

# ENGL 4420: Shakespeare and his Age

with Brian Donovan

Transcript of 5<sup>th</sup> day's PowerPoint® presentation

## The Humors

“you are altogether governed by humors”

—Hotspur's wife to Hotspur, *1 Henry IV* 3.1.232

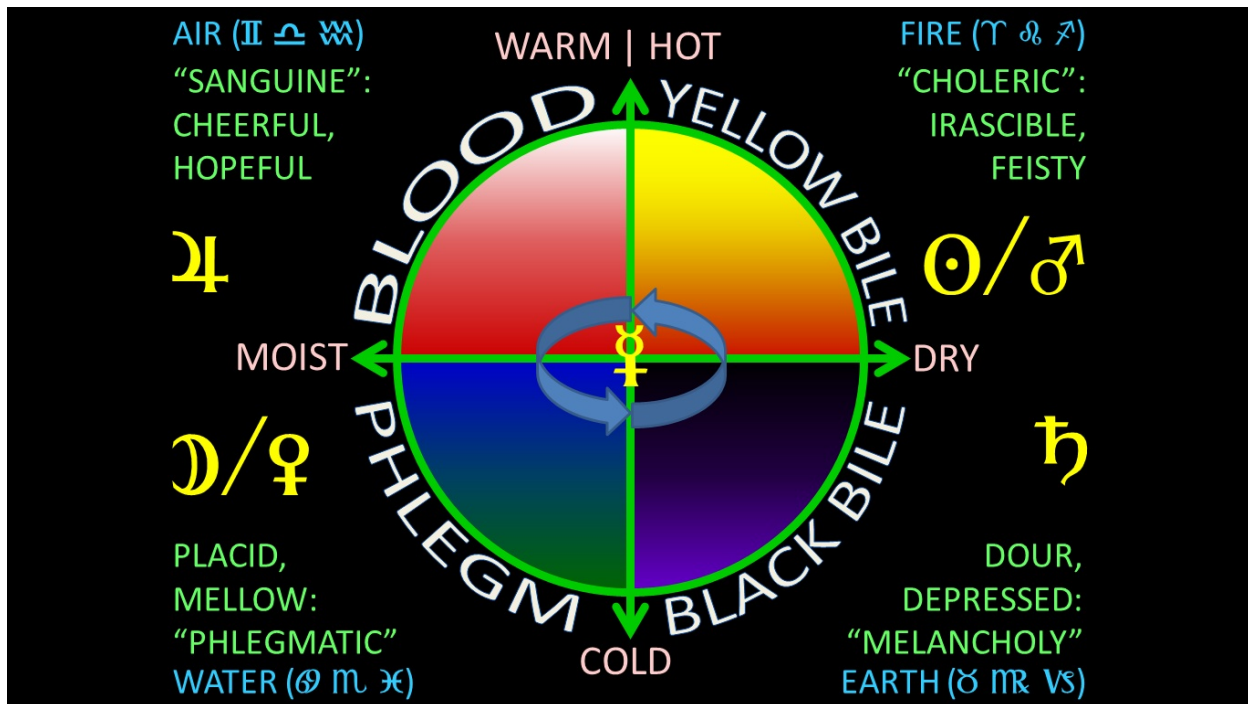
- Word “humor” has multiple meanings in Shakespeare's day:
  - Idiosyncratic habit or bent of behavior, obsession, rut, tic, hobby-horse (as in Ben Jonson's comedies, *Every Man in his Humor* and *Every Man out of his Humor*).
  - Disposition, temperament, or mood.
    - Corporal Nym in *Henry V* uses the word persistently, fancying himself a dangerous man whose moods other men should beware of: “That's the humor of it.” (
  - A literal fluid (cf. word “humid,” & the aqueous and vitreous humors in the eye)—especially one of the four principal bodily fluids in terms of which ancient and medieval medicine accounted for both physiology and psychology, including temperaments and moods:
    - Blood, phlegm, yellow bile, & black bile.

## The Four Humors

- Medical doctrine of four humors (χυμοί) was originally propounded in ancient Greek medicine, in the Hippocratic Corpus (~400ff. B.C.) and in the long-influential medical work of Galen (C2 A.D.); it was linked to doctrine of four elements, introduced by Empedocles (early C5 B.C.).
- By Shakespeare's time, the hold of this doctrine over leading medical opinion was weakening (Paracelsus is supposed to have publicly burned Galen's books in Basel in the 1520s), but it retained currency among the laity as a way to talk about psychology and temperament, much as did astrology (and the two were linked).
- Standard work on application to Shakespeare is *The Humors & Shakespeare's Characters*, by John W. Draper (Durham, NC: Duke U.P., 1945; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1965).

[Astrological sigla for following figure:

Planets:		Air Signs:		Zodiacal Signs	
☉	Sun	♊	Gemini	♈	Aries
☾	Moon	♎	Libra	♌	Leo
☿	Mercury	♒	Aquarius	♐	Sagittarius
♀	Venus				
♂	Mars		Water Signs:		Earth Signs:
♃	Jupiter	♋	Cancer	♉	Taurus
♄	Saturn	♏	Scorpio	♍	Virgo
		♓	Pisces	♏	Capricorn]



### Shakespearean Examples: Choleric

- Hal and Hotspur, according to Draper, exemplify the two planetary aspects of the choleric (yellow-bile) temperament:
  - Martial (♂): Hotspur is said by his father to be “drunk with choleric” (1.3.129, p. 1049), and lampooned by Hal as “he that kills me some six or seven dozens of Scots at a breakfast, washes his hands, and says to his wife, ‘fie upon this quiet life, I want work’” (2.4.98–100 p. 1056).  
This worse kind of yellow bile also predominates in tyrants, like Duke Frederick in *As You Like It* or the petty household tyrant Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*.
  - Solar (☉): Hal ultimately grows, as ideal king, to exemplify the solar aspect of this humor, forceful and formidable, notably including in battle, but more balanced and moderate, not so entirely *devoted* to battle as Hotspur.  
Cf. king as (ideally) sun in *Richard II* 3.2.37–53. p. 282.

### Shakespearean Examples: Melancholy

- Obvious examples of Shakespearean characters with melancholy temperaments are Hamlet, traditionally (though not by Shakespeare himself) styled “the melancholy Dane,” and Jaques in *As You Like It*, who is termed “the melancholy Jaques” in the play itself, where he is first mentioned (2.1.26, p. 414; cf. 2.5.9, p. 417, “It will make you melancholy, Monsieur Jaques”).
  - Both, the one in tragedy and the one in comedy, tend rather to philosophic contemplation than to action; this humor was also the humor of the intellectual genius.

- Glendower's deep studies in magical arcana imply some brooding melancholy in his otherwise choleric makeup.
- Orsino, in the opening speech of *Twelfth Night* (p. 446), is luxuriating in a lover's melancholy.

### **Falstaff and the Humors**

- Falstaff is a tricky case.
  - He explicitly lays claim to melancholy at *1 Henry IV* 1.2.68–78 (p. 1047), where he embraces Hal's suggestion that he be a hangman, saying that such a profession "jumps with my humor . . . I am as melancholy as a gib-cat or a lugged bear."
  - In pretending to "youth" (*1 Henry IV* 2.2.82–3, p. 1053) he implicitly claims to be of sanguine temperament, since that is the humor of young men.
  - In pretending to be a valiant man at arms, both at Gad's Hill and at Shrewsbury (where he pretends to have bested the choleric Hotspur in choler's own realm, battle), he lays claim to choler.
- In his wonderful speech in praise of his tippie of choice, the fortified wine called sherris sack (i.e., dry sherry; *2 Henry IV* 4.3.85–122, pp. 1111–12), he pretends that it promotes choler, and that those who abstain from it tend to its opposite, phlegm:
  - Men who favor "thin drink" instead, which tends to "over-cool their blood," "fall into a kind of male *green*-sickness [more typically an anemia of young girls], and then, when they marry, they [be]get wenchies." Phlegm is a feminine humor, ruled by Venus and (like menses) the Moon.
  - Sack drinkers, by contrast, experience "the warming of the blood; which, before cold and settled, left the liver white and pale, which is the badge of pusillanimity and cowardice: but the sherris warms it . . . [till the drinker] doth any deed of courage; and this valor comes of sherris."
- He is, however, kidding himself: he the immoderate sack-drinker is the one tending to phlegm (the one humor he does *not* pretend to) as evidenced by his obesity, cowardice, and placid adaptability to whatever chance throws his way.
  - In general, drunkenness is associated with phlegm, though it may per contrary promote choler in those in whom it already predominates (mean drunks).