

Poisoning in Greek and Latin Declamation

In this paper I propose to discuss the depiction of poisoning in Greek and Latin declamation, including (1) the nature of the poisons used, and how they were obtained, prepared, delivered, and detected; and (2) the motive and capacity of one of the most commonly alleged poisoners, the stepmother. While the portrayal of poisons, poisonings, and stepmothers-as-poisoners in declamation is similar to the general picture derived from elsewhere in ancient literature, the embedding of this theme in imagined trial scenarios allows us to see how stepmothers were imagined as posing a threat to the health and integrity of the family, and how one might in theory prosecute or defend against allegations of poisoning in an age before forensic science. Ancient sources examined include Seneca, Calpurnius Flaccus, Ps.-Quintilian, and Hermogenes.

The ideal audience of declamation knew that poisons were derived from a variety of plant and animal sources, and that they had different effects. Yet as in most ancient historical narratives about poisoning, declamations do not name the specific poison used, except in one unusual instance of a “poisoning” death caused by drinking cold water. Poisons were purchased elsewhere and brought into the home and/or were prepared in a remote part of the house, away from prying eyes. Someone caught preparing a poison, however, could claim that the alleged poison was merely a sleeping potion. Poisons were always delivered as a drink. If not prepared properly, a poisoned drink could be recognized by its strange color or smell, and poisons tended to settle to the bottom of the cup. Only an expert would be able to give the proper dose at the right time so that the victim would die after he returned home, rather than in front of the poisoner’s dinner guests. The only reported symptom of poisoning was indigestion. Antidotes were sometimes available, but they took time to prepare. Post-mortem evidence of poisoning

included darkened skin and swelling. However, these telltale physical signs are infrequently mentioned in declamation, which focuses instead on the motive and capacity of alleged poisoners.

One of the most common poisoners in Greek and Latin declamation is the stepmother. Unlike other poisoners, stepmothers as a group have a well established, standard motive: their natural hostility toward their stepsons. The only way to stop them from killing is to remove the stepchildren from the home. When accused, stepmothers are desperate to shift the blame on to other women—concubines, divorced mothers, and daughters. One stepmother disobeys the doctors' instructions and yet claims that the resulting death of her sick stepson was accidental. Another stepmother even tricks her doctor stepson into drinking poison himself by accusing him of poisoning her own sick son. The stepmother-as-poisoner, with her generally accepted motive and obvious capacity to commit the crime, would have been easy to prosecute and difficult to defend.