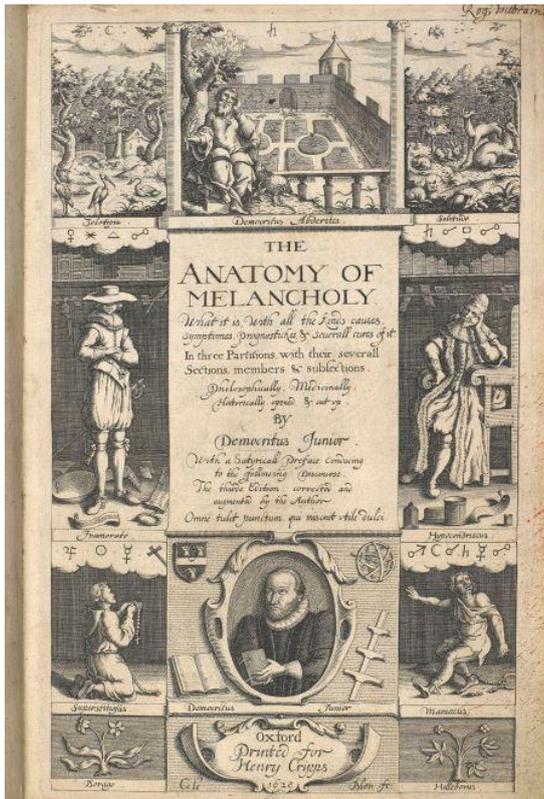


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The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century

Melancholy

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Keywords

Futility

Despair

Self-Indulgence

Self-Doubt

Salvation

Solitude

Community

Abstract

While melancholy was essentially a solitary affliction, one that traditionally shunned society and regarded its activities as sham and a waste of time, or else sought out seclusion in order to indulge in self-pleasing fantasy, sociability was widely seen as a potential cure. This was the course advocated by religious counsellors and also, increasingly, by medical professionals. Writers exploring various aspects of melancholy included Shakespeare, Robert Burton in his *Anatomy of Melancholy*, and the poet Thomas Gray in such works as *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*.

In almost every way, melancholy was always the very antithesis of sociability. The melancholy individual sought out solitariness, regarded himself or herself (though it was originally thought to be a mainly male affliction)¹ as unfit for company, and was generally unwelcomed by his fellows, not least because of the pervasive gloom and even surliness he brought with him. Melancholy not only avoided sociability, its vision seemed to expose the hollowness of all attempts at it: the coming together of humankind, it claimed, is pointless, futile, just a way of wasting time on the way to the grave. As Hamlet puts it: ‘I have of late [...] lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises; and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame the earth seems to me a sterile promontory’ and man himself a ‘quintessence of dust’;² or as a later non-fictional sufferer, James Boswell, more prosaically writes in an essay in the *London Magazine* in 1780, ‘All that is illustrious in publick life, all that is amiable and endearing in society, all that is elegant in science and in arts, affects him just with the same indifference, and even contempt, as the pursuits of children affect rational men.’³ One of the oldest of conditions, coming down from the classical world, it received a considerable cultural boost during the Renaissance period, partly through its representation on stage in works such as *Hamlet* and such Jacobean revenge tragedies as John Marston’s *The Malcontent* from 1603 and John Webster’s *The White Devil* from 1612.

Equally significant, though, were the publication in 1621 of the Oxford scholar, cleric and mathematician Robert Burton’s seminal work, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, and its several subsequent expanded and revised versions up until Burton’s death in 1640. Burton, at the outset of his book, divides melancholy into two kinds, both of them solitary. The first is actually a pleasurable kind, known as ‘White Melancholy’, and so called by the poet Thomas Gray in a letter of 1742. ‘When I go musing all alone,’ writes Burton in ‘The Author’s Abstract of Melancholy’,

‘Thinking of divers things fore-known
When I build castles in the air,
Void of sorrow and void of fear,
Pleasing myself with phantasms sweet,
Methinks the time runs very fleet.
All my joys to this are folly
Naught so sweet as melancholy.’⁴

Part of what is identified here is a strongly self-indulgent streak in melancholy, one that not only has no need of company but actually shuns it in favour of self. In Gray’s words, ‘mine,

you are to know, is a white Melancholy, or rather *Leucocholy* ... which though it seldom laughs or dances [...] yet is a good easy sort of state.’⁵ It is a feature that Gray himself draws on considerably in his own ‘Elegy written in a Country Churchyard’ of the late 1740s: ‘The ploughman homeward plods his weary way, /And leaves the world to darkness and to me.’⁶ Clearly, ‘darkness’ and ‘me’ are more compatible, more ‘easy’ with each other than daylight and company would be.

Burton’s second kind of melancholy, widely known as ‘Black Melancholy’, though, is of the kind that genuinely terrifies, fills that ‘darkness’ with horrific visions and self-doubts, not least concerning God and one’s own salvation, and has the tendency to drive its victims towards self-destruction:

‘When I lie, sit, or walk alone,
I sigh, I grieve, making great moan,
In a dark grove, or irksome den,
With discontents and Furies then,
A thousand miseries at once
Mine heavy heart and soul ensconce,
All my griefs to this are jolly,
None so sour as melancholy.’ (Burton 11)

‘Tis my sole plague to be alone’, declares the ‘Author’ as he reaches the end of the ‘Abstract’: ‘I am a beast, a monster grown, /I will no light nor company, /I find it now my misery.’ (Burton 12) The melancholy that begins as self-pleasing, as the indulgence of one’s own daydreams, speculations and above all one’s own company, can become self-pitying, self-loathing, and even suicidal. Gray’s elegy, product of ‘White Melancholy’ though it may be, ends in the unexplained death of the ‘poet’. Melancholy is dangerous.

Melancholy, to the extent that it is a product of self-indulgence, can also be its own punishment: the melancholy man removes himself increasingly from company, friends and family, from all that makes living in a society worthwhile, and sooner or later might end up paying the ultimate price. As the eighteenth-century physician Nicholas Robinson puts it in his 1729 work, *A New System of the Spleen, Vapours and Hypochondriack Melancholy*, such sufferers occupy ‘the most gloomy Scene of Nature, that Mankind can possibly encounter, where nothing but Horror reigns: where the noble Endowments of the reasonable Soul are often disconcerted to a surprising Degree, and this lordly Creature Man almost debas’d below the brutal Species of the animated Creation.’⁷

Melancholy and sociability, then, might on the face of it appear as having little in common, one seeking solitude and introspection, the other delighting in human company and all that promotes it. There are, however, significant links between them, most obviously in terms of potential treatments and cures for melancholy. It is Burton who advises ‘Be not solitary, be not idle’ (Burton, part 3, 432), and Samuel Johnson, himself subject to the severest melancholy, who rewords Burton for the benefit of Boswell: ‘If you are idle, be not solitary; if you are solitary be not idle.’⁸ Such advice, however, did not always feature amongst the prescriptions of physicians in the increasing volume of medical writing of the eighteenth century, probably because it required no medication, and therefore generated no fees, but it was a well-established feature of Nonconformist treatment for melancholy brothers and sisters – or, in religious terms, those suffering from ‘Trouble of Mind’. ‘*AVOID all unnecessary Solitariness, and be as much as possible in honest cheerful Company*’, advises the Nonconformist divine, Richard Baxter, at the end of the seventeenth century (his works were extracted and published posthumously in 1716): ‘There is no Mirth’, he continues,

‘like the *Mirth of Believers*, which *Faith* doth fetch from the Blood of Christ, and from the Promises of the Word, and from the experience of Mercy. [...] Converse with Men of strongest Faith, that have this heavenly Mirth [...] and these will be a great Help to the reviving of your Spirits, and changing your Melancholy Habit so far as without a Physician it may be expected.’⁹

And to the Nonconformist friends of the melancholy, he advises that they should ‘divert them from the Thoughts which are their Trouble; keep them on some other Talk or Business; ... Suffer them not to be alone, get fit Company to them, or them to it.’ (Baxter 122)

This is a constant theme of Nonconformist writing, and it is one that can be seen as beginning to feed into some instances of medical discourse as the eighteenth century proceeded: the physician had a part to play in the treatment of melancholy – generally, of course, through the old stand-bys of vomits, purges, clysters and blood-letting – but so too did inducing the patient to talk, to mix with company, and to find a renewed pleasure in sociability. One rather extreme version of this can be seen in the work of the Royal Physician Peter Shaw (1694-1763). Writing in 1724, Shaw advises a male hypochondriacal patient (that is, one whose brand of melancholy leads him to imagine that he has a serious physical disorder): ‘you need only live well, feed high, take a hearty Glass, and be merry with your Friends.’¹⁰ So successfully does the patient comply that ‘by the Assistance of his Friends, he was by slow degrees brought to bear his Bottle, forget his Distemper, and laugh at his own Folly.’ (Shaw 49) Few physicians would simply have sent a patient away to get increasingly drunk with friends, but the instance nevertheless indicates the part that sociability, both of a religious and of a bibulous kind, were seen to be beneficial in delivering Burton’s and Johnson’s dicta.

1. Jennifer Radden includes a useful discussion of this point, citing Galen, Areteus, Pope and Benjamin Ruth, among others. See Jennifer Radden, *The Nature of Melancholy: From Aristotle to Kristeva* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 39-40.

2. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Harold Jenkins (London: Methuen, 1982), Act II, scene ii, ll. p. 295-299, 308, p. 253-254.

3. James Boswell, *Boswell's Column*, ed. Margery Bailey (London: William Kimber, 1951), p. 209.
 4. Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. Holbrook Jackson (New York: New York Review of Books, 2001), 'The Author's Abstract of Melancholy', p. 11.
 5. Thomas Gray, *The Letters of Thomas Gray*, ed. D.C. Tovey (London: George Bell and Sons, 1900-1912), 3 vols, I, p. 102.
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 7. Nicholas Robinson, *A New System of the Spleen, Vapours and Hypochondriack Melancholy* (London: A. Bettesworth, 1729), p. 234.
 8. Samuel Johnson, *The Letters of Samuel Johnson*, ed. Bruce Redford (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 5 vols, III, p. 201.
 9. Richard Baxter, *The Signs and Causes of Melancholy ... Collected out of the Works of Mr. Richard Baxter ... By Samuel Clifford* (London: S. Cruttenden and T. Cox, 1716), p. 81-83.
 10. Peter Shaw, *The Juice of the Grape; or, Wine Preferable to Water* (London: W. Lewis, 1724), p. 49.
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James Boswell, "The Hypochondriack, no. XXXIX" ([1780](#)).*