SHAKESPEAREAN MELANCHOLY

Philosophy, Form and the Transformation of Comedy

J. F. Bernard
SHAKESPEAREAN MELANCHOLY
EDINBURGH CRITICAL STUDIES IN SHAKESPEARE AND PHILOSOPHY
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Philosophy, Form and the Transformation of Comedy

J. F. BERNARD

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I thank my family and friends for their love and support over the years. Je vous aime tous très fort.

A portion of Chapter 3, on *The Merchant of Venice*, appeared previously in *Renaissance Studies* (“The Merchant of Venice and Shakespeare’s Sense of Humour(s), 28 November 2014, p. 5). I thank them for the permission to reproduce the material here.
Picture Macbeth alone on stage, staring intently into empty space. ‘Is this a dagger which I see before me?’ he asks, grasping decisively at the air. On one hand, this is a quintessentially theatrical question. At once an object and a vector, the dagger describes the possibility of knowledge (‘Is this a dagger’) in specifically visual and spatial terms (‘which I see before me’). At the same time, Macbeth is posing a quintessentially philosophical question, one that assumes knowledge to be both conditional and experiential, and that probes the relationship between certainty and perception as well as intention and action. It is from this shared ground of art and inquiry, of theatre and theory, that this series advances its basic premise: Shakespeare is philosophical.

It seems like a simple enough claim. But what does it mean exactly, beyond the parameters of this specific moment in Macbeth? Does it mean that Shakespeare had something we could think of as his own philosophy? Does it mean that he was influenced by particular philosophical schools, texts and thinkers? Does it mean, conversely, that modern philosophers have been influenced by him, that Shakespeare’s plays and poems have been, and continue to be, resources for philosophical thought and speculation?

The answer is yes all around. These are all useful ways of conceiving a philosophical Shakespeare, and all point to
lines of inquiry that this series welcomes. But Shakespeare is philosophical in a much more fundamental way as well. Shakespeare is philosophical because the plays and poems actively create new worlds of knowledge and new scenes of ethical encounter. They ask big questions, make bold arguments and develop new vocabularies in order to think what might otherwise be unthinkable. Through both their scenarios and their imagery, the plays and poems engage the qualities of consciousness, the consequences of human action, the phenomenology of motive and attention, the conditions of personhood and the relationship among different orders of reality and experience. This is writing and dramaturgy, moreover, that consistently experiments with a broad range of conceptual crossings, between love and subjectivity, nature and politics, and temporality and form.

Edinburgh Critical Studies in Shakespeare and Philosophy takes seriously these speculative and world-making dimensions of Shakespeare’s work. The series proceeds from a core conviction that art’s capacity to think – to formulate, not just reflect, ideas – is what makes it urgent and valuable. Art matters because unlike other human activities it establishes its own frame of reference, reminding us that all acts of creation – biological, political, intellectual and amorous – are grounded in imagination. This is a far cry from business-as-usual in Shakespeare studies. Because historicism remains the methodological gold standard of the field, far more energy has been invested in exploring what Shakespeare once meant than in thinking rigorously about what Shakespeare continues to make possible. In response, Edinburgh Critical Studies in Shakespeare and Philosophy pushes back against the critical orthodoxies of historicism and cultural studies to clear a space for scholarship that confronts aspects of literature that can neither be reduced to nor adequately explained by particular historical contexts.
Shakespeare’s creations are not just inheritances of a past culture, frozen artefacts whose original settings must be expertly reconstructed in order to be understood. The plays and poems are also living art, vital thought-worlds that struggle, across time, with foundational questions of metaphysics, ethics, politics and aesthetics. With this orientation in mind, Edinburgh Critical Studies in Shakespeare and Philosophy offers a series of scholarly monographs that will reinvigorate Shakespeare studies by opening new interdisciplinary conversations among scholars, artists and students.

Kevin Curran
To Emily, who made this possible by sharing in the mirth and melancholy of this long journey.

I love you so very much.
WHAT’S SO FUNNY ABOUT HUMOURS?
MELANCHOLY, COMEDY AND REVISIONIST PHILOSOPHY

Tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you fall into an open sewer and die. (Mel Brooks)

In the induction to The Taming of the Shrew, Christopher Sly is tricked into thinking that he is a wealthy Lord who ‘these fifteen years . . . have been in a dream’ (Induction, II, 79). A servingman subsequently informs him that

Your honour’s players, hearing your amendment,
Are come to play a pleasant comedy,
For so your doctors hold it very meet,
Seeing too much sadness hath congealed your blood,
And melancholy is the nurse of frenzy.
Therefore they thought it good you hear a play
And frame your mind to mirth and merriment,
Which bars a thousand harms and lengthens life.
(Induction, II, 125–32, emphasis mine)

In its broadest sense, the scene plays out an elaborate jest on Sly, who gullibly accepts whatever information his ‘attendants’ provide. Servants convince him to watch the play by asserting that doing so has been recommended for him by his physicians to offset a medical condition: his blood is apparently too
cold, contaminated by the bodily substance known as melancholy. The implication of such a diagnosis is that exposure to the merriment of comedy will nurse him back to health. In actuality, the above-quoted speech offers dramatic exposition to frame the actual comedy about to unfold. Yet the casual conflation of theatre and medicine suggests a familiarity that resonates beyond Taming’s induction. Dramatically, Sly is about to witness the same play as Shakespeare’s audience, and the detailed description the servingman provides, along with Sly’s willingness to accept it, suggests a broader early modern awareness – at least culturally – of the physician’s prognosis concerning his melancholic state. This deceptively informal dovetailing of theatre and medicine provides a point of departure for the analysis of melancholy in Shakespearean comedy that I undertake here.

Michael Bristol perhaps said it best when he wrote that ‘nothing is more idiosyncratic than melancholia, and yet nothing is more public and histrionic in its expression’. Melancholy is ubiquitous and paradoxical. Its daunting and intrinsically contradictory nature epitomises life itself. Overlapping through the ages, its oxymoronic definitions form a truly eclectic tapestry of human behaviour. Melancholy is at once a principle of health and a catalyst for disease, an emblem of genius, a symptom of madness, a marker of grandiose interiority and a sign of feeblemindedness. It infers a seemingly endless constellation of human emotions, mores and states of being. Melancholy beckons sin, sloth, ingenuity, loss, lust, excess, depression and black bile. It proves highly malleable and incredibly adaptive, effortlessly seeping into cultures, ideologies and philosophical discourses. Its ever-present spectre within the realm of artistic creation is equally astounding. To chart the history of melancholy as a literary subject is to assemble a veritable who’s who of artistic ingenuity that yokes together classical Greek philosophy and modern-day
graphic novels, channelling Aristotle, Shakespeare and Keats as much as Byron, Benjamin and Kurt Cobain. Its critical staying power is just as remarkable. Consistently mined but never exhausted, melancholy remains a potent analytical tool that transcends disciplines and epochs, as works such as Anne Cheng’s *The Melancholy of Race*, Peter Schwenger’s *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects* or Eric Wilson’s *The Melancholy Android: On the Psychology of Sacred Machines* suggest. As both a marker of emotional turmoil and a token of intellectual gravitas, melancholy never goes out of style.

Surprisingly, its comic potential remains largely unexamined, particularly in literary studies, where tragic icons such as Hamlet and Young Werther inevitably relegate the idea of a comic sense of melancholy to an afterthought. One does not expect to encounter many comic characters professing inexorable sadness, other than perhaps as a farcical foil to the spirits of mirth and revelry that generally characterise the comic genre. Nevertheless, the notion pervades the Shakespearean comic corpus in an astonishing variety of ways, from deceptively casual mentions, such as the one discussed at the outset of this introduction, through more obvious incursions (the melancholy Jaques in *As You Like It*) to downright perplexing utterances (Antonio’s inexplicable sadness at the onset of *The Merchant of Venice*). Such instances have received a fair share of critical attention over the years, but seldom have they been placed in dialogue with one another as part of an explicit consideration of their comic functionality.

In this book, I argue that Shakespeare performs dual revisions of comedy and melancholy that shape the philosophical afterlife of both notions. I contend that Shakespearean comedy reappropriates tenets from prevalent definitions of melancholy that emerge out of classical Greece: the humoral conception of the idea, advocated by Hippocrates and Galen,
as well as Aristotle’s more spiritually inclined counterpart, which positions melancholy as a symptom of creativity and intellectual genius. Shakespearean comedy repeatedly blends the two philosophies as it rethinks melancholy through comic theatre and, conversely, retheorises comedy through melancholy. Characters rely on explicitly humoral lexicons to express themselves and, likewise, frame their melancholic dispositions as markers of a unique sense of interiority and wisdom. Conversely, this sustained focus on melancholy reshapes Shakespearean comedy away from its farcical or romantic heritage and into the more emotionally complex dramatic efforts of later tragicomedies. Comic melancholy in Shakespeare underscores the dramatic limits of this psycho-humoral dimension as it transforms the genre of comedy. The plays dislocate the notion of melancholy from individual, bodily characterisations and recast it as a more liminal, emotional imprint that proves at once painful and pleasurable.

Though Shakespeare draws substantially from established traditions, the sense of comic melancholy he extracts from them proves extraordinary, even within the plethora of meanings that early modern culture ascribes to melancholy. This book thus understands Shakespearean comic melancholy not as a fixed ideology but rather as a multivalent dramatic concept that results from the distillation of various classical and early modern sources. It underlines the productive site of analytical friction that a comic tradition of Shakespearean melancholy affords. As I will argue, the more wistful sense of melancholy that emanates from Shakespeare’s final plays marks an endpoint of sorts in the transformation of melancholy within Shakespearean comedy from an understanding of the emotions as dichotomised and towards one of them as cyclical. Through their sustained engagement with melancholy, the plays foster a perception of these seemingly oppositional sentiments as equally integral components of the affective response process; to be merry and melancholic, the plays suggest, is to be human. Ultimately, the
deceptively potent sorrow at the core of Shakespeare’s comedies, what I come to define as their ‘melancomic’ quality, forges previously unnoticed links between Shakespearean comedy and modern theories of melancholia. Under these terms, Shakespearean comedy can be conceived of as a prism that fundamentally alters melancholy as it runs through it, taking in the philosophies of Galen, Aristotle, Robert Burton and others and refracting out our modern understanding of the idea.

Shakespeare’s development of melancholy proves simultaneously anchored in the prevalent scientific discourses of his time and remarkably innovative as he hopscotches between several authoritative sources available to him. His theatre displays significant opportunism in reworking various socio-medical understandings of melancholy while developing a comic philosophy of the concept that, while very much in tune with its predecessors, proves unique to the period’s dramatic output. The classical binary of galenic and Aristotelian melancholy is a well-rehearsed one that clearly delineates the concept’s rich history. Galen’s work on anatomy provides the underpinnings of a humoral understanding of melancholy, while Aristotle introduces the connection to intellectual proficiency and creativity. However, such a dichotomy misleadingly glosses over the prevalence of melancholy within classical discourses, as the notion is discussed with remarkable frequency by philosophers, physicians and poets over the centuries. The two traditions intertwine through the ages to shape the primary doctrines of melancholy that wind up at the core of an early modern understanding of the subject. Ever opportunistic, Shakespearean comedy borrows indiscriminately from both traditions in developing a comic sense of melancholy for the Renaissance stage. In the same fashion that Shakespeare drew from Ovid, Holinshed, Greene and Plautus in creating dramatic plots, he channels elements from Galen, Aristotle, Ficino and Timothy Bright to create his own sense of comic melancholy.
References to black bile and its effects on human anatomy appear ubiquitously in scientific work produced in antiquity. In the ‘Nature of Man’, Hippocrates explains how ‘the body of a man has in itself blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile [and] these make up the nature of his body and through these he feels pain and enjoys health’. Plato writes in his dialogues that when humours wander up and down [man’s] body without finding a vent to the outside . . . they produce all sorts of diseases of the soul, [and] each of them produces a multitude of varieties of bad temper and melancholy in the region it attacks. The Stoics similarly acknowledge the ‘phantastic groundless attraction [that] occurs in the melancholic and in madmen’. These descriptions find common roots in the theory of humorality, which stipulates that the universe is composed of four basic elements: fire, air, water and earth. According to humoral theory, each of these elements possessed a dominant characteristic (heat, cold, moisture and dryness, respectively). Such an understanding formed the basis of the classical conception of anatomy, in which the body was comprised of four humours, substances that embodied a specific combination of the elements and traits listed above: blood (hot and dry), phlegm (cold and wet), choler (hot and wet) and melancholy (cold and dry). The governing principle of the humoral doctrine was one of balance, both within the body and in relation to the universe, in which harmony implied ‘a concordance in the movements of air and fluid [where] everything is in sympathy’. The body was thought to contain various other substances and tissues, such as bones and nerves, but the interplay among the four humours, during which ‘the nutriment
becomes altered in the veins by the innate heat, [where] blood is produced when it is in moderation, and the other humours when it is not in proper proportion’,\textsuperscript{7} represented a central tenet in the understanding of human health. The preponderance of a given humour would determine a person’s overall temperament. Melancholy, from the Greek words for black (\textit{melas}) and bile (\textit{khole}), was thought to produce a sorrowful demeanour that was deemed ‘least enviable, for cold and dryness are opposite to the vital qualities’.\textsuperscript{8} Melancholy thus existed first as a necessary constituent of normal human physiology rather than as a physical or mental affliction. Greek thinkers effectively differentiated between what they deemed a natural state of melancholy (an abundance of the black bile within the body) and its unnatural, diseased manifestation. Much like the Stoics’ theoretical conception of the wise man as an ‘ideally virtuous’ model to emulate, classical philosophy conceded that perfect humoral balance constituted a hypothetical ideal rather than a physical reality, one that lent itself to a broader range of discourses than a strictly anatomical conceptualisation.\textsuperscript{9}

Despite a Hippocratic focus on health and balance, the idea of melancholy as disease rapidly came to dominate medical writings on the subject. Essentially, the humours became diseased in cases of extreme imbalances, when passions such as anger and despair would heat bodily humours and produce noxious vapours that could harm the brain through the process of adustion. The works of Galen grew synonymous with a humoral philosophy of melancholy, to the point where Galenism became, as Gail Kern Paster puts it, a ‘dominant physiological paradigm’, a widespread cultural construct that endured well into the seventeenth century in spite of Galen gradually being forsaken as a medical authority.\textsuperscript{10} The treatises also display a surprising awareness of readership in offering anecdotal examples of
outrageous symptoms and bodily side effects that seek to inform as much as they do entertain. In ‘On the Affected Parts’, Galen recalls a melancholic’s overwhelming fear that ‘Atlas who supports the world will become tired and throw it away’. The story is repeated almost verbatim, and without any reference to Galen, in a list of melancholic symptoms found in Johann Weyer’s *Of Deceiving Demons* (1562). This detailing of outrageous bodily and psychological symptoms offers a prime example of the merger of medical and literary practices that begins in antiquity, a kind of scientific sensationalism that subsequently informs many early modern humoral writings.

The disease of melancholy always proves difficult to characterise definitively since it channels an overwhelming plethora of symptoms and putative causes that render any treatment onerous. Indeed, a multitude of factors, ranging from diet and exercise through natural elements such as air or flora to a penchant for vice or luxury, were thought to influence melancholy. As might be expected, the prescribed remedies were as varied as the causes and symptoms of the illness, but similarly revolved around the physical evacuation of humoral excesses. The one element that proves a staple in most discourses is the idea that melancholy produces a sense of fear and sadness without apparent cause. As Galen writes, ‘although each melancholic patient acts quite differently than the others, all of them exhibit fear or despondency’.

This particular understanding of melancholy resonates through the Middle Ages as various writers tailor the notion to their respective geographic and cultural concerns, introducing lexical variants and subdivisions of the aforementioned doctrine of fear and sadness. Writing about the life of desert coenobites in the fifth century, Cassian introduces the notion of accidia, a ‘mental state of despondency, lethargy, and discouragement’ to describe the languor that often plagues his subjects. ‘Of the Spirit of Accidie’ builds on
galeonic theories through its sustained focus on the dangers of idleness and antisocial behaviour that strongly reverberates in early modern representations of melancholy. The work on melancholy by the famed Arab physician Avicenna (c. 1170) offers a more medicalised account that further bridges classical and early modern discourses on the subject. Though Avicenna’s contention innovates on the classical model, the galenic influence still appears strong, both in its grounding of the notion in physiological principles and in its inference that melancholy, in its natural state, is a necessary and useful anatomical component. For Avicenna, melancholy becomes a touchstone of disposition, a reactionary agent for other fluids to interact with, a combination which, in turn, creates the melancholic disease. ‘If it were pure black bile,’ he writes, ‘then there would be a great deal of deliberation, and a reduction of frenzy; unless it was stirred and upset, or unless there were enmities which could not be forgiven.’

Around the same time, Hildegard of Bingen (c. 1151–8) introduces a gendered distinction to the discussion of melancholy, depicting melancholy women as ‘heedless and dissolute in their thoughts and of evil dispositions if they are grieved by any irritation’. Again, Bingen’s text recuperates galenic discourse to establish her male–female dichotomy of melancholy. It is the sustained galenic presence more than each individual argument of melancholy that is worth noting here. The definitions these authors put forth earmark the permutations that the concept of melancholy undergoes from its classic inception towards early modernity, under the paradoxical guises of a primarily physical ailment concealing powerful psychological underpinnings.

Shakespeare’s most direct sources for an understanding of the melancholic influence remain early modern, but the humoral tradition expounded here shapes the contemporary discourses he draws from. Though well suited to tragedy, the overarching association with fear and sorrow does
not serve the comic genre as fruitfully; Shakespearean melancholy always implies a sense of sadness, but the galenic model and its fluid repartee between physiological, psychological and behavioural undertones allows the comedies to integrate melancholy into multiple iterations. Shakespeare borrows heavily from the galenic discourse when having characters explain, refer to or advocate for their melancholy. The humoral lexicon becomes a representational stage tool that immediately communicates a character’s makeup to audiences. Shakespeare eventually disengages from individual humoral characterisations in developing a comic sense of melancholy, but principles of Galen’s humoral philosophy, such as balance and excess, loom large in his early comedic efforts. The plays are never locked into such an ideology, however, as they borrow as heavily from the Aristotelian tradition of genial melancholy.

Sad Clowns, Tortured Artists and Savvy Philosophers: The Genial Melancholy Tradition

Genial melancholy does not so much oppose its galenic counterpart as it complements it through the belief that melancholy can denote creativity, depth of character and intellectual genius. The idea is best represented in Aristotle’s interrogation in ‘Problem XXX’: ‘Why is it that all those men who have become extraordinary in philosophy, politics, poetry, or the arts are obviously melancholic, and some to such an extent that they are seized by the illness that comes from black bile?’ Whether Aristotle did in fact write the seminal classical discussion of melancholy does not matter much in the wake of his sustained association with it throughout history. Much in the way that Galen becomes the figurehead of a larger physiological imagining of melancholy, Aristotle is positioned as genitor to its intellectual
What’s so Funny about Humours?  

tradition by ‘Problem XXX’. Aristotle’s definition of melancholy finds its root in the idea that mingling (of hot and cold, of disease and natural temperament and so on) can produce a number of effects in an individual, both internal and external. He remarks that

in most people, therefore, arising from their daily nutrition, it produces no differences in character, but only brings about some melancholic diseases. But those in whom such a mixture has formed by nature, these straightaway develop all sort of characters each different in accordance with the different mixture; for instance, those in whom (the black bile) is considerably cold become sluggish and stupid, whereas those in whom it is very considerable and hot become mad, clever, erotic, and easily moved to spiritedness and desire, and some become more talkative.20

Aristotle conceives of melancholy as a linchpin of possibilities, a spinning wheel of symptoms, causes and behaviours that cover the near-entirety of human attributes, from the negative (mad, sluggish and stupid) to the positive (clever, erotic and spirited). Yet his understanding somewhat disregards the body to focus primarily on intellectual features. He writes that individuals whose intelligence is affected by the heat of melancholy

are affected by diseases of madness or inspiration . . . those in whom the excessive heat is relaxed toward a mean, these people are melancholic, but they are more intelligent, and they are less eccentric, but they are superior to the others in any respects, some in education, others in arts, and others in politics.21

‘Problem XXX’ lists a few classical heroes and philosophers who have suffered from such a condition before surmising that ‘in many such men diseases have come from this sort of
mixture in the body, whereas in others their nature clearly inclines toward these conditions’.

Thus, the natural state of melancholy does not suggest an ailment that occasionally plagues the philosopher or artist but rather, as Julia Kristeva suggests, is understood as the ‘very nature [and] ethos’ of the thinking man. This understanding offers a somewhat self-serving validation for those suffering from melancholy who happen to be writing about it. One cannot help but notice the irony of a melancholic philosopher declaring melancholy to be a marker of excellence in arts such as philosophy and poetry. This tendency towards self-identification becomes a common tenet of genial melancholy, one that Robert Burton eventually perfects in the seventeenth century and that informs much of the dramatic engagement with the idea, where countless characters attempt to justify their melancholy as a sign of intellectual and emotional gravitas.

Though the Middle Ages somewhat cast aside Aristotle’s conception of melancholy in favour of Avicenna’s physiological understanding, the idea re-emerges in the medical discourse of the fifteenth-century Italian physician Marsilio Ficino. Though his focus is primarily humoral, being concerned with the diagnosing, cataloguing and treatment of the diseases of the back bile, Ficino’s discussion of the ways in which melancholy affects the scholar in ‘On Caring for the Health of Students’ borrows from Aristotle’s figure of the melancholic genius. Ficino identifies astrological, spiritual and anatomical sources of melancholy in scholars and thinkers alike. The acknowledgement of the planets’ influence on behaviour predates Ficino, but its iteration in *The Book of Life* solidifies the idea that the fragile microcosm of human temperament stands at the mercy of external factors. It is when discussing the natural and anatomical source of scholarly melancholy that Ficino touches on genial melancholy most directly. He writes that
What’s so Funny about Humours?

because the pursuit of knowledge is so difficult, it is necessary for the soul to remove itself from external things to internal as if moving from the circumference to the centre. While one is looking at this centre of man... it is necessary to remain very still, to gather oneself at the centre, away from the circumference. To be fixed at the centre is very much like being at the centre of the earth itself, which resembles black bile. Contemplation itself, in its turn, by a continual recollection and compression, as it were, brings on a nature similar to black bile.  

Ficino legitimises the melancholic man by inscribing him in the elemental world. Much in the way that melancholy lies at the core of our planet through its association with earth; one must turn back towards oneself in order to truly excel intellectually. Melancholy thus invites a closing in on oneself, a withdrawal from the social dimension of life in order to achieve intellectual and spiritual excellence, all the while paradoxically connecting the melancholic individual to the world he inhabits. Ficino nevertheless acknowledges the disastrous effects that black bile exerts. For him, the act of thinking does violence upon the body since ‘in thinking, the spirit is also continually broken by such movement’. The condition is at its worst in philosophers since, as he explains, ‘their minds get separated from their bodies and bodily things’. The conception of ‘the melancholy scholar’, characterised by Ficino as a sensitive intellectual whose depth of character dwarfs others, gained tremendous popularity during the Renaissance.

The idea of melancholy as a necessary evil in the pursuit of knowledge further impresses the notion of sacrifice in the name of excellence. Genial melancholy becomes the asking price for attaining mastery and superiority within a given field of study, a notion which eventually fosters the archetypical representation of the tortured artist or genius who
Shakespearean Melancholy suffers through his craft for the benefit of others. As far as comedy is concerned, this idea is best encapsulated by the twentieth-century allegorical story of the sad clown and the psychiatrist: ‘someone once visited a doctor to find a cure for depression. “Do something amusing,” said the doctor, “like going to the circus – the great clown Grock is in town.” The patient looked infinitely sad. “But you see, doctor, I am Grock”’. The clown figure is at once intrinsically connected to the world by the laughter he elicits and yet desperately isolated by his crippling melancholy. The clown figure is thus destined to wallow in misery to everyone else’s amusement. The performative potential attached to genial melancholy offers Shakespearean comedy a clear avenue in which to develop its own sense of melancholy, both as a clownish foil (à la Jaques in As You Like It) and as a way to infuse emotional complexity into comic plots.

No Business Like Sad Business: Early Modern Melancholy

The majority of critics agree that the Renaissance represents a ‘golden age of Melancholy’ during which a fascination with the concept informs much of the period’s literary and scientific output in England, to the point of its cultural appropriation as a distinctively English trait. As Robert Burton eventually writes in his quintessential The Anatomy of Melancholy, ‘we are of the same humours and inclinations as our predecessors were; you shall find us all alike, much at one, we and our sons’. Discussions of melancholy thus relied on a blending of galenic and Aristotelian philosophies, being couched in the humoral terminology of purgation and balance while repeatedly bringing up the notion’s spiritual dimension and propensity for ingenuity. A fixation with diagnosing and treating melancholy, apparent as early as Thomas Elyot’s Castel of Helth (1539), also became a staple of English melancholy. Although foreign
discourses on the subject by the likes of Jaques Ferrand and André Du Laurens were eagerly translated, domestic studies of melancholy, such as Burton’s or Timothy Bright’s, gained tremendous popularity and eventually came to play a crucial role in appropriating melancholy within specifically English norms. The insertion of political nationalism within philosophical enquiries mirrors a broader conflation of medical and literary aspirations in early modern treatises seeking to capitalise on the large-scale popularity of melancholy to satiate their developing readership. These early modern efforts to theorise melancholy provide a potent source of inspiration for Shakespeare’s comic revision of the concept.

Timothy Bright’s *Treatise of Melancholy* (1586) builds on galenic philosophy in order to offer an exhaustive portrait of English melancholy, oscillating between being a medical oeuvre and providing a theological discourse on the properties of the soul. Bright describes melancholy as the ‘fullest of variety of passions [causing] strange symptoms of fancy and affection’ before positioning his anatomical model within an explicitly dogmatic framework that identifies the soul as the optimal connective site between mankind and God. For him, the detriment that melancholy can inflict on the soul proves worse than any form of bodily harm it may cause. Consequently, despite an extensive display of medical knowledge, the treatise identifies divine intervention, where faith leads the physician to successful treatment and spiritual health takes precedence over physical well-being, as the overriding cure for melancholy. In his concluding remarks, Bright conflates Christian doctrine and medical prognostication, asserting that the

discrete application of the wise physician (who is made of God for the health of men) shall bring [God’s help] unto you... for medicine is like a tool and instrument of the
sharpest edge, which not wisely guided nor handled with that cunning which thereto appertaineth, may bring present peril instead of health.\(^3\)

In other words, purges, diets and concoctions may help to alleviate melancholic symptoms, but the ideal remedy is found in virtue and piety; the physician (and writer) must defer to divine will when apprehending the calamity of melancholy. In terms of outlining potential sources of influence for Shakespeare’s revision of melancholy, the success of Bright’s devout endeavour is not as important as his straddling of medical and literary spheres.

Likewise, André Du Laurens’ *Discourse on the Preservation of Sight* (c. 1594, translated 1599) presents itself as both a private medical compendium (Du Laurens served as a physician for the duchess of Uzez) and as an exhaustive survey of melancholy aimed at a larger readership. The work opens with a general condemnation of the contemporary world, in which disease seemingly runs rampant, asking his readers to consider

> the lamentable times and miserable days, that are come upon us in this last and weakest age of the world, partly by reason of the commonness and multitude of infirmities, partly by reason of the strangeness and rebelliousness of diseases breaking out more tediously than heretofore.\(^4\)

The treatise offers relief in the form of instruction on how to alleviate or prevent diseases, among which is counted ‘the store of histories, and means of dispelling the mournful fancies of melancholic moods’.\(^5\) Du Laurens acknowledges the existence of several types of melancholy, but his *Discourse* eschews a discussion of the melancholic disposition itself, as it is found in what he refers to as ‘sound melancholic persons’,\(^6\) in favour of examining the disease of melancholy – what he defines in explicitly galenic terms as ‘a kind of dotage without
any fever, having for his ordinary companions, fear and sadness, without any apparent occasion’. Du Laurens’ treatise also offers another example of the scientific sensationalism previously alluded to, where the symptoms of melancholic patients are offered up as entertainment. At the onset of a chapter concerned with ‘certain melancholic persons’ and their ‘strange imaginations’, he writes that ‘it behoves me now . . . (to the end that I may somewhat delight the reader) to set down some examples of such as have had the most fantastical and foolish imaginations of all others’. The works of Bright and Du Laurens make significant contributions to the cultivation of melancholy as an object of interest that warrants serious empirical analysis while concurrently offering a potent source of entertainment. Their treatises attest to the growing versatility of melancholy as a subject of discourse in the period. Both physicians advocate its eventual eradication, but the fact that their work achieves great success in print speaks to a cultural entrenchment of melancholic philosophies within the early modern psyche that outlasts any medical reservations.

Both Robert Burton’s *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) and Jaques Ferrand’s *A Treatise on Lovesickness* (1623, translated c. 1640) exert a great degree of influence on early modern conceptions of melancholy, presenting nearly exhaustive compendiums of the subject matter. Though published after Shakespeare’s lifetime, both texts represent syntheses of prevalent and widely circulated melancholic discourses in early modern England throughout the sixteenth century. Ferrand’s work is remarkable in that it focuses explicitly on the condition of lovesickness, maintaining a primarily medical focus in diligently expounding the methods of diagnosing, treating and, eventually, curing the illness. The result is a thoroughly early modern view of love-melancholy that combines a robust classical framework with innovative scientific approaches detailing ‘pharmaceutical treatments specifically
intended for love melancholy’. Love-melancholy plays a crucial role in Shakespeare’s comedies, particularly at the turn of the century, when works such as *Twelfth Night* mark the apogee of his comic revision of melancholy. Nevertheless, in its strict differentiation of natural and deviant incarnations of melancholy, its caution against idleness and its final praise of ‘the honing and perfection of wisdom’, Ferrand’s treatise adopts a generally moralistic view of melancholy that recalls the one propounded by Bright, which similarly blurs the boundaries between scientific, spiritual and literary intentions.

With five editions during his lifetime and nearly a dozen throughout the seventeenth century, Burton’s *Anatomy* remains the epitome of the early modern literary enthrallment with melancholy. ‘I write of melancholy, by being busy to avoid melancholy,’ Burton famously writes, ‘[since] there is no greater cause of melancholy than idleness.’ Immensely popular in England, *The Anatomy* delivers a study of gargantuan proportions that incorporates a plethora of sources, including lengthy sections on romantic and religious forms of melancholy. It proves encyclopaedic in the meticulous collection of sources and the examples it produces in delineating the rampant presence of melancholy in seventeenth-century society. For Burton, melancholy is a national concern that extends beyond the individual, evidenced by the fact, as he writes, that ‘kingdoms, provinces, and politic bodies are likewise sensible and subject to this disease.’ Such a focus accounts for the larger preoccupation with both social and political reform in Burton’s work. Simultaneously, the work adopts an introspective focus on the scholarly form of melancholy from which Burton professes to be suffering. *The Anatomy* is thus no different from contemporaneous treatises in its fluctuating between literary and scientific intentions. The fact that the overall study is embedded within a
fictional narration by ‘Democritus Junior’ alerts us to the inherent dangers of treating Burton’s work as a purely scientific encyclopaedia of melancholy. It remains, however, the most renowned and sustained discussion of the subject. In addition to providing an invaluable wealth of information on the complex and often dizzying subject, it presents melancholy as fundamentally paradoxical, its remarkable discursive staying power equalled only by its incredible philosophical versatility.

Michel de Montaigne’s essays offer a potential Continental source of influence for Shakespeare’s comic melancholy that similarly attests to the concept’s dualistic nature. Montaigne’s essays express a certain disdain for sadness or, more precisely, for its excessive posturing alongside attributes such as wisdom, virtue and conscience as a ‘stupid and monstrous ornament’. The essays criticise the more superficial and easily remedied sense of sorrow, noting that little can be gained or learned from ‘[mediocre] passions that allow themselves to be savoured and digested’. Conversely, for Montaigne, true grief, the kind that dumbfounds ‘the whole soul’, serves an important purpose in its aftermath since it relaxes the soul ‘into tears and lamentations, [causing it to] unbend, extricate itself, and gain more space and freedom’. The essays remain too anchored within their own genre to be of direct influence on dramatic texts, yet both Shakespeare and Montaigne’s works suggest that melancholy and mirth can (and should) exist in paradoxical symbiosis within the individual. Montaigne’s idea that the ‘soul is often agitated by diverse passions’ recalls the humoral model of anatomy, in which the ideal of a dominant governing humour often gives way to a contested mingling of substances owing to the inherent ‘volatility and pliancy’ of our constitutions.

The comedies nod to this understanding of emotions without necessarily drawing explicitly from it. Early modern
conceptions of melancholy are constant in their scientific underpinnings yet fundamentally unstable in their definitions of their subject, which acts for them as a referent for a whole gamut of afflictions, from severe mental disturbances through physical ailments to a more mundane sense of sadness. Much like their classical ancestors, the works discussed here are representative of a broader social understanding of melancholy. Several critics have posited that Shakespeare would have been familiar with Bright’s work and, concurrently, with Thomas Wright’s *Passions of the Minde* (1601), which examines the wide-ranging effects engendered by various extremes of passion such as sadness or fear, several of which can be tied to melancholy. All of these works provide multiple templates for Shakespeare to rework melancholy through the prism of comedy. Though I refer to specific works throughout this book, my dominant critical commentary revolves around Shakespeare’s opportunistic distilling of various philosophies of melancholy throughout his comic canon.

The plays recuperate such a dovetailing of scientific and literary aims through their development of a comic sense of melancholy predicated upon performance and public fascination with the concept. The medical knowledge in Shakespeare remains subservient to dramatic intentions; scientific accuracy and medical rigour routinely give way to more colourful examples that extreme symptoms can procure. Even when characters express themselves with reference to humours, their melancholy simultaneously operates on a different level. Shakespeare never endorses a dominant doctrine for melancholic dramatisations, positioning the writings of Aristotle and Galen on the same level as the various early modern medical treatises on the subject: as easily recognisable signposts of melancholy that can be subsequently adapted to suit specific dramatic requirements. As the following chapters will demonstrate, comic melancholy in Shakespeare can seldom be accommodated solely through medical prognosis.
What’s so Funny about Humours?

and cure, nor can it be strictly understood as a revision of the Aristotelian philosophy of genial melancholy. The plays both rely on and work against such traditions in developing comic characterisations of melancholy. Likewise (as a result of it, more precisely), Shakespearean comedy proves simultaneously to be anchored in the genre’s rich history and to depart from it in innovative ways.

**Comic History Through the Shakespearean Prism**

As their mythical founders Thespis and Susarion suggest, Tragedy and Comedy have seemingly always existed as binary opposites of one another. Aristotle’s brief discussion of comedy in *Poetics*, as an ‘imitation of men worse than the average; worse, however, not as regards any and every sort of fault, but only as regards one particular kind, the Ridiculous, which is a species of the Ugly’, should not be considered as a dismissal of the genre but rather, as Andrew Stott argues, as evidence of its position as ‘a counterpoint to tragedy . . . for the purposes of producing a symmetrical literary system that reflects a conception of humanity as an amalgamation of two competing facets of character’. The idea further suggests a set hierarchy between the two genres that inevitably undercuts the value of comedy (even as a valid counterpoint, comedy actually helps define what tragedy is by showcasing what it is not). The understanding of comedy as an imitation of human faults and limitations already conflates with characterisation (rather than plot), where specific flaws create a corresponding stock figure. Theophrastus’ seminal *Character*, offering an array of short descriptions of character types meant to reflect ‘the vicissitudes’ of fourth-century Athens, exemplifies the association of comedy and characterisation that was to become one of its salient features through the ages.
This sustained focus on characters helped usher in the shift in antiquity from the older comic model of Aristophanes and its dramatisation of current Athenian affairs, towards the New Comedy of Menander, whose depictions of stock characters and plots repositioned the genre as a more ‘social comedy questioning contemporary Greek attitudes’.

The works of Menander solidify the shift by moving away from previous chorus-centric works, focusing instead on ‘individual voices on stage’ and catering to ‘the audience’s superior knowledge of what has really happened but with no means of apprising those on stage’. It is this focus on comic characterisation that Plautus and Terence recuperate when they later develop their Roman ‘comedy of manners’. The lineage discussed here bears a strong influence on Renaissance comedy in general and on Shakespearean comedy in particular. Shakespeare routinely draws from stock figures (such as the melancholic) and classical plot structure (such as Plautus’ *The Brother Meneachmi* when writing *The Comedy of Errors*). Yet, as will be discussed in greater length in the following chapters, Shakespearean comedy rapidly supersedes such classical models in fashioning its own comic characterisation of melancholy. The humour is rarely a mere counter to revelry but rather is an integral component of a character’s comic ethos.

The prevailing early modern conceptualisations of comedy remained for the most part anchored in their Aristotelian underpinnings, depicting the genre primarily as a tragic foil that could educate audiences to proper mores and behaviours. Sidney’s *Defense of Poesy* echoes Aristotle in defining comedy as

an imitation of the common errors of our life, which he representeth in the most ridiculous and scornful sort that may be, so as it is impossible that any beholder can be content to be such as one. Now, as in geometry the oblique must be known as well as the right, and in arithmetic the odd as well as the
What’s so Funny about Humours?

even, so in the actions of our life who seeth not the filthiness
of evil wanteth a great foil to perceive the beauty of virtue.\textsuperscript{55}

Comedy serves a valid literary and humanistic purpose, according to Sidney, as long as ‘the comical part’, he cautions, ‘be not upon such scornful matters as stir laughter only, but, mixed with it, that delightful teaching which is the end of poesy’.\textsuperscript{56} The \textit{Defence} similarly levies a widespread early modern criticism of works seeking to blend tragic and comic genres into what Sidney describes as the ‘mongrel tragicomedy’, in which ‘neither right tragedies nor right comedies, mingling kings and clowns . . . so as neither the admiration and commiseration nor the right sportfulness is . . . obtained’.\textsuperscript{57} As this book will suggest, Shakespearean comedy undercuts such an attitude from its onset through its development of comic melancholy, constructing in its place a melancomic model that moves away from comical stereotypes and towards more emotionally nuanced dramatic works. Though Shakespeare is not the only playwright to resist such attitudes, his comic engagement with melancholy fundamentally alters the afterlife of both notions by suggesting their oscillatory (and complementary) comic qualities.

\textit{There’s No Crying in Comedy! An Overview of Non-Shakespearean Melancholy}

The beginnings of English comedy, rooted in the modes and practices of Christian morality drama, betray a preoccupation with the mitigation of its characteristic topsy-turvy revelry, one that anticipates the medicalised language quoted earlier from \textit{The Taming of the Shrew}. Nicholas Udall’s \textit{Ralph Roister Doister} (c. 1552) opens on such a pre-emptive defence of the mirthful jesting that is to follow. Its prologue claims that it is
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Used in an honest fashion:
For Mirth prolongeth life, and causeth health,
Mirth recreates our spirits and voideth pensiveness,
Mirth increaseth amity, not hindering our wealth,
Mirth is to be used both of more and less,
Being mixed with virtue in decent comeliness.

(Prologue, 7–12)

The passage stresses the health benefits of the merriment that will follow, using medical allusions to validate the comedy that will be staged. Thus, Matthew Merrygreeke opens the play by discussing the value of mirth, declaring that ‘as long as liveth the merry man (they say) / As doth the sorry man, and longer by a day’ (I, i, 1–2). In early English comedy, being funny seemingly is not enough; the play must also prolong life and engender well-being. The imbued medical vernacular remains mainly tongue-in-cheek and plays such as Ralph Roister Doister and Gammer Gurton’s Needle (printed 1575) prove more concerned with the farcical potential of gender clashes, sexual innuendos and the general clownery of their characters than with melancholy per se. Still, the extolling of the virtues associated with the comic genre carries into the works of pioneering early modern playwrights, such as George Peele’s The Old Wives Tale (printed in 1595), where stories (on and off the stage) become a means by which to ‘drive away the time trimly’ (86) as Old Madge entertains three brothers with an outlandish tale of wandering knights, evil conjurers and damsels in distress. Peele’s comedy, a wonderfully odd blend of magic, romance and theatrics which never directly addresses melancholy, suggests that storytelling itself counteracts tragedy and that even the telling of a ‘heavy tale, / Sad in mood and sober in thy cheer’ (182–3) can bring about merriment. Although melancholy abounds within revenge plays and other tragedies that populate the decade (Thomas Kyd’s The Spanish Tragedy and Christopher
Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* are prime examples of such a phenomenon), it does not receive any substantial comic treatment at this time.

A sustained comic reliance on melancholy emerges in the 1590s, most notably in the courtly drama of John Lyly. Lyly’s interest in the notion revolves primarily around its purported inferences of nobility and intellectualism, as well as its already burgeoning popularity as an affectation. His characters, anchored soundly within the tradition of courtly love, show a clear propensity for melancholy, generally developed within the supernatural auspices of magic or divine intervention. Plays such as *Endymion* (1591) epitomise Lyly’s showcasing of grief-stricken characters whose seemingly hopeless longings are resolved ultimately through regal or godly intervention. *Endymion*’s titular character, desperately in love with the moon, Queen Cynthia, incurs the jealous ire of her lady-in-waiting, Tellus, who casts a spell on him and plunges him into an inescapable sleep for decades. The play draws on the potential for derision of its protagonist’s love-melancholy by underscoring the hindrance that such excessive displays represent. *Endymion*’s extreme bouts of lovesickness (though he sleeps for the better part of the play) clearly stress the need for their eradication. As his friend Eumenides puts it early on, ‘that melancholy blood must be purged, which draweth you to a dotage no less miserable than monstrous’ (I, i, 22–4). Queen Cynthia eventually intercedes and restores him to good health, eradicating his melancholic tendencies in the process. *Endymion* not only offers one of Lyly’s most extensive engagements with melancholy, it also provides a perfect example of the lack of any comic treatment of the humour in his works. Though melancholy is linked to the courtly affectations of the protagonist, the bulk of the comedy resides within the subplot, which depicts the misadventures of the braggard Sir Tophas, an old knight figure in the same tradition as Don Quixote. Melancholy holds
centre stage in Lyly’s comedy but also appears disconnected from the play’s comic undertones, a pattern that repeats itself in other comedies such as Gallathea (1592), in which the central plot of cross-dressing shepherdesses falling in love lends itself to potent melancholic pangs, while the subplot of three brothers seeking to become apprentices supplies most of the comedic moments.

Lyly’s drama contributes to the already established popularity of melancholy as an affect, while casting it explicitly within the scope of the romanticised depictions of nobility. In Midas (1591), the servant Licio answers Motto’s affirmation that he is ‘as melancholy as a cat’ by advising him to ‘say heavy, dull, and doltish [instead]. Melancholy is the crest of Courtiers’ arms, and now every base companion, / Being in his muble fubles, say he is melancholy’ (V, ii, 101–4). Lylian drama remains a notable precursor to, rather than a prime example of, comic melancholy as this book understands it. Nowhere does it showcase the degree of complexity and revisionism that Shakespearean comedy demonstrates in its dramatic development of melancholy. Both the romanticising of melancholy and its potentially troublesome social ubiquity resonate within Shakespearean comedy, particularly in plays such as Love’s Labour’s Lost and Twelfth Night, which explore the comic intricacies of love-melancholy and the dangers of excessive emotional longings. The frequency of such allusions alone suggests that Shakespearean comedy loosens the term’s ties to nobility while it morphs into a multivalent designation of dramatic sadness.

The first substantial comic engagement with melancholy originates within the genre of the humour play, a subset of English comedy that enjoyed scintillating albeit brief popularity on the early modern stage at the close of the sixteenth century. As Peter Womack explains, the comedy of humours, predicated on the exacerbation of the tenets of the four bodily humours,
is produced when the incontinence manifests itself in the arbitrary predominance of one of them, a systemic disorder which gives rise to temperament bias in moderate cases, and extremely to disease and madness. To the extent that this happens – and consequently that the typing serves to distinguish dramatis personae from one another – the humorous individual becomes a monster, because the flow of humour is governing the affections of the heart . . . and because the overrunning of the stable distinction between containing and contained produces uncontrolled appetites and discharges.\textsuperscript{58}

While several dramatists dabble in the genre, the works of George Chapman and Ben Jonson embody the English humour play, where the critiquing and purging of humours, manners and a plethora of quirky behaviour traits become the predominant dramatic focus. Both Jonson and Chapman help to grow melancholy’s dramatic popularity while pigeonholing its development as a source of ridicule on the early modern stage. Chapman is credited with the genre’s inception with plays such as \textit{The Blind Beggar of Alexandria} (1595), which survives in fragments, and \textit{A Humourous Day’s Mirth} (1599), considered the first complete comedy of humours.\textsuperscript{59} Ben Jonson’s humour comedies are of greater importance in terms of establishing a dramatic framework to depict humours onstage. \textit{Every Man In his Humour} (1598) and its companion piece, \textit{Every Man Out of His Humour} (1599), stage a parade of unruly humours that end up methodically purged by witty trickster figures. The process elicits laughter, but also offers a vehicle for Jonson’s clear distaste for the perceived governing powers of humoralism. In the Prologue to \textit{Every Man Out of His Humour}, the Jonsonian mouth-piece, Asper, deplores how a humour may

\begin{quotation}
By metaphor, apply itself
Unto the general disposition:
As when some one peculiar quality
\end{quotation}
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Doth so possess a man, that it doth draw
All his affects, his spirits, and his powers,
In their confl unctions, all to run one way.
But that a rook by wearing a pied-feather,
The cable hat-band, or the three-piled ruff,
A yard of shoe-tie, or the Switzers’ knot
On his French garters, should affect a humour!
O, it is more than most ridiculous.

(Prologue, 103–14)

Jonson’s characters are colourful and engaging, but his approach to humours remains largely satirical. His critique predominantly takes aim at the evasion of responsibility that comes with humorous affectations. For him, humours not only exert a totalising effect on the individual, they also morph into absurd behavioural traits that can be triggered by wearing certain items of clothing. Asper recognises that a man may exhibit a ‘peculiar quality’ superseding his behaviour, but refuses to accept that it can be remedied by any physical or medical mean. As Richard Dutton puts it, humours in Jonson stand as

a moral condition as much as a mental one, reducing [character’s] full status as human beings. In their folly they have lost touch with reality, creating for themselves private worlds of fantasy and illusion which, however comic, are not harmless; they attack the fabric of social harmony, creating the friction and mistrust which run through the play.60

Melancholy is never dealt with extensively and appears as one of several traits being paraded onstage and ultimately curbed, its comic potential inevitably trumped by that of jealousy, braggardery or puritanism. Jonson’s humour plays also offer a synecdochic example of the dramatic veering off that the genre itself eventually undertakes. The genre
gradually transforms ‘humours’ into a bloated tapestry of behavioural quirks, mannerisms, attitudes and accessories that become the target of dramatic ridicule. As their popularity increased, humour plays moved away from the philosophies of humoralism, to the point where, in some cases, the mention of ‘humours’ in a play’s title amounted to an early modern marketing ploy more than a dramatic device. 

The dramatic landscape of the seventeenth century bears witness to a return of sorts towards humoral interest, as the comedies of playwrights such as John Fletcher, Francis Beaumont, John Ford and Phillip Massinger show an increasingly medicalised approach to the dramatisation of humours. In plays such as Fletcher’s *The Humourous Lieutenant* (1619) and Massinger’s *A Very Woman* (1619–22) the diagnosis, treatment and eventual cure of humoral affictions by medical practitioners holds as much dramatic importance as the comedy that ensues from various characters’ humoral extravagances. *The Nice Valour* (1615–25) presents an intriguing protagonist, known as the Passionate Lord, who

Runs through all the Passions of mankind,
And shifts ’em strangely too one while in love,
And that so violent, that for want of business.
He’ll court the very Prentice of a Laundresse,
Though she have kib’d heele: and in’s melancholy agen,
He will not brooke an Empress, though thrice fairer
Than ever Maud was. (I, i, 50–6)

The performative nature of humoral affectation comes across strongly in this description; the speech alerts the audience to the humours the Lord will subsequently enact onstage. The Passionate Lord, through his numerous appearances onstage, exhibits the various bodily humours in sequence. The Lord’s problem, in effect, is not related to an excess of certain humours but, rather, to an endless fluctuation between them.
Humours succeed one another and ‘the taile of his melancholy / Is alwayes the head of his anger’ (III, iv, 5–6). The play impresses the connection between humours and theatrical performances. Beaumont and Fletcher’s plays rely increasingly on the scientific diagnosis, treatment and cure of humoral ailments, as opposed to the social correctives heralded by humours plays. Melancholy appears extensively in such comedies, epitomised in John Ford’s *The Lover’s Melancholy* (1628), where a physician (Corax) is asked to cure the melancholy that afflicts Palador, ruler of Cyprus. The entire play revolves around the proper diagnosing and treatment of Palador’s melancholy, which, Corax tells us, ‘is not as you conceive, indisposition / Of body, but the mind’s disease’ (III, i, 109–10). The physician eventually triumphs after having Palador witness an elaborate masque depicting the varied strains of melancholy that can afflict an individual. Posing the correct diagnosis magically lifts the melancholic veil that afflicted the patient. Here, melancholy is intrinsically connected to the comedy it occupies, but its treatment is firmly encased in the medicalised tradition described earlier; the physician more than his patient stands as the comic hero.

Interestingly, given the ongoing popularity of humours on the English stage under various permutations, Shakespeare never writes a humour comedy, either in the Jonsonian sense or in the seventeenth-century medicalised vogue described above. Critics such as Giorgio Melchiori have suggested that *The Merry Wives of Windsor* represents Shakespeare’s response to the humour play genre. Portions from the play invitingly lend themselves to a parody of humour comedies, such as when Corporal Nym delivers this assessment of Falstaff:

And this is true. I like not the humour of lying. He hath wronged me in some humours. I should have borne the humoured letter to her; but I have a sword, and it shall bite upon my necessity.
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He loves your wife; there’s the short and the long.
My name is Corporal Nym; I speak and I avouch ’tis true. My name is Nym, and Falstaff loves your wife.
Adieu. I love not the humour of bread and cheese,
and there’s the humour of it. Adieu. (II, i, 122–30)

The repeated mentions of the word ‘humour’ in nine lines of text point to a critique of the genre, depriving the concept of any meaningful dramatic impact by exacerbating its potential uses. Other than a few key moments such as Nym’s speech, *The Merry Wives*, much like the rest of Shakespeare’s comic canon, never seems to follow the humour play model. None of his comic works include the word ‘humour’ in their titles, nor do they approach the subject (melancholy especially) under similar farcical underpinnings. His comedy achieves greater complexity by weaving the melancholy into the dramatic fabric. In charting out the dual revisions of melancholy and comedy that Shakespeare undertakes, this book aims to address such a critical oversight in Shakespeare studies, where melancholy is seldom considered as an intrinsic comic element.

*Why so Serious? The Problem of the Melancomic in Shakespeare Criticism*

The idea that Shakespearean comedy bears witness to an ongoing clash of mirthful and sorrowful elements is well established in critical history. As early as 1765, Samuel Johnson remarked that

Shakespeare has united the powers of exciting laughter and sorrow not only in one mind, but in one composition. Almost all his plays are divided between serious and ludicrous characters, and, in the successive evolutions of the design, sometimes produce seriousness and sorrow, and sometimes levity and laughter.63
This affective polarity, predicated on a distinction between amiable and antagonistic characters, lies at the heart of archetypical studies of Shakespearean comedy by C. L. Barber and Northrop Frye and their perception of the genre as inherently exclusionary, a dramatic world in which the driving comic force sharply divides characters who embrace celebration from those who oppose it. Their studies of festivity, rites and the communal dimension of comedy provide the original caveat on which to interpret Shakespearean comedy as the contrast of mirthful and pessimistic forces.

Within this model, melancholic characters are depicted as nemeses to merriment. Barber writes of Jaques in *As You Like It* that his ‘factitious melancholy, which critics have made too much of as a “psychology,” serves primarily to set him at odds both with society and with Arden and so motivate contemplative mockery’.

There is nothing wrong *per se* with such a reading of the character, but it drastically overlooks the incredible potency of melancholy in the play, which goes beyond individual characterisation. Likewise, Frye places Shakespearean melancholics within a category of characters he terms comic *idiotes*, dramatic figures representing ‘the focus of the anticomic mood [and a] withdrawal from the comic society’.

Frye maintains that such characters not only hinder but actually threaten the process of self-discovery that characterises the genre. As he explains, the *idiotes*

is usually isolated from the action by being the focus of the anticomic mood, and so may be the technical villain, like Don John, the butt, like Malvolio and Falstaff, or simply opposed by temperament to festivity, like Jaques. Although the villainous, the ridiculous, and the misanthropic are closely associated in comedy, there is enough variety of motivation to indicate that *idiotes* is not a character type, like the clown, though typical features recur, but a structural device that may use a variety of characters.
Though diminutive, Frye’s interpretation gets us closer than Barber’s to a proper understanding of the function of melancholic characters in Shakespearean comedy. As will become clear in later chapters, the characters listed in the passage above (save Falstaff) are all relevant to an exploration of comic melancholy in Shakespeare, suggesting that the idea may indeed be conceived of as a structural device on the level of characters. Still, the binary of inclusion and exclusion present in these understandings of Shakespearean comedy fails to properly delineate the dramatic function of melancholy, which is never easily or successfully excluded from comic celebrations.

The dichotomy of comic characterisation outlined above informs much of the scholarship that follows, be it concordant or reactionary. Even analyses that account for the darker undertones of Shakespearean comedy seek to designate characters as either facilitating or impeding comic resolution, whether they be Frye’s idiots, Levin’s ‘playboys’ and ‘killjoys’ or, as Kenneth Muir writes, downright ‘evil characters’ who threaten the comic resolution’. Again, such readings perform a disservice to melancholic characters by absorbing them into the larger category of anticomic foils. Shakespearean melancholics transcend such classification. They permeate countless designations within the plays; they are men, women, merchants, dukes, jesters, heiresses, lovers, heroes or villains. Melancholic characters become emblematic of the blend of mirthful and unhappy elements that characterise Shakespearean comedy in general. They provide evidence that the genre finds its nexus in tonal dissonance, in the symbiotic conflation of comic and uncomic elements. In other words, if comic scenes can populate Shakespeare’s tragedy and history plays – the porter scene in Macbeth or Falstaff’s involvement in the history plays, for example – the reciprocal association may hold true as well, if only on the level of dramatic makeup. From this
thwarting of generic structures we may infer that some elements found in Shakespearean comedy are not intrinsically comic, *nor do they need to be*. To construe Shakespearean comedy as an amalgamation of different thematic and tonal fragments permits the understanding of comic melancholy as a valid mode of self-representation that is not only viable but dramatically necessary. This interpretation echoes that of Karen Newman, who contends that Shakespeare’s characters ‘are marked by what we might call a residue beyond their function . . . as agents, beyond their relation to specific actions’. For Newman, the inherent opposition found in comic characters (dating back to Samuel Johnson) is best understood as a strategy towards more realistic characterisations. As she writes, the real conflict in Shakespearean comedy transpires ‘between two different and opposing conventions, one which foregrounds itself and its artifice, the other which conceals itself by seeming “real”’.69

Newman’s understanding of dovetailing methods of characterisation in Shakespeare relying on artificial constructs to produce more ‘life-like’ representations resonates with the dual revisionist process that this book ascribes to Shakespearean comedy. This idea also recalls Katherine Maus’s discussion of what she terms the ‘radically synecdochic’ nature of early modern theatre when contrasting the genre’s physical limitations with its fervent appeal to the imagination.70 By using the artifices of stage melancholy, Shakespeare manages to create a more complex representation of the humour which, in turn, reshapes its philosophical underpinnings. Thus, in an attempt to chart the dual rethinking of comedy and melancholy that Shakespeare undertakes as early as in *The Comedy of Errors*, I focus not so much on melancholic characters but on comic characters that are melancholic.

While individual melancholic characters in Shakespearean comedy have received a substantial amount of critical attention over the years, this effort has been mainly undertaken
within larger interpretations of specific plays. Most readings of *The Merchant of Venice*, for example, offer a cause for Antonio’s sadness, but they do so in a manner that betrays a certain critical anxiousness in their urge to address the issue and move on to other concerns, treating melancholy as a stepping stone towards other lines of enquiry. I do not necessarily reject this interpretive strategy, but I seek to move beyond it by considering the functionality of melancholy within the genre of Shakespearean comedy, rather than within a given play. In doing so, I echo Jeremy Lopez’s vision of a systemic comic failure in Shakespeare denoted by the absence of certain characters from a play’s conclusion – ‘characters’, Lopez writes, who serve as ‘a reminder of the fact that the comedy has not entirely neatly tied up loose ends’. These characters, ‘whose bizarre energy’, he adds, ‘is allowed to pervade the play to the point where they have an interpretative effect disproportionate to what the genre would seem to require of them’, represent an analogous dramatic process to that of the intersecting rethinking of melancholy and comedy that Shakespeare undertakes throughout his career.

‘To tell sad stories’: Sorrowful Terminology

‘How canst thou part sadness and melancholy?’

Armado’s question to his page in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* (I, ii, 7) introduces a potential roadblock that a study of melancholy in Shakespearean comedy might encounter: are all references to sadness to be considered as melancholy? It is certainly true that not every utterance of sorrow in comedy immediately translates into a melancholic affectation that seriously complicates comic structures. Going as far back as Frye, the genre has often been perceived as ‘a structure embodying a variety of moods, the majority of which are comic in the sense of festive or funny, but a minority of which, in any
well-constructed comedy, are not'. Not only can a sorrowful premise exist in comedy, but it may also serve to intensify the eventual celebratory climax (as it often does in Shakespeare). On some level, early modern dramatists use terms such as ‘melancholy’, ‘sorrowful’ or ‘sad’ as somewhat homologous variants within the larger lexicon of sadness. This practice develops concurrently with a widespread reliance on humoral language as a dramatic tool of self-representation that further complicates the issue. Hence, Mistress Ford’s question to her husband, ‘why art thou / Melancholy?’ (II, i, 135–6), in The Merry Wives of Windsor and Antonio’s declaration at the onset of the Merchant of Venice, ‘I know not why I am so sad’ (I, i, 1) both hint at a similar emotion. Yet Mistress Ford’s question is soon dismissed – ‘I melancholy? I am not melancholy’ (II, i, 137) – while Antonio’s unresolved melancholy, as I argue later, represents one of the play’s salient features. Similarly, in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Theseus’ order to ‘awake the pert and nimble spirit of mirth [and] Turn melancholy forth to funerals; / The pale companion is not for our pomp’ (I, i, 13–15) suggests a rigid binary of mirth and melancholy similar to the one alluded to by Berowne near the end of Love’s Labour’s Lost when he declares, ‘to move wild laughter in the throat of death? / It cannot be. It is impossible. / Mirth cannot move a soul in agony’ (V, ii, 845–7). Theseus’ speech, however, does not carry the more ominous quality of Berowne’s in the wake of the French king’s passing.

Though the word ‘melancholy’ and its derivations are used extensively within Shakespeare’s comic canon, I focus on instances that carry a larger function at the level of form, to the extent that they operate as an essential cog in the mechanism of Shakespearean comedy. I use the lexical fields of melancholy and sadness somewhat reciprocally within this frame, as I do with ‘wistfulness’ in later chapters when referring to the spectral sense of melancholy that pervades
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Shakespeare’s final group of plays. Conversely, since this book attempts to extricate humour (in the generic sense) from the humoral (in its larger philosophical sense), I wish to avoid for my readers the sort of confusion that brought on blank stares from colleagues when mentioning my work on comic humour. For the purpose of clarity, I will use the term ‘humour’ only in reference to matters of humoralism, so as to not confound it with its alternative connotation (as a synonym for comedy). The latter connotation emerges from the concept of bodily humours, but it appears near 1680, where possessing a ‘sense of humour’ begins to refer to ‘that quality of action, speech, or writing, which excites amusement; oddity, jocularity, facetiousness, comicality, fun’.

Shakespeare’s comic treatment of melancholy both enables and adds complexity to the genre by moving away from the obvious dramatic avenues of mockery and derision. In distilling various philosophical discourses of melancholy into an unprecedented dramatic and affective incarnation, Shakespeare places the tenets of comedy and melancholy in a close dialogical relationship that effectively alters both of their theoretical afterlives.

In this sense, Shakespeare’s dual revision of comedy and melancholy anticipates Joseph Addison’s eighteenth-century aesthetics of laughter and its inherent shift from a ‘transgressive category [within] a moral discourse . . . into an aesthetics of pleasurable response, sympathetic laughter, and comedy’. Critics such as Ronald Paulson have linked Addison’s theory to Cervantes (and, tangentially, to Shakespeare), suggesting that Don Quixote undercuts ‘the conventional definition of comedy as satire [and] of laughter as ridicule’. It is not my intention to dwell extensively on such lineage as yet another potential source of Continental influence for Shakespearean comedy, but to hold it as further proof that Shakespeare’s melancomic undertaking happens at a time when both concepts undergo systemic ideological upheavals.
Shakespeare’s development of comic melancholy belongs in such a conversation but also represents its clearest and most influential embodiment within early modernity.

This framework requires a novel understanding of melancholic characters that pushes off from the seminal humoral criticism concerned with early modern melancholy. The contributions of Michael Schoenfeldt and Gail Kern Paster in this regard have been instrumental in outlining the ways in which humoral theory pervades the discursive, social and scientific spheres of early modern England, not merely in moments of emotional or physical trauma but also, as Schoenfeldt puts it, in the realm of ‘mundane activities’ such as eating and bodily evacuation. For Schoenfeldt, these daily acts are as much conducive to self-fashioning as extraordinary moments of revelry and excess since early modern humoral theory stresses control over one’s desire more than their fulfilment.

Within Schoenfeldt’s frame, Shakespeare’s plays provide a particularly salient reflection of an ‘inner reality via external demeanor’, a reliance on physiology to properly sketch out human emotions, desires and intricacies. Using the sonnets as his primary example, Schoenfeldt argues that a drive towards the regulation of desires informs much of the period’s conceptualisation of selfhood. ‘The Renaissance’, he writes,

seems to have imagined identity to emerge from the success one experiences at controlling a series of undifferentiated and undifferentiating desires. To give way to one’s various passions is to yield the self to the kinds of inconstancy with which the Sonnets themselves continually battle on a variety of fronts.

The oppositional dynamics Schoenfeldt describes resonate in the binary of self-control and emotional release that characterises Shakespearean comedy. Schoenfeldt comes close to uncovering the functionality of comic melancholy, particularly in his idea that the optimal aim of Shakespearean comedy
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‘is to find a way to direct such desire to socially approved ends’. Still, his model does not engage with comic melancholy in any significant way, highlighting once more the critical shortcomings that come to define the issue. Though Schoenfeldt accurately identifies the opposition that melancholics encounter throughout Shakespearean comedy – through the medium of characters like The Merchant of Venice’s Nerissa, who preaches self-control and regulation to her mistress in her first appearance on stage (II, i) – Shakespeare’s revision of melancholy escapes such a definition. Even in Merchant, there exists a strong impression that Antonio’s melancholy, though bothersome to other characters, serves a vital purpose within the comedy beyond advocacy for regulation. Shakespeare’s comic melancholy eschews self-regulation because the characterisations it offers are never strictly humoral.

Gail Kern Paster’s writings on humours contrast Schoenfeldt’s conception of the body as embedded in daily regulatory practices by stressing its basic instability. As she explains, ‘the humoral body should be characterized not only by its physical openness but also by its emotional instability and volatility, by an internal microclimate knowable . . . more for changeability than for stasis’. For Paster, passions are unruly and inevitably threaten the subject’s mastery of his abilities, but such fluctuations are to be expected in the course of everyday life. More central to her contention is the notion of humoral subjectivity, in which humours not only provide individuals with ‘characteristic ways of responding to their worlds’, but form the basis of what she terms ‘a fluid form of consciousness inhabited by, even as it inhabits, a universe composed of analogous elements’. Paster’s work unearths the fundamentally social nature of early modern humoralism, when emotional experiences always transpire within a dense cultural context. Early modern drama relies on this sociocultural realm as a way of understanding, navigating and affirming oneself within the early modern world. Yet, such a framework only tells part of
the story as far as Shakespearean depictions of melancholy are concerned. As Paster accurately points out, for Shakespeare’s comic characters, ‘humoral thinking is the basis for self-understanding and self-justification in a hostile world’. These subjection systems reflect the dialogical relationship of melancholic characters within each play, but Shakespeare’s treatment of comic melancholy exceeds this interpretative level. It allows for a symbiotic rethinking of melancholy in conjunction with the underpinnings of comic theatre so as to understand the profound transformation that melancholy and comedy undergo concurrently in Shakespeare. This divergence is particularly salient in later comic plays, which eventually do away with individual characterisations of melancholy in favour of an intangible sense of wistfulness that resituates them as generic concerns.

There is commensurate value in both critics’ reinterpretation of humoral theories. Thinking back to the passage from Taming cited earlier, the lexicon of comic characters in Shakespeare is by and large humoral, a fact that validates the cultural systems that Paster and Schoenfeldt illustrate. If there is a drawback to their analyses as far as comic melancholy is concerned, it is that it nudges subsequent critical efforts into a similarly constricted scope of research, where the notion is understood mainly as a synecdochic embodiment of larger ideological movements within the period. This focus is best exemplified by works such as Adam Kitzes’ The Politics of Melancholy from Spenser to Milton and Douglas Trevor’s The Poetics of Melancholy in Early Modern England. Each author devotes a chapter to examples of Shakespearean melancholy (in As You Like It and Hamlet, respectively), but neither text capitalises on the potent friction that comic melancholy offers. Most recently, Drew Daniel’s The Melancholy Assemblage: Affect and Epistemology in the English Renaissance and Erin Sullivan’s Beyond Melancholy: Sadness and Selfhood in Renaissance England broke new critical ground in offering definitions of early modern
melancholy as a fundamentally multivalent concept. *The Melancholy Assemblage* contends that the affect cannot be understood without an ‘epistemologically framed account’ that considers both sufferer and witness under manifold incarnations.\(^{86}\) For Daniel, early modern melancholy thus exists both individually and as ‘a plural social and material assemblage of bodies being together’.\(^{87}\) Conversely, Sullivan situates melancholy as a one of several iterations of the ‘complex emotional identity’ tied to ideas of sadness in the period.\(^{88}\) In doing so, she examines the way early modern writers understood ‘seemingly contradictory approaches to sadness and selfhood [and] how they attempted to divide this capacious passion into related, but nevertheless theoretically distinct, categories of grief or worldly sorrow, melancholy, godly sorrow, and despair’.\(^{89}\)

My work benefits importantly from such scholarship, as I join my voice to theirs in arguing for the pluralistic nature of early modern melancholy, which cannot be restricted to any particular niche, be it cultural, scientific or theological. I align myself with Daniel’s key methodological understanding of melancholy, but I depart from him by attending overtly to comedy and making a sustained argument about the relationship between melancholy, philosophy and theatrical form, which is not a primary concern of *The Melancholy Assemblage*. Similarly, though Sullivan’s work touches on comic depictions of melancholy (Shakespeare’s particularly), she does so mainly in a humoral context, drawing attention to ‘the raucous comedy that could arise from melancholy’s very earthy connection to digestion, scatology, and the viscera’.\(^{90}\) My work acknowledges such a focus but departs from it in suggesting that Shakespearean comedy presents multiple versions of melancholy which significantly transform the affect’s relationship to the comic genre in the process.

The philosophy of comic melancholy this book eventually sketches out is in itself plural. The consideration of what I term the fundamentally melancomic quality of Shakespeare’s
comedies stems from their astounding revision, interpretation and rethinking of classical and early modern philosophies of melancholy. It stands at the intersection of social, medical and literary engagements with the ideas outlined above. The melancomic thus represents the dramatic, aesthetic and emotional endgame of the ongoing transformation of Shakespearean comedy that this book uncovers. As I see it, by reworking and eventually rejecting traditional philosophies of melancholy, Shakespeare orients his comic style towards the melancomic as a fundamentally plural concept. As a generic mode, it offers a novel way to denote Shakespeare’s late works that centre on their generic hybridity and substantial melancholic character. Conversely, the term articulates both the complex dramatic tenor of Shakespeare’s later comedies and the emotional response that they invite. The play brings its audience to delight in the intangible sense of sorrow it promulgates through the staging of powerful traumas and their miraculous resolutions. Ultimately, the melancomic bridges the aesthetic and theoretical gaps between Shakespeare’s comic transformation of melancholy and our modern understandings of nostalgia, melancholia and a range of affective and performative concepts.

Melancholia and the Shakespearean Comic Spectre

As this book eventually suggests, there exist interesting interplays between psychoanalytic accounts of melancholia and Shakespeare that need to be redirected into a dialogue with comic melancholy. The works of Sigmund Freud show his interest in Shakespeare both culturally and scientifically; Hamlet looms large in his seminal essay ‘Of Mourning and Melancholia’, notably in the definition of melancholia as ‘the loss of an object that is withdrawn from consciousness’. Yet, Freud seldom engages with comedies within his psychoanalytic interpretations of the notion.
On the whole, I argue against reading backwards, from psychoanalysis into Shakespearean melancholy, a practice that still permeates relevant criticism with surprising frequency. The early modern concept of melancholy and its psychoanalytic counterpart of melancholia cannot be dealt with interchangeably despite obvious theoretical, historical and philosophical kinships. Shakespeare’s development of melancholy, comic or otherwise, resides on the theatrical stage, oscillating between inner reality and performed exteriority. Moreover, the comic vein of melancholy that Shakespearean drama puts forth resists psychoanalytic interpretations through its recuperation of the notion as an intrinsic element of comic theatre that transforms the genre itself. Freud’s theory of melancholia does intersect with the Shakespearean philosophy of melancholy outlined here at various critical junctions. The description of melancholia as a combination of mourning and narcissism that ‘behaves like an open wound, drawing investments to itself from all sides . . . draining the ego to the point of complete impoverishment’, echoes comic characterisations of melancholy such as those of Antonio or Jaques in their suggestion that such an excessive degree of self-investment proves harmful to the afflicted individual. More importantly, comedy seemingly provides the ‘high counter-investment’ that Freud deems crucial in countering the forces melancholia. Comic melancholy, as developed here, allows us to rethink more theoretical definitions of melancholy within emotional and theatrical dimensions.

This book aims to redirect melancholia’s Shakespearean heritage so as to account for its comic ancestry, suggesting that the transformation of melancholy throughout Shakespearean comedy finds strong echoes within modern conceptions of melancholia. My contention is that the altered notion of melancholy that ultimately appears in Shakespeare informs psychoanalytic theories of melancholy as much as – if not to
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a greater degree than – tragic examples such as Hamlet. The ethereal, ubiquitous sense of longing it suggests can be understood in similar fashion as the subconscious and unnameable void created by melancholia. More recent engagements with the gendered, performative and emotional implications of melancholia bear a similar emotional imprint. As I argue later on, the works of Judith Butler and Sianne Ngai both take a cue from the powerful wistfulness of later plays such as Twelfth Night and The Winter’s Tale. Definitions of gender such as Butler’s, which argues that the notion denotes ‘a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane asocial audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief’ benefits from a connection with Shakespearean comic melancholy since the plays ultimately advocate for a validation of the affect as a necessary component of emotional life. The process of recuperating undesirable emotions that Sianne Ngai outlines in Ugly Feelings will also be reconceptualised through its purported comic heritage. Though she distances her work from melancholia, Ngai’s recuperative effort towards ‘negative affects for their critical productivity’ yields an interesting parallel with later explorations of melancholy in Shakespeare’s career. Her consideration of tone in literary works and the related ‘category that makes these affective values meaningful with regard to how one understands as a totality within an equally holistic matrix of social relations’ will be of particular use in examining the late stages of Shakespeare’s comic investment in melancholy.

This book effectively bridges the gap highlighted here in its introduction between the rich amalgamation of philosophical conceptions of melancholy forming its early modern incarnation and its contemporary permutations in psychoanalysis, affect studies and performance studies. Without disregarding the long and insightful lineage of tragic melancholy, Shakespeare’s comic revision offers us the opportunity to alter
our current theoretical gazes to that effect. The nine plays I examine effectively sketch out the progressive rethinking of melancholy and comedy that Shakespeare undertakes and the lasting impact that such a process exerts on the philosophical afterlife of both concepts.

Shakespearean Melancholy

The following chapters attest to the mutual transformation of comedy and melancholy that Shakespeare develops. They first point to the gradual breakdown of traditional representations of melancholy in Shakespeare before turning their attention to its transformation into what I come to refer to as a comic philosophy of melancholy. I initially consider the ways in which early Shakespearean comedies interrogate established conceptions of melancholy such as lovesickness, mourning and interiority. Both *The Comedy of Errors* and *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, I suggest in Chapter 2, apply pressure on these melancholic expressions by developing them within explicitly comedic settings. In *Errors*, we encounter idealised descriptions of melancholy that recall its Aristotelian roots (Antipholus of Syracuse’s intellectualised profession of interiority) and romanticised undertones (Egeon’s stoic recounting of the loss of his family). Conversely, *Love’s Labour’s* depicts a more physiological sense of melancholy, anchored in the philosophies of lovesickness, climatology and ethnology. The chapter underscores the critique that Shakespearean comedy performs in reworking such philosophical notions, which culminates in the ambiguously happy resolution put forth. In both plays, there exist parallel efforts to neutralise and rehabilitate melancholic characters. The humour is not easily purged away through medical expertise, nor is it ultimately celebrated as a sign of interiority. There remains a perceptible sense of doubt as to whether characters eventually do away with the melancholy they express. *Love’s Labour’s Lost* in
particular, with the jarring announcement of the King’s death, suggests that the melancholy of early comedies shatters established classification. In its initial form, the chapter suggests, Shakespearean comedy already rejects traditional definitions of melancholy.

In Chapter 3, I build on this notion by arguing that *Much Ado About Nothing* and *The Merchant of Venice* underscore the limits of a psycho-humoral definition of melancholy, highlighted by the refusal of certain characters to address, define or temper their melancholic dispositions. Don John’s participation in *Much Ado* offers a blueprint of such a process since his villainy proves subsidiary to his melancholic countenance in clashing with the festive spirit that otherwise infuses Messina. This pattern is fully developed in *The Merchant of Venice*, where the troubled melancholic figure is one of the comedy’s protagonists. I argue that rather than seeking a clear cause for it, the merchant’s melancholy needs to be understood as a vital part of the comedy; the *why* of Antonio’s sadness does not matter as much as the fact that he consistently strives to retain the characteristic. The insistent clamouring of both Don John and Antonio on the irremediableness of their melancholy brings attention to the incompatibility of traditional definitions of melancholy with the comic genre. This revisionism disassociates melancholy from the psychophysical binary offered by traditional understandings. It undertakes a turn towards a more multifocal emotional imprint; Shakespearean comedy eventually offers an envisioning of melancholy as a liminal emotional tenet that uproots the concept from its classical underpinnings.

Chapter 4 underscores the powerful emotional ambiguity that characterises the final moments of *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*. This alteration, evidenced by the exaggerated depictions of melancholy offered by characters such as Jaques or Orsino, introduces a new understanding of melancholy that revolves around ideas of mood, time and setting.
No longer tied to physical characterisations but grounded instead in the languor elicited by the inevitable passage of time, melancholy impresses itself into the very fabric of the plays it occupies. It finds particular resonance within the various musical interludes they contain, as well as in the several allusions to the bittersweet temporal perception that characters express. In *As You Like It*, Arden Forest appears as a repository for melancholy, where various characters can discard their woes and transform themselves prior to a return to court. Within this context, Jaques, the hyper-melancholic figure *par excellence*, functions as a siphon that feeds off others’ melancholy. Similarly, melancholy affects most characters in *Twelfth Night*, but the individual characterisations give way to the sustained sense of wistfulness that gradually takes over the play. In both plays, the sense of a comic ending is seriously problematised by the growing sense of wistfulness that develops. Despite the promise of a return to court, the multiple loose ends in *As You Like It* undercut the otherwise joyful resolution. Similarly, a strong sense of this more spectral melancholy, embodied in Feste’s closing ballad, sweeps through the final act, coating it in a wistful longing for times past. The powerful emotional ambiguity of these final moments underscores the symbiotic revisions of melancholy and comedy into a melancomic theatrical and philosophical affect.

Late Shakespearean drama, Chapter 5 suggests, develops this melancomic philosophy, predicated on the yoking together of past memories of sorrow and a present sense of gratification. The late plays’ dovetailing of tragic and comic underpinnings (the staging of powerful trauma in a play’s first half which is miraculously resolved in the final act) is common critical knowledge, yet the strangely wistful tone that characterises the ending of such works stems from taxonomies related to comic melancholy rather than from the tragic overtones of their initial premises. In late Shakespeare,
irreparable past tragedies, exacerbated by lengthy time gaps, haunt seemingly joyous conclusions. The melancholy we find here suggests a voluntary sense of comic failure, since the melancomic quality of the plays infers both the legitimising of melancholy as a valid comic emotion and the nostalgic impossibility of return to a dramatic state of bliss. Doubts remain as to the potential for happiness at the end of *Pericles* despite a miraculous family reunion. The play brings its audience to delight in the intangible sense of sorrow it promotes. Likewise, *The Winter’s Tale* epitomises the idea of a miraculous resolution, yet the intensity of the trauma that has developed coats the ending in an ambiguous emotional response. This emotional response transcends generic quagmires in representing a highly pleasurable feeling that can be understood as a precursor to nostalgia. Lastly, the chapter examines *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (a collaborative effort by Shakespeare and Fletcher) as evidence that, despite its transformative achievements, Shakespeare’s comic melancholy loses out in the dramatic landscape of the seventeenth century, being supplanted by works predicated on a focal return to the humoral and the increased dramatic presence of medical practitioner characters. This shift is best exemplified by the tragicomedies of John Fletcher and his various collaborators (Francis Beaumont and Philip Massinger) as well as John Ford’s *The Lover’s Melancholy*. The play highlights the transition, as it were, from Shakespearean comic melancholy to the alternative that Fletcher’s subplot dealing with the Jailer’s Daughter puts forth.

The concluding chapter charts out potential critical links between Shakespearean comic melancholy and modern conceptualisations of melancholia in the works of Freud, Butler and Ngai. I argue that the comic philosophy of melancholy and of the melancomic I elaborate here, through its performative and affective dimensions, is consistent with the theoretical frameworks of all three writers. The chapter positions
the representation of melancholy as a productive emotional marker akin to nostalgia in its conflation of sorrow and pleasure, as well as the artistic and creative repercussions that such a connection suggests over the years.

In closing this introduction, I must caution somewhat against my own methodology. There is an obvious danger in offering what amounts to a chronological reading of Shakespeare’s comedies, the implication being that a qualitative progression coincides with the aforementioned temporal one. There is value in examining the comedies chronologically, since Shakespeare’s conception of melancholy and comedy does evolve over time. I do not intend any such assessment of quality. I would not declare The Merchant of Venice, for example, to be ‘inferior’ to Twelfth Night, comically or otherwise, nor do I wish to convey the argument that the late plays amount to a ‘perfecting’ of earlier comic efforts. I understand comic melancholy as an ongoing development throughout Shakespeare’s writing career, in which the concept progressively morphs into the elusive yet overarching presence it holds in the tragicomedies. Conversely, I do not endorse a biographical reading of Shakespearean melancholy that would envision the playwright consciously reworking the concept across his career until he finally achieves the desired melancholic effect in his final plays (and breaks his staff). The comedies discussed here are written concurrently with history plays and tragedies, both of which similarly abound with melancholic references. Yet there remains a marked progression in depictions of comic melancholy that warrants specific consideration.

Additionally, in its linking of comedies and late plays, this project overlooks the problem plays and tragedies, creating a dramatic void that needs to be pre-emptively acknowledged. As stated, my interest lies specifically in the ways in which melancholy transforms the comic form of Shakespearean drama. Shakespeare’s turn away from pure ‘comedy’ after
Twelfth Night does not necessarily imply his abandonment of melancholy as a dramatic concept. In essence, my decision to gloss over the mature tragedies and so-called problem comedies (All’s Well that Ends Well, Measure for Measure and Troilus and Cressida), pertains to scope as much as it does to context. While most tragedies and problem plays contain their share of melancholy, the relationship to dramatic structure operates differently. Melancholy is expected from tragedies; the genre compels various forms of despair as characters suffer loss, injuries or death. If anything, one should be wary of characters incapable of grief or sorrow (those who profess not to be what they are). In the problem comedies, Shakespeare’s focus is diverted to different concerns as an altogether separate set of darker images centring on notions of corruption and disease erupt. This trope resonates in tragedies such as Hamlet and Othello more than it does in the mature romantic works that preceded them. Shakespeare never exists in a vacuum, but the idea of comic melancholy as I understand it does not find any particularly compelling echoes in tragedies or problem plays.

Finally, I also want to address the bleak reading of Shakespearean comedy that my book may sometimes suggest. Inevitably, peering over yellowed play-texts within the confines of a windowless library on grey winter afternoons, incessantly seeking out their melancholic undertones, can skew one’s appreciation of how funny Shakespearean comedies truly are. If anything, that last statement speaks to my point: melancholy can be understood as an integral, non-comic component of Shakespearean comedy, and while it does not necessarily yield laughter in itself, it heightens actual comical moments. The transformation of comedy that I identify here rests simultaneously on both ends of the affective spectrum that constitutes it. Robert Burton declared early on in The Anatomy that ‘even in the midst
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of laughter, there is sorrow’. This assertion is undeniably true, but a more appropriate epitaph for this study would probably be a revision of the old adage ‘dying is easy; comedy is hard’ into a caution that, as arduous as comedy may be, writing about its inherent melancholy is to be done carefully and with a strong sense of humour(s).

Notes

1. All Shakespearean quotations are taken from Bevington, *Complete Works of Shakespeare.*
9. ‘Glossary’, *Stoic Reader,* 211.
13. For discussions of the coalescence of medical and literary aspirations in the period, see Lyons, *Voices of Melancholy* and Wells, *Secret Wound.*
21. Ibid.
22. Aristotle 279.
The association is found within the Arabic scientific tradition, in the works of philosophers such as Abû Ma’shar, going as far back as the first century. See Klibansky et al., *Saturn and Melancholy*, 127.


Radden credits Ficino’s work as ‘distinctive in developing the astrological significance of melancholy, particularly its relation to the planet Saturn’, *Nature of Melancholy*, 87. However, its association with earthiness was already acknowledged in galenic writings and, as Klibansky et al. write, ‘nearly all the writers of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance considered it an incontestable fact that melancholy, whether morbid or natural, stood in some special relationship to Saturn and that the latter was really to blame for the melancholic’s unfortunate character and destiny’, 127.

Ficino 7.

Ibid.

Watson, *Heresies and Heretics*, 77.


Bright, *Treatise of Melancholy*, 123.

Bright 323.

Du Laurens (1599), ‘To the Reader’. This address to the reader was possibly written and added to Du Laurens’ text by Surphlet.

Du Laurens, ‘To the Reader’.

Du Laurens 86.

Du Laurens 86–7.

Du Laurens 101.

Donald Beecher and Massimo Ciavolella note such innovations as the primary concern in Ferrand’s work, ‘Introduction’, 135.


Burton 20.

Burton 79.


Montaigne 9.
45. Montaigne 8.
46. Montaigne, ‘How we cry and laugh for the same thing’, 209.
47. See Hoeniger, *Medicine and Shakespeare*, 50–1. In *The Melancholy Muse: Chaucer, Shakespeare and Early Medicine*, Carol Falvo Heffernan identifies allusions to both Bright and Du Laurens in *Hamlet*, intimating Shakespeare’s familiarity with both works, 125–35. In discussing Bright’s treatise, Jennifer Radden mentions an anecdote suggesting that Shakespeare’s familiarity with the text possibly stems from his work as a proof reader in the small London publishing house of Thomas Vautrolier, which printed Bright’s treatise, *Nature of Melancholy*, 119.
51. Theophrastus, *Characters*, 2. Theophrastus’ work is crucial to the advent of the popular literary genres in England such as sixteenth-century Jest Books and seventeenth-century character books such as Samuel Butler’s *Characters* [1667–9], ed. A. R. Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1908).
52. Walton and Arnott 18 (my emphasis).
53. Walton and Arnott 52; 58.
54. Walton and Arnott 39.
57. Sidney 46.
61. Works such as Day’s *Humours Out of Breath* (1608) or James Shirley’s *The Humourous Courtier* (1631) have little to do with bodily humours (let alone melancholy). One can also think of the anonymous *Every Woman in her Humour* (c. 1598–1608) as an indicator of the popularity of Jonson’s humour comedies.
62. Melchiori writes that the play ‘is Shakespeare’s ironical tribute paid to the new theatrical genre of the comedy of humours’,
Shakespeare’s Garter Plays, 107. Likewise, although he suggests that ‘Shakespeare seems to have been responding to the newest dramatic genre of the 1590s’, Bevington adds that ‘Shakespeare characteristically does not satirise affectation so much as cherish it’, ‘The Merry Wives of Windsor’, 253.

64. Barber, Shakespeare’s Festival Comedies, 228.
65. Frye, Natural Perspective, 93.
66. Ibid.
70. Maus, Inwardness and Theater, 32.
71. Lopez, Theatrical Convention, 208.
72. Lopez 210–11.
73. Frye 92.
74. According to the OED, ‘humour’ can also refer to one’s ability to comprehend or appreciate such amusement, hence the expression ‘possessing a sense of humour’.
75. Paulson, Don Quixote in England, xii.
76. Paulson xi.
77. Schoenfeldt, Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England, 15.
78. Schoenfeldt 19.
79. Schoenfeldt 75.
80. Schoenfeldt 89.
81. Schoenfeldt 90.
82. Paster, Humouring the Body, 19.
83. Paster, Humouring the Body, 135; 137.
84. Paster devotes a chapter to Shakespearean melancholy in Humouring the Body, but her examples and analysis do not address the comic functionality of humours. See 135–88.
85. Paster, Humouring the Body, 24.
86. Daniel, Melancholy Assemblage, 5.
87. Daniel 15.
88. Sullivan, Beyond Melancholy, 4.
89. Sullivan 16.
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90. Sullivan 110.
93. Freud 212.
94. Freud 218.
95. See Kristeva’s Black Sun; Schiesari, Gendering Melancholia; Butler, Gender Trouble, 73–83, Bodies that Matter, 169–84 and The Psychic Life of Power, particularly 1–30.
99. Burton 144.