

Terminological Transitions and the Humours  
in Early Modern Thought

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Was ever woman in this humour woo'd?  
Was ever woman in this humour won?  
I'll have her; but I will not keep her long.  
What! I, that kill'd her husband and his father,  
To take her in her heart's extremest hate,  
With curses in her mouth, tears in her eyes,  
The bleeding witness of her hatred by;  
Having God, her conscience, and these bars against me,  
And I nothing to back my suit at all,  
But the plain devil and dissembling looks,  
And yet to win her, all the world to nothing!  
(*Richard III* Act 1, Scene 2)

What does Shakespeare mean here? He probably wrote *Richard III* somewhere around 1592, and the implication to a modern audience is that “humour” suggests nothing more than the mood or emotional state of Lady Anne. Yet a look at the following lines offers a decidedly physicalized contextualization alongside the psychological terms that one would expect:

Was ever woman in this **humour** woo'd?  
Was ever woman in this **humour** won?  
I'll have her; but I will not keep her long.  
What! I, that kill'd her husband and his father,  
To take her in her **heart's extremest hate**,  
With curses in her **mouth**, **tears** in her **eyes**,  
The **bleeding** witness of her *hatred* by;

Having God, her *conscience*, and these bars against me,  
And I nothing to back my suit at all,  
But the plain devil and *dissembling looks*,  
And yet to win her, all the world to nothing!

In this second version, psychological terms have been italicized and references to physical elements placed in bold. What, then, to do with the word “humour” itself? Apparently, it is both psychological and physical, both emotive and tangible. How can this be so?

This discussion shall consider approaches to the idea of the humours in early modern thought, starting with a short foundation in the classical period, then looking at the transitional usage of the terminology from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. Many of the examples come from music, as this tended to attract particular attention from writers on aesthetics and philosophy, positioned as it was within the *Quadrivium* and regarded as both an art and a science.

The concept of the four humours, melancholic, phlegmatic, sanguine and choleric, originated in Ancient thought, possibly from Egyptian or Mesopotamian philosophy. They were further linked to the theory in Greek philosophy of the four elements – earth, air, water and fire - of which everything was thought to consist. This, most famously expounded by Empedocles (c. 490-430 B.C.E.), gave the idea a quasi-scientific cast in its day, and Hippocrates (c. 460-377 B.C.E.) advanced the humours as the four liquids which formed the basis of a great deal of medical thought until well into the seventeenth century, and arguably beyond. The theory was based on the idea that an individual had a specific balance of four key liquids – black bile, yellow bile, phlegm and blood – which determined both their physical and emotional well-being. If a patient had an excess of one, an opposite humour could be introduced. As a disciple of Hippocrates (probably Polybus) put it in *On the Nature of Man*:

The Human body contains blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile. These are the things that make up its constitution and cause its pains and health. Health is primarily that state in which these constituent substances are in the correct proportion to each other, both in strength and quantity, and are well mixed. Pain occurs when one of the substances presents either a deficiency or an excess, or is separated in the body and not mixed with others. (Qtd. in Gimbel 342)

Hippocrates was, according to the Pythagoreans at least, fighting something of a battle against the traditional ideas of religion in which the primary cause of physical ills was seen as punishment by the gods for sin. It is somewhat ironic that the pseudoscience of the humours should turn out to be one of his main weapons. Claudius Galen (129-216) was a Roman physician who, whilst not the originator, is largely responsible for fixing the idea that the physiological and psychological states were linked via the humours firmly in medical thought. He first did so in the work *Quod Animi Mores Corporis Temperatura Sequantur* (That the qualities of the mind depend on the temperament of the body). The qualities of the four humours altered over time – sanguine, for example, was “dull-witted” in the Galenistic approach, as Bos notes (37) – but, by the early modern period, came to be understood more or less consistently in the following way (table 1):

**Table One: The Four Humours and their Relationships**

<b>Humour</b>	<b>Element</b>	<b>Symptom</b>	<b>Liquid</b>	<b>Season</b>	<b>Traits</b>
Choleric	Fire	Hot and dry	Yellow bile	Summer	Angry and vengeful
Melancholic	Earth	Cold and dry	Black bile	Autumn	Lazy, greedy and sentimental
Phlegmatic	Water	Cold and wet	Phlegm	Winter	Dull, pale and cowardly
Sanguine	Air	Hot and wet	Blood	Spring	Joyous, generous and amorous

Note here that the liquids also correspond to the expected times of illness. Phlegm, for example is a Winter liquid, which is when colds are the most common, and the depression of Autumn, with both the dying of plant life and the anticipation of the coming cold, is the time of melancholy. Even today, people talk about “Autumn depression”.

The humours remained central to Western medical thought, as they did also in parts of the East, such as Persia. At various times, such as during the Byzantine period (in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries C.E.), when Christianity posed a threat to the development of medical science, the theory lost a certain amount of traction, but it always seemed to *etern*. In the 11<sup>th</sup> century, St. Hildegard of Bingen even traced the conflict of the humours to the Fall of Man, stating that “...had man remained in Paradise he would not have noxious fluids in his body” (Panofsky 85). By the time of the Renaissance, it was well-established and linked to religious concepts.

Many of the elements of Renaissance thought on the role and function of the humours were combined with a kind of mystical Christianity. This is apparent in a well-known 1504 engraving of Adam and Eve by Albrecht

Dürer(1471-1528). Four animals appear, each representative of a different humour. The elk is Melancholy, the cat Choleric, the ox Phlegmatic and the rabbit Sanguine (Panofsky 85). The serpent is delivering the fruit from the tree to Eve, who is about to pass it on in turn to Adam. The placement of the animals is significant here. The mouse can lie down in peace next to the cat. All creatures are at rest and in balance. The central figures of Adam and Eve, however, are shown in tense motion. Rather than being balanced, they lean towards each other slightly, creating the impression that their act will result in further unbalancing of their bodies. This, in turn, will lead to motion of the humours. The implication is that this peaceful scene will be disturbed by the culmination of the original sin, and, by extension, the balance of the humours in the body will be disrupted. Adam and Eve, by partaking of the fruit, have initiated a fall from a perfect state of grace to one of confusion and conflicting desires.

There are also a number of contrasts in the work. There are three of these apparent. The first is the incongruity of the relationship between the cat and the mouse, with the latter clearly intended as a future victim once sin has unbalanced the Garden of Eden. The second contrast is that between the ash tree to which Adam still clings and the fig tree that bears the forbidden fruit. Finally, the parrot, representing wisdom and benevolence, is contrasted with the evil, malevolent serpent (Panofsky 84-85). These are all paralleled in the stances of Eve, the temptress, and Adam, the innocent.

By the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the humours were moving towards their transitional form, between medical reality and metaphor. They even took on nationalistic overtones. In *The Passions of the Mind in General* (1601) by Thomas Wright, a number of reasons as to why the British were better scholars than those the author encountered on the continent are advanced, primarily based on climate and its imagined inflammation of the humours. This appears to have been somewhat self-serving flattery as Wright was embroiled in political turmoil in his homeland at the time. The *Passions* is,

perhaps, the single most complete study of emotions in English to be produced during the Jacobean period. Wright contended that the “inordinate motions of Passions” come from original sin, and that the knowledge of how to control them gives one the ability to act morally (89). Again, the passions as depicted in his work have the ability to alter the humours of the body, and an excess of one passion leads to an imbalance of the humours. He acknowledged that his theory was drawn primarily from the *De sympathia* of Fracastorius (91). Thus, equipped with knowledge, physicians can decide whether to purge or apply other remedies, and further determine future preventative treatment (91).

In a later passage, Wright referred to the humoral theory of medicine, particularly with regard to the effect upon the body, citing both classical sources and the observations of contemporary physicians. He looked at the relationship between the passions and humours, explaining that they could each affect the other, and further exploring the idea that individuals have different quantities of given humours. He noted that some people are naturally happy, others “melancholy”, and others angry, and that such characteristics came from the body, “wherein one or other humour doth predominate” (139). Yet, such humours were also seen as functioning in relation to context and environment, and Wright further stated that predominant humours meant that certain passions were ignited more easily than others depending on individual inclination, as well as external factors such as “the heavens, air, sleep and waking, meat and drink, exercise and rest” (139).

There were challenges to the idea of humours both before and after this time, most notably from Paracelsus, who took chemical substances such as salt, mercury and sulfur as the basic substances. By the third decade of the seventeenth century, William Harvey had made his discovery about the circulation of the blood, publishing his observations in *De Motu Cordis* (On the motion of the heart and blood) in 1628. This pushed blood to the fore as the liquid of significance in the human body, and led to a re-evaluation of accepted humoral principles. Descartes, too, saw it as primary in his mechanistic view

of the body and this, when combined with his definitely non-humoural concept of emotive states based on the understanding of external impressions, came to suggest a rejection of the core principles of Galenistic thought.

This developing idea of what Bos calls “corpuscular natural philosophy” (43) was to lead to the marginalization of humoural liquids as a medical, physiological and psychological idea. By the latter half of the seventeenth century, physicians like Thomas Willis at Oxford were conducting anatomical studies of the brain in order to understand emotions, and the idea of the nervous system began to take form.

Interestingly, Francis Hutcheson made reference to humoural theory in a 1742 discussion of the passions. Whilst noting that such discussions of “*Fluids* and *Solids* of the Body” (1742: 57) are more properly the province of medicine, he did state that frequent excursions into a particular passion or “*Temperament*” would lead to a tendency for it in an individual. In 1759, Burke was still using humoural terminology, discussing, for example, the crudity of “...the man of too sanguine a complexion...” (36), but the term was, by this time, almost completely divorced from its original medical context and purely figurative in usage (Gullan-Whur 100).

Outside the cutting edge of medical research, the concept of the humours remained part of the metaphoric mainstream. We have already considered the example from Shakespeare, which is, of course, one of many. The theory of the humours was accepted on a number of levels. For the most part, however, it was a popular metaphor in public usage through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, separated from the medical theory and metaphysical applications (Gullan-Whur 83). A review of this change in terminological usage in England demonstrates that the integration of the ideas took place over the course of the seventeenth century and was more or less complete by the eighteenth.

Of the humours, melancholy was perhaps the most discussed in the England of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, after having been a defining characteristic of the Elizabethan era (Wells 514). This continuation of the tradition was due in no small part to Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, a vast collection of quotations and philosophical musings in three sections that has remained popular reading for the nearly four centuries since its first edition of 1621 (Harrison 49). If this can be taken as an example of the popularity of similar works, it serves to illustrate that humoural language was very much in currency in popular thought during the eighteenth century.

Burton discussed music as a cure for melancholy in the second section of the *Anatomy of Melancholy*, giving numerous quotations arguing that music has the power to “mollify the mind, and stay those tempestuous affections of it” (Burton *ii*: 115). He stated the case for music as a healing force, tying it to the comic mode and arguing that it could be very powerful when combined with; “...a cup of strong drink, mirth...and merry company” (*ii*: 115). He went so far as to distinguish between states of melancholy, noting that music could induce such a feeling, but that it was “a pleasing melancholy” (*ii*: 118), as distinct from the sickness that is the main subject of his discourse.

Ways to balance the humours were considered by writers concerned primarily with the subject of music, as various pieces were advanced to stir each specific humour. Dowland, in his translation (1609) of the *Micrologus* of Ornithoparchus, described the effect of the humours as uniters of body and soul. What he called “*Humane Musick*” is the combination of the soul and body through the “proportion of humours” (121).

Humours were also taken in the same way as affects in music, and, particularly in Elizabethan music, the “melancholic” was an affective starting point for many pieces, as it was in literature (Harrison 55). The lute solo by Dowland, *Semper Dowland, Semper Dolens*, is such a work (Poulton and Lam 42-44), and numerous examples exist in the lute-song, choral and instrumental



repertoire. The *Forlorn Hope Fancy* (Fig. 1) by the same composer even makes use of extensive descending chromaticism over fourths, an affective device used to stir the passions and evoke sadness<sup>1</sup>.



**Figure 1: John Dowland: *Forlorn Hope Fancy* (first 8 bars)**

Writing slightly later in the early seventeenth century, Francis Bacon discussed the motion of the spirits with particular reference to how music was able to affect them directly in the *Sylva Sylvarum*. Music, he stated, was able to encourage “warlike” or “soft” behaviour because the sense of hearing had a more immediate effect on the “spirits”. As for the sense of smell, this reacts with vapors in the body and undergoes “mingling”, whereas harmony reacts purely with the internal senses. Music is therefore able to have a greater effect due to its relation to hearing, with a direct connection to the “spirits” (389), whilst sight, taste and feeling are relegated to senses that must work through an intermediary. Significant here is Bacon’s use of the word “mingling”, which

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1 See the discussion of the chromatic fourth in Peter Williams’ book, listed in the Works Consulted. See particularly pp. 28-30 for Dowland.

Barnaby RALPH, Terminological Transitions and the Humours in Early Modern Thought refers to the mixing of fluids in the body as part of the movement of the passions and affections. As music does not need to “mingle” and remains undiluted, it has the greater effect on emotions.

And therefore we see that tunes and airs, even in their own nature, have in themselves some affinity with the affections: as there be merry tunes, doleful tunes, solemn tunes; tunes inclining men’s minds to pity; warlike tunes, &c. So as it is no marvel if they alter the spirits, considering that tunes have a predisposition to the motion of the spirits in themselves. But yet it hath been noted, that though this variety of tunes doth dispose the spirits to variety of passions conform unto them, yet generally music feedeth that disposition of the spirits which it findeth. We see also that several airs and tunes do please several nations and persons, according to the sympathy they have with their spirits (389-390).

Here, Bacon made it clear that what were often described in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as “ruling passions” or prevalent humours in each individual were regarded as very important to emotional reaction. Therefore, music is most effective when it is working in conjunction with a humoural sympathy rather than against it. Bacon also referred to the idea of national characteristics. He acknowledged that each individual had a different humoural makeup, but, like Wright (although employing less politicized reasoning), still felt that prevalent environmental conditions exerted an influence.

In 1657, Simpson’s *Division-Viol* used the term “humour” to refer to the mood of a piece of music: “...as when we play Loud or Soft, according to our fancy, or the humour of the Musick” (10; 56), and again in Part III, in the discussion of holding descant notes over the ground (38). Here as in other works, the word ‘humour’ is used in the same way as “affect”, describing the emotional intent of a given work. Nearly twenty years later, Thomas Mace was to use the term in a similar way. For him, the lute was certainly able to express

“humours”, as Mace noted in his commentary upon a musical example. The last section of the work is described as being, “...*peculiarly a Humour by It self*” (117). He also stated that a piece which carries on for too long in one humour becomes “...*Nautious, and Tiresome, (which has been Anciently, by some, us’d too much; but too little now a days, by others [no end bracket in original source]*” (117).

Mace gave an example from his own experience of this “divine language” of music. Whilst he was a young man working in Cambridge, he composed a work with his Yorkshire mistress in mind. Some years later, he played this with her sitting in the same room. She immediately declared an affinity for the piece, and asked that this be “her work” from then on (122-123). In his directions, he related the “humours” in the piece to those of his beloved: “*The Humour, is singularly Spruce, Amiable, Pleasant, Obliging, and Innocent, like my Mistress*” (124, emphasis in original). This use of “humours” is more in line with the usual usage of “passions” than a reference to humoral medical theory. This is an example of the transference of the terminology of the humours from the scientific world to the metaphorical and aesthetic. Mace also repeated the idea that is found in Bacon and other writers of this period that different people have different balances of the humours that affect their interpretation, stating that various moods and activities are “*Answerable to That Temper, Disposition, or Humour, in which he is*” (124, emphasis in original). These humours influence performance in tempo, articulation and dynamics. Mace, in analysis of the performance of another example, gave the following useful generalization about how the humours affect performance:

As to the *Performance of It*, you will do well to *Remember*, (as in all the rest, so in This) to Play *Loud and Soft*, sometimes *Briskly*, and sometimes *Gently*, and *Smoothly*, here and there, as your *Fancy* will (no doubt) *Prompt you unto*, if you make a *Right Observation* of what I have already told you (133).

Barnaby RALPH, Terminological Transitions and the Humours in Early Modern Thought

In a later exercise, Mace stated that; “The *Humour* must be found out, by Playing *Soft*, and *Loud*, and making your *Pauses*, &c.” (142). He did not give specific examples that tie concepts to the Galenistic quartet, but rather used the term as a general metaphor for emotional content. The problem of changes and lack of precision in terminology was mentioned by Herissone in her relatively recent book on seventeenth-century musical theory, where she states that Mace, whilst sometimes less than direct in his language, advances three aspects of composition as vital in the construction of a musical work. These are the “humour”, or mood, the “fugue”, or initial point of imitation and the “form”, or shape of the piece based on length of phrase (Herissone 215).

Herissone argues that humour is here associated with dynamic variation, but the example she gives (Mace 130) also refers to changes in tempi, which she did not note. She went on to note that “Mace was not alone in relating the term ‘humour’ to dynamic ornamentation...” (Herissone 215). This is, perhaps, an overstatement of Mace’s intent. It is more likely that the term ‘humour’ covered a number of factors of which dynamics was only one.

Reference to humoural theory continued in philosophical writing throughout the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, usually in the metaphorical sense (Gullan-Whur 101). Around 1700, Roger North mentioned “humour” in music in relation to such ideas as high notes representing heaven and the low notes hell, but dismissed much of this as a “vulgar error” (1698-1703: 215-216). In a later work, he again used the term as a general one to replace ‘affect’, stating “...that a composer should reflect which...humours he is to represent, and then to forme the style of his ayre accordingly” (1728: 177).

This use of the word “humour” as a synonym for “affect” appears again and again through the eighteenth century. A representative example can be found in a musical dictionary of 1724, *A Short Explication of Such Foreign Words as are made Use of in Musick Books*, in the description of “Ciacona”, which is defined as “...a particular Kind of Air, always in Triple Time, containing great

variety of Humour...” (21). Musical examples, as noted at the outset of this discussion, offer a particularly fertile ground for an examination of this sort, due to the placement of music itself between the arts and sciences.

In conclusion, the idea of the “humours” became one of artistic fancy after it fell from medical favour in the seventeenth century (Gullan-Whur 99). It is most commonly encountered as a synonym for either “affect” or “passion”, themselves words which faced considerable terminological confusion. The word “humour” eventually became completely divorced from its meaning of bodily fluids, and came primarily to signify an emotional state, largely in the abstract sense. A prevailing humour was thus like the aforementioned “ruling passion” that famously appears in Pope’s third Epistle in his *Moral Essays*, and one could be “melancholy”, “phlegmatic”, “sanguine” or “choleric” due to feelings that were no longer thought to be governed by the principles of Hippocrates and Galen:

“The ruling Paffion, be what it will,  
“The ruling Paffion conquers Reafon ffill.”  
Lefs mad, the wildefl Whimfy we can frame,  
Than even that Paffion, if it has no Aim. (259)

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