# Melancholy and a Tower of Solitude: Robert Burton and Michel de Montaigne

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## Introduction

English author, scholar, and clergyman Robert Burton (1577–1640), best known for his work *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, was twenty-six years old when the first English translation of Michel de Montaigne's (1533–92) *Essais* was published in 1603, the year the reign of Elizabeth I ended with her death. The French writer, who invented the literary genre of the essay, first published his *Essais* in 1580. It was apparently about this time that the Elizabethan malady of melancholia "broke out" in England (Babb 1959: 3) and that melancholy "started to appear in English literature with some frequency" (Babb 1951: vii). The English translation of Montaigne that Burton would have read was by John Florio (c. 1553–1626) (Lund 47), entitled *Essayes or Morall, Politike and Millitarie Discourses*. Burton's *Anatomy* frequently draws on Florio's translation (Hamlin 13); Lund views Montaigne's writing as a plausible influence on "the design of the *Anatomy* from its beginning" both in "explicit references" and in "thematic and stylistic similarities" (47). In fact, the *Anatomy* and the *Essais* have a number of commonalities between them. Kathryn Murphy cites, among others, their "length, digressiveness, miscellaneity" (223), their "patchwork composition" (224), and their authors' "inveterate habits of expansion" (223). Murphy argues "that the similarities between the *Essais* and the *Anatomy* are more than accidental—indeed that it is precisely in their treatment of similarity, accident, and idiosyncrasy that Burton's 'tribute' to Montaigne consists" (225).

Despite these resemblances, the two European thinkers' views of solitude appear substantially different. Burton concludes the *Anatomy* with a piece of advice to readers: "*Be not solitary, be not idle*"[1]. (*Anatomy* 3.445.36–37 [3.4.2.6]; italics in original in this quote and hereafter). The first half of this instruction is clearly a warning against the peril of solitude, an essential notion that appears in relation to melancholy throughout the *Anatomy*. The concept of solitude is no less important for Montaigne; he devotes

an independent chapter of his *Essais* to this subject. Serious studies of the relationship between Burton and Montaigne are only beginning to appear, and none have analyzed it from the viewpoint of solitude. In this essay I argue that Burton's view of solitude differs greatly from Montaigne's, but that certain statements in each author's work provide a window into an important aspect of the other's experience with melancholy that is not explicitly referenced in his text.

## 1. Solitude as a cause of melancholy

Burton, who discusses the causes and symptoms of melancholy in the first of the three partitions of the *Anatomy*, sees solitude largely as a cause of melancholy. This view is expressed clearly in the following statement about what happens to a busy and socially active person who suddenly begins to lead a sedentary life: "[. . .] one daies **solitarinesse**, one houres sometimes, doth them more harme, then a weekes physicke, labour and company can doe good. Melancholy seazeth on them forthwith being alone [. . .]" (*Anatomy* 1.239.27–29 [1.2.2.6]; boldface type added in this quote and others hereafter). This shows how Burton clearly associates solitariness with great harm. Burton's use of *solitariness* is in general agreement with the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s definition of "The state of being alone" ("solitariness, n." 1), which is in itself a neutral description. However, his reference to solitariness in wide-ranging discussions of its causes, prognoses, and cures is almost always accompanied by some implication that it is a harmful factor to the well-being of man.

This is also true of his remarks about particular symptoms caused by the influence of the four humors—phlegm, blood, choler (yellow bile), and melancholy (black bile), which, according to the humoral theory that was the standard for Renaissance medicine, are ideally supposed to be mixed "in a very exact proportion" in the body (Babb 1951: 9). Burton writes of the melancholy humor, for instance, "If it come from melancholy it selfe adust, those men [. . .] *are usually sad and* ***solitary***, [. . .] and so **solitary**, that [. . .] *[t]hey will endure no company, they dreame of graves still, and dead men, and thinke themselves bewitched or dead*" (*Anatomy* 1.401.9–14 [1.3.1.3]). The collocation of sad and solitary, along with the grim description of the condition caused by solitariness, shows how negative a view Burton often has of solitariness. To take another humoral example, being solitary is depicted negatively in the following statement: "The fumes which arise from this corrupt blood, disturbe the minde, and make them fearefull and sorrowfull, heavy

hearted, as the rest, dejected, discontented, solitary, silent, weary of their lives, dull & heavie [. . .]" (*Anatomy* 1.413.17–20 [1.3.2.3]). In Burton's thinking, which is essentially based on the humoral theory, solitariness can be caused by the influence of one or more of the four humors.

Burton makes a distinction between enforced and voluntary solitariness. He is particularly critical of voluntary solitariness, calling it "that which is familiar with Melancholy, and gently brings on like a Siren, a shooing-horne, or some Sphinx to this irrevocable gulfe" (*Anatomy* 1.243.1–3 [1.2.2.6]). Burton implies that one who chooses solitariness may be walking on a pathway toward the Elizabethan malady without knowing it. He gives a detailed account of how voluntary solitariness leads to melancholy, describing an initial symptom as follows:

> [. . .] most pleasant it is at first, to such as are Melancholy given, to ly in bed whole daies, and keepe their chambers, to walke alone in some solitary grove, betwixt wood and water, by a brooke side, to meditate upon some delightsome and pleasant subject, which shall affect them most [. . .].
>
> (*Anatomy* 1.243.3–7 [1.2.2.6])

This eventually leads to the state described below:

> Feare, sorrow, suspition, *subrusticus pudor* [risible shyness], discontent, cares, and wearinesse of life, surprise them in a moment, and they can thinke of nothing else, continually suspecting, no sooner are their eyes open, but this infernall plague of Melancholy seazeth on them, and terrifies their soules, representing some dismall object to their mindes, which now by no meanes, no labour, no perswasions they can avoide, *hæret lateri lethalis arundo* [the deadly arrow still remains in their side], they may not be rid of it, they cannot resist.
>
> (*Anatomy* 1.243.30–36 [1.2.2.6])

Thus, Burton believes that voluntary solitariness may initially place one in a comfortable and pleasant state but can lead to serious symptoms of melancholy[2].

## 2. Solitude as a "store-house" for oneself

Curiously, Burton's disapproving view of solitariness does not seem to be shared by Montaigne at all, who is, as mentioned earlier, known as a significant influence on the author of the *Anatomy*. The French essayist says in his essay "De la Solitude" [Of Solitarinesse] (vol. 1, chap. 38):[3]

> We should reserve a store-house for our selves, what need soever chance; altogether ours, and wholy free, wherein we may hoard up and establish our true libertie, and principall retreit and solitarinesse, wherein we must go alone to our selves, take our ordinarie entertainment, and so privately, that no acquaintance or communication of any strange thing may therein find place: there to discourse, to meditate and laugh, as, without wife, without children, and goods, without traine, or servants; that if by any occasion they be lost, it seeme not strange to us to passe it over; we have a mind moving and turning in it self; it may keep it selfe companie; it hath wherewith to offend and defend, wherewith to receive, and wherewith to give[4].
>
> (303)

This passage illustrates Montaigne's approval of solitariness as a healthy state for the mind to move around freely in. What he calls a "store-house" for oneself is, according to Hugo Friedrich, "an inner refuge that is always at his disposal, a refuge that does not prevent the spirit from giving the world what it expects, and taking from it what pleases the spirit" (247). Although the French moralist does also appreciate sociability and the need to fulfill one's public duties, he views solitude as a necessary factor for one's own autonomy and peace (Charpentier 1085). For Burton, however, the mind's freedom to move around means that solitary persons, thinking freely about the present, the past, and the future, "build castles in the ayre, [. . .] goe smiling to themselves, acting an infinite variety of parts, which they suppose, and strongly imagine they represent, or that they see acted or done" (*Anatomy* 1.243.8–11 [1.2.2.6]).

Montaigne states in his essay De l'Oisiveté [Of Idleness] (vol. 1, chap. 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 **idlenesse**, 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 setled and ripe, accomplish very easily: but I finde,

*Variam semper dant otia mentem*. –LUCAN, iv. 704.

Evermore idlenesse,

Doth wavering minds addresse[5].

(34)

Burton might well associate the state of mind Montaigne describes here with the initial symptoms of melancholy.

If Montaigne's solitude were a condition imposed on him, however, it would be a different story. Burton is less disapproving of enforced solitariness, which he says is commonly seen in "Students, Monks, Friers, Anchorites, that by their order & course of life, must abandon all company, society of other men, and betake themselves to a private cell" (*Anatomy* 1.242.19–21 [1.2.2.6]). While he does state that this type of solitude, especially when imposed suddenly, can be a cause of "great inconvenience" (*Anatomy* 1.242.40 [1.2.2.6]), Burton does not explicitly associate it with melancholy. This also seems to explain why he does not appear critical of solitude when he discusses the influence of the stars on symptoms of melancholy observed in a particular category of individuals, namely "Mercurialists," or those under the strong influence of Mercury: "*Mercurialists* are **solitary**, much in contemplation, subtile, Poets, Philosophers, and musing most part about such matters" (*Anatomy* 1.397.12–13 [1.3.1.3]). Since it is impossible for anyone to be selective about celestial influences, the condition referred to here could be considered a form of enforced solitude.

Indeed, Burton does recognize and acknowledge some merit in solitude: "I may not deny but that there is some profitable Meditation, Contemplation, and kinde of **solitarinesse** to be embraced" (*Anatomy* 1.243.36–38 [1.2.2.6]). In addition, Burton does not deny the value of solitude when he describes the Greek philosopher Democritus, whom he admired so much as to publish the *Anatomy* under the pseudonym "Democritus Junior."

Burton was suffering from melancholy, and Vicari believes it is safe to assume that his aim in authoring the *Anatomy* was to cure that condition (5). Indeed, Burton makes it clear that he is writing the *Anatomy* to busy himself by writing, which enables him to avoid idleness. When he says that he "would [. . .] comfort [. . .] idlenes with idlenes, [. . .] make an Antidote out of that which was the prime cause of my disease" (*Anatomy* 1.7.22–25), he seems to indicate that he views writing as an activity that will assuage the idleness that has caused his melancholy. It may also be possible to see that he is making solitude—another possible cause of his melancholy—into a cure for the malady he suffers. Montaigne seems to resort to a similar tactics, as suggested by Screech in *Montaigne and Melancholy* when he states that Montaigne conquered melancholy with melancholy (162)—the implication being that writing the *Essais* had the same curative effects on Montaigne as, according to Lund (96), writing the *Anatomy* had on Burton.

## Conclusion

This essay has argued that, while Robert Burton's and Michel de Montaigne's views of solitude differ substantially, certain descriptions in each author's work provide a window into an important aspect of the other's experience with melancholy. First, Burton describes how voluntary solitude causes an initial state of melancholy that, although perceived as pleasant, can lead to serious melancholic symptoms. This seems to illustrate the potential danger inherent in the type of solitude celebrated by Montaigne. Secondly, the tower into which the French essayist withdrew himself to read and write served, as he suggests, as a "store-house" for himself. Burton, who cautions his readers against solitude with the instruction, "*Be not solitary, be not idle*" (*Anatomy* 3.445.36–37 [3.4.2.6]), recounts his own life at Oxford: "I have liv'd a silent, sedentary, **solitary**, private life, *mihi & musis* [for myself and my studies], in the University as long almost as *Xenocrates* in *Athens, ad senectam ferè* [practically to old age], to learne wisdome as he did, penned up most part in my study" (*Anatomy* 1.3.13–16). This seems to suggest that his study, which he calls "*Minerva*'s Towre," housing "all [his] Treasure" (*Anatomy* 1.4.15), had turned into a "store-house" for Burton, perhaps without being perceived as such by its inhabitant.

These examples serve as evidence that these two Renaissance thinkers who, surrounded by more than a thousand books, devoted some two decades of their final years to authoring huge tomes, each succeeded in their own way both in turning their study into

a “store-house” for themselves and in turning solitude—a common cause of melancholy—into a remedy for that very disease.

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). I shall follow Angus Gowland’s notation for citations from the *Anatomy* (xii). For instance, (*Anatomy* 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 This has important implications for the discussion in Sakakibara (2018) regarding the apparent change in the nature of solitariness for Burton based on an analysis of his image of Democritus, in which a philological approach is used to compare multiple editions of the *Anatomy* to investigate underlying differences.

3 All English citations of Montaigne in this thesis are from Florio’s translation, which is the one that Burton would have used.

4 Montaigne’s French reads: “Il se faut reserver une arriereboutique toute nostre, toute franche, en laquelle nous establissons nostre vraye liberté et principale retraicte et solitude. En cette-cy faut-il prendre nostre ordinaire entretien de nous à nous mesmes, et si privé que nulle acointance ou communication estrangiere y trouve place ; discourir et y rire comme sans femme, sans enfans et sans biens, sans train et sans valetz, afin que, quand l’occasion adviendra de leur perte, il ne nous soit pas nouveau de nous en passer. Nous avons une ame contournable en soy mesme ; elle se peut faire compagnie ; elle a dequoy assaillir et dequoy defendre, dequoy recevoir et dequoy donner [...]” (241).

5 Montaigne’s French reads: “Dernierement que je me retiray chez moy, deliberé autant que je pourroy, ne me mesler d’autre chose que de passer en repos, et à part, ce peu qui me reste de vie : il me sembloit ne pouvoir faire plus grande faveur à mon esprit, que de le laisser en pleine oysiveté, s’entretenir soy mesmes, et s’arrester et rasseoir en soy: ce que j’esperois qu’il peut meshuy faire plus aisément, devenu avec le temps plus poisant, et plus meur. Mais je trouve, *variam semper dant otia mentem* [...]” (33).

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