

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

**Drew Daniel, *The Melancholy Assemblage: Affect and Epistemology in the English Renaissance* (Fordham University Press, 2013)**

Most of us are no doubt aware of the ancient understanding of the disease which came to be known as ‘melancholy’. Hippocrates (c. 460-370 BC), commonly seen as the father of western medicine, saw the occurrence of the malady in a person as due to an excess of black bile (hence the name), and thought ‘melancholy’ an appropriate label to use when a patient suffered from fears and despondencies which lasted a long time. But although for many centuries black bile was considered a component of the disease, people did think, from early on, further than Hippocrates. For example, Galen (AD 129-200, or later) believed that people belonged to one of four character types, corresponding with the four chief bodily fluids called ‘humours’: a melancholic had to be thought of as ‘analytic and literal’. Galen also thought of melancholy as ‘a most ignominious and miserable condition of mind’, but on the other hand according to a tradition initiated by Aristotle ‘it is a most enviable and admirable condition of mind’ (Lawrence Babb, *The Elizabethan Malady*, 1951; quoted by Daniel on p. 23). We thus find in Elizabethan culture melancholics who suffered from a form of depression, but at the same time were happy, and indeed proud, to suffer.

Nor is this all. Another fascinating feature of the disease as people during the European Renaissance perceived it was that it was likely to strike you if you were a select member of society, particularly an intellectual. In Italy, the philosopher Marsilio Ficino (1433-99) articulated this position. Perhaps most interesting of all, it turned out that melancholics were often inclined not to finish tasks which in principle they set out to do. Leonardo da Vinci is famous for many positive achievements, but also for not completing or even starting works of art, and we all know that Hamlet, usually thought of as a portrait of an arch-melancholic, was among many things a procrastinator.

Drew Daniel is fully aware of the history of melancholy and the thinking around it, and has written a very fine book calling attention to the features of the malady, and notably its odd complexity. The condition cannot simply be equated with modern ‘depression’. That word refers to something larger than melancholy, which in its well-nigh epidemic Renaissance form, particularly among the rich and intellectually gifted, had a number of quite specific features. Hamlet, for example, no doubt is despondent, but he also characteristically calls attention to his condition in a less than modest yet oblique fashion when he tells his mother in a famous speech (act 1, scene 2) which Daniel rightly quotes (121) that his mourning is not a matter of seeming but that ‘it is’: what is external may ‘seem’, but, he claims, ‘I have that within which passes show’. He is someone special. Of course, it is true that a special fate has struck him, but he is also proud of his malady, and calls attention to it as something inside him which he does not (probably cannot) name. In act 2, scene 1, he says ‘I have of late, but wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercise; and indeed, it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory’. Daniel writes a very good chapter on *Hamlet*. In particular, he seems to me right to reject the efforts of those who seek for a specific ‘explanation’ of what is perceived as the ‘mystery’ of *Hamlet*, as though, if only we were as bright as Poirot, we would find out quite specifically what it is that stops Hamlet from carrying out what he knows to be his task, just what sub-text we should assume, etc. *Hamlet*, as Daniel realises, is a play offered to us as, for one thing, a riddle. It is not solved, for example, by a book which

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had not yet come Daniel's way, David P. Gontar's *Hamlet Made Simple and Other Essays* (2013), who would have us believe (though with some caution) that Hamlet 'senses he is not the son of the man he loves but the man he loathes' (401); he cannot kill Claudius because he is Claudius's son. There is not a shred of evidence for this assumption, but it shows how far critics of *Hamlet* have gone in their quest for 'solutions' which might explain the Hamlet 'mystery'. Daniel is right to insist that we have to see Hamlet above all as suffering from melancholy as a condition. His various actions and character traits do, indeed, very closely correspond with those that Elizabethans saw as typical of melancholics.

To note that an interpretation of the malady of melancholy is by itself a task of considerable magnitude is not to say that we cannot ever come to revealing conclusions by studying it. The very best chapter in Daniel's book is to my mind the one in which he discusses Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice* as a melancholic. The play starts with Antonio saying 'In sooth I know not why I am so sad.' Not only is, for the audience, the protestation of sadness a possible pointer towards melancholy, but more important and indicative is the 'I know not why' component. As happens generally, that creates a sense of mystery on the part of Antonio's friends. When it comes to what might be an actual reason, one soon guesses that at least in part it must be sadness in love. Most readers would now agree that Antonio is in love with Bassanio, while Bassanio appears to be firmly heterosexual: he sees Antonio as his best friend, but wants to get married to Portia. Much of what Antonio does is best explained by Daniel's interpretation of him as a melancholic who is not merely generally sad, but specifically a masochist, which is to say that he at least to an extent enjoys his suffering. This, indeed, is not untypical of melancholics. Daniel leans fairly heavily on Freud's description of masochism, and that does not seem to be inappropriate. Renaissance dramatists embodied much thinking in their plays which Freud later came to express explicitly. In any case, the idea of Antonio-as-masochist could, as Daniel contends, explain at a deep level why he willingly accepts a bizarre contract with Shylock which could result in his own death. And when death is nigh he does not fear it, but only hopes that Bassanio will be there to see it (see the end of act 3, scene 3). Bassanio does come, and Antonio declares in act 4, scene 1, that he is 'a tainted wether of the flock, / Meetest for death'. A 'wether' is a castrated ram, and I must confess I have for long believed that Antonio uses the expression for one thing as an allusion to what he sees as his inherently 'feminine' nature, as a homosexual. But I had not quite realised that Freud saw fantasies of male masochists in a 'feminine' form 'place the subject in a characteristically female situation; they signify, that is, being castrated, or copulated with, or giving birth to a baby' (cited by Daniel, 109-110).

Daniel has written a complex but richly rewarding book which is a significant contribution to studies of a very important strand in Elizabethan society and culture, and which is also of great interest today, with various forms of depression unfortunately much on the increase.

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