William Shakespeare (1564–1616) created characters that are among the richest and most humanly recognizable in all of literature. Yet Shakespeare understood human personality in the terms available to his age—that of the now-discarded theory of the four bodily humors—blood, bile, melancholy, and phlegm. These four humors were thought to define peoples’ physical and mental health, and determined their personalities, as well.

The language of the four humors pervades Shakespeare’s plays and their influence is felt above all in a belief that emotional states are physically determined. Carried by the bloodstream, the four humors bred the core passions of anger, grief, hope, and fear—the emotions conveyed so powerfully in Shakespeare’s comedies and tragedies.

Today, neuroscientists recognize a connection between Shakespeare’s age and our own in the common understanding that the emotions are based in biochemistry and that drugs can be used to alleviate mental suffering.

Shakespeare depicts the full range of humoralism in his dramatic characters. An excess of the hot, dry emotion of choler, or yellow bile, produced an angry disposition. Choler is valuable in great warriors but in the domestic world of romantic comedy, anger—especially the anger of women—represents a social problem for Shakespeare’s age, which calls for strong therapeutic intervention.

I'll curb her mad and headstrong humor...

William Shakespeare, The Taming of the Shrew, ca. 1592

Melancholy Virgins
The case of Ophelia

Melancholy is the most complex of emotions for Shakespeare and his contemporaries, as it was for the ancients. The cold, dry temperament was considered the least desirable of the four, yet melancholy was also traditionally associated with genius and the life of scholarship.

In Hamlet, Ophelia becomes a classic case of the melancholy virgin because of her isolation at court, her overbearing father’s commands, and Hamlet’s withdrawal of attention from her.
The world of Shakespeare’s Humors

The four bodily humors were part of Shakespearean cosmology, inherited from the Ancient Greek philosophers Aristotle, Hippocrates, and Galen. Organized around the four elements of earth, water, air, and fire; the four qualities of cold, hot, moist, and dry; and the four humors, these physical qualities determined the behavior of all created things including the human body.

In the human body, the interaction of the four humors explained differences of age, gender, emotions, and disposition. The influence of the humors changed with the seasons and times of day and with the human life span. Heat stimulated action, cold depressed it. The young warrior’s choler gave him courage but phlegm produced cowards. Youth was hot and moist, age cold and dry. Men as a sex were hotter and drier than women.

Melancholic

- Humor: Black Bile
- Element: Earth
- Season: Winter
- Age: Old Age
- Qualities: Cold & Dry
- Organ: Spleen
- Planet: Saturn

Phlegmatic

- Humor: Phlegm
- Element: Water
- Season: Summer
- Age: Childhood
- Qualities: Hot & Dry
- Organ: Gall Bladder
- Planet: Mars

Choleric

- Humor: Yellow Bile
- Element: Fire
- Season: Autumn
- Age: Adolescence
- Qualities: Hot & Moist
- Organ: Heart
- Planet: Jupiter

Sanguine

- Humor: Blood
- Element: Air
- Season: Spring
- Age: Maturation
- Qualities: Cold & Moist
- Organ: Brain
- Planet: Moon

For William Shakespeare and his contemporaries, aging was a process of gradual drying of the flesh and cooling of bodily humors. The body’s supply of blood diminished as individuals approached the final coldness and dryness of death. In old age, the body developed an excess of melancholy and the sad, unforgiving, and close-fisted disposition that accompanied that retentive bodily humor.

In The Merchant of Venice, Shylock is reviled by anti-Semitic Venetians who might have seen him as a pathological case of unnatural melancholy or “melancholy adust.” When the body’s natural heat and moisture were burned up by vengefulness like Shylock’s against his Venetian enemies, the naturally clear fluids of the brain became darkened, resulting in an excess of the melancholy humor and what we might recognize as depression and unresolved anger.

In conclusion:

Shakespeare’s audiences were presented with plays depicting the full range of human behaviors and character types, from the venefulness of choleric old age to maidenly melancholy. If the modern age no longer recognizes the four bodily humors, we recognize the emotions with which they were associated for so many centuries.