

## Attitudes Towards Death in Middle English Lyrics and Hagiography

MATTHIAS GALLER

'How ben may yt  
At ye to deth as gladly go  
As to a feste?'

The attitude of the bulk of thirteenth- to fifteenth-century English lyrics towards death is captured in the refrain of a well-known poem by John Dunbar: "Timor mortis conturbat me."<sup>1</sup> Middle English and Middle Scots death lyrics focus on the frightening aspects of death and dying.<sup>2</sup> Pointing the listener or reader to the passing nature of happiness on earth, they warn of death's omnipotence, its suddenness and mercilessness. Dreadful and nauseous aspects of death and dying are described, like mankind's fear of death, the dying man's bodily and spiritual sufferings in the hour of death, and the putrefaction of the body. The majority of the poems can be used as evidence supporting the view of the late Middle Ages proposed by the Dutch scholar Johan Huizinga, who described the period as a time dominated by pessimism, hostility to life and obsession with death.<sup>3</sup>

Telling the lives of Christians who managed to overcome their human weakness, Middle English hagiography proposes a fundamentally different attitude towards death. The genre shares with the lyrics and many other medieval texts the attitude of *contemptus mundi*, the disregard for life on earth; but as saints' lives are dedicated to the description of the life and death of outstanding personalities from the history of faith, their treatment of death and dying produces different results. While the lyrics point to the contrast between man's life on earth, which he typically wastes in worldly pleasures, and his death bringing an end to it, in hagiography the saint's life and death form a

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unity. The martyr's sacrifice of his life consummates his testimony of faith during lifetime. In their death, saints proceed from life on earth (which they, unlike the rest of humanity, never felt very much attached to, anyway) to perfection in heaven. In this essay I want to focus on the striking differences in the treatment of death and dying in order to say more about the way Middle English genres interrelate with one another and possibly find out more about the reasons for these discrepancies.

We may suppose that the mostly anonymous authors of both genres were clerics, such as John Lydgate, John Audelay, James Ryman and Thomas of Hales. The death lyrics were written at a time when European intellectual life was dominated by Christian tenets. The impression we get from the texts, however, is that the warnings of the approaching end of our existence on earth, of the power of death and the sufferings of hell do not come up time and again because people were particularly religious, but on the contrary, they suggest that clerics saw the need to confront a growing religious indifference. Saints' lives and death lyrics are complementary as the former provide believers with models of a Christian life and death meant to inspire them to a life of piety in imitation of the saint, whereas the latter seek to impart to listeners and readers a fear of death and hell in order to give religious observance some further impetus. For this reason, Rosemary Woolf likens the function of the death lyrics to sermons, the main difference being that medieval religious lyrics apply the language of poetry to address listeners who might otherwise not be touched.<sup>4</sup> The lyrics want to make listeners reflect on mortality, on their own future death and, by spreading fear, cause them to reform their way of life, while accounts of the glorious life and death of saints bring comfort and hope to believers.

In the lyrics, death is pictured as something quite commonplace, banal, devoid of all heroism. It forms an inextricable part of our human existence. One Middle English poem illustrates death's omnipresence by suggesting that it is hidden in man's shoe ("þar deth luteth in his swo / to him fordo").<sup>5</sup> It accompanies, so to speak, our

human pilgrimage on earth wherever we go and will not be shaken off. According to another poem it lies in man's glove ("Deth is hud, mon, in þy gloue").<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, death as described in the lyrics is something thoroughly distasteful and stands in stark contrast to the beauties of life on earth. This is taught by a poem from the first half of the fifteenth century, "The Signs of Corruption," which has a woman, beautiful and rich during her lifetime, give a detailed description of the putrefaction of her body: "Wormis fynden at me greet prow, / I am hire mete, I am hire drinke."<sup>7</sup> A snake breeds in her back, the light of her eyes has gone out and her intestines rot. Her hair turns green, only grinning teeth remain in her skull:

In mi riggeboon brediþ an addir kene,  
 Min eizen dasewyn swiþe dymme:  
 Mi guttis rotin, myn heer is grene,  
 Mi teep grennen swiþe grymme.<sup>8</sup>

Her former beauty has faded; her fingers and feet, eyes, ears, arms and legs fall apart. She urges the living to face up to the transience of human beauty in time, inconvenient though it may be, and direct their thoughts to the last things.

The lyrics show a fascination with this formidable natural force which disregards human hierarchies and subjects even the highest members of society to its commands. In "Knight, King, Clerk Wend to Death," one of the Middle English *Vado-mori*-poems, a knight, representing physical power, a king, who occupies the top of the social hierarchy, and a clergyman, representing human intellect, mourn their impotence when faced with death. The king comments that in death worldly honour and happiness become worthless. He is subject to the human fate ("þe kynde wai") like everyone else:

I Wende to dede, knight stithe in stoure,  
 thurghe fyght in felde i wane þe flour;  
 Na fightis me taght þe dede to quell—  
 weend to dede, soth i 3ow tell.

I weende [to dede], a kyng I-wisse;  
 What helpis honor or werldis blysse?  
 Dede is to mane þe kynde wai—  
 i wende to be clade in clay.

I wende to dede, clerk ful of skill,  
 þar couth with worde men mare & dill.  
 Sone has me made þe dede ane ende—  
 beese ware with me! to dede i wende.<sup>9</sup>

Knowing that death treats people the same regardless of their position in society may comfort some and frighten others. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries death was seen as the great leveller of social inequality. It is the time when the well-known dances of death were painted on church walls across Europe, illustrating the almightiness of death and the equality of people from all walks of society when faced with it. The *topos* of death the leveller features in Middle English lyrics as in this one, which stresses that the powerful, the strong, the young and the beautiful are just as prone to death as anyone else:

[...] nis king ne Quene  
 þat ne sel drinke of deth-is drench. [...]  
 Ne mai strong ne starch ne kene  
 a-ȝlyde deth-is wiþer-clench;  
 ȝung and old and brith an-siene,  
 al he riueth an his streng.<sup>10</sup>

As opposed to this, hagiography, in its description of the saint's death, shows how different they are from the rest of mankind. The passage describing the saint's death is the climax of each legend, the apotheosis of their saintliness and longed-for end of their suffering on earth.<sup>11</sup> Dying for Christ at the hands of the enemies of Christianity, a martyr seems to find the fulfilment of his life in this kind of death as an ultimate testimony of faith. Only few saints die of a natural death at high age, no saint dies of sickness or hunger, in consequence of an accident or warfare or during childbirth. These common causes of death in the

Middle Ages do not seem to concern saints. They stand above 'ordinary' death just as they are raised above ordinary mankind in their familiarity with God. In order to spice up the account of a saint's death, authors like to dwell on how his or her antagonists use all their ingeniousness to increase the martyr's suffering. Technical appliances like the wheel of St. Katherine typically fail to work and the executioner needs to resort to beheading.<sup>12</sup>

### The Willingness to Die and the Fear of Death

The most prominent theme of the lyrics is the transience of life on earth. Worldly affairs lead people astray, yet fortune is fickle and lifts her favourites up in order to laugh at them later when they fall. The world's truth is painted, i.e. only an illusion, and turns into deceit:

This febyll world, so fals and so vnstable,  
 Promoteth his louers for a lytell while,  
 But at the last he yeveth hem a bable  
 Whene his peynted [trowth is torned in-to gile].<sup>13</sup>

Even though hagiography shares with the lyrics the attitude of *contemptus mundi*, its focus lies on how the saint reacts to this insight and aims at spiritual fulfilment. Aspiring to be unified with God, saints despise attractions of the world such as wealth, power and marriage. They oppose the transience of this world with their constancy in faith. The legends of St. George, St. Katherine of Alexandria and St. Margaret of Antioch, the three most popular saints in medieval England, stress the martyrs' determination to die for their faith. In Alexander Barclay's *The Life of St. George*,<sup>14</sup> for example, the saint's constancy is contrasted with the fickleness of a multitude of Christians intimidated by Dacian, governor of the city of Diaspolin in Persia. The ruler threatens the city's Christians with torture and death should they refuse to sacrifice to heathen idols. George is saddened at his fellow

believers' renouncing their faith for fear of death and chooses martyrdom. He gives his money to the poor, sells his armour—thus divesting himself of his previous role as a knight—and publicly professes his faith. The reason he states for the voluntary sacrifice of his life is his thankfulness for God's saving mankind on the cross, for which his death is only a small gift in return. George is determined to die in order to manifest his devotion to Christ, just as he ventured his life when he was fighting the dragon earlier on. All creatures have to die sooner or later, he argues, and life on earth is of small worth only. Through his martyrdom, he wants to "fortify [God's] right," which he considers more important than his life. The Christian knight applies the knightly code of honour to questions of faith:

[...] no thyng shall tourne my mynde  
 From this byleve though I shulde deth indure  
 Deth is laste ende of euery creature  
 The noblest dede that longyth to a knight  
 Is for to dye to fortyfye the right. (1788-92)

Likewise, the legend of St. Katherine stresses the martyr's readiness to sacrifice her life by contrasting her steadfastness with the weakness of other Christians. The apostasy of numerous frightened believers prompts Katherine to openly confess her faith to Maxentius, the ruler of Alexandria. In the course of the legend, Katherine manages to proselytise fifty wise men, who have come to Alexandria in order to disprove her convictions. She later even converts her antagonist's spouse and two hundred knights. In medieval hagiography, characters like the martyr, the antagonist, the antagonist's spouse, the court official, the prison ward and the executioner can only be either good or bad. Good characters let themselves be converted to the Christian faith and follow the martyr into death. As a result of their dispute with the saint, the fifty sages confess their Christian belief and remain steadfast when faced with the emperor's threats. Having burnt all of them on the stake, Maxentius tries in vain to make Katherine abandon her faith. He flatters her, he argues with her, he threatens violence and



finally tortures her, but Katherine remains firmly disposed to die for her saviour:

for I desyre to deye for hyme,  
fra lestand deide þat can me wyne<sup>15</sup>

St. Margaret seeks a martyr's death even before she first meets her would-be seducer and antagonist Olibrius, governor of Antioch. Her youthful age stands in contrast to her uncompromising readiness to receive death for her Christian belief. In Bokenham's version, the governor offers her his love, which she, as we would expect, refuses. She wants to remain a virgin and die for Christ in recompense for Christ's death on the cross:

I nowise doute, for cristys sake  
That for alle men deyed, deth to take.<sup>16</sup>

The saints' willingness to die stands in sharp contrast to the fear of death we find articulated in the death lyrics:

Lade, helpe! Ihesu, merce!  
*Timor mortis conturbat me.*  
Dred of dep̄, sorow of syn,  
Troblis my hert ful greuysly.<sup>17</sup>

It seems to be natural for the poetry of a century troubled with the plague to address mankind's fear of death frequently. Seeing entire communities die during the spread of the Black Death (around 1348) made people feel as if they were in the hands of an arbitrary and hostile power. The Church Fathers distinguished between two kinds of religious fear, the *timor servilis*, meaning the fear of punishment in the other world, and the *timor filialis* or *castus*, meaning man's fear of losing God's paternal love. It sounds paradox that Christianity, which teaches the good news of the resurrection of Christ, would also teach believers to fear death. This contradiction may be solved by pointing out that faith in the resurrection brings hope only to those who have a

clear conscience. The fact that everyone will have to give an account for their lives after death makes the sinner—which we all are, according to St. Augustine<sup>18</sup>—afraid. Medieval Christianity, however, believed in God's mercy for those who repented, even if this change of mind occurred only in the hour of death. The religious lyrics of the period wanted "to dispel the comforting remoteness by emphasizing both the uncertainty and the inevitability of death"<sup>19</sup> and shake people out of their relaxedness about faith in order to save them of damnation inflicted upon them as punishment for a sinful life.

In some way or other this fear is discussed in almost every one of the poems referred to as 'death lyrics.' The fear of death and speculations inspired by our ignorance of the future destiny of the soul can be found in religions and cultures worldwide and seem to be universal to mankind. Whereas Old French death poetry is more intellectually challenging, early (thirteenth century) Middle English poems are of a meditative character. In the fourteenth century, especially in the poems found in the Vernon Manuscript, Middle English lyrics gain in philosophical depth. "Think on Yesterday" pictures death as an aggressive neighbour who keeps threatening to attack someone, who therefore stays indoors to keep safe. In the same way, death poses a constant threat to mankind. We know that we will be 'attacked' some time, but we do not know when this will be:

Wel þou wost wiþ-ouen fayle  
 Pat deþ haþ manast þe to dye,  
 But whon þat he wol þe a-sayle,  
 Pat wost þou not, ne neuer may spye.<sup>20</sup>

Death hangs over man's life like the sword of Damocles. Unlike animals, man is conscious of his precarious situation between this world and the other and tries to come to grips with this problem by reflecting upon it ("penke of zuster-day").

Quite differently, saints' lives look at death as something to be wished and waited for. Martyrs not only gladly lose their lives in following Christ, they even seem to joyfully await their cruel deaths.



The saint's confidence is often set in contrast to the mourning and despair of anonymous admirers. We get the impression that, throughout the legend, the martyr consciously aims at death as the culminating point of a life in succession of Christ. Life on earth is a time of temptations and trials, whereas death brings the end of all suffering and leads towards the apotheosis of their faith and to their reception into God's presence. This joyful acceptance of death by the martyr remains a mystery for his or her antagonist. Maximus, who has been ordered to guard Cecilia's spouse Valerian and Valerian's brother Tiburce in prison, broaches the question of death and asks them about the reasons for their unnatural joy:

'[...] how ben may yt  
 At ye to deth as gladly go  
 As to a feste?' quod valeryan þo:  
 'If þou wylt to us make promys  
 To beleuyn, þou shalt seyn, I-wys,  
 Aftyr oure deth oure soulys vp wende  
 To þat ioyful blys wych neuere shal ende.'<sup>21</sup>

Maximus is so impressed that he also converts to Christianity. Bokenham's St. Katherine even urges her tormentors to speedily torture and execute her. She feels that she has been called by Christ into heaven, for which she gives her life on earth only too willingly (7080-85). Katherine's joyful expectation of martyrdom contrasts with the mourning of bystanders. A number of women have followed her to the site of the execution and weep over the young woman's death. Katherine calls upon them to cease their mourning and rejoice with her instead:

'O nobyl wyuys & wedwys & maydys ying,  
 Leuyth your heuynesse & your wepyng,  
 & lettyth no wyse youre entencyoun  
 Be besy for to lettyn my passyoun,  
 But rather ioyith & makyth good chere  
 That my lord, my loue, no lengere here

Wyl me suffryn, but to hys house  
Home with hym ledyn as hys owyn spouse.'

(*Lyf of S. Kateryne* 7285-92)

As the martyr may expect a glorious reception in heaven, life on earth becomes worthless for her. Understanding its futility, however, is in no ways painful as it is in the lyrics. Katherine wants to leave this world, which makes her "suffryn," as soon as possible and enter God's kingdom, the place where she feels that she belongs and where she will enjoy a privileged status as God's "spouse." The *South English Legendary* describes a bewildering, almost paradoxical scene preceding St. Margaret's death: Malchus, the executioner, cannot find it in his heart to kill the beautiful and innocent girl. A light from heaven surrounding the martyr makes him sense her holiness. He would rather ascend with her to heaven than load himself with guilt for her execution. Anticipating her glorious reception in heaven, the saint, however, is as little pleased at the executioner's pricks of conscience as at her well-wishing friends' advice. She thus urges him to speedily proceed, after which both the saint and her executioner die simultaneously. It is a pity that we never learn what becomes of Malchus's soul.<sup>22</sup>

Likewise, saints who die a natural death rejoice at the approach of their lives' end. The greater the pains St. Edmund suffers, the happier he feels. He holds no doubt that he is going to be received in heaven soon:

þe more is body i-pined was: þe ner was þen ende;  
And þo is ende-day was I-come: he wuste 3wodere wiende.  
Euere þe more þat he was in sicknesse and in wo,  
þe gladdore he was, for he wuste 3wodere he scholde go,  
And þe more he was in Ioye [...].<sup>23</sup>

With the help of pope Urban and an angel, St. Cecilia manages to convert her spouse Valerian to Christianity. Tiburce, Valerian's brother, is also willing to join the band of Christian believers, which is growing fast, yet needs to act in secrecy for fear of persecutions. He

does not seem to be disinclined to join them, but he has misgivings because of the dangers that arise with belonging to a persecuted sect. Pope Urban is wanted by the emperor and whoever is caught in his company might lose his life, a risk Tiburce is not prepared to run for his new faith. In order to convince him, Cecilia tries to explain to him her understanding of the Christian gospel. Thanks to Christ's death and resurrection and the promise of eternal life for his followers, life on earth has become meaningless. Life in heaven, in contrast, not only lasts forever, it is immeasurably more joyful than life here in this world. Later in the legend, the two men are caught burying the bodies of Christians murdered by the myrmidons of governor Almachus. They now need to explain their faith to their persecutors: Christ's followers, they say, who suffer torture and death here on earth, are rewarded in heaven with eternal bliss. Pagans, in contrast, are threatened with eternal pain in hell:

For we now here in þis lyf present  
 Suffren myscheef, peyn & torment  
 Wych sone be doon, but whan we hens wende  
 We receue ioye that neuere shal haue ende.  
 But ye doon euene þe contrary,  
 For ioye ye han here transytory  
 And momentanye; but, whan ye hens go,  
 To þe place ye wende of endless wo.

(Bokenham, *Lyf of S. Cycyle* 7945-52)

According to the martyrs, bliss or damnation after death indirectly correlate with the circumstances of life in this world and the manner of our death. A short life here on earth and death in succession of Christ are rewarded with paradise, while a long and enjoyable life almost automatically leads to damnation. Consequently, it is up to everyone of us to 'exchange' our happiness on earth for heaven's bliss. Saints' legends tend to simplify the message of the gospel, supposing that human notions of justice equally apply in heaven.

The claim that followers of Christ could simply swap life on earth for heaven and that a cruel martyr's death guarantees eternal bliss can

be found in a number of legends. St. Margaret, for example, is convinced that in compensation for her suffering, she will be spared the Last Judgement.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Bokenham's Katherine promises the empress "eternal rule" in exchange for earthly power and an immortal husband, Christ, in exchange for mortal Maxentius. Then she exhorts the empress not to fear the pains of martyrdom, because they are temporary and lead to eternal bliss. According to the saint, giving away one's life in exchange for the glory of martyrdom is a "commutacyoun of wysdam" (6961-64).

### Images of the Otherworld

The idea that man could 'drive a bargain' with God and exchange life on earth for heaven is found nowhere in the death lyrics. They argue that whatever kind of life one has led, no one can be sure of salvation. According to them, it is left to God's unfathomable judgement to decide whether the soul will be saved or not. Man is not granted admission to heaven automatically as a recompense for constancy in faith or for a righteous way of life. The God of the lyrics remains an unpredictable divine power beyond human understanding and the criteria according to which he grants or refuses his mercy remain hidden to us. The feeling of being helplessly subject to an incalculable and arbitrary will creates a dismal atmosphere in the death lyrics. Even the most pious await the Last Judgement filled with apprehension. The knowledge of death and the uncertainty of what might follow poison man's life on earth as soon as he starts to reflect upon it:

Wanne ich þenche þinges þre  
 ne mai neure bliþe be:  
 þat on is ich sal awe,  
 þat oþer is ich ne wot wilk day.  
 þat þridde is mi meste kare,  
 i ne woth nevre wuder i sal fare.<sup>25</sup>

The precariousness of life and the uncertainty of death are not the only fears addressed by the death lyrics. They go to great lengths to warn their audience of what might happen to their souls if they do not heed their advice, in contrast to the saints' lives, who reserve the threat of eternal damnation to the saints' heathen opponents. Of course, the notion of a dreadful place where the souls of the deceased are imprisoned predates the Middle Ages. Greek mythology tells of doomed figures like Tantalus or Sisyphus suffering eternal tortures in Hades. Yet at no time was the fear of hell more widespread and intense than in the Middle Ages. In order to give listeners and readers a further incentive to repent and atone for their sins, the death lyrics illustrate the tortures of hell in glaring colours. The thirteenth-century poem "Memorare Novissima Tua" describes how, step by step, the body descends from the deathbed to the floor, from the floor into the grave ("pitte") and further on into hell where never ending pains wait for it:

If man him biðocte  
 inderliche & ofte  
 hu arde is te fore  
 fro bedde te flore  
 hu rueful is te flitte  
 fro flore te pitte,  
 fro pitte to pine  
 ðat neure sal fine,  
 i þene non sinne  
 sulde his herte þinnen.<sup>26</sup>

The sufferings of hell are evoked as a strong warning against committing sins. The two introductory lines point to the meditative character of this thirteenth-century English poem. These short verses can easily be memorized and recited, unlike the long-drawn and profound reflections found in the Vernon Manuscript. A bulky thirteenth-century poem, "The Latemest Day," fans the fear of hell by giving a detailed description of the devil:

Wose seiye þene feind, hu lotliche he boe,  
 Hornes on is heuet & hornes on is cnoe,  
 Nis non þinc on liue of so ateliche bloe;  
 Wose come hondur his hont ded he moste boe.<sup>27</sup>

He stares wildly about, fire springs from his nostrils and his eyes shine like glowing cauldrons. In this description Satan becomes a hybrid bugbear, a mixture of man, dragon and horned beast. "Death," another poem, describes the pains of hell in a thoroughly down-to-earth imagery. The soul, addressing the body for whose guilt it has been thrown to hell, suffers hunger and coldness, while at the same time being roasted over glowing coals by Satan and bathing in boiling pitch:

For alle þine gultes  
 fongen schal mede.  
 þat is hunger and chele  
 and fur-bernynde glede.  
 And so me wule sathanas  
 ful atelyche brede.  
 [...]  
 In a bytter baþ  
 ich schal baþe naked.  
 Of pych and of brunston  
 wallynde is maked.<sup>28</sup>

The otherworld imagined by contemporary hagiography is thoroughly different. Saints never doubt that a glorious reception into heaven will immediately follow their death. Their dying hour is not a time of self-examination, of loss of faith, doubts or anxiety as described in the *ars moriendi* booklets. Yet we never learn what paradise will be like. Heaven is surely to be imagined as something excessively precious and desirable, but no counterpart of the death lyrics' burning cauldrons is mentioned. The notion of heaven remains obscure, inaccessible to human imagination, impossible to grasp. In the version of the *Scottish Legendary*, Katherine describes heaven to the freshly converted Porphyrius in the following terms:



in þat kinrik þat is so clere,  
 quhar for delyt men lewis here,  
 þai sall haf euir-lestand lyff  
 but payne or verray duel or striffe.  
 & gif þu franis quhat thing is þare;  
 þar is ese & sic welfare  
 þat ma nocht wthir-ways be  
 expondit na wudone to þe;  
 bot all þat gud is, It is þare,  
 & illthing ma þar cum neuir mare.  
 & gif þu speris quhat gud þat is;  
 It is sic gud, I tell þe þis,  
 þat neuir ere herd, na yhet saw hye,  
 na mycht in hart comprissit be  
 þat god has grathit for all þai  
 þat seruis hyme here, quhen þa hyne ga.<sup>29</sup>

Life in heaven lasts forever (“euir-lestand”), she promises, leaving unsaid how—if at all—eternity can be imagined. The notion of heavenly bliss is even harder to grasp. “Kinrik,” “ese” and “welfare” are rather vague terms, too closely associated with earthly notions to adequately describe happiness in the other world. In her depiction of heavenly bliss, Katherine stresses the *absence* of earthly suffering (“payne,” “duel,” “strife”). According to her, heaven can be imagined as the negation of all unpleasant aspects of life here on earth. Heaven means the presence of everything that is good and the absence of everything that is bad (“illthing”). But again, what do earthly qualities such as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ mean with regard to the other world? Descriptions of heavenly bliss therefore end acknowledging that it simply *cannot* be imagined, since it is more beautiful than anything our ears have ever heard or our eyes ever seen on this earth (723-24).

Heaven is conspicuously absent in the death lyrics. They do not recommend a particular way of life which might promise admittance to paradise after death as they would not accept that man, sinful by nature, could reach heaven by means of repentance and good deeds anyway. The fact that the decision whether our soul will be saved or damned is taken by an unfathomable God and that its destiny is beyond our control makes death so frightening. In this point, the

death lyrics seem to anticipate the Protestant doctrine of salvation. According to the thoroughly 'Catholic' genre of hagiography, people can 'qualify' for heaven through their behaviour on earth, or force a bargain ("commutacyoun") upon God—saintly life and death rewarded with paradise. Whoever sacrifices their life for Christ is a martyr and has a rightful claim to heaven, even if they have not been baptised, or do not yet fully trust the gospel's promise, like the spouse of Dacian in the legend of St. George or the fifty wise men in the legend of St. Katherine. We could try and soften the contrast between medieval hagiography's promise of salvation and the fear of damnation prominent in the death lyrics by arguing that giving one's life for Christ is already proof of a particularly strong faith, and that it is ultimately not the pains suffered, but the faith in Christ expressed through the voluntary suffering which grants martyrs their admittance into God's realm.

We would, however, unduly simplify the contrast between death lyrics and hagiography if we claim that the one spoils believers their earthly happiness by picturing death in its darkest colours while the other promises paradise as the reward for an exemplary Christian life and death. There are some Middle English death lyrics that propose alternative views on death and dying. In the literature of classical antiquity we find the image of death as peaceful sleep, as longed-for harbour or final destination of a painful journey marked by the strokes of fate. In this view, death seems to be devoid of all frightening aspects. Dividing man into body and soul, medieval Christianity thought of spiritual life, the life of the soul, as much more important than physical life and believed in the Last Judgement and a punishing God. Nevertheless, there are poems written near the end of the medieval period which look at death more positively, possibly inspired by classical literature. This fifteenth-century poem, for example, takes up the antique *topos* of death as a port of peace:

Here ys the reste of all your besynesse,  
 Here ys the porte of peese, & resstfulnes  
 to them that stondeth In stormes of dys[e]se,

only refuge to wrechis In dystrese,  
and all comferte of myschefe & mys[e]se.<sup>30</sup>

Longing for death is certainly not typical of Middle English poetry. Only unbearable pains make the speaker of a poem by James Ryman wish for death (“O dredefull deth, come, make an ende, / Come vnto me and do thy cure”).<sup>31</sup> Despite physical pains, death remains “dredefull” in these lines. “Death, the Soul’s Friend,” however, is a Middle English poem with an unconventionally positive view of death. The Last Judgement and divine punishments are faded out here; still the poem remains within the context of late medieval convictions of faith. Its topic is the longing of the human soul for its maker:

Thynk & dred nocht for to dy,  
syn þou sall nedis þer-to;  
Thynk þat ded is opynly  
ende off werdes wo;  
Thynk als so, bot if þou dy,  
to god may þou nocht go;  
Thynk & hald þe payed þer-by,  
Pou may nocht ffile þer-fro.  
With an .O. & an .I., þan thynk me it is so,  
Pat ded sal be þi sawl frend, & erthly lyff þi ffo.<sup>32</sup>

The poem claims that if you reflect on death you will come to lose your fear of it and regard it as your soul’s friend. The listener or reader is invited four times to “thynk” instead of letting himself be guided by his emotions (“& dred nocht”). Three arguments against the fear of death are mentioned: The first simply says that we shall not resist what must happen. The second sees in death the end of a life of suffering. The third argument says that God loves his creatures and that the human soul longs for its maker. Only death sets it free to return to God. The optimistic attitude of this poem springs from a positive relationship between God and man. As in mysticism, life on earth is equated with death while death turns out to be the beginning of eternal life:

Thynk þat þou ert ded alway,  
 qwyllis þat þou dwellis here;  
 Thynk þi lyff be-gynnis ay,  
 qwen þou ert layd apon a bere;<sup>33</sup>

Saints consider life in this world to be a time of trials imposed on them to show that they justly deserve heaven. They are happy to exchange this life for heaven. Doing so, they blindly trust the promise of Christ that those who die for him will be rewarded with paradise. The saints of Middle English hagiography are model Christians, they have overcome their attachment to this world and their fear of death. For the 'average' believer, to whom the *ars moriendi* booklets are addressed, the hour of death is a dreaded fight for salvation, whereas the saints regard it merely as the final test of their saintliness. They rely on God's assistance, who uses them as tools in order to demonstrate his power. Saints identify with their soul, regarding their body as an impediment on their way to God, as their weak side, which may be overcome by torture. Death, the moment when body and soul are separated, brings them the longed-for end of their suffering and opens the gates of heaven for them. In hagiography, death is perceived *ex negativo*, as the end or absence of life on earth. As saints long for God and do not doubt that they will be accepted into heaven, they rejoice at the approach of their lives' end.

The question remains how two different ways of looking at death were able to coexist during the late medieval period, supposedly so uniform in its religious doctrine and world view. Both hagiography and death lyrics were written at the same time and for the same audience, possibly even by the same authors.<sup>34</sup> We might suggest the explanation that the two genres focus on different periods in the history of salvation. Saints' lives relate the life and death of outstanding figures from the early history of Christianity, the time of persecutions in Rome, or from times when a Christian country such as Anglo-Saxon England was threatened by invading pagans. In ancient Rome, Christians were a persecuted minority, miracles happened and God interfered more often in the ways of the world.

The death lyrics, however, address the late medieval present, a time felt to be 'degenerate' when compared to the lifetime of the saints. Clerical authors would have wanted to provide their audience with both, saints' lives for encouragement and death lyrics as a warning. Nevertheless, there remains an irreconcilable contrast between the claim that a martyr's death guarantees admittance to heaven and the gnawing uncertainty of what will happen to the soul after death irrespective of how a Christian has led his life. We can conclude that late medieval convictions of faith were in no way as uniform as we might suppose when looking back at these centuries pre-dating the reformation. Considering other Middle English genres, such as moralities, romances and ballads, will further widen the spectrum and provide us with an amplitude of different approaches to questions of death and dying.

Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität  
München

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>John Dunbar, "I that in Heill Wes and Gladness," also known as his "Lament for the Makaris," *The Makars*, ed. J. A. Tasioulas (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1999).

<sup>2</sup>On death lyrics see Rosemary Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1968); Douglas Gray, *Themes and Images in the Medieval English Religious Lyric* (London: RKP, 1972); Philippa Tristram, *Figures of Life and Death in Medieval English Literature* (London: Elek, 1976), and Matthias Galler, *O Death, thou comest when I had thee least in mind: Der Umgang mit dem Tod in der mitttelenglischen Literatur* (Frankfurt a. M.: Lang, 2007).

<sup>3</sup>Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages: A study of the forms of life, thought and art in France and the Netherlands in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries*, trans. F. Hopman (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972; orig. *Herfsttij der middeleeuwen*, Haarlem: Willink, 1919) ch. 9.

<sup>4</sup>Woolf 67-68.

<sup>5</sup>Carleton Brown, *English Lyrics of the 13th Century* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1932) no. 10 (A), ll. 29-30.

<sup>6</sup>Carleton Brown, *English Lyrics of the 14th Century* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1924) no. 23, l. 31.

<sup>7</sup>MS Bodley 789, quoted from Woolf 317-18, ll. 11-12.

<sup>8</sup>Woolf ll. 17-20.

<sup>9</sup>Carleton Brown, *Religious Lyrics of the 15th Century* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1939) no. 158 (A).

<sup>10</sup>Brown, *13th Century*, no. 10, ll. 7-8 and 11-14.

<sup>11</sup>In "La mort et le corps des saints: la scène de la mort dans les Vitae du haut Moyen Age," *Le Moyen Age: Revue d'Histoire et de Philologie* 94 (1988): 21-50, Michel Lauwers looks at Latin saints' lives of the seventh to tenth centuries and notes that the scene of the saint's death mostly has a central meaning. The majority of the vitae dedicate a quarter of the narrative to the representation of the saint's death. This scene is the final and climactic point of each legend (22). Hagiographic death scenes are strongly stereotyped, the saints lose their individuality. Their idealised death is represented as a model of Christian dying (32).

<sup>12</sup>Mary's special status as mother of Christ is affirmed by her ascent to heaven. She is spared the unwelcome aspects of 'medieval' death such as pains, the five temptations during the last moments (cf. *ars moriendi*) and the putrefaction of the body.

<sup>13</sup>Brown, *15th Century*, no. 149, 22-25.

<sup>14</sup>Alexander Barclay, *The Life of St. George*, ed. William Nelson, EETS OS 230 (London: OUP, 1955).

<sup>15</sup>*Legends of the Saints in the Scottish Dialect of the Fourteenth Century*, ed. William M. Metcalfe, vol. 2, Scottish Text Society 23 and 25 (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1896) L. Katerine, 474, ll. 1101-02.

<sup>16</sup>*The South English Legendary*, ed. Charlotte D'Evelyn and Anna J. Mills, EETS OS 235, 236 and 244 (London: OUP, 1956 and 1959) *The Legend of St. Margaret*, ll. 66-67.

<sup>17</sup>*The Poems of John Audelay*, ed. Ella K. Whiting, EETS OS 184 (London: OUP, 1931) no. 51, 1-4.

<sup>18</sup>St. Augustine supposes that since the fall of man, we have been under the necessity to sin. We cannot *not* sin ("non posse non peccare"), saying that we have been left with the freedom *to* sin, but not with the freedom to decide against it (Augustine, *De natura et gratia* 49.57, PL 44.274; *De correptione et gratia* 12.33, PL 44.936).

<sup>19</sup>Woolf 75.

<sup>20</sup>Brown, *14th Century*, no. 101, 157-60.

<sup>21</sup>*Legendys of Hooly Wummen by Osbern Bokenham*, ed. Mary S. Serjeantson, EETS OS 206 (London: OUP, 1938) *Lyf of S. Cycyle*, 7998-8004.

<sup>22</sup>*The South English Legendary, St. Margaret*, 303-08.



<sup>23</sup>*The Early South English Legendary*, ed. Carl Horstmann, EETS OS 87 (London: Trübner, 1887) 590-94. Second quoted line: "And although his last day had come: He knew where he would go."

<sup>24</sup>Bokenham's version, ll. 598-602.

<sup>25</sup>Brown, *13th Century*, no. 12 (A): "Three Sorrowful things."

<sup>26</sup>Brown, *13th Century*, no. 13.

<sup>27</sup>Brown, *13th Century*, no. 29, 81-84.

<sup>28</sup>"Death," *An Old English Miscellany*, ed. Richard Morris, EETS OS 49 (London: Trübner, 1872) no. 23, ll. 195-200 and 209-12.

<sup>29</sup>*Legends of the Saints*, ed. Metcalfe, vol. 2, *L. Katerine* ll. 717-32.

<sup>30</sup>Brown, *15th Century*, no. 164, 4-8.

<sup>31</sup>"Die Gedichte des Franziskaners Jakob Ryman," ed. Julius Zupitza, *Archiv* 89 (1892): 167-338, no. 95, 1-2.

<sup>32</sup>Brown, *15th Century*, no. 163, 51-60.

<sup>33</sup>Brown, *15th Century*, no. 163, 61-64.

<sup>34</sup>John Lydgate, for example, is the author of saints' lives and of a Middle English version of the *Dance of Death*, which, in its views on death, is very close to the lyrics.