

Jane Darcy, *Melancholy and Literary Biography, 1640-1816*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Pp. 255. £50. ISBN 9781137271082.

Jane Darcy's *Melancholy and Literary Biography, 1640-1816* offers a history of the genre of literary biography in Britain throughout the long eighteenth century, focusing on the posthumous reputation of authors as sculpted by the selective depictions of their biographers. Beginning with Dryden's *Life of Plutarch*, Darcy takes her readers on a journey through the contextual pathways that lead to some key biographies of literary figures in the period, from Johnson's *Lives of the English Poets* and Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, to Godwin's *Memoirs of Wollstonecraft* and Currie's *Life of Burns*, and concluding with Hayley's *Life of Cowper*. In addition to examinations of the biographies themselves, Darcy highlights different trends and sub-genres of biography, from the 'Life and Letters' approach to 'Philosophical Biography' in which a figure is depicted primarily through a political, moral or philosophical stance.

Running parallel to this history of biography, and in chapters of their own, Darcy describes evolving understandings of melancholy, tracing its history through the works of William Harvey, Thomas Willis, Robert Whytt, William Cullen and George Cheyne. These sections of Darcy's book give a general overview of medical definitions of melancholy at the time, aligning it with a posturing of sensibility that she sees in some of the biographical depictions of literary figures. The book provides a contextual introduction to the medical history of melancholy, even if it does not venture much further than equating it with the culture of sensibility and nerves to show how Boswell, for example, depicts Johnson's melancholy as evidence that he is a literary man of feeling.

In the first half of the book, as Darcy provides the contextual background for the two themes of melancholy and biography, she deals with each of them separately within their own exclusive chapters and sections. Because of this, *Melancholy and Literary Biography* can, at times, feel like a book with two separate topics. As the title indicates, this is not a book about melancholy *in* literary biography, but rather, melancholy *and* literary biography. Darcy herself states in her conclusion: 'My quest in this book has been to chart these two paths – the development of literary biography and the cultural status of melancholy – and to show how closely the two run in parallel' (205).

However, when they do intersect in later sections of the book, primarily to demonstrate how melancholy was used to show a literary figure to advantage, Darcy's argument comes into its own. She charts a history of biography and a history of melancholy in order to argue that one can see the evolving definitions of melancholy through the ways in which literary persons are depicted in their biographies. The sections on Boswell's depictions of Johnson's melancholy and Wollstonecraft's own aesthetic descriptions of her emotions in her *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* – which Darcy argues is undone by Godwin when he publishes her letters to Imlay in his *Memoirs* – skillfully demonstrate that the way in which a writer's melancholy suffering was depicted could have a significant impact upon their posthumous reputation. The final two chapters, on Currie's *Life of Burns* and Hayley's *Life of Cowper*, are particularly valuable as Darcy brings the two themes together for a sustained examination on how biographers dealt with and depicted the intense melancholy suffered by Burns and Cowper by playing down their supposed suicidal despair and madness and turning it into a more socially acceptable aesthetic or poetic melancholy. Ironically though, according to Darcy, it was only to have Romantics like Hunt and Blake become more interested in their despair and madness.

One of the highlights of the book is the originality of its examination of religious melancholy in the period and how biographers negotiated the politics of this potentially explosive issue. It is refreshing to see work on melancholy give such scope to this important contemporary issue. As Darcy says, 'for Puritans and evangelicals alike, religious

melancholy lies at the heart of the conversion experience: without profound spiritual distress there would be no drive towards religious conversion' (85). Although her argument that religious melancholy comes into fashion with Burton and out of fashion by the mid-eighteenth century may not quite capture the powerfully divisive Nonconformist-Anglican politics that, from the Early Modern straight through to the Romantic period, made this popular for some and intensely unpopular for others, she is certainly right to highlight the ways in which biographers had to be wary of how they depicted a writer's religious melancholy when writing for a general, non-Puritan audience. Darcy's book shows just how precarious a previously sound reputation, such as Cowper's or Wollstonecraft's, could be when an author's private letters and journals are first revealed and left in the hands of a biographer to select, interpret and sculpt according to their will.

Melancholy and Literary Biography, 1640-1816 provides a valuable examination of the ways in which eighteenth-century biographers depict literary figures and demonstrates how significant the impact could be when they veered away from the poetic melancholy of sensibility. As such, Darcy's book is a welcome contribution to recent scholarship on the genre of literary biography and the posthumous publication of literary letters.

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