The Anatomy of Melancholy

By Robert Burton. Published by Henry Cripps, 1628

Hamlet
Act 2 Scene 2, lines 551–58

HAMLET The spirit that I have seen
May be a devil – and the devil hath power
T’assume a pleasing shape. Yea, and perhaps,
Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
As he is very potent with such spirits,
Abuses me to damn me. I’ll have grounds
More relative than this. The play’s the thing
Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the king.

Explore the language

The early modern theory of the humours shapes the way Shakespeare’s characters are written. In Shakespeare’s day ‘humorous’ meant moody, unbalanced or unpredictable. This is because Elizabethans believed that a person’s nature was governed by four ‘humours’ (fluids in the human body). These were blood (producing bravery), phlegm (producing calmness), ‘yellowe’ (producing anger) and black bile (producing melancholia). If the humours were not properly balanced, this resulted in mood swings and extreme behaviour. Robert Burton’s Anatomy of Melancholy is a wide-ranging exploration of some of the things that were thought to cause melancholia at the time.

• Find out about the popular understanding of melancholy by researching Burton’s Anatomy, and then see if you can find other examples of melancholy in Hamlet. Sometimes Hamlet explicitly claims he suffers from it (see for example Act 2 Scene 2, line 554), but there are many other examples too, and not just in Hamlet himself.

• How would you describe the temperament and balance of Hamlet’s emotions, or of other characters? Make notes on key characters as if you were a Shakespearean-era medical practitioner, describing their emotions and behaviour as they relate to the four humours.

Take it further

• How would you describe Hamlet according to modern theories of physical, mental and emotional disorders? If you were Hamlet’s doctor and he came to you for advice, what would you suggest?