The corrupt nature of man after the Fall, according to the *Discours des maladies mélancoliques* (1597) by André du Laurens, physician to Henri IV and renowned professor of anatomy at the university of Montpellier, is to be seen in two kinds of ‘alteration.’ The first occurs in the soul, which contains (as du Laurens’s English translator puts it) the “ingraven forme” of God but which “becommeth more outragious then a lyon, more fierce then a tyger, and more filthie and contemptible then a swine” when man gives way to his unruly appetites and passions. The second takes place when the body, the “vessell of the soule,” is “so greatly altered and corrupted” that the soul’s faculties are “likewise corrupted,” a process that arises “most sharply” in three diseases: “the frensie, madnes, and melancholie.” Just as the actions of frenetics and the mad are in no way “worthie of a man,” so “melancholike men” are “so cast downe” and abased “that they become companions to the brute beasts.” In such cases, from being “the best furnished and most perfect of all other living creatures,” a man can thereby become

most caitife and miserable creature that is in the world, spoyled of all his graces, deprived of judgement, reason and counsaile, enemie of men and of the Sun, straying and wandring in solitarie places: to be briefe, so altered and chaunged, as that he is no more a man, as not retaining any thing more then the very name.¹

Just over twenty years later the Oxford divine and amateur medical enthusiast Robert Burton wrote similarly of the postlapsarian deformation of the human being in his *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621). “Man,” according to Burton, once “the most excellent, and noble creature of the World,” has become “miserabilis homuncio, a cast-away, a caitiffe, one of the most miserable creatures of the World, if he be considered in his owne nature, and

so much obscured by his fall that (some few reliques excepted) he is inferiour to a beast.” When we yield to our “lusts” and give way to “every passion and perturbation of the minde,” we “metamorphosize our selves, and degenerate into beasts,” provoking God to anger and bringing upon ourselves “this [disease] of Melancholy, and all kindes of incurable diseases.”

For Burton as for du Laurens, melancholy could reveal and incarnate post-lapsarian misery in its quintessence, as a condition in which man was subject to disturbing emotions and irrational impulses, and thereby came to resemble “bruit Beasts... void of all reason.”

These works suggest that to be melancholic in this period was to be—or at least, be perceived to be—in some sense sub- or inhuman. In part, this perception originated in long-standing commonplaces concerning extreme emotions or psychic perturbations that associated passions with irrational animals. But as I hope to show here, the notion that the melancholic was somehow not fully human had implications for the sufferer’s selfhood that went beyond his or her simple resemblance to “bruit Beasts.” This notion was also a product of a complex and wide-ranging nexus of medical, psychological, moral and spiritual ideas about human nature, and more specifically about human subjectivity and the self. In this essay, then, I shall be investigating the relationship between ideas about melancholy and those about the self in the Renaissance, with a view to outlining the contours of the specifically ‘melancholic subject.’

I

There has been much interesting work done in the past thirty years on expressions of selfhood in early modern literature. The pioneering study in English literary studies was Stephen Greenblatt’s Renaissance Self-Fashioning of 1980, which initiated the ‘new-historicist’ project of treating early modern texts as cultural artifacts to reveal contemporary subjectivities and senses of self. These were typically shown to be of a markedly

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4 See Gail Kern Paster, Humoring the Body: Emotions and the Shakespearean Stage (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 135–88 for some illustrations of this association.