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psychiatry in history

Timothie Bright: *Melancholie, Characterie, Shakespeare and Hamlet*

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'... stumbling in the darke midnight of ignorance ...'

Timothie Bright (1550/1–1615), Cambridge graduate and Doctor of Phisicke, published *A Treatise of Melancholie* in 1586 'from litle S. Bartlemewes by Smithfield'. Robert Burton, a melancholic Oxonian scholar and clergyman, repeatedly signals his indebtedness to Bright in his unsurpassable *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, published in 1621. Bright was a physician at St Bartholomew's Hospital from 1585 until his dismissal – for neglect of his duties – and departure on 29 September 1591. Subsequently, Bright took holy orders. He died in Shrewsbury and was probably buried there in St Mary's Church.

A Treatise of Melancholie is an early holistic English essay in psychiatry that recognises, e.g. 'the instrument of reason, the braine', 'phrensies, madnesse, lunasies, and melancholie', 'the strange effects it worketh in our minds and bodies', and integrates medicine with the religion of the era. The book was popular, with two editions in 1586 and another in 1613, and in Shakespeare's day it was the most important work on the subject. Bright addresses his (fictitious?) 'melancholicke' friend:

'Your request is not onely that I should minister unto you, what my slender skill either in divinitie or physicke may afford, but that I would at large declare unto you the nature of melancholie, what causeth it, what effects it worketh, how cured, and farther to lay open whatsoever may serve for the knowledge thereof, with such companions of feare, sadnes, desperation, teares, weeping, sobbing, sighing, as follow that mournfull traine, yea ofte times, unbridled laughter rising not from any comfote of the heart, or gladnes of spirit, but from a disposition in such sorte altered, as by error of conceite, that gesture in a counterfet manner bestowed upon that disagreeing passion, whose nature is rather to extinguish it selfe with teares, then asswaged by the sweete breath of chearfulnes, otherwise to receive refreshing.'

Characterie. An Arte of Shorte, Swifte, and Secrete Writing by Character is a form of shorthand 'invented by Timothe Bright'. *The Oxford Dictionary* indicates that Bright was the first to use the term 'characterie' (1588), the expression of thoughts by symbols or characters. Professor Dover Wilson says that characterie was much used at that time for reporting sermons of popular preachers and many have supposed the piracy of Shakespearean quartos was achieved by using it at performances. Shakespeare presumably learned the word from Bright's book, and later he used it in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1598).

'M.D.' writing anonymously in *Notes and Queries* in 1853 was the earliest to suggest circumstantial evidence that Shakespeare had read Bright, observing that his expression 'discourse of reason' occurs in his work. First, it is used in the 'epistle dedicatorie' of *A Treatise*:

'I haue enterlaced my treatise besides with disputes of Philosophie, that the learned sort of them, and such as are of quicke conceit, & delited in discourse of reason in naturall things, may finde to passe their time with, and know the grounds and reasons of their passions, without which they might receive more discomfort, and greater cause of error.'

Later, the phrase occurs in *Hamlet* (1603), when soliloquising on his mother's marriage ('... How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable/Seem to me all the uses of this world'): 'O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason/Would have mourned longer-married with my uncle.'

Hamlet refers explicitly to 'my melancholy' (Act II, Scene 2) and Claudius observes: 'There's something in his soul, O'er which his melancholy sits on brood' (Act III, Scene 1). Loening's *Die Hamlet-Tragödie Shakespeares* points to Bright as the source of Shakespeare's psychology both in *Hamlet* and other plays. Loening also notes that *A Treatise* was published by Bright's publisher, Vautrollier, at his shop in Blackfriars, which is in Shakespeare's immediate neighbourhood. When Vautrollier died in 1587, his print shop and stock passed to his son-in-law, Richard Field, fellow townsman and publisher of Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594). O'Sullivan and Dover Wilson support the idea that Bright's *Treatise* influenced Shakespeare, and particularly *Hamlet*; they cite two score parallels not only of thought but also of phrase, indicating that Shakespeare had read *A Treatise*. Dover Wilson quotes a passage summarising most of *Hamlet's* moods (whether or not feigned):

'The perturbations of melancholy are for the most parte, sadde and fearefull, and such as rise of them: as distrust, doubt, diffidence, or dispaire, sometimes furious, and sometimes merry in appaurance, though a kinde of Sardonian, and false laughter.'

O'Sullivan also summarises Bright's references to the connection between melancholy and procrastination, which is so germane to the character of *Hamlet*.