

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



Mary Ann Lund, *Melancholy, Medicine, and Religion in Early Modern England: Reading 'The Anatomy of Melancholy'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). xii+223pp. ISBN 978 1 1076 5996 4.

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Mary Ann Lund's study is aptly named. It is as much about the act of reading, how it is imagined by an author and negotiated by a reader, as it is about Burton's *Anatomy*. As Walter Ong reminded us, every author constructs an image of his or her imagined reader, and Burton does so dramatically from the start when he likens his book to the talismanic drum of the 'great captain', Zisca, that was said to drive away the enemy by its mere sound. So, Burton imagines, will his book do for melancholy in the one who reads it. But talismanic gestures aside, *The Anatomy* is a good example of the changing value and function of reading. It gives a sense of what Burton read, his voluminous quotations, his breadth of interest woven into what has long puzzled scholars as a 'syncretism which [refuses to] syncretise' (p. 5, quoting Nuttall). Burton offers quotations from many various sources, carefully working them into his argument to advance the point he wants to make, at times in contradiction to the original author's position. The *Anatomy* also gives a sense of how Burton envisages his book being read: Burton qualifies theological prescription, making his work an inclusive gesture toward all those who come to it. Lund argues that it 'offers a tool that, if it does not promote "self-treatment", nonetheless encourages readers toward healing' (p. 6); it is an early modern 'self-help' book, a 'gilded pill' that 'provides pleasure and cure simultaneously' (p. 30). The reading process, like the act of writing for this author who identifies so closely with the melancholic condition of his readers, is a form of therapy. It is akin to spiritual meditation, and its organisation encourages this with para-textual features offering greater ease of navigation for readers (p. 19).

One of the most interesting aspects of Lund's study is the way that Burton's inclusiveness toward his readers offers a subtle challenge to more exacting forms of

Calvinist theology. Prominent writers like William Perkins and Timothy Bright assumed their readership included only those who showed some sign of God's election, casting others into an outer darkness of despair and damnation. Burton, in contrast, 'accepts the far greater challenge of comforting any and every reader', encouraging all to 'Hope the best' (p. 59). Some of the most convincing evidence Lund presents is Burton's interest in and borrowing from Hemmingius (Niels Hemmingsen, 1513-1600), which she develops in Chapter 2. This Danish Lutheran theologian introduces a proto-Arminian stance and gives an indication of Burton's own anti-Calvinist position. The link ties Burton into a growing number in the early seventeenth century who were becoming increasingly interested in a more irenic theology. Lund artfully navigates the complex 'spectrum of opinions' on the then controversial topic of predestination. Burton, Lund points out, cannot be located simply on a theological pole of a two-prong debate. Instead, she insists, he was responding to a vibrant spectrum of opinion, vigorously debated in the university environment where he lived. He used the rhetoric of different positions to open the possibilities of comfort to the unknown needs of his readers: the language of Hemmingius offered the hope of faith, and the more severe Calvinism of Perkins, et al., a reassuring particularity, all the while with one strategic distortion – the hope that one 'maist' be saved. Burton, Lund asserts, creates an 'alternative... religious discourse in order to cater to the needs of the unknown suffering reader' (p. 76).

Burton draws a similarly fine line, as Lund shows in Chapter 3, when he positions his text between Latin medical texts and those written in the vernacular that follow a more popular tradition. The *Anatomy* balances between the practica which carry the weight of learned Galenic and Hippocratic tradition, and the regimens which offer a more general advice on maintaining humoral balance through the regulation of external elements such as air, exercise, and sleep. While on one hand Burton compiles 'the most detailed study of the causes, symptoms, prognostics and cures' of melancholy (p. 111), the text presents an odd challenge when many of these cures can be clearly beyond the pale, 'exotic and inaccessible', such as cutting off one's genitals to alleviate jealousy (p. 105). Lund argues that, rather than these showing a disregard for his readers by presenting possibilities that will be of little benefit, they are an example of Burton offering 'the therapeutic pleasures of reading' (p. 105). This point may seem a bit strained, but Lund's wider argument that Burton performs a kind of therapy through imaginative pleasure, digressing into spectacle, satire, and religious consolation is more convincing and provides a basis for much of the rest of her book. Lund explores Burton's use of Democritian laughter and satire in Chapter 5, which brings him close to an Erasmian embrace of folly. While this too is tentative and qualified by Burton's shifting stances, adopted personas, and 'dizzying... unexpected shifts in tone and mood'

(p. 166), it gives solid ground for Lund's assertion that this textual variation is itself the point, as it offers a 'dynamic' engagement for the varied demands of his unknown readers.

Toward the end, Lund returns to the theological position adopted by Burton, drawing attention to his engagement with Reformation debates about the nature of the will. By again linking Burton with Hemmingius, and through him to Luther's contemporary, Melanchthon, Lund traces a theological stance that 'allows [Burton] to dwell on the power... of humans to change themselves' (p. 168). This leads toward a convincing conclusion that Burton aimed his text at the power of the reader to 'change himself or herself' (p. 195), and offers a satisfying challenge to earlier critical responses by Stanley Fish and John Stachniewski that read Burton as a 'negative and self-undermining text' (p. 134). Lund closes, appropriately, with a discussion of marginalia, the scribbles and annotations which give tantalising, if nonetheless unclear, indications of how Burton's text was actually read, which parts were lingered upon, and what might have been more meaningful and marked for later contemplation. This material evidence points to early modern readers who were largely supportive of the varied authorial strategies Burton provides. While it is impossible to generalise about Burton's readers – a point Lund makes throughout her book – what is clear is that the book was used and that it offered a flexible tool for a varied readership to apply to their own needs, circumstances, and dispositions. Lund has thus identified an important critical gap in the study of early modern writing and reading. By 'involving the reader' in the text's imaginative structure, she has increased not only our understanding of the *Anatomy*, but also of how Burton saw himself and his readers as diverse but intimate companions, mutually involved in the project of each other's mental and spiritual well-being.