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# When the bile turns black: on the origins of melancholy

HISTORY OF EUROPEAN IDEAS

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## ABSTRACT

The paper delves into the origins of the ancient Greek concept of melancholy. The purpose of the first part is to trace a precursor of melancholy back to Homer's description of certain emotions which are congenial with rage (*cholos* or *cholē*), and which are associated with the colour black (*melainos*). Based on a systematic interpretation of these traces of melancholy in the earliest premedical history, the second part of the paper will shed new light on the broader and more dynamic way in which part of the Hippocratic tradition conceptualized melancholy as being, not a fixed state bound to an already existing substance in the human body, but as originating from a series of transformations associated with constitutional and climatological factors.

## KEYWORDS

- Melancholy
- black bile
- anger
- Homer
- Hippocrates
- Galen

Sadness, fear, despondency, pain, indecisiveness, cowardice, lethargy, ecstasy, madness – the clinical record of symptoms of melancholy registered through history goes on and on. Is it possible to trace all these symptoms, some of which seem to contradict each other, back to one substance or temperament such as the term 'melancholy' insinuates?

The first ever to establish a correlation between a melancholic state and a particular substance, called black bile (*melaina cholē*), was the author of the Hippocratic text *Nature of Man*, who expounded upon black bile as being a primordial and already existing humour in the human body, alongside blood, phlegm and yellow bile.<sup>1</sup> However, in another text, *Airs, Waters, Places*, also belonging to the *Corpus Hippocraticum*, bile is referred to as one of the humours in the body – the other being phlegm – and it only turns black and pathological under certain aggravating circumstances, namely when it is drained of water and becomes thick and dry.<sup>2</sup>

As Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl observe in their seminal work *Saturn and Melancholy*, it was 'not without violence' that ancient doctors and philosophers made the humours, especially the black bile, fit into the tetradic scheme of the basic elements of the world.<sup>3</sup> Yet, there were other authors, who originally considered humour, such as bile, to be a 'surplus substance', observable in certain pathologies through its appearance in the urine, faeces or vomit. When bile was expelled from the body, it often appeared darker than its natural yellowish colour, possibly because it was mixed with stagnated blood.<sup>4</sup> While *Airs, Waters, Places* is more in line with this dynamic understanding of black bile and melancholy, which 'originated in Greek

medicine at a stage prior to Hippocrates,<sup>5</sup> the author of *Nature of Man*, who narrowed this understanding down to a more simplified conception, can be said to have invented black bile in order to explain the melancholic state within a system of four innate humours.<sup>6</sup>

The problem of the genesis of black bile remained unresolved. The reason for this could very well be that the dominant medical tradition, which reigned until the Renaissance and still had an enormous influence on early modern medicine, mistook it for one of the four humours of the human constitution, thereby leaving aside the less arbitrary and less restrictive theory that the black bile originated through a complex process involving heat, dryness and thickening. These factors will here be explored further in order to open up a new approach to the origins and the genesis of melancholy. The twentieth-century French philologist and specialist in Hippocrates, Jacques Jouanna, has with a certain right claimed about melancholy that 'its origin will remain hidden in the shadows of Greek medical prehistory,'<sup>7</sup> i.e. prior to Hippocrates and his school, but this should not discourage us from searching for traces of melancholy in the Greek premedical history, first of all in the *Iliad*.

The purpose of the first part of the paper is to trace a precursor of melancholy back to Homer's description of certain emotions which are congenial with rage (*cholos*), later in classical times written *cholē*, and which are associated with the colour black (*melainos*).<sup>8</sup> In the *Iliad*, we find important evidence for coupling anger and bile, a connection which was still part of popular belief in classical times, and also for the existence of somatic or physiological factors which for the Hippocratics played a key role in the transformation of *cholē* into *melaina cholē*. Based on a systematic interpretation of these traces of melancholy in the earliest premedical history, the second part of the paper will shed new light on the broader and more dynamic way in which part of the Hippocratic tradition conceptualized melancholy as being, not a fixed state bound to an already existing substance in the human body, but as originating from a series of transformations associated with constitutional and climatological factors.

## 1. Blackening anger and black grief in the *Iliad*

The emotional outlet, which the ancient Greek term *cholos* refers to, is most vividly displayed when an urgent need seizes the Homeric warriors to respond aggressively to their surroundings. In his interpretation of Homer, James Redfield translates *cholos* with 'rage' which he understands as 'a whole-body reaction, the adrenal surge which drives men to violent speech and action'.<sup>9</sup> There are, according to his reading, two ways of coping with *cholos* in the *Iliad*: 'It can be poured into violent action and in that way "healed" (IV.36). Or it can be "digested" (I.81; cf. IX.565); in the course of time the body will consume the *cholos* and the man will be calm again.'<sup>10</sup>

The consequence of the second option is, however, not as unequivocal as Redfield makes it seem. The *Iliad* presents us with a third and more ambivalent way of dealing with this aggressive 'humor' in the form of an incomplete digestion of *cholos*, which does not straight forwardly lead to a restoration of health or calmness. In the *Iliad* Achilles finds himself restraining and digesting his *cholos* more than a couple of times,<sup>11</sup> which points to the double nature of this psychosomatic phenomenon: Homer describes it both as a physical substance, bile, and as a passion, anger or rage, without consistently making any clear-cut distinctions between the two.<sup>12</sup>

Although Achilles apparently triumphs over his anger, it is not given that every person has the same luck and reaches a similar calm state of mind, as Redfield suggests. In fact, the seer Kalchas mentions the wrath (*kotos*) which accompanies the digestion of *cholos* and leaves even a mighty man behind with a resentful lust for revenge.<sup>13</sup> The man, whom Kalchas indirectly refers to, is Agamemnon, who is about to get upset with grief and anger, accumulating inside his blackened chest and heart (*phrenes*), because of the seer's prophecies. The word for Agamemnon's anger is *menos*, which refers to a similar gut-reaction as *cholos*, and it is linked to the *achos* building up in him, while he listens to Kalchas.<sup>14</sup> *Achos* is a bitter, painful form of angry grief which can either trigger the anger of the warriors, who do not grieve for long, or be the result of a growing anger,<sup>15</sup> which most often ends up overrunning all signs of mourning and sadness.

Agamemnon's response to Kalchas and his subsequent attack on Achilles' honour, as he takes his war prize from him, causes the rise of the *cholos* which fills Achilles' heart in the first song of the *Iliad*. This anger keeps welling up in him, especially when his comrades touch upon it,<sup>16</sup> until it finally seems to be consumed in the sixteenth song, where other emotions start to make the scene.<sup>17</sup> To phrase it in a Homeric terminology, part of the *cholos* felt by Achilles remains undigested or stored inside him, at least for some time; this is also why Homer, on several occasions, describes him as coming to terms with his own *cholos*. Geoffrey Kirk emphasizes that 'the point about Akhilleus is that his anger remains and he fails to digest it; it stays as a "grief to his spirit", *thymalgea*, inside him'.<sup>18</sup>

Achilles is the warrior whose chest and heart are most often filled with *cholos*, especially the type of anger which cannot be let loose immediately because it is being held back by something else. Harris cites Herodotus' observation that '*cholos* [...] appears to mean an anger which is retained and masked and is discharged at a later time, sometimes much later'.<sup>19</sup> What makes Achilles hold back his *cholos* in the first song of the *Iliad* is no one else than the goddess Athene. Achilles is about to draw his sword and slay Agamemnon when Athene comes up from behind, takes him by his hair, and hinders him from acting out his rage. Achilles is

not persuaded by the goddess at first, but he finally gives in and tells her that he will restrain his *cholos* and do as he is told. Yet, in the next lines, his *cholos* still holds sway, and he starts attacking Agamemnon again, not with his weapon, however, but using words which can also hurt a man's heart.<sup>20</sup>

Achilles is not ignorant of how *cholos* works in a man's body, especially the sort of *cholos* which he suffers from, and which swells, boils and rises inside a man like smoke.<sup>21</sup> This aggressive kind of *cholos* is like a flaming fire and appetite that burns and has to be quenched, if it is not to become a violent, destructive force.<sup>22</sup> Nowhere does Achilles' *cholos* turn black. Yet, at a crucial turning point in the *Iliad*, after his beloved friend Patroclus has died on the battlefield, *cholos* is transformed into 'fierce' and 'angry grief'.<sup>23</sup> A black cloud of bitterness (*achos*) covers him and he pours ashes over his eyes getting black stains on his clothes. Two times is the word for black, *melaina*, used together with 'dark' in only four lines conveying Achilles' suffering, his profound *achos*:

A black (*melaina*) cloud of grief (*acheos*) enwrapped Achilles, and with both his hands he took the dark dust and strewed it over his head and defiled his fair face, and on his fragrant tunic the black (*melain'*) ashes fell.<sup>24</sup>

Homer often illustrates 'inner' emotions through 'external' motion, and the black cloud and ashes give a vivid portrait of the mourning warrior's state of mind. As he lies stretched out on the floor, he almost looks like a dead man, but his forceful movements of desperation reveal that he is still alive. His comrade holds back his hands so that he will not suddenly cut his own throat, which shows that the warrior is seized by a bitter, aggressive form of grief.<sup>25</sup>

The angry grief building up in Achilles proves different from the one which seizes Agamemnon in the first song: being directly related to death, particularly to Patroclus', but also to his own death of which he is aware, Achilles' *achos* strikes deeper and throws his *cholos* back on himself. The expression 'the black cloud of grief' resonates with another Homeric expression, 'the black cloud of death', which is what Achilles is exposed to in his liminality,<sup>26</sup> being isolated from the rest of the army and unable to direct his anger outwards. He mourns his friend's death and anticipates his own death, which draws closer and momentarily deprives him of anything in life worth living for: 'my heart won't let me live on, either, in mankind's company [...] Let me die very soon, then! Clearly I wasn't fated to save my comrade from being killed'.<sup>27</sup>

Achilles' lament can be interpreted as a precursor of the form of melancholy which in classical and modern times is characterized by painful grief over the loss of a loved one, whose absence provokes a feeling of existential emptiness in the one who suffers. The only thing that seems to contain enough force to lay bond on his *cholos* is the black grief within which Achilles wraps himself. Like Hector, however, who is also caught up in the dark cloud of bitter grief in the seventeenth song, Achilles breaks free from this state of painful despondency. Instead of continuing to pity death, he faces it and goes to war to die. Both warriors get help from the gods and undergo a transformation which leads them from being surrounded by blackness to becoming bright, dazzling warriors, who show no signs of what is later to be called melancholy in the Greek tradition.

There are arguably two reasons why *cholos* does not turn black in Homer and is transformed into melancholy. First of all, it appears to be too strong a force in the warriors to be contained, and, secondly, the gods help the warriors to free themselves of whatever bitter and angry grief they may momentarily feel. When emotions, such as *menos* and *achos*, which are akin to *cholos*, either blacken the heart or turn black themselves, it is when they are, for a shorter or longer period of time, held back, not unlike blood, that swells, stagnates and accumulates inside the breast of a man. Even a God like Apollon suffers from bitter anger, which grows in him, as he approaches the Achaeans' camp like night.<sup>28</sup>

## 2. Melancholy and black bile

Our interpretation of *cholos* and congenial emotions in the *Iliad* is intended to open up a new approach to investigate the backdrop against which later thinkers and writers in the ancient Greek tradition took up and understood black bile and melancholy in relation to the human body and mind. Early writers in classical times, such as Aeschylus and Sophocles, conveyed the view, by employing almost the same words as Homer, that organs become black, when they are filled with certain humours,<sup>29</sup> and these humours can again turn black, if they stagnate and do not flow.<sup>30</sup> The dramatists may have understood this blackening effect metaphorically, and not as referring to an actual physiological process. Still, some of the writers of the *Corpus Hippocraticum*, as we shall see later, seem to imply that the blackening effect is caused by actual physical processes of retardation and accumulation. The thesis of the paper is that the origins of melancholy are to be found, not in the surplus of a mysterious substance called *melaina cholē*, but in a transformation of *cholē*, which is described as either blackening the heart or turning black itself, when it is held back, especially by deep, painful grief, also pictured as a black cloud by Homer.

In the *Iliad*, it is not given that the human body ends up consuming *cholos* completely. In the case of Achilles, it is rather through a hard-won decision that he partly overcomes his rage, which nevertheless continually returns, even after he has decided to leave behind what troubled him. This raises the question whether Achilles really heals his anger by digesting it or acting it out, or whether it is so deeply rooted in him that he will suffer from it as long as he lives. Considering that his *cholos* is not really consumed but only directed away from Agamemnon over to Hector – and that he is, moreover, said to have fed on bile, *cholos*,

when he was a child<sup>31</sup> – we are led to the conclusion that *cholos* forms part of who Achilles is and that he hence remains a ‘choleric’ hero throughout the war epos. Achilles can also show pity and generosity, yet the driving force behind his actions remains *cholos* which is ‘in the *Iliad* what torments the soul’.<sup>32</sup>

Still, what would have happened to Achilles, if he had got helplessly stuck inside grief’s black cloud, without any help from the gods, and with a rage that could not be fully healed or digested? It would offer another scenario than the two options of coping with *cholos* contemplated by Redfield, who does not take into account the possibility that *cholos* can remain undigested and unhealed, causing a pathology, which, instead of being consumed, consumes the one who suffers from it.

The French writer and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva relies on the pseudo-Aristotelian fragment thirty, when she declares Bellerophon to be ‘the first Greek melancholy hero’.<sup>33</sup> In the *Iliad*, he gets exposed to death and suffers from what Kristeva in modern terms calls ‘a non-communicable grief’, which makes men despair and lose all interest in life: ‘when all escape routes are blocked [...] men learn to withdraw rather than flee or fight’. In Homer’s dramatization of Bellerophon’s destiny, he became ‘a solitary wanderer eating his heart out’ as a consequence of being hated by all the gods and losing his children.<sup>34</sup> Achilles does not suffer the same cruel destiny as Bellerophon, but he shares with him the painful grief over the loss of a loved one, which hurts his heart and his spirit, *thymos*, and makes him shun living among other people like Bellerophon, who in turn seems to be almost consumed by his grief as he is forsaken by the gods.

In both heroes, a reversal of life, or what has been called ‘self-devouring’ in relation to another epic melancholy hero, Ajax,<sup>35</sup> comes to the fore in their tendency to consume their own body and spirit. Achilles’ digestion of his own bile, which parallels his attempt to withhold his anger, indicates a disturbance in the natural functioning of *cholos*, this psychosomatic phenomenon which, instead of helping in the digestive process, becomes digested itself leaving behind an unstilled hunger. Bellerophon appears to have taken one step further in this menacing process of self-destruction, as he is said to eat up his own *thymos*. This marks a stage never reached by Achilles,<sup>36</sup> who manages to unleash his rage by directing his *cholos* away from himself toward his enemy, Hector, and so still his ‘hunger’.

In Achilles’ lament of the loss of his friend, he mentions Heracles, who is also highlighted in the pseudo-Aristotelian fragment 30, together with Bellerophon and Ajax, as paradigmatic examples of melancholic heroes.<sup>37</sup> Heracles was in antiquity held to be ‘a typical melancholiac’,<sup>38</sup> and Homer lets Achilles mirror himself in mighty Heracles’ incapacity to flee the demons of death, adding that even Hera’s impressive *cholos* was overpowered by destiny.<sup>39</sup> Achilles’ whole lament speech revolves around powers restraining each other and the impotence suffered by even the most powerful when facing death which also pushes back his own *cholos*. The decisive and common feature of all these heroes with reference to melancholy is that their *cholos* is restrained and held back, which has a blackening effect on their mind and spirit; an evil sign of death and destruction which provokes the often contradictory symptoms so characteristic of melancholy: Agitation and despondency, rage and grief, madness and fear.

Although we do not find black bile and melancholy used with regard to these legendary heroes in Homer, later Greek thinkers and writers drew on their epic tradition in order to understand such a complex phenomenon as melancholy. What may seem anachronistic at first, namely the decision to employ melancholy, which was not yet part of the pre-classical vocabulary, to the legendary heroes of the past, appears less so if it is seen in the light of the pre-Hippocratic understanding of black bile as ‘a noxious degeneration of the yellow bile’ resulting in melancholy.<sup>40</sup> It is within this understanding that we find a precursor of melancholy in Homer and which we can trace through to classical times, where part of the Hippocratic tradition keeps relating melancholy to *cholē*. Another part of that same tradition associates melancholy with *melaina cholē*.

If we begin with the latter, represented by the author of the most influential text of the Hippocratic tradition, *Nature of Man*, declared to be ‘the foundation stone of the history of black bile, the melancholic temperament and melancholy in the medical tradition’,<sup>41</sup> then he implies that a correlation between black bile and a melancholic state exists. After having stated that ‘the black bile is greatest and strongest in autumn’, and that ‘most fevers come from bile’, the author goes on to assert that one of the complaints of black bile is quartan fevers which ‘participate in the melancholic element (*tou melagcholikou*)’, a state pertaining to the autumn of life, the age between 25 and 42.<sup>42</sup> This is an important passage not only because it is one of the few in the *Corpus Hippocraticum*, where the melancholic state is explicitly mentioned, but because the discussion of fevers in relation to bile and black bile points to a connection between both humours as well as between black bile and melancholy.

The colour black was by the Hippocratic author of *Prognostic* considered to be the most dangerous sign of disease and death,<sup>43</sup> and the melancholic state, associated with autumn and downfall, was among the severest and most troublesome affections.<sup>44</sup> It is perplexing that what may be interpreted to be the most morbid pathological sign in the Hippocratic tradition, namely the colour black, is brought into the scheme of the four humours by the author of *Nature of Man*, where it is paired with bile and forms an element in its own right alongside yellow bile, blood and phlegm. The four humours supposedly explain both health and disease, but how black bile and melancholy can reveal anything about human health remains an unexplained mystery in *Nature of Man* whose author restricts the understanding of melancholy to a single, definitive state.

What appears to be an amplification of medical theory by adding a fourth humour to the three already existing, actually

constitutes a simplification of more complex and dynamic phenomena. In other Hippocratic writings, which present less simplified and restrictive views on melancholy, the blackened bile is considered to be a 'surplus substance' rising out of the parts which in the digestion process are left undigested.<sup>45</sup> Here we find a clear parallel to Homer's recurrent description of the heroes digesting their *cholos*, which can produce, as we have seen, a hardly digestible by-product, an enduring and painful form of resentment associated with the colour black. Although *cholos* does not turn black in the *Iliad*, the epic implies that the bile can, together with congenial emotions, such as *menos* and *achos*, blacken the heart. Achilles says poetically that *cholos* is as sweet as honey when it enters the human chest, but that it also expands like smoke and can provoke derangement,<sup>46</sup> indicating that it is both felt as a material substance and as something more subtle and even menacing with an impact on the upper part of the body, the *phrenes*, where the vitality or spirit, *thymos*, is housed.

If we elaborate further on this hitherto little-explored continuity in the ancient Greek understanding of melancholy as rising out of the deranging heating effect of *cholos* on *thymos*, we notice that a dynamic spectrum within the melancholic state appears. What Homer verbalizes as eating out one's own *thymos* and causing *thymalgia*, is in a similar, albeit less dramatic way called *dysthymie*, despondency, in a Hippocratic aphorism.<sup>47</sup> Galen later paraphrases this and Aretaeus of Cappadocia slightly changes it to mean sadness (*athymie*).<sup>48</sup> In Homer, we stand at the beginning of the historic unfolding of a complex psychosomatic phenomenon which turns into melancholy only over time. The Hippocratic author carefully stresses the temporal aspect of melancholy, when he says that 'if fear or despondency lasts for a long time, this is a melancholic state (*melagcholikos*)'.<sup>49</sup>

This is one of the few times where emotional aspects of melancholy are mentioned in the *Corpus Hippocraticum*, which in general favours physiological explanations of affections and diseases. When it comes to the physiology of melancholy, clear parallels between the Homeric and Hippocratic tradition can be found. According to both traditions, the heating effect of the bile affects the digestive process and the upper part of the body, especially the chest and the eyes, which are associated with the spirit. When the heat produced by the bile becomes excessive and cannot find any external escape routes, the fire or smoke produced accumulates and starts to blacken and damage the corresponding organs by reversing vital life processes. Whereas these processes are mostly described in psychosomatic terms in Homer, the Hippocratic conception of *cholē* as bile, which is distinguished from rage, lends itself to more physiological explanations of the genesis of melancholy.

In the *Corpus Hippocraticum*, the pathological correlation of bile and the eyes is recurrent: The bilious tend to suffer from violent inflammations of the eyes, which are also more common in the season of bile, springtime.<sup>50</sup> Already in the *Iliad*, Homer insinuates – using Hector and Achilles as examples – that *cholos* expresses itself in their blazing eyes (*pyri osse*). Hector is first described as having eyes which are 'dark like night', after he has launched a gigantic stone and urged his fellow men to move forward, but then shortly after his eyes become like 'flaming fire', just like Achilles' eyes which are affected by his surging *cholos*, when he beholds the well-wrought weapon that is going to serve him in his fight against Hector.<sup>51</sup>

We shall see how one author, possibly Hippocrates himself, associates the tendency of the bilious to suffer from heat, dryness and melancholy, when they become exposed to a dry northern wind in summer and autumn. The ideal state of health in the Hippocratic tradition is when none of the humours reigns, but they check each other within a balance of equality and health. In many of the Hippocratic writings, the bile is described as going through a series of pathological stages, which give the learned doctor hints of how bad the pathology is. As already mentioned, when the stool, the blood or the bile turn black, it is considered to be a deadly sign by the author of *Prognostic*,<sup>52</sup> and two aphorisms reiterate this. The evacuation of black bile at the beginning of any disease is a mortal symptom.<sup>53</sup>

*Airs, Waters, Places*, which may have been written by Hippocrates himself, is, among all the Hippocratic treatises the one which reveals most about the puzzling genesis of black bile. In the tenth chapter, its author takes his starting point in the beneficial effect which a dry northern wind in rainless months of summer and autumn has on phlegmatic constitutions, whereas it is ...

[...] very harmful to the bilious. For these dry up overmuch, and are attacked by dry ophthalmia and by acute, protracted fevers, in some cases too by melancholies (*melagcholiai*). For the most humid and watery part of the bile (*cholēs*) is dried up and is spent, while the thickest and most acrid part is left, and similarly with the blood.<sup>54</sup>

The author describes a process by which *cholē* is turned into *melancholies*. We must assume that the dry weather in summer and autumn is accompanied by heat, and it is this combination of heat and dryness which empties the bile of humidity causing it to become thick. Black bile is the most viscous of the humours and the most difficult to evacuate, as it flows less than the others,<sup>55</sup> which allows us to conclude that it has an inherent tendency to stagnate and cause protractions.

Heating, drying, thickening: these are the stages which the bile goes through before it takes on the black shades of melancholy, according to *Airs, Waters, Places*. The author indeed refers to this pathological state in the plural. Based on his observations of different phases, which over time may lead to melancholies, it seems plausible to assume that more forms or understandings of melancholy coexist. Yet, if the black bile is posited as an already existing substance in the human organism, as the author of *Nature of Man* does, it becomes less plausible to speak of melancholy in the plural. Remarkably enough, the dominant

understanding of melancholy from late Hellenistic times over the Middle Ages and into the modern age followed the author of *Nature of Man* in binding the understanding of melancholy to the black bile as an innate substance which has hardly been seen by anybody. In *Anatomy of Melancholy* Robert Burton portrays the ancient Greek materialist philosopher Democritus as studying in vain to locate the black bile in the human body.<sup>56</sup>

Even so, the author of the pseudo-Aristotelian Fragment and two of the most perspicuous post-Hippocratic doctors, Galen and Rufus of Ephesus, held on to the restrictive theory of black bile as the cause of melancholy; the latter, however, still kept in mind the alternative and less restrictive way of explaining the genesis of melancholy, namely through the combustion of bile. Rufus even stressed one important aspect, which part of the Hippocratic tradition also highlighted, namely that it is over time that the melancholic state turns into a sombre and depressive state.<sup>57</sup> When Galen takes Hippocrates to 'reduce under two headings the symptoms of melancholics: fear and sadness (*dysthymian*)',<sup>58</sup> he loses sight of the temporal and thus transformative dynamics of melancholy, which manifests itself in manifold and often contradictory ways, and so he misleadingly simplified more complex processes, not unlike the author of *Nature of Man*, hindering a multifaceted explanation of the origins of melancholy.

In the broader understanding of the genesis of melancholy, as represented in *Airs, Waters, Places*, the three-step transformation of bile into black bile is compared to the blackening of blood when it gets dry and thickens. Already in Homer, the chest and the midriff (*phrenes*) appear to turn black, not only because of the *cholos* filling them, but because they are also 'suffused with blood'.<sup>59</sup> In other ancient traditions of medicine, we do not find a corresponding word for melancholy. Yet, the specific syndrome of obstructed anger and heat in the gall bladder, leading to a series of different symptoms, such as accumulation of heat, obstructed dark blood, blurred vision, turbulent thoughts and dreams, despondency, lack of decision and unexplained sorrow is well described.<sup>60</sup> Modern scholars and philosophers have also hypothesized that stagnated blood might have imbued the bile with its characteristic dark colour.<sup>61</sup>

Still, we do not have to leave the Hippocratic tradition to find testimonies of the two humours accompanying each other and provoking this blackening effect. In certain books of the *Epidemics*, supposedly published before the introduction of four humours by the author of *Nature of Man*, the melancholic and the blood abundant state are combined into one type and are not found separately.<sup>62</sup> Seen in this light, Galen misinterpreted this combined typology and separated the melancholic state from the blood abundant, which again may have thwarted an understanding of the interrelation between blood and the blackened bile. In fact, in most of the Hippocratic texts there are no signs of the theory of four humours and their corresponding temperaments. Even the author of *Nature of Man* recurs to the older theory of three humours right after having introduced black bile as the fourth humour.

Angus Gowland has claimed that '[i]n terms of medical history, the history of melancholy from antiquity to early modernity is predominantly one of continuity rather than change'.<sup>63</sup> This is mostly due to Galen's forceful appropriation of *Nature of Man* as the orthodox Hippocratic text on the four humours, excluding other texts which either did not mention four humours or were critical of the theory of the four humours. Instead of following Galen, we have argued that a new genealogical approach to the complex history and nature of melancholy should be disclosed, which traces its origins back to Homer and the early tragic writers. This approach offers a multifaceted conception of melancholy which may allow us in the future to reinterpret the post-Hellenic history of melancholy in a new light.

Seen from the perspective of this broader and more complex understanding of melancholy as a genuinely dynamic phenomenon associated with obstruction, retardation and accumulation of heat, the Hippocratic author Diocles' theory of surplus heat in the stomach as causing melancholy makes more sense, and it may be seen as a stepping stone to other related affections mentioned by Hippocrates and Galen, *phrontis* and *phrenitis* as signs of an overheating effect of the chest and the mind.<sup>64</sup> In medieval times, traces of this ancient understanding of melancholy can be found in the works of several authors: Avicenna's explanation of black bile as sedimented blood which affects the brain and the hypochondriacal region, when it becomes over-heated, seems to be partly derived from the Hippocratic tradition.<sup>65</sup> So does Ficino's theory that the agitation of the mind dries up the brain, spending the moisture of the bile and rendering the blood dense, dry and black. This finally leads to the melancholic state of a sad and fearful soul, according to Ficino, who also highlights, like Plutarch and Cicero before him, the *furor* and madness present in melancholy.<sup>66</sup> Further research into these often scattered observations and theories of melancholy still needs to be carried out, but the ancient Greek tradition remains the ever-present source to which all these writers keep coming back.

### 3. Conclusion

The origins of melancholy and of a broader understanding of this complex phenomenon are to be found in the pre-classical and early classical Greek tradition, first of all in Homer. In Homeric epic, rage (*cholos*) and congenial emotions, such as anger (*menos*) and grief (*achos*), have a blackening effect on certain organs, particularly the breast (*phrenes*) and the heart (*thymos*). Implicit in this early conception of blackening emotions lies an understanding of *cholos* as potentially menacing and destructive, especially when it accumulates inside a man and stagnates without any escape routes, which provokes a series of pathological symptoms associated with melancholy by post-Homeric writers. What in Homeric language is called a painful grief to a man's spirit (*thymalgia*), later medical writers designate as despondency (*dysthymia*) and sadness (*athymia*). The common denominator for

these emotional states evolving into melancholy is the concept *thymos*, which is aroused but also hurt by *cholos*, especially in the epic and tragic tradition, where the suffering is often of a deranging character including suicidal tendencies.

The Hippocratic doctors appear to have been the first to distinguish clearly between *cholē* as anger and as bile implying that a humour, such as bile, which in pre-Hippocratean texts could blacken the heart, can itself turn black. We can only speculate if it was due to an assumption or through observations of black coloured body fluids that the author of the most influential Hippocratic text, *Nature of Man*, was misled to posit black bile as an already existing humour which can cause melancholy. In the earliest Hippocratic tradition, which is more in line with the Homeric and tragic view of melancholy, the blackened bile was considered to be a surplus substance that had undergone a three-step transformation of heating, drying and thickening.

Whereas these processes are mostly described in psychosomatic terms in Homer, the Hippocratics favour physiological explanations which take into account constitutional and climatological factors. Still, there are some clear parallels between the Homeric and the Hippocratic tradition when it comes to describing the heating effect of the bile on the digestive process and the upper part of the body, especially the chest and the eyes, which are associated with the spirit. Although the more restricted theory of the black bile as one of the four humours became the most influential, due to Galen's dominance, the dynamic and multi-faceted understanding of melancholy still furnished the source for many subsequent conceptualizations of melancholy in the Western tradition.

## Notes

1. Hippocrates, *Nature of Man* IV, 1–2, in *Hippocrates*, vol. 4, trans. W.H.S. Jones, vol. 150 of *Loeb Classical Library*, ed. G.P. Goold, 7th ed. (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press and William Heinemann Ltd., 1979), 10–11. ✗
2. Hippocrates, *Airs, Waters, Places* X, 87–95, in *Hippocrates*, vol. 1, trans. W.H.S. Jones, vol. 147 of *Loeb Classical Library*, ed. G.P. Goold, 6th ed. (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press and William Heinemann Ltd., 1972), 102–5. ✗
3. Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion and Art* (Nendeln: Krauss, 1979), 8; cf. also Walter Müri, 'Melancholie und schwarze Galle', *Museum Helveticum: Schweizerische Zeitschrift für klassische Altertumswissenschaft* 10 (1953): 21–38, in which he speaks of 'traces of arduous efforts of system-building', 21. ✗
4. Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*, 8–9, 11; Müri, 'Melancholie und schwarze Galle', 32. ✗
5. Jacques Jouanna, *Greek Medicine from Hippocrates to Galen* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 233. ✗
6. Hellmut Flashar, *Melancholie und Melancholiker in den medizinischen Theorien der Antike* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co, 1966), 39–45. ✗
7. Jouanna, *Greek Medicine from Hippocrates to Galen*, 233. ✗
8. Pierre Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque: Histoire des mots* (Paris: Éditions Klincksieck, 1968), 1267–8. ✗
9. James M. Redfield, *Nature and Culture in the Iliad: The Tragedy of Hector*, expanded edition (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 14. ✗
10. *Ibid.*, 15. The references in the quotation are to the *Iliad*. ✗
11. Homer, *Iliad* I, 188–92; IV, 513; XVIII, 112–3 (Loeb Classical Library, London, 1924) 16–17; 190–1; 346–7. ✗
12. Volker Langholf, *Medical Theories in Hippocrates* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1990), 37–8. ✗
13. Homer, *Iliad* I, 81–3 (ed. cit., 8–9); cf. William V. Harris, *Restraining Rage: The Ideology of Anger Control in Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 51. ✗
14. Homer, *Iliad* I 103–4 (ed. cit., 10–11); cf. Douglas L. Cairns, 'Ethics, Ethology, Terminology: Iliadic Anger and the Cross-Cultural Study of Emotion', in *Ancient Anger: Perspectives from Homer to Galen*, ed. Susanna Braund, and Glenn W. Most (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 21–2. ✗
15. Geoffrey S. Kirk, *The Iliad: A Commentary*, vol. 1, *Books 1–4* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 73. ✗
16. Homer, *Iliad* IX, 646–8; XVI, 52–5 (ed. cit., 428–9; 168–9). ✗
17. *Ibid.* XVI, 60 (ed. cit., 168–9). ✗
18. Kirk, *The Iliad: A Commentary*, vol. 1, 394. ✗
19. Harris, *Restraining Rage*, 53. ✗
20. Homer, *Iliad* I, 190–224 (ed. cit., 16–19). ✗
21. *Ibid.* IX, 646; XVIII, 110 (ed. cit., 428–9; 10–11). ✗
22. Cairns, 'Ethics, Ethology, Terminology', 25. ✗

23. Richard Seaford, *Reciprocity and Ritual: Homer and Tragedy in the Developing City-State* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 158, 165. ✘
24. Homer, *Iliad* XVIII, 22–5, (ed. cit., 290–1). ✘
25. Ibid. XVIII, 26–34 (ed. cit., 290–1). ✘
26. Seaford, *Reciprocity and Ritual*, 166–7. ✘
27. Homer, *Iliad* XVIII, 90–1, 98–9 (ed. cit., 294–5). ✘
28. Ibid., I, 44–7 (ed. cit., 290–1). ✘
29. Fridolf Kudlien, '„Schwärzliche“ Organe im frühgriechischen Denken', *Medizinhistorisches Journal* 8, no. 1 (1973): 53–8, at 54–7. ✘
30. Langholf, *Medical Theories in Hippocrates*, 39–49, who speaks of 'obvious parallels' and 'semantic fossils' connecting the Homeric and Hippocratic tradition with respect to melancholy and related concepts, such as *cholos*, *thymos*, *phrenes*. ✘
31. Homer, *Iliad* XVI, 203 (ed. cit., 178–9). ✘
32. Geoffrey S. Kirk, *The Iliad: A Commentary*, vol. 3, *Books 9–12* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 113–4. He adds that 'what consumes it is *eris*'. ✘
33. Here and subsequently Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 3–7, 34. ✘
34. Homer, *Iliad* VI, 201–2 (ed. cit., 276–7). ✘
35. Jean Clair, 'Anatomie de la mélancholie: Un deuil sans objet', Transcription (France Culture, 2007), <http://www.fabriquedesens.net/Anatomie-de-la-melancholie-Un-deuil> (accessed July 16, 2018). ✘
36. In the last song of the *Iliad*, Achilles' mother Thetis does actually employ this expression, to eat one's heart out, about her son's despondency, but this is not a lasting state, as it seems to be for Bellerophon. ✘
37. Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*, 18. ✘
38. Boris Kayachev, *Allusion and Allegory: Studies in the 'Cirius'* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2016), 90. In the two Sophoclean tragedies called by their heroes' names, Heracles and Ajax show signs of a self-destructive form of melancholy. ✘
39. Homer, *Iliad* XVIII, 117–19 (ed. cit., 296–7). ✘
40. Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*, 14. ✘
41. Jouanna, *Greek Medicine from Hippocrates to Galen*, 229. ✘
42. Hippocrates, *Nature of Man* VII, 43–4, 20–1; XV, 1–2, 26–37, (ed. cit., 38–41). ✘
43. Hippocrates, *Prognostic* II, 5–11; XI, 24–5; XIV, 11–13, in *Hippocrates*, vol. 2, trans. W.H.S. Jones, vol. 148 of *Loeb Classical Library*, ed. G.P. Goold, 6th ed. (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press and William Heinemann Ltd., 1981), 8–11, 24–5, 28–9. ✘
44. Hippocrates, *Epidemics* III, chap. II, XIII–XIV, in *Hippocrates*, vol. 1, trans. W.H.S. Jones, vol. 147 of *Loeb Classical Library*, ed. G.P. Goold, 6th ed. (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press and William Heinemann Ltd., 1972), 252–5. ✘
45. Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*, 8. ✘
46. Homer, *Iliad* XVIII, 108–10 (ed. cit. 296–7). ✘
47. Hippocrates, *Aphorisms* VI, no. XXIII, in *Hippocrates* vol. 4, trans. W.H.S. Jones, vol. 150 of *Loeb Classical Library*, ed. G.P. Goold, 7th ed. (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press and William Heinemann Ltd., 1979), 184–5. ✘
48. Jouanna, *Greek Medicine from Hippocrates to Galen*, 242–3. ✘
49. Ibid., 235. ✘
50. Hippocrates, *Airs, Waters, Places* IV, 11–26 (ed. cit. 76–9); Hippocrates, *Epidemics* I, chap. V, 3–5, in *Hippocrates*, vol. 1, trans. W.H.S. Jones, vol. 147 of *Loeb Classical Library*, ed. G.P. Goold, 6th ed. (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press and William Heinemann Ltd., 1972), 154–5; Hippocrates, *Aphorisms* III, no. XIV (ed. cit. 126–7). ✘
51. Homer, *Iliad* XII, 462–6; XIX, 16–17 (ed. cit., 336–7; 576–9). ✘
52. Hippocrates, *Prognostic* XI, 24–8 (ed. cit. 24–5). ✘
53. Hippocrates, *Aphorisms* IV, no. XXI–XXII (ed. cit. 138–141). ✘
54. Hippocrates, *Airs, Waters, Places* X, 83–94 (ed. cit. 102–5). ✘
55. Hippocrates, *Nature of Man* XV, 28–9 (ed. cit. 40–1). ✘
56. Robert Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy* (Philadelphia, PA: Collins, 1857), 17. ✘
57. Jouanna, *Greek Medicine from Hippocrates to Galen*, 233–4. ✘



58. Ibid., 242. ✗
59. Kirk, *The Iliad: A Commentary*, vol. 1, 64. ✗
60. *A Dictionary of the Huang Di nei jing su wen*, ed. Hermann Tessenow and Paul. U. Unschuld (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2008), chap. 37: 47. See also Carlos Nogueira, *Acupuntura Bioenergética y Moxibustión Tomo II*, 6th ed. (Valladolid: Ediciones CEMETC, 2007), 667. ✗
61. Jennifer Radden, *Moody Minds Distempered: Essays on Melancholy and Depression* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 63–4. ✗
62. Müri, 'Melancholie und schwarze Galle', 32; Flashar, *Melancholie und Melancholiker in den medizinischen Theorien der Antike*, 33–4; Jouanna, *Greek Medicine from Hippocrates to Galen*, 231. ✗
63. Angus Gowland, 'The Problem of Early Modern Melancholy', in *Past & Present* no. 191 (May 2006): 77–120, at 86. ✗
64. Flashar, *Melancholie und Melancholiker in den medizinischen Theorien der Antike*, 50–3. Petronius related melancholy to the hot-brained (*caldicerebrus*), see Harris, *Restraining Rage*, 15. ✗
65. Jennifer Radden, *The Nature of Melancholy: From Aristotle to Kristeva* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 75–8 ✗
66. Ibid., 87–93. ✗

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