

THE FOUR HUMOURS: Medicine in Shakespeare's Time

Some people of Shakespeare's time believed **disease** was a punishment for sinful behavior.

Others thought it resulted from the movement of the stars and the planets. Whatever the cause, virtually everyone agreed that it triggered illness by creating an intolerable imbalance in four vital fluids in the body: blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile.

- Called "humors" or "humours" (from a Latin word for liquids), these fluids controlled health and human behavior.
- When the body produced too much or too little of a humor—or if the humor altered its consistency or ventured beyond its normal location in the body—illness resulted.
 1. Persons in whom **BLOOD** was dominant were kind, loving, merry, enthusiastic, and passionate.
 - A person with **too much** blood was considered **sanguine**
 - To rid a person of too much blood, a barber would "bleed" excess blood from a sick person using lances or knives (yes, barbers once were licensed to do medicine), opening the person's veins, or using leeches to suck the extra blood out of a person
 2. Those ruled by **PHLEGM** were sluggish, apathetic, cowardly, and dull-witted.
 - A person with **too much** phlegm was considered **phlegmatic**
 - To rid a person of too much phlegm, the doctor might suggest applying various irritants to the nose and mouth to induce violent sneezing, which eliminated the phlegm in a spectacular manner. Unfortunately, many of the powders and ointments used in the latter treatments were virulently toxic. Untold thousands of patients suffering from diseases no more severe than the flu died at the hands of various doctors.
 3. Persons dominated by **YELLOW BILE** were stubborn, impatient, vengeful, and easy to anger
 - A person with **too much** yellow bile was considered **choleric**
 - To rid a person of too much yellow bile, an emetic or vomit-inducing agent would help the patient expel the extra choler from the body
 4. Those dominated by **BLACK BILE** were depressed, irritable, cynical
 - A person with **too much** black bile was considered **melancholic**
 - To rid a person of too much black bile, the cure was to prescribe a laxative to purge it from the body
- **Diagnosis** consisted in one or more of the following: fever, headache, examining urine, astrological charts, and pulse abnormalities.
- The afflictions **in Shakespeare's plays** not only help to drive the plots and motivate the characters, but they also educate modern audiences and historians about health in Elizabethan and Jacobean England.
- TAKE NOTE in *Romeo and Juliet* when Shakespeare mentions "humors." What is he trying to express?
 ex.: Page 19 → Montague says of Romeo, "Black and portentous does this humor prove/ Unless good counsel may the cause remove."
What is Montague saying about Romeo?