

Women and Poison

We Have Always Lived in the Castle

Poison as a Women's Weapon?

- Poison often said to be a woman's method of murder
- A Few Examples
 - Sherlock Holmes in movie *Pursuit to Algiers*: "Poison is a woman's weapon"
 - Shakespeare
 - Honorable conflict in Shakespeare typically involves physical challenge
 - Poison more frequently used by Shakespeare's women characters and seen as an "indirect, dishonorable tool in opposition to straightforward violence" (Dara Kaye)
 - *Game of Thrones*?



Why?



Mary Ann Cotton, convicted English arsenic poisoner

- You didn't have to be strong (you can avoid the risks of actual physical confrontation)
- Women in charge of food preparation and administration of medicine
- A readily available weapon
- Hard to detect

Venemous Women

- Yet, women's connection to poison goes much deeper
- Women's very bodies considered poisonous in works from the Middle Ages through the Victorian Period and beyond



De secretis mulierum (The secrets of Women) late 13th Century



- Claims that menstruating women are poisonous and can infect others, particularly children and men, with leprosy, epilepsy, and even death
- Insisted that women were not just poisonous when they were menstruating—the menses contaminated women’s entire bodies as “ill humors” that could leak from their eyes, exude from their breath, and exist in their hair even when menstrual bleeding was not present
- Older women past menopause and poor women who ate a course diet were said to be the most dangerous of all

Malleus Maleficarum

- Witch-hunting guide published in 1486
- The first “bestseller” after the invention of the printing press
- Also called the “most misogynistic book ever written”
- Associates women’s inner poisonous nature with propensity toward evil and with their inherent “carnal” nature
- Belief that all witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is, in women, insatiable

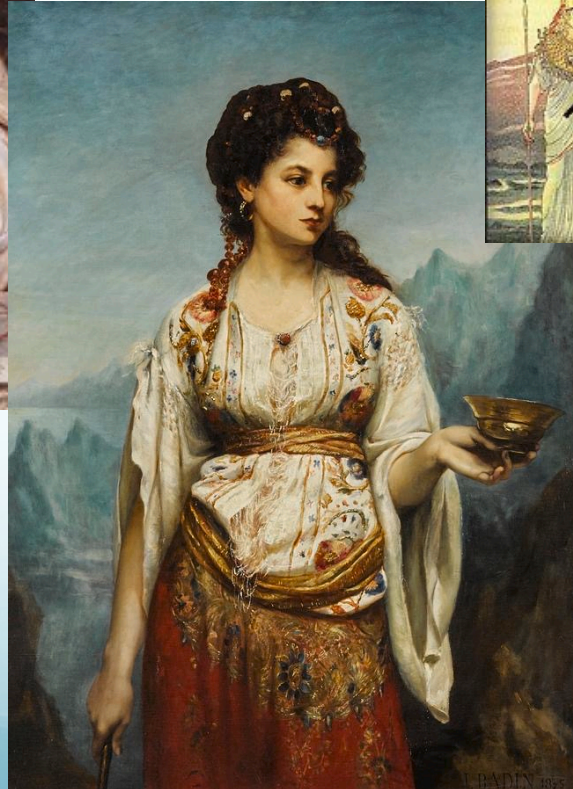


Poisonous Women in Myth



Medea

Circe



Arachne

Eve



Associated with Fear

- Fear of female power to deceive and destroy men
- Women's sexuality itself was seen as dangerous, and, as the perceived weaker sex, women's only avenue to power was through deceptive means



Views of Poison in the Renaissance

- Poison considered especially insidious because it challenged the good order created by the King and threatened to overturn patriarchal hierarchies
- No need for poisoners to possess superior physical force and no way for victims to anticipate such a deceptive crime and openly defend themselves
- Thus, poison allowed children to kill parents, servants their masters, wives their husbands, and subjects their king, as Reginald Scott, an English member of parliament writing in 1584, argued.
- Fears that poison would allow the powerless to gain mastery over the powerful were evident as well in frequent bouts of poison hysteria among slaveholders in the French and English sugar islands, and later, in the American South

Poison Hysteria in the Victorian Period

- Called the “Arsenic Century”
- A chemical element that occurs naturally in the ground
- Not dangerous in its natural state
- Becomes poisonous when converted to “white arsenic”
- Even white arsenic benign in very low doses
- During Victorian Era, appeared as an ingredient in cosmetics; ingested to keep the complexion pale; used in fabrics, paints, and dyes for wallpaper
- Doctors prescribed it for asthma, typhus, worms, menstrual cramps, and other disorders
- In high doses, causes a pretty horrible death



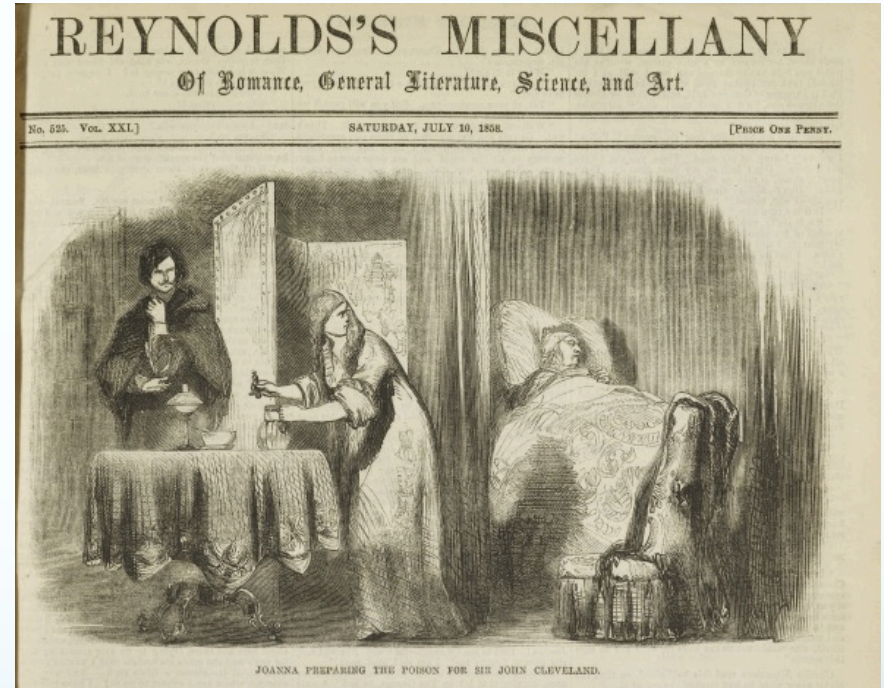
Why Arsenic as a Murder Weapon?



- Very readily available
- Easy and cheap to buy as a rat poison (called “ratsbane” in England)
- Could be administered gradually
- You didn’t need to be at the scene of the crime, since dying typically took hours
- Symptoms (vomiting, diarrhea, stomach cramps) mimicked other diseases
- Until the development of the Marsh test (mid-19th C), was impossible to detect in the human body

Poison in Popular Perception in Victorian Era

- In 1851, the House of Lords in England tried to pass a law making it illegal for women to buy arsenic
- The press reported on sensational poisoning cases
- As newspapers became cheaper, literacy rates rose, more and more people read about these cases
- Copycat crimes?



Women's Situations



- Lack of economic opportunity
- Lack of property rights
- Difficulty in escaping bad marriages and family situations
- Desire to inherit?

Yet, Men Poison Too



William Palmer, hanged in England
In 1856 for poisoning multiple people

- Of all poison killers between 1980 and 2008, 60.5 percent male and 39.5 percent female.
 - (From the U.S. Department of Justice's report on homicide trends in the U.S.)
- "Contrary to popular belief, the majority of convicted poisoners are men, overwhelmingly so when the victim is a woman. When the victim is a man, the poisoner is equally likely to be male or female."
 - (From "The Psychological Profile of a Poisoner," by Joni Johnston, appearing in *Psychology Today*, 2012)

Still...



- Men murder more than women do
- Overall, for felony murders in the U.S. today, 93.2% are male; 6.8% female
- In nineteenth-century America, 70% of accused poisoners were men and 30% women
- In England, significantly more poisonings at the time were ruled accidents or suicide than criminal acts, and men were, in fact, much more likely to murder their spouses than women were.
- Yet, when women did kill their husbands, poison was often their weapon of choice. While more than 90% of spousal killings in nineteenth century England involved men killing their wives, usually by beating or stabbing, in the small number of cases in which women were convicted of killing their husbands, 55% used poison
- So, poison **does** seem to be the weapon women often choose

Poison and Domestic Ideology



- Obsession with women poisoners, in both America and England, can largely be attributed to Victorian domestic ideology about women
- Newspaper stories about sexually licentious women poisoners, often conspiring with or attacking illicit lovers, were fascinating at a time when women were expected to be more pure and virtuous than men—angel-in-the-house figures making the Victorian home a safe retreat from the dirty, politicized, public sphere
- The fear of poisoning from within, by women who were expected to be nurturers and care-takers, was especially terrifying at a time when the home was considered a restorative haven and bulwark against the dangerous outside world