The Anatomy of Melancholy, first published in 1621, is one of the greatest works of early modern English prose writing, yet it has received little substantial literary criticism in recent years. This study situates Robert Burton’s complex work within three related contexts: religious, medical and literary/rhetorical. Analysing Burton’s claim that his text should have curative effects on his melancholic readership, it examines the authorial construction of the reading process in the context of other early modern writing, both canonical and non-canonical, providing a new approach towards the emerging field of the history of reading. Lund responds to Burton’s assertion that melancholy is an affliction of body and soul which requires both a spiritual and a corporal cure, exploring the theological complexion of Burton’s writing in relation to English religious discourse of the early seventeenth century, and the status of his work as a medical text.

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For my parents,

Clare and John
Contents

Acknowledgements ix
Abbreviations xi
A Note on Citation xii

Introduction  Zisca’s Drum: Reading and Cure  1
  Melancholy: subject and form  9
  The reader in history  13

Chapter 1  Imagining Readings  24
  Gilded pills  27
  ’Whosoever thou art’?  33
  Nashe and Montaigne on reading  45

Chapter 2  The Cure of Despair: Reading the End of
The Anatomy of Melancholy  51
  Burton and his English sources  52
  Burton and Hemmingius  60
  Burton, predestination and the English Church  67

Chapter 3  Printed Therapeutics: The Anatomy of Melancholy
and Early Modern Medical Writing  77
  Latin medical writing  78
  Vernacular medical writing  86
  The Anatomy as medical text  92
  Literary therapeutics  96
  ’Exercise rectified’  104

Chapter 4  The Whole Physician  112
  Spiritual physic  114
  Religious melancholy  118
  Burton’s flexible text  125
  Reading remedies  132
## Contents

Chapter 5   Speaking out of Experience   138
  ‘Experto crede ROBERTO’   139
  ‘Going down themselves into the deep’   146
  The melancholy Democritus   152
  Curative Christian satire?   158

Chapter 6   The Structure of Melancholy: From Cause to Cure   167
  The origins of melancholy   168
  Against beneficial melancholy   175
  Cause and cure, law and gospel   180
  A self-help book?   188

Conclusion   196

Bibliography   204

Index   221
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Abbreviations

OED – Oxford English Dictionary (www.oed.com)
P&P – Past & Present
PQ – Philological Quarterly
RES – Review of English Studies (new series)
RQ – Renaissance Quarterly
A Note on Citation

All quotations from the Anatomy, unless otherwise stated, are from the following edition: The Anatomy of Melancholy, ed. Thomas C. Faulkner, Nicolas K. Kiessling and Rhonda L. Blair, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989–2000). References to the text of the Anatomy are incorporated parenthetically in the text, by volume and page number. This edition is described throughout as the Oxford edition; all other material from it (appendices, textual notes, etc.) is referred to in footnotes, by volume and page number. For ease of reading, I have incorporated translations of Latin phrases in square brackets immediately after the Latin. Translations are taken from the commentary (vols. IV–VI) in the above edition, unless indicated otherwise. The Anatomy is divided into Partitions, Sections, Members and Subsections. I capitalise these terms when referring to them to indicate that they are formal structuring devices.

When referring to early modern authors’ names, I follow the forms Burton typically uses (as listed in the ‘Biobibliography’ of the Oxford edition, vol. VI) but also give vernacular alternatives in the first full citation, e.g. Montanus (Giambattista da Monte). In all quotations from early modern texts, the letters u/v and i/j are standardised. All quotations from the Bible are from the King James Version, unless indicated otherwise.