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## The “Poison’d Cup” and the “Invisible Spirit”: the Significance of Wine in Three Shakespearean Tragedies

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## The “*poison’d cup*” and the “*invisible spirit*”: The significance of wine in three Shakespearean tragedies.

*“O thou invisible spirit of wine, if thou hast no name to be known by, let us call thee devil!”*  
– *Othello* (III.i. 285-6)

Alcohol, feasting and revelry play a major part in most of Shakespeare’s works. Indeed “according to Buckner B. Trawick, each of Shakespeare’s plays has at least one reference or thematic element pertaining to alcohol” (Nguyen, 2012) and this reflects the norms of the society inhabited by the playwright. However, the utilisation and consumption of wine merits special focus as a signifier in Shakespeare’s work. Much has been written on the role of wine in his comedies, less so regarding Shakespearean tragedies. This discussion will focus on the significance of wine in three seminal works that were crafted at the end of the Elizabethan era, namely *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *Othello*. Beginning with an overview of the role and significance of wine to the plot of each of the plays, the analysis will then move to examine the wider connotations and considerations linked to wine consumption in early modern England.

To begin with Shakespeare’s longest play, one does not have to dig too deeply to find links with wine consumption in *Hamlet*. Origin of the much-cited modern analogy of the ‘poisoned chalice’, this tale of a son avenging his father’s murder contains myriad references to alcohol. Wine, however, is a key signifier within the plot, being linked to deceit, subterfuge, and betrayal. From the beginning, a mournful Hamlet bemoans his step-father Claudius’ propensity to drink and make-merry: “The King doth wake tonight, and takes his rouse, keeps wassail . . . as he drains his draughts of Rhenish down” (*Hamlet*, Act I, Scene iv, Line 8-10), further remarking to Horatio that this is a “custom more honour’d in the breach than the observance” (I. iv. 15-16). Hamlet’s observations set the scene for the accusation of murder against Claudius by the ghost of Old Hamlet, and immediately cast aspersions on the new king’s character and ability to rule effectively. Fast forward through the drama to Hamlet’s literal and metaphorical return from madness and the audience are made aware of Claudius’ duplicity and murderous plot, as he reveals to a vengeful Laertes that he will “have prepar’d him a chalice for the nonce [interval]” (IV. vii. 159-60), so it is no surprise that in the final duel scene the stage directions specify “*a table prepared and flagons of wine on it*” (V. ii. 239). Prior to the duel, Claudius’ order to “Set me the stoups of wine upon the table” (V. ii. 281) comes before his attempt to

execute his plan with the poisoned chalice at the first 'hit' of the foil; "Hamlet, this pearl is thine, Here's to thy health. Give him the cup" (V.ii.296-7). However, Claudius' cunning plan backfires when Gertrude, his new wife and Hamlet's mother, drinks to her son's health; "Oh my dear Hamlet, the drink, the drink; I am poison'd" (V. ii. 324). In an ironic twist Claudius is force fed the poison-laced wine by Hamlet; "Here thou incestuous, murderous, damned Dane, drink off this potion: is thy union here? Follow my mother" (V. ii. 339-41). The play concludes in the vein of all tragedies - the bodies of most of the protagonists litter the stage, stained with wine and blood in equal measure. Wine then, at the most obvious level, acts as a source of deception and is a vehicle for evil in a world where virtue and justice struggle to triumph.

This is also evident in *Macbeth* where the eponymous antihero descends from nobility to infamy as the play progresses. Here too, wine is an important addition to the storyline, facilitating Duncan's murder and thus providing the impetus for the developing theme of uncontrolled ambition. It also plays a role in the development of Lady Macbeth into a character depraved of all humanity, and heightens the misogyny within the play. Doubting Macbeth's resolution at the start, it is Lady Macbeth who contrives the fiendish plan for regicide: "Screw your courage to the sticking place, and we will not fail. When Duncan is asleep . . . his two chamberlains will I with wine and wassail so convince that memory, the warder of the brain, shall be a fume" (*Macbeth*, I. vii. 60-66). It becomes clear that she needs a little 'dutch courage' to carry out the plan; "That which hath made them drunk hath made me bold, what hath quench'd them hath given me fire" (II. ii. 1-3), and in the face of Macbeth's reluctance to revisit the scene of the crime to return the daggers and incriminate the grooms this 'boldness' stands her in good stead for the gruesome deed; "Give me the daggers . . . if he do bleed, I'll gild the faces of the grooms withal; for it must seem their guilt" (II. ii. 54-58). In the following scene, the porter's unwitting reference to "hell-gate" and "Beelzebub" (II. iii. 2-5), and Macbeth's comment that "'Twas a rough night" (II. iii. 68) are apt indeed as Macduff and Lennox enter the castle to discover the hellish scene. Later we see wine again referenced in Macbeth's growing tyranny when Banquo's ghost appears to him at the feast. To disguise his horror and settle his nerves after the first apparition, Macbeth demands "Give me some wine; fill full" (III.iv.88), only for the ghost to reappear again, prompting Lady Macbeth to excuse his erratic behaviour by suggesting a longstanding illness, although this could be interpreted as a problematic relationship with alcohol: "Think of this, good peers, but as a thing of custom: 'tis no other; only it spoils the pleasure of the time" (III. iv. 96-8). Regardless of the explanation,

wine is very clearly and definitively connected with deceit, and a key signifier in the battle between good and evil, loyalty and ambition.

Shakespeare's most skilful use of wine in complicating and developing a plot, however, comes in the manipulation of Michael Cassio by Iago in *Othello*. Seething with jealousy at Cassio's promotion, Iago exploits his rival's intolerance of alcohol in order to engineer a campaign of deceit and vengeance that ultimately destroys Othello and leads to the tragic ending of the play. At the celebration of Othello and Desdemona's marriage, Iago encourages Cassio to celebrate: "Come, lieutenant, I have a stoup of wine" (II. iii. 30), despite knowing that Cassio has, by his own admission "very poor and unhappy brains for drinking" (II.iii.34-5) and that he had "drunk but one cup tonight and that was craftily qualified [diluted] too; and behold what innovation it makes here" (II. iii. 40-2). Iago proceeds with his temptation, informing the audience of his plan; "If I can fasten but one cup upon him with that which he hath drunk tonight already, he'll be as full of quarrel and offense as my young mistress' dog" (II.iii.51-4). His scheming is, of course, rewarded, leading to Cassio's dismissal by a disgusted Othello. Iago's evil machinations are made all the more repugnant by his seeming support of a broken Cassio while he laments his loss of status: "Reputation, reputation, reputation! O, I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial" (II.iii.264-6). Iago's duplicity is executed with such conviction that Cassio cannot see that he has been manipulated and turns to blaming wine instead;

O thou invisible spirit of wine, if thou hast no  
name to be known by, let us call thee devil! . . .  
O god, that men should put an enemy in their mouths  
To steal away their brains . . . every inordinate cup is unblest,  
And the ingredient is a devil (II. iii. 285-314)

The tragic irony inherent in his words is that it is Iago, not wine, that is truly evil. In a rare moment of truth, Iago opines "Come, come, good wine is a good familiar creature if it be well used. Exclaim no more against it" (II. iii. 315-7). And so, the scene is set for Iago's monstrous plan, all through the use of wine. To a greater degree than in the other two tragedies, wine is linked with the work of the devil as embodied in Iago. When Cassio leaves the stage at the end of Act II, Iago freely admits "When devils will the blackest sins put on, they do suggest at first with heavenly shows, as I do now" (II. iii. 360-2), and this language is echoed by Othello in the final scene when Iago's true nature is revealed; "I look down towards his feet – but that's a fable. If that thou be'st a devil, I cannot kill thee" (V. ii. 285-6) and "Will you, I pray,

demand that demi-devil why he hath ensnared my soul and body?" (V.ii.300-1). Hence, wine is portrayed as the tool of the devil and is again linked with the struggle between good and evil and the dangers of blind ambition.

How then do these representations of wine reflect contemporary concerns in early modern England? D.H. Wood sees a multitude of contexts in which wine was relevant:

As an imported item for the early modern English, wine's complexity stems from the array of ways in which it is freighted with significations simultaneously, theological, political, moral, and medical: theologically, for example, due to its sacramental role in Catholic ritual; politically, from its derivation largely from the Catholic nations of Italy, France, and Spain; and both morally and medically, its tendency to abuse (2009).

To begin with medical opinion of the time, wine was of course linked to the four humours contained within the human body. According to Thomas Cogan, writing in 1589, "White wine was less hot, "less fumish and less vapourous . . .and therefore less anoyeth the heade" than other wines" (Boughner, 1939, p. 47). Indeed, Rhenish was prescribed to cure headaches (Boughner, 1939). However, red wine and claret were more valued in that "they are soone conuerted into bloud: and especially the redde, for that is hotter than white wine, and nourisheth more than claret" (Boughner, 1939, pp. 48-9). It is significant then that Rhenish is the drink of choice of Claudius as referenced previously (*Hamlet*, I. iv. 8-10), particularly as "red wine was superior to it in alcoholic strength and in the important physiological power of generating blood" (Boughner, 1939, p.49). Is Shakespeare here inviting his audience to make a subliminal judgement on Claudius' leadership, a weak drink for a weak and corrupt ruler? While both red and Rhenish contributed to the diet, excessive consumption was considered dangerous. Physician Andrew Boorde warned in 1547 that "colorycke men must abstayne from eating hot spices, and to refrayne from drinking wyne" (Chamberlain, 2013, p.26) while the *Homily Against Gluttonie and Dronkennes* (1563) advises that "he that eateth and drinketh vnmeasurably, kyndleth oft tymes suche an vnnatural heate in his body, that his appetite is preuoked thereby to desire more than it shoulde" (Chamberlain, 2013, p.26). A Jacobean audience would surely see the relevance of Cassio's drinking through the eyes of Othello, already keenly aware of the age difference between himself and Desdemona, and would understand the ease at which Iago convinces him of her adultery with Cassio when contemporary thought was that "yong men should drinke little wine, for it shall make them prone to furie, and lechery" (Chamberlain, 2013, p. 27). Having witnessed the 'furie', Iago's insistence that 'lechery' was taking place found fertile ground in Othello's insecurity.

What, then, of women and wine? Gender was another consideration in Shakespeare's world which had witnessed 45 largely successful years of rule by a woman. Contemporary scientific theory discouraged women from drinking as "excessive wine consumption could very well lend undesirable male attributes to an already volatile female humoral complexion" (Chamberlain, 2013, p. 28). Hence, as we have seen, Lady Macbeth's descent into evil and subsequent madness begins with her consumption of wine (*Macbeth*. II. ii. 1-3), defining her as "a demonic inversion of the nourishing woman" (Fitzpatrick, 2014, p.84). This reflects the thinking that "alcohol made women assertive and aggressive, and it made them challenge patriarchal power . . . disorderly women could undermine patriarchal authority by demonstrating that subordination and obedience were not the only behavioural options open to women" (Lynn Martin, 2001, pp. 96-136). Macbeth's eventual demise is prompted by the three witches, but ultimately expedited by the actions of Lady Macbeth, assisted by her consumption of wine. Similarly, in *Hamlet*, Gertrude's drinking plays a role in the unfolding tragedy. In her critical analysis of Gertrude's excesses, Stephanie Chamberlain notes that "Hamlet and the ghost merely give voice to what an early modern audience would have already believed regarding women and . . . overindulgence" (2013, p. 31). The final scene reinforces this. Despite Claudius' warning; "Gertrude, do not drink" (*Hamlet*. V.ii. 304), she defies him and drinks to her son, ultimately ending her life and informing Hamlet and the court of Claudius' deceit. Essentially, drinking women were considered dangerous, both to patriarchal control and state security.

The political situation of a state destined to be ruled by a 'foreign' monarch (insofar as James I was Scottish) is reflected in nationalist attitudes to culture and religion in all three plays. Lynn Martin remarks that "the English usually celebrated with wholesome barrels of ale rather than suspicious casks of wine" (2001, p.2) and it is notable that all three texts under scrutiny here are set in nations outside England. Rebecca Lemon's study on the custom of health drinking (which she considers a form of binge-drinking) makes some interesting observations that are pertinent to this discussion. During the 1580s and 90s, she notes the "repeated attempt to locate health drinking as a foreign practice. Playwrights, satirists, and sectarians all understood . . . its rise as a foreign phenomenon coming out of the Low Countries" (2013, p. 385). Indeed, she identifies Shakespeare in particular as depicting the practice as "compulsive, divisive, and downright sinister. What is the custom more honoured in the breach than the observance? Health drinking" (2013, p. 383). Lemon points to instances of 'healthing' in all three tragedies, including Macbeth's toast after the appearance of Banquo's ghost and Iago's involvement of the Cypriot troops in drinking Othello's health, but omitting Claudius' opportunistic tribute to

Hamlet; “If Hamlet give the first or second hit . . . the King shall drink to Hamlet’s better breath . . . here’s to thy health. Give him the cup” (*Hamlet*. V.ii. 282-297). Based on this practice alone, Lemon draws a similar conclusion to that contained herein regarding Shakespeare and wine; “a survey of health drinking in his plays reveals his repeated linking of healthing and villainy” (2013, p. 399), yet the evidence in the three tragedies under discussion here specifically points to wine as a vehicle for villainy. Religion too was an issue inextricably linked with nationalist prejudices whilst also involving wine as a signifier. Brooke Nguyen sees the Reformation as a divisive factor in society’s acceptance of alcohol consumption, but also notes that “wine was ultimately regarded as a religious symbol” (2012). This sits comfortably with Joan Fitzpatrick’s thesis that Hamlet considers himself a Messiah figure with all the resultant religious connotations:

When Hamlet announces that he could drink “hot blood” it is not only classical Rome that is suggested but also the Catholic sacrament of transubstantiation, a once familiar practice (drinking the blood of Christ) made strange by Protestantism . . . This allusion to the communion blood and the circumstances that have provoked Hamlet’s crisis of faith are further developed in the play’s final scene when Claudius is compelled to drink from the poisoned ‘chalice’, a word for a drinking-cup or goblet which has distinctly religious dimensions (2007, p.112).

Religion also comes in to play in *Othello* in which comparisons between the ‘divine’ Desdemona and the devilish Iago abound. The significance of Cassio drinking wine before becoming the metaphorical sacrificial lamb of Iago’s plotting cannot have been lost on contemporary audiences. *Macbeth*, set in the new King James’ homeland, (a hotbed for the recently formulated Presbyterianism which eschewed the practice of communion wine), subtly suggests the perils of any doctrine other than the established Protestant Church of England. After the witches’ prediction, Banquo warns Macbeth “Oftentimes, to win us to our harm, the instruments of darkness tell us truths, win us with honest trifles, to betray’s in deepest consequence” (I. iv. 123-6). And while Lady Macbeth fears her husband “too full o’ the milk of human kindness” (I.v.18), their mutual descent into depravity is preceded by the consumption of wine. Hence, both cultural and religious concerns are reflected in the plot and characterisation of all three tragedies.

As a literary genre, tragedy relies on an outside force of evil or conflict to act upon the tragic flaw of the protagonist. In the three tragedies discussed above, the consumption of wine alone does not represent this force. However, through analysis of key events in the plot and an examination of contemporary concerns of the era, it is clear that Shakespeare considered wine

an effective medium for the manipulation of virtuous characters by those with evil or villainous intent. And perhaps Shakespeare used his drama to acknowledge the tragic flaw within himself. All that is known of his death comes from the diary entry of the Vicar of Stratford; “Shakespeare, Drayton, and Ben Johnson had a merry meeting and it seems drank too hard, for Shakespeare died of a fever there contracted” (Tolman, 1919, p.88). It seems the great playwright succumbed at the end to his own “poison’d cup”.

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