

Beyond melancholy: sadness and selfhood in Renaissance England

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Deskripsi Lengkap: <https://lib.ui.ac.id/detail?id=20470185&lokasi=lokal>

Abstrak

From Shakespeares Hamlet to Burtons Anatomy to Hilliards miniatures, melancholy has long been associated with the emotional life of Renaissance England. But what other forms of sadness existed alongside, or even beyond, melancholy, and what kinds of selfhood did they help create? Beyond Melancholy explores the vital distinctions Renaissance writers made between grief, godly sorrow, despair, and melancholy, and the unique interactions these emotions were thought to produce in the mind, body, and soul. While most medical and philosophical writings emphasized the physiological and moral dangers of sadness, warning that in its most extreme form it could damage the body and even cause death, new Protestant teachings about the nature of salvation suggested that sadness could in fact be a positive, even transformative, experience, bringing believers closer to God. The result of such dramatically conflicting paradigms was a widespread ambiguity about the value of sadness and a need to clarify its significance through active and wilful interpretation-something this book calls emotive improvisation. Drawing on a wide range of Renaissance medical, philosophical, religious, and literary texts-including moral treatises on the passions, medical textbooks, mortality records, doctors case notes, sermons, theological tracts, devotional poetry, letters, life-writings, ballads, and stage-plays-Beyond Melancholy explores the emotional codes surrounding sadness and the way writers responded to and reinterpreted them. In doing so it demonstrates the value of working across forms of evidence too often divided along disciplinary lines, and the special importance of literary texts to the study of the emotional past.