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BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Melancholy without the melancholy?
New directions in early modern emotions

KRISTINE JOHANSON

In early modern studies, the affective turn has taken a decidedly melancholic direction in the last decade, as monographs devoted to melancholy by Douglas Trevor, Angus Gowland, Mary Ann Lund, Jeremy Schmidt, Laurinda Dixon, and Drew Daniel have all nuanced our thinking about the ‘Elizabethan disease’. Yet the texts under review here offer reasons to be cheerful about early modern sadness. To differing degrees Frances Gage, Stephanie Shirilan, and Erin Sullivan attend to the relationship between society and individual in the production and regulation of the passions, with each author examining how what is outside the individual – be it painting, text, or social situation – is intrinsic to the individual’s ability to be healed through their own emotional processes. For Frances Gage, Giulio Mancini’s ideas about art collecting show how art can produce domestic and civic virtue in an individual and consequently a society. For Stephanie Shirilan, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* can cure by creating wonder through its own textual properties, its form and content. While Erin Sullivan likewise argues for the self’s ability to heal as a result of external encounter, that ability is analysed largely in response to and against dominant early modern emotional scripts through what Sullivan terms ‘emotional improvisation’. Such collaborative models of emotional healing are not necessarily new; however, such models offer important means of nuancing the Neostoic views which stress the private process of regulating the passions. Each impressive in their range of sources, particularly archival materials, these texts remind us that the imagination is, perhaps, the most porous boundary of the early modern self.

In *Robert Burton and the Transformative Powers of Melancholy*, Stephanie Shirilan anatomizes *The Anatomy* to claim that the Oxford librarian prescribes the imaginative powers of wonder as a cure for melancholy, and that reading the text is itself a means of cultivating the salutary melancholy that is ‘a kind of spiritual privilege’ in Shirilan’s view (11). In chapter one, Shirilan attends to how Burton uses both his constructed persona and his *cento* form to lampoon and challenge Neostoic and Puritan ideas of care and cure. In particular, Shirilan argues, the *cento*’s inconsistencies and miscitations – Burton’s errata – use ‘opacity and

indirectness' to undermine Puritan and Neostoic arguments for tranquility and transparency and to show that rhetorical plainness is not necessarily therapeutic (33). Chapter two uses two key terms – 'sympathetic mimesis' and the 'hypochondriacal imagination' – to argue that through Burton's text we see the centrality of inward, rather than outward, experience for the melancholic (66, 77). Here, Shirilan reads Burton against other writers ('hygenists') on melancholy and argues that the irrational delusions of melancholy offered by Burton as acceptable are analogous to God's irrational love for human beings, concluding that the delusions of melancholics mocked by other writers are, in Burton, handled sympathetically and as a warning against another kind of delusion: that of imperturbability (100).

Shirilan's third and fourth chapters focus respectively on particular subsections of *The Anatomy*: 'Exercise Rectified of Body and Mind', and 'The Digression of the Ayre' to establish further the fundamental significance of wonder to warding off despair and curing melancholy. Focusing particularly on scholarly melancholy, chapter three argues that wonder is created 'sonically' – through rhetorical feature and through content. Perhaps the strongest chapter, it particularly represents the scope of Shirilan's interest and analysis as it moves from historical context to formal analysis (rightly noted by Shirilan as complementary approaches). She closely reads Burton's use of rhetorical figures such as *procatalepsis* (Puttenham's 'Presumptor'), attends to Burton's specific use of 'stupend', and even scans his prose, all in service of her argument that Burton's text itself, not just its subject, gives rise to wonder (cf. 116, 130–2). Study becomes the means to achieve the diversion necessary for the melancholic to experience a curative release (109). Chapter four likewise highlights how Burton's form translates gloom to light, despair 'into hope for regenerative, indeed, salvific, transformation' (138). The 'Digression's' 'pneumatic and hydraulic theme' in addition to Burton's *copia* are the means through which Shirilan wants again to nuance claims of Burton's Neostoicism and Epicureanism; to do so she argues for a mutability and heterogeneity in the 'Digression' that signals 'generation' (169). While I would have appreciated a traditional conclusion, Shirilan's enthusiastic Epilogue highlights how the *Anatomy* remains entertaining and challenging for contemporary, non-academic readers as she critiques the critical practices that might explain the readings of Burton so often bereft of attention to, or appreciation for, his irony and humour. She suggests that electronic resources can encourage reading-without-context, which can produce faulty critical practices that (for her) have resulted in various failings of contemporary criticism.

The Epilogue's enthusiasm is characteristic of the book as a whole, as Shirilan's passion for (and knowledge of) her subject impresses consistently through the range of sources she invokes and the erudition she displays. In this way, she at times seems to channel Burton's own methodology and form. Yet in those Burtonian elements – seeming digressions, or abrupt conclusions – Shirilan can also omit crucial analyses. Textual evidence was lacking at

moments where claims about the *Anatomy's* salubrious power needed explicit proof to be persuasive. Finally, her insistence on her project's singularity in reading Burton's positive cure seemed to understate the work of Mary Ann Lund, whose own arguments for Burton's form as curative were important for Shirilan's own.

Shirilan's interest in illuminating the positive wonder essential to Burton's melancholy is reflected in Erin Sullivan's similar urging of the ambiguous and thus often salubrious nature of sadness in her *Beyond Melancholy: Sadness and Selfhood in Renaissance England*. But if Shirilan in her scholarship pivots Burton toward the community and her insistence on Burton's belief that care will ease melancholy (18), then Sullivan pivots her subject away from the 'emotional scripts' of community to argue for early modern individuals' 'emotive improvisation' (1), a term she develops from William Reddy's (and through him, J. L. Austin's) work on emotions as speech acts. This term is Sullivan's key phrase throughout the monograph, and the process of proving it is one of the book's strengths, as she resists disciplinary boundaries to examine a range of literary and historical sources, from Shakespeare's plays to Nehemiah Wallington's spiritual notebooks to medical casebooks.

Arguing that to understand early modern selfhood we must understand sadness's inherent ambiguity, Sullivan structures her book around those early modern emotions that constitute the larger web of sadness: grief, melancholy, godly sorrow, and despair. Sullivan opens the book arguing for a 'greater emotional pluralism' (14) around sadness in particular. The first chapter provides an overview useful mainly for those unfamiliar with medical, philosophical, and theological discourses attached to grief, melancholy, godly sorrow, and despair, and briefly summarises the aspects of sadness that Sullivan later explores in detail; however, Sullivan is keen to highlight how the lines separating these aspects are often blurred. Chapter two's focus on grief establishes the range of sources that each succeeding chapter likewise reproduces, as it uses the London Bills of Mortality to assert the deadly and dangerous power of grief in the period before offering partial readings of early modern plays by Shakespeare, Ford, and Heywood as evidence of how characters 'improvise' away from dominant ideas of this emotion. (Yet given the chapter's appreciated consideration of gender and grief, I was surprised by the absence of discussion around Hamlet's 'unmanly grief'). Her chapter concludes with a close reading of grief's material and metaphysical powers in Shakespeare's *Richard II* to support her claim that early modern models of grief 'work ... together to produce a complex exchange between the involuntary physiology of sorrow and its potential wilfulness'; as we saw with Shirilan, here Sullivan too argues that sadness can have salutary effects as grief could lead to personal fulfilment and self-knowledge (78, 88).

Such positive effects form crucial parts of the succeeding chapters' arguments, which again urge the ambiguous and improvisatory nature of melancholy in early modern literary sources. Chapters three orients its analysis of

melancholy away from its courtly and scholarly milieu to focus on its connection to the guts and its 'earthy' experience. To do this, Sullivan offers new (and old) archival material from medical casebooks and shows how practices of medical diagnosis of melancholy don't necessarily hold up with the narratives provided by melancholy theorists such as André du Laurens and Thomas Walkington. Her concluding analysis argues for the positive volubility of the melancholic self through an examination of Jacques (as 'jakes') in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* and nicely places Milton's 'Il Penseroso' and 'L'Allegro' in dialogue. The powerful fourth chapter draws on life-writing, the image of the broken heart, and George Herbert's *The Temple* to argue that spiritual suffering is 'productive' and that even though literary depictions of it may be grounded in physical pain, these depictions can ultimately result in a spiritual joy and proximity to God. Sullivan explores spiritual sorrow and the 'holy passion' of joy emerging from that sorrow in religious and secular autobiography and seventeenth-century poetry, concluding that 'When framed and directed in the right way, then, broken-hearted sorrow could help produce a form of godly selfhood' (155). That idea of the importance of 'right direction' to produce positive emotional development from potentially dangerous sources is also significant for Frances Gage, as I discuss below.

Sullivan's fifth chapter tackles despair as she again highlights the ambiguity of forms of sadness: her analyses show how despair places an individual in a position that is at once dangerously precarious but yet poised for potential spiritual renewal through that precariousness. Sullivan uses poetry, drama, and prose – from Spenser's *Fairie Queene* to Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* to Robert Greene's *The Repentance of Robert Greene* – to highlight how despair, more than any of the other emotions she has analysed, places the sufferer in the unique and dangerous position of the border with spiritual renewal and damnation. But through hermeneutical process and self-narration, Sullivan claims, despair can positively empower individuals against the anxiety and fear associated with the emotion (164). Sullivan concludes that 'self-authoring' is always aligned with the positive development of the passionate self, and her Conclusion once more urges the role of 'emotive improvisation' in the achievement of these positive directions and understandings of sadness.

For as much as I appreciated the idea of individual creativity responding to social norms that is present in 'improvisation', as well as Sullivan's attention to a range of dramatic texts here, it is just that attention to theatre that made me wish for her to draw out the theatrical significances of her book's keyword: improvise. I was particularly surprised by the absence of Allison Hobgood's *Passionate Playgoing in Early Modern England* (Cambridge UP, 2013) in her discussion. The claims Sullivan makes would have been strengthened by an attention to, in Hobgood's words, the 'reciprocal exchange between world and stage in which each provides the other with something nether can cultivate alone' (95).

Like Sullivan and Shirilan's works, France Gage's *Painting as Medicine in Early Modern Rome: Giulio Mancini and the Efficacy of Art*, offers an important addition

to studies in early modern criticism that are on a larger scale rethinking the emotional work of the early modern self. Gage focuses on the Sienese scholar, physician, art collector, and ‘cultural broker’ (Gage’s coinage), Giulio Mancini (1559–1630; active in Rome 1592–1630) and his arguments concerning art collection and painting’s ability to impact domestic and consequently civil society. Gage’s introduction resists the binary of art as a cult object or an object of aesthetic value. Critiquing Ferino-Pagden’s cultural evolutionary model as ‘oversimplif[ying] historical processes’, her methodology examines the history of the collection (3); she does this by relying on crucial texts of Mancini’s which pointedly instruct collectors on how to arrange their collections and what to collect. A key text for her is the chapter ‘Regole per comprare, collocare e conservare le picture’ in Mancini’s *Considerazioni sulla pittura* (1619–post-1624).

The book’s first two chapters establish Gage’s case for re-evaluating Mancini’s reputation and his significance in early modern (art) history. These chapters take issue with what Gage sees as an absence of historicising that has occurred vis à vis Mancini – a critique that offers one of several connections to Shirilan and Sullivan’s respective works. As with Shirilan’s account of Burton, Gage’s interpretation of Mancini is one that discloses the author’s enthusiasm and deep knowledge of her subject. Gage rejects scholarly dismissal of this practitioner of humanist medicine who, she argues, ‘developed a new genre of literature’ in the *Considerazioni*, which judges art and its ends in both domestic and civil spheres (21). Chapter two attends to the Romans’ obsessions with illness, its manifestations, and its political implications; as illness was a matter of honour and dishonour, discerning ‘the disposition, fortitude, health, and inclinations of [. . . a patron. . .] was an essential skill’, one gleaned from physicians’ practice (40). Paintings, she notes, offered a quick – and thus ‘more suitable’ (than reading or listening to music) – cure for active Roman princes and prelates (55), and the Roman galleries housing them offered a therapeutic space for body and mind.

Chapters three, four, and five each attend to a specific genre of painting named by Mancini as salubrious for the self. ‘From Exercise to Repose’ argues that landscape painting was created and offered with the intent of a therapeutic transformation in the beholder. Gage analyses documentary evidence for the healing effects of viewing landscapes before turning to theories of vision and Mancini’s own arguments to conclude that it is not ‘the presentation of nature as a pharmacological storehouse’ but rather how a painting is composed and the elements of that composition that move the beholder in her imagination and through her emotion. Such elements include landscape painting’s temporality – its endurance without change, and aesthetic qualities such as *viridaria* (‘the green things of nature’, 61). These are some of the crucial qualities which, through deliberate design, could ‘engender health-giving, cheering, and recreative effects in its beholders’ (85). Chapter four provides a robust account of the Renaissance maternal imagination and the anxieties attendant on its powers. The maternal imagination is crucial to Gage’s assertion of Mancini’s

singularity in his discussions of painting in domestic spaces. For in his concern with producing both beautiful *and healthy* children through the correct curation of art in the bedroom, Gage argues, Mancini is concerned with creating ‘by extension, more perfect families and societies’ (116). This chapter also works to offer the monstrous – discussed as part of the marvellous – as potentially delightful to the right (female) audience. That delight, like the power of domestic bedroom paintings in general, depends for its power not on the binary structure of object and beholder, but on a tripartite agency of artist, *padre di famiglia*, and woman. In order to impact the (ideally male) unborn child beyond his physical appearance, even lascivious paintings could be beneficial. However, they needed ‘the artist’s enhancement of the natural powers of form and colour to act upon the imagination; the educated male beholder’s knowledge of how to evaluate, locate, and exhibit work in keeping with artistic principles and social ideas; and the female’s “fixed” gaze and “obstinate” imagination’ (116, 119). For Gage, Mancini’s re-reading of sexual paintings as salubrious is one of his critical interventions. Chapter five also asserts Mancini’s innovations in art criticism via his writings on historical painting. Of the three genres that Mancini discusses and Gage analyses, it is historical painting that speaks most directly to the production of virtuous civic society through, according to Mancini, its communication of an ‘ordered civic body’ to which historical painting must be ‘analogous’ (137). Including such paintings in domestic spaces reproduced the ideal civic order to remind the *paterfamilias* of his role in creating and maintaining an ordered household. But most importantly (as Gage reminds us in her conclusion) Mancini’s ideas – about the healing powers of certain types of art, the significance of the appropriately curated collection, and the belief that these together could produce virtuous domestic and civil societies through the behaviour of the beholder – reveal his firm belief in the essential role that painting played in early modern Roman society.

Painting in Early Modern Rome is a well-organised and ambitious book, and it is worth noting that the book is gorgeous, with many works included to illustrate Gage’s analyses.¹ My main critique originates from my role as a literary critic and cultural, rather than art, historian. In-depth knowledge of the late-sixteenth and seventeenth-century Roman court is crucial to navigating the labyrinth of personages (and their ideas) that populate Gage’s text. Indeed, both Gage’s and Shirilan’s respective monographs assume the reader is very familiar with their particular subject and field.

All three works reviewed here will appeal to scholars in a range of disciplines, most notably and unsurprisingly literary criticism and (art) history, as well as scholars researching the history of emotions, the medical humanities, the body, and early modern environments and ecologies; however, Sullivan’s *Beyond*

¹ Shirilan and Sullivan’s texts also make excellent use of images. I particularly appreciated Shirilan’s use of Burton’s doodles in his Latin dictionary and the two-page flowchart ‘Table declaring the order of the causes of Salvation and Damnation’ (pp. 180–1) in *Beyond Melancholy*.

Melancholy is aimed at the widest audience. She does not assume that a reader knows when John Donne or George Herbert were writing, and consequently while her work is clearly suited to advanced graduate students and scholars in the listed fields, it would also be appropriate for advanced undergraduates.

Each of these monographs insists that emotions can be a source of personal healing which is dependent on collaboration: between text and reader; between painting and viewer; between people, even if it is to turn away from those people. These texts importantly contribute to the continual process of nuancing how we historicize emotions and how we understand emotions in early modernity, an epistemological project which, as these works show, often confronts ambiguities and contradictions that challenge our hermeneutic abilities and help to explain why history of the emotions scholarship continues apace.

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BOOKS DISCUSSED

- Frances Gage, *Painting as Medicine in Early Modern Rome: Giulio Mancini and the Efficacy of Art*. The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016. xv + 228 pp. \$89.99. ISBN 978-0-271-07103-9 (hb).
- Stephanie Shirilan, *Robert Burton and the Transformative Powers of Melancholy*. Literary and Scientific Cultures of Early Modernity series, eds. Mary Thomas Crane and Henry S. Turner. Ashgate, 2015. xii + 218 pp. £60.00. ISBN 978-1-4724-1701-5 (hb).
- Erin Sullivan, *Beyond Melancholy: Sadness and Selfhood in Renaissance England*. Emotions in History series, eds. Ute Frevert and Thomas Dixon. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. xiv + 227 pp. £60.00. ISBN 978-0-19-873965-4 (hb).