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HOW DID HAMLET'S FATHER DIE?

The Mystery of the Murder in the Orchard

From a BBC Home Service Talk by R. R. SIMPSON

THE problem of the death of Hamlet's father has always puzzled me. You will remember that the old king was asleep in the orchard when Claudius came up to him and poured some drops into his ears. It seems to me odd that Shakespeare should use such an unusual method. Many other methods were open to him, all of them much more certain. I know of no other instance in literature where the victim was killed by having drops poured into his ear. Perhaps the Borgias may have done so, but I know of no such record.

When you consider how sensitive the ear is, it is difficult to believe that drops could be poured into it, even when the victim is asleep, without disturbing him. Even if we believe in that, can we accept that drops put into the ear can cause death? Is there such a poison? For the purposes of the play we must accept this and most people do without any more consideration.

But the problem is worthy of much more thought than that. It is the manner of the death of Hamlet's father which justifies the ensuing tragedies. It ought not to be accepted, therefore, merely to allow us to get on with the play. There was, in fact, no suspicion of foul play among the people of the country:

'Tis given out, that sleeping in mine orchard,
A serpent stung me: so the whole ear of Denmark,
Is by a forged process of my death
Rankly abus'd. . . . (Act 1, Sc. 5).

Admissible Evidence

Moreover, the only evidence we have of how the crime was committed is the evidence of the supernatural—the Ghost. The audience of Shakespeare's day believed in the supernatural. They would readily accept such evidence. But can we? If we take the questions in the order I have raised them and go back to the actual words of the play, you may agree that it is not so unreasonable as we had supposed. Is it possible to pour drops into the ear of a sleeping man without disturbing and waking him? The Ghost tells us what happened:

. . . . sleeping within mine orchard,
My custom always in the afternoon,
Upon my secure hour thy uncle stole
With juice of cursed hebonon in a vial
And in the porches of mine ears did pour
The leperous distilment. (Act 1, Sc. 5)

First it is obvious the weather was suitable. I picture a warm sultry afternoon with the old king asleep under a bee-droning apple-tree. Then it was "upon my secure hour," i.e., when his sleep was soundest. Later in the play Hamlet tells us: "He took my father, full of bread" (Act III, Sc. 3). I imagine the king had retired to the orchard to sleep off the effects of a hearty lunch. If we are correct in our picture of a warm afternoon and a man sound asleep after a hearty meal we may assume that Claudius, clutching the precious vial in his hand, had thus warmed the already warm drops almost to blood temperature. And there are two important comments about these drops; they were the "juice" of cursed hebonon and they were a "distilment." The "juice" suggests to me the expression, pharmaceutically speaking, of the essential oils of the plant. "Distilment" further suggests it was an alcoholic distillation of the essential oils, so beloved of ancient alchemists. Let us suppose it was an oily, alcoholic fluid that was used and it becomes a matter of observable fact that such drops, warmed to body temperature, could with comparative ease be instilled into the porches of the ears without disturbing a man deeply asleep.



Awkward Question

Now comes an awkward question: Do we know of any drug which could cause death if introduced into the ear in this way? There is a method of anaesthetising a membrane of the ear in which cocaine and anilin are used. But anilin must be used with caution. It must not be allowed to remain in contact with the eardrum for more than 10 minutes. If it does it is absorbed through the eardrum into the blood. This will cause a change in the blood. The haemoglobin becomes what is called methaemoglobin and the patient turns a blue colour. If this be true of anilin, could "the juice of cursed hebonon" be absorbed and exert a deadly poisonous effect? What is the juice of cursed hebonon?

Here a dispute arises among the experts on the text of the play. It is "hebonon" in the Folio edition, but in the Quarto edition it reads "hebona." There is no known drug with the name "hebonon," but some experts say it is a misprint or corruption for henbane. On the other hand "hebona" refers to what was known as ebony or what we would call to-day guaiacum. In deciding for myself on henbane rather than hebona, I am not influenced, I confess, by the pros and cons of the textual experts. I think the medical evidence in the Ghost's speech decides the

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