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Hello, my name is Michelle Zillioux, and today I will be presenting *A Tale of Two City-States: Early Modern Venetian and Florentine Perceptions of Melancholy*.

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The Pseudo-Aristotelian *Problemata* 30.1 opens with the question: “Why, as can be shown, are all exceptional men melancholic?” What follows is an exploration of a supposed connection between melancholy and diverse mental health conditions. Of course, *Problemata* 30.1 focuses on those whom society remembers for their greatness, such as artists, and leaders, who are understood to have exhibited melancholic behaviors. For these types of melancholics, their perceived genius, fame, or riches have provided them with protection from more negative understandings of their conditions. Where, then, does this leave those with less privilege in the history of mental disability?

Today, I wish to find an answer to this question. As is common amongst social issues, privilege and class have been agents of nuance. For sixteenth century Venice and Florence, Italy, this is particularly true. In the midst of a cultural rebirth, both cities regularly engaged in discourses about greatness, which led to discussions of melancholy. Artists such as Michelangelo were labeled as mad geniuses, and artwork emerged with images based on centuries-old iconographic traditions of how to depict melancholy. As I will discuss later, both the label of melancholy and images are extremely important to interpreting how early modern Venetians and Florentines understood melancholy, and even tell us a lot about understandings of disability today. In this presentation, I will argue that late 16th century Venetian and Florentine visual depictions of melancholy reveal early modern attitudes towards people with the condition that both ignore the lived experiences of the individual and provide persons with higher standing more privilege.

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In order to properly analyze how 16th century Venetian and Florentine depictions of melancholy reflect attitudes towards the condition, we must address why these cities

are important to this era in the first place. Needless to say, they were predominant cultural hubs during the Renaissance, and paramount to the study of Renaissance art history. Comparing the two therefore provides insight into cultural nuance between Italian states, and possibly other European cities, during this time. The characters of the cities differed in many significant ways as Venice had a reputation as a serene, peaceful republic, and used the power of its government to tightly control society to fit that image. Florence meanwhile suffered from centuries of internal and external political struggle and saw significant changes in governmental systems until it became a duchy in the late 1520s. Still, both cities cared deeply for their public perception and continued to dominate artistic culture for much of the Italian Renaissance.

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That being said, before we consider artwork from these city-states, it is important to consider the scientific context of melancholy during this time. For much of the Middle Ages through the Enlightenment, the majority of Europe subscribed to humoral theory. Reigning from Ancient Greece, this theory argued that the health and personality of an individual was subject to the balance of humors within the body. These humors consisted of phlegm, blood, yellow bile, and black bile. For an individual to remain healthy, they had to maintain balanced humors through behaviors such as healthy eating and regular exercise.

Black bile is particularly important to our purposes as it was believed to cause melancholy. Famously, many “great men” like Michelangelo were thought to suffer an excess of black bile, as their antisocial and fantastical behaviors lined up with melancholic symptoms.

It wasn't until the 1540s that ideas of melancholy became more nuanced, however. In Florence, language used to discuss mental disabilities became more complex as the official language of the courts switched from Latin to Italian, allowing more colloquialisms. Of course, because the language was more complex, cultural understandings followed.

Class stratification had a large part in such complexities, and thus different individuals faced different trials of perception by the public. One such kinder

conceptualization of melancholy amongst the privileged was the “mad genius” stereotype. As mentioned previously, remarkable people during the early modern period were thought of as particularly susceptible to a surplus of melancholy, as many practiced eccentric behaviors. Their success as authors, scholars, artists, et cetera, was popularly correlated with some form of “madness” -- usually melancholy. Michelangelo especially fell under this role, and he himself used the term “melancholic” as a self-identifier. Britton proposes that he, as well as others, may have used this term to excuse his misanthropic behavior. Much of Europe was highly interested in melancholy following the Protestant and Counter Reformations -- the territory of Tuscany included -- so Michelangelo’s use of the term is an unsurprising shield from criticism. For figures such as him, being perceived as melancholic offered a level of admiration and protection, or at least privilege, as Europe romanticized a very real mental health condition.

Reality differed greatly for those unlucky enough to not be deemed “remarkable” by society. Where the mad genius stereotype reveals the privilege afforded to those who could be sick or mentally disabled, it ignores those who dealt with the harsh repercussions of suffering from melancholy. The poor did not fare as well as the wealthy and were often left to disappear into obscurity. An individual’s privilege extended beyond the *how* of perception into the function of everyday life. The responsibility of caring for (or being) a person with a mental health condition could come at a steep price. Cases of criminal insanity demanded the defendant either have their care paid for as they were kept either at home, in a convent, or in prison. The same went for those deemed too mentally impaired to take care of their estate; in many cases, it was expected a tutor be hired to manage the everyday life and estate of the mentally impaired as one might a minor, and care for such individuals went farther into their adulthoods than the average Florentine -- a luxury that was also difficult to afford. In her book, *Mad Tuscans and their Families*, Elizabeth W. Mellyn mentions the case of Piera da Fella, who, in a fit of madness, murdered her children with a hatchet. Her husband, Paolo, was left with the responsibility to pay for her imprisonment and was eventually able to afford to lock her up in his home for twenty months until she was no longer at risk of fits of violence. What, then, of those individuals without money or family to ease

their care? Piera was afforded a chance to heal, whether or not the process was ideal, but were others? Of course, as Mellyn makes clear in her writing, there survives little documentation of what happened to these people, and thus, just as they were most likely abandoned to obscurity in their time, they are forgotten in ours.

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Looking at examples from Venice and Florence will allow us to see how the disparity in privilege appears in the city-state's visual cultures. But first -- how do we identify melancholy in artwork? Although some mental disabilities are relatively invisible, the early modern period had recognizable iconographies for nonvisual concepts such as melancholy. Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*, for example, boasts an illustration of the traditional Melancholy iconography. Here, she sits with her head in her hand and her eyes cast to the ground as she loses herself in thought. This juxtaposition shows up again and again in artwork throughout Europe during the early modern era.

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Both Venetian and Florentine art borrow from this iconography. Tintoretto's *The Agony in the Garden* depicts Jesus Christ's contemplation of his impending death on the Mount of Olives, hours before his arrest. Matthew 26:38 quotes Jesus as feeling "sorrow and distress" during this moment. Tintoretto depicts this: like Ripa's *Melancholia*, Jesus leans into his palm and gazes downward at his sleeping disciples. His sorrow is felt in the deep shadows of the palette and the almost defeated way he holds his head. It is clear he is lost in thought as he ignores the signs of betrayal and death around him. He is portrayed as introspective, rather than a realistic interpretation of a mental disability.

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Similarly, in the Florentine painter Giorgio Vasari's *Cosimo Studies the Taking of Siena*, realistic representation is forgone in favor of boosting the reputation of an important leader. In this image, Cosimo I de Medici, second Duke of Florence, bores over a map of Siena as the Virtues of Prudence, Vigilance, Patience, and Silence hang

around him. The latter figure, Silence, is placed in the foreground beside Cosimo I, as he assumes the melancholic pose. He and Cosimo are the only two figures unengaged with another figure within the painting as they are consumed by their thoughts. This, compounded with their placements, suggests a connection is being made between the Duke and his silent, melancholic companion. The melancholic pose is once again utilized to portray thoughtfulness present only in contexts of greatness, rather than a realistic depiction of a very real condition.

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Although the two images differ greatly in their contexts -- one being religious and the other scholarly -- there is much to say about how they reflect Italian notions. Both works work harder to reflect privileged ideas than reality, and thus speak to a disconnection between idealism and lived experiences. Really, they're a performance -- a term used here to describe the shallow representations of melancholy as a symptom or cause of intelligence or inspiration. A fleeting emotion expressed to an audience, rather than a lived reality.

This is where the mad genius stereotype comes into play. As I mentioned in my analysis of *Cosimo I Studies the Taking of Siena*, Cosimo I is clearly correlated with the melancholic figure of *Silence*; Cosimo I is thus effectively tied to the concept of an intelligent genius -- a quality that is almost validated by the presence of Silence, as it shows how serious he is about his work.

The Venetian work is just as performative, if not more. *The Agony in the Garden* is performative in that it suggests a moral. The scene relates to the follies of mankind as Jesus contemplates betrayal and sin. As Jesus prays, the viewer cannot help but to contemplate with him. In such contexts, the melancholic iconography becomes a moral cue, rather than a mental disability experienced by many.

Such representations of melancholy reveal much about Venetian and Florentine attitudes towards melancholy. Although I cannot generalize the attitudes of all citizens of these city-states, these representations at least tell of normalized understandings of the condition. In other words, it appears as though Venetian and Florentine depictions of melancholy are, in fact, idealized personifications of an extremely broad term. Vasari's

melancholics mirror the mad genius, and thus speak of the privilege afforded to the rich and favored. Just as, in reality, those with opportunity were capable of managing their diverse mental conditions with more ease than their poorer counterparts, the persons privileged enough to be depicted faced a far more ideal representation. Titian's and Tintoretto's depictions go a step further, as their figures transcend reality in their mythical-ness, and thus transcend the burdens that the melancholic in everyday life may face.

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Several hundred years later, the poor representation of melancholy, and of mental disability as a whole have left lasting negative effects on Western societies' understandings of diverse mental health conditions. Even today, a direct correlation between "melancholy" and "genius" is believed in by many. In her article, "The Mythconception of the Mad Genius," Arne Dietrich points out that these correlations pour forth in all sorts of contexts, from popular media to even peer-reviewed scientific journals. And, as Dietrich establishes, this supposed connection lacks any significant, scientific proof. Nevertheless, the myth pervades, and, as it does, misunderstandings of mental disabilities, such as depression and psychosis, make it difficult for actual, empathetic understandings about those with disabilities to be made by the public, and even medical professionals.

The erasure of persons with mental disabilities and the presentations of negative stereotypes in modern and contemporary media further disturb how people with disabilities are perceived. It can be argued that, in the works discussed earlier, there isn't an absence of the melancholic, and thus my argument is not applicable here. However, should we understand the erasure as not that of a missing figure, but as the absence of a positive, empathetic representation, it could be seen that what is truly erased is validation of real life, of lived experiences, in favor of a romantic ideal. As disability theorists such as Katie Rose Guest Pryal argue, stereotypes such as that of the "mad genius" appear innocuous as, on the surface, they appear to celebrate difference. Ultimately, however, such "celebration" defaults to misunderstanding, before leading to isolation of the different. Additionally, those who fail to fall into line with public

perceptions of ideal representations of mental disability are cast aside and further misunderstood.

With continued misunderstandings of mental disabilities, there is a continued fear attached to them. As is commonly known, people tend to fear what is unfamiliar. As media continues to prey on this unfamiliarity, in movies such as *SPLIT*, *The Joker*, and other contemporary movies where the mentally disabled is the villain, it becomes more and more difficult to remove oneself from negative biases. In connection with the idealized imaginings of early modern melancholy that have been discussed in this paper, there may be a disconnect between expectations surrounding a mental disability and the reality of one -- something which could spark far more upset and misunderstanding.

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The images societies create can tell so much about their characters and attitudes. In the case of early modern Venice and Florence, Italy, visual culture reveals a significant picture of Renaissance attitudes towards those with mental disabilities, particularly melancholy. Within the artwork of these two city-states, there is a dearth of realistic representations of melancholics. Rather, paintings by the likes of Tintoretto and Vasari reveal attention was instead paid to a romantic ideal of melancholy in a society that clearly privileged geniuses such as Michelangelo and the wealthy, such as Cosimo I, who were afforded positive representations of their melancholic behaviors. For Tintoretto, this affordance appeared in the form of moral performance as a way to produce an image of mortal contemplation, while Vasari's painting focused on scholarly associations with the condition. These images ultimately fail to tell the story of the realities of the unprivileged and mentally disabled, leaving them to fall into obscurity.