

Teacher's Four Humors in *Hamlet*

Given your knowledge of the four humors, what is the significance of these allusions to the four humors in *Hamlet*? What are we able to glean about their temperaments, personalities, and concerns?

Act III, scene 2

Hamlet: [Speaking of Horatio]

And blessed are those

Whose **blood and judgment are so well commingled,**

That they are not a pipe for Fortune's finger

To sound what stop she please. Give me that man

That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him

In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart,

As I do thee.

Hamlet talks about his reasons for admiring and trusting Horatio here, noting specifically the balance of his humors: blood and phlegm noted as "judgment." He goes on to talk about how a person with balanced humors is not "a pipe for Fortune's finger," nor is he "passion's slave." This characterization suggests that one whose humors are not in balance does not have self-control, and is rather vulnerable to others.

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Guildestern: The king, sir--

Hamlet: Ay, sir, what of him?

Guildestern: Is, in his retirement, marvellous distempered.

Hamlet: With drink, sir?

*Guildestern: No, my lord; rather **with cholera**.*

*Hamlet: Your wisdom should show itself more richer to signify this to the doctor; for me to put him to his purgation would **perhaps plunge him into far more cholera**.*

Hamlet's instructions to Guildenstern to go to the doctor with his concerns about the King's choleric temper provides evidence that, in Shakespeare's time, the temper or a mental state was caused by imbalance of the humors (four bodily fluids), therefore was a medical concern. The King's choleric state of mind can only be cured by a doctor; Hamlet feels he would only make it worse. Note also the comment that the King was "plunged" into choler, and the juxtaposition of "drink" and "choler," highlighting the fluid nature of the humors.

Act IV, scene 7

Laertes: [upon hearing of Ophelia's death]

Too much of water hast thou, poor Ophelia,
And therefore I forbid my tears.

There are multiple layers to Laertes meaning here. The most obvious of course is that Ophelia is drowned and literally has too much water. But water is also closely associated with "phlegm," the humor linked with calm, unemotional, passive, and reserved individuals. This is particularly interesting as Laertes and Polonius instructed Ophelia to be increasingly reserved and distant with Hamlet. We see her acting passive during the play-within-a-play, as Hamlet teases and taunts her, and that she offers brief replies. Her reserve may have confirmed Hamlet's feeling that she betrayed him, and led to his rejection of her and his growing animosity toward women. Hamlet's lack of faith in women is also significant as later in this speech by Laertes, Laertes ties water and tears with "womanly" behavior.