

The Romantic Robert Burton: Or, the Art of Forgery

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The art of forgery is, probably, one of the most ancient known arts, as we can read in Caro Baroja's work (1991).¹ Cases such as that of the "Paeneste Fibula", Ossian or Chatterton's Rowley are well known examples of invented objects or pieces of literature which pretend to be ancient. Some of these feigned works appeared by the end of the eighteenth century or the beginning of the nineteenth, so that this kind of forgery is often connected with Romanticism. In this milieu we find Charles Lamb, the author of the text we are commenting, entitled *Curious Fragments, Extracted from a Common-place Book, which Belonged to Robert Burton, the Famous Author of the "Anatomy of Melancholy"*. Lamb is well known thanks to his *Tales from Shakespeare* (1807), a version of the plays for children, and his *Essays of Elia* (1823). He was a close friend of Coleridge's (whom he admired, mainly in his early years). It was Coleridge himself, according to Lamb, who encouraged him to write the forgery we are studying today: "He [Coleridge] has lugged me, for a first plan, the forgery of a supposed manuscript of Burton, the anatomist of melancholy" (Lamb, Letter to Manning, March 17, 1800; Marrs 1975, I).

According to what we can see in our author's letters, these *Curious Fragments* were written in 1800, although they were not published until 1802, in *John Woodvil* (1802); the second and definitive version was that of the edition of Lamb's complete works (Lamb 1818). Before studying the text itself, we should think about some points: why was Robert Burton interesting for Coleridge or Lamb? How did they know him? Could it be asserted that Burton, like Shakespeare, was a really influential author in the development of Romanticism?

Robert Burton (1577-1640) studied Theology in Brasenose College and Christ Church College, where he was a librarian. This gave him the opportunity to read a large amount of books on several subjects; the basis of his encyclopædic work, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. It is not just a medical treatise about melancholy, but it is, in fact, a deep analysis of man, his soul, body, his social, political and moral behaviour. The prologue, entitled "Democritus Junior to the Reader" turns the work into a satire against Burton's contemporary society. All these elements and the author's bookish learning resulted in one of the seventeenth-century bestsellers in England: it was published five times in Burton's life (1621, 1624, 1628, 1632, 1638) and once in a posthumous edition (1651); and twice more before the end of the century. During the eighteenth century, the interest for this work seems to be lost: it was not reprinted again until 1800.

¹ The introduction is especially interesting in relation with my discussion.

It does not seem to be casual the fact that this edition appeared the year Coleridge invited his friend to write the pastiche. Anyway, it seems clear that there is a common interest in the authors of the last romantic generation for Burton.² Coleridge refers once and again to the *Anatomy*; he used the third edition of the work (1628), although we know that he could study a copy of the first edition (1621), owned by Charles Lamb,³ and that he annotated several commentaries on it. What did they find in Burton? Probably, the nonconformism, the satire and the irony which the Romantic authors enjoyed so much. Besides, most of the quotations from it refer to two main aspects: love melancholy and “strange phenomena”, as witches, hallucinations, etc., that is to say, very fashionable subjects.

There is no doubt that Lamb was attracted by Burton’s *Anatomy* in a special way. Just one example will be enough, what John Payne says in his work *An Old Man Diary* (1832):

This led him [Lamb] to ask me, whether I remembered two or three passages in his books of books, Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*, illustrating Shakespeare’s notions regarding Witches and Fairies. I replied that if I had seen them, I did not then recollect them. I took down the book, the contents of which he knew so well that he opened upon the place almost immediately: the first passage was this, respecting Macbeth and Banquo and their meeting with the three Witches: “And Hector Boethius [relates] of Macbeth and Banco, two Scottish lords, that, as they were wandering in woods, had their fortunes told them by three strange women” [Faulkner, Kiessling, Blair 1989-94: I, 186]. I said that I remembered to have seen that passage quoted, or referred to by more than one editor of Shakespeare. ‘Have you seen this quoted’, he inquired, ‘which relates to fairies?’ “Some put our fairies into this rank, which have been in former times adored with much superstition, with sweeping their houses and setting of a pail of clean water, good victuals and the like; and then they should not be pinched, but find money in their shoes and be fortunate in their enterprises (...) and, Olaus Magnus adds, leave that green circle which we commonly find in plain fields”. Farther on Burton gives them the very name assigned to one of them by Shakespeare, for he adds, “These have several names in several places: we commonly call them *Pucks*” (part 1, sect. 2), which Ben Jonson degrades to *Pug*. (Lucas 1903: I, 397-398)

According to this, Lamb’s knowledge of Burton was really deep: he understood the complicated organization of the *Anatomy* and its contents. This made him possible to write the *Curious Fragments*, pretending to be the author of the *Anatomy of Melancholy*. Here, Lamb writes a letter or preface attributed to “Democritus Junior” (the pseudonym used by Burton in the first edition of the book);⁴ Lamb feigns that this fragment was written when the author finished the first version of his masterpiece, that is to say, the 1621 edition (the one Lamb had read). In this sense, it could be expected to find in the *Fragment* a sort of explanation of the author’s intentions, of summary of the text content, excuses for the mistakes, etc. However, its structure seems to be the result of the assimilation of different kinds of discourse appearing in Burton’s *Anatomy*; in that sense, this first fragment could be divided into four parts:

² John Keats, for example, takes the story of Menippus the Lician from Burton (III, 2, i, 1; Faulkner, Kiessling, Blair 1989-94: III, 45-6) as inspiration for his poem *Lamia*.

³ All these data are collected, without further documentation, in Rooke (1969: I, 40; II, 41). The editor says that Lamb’s copy is lost, although E.V. Lucas had already asserted that “his own copy [of Burton’s *Anatomy*] was a quarto of 1621, which is now, I believe, in America” (Lucas 1903: 397).

⁴ See the title of the preface to the *Anatomy*: “Democritus Junior to the Reader” (Faulkner, Kiessling, Blair 1989-94: I, 1-113).

1. The first part (ll. 1-7)⁵ is similar to “The Conclusion of the Author to the Reader”, an appendix which was published only in the first edition of the *Anatomy of Melancholy*: it is the most personal part of the *Anatomy* and it summarizes in a certain way his intention;
2. The second part (ll. 8-11) is in fact a reflection of an Horatian and Ovidian topic: the apostrophe of the author to his own book, so that it will be successful. Burton develops this idea in a poem, whose beginning is very similar to the Latin words used by Lamb: “Vade Liber, qualis, non ausim dicere, *foelix* / Te nisi foelicem fecerit Alma dies” (Faulkner, Kiessling, Blair 1989-94: I, p. lxvi, “Democritus Junior ad librum suum”);
3. The third part (ll. 11-32) is a reference to the author’s erudition, and to the possible mistakes in his work, an apology that Burton presented in his preface, “Democritus Junior to the Reader” (see Faulkner, Kiessling, Blair 1989-94: I, 1-113);
4. The fourth part (ll. 33 ff.) is a reflection about love melancholy, some of whose ideas, stories and hypothesis are taken from Burton’s third book, in very similar terms (see Faulkner, Kiessling, Blair 1989-94: III, especially 2, 5, 2).

In the analysis of the language and the style in Lamb’s text, we shall have to pay special attention to his attempt to imitate Burton’s linguistic uses, in several aspects.

A) Graphemes: the spelling of the English language at the beginning of the seventeenth century was not completely fixed yet. Some medieval features coexist with the attempts to rationalize the orthography, as we can see in these cases:

- i) the mute final “-e” was still used in some words, where later on this letter would disappear. In Burton we can find words as “minde”, “faire”, “goe”, “jealousie”. Lamb knows this usage and writes words such as “blesse” (l. 2). Besides, most of the words ending in /i/ were written with final “-ie” (instead of the contemporary “-y”): “easie”, “sublunarie”, “conspiracie”, “envie”. Lamb applies this feature also to the adverbs, as “cowardlie” (l. 16), although Burton used to write this morpheme as “-ly”;
- ii) Lamb is aware of the existence of medieval and renaissance varieties in the writing of certain words, specially when a vowel is followed by a final “-r”, and he uses words such as “harte” (l. 6; in fact, the only one changing the normal contemporary spelling), which could also be written as “hearte”, “herte”. Despite all these possibilities, Burton is quite consistent in this aspect, and, for example, he commonly prefers “heart”;
- iii) Also, another possible variation used by Lamb is that of the pronoun “he” / “hee”, that is to say, to double the vowel in those cases when it had been a long vowel in Middle English (*i.e.* it is a typical medieval spelling). These alternatives are very often used by Burton, not only with the third person pronoun, but also with “we”/“wee”, “she”/“shee”;
- iv) In spite of Lamb’s familiarity with Burton’s peculiar language, there are some features he did not reflect in his text, as, for example, the use of ending double “l” in adjectives (“artificiall”, “partiall”, etc.) The imitation uses instead “instrumental” or “natural”.

⁵ The text we are using for the analysis of the *Fragments* is the one edited by Lucas (1903). The references will be to the lines of the text, and not to the page.

B) If we analyze Burton's typography, and specially the distribution of roman and italic typefaces, we will be able to state that he uses the latter when referring to proper names, titles of works, Latin words and quotations and idioms (in Latin or other languages):

Franciscus Valesius lib. 3. controv. 13 med. controv. denies there is any such *pulsus amatorius*, or that love may be so discerned; but *Avicenna* confirms this of *Galen* out of his experience, *lib. 3. Fen. 1.* and *Gordonius cap. 20. Their pulse he saith is inordinate, and swift, if she goe by whom he loves.* [Italics actually indicate the text is a quotation] (Faulkner, Kiessling, Blair 1989-94: III, 142)

In Lamb's imitation, the use of italics seems to be as consistent as in Burton:

-I turne now to my book, *i nunc liber* (l. 8)

-(...) as *Melanchton* judges (l. 52)

-I Democritus Junior have put my finishing pen to a tractate *De Melancholia* (l. 2)

-*Montaltus* confuting argueth to have been a man *malae scrupulositatis* (l. 14-15)

C) Archaisms, latinisms and vulgarisms: Lamb recognizes the different linguistic use of the seventeenth century, and chooses some techniques in order to imitate it:

- i) The use of archaisms affects specially to the morphological remains used in verbs, as the final "-th" instead of the "-s", used nowadays: "hath" (l. 3), "doubteth" (l. 14). But Lamb knows that together with this use, the modern form could appear also in certain verbs as in "travels" and "goes" (l. 45). It is interesting to notice the faithfulness of Lamb's imitation of the distribution of the "-th" and "-s": it is quite uncommon to find in Burton the forms "has", "travelleth" or "goeth";
- ii) Other archaisms are lexicological, that is to say, they concern to the use of what a nineteenth-century reader could consider old-fashioned words, as for example "bedlamite" (l. 96), with the meaning of "madman". Burton uses this term as much as "bedlam-fool", and he is considered by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as the first user of the word.;
- iii) Sometimes, the archaism is not referred to the word, but to its meaning, as in the usage of the adverb "still" with the meaning "always" (l. 98), so common in Burton and imitated by Lamb;
- iv) There are some words and expressions that could seem archaisms to the present reader, but they were not for a nineteenth century reader: "had liever" (l. 68), meaning "prefer", is quite common until recently; and "society", with the etymological meaning of "company". Therefore, they belong to the competence of Renaissance and Romantic speakers;
- v) *The Anatomy of Melancholy* is not only full with quotations of Latin works, but also Latinisms. Lamb is aware of Burton's handling of Latin terms, such as "dogmata" (l. 21), "insanus amor" (l. 38), or expressions like "e contra" (l. 29), most of them often appearing in Burton as common usages.

D) Lamb also seems to know very well Burton's typical syntax, which is the result of some features common to Renaissance English and of his particular style. For a present reader, it could result striking the long enumerations used by the author of the *Anatomy of Melancholy*:

Discontents and grievances are either generall or particular, generall are warres, plagues, dearthes, famine, fires, inundations, unseasonable weather, Epidemicall diseases which afflict whole kingdomes, territories, cities: or peculiar to private men, as cares, crosses, losses, death of friends, poverty, want, sicknesse, orbities, injuries, abuses, &c. (Faulkner, Kiessling, Blair 1989-94: II, 126)

Lamb tries to imitate this in some parts of his *Fragments*:

that first named sort clean otherwise judge of my labours to bee nothing else but a *messe of opinions*, a vortex attracting indiscriminate, gold, pearls, hay, straw, wood, excrement an exchange, tavern, marte, for foreigners to congregate, Danes, Swedes, Hollanders, Lombards, so many strange faces, dresses, salutations, languages, (...) (II. 23-27)

The lover travels, goes into foreign parts, peregrinates, *amoris ergo*, sees manners, customs, not English, converses with pilgrims, lying travellers, monks, hermits, those cattle, pedlars, travelling gentry, *Egyptians*, natural wonders, unicorns (though *Aldobrandus* will have them to be figments) satyrs, semi-viri, apes, monkeys, baboons, curiosities artificial, *pyramides*, Virgilius his tombe, relicks, bones, (...) (II. 45-51)

Another characteristic use is what could be called the "recursive subordination", that is to say, the connection of several subordinate clauses, depending one on the other, so that in the end, the result is an extremely long sentence, not easy to follow, as in:

More especially, when he shall take notice of their more secret and slye trickes, which to cornute their husbands they commonly use, they pretend love, honour, chastity and seeme to respect them before all men living, Saints in shew, so cunningly they can dissemble, they will not so much as looke upon another man, in his presence, so chast, so religious and so devout, they cannot endure the name or sight of a queane, an harlot, out upon her, and in their outward carriage are most loving and officious, will kisse their husband, and hang about their necke (dear husband, sweet husband) and with a composed countenance, salute him, especially when he comes home, or if hee goe from home, weepe, sigh, lament, and take upon them to bee sicke and sowune (like *Jocundo's* wife in *Ariosto*, when her husband was to depart) and yet arrant, &c. they care not for him. (Faulkner, Kiessling, Blair 1989-94: III, 293)

This is the style Lamb was trying to emulate in some passages: "relicks, bones, which are nothing but ivory as *Melancthon* judges, though Cornutus leaneth to think them bones of dogs, cats, (why not men?) which subtill priests vouch to have been saints, martyrs, *heu Pietas!*" (II. 51-54).

In Early Modern English, the system of the possessive went through a radical change from the medieval remains of the genitive to the new forms. The so-called Saxon genitive (Burton: "God's hands" or "Seneca's blind mind") coexisted with a new pattern, condemned by grammarians, which consisted of introducing "his" (desemantized word, *i.e.*, without a concrete generic referent) between the two elements participating in the phrase. In Burton, we can find expressions

like “Copernicus, Atlas his successour” (Faulkner, Kiessling, Blair 1989-1994: I, 66) or “it was Democritus his fortune”, which are imitated by Lamb in “Virgilius his tombe” (l. 51) or “Hippocrates his method” (l. 91).

Another point to study for the analysis of the *Fragment* is that of the authors Lamb considers as typical of the *Anatomy of Melancholy*. In it, several hundred authors are cited, as the result of Burton’s learnedness. Next, we are studying the writers Lamb puts in the *Fragment* to determine whether his knowledge of Burton’s masterpiece is so deep as it seems to be:

- i) Sir John Mandeville (l. 13) is only quoted once in Burton, talking about a different subject, but with a similar context, and also very close to Pliny, so this case could be considered a kind of reminiscence of that part of the *Anatomy* (Faulkner, Kiessling, Blair 1989-1994: II, 38);
- ii) Jean Fyens [Fienus] (l. 14) is quite a well-known writer to Burton, who talks about his works *De flatibus* and *De viribus imaginationis*, but not about *De monstis*, which is never quoted;
- iii) Ælianus Montaltus and Christophorus à Vega (ll. 15, 16) are some of the most common writers in Burton, used once and again in several subjects;
- iv) Æneas Sylvius Piccolomini, Pius II, (l. 42) is sometimes (though not too often) referred to by Burton, but his knowledge of the Pope’s works is undeniable, so Lamb is right when considering his appearance as accurate;
- v) Lamb quotes the eccentric traveller Thomas Coryate (l. 19): “Coryate could write better upon a full meal”; but, in fact, Coryate does not appear in the *Anatomy of Melancholy* (in spite of being well known at the beginning of the seventeenth century). Here, Lamb is making a reference to the satirical journal of his travel, entitled *Coryats Crudities*,⁶ and to the image of a meal used in it;
- vi) Burton handles the astrological works by Hieronimus Wolfius (ll. 22-3), but no mention is made to *The World’s Epitome*, so Lamb could be wrong either in the title or in the name of its author;
- vii) Jacopo Sannazaro (l. 29), the author of the *Arcadia*, appears only once in the *Anatomy*, when some verses of his work are cited. In that sense, it cannot be denied that Burton knew him, although he is not so commonly mentioned;
- viii) Ulisse Aldrovandi (l. 49), the Italian naturalist and physician, is used by Burton when talking about animals, and specially birds; in that sense, Lamb, quoting him with reference to the unicorn, is very accurate. However, Lamb uses a wrong spelling, “Aldobrandus”, which could be explained according to the aforesaid attempt to imitate the Early Modern English variations in orthography; however, Burton never used this misspelling.

We have studied Burton’s use of parallel Latin and English texts or translations in the corpus of the *Anatomy* or in the notes (Sáez Hidalgo 1997).⁷ Lamb knows well that the use of Latin quotations, of their partial, complete or explicative translation (in note or in the text) is one of the

⁶ Coryate (1611). This work had two appendices: *Coryats Crambe, or his Colwort wise sodden, and now serued in with other Macaronicke dishes, as the second course to his Crudities* and *The Odcombian Banquet: dished foorth by Thomas the Coriat, and serued in by a number of noble wits in prayse of his Crudities and Crambe too*.

⁷ In my paper, I analyze Burton’s most common techniques of translation with several illustrative examples.

most characteristic features of the *Anatomy of Melancholy*; and so, he carefully tries to imitate these textual elements, although, as he uses no footnotes, the text does not become so complex as in the *Anatomy*:

- i) When he uses the Latin expression “I nunc liber” (l. 8), he translates it amplifying the original meaning of the words, saying: “goe forth, my brave Anatomy, child of my brain-sweat”, showing his participation as the creator of the work, as the “father of the new-born creature”, the maker;
- ii) He also gives periphrastic translations, as in “omnino ignarus” (l. 44) translated as “he can scarce construe Corderius, yet haughty, fantastic, opiniatre”, probably an implicit reference to Virgil;
- iii) Sometimes, there is no possible translation that could render the meaning into English, because such word does not exist, so the only solution is to explain it, to do an “explanatory translation”, as Lamb has done in “compotores” (l. 59): “those jokers his friends that were wont to tipple with him at alehouses”. It is important to point out that the *Oxford English Dictionary* establishes the first usage of “compotor” in J. Walker’s *Critical Pronouncing Dictionary* (1791), but the word was already used by Burton (Faulkner, Kiessling, Blair 1989-94: I, 324).

Another typical feature in the *Anatomy of Melancholy* is the large amount of quotations, in several languages (some of them well-known to the reader, some not), most of them showing Burton’s wide learning and memory. Lamb, although reflecting this peculiarity in his *Fragment*, is much more moderate in the amount of them and in their length.

We have already talked about the fact that Burton uses footnotes with different aims: to give the bibliographical localization of the quoted text, to give the original Latin text, or the translation or to comment in some way or other; in this sense it is important to point out that the number of notes is really huge in the *Anatomy*. In Lamb’s imitation, there are not any notes, and such an important difference from Burton’s text must be something else than an oversight: maybe the character of the *Fragment*, a kind of reflection about the work and some parts of it, instead of a more or less theoretical discourse could explain the forger’s decision.

Despite of Lamb’s liking for the *Anatomy of Melancholy* and his deep knowledge of it, his mastery of Early Modern English is not perfect, and some anachronisms can be found in the text. Lamb himself was aware of some of these mistakes, and corrected those he could detect in the first version for the second edition of 1818.⁸ We have only found two possible anachronisms:

- i) “Beccaficos” (l. 94) (meaning “blackcap”) was not used, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, until 1708.⁹ We must point out that there seems to be a mistake in the entry of this word, as the first documentation is the one in this *Fragment*, and it appears with the date of 1621, the *Anatomy* first edition. So, on the one hand this error must be corrected in

⁸ T. Hutchinson wrote in *The Athenæum*, Dec. 28, 1901 that Lamb substituted “common sort” for “mobbe” (in the 1802 edition), “for the best of good reasons, because in the meantime he had recollected that to attribute the word *mob* to the pen of Robert Burton was to commit a linguistic anachronism. The earliest known examples of *mob* occur in Shadwell (1688) and Dryden (1690), whereas Burton died in January, 1640” (qtd. in Lucas 1903: 396).

⁹ The first use of this word is, according to the *OED*, that of W. King, *The Art of Cookery, in Imitation of Horace’s Art of Poetry*, 1708.

the *OED*, and on the other, we can reach the conclusion that the use of this word is an anachronism;

- ii) A more complicated case is the term “vortex” (l. 23): two hypothesis could be established:
 1. If it is used as an English word (that is to say, included in the common English usage), we must take into account that the first documented use is, according to the *OED*, in 1653, when it was introduced in English with the meaning of “rotatory movement” by H. More; during the 18th century it is also used with the Latin meaning. In this case, it would be clearly an anachronism;
 2. If it is used as a Latin word, it means “turmoil”, but the typographical conventions of the *Anatomy of Melancholy* established that italics should be used when a foreigner word appears in the text. Lamb has not changed the typeface, so he must have applied the English usage of it; nevertheless, the meaning seems to be “turmoil” rather than just “rotatory movement”. Therefore, this case could be considered either as a slip in typography or as an anachronism.

CONCLUSIONS

Our first conclusion must be, after this analysis of the *Fragment*, that Lamb has a deep knowledge of Burton’s work: its sources, structure, formal aspects, vocabulary, syntax, discursive system, etc. are very familiar for the Romantic author, attracted by the *Anatomy*’s learnedness and the subjects treated in it.

However, there are some elements in this text that will lead us to conclude that it is not a work written by Robert Burton at the beginning of seventeenth century: some historical features are not perfectly known by Lamb –as we can see in the anachronisms, or the authors quoted in the *Fragment* who were never used by Burton. Apart from this, he omits the system of notes —so important in the textual coherence of Burton’s work— and the quotations are not so common as in Lamb’s model.

Although Lamb wrote this *Fragment* as a pastime, as an answer to Coleridge’s proposal, he must have considered it a challenge, a way of showing his love and admiration for the *Anatomy*. In it, he should demonstrate his deep knowledge of the work, using several devices he thought as more specific of Burton’s masterpiece. This piece of text has commonly been regarded as a clear example of forgery, but Lamb does not seem to attempt to deceive his readers: he publishes it together with his own works, and not giving especial publicity to it as a “literary discovery”, and letting people know (as in the letter to Manning) that he was encouraged to do it. So, this *Fragment* could be considered as an exercise of style, a challenge to Lamb’s own knowledge of the *Anatomy*. The result, it must be admitted, is amazingly good.

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