

Elizabeth Hunter

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Études Épistémè

Elizabeth Hunter

## The Black Lines of Damnation : Double Predestination and the Causes of Despair in Timothy Bright's *A Treatise of Melancholie*

- 1 Much has been made of the polemical use of melancholy diagnosis to stigmatise dissenting forms of Protestant religion in England in the second half of the seventeenth century. Those groups who refused to align themselves with the official church were accused of promoting “enthusiasm”, a dangerous form of religion that threatened to destabilise the political and social order, and was based in delusional conceits caused by the overheating of the brain. Michael Heyd in *“Be Sober and Reasonable”: The Critique of Enthusiasm in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, argues that this association between passionate religion and melancholy formed part of the “medical marginalization of nonconformists” in this period first recognised by Michel Foucault. The association is seen as significant in the emergence of the Enlightenment, the decline of the belief in supernatural intervention and the development of secular approaches to explaining human behaviour and experience. Its beginning is often traced back to passages from Robert Burton’s chapter on “religious melancholy” in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*.<sup>1</sup>
- 2 This article draws attention to an earlier association between melancholic illness and English dissent, which is not so well known – melancholy and despair of election. Puritanism, a strain of Protestantism that sought to reform the Church of England from within, was active during the reign of Elizabeth I and in the years running up to the English Civil War. It was famously, perhaps infamously, influenced by Jean Calvin’s doctrine of double predestination. According to this doctrine, only those predestined for heaven (the “elect”) could obtain salvation. Although not regarded as heretical, the English authorities were uneasy about the effects of the preaching of this doctrine. Burton in his chapter on “religious melancholy” identified preaching on the subject as one of the causes of melancholic distraction. However, in their own writings, puritans took a more subtle approach to the relationship between melancholia and predestination. They argued that despair had multiple causes, including both sin and an overabundance of melancholy humour within the body that made some people susceptible to doubts about their election. While the doctrine of predestination offered comfort in normal circumstances, for a melancholic person it could be terrifying as the effects of black bile on the brain distorted self-perception concerning the state of the soul.
- 3 In their discussions of the relationship between assurance of salvation and despair the puritans were not the first to introduce the notion of melancholic despair. The first, and most extensive, discussion of the relationship between melancholy and despair of salvation in English writing can be found in a treatise on melancholy published in 1586 by the physician (later Church of England minister) Timothy Bright. While other historians have included Bright in studies of melancholy and practical divinity, the implications of his arguments for the development of pastoral approaches to despair have not yet been fully explored.

### Religious Melancholy

- 4 In order to understand Bright’s importance some background is necessary in contemporary medical theory and the links early modern writers were making between melancholy and impassioned forms of religion. According to contemporary medical theory, black bile could have a number of effects on a person’s thinking and behaviour, depending on the origin and temperature of the imbalance. The character traits most commonly associated with melancholy were apprehension, introspection, and a tendency towards sorrow and ungrounded fears and fantasies. This was caused when a blockage or weakness of the spleen allowed melancholic excrement to disperse throughout the body, mixing with the vital spirits and causing black

fumes to disturb the brain. It was thought to be a common problem for those whose work involved a large amount of reading, such as students or magistrates, as too much agitation of the mind was believed to deplete the natural heat of the body causing it to fall into a dry and cold constitution.<sup>2</sup>

- 5 As well as these common symptoms of fear and sadness, melancholy could present itself in a number of other forms. When black bile was caused by an overheating of choler or the blood (“adust melancholy”) a person became passionate and impulsive. In extreme cases, it produced a kind of mad fever in the brain. At the other end of the humoral spectrum, black bile mixed with cold phlegm could cause a person to become dull and forgetful. Melancholy when at an ideal temperature could have a very positive effect on the mind, enabling a person to achieve great feats of intellect in politics and the arts. Such inspiration appeared to some to have divine origin. The fifteenth-century philosopher, Marsilio Ficino, named this “genial melancholy”.<sup>3</sup>
- 6 Robert Burton made explicit the link between the characteristic behaviour of melancholics and certain religious behaviours and beliefs in a chapter entitled “Religious Melancholy” in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621). This final section of *The Anatomy of Melancholy* is wide ranging both in the behavioural and emotional states it described and in the beliefs it criticised. The first half delineated the symptoms and causes of “religious melancholy in excess”. It is in this section that Burton addressed the subject of enthusiasm, drawing on the traditional connection between divine prophecy and mania. Where Plato and Ficino had seen melancholic frenzy in terms of ecstatic inspiration (a kind of divine gift bestowed upon poets and prophets) Burton depicted impassioned religion in pathological terms. The enthusiast exhibited the impulsive and misguided behaviour symptomatic of fever in the brain caused by melancholy adust.<sup>4</sup>
- 7 It was in the second half of the chapter on religious melancholy, the section on religious melancholy “in defect”, that Burton addressed the problem of despair of salvation. This was a problem that, before the Civil War, was of more interest to contemporaries than the issue of enthusiasm and prophecy. Burton considered the belief that a person was beyond redemption alongside other religious doubts such as atheism. For Burton despair was not simply an emotion, but an illness in which the body as well as the mind was consumed with fear and sorrow. It was also a condition of the soul. Loss of appetite, sleeplessness, nightmares, physical wasting and loss of pleasure in normal pursuits were accompanied by suicidal thoughts and the persistent fear that salvation had become impossible. Some people in this state of mind might become violent towards others, but most often towards themselves. In some cases they believed that their thoughts came from the devil speaking directly to them or that they were possessed by demons. He used as an example the infamous case of an Italian man named Francesco Spiera, who had died of an illness apparently brought on by the belief that he was damned.<sup>5</sup>
- 8 Burton believed that this pain of mind was most often caused by a troubled conscience. However, where there was no wrongdoing to warrant such excessive sorrow, another cause had to be found. Drawing on the writings of the Swiss physician Felix Platter (1536-1614), Burton suggested that an imbalance of the melancholy humour in a person who was particularly religiously observant could cause this kind of distraction. He included a number of cases from Platter’s *Praxeos Medicae*. There was the case of a painter’s wife from Basle, who became desperate after the death of her son, and raved for four months that she was damned. Another was a merchant fell into a melancholic humour 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.<sup>6</sup> 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 *mentis alienatio* [*mental 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.<sup>7</sup>

9 Burton used the case of Spiera and Platter's writing as examples of how the melancholic humour alone could be the cause of ungrounded fears about salvation. However, he also went on to criticise a type of preaching within the Church of England that he believed was exacerbating the problem. He laid the blame for many cases of religious melancholy on ministers of religion whose sermons dwelt too much on the finer points of predestination, complaining of "Our indiscreet Pastors" who

[...] in their ordinary sermons they speake so much of election, predestination, reprobation ab aeterno, 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 [...] they so rent, teare and wound mens consciences, that they are almost mad, and at their wits end.<sup>8</sup>

10 His advice concerning those suffering over this issue was: "Let him read no more such tracts or subject, heare no more such fearfull tones, avoid such companies". To "speedily remove the cause" was the quickest way to cure the disease.<sup>9</sup> This followed typical Galenic advice that melancholy could be cured by distraction from the cause of fear.

11 As Burton was the first writer to fuse together disparate ideas from religious and medical discourse into a single concept of "religious melancholy", he is often regarded as the starting point for all seventeenth-century works dealing with religious melancholy in England, whether the topic was despair or enthusiasm.<sup>10</sup> However, here Burton was joining a discussion that had begun four decades earlier about the relationship between the theology of election, melancholic illness and feelings of despondency that contrasted sharply with the giddy experiences of ecstasy that were the source of Burton's critique of enthusiasm.

## Double Predestination

12 The theology of double predestination was developed by Calvin in *The Institutes of Christian Religion* (1536). According to his interpretation of a number of passages in the Bible referring to salvation only a minority of mankind (the "elect") could gain admission to Heaven through the atonement of the crucifixion. The majority (the "reprobate") were predestined for Hell by an immutable decree of God.<sup>11</sup> This theology was at the height of its influence in England in the late Elizabethan and early Stuart period. The positive side of this theology was the concept of the perseverance of the saints. Those elected could be sure of their salvation, which was not dependent on their own efforts. The famous puritan divine William Perkins called this the "golden chaine of the causes of salvation that can never be broken".<sup>12</sup> *The golden chaine* became the title of a famous collection of his works, first published in 1591. 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. In *The golden chaine* Perkins included "A Table declaring the order of the causes of salvation and damnation" showing the paths of the elect and the reprobate. Another popular work on the subject was Nicholas Byfield's *The Signes*, which ran through five editions from 1614 to 1637. Diary evidence suggests that people really did analyse their emotional lives for evidence that they were among the elect.<sup>13</sup> While Calvin's theology emphasised the omnipotence of God and the immovability of His decrees, this concern with signs of election in practice put the believer's subjective experiences at the centre. Despair took on eschatological significance.

13 Historians disagree over how far double predestination was accepted within the Church of England beyond puritan circles, but opposition existed, especially in the decades leading up to the Civil War.<sup>14</sup> Some were concerned that the idea that a large number of people were excluded from salvation would, in Burton's words, cause the promises of grace to become "smothered and extinct" in doubts over election.<sup>15</sup> Monarchs in particular disliked discussion of the subject, which Elizabeth I described as "a matter tender and dangerous to weak ignorant minds". 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”.<sup>16</sup> Around the same time, the royal chaplain Richard Corbett, one of the most popular poets of the first half of the seventeenth century, wrote a satirical poem entitled “The distracted puritan” making fun of the earnestness with which some people sought for signs to election:

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.<sup>17</sup>

14 Corbett was a student at Christ Church, the same college where Burton was librarian, and became Dean there in 1620. It is possible that Corbett’s influence can be seen in *The Anatomy* where Burton describes the state of mind of those despairing of salvation – “such fatal tables they forme to their owne ruine”.<sup>18</sup>

15 It is not difficult to see why double predestination was seen as morbid and dangerous in some circles. The reprobate was the “dark other” of English puritanism. Diaries and biographies recorded instances of people who became ill or distracted with the fear that they were reprobate. Perhaps it was unfortunate that the famous table in Perkins’s guide book was constructed so that the thick black line down the right side of the page showing the path of the reprobate drew more attention to itself than the thin line of the right showing the path of the elect. Erin Sullivan has discussed at length the visual impact of the diagram, also suggesting that the path of the reprobate could be interpreted as the left hand of God, representing the rejection of that side of His creation.<sup>19</sup> The problem for puritan writers and preachers was that it was impossible to impart to the populace the notion of the comfortable position of the elect without at the same time invoking the terrible idea of irrevocable damnation. On this basis John Stachniewski in his controversial *The Persecutory Imagination* concluded that the doctrine of predestination had a disastrous impact on the psychological health of the population.<sup>20</sup>

16 In the context of ongoing discussions about the signs of election and reprobation, what was the significance of the links made between black bile and despair in contemporary medical texts? Angus Gowland in his work on the intellectual and political background of *The Anatomy of Melancholy* places Burton’s chapter on religious melancholy in the context of a general trend in Europe from the late sixteenth century onwards in which medical discourse on melancholy was encroaching upon areas of divinity. This can be seen in discussions surrounding apparitions and witchcraft in which apparently supernatural experiences and visions were attributed to delusions caused by a depraved melancholic imagination. It can also be seen in sectarian controversy. In Germany Lutherans accused Calvinists of fostering melancholy through their obsession with predestination. Gowland argues that Burton exploited the polemical potential of this association between Calvinism and melancholy in the final chapter on religious melancholy in order to undermine the puritans and increase support for those within the Church of England who, like Corbett, were resistant to further Calvinist influence during the 1620s and 1630s.<sup>21</sup>

17 Gowland, therefore, understands the development of religious melancholy in the context of religious controversy. However, the trend within medicine that Gowland identifies must not be understood solely in terms of resistance to impassioned forms of religion by anxious political leaders. Discussions of melancholy, its causes and effects, were part of a reassessment of despair and its status as a sin that was taking place within Reformed religion itself. The medieval concept of *tristitia*, the sin of loss of hope in God, continued to have a profound impact on the early modern imagination, affecting literature, religious discourse, attitudes and laws surrounding suicide – the ultimate outcome of despair. Early modern people had a horror of suicide, and those who committed it were often portrayed as cowardly and degenerate.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, beginning in the last decade of the sixteenth century, puritan writers responded to the problem of despair by producing long works of consolation aimed at restoring hope to the anxious reader. The central argument of these texts was that feelings of fear and despondency

did not in themselves constitute a sin, but had a number of differing causes and purposes within the spiritual life of a believer. The guilt and terror of a person truly beyond redemption was different from the temporary sense of “desertion” by God experienced by the elect in order to bring them to a right understanding of their sin. With this greater awareness of the sundry kinds of despair, the discerning reader was enabled to diagnose the nature of his own suffering.<sup>23</sup>

18 The popularity of this topic within practical divinity during this period has been the subject of a number of historical studies in recent years. Most extensive is Leif Dixon’s *Practical Predestinarians in England, c. 1590-1640*. Dixon explores the perplexing, and hitherto neglected, question of why so many Church of England clergy were convinced that predestination could offer comfort to their parishioners, and how they attempted to impart this comfort.<sup>24</sup> Other studies of note are an article by Erin Sullivan on the ambiguous nature of despair in Elizabethan texts and Alec Ryrie’s chapter on despair in *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain*. Jeremy Schmidt in *Melancholy and the Care of the Soul* explores puritan practical divinity as a kind of therapy for those suffering from melancholy. These authors seek to revise Stachniewski’s thesis that the doctrine held a vice-like grip on the English psyche, causing nothing but anguish and self-loathing.<sup>25</sup> Part of this discussion, which has not received sufficient attention in the secondary literature on consolation, was an increasing concern with the relationship between illness and desperate behaviour in Calvinist writing in Europe. If desperation was the result of mental or physical imbalance, then the sufferer became less culpable and more worthy of sympathy.<sup>26</sup> This article focuses specifically on the medical dimension of consolation, not because it was the only, or even the most important way in which consolation literature sought to combat despair, but because its significance has been underestimated.

## Timothy Bright’s Consolation

19 Timothy Bright established the pattern of consolation that would later be used in puritan writing. He first rejected the reductionist view of despair as solely the result of bodily imbalances in which sin played no part, but then established that melancholy could play a significant role in unsettling a person’s assurance of election. *A Treatise of Melancholie* was at once a medical text explaining the effects and cure of melancholy and a work of consolation literature, seeking to provide guidance on the various types of despair and their causes. Bright addressed his treatise to a fictional friend “M”, who had become distressed over the fear that he may not be one of the elect:

You feel (you say) the wrath of God kindled against your soule, and anguish of conscience most intolerable [...] & 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.

20 “M” represented a spiritual crisis Bright saw as common at the time of his writing. “In your case”, he wrote, “I also comprehend the estate of many one at this day in like sort affected and afflicted.”<sup>27</sup>

21 Bright’s own theological convictions and his reasons for writing on the topic of predestination are obscure. He wrote the *Treatise* while working at St. Bartholomew Hospital, but he soon after pursued a second career as a clergyman. He had connections with the Reformed church on the Continent. Happening to be present in Paris during the St. Bartholomew Massacre, he 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*.<sup>28</sup> His approach to predestination within the *Treatise* itself suggests Calvinist sympathies. At one point he describes the doctrine as “this most comfortable doctrine, and the firme anchor of our profession”.<sup>29</sup>

22 Perhaps he was joining a debate already taking place across the Continent about the relationship between the body and the soul. The link between melancholy and conscience had been made by Levinus Lemnius (1505 – 1568), whose treatise on the complexions had been translated into English the previous decade. According to Christian ethics, each

person was naturally endowed with a knowledge of the principles of divine and natural law. Conscience was the ability to reason and draw conclusions from this knowledge. Lemnius, in his discussion of the melancholic complexion and associated diseases of the mind, explained that the conscience dwelling on the knowledge of sin could cause a dramatic perturbation of the mind, which would upset the body leading to melancholic madness. He saw this as a natural outworking of the just judgements of God, and took the opportunity to warn the reader of “the panges, vexations, feares and torments of a wicked mynde & of an afflicted Conscience”.<sup>30</sup>

23 Where Lemnius had left the question open, Bright set out to distinguish melancholic illness caused by terrors of conscience from ordinary melancholy. The main distinction was that the emotions of fear and despair symptomatic of an afflicted conscience had a very real basis in the just judgements of God against sinners, whereas the fears of someone suffering from melancholy had no real cause, except the effects of a natural imbalance of melancholy within the body affecting the mind. This distinction was significant because the fears of a melancholic person could be cured by following the principles of medicine that would bring the body and mind back into balance. In contrast, medicine was ineffective where the conscience was truly afflicted. Noel Brann and Angus Gowland have suggested that Bright’s attempt to separate the two emotional states was never entirely successful.<sup>31</sup> However, what was more significant for the future development of spiritual discourse on despair was that Bright argued that in some cases reprobation fears were caused by melancholic illness, or a mixture of melancholy and a troubled conscience. He thus introduced a third type of despair that required an understanding of both spiritual and medical causes.

### The “Weak Christian” and the Melancholic Complexion

24 In order to comprehend Bright’s approach to the issue of predestination, it is important to understand the readership he was addressing. Michael Winship has identified three groups of people that puritan preachers generally had in mind as people who needed to receive their message. The first group was those who had no real interest in religion, but took a shallow assurance of salvation from the Church’s teaching – those called “carnal gospellers”. Puritans aimed to arrest this group from their complacency by reminding them of the realities of sin, judgement and the terrors of conscience. A second group was “backsliders”, who had once been dedicated followers of the faith, but whose religion had become outward show. Much practical divinity was dedicated to revealing the hypocrisy of many who considered themselves true believers. However, it is the third group that Bright appears to have had in mind when he created the figure of “M”. These were “weak” Christians; those who were conscientious, but who found it difficult to believe that they were elect. Bright describes “M” as “a man exercised in the studie of pietie”, but plagued with doubts about the sincerity of his religion and the reality of the promises of salvation. This group required encouragement, and this is what Bright sought to give them by making “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 uppon the poynt of reprobation”.<sup>32</sup>

25 Whereas the puritans were concerned mainly with the spiritual progression of their listeners, Bright gave the “weak” Christian a physiological dimension by identifying him with those who were of a melancholic complexion, or were suffering from melancholic disease. Here he was describing melancholy in its most common pathological form, in which the sufferer became susceptible to unfounded fears and sorrowful moods based on misconceptions of the imagination. His purpose was to convince the apprehensive reader (represented by “M”) that his fears should be attributed to melancholy, and not to a real sense of sin. His arguments were based on the notion that, when the rational faculties were impaired by melancholy, the conscience was obscured, and a person was not able to conceive a correct sense of their own sinfulness. They were, as he put it, “blinde folded by the humour”.<sup>33</sup>

26 Bright initially acknowledged that “M”’s predicament was likely a “mixed” case of melancholy and “terror of God”. Some of his feelings were grounded in an actual knowledge of his own sinfulness. However, he urged him to recognise the symptoms of melancholy in his body: “your swolne spleen, with windnes and hardenes under the left ribbes, the hemeroydes

not flowing according to their usual manner, the blackness and grossness of that blood which hath been taken from you upon occasion". He also assumed that the reader would be exhibiting the familiar symptoms of nightmares, excessive sadness and solitariness.<sup>34</sup> In the context of a treatise largely devoted to explaining the causes and cures of disease, this was a significant attempt to shift the problem of sadness from the spiritual to the medical sphere.

27 Bright then suggested a number of ways in which melancholy could render a person susceptible to ungrounded fears concerning salvation. Firstly, although everybody sinned, and therefore nobody was entirely free from feelings of guilt, a person of melancholic temperament was most vulnerable owing to their natural tendency towards fear and sadness:

Although no man is by nature freed from this affliction [...] yet is the melancholicke person more then any subject thereunto [...] by reason the melancholicke person is most doubtful, & jealous of his estate, not only of this life, but also of the life to come.<sup>35</sup>

28 As Lemnius had suggested, a troubled conscience and fear of damnation could itself be the cause of melancholic disease. The awful anxiety of a terrified conscience, Bright explained, "easily wasteth the pure spirit, congeleth the lively blood, and striketh our nature in such sort, that it soone becometh melancholicke, vile and base, and turneth reason into foolishnesse [...] so easily is the body subject to alteration of minde".<sup>36</sup>

29 Secondly, Bright drew on the association found in medical literature between melancholy and mental or spiritual fatigue. According to a Hippocratic saying, "Fatigue of the soul comes from the soul's thinking". The complexionate melancholic was by nature more contemplative and, when the melancholic humour was moderately heated and stable, particularly suited to subtle reasoning. However, too much thinking on a difficult subject could cause the body and mind to become unbalanced. In the corpus of medical literature on melancholy, religious people were sometimes depicted as suffering from a kind of melancholy that was a cross between lover's melancholy and scholar's melancholy. The ninth century alchemist, al-Rāzī, encountered a melancholic man who told him "I think about God, the exalted, where did He come from? And how did He create the things [that exist?]."<sup>37</sup> "There are very many holy and pious men," wrote tenth-century Jewish physician Ishaq ibn Imran,

[...] 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.<sup>38</sup>

30 Bright placed the idea of the soul's fatigue in a Christian context and linked it to the contemplation of the doctrine of predestination. Owing to their capacity for abstract thought, a melancholic person was more likely to become introspective on the point of reprobation:

Now contemplations are more familiar with melancholicke persons then with other, by reason they be not so apt for action, consisting also of a temper still and slowe according to the nature of the melancholie humour [...] Such except they be well ballaced [*sic*] with knowledge of the Scriptures, and assurance of Gods spirite, are never able to abide the ouglinesse of their sinnes [...] and the narrowe point of reprobation and election propounded unto their melancholicke braines and hearts, and most miserale [*sic*] polluted soules.<sup>39</sup>

31 This was particularly true of someone whose profession involved studying divinity. Reprobation fears in Bright's explanation, therefore, became a kind of scholar's melancholy.

32 Lastly, melancholy could corrupt the imagination and judgement so that a person became fixated on a morbid idea. Renaissance writers were inclined to attribute all irrational obsessions and delusions to melancholy, whether pleasant or otherwise. There was a long tradition in classical literature of stories of the absurd imaginings of melancholics, such as that they'd been turned into glass, that the sky would fall on their heads, that their bellies were filled with mice, serpents or frogs. Many of these delusions revolved around loss of body parts – an arm, a leg, or even a head. They were partly recounted for entertainment, especially in books of jests and strange tales. In Bright's period these tales were often repeated in medical literature as typical melancholic behaviour.<sup>40</sup> If a melancholic person could be so deluded about the material world,



Bright reasoned, then it was likely that they would seriously misjudge spiritual matters also. “It be so with melancholickes”, he wrote,

[as is crediblie recorded in historie] that some have complained they have bene headlesse [...] [do] not rest uppon your deluded conceites, which if you yeeld unto, will perswade you in the ende, that you want both head and heart also.<sup>41</sup>

## The Devil’s Bath

33 It can be tempting to see Bright’s reframing of spiritual despair in terms of physiological processes as evidence that medical explanations for emotional imbalance were replacing divinity. However, this thesis would be misleading. Bright was explicit that, in some cases, the sole cause of despair was “the severity of Gods judgement, summoning the guilty conscience”.<sup>42</sup> The comfortable aspect of the *Treatise* lay in his encouragement of the reader to consider his anxieties as largely melancholic through identification with the fictional character “M”. “In respect of you my deare M. I know this discourse were superfluous”, he reassured him, after describing the pangs of the guilty man, “who standeth in neede of salve to the sore, and beareth not the least touch of this gale”.<sup>43</sup>

34 Another problem with regarding Bright in terms of a conflict between medicine and divinity is that the distinction between natural and supernatural disease was not clear in this period. The demonologist Francesco Maria Guazzo (1570-16??) asserted that it was simplistic to imagine that Galenic theories of the causes of disease disproved the power of the spiritual world. The devil was able to manipulate the humours of the body, or to suggest ideas to the imagination, that would lead to mental disturbance: “Thus he induces the melancholic disease by first disturbing the black bile in the body and so dispersing a black humour throughout the brain and the inner cells of the body<sup>44</sup>”. Even physicians, such as Lemnius, who argued for a materialistic approach to diagnosis and cure of diseases were ambivalent over whether or not imbalances in the body or mind could be exacerbated by demonic interference. André Du Laurens (1558-1609) in his *Discourse of Melancholike Diseases* wrote that the imagination of a melancholic person could become disturbed in three ways: by an imbalance in the constitution of the body; by a violent passion of the mind; or by the “intercourse or meddling of evill angels”.<sup>45</sup>

35 Demonic beings were believed to be particularly attracted to interference or possession of those of melancholic complexion because of the darkness of black bile.<sup>46</sup> It was a proverbial saying that “a melancholy head is the Devil’s bath”. In particular, the devil took advantage of the natural tendency of melancholics towards fear and sorrow. Medieval scholars had believed that the devil suited his temptations to individual complexion, so in the fifteenth-century English treatise *Agayne Despayre*, the devil assails those tending towards dryness and melancholy with thoughts of despair. Bright drew on these ideas to add to his argument that melancholics were prone to despair of salvation. Melancholy, he wrote was “like a weapon taken into Sathans hand [...] the very seate of the devill being an apt instrument for him, both to weaken our bodies with, and to terrifie our minds with vaine, & fantastickall feares, and to disturbe the whole tranquillity of our nature”.<sup>47</sup>

36 Bright was unclear about the exact nature of the demonic contribution to feelings of despair. He wrote that temptations, including the temptation to despair of God’s help, came from one of three sources: a person’s natural disposition, corrupted by original sin; the external pressures of worldly pleasures or dangers; and the malicious schemes of Satan, the worst of which was corporeal possession, but could also take the form of external assaults. Later Burton’s own account of the “devil’s bath” would contain similar ambiguity:

[...] this humour invites the Devil to it, wheresoever it is in extremity, and, of all the other [humors], melancholy persons are most subject to diabolical temptations and illusions, and most apt to entertain them, and the Devil best able to work upon them; but whether by obsession, or possession, or otherwise, I will not determine; ‘tis a difficult question.<sup>48</sup>

37 However, the temptations of godly people should be distinguished from the many accounts of physical manifestations of the devil, or cases in which a person’s body was believed to be

controlled by witchcraft or satanic possession.<sup>49</sup> By “temptations” Bright was referring to the intrusion of demonic thoughts into the mind of the believer. Satan’s ability to terrify the mind of “weak” Christians lay in his capacity to lie, twist and distort the truth so that an otherwise godly person was tempted to doubt his elect status based on an exaggerated sense of his own sin. Bright made use of a common argument in Elizabethan Protestant divinity that the godly were particularly susceptible to satanic temptations to despair because they possessed a tender conscience, whereas an irreligious person was blind and unfeeling where sin was concerned. On the basis of this argument despair in the godly could actually be a sign of election.<sup>50</sup>

38 With the cheering thought that Satan’s attacks upon the body and mind in fact constituted grounds for hope, Bright promised “M”: “I will endeavour to loose the holde your melancholic hath layed upon the assurance (as you take it) of reprobation”. This was a tactic that would become common in puritan approaches to consolation. Jeremy Schmidt has written about the importance of the idea of “the devil’s bath” in spiritual advice to the melancholic. As the devil worked primarily through suggestions planted in the mind, the disease could be turned around through theological argument and spiritual consolation. Assurance of election became a “language of dispossession” designed to cure demonic afflictions of conscience.<sup>51</sup> Timothy Bright was the earliest extant writer in English to identify this problem of a troubled conscience caused by the temptations of Satan upon a mind and body weakened by an excess of melancholy.

## The Cure of Despair

39 There was a significant difference between Bright’s approach to predestination and Burton’s later assessment. In the 1620s, in an atmosphere of increasing tension in Protestant Europe over the issue of predestination, Burton sided with the growing group within the Church of England who believed that the culture of searching for signs of election was a damaging and needless part of religion.

This furious curiosity, needlesse speculation, fruitlesse meditation about Election, reprobation, free-will, grace, such places of Scripture preposterously conceived, torment still and crucifie the soules of too many, and set all the world together by the eares.<sup>52</sup>

40 The whole question of predestination was best left alone, or to theologians. Bright, writing in the 1580s, was not suspicious of the preaching of predestination itself. It was only the distortion of the doctrine in the fragile mind of a conscientious believer suffering from an imbalance of black bile and vulnerable to the suggestions of Satan that posed a problem.

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.<sup>53</sup>

41 The introduction of the idea of melancholy affecting the brain complicated, but in some ways strengthened, the system of basing confidence of salvation in signs of election. Bright acknowledged the problem of subjectivity, especially at a time when the Galenic view of the interconnectedness of the body and the mind dominated both popular and learned culture. His solution was not that the sick reader should abandon the subject altogether, but should trust in memories of previous evidence of election, and in the judgement of friends who could testify that their behaviour was consistent with that of a true believer. The “tryall of faith” (discernment of election), he wrote, was not to be based entirely “according as the soule feeleth it in it selfe”, but also on

[...] 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 [sic] terrors.<sup>54</sup>

42 This, together with “such natural means” as would restore the body and mind to health, would bring the sufferer out of despair.<sup>55</sup>

43 Bright’s identification of melancholic illness as a possible cause of reprobation fears was crucial for the development of pastoral approaches to this issue within the Church of England.

If doubts over election were the product of a sick mind and body, they were not a true sign that a person was damned. In the last decade of the sixteenth century, and throughout the seventeenth century, English divines incorporated melancholy into discussions of predestination and despair. This took on different forms depending on the author's theological sympathies. William Perkins used arguments very similar to Bright's to distinguish between the just judgements of God against sinners and the effects of melancholy that could lead the elect to doubt their salvation. Robert Bolton also listed ways in which melancholy and true afflictions of conscience could be recognised, but expressed deep offence at the notion that preaching or reading scripture could cause melancholy. The melancholic should look to prayer and Bible reading for comfort and assurance, not avoid the issue of salvation in order to temporarily feel better, as some were suggesting. Like Bright, these puritan writers were not dismissive of the signs of election or the terror of the damned, but advised that the reader be aware of the distorting effects of an imbalance of humours on the brain when considering their own estate.<sup>56</sup>

44 In the second half of the seventeenth century, as the doctrine of predestination fell out of favour, reprobation fears were viewed as a sign of a weak mind rather than a spiritual trial that could befall the elect. Richard Baxter wrote that it was easy for a "weak-headed" person to fall into melancholy by "over-straining either their *Thoughts* or their *Affections*". This "diseased crazynes, hurt, or error of the *imagination*" was very different from those who were "rationally sorrowful for sin". One sign was that "They are oft tempted to gather despairing thoughts from the doctrine of *Predestination*." An echo of Bright's character of "M" can be seen in Jeremy Taylor's "scrupulous man", who was prone to religious melancholy, "timorous, and sad, and uneasy, and he knows not why". John Moore advised, "When you find these Thoughts creeping upon you, be not mightily dejected, as if they were certain Tokens of your Reprobation"; they depended mainly upon "the indisposition of the Body". Samuel Clarke included amongst his list of causes of "religious melancholy" "An Apprehension of being excluded from Mercy, by some positive Decree and Fore-appointment of God".<sup>57</sup>

45 By the later seventeenth century, therefore, the influence of Burton's view of the doctrine of double predestination as a cause of melancholy had become dominant. Reprobation fears joined with enthusiasm to form the diagnostic category "religious melancholy" that incorporated all emotional experiences of religion that Restoration society regarded as excessive. In many ways the association between melancholy and spirituality became less, rather than more sophisticated. Bright and his puritan successors took into account the multifaceted nature of despair as both a destructive force on the mind and body and a positive sign of a faith that was not complacent. They did not simply dismiss melancholic persons as irrational, but as "weak" in their faith and requiring the aid of both medicine and divinity to regain assurance. While religious melancholy would later become a derogatory description for those who took fear of damnation to excess, the discussion was begun by the scrupulous themselves. The motivation for writing about the body and the part it played in emotions of fear and dejection was the need to find a "cure" for doubts over election.

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### Notes

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4 For further discussion of Burton's treatment of enthusiasm and his sources see Michael Heyd, 'Robert Burton's Sources on Enthusiasm', art. cit.

5 Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. T. C. Faulkner, N. K. Kiessling and R. L. Blair, commentary by J. B. Bamborough, 6 vols., Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989–2000, iii., p. 408-445, esp. 420-423. On the Spiera case and the texts that made him famous throughout Europe see M. Anne Overell, 'The Exploitation of Francesco Spiera', *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 26, 1995, p. 619-637; Michael MacDonald, 'The Fearefull Estate of Francis Spira: Narrative, Identity, and Emotion in Early Modern England', *The Journal of British Studies*, 31, 1992, p. 32-61.

6 Burton, *Anatomy*, ed. cit., iii, p. 412-413.

7 Translation by Thomas F. Heffernan in Oskar Diethelm and Heffernan, 'Felix Platter and Psychiatry', *Journal of the History of Behavioural Sciences*, 1.1, Jan. 1965, p. 10-23, here p. 15.

8 Burton, *Anatomy*, ed. cit., iii, p. 415.

9 *Ibid.*, iii, p. 445.

10 Holbrook Jackson, 'Introduction to the 1932 Edition', in Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. Holbrook Jackson, 1932, New York, New York Review, 2001, p. xxiv; Michael MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam: Madness, Anxiety, and Healing in Seventeenth-Century England*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981, p. 223-225; Julius H. Rubin, *Religious Melancholy and Protestant Experience in America*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 5.

11 Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J. T. McNeill and trans. F. L. Battles, Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1960, p. 936-40; Rom. 11: 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. 1: 4-12, John 15.19. It is debatable whether Calvin intended predestination as a topic for ordinary preaching. The *Institutes* warns that "Human curiosity renders the discussion of predestination, already somewhat difficult of itself, very confusing and even dangerous.", p. 922-923.

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- 23 Perkins, *op. cit.*, p. 674-84. MacDonald's article on Spira is again useful as it traces the reader-response over one and a half centuries from condemnation to identification with his despair, MacDonald, art. cit.
- 24 Dixon, *op. cit.*, p. 1-7.
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- 33 *Ibid.*, p. 233.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 191-192.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 198-199.
- 36 *Ibid.*, p. 195.
- 37 *Ibid.*
- 38 Entry on 'al-Rāzī', *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (2012), online edn 2015, <http://academic.eb.com/EBchecked/topic/492607/al-Razi>, last accessed 19 November 2015; 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 '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, 1955-1957, i, p. 68-69. Jackson, *op. cit.*, p. 58-59; Noga Arikha, *Passions and Tempers: A History of the Humours*, New York, Ecco, 2007, p. 57, 160.
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- 41 Bright, *op. cit.*, p. 215-216, 237.
- 42 *Ibid.*, p. 190.
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47 The idea of the “Devil’s bath” is a refrain in Burton, *Anatomy*, ed. cit., i, p. 193, 428, iii, p. 361, 411, 433. John Bamborough includes the proverb found in H. Walther’s twentieth century compendium of 150,000 medieval proverbs in his commentary on Book One of *The Anatomy of Melancholy*: Burton, *Anatomy*, ed. cit., iv, p. 235; Snyder, art. cit., p. 38; Bright, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

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50 Bright, *op. cit.*, p. 207-209, 216-217; Schmidt, *op. cit.*, p. 49-64; Nathan Johnstone, ‘The Protestant Devil: The Experience of Temptation in Early Modern England’, *The Journal of British Studies*, 43.2, Apr. 2004, p. 173-205, esp. p. 192.

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52 Burton, *Anatomy*, ed. cit., iii, p. 436.

53 Bright, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

54 *Ibid.*, p. 224.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 224, 238.

56 William Perkins, *The whole treatise of the cases of conscience distinguished into three books*, Cambridge, 1606, p. 191-199; Robert Bolton, *Instructions for a right comforting afflicted consciences*, London, 1631, p. 197-209. See also Richard Sibbes, *The soules conflict with it selfe and victory over it self by faith*, London, 1635, p. 21-22. In 1613, just before his death, Bright also published a second edition of *A Treatise of Melancholie*, possibly as a response to the growing need for consolation literature, although the sections on the afflicted conscience remained largely unaltered.

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### ***Pour citer cet article***

#### Référence électronique

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### ***À propos de l’auteur***

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### ***Droits d’auteur***

Études Épistémè

### Résumés

## Les Lignes Noires de la damnation : la double prédestination et les causes de désespoir dans *A Treatise of Melancholie* de Timothy Bright

La relation entre la mélancolie et l'enthousiasme religieux en Angleterre a été l'objet de nombreux travaux d'historiens. Cet article examine un type moins connu de mélancolie religieuse, la crainte de faire partie des réprouvés, c'est-à-dire de ceux qui ne sont pas prédestinés au salut. Alors que Robert Burton a identifié, dans son *Anatomie de la mélancolie* (1621), la terreur de la damnation comme une forme de la folie mélancolique, le médecin Timothy Bright avait développé avant lui une approche plus fine des causes de ce désespoir dans son *Traité de la mélancolie* publié en 1586. Il propose de voir dans la doctrine de la prédestination une théologie du réconfort qui peut se renverser et terrifier les personnes sujettes à la mélancolie, comme l'humeur noire agite l'imagination et rend le patient susceptible de visions démoniaques. Bright a transmis aux pasteurs puritains l'idée que la mélancolie est une cause de l'angoisse spirituelle, et ces pasteurs l'ont incorporée dans leurs ouvrages de consolation adressés à tous ceux que faisait souffrir leur conscience malheureuse.

The relationship between melancholy and religious enthusiasm in England has been the subject of a number of historical studies. This article examines a lesser-known type of religious melancholy, the fear that one was among the reprobate (those not predestined for salvation). Whereas Robert Burton in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* identified reprobation fears as a form of melancholic madness, the physician Timothy Bright developed a more subtle approach to the causes of despair in *A Treatise of Melancholie*, published almost four decades earlier. He argued that although the doctrine of predestination was in general a comforting theology, it could be terrifying for persons subject to melancholy as the humour distorted the imagination and made the sufferer susceptible to Satanic suggestions. Bright bequeathed the notion of melancholy as a cause of spiritual anxiety to puritan ministers, who incorporated it into works of consolation for those suffering from an afflicted conscience.

### Entrées d'index

**Mots-clés** : Mélancolie religieuse, Timothy Bright, littérature de consolation, double prédestination, désespoir, Robert Burton, Réforme anglaise

**Keywords** : Religious melancholy, Timothy Bright, consolation literature, double predestination, despair, Robert Burton, English Reformation