (3.4.2.5), iii, 430.

could be saved. Others, however, were more realistic, as this extract from Downname shows:

But here the poore Christian is readie to complaine, that he is continually troubled with impious thoughts, and horrible blasphemies against God and his holy spirit, which he feareth to be the sinne against the holy Ghost ... he is to know that his state is common with Gods faithfull children, who are thus vexed especially in the conflict of temptations.

Burton made much the same argument, but, being less reticent than Downname, he embellished his account of Christian trials with details of the horrible thoughts he deemed 'not fit to be uttered'.⁵²

An example of where Burton's debt to puritan sources has not been fully realised is in his comments on Francesco Spiera, who he included in the examples of those who had despaired of salvation:

There is a most memorable example of *Francis Spira*, an Advocate of *Padua*, anno 1545, that being desperate, by no counsell of learned men could be comforted, he felt (as he said) the paines of hell in his soule, in all other things he discoursed aright; but in this most mad ... Never pleaded any man so well for himselfe, as this man did against himselfe, and so he desperately died.⁵³

This account of Spiera has been used as an example of Burton's dismissiveness of puritan spirituality and theology, and his use of medical authority as an alternative to spiritual discourse. Spiera's condition was not a judgement from God, he was simply mad in believing himself damned. As we saw in Chapter Two, Michael MacDonald has associated Burton with a conservative Church tradition that saw puritan despair as a mental illness without a religious context. He suggested that Bacon's version of Spiera's story was published as a puritan defence against Burton's position. Anne Overell sees Burton as one of the few who resisted the Calvinist agenda to present

⁵² J. Downname, *The Christian warfare wherein is first generally shewed the malice, power and politike stratagems of the spirituall enemies of our salvation* (London, 1604), p. 655; Burton, *Anatomy* (3.4.2.6), iii, 434-45.

⁵³ Burton, *Anatomy* (3.4.2.4), iii, 423.

Spiera as a dire warning against apostasy.⁵⁴ It is true that Burton's is a very truncated version of Spiera's history. He leaves out the crucial back story of Spiera's moral dilemma and bitterly regretted recantation. It is also significant that Burton did not include Spiera in the examples of those who suffered a guilty conscience as a result of God's judgement, such as Cain and Kenneth. However, it is possible to overstate Burton's departure from his source.

Burton's text was based on Edward Grimeston's English translation of Simon Goulart's *Admirable and memorable histories* (1607). It is possible to detect similar phrases lifted out of the original, especially the words 'neyther was there ever man heard pleading better for himselfe then SPIERA did then against himselfe'. Also the diagnosis of the physicians:

that he was little sicke in body, but grievously in minde: for in all other things he discoursed gravely and constantly, so as none of his familiar friends could decerne that the quickeness of his discourse and reason was any thing impaired or weakened.⁵⁵

Although Burton did not make the same attempt to distinguish between sickness originating in the body, and sickness originating in the mind, he does state that most of what Spiera said was sound. Critics have focused on the claim that Spiera's view of himself as damned was 'most mad' and ignored the first part of the statement, 'in all other things he discoursed aright'. By the 1620s it was not particularly radical to suggest that Spiera was deluded in believing himself to be reprobate. As we saw in the second chapter, in puritan circles the idea that Spiera's case was as hopeless as he himself believed was seen as questionable at best, and had been rejected outright by Perkins.

⁵⁴ MacDonald, 'Fearefull Estate', pp. 50-1; Overell, 'Exploitation of Francesco Spiera', p. 637.

⁵⁵ Goulart, *Admirable and memorable histories*, pp. 188-9, 194. Bamborough has identified Goulart's text as Burton's source for Spiera, but does not elaborate on the similarities between the two texts: *Anatomy*, vi, 280.

Burton's Cure for Fear of Damnation

In the attempt to argue that Burton rejected puritan consolation literature, even as he quoted it and deferred to its authority, the most significant way in which Burton differed from puritan writers has been overlooked. While Burton concurred in seeing sorrow for sin, evil spirits, and fear of judgement as central in understanding the causes and cure of despair, he does not, unlike his puritan sources, base consolation in assurance of salvation. As we saw in numerous cases, assurance was central to puritan narratives, marking the turning point at which a sufferer began the ascent out of despair into spiritual, mental and physical health. Dionys Fitzherbert insisted that the Catholic religion could not ultimately have given her the peace that she craved because its system of penance did not provide assurance of salvation. Thomas Becon argued that Catholic doctrine could not provide genuine relief to those on their death-bed because it denied the possibility of absolute assurance. Not only did assurance give puritans a sense of hope, it also gave them perspective, and a context in which they could place episodes of despair. When a short period of doubt was seen in the context of a whole life that had shown clear signs of election, then it seemed less likely that a person could be reprobate.

Burton's rejection of the culture of seeking for signs of election was therefore his greatest departure from his puritan sources. Burton dealt with the problem of reprobation by persuading the reader that it was impossible to know for sure whether a person was reprobate, and therefore the fear was groundless: 'This grindes their

Soules, how shall they discern they are not reprobates? But I say againe, how shall they discern they are?’⁵⁶

Instead of basing consolation on regaining a sense of assurance of election, Burton offered the model of lack of engagement with theological mysteries, as found in the example of the Collier. Burton was able to justify this position more easily in a medical text than he could have done in a text that was primarily concerned with divinity. He had no need to base his advice on any theology, Arminian or otherwise, as it was in keeping with the Galenic theory of opposites, which taught that an imbalance was best cured by applying an opposing force. Following a long tradition of treatises on melancholy, Burton advised seeking distraction from the original causes of despair. A melancholic person should be discouraged from too strenuous mental exertion, or from dwelling on ideas or objects that were not pleasing or uplifting. We have seen these ideas before in the cures suggested by Bright, but where Bright offered these suggestions alongside urging his reader to seek assurance of salvation, Burton nudged his reader away from such spiritual exercises. His final advice to the melancholy sufferer in the last paragraph of *The Anatomy* was that, if he perceived that his sickness arose from too ‘precise life’ or ‘contemplation of Gods judgements ... reading some bookes, Treatises, hearing rigid preachers’, he should endeavour to remove the cause ‘by all opposite meanes, art, and industry ... Let him read no more such tracts or subjects, heare no more such fearfull tones’.⁵⁷

From a medical point of view, Burton’s advice made more sense than that of puritan consolation literature. Traditional Galenic advice concerning melancholy was based on removing the object of fear from the melancholic imagination through

⁵⁶ Burton, *Anatomy* (3.4.2.6), iii, 434-5.

⁵⁷ Burton, *Anatomy* (3.4.2.6), iii, 445.

distraction.⁵⁸ Puritan consolation, on the other hand, encouraged further contemplation of the object of fear – the question of salvation. Burton, therefore, in the final part of the ‘Despair’ section placed his cure on a footing with general medical advice, rather than spiritual consolation. It was this move that shifted the question of the link between reprobation and melancholy towards Clarke’s concept of religious melancholy, which saw reprobation fears as delusions based in an entirely false theology of salvation, rather than merely a godly person’s false perspective on their own life. Where there could be no certain assurance of election, alleviating the passion became the aim above any spiritual objective.

Conclusion

Burton’s approach to despair had little in common either with contemporary anti-puritanism, or with the later medical attacks on non-conformity identified by Heyd. Burton’s intention in the consolation section of *The Anatomy of Melancholy* was not to disparage those who had fallen into despair – even those whom he regarded as having been overly influenced by an excessively scrupulous religion. Far from stigmatising anyone who feared they might be reprobate, he encouraged his readers to see all forms of despair and doubt as part of the human condition, in which sin, the devil and melancholy preyed on human weaknesses.

Burton shared with his puritan sources the view that despair was caused by a complex mixture of spiritual, psychological and physical circumstances, and that medicine and divinity combined provided the best means of cure. Where Burton

⁵⁸ Burton, *Melancholy* (2.2.6.1), ii, 99-100.

differed from puritan writers was in the weight of blame that he attributed to the preaching of double predestination itself and in the avoidance of the question of assurance altogether. The problem with the puritan cure for despair that rested on God's promises to the elect, was that it failed to follow the theory of opposites. It attempted to heal anxiety over election by encouraging further meditation on election. In an atmosphere of growing anti-puritanism, Burton dispensed with this element that had been so crucial in his sources, and instead relied on traditional advice for avoiding melancholy.

While he did not explicitly reject the theology of double predestination, and distanced himself from the suspect Arminian position, Burton was not what Kendall has called an 'experimental predestinarian'. Instead, he leaned towards the Lutheran position that advised the laity against too much meditation on theological mysteries. His views are reflective, not of innovations in the way medicine conceptualised despair, but of declining confidence in a religious culture that centred itself so much on the need for assurance of salvation.

CONCLUSION

In William Hogarth's 1735 engraving of the interior of Bethlem Hospital, the religious melancholic is depicted alongside other stock characters from the world of early modern madness – the melancholic lover, the raving maniac, the mad philosopher. The emaciated figure lies alone in his cell surrounded by the objects of his religious obsession, lit only by the light of a small, barred window. Gone are the concerned friends and relatives who surrounded the bedside of Francesco Spiera, Dionys FitzHerbert, Thomas Peacock and Katherine Brettergh, and who cared for Joan Drake and Nehemiah Wallington during their period of suicidal despair. Whereas in previous centuries clergymen and physicians sought to understand and console those suffering from an afflicted conscience, by the eighteenth century the religious melancholic is depicted as a figure of curiosity, beyond human compassion and reason. The visitors to Bedlam have paid their penny merely to stare.¹

Historians of madness have found a number of explanations to account for this dramatic change in attitudes towards the sick in mind. Most famous is, of course, Foucault's concept of the Great Confinement, which took place in Western Europe between the mid-seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Before this, Foucault envisages the Middle Ages and the sixteenth century as a kind of Golden Age for madness in which reason and folly were celebrated in poetry and art, and the insane roamed free in society. This world was swept away by the oppressive forces of

¹ W. Hogarth, 'Scene in Bedlam', from *The Rake's Progress* (1735), displayed at *Images from the History of Medicine* (US National Library of Medicine) [<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/hmd/ihm/>].

bourgeois Enlightenment. State-run asylum systems were developed to incarcerate the symbols of unreason that threatened this new system of values.²

Michael MacDonald, influenced by Foucault, takes a similar position when writing about the history of madness in England:

The eighteenth century was a disaster for the insane. Confined to madhouses and asylums, or even to workhouses and prisons, they waited for more than a hundred years before medical men significantly improved their methods of curing mental disorders.³

However, for MacDonald the changes in attitudes towards, and treatment of, insanity were not based merely on a growing fear of a vaguely defined 'unreason', but by the need to repress a particular type of religion. The catalyst for this was the English Civil War. Intent on crushing the religious enthusiasm they blamed for the social and political turmoil of the middle years of the seventeenth century, the ruling elite rejected everything that, in their minds, was linked with popular radicalism, including treatments for insanity based on religious and magical beliefs. Instead, they embraced secular, medical explanations.⁴

Roy Porter in *Mind-forg'd Manacles* modified the 'rise of the asylum' model of the history of madness and psychiatry for England. He emphasises the decentralised nature of treatment for the mad in the eighteenth century, and the diversity of treatments. Included in this range of approaches were the new therapies of the mad-doctors, who claimed some area of expertise, and forms of popular piety, which favoured spiritual healing and exorcism.⁵

Andrew Scull in his history of madness in English society from 1700 to 1900 is also much more cautious than Foucault in his assertions about Enlightenment

² M. Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (London, 2001).

³ MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*, p. 230.

⁴ MacDonald, 'Insanity and the Realities of History in Early Modern England', *Psychological Medicine*, 11 (1981), 11-25.

⁵ R. Porter, *Mind-forg'd Manacles: A History of Madness in England from the Restoration to the Regency* (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), pp. 31-2, 69-73.

approaches to insanity. He highlights, for instance, the fact that very few of the population of lunatics in England in the eighteenth century were confined to madhouses. However, there was a significant change in attitudes to madness in that insanity came to be defined exclusively as an illness that could only be understood and treated by members of the medical profession. Scull links this to wider social changes, such as the dissolution of the monastic orders that had cared for the poor and the sick, and the growth of cities. These alterations in the structure of society encouraged the movement to segregate the mad into specialised institutions in which they were cared for by professionals.⁶ According to Scull and MacDonald, supernatural explanations for madness did not disappear, however, but continued in nonconformist and, later, evangelical circles. Secularisation was a much slower process amongst the lower orders who continued to believe in witchcraft, demonic possession and divine intervention. It was to these classes that dissenting religion appealed, with its message that life was a struggle between the powers of darkness and light, and its alternative forms of healing through prayer, fasting and exorcisms.⁷

So, by the eighteenth century, it is deemed, there were two separate cultural approaches to insanity – the secular, medical approach favoured by the elite, and the miraculous approach of popular religion. Neither of these approaches resembles the puritan approach to consolation that has formed the subject of this thesis. As we have seen, puritans were careful to avoid the pitfalls of seeing the human subject either entirely through the lens of medical theory, or entirely through the lens of providential intervention. They practised what the modern medical profession might call ‘whole-person’ medicine. ‘Whole person’ medicine is an holistic approach to healing that

⁶ A. Scull, *The Most Solitary of Afflictions: Madness and Society in Britain, 1700-1900* (New Haven, 1993), pp. 1-25.

⁷ MacDonald, ‘Religion, Social Change, and Psychological Healing in England, 1600-1800’, in W. J. Sheils (ed.), *The Church and Healing* (Oxford, 1982), pp. 101-25; Scull, *The Most Solitary of Afflictions*, pp. 175-8.

rejects the ‘pathological’ medicine that has gained ascendancy in modern practice. Pathological medicine reduces the person to ‘a collection of separate systems, organs, tissues and cells’.⁸

Puritans saw the person in terms of their natural environment, their spiritual environment, their physiological make up, their personality, and their place in a providential scheme – a view largely shaped by Galenic medicine, as well as their own concepts of spiritual identity (elect and reprobate). All of these factors could cause, or be affected by, sickness in the mind or body. Despair could only make sense if all these factors were taken into account. If an otherwise godly person had blasphemous or despairing thoughts in which they considered themselves reprobate, they must have been placed there by the devil. If a good Christian became deranged, despaired on their deathbed or committed suicide, this must be through the effects of melancholy, and not a conscious choice. These two views of despair were not incompatible because the devil took advantage of weak complexions. These theories were entirely compatible with the theories of contemporary medicine, based on ancient and medieval authorities who saw the world in terms of fluidity between the natural and the supernatural.

Puritans in the Elizabethan and Jacobean period would simply not have recognised the dichotomy between medicine and spirituality that existed in a later period. They would not have seen in nonconformist miracle cures a continuation of their own methods, which were based, not on mystical intervention in any dramatic way, but on teaching the sufferer to distinguish between satanic thoughts, the delusions of melancholy, and the signs of election that could be seen across a life-span. This had implications for the cooperation between medicine and religion. As

⁸ D. Armstrong, ‘The Problem of the Whole-Person in Holistic Medicine’, *Journal of Interprofessional Care*, 1 (1986), p. 29.

Jeremy Schmidt has made clear, they saw their own languages of consolation as a cure for both the soul and the body.⁹ However, this ability to view a person in an holistic way also played a crucial role in sustaining the culture of puritanism itself because it provided them with a way of explaining suicide and despair of salvation in the elect. They saw physiological factors, such as melancholy, as an explanation that could be used to rationalise desperate behaviour in the elect as something external to their soul, and therefore not a sign of their true estate as God's chosen.

The differences between the therapeutic approach of late sixteenth and early seventeenth century puritanism, and the type of miracles that the nonconformists claimed to perform in the late seventeenth century make MacDonald's explanation for the rise of an exclusively medical view of mental illness problematic. Puritan therapy before the 1640s was not a form of enthusiasm. It did not rely on miraculous intervention, it was not reactionary, and it did not reject medical authority. What happened to the holistic form of therapy forged by Bright, Greenham and Perkins?

Although sectarian prejudices played some part, the simple answer to this question is that the circumstances under which puritan consolation flourished were quickly disappearing by the second half of the seventeenth century. The success of the kind of counselling offered by Bright and Perkins was based on the acceptance of Calvinist theology amongst a relatively large section of the Church of England, and on the continuation of ancient and medieval views of the body, the passions and their relationship to the supernatural world. During the seventeenth century profound changes were taking place in both religion and science that would make such views redundant.

⁹ J. Schmidt, *Melancholy and the Care of the Soul*, ch. 3.

This thesis began with a quotation from the eighteenth-century Church of England clergyman, Samuel Clarke, which suggested that reprobation was a false doctrine that led to despair. The declining acceptability of this doctrine can already be detected in our period of study. Censorship around discussion of double predestination in the 1630s delayed the publication of Bagshaw's edition of Bolton's account of the death of his friend Thomas Peacocke at the beginning of the century. It was not only the elite who rejected the astringent demands of Calvinism. Writing the preface to this edition in 1646, Bagshaw looked back on a golden age of practical divinity before 'these present times, in which ... the dreggs of schisme and sinne are come upon us'. Civil War politics was complex and, critical of Presbyterianism, Bagshaw had joined the king's side and been arrested and imprisoned as a traitor, but he was still strongly Calvinist in his ideas about sin and salvation. He complained of the growing popularity of the notion that the saints did not need to repent. 'Neither Mr Peacock,' he wrote, 'nor any of those godly Divines that came to comfort him, knew this kinde of Doctrine; neither we, nor the Churches of God, till within these few late unhappy dayes'. The new ideas of the sects that were growing in popularity cheapened grace and made people complacent about sin by providing consolation too quickly. 'It is no easy matter to go to Heaven,' insisted Bagshaw, '... the safest and surest way to it, is to sayl by the gates of Hell.'¹⁰

The success of puritan consolation lay in its ability to explain how a person who had shown clear signs of election could become mad, desperate, or even commit suicide. They presented such suffering, along with other forms of affliction or sickness, as a kind of severe mercy through which the soul gained a greater sense of peace and assurance. As religion based on seeking signs of assurance of election

¹⁰ Bolton, *The last conflicts*, sigs. A2-A5; Carter, 'Bagshaw, Edward'.

became less popular, so consolation based on assurance became unfashionable. This was one reason for the decline of this therapeutic approach. The second was changes in medicine itself, which undermined the theory of humours on which puritan explanations for despair were based. The Renaissance had given Galenism a temporary boost in academic circles. With a zest for learning and authority, scholars such as Bright, Du Laurens and Burton sought to organise and make accessible to the early modern reader all that was known about melancholy from ancient and medieval texts. This temporary flourishing, however, masked a paradigm shift that was taking place in medicine. Anatomical discoveries in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries brought into question some of the fundamental assumptions of Galenism. The rise of a mechanistic view of the body undermined the whole notion that there was a somatic link between the workings of the mind and dominant fluids in the body. The idea of a melancholic complexion, or illness, which made a person vulnerable to the influences of the devil was lost, along with the idea of the choleric or sanguine person. These ideas, which had formed the bedrock of psychological medicine since ancient times, began to lose their explanatory power in writings on natural philosophy.¹¹

However, although the puritan therapeutic was rejected in academic circles, the Calvinist narrative of sin, despair and redemption did not die out completely in the mid-seventeenth century. Dramatic stories of people who were deeply troubled by their sins, became convinced they had been rejected by God, and eventually discovered grace and mercy, carried on in radical circles, rather than in the writings of mainstream Church of England clergy and their friends. In the 1640s, for instance, the millenarian Sarah Wight experienced a deep depression that lasted four years in which ‘shee remained in grievous horror day and night; concluding shee was a Cast-

¹¹ J. Bos, ‘The Rise and Decline of Character: Humoral Psychology in Ancient and Early Modern Medical Theory’, *History of the Human Sciences*, 22 (2009), pp. 37-45.

away, a Reprobate, walking daily in the midst of fire and brimstone, as one in Hell already.’ She was cured by a miraculous trance in which she was struck deaf and blind for a week. It was through this trance that she received the gift of prophecy.¹² This type of narrative of despair, and its relationship to the previous culture of searching for signs of election and reprobation, needs further investigation, but it is generally lacking the medical comment that was found in the sources that formed the bases of this thesis. It was therefore a reductionist narrative of despair that saw sickness solely in terms of spiritual forces in the same way that mechanistic explanations saw people only in terms of bodily dysfunction.

With this perspective, it is now possible to assess Burton’s place in the rise and fall of the puritan therapeutic approach to despair. Burton’s section on despair in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* marks both the culmination of this approach to despair, and the beginning of its demise. Although Burton has often been seen as the inventor of the concept of religious melancholy, his view of despair looked back on a centuries-old tradition of interaction between Galenic medicine and a universe alive with dark spirits, which had dominated scholastic and early Protestant spirituality. His encyclopaedic work, with its ‘digression on spirits’, explaining the different powers and types of devils, belonged to the old, not the new world. His explanations for despair were based on the popular notion of the ‘devil’s bath’ and the terrors of a conscience troubled by sin. However, Burton’s work is also evidence of the reaction against puritan spirituality that had developed in elite circles by the 1620s and 30s. While he based his discussion of causes largely on what the puritans had written before him, his attack on the preaching of double predestination, on the popular culture of seeking for signs of election, and his rejection of assurance, struck at the

¹² Jessey, *The exceeding riches of grace*, pp. 8, 15-19.

heart of the cure of despair in puritan forms of piety. He also bequeathed to future generations the term ‘religious melancholy’, which was to prove of such polemical value against passionate forms of religion in the later part of the seventeenth century, and which was still in use as part of the nomenclature of psychiatry in the nineteenth century.¹³ Burton’s own views on melancholy, however, were made redundant by the same changes in science that rendered Bright and Perkins curiosities of a past era. While *The Anatomy of Melancholy* survived, its popularity depended upon its literary merits, rather than its authority as a medical text.

¹³ For instance, a picture of a woman wearing a cross, looking dejected, seated with her head leaning on her hand, appeared in *The Medical Times and Gazette* in 1858, entitled ‘Religious Melancholy’: lithograph attributed to W. Bagg, after a photograph by H. W. Diamond, displayed at *Wellcome Images* (part of the Wellcome Collection run by the Wellcome Trust website) [<http://images.wellcome.ac.uk/indexplus/email/255020.html>].

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