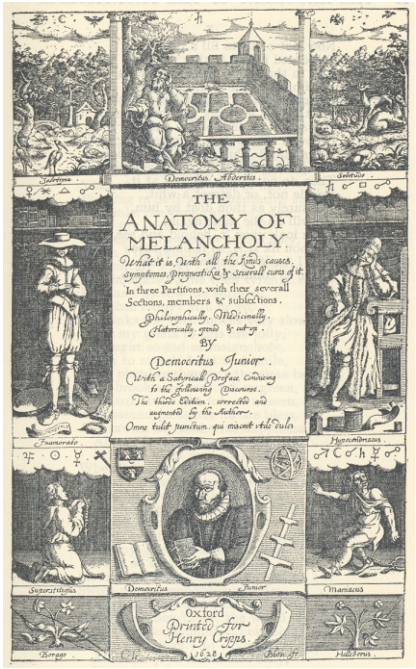
ROBERT BURTON AND HIS MISTRESS MELANCHOLY

Enzo Barillà

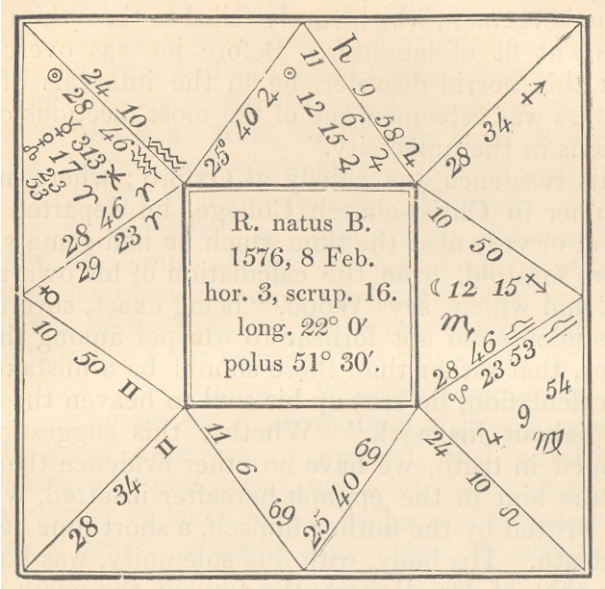
I was not a little offended with this malady,
shall I say my Mistress *Melancholy*, my
Egeria, or my *Malus Genius* [evil genius]?

(Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, p. 18)

When a rather voluminous treatise emerged from the printer's at Oxford in 1621, not a few in the venerable English university community were taken by a surprise that was directed not so much at the weight of the tome as its title and author, "*The Anatomy of Melancholy*" by a certain "Democritus Junior".[1] It did not take long, however, to arouse the curiosity of readers in what was then a blink of the publisher's eye to such a pitch as to turn the book into a best-seller. Indeed, despite its hefty consititution, the tome would be reprinted no fewer than four times —1624, 1628, 1632 and 1638—during the author's life. Born at Lindley, Leicestershire, on 8 February 1577 (the 18th according to the Gregorian calendar), the author was one Robert Burton.



Burton was well versed in astrology, and the many references to the ancient art that appear *passim* in the text attest to it. As he himself notes, "*Saturn* was the Lord of my geniture, culminating &c. & *Mars* principal *significator* of manners, in partile conjunction with mine *Ascendant*; both fortunate in their houses, &c." In effect, these details make it rather easy to reconstruct the gathering of celestial contours at Burton's nativity, which likely occurred just before 9·00 a.m. In drafting my astrological profile and comments in the following pages, I have taken 8·55 a.m as the hour of his birth.



What we have then is a treatise dedicated to Melancholy and, hence, to a certain kind of madness. It is a as important a subject as it is vast, an enterprise at once titanic for the difficulties it poses and for the expanse of the ground it covers. Yet Burton feels himself compelled to take on the challenge by a force that leaves him no choice. “When I first took this task in hand, , *et quod ait ille, impellente genio negotium suscepi* [and, as he says, undertook the work, my genius impelling me], this I aimed at, *vel ut lenirem animum scribendo* to ease my mind by writing, for I had *gravidum cor, foedum caput*, a kind of imposthume in my head, which I was very desirous to be unladen of, & could imagine no fitter evacuation than this. Besides I might not well refrain, for *ubi dolor, ibi digitus*, one must needs scratch where it itches.” (Vol. I, p. 18)

In other words, Burton fell under the same spell of creative impulse that seized the elderly Jung, who complained to his friend, the Domenican Victor White, “Not very long after I wrote to you, I simply had to write a new essay I did not know about what. It occurred to me I should discuss some of the finer points about anima, animus, shadow, and last but not least, the self. I was against it, because I wanted to rest my head. Lately I had suffered from severe sleeplessness and I wanted to keep away from all mental exertions. In spite of everything, I felt forced to write on blindly, not seeing at all what I was driving at. Only after I had written about 25 pages in folio, it began to dawn on me that Christ – not the man but the divine being – was my secret goal. It came to me as a shock, as I felt utterly unequal to such a task”. (Letter dated 19 December 1947)

There can be little question that Burton too felt himself in the grip of a similar mood. “And I doubt not that in the end you will say with me, that to anatomize this humour aright through all the members of this our *microcosmus*, is a great a task as to reconcile those chronological errors in the Assyrian monarchy find out the quadrature of a circle, the creeks and sounds of the north-east or north-west passages, & all out as good a discovery as that hungry *Spaniard’s* of *Terra Australis Incognita*, as great a trouble as to perfect the motion of *Mars & Mercury*, which so crucifies our Astronomers, or to rectify the *Gregorian* Calendar.” (vol. I, p. 37)

Melancholy is a term that derives from the late Latin *melancholia*, which in turn comes from the Greek *melankholia*, a compound of *melas*, black, and *khole*, bile. In effect, black bile was thought to be one of the four humours always present in the human body, and on their combination one with the other depended one’s state of health or illness. Even as early as the fourth century BCE it was believed that an excess of black bile led to madness, and Aristotle dedicates book XXX of his *Problemata* to the topic. Indeed, it is a veritable monograph on black bile.

Burton writes about melancholy because he is so familiar with it, though not as a pedant who views it through theoretical spectacles but as one who has experienced its force first hand. “Concerning myself, I can peradventure affirm with *Marius* in *Sallust*, *that which others hear or*

read of, I felt & practised myself, they get their knowledge by books, I mine by melancholizing." He then adds ironically, "*Experto crede Roberto* [Believe, Robert, he is an expert!]. Something I can speak out of experience, *aerumnabilis experientia me docuit* [Painful experience has taught me] and with her in the Poet, *Haud ignara mali miseris succurrere disco*, I would help others out of a fellow-feeling" (vol. I, p. 19)

Robert Burton early on came to know the harshness with which education was dispensed in his time, learning that was administered by tyrannical school masters whose methods made a lasting impression on the young boy. After attending grammar school, he went up at 16 to Brasenose College, Oxford, where he stayed for six years, speaking Latin as English appears to have been prohibited in the lecture hall. He thereafter switched to the same university's Christ Church College, where he will remain for the rest of his life and earns first his Bachelor of Arts and then Master of Arts degrees. By 1614 Burton has received his Bachelor of Divinity and permission to preach. While his ecclesiastical career will be modest, becoming vicar of the Church of St Thomas first, given the rectory of Walesby in 1622 and then granted the parish benefice of Seagrave in 1630, his life's main focus will be that of ardent scholar and *The Anatomy of Melancholy* his life's work. Burton took the vow of celibacy in 1616 and became a tutor at Christ Church, where he was appointed librarian in 1626. Robert Burton died at Oxford on 25 January 1640 (4 February by the Gregorian calendar), bequeathing his personal collection of two thousand volumes to the university's famed Bodleian Library. In the will he drafted in August of 1639, he states that though he is in good health, death would soon come knocking on his door. He left this world with a dash of irony, as the epitaph carved into his tombstone attests to: «Paucis notus, paucioribus ignotus, hic jacet Democritus Junior cui vitam dedit et mortem melancholia» ['Known to few, unknown to fewer still, here lies Democritus Junior, to whom melancholy gave life and death'].

There appears to have been little that was eventful in his life, or *le désespoir du biographe*, as Jean Robert Simon lamentably noted. Of himself, Burton wrote, "I have lived a silent, sedentary solitary, private life, *mihi et musis* [to myself and letters] in the University as long almost as *Xenocrates* in *Athens*, *ad senectam fere* [to old age almost] to learn wisdom as he did, penned up most part in my study." (Vol. I, p. 13) "I am not poor, I am not rich; *nihil est, nihil deest*, I have little, I want nothing: all my treasure is in *Minerva's* tower. Greater preferment as I could never get, so I am not in debt for it, I have a competency (*laus Deo*) from my noble and munificent Patrons, though I live still as a Collegiate student, as *Democritus* in his garden, and lead a monastick life, *ipse mihi theatrum* [a theatre to myself], sequestered from those tumults & troubles of the world. …Amidst the gallantry and misery of the world; jollity, pride perplexities and cares, simplicity and villany; subtlety, knavery, candour and integrity, mutually mixed and offering themselves, I rub on *privus privatus* [in a strictly private life]; as I have still lived, so I now continue *statu quo prius*, left to a solitary life, and mine own domestic discontents: saying that sometimes, *ne quid mentar* [not to tell a lie], as Diogenes went into the city, and Democritus to the haven, to see fashions, I did for my recreation now and then walk abroad, look into the world, and could not choose but make some little observation, *non tam sagax observator, ac simplex recitator* [not so sagacious an observer as a simple narrator], not as they did to scoff or laugh at all, but with a mixed passion." (Vol. I, p. 16)

Anthony Wood (1632-1695), a litigious antiquary and ardent historian of all things Oxonian, has left us the following sketch of Burton: "He was an exact mathematician, a curious calculator of Nativities, a thro'-pac'd Philologist, and one that understood the surveying of Lands well. As he was by many accounted a severe student, a devourer of Authors, a melancholy and humorous Person; so by others, who knew him well, a Person of great honesty, plain dealing and Charity. I have heard some of the Antients of Ch. (rist) Ch. (urch) often say that his Company was very merry, facete and juvenile, and no Man in his time did surpass him for his ready and dextrous interlarding his common discourses among them with Verses from the Poets or Sentences from classical Authors. Which being then all the fashion in the University, made his Company more acceptable." (*Athenae Oxonienses*, 1691-1692)

The extant portraits of Burton depict him as a man of robust build, a bit on the corpulent side, with dark brown, well-groomed beard. His high, broad forehead suggests intelligence and good memory and stands over large eyes of ironic gaze, a thrusting nose, a well-formed mouth connoting stubbornness with indulgent lower lip.

In effect, Burton does appear to have possessed a prodigious memory at the service of vast learning. His cultural credentials are decidedly humanist in nature but certainly not lacking in the sciences of his day. Sir William Osler said in the 1920s that the "*Anatomy of Melancholy* was the greatest treatise of medicine written by a layman". And Jean Starobinski considered it a "summa, containing all of physics, medicine, moral philosophy, most of our Greek and Latin poetic and Christian tradition that are served to us through allusions, fragments, patches sewn together one by one. For the many readers who would like to consult the ancients but haven't got the time, it is a dispensation since it encompasses an entire library."

Embedded in the introduction of his *magnum opus* is a discourse Burton wrote on utopia that has been the subject of comments by many scholars over the last few decades. After labyrinthine and recondite digressions, our author finally sets forth his agenda. "My purpose and endeavour is, in the following discourse, to anatomize this humour of melancholy, through all his parts and species, as it is an habit, or an ordinary disease, and that philosophically, medicinally, to shew the causes symptoms, and several cures of it, that it may be the better avoided" (Vol. I, p. 137, 138). But why expend so much scholarly scrutiny and learning on this malady? Burton observes with a certain gravitas, donning the robes of the shepherd of souls, "Moved thereunto for the generality of it, and to do good, it being a disease so frequent, as Mercurialis observes, *in these our days; so often happening*, saith *Laurentius, in our miserable times*, as few there are that feel not the smart of it. Of the same mind is *Aelian Montaltus, Melanchthon*, and others. *Julius Caesar Claudinus* calls it the *fountain of all other diseases*, *and so common in this crazed age of ours, that scarce one of a thousand is free from* it: and that splenetick hypochondriacal wind especially, which proceeds from the spleen and short ribs. Being then it is a disease so grievous, so common, I know not wherein to do a more general service, and spend my time better, than to prescribe means how to prevent and cure so universal a malady, an epidemical disease, that so often, so much, crucifies the body and mind. (Vol. I, p. 138)

No one, it seems, escapes it. Humans, plants, animals, kingdoms, provinces, bodies politic, all are afflicted. But a distinction must be made. Burton is addressing a diseased, not a natural state, as one may find in certain minerals, plants and animals. Nor is he remiss about handing down to us his 'catalogue of ships' in this connection. "I speak not of those creatures which are *saturnine*, melancholy by nature, (as lead and such like minerals, or those plants, rue cypress, &c. and hellebore itself, of which *Agrippa* treats, fishes, birds, and beasts, hares, conies, dormice, &c. owls, bats, nightbirds) but that artificial, which is perceived in them all." (Vol. I, p. 86).

Of the primary causes of melancholy, Burton also singles out the stars and planets, dedicating to them most of Subs. 4, Vol. I, Sec. II, Memb. I (Stars a cause. Signs from Physiognomy Metoposcopy, Chiromancy: Vol. I, p. 235). Citing the authority of Melanchthon, Jovianus Pontanus, Cardan and a number of astrologers, he proceeds by deduction to the conclusion that one of the causes of melancholy resides in the strong influence of Saturn, as much in radix nativities as in planetary revolutions and transits. Burton notes that, "The most generous melancholy, as that of Augustus, comes from the conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter in Libra; the bad, as that of Catiline's, from the meeting of Saturn and the Moon and Saturn in Scorpio, according to Melanchthon." He goes on to note that Mercury in Virgo, or Pisces in ascendant "irradiated by those quartile aspects of Saturn or Mars, (will make) the child be mad or melancholy." This he follows with, "He that shall have Saturn and Mars, the one culminating, and the other in the fourth house, when he shall be born, shall be melancholy, of which he shall be cured in time, if Mercury behold (sic) them." According to Jovianus Pontanus, "If the Moon be in conjunction or opposition at the birth time with the Sun, Saturn or Mars, or in a quartile aspect with them…many diseases are signified, especially the head and brain is (sic) like to be misaffected with

pernicious humours, to be melancholy, lunatic or mad." Burton addresses any potential criticism by noting that what he has set forth does not come from "…circumforanean Rogues and Gipsies, but out of the writings of worthy philosophers and physicians…and religious professors in famous universities who are able to patronize that which they have said, and vindicate themselves from all cavillers and ignorant persons" (Vol. I, p. 239).

In his exhaustive treatment of "Love Melancholy", Burton writes that, "Of all causes the remotest are stars. Ficinus (chap. 19) saith they are most prone to this burning lust, that have Venus in Leo in their horoscope, when the Moon and Venus be mutually aspected, or such as be of Venus' complexion. Plutarch interprets astrologically that tale of Mars and Venus, in whose genitures Mars and Venus are in conjunction, they are commonly lascivious, and if women, queans; as the good wife of Bath confessed in Chaucer:

I followed aye mine inclination,
By virtue of my constellation

But of all those Astrological Aphorisms which I have ever read, that of Cardan is most memorable, for which, howsoever he be bitterly censured by Marinus Marcennus, a malapert Friar, and some others yet methinks it is free, downright, plain and ingenuous. In his eight Geniture or example, he hath these words of himself: When Venus and Mercury are in conjucntion, Mercury in the ascendant, I am so urged with thoughts of love that I cannot rest."
(*Anatomy of Melancholy*, Vol. III, p. 64-65)

If we take a closer look at Robert Burton's nativity form the vantage point of a present-day astrologer, we immediately see several clear indications regarding both the nature of his destiny and of his temperament in his biographical information and in his justly famous *Anatomy of Melancholy.*

- Saturn is high MC in its house of Capricorn
- Mars is closely joined to the Ascendant, which is also in the house of Aries
- The Sun and Mercury are closely joined in Aquarius in the twelfth house.

The subject of our enquiry is thus first and foremost a son of Saturn. Henri J. Gouchon, in his famous *Dictionnaire Astrologique*, offers us the following abstract portrait of a saturnine person. "…the intelligence of this kind of personality is marked by its depth, its inclination to reflection and concentration. Understanding and assimilation are not instantaneous but the lessons learned leave such a deep, lasting impression that the saturnine person evinces a surprising memory even at an advanced age. Saturnines are very attentive to detail in their studies, very patient, hard-working, dogged in their overcoming of obstacles and will usually become experts in their chosen field of endeavour. It is all but certain that a strong saturnine inclination is needed to pursue a broad-ranging work of a scientific or philosophical nature, especially when it is necessary to persevere in one's research for years on end…A saturnine nature is endowed with a gift for mathematics, for all of the exact sciences…It is just as assuredly the planetary configuration that is least favoured in regard to one's love life…The saturnine person may at times find his calling in the religious life, although this was the case more often in the past than today, or become a respected farmer, agronomist, architect, librarian…" Commenting on the position of the planet in its Capricorn house, he notes that, "This combination informs those who work hard, who pursue detailed research and are gifted with the patience to dedicate their entire lives to a calling even if they receive no encouragement whatsoever." It is worth recalling in this connection the hundreds of footnotes Burton has penned to his introduction alone, a total that becomes several thousand if we look at the whole of his tract.

It is fairly easy to interpret the Sun-Mars conjunction in the twelfth house: his is an undoubtedly lively intellect but this saturnine person is to lead a retiring, confined life.

Traditionally, the house in question refers "to monasteries, chapter houses, lengthy spells of recuperation in nursing homes or sanatoria, to a life of spiritual retreat" (Angelo Brunini, *L'avvenire non è un mistero* ['The future is not a mystery'], Rome, 1980, p. 158). Sementovsky-Kurilo notes that, "Being occupied by the Sun, (this house) announces a life that will be lived in a closed environment, or one that will voluntarily renounce any ties to the outside world, a cloistered life…there is in any case the risk of shying away from the busier paths of life." (Nicola Sementovsky-Kurilo, *Carattere e destino* ['Personality and destiny'], Hoepli, Milan, 1946, p. 91).

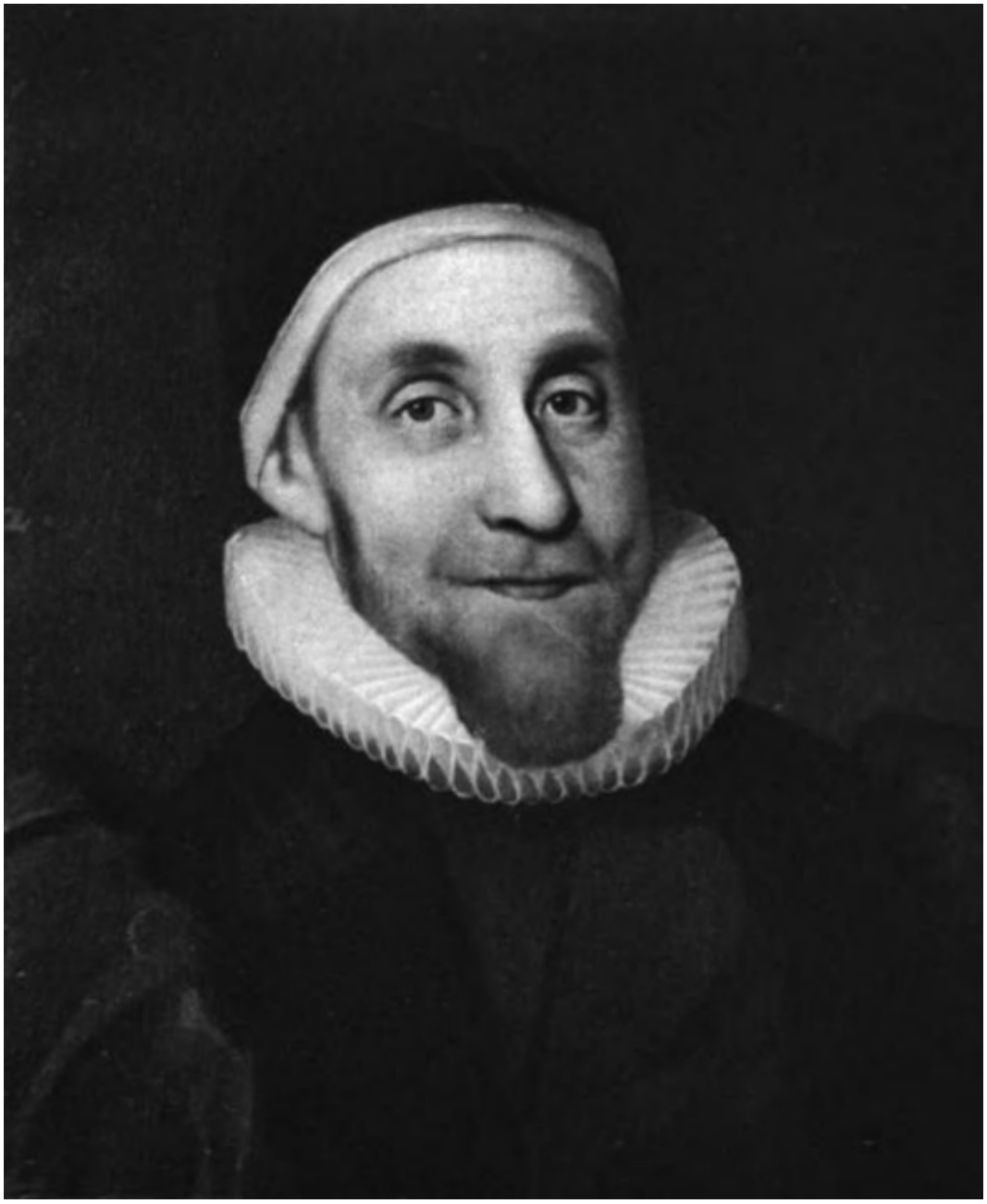
At first glance it seems more problematic to account for Mars in Aries, which is closely connected to the Ascendant between the end of Aries itself and the beginning of Taurus. This position is known to be an indicator of an impulsive and often aggressive character, one that hardly matches what we know about Burton's melancholy temperament. Indeed, as we have seen, he himself reveals that he is under the strong influence of this bellicose planet. As a matter of fact, though, the martial nature of our author finds full expression in the barbs of his pen and in an irony bordering on sarcasm. The pen is the sword the melancholy Church of England divine wields to deliver the sharp blows that spare no one who falls under them.

Thus, Burton says of his fellow writers: "…they lard their lean books with the fat of others' works. *Inediti fures* [unskilful thieves] etc. A fault that every writer finds, as I do now, and yet faulty themselves, *trium literarum homines* (men of three letters, *fur*, Lat. thief) all thieves. They pilfer out of old writers to stuff up their new comments, scrape *Ennius'* dung-hills, and out of Democritus' pit, as I have done. By which means it comes to pass, *that not only libraries & shops are full of our putrid papers, but every close-stool and jakes*, s*cribunt carmina quae legunt cacantes.* (Burton has not translated this phrase, but it might go something like "they write lines which are read while defecating", Vol. I, p. 21).

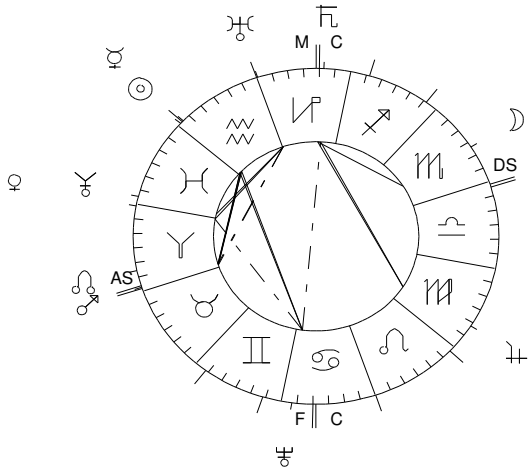
Burton is no less tender in his eloquence when it comes to magistrates: "To see a lamb executed, a wolf pronounce sentence, *latro* (a robber) arraigned, and *fur* [a thief] sit on the bench; the judge severely punish others, and do worse himself, *eundem furtum facere et punire, rapinam plectere, cuum sit ipse raptor* (the same man commits the robbery and punishes it, Punishing the robbery is the thief himself, Vol. I, p. 67).

And what are we to think of lawyers? "…*which are now multiplied* (saith *Mat. Geraldus*, a lawyer himself) *as so many locusts, not the parents, but the plagues of the Country & for the most part a supercilious, bas covetous, litigious generation of men*; *crumenimulga natio &c*, a purse milking nation, a clamorous company, gowned vultures, *qui ex injuria vivent et sanguine civium* (who make their livelihood by robbing and killing their fellow citizens), thieves and seminaries of discord; worse than any pollers by the high-way side, *auri accipitres, auri exterebronides, pecuniarum hamiolae, quadruplatores, curiae harpagones, fori tintinnabula, monstra hominum, mangones &c.*, that take upon them to make peace, but are indeed the very disturbers of our peace, a company of irreligious Harpies, scraping griping catch-poles (I mean our common hungry pettitoggers, *rabulas forenses*, I love and honour in the mean time all good laws and worthy lawyers, that are so many oracles and pilots of a well-governed commonwealth). (Vol. I, p. 92) There is of course plenty of the same for poets, rectors, orators, lovers, booksellers, Catholics and Protestants, politicians.

Dear reader, let me conclude my comments on this extraordinary author with the hope that they have managed to arouse your curiosity and urged you to set your sails in the *mare magnum* of the *Anatomy of Melancholy*. In the words of Robert Burton, it is only fitting to end with, "I fear good men's censures, and to their favourable acceptance I submit my labours, *et linguas mancipiorum contemno* (but I despise the tongues of slaves)." (Vol. I, p. 28)



Robert Burton



Lindley, 18/ 2/ 1577
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[1] I have based my paper on the three-volume edition edited by the Rev. A. R. Shilleto and published by G. Bell and Sons, Ltd., London, 1926.