

Context Corner II: Female Weakness

I. DEFINITIONS: During Jane Austen’s lifetime, “constitution” and “complexion” were two important ways of indicating the body’s health; below are definitions of these terms, as they were used historically. Important to note are the major overlaps between these two terms. These definitions are taken from the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

Constitution

(1) Physical nature or character of the body in regard to healthiness, strength, vitality, etc.

Usage dates: 1553—1855

(2) Nature, character, or condition of mind; mind, disposition, temperament, temper.

Usage dates: 1589—1855

Complexion

(1) Bodily habit or constitution (*orig.* supposed to be constituted by the ‘humours’). *Obs.*

Usage dates: 1340—1761

(2) Physical constitution or nature (of members of the body). *Obs.*

Usage dates: 1398—1604

(3) Constitution or habit of mind, disposition, temperament; ‘nature’. *Obs.*

Usage dates: 1386—1856

(4) The natural colour, texture, and appearance of the skin, *esp.* of the face; orig. as showing the ‘temperament’ or bodily constitution. (Now, without any such notion, the ordinary sense.)

Usage dates: 1580—1856

II. HUMORAL MEDICINE, NEURAL MEDICINE, AND JANE AUSTEN

In ancient, medieval, and early modern medicine, the four humors were fluids believed to circulate and mix in the body. The four humors were blood, bile, choler, and phlegm, and each humor was thought to correspond to a particular disposition (or temperament, or “complexion”); each humor also was associated with a season, an element (air, fire, earth, or water), and a particular mixture of temperature and moisture (hot, cold, wet, or dry). This diagram broadly shows these relationships:

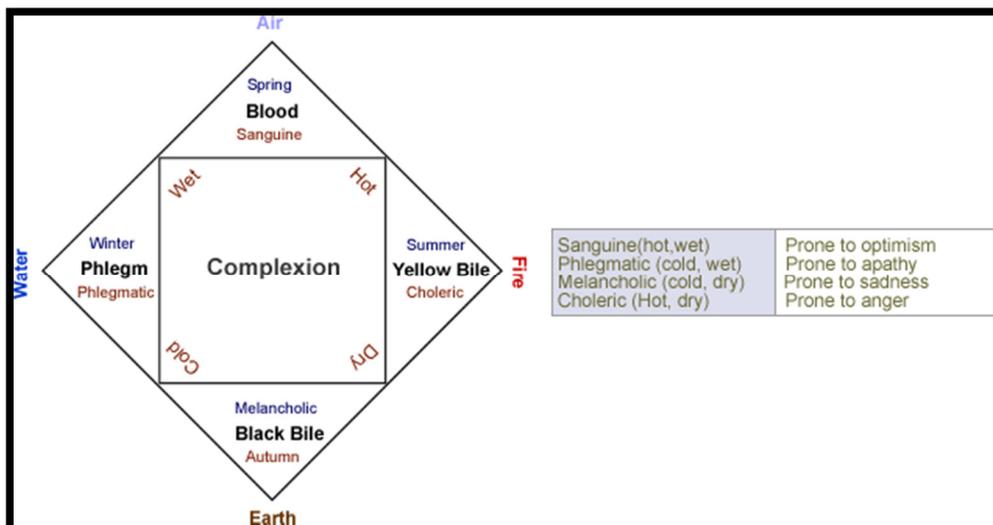


Image credit: <https://www.calvin.edu/academic/medieval/medicine/images/humors.png>

During Jane Austen's lifetime, however, a new medical paradigm focused on the nerves (or neural medicine), had largely replaced humoral medicine. However, many of the meanings associated with the humors still circulated in the language and culture (especially in reference to human temperaments) long after humoral medicine was replaced.

Our contemporary understanding of the term "complexion"—by which we mean skin color or quality—evolved from these older usages, but it is important to remember that, when Jane Austen uses the term "complexion," she usually is referencing human temperament, affect, or the appearance of the skin, particularly the face; sometimes she means skin color, but bodily chromatics are not necessarily linked to racial identity in Austen's historical moment. Of course, body colorings certainly could be read as indicators of race, as they are in our contemporary lexicon. As Roxann Wheeler writes, the only sure way to understand the meaning of "complexion" during Austen's historical moment is to consider the context in which the word is being used.

II. CONSTITUTIONAL MAINTENANCE

A. Childhood Hardening Regimes

Britons believed that steeling the constitution during childhood—by not shielding children against the British climate—could protect children from debility later in life. Excessive coddling was strictly to be avoided by eighteenth-century parents because it was widely believed that permissiveness and indulgence could spoil children's constitutions. Sturdy British constitutions were critical during this period—an age of ongoing war with France and imperial expansion. John Locke, in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), elaborates these ideas about the proper treatment of British children. Notably, he recommended hardening rituals only for boys; Mary Wollstonecraft would respond to this one-sided treatment of the question in her *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787).

B. Weather and Aerial Environments

Because the climate was intimately linked to bodily health through the older medical foundations of humoral theory, eighteenth-century Britons paid special attention to their interactions with the out-of-doors. These measures might seem nonsensical to us in the present day, but it was a system that made a great deal of sense during an age when most people did not regularly think about what the insides of their bodies looked like. Human anatomists of this period (and before) certainly had a sense of the body's internal architecture and workings—but in an era before the stethoscope (invented in 1816), the x-ray (discovered in 1895), and the MRI (which arrived in 1971)—ordinary people tended to understand the inner-workings of their bodies by analogy to the outside world, which is the foundation of humoral medicine. Although humoral medicine was replaced during the eighteenth century by neural medicine, which focused on the nerves, humoral ways of thinking persisted in the culture well into the nineteenth century.

C. Sensibility

The eighteenth-century culture of sensibility was contemporary to the rise of neural medicine in Britain. "Sensibility" had critical aesthetic and literary incarnations and, from a medical history standpoint, it depended heavily on Newtonian and Lockean descriptions of human perception, which slowly were moving thinking about the body away from the humoral system. "During the eighteenth-century," G. J. Barker-Benfield writes,

this psychoperceptual scheme became a paradigm, meaning not only consciousness in general but a particular kind of consciousness, one that could be further sensitized in order to be more acutely responsive to signals from the outside environment and from inside the body. While sensibility rested on essentially materialist assumptions, proponents of the cultivation of sensibility came to invest it with spiritual and moral values. (xvii)

The culture of sensibility was a deeply gendered view of the human nervous system; it posited that women's nerves were more susceptible than men's and had to be more rigorously protected from corrupting factors, both physiological and moral.

III. EXPOSURE

The human constitution (or complexion), eighteenth-century Britons believed, could be compromised by a variety of extremes that often were characterized as “immoderation” or “exposure.” Below are a few categories in which Georgian-era Britons believed themselves capable of overdoing it.

A. Food and Drink

Constitutional maintenance was an ongoing exercise in moderation, especially in eating and drinking. Food that was too rich or ornate—like sauces or soufflés—was thought to compromise or sicken British constitutions with French influence and the unnecessary excesses of the upper classes. Alcohol, like rich foods, was sometimes believed to have restorative qualities, but only if consumed in moderation.

B. Weather

Exposing the body to extremes of heat or cold, or getting the body too wet, often was perceived as a course of constitutional ruin. It is a common literary trope of the period—found in Austen's work and elsewhere—that women (and sometimes men) become sick after getting too wet in the rain. There are medical and moral meanings at play here: the medicine of the period urged Britons to balance their body's interactions with the out-of-doors, and moral codes ascribed social and sexual propriety to doing the same. At the same time, a growing literature on landscape “improvements” stressed the salubrity of certain kinds of airs and places, particularly the waters and atmosphere of the seaside, which were broadly commercialized.

C. Climate

Hot climates, particularly the tropical regions of Britain's empire, formed a special case of “extreme weather.” Britons widely believed that their northerly-formed constitutions could sicken and become permanently debilitated by sojourns in more southerly latitudes. The biological reality, of course, is that the age of imperialism was an era of colliding disease environments: the human body transported over the globe pathogens and other sub-cellular forms, like the sickle-cell trait in Africans, which produced massive human wreckage in epidemics and bodily systems otherwise un-adapted to new microbes and parasites.

D. Company

The moral meanings ascribed to sensibility also suggested to Britons that their constitutions could be ruined by courting the company of unscrupulous people; this was especially true for women whose physiological constitutions (and social reputation) could be ruined by extra-marital sex and unsanctioned pregnancy.

IV. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

A. In *Mansfield Park*, many of Austen's characters are preoccupied with the idea of “improvements”—whether they are to Fanny's complexion, Mr. Rushworth's grounds at Sotherton, or Edmund's future living at Thornton Lacey. How does Austen use the language of “improvements” to advance or complicate the relationships between her characters?

B. At the beginning of Chapter 7, Edmund and Fanny discuss Mary Crawford's “complexion”; what is the relationship Austen portrays between bodily surface and human depth (in this or any other passage)?

C. Revisit the series of events in Chapter 7 when Fanny is cutting roses in the heat and reclining on the sofa because of a headache; how do discourses about weather, aerial environments, and female sensibility structure the social interactions of these episodes?

D. Consider Sir Thomas Bertram's discussion with Fanny of Henry Crawford's marriage proposal. Why is Sir Thomas preoccupied by the lack of a fire in Fanny's apartment? How do ideas about Fanny's "comfort" frame this discussion?

E. How does Austen describe Tom Bertram's illness, and what are its narrative purposes?

V. FURTHER READING

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