

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



**Stephanie Shirilan, *Robert Burton and the Transformative Powers of Melancholy***  
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In a certain sense, new historicism revived Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*. Before the late 80s, this formidably long, formidably erudite book had been the subject of a spattering of 20<sup>th</sup> century scholarship, much of which was published only in dissertation form. Since then, it has become an oft-cited reference in scholarly work on the early modern body. This move from literary subject to reference object has transformed the *Anatomy* from an under-examined literary curiosity into a highly-visible historical source on early modern embodiment and emotion.

In her recent monograph on the *Anatomy*, Stephanie Shirilan argues that this increased visibility has come at a price. *Robert Burton and the Transformative Powers of Melancholy* shows readers where and how these consultative readings obscure the book's unique contribution to early modern English writing on melancholy. Shirilan argues that the *Anatomy* is a sophisticated, sustained rhetorical performance constructed to produce positive, material transformations upon melancholic imaginations. In doing so, she makes a compelling case for reading Burton's book as a significant literary invention with a unique therapeutic purpose — not to cure melancholy, but rather (quite literally) to reimagine it as a force for positive personal and social change.

The book's first two chapters illustrate how the *Anatomy* recalibrates negative seventeenth-century stereotypes of melancholy, especially those that suggest that melancholic anxieties are unsubstantiated or self-indulgent. Chapter 1 focuses on the *Anatomy*'s preface, in which

Burton, under the name Democritus Junior, offers a complex, often contradictory account of his writerly method and purpose that critiques Neostoicism's valorization of transparency and tranquility. Shirilan argues that Burton's multifaceted representation of this authorial alter ego both obfuscates Burton's own identity and evokes the rich, complicated textual history of Democritus, the 'laughing philosopher' who chortles at the world not out of derision but sympathy. Chapter 2 considers how the *Anatomy* promotes (and proliferates) this sympathetic recognition between melancholy subjects and their worlds. Following ancient sources, most seventeenth-century spiritual hygienists and physicians believed that melancholy sufferers' sympathetic self-identifications with animals and objects were 'delusions' caused by the melancholic's 'thin skin'. According to Shirilan, Burton challenges this belief: while he recognizes that the melancholic's heightened sympathy puts him in a precarious position, his descriptions of these 'delusions' suggest that this characteristic must be properly cultivated, rather than cured.

The book's latter two chapters focus on how and why Burton promotes these melancholic self-identifications within the *Anatomy*. Together, they argue that Burton fashions a rhetorical style that materially cultivates positive melancholic sympathy. In Chapter 3, Shirilan addresses a question that has long dogged Burtonian scholars: how can such an overwhelming volume of scholarly learning cure a disease aggravated by study? Rather than interpret this apparent contradiction as a design flaw or an ironic nod to the persistence of melancholic impulse, she illustrates how Burton's diffuse treatment of fantastic scholarly subjects pleasantly distracts melancholic readers from their brooding impulse. By inducing 'wonder' among readers, this form of 'ecstatic study' eases the burden of heavy melancholic spirits (p. 102). Chapter 4 extends this argument with a discussion of the 'Digression of the Ayre', which appears in Part III of the *Anatomy*. A 'dizzying, airborne survey of the mysteries of the natural world', the 'Digression' exemplifies the 'ecstatic study' that, Shirilan argues, the *Anatomy* promotes (p. 137). It also links the melancholic's transformable spirit to a mutable, ever-morphing elemental world. Merging Epicurean and Christian traditions, this worldview translates 'cosmic terror into wonder' at the infinite variability of God's creation (p. 138). In doing so, Shirilan argues, Burton fashions the melancholic's personal vicissitudes as an extension of God's own wondrously malleable creation and an agent for spiritually-invigorating social change.

Shirilan may frame her study as a corrective to new historicism's treatment of Burton's *Anatomy*, but this should not be mistaken for an antipathy for historicism (new or otherwise). Quite the contrary: many of her study's most illuminating moments occur when

Shirilan historicizes the *Anatomy* in ways that highlight what makes the book's form and philosophy so singular within seventeenth-century contexts. For example, to make her argument that the *Anatomy*'s digressions lighten melancholy's heavy humors, Shirilan shows how early modern Neoplatonists and Paracelsians repopularized the Stoic belief in *pneuma*, the 'spirit-laden air or breath' that creates the 'sympathetic mechanism' by which Burton's rhetoric would have transformed his readers' material bodies (p.111). She traces this philosophy through a lyrical reading of the *Anatomy*'s 'Digression of the Ayre', which illustrates how Burton's citation of oft-repeated anecdotes and images creates a sympathetic connection between melancholic readers and writers. Elsewhere, she demonstrates the uniqueness of Burton's approach through comparative rhetorical analysis: while spiritual hygienists and physicians used case studies to highlight the many novel cures for melancholic delusion, Burton does so to emphasize the dizzying variety of sympathetic experiences that melancholics can access.

Shirilan's argument is most compelling when engaged in these historically-informed close readings of Burton's scholarly, yet lyrical, prose. As a reader, I found myself wanting *more* such moments — both because the book seeks to counteract scholars' typically nonformalist readings of the *Anatomy* and because Shirilan's extended formal readings lend it some of its most cogent, even moving moments. This is especially true in the book's first two chapters, in which Shirilan's (often fascinating) excavations of Burton's dense cultural and scholarly references (for this reader) overshadow the insightful, but comparatively brief, close readings of the *Anatomy* that each features. I also appreciated Shirilan's sustained engagement with Mary Ann Lund's and Angus Gowland's recent studies of the *Anatomy*, both of which share Shirilan's formal investments but draw different conclusions about the text's tenor and purpose, and I would have been interested in seeing her critical responses to other recent, formally-attentive work on the *Anatomy*, including readings by Douglas Trevor and Drew Daniel.

Nevertheless, the book's value to the field of Burton studies is clear. For new readers of the *Anatomy*, Shirilan's study provides a copious, engaging account of the philosophical and rhetorical traditions that inform Burton's formal choices. This meticulous contextualization helps readers decipher the remote stylistic methods that encode Burton's sensitive wit. And, for those accustomed to treating the *Anatomy* as an encyclopedic reference rather than a unified literary work, she makes a compelling argument that the book's form and therapeutic approach are exceptional rather than exemplary. But, perhaps most notably, this rigorously-researched monograph demonstrates the sort of prolific curiosity and care that

define the *Anatomy* it examines. Whether excavating histories of language or closely reading a cleverly revised reference, Shirilan's treatment of Burton is both interesting and deeply *interested* — both a critical examination of the *Anatomy* and a sympathetic aspiration toward the passionate spirit that animates it.