

# Applying the Abject : Working with Kristeva's Concept of Abject toward a Cultural History of Poisoning

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**Abstract:** This contribution will argue that Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject is a valuable tool of analysis for writing the history of poisoning in an interdisciplinary perspective. The article will concentrate on discourses in science, literature and film. The project started with an analysis of scientific texts, which was then extended to literature and to film studies. From the beginning, one of the aims was to better understand the explicit and implicit gendering of poison discourses and poisoning stereotypes. This essay will first provide a short account of the most important metaphors and motives in a "Kristevan" account of the scientific discourses on poisoning. In a second part, literary texts dealing with the topic of poisoning will be analyzed. Finally, the third section of this paper will investigate the poison narration in Charles Chaplin's film *Monsieur Verdoux* (USA 1947).

**Résumé:** Cet essai soutient que la notion d'abject de Kristeva est un outil d'analyse qui permet d'écrire de façon interdisciplinaire l'histoire de l'usage de poisons. Concentré sur les discours en sciences, littérature et cinéma, il commence par une analyse de textes scientifiques qui est ensuite étendue à la littérature et aux études de cinéma. Un des objectifs de départ était de mieux comprendre les questions de genre explicite et implicite des discours sur les poisons et des stéréotypes de l'emploi de poisons. L'essai fait d'abord, dans une perspective kristevienne, le point sur les métaphores et les motifs les plus importants des discours scientifiques traitant de l'empoisonnement. Une analyse de textes littéraires suit. La troisième section est consacrée à l'examen du récit du poison dans le film de Charles Chaplin *Monsieur Verdoux* (USA 1947).

**Keywords:** abject – poison – poisoning – poisoner – gender – money – modern subjecthood – sublime – Shakespeare – *Hamlet* – *Romeo and Juliet* – *Timon of Athens* – Bulwer-Lytton – *Lucretia* (1846) – *Monsieur Verdoux*

**T**his paper will argue that Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject is a valuable tool of analysis for writing the history of poisoning in an interdisciplinary perspective. We will concentrate on discourses in science, literature and film. Our project started with an analysis of scientific texts, which was then

extended to literature and to film studies. From the beginning, one of the aims was to better understand the explicit and implicit gendering of poison discourses and poisoning stereotypes. The linkage between poisoning stereotypes and gender stereotypes has been stable over centuries, and even today, the prejudice that women have a greater propensity for poisoning others in comparison with men is still alive.<sup>1</sup> Crossing the borders between science, literature, and arts, the subject of poisoning has traveled through a rich history of memories, translations, and citations. We are convinced that gender stereotypes and implicitly gendered narrations have a particularly stabilizing effect on political and scientific discourses. Taking the example of poisoning, we will argue that these stereotypes generally endow discourses with a surplus of significance, and maybe even credibility.

Consequently, viewing our topic from the perspectives of history of science and literary and film studies, it seems worthwhile to look deeper into the epistemological structure of poisoning discourses. This is where our interdisciplinary cooperation started. The idea to apply Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject (*Pouvoirs* [*Powers*]) to this discursive field occurred somewhere in the middle of our research process, when we saw how deeply-rooted in history some of the metaphorical elements of "poison," "poisoning," and "poisoner" are.<sup>2</sup>

Our paper will first provide a short account of the most important metaphors and motives in a "Kristevan" account of the scientific discourses on poisoning. Here we propose to distinguish three main motives describing the epistemological structure of poisoning. These three motives are present in scientific discourses from 1750 to 1900; but they can be traced back even farther. They may be considered as an epistemological backbone of poisoning discourses across the disciplines. In a second part, we will analyze literary texts dealing with the topic of poisoning. Within this literary section, we will first analyze the interwoven motives of poison and money in Shakespeare's work. Then we will turn to a nineteenth-century novel comparing the figure of the Renaissance woman Lucretia Borgia with Bulwer-Lytton's nineteenth-century Victorian version of that figure, *Lucretia. Or The Children of the Night* (1846). Here, blurred identities and abstraction intersect with an abject femininity, with the secret, and the sublime. Finally, the third section of this paper will analyze the poison narration in Charles Chaplin's film *Monsieur Verdoux* (USA 1947).

This common contribution on the abject and poisoning has one grammatical, but three psychological subjects : The first section represents the perspective of Bettina Wahrig, the second was written by Martina Mittag, and the third section is authored by Heike Klippel. We hope that the text will at least in part convey to the reader our experience : We feel that we have already defined quite a lot of common ground.

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<sup>1</sup> Critical discussion in Watson 45ff.; Wahrig 317ff.

<sup>2</sup> Our understanding of the term will be explained in section 1.

## 1. A “Kristevan” account of the scientific discourses on poisoning

When looking for a field of historical research that would simultaneously put a focus on gender, power and knowledge between 1750 and 1850, I observed that authors in medical and pharmaceutical journals often drew the attention of their audience toward the topic of poisoning. Many of the images were implicitly or explicitly gendered. Medical and pharmaceutical writings on poisons were heavily loaded with central cultural values like responsibility (of the powerful toward the powerless, but also of the “subject” toward society), the power of science, and the value of nations. Misogynous statements were present all along, but the narratives and their contexts changed over time.

In order to get beyond collecting and describing my corpus of medical and pharmaceutical journals, I committed a transgression. I scanned a representative collection of German literature from the eighteenth to the twentieth century on CD-ROM (Bertram), searching for “poison” and “poisoning,” and I started to construct a deliberate conceptual/metaphorical grid which condensed the most frequent and the most persistent metaphorical elements in the texts I had found. So this was a double transgression – just looking at fragments of texts instead of reading them from the beginning to the end as I had been taught, and disregarding the fact that I was (and am) a historian of science, and not a literary studies person. But indeed the grid brought to light a series of images and concepts that seemed to be applicable both to literary and scientific texts. Apart from finding direct quotations from and allusions to literary texts and motives in my scientific texts, it now occurred to me that there was a deeply rooted tradition that manifested itself in the terms “poison” and “poisoning.”

I then sought help from a professional historian of literature, Martina Mittag. Later on, we thought that since a text is a text is a text, it might be instructive to look at a different medium, and at that point Heike Klippel, a film historian, joined us. Martina jolted me back in time, because she pointed out that many of the motives that I found in eighteenth-century scientific literature lead us right to the time of Shakespeare, whereupon we discovered that in principle we should have gone as far back as Latin and Greek Antiquity. Somewhere in the process we found that Julia Kristeva’s concept of the abject was applicable to the issue of poison and poisoning, which might explain why poisoning has remained such an equally alarming and attractive subject. If the abject articulates a cultural constellation and a pattern of concepts/imaginings that are deeply rooted in “Western” culture, it might be worthwhile analyzing the functioning of poisoning discourses in science, in general public and in artistic productions. There is much to be learned from applying or modifying this category.

In her book *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* Julia Kristeva argues that abjection is the important but inarticulate ground for the genesis of symbol-production under the law of the “nom du père.” The latter breaks up the indiscriminate unity between mother and

child and normalizes the child's sign production, but it leaves behind a field where the "logic of the forbidden" – as Kristeva formulates it using a phrase coined by Georges Bataille – still exists. This abject creates the "*misère de l'interdit*" (Kristeva, *Pouvoirs* 79).<sup>3</sup> The field of the abject implies a form of subject/object relation prior to, or – as I would like to shift the argument – alternative to subject/object relations which are in keeping with the Aristotelian logic of the excluded third. But abjection in Kristeva's understanding is not only a necessary precondition for symbol-production in the father's name. It also and simultaneously undermines the latter:

Ce n'est donc pas l'absence de propreté ou de santé qui rend abject, mais ce qui perturbe une identité, un système, un ordre. Ce qui ne respecte pas les limites, les places, les règles. L'entre-deux, l'ambigu, le mixte. (*Pouvoirs* 12)

It is not the absence of propriety or sanity which makes someone/something abject, but that which troubles an identity, a system, an order. That which does not respect the limits, the places, the rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the mixed (existence). (*Powers* 4)<sup>4</sup>

Hence, abjection is a process that implies exclusion, but it also represents a contrasting process: Since abject sign production persists, it undermines and circumvents the separations and exclusions inherent in the logic of social order and its concomitant forms of communication.<sup>5</sup>

Our interest in abject sign production lies mostly on the epistemological side. Understanding the abject as a psychological entity can *help us understand its role in scientific discourse*, but we do not intend to engage in a discussion about whether or not psychology is prior or "basic" to the discourses we interpret. Hence, we are less interested in a possible *ontology* of the abject than in the abject as an *instrument* of critical analysis. Abject sign production then may be seen as a reservoir of subversion. Scientific discourse is generally understood as erecting clear borders between one object and another, as requiring a neat distinction between the subject and the object. When looked at from the perspective of the abject, the analysis of these discourses focuses on a

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<sup>3</sup> "Il s'agira, dans ce qui suit, de suggérer que cette relation archaïque à l'objet traduit en somme la relation à la mère" (Kristeva *Pouvoirs* 79) ["In the following, my point will be to suggest that such an archaic relationship to the object interprets, as it were, the relationship to the mother" (Kristeva, *Powers* 64)].

<sup>4</sup> The English translation uses "composite" instead of "mixed," but mixing is a thoroughly pharmaceutical activity.

<sup>5</sup> For a dialectical interpretation of Kristeva, see Maria Margaroni.

subversive undercurrent of scientific discourse – an undercurrent that undermines distinctions and is just as productive as the distinctions themselves.<sup>6</sup>

In our specific case, the discourse on poisonous substances implicitly articulates the social order and the threat under which it is erected and upheld, namely the threat of reversion, subversion and upheaval. Images pertaining to these threats have been deeply inscribed into explanations of the nature and effects of poisons.

*Central Paradox Question: What does the abject articulate? Three motives*

It is now interesting to note that scientific poisoning discourses not only take up narrations of poisonings and poisoners from the literary and cultural context but that they have a kernel of knowledge which can be spelled out as a remembrance of the abject. I will try to explain this by asking a paradoxical question: “*What does the abject articulate?*” A preliminary answer will be given by short descriptions of our three central narrative moments, our three “motives.”

These motives overlap, and it looks as if they all together constitute the theme of sublimation/the sublime within the figure of the abject. But this is something to be further discussed by the three authors of this paper.

*First motive: Small quantity, enormous effect*

In many definitions of poison (from the early eighteenth to the late nineteenth centuries) we find the statement that poisons are those substances that have an enormous deleterious effect even in a very small quantity.<sup>7</sup> This resonates with

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<sup>6</sup> A still popular image depicting science as an activity that brings about clarity and regularly starts off with clear-cut definitions and distinctions no longer corresponds to the general perception of historians of science. Defining, classifying, and identifying are still regarded as essential activities of the sciences, but they come at the price of boundary objects (see Löwy).

<sup>7</sup> For example: “POISON\*, in medicine, a malignant quality in some animal, vegetable, or mineral body, which renders it hurtful, and even mortal, to those who take it in even a small quantity” (Chambers *Suppl.*, no page given). In their medical encyclopedia, Johann Samuel Ersch and Johann Gottfried Gruber distinguish between the *scientific* notion of poison that does not depend on the quantity but on the effect of a substance, and a *commonsensical and juridical* notion that does depend on quantity: “Eine fernere Eigenschaft der Gifte in diesem Sinne ist es, daß ihre verderblichen Wirkungen schon durch eine verhältnißmäßig kleine Menge in die Erscheinung treten, wodurch eben die Möglichkeit bedingt ist, sie jemandem in verbrecherischer Absicht und mehr oder weniger unbemerkt beizubringen” (Theile 81). In the *Dictionnaire médical* of 1887 the notion of poison is no longer dependent on a small dose but, at the same time, an exact definition seems to have become impossible: “Si la signification du mot poison est parfaitement saisie et presque toujours exactement appliquée par tout le monde, il est cependant impossible d’en donner une définition qui puisse convenir dans tous les cas.” Hence, there is now a contrast between the everyday concept of poison and poison as a scientific concept, which also means that poisons more or less escape classification: “Les poisons ne constituent pas en effet un ordre ou un groupe naturel doué de propriétés assez nettement définies pour pouvoir être isolés et caractérisés par

narratives dating from Antiquity like that of the poisoning of Heracles, who suffered greatly from the effects of just one drop of blood from the dying Hydra on his own arrow : The Centaur that he had killed with this arrow took revenge and donated some of its blood to Heracles' wife who later sent him a cloak impregnated with it. She (erroneously) believed that this would help to rekindle Heracles' waning love. In Ovid's version, sudden and violent action is represented by the metaphor of cast iron which as a result of its extreme heat causes the sudden evaporation of water : Arthur Golding's translation of 1567 remains close to the Latin original, "The scalding venom boiling in his blood, did make it hisse, As when a gad [spike, bar] of steel red hot in water quenched is" (Ovid 1567, 113: Book IX). In his 1727 translation, Samuel Garth compares the poison's action with a process of fermentation : "As the red iron hisses in the flood, / So boils the venom in his curdling blood" (Ovid 1727, vol 2, 49).<sup>8</sup> In contrast to the earlier translation, the process is now envisaged using a popular alchemical metaphor. Curdling or fermentation occurs almost instantaneously after the addition of *just a few drops* (e.g., of acid) to milk or blood.

Likewise, in 1702, the physician Richard Mead was fascinated by the observation that "one drop" of viper poison would "do the execution" (Mead 9). He thought that poison crystals had sharp edges that could slice open the red blood cells, and the liquid thus set free would make the blood suddenly curdle by releasing some chemical agent.<sup>9</sup> From about 1820, pharmacologists wondered whether there was an active contribution of the organism to the process of poisoning (Wahrig "Organisms"). This, too, could explain the enormous effect of small quantities.

### *Second motive: Underdetermination*

The commonplace that poison is a substance that acts in a very small quantity is old, but it was undermined very early. Amongst the most interesting commentators in early modern times is Paracelsus. His famous dictum *dosis facit venenum* has been dramatically misunderstood up to the present day. By no means does it point to the necessity of establishing a quantitative relation between dose and effect (see Papadopoulos). On the contrary, Paracelsus states that poison and medicament are usually present in the same substance; their separation belongs both to the art of healing and to the basic capacities of the human body. Poisons often enter the patient's body by the medium of food, or with a medicinal drug. In order to prevent this, procedures of

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quelques-unes de ces propriétés qui seraient applicables, sans restriction, à chacun en particulier. La toxicité n'est pas une chose absolue . . ." (Raige-Delorm/Dechambre 78).

<sup>8</sup> Note that already the ghost in Hamlet describes the action of the poison as "curdling" his blood. See the following section of this essay authored by Martina Mittag.

<sup>9</sup> Mead later revised the thesis that all poisons acted mainly on the blood, but he still used concepts from fermentation and thought that mineral poisons harmed the body by the edges of their crystals. See Mead 1756.

purification, refinement, and separation have developed throughout history. Mixture is something potentially dangerous that has to be controlled. The patient's bodily constitution, his diet, and other circumstances (like astrological constellations) have to be taken into account in order to find the adequate substance and "dose." As in Kristeva's account of the abject, mixture and impurity have a close symbolic linkage. Cleaning and separating are positioned on contrasting sides, the most important procedure here being sublimation (see next section of this paper). Yet other authors in early modern pharmacy were convinced that the art of pharmacy consisted in the right composition, hence mixture.

In 1785, Joseph Plenck, the author of a toxicology textbook, defined poisons by the criterion of small dose. When he added that the quantity of the administered substance determined whether or not it was a poison, he was already steering toward a toxicology, marking the difference between poisonous and medicinal action mainly by quantity (11). The *episteme* of modern pharmacy/pharmacology, that started out around 1850, has ruled out circumstances and mixtures and concentrated on linear relations between cause and effect. Yet, subterranean motives deriving from the more ancient *episteme* have lived on. Narratives of under-determinacy were nourished by numerous court cases in which it was impossible to decide whether the amount of poison administered to the victim had been sufficient to cause his/her death. There were even individuals who habitually ingested the number-one poison of the time – arsenic – in quantities which would have been deadly to anyone else (Tschudi 1). In addition, even the most advanced chemical tests proved to be fallible when applied in forensic cases: They were potentially inconclusive and susceptible to errors.<sup>10</sup>

The aspect of under-determinacy is not only characteristic of poison as an object of forensic medicine and chemistry. It was also in the background of nineteenth-century narratives of accidental poisoning. This is illustrated by two case reports from French and Belgian medical journals. In 1869, the pharmacist Stanislas Martin was called to attend to two children who both had a mysterious illness. The children, who were apparently employed as homeworkers, complained of a general "malaise." The symptoms were vague: the young patients suffered, but it was difficult to say from what. It was only the pharmacist's acumen that led to the discovery of the cause, namely poisonous stearin candles in the children's working room. In the story, the "malaise général" contrasts with the identification of the source, but it corresponds to the expanding industrial production that was the source of many new and poisonous dyes and paints (Martin 391).

In 1873, a French physician attended to a clerk (a passionate hunter) who was feeling an extreme "dépérissement" when working in his office, which he had adorned with stuffed deer. During a stay at the seaside, the patient recovered but, after his

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<sup>10</sup> "The debate over the evidentiary value of arsenical spots, from our analytical vantage point, can be regarded as a set of contemporary reflections on the breakdown of toxicological signification stemming from a relationship of underdetermination" (Burney 102). See also the whole chapter 78-114.

“reentrée,” the “détresse” started again. The vomiting, uneasiness, anxiety, and cramps that he complained about (Wintribert 341) were (and are) all well-known symptoms of poisoning. They were reported in many cases, but they were as unspecific as the illnesses described by the words “malaise” and “détresse.” Besides, who would not complain of a certain amount of “dépérissement” in view of the “reentrée” (which seems to be a perilous moment of *passage* up to the present day)? Simultaneously, the symptoms are in line with the aspect of rejection included in the figure of the abject (Kristeva, *Powers* 2). In the case of the clerk, arsenic preparations had been used for the conservation of his hunting prey. Case reports like these often refer to the dangers of new substances that were industrially produced or of the conditions and circumstances of industrial production itself.

### *Third motive: Constructing identities*

Under-determination and paradoxical relationships may be regarded as the origin of the urge to construct identities. It is essential to identify and define poisonous agents, poisoners, and – conversely – the healthy individual or collective body that must be defended. We find narrations of identities in the conclusions penned by the authors of the above-cited case reports : “The malaise général” is reduced to poisonous candles (containing copper arsenic); the arsenic in the stuffed deer is the origin of the “dépérissement.” The scientist can point to material causes, although most often he does not know anything about the pathogenic mechanism of the agents he identifies. The scientist in court can show the arsenic mirror produced by the most common chemical tests.

### *Sublimation/The Sublime*

Under-determinacy, abstraction, and the process of refining are constitutive concepts of sublimation both in the chemical and in the psychological sense : Sublimation is a process of refining substances, and as such it was a concept of Early Modern chemistry. The image of a substance being heated and then condensing further up in the reaction system (in the test tube, or in the alembic) links sublimation and the sublime. The image of a sudden change in the chemical characteristics of a substance is also associated with sublimation that is in turn the nucleus of discourses on poisons. The abject borders on sublimation: it is “edged with the sublime” (Kristeva, *Powers* 11), dangerous *and* productive, creative *and* highly ambivalent.

Our next section will take up the topic of the sublime. Writing on poisons always means a zigzag along the dividing lines of power. It means articulating what should not/no longer be articulated because it is against the law of the father, because it is something which points to a relationship with the mother, to the indistinct, the dangerous, but also to creativity and power.

## 2. Poison and Abject in Literary History

Continuing Bettina Wahrig's zigzag along the delimitations of power I will move into more abstract zones and comment on the abject as the shadowy Other of modern subjecthood. It develops from its early modern beginnings to its full-fledged version in the nineteenth century. Having departed from questions of a) gender and b) secrecy in the early modern period I soon came across the topic of gendering in the history of science and like Bettina Wahrig developed an interest in those discursive boundaries that are as symptomatic of the talk on poison as they are of secrets. Once it had dawned on me that a poison is not a poison is not a poison (see the three motives formulated above), it was clear that there was a definitive link between secrecy and poison as culturally defined phenomena, and the link pointed to the question of power. Some examples from Shakespeare might suffice to illustrate early modern reformulations of the connection between poison and power, and they are all the more valuable for pointing to the past and to the future at the same time : *The Tragedy of Hamlet*, the most well-known example, depicts a poisoning case still anchored in a traditional order of things, which is, of course, about to collapse. The secret murder of Hamlet's father through henbane not only points to the death of an individual and a king, it also attacks a whole universe, a worldview : not the "I," but "[t]he time" ... "is out of joint" (1.5.189). The notion of the abject as we know it is hardly applicable if seen from a more traditional pre-modern perspective. Rather than autonomous self and individual will, Gertrude, Claudius, Polonius, and Ophelia here seem to be the victims of changing circumstances. Even Claudius' ambitions remain childlike, pale and little strategic. While most individuals in *Hamlet* die with old Denmark, the reconstruction of subjecthood as a decontextualized, autonomous entity marks a central aspect of the modern age and is accompanied by shifting notions of power and subjecthood. The abject in *Hamlet* begins with a transformed subject, where the construction of self calls up and necessitates its other, where Claudius's ambition turns into murder and Hamlet's revenge into the erasure of a whole family. Indeed, what emerges out of that earthquake is an individual severed from his contextual network of dynasty, family, and mother, an individual who will read and think, and change the world – and is perfectly able to hide his thoughts from the outside world. Shakespeare's worlds are full of seeing and seeming, of outward show and inner will, of individual desire and outward constraints. The new focus on this hidden interiority of the subject is supported by the early modern "media revolution," that will (slowly, of course) give rise to the modern reader, one whose bodily surfaces do not necessarily reflect mind and soul, and a subject that has started "writing" itself, withholding secrets, producing others, always caught in the tension between seeing and seeming that marks many of Shakespeare's (and his

contemporaries’) plays.<sup>11</sup> It might also not be a coincidence that the victim in *Hamlet* is poisoned through the ear, thus pointing to the approaching end of an aural-oral economy that will give way to a new focus on sight, a culture of reading and reasoning. Hamlet’s revenge will be an individual revenge, but he cannot rescue the collective order of Denmark.

As an obvious indicator of economic power, the *topos* of money as poison serves as a focus in *Timon of Athens* to illustrate that change : whereas money in a contextual framework of church or court had a positive connotation in a world run on principles of loyalty and honor, it will assume rather negative qualities in a society run on hard cash. Thus the once rich and generous Timon, who had lived in utmost pomp and luxury until he lost all his riches, left Athens to seek shelter from human beings in the woods. In this abject state of savage life he ironically accuses money as the medium of abjection, lamenting its poisonous nature and its effect of corrupting the order of things:

Thus much of this will make black white, foul fair,  
Wrong right, base noble, old young, coward valiant.  
. . . . This yellow slave  
Will knit and break religions, bless the accursed;  
Make the hoar leprosy adored, place thieves  
And give them title, knee and approbation  
With senators on the bench . . . . (Shakespeare, *Timon* 4:3.27-37)

It is here that Shakespeare recognizes the trap of the modern subject, its Other, and great equivocator, and – at the same time – shows how our construction of identities is motivated by the necessity to defend ourselves against the abject. Marx was extremely fascinated by this passage and declared that money was

the distorting and confounding of all human and natural qualities, the fraternization of impossibilities. . . . Money is the alienated *ability of mankind*. That which I am unable to do as a *man*, and of which therefore all my individual essential powers are incapable, I am able to do by means of *money*. Money thus turns each of these powers into something which in itself it is not – turns it, that is, into its *contrary*. (190)

Whereas the reversal at work in *Hamlet* – the play ends with the extinction of a whole family instead of a new legitimate king – is an ontological phenomenon, realized through poison in its concrete sense, in *Romeo and Juliet* the secret swapping of poisoned

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<sup>11</sup> In *Othello*, see the many references to “seeing” and “seeming” that characterize the early modern rise of (hidden) individual ambition vs. traditional values of honor and public responsibility.

swords and poisoned drinks by which the lines between murderer and victim, good and evil are blurred and in a most literal sense *con-fused*, is taken to a more abstract level when focusing on money and poison in a metaphorical sense.<sup>12</sup> Money and poison as the great equivocators reappear when Romeo, believing Juliet dead, buys poison from the poor apothecary in order to set an end to his now worthless life:

There is thy gold, worse poison to men's souls  
 Doing more murders in this loathsome world  
 Than these poor compounds that thou mayst not sell.  
 I sell thee poison, thou hast sold me none . . . .  
 Come, cordial and not poison, go with me  
 To Juliet's grave, for there I must use thee. (Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*  
 5.1.80-86)

The con-fusions of poison and money, those that Friar Laurence points to when he says “confusion’s cure lives not in these confusions” (4.5.65), parallel the inversion of death and life, which accompany early modern reformulations of the subject. If money appears in its corrupted version in Romeo’s lines, poison helps to stimulate life in an emerging economy of subjecthood that privileges romantic love over family arrangement. From that perspective Romeo’s “cordial” parallels Cleopatra’s poisonous snakes in *Antony and Cleopatra* that are to end her life (“Dost thou not see the baby at my breast, / That sucks the nurse asleep” [*Antony and Cleopatra*, 5.2.304-5]) commented by Burton Raffel in his introduction to the play: “Rather than seeing herself as the ‘victim’ of a poisonous snake, Cleopatra here turns herself into the giver, not the recipient, and what she gives is, metaphorically, life rather than death” (Shakespeare, *Anthony* xxxi). Likewise, the reformulation of values in *Romeo and Juliet* is recognized by Capulet, Juliet’s father, after her presumed death:

All things that we ordained festival,  
 Turn from their office to black funeral;  
 Our instruments to melancholy bells,  
 Our wedding cheer to a sad burial feast,  
 Our solemn hymns to sullen dirges change,  
 Our bridal flowers serve for a buried corpse,  
 And all things change them to the contrary. (*Romeo and Juliet*, 4.5.84-90)

As in *Hamlet* (and differently from *Antony and Cleopatra*) the poisonous substance seems to multiply and undermine all previous planning through the uncontrollable

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<sup>12</sup> Marx points to this resemblance himself when he characterizes money as the “true agent of separation and the true cementing agent [:] . . . it is the chemical power of society” (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*).

effects that frame its use (the ghost of the Father, secret sabotage, miscommunication, secret interchange). However, *Romeo and Juliet* takes inversion to a level of abstraction that is symptomatic of a more general process of change in the early modern period. Instead of the illicit relationship, it now perverts parental planning, previously conceived of as “promotion” (4.5.71); instead of wealth, money promotes death. And more than that, poisonous substances as well as financial factors affect the stability of individuals, pluralizing meaning in the sense of Kristevan abject-hood : they potentially enable love like in *Midsummer Night’s Dream* (when Titania falls in love with Bottom), bring death as in *Hamlet*, serve as cordial as in *Antony and Cleopatra*, lead to excessive desire as in *The Merchant of Venice* (where affection and avarice compete when Salanio mimics Shylock’s cries of “My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!” (2.8.15-16)<sup>13</sup> – both money and poison trouble the very categories that the newly emerging subject is based on, they trouble “an identity, a system, an order” (Kristeva, *Pouvoirs* 12). This paradox becomes particularly acute where it foreshadows the opening of new markets, the introduction of paper money and the opening of the Bank of England in the later seventeenth century. These will be essential factors in relocating the multiplicatory nature of money toward a new level of abstraction and dematerialization that parallels similar developments in the use of poisons through quantification and realignment within a logic of cause and effect.

Money then points to both the newly emerging “I” that is conjured in the staccato repetition of “Put money in thy purse” in Othello – and the Not-I, perfect medium of abjection, as it triggers fusion and confusion. In a full-fledged nineteenth-century subject economy, after all the one that Marx referred to, this paradoxical relation is of course far more pronounced than in these early modern beginnings. In order to illustrate the gendered nature of the abject, Bulwer-Lytton’s novel *Lucretia, Or, The Children of the Night* (1846) provides an excellent starting point. Here Bulwer-Lytton builds on the story of the fifteenth-century Italian star poisoner, seen as whore and holy at the same time, translating her into what seems a very British nineteenth-century logic

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<sup>13</sup> It is worth looking at the full description of Shylock’s reaction to the theft and subsequent escape of his daughter because it reflects his confusion over the objects of desire (keeping in mind that this is Salanio’s perspective):

I never heard a passion so confused,  
So strange, outrageous, and so variable,  
As the dog Jew did utter in the streets:  
‘My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!  
Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats!  
Justice! the law! my ducats, and my daughter!  
A sealed bag, two sealed bags of ducats,  
Of double ducats, stolen from me by my daughter!  
And jewels, two stones, two rich and precious stones,  
Stolen by my daughter! Justice! find the girl;  
She hath the stones upon her, and the ducats.’ (Shakespeare, *The Merchant* 2.8.12-22)

between the Victorian angel in the house and the cold-blooded poisoner. What is at stake is of course MONEY, and Bulwer-Lytton's Lucretia murders for a legacy that would otherwise be denied to her. However, her scheme does not reflect the dirty world of crime and intrigue but an intricate quasi-scientific venture that opens up to Lucretia those very qualities that are denied to nineteenth-century women : knowledge, power, and respectability. Whereas poisoning was traditionally gendered as an effeminate version of murder, it is here linked to (male) scientific knowledge, and at times the story reaches a paradoxical state where subject and non-subject merge, a moment that turns the poisonous substance into an agent of sublimity :

It is a mighty thing to feel in one's self that one is an army, – more than an army. What thousands and millions of men, with trumpet and banner, and under the sanction of glory, strive to do, – destroy a foe, – that, with little more than an effort of the will, with a drop, a grain, for all his arsenal, – one man can do. (Bulwer-Lytton 215)

The “man” who poisons is of course a woman, and this passage represents a curious version of the Burkean sublime, that mixture of utter pleasure and horror which seizes body and mind equally. Considering the historical context of the French Revolution – which Burke had commented on – it also forms part of the connection between a woman's descent into crime and the fear of the nation's collapse into political turmoil. In her dialogue with her French collaborator Dalibard, Bulwer-Lytton's Lucretia partakes of a moment of sublimity that is usually not ascribed to women :

There was a horrible enthusiasm about this reasoning devil [Dalibard] as he spoke thus; his crest rose, his breast expanded. That animation which a noble thought gives to generous hearts, kindled in the face of the apologist for the darkest and basest of human crimes. Lucretia shuddered; but her gloomy imagination was spelled; there was an interest mingled with her terror. (Bulwer-Lytton 215)

Interest and terror : far more than in Bulwer-Lytton's contemporaries' strange fascination with the coolness of murderers, the nineteenth century presents itself here in all its strange ambivalence : reason topples over and becomes its opposite — sheer violence and utter brutality. The fascination about the latter is definitely not founded in reason. While this ambivalence reaches far wider than our perspective allows for, the question of gender evoked in the situation appears interesting in itself. As with the sublime, (male) subjecthood is challenged by a monstrous unfathomable femininity, which exceeds and negates it. Like (feminine) nature the figure of the murderess threatens humanity at its core but – for the reader, of course – is kept at bay by her virtual nature. The space of the novel allows for the doubling gesture of being both self

and Other characteristic of the Kantian as well as the Kristevian experience. Performing the uncontrollable multiplication that already linked money and poison in Shakespeare's plays and made for the paradoxical relation of self and other, the fusion of "interest" and "terror" now point to a sublimity outside that very economy of s/abjecthood.

If for Kant the sublime marks the edge of the subject (see section 3 below), Kristeva's sublimity is explicitly linked to the abject – and a notion of the sublime which fuses Kant's metaphysical and Burke's psychological sublime, empowering challenge to the powers of the subject AND utter loss of self:

As soon as I perceive it, as soon as I name it, the sublime triggers – it has always already triggered – a spree of perceptions and words that expand memory boundlessly. I then forget the point of departure and find myself removed to a secondary universe, set off from the one where "I" am – delight and loss. Not at all short of but always with and through perception and words, the sublime is something added that expands us, overstrains us, and causes us to be both here as dejects, and there, as others and sparkling. (Kristeva, *Powers* 12)

### 3. Poisoning as an abject activity in popular cinema

It was in fact the reading of Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* that directed my attention toward Charles Chaplin's *Monsieur Verdoux* (USA 1947) among the wide selection of films in which the topic of poisoning occurs. To my understanding the film elaborates and visualizes certain topics that are crucial to Kristeva's work and which have been applied to discourses on poison by Bettina Währg: the first is the idea of the utter opposition to subject as well as object (Kristeva, *Powers* 1), an unspeakable that cannot be identified and can only be traced to bodily wastes, fluids, unstructured organic matter, decay and definitely death.<sup>14</sup> A second important aspect is the deep involvement into the archaic maternal, aeons before any differentiation takes place (*Powers* 10-15). The third topic which is important for the film is the abject criminal who (in the Kristevian sense) neither breaks nor denies the law but winds himself around it in a parasitical manner, being false, corrupt, cheating (16-18). In the following I will first shortly sketch some characteristics of Chaplin's film and in the next step develop the discourse of the abject through the film analysis.

*Monsieur Verdoux* is a dark comedy with serious and dramatic elements. It is part of the later work of Chaplin who at the time was 58 years old. As the well-known *Arsenic and Old Lace* (USA 1944) it treats the serial killing of elderly people, but in Chaplin's film the apparent motive is not mercy, and the ones to be killed are women.

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<sup>14</sup> "Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit – *cadere*, cadaver" (Kristeva, *Powers* 3).

M. Verdoux is a polygamist who is married to several women at a time. He kills them off to inherit their money. Since he lost his job, this is his way of supporting his son and young wheel-chair-bound “true” wife. Finally caught, he chooses not to escape the police. While walking up to the guillotine he remains aloof and acts like an aristocrat, acknowledging having lost his case but admitting no guilt, and attenuating his own crime by criticizing modern society for the mass murder in World War I. When the priest asks him to make his peace with God, Verdoux answers : “I am at peace with God. My conflict is with man. [...] Who knows what sin is. Born as it was from heaven, from God’s fallen angel. Who knows the ultimate destiny it serves?” And to the priest’s prayer, “May the Lord have mercy on your soul,” he answers: “Why not. After all it belongs to Him.”<sup>15</sup>

Verdoux uses various means to kill that generally remain off screen. The exception is killing by poisoning : it is a central narrative element of the film. Verdoux first extracts information about a certain poison from the local apothecary<sup>16</sup> and wants to test it on a young woman he happens to meet in the street but decides against it in the last moment. Instead, he rather casually poisons a policeman who is in possession of evidence against him. The climax of the poison thread is Verdoux’s unsuccessful effort to kill one of his wives who has the telling name of Anna Bonheur.

The combination of Verdoux’s inability to poison the young woman, the easy riddance of the wives and the prolonged complications of the attempted murder of Mme Bonheur all lead to the assumption that the film displays a strong interest in the dispensability of unfertile femininity. All of Verdoux’s victims are portrayed as clearly post-menopausal : they have their hair pinned up, they lack feminine characteristics or sinuous body shapes; instead they are either heavy and stately or dry and rigid. There is no tenderness in their physique, and only to Mme Bonheur a certain softness is allowed, but this is the unpleasant softness of a face fallen out of shape, of exaggerated feminine attire, ostrich feathers and inadequate frills. Neither of the two younger women (the one Verdoux considers poisoning and his wife) is depicted as erotic or sensuous. They are rather sensitive, thoughtful, and their faces are lit to appear bright and innocent when they look up to Verdoux, their benefactor. Here it is interesting to consider the age of the actresses in the film. The actresses playing the illegitimate wives, their maids, or their sisters are all in their fifties. However Martha Raye portraying Annabella Bonheur is 31. Raye was obviously chosen because she was a comedian, qualified to play the frighteningly grotesque female. As Verdoux’s official and beloved wife, Mady Corell was almost forty, but nevertheless she appears youthful and maiden-like and seems much younger than Annabella Bonheur. It is not an uncommon practice in Hollywood cinema to cast younger actresses for the roles of older women. Film mothers, for

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<sup>15</sup> *Monsieur Verdoux*, 1:56:15-1:56:59.

<sup>16</sup> The poison should be a composition of exnide, ethna bromide and C2HC, supposed to be infallibly deadly, leaving no traces in the body.

example, are often played by women who are not significantly older or may even be younger than the male actor who interprets their son.<sup>17</sup> The age of women on the screen corresponds to their physicality only to a very limited extent. It is instead an effect of the discourse of the film text that intentionally makes age disappear or reappear as indeed a physical characteristic. With this in mind it is rather unusual to see in *Monsieur Verdoux* middle-aged actresses whose age is pointed out. This choice creates a very strong impression of aging women dominating the film, an impression to which the character played by Martha Raye, emphasized through a number of very disadvantageous shots of her, which again equate 'unattractive' with 'old,' is easily subsumed.

It is obvious that these women are not individuals but act as a negative figuring of the improper and unclean which, according to *Powers of Horror*, disturbs identity (Kristeva, *Powers* 4). The absence of the horrors of maternity is the main characteristic of all femininity in the film. At the same time maternity is the demarcation line between acceptable and deeply rejectable femininity, which must be done away with. The innocent state before maternity is allowed to live. The female body past maternity is not just worthless but a threat by its very existence, a reminder of death : its status must be clarified by becoming really dead, a process emphasized by the introduction of the film's first dead woman shown in the form of smoke. Verdoux, whom we see for the first time, is cleaning up a house after his recently deceased wife, whom we know he has killed and presumably burnt since heavy smoke is coming out of the incinerator. The black smoke communicates the idea that something very dirty and difficult to destroy is being burnt, contaminating the idyllic garden in which Verdoux is enjoying the roses.<sup>18</sup> In a way the black cloud represents all the women to follow : strong, menacing and at their best only when destroyed and retransformed in ignoble dirt, earth returned to earth.

The women's function is to save the main male character from becoming an obsolete figure. He is also aging, but he is lively, agile, and determined by his spirit, not his body. For a man, it is suggested, being in his fifties is not a problem: fifteen or fifty, a man has apparently a claim to an unchanging existence. There is a strong implicit idea that a man stays alive and well as long as he bans maternity into the unspeakable beyond and holds on to innocent femininity. This idea is especially emphasized through Chaplin's well-known private situation at the time. Four years prior to *Monsieur Verdoux* he had been the subject of a scandal due to a paternity suit from which he emerged triumphant by marrying Oona O'Neill just after her eighteenth birthday. Like Verdoux in the film, Chaplin had small children, confirming that menopause and infertility only

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<sup>17</sup> To give just one example: in *Notorious* (USA 1946, Dir. Alfred Hitchcock) Leopoldine Konstantin, born in 1886, plays the mother of Claude Rains, born in 1889.

<sup>18</sup> At the same time a vague menace for him comes from the remarks of the elderly neighbor women : "I wonder how long he's going to keep that incinerator burning. It's been going for the last three days" (0:06:28).

devalues actual or potential mothers. Not even death can question this – as the film tells us from the first minute. Interestingly enough the film begins in a graveyard : Verdoux is already dead. Far from being a dirty cloud, he is represented by an erect stone with clear-cut writing. The camera lightly moves around the bright graveyard, creating the impression that his soul is hovering among the trees. Unsurprisingly, he still speaks, introducing his story in his mannerist, would-be self-ironical but in fact cocky style.

Nevertheless, the narrator's attempt to appear as a clean and honorable man fails. The structure of the film too bluntly marks the abject, obsessively repeating the empty gesture of throwing away : we never see a murder actually happening, only the before and after. The women's bodies do not actually become cadavers in this film, they are shown to us only when still alive. Out of this refusal to create an object of rejection, no subjectivity, as Kristevas says, can be recovered. As a character, Verdoux is contaminated by his compulsive loathing of women : neither his brilliancy nor the comedy elements can cover up his dwarfish, foppish appearance. The false eyebrows and the pouting mouth are meant to be funny, the elegance and "English" accent are supposed to be refined, but they cancel each other out and leave the dreadful impression of a little man with dyed hair whose latently hysterical warding off of death is despicable. But his "abjectivity" goes much further and emanates from a deep lack of identity and "uncleanliness" on various levels. The film is neither comedy nor drama. Verdoux is neither a criminal nor a philosopher, but most of all he is neither a man nor a woman – he is a poisoner. As shown by Bettina Wahrig, poison is a most undefined and fatal substance and the poisoner the lowest and most unmanly type of murderer. Poisoning is the alleged classical murder method of women. Being too weak and cowardish to use violence, the poisoner abuses intelligence and science for her/his base purposes. In the respective discourses poisoner and poison are regularly conflated, both being insidious and thoroughly evil. Poisoning as an abject activity is in fact what accounts for the unsavory effect of the film.

Presenting poisoning as a highly comical episode unfolds the gender aspects of poisoning. The most infallible mixture, proven by the death of the policeman, fails against Anna Bonheur. At first sight it seems that Anna Bonheur cannot be killed because she is a joke, a farce of femininity. She belittles Verdoux, scolds him, calls him "pigeon," and in her presence he completely loses control. I concur with Robert Warshow's observations : "Not only does she defeat him : she overshadows him at every moment. With Annabella, Verdoux is a subdued man; intelligence is on his side, but in this case intelligence does not count – Annabella has the vitality. There is a kind of desperation in his painstaking and elaborate attempts to kill her [...] he is up against a force greater than his own" (Warshow 190).

Verdoux's complicated effort to poison Anna indicates how important it is for him to get rid of her. But the comedy of *quid pro quo* makes him the butt of his own scheme. Verdoux leaves the bottle with the label "Peroxide" containing the poison in the bathroom while putting the real peroxide in Annabella's wine – in the meantime the

maid dyes her hair with the bottle. Giving Annabella Bonheur a harmless substance by mistake is not confusing enough : instead of drinking his sarsaparilla, Verdoux accidentally drinks the “poison” himself when Anna, with her big behind, moves the tray with the glasses. Believing he has ingested the poison, Verdoux has a hysterical fit and gets his stomach pumped.

Annabella is transgressive in that she does not accept her position as inferior, which leads to her being portrayed as particularly loathsome. While the film depicts the killing of elderly women as virtually natural, it makes the death of Annabella Bonheur a necessity, as reflected, for instance, in a comment made by French filmmaker Claude Chabrol in a short documentary devoted to *Monsieur Verdoux* : “A striking detail in *Verdoux* is the fact that the women he kills are ugly and unbearable. . . . [Annabella Bonheur] represents all the elements that in a European mind define American vitality and vulgarity. . . . Martha Raye’s character is really the kind of person you want to murder. Kill her already!”<sup>19</sup> Comments made on the Internet Movie Data Base show that Chaplin’s concept of the woman “over the top” was successful. One comment reads : “Brash loudster Martha Raye, often considered a bust in films for being intolerably larger-than-life . . . [is] a shrill, obnoxious . . . dame whom nobody would really mind seeing knocked off” (Brumburgh).

Annabella seems old in a specifically appalling way because she claims sexuality for herself. Not only the remarks she makes but the ways the camera shows her use her body and display conjugal and domestic affection continuously underscore her inappropriateness. When sitting with Verdoux on the sofa, she throws her legs onto his knees. The camera keeps on lingering in a crude manner on her seemingly wide behind, large bust, her big mouth, and garish getup. On the night preceding the poisoning attempt, Verdoux resorts to chloroform to save himself from having to perform his marital duties. Chaplin’s film not only jokes about Annabella’s sexual appetite but also about the horror of her becoming a mother. When she holds up a pair of baby socks, Verdoux seems shocked. He produces a contrived smile when he learns that it is the neighbor who is pregnant. To Verdoux, grotesque as she may seem, Annabella is the bad weed : spreading all over the place, devouring everything in the way and even threatening to reproduce: the situation requires poisoning.

But Verdoux fails and debases himself to the extreme. Counting on his superior intellect, he proves himself to be as undefined as the poison itself. He becomes involved in a most unsettling mixture of fluids : his fumbling of peroxide bottles in the bathroom, the poison on the head of the maid, the “vile” sarsaparilla he drinks confirm his lack of performance. This vile wine is literally given to him by Annabella’s behind. He has finally become the receptacle, the abject maternal body. Pumping his stomach, he discharges some amorphous inside to remain emptied, a cadaver.

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<sup>19</sup> *Chaplin Today: Monsieur Verdoux* (F 2003: TV, Dir. Bernard Eisenschitz): 0.14.56-0.16.12, English translation of Chabrol’s spoken comment.

Verdoux's existence beyond the law is reflected in the continual claim of the murderer and comedian to be taken seriously as a philosopher. In the end he even assumes that his deeds might serve some unknown destiny and puts himself on a level with God. Disintegrating in this manner, Verdoux shows what Kristeva calls "the infamy of fascism": "The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them. . . . It kills in the name of life" (Kristeva, *Powers* 15-16).

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