

English Honours; U.G. - I; Paper - 01

Topic: Ben Jonson's Concept of Humours

The term 'Humours', as used by Ben Jonson, is based on an ancient physiological theory of four fluids found in human body. According to this theory there are four fluids in human body which determine a man's temperament and mental state. These four humours are Blood, Phlegm, Choler (or yellow bile) and Melancholy (or black bile). A normal man has these four humours in a balanced proportion. But the excess of any of these humours makes him eccentric in one way or the other. He becomes abnormal and develops some kind of oddity in his temperament or behaviour and thus becomes an object of fun and ridicule. The humour of Blood makes a man excessively optimistic or sanguine, even without the slightest chance of hope or success. Phlegm makes one excessively calm and docile, Choler makes one highly ill-tempered, and black bile makes one excessively melancholy and morbid.

Ben Jonson explicates the theory of Humours in the Introduction to his play "Every Man in His Humour". Ben Jonson's comedies are called 'Comedies of

Humour" because the principal characters in all his comedies are victims of one humour or the other. Bobadil, for example, is characterized by his decorous manners, uttering improbable boasts. Asper in "Every Man Out of His Humour" is a harsh and pitiless judge. Delia is an idealizing husband consistently rebuffed by his wife. There is a stream of satire in all Ben Jonson's principal characters. ⇐