

POISON EATERS

POISON EATERS
SNAKES, OPIUM, ARSENIC,
AND THE LETHAL SHOW

RICHARD SWIDERSKI



Universal-Publishers
Boca Raton

Poison Eaters: Snakes, Opium, Arsenic, and the Lethal Show

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POISON EATERS' DIRGE



Mark the brave poison eaters,
Valiant hearts!
What a tale of suffering their countenance imparts!
In the turmoil of the day,
When you happen in their way,
How they look at you and moan
In a tone scarce a groan
As of old,
Like a pitiful appeal to recesses of your soul,
As they hasten never stopping with a madness to their goal;
As they roll, roll, roll
Toward the abyss of their goal,
While their weaker brothers fret
At the fate that they have met
Long foretold.
O, the brave poison eaters!
What a tale they have to tell
Of despair.

The University (of Michigan) Homeopathic Observer,
April, 1906, III, 2:113

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PREFACE



I regularly take poison, and live. I am convinced that I live because I take the poison, not in spite of it. I returned to the United States because I knew I could obtain the poison here and not in Kenya where I was living. There are poisons available there too, just not this particular poison. I started taking it with no promise of a cure, only a percentage likelihood of preventing further degeneration. And with the assurance that it would cause “flu-like” symptoms, which it did, and the further assurance that they would abate, which they did. There was no forecast of the floating malaise, the impressions of wildly fluctuating body temperature, the revival of old inflammations, to name a few.

There is no chance that I would choose this drug as a poison if I wanted to poison myself. I wrote this book because I wanted to feel out the differential between self-assured destruction, suicidal self-poisoning, and the poisoning that leaves you alive, and benefits you in hoped-for, unpredictable ways. I wanted to find others who existed in this poison eating limbo before the “prescription drug” label covered this act with medicine and economics. I did find them, and by the grace of poison wrote this book.

It is titled *Poison Eaters* because all of us treat poisons as food needed to live, become natural to our interiors, whether we eat, drink, inhale, inject or otherwise absorb the poisons. No parallel with opium eaters is intended. Opium is a poison, but it is not initially taken because it is one. It makes other promises. Poison eaters take poison because they know it is poison but are sure they can gain enough of an edge to milk the benefits before the doom. Poison is an acquired taste for us.

INTRODUCTION



There is a stage intermediate between eating poisons and surviving, and surviving the poisons we eat.

As we developed techniques to better the abilities of our own bodies to detoxicate natural foods, we extended the range of our consumption to include broadly nutritious, potentially lethal plants such as the potato, cassava and taro. Peeling and scraping, adding minerals and of course heating all advanced the benefits over the cost of consuming these foods, and made it worthwhile to cultivate them. Breeding could also minimize the poisonous effects, but with unpredictable side effects in the makeup of the resulting food.

Some varieties of plants were so adaptable that their cultivators ate them to survive knowing they were mildly poisonous. Monoculture and overprocessing proved their own kind of poison. As the production of food became industrialized, poisons directed at spoilage factors were added to extend the edibility of the food. Toxins were reintroduced that had been banished by processing or never were present.

In the intermediate state, known and visible poisons are openly eaten and the survival of the poison eater is an exhibit of an achieved or faked resistance. This dramatizes the earliest experiments with plant and animal matter that might or not be food, known only from the results of consumption. New, composite poisons are created out of the old ones, which are refined and dissipated in the combination. The triad of food, poison, medicine is taken in hand. The interplay of its components is laid down in formulas and episodes

of life, death and consumption. In the poison eater's career the constant discovery of what is edible, what heals and what kills is reenacted.

Between controlling the poisons the body couldn't eliminate with mechanical and chemical means and making the processed food selectively poisonous again there is a period of experimentation and reconstruction of the original state of food-seeking amid the poisons. The knowledge gained cannot be turned back. Foods prepared for confident eating are distinguished from unmitigated poisons. But there is a suspicion that another level exists, that what is known to be poisonous, plants and animals, can also be incorporated into the diet. What's more, this new diet can be proof against all poisons, known and unknown, accidentally received and deliberately administered. Pharmacy and gene therapy have the same premise.

People eat (drink, inhale, inject) poisons to fend off poisons they do not know, but can expect. The intention is not to kill themselves but to make their bodies familiar with a known poison in order to make any other poison, including the poison of disease, equally familiar and harmless. It is imitative magic, warding off a threat by mimicking it. Describing this plan as immunization came as the multitude of poisons being made and consumed required an inherent bodily defense. At first, all poisons came from the outside.

Without sufficient evidence to support the speculation, I imagine a primordial state of foraging for food, trying random fruits or roots in the hope they might be nourishing, or because they resemble others known to be safe and satisfying to consume, or because animals were observed eating them. Death might ensue from taking the wrong kind or too much of the right one. Foragers learn by experience and transmit their knowledge.

The only substantiation of this drama comes from a scant record in teeth and bones, the fossilized remains of food and the tools to prepare it, and sometimes of what was eaten. This is enough evidence to learn about food but not about poison.

Tombs can be opened and the remains of tissue and hair analyzed for the presence of a known chemical or its effects. Suspected wrongdoing, assassinations and accidents, can be confirmed or denied. The purpose of an alleged poisoner might be traced from historical documents, or in the absence of documents inferred from general circumstances.

Non-suicidal and non-homicidal receiving of poison, poison eating, does not leave remains, but it does leave a record of belief and general intention. This record has not been discerned amid the history of adding foreign substances to the body. It has been submerged in retrospect beneath the idea of

antidotes and immunity. In this book I look for the record of poison eating and uncover remarkable beliefs and practices arising, dying off, and continuing.

The value of this investigation is in seeing remarkable beliefs and practices, and more, how we have become persuaded to eat poisons on a regular basis. No longer aware of the long-ago aspiration to resistance to all poisons, we need poisons from the outside to resist the other poisons from the outside.

The key to the investigation are some basic observations which can be ascribed to early humans worldwide, based on the stories and formulas they later set down. Some plants and minerals, unimposing or salubrious in small quantities, are deadly when the amount taken is increased. This evolves into the poison-drug dosage scale of all medical systems.

A vegetable poison that set a standard is opium, since antiquity known to kill, or to remove all pain entirely forever, in doses greater than those required only to remove pain. With safe doses taken repeatedly the pain does not go away completely, and ever greater amounts are required to dismiss pain, finally exceeding the deadly amount. The opium eater automatically becomes a poison eater unaffected by who knows what other insults to his body. Other happy poisons must act the same way. If lethal they must be beneficial at a lesser and regular dose.

Venomous snakes, or snakes believed to be venomous, provide the other component of the poison-eating model. Snakes kill animals and humans with their bites, but not themselves or each other. They devour animals they killed by a bite without dying, indeed they depend upon the bite and the venom to kill the prey. Before venom was known to be a fluid injected with fangs or spit from the mouth, the body of the snake as a whole was thought to harbor the poisonous principle, and was ingested by a potential victim to replicate the snake's comfort with its own poison. Eating snake parts, and drinking liquids in which snakes were steeped, was a way transfer the snake's poison resistance to the poison-naïve human.

These mixtures and acts of consumption are accompanied by words that both fix them and bleed at the edges. The array of words and expressions arising from the theriac, somewhat corresponding to poisons and medicines, will map part of this exploration.

The following chapters examine formulas that employ either or both of these principles to create a poison that imbues the consumer with poison that makes him proof against poisoning. This is a world in which the enemy or rival can slip a concoction into food or water, or deliver it through articles of common use. It is a world in which the serpent can strike without warning, a former danger that should not be discounted because it is now metaphoric.

All poisons were the same under those conditions. The particular set of poisons and stories here are African, Near Eastern, Indian, European and American, and only some of the poison eating in these areas. Central Asia, China, Japan, southeast Asia, Indonesia and the Pacific had realms of poison eating using poisons of their own.

These formulas and the stories surrounding them constitute a body of evidence on poison-eating, much like the results of laboratory experiments feeding foods and poisons to animals to observe their preferences and the outcomes of pursuing those preferences. The quantitative element is missing from the poison eating and poison protection evidence: we have few accounts of who ate the poisons, under what circumstances and with what results. All that remains from the earliest period of poison eating is tales told with authority of kings and religious figures.

The tales are of people who make themselves resistant to poisons or are made resistant through physical and extra-physical means. They are models of the poison eater's situation between the natural and supernatural spheres, and, most important, between the literal-formulaic and the metaphoric-creative. These tales confirm and question the boundaries between poison, food and medicine, which extend into all three spheres simultaneously.

A young woman is poisonous by nature because she has been raised in an environment that contains only lethal substances. Metaphoric from the start, of bad families and evil kingdoms, this is a toxic upbringing, surprising in how literal it can remain, and how persistent a model it provides for poison eating. Someone accused of a crime is given poison which, if he or she is innocent, will cause sickness because the nature and intent of the person are not poisonous. Irony is alive here.

The earliest poisonous poison protection compounds, far from clinically recounted, do offer a record of the idea of the poisoned unpoisonable body developed by making and taking these formulas. The secrecy covering the list of ingredients is lifted away by competition among doctors to prove they have the best preventive. The principle of operation exposed shows an integration of the opium component and the snake component of poison resistance through poison eating.

Accompanying them are two other elements common to medication. Further ingredients appeal to what cognitive scientists call qualia, distinct elements of perception, in this case smell, taste and texture, to substantiate in sensory fashion the known contents of anti-poison. Bitterness to call up poison and sweetness to make it palatable (poisonous anti-poison). Slippery, piercing textures imply the presence of the snake.

Added to the sensory ingredients are those with a distinct physical action: purgatives, expectorants, diuretics. They operationalize the urge to get the poison out of the system as the sweetness counteracts the bitterness. Many plants used as drugs are extremely bitter, for instance the aristolochus and squills that appeared in many anti-poison formulas, and worked both as poison markers and as purgatives.

Sudorifics, sweat-inducers, also were prominent in the compound theriac. They were an avenue of poison emission, and by seeming to shed the skin perfected the serpent reference. The body receiving the anti-poison poison might feel as a snake imagined.

This composition of differing elements both active and symbolic is achieved in the preparation called the theriac reaching its classic form (as far as later writers were concerned) in the works of Galen. The earlier theriacs (many cited by Galen) had some of these ingredients and not others. The Pontic king Mithridates lent his name to a universal antidote slippery and purgative in nature reputedly resulting from his precocious experiments with convicts and then upon himself.

Galen singles out the “great theriac” of his fellow Greek physician in Rome, Andromachus, an ambitious undertaking that included no fewer than 54 separate parts, serpent trochists and opium, bitter herbs, purgatives, and honey and requiring a long process of preparation. This was a basis for interpretation and revision over the ensuing centuries, and spawned or absorbed numerous other formulas at the hands of famous physicians of many nationalities. Galen and his compatriot had constructed another level for the theriac. By initiating the multiplication of ingredients beyond what might be taken to act simply they constructed the platform for a cosmographic poison/anti-poison.

The ingredients came from all over the known world, a map in medicine of the Roman Empire and its successors, and they were meant to address the variety of temperaments, hot, cold, wet, dry, that the human body might hold. This turned out to be the most enduring scheme of the theriac with its snakes and opium (or without either or both). The array of ingredients could be falsified and reaffirmed and institutionalized and decried but it continued to be assembled until the early twentieth century if only because something that had persisted so long must have a hidden value. The royal charter of the investigative Mithridates added value to the Galenic record.

The theriac was good for physicians, who could labor at its production and treat emergency poisonings with a sample from a long-lasting private store. And it was good for cities, Jerusalem, Cairo, Venice and Marburg,

where the theriac was made publicly under official supervision and exported to the rest of the world.

Finally it was good for quacks and mountebanks, who claimed to be selling the authentic theriac or some substitute, and put on shows of poison eating and survival to prove it. Poison eating and unharmed snake handling had long been a boast by local braggarts and a display at fairs and on town squares. Now the charlatans of the cities made grand theatre out of self-poisoning, serpent attack and survival featuring remedies they were willing to part with for a price. And the theriac became a metaphor for spiritual and political poisoning and its cures. Always theriac was understood to be the poison that overcame poison in advance of the poisoning.

By the sixteenth century there were numerous theriacs and numerous variations on the word “theriac” naming them (tiriac, dryakel, treacle, for instance). A counter movement grew among doctors and pharmacists to authenticate their painstakingly exhibited drug by publishing formal treatises which set out the ingredients and methods as they were laid out in containers on tables before a theriac-making. At the same time they developed lists of substitutes for no longer obtainable or even securely identifiable herbs.

A theriac science emerged at the hands of master preparers, such as Moyse Charas, also a student of snakebite and an exhibitor of snakes. The skeptical physician Francesco Redi, employing the services of a descendant of ancient snake handlers, used snakes spared from the theriac to demonstrate that snake venom is the poison. Redi himself expressed doubt about the ability of so many ingredients to treat all parts of the body.

As the theriac faded, and the fascination with the potential poison-eating of handling venomous snakes continued, scientific chemistry produced new poisons and scientific poison eaters arose to receive them.

Bernoin and Pontaeus were doctors with poison eating assistants for their antidote-hawking shows. Chabert, his name shadowing another famous remedy, resisted fire onstage and claimed to drink prussic acid until he was challenged to a verifiable test of his poison endurance by the doctor-editor of a rising medical journal. Chabert later transformed himself into a doctor who fed poison to his patients and extracted their hookworms. His challenger later died from exposure to stylish, arsenical wallpaper.

Scientific investigation of presumably traditional poison eating, the arsenic habits of Austrian peasants, coincided with the attempt to use an arsenic eater’s practice as a courtroom defense for someone accused of deliberately poisoning him. The medico-legal framework of poison eating extended to

poison squads formed to test foods treated with preservatives and other chemical additives, and around the same time to the absorption of snake venom.

Attempts to explain and induce acquired immunity to disease toxins recurred to the idea of mithridatisation, building resistance in an experimental subject through repeated doses of the toxin. All of the explorers of the immune response, Ehrlich, von Behring, Metchnikoff, felt obliged at least to address the capacity of regular poison exposure to generate immunity. Mithridatism had its longest life in the attempts to induce resistance to the progress of tuberculosis through the exposure to the assumed essence of the disease toxin, tuberculin. That failure was the final exhibit of therapeutic poison eating. The immune science that followed observed the principles but did not use the names.

The evidence accumulated during this review of poison eating from the poison maiden, the poison ordeal and the theriac to therapies trying to stimulate the immune response exposes the false duality of poison and drug. Poisons are eaten because they are poisons, which is what it means for them to be drugs. The urge to eat poisons accompanies and complements the urge to eat sweet and salty things, and is part of the same exploratory desire.

I



POISON MAIDEN AND POISON ORDEAL

There are two poison eater narratives, one slow and adaptive, the other abrupt and judgmental. Both depend upon belief in a universal poison which can be assimilated to human nature under the control of a political authority. Crossing these narratives are themes that remain for the whole of human history with poisons. The narratives and their surrounding themes interpret a primordial encounter with the products of the outside world, candidate foods becoming poisons becoming medicines.

Alexander the Great receives a young woman in tribute from the Queen of the North. Before he can take advantage of the gift, his tutor Aristotle warns him that she is a poison maiden who will kill him on contact. She has been fed noxious plants and venomous snakes from infancy and, while resistant to any poison she might imbibe, she herself acts as a poison to anyone who has intimate relations with her.

This story, derived from a Latin translation of an Arabic source, was popularized in Europe by the late Latin collection, the *Gesta Romanorum*, and has been passed along since then in oral and literary forms. The poison is only one way in which the maiden might be noxious: she might contain serpents and dragons or be the haunt of destructive demons.

In a 15th century French version Aristotle's warning is backed by his own mentor Socrates, and Alexander performs the experiment of having slaves kiss his intended. The slaves die, and Alexander has the poison maiden beheaded

and her remains burned far from human dwellings. In yet another version the poison maiden matures inside the egg of a large, venomous snake. The travel-liar John Mandeville merged the poison maiden with another fable of sexual threat when he had maidens of one “fair and good isle” contain a snake that bit the male entering her, which explained the custom of a volunteer other than the husband passing the first night with the bride. Snakes, slaves and royal experiments with human lives haunt this story.

The woman from outside a man’s homeland might seem to have acquired a poison nature in that foreign place. Ingesting local poison from infancy onward makes the adult poisonous to someone of another upbringing. It also makes her proof against all poisons. This is a scathing metaphor for sexual and familial incompatibility projected into a physical supposition: the human body can become poison by eating and drinking poisonous substances in some faraway kingdom.

The glance of the poison maiden, like that of a serpent, can kill its object; her breath is serpentine, not repulsive in smell but fatally alluring. The attractions toward love and procreation have been inverted in the poison maiden, drawing in her mate only to destroy him.

The poison maiden is poisonous because she is a maiden. The eighteenth century Dresden physician Martin Schurig declared that the saliva of a young girl taken in love (*puella amata*) is poisonous “in proportion to the pleasures.” Before the menses begin to flow, body fluids brim over with noxious influences which can be transferred to the heedless lover. When Schurig later recounts the Alexander the Great story he explains that Aristotle knew from the serpent-like sparks in the eyes of the girl that she was nourished on aconite, and coitus with her would spell the emperor’s doom.

The poisonous nature of body fluids at early stages of life underlay the fundamental belief that poisons could be inherent in the human body as they were in plants and animals. Schurig’s story pushes menstrual danger back to the point of being a protective cover for young girls against marauding males. Yet in keeping with the traditions of poison maiden as set down in the Alexander-Aristotle legend, Schurig explains the girl’s toxicity in terms of another story, that Indian monarchs nourished young women on the plant toxin aconite, which can be absorbed through the skin, and used them to destroy rivals. It may simply have been that the young women carried aconite, and applied it when the intended victim was most vulnerable.

Other stories have the poison maidens harboring serpents which sting the groom on the wedding night. In every case the usual features of childhood

nurture, youth, amorous relations, marriage and the wedding night are made poisonous.

Snakes, spiders and scorpions were the ever-present example of creatures poisonous by nature, not harming themselves but deadly to others. Some poisonous animals with specific uses—poison arrow frogs, for instance—do acquire their content by absorbing poisonous matter from plants. Humans can build a tolerance to instantly lethal doses of a plant-derived poison like opium by gradually increasing the intake—and become unable to stop taking deadly doses. The poison maiden stories and their variants espoused the aspiration to make a body resistant to all poisons, and thus to the universal poison/antidote.

There is no evidence that eating poisons or receiving snakebites from infancy onward would do anything other than sicken and kill the poison eater. The poison maiden story opens a belief, even a hope, that arose long before anyone in Europe knew about poison arrow frogs. The belief is that people can become resistant to all poisons by eating a key poison or a variety of poisons and therefore would be poisonous themselves. This experiment was urgently imagined in its success but never reported to be successful in fact.

Poison becomes food to such a person. She can, and in fact must, ingest lethal things with the same regularity that others take meals. This image of systemic poisonousness is also an image of systemic immunity but without the innocence of immunity. Where imaginative writers chose to examine the possibility of acquired systemic resistive poisonousness, they retained the marital or courtship paradigm with the woman the poisonous party.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "Rappaccini's Daughter" (1844) makes the young man a medical student in Renaissance Padua infatuated with the daughter of a notorious doctor. Learning that the doctor has made a human experiment of his daughter and raised her on poisonous plants, and that she can never leave the noxious garden where she lingers, her suitor gives her an antidote to drink, thinking this will free her of the lethal hold. She dies instantly: her nature has become poison and the antidote is poison to her.

Hawthorne filled out the poison maiden story in medical terms, by making the maiden vulnerable to an anti-poison. In his time poisons were poised against antidotes, which were wielded by authoritarian doctors who did experiment on animals and humans with great freedom. There was no universal poison, though there were aspirations to it.

In Richard Garnett's 1903 story "The Poison Maid" herself warns her suitor of her deadly upbringing. The man assures her that he had the same