

Humouring the Hero: The Uses of Melancholy among Military Nobles in Late Elizabethan England

The interest of this article is twofold: first, to establish and explore the intricate connection between two key concepts in the fashioning of English military nobles: the *hero* and *melancholy*; and second, to explain their usages and usefulness in the last decades of the sixteenth century, when both terms were used a lot more frequently than ever before in the English language (see, for *hero*, Simpson et al. 171 and Low 23–24, and for *melancholy*, Babb 73). It is possible to link this increase at least partially to the advancement of one particular *social figuration*¹: the generation of young courtiers of Queen Elizabeth I who were born around 1560 and stepped into the courtly sphere in the 1580s and 1590s. As I will argue, the use of both terms by these persons and for these persons was connected with the way they fashioned themselves and the way they were fashioned by others. I will use the term *self-fashioning* from Greenblatt to refer to the ability of early modern individuals to produce fictions or performances of the self in order to influence hierarchical power relations between persons (1–9). Thus, I will propose that fashioning oneself as heroic or as melancholic could be used as a resource for a person's social advancement.

1. A Social Figuration and Its Use of Heroics

This article will focus on the paradigmatic figure of Philip Sidney (1554–1586) who, from adolescence, was viewed as being extremely gifted and charismatic and happened to be the nephew of the ageing queen's childless and ageing favourite, the Earl of Leicester. Thus, Sidney was widely expected to eventually succeed to the politically important and economically reassuring role of the queen's favourite. He became the focal point of a political faction in favour of a more

aggressive foreign policy against Spain that involved England with military on the continent from the mid-1570s ("Leicester-Walsingham alliance", Adams 25 and passim). The queen herself referred to Sidney once as "le plus accompli gentilhomme de l'Europe" (Sidney, *Correspondence* II 999). He travelled Europe extensively and brought many ideas and practices of the Mediterranean Renaissance and of the European *republic of letters* into the practical life and behaviour of his generation of fellow court hopefuls, such as Walter Raleigh, Robert Devereux, the 2nd Earl of Essex, and Fulke Greville. In this climate of "intellectual bombardment" by humanist ideas as well as by Calvinist beliefs (Waller 331), Sidney used and exploited both heroics and melancholy for his self-fashioning: He "set the English Renaissance on its course" (Buxton 255) and was soon to be followed by his circle of friends and clients, but also by courtiers of rivaling factions – a social figuration adapting to a new mode of self-display in the context of the court.

The essential text that prescribed how the European nobility imagined the perfect courtier was the *Cortegiano* by the Italian humanist Baldassare Castiglione (1527). Only in the second half of the century did it begin to influence English court society profoundly. In his role as a communicator and adopter of new ideas and practices, Philip Sidney was considered by contemporaries as one of the most perfect personifications of the *cortegiano* (Duncan-Jones 156), and it was rumoured that he never left this book behind when travelling (Matz 59). In essence, being a *cortegiano* meant trying everything to appeal to the prince, withholding any grudges or frustrations, and always acting with *sprezzatura*, a form of nonchalant grace, without ever exposing any strain from pressure. The court became the space of dissimulation (Asch 56). By the 1590s, the ideal of the *cortegiano* had assumed a firm

cultural influence over the late Elizabethan court figuration, shaping a “dramatistic identity” for the courtiers, who “each, in his own way, emulated the queen’s artistic self-display” (Javitch 74). The male courtiers presented the theme of politicised love in gendered terms to the female monarch, the target of the sublimated erotic longing of the courtiers. The different forms and means of fashioning oneself as a courtier constituted the Renaissance ideal of the *uomo universale*, the man well versed in any graceful kind of activity, which could comprise the erudite sphere of literature and the arts as much as the military sphere. In fact, the *cortegiano* was expected to choose his “chief business [...] to be arms” (Castiglione 72).

In the decades before the 1580s, young, aspiring nobles had tended to use an almost exclusively military model of heroics to display their readiness to serve for the monarch (for brief surveys, see Low 22–27 and Evans 361). This model could provide them a good name and make them powerful friends at court as well as among the noble elites with their traditional monopoly on waging war and using violence (especially when the monarch was a woman who could not lead the troops into battle herself). By acting on the battlefield or training for it in tournaments, an aspiring noble could focus the attention and the expectations of a group to his person. By displaying readiness to sacrifice oneself while performing heroic military deeds, the self-fashioned noble warrior hero could accumulate social capital.

Whilst the *Cortegiano* prescribed for courtiers to excel as soldiers, the figure of the hero does not fit the job description completely: When the courtier finds himself in a battle, he should do what is constructed as heroic – “do the outstanding and daring things that he has to do” – but only when “in the sight of all the noblest and most respected men in the army, and especially [...] before the very eyes of his king” (Castiglione 72). Thus, all success depended on the visibility of the deed and on the impression given to the superiors, not on the actual accomplishment: “I have known men who, though very able, were stupid on this score, and would risk their lives as much to capture a flock of sheep [...] – which is something our Courtier will not do” (ibid.). Disimulation lay at the core of the courtier warrior’s behaviour; not the actual will to sacrifice. And while there is no simple definition, a core of elements that constitute a hero can be determined: A hero is a figure constructed by a community of followers using him (or her) as a focal point of admiration or of exemplarity; the hero acts on

their behalf and with the will to sacrifice himself. The hero also has the transgressive element of the liminal figure who is able to collect, focus and transcend the values and imaginations of a given group of admirers (von den Hoff et al. 8). Thus, the hero may embody the frictions and problems of social groups and may open up perspectives to resolve them. This is not easily reconciled with the well-functioning courtier, who is constructed as subordinate to an authority with whose demands he eagerly tries to comply. As Alan Hager puts it: “The courtier works by indirection, the hero not” (33).

2. The Late Elizabethan Crisis and the Malady of Melancholy

However, even this courtier mode of the traditional military hero was being challenged in late Elizabethan times (Matz 155 n13). The nobles’ fields of action were coming under pressure in the last decades of the sixteenth century. Although Lawrence Stone’s thesis of a “crisis of the aristocracy” has been deeply transformed – and in military matters firmly rejected –, the state, religion and society of the late Elizabethan age changed profoundly (for an overview, see Gajda 13–19). The rise and consolidation of the early modern state set in motion a dynamic of centralisation and put the political spaces and possibilities of autonomous aristocrats under duress. The pre-modern personalised way of governing, which depended on the cooperation of nobles with their monarch, was giving way to a more hierarchical political style which threatened the role of the nobility. Interlocked with this political development was the increase of confessional concerns as a factor of public life in general. The struggles between the different confessions consolidated the dogma and institutions of the respective churches and transformed individual sets of belief into collective ideologies. State and church required their subjects’ complete adherence and extolled pressure on the individuals to conform. Alongside these underlying structural changes, there were problematic developments that burdened the political climate from the late 1570s. The many problems facing late Elizabethan political culture made it “rife with [...] political discontent” (Kitzes 15): the fear of an assumed Jesuit infiltration of Protestant England, threats of invasion from Spain and rebellions in Ireland, and the precarious state of Protestants in the Netherlands and in war-torn France, all of which seemed to diminish hopes for the establishment of a peaceful European order. This amounted to

rising fears of civil war on English soil and contributed to an increase in emotionally expressive language among elite writers. In the late Elizabethan years, an “affective vogue” (Paster 6) was using melancholy as a semantic code and as an aesthetic expression of the changed emotional display among aristocratic elites.²

What was the cultural consequence of all these developments on the social figuration of military nobles aspiring to political careers? I wish to argue that these nobles turned the problematic circumstances into an aesthetic advantage: As long-standing traditions were being marginalised, ideas and practices from the former margins were incorporated into the dominant cultural display – particularly through an extension of the noble self-fashioning to include the aesthetic form of melancholy. In no small part because of this, during the last quarter of the sixteenth century talking about melancholy “changed from virtually irrelevant to tremendously important” (Kitzes 15). It is the nobles’ emotional display only that is examined here, rather than the question of whether this was felt authentically or not. In what follows, I will therefore concentrate on the aesthetics of melancholy as it created interaction with a courtly public – which could activate a “vicarious feeling” for the person on display (Brady et al.) and thus form a joint “perceptual community” with the person on display (Daniel 5).

Melancholy was received from classical medical thought as one of the four bodily fluids that were thought to be responsible for the (static) character of persons, as well as for illnesses when one of the four fluids was predominant. The four temperaments attributed to humans (choleric, sanguine, phlegmatic and melancholic) derived their names from the fluids; an excess of black bile (in ancient Greek *μελαγχολία*) could lead to a melancholic character as well as a suffering of the mind. This pathological state was usually associated with disease, suffering, old age and death. Among many Renaissance humanists, be they Aristotelians, Platonists or Stoicists, it was common to believe that the melancholic state of a person signified his or her failure to live virtuously. In particular, the evils that were associated with withdrawal from society and from human company were attributed to melancholy (Gowland 112–114).³

In the extended correspondence Philip Sidney maintained with his Huguenot mentor Hubert Languet, melancholy is frequently mentioned as a malady. In the 1570s, for instance, Languet

wrote that “I was very troubled [...] that you are not in very good health and even more melancholy than usual. I beg you to take care of your health, and not to spend so much time on your studies” (Sidney, *Correspondence* I 87) or to “take pleasure and dispel that sometimes excessive melancholy” (ibid. 101). Sidney himself confessed that “I am often more melancholy than either my age or my activities demand; but I have fully proved by experience that I am never less liable to moods of melancholy than while I am pitting my weak mental powers against some difficult challenge” (ibid. 106), obviously meaning a kind of disease of the mind that he felt the need to legitimise. Languet also wrote that Sidney’s many continental admirers “fear that the pleasure of a long retreat will weaken that passion of yours to pursue the noblest goals, and that a love of leisure you used to despise will gradually steal into your soul” (ibid. 998). Even in the learned *res publica litteraria*, leisurely melancholic contemplation was viewed as a threat for the promising young courtier. At the same time, a political undertone needs to be noted here: Exhortation against melancholy was triggered by the fear that a future statesman who was supposed to hold the fate of European Protestantism in his young hands would not manage to act according to the plans of his continental friends.

Sidney was by no means the only of his courtier generation to mention inner states of pathological melancholy. Jonathan Gibson has remarked on the “glut of excessively melancholic patronage letters” by courtiers such as Walter Raleigh and the Earl of Essex in the 1590s (456). Robert Devereux, the 2nd Earl of Essex, was Sidney’s successor as the head of the militant faction of young courtiers after the latter’s death in 1586. The Earl of Essex is usually considered as a man giving in aggressively to untempered passions. But he has also been described as being of melancholic temperament. John Dover Wilson has pointed to his “moods of profound melancholy” (105). One example of this is a letter by Essex to his sister Penelope Rich, probably dating from early 1589, in which he uses melancholy as a vehicle to express dissatisfaction with his courtly advancement: “I am melancholy, mery, some tymes happy and often discontented. The Court [hath] as many humors as the rayne bow hath collores. The tyme wherin wee liue, more vnconstant then women’s thoughtes, more miserable then old age ytself, [...] breedeth [...] people [...] that is violent, desparate and fantastical” (Daybell 117–118). The use of melancholy here serves a political purpose: to illustrate for his aristocratic circle – of which his sister was

an active part – the dissatisfaction at the court, which in his view deformed its courtiers and their humours in all conceivable ways. Essex's melancholy temper allows his displayed mood to oscillate between happiness and discontentedness.

Thus, many of the military courtiers wrote of themselves as melancholy in a pathological, suffering way when they turned to their political and social following. This was diametrically opposed to the prescriptions which the *Cortegiano* gave for the successful courtier. The courtly manual states that being a good courtier means being more than a “flatterer”, which can only be avoided by

love [... for] their prince [or] their friends, which I wish our Courtier to do above all else [...]. And I would have our Courtier bend himself to this [...] so that his prince cannot see him without feeling that he must have something pleasant to say to him; [...] and, with these precautions in mind, he will never be ill-humored or melancholy before his prince, nor taciturn [...], which is something truly odious. (Castiglione 80–81)

So, to be a “perfect courtier” one had to display nothing but vivid pleasantness to one's prince – otherwise, the courtier would seem “ill-humoured or melancholy”. And such a display of discontentedness was something the perfect *cortegiano* was simply not allowed to do. Accordingly, the scholar Pierangelo Schiera sees in melancholy “the main obstacle to the fulfilment of the gentleman ideal” (341, trans. mine).

3. Refashioning Melancholy by Humouring the Hero

Why did Sidney, Essex or Raleigh invoke the state of melancholy so lavishly if it was not advisable at court? The use of melancholy for self-fashioning does not seem to make sense at first glance; and the usefulness of a malady, a sickness of mind, a forlorn state of contemplative or hurtful solitariness needs to be explained. How could this potentially devastating display help a courtier's social advancement? And how could melancholy, the passive state of sadness, solitary contemplation and pleasurable suffering, be used in the courtier's self-fashioning at the same time as military heroics with all its brilliance and assertiveness?

This was achieved by recapturing a thread of melancholy from antiquity which transformed the disease into a rare and positive distinction: The foundation of this process was the *Problema XXX*, 1, which was then believed to be written by Aristotle. It claimed that all eminent men and heroes like Hercules, Ajax and Bellerophone were melancholic (see Klibansky et al.), thus constructing social preeminence as combined with the genius inspired by noble melancholy. The next step took place in Renaissance Florence, when Marsilio Ficino added to this idea the Platonic thought of divine frenzy. For Ficino, a “conjunction of planetary and humoral influences” is responsible for “solitary episodes of divine frenzy [...] and extraordinary capabilities in philosophy, prophecy, poetry” that bring about “an exceptional, inspired state of self-alienation [...] in which the mind is separated from the body”, ready to return to the original transcendent unity of all beings (Gowland 107). But according to Ficino, this state is a rare exception; usually melancholy occurs as a pathological state. Thus, only a few eminent men are deemed able to transform this disease into the dignified state that became so attractive for aristocratic self-fashioning.

How exactly these Renaissance ideas came to England is still not known. Many have proposed that Giordano Bruno, an Italian philosopher who spent some years in the 1580s in the courtly circles of London, played an important role (Gatti). According to Noel Brann, who has written the most extensive study on Renaissance theories of genius, “Bruno viewed melancholy as an actively dynamic aid to the heroic will” which served as “a terrestrially based collaborator of the heroic will's divinely instilled drive, on the wings of divine frenzies, to traverse the rationally insurmountable gulf separating the finite from the infinite realm of existence” (319). This view had much in common with Ficino's neo-Platonic ideas and came to be shared also among the military nobles of late Elizabethan England. No paper from Sidney that has survived to this day mentions Giordano Bruno (Gatti 194), and the extent to which Bruno really influenced Sidney is still in doubt (Hillyer chapter 8). At least, when Bruno dedicated his dialogue *Spaccio della bestia trionfante* to Sidney, he wrote, “I would be untrue to myself [...] if I did not express my esteem for your genius and celebrate your many virtues which you made manifest to me” (trans. Howell 35). And the influence of Bruno on many other persons within the social figuration of the courtiers and the networks of their literary and artistic clientele is well known. What can be established is that Sidney and his social figuration learned

from continental humanist and neo-Platonic debates and integrated them into their self-fashioning. For instance, Sidney himself incorporated a poem into his *Arcadia*, “O sweet woods, the delight of solitariness”, which became something of an “anthem” for melancholics (Kitzes 4). This poem advances very similar ideas on the expansion of the mind to higher spheres of knowledge: The woods of solitariness are a place in which “[c]ontemplation here holdeth his only seate: / Bowned with no limits, borne with a wing of hope / Clymes even unto the starres” (*Poems* 68).

From the 1580s on, melancholy was turned into a “mark of status” (Kitzes 123), distinguishing the few noble minds who were able to turn pathological melancholy into something positive. As John Lyly wrote in his play *Midas* (1592): “melancholy is the crest of courtiers’ armes, and now everie base companion [...] says he is melancholy” (MacDonald 151). This illuminates ironically the desire for social distinction by aristocrats fashioning themselves as melancholics, but at the same time shows awareness that “everie base companion” was trying to imitate this behaviour: The socially elevated obviously felt the pressure a growing public sphere was placing on their status – and this meant an increased need for legitimation. These eminent men met this need in part by assuming new roles.

3.1 Writing Melancholy

One role that many of the military nobles of late Elizabethan England added to their repertoire was that of the poet, the creator of literary imaginations – thereby fusing *arma et litterae*, not for the first time in history but with particular vigour after an extensive separation between the military and artistic spheres. This brought about some difficulties as the military sphere was associated with impulsive, aggressive behaviour, with an active life of visible physical expression, while the literary sphere had traditionally been connected with the learned leisure of secluded, solitary contemplation.

Led by a number of nobles, especially Philip Sidney, the court became the place of *courtier poets* (May; Duncan-Jones) in the late Elizabethan era. This is not to say that there were no courtiers before that time who had written and recited literature. However, only when Sidney “had initiated a wholesale transformation of English poetry” starting in about 1577 to “wholly transcend”

everything that had been produced close to the Queen’s court (May 69) did a new model for aristocratic poets emerge, a “new Crew of courtly makers”, as George Puttenham put it 1588 in his *Arte of English Poesie* (61). As many of these poets were active soldiers, they are also known as *soldier poets* (McKeown and Hillyer chapter 1) – in this way fusing the models of courtier, soldier and poet into a distinct model of aristocratic life.

However, Sidney was uneasy about his position as a poet; writing poetry “itself had first to be raised up within the court” by his social figuration (May 202). He even wrote a whole *Defence of Poetry* in response to allegations put forward by Stephen Gosson in his *School of Abuse* (1579). Sidney rephrased Gosson’s critique thus: “before poets did soften us, we were full of courage, given to martial exercises, the pillars of manlike liberty, and not lulled asleep in shady idleness with poet’s pastimes” (Sidney, *Defence* 101–102). Gosson aggressively tried to place the position of the poet in opposition to the martial hero of the battlefield and tried to show that making poetry as a courtier could only destroy military prowess. Sidney responded first by playing down his work as a poet, describing it as a leisurely activity: “in these my not old years and idlest times having slipped into the title of a poet, am provoked to say something unto you in the defence of that my unelected vocation, which if I handle with more good will than good reasons, bear with me” (ibid. 73). But still, in his view, nobles like himself excelled in this field just as in any other without compromising their *sprezzatura*: “I have found in divers small learned courtiers a more sound style than in some professors of learning” (ibid. 118). It was the excellence of his socially elevated group which gave Sidney the means to be a good poet, without even having to try too hard.

The function Sidney ascribed to the poet in his *Defence* was opening up imaginative spaces that could directly influence the readers. For him, poetry had “this scope: to know, and by knowledge to lift up the mind from the dungeon of the body to the enjoying his own divine essence” (82). He used a language that had been associated with the heroic (“divine essence”) and combined it with the striving for knowledge and the imitation of examples with the goal of moving oneself to “honourable enterprises”, in which “rests the heroical”: It is figures like “Achilles, Cyrus, Aeneas” – “Who doth not only teach and move to a truth, but teacheth and moveth to the most high and excellent truth [...]. For as the

image of each action stirreth and instructeth the mind, so the lofty image of such worthies most inflameth the mind with desire to be worthy” (98). Thus, the frenzied *ingenium* could actually trigger virtuous action, dissolving the opposition between the active and the contemplative, and directly associate poetry with the realm of heroes. Sidney even went on to call poetry “the companion of the camps” (ibid. 105), thus linking the possibilities of genial poetry with the resources of martial heroism.

One of the most significant signs of Philip Sidney’s identification with the melancholic *ingenium* is one of his *imprese*: “Macular modo noscar”, “Spotted to be known” (see Coulman). It depicted a sheep marked with the sign of the planet Saturn, which was the marker of melancholy. This *imprese* was used by Sidney for his actual martial performances at the court and before the queen, as well as for his literary alter ego Philisides, one of the figures of Sidney’s pastoral romance, the *Arcadia*. What this enigmatic *imprese* might mean is shown by Sidney’s client Abraham Fraunce, who not only published a book recording all of Sidney’s *imprese* two years after his patron’s death (in 1588) but also provided one Latin poem deciphering this specific one:

When one who is whiter than the swan,
and milder than the young lamb, wears
the sign of the melancholy old man, mortal things [...] are in flux; [...] a new cycle of destinies is being born in the heavens [...]. No blemish is found on the peerless body: there is, and can be, no place for spots. Neither the stigma of dishonor, nor the human hand, has branded this sheep [...]. The signs you see were impressed by the hand of the Sky-thundering old man: he marks this sheep as belonging by right to the gods, as belonging to him.
(trans. Coulman)

Thus, the master of melancholy branded Sidney as belonging to him but in no way stained him: Rather, he marked him as surpassing the sphere of mortals in a time of turmoil, remaining the unspoiled hero. This same *imprese* was used as the device of the “melancholy shepherd” Philisides in the *Arcadia* (*New Arcadia* 482) when he jousts at an Iberian tilt, as a shepherd knight, his armour “dressed with wool”, his lance – bearing the device “Spotted to be known” – looking like a sheep hook (255). In this way, Sidney claimed

identity with one of his literary figures, thus bridging the gap between literature and real life, extending his self-fashioning into a literary work.

All this alludes to the powers and possibilities of the genre of the *Arcadia*, the pastoral romance which was traditionally considered to be the place of peaceful, secluded harmony and also of melancholy. This emerges from Sidney’s description of the *Arcadia* at the beginning of the text itself: “The country of Arcadia among all the provinces of Greece hath ever been had in singular reputation; [...] principally for the well-tempered minds of the people”; and “[e]ven the Muses seem to approve their good determination by choosing this country for their chief repairing place” so that “the very shepherds have their fancies lifted to so high conceits that the learned of other nations are content to [...] imitate their cunning” and their poetry (Sidney, *New Arcadia* 16). This country, which produces such excellent people, becomes “a resort for melancholics” (see Schleiner 225), while at the same time the *Arcadia* followed the adventures and fights of two young noblemen. It thereby became a mixed genre of (melancholic) pastoral and (heroic) epic which fused adventurous chivalric heroics with the inspired heroics of the melancholic *ingenium* under the sign of Saturn.

The mark of Saturn was also used as a means of identification by other courtiers. The Earl of Essex, for instance, used the astrological symbol of Saturn to sign a letter of advice to a fellow courtier, Fulke Greville, Philip Sidney’s best friend, in 1589 (Bacon 211, 797).

Apart from this direct association with melancholy, the main theme of the courtiers’ and soldiers’ lyrics also corresponded to melancholy. Neo-Petrarchan love sonnets, complaining about unwarranted love that usually stood not only for erotic longing but also for political relations, were at the heart of the literary output of these courtier poets (May; Norbrook 141). And exactly this sublimated erotic longing was considered as love melancholy. As Robert Burton explained in his *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), “heroical, or love-melancholy, is more eminent above the rest, and properly called love. [...] It is called heroical, because commonly gallants, Noblemen, and the most generous spirits are possessed with it” (39). By writing and reciting poems on unrequited love, these nobles could display their “generous spirits”. For instance, in Sidney’s *Arcadia*, the “unluckie love” by Amphialus fills his mind “with melancholie” (*New Arcadia*

441), and a sonnet written “to the tune of *The smokes of Melancholy*” declares the speaker who has “felt the pangs of love” as “the modell of misshape, / Engulfed in despaire”. He asks: “Come learners then to me” and “[t]read in my steppes, or follow not”, thus praising the speaker as a role model for learners of melancholic grief (Sidney, *Poems* 153). This love melancholy could turn into a more overtly political statement when connected to the social type of the *malcontent* as a “disgruntled or seditious traveler” that was being established in England from about 1580 (Babb 75). In his *Dispraysse of a Courtly Life*, Philip Sidney let a “wandering malcontent” speak, “[o]n lamenting wholly set”, who was “[o]nce to Shepheard’s God retaining, / Now in servile Court remaining”. This malcontent stated: “Greater was that shepheard’s pleasure / Then this false, fine, Courtly pleasure”. The only hope remaining for the malcontent is “my two loves’ sake”, his two best friends, “[i]n whose love I pleasure take, [...] / Of all men [...] / Grant me with those two remaining”. Sidney asked the god of the shepherds for the intimate company of friends as the only remedy to courtly disfavour (Sidney, *Poems* 262–263). Similarly, the motif of hindrance was central to Essex’s “utilitarian” poetry (May 109), and Paul Hammer suggests that the poems have a “plaintive nature” more expressive than would be possible to ascribe to literary tradition and genre standards (330). When Essex was in trouble, he wrote about his relation to the queen: “Her thoughts and myne such disproportion have: / All strength of love is infinite in mee; / She useth the advantage tyme and fortune gave / [...] But I, poore I, must suffer and knowe noe cause” (May 254).

As we have seen, by fashioning themselves with the melancholic *ingenium* and by exploiting the genre tradition of heroic love melancholy, the military nobles rendered their own literary activities as being part of the heroic sphere and extended the possibilities of heroic self-fashioning to the melancholic *ingenium*.

3.2 Performing Chivalry, Performing Melancholy

The actual physical sphere of the military nobles was also being humourised. The traditional military culture of nobles was displayed in the language of chivalry (see Davis 235–239). As David Trim notes, there had been “a significant hiatus” in chivalric writing for about a century before the “revival led by Sidney” (110). This revival led

to an exuberant display of chivalric modes as the *Cortegiano* required: Whenever the courtier would “engage in arms in public show”, he was advised to “be as elegant and handsome in the exercise of arms as he is adroit, and to feed his spectators’ eyes with all those things that he thinks may give him added grace” (Castiglione 72–73). This advice was carried out in splendid ways but, I would argue, was also transformed. The knight came to be displayed – not always, but often – in a melancholic way, thus projecting some of the virtues and resources of melancholy (such as pensiveness, solitariness and longing for something not present but neither lost entirely) into the medieval world of chivalric culture.

Sidney’s poetic theory of literature arousing virtuous action was put into practice here – in rituals and other planned performances according to costume and traditions, but also in “dramatic” actions that Raleigh and Essex were known for (Javitch 74): When Walter Raleigh was imprisoned in the Tower in 1592 and saw the ship of the queen passing by on the Thames, he put on such a passionate performance of raging love sickness that Arthur Gorges wrote in a letter: “I feare Sir W. Rawly; wyll shortly growe [to be] Orlando furioso” (Bates 139). And even the queen herself showed one of her leading courtiers, Lord Burghley, that she was able to partake in this chivalric performance of courtly closeness and melancholic retreat: When he excused himself from a public entertainment given for Elizabeth, he cited melancholy as a cause; she would not have this as an answer and, in a mock Chancery charter, demanded Burghley to fulfil his duties as a courtier by attending – and, at the same time, applying the language of melancholy retreat to her letter which entered into the social play of the royal entertainment. She ordered him “too abiure desolacon & mourning (the consumers of sweetnes) too the Frozen Seas and deserts of Arabia Petrosa, uppon payn of fyve hundred despights too their terror & contempt of their torment, if they attempt any part of your hoous agayn” (Heaton 27).

Sometimes, the connection between melancholy and chivalry was also explicitly named through reference to the “melancholic knight”. In 1592, a text was written for a performance, presumably for the second Woodstock entertainment of the same year, *The melancholie Knights complaint in the wood*. It asked: “What troupes are theis, which ill aduised, presse / Into this more, then most unhappie place?” This place was the “verie seate of malcontentednesse: / Ladies with loues, and louers with disgrace / [...] Both malcontent;

[...] for our most foolish wooing.” The themes of the courtly love sonnets were thus presented in a visible display in front of the monarch: “Dispaire is all our hope; distrust our staie; / contempt our fauour; our reward disdaine”. Until being released, the knights are passive and are confined to inaction: “Meane-while this groue must be our resting-place; / we knights as treese, whom rootes of faith doe binde” (Inner Temple Library, London, MS Petyt 538 vol. 43, fol. 300v). And at the Accession Day in 1600, George Clifford, the 3rd Earl of Cumberland, presented himself in his speech to the queen as a “melancholy knight” who “hath made ladders for others to clymbe, and his feet nayled to the ground” and who “now rowleth up and downe, in open feild, a field of shaddow” (Heaton 78): As in the complaint cited above, despite helplessly trying time and again, any movement is futile. That this reworking of the courtly model of chivalric display unravelled not entirely without fractions can be seen from the mocking that gained currency at the turn of the sixteenth century, from Thomas Nashe’s *Unfortunate Traveller* (1594) to Samuel Rowland’s *Melancholy Knight* (1615) (generally, Davis 97, 99–133).

This humourised reading of the chivalric language also gave way to an increased valuation of the contemplative parts of chivalric culture. It is important to note that at the end of the sixteenth century, the radical opposition between virtuous physical activity and problematic contemplative passivity was blurred. Montaigne, for example, demanded to “leave aparte this out-worne comparison, betweene a solitarie and an active life” (Montaigne, *Essays*, trans. John Florio, as cited in Gowland 116). Rather, people concerned with the public good should be able to detach from political affairs and socialise in secluded groups of like-minded learned individuals to foster reflections and exchange ideas for the good of the common weal (Gowland 116–117), as Philip Sidney’s mentor Hubert Languet would advise in 1574: “[F]ind comrades in whose honest company you can take pleasure and dispel that sometimes excessive melancholy of yours” (Sidney, *Correspondence* I 101). And in 1580 he remarked to Sidney: “You sometimes used to say that [...] nothing would give you greater pleasure [...] than to spend your life in civilized leisure with your friends, if that were ever permitted you” (999).

Sidney’s *Arcadia* also suggests a preference for contemplative over active life (Norbrook 82–83; for the opposite view, Lindenbaum 191–192). Here, one of the young protagonists, Pyrocles, exclaims to the elder ruler Musidorus:

yet see I the bounds of all those knowledges, but the workings of the mind I find much more infinite than can be led unto by the eye, or imagined by any that distract their thoughts without themselves; and in such contemplations [...], I enjoy my solitariness, and my solitariness perchance is the nurse of these contemplations. [...] Condemn not therefore my mind sometime to enjoy itself. (Sidney, *New Arcadia* 50)

This is a redemption of solitariness for purposes of extending the limits of one’s own mind and imagination which fits well with some thoughts of Italian Renaissance humanism: It is a celebration of the *ingenium* which, in turn, is questioned by Musidorus as he “framed in his mind a reply against it in the praise of honourable action (in showing that such a kind of contemplation is but a glorious title to idleness)” (52) but which he did not actually utter because he was moved by Pyrocles’s statement. The *Arcadia* suggests that as long as Pyrocles keeps himself good company, he may enjoy the seclusion (ibid.). Thus, Sidney himself advocated in his literary work the reconciliation of the contemplative sphere with the heroic sphere of the military, as the young protagonist Pyrocles was fashioned in many ways as a hero of martial adventures (Lindenbaum). This created a new space made possible in part through the adoption of melancholy pensiveness as a legitimate mode of noble display.

The traditional model of heroics, as it had been celebrated in engravings, courtly performances such as tournaments, and panegyrics, was connected with the language of chivalry (for its perseverance well into the seventeenth century, see Davis 239). By humouring it – which means: by fusing melancholy into the knight and his performances –, this language of chivalry was also transformed and opened up imaginative and real spaces that had not always been associated with the heroic knight.

4. Conclusion: The Uses of Melancholy

Is there more to this late Elizabethan noble display than “just a fashionably melancholic pose” (for a narrower context, Alexander 187)? If the historical usefulness of late Elizabethan melancholy had been confined to a short-lived fad without any deeper layers of meaning, it would be difficult to explain the enduring presence and increasing popularity of the melancholic fashioning well into the 17th century, for generations and in many parts of Western Europe (Weber, esp. 174–189).

Another claim about the courtier generation considered here is that they used melancholy mainly to display their thwarted personal ambitions, thus turning the melancholic self-fashioning into a mere superficial expression of individual career planning. This cannot be maintained empirically. Gavin Alexander, for instance, pointed out that the poems of Robert Sidney – the younger and surviving brother of Philip Sidney – were at their most melancholic when his career and finances were at their best (Alexander 187). Thus, by no means may all melancholy display be explained by personal disillusionment or political propaganda.

As L.C. Knights notes, social and economic factors need to be taken into account when explaining the melancholic fashion, pointing at a heightened awareness of death due to wars and plagues or an increase in learned men who did not see enough opportunities for their own advancement (319–332). Some scholars have turned to Hegel and Freud, as Bryan Lowrance has done (121, 183–184, 245–246, 270–271), or to Norbert Elias, as Wolf Lepenies has proposed (47–52 on the “king’s mechanism”), to explain the melancholy of the early modern nobles in response to the rise of the bureaucratic, centralised state and the absolutist embrace of homogenised subjects. Lowrance has put forward the hypothesis that “*political* impossibility is the source of heroism’s *poetic* power”: The crafted hero of literature begins his rise when the “possibility of real-world heroes” is about to be extinguished (20–21). But these insights cannot be upheld when the recent historiography on early modern nobility is taken into account: There was not simply a “crisis of aristocracy” in which the nobility was cut off from military and political service, as Lawrence Stone posits for the decades around 1600. Rather, the need for nobles to administer the still fragmented political regimes and use their patronage networks was great, as

was the continuing demand to use their military experience and prowess (Manning 16–24)

By writing themselves, the literary courtiers were able to influence the picture emerging from the representations in which they partook and which formed in an especially powerful way the political culture of the time – literature became, as Colin Burrow notes, “a crucial tool of government” (13). The literary courtiers became the ones steering not only a cultural trend but also crucial political developments. Blair Worden has shown, for instance, that Sidney’s *Arcadia* was a thinly veiled critique against the Anjou match⁴ (as part of a “concerted aesthetic campaign” with other courtiers from the Leicester circle; Burrow 14). And by integrating the retreat as an indispensable part of the aesthetics of melancholy into their self-fashioning, the courtier nobles were able to legitimise an autonomous space for their own conceits and for court critique. What could have been a refuge, a seclusion, became intrinsically connected with the sphere of military prowess – the very visible sphere in which any male aristocrat could advance to an important position at court. Encompassing suffering and passion, retreat from and return to public life, and literary activity, this self-fashioning enlarged the heroic sphere by means of melancholy. This opened up new spaces for this social figuration and distinguished it from other groups. In the process, different spheres were combined, giving the nobles a chance to appear consistently in the manifold roles they played – from courtier to diplomat, from poet to soldier. Even though Sidney was by no means a “systematic thinker” (Howell 35), he was a coherent fashioner: His displays of the roles and characteristics of young courtiers in late Elizabethan England were bound together by the joint aesthetics of melancholy. Thus, as has been said in a different context, “his figure provides an image of unity in the midst of social and cultural conflict” (Matz 56). This happened without denying the inner struggles and pressures from different sides – because of the extreme openness of melancholy for the most diverse interpretations (Brady et al.). Still, as Adam Kitzes notes, melancholy was a “conglomeration – really, the lumping together – of several different strands of thinking” that were not “entirely compatible with one another” (10)

The melancholic self-fashioning could also help nobles tap into new resources, which I will only mention in passing. The traditional military model of the hero was uniformly gendered as masculine, as virile and physically aggressive – while the accompanying model of melancholy

could be gendered as at least more feminine (on positive melancholy as accessible to noble women, see Dawson 96–99 against Schiesari). This, in turn, could open the heroic sphere for women, which is validated by Sidney's *New Arcadia*. One part of it centres on the heroine Pamela and her steadfastness while suffering in captivity (*New Arcadia* book 3, esp. 418–426). It has been claimed that her action “transforms the heroic life” to a new model (Craft 5–6).

By using the aesthetic language of melancholic display in a heroic mode, the military nobles turned problems into advantages. Not only were they able to give their actions and behaviour, their retreats from hostile environments and their venturing into new spaces a coherent look, but they were also able to regain a cultural advantage by setting a new cultural paradigm. In many ways the creator of their own appearance, their own story and their own web of significance, these courtier-soldier-poets were weaving and weaving their imaginative fabric with traces of melancholy, humouring the hero they performed. In conclusion, it can be stated that melancholy assumed an important role in the heroic self-fashioning of the social figuration circling around Philip Sidney. Further research will be needed to substantiate its place and importance in connection to other modes of heroisation (like suffering and death in the Christian tradition) and to other social figurations, spaces and times.

Andreas Schlüter is working at the Collaborative Research Center 948 in Freiburg and studying early modern history of Western Europe. He currently works on his dissertation supervised by Prof. Ronald G. Asch which focuses on the changing models for the heroisation of warrior nobles in England and France, ca. 1580–1630.

1 Figuration is used as a term for a constellation of people who share a certain social status and cultural codes but are not necessarily a coherent group. The term was introduced by Norbert Elias to describe the court society as a whole. It has been adapted for the research on the social foundations of heroics (von den Hoff et al. 9).

2 See Campana 10: The 1590s were an epoch in which “intense forms of affect and sensation were [...] in flux”.

3 For a concise overview of the Renaissance reception of the antique conceptions of humours, temperaments and especially melancholy that encompasses a lot more thinkers and strands of thought than the classic work by Klibansky et al., see Schleiner 20–28.

4 The Anjou match was the courting of Queen Elizabeth by the French king's youngest son, the Catholic Duke of Anjou, in the late 1570s, which threatened the position of the

court party led by Leicester and Francis Walsingham, who strove for an aggressive, militant foreign policy helping the Protestant cause (see Worden 89–114).

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