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DBS Research Day, 8th June, 2018

Shakespeare's most toxic play—poison as weapon and metaphor in *Hamlet*

Poison is an asymmetrical weapon—a tactic of the weak against the strong—which can kill without incurring any risks on the attacker. For this reason poison has been judged throughout history as dishonourable and unmanly, and was often associated with women, members of disempowered minorities such as Jews 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 (“foul and most unnatural”) has been considered beneath contempt, unchivalric, treacherous and deceitful, precisely because of its violation of the code of honour and fair play.

Moral revulsion 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. Logistically poison allows for ingenious methods of administration that can penetrate even the most stringent safeguards. Historical and folkloristic accounts abound in stories of poisons added not only to food or drink but also put on clothes, armour, books, letters, crosses, flowers, skulls, paintings, in incense, perfume, cosmetics and so on. Many of these stories may appear fantastic and almost unbelievable, but so do the seemingly improbable but nonetheless true cases of chemical weapons administered in modern espionage through cigars, umbrellas, needles and sprays of nerve agents. The aura of mystery surrounding the invisible but often inescapable lethal weapon continues to feed popular imagination, superstition, and fear even today.

But accounts of poison are not just about the sensational logistics of secret murders; they also bespeak the devious, cowardly, and dishonourable characters of those who resort to chemical weapons. The irrational fear of poison in medieval and Renaissance Europe, the violation of the code of honour and fair play, 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, military or legal problem but as a reflection of evil in the spiritual world. Like infectious diseases and plagues—frequent occurrences in early modern Europe—poison was explained primarily as a moral metaphor, as a symbol of sin, corruption, and divine vengeance.

No other Renaissance play exploits the literal and figurative implications of poison more comprehensively than Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1600). In the world's most famous play 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 historic time out of joint. In Shakespeare's England the turn of the sixteenth-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 Elizabeth. 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. The sentinel's intuitive reflection about something rotten in the state of Denmark from the beginning of the play is followed by a dramatization of a political disease that culminates in the wiping-out of the entire royal family and the change of the political regime.

The official version of the old king's death—by a serpent's bite while sleeping in an orchard, with a nod towards Satan in the Garden of Eden—is only correct insofar as it identifies poison as the cause. The Ghost briefly returned from the Purgatory offers to his horrified son a graphic account of the symptoms produced by the “juice of cursed hebona” (possibly hemlock) poured in the porches of his ear by his brother. Unlike the more graphic forms of violence involving swords and bloodshed, poison works invisibly from within the body, and its hidden deadly effects have to be vividly described rather than shown:

Upon my secure hour thy uncle stole
With juice of cursed hebona in a vial
And in the **porches** of my ears did pour
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 possess
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.

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.

Pouring poison in the ear is far less effective than snake bite, and even less so than the more typical use of poison added to food or drink. In Shakespeare’s play this particular manner of poisoning could have been inspired by a discovery in 1564 of the internal connection between ear and throat by a Venetian anatomist Bartholomeo Eustachio. In the Ghost’s description the Eustachian tube becomes one of the “natural gates and alleys of the body,” and makes poison poured into someone’s ear equivalent to swallowing. Poisoning through the ear reappears in “The Murder of Gonzago,” an otherwise unknown play chosen by Hamlet for the court performance to catch the conscience of the king. The title of this inner-play was probably inspired by the historical Francesco Maria I della Rovere, Duke of Urbino, who was reputedly murdered in 1538 by having poison poured in his ear at the instigation of a kinsman of the duchess, one Luigi Gonzago. Whatever the historical inspiration, both the serpent and the poison poured in the ear in Shakespeare’s play aptly reflect the character of the super villain Claudius, the king’s brother.

Claudius is not only a cold-blooded, treacherous murderer by poison but, like the eloquent serpent from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, an effective and cynical poisoner of people’s minds (through their ears of course) by means of verbal persuasion (“with tongue in venom steeped”). The Elizabethans apparently believed that the source of a snake poison could be the tongue as well as the teeth. Just as chemical poison attacks the body’s immunity system, so toxic, manipulative speech disrupts the mind and exploits psychological vulnerabilities by perverting logic, causing delusions, suspending critical judgment, and harming one’s moral character by sometimes making otherwise decent people do evil things. In Shakespeare’s play 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 forgèd process of my death / Rankly abused”, that is, publicly falsified the account of his brother’s death.

Other examples of Claudius’s power of verbal persuasion and toxic lies are in evidence throughout the play. Using the “witchcraft of his wits” he has probably seduced (according to the Ghost) the Queen before murdering her husband. In the early court scene the new king appears to exude confidence and competence, but the disturbing if silent appearance of the ghost of the old king just before this scene casts doubt on the sincerity of the sentiments expressed in Claudius’s opening speech (his “most painted word” by his own admission). References to his “dear brother’s death,” to his former sister-in-law and now his wife, and his

rebuke for the grieving Hamlet all appear, in view of the revelations from the following Ghost scene, blatantly false and hypocritical. The “damned incest” of the new royal marriage is another source of potential moral corruption: having married her former husband’s brother the Queen is now living “In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed, / Stewed in corruption,” and of “honeying and making love / Over the nasty sty.”

The chemical poison employed to murder the old king thus spreads its figurative contamination to envenom minds, human relations, and politics, beginning—interestingly—with the old king himself. In the words of the critic Tanya Pollard: “Just as the literal poison corrodes the king’s insides and leaves him as a stiff, empty carcass, so he intends his toxic narrative to eat away at Hamlet’s interior, taking over his thoughts and infecting him with the violence of the ghost’s discontent and distrustfulness.” The poisoning of the king through the ear metaphorically transforms poison from a physical to a psychological weapon, as the Ghost pours verbal venom—the virulent narrative of his death—into his son’s ear, playing on his filial love, loyalty, and youthful idealism. 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, the Queen, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. 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” following her father’s death; the contagion of unrest is beginning to spread through the society, with people “muddied, / Thick and unwholesome in their thoughts and whispers”; while Claudius pours the poison of hypocritical lies into Laertes’s ears 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 fake news strategy works, especially when his figurative mention of the word “envenom” in relation to a letter from Hamlet plants a seed in Laertes’s mind to literally “anoint my sword” with “an unction [poison].” 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.” The poison in the chalice, a parody of the Holy Communion, sums up Claudius’s perverse character: the poisoned pearl is allegedly “Richer than that which four successive kings / In Denmark’s crown have worn.”

Another major source of moral corruption in Elsinore acting in collusion with the King's official propaganda is Polonius, the Councillor of the State and in practice the chief of security. If the King's role is to obtain and protect his power through murders by poison, the main role of Polonius is to gather intelligence and in the process contribute to the toxic atmosphere of insincerity, distrust, fear and paranoia that pervades the court. Shakespeare's portrayal of Danish politics appears to reflect obliquely on the England of Queen Elizabeth, whose court, according to the historian Susan Brigden, was "a place of lies and spies, of 'privy whispering,' where intrigue and treachery flourished, and where the truth was not to be found." Like the all-seeing and all-hearing Polonius, Queen Elizabeth was often portrayed in gowns embroidered with eyes and ears, as symbols of her ceaseless vigilance over her people. The King too employs Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to spy on Hamlet, while Polonius even sends his man Reynaldo to spy on his son in France. Several scenes in the play involve eavesdropping with Polonius as the hidden listener, and there are many instances of secrets being hidden or revealed. The critic Patricia Parker sees the play as being written at a crucial historical juncture when a modern state secret service was being developed, "involving the mediation of agents, go-betweens, and representatives across bureaucratic as well as geographic distances, along with the corresponding multiplication of informers and spies." In other words, in *Hamlet* Shakespeare created a template for the working of a totalitarian regime, with its toxic atmosphere of routine surveillance by the authorities which deprives citizens of their privacy, intimacy and freedom, instilling a sense of constant fear and suspicion. In a totalitarian state walls have ears, literally, whether it is an eavesdropper behind the arras or a secret police operative listening in to private conversations in a bugged apartment or on a tapped telephone line. The idea that Denmark is a prison, found in the First Folio edition of *Hamlet*, resonated in a number of influential and politically subversive twentieth-century productions of the play in countries gripped by oppressive Communist regimes, including the Soviet Union, Bulgaria, Romania, East Germany, and Poland.

Poison as a murder weapon with which the Hamlet story began returns in the final scene with a choreographed succession of violent onstage deaths. With Laertes's envenomed rapier and the King's poisoned pearl in the chalice it is a matter of short time before they perform their deadly work. But the treacherous plan 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 the unintended victims, both the innocent—or the less deserving—and the guilty ones. Having put the poisoned pearl 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 the poisoned drink, thus delaying his demise, as if poetic justice reserved for the Prince a more heroic if also partly ignoble death from the poisoned rapier. Unexpectedly, however, 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. 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 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 royal fratricide: appropriately therefore the Queen 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 grievèd spots," but she is otherwise most probably innocent of the more heinous crimes (such as conspiracy in her former husband's death for example). 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 Claudius's true nature, unsuspecting and unaccusing to the last, unlike Laertes who, killed with his own envenomed rapier, literally 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 the old king and for the current poisonous plan, which kills not only the Prince as the intended victim but also accidentally the Prince's mother. Interestingly, 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"; 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.

No other known Renaissance play enacts a wholesale slaughter by poison, preceded by the ever-thickening toxic atmosphere and contagious moral corruption, to a degree found in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Despite being less spectacular than theatrical death-scenes involving force and physical violence, with clashes of swords and stabbings complete with splashes of pig's blood, onstage deaths by poison must have nonetheless appeared deeply unsettling to the audiences by their "unnaturalness," precisely because of the secretive, unsuspected, and mysteriously lethal nature of the often invisible weapon. 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, disease, and corruption.