

**The Subtextual Body: Melancholy, Humoural Physiology and Bodies of
Knowledge in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century English Literature**

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Abstract

The Subtextual Body: Melancholy, Humoural Physiology and Bodies of Knowledge in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century English Literature

This dissertation examines the themes of epistemology related to the physiology of the humours and melancholy in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English prose, with chief emphasis on Robert Burton's (1577-1640) *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621). It charts the transformations of the humoural condition in philosophy, anatomy and the medical treatise throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, from the renewed interest in the Renaissance of the 'inspired' form of melancholy by Florentine Neoplatonist Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) to the middle of the seventeenth century in the writings of Thomas Browne (1605-1682). The first chapter serves as an introduction to the approach of the dissertation, which integrates a cultural historical approach to literary analysis of the *Anatomy* as some form of an anatomical treatise in the sense that it treats both a body of knowledge and knowledge of the body. Chapter two interrogates the distinction made by scholars between the 'Ficinian' and 'Galenic' forms of melancholy, and argues that sixteenth- and seventeenth-century humoural physiology recognises no such distinction, but rather that they serve as mutually sustainable responses to the problem presented to humoural physiology of visualising the interior of the living human body. Chapter three argues that, rather than using 'anatomy' and 'melancholy' as metaphorical constructs for rhetorical aims, the *Anatomy* pursues the intellectual possibilities implicit in anatomy as a highly procedural mode of analysis toward comprehending knowledge of a humoural body described in Galenic medicine, but that the text, as a result of the complications with completing such a body of knowledge, instead voices disembodiment. The fourth chapter proposes an analysis of Thomas Browne's *Hydriotaphia*, known also as *Urn*

Burial (1658), as having thematic continuity with both Burton's *Anatomy* but also seventeenth-century humoral physiology as well, in that, while studying the past from the perspective of antiquarian speculation and cultural history, it concludes similarly that knowledge of the complete is impossible by the analysis of ruined and fragmentary objects and surfaces.

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