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"I have decreed not to sing in my cage". Melancholy at Court from Castiglione to Shakespeare's Much Ado About Nothing

Sommario | **Abstract**

In light of the well-established presence of Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier* in Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, I will focus on the villain of the play, Don John, and emphasise the hitherto unacknowledged similarities between his character and the melancholic courtiers against whom Castiglione had warned in his work. In so doing, I will underscore how Shakespeare did not limit to a simplistic construct of imitation and adaptation of his Italian model, but proved to be well aware of the contemporary debates surrounding the spreading and the dangerous effects of melancholy.

Parole chiave | **Keywords**

Shakespeare; *Much Ado About Nothing*; *Castiglione*; uncourtliness; melancholy

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1. *Introduction*

Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, Lodwick Hartley argued, "generally posed more problems to the reader than to the spectator, who has been too busy enjoying the play to bother" (1965: 609). The problems that the reader cannot help noticing originate from the awareness that – despite its aery atmosphere – the Italian court of Messina which Shakespeare brings on stage is far from an idyllic setting. Both the devious conspiracy that threatens the main characters' (Claudio and Hero) happy ending and the "merry war" (I.1.58-59) between the popular protagonists of the subplot (Benedick and Beatrice) provide constant references to fighting, infidelity, spying, and injuring[1]. "To be sure", as Stephen Greenblatt acknowledged, "the[se] horrors are not themselves realized dramatically in the play; they are present as mere jokes. Nonetheless, they are present, recalled again and again by the constant threat of disaster […]" (1997: 1384). Disquieting though this is, it is also hardly surprising. In his *The Civilizing Process*, after all, Norbert Elias

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has thoroughly explained how the development of courtly ideals had not really suppressed the dangers and the violence which had characterized the aristocratic life of the Middle Ages. Just as Shakespeare suggests in *Much Ado*, under their charming surface, the new social spaces of the early modern courts did prove to be perilous battlefields. Dangers were still there, painfully kept at bay by the imposition of the strict behavioural code required at court, while physical violence was sublimated into witty verbal exchanges between the newly-fashioned gentlemen and gentlewomen (Elias 1939, ed. 2000: 387-97).

In Shakespeare's times, a thorough account of both benefits and dangers of courtly life could be found in one of the most widely read books of the Italian Cinquecento: Baldassarre Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier* (1528). Set at the court of Guidubaldo da Montefeltro of Urbino, this book discussed in detail the sophisticated "performance" that courtiers were called upon to play, thus outlining the qualities that the ideal courtier had to possess – such as grasping the intricacies of diplomacy, engaging in entertaining conversation, or singing and dancing pleasantly – which were necessary to win the favours of their sovereigns. Castiglione particularly underscored that this "performance" had to appear most spontaneous to be effective. To please the sovereign, in other words, the ideal courtier had to master the so-called *sprezzatura*, a sophisticated form of nonchalance that allowed them to pretend to be naturally fit for courtly life. However deceitful this form of self-fashioning may seem, Greenblatt argued, it was "a means not of withdrawing from a [still] treacherous world, but of operating successfully within it" (1997: 1382). Always according to Castiglione, in order to become a courtier "without any defects", not only did gentlemen and gentlewomen have to "be endowed with beauty of countenance […] and with an attractive grace" (ed. 1976: 60), but they also had to "strive to give a good impression at the

beginning" (56-57). This was a crucial part of every courtier's gradual attempt at making themselves as agreeable as possible to their sovereign, before eventually arising to the rank of the latter's personal advisors (285). Those courtiers who did not accept or (more or less subtly) rebelled against the social rules on which the court was built, David Javitch explained, produced considerable tensions, and even put the survival of the court itself in danger (1983).

Undeniably set in the same aristocratic context as Castiglione's *Courtier*, Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* does indeed stage a group of courtiers who destabilize the court of Messina with their uncourtly behaviour. Although at different levels, both Don John – the mind behind the mentioned conspiracy laid against Claudio and Hero – and Benedick and Beatrice contribute to bringing to light the fragile foundations of courtly life. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that any alert reader, as Hartley rightly acknowledged, should notice the discordant note underlying this apparently joyous comedy. Much more than Benedick's and Beatrice's, it is Don John's behaviour, however, which seriously threatens to turn the comedy into a tragedy. By building on the well-established presence of *The Book of the Courtier* in *Much Ado About Nothing*, in the following section I will therefore focus on Don John, the true villain of the play, and emphasise the hitherto unacknowledged similarities between this character and the melancholic courtiers against whom Castiglione had warned in his work.

2. *Melancholic courtiers from Urbino to Messina*

Between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, scholars such as George Wyndham and Mary Augusta Scott began to put forward evidence for the presence of Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier* in *Much Ado About Nothing* (Wyndham 1898: cxix-cxx; Scott 1901). Scott, in particular,

famously showed the affinity between the "merry war" engaged by Benedick and Beatrice and that engaged by two minor characters of *The Courtier*, Lord Gaspare Pallavicino and Lady Emilia Pia. "[A] comparison between the play and the dialogue", she wrote, "shows remarkable coincidences in character, in action, in environment, in thought, and in language" (1901: 502). However, no thorough study on the early modern circulation of *The Courtier* was available at the time and the contributions on the topic limited to underscoring a general influence of Italian courtesy books on English culture and literature (Raleigh 1900: lxxix-lxxxiv). It was only in 1995 that Peter Burke convincingly proved how well-known Castiglione's masterpiece was in sixteenth-century England. *The Book of the Courtier*, he demonstrated, began to circulate already in the 1530s, and appeared in various Latin editions too, before being translated into English by Sir Thomas Hoby in 1561 (Burke 1995: 64-93). Despite being cautious about Shakespeare's possible acquaintance with Castiglione, Burke nonetheless acknowledged that "the tone of [*The Courtier*'s] dialogue[s] is not far removed from *Love's Labour's Lost* (say) or *Much Ado About Nothing*" (34). Since then, other studies have investigated the relationship between the writer and the dramatist, and concluded that an alert intellectual such as Shakespeare could not have ignored the ideas discussed by Castiglione (Gent 1972; Bradbrook 1991; Baldini 1997; Comensoli 1998; Baldini 2003; Cohen 2007; Berger 2014; Roe 2014). In fact, Philip Collington argued that Castiglione is *everywhere* in Shakespeare's comedies (2006: 281-312). Well beyond a mere matter of intertextuality or parallelisms, Collington proved how "the issues debated in *The Courtier*" – such as *sprezzatura*, just to name one – "reappear as a number of thematic controversies", especially in *Much Ado* (284).

Even before Burke's groundbreaking work, most of the studies which had looked at *Much Ado About Nothing* through the

lens of *The Book of the Courtier* had particularly focused on the mentioned protagonists of the play's subplot – Benedick and Beatrice – and their (non) adherence to courtly ideals (Bullough 1958: 79-80; Lewalski 1969: xiv-xvi; Humphreys 1981: 16-19). In this regard, Benedick's characterization has been shown to draw on the portrait of Castiglione's ideal courtier, although in a humorous key (Camerlingo 2019). Shifting the attention to an aspect that scholarship has not taken into consideration so far, I would like instead to tackle the issue of how much Shakespeare's characterization of Don John too seems to have been influenced by *The Courtier*, and particularly by Castiglione's warnings against melancholic – and therefore dishonourable – courtiers.

When he arrives at the court of Leonato, the governor of Messina, with his half-brother Don Pedro, prince of Aragon, and his companions Benedick and Claudio, Shakespeare's Don John is presented as the taciturn and melancholic type, who hardly utters scarce words of gratitude to Leonato for his hospitality. Moreover, the latter also informs the audience that Don John has just had a disagreement with his half-brother and rightful sovereign: "Leonato: Let me bid you welcome, my lord. *Being reconciled to the Prince your brother*, I owe you all duty. | Don John: I thank you. *I am not of many words*, but I thank you" (I.1. 147-51, emphasis mine). Not only does Don John stand out from the very beginning as an impolite courtier, but his melancholy is soon shown to hide a dangerous tendency to insubordination, which will indeed prove to be highly destabilizing for the microcosm of the Sicilian court:

> Don John *I had rather be a canker in a hedge than a rose in his [Don Pedro's] grace*, and it better fits my blood to be disdained of all than to fashion a carriage to rob love from any. In this, though I cannot be said to be a flattering honest man, it must not be denied but I am a plain-dealing villain. I

> am trusted with a muzzle and enfranchised with a clog. Therefore *I have decreed not to sing in my cage*. If I had my mouth I would bite. *If I had my liberty, I would do my liking*. In the mean time, let me be that I am, and seek not to alter me (I.3.25-34, emphasis mine).

As has been variously underscored, Don John's antisocial behaviour owes much to his being the bastard brother, the outsider who is constantly reminded of the gracious tolerance that his legitimately high-born fellows grant him (Berger 1982; Neill 1993; Findley 1994). "Like *King Lear*'s Edmund", Claire MacEachern explained, "Don John's ethical nature seems predetermined by the political and economic circumstances of his birth […] [h]e is a kind of walking impersonation of the way in which illegitimate sexual activity can produce social malcontents" (2016: 52-53; Nigri 2018). In a sense, then, Greenblatt was right when he claimed that Don John's impoliteness was the sign of his conscious rebellion against court manners, on which the system of "mutual obligation and interconnectedness" that kept him at its margins was based (1997: 1382). Yet, considering the several echoes between *The Courtier* and *Much Ado* identified by a significant body of scholarship, I do think it is worth underscoring that what Shakespeare brings on stage with his melancholic and aloof Don John is also the same kind of courtier against whom Castiglione had warned in his influential work. In Book II of his *Courtier*, the Italian writer had patently stated as follows:

> I want the courtier […] to make it clear on all occasions and to all persons that he […] devote[s] all his thought and strength to loving and almost adoring the prince […] Prepared in this way, *he will never appear before his prince in a bad humour, or in a melancholy mood; nor will he be as taciturn as are so many who may seem to bear a grudge against their masters, which is truly odious* (1976: 125-26, emphasis mine).

If, as has been claimed, correspondences between Benedick and Castiglione's ideal courtier can be easily established, it is not too far-fetched to argue that, when it came to the villain of the play, Shakespeare may have decided to portray Don John as a taciturn and melancholic type so as to echo what Castiglione had written about courtiers who seemed "to bear a grudge against [their] masters" (126). To be sure, other influential conduct books circulated at the time in England, such as Thomas Elyot's *The Boke named the Governour* (1531), or Giovanni Della Casa's *Galateo* (1558), or Stefano Guazzo's *The Civil Conversation* (1574), just to name the most famous ones (Shrank 2019). And all of them presented impolite and/or dishonourable courtiers in similar terms. However, at least to my knowledge, in none of the others is the parallelism between uncourtliness and melancholy drawn as explicitly as in Castiglione's *Courtier*. It is for this reason, therefore, that Shakespeare's Don John may be said to remind of Castiglione's melancholic and dishonourable courtiers, which contributes to confirming *The Book of the Courtier* as a possible source of inspiration for the playwright in *Much Ado About Nothing*.

In this regard, I would like to focus on the melancholy of Castiglione's and Shakespeare's "taciturn" courtiers, because what might appear as fleeting references on both authors' part prove to be significant remarks instead. The early modern age, as Jean Starobinski thoroughly explained, was indeed the golden age of melancholy, being as it was at the centre of lively debates among philosophers, poets, and doctors, who strove to understand its ambiguous origins and symptoms (1962). At the same time a sign of genius and a disease of both mind and body, melancholy spread like an epidemic between the sixteenth and the seventeenth century: "[T]here was a widespread concern […]", as Mary Ann Lund acknowledged, "that melancholy was becoming increasingly prevalent" (2010: 9).

From France and Italy to Germany and England, so many cases of people suffering from this disease came to be known that a heated debate broke out among eminent personalities at the time. "[F]or many members of the learned community […]", Angus Gowland maintained, "discourses on the passions and on melancholy served as outlets for anxieties that were in many cases shaped, and in some cases provoked, by consciousness of [the political-religious conflicts developing after the Reformation]" (2006a: 119).

In Shakespeare's England, this hotly-debated issue was given considerable attention by a wide variety of writers, including physicians, philosophers, ecclesiastics, and scholars (Babb 1951; Lund 2010; 2021). Among the first and most widely read, the Anglican clergyman and physician Timothy Bright with his *Treatise of Melancholy* (1586) must be mentioned, whose influence on Shakespeare's own dramatic output has been often suggested (O'Sullivan 1926; Matthews 1935; Riesenfeld 1957; Heffernan 1995: 123-47). Taking his cue from "the increasingly personal sense of responsibility being assumed by English Protestants […] in their endeavor to purge religious guilt from their souls" (Brann 1980: 63; Hunter 2015), Bright was particularly interested in analysing the differences between what was thought to be a "natural" sort of melancholy and "that heavy hande of God upon the afflicted conscience, tormented with remorse of sinne, and feare of his judgement" (Bright 1586: IIIv). Truth be told, in voicing the century-old correlation between macrocosm and microcosm, and between body and soul, Bright actually did little more than aligning himself with the well-established Galenic theory of the humours, and thus justified natural melancholy as the result of "a temporary imbalance of the body fluids" (Brann 1980: 66). Particularly, he argued that a melancholic mood was the typical disposition of all those people who experienced upsetting passions, such

as "feare, sadnes, dispaire" (Bright 1586: GIIr), which caused them a momentary phase of "irrationality" (Gowland 2006a: 98). Of course, this does not mean, as Elizabeth Hunter rightly showed, that Bright limited to "dismiss[ing] melancholic persons as irrational", but considered them "as "weak" in their faith and requiring the aid of both medicine and divinity to regain assurance" (2015). This link between melancholy and passions so perturbing as to obfuscate one's reason is especially revealing. It means, to put it in Gowland's words, that Bright somehow perceived melancholy as the sign of "the breakdown of psychic harmony in the individual", and consequently those affected by melancholy as potential contributors to the "disintegration of the harmony in society as a whole" (2006a: 117). This was indeed a widespread fear at the time and the same conclusion that would be drawn by Robert Burton in what can be considered as the early modern masterpiece on the topic, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621). In this encyclopaedic work, Burton recorded all the causes of and remedies to a phenomenon which was so widespread to be called the "Elizabethan malady", to use Lawrence Babb's definition (1951: vii). Burton would particularly highlight how melancholy did often manifest itself as a consequence of people's inadequate control of their own passions. According to him, such lack of control corresponded to a disturbed and ultimately unhealthy relationship with the society in which they lived (Trevor 2004; Gowland 2006b; Lund 2008; Volpone 2017). That is why, in the *Satirical Preface*, Burton expressed his willingness to find a cure not only for melancholy, but also for the social disorders and the violence that it caused. For the same reason, Burton ended up longing for a model society, where laws could be able to tame all forms of human excess and thus eradicate melancholy as well as its dangerous outcomes (Gowland 2006b: 205-96; Starobinski 2012: 152-53).

Going back to the fore-mentioned passages of *The Book of the Courtier*, it appears evident that Castiglione had somehow expressed this same concern decades before Bright and Burton. Since the court was a microcosm regulated by the same dynamics as the macrocosm, in explaining the socio-political importance of the rules set to control the behaviour of the courtiers, Castiglione had made it clear that those who showed up taciturn and melancholic at court were evidently unable to control themselves, and thus posed serious threats to the social order in which they lived (Kullmann 2014: 57-72). Due to chronological issues, Shakespeare was not able to read Burton's *Anatomy*. In all likelihood, however, he came to know Castiglione's *Courtier* and Bright's *Treatise*. Bringing together uncourtliness and melancholy, in *Much Ado About Nothing* Shakespeare does indeed seem to give shape to the same general fears, which had been more or less explicitly voiced both in the most famous conduct book of the Renaissance and in Bright's influential work. In his comedy, as mentioned above, the dramatist openly shows how much the melancholic – and thus obviously unfit for courtly life – Don John comes to represent a potentially fatal threat for the socio-political order of Messina, which so much resembles the court where *The Courtier* is set. It is him the one who concocts, with the help of his acolyte Borachio, malevolent accusations of sexual promiscuity against innocent Hero – the fiancée of his half-brother's friend, Claudio:

> Borachio: I think I told your lordship a year since how much I am in the favour of Margaret, the waiting gentlewoman to Hero.
>
> Don John: I remember.
>
> Borachio: I can at any unseasonable instant of the night appoint her to look out at her lady's chamber window.
>
> Don John: What life is in that to be the death of this marriage?

> Borachio: *The poison of that lies in you to temper*. Go you to the Prince your brother. Spare not to tell him that he hath wronged his honour in marrying the renowned Claudio […] to a contaminated stale, such a one as Hero.
> Don John: What proof shall I make of that?
> Borachio: Proof enough to misuse the Prince, to vex Claudio, to undo Hero, and kill Leonato. Look you for any other issue?
> Don John: Only to despite them I will endeavour anything (II.2.11-27, my emphasis).

Because of the "poison" that lies in his melancholic – and therefore "sick" – soul ("I am sick in displeasure to him [Claudio]" [II.2.3]), Don John manages to sabotage the marriage between Claudio and Hero, who reportedly dies of shame (Kullman 2014: 67-69)[2]. In so doing, besides unsettling the social life of the Sicilian court with this act, Don John also seriously damages the political relations between Don Pedro, who believes his lies and wants to leave Messina at once, and governor Leonato and his brother Antonio, Hero's father and uncle respectively:

> Leonato: But brother Antony –
> Antonio: Come, 'tis no matter.
> Do not meddle, let me deal in this.
> Don pedro: Gentlemen both, we will not wake your patience.
> My heart is sorry for your daughter's death,
> but on my honour she was charged with nothing
> but what was true and very full of proof.
> Leonato: My lord, my lord –
> Don Pedro: I will not hear you.
> Leonato: No? Come brother, away. I will be heard.
> Antonio: And shall, or some of us will smart for it (V.1.101-10)

In agreement with Collington, it is not detecting the exact quotation from Castiglione that matters here (Collington 2006:

282-83). Rather, what I would like to claim is that in *Much Ado About Nothing* Shakespeare did prove to share Castiglione's same concern regarding potential threats to the precarious balance of courtly life, in both cases significantly represented as the consequences of the actions of melancholic courtiers. In this comedy, where his well-established confrontation with Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier* is most evident, Shakespeare does indeed seem to align himself with the Italian author's claim that a melancholic behaviour was not only the sign of uncourtliness, but also possibly dangerous for society as a whole (Heffernan 1995; Tambling 2004; Pettigrew 2007; Gowland 2006b: 139-204; Lund 2008; 2010: 112-37; Ragni 2017). At the same time, by presenting Don John as the mind behind the plot laid against Hero and the cause of the political tensions which threatened to break the peace between Don Pedro and Leonato, Shakespeare did not limit to a simplistic construct of imitation and adaptation of his Italian model. He also proved to be well aware, as written above, of the contemporary debates surrounding the spreading and potentially devastating effects of melancholy as they were being widely discussed in influential works, such as Timothy Bright's *Treatise on Melancholy*.

3. *Conclusion*

In this contribution I have put forward further evidence for the presence of Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier* between the lines of Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. Building on previous studies which had showed the similarities between Castiglione's ideal courtier and the character of Benedick, I have shifted the focus of attention onto the villain of the play, and underscored that, when he staged Don John's infamous deeds, Shakespeare seems to have had the dangerously melancholic courtiers plainly condemned in *The Courtier* on his mind. Alert as he was to the vagaries of the human soul, Shakespeare

also proves to have grasped, I argue, the closeness between Castiglione's considerations and the contemporary debates on the spread of melancholy, which he would tackle in several other works. Drawing inspiration from ideas that he found in one of the masterpieces of Cinquecento Italy, in other words, not only did Shakespeare unmistakably reconstruct the atmosphere of *The Book of the Courtier* in his *Much Ado About Nothing*, but he also bound it to his own dramatic agenda and the specific historical context of Elizabethan England.

Notes

[1] All references to Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* are from *The Oxford Shakespeare* (2005) and will appear parenthetically in the text.

[2] After being falsely accused of disloyalty to Claudio on the day of their wedding in IV.1, Hero faints. As the presiding friar believes her innocence, he suggests her family to tell the other characters that she has died. In so doing, he hopes, Claudio will be inspired with remorse. Shakespeare will then solve everything by means of the local Watch, who will reveal Don John's treason in V.1, and allow for the inevitable happy ending.

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