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978-0-521-86768-9 - The Worlds of Renaissance Melancholy: Robert Burton in Context

Angus Gowland

Excerpt

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Introduction

Surveying the world outside his study in Christ Church, Oxford, at the end of the year 1620, Robert Burton diagnosed an epidemic of melancholy. It was now, he thought, ‘a disease so frequent . . . in these our daies, so often happening . . . in our miserable times, as few there are that feele not the smart of it’. Since it was ‘a disease so grievous, so common’, he claimed to ‘know not wherein to do a more generall service, and spend my time better, then to prescribe means how to prevent and cure so universall a malady, an Epidemicall disease, that so often, so much crucifies the body and minde’ (1.110.9–19). Burton cited a range of neoteric philosophical and medical authorities to support his diagnosis. Whilst examining the spleen and its role in generating hypochondriacal melancholy in the 1552 edition of his *De anima*, Philipp Melanchthon had written that there were so many cases of this disease it was pointless to count the sufferers.¹ Later in the century André du Laurens had concluded his chapter on the same species of melancholy by noting its frequency ‘in these miserable times’, and pointing out that ‘there are not many people which feele not some smatch thereof.’² ‘This disease is most frequent in these days’, agreed Girolamo Mercuriale, in the chapter on melancholy in his *Medicina practica* of 1601.³ The same diagnosis was supported by Giulio Cesare Chiodini, who asserted in his *Consultationes* of 1607 that ‘in our times scarcely anyone can be found who is immune from its contamination’. Melancholy, according to Chiodini, had not

¹ Melanchthon 1552, sig. F2: ‘Exempla adeò crebra sunt, ut hic nomina eorum recitare nolum, quos vidimus hoc morbo laborare.’ This observation was not present in the 1540 edition.

² Du Laurens 1599, p. 140.

³ Mercuriale 1617, I.10, p. 55: ‘Sed istud satis est intelligere, hanc affectionem esse temporibus nostris frequentissimam, ut propter hoc pertineat ad culturam ingeniorum vestrorum diligenter curationem hanc intelligere.’

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only spread throughout the population; it was, as he put it, the ‘fountain of almost all other diseases’ afflicting his society.⁴

The Anatomy of Melancholy was written as a response to a perceived epidemic of the disease. But earlier in the book’s preface, Burton gave a different account of his reasons for writing. This was that he was himself afflicted by the disease, but considered writing about it to be a beneficial enterprise: ‘I write of Melancholy, by being busie to avoid Melancholy’ (1.6.29–30). How could writing about something be construed as a means of avoiding it? Having raised the question, the answer which he immediately supplied was in accordance with the Senecan maxim ‘Otium sine literis mors est et hominis vivi sepultura’,⁵ that the activity of writing was a ‘playing labor’ to counteract the danger of the ‘idleness’ that caused and exacerbated the condition (1.6.30–7.5). But why write about melancholy rather than another, more light-hearted subject? Because, as he confessed, he felt an overwhelming need to ‘scratch where it itcheth’, and ‘could imagine no fitter evacuation’ of his melancholic ‘Impostume’ than to investigate the nature of the affliction (1.7.18–20). As he continued, it became clear that he intended this activity of ‘scratching’ – an appropriately physical metaphor for a lifelong writing enterprise – to have a psychologically therapeutic effect. His purpose was ‘to ease my minde by writing’, and his strategy to accomplish this was to ‘expell *clavum clavo*, comfort one sorrow with another, idlenes with idlenes’, and ‘make an Antidote out of that which was the prime cause of my disease’. (1.6.29–30, 7.16–17, 23–5). This was turning melancholy against itself, apparently a kind of literary-poetic ‘homeopathy’ working on the principle of *similia similibus curantur* and in obvious tension with conventional Galenic ‘allopathy’ based on the contradiction of opposites.⁶ It was for his own benefit, though he was careful to remark that he ‘would helpe others out of a fellow-feeling’ by spending his ‘time and knowledge . . . for the common good of all’ (1.8.6–10). He had an illustrious predecessor in Cicero, who had famously written the *Consolatio seu de luctu minuendo* ‘after his Daughters departure’ (1.7.31–2), and had offered a vision of philosophical writing in retirement

⁴ Chiodini 1607, consultatio 98, p. 232: ‘Affectus melancholicus, maximè verò qui flatulentus, & Hypochondriacus vocatur, adeo nostris temporibus frequenter ingruit, ut quemadmodum nullus ferè ab eius labe immunis reperitur, ita propria natura omnium quasi morborum, omnium penè Symptomatum occasio existat, id quod in omnibus, at praesertim in illustrissimo.’

⁵ Seneca 1917–25, DCCCII.3, vol. II, pp. 242–3. On the Stoic conception of writing as spiritual exercise see Hadot 1998, pp. 48–51.

⁶ See Blok 1976, pp. 139–46.

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that would simultaneously relieve the *animi aegritudo* of the author and serve the commonwealth.⁷

How exactly did Burton envisage the literary transformation of the 'disease' into its 'Antidote'? The answer is in the character of the book's contents, which were presented as an investigation, not of the author's own melancholy, but rather of the diverse forms of melancholy in the world surrounding him. It is this sustained involvement with the condition of the contemporary environment which allows us to speak of Burton's vision of the world as melancholy, and which distinguishes his treatise from both the conventional medical writings of the era and the self-exploratory project of Montaigne.⁸ In his eschewal of inwardness there was, perhaps, an Augustinian rejection of the *amor sui* involved in introversion for the sake of self-knowledge rather than the discovery of God – recall Pascal's castigation of Montaigne's 'sot projet... de se peindre'.⁹ But Burton had a practical psychological rationale. In the main treatise of the *Anatomy*, it was emphasised that although the melancholic would be inclined to indulge restless thoughts, he was not to be allowed to 'please himself' in solitariness with 'private and vaine meditations', as this would only exacerbate his psychological turmoil (1.392.24–393.31 [1.3.1.2]; 2.109.12–15 [2.2.6.2]). Sufferers from the disease were advised to resist the temptation to revel in the 'fond imaginations' brought by 'this delightful melancholy', and instead 'divert' their 'thoughts' away from the conditions that had led to their personal affliction (2.101.15–102.31 [2.2.6.1]). Burton made the point that the melancholic should 'never bee left alone or idle... least hee abuse his solitarinesse', and to this end, he told his readers that they should 'set him about some businesse, excise or recreation, which may divert his thoughts', otherwise his restless imagination would 'melancholize, and be carried away instantly, with some feare, jealousy, discontent, some vaine conceit or other'. (2.106.19–107.7 [2.2.6.2]).

Given this conception of the diseased imagination's tendency to 'worke upon it selfe', we can see why, in Burton's view, it would have been counterproductive to engage in introspection. Provoked by a desire to relieve his melancholy, and having gained knowledge of its effects from his own '*melancholizing*' (1.8.2–6), he chose to investigate the forms of the disease that he perceived elsewhere, to 'comfort one sorrow' – his

⁷ Cicero 1933, I.4, pp. 10–13.

⁸ On Burton's use of Montaigne's *Essais* see Dieckow 1903, pp. 92–115.

⁹ Pascal 1976, p. 322.

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own – ‘with [that of] another’. His fundamental self-therapeutic procedure was therefore not homeopathic introversion but allopathic diversion, which he hoped would ‘ease’ his own melancholy. By constructing an elaborate vision of the melancholic world, he was giving in to his compulsion to ‘scratch where it itcheth’ but avoiding the temptation to ‘melancholize’ upon himself. This negative view of melancholic self-reflection extended even to his conception of the effects of reading about the disease in the *Anatomy* itself. In the third edition (1628), he warned that the propensity of the melancholic to ‘misapply’ everything he experienced to himself was such that anyone afflicted with the disease would be well advised to omit ‘the Symptomes or prognostickes in this following Tract’ in case ‘hee trouble or hurt himselfe’ unnecessarily.¹⁰ Readers were left to wonder whether the author included this because of the mixed reception of earlier versions of the book, which, he claimed, had led to his being ‘honoured by some worthy men’ but ‘vilified by others’.¹¹

Even if the *Anatomy* was written to provide its author with relief from his own condition, Burton wanted his readers to consider his ‘chief motives’ to be the ‘generalitie of the Disease, the necessitie of the Cure, and the commodity or common good that will arise to all men by the knowledge of it’ (1.20.26; 23.9–10, 19–24). We should see the aims of the author with respect to himself and his readership as united by a shared concern to assist the alleviation of melancholy.¹² The goal to be attained was tranquillity, which appeared throughout the book as the opposite of the anxiety that characterised the experience of the disease. However, as I aim to show in this study, Burton’s conception of his own melancholy was inextricable from his perception that the early modern world was suffering from the same condition. Insofar as the *Anatomy* was the written enactment of its author’s search for tranquillity, it was simultaneously an attempt to address the absence of tranquillity in that world – to understand its variety of kinds, causes, and symptoms, and discover means of its remedy.

¹⁰ Burton 1628, p. 17; or 1.24.7–14. See also Burton 1624, p. 161, or 1.387.5–7 (1.3.1.2); Burton 1628, p. 174, or 1.387.20–3 (1.3.1.2); and Burton 1632, p. 183, or 1.387.20–1 (1.3.1.2). This idea was echoed in Shaftesbury’s *Characteristicks* (1711): Cooper 1999, vol. II, p. 143.

¹¹ Burton 1628, pp. 10–11; or 1.14.26–15.5. Cf. 1.9.11–13.

¹² See Heusser 1987, Vicari 1989, and Miller 1997.

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Introduction

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Robert Burton was born on 8 February 1577 in the village of Lindley, Leicestershire, into a well-established landed gentry family.¹³ Robert was the second son of Ralph Burton and Dorothy Faunt; we know very little of his five sisters and three brothers, with the notable exception of William. Like his younger brother, William Burton put his humanistic education to good use, authoring an unpublished Latin play, *De amoribus Perinthii et Tyanthes* (1596), translating the Greek of Achilles Tatius into *The most delectable and pleasaunt History of Clitophon and Leucippe* (1597), and proceeding to acquire fame in antiquarian circles largely as a result of the publication of *The Description of Leicestershire* (1622). In this work, William recorded his great admiration for his uncle and godfather Arthur Faunt, one of a number of Catholics on Dorothy's side of the family, as 'a man of great learning, gravity and wisdom'.¹⁴ Faunt had attended Merton College in Oxford in the 1560s before becoming a Jesuit, after which he published a number of works of controversial theology and mingled freely as an intellectual exile in the court circles of Counter-Reformation Europe.¹⁵ He seems likely to have had an influence on William's religious leanings, since the latter enthusiastically anticipated, and subsequently endorsed, the Laudian programme to restore the 'beauty of holiness' to the English Church by refurbishing his own chapel at Lindley in 1623.¹⁶ (This feature of the Burton family heritage has been overlooked by modern scholarship on *The Anatomy of Melancholy*,¹⁷ but the religious values represented by Arthur Faunt may well have been a significant background factor in shaping the spiritual sympathies it expressed.) William Burton also recalled in *The Description of Leicestershire* that after being deprived of the office of Lieutenant General of Leicestershire by the Earl of Huntingdon in 1588, Arthur's brother Anthony 'fell into so great a passion of melancholy, that within a short time after hee dyed', and took the opportunity to advertise the family wares: 'What the force, power, and effect of Melancholy is, I referre the Reader to the *Anatomy of Melancholy*, penned by my brother Robert Burton.'¹⁸

Robert Burton was schooled in Sutton Coldfield and Nuneaton, before matriculating from Brasenose College, Oxford, in 1593. There is an

¹³ For most of the extant biographical details see Nochimson 1974.

¹⁴ Burton 1622, pp. 106.

¹⁵ Burton 1622, pp. 105–6.

¹⁶ See Cust 2004–5.

¹⁷ For example, in Nochimson 1974, p. 87.

¹⁸ Burton 1622, p. 105.

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unaccounted pause in his university career, which has prompted speculation that at this time he suffered some kind of illness, and possibly visited the astrological physician Simon Forman in London for treatment of melancholy.¹⁹ However, after his election to a Studentship at Christ Church in 1599 – it is impossible to know why Burton changed college, though it is interesting to note that Brasenose had a reputation for producing ‘godly’ preachers²⁰ – he proceeded under the tutorship of John Bancroft, the future bishop of Oxford, to receive his BA in 1602, his MA in 1605, and finally his BD in 1614. Two years later, he was appointed to the benefice of St Thomas in Oxford, and after another two years was granted his licence to preach. Around this time, he served for three years as Clerk of the Oxford Market. In 1624, he acquired another living as Rector of Walesby in Lincolnshire, which he was apparently forced to resign in 1631 when his patron, the Countess Dowager of Exeter, turned it over to Lionel Cranfield, Earl of Middlesex. In 1633 or 1634, he was preferred to the more substantial Rectorship of Seagrave in Leicestershire with the support of the county aristocrat George, Lord Berkeley. His new patron had been made a Knight of the Bath in 1616 when Charles became Prince of Wales after the death of Prince Henry, and although he would not be active in the Civil War, his royalist sympathies are suggested by his impeachment in the Commons for high treason in September 1647. Burton’s family partially held their manor in Lindley from the Berkeleys, and George had also possibly been tutored by Burton at Christ Church. It was perhaps significant that it had taken over a decade for Burton’s dedication of the *Anatomy*, first made in 1621, to achieve its desired effect.

Burton’s first literary production was a Latin pastoral comedy, *Alba*, which was performed before James I at Christ Church on 27 August 1605. It seems not to have gone down well. One observer, Philip Stringer, called the play ‘very tedious’, and reported that ‘if the Chancellors of both Universities had not intreated his Majesty earnestly, he would have gone before half the Comedy had been ended’.²¹ It is now lost, but the costume and props lists indicates that it involved classical-mythological figures, kings, nymphs, hermits, satyrs, morris-dancers, a magician, an old crone, and a dozen live white doves.²² In the following year, Burton began his second work, the Latin comedy *Philosophaster*, which he revised

¹⁹ See Evans 1944, p. 7, and Traister 1976.

²⁰ Richardson 1972, pp. 58–63. On Brasenose see Dent 1983, p. 167.

²¹ Quoted in Nochimson 1974, p. 97.

²² Boas and Greg 1909, pp. 249–50, cited in Nochimson 1974, p. 98.

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and corrected in 1615. This satirised the various ‘Philosophasters’ to be found in the university life of ‘Osuna’ – a thinly disguised Oxford – and its characters included a Jesuit magician, ‘Polumpragmaticus’; his sidekick, ‘Equivocus’; a mathematician, ‘Lodovicus Pantometer’; a sophist, ‘Simon Acutus’; and a grammarian, ‘Pedanus’. As these names indicated, and as the epilogue confirmed, the purpose of the play was to ridicule contemporary scholarship and provoke reform: ‘Fremat, frendat licet. / Unus et alter laesus. Bonus quisque dabit / Iam renovatae plausum Academiae. / Longùm efflorescat Osuna Academia.’²³ This anticipated one of the themes of the *Anatomy*, and we can see a prototype of Burton’s satirical-encyclopaedic authorial *persona* of ‘Democritus Junior’ in the wandering scholar ‘Polumathes’, who delivered the lament ‘Divites plures, paucos doctus, sapientem neminem.’²⁴ We do not know exactly when he began the composition of the *Anatomy*, but given the size of the book it was presumably several years before its first publication in 1621. He continued to work on it up to his death in January 1640, producing new editions of ever-increasing length in 1624, 1628, 1632, and 1638. A version with a relatively small number of the author’s final additions and modifications was published posthumously in 1651.

Very few details concerning Burton’s life at Oxford have survived, but this is more than compensated for by the rich mine of information about his interests preserved in the form of his large personal library.²⁵ As well as being librarian at Christ Church from 1626 onwards, he was an avid collector of books and all kinds of printed material in genres that ranged from theology, history, medicine, politics, literature, geography, astronomy, and astrology to mathematics, agriculture, law, and descriptions of marvels. The range of intellectual interests this reflects was not unusual in itself, since this was the age in Oxford, and indeed in England, where achieving a reputation for ‘general’, encyclopaedic learning was held to be one of the greatest triumphs of a humanist’s career.²⁶ But comparing his library to others of the era, he appears to have been particularly interested in information about the contemporary world, as over three-quarters of his books of history and literature were concerned with the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries, and like many of his contemporaries he regularly indulged himself by purchasing news pamphlets.²⁷ His active reading

²³ Burton 1977, p. 226.

²⁴ Burton 1977, p. 195.

²⁵ See Kiessling 1988.

²⁶ See Casaubon 1999 and Feingold 1997, p. 218.

²⁷ Osler 1926, p. 187; Kiessling 1988, p. 371.

practices – also typical amongst humanists of this period – are suggested by the annotations that can be seen in about one-fifth of his volumes. As one would expect, works dealing with melancholy are heavily annotated, and copious reference lists on a range of subjects that were discussed in the *Anatomy*, as well as quotations, anecdotes, poems, proverbs, and paradoxes, can be found scribbled in the pages, flyleaves, and blank pages of many books.²⁸ Some of his notes reveal a reader who was very far from being disengaged. Burton's response to George Carleton's dismissal of judicial astrology near the beginning of his *Ἀστρολογία: The madnesse of astrologers* (1624) was to ask in a marginal comment, 'What alreadie?' 'Mentitur' was his more blunt reaction to John Eliot's claim, in *The survey or topographical description of France* (1592), that the population of Paris was 'many millyons'.²⁹ His library acts as a strong testament to the fact – which we shall see confirmed by the contents of the *Anatomy* – that he was a critical reader, engaging with his books and looking to use and transform their contents for his own purposes. The currently prevalent image of Burton as a naïve and occasionally careless compiler of other authors' views cannot remain.³⁰

THE 'LETTER TO DAMAGETES'

Burton's response to the contemporary world was largely determined by a combination of moral-philosophical and spiritual commitments, and in seeking to understand the way these were manifested in the content and form of the *Anatomy* we need first to examine his choice of *persona* as 'Democritus Junior'. The title-pages of the six editions of the work published between 1621 and 1651 concealed the author's identity behind this pseudonym, notwithstanding the inclusion of several clues elsewhere in the book.³¹ Six of the seven parergic components accompanying the main text – the illustrated frontispiece and its expository 'Argument', the dedication to Lord Berkeley, the poems 'Democritus Junior ad Librum suuum' and 'Heraclite fleas...', and the admonitory 'Lectori malè feriato' – referred to Democritus Junior, and the first pages of the

²⁸ Kiessling 1988, pp. xxxiii–iv.

²⁹ Kiessling 1988, p. xxxiii.

³⁰ See, for example, the views expressed in Bamborough 1989, p. xxvi; Vicari 1989, p. 193; Pigeaud 1992, p. 221; and cf. the comments on Montaigne scholarship in Friedrich 1991, p. xxix. For a recent suggestion that Burton was an 'active' reader see McCutcheon 1998, p. 74.

³¹ See Burton 1621, sig. Ddd3^v, and the hints at 2.61.12–13; 2.61.17–18, d; 2.61–31–2, k; 2.66.21–5, p (2.2.3.i). From the third edition onwards, Burton's portrait and coat of arms appeared on the illustrated frontispiece.

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satirical preface provided substantial detail concerning the ‘reason of the Name’ Burton had assumed (1.6.12). Few modern readers have failed to register the high degree of importance that must be given to this pseudonym, and its literary-satirical associations have been well illustrated.³² But its philosophical aspects have been almost totally ignored. The satirical connotation of the laughing figure of Democritus was in fact an aspect of his moral-philosophical identity. It is by attending to this dimension of ‘Democritus Junior’ that we may recover the ‘truth’ Burton avowedly delivered whilst speaking ‘in jest’.

The prefatory satire ‘Democritus Junior to the Reader’ was an extended adaptation of the pseudo-Hippocratic *Letter to Damagetes*, an apocryphal tale in which the philosopher Democritus proved to the physician Hippocrates that the world was universally suffering from madness.³³ The *Letter* was well known in European humanist circles, especially after its inclusion in Fabio Calvo’s Latin translation of the Hippocratic *corpus* issued in 1525, though Burton was virtually unique in using it in such substantial detail. His adaptation bore all the hallmarks of the manner in which humanists had long sought to apply classical texts to the contemporary world.³⁴ In the first place, he employed the trope of *similitudo temporum* – based on the axiom that the essentials of human nature never change (1.39.2–12) – to update the message of the *Letter* for the contemporary world. Indeed, it was his opinion that Democritus’s assessment of ‘the World in his time’ was even more relevant to ‘this life of ours’ than it had been to his own age (1.37.14, 20). More important, however, were the philosophical aims of ‘Democritus Junior to the Reader’. Its core argument was rooted in the moral psychology found in the pseudo-Hippocratic text, an eclectic configuration of Cynic, Epicurean, and Stoic ideas. As we shall see in later chapters, Burton extensively exploited the intellectual resources of this text as a platform for addressing contemporary political issues. To begin to understand his position, we must first look at his re-telling of the *Letter*, whose importance was signalled by his decision to insert it ‘*verbatim* almost, as it is delivered by *Hippocrates* himself’ one-third of the way into the preface (1.33.6–7).

In Burton’s account, which began by supplementing information about Democritus contained in the *Letter* with details taken mainly from

³² See Holland 1979; Jehasse 1980; Rutten 1992, pp. 181–6.

³³ Hippocrates 1990, xvii, pp. 73–93.

³⁴ For the reception history of the *Letter to Damagetes* see Rütten 1992; on Burton’s use of the text see Rütten 1993.

Diogenes Laertius, the renowned philosopher was a citizen of the Thracian town of Abdera, to which place he had been summoned as ‘their Lawmaker, Recorder or Towne-clearke’. Eventually, however, he took off to ‘a Garden in the Suburbs’ to devote himself ‘to his studies, and a private life’,³⁵ only occasionally visiting the harbour to ‘*laugh heartily*’ at what he saw there (1.3.1–5). His laughter was provoked by the ridiculousness of the ‘whole life’ of the Abderans, who for their part were convinced that Democritus had succumbed to madness, and summoned the famous physician Hippocrates ‘that he would exercise his skill upon him’ (1.32.33–33.4). On meeting Democritus alone in his garden, ‘*with a Booke on his knees*’ and ‘*cutting up severall Beasts*’, Hippocrates discovered that he was investigating the causes of madness and melancholy, and expressed his admiration at Democritus’s ‘happinesse and leasure’ – in contrast to his own life consumed by necessary ‘domesticall affaires’ (1.33.10–24). At this, Democritus ‘profusely laughed’, explaining the cause of his mirth to be ‘the vanities and fopperies of the time’, seen especially in the absence of virtue and variety of passions that dominated men, made them miserable, and produced ridiculous ‘behaviours’ that ‘*expresse their intollerable folly*’ (1.33.24–34.2).

Hippocrates initially countered Democritus’s case that men were ‘as disordered in their mindes, as *Thersites* was in his body’ with the idea that their actions were compelled by necessity, and excused by the uncertainty of human knowledge of the future (1.34.21–6). But the philosopher expanded his argument. Mankind was deserving not of pity but of laughter because it failed to ‘consider the mutability of this world’, sought ‘superfluties, and unprofitable things’ beyond that which had been provided by ‘Nature’, succumbed to ‘Avarice, Envy, Malice, enormous villanies, Mutinies, unsatiabable desires, Conspiracies, and other incurable Vices’, and generally ‘know not themselves’ (1.35.7–36.3). Such was the vanity, hypocrisy, and passionate madness of humanity, Democritus concluded, ‘why should I not laugh at those, to whom folly seemes wisdom, will not be cured, and perceive it not?’ (1.36.3–37.8). The scene ended with a critical reversal of the Abderans’ diagnosis. According to Hippocrates, ‘the World had not a wiser, a more learned, a more honest man, and they were much deceived to say that hee was mad’ (1.37.9–13).

Two general features of this fable are indispensable for understanding its role in the *Anatomy*. First, although Burton recorded Democritus’s

³⁵ Cf. Hippocrates 1995, xvii.2, pp. 74–5 (=Hippocrates 1525, p. 713).