



Review of Erin Sullivan, *Beyond Melancholy: Sadness and Selfhood in Renaissance England*

Journal:	<i>The Seventeenth Century</i>
Manuscript ID	Draft
Manuscript Type:	Book Review
Date Submitted by the Author:	n/a
Complete List of Authors:	Langley, Eric; UCL, English
Keywords:	Sullivan, melancholy, sadness, Renaissance, humors

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3 Reviewed monograph:
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5 Erin Sullivan, *Beyond Melancholy: Sadness and Selfhood in Renaissance England* (OUP,
6 2016), ISBN 978-0-19-873965-4 Price: £60.00, 227 + xiv pp.
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9 Reviewer: Eric Langley, UCL
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12 Erin Sullivan's scholarly and consistently engaging contribution to OUP's Emotions in
13 History series, *Beyond Melancholy*, sets out not only to add nuance, local complexity, and
14 taxonomic specificity to broad period conceptions of sadness, but also to make sadness
15 less depressing, showing how depictions of this temperamental excess may be
16 pervasive but not exclusively negative. This is, she argues, a "basic" human emotion but
17 one whose seeming universality needs to be both atomised and inventoried in order to
18 account for grief's more particular passionate gradations: from its moral, intellectual,
19 and spiritual manifestations, to its grosser, corporeal forms, experienced right in the
20 gut. This is the dominant methodology of Sullivan's study, which consistently seeks to
21 refuse simple binary taxonomies – so 'melancholy [she explains] can be raucous and
22 tender, bodily and spiritual, scatological and political all at once' – in order to account
23 for the complexity of the emotion in both Renaissance medical, religious, and dramatic
24 texts, as well as in experience. Sullivan announces in her introduction that she sees
25 literary texts in particular as offering 'the scope and means [for writers] to explore
26 existing emotional standards and, if necessary, to take them off script,' and indeed each
27 chapter or sub-section tends to include at least one 'off-script' moment where Sullivan
28 undermines the categorical neatness of either medical diagnoses or subsequent critical
29 wisdoms, to explore unexpected instances of sorrow, both painful and vitalising.
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34 The challenge of this study is to take on the almost emblematic iconicity of sadness –
35 and in particular, melancholy, the most Elizabethan of maladies – and reconsider it
36 without preconception. Accordingly, Sullivan has recourse to an impressive array of
37 period texts and sources, often devoting considerable time to detailed, and often
38 suitably graphic, accounts of medical practice and case-records, full of scurvy,
39 flatulence, cramps, and fluids. This study, quite intentionally and to its credit, is as
40 comfortable with medical history as cultural history, often allowing itself lengthy
41 periods away from direct literary appreciation, and throughout Sullivan applies analytic
42 attention to a wide range of period texts, from the obvious melancholic canon of Burton,
43 Donne, Wright, Milton, to less familiar tracts and tables, bills and pamphlets, sermons,
44 emblems, and life-writing. There is a real wealth of material here for future scholars,
45 and notably sensitive readings of 'Il Penseroso,' *The Temple*, and *The Faerie Queene*, as
46 well as stand-out discussions of period spiritual autobiographies (often by women) in
47 two long chapters on religiously-inflected melancholy, which are particularly strong
48 examples of Sullivan's ability to develop a focused discussion through the accretion of
49 numerous close readings from multiple sources.
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53 During each of these accounts – which consider particular manifestations of grief in
54 terms of, for example, gender or class – Sullivan's secondary interest is in describing the
55 ways in which emotional experience shapes the sufferer's own sense of subjectivity, or
56 the period's attitude to 'affective selfhood.' As before, the intention here is to complicate
57 received conceptions of, for example, the primacy of humoral influence in the fashioning
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3 of the subject, to 'push the historiography of early modern emotion beyond its
4 preoccupation with medical humoral theory' in order to define 'a more dynamic,
5 pluralistic, and at times, unpredictable model of affective selfhood than has previously
6 been acknowledged.' Perhaps there is unnecessary combativeness here in the
7 presentation of previous scholarship; Gail Kern Paster, for example, whose work
8 essentially underpins so much of this "history of the emotions" material and informs so
9 much of what has become an increasingly popular critical field, receives sharp-
10 shouldered treatment, becoming a foil, or a fall-guy for "critics" who are said to over-
11 emphasise the importance of humoralism in Renaissance thought (although Paster
12 clearly has encouraged this, 'emboldening [Sullivan's] argument' as PhD examiner, we
13 are told). Essentially, I see little here that intrinsically contradicts the implications of
14 Paster's work, or indeed which does not usefully develop her thinking, and
15 consequently would suggest that this study's only infelicity is Sullivan's insistence that
16 "previous scholarship has failed to account for..." which feels out of place in a
17 monograph which makes a real and sustained virtue of its critical awareness, its
18 scholarly inheritance, and its own contribution to a mutually beneficial collective
19 debate. This study need not be seen as an 'intervention' or 'remedy' in order to be
20 appreciated; rather Sullivan offers a nuanced realignment of some scholarly tendencies,
21 and an insistent reminder of both the complexity and the positive potential of a
22 fascinating temperamental state understood not simply as a distracted distemper but as
23 a state of 'passionate rationality,' as providing 'impetus [for] strident ... self-expression,'
24 or 'as the guiding force ... towards self-awareness ... self-knowledge' and even 'self-
25 transformation.'

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30 The characteristic theoretical particularity to Sullivan's account is a notable emphasis
31 not just upon how the subject is *affected by* emotion, but upon the subject as productive.
32 'In this way,' Sullivan explains, 'technologies and ontologies of self were more
33 fundamentally intertwined than has sometimes been acknowledged, with personal
34 experience and identity emerging not only from social operations that produced them
35 from the outside in, but also from the knowledge systems that purported to define them
36 from the inside out:' this is – on its own terms, and regardless of what others may or
37 may not have explicitly acknowledged – persuasive, and Sullivan's sustained
38 examination of the 'more personal and practical manifestations' of sadness is
39 refreshingly sensitive to, and engagingly positive about, the easily obscured felt
40 experience of a historically specific but 'messy' emotion, particularly in its spiritual and
41 theological context.
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