

Book Review

Death By Shakespeare
Snakebites, Stabbings and Broken Hearts
By Kathryn Harkup

Death By Shakespeare is an attempt to demystify and contextualize the many deaths that occur throughout Shakespeare's dramatic canon. Harkup's background as a chemist provides a scientific perspective, which is often not in the foreground of Shakespearean criticism. Breaking the deaths down into a variety of categories, Harkup addresses the logistics and credibility behind Shakespeare's darkest plot devices. More specifically, the deaths are examined through what we understand about Elizabethan perspectives. It is clearly established within the first few paragraphs that it is important for us as contemporary readers to understand that the Elizabethans' experience with death is very different from our own. In order to properly understand the way in which Shakespeare utilizes death as a plot device, hinges on our understanding of this cultural disconnect between centuries.

One thing that does not change, however, is science. Scientifically speaking, death itself has not changed. Arsenic or puncture wounds from weapons, for example, can still kill today, we just have a better understanding of medicine and treatment. Harkup argues that death was "a familiar feature of everyday life" (Harkup, 10) in the Elizabethan period, and that the goal of theatre in this period was entertainment, not accuracy (Harkup, 59).

Because death was such a common thing for the Elizabethans, the idea of death onstage becomes quite a tricky thing to write. Of course, Shakespeare's "first loyalty was to the drama itself; historical accuracy and realism were only secondary considerations" (Harkup, 338). However, Shakespeare would have been concerned with more than just narrative clarity and dramatic effect, but also with catering to all the implications that come with audience familiarity

with death and the events that he was writing about. In many cases, he was writing about historical events or circumstances that were familiar to the audiences, this requires a certain, but not prioritized, level of dramaturgical accuracy in storytelling, expertly blended with the knowledge that there was no reason to go into detail over events that audiences would have already been familiar with (Harkup, 120). There's something to be said about the dramatic power of nuance and implication.

There was also a certain expectation that deaths shown on stage would be physiologically accurate to a certain extent. Audiences would have been familiar with executions, war, and other gory scenes, so it was important that any special effects like blood and gore shown on stage were believable (and in close proximity as well). Harkup goes into detail about how these effects would have been achieved. There was certainly an affinity for the macabre in Elizabethan drama, and Shakespeare was not the only playwright to capitalize on this.

Harkup argues that one of the greatest disconnects between contemporary audiences and Early Modern drama is stage deaths. To a contemporary audience, the deaths in Shakespeare's plays may seem a bit far-fetched and unrealistic. Our colloquial understanding of death has changed significantly in the past few centuries since these plays were written, and it is important for us to keep in mind cultural differences when we encounter these plays. The final chapter in Harkup's book, "Exit, pursued by a bear," goes into depth about some of Shakespeare's more obscure deaths, including the infamous bear attack. Harkup goes into depth about the main manners of death in Shakespeare's canon and demystifies how they physiologically were or were not possible. Grounding these previously thought "absurd" deaths in science effectively helps the audience to not see Shakespeare as so "far away" as he and his works are sometimes perceived to be.

Framing these literary works through the lens of science, as shown by Harkup, can be highly effective for contextualizing Early Modern Drama and further understanding the cultural ideas that are rooted in this literature. Not only is this research beneficial for scholars, but also for directors, dramaturgs, and actors. Providing scientific explanations, and even symptoms, of these occurrences provides a whole new approach to how Shakespeare's stage deaths can be approached and understood. For example, understanding the exact effects of a poison that a character ingests adds an additional layer of realism to a performance.

The scientific exploration of Shakespeare's deaths aids in the understanding and analysis of the text. In turn, the science behind these events helps to humanize the characters and ground these heightened plays into something innately human regardless of the time, death. Shakespeare's works are full of "extraordinary insights into the process of death" (Harkup, 338), but our understanding of death is far more complex in the twenty-first century than it was in the Elizabethan period simply due to scientific advancements. These scientific advancements do not undermine these dramatic works, but rather, they further support and expand upon these narratives. Harkup concludes by effectively stating that although Shakespeare primarily wrote for dramatic purposes, his deaths are just as complex as the plays he wrote.