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Altogether Governed by Humors: The Four Ancient Temperaments in Shakespeare

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of English
College of Arts and Sciences
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Dedication

For Betty Jean Johnson, who incited my interest in Shakespeare.

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ABSTRACT

Hippocrates, and later Galen, hypothesized that a person's character was influenced by a combination of four humors that governed the body: black bile, phlegm, yellow bile, and blood. Centuries later, the Elizabethans adopted these ideologies to their medical practices, and associated each humor with one of four temperaments: melancholy, phlegmatic, choleric, and sanguine. References to the four temperaments may be found embedded in a number of William Shakespeare's texts, most notably *Hamlet*, *Henry IV, Part 1*, *Macbeth*, and *Twelfth Night*. While many figures in Shakespeare embody many humoral traits, allowing for character development throughout the play, several characters possess a superfluity of one particular humor. As these characters motivate the action of each respective play, the play provides textual evidence that identifies the traits associated with each temperament.

Hamlet exemplifies the melancholy temperament, Sir John Falstaff the phlegmatic temperament, Lady Macbeth the choleric temperament, and Viola the sanguine temperament. The respective personalities of these characters are revealed not only by their actions in the plays but by numerous textual allusions to each humor. In examining these four characters, the reader may become familiar with the humor that each character represents, and, in turn, possess a greater knowledge of the driving forces behind many of

Shakespeare's heroes, heroines, villains, and clowns. Moreover, these examinations may also shed light on the beliefs of early modern England and the beginning of character study and development.

I

Introduction

Greek scientists Hippocrates and Galen hypothesized that a person's character was influenced by a combination of four liquids, or "humors," that governed the body. An abundance of black bile, phlegm, yellow bile, or blood had an authoritative affect on one's personality. Centuries later, the Elizabethans adopted these ideologies to their medical practices and associated each humor with one of four temperaments: melancholy, phlegmatic, choleric, and sanguine. Although Galen maintained that all individuals possessed all four humors, he also held that the humors often became unbalanced, which produced distinctive personality types. Thus, a person with a predominance of the humor black bile would fall into a state of melancholy; a person with a surplus of phlegm would grow slothful and phlegmatic; a person with an excess of yellow bile would exhibit a choleric temperament; and a person with a plethora of blood would seem well-tempered and sanguine. As this was the accepted ideology in early modern England, William Shakespeare frequently referenced the four temperaments and the four humors. While many figures in the Shakespearean canon display a variety of humoral traits that allow for character development throughout the plays, several characters possess a superfluity of one particular humor that associates them with a particular personality type. As these characters motivate the action of each respective play, the play frequently provides textual evidence that identifies each of them with one particular temperament.

In this thesis, I will focus on four of Shakespeare's most memorable humoral characters and also on the foil figures in each play who accentuate the humor of the principle players. Hamlet, perhaps the most famous melancholy figure in literature, dominates Shakespeare's most popular tragedy, which bears his name, and the play provides many textual allusions to the characteristics of melancholy and its governing humor, black bile. The other central characters of *Hamlet*, including Claudius, who exhibits both phlegmatic and choleric traits, and the consistently choleric Laertes, emphasize this melancholy temperament by contrast. Sir John Falstaff, one of Shakespeare's most beloved comic figures, exemplifies the most indelible phlegmatic character in Shakespeare's greatest history play, *Henry IV, Part 1*. Although a figure in the comic subplot of the play, Falstaff shares the stage with the melancholy King Henry, the choleric Hotspur, and the sanguine Prince Hal, all of whom highlight his particular humor. In *Lady Macbeth*, the leading lady of the tragedy *Macbeth*, Shakespeare creates the most unforgettable female hero/villain in all of drama and appropriately identifies her with choler. The malevolent choleric Queen appropriately bears a stark contrast to the benevolent sanguine King Duncan, who falls under the wrathful hand of Lady Macbeth. Finally, Viola, the transvestite heroine of Shakespeare's final festive comedy, embodies the exemplary sanguinary character who contrasts vividly with the melancholy entourage surrounding her, and the phlegmatic foils of the play's subplot.

Surprisingly, although the early modern scientists associated the melancholy and phlegmatic temperaments with the feminine and the choleric and sanguine temperaments with the masculine, in his most celebrated humoral figures, Shakespeare has reversed this gender stereotype. In the four plays that I will investigate—*Hamlet*, *Henry IV, Part 1*,

Macbeth, and *Twelfth Night*—the respective personalities of the central figures are revealed not only through their actions and the contrast with other figures in the plays, but also by subtle textual allusions. Many different elements could influence a humoral abundance and a change in one's personality, including the function of specific organs, the location of particular planets, or even the time of day and season of the year. Shakespeare has embedded references to several governing elements of each personality in each of these four plays, which I will evaluate in my examination of the four characters. I hope not only to illuminate the reader's understanding of these characters, but also to make the reader more familiar with the humor that each character represents and thus with the driving forces behind many of Shakespeare's heroes, heroines, villains, and clowns. In addition, I hope that these examinations may also shed light on the beliefs of early modern England, some of which have influenced modern studies of human personality.

II

The Humors

While Homer wrote *The Iliad*, he concurrently served as deputy chief of the medical staff with Agamemnon's army during the siege of Troy (Nutton 37). Whereas popular theory in ancient Greece attributed disease to wrathful gods, in his poems Homer offered a more complex insight into medical theory. Vivian Nutton praises the writer's sophisticated treatment of various medical details, which provide evidence of his background in the medical field (37). Not all tragedies of ancient Greece were simply explained by supernatural intervention, and Nutton argues that, like Homer, Hesiod offers alternative explanations in his *Works and Days*: "Misery, famine, and plague may be sent from heaven by Zeus in order to punish those who act violently or cruelly, but the poet also conjures up a vivid picture of diseases roaming around the world" (39). As ancient medical theories developed, writers expressed them in literary works:

The Homeric poems afford us a glimpse of medical ideas and practices long before any of our strictly medical literature, and although their information cannot be taken back to the heroic days of Agamemnon and Odysseus, it can be used to illustrate what the poet's audience would have expected or taken for granted (Nutton 37).

By exploring works of literature, we not only gain insight into the scientific beliefs of an era, but also understand how these beliefs influenced a population. By studying literary

characters, we may understand how real people may have acted or treated disease, and how different theories influenced daily life.

In the fifth century B.C.E., thinkers began to look closely at the human body. One prominent philosopher, Empedocles, listed four stable elements as building blocks of the world—earth, water, air, and fire—positing that in unstable conditions, these elements “produced everything that could be perceived” (Nutton 45). Other scientists and philosophers accepted this notion, which emerged as the common belief by the mid-fourth century. Theories of disease, linked to an inadequate combination of these elements, were no longer the sole purview of philosophers (Nutton 45-46). These theories explained the concept of humoral pathology, which Hippocrates elevated to the level of a scientific theory in the fourth century B.C.E. (Kail 141). Humoral theory attributed the same four elements of the world—earth, water, air, and fire—to the physical makeup of the human body. According to Irving Edgar, “We have then a picture of a man as a replica of the universe, made up of the four elements” (208). These elements corresponded to four fluids within the body, referred to as the “humors.” Aubrey C. Kail describes the association between the elements and the fluids, correlating earth with black bile, water with phlegm, air with blood, and fire with cholera (142). Just as, according to Empedocles, an unstable combination of elements affected the physical world, or macrocosm, so an unstable combination of humors affected the human body, or microcosm.

Physical and mental illness resulted from a predominance or deficiency of one or more of the four humors (Kail 142), and the Hippocratic tradition, based on the theory of the four humors, created a foundation for the modern medical tradition (Nutton 53). In

the second century A.C.E., Galen expanded on the ideas of Hippocrates and, as F. David Hoeniger further observes, Galen incorporated psychological behavior into humoral theory. According to Galen, “an individual’s temperament, produced by the excess or deficiency of one or two of the humors, exercises a decisive influence on his or her passionate condition” (Hoeniger 163). Whereas Hippocrates linked the fluid humors to the natural elements, Galen connected both the elements and the humors to different passions and these views survived several centuries, lasting through the Renaissance period in England (Kail 141). Just as *The Iliad* embodies the medical practices of ancient Greece, so William Shakespeare’s plays provide a window into the theories of early modern England, which revolved around the ancient theories of the four humors.

The four temperaments—melancholy, phlegmatic, sanguine, and choleric—were determined by different humors, associated with different elements, hosted by different organs, and ruled by different planets. According to the physicians of early modern England, certain foods influenced particular humors, which could cause a change in mood, and the time of day and seasons of the year also played a part in a person’s temperament. Ruth Leila Anderson lists two qualities of each element that coincide with each temperament. When these qualities were mixed in the macrocosm (the physical universe), they produced one of the four elements; when they were mixed in the microcosm (the individual), they produced one of the four humors.

Melancholy, an affect of the element earth and the humor black bile, was cold and dry (Anderson 29). A necessary balance to the two hot humors—yellow bile and blood—black bile fed such parts of the body as the spleen (Anderson 34) and an excess of black bile encouraged a melancholy personality (Kail 142). Edgar further argues that

“Saturn tended to cause an excess of black bile promoting melancholy” and that “the moon especially was held important in the causation of mental illness” (215). Each day, melancholy reigns from 9 p.m. to 3 a.m., and in winter melancholy increases as the humors thicken, sending natural heat inward (Anderson 35). Once, Shakespeare mentioned melancholy as a “surly spirit” (Kail 142).

A phlegmatic temperament, governed by the element water and the humor phlegm, consisted of cold and moist qualities (Anderson 29). The predominance of water and phlegm led a phlegmatic person to fearfulness and sluggishness (Anderson 32). Early modern physician Andreas Laurentius maintains that phlegmatic individuals were “blockish...because the substance in their braine is too thicke and the spirits laboured therein too grosse” (qtd. in Edgar 207). The lungs hosted the humor phlegm and the planet Venus governed the phlegmatic temperament, which, interestingly, was linked to women and children, as well as voluptuaries (Edgar 215). Under the moon, a phlegmatic temperament turned people into “simpletons and fools” (Edgar 215). Anderson lists the phlegmatic hours as between 3 p.m. and 9 p.m. and implies that phlegm abounds in autumn months (35).

Laurentius identifies sanguine individuals as “having ‘the best complexion for health and long life’” (qtd. in Edgar 207). Linked to the element air and the humor blood, the sanguine temperament possessed hot, moist qualities, the antithesis of the cold, dry melancholy (Anderson 29). The sanguine humor, blood, dominated between 3 a.m. and 9 a.m. and began to increase and flow freely during the spring (Anderson 35). Winifred Overholser describes the sanguine person as physically handsome, cheerful, and charming (342). The liver hosted the sanguine temperament, and producing healthy,

warm, red blood encouraged bravery (Hoeniger 175). However, frequently Shakespeare refers to “the opposite situation when...the liver does not transform the chyle completely into blood, leaving it pale-colored because of an abundance of phlegm” (Hoeniger 175). This opposition reflects the ease with which humors could be altered, thus affecting a person’s entire temperament.

The choleric temperament, in opposition to the phlegmatic personality, coincided with the element of fire, possessing hot, dry qualities (Anderson 29). Associated with the fluid humor of yellow bile, choler collected in the gall bladder. Hoeniger interprets yellow bile as “a hot humor,” explaining that “gall was often associated with a person’s sheer capacity for hot passions like anger” (176). Thus, while the gall bladder regulated the choler in a person’s body, it also served as a reference to the temper of a choleric individual. Astrologically, “the sun was in relation to the humor, yellow bile, appropriate to rulers and self-willed women, and, in conjunction with Mars, to soldiers, roisterers, and drunkards” (Edgar 215). The choleric humor is in residency between 9 a.m. and 3 p.m., and rules during the summer months (Anderson 35).

Edgar explains that Elizabethan medicine encompassed the psychology of the humors, as well as of complexions and mental passions (206). The elements and fluids that Hippocrates and Galen held responsible for physical well-being were also believed to influence psychological behavior, including temperament and personality. The personality types associated with a predominance of each humor—black bile, phlegm, blood, and yellow bile—were melancholy, phlegmatic, sanguine, and choleric, all of which are personified in Shakespeare’s characters. As Kail explains, “Shakespeare mentioned all the humours in his plays, using them in different contexts and with a wide

range of meanings. He knew which humour was akin to which of the four elements” (142). Homer’s *Iliad* details ancient medical matters, and, similarly, Shakespeare’s treatment of the humors creates a representation of the sixteenth century (Edgar 108). In fact, Edgar argues that “[Shakespeare’s] plays really give us a better composite of medical practice in [the sixteenth] century than all the authorities quoted” (109).

III

Hamlet, the Melancholy Prince

The melancholy temperament abounds throughout Elizabethan literature. In Shakespeare's plays, the melancholic figures are easily recognized. In *As You Like It*, Duke Senior and his cohorts have an optimistic outlook towards their banishment to the forest of Arden, while Jaques constantly reminds them of all their reasons to be unhappy in the forest. Jaques serves as comic relief by satirizing the concept of the melancholy malcontent, acting as a foil to the optimistic characters of his play, particularly Rosalind. This temperament did not always invoke laughter, however, as Anderson asserts: "melancholy, sometimes called black choler, is earthy and gross, thick, black, and sour" (34). In early modern England, a melancholy temperament carried serious implications. In *Hamlet*, the titular character constantly broods throughout his tragedy, wracked with grief from the recent death of his father, the recent remarriage of his mother to his uncle, and his tumultuous love affair with Ophelia. The other characters call him mad, and struggle to uncover the cause of his illness. Hamlet worries, second-guesses, and questions everything, ultimately destroying himself and those around him. Hamlet's tale of melancholy ends in death.

In *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, Robert Burton explains that melancholic people are consumed by "irresolution, inconstancy, [and] vanity of mind" and that "their fear, torture, care, jealousy, suspicion, etc., continues, and they cannot be relieved" (139). In

Hamlet's introductory scene, his mother comments on his dark disposition, pleading, "Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted color off" and "do not seek for thy noble father in the dust," reasoning that "'tis common; all that lives must die" (1.2.68-71). However, as Burton's definition implies, Hamlet "cannot be relieved" of the grief that he feels for his father; furthermore, as the play progresses, we see this grief develop into jealousy and suspicion of Claudius, his uncle and stepfather, mentally torturing the prince. A.C. Bradley, the first scholar to discuss Hamlet as a melancholic tragic hero, asserts, "By temperament [Hamlet] was inclined to nervous instability, to rapid and perhaps extreme changes of feeling and mood" (110). The melancholy that possesses Hamlet throughout the play influences his actions, which are as unstable as his mind, for, as Bradley states, "the whole story [of *Hamlet*] turns upon the peculiar character of the hero" (89).

Black bile, the excessive fluid that caused melancholy, generated in the brain and remained in the spleen (Draper, "Star-Crossed Lovers" 22). While Shakespeare often made reference to the governing organ of humoral fluids, he makes only one reference to the spleen in *Hamlet*. At Ophelia's burial, Laertes censures Hamlet, and the Prince swears, "I am not splenitive and rash" (5.1.262). In this sole reference to the spleen, Hamlet refers to cholera rather than melancholy, insisting that he is not ruled by fiery passion like Laertes. Interestingly, although Shakespeare makes countless textual allusions to the humors throughout his plays, he refrains from linking the spleen to melancholy. Rather, as Hoeniger asserts, Shakespeare links the spleen to other humors to demonstrate a functioning spleen that absorbs excessive black bile (177). Since Hamlet remains melancholy, references to the spleen prove unnecessary, for, theoretically, the prince's organ does not operate effectively.

The melancholy temperament arises from the element earth. Dry and cold, a surplus of earth causes slow, heavy movement in its host (Anderson 32). Throughout *Hamlet*, the many references to “earth” embedded in the text remind the audience of the underlying cause of the tragedy. Shakespeare uses the word “earth” and its variants, e.g. “earthly,” twenty-three times in the text of *Hamlet*. If this number seems insignificant, we must remember that Shakespeare chose his words carefully and deliberately. *Richard II*, which shares with *Hamlet* a melancholy hero, mentions the word “earth” twenty-four times, but otherwise the word is scarce in Shakespeare’s plays. *Antony and Cleopatra*, which has the third most references to “earth,” trails far behind *Hamlet*, only invoking the word fifteen times. To prove that usage of the word was not common, I will point out that *The Taming of the Shrew* uses the word only once. David Bevington submits that “a recurring motif in *Hamlet* is of a seemingly healthy exterior concealing an interior sickness” (546). The subtle references to earth hidden in the text reflect the interior sickness of Hamlet—a sickness related to both earth and black bile—and, as Bevington continues, “this motif of concealed evil and disease continually reminds us that, in both a specific and a broader sense, ‘Something is rotten in the state of Denmark’” (546). Thus the text offers clues to the melancholy temperament of its protagonist. Often, characters in the play make references stressing the distance between heaven and earth. While Hamlet is alive, he is ruled by melancholy; he is ruled by the element earth while he walks the earth. This melancholy prevents him from the decisive action to which he has been called by the ghost of his father.

The melancholy temperament is often associated with both Saturn and the moon. In act 1, Horatio cautions Hamlet, “The very place puts toys of desperation, without mere

motive, into every brain that looks so many fathoms to the sea and hears it roar beneath” (1.4.75-78). However, Hamlet does not heed this warning, and is thrown into a sea of melancholy. Moreover, Horatio’s statement links the concept of melancholy to the moon. Theorists maintained that the planet Saturn influenced the excess of black bile that led to a melancholy disposition, although Thomas Vicary and others also listed the moon and stars as having an effect on one’s temperament (Overholser 336-337). In fact, Burton claims that the moon “many times produceth melancholy,” and cites “lunatic persons that are deprived of their wits by the moon’s motion” as an example (qtd. in Overholser 337). The moon, playing an important role in one’s sanity (or lack thereof), serves as an important symbol throughout *Hamlet*. The moon’s motion influences the tide, and the early moderns believed that it affected a melancholy person’s wits in a similar manner. When Horatio mentions “every brain that looks...to the sea,” he describes the brains of the melancholy individual, which, like the tides of the sea, are controlled by the moon. In 1587, Vicary claimed, “The brain hath this property that it moveth and followeth the moving of the moon; for in the waxing of the moon the brain followeth upwards; and in the wane of the moon the brain descendeth downwards” (qtd. in Overholser 337). Lunar references throughout the play include the use of the terms “wax” and “wane.” Laertes assures Ophelia that Hamlet’s love is inconstant: “As this temple waxes the inward service of the mind and soul grows wide withal” (1.3.12-14); moreover, when Hamlet follows the ghost, Horatio describes, “He waxes desperate with imagination” (1.4.87). These utterances occur early in the text, and, in act 2, Hamlet wonders how the Player King “could force his soul so to his own conceit that all his visage...wanned” (2.2.553-554). The Player perplexes Hamlet. In a world where a

healthy exterior conceals an ill interior, the Player King acts as a foil. While most of *Hamlet*'s figures feign normalcy, the actor portrays "tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect, [and] a broken voice" (2.2.555-556). The actor's visage, although not his soul, wanes; conversely, Hamlet's soul "descendeth downwards" as the play progresses.

The Player King is not the sole foil to the melancholy prince. Sara Munson Deats contrasts Hamlet to "the fiery Laertes," and compares him to Claudius: "as he descends spiritually, Hamlet begins more and more to resemble his arch adversary Claudius" (22-23). Although the wicked Claudius possesses enough choler to kill his brother the King to claim the crown, he also may exhibit some phlegmatic qualities. In act 1, scene 4, Hamlet scoffs that the king "takes his rouse, keeps wassail," and that "as he drains his draughts of Rhenish down, the kettledrum and trumpet thus bray out the triumph of his pledge" (8-12). "Fiery" Laertes, then, portrays the most choleric figure in the play. At Ophelia's grave, the splenitive Laertes does not hesitate to attack Hamlet in a rage, crying, "The devil take thy soul!" (5.1.259). Here, unlike Hamlet, Laertes rejects conscience, God, the afterlife—everything. In the final scene of the play, Hamlet mentions that his melancholy actions, which "might [Laertes'] nature...roughly awake" were caused by madness (5.2.229-230), thus linking his melancholy to madness and acknowledging the ignition of Laertes' choler in response to his own melancholy temperament. Moreover, as they duel, Hamlet asserts that Laertes' skill will "stick fiery off indeed" (5.2.255), again linking his opponent's exploits to his exorbitant passion. Laertes' hot passion contrasts drastically with Hamlet, and Anderson posits that "whenever the quality [of melancholy] becomes extreme... it benumbs the powers of the soul" (38). Whereas heat may incline Laertes to his hot passions, "cold, in the real sense

of the word, [is] detrimental to man” (Anderson 38), and Hamlet certainly demonstrates this point.

Even as the melancholy type is the most referenced temperament, it is also the most frequently mentioned mental illness in Elizabethan literature (Overholser 344). In early modern England, the word “psychiatry” did not exist; however, types of mental illness were nonetheless categorized, “as maniacs, as melancholics, as suffering from phrenitis, frenzy, lunacy, or demoniacal possessions” (Overholser 335). Melancholy was classified among several types of mental illness, and taken very seriously. Melancholy was linked to madness and associated with the effects of insanity, including hallucinations and frenzy. Overholser submits that “it was generally believed also that the melancholy individual was particularly subject to demonic influence” (343). Therefore, because Horatio, Marcellus, and Barnardo also see the spirit, we can assume that the ghost is not a hallucination, but that Hamlet may have been particularly susceptible to supernatural communication in his melancholy state, since as a melancholic, it would have been logical to the Elizabethans that the melancholy Hamlet would interact with a supernatural force, “doomed for a certain term to walk the night and for the day confined to fast in fires” (1.5.11-12). If Hamlet had already succumbed to the agony of his mother’s quick remarriage and his uncle’s new role as stepfather, perhaps he needed no further prodding to cross the line into madness.

Deats has observed Hamlet’s unbalanced behavior and views the play as “a tragedy of misdirected action” (23). In her study of two important scenes of the play, Deats concludes that “the Prince’s own wild whirling between the extremes of melancholy and cholera certainly contributes to the bloody conclusion” (22). In *Hamlet*,

the melancholy temperament causes the prince to think when he should act, or, conversely, to act when he should think. Deats focuses first on act 3, scene 3, in which Hamlet, armed to slay Claudius, finds his stepfather kneeling in prayer. Burton observes of the melancholic person: “He will freely promise, undertake any business beforehand, but when it comes to be performed he dare not adventure but fears an infinite number of dangers, disasters, etc.” (135). Indeed, in act 1, Hamlet promises his father’s ghost, “Thy commandment alone shall live within the book and volume of my brain, unmixed with baser matter” (1.5.103-105), yet when the moment arrives, the prince falters. Here, as Deats points out, he thinks when he should act. Bradley also asserts that Hamlet fails here, citing his first words upon seeing Claudius: “Now *might* I do it” (qtd. in Bradley 135, emphasis mine), describing Hamlet’s hesitation as “melancholy paralysis” (135), and identifying this incident as the play’s turning-point (136). In sparing the king’s life, claims Bradley, Hamlet ultimately sacrifices the other characters in the play who begin to die shortly thereafter (136).

Deats next cites “the skewering of Polonius” (23) behind Gertrude’s curtain in act 3, scene 4, as a contrast to Hamlet’s hesitation: “In failing to avail himself of this fortuitous opportunity for action [by sparing Claudius’ life], Hamlet commits his first serious error in judgment... Yet clearly some action should be taken lest Hamlet irrevocably lose the initiative” (22). Indeed, Hamlet does take “some action”: shortly after he refrains from killing Claudius, Hamlet acts quickly, recklessly slaying Polonius. Thus, he becomes a murderer rather than his father’s avenger by acting too quickly instead of pausing to assess the situation. Hamlet blames his haste on his “madness,” which Deats reads “in the Elizabethan sense of ‘uncontrolled by reason’” (23).

Throughout the play, Hamlet struggles to achieve a balance between reason and passion, thought and action, which is exemplified in these two paradoxical scenes.

Hamlet laments to Horatio, “Blessed are those whose blood and judgment are so well commedled” (3.2.67-68). *Hamlet* is a play that revolves around the titular character’s lack of balance, caused by his melancholy temperament. Deats believes that Hamlet would have been a better king than Fortinbras, who wins the crown after the deaths of Claudius and Hamlet (25), but Hamlet’s melancholy seals his fate. Although Deats suggests that Hamlet does achieve equilibrium between passion and reason at the end of the play, his newfound stability comes too late. Of course, many others besides the Prince of Denmark suffer as a result of Hamlet’s fickle temperament; Polonius, Ophelia, Gertrude, Claudius, Laertes, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern also die in its wake. Thus, *Hamlet* illustrates the severity of the most referenced temperament in early modern England.

IV

Sir John Falstaff, the Phlegmatic Knight

Shakespeare's phlegmatic characters often function in the subplots of his plays, or perform minimal roles of comic relief. In *Twelfth Night*, the phlegmatics, Sir Andrew Aguecheek and Sir Toby Belch, serve as comic foils to the lovers of the play, as Sir Toby suggests Andrew as a suitor for Olivia in order to continue drinking on Andrew's dime. In *The Tempest*, Trinculo and Stefano stumble through the island, their exploits contrasting with the adventures of the other shipwrecked characters. In *Macbeth*, a drunken porter draws laughter from the audience in a brief intermission between two bloody scenes—the murder of King Duncan, and the discovery of the crime. While the phlegmatic characters elicit laughter, they rarely share the spotlight with the protagonists of their respective plays.

In *Henry IV, Part I*, however, the phlegmatic character is given a much larger role. In fact, the drunken, slothful Sir John Falstaff remains one of most memorable characters in the entire Shakespearean canon. Albert H. Tolman declares,

Of the characters of the great dramatist, Hamlet, Cleopatra, Iago, and Falstaff are among the most marvelous...Each of the first three named...is the central force in a great play...but how is it with Falstaff? Is he a mere accident that befell Part I and II of *Henry IV*—a happy casualty? (1-2).

David Scott Kastan agrees: “indeed, through the nineteenth century, criticism tended to focus on the fat knight to the exclusion of the rest of the play, attracted to his irrepressible vitality and largely unconcerned with how (or even if) the character fitted into the larger dramatic design” (14). Why would Shakespeare invent a comic figure who would inadvertently detract from the main plot of his play? I suggest that the character of Falstaff was no accident; he is an intentionally likeable character who, although largely lacking in merit, displays several commendable virtues. Kastan declares that “though Falstaff is, of course, Sir John, an aristocrat, he continuously reinvents himself as an irrepressible everyman: ‘sweet Jack Falstaff, kind Jack Falstaff, true Jack Falstaff, valiant Jack Falstaff,’ one with ‘every man jack’ (2.4.463-4)” (39). In creating his “everyman,” Shakespeare deemed it appropriate to make him phlegmatic.

When Falstaff enters *Henry IV Part 1*, he requests the time, an honest query.

Prince Hal responds with an insulting summary of Falstaff’s character:

Thou art so fat-witted with drinking of old sac, and unbuttoning thee after supper, and sleeping upon benches after noon, that thou hast forgotten to demand that truly which thou wouldst truly know. What a devil hast thou to do with the time of the day? Unless hours were cups of sack, and minutes capons, and clocks the tongues of bawds, and dials the signs of leaping houses, and the blessed sun himself a fair hot wench in flame-coloured taffeta, I see no reason why thou shouldst be so superfluous to demand the time of day (1.2.2-11).

Falstaff has barely walked onstage when Hal paints for the audience the portrait of the phlegmatic man. Anderson describes the phlegmatic character as “generally slothful,

given to bodily pleasures, sleepy, idle, dull of wit, heavy, and slow” (34), all traits that Hal attributes to Falstaff. Immediately, we know that Falstaff is lazy, “fat-witted” or dull, and, most important, a drunk. Falstaff’s excessive “drinking of old sac” (a habit that continues throughout the play), is characteristic of the phlegmatic humor, whose element is water. As U.C. Knoepfelmacher bluntly observes, “[Falstaff’s] element is Water, or, more properly, wine” (498).

Hal accuses Falstaff of “sleeping on benches until after noon.” As mentioned earlier, Anderson lists the phlegmatic hours as between 3 p.m. and 9 p.m.; thus, Hal’s comment implies that Falstaff does not begin his day until his appropriate hour. While Hal criticizes Falstaff for sleeping through the morning, I suggest that this habit occurs in opposition to the choleric hours. Cholera, according to Anderson, reigns between 9 a.m. and 3 p.m.; thus, the dull-witted Falstaff would have no need to be awake at this hour, when a hot passion is in abundance. Because cholera opposes phlegm, I also suggest that Falstaff may sleep through these hours simply because he lacks the cholera that would incite activity in the morning hours.

To Hal’s assertion, Falstaff replies, “We that take purses go by the moon and the seven stars” (1.2.13). The moon reduced phlegmatics to mere simpletons, and so here it seems that Falstaff not only acknowledges Hal’s suggestion that he is “fat-witted,” but he also embraces it. By attributing his role as petty thief to the intrinsic influence of his humor, Falstaff asks Hal to forgive his flaws, pleading, “When thou art king, let not us...be called thieves of the day’s beauty” (1.2.22-24); that is, do not let his men be criticized for “[wasting] the daylight in sloth” (Kastan 151). Continuing, Falstaff repeats himself, begging Hal, “Let us be Diana’s foresters, gentlemen of the shade, minions of

the moon, and let say we be men of good government, being governed, as the sea is, by our noble and chaste mistress the moon” (1.2.24-28). Kastan’s footnote suggests that Falstaff’s reference to Diana “echoes the familiar language of praise surrounding Elizabeth” (152). Here, Falstaff uses his fidelity to Prince Hal to excuse his behavior, again stressing that he is controlled by his humor and that he will be “in good government” under the rule of Diana. Moreover, the phlegmatic element water links Falstaff to the sea. Since the moon governs the sea as well as Falstaff, the fat knight takes no responsibility for his behavior, since Falstaff’s persona, innately born under the moon, is controlled by the phlegmatic humor. Only after building a defense replete with humoral references does Falstaff admit to what exactly he and his men *do*—“we steal” (1.2.29).

All four of the humoral temperaments are present in *Henry IV, Part 1*. In his article, “The Humors as Symbolic Nucleus in *Henry IV, Part 1*,” Knoepflmacher asserts that the differentiation between the humors “provides the basis for a symbolic nucleus which binds the play’s abundant references to blood, sickness, and the four elements” (497). According to Knoepflmacher, King Henry portrays the melancholic figure; Hotspur embodies the choleric man; Prince Hal represents the sanguine hero; and, of course, Falstaff illustrates the effects of a phlegmatic temperament (497).

Kastan also comments on the nuclear characters of *Henry IV, Part 1*: “The four major roles, unique in Shakespeare’s canon in the almost equal sharing of the lines, do define the outlines of the play’s brilliant prismatic achievement” (7). While Kastan notes the uniqueness of the play that divides the four major roles into nearly equal parts, he also delineates the breakdown of lines in the play. Ironically, the titular character speaks only

338 lines, while Hal speaks 514, Hotspur 538, and the phlegmatic Falstaff dominates the play with 542 lines (Kastan 7). It might seem ironic that Shakespeare would give more lines to the central character in the supposed comic subplot than to the eponymous hero of the play; however, arguably, the comic plot shares dominance in the play with the political plot.

Knoepfmacher notes that Falstaff's superfluity of phlegm distinguishes him from the other humoral characters in *Henry IV, Part 1*. First, Falstaff's behavior in the battle situates Falstaff in opposition to Hotspur. Knoepfmacher delineates the contrast: "Falstaff, in turn, shuns the heat of battle...His 'instinctive' coldness, however, prolongs his life on earth" (499). However, Falstaff's primary role is not to contrast with Hotspur, but to complement Prince Hal; as Tolman posits, "the whole development of Hal is made natural and understandable by the influence of Falstaff" (11). Early in the play, Prince Hal seems more concerned with playing tricks on Falstaff than with matters of the state. So concerned is King Henry that he asks his son,

Could such inordinate and low desires,
Such poor, such bare, such lewd, such mean attempts,
Such barren pleasures, rude society,
As thou art matched withal and grafted to,
Accompany the greatness of thy blood
And hold their level with thy princely heart? (3.2.12-17)

Initially, Hal seems to follow Falstaff's phlegmatic path by carousing at the tavern while Hotspur builds his army and King Henry rebukes his son, admitting "[Hotspur] hath more worthy interest to the state than [Hal] the shadow of succession" (3.2.98-99). Although

the title of the play suggests that the play is the history of King Henry IV, much of the plot relies on Hal's "coming of age," in which Falstaff plays a crucial role. Falstaff provides the comparison between the Prince Hal whom we see early in the play, and the Prince Hal who triumphs over Hotspur in the denouement.

In act 2, Hal declares that "I am no proud Jack like Falstaff" (2.4.11), but in act 3, Falstaff reminds Hal that neither is he a King Henry:

Falstaff: ...but as thou art prince, I fear thee as I fear
the roaring of the lion's whelp.

Prince: And why not as the lion?

Falstaff: The King himself is to be feared as the lion.

Dost thou think I'll fear thee as I fear thy father? (3.3.147-151)

King Henry admonishes Hal's behavior, lamenting that the choleric Hotspur is more fit for the throne than his son; similarly, Falstaff attests that Hal remains subordinate to the king; clearly, Hal must abandon his phlegmatic ways in order to ascend the throne. As Hal changes, Falstaff remains the same as a reminder of the early image of the prince. Tolman elaborates: "how can [Shakespeare] make us feel that the boon companion of roisterers develops naturally into the hero-king, admired of all? A large part of the answer...is—Falstaff" (8). Throughout, the play compares Hal's weaknesses to the vices of the phlegmatic Falstaff, the strengths of the choleric Hotspur, and the vacillations of the melancholy King Henry IV. In terms of the four humors, Falstaff's excess of phlegm is necessary to accentuate "the unbalance of humors which exists in the characters of the King, Hotspur, and Falstaff, the 'foils' to [Hal's] 'glitt'ring' reformation" (Knoepflmacher 498).

As a common thief, “Sir” John Falstaff creates a stark contrast with the royal figures in the play. Moreover, Kastan submits that “the social and generic richness that marks *Henry IV, Part I* reveals and disrupts the social hierarchies that conventional histories silently assume and reproduce” (16). I suggest that Falstaff’s effectiveness relies in part on his phlegmatic personality. Tolman explains that “in Shakespeare’s day the drinking of alcoholic liquors was universal. Everybody drank, and at some time in his life even the most abstemious man was likely to be overcome by his potations” (44). It seems reasonable then, that Shakespeare’s “everyman jack” has something in common with Shakespeare’s audience. Shakespeare exploits Falstaff’s alcoholism for comic effect, but the character nonetheless includes even the Globe’s groundlings in an otherwise aristocratic history play. From Hal’s initial chiding of Falstaff to the continuous jests at Falstaff’s expense, the fat knight functions as both a comedic force and a sympathetic character for every social class in attendance at the Globe.

Even the name “Falstaff” suggests a bawdy play on words, while signaling one effect of the phlegmatic’s indulgence in alcoholic beverages. In *Macbeth*’s brief comedic interjection amidst the murder of King Duncan, the weary Porter provides some insinuations regarding liquor. He remarks that alcohol “provokes the desire, but it takes away the performance” and “makes [men] stand to and not stand to” (*Macbeth* 2.3.28-33). The porter’s revelation applies to the origin of Sir John’s name. Murray J. Levith claims that “Hotspur conveys phallic potency and contrasts meaningfully with the name Falstaff, implying ‘fallen staff’ for impotence” (36). Falstaff’s name, then, functions as both a bawdy joke and a physical effect. Levith’s observation also creates opposition

between the names of Falstaff and Hotspur, a subtle reference to the conflict between Hotspur's choleric temper and Falstaff's excess of phlegm.

Amidst the culminating battle in act 5, Falstaff assures Hal, "Well, if Percy be alive, I'll pierce him. If he do come my way, so" (5.3.57-58). However superficially, Falstaff claims to desire to fight on Hal's behalf; nonetheless, in the following scene we watch Falstaff's "performance," for when the Earl of Douglas engages him in battle, "[Falstaff] falls down as if he were dead" (5.4). Thus, Falstaff's involvement in the battle is creatively and comically phlegmatic. Overholser posits, "The phlegmatic type was fond of luxury, and if he had been born under the moon might be a fool and a coward" (342). During the battle, the knight becomes a parody of phlegm; he carries his "luxury," a bottle of sack (5.3), even in the middle of war, and quickly feigns death in an act of cowardice (5.4). Juxtaposed with Hal, who acknowledges the seriousness of war, Falstaff continually draws laughter from the audience.

Upon Falstaff's entrance in the play, Hal labels him phlegmatic, and it is no accident that Falstaff's character usurps Henry IV's history. "The comic plot does more than merely parody the historical action," asserts Kastan (16). In creating a subplot that competes with the main storyline, why make the central, vehicular character of that subplot phlegmatic? A sanguine person might outshine the play's hero, Prince Hal; a choleric character would not evoke the laughter that Falstaff demands. In the vein of Jaques from *As You Like It*, a melancholic figure might be humorous, but would a melancholy Falstaff perhaps overshadow the sanguine young Prince? According to Kastan, "comedy here isn't subordinated to history, nor does it compete with history" (14). Similarly, Falstaff is neither subordinated to Hal, nor does he compete with Hal.

The play serves neither as an exclusive retelling of Hal's ascension to the throne, nor as "a mere vehicle for the display of Falstaff's wit" (Kastan 5). Falstaff cannot be in complete opposition to Hal, or he would compete with Hal; therefore, a melancholy Falstaff opposing a sanguine Hal does not work. Because the sanguine and the phlegmatic share "moist" qualities, Falstaff works as a comedic complement to the young prince rather than as a threatening competitor.

V

Lady Macbeth, the Choleric Villainess

Anderson notes that “Hamlet rebukes himself for being pigeon-livered and without gall” (74). Hamlet suffers from melancholia, but perhaps he would have rather been choleric. Choler inflames the spirit and incites action (Anderson 75) rather than enveloping the soul in despair. The tragedies nearly always involve at least one choleric character, with personalities defined by rage, anger, and ambition. Tybalt in *Romeo and Juliet* is a choleric type, as he continues to challenge Romeo even as the latter seeks peace with his new kinsman. *Hamlet* invests first Claudius and then Laertes with choler, while *Othello* presents Iago as the choleric *deus ex machina*, baiting Othello from beginning to end for no reason but jealousy and bad temper, and consistently creating scenes of violence and chaos. King Lear begins as the choleric man, angrily banishing the truthful Cordelia and wrathfully dismissing Kent’s plea in her defense, and, ironically, Lear changes only after suffering abuse at the hands of his cruel daughters, Regan and Goneril. Choleric figures are not limited to the tragedies. Some readings identify Shylock, stubbornly seeking vengeance on Antonio in the form of the infamous pound of flesh, as the choleric villain of the comedy *The Merchant of Venice*. *As You Like It*’s villainous characters, Oliver and Duke Frederick, both embody the choleric figure, setting the plot in motion by banishing their respective brothers, Orlando and

Duke Senior, and driving the action of the plot through their attempts to murder these two brothers.

In each case, the choleric characters either initiate the action of the plot through banishment or conspiracy, or create new obstacles in their search for revenge. Macbeth's ambition might suggest his inclusion in this category, but I submit that Lady Macbeth portrays the true choleric figure of the play, and the most memorable choleric female in Shakespeare. Many of the characters in Shakespeare's plays, such as Jaques who appears innately melancholic, seem intrinsically linked to a particular humor. Others may have been socially constructed into their respective temperaments—who can blame Shylock for his cholera, after witnessing his treatment by the other characters? However, Lady Macbeth chooses her temperament. Not only does she invoke the aid of the supernatural, but she begs the spirits to transform her into a wicked, choleric villainess, which she views as her only pragmatic option to successfully secure the crown.

When Lady Macbeth receives her husband's letter, detailing the prophecy of the Weird Sisters, she immediately questions Macbeth's temperament:

Yet do I fear thy nature;
It is too full o' th' milk of human kindness
To catch the nearest way. Thou wouldst be great,
Art not without ambition, but without
The illness should attend it (1.5.16-20).

According to his wife, although Macbeth possesses some ambition, he lacks the choleric "illness" that would drive him to take action. Like Hamlet, Macbeth lacks the "gall" that would "inflamm" his action; furthermore, whereas a ghost persuaded Hamlet to seek

revenge, Lady Macbeth must persuade Macbeth to pursue the prophetic crown: “Hie thee hither, that I may pour my spirits in thine ear,” Lady Macbeth commands (1.5.25-26). After assessing her husband’s personality, she describes how she will direct him to murder Duncan. Anderson explains that in the heat of summer, during which “spirits escape from the body with exhalations...Choler is in ascendancy” (35). With her own ascending choler, the heat of Lady Macbeth’s fiery temperament allows her to convey her wrathful, ambitious spirits to her husband by telling him of her plan. In treating this passage, Paul H. Kocher claims, “She obviously means nothing supernatural; she is planning figuratively that she will impart to Macbeth by persuasion the same ambitious courage that her animal spirits have given her” (347). However, she must be certain that *she* possesses these animal spirits.

In order to achieve this ambitious courage, Lady Macbeth is convinced that she must deny her femininity and thus she invokes the animal spirits: “Come, you spirits that tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here and fill me, from the crown to the toe top-full of direst cruelty!” (1.5.40-43). Anna Jameson posits, “in the mind of Lady Macbeth, ambition is represented as the ruling motive, an intense overmastering passion, which is gratified at the expense of every just and generous principle, and every feminine feeling” (323). Lady Macbeth understands that she must rid herself of her femininity in order to embrace the choler that she covets. Jurgen Schafer points out, “when a distinction is made [among the humors], the hot complexions (sanguine, choleric) are assigned to the male, the cold (melancholic, phlegmatic) to the female” (208). Therefore, Lady Macbeth feels that she must be “unsexed” if she would achieve the rage of choler that she desires. “Make thick my blood!” continues the tragic heroine (1.5.43). Usually, melancholy

contributed to thick blood, preventing it from flowing freely through the body (Anderson 34), and Lady Macbeth has thus been mistaken for a melancholic woman. For example, Kocher argues that “thick melancholic blood...will flow towards the heart and there be made yet heavier and colder. It will stop up the avenues to the conscience” (347).

However, I insist that in Lady Macbeth’s next lines, she clarifies her goal as choleric, not melancholy, ordering the spirits: “Take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers” (1.5.48). Kocher explains, “Both literally and symbolically, the milk of human kindness in her will thus give place to a fluid productive of ruthlessness and rage” (348).

Ruthlessness and rage are attributed to choleric, and the gall bladder hosts this vile temperament. Hoeniger asserts that the term “gall” encompasses the organ, the gall bladder, and the humor, yellow bile, as well as any intensely bitter substance, or a related passion (175), and Anderson further suggests that choleric physically collects in the gall bladder (37). Lady Macbeth barter her femininity, and exchanges her breast milk for choleric itself. She does not stop by asking for choleric to collect in her gall; she sells her sex, and her soul, for evil.

Anderson describes choleric individuals as “easily provoked, given to treachery, vehement in action; fierce in assailing but inconstant in sustaining assault; inclined to envy, pride, prodigality, and wrath” (34). From her first appearance in *Macbeth* we see that Lady Macbeth is easily provoked, given to treachery, and vehement in action. One letter inspires her to reject all qualities of kindness and of womanhood, and to plan the murder of King Duncan. This scene also clarifies her inclination to pride and to wrath; she thrills at the title of “Glamis” and the prospect of “Cawdor.” She foreshadows the “keen knife” that will later slaughter the king and his guards, ominously declaring that

“the raven himself is hoarse that croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan under [her] battlements” (1.5.38-40). However, as the play continues, Lady Macbeth proves “inconstant in sustaining assault.” Kocher observes that during her monologue in act 1, scene 5, the “thick night must hide her victim from her even as she strikes the blow” (348). Similarly, she must drink in order to screw her courage to the sticking place (1.7.61). Finally, as she awaits the confirmation of the murder from her husband, Lady Macbeth laments, “Had he not resembled my father as he slept, I had done’t” (2.2.12-13). This explains why our female tragic hero, although filled with choler, must recruit her husband to carry out her murderous plan.

In “The ‘Gracious Duncan,’” John W. Draper argues that *Macbeth*’s ill-fated king possesses a sanguine temperament, which ultimately leads to his demise. Developing Draper’s analysis, I suggest that Lady Macbeth’s choler serves as a foil to King Duncan’s lack of yellow bile. Draper posits, “Duncan must have the innate goodness of a god-appointed sovereign, in contrast to the wicked usurper Macbeth” (“Gracious Duncan” 495). However, although Macbeth is certainly wicked, I would insist that he acts under his wife’s influence; if he were a true choleric individual, Macbeth would not allow himself to be dominated by his spouse. Conversely, the sanguine personality, although the most genial of the temperaments, “had also weaknesses that might destroy this most blessed condition” (Draper, “Gracious Duncan” 496). Duncan’s sanguinity provides his tragic flaw, and he is doomed to die within the confines of the choleric castle at Inverness. Upon entering Macbeth’s castle, Duncan remarks, “This castle hath a pleasant seat. The air nimbly and sweetly recommends itself unto our gentle senses” (1.6.1-3). Draper suggests that as a sanguine king, Duncan “lacks the caution that foresees and

evades the pitfalls of catastrophe” (“Gracious Duncan” 498), and is “at once charming and easily deceived” (“Gracious Duncan” 495). Ironically, Duncan praises the sweet, nimble air surrounding the castle, although even the atmosphere often influenced temperament; for example, bad smells often caused melancholy (Kail 147). Draper asserts that “[Duncan] places himself in Macbeth’s own castle ‘in double trust,’ without adequate personal safeguards; and indeed he suffers the penalty of his over confidence” (“Gracious Duncan” 497). Lady Macbeth harps on this, asking her husband, “What cannot you and I perform upon th’ unguarded Duncan?” (1.7.70-71). Filled with choler, the confident Lady Macbeth assures Macbeth, “screw your courage to the sticking place and we’ll not fail” (1.7.61-62); nevertheless, she remains careful. Draper asserts that “royalty in that age had to be made of sterner, choleric stuff” (“Gracious Duncan” 499) than Duncan possesses, and for some time, Lady Macbeth’s plan seems to work. However, “the mercurial Macbeth is a misfit in his royal robe, and also Lady Macbeth in her guise as co-conspirator” (Draper, “Gracious Duncan” 499). Macbeth initially lacks the choleric impulse to claim his crown, and Lady Macbeth must obtain the gall to kill Duncan supernaturally; thus “the theme of the piece is the ruinous incompatibility of a man’s inner self with the demands of his social place” (Draper, “Gracious Duncan” 499). While Duncan, by nature, is not a fit monarch, Lady Macbeth’s tragic flaw remains her *unnatural* attempt to alter her identity. While Hamlet’s innate melancholy leads him to his death, Lady Macbeth’s demise results from an unnatural invocation of choler.

In *Macbeth*, the female tragic hero disrupts the order of the universe by calling upon supernatural “spirits” to change her temperament. In early modern England, scholars were fascinated by the correspondence between the macrocosm and microcosm,

the world created by God and the realm of the human body and mind (Hoeniger 115-116). Choler could be intrinsic or the effect of astrology, diet, or even time of day. In Lady Macbeth's case, however, she must defy nature to alter her temperament, and Shakespeare illustrates the effects of this alteration in her final scene. In act 5, scene 1, a Doctor of Physick attends on Lady Macbeth, a doctor whom Kocher labels superfluous (341). Certainly, early modern doctors were schooled in humoral pathology and might seek to cure illnesses that stemmed from an excess of one of the four humors. However, as Kocher illustrates, "during the sleep-walking scene [the Doctor] confesses, 'This disease is beyond my practice,'" and after the sleepwalking scene has ended, "wishes himself replaced by a clergyman" (341). By disrupting her own microcosm, Lady Macbeth has stepped outside of the territory of physical medicine, and must suffer the consequences.

Critics often view the "sleepwalking scene" through a psychoanalytic lens, attributing the "great perturbation in nature" (5.1.8) to guilt and insanity. I suggest that Lady Macbeth's "slumbry agitation" (5.1.10) may also be studied as an effect of her dominant humor. Anderson asserts that "choler prevents the body from becoming heavy, sleepy, and dull" and that "if choler is corrupt, [choleric individuals] are subject to evil passions and dreadful dreams" (34). According to Hoeniger, "they sleep badly and have bad memories" (165). Lady Macbeth's insanity differs significantly from Hamlet's, being governed by a dissimilar humor, and sleepwalking seems the appropriate effect of her madness. Left to their imaginations, the insane might also revert to mental images (Hoeniger 207), as when Lady Macbeth, in her senseless state, reprimands her husband, "Fie, my lord, fie, a soldier, and afeard?" (5.1.35), and instructs him, "Wash your hands,

put on your nightgown; look not so pale!” (5.1.61-62). Even in psychosis, she remains choleric. In her introductory scene, Lady Macbeth ordered the spirits:

Stop up th’access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
Th’effect and it! (1.5.44-47)

In her final scene, she becomes what she desired—a human shell, devoid of remorse and natural feelings, left alone with the effects of her choler.

As Kocher insists, Lady Macbeth’s illness lies beyond her doctor’s practice. Of madness, Overholser states, “since the condition was due to a perturbation of the humors, it was important that the patient should be relieved of them as much as possible. Consequently, we find bloodletting frequently prescribed” (345). Lady Macbeth embodies the grossest perversion of humors, yet she cannot be relieved; her blood has been thickened and dried up, and thus no physician can cure her. Burton accorded that “if a disease is caused by incantation, it must be cured by it” (qtd. in Overholser 345), and the doctor echoes this idea: “Unnatural deeds do breed unnatural troubles” (5.1.71-72). Thus, the unnatural Lady Macbeth cannot be saved by any natural remedy. The sleepwalking scene marks the culmination of Lady Macbeth’s early transition in the play, from humoral balance to excess choler. The scene displays the consequences of defying one’s natural microcosm by calling on supernatural forces to change one’s intrinsic humoral makeup. A person’s temperament could be determined by seasons or constellations, but should not be altered in the fashion of Lady Macbeth’s invocation.

More importantly, Lady Macbeth exhibits the consequence of an extreme abundance of choleric wickedness, the most dangerous of the four temperaments.

VI

Viola, the Sanguine Heroine

Purely sanguine characters are difficult to recognize, even in Shakespeare's comedies. Rosalind in *As You Like It* represents a strong, passionate, and well-tempered woman, but she begins as a melancholy female, distraught by her father's banishment, and only achieves a sanguine disposition in the magical Forest of Arden. Galen believed that various internal organs related to passions and emotions, and the liver hosted the humor blood that determined the sanguine personality type. Thus, in *The Tempest*, when Ferdinand persuades Prospero that "the white cold virgin snow upon [his] heart abates the ardor of [his] liver" (4.1.55-56), he is, in effect denying his sanguine temperament; however, arguably, Ferdinand submits to Prospero's demands only in order to win the hand of his love-interest, Miranda. Similarly, a kiss from Benedick silences the sharp-tongued, sanguine Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing*, and Benedick's words conclude the play. However, in *Twelfth Night*, Viola never compromises her strong personality. Viola emerges as the most sanguine of Shakespeare's heroines, because she allows her vital organ, her liver, to govern her actions. Many characters in Shakespeare allow the liver to influence their emotions, but Viola remains the most optimistic and well-tempered of characters because her passions are constant. Fittingly, Shakespeare's final festive comedy, *Twelfth Night*, centers on one of the most sanguine of Shakespeare's *dramatis personae*—Viola.

Viola's sanguine attitude generates the action of *Twelfth Night*, although little critical attention has been paid to her genial personality. In fact, although many articles have been written about the melancholic and choleric characters in Shakespeare's works, and much has been said about the phlegmatic Falstaff, analyses of the sanguine characters are rare. The majority of the sanguine characters present in Shakespeare's plays are female—an ironic subversion of the patriarchal society of early modern England, in which the generic “man” referred to both sexes, and, as mentioned above, sanguinity was usually assigned to males. Conversely, in Shakespeare's comedies, the sanguine women frequently function as the problem-solvers and interior directors. Although these heroines, such as Rosalind, often act melancholy at some point during their respective plays, Viola remains consistently optimistic, even after a shipwreck leaves her alone and stranded in foreign Illyria.

The play's title derives from a traditional festivity celebrating happiness and joviality, and, predictably, Viola's sanguine characteristics are rewarded by the end of the play. While Galen described an excess of yellow bile, black bile, or phlegm as a “cacochymia” in a person, he called the superfluity of blood a “plethora,” derived from the Greek “abundance” (Brain 11). The fluid blood, which governs the sanguine temperament, remains superlative, and, unsurprisingly, comprises the most pleasant personality type. Schafer explains, “it is perhaps sufficient here to state that ‘hot’ complexions are generally given preference over ‘cold’ and that the sanguine is generally considered the best of these because its first qualities, heat and moisture, correspond to the general necessities of life” (206).

As blood served as the fluid linked to the sanguine humor, it was also associated with the liver as its organ. Henry Alan Skinner mentions the idea that blood, linked to health and nutrition, formed in the liver (214); and the foremost function of the liver remained to serve as the blood-forming organ (256). Peter Brain expands on the usefulness of the organ by linking blood and liver to the heart: “From the liver, the route of the veins in Galen’s system, the venous blood is distributed to the periphery through the veins, except for some that goes to the right side of the heart” (10). Therefore, the liver aids in nutrition by forming blood, the sanguine fluid, and distributing it throughout the body, including the heart. Of course, the sanguine individual relies most on his or her heart, the seat of the passions, and the amount of blood in the heart is determined by the strength of the liver. I will argue that the liver, identifying the humor of its heroine, appears as a dominant symbol in the language of *Twelfth Night*.

When Viola, disguised as the eunuch Cesario, suggests to Duke Orsino that perhaps some woman loves him as strongly as he loves the countess Olivia, the Duke immediately dismisses the possibility, declaring, “Their love may be called appetite, no motion of the liver, but the palate” (2.4.56-7). In a footnote, Bevington explains that Orsino believes that “real love is a passion of the liver, whereas fancy, light love, is born in the eye and nourished in the palate” (206), and that the Duke refuses to believe that any woman could experience the “real” love that he feels for Olivia. Ironically, Orsino represents this fancy love, whereas Viola remains the passionately devoted character. However, the mere reference to the liver, the location of true passion, foreshadows Viola’s success in winning Orsino’s heart. As Lydia Forbes notes, “By the fourth scene, Orsino has actually fallen in love with Viola. She wins him ‘liver and all’ in the second

act...her disguise lets him become devoted, without being confused by the erratic passions he associates with love of woman” (479). As Orsino’s confidante, Viola’s personality shines through her “Cesario” disguise, and Orsino unknowingly develops a deeper attraction to Cesario than the light love with which he dotes on Olivia.

Orsino’s linking of appetite with love is a metaphor characteristic of his lovelorn pose. Throughout the play, he likens his melancholy to excess of food, as when he opens the play with the demand, “If music be the food of love, play on. Give me excess of it, that surfeiting, the love may sicken and so die” (1.1.1-3). Orsino’s desire for excess can be satisfied only by Viola, the woman controlled by the sanguine temperament stemming from the blood in the liver. Scientifically, the liver serves as the organ that aids digestions, or the “conversion of food and drink into useful blood” (Brain 9). Blood, of course, was the dominant humoral fluid in the sanguine figure, and, according to Galen, the conversion into useful blood took place in the veins of the liver; furthermore, the particular qualities of useful blood are well-tempered and balanced (Brain 9-10). Fittingly, Viola assists Orsino in absorbing his extreme needs by feeding his craving for love when she wins his heart at the close of the play.

Forbes explains that similar themes present in the main plot are developed in the subplot of the play. Maria uses what Forbes describes as “her determination and successful ruse” (481) to win Sir Toby. As Viola deceives the melancholy Orsino and wins his heart, so Maria dominates the figures who suppress their livers—the phlegmatic Sir Toby and Sir Andrew, and the melancholy Malvolio—manipulating the men for her personal benefit. Maria uses Malvolio as an instrument, and he proves to be a crucial pawn as the melancholic character who never learns to accept his sanguine traits. Forbes

describes Maria's cunningness as she proposes to forge a letter to Malvolio, which ultimately leads to his imprisonment. Olivia disapproves of the cruel treatment of Malvolio, which Maria blames on Sir Toby, and this puts Toby in such bad rapport with Olivia that he is forced to marry Maria in order to remain under Olivia's roof. Forbes argues that "this is as superficially sudden as Orsino's capitulation to Viola, and Sir Toby will never be any more aware than Orsino that this result has been in the making since Act I" (481).

Sir Toby and Sir Andrew may be easily duped, and even Fabian jests to Andrew that Olivia dotes on Cesario simply to "put fire in [Sir Andrew's] heart and brimstone in [his] liver" (3.2.19). As Brain states, "wine, taken in moderation, increases the innate heat most effectively; in *excess*, however, it has the opposite effect" (9, emphasis mine), and both Andrew and Toby strain their livers with excessive drink. Even Sir Toby wagers, "for Andrew, if he were opened, and you find so much blood in his liver as will clog the foot of a flea, I'll eat the rest of th' anatomy" (3.2.59-61). Bevington's footnote explains that a bloodless liver signified cowardice (212), enforcing Toby's idea that since Andrew's liver is unhealthy, so is his personality. Forbes observes that Maria maintains total control of her actions and affairs, which I consider the result of a dominant sanguine humor. Although the phlegmatic Sir Toby remains drunk at the end of the play, Maria has successfully utilized her forces—her sanguine talents—to manipulate him into marrying her (Forbes 481).

A comparison of the two heroines of the play—Viola and Olivia—reveals the importance of the liver and the sanguine humor in *Twelfth Night*. Viola's liver governs her personality, and throughout the play she strives to teach Olivia to drop her mournful

persona and become an optimistic individual. Olivia and Viola share several similarities, most notably the loss of their brothers. However, Olivia revels in mourning, refusing to strive for love, whereas Viola makes peace with the notion that if Sebastian lives, she need not mourn: “Mine own escape unfoldeth to my hope” (1.2.19); if he is dead, she understands that he rests in a better place. Feste criticizes Olivia: “The more fool, Madonna, to mourn for your brother’s soul, being in heaven” (1.5.67-68), whereas Viola does not mourn, but rather seeks love from Orsino for herself. The different reactions of Olivia and Viola to a similar situation are governed by their humors. When Viola hears of the melancholy Countess and the lovelorn Duke, the sanguine heroine immediately develops a plan, swearing, “Oh, that I served that lady, and might not be delivered to the world till I had made mine own occasion mellow what my estate is!” (1.2.41-4). Once she introduces Olivia to the optimistic temperament of sanguinity, Olivia does fall in love—with Cesario—in the same manner that Orsino develops a homosocial affection for the “boy.”

The similarity of their names—Viola and Olivia—consistently reminds the audience that the two leading ladies of the play parallel each other, and these names also identify the force controlling their personalities. The word “liver” originates from the Anglo Saxon “lifer,” and is likely a derivative of the Greek and Latin words for “life” (Skinner 255). The letters “L” “I” “V” occur in both names, but in reversed order. The organ that governs the sanguine humor symbolizes the temperament that Olivia must embrace in order to experience a happy ending. The letters, in order, vividly accentuate the importance of the liver, a consistent clue for Olivia. The letters of the name “Viola” need not be so bold because, from first to last, she remains optimistic; thus, the letters can

run backwards in her name, since Viola needs no reminder of how to achieve happiness. Similarly, Malvolio seems a victim of the same limitations as a very unhappy, pessimistic man whose name also contains the letters “L” “I” and “V,” although, in his name, the letters are jumbled. Without examining the spelling of women’s forenames, the letters of Malvolio’s name would appear unimportant. When he believes Olivia has written to him, in a lewd joke on Shakespeare’s part, Malvolio lists her “C” “U” and “T” as recognizable. However, he does not mention the letters identifying the liver, and indeed he never recognizes them, never allowing his liver to govern his personality. While Olivia becomes optimistic and acquires a genuine love by the end of the play, the consistently punished Malvolio remains miserable.

The title of the play connects to the themes of sanguinity embodied in the festival of Twelfth Night and celebrated in the days surrounding Christmas. The holiday falls in the middle of the winter season, but also at the end of the Gregorian calendar year. Of course, the humors were associated with certain seasons of the year and, as Brain points out, “blood corresponds to spring, the season in which it characteristically increases in the body, and in Galen’s view, spring has to be thought of as eucrasic or well-tempered” (7-8). The celebration of Twelfth Night, then, arrives at an opportune time to indulge in the sanguine humor, and adopt the emotions that arrive with the spring season. The rites of Twelfth Night nearly parallel the observance of the New Year, a time in which winter ends, and spring follows. For the sake of my argument, the spring season is an appropriate metaphor for the changes that Viola produces through her lessons. Olivia, introduced as woman in mourning, relishes sorrow as an excuse to repel any suitors and any chance of love; her state of mind very closely resembles winter, and the images of

death associated with the season. However, under Viola's instruction, Olivia assumes a new approach to love, readily embracing the passion. Of course, Olivia cannot obtain Viola's heart, but when she becomes more sanguine, Sebastian appears as a regeneration of Cesario, whom Viola has laid to rest. Moreover, Orsino, wallowing in melancholy like Olivia at the beginning of the play, is reborn through his love for Viola. The personality changes of both Orsino and Olivia from melancholy to sanguine resemble the metaphors associated with spring, and occur just in time for the seasons to change, thus making *Twelfth Night* an appropriate period to celebrate the most pleasurable temperament.

VII

Conclusion

In his book, *Personality and Temperament*, Solomon Diamond references Shakespeare when he asserts, “There have been many attempts in the history of medicine to define a relation between temperament and physique, or gross body build” (138). In creating his characters, Shakespeare knew to make Falstaff fat and Cassius lean for theatrical effect (138). By accepting Hamlet as melancholic, Lady Macbeth as choleric, and Viola as sanguine, we might infer the physical characteristics necessary to these characters just as fatness was required of Falstaff.

Bevington provides a list of the Hamlets of the past, asserting that *Hamlet* possesses a rich production history and a variety of interpretations (551). Henry Irving, who performed the role from 1864 to 1885 (Bevington 551), was rather unattractive and had a slight build (Irving). As the dryness of the humor made the body lean (Anderson 38), Irving may have resembled the essential melancholic, although his physique may have been socially unappealing. John Gielgud, playing Hamlet in 1930, portrayed the pale prince that “Coleridge had imagined” (Bevington 551). More recent Hamlets include Laurence Olivier in 1948, Aiden Quinn in the 1970s, Mel Gibson in 1990, Kenneth Branagh in 1996, and Ethan Hawke in 2000 (Bevington 551-552). While these men look more conventionally attractive than Irving’s earlier Hamlet, none has an

exceptional build. Furthermore, it seems that the typical Hamlet, portrayed on both stage and screen, usually has brown hair.

Whereas casting directors for *Hamlet* take some license in choosing their Danish prince, the role of Falstaff provides less flexibility. The stereotyped phlegmatic character is short and fat (Anderson 34) with blond or white hair (Anderson 40). The text of *Henry IV, Part 1* clarifies that Falstaff adheres to this description. Early Falstaffs included John Lowin, who played to “mighty applause” in the seventeenth century; Thomas Betterton, who assumed the role from 1700 to his death in 1710; and James Quin, a popular Falstaff from 1721 to 1751 (Kastan 79-85). Both Betterton and Quin graduated to the role of Falstaff after playing Hotspur, as the former became more appropriate to their age (Kastan 83-85). When actors did not properly fit the rotund model of the knight, they often added stuffing for the part. Although Falstaff must be fat, not all plump actors must be Falstaffs; thus, in the nineteenth century, a performance by the obese Stephen Kemble prompted a review that read, “Every fat man cannot play a great man” (qtd. in Kastan 86). While Ellen Terry’s physical beauty and charm compensated for her theatrical shortcomings as Lady Macbeth, the character of Falstaff relies equally on stature and wit.

Anderson lists the physical traits of choler as tall, lean, and brown, with black, crisp hair (34). Jameson presents two illustrations of Lady Macbeth in her book, J.S. Sargent’s painting of “Miss Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth” and R. Westall Pinxt’s portrait of Sarah Siddons in the same role. Both women fit the description above, and are posed in powerful, menacing positions. Mrs. Siddons, acclaimed as a “tragic actress,” in 1812 played Lady Macbeth in her farewell role to much approbation (Siddons). Miss Terry, an actress who played Lady Macbeth in the late nineteenth century, gained approval from

her “regal beauty and radiant personality,” which compensated for her inadequacies as an actress (Terry). In 1976, Trevor Nunn staged *Macbeth* with Judi Dench as the female lead, clothing Dench in black to provide a stark contrast to Lady Macduff, clothed in white (Rosenberg 195). Dench “seemed unmistakably a wretched queen” (Rosenberg 195), and received praise for her performance. More recently, in 2006, the blonde-haired Jennifer Ehle, wearing a white Michael Krass gown, played the part opposite Liev Schreiber in a Public Theater production in New York. The pair received mediocre reviews, as one critic wrote, “Blood flows regularly, but as if dispensed from silver taps. In the end neither Mr. Schreiber nor Ms. Ehle seems fully to inhabit the darkness of their characters” (Isherwood). In *Macbeth*, the female villain advises her husband to “look like th’innocent flower, but be the serpent under’t” (1.5.65-66); conversely, the actress playing Lady Macbeth might need to look like the serpent in order to convincingly play one of Shakespeare’s most wicked females.

The sanguine character might be identified by “auburn or yellow hair” (Anderson 40), and as blood influenced the most healthy, genial humor, the sanguine character possessed the most handsome looks (Draper, “Star-Crossed Lovers” 21). We imagine a handsome Viola, as Duke Orsino describes Cesario: “Diana’s lip is not more smooth and rubious” (1.4.31-32). In his 1996 film adaptation, Nunn cast his wife, Imogen Stubbs, as Viola, with Helena Bonham Carter as Olivia. To translate Orsino’s comment into modern terms, a San Francisco Chronicle critic wrote, “Viola cuts her hair, dons a breast flattener and a fake mustache. She still looks pretty good” (LaSalle). More specifically, Stubbs’ blonde Viola fits Anderson’s model, and Bonham Carter’s dark-haired Olivia allows the audience to compare two very different leading ladies. Because Olivia begins

the play in mourning, the dark-featured Bonham Carter physically exemplifies the part of the melancholy brunette.

Of course, it would be foolish to suggest that Trevor Nunn and his contemporaries read Galen and Hippocrates before casting their leading parts. While the humoral theory circulated throughout early modern England, our medical practices today have evolved well beyond the ideas that Shakespeare incorporated into his works. Yet, are our theories so far removed from those of the seventeenth century? Overholser points out, “If with all our present understanding of psychology, of physiology and anatomy...we still have much to learn, what should we expect of the attitudes and knowledge in the time of Shakespeare...?” (336, emphasis mine). Psychologists continue to spend ample time studying behavioral patterns and personality, and even in the last century we have been offered new theories to accept or to reject as explanations of the human mind and body. Even Overholser’s article, not yet fifty years old, seems outdated as she claims that “daily we read of...Freud and Jung” (335). Yet, critics label Macbeth schizophrenic and Hamlet bipolar, as if Shakespeare’s character sketches provide relevant insight into modern psychological paradigms.

In Diamond’s book, published in 1957, the author lists four dimensions of temperament (126), and four patterns of effective response (128). Although these traits relate to the humoral theory only in terms of number, Diamond draws a two-dimensional model to illustrate how the four humors would fit into modern psychology. Diamond’s four feelings, listed in clockwise fashion, are excitement, pleasantness, depression, and unpleasantness (129). Excitement and depression, located top-center and bottom-center, respectively, signify either high or low activity. Unpleasantness, located far left, and

pleasantness, located far right, stand for withdrawal or approach, respectively. Just as the four humors consisted of two of the four qualities, hot, cold, moist, and dry, Diamond places the four temperaments at 45-degree angles between each axis. Thus, sanguinity belongs between High Activity/Excitement and Approach/Pleasantness, phlegm between Approach/Pleasantness and Low Activity/Depression, melancholia between Low Activity/Depression and Withdrawal/Unpleasantness, and cholera between Withdrawal/Unpleasantness and High Activity/Excitement.

Although Diamond admits that his model does not fit each temperament perfectly, he insists that it creates a visual correspondence between ancient medicine and modern thought. The sanguine personality fits well between the feelings of excitement and pleasantness, as melancholy fits into the space between depression and unpleasantness. Diamond laments that phlegm and cholera do not fit so comfortably (130). However, I argue that cholera does represent excitement and unpleasantness, as the choleric individual is prone to rage. As for phlegm, Falstaff illustrates the pleasantness of the temperament, and recent studies linking alcoholism to depression might account for the second factor of the chart. Although not an impeccable match, Diamond's more modern model does illustrate some correlations between modern behaviors and the patterns of the humoral theory.

More recently, David Keirsey published his book, *Please Understand Me II*, which deals with temperament, character, and intelligence. Keirsey lists four "groups" of personalities, adapted from Isabel Myers' sixteen "types" (18). Myers and her mother, Kathryn Briggs, created a questionnaire entitled "The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator" which gained popularity in the 1990s, with millions of people taking the test each year

(Keirsey 3). Using Myers' groups as a modern example, Keirsey asserts, "If we scan the variety of contributors and the many characteristics they have attributed to the four temperaments, we are able to see how true-to-type the four classifications have remained over the centuries" (26). Arguably, a widely-shared recognition of personality exists, although the most recognized dispositions change over time.

Keirsey includes two personality tests in his book, which he labels "sorters." Complete with answer key, the tests invite readers to discover their own intrinsic personality. The study of personality and behavior still excites interest in today's society, and is embedded in our own literature. Newspapers and women's magazines offer daily or monthly horoscopes, and people are often thought to possess certain qualities depending on their astrological sign. Draper claims that melancholic individuals were often born under Taurus, Virgo, and Capricorn; phlegmatic persons under Cancer, Scorpio, and Pisces; choleric types under Aries, Sagittarius, and Leo; and sanguine individuals under Gemini, Libra, and Aquarius ("Star-Crossed Lovers" 21-22). Today's popular horoscopes often advise "love matches" for each zodiac sign, a practice not unlike the early modern belief that certain qualities were in opposition, while certain temperaments complemented each other.

Shakespeare uses numerous references to the physiological and psychological beliefs of early modern England in his plays. The four distinguishable personality types, melancholy, phlegmatic, choleric, and sanguine, may be attributed to nearly all of the characters within the scope of Shakespeare's works. Usually the characters exhibit more than one temperament throughout the course of a play, but some characters serve as the very embodiment of one humor. Textual evidence purports Hamlet to be tragically

melancholic, Falstaff to be wholly phlegmatic, Lady Macbeth to be fatally choleric, and Viola to be innately sanguine. As quoted earlier, Homer provided a glimpse into ancient medical practices, as does Shakespeare. As Nutton claims, these works illustrate the knowledge that audiences of the period expected of the writers. Although Galen and Hippocrates are no longer household names, even today's society reflects on the theories that they presented centuries ago. As modern doctors, psychiatrists, surgeons, and psychologists continue to perform studies on personality, behavior, and medicine, their medical research will continue to influence the literature of even the twenty-first century.

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