

Poisons and Blades: Culturally Accepted Killings in Shakespeare's Tragedies

Brittany Ginder

Comparative Drama Conference 2014

In Renaissance play tradition, to have a woman commit an act of violence onstage against anyone other than herself is uncommon, while masculine characters are expected to willingly get their hands dirty with the blood of their chosen enemies. Furthermore, when women do commit acts of violence, poison is the weapon of choice, whereas blades are held within the realm of men. In this paper, I aim to analyze the types of violence portrayed by characters of different sexes, focusing particularly on Shakespeare's tragedies of *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*. I will examine the strict rules in the Renaissance regarding the culturally acceptable ways of each sex to commit murder, and also how characters who killed outside of those prescribed boundaries are rare. Most intriguingly, I will explore how these most transgressive actions are often overlooked, even in current Shakespearean scholarship.

To begin with, the bard's favored modes of killing must first be examined. Going back to the beginnings of time, duties in the earliest of tribes were divvied up between hunting and gathering. Hunting (with handmade, sharpened tools) was performed by the men while the task of gathering (finding herbs and berries to cook, clean, and heal with) was assigned to the females of the tribe. Despite the advances made in the Renaissance from this antiquated mode of survival, the cultural bias of men as hunter/killers and women as gatherers in the home still existed. Poisons, made from various herbs and often created in a kitchen-like setting, were thus categorized as a "feminine" way to kill. They were the great equalizer. According to a 2012 article by Shakespeare scholar Dara Kaye, poison "allow[ed] those with lesser physical strength,

wits, political power, or other means to prevail over those with greater power, and is therefore potentially a force against tradition, order, and hierarchy” (18). When used by men, it was considered dishonorable and weak compared to the more masculinized use of a hunting tool.

Similarly, it was unheard of on the Shakespearean stage for a woman to use a blade to kill. Such physical and bloody violence was never expected to come from the hands of a woman. “The public perception of physical violence,” claims Steven Woodward, “is that it is almost exclusively a masculine form of aggression... In the public mind, women and children remain outside the law: women above it, because they are the ultimate guardians of our moral code; children below it, because they have not yet had a chance to internalize that code” (304). Hence, a sword, which can easily be argued as a metaphorical phallus, is much too dangerous for a woman to wield- it would upset the patriarchy as well as the culturally hegemonic code of morality. For a woman to commit an act of violence with a blade would mean that she wasn’t a woman at all- but, instead, more of a demon or a witch in a woman’s shape.

For the remainder of my analysis I have created a handy chart that details which characters commit murder within *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth* and highlights those who perform outside the boundaries of these gendered forms of assassination. Please feel free to follow along. ☺

Looking at Shakespeare’s body of work, potions or poisons are used in only six of his plays (*Cymbeline*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*). Within this sextet, poison is the weapon of choice for many women and only one man: Claudius. His poisoning of King Hamlet (the elder) is culturally seen as the act of a cowardly man. Despite the common strength of Shakespeare’s villains (Iago, Edmund, and Bolingbroke- if you want to call him a villain- which is another paper all together) this cunning and power is not

shared with Claudius. When faced with finding a way to kill Prince Hamlet, he again chooses poison as his tool for destruction. “While preparing poison for Laertes’ sword and for a cup of wine intended for Hamlet, Claudius leaves the actual swordplay to Laertes and Hamlet,” claims Kaye. “Hamlet knows which end of a sword to hold... and could be too threatening to Claudius in direct combat” (25).

Claudius proves his cowardice with the use of such a domesticated and feminized weapon. Although men using poison was not as unremarkable on the Renaissance stage as women using blades was, it was still negatively perceived. Poison is used by men in *The Duchess of Malfi*, *The Jew of Malta*, and *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, to name a few, but always by an outsider in the community of the play. Contemporary Renaissance writers also seemed to dislike the use of poison in general on the stage. In his 1584 *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, Reginald Scot claims (rewritten in plain text for the sake of this reading)

“truly this poisoning art... is most abominable; as whereby murders may be committed, where no suspicion may be gathered, nor any resistance can be made; the strong cannot avoid the weak, the wise cannot prevent the foolish, the godly cannot be preserved from the hands of the wicked; children may hereby kill their parents, the servant the master, the wife her husband, so privately, so inevitable, and so incurable, that of all others it has been thought the most odious kind of murder” (94).

Claudius’s use of poison is not his only choice- he is not forced to use it for any reason. Sacrificing any honor he may have internally found in his actions, his use of poison is convenient, safe, and, as presented by Shakespeare, the ultimate in effeminate cowardice.

Although Claudius’s transgressions are documented and starting to be discussed by more contemporary scholars, the opposite side of this culturally acceptable killings coin is rarely discoursed in depth. In all of Shakespeare’s tragedies where a sword or a blade is used to kill, in

only one is it brandished by a woman. In Act 3 Scene 7 of *King Lear*, the First Servant attacks the Duke of Cornwall in response to the brutal blinding of Gloucester. After fatally wounding the Duke, Regan steps in. Hastily taking a sword from a nearby retainer, she proclaims her anger towards the impudent servant, flanks her opponent, and murders him.

Regan's slaughter of the servant is a man's killing done by the hand of a woman. It is the moment in the play where we see Regan fully take up the mantle of "masculine" by taking the sword of another man (her metaphorical phallus) and stabbing her foe. Textually, there is not even a reaction from Regan in response to such a transgressive act. It is presented almost as if she has done this before. She subverts the norms of womanhood throughout the play by calling the shots inside and outside her household, but this is a rebellion unlike any other in all of Shakespeare's canon. In keeping with the acceptable traditions discussed in this essay, men are the hunters that kill with their specially built weapons. The only reason for a woman to ever kill with a blade was if she should turn it upon her own breast. Then, and only then, was it tolerable for a woman to engage in a more gruesome means of death. Yet, Regan kills a servant with a sword in the middle of Gloucester's home with a room full of witnesses and no one seems to find this action terribly out of the ordinary.

Within the entire section devoted to *King Lear* in her book Shakespeare's Division of Experience, Marilyn French includes a single sentence in response to Regan's transgressive killing: "Regan performs an act unique in Shakespeare: she kills, in her own person, with a sword" (231). She then moves on to discuss Goneril's "womanly" killing of her sister and then switches gears back to the feminine natures of Albany and Edgar. Unfortunately, this small bit of attention paid to Regan is still more than most. Her fierce killing of the servant is usually presented as an afterthought- a plot point that needn't be discussed or paid attention to. I have yet

to find any kind of definitive Renaissance reaction to Regan's murderous act. I hypothesize that, since she was being portrayed on stage by a young man, that the act was, perhaps, a moment where the audience broke out of the performance to remember that it wasn't *actually* a woman committing such a heinous crime before them. But, again, this is just a hypothesis.

In addition, I feel that Lady Macbeth could and should join Claudius and Regan's circle of transgressive killers. Using Strindberg's theory of Psychic Murder, *Macbeth* (the play) can be read in a way in which Macbeth (the man) is being employed as a weapon of Lady Macbeth. By the transitive property, any killing committed by Macbeth is initiated by his manipulating wife.

According to French physician and neurologist Dr. Hippolyte Bernheim's 1906 book *Suggestive Therapeutics: A Treatise on the Nature and Uses of Hypnotism*, it is possible that Macbeth could be considered an "instinctive imbecile," who can "talk well, reason correctly, [is] sensible, and sometimes brilliant in conversation... [but has] no moral spontaneity [and] does not know how to behave, obey[ing] all suggestions, submitting readily to all outside influences" (180). Lady Macbeth sees the weakness in her husband's mind but she is also aware that the strength in his political office and physical body are what she needs to reign supreme.

"Come, thick night," she says in Act 1 Scene 5, "And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell, that my keen knife see not the wound it makes" (1.v.400-402). This early in the play she has already set in motion the use of Macbeth as her weapon, but she is blissfully unaware of all of the blood that will be shed by her husband (and her) hands in the remaining acts of the play. In the famous "Out, damned spot!" speech, she constantly refers to Macbeth's murderous acts as things that they have done together- "What need *we* fear who knows it (that they killed Duncan), when none can call *our* power to count?" (5.i.2161-2163). Shortly after this: "The thane of Fife has a wife: where is she now?—What, will these hands ne'er be clean?—No more o' that, my

lord, no more o' that" (5.i.2166-2169). In this reading, Macbeth is the literally masculinized weapon of Lady Macbeth. The blood of Duncan (and all others slain by her husband) is on her hands- and she can't seem to get them clean.

Shakespeare's stage was laden with dramatic conventions that were generally well accepted by those who came to enjoy the performances of his work. It seems that, at least for the bard, there were acceptable ways for men and women to commit acts of violence onstage. Women, gatherers by nature and keepers of the home and hearth, were allowed to kill with poison and men, natural hunters, were prescribed blades for their mortal purposes. So what does it mean when one of his characters breaks out of this conservative mold? Normally, to intentionally disobey the norm is something worth noting and I feel that a discussion regarding the transgressive gendered killings of Claudius, Regan, and Lady Macbeth is long overdue.