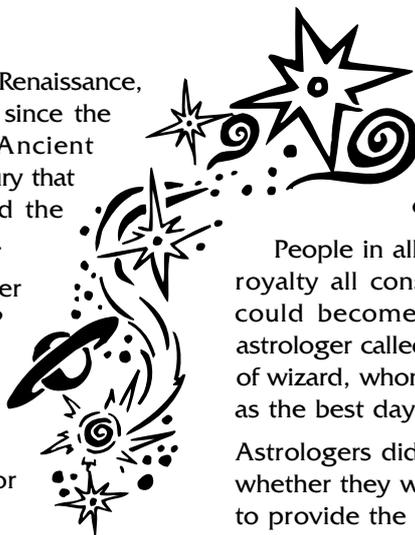


# MEDICINE

Despite all the other great advances of the Renaissance, ideas about medicine had hardly changed since the times of Aristotle and Hippocrates in Ancient Greece. It wasn't until the seventeenth century that men like William Harvey, who discovered the circulation of blood, began to change ideas.

Which organ of your body do you consider the most important? The heart? The brain? In Shakespeare's time, the most important organ was considered to be the liver. People believed that the liver controlled the body by producing four fluids called **the humours**. This belief had been held for over 500 years!

To be in good physical and mental health required the right balance of these four humours. Each humour influenced a different aspect of the personality and whichever aspect of the personality seemed dominant showed which humour a patient had too much of.



**Blood** – made you sanguine, ie passionate, loving, happy and caring.

**Phlegm** – made you phlegmatic ie cowardly, insensitive and not very clever.

**Yellow bile** – made you choleric, ie stubborn, impatient and angry.

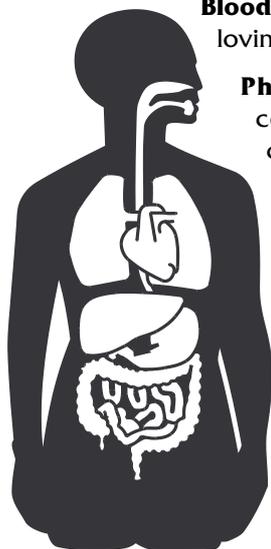
**Black bile** – made you melancholy ie mournful, cynical and greedy.

If your humours were thought to be out of balance, there were two main treatments. If you were lucky, you were given various herbs to drink (like rosemary, mint, liquorice and lavender). If you were unlucky you were treated with 'blood letting'.

When the humours were out of balance, the fluids had to be drained. Leeches were attached to your body to suck out the fluids until your balance was restored. This was a treatment that Elizabethan doctors used for virtually any illness!

Over 500 years the belief in humours had developed into a very complex system to which almost everything could be related. The state of your humours was affected by astrology, by the food you ate, by your age and innumerable other minor factors.

One illness that could not be cured by leeches, was the bubonic plague. In Shakespeare's time, epidemics of plague were killing hundreds of people at a time. When there was an epidemic, people were forbidden from gathering in large crowds, for example in theatres, to try to prevent the spread of the disease. They still had to congregate in church however. Other common illnesses of the time not helped by leeches were diphtheria, smallpox and scarlet fever.



# ASTROLOGY

Many people today glance idly at their horoscopes in newspapers and magazines but, in Shakespeare's time, astrology was regarded as an important influence on everyone's lives.

People in all walks of life from peasants to merchants to royalty all consulted astrologers – and these astrologers could become very rich! Queen Elizabeth had a court astrologer called Dr John Dee, widely regarded as some sort of wizard, whom she consulted about important events such as the best day for her coronation.

Astrologers didn't just tell people about their characters or whether they would be lucky that day, they were expected to provide the answers to very specific questions:

A merchant might ask on which day a ship would return from the Americas.

A husband might ask if his wife were being unfaithful.

A wife might ask if she were pregnant.

Even the church didn't regard astrology as wholly wrong; priests were known to consult astrologers, for example to find out if they would be promoted.

Famous astrologers of the time were:

Dr John Dee, Simon Forman, Nathaniel Culpepper, William Lilly

Peasant farmers would not have been able to afford to consult astrologers but they bought almanacs and they were said to consult these more than their Bibles. An almanac listed the dates of all the year's festivals, but it also gave predictions about crop failures or plagues and disturbances and gave advice on the best times to plant and harvest according to the influence of the planets.

Astrology was very important in medicine. Every part of the body was ruled by a sign of the zodiac and humours (see Medicine) related to different signs of the zodiac too. Doctors and astrologers were closely associated in people's minds, since by using the position of the planets at a specific time it was believed astrologers could diagnose a problem and prescribe a cure. There were even doctors called 'piss-prophets' who could diagnose an illness using astrology by studying urine produced at a certain time of the day!

Many astrologers were also alchemists. That means they practised a blend of chemistry, astrology, occultism and magic, particularly concerned with transforming other metals into silver and gold. The borders between science, religion, astrology and magic were far less clear in those days.

There was a widespread belief in witchcraft and some unfortunate women were killed when a community turned against them. A witch was considered to be in contact with Satan. People could also become possessed by devils – a good test for this was whether the person could pray or say the name of God – in **Twelfth Night** Maria and Sir Toby pretend that Malvolio is unable to pray and therefore must be possessed.

Wise women (or men) could be found in most communities and they provided a valuable service of potions and spells for illnesses or problems. Their success rate was higher than many of the so-called doctors of the time but, at any moment, an unsatisfied customer could turn on them and accuse them of witchcraft.