Stephanie Shirilan


Stephanie Shirilan has rendered a service to the melancholics among us who desire relief from their isolated studies, which exacerbate their melancholia, but who so often find in their books diversions lofty and sublime as well as literary sympathy with writers and readers engaging in the same process. They seek what Shirilan says Burton aimed to offer in The Anatomy of Melancholy: not an amateurish compendium of the various learned treatments of melancholy available to him by the time of the volume’s first printing in 1621, but a mixture of delightful, conflicting descriptions, diagnoses, and treatments for the affliction. Only the melancholic individual would so studiously seek out and find relief in such a work, in its plenitude, Shirilan explains – plenitude demonstrated by way of Ovidian copia, openness, questions introduced rather than answered (pp. 10, 152). Shirilan is right that this is a picture of Robert Burton we have not seen in former examinations of Anatomy. His flights of fancy have been weighed down by what Shirilan convincingly asserts and demonstrates is an history of misreading (pp. 5–14, 177–84). For all of these reasons, Shirilan’s Robert Burton and the Transformative Powers of Melancholy is itself potentially transformative for estimations of Burton and his long volume.

In four developed chapters with a significant and engaging introduction, Shirilan makes a compelling case for the misunderstanding of Burton’s efforts by the latest century of scholars. She then proposes a new reading of The Anatomy based on the idea that Burton intended to perform a therapeutic treatment in individuals who suffer from the very subject covered, never to effect a cure but to provide relief, to enable them to persist productively in their conditions. To manage this task, Shirilan provides both the early modern theoretical underpinnings for such a therapy, comparing Burton’s work on the subject to that of others at the time – notably Levinus Lemnius, Thomas Walker, and Timothy Bright (p. 91). She also supplies multiple examples of the various imaginative excursions on which Burton takes his readers as part of that therapy – the most significant being his “Digression of Air” (pp. 137–75). Primarily, Burton aims to give readers exercise for their imaginations such that they would be moved to experience not merely new thoughts but new physiological sensations and, via sympathetic association, new communities – these things helping the melancholic avoid debilitating fear and isolation (pp. 66–78, 148–9).

In a number of aspects, what Shirilan accomplishes here is also of benefit beyond the scope of Burton’s Anatomy. This is true of her treatment of Burton’s
understanding of the power of the imagination, for example: “the skin continues to be construed as the battered precipice between a putative ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ of the body, obscuring other physical and psychical locations where the boundary between itself and other was discursively wrought,” but “in much of the period’s spiritual and medical literature, [it] is not the dermal surface of the body so much as the imagination” where this contact between inside and outside occurs (p. 69). This is a valuable observation as scholars turn to the work of Michael Serres and Jane Bennett and others rethinking the limits of the human, of agency, and of reality. In light of Shirilan’s evidence, there is good cause to include a consideration of Burton and of the imagination in discussions of assemblages and actants. Two additional and related discussions with benefit beyond the volume’s titled subject focus on the idea of the melancholic person as one made of glass: with thin skin such that he or she is always in contact with the passions of others. Although a painful condition, “[t]he melancholic’s delusional brittleness,” Shirilan explains, “warns against the consequences that ensue from delusions of imperviousness and imperturbability cultivated in the name of good spiritual hygiene” (p. 100). Melancholy, as Burton understood it and as Shirilan demonstrates, was not a condition to be cured so much as to be carefully handled, as if one were made of glass, with all of the wonders attendant upon such a phenomenon. Burton emerges from Shirilan’s pages a student of wonder who wishes to help sensitive readers avoid some of the harsher sanctions on the passions advanced by Neostoics and Puritans (pp. 5, 33). Such a reader might be one like Shakespeare’s character Hamlet or like John Donne as self-represented in Devotions – each a man of glass, balancing brittleness, sensitivity, and curiosity.

There are many reasons to recommend Robert Burton and the Transformative Powers of Melancholy to scholars and advanced graduate students working on early modern literature, the history of medicine, studies of the imagination and memory arts, and early modern religion and philosophy. It must be said, however, that this book would only be for advanced graduate students and scholars, because its erudition and its examples are themselves often dizzying in complexity. Refreshingly, this is a fact that Shirilan self-reflectively acknowledges in a full section entitled “Method and Madness” which closes the Introduction. “And down the rabbit hole we go, or don’t’ go,” she explains. “This is the game Burton invites and the choice he leaves to the reader of his labyrinthine text” (p. 27). By offering a venture down the rabbit hole, Burton grants access to the sublime of plenitude and community that provides the melancholic with relief. This is a relief that one may also, even if briefly, acquire from following Shirilan’s erudite and copiously notated-through lines. The whole,