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Joanna Piccotto
Princeton University

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Jennifer Radden, ed., *The Nature of Melancholy from Aristotle to Kristeva*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. vii-xv + 373 pp. ISBN 0195129628.

Reviewed by Joanna Picciotto, Princeton University

The Nature of Melancholy from Aristotle to Kristeva responds to a real need: the concept of melancholy has generated a tradition of writing at once coherent and diverse enough to reward comparative study, yet it has never been the subject of an anthology. The book has little to offer the specialist, who will find the selections familiar and the lack of notes infuriating, but it might interest many other academic readers: psychoanalytic theorists whose expertise does not extend to how “theory” was practiced before the late nineteenth century, or analytic philosophers of mind interested in how subjective experience has been imagined outside their intellectual tradition. In the hands of the right teacher, the book could also serve as the backbone of a fascinating theme-based course in history, literature, art history, cultural studies, or women’s studies. The dust jacket suggests that the anthology will also be “fruitful reading for those who suffer from depression, as well as their families, care-givers, clinicians, and therapists,” a statement which reflects the ambition of the crossover book at its most generous. Despite the comfort academics take in thinking of tiny readerships as the inevitable reward for scholarly rigor, Radden’s anthology raises important questions about the no less rigorous demands of producing a scholarly book for a wide audience. As long as such a book is handsomely produced or illustrated, it will find purchasers; this anthology is both, and one can imagine therapists receiving multiple copies as holiday gifts. But producing a book to be read is another matter. One does not always get a clear sense from this anthology what Jennifer Radden expects the lay reader to gain from making the effort.

The anthology is effectively two different anthologies: Part I covers accounts of melancholy from Aristotle (or pseudo-Aristotle) to Freud; Part II, which traces melancholy’s fate after Freud, offers a useful cross-section of twentieth-century diagnostic approaches to melancholy and depression. Most of the anthology is taken up by the first part, which is a pity, because the later selections will be far more accessible to the modern reader, and Radden’s introduction provides a clear framework for understanding them. In her account, the nineteenth century marks a sharp break in melancholy’s history: the diagnostic criteria of melancholy were drastically narrowed as faculty psychology effected the separation of affective and psychotic disorders that characterizes the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* classifications today. As the science of psychology increasingly focused on signs rather than symptoms, on behavioral rather than subjective evidence, psychoanalytic theorists developed a counter-discourse with an opposite emphasis, one that preserved some features of pre-modern accounts of melancholy. Thus it is that just as melancholy has been abandoned by psychiatrists as a diagnostically useless concept, it has blossomed under the rubric of “theory.” Radden’s overview of this portion of melancholy’s history is cogent and thought-provoking. The selections corresponding to this discussion, some of which come at the tail end of Part I, will offer a variety of useful perspectives and perhaps even comfort to the reader interested in gaining insight into depressive states.

The anthology’s claim to being a therapeutic resource, a sort of guide to the perplexed, is more difficult to sustain in the vastly longer Part I. Because of melancholy’s culturally constructed, hence historically variable nature, many early accounts will necessarily present themselves to the

modern reader as obsolete theories about often equally obsolete symptoms: conditions like melancholy and depression are not only neurochemical facts but experiences in search of interpretations, which, once assembled from cultural materials at hand, exert a shaping influence on the experiences themselves. Radden discusses the issue of historical difference in her introduction, noting that it is difficult to determine whether there is any common ground between the melancholia of Greeks, the melancholy of the Renaissance, and today's clinical depression, but she does not give the reader a clear sense of how the question might be resolved or profitably explored. Readers might have gained some purchase on the issue of historical difference had some selections treated melancholy from the perspective of its sufferers; excerpts from autobiographies, diaries, and letters could have revealed *behind* obsolete personalities, as it were, people trying to make sense of their own experience in terms of what they took to be a reliable understanding of melancholy. But the anthology's principle of selection seems to have been strictly nominalist; almost all the excerpts are taken either from treatises on or formal discussions of melancholy, or related conditions, or from poems with the word "melancholy" or "spleen" in their titles. Since the anthology is not a word-history, a more imaginative and capacious principle of selection might have been used. Had the reader been able to trace personal epistemologies of melancholy as they took shape between cultural norms, the demands of social performance, and private internal discourse, he might have gained a richer sense both of melancholy's historicity and its universality. This was clearly the intended function of the literary selections, which are sometimes introduced as versified treatises or straightforward reports of symptoms rather than as idealized representations of "model pathologies" with normative as well as descriptive and expressive power. Rather than alerting the reader to the performative element of self-fashioning in the powerfully stylized self-portraits of poets like Anne Finch or Baudelaire, Radden encourages the reader to take them at their word: Baudelaire's "life was marked by Bohemian excesses, illness, and despondent and despairing mood states such as we find conveyed in the two hauntingly sad poems reproduced here" (231). However, one remains grateful that such material was included at all; Radden is right to think that these selections bring the reader a little closer to melancholy both as a lived experience and as a conceptual framework through which people tried to shape and understand that experience. More literary selections from earlier periods would have helped to bring this perspective where it is needed most.

The apparent divide between modern and pre-modern theories of melancholy that may to some degree impede the book's therapeutic ambitions could be the foundation of its intellectual interest: the prehistory of modern melancholy, after all, seems an excellent way to make dramatically vivid the historical contingency of mental illness for students and readers unfamiliar with constructionist accounts of subjectivity. In the preface, Radden describes her inclusion of ancient, medieval, and early modern writings on melancholy as "homage to its past" (vii); thankfully, she provides reasons to read them other than this pious goal. She suggests that new theories of knowledge, nonmedical (i.e., psychoanalytic) interest in melancholy, and interdisciplinary scholarship on the Foucauldian model encourage us to "to revisit what we once believed we knew and to reevaluate that knowledge" (viii). This appeal to various poststructuralist trends is sensible; certainly interdisciplinary study seems appropriate to a concept that predates modern disciplinary divisions and seems likely to outlast them. More broadly, antiprogressivist models of intellectual history might help to discourage readers from regarding the history of theories of melancholy as a story of increasingly accurate accounts about the brain, which would relegate the early work on melancholy to a history of false starts.

Unfortunately, however, Radden does not develop her Foucauldian rationale for the sweep of her selections, and the obstacle to therapeutic value becomes an obstacle to intellectual excitement as well, since good antiprogressivist intentions alone do not make a compelling narrative. Without any editorial apparatus to make sense of this material, the reader is left with the relativist's well-meaning but vacuous challenge to spur him on: why should we privilege our own stories about melancholy over these? Why *not* read them? Radden speaks in a humanist vein of "a kind of conversation, or dialogue, conducted across centuries— and continents" (ix) but the reader cannot join this conversation without a translator: for this material to make a claim on her critical attention as deserving "reevaluation," some context must be provided for its claims, many of which will otherwise strike her as merely picturesque. Faced with Avicenna's assertion that hairy people are more melancholy than others are, she is left at liberty to marvel that rational people ever believed such things. A therapist interested in gaining a new perspective on clinical depression will not find herself much enlightened by Timothie Bright's observations on the relationship between melancholy and demonic possession, unless an editor intervenes to show her what she should be looking for. By forgoing explanatory notes, Radden risks confirming progressivist prejudices which would find little of useable worth in this superceded knowledge.

In the introductions to the individual readings, Radden's light editorial touch becomes, at times, a positive barrier to comprehension. Rather than showing how each selection fits into its historical moment and how it relates to earlier and later selections, these introductions veer dangerously close to encyclopedia boilerplate: birthplaces, geographical movements, academic degrees and honors received, a colorful anecdote or personal quotation. We learn that Galen modeled himself after a father who was all goodness, rather than his mother, who was a shrew, a revelation which reveals nothing of relevance to the selection or the features of Galenic thought relevant to the tradition as a whole. Radden often usefully comments on themes she finds striking in a particular selection, but by leaving unexplored their points of contact with other selections, she gives these observations the character of casual remarks, which can make for dispiriting reading. For example, she is particularly struck by Hildegard of Bingen's suggestion that black bile was in Adam's seed, rendering human susceptibility to melancholy part of the burden of original sin. This idea was not unique to Hildegard or medieval thinkers; it became a major theme in early modern, especially Paracelsian, writings that describe the fall as a fall into pathology; and no less important a figure than Robert Burton devotes the first chapter of the *Anatomy of Melancholy* to an exposition of the idea. Radden's selection from the *Anatomy* doesn't reproduce this discussion, nor does she mention it, giving the reader the impression that it is an obsession peculiar to Hildegard.

At other times, the introduction seems unrelated to the selection it discusses. For example, Radden compares acedia as described by the fourth-century monk Cassian to a state of despondency and lethargy described by later medieval accounts of melancholy and exemplified by Petrarch's bouts of solitary weeping. She does not make clear that the selection from Cassian describes the desire of monks to leave their cells in order to pay social visits to other monks and perform active works of charity, like visiting the sick, as symptoms of acedia. From Cassian's perspective, of course, what looks like action to the monk suffering from acedia is merely pseudo-action, since contemplating Jesus in the privacy of his cell is the activity to which he should be devoted, but it is only from this point of view that such social behavior can be understood as indolent despondency. The suggestion that the behavior of these gregarious

monks, however much it bothered Cassian, actually did resemble Petrarch at his most forlorn is misleading.

If the fragmented, anecdotal, and occasionally misleading introductory discussions do not help to render the premodern tradition more accessible to the general reader, Radden's overestimation of the uniformity of this tradition also deprives it of narrative interest. There is no selection in Part I, for example, that evinces the seventeenth-century shift from a humoral to a mechanical model of the human body, although Radden does mention this development in the introduction. The shift to a mechanical rather than humoral explanation of qualities, centering primarily on the nervous system, led to an explosion of texts on nervous disease at the beginning of the eighteenth century, culminating in the publication in 1733 of George Cheyne's *The English Malady*, through which melancholy, redescribed as nervous malaise, came into its own as a disease of civilization. What G.S. Rousseau has called "the nervous revolution" is perhaps the most decisive shift in the history of melancholy prior to the nineteenth century, since it provided an entirely different etiology for melancholic symptoms: lax fibers, which could be made taut through exercise, or "voluntary labor." The belief that the laboring orders of society were largely immune to these disorders encouraged the rich to exhibit their nervous systems as class markers: to be melancholy was to give somatic proof that one was a person of quality.

Melancholy's simultaneous links with creative energy and with idleness, which Radden mentions in the introduction as recurring features of the tradition, entangles its history with the history of changing attitudes toward intellectual pursuits, which have been viewed both as an extension of leisure and as a type of labor at different historical moments. The association of melancholy with glamorous attributes, particularly genius, in the Renaissance was related to a new idealization of intellectual activity itself: the link between renunciation of the world and the intellectual drive to understand it made melancholy not just the philosopher's disease but his ethos. By the time we reach the early eighteenth century, however, the intellectual prejudices of empiricism have altered this picture considerably. Evidence that too much mental exertion without a corresponding physical exertion in the world of real objects led to delusory beliefs about the world was to be found not only in the addled perceptions of the lady of quality who suffered from depressed spirits and lax fibers, but in the scholastic's armchair theorizing, which empirical philosophers habitually described as a species of delusion. The exemplary contrast between the sedentary body and an over-active mind thus led to a very different account of what had once been celebrated as the philosopher's disease: no longer a means to knowledge of the world but rather a barrier to it, melancholy became less the sign of the thinking man than the feeling woman or feminized "man of feeling"—part of the expected constellation of traits of the deranged schoolman or poet subject to the rule of fancy rather than, say, the truth-seeking natural philosopher.

In assembling this anthology, Radden took on an exceedingly difficult task; in addition to covering a very long history, she had to do justice to the alterity of the premodern intellectual tradition (in effect, a miscellany of traditions) while at the same time presenting it in an analytically tractable form. She takes pains to treat this tradition respectfully, observing, for example, that what might seem like its sloppy heterogeneity—its ability to accommodate contradictory symptoms and etiologies without apparent strain—permits a descriptive richness lacking in many current accounts of clinical depression. Such special pleading, however, might

discourage the reader from searching for a deeper logic beneath apparent ambiguities and contradictions. Sometimes, contradictions in this tradition are actually just signs of change, as in the case of the developments noted above. At other times, there may be no contradiction or ambiguity at all. The absence of a clear distinction between melancholy as a temperament and as a disease in Galenic thought, for example, which Radden treats as yet more evidence of the tradition's heterogeneity, resulted less from a lack of clarity than from a positively held belief in the arbitrary nature of any such boundary. In this belief we can see the roots of our notion of the pathology of the everyday. Such an understanding of the shared structure of pathology and states of relative health, conceived of as precarious states of balance, invites comparison with Freud's sense of neurosis as the basic human condition, linking him to earlier thinkers who related melancholy to the basic human condition of "fallenness." Radden is understandably wary of making such baldly anachronistic connections, but describing old theories in terms that their originators might not recognize is part of the work of "reevaluation" which she rightly urges us to undertake. The fact that it is so hard to rescue such a project from a soggy universalism on one hand and a crushing awareness of historical difference on the other reveals how much scholars in the humanities need a working vocabulary and set of strategies with which to interest a wide audience in the beliefs and knowledge practices of the past.

The Nature of Melancholy is to be commended for its attempt to bring wide and generous frames of reference to bear upon a subject that holds interest for many readers. Its immense chronological sweep invites scholars in the humanities to consider whether they have pursued their fascination with historical difference, with ruptures rather than continuities, at the expense of providing readers with a useable past. Although the professional survival of academics depends on specialization, our specialized stories should still be susceptible to inclusion in broad, and broadly compelling, narratives; Radden has made a heroic and imaginative attempt to provide us with one. The promise, value, and even the defects of this project should inspire more academics to question the widespread notion that producing books for the student and general reader poses fewer challenges than writing books for each other.