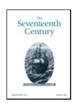
## **The Seventeenth Century**



## Review of Erin Sullivan, Beyond Melancholy: Sadness and Selfhood in Renaissance England

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## The Seventeenth Century

Reviewed monograph:

Erin Sullivan, *Beyond Melancholy: Sadness and Selfhood in Renaissance England* (OUP, 2016), ISBN 978-0-19-873965-4 Price: £60.00, 227 + xiv pp.

Reviewer: Eric Langley, UCL

Erin Sullivan's scholarly and consistently engaging contribution to OUP's Emotions in History series, Beyond Melancholy, sets out not only to add nuance, local complexity, and taxonomic specificity to broad period conceptions of sadness, but also to make sadness less depressing, showing how depictions of this temperamental excess may be pervasive but not exclusively negative. This is, she argues, a "basic" human emotion but one whose seeming universality needs to be both atomised and inventoried in order to account for grief's more particular passionate gradations: from its moral, intellectual, and spiritual manifestations, to its grosser, corporeal forms, experienced right in the gut. This is the dominant methodology of Sullivan's study, which consistently seeks to refuse simple binary taxonomies – so 'melancholy [she explains] can be raucous and tender, bodily and spiritual, scatological and political all at once' – in order to account for the complexity of the emotion in both Renaissance medical, religious, and dramatic texts, as well as in experience. Sullivan announces in her introduction that she sees literary texts in particular as offering 'the scope and means [for writers] to explore existing emotional standards and, if necessary, to take them off script,' and indeed each chapter or sub-section tends to include at least one 'off-script' moment where Sullivan undermines the categorical neatness of either medical diagnoses or subsequent critical wisdoms, to explore unexpected instances of sorrow, both painful and vitalising.

The challenge of this study is to take on the almost emblematic iconicity of sadness – and in particular, melancholy, the most Elizabethan of maladies - and reconsider it without preconception. Accordingly, Sullivan has recourse to an impressive array of period texts and sources, often devoting considerable time to detailed, and often suitably graphic, accounts of medical practice and case-records, full of scurvy, flatulence, cramps, and fluids. This study, guite intentionally and to its credit, is as comfortable with medical history as cultural history, often allowing itself lengthy periods away from direct literary appreciation, and throughout Sullivan applies analytic attention to a wide range of period texts, from the obvious melancholic canon of Burton, Donne, Wright, Milton, to less familiar tracts and tables, bills and pamphlets, sermons, emblems, and life-writing. There is a real wealth of material here for future scholars, and notably sensitive readings of 'Il Penseroso,' The Temple, and The Faerie Queene, as well as stand-out discussions of period spiritual autobiographies (often by women) in two long chapters on religiously-inflected melancholy, which are particularly strong examples of Sullivan's ability to develop a focused discussion through the accretion of numerous close readings from multiple sources.

During each of these accounts – which consider particular manifestations of grief in terms of, for example, gender or class – Sullivan's secondary interest is in describing the ways in which emotional experience shapes the sufferer's own sense of subjectivity, or the period's attitude to 'affective selfhood.' As before, the intention here is to complicate received conceptions of, for example, the primacy of humoral influence in the fashioning

of the subject, to 'push the historiography of early modern emotion beyond its preoccupation with medical humoral theory' in order to define 'a more dynamic, pluralistic, and at times, unpredictable model of affective selfhood than has previously been acknowledged.' Perhaps there is unnecessary combativeness here in the presentation of previous scholarship; Gail Kern Paster, for example, whose work essentially underpins so much of this "history of the emotions" material and informs so much of what has become an increasingly popular critical field, receives sharpshouldered treatment, becoming a foil, or a fall-guy for "critics" who are said to overemphasise the importance of humoralism in Renaissance thought (although Paster clearly has encouraged this, 'emboldening [Sullivan's] argument' as PhD examiner, we are told). Essentially, I see little here that intrinsically contradicts the implications of Paster's work, or indeed which does not usefully develop her thinking, and consequently would suggest that this study's only infelicity is Sullivan's insistence that "previous scholarship has failed to account for...," which feels out of place in a monograph which makes a real and sustained virtue of its critical awareness, its scholarly inheritance, and its own contribution to a mutually beneficial collective debate. This study need not be seen as an 'intervention' or 'remedy' in order to be appreciated; rather Sullivan offers a nuanced realignment of some scholarly tendencies, and an insistent reminder of both the complexity and the positive potential of a fascinating temperamental state understood not simply as a distracted distemper but as a state of 'passionate rationality,' as providing 'impetus [for] strident ... self-expression,' or 'as the guiding force ... towards self-awareness ... self-knowledge' and even 'selftransformation.'

The characteristic theoretical particularity to Sullivan's account is a notable emphasis not just upon how the subject is *affected by* emotion, but upon the subject as productive. 'In this way,' Sullivan explains, 'technologies and ontologies of self were more fundamentally intertwined than has sometimes been acknowledged, with personal experience and identity emerging not only from social operations that produced them from the outside in, but also from the knowledge systems that purported to define them from the inside out:' this is – on its own terms, and regardless of what others may or may not have explicitly acknowledged – persuasive, and Sullivan's sustained examination of the 'more personal and practical manifestations' of sadness is refreshingly sensitive to, and engagingly positive about, the easily obscured felt experience of a historically specific but 'messy' emotion, particularly in its spiritual and theological context.