Shakespeare's Sweet Poison

by David P. Gontar (February 2014)

> "I am a soldier and now bound to France." — Queen Eleanor
>
> "Stay, stay thy hands! Thou art an Amazon, and fightest with the sword of Deborah."
> — Charles, Dauphin of France to Joan of Arc

In an article in *The Shakespeare Institute Review,* Vol. 1, June, 2012, titled "*Murther Most Foul: poison as a gendered weapon in Shakespeare*," Dara Kaye's lead sentence is this:

"Shakespeare's characters use poisons or potions in six plays, but in only one, *Hamlet*, is poison wielded by a man." (Kaye, 18) A few sentences later that individual is identified as *King Claudius* ("the outlier"). (Kaye, 18)

No others are mentioned in that categorical introit.

Yet in Act Four, sc. 7, it is Claudius and Laertes who conspire to kill the Prince in a fencing match. Claudius's idea is that one of the swords should be not blunt (as for play) but razor sharp. Poison is not mentioned by him.

> CLAUDIUS
>
> He, being remiss,
> Most generous, and free from all contriving,
> Will not peruse the foils; so that with ease,
> Or with a little shuffling, you may choose
> A sword unbated [=unblunted, see, Bate, 1985, n. 119), and in a pass of practice,
> Requite him of your father.
> (IV, vii, 107-112)

There is nothing of poison in this scheme.

Laertes immediately responds that he has *already* bought a potent poison to use on Hamlet. That is, poisoning Hamlet is proposed not by Claudius but by Laertes.

LAERTES

I will do't.
And for that purpose I'll anoint my sword.
I bought an unction of a mountebank
So mortal that, but dip a knife in it,
Whence it draws blood no cataplasm so rare,
Collected from all simples that have virtue
Under the moon, can save the thing from death
That is but scratched withal. I'll touch my point
With this contagion, that if I gall him slightly,
It may be death.
(IV, vii, 112-121)

It is as clear as crystal, then, that Laertes is a principal in the murder of Hamlet by poison. He buys the deadly substance and identifies himself as the one who will coat his sword with it. Yet Ms. Kaye insists that Claudius is the sole poisoner: "*Hamlet's* Claudius is the only man in Shakespeare who uses poison for violent ends." (Kaye, 24)

What could be more obvious than that – and more patently erroneous?

After Hamlet and Laertes are mortally wounded with the poisoned foil, Laertes declares his responsibility: "I am justly killed with mine own treachery." (V, ii, 260) That is, he has with premeditation tainted his sword and fought a sportive bout with the Prince in which both are lacerated by the envenomed blade. He is a self-confessed poisoner. In a moment of mortal desperation he then tries to shift responsibility to Claudius ("The King, the King's to blame," (V, ii, 274), but the admission against interest (V, ii,260) is already on record: Laertes' excited utterances confessing homicide by poison create an irrebuttable presumption of his guilt.

Ms. Kaye adds:

> *While preparing poison for Laertes' sword and for the cup of wine intended for Hamlet, Claudius leaves the actual swordplay to Laertes and Hamlet. Hamlet knows which end of a sword to hold, as demonstrated against Laertes, and could be too threatening to Claudius in direct combat. (Kaye, 25)*

Why would a middle-aged gourmand contemplate crossing swords with youthful, athletic Hamlet?

This is an idea from outer space. There is nothing to suggest that the alcoholic and sybaritic King is expert or even competent in the martial arts. Further, he has no reason to grapple with Hamlet. It is Laertes who is incensed against Hamlet, the killer of his father Polonius. He returns from Paris enraged at the King for presiding over his father's demise and his sister's madness. When Claudius sputters that he could not proceed directly against Hamlet on account of the immense affection Gertrude feels for her son, and "the great love the general gender bear him," (IV, vii, 5-25) Laertes consents to satisfy his need for revenge by doing away with Hamlet in a rigged fencing match. Claudius's wrong is not that he eschews a duel with Hamlet on account of physical cowardice, but that he takes advantage of Laertes' anger to continue the career of skullduggery by poison he began with the murder of his brother, King Hamlet the Dane.

The texts of this play in Taylor and Wells and Bate and Rasmussen offer no evidence that Claudius prepared poison for Laertes's sword, a strange thing to do as Laertes has told him that he has his own poison and plans to tip his sword with it. Has there been a change of plans? What Claudius does say is that in addition to the toxic foil to be provided by Laertes, he (Claudius) will arrange for a cup of poisoned wine to slake Hamlet's thirst at half-time.

> I ha't! When in your motion you are hot and dry –
> As make your bouts more violent to that end –
> And that he calls for drink, I'll have prepared him
> A chalice for the nonce, whereon but sipping,
> If he by chance escape <u>your</u> venomed stuck,
> Our purpose may hold there.
> (IV, vii, 128-134)

What these passages show us is that the factual claim made by Ms. Kaye is false. Claudius is not the only male poisoner in Shakespeare. He is not the only male poisoner in *Hamlet*. What is she trying to accomplish with this misleading information?

> *Honorable conflict in Shakespeare typically involves physical challenge. Romeo faces Tybalt avenging Mercutio. Prince Hal defeats Hotspur in battle. In Richard II Mowbray and Bolingbroke bring their dispute before the their king, who sanctions a duel.*
>
> *Duels, then, test and prove hierarchical order, affording opportunity for providence to aid the righteous.*
>
> *Women, however, generally have neither access to such dueling rituals nor the strength and training to defeat male opponents. (Kaye, 18)*

The difference between armed combat and poisoning is that the latter is sneaky, a subterfuge that renders its victim unaware and incapable of self defense. It is a contemptible form of struggle. When Shakespeare allegedly shows five female poisoners and only a single male poisoner, he is representing women in an unbalanced way, as inherently duplicitous. Of course, the trope of poison as a “gendered weapon” is silly on its face, since poison is essentially neutral. It has no sex. Only poisoners are “gendered.” What is meant is that in Shakespeare women are not depicted with as much integrity as men. In conflicts men show themselves above board and decent. They challenge each other and allow for ordered, regulated combat. (See, especially, *The Two Noble Kinsmen,* III, i, 73-93) Women, however, take advantage, conceal differences and act surreptitiously, that is, criminally, against their perceived enemies.

Yet this simplistic distinction is immediately upended in the very example offered from *Hamlet*. The 'either-or' choice is shown to be a false abstraction. Laertes does challenge Hamlet to a fencing match in the usual way of medieval and Renaissance men, but he combines that honorable outward aspect with deceit, adding an undisclosed, sharpened and poisoned sword and Claudius's fatal cup to the program. According to the Jiminy Cricket dualism proffered by Ms. Kaye, this should not be possible. Yet there is no comment in her essay about this anomaly. The truth is that there are two male poisoners in *Hamlet*, not one, as claimed by her.

Could there be others?

Naturally, we all recall that poison is featured in *King Henry VI, Part Two*. Where is the lone female hand there? Suffolk, York, Cardinal Beaufort and Queen Margaret conspire together to rid the court of good Duke Humphrey. This cabal is comprised of three men and one woman. Do these grand personages throw down the gauntlet to Gloucester, inviting him to show his mettle in a Field of Cloth of Gold tourney? No. They put their heads together for the purpose of getting rid of him as soon as possible, by stealth. The means don't matter.

> SUFFOLK
>
> And do not stand on quillets how to slay him;
> Be it by gins, by snares, by subtlety,
> Sleeping or waking, 'tis no matter how,
> So he be dead; for that is good conceit
> Which mates him first that first intends deceit.
> (III, i, 261-265)

Which individual will take actual responsibility for putting Humphrey out of commission is not clarified. But one thing is clear: it will not be the lady, Margaret. At the conclusion of the

conspiratorial colloquy, Beaufort signals his active involvement. “No more of [Humphrey],” he tells Suffolk, “for I will deal with him that henceforth he shall trouble us no more.” (III, i, 323-324) This makes sense since from the beginning of the trilogy Humphrey and Cardinal Beaufort (Winchester) have been at each other's throats, even agreeing to have at each other with swords. (II, i, 35-53) In the very next scene, however, we see hired murderers snuffing out the life of Humphrey and reporting back to Suffolk. Wasn't Cardinal Beaufort in charge of the dirty work?

FIRST MURDERER

Run to my lord of Suffolk – let him know
We have dispatched the Duke as he commanded.

SECOND MURDERER

O that it were to do! What have we done?
Didst ever hear a man so penitent?

FIRST MURDERER

Here comes my lord.

SUFFOLK

Now, sirs, have you dispatched this thing?

FIRST MURDERER

Ay, good my lord, he's dead.

SUFFOLK

Well, that's well said. Go, get you to my house.
I will reward you for this virtuous deed.
The King and all the peers are here at hand.
Have you laid fair the bed? Is all things well,
According as I gave direction?
(III, ii, 1-12)

Here is a mode of homicide not mentioned by Kaye: death by hired assassin, a frequent male device in Shakespeare. Should this not have been included as a third type of fighting, along

with poison and open armed combat? Plots, schemes and traps are devices common to both genders in Shakespeare, an inconvenient truth for doctrinaire feminists. When Shakespearean male characters engage in such murderous plots and schemes are they behaving nobly – or as no better than poisoners?

But wait, there's more.

In Act Three, sc. 3, we are confronted with the surprise death of one of our four conspirators, Cardinal Beaufort. The poor fellow is visited on his death bed by King Henry, Warwick and Salisbury.

> *Enter King Henry and the Earls of Salisbury and Warwick. Then the curtains be drawn revealing Cardinal Beaufort in his bed raving and staring as if mad.*

KING HENRY

How fares my lord? Speak, Beaufort, to thy sovereign.

CARDINAL BEAUFORT

If thou beest death, I'll give thee England's treasure
Enough to purchase such another island,
So thou wilt let me live and feel no pain.

KING HENRY

Ah, what a sign it is of evil life
Where death's approach is seen so terrible.

WARWICK

Beaufort, it is thy sovereign speaks to thee.

CARDINAL BEAUFORT

Bring me unto my trial when you will.
Died he not in his bed? Where should he die?
Can I make men live whe'er they will or no?
O, torture me no more – I will confess.
Alive again? Then show me where he is.

I'll give a thousand pounds to look upon him.
He hath no eyes! The dust hath blinded them.
Comb down his hair – look, look: it stands upright,
Like lime twigs set to catch my wingèd soul.
Give me some drink, and bid the apothecary
Bring the strong poison I bought of him.

KING HENRY

O Thou eternal mover of the heavens,
Look with a gentle eye upon this wretch.
O, beat away the busy meddling fiend
That lays strong siege unto this wretch's soul,
And from his bosom purge this black despair.

WARWICK

See how the pangs of death do make him grin.

SALISBURY

Disturb him not; let him pass peaceably.

KING HENRY

Peace to his soul, if God's good pleasure be.
Lord Card'nal, if thou think'st on heaven's bliss,
Hold up thy hand, make signal of thy hope.

Cardinal Beaufort dies

He dies and makes no sign. O, God, forgive him.

WARWICK

So bad a death argues a monstrous life.
(III, iii, 1-30)

Though there are unanswered questions here, the scene bears directly on the contention of Ms. Kaye that the only male poisoner in Shakespeare is Claudius. We have seen this claim disconfirmed by the actions of Laertes. It is also refuted by the instance of Cardinal

Beaufort, who confesses deliriously on his deathbed that he made preparations to kill Gloucester by means of a substance purchased from an apothecary. (IV, i, 18-19) Beaufort is therefore another Shakespearean male poisoner. Though the text makes plain that his death was really brought about by agents of the Duke of Suffolk, Beaufort's intention was to use the poison to murder the Duke. For though he is raving, it appears the subject of Beaufort's hysteria is Humphrey, whose appearance to Beaufort ("Comb down his hair, – look, look: it stands upright") tallies with the actual physical condition of the dead Duke Humphrey when viewed by Warwick and Henry: "His hair, you see, is sticking; His well-proportioned beard made rough and rugged, Like to the summer's corn by tempest lodged." (III, ii, 174-176) The most natural inference is that shortly after the assassins did their mortal deed, Beaufort entered Humphrey's chamber and was shocked to behold the hideous visage of the man he'd been planning to poison. The impact of this spectacle on Beaufort resembles the effect on Macbeth of Banquo's ghost. The corpse has all the indicia of murder. As Warwick declares, "It cannot be but he was murdered here." (III, ii, 177) In a flash, the Cardinal realizes that as he is part of Suffolk's faction, and assumed responsibility to take off the Duke himself, he will most likely be identified as Humphrey's killer. This sends him over the edge – into madness. The most likely account of his condition in this scene, then, is that in a state of mortal sin related to his attempted homicide, and the condition of his dead victim, Cardinal Beaufort hastily consumes the poison he had intended for Humphrey, and so perishes in agony, unshriven.

That means there are at least three male poisoners in Shakespeare, not one.

What about *The Tragedy of Richard II*? Picture yourself in the Tower of London, a fly on the wall of deposed King Richard's cold, barren cell. What do we behold? A keeper enters bearing food, and dismisses the attending groom. Has the King a hearty appetite – or does he view that prospective meal as his last?

Listen.

KEEPER (*to groom*)

Fellow, give place. Here is no longer stay.

RICHARD (*to groom*)

If thou love me, 'tis time thou wert away.

GROOM

What my tongue dares not, that my heart shall say.

KEEPER

My lord, will't please you to fall to? [That is, will you eat this food?]

RICHARD

Taste of it first, as thou art wont to do.

KEEPER

My lord, I dare not. Sir Piers of Exton,
Who lately came from the King, commands the contrary.

RICHARD (*striking the Keeper*)

The devil take Henry of Lancaster and thee!
Patience is stale, and I am weary of it.
(V, v, 95-104)

Here Sir Piers of Exton and his goons, who were huddled behind the door, rush in and slaughter their sovereign. Though their hope that Richard would consume the tainted meat and perish of poison is frustrated, they have a Plan 'B': attack him *en masse* with pikes and blades and stab him to death.

These results are then duly reported to Bolingbroke, now minding his royal business on the throne as King Henry IV. His reaction is instructive.

EXTON

Great King, within this coffin I present
Thy buried fear. Herein all breathless lies
The mightiest of thy greatest enemies,
Richard of Bordeaux, by me hither brought.

KING HENRY

Exton, I thank thee not, for thou hast wrought
A deed of slander with thy fatal hand
Upon my head and all this famous land.

EXTON

From your own mouth, my lord, did I this deed.

KING HENRY

They love not poison that do poison need;
Nor do I thee. Though I did wish him dead,
I hate the murderer, love him murderèd.
The guilt of conscience take thou for thy labour,
But neither my good word nor princely favour.
With Cain go wander through the shades of night,
And never show thy head by day or night.

* * *

Lords, I protest my soul is full of woe
That blood should sprinkle me to make me grow.
Come mourn with me for what I do lament,
And put on sullen black incontinent.
I'll make a voyage to the Holy Land
To wash this blood from off my guilty hand.
(V, vi, 30-50)

Based on this text, Exton does not disclose to King Henry the actual mode of murder. Henry doesn't realize that Richard is slain by steel. That is why his mind reverts to “poison.” (V, vi, 38) Shakespeare is telling us that it was Henry who ordered the elimination of the imprisoned Richard by poison. He also show us Henry's feelings of guilt, which parallel those of Cardinal Beaufort in *King Henry VI*. Unlike the situation in *King Richard III*, in which King Edward IV sought to reverse the order of execution of his brother Clarence (killed in the Tower by Richard), only to discover that his commutation of sentence had not been heeded, (II, i, 86-95), here hand-wringing Bolingbroke never rescinds the order to assassinate Richard. Hence his load of guilt. He is a *de facto* poisoner.

How many Shakespearean poisoners have we then? In *Richard II*, three males collaborate to knowingly and deliberately poison King Richard II. They are Bolingbroke, Exton and the keeper, who delivers the lethal supper and knows full-well what menace it contains. These three added to the three Shakespearean poisoners previously identified above give us a total of *six male poisoners*.

It would be jolly to continue in this vein. What would we say of the macabre Titus Andronicus, for example, who slaughters Chiron and Demetrius and grinds their bones to make the pie he serves as a “dainty” dish to their mother, Tamora Queen of the Goths? When she learns what was actually on the menu, is the result ptomaine, or mere upset stomach? As Titus stabs her before dessert, we'll never know for sure. (*Titus Andronicus*, V, iii, 53-63) As the *modus operandi* is identical to that of the classic poisoner, we must include Titus, making at the very least *seven male Shakespearean poisoners*.

Before turning to potions, we should pause to reflect on women and force of arms. It is a notable irony that, in its haste to portray women as perennial victims, feminism offers demeaning caricatures of female literary characters. A good example of this tendency is provided by Ms. Kaye, when she says “A wronged woman's only honorable options are to prevail upon a male intermediary or die.” (22) That is fortunately true neither in life nor in Shakespeare. In *King John*, for example, Queen Eleanor is a martial figure who commands an army, as the epigraph of this essay attests. (*King John*, I, i, 150) As far back as Plato, the fountainhead of Shakespeare's intellectual art, able women were to be included in the warrior/guardian class, as was made clear in *Politeia* (455d). Though Ms. Kaye states unequivocally that early modern England women had neither the training nor the ability to wield a sword, Shakespeare knew better than that. Has Ms. Kaye forgotten Joan of Arc in *King Henry VI*, who defeats Charles, Dauphin of France, in hand-to-hand combat? (*King Henry VI*, Part One, 70-84) What about Queen Margaret in the same play, who responds to Henry's shameful concessions to the York faction by assembling her own army, hunting down Richard and killing him on the reeking field of battle? Why didn't she just use poison instead? We should also not forget that Hippolyta, of A *Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, is a professional warrior who fought with her sword gallantly against the uninvited Theseus.

Since Ms. Kaye's contention includes “potions” as well as poisons, we need to consider whether male figures in the plays use non-lethal substances to achieve their ends as well. One of the six plays listed by Ms. Kaye is *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Not much is said about it, however. We must be edified by this: “*A Midsummer Night's Dream* has been similarly treated, as Puck is non-human and uses potion as a toy for play, not as a substitute for violence.” (21) Well, the potioner is not Puck, a mere agent of the royal will, but Oberon, King of the Fairies. And his use thereof is not as a game, jest or toy, but to restore the proper order of love amongst four misguided and stumbling mortals.

OBERON

I know a bank where the wild thyme blows,

Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows,
Quite overcanopied with luscious woodbine,
With sweet musk-roses, and with eglantine.
There sleeps Titania sometime of the night,
Lulled in these flowers with dances and delight;
And there the snake throws her enamelled skin,
Weed wide enough to wrap a fairy in;
And with the juice of this I'll streak her eyes,
And make her full of hateful fantasies.
Take thou some of it, and seek through this grove.
A sweet Athenian lady is in love
With a disdainful youth. Annoint his eyes;
But do it when the next thing he espies
May be the lady. Thou shalt know the man
By the Athenian garments he has on.
Effect it with some care, that he may prove
More fond on her than she upon her love;
And look thou meet me ere the first cock crow.
(II, i, 248-267)

To the list of seven male poisoners in Shakespeare, we must add the employer of potions, Oberon, bringing the total number of males to eight. When Oberon proceeds to strive against his marital adversary Titania in a child custody dispute, he personally dopes her with an hallucinogen, the juice of that “little western flower,” causing her to have a love affair with a talking animal. While she is distracted in the coils of fantastic bestiality, Oberon kidnaps her adopted child. What is this if not substituting stealth for violence to commit a patent wrong?

It is hardly possible to object that Oberon is “non-human,” as we do not judge him by the artifice of ontological taxonomy, but always as a human exemplar. His purposes are not ludic but in deadly earnest, carried out with all the tenacity and zeal of parties litigant in a contested domestic action in Los Angeles County. Ms. Kaye is willing to set Cleopatra down as a user of poisons and potions though she imposes on no one. “Antony and Cleopatra is suffused with language about potions and drugs. Cleopatra is repeatedly compared with serpents and venom. She is a drug user . . . .” (Kaye, 21) So what? Cleopatra inflicts potions and poisons on no one. With Anthony dead, and trapped by the forces of Rome, she commits suicide the most painless way available, the bite of the asp. Her serving maids voluntarily do likewise. How

logical is it to say Cleopatra is a user of potions and poisons and Oberon is not? A better argument would be that Oberon, who takes advantage of Titania by smearing a love potion on her sleeping face, making her lose control of her sexuality, is the genuine potioner, not Cleopatra, whose final actions are confined to herself, as were, say, the suicides of Brutus and Antony.

Take *Romeo and Juliet*, mentioned by Ms. Kaye but omitted from her list of six relevant plays. Romeo Montague commits suicide by poison purchased by him in an apothecary's shop. He is a male. Juliet (female) has no contact with poison. She is important for our purposes, however, as her death-like slumber in the tomb of her ancestors is engineered by Friar Laurence, a fellow with some knowledge of potent substances. It was he who gave her the herbal potion which so closely mimics death. His is a mind worth inspecting.

FRIAR LAURENCE

The grey-eyed morn smiles on the frowning night,
Chequ'ring the eastern clouds with streaks of light
And fleckled darkness like a drunkard reels
From forth day's path and Titan's fiery wheels.
Now, ere the sun advance his burning eye
The day to cheer and night's dank dew to dry,
I must up-fill this osier cage of ours
With baleful weeds and precious-juicèd flowers.
The earth, that is nature's mother, is her tomb.
What is her burying grave, that is her womb,
And from her womb children of divers kind
We sucking on her natural bosom find,
Many for many virtues excellent,
None but for some, and yet all different.
O mickle is the powerful grace that lies
In plants, herbs, stones and their true qualities,
For naught so vile that on earth doth live,
But to the earth some special good doth give;
Nor aught so good but, strained from that fair use,
Revolts from true birth, stumbling on abuse.
Virtue itself turns vice being misapplied,
And vice sometime's by action dignified.
Within the infant rind of this weak flower

Poison hath residence, and medicine power,
For this, being smelt, with that part cheers each part;
Being tasted, slays all senses with the heart.
Two such opposèd kings encamp them still
In man as well as herbs – grace and rude will;
And where the worser is predominant,
Full soon the canker death eats up that plant.
(II, ii, 1-30)

In Friar Laurence we have a philosophical botanist whose knowledge of nature spans good and evil properties. He may be viewed as our ninth Shakespearean male potioner/poisoner. Though essentially an amateur healer, he has sufficient knowledge of toxic substances to be able to concoct efficacious poisons. We do not know if he has done so. He can also tap into the healthful and curative resources of his herbal environment. Most importantly, he has acquired insight into the relationship between these positive and negative dimensions, perceiving, for example, that nothing is either purely good or bad in itself. "For naught so vile that on the earth doth live, but to the earth some special good doth give." This is a theme that runs like an underground current through Shakespeare, turning up at unexpected moments. Thus we find King Harry in *The Life of King Henry the Fifth*, when faced with the perils of battle, musing this way:

There is some soul of goodness in things evil,
Would men observingly distill it out –
For our bad neighbor makes us early stirrers,
Which is both healthful and good husbandry.
Besides, they are our outward consciences,
And preachers to us all, admonishing
That we should dress us fairly for our end.
Thus we may gather honey from the weed,
And make a moral of the devil himself.
(IV, i, 4-12)

Another example of the same insight can be found in *As You Like It*, when Duke Senior praises his harsh outdoor environment:

Now, my co-mates and brothers in exile,
Hath not old custom made this life more sweet
Than that of painted pomp? Are not these woods

More free from peril than the envious court?
Here feel we not the penalty of Adam,
The seasons' difference, as the icy fang
And churlish chiding of the winter's wind,
Which when it bites and blows upon my body
Even til I shrink with cold, I smile, and say
'This is no flattery. These are counsellors
That feelingly persuade me what I am'.
Sweet are the uses of adversity
Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous,
Wears yet a precious jewel in his head;
And this our life, exempt from public haunt,
Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
Sermons in stones, and good in everything.
(II, i, 1-17)

That is to say, there is a distinctly toxic element to life, which, while it is a difficulty, is not absolutely so. It may be compared to a poisonous toad, which yet carries within itself a precious jewel of wisdom and of healing. Meeting the stressful and painful aspects of life affirmatively and with judgment, Shakespeare teaches, may make us better, more durable, more patient persons, giving us cause to be thankful not only for life's blessings but equally for its hurdles and impediments. Even poison has its uses. Radiation, for example, which can cause cancer, may also be employed to destroy malignant lesions. Anger, a fault, may rescue us in emergencies. Homeopathic medicine is based on the principle that small doses of a known toxin may either render us immune to certain illnesses or help us to regain health. Foreshadowing this dialectical philosophy of Friar Laurence earlier in the play, Romeo's friend, Benvolio, advises:

Tut, man, one fire burns out another's burning,
One pain is lessened by another's anguish.
Turn giddy, and be holp by backward turning.
One desperate grief cures with another's languish.
Take thou some new infection to thy eye,
And the rank poison of the old will die.
(I, ii, 44-49)

Here Shakespeare characterizes romantic love, with all its pain, not as a virtue, but as a spiritual infection. Romeo's desire for Rosaline can be cured homeopathically by accepting the more severe disease of prettier girl. Here, in the tradition of Socratic philosophy, we witness the intersection of wisdom and ironic humor.

In Act Four, sc. 2, we see the practical implementation of Friar Laurence's metaphysic. The prescription for Juliet is a small dose of death.

> Take thou this vial, being then in bed,
> And this distilling liquor drink thou off,
> When presently through all thy veins shall run
> A cold and drowsy humor; for no pulse
> Shall keep his native progress, but surcease.
> No warmth, no breath shall testify thou livest.
> The roses in thy lips and cheeks shall fade
> To wanny ashes, thy eyes' windows fall
> Like death when he shuts up the day of life.
> Each part, deprived of supple government
> Shall, stiff and stark and cold, appear like death;
> And in this borrowed likeness of shrunk death
> Thou shalt continue two-and-forty hours,
> And then awake as from a pleasant sleep.
> (IV, i, 93-106)

We know the rest. Unbeknownst to the well-intentioned Friar, his messages explaining the plan to Romeo will never get delivered, and Juliet's affair with death is fated to be consummated. Yet even here, in the face of tragedy, all is not lost. Our principal consolation is not the mere end of the feud between the houses of Capulet (one almost writes 'Copulate') and Montague, but, far more profoundly, the illustration of the ideal moment of absolute love and unqualified devotion. Our lesser world of checks, contingencies and compromises is in one instant lit up by this dramatic skyrocket of the Unconditioned. Who would have it otherwise? Mr. and Mrs. Montague paying monthly bills in their Verona flat while the baby screams? No, thanks.

From Friar Laurence's alchemy we may advance to others who look even more searchingly and creatively at life. For example, poison takes on fresh meaning in the tropes of Shakespearean characters who stand more distally from habit and convention and act as critics to oppose them. A newcomer like the Bastard in *King John* thinks outside the box, and can use his

insights constructively, both for his own progress and the betterment of the world. If complacency and self-interest tend to social decay, then we exist already in a state of toxic decomposition. Paradoxically, the antidote is the 'poison' of criticism, that is, ideas which must sound painfully in the ears of social parasites and reactionaries. Recall Socrates' comparison of himself to a stinging fly that bites the nag of state. (*Apology*, 30d) They poisoned him in requital of that. (*Phaedo*) Think of the Fool in *Lear*, with his stinging barbs. Do they not fester? One could even argue that it is with such 'poisonous' outsiders that Shakespeare identifies most closely.

> But this is worshipful society,
> And fits the mounting spirit like myself;
> For he is but a bastard to the time
> That doth not smack of observation;
> And so am I — whether I smack or no,
> And not alone in habit and device,
> Exterior form, outward accoutrement,
> But from the inward motion — to deliver
> Sweet, sweet, sweet poison for the age's tooth;
> Which, though I will not practise to deceive,
> Yet to avoid deceit I mean to learn;
> For it shall strew the footsteps of my rising.
> (*King John*, II, i, 205-216)

Jacques in *As You Like It* sings the same tune, but in a minor key.

> I must have liberty
> Withal, as large a charter as the wind,
> To blow on whom I please, for so fools have;
> And they that are most gallèd with my folly,
> They most must laugh. And why, sir, must they so?
> The way is plain as way to parish church:
> He that a fool doth very wisely hit
> Doth very foolishly, although he smart,
> Seem aught but senseless of the bob. If not,
> The wise man's folly is anatomized
> Even by the squandering glances of the fool.
> Invest me in my motley. Give me leave
> To speak my mind, and I will through and through

Cleanse the foul body of th'infected world,
If they will patiently receive my medicine.
(II, vii, 47-61)

CONCLUSION

The physician and the poisoner share a knowledge of deadly substances, but with important differences. The poisoner acts covertly, with malice, and has a narrow understanding of his art and its substances. The true physician, on the other hand, familiar though he is with toxic elements, is apprised of their benefits and antidotes as well, how they can heal as well as hurt. Moreover, he has taken a Hippocratic Oath to 'do no harm'. The liar, the slanderer and the propagandist are masters of deception, and the rumors that they scatter in the today's electronic winds go quickly “viral” and pandemic. Once in place, ideologies, dogmas and prejudices are almost impossible to root out. Civil society sickens and falls into decay. Many a necropolis slouching its way to extinction has been proclaimed a utopia by cheering voices. At that point rational philosophy is useless. Only the ironic artist, the satirist wielding caustic pen or tongue, has any chance of cleansing the foul body of the infected world. But the prophet's message is painful; no one but an oracular spirit of the most transcendent genius can hope to deliver it and be heeded. That is Shakespeare. In the words of Northumberland, grieving over the loss of his only son:

For this I shall have time enough to mourn.
In poison there is physic; and these news,
Having been well, that would have made me sick,
Being sick, have in some measure made me well;
And, as the wretch whose fever-weakened joints,
Like strengthless hinges, buckle under life,
Impatient of his fit, breaks like a fire
Out of his keeper's arms, even so my limbs,
Weakened with grief, being now enraged with grief,
Are thrice themselves.
(*King Henry IV*, Part Two, I, i, 136-145)

Plato and Shakespeare sought to demonstrate that a malefactor is his own first victim. I must believe the lie myself to spread it abroad. To make others ill I must first have the contagion myself. In his vivid portrait of the death of Cardinal Beaufort in *King Henry VI*, Shakespeare shows us how the putrefaction of the soul is madness and the bad death of the body as well. On the other hand, a true physician, like Cerimon of Ephesus in *Pericles* (Sc. 12) can bring the

seeming dead back to life. And Cerimon is Shakespeare's puppet.

In a rotten society thought falls ill, and bears the form of ideology, a disorder which may be regarded as the influenza of the intellect. It is prejudice writ large. The ideological bacillus hijacks the cerebral cortex and rapidly multiplies arguments designed to bolster some preconceived and expedient idea. As this happens, objectivity shuts down, and the ability to perceive competing facts which might conduce to different conclusions evaporates.

That which calls itself “feminism” today is an anti-wisdom, dogma masquerading as thought. One of its most common symptoms is blindness to more holistic outlooks and the evidences that support those outlooks. Feminism is a species of faddism, the assumption that what is new and popular is better than anything in the past. As “ye olde Shakespeare,” the “dead white male,” is blithely tossed in with the dinosaurs (he didn't have Twitter or an iPhone, did he?), he is the bogeyman, the perfect target. You see, Shakespeare had one boot in the Middle Ages, and believed with everyone else that men are noble and women aren't. Just look at the plays. When the men have spats they march out into the field like mountain goats in rut and start butting each other's heads. Women just get bitchy. See the difference? When a brain infected with the germ of feminism attempts to perform literary exegesis, it is pre-programmed to select and process only data favorable to its “women-as-victim, man-as-oppressor” narrative.

Ms. Dara Kaye sets out six plays in which poisons or potions are used, and blandly announces that in only one of them is the user male. Patient study will reveal that of the alleged instances of aggressive female use of such substances, only Goneril in *Lear* is valid. (V, iii, 89-100) The other cases are all so equivocal as to be without probative value. In the arguments made above we have seen not one but nine male characters who make significant use of potions and poisons. This is the kind of blunder that happens when texts are reflected in the Fun House mirrors of feminist ideology: up becomes down, black becomes white, and poison acquires “gender.” Such is the singular advantage of knowing everything in advance; it spares us the trouble of actually reading. We can finish typing early and have lunch with the girls up in Westport.

The mature response, of course, is not to demonize feminism. Like the winter weather Duke Senior exults in, the lessons we learn from the “politically correct” have a special savor, the sweetness of adversity. These are the venomous toads of our time. When their minds are carefully dissected, we can still find that precious jewel of truth within.

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