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Shakespearean Melancholy: Philosophy, Form and the Transformation of Comedy / J.F. Bernard

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Reviewed by LIEKE STELLING

Few songs are as poignantly moving as Irving Berlin's "Blue Skies," particularly in Willie Nelson's rendition, which became a hit in 1978. It is precisely the combination of highly, almost excessively uplifting phrases, like "nothing but blue skies / from now on," and the sad inflections of the melody that create an incongruity which heightens the bittersweetness of the song and produces a comical effect. As such, the inherent ambivalence of the song, also reflected in the double meaning of the word "blue," becomes a much more powerful expression of the sense of what it means to be human than what we experience in more cathartic songs that, both in tune and lyric, are unambivalently tragic. Berlin's song can be seen as the musical equivalent of the comedies that J.F. Bernard discusses in his eloquent and appropriately witty study of the correlation between melancholy and comedy in Shakespeare's drama. This monograph is part of the *Edinburgh Critical Studies in Shakespeare and Philosophy*, which is less interested in the historical and historicist significances of Shakespeare's works than in their timeless philosophy. Indeed, Bernard seeks to arrive at an understanding of Shakespeare's philosophies of melancholy, as expressed in his comedies, that allow us to better comprehend modern theories of this complex emotion.

The introduction, which is also the first chapter, nevertheless offers a solid discussion of the rich variety of theories of melancholy that were developed in the "golden age of Melancholy" (14), the Renaissance, and in turn had their roots in classical understandings. When we realize that melancholy in the early modern period is "at once a principle of health and a catalyst for disease, an emblem of genius, a symptom of madness, a marker of grandiose interiority and a sign of feeble-mindedness" it is indeed surprising that its refraction through (Shakespeare's) comic drama has escaped scholarly attention (2). Bernard's point is that comedy, more so than tragedy, is interested in the cyclical and natural relationship between the "seemingly oppositional" feelings of mirth and melancholy, and, therefore, in the question of what it means to be human. This quality he coins as "melancomic."

Chapter 2 is devoted to *The Comedy of Errors* and *Love's Labour's Lost* and the first to support Bernard's overall argument that Shakespeare works out "a mutual transformation of comedy and melancholy" in his comedic oeuvre (45). Both plays draw from traditional theories of melancholy, associating it with, among other things, lovesickness, masculine identity, and Englishness, but they also problematize these understandings as well as the comic framework in which they are presented. This effect is particularly strong in their ambiguous endings, which move towards but never fulfill a promise of "purg[ing] away their melancholic pangs" (90). The following chapter develops this idea further in its analysis of *Much Ado about Nothing* and *The Merchant of Venice*; these works underscore to an even greater extent that classical (Galenic and Aristotelian) understandings of melancholy are

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irreconcilable with comedy. In addition, this chapter shows how Shakespeare departs from the Jonsonian humor comedy genre by presenting excessively melancholic characters who are not funny in and of themselves. What Don John (in *Much Ado*) and Antonio (in *Merchant*) have in common is that they insist on their inherent melancholiness, without reflecting on it or trying to remedy it. This, then, helps us to better understand the isolation of these characters at the end of the plays, which, as Bernard acutely observes, is not the result of their victimhood at the hands of the other characters, but of their “incessant refusal to purge their melancholy” (99).

Chapter 4 offers an analysis of *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night* and introduces a new twist in Shakespeare’s understanding of melancholy. Here, the emotion is not so much bound up with character as with spatial and temporal surroundings, a notion that is typically considered modern and finds theoretical expression in the writings of philosophers like Timothy Morton, Walter Benjamin, and Judith Butler. Often described as the last and best of Shakespeare’s comedies, these two plays also contain, as Bernard argues, the essence of the melancomiac. This manifests itself in the presentation of melancholy as genuinely comical, in inherently paradoxical endings of “bittersweet celebration” and of “sobering disillusionment in the face of the unrelenting passage of time [...] amidst ecstatic celebrations” (154).

In the last chapter that discusses specific works, Bernard turns to three late Shakespeare plays (including one that was co-written by John Fletcher) that are known for their resistance to generic classification: *The Winter’s Tale*, *Pericles* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. These works further expand the temporal understanding of melancholy, notably in terms of lost time. The endings of all three plays are comic, offering (miraculous) reunifications and other resolutions, but they fail to properly relieve the melancholy mood that was created in earlier scenes, inviting audiences to remember the trauma characters have suffered. As such, they create a nostalgic longing “for what the past could have been” (177). Bernard calls these late plays “profoundly melancomiac,” as their melancholy and comedy keep each other in balance, something that helps us gain a better grasp of the reason as to why these works are so difficult to classify.

The final chapter is devoted to the modern comic philosophy of melancholy and shows how Shakespeare’s renderings of it on the early modern stage affirm and complement the theories of Sigmund Freud, Judith Butler and Sianne Ngai, among other philosophers. While Freud famously and helpfully uses *Hamlet* to expound his understanding of melancholia as “the loss of an object that is withdrawn from consciousness,” a more substantial engagement with Shakespeare’s late comedies, Bernard shows, would have offered an even clearer illustration of Freud’s theory. While Butler clearly distinguishes between the performance of gender and theatricality, dismissing the latter as less relevant, Shakespeare’s female comic characters “in being denied access to the masculine ideal of melancholy [...] assert their gendered identities” in reaction to male melancholy (223-24). Ngai, who specializes in the power of uneasy and unprestigious negative emotions, such as irritation or paranoia, does not consider melancholy, as it is too canonical. Yet, as Bernard argues, Shakespeare’s comic melancholy perfectly suits Ngai’s interest in “ugly feelings,” precisely because it is “fundamentally non-cathartic and often offers no sense of release whatsoever” (228).

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For those who are interested in early modern perceptions of the intriguing correlations between melancholy and humour this book is perhaps not the best place to start. It is very philosophical and unapologetically concerned with Shakespeare's ingenuity and the extraordinary ability of Shakespeare's works to convey a sense of what it means to be human in their comic depiction of melancholy. Yet as such it is a very welcome contribution to the scholarly treatment of comedy and humour, which are still not regarded with the same philosophical seriousness as tragedy and melancholy. Bernard's readings of the plays yield fresh insights into specific characters, into the important and understudied status of sadness in Shakespeare's comedies and the development of comedy within Shakespeare's oeuvre itself. If, as the blurb of this book promises, "we are reminded that, behind roaring laughter, one inevitably finds the subtle pangs of melancholy," Bernard's monograph also invites us to see that melancholy finds its most human and affective expression in the form of comedy.

Lieke Stelling is Assistant Professor of English at Utrecht University. Her monograph *Religious Conversion in Early Modern English Drama* has recently appeared from Cambridge University Press. She is currently working on a new book project entitled *Faith in Jest: Humour and Religion in the Literature of the English Reformation*.