



THE RENAISSANCE OF EMOTION

UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF SHAKESPEARE IN
TEMPORARIES

EDITED BY
RICHARD MEEK & ERIN SULLIVAN

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The Renaissance of emotion

Understanding affect in Shakespeare and his
contemporaries

Edited by Richard Meek and
Erin Sullivan

Manchester University Press

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Notes on contributors

David Bagchi is Senior Lecturer in Ecclesiastical History at the University of Hull. He specialises in the history and thought of the Reformation, with a particular interest in the theology of Martin Luther, early modern religious polemic and the use of the printing press for disseminating theological ideas. His major publications include *Luther's Earliest Opponents: Catholic Controversialists, 1518–25* (Fortress, 2nd edn, 2009) and *The Cambridge Companion to Reformation Theology* (2004) (co-edited with David C. Steinmetz).

Frederika Bain works at the University of Hawai'i, where she recently completed her dissertation focusing on representations of bodily modification, primarily dismemberment, in medieval and early modern literature. She has also published a short edition of early modern fairy spells. Her other research interests include monstrosity and monstrous births, the animal–human boundary, and medieval and early modern midwifery.

Richard Chamberlain is Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Northampton. His main interests are in Renaissance literature, Shakespeare studies and critical theory, with particular focus on the politics of interpretation and the relationship between literature and society. His monograph *Radical Spenser: Pastoral, Politics and the New Aestheticism* (Edinburgh University Press, 2005) approaches these questions by tracing the ethical and political implications of an open-ended 'pastoral' logic at work in Spenser's writing. He is working on a new book, *Shakespeare's Refusers*, looking at figures who negate coercive social participation – that is, who 'just say no' to behaviour collectively enforced in the name of enjoyment.

Sara Coodin is Assistant Professor of Classics and Letters at the University of Oklahoma. Her research focuses on classical philosophy's importance to

thought and action in Shakespeare's plays, as well as classicism and Christian Hebraism in Renaissance England. She has published on these topics in several Shakespeare journals and edited collections, and is currently completing a book-length study of Shylock's moral agency that focuses on his use of biblical citation in *The Merchant of Venice*.

Peter Holbrook is Professor of Shakespeare and English Renaissance Literature at the University of Queensland, and Director of the UQ Node of the ARC Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions, Europe 1100–1800. He is the author of *Shakespeare's Individualism* (Cambridge University Press, 2010) and *Literature and Degree in Renaissance England: Nashe, Bourgeois Tragedy, Shakespeare* (University of Delaware Press, 1994), and co-editor, with David Bevington, of *The Politics of the Stuart Court Masque* (Cambridge University Press, 1998).

Ann Kaegi is Lecturer in English at the University of Hull, where she researches the historical dramas of Shakespeare and his contemporaries and 'unruly voices and unruly subjects' in early modern writing. She has a long-standing interest in early modern resistance theory, civic culture and the political languages of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Her recent publications in these areas include articles in the *Journal of Early Modern Studies* and *Shakespeare*, and an introduction and revised set of notes for the Penguin Shakespeare edition of *Henry V*. She is currently writing a monograph provisionally titled *England's Woeful History*.

Andy Kesson is Senior Lecturer in English Literature at Roehampton University and a guest lecturer at Shakespeare's Globe. His work focuses on performance theory, book history, representations of the body and sexuality on and off the stage, reception theory, pedagogy and the history of English as a scholarly discipline. He is the author of *John Lyly and Early Modern Authorship* (Manchester University Press, 2014) and with Emma Smith is the editor of *The Elizabethan Top Ten: Defining Print Popularity in Early Modern England* (Ashgate, 2013). He is currently working on a study of London's earliest playhouses.

Mary Ann Lund is Lecturer in English at the University of Leicester, where she works on prose writing, religion and medicine in the English Renaissance. She is the author of *Melancholy, Medicine and Religion in Early Modern England: Reading 'The Anatomy of Melancholy'* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), which was shortlisted for the CCUE Book Prize in 2011. She is currently editing volume 12 of *The Oxford Edition of the Sermons of John Donne*.

(gen. ed. Peter McCullough), and has a research interest in the experience of illness in early modern literature.

Richard Meek is Lecturer in English at the University of Hull. He has published articles in *SEL*, *English*, *Literature Compass*, *FMLS* and *Shakespeare Survey*, and his book *Narrating the Visual in Shakespeare* was published by Ashgate in 2009. He is interested in representations of sympathy and empathy in early modern literature, and his current research project is a monograph on this topic, provisionally entitled *The Relativity of Sorrows*. In 2012 he edited a special issue of *Shakespeare* entitled 'Shakespeare and the Culture of Emotion'.

Ciara Rawnsley is an early career researcher, currently working within the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions at the University of Western Australia. Her role is to help develop and manage a new, web-based resource for researchers studying the history of premodern emotions. Her research interests are in Shakespeare, emotions and folk and fairy tales. She has published in *Journal for Early Modern Studies* and has contributed chapters to two volumes on Shakespeare and emotions. She is also currently co-editing a volume of essays on children's literature, childhood death and emotions 1500–1800.

Erin Sullivan is Lecturer and Fellow at the Shakespeare Institute, University of Birmingham, where she works on emotion, psychology and identity in the English Renaissance. She has published research in this area in *Cultural History*, *Studies in Philology*, *The Lancet* and *Emotions and Health, 1200–1700*, ed. Elena Carrera (Brill, 2013), and has also worked extensively on Shakespeare's role, emotional and otherwise, in the London 2012 Olympics. She is currently completing a monograph called *Beyond Melancholy: Sadness and Selfhood in Renaissance England*.

R. S. White is Winthrop Professor of English and Cultural Studies at the University of Western Australia and Chief Investigator for the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotion (1100–1700). From 2008 to 2013 he was an Australian Professorial Fellow. He has published widely on Shakespeare and the younger Romantics, including *John Keats: A Literary Life* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010; paperback 2012). He is also the author of several monographs on English literature and the history of human rights, most recently *Pacifism and English Literature: Minstrels of Peace* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

Nigel Wood is Professor of Literature at Loughborough University and a Senior Research Associate at the Shakespeare Institute, University of Birmingham. He has edited six volumes in the *Theory in Practice* series for Open University Press (1993–97), including those on *The Tempest*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Measure for Measure*, *Hamlet*, *Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2* and *The Merchant of Venice*. His most recent work on Shakespeare has been focused on the interface between his comedies and early modern notions of the public sphere, with specific reference to staging conditions, and he has recently edited *She Stoops to Conquer and Other Comedies* for the Oxford English Drama series (2007).

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Introduction

Richard Meek and Erin Sullivan

IN THE PENULTIMATE SCENE of William Shakespeare's *Richard II*, Richard is alone in prison, reflecting upon his misfortunes – and his emotional state. In a typically comparative mode, Richard likens his empty cell to the world, and resolves to populate it with his own thoughts:

My brain I'll prove the female to my soul,
My soul the father, and these two beget
A generation of still-breeding thoughts;
And these same thoughts people this little world,
In humours like the people of this world,
For no thought is contented.¹

In this complex passage, Richard's discontented thoughts are said to resemble the variety of 'humours' – that is, the unbalanced moods and temperaments – that can be found in the world at large. Echoing contemporary Aristotelian and Galenic thinking, Richard's material brain becomes the fecund matter into which his immaterial soul injects its potent form, producing a seething family of humorally inflected conceits. The passage illustrates Shakespeare's awareness of natural philosophy and medical humoralism as a means of explaining mental and emotional processes, both those of Richard and early modern individuals more generally. For some recent critics of Renaissance literature and culture (and Shakespearean drama in particular), Richard's comments might confirm the notion that humoral theory was the essential model for understanding the emotions in the period, rooting such phenomena in the materially bound 'ecology' of passion, sensation and embodied experience.

Yet what is striking in this passage is that Shakespeare explicitly uses humoralism metaphorically, as part of an extended simile that transforms Richard's thoughts into a self-generated audience that is at once real and

imagined. In the lines that follow, Richard compounds his initial humoral account, layering on top of it biblical quotations, proverbial sayings and even more elaborate metaphorical conceits as he continues to explore his mental and emotional state. After quoting two passages from the Bible that emphasise the value of poverty and humility – suggesting his uncertainty, perhaps, about his chances of entering the kingdom of heaven – Richard likens his thoughts to ‘silly beggars’ sitting in the stocks, who take solace in the fact that ‘many have and others must sit there; / And in this thought they find a kind of ease’ (5.5.25–8). The sound of offstage music prompts Richard to consider his situation in more sonic terms: ‘Music do I hear? / Ha, ha, keep time! How sour sweet music is / When time is broke and no proportion kept!’ (41–3). Like ‘a disordered string’ (46), he imagines himself out of tune and out of time with the world around him, a proposition that leads him to figure himself next as a clock: ‘My thoughts are minutes, and with sighs they jar / Their watches on unto mine eyes’ (51–2). Alone in his cell, he imagines his finger, ‘like a dial’s point’, wiping tears from his face, and his heart, like a clock’s bell, counting out the hours with its ‘clamorous groans’ (53–6).

The elaborate and at times unwieldy conceits of this speech emphasise the difficulties in turning one’s emotions into language, and suggest that all attempts to articulate inward feelings involve a certain degree of translation or metaphorical conceptualisation. As Emma Mason and Isobel Armstrong have written, ‘[a]rt can put the passions outside the self only by representing them through what they are not, through the substitutions of image, picture, or proxy enactment’.² Humoral theory is invoked in this speech, to be sure, but only as one of a series of metaphors that Richard employs to describe his fragmented self – a self too complex and disordered to be contained within any single paradigm or framework, or indeed any fixed form. His identity is figured as a continual performance, and an imperfect and unstable one at that, suspended between competing thoughts, quotations, metaphors and imagined roles: ‘Thus play I in one person many people, / And none contented’ (31–2). Taken as a whole, Richard’s speech suggests something of the diversity and even mystery of early modern emotional experience, particularly as it related to the understanding of the self. While there are many ways to describe what such emotional experience might be like, there is no single or straightforward way of explaining what it actually is.

Recovering Renaissance emotion: humoralism and beyond

This book seeks to recover the plurality and creativity of Renaissance and early modern emotion, attending to the multiple intellectual frameworks and aesthetic strategies Shakespeare and his contemporaries used to probe the meaning of passion and its significance in human life. Such an ambition builds on a growing interest in emotion across Renaissance and early modern studies. Since the turn of the twenty-first century we might say that there has been a 'Renaissance of emotion' in the field, with scholars across various disciplines turning their attention to the centrality of emotion (or passion, or affect – more of which to follow) in all aspects of early modern literary, dramatic, cultural and political life. Indeed the expansion of emotion studies has been so striking and pervasive as to prompt several scholars to point to an 'emotional turn' across the humanities.³ Whereas emotional experience may have once been seen as too ephemeral, unrecoverable or idiosyncratic for systematic scholarly analysis, critics are increasingly considering the ways in which the study of emotion connects with fundamental questions about the relationship between self and society, mind and body, biology and culture, and the representation of lived experience.

As has already been suggested, in Renaissance and especially Shakespeare studies, academic interest in emotion has largely been informed by the cultural history of medical thought, resulting in a picture of early modern emotion that stresses the centrality of the material, humoral body. Scholars in the field have tended to focus on the physiological determinism of emotion in early modern texts, arguing that feeling was something that happened *to* the body of the passive, receptive subject, who either gave way to these material impulses or attempted to resist them through stoical self-control. Perhaps the most influential study to adopt this approach has been Gail Kern Paster's *Humoring the Body: Emotions and the Shakespearean Stage* (2004), which emphasises the ways in which early modern passions were inseparable from physiological experiences. Paster suggests that, for early modern individuals, 'the passions actually *were* liquid forces of nature, because, in this cosmology, the stuff of the outside world and the stuff of the body were composed of the same elemental materials'.⁴ She is keen to historicise early modern emotional experience, proposing that, no matter how 'natural' an emotion might feel, it always occurs 'within a dense cultural and social context' specific to time and place.⁵ In the case of early modern emotional culture, Paster offers a vivid description of the psychophysiological holism she believes was produced by the context of Galenic humoralism:

[T]he bodily humors and the emotion that they sustain and move the body to express in action can be lexically distinguished but not functionally separated. For the early moderns, emotions flood the body not metaphorically but literally, as the humors course through the bloodstream carrying choler, melancholy, blood, and phlegm to the parts and as the animal spirits move like lightning from brain to muscle, from muscle to brain. (p. 14)

For Paster, the individual is a fundamentally material entity, subject not only to humoral fluctuations in the body but also to elemental shifts in the wider natural world, or 'ecology', as she calls it. A similar approach is taken in *Reading the Early Modern Passions: Essays in the Cultural History of Emotion* (2004), which Paster co-edited with Katherine Rowe and Mary Floyd-Wilson. As the editors emphasise in their Introduction, several of the book's contributors explore how 'pre-Cartesian psychophysiology may have affected early modern self-experience', and the ways in which 'the very language of physiology ... helps determine phenomenology'.⁶ While *Reading the Early Modern Passions* includes work that explores methods and approaches beyond Galenic humoralism – for example, the chapters by Richard Strier and Douglas Trevor – the historiographical legacy of the book has been the emphasis on humoralism that is present in its framing introduction and several of its subsequent chapters. Along with Michael Schoenfeldt's *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England* (1999) these studies have been highly influential, arguably setting the emotional agenda in Shakespeare and Renaissance studies.⁷

Such an approach reminds us of the extent to which emotions, as William Reddy puts it, 'have a kind of history', and suggests that some of the descriptions of emotion that we now think of as metaphorical – having a broken heart, or being infected with fear – had literal resonance in the period.⁸ Moreover, the emphasis upon the bodily aspects of emotions can seem especially attractive, as it resonates with the concerns of late twentieth and early twenty-first century neuroscience, which increasingly questions dualistic assumptions about the disembodied mind.⁹ Recent work in Shakespeare studies has continued to argue for the acceptance of this critical paradigm, extending it to the realm of early modern literary and theatrical reception. In *Shakespearean Sensations* (2013), Katharine Craik and Tanya Pollard argue that critics need to take seriously 'the complex and intimate reciprocity between books, bodies, and selves', and suggest that '[o]ur longstanding habit of separating bodily responses from intellectual reasoning has deterred critics from exploring their interdependence'.¹⁰ For Craik and Pollard, early modern descriptions of somatic responses to literary texts are not merely rhetorical

tropes, but instead offer accurate descriptions of readers' bodily sensations: 'Books and plays were among the external agents capable of profoundly altering humoral balance, implicating readers and theatregoers in complex processes of transaction or exchange.'¹¹ Their work highlights the profound impressionability of the humoral, emotional self, while also drawing attention to the ways in which readers and playgoers acted as agents in this process by seeking out the imaginative and sensory experiences offered in contemporary literature and drama.

Such scholarship has been extremely valuable in foregrounding the importance of humoralism in relation to historical phenomenology and embodiment, but it has to some extent obscured the way in which other intellectual and creative frameworks, such as religious and philosophical belief, political performance, or rhetorical and dramaturgical style also shaped cultural beliefs about emotional experience. Such frameworks complicate the humoral paradigm and point to more active and wilful experiences of emotion in the period, in which writers drew on multiple emotional discourses in order to construct their own particularised models of feeling. Indeed Richard Strier has questioned the ability of purely humoralist readings to recover the full variety of emotional experience on display in Renaissance writing, arguing that 'the early modern period is a period where all discourses are contested, and that to take a Galenic discourse as somehow a master-discourse is mistaken'. 'If we are trying to understand early modern persons', he continues, 'we need to take into account all the available resources the period offered, in all their abundance and contradiction, and see which ones are being mobilized in any particular instance.'¹² More recently, in *The Unrepentant Renaissance* (2011), Strier has suggested that 'the new humoralism' of the last decade is akin to new historicism in its questioning of individual agency, and that humoral theory is one of several tools used by scholars to characterise the period 'in dark and dour terms'. He writes that the focus of the new humoralists 'might be said to be on selves in the period as physiocultural rather than sociocultural formations', and suggests that more attention might be given to the ways in which such selves resisted 'systematizing' in favour of more 'bumptious, full-throated, and perhaps perverse' ways of feeling.¹³ Bridget Escolme has voiced a similar 'desire to give pleasure equal weight with anxiety' in the study of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, while Brian Cummings and Freya Sierhuis have called for a 'realignment' of early modern emotion 'both with the ancient concerns of rhetoric and with contemporary reflections on intersubjectivity and self-reflection'.¹⁴

Even scholars largely interested in the medical nature of Renaissance and early modern emotion have begun to take issue with the totalising predominance of humoralism within the field. In her discussion of anger and health in late medieval and Renaissance Europe, Elena Carrera has challenged the assumption that a ‘humoral inevitability’ or ‘determinism’ single-handedly dictated medical interpretations of the passions. She argues instead that mind–body relations were not so ‘unidirectional’, and that mental and even rational phenomena such as *pneuma* – an entity she describes as ‘approaching the substance of celestial beings’ – played a larger role in the production of passion than has previously been recognised.¹⁵ Likewise, in his work on melancholy and Galenic humoralism, Angus Gowland has posited that the kinds of emotional subjectivity found in Renaissance medical and philosophical discourse ‘cannot be understood exclusively or even primarily in terms of the body and its humours, but rather in terms of the relationship between the body and the soul’. Through a careful examination of a range of European writings on the subject of melancholy, Gowland emphasises the complexity of the relationship between the material and immaterial self and notes that while ‘occasionally these connections were suggestive of a radical materialism ... the two domains [of body and soul] never collapsed into each other’.¹⁶ Such work has drawn attention to the fact that early modern theories of mind, soul and will overlapped with those of the body in complex and often contested ways, destabilising any straightforward explanation of how emotional experience might be produced or what it might mean from a moral or social point of view. Understanding emotion in the Renaissance was part of the larger project of understanding the human, and accordingly it required insights from all of its philosophical, spiritual, physiological and creative engagements.

Emotional frameworks: religion, rhetoric, performance

If we do want to historicise the early modern passions, then, we need to give more attention to the other systems of knowledge and representation that people used to conceptualise and articulate emotional experience. While such frameworks are numerous, the contributors to the present book focus on what we believe to be three of the most important areas of influence: religious and philosophical belief, linguistic and literary form, and political and dramaturgical performance. In their investigation of these areas, the chapters below cover a range of texts by writers including Thomas Wright, Thomas Cranmer, Robert Burton, John Lyly, Thomas Preston and William