

Robert Burton's Portrait 'Philosophically, Medicinally and Historically' Supported

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“Title pages of sixteenth-and seventeenth-century books were sometimes posted up in the street as advertisements” says Philip Gaskell 1972: 183. This commercial burden must have conditioned the design, arrangement and content of those initial images and words. In the frontispiece of Robert Burton’s *The Anatomy of Melancholy* emblematic images are organised as a prefiguration not only of the treatise itself but also as presentation of the author’s interests. Icons representing the most common inducers of Melancholia establish a connection between emblematic and philosophical, medicinal and historical arguments. When viewing the title page, the portrait of the author controls the perspective and offers itself as the link between scientific and non-scientific. This paper will succinctly explore the images integrated in the frontispiece in order to show how the author’s portrait exceeds the limits of the square assigned to his face.

The insertion of the author’s portrait in Renaissance frontispieces is a solid expression of the rhetorical debate between *oratio* and *vultus*. This debate seeks to prove the superiority of either the physical image of the author or the authorial discourse itself. With the author’s portrait, with the face, frontispieces become the link between the image of the author and the text. Frontispieces occupy a peripheral position with regards to the written text. As Gerard Genette 1997 argues, these frame materials or “paratexts” constitute an integral part of a literary text, occasionally offering a reader fully articulated readings and always subtle interpretative clues. Genette 1997 maintains that a printed text’s presentation of itself (its title page, illustrations, preface, or even the author’s name) is “always the conveyor of a commentary that is authorial or more or less legitimated by the author.”

Antoine Compagnon has termed differently the text presentation. For him, title, table of content, authors name and portrait are called perigraphy of the text. In this perigraphy or “paratext”, if you prefer to use Genette’s term, the limits of the work are defined. Steven Rendall 1988 says that the author’s portrait is not “part of the text or composition but part of its frame, and because they figure a subject that claims not only to have produced the work but also, through the immanence of individual attention, to determine—that is, to limit—its meaning” (Rendall 1988: 144). The frontispiece of *The Anatomy of Melancholy* contains a perigraphic portrait of its author. It is a frontispiece in debt with emblematics, even though we find no motto. The argument of the frontispieces is presented before the frontispiece itself so as to guide the reader not only through the images of the opposite page but also as a synthetic presentation of the anatomical method. The dissecting nature of the genre is revealed in the two first lines of the argument:

: “Ten distinct squares heere seene apart, Are joyn’d by Cutters art.” The engraver’s hand illustrates and separates each scene, each picture, and illustrating takes apart the diverse nature of melancholy as the reader is about to be informed about them. Partitions, sections, subsections, the organisation of an anatomy finds an illustrated reflection in the frontispiece.

The argument of the frontispiece tells the reader where to look first: “Old Democritus under a tree...” Under the sign of Saturn sits Democritus Abderites. In the introductory section *To the Reader*, Robert Burton traces the history of the Abderites and finishes by describing how he would laugh “at such a variety of ridiculous objects”:



Whitney’s emblem *In Vitam Humanam* (Green 1967: 14), directly imported from Alciati’s *Emblemata*, gives us a chance to appreciate how the laughter of Democritus had permeated much more than philosophical treatises. But in the frontispiece, he is pensive making, as the argument says, “Anatomy” of the creatures around him. Here the Abderites is closer to the image of Melancholia provided by Peacham 1966: 126:



Under the sign of Saturn and the illustration of Democritus Abderites finds its counterpart in Democritus Junior, Robert Burton, the author of the Anatomy.

Thus, the central axis of the frontispiece is occupied by the model upon which the author has tackled the subject of Melancholy, the title (eleventh square), Burton's portrait (tenth square) and the name of the printer (eleventh square). The vertical line, then, is formed by model, title, author and printer. Whereas the commentary about Democritus Abderites takes eight lines and can be connected to emblematic images which circulated at the time of publication, the portrait of the author double the lines and is not dependent on the iconographic knowledge of the reader, in fact presents the reader with a dilemma:

Now last to fill a place,
Presented is the authors face;
And in that habit which he weares,
His image to the world appears.
His minde no art can well expresse,
That by his writings you may guesse.
It was not pride, nor yet vainglory,
(Though others doe it commonly)
Made him doe this: if you must know,
The printer would needs have it so.
Then doe not frowne or scoffe at it,
Deride not, or detract a whit.
For surely as thou dost by him,
He will doe the same againe.
Then looke upon't, behold and see,
As thou likest it, so it likes thee.

We could consider these lines the epigram to the tenth square. They are revealing beyond the question of the superiority of image versus text, of *oratio* versus *vultus*. The first six lines remind us how incomplete an evaluation based only in the visual could be: "His mind no art can well express". An echo of Duncan in Macbeth, when he says "There's is no art/ to find the mind's construction in a face" (*Macbeth* 1. IV). Perhaps this is why we have the counterpart in the Abderites, as if a literary vision of the physical could complete what the face lacks.

Oratio and *vultus* together again. However in this case the following lines do anatomise the author's face, they justify his presence in the frontispiece and frame it as a necessity of the literary act. The engraver, the cutter, needs to identify the face of the author. In spite of the centrality Burton's portrait enjoys, the author minimises the fact that his face is there. Burton appears as the articulator, the only axis of the discourse about melancholy in the different versions of the illness as condensed by the rest of the illustrations. Burton's face looks obliquely to the open book outside the portrait frame offering himself as an expert, he holds a closed book. As Willet states in the unillustrated emblem 24, *Sapientia humana stultitia coram Deo*, of his *Sacrorum Emblematum Centuria Una* (1592), "an open book cannot be read by an uneducated man; a closed book cannot be read by a learned man" (Daly 1993: 272). Burton's position in the title page is a promise that the task of handling both books will be a successful one.

These portraits negotiate a triangle: Reader, author and narrative persona converge in the expectations a text, about to be read, generates. But in order to do so the work prefigured in the frontispiece must not only present a philosophical substratum for the topic of Melancholia, even if the face of the author is added it does not still suffice. In fact, the individuating factor of the portrait, *vultus*, needs again a reference to *oratio*. Even if, as Foucault points out in “What is an author? (Harari 144-160)”, the portrait individuates the person who produces the text and the function of the author, as the French philosopher defines it, drawing from the physical presence the actual ascription of a discourse to a person is completed only when the frontispiece reveals the principles upon the different versions of the disease could be recognised. Astrological signs, emblematic images, engage the viewer of the frontispiece. They promise a degree of understanding in tune with tools of representation which may be within reach and, as Peter M. Daly affirms, “recognition of meaning depends on understanding of the thing portrayed” (Daly 1979: 43).

Mario Praz has commented on the use by Burton of emblematic imagery (Praz 1989: 250-1). The scientific claim of Burton’s text is in need to absorb what culturally and historically has marked non-scientific prose and poetry up to then. Astrology partakes its space in the frontispiece with the emblem and the reunion of the two reassures the reader. The square devoted to Jealousy draws so heavily on traditionally emblematic views that Burton thinks unnecessary to explain in detail the contents:

Toth’left a landskip of Jealousye,
Presents it selfe unto thine eye,
A kingfisher, a swan, an Herne
Two fighting Cocks you may discerne
...
Symbols are these, I say no more,
Conceive the rest by that’s afore

In his *A Collection of Emblems, Ancient and Moderne* (1635), George Wither presents an image of two cocks facing one another, with hens and other birds in the background.



The epigram warns us about men who are like cocks: “Beware of men who, like cocks, will fight with fury and rage over a female...(Wither 1635: 71). In spite of the difficulty to discern the image today, Burton says “no more”, sure that the representation will transmit exactly what the author wants.

For the image of solitariness, the argument of the frontispiece states that “a portrature doth well expresse”. The square is in reality a version of the emblem of Melancholia by Peacham1966, shown before, and the author gives us full detail of the scene: “sleeping dogs, cat...” But above all, he prevents us from misinterpreting the scene, due to what he blames on the cutter. Melancholia should dwell in darkness and the square shows day with flying owls in the sky: “In melancholy darknesse hover,/Marke well: if’t be not as’t should be,/Blame the cutter and not me.” The literariness of the frontispiece functions as an of the text. Yet this literariness--the ability of the frontispiece to shape a reader's encounter with the narrative it prefaces--can be problematic for authors who, after all, turn the execution of the frontispiece over to a third party.

In another square Burton presents *Inamorato*, the lover, whose “lute and bookes about him lye,/ as symptomes of his vanity./ If this doe not enough disclose,/ to paint him, take thy selfe by th’nose.” We will not need to undertake the author’s suggestion to complete *Inamorato*’s picture, instead we can go back to Peacham1966 and his emblem 127, with the motto *Sanguis*, one of the four humours analysed in the anatomy:



By nature is benigne, and gentlie meeke,
 To Musick, and all merriment a frend;
 As seemeth by his flowers, and girlondes gay,
 ...
 Bold, bounteous, frend vnto the learned sort;
 For studies fit, best louing, and belou'd,
 Faire-spoken, bashfull, seld in anger moou'd.

Garlands, books and lute appear also in the frontispiece square respecting, thus the iconology traditionally related to the sanguine humour and offering the reader a bridge between cultural *episteme* and pseudo-scientific discourse.

Anatomy as opposed to analogy aims at taking apart a subject so that by comprehending its part the whole may come to light. However in the dividing work the clear-cut analytical task is embellished with Burton's interest in astrology along with his conviction that in order to persuade he needs to connect with the complicity of the emblem. His *vultus* surrounded by emblematic images fulfils the difficult task of connecting to the reader at the same time he claims authorial space.

Like laughing Democritus, the melancholy philosopher of Abdera with whom Burton identifies, he seems convinced of the incurable folly of mankind. His desire to observe from "some high place" seems to be related to a dark vision of the human condition. This preference for a detached observation did not imply passivity towards the world. Burton is not different from others because, as he says in the preface, "I writ of melancholy, by being busy to avoid melancholy." (12) To live quietly, though laughing like the Abderites, was not enough and the textual result of this busy business reveals a pressing need to persuade others to adopt his viewpoint; his efforts to "prove" to the reader the implacable folly of humankind in all times and places, as well as to "prove" the urgent need for a "cure", is the burden of "Democritus JR. To the reader":

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...I know not wherein to do a more general service. (29)"

Interestingly enough the cures are also advanced in the frontispiece. Two squares represent *Borage* and *Hellebore*. *Borage* had, in Burton times, already a long-standing history as remedy for diverse diseases. *Hellebore* was medicinally used in ancient Greece against insanity, not in Burton's times (Chapple 1993: 104). The author is drawing from historical sources to suggest *Hellebore* as a metaphor for cure in general. Burton's continuous references to the plant in the preface are ironic comments regarding a cure for the pervasive madness and melancholy of his age. In fact he goes to the extend of suggesting that "there is much more need of Hellebor then tobacco" (1:25).

I would like to draw your attention to one more square of the frontispiece. If the centre of the page contains the title, name of the author and structure of the book, the square below Burton's face holds the necessary printing information, place, date, name. Flanked by *Borage* and *Hellebor*, the traditional and classical remedies respectively, the printing information stands as source of remedial consequences as well. Botany and printing together make us consider that the modernity of *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, encapsulated in the frontispiece, could perhaps be best considered in the light of the conflation between the claim of scientific status and the use of culturally loaded images, and the editorial need to attract an audience.

The concoction printed for Henry Cripps and now in the hands of the reader may prove as useful to fight melancholy as the two plants. The three remedies present themselves in paralleled position, sustaining the rest of the squares and waiting for their direct originator to open the closed book he is holding in his hands.

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