**The Four Humors**

**An Introduction with Primary Sources**

During Shakespeare’s time, people believed that the “Four Humors” affected not only our physical health, but also our personalities and mental well-being. The four humors theory was developed in ancient Greece and Rome and influenced European medicine until at least the 18th century. The four humors were blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile. These were in balance in a healthy person. Slight imbalances, favoring a specific humor, were thought to result in specific personality types. Greater imbalances were thought to lead to illness. In order to heal the sick, balance of the four humors had to be restored. Each humor was associated with a specific element, season, age, quality, personality type, and Zodiac symbols.

Scanned page of the book, Optick Glasse of Humors. At the top of the page are 2 boxes with titled images of Oxford and Cambridge. Below is a cosmological chart made of concentric circles, split into 4 segments, with names of planets and constellations in the segments.


Thomas Walkington, *Optick Glasse of Humor,* 1631

Courtesy National Library of Medicine

**The Four Humors: Blood**

Associated Adjectives—Sanguine, sanguineous

Scanned page of the book, Minerva Britanna. At the top of the page is the word "Sanguis" and a man playing a stringed instrument while standing next to a goat with a bunch of grapes in its mouth; black text appears underneath the image. The text reads:
"The Aierie Sanguine, in whose youthfull cheeke, 
The Pestane Rose, and Lilly doe contend: 
By nature is benigne, and gentlie meeke, 
To Musick, and all merriment a frend; 
As seemeth by his flowers, and girlondes gay, 
Wherewith he dightes him, all the merry May.
And by him browzing, of the climbing vine, 
The lustfull Goate is seene, which may import, 
His pronenes both to women, and to wine, 
Bold, bounteous, frend vnto the learned sort; 
For studies fit, best louing, and belou'd, 
Faire-spoken, bashfull, seld in anger moou'd."


[Modern English translation of the text]

Airy Sanguine, whose youthful cheek is both pink and white, is naturally kind and gentle and humble. He loves music and all merriment, as indicated by the flowers and garlands that he decorates himself with throughout the merry month of May.

Near him are a climbing vine and a lustful goat, indicating his fondness for both wine and women. He is bold, generous, a friend to learning, fit for studies, most loving and beloved, fair-spoken, not boastful, and seldom angry.

Henry Peacham, *Minerva Britanna,* 1612. Courtesy Folger Shakespeare Library

**The Four Humors: Yellow Bile**

Associated Adjectives—Choleric

Scanned page of the book, Minerva Britanna. At the top of the page is the word "Cholera," and a shirtless man holding a sword in his right hand while standing next to a lion that is lying on the ground; black text appears underneath the image. The text reads:
"Next Choller standes, resembling most the fire, 
Of swarthie yeallow, and a meager face; 
With Sword a late, vnsheathed in his Ire: 
Neere whome, there lies, within a little space, 
A sterne ei'de Lion, and by him a sheild, 
Charg'd with a flame, vpon a crimson feild.
We paint him young, to shew that passions raigne, 
The most in heedles, and vnstaied youth: 
That Lion showes, he seldome can refraine, 
From cruell deede, devoide of gentle ruth: 
Or hath perhaps, this beast to him assign'd, 
As bearing most, the braue and bounteous mind."

[Modern English translation of the text]

Next Choler stands, resembling fire the most, and having a face that is dark yellow and thin. He has a sword that he has taken out of its sheath in his anger, and close to him is a stern-eyed lion. He also has a shield with a flame on a crimson background.

He is painted young to show that his passions control him and that he is a thoughtless and

undisciplined young man. The lion indicates that he can seldom keep from performing cruel deeds and is without pity. However, the lion also indicates that he has a brave and wide-ranging mind.

Henry Peacham, *Minerva Britanna,* 1612. Courtesy Folger Shakespeare Library

**The Four Humors: Phlegm**

Associated Adjectives—Phlegmatic

Scanned page of the book, Minerva Britanna. At the top of the page is the word “phlegma,” and a picture of a man sitting next to the fire of a hearth, a turtle near his feet. Under the picture is black text. The text reads:
"Heere Phlegme sits coughing on a Marble seate, 
As Citie-vsurers before their dore: 
Of Bodie grosse, not through excesse of meate, 
But of a Dropsie, he had got of yore: 
His slothfull hand, in's bosome still he keepes, 
Drinkes, spits, or nodding, in the Chimney sleepes.
Beneath his feete, there doth a Tortoise crall, 
For slowest pace, Sloth's Hieroglyphick here, 
For Phlegmatique, hates Labour most of all, 
As by his course araiment, may appeare: 
Nor is he better furnished I find, 
With Science, or the virtues of the mind."

[Modern English translation of the text]

Here Phlegm sits coughing on a marble seat, just like the money lenders in the city sit in front of their gold. His body is fat, not because he eats too much meat but because he has dropsy, so fluid has collected in his body. He keeps his lazy hand in his shirt as he drinks and spits and nods off to sleep by the chimney.

A tortoise crawls beneath his feet, symbolizing his sloth, or laziness, because Phlegm hates working most of all, as his coarse clothing indicates. Nor does he like to study or put his mind to good use.

Henry Peacham, *Minerva Britanna,* 1612. Courtesy Folger Shakespeare Library

**The Four Humors: Black Bile**

Associated Adjectives—Melancholy

Scanned page of the book, Minerva Britanna. At the top of the page is the word "Melancholia" and a bearded man sitting with a book on his lap and a bag in his right hand, while an owl and a cat sit on each side of him; black text appears underneath the image. The text reads: 
"Heere Melancholly  musing in his fits , 
Pale visag'd, of complexion cold and drie, 
All solitarie, at his studie sits, 
Within a wood, devoid of companie: 
Saue Madge the Owle, and melancholly Pusse, 
Light-loathing Creatures, hatefull, ominous.
His mouth, in signe of silence, vp is bound, 
For Melancholly loues not many wordes: 
One foote on Cube is fixt vpon the ground, 
The which him plodding Constancie affordes: 
A sealed Purse he beares, to shew no vice, 
So proper is to him, as Avarice."


[Modern English translation of the text]

Here Melancholy, absorbed in his struggles, with a pale face and cold, dry complexion, sits by himself in his studies. He is in the woods, without any company except for Madge the owl and a melancholy cat, two hateful and ominous animals that loathe the light.

As an indication of his silence, his mouth is bound because Melancholy doesn’t like to talk. One of his feet is on a cube, fixing him firmly to the ground and providing him with a dull steadiness. He also has a sealed purse to indicate that there is no vice better suited

to him than greediness.

Henry Peacham, *Minerva Britanna,* 1612. Courtesy Folger Shakespeare Library