



Plants and Prayers

Health and healing before 1700

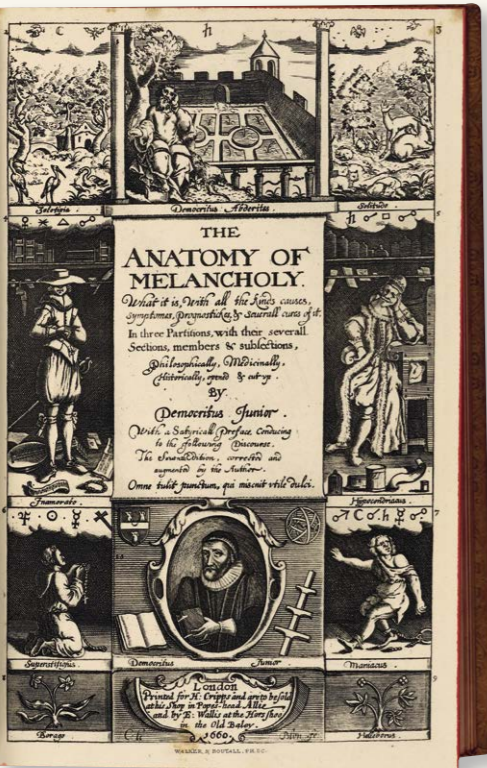
Humoral Theory: The basis of medical thought for millennia

Physicians used various signs and explanations to diagnose illness. One of the most common was humoral theory. In this theory, the human body is made of four humours: blood (*sanguine*), black bile (*melancholy*), yellow bile (*choleric*), and phlegm. An imbalance in the humours is the cause of illness.

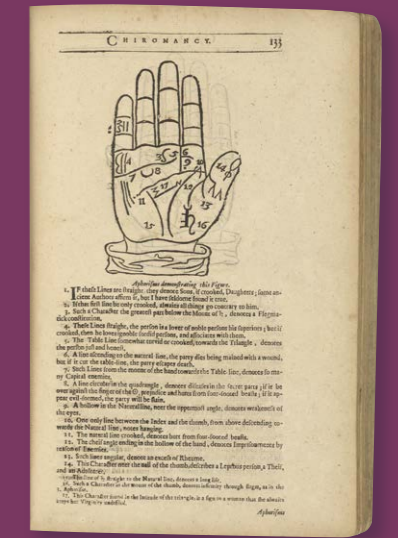
Each humour relates to one of the four elements originally defined in Antiquity (air, earth, water, fire), a mixture of two qualities (hot, cold, dry, or wet), and a personality temperament. For example, an abundance of black bile resulted in a *melancholic* temperament (sad, reserved), while an abundance of blood resulted in a *sanguine* temperament (relaxed, happy). A patient's *complexion* (healthy or unhealthy) was determined by the balance of these factors.

It was the doctor's responsibility to accurately diagnose the offending humours and restore the balance through plant medicines, diet, purging, bloodletting, sleep patterns, and curing by *contraries*: a hot and wet infection could be counteracted with a cold and dry plant. Diet, sleep, exercise, emotions, planetary movements, and weather conditions were all factors that influenced illness. By correcting an excess or a deficit, healing could be enabled.

Vapours were thought to be gases that were generated through normal bodily processes, which could build up and cause disease if not properly released through the pores or the lungs. Thus, opening the pores, through baths, sweating, or medicines, was an important component of the treatment process when vapours were believed to be trapped in the body. *Pronosticacioun* (prognosis) was an important part of the diagnostic process. This is the doctor's ability to read the humours and *signs* (or symptoms) of a condition and then predict the likely outcome, which can include the stages of the illness up to predicting whether the patient will live or die.



Frontispiece from Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1896), originally printed in 1651, showing Borage and Hellebore, both believed to be treatments for melancholy. Woodward Collection PR2223.A6.S4



Chiromancy (palm-reading) was believed to reveal humoral balance, as here where the angular lines denote "an excess of Rheume" and the mound of the thumb indicates a phlegmatic constitution. From Saunders *physiognomie, and chiromancy, metoposcopia, the symmetrical proportions and signal moles of the body...* (1671). Special Collection Oversize HL657 SAU



The link between the four humours, their qualities, and personality type. Copyright University of Nottingham, Manuscripts and Special Collections.



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Table of the humors from an English translation of influential French barber-surgeon to the Valois Dynasty, Ambrose Paré. *The works of Ambrose Parey: wherein are contained an introduction to chirurgery in general...*(1691). Med Chi Oversize WZ240.P25 PAR

	Humors	Qualities	Colors	Temp.	Loc.
Blood	Of Nature very hot and moist in nature compared to other humors.	Of Qualities very hot and moist.	Of Colors red.	Of Temp. hot.	Of Loc. in the heart, liver, and spleen.
Phlegm	Of Nature very cold and moist.	Of Qualities cold and moist.	Of Colors white.	Of Temp. cold.	Of Loc. in the lungs, brain, and joints.
Choler	Of Nature very hot and dry.	Of Qualities hot and dry.	Of Colors yellow.	Of Temp. hot.	Of Loc. in the stomach, gall bladder, and small intestine.
Melancholy	Of Nature very cold and dry.	Of Qualities cold and dry.	Of Colors black.	Of Temp. cold.	Of Loc. in the spleen, bladder, and lower part of the lungs.