Shakespeare's Use of the Ineffectiveness of Poison against Worthy Kings and Good Characters

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1. Chance and method, intention and fatality: an initial analysis

What are the differences between chance and method? How does the difference between chance and method intervene in a process of critical analysis? This essay aims to establish whether certain occurrences in Shakespeare's tragic canon and in his romances are the outcome of randomness or if they have at their base a clear authorial intention; and whether they are the result of pressing external influences, suggestions, or conditionings derived from what the author previously knew or read, or they are just coincidences due to chance.

Overall, both randomness and method belong to the conceptual category of interpretation of events. Randomness assumes the traits of unpredictability, of fortuity, and is indicative of a lack of planning. Random events have the characteristic of being accidental episodes, not determined or controlled by the will. They occur without a verifiable reason, thus nullifying the cause→effect sequence, or, better, the will→result concatenation.

By contrast, method implies specific and systematic intentionality, and its result is the outcome of an *a priori* determined process, supervised by the mind. A method assumes the expectation that the same data could appear again when the same conditions are present. As a consequence, the identification of a method could possibly allow one to trace – obviously with some margin of error – the reasons which determined that method.

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In a recently published book dealing with the issue of justice in Shakespeare's tragedies, I observed that the dramatist makes very attentive use of poison.[1] Textual analysis has shown that toxic substances are employed only to kill those who are guilty either of grave sins or of lustful behaviours and misconduct, ranging from usurpation, to murder, depravity, or lust; i.e. of conduct characterized by serious violations of moral and ethical codes. It is of no use to retrace here the reasons for these occurrences or to disclose the exact accounts of the different poisonings. It will suffice to briefly recall the death of Regan, guilty of murdering the servant who tries to defend Gloucester, as well as of being disrespectful towards her father and of nourishing lascivious intentions towards Edmund. But one thinks also of the usurper King John's death, in the eponymous drama,[2] or of the several deaths by poisoning that characterize *Hamlet*'s last scene,[3] or of the deaths, in *Antony and Cleopatra*, of the lustful Queen of Egypt and her maids, Iras and Charmian, culpable of those lewd actions and that conduct that a fortune-teller predicted at the beginning of the play.[4]

[1] It would be impossible to trace in these pages exact accounts of the different poisonings and of the reason for these poisonings; for a detailed study on both the use of poison in Shakespeare and on the issue of justice in his tragedies, see G. Leone, *Il palcoscenico esemplare. La questione della giustizia nelle tragedie shakespeariane*, 2 ed. (Napoli: Liguori, 2016).

[2] Obviously, *King John* is to be included among the historical plays, yet precisely the King's death by poisoning was invented by Shakespeare; even in *Holinshed's Chronicles*, King John's death, as well as Arthur's, are surrounded by doubts, as Sabbadini painstakingly underlines. See W. Shakespeare, *Re Giovanni*, ed. S. Sabbadini (Milano: Garzanti, 1993), p. 218, n. 186.

[3] Even Hamlet's father must be considered guilty, as the Ghost will admit while talking to the Prince of Denmark in a famous passage of the play: *Hamlet*, 1, 5, 9-91; but one thinks also of the words uttered by Hamlet in 3, 3, 80-81. On this, see Leone, *Il palcoscenico esemplare*, p. 74, n. 116; R. W. Battenhouse, *Shakespearean Tragedy. Its Art and Its Christian Premises*, 2 ed. (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1971), p. 239 ff. and S. Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). It is hardly necessary to mention that this text neither intends to investigate the deaths from poison nor the reasons of the deaths from poison, but, the inefficiency of the toxic substance on certain occasions. For further information on deaths from poison see Leone, *Il palcoscenico esemplare*, pp. 67 ff.

[4] In the play, the three women are presented as incarnations of uncontained lasciviousness, in the grip of the lustful distortion of desire, impetuously directed to the satisfaction of their own pleasure (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 1, 2, 34-49). With reference to lust conceived as sin, it is worth underlining, in Serpieri's words, that "during the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, sin starts to be identified more

And lustful acts, in early modern England, were deplored and deemed execrable, as deviations from the shared moral code.[5]

Finally, poison kills Romeo, the unfortunate lover who first slays Tybald in a duel, then stabs Paris in the Capulets' crypt. Hence, the young Montague is guilty of double murder. He himself recognizes his wrongs and commits suicide believing he is performing an act of justice:

> *Romeo*: Tybalt, liest thou there in thy bloody sheet?
> O, what more favour can I do to thee
> Than with that hand that cut thy youth in twain
> To sunder his that was thine enemy?
> (*Romeo and Juliet*, 5, 3, 97-100)[6]

Therefore, textual evidence shows that violent spasms of poisoning are reserved to characters who can be charged with transgressions or blameworthy deeds. This, of course, does not imply that all culprits die from poison, but that all those who die from poison are guilty.

The regularity with which these deaths follow one another leads immediately to a further reflection: the hypothesis of a poison that infallibly strikes the wicked, a tool conceived by Shakespeare to punish faults and sins, should find comfort in some of its appropriate, circumstantial, inefficiencies. If it is true that poison acts as a destroyer of the sinners, then, it must also be true that it will not operate against the innocent. And so it is.

2. The inefficacy of poison

Absolutely certain of his bride's betrayal, Leontes orders Camillo to kill Polixenes, unjustly suspected of having an affair with the Sicilian Queen: "How I am galled, mightst bespice a cup/ To give mine enemy a lasting wink,/ Which draught to me were cordial" (*The Winter's Tale*,

than ever with sexual transgression, being condemned by both sides according to an intransigent humiliation of the senses". See Alessandro Serpieri in W. Shakespeare, *Misura per misura*, ed. A. Serpieri (Venezia: Marsilio, 2003), p. 28. The translation is mine. It should be added that, precisely in the case of *Antony and Cleopatra*, death by poisoning is put on stage taking into account the historical sources of the play.

[5] Especially if they were carried out by women of high status.

[6] Shakespeare quotations are taken from J. Jowett, W. Montgomery, G. Taylor, S. Wells, *The Oxford Shakespeare. The Complete Works*, 2 ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

1, 2, 318-319).[7] Yet, infringing the instructions received, instead of poisoning Polixenes, Camillo decides to run away with the Bohemian king and to put himself at his service (1, 2, 352-364). Several years later, after a series of vicissitudes in the Kingdom of Sicily and the territory of Bohemia, the play finds a happy ending in the resolution of the misunderstandings and in the revealing of the truth, somehow already anticipated by the oracular response uttered in act III by Cleomenes and Diones: "Hermione is chaste, Polixenes blameless" (3, 2, 132). The regicide planned by Leontes is thus thwarted by Camillo's wise decision.

If in *The Winter's Tale* poisoning is not even tried, the same does not happen in *Pericles*. Having discovered the riddle that hides the incestuous relationship between the King of Antioch and his daughter, Pericles prefers to linger before providing the solution. Antiochus – realizing he is facing the man who can reveal the secret which sullies his reputation as both father and King – grants the Prince of Tyre forty more days to produce the answer, but in the meantime he surreptitiously orders Thaliard to poison Pericles:

> *Antiochus*: Behold, here's poison, and here's gold.
> We hate the Prince of Tyre, and thou must kill him.
> It fits thee not to ask the reason why,
> Because we bid it. Say, is it done?
> *Thaliard*: My lord, 'tis done.
> (*Pericles*, 1, 1, 156-160)[8]

However, the trap commissioned by King Antiochus from his faithful chamberlain will not be followed through: Pericles flees before the treacherous action hatched against him is accomplished. Shakespeare's plot does not contemplate poison eliminating the noble Prince whose virtue, preserved by the blows of doom and "led on by heaven", will be "crowned with joy at last" (*Pericles*, V, Epilogue, 6). Once again, the attempt to murder an innocent ruler by poison fails. Once again, poison has no effect against a righteous and noble-hearted man.

And while in both *The Winter's Tale* and *Pericles* venom is not even administered, and poisoning does not occur thanks to the providential departure of the potential victims, in *Cymbeline* a supposedly lethal

[7] Obviously, *The Winter's Tale*, *Pericles* and *Cymbeline* are romances, but, as we shall see, the ineffectiveness of poison can also be found in some tragedies.

[8] Quotations from *Pericles* are from: W. Shakespeare, *Pericles*, *Prince of Tyre*, ed. P. Edwards (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976).

liquid will prove appropriately ineffective, if not programmatically harmless. Indeed, now poisoning is avoided by the intuition of Cornelius, who instead of the deadly mixture requested by the Queen, distrusting the woman, prepares a non-toxic concoction in which there is no danger but to "stupefy and dull the sense a while" with no peril "more than the locking up the spirits a time,/ To be more fresh, reviving" (*Cymbeline*, 1, 5, 37-42). The wicked Queen, unaware of the physician's subterfuge, will give the liquid to Pisanio passing it off as a miraculous tonic "Which hath the King/ Five times redeem'd from death" (62-63). Posthumus' servant, in all good faith, delivers the mixture to Princess Imogen, daughter of King Cymbeline, who, unjustly accused of adultery, is about to leave Britain. Pisanio addresses Imogen as follows:

> *Pisanio*: My noble mistress,
> Here is a box, I had it from the Queen,
> What's in't is precious: if you are sick at sea,
> Or stomach-qualmed at land, a dram of this
> Will drive away distemper.
> (*Cymbeline*, 3, 4, 188-192)

The poison which the Queen underhandedly gave to Pisanio was nothing but a harmless substance (5, 6, 253-258). But what would have happened if the poison had had its effect or if things had gone in a different way? The Queen, in her confession on her deathbed, admits that despite pretending to love Imogen she hated her and would have killed her using poison (5, 6, 43-47). Furthermore, she confesses to having set aside for the King "a mortal mineral which, being took,/ Should by the minute feed on life and, ling'ring,/ By inches waste [the King]" (5, 6, 50-52). All this was for dynastic reasons: "to work/ Her son into th'adoption of the crown" (5, 6, 55-56). The possible scenario would have been shockingly dominated by disorder. Hence, as in *Pericles* and in *The Winter's Tale*, in *Cymbeline* too the appropriate ineffectiveness of poison prevents the violent, painful, and subversive death of a good ruler and his family (in this case, in fact, the poisoning would have caused the death of both the monarch and his daughter). Regicide by venom is prevented again and a good King survives the snares conceived by his enemies.

The years in which Shakespeare writes are characterized by continual political turmoil. The attempts to murder the head of state and manoeuvres aimed at overthrowing the political (and religious) balance of the kingdom kept happening with alarming frequency. The

safety of the monarch was put at risk on a daily basis. Shakespeare was aware of the perils menacing the English palace, as he had full knowledge of the court intrigues and struggles for power. In any case, what should be noted here is that, in his tragedies and in his romances, attempts to kill a good sovereign carried out by means of poison never find fulfilment. In the next pages, the possible reasons for this dramatic choice will be investigated.

But the inefficiency of poison is not exclusively confined to subversive endeavours to commit regicide. More generally it occurs in machinations involving innocent characters. Indeed, the poisoning of Desdemona is paradoxically avoided by Iago's subtle and canny perfidy. "Get me some poison, Iago, this night" (*Othello*, 4, 1, 199) says the Moor, now plagued by doubt and in search of a 'tool' to kill his wife. "Do it not with poison, strangle her in her bed,/ even the bed she hath contaminated" (4, 1, 202-203) retorts the Ensign proposing a murder to be carried out in the very sheets which Desdemona tainted. Yet, soon, those sheets will become the shroud of a faithful wife who exhales her last breath chocked by her jealous and deceived husband. Thus, once again, the violent spasms of poisoning do not affect an innocent character.

Something similar happens in *Romeo and Juliet*. When the effect of the appearance of death ends, waking up in her family crypt – in the hope of re-embracing her Romeo, but finding him lifeless, killed by the poison he ingested – Juliet realizes the failure of the plan designed by Friar Lawrence. The weight of loneliness becomes an unbearable burden for her: the drive towards death becomes inevitable. Yet, when she seeks the deadly liquid in the vial still held in her lover's hands she discovers it empty and dry, with not a drop of poison left:

> *Juliet*: A cup clos'd in my true love's hand?
> Poison, I see, hath been his timeless end.
> O churl!-drunk all, and left no friendly drop
> To help me after?
> (*Romeo and Juliet*, 5, 3, 161-164)

Juliet is anything but evil; she is determined, she is in the throes of an infatuation which causes her intense torment: a passion that multiplies her courage and perhaps her recklessness. Although she may appear unreasonable and unwise, one cannot assimilate the young Capulet's behaviour to Cleopatra's or Charmian's misconduct, nor has Juliet ever acted angrily or violently towards others. Hence, she is spared death

by poisoning: a dagger will put an end to her life. In this case too, poison does not kill a rightful protagonist.[9]

Considering the number of immoral characters eliminated through toxic substances, and given the constancy with which the poison's inefficiency → character's honesty correlation is repeated, the datum cannot be recorded with superficiality, but it must be sifted through a detailed analysis. Does this correlation lack a definite and identifiable cause or is it, instead, the expression of a process grounded on a deliberate choice? If so, what are the possible reasons for this choice? Is it possible to think that Shakespeare decided to use this strategy of inefficiencies for a specific reason or as a result of a particular suggestion?

The systematic regularity with which the correlation is present lets one suppose that, in given situations, the ineffectualness of poison is not the result of simple chance, but is an unvarying solution planned to spare the innocents' life. This obviously does not mean that the innocent should not lose their lives (Desdemona, to give just one example, will die by suffocation), but that innocents are not eliminated by means of venom.[10] But does it suffice? Why did Shakespeare decide to opt for such a choice?

It is worth underlining that this paper does not presume to establish an incontrovertible truth. It only aims at exploring the possible reasons that lie behind Shakespeare's choice. It is but an attempt to investigate whether there is a causal motivation for this constant correlation between the ineffectiveness of poison and the character's innocence. It tries to find out if this correlation is merely the result of chance (which is also a possibility that must be taken into account, even if remotely), or whether there is a reason – more or less conscious, more or less due to political exigencies or to cultural influences – by which the correlation occurs.

3. Doctor López and the poison for the Queen

To find some reason which induced Shakespeare to consider as appropriate the ineffectiveness of poison in certain dramatic situations

[9] The only fault that one could ascribe to Juliet is precisely that of suicide, considered, in itself, a sin against God, as Imogen will say in *Cymbeline*, 3, 4, 76-78. But of course this is not enough to make her a wicked character. In any case, when she looks for poison she obviously has not committed suicide yet.

[10] For an analysis of Shakespearean characters' deaths and the correlation between characters' guilt and their deaths in the dramatist's tragic canon see Leone, *Il palcoscenico esemplare*.

it could be useful to point out, albeit briefly, the historical context in which Shakespearean production is set.

Having ascended the throne in 1558, Queen Elizabeth had to face both the incessant restlessness triggered by the Anglican schism and the many plots conceived against her. The execution of Mary Stuart did nothing but aggravate the situation by becoming a contributing cause of the forthcoming war against Spain. Yet, despite the victory against the *Invincible Armada* (1588), the fears of foreign invasion increased, as did the risks to the freedom of the English people. The alert for possible attacks was high. The conspiracies of Spanish Catholics followed, in parallel with the attacks of the extreme wing of English Catholics, who would have preferred a Catholic King on the throne. Obviously, the internal enemies of the Elizabethan throne found in the Pope an extremely powerful ally. The situation was one of constant suspicion. And among the plots to kill Elizabeth, on 21st January 1594, i.e. when Shakespeare was almost 30, the Earl of Essex, at the head of an inspection team trained to prevent and foil the conspiracies against the monarch, intercepted the alleged machinations of Dr. Roderigo López, a converted Jew of Portuguese origin who was personal physician to the Queen. The doctor was suspected of plotting on behalf of the Spanish crown.

According to the chronicles, in Dr. López' pockets there were found several letters that reported the exact amount of a sum given to him by Philip II of Spain in order to carry out a mission of enormous importance.[11] However, at least at first, the charges against the doctor were not backed by sufficient evidence to convict him. Moreover, López could count on powerful and prestigious friends and allies. Thus, when, on 1st January 1594, he was arrested for the first time, the Queen reproved Essex, hurting his pride and calling him "*rash and temerarious youth*, to enter into a matter against the poor man, which he could not prove, and whose innocence she knew well enough; but malice against him, and no other, hatch'd all this matter which displeas'd her much, and the more, for that, she said, her honor was interested herein".[12]

Disappointed and humiliated, straightaway Essex began looking for evidence that could convict the Doctor. The research and investigations were thorough and continued for some time until the

[11] Cf. S. Greenblatt, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), p. 273.

[12] Cit. in ibid., p. 274.

Earl had López arrested again. This time Essex could also count on the overwhelming, and possibly biased, evidence provided by Mr. Ferreira, a Portuguese man who had lived in López' house in Holborn. The trial was held on 28th February 1594 and Rodrigo López was accused of trying to poison the Queen in exchange for 50,000 crowns offered by the King of Spain. In his *Elizabeth & Essex*, Lytton Strachey gives a precise account of what happened during the trial:

> At one point in his examination, Ferreira asserted that Dr. Lopez had written to the King of Spain, professing his willingness to do everything his Majesty required. The question was then asked – "Would the Doctor have poisoned the Queen if required?" and Ferreira replied in the affirmative.[13]

After collecting all the evidence, Essex produced a report stating the absolute guilt of López: "I have discovered […] a most dangerous and desperate treason. The point of conspiracy was her Majesty's death. The executioner should have been Dr. Lopez; the manner poison".[14]

Yet, as Greenblatt notes, Dr. López' guilt was never fully ascertained. The testimonies against him were extracted under the threat of torture and the accusations supported by evidence neither actually produced nor substantiated in fact.[15] In any case, convicted of high treason, Dr. López was executed on 7th June 1594. The news had great resonance and the execution was a public event, with tragically hilarious aftermaths:

> a vast crowd was assembled to enjoy the spectacle. The Doctor standing on the scaffold attempted in vain to make a dying speech; the mob was too angry and too delighted to be quiet; it howled with laughter, when, amid the uproar, the Jew was heard asseverating that he loved his mistress better than Jesus Christ.[16]

It should immediately be said that there is no evidence that Shakespeare directly witnessed the event. However, it is highly unlikely that he was not aware of it: the news regarding the execution spread quickly, and surely the circumstances related to the event and the macabre irony of Dr. López' last speech caused a great sensation in the country. Several critics even believe that Shylock's character is modelled along the lines

[13] L. Strachey, *Elizabeth & Essex* (Oxford and Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 53.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid., pp. 53-4.

[16] Ibid., p. 58.

of Dr. López. Greenblatt is among them. Referring to the Doctor's last moments he writes: "This laughter, welling up from the crowd at the foot of the scaffold, could well have triggered Shakespeare's achievement in *The Merchant of Venice*".[17] Hence, in all probability, Shakespeare was aware both of the attempted poisoning of the Queen and of the failure of the mission.

From a purely political point of view, the death of Elizabeth could potentially have generated wars for power, claims to the throne by foreign rulers, internal revolts, and wars of religion. The very stability of the country would have been in danger. Therefore, it is also possible that the decision to prevent the envenoming of monarchs in Shakespeare's plays is in good part due to echoes of the event of the supposed poisoning by López. Shakespeare may have been strongly influenced by the episode and would have transposed on stage a model that drew inspiration from the story of the doctor. The toxic substance did not produce lethal effects on honest and morally flawless rulers, and so it did not happen to Elizabeth, thus avoiding a political and social upheaval in the country, at the same time safeguarding the lives of people who could not be considered guilty of severe crimes.

It is no mystery that Shakespeare drew a number of ideas from the real life of the kingdom to sketch out his plays.[18] Inspirations from everyday life often constituted the theatrical framework on which he built his dramaturgy. Theology and classical notions were mingled with popular scenes and coeval customs in a performance in which, to quote Greenblatt: "elements were crossed, torn apart, recombined, set against each other; particular social practices were magnified by the stage, others diminished, exalted, evacuated".[19]

Although recombined, reshaped or melted, references to the customs and people of Renaissance England were numerous. Indeed, Shakespearean texts also often present specific references to British politics or rulers of the time, ranging from a possible reference to the

[17] Greenblatt, *Will in the World*, p. 277. On similarities between Dr. López and Shylock see, also, W. Baker, B. Vickers, *The Merchant of Venice: Shakespeare: The Critical Tradition*, Vol. 5 (London and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005).

[18] On this see, also, P. J. Smith, *Social Shakespeare. Aspects of Renaissance Dramaturgy and Contemporary Society* (New York: Macmillan, 1955). Of great interest are also the essays included in *The Cambridge Shakespeare Library*, Vol. I, *Shakespeare's Times, Texts and Stages*, ed. C. M. S. Alexander, introduction by S. Wells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[19] S. Greenblatt, *Shakespeare Negotiations. The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 19.

figure of James I in the Duke in *Measure for Measure*, to the verses dedicated to Queen Elizabeth in *Midsummer Night's Dream* (2, 1, 157-164), in which Shakespeare describes the monarch as the most chaste.[20] And it is no surprise: in those years there was a cult of Elizabeth, as both a woman and a sovereign. The Queen was depicted as virtuous and good, pure and incorruptible, a virgin bearer of fecundity. She was renamed Cynthia, Astrea, Pandora, Gloriana, Belphoebe, Diana, *Virgo Coelestis*, and *Virgo Imperialis*; for her George Chapman wrote a *Hymnus in Cynthiam*; likewise, Spenser's *Faerie Queene* is dedicated to her.[21]

Thus, perhaps unconsciously, or in homage to the monarch's narrow escape, or even to avoid censorship by the Master of Revels, who could have found any distorted reference to the event offensive and politically dangerous, Shakespeare might have considered it appropriate to put on stage just the relationship: *blamelessness-of-the-monarch→ineffectiveness-of-the-poison*.

It should be stressed that there is no evidence that, only on the basis of the episode linked to the attempted poisoning of the Queen, Shakespeare decided to make poison ineffective against fair and rightful rulers.[22] However, this is a possibility to take into account. Also, it is possible that Dr. López' prosecution is not the only motivation for the providential and opportune inefficiency of Shakespeare's venom. Other reasons, of no less importance, may have contributed to producing the programmatic ineffectiveness of the lethal substance, reasons which could possibly be directly intertwined with what happened to Dr. López.

4. Shakespeare and the Gospel of Mark

In the opening of a very interesting study on the influence of the Bible on Shakespeare, referring to the numerous allusions to the sacred text

[20] One reads the lines uttered by Oberon: "A certain aim he took / At a fair vestal thronèd by the west, / And loosed his love-shaft smartly from his bow / As it should pierce a hundred thousand hearts. / But I might see young Cupid's fiery shaft / Quenched in the caste beams of the wat'ry moon,/ And the imperial vot'ress passèd on, / In maiden meditation, fancy-free" (*Midsummer Night's Dream*, 2, 1, 157-164).

[21] The fourth Eclogue of *The Faerie Queene* (1590-1596) is precisely addressed to Elizabeth, first "Queen of the Shepherds" and then "Fairy" Queen.

[22] For further information on Dr. López, see, among others, Greenblatt, *Will in the World* (one reads in particular the chapter entitled 'Laughing at the Scaffold') and Strachey, *Elizabeth & Essex.*

in the works of the dramatist, Hannibal Hamlin writes: "such allusions are frequent, deliberate, and significant and […] the study of these allusions is repaid by a deeper understanding of the plays".[23]

And Shakespeare's biblical allusions are no surprise. Elizabethan society was regularly devoted to the reading of the Bible and exegesis of passages in it.[24] The text was fervently consulted and carefully examined in all its parts; each verse was welcomed as a form of heritage and as the highest expression of the teachings imparted to man. The holy word inspired both artists and ordinary people, being considered as a key to knowledge of the mysteries of life and the world. Moreover, the debate triggered by the Reformation had given a huge boost to the individual reading of the Bible. Every part, every passage, was investigated in search of answers that would have removed any doubts related to the religious life of the community, at the same time giving comfort and providing concrete information both on the choices to be made and on the inscrutable signs that were seemingly informing Renaissance man's life. For the Protestant, in particular, Holy Scripture was at the basis of the doctrine: inspired by God, the holy word was the main way to attain salvation; the will of God, the destiny of the soul could, and should, be understood just through *Sola Scriptura*.

This having been ascertained, it is worth pointing out that the ineffectiveness of the toxic substance, detectable in Shakespearean texts, seems strongly to refer to what is related in a passage of the Gospel of Mark. Having described the stages of the Passion and recounted the suffering of Christ's crucifixion at Calvary, in the last chapter, the sacred text reports the moments when Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of James, among others, come to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus. When they reach the place, early in the morning, they see that the stone covering the entrance has been rolled away (despite its large size and huge weight). Entering the sepulchre, they see a young man in a white robe who announces the resurrection of Christ. Later, Jesus appears to Magdalene and finally to the disciples, admonishing them for not believing the account of his resurrection. At last, before ascending to heaven and sitting at the right hand of the Father, he utters these words:

[23] H. Hamlin, *The Bible in Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 1.

[24] On this, see ibid., pp. 1-5.

Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature. **16** He that shall believe and be baptized, shall be saved: but he that will not believe, shall be damned. **17** And these tokens shall follow them that believe, In my Name they shall cast out devils, and shall speak with new tongues, **18** And *shall take away serpents, and if they shall drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them*: they shall lay their hands on the sick, and they shall recover.[25]

Mark, 16, 15-18 (emphasis added)

The abovementioned lines give the last speech, as reported by Mark, uttered by Jesus before taking leave of the apostles. Obviously, this is one of the most important passages in the evangelist's text: it tells of salvation and damnation, crucial topics for Elizabethan and Jacobean culture. In those verses the guidelines to achieve redemption are laid down and, simultaneously, the signs that will make manifest God's approval to the whole community are shown: "these tokens shall follow them that believe". During the Reformation, after the posting of the Lutheran theses, in a seething context of protest, when every single Catholic was looking for the signs of divine grace, Mark's verses were loaded with an absolute value. They represented the Messiah's spiritual testament, giving a detailed account of his final directives.

In late sixteenth-century England, issues such as predestination, or Christ's exclusive power to grant grace regardless of the merits acquired by men (*Solus Christu*s) were daily and forcefully debated. The dispute on free will involved burning quarrels and often violent outcomes. In 1528, in his *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, More pointed out that negation of works and salvation obtained exclusively by way of faith – as professed by Calvin – would lead to gradual social and civic apathy. To this Catholic idea there was opposed the Calvinist-Protestant conception that men would continue to do good deeds to give manifest evidence of their enjoying divine favour, also avoiding working improperly, which would have represented a visible sign of them not being in God's grace.

In such a religious-cultural context, the search for the marks of grace was spasmodic. It goes without saying that Jesus' words

[25] All quotations from the *New Testament* are from the *Geneva Bible*, 1599 Edition. It is worth remembering that the lines are not found in the Gospels of Luke, Matthew and John. Moreover, according to the CEI edition of the Bible, the 9-20 verses were not written by Mark, since they differ too much from the rest of the Book, but they are to be considered an insert conceived by first-generation Christians. Indeed, for what matters here, the question is not very relevant: what matters instead is that the lines are present in the Geneva Bible, 1599 Edition, and therefore that they were read, commented on and endorsed by Elizabethan culture.

related by Mark as the last mystical teaching were immediately regarded as a theological legacy. Now Christ was clearly identifying the signs of his blessing. God's chosen ones could be instantly recognizable in the eyes of all men: "they shall cast out devils, and shall speak with new tongues, And *shall take away serpents, and if they shall drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them*: they shall lay their hands on the sick, and they shall recover". As far as it is relevant here, the righteous who drink poison will not die because of it.

Considering the importance and authority of the message handed down to people as the Messiah's last teaching, it is difficult to imagine that Mark's words were unknown to the Elizabethan audience. Indeed, presumably, these parts were the ones most considered by Elizabethan and Jacobean public attention.

With this in mind, it could be possible to assume that, deliberately and programmatically, Shakespeare decided to put on stage events in which a ruler, or a good character, is threatened by a possible poisoning, never allowing such a terrible death to occur. In this, the spectators would have probably recognized the signs of grace in the inefficiency of poison. The association would have been grasped and appreciated. Renaissance theatregoers' capability of identifying and decrypting biblical clues is known; they were indeed able to understand the full meaning and symbolic value they were charged with, as Hamlin points out: "People have been aware of Shakespeare's biblical allusions for centuries and indeed since the plays were first performed and read".[26]

Therefore, the possibility must also be taken into due account that Shakespeare used many biblical allusions – including the attentive use of poison and its inefficacy – precisely to deliberately provoke associations in the mind of the spectator. The dramatist would have obtained an admiring public response: "Shakespeare's use of religious language […] reveals a very great deal about the various reactions he expected his audience members to have".[27] In Renaissance theatre the complicity between the author and the audience included the active participation of the viewer, that is to say his ability to interact with the text and to activate, starting from it, a productive exegetical process. Steven Marx states: "allusion works by hidden meanings, coded communication between author and reader. It requires the reader to

[26] Hamlin, *The Bible in Shakespeare*, p. 1.
[27] A. Shell, *Shakespeare and Religion* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 65.

be familiar with the absent evoked text and eager to participate in the active process of interpretation".[28]

More must be added. It is not incautious to assume that, during the Elizabethan reign, Mark's passage was used – possibly not directly by Shakespeare, but by ordinary people or by the entourage of the court – to enhance the virtue and purity of the Queen.[29] So it could be plausible that, for political purposes, for sectarian reasons, or simply because of people's approximation, the danger Queen Elizabeth escaped may have been associated with the word of God: poison will not strike "He [she] that shall believe". And the fact that the Gospel literally reads "if they shall *drink* any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them" was of little importance.[30] The fact that the poison has been ingested by the victim or not was irrelevant. The objection according to which the reference to the Gospel passage was not realistic in view of the fact that actually the deadly liquid was never drunk by the Queen would have been meaningless. The ultimate sense of the Gospel message was clear: the good – they could be either kings or ordinary subjects – will not suffer the terrible effects of poison; their limbs will not be twisted with spasms caused by the flowing of the toxic substance in their bowels.

Hence, the inefficiency of Shakespearean poisonous substances could be attributed to two distinct reasons: the alleged conspiracy hatched by Dr. López[31] and the verses of Mark; but it is also plausible that Shakespeare interwove the two pieces of information, connecting

[28] S. Marx, *Shakespeare and the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 14.

[29] In this perspective, it would be possible to analyze the presence of a snake embroidered on the left sleeve of the *Rainbow Portrait*. The portrait was painted between 1600 and 1602, i.e. after the attempted poisoning of the Queen had occurred. It is more than appropriate, however, to underline that the symbolism of the portrait has already been thoroughly examined and that the image of the snake has been assimilated to the idea of wisdom proposed by Cesare Ripa in his treatise on *Iconology* (1593).

[30] Emphasis added.

[31] In this regard, it should be noted that all the plays in which poison's ineffectiveness is presented to the public were written after 7th June, 1594, that is to say after the execution of Dr. López, i.e. after the attempted poisoning of the Queen. Referring to the attempted regicides by poison (or the attempted poisonings of members belonging to the royal line) one should consider that *Pericles* was written in 1608; *The Winter's Tale* in 1611, *Cymbeline* in 1610. As regards the poisoning of an innocent character, one should consider that *Romeo and Juliet* was written in 1595 and *Othello* in 1604. On the faults of the characters in *Romeo and Juliet*, see Leone, *Il palcoscenico esemplare*, pp. 99 ff.

the Queen's escaped poisoning to Mark's excerpt. In so doing, the playwright would not have committed the theological inconsistency of letting a righteous person be killed by venom. And, basically, how could Shakespeare have submitted a plot that so patently contravened the holy dictate to an audience imbued with biblical culture and thirsty for sacred readings, a plot which was opposed to Jesus' last will and teaching? Ascertaining the word of Mark, how would it have been possible, for Shakespeare, to let his good characters die by poisoning?

The possibility that non-poisoning was conceived by the dramatist as a kind of judgment of merit assigned to the characters takes shape. It is plausible that in the playwright's theatrical project there were some social-religious appraisals according to which poison's inefficacy was indicative of moral and spiritual integrity. Escaping from poisoning was a sort of privilege, given to good characters, which had to be preserved in compliance with the words of the Gospel.

This does not necessarily mean that Shakespeare expressed in this way his adherence to Catholic or Protestant faith. It has already been pointed out that the dramatist never explicitly declared his political or religious belief, always keeping a distance from any stance that manifested his belonging to this or that faction, or doctrine, or philosophic credo. Kernan suitably writes "Shakespeare took his politics, like his religion and his philosophy to his grave with him".[32]

More simply, it is likely that Shakespeare followed the indications taken from the Bible to meet the expectations of a public that, in all probability, would not have welcomed the death by poison of an innocent, deeming the episode misconceived and disrespectful of the will of God.

Thus, to conclude, this text aims, on the one hand, to raise the theme of ineffectiveness of the poison in certain, specific, occasions, and on the other, to attempt to investigate the reasons that determined the inefficacy of the toxic substance. Evidently, to make this analysis complete, the possibility that the correlation between the poisoning ineffectualness and the honesty of the character is attributable to a non-voluntary randomness must also be taken into account, even if with a lower coefficient of probability; i.e. the possibility that this connection is the result of a coincidence. In all cases, the datum remains: whatever the reason, the fact is that honest Shakespearean protagonists, be they Kings or other innocent characters, benefit from the inefficacy of poison.

[32] A. Kernan, *Shakespeare, the King's Playwright* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. XXI.

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