

Bríd Phillips // Recently I came across research on Shakespeare and positive emotions which made the point that the field of the History of Emotions has focused almost exclusively on the so-called negative emotions represented by writers in the early modern period. This statement gave me pause. I examined the work I had myself attended to in this field and also in the field of Health Humanities and it was apparent that I too engage in considerations of negative emotions. I examined violent and negative spaces in Shakespeare's *locus amoenus*. I studied the effects of grief and emotional contagion in *Hamlet*. And for *Synopsis* I have written on the power of poetry to communicate with palliative patients, in addition to a piece on witnessing the experience of grief. We continue to be influenced by early modern thinking on emotions, either as academics, generalist readers, or social partakers of the offerings of such playwrights as William Shakespeare. But what are some of these influences, and do the negative emotions hold sway as they did before?

The early modern opinion on emotions and the mind posited by Thomas Wright in 1601 often holds true today. According to Wright, the imagination and subsequently the passions are moved in three ways: 'by humours arising in our bodies, by external senses and secret passage of sensual objects, by the descent or commandment of reason' (5.1.8-15). Michel de Montaigne, a French early modern philosopher, was also interested in the power of the imagination, quoting a medieval philosophical axiom in his work, '*Fortis imaginatio generat casum*,' or 'a powerful imagination generates the event' (109). He continued by stating that the imagination can then cause emotions in the person visualizing an experience. Martha C. Nussbaum stresses the role that imagination plays in our emotional transactions today which accords with early modern thinking (243). There is an underlying theme ranging across this scholarship that suggests that the emotions can and should be tempered by reason.

Another early modern understanding in some circles was that the eyes were the vehicle for allowing emotional excesses to enter the mind. In *Hamlet*, Ophelia opens her mind to Hamlet's madness and terror, through the power of vision when she gazes upon him in a state of extreme emotion, 'so piteous in purport/ As if he had been loosed out of hell/ To speak of horrors (Shakespeare 2.1.79-81). I suggest that this is the moment when Ophelia becomes irrevocably affected emotionally as she had looked upon madness and allowed it to enter through her eyes (Phillips 185). To this day, from infancy to adulthood, there is evidence that we often rely on viewing the eye area when attributing emotional states; and in these studies, 'fear' is often the most powerful mover (Vanderwert et al.; Bentin et al.). However, as a transformative agent in the early modern period, sadness, melancholy and grief held a privileged position. For example, Erin Sullivan notes that in the early modern period, 'medical and religious belief held that all of the

passions could alter the way a person's mind, body, and soul functioned, but none of them, countless writers insisted, did so dramatically, and variously, as sadness' (1). We see this in *Hamlet*, when Gertrude, Hamlet's mother, notes that, grief 'common to all' has such a particular expression in Hamlet (Shakespeare 1.2.72). It appears to alter his ability to act, to process situations, and his ability to function physically.

To return to the idea of engagement with negative emotions, I propose it helped play-goers to process their own experiences. In Shakespearean drama, the stage becomes a safe space to experience emotional excesses and consider their implications. Playgoers could witness these effects and consider them in relation to their own lives and emotional states. Bridget Escolme investigates emotional excesses on the Shakespearean stage and, in particular, anger, laughter, love, and grief. She seeks to 'bring together ideas about the passions and their perceived excesses that were circulating among the literate in early modern England' (220). In doing so, she makes the case that anger can be used for positive means—an argument not wholly understood in modern times. However, she also brings to light the negative aspects of presumptively positive emotions. Laughter, for example, with its potential for cruelty and love, is an emotion which can have amoral or psychologically damaging aspects.

Iterations of threnody, stories of tragedy, or dramatic presentations of grief strike a chord and offer us an opportunity to examine our own life. Is the catharsis they offer predicated on knowing that others have the capacity to feel as deeply and sadly as ourselves? To answer this question, I turn to modern research which posits that people underestimate the peer prevalence of negative emotional experiences as we mostly see other people in social circumstances when we are performing to the emotional community in which we find ourselves. Negative emotions are, more often than not, hidden in these circumstances (Jordan et al. 121). In addition to genuinely experiencing more positive emotion and less negative emotion in social settings, people may also tend in such situations to preferentially suppress the expression of negative emotion compared to positive (Jordan et al. 121). But the question remains: can engagement with negative emotions have a beneficial effect? Jordan et al. note (122) that 'some research suggests that downward emotional comparisons can improve people's well-being: In one study, reading about a peer who was experiencing very negative affect improved the moods of depressed undergraduates' They suggest that people feel less lonely and depressed if they know that others experience the same negativity.

Therefore, engaging with negative emotions does have positive merit and emotional benefits in some situations as it can make us feel less isolated and alone in our experiences. Borrowing from narrative medicine and the early modern period, we can say that engaging with stories and emotional narratives offers us a positive way to make sense of our life experiences.

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Shakespeare and Emotions

