

Piotr Sadowski

Published in *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, 53/3 (Sep. 2020), 139-154.

“Foul, strange and unnatural”: poison as a murder weapon in English Renaissance drama

### Abstract

Less spectacular than theatrical violence involving bloodshed, stage murder by poison is nonetheless unsettling because of its secretive nature. Perceived in Renaissance England as dishonorable and unmanly, poison was often associated with women as the “weaker” sex, with discriminated minorities such as Jews, and with Machiavellian politics from continental Europe.

Compared with theatrical plays involving violence killing by poison, with no physical struggle between opponents, no clash of weapons, severed limbs, and generally no bloodshed, may be lacking in exciting dramatics, but it is nonetheless deeply unsettling, “foul, strange and unnatural” (*Hamlet* 1.5.26),<sup>1</sup> precisely because of the secretive and mysteriously lethal nature of the often invisible weapon aimed at unsuspecting victims. As a form of homicide in early modern England murder by poison was in a category of its own. Writing in 1614 the lawyer Sir John Croke opined that “of all murders poisoning is ye worst and more horrible 1 Because it is secret 2 Because it is not to bee prevented 3 Because it is most against nature and therefore most heinous 4 It is alsoe a Cowardly thing” (qtd. in Gaskill 208). Unlike strangulation, cutting and penetration with weapons such as swords, daggers, crossbows and firearms, poison affects the organism undetected and destroys it, initially without symptoms, gradually from within.

Poison is a “Cowardly thing” because it is an asymmetrical weapon—often used as a tactic of the weak and marginal against the powerful—which can kill without incurring any risks on the attacker (Bellany 559, 561). As a form of premeditated violence poison has been almost universally judged as dishonorable and unmanly, and for that reason often associated with women, members of other disempowered social and ethnic groups and, as perceived in Renaissance England, with Machiavellian politics from continental Europe, especially Italy. When committed by men in positions of power, in drama most famously in *Hamlet*, murder by poison has been considered beneath contempt, unchivalric and deceitful, precisely because of its violation of fair play in denying the victim/opponent an opportunity of self-defence.

Poison upset the course of justice also because it was almost impossible to detect and therefore hard to guard against, and even harder to identify after the event. To the Jacobean jurist Edward Coke (1552–1634) poison was “most horrible, and fearfull to the nature of man,” which of all forms of killing carried the automatic penalty of murder with premeditation (Bowers, “The Audience” 497).

Moral revulsion and legal condemnation apart, poison has nonetheless been for obvious practical reasons the perfect tool of murder and assassination. Its delayed but irremediable effects allow the assassin to make good his or her escape, for whoever administered the poison is long gone by the time it takes effect, making exposure difficult. William Crashaw wrote in 1618: “Poison for the most part kills not presently, but after a time, some sooner, some later, but all at last. The Italians haue poisons (. . .) that will kill after a day, a weeke, a month, a yeare” (10). Logistically poison allows for ingenious methods of administration that can penetrate even the most stringent safeguards. Crashaw lists “poisons for our Meate, for Drinke, for Apparell, for Arrowes, Saddles, Seats, Stirrups, for Candles, Torches,” because “Nothing that comes about a Man, nothing that he touches, or that toucheth him, but Mans wickednesse hath fitted, and prepared poison for it” (14). No doubt some of the methods of poisoning recorded in early modern texts were fanciful, a mixture of rationality and mythology. Ignorance of pharmacology, as well as the secrecy and mystery surrounding the application and effect of poison easily stimulated the sensationalist imagination. At the climax of Middleton’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy* (1606), Vindice meets out a savagely cruel punishment on the lustful Duke by making him kiss the poisoned, painted mouth of dead Gloriana, Vindice’s fiancée poisoned by the lecherous Duke for refusing to yield to his lust. Stories of poisons on clothes, armor, books, letters, crosses, flowers, skulls, and paintings, in incense, perfume, and cosmetics are often impossible to verify, but they have forever become the stuff of folklore and historical romance (Huxtable 104; Wilson, *Poison’s Dark* xxii).

In politics poison was often an effective tool for clearing the path to succession, partly because it enabled usurpers to topple rulers without appearing to have committed an obvious crime. Because of its apparent effectiveness poison became the second most common (after murder by sword or dagger) cause of non-natural death among powerful people in the Middle Ages (Collard 34). Having murdered (with a dagger) Duncan, Macbeth envies the king’s good sleep after life’s fitful fever, where “Nor steel nor poison, / Malice domestic, foreign levy, nothing / Can touch him further” (3.2.26–28). The defeated Richard II sits morosely on the ground to “tell sad stories of the death of kings– / How some have been deposed, some slain in war, / Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed, / Some poisoned by their

wives, some sleeping killed, / All murdered“ (3.2.152–56). The sheer quantity of the stories of poisoning, as exemplified by Renaissance drama, testifies to the privileged place of poison in popular imagination fuelled by superstitious and irrational fear (Pollard 8; Wiggins 51).

The cognitive scientist Steven Pinker observes that to most people there is something distinctively repugnant about the use of poison as a weapon. The suspension of the normal rules of decency that allows soldiers to do their thing apparently refers only to the sudden and direct application of force against an adversary who has the potential to do the same. On the other hand poison, with which the attacker destroys his enemy without taking any risks to his own safety, seems to violate most people’s instinctive sense of fairness (Pinker 331–32; Price 1–2). Precisely because of its inherent treacherousness poison has been reviled throughout the ages as uniquely foul and perfidious. Poison has been the method of the sorcerer rather than the warrior, of the coward rather than the hero, of the woman (with her control of kitchen and the medicine chest) rather than the man. Still today in international debates, every time the subject of chemical weapons is raised, it is routinely accompanied by adjectives such as “barbaric,” “immoral,” “horrible,” and “inhumane.” Why do we think differently about chemical weapons to those involving the primitive violence of cutting, crushing, and stabbing?

For Richard M. Price poison has been condemned as a weapon precisely because it excludes death or injury to health by means of force, whether the cut of a sword, the thrust of a spear, or the piercing of the body by an arrow or bullet (22). The jurist Alberico Gentili wrote in 1589 that “since war is a contest of force, it ought not to be carried on with poisons, which are distinguished from force” (155). While Gentili concedes that “more is accomplished in warfare by craft than by force,” he condemns the use of poison, “a guileful deed,” on legal grounds, because it goes “beyond the rules of warfare, which is essentially a contest between men,” for “war ought to be limited to things which it is within human power to resist”; that is, the victim should be able to defend himself (156–58). Poison eliminates that chance, removing what the law of nations in early modern Europe defined as honorable and righteous rivalry in arms (Grotius 353), with its implied endorsement of patriarchal militarism. This is why George Carleton, writing in 1625, could acknowledge the manly courage of the King of Spain in openly attacking England by sea in 1588, while at the same time calling the Spanish king’s attempts in 1593 to poison Queen Elizabeth (using Dr. Roderigo Lopez, the Queen’s physician, as his agent) “most unkingly” and “most unmanly” (194–95).

In short, the historic taboo on the use of poison as a weapon reinforced the assumption of moral superiority of patriarchal political systems. If the political practice of war, argues Richard M. Price, was to remain “the sport of kings” by legitimizing the right of the powerful and wealthy elite to prevail, then techniques that could undermine that practice could not be tolerated. Poison threatened the patriarchal status quo because its easy accessibility and the inability to defend against it could leave princes vulnerable to assassination. Also, the use of poison threatened to undermine the class structure of war, for a relative commoner could possess significant destructive capacity without the elaborate and expensive knightly accoutrements of horse and armor. By contrast, while poison depends on a degree of arcane knowledge it is ultimately low cost and technologically simple, and thus potentially widely available (Price 25).

Poison as a potential social equalizer able to subvert the hierarchy of power had also implications for gender relations. According to Margaret Hallissy, the widespread association of poison with women is a result of the historical disempowerment of the sex that was denied the right to voice its grievances “honorably,” on an equal footing with men. Among men of the same social class publicly acknowledged confrontation is, despite an apparent clash of interests, a kind of bonding in which each opponent gives the other the opportunity to demonstrate prowess. “But women, inferior creatures, cannot participate in this male bonding ritual . . . Men cannot demonstrate prowess by fighting an opponent so weak; women have no hope of winning in hand-to-hand combat. Therefore they use poison” (5; Dolan 30; Scot 67). Throughout history women had neither access to male practices of honorable combat and duelling rituals, nor the strength and training to defeat male opponents in open violence. A woman with a violent intent often had no option but to compensate for her inferior strength and martial skills by resorting to a secret weapon that did not rely on force (Kaye 18). In consequence, just as a male duel involves openness and strength, female killing by poison is by its nature secretive and fraudulent. In the historic battle of the sexes poison has thus been an insidious equalizer of strength, in which the female poisoner used superior secret knowledge to compensate for physical inferiority (Hallissy 6, 60; Glaser 7).

The *venefica*, a female poisoner and potion-maker, has become a stock character in folklore, representing the dark and devious underside of the legitimate feminine roles of the nurturer and healer. The experiential knowledge of nature’s secrets (as opposed to theoretical, philosophical knowledge) had long been the domain of women, who as household members responsible mainly for care-giving, nourishment, and domestic medicine had acquired “occult” expertise in the properties of plants, minerals, and animals (Floyd-Wilson 14). The

stereotype of a female poisoner is one of a gentle, weaker but deceptive person who has access to the food and the medicines prepared for unsuspecting members of her household. The witches in *Macbeth* (4.1) are more exotic and terrifying to behold than the domestic and innocent-looking *venefica* types, but they are shown gathered around a cauldron, a familiar cooking vessel in early modern England, at the moment when their power over Macbeth is strongest. Their brew is an inversion of the banquet, an anti-feast that replaces wholesome, nourishing food stuffs with animal and vegetable toxic, inedible, cannibal or fantastic ingredients, including parts of toad, snake, newt, frog, bat, dog, adder, blind-worm, lizard, howlet, dragon, wolf, mummy, shark, tiger, baboon, goat, hemlock and yew (4.1.26–30) (Levy 44, 99–101; Marienstras 85–86; Topsell 730, 763). *Macbeth*'s witches and their mistress Hecate are the stuff of myth rather than history, but their refrain “double, double toil and trouble” has an apparently more homely ring to it. According to Joan Fitzpatrick, it alludes to double beer (“doble-doble-bere”) brewed illegally in Elizabethan England, which was especially strong because it was boiled twice (51).

Compared with the frequency of violent male quarrels settled with a dagger and involving bloodshed, the Elizabethan legal records reveal few cases of poisoning; these are usually about husbands killed by their wives with adultery or inheritance as the motive. Typical examples include a chandler's wife pilloried in Cheapside in 1574 for attempting to poison her husband; the burning of a woman at Tunbridge, Kent, for poisoning her husband; or the burning of a woman in Smithfield in 1587 for poisoning her uncle (Cockburn 57). Such is the historical background of the play *Arden of Faversham* (1590), based on the notorious murder in 1551 of a gentleman Thomas Arden of Faversham, Kent, at the combined hands of his wife, Alice, and her lover, Mosby (Dolan 51–57). This collaborative play (probably including Shakespeare) offers the first full-scale portrait of a female murderer presented on the Elizabethan stage. The poison used in the play (some liquid stuff to be mixed with food) is indeed “feminine” and culinary in nature: “Put but a dram of this into his drink, / Or any kind of broth that he shall eat, / And he shall die within an hour after” (I, 283–85). However, Alice botches the recipe and the husband realizes after the first bite that there is something unwholesome about the broth. The wife, pretending to be offended, throws the broth on the ground, thus destroying the evidence.

Thomas Arden is eventually murdered in the play in a more conventional way by being “pulled down with a towel” and stabbed (XIV, 229–36). When the crime is revealed, the Mayor arrests the culprits with a promise of the “speedy execution of them all.” The domestic drama can also be interpreted as a metaphor for the rebellion against the state and its

government: the analogy between household and nation meant that both were under the rule of the same law that made a wife's or servant's killing of their husband or master punishable not simply as murder but as petty treason (Lockwood xiv–xv). In the play the wife complains to her husband: “Thus am I still, and shall be while I die, / Poor wench abused by thy misgovernment” (XIII, 108–13). The marriage seems to be psychologically mismatched, although no specific details of the wife's grievances are provided, other than the fact that she fancies the upstart Mosby. Interpreting domestic murder as petty treason made the crime analogous to the killing of the nation's ruler, and was accordingly punished as such: hanging for a servant and burning at the stake for women. Despite the fact that more people in early modern England were killed by the dagger or sword than by the cup (Bowers, “The Audience” 498), it was the moral revulsion at domestic murder by poison that made the sensational play like *Arden of Faversham* all the more popular.

The stereotype of a female *venefica* notwithstanding, the most famous poisoner and potion-maker in Shakespeare's canon are, interestingly, men: Claudius and Friar Laurence respectively. Lady Macbeth adds a sleeping dram to the wine drunk by Duncan's chamberlains (2.2.7), but her main weapon is the dagger wielded by Macbeth with her encouragement. Margaret Hallissy notes that Shakespeare seems to have been indifferent in his plays to the dramatic potential of the stock character of a woman poisoner, as if he was consciously avoiding the obvious cliché (86). The offstage poisoning of Regan by her sister Goneril towards the end of *King Lear* (5.3.201–2) is treated marginally, while the old King himself briefly alludes to the cultural stereotype in the reconciliation scene, when he offers to accept any punishment for his initial injustice to Cordelia: “If you have poison for me, I will drink it” (4.6.65).

The closest approximation in Shakespeare's plays to the *venefica* type is the wicked Queen in *Cymbeline* (1610). Politically, she represents nationalistic, aggressive patriotism and insular opposition to the Romans (3.1.12–14), a kind of Brexit *avant la lettre*, that puts Britain's future at risk. In the realm of home affairs her plan is to marry Cloten, her son from a previous marriage, to her current step-daughter Innogen to plant Cloten on the throne. Failing that (Innogen cannot stand the loutish Cloten and in any case she loves Posthumus, to whom she is secretly married) the Queen's plan B is to poison her stubborn step-daughter as well as the king (3.5.57–59; 5.6.242–58). In her design she embraces fully the stereotype of the wicked step-mother of folk myth (“the slander of most stepmothers,” 1.1.72, “a stepdame false,” 1.6.1), who for evolutionary reasons is more protective of her biological son than of her Cinderella-type step-daughter. The Queen has learned about chemistry from the physician

Cornelius, ostensibly to make perfumes, distil, preserve food and make confections for the king (1.5.11–15). But she also instructs Cornelius to prepare the “most poisonous compounds,” “the movers of a languishing death, / But though slow, deadly” (1.5.8–10). To allay the physician’s suspicions the Queen pretends curiosity about the poison’s effect on animals (1.5.38). The sceptical physician secretly substitutes a soporific drug for the poison, which the Queen gives to Innogen’s loyal servant Pisanio in a small box as an alleged health restoring cordial (1.5.60–64, 3.4.189–92). Rather amazingly, despite his distrust of the Queen Pisanio does not suspect the box’s “medicinal” contents and hands them to Innogen, who, having fallen ill, takes the sleeping potion believing it to be medicine (4.2.38). What follows is a harrowing death-and-rebirth experience when, initially presumed dead, she wakes up to find herself lying next to a headless corpse of Cloten dressed in Posthumus’s clothes. Innogen’s grief and horror on this occasion are reminiscent of Juliet with Romeo’s body in the vault. Meanwhile the wicked Queen, deeply worried about her absent son, meets poetic (and providential, 5.6.464–66) justice by dying after descending into a fevered madness (4.3.1–2).

The Queen in *Cymbeline*, *King Lear*’s Goneril, and the wife in *Arden of Faversham* are probably the only dramatic *veneficae* born on British soil; the majority of poisoners and potion-makers found in the English drama of the period are male but distinctly foreign, usually Italian, or at least non-English, as in *Hamlet*. In early-modern England poisoning was regarded as a crime alien to the country’s national character, and hence particularly abhorrent. In *A Quip for an Upstart Courtier* (1592) Robert Greene offers a contest between Cloth-Breeches, who stands for “the old and woorthye customes of the gentilitie and yeomanrie of Englande,” and Velvet-Breeches, who represents newfangledness of Renaissance Italy, with its “vain-glory, self loue, sodomie, and strange poisonings” (1). It appears that in early modern England native poisoners reflected mainly the negative feminine stereotype, while foreign, especially Italian poisoners were associated with effeminate decadence and unmanly cowardice of continental nations and ethnic groups.

The Queen in *Cymbeline* traffics in literal poison, but figurative poison is reserved in the play for the “poisonous tongued” Giacomo (3.2.5), “slight thing of Italy” (5.5.158), Innogen’s slanderer. In the play ancient Rome stands anachronistically for Renaissance “drug-damned Italy” (3.4.15), considered in Jacobean England as sophisticated but decadent, dangerous, and untrustworthy (Parolin 190, 195–96, 200). The violation of fair play and of the traditional code of manly honor implied by the use of poison seemed alien in early modern England, which still saw itself as adhering to the rules of medieval heroics and chivalry, different from Machiavellian pragmatism, calculated opportunism, or family vendetta. When Romeo is

banished for killing Tybalt, Lady Capulet considers it a matter of course to “send to one in Mantua . . . to give him [Romeo] such an unaccustomed dram / That he shall soon keep Tybalt company” (3.5.88–91). In Marston’s *Antonio’s Revenge* (1601) the chief villain, Piero Sforza, Duke of Venice, gloats of murdering treacherously his rival Andrugio, Duke of Genoa, by means of a slow-acting poison dropped “in the bowl / Which I myself caroused unto his health” (1.1.68–69). In Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi* (1612) the Cardinal seals his mistress’s fate by giving her a religious book covered with poison to kiss and swear on not to reveal the Cardinal’s plan to have his sister the Duchess and her children murdered (5.2.268). Middleton and Rowley’s *The Changeling* (1622) may be set in Spain, but the sententious “I’ll rather like a soldier die by th’sword / Than like a politician by thy poison” (5.2.28.9) seems to express a sentiment more typical nearer the English home. Similarly, the banished Belarius in *Cymbeline* praises his primitive but honest life in a cave in Wales, in which “we will fear no poison which attends / In place of greater state” (3.3.77–78).

Compared with Italy, in late medieval and Renaissance England murder by poison, though not unheard of, was reportedly rare. When men quarrelled, robbed, and murdered they tended to do it in an open and not in a cunning and underhand fashion. Cases of political (as distinct from domestic) poisoning, however, do crop up on occasion. In 1232 Hubert de Burgh, Earl of Kent, was charged with poisoning the Earl of Salisbury and the Earl of Pembroke. Elizabeth’s reign witnessed a spate of notorious accusations of political poisonings, including the case of Roderigo Lopez, a Portuguese Jew who was physician to the Queen, convicted in 1594 of attempting to poison her medicines, probably at the instigation of the King of Spain (Green). Writing in 1624 George Carleton called Lopez’s alleged crime “a thing horrible to be named, much more to be imagined, and most detestable to be undertaken, to poison her Majestie” (178; Harris 81–82). A Catholic pamphlet *Leycester’s Common-wealth*, originally published in 1584, accused Elizabeth’s favorite, Earl of Leicester, of poisoning the Earl of Essex, “so he dyed in the way of an extreme flux, caused by an Italian *Recipe*, . . . the maker whereof was a Chyrurgeon (as is believed) that then was newly come to my Lord from Italy: a cunning man” (Parsons 23; Bellany 567–69). During the Jacobean period the Earl (later Duke) of Buckingham was suspected of trying to poison King James, while James himself of trying to poison Henry, Prince of Wales (Bellany and Cogswell; Pollard 7). The popularity of poisoners in Renaissance literature no doubt reflected the notoriety attained by these and other high-profile cases of real and alleged poisonings (Wilson, “Watching Flesh” 97–98; Emsley 141–42). More often than not, however, the poisonings on historical record in England were attributed to “the Italian arte” (*The Copie of a Letter* 29), and other “foreign bodies” such as



Jews, Spaniards, and continental papists, whose poisonous practices were particularly feared, as foreign potions could escape the experience of English doctors.

Even the vague circumstances of the poisoning of King John, as presented in Shakespeare's play, suggest a foreign plot, possibly an involvement of Papacy (Bellany 563–64; Wilson, *Poison's* xxvi). On the eve of the battle with the French the King appears on the field with a fever, too weak to lead the army (5.3.3–4, 17). He is suspected of being “poisoned by a monk” (5.6.24) at the abbey in Swinstead, a circumstance that reflects the play's anti-clerical bias focused on the character of the meddling papal legate, Cardinal Pandulph. In the event both the King and the monk, who was the King's taster at the table in the abbey, die of the same poison in circumstances that remain unclear in Shakespeare's play but are explained in the play's source, Holinshed's *Chronicle*: the monk “gaue the King poison in a cup of ale, wherof he first tooke the assaie, to cause the king not to suspect the matter, and so they both died in manner at one time” (Bullough 140).

Frances A. Yates interprets the story of the poisoning of King John in the broader context of the late medieval pan-European struggle for supremacy between the Papacy and the Empire. In Bishop John Jewel's *Apology for the Church of England* (1560) Yates finds an allegation that the poisoning “of our King John of England in a drinking-cup” was carried out on papal orders. In another important work of the English Reformation, John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* (1563, 1570), one example of the behavior of the popes to kings of England includes a story of the poisoning of King John by a monk at Swineshead. Copies of the 1570 edition of *Acts and Monuments* were displayed in cathedral churches and in the houses of the Anglican clergy throughout the country, and both *Acts and Monuments* and Jewel's *Apology for the Church of England* were often chained in churches (Yates 40, 44). In a violently anti-Catholic play *King Johan* by John Bale, written during the reign of Henry VIII, King John is poisoned by a drink (“they have me intoxicate”) offered him by a monk Simon of Swynsett (Bullough 70). Writing in 1584 Reginald Scot also endorses what must have been at the time a widely accepted account: “The monke that poisoned king *John*, was a right *Veneficus*; to wit, both a witch and a murtherer” (6). The alleged involvement of the Papacy in the death of King John could thus be assumed to be common knowledge in Elizabethan England, which would explain the relative vagueness concerning the circumstances of the poisoning of the King found in Shakespeare's play.

Assassination by poison appears nonetheless to be comparatively rare in English history. However, in 1531 there was a celebrated case of poisoning which Henry VIII considered “so odious” that he decreed that poisoning should be regarded as a species of high treason, rather than a mere felony. The case involved one Richard Roose, cook to John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester, who was found poisoning several members of the Bishop's household (the Bishop

himself did not eat the tainted gruel and was unharmed). The horrified members of Parliament hurriedly passed an act imposing the penalty of boiling alive for the crime (Kesselring, “A draft” 94–99; Gaskill 207–208; Bellany 559–61). In order to prolong the agony it was specified that the murderer was “first to be put in at the tiptoes” and then immersed “by little and little” (Bowers, “The Audience” 496; Kesselring, *Mercy* 37–38). Several individuals suffered this penalty during Henry’s reign, including a young serving girl named Margaret Davie, “which had poisoned 3 households that she dwelled in,” according to Charles Wriothesley’s *A chronicle of England* (134). However, the law was considered “too severe to live long,” inspiring such revulsion that it was repealed during the reign of Henry’s son, Edward, in 1547.

It is possible that the fate of the serial poisoner Barabas from Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta* (1592)—death by boiling in a cauldron—consciously recalls the punishment for poisoning decreed by Henry VIII but long since consigned to history (Shapiro 111). Barabas brags of poisoning wells (2.3.178) and carries out with visible relish a series of sophisticated poisonings of his enemies. When his daughter, Abigail, enters the Christian convent Barabas renounces her and proceeds to poison her and the nuns. He orders his Turkish slave, Ithamore, to bring him a pot of rice intended as a gift for the nuns, to which he adds “a precious powder” bought once from an Italian in Ancona (3.4.49, 78–79). The powder’s “operation is to bind [constipate], infect, / And poison deeply: yet not appear / In forty hours after it is ta’en” (3.4.70–72). When Ithamore betrays the crime to the courtesan Bellamira and the thief Pilia-Borza, Barabas murders them all using poisoned flowers. He also adds poison to the wine offered to the carpenters employed to construct a trap (“a dainty gallery”) to capture Selim-Calymath, the Turkish leader who invaded Malta. For his odious acts Barabas is finally boiled alive onstage in a cauldron (5.5.54–65).

Whether used by men or women, English or foreign, Catholic, Jewish, or Muslim, poison in drama is more than a murderous weapon; it bespeaks a treacherous, cowardly, and dishonorable character of its user, and as such has moral and other metaphorical implications. The irrational fear of poison in medieval and Renaissance Europe, the violation of the code of honor and the principle of fair play that it involved, coupled with an almost complete ignorance of the diagnosis and treatment of poisoning, meant that its action was generally regarded not so much as a medical or legal problem but as a reflection of evil in the spiritual world. Like any infectious and contagious disease, in a pre-scientific world poison was explained primarily as a moral metaphor, as a symbol of sin, corruption, and divine vengeance (Houssemayne 6; Lodge 2–3).

While the cartoonish villainy of Barabas exploits popular anti-Semitic prejudice, in *Hamlet* (1600) murder by poison becomes an all-embracing metaphor of the corruption and decay of the Danish court, which in turn becomes a wider metaphor of a time out of joint. In Shakespeare's England the turn of the century marked a millenarian unease about the new world emerging from the Renaissance and the Reformation, exacerbated by the anxiety about the country's political future at the end of the long reign of childless Elizabeth (Brigden 311, 355). In *Hamlet* the chemical poison destroys the King's body, but the toxicity of moral corruption generated by adultery, fratricide, usurpation, incest, hypocrisy, paternal bullying and ever-present spying also destroys people's souls and human relationships, drives the sensitive to madness and suicide, and ultimately leads to the collapse of the political system. In fact, in no other early modern play does the literal and figurative poison dominate the plot, mood, and characterization to such an extent, with far-reaching moral, theological, political and social implications, not only within the world of the play but also for Shakespeare's England.

The Ghost briefly returned from the Purgatory offers to his horrified son a graphic account of the symptoms produced by the "juice of cursèd hebenon" poured in the porches of his ear by his brother (1.5.62–64). Unlike the more easily staged or imagined forms of violence involving force and visible weapons, the poison works from within the body, and its hidden deadly effects have to be vividly described rather than shown:

The leperous distilment, whose effect  
Holds such an enmity with blood of man  
That swift as quicksilver it courses through  
The natural gates and alleys of the body,  
And with a sudden vigour it doth posset  
And curd, like eager droppings into milk,  
The thin and wholesome blood. So did it mine;  
And a most instant tetter barked about,  
Most lazar-like, with vile and loathsome crust,  
All my smooth body. (1.5.64–73)

The "porches," "gates," and "alleys" of the King's anatomy become a symbolic city, and by extension the state: the sudden decomposition of the King's body caused by poison initiates the disintegration of Danish body politic by moral corruption. Elaborate metaphors of the state as a body politic, subject to diseases analogous to those that weaken a physical body of the king, were indeed commonplace in Elizabethan writing. In *Henry IV, Part 2* for example,

the King's sickness, identified as apoplexy (4.3.130), becomes a metaphor for the unhealthy state of the nation threatened by a civil war following Henry's "sin"—his deposition and murder of Richard II. When Henry talks of a renewed rebellion only the suffix "-dom" separates the diseased body politic from his own illness: "Then you perceive the body of our kingdom, / How foul it is, what rank diseases grow, / And with what danger near the heart of it" (3.1.37–39) (italics added).

In *Hamlet* the new king is not only a cold-blooded, treacherous murderer by poison but, like the eloquent serpent of the Bible (*Genesis* 3.1–6), an effective and cynical poisoner of people's minds (through their ears of course) by means of verbal persuasion ("with tongue in venom steeped," 2.2.448). The Elizabethans apparently believed that the source of a snake poison could be the tongue as well as the teeth (Crashaw 6). Just as chemical poison attacks the body so toxic speech disrupts the mind and exploits psychological vulnerabilities by causing delusions, perverting logic, suspending critical judgment, and harming one's moral character by sometimes making otherwise decent people do evil things. In "that drug-damn'd Italy" (*Cymbeline* 3.4.15) Giacomo's false accusation poisons the mind of the decent Posthumus about Innogen's virtue: his slanderous letter is described as "sharper than the sword, whose tongue / Outvenoms all the worms of Nile" (3.4.32–35). In *Hamlet* the serpent that now wears the crown (1.5.39–40) has not only killed his brother by pouring poison in his ear, but he has also "the whole ear of Denmark / . . . by a forgèd process of my death / Rankly abused" (1.5.36–38), that is, spread fake news to publicly falsify the account of his brother's death.

The chemical poison employed to murder the old King thus spreads its figurative contamination to poison minds, relationships, and politics, beginning—interestingly—with the old King himself, who as the Ghost pours verbal venom—the horrifying narrative of his death—into his son's ear, playing on his filial love and loyalty. Having absorbed the Ghost's rhetorical toxin, the Prince disseminates it in various forms throughout the Danish court, where it enters all ears, with disastrous consequences. Every character to whom Hamlet speaks with venom, with bitterness and anger, is doomed to die: Polonius, Ophelia, Laertes, Claudius, Gertrude, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (Mallin 68). Like living organisms succumbing to parasites, vulnerable human minds become prey to information viruses which replicate themselves by jumping from person to person, mainly via language, wreaking psychological havoc along the way. Ophelia loses her sanity from "the poison of deep grief" (4.5.74) following her father's death, while Claudius pours the poison of hypocritical lies into Laertes's ears (4.7.1–35, 50–161) by inciting him against Hamlet as responsible not only for

Polonius's death but allegedly also for Ophelia's madness and suicide. The King's verbal venom eventually succeeds in manipulating Laertes to literally "anoint my sword" with "an unction [poison]" to be used against Hamlet during the fencing duel. For his part Claudius openly joins the anti-Hamlet conspiracy by preparing a poisonous plan B: a poisoned chalice, "whereon but sipping, / If he by chance escape your venom'd stuck, / Our purpose may hold there" (4.7.133–34).

Poison as a murder weapon with which the Hamlet story began returns in the final scene with a choreographed succession of violent onstage deaths. As things get out of control in the excitement of the fencing match, the King's treacherous plan backfires and the poison kills both the intended and unintended victims, both the innocent—or the less deserving—and the guilty ones. Unexpectedly, the Queen takes the King's cup to drink to her son's good fortune in the duel, thus becoming the first victim of a murderous master plan that has gone wrong. Whatever the extent of the Queen's guilt of marital infidelity and of her cowardice to confront the truth about her former husband's death, she becomes the second female victim (after Ophelia with her offstage watery death) of the court's toxic atmosphere that started with the Claudius's fratricide. The accidental nature of her death appears to confirm her marginal role in the play: her only active if inadvertent role at the end is to give Hamlet the first clue of the foul play at work and of its source ("The drink, the drink—I am poisoned," 5.2.264). She remains, however, ignorant of the King's true nature, unlike Laertes who, killed with his own envenomed rapier, openly points the finger of blame at the King before he dies (5.2.273).

The next to die, "justly served," is the King who, interestingly, is killed by Hamlet twice: first with Laertes's envenomed weapon and a moment later by having the poisoned drink forced between his lips (5.2.274–79)—a double death by poison as a punishment both for the original murder of old Hamlet and for the current poisonous plan (Bowers, "The Death" 40; Mack 133–34). As he meets out the final justice Hamlet is—unbeknown—himself already mortally wounded by Laertes's rapier, but of all the victims who die of poison in the last scene it takes the Prince—for dramatic reasons—the longest to do so. As the last about-to-die member of the royal family, Hamlet attends to the remaining state business: he exchanges forgiveness with Laertes; says adieu to the wretched Queen (5.2.285); addresses the court meta-theatrically as an "audience to this act" (5.2.287); bids Horatio to report his cause aright "To the unsatisfied" (5.2.292); and gives Fortinbras his "dying voice" (5.2.308), thus legitimizing the Norwegian rule in Denmark (Guthke 42).

Staging deaths by poison may appear less spectacular than scenes of violence involving physical force, with clashes of swords and stabbings complete with splashes of pig's blood

(Gurr 182). Murder by poison remains, however, deeply unsettling because of its perceived “unnaturalness,” with its unheroic violation of fair play implied by the secretive and mysteriously lethal nature of the invisible weapon. The absence of external symptoms can make poisoning easier to stage, but it also means that its inner effects have to be communicated verbally rather than visually, similar to the states of mind and emotions. It takes the Ghost of Hamlet’s father full thirteen lines to describe with blood-curdling vividness the effects of poison on the body (1.5.62–73); Cleopatra’s nirvanic bliss caused by aspic venom is what she *tells* us she is feeling (5.2.290–91, 306); just as King John’s internal burning from poisoning is announced by his complaint of a “hot summer” in his bosom, which crumbles his bowels to dust (5.7.46–48). But whatever stage chemical weapons lack in external theatrics they compensate by the unnerving secrecy of their application and the mystery of their operation which, like magic, stimulate the imagination by provoking moral revulsion and irrational fear of invisible and therefore indefensible contamination and corruption.

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## Bio

PIOTR SADOWSKI is lecturer in humanities in Dublin Business School. He is the author of *Dynamism of Character in Shakespeare's Mature Tragedies*, plus other books and articles on medieval literature, gender, communication theory, film studies and semiotics. Personal webpage: [www.piotrsadowski.org](http://www.piotrsadowski.org)

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> All quotations from Shakespeare are from Stanley Wells, Gary Taylor, John Jowett and William Montgomery, eds. *The Oxford Complete Works of Shakespeare*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005.