

‘Between the confines of sense and Reason’.

The role of the imagination in the *Anatomy of melancholy*.

Robert Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* conveys an impressive body of medical and humanist knowledge through a multitude of voices and styles, leading some of its interpreters to reject its unity and originality. We sustain that Burton’s understanding of the imagination, “the queen of mental powers”, is probably the most innovative contribution of his work. Grounded on the Aristotelian model, Burton develops an operative conception of imagination that is central in the fulfillment of the prophylactic and therapeutic goals of the *Anatomy*. Burton describes the normal functioning of imagination, bridging between the physical and the immaterial soul with reproductive and creative features, but also its abnormal and/or pathological manifestations, particularly the way it has “the power to arouse the [melancholic] passions”. Contrasting with some of his immediate predecessors, the Oxford scholar sustains that the humoral distemper described in medical treatises is insufficient to understand the causes and manifestations of the afflicted consciousness of the melancholic. In opposition to other classic mental conditions, in melancholy imagination plays a constitutive part both as a cause and in the progress of the illness. The estimative power of imagination, the way it values external and internal objects, retrieved in first-person experience, is determinant for the recurrence of beliefs and affective responses with consequences in the bodily mixture. Recognizing the embodied nature of melancholy, Burton is particularly attentive to the formation of recursive patterns of perception, emotion and cognition which lead to chronic melancholy. The particular kind of delirium in which melancholy consists is described by Burton as the consequence of an unbounded imagination, “first step and fountain of all grievances”, initiating damaging forms of enjoyment. On the other hand, a kind of “guided imagining” is required for the inoculation and relief of melancholy syndromes. These goals are not simply stated, through the prescription of truncated scripts of dietetic and spiritual measures. Burton constructs a reading experience that relies on the imagination as a way to understand, prevent and cure sensory, emotional and cognitive iterations of melancholy. Inspired in the story of Zisca’s drum, Burton designed the *Anatomy* so that it has incantatory gifts for its reader, it must “drive away melancholy (thou I be gone).”

Brief Biography

Cláudio Alexandre S. Carvalho (b. 1982) is doctor in Philosophy (University of Coimbra, 2012), in the field of Ethics and Political Philosophy, with a thesis devoted to the study of the concepts of kinship and gender in the transition to modern society, with incidence in Hegel and contemporary interpretations of Lacan, Judith Butler and Niklas Luhmann. From 2006 to 2015, he was a member a member of Institute of Philosophical Studies (former LIF – Language, Interpretation & Philosophy) at the Department of Philosophy, Communication and Information at the University

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Cláudio Alexandre S. Carvalho is currently a researcher at the Institute of Philosophy (University of Porto), on the research group “Aesthetics, Politics & Knowledge” with a postdoctoral fellowship of the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT). His research project aims at understanding the constitution of a therapeutic medium in modern society, attending to the social and political context.