Medical Diagnosis and the Colour Yellow in Early Modern England

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1 Of all colours, yellow is most prone to conceptual and chromatic smudging. Associated with the colour gold, emblem of royalty, luxury and wealth, yellow is gold’s contrary: the quotidian, the abject and the organic. Beyond this polarity, it possesses a “multivalent figuration” as Sabine Doran argues in her 2014 *The Culture of Yellow* (18). For Doran, yellow is inscribed in a network of meaning that in modernity came to be embedded in aesthetics. For analyses of colour in premodern society, however, we are indebted to the medieval historian and symbologist Michel Pastoureau. Pastoureau’s appraisal of medieval chromatics has shown that colour is more than an idea and that it operates as a complex cultural construction of shifting semiotics as well as a phenomenon of physical perception (his emphasis is not on aesthetics per se). The medieval world understood colour as one of the properties of things, *proprietatibus rei* (accidents), and interpreted it through philosophy, theology, rhetoric and medicine.

2 This article thus examines the interpretive continuities and discontinuities of the colour yellow in selected medieval to early modern medical texts by Bartholomaeus Anglicus, Thomas Elyot, Andrew Boorde and Stephen Batman, and it argues that yellow’s multivalency is visible in early modern medical diagnosis.
1. Yellow and the humours

The intellectual background subtending colour and medicine in early modern England strengthens claims about yellow’s mutable history. Roman, Greek and Arabic medical sources formed the basis of English medical training. Aspirant physicians usually studied at continental schools, such as those at Montpellier, Padua or Salerno, where they learnt about the constituents and functions of living and non-living forms from compilations such as the *Articella*, a key textbook of Hippocratic-Galenic theory compiled in the 12th century and printed in sixteen editions up to 1534 (O’Boyle 53-54). The compilation’s first three articles, *Ysagoge Joannitius*, *Phylaretus de Pulsibus* and *Theophilus de Vrinis*, delineate the crucial conceptual frameworks of a holistic cosmic system; four fundamental elements, *i.e.* ignis, aer, aqua, and terra, were believed to organize, operate within and influence human, animal and vegetal bodies. The elements, interacting with differing proportions of heat, cold, moisture and aridity, organised the four liquids or humours: blood, red bile, phlegm and melancholia (black bile). For example, fire — hot and dry (*ignis calidus et siccus*) became the perfect choleric humour; Leo and autumn were its astrological sign and season. Sanguine, phlegmatic and melancholic mixtures: *aer calidus et humidus, aqua frigida et humida, terra frigida et sicca*, were similarly codified within that system. These elements and properties created diagnostic markers for medical interpretation; yellow was a crucial signifier in this development for two reasons.
In the *Articella*, yellow appears in Joannitius as an unnatural form of *choler*. In his scheme, *colora rubea* (red bile) covers a family of yellow and green shades. Given an admixture of differing proportions of heat and moisture, the natural form of choler transforms into *citrina* (lemon), which he describes as a cooler form of the dominant humour. *Vitellina* (egg-yolk), *colera prassina* (leek-green) and *erugina ad modum viridis* (verdigris (ii)) are additional variations and combinations of the elements that reside under the rubric of “red bile.” By the early 16th century, yellow bile was the most common term for the choleric humour. This lexical shift foregrounded yellow as a major symbol in humoural theory. Further, yellow’s place in medicine was secure as it is the colour of many of the body’s natural waste products, which are on the golden spectrum: urine, ordure, pus, and vomit. It is common sense that these natural products (urine and excrement being essential components of living beings and pus and vomit being natural expulsions to heal sickness) can be healthy or unhealthy. Not only waste byproducts, but the skin, the sclera, the tongue and mucosa can change colour during illness, with yellow implicating itself in many of these observable changes. Apart from red, yellow is the colour with the most variety of shades, tones and tints when it comes to readily observable bodily symptoms. In sum, the colour yellow is often the referee in determining deviations from health to bodily disorder.

From the 15th century onwards, medical knowledge circulated through a flourishing literature of advice. Hundreds of Mirrors-for-princes and rulers, dietaries (such as John Lydgate’s *Dietary*) and health regimens (such as the *Regimen sanitatis salernitanum*, and Galen’s *De sanitate tuenda*) were produced under patronage or for didactic and private use. Vernacular texts that treated everyday health matters were becoming popular but not without some protest from trained physicians. In 1536, the court diplomat and scholar Sir Thomas Elyot wrote a vernacular advice book called the *Castel of Health*. What was unusual about this book was that Elyot was not a physician. Nor was he a “common” man. His mentor, Thomas Linacre, was first physician and founder of the Royal College, and famously translated several of Galen’s Greek texts into Latin. Elyot claimed his own medical knowledge was equal to those who practiced “physick”, even that he was superior to them in that he translated sophisticated science into language accessible to the reading public (Proheme, *Castel Aii-iv verso*). Elyot’s lengthy justification for writing his *Castel* as a “knight” rather than a “physician” in the Proheme (A.ii) to the 1541 edition holds a mirror to the anxiety that we can assume was felt by trained doctors who believed Elyot was transgressing on their professional territory. Elyot, it appears, had a different and more personal agenda in writing his text.

In the *Castel*, natural choler is the “fome of bloud, the color whereof is redde and clere, or more lyke to an orêge colour, and is hot and drye, wherin the fire hath dominion, and is lyght and sharpe [...]” (9). Natural choler is between white and red and is hot and dry. Fire dominates natural choler; it is created of the most subtle part of “matter decocte or boyled in the stomacke, whose beginning is in the lyver” (13). In this scheme, four kinds of corrupted or unnatural choler are created when the other three humours comingle in varying degrees. As in Joannitius, the four unnaturals are citrine or yellow choler, a mixture of natural choler and “fleume”. *Vitellina* is now “yelky, like yelkds of egges”, or congealed phlegm (ibid.). Leek green arises from the stomach and green canker or metal is from excessively dry choler or phlegm and is deadly, like venim. Later, Elyot explains that the perfect colour complexion is “redd and clere” similar to an “orange” colour (9v). The foods engendering choler include leeks, mustard and pepper. He writes that
Galen commends yellow, clear wine because of its heat, which is the proper colour of very hot wines (32v). The list is prescriptive and the foods are either homeopathic or function by contraries of colours and elements. At the end of the list of foods causing choler, Elyot includes “lacke of exercise” as a further source (9). Later in the Castel, he expands on this idea and suggests that exercising too soon after eating will augment yellow choler. The way to find out when to exercise is by checking the colour of one’s urine. The ideal time is when the colour is temperate, “not red nor pale, but as it were gilt, than shuld exercise have his beginning” (45).

Four Temperaments

Elyot wrote of bouts of ill-health (colic and kidney stones) in several letters addressed to Cromwell (Wilson, 13, 22, 26). However, on the section on the choleric disposition in the Castel, Elyot confesses to the reader in an autobiographical moment that he, too, has suffered from choleric imbalance:

> Wherfore besyde the opinion of best lerned men, myne owne peynful experience also moueth me, to exhorte them, whiche be of this complexion, to eschewe moche abstynence (of food). Those who have known me have perceyued in my body a great alteration, that is to say, from ylle astate to better. (71)

Elyot wanted others to diagnose and understand their own humoural disposition, but he also advises his readers to contemplate the Scriptures and take moral counsel (Richards 262). The latter is a theme also found in his Boke Named the Governour (1531) a courtesy manual, or regimen for self-governance, with a blend of morality and physiology where Linacre is cited again as a source of health advice. The digestion of close, concentrated reading calms the passions and leads to health, and may, as the 1422 Gouernaunce of Prynces from the Secreta Secretorum claims, assist the choleric man who possesses a “sharpe witte” and is wise and has a good memory (220).

Elyot’s integrated understanding on self-management in the Governour urges readers to incorporate exercise into their regimen (XVI). As he did in the Castel, he warns against exercising too soon or too late after food since either will flood the body with crude humours or augment yellow choler (45). But the small section on exercise, far from telling
readers how and when to implement a workout, is actually pointing them to the sedentary activity of reading books. Further, Elyot addresses only those readers who “understande latine” and who are able to take “moche delectation” from Galen’s Latin *In sanitate tuenda* (Book 1, f. 63). This is in stark contrast to his Castel, which is written for all who can read English. Another layer of pseudo-medical elitism is added in the Governour when Elyot heaps praise on his mentor Thomas Linacre with the moniker “Henry VIII’s late physician” (f. 63). For others, presumably those who do not read Latin, he suggests that the best physical exertions to strengthen and toughen up the body in the event of war or other emergencies are wrestling, hunting, shooting with the long bow and dancing. These are activities, one imagines, not necessarily readily available to the non-Latin reading population.

2. A confused lexicon of yellow

10 In his *Dictionary* (1538), Elyot’s “citrinus” is defined as “of orenge color, or lyke golde”. Likewise, “[F]laueo” is like gold or of yellow colour (F. ante L). Curiously, Elyot describes *glaucus* as a “grey colour” but *glaucus substantium* is a god of the sea, a common name, or the name of a fish (G Ante L). Cerulean is

blew or grey as the skie is, when it hath littell speckes of grey cloudes: but Antonius Thylesius, in his boke of colours saith, that Caelieus color, and Glaucus, is all one, saying that glaucus, is more common: and desreyveth them both to haue a certaine fyr bryghtnesse and ruddinesse, as in the cies of a lyon or an oule. Also in the skynnes of yonge withy branches, and in chestnut: in horses he calleth it a baie, but no a bryght baie. (f. 18)

11 Yet the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “glaucous” as a dull or pale green colour passing into blue (a). “Glaucus” often meant yellow in English Royal Wardrobe accounts from the early fourteenth to the 16th century (Monnas 27-28) but an illustration of *glaucus* urine in the following uroscopic chart shows a tint of yellow rather than cerulean blue or grey.

12 One puzzling feature of yellow in medicine, which I touched on earlier, is the ready substitution of the words “red bile” with “yellow bile”. This leads to confusion about what actual shade, tone, and hue we understand yellow to be in certain texts, such as Joannitius’ *Isagoge* in the *Articella* (red bile) and in the *Regimen sanitatis salernitani*um (where it is described as *rufus* [176]). But yellow has a confused genealogy aside from its early humoral imprecision. In early medicine, the colour yellow’s polyvalence is highlighted by the word “glaucus” though not in the context of colour definition as we saw in Elyot’s *Dictionary* (1538). Classical Latin defines *glaucus* as a bluish fish of the same name, *glaucus* as celandine, which is yellow. *Glauecum*, however, is a bluish-coloured plant or celandine (Lewis and Short, 813). Medieval and early modern medicine were able to live with a word for yellow that meant “cerulean blue” or “grey” or gilt as the heading *De colore glauco sive flavo* in Bartholomaeus Anglicus’ *De Proprietatibus Rerum* suggests. *Glaucus* or *flavus*: grey or yellow, cerulean blue or gold colour. Elyot too is well aware of the anomalies of *glaucus* but repeats it from *De Proprietatibus Rerum* without clarification. Copying is seen in other texts, such as Andrew Boorde’s and Stephen Batman’s *On Bartholome*. We cannot brand this confusion as duplicity as we have no evidence of deliberate obfuscation. One explanation may lie in a widespread belief in medieval thought about the “inherent instability of colour-sensations” (Gage 69). We do, however, find that these colour anomalies are left hanging, untroublingly unresolved. Perhaps as
an antidote to this lexical slipperiness, medical writers employed metaphors and similes (often from quotidian objects) in their attempts to convey the meaning of shades of colour in ways that their readers would understand from their own experience.

Articella. A Doctor Examining Urine c. 1300

Another writer named Andrew Boorde, a trained physician, wrote a *Regyment or Dyetary of Healthe* in the later 16th century. His manual resembles a modern Feng Shui script in that it begins with lengthy advice about how to select the best location and how to build a house that enhances health. After one’s house is built, Boorde recommends a diet for those suffering from humoural misalignment. For example, the “colorycke” man or woman is to abstain from hot spices, wine, coleric meats, or fasting, as choler is hot and dry (Ch. xxv). He recommends the following herbs to purge choler: wormwood, fumytory, centory, wild hops, manna, reuherbe, tamarindes, and the whey of butter (ibid.). Up to the 18th century, similar remedies based on the humours were recommended for horses with jaundice or “the yellowes” (Gibson 140-41).

Early modern medicine relied on a 13th-century book written by Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *De Proprietatibus Rerum*. John Trevisa’s Middle English translation *On the Properties of Things* in the 14th century was superseded by Wynkyn de Worde’s printed 1495 version, *De Proprietatibus Rerum*. In the late 16th century, Stephen Batman further developed this influential text with *Batman on Bartholome* (1582). Most of John Trevisa’s text is intact in Batman’s edition. Although Batman claimed on his frontispiece that his edition “corrected, enlarged and amended” Trevisa’s, Bartholomaeus’ trajectory on colour in Trevisa and Batman is strikingly similar being based on the Aristotelian theory of a seven-colour spectrum: black, white, red, purple, yellow, green and blue (*De sensu* 3.439b).
Nevertheless, Batman did add a section at the end of Coloribus titled “the order of colours to limn with, after the accustomed skill of this latter time, not unprofitable for Painter and Stainers”. The addition instructs the limner on the five grounds (395) and the twelve signs of colour. Batman advises on the best inks to use, how to keep one’s colours “fair” and how to prepare paper or parchment for gold leaf.

It is likely Batman copied from Elyot’s Castel and Andrew Boorde’s Breuary of Helthe (1547) for some of his information although his addition is his own. It is also probable that Elyot and Boorde copied from an early edition of De Proprietatibus Rerum. Batman was updating medical information for his readers who accepted contemporary advice treatises as trustworthy medical sources (Parrish 338) although these contemporary sources were mashups of ancient and medieval texts. Parrish concludes that “humoral theory in medicine and diet still prevailed in the sixteenth century” and that “little knowledge [...] differentiates the thought of the sixteenth century from the thought of the thirteenth century” (345-46). We cannot be as confident as Parrish that little change occurred during these centuries.

In all the above texts, white is the star performer: chief and “ground of meane colours, of much clear light and pure matter and clear [...] the more the pure matter is the more white is the colour” (De Proprietatibus Rerum 1284). In Batman, white is “fundament and grounde of mean colours” (392). Yellow is placed next to white on the Aristotelian spectrum, and is therefore close to the clarity and pure perfection of white, with red as the middle colour between black. But Batman also enters the glaucus/yellow fray:

De colore glauco sive flavo. Yalowe is gendred of whitenes, drawing some deale towards red, and is gendered as aui. meneth, in matter it is somedeale temperate in comparison to greene color. As (he saith) greene color in trees chaungeth into yeolow in harvest time, when in leaues is much matter more moistened then the matter yeolo & and the thick parts wasted some and some by working of heat, & not all destroyed, though cold hath the mastry. On the other hand , if cold has the mastery, the leaves will have white as well as yellow colour. (Cap. 12)

Batman tries to explain glaucus as yellow that is brought about by a change in the arboreal seasons. A green leaf will change to yellow when the climate is cold or hot. In her authoritative overview of uroscopic texts, M. Teresa Tavormina has noted that colour terms are notoriously difficult to define precisely in words alone, even within a single language, much less between languages and with terms whose meanings may be obscure or may change in the process of transmission. (151)
3. Yellow’s spaces: disease, drama and daily life

Tavormina explains this chromatic mobility in terms of cultural and language transmission. As the many examples of *glaucus* show, some erroneous or confusing translations remain out of what appears to be, habit or out of a familiarity with paradox. Nevertheless, these challenges to understanding colour terms did not impede physicians from performing their duties, which entailed a detailed knowledge of theory combined with sensory observation. Sight, smell, taste and touch (colour, odour, flavour and feel) were the bases for diagnosing internal disease from external signs. Some diseases were easy to perceive visually and in those diseases external signs were unequivocal. For example, yellow had its own symptom/disease: jaundice, a word whose entomological origins stem from Old French “jaunisse” and Latin *galbinus*. Jaundice, a noun, sometimes termed “yellow evil,” is also a word that entwines meanings from medicine, colour and temperament. Modern medicine teaches that excess bilirubin, a chemical produced by the liver, is responsible for causing yellowing of the whites of the eyes, the pigments the skin and saffron-shaded urine. However in early modern medicine, it was thought that the yellowing of the body was caused by an imbalance of the liver or an irregularity in bile “as it fare þe iaudy, pat is chaungyne of kynde colour into foule colour and vnsemeliche” (*De Proprietatibus Rerum* 1283; *Batman on Bartholome* 391).
19 The pairing of leprosy with yellow occurred with sufferers describing a particular leprous condition called *leontiasis*. A person suffering this particular form of leprosy had thin hair of a lion (reddish-yellow), and yellow and brown macules on their body (Demaitre 61, 92-93). Although the disease was believed to ascend from black bile, yellow was a component of it. Further, yellow in its various tones and shades was essential in diagnosing the “tisike” or cough:

> And if it comep of hete, his / spetting is citryn, eipir ʒelewe as safron, eipir grene. And þe body febleþ euery day moche and openly. It must be helid as þe coughe pat comeþ of hete. But if it comep of colde, þe spitting is white eipir ʒelewe, and it shal be helid as þe cold couȝ. (Getz 136)

20 The colour of expelled sputum allowed the doctor to discern the temperament underlying the cough; from this information they prepared bespoke herbal remedies.

21 Not only physical disease but also moral disease shared in yellow’s alleged duplicity. One famous example where yellow indicates moral disease is in the portrait of the Pardoner in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. With thin hair, “yellow as wax But smoothe as a strike of flex,” the Pardoner is one of the most spiritually and physically sinful pilgrims in the company ( *Canterbury Tales*, Prol. 675-79). Exhibiting markers of a phlegmatic disposition, his soft yellow hair exposes not only his humoural but also his moral character. In particular, the Pardoner’s detour from his role of confessor to merchant of fake relics and papal indulgences is pre-empted by Chaucer’s knowledge of complexion theory. By Shakespeare’s time, colour-coded emotions were evident but inconsistent. Shakespeare’s plays use yellow-eyed to show jealousy in a *Winter’s Tale* (“If thou hast The ordering of the
Mind too, mongst all Colours No Yellow in't", (OED 4.B.1.c). In Much Ado About Nothing, Beatrice calls Claudio "civill as an orange, and something of that jealous complexion" (2.1. 55). Yet in Othello we find "O beware ielousie. It is the greene eyd monster" (OED 2.b.). We cannot know why the motif for jealousy in modernity fixed on green-eyed rather than yellow-eyed.

Nor was clothing immune from colour coding. The Church issued decrees prescribing the correct tones for priestly vestments during the cycles of the liturgical year. At Lincoln in 1536, yellow was to be worn in Lent (St. John Hope 24). After the execution of Henry VIII’s Catherine of Aragon, he and his new bride, Anne Boleyn, appeared in matching yellow clothing the morning after. Yellow was supposed to signify mourning (St. John Hope 24). For the general populace, quotidian aspects of life influenced the names of clothing colours. In a 1552 sumptuary statute various shades such as “orange-tawny, russet, marble, sheepe’s color, lion’s color [...] new sad colour, and puke” are cited (Schneider 117). In Greene’s Tu Quoque, performed in London in 1611, one Bub (Bubble) tells Staines, a character in the play, to “run to the Mercers to buy ells of horse flesh coloer’d taffeta, yards of yellow satin, and eight yards of oranje tawney veluet” (D3). Also, joyce criticises Staines with her speech: “For your Face, I neuer faw a worfe, It lookes as if’t were drawne with yellow Oacker / Vpon blacke Buckram” (H4). These two examples show differences in yellow's meaning. Yellow and orange tawny are cloth colours; yellow ochre is a less attractive colour when painted on a face. Colours, such as pease porridghe (a boiled legume mash that was pale yellow), dun (a dirty yellow), rat’s colour (self-explanatory), horse flesh (horse hide), gooseturd green and puke (dark grey), underline how chromatic terms were devised from quotidian objects. In addition, the English chronicler Holinshed expressed dismay at the plethora of clothing colours he observed:

I might here name a sort of hewes deuised for the nonce, wherewith to please phantastical heads, as gooseturd greene, pease porridghe tawnie, popingaie blue, lustie gallant, the diuell in the head (I should saie the hedge). (Chronicles 1.290)

Ben Jonson’s 1601 The Poetaster includes dialogue where a protagonist, when told of his lord’s delay, asks: “what, have they [the mules] the yellows [...]” (Act 1, Scene 1, p. 17). The “yellows” were equine liver disorders or jaundice.

In the early 17th century, a fierce debate raged in London about the wearing of ruffs yellowed by starch. On the other hand, the yellow of crocus, or croceus, became a synecdoche for wealth by its association with the rare and expensive saffron stamens that provided the cloth dying industry and its traders their prosperity (Monnas 25-28). The associations with prosperity and trade did not stop there. Ann Jones and Peter Stallybrass argue that saffron-yellow was “a culturally-freighted colour” (140) as it linked indulgence with waste. Significantly, it was imported from England’s early modern enemies: “Spain and France” (ibid.). But in Wynkyn de Worde’s 1495 translation of Trevisa, De colore croceo has medical significance:

Saffron colour dieth and coloureth humours and licours more then citrine, and betokeneth passing heate & distemperaunce of bloud in the licour by medling of cholera, as it fareth in them that haue the launders, their vrine hath yeolowe spume, & they haue yeolow eyen, & their skinne is foule and citrine. Most hottest birds of complection and cholarike, as birds of pray haue their vtter parts yeolow of colour, as their feet and bills. And that commeth of right much cholarike & hot fumositie which kinde calleth into the vtter parts, and they haue therefore such colour. (Ca. 16)
4. Colour, uroscopy and medical diagnosis

Nowhere does yellow shine more than in uroscopy, which is a key link between humours and colours (Moulinier-Brogli 142). Uroscopy was one of the primary commonplace and medical diagnostic tools available in premodern England, and one of a physician’s chief skills was to analyse it in order to detect ill health in their patient. Armed with a urine chart, the theory of the admixtures of humours, and a rounded glass flask called a “matula” or “Jordan”, the physician was ready to read the patient’s urine. In medieval and early modern manuscripts and print depictions, this rounded glass flask, which became the physician’s emblem, is always held above the physician’s head. In practice, the contents are scrutinized against a translucent light source to see fragments if present as well as colour and viscosity.¹

Urine analysis chart, Nicholas of Lynn, end of 14th century

Theories about urine appear early in the Articella in Theophilus’ De Vrinis (7th century, Wallis 38) where “urine” is defined as colamentum sanguinis (Biiiv, Elyot 53). There were usually twenty colours in uroscopy: albus, lacteus, glaucus, charopos, subpallidius, pallidus, subcitrinus, citrinus, subrufus, rufus, subrubeus, rubeus, subrubicundus, rubicundus, inopos, kyanos, viridis, lividus niger, adustus, and niger mortificatus. Uroscopic systems differing in arrangement and extent recur in vernacular texts in the 16th and the 17th centuries, but they consistently treat substance, colour, contents and regions in the Jordan (high, mid and low). Reflecting the humoral basis of the world, doctors thought heat and cold produced the colour of urine; dryness and moisture its
substance or *hypostatis*. The perfect colour of urine is bright gold, that is, the colour of “*gylte*” whereas saffron, or glowing red “*fyre*” signifies an excess of digestion (87v). In the anonymous *Seynge of Uryns* (1525), healthy urine of a choleric person is framed as “yellow as an orange, or else like the juice of celondine, and thin with an even and clean substance” (f. ii). Lack of digestion reveals urine that is clear white like water, grey as horn, white as whey or the colour of camel’s hair. The beginning of digestion produces pale urine like meat broth. During mid-digestion, urine becomes citrine yellow or subcitrine.

The contents of urine conjure a universe of environmental diversity. Suspended grounds, clouds, wheat bran, foam, bells, bubbles, cobweb-like structures, minute items like rent clothing, motes of the sun, the contents of sores, semen, gravel or sand are the descriptors for floating or settled urine particles. Moreover, the substances are coloured. Equally, ordure, sweat, vomit and spittle are scrutinized for their substance and colour so that the reader may help the physician make a proper diagnosis (88-89).

Urine investigation was sometimes sensory experience. The colours were specified in some detail in the *Seynges of Uryns*: white as clay, water from a well, whitish yellow almost as bright as the horn of a lantern, russet, the broth of half-soaked flesh, yellow but not as yellow as the yellow apple, yellow as saffron from the garden. But by the 17th century and even earlier, health advice literature allowed for greater knowledge of the interpretation of urine by anyone who could read and had access to vernacular texts, although this proved to be an unpopular development for trained physicians. Two views prevailed. First, all disorders could be discerned by viewing the patient’s urine, sometimes without the physician seeing the patient, and second, uroscopy was an effortlessly learnt skill. Eventually, several satirical publications savaged uroscopic quackery. Titled “The Pisse-Prophet Lectures”, their motto was *Vrine est meretrix, vel mendax* (“urine is a harlot and a liar”). The full title of Thomas Brian’s 1655 satire sets the tone of these texts: *The Pisspot Prophet, or, Certain Pisse-Pot Lectures. Wherein are newly discovered the old fallacies, deceit, and jugling of the Pisspot Science, used by all those (whether Quacks, and Empiricks, or other methodical Physicians) who pretend knowledge of Diseases, by the urine, in giving judgement of the same. Never heretofore published by any man in the English Tongue*. Unscrupulous practitioners promised their gullible patients that they could not only diagnose illness but also predict the future by examining their urine. Aside from the misogynistic gendering of urine’s deceit, a physician who falsely pronounced results from urine was called a “lying oracle” as this so-called prophet pretended they could discern age, sex and disease from urine (2). Clearly, some of these false prognosticators were motivated by financial gain but they appeared to have a willing audience who readily believed their predictions. The Lectures tried to counter the infallibility of urine divination by preaching that “there is no certain knowledge of an Disease to be gathered from the Urine alone, nor any safe judgement to be exhibited by the same” (1.1-2)

In his *Breuiary*, Boorde had written that urine was not to be trusted as a sole source of medical information. As a physician, he comes down on that side to emphasise that only a trained or true physician can accurately interpret urine in situ or immediately after the patient produces it. “I do say that an urine is a strumpet or an harlot, for it will lye, and the best Doctour of Physick of them all may bee deceived in an urine” (E22). In particular, he strikes hard at the unreliability of the “colour” of urine: “[T]he colours of urines is a strompet or a harlot” (T26). Boorde alludes to the situation where a patient may have produced the urine the day before the physician was able to examine it. In these
instances, the urine may have been swapped with that of an animal or in the case of a woman, with that of a man’s urine. For Boorde, the “hypostasie” or substance is not only a reliable guide to a patient’s condition, it is an infallible authority (E26).

Moulinier-Brogli states that medicine was bipolar, an art as much as a science and in that she suggests that uroscopy mediates between science and the body (183). From Elyot, Boorde, Batman and Bartholomew’s accounts, we can agree that yellow’s mediatory function lies between the grand and the quotidian. Yet, there is nothing more quotidian that urine. The function of the physician though is to look at, in and through urine-in-a-Jordan as if looking at a stained glass window. This examination is analogous to close reading, to digesting the word or the image, in this case the image of yellow liquid backlit and hence translucent. The dazzling uroscopy charts and uroscopic manuscripts that flourished in medieval England and became central to early modern medicine privilege yellow as perhaps the most important colour in medicine.

My examples about yellow are largely from medical writings. Batman’s Bartholome links colour in the first instance to the biological world of optics and light, as accident (because colour is a property), rather than substance. An example is Batman’s description of “sirico pigmento” or Pheniceus, glossed as a golden colour found in the cliffs of the Red Sea in a country called Phenicus (394). In his Batman on Bartholome, De sirico pigimento is “acounted among feyned colours for it is somtyme ymade of synopis and of sandix medeled yfere, as Ysider seip” (Cap. xxv). Sirico is “chief lettre of bookes ben ywrite“ (II.1293) whereas Batman adds emphasis with “the chiefe and principall letters of bookes be written” (394).
There is a striking consistency among the writings on colour in early modern health advice literature. Yet there are several intriguing differences and additions in the De Coloribus section in Batman. First, he adds a section addressed to painters and limners directly after his colour chapter. If this book were for a general audience, albeit a learned audience, Batman is indicating a personal or public interest in an artistic and/or scriptural economy. The placement of the addition following a description of individual colours elaborates two non-humoural roles for colour. Colour, Batman implies, is part of the apparatus needed to create or copy texts and images — on paper or parchment — and colour is able to belong to the sphere of scriptural and textual representation, without an elaborate humoural association.

Second, although Elyot, Boorde, and Batman diverge little from Bartholomaeus Anglicus’ De coloribus, they include self-reflexive comments that are political, authoritative or medical in their prefacer and texts. These details breathe life into their narratives and give a sense of applied medical knowledge. In Elyot, there is evidence of a personal voice and experience (Castel, Governour). Elyot does not meddle in traditional colour theory but presents himself as the paradigmatic choleric man, suffering the worst and enjoying the best aspects of that humoural disposition. Likewise, Batman does not change the chromatic core of colour theory, but he acknowledges that colour is one of the properties of book production. In this way, he co-locates colour as a sign of health or disease, with colour as intrinsic to figural representation (painters and limners). Judging from the evidence in Elyot, Boorde and Batman, we have to agree that much of 16th-century medicine was indebted to medieval and earlier understandings of disease and it is clear that Elyot, even though a diplomat, read and copied some of the main early medical texts that held sway. On the one hand, medical knowledge was the focus of enthusiastic exploration and on the other hand print culture enabled ideas from the past to be dispersed to an eager and increasingly literate population. Nevertheless, some of the newer medical ideas, such as we saw in Boorde, dawdled into the public domain as the “piss” satire shows.

Pastoureau observes that all colours can be perceived positively or negatively. Yellow had become comparable to the colour gold, which is the symbolic good yellow. Being next to white, yellow is nearly perfect, nearly clear, pure light in the Galenic scheme on colour. But Pastoureau suggests that good yellow, or gold, left any other yellow shade to culturally depreciate into aggression, disorder, madness and spiritual chaos. It is true that yellow has an unsettling history. In the medieval world, Herman Pleij claims, yellow was the colour of “sorrow, covetousness, hunger, and death.” Citing the symbol of the pale horse of the Apocalypse from the Bible and the sinister yellow that stigmatized particular religions, races (such as Muslims and Jews), and occupations, Herman Pleij, like Pastoureau, underlines what can only be described as yellow’s shameful past. Pastoureau’s comments do not go too far when we look closely at the negative associations of yellow. But in medical vernacular texts, yellow attempts to somewhat overwrite its previous bad reputation and hence diverge from these polarised interpretations. Within early modern medicine, yellow has not been entirely hijacked by gold, since Elyot, Boorde and Batman illustrate that good yellow can equate with health. The Western history of ideas on “colour” is far from straightforward. Ideas we believe today, for example the colour composition of the rainbow or the number of primary colours, differ from early modern pre-Newtonian interpretations of colour. Yellow, though, is always with us existing in a dialectic with elementary and bodily...
nature even if its early modern medical history is made strange to us through semantic ambiguities.

I would like to close with an example that marries art and humoral yellow.

5. Conclusion

Portrait of Sir Thomas Elyot (c.1490–1546) c.1532–4

Hans Holbein the Younger’s striking portrait of Elyot deserves comment. The painter drew many of his subjects in black and white chalk on a pink background, which was prepared from calcium carbonate, vermilion and yellow ochre, with rabbit skin binder (Button 99, Mayhew 15). Despite academic speculation about Holbein’s motives for this practice, Victoria Button has recently argued that Holbein’s custom was utilitarian: to save time. This hastened the lengthy process of mixing skin colour, shortened the sitting time and hence decreased the client cost for commissioned portraiture (217). Holbein’s pink underlay composed of white, black and red conforms to the Aristotelian golden mean, “rede and white” being the perfect equilibrium of humours (Castel 13).

Facing to the right, Elyot gazes into the distance, both sombre and composed. While Cathy Shrank sees a disappointed and defeated figure, one more sombre than Holbein’s usual sitters, it is also possible to see a self-confessed choleric man in complete humoral balance, neither angry nor overheated (289). Yellowish tints predominate in the portrait: in the hair, the fur collar, and the skin, and in a pale, thin yet distinct yellow line and crucifix arching inversely across the robes of his chest. We cannot be certain whether or not Elyot advised Holbein on the portrait’s execution. But Elyot’s portrait might depict an
exemplar of one who has undergone a “greate alteration” from “ylle astate to better” (Castel 71), and is now his perfect, “yellow” self.

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Medical Diagnosis and the Colour Yellow in Early Modern England


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8. Windsor. Royal Collection Trust/ © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2014, Portrait of Sir Thomas Elyot (c. 1490-1546) c. 1532-1534, 27.8 x 20.8 cm, Hans Holbein the Younger (1497/8-1543).

NOTES

1. “[N]ow a days the most common iudgement in syckenesse is by urnyes” (Castel 87).
2. “[L]a medicine était bipolaire, à la fois science et art” (Moulinier-Brogli 183).
3. “[T]outes les couleurs, en effet, peuvent être prises on bonne ou en mauvaise part” (Pastoureau 228).
ABSTRACTS

This article will survey the colour yellow in early modern England using resources chiefly from medicine but also literature, sumptuary law, and quotidian culture. In doing so, it interrogates the extent to which this colour changed in symbolism and meaning from the early 15th to the early 17th century. It takes as its starting point humoural theory, which was a vital component of not only medieval but early modern medical diagnosis. The discernment of a person’s underlying disposition relied on knowledge of humoural properties: phlegmatic, sanguine, melancholic or choleric. In especial, the humours were “colour-tagged”, with the choleric temperament usually described in medieval medical treatises as “yellow”.

Michel Pastoureau has alerted us to the ambiguity of interpretation the medieval world imposed on particular hues. An examination of colour in early modern England also illuminates the perceptual edges that flow from a society’s chromatic practice, medical understanding and cultural symbolism. Although we cannot assume a transhistorical shared optics of any colour, “yellow”, by its affinity with various bodily byproducts, holds a special place in medical diagnosis. This leads us to question how we might interpret its meanings, both fluid and complex, within early modern England.

Cet article vise à analyser la couleur jaune dans l’Angleterre pré-moderne en utilisant les ressources de la médecine, de la littérature, des lois somptuaires, et de la culture quotidienne de l’époque. Ce faisant, il étudiera comment cette teinte a changé de symbolisme et de sens entre le début du XVe et le début du XVIIe siècle. Il prend comme point de départ la théorie humorale, élément essentiel du diagnostic non seulement médiéval mais aussi renaissant. Le discernement de la disposition humorale sous-jacente d’un individu s’est en effet longtemps appuyé sur la connaissance des propriétés de cette disposition (propriétés flegmatique, sanguines, mélancoliques ou colériques). Or, les humeurs étaient caractérisées par des couleurs précises. Ainsi, le type colérique décrit dans les traités médicaux médiévaux est toujours « jaune ». 

Michel Pastoureau a déjà mis en lumière l’interprétation pour le moins ambiguë des couleurs du monde médiéval. Mais un examen de la couleur dans l’Angleterre de la Renaissance éclaire également les perceptions chromatiques de la société du XVIe siècle, ainsi que ses habitudes culturelles et sa compréhension des problèmes médicaux. Si la perception de la couleur varie toujours selon l’époque dans laquelle on se trouve, le « jaune », de par son affinité avec divers sous-produits corporels, occupe une place bien particulière dans le diagnostic médical. Il faut donc nous demander comment nous pouvons interpréter ses significations, fluctuantes et complexes, dans l’Angleterre de la première modernité.
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Mots-clés: théorie humorale, histoire de la couleur, jaune, littérature de conseils prémoderne, tempérament colérique, uroscopie, Thomas Elyot, Barthélemy l’Anglais, Stephen Batman, Andrew Boorde

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