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Popular Narrative Representations Of Royal Female Poisoners Since Victorian Era

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Women have been the subject of much ridicule especially if they step out of the crooked lines etched by modern civilizations across the world. They can either be put up on a pedestal as maternal deities (Durga, Gaia), glorified for their silent sacrifices for the betterment of the society (Iphigenia and Polyxena) or criticized for their independence from inhuman atrocities (Amazons, Hecate). It has thus been unsavoury or astonishing for the society to digress from conventional murderers, villains and mobsters, especially when these roles were taken up by women. The very first recorded female murderers actually caused a stir in America, such as case of the famous socialite, Delphine LaLaurie who narrowly escaped justice as well as an infuriated mob after inflicting horrendous carnages following slave homicides in 1834 (1).

Since she was aided by her servants, they were the ones who served punishment while she evaded justice. The motive of this paper is to discuss the representation of historically famous poison plots of some noblewomen in the literary pages of 19th century that had been depicted using various narrative styles.

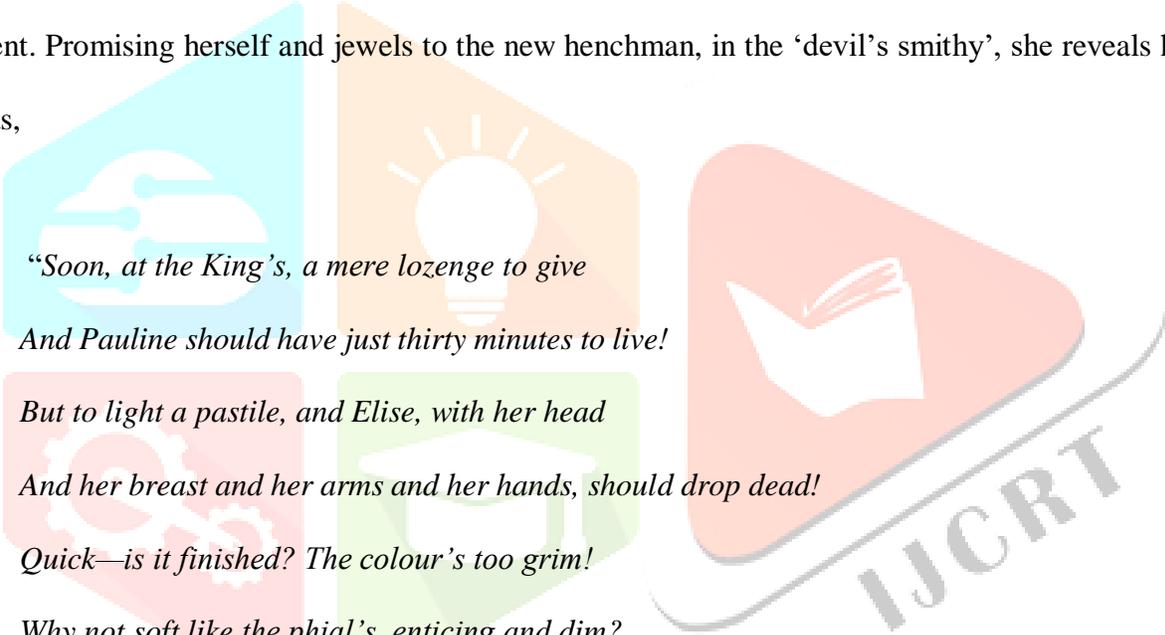
Women, Class and Poison

What actually surprised the commoners across the globe was the administration of poisonous substances as murder weapon by caregivers who were a part of their own social stature. Between 1895 and 1901, an American nurse, Jane Toppan, nicknamed 'Jolly Jane' and 'Angel of Mercy' targeted and poisoned her patients and their family members in a killing spree that spanned over a hundred victims. She actually cradled her dying 'patients', deriving an erotic pleasure watching the 'soul leave their eyes' and was seemingly addicted to the sense of power it provided her. She was removed from various hospitals on simple charges of theft and reckless overdose of opiates. A toxicology report, requested by a victim's kin however, found her guilty yet the court ruled her guilty on charges of insanity and she spent the rest of her life in Taunton Insane Hospital. (2) Just like much of her killings went unacquitted, a century later, another caregiver, a plain Jane, Jolly Joseph in the remote town of Koodathayi in India is still undergoing trial after poisoning her entire family, her current husband's ex-wife and many more relations.

The most famous mention of a noblewomen serial killer(s) who secretly administered poison has to be that of Sicily based Giulia Tofana whose operation was a notorious remedy to marriage related atrocities in the late 17th century. Her invention, *Aqua Tofana* was an odourless colourless concoction openly sold under the tradename *Manna di San Nicola* (Manna of St. Nicholas of Bari) as a cosmetic or a devotional object complete with the picture of St. Nicholas. They were to be administered slowly so as to not rouse suspicion, even the victims displayed varied signs of flu, cognitive and cardiac impairment which hoodwinked even the authorities of the time. (3) The murders became such a rave that many a 'black widows' were noticed by the clergy, rousing suspicion on their contempt. The discovery of a safe containing letters and vials of poisons that revealed a plot by jilted lovers stirred the court of King Louis XIV of France. He ordered investigations into the affair of the poisons (*affaire des poisons*) that led to a prolonged chase and execution of another serial murderess, Marquise de Brinvilliers.

First Person Representation in Dramatic Monologue

In his renowned dramatic monologue form of hearing straight from the horse's mouth, Robert Browning paints a grotesque portrait of the Marquise marvelling at the display of poisonous concoctions in his *The Laboratory* (1844). She tells the apothecary that she turned to him for vengeance on her lover and his new love interest especially when they think that she is praying and is helpless as she herself is of slight frame. Suffering from varied norms of patriarchy, the lady chooses to murder the new paramour rather than the reason for her pain, her lover/husband. She is intoxicated by the power the deceptively guised poisons hold in their incognitos as in an earring, a little box, a ring, the handle of a fan etc and has one prepared for her at the very moment. Promising herself and jewels to the new henchman, in the 'devil's smithy', she reveals her revenge plan as,



*“Soon, at the King’s, a mere lozenge to give
And Pauline should have just thirty minutes to live!
But to light a pastile, and Elise, with her head
And her breast and her arms and her hands, should drop dead!
Quick—is it finished? The colour’s too grim!
Why not soft like the phial’s, enticing and dim?
Let it brighten her drink, let her turn it and stir,
And try it and taste, ere she fix and prefer! (Lines 21-32)*

Famed for his monologues of the twisted minds such as the Duke of Ferrara (*My Last Duchess*), Porphyria's unnamed murderer (*Porphyria's Lover*), Count Guido Franceschini (*The Ring and the Book*) etc with the unassuming bystanders, Browning has imagined the noblewoman as a sadist, engulfed in avenging herself to the extent she derives pleasure from the brewing of the deadly drink. She is fascinated by the 'faint smokes curling whitely' (line 2), remarking "What a wild crowd of invisible pleasures!" (line 18) when the potions are being brewed and decides to "Better sit thus and observe thy strange things" (line 11). She removes her

gas mask hastily and is unconcerned whether the pricey poison that is to avenge her self-esteem can harm her, proving that she takes her crime lightly. (4) Her disturbed psychological state due to the infidelity is reflected in the alliteration of the word 'laugh' in the line, "While they laugh, laugh at me" (line 7) as she feels inferior to her much more alluring target. As a means of restoring her self-esteem, she goes in a fickle trance state when she finds the means to end her suffering inflicted by a Pauline and Elise (lines 22-23) easily with her 'fortune's fee' (line 43). Browning in his classic cliffhanger narrative technique, excludes the further episodes or any conclusion for the reader to ponder and wonder.

Arsenic in Victorian England was readily available as Ratsbane or rat poison and when administered slyly could mimic symptoms of vomiting, diarrhoea which could be a result of a vast number of diseases, hence the misplacement of the blame. Therefore, the timidest of the womenfolk could easily escape a troubled arranged marriage and either live a lavish lifestyle or live with a lover unquestioned. As a result in 1851, the House of Lords in England actually passed a law making it illegal for women to buy arsenic (Sale of Arsenic Regulation Act of 1851), to curb secret poisoning, apothecaries were shut down and elaborate legal witch-hunt began to label such vixens. While the prosecution always attempted to highlight their evil nature, the courtrooms were thronged by women attempting to 'learn' the art by hearing the testimonies. (5) Oddly arsenic along with chloroform and strychnine were being commonly used as cleaning agents or medicines hence their sale in apothecaries. Yet there are multiple accounts of women being tried after this and punished by death at times without proper trials, unfortunately they all had the recurring theme of women living in unhappy conjugal alliances being threatened of their basic necessities (Eliza Fenning). The enhanced level of punishment was done to restore order in the society and also to legally curb the cases with the help of Marsh test, proper records of customers and even the addition of colouring agents to identify the poison in food. However, all of the above practices weren't very effective for long.

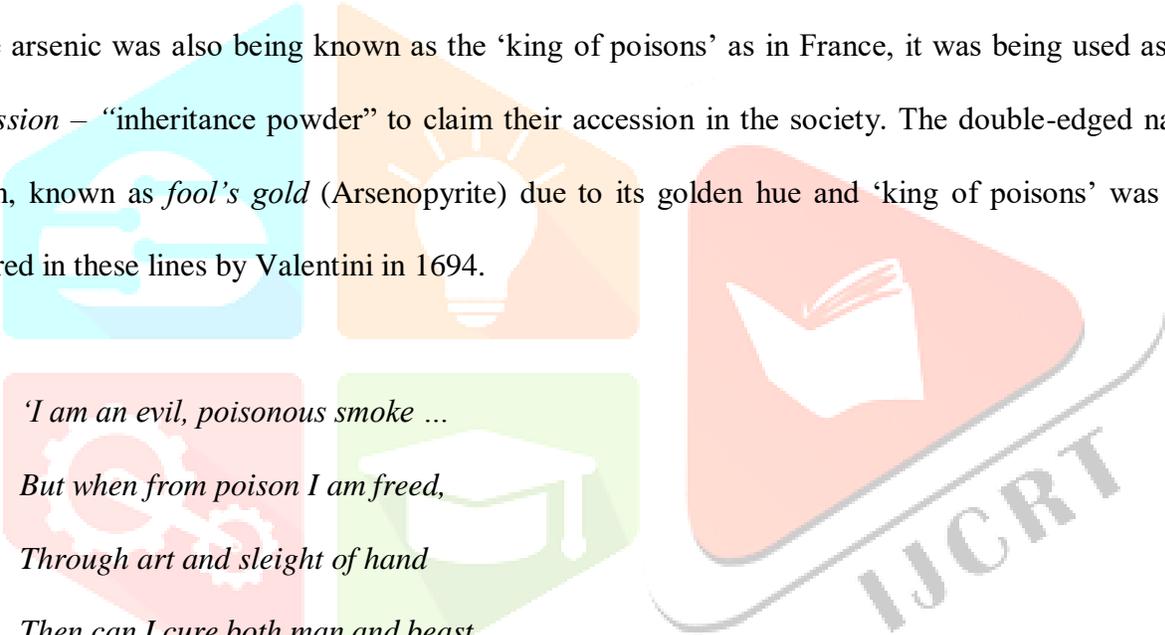
Also, since its first isolation in 1250 from soap by an alchemist in France, white arsenic (arsenic trioxide) was actually consumed by women mixed with vinegar and chalk to improve the fairness of their complexion, even used as a dying agent to brighten wallpapers, something that killed Napoleon I in 1821.(6) Apothecaries frequently sold them to adulterate food resulting in an infamous mixing of arsenic instead of white gypsum

(1858 Bradford sweets poisoning) which led to the creation of Pharmacy Act 1868. Curbing arsenic solely for women was questioned as

'How to convict of arsenical poisoning when ladies use arsenical cosmetics; when confectioners sell arsenical sweetmeats; when paperhangers clothe our walls with arsenical hangings, and impregnate all the air with fine arsenical dust; above all, when chemists sell arsenic for a toothpowder and label it mercury?' (7)

Third-Person Limited Perspective in Fantasy Fiction Saga

White arsenic was also being known as the 'king of poisons' as in France, it was being used as *poudre de succession* – "inheritance powder" to claim their accession in the society. The double-edged nature of the poison, known as *fool's gold* (Arsenopyrite) due to its golden hue and 'king of poisons' was beautifully captured in these lines by Valentini in 1694.



*'I am an evil, poisonous smoke ...
But when from poison I am freed,
Through art and sleight of hand
Then can I cure both man and beast,
From dire disease oft-times direct them;
But prepare me correctly, and take great care
That you faithfully keep watchful guard over me;
For else I am poison, and poison remain,
That pierces the heart of many a one.'*

It was suddenly such a widespread trend that the popular book and TV series *Game of Thrones* (*Song of Ice and Fire*, 1996) has a famous conversation between Ned Stark and Pycelle, where they discuss the nature of Jon Arryn's death, (the former's brother-in-law) and come to the conclusion that he was poisoned. The Grand Maester Pycelle says,

“What you suggest is possible, my lord, yet I do not think it likely. Every hedge maester knows the common poisons, and Lord Arryn displayed none of the signs, And the Hand was loved by all. What sort of monster in man’s flesh would dare to murder such a noble lord?”

“I have heard it said that poison is a woman’s weapon.”

Pycelle stroked his beard thoughtfully. “It is said. Women, cravens... and eunuchs.” He cleared his throat and spat a thick glob of phlegm onto the rushes. (Pg206-207)

The author George R.R Martin depicts Lady Arryn as a psychologically twisted character who is jealous of being considered over her sister and later her niece by her choice of paramour. Hence, she is easily used as a pawn by a sly man who poses as a lover to achieve his political aim of causing discord between ruling parties.

The poison called ‘Tears of Lys’ described as

‘A rare and costly thing, clear and sweet as water, and it leaves no trace.’ (pg 262), occurs many times as a discreet mode of political disposal in the book. After supposedly murdering her husband using a rare poison, she enjoys murder so much that she frequently has people thrown from a ‘moon door’, plummeting to their death on the whim that they were trying to harm her house. (8)

She is portrayed as ‘impulsive’(pg55) by her sister Catelyn Stark and ‘a frightened cow’ by the Lannister twins (pg71) but the grand master Pycelle describes her emotional state as “... grief can derange even the strongest and most disciplined of minds, and the Lady Lysa was never that. Since her last stillbirth, she has seen enemies in every shadow, and the death of her lord husband left her shattered and lost.” (pg207) Bryden Tully said that, “The Lysa who came back from King’s Landing is not the same girl who went south when her husband was named Hand. Those years were hard for her. You must know. Lord Arryn was a dutiful husband, but their marriage was made from politics, not passion.” (pg297) As a result she mollycoddled her only son Robert and falls in the trap of her childhood errand boy who used her to rise politically and even dies ironically by falling from the same moon door she had had thrown so many. Despite all the literary evidence, it is unclear why she behaved the way she did, in the similar fashion of Gertrude whose irrational behaviour leads to her own untimely death by an ampoule of henbane meant to kill her son, Hamlet (Act 1, scene V).

More royal women resorted to murder by poison in the popular series and the victims die either heinously and fast or torturously and slow. Lady Olenna Tyrell and Ellaria Sand have been ‘unsex-ed’ like Lady Macbeth into becoming murderers for the sake of revenge or mere protection from a bad marriage. It is interesting to note here that the aristocratic women who committed these hidden murders were all desperate to end their miseries and had no one to turn to, having suffered at the hands of the men in their own families. Yet they ended up being stereotyped, taking up centre stage as evil stepmother (Snow White), the jilted lover (Maleficent, Othello), the wife with an agenda (Medea, Thérèse Raquin) etc and in television soaps are crucial to increase television rating points (TRP).

Mythical Narrative

Many royal women in mythology have resorted to poison when it came to removing the ‘other women’ who threatened them in any way just as Medea killed her paramour Jason’s bride to be Glauce along with the father of the bride by poisoning them with a robe and a coronet. In Euripides's play of the same name, she is saved by deus ex-machina multiple times; despite poisoning multiple individuals for personal gain and even manages to evade justice, however not all the women who poisoned were presented the same fate. In the German fairy tale, *Sneewittchen/ Schneewittchen*, famously adapted by the Grimm brothers in English as *Snow White* in 1857 under *Grimms' Fairy Tales*, the *böse Königin* or the Evil Queen is shown to have died at her own hands or designs such as self-inflicted punishments of touching her own poisoned rose, dropping dead out of spite or distilled for children as mere banishment or absconding.

An earlier version of the same German story, *Volksmärchen der Deutschen* published in 1782 by Johann Karl August Musäus has a story of Richilde Brabant, the lady who went on to become the inspiration for the quintessential evil stepmother in children’s folk tales. The famous alchemist Albertus Magnus gifts her a mirror that she taints by demanding frivolous and vainglorious inquiries such as corrupting the mind of Earl Gombald of Lowen into leaving his wife and daughter to marry her (9). When she finds out that the

daughter, Blanca has surpassed her in beauty, she conspires with Sambul the Jewish court physician to poison her thrice, once by a pomegranate, second by a soap and third by a letter. Each time Blanca is saved by the audacious dilutions of the concoctions and even manages to smit Godfrey of Ardenne who plans to avenge the evil matron. He proposes her and on her marriage day, makes her confess her crime, making her pronounce her own punishment,

'Richilda, chagrined at an accident that seemed to delay her wishes, or at least to cast a gloom over the auspicious day, said with displeasure, 'Oh, frightful deed! the cruel mother deserve, in the place of her she has murdered, to open the bridal dance with the unhappy youth in red-hot iron shoes. This would be balm for the wounds of his hear; for revenge, like love, is sweet.' 'Amen! a righteous sentence,' returned Godfrey, 'so be it!'—The whole court applauded the Countess's just judgment; and the wittlings presumed to declare, one and all, that the queen who went to Solomon for a cargo of wisdom, could not have pronounced a better decree.' (9)

This is followed up by Shakespeare in his play, *The Tragedie of Cymbeline or Cymbeline, King of Britain*, where Snow White/Blanca is represented by Imogen and is targeted by the queen to marry her son Cloten to secure her bloodline's accession on the throne of Britain (10). She is portrayed as similar to Agrippina the Roman empress in her endeavour and attempts to poison Imogen and the king Cymbeline but is thwarted by the court physician Cornelius who reveals her nefarious actions in the following revelation,

"Your daughter, whom she bore in hand to love

With such integrity, she did confess

Was as a scorpion to her sight; whose life,

But that her flight prevented it, she had

Ta'en off by poison.

More, sir, and worse. She did confess she had

For you a mortal mineral; which, being took,

Should by the minute feed on life and lingering

By inches waste you: in which time she purposed,

By watching, weeping, tendance, kissing, to

O'ercome you with her show, and in time,

When she had fitted you with her craft, to work

Her son into the adoption of the crown:

But, failing of her end by his strange absence,

Grew shameless-desperate; open'd, in despite

Of heaven and men, her purposes; repented

The evils she hatch'd were not effected; so

Despairing died.' (10)

Conclusion

Royal women in the Victorian era had a lot of literary help in the form of sensational journals, Greek as well as Roman mythology, historical drama, courtroom drama and what not to either remove a rival lady from the lives of their royal paramours to avoid jeopardizing their positions in their household or to ascend in the royal society. In doing so, they earned themselves notoriety that are repeatedly used to create thrilling literary characters to ramp up their adaptations.

Despite the ever-lasting fame, they are awarded with the least intimidating titles in the annals of history while the male serial killers enjoy the heavier ones. Fearsome women soldiers (The Dahomey Mino) as well as warrior queens (Queen Manikarnika of Jhansi) in every culture have safeguarded their territories against colonial powers and the female of every predatorial species are far more dangerous than their male counterparts. Yet they end up being sexualized and packed as the surprise element in every thriller. In the introduction of her book *Women Who Murder*, Mitzi Szereto, remarks,

'Conversely, we often see female offenders stereotyped by the media, such as being given nicknames that "fluffy-ify" them into a parody of a killer, especially when it involves serial murders. Whereas many of our notorious male serial killer have serious-sounding nicknames like the "Night Stalker" (Richard Ramirez), the "Green River Killer" (Gary Ridgway), and the "Yorkshire Ripper" (Peter Sutcliffe), their female equivalents are frequently tagged with less threatening monikers such as "Jolly Jane" (Jane Toppan), the "Giggling Granny" (Nanny Doss), and "Arsenic Annie" (Anna Marie Hahn), which more so conjures up the image of the sweet (albeit homicidal) elderly ladies from Arsenic and Old Lace than it does cold-blooded female murderers. It's as if we're not ready to acknowledge the uncomfortable truth that women can be monsters too.' (11)

All the narrative styles used to describe are penned by male writers many of whom have come close to understanding the female psyche when it comes to committing murder, albeit by the easiest and possible second-hand administration of poison. The lady mentioned by Browning is a jilted lover whose further motives, public criminal accomplishments, punishments etc are left as cliffhanger for the audience to gasp at. Lady Arryn was rendered eccentric by a loveless marriage, centred as a pawn by her childhood friend for his own political gain, pitted against her own niece and her death masked as a suicide. While the mythical yet quintessential evil stepmother has become a cultural narrative, echoing till date in children's storybooks and their dramatizations, few narratives has come up from the perspectives of these women. Hence it can only be assumed, unless we have a female Hanibal Lector to dictate the inner workings of the minds of such murderesses.

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