

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



**Brian Cummings and Freya Sierhus, eds, *Passions and Subjectivity in Early Modern Culture*  
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This book follows in the recent critical interest in passions often grouped under the rubric of ‘the affective turn’, a diverse array of theory on the importance of passions, from re-theorization of affect in queer studies to the recent reappraisal of the role of affect in philosophy and psychology. Cummings and Sierhus approach the question of affect from the interdisciplinary domains of philosophy and literary studies, aiming to question what they take as a ‘physically determinist model of passions’ that has dominated the field of early modern literary studies (p. 285). Taking aim specifically at the influential model of early modern passion as ‘embodied emotion’ defined through the four humors of Galenic psychology — a model popularized by Gail Kern Paster in *Humoring the Body* and *Reading the Early Modern Passions* — this book instead seeks to re-introduce notions of soul, mind, and political agency into the conversation about passions (p. 75). In place of the ‘physically determinist’ model of passions, this book offers a variety of ways to think about early modern passions through the prism of philosophy, both the philosophical/religious texts circulating in early modern period (models of passions offered in Augustine, Cicero, Calvin, Montaigne, among others) and philosophical models of passions available now (Spinoza and Wittgenstein).

The collection seeks to cool down the fervor with which literary scholars such as Paster, Michael Schoenfeldt, Bruce Smith and Mary Floyd-Wilson have embraced the identification of passions with physical substance and the corresponding narrative according to which an irreducible cultural distance separates our Cartesian, disembodied concepts of passion from the early modern counterpart, where, in the words of Charles Taylor, ‘Melancholy is black bile. That’s what it means’ (qtd. on p. 88). The best essays in the collection deliver on the promise of complicating and re-historicizing this account of early modern passions by turning to the sources used by Gail Kern Paster, Michael Schoenfeldt, and other scholars, and showing how in fact the world of early modern

passions is far more complex than the humoral identity between passion and substance would make us believe.

The essays show that we have overlooked important early modern accounts in our near-exclusive preoccupation with humoral theory — most notably, early modern discourse on friendship and modeling of passions in the debate of the English Reformation — and that humoral theory itself can be reread as much less physically deterministic. The strongest critique of passions' physical determinism is perhaps delivered in Angus Gowland's essay, 'Melancholy, Passions and Identity in the Renaissance' (pp. 75–94). Gowland carefully takes the reader through foundational texts on melancholy and convincingly shows how reading early modern passions as simply 'humoral' is reductive and does not do justice to the complex interaction between the soul, the body and the environment. He explains the complex logic of causation thus: 'Passions do not originate in the body, but in the external senses and then the perceptive powers of the soul, the "internal senses" of common sense, imagination, fantasy and estimation, which influence the motive powers (the appetites producing emotions) and also pass on various effects via the animal spirits to the bodily organs' (p. 90).

If Gowland's essay suggests that historical phenomenology — the approach taken up by Gail Kern Paster and other scholars interested in passions — is not historical enough, the other essays in the collection mine the archive for other, non-humoral accounts of passion and aim to replace the current 'physically determinist' account of passions with an 'intersubjective' model of early modern self. The intersubjective model, the "sense that one's identity inheres *first* in the other" (Nancy Selleck, qtd. on p. 17), is most forcibly developed by Christopher Tilmouth, whose essay 'Passion and Intersubjectivity in Early Modern Literature' opens the book collection and whose claim is then taken up by Russ Leo and Brian Cummings in Part I. Tilmouth gives a quick reading of a number of texts, though mostly Shakespeare (*Henry IV*, *Henry V*, *Rape of Lucrece*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *Julius Caesar*) and he claims that 'Shakespearean drama [...] repeatedly emphasizes selfhood's position as something called into being dialogically, in association with others' (p. 20). Although philosophically interesting, the model of the intersubjective self seems liable to the same criticism that the contributors level at the previous model: the intersubjective self may seem not a description of the early modern paradigm, but rather a projection of modern desire by critics who are philosophically and ethically invested in the value of an intersubjective construction of self.<sup>1</sup> For instance, Tilmouth focuses almost exclusively on Shakespearean drama while Brian Cummings chooses as his focus Donne's letters, a form, which he acknowledges is intersubjective by its very nature (p. 65).

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<sup>1</sup> Angus Gowland discusses the 'loathing, and seemingly also the fear, of the Enlightenment' which funds the previous critics' heartfelt embrace of the material subject, on p. 92.

Alternative, non-humoral accounts of self would surely include an account of the intersubjective self — as is brilliantly demonstrated by a number of essays in the book — but it is not clear that most early modern writers adhere to this model. Thus, even the contributors in the same volume present strikingly different options: The case for an intersubjective model of self is strongly made by Brian Cummings on the evidence of Donne's letters, but when Katrin Ettenhuber turns to Donne's sermons and his description of grief, she finds Donne impervious to God or intersubjectivity as such: Donne describes grief, she contends, 'as a state of physiological impurity, "undigested, uncocted, and retaining yet some crudities": a somatic experience', which resists St. Augustine's precepts to 'sublimate and convert' intense grief into godly devotion (p. 213). Another intriguing scenario is offered by Björn Quiring who reads Milton's *Paradise Lost* as a work that shies away from the material and sacramental aspects of Christ's pain, sublimating and eliding the aspects of grief that Donne found all too hard to ignore (pp. 253–66).

The book is divided into five parts. 'Part I: Intersubjectivity, Ethics, Agency' advances the claim about the intersubjective model of early modern self. The intersubjective model is brilliantly argued by Christopher Tilmouth on the example of Shakespearean drama and by Brian Cummings in reference to Donne's letters. Russ Leo's essay is a sort of extended glossary on the terms *affectus*, *afficio*, and *affectio* as they are used in Spinoza's *Ethics* and would probably be more of interest to a philosopher of Spinoza than to a literary scholar (as is the essay by Ioannis D. Evrigenis on the use of terms "passion" and "reason" in Hobbes's body of work in Part III).

The essays in 'Part II: Embodiment, Cognition, Identity' are loosely unified in their emphasis on the equal roles of body and mind in passion. Angus Gowland provides a nuanced analysis of early modern melancholy as a disease of the body, but also a derangement of 'psychic powers of imagination and reason' (p. 86). Felicity Green discusses Montaigne's conception of the soul as possibly mortal and subject to the infirmities of the body, and Katharine Fletcher delivers a Christian reading of Milton's *Paradise Lost* as a work that validates the role of passions in helping Adam (and the reader) reach God. (Surprisingly, Fletcher makes no reference to Björn Quoring's essay on *Paradise Lost* in the same collection.)

'Part III: Politics, Affects, Friendship' claims its focus on friendship primarily due to Freya Sierhus's brilliant study of early modern discourses of friendship in the context of the work of Fulke Greville. Her essay is followed by Isabel Karreman's political reading of nostalgia as a sort of false consciousness (founded by forgetting as much as by remembering) in the plays by Thomas Dekker and Thomas Heywood. Finally, Ioannis D. Evrigenis argues for Hobbes's consistent attitude to passions and reason throughout the corpus of his work.

'Part IV: Religion, Devotion, Theology' is perhaps most unified in its focus on religion: Joe Moschenka highlights the use of metaphor and evasion in writers of the English Reformation and

their purposeful ambiguity in dealing with the senses; Katrin Ettenhuber isolates grief as a passion that is particularly difficult to re-purpose for God in Donne's sermons; and Adrian Streete outlines the differences between Calvinist and Arminian attitudes to passions in the English Reformation. Finally, 'Part V Philosophy and the Early Modern Passions' shows how to read *Hamlet* through Wittgenstein (Daniella Jansc6) and Descartes (Stephan Laqu6), and, in a wonderful essay, Bj6rn Quiring discusses the value of sacramental suffering in *Paradise Lost*.

This book's strongest contribution to the field of early modern affect studies is its reassertion of the previously neglected discourses of philosophy, religion, and friendship in shaping early modern attitudes to passions. The collection furthers the conversation about the role of the English Reformation in changing the prevailing attitude to passions ('Part IV: Religion, Devotion, Theology') and invites a more scrupulous attention to the 'historical' claim in the field of early modern historical phenomenology. On the other hand, the book's excitement about intersubjectivity and the importance of affect for politics places it alongside modern affect theory — books like Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth's *The Affect Theory Reader*, Diana Coole and Samantha Frost's *New Materialisms* or Brian Massumi's *Parables for the Virtual*. Like these books, Cummings, Sierhus, and the contributors grant 'to the body the possibility of agency' and validate the value of passions, but do so using the historical resources of the early modern literature and philosophy (p. 63). The interdisciplinary focus of the essays does not always work (some essays are just philosophy, while others are straightforward literary analysis), but as a whole, the collection does show what can be achieved if one reads early modern passions philosophically.

## Works Cited

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