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MELANCHOLY: A BRIEF HISTORY OF AN ANCIENT CONCEPT

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Abstract

This research note provides the intended readers with a basic outline of the historical transformation, social categorization, and medical classification of melancholy as disease, disorder, temperament (disposition), and mood (state of mind) throughout the ages, beginning with ancient Greece. It attempts to give a brief account of the chronological change in understanding, explanation, and interpretation of the concept of melancholy and the melancholy states until the 20th and 21st centuries, when it is rather begun to be regarded as an emotional response to an unconscious loss and lack, and eventually a transient emotion. This review aims to serve as a useful introduction to the melancholy studies and for the researchers, particularly for those who aim to develop a clear and concrete idea about the field. It is chiefly based upon the theories suggested by the eminent scholars of each period, Aristotle, Galen, Avicenna, Hippocrates, Robert Burton, and George Cheyne, and their erudite works. Within this framework, the present research note is respectively focused on the Ancient Greek times (referring to the conventional notion of melancholy characterized by the theory of humours), the medieval period, the Renaissance age, the seventeenth century, and, lastly, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a whole to explore the internal and external histories of the term.

Keywords: Melancholy, Black Bile, Burton, Cheyne

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The history of melancholy is as intricate as its nature. From being described as a natural outcome of an excessive amount of black bile available in the body and then diagnosed as a category of mental disorders, the modern melancholy has come to be regarded as a transient mood that grips the human beings now and then. Despite the boundless categories, variations and cognates the term has acquired over the years or, in other words, being “weighted down with the intricacies of its historical burden” (Ferber, 2013, p. 3), one thing still remains unchanging: melancholy has always been an interesting literary subject for the men of letters for every period. Literary scholars have thematised melancholy as a fashionable topic trend in their works through feigning melancholy to seduce or incite the readers that are supposedly afflicted with this disorder or at times to manage their innate melancholic personality via textual representations of the authorial self. These genuinely melancholic writers have mostly provided a remarkable outburst of the subjective experience of melancholy through depicting, narrating, struggling and, in the final analysis, overcoming this state of objectless and causeless despondency by applying the self-narrative as a curative method. Within this scope, the historical background of the present study provides the chronological transformation of melancholy as disease, disorder, temperament and mood over the years, beginning with the Ancient Greece so that it becomes perceptible to the intended readers how the understanding of melancholy has undergone a considerable and critical change over the years.

The classical notion of melancholy of the Ancient Greek times manifests itself best with the theory of humours and the doctrine of such scholars as chiefly Aristotle, Hippocrates, Galen and Avicenna. The humoral theory deals with melancholy as a disease of excessive black bile that is represented to be a direct outcome of the failing spleen to which the function of clearing away the bile from the body is assigned. For the treatment of the disease of melancholy, physicians and philosophers suggest the cure of creating the right balance of black bile that “tends to be in excess, as regards seasons, mainly in the fall of the year, and, as regards ages, mainly after the prime of life” (Galen, 1916, p. 203). Hippocrates (1931) explains the term of disease as a medical condition of whose origin and cause might be clearly known and health as “when these elements [blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile] are duly proportioned to one another in respect of compounding power and bulk, and when they are perfectly mingled” (p. 11). Therefore, he defines melancholy as a disease of an imbalance of the bodily black bile that is described to be “the most viscous of the humours in the body, and that which sticks fast the longest” (Hippocrates, 1931, p. 41). Correspondingly, Avicenna (1973) associates disease with “an abnormal unnatural state of the human body, in virtue of which injurious effects result” (p. 156) and identifies the melancholy disease with the weak spleen as well as the presence of the atrabilious humour which exists in two forms: “There is a natural or normal form of this effete substance, and also as an abnormal or morbid form” (p. 84). He thus provides a simple explanation for the melancholy disease with such symptoms as “inexplicable sense of gloom and dread” (1973, p. 446), implying that the disease results from the latter of two types of humours. Aristotle discusses melancholy basically as one of the many diseases of black bile and categorizes two essential types of the disease, stating that “for many such men have suffered from diseases which arise from this mixture in the body, and in others their nature evidently inclines to troubles of this sort” (1973, p. 157). Accordingly, he suggests that some people are born melancholic whereas others become melancholic due to environmental factors such as diet, climate, alcohol and other reasons. For the first group of people, melancholy is their temperament which is “in itself variable” (Aristotle, 1973, p. 163) and for the latter, melancholy turns out to be a disease.

The medieval period offers a theological explanation of melancholy, positing the concept within religion and regarding it as a kind of spiritual disease rather than a physical one. The shift in the social perception and definition of the disease manifests itself with the change in linguistic signifiers as a new cognate is coined in this era. Acedia, “a Greek word that means “noncaring state”” (Radden, 2000, p. 69), comes to denote the illness that afflicts particularly the monks who are forced to devote an extremely disciplined and isolated life to religion. Demonstrating itself with such symptoms as sleep and eating disorders, nightmares, fainting and suicidal tendency, acedia is acknowledged as a sin owing to refraining man from prayers in that “acedia was a sin against God, of not loving him, of being repelled by divine goodness” (Bowring, 2008, p. 93). Acedia indisputably reveals religious despair and despondency, which involves it in the seven deadly sins as the sin of sloth since “the sin of Sadness, where the apathy and lack of joy were interpreted as the refusal to embrace the goodness of spirituality and appreciation of God” (Bowring, 2008, p. 93). The term is interchangeably used with another concept, tristitia, which signifies a much more elevated form of despair as acedia is truly attached with negative connotations till the end of the Middle Ages.

The Renaissance age, with the advent of humanism and reformation, annihilates the scholastic doctrine of the dark middle ages and evaluates the melancholy state as the normal temperament of the man of genius rather than a disease. During this era, melancholy comes to be associated with brilliance, creativity and artistic talent and interpreted as an intellectual pursuit for the men of philosophy and letters. The humanistic movement prevailing the era acquires melancholy with fresh meanings and motifs, relocating the concept within the framework of the natural disposition of the man of intelligence as the “homo melancholicus, the brooding man of genius, [who] was born under Saturn and influenced by Mercury” (Radden, 2009, p. 6). Accordingly, the astrological explanations of melancholy are put forth by the contemporary scholars of the period, establishing a connection between Saturn and melancholy as well as between melancholy and witchcraft, as “Satan rather than Saturn became the governing force for melancholy in the eyes of those who considered it a sign of possession by the devil, or punishment for evil” (Bowring, 2008, p. 26).

The seventeenth century understanding of melancholy is represented by Burton’s *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, which might be accepted as the first work that systematically discusses the concept as disease and within the same classification as madness. Providing the definition of melancholy as “so universal a malady, an epidemical disease, that so often, so much crucifies the body and mind” (Burton, 2009, p. 103), he explains the disease as the consequence of black choler as a settled humour and discovers a connection between the disease and the spleen. Fear and sorrow without cause are accounted for the essential symptoms of melancholy disease which is in itself divided into two basic categories: melancholy in habit and melancholy in disposition. The former refers to the chronic disease of the excessive black bile which proves to be extremely arduous to be removed and treated by the physicians whereas the latter signifies the transitory mood of a healthy subject and mostly appears to occur for a specific occasion. As for the causes of the disease, he gives an outline for the general causes as natural and supernatural ones. Natural causes cover those that are described as universal and primary while supernatural ones are mostly related with God, angels, devils and witchcraft. Burton furthermore clarifies the disease as the malady of the scholars and men of genius due to the solitary and sedentary style of life these people are subjected to. He accordingly uses the terms hypochondriasis and vapours for the melancholy disease, stating that the latter is induced by the menstruation blood, gendering the disease within itself.

The eighteenth century proves to be at the peak of melancholy with a cornucopia of publications that offer medical, philosophical and theological explanations and abundant linguistic signifiers. As the preceding era is represented by Burton, the present period is symbolized particularly by George Cheyne and his *The English Malady*. Cheyne categorizes melancholy and other related concepts (spleen, vapours and lowness of spirits) as nervous distempers, making a strong connection between these diseases of the nervous system and other factors as diet, climate and lifestyle, and refers to the vapours “as the first symptoms of a real chronical disease” (Cheyne, 1991, p. 203). This authoritative work is significant in that “Cheyne can be cited as evidence that melancholy is quite distinct from madness” (Darcy, 2013, p. 70). Apart from this medical masterpiece, the long eighteenth century witnesses the rise of fashionable melancholy in literature due to the images collected around the concept for the artists that intend to promote themselves as intellectual and refined. As “sadness made one interesting” (Sontag, 1978, p. 31), artists desire to construct a melancholic self in their works to promote the self as a kind of image, contributing to the idealization and romanticization of the disease. Therefore, authors who feign melancholic and are genuinely melancholic aestheticize their personal suffering in prosaic and poetic works even though “the eighteenth century was not the first age to consider itself as a uniquely melancholic one” (Darcy, 2013, p. 71).

The nineteenth century is the age when psychiatry emerges as a distinct discipline of the field of medicine and with it, psychiatric diagnostic classifications of diseases appear. The advances in clinical medicine reconstruct the classification of melancholy, making a crucial distinction between melancholy and melancholia, the latter being in use only with the arrival of the nineteenth century. Melancholy is thus mostly employed to refer to “mood, states, and dispositions attributable to most people” (Radden, 2009, p. 39) whereas melancholia to a specific mental disorder. In this regard, it might be suggested that melancholia grows into a separate aspect and more severe cases of melancholy which require medical treatment and at times hospitalization. It is very often applied to refer to the patients with mental disorder and insanity. Toward the end of this century, another linguistic signifier, depression, appears to define a symptom of melancholia, which as a matter of fact turns out to be a blanket term and “began to eclipse “melancholia,” in referring to disorder category, only by the twentieth century” (Radden, 2009, p. 39).

When all the facts hitherto provided are taken into consideration, it might be inferred that melancholy was perceived in accordance with the social, medical, philosophical and cultural changes of each era. Every age has to come to manifest its own melancholy understanding, coining a new signifier in the language for each subtype/subcategory so that in a way the concept has been overshadowed by its internal history. Yet, it should be highlighted that melancholy in itself embraces a relatively older historical background than psychoanalysis itself even though with the emergence of psychoanalysis the idea of melancholy is begun to limited to only an emotional response in which the boundaries of the lost object and the subject are amalgamated. To sum up, it might be said that melancholy has for centuries served as a social and personal text the authorial personae produce a completely unique subjective experience for both the symptoms and the cure while accordingly “female and male melancholy possess a distinctive structure and follow a different development” (Yemez, 2018, p.125) within themselves².

² For further discussions on the historical background of melancholy and related concepts, please see Yemez, Ö. (2018). *Aesthetic transformation and functional displacement of melancholy: the analysis of melancholic persona in the selected works of eighteenth-century poets* (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation). Karadeniz Technical University, Trabzon.

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