

**Tirso de Molina's *El melancólico* and the Performative Authenticity of Early Modern (Pseudo-)Melancholy**

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To call melancholy an epidemic from our Covid-19-stricken vantage of today would seem to strain, if not shatter, the metaphorical viability of the term with the dual weight of bad science and unjustifiable hyperbole. Yet centuries before the development of medical virology and vaccines, many early modern Spanish thinkers believed melancholy was ravaging the Peninsula not unlike a contagion, and with sometimes lethal effects. As early as the fifteenth century, Alfonso de Palencia would remark soberly that “la común tristeza atormenta la España” (44).<sup>1</sup> By the late sixteenth century the illness was rousing increasing attention from psychologists, physicians, and humanists, from Juan Huarte de San Juan’s pivotal *Examen de ingenios*, which updated Galenic medicine to expound on the physiological mechanisms of humoral imbalance, to a slew of treatises dedicated exclusively to melancholy, such as Alonso de Santa Cruz’s *Sobre la melancolía* (ca. 1569) or Andrés Velásquez’s *Libro de la melancholia* (1585), the earliest extant text on the malady in a European vernacular. And there appeared to be no shortage of patients, historical and fictive, on whom they could have tested their theories and cures. In a “world so full of this melancholy,” Teresa de Ávila lamented its susceptibility to the devil’s wiles and encumbrance of confession, while more zealous clergy and inquisitors attached it to the specter of witchcraft.<sup>2</sup> It plagued a growing class of *hidalgos* whose irremediable poverty became parodic fodder for the anonymous *Lazarillo de Tormes* and Cervantes’s *Don Quijote*. The latter’s protagonist waxes melancholic in the second part of the novel and, according to the narrator, eventually perishes from it.<sup>3</sup> Given the tendency to ascribe its ubiquity in early modern Spain to national and imperial decadence, it comes as little surprise that even King Philip II, cloistered in later years in his palatial residence of El Escorial, was reputed to have been influenced by the sign of Saturn. Melancholy’s outsize proportions, moreover, are matched by an accordingly vast critical bibliography.<sup>4</sup> So pervasive is melancholy in the primary and secondary literature that it has become almost synonymous with early modernity—not just as a chronic affliction of the medico-psychological domain, but as what Martin Heidegger and Raymond Williams would call respectively a *Stimmung* or “structure of feeling” (Williams 128–35) of the period at large. This is especially true for early modern Spain, whose reputation for engendering melancholics was legendary both within and outside the country’s borders.<sup>5</sup> So it is that Baltasar Gracián could declare in the mid-seventeenth century that, owing to their “sequedad de condición y melancólica

<sup>1</sup> I have modernized the orthography and syntax here and in additional citations below.

<sup>2</sup> “Everything is immediately condemned as from the devil or melancholy. And the world is so full of this melancholy that I am not surprised. There is so much of it now in the world, and the devil causes so many evils through this means, that confessors are very right in fearing it and considering it carefully” (Teresa de Ávila, qtd. in Radden 113). For melancholy’s similar affiliations with witchcraft, see Bartra 107–23.

<sup>3</sup> The melancholy of the *Caballero de la Triste Figura* and his squire has been analyzed at length by Bartra (227–80); Layna Ranz (217–92); Peset; Soufas, *Secular Mind* (1–36); and Starobinski (549–66), among others.

<sup>4</sup> Though far from an exhaustive catalogue, key monographs on early modern Spanish melancholy include Atienza; Bartra; Carrera, *Madness*; Gambin; Orbitg, *L’humeur noire*; R. de la Flor, *Era melancólica*; and Soufas, *Secular Mind*.

<sup>5</sup> In the words of one historian: “There can be no doubt that the seventeenth century, the latter half of Hapsburg domination in Spain, was a period the equal of which in dismal depression and sordid melancholy it would be difficult to find in modern history” (Klein, *The Mesta*, 244).

gravedad,” “los españoles... son llamados de las otras naciones los téttricos y graves” (II, 100; III, 292). Mimicking the summary wit of the author of the *Criticón* and *Oráculo manual*, we might say that Spain had become a proverbial hotbed of cold and dry temperaments, an omphalos of navel-gazing.

And yet, as much as such abundant anecdotes imprinted early modernity with the distinctive, if abject, hallmark of melancholy, its authenticity has more recently come under scrutiny, with scholars questioning whether the disease was truly as widespread as early modern commentators claimed. Angus Gowland, for instance, asserts in an incisive essay that “for the historian the problem of early modern melancholy cannot be why so many suffered from the disease, but why so many were preoccupied with its assumed frequency” (83). Part of the answer lies in melancholy’s overdetermined status, its possession of a semantic excess that is not only capacious but often contradictory. Early modern melancholy did not fall strictly within the purview of medicine, but instead seized the attention of social, political, religious, philosophical, artistic, and literary quarters. Even though Velásquez had parsed the concept into four distinct meanings—as one of the bodily humors, black bile (along with yellow bile, phlegm, and blood); as one of their corresponding temperaments (along with the choleric, phlegmatic, and sanguine); as the pernicious *atra bilis* or adust choler; and, finally, as *melancholia morbus*, a form of madness—each of these fell under the umbrella term of “melancolía.” The polysemy of “melancholy” could thus designate someone predisposed to an imbalance of black bile but experiencing no ill effects, someone suffering from temporary feelings of sadness, or someone afflicted by severe mental derangement, and everything in between.<sup>6</sup> It is not surprising, then, that melancholy’s triggers could range from the humoral, environmental, familial, or merely circumstantial; that its symptoms could encompass sorrow, fear, withdrawal, lethargy, insomnia, sallowness, and manias, delusions, and psychoses of all stripes; nor that its remedies varied just as widely, from generally benign changes to one’s diet and surroundings, pastoral care, or the therapeutic enjoyment of social companionship, laughter, literature, or music, to prescriptions of a potpourri of herbal cures, pseudoscientific elixirs, and warm baths, and including more aggressive treatments of purgatives, bloodlettings, cauterizations, or the application of leeches. Following Galen’s influential paradigm, melancholia was the wretched, pathological aftermath of an overproduction of black bile, yet, after Marsilio Ficino rehabilitated in the fifteenth century the condition’s Aristotelian associations with creativity, it also became enshrined as an enviable token of genius. These multiple, disparate, and often confounding permutations, which the English Renaissance critic Drew Daniel, channeling Deleuze and Guattari, collectively calls “the melancholy assemblage,” raise a series of crucial questions: How to validate a psychological affliction that is not only experienced subjectively but whose diagnosis must contend with symptomatic variability and a dearth of reliable, readily quantifiable physiological markers? Where is one to draw the line between a legitimate, diagnosable disease and a given patient’s *perception* of illness? How much of melancholy was a genuine psychological condition, and how much was passing fashion, self-styled obsession, or collectively imagined hysteria?

Such questions, of course, only become more laborious when posed to premodernity. As Fernando R. de la Flor observes, “the epoch is the effect of a reconstruction, developing itself in the mode of a narrative, a ‘scene,’ or, even better, a *scenography*. There is, therefore, a melancholy, and there is also a ‘theater of melancholy.’ Only the latter offers itself momentarily and in disguise to the interpretative disposition of the analyst” (“Melancholic Baroque” 12–13). If R. de la Flor discounts the notion that a chronotope like early modern Spain can properly be deemed

<sup>6</sup> Orobítz studies the polysemy of melancholy in depth (*L’humour noire* 15–46; 336–57).

melancholic, that atrabilious complexion might constitute a defining mood for the period, then Daniel's skepticism proves even more damning. Subsuming melancholy to one of the "long discredited frameworks of Renaissance intellectual history," whether because an "aesthetic matter of passé sensibility or an epistemological matter of insincerity and unverifiability or a biological matter of bad science," he contends that early moderns themselves harbored doubts about the material and biological footing of a condition that nonetheless appeared to be pervasive (1; 5). By shifting from the traditional emphasis on melancholy as an essentially inward problem of the self to one that plays out in an interpersonal, social arena promoting "the cultivation of a theatrical stance that displayed the melancholic individual to society," Daniel asserts that "[t]he scene of melancholy recognition" becomes "haunted by the possibility of falsehood and deception" (132; 28). As if to drive the final nail in the coffin of a legitimate disease that might otherwise claim victims to bury therein, he goes so far as to equate melancholy with posture itself ("melancholy *is* posture," 51).

In what follows, I want to tease out the mutual implications of melancholy and the incertitude born of its dalliances with pretension in the most conspicuous and theatrical of places: an early seventeenth-century drama by Tirso de Molina called *El melancólico*. The play, with the armchair diagnosis broadcasted in its title, can be seen to perform in microcosm the overdetermined position of melancholy in established narratives about early modern Spain at large, with each foregrounding as a revealing catch-all an apparently private or, in Freudian terms, decathecting psychological condition. Like other recent scholars, I am generally wary of uncritical invocations of early modernity as "the Golden Age of melancholy," and the condition's role in Tirso's drama is admittedly less clear-cut than the overt simplicity of its title would imply.<sup>7</sup> My close reading of its eponymous character, informed by the histories of emotion and medical science, suggests that we should take his psychological condition neither at face value nor as solely a theatrical ruse, thus consolidating melancholy as a prime object of analysis for the current "historiographical turn" toward early modern uncertainty (Faini).<sup>8</sup> Here the wedge that other critics have attempted to drive between appearance and reality can only be so practical, since melancholy's constitutive ambiguities prevent their cleaving from one another in a clean fashion, always leaving residual orts, shards, and remnants of each. Yet by uncovering the tension between melancholy as a private condition and public performance, and by rescuing the psychologically generative effects of performance itself, my analysis aims to tip the scales back toward credulity. Ultimately, my reading of *El melancólico* holds that the doubts engendered by the performance of melancholy make it no less an authentic condition, and that in fact its inherent ambiguity is precisely what renders its representation in the play at once more plausible and historically verisimilar.

*El melancólico* enacts in many respects the conventional fare of Spanish classical theater, particularly its subgenre of the *comedia palatina*. In brief, the plot turns on the conflicts generated among the high nobility by impossible love, which is resolved only by an unexpected revelation that allows for the closure of marriage as the curtain falls. Tirso's play initially characterizes its titular melancholic, Rogerio, as an erudite scholar entirely uninterested in the frivolities of romantic love. However, at the exhortations of Pinardo, whom he believes to be his father, he

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<sup>7</sup> Bartra titles a chapter of his book "El Siglo de Oro de la melancolía" (67), a formulation first articulated by Starobinski (62).

<sup>8</sup> Elsewhere I have made the case for the utility of the history of emotion for understanding early modern Spanish drama (Johnson). For a concise overview of recent approaches to early modern melancholy through the history of emotion, see Johanson.

eventually pursues an affair with a local shepherdess, Leonisa. Contrary to Pinardo's intention that the sexual encounter serve strictly the more expedient aim of preparing Rogerio for the demands of courtly life, they fall madly in love. Shortly thereafter, Rogerio learns he is the illegitimate son of the Duke of Brittany, who summons him to Nantes to assume his proper noble stature, sundering him from Leonisa and plunging him into sullen grief. His predicament grows direr with the jealousy of learning that she has another suitor back home, Filippo, and with the despair of the duke's insistence that he wed his cousin Clemencia instead. These imbroglios are untangled by the eleventh-hour discovery that Leonisa too is in fact of the same patrician lineage, enabling her marriage to Rogerio and the happy ending typical of the genre.

Ubiquitous though it is among Spanish *comedias*, one could argue that such a denouement is more potent, because more contrasting, in a play whose main character has agonized in disconsolate sorrow for the duration of Acts II and III. Indeed, traditional approaches to *El melancólico* foregrounded Rogerio's temperament not only as one of its most distinctive features, but also as implicit proof of a broader Tirsonian interest in psychological character studies, garnering the play the label of an "excellent drama of character" (Wilson, qtd. in Arellano, "Comedias melancólicas" 26). Alongside assessments of Tirso's dramatic oeuvre as "psicológicamente impecable, realista y humano como ninguno" (Sancho de San Román 7), some critics hailed "el Tirso único, el Tirso psicólogo" for the penetrating "psicología prócer" of *El melancólico*'s protagonist (Ríos 67; 69), others affirmed that the psychologically conflicted Rogerio distinguishes Tirso as "un gran conocedor del alma humana" (Hualde Juvera 44), while still others speculated that Rogerio was modeled on the legendarily prudent and purportedly melancholic Philip II (Hartzenbusch 331).<sup>9</sup> The nineteenth-century dramatist and scholar Juan Eugenio Hartzenbusch adduced this hypothesis—and its corollary of a belated acquiescence to decorum for the deceased monarch—as the impulse for why Tirso appears to have adapted *El melancólico* into another play, *Esto sí que es negociar*, which largely disposes of a saturnine Rogerio in favor of a more assertive, dominant Leonisa. Among the scarce studies that attend to *El melancólico*, almost all of them occupy themselves with similar questions of authorial motive, debates over authorship and chronology, or comparisons between the two plays.<sup>10</sup>

Recent interpretations, however, have questioned the legitimacy of not only *El melancólico*'s reputation for psychological realism, but also that of melancholy as a decisive critical lens for a protagonist who often invokes the disease as but an alibi for his untoward lovesickness. Some scholars have claimed, for instance, that "[n]o hay motivos fundados para afirmar la complejidad interior de Rogerio," or that "[l]a melancolía en *El melancólico* no surge de complejas actitudes internas, sino de una pena amorosa concreta y precisa" (Arellano and Sbriziolo, "Introducción" 260; Arellano, "Comedias melancólicas" 29). These assessments attempt to situate Rogerio's symptomatology as a necessary cog in the largely standardized action of a *comedia de enredo*, which draws its entertainment value from the frenzied confusion of subterfuge, illusion, duplicity, multiple love triangles, and surplus of dramatic irony. Melancholy, in this paradigm, functions as little more than a mechanism of emplotment, entailing not a genuine, diagnosable medico-psychological condition but an opportune pretext for throwing fellow

<sup>9</sup> Ríos focuses almost exclusively on the supposedly autobiographical profile of *El melancólico*, its excoriation of hereditary nobility, and how it purportedly inspired Cervantes's *El licenciado Vidriera*.

<sup>10</sup> To cite merely a few examples, see García Ruiz; Heiple; and Wade for what the latter critic long ago called Tirso's penchant for "self-plagiarism in plot." Critics who have analyzed Tirso's interest in the theme of melancholy, including Pallares; Schalk, whom I have been unable to consult; and Soufas, *Secular Mind* (37–63), largely focus on other works.

characters off the scent of true love and thus for prolonging the suspense—as if to hoist neutralizing scare quotes around “melancholy.”<sup>11</sup> The attempt to distinguish in such a way between illusion and reality, affect and affectation aligns, albeit in a much more limited fashion, with Daniel’s own project to attenuate the material basis of melancholy through its susceptibility to imposture.

On the one hand, I concur with these critical interventions insofar as they might rescue a latent theatricality in Rogerio’s self-presentation as a melancholic. To neglect this aspect of the character, I would suggest, does a disservice to the psychological complexity of the drama while disregarding the ample contextual and historical cues that underscore just how natural and verisimilar such a performance would be. Court society, in which Rogerio becomes in Act II a reluctant participant, was infamous for its fakery, with manuals of the period casting it as a nave of shallow artifice and insincerity. In addition to the overall skills of dissembly, dissimulation, and *sprezzatura*, the sixteenth-century English writer and critic George Puttenham advised specifically that the aspiring courtier have “sickness in his sleeve,” a readymade medical pretense or ‘diplomatic disease’ to avoid more toilsome obligations (379). Malingering was by no means endemic to society’s upper echelons, however. In 1595, Giovanni Battista Selvatico thought the problem urgent enough to publish a treatise dedicated to exposing impostors of a legion of medical diseases, even if the section on melancholy largely frets over whether its sufferers are demonically possessed (149–79).<sup>12</sup> Because a diagnosis of mental illness or “melancolía morbo” exonerated the accused from punishment, inquisitors enacted various schemes to try to winnow phony *locos* from the authentically insane (Tropé 62–64). False mendicants were another perennial target of popular concern for simulated illness or disability, as attested by various tracts, engravings, and, in Spain, a trove of literary *pícaros* primed to exploit the tricks of their trade. What this means is that there was an abundance of examples, real and fictive, from which Tirso could draw for a pseudo-melancholic character, whose placement in a courtly milieu would have made his performative guile all the more believable.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, an examination of historical understandings of melancholy and a close reading of the affective content of the drama reveal that there is more beneath the surface of Rogerio’s melancholic (im)posture than meets the eye. As a point of departure, I would propose that, just because he evinces a vested interest in *appearing* melancholic to others, does not disqualify him *ipso facto* from also *being* a melancholic, particularly when, as we will see, so much about the character aligns with early modern understandings of the condition, from his genius to his belated interest in sex, his ensuing lovesickness, and placement in a courtly milieu. One problem is that the same critics who rightly alert us to melancholy’s potential theatricality tend both to ignore these details and to oversimplify early modern conceptions of the affliction. Ignacio Arellano has recently claimed that Rogerio’s emotional state cannot qualify as melancholy because it is triggered by an acute event rather than a chronic illness (Arellano, “Comedias melancólicas” 16; 29–30),<sup>14</sup> basing this assertion on a distinction that Lope de Vega draws in a personal letter:

<sup>11</sup> My own assessment tends to concur with Hualde Juvera, who sustains that “el carácter y el enredo están entrelazados y forman una unidad tan compacta que resultan inseparables uno de otro” (76).

<sup>12</sup> Based on a text by Galen, Selvatico published his treatise in Latin as *Institutio Medica de iis qui morborum simulant deprehendendis* [Medical Training for Catching Those Who Feign Illness].

<sup>13</sup> Other plays stage overt cases of melancholic imposture, such as *El príncipe melancólico*, of dubious authorship but once attributed to Lope de Vega, and whose protagonist deliberately feigns melancholic derangement in a perverse and largely parodic bid to win over the object of his affection. I find Tirso’s *El melancólico* more interesting precisely because of its ambivalence.

<sup>14</sup> Arellano’s study builds on a much earlier essay (“El sabio y melancólico Rogerio”) and transmits, often verbatim, the same conclusions he drew about Tirso’s *El melancólico*. His acknowledgement that “melancólico” and

“la diferencia [de las tristezas] a la melancolía es que las unas nacen de los sucesos, y las otras de la falta de la salud y de la influencia del cielo” (387). Due to the misfortunes and tragedies that befell him in later years, including the untimely death of his son, Lope was well versed in life’s sorrows, yet the seductive simplicity of the quote neglects not just the many treatises dedicated to a fuller elaboration of melancholy but also the occasional nature of the letter itself.<sup>15</sup>

More thoroughgoing treatments through the ages uphold not only that melancholy could be triggered by an event, but that that event was most likely to pertain to the woes of love and sex. Already in Antiquity, Aristotle pondered why melancholics are “particularly inclined for sexual intercourse” (*Problems* IV, 30: 880a30; 2945), while medieval physicians and poets across Christian Europe and the Islamic Middle East spilled much black ink over black bile and its links with lovesickness, building on “a medical tradition that constantly considered love and melancholy as related, if not identical, maladies” (Agamben 17).<sup>16</sup> Around the same time that the Spanish *comedia* was reaching its apogee, comprehensive inquiries on melancholy doubled down on these affiliations, from Jacques Ferrand’s 1610 *Traité de l’essence et guérison de l’amour ou mélancolie érotique* to Robert Burton’s encyclopedic *Anatomy of Melancholy* of 1621, a full third of which is dedicated to erotic melancholy. In Spain, Francisco López de Villalobos and Tomás Murillo y Velarde, court physicians to Charles V and Philip IV, respectively, were similarly well-versed in the intricacies of love melancholy or the *mal de amor* (Soufas, “Melancholy, the *Comedia*” 303). In fact, judging by Tirso’s literary contemporaries, it became something of a commonplace that sexual desire and the absence of one’s beloved could engender melancholy. The sixteenth-century poet Hernando de Acuña plays with the notion in a composition that begins thus:

De diversas ocasiones  
Nacen diversos efetos,  
Y así de muchas pasiones  
No se alcanzan los secretos,  
Ni se entienden las razones:  
Hasta ahora yo tenía  
por cierto, señora mía,  
que solo del mal de amor  
procediese el triste humor  
que llaman melancolía. (89)

As these opening lines suggest, the poetic self, an alter ego of Acuña, will be surprised to learn that melancholy can proceed from causes *other than* lovesickness. In this case, an admirer

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“melancolía” in the play are “plurisignificativos” does unfortunately little to attenuate the rigidity of his analysis (“Comedias melancólicas” 29).

<sup>15</sup> Its purpose was to console its recipient, Luis Fernández de Córdoba y Aragón, Duke of Sessa (1582–1642), over the torments of a love affair. Their long and robust correspondence offers subtle evidence of Lope’s ongoing efforts to curry favor with his powerful patron, such that assurances that he was suffering the throes not of melancholy but of a more fleeting and innocuous sadness must be taken with the requisite grain of salt. It should be noted that, though he neglects this important context, Arellano does provide a handful of examples from other plays that distinguish between “tristeza” and “melancolía” (“Comedias melancólicas” 16–17). However, as I explain below, such distinctions are tenuous, at best, and often at odds with the medical literature of the epoch.

<sup>16</sup> For useful overviews of the medical and literary history of *amor hereos* or love melancholy, see also Gambin (123–19); Orobítz, *L’humeur noire* (125–44); Wack (3–30); and Wells (19–59). Soufas, *Secular Mind* (64–100) interprets its treatment in the dramaturgy of Lope and Calderón.

becomes melancholic when he withholds his writing from her, a ploy to meet her in the flesh. Steadfast, the woman rejects not only the poet's sexual advances, but also the invitation to share her morose suffering with him. An obscure poem attributed to Quevedo limns a similar scenario of a lady requesting that the poetic self determine the cause of her melancholy,

que esta secreta pasión  
 no quiere que se revele  
 su causa, que a veces suele,  
 con este oculto accidente,  
 irse acabando el doliente  
 sin saber dónde le duele. (89–90)

Conceding the logic of why “le dan fantástico origen, / porque sin causa se afligen” (91), the poem exposes through Baroque paradox and subtle satire the uncertain etiology, vexing inconsistency, and dubious cachet of “tan alta enfermedad” (92), only to implicate in the last stanza, with no small measure of irony, nothing other than love as the culprit of the melancholic woman's affliction.<sup>17</sup> And for Bartra, Cervantes's *Don Quijote*—with the mad knight's tortuous, unrequited love for Dulcinea—represents the most elevated and influential example of erotic melancholy (154).

Yet even the dialogue of the play itself is sufficient to refute Arellano's surprisingly reductionist claim that Rogerio, because missing his beloved, is merely sad. Numerous references to Rogerio's condition as both sadness and melancholy betray an ambivalence at odds with the notion of a clearly discernible distinction, whether semantic or symptomatic, between the two. To cite merely a couple of examples, at the beginning of Act II the Duke expresses incredulity that Rogerio is manifesting outward signs of sorrow precisely when his sudden elevation to the palace ought rather to prompt gestures of merriment: “¿melancólico tú? ¿Tú con tristeza?” (312, v. 1029). Moments later, in his first encounter with Clemencia, the newly minted royal himself will excuse his conduct through recourse to both emotional states in practically the same breath:

Perdóneme vuestra alteza,  
 que merece su belleza  
 un gusto más sazonado  
 que el mío, agora asaltado  
 desta enfadosa tristeza.  
 Para mejor ocasión  
 guardo el agradecimiento  
 que debo a tanta afición,  
 cuando el amor y el contento  
 pongan el gusto en sazón,  
 y entre tanto dé lugar  
 a que sin más compañía  
 que mi descortés pesar  
 ceda a la melencolía  
 el derecho del amar. (316, vv. 1146–60)

<sup>17</sup> Bartra also analyzes each of these little-known poems by Acuña and Quevedo (Bartra 154–56; 218).

Though one could dismiss the interchangeability of “tristeza” and “melencolía” on aesthetic grounds as the manifestation of a need for variety or rhyming pairs or, on psychological grounds, as the effect of a logical or linguistic slip in Rogerio’s attempts to parry the insistent demands of fellow characters, it would be difficult to account for the sheer number of such examples on these grounds alone. More fundamentally, the theoretical distinction in early modernity between sadness and melancholy fails to bear out even where one would most expect to encounter it. The economical definition in Covarrubias’s dictionary, for example, advises initially that “no cualquiera tristeza se puede llamar melancolía” before admitting that “decimos estar uno melancólico cuando está triste” and, tellingly, using one term to define the other: “Melancolizarse, entristecerse. Melancólico, triste y pensativo en común acepción” (1264). In addition to the typological distinctions noted above between humoral predisposition and morbid illness, not to mention the discrepancy between its genial and pathological veins, the lexicographer’s gloss suggests we must grapple with the variations between strictly learned definitions and common usage, all of which lades early modern melancholy with an indeterminate semantic field. Nevertheless, as Christine Orobitg has perceptively noted, even among the writings of physicians—precisely where one would anticipate a more exacting differentiation—*melancolía* and *tristeza* are frequently used interchangeably, as “l’envers et l’endroit d’un même malaise” (*L’humeur noire* 38).

Another critical objection to Rogerio’s emotional state is that the words “melancholy” or “melancholic” do not appear until Act II of *El melancólico*, as if that belated act of naming in itself should disqualify or erode the authenticity of the condition trumpeted in the drama’s title (Arellano, “Comedias melancólicas” 30). It is true that the first act largely occupies itself with establishing Rogerio’s character and the amorous circumstances that will underpin the main dramatic conflict for the remainder of the play, but there are at least two main facets of this characterization that prepare the soil for his melancholy to germinate in a more robust and verisimilar fashion. The first is his highborn status, inherited title, and, eventually, his presence in a courtly milieu. Despite the fact that Baldesar Castiglione will warn the aspiring courtier to “never be ill-humored or melancholy before his prince” (111), the privileged and largely sedentary life of rulers, especially that of kings and their kin, was long believed to be comorbid, as it were, with the throes of melancholy. Walter Benjamin would declare in his study of the *Trauerspiel* that “[t]he prince is the paradigm of the melancholic” (145), though the association was already firmly entrenched among such medieval thinkers as Maimonides and Gerard of Berry, among others (Bartra 97; Wack 61; see also Orobitg, “Le prince”; and Gambin, 53–74). The notion nevertheless took on new meaning with the advent of early modern European court society and its ensuing tradition of *de curialium miseriis*, the proliferation of tracts vilifying the corruption, duplicity, decadence, sycophancy, and depravity of a system plagued by throngs of eager courtiers who toiled in misery in their often futile attempts to *medrar* and climb the social-bureaucratic ladder. Many such texts juxtaposed this contempt for the court with praise for the countryside, such as Antonio de Guevara’s *Menosprecio de corte y alabanza de aldea* (1539), in which he bemoans his stint as a courtier: “¡Oh cuán triste, oh cuán miserable es esta vida!” (130). Rogerio’s own grievances echo this tradition when, newly installed in the palace, he claims to long for the salubrious, peaceful moderation of his former abode: “ya el agua, el viento, y ya el campo verde, / midiendo auroras frescas / con envidiosas cazas y pescas” (313, vv. 1065–67). What he truly yearns for, of course, is his beloved shepherdess, but this does not alter the fact that melancholy, according to the prevailing wisdom of the epoch, will become a sort of workplace hazard for those who toil at court.

The other key plot detail that underwrites Rogerio's melancholy is the emphasis on his disposition as a preternaturally gifted, prudent scholar "de tanta ciencia adornado" (280, v. 308), well versed in the arts, philosophy, astrology, and other areas of study. Early in Act II, the newly minted royal will invoke this bygone immersion in letters as a pretense for his unhappy demeanor, lamenting that courtly demands preclude intellectual pursuits. Beyond the more overt aspects of this imposture, there is a curiously self-conscious, performative quality to Rogerio's professed investment in the life of the mind, even after accounting for the fact that his early training was designed to prepare him as a courtier. Referring repeatedly to his "ingenio," he frets about his ability to distinguish himself from the "ignorante" and "necio" in a domain with little use for his genius: "es el ingenio lo que vale menos, / y así siento, ofendido, / tener en menos lo que más ha sido, / pues creará quien me jura / que no es sabio quien tiene tal ventura" (312–14, vv. 1041–1101).<sup>18</sup> Similar preoccupations with social distinction will vex him throughout the play. While agonizing over how to resolve his amorous predicament, he reasons that, were he to simply wed Leonisa to Filipo, he could at least boost his reputation as an intellect ("Casarlos mañana intento / y mostrar cuán sabio soy"; 363, vv. 2406–07).<sup>19</sup> Ultimately, however, the solution to his woes will require even greater ingenuity and a highly theatrical ruse by which Leonisa masquerades as a witch and, later, as an English duchess. Clearly, the melancholic is not the only one with a penchant for the art of performance and deception.

Though Rogerio's fixation with his public image would appear to be at odds with the private introspection he claims to have so valued about his life in the countryside, what is important for the moment is the abiding, unambiguous association between genius and melancholy that, thanks to Ficino's revival of the classical concept, flourished in the Renaissance.<sup>20</sup> In his reply to Rogerio's lament, the duke parses his illegitimate son's apparent condition thus: "Toda melencolía / ingeniosa es un ramo de manía, / y no hay sabio que un poco, / si a Platón damos fe, no toque en loco" (315, vv. 1102–05).<sup>21</sup> Because a "sabio," Rogerio is already susceptible to melancholia long before his arrival to the court, a liability supported by early and frequent allusions to his cold and dry temperament and comparisons to bronze, marble, and stone (281, v. 331; 284, v. 398; 282, v. 340; 282, v. 343). According to Huarte de San Juan, "en los cuatro humores que tenemos, ninguno hay tan frío y seco como la melancolía; y todos cuantos hombres señalados en letras ha habido en el mundo dice Aristóteles que fueron melancólicos" (332). Even if it cannot constitute a preexisting condition *per se*, and even if the play does not explicitly designate Rogerio as a melancholic until Act II (save for what one can surely infer from the title), discerning spectators would easily recognize the tendency in these humoral connotations and the dramatic emphasis on his intellect.

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<sup>18</sup> In Act III, Rogerio will have occasion to demonstrate his Solomonic wisdom when several of his subjects seek counsel on everyday problems (353–57, vv. 2123–2233). The "respuestas con viso de oráculos" (Hartzenbusch 331) that he offers represent yet another parallel with melancholy through its popular association with prophetic abilities (see Bartra 107–09).

<sup>19</sup> It is in this absorption with his self-image that I can perceive a whiff of parody in Rogerio's characterization, a tone insinuated only indirectly by Arellano ("Comedias melancólicas" 31) and Soufas (*Secular Mind* 70). For a modern take, infused with frequent black humor, on the everyday performances we enact, see Miller.

<sup>20</sup> For a lucid reflection on the motives behind the prevalence of scholarly melancholy, see Gowland 115–16.

<sup>21</sup> Early modern thinkers attempted to reconcile Platonic notions of *furor* and divine inspiration with such pseudo-Aristotelian questions as: "Why is it that all those who have become eminent in philosophy or politics or poetry or the arts are clearly of an atrabilious temperament, and some of them to such an extent as to be affected by diseases caused by black bile...?" (*Problems* XXX, 1: 953a10–15; 3211). For a thorough analysis, see the classical study by Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl (15–41).

Visual cues serve a similar function in disclosing Rogerio's emotional state to fellow characters. At the beginning of Act II, in the midst of the presentation of his new heir before the court, he interrupts his own speech when he suddenly notices his sullen demeanor: "Rogerio, ¿pues qué es esto? / Tú, triste agora, cuando manifiesto / secretos que ha tenido / el tiempo en las entrañas del olvido?" (311, vv. 1018–21). Beyond the subtlety with which the dialogue relies on embodied emotions that are only implicit in the text but would be enacted visibly on stage, the duke's questions underscore more generally just how instantly recognizable are the gestures of feelings like melancholy. The hunched posture and propping up of the head immortalized by Dürer's angel in *Melencolia I* (1513–14), along with a bevy of other engravings, emblems, drawings, and paintings of the affliction produced throughout the early modern period, formed part of a readily legible iconography for melancholy.<sup>22</sup> Even if such representations drew inspiration from real, lived experience, they were to some degree also ambiguous and reproducible—in other words, even untrained actors could mimic a melancholy pose that would be immediately perceptible to an audience without pinning down necessarily whether it denoted pathological illness, fleeting sorrow, or something in between. The apparent spontaneity with which Rogerio's countenance startles the duke suggests the lack of any strategic motive for pretense, and yet the latter's incredulity, born of the dissonance between Rogerio's misery and what should otherwise be a jubilant occasion, will tacitly buttress the assumption that his melancholy is an idiopathic or humoral disposition while deflecting suspicions away from its true cause.<sup>23</sup>

In effect, once again, Arellano contends that, because Rogerio is merely experiencing the sadness of an acute loss, he cannot qualify as a full-blown melancholic, and therefore that his claims to the contrary are but a performative gambit to deceive other characters and conceal his illicit love. If this is true, then Clemencia is the one character who sees through the act, suspecting immediately that his pretexts are precisely that. After her suspicions are confirmed, nonetheless, she succumbs to the same illness, as if by contagion, as the duke reports: "Hijo, de vuestra tristeza / participa vuestra prima; / enferma por vos está." He then goes on not only to employ a patently medical language to describe her condition ("enferma," "sanará," "salud") but, despite his belief that a visit by Rogerio will cure what ails her ("visitalda y sanará, / pues veis en lo que os estima"; 358, vv. 2237–41), also dispenses what are presumably court physicians to perform a bloodletting on her, a staple procedure for melancholics (358, vv. 2256–57). Of course, none of this changes Rogerio's desire to obscure the cause of his own affliction, as he himself admits: "con sofísticas razones, / buscar necias ocasiones / para mi melencolía," biding his time "como se ignore la causa / de tanta melencolía." (317, vv. 1186–89; 319, vv. 1233–35).

Naturally, he offers these confessions *sub rosa*, only after other characters have exited the stage. What makes such admissions noteworthy is that he refers to his condition as melancholy even when alone, when divulging anything other than his true feelings, to which the audience has been privy all along, would be moot. He will continue to call himself melancholic when no one is around to overhear him later in the play, as he does in the soliloquy that opens Act III:

Estaba melancólico yo, cielos,  
por ver que un imposible apetecía,  
¿qué haréis agora, pues, desdicha mía,

<sup>22</sup> Panofsky, Fritz, and Saxl analyze Dürer's engraving and its legacy in depth (284–399).

<sup>23</sup> Later, when Leonisa pretends that an occult curse is the source Rogerio's melancholy, the duke responds: "Yo lo creo, / que tristeza semejante / no es natural ni yo puedo / creer que quien sabe tanto, / si hechizos no me le han puesto / como está, viéndose duque, / se entristezca; ¿es verdad esto?" (373, vv. 2673–79).

si sobre un imposible os cargan celos?  
 Corales dan al corazón consuelos  
 y en mí corales son melancolía. (351, vv. 2058–63)

Having wrongly intuited that a coral necklace worn by Leonisa, a gift from Filipo, corroborates that their love is reciprocal, Rogerio despairs at his increasingly forlorn predicament. Even though Leonisa's attire proves to be at odds with her intentions, there can be seemingly little risk of misinterpreting Rogerio's self-described mental state when, as the sole character on stage, he suddenly lacks any discernible motive to feign a melancholy less than sincere. To pose the question more directly, with no one left to mislead, why not just drop the act?

If we provisionally accept the premise that he has merely been impersonating the role of a melancholic in Act II, then we discover a tantalizing response in the polysemy of performativity, namely in the rich theoretical legacy of J.L. Austin's foundational work on speech acts and performative utterances. Without lingering unduly on the concept, I would suggest that, if we are to assume that Rogerio does not possess an atrabilious temperament *sensu stricto*, an utterance like 'I'm melancholic' may possess a peculiar illocutionary, extradiscursive force. In fact, William M. Reddy has proposed that "[t]he startling features of emotional utterances that take the form of first-person, present tense emotion claims warrant designating such utterances as constituting a form of speech act that is neither descriptive nor performative." The historian of emotion goes on to christen these utterances "emotives," which are "instruments for directly changing, building, hiding, intensifying emotions." "Just as Austin noted that performatives are not true or false but either efficacious or ineffective," Reddy importantly explains, "so emotives are neither true nor false"; their efficacy can be determined "depending on whether their effects confirm or disconfirm their claims" (Reddy 104–05; 108). That Rogerio self-identifies as a melancholic in private would appear to confirm the effectiveness of the emotives he utters under the guise of deception in public. To rescue an action verb that has become now largely obsolete but was common in early modernity, it would seem apt to say that all his talk of melancholy *melancholizes* him.

Not just words but gestures, too, can exert a potent effect on one's affective state, given the intimate relationship in the emotional realm between physiological, psychological, discursive, and cognitive processes. As early as Hippocrates, it was believed that bodily posture could affect temperament and the susceptibility to disease. In the nineteenth century, William James hypothesized that our bodily response to a given stimulus determines our affective experience, such that we feel sadness because we weep, and not the other way around (1065–66), while Darwin went further to propose that "[e]ven the simulation of an emotion tends to arouse it in our minds" (386–87). In the 1960s, Silvan Tomkins, whose writings have been pivotal for the twenty-first-century affective turn in cultural studies,<sup>24</sup> rehabilitated these premises to suggest that the body, and especially the face, communicates an affective state not only to others but also "to the self, via feedback" (113–14). Later experimental psychological and neuroscientific research supported the validity of what has become known as the facial feedback hypothesis, deepening and reinforcing the links between physiology and emotional experience. One prominent study, for instance, established that merely holding the mouth in the position of a smile or frown respectively enhanced or diminished subjects' perceived level of enjoyment of an activity (Strack, Martin, and Stepper), lending empirical credence to ancient wisdom and modern self-help literature urging us to augment

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<sup>24</sup> Sedgwick and Frank jumpstarted interest in Tomkins' work on affect theory with their essay "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins," first published in 1995.

our happiness by smiling through adversity.<sup>25</sup> Conversely, research on placebos has demonstrated that psychogenic effects (i.e. the thought that one is swallowing a pill to alleviate an illness) can produce measurable physiological outcomes, even when patients are aware that they were given an inactive substance. More generally, growing insights from psychosomatic and behavioral medicine, psychoneuroimmunology, and embodied cognition are today upturning Western modernity's reliance on Cartesian dualism to discover new, mutual links between the body and mind and develop correspondingly comprehensive treatments.

Allow me to stress that my intention is neither to apply the results of such scientific findings to early modern drama, as proponents of cognitive literary studies have sometimes done, nor much less to suggest that Tirso, despite his patent interest in medical themes (Sancho de San Román), somehow anticipated or upstaged, as it were, these later theories. By pushing to its limits the thought experiment that Rogerio's melancholy is a wholly insincere production, I instead want to register, first, the causal relationship between discursive, gestural performance and the material experience of an affliction like melancholy and, second, the corresponding limitations for literary critics of diagnosing the presence, or absence, of an ailment as complex, diffuse, and delocalized as melancholy, situated astride the tenuous early modern boundaries of body, mind, and soul. Furthermore, as a mental illness with embryonic links to hypochondriasis, or what modern medicine would deem a somatoform disorder, melancholy would likewise require that a medical practitioner tread with caution to differentiate the patient's subjective experience of illness from the possible existence of a physical lesion, hormonal imbalance, or neurological disorder. To do otherwise would be to abdicate the Hippocratic principles of therapeutic care, tantamount to what in our contemporary parlance has been coined "medical gaslighting" (Caron). Just because from our modern perspective we can recognize melancholy as a trendy aesthetic syndrome, and thus easily dismiss it as a pseudoscientific relic of fancy, does not mean that early moderns did not suffer the real effects of chronic depression, anxiety, and related symptoms that would have fallen under its purview, or that others did not genuinely believe they suffered from the condition but today would be diagnosed with a somatoform or factitious disorder.<sup>26</sup> This is not to conflate melancholia with modern clinical understandings of mental illness—even if careful scrutiny often yields salient parallels between the two—but to leaven critical skepticism of a fashionable, freely impersonated disease with a historically responsive, patient-focused benefit of the doubt. In my view, it is facile and rather banal to brandish the privilege of critical hindsight to disqualify early modern melancholy on ostensibly objective grounds. Interpreting it through what Lilian R. Furst describes as "culturally shaped idioms of distress" (x) can serve as a persuasive, and frankly more interesting, antidote to such essentialist approaches.<sup>27</sup>

To insist too forcefully on the unverifiable nature of early modern melancholy is to neglect, moreover, that disease and illness in general are socially constructed concepts. Returning once more to the contemporary context of the Covid-19 pandemic with which this essay began, we know all too well that the science of virology is not immune, as it were, to politics, economics, or culture; that the material existence of a novel coronavirus does not translate objectively or

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<sup>25</sup> Though more recent studies have sometimes failed to replicate the outcome of this and other tests of the facial feedback hypothesis, a meta-analysis published in 2019 found significant evidence for its validity, albeit with important limitations (Coles, Larsen, and Lench).

<sup>26</sup> Other critics, including those otherwise skeptical of the material basis for the disease in early modernity, also acknowledge the likelihood that melancholy encompassed similarly real forms of suffering (Bartra 33; Daniel 22; and Gowland 113).

<sup>27</sup> Furst's terminology appropriates that of the American Psychiatric Association. For an overview of early modern Spanish medical approaches to melancholy and its relationship to mental illness, see Carrera, "Mental Disturbance."

forthrightly to the public sphere; that hard scientific data and statistics require complementary interpretative and rhetorical labors. The dismissal of early modern melancholy by Daniel as “an epistemological matter of insincerity and unverifiability or a biological matter of bad science” telegraphs an illusorily teleological model of scientific progress, as if at once to absolve us moderns of the abject failures of twenty-first century epidemiology and to reify the commonplace of premoderns as hopelessly superstitious and irrational. The fact is that ‘verifiability’ itself is predicated on a positivist fantasy of scientific knowledge as always empirical, objective, and detached from a given sociocultural reality. Though not without its dissenters, a growing consensus among historians of science and medicine espouses “the premise that disease is primarily a social phenomenon and, therefore, it can only be fully understood in the precise sociocultural context where it has been perceived as so” (Arrizabalaga 53–54).<sup>28</sup> For afflicted fictional characters, of course, such a context is further mediated by the literary or dramatic text, even if early modern melancholy, as Bartra and others established long ago, was as much a concern for aesthetics as for early medicine or humanist philosophy. In order that the literary critic’s diagnosis be cogent, relevant, and meaningful, it ought to hew closely to the prevailing historical understandings of melancholia—confounding and contradictory to the current state of psychopathological medicine though they may be. In short, a diagnosis based less on verity or verifiability than on verisimilitude.

Critics of Tirso’s *El melancólico*, in proclaiming that the titular character is not *really* melancholic, seem oddly prone to overlooking this rather elementary distinction. Perhaps it should be acknowledged in passing that a drama about the chronic inner struggles of a somber character ravaged by a morbid excess of black bile would, if remarkably modern, also be likely tedious for spectators more accustomed to, say, the philandering, swashbuckling feats of a Don Juan, the archetypal protagonist of Tirso’s much more popular *El burlador de Sevilla*. Yet if we account for the poetic license with which the dramaturge adapted melancholy to a plot more likely to appeal to the playgoers who packed seventeenth-century theaters, then I would argue that *El melancólico*’s representation of melancholy is quintessentially verisimilar. The perception in early modern Spain that melancholy was rampant, transmissible, and legible by a set of visible symptoms meant that it could be readily diagnosed and credibly feigned, even as its apparent ubiquity—and the surplus of overdetermined, often contradictory significations of the disease—made it a locus of uncertainty. Equivocation, ambiguity, and theatricality, in other words, are already baked into early modern conceptions of seventeenth-century melancholia. As spectators or readers know, and as other characters begin to suspect, Rogerio’s story is anything but reliable. “Paradoxically, however,” as Furst elucidates with regard to literary depictions of illness, “this is the point where the literary configuration approximates most closely to that in clinical practice, for the patient may also consciously or unconsciously resort to obfuscation, withholding or distorting crucial information. To some degree all patients will, without deliberate intent, engage in such misrepresentation” (57). All of this makes Rogerio’s portrayal of melancholy *more* historically accurate, not less. If *El melancólico* is psychologically gripping and realist, it is not because the protagonist’s affective state is straightforwardly clear, but precisely because of its dubious entanglements with deception, self-deception, and performative artifice. By exposing the internal

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<sup>28</sup> Though geared toward paleopathology of the ancient past, Mitchell provides a useful overview of the challenges of and debates over the use of historical texts for retrospective diagnosis, while Arrizabalaga advocates for a constructionist approach to the history of medicine, at the extreme end of which are those who assert “that any object of scientific knowledge—in our case, disease—cannot be considered as a true, objective entity pre-existing its representation, for it merely consists of such a representation” (Arrizabalaga 54).

calculus of a character predisposed to a melancholy that simultaneously serves as an ideal emotional alibi, Tirso also stages the metatheatrical authenticity of imposture.

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