

The unmanly weapon: killing by poison in Shakespeare's tragedies

Poison is a form of asymmetrical weapon—a tactic of the weak against the strong—which can kill without incurring any risks on the attacker. As a form of premeditated violence poison has been judged dishonourable and unmanly, and for that reason often associated with women, members of other disempowered social groups and, as perceived in Renaissance England, with Machiavellian politics from continental Europe. When committed by men in positions of power, as in *Hamlet*, murder by poison is considered beneath contempt, precisely because of its association with unchivalric cowardice and treachery. Still, despite the moral revulsion poison has been the perfect tool of murder and assassination. It allows for ingenious methods of administration that are difficult to guard against, from poisoned food and drink, books and letters, gloves, flower scent and fumes to cigars, umbrellas, and polonium-210 of modern espionage. Also, poison's delayed but irremediable effects allow the assassin to make good his or her escape, making exposure difficult. Precisely because of its effectiveness poison appears as the second most common cause of non-natural death (after murder by sword or dagger) among powerful people in the Middle Ages.

But poison in drama is more than a murderous weapon in a tragic plot; it bespeaks the treacherous and cowardly character of its user, and can have wider moral and metaphorical implications. Due to the irrational fear of poison in early modern Europe, based on an almost complete ignorance of its diagnosis and treatment, poison was explained less as a medical problem than as a symbol of sin, corruption, and divine vengeance. As a demonic force poison belonged to magic rather than science, and was widely attributed to witches, sorcerers, and other undesirable aliens rather than to legitimate physicians and pharmacists.

In *Hamlet* poison, with which the old king is murdered before the start of the play, 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 was marked by a millenarian unease and uncertainty about the new world emerging from the Renaissance and the Reformation, exacerbated by the anxiety about the country's future at the end of the long reign of Elizabeth. In the play the chemical poison destroys the king's body, but the toxicity of moral corruption generated by adultery, fratricide,

usurpation, incest, hypocrisy, and ever-present spying also destroys people's souls, drives the sensitive to madness and suicide, and ultimately leads to the collapse of the political system and the wiping-out of the entire royal family.

The official version of the king's death—by a serpent's bite while sleeping in an orchard—is correct insofar as it identifies poison as the cause. Regicide by poison, absent in the play's sources, and the entire "toxic" dimension of the dramatic plot are among Shakespeare's original contributions to the Hamlet story. In the Ghost's graphic account of poisoning the "juice of cursed hebona" is poured into the porches of the King's ear to spread "through / The natural gates and alleys of the body". In this way the king's anatomy becomes a symbolic city, and by extension the state: the sudden decomposition of the king's body caused by poison initiates the rotting of Danish body politic by moral corruption.

Equally metaphorical are the serpent and the poison poured in the ear. The play's main villain is not only a cold-blooded murderer but, like the eloquent serpent from *Paradise Lost*, an effective and cynical poisoner of people's minds (through their ears of course) by means of verbal persuasion. The Elizabethans apparently believed that the source of snake venom was the tongue rather than the teeth. Just as chemical poison attacks the body so toxic speech disrupts the mind and exploits psychological vulnerabilities by causing delusions, perverting logic, and harming one's moral character by sometimes making good people do evil things. The serpent that now wears the crown has not only killed his brother by pouring poison in his ear but he has also "the whole ear of Denmark / . . . by a forged process of my death / Rankly abused", that is, publicly falsified the account of his brother's death.

The poison first used to murder the old king thus spreads its figurative contamination to infect minds, human relations, and politics. Ophelia loses her sanity from "the poison of deep grief" following her father's death, and Claudius takes time to pour the poison of hypocrisy into Laertes's ears by inciting him against Hamlet. The King's figurative mention of the word "envenom" in relation to a letter from Hamlet plants a seed in Laertes's mind to literally poison the tip of his rapier before the fencing match. For his part Claudius openly joins the anti-Hamlet conspiracy by preparing a poisonous plan B: "I'll have preferred him / A chalice for the nonce, whereon but sipping, / If he by chance escape your venom'd stuck, / Our purpose may hold there".

Poison as a murder weapon with which the Hamlet story began returns in the final scene with a choreographed succession of violent onstage deaths. But the plan involving the envenomed rapier and the poisoned chalice backfires, things get out of control in the violent excitement of the fencing match, and in the ensuing chaos the poison kills both the intended

and unintended victims, both the innocent—or the less deserving—and the guilty ones. Having put the union in the chalice in full view the King craftily takes a sip from it before the poison has time to dissolve. After scoring the first hit with Laertes Hamlet declines the King's offer of a drink, as if poetic justice reserved for the Prince a more heroic if also partly treacherous death from the poisoned rapier. 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 plan that has gone wrong. When the Queen ignores the King's panicky plea not to drink the game is effectively over, as is confirmed for the audience in the King's aside "It is the poisoned cup! It is too late".

If there is an element of poetic justice in the play's final multiple onstage deaths, one would expect them to balance crime with punishment, guilt with retribution. Whatever the extent of Gertrude's guilt of marital infidelity and of her cowardice to confront the truth about her former husband's death, she becomes the second female (after Ophelia with her watery death) victim of the court's toxic atmosphere that started with the King's fratricide: appropriately therefore Gertrude dies from a drink poisoned by the King. The accidental nature of her death appears to confirm her marginal role in the play: her soul may be full of "black and grieved spots" but she is otherwise most probably innocent of more heinous crimes. 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"). She remains, however, ignorant of the King's true nature, unsuspecting and unaccusing to the last, unlike Laertes who, killed with his own envenomed rapier, openly points the finger of blame at the King before he dies.

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—a double death by poison as a punishment both for the original murder of old Hamlet and for the current poisonous intrigue. As he meets out the final justice Hamlet is—unknown—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. He exchanges forgiveness with Laertes; says adieu to the wretched Queen; addresses the court meta-theatrically as an "audience to this act"; bids Horatio to report his cause aright "To the unsatisfied"; dissuades him from drinking the remaining poison from the cup, both to spare his friend's life and to make sure that someone remains alive to tell his story; and gives Fortinbras his "dying voice", thus legitimizing the Norwegian rule in Denmark.

If in *Hamlet* poison becomes a metaphor for moral corruption and male unscrupulous thirst for power, in *Romeo and Juliet* poison is associated with uncontrollable and ultimately self-destructive romantic passion. For the sensible Benvolio falling in love at first sight means catching “infection to thy eye”, while love in general is defined as “rank poison” that acts invisibly from within completely to alter one’s personality. Love as sickness, madness, or personal religion are indeed age-old clichés of romantic vocabulary. In a literal sense in *Romeo and Juliet* lethal poison and death-feigning sleeping potion become weapons with which the helpless star-crossed lovers fight against extreme external odds for their freedom to live together or, failing that, to die together.

The suppliers of chemical weapons in the play are the benevolent Friar Laurence in Verona, who provides Juliet with a sleeping potion to evade an unwanted marriage to Paris; and a shady apothecary in Mantua, who sells the desperate Romeo poison to end his life after Juliet’s presumed death. Despite Juliet’s impatient willingness to take the potion, she later has misgivings about swallowing the draught, as evidenced by her anguished soliloquy about waking up among the dead and going mad. She even begins to doubt the Friar: for all she knows he could be poisoning her to save himself from being exposed for marrying her to Romeo clandestinely. In folklore the poison and the sleeping potion often come together, with one as a ready substitute for the other, as in Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline* where the Queen’s poison intended for Imogen is secretly replaced with a sleeping potion by a physician. Just as poison could be secretly administered in a golden cup or disguised as medicine, outwardly appearing attractive or wholesome but in fact concealing lethal effects, so the initial death-like symptoms of a sleeping potion, as experienced by Imogen and Juliet, ultimately conceal its true, harmless nature.

While the sleeping potion is a logical practical choice for Juliet, the reasons for Romeo’s choice of poison as a suicide weapon are not immediately clear. When Romeo first becomes “desperate” upon hearing the news about his banishment his reaction is to stab himself, but when in Mantua he receives the false news about Juliet’s death he buys poison to end his life. His intention is to return secretly to Verona to drink the poison next to his wife in the vault. But why couldn’t he just kill himself there by stabbing as he earlier attempted? He is well armed and violently disposed after all, having just killed Paris with his sword outside the tomb. Even Juliet, as she wakes up only to find her husband lying dead from poison next to her, stabs herself with Romeo’s own dagger. The use of poison by Romeo appears important, for Shakespeare, following his sources, introduces a whole scene with the apothecary: a poor and famished man, with an exotic-looking shop full of mysterious quasi-alchemical objects

and utensils. The apothecary's dire penury is why he agrees to sell Romeo poison, a capital offence in Mantua, another reason being Romeo's extravagant payment of forty ducats which, as a man about to die, he probably feels he does not need. Romeo's suicidal disposition also accounts for his inverted logic, whereby the gold he pays becomes "worse poison to men's souls . . . Than these poor compounds", while the poison he buys becomes in his mind health-restoring cordial.

Back in Verona in the Capulet vault Romeo kisses Juliet and drinks the poison practically at the same time ("Thus with a kiss I die"), visually confirming the metaphor of love as "rank poison" from the beginning of the play. A moment later the situation becomes almost symmetrically reversed: Juliet is awake and Romeo is (this time truly) dead, and it is the wife who now kisses her dead husband, hoping to suck some poison from his lips. Only because there is none left she stabs herself with Romeo's "happy dagger", both to remain loyal to her dead husband and to attain dignity and control over her own life by evading her parents' tyranny. Despite the strict Christian proscription against suicide no one in "fair Verona" comments on the theological implications of the lovers' dying by their own hands, and the play glosses over legal sanctions against suicide in the general grief. It seems as if in *Romeo and Juliet* love, with its devotion, "blushing pilgrims", and martyrdom, has replaced religion. Shakespeare of course must have known that the canon 'gainst self-slaughter applied equally in Catholic and English churches, but Verona was sufficiently far from England to allow suicidal love to triumph over religious orthodoxy.

Antony's Rome and Cleopatra's Alexandria are both historically and culturally even further removed from Shakespeare's England to eliminate any moral implications of the elaborate, theatrical suicide committed by the two famous lovers. Just as Romeo buys poison to be reunited with his supposedly dead wife, so Antony, deceived by Cleopatra about her death, decides to commit suicide "after the high Roman fashion" to join her in the other world. For her part, the proud Egyptian queen intends in her suicide not only to evade Caesar's plan to lead her in triumph through Rome, but also to turn herself into a work of art by becoming "marble-constant", like a statue and a divine being beyond change.

Antony and Cleopatra die together, but they also die apart and alone, using their chosen methods of death to reflect their personalities and stations in life. Defeated in battle and betrayed, as he believes, by the woman for whom he has fought, the warlike Antony throws himself on his own sword, and later bleeds to death in terrible pain in Cleopatra's monument. Cleopatra's suicide weapon is by comparison unheroic and unmanly, but equally reflective of her personality and status: she dies from the venom of an asp sneaked to her monument past

the Roman guards in a basket of figs. The asp was in antiquity a generic name to cover a range of venomous snakes, and in an Egyptian context it could refer to the horned sand viper, *Cerastes cornuta*; or the closely related *Cerastes vipera*, also known as the Egyptian asp or Cleopatra's asp; or the cobra, *Naja haje*, which would have been an appropriate symbolic choice for Cleopatra. In Plutarch's *Life of Marcus Antonius*, Shakespeare's chief source for the play, upon her deathbed the queen wore a pharaonic headdress featuring a stylized cobra symbolic of sovereignty and sacred to the goddess Isis, of whom Cleopatra believed herself to be an avatar. The asp became Cleopatra's iconic attribute: having failed to display the live Egyptian queen in his Roman triumph, writes Plutarch, Octavius Caesar "caried Cleopatraes image, with an Aspicke byting of her arme". In a more romantic version of Cleopatra's death found in a thirteenth-century anonymous Italian *I Fatti di Cesare* (The Deeds of Caesar), the queen died by placing the snake to her left breast near her heart.

Cleopatra's suicide by the asp not only ends Shakespeare's romantic plot but also brings to a culmination the play's serpent theme. Just as Rome is associated with the Tiber so is Egypt with the Nile, the source both of fruitfulness and carrion-eating insects, harvest and deadly serpents. Cleopatra is herself the "serpent of old Nile" and the river reflects something of her paradoxical nature, both life-enhancing and fatally poisonous. In the play the expertise on snake venom is provided by a garrulous "rural fellow" who brings Cleopatra the asp concealed in a basket of figs, but the queen certainly knows what she is doing when she orders a secret delivery of "the pretty worm of Nilus . . . That kills and pains not" to her monument. The idea of painless snake venom appears to belong to fiction, because in nearly all real cases of bites by a venomous snake the immediate effects are deeply unpleasant, with symptoms including burning pain, muscular convulsions, weakness, nausea, vomiting, vertigo, fever, dizziness, fainting and so on. Shakespeare transcended both his sources and common knowledge about venomous snakes by turning Cleopatra into an Oriental mistress of sensual pleasure in death as well as in life. In an account full of sexual innuendoes the rural fellow speaks of the "immortal" effect of the snake's bite, of women "something given to lie [that is, with men]", who have "died of the biting of it". Underlying these equivocations are phallic associations of the snake and the orgasmic "dying" from the worm that "will do his kind" but is "not to be trusted", for ultimately "there is no goodness in the worm".

True to her hedonistic principles Cleopatra clearly intends to have "joy o'th' worm" even as she prepares to die from its bite. She expresses "immortal longings" as she puts on her robe and crown to respond to the dead Antony "rouse himself" to praise her noble act. Identified earlier with the "serpent of old Nile" she now makes her attendant woman Iras die

just by giving her a farewell kiss: “Have I the aspic in my lips?” The agony of dying blends with erotic pleasure where “The stroke of death is as a lover’s pinch / Which hurts and is desired”, while the sharp teeth of the venomous snake are disarmed into a maternal image of “my baby at my breast / That sucks the nurse asleep”. The venom itself, normally causing stinging pain in the victim, is transformed into a soothing narcotic “As sweet as balm, as soft as air, as gentle”, which makes death pleasanter than life: “What should I stay“. Absent too are the usual external symptoms of death, often ugly and disturbing to onlookers. Caesar’s brief autopsy of Cleopatra’s body discovers no bleeding, no swelling, just “a vent of blood” on her breast and “something blown” on her arm, as if from love bites. Otherwise the dead queen looks as in a post-coital sleep, having used death to turn her body into a statuesque work of art alluring enough to “catch another Antony”.

Poison thus appears in two main contexts in Shakespeare: political and romantic. In the political context poison is used as a homicidal weapon in masculine struggle for power, while in romantic situations poison becomes a suicidal weapon used mainly by women. Compared with theatrical murders and suicides involving force, with clashes of swords and stabbings complete with splashes of pig’s blood, onstage death by poison may appear less spectacular. At the same time the absence of shocking external symptoms makes poisoning easier to stage, which also means that its internal effects have to be communicated verbally rather than visually, similar to the states of mind, sensations and emotions. Cleopatra’s nirvanic bliss caused by aspic venom is what she tells us she is feeling, and it takes the ghost of Hamlet’s father full thirteen lines to describe with blood-curdling vividness the effects of poison on the body. But whatever stage chemical weapons lack in external theatrics they compensate by the unnerving secrecy of their application and the mystery of their working which, like magic, provokes irrational fear of invisible and therefore indefensible contamination and corruption.