



Hamlet's Madness, Antonio's Sadness, and Mercutio's Illness:
Interpretations of Melancholy from Shakespeare to Freud and Julia Kristeva

By

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Abstract:

This essay analyses the concept of melancholy through Shakespeare's works (especially Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, and The Merchant of Venice), Freud's studies on melancholy, and Julia Kristeva's essay, "Black Sun: Depression and melancholia." Melancholy, described by the Greek term of "black bile," is a manifestation of the sensitive and poetic spirit in the Renaissance, rehabilitated by Marsilio Ficino from the negative overtones of the Middle Ages. In Shakespeare's time, melancholy was a "fashionable disease," a pathological mental state peculiar to the *mens contemplatrix* — both a disease and a spiritual energy — accompanied by symptoms of inexplicable sadness, pessimism, skepticism, decadence, alienation and introversion. In this paper, I seek to interpret Shakespeare's idea of melancholy in the light of Freud's and Kristeva's theories, from the exciting and elusive imprint of the unconscious to the "Black Sun," the blinding intensity of affect that eludes conscious elaboration.

Keywords: Melancholy, Shakespeare, mourning, narcissism, Freud, Julia Kristeva

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Melancholy is a term of Greek origin: 'melaina khole' or the *black bile*.¹ In the ancient, medieval, and premodern medicine in Europe, melancholia describes a condition characterized by markedly depressed mood, bodily complaints, and sometimes hallucinations and delusions. Melancholy was regarded as one of the four temperaments matching the four humors.² Until the 18th century, doctors and other scholars classified melancholic conditions as an excess of a notional fluid known as "black bile," which was commonly linked to the spleen. Hippocrates and other ancient physicians described melancholia as a distinct disease, including persistent fears and despondencies, poor appetite, abulia, sleeplessness, irritability, and agitation.³

During the late 16th and early 17th centuries, a cultural and literary cult of melancholia emerged in England, linked to Neoplatonist and humanist Marsilio Ficino's transformation of melancholia from a sign of vice into a mark of sensible talent or simply mark of genius.⁴ This fashionable melancholy became a prominent theme in literature, art, and music of the era. This period is Shakespeare's age - the phenomenon of melancholy, as a poetic organizing principle, appears in many of his plays and becomes a "trademark" of famous characters such as Hamlet, Mercutio, Antonio of the Merchant of Venice, or the "melancholy Jacques" of *As You Like It*.⁵ In this essay I would like to deal with the melancholy of Hamlet, Mercutio and Antonio, using Freud and Julia Kristeva's interpretation as a guide.

In medieval cosmology, melancholy is traditionally associated with the earth, autumn (or winter), the dry element, cold, the north wind, the color black (think of

¹ <https://georgejziogas.medium.com/a-brief-history-of-melancholy-9af8bc51aa71>

² <https://www.cabinet.ox.ac.uk/aristotles-four-elements-and-galens-four-humours>

³ <https://georgejziogas.medium.com/a-brief-history-of-melancholy-9af8bc51aa71>

⁴ Mary Ann Lund: Better than laughing: Renaissance melancholy. April 9, 2021, Folger Shakespeare Library, <https://www.folger.edu/blogs/shakespeare-and-beyond/renaissance-melancholy-better-than-laughing/>

⁵ Mary Ann Lund: A User's Guide to Melancholy. Cambridge University Press, 2021

Hamlet's famous "nighted colour" dress in the beginning of the play⁶). Its planet is Saturn, among whose children the melancholic finds himself with the hanged man, the cripple, the gambler, the monk and the swineherd, as Professor Giorgio Agamben observes it.⁷

Freud published his study *Mourning and Melancholia* in 1917, during the First World War. In this essay, Freud argues that mourning and melancholia are similar but different responses to loss.⁸ In mourning, a person deals with the grief of losing of a specific love object, and this process takes place in the conscious mind. In melancholia, a person grieves for a loss they are unable to fully comprehend or identify, and thus this process takes place in the unconscious mind. Mourning is considered a healthy and natural process of grieving a loss, while melancholia in this sense is considered pathological.

In the *Mourning and Melancholia* the Freudian analysis of the mechanism of the melancholia reconsiders two elements that appeared traditionally in the patristic descriptions of *acedia*: the withdrawal from the object and the withdrawal into itself of the contemplative tendency.⁹

According to Freud, the dynamic mechanism of melancholy borrows its essential characteristic in part from mourning and in part from narcissistic regression. As we know, Hamlet's melancholy attitude is rooted in his mourning - reflected in the "nighted colour" of his black costume, mentioned above - and the way he maintains and wears this mourning, and then tortures his mother and Ophelia for it and through it, certainly shows signs of narcissism. As when, in mourning, the libido reacts to proof of the fact that the loved one has ceased to exist, fixating itself on every memory and object formerly linked to the loved object, so melancholy is also a reaction to the loss of a

⁶ William Shakespeare: Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. Act One, Scene Two.

⁷ Giorgio Agamben: Stanzas. Word and Phantasm in Western Culture. University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

⁸ Sigmund Freud: Mourning and Melancholia. <https://www.freepsychotherapybooks.org/ebook/mourning-and-melancholia/>

⁹ Földényi F. László: A melankólia dicsérete. Jelenkor Kiadó, 2017.

loved object. Such loss is not followed by a transfer of libido to another object, but rather by its withdrawal into the ego, narcissistically identified with the lost object.¹⁰ Freud does not conceal his embarrassment before the undeniable proof that, although mourning follows a loss that really occurred, in melancholia not only is it unclear what object has been lost, it is uncertain that one can speak of a loss at all. This phenomenon of uncertain origin also appears in Hamlet's mourning¹¹ - it is not clear whether Hamlet is really hurt by the death of his father, by the knowledge of his absence, by his loss, by the fact of murder, of Claudius's fratricide or whether there is a more general disorder at work in him when he speaks so: "I do not set my life at a pin's fee"¹² - is it a fear of the unknown, which cannot be specified? "It must be admitted – Freud writes – “that a loss has indeed occurred, without it being known what has been lost.”¹³ The melancholia offers the paradox of an intention to mourn that precedes and anticipates the loss of object. Hamlet feels sick and miserable in Denmark, which is now a prison for him - but perhaps it was a prison even before Claudius; he is also sick and miserable in his own body, which is a prison for his spirit - the monologue “To be or not to be” is also about the desire and impossibility of escape, and the unspeakable fear of “unknown dreams”¹⁴ (“In that sleep of death *what dreams may come*”¹⁵ – he expresses this anxiety with disturbing precision in the monologue.)

The melancholic character was easy to recognise on an Elizabethan stage: lean and pale, sad and brooding, suspiciously looking around for enemies. As Hamlet describes it himself: “I have of late – but wherefore I know not – lost all my mirth,

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud: Mourning and Melancholia. <https://www.freepsychotherapybooks.org/ebook/mourning-and-melancholia/>

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² William Shakespeare: Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. Act One, Scene Four.

¹³ Sigmund Freud: Mourning and Melancholia. <https://www.freepsychotherapybooks.org/ebook/mourning-and-melancholia/>

¹⁴ Nelly Ekström: Hamlet, the melancholic Prince of Denmark. 16 December 2016. <https://wellcomecollection.org/stories/hamlet-the-melancholic-prince-of-denmark>

¹⁵ William Shakespeare: Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. Act Three, Scene One.

forgone all custom of exercises, and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory”¹⁶. Fluctuations in behavior are a sign of melancholic imbalance. Sometimes, Hamlet speaks in a calm voice, although he is gloomy and sad. Other times, his speech is chaotic and resembles the ramblings of a madman.

The French essayist Montaigne observed that “the force of extreme sadness inevitably stuns the whole of our soul, impeding her freedom of action.”¹⁷ It may thus be said that the prince finds himself paralyzed, unable to act upon his desires. In Hamlet, grief and geniality waltz together to the point of exhaustion, which ultimately leads to confusing thoughts. Hamlet is unable to pinpoint what caused the loss of his cheerfulness. The earth is to him a “sterile promontory,” yet he can cleverly choose his words, showing that his mind is agile. He enters and exits the “coat” of madness, making it hard for the critics to place a certain label on his “antic disposition.”¹⁸ Hamlet’s madness cannot be separated from the idea of love; in Shakespeare’s days, love was regarded as a sickness itself, having similar symptoms to melancholy.¹⁹ From this point of view, melancholy would be not so much the regressive reaction to the loss of the love object as the imaginative capacity to make an unobtainable object appear as if lost. For many generations of audiences and readers, Hamlet’s distinctively melancholic introspections, especially in the soliloquies expressing the unsettled and darkly inflected motions of his mind, have appeared to be integral to his character. In modern criticism, Hamlet’s melancholy has sometimes been used to provide solutions to the puzzles of the play, such as his irresolution and failure to act, a trend that was given further impetus by the publication in 1964 of the monumental study of pre-modern melancholy

¹⁶ William Shakespeare: Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. Act Two, Scene Two.

¹⁷ Michel de Montaigne: The Complete Essays. Second book: On Sadness. (trad. Charles Cotton) <https://newt.to/michel.de.montaigne/Ggb5LFM8oK/BDMXuAiMdX>

¹⁸ Nelly Ekström: Hamlet, the melancholic Prince of Denmark. 16 December 2016. <https://wellcomecollection.org/stories/hamlet-the-melancholic-prince-of-denmark>

¹⁹ Teodora Georghe: Understanding Hamlet’s Madness: Melancholy and Folly. Sep 25, 2023. <https://owlcation.com/humanities/Hamlet-The-Melancholic-Fool>

by Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl.²⁰ More recently, Hamlet's melancholy has been discussed in 'humoral' readings and passed through the medium of affect theory, incorporating material from modern cognitive neuroscience, psychology and psychoanalysis as well as early modern medicine and philosophy.²¹ For Shakespeare, as for his contemporaries, the imagination has the potential to dominate the mind and affect the body. In Hamlet, the aspects of the imagination are inflected with the complexities attendant to the prince's melancholy, rendering the space of the drama as an 'imaginary reality', in which the perceptions, emotions and mental images of the other characters are disturbed by the prince's melancholic mind.

The same tradition that associated the melancholic temperament with poetry, philosophy, and art attributed to it an exasperated inclination to Eros. Aristotle, in a section of the book *Problems* (*Problemata*), affirms lustfulness among the main characteristics of melancholy. "The liquid and the mixing of the black bile is due to breath (...) and the melancholic are usually lustful. For sexual excitement is due to breath."²² This sexual excitement, this imaginary erotic overactivity, can also be observed in Mercutio's character, especially in the Mab Speech. In this case, however, Mercutio counterpoints Romeo's exposed, passive and lethargic melancholy during his imaginary love for Rosaline, with his own active, agitated, volatile temperament, his strong bipolar traits, interspersed with manic outbursts. The character's name can also be linked to the element mercury, which in the Middle Ages was associated with diseases of the nervous system because of its speed and volatility.²³ (Indeed, exposure to mercury and mercury-containing organic compounds is toxic to the nervous system.) During the Queen Mab Speech we're seeing Mercutio in a manic phase; in the

²⁰ Angus Gowland: Hamlet's Melancholic Imagination. 04 April 2024.
https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10191301/2/Gowland_Hamlet%E2%80%99s%20Melancholic%20Imagination_AOP.pdf

²¹ *ibid.*

²² Aristotle: Problems. Book XXX. (trad. Walter Stanley Hett).
<https://archive.org/details/problems02arisuoft/page/n5/mode/2up>

²³ <https://www.enotes.com/topics/romeo-and-juliet/characters/mercutio>

monologue he seems like someone with pressured speech.

This is the hag, when maids lie on their backs,
That presses them and learns them first to bear,
Making them women of good carriage:
This is she—²⁴

The final passage of the monologue gives a strong sense of the influence of Eros in the images of the excited vision; and as the attack calms, Mercutio speaks of a cold glow, the icy wind of the North - the latter often associated with melancholia in Shakespeare's time.²⁵

Which is as *thin of substance as the air*²⁶
And more inconstant than the wind, who woos
Even now the frozen bosom of the north,
And, being anger'd, puffs away from thence,
Turning his face to the dew-dropping south.²⁷ (*Romeo and Juliet*, Act I, Scene 4)

This provides us with the idea that Mercutio suffers from something of which he never speaks but weighs on him heavily. We could quite easily take a Freudian approach to this speech, delving into Mercutio's emphasis on dreams and the idea of wish fulfillment (being the realization of desires through unconscious means via dreams or daydreams). With talk of giving visions of love to lovers and images of war to warriors, the "fairy's midwife" seems to personify this notion.

²⁴ William Shakespeare: *Romeo and Juliet*. Act One, Scene Four.

²⁵ Mary Ann Lund: Better than laughing: Renaissance melancholy. April 9, 2021, Folger Shakespeare Library, <https://www.folger.edu/blogs/shakespeare-and-beyond/renaissance-melancholy-better-than-laughing/>

²⁶ the lightness of mercury

²⁷ William Shakespeare: *Romeo and Juliet*. Act One, Scene Four.

“Melancholy is amorous passion's somber lining. A sorrowful pleasure, a lugubrious intoxication constitute as much the banal background from which our ideals or euphoria break away as that fleeting lucidity which fractures the hypnosis entwining two people together”²⁸ - writes Julia Kristeva in her essay on the melancholic imaginary. Depression is the hidden face of Narcissus – “this time, however, it is not brilliant and fragile amorous idealization that we will focus upon but, on the contrary, the shadow cast over the fragile ego, barely dissociable from the other: a shadow cast, precisely, by the loss of this necessary other. A shadow of despair.”²⁹

Kristeva's words above bring us to the third melancholic Shakespearean character to be discussed, Antonio from *The Merchant of Venice*. Kristeva speaks of "the gloomy tissue of loving passion, of regretful delight, of mournful intoxication"³⁰, or, in a more expressive and poetic way, of “the Black Sun of the melancholia”³¹ - all the things that define the enigmatic title character of this tragicomedy. Since, if we look closely, Antonio's inner (and mostly the external) life is also marked by this awesome and amazing "Black Sun”

In sooth, I know not why I am so sad:

It wearies me; you say it wearies you;

But how I caught it, found it, or came by it,

What stuff 'tis made of, whereof it is born,

I am to learn;

And such a want-wit sadness makes of me.

²⁸ Julia Kristeva: On the melancholic imaginary, New Formations, 1987.

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ *ibid.*

That I have much ado to know myself.³² (*The Merchant of Venice*, Act I, Scene I)

As a keynote, we learn of Antonio's seemingly unjustifiable sadness; of a lack that seems (or consciously) to know no object; and then we learn that Antonio "therefore his merchandise makes him not sad." Yet his "mind is tossing on the ocean"³³, as one of his friends Salarino says; but this is not the real sea that surrounds the city of waters, Venice, or the oceans beyond; this is the "inner sea" itself, the uneven terrain of Antonio's soul or subconscious, the strange no-man's-land that Kristeva calls the "mental space that moves towards death"³⁴. The reason for Antonio's melancholy is a half-hidden longing, a love that really can never be satisfied, for his best friend, the young Bassanio, for whom he is about to give his heart - in the most flesh-crushing sense. This is the "regretful delight", "mournful intoxication"³⁵ what Kristeva refers to; "A stage where every man must play a part, And mine *a sad one*."³⁶ says Antonio, but the reason for this sadness is a deep, unfulfilled yearning." No matter how assertively we arrange our world, it rests on precarious and fragile pillars"³⁷, says László F. Földényi, the excellent Hungarian aesthete and literary critic. There are few cities more melancholic than Venice in this sense, for it lacks firm foundations, and behind all its wealth and luxury, it is all about uncertainty and impermanence. Antonio's fate is doubly precarious: his existence is based on faltering ships, his happiness on a partially impossible love, on someone he can never fully possess and will lose soon. The resultant melancholy is experienced in the narcissistic suffering referred to by Kristeva³⁸, where the melancholy mask that looks at us actually conceals a frozen despair; and this despair is muted in the fifth act of the play, at the time of the universal

³² William Shakespeare: *The Merchant of Venice*, Act One, Scene One.

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ Julia Kristeva: *On the melancholic imaginary*, New Formations, 1987.

³⁵ Julia Kristeva: *On the melancholic imaginary*, New Formations, 1987.

³⁶ William Shakespeare: *The Merchant of Venice*, Act One, Scene One.

³⁷ Földényi F. László: *A melankólia dicsérete*. Jelenkor Kiadó, 2017.

³⁸ Julia Kristeva: *On the melancholic imaginary*, New Formations, 1987.

(and rather ambiguous) happy ending, when the victorious Portia has snatched away not only Bassanio's body but also the idea and all possibilities of Bassanio's love. Before, in the fourth act, Portia in the mask of the penal judge, has destroyed the Antonio's desire giving his life for Bassanio – she has taken away his love-death sacrifice; her exclusive, possessive love (for which she has also paid a high price, both in reality and metaphorically), does not tolerate emotional rivalry. It is inherent in love and desire that they carry within them the seeds of melancholy; when we love, we live perpetually on the edge, in a kind of inner state of promptness, with awareness of a possible loss.

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