Melancholy: The Evolution of the English Malady, c. 1550-1750

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Abstract

This article argues that the spread of transnational medical theories had a significant effect on how the English perceived the condition of melancholy and, by extension, themselves in the early modern era. The point is made by studying the spread of ideas on melancholy expressed in a popular late-fifteenth-century Italian text, *De vita libri tres* by the philosopher Marsilio Ficino. By examining how Ficino's theories of inspired, or genial, melancholy influenced the English medical landscape, this article attempts to highlight the potential for foreign opinion to shape part of what would become known as the essential English character by the eighteenth century.

Keywords: melancholy, identity, history.

Introduction

In 1733, the society doctor George Cheyne published a popular treatise on melancholy entitled *The English Malady*. In the prologue, Cheyne explains his choice of title, saying that it is "a reproach universally thrown on this Island by Foreigners, and all our Neighbours on the Continent, by whom nervous Distempers, Spleen, Vapors, and Lowness of Spirits, are in Derision, called the English Malady."[1] He adds

[1] George Cheyne, *The English Malady: or a Treatise of Nervous Disease of All Kinds; As Spleen, Vapours, Lowness of Spirits, Hypochondriacal, and Hysterical Distempers, c. In three parts* (London, 1734), i-ii

that in his opinion almost a third of the residents of England are affected by some sort of nervous disorder.[2] He was not alone in this assessment: by the eighteenth century, England was considered such a gloomy nation that melancholy became colloquially known as the "English disease" at home and abroad.[3] However, as popular as this reputation would become in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the melancholic disposition had not always been connected with the English. In fact, according to ancient Greek theories on the characters of nations, the northern peoples were traditionally considered antithetical to the melancholy character.[4] How was it, then, that the more sanguine traits classically associated with the English in their northern habitat were shed in the early modern period in favour of a melancholic character? What factors contributed to the development of this melancholic reputation from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries? This article will attempt to answer these questions by tracing how the English character was depicted in ancient ethnological and geographical theory and how that portrayal was changed during the early modern period by the transnational influence of genial melancholy as reflected in English medical texts.

Transnational Medicine: the case of Ficinian melancholy

An analysis of transnational influences on English medical theory allows a glimpse into an aspect of identity formation that has been largely underdeveloped in early modern English historiography.[5] Changing medical theories on melancholy, particularly those developed on the Continent and introduced later into the English medical landscape, had a significant effect on how the English perceived melancholy and, by extension, themselves in the early modern era. This article will look at the impact of one Italian text, *De vita libri tres* by the philosopher Marsilio Ficino, and its theory of genial, or inspired, melancholy in an attempt to shed light on how transnational concepts influenced the

[2]Ibid.

[3]Angus Gowland, "The Problem of Early Modern Melancholy", *Past Present* no. 191 (2006), 77-80.

[4]Mary Floyd-Wilson, *English Ethnicity and Race in Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 23-26.

[5]In this article the term "transnational" will be used as defined by Akira Iriye: "Transnational history may be defined as the study of movements and forces that cut across national boundaries". In Akira Iriye, "Transnational History". *Contemporary European History* 13, vol. 2 (2004): 213.

English medical landscape. Through an examination of the effects of Ficinian theory on melancholy texts, it is possible to show the power of foreign opinion to mould and form part of what would become the essential English character by the eighteenth century. It was Ficino's theory of genial melancholy and his belief that it could be cultivated in any location that contributed directly to the eventual transformation of England into a thoroughly melancholy nation.

Early Modern Melancholy and Humoural Theory

To answer the question of why Ficino's ideas on melancholy were so influential in English medical texts, it is imperative to answer two other questions first: what exactly was early modern melancholy, and what was the English relation to it at the beginning of the time period in question? The answer to the former question is that melancholy was in many respects similar to the modern definition of depression.[6] Its two main symptoms were unsubstantiated sadness and fear.[7] It also encompassed symptoms, however, that were far more expansive than our current day diagnosis. Its sufferers saw visions and fantastical images, their memories often failed them, and their bodies experienced pains in the chest, stomach, back, and spleen. Worse yet, if not cured, melancholy could lead to insanity.[8] Thus, melancholy was much more than a simple sad or pensive feeling. It was viewed as a legitimate disorder, and doctors throughout the early modern period struggled with its identification and cure.[9]

[6]The Oxford English Dictionary definition of depression is listed as: "Frequently a sign of psychiatric disorder or a component of various psychoses, with symptoms of misery, anguish, or guilt accompanied by headache, insomnia, etc." "Depression". *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. *OED Online*. http://www.oed.com/ view/Entry/50451?redirectedFrom=depressioneid. Accessed 26 April 2019.

[7]Timothy Bright, *A Treatise of Melancholie* (London: Printed by Thomas Vautrollier, dwelling in the Blackfriars, 1586), 3-5; Burton, Robert. 1621. *The Anatomy of Melancholy: What It Is, with All the Kinds, Causes, Symptoms, Prognostics, and Several Cures of It. In Three Partitions. A New Edition* (New York: Sheldon and Company, 1862), 226.

[8]Thomas Willis, *Thomas Willis's Oxford Lectures* (1660-67). Edited by Kenneth Dewhurst (Oxford: Sandford Publications, 1980), 122; 130-31.

[9]For more on melancholy as a medical diagnosis in the early modern period, see: Katherine Hodgkin, *Madness in Seventeenth-Century Autobiography*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 60-85; Robert S. Kinsman, 'Folly, Melancholy, and Madness: A Study in Shifting Styles of Medical Analysis and Treatment,1450-1675', in *The Darker Vision of the Renaissance: Beyond the Fields*

To answer the second question, how the English related to melancholy at the beginning of the early modern period, it is necessary to have an understanding of ancient humoural theory. Melancholy, it was believed, stemmed from an overabundance of black bile in the body. As one of the four elements that were said to comprise man in the humoural system (the others being blood, phlegm, and choler), black bile was the humour most associated with low mood and melancholy diseases. According to Ancient Greek climatic theories, which drew on the principles of geography and climate to assign temperaments to different nations, the northern location of England meant that the people there were connected with a surplus of blood or phlegm, not black bile.[10] The Greek authors of these climate theories, such as Hippocrates, Galen, and Aristotle, believed that just as the overabundance of a humour in the body could cause medical or temperamental shifts in the individual, it could also explain the unique qualities and identities of different nations. Following the dominant Aristotelian branch of climate theory that believed that human temperament actually counteracts the effects of climate and geography, the cold temperatures in the north meant that the English were traditionally considered to be sanguine or phlegmatic.[11] Quite the opposite of the melancholy man who could be found in southern locales, the English were typically described as merry warriors, barbarous and simple, who were strong in body if not necessarily in mental acuity.[12]

This characterisation continued into the sixteenth century and became the basis of anxiety for some Englishmen at a time when the humanist value on rational thinking was spreading throughout Europe.[13] Continental writers like the Belgian physician Levinus Lemnius still regarded the northern people as "dull-witted" and "pezantly" by nature, as opposed to the "sharpe" southern men who are known for their "excellency of learning" and "flowing eloquence".[14] English au-

of Reason, edited by Robert S. Kinsman, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 273-320; Jennifer Radden (ed.) *The Nature of Melancholy: From Aristotle to Kristeva* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 173-75.

[10]Floyd-Wilson, *English Ethnicity*, 23-25.

[11]Ibid., 25.

[12]Ranulph Higden, *Polychronicon Ranulphi Higden, Monachi Cestrensis; Together With the English Translations of John Trevisa and of an Unknown Writer of the Fifteenth Century*. Edited by Churchill Babington and J. Rawson Lumby, translated by John Trevisa. Vol.1. (London: Longman et al., 1865), 51-53.

[13]Floyd-Wilson, *English Ethnicity*, 35.

[14]Levinus Lemnius, *The touchstone of complexions: generallye applicable, expe-*

thors began to express their dismay at being labeled sanguine or phlegmatic with the attending associations of incivility and slower wits.[15] In *The Passions of the Minde in Generall* (1604), the English author Thomas Wright acknowledges that his countrymen are generally believed to be unwise and barbarous, a reputation that he believes can be amended by mimicking the manners of southern nations.[16] Another Englishman, Thomas Walkington, attempts to correct his native country's reputation through geographical manipulation. In *The Optick Glasse of Humors* (1607), Walkington endeavours to separate his English compatriots from other more northerly nations who are known to be "devoid of wit, yet haue great strength". He writes:

> We must note here, that this is spoke of the remoter parts neare vnto the pole, lest we derogate any thing from the praise of this our happy Ileland... all which by a true diuision of the climes is situated in the septentrional part of the world, wherein there are and euer haue beene as praegnent wits, as surpassing politicians, as iudiciulous vnderstandings, as any clime euer yet afforded vnder the cope of heauen.[17]

With his inclusion of Britain into the "septentrional part of the world", Walkington removes the English not only from their association with the northern Scythian people but also from their customary dull-witted reputation.[18] The English attempts to rehabilitate their character soon gained a champion from an unexpected place. The transfer of ideas from a late fifteenth-century publication of an Italian book based on an ancient Greek conceptualisation of melancholy would dramatically change how the English discussed that condition and their own relationship to it.

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dient and profitable for all such, as be desirous carefull of their bodylye health. Translated by Thomas Newton (London: Printed by Edward Alde for Michael Sparke, 1633), 25-31.

[15] Floyd-Wilson, *English Ethnicity*, 26-35.

[16] Thomas Wright, *The passions of the minde in generall. Corrected, enlarged, and with sundry new discourses amended. With a treatise thereto adioyning of the clymatericall yeare, occasioned by the death of Queene Elizabeth* (London: Printed by Valentine Simmes for Walter Burre, 1604), lvii-lviii; lxii-lxiii.

[17] Thomas Walkington, *The Optick Glasse of Humors. Or The touchstone of a golden temperature, or the Philosophers stone to make a golden temper* (London: Printed by John Windet for Martin Clerke, 1607), 16.

[18] Ibid.

Marsilio Ficino's Inspired Melancholy in *De vita libri tres*

In 1489 Marsilio Ficino published his popular philosophical and medical treatise on the health of the intellectual, *De vita libri tres*. This book, which was in print continuously until the middle of the seventeenth century and ran through nearly thirty editions,[19] resurrected the redeeming features of melancholy that had existed beneath the surface of the ailment since classical times, side by side with the painful symptoms of the disease.[20] As dreadful as it was, melancholy was not entirely without positive associations. Aristotle, the reputed originator of this line of thought, asks in his *Problem XXX.I*: "Why is it that all those who have become eminent in philosophy or poetry or the arts are clearly melancholics, and some of them to such an extent as to be affected by diseases caused by black bile?"[21] This question and its connotation that men of great talent are sufferers of melancholy had consequences that would reverberate through the centuries and shape the spheres of identity and medicine in ways unimaginable to the ancient world. For in connecting melancholy with genius and creative ability, the Aristotelian tradition created a positive side for the sufferers of an otherwise intolerable disease.[22]

Aristotle's *Problem XXX.I* had gone largely ignored for the better part of the Middle Ages,[23] but the notion of inspired melancholy eventually resurfaced in the writings of Italian Renaissance humanists, such as Francesco Cattani da Diacetto, Pietro d'Abano, Leon Battista Alberti, and Tommaso Campanella.[24] Ficino was one of the most influential of these humanist philosophers of the fifteenth century, due in no small part to the popularity of his theories on genial melancholy. The son of the court physician of Cosimo I de' Medici and a physician him-

[19]Marsilio Ficino, *Three books on Life: a critical edition and translation with Introduction and Notes*. Edited by Carol V. Kaske and John R. Clark. Tempe Arizona: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2002), 3.

[20]Ibid.

[21]Aristotle, *Problem XXX.I*, as translated in Klibansky, Raymond, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl (eds). *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion and Art* (London: Thomas Nelson Sons Ltd, 1964), 18.

[22]Klibansky et al., *Saturn and Melancholy*, 41.

[23]Ibid., 67.

[24]Noel Brann, *The Debate over the Origin of Genius during the Italian Renaissance. The Theories of Supernatural Frenzy and Natural Melancholy in Accord and in Conflict on the Threshold of the Scientific Revolution* (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2001), 21, 96, 120, 449.

self, Ficino's knowledge of Galenic and Hippocratic medical theories are on display in the *De vita libri tres*. Using an amalgam of philosophical, medical, and astrological theories, Ficino reintroduces the Aristotelian concept of genial melancholy into Renaissance learning. This genial melancholy is an exceptional state (melancholy in its normal shape is still viewed as a "pathological and vicious state") and constitutes "a form of intellectual and spiritual excellence" in the individual it touches.[25] It is associated with reason and extraordinary intellectual gifts by Ficino, and rather than being classified as a disease, he posits that genial melancholy is "an exceptional, inspired state of self-alienation—a type of *vacatio* or *alienation*—in which the mind is separated from the body".[26]

In this way, melancholy became "a point of intersection between humanism and medicine".[27] The form of melancholy that affects the body is separated from that which touches the mind and inspires the poets, philosophers, and artists in the way that Aristotle imagined.

In discussing inspired melancholy in the *De vita libri tres*, Ficino connects it intimately with the lifestyle of scholars. This is significant for the spread of his theories because he aligns scholars (and, by extension, wisdom) with the melancholy temperament and also makes a clear connection between the planet Saturn and its effect on the intellectual. Saturn's influence, with its associated positive and negative properties, was considered to make individuals quite susceptible to bouts of melancholia, but also could provide them with focus and wisdom (coincidentally traits which the English were traditionally said to lack). Ficino credited much of a scholar's attributes to astral influences, but crucially he also alleged that melancholy could be cultivated by men regardless of their locale.[28] This belief allowed for the transfer of Ficinian melancholy to locations that were not typically disposed to that humour, including the northern regions that surrounded England.

Melancholy in Elizabethan England: a lamentable malady

The effect of Ficino's reintroduction of genial melancholy greatly impacted views on that condition, quite quickly in Italy and northern

[25]Angus Gowland, "The Problem of Early Modern Melancholy". *Past Present*, 191 (2006), 107.
[26]Ibid.
[27]Ibid., 103.
[28]Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, 22; 253-55.

Europe and, almost a full century later, in England. English nods to melancholy do not appear regularly before the mid-sixteenth century, concurrent with the increasingly popular practice of young gentlemen travelling the continent for education and pleasure in what was the sixteenth-century precursor of the Grand Tour.[29] The reception of the Ficinian conception of melancholy introduced into England as part of the cultural exchanges spurred on by travellers to Spain, France, Germany, and most importantly, Italy, can be traced in the major medical publications of the period.

The first reaction to the culture of inspired melancholy upon its introduction to England was one of distaste for foreign influence. While there were some proponents of adopting melancholic traits, the condition, considered generally antithetical to the English, was largely mocked on the stage and in popular culture as a result of its innate foreignness.[30] This is not surprising considering that England under Elizabeth I's reign was notoriously rife with xenophobia. Multiple decades plagued with inflation, famine, and disease in the last half of the sixteenth century contributed to a sense of wariness against strangers, and proclamations had to be issued in 1559 and again in 1581 under the Queen prohibiting violence against foreigners in London.[31] Over a century later Daniel DeFoe still would characterise the English as "surly to strangers".[32]

The anxiety and apprehension about foreign influence that was growing in Tudor England can be found in many books of the second half of the sixteenth century. Numerous advice manuals, for example, were quick to spurn any encroachment of foreign characteristics in the form of melancholic traits onto the English temperament. Elizabeth I's onetime tutor, Roger Ascham, writing in 1564, worried that the "plain" Englishman is quick to be corrupted by foreign influences. A proponent of foreign travel when undertaken in the correct manner, Ascham nevertheless blamed Italy for the return of monstrously formed English-

[29]Edward Chaney, *The Evolution of the Grand Tour: Anglo-Italian Cultural Relations Since the Renaissance* (London: Frank Cass, 1998), 64.

[30]Sara Warneke, "Educational Travelers: Popular Imagery and Public Criticism in Early Modern England." *Journal of Popular Culture*, 28, no.3 (1994), 71-73.

[31]Ibid., 73.

[32]Daniel Defoe, *The True-Born Englishman: A Satire*, in *British Literature 1640-1789: An Anthology.* Edited by Robert Demaria Jr (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 508-10.

men, better known by the epithet "Italianate Englishmen".[33] These inwardly deformed Englishmen returned to their native country wearing black clothing and loudly exhibiting a newfound sense of misanthropy—traits that were associated in the public mind with the Italian culture of melancholy. They had traded their merry dispositions in for shows of foreign traits associated with the melancholic temperament such as sighing, weeping, pining, and exhibiting their knowledge to anyone who will listen. Ascham lists the faults of the English when they return from Italy as being "singular in knowledge, ignorant of nothing; so singular in wisdom (in their own opinion) as scarce they count the best counselor the prince hath comparable with them; common discoursers of all matters . . . with smiling countenances and much courtesy, openly to all men."[34] Echoing Ascham's sentiment against "Italianate Englishmen" two decades later, William Rankins's advice manual titled *The English Ape* asserted that the desire to follow foreign fashions is what leads to degeneration in England.[35] At the close of the sixteenth century, the English publication of *The Problemes of Aristotle* (1595) described melancholy as the worst of the complexions "because it is the dregges of the bloud, which is an enmie of mirth, and farthest off from the beginning of mans life, and bringeth olde age and death, because it is dry and cold".[36]

This negative view of melancholy is also reflected in the first full-length medical text on the malady that was produced in England. Printed in 1586, *A Treatise of Melancholie* by the physician Timothy Bright was the most important English work on the subject for the next three decades. The book is constructed like a self-help manual in which Bright writes to his friend "M." about his struggle with the melancholy malady and how he can attempt to treat himself from home.[37] Bright's advice is based on the Galenic model of melancholy, which was attributed to an imbalance in the humours of the body. This was the traditional medical theory that had been espoused since the time of Hippocrates and

[33]Roger Ascham, *The Schoolmaster* (1564), (London: Cassell and Company, Limited, 1909), 75.

[34]Ascham, *The Schoolmaster*, 74.

[35]William Rankins, *The English Ape, the Italian imitation, the Foote steppes of Fraunce* (London: Printed by Robert Robinson for Richard Jones, 1588), 13.

[36]*The Problemes of Aristotle* (Edinburgh, 1595), as quoted in Floyd-Wilson, *English Ethnicity*, 75.

[37]Jennifer Radden (ed.), *The Nature of Melancholy: From Aristotle to Kristeva* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 119.

Galen in ancient Greece and was still the dominant medical theory at the beginning of the early modern period in Europe. In line with this conventional treatment of melancholia, Bright adopts an almost completely negative version of the disorder. He describes it as the companion to "feare, sadness, desperation, teares, weeping, sobbing, sighing",[38] writing that those who suffer from it are typically dark and thin with superstitious, envious, and deliberative natures.[39] Throughout his book, Bright treats melancholy purely as a disease, and a lamentable one at that.

Bright's focus on the negative aspects of melancholy is only tempered once in his book. In this instance he writes that while melancholy causes "dulnesse of conceit" in men because the substance of the brain is "more grosse, and their spirite not so prompt and subtile as is requisit for readie vnderstandinge", sometimes despite this they can be very witty. This is attributed to either their dogged perseverance in studying, which makes them "seeme to haue that of a naturall readinesse", or because their melancholy humour has been made subtle and purified by heat.[40] Bright takes it as a commonplace that melancholy is directly linked with intense study and an intellectual lifestyle.[41] Although Bright links scholars and melancholy, he does not go so far as to associate the condition with the great genius promoted by the genial melancholy of Ficino and his peers. His begrudging nod to the wit of some melancholy men belies at least a basic knowledge of Ficinian or Aristotelian ideas, but his interpretation of melancholy belies an (albeit implicit) adherence to the established climatic view of melancholy as an ailment that is foreign to the English temperament. For Bright, melancholy is not a condition that should be embraced by the English public as its genial version had recently been on the continent. In this sense, Bright's work was very much a product of the late sixteenth-century anxiety that surrounded the traditional humoural English identity as a northern people. His work is insular in scope and he does not allude to any true benefits to be sought in a melancholy diagnosis. As Ficino's genial melancholy thesis gained more traction in England, however, later medical texts would begin to see its advantage and applicability to the

[38]Timothie Bright, *A Treatise of Melancholie*. (London: Printed by Thomas Vautrollier, dwelling in the Blackfriars, 1586), 4-5.
[39]Ibid., 123-131.
[40]Ibid., 129-30.
[41]Ibid., 235-36.

English character.

Changing Theories: Ficinian influence in the seventeenth century

Unlike Bright, the authors that came after him had a penchant for elaborating on the positive aspects of melancholy in terms similar to those found in Ficino. The Oxford scholar Robert Burton was one such of these authors. Although he was not a physician himself, Burton's contribution to the study of early modern melancholy is difficult to overstate. His 1621 tome, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, became the most popular text on the condition written for centuries, and its value comes from its encyclopedic dedication to compiling a vast range of sources about melancholia.[42] Similar to Bright's *Treatise of Melancholie*, Burton's book was intended as a helpmeet to those who suffer from the disease, including himself.[43]

Burton's text is ambivalent toward a range of issues relating to melancholy, and his opinions on its genial character are no exception. He does not release melancholy from all of its negative connotations and the very real suffering it can cause,[44] but he also frequently cites Ficino and his more positive theories on melancholy in his book.[45] This is unsurprising given Burton's lifelong occupation as a scholar. Ficino's view that positive aspects of melancholy are especially associated with intellectual pursuits was well-suited to Burton's own experience, and Burton gives over a portion of his work to discussing "the misery of Scholars".[46] He advocates that the English can be affected in positive ways by melancholy, despite the negative effects it can cause in the individual.

The degree to which Burton accepted Ficinian genial melancholy is a matter of debate among scholars. The literary scholar Mary Floyd-Wilson believes that Burton, rather than accepting Ficino's genial melancholy, manipulated his theories on the condition into something that

[42] Angus Gowland, *The Worlds of Renaissance Melancholy: Robert Burton in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 33-34.

[43] Gowland, "The Problem of Early Modern Melancholy", 2.

[44] Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, 160-161.

[45] For some examples of his citations to Ficino, see Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, 110, 120, 137, 148, 161, 187-88, 287-88, 326, 412, 426-28, 454, 468-70, 529, 596.

[46] Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, 187-201.

could be more easily applied to the English populace. She writes that "Burton's efforts to extricate melancholy from its Ficinian legacy go hand in hand with his elevation of a sanguine form of melancholy", a form whose positive powers were the exclusive preserve of the northern nations.[47] This theory can be disregarded, however, after a closer inspection of Ficino's belief that melancholy can affect anyone, regardless of geography.[48] Due to this conviction, it was unnecessary for Burton to change Ficinian views to suit his native land. In fact, in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, melancholia is universal (in an opinion quite different from that held by Bright less than forty years prior): "no man living is free, no stoic, none so wise, none so happy, none so patient, so generous, so godly, so divine, that can vindicate himself; so well composed, but more or less, some time or other he feels the smart of it [the melancholy disposition]."[49] As everyone was able to experience the melancholy disposition in Ficinian theory, Burton is able to remove the geographic limitations of that disease from its classical southern roots and apply it quite easily to the English without further manipulation. It is the dissemination of genial theory and its geographical change, concepts Burton directly lifts from *De vita libri tres*, that allow the English to further explore their connection with melancholy and see it as something other than the dreadful disease of the late Elizabethan era.

Melancholy as the 'English Malady': a more genteel melancholy

Over a century later the concept of genial melancholy can be seen in its next iteration in George Cheyne's 1733 treatise, *The English Malady*. A Scottish physician who spent much of his practicing career in Bath, Cheyne sought to identify the nature of melancholy and associated nervous distempers and provide cures for sufferers. He, like Burton, was plagued with nervous ailments and wrote from the point of view not only of a physician but also as a fellow sufferer of melancholy.[50] Acclaimed as one of the most pivotal texts in positioning eighteenth-century melancholy as the disease of sensibility and the upper classes, *The English Malady* propagated a new form of beneficial melancholy that would

[47]Floyd-Wilson, *English Ethnicity*, 76-77.
[48]Ficino, *Three books on Life*, 22; 253-55.
[49]Ibid., 191.
[50]Anita Guerrini, *Obesity and Depression in the Enlightenment: The Life and Times of George Cheyne* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000), xv.

become ingrained in the English identity.[51]

The designation of the "English disease" for melancholy inspired Cheyne's choice of titles, and even though he asserts that the sobriquet was thrown on England "in derision",[52] his treatise makes it clear that melancholy was actually an attractive ailment to have. This was because Cheyne, like his contemporaries, attributed the ailment to the "continu'd Luxury and Laziness" that England was prone to as a newly wealthy country.[53] Fashionable society doctors such as William Stukeley, Nicholas Robinson, and Sir Richard Blackmore worked to rehabilitate melancholy: "Their tactic was not to deny Albion's malaise, but to capitalize on it, putting the depressed and the distressed in a new light."[54] Cheyne succeeded in doing this by attributing riches and the subsequent leisure of the "better Sort" as two of the main causes of melancholia in England.[55] This association of wealth and sensibility with melancholy created a new form of positive melancholy that became incredibly popular in eighteenth-century society. It was not exactly the same form of genial melancholy that Ficino espoused; rather, instead of inspired genius, Cheyne put more emphasis the connection between melancholy and gentility. Cheyne writes, ". . . this Disease [nervous disorders] is as much a bodily Distemper . . . as the Small-Pox or a Fever; and the Truth is, it seldom, and I think never happens or can happen, to any but those of the liveliest and quickest natural Parts, whose Faculties are the brightest and most Spiritual, and whose Genius is most keen and penetrating, and particularly where there is the most delicate Sensation and Taste, both of Pleasure and Pain".[56] Nevertheless, Cheyne's conception of melancholy as an indicator of sensibility and gentility would have been inconceivable without the Ficinian legacy. He still attributes melancholy to scholars and the intellectual lifestyle, and even though he makes melancholy more accessible to men who are not necessarily geniuses, the attribute still carries connotations of intelligence and talent. Melancholy is not portrayed as dreadfully as in Bright's *Treatise of Melancholie*, nor is it as fo-

[51] Cheyne, *George Cheyne: The English Malady* (1733). Edited with an Introduction by Roy Porter (London: Routledge, 1991), xl.

[52] Cheyne, *The English Malady*, i-ii.

[53] Guerrini, *Obesity and Depression*, 48.

[54] Roy Porter, "The Rage of Party: A Glorious Revolution in English Psychiatry?" *Medical History* 21, no. 1 (1983), 42-43.

[55] Cheyne, *The English Malady*, ii.

[56] Ibid., 262.

cused on intellectual genius as in Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*. With Cheyne's publication, a newer, more genteel understanding of melancholy emerged, and the English became more receptive to embracing a melancholic character. As the medical historian Roy Porter writes of melancholy in the eighteenth century: "Rendered thus as the infirmities of the gifted, singularities and indulgences of temper were no longer occasions for shame and blame; they now had a medical certificate".[57] By 1778, James Boswell could write in his popular newspaper column that his countrymen "may console ourselves in the hour of gloomy distress, by thinking that our sufferings make our superiority".[58] Melancholy was the price to pay for a rehabilitated reputation, "a disease of civilization, a success tax on a people flourishing as never before".[59] Eighteenth-century melancholia, in its Cheynian form with its qualities of focus, civility, and sensibility, was the opposite of the climatic reputation that the English had as a sanguine, barbarous, and inconstant people at the beginning of the early modern period.

Conclusion

Melancholy, once dreaded and disparaged by the English, evolved into a condition that the English bore with something akin to pride. Much of this evolution can be traced to the indelible impact that one transnational influence, Ficino's *De vita libri tres*, had on the English perceptions of melancholy in medical texts. The *De vita libri tres* is not the only transnational text that changed medical theory and identity in early modern England, but its influence cannot be overstated. By the time Cheyne declared the English as the most melancholy of nations in his book title, it is true that the form of positive traits associated with melancholy had morphed from genial inspiration to high sensibility. Nonetheless, Ficino is to thank for re-associating melancholy with positive traits for the first time since Ancient Greece. The spread of ideas on genial melancholy from Renaissance Italy to early modern England allowed authors of English medical texts to redefine classical definitions of melancholy and its relationship with the English populace.

[57] Porter, "The Rage of Party", 43.

[58] James Boswell, "The Hypochondriack. No. V." *The London Magazine, Or, Gentleman's Monthly Influencer*, 47 (1778), 58.

[59] Porter, "The Rage of Party", 43.

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