

Humours

Historical Background

The theory of humours originated in the ancient world. The great 2nd century A.D. Roman physician Galen established a system that combined elements of anatomy, psychology, astrology, pharmacology, and just about every other area of knowledge to which the ancients had access. Little about the system had changed by Shakespeare's time almost fifteen centuries later. The most famous treatment of the theory of humours in English was Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, and while this book did not appear until 1621 — five years after Shakespeare's death — in truth it merely summarized material that was available in other sources, albeit in a more entertaining and comprehensive form than it had appeared before.

The Basics

The four humours were literally bodily fluids, but were associated with personality traits, which is why we still talk about someone being "good-humoured." Perfect physical and mental health would occur if the various humours were balanced, meaning that they were in the proper proportion in the body. However, no one was ever thought to be perfectly balanced. Minor imbalances were associated with personality traits, whereas severe imbalances led to bodily illnesses and personality disorders. An excess of a humour could be treated by decreasing the amount of that humour in the system, for example by bleeding, diuretics, laxatives, or enemas.

Connections

This table shows some of the associations given to the humours

<i>Humour</i>	Blood	Phlegm or Pituita	Yellow Bile	Black Bile
<i>Character Type</i>	Sanguine	Phlegmatic	Choleric	Melancholic
<i>Element</i>	Air	Water	Fire	Earth
<i>Planet (or luminary)</i>	Jupiter	Moon	Mars	Saturn
<i>Astrological Signs</i>	Gemini, Libra, Aquarius	Cancer, Scorpio, Pisces	Aries, Leo, Sagittarius	Taurus, Virgo, Capricorn
<i>Wind/Direction</i>	South	East	West	North
<i>Temperature/Moisture</i>	Hot and Moist	Cold and Moist	Hot and Dry	Cold and Dry
<i>Season</i>	Spring	Winter	Summer	Autumn
<i>Phase of Life</i>	Adolescence	Childhood (also senility)	Adulthood	Old Age
<i>Appearance</i>	Large-framed, with a pink or red complexion	Fleshy and fair	Slim, wiry, red-haired	Slim, fair, not muscular