

issue. To me in medical terms the "juice" meant the expressed juice of a plant. It could therefore be the juice of henbane; but hebona or ebony or guaiacum is the resin of a tree. There is therefore a considerable difference. The old alchemists would not be likely to use the term "juice" loosely for two such distinctive products. Next it was a distilment and again the pharmacologists would distil henbane but not guaiacum. In addition henbane in a fraction of a grain is a very potent poison. But the medicinal dose of guaiacum is 5-15 grains. From our study too of the accurate use to which Shakespeare put his knowledge of other poisons, e.g., aconite, etc., it would be unlike our experience of him to find him tripping up in this important detail.

#### Death and Dermatitis

Henbane is the plant *hyoscyamus niger*. It proves deadly when eaten by poultry—hence its name. The poisonous alkaloid hyoscyine can be obtained both from the freshly expressed juice and from alcoholic extracts. A very small amount of this alkaloid is fatal to human beings. While I know of no reference in the modern literature of toxicology to hyoscyine being absorbed through the skin of the ear, we are not in a position to know precisely what preparation might have been used by the old alchemists. But we do know that Pliny refers precisely to oil of henbane in the treatment of earache. Shakespeare may have known of this reference. Since we know that anilin is absorbed and acts on the blood, it is not so far-fetched to imagine that such a preparation of hyoscyine could also be absorbed and exert its poisonous effects on the blood.

But even yet Shakespeare has not finished with the details. His final description tells us clearly of the skin eruption which spread rapidly all over the victim's body as a result of the poisoning.

And a most instant tetter bark'd about,  
Most lazar like, with vile and loathsome crust,

All my smooth body. (Act I, Sc. 5).

Is there such a skin condition? Can it be produced in the manner described? And can it cause death? To me the description is that of acute *exfoliative dermatitis*, a disease in which the entire skin of the body may be shed in "vile and loathsome crust." This skin condition may arise in several ways. It is known to have been caused, for example, by the injection into a vein of very small amounts of arsenic. So that small quantities of poison in the blood can give rise to this horrible skin disease. And in some cases it can prove rapidly fatal. One other point intrigues me about this method of poisoning. There would be no external evidence. The leperous distilment was probably a brownish oily extract and small in quantity—"in a vial." So even if the ears were examined after death, I doubt if the poison could be distinguished from the soft wax found naturally in the ear.

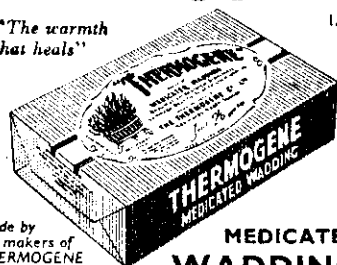
It would seem that here we have the almost perfect crime. No clues were left and death was attributed to the serpent's bite, as it might easily have been. Only once before the Ghost speaks does Hamlet express any suspicion. When Horatio has told him about the Ghost walking, Hamlet exclaims:

My father's spirit in arms! all is not well;  
I doubt some foul play. (Act I, Sc. 2).

We are left then to decide on the evidence supplied by the Ghost. And while I have some doubts about supernatural evidence being accepted nowadays, you may agree with me that there is something intriguingly persuasive about the arguments I have presented.

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