

# Medieval Physiognomy & the Humours

**The Humours:** Medical science in the Middle Ages believed that there were four chief liquids in human beings that had to be balanced. These fluids were derived from the four elements. Listed below as

**Humour (source): Associated Element (nature): Temperament**

- **Blood** (head): **Air** (hot and moist): **Sanguine**
- **Yellow Bile** (gall bladder): **Fire** (hot and dry): **Choleric**
- **Phlegm** (lungs): **Water** (cold and moist): **Phlegmatic**
- **Black bile** (spleen): **Earth** (cold and dry): **Melancholic**

- Effects of Humors on individuals
  - Physical diseases and mental imbalance could be the result of one humor dominating over the others, or from a lack of balance among the liquids.
  - The Humors gave off vapors which ascended to the brain.
  - Someone's characteristics (physical, mental, and moral) were due to the balance of Humors. Perfect people do not have any one humor dominate over any other.
- Different kinds of imbalances
  - Sanguine man: Blood dominates over the other Humors. The Franklin would be an example of such a person. Sanguine men are joyful, amorous, and beneficent.
  - Choleric man: Yellow bile dominates over other Humors. Choleric men: easily angered, impatient, stubborn, vengeful.
  - Phlegmatic man: Phlegm dominates over the other Humors. Phlegmatic men are boring, pale, and cowardly.
  - Melancholic man: Black bile dominates over the other Humors. Melancholic men are greedy, fat, backward, lazy, pensive, and sentimental. The Nun, Monk, and Oxford Priest could be examples of such types of people.

**Physiognomy:** Theory that the mental and emotional characteristics of an individual could be determined from physical characteristics.

Examples of physiognomy in *The Canterbury Tales*:

- The Pardoner—According to medieval physiognomy, sparse yellow hair, soft and long, was an indication of cunning and deceptiveness. Hare eyes could mean gluttony and drunkenness. A goat-voice and beardless face indicate a lack of manhood and treachery.
- Wife of Bath—The fact that her teeth are wide apart indicates that she's envious, irreverent, bold, deceitful, and likes luxury. It is also possible that her characteristics indicate her destiny to travel often.
- The Miller—His characteristics, such as his red beard, large nostrils, and the wart on his nose, could indicate his bold and quarrelsome nature.
- The Reeve—His slenderness & calf-less legs indicate the choleric humor of a quick temper, sharp wit, and lustfulness.

## The Humours and Temperament

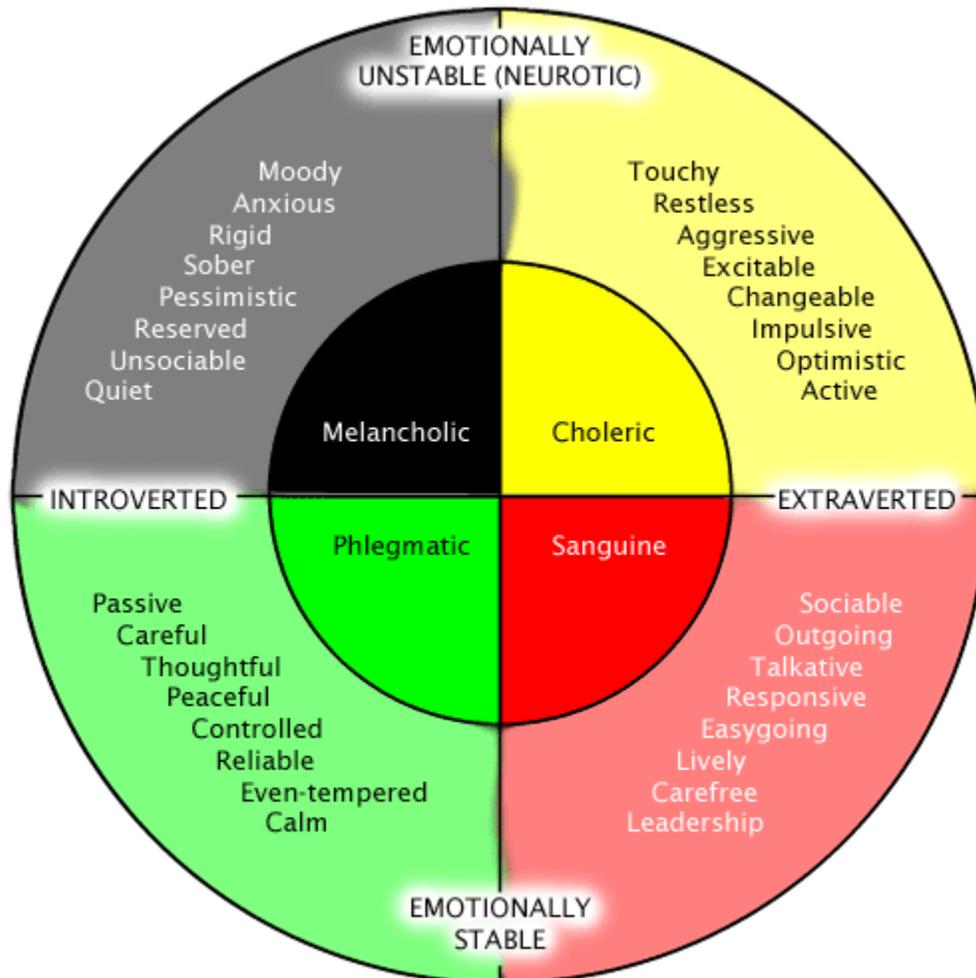
The underlying principle of medieval medicine was the theory of humours. This was derived from the ancient medical works, and dominated all western medicine up until the 19th century. The theory stated that within every individual there were four **humours**, or principal fluids - black bile, yellow bile, phlegm, and blood, these were produced by various organs in the body, and they had to be in balance for a person to remain healthy. Too much phlegm in the body, for example, caused lung problems; and the body tried to cough up the phlegm to restore a balance. The balance of humours in humans could be achieved by diet, medicines, and by blood-letting, using leeches. The four humours were also associated with the four seasons, black bile-autumn, yellow bile-summer, phlegm-winter and blood-spring.

The [astrological](#) signs of the [zodiac](#) were also thought to be associated with certain humours. Even now, some still use words "choleric", "sanguine", "phlegmatic" and "melancholy" to describe personalities.



HUMOUR	TEMPER	ORGAN	NATURE	ELEMENT
<b>Black bile</b>	Melancholic	Spleen	Cold Dry	Earth
<b>Phlegm</b>	Phlegmatic	Lungs	Cold Wet	Water
<b>Blood</b>	Sanguine	Head	Warm Wet	Air
<b>Yellow bile</b>	Choleric	Gall Bladder	Warm Dry	Fire

Where are you on the circle?



Eysenck, H.J and Eysenck, M.W. *Personality and Individual Differences*. Plenum Publishing, 1958.

**Choleric**

- Touchy
- Restless
- Aggressive
- Excitable
- Chargeable
- Impulsive
- Optimistic
- Active

**Melancholic**

- Moody
- Anxious
- Rigid
- Sober
- Pessimistic
- Reserved
- Unsociable
- Quiet

**Phlegmatic**

- Passive
- Careful
- Thoughtful
- Peaceful
- Controlled
- Reliable
- Calm
- Even tempered

**Sanguine**

- Sociable
- Outgoing
- Talkative
- Responsive
- Easygoing
- Lively
- Carefree
- Leadership

# The Four Temperament Types

Each of the four humours corresponded in ancient times to a different personality type.

## Sanguine

The sanguine temperament is fundamentally impulsive and pleasure-seeking; sanguine people are sociable and emotional. They tend to enjoy social gatherings, making new friends and tend to be boisterous. They are usually quite creative and often daydream. However, some alone time is crucial for those of this temperament. Sanguine can also mean sensitive, compassionate and thoughtful. Sanguine personalities generally struggle with following tasks all the way through, are chronically late, and tend to be forgetful and sometimes a little sarcastic. Often, when they pursue a new hobby, they lose interest as soon as it ceases to be engaging or fun. They are very much people persons. They are talkative and not shy.

## Choleric

The choleric temperament is fundamentally ambitious and leader-like. They have a lot of aggression, energy and/or passion, and try to instill it in others. They can dominate people of other temperaments, especially phlegmatic types. Many great charismatic military and political figures were choleric. They like to be in charge of everything.

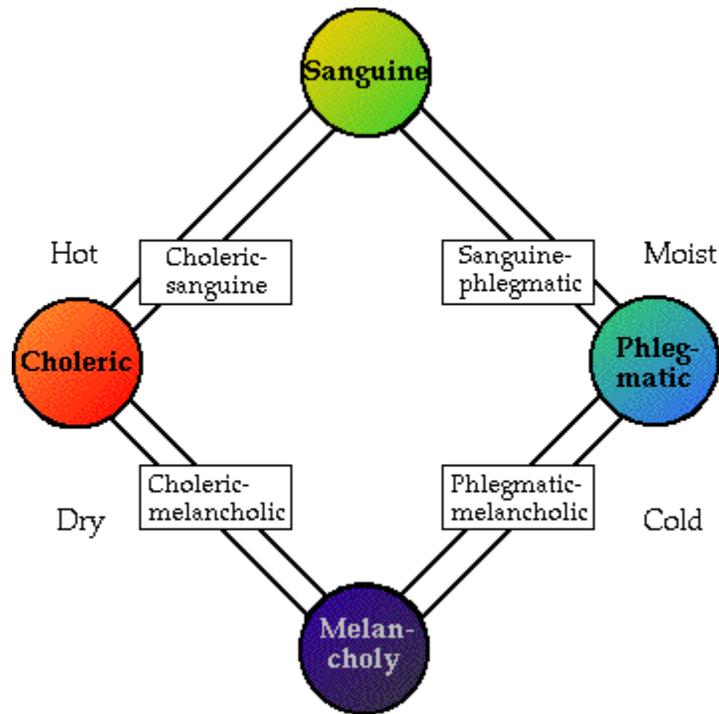
## Melancholic

The melancholic temperament is fundamentally introverted and thoughtful. Melancholic people often were perceived as very (or overly) pondering and considerate, getting rather worried when they could not be on time for events. Melancholics can be highly creative in activities such as poetry and art--and can become preoccupied with the tragedy and cruelty in the world. Often they are perfectionists. They are self-reliant and independent; one negative part of being a melancholic is that they can get so involved in what they are doing they forget to think of others.

## Phlegmatic

The phlegmatic temperament is fundamentally relaxed and quiet, ranging from warmly attentive to lazily sluggish. Phlegmatics tend to be content with themselves and are kind. They are accepting and affectionate. They may be receptive and shy and often prefer stability to uncertainty and change. They are consistent, relaxed, calm, rational, curious, and observant, qualities that make them good administrators. They can also be passive-aggressive.

# More on The Humours



The humours each had associated physical and mental characteristics; the result was a system that was quite subtle in its capacity for describing types of personality.

Humour	Qualities	Element	Personality
Sanguine	hot, moist	air	Optimistic, red-cheeked, corpulent, irresponsible (Falstaff)
Choleric	hot, dry	fire	Short-tempered, red-haired, thin, ambitious (Hotspur)
Phlegmatic	cold, moist	water	Sluggish, pallid, corpulent, lazy (Are any of Shakespeare's characters phlegmatic?)
Melancholic	cold, dry	earth	Introspective, sallow, thin (Richard II, Hamlet)

In addition, different humours could be combined for more complex personality types: choleric-sanguine, phlegmatic-melancholic, and so on.

Source: <http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/SLT/ideas/order/humours.html>