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Humours and passions

MADOC CAIRNS

The Elizabethan Mind

HELEN HACKETT

(YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 448 PP, £25)

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PSYCHOLOGY ranks alongside fine art, linear time and human sexuality as a field the Catholic Church first invented, then abandoned, and thereafter shrouded in guilty, confused silence. Whether you consider this separation benign or otherwise depends on how much patience you have for priests and psychiatrists respectively and, correspondingly, whether you'd greet an amalgam of the two with equanimity – or horror. Tragic or not, the bifurcation between spirituality and theories about the mind quietly defined the twentieth century. But it was one contrived in the sixteenth, as amply demonstrated by Helen Hackett's *The Elizabethan Mind*, a new study of early modern ideas about interior life.

“As slime and dirt engender toads and frogs,” wrote Thomas Nashe, contemplating the “black bile” of melancholy, “so this slimy melancholy humour engendereth many misshapen objects in our imaginations.” It's not quite the DSM-IV. And the abiding sense one gets from *The Elizabethan Mind* is that the definite article of the title is not so definite after all: Hackett's sources can't agree what the mind does, or even what it is. Psychology is a matter of humours, four physical substances circulating in the body, educated early-moderns profess – unless it's all down to spiritual warfare between angels and their demonic opposites.



Elizabethan playwright Thomas Nashe contemplated the 'black bile' of melancholy

Or both: Johann Weyer, physician and devil-finder, proposed that the Devil “stirred up the humours” to induce fantasies in otherwise sober brains. Medical science, classical-inflected philosophy and Christian theology – leavened by popular superstition – all played a role in the ebbs and flurries of the mind, but none a decisive one. Explanations abounded and overabounded, dyked by sectarian divides in one place; inundating those verities in others. Hackett thinks the motley of theories is itself instructive. Hoary old standbys about Descartes' scission of mind from body have to be retired, she says: dualism predates the Enlightenment, and embodiment, in various forms, postdates it. Seat of terror and salvation, the mind was, for the Elizabethans, anything but simple.

And Hackett's sources introduce yet more complexity. Theses from the period, scientific or otherwise, are well-researched and well-referenced in *The Elizabethan Mind*. To judge the period as it was lived requires sonnets and plays and letters be assayed too. Worthy work, but several lifetimes of it. Hackett callipers her subject with shrewd delicacy, arranging interventions and insights along a line of recognisable topoi – the role of women, attitudes towards race, Shakespeare, demonic possession. They offer readers a way into the thickets of scholarship, and the author a way out.

ON THE other side we discover the origins of secular psychology – although Hackett sees Shakespeare, not Bacon, as culpable here – and an omnium gatherum of enduring themes. Much more interesting is what didn't endure: the failed ideas, extinct concepts, theses so alien as to seem patently lunatic. Heraclitus' fire is the best-known and most-missed exemplar, a vision of the universe as permeated by world-making flame. Humours and spiritual warfare, prophetic dreams and the five powers of the intellect: for Hackett's subjects, the mind mattered, everywhere saturated with a meaning beyond sense.

Our own individualised approach to psychology – centred almost exclusively around a rigid, atomistic selfhood – seems impoverished by comparison. Benefits of the “buffered self” aside, it's hard to read Hackett's deft exposition of the martyr-poet Robert Southall's preaching on passion as providential without a sense of loss. And perhaps of recognition. Hackett is emphatic that the porous, embodied Elizabethan sense of self is in some ways on the return. Blind faith in science is on the wane; technological solutions illumine spiritual problems; and there's a renewed conviction abroad that, buffered or not, to look inwards is to look out. For good or ill? No easy answers here. It's all in the mind.