

Burton, Robert

ANATOMIST OF MELANCHOLY

MD

PERSONALITY



In 1621, a year after the publication of that landmark in scientific method, Francis Bacon's *Novum Organum*, and only seven years before William Harvey's publication of his epochal work on the circulation of the blood, there was printed at Oxford a book described on the title page as *The Anatomy of Melancholy, What It is, With All the Kindes, Causes, Symptomes, Prognostickes, and Severall Cures of it. In Three Maine Partitions, with their severall Sections, Members and subsections Philosophically, Medicinally, Historically Opened and Cut Up by Democritus Junior.*

Unlike his two great contemporaries, Bacon and Harvey, the author was an Oxford scholar and divine named Robert Burton. Although not a man of deep philosophic or scientific bent, his scholarly assiduity, lively wit and vivid imagery, allowed him to produce a book of immediate and lasting interest, a mirror of Renaissance knowledge of psychiatry, larded with divers curiosa uncritically garnered from a wide variety of sources, to which he added some trenchant commentaries on the manners and mores of Jacobean England and human frailty in general.

A leading 20th century scholar, Lawrence Babb, estimates that discussion of what today is called psychiatry, psychology, physiology or any other branch of medicine occupies less than one-fourth of this extraordinary book whereas the bulk of it includes alchemy, Rosicrucianism, comets, mines in the New World, aphrodisiacs, heraldry, botanical gardens, magnetism, chiromancy, Queen Elizabeth, Helen of Troy, the misanthropy of Timon of Athens, falconry, tobacco, the evanescence of beauty, the delays of the law and the venality of lawyers, amulets, simony, the vicissitudes of fortune, the decay of the world, Mark Antony and Cleopatra, miraculous cures, the sin of curiosity, the machinations of the Jesuits.

True to Renaissance traditions of scholarship, Burton wanted to have the book published in Latin, but the refusal of any printer to take that risk preserved for posterity the flavor of a highly personal manner, for which the author presents a tongue-in-cheek apology.

In his preface he states: "And for those other faults of barbarism, *Dorick* dialect, extemporanean style, tautologies, apish imitation, a rhapsody of rags gathered together from several dung-hills, excrements of authors, toys and fopperies confusedly tumbled out, without art, invention, judgement, wit, learning, harsh, raw, rude, phantastical, absurd, insolent, indiscreet, ill-composed, indigested, vain, scurrile, idle, dull and dry, I confess all ('tis partly affected) thou canst not think worse of me than I do of myself."

The first editions of his "confusedly tumbled out" miscellany quickly sold out, and the author thought well enough of it to spend the remaining 20 years of his life expanding it from about 300,000 words to nearly half a million in his sixth and last edition, published posthumously.

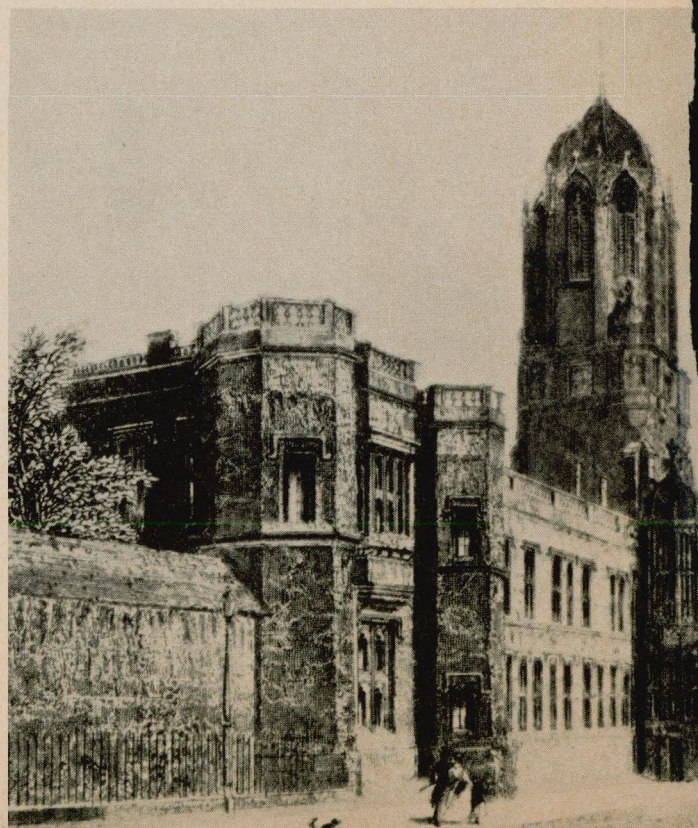
Preceding page: portrait of Robert Burton by an unknown painter in the collection of Brasenose College, Oxford. From Christ Church College, Oxford, seen here in an 1840 lithograph, he received his B.A., M.A. and B.D. degrees and lived his life as a fellow and a historian.

BACKGROUND. In Renaissance England the "melancholy" type was frequently portrayed in literature and drama and considered particularly distinguished ever since travelers to Italy in the Elizabethan era had found it much in vogue among Italian intellectuals, who were attracted by the Aristotelian concept that black bile engenders exceptional intellectual and creative capacities.

Burton, himself a melancholic, explained in his preface: "I write of melancholy, by being busy to avoid melancholy. There is no greater cause of melancholy than idleness, no better cure than business." In defense of his qualifications as an authority he added: "It is a disease of the soul on which I am to treat and as much appertaining to a Divine as to a Physician."

His conception of melancholy was based on the Galenist humoral theory still prevalent in the Renaissance; his method was to cite authorities in support of each point, leaning most heavily on Hippocrates, Galen, Avicenna, and embellishing his discussion with numerous references from literary, theological and other sources.

In the first of the three main "partitions" of the book, the author deals with the kinds of melancholy, its causes and symptoms. Among causes he lists are God, the devil, witches and magicians, the stars, old age, parents (by propagation), bad diet, retention and evacuation, bad air, immoderate exercise, solitariness, idleness, excessive or inadequate sleep, passions and perturbations of the mind, fear, shame, disgrace, envy, malice, hatred, discontents, cares, miseries, concupiscence, covetousness, immoderate



pleasures such as love of gaming, wine and women, vainglory, self-love, praise, honor, immoderate applause, pride, overmuch joy, overmuch study (there is a long digression on the miseries of scholars), education, scoffing, calumnies, poverty, loss of goods and of friends, fears about the future, superfluous industry, disgrace, infirmities.

The lengthy digression on evil spirits as a cause of melancholy cites cases "out of most approved physicians," including Cornelius Gemma, who "related of a young maid, called Katherine Gualter, a cooper's daughter, *anno* 1571, that had such strange passions and convulsions, three men could sometimes not hold her; she purged a live eel, which he saw, a foot and a half long, and touched himself; but the eel afterwards vanished; she vomited some twenty-four pounds of fulsome stuff of all colors, twice a day for fourteen days; and after that she voided great balls of hair, pieces of wood, pigeon's dung, parchment, goose dung, coals; and after them two pounds of pure blood, and then again coals and stones, of which some had inscriptions, bigger than a walnut, some of them pieces of glass, brass, etc., besides paroxysms of laughing, weeping and ecstasies, etc. *Et hoc (inquit) cum horrore vidit, this I saw with horror. They could do no good on her by physic, but left her to the clergy.*"

On bad diet as a cause of melancholy he observes:

"Hart and red deer hath an evil name: it yields gross nutriment: a strong and great grained meat, next unto a horse. Which, although some countries eat, as Tartars, and they of China, yet Galen con-



The Orphans' Cry, a woodcut from the pamphlet "London's Charity," *Emlarged*, 1649. Burton proposed that suffering such as this could be eliminated if the incapacitated and the poor received care as a right rather than as charity.

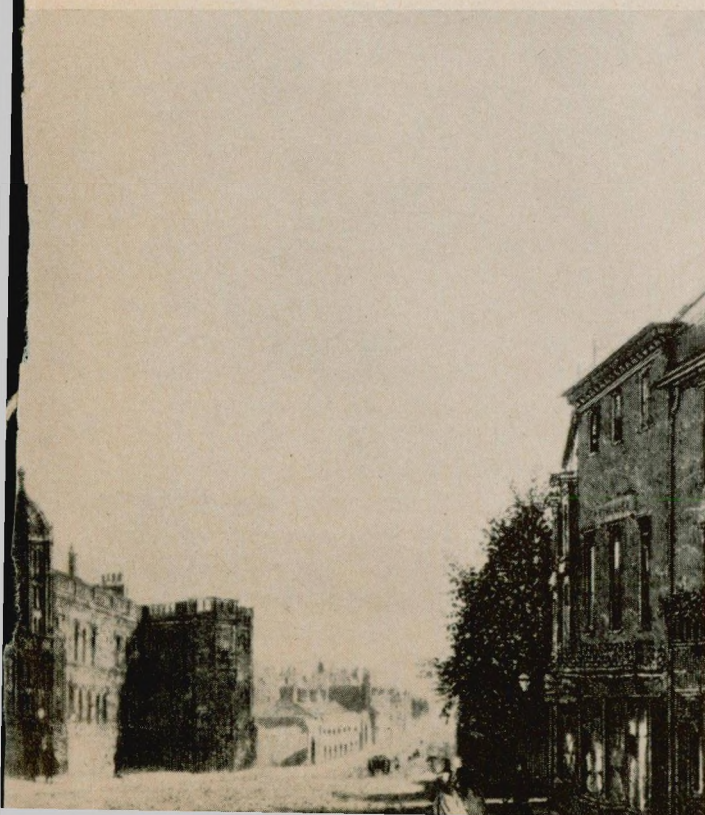
demns. Young foals are as commonly eaten in Spain as red deer, and to furnish their navies, about Malaga especially, often used; but such meats ask long baking or seething to qualify them, and yet all will not serve.

"All venison is melancholy and begets bad blood; a pleasant meat in great esteem with us (for we have more parks in England than there are in all Europe besides) in our solemn feasts, 'Tis somewhat better hunted than otherwise, and well prepared by cookery; but generally bad, and seldom to be used. . . .

"Milk, and all that comes of milk as butter and cheese, curds, etc., increase melancholy (whey only excepted, which is most wholesome): some except asses' milk. . . .

"Amongst fowl, peacocks and pigeon, all fenny fowl are forbidden, as ducks, geese, swans, herons, cranes, coots, didappers, waterhens, with all those teals, currs, sheldrakes, and pecked fowls, that come hither in winter out of Scandia, Muscovy, Greenland, Friesland, which half the year are covered all over with snow and frozen up. Though these be fair in feathers, pleasant in taste, and have a good outside, like hypocrites, white in plumes, and soft, their flesh is hard, black, unwholesome, dangerous, melancholy meat."

Burton discusses therapy under a threefold head-



ing: diet or living, apothecary and chirurgery. Regarding diet he observes: "Make a melancholy man fat, as Rhasis saith and thou hast finished the cure." A strong advocate of occupational therapy, he recommends outdoor exercise as well as recreations of the mind within doors through books, maps, pictures, with lace making, spinning and needlework for women.

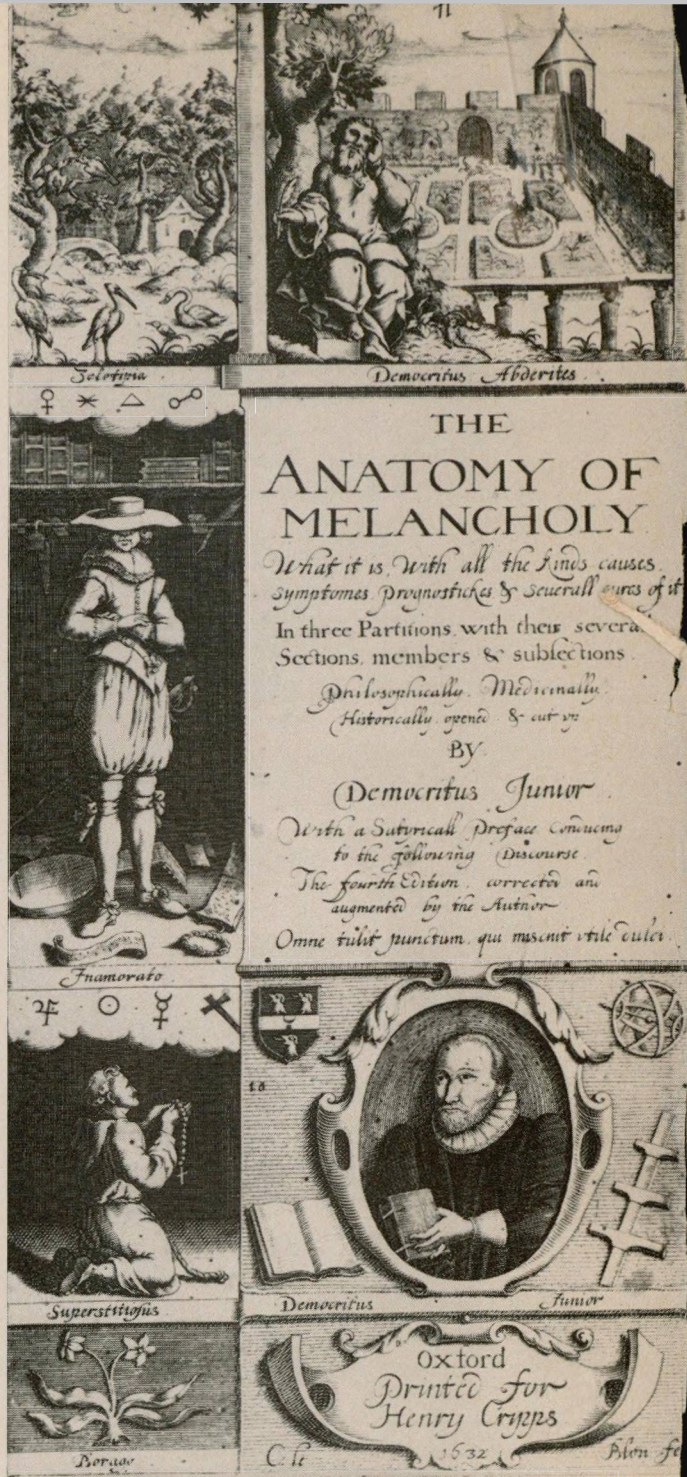
For apothecary physic he lists borage and bugloss among the most important herbs, recommends purgatives both upwards and downwards, favoring white hellebore or sneezing powder, aloes and tobacco, "a good vomit." Among chirurgical remedies he gives first place to leeches, also lists phlebotomy and mentions "boring the skull with an instrument to let out the fuliginous vapors."

Love-melancholy, the main theme of the third partition, inspires one of Burton's most piquant passages on the blindness of love: "Every Lover admires his Mistress, though she be very deformed of her self, ill favoured, wrinkled, pimpled, pale, red, yellow-tanned, tallow-faced, have a swollen Juggler's platter-face, or a thin, lean chitty-face, have clouds in her face, be crooked, dry, bald, goggle-ey'd, blear-ey'd, or with staring eyes, she looks like a squis'd cat, hold her head still awry, heavy dull, hollow-eyed, black or yellow about the eyes, or squint-eyed, sparrow-mouthed, *Persean* hook-nosed, have a sharp Fox nose, a red nose, *China* flat great nose, *nare simo patuloque*, a nose like a promontory, gubber-tushed,* rotten teeth, beetle-browed, a Witch's beard, her breath stink all over the room, her nose drop winter and summer, with a Bavarian poke under her chin, lave-eared, with a long crane's neck, which stands awry too, *pendulis mammis*, her dugs like two double jugs, or else no dugs, in the other extreme, bloody-falnt fingers, she have filthy long unpared nails, scabbed hands or wrists, a tanned skin, a rotten carcass, crooked back, she stoops, is lame, splay-footed."

Burton unflinchingly continues: *as slender in the middle as a Cow in the waist*, gouty legs, her ankles hang over her shoes, her feet stink, she breed lice, a mere changeling, a very monster, an auf imperfect, her whole complexion savours, an harsh voice, incondite gesture, vile gait, a vast virago, or an ugly Tit, a slug, a fat fustilugs, a truss, a long, lean raw-bone, a skeleton, a sneaker (*si qua latent meliora puta*) and to thy judgement looks like a merd in a lanthorn, whom thou couldst not fancy for a world, but hatest, loathest, and wouldest have spit in her face, or blow thy nose in her bosom, *remedium amoris* to another man, dowdy, a slut, a scold, a nasty, rank, rammy, filthy, beastly quean, dishonest peradventure, obscene, base beggarly rude, foolish,

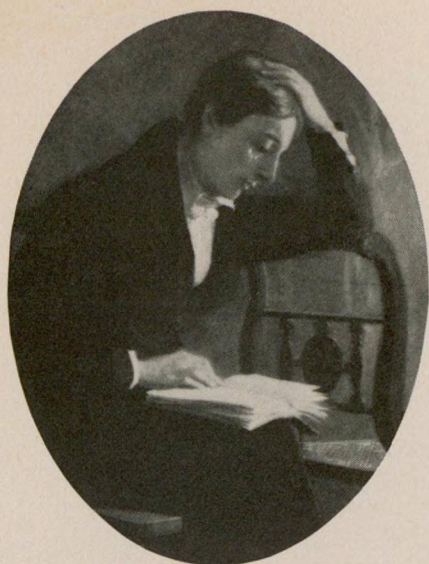
*Teeth that project irregularly.

†Chilblained.

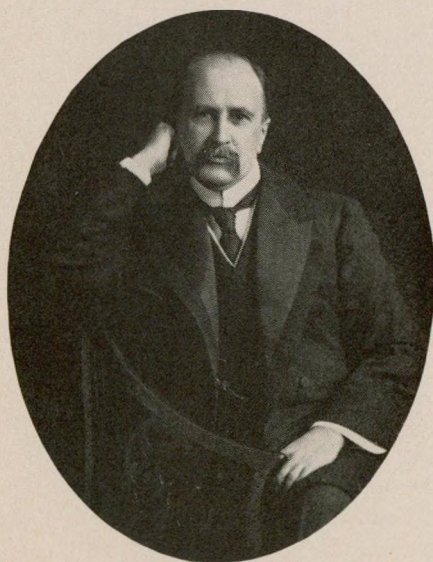


untaught, peevish, *Irus'* daughter, *Thersites'* sister, *Grobians'* scholar, if he love her once, he admires her for all this, he takes no notice of any such errors, or imperfections of body or mind.

Though some contemporary authorities asserted that love-melancholy was incurable, Burton insisted that it could be helped by diet and exercise, abstaining from wine and from meats which cause venery or provoke lust. "Those opposite meats which ought to be used are Cowcubers, Melons, Purselan, Water-Lilies, Rue, Woodbine, Ammi, Lettice, which



Title page of the fourth edition of *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. Burton published the work first in 1621; five subsequent editions, in 1624, 1628, 1632, 1638 and 1651 (posthumous), included his alterations, enlargements and revisions. The work fell into obscurity during the 18th century but in the 19th century interest in it was revived. Poet John Keats, above, a great admirer was inspired by it to write "Lamia" and "Ode on Melancholy."



More recent champion of *The Anatomy of Melancholy* was Sir William Osler who called it an unequalled record of the ironies of man, a fantastic but fascinating medley at which one does not know whether to laugh or to weep.

Lemnius so much commends." Physick may be used: "*Amatus Lusitanus* cured a young Jew that was almost mad for love, with the syrup of Hellebore, and such other evacuations and purges, which are usually prescribed for black choler: *Avicenna* confirms as much, if need require, and *blood-letting above the rest*, which makes *amantes ne sint amentes*, lovers to come to themselves, and keep in their right mind."

Other antidotes to love sickness are travel, good counsel and persuasion, and a critical attitude. "Follow my counsel, see her undrest. . . . It is reported of *Seleucus* King of *Syria*, that seeing his wife *Stratonice's* bald pate, as she was undressing her by chance, he could never affect her after." The last and surest remedy, concludes the author: "When no other means will take effect, is to let them go together and enjoy each other."

SOURCES. Besides the ancient classic and Arabic sources, Burton in his writings drew on numerous Renaissance medical works, among them *Aelianus Montaltus' Archipathologia*, *Antonius Guianerius' Practica et omnia opera*, treatises on mental ills by *Pratensis*, *Heurnius Sckenkius* and numerous other authorities.

For information on black magic and sorcery he turned among others to *De praestigiis daemonum* by *Johann Weyer*, *Cornelius Agrippa's De occulta philosophia*, *Malleus maleficarum* by *Jakob Sprenger* and *Heinrich Kramer*.

His accounts of strange and distant lands are based both on the ancients (*Herodotus*, *Strabo*, *Tacitus*, *Pausanias*) and the great travel account of *Marco Polo*, *Turkish Journey* by the 16th century Flemish traveler *Busbequius*, *Expeditio in Sinas* by the Italian Jesuit missionary to China, *Riccus*, *Africae descriptio* by the Moor *Africanus*, and the Jesuit *José de Acosta's* accounts of the New World. He was also well-versed in *Chaucer* ("our English Homer"), *Spencer*, *Marlowe*, *Ben Jonson*, but he made only limited mention of the works of *Shakespeare* and strangely omitted any reference to *Hamlet*, the prince of melancholy.

SCIENCE. In a world of advancing scientific knowledge, Burton displayed a haphazard knowledge of many new discoveries, but he remained essentially conservative, content to rely on authority, never given to experiment, uncritical in his acceptance of the existence of magic and evil spirits; he was so lacking in an understanding of the importance of the clinical approach that he never mentioned personal observation of any psychiatric case except his own.

Harvey's work on the circulation of the blood appeared before the fourth edition of *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, but Burton never mentioned it. Nor did he give evidence of familiarity with *Vesalius'*

Fabrica. He complained that Paracelsus "is so stiff for those chemical medicines that in his cures he will admit almost of no other Physick." Against that view he counterposed the defense of astrology in medicine by Hippocrates, Galen, Avicenna, but acknowledged that he was not qualified to judge.

Burton himself made an astrologic prediction of his own death which was so close to the actual time that Oxford students spread the absurd rumor that he had committed suicide in order to sustain his forecast.

LIFE. Robert Burton was born in Lindley, Leicestershire, on February 8, 1577, the fourth of nine children. He received his B.A. from Christ Church College, Oxford, in 1603, his M.A. in 1605 and his B.D. in 1614, and spent the remainder of his life there as fellow and historian. From 1616 he was vicar of St. Thomas in the suburbs of Oxford, and also later held (apparently as absentee) the living of Seagrave in Leicestershire, an appointment by George, Lord Berkeley, to whom he dedicated all editions of the *Anatomy*.

As an Oxford fellow he was not allowed to marry, but he expressed the view that scholars should have that right. He also denounced the Roman Catholic rule of celibacy for its clergy as contrary to nature, religion and humanity. He confessed that he was a novice not qualified to write on love, but nevertheless produced 250 pages on the subject. He enjoyed conviviality, music, sports, and even approved of gambling in moderation. He died on January 25, 1640.

For all his bookishness he was thoroughly familiar with the economic, political and social problems that beset the England of his day. Besides presenting social views far in advance of his time in his sketch of a "poetical ideal state" he addressed himself to the immediate needs of the economy, adopting the mercantilist position, seeking protection for English industry by discouraging imports, especially of luxuries, and encouraging exports of manufactured goods but not of raw materials because that would deprive English laborers of work.

His duties as clerk of the market at Oxford probably furthered his knowledge of trade and husbandry. In his ideal state he proposed to enforce standard weights and measures, eliminate private monopolies, remove hindrances to sane marriage by reducing or eliminating dowries, while forbidding marriage of the diseased and deformed. He advocated the fullest utilization of all available resources in land and manpower, with guaranteed employment and recreation for all able-bodied persons, as well as care for the incapacitated as a matter of right rather than charity. In addition he envisaged a system of qualifying examinations for magistrates, lawyers, physicians, clergymen.

He scorned purely fanciful utopias, condemned communalism, the basis of the ideal states described by Plato and Thomas More, and also opposed slavery, which Plato accepted and More approved as a penalty for criminals.

The many accounts of life in China that he examined seem to have inspired many features of Burton's utopia, for he noted with admiration the building of straight streets, the prohibition of beggary, a minimum age for the marriage of women, and laws against carrying weapons in the cities. By the adoption of the pseudonym Democritus Junior, Burton apparently sought to emphasize his role as satiric social critic, referring to Democritus as the "common flouter of folly."

INFLUENCE. The *Anatomy of Melancholy* fell into relative obscurity in the 18th century, so that few readers of Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* were aware of how extensively Sterne had borrowed from Burton. Charles Lamb played a major role in the revival of interest in the book during the Romantic period which resulted in publication of 41 new editions or reissues during the 19th century. John Keats, one of Burton's most fervent admirers, wrote enthusiastic commentaries on the book which inspired his poems "Lamia" and "Ode on Melancholy."

In the medical profession Sir William Osler praised Burton's work in the highest terms: "No book of any language presents such a stage of moving pictures—kings and queens in their greatness and in their glory, in their madness and in their despair; generals and conquerors with their ambitions and their activities; the princes of the Church in their pride and in their shame; philosophers of all ages, now rejoicing in the power of intellect, and again grovelling before the idols of the tribe; the heroes of the race who have fought the battle of the oppressed in all lands; criminals, small and great, from the petty thief to Nero with his unspeakable atrocities; the great navigators with whom Burton traveled so much in map and card, and whose stories were his delight; the martyrs and virgins of all religions, the deluded and fanatics of all theologies, the possessed of devils and the possessed of God; the beauties, frail and faithful, the Helens and Lucretias, all are there. The lovers, old and young, the fools who were accounted wise, and the wise who were really fools; the madmen of all history, to anatomize whom is the special object of the book; the world itself, against which he brings a railing accusation—the motley procession of humanity sweeps before us on his stage, a fantastic but fascinating medley at which he does not know whether to weep or to laugh."

SUMMING UP. By Charles Lamb: "That fantastic old great man."

