Melancholy, the _Comedia_, and Early Modern Psychology

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The recent debates concerning the use of the terms _Golden Age_ and _early modern_ with regard to Spanish Renaissance and Baroque literary production reflect some of the issues inherent in a discussion of the frequent depiction of melancholy in literature of the period. In particular, the _comedia_ with its representational connections to social, political, and religious currents held in common with its popular and royal audiences provides a useful example of such discursive and performative contributions to the appreciation of what was developing in the intellectual culture. Among the elements of life in mid-16th-century and into late 17th-century Spain is the shift in epistemological grounding from the preceding relational model of likeness and resemblance to the evolving model of difference and individuality. Melancholy, a condition with various symptomologies and recognitions, is a hallmark representing this intellectual shift, and the _comedia_ stage is especially rich with examples of its usefulness to playwrights in their depictions of the rising recognition of the hegemony of the individual intellect.

Pursuing the argument about current terminology in the debate regarding _Golden Age/Siglo de Oro_ or _early modern_, I have found very useful two recent articles, one by Margaret Greer and the other by Alison Weber. In companion pieces published in 2011 in _PMLA_, these scholars examine the usefulness for literary and cultural discussions of 16th- and 17th-century Spanish literature of these labels. Whether these terms are interchangeable is not an option in either study, but rather each presents a disentangling of the complex, and often overlooked, underpinnings of the two rubrics. Not only noteworthy is the clumsiness of the first name that signals more than 100 years of chronology, but likewise the difficulty of determining the exact beginning date of that period as well as its general application to the Spain of the time. Weber asserts: “For whom was

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the Golden Age an epoch of splendor, happiness, and justice? Clearly not for the soldiers, peasants, slaves, prostitutes, and indigenous peoples pressed into labor on New World encomiendas."3 In this same critique of terms, Weber later opines: “While ‘Golden Age’ focuses our attention on the rediscovery of classical learning, ‘early modern’ favors other precipitating factors for demarcating a new age: political (the consolidation of monarchical power), social (urbanization and demographic growth), and technological (the introduction of the printing press).”4 Greer observes as well, remarking on assertions of José Maravall about the dissolution of the dream of a utopian “golden primeval happiness” based on reports about native peoples in the New World, that “[the] first challenge the Spanish Golden Age presents early modern studies, then, is dealing with the formulation of that [utopian] dream and the obstacles to its realization on either side of the Atlantic.”5

What has become the customary acceptance of the terms Golden Age/ Siglo de Oro further separates Spain and its intellectual and literary history from the rest of Europe. As Weber questions “whether replacing Golden Age with early modern will attract a broader audience of non-Hispanists,” she continues:

I doubt I am alone in grumbling when I pick up a monograph or collection of essays claiming to treat a topic in “early modern Europe” and discover that Spain is mentioned only glancingly or not at all. It would appear that the Franco-era tourism board—“España es diferente”—has been all too successful. Golden Age advertises Spain’s difference, but at what cost? Does an air of exoticism attract readers or give them permission to ignore our subject as peripheral?6

Turning specifically to critical appreciation of Spanish drama of the 16th and 17th centuries, she notes that the theater in Spain, as is also the case with Spanish poetry of this time period, was “originally intertwined with Italian models, in its early theorization” with such components as court drama and the traveling theatrical troupes. And she continues that when Lope de Vega “declared that he had locked away the theorists with Terence and Plautus and wrote for his paying public…Spanish theater had found its own voice and a cultural centrality equaled only by Athenian and

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5 Greer, “Mine and Thine,” p. 218.