# Altered Judgment: Poison in Early Modern England

**Abstract**

In the early modern period, the humoral theory was still predominant to explain physical and mental states. If unbalanced, the four humours – blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile – could lead to sanguine, phlegmatic, choleric or melancholic state. The balance of these humours could be affected by environmental factors, amongst which weather, activity and diet are mentioned. This period’s medical thinking was completed by works on poison and drugs. In fact, they constitute the subject of a number of different types of writings: treatises on drugs, plays featuring poison or drugs as part of their plot, broadside ballads relating events involving poisoning. Poison thus travels between different types of writings, from nonfiction to fiction, suggesting the transposable nature of this element. In this work-in-progress paper, I will focus on four broadside ballads specifically related to the Overbury affair. Some relate the events, insisting on the use of the poison in this affair, while others use it as part of their narrative strategies to expand on the reality of the events. The reality of the trials becomes fiction through the use of this key element: poison. In this network of stories, poison in fact is no longer necessarily literal, instead it becomes the element that triggers a narrative, blurring the line between the real events and its fictional accounts.

**Paper**

* Pre-Intro

As part of the “Theater and Judgement in Early Modern England” research project, I have so far been focusing on judgment within various features of early modern print, such as typography or pamphlets. I’ve recently been drawn to broadside ballads for their woodcuts and their association to music and performance. Today’s work-in-progress paper will feature four ballads related to the Overbury affair and how poison becomes a motif of this affair as well as a narrative device. I would like to explore how poison is used to alter the narration of these real-life events and thus potentially the discernment of the audiences. I look forward to your comments, questions and suggestions.

* Intro

In the early modern period, the humoral theory was still predominant to explain physical and mental states. If unbalanced, the four humours – blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile – could lead to sanguine, phlegmatic, choleric or melancholic state. The balance of these humours could be affected by environmental factors, amongst which weather, activity and diet are mentioned[[1]](#footnote-1). These ideas derive from ancient Greek writings by Hippocrates and Galen[[2]](#footnote-2). Some of these were made available in Latin such as Hippocrates’s ideas in a volume which contains eighty small works, which for the most part have not been available in Latin for approximately two thousand years and was published in 1525. Galen’s writings were translated by Nicholas Culpeper and published under the title *Galen’s Art of Physick* in 1652[[3]](#footnote-3). Other works based on humours theory were published throughout the period[[4]](#footnote-4). These humour-based medical ideas existed alongside works on poison and drugs. In fact, they constitute the subject of a number of different types of writings: treatises on drugs such as *King James His Counterblast to Tobacco* published in 1604 or treatises against make-up, treating it as a poison such as in Thomas Tuke’s *A Treatise Against Painting and Tincturing of Men and Women: Against Murther and Poysoning: Pride and Ambition: Adulterie and Witchcraft. And the Roote of all These, Disobedience to the Ministery of the Word* published in 1616 in which cosmetics are defined as “poysonous to the body, and pernicious to the soul”[[5]](#footnote-5). This is interesting also when thinking about the theatre and stage make-up for instance, which is something I haven’t had chance to look into much yet, but that I wish to pursue. About the theatre, as you probably know, a lot of plays featured poison or drugs as part of their plot: think of *Romeo and Juliet* with the potion faking Juliet’s death as well as the real poison that Romeo drinks; in *Hamlet* to murder Old Hamlet, the poisoned blade during Hamlet and Laertes’ fight or even the one reused in the play performed for Claudius to expose his guilt; *Midsummer Night’s Dream* and the flower, the “love-in-idleness”, which will make characters fall in love with the first person they see when they open their eyes. Another printed format in which poison could be found in the period were broadside ballads, which related events, potentially scandals and murders, involving poisoning such as the one which we will be looking at today, that is ballads related to the Overbury affair, so called after the victim Thomas Overbury.

As begins to be clear through this overview, poison thus travelled between different types of writings, from nonfiction to fiction, suggesting what I will call for now, for lack of a better idea so far, the transposable (or maybe transferable) nature of poison. In the context of the Overbury affair, some of these ballads relate the events, insisting on the use of poison, while others use it as part of their narrative strategies to expand on the reality of the events. But before we dive into these texts, I will briefly summarize the events of the Overbury affair, which as you will hear (and I’m sorry for those of you who may have already heard about this in a previous recent presentation at the medieval and early modern CUSO in Geneva), so as you will hear, the Overbury affair could definitely make a great Netflix series! So the characters of this affair are Robert Devereaux, Earl of Essex, Frances Howard, Robert Carr, Earl of Somerset and the King’s favourite, Sir Gervase Elwes, the new Lieutenant of the Tower of London who knew the Howards and was awarded the post exactly for this reason, Richard Weston, recruited as Overbury’s keeper, James Franklin, an apothecary who provided the poison, Anne Turner, confidante to Frances Howard and helped in the process of poisoning, Thomas Overbury, knight, poet and Robert Carr’s friend (at least in the first place). The story begins with Robert Devereaux and Frances Howard’s wedding in 1606 when they were respectively 14 and 13 years old. After the wedding, Robert Devereaux went on a trip and when he came back, Frances Howard wanted a divorce on grounds of impotence and because the marriage had never been consummated. During the trials for the divorce, it was said that Devereaux was impotent due to a bewitchment which made it impossible for him to have sexual relations, only with his wife though. Once the divorce was secured in 1613, Frances Howard was able to marry Robert Carr, with whom she is thought to have had an affair. However, one man, Thomas Overbury, was opposed to this relationship. Overbury was a knight and a poet. He had been imprisoned in the Tower of London when he refused the King’s request to go as an ambassador to Russia. He died in the Tower by poisoning. A few years later, allegations arose that Robert Carr and Frances Howard had arranged to poison Overbury through the food that was brought to him in the Tower. They had accomplices and trials were conducted to solve this crime and punish the murderers. Weston, Franklin and Turner were all tried, convicted and executed for the part that they played in this murder. Robert Carr and Frances Howard were brought to trial in 1616, and although she confessed that she had arranged for the poisoning of Overbury, she was not executed. In fact both Carr and Howard were imprisoned in the Tower of London until they were both pardoned in the 1620s.

* Texts: four ballads

A Sorrowfull Song

* Relating the events in a ballad, making it available to the public, and insisting on the poison and the mechanics of the scheme.
* Naming the people directly: Overbury, Weston, Turner, Franklin
* Painting a very good picture o Overbury
* Promising some type of Justice
* This is one way in which the story is conveyed in the period

Mistress Turners Farewell to all Women

* Using it as a way to warn against pride 🡪 moral
* Pride as a type of poison 🡪 altering the mind and pushing to do such things

Poysoned Knights Complaint

* Poison is not the end, opens up a new possibility to express from somewhere else, the dead.
* Poisyon is not only referring to the substance
* “bloody mind”
* Link between religion and poison?
* Asking or justice
* Revenge / Justice

A Kentishman of Maidstone

* Poison becomes a character, part of a trial, associated with sorcery
* Parallel possible with witches?
* Final punishment depicted on the woodcut
* Symbol of hanging // judgment 🡪 witches burnt (usually strangled before as act of mercy) in Scotland 🡪 detaching the head from the rest of the body 🡪 physical space of mind / judgement?
* Conclusion

One of the next steps for this research is to find out more about the trials themselves, see if they are records of them and compare the narratives between the trial reports and the narration of this affair. The idea is to compare them to try and understand to what extent and with what strategies this became a sensational story more than a mere news item. As Catherine E. Thomas recalls, “scholars have explored […] ‘deadly discourse[s]’ across several genres to demonstrate the ways poisoning functioned as literary tradition, rhetorical device, and cultural signifier”[[6]](#footnote-6). As I hinted before, I believe that the poison is a key element to get to the sensational aspect of the stories. The network effect of these ballads together with other types of writings that were published around this affair such as plays, paratextual materials to Overbury’s poem *His Wife* and pamphlets on the affair or about poison, such as the one on cosmetics, also contribute to that. In these ballads, poison in fact is no longer necessarily literal, instead it becomes the element that triggers a narrative. The network of works circulating about the affair compels the audience to piece all of these materials together to try and make sense of it. Their discernment of the real-life events is altered in that the number of texts and sensational stories circulating at the time blurs the line between the real events and its fictional accounts.

1. Steggle, Matthew. “The Humours in Humour: Shakespeare and Early Modern Psychology”, *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespearean Comedy*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. p. 221. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Other medical ideas circulated in the period, but this was the most famous theory. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/shakespeare-and-the-four-humors/index.html#section2> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Pollard, *Drugs and Theatre in Early Modern England*, p. 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Catherine E. Thomas, “Toxic Encounters: Poisoning in Early Modern English Literature and Culture”, p. 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)