

Poison's Dark Works in Renaissance England. Miranda Wilson.
Lanham: Bucknell University Press, 2014. lvii + 200 pp. \$80.

When it came to poisoning in the Renaissance, no one, it seemed, was safe from attack, and no one was immune to suspicion. In England, you might be less suspect if you were English born, a man, and a Protestant, and if you were not part of any questionable profession. But even then, Renaissance England was a mistrustful place and, it seems, everyone could be a perpetrator or victim.

So when Wilson sets out to explore the cultural dynamics of poisoning in the period, she has fenced off a fruitful plot. Perhaps too fruitful, since everywhere one turns in the

writing of the period, poison is invoked. A student of Shakespeare, as just one instance, could likely immediately call to mind several examples, from Juliet's panicked theory that Friar Laurence may be trying to poison her, to Laertes's use of a poisoned sword in *Hamlet*, to the Queen in *Cymbeline* who tries but fails to poison her enemies. Still, if identifying social flashpoints around poison is shooting fish in a barrel, the fish are worth the shooting and Wilson is a skilled marksman.

Drawing lucidly on a wide range of early modern sources, Wilson shows that poisoning obsessed the early modern imagination largely because it seemed so difficult to detect and to prevent. Its hidden nature — its status, that is, as a “dark work” — raised troubling questions about evidence and guilt. If poisoning is, by nature, an invisible crime, a *crimen exceptum* in the legal terminology of the day, how is it to be prevented, and if not prevented, how justly punished?

Wilson's reading of *The Winter's Tale*, which underpins much of the first chapter, is adept, moving from poisoning itself, to the legal hornet's nest surrounding poisoning, to the question of establishing guilt in general. At times this reading seems muddled by its tendency to mix the literal attempts at poisoning with the use of poison as a metaphor for Leontes's disordered mental state. Even so, I cannot fault this volume for ranging widely, even wandering, for its subject is wide, and any scholar steely enough to tackle it deserves a certain amount of latitude.

By the same token, the subject is so vast that the author must be forgiven for leaving some interesting avenues unexplored. For instance, in her reading of *Hamlet*, Wilson notes that “the members of the play world do not recognize” the effects of poison on the body of old Hamlet when they, presumably, discover it after death (60). But even assuming that Claudius, and perhaps Gertrude, did not hide the body from others, those others might have recognized poisoning, but put the effects down to the poison of the serpent that supposedly stung the former king. More precisely then, the members of the play world could not distinguish between poison (crafted by man) and venom (created by nature), a distinction not emphasized in this text but that might merit further consideration. Some consideration of Cleopatra's suicide, for instance, might be revealing. Still, the reading of *Hamlet*, particularly the character of old Hamlet, is deeply satisfying, placing old Hamlet, perhaps the best-known fictional poison victim of the period, within the context of the developing practices of autopsies and inquests.

The matter of the woman poisoner is handled competently in chapter 3, but the best is reserved for last in this study. The final chapter makes astute observations about the way the period wildly overestimated what could be done with poison, such that poisoning often embodied “a fantasy of control” (134). From there, Wilson embarks on a startlingly ingenious analysis that connects poisoning with advances in timekeeping.

As a final note, I must commend the author for her choices of absorbing illustrations from Renaissance books; they enhance the present volume immensely. In all, this book is fascinating in its subject matter, articulate in its presentation, and admirable in its

scholarship. It will, no doubt, provoke much thought in students and scholars of the Renaissance.

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