Complexion, Temperament and Four Humor Theory in the Renaissance

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Abstract

A central concept in Galenic medicine, the temperament designates the state of health resulting from the balance of the four humors: blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile (or melancholy). Produced in the liver during digestion, the humors stem from the mixture of the primary qualities (hot, cold, dry, and moist) related to the four elements (air, fire, water, and earth). The notion of temperament was fundamental for theoretical and practical medical branches, from physiology and pathology to therapeutics and dietetics. It defines the physical constitution of all living beings as well as food, drugs, and natural things in general. In therapeutics, the patient's humoral imbalance is cured by a qualitatively "contrary" remedy, an appropriate diet or by surgical means such as bloodletting and clyster. Because temperament also involves the mixture of elements, it gave rise to long-standing debates in medieval and Renaissance philosophy about the status of the elements in the compound, in particular their qualities, matter, and form.

Synonyms

Complexio; Crasis; Temperamentum;
Temperatura; Temperies

Heritage and Rupture with the Tradition

Throughout his works, Galen established the notion of temperament by merging into a systematic theory the Hippocratic approach to humors and qualities in *On the Nature of Man* with Aristotle's physics of elements and mixture in *On Generation and Corruption* (Jouanna 2012; Hankinson 2017). In this perspective, the Galenic tradition aligned the four humors with the four elements and their qualities, and more broadly with the four ages of the human being and the seasons (Nutton 2004; Siraisi 1990). According to Galen's *On Mixtures*, the temperament varies from one individual to another within the same species and is determined by the standard of "well-temperate" median state (*eukraton*), which is specific to each species of plants and animals. Such a canonical model of "just" temperament (*ad justitiam*) is a proportionate mixture of the four qualities. From this model derive eight variations including four simple temperaments with one prevalent quality, and four compound temperaments with two complementary qualities (Galen 1997).

On that basis, scholastic physicians developed sophisticated explanations of the complexional

variations of living beings, body parts, and drugs (Ottooson 1984; French 2001; McVaugh 1975). In order to map the multitude of temperaments in the physical world, the temperaments of living beings were classified following an intensity scale of qualitative degrees, which were associated with the Galenic definition of “latitude of health.” The numerous variants of temperaments were integrated into the framework of four humoral complexions corresponding to the four compound ones: “sanguine” (hot-moist), “bilious” (hot-dry), “phlegmatic” (cold-moist), and “melancholic” (cold-dry). Furthermore, the discussions on complexion opened on diverse interpretations of the Aristotelian concept of mixture. They questioned the permanence of the elemental forms in the compound and the nature of the substantial form of the “mixt,” as testify the accounts of Avicenna, Averroes, and Thomas Aquinas, among others (Maier 1982). Such a doctrinal background is patent in the medical terminology of temperament designating either the process of mixture (*commixtio*) or its temperate product (*complexio*) (Jacquart 1985).

In the late Renaissance, the medical philosophy of Jean Fernel spread the idea that the temperament of living beings not only results from the blending of the four elements but also involves a celestial entity related to the body’s life, innate heat, and substantial form. When subject to violent affections such as epidemics and poisons, this life principle requires a specific therapy alternative to the Galenic cure by contraries (Fernel 1567). For its Platonic interpretation of Galen, Fernel’s account of temperament was widely discussed by early modern physicians (Hirai 2011; Richardson 2018). Moreover, followers of Paracelsus like Petrus Severinus challenged the Galenic notion of temperament on the basis that it endorses the mixture of elements as perishable and sterile material units. Instead, they established that the physiological functions and diseases stem from alchemical processes operated by three principles (Salt, Sulfur, and Mercury) which are rooted in incorporeal and celestial seeds. Nonetheless, many alchemist physicians such as Joseph Du Chesne and Daniel Sennert proposed a

compromise by reuniting Fernel’s theory of temperament with Paracelsian alchemy.

Cross-References

- Du Chesne, Joseph
- Elements, Renaissance Theory of Natural
- Fernel, Jean
- Innate Heat
- Paracelsus and Paracelsianism
- Pharmacology in the Renaissance
- Physiology in Renaissance Medicine
- Seed Concept
- Sennert, Daniel
- Severinus, Petrus

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