

Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band: 30 (2014)

Artikel: Feeling dreadful : fear and therapy in The Scale of Perfection
Autor: McCann, Daniel
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-583883>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 18.04.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Feeling Dredeful: Fear and Therapy in *The Scale of Perfection*

Daniel McCann

Fear, as understood by medieval medicine, is a dangerous and potentially lethal passion of the soul that ought to be avoided. Yet while both academic medical texts and vernacular regimens of health stress the dangers of fear, medieval theology holds a very different opinion. As popular devotional materials and complex theological treatises make clear, fear is uniquely suited to promote the ultimate health of the soul – its *salus* and union with God. This paper will explore how medieval theology reconfigures fear as a passion of the soul that edifies and promotes health. Focusing upon the connection between emotion, medicine and religious literature in late-medieval England, the paper will explore *drede* – or fear – and its therapeutic uses in Walter Hilton’s *The Scale of Perfection*. This text is remarkable not simply for its widespread dissemination, but also for its sophisticated comments regarding *drede*’s utility. It identifies *drede* as a means of altering the soul in specific and highly desirable ways, as an initial means of returning the soul to God by promoting the key virtue of *kenosis* or *mekenesse* within the very construction of the soul itself.

Introduction

Hys sorwful hert gan faste faynte
And his spirites wexen dede;
The blod was fled for pure drede
Doun to hys herte, to make hym warm—
For wel hyt feled the herte had harm. (Chaucer ll.488-92)

Emotion, Affect, Sentiment: The Language and Aesthetics of Feeling. SPELL: Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature 30. Ed. Andreas Langlotz and Agnieszka Soltyś Monnet. Tübingen: Narr, 2014. 89-107.

The Man in Black is feeling seriously unwell. The symptoms and cause of his illness are listed by Chaucer: “pure drede” has overcome the character. Drede, or fear, is dangerous due to the cardiac and pneumatological changes it causes. It weakens the pulse, cools the body, contracts the heart, and hinders the circulation of vital spirit and blood to a potentially fatal extent. Its effects cause a humoral imbalance that Chaucer, blending medical knowledge with poetic purpose, evokes in the description of the character’s skin pigmentation – he turns green “[a]nd pale, for ther noo blood ys sene / In no maner lym of hys” (ll.498-499).¹ Though poetic, such a description is wholly consistent with medieval medical understanding. Drede, according to the period’s key medical compendia the *Articella* and *Pantegni*, was a passion of the soul that should be avoided. Both these Latin compendia deal with the physiological consequences of fear – variously termed *timor* or *metus*; drede being the Middle English equivalent.²

In contrast to medical literature, medieval devotional and religious materials express a very different opinion. These sorts of texts view fear more positively, rendering it as a tool of emotional/spiritual cleansing that can enable union with God. Walter Hilton’s *Scale of Perfection* (circa. late1380s) is an excellent Middle English example of one such text. Unlike the medical literature of the time, the *Scale* renders drede not as something to be avoided but as an instrument that can purify the heart, cleanse the soul, and encourage humility. As I shall argue in this essay, the *Scale* identifies drede as the cure for mankind’s emotional pathology – as a therapy that enables purity of heart, humility, and “reformynge in feelynge” (2.557).³ But, before examining the *Scale*’s use of drede, I shall provide some context by discussing the understanding of fear within medieval medical and religious literature.

¹ The breadth of Chaucer’s scientific knowledge has been documented well; for an overview see Glending Olson’s “Geoffrey Chaucer.” I am grateful to Professor Vincent Gillespie for drawing my attention to the complexities of this passage and for his insightful comments on an earlier draft; see his “Dead Still/Still Dead.” Also, Professor Peregrine Horden has illuminated the medical significance of this passage in his “A Non-Natural Environment” and has been generous with advice. Additional thanks are owed to Professor John Thompson (Director of the Institute for Collaborative Research in the Humanities, Queen’s University Belfast), and Professor Malcolm Andrew for reading earlier versions of this article. Finally, thanks are owed to the Leverhulme Trust for funding my research.

² I was able to find a number of synonyms in the Middle English Dictionary that share in the meaning, such as *ane*, *ei*, *ferde*, *ferdeleik*, *ferdnesse*, *ferdship*, *ferfulli*, *frai*, *gastli*, *gastnesse*, *hidour*, *radnesse*, *reuli*, and *ugginge*.

³ Henceforth quoted as *Scale* with book and line number.

Reforming Feelings

It is unity, not division, that defines the medieval understanding of the human being. Body and soul are subtly blended into an interconnected system with changes in one aspect causing changes in others. As the emotions are one such aspect, they are of considerable importance, a fact made clear in the medical compendia mentioned above. The *Isagoge ad Technē Galienae* of Johannitius classifies them as one of the *res non naturales*, or “non-natural things” (Wallis 146). These form a category of six factors which determine health, such as the “air and the environment, eating and drinking, exercise and baths, sleep, coitus, and the ‘passions/accidents of the soul’” (Horden, “Religion as Medicine” 143). The last factor refers to the emotions and presents them as variable states that the soul is subject to, and that have a direct physiological impact. Specifically, they cause the body’s natural heat and energy to contract or diffuse (Wallis 146). Thus the experience of the passions is both psychological and physiological, causing specific changes in the movement and quality of the body’s various fluids.

Constantine of Africa’s translation of the *Pantegni* provides more detail. It establishes a connection between the passions and the internal movement of vital spirit to or from the heart – the organ responsible for its generation. Joy (*gaudium*) and anger (*ira*) are centrifugal and cause vital spirit to move from the heart to the body’s extremities; distress (*tristitia*) and fear (*timor*) are centripetal, causing vital spirit to retreat to the heart (Harvey 25). Joy and distress work slowly, while anger and fear work rapidly. The medical consequences are far-reaching. If vital spirit rushes out from the heart, the organ weakens while the body’s extremities overheat and desiccate. Conversely, if it rushes to the heart, the extremities cool and become deficient in vital spirit. In both cases humoral imbalance occurs thus increasing the likelihood of disease (Rawcliffe, “The Concept of Health” 330). By extension this will impact upon the subsequent production quality of natural, vital, and animal spirits.⁴ Compounding all this is the danger of habituation. The natural reciprocity between the passions and their somatic consequences causes certain forms of feeling, and certain physiological states, to become habituated and potentially permanent (Harvey 19). As some of these states are conducive to disease or characterised by high morbidity, the dangers posed by certain passions are clear.

⁴ For a survey of the medical significance of emotions and theological engagements with them, see Knuuttila, *Emotions* 214-15.

Fear, given its rapid and potentially fatal effects upon the body, is in many ways the most dangerous. It is for this reason that these medical compendia recommend its opposite – moderate joy – as the passion most conducive to good health. Similar recommendations are found in medical regimen texts aimed at a more general audience; these were often in high demand after occurrences of the plague (Bonfield 241). For instance, the Middle English translation of the *Secretum Secretorum* emphasises the therapeutic significance of joy, extolling its readers to be “mery and glad . . . and beholde delitable bokes” (Manzalaoui 59). In the same way, John Lydgate’s *Dietary* stresses the importance of “a glad hert,” because “care-a-way is a good medycyne” (ll. 62-65). A clear consensus emerges: fear is dangerous and ought to be avoided, and the other passions of the soul must be regulated to ensure good health.

While this is the case for medical knowledge, medieval theology views fear as something positive – as a passion of the soul that can lead to God. This is all the more remarkable given the close relationship between science, medicine and theology during the period.⁵ The medieval definition of health demonstrates this most clearly: the Latin *salus* is a complex concept encompassing both health and salvation. Yet, despite the overlap, there is a considerable gulf between the medical and theological understanding of fear – negative in the former and positive in the latter. The precise reasons for this dichotomy lie beyond the scope of this essay. It is clear, however, that fear shifts dramatically in its significance. It moves from being an aetiology for various psychosomatic problems towards a tool or instrument of treatment for mankind’s post-lapsarian state of illness.

Unsurprisingly, this positive attitude towards fear is inherited from the Bible and early Church writings. Both the Old and New Testament frequently mention fear. It is to be reserved only for God (Jeremiah 5:22, Isaiah 8:12-13), an experience that initially brings wisdom (Psalms 111:10, Proverbs 9:10, Job 28:28), but ultimately cleansing and spiritual perfection (2 Corinthians 7:1). Such utility is explored and extended by key thinkers in patristic theology. For Clement of Alexandria fear is central to an advanced Christian life. Each person begins by fearing God’s Law and His punishment, characterised as the fear of a slave or *timor servillis*. From there, the person progresses to the fear of sin and the reverential fear of God’s awesome nature, characterised as the fear of a son

⁵ For an overview of the interaction between theology and medicine during the period see Peter Biller and Joseph Ziegler. For more detail on the scientific aspects of theology see A. J. Minnis, and A. B. Scott 197-212.

towards his father or *timor filialis* (Clement of Alexandria 2.12). St. Basil, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus develop its programmatic utility further. They combine Christian anthropology and Platonic psychology to render fear as a means of perfecting the soul: it helps restore the soul's divine image, cleanse it from sin and further mitigate the disastrous consequences of the Fall (Basil 889-1,052; Gregory of Nazianzus 813-51; Gregory of Nyssa 2.320). Fear becomes an instrument of therapy, a tool for cleansing the soul and restoring its original state of operation. In this sense, it is a restorative treatment that returns the soul to a state of order. Ultimately, this would result in the soul being restored so much to God as to share in His being – a deifying process termed *theosis* (Knuuttila, *Emotions* 128). Fear is thus a process as much as a passion, facilitating better moral behaviour and an increasingly intimate relationship with God.

During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries these patristic discussions receive fresh philosophical and methodological interest. The understanding of the soul's programmatic ascent, and the role the passions play in that process, is reinvigorated due to the widespread dissemination of the medical compendia mentioned above, and the translation of Avicenna's works on the soul. Such knowledge allows the abstract aspects of Christian mystical and spiritual experience, and the preparatory benefits attributed to fear, to become conceptually grounded within intricate medical frameworks. New understandings of the soul's relation to the body arise and provide clearer ways of articulating the precise psychosomatic mechanisms by which, and through which, the soul is cleansed and brought closer to God (Knuuttila, *Emotions* 178). Treatises such as William of St Thierry's *On the Nature of the Body and the Soul*, Hugh of St Victor's *The Union of Body and Spirit*, and Alcher of Clairvaux's *The Spirit and Body*, are all sophisticated examples of the fusion of medical and theological knowledge. They contend that the vital and animal spirits are the medium through which the body and the soul are subtly interconnected. They are the point of contact between the corporeal and the incorporeal, and so play a pivotal role in the operation of the body, the cognitive faculties and, by extension, the higher powers of the soul. Crucially, the quality and nature of these spirits are themselves affected by the humors and, more broadly, the regulation of the non-naturals:

Each spirit, whether it be animal, vital, or natural, although all their substance is from the subtle parts of the humours, yet has its own complexion by reason of the proportion of the quantities of the subtlety of the humours, and of the form of the mingling.

(Avicenna, *De medicinis cordialibus*; quoted in Harvey 25)

Given such interconnection, there exists the tantalising possibility of manipulating the soul through manipulating its basest aspect – the body’s pneumatological system. Medieval theology, therefore, embraces contemporary medical knowledge to construct a methodology for the proximal treatment of the soul. As the heart is the organ which generates vital spirit, and the passions of the soul are physiologically constituted by the movement of vital spirit, the instrumental value of fear begins to become apparent. Careful modulations of it cause predictable cardiac and pneumatological changes. These changes will in turn alter the quality of the body’s vital and animal spirit, refining them, and thus refining the operation of the soul and its higher powers – changes which can become habituated through frequency. Such refinement is essential for advanced access to God. As St Bernard notes, “the heart must be cleansed if the soul is to see God” (89). In his influential *Speculum Naturale*, Vincent of Beauvais emphasises the connection between the vital spirit and God, noting that within the soul “God is there as a [principle of] life, that is, he vivifies the soul . . . is inside [the soul], for he is united with it and poured into it” (quoted in Caciola 282). Unity with God, according to such medically informed theology, requires a pneumatological transplant – the gradual refinement and eventual replacement of vital spirit with the Holy Spirit. Fear, due to its psychosomatic effects, works to purify the heart and the vital spirit, thereby facilitating the possibility of divine contact.

Its utility in theosis, though very much at the initial stages, becomes increasingly clarified. Later writers, such as John Blund, John of La Rochelle, and Isaac of Stella, offer increasingly sophisticated engagements with Avicenna’s faculty psychology. Their works offer new taxonomies for the soul and its powers, and address its disordered state following the Fall. They contend that the concupiscible and irascible powers in the soul contain specific emotional responses and states, and schematise them into opposite pairs. Fear’s utility rises even higher here, as the passion becomes directly connected to the irascible power of the soul and can therefore play a key role in restoring its prelapsarian functional order. It can do so because one of the key motive acts of the irascible power is humility or “poverty of spirit” or *paupertas spiritus* (John Blund 20.25-21.7; 25.4; John of La Rochelle, *Summa de anima* II.107.50-91, and

his *Tractatus de divisione multiplici potentiarum animae* 143.205; Isaac of Stella 153-77). Such humility is the foundation of *kenosis* – the Christian ideal of “self-emptying” exemplified by Christ that must precede any theotic union with God. Another key motive act, penitence or *paenitentia*, is also evoked by fear. As a direct part of the soul’s irascible power, fear therefore facilitates the emergence of an emotional complex within the soul, enabling states that constitute “various forms of the flight from evil” and are vital for an advanced Christian life (Knuuttila, “Emotion” 435). While it is still a dangerous passion, fear nevertheless becomes rendered as a preparatory treatment – one of the initial steps in the soul’s programmatic reformation that can help further theosis. In this sense medieval theology draws from medical knowledge to render fear as therapeutic if correctly directed and controlled.

All these theological texts are primarily theoretical in nature; others are more practical. Just as medieval regimen texts distil academic medical knowledge into mnemonic guidance for healthy living, medieval manuals of meditation, contemplation, pastoral care and catechetical instruction are themselves distillations of advanced theological materials. Such texts are practical guides for those embarking on the initial to advanced stages of Christian life and function as regimens of the soul designed to promote its ultimate *salus*. In later medieval England a wealth of these texts can be found. Due to the labours of medieval scholars such as John Blund, Robert Grosseteste and Roger Bacon, advanced speculation on the soul’s ascent developed in Paris finds a home in Oxford, and becomes part of the innovative and “increasingly forensic pastoral care of the thirteenth- and fourteenth-centuries” in England (Gillespie, “Thy Will Be Done” 101). I shall now turn to one Middle English example that clearly sets out drede’s importance for bringing the soul closer to God – Walter Hilton’s *The Scale of Perfection*.

Regimens of the Soul

Directed to a “goostli suster in Jhesu Crist,” the *Scale* is a didactic text from the fourteenth century designed to help its reader advance in his or her spiritual life. It consists of two books which differ in terms of length and complexity, and were probably written at different points in Walter Hilton’s religious life and career.⁶ Despite these modest differences, both books deal with a central issue: the gradual reformation and restoration of the soul to the image and likeness of God; a process consisting of two interrelated stages. The first is the most uncomplicated and is termed the reforming in faith; the second is much more complex and difficult and is termed the reforming in feeling and faith. A central feature of the *Scale* is thus a marked interest in the psychological and emotional disposition of its intended recipient. The text’s discussion of “affecciouns,” “feelynges,” and “mekenesse” is a clear sign that its spiritual advice is directly concerned with how best to govern and regulate the passions and powers of the soul.⁷ To a large extent, therefore, the text can be considered as a regimen of the soul: the *Scale*, like the medical regimen texts mentioned earlier, offers practical advice on how to promote “goostli hele” (1.1233).

Achieving such a state of health requires not just sacramental and liturgical observance, but also the programmatic experience of precise emotional states designed to alter the soul. This reforming in feeling and faith is a long-term goal that requires constant effort, yet it all begins with a key passion of the soul – drede. It is through drede that the benefits of an advanced Christian life can be realised: it purifies the heart and soul, encourages a Christ-like humility, and – should grace be granted – facilitates a much closer relationship with God. However, before the text extols the benefits of drede to the reader, it makes it very clear why it is needed in the first place: the soul is sick and damaged almost beyond repair. The precise cause of the soul’s affliction is simple – original sin, or “synne.” It is due to such synne that the soul is “wel foule disfigured and forschapen with wrecchidnesse” (1.2418-9) and “forschapen fro the kyndeli schap of the ymage of Crist” (1.2587-8). Synne thus occludes and defaces the image of God in the soul. Yet it also goes much further, and through it mankind is “forschapen like to a beest; with

⁶ For an overview of Hilton’s life and career, see John H. P. Clark. For a richer understanding of the text’s influence and use in a variety of pastoral contexts, see Gillespie’s “Idols and Images,” also Jeremy Catto’s “1349–1412.”

⁷ These terms possess a wider semantic range and, broadly speaking, cover a multitude of interconnected cognitive and perceptual processes within the mind.

whiche beestli clothis we alle aren born, and umbilapped and disfigured from oure kyndeli schaaap” (1.2426-7). In this sense, synne is much more than an abstract theological concept, and instead operates like a leprous disease: synne is debilitating and deforming, it corrupts the soul’s order and nature, and blights the body through deforming the soul (Rawcliffe, *Leprosy* 71-3). Hilton foregrounds this sense of a complete pathology by noting not just how synne occludes the image of God in the soul, but also how it compromises its functional order:

For thou schalt undirsronde that a soule hath two parties. The toon is called the sensualite; that is the fleschli feelynge bi the fyve outeward wittes, the whiche is comoun to man and to beest. Up the whiche sensualite, whanne it is unskilfulli and unordynateli rulid, is maad the image of synne, as I have bifore seid, for than is the sensualite synne, whanne it is not rulid aftir resoun. (2.658-62)

Synne causes deformity through disarray: its presence subverts the natural hierarchy within the soul, causing the lesser sensuality to run amok and strive for control. The soul’s rational part, which “schulde be maister and sovereyne, and that is propirli the ymage of God” (2.664) is thus compromised and unable to properly govern this lower part. The result is a soul ruled not by reason, but rather disordered desire. The overall results of this deformity are a state of defective cognition and an emotional pathology – the soul no longer loves virtue, but instead delights in improper pursuits and is divided against itself. There are now “two lawes in a soule” (2.499) – God in the reason and synne in the sensuality – which are opposed and keep the soul in a state of perpetual inner conflict. In its original state the soul was “the moste worthi creature that evere God made” (2.686) and so “schulde noo thinge loven and liken but oonli God” (2.688-9). After synne, however, it has become so contorted and deformed that it “cheseth his reste and his blisse in a passynge delite of an ertheli thinge” (2.694-5). The internal operation and order of the soul has become compromised to the point that it desires the wrong things: its affective power is now wholly disordered and misdirected, so much so that an emotional pathology blights the soul. In short it loves itself, not God.

Hilton makes the disastrous consequences of this affective disorder quite clear. He asserts that synne is “a fals mysruled love unto thisilf. Oute of this love cometh al maner of synnes bi sevene ryveres, the whiche aren thise: pride, envie, ire, accedie, coveitise, glotony, and lecherie” (1.1556-8). From self-love comes a host of additional sins. Thus, a “mysruled” affection is a vicious circle that exists as the foundation,

cause and consequence of all further damage to the soul. It is little wonder then that the text places such emphasis on reforming the feelings and re-aligning the affections towards God. The soul's deformity and sickness through synne are what the text seeks to remedy, and it provides a two-tiered process for doing just that. The first stage is the reforming in faith which "mai lighteli be geten" (2.466), as it comes from the saving work of Christ's Passion. It requires simply faith in Christ and the Church and receiving the sacraments. However, while this mitigates the disastrous consequences of synne, the affective and cognitive deformity still persists. It is the second stage, the reforming in feeling and faith, that addresses the remaining problems. Unlike the first, this stage "mai not lightli be geten, but thorough longe traveile and mykil bysynesse" (2.857-58). Treating the affective disorder of the soul is a long-term process which begins with the programmatic experience of a specific passion of the soul – drede.

Over the course of the text, the reader is encouraged to appreciate drede's complexity and utility. It must, like all the passions of the soul, be directed towards its proper object – God. From the very outset of the text a contrast is established between the self-focused and self-loving "dredis of alle ertheli thynges" (1.21) and the correct drede of God; with the stipulation that an advanced spiritual life requires the reader to become "as it were deed to alle ertheli loves and dredes" (1.7-8). The distinction between them is not affective but rather object-orientated. As a passion of the soul, drede operates within the same psychosomatic parameters as set down by medieval medicine; what differs, and what is key here, is the focus of that drede. When directed towards earthly/non-spiritual matters it is part of those "fleschli desires and veyne dredes, that risen oute of thi herte thorough corrupcioun of thi fleschli kynde" (1.7-8). Such drede is a species of pride and self-love – and all love must be reserved for God alone. Drede of God, therefore, is by its very nature self-less, as the passion's object is not the self but instead wholly another.

The text, drawing from those theological materials mentioned earlier, makes the further distinction between *timor servillis* and *timor filialis*. It notes that, initially, the drede of God takes the form of "drede as a thral" (2.3319). This is the "fear of slaves," of those who "dreden Him as man" (2.1991-2) and "thenken thanne that God is wrooth with hem as a man schulde be yif thei hadden trespaced agens hym" (2.1993-5). Only later, after much effort and grace, may the person progress to the more advanced "fear of sons." It is a state consisting of a different relationship to God, in which the person "maketh him His freend bi trewe

acord, and therefore as to a trewe frend that pleseth Hym with love, not serveth Him bi drede as a thral" (2.3318-9).

The text, however, does not rest here, but offers a sustained metaphorical treatment of drede that emphasises its instrumental potential in reforming the soul. Sin which arises from self-love – the “stirynges of pride, envie, veynglorie, or ony othir” (1.2560-1) – can be stopped and contained if confronted with drede:

Agenstonde it, and folwe hit not neither in word ne in deede, as moche as thou mai, but as he riseth smyte him doun agen; and so schalt thou slee it with the swerd of drede of God, that it schal not dere thee. (1.2557-60)

Endowed here with a martial force, drede is a potent passion of the soul that acts as a targeted treatment for synne. Such a metaphorical rendering is wholly consistent with contemporary medical knowledge, as the forceful, violent and potentially dangerous aspects of drede are encapsulated with this image of a sword. Yet it is also highly precise. Drede does not run rampant, but targets synne and strikes it down alone. Within the context of this metaphorical presentation, therefore, there is the implicit idea of surgical precision and directed therapy: drede of God works curatively by removing only sins. A more domestic metaphor reinforces this function. In a passage which compares the reader’s soul to a house for God to live in, Hilton states that “thou schalt cast oute of thyn herte alle sicke synnes, and swepe thi soule clene with the besome of the drede of God” (1.1407-09). Drede is likened to a broom that cleanses and purifies by removing corruption from heart and soul. This metaphor, in particular, conveys a crucial point: drede purifies the heart. Drede can do this because it directly and precisely targets the sins arising from self-love; sins which the text asserts come from a specific place:

Badde thoughtes and unclene affeccions comen oute of the herte, the whiche filen a man, as oure Lord seith. Thei owthere bynemen the liyf of the soule bi deedli synne, or ellis thei feble the soule and maketh it seek, yef thei ben venial. (1.2500-02)

Such a statement distils complex medical knowledge and theological speculation into accessible advice. It highlights in succinct form that many of the soul’s problems stem from its basest aspect – the heart, or seat of the soul. While synne damages the soul in specific ways, its pernicious effects are total. The whole soul is damaged by synne, from its highest affective and cognitive powers to its lowest cardiac and pneumatological aspect. Purifying the heart, therefore, is a matter of some ur-

gency. If left unchecked, synne will continue to contaminate and infect the soul, and so the text offers practical solutions to achieve purity or *clennesse*. While Christ's Passion and the sacraments are the most important forms of initial treatment, it is drede which takes the cleansing process further. Like a sword, it will cut out those sins and contaminating affections, and so purify the heart. Since "her is moche pride hid in the ground of thyn herte, as a fox daareth in his den" (1.1824-5), the reader must "gete clennesse of herte bi distroyng of synne" (1.637-8). Drede specifically targets these sins – it is instrumental in enabling purity of heart.

Clennesse is vitally important for those wishing to join with God in theosis. As the text makes clear via a Biblical quotation, it is not only a state to aspire to but also a condition to be met – "Blissid be the clene of herte, for thei schullen see God" (1.346-47).⁸ The goal of seeing God, therefore, first requires purification: "the more clene and sotil that the soule ys maad . . . the scharpere sight it hath and the myghtiere love of the Godhede of Jhesu" (2.2201-203). Drede helps realise this goal, as it purifies the basest aspect of the soul – the heart and its vital spirit – and makes it more suitable for God. Yet, such purification is only the initial therapeutic function of drede; at this stage it treats the symptoms of the deformed soul, not the cause. There is another level to its healing work that is more expressly concerned with effecting changes in the soul, with reforming it:

[W]hat that thou feelist, seest, or smellest or savours, withouten in thi bodili wittes, or withinne in ymagynyng or feelyng in thi resoun or knowyng: bryng hit al withynne the trowthe and rulis of Hooli Chirche and caste it al in the mortar of mekenesse and breke it smal with the pestel of drede of God. (1.619-23)

The totality of perceptual, cognitive, and psychological being must be submitted not just to the rules of the Church, but also to the reforming power of drede. Its therapeutic instrumentality is brought to the fore here by use of a sophisticated medical metaphor. It is likened to a pestle, to a common tool used to prepare medicinal ingredients. Such a rendering conveys how drede functions therapeutically: it is an instrument of reformation, as the pestle works by grinding down what it touches. In this sense, drede functions literally to reform the deformed psychology of the reader – it grinds it down into a "pouder" that can then be burnt "in the fier of desire, and offre it soo to thi Lord Jesu Crist" (1.623-4).

⁸ A similar quotation from the Beatitudes occurs in 2.569-71.

However, it can only carry out this reforming work when used with another instrument – the mortar of mekenesse. Only when drede is combined with the virtue of humility – or mekenesse – can it take the deformed soul and reform it into something acceptable to God. Both are complimentary; the pestle of drede only works when used with the mortar of mekenesse.

The metaphorical context conveys this sense of interconnected function: they are instruments of reformation that must be used together to achieve their therapeutic effect. Drede, therefore, cannot be separated from mekenesse – both must be used to reform the soul. The course of treatment is clear. Only drede removes the damaging pride that blights the soul, and thereby encourages the virtue of humility. As the text asserts, “for but yif a soule be first smyten doun fro the heighte of itsilf bi drede . . . it is not able to suffre the schynynges of goostli light” (2.1586-9). Without drede there can be no humility – no mekenesse – and without mekenesse the soul can never move closer to God:

Upon whom schal My spirit reste? And He answereth Himsilf and seith:
upon noon but upon the meke, poverli and contrite in herte and dredynge
My wordes. Thanne yif thou wolt have the spirit of God rulynge thyn herte,
have mekenesse and dreede of Hym. (1.528-31)

An over-arching condition is set: only those who achieve the precise emotional states specified in the Beatitudes are worthy to have God inhabit their hearts. Drede and mekenesse are forever connected, yet they differ in terms of their therapeutic function. With drede, the sins arising from self-love are treated and purged from the heart; with mekenesse, self-love is targeted. Purifying the heart is one thing, and an initial stage at that; joining with God in theotic union is quite another. To achieve such a state, the soul must undergo a further and more radical treatment carried out by mekenesse:

The trewe sunne of rightwisenesse, that is, oure Lord Jhesu, schal springe to yow that dreden Him; that is, to meke soulis that meke hemself undir her even Cristene bi knowynge of here owen wrecchidnesse, and casten hemself doun undir God bi noghtynge of hemself in here owen substaunce thorough reverente drede and goostli biholding of Him lastandli, for that is perfight mekenesse. (2.1593-97)⁹

⁹ This is another Biblical quotation that Hilton is explicating, specifically of Isaiah 66.1-2.

Treatment now moves from purification to reformation. The “noghtynge” of the soul, a process of kenotic self-emptying, must be undertaken by those wishing to unite with God. It is the very essence of mekenesse, and it is dependent upon drede. The passage stresses their interdependence and interconnection – only the “reverente drede” of God can engender a mekenesse in the soul which empties it of self-love and self-absorption. In this sense the text distils advanced theological materials which, as mentioned earlier, make an explicit connection between fear and humility. As fear belongs to the irascible power, and humility – or poverty of spirit – is localised to the contrary disposition of the irascible power, drede and mekenesse thus reside within the same system. By using drede, the soul can be manipulated or influenced in specific ways – it can be purified in a pneumatological sense, and then treated and partially reformed through the mekenesse that drede engenders. The *Scale* foregrounds the reforming power of this course of emotional therapy. From the outset, the reader is encouraged to “turne thyne herte with thy body principali to God, and schape thee withinne to His likenesse bi mekenesse” (1.14-15), to “breke thisilf in mekenesse” (1.627), and to “be first reformed bi fulhed of mekenesse and charitee to the liknesse of Jhesu in His manhede” (1.2607-9). Mekenesse is understood to reshape and remodel, to alter the soul in the best possible way. It is “soothfast and medicynable” (2.1151-52), as it “maken good acord in the harpe of thi soule” (2.1145-46) – it takes the deformed and disordered soul and brings it back into a state of harmony. Specifically, mekenesse realigns the soul’s affective power towards its proper object, replacing self-love with love of God:

Mekenesse seith, I am nought, I have nought. Love seith, I coveite nought but oon, and that is Jhesu . . . The lasse thou felist that thou art or that thou hast of thisilf thorough mekenesse, the more thou coveiteste for to have of Jhesu in desire of love. (2.1143-9)

The “noghtynge” of the soul is as much a process of affective restructuring as it is of self-emptying. It is a course of treatment that removes the “fals mysruled love unto thisilf” (1.1556) which is the cause and consequence of synne. In its place a profound love of God emerges that works to remedy the soul’s principal deformity – its misaligned affective power. By loving God rather than itself, the soul is brought back to its proper order with its affective power disciplined and re-directed towards its creator. Such a restructuring of the soul will also work to eliminate sin and beget virtue. As the cause of all sin is self-love, replacing it with love of God will cause the “ground of synne” (1.1514) to be “stoppid

and distroied, and the springe mai be dried” (1.2185-86), and the soul will pursue virtue instead of vice. The role mekenesse plays in ensuring the health of the soul is therefore considerable, so much so that the text asserts that “as mykil as thu hast of mekenesse, so mykil haste thou of charité, of pacience, and of othere vertues” (1.452-53). Yet, despite its benefits, such a process is long and difficult.

Initially, mekenesse is engendered through the rational power of the soul; only later, God’s grace permitting, will it work through the affective power: “there is two maner of mekenesse. Oon is had bi wirkyng of resoun. Anothir is felt bi special gifte of love. But bothe aren of love” (2.2569-70). At this stage not only will the soul find virtue pleasant instead of arduous, it will also be ready to come towards the highest level of reformation possible – the reforming in feeling. Such an achievement is, however, wholly conditional upon mekenesse: “he that hath not trewe mekenesse ne ful herteli bisynes mai not come to the reformyng in feelyng” (2.1090-91). From drede comes such mekenesse, and from such mekenesse an intense love of God. It is an emotional trajectory consistent with the higher *timor filialis*. This advanced state of fear generates an emotional complex of humility and love that allows the soul to become more like Jesus, to reflect better the image of God, and begin to return to its original state of perfection. It is, if properly controlled and directed, a therapeutic feeling that can reform the soul.

Conclusion

In a poetic manner, Chaucer’s description of the Man in Black with which the essay began offers a perfect example of how dangerous drede can be. Not only has drede caused circulatory problems and a general humoral imbalance, but it has also cost the character the use of his wits – he “had wel nygh lost hys mynde” (1.511). This passion of the soul affects the whole person, from the operation of the internal organs and the pneumatological system, to the perceptual and cognitive capacities of the soul. The fiction, therefore, conveys the well-attested medical fact of drede’s extreme potency. Yet, as the new, medically-informed theological works on the soul made clear, such power also carries great potential. For these works on the soul and its powers, fear is a useful instrument of therapy that, if properly used and directed, can treat the soul in specific and desirable ways. On the most physical level, it affects the heart and vital spirit, subsequently altering the production quality of

animal spirit and thus refining the operation of the soul. On the most rarefied and spiritual level, fear directly engages with a specific power of the soul, and can be used to promote kenotic and penitential states within its irascible power. It is, in all senses, preparatory, as fear can be used to prepare body and soul for the possibility of Divine contact. Herein lies its chief utility – while it is a dangerous passion, its ability to encourage humility within the soul is too great a potential to overlook. Emerging from such advanced theological texts are more focused, practical ones designed for spiritual progression and development – applied regimens of the soul. Hilton’s *Scale* is one such text, as it offers the reader accessible advice and programmatic guidance to help the soul on its journey towards God, towards “goostli hele.” It emphasises drede as crucial in reforming the deformed soul: this passion does not simply purify the heart, but also destroys sin and promotes the key virtue of mekenesse. Drede thus reshapes the soul away from self-love to love of God alone. It is a text, therefore, that draws from a range of theological works that employ medical knowledge to aid Fallen humanity: a text that combines literature, theology and medicine to demonstrate that feeling dredeful can be the best thing for you.

References

- Avicenna. *De Medicinis Cordialibus. Liber De Anima Seu Sextus De Naturalibus IV-V*. Ed. S. Van Riet. Leiden: Brill, 1972: 187-210.
- Basil the Great. *Regulae Fusius Tractatae. Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca*. Ed J. P. Migne. Volume 31. Paris: Garnier Frères, 1857-66: 889-1052.
- Bernard of Clairvaux. *On Conversion. Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works*. Trans. G. R. Evans. New York: Paulist Press, 1987: 68-98.
- Biller, Peter and Joseph Ziegler, eds. *Religion and Medicine in the Middle Ages*. Woodbridge: York Medieval Press and The Boydell Press, 2001.
- Blund, John. *Tractatus De Anima*. Eds. D. A. Callus and R. W. Hunt. London: Oxford University Press, 1974.
- Bonfield, Christopher Alan. "The Regimen Sanitatis and its Dissemination in England, c.1348-1550." Unpublished doctoral dissertation: University of East Anglia, 2006.
- Caciola, Nancy. "Mystics, Demoniacs, and the Physiology of Spirit Possession in Medieval Europe." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42/2 (2000): 268-306.
- Catto, Jeremy. "1349–1412: Culture and History." *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Mysticism*. Eds. Vincent Gillespie and Samuel Fanous. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 113-33.
- Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Book of the Duchess. The Riverside Chaucer. 3rd Edition*. Ed. Larry D. Benson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Clark, John H. P. and Rosemary Dorward, trans. *Walter Hilton: The Scale of Perfection*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1991.
- Clement of Alexandria. *The Stromata or Miscellanies. The Ante-Nicene Fathers. Volume 2*. Eds. A. Robert and J. Donaldson. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1967.
- Gillespie, Vincent. "'Thy Will Be Done': Piers Plowman and the Pater Noster." *Middle English Religious Texts and Their Transmission: Essays in Honour of Ian Doyle*. Ed. Alastair J. Minnis. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1994: 95-119.
- . "Dead Still/Still Dead." *The Medieval Journal* 1.1 (2011): 53-78.
- . "Idols and Images: Pastoral Adaptations of *The Scale of Perfection*." *Langland, the Mystics and the Medieval English Religious Tradition: Essays in Honour of S. S. Hussey*. Ed. Helen Phillips. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990. 97-123.

- Gregory of Nazianzus. *Adversus Iram. Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca*. Ed. J. P. Migne. Volume 37. Paris: Garnier Frères, 1857-66: 813-51.
- Gregory of Nyssa. *Life of Moses*. Eds. A. Malherbe and E. Ferguson. New York: Paulist Press, 1978.
- Harvey, Ruth. *The Inward Wits: Psychological Theory in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Warburg Institute Surveys VI*. London: Warburg Institute, 1975.
- Hilton, Walter. *The Scale of Perfection*. Ed. Thomas H. Bestul. Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000.
- Horden, Peregrine. "Religion as Medicine: Music in Medieval Hospitals." *Religion and Medicine in the Middle Ages*. Eds. Peter Biller and Joseph Ziegler. York: The University of York, 2001. 135-154.
- . "A Non-Natural Environment: Medicine Without Doctors and the Medieval European Hospital." *The Medieval Hospital and Medical Practice*. Ed. Barbara S. Bowers. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007. 133-145.
- Isaac of Stella. "Epistola De Anima." *Three Treatises on Man: A Cistercian Anthropology*. Ed. Bernard McGinn. Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1977. 153-77.
- John of La Rochelle. *Summa De Anima*. Ed. J. G. Bougerol. Paris: Vrin, 1995.
- . *Tractatus De Divisione Multiplici Potentiarum Animae*. Ed. P. Michaud-Quantin. Paris: Vrin, 1964.
- Knuuttila, Simo. "Emotion." *The Cambridge History of Medieval Philosophy. Volume One*. Ed. Robert Pasnau. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 428-40.
- . *Emotions in Ancient and Medieval Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Lydgate, John. *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate*. Ed. H. N. MacCracken. EETS o.s. 192. London: Oxford University Press, 1934.
- Manzalaoui, A., ed. *Secretum Secretorum: Nine English Versions*. EETS o.s. 276. London: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- Minnis, A. J. and A. B. Scott, eds. *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism c.1100-c.1375: The Commentary Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Olson, Glending. "Geoffrey Chaucer." *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*. Ed. David Wallace. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. 566-88.
- Rawcliffe, Carole. "The Concept of Health in Late Medieval Society." *Le interazioni fra economia e ambiente biologico nell'Europa preindustriale secc. XIII-XVIII*. Florence: Florence University Press, 2010. 321-38.

———. *Leprosy in Medieval England*. Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2006.

Vincent of Beauvais. *Speculum Naturale*. Graz, Austria: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1965.

Wallis, Faith, ed. *Medieval Medicine: A Reader*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010.