

Robert Burton and Idleness in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*

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Abstract

This paper explores multiple aspects of seventeenth-century English author Robert Burton's view of idleness as expressed and implied in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. An analysis of Burton's references to this notion in the text finds that he views idleness almost exclusively as the predominant cause of melancholy. An examination of religious and social contexts reveals that his highly critical view of idleness can be attributed to the combination of the Christian moral concept of *acedia* with an array of political and social factors specific to late Elizabethan and early Jacobean England. These include English authorities' declaration of idleness as a crime punishable by execution in response to the apprentice riots of the 1590s and the perceived laziness of Englishmen, which Burton blames for the country's relative weakness. Furthermore, although a correlation between idleness and the Latin concept of *otium* is widely assumed in the study of English literature, the text of the *Anatomy* suggests that while Burton was fully aware of the implications of *otium*, he drew a clear distinction between *idleness* and *leisure* by assigning the former to refer to a cause of melancholy and the latter to a beneficial aspect of *otium*.

Key Words: Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, melancholy, idleness, *otium*

1. Introduction

English author, scholar, and clergyman Robert Burton (1577–1640) is best known for his work *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621). The *Anatomy*, which comprises three partitions, takes the form of a medical manual examining melancholia, or what is now termed clinical depression. In partition 1, Burton discusses the causes of melancholy; in partition 2 he addresses its cures; and in partition 3 he examines two specific types of melancholy: love-melancholy and religious melancholy. He concludes the *Anatomy* with a piece of advice to readers wishing to avoid the Elizabethan malady: “*Be not solitary, be not idle*” (3.445.36–37 [3.4.2.6]¹; italics in original²). Indeed, throughout the text of the *Anatomy* the state of idleness appears mostly as a cause of melancholy. According to the humoral theory, which set the standard for Renaissance medicine,

melancholy is caused by the melancholic humor (black bile), one of the four humors that constitute the fluid content of the body—the other three being blood, choler, and phlegm (Babb 1959: 2). The Elizabethan malady “broke out in England, apparently about 1580, and continued for several decades” (Babb 1959: 3), spanning Burton’s entire lifetime. Melancholy started to “appear in English literature with some frequency” in the 1580s (Babb 1951: vii).

The notion of idleness appears largely as a major cause of melancholy in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. However, Burton’s perception of idleness appears to have more dimensions than are immediately visible. The main objective of this paper is to explore various aspects of Burton’s view of idleness, as expressed and implied in his text. By so doing, it aims to demonstrate that this is closely related to his motive for writing the *Anatomy*, influenced by his view of England as a place where the idleness of his countrymen was an impediment to achieving the level of prosperity enjoyed by other nations.

To begin with dictionary definitions, the *Oxford English Dictionary* lists four meanings for *idleness*, of which the most applicable to Burton’s usage in the *Anatomy* is: “The state or condition of being idle or unoccupied; want of occupation; habitual avoidance of work, inactivity, indolence; an instance of this” (“Idleness” 4). The definitions of *idle* in the same dictionary include: “Of persons: Not engaged in work, doing nothing, unemployed” (“Idle” 4) and “Addicted to doing no work; lazy, indolent” (“Idle” 6). Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) defines *idleness* as “Laziness; sloth; sluggishness; aversion from labour” (vol. 1, IDO–JEA) and *idle* as (1) “Lazy; averse from labour”; (2) “Not busy; at leisure”; (3) “Unactive; not employed”; (4) “Useless; vain; ineffectual”; (5) “Worthless; barren; not productive of good” (vol. 1, IDE–IDL).

This paper will first look at specific references to idleness in the *Anatomy* in order to characterize Burton’s view of idleness as well as to identify the mechanism whereby he considers idleness to cause melancholy. Burton’s view will then be compared with those of other relevant authors to support the resulting characterization. The third section will examine Burton’s view in religious and social contexts with a focus on his outlook on England and the upper classes in relation to idleness, and will attempt to identify an important part of his motive for writing the *Anatomy* in his self-perception as a “spiritual physician” working to address problems caused by his idle countrymen. In the fourth section, I will discuss differences between idleness and other aspects of *otium* in Burton’s perception as observed in the *Anatomy*.

2. Idleness as a cause of melancholy

Burton’s references to idleness in the *Anatomy*, not surprisingly, make it clear that he regards idleness first and foremost as a major cause of melancholy, the central subject of his writing. The

most explicit statement to this effect appears in the preface: “There is no greater cause of Melancholy then **idleness**” (1.6.30–31; bold print added³). Other references to idleness as a principal cause of the malady include “the greatest cause of Melancholy” (1.239.3–4 [1.2.2.6]), cited from Persian physician Muhammad ibn Zakariyā Rāzī (Rhasis 865–925), and “a sole cause of the sicknesse of the Soule” (1.239.8 [1.2.2.6]), from Plutarch. This relationship of idleness to melancholy is also expressed clearly, for instance, as: “[. . .] *they that are **idle** are farre more subject to melancholy, then such as are conversant or employed about any office or businesse*” (1.239.6–7 [1.2.2.6]). Melancholy is also described as “[a] disease familiar to all **idle** persons, an inseparable companion to such as live at ease, *pingui otio desidiosè agentes* [acting lazily in bloated sloth]⁴, a life out of action, and have no calling or ordinary imployment to busie themselves about, that have small occasions” (1.239.13–16 [1.2.2.6]).

The mechanism whereby idleness causes melancholy is explained by Burton using the humoral theory, which dominated medicine in his time: “[an idle life] *fills the body full of fleagme, grosse humours, and all manner of obstructions, rhumes, catarres*” (1.239.1–3 [1.2.2.6]). To illustrate how idleness leads to melancholy, he brings up images of plants and animals:

As Fearne growes in untill’d grounds, and all manner of weeds, so doe grosse humours in an **idle** body, *Ignavum corrumpunt otia corpus* [Inactivity corrupts the idle body]. A horse in a stable that never travels, a hawke in a mew that seldome flies, are both subject to diseases, which left unto themselves, are most free from any such incumbrances. An **idle** dogge will be mangie, and how shall an **idle** person thinke to escape?

(1.240.4–9 [1.2.2.6])

In this passage, the increase in “gross humors” caused by inaction which eventually leads to melancholy is likened to the growth of ferns and weeds on untilled land.

In addition to these direct references, looking at the other words Burton uses together with *idleness* will be useful in determining the position of *idleness* on his semantic map. Simple combinations such as “Lazinesse and Idlennesse” (1.241.22 [1.2.2.6]) indicate that Burton uses *idlennesse* to mean sloth and indulgence. When he writes of the danger of education as a potential cause of melancholy “that streame of drunkennesse, **idlennesse**, gaming, and many such irregular courses [. . .]” (1.331.29–30 [1.2.4.2]), *idlennesse* is listed alongside *drunkennesse* and *gaming*. These are all instances of typical temptations for young students, but Burton appears particularly critical of idleness when he compares it to “a Tempest” which nullifies the education a young man has been given by parents, tutors, and friends:

A young man is like a faire new house, the Carpenter leaves it well built, in good repaire, of solid stuffe; but a bad tenant lets it raine in, and for want of reparation fall to decay, &c. Our Parents, Tutors, Friends, spare no cost to bring us up in our youth, in all manner of vertuous education; but when wee are left to our selves, **Idlenesse** as a Tempest drives all vertuous motions out of our mindes, & *nihili sumus* [and we are worthless], on a sudden, by sloath and such bad waies we come to naught.

(1.242.8–14 [1.2.2.6])

It is noteworthy that in this passage Burton likens a young person to “a faire new house,” an idle person to “a bad tenant” inhabiting it, and idleness to his or her failure to maintain it with care. Underlying the passage is the belief that a person educated properly by dedicated parents, tutors, and friends normally remains a virtuous individual, like a well-maintained house. Burton, who uses the adjective *vertuous* twice in the passage, regards idleness as a horrible vice that can destroy such a “house” down to its foundation.

Statements suggesting his attitude toward idle individuals also provide an indication as to his view of idleness. For instance, the passage “[. . .] enforce **idle** persons to worke, drive drunkards out of the alehouse, repress theeves” (1.85.19–20) implies that Burton sees idle individuals on the same level of moral unacceptability as drunkards and thieves. In the passage, “Wherefore I will suffer no Beggars, Rogues, Vagabonds, or **idle** persons at all, that cannot give an accompt of their lives how they maintaine themselves” (1.93.8–10), idle persons are grouped in the same category as beggars, rogues, and vagabonds. The appearance of the term *idle persons* together with these strongly negative words shows how critical Burton’s perception of idleness is.

Burton makes a distinction between physical and spiritual idleness when he says that “[idlenesse] of body is nothing but a kinde of benumbing lazinesse, intermitting exercise” (1.239.32–33 [1.2.2.6]) and that “[i]dlenesse of the minde is much worse” than that of the body (1.240.9 [1.2.2.6]). Expressions he uses to make his point include: “*Ærugo animi, rubigo ingenii* [the verdigris of the soul, the rust of the disposition]: the rust of the Soule, a plague, a hell it selfe” (1.240.10–11 [1.2.2.6]). He goes on to write: “*As in a standing poole, wormes and filthy creepers increase, (& vitium capiunt ni moveantur aquæ* [and waters become corrupt unless they are moving], the water it selfe putrifies, and aire likewise if it bee not continually stirred by the winde) *so doe evill and corrupt thoughts in an idle person,*⁵ The Soule is contaminated” (1.240.12–15 [1.2.2.6]). This suggests a belief that the mind should be in constant motion if it is to evade staleness and avoid gathering rust. Behind it we can observe the same idea as in the passage cited earlier that starts: “As Fearne growes in untill’d grounds, and all manner of weeds, so doe grosse humours in an idle body, *Ignavum corrumpunt otia corpus* [Inactivity corrupts the idle body].”

The idea is that leaving one's potential unutilized or underutilized leads to an increase in "gross humors"—an unhealthy imbalance of humors—which in turn results in what Burton describes as a contaminated soul. The following passage also helps to explain why Burton feels man should avoid idleness: "The heavens themselves run continually round, the Sun riseth and sets, the Moon increaseth and decreaseth, Starres and Planets keep their constant motions, the aire is still tossed by the winds, the waters ebbe and flow to their conservation no doubt, to teach us that we should ever be in action" (2.67.14–18 [2.2.4.1]). The idea behind Burton's reasoning here, which cites the constant movement of celestial bodies and in natural phenomena, is that man should do as nature does. Here we can see an influence of the Stoic ideal of living according to nature (*ad naturam vivere*). Burton then goes on to say that the Roman philosopher Lucius Annaeus Seneca (4 B.C. –65 A.D.), who is considered one of the classical authors who influenced him,⁶ "would have a man doe something, though it bee to no purpose" (2.67.20–21 [2.2.4.1]), and refers to Xenophon as "wish[ing] one rather to play at tables, dice, or make a jester of himselfe (though he might be far better employed) then doe nothing" (2.67.21–23 [2.2.4.1]). Burton appears to be undertaking this for himself when he writes, "I write of Melancholy, by being busie to avoid Melancholy" (1.6.29–30). It seems that, in his view, being busy for its own sake can be an effective step toward preventing and curing melancholy.

In partition 3 of the *Anatomy*, idleness appears as a cause of love-melancholy, one of the two particular types of melancholy Burton focuses on in this partition. The relationship between idleness and love-melancholy is depicted, for instance, as: "**Idlenesse** overthrowes all, *Vacuo pectore regnat amor* [Love reigns in an empty breast], love tyrannizeth in an **idle** person" (3.62.23–24 [3.2.2.1]) and "[h]omines nihil agendo malè agere discunt [through doing nothing men learn to do ill]; 'Tis *Aristotles* Simile, as match or touchwood takes fire, so doth an idle person love" (3.62.27–28 [3.2.2.1]). As is the case with other types of melancholy, the best way to fend off love-melancholy is to avoid idleness: "No better meanes to resist or repell [love-melancholy] then by avoiding **idlenesse**, to be still seriously busied about some matters of importance, to drive out those vaine feares, foolish phantasies and irksome suspitions out of his head" (3.306.27–30 [3.3.4.1]).

Importantly, there is no apparent sign that Burton considered any aspect of inactivity, or a relaxed state of the mind, that would potentially be conducive to the well-being of the spirit. This is quite unusual given that a number of other authors, including some who influenced Burton, appreciated and celebrated it; some even encouraged people to be idle.

Michel de Montaigne (1533–92), who is widely considered a strong influence on Burton,⁷ states in his essay "Of Idleness" (vol. 1, chap. 8):⁸

It is not long since I retired my selfe unto mine owne house, with full purpose, as much as lay in me, not to trouble my selfe with any businesse, but solitarily and quietly to weare out the remainder of my well-nigh-spent life; where me thought I could doe my spirit no greater favour, than to give him the full scope of **idleness**, and entertaine him as he best pleased, and withall, to settle him-selfe as he best liked: which I hoped he might now, being by time become more settled and ripe, accomplish very easily: but I finde,

Variam semper dant otia mentem. [Idleness always breeds an inconstant mind.] –LUCAN, iv. 704.

Evermore idlennesse,
Doth wavering minds adresse.

(34)

Montaigne's celebration of idleness as the greatest "favour" for his spirit shows that he perceives it as a highly desirable—and possibly even ideal—state of mind. This makes a good contrast with Burton's view of idleness.

Puritan Margaret Hoby (1571–1633) was a contemporary of Burton who wrote the earliest known diary by a woman in English. Miriam Nandi refers to a distinction between two notions of idleness that she observes in Hoby's diary: "idleness as sin that is to be avoided at all costs on the one hand, and idleness as contemplation and introspection on the other" (47–48). Nandi adds, "At the end of the day, idleness is on the agenda of the devout puritan, but it is a very specific idleness, an idleness connected with introspective spirituality" (49). It is noteworthy that even a devout Puritan like Hoby, living in the same age as Burton, regarded idleness as partially acceptable if its goal was contemplation and introspection. In comparison, Burton seems essentially to consider all kinds of idleness as, to borrow Nandi's words, a "sin that is to be avoided at all costs."

The Romantic ideal of idleness will serve as another point of reference. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's (1712–78) statement in *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* (*The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*) that his solitary life on St. Peter's Island was "the happiest time of my life, so happy that it would have contended me for my whole existence without the desire for another state arising for a single instant in my soul" (Rousseau 1979: 64)⁹ clearly suggests that he recognized value in idleness.¹⁰ Furthermore, Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834) is considered by Adelman to be "one of a number of figures around the turn of the nineteenth century who classify repose and contemplation in [a] positive and creative manner" (Adelman 2014: 176).¹¹ Burton's view of idleness is characterized by its complete lack of such a perception.

Thus, in the *Anatomy*, Burton refers to idleness mostly as a principal cause of melancholy, and his view of idleness is often extremely critical, as illustrated by the grouping of idle persons

with beggars, rogues, and vagabonds. He considers idleness a harmful vice that can negate the effects of education on young people, who would otherwise be able to retain their virtues, as a house can remain in the fine condition that the carpenters left it in. Burton accounts for the harm of idleness to the spirit by reasoning that inaction increases the quantity of “gross humors” in the body, and that the resulting imbalance in the humors “contaminates” the soul. He believes that just as nature is in constant motion, man must be in constant motion to keep the humors in his body in a healthy balance, to maintain the well-being of the spirit. A notable characteristic of Burton’s view is the near-complete absence of a perception of idleness as a state or quality to be valued, appreciated, or celebrated.

3. Idleness and Burton’s view of England

Having examined Burton’s view of idleness as little other than a cause of melancholy, I shall now begin to link it with the religious and social contexts in which he held this view. Burton’s perception of idleness seems to be influenced by multiple discourses on this notion. In this section, I analyze his view of England and the upper classes in relation with idleness to find out whether it has any relationship with his motive for writing the *Anatomy*, focusing on idleness as the sister-epidemic to the Elizabethan malady of melancholy.

A fundamental factor behind Burton’s inclination to view idleness as a vice is the Christian notion of *acedia* (also spelled *accidia* or *accidie*), one of the Seven Deadly Sins. *Acedia* is commonly translated as “sloth.” Throughout its history in the Christian moral tradition, the concept of idleness has been strongly associated with the vice of *acedia* (Sadlek 24). It is reasonable to assume that, as an Anglican priest, Burton was under the influence of this view, which regards idleness as closer in meaning to sloth and indulgence. Indeed, “the sin of *acedia*” is equated with the “state of despondency that seems to have shaped later medieval conceptions of melancholy” (Radden vii). Burton’s direct reference in the *Anatomy* to “one of the seaven deadly sinnes” (1.238.25 [1.2.2.6]), even though he does not use the word *acedia*, provides evidence that such conceptions of melancholy influenced his view of idleness. Burton was not a Puritan; therefore, his flat rejection of idleness cannot be ascribed to a Puritan work ethic.

The Christian moral association of idleness with *acedia* was reinforced in England during Burton’s lifetime by a series of developments in English society. This social trend in late sixteenth-century England was one of the decisive influences that caused Burton to remain extremely critical of idleness. The apprentice riots of the 1590s defined the public attitude toward idleness at the time, and he had lived through this period in his youth. Anglin describes the strong anti-idleness sentiment pervading England during that era: “Cautionary texts warning of the social, emotional and spiritual hazards of idleness were virtually omnipresent in 1590s London; this was

a consequence of the common view that idleness itself had become omnipresent, a kind of sister-epidemic to the ‘Elizabethan malady’ of melancholy” (86). She adds, “Didactic or legal documents such as sermons and proclamations asserted a rigid sense of virtue, classifying idleness as a sin and a crime and connecting the concept back to religious sloth or acedia” (86). English authorities blamed idleness for the problems facing the capital city and punished it with execution (89). It is conceivable that English authors writing during this period, including Burton, were practically unable to escape the influences of such political and social trends. The association of idleness with *acedia* in the Christian moral tradition was already a strong factor behind Burton’s critical view of idleness. When this association was reinforced by London authorities’ ruthless reaction against the apprentice riots of the 1590s, any inclination Burton might have had for presenting idleness as anything but a vice disappeared.¹²

Indeed, it is possible that Burton’s frustration with the idleness of Englishmen was an important part of his motive for writing the *Anatomy*. Burton’s view of idleness is inseparable from his view of England because, as Legouis has correctly pointed out, idleness is the key word in Burton’s view of England (374). It reflects his reaction not just to the apprentice riots in the 1590s, but also to ongoing developments in English society in his time. Burton’s remark that “[i]dlenesse is the *malus Genius* [evil genius] of our Nation” (1.76.9–10) should, therefore, be read in the social context characterized by such trends as the emergence of the gentry as a new social class between the aristocracy and the yeomanry. A significant factor affecting his view of idleness and England is his frustration with the laziness of his countrymen, and his dissatisfaction with the English gentry in particular, whom he considers “complacent, ignorant, and slothful” (Babb 1959: 98), as suggested by the following passage:

But amongst us the badge of gentry is **idlenesse**: to be of no calling, not to labour, for thats derogatory to their birth, to be a meere spectator, a drone, *fruges consumere natus* [born to consume the fruits of the earth], to have no necessary employment to busie himselfe about in Church and commonwealth (some few governers exempted) *but to rise to eat, &c.* to spend his dayes in hawking, hunting, &c. & such like disports and recreations (which our Casuists taxe) are the sole exercise almost and ordinary actions of our Nobility, and in which they are too immoderate.

(2.68.6–13 [2.2.4.1])

A similar sentiment about the general inclination of the upper classes toward idleness is expressed elsewhere:

And this is the true cause that so many great men, Ladies and Gentlewomen, labour of this disease in country and citty, for **idleness is an appendix to nobility**, they count it a disgrace to worke, and spend all their daies in sports, recreations, and pastimes, and will therefore take no paines; be of no vocation: they feed liberally, fare well, want exercise, action, employment, (for to worke, I say, they may not abide) and company to their desires, and thence their bodies become full of grosse humors, winde, crudities; their mindes disquieted, dull, heavy, &c. care, jealousy, feare of some diseases, sullen fits, weeping fits sease too familiarly on them.

(1.240.27–35 [1.2.2.6])

As he points out the idleness of the gentry and the nobility, Burton presents his argument using rhetoric applying the same Elizabethan notion of idleness to the upper classes that is applied to the working class. As we have seen, Burton considers idleness to be a great vice that can mar the entire education of a young student, and likens its effect to an inhabitant causing his well-built house to fall into disrepair. As he applies the same concept to the entire nation of England, he is accusing a wide range of classes, from laborers all the way to the gentry and the nobility, of doing great harm to the house they inhabited—England—demonstrating how the idleness prevalent across classes causes damage to the entire nation.

On an international level, Burton laments the idleness of England in comparison with foreign countries: “Our land is fertile wee may not deny, full of all good thinges, and why doth it not then abound with Citties, as well as *Italy, France, Germany*, the Low countries?” (1.76.6–8) In addition, having stated how the industriousness of the Chinese made their countries prosperous and flourishing, with “not a begger, or an idle person to be seene” (1.79.25), he writes of England that “(w)ee have the same means, able bodies, pliant wits, matter of all sorts, Wooll, Flax, Iron, Tin, Lead, Wood, &c. , many excellent subjects to worke upon, only industry is wanting” (1.79.26–28). In Burton’s view, lack of industry prevents his country from utilizing more of its potential and thereby hampers its prosperity.

Importantly, religious, medical, or political leaders are not included among those whom Burton regards as idle. On the contrary, he views these figures as fighting the national malady of idleness, as suggested by his reference to “our Divines, Physitians and Polititians,” who “so much labour, and so seriously exhort” to “correct and avoid” the “errors and inconveniences” caused by idle people (2.68.25–26 [2.2.4.1]). Since Burton himself was a clergyman, and “[a]n attempt to ameliorate, if not to cure, illness was a pastoral duty perfectly consonant with his vocation as a priest” (Bamborough 2004), it is safe to assume that he considers himself part of this effort to address the nationwide problem. In addition, his statement that “[a] good Divine either is or ought

to be a good Physitian, a Spirituall Physitian at least” (1.22.23–24) seems to indicate that he positions himself as a “spiritual physician” treating “a disease of the soule” (1.22.20–21). In Burton’s mind, idleness is perceived distinctly as a national problem, prevalent across social classes from laborers to the gentry and the nobility, which is responsible for the nation’s weakness in comparison to other countries. It is very possible that his desire to address the problem of idleness, the sister-epidemic to the Elizabethan malady of melancholy, was an important part of his motive for writing the *Anatomy*. Thus, idleness dominated Burton’s mind as a specific problem he felt he needed to focus on; this may, as we shall see in the next section, have caused his usage of the word *idleness* to exclude the beneficial side of *otium*.

4. References to positive aspects of *otium*

The study of English literature has generally assumed that idleness can be considered synonymous with the Latin concept of *otium*. In the introduction to *Idleness, Indolence and Leisure in English Literature*, Monika Fludernik and Miriam Nandi state: “In English literary texts, idleness, indolence and leisure are synonyms for the practice or state of *otium*” (3). Idleness, they add, is “the most common English translation of *otium*” (5).

As we have seen, Burton’s general tendency is to view idleness as a “contaminated” disposition. However, if we expand the scope of our investigation to include the concept of *otium*, we find that Burton does indeed make references to some positive qualities. These references appear, for instance, in association with the image of Democritus (c. 460–c. 370 B.C.), the Greek philosopher he admired so much as to publish the *Anatomy* under the pseudonym “Democritus Junior.” When Burton describes “Democritus in his Garden,” his expression of the quality of *otium* seems to take the form of the English word *leisure*. In recounting Hippocrates’s encounter with Democritus in the preface “Democritus Junior to the Reader,” he writes: “*Hippocrates* commended his [Democritus’s] worke, admiring his happinesse and **leasure**” (1.33.19–20). Having come to Abdera, Hippocrates goes to see Democritus and finds him “in his Garden in the Suburbs all alone, *sitting upon a stone under a plane Tree, without hose or shooes, with a Booke on his knees, cutting up severall Beasts, and busie at his studie*” (1.33.11–13). “[B]usie” as he may be “at his studie,” the state being depicted is clearly one of *otium*. Yet Burton calls this “*leasure*.” As such, it is conceivable that Burton, whose perception of *otium* can be inferred from the description above, is likely to use *leisure* (*leasure*) to refer to the positive side of *otium*—a set of qualities conducive to a healthy state of mind—for which Fludernik and Nandi claim both *idleness* and *leisure* are synonyms in English literary texts.

The notion of *otium*¹³ was handed down to medieval culture “with positive and negative connotations intact” (Sadlek 21). Although it has been associated with *acedia*¹⁴ (Sadlek 23), in

the classical medieval social model of the Third Estate, *otium* was a privilege granted to aristocrats, and to religious persons who “enjoyed the *otium* necessary to study religious literature and to contemplate divine mysteries” (Sadlek 21). As a Latinist well versed in ancient Roman works, Burton must have been familiar with such dimensions of *otium*, but they were not expressed as *idleness* in his text.

In *De otio (On Idleness)*, the Roman philosopher Seneca recommends retiring into a dialogue with classical authors—Greek philosophers, in his case: “Although we attempt nothing else that would be beneficial, nevertheless retirement in itself will do us good; we shall be better by ourselves. And what of the opportunity to retire to the society of the best men, and to select some model by which we may direct our own lives? But we can do this only in **leisure**”¹⁵ (Seneca 1932: 181). This recommendation of retirement, a form of *otium*, into a dialogue with classical authors must have been appreciated by Burton, who devoted himself to his studies and the writing of the *Anatomy* surrounded by numerous classical and contemporary books in “*Minerva’s Towre*,” where “all [his] Treasure is” (1.4.15).

It appears that Fludernik and Nandi’s assumption that *idleness* is generally interchangeable with the Latin concept of *otium* in English literary texts does not apply to the *Anatomy*. The semantic scope of *idleness* in Burton’s text seems to cover only a limited part of the full scope of *otium*; a significant part of it appears to be covered by the word *leisure*. In other words, Burton makes a clear distinction between *idleness* and *leisure* by assigning the former to refer to a cause of melancholy and the latter to a beneficial aspect of *otium*.

As stated earlier, when John Florio translated Montaigne’s *Essais* in 1603, he used the expression “give him [my spirit] **the full scope of idlenesse**, and entertaine him as he best pleased” (34). While it should be taken into account that this is a translation, not original writing in English, if Florio’s Montaigne is “one of the great translations of the Elizabethan age” (O’Conner) and Florio sought “to repeate in true English what you reade in fine French” (qtd. in O’Conner), then we should be able to assume that his choice of *idlenesse* conforms to the standard usage of his times. Florio uses the word *idlenesse* as a translation of *oisiveté* in Montaigne’s text.¹⁶ In Cotgrave’s *A Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues* (1611), the first great French-English dictionary, *idlenesse* appears as the second choice in a list of English renderings of the French word *oisiveté* (another spelling of *oisiveté*), the first being *sloath* (OIS–OLI)—the common translation of *acedia*, one of the seven deadly sins, as discussed earlier. This means that the translator Florio could have chosen *sloath*, a word with stronger negative connotations, but opted for *idlenesse*. Importantly, Florio, who was in his forties during the 1590s, when the apprentice riots were rampant, does use the word *idlenesse* to refer to a desirable state which enables one to care for one’s soul, an activity akin to treatment of melancholy in the sense

that both involve restoring the well-being of the soul. The complete absence of such a usage of *idleness* from the *Anatomy*—especially despite Burton’s admiration for Montaigne, whom he cites approvingly at the beginning of the introductory section of the *Anatomy* (1.4.1)—confirms that Burton’s attitude toward idleness tends to be highly critical.

To sum up, Burton’s marked tendency to view idleness as a cause of melancholy does not mean that he is unaware of the positive side of *otium*. The text of the *Anatomy* shows that he is fully aware of it, but that, contrary to the widely shared assumption that *idleness* and *leisure* are synonyms for the state and practice of *otium* in English literary texts, he expresses it not as *idleness* but as *leisure*. Burton thus makes a clear distinction between *idleness* and *leisure* by assigning the former to refer to a cause of melancholy and the latter to the beneficial aspect of *otium*.

5. Conclusion

Robert Burton sees idleness as the greatest cause of melancholy and his view of it is often highly critical. He considers idleness to be a harmful vice that can negate the effects of education on young people, who would otherwise be able to retain the virtues they have been taught. Burton’s reason for perceiving idleness as harmful to the spirit is based on the humoral theory that inaction increases the quantity of “gross humors” in the body; the resulting imbalance in the humors “contaminates” the soul. He believes that just as nature is in constant motion, man must remain in constant motion to keep the humors in the body in a healthy balance and maintain the well-being of the spirit. A notable characteristic of Burton’s view of idleness is that he does not present it as a state or quality to be valued, appreciated, or celebrated.

Burton’s perspective derives from a set of traditions combined with an array of political and social factors specific to his times. What underlies his conception of the notion is the Christian moral tradition, with its concept of *acedia* (sloth). This was reinforced by his reaction as an Anglican clergyman to developments he witnessed in late Elizabethan and early Jacobean England, notably the apprentice riots of the 1590s and the laziness he perceived as prevalent across social classes, including the gentry and the nobility. His remark, “I write of Melancholy, by being busie to avoid Melancholy” (1.6.29–30), seems to suggest that he feels threatened in some way by risks associated with idleness. However, the notion of idleness is important to Burton not just on a personal level, but also—and perhaps more so—on a national level. He expresses frustration with the idleness of Englishmen, especially of the upper classes, and blames this for England’s relative weakness, in the belief that it has prevented the country from becoming as prosperous as it could be. It is conceivable that he considers it a pastoral duty to address this problem, which he endeavors to work on as a clergyman and a “spiritual physician.” Burton’s

view of idleness is thus shown to be closely related to his motive for writing the *Anatomy*.

The text of the *Anatomy*—the description of “Democritus in his Garden” in particular—suggests that Burton was fully aware of the positive aspects of *otium*. Given the fact that the *Anatomy* was written under circumstances characterized, at least partly, by what can be considered *otium*, he cannot have been blind to its positive qualities, which other authors might well have expressed as *idleness*. The fact that Burton excluded the positive aspects of *otium* from his conception of idleness explains his consistently critical stance toward idleness throughout the *Anatomy*.

This tendency can also be explained from a linguistic point of view, notably in terms of Burton’s preferences in word choice. The boundaries between the semantic fields of words can change over time, and vary from individual to individual. Again, the texts examined indicate that Burton was well aware of the value of *otium* for the well-being of man, but expressed it without using the word *idleness*. There seems to be a gap between Burton’s semantic field of *idleness* and that of other authors. The semantic field of *idleness* as used by Burton does not seem to cover certain aspects of *otium*, which are referred to by him most often as *leisure*.¹⁷

In conclusion, underlying Robert Burton’s simple advice to “be not idle” toward the end of *The Anatomy of Melancholy* are the ramifications of his thoroughly meditated reaction—based on his religious, moral, social, and political observations and reflections as well as personal ones—to the circumstances under which he perceives idleness to be the predominant cause of the Elizabethan malady of melancholy.

Notes

¹ All citations from *The Anatomy of Melancholy* are, unless otherwise stated, 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). This edition is based largely on the fourth edition of 1632. I have followed Angus Gowland’s notation for citations from the *Anatomy* (xii). For instance, (1.243.5–8 [1.2.2.6]) means that the text is cited from lines 5 to 8 on page 243 in volume 1 of this edition, located in partition 1, section 2, member 2, and subsection 6.

² All italics in quotations from Burton hereafter are in the original.

³ All bold print hereafter is added by the author.

⁴ All translations from Latin in quotations hereafter are my own.

⁵ This is a translated quote from Seneca: *Sicut in stagno generantur vermes, sic & otioso malae cogitationes*.

⁶ Burton’s admiration for Seneca is illustrated by such references as “wise *Seneca*” (1.239.30 [1.2.2.6]) and “that Superintendent of Wit, Learning, Judgement” (1.15.7). Seneca is the first author to be quoted by

Burton in the preface “Democritus Junior to the Reader,” and has a strong presence in the numerous quotations from classical works filling the pages of the *Anatomy*.

- ⁷ According to Mary Ann Lund, Montaigne’s writing “can [. . .] be plausibly regarded as an influence on the design of the *Anatomy* from its beginning, an influence evident not only in explicit references but also in thematic and stylistic similarities” (47). Lund states that “Burton refers to [Montaigne] eight times in the *Anatomy* (only once via another author), and these references, from throughout the *Essais*, appear from the first edition onwards” (47). The French essayist first published his *Essais* in France in 1580, when Burton was three. Its first English translation of the *Essais*, by John Florio (c. 1553–1626), entitled *Essayes or Morall, Politike and Millitarie Discourses*, was published in 1603, the year when Burton was 26 and when the reign of Elizabeth I ended with her death. Lund suggests that Burton would have read Montaigne in this English translation by Florio (47), who is one of the only two French authors with whom Burton appears familiar, the other being François Rabelais (Babb 1959: 49).
- ⁸ All English citations of Montaigne in this thesis are from Florio’s translation, which is the one that Burton would have used.
- ⁹ French original: *le temps le plus heureux de ma vie et tellement heureux qu’il m’eût suffi durant toute mon existence sans laisser naître un seul instant dans mon âme le désir d’un autre état* (1972: 95).
- ¹⁰ Richard Adelman, arguing that solitude is “a divine blessing” in Rousseau’s mind, points out that Rousseau’s walks “depict idle contemplation as operating in a sphere removed from the physical constraints of the world” (2011: 89); hence, idleness was what allowed him to “let his thoughts flourish and prosper” (2011: 89).
- ¹¹ Adelman, “Idleness and Creativity.”
- ¹² This probably helps to explain the difference between Burton, who is extremely critical of idleness, and John Milton (1608–74), Rousseau, and other authors celebrating idleness who did not live through this period.
- ¹³ Jean-Marie André observes that “the history of *otium* appears as that of confrontation between a spontaneous, traditional lifestyle and reflective ethics based on culture” (my translation). French original: *L’histoire de l’otium apparaît comme celle d’un affrontement entre un mode de vie spontané, traditionnel, et une éthique réfléchie, fondée sur la culture* (531).
- ¹⁴ As noted in the third section of this paper, the common English translation of *acedia* is “sloth” and not “idleness.”
- ¹⁵ Latin original: *licet nihil aliud quod sit salutare temptemus, proderit tamen per se ipsum secedere: meliores erimus singuli. quid quod secedere ad optimos uiros et aliquod exemplum eligere ad quod uitam derigamus licet? quod nisi in otio non fit [. . .]* (Seneca 2003: 37)
- ¹⁶ The French original in Montaigne’s text reads: *il me sembloit ne pouvoir faire plus grande faveur à mon esprit, que de le laisser en pleine oysiveté* (Montaigne 2004).

¹⁷ The same condition may be described by the Romantics as *idleness*. As a result, a state which would be referred to by Romantics as *idle* is not necessarily referred to as such by Burton. If his final remark in the *Anatomy*, “be not idle,” strikes one as shocking, it is perhaps possible to assume that Burton was well aware of a beneficial aspect of *otium*, but that the notion of idleness was just too negatively charged for him to describe this aspect as *idleness*.

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